

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID

Proceedings of the 5th International Congress
on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

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Congress on the Archaeology of
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La artesanía y el arte en el Oriente Antiguo

4. *Reports on the Results from the Latest Archaeological Seasons*

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Programme - Programa

Living with the dead. Tell Tweini: Middle Bronze Age tombs in an urban context

H. Hameeuw - K. Vansteenhuyse - G. Jans - J. Bretschneider -
K. Van Lerberghe, Leuven

Abstract

The excavations at Tell Tweini/Syria have unearthed several types of Middle Bronze age tombs. During seven seasons the Syro-Belgian team discovered several jar and other simple burials, a bee-hive structure and chamber tombs in an urban context. The rich inventories of these graves consist of seals, bronze ornaments, jewellery, a fenestrated bronze axe (duckbill variety), figurines, numerous red and black slipped juglets, Syro-Cilician ware vases and Cypriote White Painted jugs. Nearly all the burials were undisturbed. Of particular interest is a collective chamber tomb containing 58 individuals that was built under the floor of a building; a large plastered basin was set in the floor above the tomb suggesting mortuary cult practices. This brief presentation illustrates the different modes of burial customs within the urban area Middle Bronze Age Northern Levantine community at Tell Tweini.

Keywords: Levantine archaeology, Middle Bronze Age, coastal Syria.

Introduction

Since 1999 the Syro-Belgian interdisciplinary team, led by M. Al-Maqdissi (General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, Syria) and K. Van Lerberghe (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium), has been excavating at Tell Tweini, some 30km south of Lattakia, located 1,7 km inland of the Syrian Coast.¹

At the current state of research a stratigraphy from the later Early Bronze Age till the Byzantine era has been established. Within the archaeological layers several Middle Bronze Age constructions were unearthed. These reflect a residential character, with well-built walls of natural stones and both plaster and beaten earth floors. Multiple graves are often found beneath the floors. The funerary remains consist of simple earth graves, jar burials and built tombs. All are located within the urban context. This contribution focuses on eleven of those graves and aims to provide a general introduction to the local mortuary practices. The excavations at Tell Tweini confirmed the common practice of linked domestic structures and graves in the Middle Bronze Age Levant. The findings suggest an architectural and ideological connection between the living and the dead.

Earth burials

Three simple earth burials dated to the Middle Bronze Age have been discovered at two locations. The first (locus TWE-A-00934, square AF4) revealed

¹ Bretschneider, J., Cunningham, T.F and Van Lerberghe, K., 1999, Gibala. The first two excavations 1999 and 2000, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31, Münster, p. 75-131.

a simple earth burial. The grave had a direct relation with a Middle Bronze Age II domestic construction. The burial was placed beside the foundations of wall TWE-A-00931 and just below a beaten earth floor. A young female body, about 20 years old², was placed at the bottom of the shallow pit, with her legs pulled up to the left, the head oriented to the north but facing east. An infant, age 1 to 1,5 years, was positioned between her arms.³ Among the gifts were two dipper juglets, one of them, TWE-A-00934-C-001, similar to the one found in burial TWE-A-01070 (*infra*). Other finds included a juglet in the Cypriot White Painted Cross Line Style and two carinated bowls, TWE-A-00934-C-004 also with strong parallels to TWE-A-01070. Aside from the ceramics a small figurine and a silex tool were part of the inventory. On the feet of the adult skeleton the skull of a cow or ox was placed. Several other animal bones were found all around the grave.⁴

At the second location two simple earth burials were found (loci TWE-A-02544 and TWE-A-02545, square AB5) in a small sounding some 20 to 40cm below two jar burials. The limited excavated area in this sounding made it impossible to determine whether the graves were related to urban structures. The skeletons of both graves were badly preserved. TWE-A-02544 consisted of a male child of circa 6 years. The grave also contained one rounded juglet similar to fragments found in square AE4 (TWE-A-00942-C-003) within a Middle Bronze Age I context. No ceramics were found in locus TWE-A-02545 but a silver-tin bracelet (TWE-A-02545-M-002) and five beads lay close to the neck of a 2 to 3 year old child.

