A CEREMONIAL CENTER FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

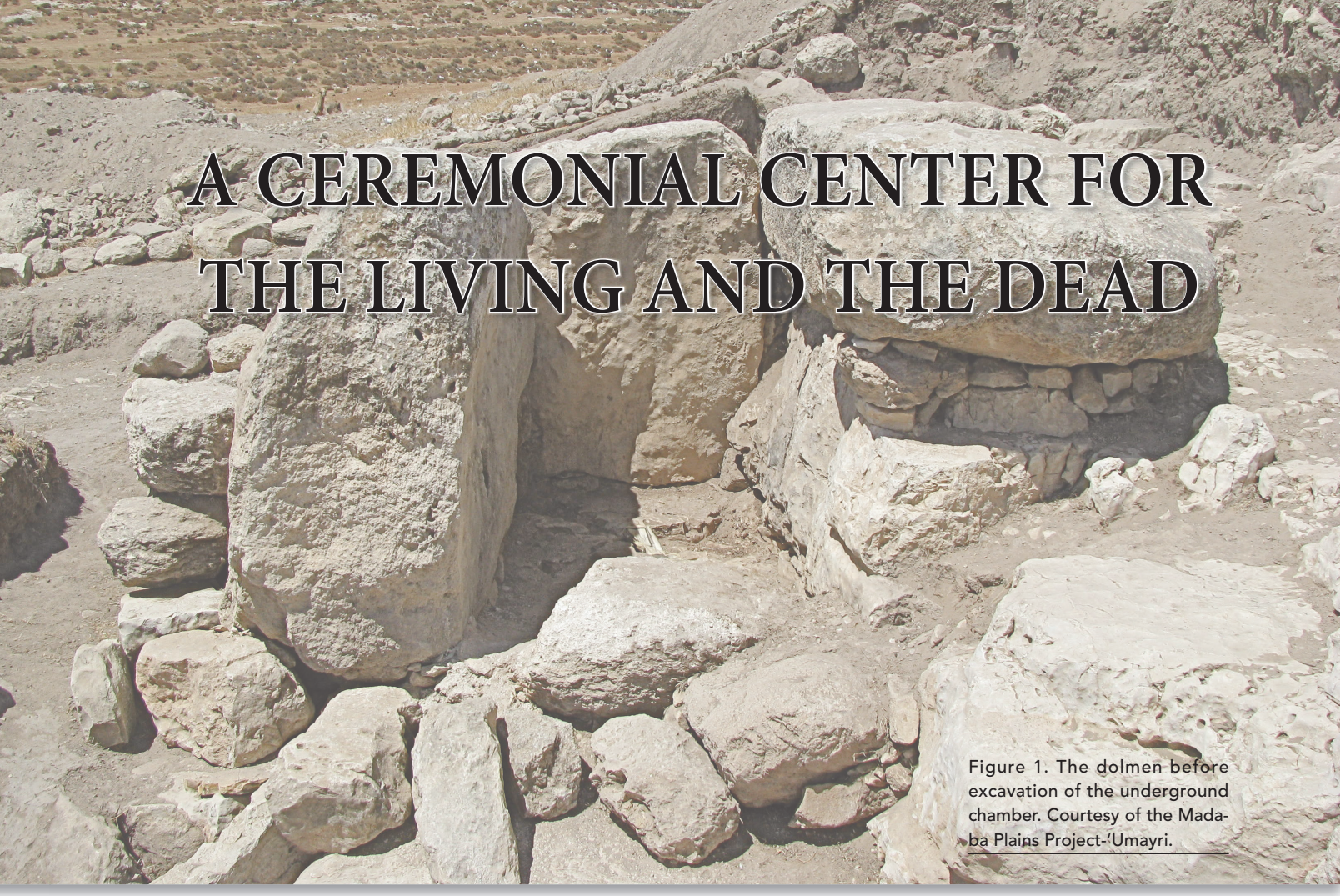


Figure 1. The dolmen before excavation of the underground chamber. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-ʿUmayri.

Gloria London

Were it not for the living, the dead would have died long ago. —Arabic proverb

Along with the geography of the region, the domestic and mortuary remains at Tall al-ʿUmayri in Jordan (see further Herr and Clark 2009) provide a broad perspective on ancient societies. Located in a relatively fertile zone with a permanent water source, it made an alluring destination for ancient people. Indeed, evidence is accumulating to suggest that the area may have served as a ceremonial center for commemorating buried ancestors and seasonal festivities.

Ceremonial and feasting-related finds came primarily from deposits at two locations, each dated to different time periods: (1) for the Early Bronze I (EB I, 3500–3000 B.C.E.), located on the lower slope of the site was a dolmen tomb with finds suggesting that it may have remained important long after the last corpse was placed in the tomb; (2) from the late second millennium came sizable storage facilities and a pit filled with bones, associated with the *marzeaḥ* tradition, which could have functioned at joyful and sad occasions.

