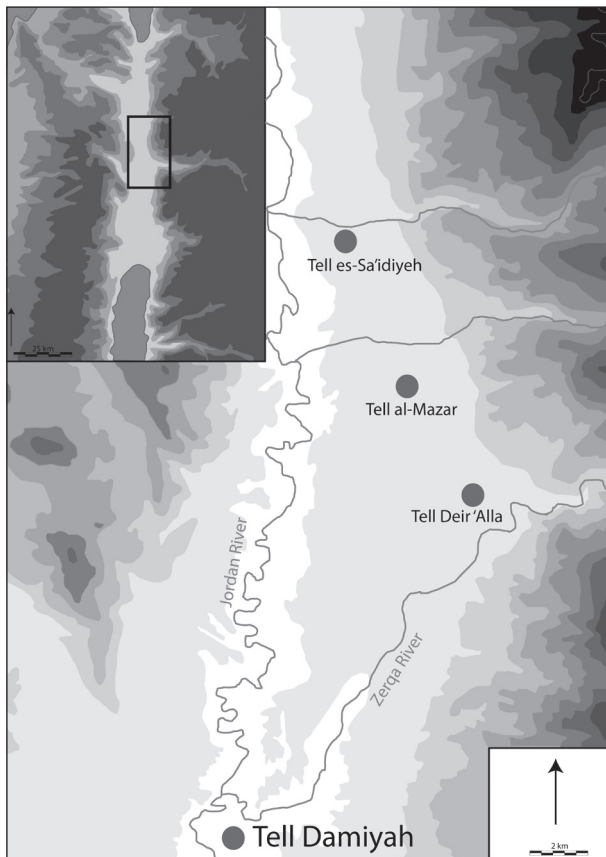


# RECYCLING THE VALLEY: PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 2016 AND 2018 EXCAVATIONS AT TALL DĀMIYAH

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## Introduction

Tall Dāmiyah is one of the few settlement mounds located on the east bank of the Zūr, just south of the confluence of the Az Zarqā' and the Jordan River (**Fig. 1**). It is, as the famous archaeologist William Foxwell Albright correctly describes, “a small but well-formed” archaeological site (**Fig. 2**; Albright 1926: 47). Its summit covers an area of less than



1. Map of the Central Jordan Valley and the location of Tall Dāmiyah.

one hectare, which is indeed small compared to many other sites in the area, like Tall Dayr 'Allā or Tall As Sa'īdiyyah. Human occupation started in the second Millennium BC on a natural rise, parts of which are still visible on the west side. Surface material and excavation results suggest that Tall Dāmiyah was occupied throughout the Iron Age, at least until the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, after which the mound was visited only occasionally (Petit 2009b; Petit 2013; Petit 2014; Petit and Kafafi 2016; Kafafi and Petit 2016, 2018; Petit and Kafafi 2018). Tall Dāmiyah's location is of strategic importance, for it guards one of the few fords of the Jordan River. Looking north from the summit one can see the impressive mound of Tall As Sa'īdiyyah in the distance.

Small archaeological rescue operations at Tall Dāmiyah started in 2004, after a bulldozer had cut the southern slope, resulting in increased surface run-off and erosion. This project was carried out by Omar al-Ghul from Yarmouk University and Lucas Petit, at that



2. Tall Dāmiyah in 2018, seen from the south (photograph by Yousef Al-Zu'bi).

time staff member of Leiden University (Kaptijn *et al.* 2005). It was decided together with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan to continue in 2005 to get a better idea of the site's occupation history (Petit *et al.* 2006). Discoveries from these seasons, such as a bulla inscribed with cuneiform and the remains of large anthropomorphic statues, suggested that Tall Dāmiyah was important during the Iron Age.

