

Barsinia: a Newly-Excavated Archaeological Site in North-Western Jordan

Introduction

On the basis of the results of a survey carried out in the west Irbid region during September 2005, a number of prominent rural archaeological sites can be recognized. These sites reflect flourishing activity throughout many historical periods. One of the major sites, rich in archaeological remains and continuously occupied from the Early Bronze Age until the Ottoman period, is Barsinia (El-Khoury *et al.* 2005; Site 18). Excavating these sites was subsequently a priority, as rural sites have received less attention in the literature than urban settlements.

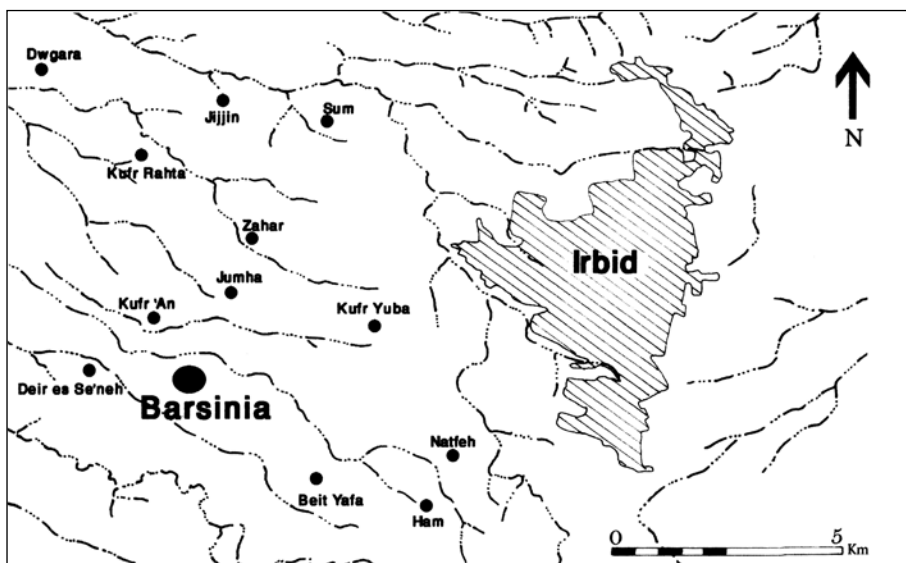
Location

Barsinia (JADIS 2221030 Barsina) is located in north-western Jordan, 15km west of the modern city of Irbid and 1.5km east of the small village of Dayr as-Si'nah (FIG. 1). The pottery assemblage found at the site during the west Irbid survey and first season of excavation confirmed that it was occupied for more than 4,000 years, from the Early Bronze

Age until the last century. It is therefore typical of the rural sites in this region, which were occupied for long periods of time. The site was abandoned about 100 years ago after its inhabitants moved to the nearby village of Dayr as-Si'nah. The name of the Barasneh family, who live at Dayr as-Si'nah today, is most probably derived from Barsinia. The formation of the rural communities of the region, most of which are ethnically based, will be a topic for future research.

Nature of the Site

Barsinia covers an area of *ca.* 112,000 square meters (FIG. 2) at an altitude of 512 meters above sea level. The area is domestic in nature, with tombs surrounded by agricultural fields. About 300 meters south of the site are some structures which appear to be connected to it. There is also a rock-cut press, comprising a large rectangular basin more than one meter deep (FIG. 3), and a quarry from which its building stones were cut (FIG. 4). The surveyed