Adopting Ancestors

Burial in the vicinity of a venerated individual was one way to guarantee annual visits by family members and others who passed by or stopped. In addition to respecting and acknowledging tombs of unknown people, later visitors gradually adopted those buried at prominent water sources or on migratory routes. Whether or not they were actually blood-related or part of an extended family, those buried at important shrines were elevated to ancestor status and were enveloped in later oral histories and traditions. For instance, Bedouin in the mid-nineteenth century would visit a shrine but have minimal details about the deceased saint, who nevertheless was designated as the progenitor of their tribe (Marx 1977, 47).

Advantages in claiming a link to venerated tombs include legitimizing authority over the water source and adjacent lands. In claiming ties to the deceased, a social order for the living arose. Precedence and the antiquity of the burial gave a competitive edge against others who might want water or territory (Lowenthal 1985, 41, 53). Whoever claimed ownership by precedence exercised the right to grant others permission to access water and cross through the territory.

Dolmen Tombs in Central and Southern Jordan

Early Bronze Age dolmen tombs are impressive house-like structures built of large stone slabs that stand on bedrock. In Jordan, dolmens are found individually or in groups known as fields. At al-Murayghât–Hajr al-Mansûb in southern Jordan, the ceremonial landscape is still in use by migratory pastoralists who camp there in summer. Nearby farmers cultivate the site and recently reset a fallen stone, demonstrating its enduring relevance to the twenty-first century. Bedouin tribal marks and the custom of rubbing blood on the stone were recorded in the late nineteenth century. These practices imply the continuing significance of stones erected in the Early Bronze Age, some five thousand years ago (Savage 2010).

It has been assumed that the builders of these tombs were pastoralists who buried their dead at specific locations on regular migration paths, enabling them to pass by the site at least once or twice a year. The impressive structures are often found in steep terrain suitable for animals. Some tribal members might reside in permanent villages all or part of the year, but others followed the herds.

After their construction and initial use, the dolmens may have functioned differently in later time periods. Feasts and stories, passed from one generation to another, may have been a repeated theme. Early Bronze IV, Middle and Late Bronze, Iron Age, and later surface sherds found at some of the dolmens record reuse or continued use of the tombs (Epstein 1975; Savage 2010, 36; Prag 1995, 79).

The lone dolmen at ʻUmayri abuts the ancient settlement on the tell, which developed after the dolmen was constructed. Growing evidence of nondomestic artifacts excavated at the mound can be understood as indicative of a population responsible for maintenance of the spring/well and, possibly, the dolmen. The proximity of tell and tomb requires that we examine them together and in relation to other nearby mortuary remains.

Tombs at Tall al-ʻUmayri

Two burial chambers at Tall al-ʻUmayri include the Early Bronze dolmen and a Middle Bronze (MB) II tomb. The dolmen consists of three large vertical stone slabs leading down to an underground, multifloored chamber (fig.1). The slabs of rock create an above-ground structure that was ordinarily roofed with a capstone; it is missing at ʻUmayri (Dubis and Dabrowski 2002).

Slow erosion from the mound, perhaps not until the Byzantine era, gradually covered and protected the dolmen, with sediments almost completely covering it by the late twentieth century (Herr 2002). Inside were partial skeletal remains of twenty individuals, twenty complete ceramic containers, chipped stone tools, maceheads, beads, and spindle whorls dating to EB IB, that is, to roughly 3100 B.C.E. Disarticulated bones displaced earlier burials in a process known as "secondary burial."

Irregular boulders arranged in a circle around the dolmen on the purposefully flattened bedrock are similar to stone circles found at other dolmens. Beaten-earth surfaces and plaster floors associated with the circle attest to repeated reuse, possibly as people circumambulated the grave. A table-like stone platform was possibly used "to conduct feasts and other mortuary or funerary rituals" (Herr and Clark 2009, 72). A nearby shelter, found in 2008 about 4 m from the dolmen, could have been used with the dolmen.

