

# Bethlehem. Rescue Excavations 2015–2020 by Sapienza University of Rome and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities

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## Abstract

Sapienza University of Rome and the Palestinian MoTA-DACH have been carrying on several campaigns for the protection of the archaeological heritage in the urban area of Bethlehem since 2015. A large necropolis with tombs dating from the Early Bronze IV, the Middle Bronze Age, and the Iron Age II was discovered and excavated at Khalet al-Jam'a. Rescue interventions involved other cemeteries, such as that of Jebel Dhaher, Bardhaa, and Hindaza, with similar chronological ranges. The overall results provide important insights into the history of Bethlehem during the pre-classical periods and, perhaps even more significantly, has allowed, at those locations, the PNA to manage heritage while promoting a sustainable development notwithstanding the grave constraints imposed from the outside.

## Introduction

Sparse archaeological findings suggest that Bethlehem, situated along the main road to Hebron, 8 km south of Jerusalem, was originally occupied during the pre-classical period. The modern city arose at a strategic crossroad of the inner dorsal road crossing Judah with two major *wadis* sloping down to the Dead Sea (Nigro 2015: 3). Water supply in Bethlehem is assured by several sources distributed in its surroundings. Six main springs (known as 'Ain Umm al-Daraj, 'Ain Artas, 'Ain Salih, 'Ain Faruja, 'Ain Attan, 'Ain Battir) provide the vital supply for communities living in the area since the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

During the period between 2015 and 2020, the aim of the joint expedition between Sapienza and MoTA-DACH (<http://www.lasapienzatojericho.it/Betlemme/>) was to monitor and survey natural, archaeological, historical and cultural sites and monuments dating back from the beginning of the Early Bronze Age up to the Islamic Period, in order to assure their documentation and scientific valorization (Nigro *et al.* 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2019; 2020). It allowed to develop a very comprehensive archaeological map of the city of Bethlehem and its surroundings, providing a very successful tool and strategy in the midst of pressing development concerns in an area with a very high demographic pressure.<sup>2</sup> The joint expedition between the Sapienza University of Rome and the MoTA-DACH in the Municipality of Bethlehem aims in fact to survey, document and recover tombs, structures and items threat-

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2 See <https://pf87.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=60b0495a716d400e97198e11070f8e2e>.

ened by modern building activities and illegal trade, to preserve the collective memory and to provide a more detailed history of the communities living in Bethlehem in Antiquity.

### **The archaeology of Bethlehem in brief**

If one considers only the urban area of Bethlehem itself, archaeological information is not especially abundant. Apart from the Lower Pleistocene faunal remains (Bate 1934; 1941; Bate and Gardner 1937), the earliest evidence of human occupation in the Bethlehem district are Neolithic flints retrieved in various areas of the town, and the nearby village of Beit Sahur (Stockton 1967), where the earliest stable community settled during the Late Chalcolithic period. The Beit Sahur settlement further developed in the Early Bronze Age (Hennessy 1966; Dinur 1987; De Cree 1999; Nigro 2015: 4). Five inscribed bronze arrowheads from el-Khadr represent the Iron Age in Bethlehem (Sass 1988: 73-78, 148, fig. 17, nos. 185-195), these being amongst the earliest documents written in alphabetic letters found in Palestine. As regards the occupation of the city in this period, other information comes from the excavations of the so-called “David’s Well”, where two collared-rim jar fragments were found in 1968 (Bagatti and Alliata 1980: fig. 4, nos. 1-2; Nigro *et al.* 2017a: 23–24). Bethlehem shows up again in the record during Roman times. The erection of the Lower Aqueduct (Smith 1907: 125-127; Prag 2008), connecting all the major water sources to Jerusalem, was a starting point for the town revival. Empress Helena, Constantine’s mother, began to build up the Basilica that was completed around 330 AD (Vincent and Abel 1914; Harvey 1937; Richmond 1936; Bagatti 1952: 9-69; Taha 2012; Nigro 2015: 9-11), and by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (384-386), Bethlehem also became the residence of Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin (the ‘Vulgata’) (Nigro 2015: 10). Later phases are better documented but they do not concern us here.

