

Iraq al-Amir

Iraq al-Amir is well known as the palace complex of the Hellenistic Tobias family, with its caves in the cliffs above. It is much less known that there are two small dolmen fields nearby, overlooking the Wadi al-Sir. They were first surveyed by the archaeologist Ji, who registered 15 dolmens in total. They are spread over two areas, one, east of the Wadi al-Sir, called 'al-Qasabat' and one, west of the same wadi, called 'al-Matalla'. Most of the dolmens are oriented roughly north-south and consist of a capstone, two side slabs and one or more closing stones at one end. There are no floor slabs. There are some standing stones and also a number of rock-cut tombs, one of which Ji excavated in 1996. It contained a large number of human skeletons, and was dated to the transition of Chalcolithic–Early Bronze Age I; Ji suggests that the rock-cut chambers are slightly earlier than the dolmens.

Notwithstanding the obvious architectural differences, Ji was of the opinion that the dolmen fields were proof of the migration routes through the wadis and suggested that the supposed link between dolmens in the Jordan Valley and on the plateau was evidence of some form of pastoral nomadism.



Standing stone above Iraq al-Amir



Rock-cut tomb and dolmen above Iraq al-Amir

How to get there

N 31°54'39.4"

E 035°45'52.5"

For the few dolmens visible south of Iraq al-Amir, take a road to the left at some point before reaching the Tobiad palace, in order to reach the south slope. I have never found the ones north of the palace, on the opposite slope.

References:

- Ji, C. C. 1997. The Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Cemeteries near 'Iraq al-Amir and the Preliminary Report on Salvage Excavations. *ADAJ* 41: 49–63.
- 1998. Archaeological Survey and Settlement Patterns in the Region of 'Iraq al-Amir 1996: A Preliminary Report. *ADAJ* 42: 594.
- Loh, C. M., and C. C. Ji. 2000. A Preliminary Report on the Human Remains from a Rock-cut Chamber Tomb near 'Iraq al-Amir. *ADAJ* 44: 201–7.

Rawdah

The area has been given many names in the past. The dolmens are found on foothills roughly east of the village of Rawdah (formerly al-Shaghur/al-Mazar). The fields start in the valleys just south of Wadi Kafrein and Tell Hammam in the north, then continue over Wadi Maata, Wadi Quseib, on the spurs near al-Maberah, to the northeast near Ain al-Meheiyneh; to the south they start towards Tell al-Matabi, which is on the lower slopes of the Wadi Hesban and Wadi al-Muthariqa, just south of the main road towards the Dead Sea. Conder also called the area Ghor as-Seisaban.

The area thus consists of different valleys running down towards the Jordan Valley, with dolmens mainly in brown crystalline sandstone appearing both on the ridges and in the valleys. The southern-most ones also have some limestone slabs. If one were to group them into 'wadi-groups', there would be about seven of them. About six dolmens can easily be seen on the left (south) of the Na'ur-Dead Sea road, usually with a bedouin family camping in their midst. Both this group and the one further south have been called Matabi in the older literature. The southern-most group is close to the military post on the south slope of Wadi Hesban, which can be reached on a secondary road. There, in the recent past, one could also see a menhir (2.5 m high) on a north-facing slope. It was, however, pulled down in November 2005, during which senseless action the top was broken. According to locals, there was another standing stone even further south.

Many other dolmens are visible on the right of the Na'ur-King Hussein Bridge road; look for them just after the road turns towards the north, whilst still in the lower foothills. Others are behind the new blue mosque on the road towards Shuna Shamaliyah and on the right of the same road.

Most of the dolmens are built on circular platforms with an average diameter of 6 m, lined with larger stones. Usually, as in Dahmiyah, the top and side slabs are crude, whereas the end slabs are somewhat worked to fit the openings. There are also a number of standing stones in the area, seemingly associated with the dolmens. One or two, such as the one at the southern end which was pulled over in 2005, were very big, but most are not really larger than the side slabs of dolmens.

I collected sherds of pottery lying around as a result of several, obviously

clandestine excavations as well as from a cave nearby. The sherds, including cups which resemble ones found by Stekelis at Adehmeh (Stekelis 1935: pl. V), are mostly EB IB with some EB IA. Mallon speaks about an MB I chalciiform cup.

Although I grouped them together under the name of Rawdah, there are local differences. The southern two groups sometimes have a somewhat more cist-like character and are partially in a continuous line next to each other. The northern groups seem less worked but this could have been influenced by the slightly different type of rocks.

In 2006 the area was the subject of some limited research by L. Clayton from the State University New York at Binghamton (USA) and it will hopefully be surveyed later.

The area is also interesting because of a couple of circles. The most interesting one is 50 m south of the newly built blue mosque. It may very well have been a local cult center, which forms the epicenter of the dolmen fields. On the opposite plateau, towards the northeast, another circle is visible, somewhat less well constructed. I also noticed two small circles, probably enclosures, in the valley just west of the mosque. This horseshoe-shaped valley, which was very pretty in its emptiness, it seems is now also going to be built up. A pity for all the nice dolmens in that valley, many of which are still relatively intact at the time of writing.

At the bottom of this small wadi, very close to the village, lies a very large circular stone with a round hole. It is nearly a meter thick, and has a diameter of



Conder's circular stone?

nearly 3 m, thus making it too big for a regular mill-stone. Could this have been the 'Mensef Abu Zeid' of Conder's *Survey of Eastern Palestine* (page 193)? He related a story about this disk of a famous Arab hero who feasted the local tribe on a whole camel, rice and butter which melted down the hole. It was probably the same stone also mentioned by Merill in 1881 as being an

ancient mill-stone (page 231). Merrill rightly pointed out that it was made from a type of stone that is not local. Indeed the disc is of limestone, while the direct environment is sandstone.

How to get there

South (Matabi)

N 31°49'21.3"

E 035°41'12.9"

South of the Na'ur–Dead Sea road

31°49'34.5"

E 035°41'15.2"

Circle close to mosque

N 31°49'41.2"

E 035°40'56.0"

Northern valleys

N 31°50'07.5"

E 035°40'47.8"

Driving south on the highway from Amman, take the Na'ur branch towards the Jordan Valley; near the bottom, the road forks just after a military checkpoint. The dolmen fields start about 500 m further down on both roads leading from the fork and are spread over several valleys.



Dolmens overlooking the village of Rawdah



Individual dolmen at Rawdah

References:

- Conder, C. R. 1889. *The Survey of Eastern Palestine* I. London, The Committee of the Palestinian Exploration Fund.
- Dajani, R. W. 1967–68. Excavations in Dolmens. *ADAJ* 12–13: 56–64.
- Glueck, N. 1951. Explorations in Eastern Palestine, IV. *AASOR* 25–28, (1945–1949): 384–87.
- Herber-Percy, A. 1896. *Travels in Moab, Ammon and Gilead*. London.
- Mallon, A. 1929. Notes sur quelques sites du Ghôr oriental. *Biblica* 10: 225–27.
- Merill, S. 1881. *East of the Jordan*, London.
- Prag, K. 1995. The Dead Sea Dolmens: Death and the Landscape. In *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*, ed. S. Campbell and A. Green, 75–84. Oxford.
- Swauger, J. L. 1965. Study of Three Dolmen Sites in Jordan. *ADAJ* 10: 5–36.