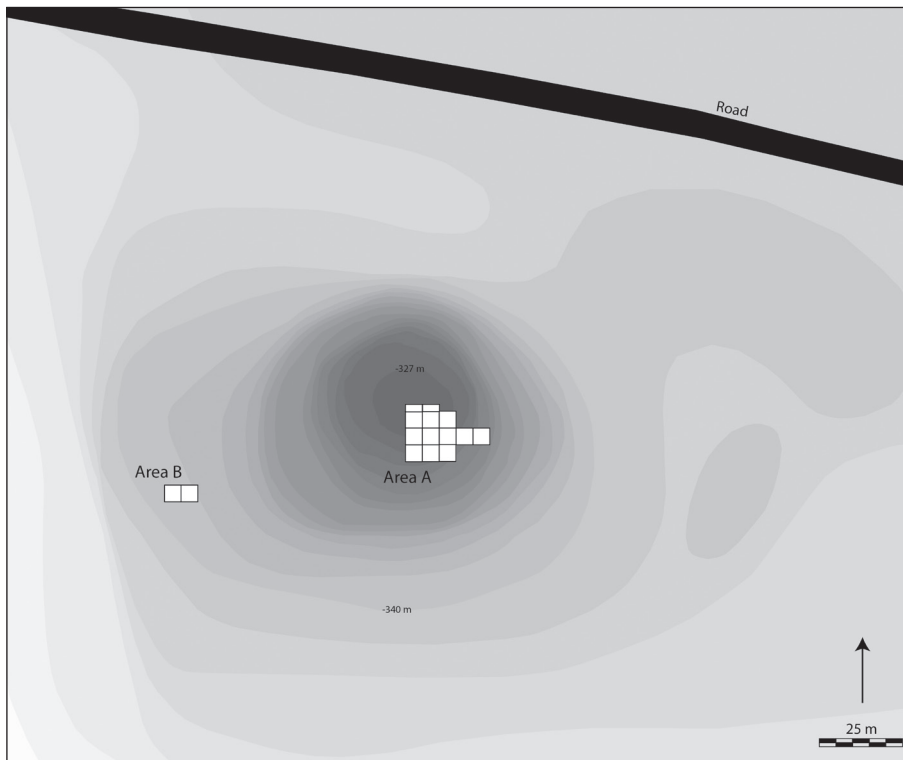
### Recycling the Valley

In 2012 the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities decided to renew the excavations at Tall Dāmiyah within the project *Recycling the Valley*. This project was initiated to study the intriguing short-term settlement cycles in the Central Jordan Valley during the first Millennium BC (Petit 2013; Kafafi and Petit 2018: 317-318). In this period the inhabitants of the region were avowedly involved in a continuing process of migration and return migration to search for the most favourable areas, while maintaining a sedentary way of life. This project intends to systematically investigate the role of the Central Jordan Valley during the Iron Age and Persian Period. Information from previously excavated sites in the Valley, such as Tall Dayr 'Allā and Tall Al Himmah, will be compared with new results

from the Valley and the eastern plateau. In 2014 Yarmouk University became an equal partner in the project, represented by Zeidan Kafafi.

As mentioned in previous publications, Tall Dāmiyah was continuously occupied from approximately the 15<sup>th</sup> until the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (Petit 2009b; Petit and Kafafi 2015, 2018; Kafafi and Petit 2016, 2018). This is in sharp contrast to the aforementioned short-term settlement cycles at other nearby sites, like Tall As Sa'īdiyyah, Tall Al Mazār, and Tall Dayr 'Allā (Van der Kooij 2001; Petit 2009b). This non-continuous occupation pattern has been attributed to catastrophic events and climate changes disrupting, among other things, the fragile irrigation system that was needed for agriculture (Kaptijn 2009; Petit 2009b). Tall Dāmiyah had apparently a different way of overcoming these challenges, or for some reason proved to be resilient.

In 2014 and 2015, the team discovered remains of a sanctuary that was completely burnt down around 700 BC, on the summit of the *tall*. Its inventory was encountered *in situ*, which is a rare find in the Southern Levant. It was concluded that Tall Dāmiyah functioned as a waypoint with a sanctuary for traders and travellers even at times when the rest of the valley was abandoned (Petit and Kafafi 2016).



3. Site plan with location of Area A (summit) and Area B (western foot).

### The 2016 Excavation Season

The 2016 excavation season ran from the 25<sup>th</sup> of September until the 20<sup>th</sup> of October. The team worked mainly on the summit, although some additional work was carried out on the ridge at the western foot of the *tall* (Fig. 3). The main aim during this season was to complete the investigations of the sanctuary, and to start uncovering the preceding occupation remains, dated provisionally to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Extra attention was paid to Persian-Hellenistic silos and the two later graveyards in order to understand the post-Iron Age occupation at Tall Dāmiyah (see for more information on the site's stratification, Petit and Kafafi 2016: 19; 2018; Kafafi and Petit 2018).

