



RECENT DISCOVERIES IN NUMEYRA EAST OF THE DEAD SEA (JORDAN VALLEY, SOUTHERN LEVANT)

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ABSTRACT

The present article considers Numeyra village site on the eastern coast of the Dead Sea in Jordan Valley towards the Southern Levant.

The main objectives of this article is to assess the results of conducted field work in the area between 1995-2011 which includes survey, excavations, inspections in addition to understand the chronological sequences on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea especially during the Bronze Age and comparing the results with recent theories regarding the settlement of Early Bronze Age in Jordan Valley and the surrounding area.

KEYWORDS: Archaeology, Excavations, Architecture, Artifacts, Jordan Valley.

1. INTRODUCTION- PREVIOUS EXPLORATION

Southern Ghor has been examined by a number of visitors, pilgrims and travelers since the mid-19th century. The principle of observations of the archaeological character since that date were made by H.B. Tristram in 1872 (Tristram, 1873), by A. Musil between the years 1897 and 1902¹, and by an expedition that involved sounding at certain sites, led by W.F. Albright in 1924 (Albright 1924). An extensive survey was conducted in the southern Ghor and Wadi Arabah by F. Frank in 1932 and again in 1933-4 (Frank, 1934). He was followed in 1934 by N. Glueck², who covered a number of the same sites. The most significant research in recent years has been undertaken by W. Rast and R.T. Schaub (Rast and Schaub 1974), who made an archaeological survey of the southern Ghor in 1973, and subsequently carried out major excavations at Bab edh-Dhra' and at en-Numeyra¹ (Fig.1).

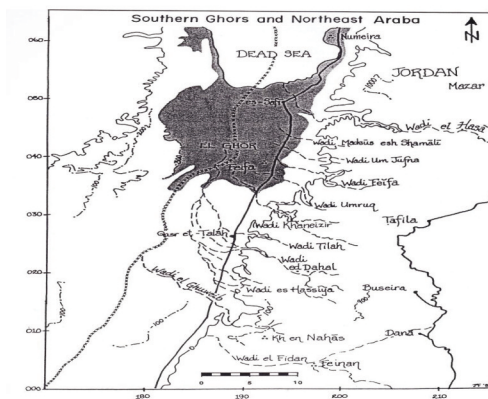


Figure 1. General plan showing the Numeyra sites and the surrounding zone .

Although principally concerned with the Bronze and Iron Age occupation of the region, Rast and Schaub made useful observations on later periods. In 1980, D. McCreery undertook a survey of the area and noted the degree to which it was changing as a result of modernization of the

agricultural and industrial sectors with a consequent effect on the archaeological sites of Ghor. Our own interest in the region arose from the fact that earlier expeditions had noted the presence of Nabatean and Classical sites in southern Ghor – especially Glueck, Rast and Schaub and McCreery- and yet the area was at the time virtually unknown to some archaeologists. It therefore seemed useful to examine the sites of the area to consider them in the light of their occupation in Bronze, Byzantine and Islamic times, with particular intention to investigate how the area related to the rest of Jordan in the early Bronze, Byzantine and Islamic periods, and also to consider the area's settlement in later times.

2. FIELD SURVEY

Three main sites were located as a result of field survey, Tell an-Numeyra, Rujum an-Numeyra and Lower Numeyra (Fig. 2). The presence of more archaeological remains can be inferred in some alluvial terraces which may hide some small- and medium-sized sites located close to the surrounding zone. Moreover; it is far away from the main village site to the north and south, such as the site of the lower Numeyra that was discovered later on.¹



Figure 2. RUJUM and an Numeyra after excavations work

3. THE EARLY BRONZE AGE, THE WALLED TOWNS

The Early Bronze Age walled town site of Numeyra occupies the flat hilltop of a promontory next to the Dead Sea coastal highway, some 14 km south of the Karak-Southern Ghor junction, at the point where Wadi Numeyra enters the floor of the valley. Recent work in the area has identified and partly excavated sites from the Nabataean, Byzantine and Ayyubid-Mumluke periods, attesting to the archaeological wealth of an area that until recently had been largely renowned for its Early Bronze Age remains.

