A SALVAGE EXCAVATION AT A 6th-7th CENTURY C.E. SITE ON PALMACH STREET, BEERSHEBA.

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Introduction

In March 1998, during construction activity on a modern road, inspectors of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) discovered archaeological remains on Palmach Street in Beersheba. Beginning in August 1998, the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University undertook a salvage excavation at the site.1

The Palmach Street site is located within the borders of the Old City in modern Beersheba (Fig. 1; Map Ref. 130025–130045/071220–071235), on the northern bank of Nahal Beersheba, ca. 350 m. northwest from the so-called “Abraham’s Well”. It lies ca. 260 m. above sea level on a bedrock hill belonging to the Sheva Formation (Horowitz 1979:71, Fig. 4.2). The rock-hewn structure that was exposed appears at a depth of ca. 1.20 m. beneath the present surface.

The local grid of the excavation was established in accordance with the direction of the modern street. Two squares measuring 5 x 5 m. were opened and the coordinates were given as A1 and B1. The registration system was based on loci and basket numbers. There was no distinction between architectural elements (walls, etc.), features (installations, etc.) and debris layers; all are considered loci.

Stratigraphy and Architecture

In the course of excavation a nearly complete architectural complex was exposed (Fig. 2). This consists of a rock-hewn structure with a built entrance comprising a threshold and doorjamb that merge into the rock by means of a built wall. The structure is situated on an east-west axis and has two rock-cut rectangular chambers that are divided by hewn pilasters oriented north-south.

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1 The excavation (License No. G-120/1998) was directed by the author, and assisted by A. Siman-Tov. It was financed by the municipality of Beersheba and Asphalt Darom Ltd. Area photographs were taken and plans drawn by the excavators. Plans were prepared for publication by J. Dekel. Finds were photographed by P. Shrago and S. Feldman. Pottery was restored by R. Pelta and drawn by A. Speshilov. Others involved were: Dr. Y. Goren (kiln wasters analysis), H. Gitler (numismatics), R.E. Jackson-Tal (glass), M. Sadeh (archaeozoology), A. Shavit (Ramot – Archaeology), N. Negev and F. Zontag (IAA). I wish to thank all of them. I am indebted to Prof. M. Fischer, E. Ayalon and especially O. Tal for their valuable comments throughout this study.

2 Fig. 1 shows a German aerial photograph of the site made in 1918 (Etington 1979: Fig. 1). No. 1 indicates our excavation and No. 2 is possibly a Roman Army camp in the vicinity of the site (Fabian 1994:146; Ein-Gedy and Masarwah 1999). This map was prepared for publication by N. Arnon and P. Shrago.
Fig. 1. The general location of the site. No. 1: Excavation Site, No. 2: Roman Army Camp.
The pilasters protrude about a meter from the outline of the structure and form a 1.3 m. wide passageway between the two rooms. The west room (Locus 120) measures 2.1 x 3.5 m.; the east room (Locus 121) measures 2 m. from east to west while its width is unknown due to the destruction of the northeast corner by a modern drainage channel. It may be assumed that the two rooms were almost symmetrical in dimensions (Fig. 3). They are rock-cut to slightly different depths. The west room is higher with a maximum floor level of ca. 258.8 m. above sea level.\(^3\) The east room is lower and has a maximum floor level of ca. 258.49 m. However, in the northwestern part of the east room, ca. 0.2 m. from the north pilaster, is a rock-cut depression at an elevation of 258.45 m. The depression is rounded with a diameter of 0.4 m. and may be part of an installation whose function is unclear. Only the southern part of the built entrance facade of the structure was exposed. Here the built wall abuts the southern rock-cut wall of the east room, forming the southeast corner of Locus 121 and differing from the other exposed corners of the structure which are all rock-hewn.

The built wall (Locus 103) is about 1.0 m. long (north-south) and 0.6 m. wide (east-west). Its exterior faces east and is built of large well-dressed limestone ashlars, whereas the rest of the wall is filled with fieldstones of various sizes.

\(^{3}\) All following elevations are above sea level.
Fig. 3. The general plan of the excavation
It was built using a dry construction method with no mortar, and is preserved to a height of 1.6 m. The uppermost part of the wall constitutes the south doorjamb of the entrance to the structure and is fully preserved except for the lintel. The doorjamb has four courses and protrudes northward from the end of the wall thus forming a 0.1 m. recess. The lowest course, being the most massive (0.6 m. high), is laid partly on the bedrock and partly on the threshold. The third course above the threshold, 1.15 m. above it, has a cut depression that was used as a bolt socket (measuring 0.7 x 0.15 m.). This stone was dressed in a different manner from the others, and could be a Nabatean capital in secondary use (Fig. 4). A characteristic projecting horn points to such a possibility (cf. Negev 1974: Pls. 27–29).

