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A Roman Tomb at 'Ein el-Sha'ara

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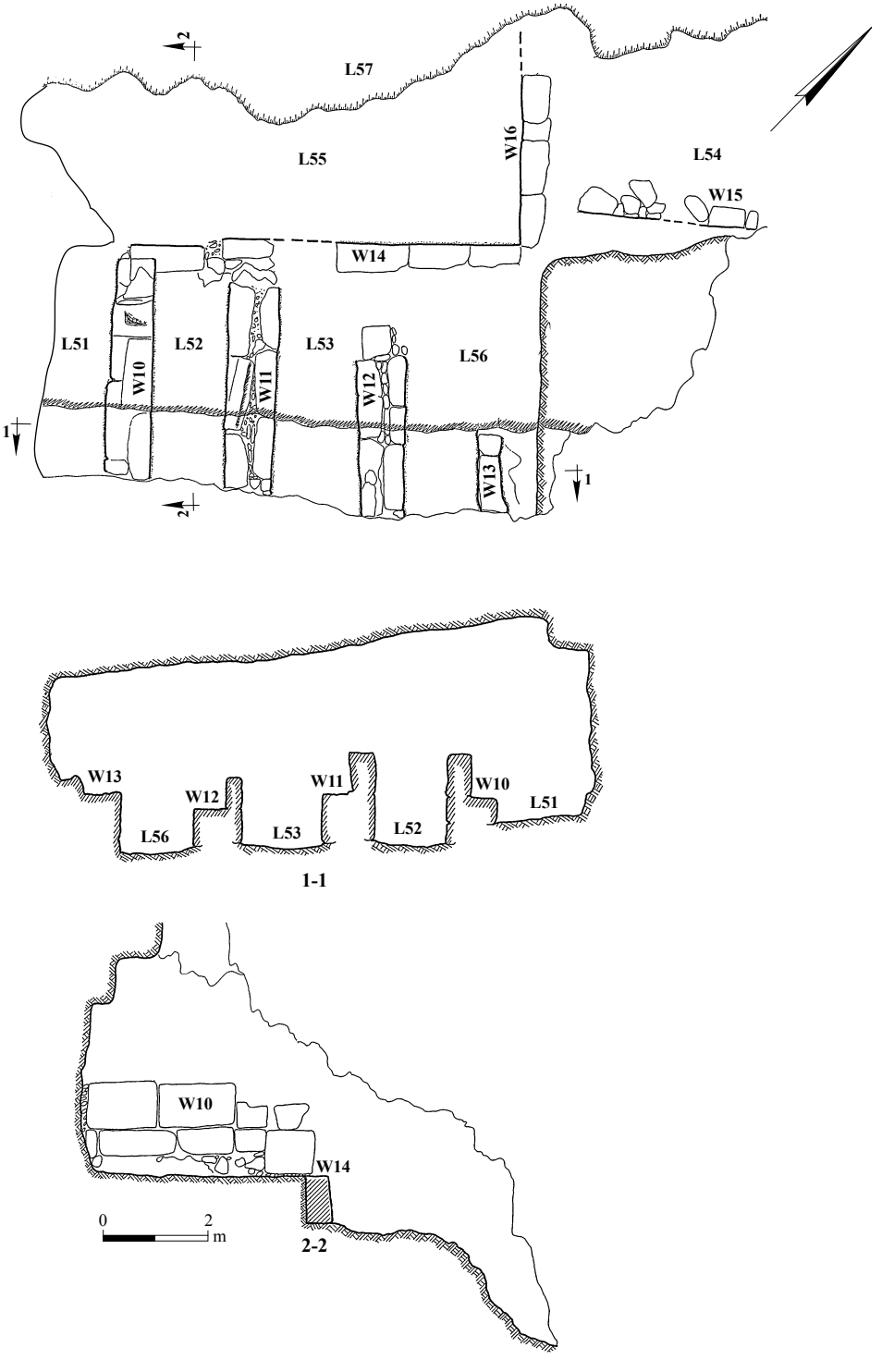
A Roman-period tomb was crudely hewn from a natural cave in the hard limestone bedrock at 'Ein el-Sha'ara, located in the eastern part of the city of Umm el-Faḥm (map ref. OIG 16570/21380; NIG 21570/71380). A salvage excavation was undertaken after considerable damage was caused by development work.[1]

The Excavation

Only the eastern part of the tomb was preserved, sloping downhill from east to west (Fig. 1; Plan 1). The surviving remains of the tomb contained the eastern half of a square central chamber (L55); four burial troughs on the east (L51, L52, L53, L56) separated by stone-built partitions (W10, W11, W12); and part of another trough to the north (L54). This suggests there may have been another row of troughs on the northern side of the chamber. The roughly hewn cave walls (W13, W15) were faced with cut stones and the gaps filled with debris. It was impossible to determine the location of the entrance to the tomb.

