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Notes on a Disappearing Past

Palestinian Looted Tombs and their Archaeological Investigation



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ABSTRACT

This report describes archaeological rescue work in four looted tombs from late Roman and early Byzantine times in the surroundings of Ramallah, located in the Occupied Palestinian National Territories (OPNT). One goal of our work was to assess in detail how much of the original remains of a tomb are left behind after looting. A second aim was to explore the actual practices of looting by comparing interviews with looters with the results of an archaeological examination of looting practices of these tombs. This provides a unique comparative perspective that draws on oral history and its material correlates. Finally, this work helps to assess future possibilities for reconstructing what has been lost during looting events. The results of the research include unexpected insights, such as the repetitive character of looting single tombs, the presence of modern material remains of the looting process itself, but also the use of previously looted tombs for new purposes.

KEYWORDS: Palestine, Roman period, antiquities looting, Byzantine period, vandalized tombs

1. Background and Goals of the Project

What remains in a tomb after it has been thoroughly looted? This question is at the root of our report on a pilot project, carried out in May 2012 to examine looting practices archaeologically, that is, by means of an intensive excavation of a small number of plundered Roman (historically dated to 37–324 CE) and Byzantine-period (324–638 CE) tombs.¹ These tombs have been an important target of looters for many decades, and early British reports already mention the practice (Moulton 1921: 95–97). A variety of reasons, ranging from economic hardship to Israeli antiquities laws and weak law enforcement in the Occupied Palestinian National Territories (OPNT), have led to a situation in which looting threatens to destroy a whole section of the region's past (al-Houdalieh 2009). The severity of this destruction became apparent when we surveyed the Roman site of Khirbet Qafr Shiyan (or Kafr Shiyan). The site includes an impressive Roman road leading up to the settlement's main building, cisterns, and other architectural remains. On the western slope of this site, we found more than 35 Roman-era, semi-subterranean rock-cut tombs located approximately 10 to 12 m apart from each other: all were heavily vandalized.² The fields around the modern villages of Saffa and Bil'in where we conducted our work display a large number of tombs as well—and again, we did not find a single one undisturbed (for more information on the looted tombs west of Ramallah province see al-Houdalieh 2014a).

One of us (S.H.) has been working for the past several years on problems associated with the looting of antiquities. During conversations in Berlin in 2011, the authors developed the idea of juxtaposing this ethnographic information on looting with what can be gleaned from an archaeological examination of the looting activities themselves. Our goals for the project were threefold. First, we wanted to understand the ways in which looters deal with ancient sites after completing their work: Do they leave the tombs open, partially or completely backfilled? How do the materials left behind in the tombs compare to looters' oral accounts? Apart from an analysis of looting practices, a systematic documentation of what is left behind can help construct a baseline to estimate the losses that have already been inflicted on Palestine's archaeological heritage through the removal and sale of archaeological objects. This could allow more precise assessments of future losses, should this practice continue or intensify in the OPNT.

Our second aim was to use archaeological methods to investigate the process of looting itself, based on the notion that archaeology is the discipline par excellence for a reconstruction of past practices, whether in ancient times or in the more recent past (e.g., González-Ruibal 2008; Graves-Brown, Harrison and Piccini 2013). We were particularly interested in the local practices of pillaging tombs, rather than their aftermath—such as negotiations with antiquity dealers—or the socio-political background that generates looting. These latter questions have been explored by others (e.g., Kersel 2008; Yahya 2008; al-Houdalieh 2010). Some looters indicate that they do not take all objects they find in the tombs, especially large jars, due to the difficulty of hiding them in their homes before a potential sale to antiquity dealers. Furthermore, looted tombs often undergo secondary uses that may also impact archaeological evidence of earlier times. We start from the premise that tombs have a “social life,” just like the objects they contain or used to contain (Appadurai 1986; Gerritsen 1999; Marshall and Gosden 1999; Joy 2009; for a critique of this concept see Jung 2015). As such, it is not only a question of whether ancient evidence has been destroyed, but just as much

a matter of how tombs and their contents have become enmeshed in a series of modern practices that thereby modify and transform them.

Finally, by comparing the reconstruction of what has been lost and the ways in which this loss occurred, we make some suggestions about the future of these specific tombs as an important part of Palestinian heritage. This documentation may also offer some insights to help the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage to better deal with potential damage in the future. We see our work also as a pilot project that needs to be broadened and developed further.

Ultimately, our aim is to investigate the differences, correspondences, and degrees of complementarity between ethnographic and archaeological data on tomb looting. By comparing the results of interviews with looters and the archaeological evidence we recovered, we are able to weigh the perspectives offered by each in order to reach a more differentiated understanding of the practices of modern tomb looting.

2. The Region

Fieldwork was conducted in the modern villages of Bil'in and Saffa, which are situated on the western slopes of the Judaeian hills in Ramallah and al-Bireh province. Bil'in is home to about 2,000 inhabitants and lies 16 km west-northwest of Ramallah, while Saffa, with well over 4,000 inhabitants, is located at the same distance to the west of Ramallah (Fig. 1). Both villages are located just east of the 1949 Green Line and were occupied by Israel in 1967. Since 1995 they are under Palestinian civil control but full Israeli security control (“Area B”; for further information on the division of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and oversight of their archaeological resources, see al-Houdalieh 2010 and Kersel 2015).

Both villages have lost agricultural land through the occupation and/or the construction of the Israeli separation wall, which runs directly west of them (Fig. 2). Bil'in is renowned for its active resistance against being cut off from its agricultural lands through the construction of the separation wall. With the support of international activists, its residents succeeded in having the course of the



FIG. 1
Map of Mandate Palestine locating Saffa and Bil'in. (Map by R. Stidsing.)

wall changed. Both villages experienced a four- to fivefold population increase between 1945 and 2007 while losing land and water resources due to occupation and sinking ground water levels. These socio-economic aspects must be taken into account as a background for the looting of tombs, and some modern finds can be interpreted in terms of this political setting (see below, Tomb 3).

While Ramallah lies at an elevation of 870 m, Bil'in and Saffa are situated at only 350 m above sea level, half-way down the Judean Hills. The subregion's landscape is characterized by soft limestone, allowing for the formation of natural caves. Most streams flow down the western slopes leaving deeply carved wadis that are nowadays mostly dry in summer. As the lower western slopes

receive an average annual rainfall of 400–500 mm, with double as much at the top of the hills, the terra rossa and rendzina soils are cultivable. Olive trees and grain are the dominant crops, while sheep and goats are common farm animals of the region. Since summers are warm and dry and winters wet and mild, the region yields plenty of crops and pastoral products as long as water requirements are met. This fact together with the strategic position close to long-distance trade routes and between powerful political interests led to continual habitation of this region as well as to its contestation since ancient times.

3. Methods

3.1. Interviews

The archaeological season was preceded by numerous personal interviews with tomb looters conducted by the lead author in order to learn about the methods they used (see also al-Houdalieh 2012, 2013, 2014b). Questions included their approaches to locating tombs, the motives behind removing and selling part of a cultural legacy, the social background of and relations among individuals and groups of looters, the numbers and descriptions of the looted tombs as well as their human and material contents and how the looters dealt with the human skeletal remains and other archaeological finds in the tombs.

The interviews for this research project were carried out between May 1–10, 2012, with a total of nine informants (all had participated in looting tombs that were later excavated by us). Of these, five were already known to the first author, having provided him with information on illegal digging in Ramallah province in the past decades, and four of these five informants served as mediators to encourage prospective new informants to agree to being interviewed. At the beginning of each interview, the potential interviewees were made aware of how their responses would be used and were assured that any identifying personal information would be kept strictly confidential. As a commitment to the ethical principles appropriate for studies involving human subjects, our informants are kept anonymous in accordance with the American Anthropological Association's

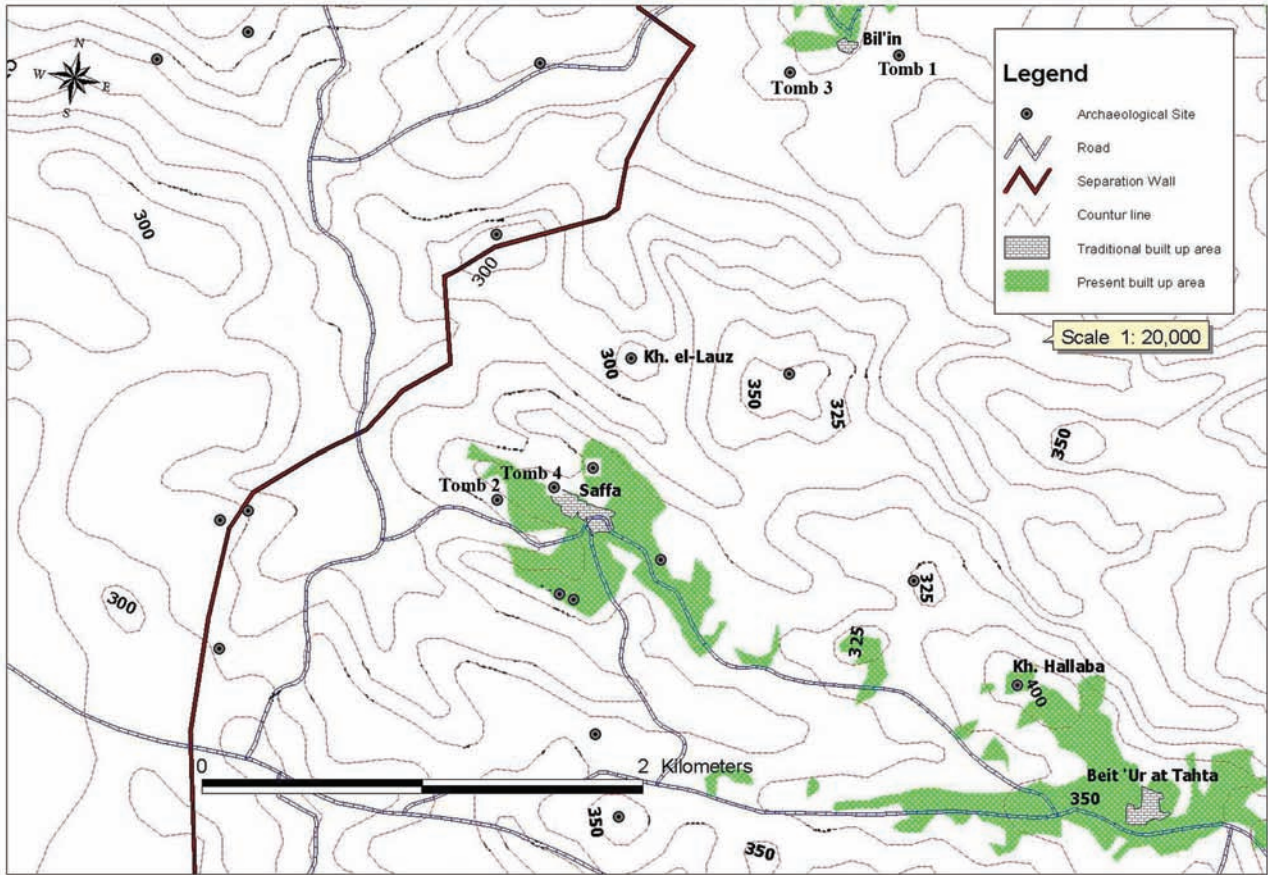


FIG. 2
Map of the region around Bil'in and Saffa with the four investigated tombs. (Map courtesy of the authors.)

basic tenet of “do no harm” (American Anthropological Association 2012).

For this study, each informant was asked a set of questions. The responses were written down on the spot in a separate file for each interviewee and later translated from Arabic into English. The questions concerned personal information (such as name, age, education level, number of family members, and place of residence) and how many times the interviewee participated in or conducted an illegal dig. The interviewees were also asked whether they had participated in looting one of the tombs chosen for this excavation project, how many people had taken part, what they found in the tomb, and the state in which they found it.

During the excavations we also visited one of the looters to inquire about the state of Tomb 1 (see below), as it contained an extraordinarily large amount of bones. The

responses to all interviews have been transcribed, translated, and edited for better comprehension.

3.2. Excavation Methods

The excavation lasted eight days, from May 12–19, 2012. The team consisted of the three authors, a B.A. student in the archaeology department of al-Quds University, and for each tomb one or two local workmen. Work on each tomb took approximately two days. Four tombs were explored, two of them in the vicinity of Saffa village, the other two near Bil'in (Fig. 2; Table 1). Two of these are of the *loculus* (kokhim) type, meaning that they contain tunnel-like niches the length of a human body cut perpendicularly into the walls of the tomb. The other two tombs were of a simple *arcosolia* type with arched, shelf-like niches hewn into the rock parallel to

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF THE EXCAVATED TOMBS, THEIR LOCATION, TYPE, AND DATING

Tomb number and name of area	Village	Tomb type	Number of burial spaces	Approx. date
1 Qbur al-Banat	Bil'in	Arcosolia	3	Late Roman-Byzantine
2 eth-Thaher	Saffa	Loculi (<i>kokhim</i>)	3, 1 unfinished	Early to Late Roman
3 Sha'b al Hawa	Bil'in	Loculi (<i>kokhim</i>)	3 unfinished	Early to Late Roman
4 (Saffa)	Saffa	Arcosolia	3	Late Roman-Byzantine

the chamber walls. Numerous excavated tombs in the southern Levantine region, including Transjordan, point to a Late Hellenistic to Early Roman date for the *loculus* tombs and a Late Roman to mainly Byzantine date for the tombs with *arcosolia*. We do not venture any further into the dating of the tombs here, as finds from those investigated are not conducive to a more precise dating.