The archaeologist Nelson Glueck, while inspecting the more easily visible Rujum en-Numeyra in 1934, saw the remains of Numeyra town or village site and recognized it as an ancient settlement, but did not appreciate its full significance. He passed through it briefly and picked up "a few indistinguishable pottery sherds," noting "a large rectangular area with some trace of what may have been originally an enclosing wall." In 1973, the American scholars heading the Expedition to the South-East Dead Sea Plain in Jordan, Walter Rast and Tom Schaub, examined Numeyra more closely and identified it as a walled town dating from the EB III period (c. 2750-2300 BC).

Two seasons of excavations were conducted between 1995-1997 and more recent analyses of the excavated material have shown that the walled town at Numeyra existed for perhaps a century towards the end of the EB III period. So that, It had close links with the bigger EB III city at Bab edh-Dhra'. Dr. Michael Coogan, who headed the excavation season at the site, sees Numeyra as "almost a colony clear cultural connections between the two sites," while Schaub added Numeyra may be a "satellite" settlement reflecting the expansion of the Bab edh-Dhra' south. Among the shared cultural features between the two settlements are similar fortification walls;

circular, flat-stone cooking areas; ceramic and flint tool repertoires; jar-based storage techniques; and agricultural systems that employed irrigation and crop rotation to grow barley, wheat, grapes, flax, olives, chickpeas, dates, lentils and figs¹

4. SINGLE-PERIOD SITE

Unlike Bab edh-Dhra, Numeyra seems to have been inhabited only during the EB III period, though there may have been an earlier EB I occupation east of Numeyra, further up in the adjacent hills. After its destruction around 2350 B.C., the town site was abandoned and never again resettled.

The settlement measured just over one hectare in size, and was protected by a four meter-thick stone and mud-brick town wall; the wall was interrupted at seven-meter intervals by transverse sections – showing exactly the same EB III town wall engineering as that which was used at Bab edh-Dhra'. Within its walls, the town of Numeyra consisted of scores of houses, typically comprising covered rooms built around an open courtyard (suggesting family-based organization). The domestic units were arranged around a main street that crossed the town in an east-west direction. The outline of the street is still visible on the ground today. The rooms of the houses seem to have had specialized uses, e.g., to store foodstuffs in large ceramic jars, pits or plastered bins; to cook or bake on one meter-diameter circles of flat stones embedded in the ground; to prepare food; to repair and store ceramic jars; to weave; or to sleep. Peculiarly, most doorways were blocked with stones, apparently shortly before the final abandonment of the town, after a violent earthquake. One theory sees the blocked doors as evidence that the inhabitants of Numeyra may have anticipated the earthquake, and deliberately abandoned the town temporarily for the safety of nearby open areas (Fig. 3).

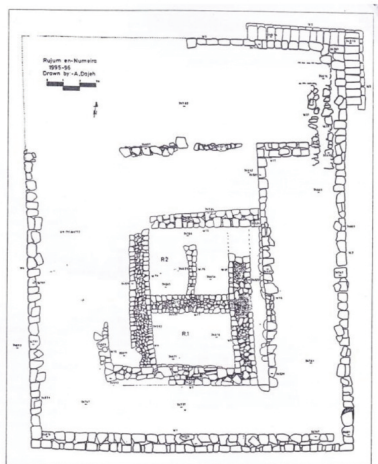


Figure 3. Top plan of the discovered area of the tell an Nymeyra.

Some scholars suggest the inhabitants may have emptied their houses of valuable (most storage pits were found empty, and no small finds, jewelry, gold or other precious items were recovered in the dig), blocked their doors for safety, cleared out the center of the town (no dead bodies were found in the ashy debris of the final destruction within the walls), and evacuated the town, perhaps planning to return after the anticipated shake.