The walls of the central chamber, W14 (3.8 m long) and W16 (preserved 1.6 m long), were constructed of one course of large hewn stones (c. 0.4 m high). They reach the floor level of the burial troughs (Plan 1: Section 2–2).

Fig. 1. The central chamber and the four burial troughs, looking east.



Plan 1. Plan and sections of the tomb.

Table 1. Anthropological Remains in the Troughs

Locus No.	Description
51	2 male adults, 1 boy (6 years)
52	At least 6 individuals: 3 males, 1 female, 2 children (8 and 12 years)
53	At least 4 adults: 2 males, 2 females
54	At least 3 adults: 1 male, 1 female, 1 unidentified, unknown number of children
56	Unknown number of individuals

The troughs contained the poorly preserved remains of over 16 adults and children (Table 1). Bone splinters collected on the surface indicate at least two more individuals. In the central chamber were splinters of over three additional adults and children (one individual 20–30 years of age).

Burial Trough 51, to the south of W10, seems to have been inaccessible from the main chamber. Its floor was c. 0.2 m higher than the floors of the other niches and thus, it was apparently not used for burial at the time of construction of the tomb, but only at a later stage.

THE FINDS

The objects recovered in the tomb comprise glass objects (see Jackson-Tal, this volume), ceramics (Fig. 2:1–16), a three-legged basalt bowl (Fig. 2:17), bone and ivory pins and needles (Fig. 3), assorted metal items and jewelry (Fig. 4) and various small stone finds (see Jackson-Tal, this volume). Such items are well-known in Roman domestic and funerary contexts in Israel and throughout the Roman world, and probably represent the personal effects of the deceased.

Pottery

Most of the pottery sherds were retrieved from the central chamber (L55), with some found in the area to the west that had been damaged by heavy equipment (L57). Cooking pots comprised the majority of the vessels (Fig. 2:1–11), along with a number of jars (Fig. 2:12–16). Two types of cooking pots were discerned. Those in Fig. 2:1–8 have a globular-shaped body, no neck and an everted, angular rim. They resemble cooking pots found at Jalame (Johnson 1988: Figs. 7.35–7.37), where they were attributed to the fourth century CE. The second type of cooking pot (Fig. 2:9–11) is globular in shape with a short, straight neck, a small handle extending from the rim to the shoulder, and two or three grooves cut into the rim. This type of pot has a long history, first appearing in the second century BCE (Lapp 1961: Type 71.1),[2] and continuing into later periods, for example at Dor, dating to the second–third centuries CE (Guz-Zilberstein 1995: Fig. 6.49:14–16). In the later pots of this type, the neck becomes somewhat shorter and straighter, like those represented here. This type of vessel was also found in a Roman burial context at nearby ‘Ar‘ara (Zias 1980: Fig. 4:3, 4; Lipkonsky 2008: Fig. 4:5, 8). The storage jars in Fig. 2:12, 14, 15 have straight necks and a ridge at the neck base, typical of the second–fourth centuries CE (Lipkonsky 2008: Fig. 4:13–15).

Bone and Ivory Objects

Over 12 worked bone and ivory objects were recovered in the burial troughs, including a concentration of items in L52 near W11 (B513), which contained five bone pins, a bone needle and an ivory pin (Fig. 3). A similar collection of bone objects was recovered at Samaria, where they were assigned to the Roman period. A pin closely resembling one from L52 (Fig. 3:5) was dated specifically to the third–fourth centuries CE (Crowfoot 1957: Fig. 114:16, 17).

