

Dahmiah dolmen field

The very large dolmen field of Dahmiah, situated on the lower foothills of the Jordan Valley and extending over several kilometers, can rightfully claim to be the first Jordanian dolmen field described in modern-day literature. On March 29, 1817, two British explorers, C. L. Irby and J. Mangles, observed at the foot of the mountains

some very singular, interesting, and certainly very ancient tombs, composed of great rough stones, resembling what is called "Kitt's Cotty House in Kent" (*note: a dolmen near Maidstone*). They were built of two long side stones, with one at each end, and a small door in front, mostly facing to the north; this door was cut in the stone. All were rough stones apparently not hewn, but found in fragments, many of which are seen about the spot in huge flakes: over the whole was laid an immense flat piece projecting both at the sides and ends (Irby and Mangles 1823: 325).

Many subsequent early travelers saw these dolmens, which are dotted on the slopes and clearly visible against the bare rocks. Among them were the Duc de Luynes and F. M. Abel.

During World War II, in 1942–1943, an extensive survey, followed by some excavations, was undertaken by Stekelis (who called the area Ala-Safat). Although his subsequent dissertation on the subject was published only in Spanish, it greatly helped in advancing knowledge on these structures in the Levant. For a long time it was considered the most comprehensive work on the subject. Stekelis counted 164 dolmens as well as several large stone circles, standing stones, rock-cut tombs and cup holes, all of which he described in detail. His excavation of a number of dolmens added considerably to the knowledge of the material associated with burial rituals, and he dated them to the Early Bronze Age.

Another major effort in dating these dolmens came from Yassine in 1985. He excavated some of the dolmens and transferred some to the University of Jordan campus in Amman, where they can still be seen, including a two-storied one. He was lucky to find an assemblage of Early Bronze Age I pottery in a small, undisturbed dolmen (or cist?), which had subsequently been covered by a larger one.

Although the slabs are mostly somewhat smaller than the dolmens of the Jordan plateau, they are often quite formidable nevertheless, and many dolmens



Dolmen surrounded by a well-built cairn at Dahmadiyah

are still in place. Many are covered by a stone cairn, sometimes constructed of well-cut rectangular slabs, which may have been built up when the dolmen fell out of use as a burial place.

Most of the dolmens, but certainly not all, are aligned north-south. The slabs are of so-called Ramla sandstone (Azab, middle Jurassic) and travertine. Side slabs are usually about 1 m apart. The cover slab and side slabs are usually rude in character although some are occasionally worked, whereas the end slabs have often been carefully worked. Typical for the area, and already noted by Irby and Mangles, are the portholes with frames on some of the dolmens' front slabs, an architectural feature which can also be found on rock-cut tombs nearby. Swauger already remarked that they occurred only in the northern part of the dolmen field; with portholes without frames further south, and an absence of portholes in the most southern area. It may signal a geographical procession of types, but will be hard to substantiate without enough material evidence. The portholes were surely made to close the entrances of the dolmens, possibly with wood, reed and/or mud, after deposition of the body. This would have allowed later generations to reopen the dolmen and add other bodies (or remove the previous ones). Stekelis remarked that many had small corridors in front of the entrance, within the circular platform on which they stood. These were small rectangular chambers with flat covering slabs, often containing the oldest pottery remains.

Stekelis found remains of bodies in a contracted position as well as cremated bodies, pointing out that the dolmens were used for collective burials. He also paid attention to some large circles (up to 45 m in diameter) in the area, as well as the rock-cut tombs, which he considered to be a Middle Bronze Age continuation of the dolmen tradition. Nowadays, it has become more common to associate the rock-cut tombs with their portholes to the dolmens nearby.

The field includes several standing stones, amongst which there is a large one at its southern end described by J. Undeland.

Some of the dolmens in the southern part have remains of a stone wall made of well-cut stones, like bricks. They have sometimes been thought to be towers, but this is not correct. It seems more logical to consider this superstructure as part of the final phase of dolmen use, or an architectural transition to the cairn. Indeed, some of the chambers inside these lithic superstructures are relatively small.

Unfortunately, a travertine stone quarrying company called Travco became active in the area in the twenty-first century. Recently it managed to obtain a license to quarry most of the area where the dolmens stand. The dolmen-builders knew what they were doing; the travertine slabs are unique in Jordan and very much in demand nowadays! In 2005, at my suggestion, the Department of Antiquities conducted a survey of the part of the field which is being threatened by the quarry—which is probably 90 percent. The unpublished survey counted more than 300 dolmens, including remains and other related structures. Further surveys and possible rescue excavations are foreseen for the future. Negotiations between the Department and the company involved in the quarry will hopefully result in the preservation of at least a part of this famous field.



*Rock-cut tomb
at Dahmiah*

How to get there

The area is geographically defined by (roughly)

in the north

N 32°06'59.0"

E 035°36'32.9"

in the south

N 32°05'39.7"

E 035°36'06.3"

Traveling northwards up the Jordan Valley towards Deir Alla, the Travco stone quarry should be clearly visible on the right, close to the road, about 5 km south of the Salt–Jordan Valley junction. Cross the small canal east of the main road (just before a military camp). The dolmen field is (still) north and south of the quarry and stretches over a relatively thin, but long band of lower foothills. You can follow the road alongside the canal.

A few similar dolmens can also be found on the lower slopes of the foothills on the north side of the Zerqa river–Jordan Valley junction, north of Deir Alla. This area also houses several rock-cut tombs.

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