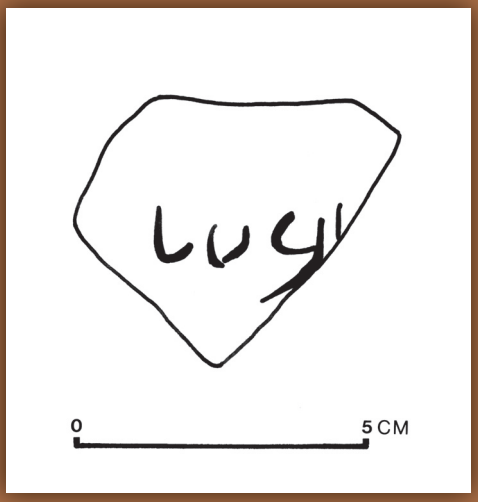
Nearby and hewn into the sloping limestone bedrock was an MB II/LB I chamber tomb containing complete pots and bones from eleven articulated and seven fragmentary skeletons. The tomb contained the remains of eighteen individuals of all ages, among which were eleven nearly complete skeletons. Primary inhumations suggest a multigenerational tomb for a local, resident family. Here, too, a broken jug smashed against the tomb steps implies a postburial ceremony at the tomb (fig. 2).

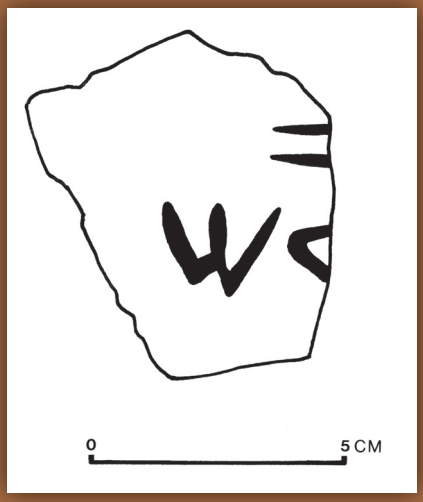
The ʻUmayri dolmen, constructed about 200 m from a critical water source before any built settlement started at the site, was part of the physical and social landscape for millennia. Proximity to the spring might have induced later people to associate those buried in the dolmen as protectors of the water source. This could explain why it remained unlooted, in contrast to thousands of robbed dolmens elsewhere in Jordan. MB II/LB I people chose a burial site nearby, possibly to incorporate the sanctity of the dolmen into their history. It served to legitimize the authority of the living to control water use. As an inescapable marker on the horizon, people who lived at the site or periodically stopped for water or other reasons could have adopted it in one form or another in different eras.

Tall al-ʻUmayri Stratified Deposits

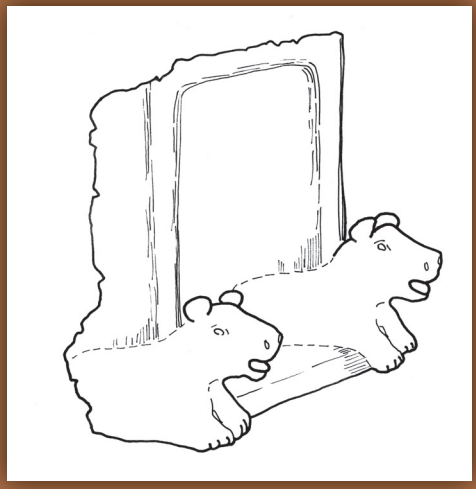
Results of twelve excavation seasons at Tall al-ʻUmayri, recently presented by excavators Herr and Clark (2009),

Figure 2. MB II/LB I tomb, cut into bedrock, shows a couple of steps down to the chamber. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-ʻUmayri.

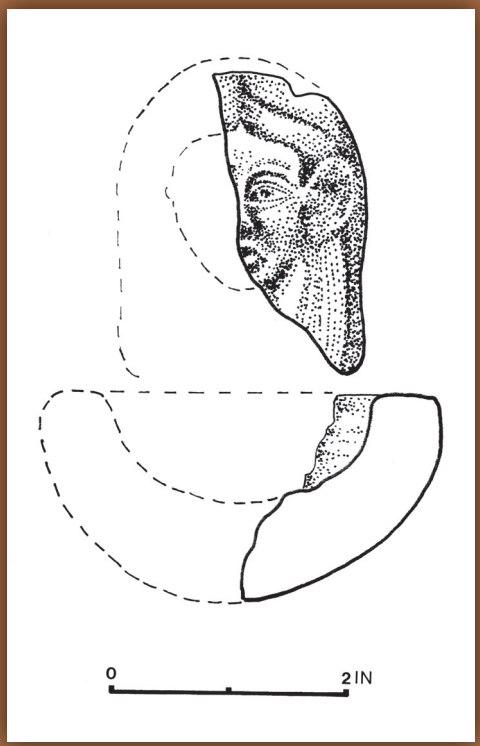




Figures 3a–b. Ostraca (a) "To Ba'al" and (b) *qdš* ("holy") inscribed on sherds. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.



Figures 4a–c. (a, upper right) An Iron Age model shrine guarded by lions, (b, lower left) a mold and reconstruction of a female head figurine, and (c, lower right) a miniature model shrine. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.