Jar Burials

At three locations a total of five jar burials were discovered containing primarily small children or infants. Subfloor jar burials are very common in the Levantine Middle Bronze Age tradition. TWE-A-01070 and TWE-A-01085 were found together beneath a beaten earth floor in squares AD4 and AE4. The 50cm high burial jar of TWE-A-01070 was broken and most of the skeletal remains were found outside the jar. The inventory of the jar burial consisted of a Middle Bronze Age IB carinated bowl and a juglet with horizontal red bands in Levantine Painted Ware. No objects were given to the buried infant in TWE-A-01085 and its skeleton was severely disarticulated.

The second location revealed two more jar burials: TWE-A-02542 and TWE-A-02543 (in square AB5). Those were discovered in the profile of a small sounding. TWE-

² The anthro-biological examinations were conducted by F-X. Ricaut during the 2006 season.

³ The burial of a single adult with a single infant or child is uncommon in the Levant, for a rare parallel see Loud, G., 1948, *Megiddo II, seasons of 1935-39*, Oriental Institute Publications 62, Chicago, fig. 293, tomb 3093.

⁴ Thalmann, J.-P., 2006, *Tell Arqa – I, Les niveaux de l'âge du Bronze Volume I: Texte*, Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique 177, Beyrouth, p. 65-67. The skulls of sheep and goats were found in several adult inhumations, see Tell Arqa tombs T13.10, T13.27 and T13.31. Note the remarks on p. 67 where food offers are linked uniquely to adult inhumations. TWE-A-00931 is a mixed grave with an inhumation of both an adult and an infant.

A-02543 was too damaged after being compressed by the earth above to allow further excavation. TWE-A-02542 was protected by two large stone slabs above and could be studied. Anthro-biological examination of the human remains in the jar identified three different individuals. Beside two children of ca. 5 years old, the examination assigned some skeletal remains to an adolescent or adult.⁵ The inventory of the jar consisted of two red burnished dipper juglets, fragments of two black slipped juglets and a bronze bracelet which was still around an arm. The burial jar measured 60 by 30cm. Both TWE-A-02542 and TWE-A-02543 were found 60-70cm beneath a Late Bronze Age plaster floor (TWE-A-02535). Both jar burials can be dated to Middle Bronze Age II.

A third location revealed a jar burial (TWE-A-00051) with one skeleton of a child and as inventory five ceramic vessels.⁶ The body was placed in foetal position and the jar had a north-south orientation. It was discovered beneath the wall of an early Late Bronze Age room and at the same height of the lowest remains of a Middle Bronze Age structure. The ceramics consist of two red slipped juglets, a dipper juglet, a small carinated bowl and a red slipped plate. At Ugarit⁷ and Tell Arqa⁸ jar burials with a similar composition of grave gifts occur in Middle Bronze Age II.

Built tombs

Three structures built with roughly worked stones were found to have functioned as tombs. Two of those were excavated in field A, one in field B.

In a closed one-chambered structure, 86cm below inhumation TWE-A-00934, a young masculine adult burial, age 20 to 35, was placed (locus TWE-A-00954). This was a small well constructed corbelled-vault tomb which does not seem to have an entrance. Beside the skull a bag-shaped juglet, probably painted, was found. A bronze pin lay over the upper arm and left side of the ribcage. The juglet, as the prime datable object, has parallels from late Middle Bronze Age I Sidon.⁹ Over one of the fingers of the left hand a bronze ring was placed, the hand itself positioned on the pelvis. The body was laid on its back with legs pulled up to the left, the orientation was east-west, the head to the east.

⁵ This is remarkable as it is commonly accepted that jar burials in the Levant are, throughout the Middle Bronze Age, uniquely used for infants, young children or juveniles. The well-examined jar burials from Sidon revealed one jar with the human remains of a 13 years old child, Sidon burial 14, see Doumet-Serhal, C., 2004, Sidon (Lebanon): Twenty Middle Bronze Age Burials from the 2001 Season of Excavations, *Levant* 36, London, p. 108. Closer to Mesopotamia the tradition of adults buried in jars is known, for Mari see Jean Marie, M., 1999, *Tombs et Nécropoles de Mari*, Mission Archéologique de Mari V, Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique 153, Beyrouth, p. 32.

⁶ Bretschneider, J., Al-Maqdissi, M., Vansteenhuyse, K., Driessen, J. & Van Lerberghe, K., 2004, Tell Tweini, Ancient Gabala, in the Bronze Age, *Ägypten und Levante* XIV, Wien-Kairo, p. 224-225.

