

ISRAELITE AND SIDONIAN BURIAL RITES AT AKHZIV

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Akhziv is situated on the coast between Acre-Acco and Tyre.

Archaeological excavations (1958, 1960, 1963) at biblical Akhziv revealed two separate yet contemporaneous cemeteries, the southern and the eastern, where the inhabitants of Akhziv had buried their dead for about three hundred years from the Early (Israelite) Iron Age until the Assyrian conquest at the end of the 8th century B.C.E.

The southern cemetery had been frequently rifled since the beginning of this century and was renowned for the delightful terracotta figurines which had been picked up in the sand. Looting continued until World War II, when clearance of tomb-chambers on a large scale was undertaken by the Dept. of Antiquities under the direction of the late Prof. I. Ben-Dor.¹ The southern and the eastern cemeteries were shown to contain large rock-cut collective tombs, which the excavators dated to the 7th century B.C.E.

Excavations of the southern cemetery were resumed in 1958 and 1960. The eastern cemetery was excavated and tested again in 1963. The southern cemetery lies at the southern end of the Akhziv bay, the *tell* rising at the northern end of the bay. The area of the cemetery is covered by high sand dunes which overlie a kurkar ridge into which the rock-cut tombs were hewn.

Before we began our first season of excavations in 1958, it was decided not to trench for tombs but to unearth horizontally a wide and continuous area. As a result, by the end of the first season we noticed that the southern cemetery contained 4 types of burials. Here we shall describe only three types of Iron Age burials: single burials, inhumation or cremation; inhumation burials associated with cremation burials with funerary offerings placed above the grave; and, thirdly, rock-cut tombs.

Single inhumation and cremation burials were found frequently in close association. For the purpose of this paper, tomb 645, which had not suffered much, will best illustrate how such burials were prepared.

1. Only two months have passed since Prof. Ben-Dor left us. I wish to recall the memory of his unflinching kindness and helpfulness which I learned to appreciate. Many of us here will long remember his welcome and expert advice, which in his capacity of Deputy Director of Antiquities of Israel he extended to all newcomers.

Near the surface and below the top layer of sand, fragments of large jars were found. These jars, known from strata V-VI at Hazor² and from the excavations of the *tell* of Akhziv, date from the 8th century B.C.E. Just below the jars at a level which was the surface in the Iron Age, a fallen stela was found with bowls and platters placed near its foot. At the same spot, but at least 0.5 metre deeper, a man's skeleton was encountered. The skeleton rested on its back and the legs were flexed. The head was resting inside the mouth of a krater-amphora, the rim of which had been broken to admit and support the head of the deceased. A little jug had been placed in the hands of the dead. A second krater-amphora had been placed alongside the first. Upon examination of the kraters, they proved to be urns containing cremation burials. Among other pottery deposited with the deceased, there were the characteristic Sidonian red-slipped pitchers and decanters known as Phoenician pottery all over the Mediterranean.

Fortunately, the stela and the grave had escaped the sharp eyes of the E-zib villagers who had been searching the same area for stelae of which they had sold three or four to the Palestine Archaeological Museum. We can thus recognize stratigraphically three major episodes in the sequence of events connected with the grave. First, there was the interment of the two cremation urns together with funerary gifts. The skeleton was not found disarticulated nor had the pottery been disturbed. The inhumation burial had taken place either at the same time or immediately afterwards when the grave was probably still open. Secondly, the grave was closed and the stela erected above the grave, and bowls and other pottery were deposited near the stela.

It was not clear whether the stela had served just to mark and name the grave or whether it was a standing stone put up for worship and prayer to procure help and protection for the deceased and his family. This question was at least partially answered by comparing the pottery and finds inside the grave with those deposited above the grave around the standing stone. Inside the grave were found personal items indicating the status and rank of the deceased, such as his or her seal or ring, or his weapon. There were drinking vessels, a jug or decanter, a bowl or plate for eating. Above the grave were found censers, lamps, libation cups, votive figurines, so-called fruit bowls, in addition to vast quantities of platters, all sorts of dishes and wine and water jars. The pottery

2. Y. YADIN and others, *Hazor* I, II, III-IV (Jerusalem). See among others *Hazor* I, Pl. LXXII, Figs. 1-9.

vessels which were used in religious rites, together with the ashes still adhering to them, bear mute witness to the third and final act of burial. The letters and signs engraved on the stela itself suggested to Prof. Cross that the stela was dedicated to Tanit³ on behalf of the dead. The archaeological evidence strongly indicates that the stela was the centre of an area above the grave, where the family met to pray and perform the funeral rites.

