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Eshmoun Valley: Preliminary Report on the Second Season of the Survey, 2005

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ESHMOUN VALLEY

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE SECOND SEASON OF THE SURVEY, 2005

Krzysztof Jakubiak, Michał Neska

The second season of the Polish-Lebanese survey¹ of the upper part of the Auali (Eshmoun) river valley commenced on September 1, 2005. Fieldwalking was completed by the end of the month. The area covered this year extended from where the survey had finished last year at a point west of Marmousa Chapel to the convents of Deir es-Saide and Deir er-Rahbat near Joun. Several places surveyed last year were rechecked owing to new information about the existence of rock-cut tombs collected in the last days of the first season of fieldwalking. Another pursuit was to explain the total absence of surface finds in the vicinity of the Roman temple at Bisri, tentatively attributed to river erosion.

The actual surveying was divided into two zones, the bottom of the valley being fieldwalked by one group and the slopes by another one, the latter team having to deal with heavy bush cover, which hardly made the prospection easy. The following report is by necessity brief and presents only the most important observations made during the survey.

1 The Polish team included the present writers co-directing the effort, accompanied by Mrs. Olga Wasilewska, Mrs. Zofia Zakrzewska, Mr. Maciej Mielecki and Mr. Piotr Witkowski, archaeologists; and Mr. Maciej Krajcarz, geologist. The Lebanese team headed by Mr. Asa'ad Seif, who is also Project Director on the Lebanese side, included Dr. Corine Yazbek, archaeologist; Mr. Abdallah Ala'Eddine, ceramologist; and Mr. Wissam Khalilin, archaeologist. Sedimentologist and speleologist Dr. Fadi Nader, Director of the Institute of Geology of the American University of Beirut, kindly consulted our findings.

The project is grateful to Mr. Frédéric Hussein, Director General of Antiquities in Lebanon, for permission to continue the survey and for his unfailing support at every step of the project.

MODERN STRUCTURES

Only six stone cottages of recent date were located this year, compared to at least 27 last year. These rectangular constructions were built of stone blocks, in one case (site 45, cf. map in *Fig. 1*) taking advantage of the steep rock valley slope, approximately 4 m above the modern road. Another house observed in Bisri village (site 60) was located almost on top of the mountain peak where the modern village is located. Several other severely destroyed structures, possibly

dwelling, were recorded in Bisri. Unlike these first two buildings, the ones from sites 62 and 66 had vaulted substructures. The house from site 62 is one of the best preserved of its kind, permitting observations concerning the interior layout. In no. 66, lime mortar was observed bonding the stones, the first case of mortar bonding to be recorded during the survey. The remaining two stone houses located this year were found on sites 48 and 49.