⁷ Schaeffer, C.F.A., 1962, *Ugaritica IV. Découvertes des XVIIIe et XIXe Campagnes, 1954-1955*, Mission de Ras Shamra 15, Paris, pl. XV, fig. 5. A Kamares ware cup found together with this parallel assemblage at Ugarit (similar to TWE-A-00051) dates to Middle Minoan II.

⁸ See for example T13.38 from Tell Arqa (Thalmann 2006) (*cf.* note 5).

⁹ See vessel S/1803, dated to late MB I or early MB IIA (fig. 14, Table 7) (Doumet-Serhal 2004) (*cf.* note 6).

In a sounding in field B, 1m below the earliest Iron Age occupation levels, the top of a bee-hive structure was found (TWE-B-05523).¹⁰ Because of the limited size of the sounding it was impossible to establish any connection with other architectural features. Inside the sealed structure a 35cm high globular jug with bichrome butterfly motives was found in Syro-Cilician/Levantine Painted Ware. This jug can be dated to late Middle Bronze Age I.¹¹ In a lower level of the structure, two adult skeletons were recovered, both articulated, although the skulls were damaged. The largest of the two skeletons lay in foetal position on its right side, the head facing east. Beside the shin-bone of this skeleton lay a fenestrated bronze axe of the «duckbill» variety, well known from Middle Bronze Age I (warrior) graves in the Levant and Egypt. The bee-hive structure itself, in which the graves were placed, is believed to have been constructed in the Early Bronze Age.

The largest and most elaborate grave found at Tell Tweini is TWE-A-00170. Its burial chamber was opened in 2004. The shaft was excavated during the succeeding season. The complex has a well known pattern for the Levantine Middle Bronze Age: shaft –dromos– burial chamber. This concept is well known from Ugaritic funerary architecture. Good parallels from an urban context are the corbelled-vault tombs at Megiddo from Middle Bronze Age II.¹² Although the burial chambers at Megiddo are rectangular, TWE-A-00170 has an elliptical ground plan. The entire tomb was constructed with unworked stones. Its burial chamber is vaulted as a dome from the bottom to the top. At Ugarit the Middle Bronze Age burial chambers are usually only partially vaulted and covered at the top with large stone slabs. The measurements of the construction are: burial chamber: length 2,65m, width 2,30m, height 1,5m; dromos: length 0,75m, width 0,40m, height 0,65m; shaft: diameter 0,9m, height 1,60m.

The grave was not robbed and contained the remains of at least fifty-eight individuals.¹³ Some of the skeletal remains were stacked against the walls as in an ossuary. Most of the tomb inventory was deposited near the dromos entrance. The

¹⁰ Bretschneider *et al.* 2004, p. 220 (*cf.* note 7)

¹¹ Bagh, T., 2003, The Relationship between Levantine Painted Ware, Syro/Cilician Ware and Khabur Ware and the Chronological Implications, in Bietak, M. (ed.), *The Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. II*, Wien, p. 230-232. Bagh dates the jug at the end of the 12th – beginning 13th Dynasty in Egypt, her MB IIA, which corresponds with our late MB I.

¹² Kempinski, A., 1989, *Megiddo, A City-State and Royal Centre in North Israel*, Materialien zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie 40, München, p. 191 (fig. 48/1), 193, and Schumacher, G., 1908, *Tell el-Mutesellim I. Band, Fundbericht: A. Text & B. Tafeln*, Leipzig, tables IV, VI. See also T.8096 from Tel Dan, David, I., 1995, Mortuary Practices at Tel Dan in the Middle Bronze Age: a Reflection of Canaanite Society and Ideology, in Campbell, S. & Green, A., *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*, Oxford, p. 122-124.

¹³ As a parallel we refer to the cursorily excavated Middle Bronze Age collective tomb (T.IV) from nearby Tell Sukas. The shape of the tomb's construction is not known as it was excavated layer by layer in a small sounding, but its excavator speaks of «primitive walls of stones» of a pit being oval and measuring 2,70 by 1,90m. In between three successive periods of usage, fill layers were found, the tomb counted 41 skeletons. See Thrane, H., 1978, *Sukas IV, A Middle Bronze Age Collective Grave on Tall Sukas*, Publications of the Carlsberg Expedition to Phoenicia 5, Copenhagen. The Levantine tradition of multiple successive interments in the same tomb is very well known from Jericho, yet those tombs were not found in a domestic context but at cemeteries outside town and were cut into rocks. See Kenyon, K.M., 1960 & 1965, *Excavations at Jericho, I & II*, Jerusalem – London.

