

Bioarchaeology of the Near East 2:97–99 (2008)

Short Fieldwork Report: Jebel Mashtale and Tell Marwaniye (Syria), seasons 2005–2006

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(published online on www.anthropology.uw.edu.pl)

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Jebel Mashtale and Tell Marwaniye (Syria), seasons 2005–2006

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In the early 2000s, archaeological excavations at Tell Masaikh (see report in this volume) were accompanied by surveys of the left bank of the Euphrates. Among many small sites dated chiefly to the Iron Age and later periods, two partially destroyed areas of settlement were found: Jebel Mashtale (34°53'40"N 40°36'23"E, ca. 10 km downstream from Tell Ma-

saikh) and Tell Marwaniye (34°52'00"N 40°39'43"E, ca. 15 km downstream from Tell Ma-saikh). The former, originally ca. 10 hectares in size, has been bisected by a temporary stream and damaged by the activities of modern inhabitants of a nearby village. Tell Marwaniye, now covering only ca. 6 ha, was originally a much larger site, perhaps up to 30 ha. Most of the area has been leveled by an ancient natural or artificial branch of the Euphrates and has been used for agricultural production over the centuries.

In 2004, rescue excavations began at Jebel Mashtale, and in 2005, a test trench was dug at Tell Marwaniye. Excavations at both sites were suspended following 2006. The stratigraphy at both sites appeared to be quite similar, with most levels dating to the Late Bronze Age, the beginning of the Iron Age, and the Islamic period (Masetti-Rouault 2006). At Tell Marwaniye, an Old Babylonian occupation was also detected. A few burials dating to various periods were explored and an Islamic cemetery was discovered on the top of Jebel Mashtale, roughly dated to the Ottoman period. Basic sex and age frequencies of the entire sample are presented in **Table 1**. Due to the small number of skeletons recovered at Tell Marwaniye (only four children), data from both sites has been pooled. Only eight poorly preserved skeletons date from the Pre-Islamic strata, most individuals were found in the recent Islamic cemetery at Jebel Mashtale. Basic descriptions of skeletons found in 2005 have been published elsewhere (Tomczyk & Sołtysiak 2007).

Table 1. Sex and age patterns in the chronological sub-samples from Jebel Mashtale (JM) and Tell Marwaniye (TM).

Period	Infants (0-2 years)	Children (2-14 years)	Juveniles (14-21 years)	Adults			Total
				F	?	M	
Kassite (JM)	1						1
Iron Age II (TM)	3						3
Seleucid (JM)				1			1
Roman/Byzantine (JM)		1			1		2
Pre-Islamic (JM)					1		1
Islamic (TM)		1					1
Islamic (JM)	15	6	1	1	2		25
Unknown (JM)	2	1		2	3	1	9
Total	21	9	1	4	7	1	43

Most remarkable is the prevalence of children (especially infants) in the Islamic cemetery. In local tradition, Jebel Mashtale was recognised as an important place for Bedouin tribes inhabiting the region. The children buried there are thought to be protected by a sheikh's daughter whose grave (no longer visible on the surface) had originally been a central place in the cemetery. The validity of this oral tradition is confirmed by a clear prevalence of children which comprise more than 80% of the Islamic sample from Jebel Mashtale.

Among the skeletons from earlier periods, the most interesting (from a taphonomical perspective) belonged to an adult female ML02 C74 dated to the Seleucid period. She was buried in a terracotta coffin only ca. 80 cm in length; the body was forced to lie in an extremely flexed position, with the knees touching the cranium and the foot bones were found scattered over the pelvis.

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Deir an-Naqlun (Egypt), season 2006

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This paper discusses the Coptic mummies from cemetery C at Deir an-Naqlun in Egypt (29°11' 35"N 30°52'31"E). The site is also known in the literature as Deir el-Malak Ghubriel (Monastery of Archangel Gabriel). It is situated in the Western Desert, at the foot of a rocky cliff, 16 km south of the city of Fayum and 120 km from Cairo. It is one of the oldest, still existing Coptic monasteries in Egypt, with its origins reaching into the 6th/7th or even 5th century CE (Dobrowolski 1990).

Excavations at the site have been carried out since 1986 by the Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw team led by Włodzimierz Godlewski. Cemetery C was identified during the survey in 1987 when one of the disturbed graves was excavated. The number of burials was estimated at more than 180 graves. The regular exploration of the cemetery began in 2004. Since then, 14 rock-hewn graves dating to the 6th/7th c. CE have been excavated (Godlewski 2005). The remains studied by Robert Mahler and the present author represent 8 male individuals. Biological age of the examined individuals was assessed using the methods outlined by Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994), i.e., suture obliteration, the pubic symphysis, auricular surface, and dental wear. The individuals ranged in age from 30 to 45 years. For height reconstructions the formulae for white males were used (Trotter & Gleser 1952).

In five cases partially naturally mummified soft tissue was present on the skeletons and was scored using the protocol proposed by Aufderheide (2004). This method involves determining the presence or absence of individual external characteristics such as hair, beard hair, ears, eyes, nose, penis, nails, internal organs, as well as estimating the degree of preservation of the soft tissue in relation to the preserved bones in each individual.

To assess the state of preservation of both the bone and soft tissue, a six-degree scale was used, where 0 indicates the complete absence of bone / soft tissue and 5 the full preservation of all bones and soft tissue. A total of 5 categories (head, chest, abdomen, both arms, and both legs) with fully preserved bone / tissue material (max. 5 points) amount to 25 points. The main advantage of this method is that the obtained rate can easily be expressed as a percentage by simply multiplying the sum of the results in each category by 4 to get 100 points for B (bone) and S