Upon excavation of the rock-cut tombs adjacent to the rather simple graves, the entrance and exit from the entrance-shaft into the chamber was found to be elaborately blocked. It was quite obvious that no effort had been spared to prevent the dead from leaving the tomb chamber. A very heavy door slab closed the entrance and an immensely heavy sealing stone kept the door slab in position. The more surprising was the unexpected discovery that the ceiling of the chamber had been cut open. A large rectangle or square had been purposefully quarried. The edges of this rectangle or square had been carefully chiselled and smoothed to serve as a foundation course for a superstructure, in most cases apparently a platform (Fig 1). Luckily we found some building stones which fitted the edge, as well as a table altar which must have stood on the platform. Another nearby rock-cut tomb revealed the same architectural features. In addition to the smoothed edges and margins of the cut ceiling, remains of plaster foundations were found in a circle round the rectangle cut into the rock ceiling. The circular line of plaster and lime remains indicated that the platform or whatever other superstructure was built had been covered by lime and plaster and was round in shape.

It became clear beyond reasonable doubt that the monumental rock-cut tombs had been designed to serve the same sequence of events at the time of burial as the simple graves, one of which has just been described. There was, however, one important distinction. The statistical study of the pottery found inside the chamber-tomb and the anatomical examination of the inhumed skeletons suggest that over 400 persons were laid to rest in the chamber. Cremations were apparently few. Unfortunately, it was not possible to establish the exact numbers of calcined skeletons.

Time and the subject of this paper do not now permit us to compare the individual inhumations and cremations with the collective tombs

3. F. M. Cross, Jr., 'Phoenician tomb stelae from Akzib' in M. W. PRAUSNITZ, *Tombs of Iron Age Akhziv* (report forthcoming).

which were family tombs and had probably been used for over 250 years. The presence of standing stones, the platforms, the table-altars, the sacrificial and ritual pottery above the graves or tombs tempt us to interpret these remains in terms of a Sidonian continuity of Canaanite worship in the southern cemetery. Thus, the arrangement, placing of vessels, the hearth, the standing stone as centre of the ritual above the grave or placed on the platform, persuade us that they represent small-scale *bamoth* for the purpose of prayer.

In 1963 excavation of the eastern cemetery was resumed. Unlike the southern cemetery, this cemetery was not covered by dunes. The same horizontal excavation technique of stripping surface areas, square after square, was continued. In the area excavated, no remains of superstructures, platforms, standing stones, or pockets of pottery were discovered above the tombs or beneath the surface. Nor was any single inhumation or cremation in urn burials encountered. The total absence of these types of individual burials in the eastern cemetery is of the greatest significance for the southern cemetery as well⁴ where we find cremation burials commonly practiced. All finds in the eastern cemetery come only from the shaft and the tomb chamber. In the eastern cemetery the rock-cut tombs were sunk considerably deeper in the rock formation. Stairs led down into the entrance shaft towards the door which had been secured by packing stone. Some chambers had closely fitted doors, practically air-tight. The layout of the tombs did not differ from that in the southern cemetery, with one most important distinction. None of the tomb ceilings in the eastern cemetery had been cut. On the contrary, deeply sunk into the rock, it appeared that every effort had been made not to attract attention (Fig 2). In fact these tombs do not differ in principle from the rock-cut tombs which appear in the Patriarchal Age.

The tomb chamber contained hundreds of skeletons, usually laid out on the flat floor of the tomb chamber. Some tombs, probably later ones, have a central pit and the dead were laid to rest on the broad shelves along the three sides of the rock chamber between central pit and walls. The pottery found with the dead inside the chamber is the same red-slipped and painted pottery found in the southern cemetery. The southern and eastern cemeteries were therefore in use at the same time. It has been reckoned that the eastern cemetery might have been in use for about 300 years with the end of the eighth century B.C.E. as *terminus ante quem*.

