More on Mesopotamian Burial Practices in Ancient Israel*

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Burial Jars and a 'Bathtub' Coffin from Hazor

A bell-shaped vessel uncovered at the excavations at Hazor conducted by Yigael Yadin in 1957–1958 is included in the pottery plates of the report, where it is described as a 'basin' (Fig. 1). The vessel is c. 53 cm. in diameter at its widest and 50 cm. in height, and is of grey-buff clay with a black core. Just below the inverted rim there is a raised band with evenly spaced finger indentations. The base of the vessel was broken; it is not clear, therefore, whether the vessel had a button base or was pierced through. The vessel is attributed to Area B, Stratum VA, Building 3148, Room/Locus 3166; its context is discussed below.

Although the vessel's function has not been defined, it is clear from Mesopotamian parallels that it is the lower part of a Mesopotamian-style jar burial. Similar vessels are too numerous to be discussed here in detail; one example from Nippur will suffice for our purposes (Fig. 2). This vessel is similar to the Hazor jar in its bell shape and finger-indentated raised band; it has a button base. Such jars belong to Baker's Type 1b, which begins in the early post-Kassite period and goes out of use around the sixth century B.C.E. The body would have been placed curled up in the

* This article was written during my time as a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research. I would like to thank Ruth Amiran and Miriam Tadmor for reading and commenting on various drafts of this paper. Any errors or omissions are mine alone.


2 E. Strommenger (Grabformen in Babylon, Baghdafter Mitteilungen 3 [1964], pp. 157–173) is the standard treatment of all Mesopotamian burial practices up to the mid-1960s. H. Baker (Neo-Babylonian Burials Revisited, in S. Campbell and A. Green [eds.]: The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East [Oxbow Monograph 51], Oxford, 1995, pp. 209–220) is an update of Strommenger's work; pp. 210–213, Fig. 25.1–2 cover her two classes of jar burials.


4 Baker (above, n. 2), p. 213, Fig. 25.2.
jar, which would then have been covered by a large bowl or krater. The Hazor piece seems to be the first example of this form of burial to be found in Israel or Jordan.5

Although the nature of the vessel is clear, its occurrence in Room/Locus 3166 of Building 3148, a four-room house south of the Israelite Citadel, is not. This building went out of use, according to the excavators, in 732 B.C.E., when the Assyrians destroyed the Citadel.6 Thus, the piece comes from a context that predates the establishment of Assyrian presence at the site. Two alternatives can be proposed to explain its presence near the Stratum VA Citadel. One is that Mesopotamian cultural influence began to permeate Israel before the Assyrian conquest. If this scenario is correct, then the jar was in Room/Locus 3166 awaiting its intended funerary use.

The other possibility is based upon the Mesopotamian practice of interring the dead inside the settlement, below the floors of buildings.7 Perhaps the jar’s original context is in the later Stratum III, when this area was occupied by the large Courtyard/Locus 3150; this courtyard was part of the even larger Assyrian or Babylonian Citadel of Stratum III.8 The burial pit for the jar may have been cut from the surface of

5 E. Bloch-Smith (Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead [JSOT ASOR Monograph Series 7], Sheffield, 1992, pp. 160–164, 185–186, 220–221) does not cite this piece, or any similar jar burials, in her extensive treatment of the subject.
8 Yadin et al. (above, n. 6), p. 43. Fig. 3: Courtyard 3150 is shown, but no description is given. On Stratum III, see Y. Yadin: Hazor: The Head of all those Kingdoms, London, 1972, pp. 191–194.
the Stratum III courtyard down into Stratum VA; subsequently it may have been looted and the jar tossed back into the pit from which it had been robbed, thus placing the empty Mesopotamian-style jar in the apparently Israelite context of Stratum VA.

The jar, largely intact, is shown in one photograph in the Hazor report as it was found. Unfortunately, this photograph does not help us choose between the above alternatives; debris is strewn everywhere and it is not clear whether the depression in which the jar sits is an ancient pit or a product of the excavation process. The jar was found on its side, its upper part approximately even with the top of the adjacent Wall 3629, apparently preserved only two courses high. Due to the vessel’s size, it is impossible to determine whether it was placed on the floor of Room/Locus 3166 or on fill above it. It is clear that the jar had not contained an intact burial, as it was not found with a lid. This, however, does not rule out either of the above alternatives.

There are two additional fragments of what may be the remains of Mesopotamian burial jars from Hazor. Neither fragment is sufficiently well preserved to give an accurate approximation of the size of the vessels, but they appear to have been quite large. Both, described in the captions as ‘basins’, are rim fragments of vessels with thick slanting walls, roughly squared rims below which are raised bands with narrow diagonal impressions, not the usual wide finger indentations. Neither is discussed or described in the text, nor are any photographs provided. One (Fig. 3), composed of pink clay with a thick grey core, is recorded as coming from Locus 3177 in Squares E–F/8–10, a large courtyard to the east of the Stratum VB Citadel. The other (Fig. 4), a grey buff clay with a black core, is from Locus 3148 in Squares E–F/9–10, the central room of the above-mentioned Building 3148. Both these areas are below Courtyard/Locus 3150 of the Stratum III Citadel, which has already been suggested as the original context of the almost complete jar discussed above.