In area B one square from previous seasons was re-opened, in order to further explore the puzzling nature of the occupation at the western foot of the site (Petit and Kafafi 2018: 332-344). Other sites in the Central Jordan Valley show settlement areas and cemeteries on so-called “lower *talls*” such as Tall Al Mazār and Tall As Sa‘īdiyyah. In order to decipher the settlement size of Tall Dāmiyah during the Iron Age, it was necessary to understand this lower area and to see if this part of the site was inhabited during the first millennium BC. After two seasons, it seems clear that this western lower ridge was never intensively occupied. The team discovered alternating layers of burnt material on top of natural sand deposits. A calibrated radiocarbon date (1385-1235 BC)<sup>1</sup> ruled out the possibility that these layers were the result of the medieval sugar industry, as was proposed before (Petit and Kafafi 2018: 333-334). Furthermore, based on Late Bronze pottery, we suggest that this area was not a living quarter, but used for an unknown industry during the Late Bronze Age. Clear Iron Age occupation could not be detected in any of the excavated squares. Only after the Iron Age, pits and graves were dug into the foot of *tall*, cutting through these burnt layers.

In area A, on the summit, more than 40 Byzantine and Ottoman period graves were studied, as well as numerous Persian-Hellenistic pits. The Ottoman graves wrought havoc on an earlier Byzantine graveyard, making dating of

individual graves challenging. Most clearly Ottoman period burials were often constructed with wooden beams, of which fragments were encountered which often contained iron or bronze pins. The Byzantine burials, on the other hand, often contained beads and occasionally yielded a glass vessel. Furthermore, the latter graves themselves were not cut as deep as the Ottoman ones. Extensive research on both graveyards will be carried out in the near future.

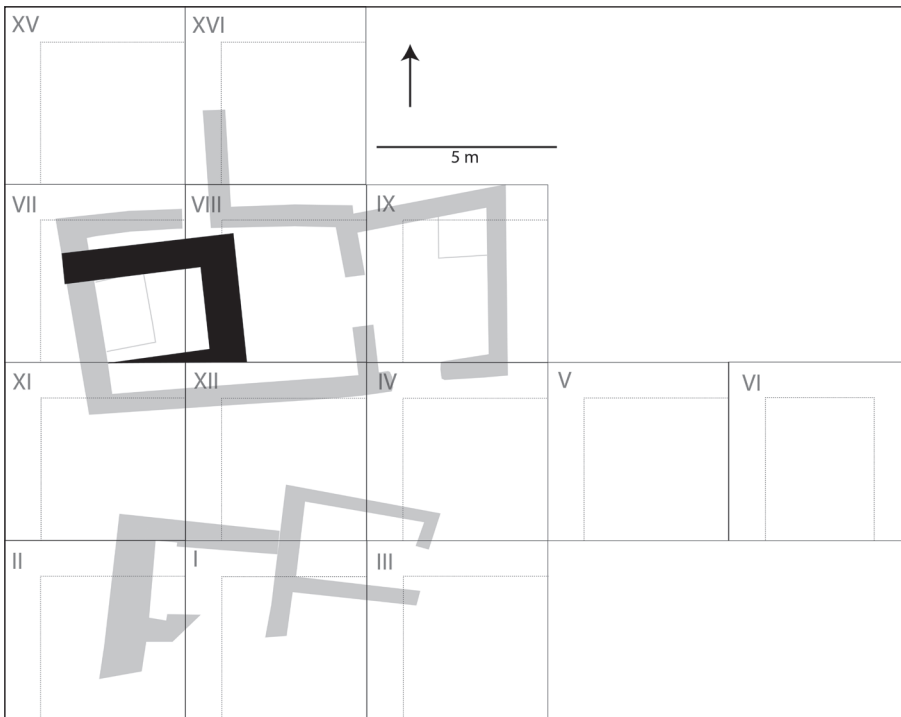
The pits, all dated to the Persian-Hellenistic periods, were filled intentionally with organic material and debris from the settlement mound<sup>2</sup>. It has been proposed in the past that these were silos in which animal fodder was stored for dry seasons (Petit 2014). In such pits in square VII and VIII, the team additionally discovered many loom-weights. Such loom-weights are also encountered at other sites in the Central Jordan Valley (*cf.* Boertien 2013). Textile production seems to have been an important industry between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, even though the region had no permanent settlements during this period.

