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The Jewish Necropolis at Jericho¹

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Under the impetus of a sudden influx of stone ossuaries in the antiquities market, suggesting tomb robberies in the Jericho region, a survey was carried out on behalf of the Archaeological Staff officer for Judea and Samaria which resulted in the discovery of a Jewish necropolis covering some 10 km along the foothills to the west of Jericho. A small portion of the necropolis was excavated and found to date from the 1st century B.C. to the 1st century A.D. (Hachlili 1979, 1980).

The cemetery was located outside the town, as was the usual Jewish practice. The tombs were cut into the bedrock, and each consisted of a square chamber with a small rectangular pit cut into the floor and surrounded by ledges. From one to nine loculi approximately 2 m long, 80 cm high, and 55 cm wide were cut into the chamber walls (fig. 1). The loculus and tomb en-

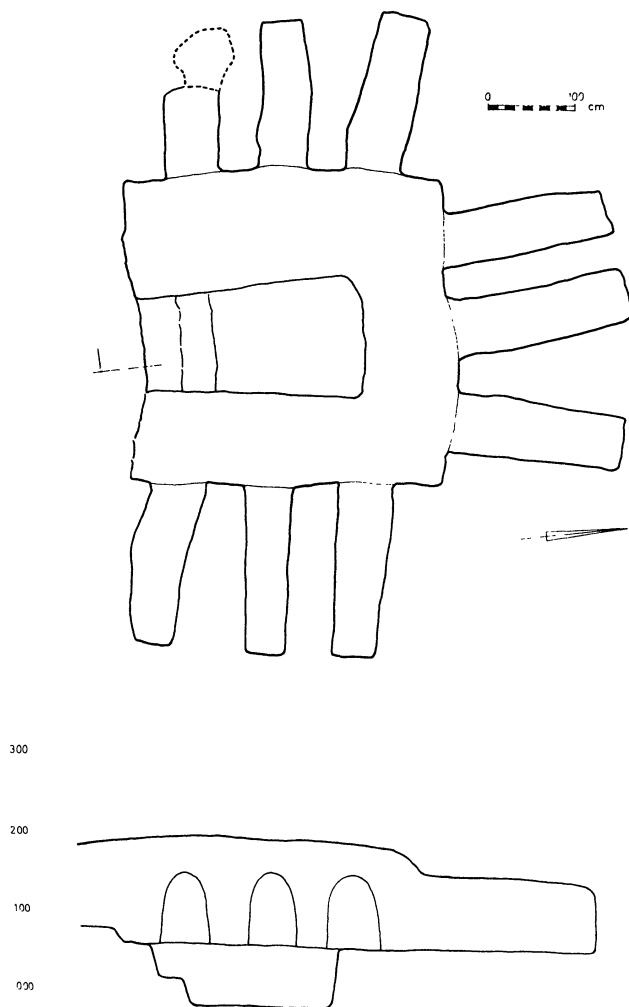


FIG. 1. Floor plan of a tomb from the Jewish necropolis at Jericho (top) and section of wall at bottom of plan showing loculus entrances (bottom).

¹ The anthropological analysis was supported in part by grants-in-aid from the Israel Academy of Sciences.

trances were individually sealed with large stones. Some of the tombs contained primary extended burials in wooden coffins, dated to the 1st century B.C.; others contained secondary burials in limestone ossuaries, dated to the 1st century A.D. A third type of burial was found in three tombs which contained large heaps of disarticulated bones in the loculi and on the floor of the central chamber; these were probably contemporaneous with the ossuaries.

The coffins were made of local wood—cypress, sycamore, and Christ's-thorn. They were rectangular, made of planks held together with wooden pegs and hinges, and had gabled lids. From one to three individuals were found in each coffin, usually an adult and a child but occasionally two or even three adults, each lying on a leather mattress one above the other. Cooking pots were found beside the coffins or in front of the loculi, and small pots and wooden vessels and, in five instances, leather sandals were found in the coffins of women and children. In one coffin a coin of Herod Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6) was found. Outside some of these tombs were large storage jars which probably contained water used for washing the hands after visiting the tomb.