1. Location of Barsinia.



2. Site of Barsinia, looking north-east.



3. Press located south of the site.

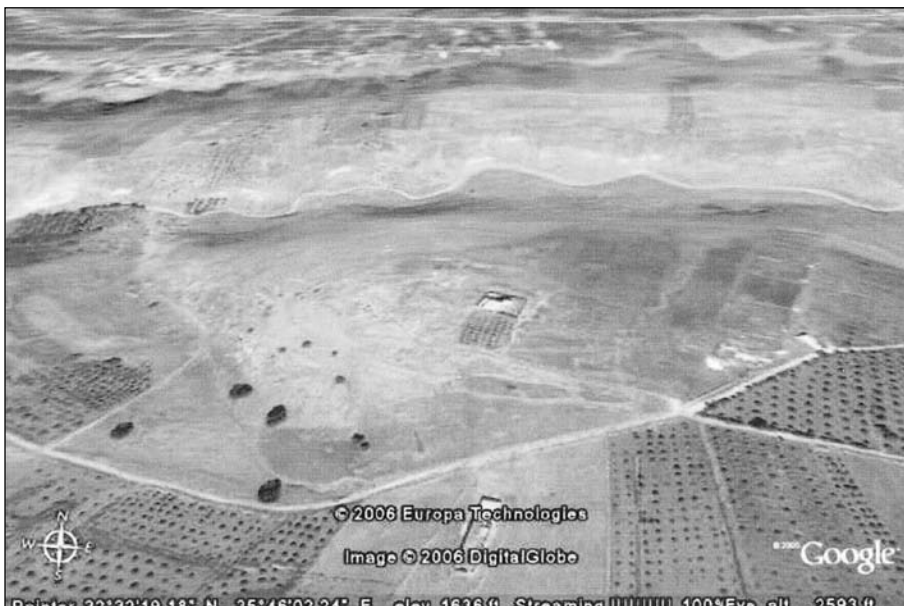


4. Quarry located south of the site.

also recorded 17 cisterns, a number of caves, some partially walled-in, and traces of buildings within the overall area of the site (FIG. 5).

The settlement demonstrates that rural dwellings were established in the region in ancient times and were also common in the later periods, up to the

present day. To date, our main source of information for most of the ancient rural sites in the region comes from archaeological survey. Unfortunately, although survey can provide information about site distribution and an indication of the intensity of occupation throughout the ages, it does not provide sufficiently



5. Aerial view of the site.

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detailed information about individual sites.

The landscape around Barsinia is typical of the Mediterranean highlands that make up most of north-western Jordan. Its ecological zones range from semi-arid to semi-humid. These highlands receive Jordan's highest levels of rainfall, have a generally cool climate and separate the Jordan valley and margins from the plains of the eastern desert. The soil at the site is of the type known as *terra rossa* or red Mediterranean soil (FIG. 6). It is situated in a region that forms part of the Mediterranean climatic zone, the main characteristics of which are winter rain and summer drought. It has a modest rainy season from November to March, followed by five completely rainless summer months between May and September. Winter temperatures average 5 to 10° C.; summer temperatures range between 25 and 30° C. The average annual rainfall is around 600 to 700 millimetres. In general, the climatic and geographical situation of the site is favourable for farming; indeed, the entire region is thought to be capable of yielding crops without irrigation. The plains around the site could be considered as cereal-producing areas.

Barsinia flourished and reached its peak during the Roman and Byzantine periods. It had direct contact with the large cities of the area, being just 15km south-west of Capitolias, 30km north of Gerasa and 20km east of Pella. It was one of the few sites with evidence for continuous occupation, even during the Hellenistic and Abbasid eras when there was a decline in both the number of sites and the population. Numerous imported objects at the site, especially during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine

periods, show that at least some of the inhabitants engaged in activities other than agriculture.

