

The Necropolis of Abila of the Decapolis 2019-2021

Abdulla Al-Shorman

Access Archaeology





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TO

The soul of Hussien Debajah, the friend and photographer.

Engineer Nayef Tura'ani, the friend and tutor.

PREFACE

This book was motivated by the desire I have had to further understand the burial practices during the classical period in Jordan. It will hopefully serve as a documentary source for the tombs of Abila that were subject to vandalism by tomb robbers for many centuries. The 'Necropolis of Hesban' was an inspiring book where I adopt its tomb classification and make use of its parallel examples. 'The Necropolis of Abila of the Decapolis' is intended to serve as a source of information for scholars who wish to understand the Roman/Byzantine culture that existed in Jordan and how it came to an end. Most of the archaeologists that I have come into contact with during last two decades support what they call Romanization excluding the local people, their language and culture. We wished that we had enough information on how they co-existed and what was their role in a powerful and dominating Empire. Unfortunately, the locals enter the history of the region just after the end of the Byzantine period; everything they had accomplished then was attributed to the Greeks and the Romans.

Although more fieldworks are needed, this book provides funerary information that could be the start to generate a model for supporting or refuting the models of local people's acculturation, assimilation or cultural isolation. I started writing the 'Necropolis of Abila of the Decapolis' after the first season of excavation at the site in 2019, where I got inspired by the tremendous amount of data the team had collected. The collection of data for this volume ended after the third season of excavation in 2021. I employed high quality AutoCAD 2d drawings and SketchUp 3d sections of every tomb we excavated or surveyed. The dating and location of the tombs allowed me to track the temporal use of the Necropolis and, therefore, narrate the story of Abila from a funerary perspective.

Finding intact tombs was one of my aims during the third season of excavation, which was not an easy feat. For this reason, we used GPR instruments to scan Area J. We were fortunate to discover Tomb J33, which was intact and had never been utilized since its construction. This tomb adds to the body of knowledge we already had and offered further insights on the Late Roman/Early Byzantine transition period. We will search Area H for further Hellenistic tombs in the summer of 2022 to corroborate the present volume's premise that the early residents of the site during the Early Hellenistic period were not natives. I sent several samples to Durham University for Strontium isotope analysis in the hopes of learning more about human mobility during the site's classical period. Finally, the fieldwork team is hoping that this volume will catch the archaeologists' attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This book and the bioarcheology fieldwork of 2019, 2020, and 2021 at Abila were generously supported by Yarmouk University. I am indebted to the team who accompanied me during the months of excavation and surveying at the Necropolis; Faris Bdair (Co-director), late Hussien Deebajah (Photographer), Mahmoud Alwan (GPR technician), Waleed Abu Alhayja (Surveyor), Mousa Sarbal (Archaeology technician), Maria Allan (Teaching assistant), Hussien Sababbeh (Archaeology Professor), Sarah Alomari (Teaching assistant), and the Anthropology undergraduate students. Special thanks are due to the Director General of the Department of Antiquities, the Department's representatives Emad Obiedat, Mousa Malkawi, Hadi Migdadi, Asma Alzibdeh, Bashar Sbiehat, and Daifallah Obiedat. Without the locals' support and the enthusiasm of the local workers the fieldwork at the Necropolis would have not seen success.

The collected data from previous archaeological excavations at the Necropolis by Harold Mare, John Davis, Neathery Fuller and Robert Smith were of great help; they and the editor of the Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin permitted the use of the published top plans of tombs. Professor Michael Fuller, St. Louis Community College provided the top plan of the Apsed tomb and the photograph of Columbaria H61. I am indebted to ACOR for providing the requested pictures.

We owe heartfelt thanks to the local community, which was extremely generous and logistically supportive. The landlords around the site provided all means of support, and we believe that their partnership during the three seasons of excavation put the project on track for success and achievement.

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ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

Abila of the Decapolis (now Qwailbeh, Raphana during the Roman period, and also known for a time as Seleucia) is located in northern Jordan ($32^{\circ}40'52''$ N $35^{\circ}52'11''$ E) 15 kilometers north of Irbid city, 15 and 50 kilometers northeast of the Decapolis cities of Gadara and Pella, respectively. Abila was constantly on the verge of several major empires, including those founded by the Egyptians in the Bronze Ages, Aramaeans, Persians, Greeks, Nabateans, Romans, Byzantines, and finally Umayyads. This generated a conflict between the city's sedentary residents and the indigenous who lived beyond the city's walls. Abila became one of the Decapolis cities during the Late Hellenistic period, only after sharing the other cities the same language, culture, city-state plan, and political status. Each of the ten cities was a self-contained city-state that was subordinate to Rome. They were centers of Greek and Roman culture in an area dominated by Semitic-speaking peoples (Nabataeans and Arameans). During the reign of Emperor Trajan, the cities were assigned to the provinces of Syria and Arabia Petraea; several cities were eventually given to Syria Palaestina and Syria Secunda. Except for Damascus, Hippos, and Scythopolis, the bulk of the Decapolis region is in Jordan.



