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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS
AT THE YASILEH SITE IN NORTHERN JORDAN:
THE NECROPOLIS

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Résumé – La découverte d’une tombe dans la région de Yasileh, au printemps 1988, a été à l’origine des campagnes conduites par l’Institut d’Archéologie et d’Anthropologie de l’Université du Yarmouk sous la direction du Pr. Zeidoun Al-Muheisen. La nécropole, aménagée dans la paroi crayeuse qui borde la rive est du wadi Yasileh, comprend 35 chambres de type familial; ces tombeaux comptent un nombre variable d’alcôves et de loculi. Les chambres funéraires, particulièrement bien conservées, présentent chacune un mode d’aménagement et de décoration spécifique. Le soin apporté à l’élaboration du décor architectural laisse supposer que l’absence de décor pictural est volontaire. À côté de ces chambres rupestres, l’existence de sépultures individuelles a été également relevée.

Abstract – The first area to be excavated at Yasileh was the necropolis, which extends over the eastern slope overlooking the wadi Yasileh. During the 1988-1994 seasons, the excavations were conducted by the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at Yarmuk University and headed by Prof. Zeidun Al-Muheisen. Some 35 funerary chambers were identified, each containing a number of loculi and burial remains. The chambers were of various designs but could be categorized into three main patterns: a central hall with loculi hewn into the walls; a large chamber with graves cut into the walls and/or the ground; and thirdly, alcoves and arcosolia set into the chamber walls. The data collected from the tombs allow us to date the necropolis to the Roman and Byzantine periods. Besides the funeral chambers intended for family interment, many individual graves were also found in this area and in the northern part of the site.

Yasileh is located 9 km east of Irbid and 5 km west of Al-Ramtha (fig. 1), in northern Jordan. ‘Yasileh’ is a Syriac word meaning Selah (“relation”) and is very close in meaning to the Arabic word ‘wasileh’, which means vast land that connects several adjacent areas.

The site is divided into two sections by wadi Al-Yasileh (Al-Shalalih) which runs from south to north; the first area is located on the eastern slope overhanging the wadi, while the second extends along the fairly even western bank (fig. 2).

Yasileh has an important geographical location since the area was a crossroad for the ancient trading routes between Southern Syria, Jordan and Palestine, in addition to the fact that the land in the surrounding area is very fertile and very well suited for agriculture. The wadi Shalalih area including the site of Yasileh is a large depression, a natural basin in which to collect rainwater where the annual
rainfall for the Yasileh area has been estimated at between 400-500 mm. A sufficient supply of water was also ensured by cisterns cut into the rocky sides of wadi Yasileh (fig. 3), as well as a spring (Ma’alaqa spring) located 1 km to the north of the site (fig. 4).

Thus we can say that Yasileh and the surrounding area were well suited for habitation and an agrarian-based population, thanks to readily available water resources from springs and rainwater reservoirs, fertile arable land and a mild climate. The people of Yasileh cultivated grains, vegetables, and in particular grapes for wine, as evidenced by the wine presses discovered at the site; this was the most likely reason for people to have remained settled here for many centuries.

The pottery sherds from the excavated areas reflected a wide variety of forms and periods; the earliest sherds date back to the late Hellenistic period but are also evidenced through the Islamic periods, with a notable profusion of Roman and Byzantine sherds. This can be attributed to the prosperity...
and importance of the site during these periods, which is also known to have been documented at some of the other sites in Northern Jordan.

As for the geology of the site, we were able to distinguish three geological periods; during the Pleistocene, there were basaltic flows and terrace graves. The Middle Eocene layers consist of chalky marl with chert layers, white, soft, upper chalky limestone with chert layers, a cherty limestone, hard, dark gray to brown, and a lower chalky marly limestone, whitish to beige and soft. In the uppermost Cretaceous the rocks consisted of bituminous marl (Oil shale), dark gray to light gray with chert nodules and bands.

Although Yasileh is located in an area where many surveys had been carried out it does not appear to have been mentioned before the accidental discovery of a tomb in the spring of 1988. Since then however, nine campaigns have been carried out by the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology of Yarmuk University, headed by Zeidun Al-Muheisen.

In addition to the necropolis (fig. 5), four main archaeological structures have been identified. Two churches were brought to light in the southern and northern parts of the site, the first built on a terrace on the western bank of the wadi (fig. 6). A burial site consisting of a coffin made of large stone slabs was found in the northeastern corner of the church, and contained two male skeletons and a bone toggle from a monk’s mantle. According to various pieces of evidence, the church probably dates back to the middle of the Vth or beginning of the VIth century AD. The second church, found during the last season, has a mosaic pavement dated to the year AD 528 (fig. 7).

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In area B located on the eastern bank, a large rock-cut wine press was uncovered (fig. 8). The two-storey complex includes several rooms, with treading floors, vats and cisterns, as well as storage caves (fig. 9). On the same bank, below the wine press, an important structure was cleared, which building techniques as well as pottery sherds allowed us to date to the Hellenistic period (fig. 10).

Among other discoveries made at the site and one of great importance, was a cemetery (A) including 35 large funeral chambers in addition to individual tombs, located in the cretaceous rocks on the slopes of the wadi Yasileh, near the mouth of the wadi ash-Shalalih. The sensors also indicated another cemetery (B) located to the north (fig. 2).

The funeral chambers, which are well-constructed and hewn out of the rock, include ten to thirty graves (loculi), and although there is no evidence of painted decoration, the skill and effort exerted in cutting these loculi are remarkable. Some finds in the excavated tombs, including significant amounts of pottery, jewelry and coins, manifest that the cemetery was used from the pre-Roman period until the end of the Byzantine era.