Architectural Remains

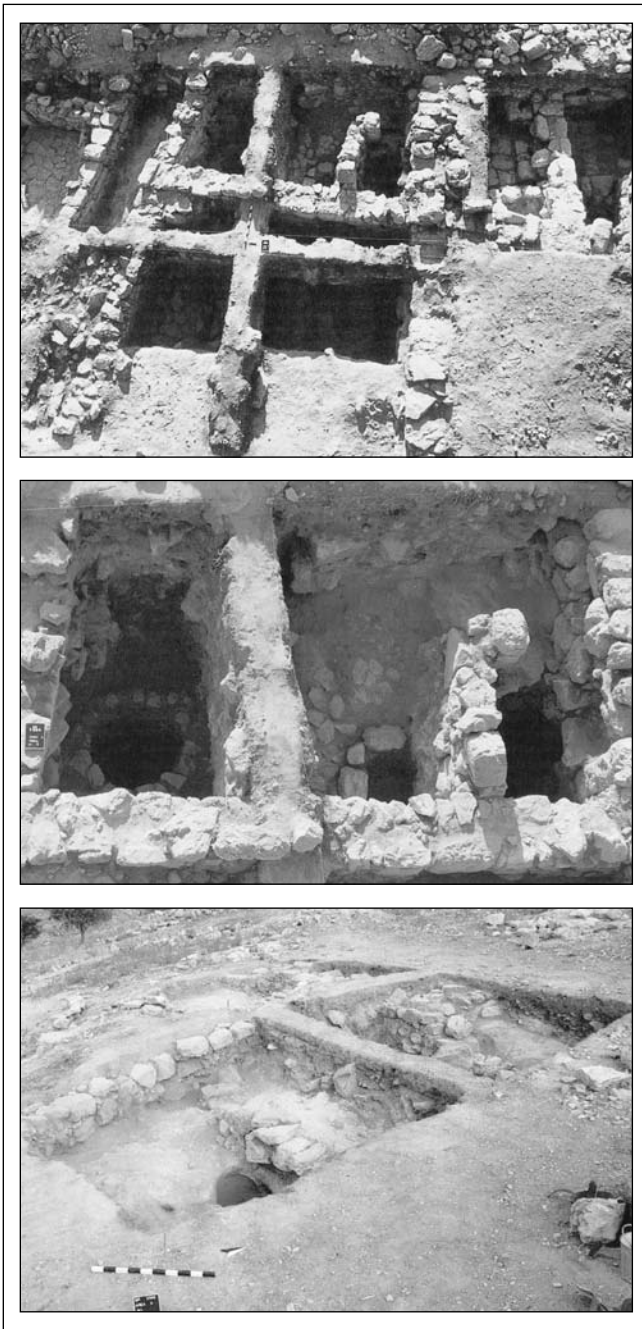
The nature of the dwelling houses at the site was revealed during the first season of excavation. The dwelling houses that were partly-excavated (FIG. 7a, b) suggest that several houses were grouped together in a single neighborhood. The architectural remains uncovered so far are of medium quality. The walls are mostly built of large cut and uncut stones. They were re-built in different phases, as demonstrated by the presence of blocked entrances. The upper-most levels of the walls were built of different types of re-used stone and both quality and technique vary. The floors were paved by stone slabs, parts of which were still preserved in some of rooms. However, other floors were destroyed and the stone slabs re-used in blocking entrances and re-building the upper levels of walls.

On the basis of the pottery, the site was occupied for a long period of time. Late Byzantine sherds are predominant, but Umayyad sherds were also found in large numbers, as well as late Roman and a few early Roman sherds. Individual Abbasid, Ayyubid / Mamluk, Fatimid, and Ottoman potsherds were also found.

Two test pits were dug down to the bedrock and encountered earlier phases of occupation. These test pits showed that some walls were built earlier than expected. According to pottery readings, the site was occupied from the Early Bronze Age onwards. The most visible period of occupation exposed in the test pits was Hellenistic. Two grain silos (FIG.



6. Agricultural fields around the site.

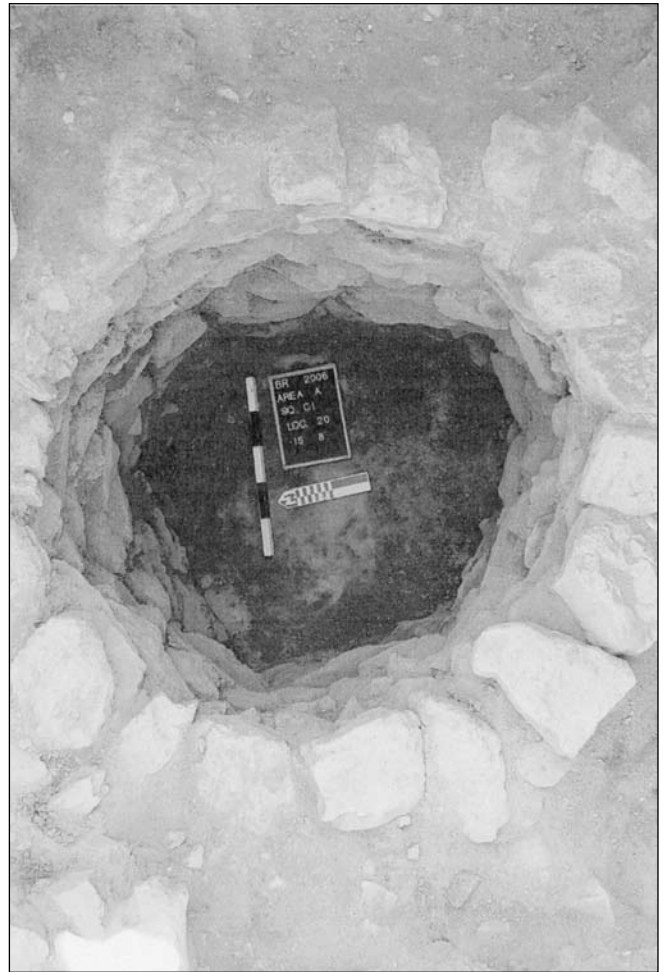


7a, b, c. Excavated plots in Area A.