same practice was attested in the Middle Bronze Age Megiddo tombs. The grave goods consisted of a wide variety of ceramic (158) and bronze objects (pins, needles, knife and ring), a cylinder seal, a figurine and beads. The ceramics include red and black slipped juglets with a stepped rim profile, plates, dipper jugs, piriform jugs with pronounced shoulders and a small arched double-strand handle, and three jugs in White Painted Cross or Pendent Line Style. All this material can be dated to Middle Bronze Age II. The tomb entrance was situated directly beneath a stone floor (TWE-A-00197) and the tomb's orientation (shaft-south; chamber-north) runs parallel with the remaining foundations of a late Middle Bronze Age room. Directly above the burial chamber, slightly to the north, the bottom of a white-plastered basin was preserved (TWE-A-00167). The soil around this basin is red. The relation between the tomb and the basin remains unclear (the practice of libations can be suggested)¹⁴ and no parallels for this feature, from e.g. Ugarit, are known to us. Noteworthy are the several drilled holes in the ends of the large cover slabs on top of the corbelled-vault burial chamber. These could relate to the «libation» installation or could be a structural element for lifting the largest slabs. A handle of a White Painted V jar was found in the fill of the shaft, indicating that the final use of the shaft took place towards the end of Middle Bronze Age II.

The Middle Bronze Age tombs from Tell Tweini are all found in an urban context. It appears none of them was robbed, neither in antiquity nor in recent times. Their presence beneath domestic architecture must be seen as intentional. They demonstrate the role the dead had still to play in the lives of their descendants. Burials within the boundaries of urban centres are more easily associated with ancestral worship while those at a distance from settlements are seen as territorial markers.¹⁵ Little is known or can be presumed in the matter of mortuary practices. The white-plastered basin on the floor above TWE-A-00170 might suggest such practices, but is so far unique at Tweini. If mortuary practices in houses with burials were conducted, related objects could be expected. Unfortunately, until now, such items could not be distinguished among the excavated material.

¹⁴ Remarks on the practice of libations at Ugarit see Salles, J-F, 1995, *Rituel Mortuaire et Rituel Social à Ras Shamra/Ugarit*, in Campbell, S. & Green, A., *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*, Oxford, p. 179-182 and Pitard, W.T., 1994, The «Libation Installations» of the Tombs at Ugarit, *Biblical Archaeologist* 57/1, Cambridge (Mass.), p. 20-37. It should be stressed that no canalisation installations were found in the vicinity of TWE-A-00170.

¹⁵ Hallote, S.R., 1995, Mortuary Archaeology and the Middle Bronze Age Southern Levant, *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 8.1, Sheffield, p. 103-104.

