

WINE PRODUCTION IN THE HILLS OF SOUTHERN AMMON AND THE FOUNDING OF TALL AL-‘UMAYRĪ IN THE SIXTH CENTURY BC

by
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Abstract

This paper uses the results of excavations at Tall al-‘Umayrī and neighboring farmsteads and the findings of the regional survey regarding landscape resources to suggest how the hilly landscape south of ‘Ammān was used in the sixth to fourth centuries BC. The large administrative complex at Tall al-‘Umayrī and its associated domestic buildings may be dated to the first half of the sixth century BC based on epigraphic and paleographic data from seals and an ostrakon. Based on striking similarities of pottery and material culture between al-‘Umayrī and the scores of nearby small farmsteads with associated winepresses, we suggest that, following the Babylonian campaign against Ammon in 582 or 581, the Ammonite monarchy sponsored the construction of these farmsteads and the administrative site of al-‘Umayrī to oversee the production of wine on the hilly slopes for export to Babylon as tribute. This use continued into the Persian period, though as an integral part of the Persian empire.

Introduction

The hinterland survey of the Mādabā Plains Project (directed by Øystein LaBianca with Gary Christopherson) has led to the discovery of scores of fortified farmstead sites in the hilly region surrounding Tall al-‘Umayrī. These sites are characterized by a central structure built of large stones and thick walls, usually in the company of one or more outbuildings. In the area immediately surrounding the central structure there was often found one or more winepresses, a cistern or two, and one or more caves for storage. Although some of the sites were reused in later periods, virtually all of them were built first in the late Iron II period. It is the purpose of this paper to explore why these farmsteads appeared suddenly at this time.

Tall al-‘Umayrī : The Administrative Center

The excavations at Tall al-‘Umayrī have already been shown to be significant for understanding the end of the Iron Age on the plateau of Transjordan (Herr 1995). Data from several excavations in the region now indicate that the Ammonites did not dis-

appear with the Babylonian invasion, but instead flourished also in the Persian period, perhaps as late as the fourth century BC. There was little or no break at the time of the Babylonian empire and the results from al-‘Umayrī and its region (the farmsteads) help explain why.

At the western edge of the city two large public buildings and at least one domestic complex have so far been excavated (Figs. 1 and 2). The walls of Buildings A and B in Fig.2, the administrative structures, are well over a meter thick (some are almost two meters thick) and must have stood at least two stories high. In fact, the walls are basements, dug deep into the ruins of earlier cities. Basements are rare and only serve to emphasize the importance of the public role of the buildings. Moreover, six seals (four inscribed, two uninscribed) have been found in the area of the buildings. Because seals are usually associated with official documents, the administrative function of the buildings is underlined.

Two inscriptions and one of the farmsteads combined together give us clues about the founding date of the buildings.



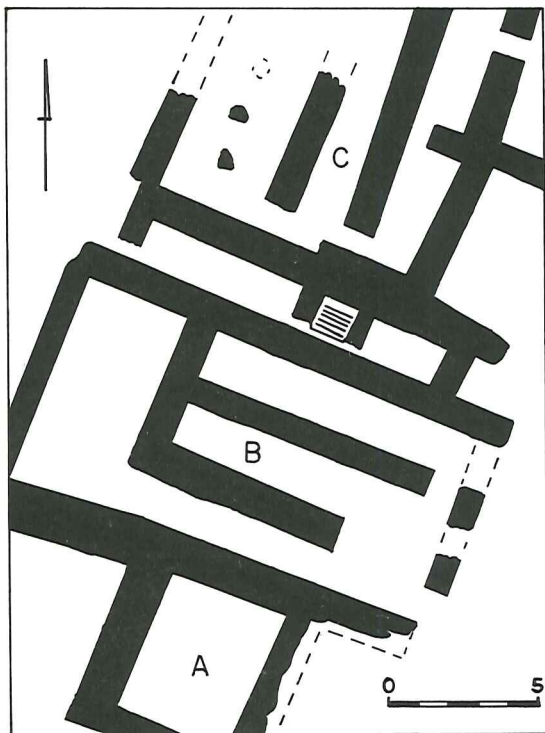
1. Aerial photograph of the administrative complex and associated domestic building in Fields A and B at Tall al-'Umayri.

The first inscription was an ostrakon found in a pit below the foundation of the first walls of the domestic complex north of the administrative buildings. It therefore dates to the earliest periods of settlement. It is a typical ostrakon with a list of names. The paleographic date of the Ammonite cursive writing belongs roughly to the middle of the sixth century BC (Sanders 1995); it could be a generation earlier or later.

The second find was a seal impression

discovered in topsoil above Building A. Because the top of the hill was used as an agricultural field for centuries after the last city went out of use, many of the objects from the upper stories of our buildings are found today in a deep layer of topsoil.

The seal impression was that of Milkom'ur, who was no ordinary merchant or scribe, but an high official of the Ammonite King Ba'alyasha', as the title "servant" indicates on this seal. Even the pic-



2. Plan of the buildings in Fig. 1.

ture in the middle of the seal boasts of his royal connections (Herr 1985; Younker 1985).

Based on the writing style, the seal that made the impression dated to the early sixth century. Who was this king Ba'alyasha'? The late Robert Boling, the director of our regional survey in 1984 when this find was made, first realized this was the Ammonite version of an obscure king mentioned in the Bible – Baalis (Jer. 40:14). Soon after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, our king conspired with a renegade prince of Judah named Ishmael, who had escaped the destruction of Jerusalem, to kill Gedaliah, the Babylonian governor of Judah, in 582 BC.