Earlier ashy destruction levels suggest Nymeyra may have suffered a previous but milder shake after which it was rebuilt. There is possible evidence for this earlier calamity in the excavation of the east tower, a massive (10×7,4m) stone tower entered via a staircase, which still had traces of plaster on its tower steps. Excavations showed the tower to be a later addition to the city's fortifications, perhaps reflecting a worsening security situation in the area around or just before 2400 B.C. The tower excavations also produced two different layers of burnt destruction debris with the remains of human victims, indicating that the city was twice destroyed: one destruction during its life span, and another that finally brought the city to an end. If not from an earthquake, the earlier destruction

may reflect military attacks during a period of political difficulties that required the addition of a major fortified tower to secure the town's defensive system.

Coogan believes Nymeyra was finally abandoned after extensive earthquake damage, evident throughout the site in the form of thick ashy layers, burnt roof timbers, and collapsed walls. The final destruction of the town was sudden and devastating; parts of the site had 1.5m thick destruction debris and up to 40cm thick ash layers, which sealed in the occupation layers until they were examined by archaeologists this century. Freshly picked grapes with their skins still intact, carbonized in the burning associated with the final destruction of the town, help archaeologists pinpoint the destruction of Nymeyra to the late summer or early autumn.

5. THE IMPACT OF GEOLOGY

Geological investigations and assessment (shows that the Wadi Nymeyra river bed, now north of the site, may have flowed just south of the town during the EB III period. Some speculate that the same earthquake that destroyed the city around 2350 B.C, also may have caused the wadi bed to shift to the north of the walled town site. Much of the mound on the north side of the site, and parts of the town wall and related towers, have eroded away due to the action of water and alluvial matter coming down Wadi Nymeyra during the past 4000 years. The Wadi Nymeyra river bed is now as much as 50m lower than it was during the EB III period. Alluvial remains can still be seen high up among the rocks on the north side of the wadi, where it emerges from the hills to the east. In antiquity, the walled town would have been perched on its high alluvial hilltop immediately adjacent to the perennial flow of Wadi Nymeyra, enjoying a good vantage point and access to fine agricultural lands all around it.

Partly confirming the theory of the

shifting of Wadi Numeyra to the north was the discovery of an EB I period walled town just north-east of Numeyra, called Ras en-Numeyra. This earlier town had a 1.75m thick fortification wall, with mud-brick buttressing along its south side and all occupation to its north. The occupational evidence on the north side of Ras en-Numeyra was almost entirely washed away after Wadi Numeyra shifted its course to the north.

6. MOST RECENT EXCAVATIONS

The latest excavations in the Numeyra area were conducted between 1995-1997 followed by survey and field assessment between 2008-2011. The team, headed by Dr. Mohammad Waheeb carried out limited excavations at three sites near the Numeyra town site that were threatened with damage due to the construction of the new high way in that area.

The field results revealed interesting features of stratification and architecture which date to the Bronze Age, especially EB I-III.

Part of the defensive wall at the north-western corner was uncovered and some other related walls of rooms of different directions were investigated. Through our limited work at the site we were able to follow part of an architectural unit. What distinguishes the site is the destruction layer, an ashy layer, which was noticed everywhere in the excavated sections. The material recovered from the site revealed different kinds of it among them pottery shreds, bones, seeds, small lumps of copper, charcoal, and mudbrick fragments. Excavations revealed the remains of fire and destruction extending to all directions and covering the floor of the north western corner of the village site. This reinforces the idea that an earthquake put an end to the progress of the town at the end of the EB III period. The inhabitants of the town either left the place to a nearby village or to a safer area (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).



Figure 4. The excavated area of the tell revealing remains of EB III rooms .



Figure 5. The outer walls of the discovered area of the tell .

7. RUGUM AND AN NUMEYRA

The most visible site is that of Rugum Numeyra, which stands immediately west of the highway on the stretch of land leading westwards to the Dead Sea shoreline, about 200m south of EB III Numeyra. It measures 17×19m, and stands nearly five meters high. D.R GLUEK and others saw it as one of a series of Nabataean stations along the route from Aqaba to Karak, via Wadi Arabh and Southern Ghors. Glueck also saw traces of past cultivation between the rujm "tower" and the Dead Sea shore. The recent excavations of the eastern side of the rujm uncovered a complete architectural unit comprising several walls that formed small rooms. The structures were built on a series of terraces

that raised them above the level of the plain and protected them from the erosion action of the wadi.