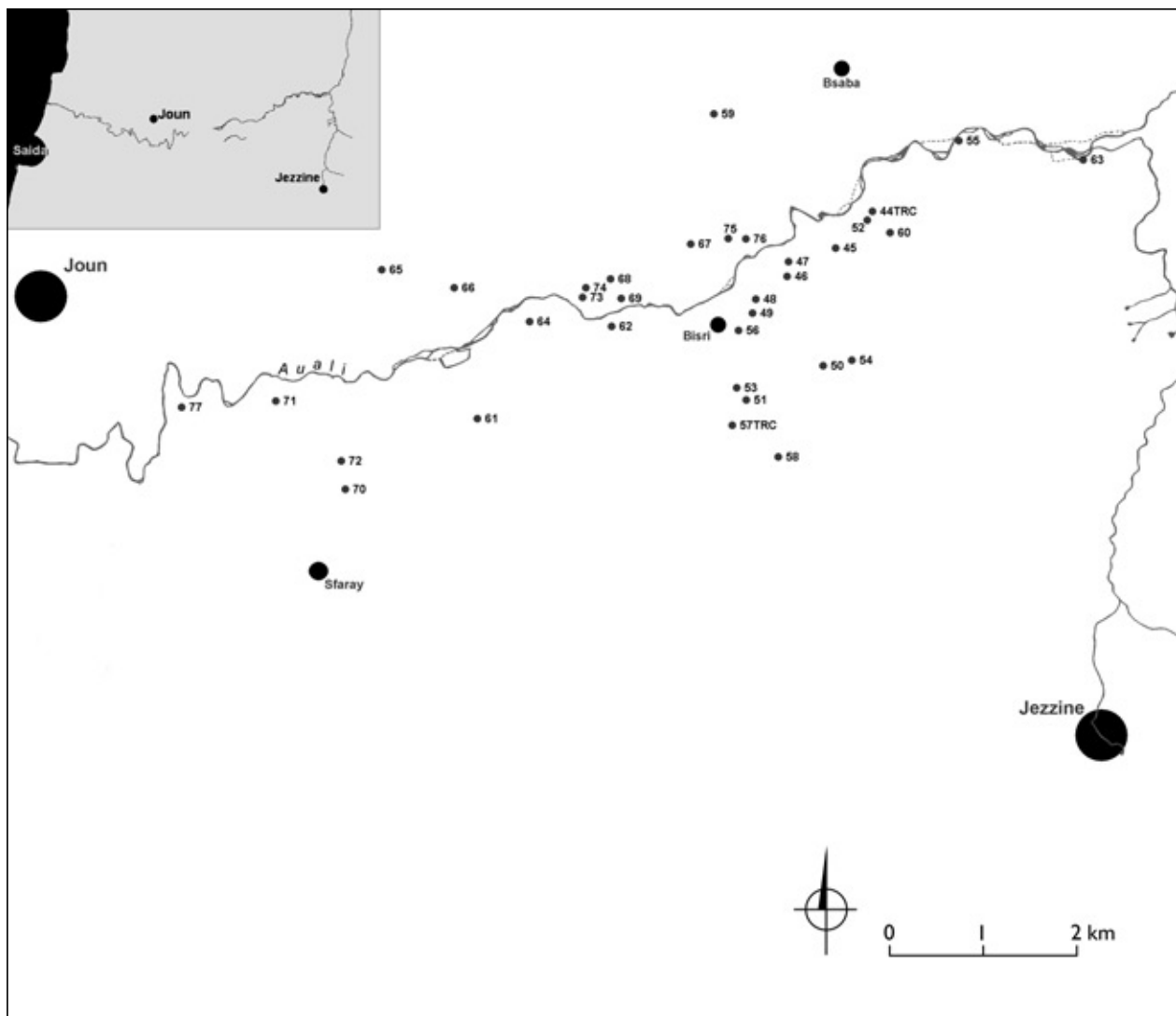


Fig. 1. Map of the surveyed area in the Auali (Eshmoun) Valley, 2004-2005 (Drawing P. Witkowski)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

The oldest of the archaeological sites discovered this year have been attributed tentatively to the Pre-pottery Neolithic period. The first of two such sites (no. 68; N 33°35'01.9"; E 35°31'36.6"; 493 m a.s.l.) was localized on the northern slopes of the valley above El Kherbe village. A concentration of flint material was observed, approximately 1.5 ha in area, but no traces of any constructions or related material except for some modern ceramics. Considering the size of the site, it could be interpreted as a village or big workshop. The other site with abundant flint material (no. 77; N 33°34'14.9", E 35°28'40.9", 211 m a.s.l.) was found on the southern slopes of the valley. It covered about half a hectare. The surface collection included several potsherds.

One Chalcolithic or Bronze Age settlement was also localized on the southern valley slopes. The site (no. 59; N 33°35'59.4"; E 35°32'17.9"; 659 m a.s.l.) lies on a jutting rise west of El Baabe village. A modern villa with swimming pool erected on the spot has all but obliterated the ancient remains and more testing will be needed (possibly during the next season) to confirm the presence of the site.

Rock cut tombs, nine in all, were identified on five different sites (nos 46, 51, 55, 70, 72). The sepulchers were either chamber tombs with niches for burials or rock-cut pits for single burials. All were of the Roman period, most likely from the 3rd-4th century AD judging by the overall shape and cutting technique.

Site 46 (N 33°35'03.9", E 35°32'49.2"; 438 m a.s.l.). Two chamber tombs. The western of the two [*Fig. 2*] had a square entrance with the sides recessed to fit a closing slab. The entrance was set inside a recessed frame with vaulted top and a step

threshold. Inside the chamber there were two burial niches, one opposite the entrance and another one to the right. The niches were cut as arcosolia with arched vaults.

The other tomb was prepared for four internments [*cf. Fig. 2*]. The entrance was again of square shape. One burial niche was located to the left of the entrance, two others to the right and the fourth further to the back of the chamber. The ground plan of the tombs could not be documented because of the thick accumulations inside the chambers.

Site 51 (N 33°34.2' 21.0"; E 35°32' 33.3"; 539 m a.s.l.). Similar tomb located near the modern road, cut not in the valley slopes as is the rule, but in a freestanding grey rock. The entrance was generally rectangular in shape with recesses for the closing slab. Inside the chamber were two burial niches with vaulted tops. Stones and earth accumulated inside the tomb precluded full documentation.