The threshold was built of smooth slabs with only one stone preserved in its entirety and the beginning of a second stone. The continuation of the threshold to the north was difficult to trace because of the presence of the modern drainage pipe there. The threshold is 0.15 m. high and sits on a 0.1 m. thick foundation of well-packed earth, separating the threshold from the rock’s face. The wall (Locus 103), on the other hand, is located directly on the rock surface.

Fig. 4. A possible Nabatean capital.

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4 I’m grateful to N. Negev from the IAA, who raised this issue during his visit to the site. Prof. M. Fischer agrees with such a possibility (pers. com.).
Just east of this wall (Locus 103) a tabun (oven) (Fig. 5; Locus 119) with a diameter of 0.6 m. was found. It was built of high-temperature fired ceramic plaques and encased with small fieldstones on the exterior. The tabun is 0.51 m. high with a bedrock foundation, at an elevation of 258.58 m. The eastern part of the tabun was destroyed by the installation of a modern drainage pipe. The tabun was filled with burnt sandy soil and charcoal in which a large amount of pottery, mostly juglets sherds, was found (Locus 112).  

5 According to A. Zelin and F. Zontag, the IAA inspectors who supervised the building activity at the site, the juglet assemblage (see below) was retrieved from the tabun area.
Both rooms of the structure, except the southern part of Locus 121, were basically covered by an almost sterile black swampy soil (Loci 115/117), while above it there was a dark-brown sandy soil layer (Loci 100/109). It should be noted that within the upper fill one Late Roman coin was found (Fig. 6; Locus 109; Basket 1012; IAA No. 84468). It may reasonably be assumed that these two fills were created after the site was abandoned. The southern part of the eastern room was covered by burnt sandy soil ca. 0.55 m. thick (Locus 111); it is situated above the bedrock and includes a large amount of broken pottery.

![Fig. 6. The Late Roman coin.](image)

The rock in which the structure was hewn continues along some 7 m. to the southeast of the southwest corner of Room 120, over the majority of the area of Square B1. The uncovered rock surface is triangular in outline and has been smoothed in the eastern sector. To the east of the rock surface the excavation reached a depth of 257.74 m., stopping at a hard dark-brown calcareous sand without any finds. At the start of the excavation in this area, two fireplaces were exposed, one above the other, both containing a few sherds (Fig. 7). The upper one (Locus 104) is located ca. 1.5 m. to the west of the modern drainage cesspool, at a top elevation of 260.14 m. and a bottom level of 259.75 m. Its shape was irregular, measuring 0.7 x 1 m. Beneath it was another fireplace (Locus 105), also irregular in shape but larger (1.5 x 1.6 m.), with a bottom level of 259.51 m.

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6 The coin was identified by H. Gitler as dating to the Emperor Arcadius 383–386 C.E. AE 4. Mint of Alexandria; 0.98 gr. ↑. *Obv.* DNARCAD IVSP[FAVC] Bust r., pearl diademed. *Rev.* VOT/X/MVLT/XX in wreath; beneath, mint mark illegible (cf. Grierson and Mays 1992: Arcadius Nos. 48–52). Due to the fact that the building existed in the 6th-7th centuries C.E. (see below), it seems that the coin rolled down from the southwestern slope, where an additional site may be located.
One bone, *Ovis/Capra*, a right humerus distal fragment, was found within this fireplace, while the upper one did not contain any bones.\(^7\) Both fireplaces were in use after the main complex ceased to exist.

**The Pottery\(^8\)**

The pottery is generally dated to the Late Byzantine-Early Islamic periods. Three groups may be discerned according to their contexts:

**Group 1:** A well-stratified group from the building (Fig. 8) originated in the layer above the bedrock (Locus 111) and the fill of the *tabun* (Loci 106 and 112).\(^9\)

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\(^7\) It should be mentioned here that only two bone fragments were found in the site and except the former it includes *Ovis/Capra* femur left, fragment proximal, which was exposed in Locus 106, above the *tabun*.