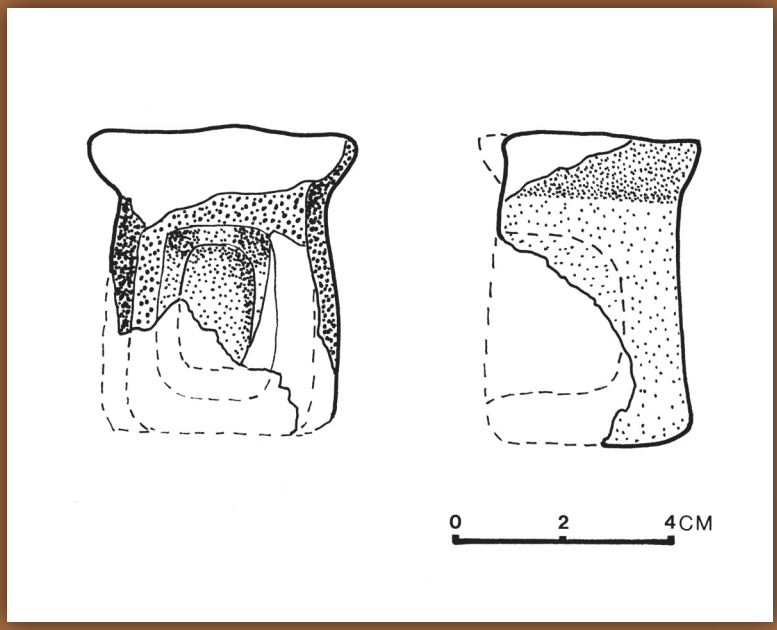


Figure 5. A collar rim jar/pithos from Building B at Tall al-'Umayri. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

produced well-preserved structures, inscriptions, pottery, animal bones, and over one hundred seals and seal impressions. Together they imply that the site was a seat of political authority from the Bronze through Iron/Persian periods. The inscribed seals of high-status government officials suggest bureaucratic importance and even the royal patronage of a named Ammonite king.

Two ceramic model shrines and two dedicatory inscriptions (ostraca; see figs. 3a–b) are among the uncommon finds of Late Iron II. The incised jug reads "To Ba'al" and was possibly an offering to that god (Herr 2000a, 250). The letters *qdš*, "holy," on another sherd (Herr 1997, 329) also suggest ritual offering. Yet another ostracon contains the word *šlm*, "peace, contentment," and may be part of a blessing formula.

Iron Age model shrines, a miniature model shrine, figurine molds, and over one hundred excavated clay broken figurines are among the first-millennium finds. Two molds, one a human head and the other a lion's head (Dabrowski 1997, 346–48; 2000, 219) imply local manufacture of clay figurines for ceremonial use (figs. 4a–c).

Late Second Millennium B.C.E. Late Bronze/Iron Age Remains at 'Umayri

Buildings and associated Late Bronze/Iron Age era artifacts are atypical of finds from other sites dating to the end of the second millennium B.C.E. (figs. 5–8). Although pottery and building designs display some similarities with the small work stations around the Jerusalem area (London 2003), the overall scale and diversity of artifacts set 'Umayri apart.

On the western and highest part of the site, near the LB II temple/shrine, Building A is differentiated into areas, one part designated as a "cultic corner" for "ceremonial activity" (Herr

Figure 6 (below). The LB II shrine/temple with five standing stones in a niche was repeatedly replastered and well-maintained. On the floor stands an offering table. Courtesy of E. Bedell.

Figure 7 (above). Stem of a painted chalice as excavated in the LB II temple/shrine. Courtesy of E. Bedell.