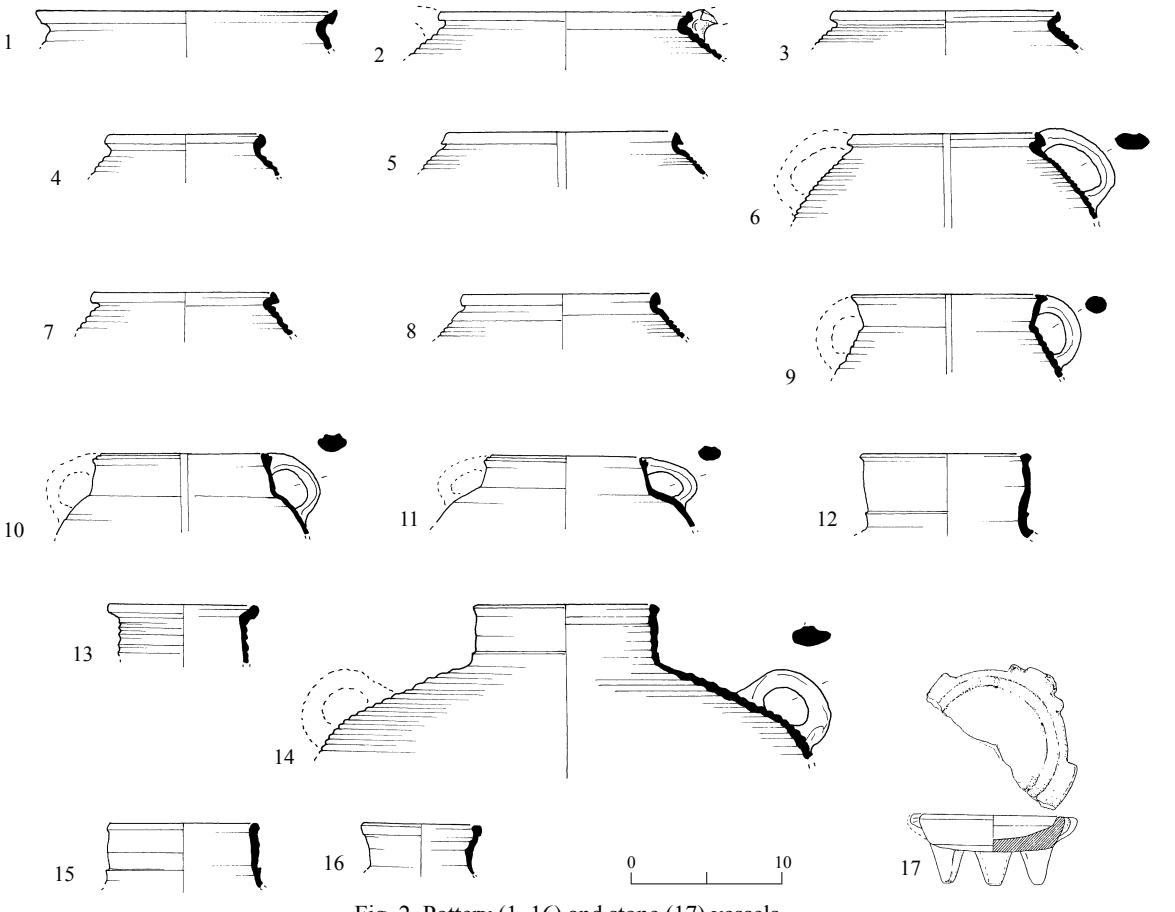


Fig. 2. Pottery (1–16) and stone (17) vessels.

No.	Object	Reg. No.	Locus	Description
1	Cooking pot	535/3	55	Cream slip, buff-orange ware
2	Cooking pot	535/5	55	Cream slip, buff-orange ware
3	Cooking pot	551/5	55	Gray slip, buff-orange ware
4	Cooking pot	551/2	57	Cream slip, buff-orange ware
5	Cooking pot	575	57	Brown slip, buff-orange ware
6	Cooking pot	535/4	55	Cream slip, reddish brown ware
7	Cooking pot	551/1	55	Cream slip, buff-orange ware
8	Cooking pot	506	53	Reddish brown ware
9	Cooking pot	535/1	55	Orange-white ware, white inclusions
10	Cooking pot	502	50	Reddish orange ware, brown inside
11	Cooking pot	582/1	57	Gray slip, orange ware
12	Jar	582/3	57	Gray slip, light brown ware
13	Jar	535/2	55	Cream slip, orange ware
14	Jar	532	51	Reddish brown ware, black core
15	Jar	582/2	57	Cream slip, orange ware
16	Jar	551/4	55	Orange ware, dark red core, white inclusions
17	Bowl			Basalt

Fig. 3. Bone and ivory objects (L52, Basket 513).