\(^8\) Except for the pottery, the coin and two bone fragments (mentioned above), the excavation yielded the following finds: 1) Small folded in rim fragment of glass bottle found out of context (Locus 110; Basket 1019). The exact date is uncertain due to its size and common technique. According to the fabric, it can be assigned a general date in the Late Roman-Byzantine periods. 2) A number of kiln wasters (slag) [Loci 105 (Basket 1009); 107 (Basket 1010); 117 (Basket 1025); 118 (Basket 1026)]; their presence point to the possibility of a pottery kiln in the vicinity of the site. Such an assumption corresponds with the pottery finds, which seem to be locally manufactured (see below).

\(^9\) The burnt sandy soil (Locus 106) was situated immediately above the *tabun*’s fill (Locus 112); both were disturbed during the modern building activity. However, the lowest elevation of Locus 112 makes its provenance more convincing.
Group 2: A group found within the fills covering the building area (inside and outside) after its abandonment (Fig. 9:1, 2, 4–6, 9, 17).

Group 3: An unstratified group which was collected by the IAA inspectors during the modern construction, before the salvage excavation (Fig. 9:3, 7–8, 10–16).

The first group includes various types of bowls (Fig. 8:1–6), among them a Fine Byzantine Ware specimen (Fig. 8:1; Magness 1993:195, 197, Form 1B, with references), dated accordingly to the mid-6th to late 7th centuries C.E. It also includes a casserole (Fig. 8:7) of Magness' Form 1 (1993:211–212, with references) that is dated as above, and lids that may serve such casseroles (Fig. 8:8–9). A group of Palestinian bag-shaped jars that seem to be dated to the Late Byzantine–Early Islamic periods belong to Rosenthal-Heginbottom's Form 1 (1988:84–85, with references). The jars have been classified in her sub-forms: Variant A, with a vertical or nearly vertical neck (Fig. 8:12–14; cf. ibid.: Pl. II: 26–27), and Variant D, characterized by a low neck with an inner fold (Fig. 8:11; cf. ibid.: Pl. II:91). The different types of high-necked jars (Fig. 8:15–20) have no exact parallels and seem to be locally manufactured. Other forms, as well as the amphora (Fig. 8:21), stand (Fig. 8:22), juglets (Fig. 8:23–25), and jug bases (Fig. 8:26–27, the latter is knife-shaven) are too fragmentary to attribute to specified types. The small string-cut flat base of an elongated juglet (Fig. 8:28) has parallels at Nessana (Baly 1962: Pl. LIII: Form 88:1, 2), Tel Masos (Fritz and Kempinski 1983: Pls. 101 C; 169:3, 4, where it is considered as a candlestick lamp) and Ramot Nof, Beersheba (Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994: Fig. 6:33–34), and appears to be at home in 6th-7th century C.E. contexts.

The second group was retrieved from the fills covering the building area. Chronologically, the most meaningful sherd (Fig. 9:8) comes from the lower fireplace (Locus 105) which, due to its elevation, seems to have been in use after the building was abandoned and covered. Therefore, this so-called “Gaza jar” with a thickened uplifted rim provides a terminus post quem for the building that can be no later than the end of the 7th century C.E. (Adan-Bayewitz 1986:97–99; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1988:85–86; Fischer and Tal 1999:309). The open forms of this group include a Cypriot Red Slip Ware bowl (Fig. 9:1) dated to the second half of the 6th century C.E. (Hayes 1972:379–382, Form 9, Type A, Fig. 81:1), and two arched-rim basins (Fig. 9:5–6) belonging to Magness’ Forms 2A and 2B respectively (1993:206–8), dated to the late 7th century C.E. An incised decorated sherd (Fig.9:17) could be compared with similarly decorated sherds from Bethany (Saller 1957: Pl. 124:6, 7) and Tel ‘Ira (Fischer and Tal 1999:311, Fig. 6.139:4, with references); both are dated to the Late Byzantine–Early Islamic period.
The third group collected by the IAA inspectors seems basically to be contemporary with the first group since several vessels are identical, namely Fig. 8:1 vs. Fig. 9:3, Fig. 8:7 vs. Fig. 9:7, Fig. 8:15 vs. Fig. 9:8 and Fig. 8:25 vs. Fig. 9:11. It consists mainly of juglets having forms without exact parallels that were collected in the area of the tabun and from its fills (Fig. 9:11–13; Fig. 10).

