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Report on the 2017 archaeological soundings at Qornet ed-Deir, Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve

Bettina FISCHER-GENZ, Hermann GENZ, Nada ELIAS and Claude DOUMET-SERHAL

At the site of Qornet ed-Deir in the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve, small soundings were undertaken in 2017 at the foot of the hill and up on the naturally fortified summit. The building in the lower Area 1 was built of massive stone walls and probably was used in the Roman-Byzantine period as a way station or military base to secure the roads leading from the coast to the mountains. The sounding in one of the two multi-room buildings up on the plateau revealed massive architectural remains of the Middle Islamic Period, possibly from collapsed vaulted rooms. The Roman-Byzantine occupation phase below it was associated with a built chamber tomb, in which at least 10 individuals were buried, and which might have been reused in the later periods as well. Finally a significant Middle Bronze Age I-II occupation layer was encountered in the sounding, and further work will show whether the well preserved "tannour" structure was part of a domestic context.

Introduction

Within the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve[1], the "Qornet el Deir Cultural trail" is highly frequented by visitors and tourists, as it is one of the shorter and easier looping trails (trail D, 1.9 km). It provides beautiful landscape vistas and a visit to the archaeological site of Qornet ed-Deir, and can be combined with other trails such as the "Roman stairs" (trail A)[2]. The APJM (Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa) set up several information panels when the trail was first opened in October 2016. The panels provide very general information on the lime kiln at the bottom of the site, the site's strategic position on a high rocky plateau enclosed on all sides by natural stone walls 4-5m in height and the surface finds comprising Roman as well as Medieval pottery. Two panels also alert visitors to the traces of previous destructions caused by bulldozers and dynamite, and invite them to use their imagination for the long history of Qornet ed-Deir still buried underground.

The site of Qornet ed Deir consists at the bottom of the rocky outcrop of building remains in front of a lime kiln (**Fig. 1**), and at the top of several multi-room buildings (**Fig. 2**), as well as a rather substantial surrounding barrier formed out of the natural rock around the top of the hill. Although it was clear from pottery picked up during the cleaning of the site prior to the establishment of the trail, that the Mamluk and Ottoman periods are represented, the full extent of the settlement history of the site remained unknown. The lower site, Area 1, has beautifully built massive walls reminiscent of Roman architecture, but barely any pottery on the surface to give indications to its date and purpose. The upper multi-room building (Area 2) was heavily disturbed, with at least two building phases visible, and from the pottery clear indications for a longer settlement history present under the surface.

In the summer of 2017, a permit was granted by the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) to conduct two small soundings in the presumably

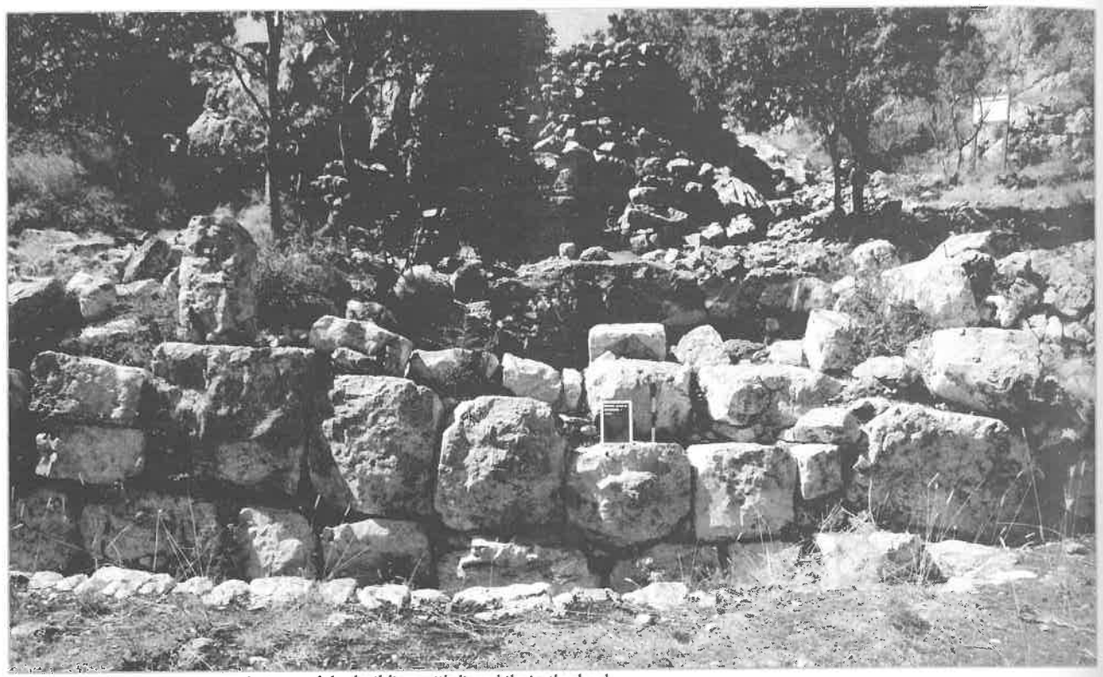


Fig. 1- Area 1: construction technique of the building with lime kiln in the back.

