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Wādī Khunayzīrah Astonishing Discoveries of 2018: Unknown Tombs from the Early Bronze Age and Nabataean Periods

Introduction

Until recently, very little has been known about the antiquities of Wādī Khunayzīrah. During Burton MacDonald's survey of the area in 1985–1986, site number 108, Rujm Khunayzīrah, was singled out due to interest in the Iron Age II and recommended for excavations, but none had ever taken place. However, from February to March 2018, rescue excavations were conducted by the Department of Antiquities staff from the Southern Ghawrs office. Some astonishing finds were revealed, namely well-built tombs with remarkable grave goods dating to the Early Bronze Age and Nabataean periods.

Wādī Khunayzīrah is located in the Southern Ghawrs, at the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea (36R 732623.84 3420578.99), cut across by the main Aqaba highway (Route 65; FIG. 1).

The northern side was selected by the Jordan Valley Authority to be dammed in order to divert water into a large water reservoir (*birkah*) to irrigate local lands for agriculture. Before these works began, the Department of Antiquities was contacted to investigate whether there were any antiquities, and consequently rescue excavations were conducted there.

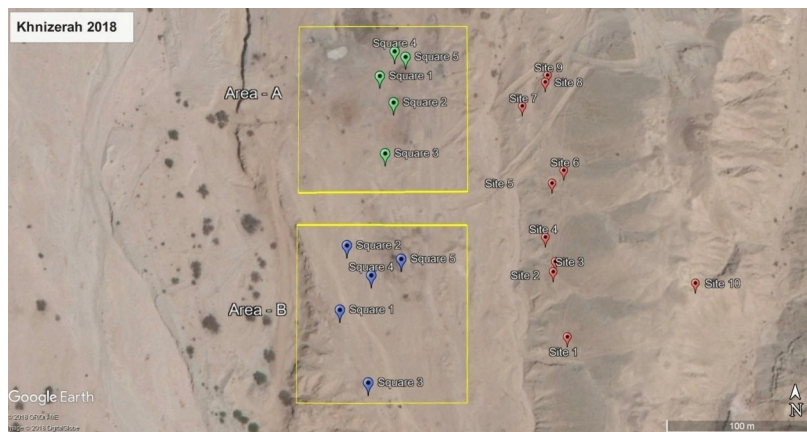
Two parts were designated as Area A and Area B (100×100 m each) respectively. Within each of these, five 4x4 m squares were plotted and excavated. In addition, a survey just east of the two squares identified ten archaeological sites (FIG. 2).

Early Bronze Age Tombs

Near Rujm Khunayzīrah (Site 10) in Area B, a tomb was identified and excavated (FIG. 3). On a section of the east side, only 1 m beneath the



1. Location of Wādī Khunayzīrah cut across by the Aqaba highway (Route 65).



2. Location of areas and sites investigated and excavated.



3. Tomb in Area B before excavation.



4. Stone-lined grave in Area B after excavation.



5. An adobe-made structure, probably a tomb.



ground, is a small semi-globular-shaped grave lined on the west side by stones. It was used to bury a child (FIG. 4). Associated with this grave was a rectangular adobe-made structure and another rectangular structure made of stones. Both of these were probably tombs (FIGS. 5–6).

A third structure was also excavated, which formed part of a double chambered adobe-built tomb similar to one found at Early Bronze Age II Numayrah (FIGS. 7–8). This structure, plus the pottery finds, help date the burials to the same period.

Two types of pottery forms were recovered from Area B: closed-form pots (FIG. 9) and open-form earthenware vessels (FIG. 10). Of particular interest was a pot found in a stone bowl (FIG. 11). Several copper-alloy pins were also found, which may have been associated with clothing.

In conclusion, the tombs excavated in Area B of Khunayzīrah were shallow (perhaps due to soil erosion), rectangular, and built of adobe bricks, but their funerary architecture is not well known. Human bones were well preserved and collected. Pottery vessels helped to date the burials to the Early Bronze Age II period.

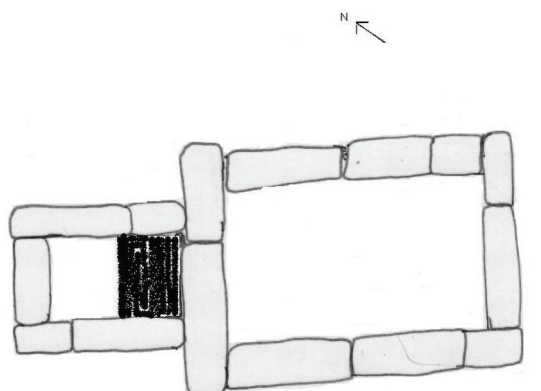
Nabataean Burials

Area A was located further to the west (FIG. 2). The burials there were at a much deeper level, over 2 m down, in well-preserved shaft tombs undercut to the east and covered by adobe bricks and stones similar to those found by Politis at Khirbat Qāzūn in Ghawr al-Mazra‘ah

6. A structure made of stones, probably a tomb.

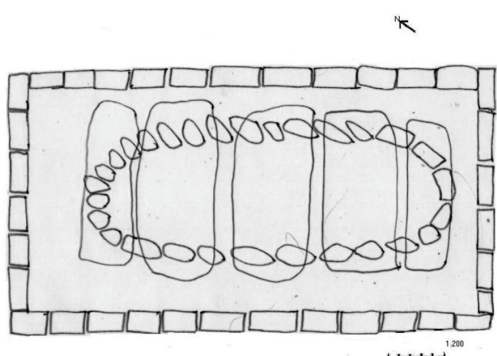


a



b

7. a-b) Double-chambered tomb similar to one found at Numayrah (M. Alzahrán).