FIGURE 8. GROUP 1 POTTERY TYPES

<table>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Locus</th>
<th>Total Specimens</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bowl</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bowl (Cup)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bowl</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bowl</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Casserole</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lid</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
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<td>111, 112</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<td>112</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Juglet base</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

This juglet assemblage contains an unusual amount of such vessels. The prototype in Fig. 9:11 has seventeen nearly complete specimens; that in Fig. 9:12 has four; and that in Fig. 9:13 has two nearly complete specimens.
Fig. 8. Group 1 pottery types.
All of these juglets seem to be locally manufactured. The small amphoriskos (Fig. 9:14; Fig. 10) can be compared with Late Byzantine examples from Nessana (Baly 1962: Pl. LVII:RDH3) and from a Byzantine well near Tell el-Farāh (South) (Tubb 1986: Fig. 6:6). A juglet base of unknown provenience (Fig. 9:15) belonging to the characteristic Fine Byzantine Ware Form 2A, is dated the same as the previous specimens (after Magness 1993:240 with references). A cream ware wheelmade biconical lamp (Fig. 9:16) from the tabun area has no exact parallels, although its plain body and flat flaring rim with an attached loop handle resembles some Late Byzantine Palestine red ware lamps (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978:122–123, No. 508). Nevertheless, the closest parallel to our type was found at a pottery kiln from the 7th century C.E. in Aqaba (Melkawi, Khairieh and Whitcomb 1994: Fig. 11:e). According to Whitcomb (ibid.:460) its form is unique to Aqaba and may be related to lamps from the monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes11 (Winlock 1926: Fig. 38) and elsewhere in Coptic Egypt.

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11 Whitcomb’s parallel from the monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes (Winlock 1926: Fig. 38), does not seem correct. However, one of the lamps (ibid.: Pl. XXXII:a) seems to belong to our form, although the quality of the picture does not permit verification.
Fig. 9. Groups 2 and 3 pottery types.
Summary

In the course of the excavation, a Late Byzantine-Early Islamic subterranean structure was exposed which is comprised of two hewn rooms and a built entrance. Judging from the preserved height of the doorjamb, which protrudes 0.9 m. above the upper rock level, it is plausible that there was also building activity above the rock, but no traces remain. Apparently this building activity was not preserved because it was built of mudbricks. It is unlikely that it was of masonry and was subsequently robbed, since the doorjamb was preserved. Hence we should define the structure as semi-subterranean. The possible utilization of such structures in similar geographic and climatic conditions as dwellings, were recently shown in the case of ‘Avdat (Potchter 1992:35–37). However, due to the large number of storage jars which were discovered within the structure, its possible utilization as a storage structure cannot be rejected.

The fact that the floors of the structure yielded no finds except in the southern part of the east room and within the tabun, suggests that the structure was intentionally abandoned. The finds from the tabun are probably indicative of its use for cooking, and the burnt area in the southern part of the east room probably accumulated as a result of the cleaning of the oven. The fact that the burnt waste was deposited within the structure suggests that the east room
not serve as a dwelling but rather for daily activities. The cut depression in this room supports this assumption. Moreover, the floor level of the east room is about 0.3 m. lower than that of the west room, which most likely served as living quarter. The reason for the height differential was probably to prevent the penetration of rainwater into the dwelling area. The location of the entrance and of the *tabun* beside it, point to the inhabitants' consideration of the wind patterns in the Beersheba area. At night, the wind is mostly from the east. Sometime after sunrise, the wind is from the west. At noon and in the afternoon, the wind turns to the northwest, while in the evening it blows from the northwest to the southeast (Skibin 1979:325–326). This indicates that the oven was operated chiefly in the morning and in the evening in order to prevent smoke in the living quarter. Obviously this is only a proposed reconstruction, and uncertain at best. However, the attempt to understand the lifestyle of ancient inhabitants is a challenge, especially in view of the fact that research of ancient ecology is still in very preliminary stages.

A general 6th-7th century C.E. date emerges from the typological and chronological study of the different classes of pottery from the building. This corresponds to a number of recently excavated neighbouring sites that were established at the end of the Byzantine period and continued into the Early Islamic period (Govrin 1988/89:12; Negev 1994:147; Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994). As a part of the Beersheba settlement belt, each of them shows a similar picture of a gradual decline at the beginning of the Early Islamic period (cf. Rubin 1990:180–183). However, the generally abandonment of the Negev highlands settlements is not attested until the beginning of the Abbasid period (Haiman 1995:45, n.15).

REFERENCES


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