A first step in our explorations involved checking whether a structure was safe enough to enter, as many tombs have dangerous cracks in the roof or are home to snakes (see al-Houdalieh 2013). A second step consisted of a brief assessment of potential finds and conditions of the area directly outside the tomb. Only then were excavations started by systematically exposing the outside features to the extent necessary. Outer courtyards, typical for subterranean rock-cut tombs from late antiquity, were not exposed in their entirety, as this would have decreased the number of tombs explored in the short time available to us.

Due to the unfunded nature of the project, we worked with simple but adequate excavation equipment available at the Institute of Archaeology of al-Quds University. This included a compass, pocket lamps, line levels, a screen of ca. 6 mm mesh, “guffas” (the local buckets made from old car tires), pickaxes, trowels, and shovels. Work inside the tombs was at times tedious and exacting. For example, the *loculi* in Tomb 2 are so small that one person can work only with difficulty inside them. There is no other choice than to lie on one’s belly, pocket lamp in mouth, scraping and observing simultaneously where the soil matrix changes and a new locus needs to be assigned. Encountering human bones in situ in such a context makes their systematic exposure and documentation challenging. Screening of excavated soil was not possible

for all tombs. While the extremely sticky terra rossa from Tomb 1 could not be passed through a screen, large volumes of the dry fill of Tombs 2 and 3 were screened.

Documentation proceeded using locus sheets with a description of features, photos, and measured drawings. All features as well as the fill were recorded using locus numbers (hereafter abbreviated as “L.”). Thus, a *loculus* or *arcosolium* as well as a threshold to a tomb were each given their own locus number. The fill within such contexts was recorded as one or several separate loci. Finds were identified and pre-sorted in the field, both from the screen and hand collections. Finds were later washed and sorted at the campus of al-Quds University in al-Bireh. All objects, bones, and other materials are currently housed at the Archaeological Institute of al-Quds University in al-Bireh.

The sorting of finds was done separately for each tomb. We first categorized them according to their age, separating those from modern times from Roman/Byzantine finds (Appendices 1 and 2). In a second step, standard procedures for artifact analysis were followed: Sorting and counting for a quantified analysis and drawing and photographing of relevant materials. For the modern finds this kind of analysis was more complex and less familiar. Modern objects can be divided into hand-made local items and industrial products. The design and other characteristics allow for some precision in dating the industrially made objects, while dating as well as clear functions are often less evident in the case of hand-crafted and recycled pieces.

One major group of finds, the human bones (and some faunal remains), has not yet been analyzed. They can only be marginally integrated into this report through information on their preservation, contextual analysis, and

estimated numbers of individuals in specific contexts. However, analyses of demographic parameters, indicators of health, trauma, and nutritional status should be conducted when opportunities emerge.

4. Investigations of Tomb 1

Tomb 1 is located on the western part of the hill known as Qbur al-Banat (“tombs of girls”), just to the east of the recently constructed Bil’in girls’ school. The school is at the very bottom of the hill, while the tomb is situated on the lower part of the rocky and barren slope at an elevation of 360 m asl (Fig. 2). Further north, on the upper part of the hill, some olive and oak trees can be found. While shrubs are often encountered near tombs, this one was relatively exposed and easily visible. In the immediate vicinity of Tomb 1, there are several other looted rock-cut tombs, Roman and/or Byzantine winepresses, bowl-like depressions and a stone quarry. Interviews with seven local villagers, two of them members of the village council, indicated that three years ago, during the construction work on the school and the road that leads to it, several rock-cut tombs and two ancient winepresses were destroyed. Work at Tomb 1 started on May 12 and was terminated on May 13, 2012.

4.1. Ethnographic Account

An interview was conducted with one of the three people who participated in looting Tomb 1. He was 61 years old in 2012 and a father of seven children. He attended school up to the second grade of elementary school and participated in illegal looting more than 40 times. According to the interview, the tomb was first entered in 1972 by a group of three people from Bil’in village, encouraged by an antiquities dealer from the Ramallah region who visited the Qbur al-Banat area with one of the members of what was to become the looting group. After noticing a rectangular rock cut, the dealer recommended digging there because of the probability of finding a tomb. After removing some surface soil, the group found many steps and an entrance blocked with a large rock, which they later destroyed. After about 20 minutes of waiting (the

length of time they thought was sufficient to ventilate the tomb), they entered easily.

The interviewee described the tomb when they first entered:

The floor of the tomb was clean with no soil accumulation or stones. The three graves were completely open with no stone cover, and the bones were undisturbed with some soft soil underneath them. In each grave [*arcosolium*] eight lamps were placed either near the head of the deceased or at the raised edge of the graves. In the grave [*arcosolium*] located to the right of the entrance, we found some colored beads, ‘*midma’a*’ [a glass bottle], some scattered glass pieces and one ‘*antika*’ [a coin].

Honestly we didn’t dare to remove any bone from its original place because we believed in the sanctity of death, and if we removed a bone to look for valuable materials under it, we put it back carefully in its original location. We finished rifling this tomb in less than one day, and we sold what we found for 10 Israeli lira to the same antiquities dealer who had recommended that we dig in this area. At the end we left the entrance uncovered and people used to enter the tomb for many years.

4.2. Excavated Features

The tomb consists of a rock-cut staircase, elaborate entrance and an inner chamber surrounded by three *arcosolia*, one on each side (Fig. 3). At the beginning of our work, we found the tomb’s entrance open and the staircase leading down to the doorway of the tomb relatively clean (Fig. 4). The staircase (L. 4) was cut into the natural limestone bedrock and consists of five steps and a landing (L. 6). The doorway to the tomb is located in the central part of the western façade and measures 0.68 x 0.62 m. Based on the existence of a well-cut channel around the doorway on the outside, we believe that it was sealed in antiquity with a large stone set in this channel. The threshold is raised 1.6 m above the level of the chamber floor. Inside the entrance there is a steep step (L. 7) carved into the bedrock, 0.6 m below the level of the landing. It leads down to the roughly hewn bedrock floor of the main chamber.

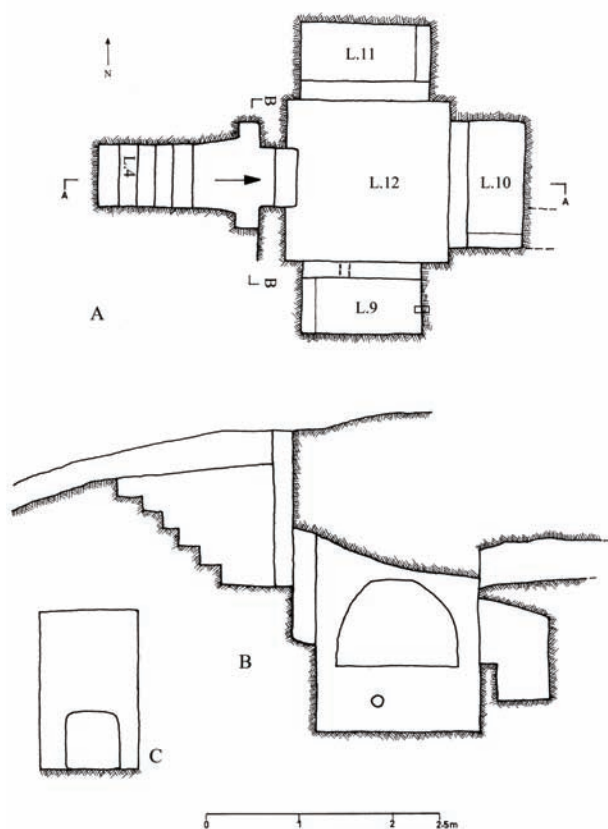


FIG. 3
Plan and section of Tomb 1 near al-Banat school, Bil'in. A: Top plan;
B: Cross-section A-A; C: Cross-section B-B. (Drawing by I. Iqtait.)

The subterranean chamber is square in plan. It consists of a central burial chamber (L. 12) and is flanked by three trough-like adult graves of similar shape and size. The troughs each have a ca. 0.2 m wide protrusion as a headrest, located on one of the short sides. Additionally, the southern *arcosolium* has a circular opening at the level of its internal floor, permitting water or other liquids to drain from the trough into the main chamber. The chamber's floor is quite level, without any artificial depressions, and the ceiling slopes gradually towards the back with a natural irregular cavity at the upper back left (northeast) that is at least 1.50 m long. The marks of hewing tools can be seen on the walls and floor of the chamber and on the three *arcosolia*. These tool marks can be classified according to their width into a finer, more pointed one (6–8 mm width) and a flatter one (9–13 mm).

The main chamber was at one time filled with very moist terra rossa soil up to the rim of the burial benches in the *arcosolia*. The walls show a line at a height of about 1.50–1.80 m above the floor, underneath which the walls are reddish-brown. Above, they are much lighter (Fig. 5). Apparently, at some time before or after recent looting events, the tomb was filled up to this line with local *terra rossa* soil, likely washed in through the open door after looting and/or the natural cavity in the eastern upper ceiling above the *arcosolium* L. 10. This explains the damp feel of the fill in general.

In the main chamber, we designated the surface material as Locus 7 (Fig. 6). Here, we found scattered modern objects made of plastic, glass, metal and wood (see below) as well as two relatively well preserved human skulls. Numerous large stones were found between these items. Clearing the surface materials proceeded by removing first the stones and modern objects as well as the large amount of long bones, skulls, and skull fragments. Underneath, we excavated a mixed layer, 0.85–1.4 m thick (L. 8). It consisted of a compact, reddish-brown terra rossa deposit mixed with a large number of irregularly shaped stones and a very few thick, flat slabs that might have been part of a larger stone blockage of the tomb's doorway. Several scattered modern objects made out of plastic, glass, metal and wood were recovered, along with pottery sherds, part of a metal ring and pieces of at least two bracelets made of ivory or polished bone (Fig. 7.4–7.8), numerous snail shells and a few animal bones.

During the excavation of this layer, we noticed the high density of human skeletal remains in the uppermost part close to the tomb entrance, consisting of long bones, fractured skull remains, and smaller pieces of human bone. Skeletal remains were rarer in the lower parts of the deposit. The bones were disarticulated, lying at varying degrees of slant, and in bad condition. The density of bones inside the entryway might suggest that they were recently thrown into the tomb together with the modern trash. This suggestion was confirmed by a member of the village council of Bil'in. He stated, "when we leveled the area using a bulldozer, in order to build al-Banat school just a few meters west of this tomb we destroyed ancient graves.



FIG. 4
Stairway into Tomb 1 after cleaning; note the two vertical cuts at the entry into the tomb. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

We collected the large bones and put them in this cave [Tomb 1].”

On the surface of the first *arcosolium* (L. 13) to the right side of the tomb doorway (L. 9), was a metal paint bucket. Below, we excavated a compact reddish-brown soil layer, 0.3 m thick on average (L. 14; Fig. 6). It was mixed with very few small and medium-sized stones and included a large number of human skeletal remains, a few shells and snails, ancient pottery sherds, a metal ring, and a small stone slab (Fig. 8; Fig. 7.3). Based on the skull fragments, we estimate that the excavated bones in this *arcosolium* belong to more than two different individuals.³

In the second *arcosolium* (L. 10), opposite the entrance to the tomb, we excavated a relatively thin layer

(L. 16, 0.15 m thick on average) with the same characteristics and inclusions as the one encountered in the first *arcosolium*. Based on the total number of long bones and skull fragments, it seems that the human remains derive from more than one adult (Fig. 9).

In the third *arcosolium* to the left side of the tomb's entrance (L. 11), there was a minimal accumulation with characteristics similar to the deposits in the first and second *arcosolia*. It included pieces of a plastic bucket, pottery and glass sherds, snail shells, part of a metal finger ring, and a small quantity of human bone, probably belonging to at least two adults. It is noteworthy that the large bones found in the three *arcosolia* were in a better physical condition than most others, even though many show signs of recent breakage.