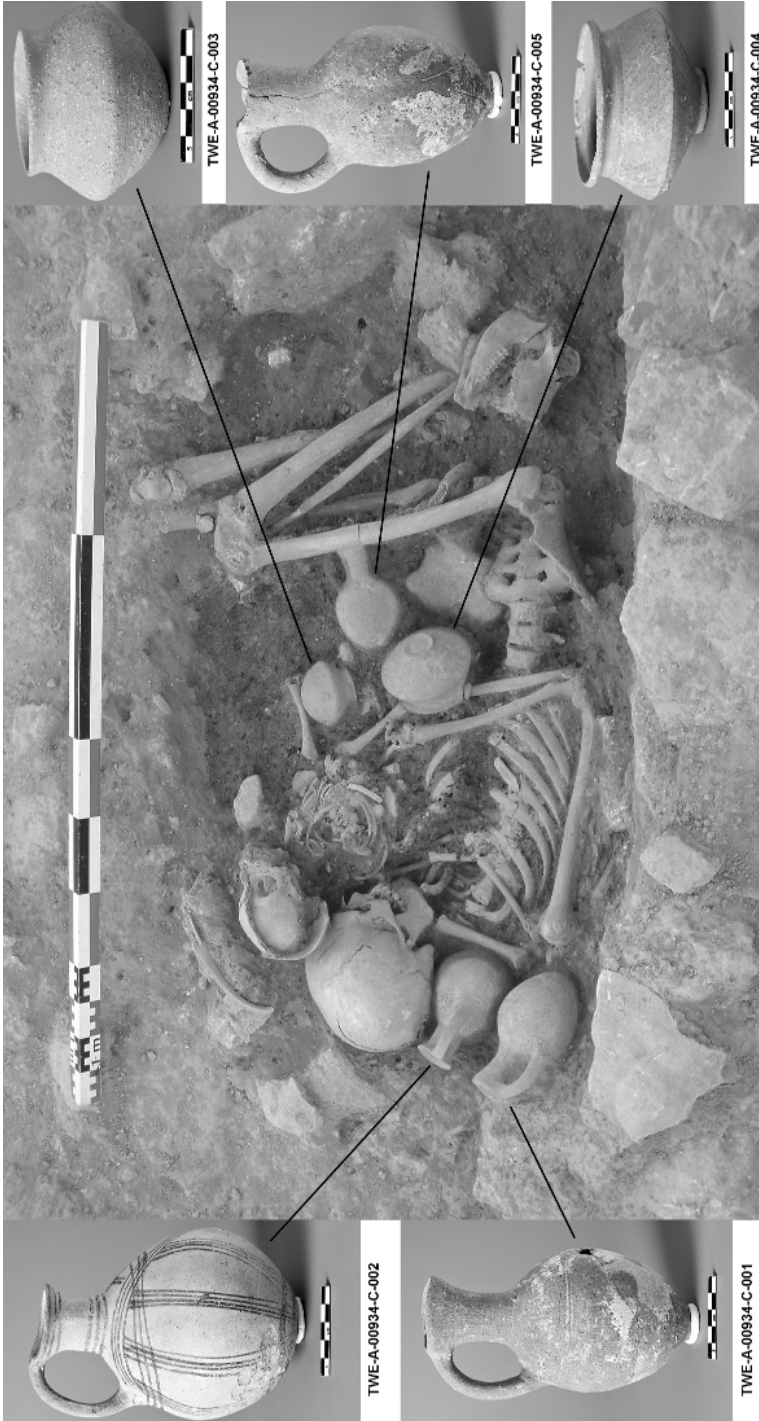


Fig. 1: Ceramics of grave TWE-A-00934.



Fig. 2: Jar burial TWE-A-00051.