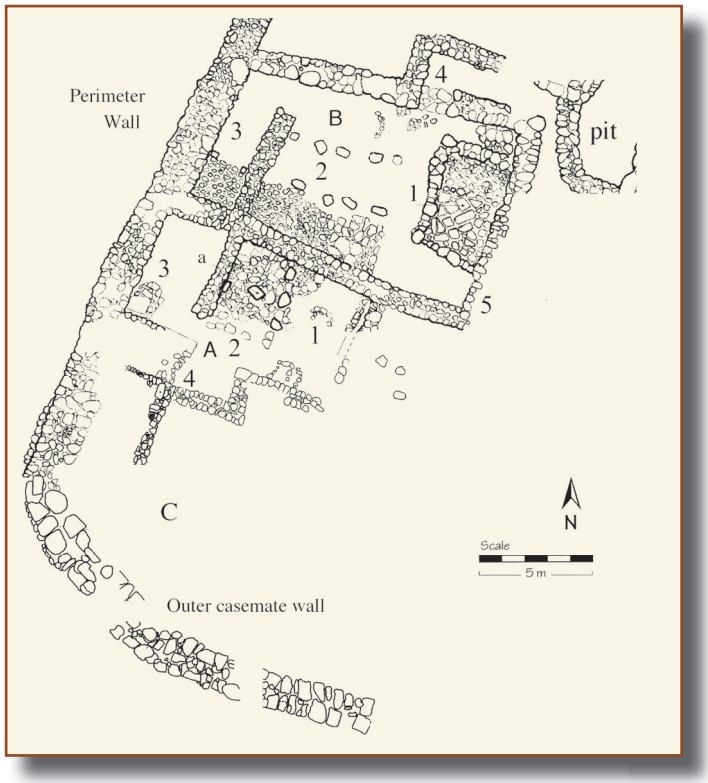


Figure 8. Plan of Buildings A, B, and C at Tall al-'Umayri. Building A1:beaten floor, bins, hearth, bench, basalt quern, and small pots; A2: flagstone surface of possible cultic area with an altar; A3: raised platform and jars; and A4: seven rectangular flat-lying standing stones. Building B1: paved area; B2: pillars; B3: partially paved room with collarred-rim jars; B4: ante-chamber and possible building entrance; and B5: southern entrance. The LB II temple/shrine stands north of Building B. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

2006, 72). On the paved floor in front of a standing stone is a smoothed, oval slab, possibly an offering table (fig. 9). Across from the standing stone lay seven white limestone slabs, possibly spare standing stones (Herr 2006, 62–63; fig. 10).

The opposite end of the room held animal bones, some with butchering marks, a hearth, storage bin, bench, ground stone tools, and some collared-rim storage jars. With only 12 percent cookware, Herr (2006, 70–71) speculates that cooking or cooking-pot storage occurred elsewhere. Unusual pots account for as much as 10 percent of rims: three lamps, three chalices, a flask, two juglets, two *pyxides*, two amphorae, a basket-handled jug with a sieved spout, a painted sherd, and a nearly complete spouted krater or "oil separator" (fig. 11). For Herr (2006, 68), this suggests agricultural or possibly "a cultic interpretation" because oil from the first pressing was part of cultic activities (Zevit 2001, 139 n. 28). In contrast, the pottery within Building B, a four-room construction, comprised 50 percent *pithoi*, versus 22 percent in Building A.

A vast reserve of about one hundred collared-rim storage jars/*pithoi*, which date Building B to the Late Bronze/Iron Age, represents an impressive central storage depot not found in contemporaneous sites (fig. 12).

Metals, Seals, and Stone Artifacts in Late Bronze/Iron Age Buildings

Nonceramic artifacts from Building B, including a broken bronze male deity figurine, bronze weapons, inscribed seals, and many stone artifacts, individually are appropriate for domestic use but can assume different uses when considered collectively. The large storage facility is atypical of an ordinary house and more characteristic of an administrative or collection depot.

In Building A, the pottery, standing stone(s), "offering" slab, benches, animal bones, and so on imply ceremonial use and possibly animal or grain offerings. The finds concur with the material correlates Zevit (2001, 81) compiled for cultic activities: standing stones, figurines, unusual pottery, metal artifacts indicative of wealth, multiple examples of a symbol, storage jars, hearths, basins, bins, and cooking pots. Located at the highest part of the site, Buildings A and B indicate use by a small number of individuals with high political, social, or religious rank.

Animal bones with butchering marks found in both buildings are a fraction of excavated faunal material. Within a nearby deposit, animal bones were found interspersed with high-status items: metals, seals, Chocolate-on-White ware, and

Figure 9. Building A: (1) beaten earth floor; (2) standing stone and possible altar/table; (3) inner perimeter wall; and (4) space in front of the flat-lying "extra standing stones." Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

Mycenaean and Cypriot sherds, which are relevant for assessing the function of Buildings A and B.

Late Bronze II/Iron Transitional Era Animal Bone Deposit

Adjacent to the entrance to Building B is a stone-lined space discovered between partially excavated MB II walls (fig. 3). The large (minimally 5 m wide x 2 m deep) area held over 25,000 animal bone fragments and sherds of collared-rim jars, cookware, and other pots identical to those in Buildings A and B (Herr 2006, 72).

Detailed examination of nearly six thousand bone fragments, including analysis of the body part distribution, sex and age of animals, fragmentation, and the like, leads archaeozoologists to designate the remains as a garbage dump (Peters, Pöllath, and von den Driesch 2002, 306). Profuse organic debris, along with more cooking pot sherds than anyplace else, caused the excavators to come to the same conclusion and to categorize it as a refuse deposit (Herr 2000b, 279). Cooking pots account for 35 percent of the 458 rims. In Buildings A and B, cookware is only 12 percent and 8 percent.