FIG. 5
Loculus L. 9 after excavation. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

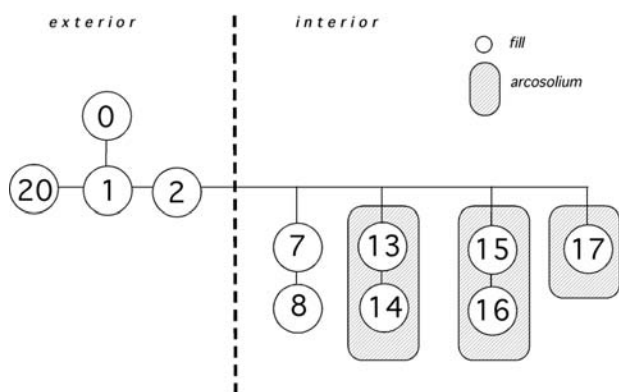


FIG. 6
Stratigraphic matrix of Tomb 1.

4.3. Finds from Antiquity

The number of ancient pottery sherds found inside the tomb is much larger than those recovered outside (Table 2). More important, the proportion of diagnostic sherds is significantly greater (19.4 percent diagnostics from inside the tomb versus 7.8 percent from the collections from the entry). Most likely this is due to both depositional and post-depositional processes: Some of the sherds that were found in the entryway outside the tomb probably do not originate from grave goods and/or looting events but are part of erosional slopewash from the eastern slope above the tomb. Since many diagnostic

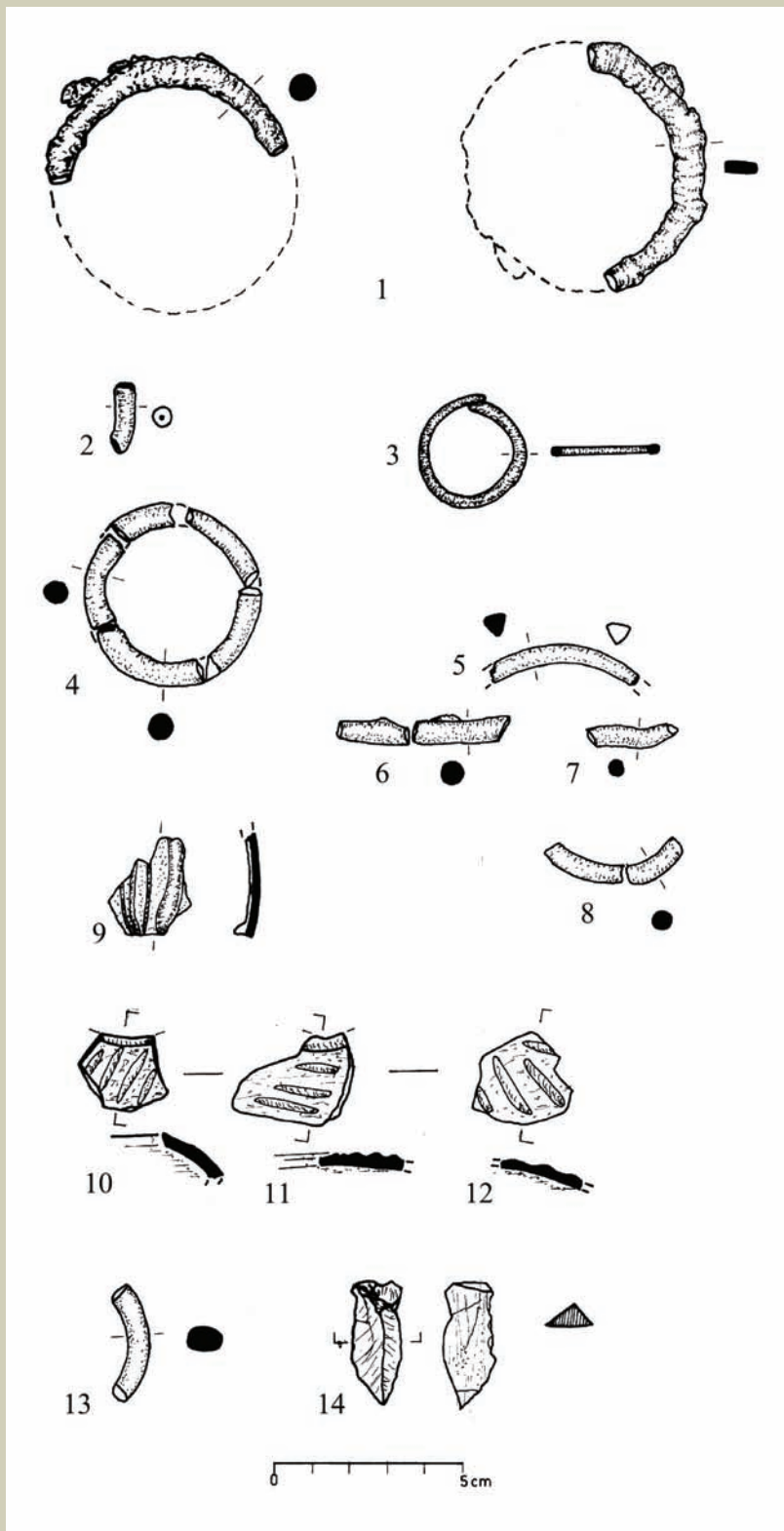


FIG. 7

Objects from Tomb 1 in Bil'in, other than #14 all possibly Byzantine: (1) metal bracelet (L. 1); (2) glass bead (L. 1); (3) metal finger ring (L. 14); (4) ivory bracelet (L. 8); (5) glass bracelet (L. 8); (6, 7, 8) parts of an ivory bracelet (L. 8); (9) piece of glass vessel (L. 1); (10, 11, 12) oil lamp fragments (L. 8); (13) glass bracelet (L. 14); (14) lithic arrowhead (?; L. 20). (Drawings by I. Iqtait.)



FIG. 8
Modern objects as encountered before excavation, *Loculus L. 9*. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

sherds, if not of hard-fired wares, lose their identifiable morphology when embedded in eroding sediments, the proportion of diagnostics tends to decrease over time, often radically.

In the case of Tomb 1, however, the sherds found within the accumulated sediments of the central chamber floor cannot be unequivocally identified as grave goods either. The suggested date of tomb construction in the Byzantine (or possibly Late Roman) period must therefore rest mainly on its architectural features such as the *arcosolia*. Most of the pottery consists of a gritty, rather unspecific corrugated red ware with heavily worn breaks. Diagnostics are mainly ring bases, handles with an oval cross section and broad groove on the back, as well as a few rims, many of them too unspecific and heavily worn for precise dating

(Fig. 10). Nonetheless, it seems possible that these are wares from the Kefar Hananiya pottery production site (Adan-Bayewitz 2003). If these red wares are vessels that were destroyed in a looting event, this must have happened long before the ethnographically attested one in the 1970s: the breaks are too worn to be recent. An exception are a few buff-colored sherds from Locus 8. These exhibit signs of more recent breakage and are from one or several vessels with comb stroke decoration. Their difference to the remainder of the pottery suggests a later date than for the rest, both in terms of production and breakage. They could even be fairly recent. Several pieces of bronze rings may also date from antiquity, whereas none of the glass pieces discovered show any patina, confirming that they are modern.



FIG. 9
 Loculus L. 10 before excavation. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

TABLE 2. ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE QUANTITIES OF SHERDS AND DIAGNOSTICS IN CONTEXT TYPES FROM THE FOUR INVESTIGATED TOMBS

Tomb	Total # sherds	# diags.	# sherds outside	% diags. outside	# sherds inside	% diags. inside	% diags. all contexts
1	229	31	76	7.8	153	19.4	13.5
2	381	62	118	6.7	263	20.5	16.3
3	426	21	388	4.6	38	7.9	4.9
4	8	5	0	—	8	62.5	62.5

4.4. Finds from Modernity

A number of finds from recent times were found in the central chamber of the tomb (Appendix 2). Among them were a large piece of a light blue back of a “monobloc” chair, one of the globally available, stackable plastic chairs,

as well as a whitish leg of a second one (next to the wooden scale in Fig. 8). In Locus 8 we encountered more of these remains. The designer and earliest production of these chairs are unknown, although an approximate terminus post quem is the early 1970s (Gosnell 2004). Two bright



FIG. 10
Pottery from Tomb 1, L. 14. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

blue plastic Pepsi bottle caps provide a much more precise date (Fig. 11). This particular Pepsi logo was created in 1991 and was slowly replaced after the year 2008 (Anonymous 2016a), so the deposition of L. 8 must have occurred after 1991. Another datable item from Locus 8 is an aluminum sardine can of a Portuguese brand (“Porthos”) with Hebrew printing and an expiry date of December 31, 2014. Canned sardines remain edible for several years, so the can could indicate a visit to the tomb by the sardine consumer between ca. 2009 and 2012 (when we excavated there). Portuguese canned fish is exported on a global scale, and Porthos is the name of the exporter, not a specific producer of fish. This find, along with the “monobloc” chair and the Pepsi bottle caps, reveal the extent to which specific global food items of the (post-) modern world are distributed in the OPNT (Phillips 2006; Meneley 2014).

Can these finds be combined to date the recent frequenting of the tomb? That is, can one combine the fish tin from ca. 2009–2012 with the Pepsi bottle caps (phased out after 2008) to argue for some event in the years 2008–2009 that produced the state in which we encountered the tomb? This would fit well with the oral information that in 2009, three years before the excavation, tombs were entered during the construction of the nearby girls’ school. However, a sequence of several



FIG. 11
Selection of modern objects from Tomb 1. (Photos courtesy of the authors.)

shorter visits to the tomb cannot be excluded. Other objects from recent times include a wooden spatula (Fig. 11) found in the stairwell outside the tomb, various pieces of window and bottle glass, and the aforementioned metal bucket for white paint. The latter could have been used during looting events to remove soil from the tomb chamber, but it could just as well be a leftover from the school builders who dumped it in the tomb.

4.5. *Reconstructing the Social Life of Tomb 1*

The combination of ethnographic and archaeological evidence allows us to examine the “social life” of Tomb 1. Importantly, this consists not only of tomb

construction and the burial of individuals in a tomb in antiquity, but also of later uses in the form of looting episodes, depositions of human skeletal remains long after the original burials, as well as the excavations that we conducted, thereby rearranging the tomb's contents more than one time.

In attempting to reconstruct the "social life" of Tomb 1, we must confront discrepancies between the ethnographic and the archaeological evidence. The oral account of the looters stated that the tomb chamber was completely clean and lacking in any earthen deposits. In contrast, during our work we excavated a soil layer up to 1.5 m thick, mixed with various material objects, including modern items, and human skeletal remains. How can this contradictory information be reconciled?

Observations based on our excavation make a number of points clear. First, as already mentioned, there was a significant accumulation of earth in the tomb. Second, substantial quantities of human skeletal remains were present: Based on our field observations of the skulls, skull fragments, and long bones collected, we tentatively conclude that the bones of a minimum number of nine individuals were found in this tomb, with at least two in each *arcosolium* and three or more in the main chamber. This is a high number for such a small tomb. Third, the arrangement of skeletal material was haphazard, with larger bones such as humeri dominating in the uppermost layer and even on top of the accumulated sediment. Fourth, lying on the surface, along with two human skulls, were pieces of plastic chairs and the white paint bucket in the southern *arcosolium* (L. 9). Together, these observations point toward very recent depositions of both objects and human bones in the tomb.

We suggest that the bones discovered on the surface of the tomb's fill are from a systematic looting of other tombs—collected elsewhere and dumped in this tomb. The elements that speak in favor of such a reconstruction are that (a) looting is a practice known to many people, including in Bil'in; (b) the metal bucket from Locus 13 (Fig. 8) and a wooden spatula found just outside the tomb (in L. 1, see Fig. 11) could have been tools used to explore such tombs; (c) the bones would likely have been broken to a greater extent if the tombs had been emptied

without much care for the objects inside; (d) assuming that our preliminary assessment of the bone assemblage is correct and they consist mainly of skull fragments and long bones, this is what one would expect for burial remains transferred from other tombs, with the larger, more obvious bones moved and the smaller ones lost along the way; and (e) the bones lay atop a substantial accumulation of sediment, not on the floor of the tomb or the *arcosolia*.

The sardine can, Pepsi bottle caps and an additional plastic cup point to one or several picnic-like events, the remains of which may have been discarded in the tomb. These objects cannot be leftovers from the looting in 1972, as all dateable items can be assigned to the years 1990 to 2012. Rather, there is the possibility that the construction workers from the girls' school threw these and other objects into the tomb, as suggested by our oral informants.

What, then, about the oral testimony that states that the tomb was looted in 1972, at which time the men found a clean floor with the human remains in situ in the *arcosolia*? There are at least two possible explanations for this discrepancy with respect to the comparatively disorderly state in which we encountered the tomb. One is that the interviewee misremembered the situation in the tomb or confused it with another one. Alternatively, the account may be accurate, in which case there must have been a subsequent looting event that thoroughly disturbed the skeletal remains in the *arcosolia*. This event either preceded or accompanied the deposition of large quantities of earth plus additional human skeletons in the tomb that may well have been connected to the construction of the nearby school.