### **The necropolises south of Bethlehem**

The joint expedition led to the identification, rescue excavation and protection of four different burial places, all of them located within a radius of 1.5 km south of the Church of Nativity. These were part of a system of cemeteries on the emerging bedrock spurs of the hills in between Wadi ‘Artas, Wadi Ta’amireh and Wadi et-Tin, starting to the south of Bethlehem up to Tekoa, firstly established during the Early Bronze and in use during the urban occupation of Bethlehem in the Bronze and Iron Ages. One may perhaps even venture to suggest that each of these cemeteries was related to an extended family group, a clan, or a tribe.

#### *Khalet al-Jam’a*

The discovery of a huge necropolis in the sloping hill of Khalet al-Jam’a (lat. 31.6818666460001; long. 35.2102333120001) sheds new light on the history of Bethlehem during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 186-193; 2017a: 10-16; 2019).

Building activities cut through the central area of an at least three hectares-wide cemetery consisting of rock-cut shaft tombs, in the early spring of 2013. Unfortunately, many of these tombs suffered complete destruction or looting before the MoTA-DACH intervention. Two main terraces with underground caves hosted two different cemeteries. The largest Intermediate Bronze Age-Middle Bronze cemetery was on the lower southern terrace (Areas A, B, C), while a less densely used Iron Age cemetery was implanted on the upper northern terrace (Area D).

Tomb A1 (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 186–186, figs. 4–7; 2017a: 11, figs. 11, 12: BL6166) is a multi-chambered shaft-tomb damaged by bulldozing activities. Chambers were dug exploiting communicating underground cavities. Four chambers and one shaft were identified. Funerary set included pottery vessels,<sup>3</sup> two bronze daggers and other personal ornaments. Human remains were unfortunately largely disturbed by the collapse of the roof. Three mandibles probably belonging to different individuals (a male, a female, and a child) were found in Chamber 1 (Nigro *et al.* 2017a: 13–14, table 1). The chronological setting is within MB IIB.

Tomb A2 (Fig. 1; Nigro *et al.* 2015: 187–189, figs. 9–17; 2017a: 11–12, fig. 12) is possibly the conjunction of three different caves with its own shaft. A roughly triangular rock pillar was carved out from the bedrock at the center of the tomb between Chambers 2 and 3. Chamber 1 is the largest one with a square shaft sealed by a rectangular slab. Another square shaft was in Chamber 2, while a circular one had cut through across Chambers 2 and 3. An underground passage, between Chamber 2 and nearby Tomb A1, was found blocked. Both Chambers 2 and 3 had a raised niche inside, for hosting a lamp in the EB IV phase (Nigro *et al.* 2015: figs. 15, 16:1). Pick marks were visible on the chambers rock cut ceilings and in the shafts. More than one hundred complete vessels were found in Tomb A2, as well as several bronze and stone objects. Sparse human bones were found in Chamber 3 belonging to different individuals. Some animal bones were maybe connected to food offerings. The funerary equipment of Chamber 1 is composed of pottery,<sup>4</sup> two so-called ‘Hyksos’ scarabs (4368, 4369),<sup>5</sup> three daggers, one socketed axe, and a toggle pin (Fig. 2). Dagger n° 6187 conceivably belongs to an early Minoan type. The socketed axe (6186) has two ribs along the edge, the shaft-hole decorated by two ridges and one hook, the blade has a lenticular cross-section and can be compared with the one recovered from Tomb 9 at Jericho by J. Garstang (1932: pl. XXXVII:1–7), and in some other key-sites, as Ugarit (Caveau LVI, Schaeffer 1938: fig. 32; Caveau LVII, Schaeffer 1938: fig. 39) and el-Jib (Tomb 45, Pritchard 1963: fig. 51), but the most reliable comparisons are from Tel Aviv Harbor (Kaplan 1955: fig. 5:2), and from Rishon Le-Ziyyon (Kan-Cipor-Meron *et al.* 2018).

Tomb A7 (Fig. 3; Nigro *et al.* 2015: 190: figs. 20–22; 2019), identified in 2015 and excavated in 2019, is quite different from most of the tombs in the KJ necropolis. It is a huge underground complex with at least seven entrances/shafts and ten large chambers with several recesses connected by passages and arches (Nigro *et al.* 2019: fig. 3).