*Figure 1: A general view of Abila showing the Necropolis to the right, wadi Qwailbeh.
Photographed by Hussien Deebajah.*

The natural environment of Abila played an important role in shaping the region's history, culture, and economy. Favorable conditions found at Abila contributed to the initial habitation of the area and the prosperity of the region. Abila's natural environment had a significant impact on the region's history, culture, and economy. The favorable climate conditions, although fluctuated, led to the region's initial settlement and prosperity especially during the Early Bronze Age (Frumkin et al., 1991), which was the best during the Holocene. Unlike Wineland (2001), who claimed that the Levant's overall climate had not altered since 9000 BC, the Levant saw climatic ups and downs over the Holocene, with the Middle Bronze Age being the driest period (Al-Shorman, 2002).

The geography of Abila is characterized by steep slopes and escarpments between 350-468 meters above sea level. It is a huge site with a 1.5-kilometer north-south dimension and a 0.6-kilometer east-west dimension. A perennial spring, Ain Qwailbeh, is located at the southern end of wadi Qwailbeh and irrigates the expansive and productive fields all around, helping make the site an important one for habitation throughout its archaeological history (Mare, 1993) (Fig. 1). Furthermore, water availability and soil fertility had contributed to the development and prosperity of Abila's successive cultures. The site is warm in summer (May to October) and cold in winter (November to April), receiving about 350-400 mm rainfall annually. Yarmouk River, Jordan River, and Lake Tiberias are all nearby.

The urban area of Abila occupies two hills in the west (Tell Abila and Tell Umm al-Amad), while the Necropolis occupies four hills to the east of wadi Qwailbeh. The region's geology is mainly of the Belqa Group; beds of limestone, chalky limestone, and chert are laid down in marine deposits. Their relatively soft stone is extensively transected by eroded wadis and is covered by meters of erosional Terra Rossa soil. The site is covered by another meter of Rendzina soil. Both soils are fertile, allowing agriculture and arboriculture to thrive (Khries, 2010). The site's geology is ideal for stone quarrying and tomb carving, with the entrances cut through a bed of hard limestone and the burial chambers carved into a bed of chalky limestone to ensure its long-term viability (Fuller, 1987). The geography and geology of Abila ensured a self-sufficient economy, which consolidated independence and ensured the inhabitants' access to a diverse range of materials and cultural experiences.

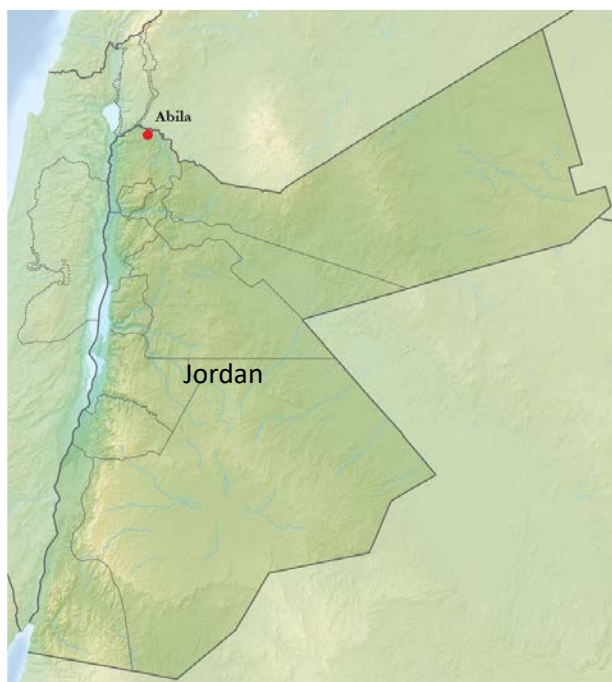


Figure 2: The location of Abila of the Decapolis.

Abila has the largest Necropolis in Jordan (about 0.4 km²) with unique and diverse tomb typologies that reflect the social and biological lives of the people who lived there throughout history. According to Fuller (1987) and Mare (1992), the variation in tomb architecture and grave offerings at Abila is attributed to three distinct social classes residing in the city during the Roman and early Byzantine periods: the wealthy elite had larger tombs decorated with paintings and occasionally containing basalt sarcophagi; the commoners had less elaborate tombs; and the poor could have afforded only shaft graves. Previous studies on the tombs of Abila showed temporal and spatial variations in the typologies and architecture including painted tombs (Smith and Mare, 1997). These paintings consist of a variety of themes, including human, mythological, animal, and geometric representations (Shaer, 2003).