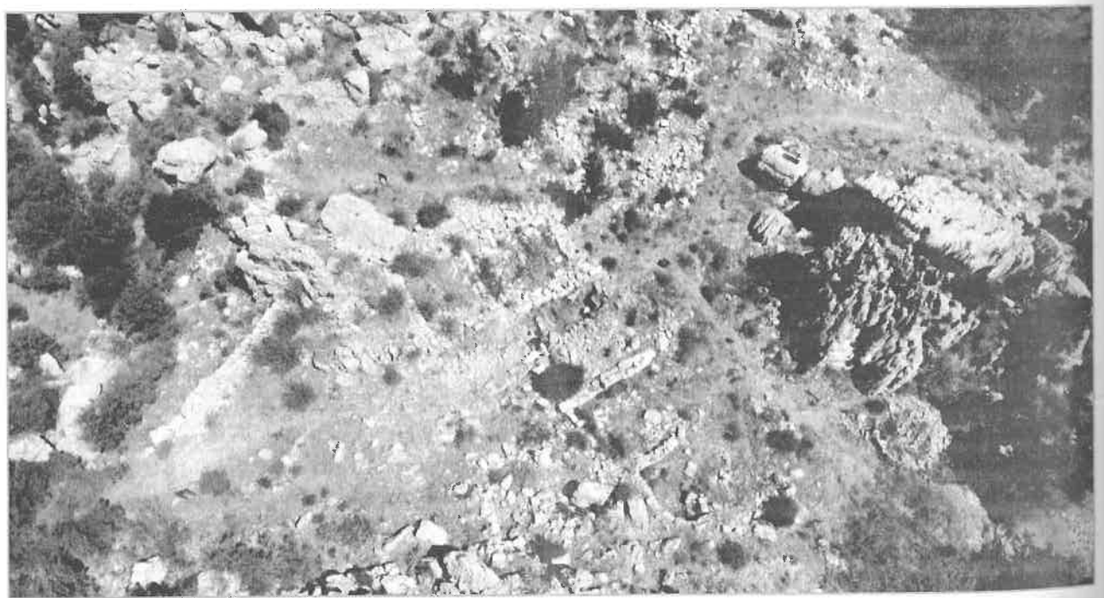


Fig. 2- Plateau of Qornet ed-Deir with Area 2.

Roman building on the northern slope (Area 1) as well as in Room 2 of the multi-room building up on the plateau (Area 2). Area 2 was selected as the most accessible area inside the building in-between massive stone collapse, and the goal was to ascertain the date of the different building phases and gain some insight into the function of this architectural complex in a highly strategic location[3]. In addition, an underground chamber measuring 1 x 2.50 m in the western prolongation of Area 2 was investigated, as it had been disturbed in previous decades and was endangered.

Area 1

In this area at the bottom of the stairs ascending to the plateau, we exclusively worked in the western of the two rooms of the structure, which was larger and easier accessible. The eastern room is probably a small annexe. Only the north wall (Context 1001) and the west wall (1002) of the main western room were visible from the beginning (**Fig. 3**). A 1m wide gap at the visible southern end of the western wall very likely represents an entrance. The south wall and the east wall remained unclear, and even during the one week of sounding no evidence for their location were obtained (**Fig. 4**). The eastern wall was probably thoroughly disturbed by tree roots, whereas the southern wall was either covered or destroyed by context 1003, which is rubble from the medieval lime kiln right next to it.

Inside the room under the topsoil (Context 1000) was a stone collapse (context 1004) consisting of very large mostly rectangular ashlars, which clearly represent collapse from the walls. On the surface it looked as if the northern wall was three courses wide in contrast to the western wall, which only was two courses wide. But after the removal of the stone collapse 1004 it turned out the innermost line of the northern wall just represented collapse and this wall also was two courses wide. Under 1004, context 1005

Fig. 3- Area 1 from the south.

Fig. 4- Area 1 from the west.

was discovered which consisted of a clay soil, slightly reddish in colour, which was very hard to excavate due to its density. Also this context contained stones, but mainly smaller in size. This was also the only context that produced some pottery sherds, unfortunately mainly body sherds of ribbed vessels which belong to a very long-lived pottery tradition covering the first millennium AD, not allowing us to clearly assign it to the Roman or Byzantine period[4]. But it would seem that the site started out as early as the 3rd c. AD, judging from the single rim of a type of Beirut Amphora found in the lowest level (FN 7, context 1005). The pottery is still under analysis, and further results will be forthcoming.

Due to the quantities of large stone collapse, the excavation was stopped before any floor level was reached. Therefore questions regarding the function and precise date of the structure cannot be answered with certainty. However, the building's position along one of the access routes to the site from the north as well as its construction technique (made out of large, well-hewn ashlars with walls up to 1m in thickness) suggests that we are dealing with an extra-urban administrative or military building, such as a police or custom's building, for example. This building was certainly somehow connected to securing and/or controlling access to the plateau, and it was probably integrated into the wider communication network from the coast through Afqa into the Beqaa.

Area 2

During a preliminary mapping in 2016 before the inauguration of the trail, the four rooms on the western side of the plateau were numbered from north to south (**Figs 5 and 6**). Another multi-room building lies to the north-east of the plateau, which has not been cleared of vegetation or been investigated yet.

