

AN EARLY BRONZE AGE IV CEMETERY AT AL-BAŞŞAH, NEAR 'IRAQ AL-AMIR

by
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Background

Recent work conducted along the road from Wadi es-Sir to 'Iraq al-Amir has revealed the presence of a number of archaeological sites. One of them is an Early Bronze Age cemetery of shaft tombs located near Kahf al-Başşah, or Mugharat al-Kaniseh, a site with the remains of a Byzantine cave-church and an Islamic cemetery, already under Department of Antiquities protection (JADIS 2214.003). The new site, named al-Başşah, is located at Palestine grid coordinates 223.36 149.26 (map 3153.1.NW), and is listed in JADIS under the site number 2214.034.

The limits of the cemetery are still unknown, but it approximately extends to the north to Kahf al-Başşah and the modern cemetery, and to the east and south above the valley floor of 'Iraq al-Amir. Salvage excavations were conducted in 1994 by a team of archaeologists of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, directed by Mohammed Waheeb.¹ four tombs were excavated, all of them disturbed by bulldozing and ancient silting of the rock-cut chambers.

A limited survey was conducted in the area of the cemetery. It revealed rock-cut classical tombs, cisterns and wells, wine presses, rock-cut features such as quarries and channels, and Early Bronze, Roman and Byzantine pottery fragments.

As far as the tombs are concerned, they average 3 m in length by 2.50 m in width, and are 1.30 to 1.70 m high. They probably had a shaft located to the east of the chambers, but this section of the tombs was bulldozed before archaeological investigation could be conducted. As regards distinguishing features, tomb 3 has a small lamp niche, but no lamps were found among the

grave goods; tomb 2 is either a bilobate tomb or a single chamber with a pillar. Unfortunately the bulldozing of this section of the tomb prevented further study. Besides this feature, tomb 2 also has steps leading down into the chamber.

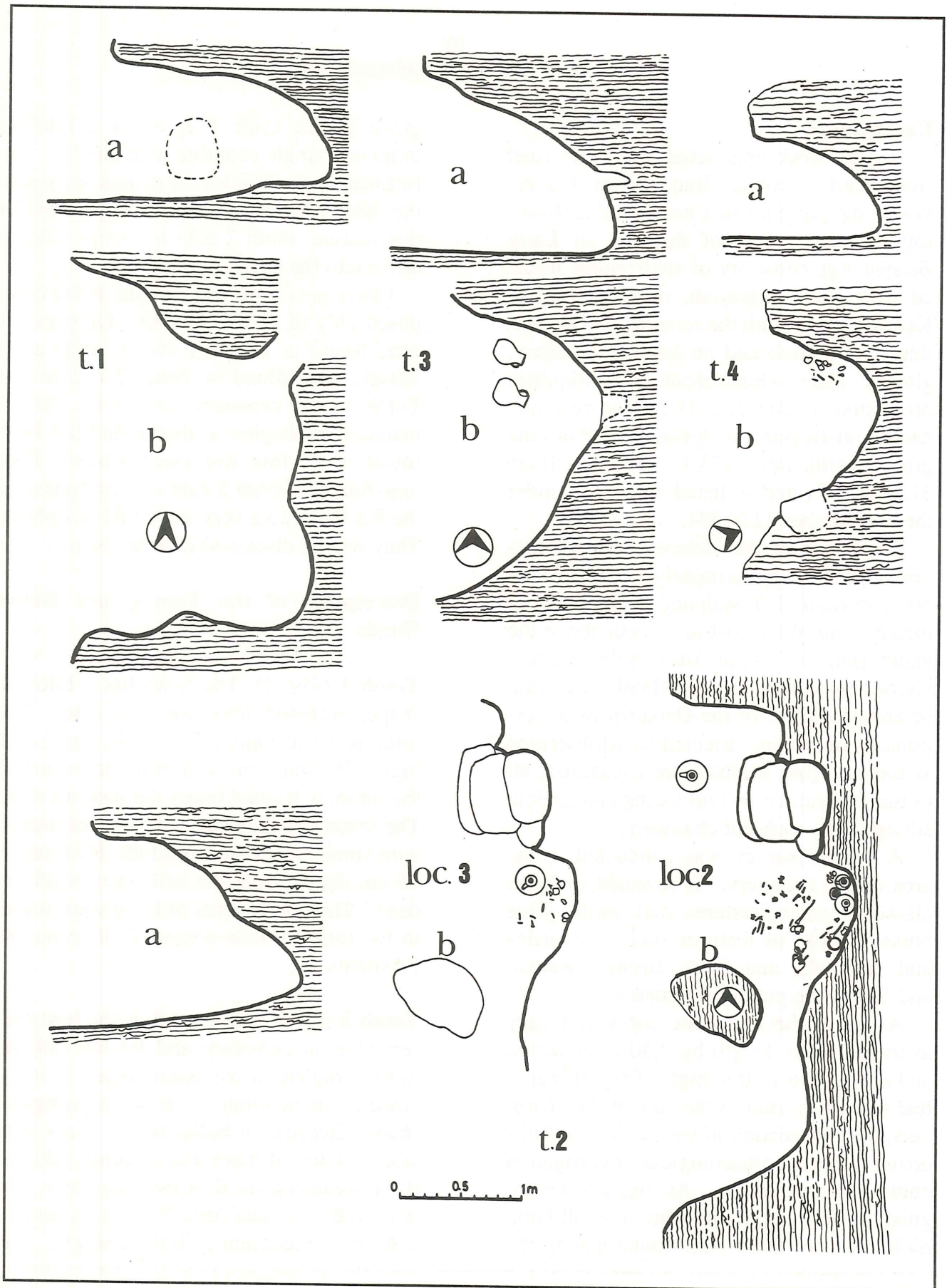
Grave goods are very simple, being composed only of pottery vessels. Only sherds were found in Tombs 1 and 4, while eight vessels were found in Tomb 2 and two in Tomb 3. The cemetery dates to the EB IV: materials belonging to this period has been found in all four excavated tombs. Four jugs found in tomb 2 date to a late phase of the EB IV, or to a very early MB IIA phase. They will be discussed in detail below.