9 Yadin et al. (above, n. 1, 1961), Pl. L:2.
10 Ibid., Pl. XLIX:5.
11 Ibid., Pl. CCXXIV:11 from Locus 3177 of Stratum VB, Pl. CCXXX:24 from Locus 3148 of Stratum VA.
A fragment of what seems to be a ‘bathtub’ coffin was also reported from Hazor (Fig. 5). This piece, also described as a ‘basin’?, has a vertical stance and a slightly smoothed square rim; it is c. 62 cm. wide. The walls are light brown clay with a black core. There is a raised band below the rim, with evenly spaced finger indentations. This fragment is said to come from Locus 3121 of Stratum IV in Square B10/11, a room to the north of where the Stratum V Citadel had stood. This is below Courtyard 3002, the main internal courtyard of the Stratum III Citadel. The Hazor ‘bathtub’ coffin belongs to a distinctively Mesopotamian burial practice. 'Bathtub' coffins are discussed in depth below.

Fig. 5. Fragment of ‘bathtub’ coffin from Hazor (Yadin et al. [n. 6], Pl. C:28). Scale: 1:10.

The contexts of the two fragments of burial jars and the fragment of the ‘bathtub’ coffin are even more problematic than that of the complete burial jar. Since they are only fragments they cannot be in their original contexts. The question whether they belong to the strata to which they are assigned, or to the period of the Stratum III Citadel remains open.

A ‘Bathtub’ Coffin from Megiddo

Another previously unrecognised ‘bathtub’ coffin, from Megiddo Tomb No. 37 (Fig. 6), has recently come to my attention. The fragments of the coffin were found re-used as part of the roof of Kiln No. 22; it was not possible, therefore, to reconstruct the complete shape. Neither end of the coffin appears to have been preserved, as no mention is made of the handles which would normally be found there. Enough, however, is preserved to show the thick vertical walls and heavy rim characteristic of such coffins. Most telling is the raised band with finger indentations about midway down the vessel's wall, perhaps the most diagnostic feature of such coffins. The coffin is 67 cm. wide and 57 cm. deep at the rim; the excavators were unable to establish its length. The clay is coarse black with a red slip, the latter an unusual feature for such coffins; it may have been intended as an imitation of bronze, as several examples made of bronze are known from Mesopotamia and Persia.

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12 Yadin et al. (above, n. 6), Pl. C:28, from Locus 3121 of Stratum IV.
13 See Zorn (above, n. 7), pp. 216–224, for a full discussion of other examples of such coffins, their parallels and usage.
14 P.L.O. Guy: Megiddo Tombs, Chicago, 1938, p. 77, Fig. 87.
Although the Megiddo coffin was not found in situ in its original funerary context, it probably comes from the surrounding cemetery, if not from Tomb No. 37 itself, rather than from inside the city. As previously mentioned, the normal Mesopotamian practice was for such coffins to be interred inside the settlement, below the floors of houses. In Israel and Jordan such coffins are found in both extra-mural cemeteries and ancient settlements, showing local and foreign interment practices. The use of the coffin fragments as part of the roofing material for the kiln also bears upon the dating of Tomb No. 37, suggesting that the tomb probably went out of use after the Assyrian conquest of Megiddo in the latter part of the eighth century B.C.E., unless, as noted above, the Israelites had begun to adopt Assyrian practices before the actual conquest. This date might apply to the final dating of the cemetery as a whole, unless the potters chose, and were allowed, to site their kilns in an active cemetery.

A Burial Jar from Dor
A fragment of a large jar (c. 58 cm. in diameter) has recently been reported from Tel Dor, Phase 9 in Area A0 (Fig. 7). In the rim’s shape and stance, the vessel resembles the Hazor specimen, although it is not angled quite so high. There is a raised band below the rim, but without finger indentations, a feature which also has parallels in Mesopotamian burial jars. Its context in Phase 9 is uncertain as no clear

15 E. Stern et al.: Excavations at Dor, Final Report Volume 1B, Area A and C: The Finds (Qedem Report 2), Jerusalem, 1995, p. 13, Fig. 1.7.9. The report describes it as a coffin, but the stance of the rim is more appropriate for a burial jar.
16 McCown and Haines (above, n. 3), Pl. 157:7.
architectural features were uncovered to which it can be linked. The ceramics found in this phase suggest a date between 720 and 650/630 B.C.E. Its presence on the tel does, however, indicate that some burials were taking place within the city's walls. Fragments of three, or possibly four, additional coffins or jars have been uncovered at Dor and await full publication.

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**Fig. 7.** Fragment of burial jar from Dor (Stern et al. [n. 15], Fig. 1.7:9). Scale: 1:10.

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**A ‘Bathtub’ Coffin from Jezreel**

The excavations at Jezreel have recently uncovered a complete Mesopotamian-style ‘bathtub’ coffin, with its burial intact. A rim fragment of an additional coffin was also recovered.

The three jars and coffin from Hazor, the Megiddo coffin, the four or five Dor jars/coffins and the two Jezreel coffins add to the growing list of Mesopotamian-style burials known from ancient Israel and Jordan; at least 31 coffins or jars from this region are now attested. These remains are evidence of the strong impact of the Assyrian–Babylonian culture on funerary practices in one of the more distant parts of its sphere of influence.

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17 Stern et al. (above, n. 15), pp. 14–15.
18 I would like to thank Ephraim Stern, Director of the Tel Dor excavations, for permission to cite these pieces before their publication. Thanks are also due to Ayelet Gilboa for facilitating my examination of these fragments.
19 I would like to thank David Ussishkin, Co-director with John Woodhead of the Jezreel excavations, for allowing me to mention the pieces from Jezreel before their publication.
20 See Zorn (above, n. 7), pp. 218–219, for a summary of previously known Mesopotamian burials in Israel and Jordan.