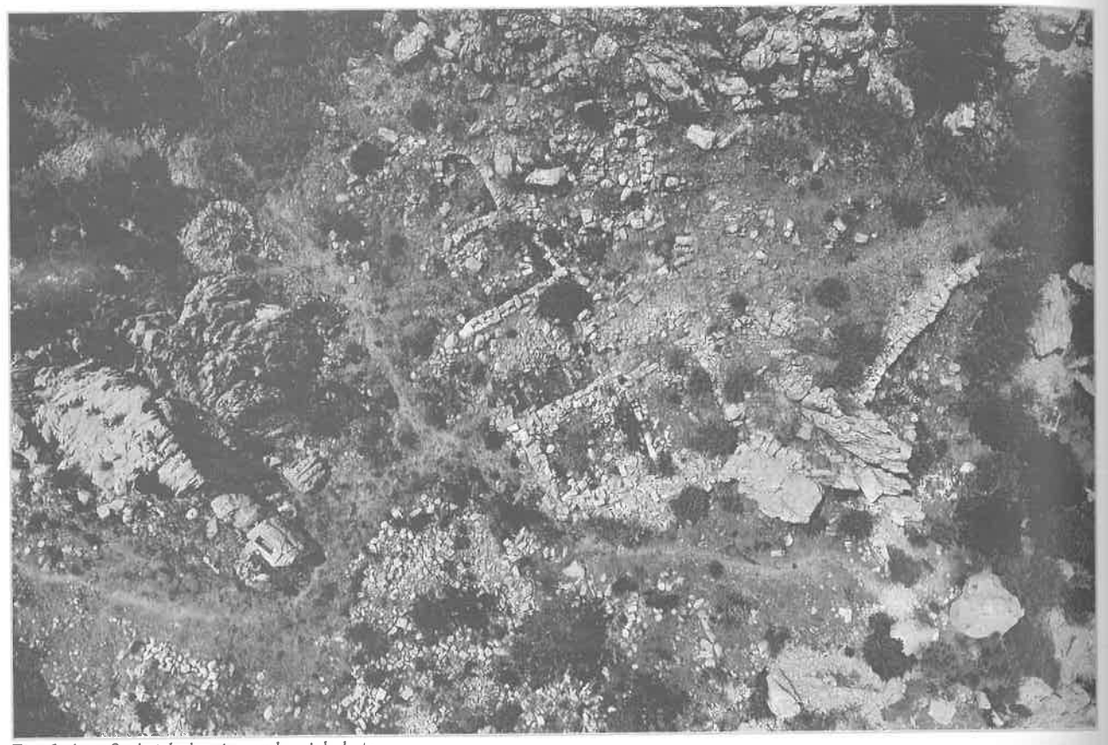
As previously mentioned, Room 2 of the multi-room building was selected for an archaeological sounding, as it seemed to be the most accessible one in terms of stone collapse. It measures about 2.40 x 8.40m, and includes at its western end what was first thought to be one of the typical piriform cisterns, but turned out to be a well constructed underground burial chamber measuring 1 x 2.50 m (**Fig. 7**).

The surface of the entire room needed to be cleared of a massive stone collapse (Context 2000), which contained copious amounts of pottery and very loose brown soil. Many of these stones were well hewn and measured about 60 x 40 x 40 cm. In all likelihood these stones had fallen from a vault above the room, as after more investigations several bases for central stone pillars could be identified in other rooms. In order to see how deep the stone collapse reached and what levels were preserved underneath, the square was divided into four parts: from east to west 2/1, a baulk of 2m width only later excavated as 2/4. 2/2 and the adjacent constructed underground chamber 2/3. A surface cleaning of the next room to the west was conducted to facilitate completing the plan of the building.

Figs 5- Area 2, sketch drawing and aerial photo.

Area 2/1

2/1 was the easternmost part, and here under the large stone collapse two steps leading into the room were found (**Fig. 8**). A compacted layer with small white stones in dark brown soil below the unfortunately not detectable floor level of the room started to yield a large amount of Middle Bronze Age pottery, context 2005. In between were a fair amount of Roman forms, among those some eroded ESA sherds as well as some early Roman bowls and cups[5]. This layer was dug down almost 2m, continuously revealing Middle Bronze Age pottery, and no further floors or structures were encountered so far. This layer certainly continues further down as no bedrock was reached. The Middle Bronze Age pottery is consistent with domestic contexts from settlements, no fine wares were observed so far. There is a predominance of storage jars with elongated folded rims and slightly convex bases (see **Tab. 1** and **Pl. 1**), which date to the later Middle Bronze Age I phase or the transition MBA I-II. So far no cooking pots have been noticed, but two body sherds of rather massive baking trays were found as well. Although the fabrics differ from those found on the coast, the general spectrum of forms seems to be the same (Genz *et al.* 2010: 188 and 196).



Figs 6- Area 2, sketch drawing and aerial photo.

Area 2/2

The sounding in the middle of the room, called 2/2, revealed under the stone collapse on the third day of excavation the outline of a round pottery structure adjacent to the southern wall of the room, which was first interpreted as a *tannour*, context 2009 (**Fig. 9**). As the walls of the "tannour" made of fired pottery (or even made of reused *pithoi*) looked to be restorable, they were consecutively collected and bagged separately. It became apparent that there was a distinct outer and inner wall (**Fig. 10**), or indeed two layers of pottery set one into the other. When the material was washed, it was found that there were at least two and possibly three rim forms, and there was evidence of fenestration or at least one opening with vertical finished edges perpendicular to the rim[6]. Although the structure could be used as a *tannour*, another possible identification of this vessel could be a Middle Bronze Age cult stand, as we know them for example from Kamed el-Loz[7]. It is not clear yet whether it is indeed one vessel, or possibly several. When the pottery from the adjoining Area 2/1 was washed, it appeared that more pieces of the same or similar vessels were also found in that square among the Middle Bronze Age pottery from that context. Due to the two parts set within each other it is possible that the "tannour" in Area 2/2 was not in its original location, although its preservation and upright position make it at least possible that it was *in situ*.