Description of the Tombs and Grave Goods

Tomb 1 (Fig. 1): The tomb has a bilobate shape, accessed from the east side. The tomb is 3.3 m long, 2.3 m wide, and 1.3 m high. The shaft, in the north-east section of the tomb, is located under the modern road. The tomb was silted up with red soil mixed with small stones and roof fall. Roof fall is 15 cm deep, while the soil layer is 25 cm deep. Three fragments of bone were found in the tomb. Finds consisted of some EB IV sherds.

Tomb 2 (Fig. 1): This tomb is the best preserved in the cemetery, and the one with the most complete grave assemblage. It is located north of tomb 1. It has an irregular shape. Because of bulldozing it is not possible to know if there was a central pillar or if the tomb consisted of two chambers. As it is today, it measures 4.30 m in length, 1.80 m in width and 1.70 m in height. The

1. The team included Zuheir Zubi, Yazid Elayan, and Emsetif Suleiman.



1: Tombs 1-4. a: section; b: plan

entrance is on the east side and is blocked by fallen stones. Three steps lead from the entrance to the tomb floor. Three layers of deposits were found in the tomb. The first is composed of roof fall of chalky *huwwar*, 10 cm deep, layer 2 was composed of red soil, 30 cm deep, and layer 3 was composed of brown-red soil. Water seepage affected the contents of the chamber, which moved the vessels around. Skeletal remains were found in layers 2 and 3. In locus 2 a broken skull was found, with other skeletal remains, while in locus 3 two broken skulls were found, along with other bone fragments.

Finds: locus 2: seven jugs, one bowl; locus 3: one jar.

Locus 2:

- Jug (I.AR.4; Fig. 2:1): Medium jug (20.4 high, 19.6 diameter) with strap handle from below vertical rim to shoulder. Impressed finger nail decoration on handle and at base of neck. Squat ovoid body, flat base, tall neck. Well fired ware with small to medium inclusions. Human bones were contained in this jar. 10YR 7/2 ware. EB IV.

- Jug (I.AR.5; Fig. 2:2): Medium jug (20.7 high, 16.0 diameter) with loop handle from below rounded vertical rim to shoulder. Roulette decoration on handle and at rim base. Tall body with slight carination at mid body. Gritty ware with small to medium inclusions. 10YR 7/3. EB IV/MB IIA.

- Jug (I.AR.6; Fig. 2:3): Medium jug (18.0 high, 14.2 diameter) with loop handle from rim to shoulder. Everted rim with ridge at base of neck. Button base, slightly rounded. Fine ware, with some limestone inclusions. 2.5YR 6/4. EB IV/MB IIA.

- Jug (I.AR.7; Fig. 2:4): Small jug (15.2 high, 12.3 diameter) with loop handle from rim to shoulder. Vertical rim, flat bottom, slightly carinated body. Gritty ware with small grog and limestone inclusions, well fired. 7.5YR 7/4 exterior. EB IV/MB IIA.