The cemetery site poses a significant question regarding its identity and the role it played in the area which cannot be fairly evaluated, but might be related to another cemetery found in Qweilbeh 3, which was closely correlated with the nearby town of Abila, the local cultural centre at that time. No archaeological evidence was found proving that any building of similar type ever existed in the area surrounding Yasileh, yet unlike Qweilbeh this site is a treasury of archaeological ruins. In addition to the cemeteries in the area, here we stand in an inhabited area still not clearly identified except for a building and some other evidence dating it to the Hellenistic age. Many wells found at the site add to its demographic significance.

The area of the necropolis, the skill used to construct the funeral chambers, and the significance of the archaeological material found (despite ancient robberies) clearly shows this area

to have had substantial human settlement. The extent of the necropolis reflects the economic level of the inhabitants, and this is further supported by the refineries and churches. Assuming that Yasileh had no connection with the Decapolis alliance, its mere location in the heart of the transportation network connecting the Decapolis towns urges us to believe that it performed a significant role in the economic organization in the area, and one that is not clearly recognized, especially during the Byzantine era.

The whole northern area of Jordan is rich with tombs and necropolis discoveries that are interrelated with several Decapolis cities, and although some painted tombs have been found there is no systematic or organized program of discovery for such tombs and consequently no opportunity for them to be comprehensively catalogued and restored.

Even for the more substantial parts of the site, there are no major groups of tombs of sufficient number worth performing a concentrated study; until recently only small groups of funeral rooms have been discovered, the rest have been ruined. The cemetery discovered near the ancient city of Abila is an exception that allows us to conduct an integrated study not only on the decoration but also on the interior structure, most specifically on the general order of the funeral rooms and *loculi*.

In 1988 the sudden discovery of a single grave gave rise to the hypothesis that several graves existed, and many were in fact identified during the following months, with 35 burial chambers and some individual graves being excavated. The collective burials so far identified are constructed on the limestone slopes overlooking the Yasileh or Shelalih valley, extends along the side-across of the eastern southern side of the valley which ensures that the cemeteries extend far to the north or could be divided into two parts; one of which is the part extending to the north, reflecting the luxurious standard of tombs but unfortunately it still needs more excavation work to be brought into full shape. On the other hand, the sum of information collected points out that this necropolis might have been of more significance although the tombs discovered here were less huge than the other ones what might reflect a sort of social and economic separation.

The 35 funeral chambers currently discovered are distributed in two different levels along the downhill slope. And because they were buried, they were found to be in good shape, despite the site having been ravaged by grave-robbers in the past.

The tombs were tightly closed using wooden taproot, doors made of limestone or sometimes by walls, in which case the graves could not be entered or reused except by tearing down and then rebuilding the wall. One of the doors closing tomb 1 was found on the outer side of the tomb but when replaced in its original position it was perfectly functional again. Similar doors have been found in Jerash and Hesban. Access to these tombs was either by steps or sometimes via narrow paths, and although they were close to each other they were uniquely designed. A large hall can be found inside the necropolis and sometimes surrounded with a kind of pavement, the tombs being constructed in the walls as *arcosolium* or simple *loculi*. The tombs were devoted to coffin burials, an example of which was found in tomb 1 cut out of the rock using the same method as in Qweilbeh. One *arcosolium* can include two or three graves as in tombs 5 and 10, showing an *arcosolium* pattern that was less common. These were constructed in memory of upper class individuals what helps to identify the person who constructed the tomb, usually a family member, or often the person buried in the tomb, especially when it is constructed in the lower walls.

Some *loculi* of different patterns were also found sometimes associated with walls, or hewn laterally from the rock walls of the burial chamber as in tomb 1, cut into the pavement as in tomb 6, or even dug out of the floor of the collective burial as in tomb 19. The most special collective burial was found in the form of a single rectangular room; with dimensions up to 1.5 m, the *loculi* were tiled over.

Many of the loculi do not conform to any of these patterns. They were all prepared in the same way with the coffin made of wood, rock or lead. The open side of the collective burial was closed by constructing a wall in the method common at that time, examples of which are found in Qweilbeh. The name of the dead, along with some funeral phrases, is engraved on the surface of the rock. The only exception was found in tomb 6 dating to the mid-late Roman period, where a group of bones were found in a lead coffin buried under the floor of the tomb. Ashes and calcified bones were found in the coffin, surely the remains of a member of the family to whom the grave belonged; this person seems to have died somewhere away from Yasileh and was therefore buried in a regular grave.

Although Yasileh is in an area where painted tombs are especially widespread, no indication of such decoration has so far been discovered in this necropolis, and in spite of all the research done no sign of paint or colored dye were found. Generally, the presence or absence of dyes, the method of tomb preparation and the archaeological materials found could all be taken as unique evidence of the living standards enjoyed by the inhabitants of the area. Yet it should be mentioned here that signs of colored decoration were found in both churches in Yasileh, which proves that it was familiar in this area. In fact, several explanations should be discussed in this regard; the graves were easily hewn and engraved out of the whitish limestone, a fact that has helped to produce this form of archaeological pattern. Another amazing feature of this pattern is the incredible accuracy of the drawings made on the arcosolia, the accuracy of the end of the arcs on which the arcosolia lean and the sconces made for illumination.

The corners are always a 90° angle and the front-facing walls remind us of those built by the Nabateans, all constructed with maximum care. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that this form of decoration was selected by people who wanted a tomb engraved with a simple pattern.

One of the most interesting purposes of these elaborate tombs is their aesthetic basis, while the painted tombs found in Qweilbeh were from a different period. The purpose of this research is to discuss the different methods of grave preparation according to the era in which they were constructed; this was referred to above while discussing the way the collective burials were locked using doors or walls, a method which was not haphazardly selected for it was designed to suit the planned purposes of the grave. The door was designed as a mean of access allowing regular visits to the tombs, especially for festivals and ceremonies; so tomb 1 (which can be dated to the Roman period) was locked with taproots. But several other tombs were walled up and could only be entered by tearing down the wall to allow subsequent burials. This type of tomb indicates that no ceremonies were held inside the tombs except those that took place at the time of the burial. The absence of doors is evidence of a change that occurred in burial traditions, and might also indicate that the doors never existed or were removed during the Christian era because they were found to be useless.