Seetzen (1810) was the first to explore Abila, followed by Bruckhardt (1812), Wetzstein (1860), Merrill in 1875 (Mare, 1989), and Schumacher (1888). The other documented survey was carried out by Gottlieb (1889), when he surveyed six Roman tombs with central chambers and loculi. Nelson Glueck in the 1940s described the site as an easy quarry for nearby villages to pillage for constructing their homes (Glueck, 1943), which has contributed to the loss of many structures at the site. Qutshan (1960) reported a painted and other rock-cut tombs at the site (Figs. 3 and 4). In 1980, Harold Mare surveyed the site and

concluded that Abila's history began in the Neolithic and lasted through the Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods (Mare, 1982). Temples, mosaics, churches, basilicas, water tunnels, burial complexes, and many other noteworthy items have been discovered at the site, indicating that Abila had a sizable population throughout the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. The heyday of Abila can be regarded to have occurred during the Greco-Roman period (Mare, 1988). In 1981, Harold Mare surveyed the site again and explored another chamber tomb (Mare, 1981). Two years later, the American expedition excavated more Roman/Byzantine tombs (Davis, 1983). Then in 1984, Davis reported the results of four tombs in areas K and J (Davis, 1985). Another eight tombs of different periods were reported by Fuller (1987a) and another 11 tombs by Fuller (1987b). Smith (1989) excavated two pre-Hellenistic, one Hellenistic, two Roman, and five Byzantine tombs in 1988 and 12 others in the year after (Smith, 1990). Two years later, he reported the excavation results of 10 tombs of various types (Smith, 1992). The 1996 season of excavation at the site excavated six shaft-graves and six polyandria (Smith, 1996). In the summer of 2019, 2020, and 2021 Al-Shorman (2019, 2020, and 2021) excavated and surveyed many tombs in areas L, J, and N. using archaeological and geophysical methods, including the Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) (Fig. 5), aerial photography (Fig. 6), and Global Positioning System (GPS) (Fig. 7).

Although most of the tombs were robbed, they possess a wealth of data on funerary practices and on the skeletal biology of the inhabitants. The diversity in tomb typology speaks of Abila's culture rise, change, and decline. The recovered skeletons added to the understanding of the biology of the inhabitants, health, diet, and disease. Accordingly, this book documents and classifies the various tomb types at Abila, introduces the burial practices during the classical period, and proposes a model of Abila's societal collapse. In addition, the book reviews the previous excavations at the Necropolis of Abila. All surveyed and excavated tombs are given as top and section plans to allow future comparative studies on a local and regional scale.



Figure 3: A painted portrait from Tomb L17 at Abila.



Figure 4: A painted rooster from Tomb L 17 at Abila.



Figure 5: The use of GPS at Abila, 2019 season.



Figure 6: Aerial photograph of Tomb N1, 2021 season.



Figure 7: The use of GPR in surveying, 2020 season.

THE NECROPOLIS OF ABILA AND TOMB TYPES

Abila's tombs were dated based on the recovered pottery assemblages in the various loci inside them. Besides pottery, the field season of 2019, 2020, and 2021 dated the cleared tombs based on their architecture and the previously published similar reports from Abila. Most of the recovered tombs at the Necropolis were dated to the Roman and Byzantine periods. Abila has the largest known Necropolis in northern Jordan. The tombs are located east of wadi Qwailbeh occupying four major hills with very steep slopes. According to the plan of Abila-AE 90, they are found in areas H, J, L, and K, this nomenclature does not infer tombs' chronology (Table 1) or typology (Fig. 8). A new area named N is assigned in 2019 by Al-Shorman (2019) west of Umm Al-amad church. The tombs in the Necropolis are located on steep slopes at elevations that range from 352 to 468 m above sea level. The Necropolis of Abila suffers vandalism and clandestine robbing, where it is almost impossible to find an intact or not a plundered tomb. However, tomb robbing was not uncommon in ancient times, where a fifth century BC basalt sarcophagus from Sidon bears a Phoenician inscription that prohibits violation of burials "whoever you are, ruler and ordinary man, do not open this resting-place and do not search in it for anything, for nothing whatever has been placed in it" (Grinsell, 1975:97).

The enormous number of tombs reflects the higher density of population, where it was estimated that the population during the Iron age was about 3500, the Roman period population numbered approximately 6000-8000 and then doubled by the Late Byzantine period as indicated by the intensive landuse pattern in the countryside (Fuller, 1987). The topography of the Necropolis is similar to those found in other Roman/Byzantine sites in northern Jordan, to name few Ya'mun, Yasielah, and Natfieh. Abila had social and trade relationships with the neighboring regions, not to mention that it was one of the Decapolis cities.

Table 1: Archaeological periods after Hendrix, Drey, and Storfjell, (1996) and Waterhouse (1998).

Period	Abb.	Date
Middle Bronze	MB	2000-1550 BC
Late Bronze	LB	1550-1200 BC
Iron Age	IA	1200-332 BC
Hellenistic	Hel	332-63 BC
Early Hellenistic	E Hel	332-192 BC
Late Hellenistic	L Hel	192-63 BC
Roman	Rom	63 BC-AD 324
Early Roman	ER	63 BC-AD 135
Late Roman	LR	135-324 AD
Byzantine	Byz	324-640 AD
Early Byzantine	E Byz	324-491 AD
Late Byzantine	L Byz	491-640 AD