In conclusion, our work at Tomb 1 revealed a highly complex sequence of looting events, including the likely addition of human remains removed from other tombs. Archaeological remains from antiquity are rare, as are objects that would indicate actual looting practices. The cultural dimension of the finds from recent times implies the reach of globalized food production into the quotidian life of a village such as Bil'in. The global distribution of goods has a political dimension as well: They are channeled into the OPNT via Israeli routes, as is evident in the Portuguese fish can with Hebrew writing.

5. Investigations of Tomb 2

This tomb is located approximately 500 m west of the historic core of Saffa village, on the northern slope of a low mountainous area (at an altitude of about 320 m) known by local people as eth-Thaher. The tomb is a few meters south of a narrow ancient road that in antiquity connected the historic village of Saffa to the east with other settlements to the west, including Khirbet Krisanna, Kreekir, and Bad 'Issa (Fig. 2). The villagers still use this road to access their fields which are planted with olive trees and grapevines. In 2001, the first author conducted a survey of winepresses in eth-Thaher, documenting a total of 21; seven were then excavated. They date to the Roman and Byzantine periods and vary in size, shape, and pressing technique. The presence of a large number of winepresses in the 350 x 300 m eth-Thaher area indicates that the region specialized in the exploitation of grapevines during the Roman and Byzantine periods (al-Houdalieh 2004).

A survey of looted tombs in Saffa village, carried out by the first author in 2011, included the eth-Thaher area. Eight pillaged, subterranean rock-cut tombs were documented, four dating to the Roman and four to the Byzantine period. The looters had backfilled the entrances to four of these tombs partially or completely and leveled the adjacent area to make it once again suitable for cultivation. The entrances of three other tombs are still open. The last tomb, which was looted in the late 1980s and included seven *loculi* according to information provided by two individuals involved in this looting activity, was reconstructed for use as a cistern.

One of the Roman-period tombs with a closed entrance was included in our project. We worked there on May 14 and 15, 2012. Apart from the authors, an archaeology student and two other workers contributed to the excavation.

5.1. Ethnographic Account

Interviews were conducted with three individuals who participated in the looting of this tomb. We learned that it had been vandalized at least three times by three

different groups. The following are the most important results of the interviews:

The tomb was first looted at the end of the 1970s by a group consisting of four individuals, three of them from Hebron (al-Khaleel) and the fourth from Saffa village. One of the individuals involved in this looting offered the following statement:

To determine the existence of a tomb in that area, we depended on observations of the upper part of right angles cut into the rock, with the presence of wild bushes growing directly next to them. We started digging in the middle of the southern rock cut with small inserts; we found right away a stone slab that had been used to close the entrance. With conventional digging tools such as axes and hammers, we broke the stone slab. After about 25 minutes, the period we used to ventilate the tomb, we entered it crawling on our bellies. The floor was covered with a small amount of soft soil less than 10 cm thick. Three of the *loculi* were closed with stone slabs and contained skeletons, while the fourth was open and empty of any human skeletal remains. We found a small jar in this latter grave. In the other three graves [*loculi*] we collected five lamps, one plate, and a small glass bottle. Based on our experience in digging out ancient tombs, we expected to find a square depression cut into the chamber floor that was usually used to dump the human skeletal remains of former deceased persons together with their offering objects. So we dug in the rock after checking the deposit accumulated on it, but we did not find anything. We did not have to remove dirt to the outside of the tomb because there was very little accumulation. We worked in the tomb for about 10 hours, and when we finished we left it open.

The second vandalism happened in 1985 when a looting gang reentered this tomb. The group consisted of three individuals, two from Saffa village and the third from a village east of Ramallah. A member of the group reported:

We were a group of six people digging in a tomb located approximately 100 meters south of this one. When we were almost done with it, I went with two



FIG. 12
Discoloration on outer façade of Tomb 2 before the start of excavation. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

others from the group into this tomb to search for coins and seals, even though we knew that it had been dug earlier. After removing a little bit of soil from the entrance we were able to enter. We sifted the dirt pile we found on the inside for almost two hours. Then we decided to go, leaving the entrance open, because we didn't find anything.

The third plundering of this tomb took place in 1994 and was carried out by an amateur gang consisting of four individuals from Saffa village. One of the group's members stated:

We were without work. Each of us has responsibilities for a large family. At that time many people searched archaeological sites to find valuable objects to sell to antiquities dealers. So I decided with three friends to make a living through 'grabbing.' Nearly two months after starting our work, we entered the tomb and dug

for about four hours, but we did not find anything. We left the entrance open as we found it.

5.2. *Archaeological Features and Stratigraphy of Tomb 2*

When we started the excavation, the tomb entrance was closed (Fig. 12). We asked the owner of the land on which this tomb is located about the looting history of this tomb. He provided us with the following information. "The tomb was completely open until 1996, when I decided to close it with rubble and soil in order to prevent people from entering it and to level its area to be suitable for cultivation." The original level of soil accumulation could be seen easily in the form of a discoloration from gray to buff on the vertical face of the tomb's entrance wall (Fig. 13, above tomb opening). The entry had been carelessly covered with earth plus two or three stones. A young olive tree to the east of the doorway was left standing by the looters.



FIG. 13
Façade and opening of Tomb 2. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

The tomb consists of two spaces, one external and one internal, separated by a rock-cut wall about 0.45 m thick. The external space served as an open forecourt consisting of a well-leveled depression in front of the façade that measured 3 x 2.8 m (Fig. 14). The sides of the forecourt are cut into the limestone bedrock and meet at right angles; they as well as the interior of the tomb exhibit traces of hewing tools. Across the northern end of the forecourt ran a stone wall that was built along the aforementioned ancient road. The entrance façade is about 1.25 m high; the other sides of the forecourt range from 0.45 m to 1 m height.

In order to investigate the deposits located in the forecourt, as well as to make enough space for the team to enter the tomb, we excavated a trial trench of 2 x 1 m next to the tomb's opening (Fig. 13). We identified three layers (L. 1, 2, and 6 with L. 7 as the floor of the courtyard) with a

total thickness of about 0.6 m. The sediments were loose and brown to yellowish brown in color and included small to medium-sized stones, tree roots, some snail shell, Late Roman/Byzantine pottery sherds, and a tessera. Directly on the floor of the forecourt were the remains of a white cement-like plaster layer 2 cm thick (L. 8; Fig. 15). Based on inspection in the field, this plaster layer consisted of lime, ash, and a small amount of natural aggregations. The entire floor surface and maybe the four sides of this forecourt seem to have been plastered in antiquity.

The doorway (L. 13) is situated in the center of the façade and is surrounded on the outside by a carved, recessed frame (0.15 m deep) along its top and two sides. The sill is 7 cm higher than the floor of the forecourt and 0.55 m higher than the main chamber's floor (Fig. 14). A piece of a large stone slab was found outside close to

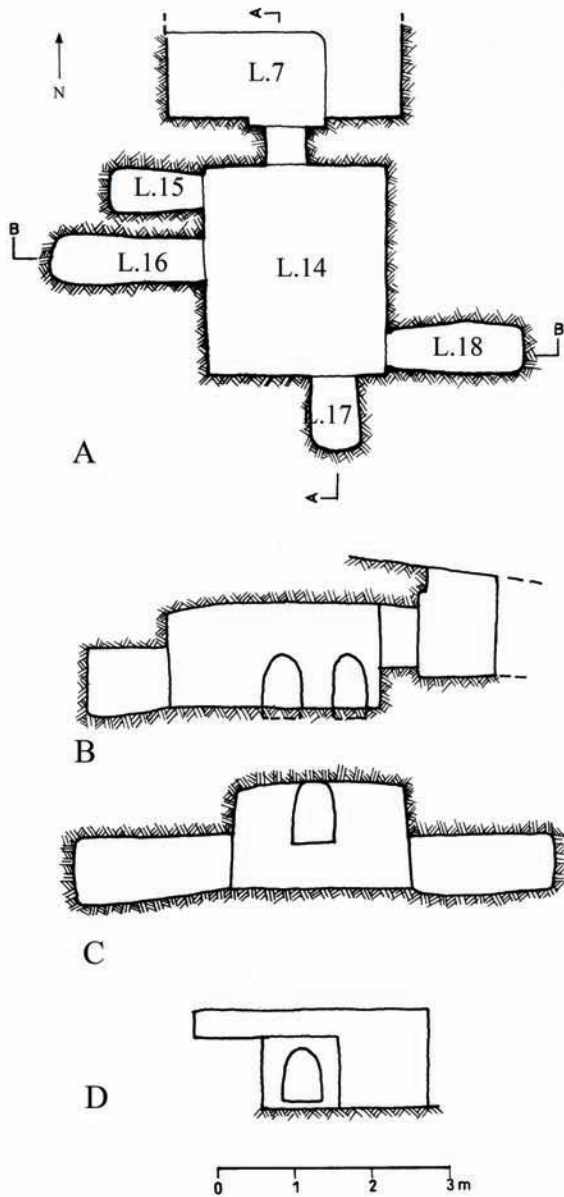


FIG. 14
Plan and section of Tomb 2 at al-Thaher near Saffa. A: Top plan; B: Cross-section A-A; C: Cross-section B-B; D: Elevation of the entrance façade. (Drawing by I. Iqtait.)

the doorway. It is 0.77 m high, 0.19 m thick and 0.40 m wide and may have been part of the original doorway blockage (Fig. 16).

The internal burial chamber (L. 14) is surrounded by four *loculi*, all of nearly the same shape but differing sizes (Fig. 14). The floors of the two western *loculi* (L. 15 and 16) are 0.15 m deeper than the main floor level of the chamber, whereas the floors of the other two *loculi* are at the same level as the main chamber. The corners, sides, and floor of the shortest *loculus* (L. 17, 0.9 m long), display many protrusions, indicating that its construction remained incomplete (Fig. 17).

On the floor of the main chamber, we excavated a compact gray layer 0.2–0.4 m thick (L. 19). It included several medium-sized, unworked stones, one complete and several fragments of stone slabs which may have served to close some of the *loculi*, pottery sherds, a few fragments of human bone, a piece of a wooden stick, snail shells, ancient glass fragments, and a modern Israeli coin (10 agorot, with a value of 2.6 cents). In the northeastern corner of the main chamber, we excavated a pile of gravel mixed with small lumps of dirt. This could indicate that one of the groups that dug in the tomb used a screen to search for coins and other small items.

The first *loculus* (L. 15) contained a loose, yellowish-brown layer 0.35 m thick (L. 19; Fig. 18). It included pottery sherds, shells, and disarticulated human bones. A similar deposit (L. 20), but only 15 cm thick, was excavated in the second *loculus* (L. 16). A few skull fragments were found at the entrance of the *loculus* towards the main chamber. Below this context, L. 21 contained long bones, probably from both legs of an individual, that were still partly in situ. They were found at the far end from the main chamber (Fig. 19). Recent breaks on these bones are likely a product of one of the looting events. Locus 20 contained pottery sherds, shells (including snails), and plastic bags, which was not the case in the lower deposits in this *loculus* (L. 21). Based on the in situ human bones, we can conclude that this *loculus* was not completely emptied by the looters. In the third *loculus* (L. 17), the smallest one in this tomb, we excavated a heap of earth (L. 22) with the same characteristics as the deposits in the other *loculi*. Locus 22 included a large number of disarticulated human remains, especially long bones, as well as snail shells and pottery sherds. Since this *loculus* was unfinished, the bones encountered inside it were probably gathered from other *loculi* and dumped into it by the



FIG. 15
Plaster from L. 6, Tomb 2.
(Photo courtesy of the
authors.)



FIG. 16
Closing slab for Tomb 2,
found on the inside. (Photo
courtesy of the authors.)



FIG. 17
 Loculus L. 17, Tomb 2, after excavation. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

looters of this tomb during their digging. In the fourth *loculus* (L. 18), we excavated a 0.2 m-thick deposit (L. 23) also with the same characteristics as those in the other *loculi*. It contained pottery sherds, disarticulated human bone, snail shells, a metal pail with a capacity of 20 liters, and a 2 m-long, angled iron rod, a type often used for fencing (Fig. 20). It is likely that the pail and rod were part of the digging equipment used by the looters.

The floor of the main chamber was uneven, with shallow, irregularly shaped depressions. However, all sides and the ceiling were carefully cut out of the bedrock, with traces from cutting tools that could be classified according to their width into a small (5–8 mm width), a medium (9–12 mm), and a large one (13–20 mm). Some cracks of 0.5–1.2 cm are visible in the chamber’s ceiling and sides (Fig. 21).