The sketches revealed in these funeral rooms can be studied within the same concept since tomb 1 reflects the special features for which Roman graves were known, where the arcosolium in the center of the funeral chamber was made especially for the founder of the collective burial, and a series of similar loculi were cut out of the side walls. A new style of collective burial featured arcosolia in the center of the chamber and round the edges were extra rooms each including many loculi, as if intended to isolate tombs of certain families from the common collective burial.

Looking at the tombs from this point of view, the change that took place in the internal distribution of the tombs can be seen as reflecting family status and social class. Whatever the reasons for adopting such a pattern in the necropolis it was not haphazard during the Roman era, as witnessed in the tombs found in Qweilbeh. On the other hand, tombs built in this pattern in Yasileh date to the late Roman or Byzantine era, which supports the belief that these tombs are from an older period, for similar tombs have been found in the Bediyeh site near the city of Ajlun in Northern Jordan.

In the absence of accurate information, and if these discoveries were further supported with other similar ones, such results can represent new trends in dating. In Yasileh, parts of these tombs were found in good condition and in addition to the archaeological material found, several significant skeletons found in the graves were identified, although they were scattered on the floor of the funeral room.

143 skeletons of adults and children, in addition to two male skeletons, were discovered in the church. These human remains, which were the subject of our first article published on the subject, are still under study. The significance of the discovery of this funeral group stems from the period, going back to the Byzantine and Roman ages. Unfortunately, we are unable to make substantial comparisons regarding the statistics of the population (number of women, men, adults and children), the morphological characteristics and the general status of the population, due to the absence of other funeral groups.

As mentioned earlier, the archaeological excavations in this necropolis are still incomplete, but the information collected can be a basis for conjecture and the formation of several conclusions as to the nature of the social status of those buried in this necropolis, being the earliest of those found to be associated with the Decapolis.

**Anthropological Remains**

Owing to the fact that not a single skeleton was found in a primary archaeological context it is almost impossible to deduce any information regarding the original burial position. However, judging from the orientation of the loculi the burials were mostly positioned north-south. Primary judgment of the uncovered bones demonstrated that the tomb housed some 44 individuals, outnumbering the loculi and graves; this may indicate either that the tomb was used over several generations or, alternatively, that collective inhumation was the norm. Among the analyzed skeletons are four infants, nine children (aged between 1-8 years), 19 adult males, 6 adult females (one of an old person) and five were not assigned.

**Patterns of Burials at Yasileh**

Yasileh was found to contain a variety of interment and burial styles including tombs with a central hall, some with graves constructed in the ground or in side walls and tombs where a single individual was interred.

*Tombs with a Central Hall*

This style resembles tombs built in a private hall, the entrance opening onto a central hall whose measurements and design differ, some being square and others rectangular. Inhumation took place in the ground of the hall, in the sidewalls or sometimes in chambers branching off the main hall, which seems to have been where the burial ceremonies took place or was perhaps an area where mourners gathered during religious and social occasions. This type of burial is represented by tombs 2, 3, 7 and 10.

*Tomb 2 (fig. 11)*

The entrance to this tomb is rectangular in shape (1.70 m high x 1 m wide) and leads by way of two
steps (each 0.27 cm high) to a low rectangular hall with overall measurements of 4.65 m in length and 1.90 m wide.

At the end of the hall, on the eastern side opposite the entrance side, is a medium-sized niche; the floor level there is higher than that of the main hall and is accessed via three steps each measuring 1.65 x 1 x 0.25 m.

The niche housed a tomb (2.10 m long, 0.79 m wide and 0.08 m deep) with a north-south orientation and the area where the slabs rest is 0.55 m deep. An arch effectively divides the hall into two parts, and a concavity constructed on the southern side of the tomb is accessible via three steps the same width as the entrance itself. At the eastern end, another grave was discovered also with a north-south orientation, while the southern side also has a niche accessed by three steps. The northern side has an incomplete niche and a concavity approached by three steps, but neither contained graves.

Tomb 2 is distinguished by the five concavities constructed in the three sides apart from the entrance side; only two of these had been used for burials, the first one in the southern side and the second at the back. The tomb appears to have been left unfinished probably due to the geological nature of the area, since severe cracking could have hampered completion of the tomb.

**Tomb 3 (fig. 12)**

The entrance to tomb 3 is amorphous due to collapse, but leads into an approximately square hall (2 x 1.80 m) with niches on three sides, each of which contains three burials: the recess in the eastern side contained graves (4, 5 and 6) averaging 2 m in length and 0.50 m in width, with a space left between adjacent graves; on the southern side of the tomb, a burial chamber inside the niche contained graves (1, 2, and 3) also with narrow passages between them, while the recess in the northern side contained graves 7, 8, and 9.

**Tomb 5 (fig. 13)**

Tomb 5 has a rectangular entrance (1 m wide, 1.65 high) leading via a step to a rectangular hall with a niche constructed in the back wall, reached by four steps. There were three graves (7, 8 and 9) constructed in the ground, 8 and 9 oriented east-west and separated by a narrow passage, while the third (7) was constructed in a semi-circular cavity. Running along the walls of the tomb
is a 0.25 m *mastaba* or bench, but the distinguishing feature of this tomb however is three intersected arches.

The southern side had a niche encompassing a burial chamber accessed by two steps; the chamber contains two north-south oriented graves with a narrow passage between them. Two steps lead up to a small cavity in the wall of the burial chamber, which contained a grave oriented east-west. Graves uncovered in this side of the tomb are designated 1, 2, and 3, while graves 4, 5 and 6 were found in a similar burial chamber in the southern wall.

The northern side contained two burial chambers; one is a recess accessed by two steps and containing three graves, two of which are oriented north-south and separated by a narrow passage ending in two steps, while the third grave, oriented east-west, was found in a niche constructed within the chamber (graves 13, 14, and 15). The other chamber within the northern side resembles that just described and contains graves 10, 11, and 12.

