

# Life and Death at Beth Shean

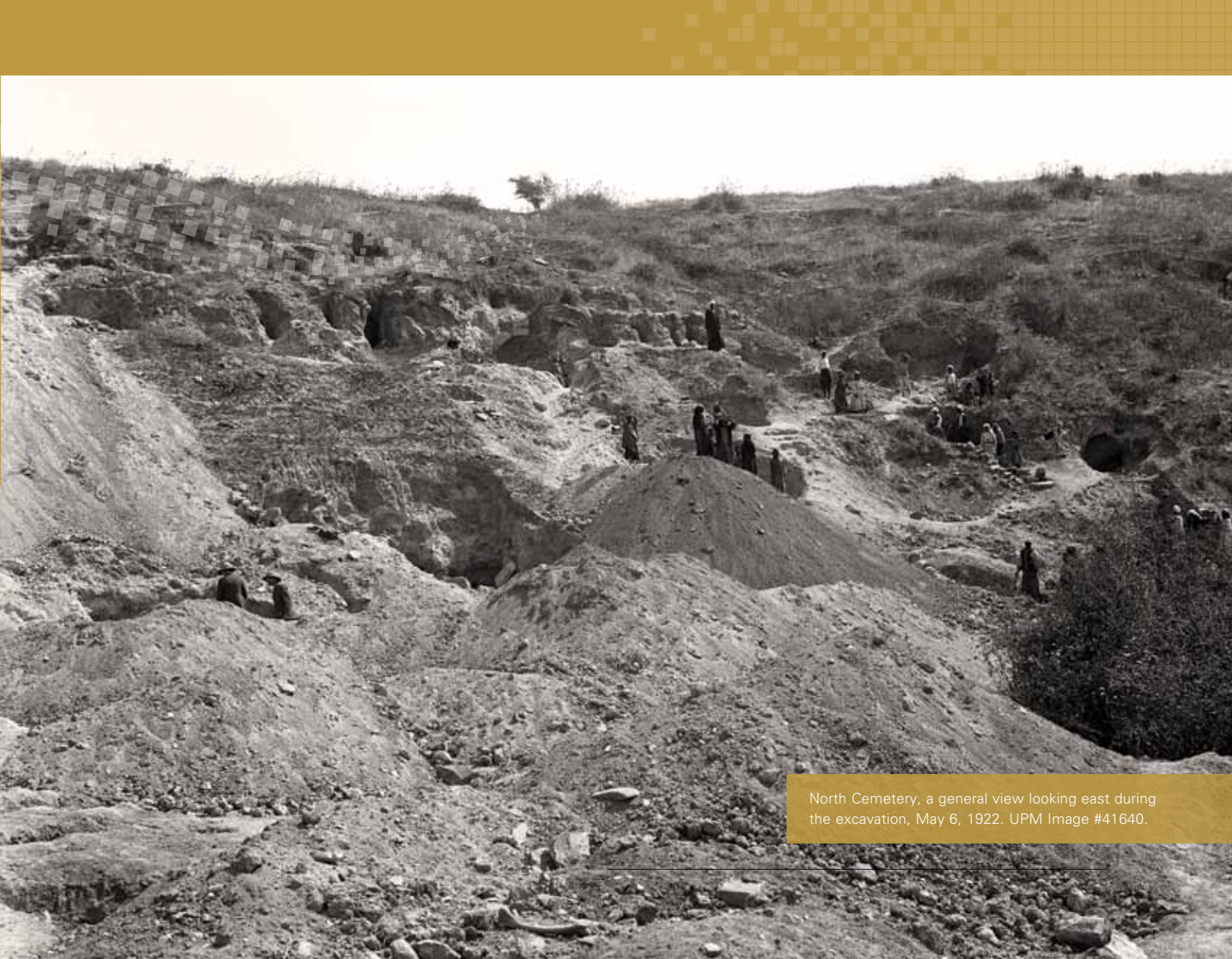
BY EMERSON AVERY



Tomb 208, view during excavation in 1926, looking north. UPM Image #79595.

*Objects associated with daily life also found their way into the tombs, either as offerings to the deceased, implements for the funeral rites, or personal possessions of the deceased. The carefully recorded excavation of the Northern Cemetery provides an opportunity to reassemble the artifacts found together—as has been done for a 5th-century tomb in the Penn Museum’s Roman Gallery—and to question the longevity of tomb use and the religious identities of the deceased through the examination of tomb assemblages.*





North Cemetery, a general view looking east during the excavation, May 6, 1922. UPM Image #41640.