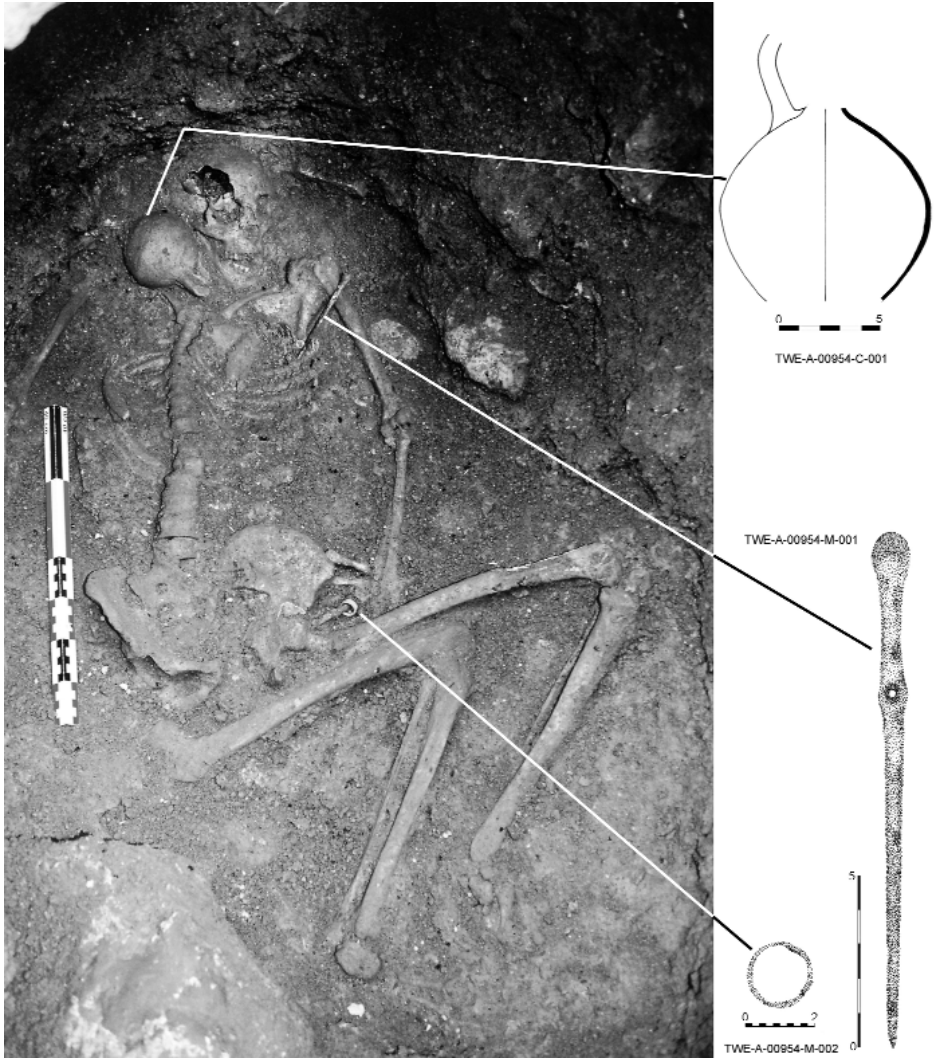


Fig. 3: TWE-A-00954 with inventory (drawings K. Vansteenhuyse & E. Cuypers).

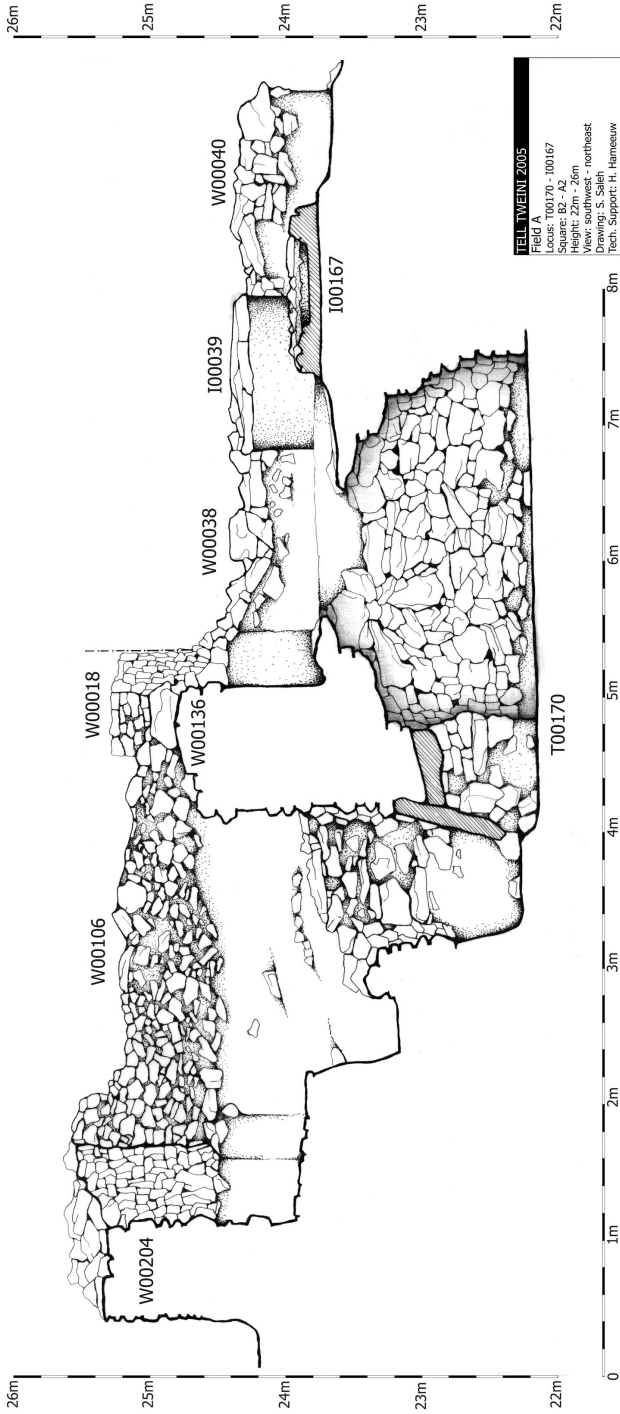


Fig. 4: Section drawing of tomb TWE-A-00170, top of burial chamber is open as the result of excavation (drawing S. Saleh).

