



Project Gallery

A monumental burial complex from an Amarna-age port at Yavneh-Yam, Israel

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Despite its geographic correspondence with a key fourteenth-century BC port, the tell of Yavneh-Yam has yielded only meagre evidence for Late Bronze Age occupation. The recent discovery of a sealed monumental rock-cut burial cave with hundreds of grave goods provides the first clear evidence for a significant polity.

Keywords: South-west Asia, Late Bronze Age, burial cave, anchorage

Introduction

Tel Yavneh-Yam is located on a small promontory on the eastern Mediterranean coast between Jaffa and Ashdod (Figure 1), overlooking one of the best natural anchorages in the southern Levant (Kaplan 1993). The site is seemingly mentioned in Egyptian lists of Levantine cities and in the el-Amarna letters of the fourteenth century BC as *Muhazi* (harbour, emporium; Moran 1992: 340), but excavations at the settlement have yielded only some pottery scatters, small cave burials and cist tombs dating to the Late Bronze Age, along with evidence for the continued use of a gate-complex (Uziel 2008; Yannai *et al.* 2013).

The importance of maritime trade implied by the appellation *Muhazi* is scantily reflected in the presence of some imported pottery in the graves, stone anchors and the unique cargo of a goldsmith hoard found in the anchorage (Golani & Galili 2015). However, in 2022 construction work at Palmachim Beach National Park broke through the ceiling of a large rock-cut Late Bronze Age II (fourteenth–thirteenth centuries BC) burial cave. The sealed cave contained hundreds of grave goods with little or no sediment cover—a unique phenomenon in Late Bronze Age monumental burials. The interments were surrounded by a multitude of imported and local pottery vessels containing well-preserved botanical and zoological remains.

Being the first undisturbed Late Bronze Age II monumental burial discovered in Israel since the 1960s, the cave was immediately recorded with photogrammetry to

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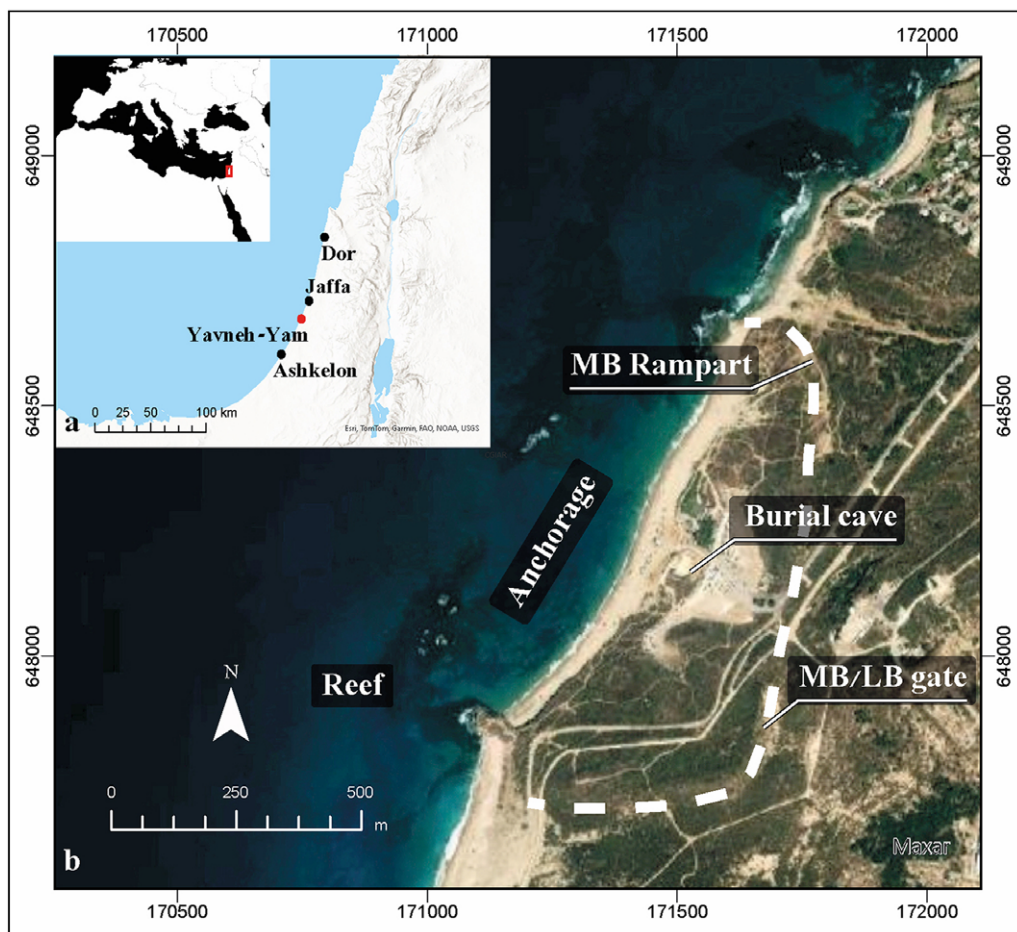


Figure 1. Location of Yavneh-Yam (a) and the main features at the site (b). MB: Middle Bronze Age; LB: Late Bronze Age (figure by Yuliya Gumenny & Assaf Yasur-Landau).

create a high-resolution 3D model (Figure 2). The following night, the cave was partially looted; around 10 per cent of the finds were stolen, and some of the skeletons were disturbed. The detailed documentation of the cave before the robbery allowed us to analyse the spatial distribution of the finds as if the robbery never occurred.

