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KHIRBET AL BERGE

DISCOVERING A NEW ROMAN AND BYZANTINE SITE

Ryszard F. Mazurowski, Bassam Jamous

A new archaeological site has been discovered about 3 km southeast of Qaramel village and 5 km west of Fafin.¹⁾ At Khirbet al Berge, as the place is called, architectural remains were found stretching over an area of c. 4 ha. On a rocky hilltop about 300 m to the west of the ruins in the valley, a cemetery consisting of at least twenty rock-cut tombs, presumably from the same period, was located. With permission from the Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums at Damascus, the team dug a series of probes in some of the obviously disturbed tomb chambers, as well as carried out a provisional survey of the ruins.

1) The discovery was made on April 26, 2000, by members of the Polish-Syrian archaeological expedition to Tell Qaramel. Subsequent surveying was carried out by Prof. Dr. Ryszard F. Mazurowski, Dr. Dorota Ławecka, Mr. Piotr Kaczmarek and Ms Renata Maskowicz from the Qaramel team, in association with Messrs. Yusef Mohammad Al Delidie and Samer Abdel Ghafour, representing the Regional Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Aleppo.

THE SITE

The site in the valley (*Fig. 1*) seems to be a large (c. 4.5-5 ha) and previously unknown Roman military camp (?), surrounded by a regular wall made of dressed stone blocks. To the west and southwest the wall encompasses two empty areas of a refugial nature. In the central part of the camp one can see the foundations of three monumental stone buildings developing on an E-W axis along regular cobbled streets. These rectangular structures are c. 55 m long and c. 30 m wide. Inside each there are traces of big rooms with surviving doorways preserved to c. 130 cm of their height, as well as smaller separate buildings in the vicinity. The site yielded considerable quantities of terracotta

tiles and sherds of apparently 2nd century AD date, along with ceramic evidence and several marks on the stone jambs of structures, suggesting intensive reuse and partial rebuilding in Byzantine times.

Robbers' pits, evidently newly cut, were observed in a number of places inside the buildings, damaging severely ancient occupational layers. (Some of these pits had been covered with stones after our first visit to the site, suggesting that the robbers are continuously active in the area.) The nearby cemetery, obviously connected with the site, also had incurred heavy damage, including apparent removal by bulldozer of layers of soil covering the tomb entrances.



Fig. 1. Khirbet al Berge. Ruins in the valley viewed from the west (Photo R.F. Mazurowski)