The layer around it was made of rather hard grayish soil, possibly due to an ashy component, with only few pottery fragments. The "tannour" sits on its lower rim in an almost sterile layer of red clay, with a dense concentration of white stones 10–20 cm in size (**Fig. 11**). The same white stone layer was also

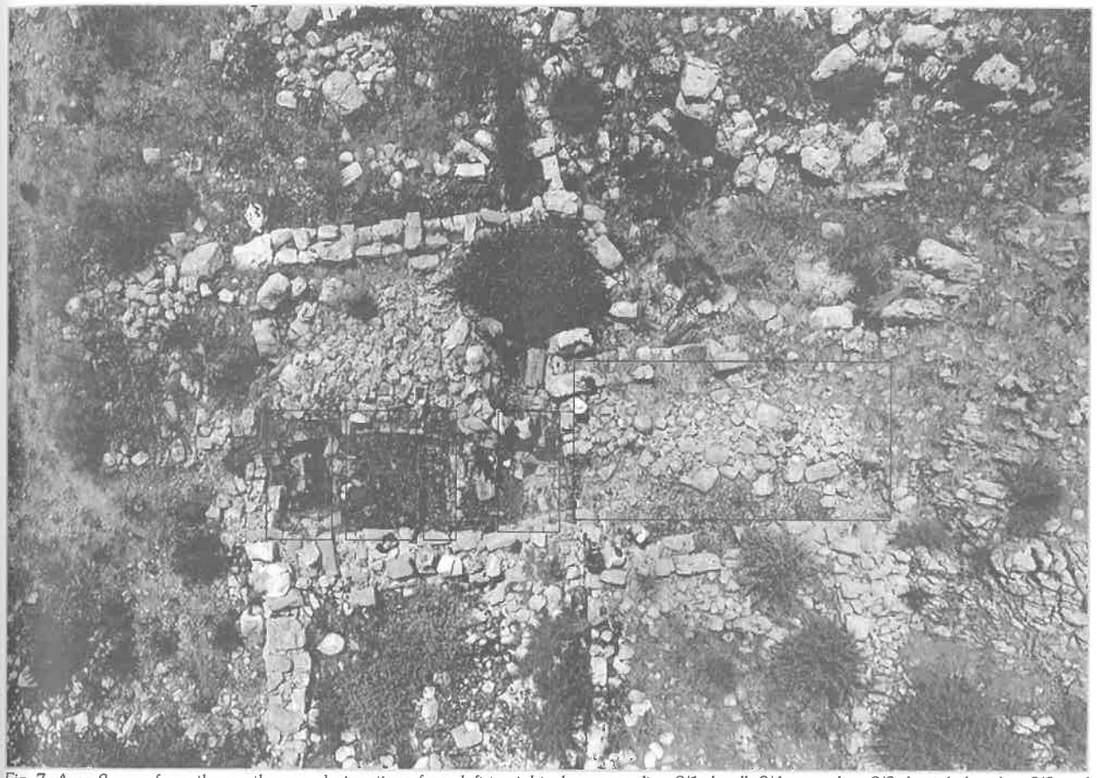


Fig. 7- Area 2 seen from the south, area designations from left to right: deep sounding 2/1, baulk 2/4, sounding 2/2, burial chamber 2/3 and adjacent room 2/5.

encountered in area 2/1 as context 2005. This level is entirely made up of Middle Bronze Age material and needs to be excavated further down. Here we found a fragment of an MBA I convex jar base and small jar rim (see **Pl. 1**). Possibly this clay layer, which was also found in the northern part of Area 2/2, might have been a floor. It could alternatively have come from decomposed mud brick structures such as benches. But the preservation conditions were unfortunately not good enough to determine any particular shape, only the concentration of this pure clay material otherwise not encountered in the area.

The entire structure of the "tannour" had a diameter of 70 cm, and the walls were preserved to a height of around 30 cm. From the partial removal of the baulk in between 2/1 and 2/2, labelled Area 2/4, it is clear that the layers containing Middle Bronze Age pottery can be expected to go down for at least another meter or more, judging by the level reached in Area 2/1.

Area 2/3

In Area 2/3 it was first thought that the visible underground structure would be a cistern. But the cleaning of the surface showed that it was indeed a roughly north-south oriented built chamber tomb with at least three roof stones *in situ*, possibly two more in the northern part that are now broken and not completely preserved (**Figs 12 and 13**). After the removal of one of the middle-roof stones, it was possible to access the tomb (**Fig. 14**) and to check whether it was still containing human remains *in situ*. At first it seemed through the material that had fallen through the cracks of the northern most roof stones