8) and a Rhodian jar handle (FIG. 9) dated to the 2nd century BC were found.

Tombs

Apart from the building remains, tombs are the most obvious monuments at the site and indicate the extent to which the countryside around the cities flourished. Barsinia was notable for the variety of its tombs. They are indicative of a high standard of living and productive economy, especially

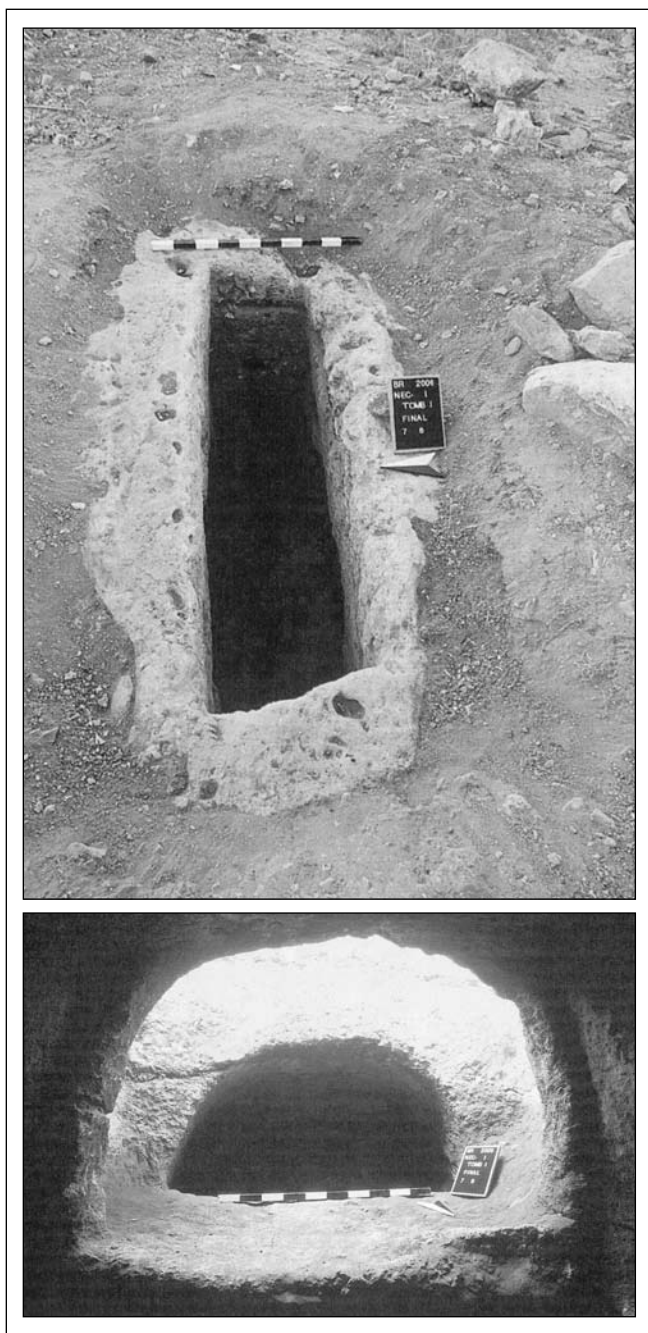


8. Silo in area A.



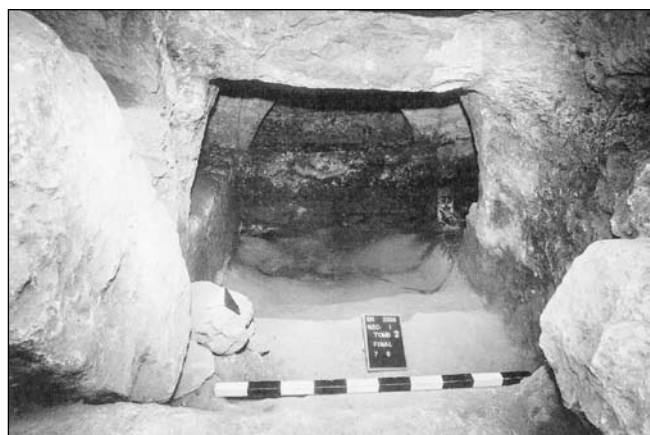
9. Rhodian stamped amphora handle.

during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. They are also good evidence for the presence of wealthy individuals in the countryside. Four different types of tomb have been excavated: a chamber tomb with shaft entrance (FIG. 10a, b), a cave chamber tomb with horizontal entrance (FIG. 11), an individual simple rock-cut tomb (FIG. 12) and