It seems to have originally consisted of different tombs, then unified into one large underground complex during Iron Age II. The oldest nucleus of the structure was hewn in the EB IVB–MB I and in use during the whole Middle Bronze Age, as the funerary equipment suggest. The entrance was through Shaft 7. Afterward, in the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the three tombs were rearranged, cleaned, and then joined together. Shafts 3 and 4 were excavated, as

3 The pottery repertoire of Tomb A1 is consistent with Groups II–IV typology as outlined by K. Kenyon for the Middle Bronze pottery from the Necropolis of Tell es-Sultan/Jericho (Kenyon 1960: 268–271; 1965: 268–271). Vessels are comparable with Garstang 1933: pl. V:5; Kenyon 1965: figs. 113:2, 157:6, 222:2, 230:5; Ben-Tor 2004: 13, fig. 2.10:38–49. Toggle pin 6192 can find comparisons in Tomb B3 at Jericho (Kenyon 1960: fig. 165:1).

4 The pottery equipment of Tomb A2 seems to correspond to that of Tomb Group III of Kenyon’s typology of Tell es-Sultan Necropolis (Kenyon 1965: 269). Vases can be compared with Garstang 1933: pl. XVII:6; Kenyon 1960: fig. 191:3.

5 Nigro *et al.* 2015: fig. 13. Scarab 4369 is incised with concentric circles (Ben-Tor 2004: 34, fig. 5) and it can be compared with one specimen from Tomb P17 at Jericho (Kirkbride 1965: fig. 289:2).

ventilation shafts or for dropping raw materials. These variations of the tomb apparently indicate a change in the use of the cave, which was transformed into an underground production and storage area, associated with the nearby Iron Age Tower.

According to the ceramic repertoire, Tomb A7 was first used during the Early Bronze Age IVB (Nigro *et al.* 2019: 7-8, fig. 12). In fact, the burials here identified are dating back to this period. Then the tomb was re-excavated and re-used during the Iron Age IIB-C, as already observed in other tombs of the same necropolis (for example Tomb A1), in the cemetery of Jebel Daher, or in the necropolis of Tell en-Nasbeh (McCown and Wampler 1947: 77-84). The Iron Age ceramic repertoire consists of a few complete vessels, basically lamps, Red Slip carinated bowls and hemispherical bowls, deep bowls,<sup>6</sup> and kraters, together with some stamped handles (Fig. 4; Lemaire 1981; Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010; 2011; Sergi 2016), namely 2-winged *lmlk* (KJ.19.TA7.8/42 and KJ.19.TA7.11/103) of 0 II Type, and one (KJ.19.TA7.10/137) of X II Type (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 7). Parallels have been found at Ramat Rahel,<sup>7</sup> Gibeon/el-Jib<sup>8</sup> or in the same area of Bethlehem (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 17, table 1; Nigro 2015: 9). Other two handles have two Concentric Circles Type impressions with a central dot (KJ.19.TA7.11/101 and KJ.19.TA7.11/102). Concentric Circles Type mainly spreads over Highland sites after the end of 8<sup>th</sup> century (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 8), as Ramat Rahel (Sergi and Koch 2016), Jerusalem/al-Quds (Prag 2001: 220-221) and Tel Moza/Qalunya (Brandl, Greenhut and Vainstub 2009: fig. 5.5). Moreover, a clay pillar figurine (Nigro *et al.* 2019: fig. 9; Kletter 1996: 29-30), three handmade zoomorphic figurines, several flint cores, fragments of stone vessels, stoppers, pestles, grinding stones were found together with three *marābiṭ faras* for tying animals.

Area B was in use during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. Three tombs were at the north-west corner of the Area (B9, B10, B11). Tomb B9 was completely removed for building the foundation of a factory, so that it was visible just in section (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 191, figs. 23-24).

Tomb B10 was a few meters to the north of Tomb B9 and had originally one chamber and one circular shaft to the south (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 191, fig. 25). Tomb B11 (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 191, figs. 26-27) is just partially preserved, to the north-east of Tomb B9.

In Area C two tombs (Tomb C5 and Tomb C12) were explored during rescue excavations (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 192, figs. 28-29; 2017a: 12, figs. 13-15). Unfortunately, other two tombs (C18 and C20) were looted before the intervention. Tomb C12 is a shaft tomb provided with a round domed chamber, and a squared shaft to the south. One male almost complete inhumation was found inside this tomb together with an EB IV four spouted lamp, that represents the only funerary equipment here collected.