Tomb 5 is distinguished by two niches in the middle, identical in size and design, the function of which was either to hold lamps or simply to be a decorative features. All but one of the graves (where two skeletons were found) held a single skeleton, and tomb material included beads, pottery sherds, rings, and pottery lamps, while some tombs held animal bones.

*Tomb 7 (fig. 14)*

This tomb has a comparatively spacious antechamber leading to a rectangular entrance giving access to a rectangular hall (4 m long and 2 m wide) with a semi-circular niche at the rear containing three raised graves; two, separated by a narrow passage, follow an east-west direction while the third is oriented north-south. Four burial chambers branch off the main hall, two on the southern and two on the northern side, each of them holding three graves. The interior of the chambers is semi-circular and this shape is echoed by the opening. Tomb 7 consisted of five burial chamber niches, all but one encompassing three graves, whereas the main niche contained four graves.

*Tomb 10 (fig. 15-16)*

Tomb 10 has a *dromos* (1.50 m wide and 3 m high) with seven steps, and two steps descending from it to a central hall. The tomb consists of three interconnected chambers typically measuring 3.65 m in length and 2.65 in width, while a niche on the eastern side contains a burial chamber with three raised graves (1, 2, and 3) oriented north-south. The average dimensions of these graves are 1.90 m long, 0.75 wide and 0.90 deep and are separated by narrow (0.25 m) passages. There is also a funerary
complex in the northern side (graves 14, 15 and 16) resembling that in the southern side.

Halls 1 and 2 are connected by an arch; hall 1 is cruciform in shape and has burial chambers at the northern and southern ends of the cross; the south chamber held three raised graves, two oriented north-south and separated by a narrow pathway ending in two steps leading into a recess containing the third grave (oriented east-west). The graves in this chamber are designated 4, 5, and 6.

The north chamber included two graves (12 and 13) following a north-south direction separated by a narrow passage ending in two steps leading to a (currently) unexcavated niche. The first chamber on the south opens through a gap (window) to another chamber, semi-circular in shape.

The eastern section of the cross opens onto a burial chamber containing five graves (7, 8, 9, 10, and 11) distributed as follows: in the southern side were two graves, one constructed in the ground and the other built inside a small niche and raised some 0.25 m above the ground.

The northern side is a replica of the southern one, except that the chamber held only two graves (10 and 11). The two sides are separated by a narrow passage ending with three steps leading to a small niche inside a cavity wall, where the fifth grave (11) was found. This tomb is unique because of its architectural attributes; although not decorated, the arches and niches are of real beauty.

**Analysis of the Discovered Tombs**

1. **Tombs with a Central Hall**

Four tombs can be thus classified since they share some architectural features.

a. **Plan**

A typical tomb has a central hall from which burial chambers branch off, though the general plan of the chambers and the number and alignment of tombs within them can differ from one to another.

The size and shape of the central halls also differs from one tomb to another, being variously squared, rectangular, or occasionally cruciform. Some chambers had decorative elements such as arches and niches (the latter may have held lamps or have been purely decorative) while others had no such features; some tombs are characterized by a mastaba running along the walls 0.25 m above the floor. It must be said, however, that dimensions and plans of the tombs have not always been accurate.

b. **Niches**

Niches are a common feature of the four kinds of tombs and almost every hall ended with a curved niche, which, as a rule, contained a burial chamber and several graves. Tomb 2 has four niches but because of collapse risks the fifth has not been excavated. Tomb 3 has three niches within three burial chambers. Tomb 4 contained five graves within five burial chambers. Tomb 10 contained five graves within five chambers.
In some tombs, the burial chambers inside the niche also end in a niche on the other side, encompassing a grave(s); for example, hall 3 in tomb 10 ends with a concavity including a grave oriented east-west. Each chamber in tomb 7 ends with a small niche containing a grave. The main concavity in tomb 2 encompasses a smaller niche facing the main entrance, which also contained a grave.

Yet, in addition to common architectural features shared by the excavated tombs (e.g., plan, distribution of tombs, niches...), there are architectural differences in the structural features, which distinguish the tombs from each other, such as the number of burial chambers and graves. For example, tomb 2 has an arch that had the effect of dividing the central hall into two identical parts, but besides its architectural significance the arch enhances the beauty of the tomb. Only two individuals were buried in tomb 2, one in the first south chamber and the other in the main concavity facing the entrance, while other chambers were devoid of burials. Because of severe risks of collapse, digging was stopped before the tomb had been entirely excavated.

c. Special architectural elements

A large curved recess facing the entrance, encompassing three imbricated arches whose function appears to be decorative, characterizes tomb 7, and several burial chambers branch off its central hall. The wall separating rooms 1 and 2 contained two identical curved recesses whose function could have been either aesthetic embellishment, or to hold lamps, although no smoke stains were found to support this supposition.

Tomb 7 also yielded a coin dating from the reign of Emperor Constantine I (AD 306-337). The coin has a puncture on its right side and the obverse carries a right profile of the crowned emperor 9. The reverse of the coin depicts the god of the sun in a standing posture wearing a radiant crown, with a flowing cloak fastened around his neck; he holds a round shape in his left hand while the right hand is raised in a waving posture 10.

Tomb 10 provided a Roman bronze coin minted during the reign of Constant Augustus (AD 337-350). On the obverse, the coin carries a picture of the crowned emperor 11. There were several indications that the tomb belonged to a wealthy family, such as its grand character and appearance, and lavish decoration with architectural detailing; there were several niches and some five chambers where 16 individuals were buried.

2. Tombs with graves dug in the ground

Tombs with graves dug in the ground contained not only individual but also collective inhumation; this style of tomb consists of an entrance that opens onto the actual burial ground; the dimensions of both entrance and burial area differ from tomb to tomb. Tombs 4, 6, 19, 42 and 47 are classified under this category.