The animal bones were identified as sheep/goats (82 percent) and cattle (14 percent), with smaller percentages of other domesticates and under 1 percent wild fauna. Butchering marks are present. Most (85 percent) animals were slaughtered young, at age two, coinciding with their peak body weight and before herders would find it necessary to invest in feeding them after weight gain had slowed (Peters, Pöllath, and von den Driesch 2002, 306). Hind limbs (28 percent) are a little more numerous than fore limbs (18 percent) but likely reflect the manner in which the bones broke (Peters, Pöllath, and von den Driesch 2002, 312–17).

Animal bone deposits rarely include all skeletal parts of each animal. However, this does not hold for the unusually comprehensive collection of bones in the bone repository. The archaeozoologists conclude that the presence of complete skeletal material requires that slaughter, butchering, cooking, and eating occurred near the pit. No other actions could assure that nothing was lost (Peters, Pöllath, and von den Driesch 2002, 316).

Distinct deposits within the pit were recognizable in the many layers of different colored soil, some ashy and others brick-like. Tip lines of ashy deposits slant downward and indicate that bones and sherds were dropped in from west to east, that is, from the direction of Building B. A 4-cm-thick cover of black ash and patches of ash and burnt or disintegrated organic material were also found.

Metals, Seals, and Stone Artifacts in the Late Bronze/Iron Age I Bone Deposit

Seals, metal fragments, and ingots were discarded with the bones. These glyptic finds, including a scarab, a scaraboid, two cylinder seals, plus one square and one conical seal, are in some cases comparable to those from Tell Beit Mirsim and Mount Ebal (Eggler, Herr, and Root 2002, 246). Yet other artifacts found at ʻUmayri, such as collared-rim jars and the four-room house, resemble jars and buildings in the central hill country of Israel.

Assessment of the Contents

Seals embodying the identity of individuals, families, larger social units, and elite status signal the broad-ranging social, political, and economic interests and players involved. Unfinished seals of volcanic tuff signify the continuing authority to carve seals by people who apparently maintained the MB II and LB II tradition of community leaders resident at ʻUmayri.

The possibly "sacred" nature and protective treatment of bones at ʻUmayri is suggested by an absence of scavenging animals or exposure to the elements. A solitary buzzard bone is the sole evidence of a predator in the pit. Normally, pets or other animals feed on discarded bones, as for example in Bedouin and the Druze communities of the region today.

Rather than dispose of the bones away from buildings and people, the bones were carefully collected and covered, perhaps as sacred refuse. Zevit (2001, 200 n. 125) describes a Greek custom of 600–300 B.C.E. that involved sacred refuse. Tents set up within or outside sanctuary areas were for consuming a ritual meat meal. No one was permitted to remove sacred meat from sanctuary grounds. Zevit compares this arrangement to the Mount Ebal enclosure, where a relatively small number of bones have been found. In contrast, the ʻUmayri bone "pit" holds every bone of the body (skeletal element) of the most abundant animals (fig. 13).

Figure 10. Collection of rectangular standing stones in the corner Room A4, near the vertical standing stone and possible "offering table." Courtesy of E. Bedell.

Figure 11 (left). Spouted oil separator for agricultural or possibly ceremonial use. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

Figure 12 (right). Reconstructing LB/Iron Age collar rim storage jars from Building B at Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

Social Zooarchaeology

Animal skeletal elements, their quantity, find location, size, and condition offer information on the people responsible for faunal deposits (Crabtree 1990; DeFrance 2009). Evidence of the socioeconomic status of those who organized, contributed, and participated (i.e., slaughtered, skinned, cooked, served, and ate the meat) is discernible in the self-contained deposit of bones. According to ethnographic and epigraphic sources, three circumstances result in large quantities of bones: sacrificial, hunting, or feasting rituals. Minimally burnt bones or evidence of intense heat may imply that sacrifice was not the primary action resulting in the bone accumulation. Ritual sacrifice in the ancient Near East often involved burning donated portions to a deity (see Levine 2002), which presumably could have resulted in blackened or otherwise burned bones. Still, one cannot entirely eliminate some animal sacrifice having contributed to the deposit, especially that which would have included consumption of nonsacrificed carcass portions. A paucity of wild animals, 1 percent, rules out a hunting celebration. Feasting remains the best explanation.

Cooking technique, bone fragmentation, the presence/absence of specific bones, and their condition can reveal the social status of those involved in activities related to faunal remains (DeFrance 2009, 122). The bone fragments at 'Umayri implicate people of different social statuses. Roasted (burned) bones are rare and possibly were reserved for the elite. Bones of low meat value for all domesticated animals could signify people of lower social status. The small size of cracked and butchered bones, including those with little meat, boiled in pots of stew or soup, imply the attendance of lower-status segments of society. Highly fragmented bones, cracked to extract the marrow, fit into a stew pot to make a broth and extend the valuable protein source. An abundance of meat requires enough people to eat before it spoils and is a feast remembered for the food and the people present (Banning and Kohler-Röllefson 1986, 163–64).