The KJ necropolis also included an Iron Age cemetery, in Area D, in the northern uppermost terrace. An Iron II tomb in the Barmil's Family yard has provided a rich comparative assemblage. The tomb, named Tomb D13 (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 192, fig. 30; 2017a: 12-13, fig. 16), is a circular chamber characterized by the presence of a V-shaped installation made

6 De Groot and Bernick-Greenberg 2012: 58-62; sometimes the Red Slip is applied in a concentric circle pattern.

7 For 0 II Type at Ramat Rahel see Sergi 2016: 333-339; for X II Type see Sergi 2016: 326-333. The handle KJ.19.TA7.8/42 has also two concentric circles incised above the stamp, a common specimen in the southern sites of the Levant as Ramat Rahel (Sergi 2016: 339, figs. 151-152).

8 For the 0 II Type at Gibeon/el-Jib see Pritchard 1959: fig. 12:5; for X II Type see Pritchard 1959: 18-19, fig. 8:530.

of stones, located roughly in the middle. Human bones and several personal ornaments were upon this installation (B.3). The funerary furnishings were copious (Fig. 5), including typical Iron IB and II pottery shapes (Nigro *et al.* 2015: figs. 31-32; 2017a: 12-13, figs. 17-18).

As it regards small finds, 37 objects were collected in Tomb D13, they mainly consist of bronze and iron bracelets, bronze and iron rings, numerous semiprecious beads, an *udjat*-eye, shells, bone items, one seal, one signet-ring seal, one ivory scarab, and one ivory pommel. A such equipment speaks for a continuity of the occupation of Bethlehem from the Bronze to the Iron Age, as well as for the identification of KJ with one of the main necropolises of the city.

Finally, a rock-cut wine press together with a couple of round basins was uncovered in Area A dating to the Byzantine Period (Fig. 6; Nigro *et al.* 2015: 193, figs. 33-35). The three rock-cut vats were plastered with a pinkish hydraulic revetment.

In Area A, two circular stone-built lime kilns, also dating to the Byzantine Period, were found respectively to the north and to the south of Tomb A7. Moreover, the limestone boulders foundations of an Iron Age tower were uncovered roughly at the center of the lower terrace and in proximity of the same Tomb A7 (Nigro *et al.* 2015: 193, figs. 36).

### *Jebel Dhaher*

The necropolis of Jebel Dhaher (lat. 31.6948340370001; long. 35.18991801) was brought to light by chance during construction works for the military compound of the Palestinian Police in October 2016 (Fig. 7; Nigro *et al.* 2017a: 16, figs. 22-24).

This is distinguished by underground tombs, with circular shafts and generally a single round domed chamber, densely distributed. Three more tombs were already discovered in 2003 along the western boundary wall of the compound. When rescue excavations started at Jebel Dhaher, Tomb A (Nigro *et al.* 2017: fig. 25), the southernmost one, was still visible, while the other two tombs (B and C) had already been buried under a concrete wall, later also Tomb A was buried.

The necropolis of Jebel Dhaher was in use according to architectural features and funerary equipment from the Early Bronze IVB, as in the case of Tomb 6 (Nigro *et al.* 2017: 19, figs. 38-43),<sup>9</sup> up to the Middle Bronze Age, as in the cases of Tombs 1 (Fig. 8; Nigro *et al.* 2017: 17, fig. 28),<sup>10</sup> 2 (Nigro *et al.* 2017: 17, fig. 29),<sup>11</sup> and 3 (Nigro *et al.* 2017: 18-19, figs. 30-32),<sup>12</sup> that shows a complex plan, with at least two chambers and a stone platform. Tomb 5, furthermore, testifies a maybe limited use of the necropolis during the Iron Age (Nigro *et al.* 2017: figs. 33-36).

9 The pottery equipment is comparable to necked jars with globular body and short flaring neck (Class NJ2 of D'Andrea 2014: vol. 2, 265) and to ovoid storage jar (Class 1.2 of D'Andrea 2014: vol. 2, 294-295, pl. CXVIII:2).

10 In Tomb 1 an ovoid Middle Bronze IB jug (JD.16.T1/1) with painted decoration was found (Pritchard 1963: pl. 21:48). This jug with painted decoration, that can find some comparison at Tell el-Mutesellim (Loud 1948: pls. 11:18, 22; 12:21), suggests a possible date to the early phase of the Middle Bronze I (Gerstenblith 1980: 69; Nigro 2008: 379).

11 A Middle Bronze II dipper juglet with pinched rim (JD.12.T2/1) found in the shaft can be compared with Kenyon 1965: fig. 121:5.