**B**EGINNING IN 1922, ARCHAEOLOGISTS FROM the Penn Museum conducted a series of four campaigns of excavation in the Northern Cemetery of Beth Shean. Ultimately they documented more than 200 tombs dating from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine Period. And while the earlier tombs were eventually published, a full accounting of the Roman and Byzantine-era graves never appeared. Fitzgerald's typescript "Excavations in the Northern Cemetery Area, 1922–1931" remains in the Penn Museum Archives, its margins filled with the author's notes but its contents still not widely known. Nevertheless, Beth Shean's necropolis, of which the Northern Cemetery is only a part, has long been recognized as one of the most extensive in Roman Palestine.

The tombs from the Roman and Byzantine periods (1st century BCE to 7th century CE) are rock-cut chamber tombs consisting of a central room whose walls are pitted with multiple cavities for burial. This type of mausoleum is common and long-lived in Palestine and elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean. This does not mean that all such graves were homogeneous; no two tombs are exactly alike. Such variation does not have obvious chronological implications, however, and the tombs must be dated on the basis of the artifacts found in and around them. Efforts to do so are not always straightforward. Many of the mausolea were looted before the excavators' arrival, and the tomb assemblages encountered by Clarence Fisher and his successors were often compromised. The project records constitute another source of





North Cemetery, plan from the early stages of the excavation, August 1922. Many of the tombs carved into the slope overlap in the plan. The most common type of burial has a central chamber with individual tombs opening off of it.



CN IV 208

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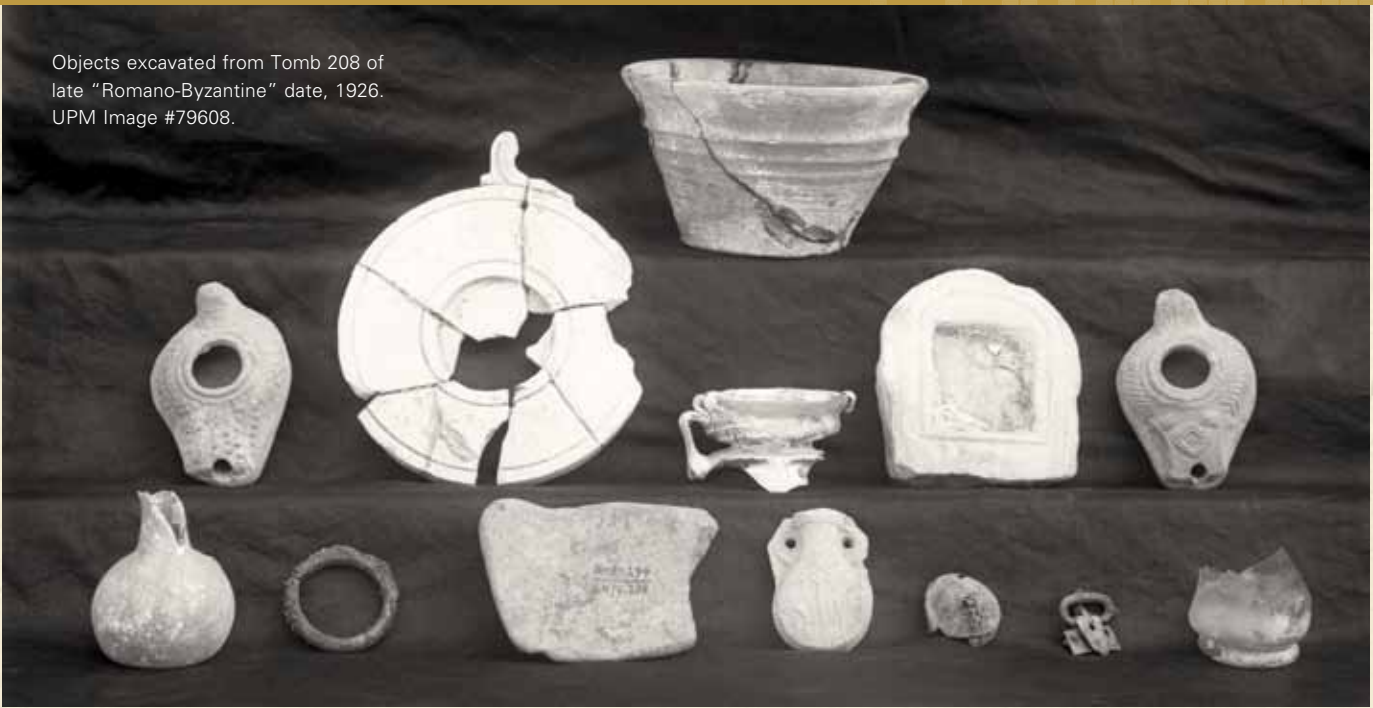


This tomb is in two portions, having two small square chambers (A&B), of which A, near entrance is at lower level than B, and not parallel with it. To W. of A are loculi C, D, with deep graves; round B loculi E F G H I are shallow cosses. Between A and B may have lain another loculus. All around A the original plaster is visible on the wall, near ground level. Some broken glass came from loculus D.