The tomb

The facade of the tomb was smoothly cut in the sloping outcrop of the aeolianite (*kurkar*) coastal rock. Entrance to the cave was through an arched opening (Figure 3) subsequently sealed by two large stone slabs that were found *in situ*. The nearly square, rock-cut burial chamber measures 6.3×6.5 m with an approximately 2m-high ceiling

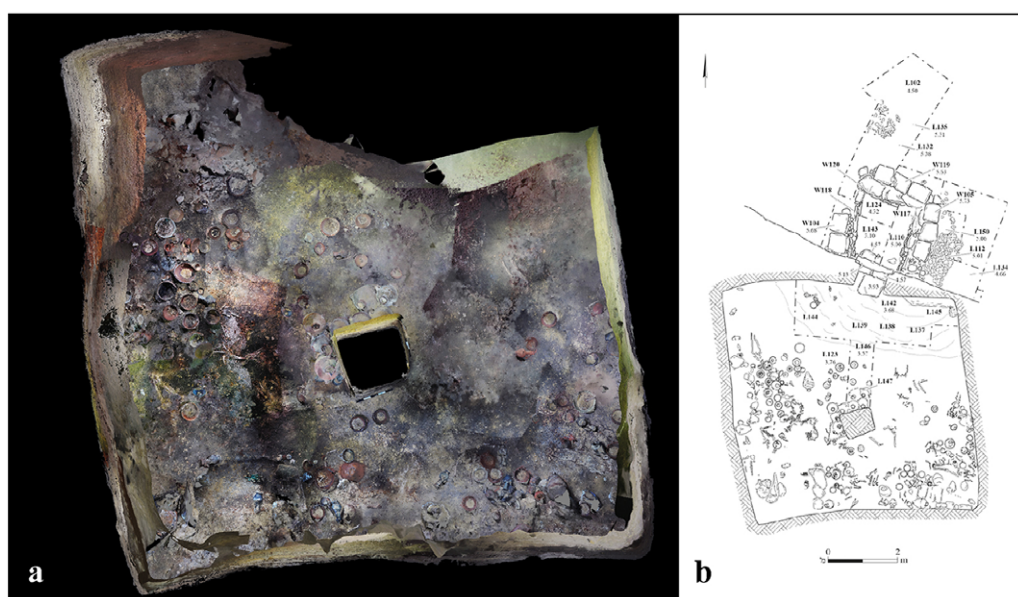


Figure 2. Orthophoto (a) and plan (b) of the burial cave before the robbery (orthophoto by Emil Alajem; plan by Shatil Emmanuilov; images courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority).



Figure 3. Views of the cave entrance: a) from the inside; b) from the courtyard (figure by Shatil Emmanuilov; images courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority).

supported by a central rectangular pillar. At least 10 individuals (seven adults, two children and one of indeterminable age) had been placed along the walls of the cave in supine or flexed positions.

