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Short fieldwork report

Human remains from Barja, Lebanon, 2013

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The necropolis at Barja is one of the two Roman-period cemeteries situated in this locality (33°39′19″N, 35°26′22″E). Located between Chhîm and Porphyreon (Jiyeh), some 16km northeast of Sidon (**Figure 1**), it likely served as a settlement connecting these two ancient villages. Remains from the necropolis were subject to study between 1998 and 2015 by a team from the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Warsaw (El-Tayeb 2002). The necropolis consists of eight burials constructed on two levels (**Figure 2**). One of the chamber tombs contained a sarcophagus cut into bedrock. Its decoration consisted of two male figures holding ram protomai, a garland, and two seated lions with raised paws on either side. The sarcophagus was

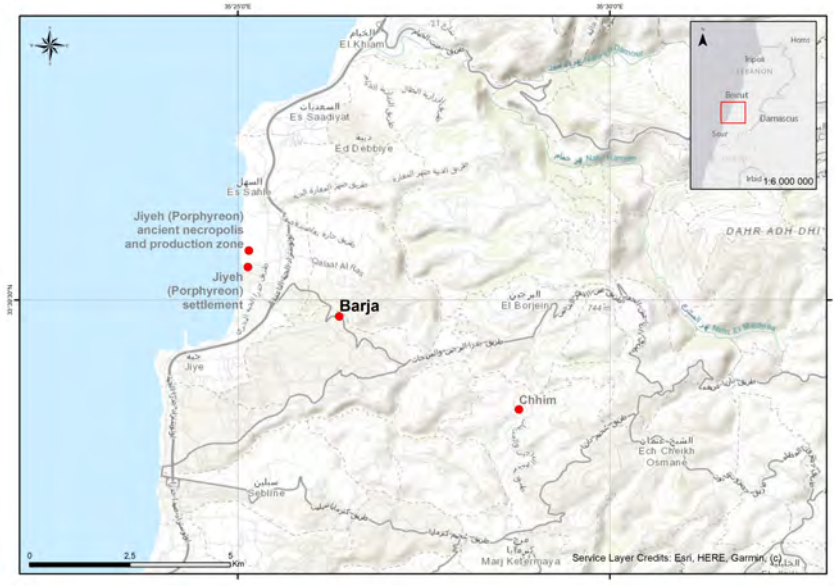

Figure 1. Map showing location of Barja. Drawing by J. Chyla.

dated based on stylistic grounds to the late 2nd century CE (Gwiazda 2013:62). The human remains studied in the present paper were recovered in 2013 from sarcophagi located in the central part of the necropolis. All graves had been thoroughly plundered and reused for various purposes in modern times, thus any attempt to date the remains more precisely is unfortunately impossible.

Figure 2. Necropolis of Barja. Photographs by T. Waliszewski.

Table 1. General description of human remains from Barja.

Tag	MNI[1]	element	NISP[2]	Adults	Subadults
13/A	2		11	unknown sex	child 2–7 years old
21/08	1		1		adolescent
21/09	1		1	unknown sex	
21/16	6	femora	189	male*, female*, unknown sex	children 3–5, 3–5, 8–12 years old
21/17	6	tibiae	103	male*, four individuals of unknown sex	child 2–7 years old
21/18	3	femora	56	male*, unknown sex	adolescent
21/19	14	tibiae	194	male*, male*, female*, female*, five individuals of unknown sex	adolescent, adolescent, children 2–7, 2–7, 8–15 years old

[1] MNI – minimum number of individuals with indicated element that was used for its estimation
[2] NISP – number of identified specimens [3] male*, female* – less likely sex assessment

Human remains from Barja were recorded using standard guidelines (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994) with some modifications (Sołtysiak et al. 2019). All of the remains came from secondary deposits and the state of preservation varied; some elements were strongly eroded while others were complete and rarely affected by taphonomic agents. Occasionally rodent tooth marks were noted (**Figure 3**) which was expected given that the remains had been decaying in an open space (Sołtysiak & Fetner 2017).

There are seven contexts where human remains were present and the minimum number of individuals (MNI) per context varied from one to fourteen. Overall the MNI is 33 (see **Table 1**) including 21 adults and 12 subadults. Neonate remains were not identified, but this may be an artifact related to their small size and higher risk of erosion. Both males and females were identified and no clear sex or age-at-death bias was observed, suggesting that the necropolis at Barja was a regular attritional cemetery. However, the retrieval bias is quite evident, as most identified fragments are tibiae and femora, with a much lower frequency of other long bones and very few minor or fragile skeletal elements noted in the whole assemblage.

Figure 3. Rodent tooth marks on a bone fragment from Barja 21/19. Scale bar 1cm. Photograph by A. Sołtysiak.

Figure 4. Spondylosis in a cervical vertebra (C7) from Barja 21/16. Scale bar 1cm. Photograph by A. Sołtysiak.

Due to the secondary nature of the assemblage and post-mortem erosion of many of the elements, it was not possible to score pathological conditions in a systematic way. There was one older individual in 21/16, whose auricular surface was affected by porosity and marginal erosion (stage 8), accompanied by a very irregular retroauricular area. It is likely that the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar vertebrae exhibiting spondylosis and degenerative joint disease (DJD), especially clear in the lower cervical vertebrae (**Figure 4**), belonged to the same individual, together with the left first metacarpal showing eburnation and large osteophytes on its distal epiphysis. However, only slight and initial DJD was present on the right first metacarpal of the same individual. Very prominent palmar margins were noted on the intermediate phalanges, perhaps also from the same individual. Relatively well preserved cranial fragments of a younger child from the same assemblage exhibited early onset porotic hyperostosis and *cribra orbitalia*, but no other crania were available for scoring these conditions.

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