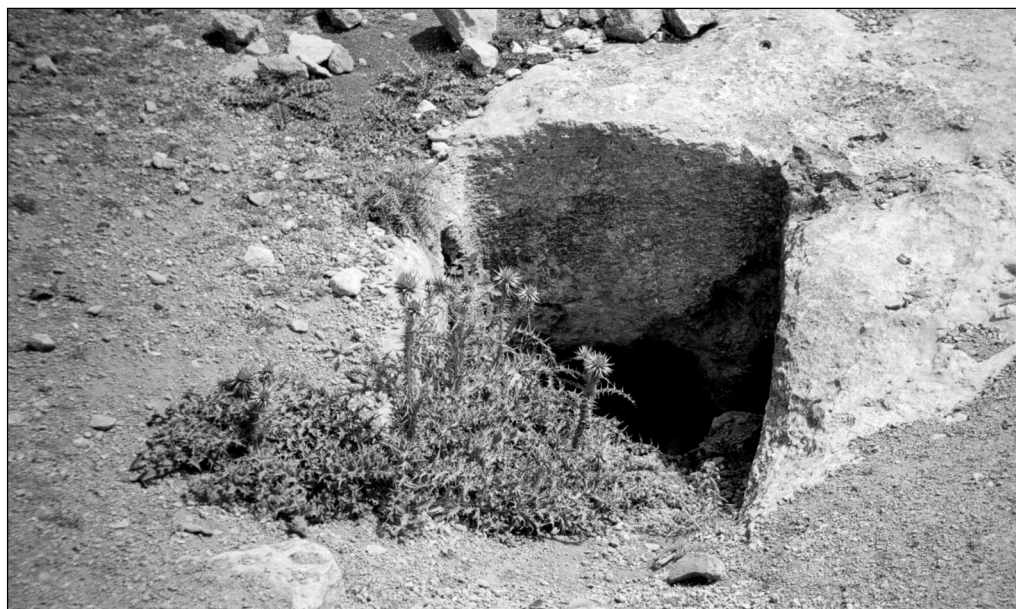


Fig. 2. Khirbet al Berge. View of the entrance to one of the rock-cut tombs of the Roman period (Photo R.F. Mazurowski)

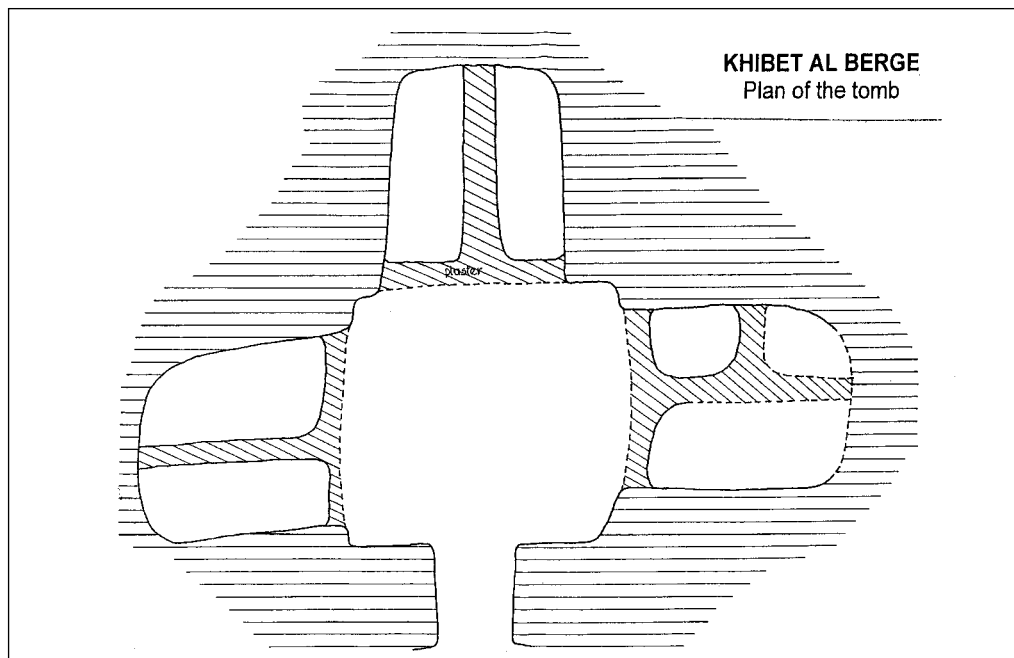


Fig. 3. Khirbet al Berge. Plan of one of the investigated tombs of the Roman period (Drawing R. Maskowicz)

THE CEMETERY

The shafts or entrances to the underground tombs are clearly visible on the surface (*Fig. 2*). They are located for the most part near the top of the hill in its northern part. In some cases they have been hewn into the rock for about 1-1.5 m and consist of chambers with niches for the burials. The one tomb that was explored was found to have a rectangular chamber 2 by 3 m and about 2 m high with three burial niches cut in three walls (*Fig. 3*). Modern

plundering appears to have damaged only the uppermost layers in the chamber and niches. Burials should presumably be expected in the lower-lying levels.

Further to the south several oblong or rectangular graves with stone casing walls were discovered on the surface. They are 2.5-3.0 m long and 2.0-2.5 m wide. All of them appear to have been robbed. Also plundered were regular round tumuli of stones piled up on top of rectangular cysts.