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*An Early Bronze
Age Cemetery in the
Northern Jordan
Valley, Israel*

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Since my return from Jerusalem in the fall of 1987, I have renewed my work on the material from the Oriental Institute excavations at Beth Yerah

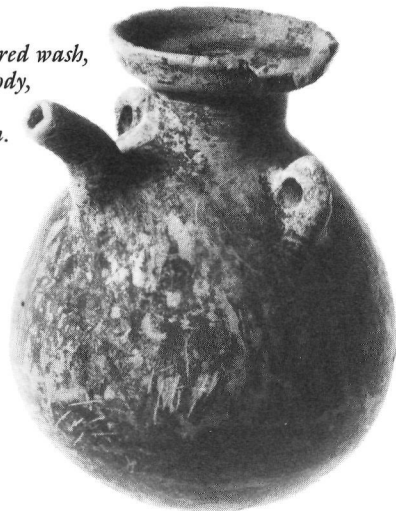
(Khirbet Kerak) in the northern Jordan Valley of Israel. Although much of the preparation has been done for the material dating to the latter part of the Early Bronze Age (EB II-III), the earliest phase of the occupation at the site (EB I) has not been examined in detail. ▼ In order to supplement the excavated sherds from Beth Yerah with whole vessel forms of the EB I, I began to examine the EB tomb deposits excavated by the Oriental Institute at Nahal Tabor, about 10 kilometers south of Beth Yerah. The deposits from the tombs of this cemetery proved to be exceedingly rich, both in quantity and in diversity of type. This led to my decision to gather the various records of the excavation (some were in Chicago and some in Jerusalem) and to prepare the finds for a complete publication. ▼ At the request of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, Prof. P. Delougaz, who at the time was excavating at nearby Beth Yerah, agreed to conduct salvage excavations at the cemetery in 1964 and 1966. Assisted by several members of Kibbutz Gesher and some of the staff from the Beth Yerah excavations, Delougaz cleared a total of 19 tombs. Although some tombs had been looted, most contained at least a few complete vessels. Some of the tomb deposits were quite large, with numerous whole vessels, and one tomb had more than 60 complete pots from the Early Bronze Age. Most of the tombs in the cemetery dated to the first part of the Early Bronze Age, but one tomb contained Middle Bronze Age vessels and two tombs dated to the the Late Bronze I period. Several tombs also included vessels that may date to the very end of the third millennium (EB IV/MB I). ▼ The cemetery was located on a hillside just at the point where the Nahal Tabor (Wadi Bira) debouches from the hills of Lower Galilee into the flatland of the Jordan Valley. Most of the tombs were roughly semi-circular. They had originally been hewn into the soft rock of the hillside, but severe erosion for the past several millennia had removed the chamber roofs, and when they were excavated the tombs were simply depressions in the earth. In some cases flat limestone slabs were carefully laid to form a floor for the tomb chamber. ▼

Because of the severe erosion, preservation of skeletal material was not good. In some of the chambers the number of skulls and skull fragments indicates multiple burial, but accurate counts of buried individuals and their placement at death will be

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"Teapot." Buff ware with red wash, lattice burnish on upper body, lower body completely burnished. Height 12.6 cm. Early Bronze I, Tomb 4.



difficult to reconstruct. Skeletal analysis will be able to provide a tally of the minimum number of individuals in each tomb, however.

Because we are still at an early stage of analysis, it is difficult to provide a precise chronological span for the tomb deposits, but three of the tombs do contain excellent examples of Gray Burnished ware. Although the number of vessels accompanying the Gray Burnished ware vessels is small, it should at least broaden the known assemblage of vessels from this earliest phase of the Early Bronze I period.

The tombs have numerous examples of high loop-handled cups (ubiquitous in EB I tombs), bowls with conoid projections (common in deposits in northern Palestine), "teapots," and other spouted vessels. Only one tomb yielded a significant number of vessel types that may go into EB II (Tomb 44). This tomb also contained one example of a Khirbet Kerak ware bowl, but its context is uncertain.

The Early Bronze Age vessels from Nahal Tabor have much in common with the cemetery excavated by Garstang and Kenyon at Jericho. The recent excavations by M. Sebbane at En HaNaziv have also produced an assemblage which is strikingly similar to that of Nahal Tabor.

Several daggers and one axe were recovered, and in at least one case the rivets for fastening the dagger to a wooden handle were still preserved in the butt of the blade. The metal weapons found in these tombs were in excellent condition, probably due to the relatively dry conditions of the Jordan Valley. One limestone macehead was also found.

The publication of the Nahal Tabor cemetery should be seen in the context of the veritable explosion of information on the Early Bronze Age which has occurred in the last decade. New excavations and the publication of older excavations have provided us with a wealth of data to begin a

serious analysis of the process of urbanization and possible state formation in late fourth and early third millennium Palestine.

In addition to the study of these large-scale political and cultural questions made possible by these excavations, we are beginning to be able to draw our regional maps with more confidence. The identification of relatively small regional territories is giving sharper definition to our chronology of the EB I, a problem which has always plagued us in our attempt to study the transformation from the "village" culture of EB I to the relatively more "urban" EB II-III period. The Nahal Tabor cemetery should prove to be a useful contribu-

tion to the burgeoning study of Early Bronze Age sites in the Rift Valley from Tel Dan in the north to Bab edh-Dhra in the south.

Although some of the vessels have been published separately, it is important to present the full context of these pieces. It should also provide a good selection of whole forms against which we can compare the fragmentary sherd material excavated from settlement sites, as well as contributing to our knowledge of burial customs from this early period. Though the excavations at Nahal Tabor were conducted more than 20 years ago, we are confident that the publication of the cemetery will serve as a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the material culture of Palestine in the Early Bronze Age.



The cemetery is on the slope in the foreground, Kibbutz Gesher in the background. View to the North.