- Jug (I.AR.8; Fig. 2:5): Small jug (14.8 high, 12.2 diameter) very similar to jug

I.AR.6, with handle from rim to shoulder. Everted rim with ridge at base of neck. Button base, slightly rounded. Fine ware with small inclusions, well fired. 2.5YR 6/4 exterior. EB IV/MB IIA.

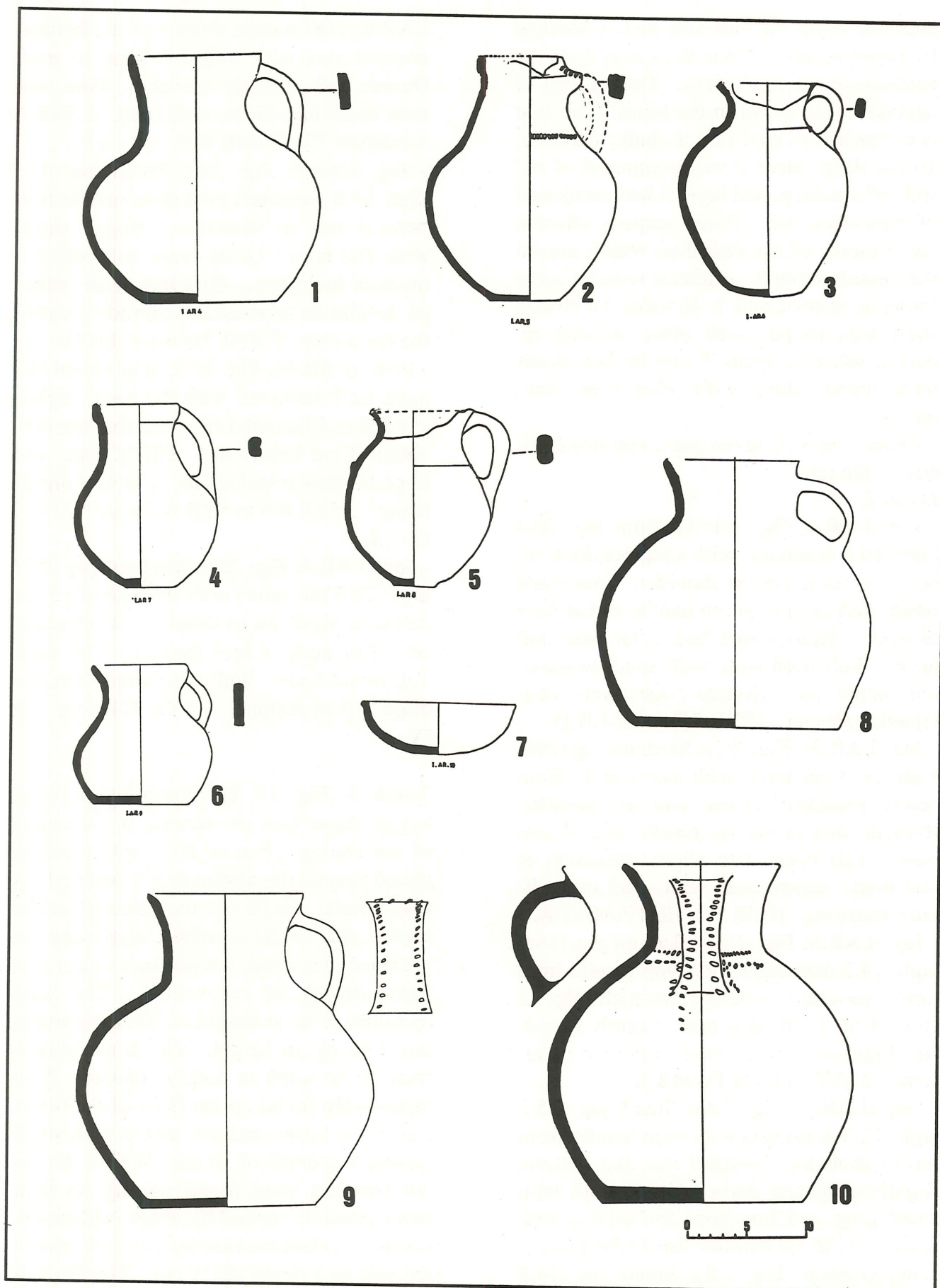
- Jug (I.AR.9; Fig. 2:6): Small jug (11.5 high, 11.0 diameter) with strap handle from vertical rim to shoulder. Baggy shape, wide flat base. Gritty ware with small to medium inclusions. Rim has small indented decoration produced by slightly pressing the fresh clay. 7.5YR 7/4 ware. EB IV.