According to the results of survey depending on recovered stuff, the structure possibly represented a watch-tower overlooking the eastern part of the Dead Sea shore during the Nabataean period. This date is based on the discovery of two lamps and one juglet of Nabataean type mixed with several pottery sherds. The site was reinhabited extensively during the Byzantine period. Quantities of pottery sherds and traces of foundation walls were discovered on the surface of the site, showing that a large settlement occupied the area during the 5th-6th century AD.

Parts of the large Byzantine cemetery have been identified around the rujm, but in many areas, it had already been robbed out. The site may have connections with the major town Numeyra, but clear evidence is not available. Only quantities of pottery sherds dated back to EBIII were found around the Rugum and the surrounding zone

8. LOWER NUMEYRA

A new site located 50m north west of Rujm an-Numeyra was called Lower Numeyra. Due to the seasonal erosion activity of the wadi the site was found covered with small and medium stones mixed with sand and pebbles,. The conducted systematic excavations uncovered several rooms its walls were constructed of undressed sandstone and limestone. The site dates from the Ayyubid-Mamluke period and seems to have been a rather substantial workshop that may have been associated with a press for the sugar industry, which is well attested from that period in this region. The site comprise a basin, a well, water channels, and a pottery kiln. The most common finds at the site were fragments of sugarpots and painted pottery sherds from the Ayyubid-Mamluke era (1174-1516 AD). A survey west of the site

along the Dead Sea shore, revealed isolated collapsed walls and arches, associated with pottery sherds from the Byzantine and Ayyubid-Mamluke eras (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Rugum an Numeyra close to the main road Dead Sea –Southern Ghosr

9. DISCUSSION - CONCLUSIONS

Work at Numeyra provided new evidence that Southern Ghosr were more extensively occupied in antiquity than had been previously thought. A survey of a 2 × 1km strip on each side of Numeyra identified several new sites that had not been previously known, ranging from the Chalcolithic to the Mamluke periods 4000 BC-1516 AD.

A recent work on EB III in southern Palestine, dealing especially with settlement patterns, trade, and the environment, corroborates some of the theories advanced here concerning the causes for deurbanization (Fargo 1979). In broad outline, this work, utilizing the model of “culture as a system composed of interacting subsystems” has demonstrated that the environmental system (flora, fauna, geology, climate) was in equilibrium with the culture system for much of the Early Bronze Age, but that an imbalance in this system led to the breakdown in EB III with the resulting deurbanization of EB IV. This imbalance was the result of complex factors, but the environment was a significant determinate. The alteration in southern settlement patterns, from the regions of

intensive agriculture in the coastal plain to the hill country and high plateaus where herding and some agriculture took place, reflects the need to find resources for subsistence elsewhere and a serious environmental fluctuation (Fargo 1979: 247-52).

Another discernible factor contributing to the demise of urban life was a weakened economy apparently occasioned by the cessation of trade between Egypt and Palestine and Jordan, beginning with the destruction or collapse of trading centers such as Arad in EB II. The amount of Egyptian material in EB I-II certainly reflects a healthy trading economy and political stability (Hennessy 1967: 49-62; Amiran 1973b; Amiran, Beit-Arieh and Glass 1973; Beit Arieh 1974; Beit-Arieh and Gophna 1976;; Gophna 1976ab). As Egyptian overland trade through Palestine and Jordan ceased - outside of Ai, a noticeable paucity of Egyptian objects in EB III points to this conclusion - and the economy of the country must have been seriously affected. Along with waning Egyptian influences, possible punitive campaigns in EB III against the "sand dwellers" cannot be ruled out, although it is highly doubtful that the demise of EB III cities can be attributed solely to Egyptian Fifth/Sixth Dynasty military campaigns.