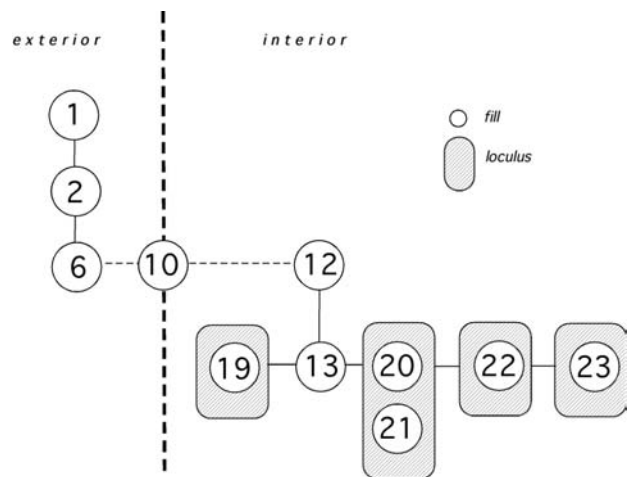


FIG. 18
 Stratigraphic matrix of loci in Tomb 2.

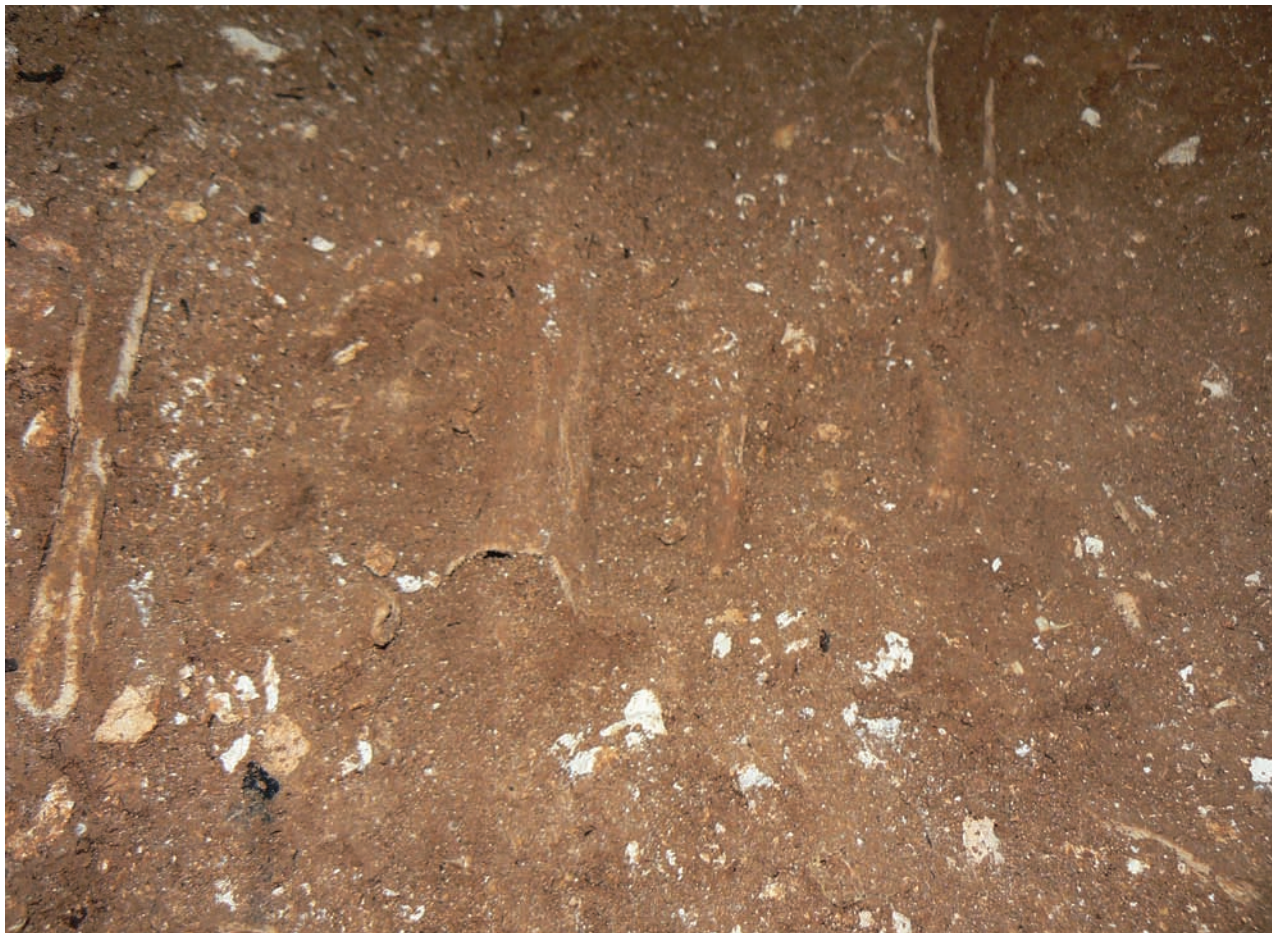


FIG. 19
In situ human bone (L. 21) in *loculus* L. 16, Tomb 2. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

5.3. Roman-Byzantine Finds

Apart from pottery, one greenish-gray tessera, originally destined for a mosaic, was found in L. 2, just a few centimeters above the plaster layer of the forecourt's floor. The backfill of the forecourt was probably brought in from the surroundings by the landowner to level the surface. It can therefore not be assumed that there was a mosaic pavement close to the tomb. It is also significant that a small number of lithics were found in the two layers of this fill. Their presence indicates an archaeological site of pre-Roman times somewhere in the vicinity.

All other identifiable material from antiquity consisted of pottery. No metal fragments were found, even though we screened much of the sediment. The overall proportion of diagnostic sherds (16.3 percent) is similar to Tomb 1.



FIG. 20
Iron rod found in Tomb 2. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)



FIG. 21
Cracks in the main chamber of Tomb 2. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

When we calculate the proportion of diagnostics for all loci inside the tomb versus those outside, we again find that diagnostics occur at percentages three times higher inside than outside (20.5% inside, 6.7% outside), suggesting two different geomorphological environments and sources for the sherds. In the case of Tomb 2, we have the possibility of comparing sherds from undisturbed and disturbed loci, as the second *loculus* (L. 16) contained bones still in situ (L. 21) as well as one well preserved rim of a small, light buff bottle (Fig. 22 bottom; Fig. 23 lower). It is a thin-walled vessel with restricted neck and a thin, light buff slip that is flaked off in some places, over a slightly reddish core. Sherds of similar thickness and ware were found in the unfinished *loculus* 17 (L. 22) and *loculus* 18, the one that contained a bucket. From *loculus* 18 comes a flat base that may have belonged to this small vessel (Fig. 22.4, lower part). This shows that one can potentially expect to find the entirety of objects that were destroyed during looting, but they may be distributed across a tomb depending on the looting process and, potentially, multiple looting episodes.

In Tomb 2, we can identify several variables that point to more (or less) disturbance through looting by comparing the ceramic material from the one undisturbed context (L. 21 and, to a certain extent, L. 20) to other loci. First, sherd size differs according to degree of disturbance, with larger sherds being more frequent in contexts only touched but not completely pillaged by looters (compare Fig. 23

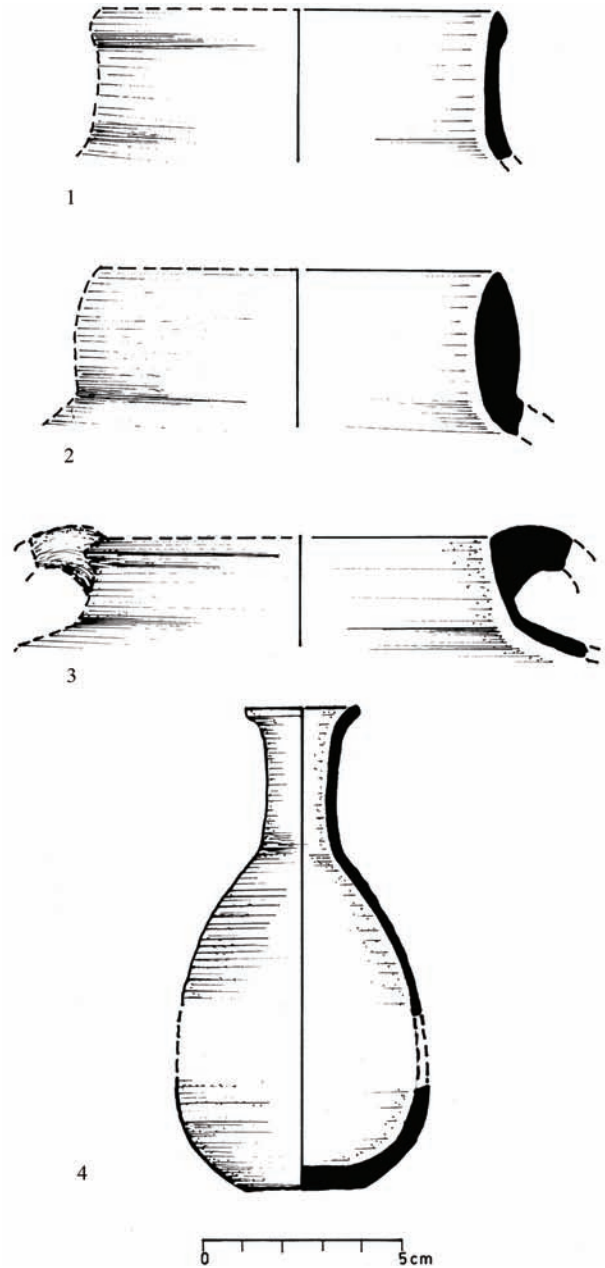


FIG. 22
Pottery sherds from Tomb 2 near Saffa, likely dating to the Roman period: (1) cooking pot (L. 22); (2) jar (L. 2); (3) cooking pot (L. 23); (4) pottery bottle (L. 21 and 23). (Drawings by I. Iqtait.)

upper and lower). Second, the variability of pottery wares is relatively low in Locus 21, with the light buff ware of the flask dominating over a few reddish pieces of a different



FIG. 23
Pottery from Tomb 2; upper: L. 2; lower: L. 21. (Photos courtesy of the authors.)

vessel. Third, breaks resulting from looting show little to no wear, whereas eroded breaks are typical for vessels broken in antiquity, as already discussed for Tomb 1. These three variables not only set Locus 21 apart from the others but are relevant for a comparison of the pottery from Tomb 2 to that from Tombs 1 and 3. In the latter two tombs, remains of the original burial assemblage are hard to distinguish from other pottery sherds that may have been brought into the tombs by looters or through long-term erosional processes. The amount of corrugated red wares is higher in outside than inside contexts. This may have to do with the date of the grave goods. Corrugated wares tend to be from Late Roman to Byzantine times (Adan-Bayewitz 1993; Vokaer 2010), indicating an earlier date for the tomb's construction and its use than the pottery found outside the tomb. However, there is one rim of a typical, two-handled red pot reminiscent of the Syrian "brittle ware" rims from Locus 23 that can also be dated to Late Roman/Byzantine times (Adan-Bayewitz 1993, Form 4).

5.4. Objects from Modern Times

Most of the modern finds from Tomb 2 are related to looting activities. Next to the entry, we found substantial

pieces of charred wood that are likely to have been from makeshift torches that were used in one (or several) of the exploration episodes. Two *loculi* contained remains of plastic bags, likely brought for the collection of finds. Most of the looting tools were found in Locus 23. We already mentioned the long iron rod and the rusty bucket. There were also cigarette butts in this locus. The iron rod may have been used to explore the extent of *loculi* without completely emptying them. This would imply some looting experience, since the rod would help to differentiate between unfinished and finished *loculi*. Only the latter would potentially contain skeletons and burial gifts. Buckets are needed for all excavations. In contrast to Tomb 1, none of the modern finds from Tomb 2 can be dated more precisely, making an assignment of the tools to one of the three orally documented looting episodes impossible.