4. See above, n. 3.

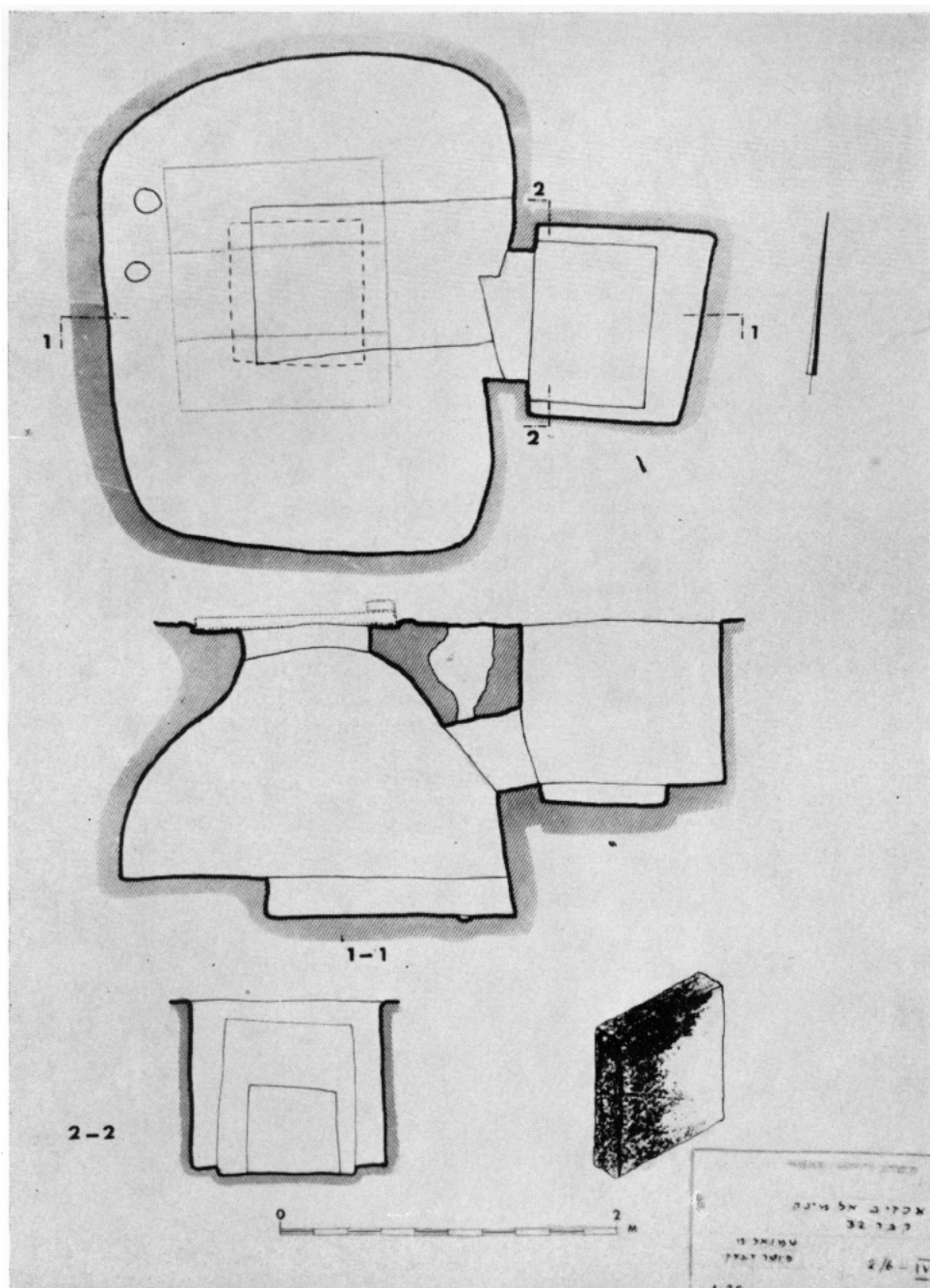


Fig. 1. Plan Iron Age burial tomb. Southern Cemetery Akhziv.
Note: rock ceiling of burial chamber and foundation for Superstructure.