No.	Object	Reg. No.	Description
1	Pin	513/1	Bone; crisscross incisions on pointed, elongated head
2	Needle	513/3	Bone
3	Pin	513/7	Bone; crisscross incisions on elongated head
4	Pin	513/4	Bone; crisscross incisions on elongated head
5	Pin	513/2	Ivory; lathe-made; knob-shaped head with disk at neck, tiny hole at top of knob
6	Pin	513/5	Bone; short, paddle-shaped head
7	Pin	513/6	Bone; irregularly-shaped head

Metal Objects

Among the metal finds from the tomb (Fig. 4) are a number of cosmetic utensils that are common at many Roman sites (Fig. 4:1–6; e.g., Tomb T1952 at Tel Qiri, see Ben-Tor and Portugali 1987: Fig. 6:42). The spatula in Fig. 4:2 was found inside a glass kohl tube (see Jackson-Tal, this volume: Fig. 3:17). However, some of these spoon-like objects and others may have served as medical utensils, as they resemble items found in surgical tool kits from physicians’ burials of the Roman period (e.g., Künzl 1982: Figs. 18:13; 78). The poorly preserved, hemispherical object attached to a small tube (Fig. 5:7) resembles a surgical instrument unearthed at the Roman hospital in Baden, Switzerland (Milne 1907: Pl. 38:2).

Other metal finds include jewelry, decorative pins, a mirror, buckles, attachments to wooden boxes and nails (Fig. 4:8–26).

