

Greater Amman

Anyone who knows modern day Amman would find it difficult to imagine the empty landscape surrounding the small citadel and Roman theatre as they were a hundred and thirty years ago. In the 1880s, in Conder's day, according to his own observation, the very center of Amman included not less than ten dolmens and six menhirs. Needless to say, they have all vanished. The dolmens had a regular trilithon form, but no mention is made of any platform. The standing stones seem to have been unhewn, and one showed traces of a socket.

A few decades later (1911), Mackenzie paid attention to a group of rude stone monuments on Jebel Amman, west of the city center. These consisted of different dolmens or dolmen-type structures, which are now gone. Still standing, however, is the Rujm al-Malfuf, an Iron Age tower and settlement, typical of the Amman region, made of large uncut slabs. It stands, somewhat over-restored, right next to the Department of Antiquities. Mackenzie's speculation that there would be a relationship between the two types of architecture has, however, been conclusively disproved.



Wadi Sakrah standing stone after excavation

Surprisingly, it is still possible today to find an impressive standing stone in one of the main residential areas of Amman, namely that of Shmeisani. It is one of the most imposing stones of Jordan, about 3.5 m high and 2.5 m wide, standing on a (still) empty plot between Jaber Bin Hyyan and al-Maqdisi streets. There does not seem to have been much of a surrounding structure (although no cleaning/excavation has been undertaken).

Wadi Sakrah is one of the principal wadis leading to downtown Amman from the west. It was in that wadi that a standing stone was pointed out to the author by the writer and photographer Jane Taylor in 2005. After having been informed, the Department of Antiquities decided to clean the structure, which had never been surveyed. It proved to be a 2 m high stone positioned on a double-row rounded platform, delineated by very big and mostly uncut boulders. The pillar-shaped orthostat was slightly inclined (to the north) and seemed to have been artificially rounded on the top. As the plot could not be acquired it was decided to dismantle the structure in order to re-erect it at a later stage on the archaeological trail in the King Hussein Park in west Amman. Unfortunately, during the removal very little evidence of dating came to light; gold diggers had already dug everywhere, however the architecture remained intact. A few sherds and flints seem to indicate an Early Bronze Age date. All the same, the structure can be considered to belong to the oldest architecture surviving in the town of Amman and is rather rare in having an elevated megalithic platform construction.

Wadi Sakrah has a few more standing stones which are not as conspicuous.

Off the beginning of Jordan Street (coming from Istiqlal Street) where it heads out north of Amman there is an area called Rujm Ain al-Bayda, which is known for its Iron Age towers and settlements. Here, remains of a couple of dolmens could still be seen in 2006 but the area is quickly being built up and they are likely to disappear very soon.

Another small group of dolmens seem to have existed at Tla al-Ali, more or less facing the University, according to the slabs that I saw lying around.

References:

Conder, C. R. 1889. *The Survey of Eastern Palestine* I, 20–26. London, The Committee of the Palestinian Exploration Fund.

- Mackenzie, D. 1911. The Megalithic Monuments of Rabbath Ammon at Amman. *Palestine Exploration Fund Annual* 1: 1–40.
- Abu Dayyah, A.-S., J. A. Greene, I. H. Hassan, and E. Suleiman. 1991. Archaeological Survey of Greater Amman, Phase I, Final Report. *ADAJ* 35: 361–95.



Standing stone in Shmeisani, with Jane Taylor