These two inscriptions, the ostrakon and the seal impression, give us a date of around 580-560 BC for the foundation of the administrative complex at Tall al-'Umayri. The seal impression made during the reign of a king who ruled around 580 does not allow us to suggest a later date than about 560; and the ostrakon, written in

a script of the mid sixth century, does not allow us to go much earlier than about 580. Because the seal impression was made by a royal official, we can identify our administrative buildings at al-'Umayri with the Ammonite monarchy of the early sixth century.

Survey Site 84

In 1994 David Hopkins of our hinterland survey excavated a very rich farmstead site (Survey Site 84) about two kilometers south of al-'Umayri. The site was typical of the many farmstead sites described above, with three winepresses, a cistern, and several storage caves surrounding the building. None of the other farmstead sites so far examined in detail have produced the well preserved finds that this one did, including many reconstructable storage jars, three seals, scores of stone agricultural tools (virtually all complete), and the remains of three human skeletons apparently caught in the structure when it was destroyed.

Two of the seals depict a Neo-Babylonian scene similar to one of the uninscribed seals found in the administrative complex at al-'Umayri. Further, the pottery and other finds were identical to those found associated with the same buildings as well as the other farmsteads of the region. Because of the ceramic and glyptic similarities between the farmstead, the other similar structures in the region and al-'Umayri, it is reasonable to conclude that these hinterland farms were contemporary with the administrative center at al-'Umayri and probably functioned in some kind of common relationship.

The presence of winepresses in the area of most of the farmsteads suggests that at least one of their major functions included the production of wine from orchards most likely grown on the slopes of the hills around the farms. Although the sites probably also produced other crops, grapes

seem to have been the major activity.

Discussion

It is not a major leap of reason to suggest that the administrators at al-'Umayri were organizing wine production at the farmsteads for the Ammonite monarchy. But why? Again, our regional survey points in the direction of an answer. Sites dated earlier than the foundation of al-'Umayri were not frequent in our region. Tall Jāwa, ca. 4 km to the east, probably was occupied, but the immediate region of al-'Umayri was relatively empty of settlements and the hill-sides were being underutilized agriculturally. It seems that the 'Umayri administrative center and the farmsteads were part of a well orchestrated governmental infrastructure primarily for the production of wine.

That it was a project of the central government also helps explain why so many farmsteads were built in a relatively short period of time and why the main buildings seem so monumental. It was a crown-sponsored program.

But why did the Ammonite monarchy decide to invest so heavily at this time? Josephus gives us a strong clue in *Antiquities* 10.9:7 when he mentions that, after the murder of Gealiah in 582, the Babylonians took revenge on Ammon for their complicity. I suggest that the al-'Umayri administrative center was built by the Ammonite monarchy to administer government sponsored grape plantations at the farmsteads to produce wine for export to Babylon as tribute after the Babylonians defeated Ammon in 582. The collection, bulking and shipment of the wine was handled by the officials living and working at al-'Umayri. The seals were used with official royal documents to keep track of bureaucratic proceedings, either as sales to the crown or as shipments to Babylon or other imperial storehouses.

The administrative buildings seem to have continued, with only slight changes,

well after the time of King Ba'alyasha', who may have begun this huge task. Two pieces of Attic pottery, imported from Greece in the late sixth or fifth centuries BC, were discovered in 1987 between the two floor levels in one of the administrative buildings.

Then, in 1989, two other finds appeared in Building B. They were again seal impressions. Stamped onto the handles of jars, there was no artwork on them and the letters were much larger and more crudely shaped than those on the Ammonite seals. Both impressions said exactly the same thing, but were made by two different seals (Herr 1992). The script on the impressions was not Ammonite as all our seals from al-'Umayri had been, but Aramaic and dated to the very end of the sixth century or the beginning of the fifth century BC. The first three letters make up a typical Ammonite hypocoristic: Shuba, perhaps short for Shub'il, followed by the national name Ammon. These impressions are similar to a class of seals and seal impressions found by the scores primarily in the Jerusalem region that contain the name *yh(w)d* "Judah". They, too, are written in the Aramaic script. And they, too, date to the late sixth or early fifth century BC. Our two Ammon seals are probably the Ammonite version of these *yh(w)d* seals.

Most scholars now believe that the *yh(w)d* seals were part of the Persian provincial taxation system, usually stamped onto jars of goods (Stern 1982: 202-206) and that the names on them probably indicate either the governor of the Persian province or the provincial treasurer in charge of tax collection. The same most likely holds true for the two Ammon seal impressions from al-'Umayri. Shuba was either the governor or treasurer of the Persian province of Ammon. Recently, in a synthesis of history and politics in Palestine during the Persian period, André Lemaire correctly admitted there

was not enough evidence to state whether or not Ammon was indeed a province (Lemaire 1990). But with these two seal impressions, we can now be more certain.

The presence of two impressions, made with different seals, confirms an official function connected with them. Potters in different locations probably had their own stamps bearing Shuba's name that they placed on jars made for the government. The jars, transported around the country, held taxes in kind. Two of those jars ended up in the same administrative building at Tall al-'Umayri where they may have held wine, continuing the same function of 'landscape production' as had taken place during the last years of the Ammonite monarchy.

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