During our work inside this tomb we documented a large number of intact and fragmented snail shells (Fig. 24). Those found in *loculus* 15 (with a fill designated as L. 19), the first *loculus* on the right from the entrance, were entirely intact. In *loculus* 16 and 18 (L. 20, 21, and 23; Fig. 18) the shells were fragmented to varying degrees (Table 3). The smallest amount of shells was found in *loculus*

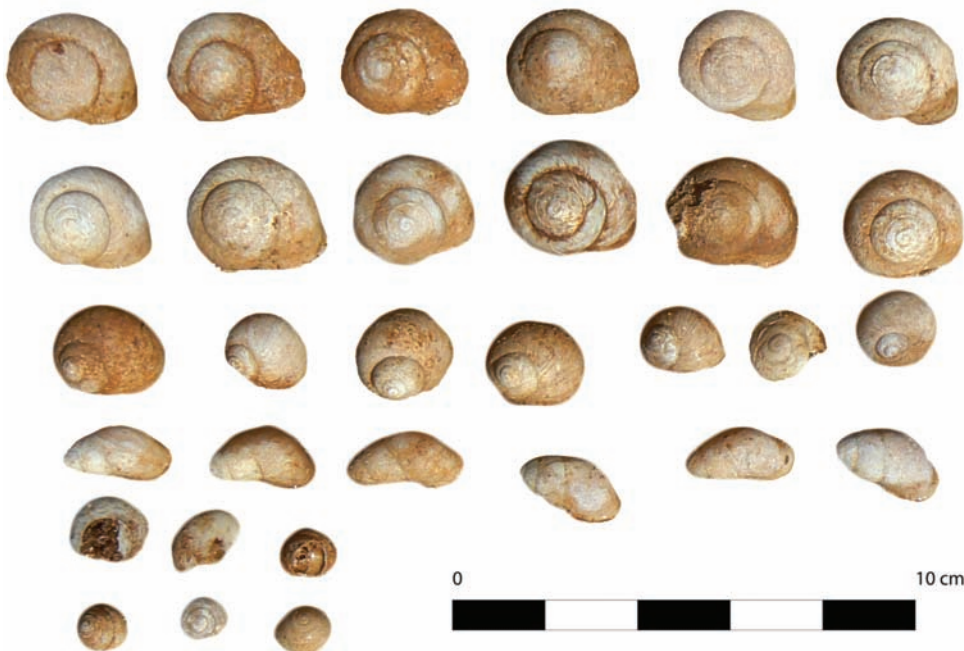


FIG. 24
Snail shells from Tomb 2. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

TABLE 3. SNAIL SHELLS FROM *LOCULI* IN TOMB 2

Locus	# of large shells	# of medium shells	# of small shells	# complete specimens	# of fragments	Ratio complete: fragmentary shell
19	2	6	2	10	-	-
20	11	7	9	27	9	3.0 : 1
21	6	2	6	14	13	1.1 : 1
22	6	-	-	6	11	0.5 : 1
23	12	13	5	30	25	1.2 : 1
sum	37	28	22	87	58	

17 (L. 22), and only one third of the pieces were intact. Based on the information provided by the interviewees, it appears that the entrance of the tomb was fully closed before they entered it. Considering the absolutely clean state in which Tomb 4 with its closed entryway was found (see below), we can assume that snails are unable to enter a fully closed tomb. Therefore, all of the snail shells should date to the time after the first looting (1970s), when the tomb had been left open according to the oral information. The physical conditions of the snail shells encountered in this tomb may indicate that the *loculi* with intact shells were only explored once, whereas the *loculi* with fragmented pieces were plundered two or three times.

While these observations allow a partial reconstruction of the sequence of looting, they do not allow us to identify with certainty which of the groups used the bucket and the iron rod. It might have been the second one, in which case the looters would have brought with them materials they deemed not to be worthy of retaining. The charred wood from torches, however, should be ascribed to the last group of looters. This was material from the surface of the fill next to the entry that would have been disturbed had there been further looting events.

5.5. Tomb 2: An Archaeology of Looting

Tomb 2 stands out in our sample by showing no other traces than those of past burials and present looting, a situation that we originally expected for all tombs. The ethnographic evidence was crucial for indicating the occurrence of multiple looting episodes, which could

only partly be corroborated archaeologically through close observation of the degree of breakage of the snail shells. However, the archaeological evidence allowed us to identify practices of looting not attested in the interviews, such as screening and the moving of bones and fragments of burial gifts within the tomb in the course of looting sequences. The few recent objects we found include tools for lighting that must have produced quite a lot of smoke in the tomb during the last attempt at looting, “distance exploration” (the iron rod), and a bucket for soil removal. Other tools must have been used but were too valuable to be left behind. Significantly, we did not find any evidence for food consumption in this tomb, only two cigarette butts, while the modern finds in both Tombs 1 and 3 contained packages of food. This may imply that looting the tomb proceeded without any lengthy pauses. The only item inadvertently left in the tomb was a coin of low monetary value.

Archaeologically, L. 21 is of particular relevance as this was the only context in all our explorations with in situ skeletal material. It points to the possibility of similar discoveries in other tombs, although how often such a situation occurs must remain an open question, especially in cases where tombs were looted several times.

It is also important to be able to establish whether soil was removed from a tomb, as this will have an effect on the completeness of the skeletal material. Since human bone is not (yet?) a commodity on the antiquities market, it is usually left in the tomb, albeit often in a highly disturbed fashion. Objects that originally belonged to a burial but were broken in the course of looting may also be encountered. Investigations of pottery should focus

on variability and breakage studies to sort out material that belonged to the burials versus sherds that are the result of natural depositional effects or recent human disturbance when a tomb was left open.

6. Politics and Late Antique Burials: Tomb 3

Located on the western slope of a hill known locally as Sha'b al-Hawa, this tomb lies about 500 m to the southwest of Khirbet Kreekir and approximately 900 m southwest of the center of Bil'in village at an elevation of about 380 m above sea level (Fig. 2). It is located directly to the north of a new gravel road and to the east of a parcel of land planted with olive trees (Fig. 25). In the vicinity, there are several other looted, subterranean rock-cut Roman and Byzantine tombs. At a distance

of 600 m to the west is the Israeli separation wall, and the tomb is in the area of internationally known weekly demonstrations against this wall (Matar 2015).

6.1. *Ethnographic Account*

The first author conducted a personal interview with a 34-year-old father of three sons. He participated in the vandalizing of more than 45 tombs. As a member of the group that dug Tomb 3, he provided the following information:

The tomb was dug in 2009 by a group consisting of five individuals who were highly experienced in digging archaeological sites, dating archaeological materials, and estimating prices based on the latest developments in the illegal antiquities market. We



FIG. 25

Landscape surrounding Tomb 3, view in the direction of the separation wall (not visible). (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

first thought that this tomb included a large amount of valuable archaeological objects, especially after we found a large number of Roman objects (pottery vessels and coins) in a nearby tomb, and because the entrance façade was well-cut and dressed. The forecourt and the doorway were buried by soil, but the entrance was not blocked by stones. When we entered the tomb, we found only a small amount of dirt on its floor that we checked with our machine [apparently, a metal detector], but we could not find any valuable artifacts or even bones.

6.2. Excavation of Archaeological Features

Like the other two tombs described, Tomb 3 is located on a slope. It consists of two spaces, one external and one internal, making its general layout rather similar to Tomb 2 (Fig. 26). The external space, which served as an open forecourt, is a well-leveled depression (2.65 m x 1.8 m) in front of the façade of the tomb (Fig. 27). The depth of the forecourt at the tomb's entrance is about 1.5 m but only 0.4 m at the opposite side. Its sides and floor are well cut vertically into the natural limestone bedrock, with traces of hewing tools visible. The threshold of the doorway into the tomb is approximately 5 cm higher than the court's floor. The latter slopes slightly downward, toward the outer edge (the side opposite the entrance) in order to drain rainwater. It also includes a cup-like depression, 12 cm in diameter and 15 cm deep just in front of the tomb entrance.

Wild grass was growing on the surface of the forecourt (L. 0) where we encountered a range of objects of recent date, many of them pointing to the conflict over the nearby separation wall (see below, Table 4 and Appendix 2). We dug a trench of 2.25 x 1.5 m next to the entrance façade in order to ascertain the nature of the accumulations there and to open up a space to enter the tomb for excavation. In this trench, we identified two layers. The uppermost (L. 1) consisted of loose gray soil, 20–30 cm thick, that included a large quantity of Late Roman/Byzantine sherds as well as snail shells. The lower layer (L. 2) consisted of darkish-brown, compact soil and was 25–30 cm thick (Fig. 28). Apart from an even greater amount of pottery, there were a few pieces of glass of

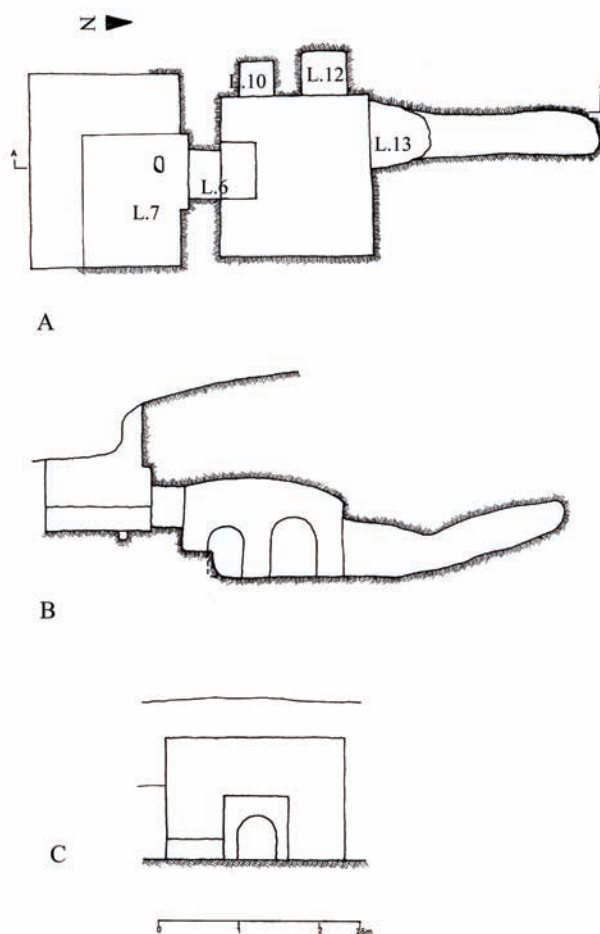


FIG. 26
Plan and sections of Tomb 3 near Bil'in. A: Top plan; B: Cross-section A-A; C: Elevation of the entrance façade. (Drawing by I. Iqtait.)

unclear date. This layer had probably eroded from the northern slope since Roman times.

The entrance of the tomb (L. 6) is situated in the center of the façade; it measures 0.55 x 0.45 m and is 0.45 m deep. It is surrounded on all sides by a recessed frame 0.8 m wide and 10 cm deep. A threshold leads down into the tomb's main chamber, which is at a level of 0.6 m below. Directly inside the entry, a 0.3 m-high step was cut into the bedrock (Fig. 26).

The internal burial chamber is square, measuring 1.8 x 1.8 m with a height of 1.4 m. Its floor is uneven and displays some shallow, irregularly shaped depressions. The floor is on average 0.55 m lower than the outside



FIG. 27
 Overview of forecourt of Tomb 3. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

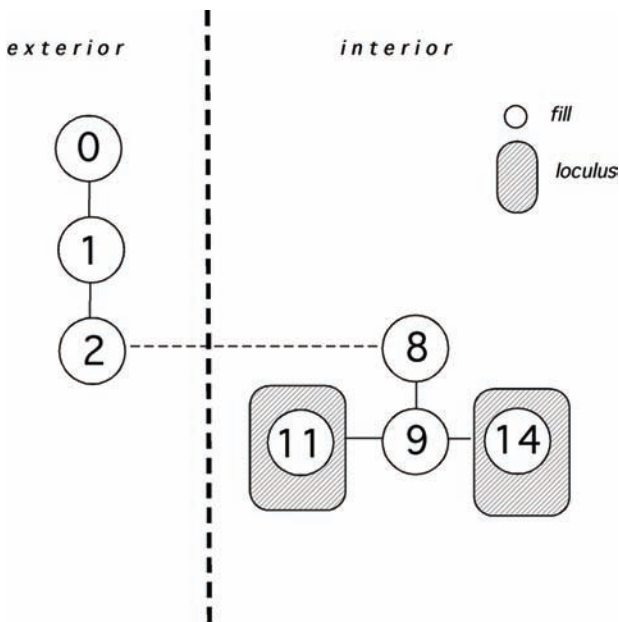


FIG. 28
 Stratigraphic matrix, Tomb 3.

courtyard. On the floor of the chamber we excavated a loose, light-brown earthen deposit (L. 9) of 15–35 cm thickness. It contained a few medium to large unworked stones, pottery sherds, a few bones, plastic, snail shells, and a range of broken and used objects from recent times.

Three *loculi* extend from the main chamber, two to the west and one to the north. They are adjacent to one other and all of nearly the same shape but different sizes (Figs. 26, 29 and 30). The two *loculi* 10 and 12 on the western side are relatively well cut. *Loculus* 10, located close to the entrance, is smaller and less deep than the one next to it (*loculus* 12). *Loculus* 13 in the northern wall of the main chamber is less regular than the other two, probably because of a natural, lengthy hole in the rock that extends for another estimated 2 m to the back. The excavated layers in the three *loculi* were of the same consistency and color as in the main chamber. The tomb was probably unfinished and never used for burial in antiquity, although there were a few bones in the main chamber.



FIG. 29
Tomb 3, *loculi* L. 10 and 12. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

The walls and ceiling of the tomb are well cut, with traces of hewing tools (Fig. 31) that could be classified according to their widths into three types of 5–8 mm, 9–12 mm, and 13–22 mm. Marks in the soft limestone consist of parallel grooves, sometimes of considerable length. The walls and ceiling have some cracks, ranging from 0.3 to 0.6 cm in width. We noted a strange, bright blue discoloration at the lower back wall and to some extent on the sidewalls of the main chamber and reaching into the *loculi* (Fig. 30). The origin of this discoloration is unclear, but a connection with tear gas or other chemicals used in conflicts near this spot seems likely (see below).

6.3. Finds from Antiquity in Tomb 3

As mentioned, the archaeological evidence from Tomb 3 suggests that it was never used for the purpose of burial.