Near Eastern administrative centers in towns and cities include texts recording the receipt and use of animals and foodstuffs since the Early Bronze Age. For example, the Ur III Drehem archive notes the age, sex, appearance, and feeding habit (hand-fed or not) for incoming animals collected by the resident authority (Hilgert 2003, 52, 64, 77). Disbursements or redistribution of foodstuffs to temples, soldiers, and local authorities are recorded. In lieu of written records of grains or livestock received at 'Umayri, the dry storage depot of collared-rim jars and abundance of animal bones implies administrative responsibilities beyond the needs of the immediate or extended family. Instead, local 'Umayri Late Bronze/Iron Age resident leaders organized feasts. Leaders ostensibly asserted their authority in a method employed by rulers of neighboring communities but not documented in texts found at urban centers. 'Umayri provided a venue for rural public events provisioned by community leaders who collected and redistributed essential foods.

Figure 13. East of Building B, the space between two MB II walls reused for the deposition of animal bones and other artifacts. Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project-'Umayri.

Late Bronze Age cuneiform texts from Emar in Syria document the collection by local authorities of animals and their subsequent designation for cultic or kitchen purposes and for

dignitaries (Fleming 1996). The texts refer to participation of the general community in seven- to nine-day feasts during which no specific cultic events occurred. The king contributed feast supplies but had no other prescribed activity related to the celebration. Alternatively, a temple would provide animals for slaughter. The seven-day Zukru Festival and installation of a priestess is one example of an elaborate feast celebrated every seven years, in addition to less ornate feasts annually (Lev-Tov and McGeough 2007).

The Late Bronze Age Emar texts, like the EB III Drehem tablets, list domesticated animals slaughtered and/or sacrificed to commemorate an event and/or honor a deity. The same animals appear in a late Iron Age Aramaic inscription on a mortuary stela at Zincirli in Syria. It specifies a bull for feasts at the time of death and sheep/goats for subsequent feasts to commemorate the burial spot, which is a traditional theme echoed throughout the ancient Near East (Pardee 2009, 54; Struble and Herrmann 2009, 29–30). The same animals were found at ʻUmayri and other sites with remains of feasts and/or offerings, such as Hazor, where a collection of seventeen thousand bones is attributed to a ritual feast (Zuckerman 2007).

Partaking in feasts by the general population implicitly acknowledges the power and authority of a king or local deity and his or her cult leaders. Inclusiveness of feasts marks them as designed to display and reaffirm the social status of participants and the ruler (Lev-Tov and McGeough 2007, 92–94). Feasts engage a larger group of people than normal who participate in a ritual of special food to inspire loyalty and a sense of belonging to a group and leader. Feasts can happen at the start or end of an action or with the telling of stories and histories (Sherratt 2004, 308). They help maintain social ties between people and groups of people, if social transactions take place. Positive or negative social situations, such as burials or deaths, are stimuli for feasts.

Seasonal Celebrations and Scheduling Patterns

The regional landscape juxtaposes widely diverse ecozones, all within close proximity, differing in altitude, slope, precipitation, flora, fauna, soil, and temperature. The physical geography requires seasonal scheduling of resources to utilize the dispersed natural abundance. It was beneficial for community members to schedule visits to various ecozones at different times of the year to extract their natural resources. At other times the entire family would convene and lead to periodic increases in population at ʻUmayri. Building projects are a dry-season task requiring material and labor. Another seasonal activity, pottery manufacture, corresponds to the dry months of spring and summer, May through October, when clay is more easily mined than when wet and heavy. Wood to fuel the kiln is dry, and pots dry and fire quickly.

Descriptions of feasting among current pastoralist populations in the Middle East provide meaningful parallels, given the permanency of environmental constraints. People in antiquity and today face water scarcity. Drought occurs almost annually at the present time. Marginally productive lands tend to produce the same behaviors across the expanse of time. As a result, current populations coping with the same terrain as in the past can serve as models for strategies designed to maximize the environment.

While scheduling visits to different areas at different times of the year maximizes the varied ecozones, only seasonal visits to tombs would involve the entire family group. When commemorating ancestors, people engaged in a full range of social, economic, and political transactions. Daily milking and feeding of animals and processing and preserving milk and other foods continued unabated. The annual ingathering of extended families offered opportunity to participate in trade, barter, politics, medicine, healing, and life-cycle events, under the protection of the ancestors buried at the dolmen. They were essential to legitimize any current political authority, to maintain and foster political cohesion, to preserve old and form new alliances, or to bless marriages, all of which involved feasts.