Square XI was opened to provide a connection between the sanctuary and the building to its south. Other than several graves, a walking surface was found, belonging to the sanctuary phase. This surface was encountered somewhat higher in elevation than that in the sanctuary building (Fig. 4). Most of square XI probably comprised a street, similar to squares XII and IV, and sedimentation over time caused the difference in elevation between the interior and exterior surfaces. The street sloped down towards the east, and it is postulated that there was a path all the way down along the steep eastern slope. A rare find from the street levels in square XI was a worked bone handle, burnt by the conflagration around 700 BC (Fig. 5).

In the southernmost square, square I, the uppermost layers can be dated to the 9<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century BC. The aforementioned bulldozer had not only removed most of the buildings south of the sanctuary, but also the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC—remains immediate below. The 9<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century BC—layers in square I consist of a bread oven in a courtyard, surrounded by two buildings (Fig. 6). The pottery from this phase

1. GrA 68284 – Age BP 3045, Error +/-35 (calibrated 1 sigma: 1385-1235 BC).

2. GrA 68283 – Age BP 2225, Error +/-30 (calibrated 1 sigma: 365-350, 300-210 BC).



4. Plan of the sanctuary (grey) and the older building (black).

differs from the sanctuary phase, which is particularly visible by an increase in the amount of red-slipped sherds.

### The 2018 Excavation Season

After a break in 2017, the excavation resumed in October and November 2018. Work was carried out in six squares, all located on the summit of Tall Dāmiyah (see Fig. 3). The aim was to get more information about 8<sup>th</sup> century BC phases, located directly below the sanctuary. Additionally, the area north of the sanctuary was investigated.

At the beginning of the season the remaining features from the sanctuary were investigated. Among these were two platforms, both constructed from sun-dried mudbricks and covered with lime plaster. In previous seasons figurines, animal skulls, one fragmented head of an anthropomorphic statue and a pottery stand were encountered immediately next to these podia. Likely most of them had fallen off the platforms during the final conflagration (Petit and Kafafi 2016, 2018). After removing the western platform, in square VII, the team surprisingly discovered the skeletal remains of a snake directly underneath it (Fig. 7). This context is now being investigated, to see if this animal was placed here intentionally, or if it was intrusive. Radiocarbon dating of its bones could

provide further insight into this matter. While seemingly quite a unique situation, depictions of snakes have been found frequently near



5. Fragment of a bone handle.



6. Mudbrick walls, a bread oven and the remains of a ceramic bowl found in square I.



platforms in Iron Age temples and sanctuaries, also in the Jordan Valley (e.g. Rowe 1940: pl. 14:1.3 and pl. 16:1-3).

Trenches XV and XVI were opened directly north of the sanctuary, to check the northern wall and adjacent areas. In former articles the sanctuary was considered a freestanding building with an entrance in the south wall (e.g. Petit and Kafafi 2016). However, since the northern enclosure was partly hidden in the baulks of squares VII, VIII and IX, it remained a hypothesis that needed further investigation. An additional argument to assume adjacent rooms to the north, was the excellent preservation of the northern wall of the sanctuary (at least 1.5m) compared to the *ca.* 20cm height of the southern one. If the sanctuary was free-standing, walls would have been preserved more or less equally. The results from the two new trenches confirmed the idea that the sanctuary was part of a larger complex. In square XVI we discovered a second room probably used for storage (Fig. 8). A horse figurine on the floor was the same as those found in the sanctuary, but unfortunately Persian and Hellenistic pit makers had damaged a large part of the floor.

After the 2018 season, we are confident that the sanctuary was part of a larger complex. The complex could be entered via a small opening in the northern wall of the sanctuary (see Fig. 4). It is at this stage unclear if the whole complex was roofed, or if there was an inner courtyard surrounded by more rooms. The limited amount of roof material in square XV suggests the latter.