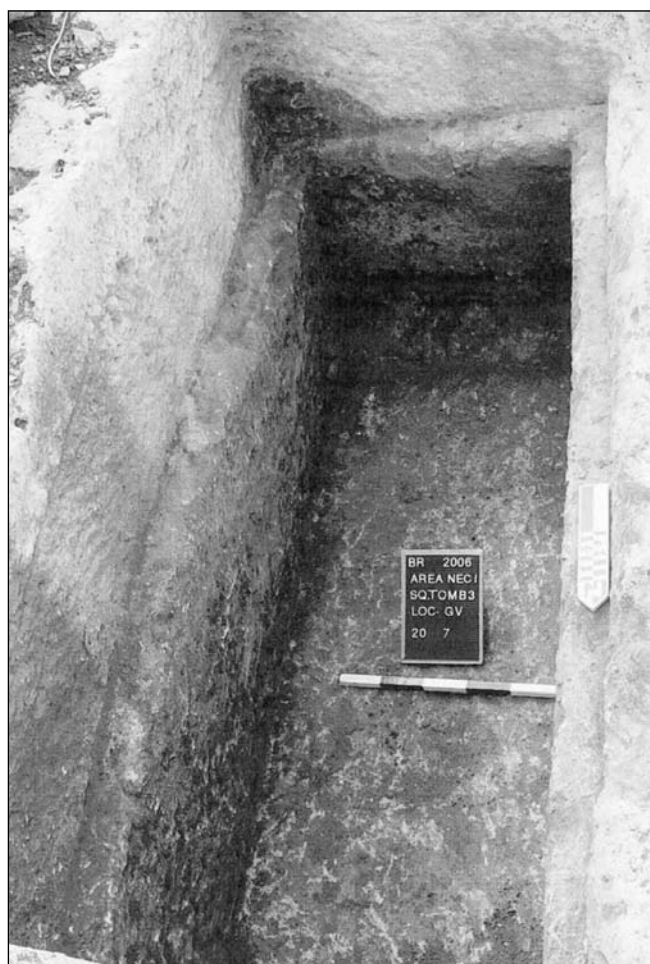


10a, b. Chamber tomb with shaft entrance.

a monumental built-up tomb (FIG. 13). The first three types are recognizable as the most familiar tomb types of the region. The chamber and shaft tombs contained multiple burials cut into the soft limestone. The burials were originally covered with soft limestone slabs. Fragments of these slabs were found inside and outside the tombs. The fourth type is a kind of mausoleum, or tower tomb, and usually served not only as a tomb but also as a cult place. All the tombs contained individual potsherds and



11. Chamber tomb with horizontal entrance.



12. Individual simple rock-cut tomb.

human bones in extremely fragmentary condition. They were in great disorder, owing to looting in recent and perhaps ancient times.

Conclusion

Barsinia is a very fine example of a prominent rural archaeological site in north-western Jordan. The



13. Monumental built-up tomb.

results of the first season of excavation provided a wealth of information about the nature of occupation at the site, especially during the Classical and early Islamic periods. The continuous occupation at the site is evidence for its importance from the Early Bronze Age until about 100 years ago. The quantity of information from the first season of excavation is not enough to permit a detailed reconstruction of the history of the site. However, it clarified the occupational phases and hints at the importance of the site, especially during the Classical and early Islamic periods. This information will encourage further archaeological and ethno-archaeological studies at the site, aimed at clarifying the development of rural settlements in the region from ancient periods to the present.

Recommendations

Soon after the end of the first season of excavation, extensive looting and illegal excavations took place (FIG. 14). Many architectural elements, such as the standing walls, tombs and paved floors were destroyed by the locals (FIG. 15). Small shelters were built over the ruins to facilitate furtive illegal excavation (FIG. 16). The other main risks to the site are a lack of maintenance and the need for conservation of in-situ excavated remains. One hopes that this paper has identified some of the key problems related to site protection and preservation. The site was subjected to destruction and theft even before excavation. It is urgent to highlight the need for guidelines and planning procedures relating to the design and implementation of future projects. It is also necessary to make recommendations for future study, not only at this site but also at other excavated sites in the region.



14. Illegal excavations at the necropolis.



15. The destroyed built-up tomb, shown previously in FIG 12.



16. Small shelter built by the locals to shield illegal excavations from view.

Bibliography

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