Tomb 4 (fig. 17)

The hall of tomb 4 has two steps in front of a rectangular entrance (1.55 m high and 1 m wide), which leads into a large (6.50 m x 4 m) rectangular room, with a niche containing a grave carved out the eastern side (a bronze statuette of Aphrodite was discovered in this grave: fig. 18) 12. The grave, 1.90 m long and 0.70 m wide and oriented north-south, is raised slightly above floor level. This hall (ante-

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10. AL-MUHEISEN 1994, p. 34.
chamber) is separated into two parts by a 1 m wide path ending on the east with two ascending steps leading to a niche. Excavations uncovered fourteen graves (average dimensions: 2 m long, 0.50 m wide and 0.80 m deep), seven in each of the northern and southern parts of the yard, all aligned north-south with a narrow pathway left between adjacent graves. A square hole carved in the ground in the middle of the entrance may have been a door socket.

**Tomb 6 (fig. 19-20)**

With 31 burials found within it, tomb 6 is among the largest excavated at the Yasileh site; two of the graves (30 and 31) belong to children. The tomb was accessed on the western side, the entrance giving onto a rectangular hall (6 m long x 1.50 wide) ending in a semi-circular niche on the eastern side. The eastern wall of the niche contained what appeared to be a small recess that might have been intended to hold pottery vessels. The niche also contained two raised, coffin-like graves (designated 9 and 10). One of the graves (9) follows an east-west direction, while the other (10) follows a north-south direction. A further two graves were found, each one in the side cavities situated at the south and east ends of the tomb. On average, the graves in the tomb 6 measure 1.50 m deep and 0.50 m wide.

Fourteen ground tombs were found in the main hall. The graves were raised above floor level and arranged in two rows, one on the south and the other on the north side of the hall, each row consisting of seven tombs (southern row: tombs 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23; northern row: tombs 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30). Grave 31 was identified in the south-east corner, parallel to the steps leading to the niche on the east, and contained a lead coffin in which a child had been buried.

Tomb 6 contained 12 graves carved out in the walls (southern wall: tombs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7; northern wall: tombs 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16); there was a 1 m wide passage between the two rows of graves. In the north-west corner of the tomb was found a 0.57 m deep hollow with a furrowed edge to hold a covering stone.

This tomb also provided a unique find, an altar discovered in the middle of the main hall. The altar could have been used during the funeral rites, or may have been left by mourners; the tomb also yielded animal bones, some of them showing signs of burning, which may indicate that funeral process included animal sacrifice.
Graves 27 and 28 are considered especially important for they provided a relatively rich assortment of funerary goods. Grave 27 contained a ring still on the right hand of the deceased, while grave 28 yielded some beads, an iron ring, a bracelet and pottery fragments.

**Tomb 19 (fig. 21)**

Tomb 19 is entered through a rectangular hall (14 x 6 m) opening onto a circular hall; the hall has a semi-circular niche on the north and south sides, each one approached by two steps and containing three sarcophagus-shaped graves above ground-level of the niche itself; two graves are oriented east-west while the third is oriented north-south; a small passage runs between the tombs.

The niches are typical in terms of general plan, number of graves in each of them and special distribution of graves within them. Sixteen graves (average dimensions 1.83 x 0.60 x 0.76 m) arranged in two identical rows of eight, oriented north-south, were identified within the rectangular hall, each grave separated from its neighbor by a 0.25 m wide space. Slabs rested on spaces 1 m wide and 0.25 m below ground level. The two rows of graves were separated by a 6 m long and 0.60 m wide passage. Around
the hall is a rectangular terrace that might have been intended for mortuary material such as lamps and other vessels.

**Tomb 47 (fig. 22)**

It is accessed through a narrow passage (2 m long x 0.50 m wide) that leads to a small, low entrance giving onto a hall (2 x 1.70 m). The tomb contained the collective burial of probably three individuals. Three steps lead to a small burial chamber with the interments distributed as follows: two individuals placed in cut graves on the northern and southern sides of the chamber, the third in a wooden coffin (1.85 m long) placed between the graves. Skeletal material was very poor and restricted to a few fragmentary bones found in the space where the coffin had been, although only a few pieces of wood remained; other finds were a pair of earrings and a copper bracelet.

**Analysis of tombs with graves carved in the ground**

A common feature of the above-described tombs is that they all contain graves carved in the floor, but they differ in terms of layout and proportion. The graves are usually covered by stone slabs, and adjacent tombs were separated by a small path or passage averaging 0.50 m in width. Tomb 6 is unique among the excavated tombs for the following reasons:

- It contains a large number of graves (31 in total). The eastern side has a small niche that may have had a decorative function and/or a practical function (i.e. where pottery lamps were placed).
- In the north-west corner of the tomb is a 3.70 m deep circular hole covered with a stone. The covering stone is fixed by a lip around the rim of the opening.
- A small altar was found in the middle of the rectangular hall, which could have been used during funeral rites.
- Grave 31 contained a lead coffin with the skeleton of a child.
- In addition to the human remains, the tomb provided animal bones showing evidence of having been burnt (an indication that animal immolation was part of the funeral rites or that the sacrificed animal was to accompany the deceased to his immortal home).

Tomb 19 is distinguished among the other tombs by the presence of two semi-circular niches in the eastern (back) side, each of them with three graves, and it also has a mastaba surrounding the four sides; this mastaba (0.25 m wide and 0.20 m high) could have been intended to hold mortuary provisions.

Tomb 47 is unique amongst the other tombs since it has only two graves and is also small in dimension compared to the other tombs excavated at Yasileh.

**3. Tombs with graves carved out the sidewalls**

This category of tombs consists of a central hall that varies in size, proportion and design from one tomb to another and side niches (recesses) also of different sizes, where the deceased were buried. Tombs 1, 9, 14 and 39 are classified in this category.
a. Description

**Tomb 1 (fig. 23-24)**

Tomb 1 is a rock-cut complex consisting of three main areas, the entrance, atrium and loculi, all of which are carved out in the sidewalls.