Thus it is clear that in any type of cultural change - in the present case a reversion to semi-sedentarism and pastoralism after centuries of urbanized life - there are complex social processes involved. We have attempted to explain deurbanization as arising from several mechanisms, in particular, climatic pressures and a weakened economy resulting from changes in regional and inter-regional trade systems. These conditions, affecting food production and supplies, as well as the entire economy in general, were apparently such that adaptation proved unfeasible, and the abandonment of sites ensued, evidenced by an occupational gap on most *tells* like

Numeyra. The point to be stressed here is that the past attempts to explain deurbanization on the basis of invasion / destruction theories are unsubstantiated by evidence in the archaeological record.

Despite the stratigraphical break, the explicit evidence for continuity of tradition in the material culture belies a radical change in the social organization. The presence of Syrian element in the EB IV repertoire, coupled with the evidence for northward extension of Palestinian-Transjordanian culture beyond its usual geographical sphere, would seem to witness cultural interaction with Syria on the EB III- EB IV horizon.

It is true that this cultural interaction and the acknowledged diffusion of Syrian influences may imply some new elements in the local population (whether or not "Amorites" is impossible to know). However, the transmission of cultural traits, i.e., "trait diffusion," can occur by the spread of ideas (Trigger 1968, Flannery 1967), as well as by the spread of human behavioral systems including both cultural and environmental elements. Conventionally one sees the spread of cultural elements by means of commercial relations, migrations (either organized or unorganized), political relations, or simply by geographical proximity and thus mutual acquaintance with another culture. A valuable avenue of research for the future would be a study focusing on the causal mechanisms which are operative in the present case.

If analysis of the stratigraphical and ceramic evidence is correct, then the EB IV period can be subdivided into three broadly defined phases. The intermingling of Syro-Palestinian traditions is first encountered in Phase 1 of Transjordan (EB IVA), where the earliest form of the EB IV assemblage appears. Due to close affinities between Transjordanian Phase 2 and northern Palestine (EB IVB), we are led to conclude that Early Bronze peoples filtered back into

the country soon afterwards, bearing with them added Syrian elements. Finally, late in the period there is a cessation of occupation in southern Transjordan and a concurrent increase in occupation of southern Palestine, where the last phase of Early Bronze civilization is attested (EB IVC). It cannot be stressed enough that within this schema, complex interrelationships obtain among the several regional families. It is thought that this framework, for which dates of 2400/2350-2000/1950 B.C, seem appropriate best reflects the historical and cultural situation in Transjordan/Palestine

at the end of the third millennium B.C. As new evidence surfaces, it is hoped that this proposed chronological and typological schema will provoke additional research and will become the basis of further refinement in the inner chronology of EB IV (Richard 1980).

All these activities show the need for an even better organized system of intensive surveying of the southern Ghor of Jordan which can provide immediate information on the presence of archaeological sites in areas of possibly modern construction

FOOTNOTE

- 1) Alluvial debris resulted from running water partly covering and cutting the cultural layers. The extent of the disturbed cultural layers cut by the water is difficult to determine especially at northern part of the site. A bulldozer cut of the existing road at the central area of the site resulted in separating the archaeological deposits into two parts (east and west of the existing road) and exposing cultural layers in section up to 2m high. The length of this cut is 50m. Several Byzantine tombs were exposed as a result of this bulldozing. A grid was established in order to follow Wheeler –Kenyon procedure for excavations. Several factors have been considered in a work plan for an-Numeyra: 1) The size of the area to be examined, 2) The depth of the archaeological deposit (up to 2m) and 3) The complexity of the architectural remains which may be found.
- 2) Excavations in the near future will continue to cover the western parts of the site where a large Byzantine cemetery was noticed surrounding the site in the east and west. Some of the tombs were disturbed by robbers' activities. There is no firm evidence of an EB III cemetery at Numeyra, though surface remains hint at a cemetery site south of the walled town. As all the other EB walled towns in Southern Ghors had associated cemeteries, Numeyra should logically have one as well. One theory suggests that the inhabitants of Numeyra buried their dead in houses. Another possibility is that Numeyra's cemetery was located north of the site, in which case it would have been completely washed away by the erosion action of Wadi Numeyra.

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