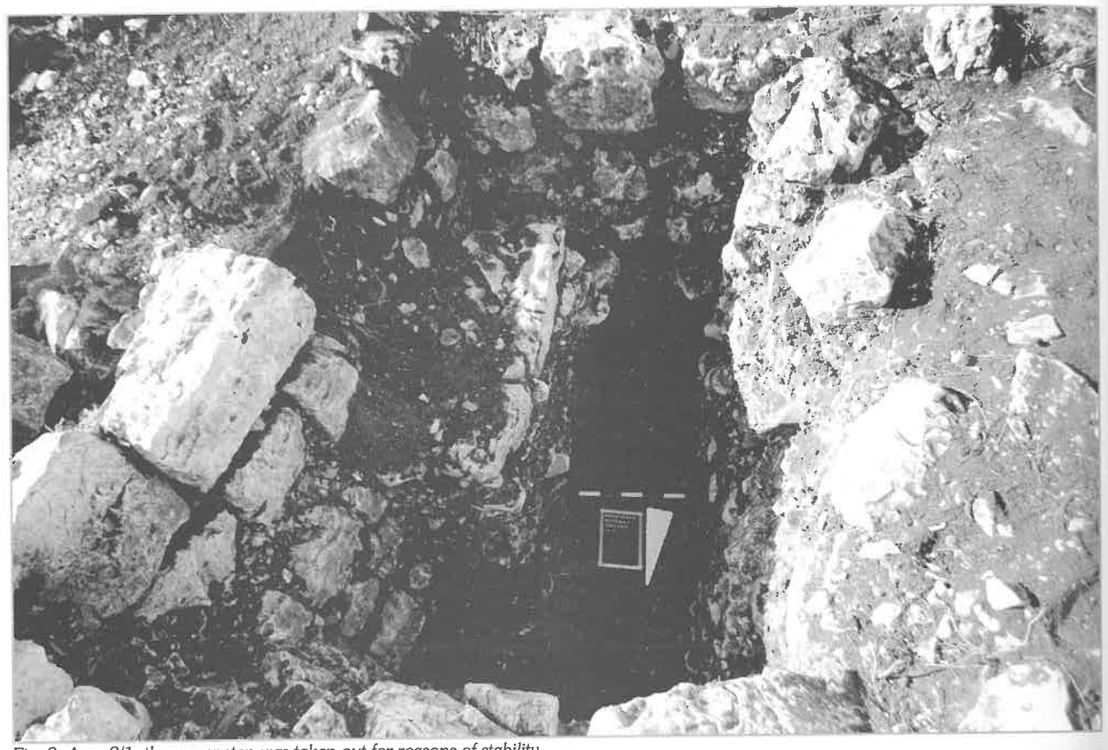


Fig. 8- Area 2/1: the upper step was taken out for reasons of stability.

that the tomb was heavily disturbed, but after several *craniums* were collected in Context 2026, it became apparent that indeed the skeletal remains below were still articulated, and that the levels underneath had to be excavated by a specialist. The pottery sherds found in the upper layers of the tomb were from the Middle Islamic Period, roughly the 12th-15th c. AD.

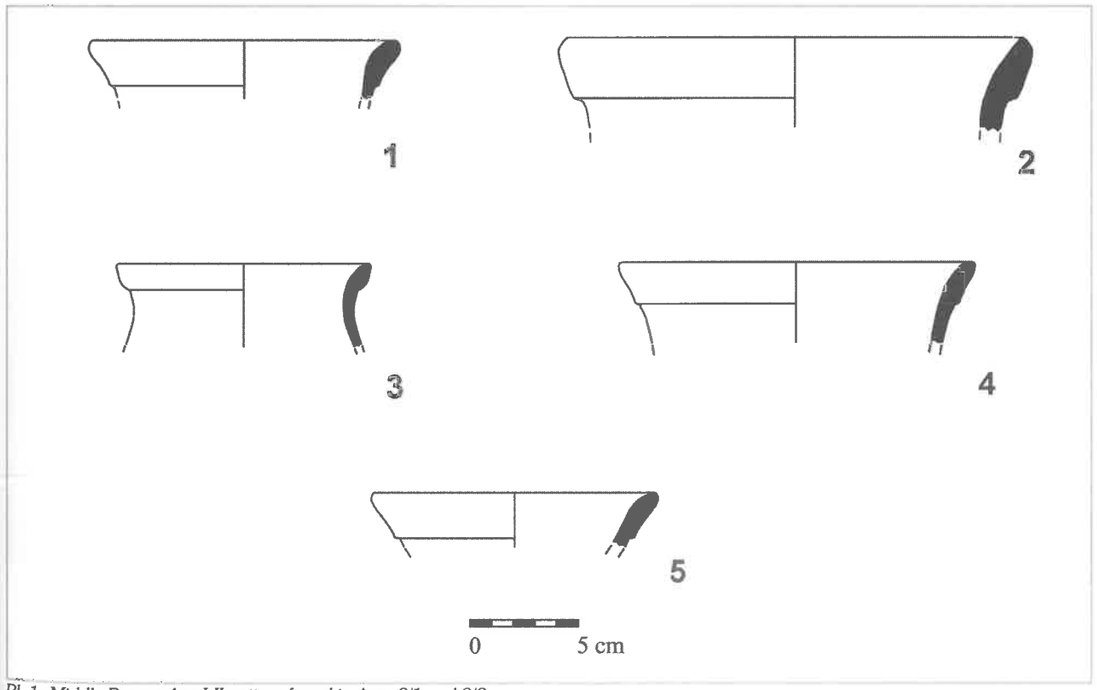
At this stage, Dr. Nada Elias agreed to join the excavation, and under her careful supervision the entrance to the tomb at the southern wall was uncovered (**Fig. 15**). The built chamber tomb has an irregular trapezoid shape, 3.10 metres long, by 1.50 metres wide to the north with 1.38 m deep and 0.50 metres wide to the south with 1 metre deep. The entrance passage is located on the southern wall that is 0.50 metres wide by 1 m high, it was blocked by a flat stone slab (0.50 metres wide by 0.50 m high).