As in other tombs in the area, the entrance faces west and is made of well-dressed stones; the entrance block is 2 m high and 1.80 m wide including the upper horizontal lintels and the two jambs; when discovered the entrance opening (1.50 m high, 0.75 m wide) was blocked by a massive, intact well-shaped stone door. The entrance leads directly into a rectangular atrium (ca. 2 x 3 m) on an east/west axis. A section across the atrium shows a chamber with an irregular vaulted roof reaching a height of 3.5 m in the centre. Around the atrium walls is a 0.20 m high bench, and a smaller (2 m wide) vaulted rock-cut chamber was located beside.

The tomb counts 25 loculi, all of which are cut into the side walls, including loculi 13 and 14 which are located in the vaulted chamber at the back end of tomb. Cist graves 26 and 27 were cut into the floor directly in front of loculi 20, 21, and 22.

The loculi in the side walls are oriented north-south while the vaulted room loculi and the cist graves on the main floor have an east-west orientation. The bottom floor levels of the loculi are the same as that of the top surface of the bench surrounding the atrium. Loculi 3, 4, 5, 13, 15 and 18 and cist graves 26 and 27 are exceptions, as they were cut at a deeper level. The sidewall loculi are separated from each other by partition walls varying in thickness between 0.25-0.40 m.

The architectural attributes of all of the loculi are similar except for the above-mentioned exceptions. The loculi are usually rectangular and on average are 2 m long, 0.55-0.64 m wide and 0.96-1.30 m high. Loculi 3, 4, 5 and 18 are 0.40-0.60 m below floor level, while loculi 13 and 14 were very badly damaged and their measurements could not be determined. The area where loculus 15 was located has an irregular vaulted roof and the grave itself is an uneven rectangular shape with an east-west orientation, and looks as though it could have been a later addition.

An arrangement similar to that of tomb 1 at Yasileh is known in other Roman funerary sites in Palestine and Jordan. A rock-cut tomb was uncovered at el-Jish in Palestine in 1937, consisting of
17 “burial niches” cut into the three walls of the sepulcher. Another example, although smaller in size and containing a lesser number of loculi, was excavated at Nazareth; the tomb has a rectangular chamber and a barrel-vaulted roof, however its distinguishing feature is a shaft tomb cut in the chamber. Excavations at Abila in northern Jordan have uncovered a relatively similar tomb consisting of 15 loculi cut into the sidewalls and a central chamber. This tomb possibly dates from the Early Roman era.

When excavations started in the tomb the atrium was wholly covered with heaps of soil and boulders among which were quantities of pulverized skulls and bones, fragmented pottery and modern artifacts. Upon recovery, the loculi and graves were found to have been opened and their contents either stolen or mixed up, indicating that the tomb had been subjected to rough and continual plundering. Despite this however, some pottery, bones, a considerable collection of beads, glass fragments and pieces of metal were collected from the debris.

**Tomb 9 (fig. 25-26)**

A step leads to the entrance of tomb 9, which is rectangular (1.30 m high x 0.85 m wide) and opens onto a rectangular hall with overall dimensions of 6.50 x 3 m; at the eastern end is a raised semi-circular niche approached by one step, which contained no human remains, but the tomb has eight graves in sidewall cavities, four in each of the southern and northern walls. The average dimensions of the cavities are 2 m deep and 6.50 m wide and the deceased were laid directly on the floor with no attempt to dig graves.

**Tomb 14 (fig. 27)**

The tomb was found severely collapsed. The entrance opens onto a small rectangular hall (2.89 x 1.20 m) but, conspicuously, no niche was constructed at the opposite end of the hall. Excavations have uncovered seven graves in side recesses; three graves (nos. 1-3) were built in the southern side of the chamber.
the tomb, with grave 1 located at a certain distance from the other two. The northern wall contained two recesses, each one holding two graves (nos. 4-7) of average dimensions 1.80 m deep and 0.50 m wide.

**Tomb 38**

Due to collapse, no genuine entrance was discovered for this tomb, which was found to contain 18 graves, of which nine were carved in the ground and nine were in lateral cavities. Past the entrance area there are two interconnected halls divided by an arch, which gives a degree of magnificence to the tomb; a niche at the far end of the hall held a grave oriented north-south.

Of the 18 graves defined in this tomb, six were in a niche in the south side; three were dug in the ground and three were constructed in semi-circular side-cavities; average dimensions of the graves are 1.90 x 0.80 x 0.90 m. In the northern side of the tomb is another niche, identical to the one in the southern side in plan, number of tombs and distribution. The back hall contains six graves, three on the ground and three in lateral cavities in the south, east, and north walls of the hall.

**Tomb 39 (fig. 28)**

Tomb 39 held 14 burials distributed in two large chambers; these chambers (northern and southern) are identical in plan and each one contains six graves cut out of limestone and covered with slabs, as were the graves on either side of the entrance. Tomb 39 had been roughly looted and skeletal material was in an advanced stage of deterioration.

Following is a description of burial contents. Graves discovered in the northern chamber (nos. 1-6) were completely empty, as was grave 7, on the left side of the entrance. Grave 8, on the right side of the entrance, yielded some osseous remains accompanied by a pair of gold earrings, suggesting that the grave might belong to an adult female; this grave also contained remains of a child.
Two loci (020 and 021) were defined in grave 10 in the southern chamber. This grave contained remains of an adult, probably a female as indicated by a pair of gold earrings. Grave 11 with two loculi (022 and 023) held some teeth that may indicate an adult burial, and was accompanied by a bead. Graves 9, 12, 13 and 14 were void upon recovery, and the collapse of some parts of the eastern chamber made it difficult to continue excavations there, and no work has been done in the central and eastern parts of the tomb. Admission to the tomb was via six steps leading to the ante-entrance area that is defined by pebbles. The tomb has a rock-cut door that revolves and opens by using wedges placed on the left side (oriented northward).

