

AREA G.8 (UMM ES-SARAB)

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During the second half of the 1974 season the archaeological survey team carried out a sounding at one of the sites discovered in 1973. It was hoped the sounding would illuminate the history of the site chosen, as well as test the validity of the surface sherding that had been conducted in the Ḥesbân region. Umm es-Sarab (Site 54, ref. 2292.1379), a low hill 4.5 km. north-northeast of Tell Ḥesbân, was selected because of its accessibility and because some relatively rare pottery had been found there (namely, Hellenistic and Middle Bronze/Late Bronze).

The excavation, designated Area G, Square 8, began July 23, 1974, and was concluded August 7. Two Squares were laid out extending north-south on the northwest side of the hill and measuring 2×6 m. each with a one-meter balk between them. Both Squares were excavated to bedrock, the depth of soil averaging only about 0.75 m.

Square G.8A

Square G.8A was located on the upper terrace edge of the site. Three basic soil layers were discerned, with two burials embedded in the lower layer and two installations in bedrock. No architecture or occupation surfaces were encountered. The uppermost layer (Locus 1) was the root-disturbed top soil; it contained pottery of the Byzantine, Early Roman, Hellenistic, and Iron II/Persian periods.

Locus 2 below it was a soil layer averaging 0.17 m. in depth and extending over the entire Square. Since there was no equivalent layer in Square G.8B, Locus 2 must have lensed out in the balk where bedrock drops sharply to the lower terrace. The

pottery was predominantly Early Roman with some possible Iron Age body sherds. Below this locus, Early Roman was the latest pottery in all loci. (In Locus 4 there were a "few possible" Byzantine sherds and in Locus 10, "one possible Byzantine body sherd." If these few doubtful sherds are disregarded, all the material below root soil in Square G.8A dated to the Early Roman period.)

Locus 4 overlay bedrock and bedrock installations in the southern three quarters of the Square. Pottery was Early Roman, with some possible Iron Age and possible Bronze Age sherds. Within Locus 4 were two burials—Locus 6, a male about 25 years old (Pl. X:B), and Locus 9, a female of about the same age. The burials were oriented east-west at the same level, and were placed about 1.4 m. apart. No equipment was found with the skeletons and efforts to discern burial pits failed. It seemed, therefore, that these were shallow burials of poor people in the Early Roman period.

In the southeast corner of the Square below Locus 4 there appeared a pit in bedrock (Locus 8) which by its symmetry seemed to be artificial. Three Early Roman sherds were found in the soil within the pit. A very tentative interpretation is that this pit was a receiving vat for a wine press, the treading basin of which would have been south of the Square. (Present land use of the site includes a fine vineyard/orchard across the summit.)

Almost directly beneath burial Locus 9 was a shaft (Locus 10) cut in bedrock and measuring 0.61 m. (north-south) \times 1.5 m. (east-west), and 1.54 m. deep. On the south side of the shaft at the bottom was a flat blocking stone with a nearly intact Early Roman oil lamp placed at its upper west corner. Removal of the blocking stone revealed a very small (0.68 \times 0.40 m.) burial niche (Locus 12), which was almost empty. Within the 0.03 m. of dark soil on the bottom of the chamber were found four teeth, fragments of thin cranial bones, and a small bronze ring. No pottery was found within the loculus. The small size of the niche suggested a child burial and indeed the thin cranial bones and deciduous teeth indicated a maximum age of twelve for the person buried there.

Robbing of the tomb took place perhaps in the Early Roman period, yet sufficiently long after burial for the bones to be brittle, resulting in teeth and skull fragments being left behind.

Square G.8B

Lying north of, and downhill from, Square G.8A on a lower terrace, there were four soil layers in Square G.8B, quite distinct from those in Square G.8A because of the abundance of Byzantine pottery in all but three pails. Locus 1 was the ground surface soil and in two of the three pails of sherds from this layer the latest pottery was Early Roman—quite surprising in view of the fact that all loci below contained Byzantine ware. Locus 3, a soil layer, extended over the entire Square. Its latest pottery was Byzantine but both soil layers below it yielded a few Ayyūbid/Mamlūk sherds.

Locus 5 was hard-packed, light colored soil found over the whole Square. It yielded one Ayyūbid/Mamlūk sherd, Byzantine, Late Roman, Early Roman and two possible Bronze Age sherds. It lay over bedrock in the southern two-thirds of the Square and over Locus 7 in the northern part. Locus 7 was characterized by rock tumble amid loose, light brown soil. Its pottery was Ayyūbid/Mamlūk, Byzantine dominant, and Roman. Locus 11 was a line of stones within Locus 7 and was founded on bedrock. It was 1.8 m. long and two courses high. The small size and crudeness of the stones make it unlikely that it was a wall but rather a stone fence at best.

Thus Square G.8B presented almost an inversion of material: at the lowest level Ayyūbid/Mamlūk well-attested, Byzantine dominant, with Early Roman lightly represented; at the upper level Ayyūbid/Mamlūk and Byzantine all but absent, with Early Roman dominant. It seemed, therefore, that this debris was dumped in a leveling operation which left Early Roman levels exposed in Square G.8A uphill, and produced the flat top on the site that today supports an orchard. This operation must have taken place in Ayyūbid/Mamlūk times or perhaps even later.

Conclusions

One of the objectives of the sounding was to test the validity of surface sherding; that is, do the sherds collected from the ground surface correlate closely with materials found through excavation below the ground surface? Table 1 shows that the ground surface collection did anticipate the pottery excavated.

SURVEY	Ayyūbid/Mamlūk	Umayyad	Byzantine	Late Roman	Early Roman	Hellenistic	Iron Age	Iron II/Persian	Iron I	Bronze Age	LB/MB	Middle Bronze	Early Bronze
SQUARE G.8A		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SQUARE G.8B	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X			

Table 1. Distribution of Umm es-Sarab pottery by periods, from the archaeological survey and the soundings.

The only difficulties were the general absence of Ayyūbid/Mamlūk sherds which appeared in small quantities in Square G.8B, and the lack of distinct Iron II/Persian ware, although some of this was probably included in "Iron Age" sherds. The ground surface material yielded a broader spectrum in terms of Umayyad and Iron I pottery and more distinct readings on Bronze Age sherds.

Sherding the site in six separate sectors also provided significant information. The collection from the northside of the upper terrace, unlike sherds from all other sectors, contained no Byzantine and only a few possibly Late Roman sherds. There Square G.8A was laid out but it yielded only a few questionably Byzantine and no Late Roman sherds. The lower terrace collection, however, had both Byzantine and Late Roman well attested and both ceramic periods were encountered in Square G.8B at that location.

Although no surfaces or clear architecture came to light in the soundings, the pottery, which was found all the way to bedrock, indicated that Umm es-Sarab was occupied especially in Byzantine

and Early Roman times. No loci were found which could be dated to earlier periods, although Hellenistic, Iron Age, and Bronze Age sherds appeared in mixed contexts. Thus the elusive Middle Bronze/Late Bronze pottery, which was found on the ground surface and which is so uncommon in Trans-jordan, could not be clarified in context.