The almost complete lack of human bones supports this. However, this interpretation requires an explanation for the large number of pottery sherds recovered: 388 from courtyard contexts and 38 from inside the tomb. The percentage of diagnostics is significantly lower than for the other two excavated tombs, especially for contexts from inside the tomb (Table 2).

Except for a handful of sherds from the courtyard fill (L. 1), all are very small, with a maximum dimension of 3–5 cm, and consist of corrugated red wares with a sandy texture (Fig. 32). Some have a dark red to brown slip. Where present, this surface coating is heavily eroded. Indications for the original shapes are rare; a few handles with oval cross-section and remains of ring bases occur. The wares and a few recognizable shapes (Fig. 33) would seem to suggest a date ranging from Late Roman to the



FIG. 30

Tomb 3, loculi L. 12 and 13; note blue discoloration of the walls. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)



FIG. 31

Tomb 3, hewing marks in the ceiling. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)

Byzantine period. The broken edges of the sherds are almost all heavily worn, leading again to the conclusion that they were washed in from the surrounding fields. But how did sherds end up in these fields? There are no traces of an ancient village nearby. Instead, it is well known that the whole Levantine region was intensively exploited agriculturally in the Byzantine period (Geyer, Besançon and Rousset 2006). If there were fields, it is possible that fertilizer was brought out from villages and that sherds were spread across the landscape through manuring practices (Wilkinson 1989). That would also explain the extreme fragmentation of the pieces and their heavily eroded state. Much of the material is likely to have been further mixed up due to the looting activities in 2009.



FIG. 32
Pottery from Tomb 3, L. 1.
(Photo courtesy of the
authors.)

6.4. Modern Finds

Tomb 3 stands out from the others because of its large quantity and high variability of finds from very recent times (Table 4). On the surface as well as below, we found signs of violent conflict that can be related to the nearby separation wall. These materials can be classified into several categories:

- Weaponry of official forces, such as rubber bullets, shell casings, and tear-gas cartouches (Fig. 34, upper left);
- Weaponry of the subaltern, consisting mainly of small glass bottles with paper-like closings (Molotov cocktails; Fig. 35);

- Food-related items, mainly plastic and other containers (Fig. 34, middle);
- Objects of unknown function.

External criteria allow a further narrowing of the dating of some of these objects. First, the year 2005 marks the weekly Friday protests by Bil'in residents at the Israeli separation wall, followed by violent repression from the Israeli side that caused numerous injuries and, up to the time of this writing, two deaths (see SITU & Weizman 2014). Second, the year 2009 is presumably the one and only time when looting was attempted, leading to some moving of earth that mixed deposits both in the courtyard and inside the tomb. According to the looter's

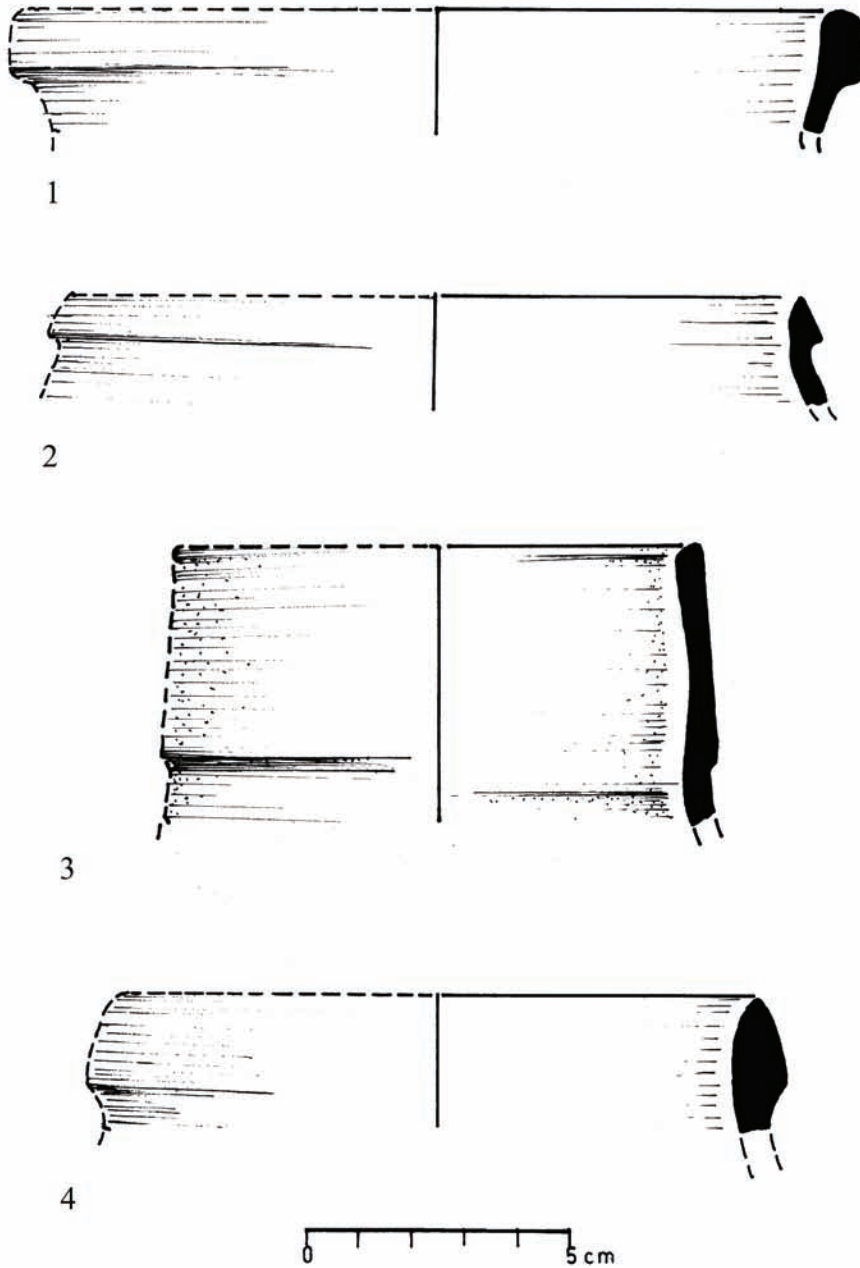


FIG. 33
Pottery sherds from Tomb 3 near Bil'in,
possibly Roman: (1) jar (L. 9); (2) bowl
(L. 9); (3) jar (L. 2); (4) jar (L. 9).
(Drawings by I. Iqtait.)

account, the tomb was not accessible before 2009, while it remained open after that event.

Taking these chronological indicators of events into account, we can assume that all of the modern objects inside the tomb were left there between 2009 and (at the latest) May 2012, the date of our work, but more likely earlier than 2012, as at the time of our excavations the entry was heavily overgrown with thistles. The objects

found in the tomb's courtyard were mixed into the deposits (L. 1 and 2). These could date partly to the time between 2005 and 2009, as the looters would have dug them up and re-deposited them. Inside the tomb, the surface of the deposit in the main chamber (L. 8) would date between 2009 and 2012. The materials from the deposit in the main chamber (L. 9) are more likely to derive from a time before the looting and were perhaps mixed into

TABLE 4. MATERIAL FROM RECENT TIMES FROM TOMB 3

	Rubber bullets	Shell casings	Tear gas cartouche	Molotov cocktails	Tapuzina sherds	Food packages	Other
Locus 0 (surface outside)	2				1 bottle, 11 sherds		4 glass sherds
Locus 8 (surface inside)		1 (rusty)	1		1 base	1 Pepsi plastic bottle, plastic bags, 1 package sunflower seeds (expiry 2010)	1 piece of wood, 1 tree branch, 1 piece of metal grate
Loci 1 and 2 (deposits outside)	1				14 sherds, incl. 3 openings	1 coke bottle rim, 1 bag "Tarzan" chips	46 glass sherds, unspecific, 1 rusty metal sheet, 2 pieces plastic, plastic bag
Loci 9 and 11 (deposits inside)		1 machine gun cartouche		2 (and 4 more?; cf. glass sherds)			27 glass sherds, unspecific, sheet metal, plastic
			Official Force Weaponry			Weapons of the Subaltern	
After 2009			4			1-2	
2005–2009			1			2-6	

the soil during the search for antiquities. That is, they were originally outside of the tomb and only brought in with the looting activities.

Table 4 allows us to tentatively conclude that in the years from 2005 to 2009 (represented by the loci that are below today's surfaces inside and outside the tomb), the number of subaltern weapons in the form of Molotov cocktails was relatively high, and potentially deadly violence by the Israeli forces is apparent in the form of a cartouche of a gun. On the other hand, in more recent years, this spot saw much more Israeli intervention, including attacks with tear gas, live ammunition, and rubber bullets. Special items are the Tapuzina glass bottles. Tapuzina is a soft drink produced by Jafora-Tabori Ltd. with its main seat in Rehovot in Israel (Anonymous 2016b). The brand Tapuzina was created in 1994 and is sold particularly in Israel and the OPNT. The producer uses mainly PET plastic bottles but also sells juice in glass bottles of 250 and 330 ml. These bottles are apparently well suited for use as Molotov cocktails. Whether all of the fragments we discovered were used for the fabrication of Molotov cocktails is hard to say. Clearly, people

who frequented this place also had small amounts of food and other kinds of soft drinks, the packages of which could not be turned into weapons (Table 4).

6.5. An Archaeology of Modernity in Tomb 3

The sequence of events for Tomb 3 is completely different than for Tombs 1 and 2. If construction work, burial, and looting were the main practices identified for the first two tombs, Tomb 3 is characterized by unfinished labor in antiquity and modern uses for looting but especially for activities unrelated to the tomb itself. Eroded ancient sherds in substantial quantities can be connected to agricultural activities in Byzantine and perhaps later times. Located close to the village of Bil'in, the tomb witnessed a particularly intense use in the last 15 years, as the area became a hotspot of conflict between Israeli forces and Palestinians. The reason is the building of the separation wall and the extension of the settlement of Modi'in Ilit eastward up to the wall—an illegal land grab according to international law (International Court of Justice 2004). The expropriation of 60 percent of Bil'in's agricultural



FIG. 34
Tomb 3, modern finds. Upper: tear gas cartouche (Israeli army); middle: food package; lower: glass sherds of Tapuzina bottles. (Photos courtesy of the authors.)

lands by the Israeli state led to a movement of mostly peaceful resistance despite the use of life-threatening force on the Israeli side.

The archaeological finds from Tomb 3 are not without a certain explosiveness: When one of Bil'in's protest leaders, Abdulla Abu Rahma, organized an exhibit of similar

objects—tear gas cartouches, rubber bullets, and shell casings—he was put on trial for “possession of weapons” and spent 15 months in jail (Edelson 2009). It seems that the simple fact of collecting evidence of violent acts committed by a state presents a certain risk.

7. Tomb 4

Tomb 4 is located in the northern part of Saffa village (Fig. 2), approximately 50 m to the east of the western cemetery. It is in a garden belonging to a modern house, at an elevation of about 330 m above sea level. Around this tomb are a number of other looted Roman and Byzantine tombs, ancient winepresses, cisterns, and remains of ancient walls.

Initially, our plan was to excavate a tomb on an adjacent piece of land. But after searching, we decided not to do so. It would have taken a long time, as it was full of dirt and stone accumulations, and the work would have been risky due to the wide and growing cracks in its roof as well as the damage caused by a large fig tree planted directly at its entrance. During the evaluation, the owner of the land where Tomb 4 is located visited us with a group of workers who were digging a cistern on his property. The next day, while we were still working at Tomb 3, we received a phone call from one of the workers stating that they had found a tomb during the construction of the cistern, and they had already started to expand the tomb itself to incorporate it into the cistern (Fig. 36).

When we reached the spot, we found that the workers had already destroyed part of the southern wall and the eastern *arcosolium*, one of originally three *arcosolia*, after searching for valuable material and cleaning out the tomb for its future function as a cistern by removing almost all of the bones and discarding them. We told them of the necessity to inform the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and asked them to stop destroying the tomb. But the owner of the land refused to do so, fearing that the Department would prevent him from completing the new cistern. We then asked him to allow us to work in the tomb, to photograph, draw, and document it (Figs. 37–39). He agreed, on



FIG. 35
Tomb 3, glass from
L. 9: Tapuzina bottles
and remains of ignition
paper. (Photo courtesy
of the authors.)