Feasting at ʻUmayri may have revolved around the seasonal scheduling of resources. After wintering in semi-arid zones, people came to ʻUmayri in spring and summer due to the availability of water and vegetation for grazing. Bones of sheep or goats under three months and up to six months of age are rare, marginally hinting at an arid and warm birthing locale away from ʻUmayri. After a few months, the herd shifted to the central Jordanian Highlands where barley ripened and sheep shearing occurred before the summer heat. Ample water for drinking, washing sheep, and cleaning sheep skins and wool enabled herders to celebrate seasonal migrations as farmers engaged in harvest festivities. The co-occurrence of an unlooted dolmen, the abundance of animal bones, the standing stones, and a sizable storehouse of large jars is best explained as a meeting place where buried ancestors and water enticed visitors for millennia.

The *Marzeaḥ* Social Institution

The death of an elder leader or family member can cause strife or threaten the status quo as a new person takes charge. One purpose of mortuary practices is to create and maintain a new or existing social order. They bring people together to confront new challenges and to offer options to establish new bonds and alliances. Such a large assemblage of people required adequate food.

The *marzeaḥ* is a social institution mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, Punic, and Nabatean literature spanning three thousand years. Earlier texts from Emar, Ebla, and Ugarit discuss the *marzeaḥ* as a group of people who organized drinking and feasting. Participants in the *marzeaḥ* seem to have been well-to-do people and/or landowners (Pardee 2002, 217) who met at a house or a more specialized setting associated with public spaces. Ugaritic and later Phoenician and Punic texts lack a funerary component (Zevit 2001, 577 n. 233), but biblical references (Jer 16:5–9; Amos 6:3–7) include duties performed at funerals and weddings (Zevit 2001, 577 n. 233). *Marzeaḥ* observances likely

changed throughout time, but they invariably included drinking alcoholic beverage (McGeough 2003–2004).

References to *marzeaḥ* in the Hebrew Bible mention a luxurious meal of two types of meat. The success of the event required the presence of ten men whose drinking and singing had the "power to protect" and ward off evil (Zevit 2001, 576). Ugaritic texts refer to twelve or so men (Pardee 2002, 184 n. 2). Texts about private *marzeaḥ* are scant. A link between periodic drinking events or banquets organized by high-status men and a cult of the dead or mourning remains debated (Greer 2007, 246–47).

Finds at ʻUmayri seem to suggest the *marzeaḥ*, including feasting and a sizable storage facility in a house, rather than a temple or palace. The large collection of slaughtered animals provided a sumptuous meal. The bones were found with deep as well as shallow bowls for serving drink and/or food. Small juglets, flasks, and *pyxides* could have held special oils. All were deposited at a venue close to a large, well-maintained four-room storage structure similar in form to a residential house and likely owned by a leader of some type. Funerary associations are absent.

The only attribute common to the *marzeaḥ* throughout history is consumption of an alcoholic drink, namely, wine (McGeough 2003–2004, 410). The biblical *marzeaḥ* functioned at happy and sad occasions, since weddings and funerals involve transactions rather than just religious ceremonies. Marriages bond two families, not two individuals. Large numbers of people participate in weddings and funerals by exchanging gifts, such as livestock, for immediate consumption and for the new couple. Plentiful food plus people are occasions to commemorate ancestors and conduct weddings then and now.

ʻUmayri provides the material remains that may correspond to Bronze and Iron Age textual evidence of a final, postburial stage of mortuary behavior. For three thousand years the dolmen stood unobstructed and undisturbed, never defaced. Instead, local leaders organized seasonal feasts coinciding with harvest, animal shearing, and culling practices as part of the agrarian and pastoral lifestyle.

The dolmen and ceremonial or administrative buildings suggest long-term use of the area for community-wide events and organized ceremonies of all types. Rather than cultic, ritual, or religious events necessarily, they were part of daily life, just as certain Ugaritic and biblical holy days coincide with harvest holidays. Officials collected livestock and grain, as known from texts in the towns and cities, in order to redistribute them to ensure basic survival while quietly asserting their authority. In complex prestate-level societies, political elites organize labor and the economy to a greater or lesser extent. They allocate labor, including animal rearing and subsequent use, in order to best increase their own wealth/status and that of the community.

Adopted ancestors buried in the dolmen provided a physical landmark in an open, accessible place next to the water source. Permanency of the ʻUmayri water supply and the dolmen, in an area experiencing one major earthquake each century and smaller jolts more frequently, perhaps instilled respect for the site. Eventually that translated into ritualized ceremonial habits with or without religious significance.

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