

THE SKELETAL REMAINS FROM EL-MUNṬAR EL-ĀBYAD

YOSSI NAGAR

INTRODUCTION

During the 2003 salvage excavations at el-Munṭar el-Abyad, human skeletal remains were found in jars, cist tombs and sarcophagi, representing burials from Middle Bronze Age II and the Persian and Roman periods (see Atrash and Golani, this volume), the remains were in a very poor state of preservation and were reburied by officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs immediately after their excavation, impeding a full reconstruction of anthropological parameters. Still, reconstruction of the burial practices was possible in most cases, and the estimation of age at death was made using dental parameters (Hillson 1986). Sex estimations of adult individuals could not be made, nor could any analyses be carried out to check the presence of pathologies or recording of metric and non-metric traits. The age, burial posture and age estimation for each of the burials from the Persian period (Stratum II) is summarized in Table 1; similar data for the burials from MB II (Stratum III) and the Late Roman period (Stratum I) are presented in the text below.

Table 1. Skeletal Remains from the Persian Period

Tomb No.	No. of Individuals	Burial Posture	Age at Death Estimation
T6	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	Adult (>15 years)
T8	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to west	?
T9	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to west	20–30 years
T10	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	40–50 years
T13	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	40–50 years
T14	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to west	40–50 years
T16	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	20–30 years
T17	At least 1	Few scattered remains, indicating a disturbed grave	Unclear, not an infant
T18	1	Unclear, only a few skull vault fragments	<15 years
T19	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	15–20 years
T21	1	On back, east–west orientation, head to east	Adult (>18 years)

THE FINDS

The Middle Bronze Age (Stratum III)

Numerous jars, presumably used for the burial of infants, were revealed in the MB II settlement (Stratum III; see Atrash and Golani, this volume). Of the thirteen infant jar “burials”, eight lacked osteological material, three produced only a few unidentifiable bone crumbs and only two produced identifiable skeletal remains. The lack of osteological remains in most jars may be due to the total disintegration of the bones; alternatively, the jars might have served as offerings or tomb markers.

In total, remains from five burials were attributed to the Middle Bronze Age settlement: A jar burial of an infant 2–4 years old (T38, L1221), a jar burial of an infant of uncertain age (T39, L1222), and the burials of three adults aged 20–30, 30–40, and >15 (T25, L1162; T26, L1032; L1210). The bones of two of the adult individuals were found in anatomical articulation, indicating primary burials: one (T26, L1032) was placed on its left side in a southeast–northwest orientation, head to the southeast, while the other (T25, L1162) was placed on its back, in a north–south orientation, head to the south. The third individual (L1210) was not identified as a burial and consisted of scattered bones. Covello-Paran (forthcoming) described Middle Bronze Age human burials concurrent and within the settlement’s area at the site of ‘En Hīlu, in the Lower Galilee. At that site, infants were buried in jars and adults in cist burials in varying head orientations.

The Persian Period (Stratum II)

Of the 19 burials associated with the Persian period (Stratum II), only 11 produced osteological remains of any significance (Table 1). These included at least one child <5 years old and eight adults of a wide age range. The age at death of two other individuals could not be determined.

In contrast to the Middle Bronze Age, where burials were carried out within the habitation site, the Persian-period burials were located in a defined cemetery, outside the contemporary dwelling area whose exact whereabouts are as yet unknown (see Wolff, this volume). As seen in Table 1, burial practices were consistent; all were single interments, with the bodies placed on their back in a general east–west orientation. However, the orientation of the head varied. This situation is similar to the large Persian-period cemetery uncovered at Tel Shor in the Jezreel Valley (Yannai, forthcoming).

The Roman Period (Stratum I)

Remains of at least eight individuals were attributed to Roman burials (Stratum I), found scattered inside or alongside sarcophagi fragments. The age at death of two of these individuals was estimated at 30–40 years and one, at 30–50 years. The age at death of the rest of the individuals could not be determined, yet based on the size of the fragments, these did not represent infants or small children. Some of the bones from L1333, L1415 and L1417 were burned. This phenomenon was also documented in a Roman-period burial

at Legio in the Jezreel Valley (Tepper, forthcoming); according to the excavator, it may possibly attest to the presence of Roman soldiers at the site.

CONCLUSIONS

The remains of at least 14 individuals from three different periods were unearthed at el-Munṭar el-Abyad. The Middle Bronze Age burials included two jar burials of infants, and the burials of three adults in pits, all within the dwelling area. Other jar burials, with no identifiable osteological remains, were also discerned, presumably having been completely deteriorated. Burials from the Persian period included a child, eight adults and three individuals of unknown age, all in cist tombs which were part of a larger cemetery. Burials from the Roman period included two adults and six individuals of unknown age, in association with sarcophagi. More skeletal remains from these periods were found in a subsequent excavation in this area (Shalev, in prep.),¹ and a conclusive report will be published upon completion of their study.

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¹ Permit Nos. A-7277, A-7543. The author would like to thank Yiftah Shalev for providing information concerning this as yet unpublished excavation.