Middle left, North Cemetery at the beginning of excavation, 1922. UPM Image #41643. Bottom left, North Cemetery excavation in 1926, showing the density and overlapping of burials. UPM Image #30066. Above, Excavator's card recording daily activity on Tomb 208, September 22, 1926. UPM Image #CN-IV-208.



Objects excavated from Tomb 208 of late "Romano-Byzantine" date, 1926. UPM Image #79608.



difficulty. Standards of archaeological documentation were less rigorous in the 1920s, and only sometimes do we have good, specific information relating objects to their find-spots. The record of Tomb 224, in which it is indicated whether objects were found in the individual tombs or in the central chambers, is exemplary. The description of Tomb 208, in which the find-spot of only one object is recorded, is more typical, but the limited information is nevertheless useful: both the tomb and the objects were photographed, and the architecture was described in the excavators' notes.

In a group of eleven tombs examined at the outset of this project, nine could be provided with a chronology. Tombs 201, 208, and 225 were associated with objects from the 4th to the 6th centuries CE, while Tombs 210 and 248 appear to date to the 1st to 3rd and 1st to 2nd centuries, respectively. The four remaining cases, however, appear to have been in use from the 1st to the 6th centuries, and possibly longer.

In many respects, mortuary practices appear to have been quite conservative. This was obviously true in regard to place. The Northern Cemetery was already in use in the Early Bronze Age, although the frequent irruption of later burials into early tombs cannot easily be squared with notions of cultural memory. Other indices of conservatism emerge from an examination of the contents of the tombs. The variety of objects found is impressive, and may be characterized, roughly in order of their frequency, as ceramic vessels, ceramic lamps, glass vessels, and small personal items. Their implications go beyond their use as chronological indices.



Above, lamps, glass bottles, and miscellaneous bronze objects excavated from Tomb 201. UPM Image #238268. Below, Tomb 206, vessels and lamps excavated in 1926. UPM Image #79606.





Even when we account for losses from looting, evidence for specifically Christian, Jewish, or pagan rituals is surprisingly limited in light of the well-developed eschatologies of modern Christianity and Judaism that elucidate final rites. But it is nevertheless the case that the materials from the Byzantine period tombs often seem curiously ecumenical. The number of items that make explicit reference to religious faith is relatively small, and their interpretation far from certain. Among them are two 4th or 5th century CE lamps from Tomb 206, one decorated with a cross and the other with a menorah and incense shovel (*mahta*). Their iconography is unambiguous, but the meaning of their juxtaposition in a single tomb is not. In light of their proximity, however, it does not seem tenable to suggest that the faiths (or at least their symbols) were kept rigorously separate in death. Instead, one has the impression that religious identity was not very frequently highlighted in the tomb.

The evidence, in fact, points to the existence of a limited sort of *koine* with respect to mortuary ritual, some particulars of which survived the process of increasing religious differentiation. The majority of the ceramic and several of the glass vessels found in the Northern Cemetery were designed for the preparation or serving of food, and as such, may be related to a custom which remained current throughout the era of Roman and Byzantine rule. Periodic graveside banquets, in which the family of the deceased gathered to honor his or her memory, were frequent in pagan and early Christian contexts. The evi-



dence for an analogous Jewish practice is less compelling, but here, too, it is clear that food offerings were made. The archaeological evidence for such practices in the Northern Cemetery is not as suggestive as it is elsewhere; at Nabataea, for example, stone *triclinia* or dining rooms were built to accommodate such gatherings. But the practice was locally too common to be easily discounted.

The eschatological import of graveside feasts must have varied, but the reasons for their popularity are easy to understand. Death is the ultimate rupture, and regularly reconvening with the departed provides an opportunity to reaffirm the ties that death has severed. The virtual absence of inscriptions from the tombs, combined with the excavators' lack of interest in anthropological remains, means that it may be impossible to establish what specifically those ties might have been. The possibility that they were familial, however, is compelling: family mausolea were ubiquitous in the Roman Mediterranean. Moreover, the longevity of use of the Beth Shean tombs becomes more understandable in a family context. Successive generations regularly returned to the tombs of their ancestors, making the Northern Cemetery an integral part of the city's life. 🏠

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#### For Further Reading

Oren, E. D. *The Northern Cemetery of Beth Shan*. Leiden: Brill, 1973.

Rebillard, É. *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology Vol. 59. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

Toynbee, J. M. C. *Death and Burial in the Roman World. Aspects of Greek and Roman Life*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.



Left and above, lamps from Tomb 206 were decorated with both Christian and Jewish symbols. This lamp includes a menorah and incense shovel. Museum object #29-102-210, UPM Image #238295. Another lamp, not shown here, depicts a cross on the nozzle (Museum object #29-102-211).