The data collected so far indicates that this built chamber tomb is a multiple burial. An adult skeleton (individual 2037) with preserved anatomical connection was recorded and excavated, with on top the disturbed cranial remains of three individuals in the northern corner of the tomb (**Fig. 16**).

Concerning the bio-anthropological study, adult sex was determined from the *os coxae* following the methods of Bruzek (2002) and Murail *et al.* (2005). Adult age-at-death was determined from morphological changes of the auricular surface of the ilium (Schmitt 2005). We have also recorded other biological data which may be crucial to the interpretation of theses remains but we prefer to excavate all the skeletal remains in the coming season so we can have a wider view of the whole burial sequences within the Tomb (**Tab. 2**).

Number	Registration number	Description
Pl. 1:1	QED 17 2/1 FN 29.1	Grey clay with few fine subangular grits (limestone and grey particles up to 1 mm). Well fired, manufacturing technique unclear. Outside and Inside: pale brown, eroded.
Pl. 1:2	QED 17 2/2 FN 16.2+7	Yellowish-brown clay with many fine to large subangular grits (limestone 1-3 mm). Well fired, manufacturing technique unclear. Outside and Inside: yellowish-brown, eroded.
Pl. 1:3	QED 17 2/2 FN 12.2	Reddish-brown clay with dark grey core. Medium amount of fine to medium sized subangular grits (limestone 1-2 mm). Well fired, manufacturing technique unclear. Outside and Inside: reddish-brown, eroded.
Pl. 1:4	QED 17 2/1 FN 29.2	Reddish-brown clay with medium amount of fine to medium sized subangular to angular grits (limestone and grey particles 1-2 mm). Well fired, manufacturing technique unclear. Outside and Inside: reddish-brown, eroded.
Pl. 1:5	QED 17 2/1 FN 29.3	Reddish-brown clay with brown core. Medium amount of fine to large subangular grits, limestone 1-3 mm. Well fired, wheelmade. Outside: reddish-brown, wheelmarks. Inside yellowish-brown, smoothed.

Tab. 1- Diagnostic Middle Bronze Age I-II pottery found in Area 2/1 and 2/2 (see Pl. 1).



Pl. 1- Middle Bronze Age I-II pottery found in Area 2/1 and 2/2.

Fig. 9- Area 2/2: "tannour" seen from the west.

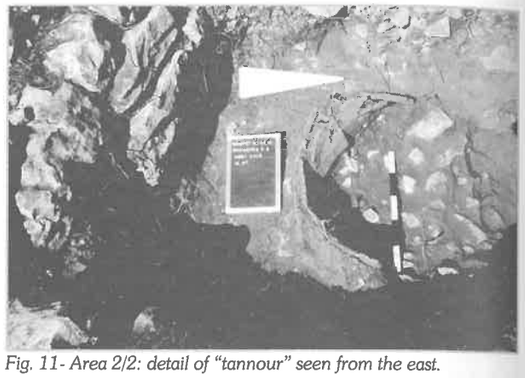


Fig. 11- Area 2/2: detail of "tannour" seen from the east.

Fig. 10- Area 2/2: "tannour" seen from the north.

Figs 12- Area 2/3: view of the stone slabs covering the entrance to the chamber from the west.

Fig. 13- Area 2/3: view of the stone slabs covering the entrance to the chamber from the east.

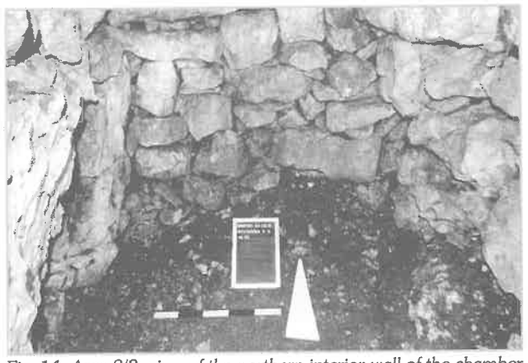


Fig. 14- Area 2/3: view of the northern interior wall of the chamber before further excavation of the articulated skeletons.

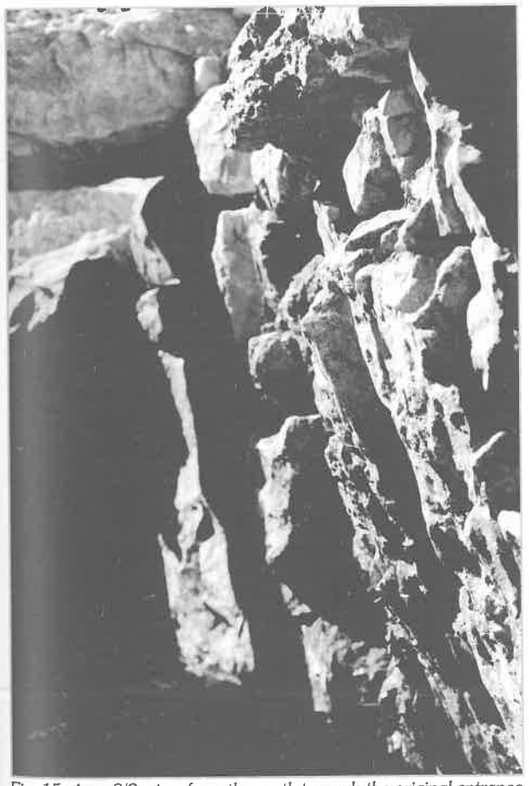


Fig. 15- Area 2/3: view from the north towards the original entrance closed with a stone slab.