8. Plan of Early Bronze Age II tomb structure found at Numayrah, made of stone within an adobe brick enclosure (M. Alzahrán).



a



b

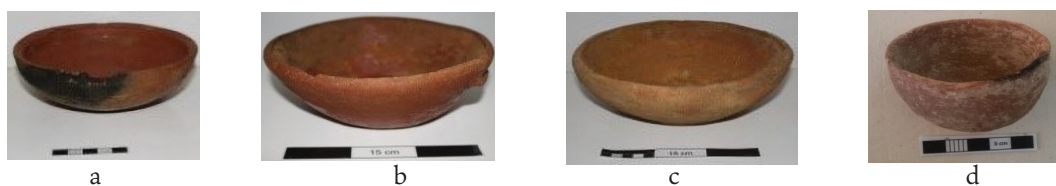


c



d

9. a) Flat-based medium-sized jar, white grits, firing (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5), b) flaring jar neck (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5), c) small jug with loop handle, painted in red (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5), d) rounded jar (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.4).



10. a) Bowl-shaped oil lamp (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.4), b) bowl with vestigial ledge handle (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.4), c) bowl (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5), d) cup-shaped oil lamp (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5).



11. Pot found in stone bowl from Area B dating to the Early Bronze Age II period (KHZ. 2018 Area B Sq.5).



a

b

12. a, b) 12. Shaft graves excavated in Area A of Khunayzīrah sealed with adobe bricks.

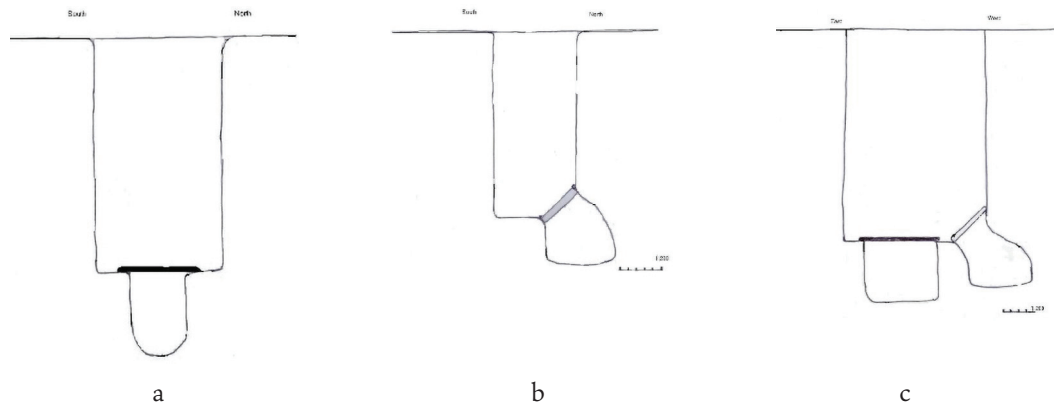
(FIGS. 12, 13a–b; Politis 2019: 434–6). The bodies were similarly wrapped in textiles or leather body-bags. Although few objects were found in the graves themselves, pottery dating to the 1st to 2nd c. AD (FIG. 14) and jewellery (FIG. 15) in their shafts and in the vicinity helped to date the burials to Nabataean–Late Roman times.

As is visible in a section of one shaft (FIG. 13c), one grave is carved into the north side of the shaft with a body wrapped in a textile, and another is

carved in the middle of the shaft with the deceased placed in a wooden coffin (FIG. 18). Both of the graves were oriented east-west. Pottery found in these graves dates to the Late Roman period. Other organic finds included a well-preserved pair of leather sandals (FIG. 17).

Conclusions

Both Area A and B burials represent unique finds at Wādī Khunayzīrah which were not known before. The extent of Early Bronze Age occupation is not as



13. Sections of deep shaft graves excavated in Area A of Khunayzīrah sealed with adobe bricks (M. Alzahrān).



14. Two-handled ribbed red cooking pot, Late Roman/Early Byzantine (KHZ. 2018 Area A Sq.6).



15. Pair of lunate-shaped gold earrings, *ca.* 1st to 2nd c. AD (KHZ. 2018 Area A Sq.6).



16. Fragmented wooden coffin from shaft tomb, *ca.* 1st to 2nd c. AD (KHZ. 2018 Area A Sq.6).



17. Leather sandals, *ca.* 1st to 2nd c. AD (KHZ. 2018 Area A Sq.6).

surprising, but still quite important considering the southerly limit. Nabataean presence should also not be unexpected as Wādī Khunayzīrah was within their territory. But, the fact that the burials have survived for centuries undisturbed makes them invaluable. Therefore, the preservation of the site is imperative and further archaeological investigations and excavations should be conducted there in order to put these discoveries in their proper cultural and regional contexts. The Iron Age was not represented in the areas investigated, but it also needs to be

examined in order to better understand Iron Age Rujm Khunayzīrah, which was located nearby.

Bibliography

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- Zahran, M.H. 2004. "The Excavation and Conservation at Numeira [in Arabic]." In *Report of the Directorate of Archaeological Studies*. Amman: Department of Antiquities.