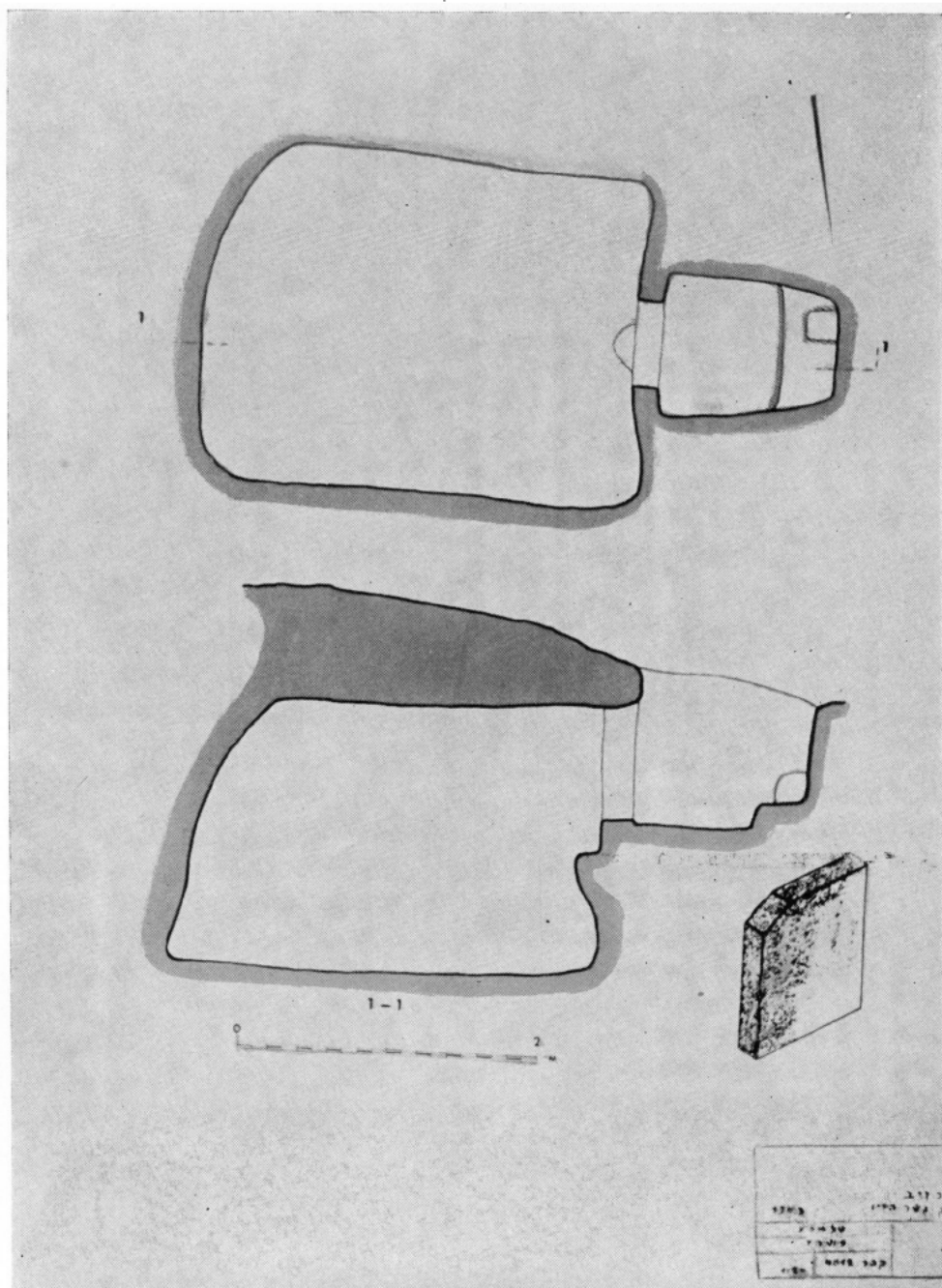


Fig. 2. Plan Iron Age burial tomb, Eastern Cemetery Akhziv.
Note: rock ceiling of burial chamber untouched.

The differences between the eastern and southern cemeteries are striking. It is evident that in the eastern cemetery funeral practices were meant to avoid rites which must have been repugnant to the people of Akhziv who buried their dead there. A glance at I Kings XIII:2-4 — 'the altar — that is the *bama* and the *misbeah* (where human bones had been burnt) shall be rent' — or in the same chapter, verses 19-26, where the story of the disobedience of the Ish Elohim is told — 'for as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the Lord... thy carcass shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers' (XIII:22) — is sufficient to show the revulsion the Israelites began to feel for individual inhumation or, even worse, cremations. It was their pious wish to lie by the side of their ancestors and be buried next to their fathers.

The co-existence of two separate but contemporary cemeteries serving the people of Akhziv can be best explained by quoting Judges I:31-32 'Neither did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Akhziv... but the Asherites dwelt among the Canaanites the inhabitants of the land: for they did not drive them out.' One cannot but admire these Canaanites-Sidonians, as well as the Israelites of the tribe of Asher, who continued, each in his own way, to retain their identity and to adhere to the funeral rites of their forefathers while they shared, apparently for over three hundred years, the same land and language.