The ossuaries were rectangular and carved from a single piece of limestone, with a separate stone lid. They were usually incised with various motifs, the most frequent of which was from one to three rosettes set in a frame. The name and other details, such as family origin and personal history, were incised on some of the ossuaries in Jewish and Greek script. These inscriptions have helped to establish the family relationships of the interred and to check the anthropological findings (Hachlili 1978, 1979; Hachlili and Smith 1979). The ossuaries varied from 50–70 cm in length and were 25 cm wide. They usually contained the disarticulated bones of one individual, whose remains had been placed in the ossuary after primary interment and decomposition of the flesh. Occasionally the remains of as many as three individuals were found in the same ossuary. The very small ossuaries contained infant burials. Only a very few vessels were found in the tombs with the ossuaries; these were usually in the central pit.

Broken pottery of the 1st century A.D. and two coins of Herod Agrippa I (A.D. 41–44) were found with the piles of disarticulated bones.

In sex and age distribution, physical characteristics, and skeletal pathology, no differences were found between the three burial types. Approximately one-third of the remains were those of infants and children, while nearly one-fourth had survived beyond the age of 50. These figures compare favorably with the mortality figures for Hellenistic Greeks and 19th-century Bedouin from the Beer Sheba region and are slightly better than those for Jerusalem Jews of the same period (see table 1). The Jericho population also enjoyed good health throughout life. Even in the older individuals, very few degenerative joint changes were found, and the major health problem seems to have been periodontal disease and consequent tooth loss. Most individuals aged 40+ had lost several teeth from this condition. The physical characteristics of the Jericho population were indistinguishable from those of Jews of the time in other regions (Ein Gedi, Jerusalem, and Meiron). The Jewish population of 200 B.C.–A.D. 400 was characterized by short to medium stature, fairly large brachycranic to mesocranic crania, and short, broad faces (Arensburg 1973, Arensburg et al. 1980, Smith and Zias 1980, Smith and Arensburg 1982).

Until now, our knowledge of the Jewish burial customs of this period has been mainly derived from salvage excavations of tombs in Jerusalem that had been looted and damaged in the course of construction (Kloner 1980). Our excavations have revealed two distinct burial customs among the Jews of Jericho. During the 1st century B.C. they buried their dead in wooden coffins; suddenly, at the beginning of the 1st century A.D., they began to practice secondary burial in limestone ossuaries. No

TABLE 1
AGE DISTRIBUTIONS OF VARIOUS SKELETAL POPULATIONS

POPULATION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE IN EACH AGE GROUP					
		0-5	6-11	12-19	20-29	30-49	50+
Jericho Jews (present material)	244	24	10	5	5	33	23
Jerusalem Jews (1st century B.C.-1st century A.D.; Smith and Zias 1980)	98	25	7	8	17	29	13
Meiron Jews (4th century A.D.; Smith and Bournemann 1976)	108	32	9	6	6	32	15
Hellenistic Greeks (Angel 1969)	144	38	8	3	8	33	10
Beer Sheba Bedouin (19th-century A.D.; Goldstein, Arensburg, and Nathan 1976)	216	23	10			50	17

completely satisfactory explanation of this change has been found, although several suggestions have been offered (see, e.g., Rahmani 1961:117-18; Meyers 1971:80-89; Hachlili 1979:34-35; 1980:239; Kloner 1980:247-53). Because of pressure exerted by minority groups, we have been unable to continue this important excavation, which we hoped would provide a detailed picture of paleodemography and disease prevalence in this population. (We estimate that at least 100,000 individuals were interred in the necropolis.) The excavations were stopped two years ago, and we have heard that the tombs are once again being looted.

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