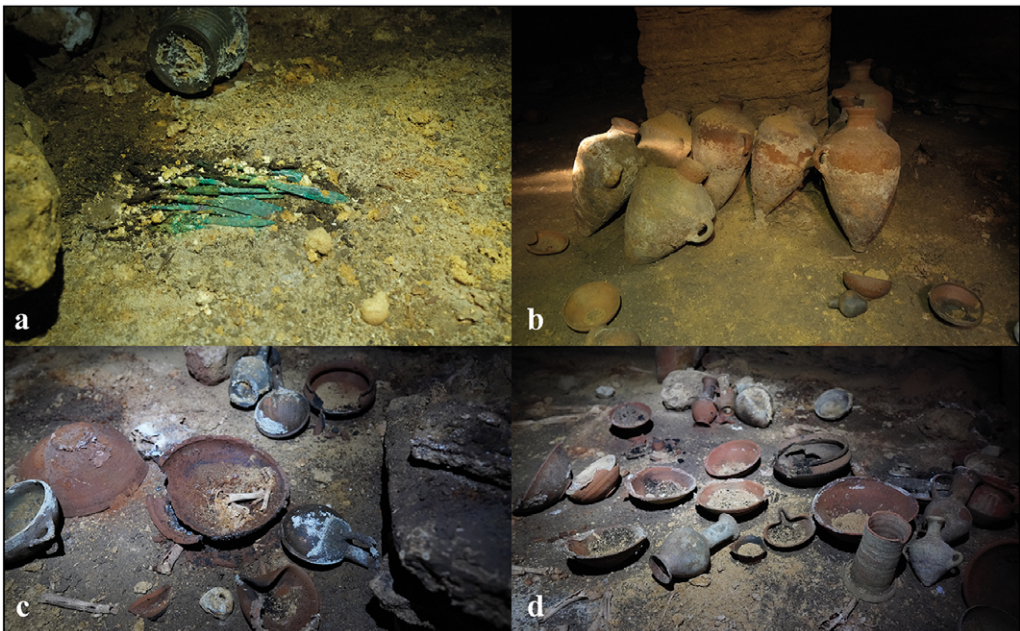


Figure 4. Finds from the cave: a) bronze arrowheads; b) storage jars near the central pillar; c & d) bowls with food remains (figure by Emil Alajem; images courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority).

The vessels surrounding the skeletons had contained whole fish, the limbs of sheep and goat and both charred and uncharred plant material (Figure 4c–d). Overall, more than 140 complete ceramic vessels were found in the cave, most of them still in their original deposition state. Imported pottery included Cypriot Base Ring II jugs (approximately 20 vessels), Aegean Late Helladic IIIA2 cups, Cypriot piriform shaved juglets and White Slip II bowls. Initial analysis indicates deliberate spatial distribution of pottery within the cave: eight large storage jars were placed around the central pillar, away from the interred individuals, and the mouths of some were covered with oil lamps (Figure 4b). The back of the cave featured two installations made of two–three stone courses, possibly intended to mark burials of prominent individuals (Figure 5). The western installation yielded a cluster of arrowheads with the remains of their wooden shafts (Figure 4a). The eastern installation was accompanied by nine Base Ring II jugs. Special finds in the tomb include a gold earring, a vessel in the form of the Egyptian god Bes and a scarab bearing the name of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC).

The imported and local pottery (Figure 6) indicates that the cave was in use during the middle of the fourteenth to the beginning of the thirteenth century BC—the Late Bronze Age II in Canaan and the late Eighteenth–early Nineteenth Dynasty in Egypt.

Excavations in front of the cave entrance revealed a small 2.8×2.8 m enclosure built of fieldstones and ashlar (Figure 3) leading from an open courtyard to the cave entrance. Excavations in the courtyard revealed layers of dark ashy sediments and a stone-lined pit, as well as a complete storage jar, cooking-pot sherds, animal bones and a terracotta figurine fragment—probably the remains of funerary rites.



Figure 5. Finds near the stone installation, including Cypriot pottery (figure by Emil Alajem; images courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority).



Figure 6. Selected pottery from the burial cave (figure by Jonathan Gottlieb).

Monumental burials in Late Bronze Age II Canaan

Canaanite burial practices are diverse and include interments in natural and man-made caves, pits, intramural burials and various unique structures (Gonen 1992). Rock-cut tombs are scarce (most are reused Middle Bronze Age tombs) and only a few have been properly documented (summary in Gonen 1992: 55–56, 59–60; for Dothan T1, see Nagagreh 2021). Among these, the only tombs comparable with the size and scale of the Yavneh-Yam cave are the underground structures in Dothan (8.3 × 5m) and Bahan (5 × 7m), both of which evidence later activity.

The Yavneh-Yam burial cave is therefore the only monumental rock-cut burial from Late Bronze Age II Canaan found intact and fully recorded. Construction of the burial complex exhibits considerable energy expenditure and technical know-how, reflected in the ashlar masonry, rock surface preparation, tomb symmetry, arched entrance and supporting pillar—an unparalleled example of Late Bronze Age II Canaanite funerary architecture. Together with the extensive remains, the resources required for the burial complex suggest that the Yavneh-Yam complex stands out as a unique example of Canaanite elite burial under Egyptian sovereignty as recorded in the Amarna correspondence.

Funerary rites in Late Bronze Age II Canaan

The finds from the open courtyard provide the first substantial evidence for Late Bronze Age II funerary banquets, previously noted on a smaller scale at a single burial from Late Bronze Age I Ashkelon (Brody 2010: 134). Grave goods from simpler burials suggest a Late Bronze Age ‘funeral kit’ (Baker 2006). Yavneh-Yam reveals that the ‘kit’ in monumental burials differs from the standard one in the distribution of associated pottery, demonstrated by the communal position of storage jars around the central pillar and the large concentrations of Base-Ring jugs around particular interments. Yet burial goods were clearly just one part of the ‘funerary kit’; burial rites were supplemented by feasting activities outside the tomb. Geoarchaeological, zooarchaeological, archaeobotanical, petrographic and residue analyses are ongoing and will shed light on the ceremonies carried out in the monumental burials of Canaan’s elite.

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