Fig. 16- Area 2/3: view from the south onto the superimposed articulated skeletons.

Code ind.	Age	Sex	Orientation Position	Upper limbs	Lower limbs	Closer relationship
2037	[20-29]	M	NS Supine	Right forearm N/A Left arm flexed	Extended	Below 2026
2038	[>20]	I	NS	N/A	N/A	Below 2026 (Burial fill)
2039	[>20]	I	NS	N/A	N/A	Below 2026
2040	[>20]	I	NS	N/A	N/A	Below 2026
2042	[>20]	I	NS Supine	Right extended	Not Excavated	Below 2037

Tab. 2- Age and sex determination of human skeletons as well as the orientations of bodies and limb positions and their stratigraphic relationships (AD= Adult, M=Male, I=Indeterminate, NS= North-south NA=Not available).

The following section summarizes the preliminary archaeo-anthropological examination of the skeletal remains recovered from this deposit. Individual 2037 is an adult, male aged between 20-29 years at death. This individual was buried supinely in the tomb; the *cranium* is located to the north, the feet oriented to the south. The right forearm is not preserved but the left forearm is flexed. The lower limbs were extended. It seems clear that this individual was a primary burial, but the upper limbs were slightly disturbed possibly at the beginning of the intervention or before. The lower limbs do not present displacements within and outside the original volume occupied by the body; both femora and the tibiae and fibulae bilaterally were positioned with their anterior surfaces uppermost. Decomposition probably occurred in an open space.

Individual 2042, is an adult that had on his right arm two simple bronze bracelets (**Fig. 17**). The excavation of this individual is still in progress.

The very narrow space only allowed for one person to work inside the Tomb, but all in all the minimal number of individuals is 10 so far,. More skeletons still remain in the tomb, which will hopefully be excavated in the coming season. In addition to the simple bronze bracelets, two little bronze bells (**Fig. 18**), fragments of a *terracotta* lamp and a few beads were

Fig. 17- Area 2/3: upper bronze arm ring in situ *around the wrist of a male individual.*

Fig. 18- Area 2/3: bronze bell found close to the wall in the tomb.

discovered inside the tomb. A comparative study of funerary practices for this period in the wider region will hopefully shed some light on the cultural context of this burial chamber[8].

Direct radiocarbon determination from ^{14}CHRONO Centre (using AMS) on three bones samples from the firstly collected *crania*[9], date two of the samples towards the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th c. AD, therefore the middle Roman period, and one sample to the 7th c. AD (**Tab. 3**). Nothing in the three samples indicated a "reservoir effect". The quality of the collagen representing the preservation condition of the bones is reflected in the C:N-level and should be between 2.9-3.6 in order to give good results, while the relative collagen amount should be above 1%. The Qornet ed-Deir samples fulfilled both *criteria*. The isotopes, namely δ15N and δ13C can be used as indicators of the diet during a lifetime. On the base of our three samples we can therefore assume a mixed diet based on agricultural products, a low amount of animal-based products and a very low to non-existence use of fish or marine resources.

There was indeed some Roman pottery in the lower contexts, and at least the complete juglet found wedged in between the covering stones (context 2017, FN 34, **Fig. 19**) indicates a Roman date as well, even though a lot of Byzantine to Middle Islamic pottery was found on top of the burials[10]. Most individuals had their head to the north and feet oriented to the south, only one so far is oriented in the opposite direction. For the moment we cannot determine if they were related and what community they belonged to.

Area 2/5

The room west of Room 2, Area 2/5 (**Fig. 20**), was cleaned on the surface to allow a better mapping of the walls. During the cleaning, Context 2033 revealed in the southern entrance to the building wedged between two stones next to the threshold a beautiful figurative handle of either a jug or a large terracotta lamp (**Fig. 21**). From the style this most probably belongs to the Byzantine period, and the whole pottery from this context was Byzantine without Roman or later intrusions.

Sample ID	Radiocarbon dating			
	Labo code C14	Date BP conventional	Date cal.	Reference
QED 2	UBA_37491	1712+/-36	244- 400 AD	this study
QED 4	UBA_37492	1517+/-49	426- 632 AD	this study
QED 7	UBA_37493	1734+/-33	237- 389 AD	this study

Tab. 3- Radiocarbon dating results in the chamber built tomb carried out by Chris Tyler-Smith and the Wellcome Trust (098051) at 14CHRONO Centre (using AMS).

Fig. 19- Area 2/3: juglet found at the western edge of the covering stone that was removed.