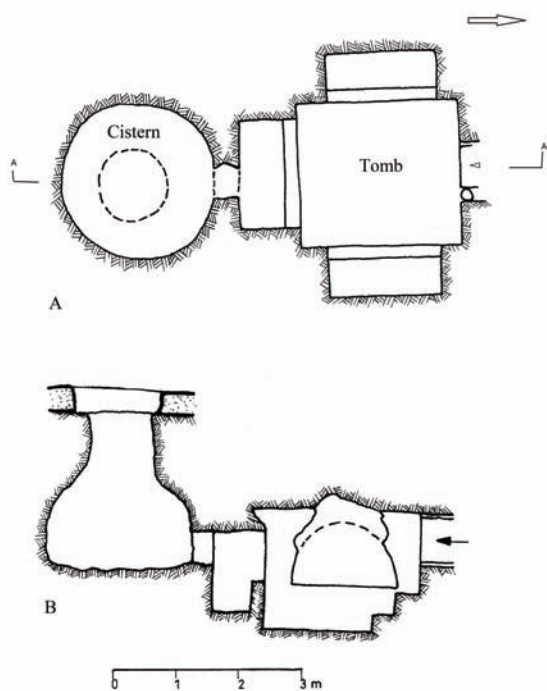


FIG. 36
Plan and section of Tomb 4 in Saffa. A: Top plan; B: Cross-section A-A.
(Drawing by I. Iqtait.)

condition that we would not stop his work for more than three hours. In the southern *arcosolium* we found a tooth, some finger bones, and one bead, and in the western one a fragment of a rib. We also encountered a piece of a glass bead, fragments of an oil lamp (Fig. 40), and a few jar sherds on the floor of the main chamber.

Personal interviews were conducted with the four workers who dug the cistern. One of them is well known to the lead author from previous fieldwork projects; he has engaged in looting antiquities and participated in two groups who had dug more than 10 tombs. Our interviews yielded the following information:

When we first entered, the chamber's floor was completely free of dirt and stones despite the presence of widening cracks in the ceiling and the walls. The three graves [*arcosolia*] were uncovered [not covered with stone slabs]. Two of them, the southern and the western ones, included fragmentary bones, and



FIG. 37

Door slab of Tomb 4, seen from the inside; on the outside apparently walled in with stones. (Photo courtesy of the authors.)



FIG. 38

Recently cut cistern that led to the discovery of Tomb 4.

(Photo courtesy of the authors.)

the other was completely free of bone. Also, a small intact glass bottle was found in the southern tomb [*arcosolium*].

Due to the very brief period of time at our disposal, our examination of this tomb was cursory at best. Three interesting observations concerning the conditions on the inside of Tomb 4 are that (a) the limestone was of a clean white color with reddish veins (Figs. 37, 38), (b) outside the slab that served as a door stone, a wall seems to have been built, and (c) on the floor of the main chamber, there were no significant accumulations of soil or remains of small sherds. This suggests that the red corrugated pottery from the other tombs does not belong to destroyed burial gifts, but rather that it was deposited together with soil in those tombs after episodes of looting.



FIG. 39
Preserved arcosolium of Tomb 4.
(Photo courtesy of the authors.)

8. Conclusions

This experimental project, bringing together oral history and an archaeology of modernity to investigate the aftermath of looting events, is only a beginning of a potentially larger one. The combination of interviews and excavation reveals a number of important differences between these two documentary technologies. With archaeological work alone, we would not have inferred that tombs were looted several times in a row. This became especially clear when evaluating Tomb 2. However, once sensitized to this possibility, we were able to show that at least in this particular case, the snail shell analysis can contribute to a reconstruction of the details of looting sequences within the tomb that were not evident from the interviews, namely, which *loculi* were likely emptied during which of these events.

Second, archaeology is not able to confirm or reject the reliability of interviewees' information about the objects they discovered and sold. The quantity of fragmented objects that may have been broken and left behind by looters was extremely small in all of the tombs investigated. Only Tombs 2 and 4 seem to have contained objects that could have been sold. This might suggest that most of the looters are so professional that they do not break their finds and that they have considerable fieldwork experience. Should this

finding be corroborated by other research, the pursuit of an "archaeology of looting" without the possibility of in-depth oral interviews would not enable us to identify what has been lost to the antiquities market. However, variable degrees of reliability of information revealed by interviews with looters must also be taken into account.

Conversely, archaeology has advantages over interviews when it comes to the exploration of material that enters tombs, often as a consequence of looting. This material may consist of modern objects, but also ancient sherds and even bones from tombs in the vicinity. The results of our investigation of Tomb 1 have implications for the analysis of ancient looting habits, as attested, for example, for Early Dynastic burials in southern Mesopotamia (see Pollock 1991). Where the pillaging of tombs is anchored in cultural habits, human bones and fragments of burial gifts that remain in tombs are not necessarily part of the original tomb assemblage but could have been added later.

Third, when there are indications for a commingling of bones and mixed burial assemblages, it becomes important to try to separate original burial materials from later, added ones. In purely archaeological terms, we identified several sources of important information for the reconstruction of the looting sequence of these kinds of tombs. Apart from architecture, this includes

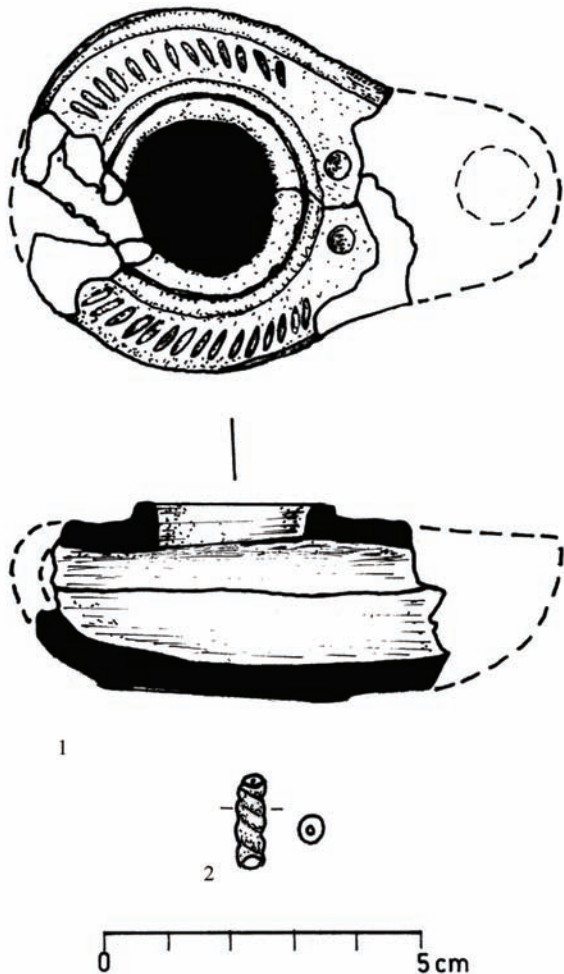


FIG. 40
Oil lamp with simple incisions; fragment of a twisted glass bead, both from Tomb 4. (Drawing courtesy of the authors.)

observations on discoloration of the limestone in inner chambers. Analyses of the size and average weight of sherds as well as the erosional state of sherd breaks can help identify objects that belonged to the original burial gifts as opposed to those that entered tombs either as a result of looting or in other ways.

Finally, the variability of the post-looting uses of tombs was unexpected. Of the three tombs pillaged with intent (Tomb 4 was discovered accidentally), only Tomb 2 displays unequivocal traces of the act of looting, including some of the tools used. This was also the

only tomb that included a context that had remained untouched. One of the most important reasons is likely that its entry had been closed by the landowner. Tomb 1 had been turned into a dump for bones and garbage from elsewhere, while Tomb 3 held the most surprising evidence from modernity, having been transformed into a strategic place of retreat for Palestinians in moments of violent conflict with the Israeli military at the nearby separation wall.

Considerable insights can still be gained into the construction of tombs even after their looting. And as long as the skeletal remains are not completely destroyed, assemblages such as the large number of human skeletal remains from Tomb 1 could be analyzed to learn more about the nutritional status, health and demographic parameters of a rural population in the Judean central hills in late antiquity.

In the past several decades, archaeologists have turned their attention increasingly to the contemporary past, using the theoretical and methodological tools of the discipline to examine material remains close to home temporally as well as spatially (e.g., Schofield 2009; Moshenska 2016; Holtorf and Fairclough 2013). Our work here is a contribution in this direction and one that complements the research of other archaeologists, including Kersel and Chesson (2013) whose project “Follow the Pots” examines looting of Bronze Age tombs in Jordan (see also <http://followthepotsproject.org/>).

Our results suggest that further archaeological fieldwork is unlikely to yield significant information on the objects looted and sold on the art and antiquities markets. Human remains recovered from these tombs can, however, offer bio-archaeological information that we have not yet been able to analyze, so at present we are unable to make further statements about this component of our research. To us the uniqueness of the sequence of events undergone by each of the tombs in the course of its looting seems of most importance. We venture to predict that further research in this direction will reveal an astonishing multiplicity not only of ancient tomb constructions, but also of looting practices and post-looting uses of these ancient monuments.

APPENDIX 1. FINDS FROM ANTIQUITY IN TOMBS 1 THROUGH 4 (“DIAGS” = DIAGNOSTIC SHERDS)

Location	Tomb	Locus	Pottery	Human bone	Other items
Bil'in	1	0	1 sherd		some glass
Bil'in	1	1	47 sherds (3 diags)	present (large quantity, incl. a skull)	metal bracelet (Fig. 6.1)
Bil'in	1	2	14 sherds (2 diags)	present (large quantity)	bronze object
Bil'in	1	7		present (incl. parts of 2 skulls)	
Bil'in	1	8	99 sherds (19 diags)	large quantity	pieces of ivory bracelets (Fig. 6.4 and 6–8) and glass bracelet (Fig. 6.5)
Bil'in	1	13		many long bones, 3 or 4 skulls, 2 pelvic elements	
Bil'in	1	14	33 (5 diags)		glass (bracelet?)
Bil'in	1	15		present	
Bil'in	1	16	9 (1 diag)	present	
Bil'in	1	17	12 (all diags)	present	glass, part of a ring?
Bil'in	1	20	14 (1 diag; 2 poss. from <i>tabun</i>)		arrowhead? (silex)
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	1	56 (4 diags)		lithics
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	2	62 (4 diags)		lithics; greenish gray tessera
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	10	<i>No documentation</i>		lithics
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	12	<i>No documentation</i>	present	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	13	<i>No documentation</i>	present	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	19	22 (6 diags)	fragmentary with spongy texture	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	20	84 (5 diags)	present	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	21	32 (5 diags)	many spongy bones, many teeth (at least 1 adult, 1 subadult)	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	22	40 (15 diags)	present	
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	23	85 (23 diags)	present but not much	
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	0	8		
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	1	100 (6 diags)		
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	2	280 (12 diags)		
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	9	34 (3 diags)	present	
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	11	4		
Saffa	4	0	8 (5 diags)	present; 1 tooth	glass bead

APPENDIX 2. FINDS FROM RECENT USE OF TOMBS

Location	Tomb	Locus	Finds
Bil'in	1	1	1 piece thick window glass; lengthy piece of wood
Bil'in	1	2	black plastic; plastic Pepsi bottle cap
Bil'in	1	7	remains of blue plastic chairs; 1 black jacket; 1 metal bucket
Bil'in	1	8	remains of thin plastic cup; 1 sardine can (Porthos, from Portugal, expiry date 31.12.2014; Hebrew writing); Pepsi bottle cap; 1 piece window glass; 2 pieces of necks of bottle glass; remains of plastic chair
Bil'in	1	13	plastic
Bil'in	1	17	plastic
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	2	glass
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	12	substantial pieces of charred wood (remains of torches?); 1 coin (10 agora)
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	13	pieces of wood
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	20	2 plastic bags (1 black, 1 transparent)
Saffa eth-Thaher	2	23	2 cigarette butts; remains of a black plastic bag; 1 old iron bucket; 1 cylinder-shaped and 1 two meter-long iron rod
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	0	2 rubber bullets; 1 bottle (Tapuzina); 15 glass sherds from bottles (3 bases, 1 rim, 4 with textured surface, 4 green)
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	1	glass (14 pieces Tapuzina bottle incl. closed bottle cap; 4 green, 1 white bottle rim; 1 Coke bottle rim & shoulder; 34 sherds white glass; 1 base; 1 piece "99"); 1 piece rusty sheet metal; 2 pieces plastic; 1 rubber bullet; 1 black plastic bag; 1 plastic bag Tarzan chips
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	2	glass: 9 white simple, 1 white base, 1 green, 1 brown
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	8	1 one-liter plastic Pepsi bottle; black and transparent plastic bags; 1 rusty shell casing; 1 plastic bag from roasted sunflower seeds (expiry date 2010; in Arabic); 1 piece of wood; 1 branch; 1 piece of metal grate; glass; 1 tear gas cartouche
Bil'in Sha'b al Hawa	3	9	glass: 2 pieces Tapuzina bottleneck, 1 base, 27 other glass sherds, 1 Molotov cocktail; 1 machine gun cartouche (Uzi?); sheet metal; plastic

Notes

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1. The work was conducted with the permission of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH).
2. The lead author visited the site again in the summer of 2016 and found that most of these tombs are either completely or partially destroyed. The entrances of the others are back-filled with heaps of dirt due to recent urban development activities.
3. It should be emphasized that these are very preliminary estimates that need to be confirmed or modified by a full osteological analysis.

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