- Bowl (I.AR.10; Fig. 2:7): Small bowl (4.7 high, 12.3 diameter) with flat base, slightly everted and flattened rim, and shallow carination 2 cm below rim. Gritty ware with large limestone inclusions. Cracked during firing. 2.5YR 6/6 to 5YR 6/2 ware. EB IV.

Loc. 3:

- Jug (I.AR.3; Fig. 2:8): Medium jug (22.6 high, 22.5 diameter) with strap handle from below vertical rim to shoulder. Undecorated. Tall neck, wheel thrown. Flat base. Tall ovoid body. Well fired ware with medium grit inclusions. 7.5YR 7/4 ware. EB IV.

Tomb 3 (Fig. 1): The tomb has a round baggy shape with an entrance in the center of the ceiling. Part of the tomb could be traced despite the destruction it suffered. A small niche 20x10 cm was located in the eastern side of the chamber, suggesting the presence of a lamp, but no such object was found during the excavations. The tomb measures 2 m in length, 2.50 m in width, and 1.60 m in height. The *huwwar* bedrock of the tomb is deeply fissured. Two layers were found on the floor of the tomb. Layer 1 is brown-red soil mixed with small stones, to a depth of 20 cm. Within this locus two jars were found, resting on their sides, possibly moved by water infiltration. Locus 2 is characterized by soft and smooth red soil to a depth of 25 cm. The floor is flat *huwwar*, without evidence of bedding



2: Tomb 2: pottery (1-8); Tomb 3: pottery (9-10).

layers.

Finds: Two jars, EB IV.

- Jar (I.AR.1; Fig. 2:9): Large jar (26.6 high, 25.2 diameter) with strap handle from below rim to shoulder. Vertical neck with slightly everted rim. Finger nail impressed decoration on handle. Squat ovoid body and large flat base. Gritty ware with small inclusions. 10YR 8/3 ware.

- Jar (I.AR.2; Fig. 2:10): Large jar (29.1 high, 26.2 diameter) with strap handle from below rim to shoulder. Vertical neck with everted flattened rim. Finger nail impressed decoration on handle, at base of neck, and on body around handle attachment. Two parallel lines at base of neck, the upper one more regular than the lower one. Ovoid body, flat base. Gritty ware with medium inclusions. 10YR 7/3 ware.

Tomb 4 (Fig. 1): The tomb is similar to tomb 3, with a rounded baggy shape. The entrance on the northeast side was accessed by a shaft (unexcavated) blocked by a round limestone rock. The chamber measures 2 m in length, 1.70 m in width and 1 m in height. 2 layers were found in the tomb. Layer 1 consists of a 10 cm deep roof fall, above layer 2, a 15 cm deep layer of red-brown smooth soil. The bones consisted of a skull in fragmentary condition and few other bone fragments. Only few EB IV sherds were found in the tomb. They belong to three different vessels: one is a jug of the type of Tomb 2, I.AR.6 (Fig. 2:3).

Discussion

The EBIV material found at al-Baṣṣah fits well in the types of the Amman area, especially for the two jugs found in tomb 3, which are closely paralleled at nearby sites such as Umm al-Bighal (Helms 1989). The fact that lamps have not been found in the cemetery is not a surprise, since this item is not as common in the Amman area tombs

as in the Jordan Valley. The globular jugs found in tomb 2 (Fig. 2:2-5) and 4 (not illustrated, fragmentary) are quite interesting since they can be assimilated to Syrian types of the late third millennium B.C. A parallel from a relatively close site comes from Jericho, where tomb K3 contained similar jugs (Kenyon 1965:205 fig. 93:10,11,14). The tomb, however, is dated to an early phase of the Middle Bronze Age IIA for the presence of characteristic items such as carinated bowls and piriform jugs. A mixed deposit, however, should not be excluded, considering also the presence of a bowl of caliciform type in the same tomb. In Syria similar jugs have been found mainly at central and north-central sites, such as Hama, str. J (Fugmann 1958: fig. 75, 98).

It is the first time that a Syrian influence is identified in EB IV contexts of the Amman area. In general, "caliciform" and other Syrian cultural elements of the late third millennium B.C. are rarely found in contemporary contexts of the Southern Levant. Given the presence of this type of jug in two of the four tombs investigated, it would be interesting to know whether this type of pottery was directly imported or whether it was manufactured locally imitating foreign models. Whatever the answer, its presence in a relatively isolated site, without clear remains of a large settlement of the same period, is also rather puzzling, even if EB IV pottery, without clear architectural remains, have been found by Paul Lapp at 'Iraq al-Amir stratum IV (Lapp. 1983:8). Needless to say, only further investigation of the cemetery and the surrounding areas will help to clarify the problem.

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