Other tombs excavated were single graves (nos. 40 and 41) and both were looted; the excavations in these two tombs and information on these graves will appear in the final field report as a separate appendix. Remains of an adult male were found at the bottom of tomb 41, but were badly preserved.

**Tomb 42** (fig. 29)
It was found to have been robbed at recovery and all contents were damaged; it held the remains of two adults, one in a wooden coffin and the other in a slab-covered trench.

**Tomb 44**
It is a collective one robbed in antiquity, and chisel marks on the inside of the tomb may indicate that it was left unfinished; quantities of dirt have invaded the grave through the fallen ceiling and the collapse of tomb 44 revealed another tomb built upon it, but the large boulders filling the center of tomb 44 make excavation difficult and due to shortage of time it has not been fully excavated; some scattered human bones were found in the top soil. Two steps leading to the burial chamber function as an entrance while the door seems to have been destroyed.

**Tomb 45**
With a single burial, it has been looted and destroyed; excavations have uncovered three courses of the lower part of the wall-door that used to close the burial chamber. Some bones, probably belonging to a female, accompanied by a blue glassware vessel missing the rim, were found at the eastern end of the tomb.

**Tomb 46**
It is the best-preserved tomb having escaped looters, and accommodated the remains of an adult female in her fifties. The door-wall is still standing and has been drawn and photographed. Unfortunately, due to humidity, the osseous material was deteriorated and would crumble into powder when touched. The body had been interred in a supine position with the head to the north. Both arms and legs were completely disintegrated to dust and their original arrangement in the tomb could not be reconstructed, nor were any funerary objects found.
Tomb 48

It has housed multi-interments, but is now completely empty except for a few brittle bones indicating the remains of an adult male; due to collapse of the ceiling the eastern portion of the grave was not excavated. The entrance consists of three steps leading down to the burial chamber, which has a single cut grave on the southern side; there is no genuine north side, only an open groove.

Tomb 49

The last tomb to be excavated was no. 49, revealing a collective burial of three individuals. The entrance consisted of one step leading to the chamber, but remaining parts of interlocking stones were found standing on the north and south sides. Excavations have uncovered skeletal remains belonging to two adult males and an adult female at the bottom level of the chamber; the males were arranged lying beside each other, while the female was on the northern side in a supine position with arms extended along the body. To the south of the female was a male placed on his left side with the left leg crossing under the right one, but the second male skeleton was incomplete, therefore the original configuration could not be established. Only the skeletal remains of the lower limbs of the males were present, while other parts (the torso) were disarticulated and scattered around.

In summary, all ten tombs had been destroyed by looters upon recovery and no whole skeletons were found; even in tomb 46 that had escaped looters, deterioration due to humidity had fragmented the skeletal remains.

Excavations in the residential areas (precisely Area G, Square XA. 27) revealed four burials dating from the Islamic period, three adults and a child. The graves are of the cist tomb type, rock slabs representing the sidewalls and ceiling. Burial I was found at locus 006, covered with rock slabs; it held the badly preserved remains of a child. The child was positioned lying on the right side with the head facing south towards Mecca according to the Islamic tradition. No cultural objects of any kind were found.

Burial II was defined as locus 015, which is a cist grave covered with five rock slabs. Skeletal remains in good condition belonged to an adult female, resting on the right side with the head facing south; accompanying the skeleton were two rings placed next to the right hand, a bracelet decorated with beads and two coins.

Burial III was found at locus 016, a cist grave covered with five slabs containing osseous remains; the orientation of the skeleton could be determined although the bones were badly decayed. The body had been laid on the right side with the face tilted towards the south; the gender could not be determined, but a wooden object found near the head could be part of a necklace.

Burial IV was uncovered at locus 018, a large grave covered with seven slabs; the bones were in a relatively good condition although with some fragmentation of the cranium and pelvis. The skeleton was defined as that of a male, placed on the right side with the head towards the south. This tomb yielded no objects.

In summary, the 1994 excavations at Yasileh were successful and a lot was achieved despite it being a short season. We attempted to understand variation in tomb types in Cemetery A, but Cemetery B still needs a lot of work in order to understand the nature of tomb types, a question for future investigation.

b. Analyses of tombs with graves carved in sidewalls

Common elements

A common aspect characterizing this type of tomb is that graves are carved in deep cavities in sidewalls, the deceased being either placed on the ground or in graves dug within these cavities, and then closed with stone slabs. This type of tomb is spacious and architecturally designed to maximize the space available for burials, both in the ground and in wall cavities; both the cavities and the graves are generally spaced about 0.25 m apart.
**Uncommon elements**

Certain architectural elements and finds are specific to particular tombs, for instance tomb 1 is characterized by three rosettes decorating the lintel stone; this type of embellishment rarely, if ever, appears in other tombs. Grave 7 within tomb 1 yielded a Roman bronze coin, the obverse depicting Salonina, wife of Emperor Gallienus, and the reverse depicting her feeding a snake she is holding. The coin was minted in Asia Minor during the period AD 260-268.  

Grave 5 provided a Roman bronze coin dating from the reign of an Emperor wearing a crown and with her hair twisted and dangling on the right side, identified as Diocletian (AD 284-296). The obverse shows the crowned emperor while the reverse depicts the emperor in military dress holding a spear and a round shape, an inspiration of the god Jupiter and symbol of victory.  

Grave 3 provided a Roman bronze filigree minted during the reign of Constantius II (AD 337-361). The obverse depicts the crowned emperor, while the reverse shows two Roman soldiers armed with spears, with two flags between them.  

Tomb 1 had a hemispherical roof, and two recesses were found in the middle, probably to hold pottery lamps. It is remarkable that some graves of tomb 1 were devoid of human remains, while others contained more than one individual. Also, this tomb provided a variety of finds including glass bottles, metallic items and pottery, as well as some wood remains and iron nails that might indicate there had been a coffin in the grave; this assumption is particularly supported by the fact that the iron nails were very close to the human bones. Two bronze bracelets were found worn by the child buried in this grave.  