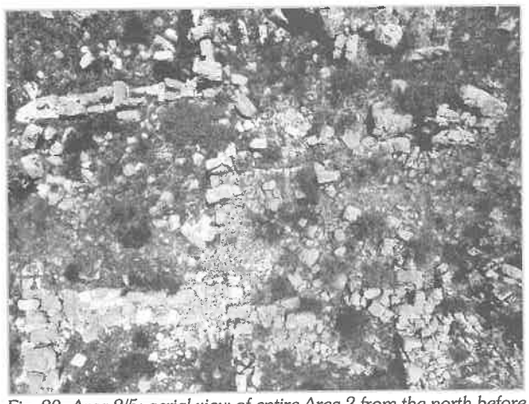


Fig. 20- Area 2/5: aerial view of entire Area 2 from the north before excavation – Area 2/5 is located in the western half.

Fig. 21- Area 2/5: byzantine terracotta handle of either a jug or lamp.

Conclusions

A preliminary analysis of the pottery shows that in the upper layer there is among the stone collapse not only high quality Mamluk glazed pottery, but also material from the 11th/12th c. as well as Roman to Byzantine pottery. The stone collapse indicates that the latest architectural phase consisted of vaulted multi-room buildings, which according to the ceramic material in their earlier phase probably dates to the Mamluk period, but might have been reused in the Ottoman period[11]. To what architectural layers the residual Roman/Byzantine pottery might belong needs to be checked in the upcoming excavation season: the tomb certainly belonged to the Roman period, although it might have had some later reuse. The next stratified layer, still partly disturbed by the stone collapse of the vaults, belonged to the Middle Bronze Age – at least in Area 2.

The results of the archaeological soundings make it very clear that Qornet ed-Deir is a site of outstanding importance for our understanding of the material culture of the higher regions of the Lebanon Mountains. The site is not only noteworthy through the long occupational history from the Middle Bronze Age to the Ottoman period, but also through the wealth of architectural features and its distinctive strategic position, with natural rock formations turned into a defensive enclosure. If the "tannour" turns out not to belong to a domestic context, then there might even be a cultic feature in this high place during the Middle Bronze Age. The well preserved communal chamber tomb of the Roman period also raises important questions about the function of the site, and at this point the interpretation could range from a religious convent to a military stronghold. It is clear from the pottery that the community at Qornet ed-Deir had significant wealth and connectivity, which would probably preclude this to be a mere agricultural village site.

For the Roman period, the massive building structure in Area 1 and the evidence of the Roman road in connection with the numerous Hadrianic Forest inscriptions in the Jabal Moussa area indicate that we are dealing with a strategic site connecting the coast to the high mountains, leading on to Afqa and further into the Beqaa. We know of a similar setup in the neighbouring Nahr Ibrahim Valley, where the Yanouh survey and excavation project[12] has provided important comparative data for the comprehension of the archaeology of the Jabal Moussa region.

Notes

1- We would like to thank the Directorate General of Antiquities of Lebanon for granting us permission to undertake this study, and we are especially grateful for the ongoing support of our government representative Tania Zaven. And most of all, our deep gratitude to the dedicated members and staff of the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa (APJM), who not only made this project possible through their financial support, but tirelessly worked with us in the field and shared their vast knowledge and experience on the Jabal Moussa region and its people with us.

2- See for more information http://jabalmoussa.org/facilities/ on the Qornet el Deir Cultural trail (trail D on the interactive map).

3- Even before the onset of excavations in the summer of 2017, surface cleaning of several areas was undertaken in order to enable the drawing of architectural plans by the topographer. We anticipated from the available surface pottery multi-room buildings of the Middle Islamic to Later Islamic period 12.-18. c. AD, with a Roman phase of unknown layout and function beneath.

4- There were in terms of diagnostic pottery fragments a cooking pot rim with handle roughly datable to the 1st-8thc. AD, and a lug handle on a shoulder typical for the 1st-6thc. AD.

5- The pottery is still being further studied, so these observations remain preliminary for the time being.

6- In her study of different *tannour* types from the prehistoric to the modern period, Alison McQuitty observed in Aqaba ovens that had several layers of pottery set one within the other, see McQuitty 1994, p. 63–65. But she rightly states that there is usually a lot of ash and faunal remains associated with these ovens.

7- Among the multitude of different forms of cult stands found in the middle Bronze Age temple of Kamid el-Loz, Martin Metzger also presents some rather large examples and refers to comparisons with fenestrations. See Metzger 2012, p. 194 fig. 77 for simple forms, and Metzger 2012, p. 203 fig. 88 for fenestrated ones.

8- In the case of the two individual burials found in the basilica of Yanouh, their date could unfortunately not be confirmed for either the Byzantine or the medieval period, see Gatier *et al.* 2002, 217–219.

9- We would like to thank Chris Tyler-Smith and the Wellcome Trust (098051) for providing three-Radiocarbon dates of the skeletons excavated before Dr. Nada Elias joined the team.

10- The analysis of the pottery is still ongoing, but we would like to thank Dr. Valentina Vezzoli and Dr. Stephen McPhillips on their valuable input in this matter.

11- Their layout is very reminiscent to the so-called "Buyut", three ottoman houses that are included in the hiking trails in the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve. From the surface finds at Qornet ed-Deir it is clear that at least some ottoman material is present, namely one clay pipe fragment.

12- The archaeological mission at Yanouh under the direction of the Université de Saint-Joseph has undertaken since 1999 a survey of the upper valley of the Nahr Ibrahim together with excavations at Yanouh and Tell Kharayeb. For a bibliography see also Gatier –Nordiguian 2005.

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