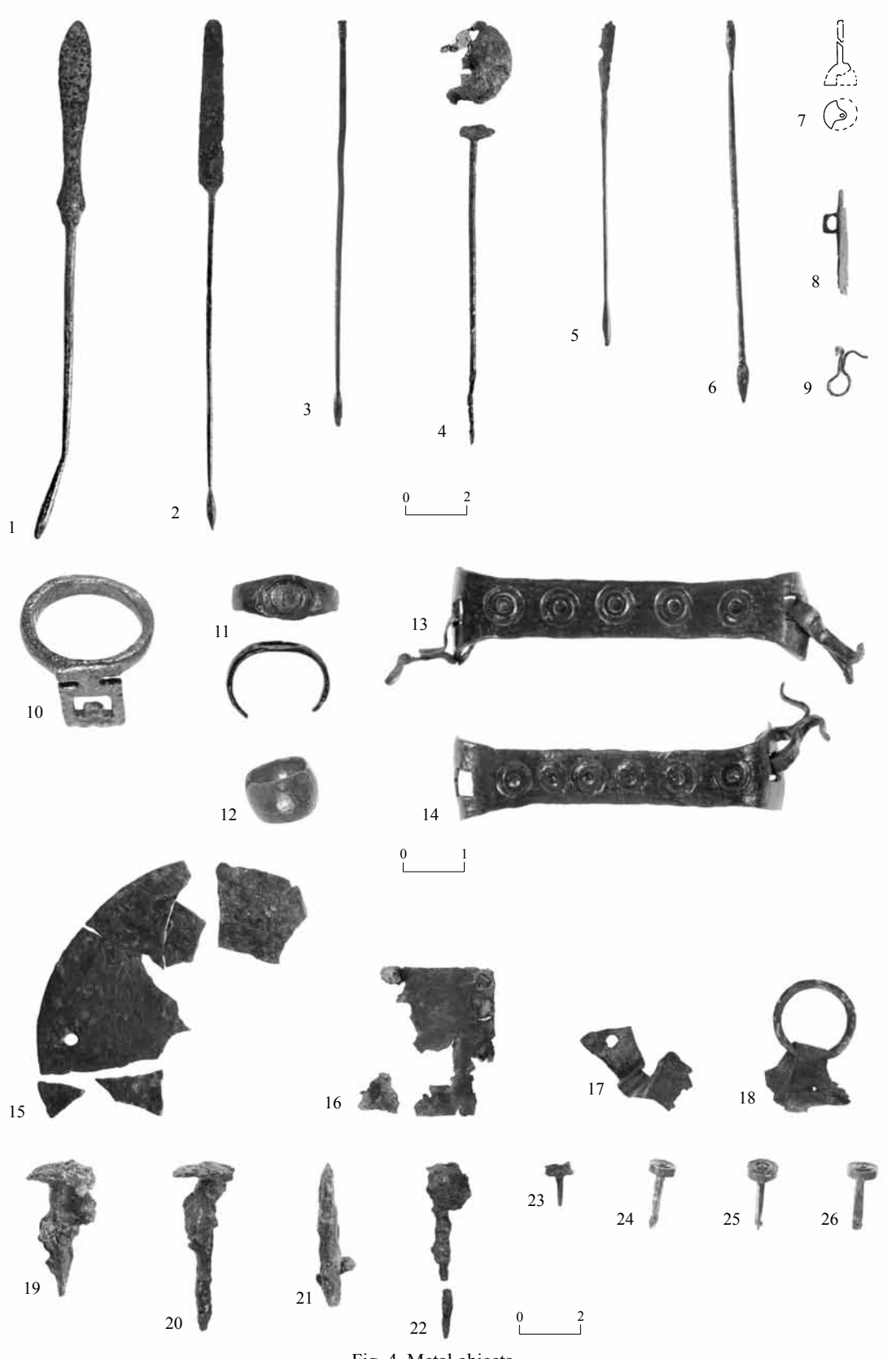


Fig. 4. Metal objects.

◂ **Fig. 4**

No.	Object	Reg. No.	Locus	Description
1	Spatula	541	56	Bronze
2	Spatula	515/A	53	Bronze
3	Spatula	512/BB	52	Bronze; head missing, square section
4	Spatula	515/B	53	Bronze; round spoon-like head
5	Spatula	515/BA	52	Bronze; round section, elongated spoon-like head
6	Probe(?)	512/BC	52	Bronze; elongated, sharpened tip
7	Medical instrument(?)	512/A	52	Bronze; hemispherical body with protruding tube
8	Hasp	541/A	56	Bronze; part of a box
9	Clasp	512/CL	52	Bronze; part of a box
10	Key ring	558	55	Bronze
11	Finger ring	543	52	Bronze; stone missing
12	Band	512/C	52	Bronze
13	Handle	577	57	Bronze; box handle with clasp attachments
14	Handle	538/AA	57	Bronze; box handle, clasp missing
15	Mirror	538/AB	55	Bronze; silver remnants
16	Decorative plate	522	53	Bronze; remains of nails for attachment
17	Buckle	541/A	56	Bronze
18	Buckle	541	56	Bronze
19	Nail	512/DA	52	Iron; wood remnants
20	Nail	523/A	53	Iron; wood remnants
21	Nail	512/DB	52	Iron; wood remnants
22	Nail	523/B	53	Iron; wood remnants
23	Sandal nail	523/C	52	Iron; squared, pointed tip
24	Decorative pin	512/DE	52	Bronze, hole at tip containing traces of iron
25	Decorative pin	512/DF	52	Bronze; hole at tip containing traces of iron
26	Decorative pin	512/DJ	52	Bronze; hole at tip containing traces of iron

CONCLUSIONS

The burial complex of ‘Ein el-Sha‘ara may have been originally constructed in the second century CE, although its main period of use was during the third and fourth centuries. This is in accordance with the ceramic and glass objects from the cave, which range in date from the second to the mid-fourth centuries CE (see Jackson-Tal, this volume). Locus 51 was not originally intended for burial use, and contained human remains representative of a later period.

NOTES

[1] The excavation was carried out on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Permit No. A-2340) in July 1995, under the direction of the author, assisted by Doron Lipkonsky (excavation organization), Avraham Hajian and Olga Star (drawing of plans), Marina Rappaport (drawing of finds other than glass), Tsila Sagiv (photography), Ella Altmark and Raisa Vinitski (cleaning of metal finds), Yehoshua Drey (metal finds consultation), Yossi Nagar (physical anthropology), Eitan Ayalon (ceramics and metal finds consultation), Rivka Berger-Calderon and Marva Baluka (ceramic finds consultation) and Ofra Rimon (medical instruments consultation).

This report was originally submitted in 1997, and has not been updated by the author since then. It was re-edited for publication in this volume.

[2] From the second century BCE until the mid-first century CE, this type of pot was used prominently for burial purposes, as seen in tombs from this period at ‘En Gedi (Hadas 1994: Fig. 69:4, 5).

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