Site 55 (N 33°35' 47.6", E 35°34' 19.5"; 432 m a.s.l.). Three tombs, each with several burial niches, located on the southern slopes of the valley. In each of the tombs several places for sarcophagi were localized. On the wall of one of the tombs, just inside the entrance to the right, there are some rock carvings: an apparent palm branch and a naked human male figure [*Fig. 3*]. A palm branch carving can be seen in another of the tombs, where it is hewn on the wall near the burial niche. This is unusual iconography as far as the decoration of rock-cut tombs in the area is concerned. It is unfortunate that a few days after our discoveries the tombs were vandalized.

Site 72 (N 33°33'57.5"; E 35°29'47.9"; 476 m a.s.l.). Chamber tomb found below a modern road several hundred meters north of site 70. Almost square entrance and three

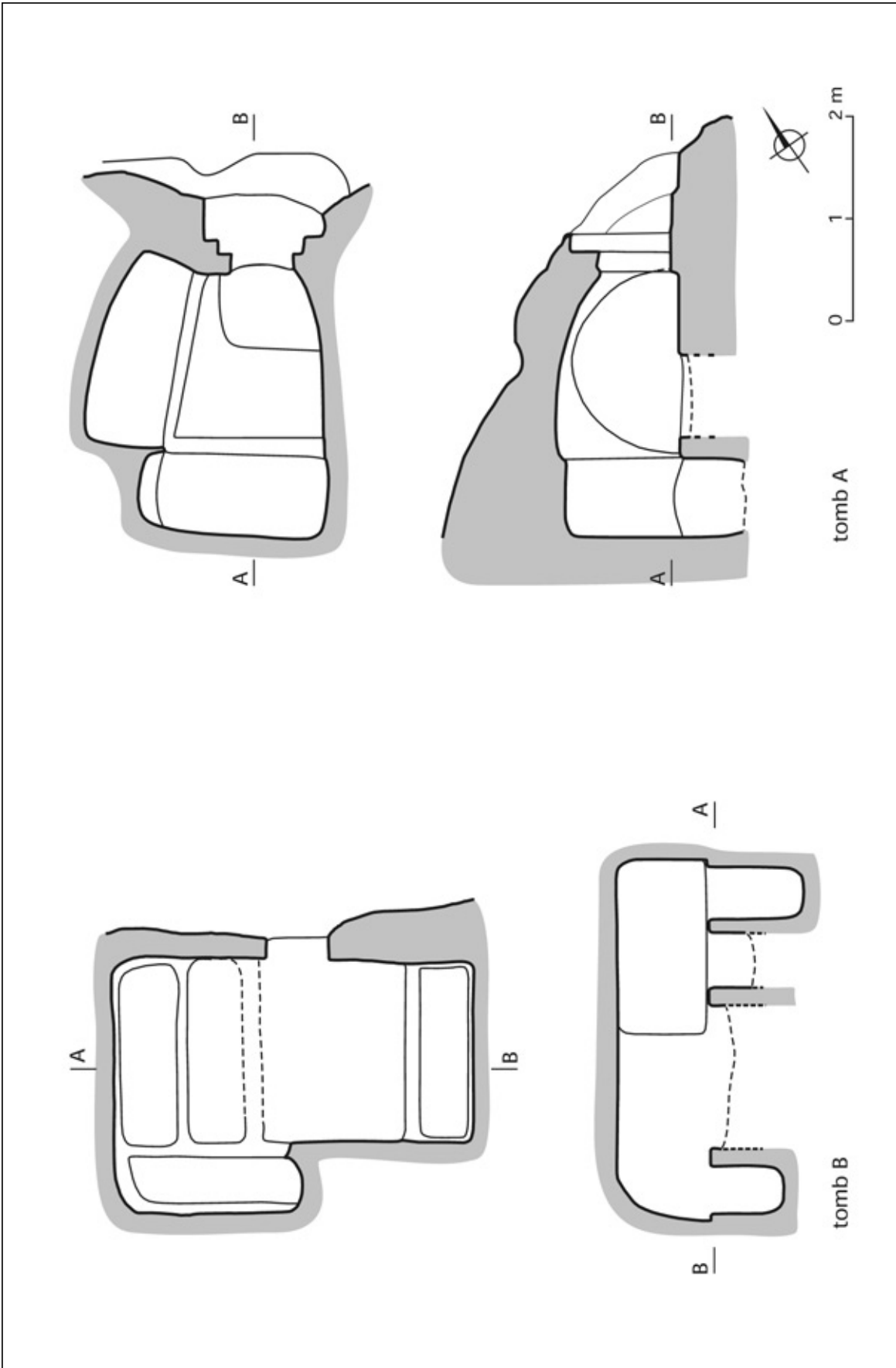


Fig. 2. Rock cut chamber tombs A and B from Site 46
(Drawing O. Wasilewska)

burial niches inside the chamber, identified only tentatively because of severe damages. The crudeness of the stone-dressing suggests that the tomb was never finished.