12 The pottery repertoire is common to Middle Bronze Age II tombs of the Southern Levant (Pritchard 1963: fig. 50:20; Loffreda 1984: fig. 4:22; Garfinkel and Cohen 2007: 61; Zuckerman 2007: 189).

### *el-Atan Tomb*

A tomb was discovered during some construction works for a private house, a few hundred meters east of the Nativity Church, along el-Atan street in June 2009. As regards the connection of the el-Atan Tomb to a cemetery, it can be related to the nearby necropolis of Beit Sahur. The tomb consisted of a rock-cut underground oval chamber with a domed roof (Nigro *et al.* 2017b). The vertical shaft and the entrance were to the north of the chamber, closed by a roughly carved limestone slab. A complete adult female skeleton laid flexed on the right side almost in the middle of the chamber. The funerary set (Fig. 9) comprised pottery vessels: four-spouted lamps, bowls and a beaker, jars, *amphoriskoi*, dating back to the Early Bronze IVB. Several personal items accompanied the dead: a copper pin, 5 carnelian beads and a flint scraper.

### *Bardhaa*

A necropolis in the village of Bardhaa (lat. 31.684435029; long. 35.2213540020001), to the east of Khalet al-Jam'a, was discovered and looted in the period between 1967 and 1995. The Necropolis was set on the northern flank of Wadi Ta'amireh and to the west of Wadi et-Tin. It was first established in the Early Bronze Age and remained in use during the Middle Bronze Age. Tombs are of shaft type, with squared or round shafts, leading to underground rock-cut chambers.

### *Hindaza*

A huge tomb threatened by looters was excavated and rescued at Hindaza (lat. 31.686101115616946; long. 35.21539053140699), to the south of Bethlehem, in between Khalet al-Jam'a and Bardhaa in the spring 2020. The underground complex was possibly excavated and used during the EB IV, as four-spouted lamp testifies, and then reused during the Middle Bronze Age, probably as a family tomb, as it is already registered in the KJ necropolis. Unfortunately, human remains, only partially preserved, were scattered and disturbed. The MB funerary set is equipped with lamps, bowls, large bowls and Gublite bowls, juglets and dippers, and jars with two and four handles (Montanari and Titi 2022). Also, some metal items were collected, as pins, a dagger with flat midrib and two curved knives (Fig. 10). This kind of weapon, attested also in MB tombs at Jericho (Tomb 9, D9, D22, and P19; Garstang 1932: pl. XXXVII:6; Kenyon 1965: fig. 111:8-9, 12-13, 17), el-Jib (Tomb 15, Pritchard 1963: fig. 24; Tomb 45, Pritchard 1963: fig. 51), and Sidon (Doumet-Serhal 2003: 50, 54; 2013: 71), often together with a mid-rib dagger, is usually connected with feasting activities.

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Khalet al-Jam'a 2015  
Plan of Tomb A2  
North-southwest section of Chamber 3 and Shaft 3  
M. Tamburrini

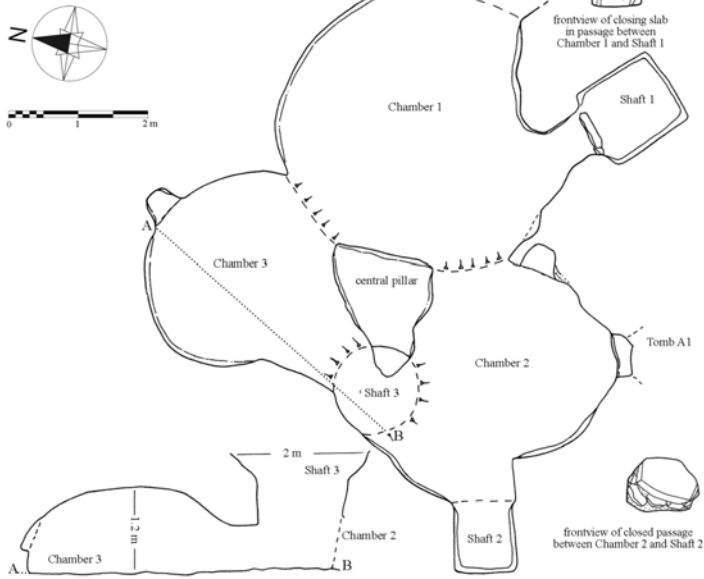


Fig. 1: Plan and section of Tomb A2 (with front view of closure stones) of the Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a