**4. Isolated graves**

Many of these graves have been located on the edge of the area overlooking Wadi Yasileh from the west. Dug out of limestone rock, they are individual graves and not part of a tomb complex although many are found distributed among the multiple burial tombs along either side of Wadi Yasileh.  

The sample includes two tombs (nos. 23, 42) and the Church tomb. Isolated tombs are usually constructed with stone-slab sides and covered with protruding slabs.  

**Tomb 23**  
The tomb was located on the right edge (east) of Wadi Yasileh. The tomb is rectangular in shape (2.40 m deep) with a few steps leading down into the grave to a depth of 0.25-0.75 m; a partition wall of stones, stone chips and mud was found in the eastern corner of the tomb which, when removed, revealed a grave cut out of limestone, containing some beads. Isolated graves are usually devoid of any funerary material and may therefore have been the graves of poor people.  

**Tomb 42**  
A dromos (2 m long and 1 m wide) leads to the entrance of tomb 42. The central hall is approximately square in plan and tool marks can be seen on the walls, although the tomb suffered damage from both moisture and cracking. A grave (1.50 m long x 0.50 m wide) oriented north-south was found in the south-east corner.
During the 1994 excavations at the site wood residues were noticed covering an area (1.90 m long and 0.50 m high) of the eastern wall, which may indicate a perished coffin; one of the pieces of wood is inscribed with a *crew step* (graded lines with square angles) decoration; the ground where the grave is located slopes toward the west and ends with a step. The remaining part of the chamber could have been used during the funeral ceremony.

**Church I Grave (fig. 30)**

A single grave was found in church I representing a single burial episode although the grave contained the remains of two deceased, possibly as the result of an accident 18.

**General Architectural Attributes of the Yasileh Tombs**

All tombs were hewn out of limestone rock, which is easily shaped, and allowed the builders to exhibit their skill and mastery in constructing arches and niches. All tombs were oriented to the west, possibly indicating that the builders realized the benefits of exploiting the slope. Every tombs were closed with stone doors varying in shape and size from one tomb to another, with door sockets in the middle of the entrance.

The entrance leads to a burial chamber, a small hall or interconnected halls separated by arches, interment being in the ground or in lateral cavities. Some tombs showed tool marks; some were carefully executed while others were roughly made; it is probable that tombs were constructed by specialist artisans. In most of the tombs the end of the main hall has a niche containing graves, although tombs 14, 39 and 47 had no such cavities. Graves were constructed in the ground or in lateral cavities, oriented either north-south or east-west. Burials were covered with stone slabs fixed by a narrow (0.10-0.20 m wide) lip round the top edge. Almost all of the graves had a stone placed at one end, probably where the head of the deceased rested. Graves were arranged a small distance apart in adjacent rows, the rows separated by a space 0.80-1 m wide to facilitate movement.

The geological setting of the cemetery made tombs susceptible to cracking and often hampered their completion; in tomb 11 for example, the hall has been hewn out but no graves made, whereas tomb 2 was abandoned before it was completely finished, since only two graves (1 and 2) were used.

The cemetery at Yasileh has been the victim of organized illegal digging, contributing to the loss of much data concerning the inhabitants of this site before it has been properly documented.

Niches were probably constructed to hold lamps but may also have been architectural decoration. Despite the fact that niches and arches bestow some greatness on the tombs, the absence of other decorative elements (e.g. frescoes) in the Yasileh tombs is particularly remarkable; the only other decorative element found was the carved rosettes in tomb 1.

BURIAL CUSTOMS AT YASILEH IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

At Yasileh, the deceased were placed in a supine position with the face upward. Some graves were constructed in the front part of the tomb with niches at the head, and could be those of individuals of high social status.

Among the special burial artifacts and finds are a statue of the Goddess Aphrodite and groups of coins unearthed near the deceased, near the head or phalanges, but never in the mouths of the deceased (it is thought that coins found in mouths represented taxes for the afterlife of the deceased)\(^\text{19}\); other tomb artifacts included bracelets made of glass, iron and/or bronze, ornamental objects made of bronze, bone and/or wood, pottery lamps and flasks, and pottery sherd\(^\text{20}\).

The people of Yasileh adopted different funerary practices during the Roman and the Byzantine periods, which can be attributed to a change in religious beliefs from one period to the other; undoubtedly the adoption of Christianity had crucial effects on the behavior of the people which was, in turn, echoed and reflected in the material objects used in funerary practices. Some tombs, initially hewn and used during the earlier period are proven to have been reused during the later period; this is evident in tombs that have skeletal remains accompanied with Byzantine pottery, but also crosses and bells of bronze\(^\text{21}\).

So at Yasileh there is evidence of the different mortuary practices used throughout the Roman and Byzantine eras, which can be attributed to a change in religious beliefs from one period to the other; undoubtedly the adoption of Christianity had crucial effects on the behavior of the people which was, in turn, echoed and reflected in the material objects used in funerary practices. Some tombs, initially hewn and used during the earlier period are proven to have been reused during the later period; this is evident in tombs that have skeletal remains accompanied with Byzantine pottery, but also crosses and bells of bronze\(^\text{21}\).

The discovery of bone and iron nails in some tombs can be considered indications that the deceased had been buried in coffins which rotted away and vanished due to moisture. The tombs had main entrances that used to be closed by well-worked, mortared stones and mortar, and which had to be opened and resealed repeatedly for fresh burials or at the time of commemoration ceremonies for the deceased\(^\text{24}\).

Unfortunately, as already mentioned, most of the excavated tombs have been subject to chronic destruction and only a few skeletons were found in a primary anatomical position, thus the sample is too small to enable reconstruction of such issues as the demography, state of nutrition and/or paleopathology of the people of Yasileh.

\(^\text{19}\) AL-MUHEISEN 1994, p. 651-653.
\(^\text{24}\) AL-MUHEISEN 1994, p. 5-27.
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