In squares VII, VIII, IX and XII, occupation remains from the 9<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC were excavated. The main feature of this phase, discovered in square VII, is a

rectangular building constructed with sun-dried mudbricks. It was oriented slightly offset from the east-west axis with a large entrance towards the north (see Fig. 4). The western part of the room, presumably half of the building, remains unexcavated. Due to the thickness of the walls (1.12m), the character of this structure is more massive than the later sanctuary with 0.63m thick walls. The team recovered the remains of an outsized ceramic vessel on its floor (Fig. 9). Unfortunately, most of the sherds were



7. The remains of a snake below the western podium.



8. Yousef al-Zu'bi making photographs of a floor context.



9. Fragments of a large krater on the floor.

removed by yet another Persian-Hellenistic period circular pit. The sherd fragments belong to a large krater with an out-curving rim, a ridge with fingerprints on the neck, and a spherical body. The red painted decoration on this vessel is organized in at least two superimposed registers (Fig. 10). The lower register repeats a series of irregular stepped triangles, whereas the upper one shows animal and plant motifs resembling the well-known tree of life, often interpreted as symbolizing fertility (cf. Giovino 2007). A good parallel of this depiction was found on a large pithos from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, in the Sinai peninsula, where it was considered to have been used in cultic activities (Dever 1984: fig. 7). Considering that both this building and the krater were found directly underneath the later sanctuary is a reasonable argument to assume continuous cultic activities at Tall Dāmiyah during the Iron Age. However, to date no other objects related to cultic practice were found in the occupation layers of this phase.

In squares VIII, IX, and XII the team reached courtyard layers below the aforementioned massive building, in which some bread ovens were found. Hardly any construction material was encountered in these layers, leading us to assume that if there were buildings in use during this phase, they would have been located elsewhere on the summit.

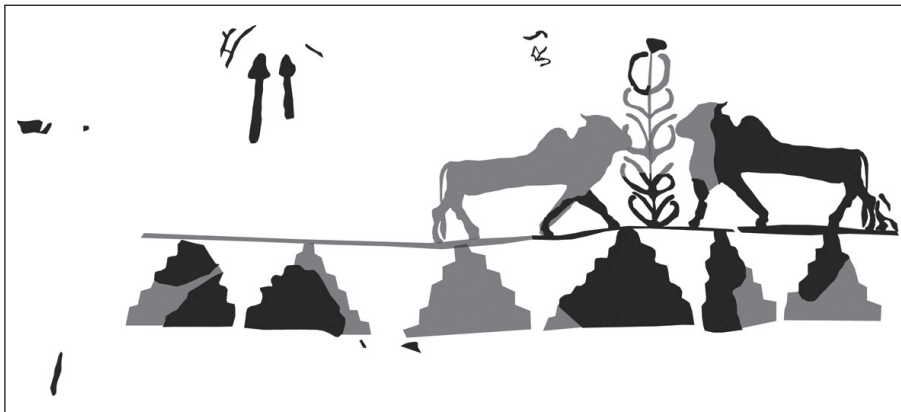
### Discussion and Future Challenges

Tall Dāmiyah is considered to be an important waypoint with a sanctuary during much of the Iron Age. This small site, consisting of the sanctuary on the summit flanked by only a few other buildings, attracted people from all over the Southern Levant and beyond. Among the finds that attest to these far-reaching contacts are Cypro-Phoenician pottery and Assyrian Palace Ware, but also Mesopotamian seals and Egyptian scarabs.

Furthermore, Tall Dāmiyah consists of multiple occupation phases that follow each other relatively quickly, without long abatements. Fires, earthquakes, and short periods of erosion can be identified, but these did not seem to stop people from using the site as a place for cultic practice. In contrast to sites with a long, but interspersed occupation histories, Tall Dāmiyah is excellent for identifying small- and large-scale changes, especially in material culture. With detailed stratigraphic analyses and techniques such as XRF analysis, the team hopes to identify these changes and similarities in occupation, material culture, and long-distance trade during the Iron Age. The *Recycling the Valley* project intends to utilize the unique archaeological context of Tall Dāmiyah to refine the occupation history and material culture chronology of the Jordan Valley and beyond during especially the Iron Age.

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10. A sketch of the drawing on the krater (dark grey is present, light grey is reconstruction)

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