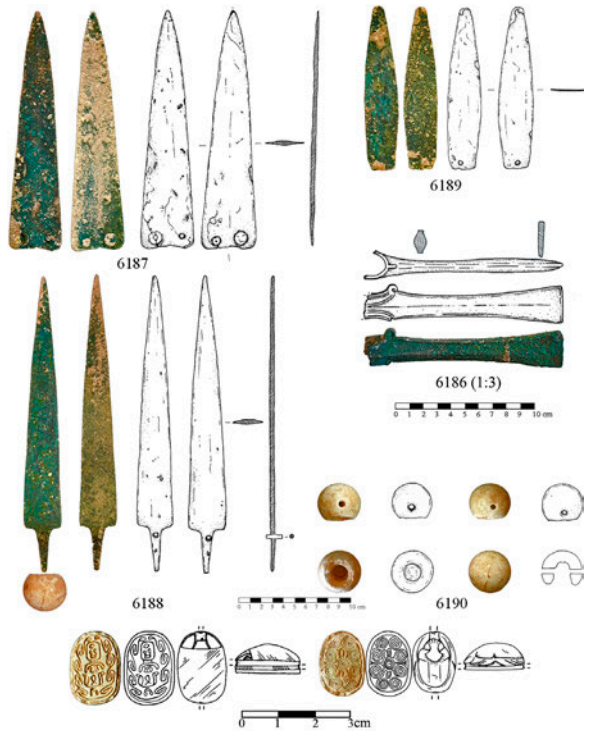


Fig. 2: Daggers, pommel, axe, and scarabs from Chamber 1 of Tomb A2 of the Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a

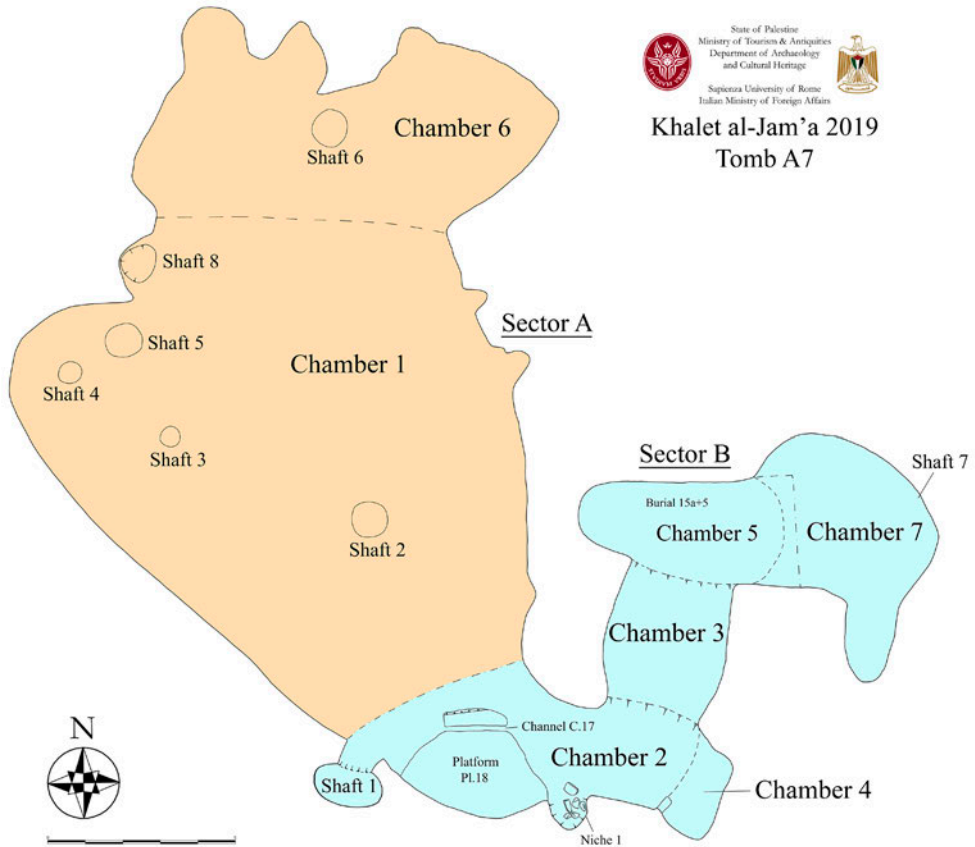


Fig. 3: Plan of Tomb A7 of the Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a