Pit graves cut into the rock and possibly containing lead coffins were found on sites 51 and 70. On the former of the two, the trench had been cut in a piece of grey rock sticking out in the middle of a cultivated field. As for the other site (N 33°33'47.7"; E 35°29'48.9"; 506 m a.s.l.), believed to be a settlement or village, pit graves were found cut in the rock inside a recent stone construction used as a keep for goats or sheep. Two of these graves were oriented N-S and were equipped with recesses around the edges for fitting covering slabs. A third pit was oriented E-W, but it was so severely damaged that its identification as a grave is purely tentative.

Remains of Roman-age settlements or farmsteads were discovered on eight sites, identified from the surface pottery and glass collection (nos 47, 53, 62, 65, 70, 71, 74, 75), augmented with Roman coins on sites 62 and 75. Typical water cisterns were localized on sites 65, 70 and 71. As it is only natural that cemeteries did not exist in a void away from settlements, it can be assumed, for example, that the necropolis on site 46 was connected with the village on site 47. (We were told by the local inhabitants that the locality on site 47 had once been called Maloulith or Maloula, which was apparently the name of the village in Aramaic). Other connected settlements and burial grounds include 53 and 51, 37 and 55. In the case of site 70, some graves were found near the settlement. Four sites are presumed to date to the Late Roman Period, two on the northern slopes and two on the southern ones. Site 66 was located on the edge of the slope west of El Kharbe. The site and the location were discussed above. Several Late Roman

potsherds found among modern ceramics within the limits of El Kharbe village located site 69 there. On the opposite side of the valley, potsherds from the same period were found north of the modern village of Mazraat el-Mathane. Meriting special attention is site 63 located on the flat



Fig. 3. Carved decoration inside the chamber of a tomb from Site 55 (Photo K. Jakubiak)

ground of the second geological terrace. About four dozen distinctive potsherds of the Late Roman and Early Byzantine period were discovered scattered over an area of approximately 3500 m². Since the area is cultivated, there exists the risk that the sherds were brought there with fertile soil trucked in from elsewhere.

Other sites identified by the survey team (nos 50, 52, 54, 57, 58, 60, 61, 67 and 73) could not be attributed safely for lack of distinctive material in the surface collections. The ruins of a stone mill at site 73 dated to the 19th-20th century. Most other sites appeared to be recent (like site 60 localized in Bisri village), but it cannot be excluded that at least a few of them contained also ancient vestiges.

Site 25 found in 2004 was examined as part of the rechecking program. It lies in steep terrain north of Bhannine Village on the eastern side of Wadi Bhannine. It is overgrown with grass except for the cultivated terraces. At about 8 hectares of area it is the biggest site detected by the expedition so far. The pottery surface collection represents virtually all periods from the Hellenistic through Ottoman times with the nearby Bhannine Village still being inhabited today.

Continued geological reconnaissance resulted in geological and geomorphological maps being prepared for the middle part of valley, called the Bisri Plain, between Bisri village and Nahr El Barouk stream. Three superposed accumulation-erosional terraces were found. The upper two constitute two different erosional surfaces of the first, lowest accumulation terrace, which is built of lacustrine silts and represents a lake stage of valley development. The upper part of the second

terrace is made of sands and gravels which covered the silts. The boundary between the two demonstrates erosional character with sands and gravel being deposited in high-energy conditions representing a flood facies (distinct near the water course and particularly in the geological sections cut by water in the erosional deposits). The uppermost terrace is also built of sands and gravels, and is of alluvial origin.

The geological development of the valley can now be reconstructed. The first important episode in historical times was the appearance of a lake, which built up behind a natural dam in the form of a huge landslide tongue. The lake filled all of the Bisri Plain, giving rise to the lacustrine silt deposits which accumulated on its bottom. It went through different stages before drying up finally sometime in the Late Hellenistic or early Roman period. The lacustrine silts proved to be highly fertile agricultural soil used throughout Roman times. A second important change in river regime occurred in the Late Roman period. From a stabilized river with low flows, it changed to an annual cycle with floods. Deluges presumably damaged or destroyed Roman buildings, like the Bisri Temple, for example. It was then that the river finally cut through the natural dam, forming a deep eroded channel. In the end effect, the river regime and water level were stabilized once again.

The dating of erosional episodes and accumulation cycles depends generally on archaeological finds. The creation of the lake, however, and the rate of late lacustrine sedimentation will be determined once a thermoluminescence analysis is carried out of samples that the team has taken from the sediments.