Fig. 4: a) KJ.19.TA7.8/42 with 2-wingled lmlk stamp impression (O II Type) and concentric circles; b) handle KJ.19.TA7.10/137 with 2-wingled lmlk stamp impression (X II Type); c) handle KJ.19.TA7.11/103, with 2-wingled lmlk stamp impression (O II Type); d) KJ.19.TA7.11/101 and KJ.19.TA7.11/102 with Concentric Circles Type stamp impression; e) form Tomb A7 of the Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a

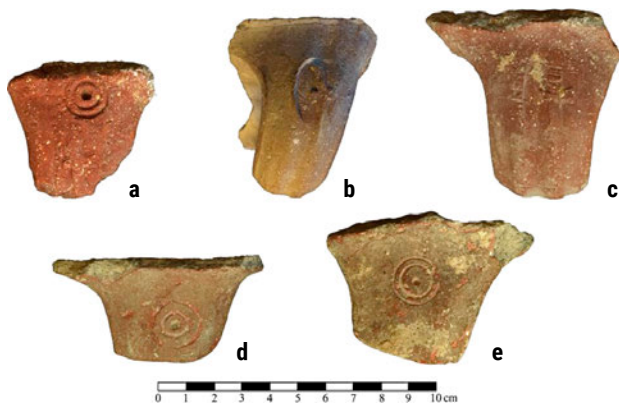




Fig. 5: Funerary equipment from F.1 of Tomb D13 of the Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a



Fig. 6: Wine press in Area A, foreground, and Herodion, background; view from the north-east, Necropolis of Khalet al-Jam'a



Fig. 7: The site of Jebel Dhaher during rescue excavations in November 2016, from north-east

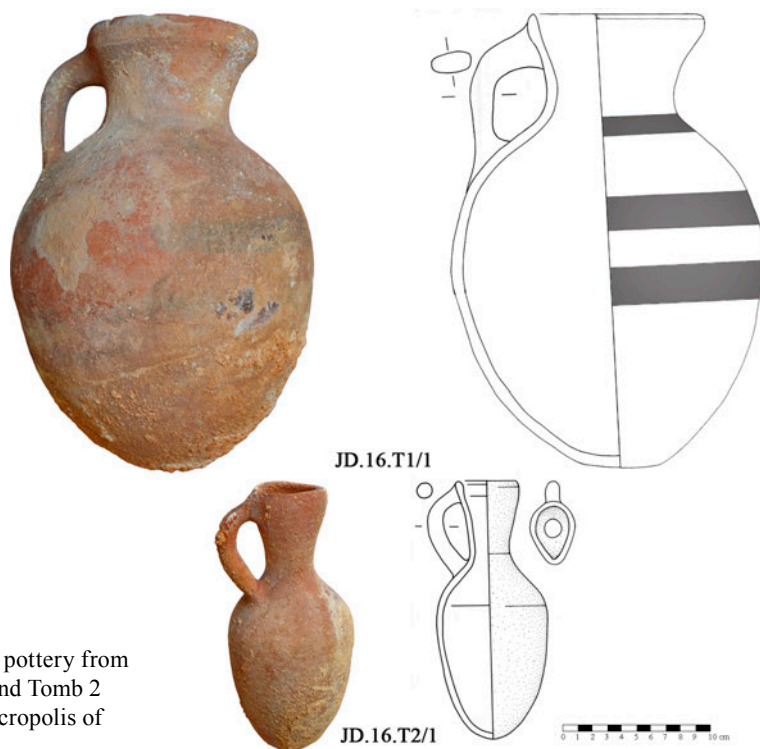


Fig. 8: Middle Bronze pottery from Tomb 1 (JD.16.T1/1) and Tomb 2 (JD.16.T2/1) of the Necropolis of Jebel Dhaher



Fig. 9: Early Bronze IVB funerary equipment of the el-Atan Tomb



Fig. 10: The dagger BL11857 and the curved knife BL11859 at the moment of the discovery in the tomb of Hindaza, 2020

# 12 ICAANE

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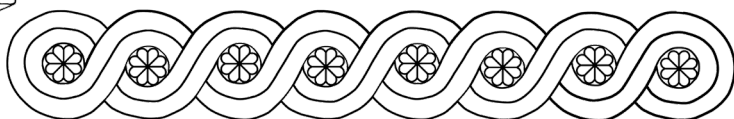
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