

## Did the Maccabees Practice Infant Sacrifice? The Evidence from Tel Kedesh

Maccabees Project Brown Bag Discussion, October 7, 2015

*The hour-long exchange focused on interpretation of an infant's skeleton found without head, hands, and feet at Tel Kedesh. Researchers from five disciplines (archaeology, history, theology, Jewish studies, and medicine) exchanged observations, posed questions, and explored an array of scenarios that might explain why the dead infant was placed in the archive room, whether its placement was related to the destruction of the site, and what such a relationship might imply about local culture and religion, and about shifts in political power and presence attested in the early Hasmonean era. All too brief, the conversation nevertheless proved the value of interdisciplinary conversation, especially as it allowed us to hear questions posed from other disciplines, to distinguish questions that could be answered immediately from those could not, and to identify what we need to know in order to test the plausibility of explanations.*

*In the interest of continuing the conversation, we send this summary and a request: **please send us one question about today's topic that you wish could be answered and/or one additional area of inquiry worth pursuing.** What do we need to know in order to figure out what happened at Kedesh? What kind of evidence would it take? Where might we go to find it? And what other events and subjects might this find be relevant to?*

*We will collate and send out these follow-up questions, and think about productive ways to continue the discussion. Any and all suggestions welcome!*

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The issue: how to characterize the infant burial found in the archive room of the imperial administrative building at Tel Kedesh, Israel. Is it a standard burial, a sacrifice, both, neither? However defined, the burial raises a series of additional questions:

- can it be precisely dated?
- who might be responsible?
- must the burial be linked to the room in which it was found?
- are there purity implications because of the placement of the burial?

We began with an overview of salient archaeological, forensic and textual evidence:

- Architectural context: the northernmost room of a three-room complex in the northwest corner of the building; single off-center door on the south wall leads to an anteroom (figs. 1 and 2).
- The position of the burial is flush against the north wall of the room, aligned with the doorway on the south wall, meaning that it was not placed centrally along the wall. A semi-circle of small field stones had been arranged to demarcate the space.
- The placement of the bones suggests that the burial was an *in situ* primary inhumation, meaning that it was not moved from somewhere else. Notably, none of the bones appear to have been crushed or damaged from falling debris – although no protective covering was found during excavation (fig. 3).

- The skeleton lacked a skull as well as bones from hands and feet, but these elements are so ephemeral in infants that their absence may not be meaningful. For example, infant finger bones are the size of a grain of rice, and the skull is paper-thin.
- Other finds in the archive room:
  - 40-45 small flasks that originally held cedar oil, a preservative for papyrus;
  - about 1800 clay sealings indicative of documents from a range of sources: Seleucid imperial court; high-ranking Seleucid officials; city offices of Tyre and Sidon; provincial officials; and private individuals;
  - various singular foreign goods, all ceramic so not inherently valuable but each rare in this region and period. These may be gifts from visiting officials.
- Stratigraphic situation as follows:
  - Lowest level: floor made of small old pottery fragments laid in lime mortar.
  - On and just above floor levels: bullae, oil flasks, other ceramic finds, burial.
  - Within the room's single doorway: small and larger stones filled the open space to a height of about one meter, forming a visual blockage but not actually precluding an ability to enter and exit the room (fig. 4).
  - Fully covering and sealing the door blockage and all objects, including the burial was a deep, compact, very hard layer of burned mud brick. Embedded within were roofing nails originally from the wooden beams of the ceiling. The mud brick layer is the residue of the upper portions of the walls that had fallen in.
- Burning: the archive room had been deliberately set on fire. The evidence for this includes cracked edges of the stones of the room's walls, the firing of the clay sealings (and the burning of the papyri), the burning out of the lime mortar of the floor make-up, and the burned mud brick that filled the room. That said, it is notable that the burial and the oil flasks – both of which were found beneath the burned mud brick layer – were *not* burned.
- Chronological evidence brackets the burning and the burial between 144 and the later 130s BCE, but it is not possible to determine if these occurred in tandem, in close succession, or with some time elapsed between them.
- This is the *only* room in the administrative building to have been burned. In other rooms there were signs of disturbance and hasty abandonment, with entire sets of dishes and other utility items left on floors, but no signs of significant damage or deliberate destruction.
- 1 Maccabees 11.63-64, 67-74 describes a battle between the Hasmonean Jonathan and the Seleucid king Demetrius II, in which the Seleucids set up a military camp at Kedesh and Jonathan successfully overtakes the camp and kills 3000 men before returning to Jerusalem. The internal chronology of the text situates this event in the late 140s BCE.

Spirited discussion ensued, with various questions posed.

- Were all parts of the room definitely burned or could the evidence support a reconstruction of partial burning here and there? Might partial burning explain why neither the burial nor the oil flasks were burned?
- What evidence would relate the burial to any known contemporary sacrificial practices? No material similarities with the burials in the Carthaginian (and other) tophets: no stelai, no burning of bones, no animal bones, no burial urn or pit.
- If the burial is intended to send a message, what might that be? Ideas:

- intentional desecration, exploiting taboos in Judean and Hellenistic culture; modeled on literary or historical antecedents?
- purification of place (or territory)
- a kind of display. Note that the burial was marked off by stones and that the bones were not crushed.
- laying out a body for mourning
- related to intentionally violent caesura, a “stopping of time.” Compare an analogous intervention that occurred at this same time (late 140s) in the archives at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, where the Seleucid-era dates on tax bullae were brutally gouged out.
- What other historical scenarios might this evidence support? For example, might we imagine other groups who were against the Seleucids besides or instead of the Maccabees? Perhaps some such group drove out the building’s officials and destroyed the archive, perhaps defiling it with the dead baby to prevent future use.

We hope to gather additional details about the burial, including:

- examine the ends of all bones for cut marks that would indicate deliberate mutilation;
- examine the bones for animal bite marks that would indicate exposure for some time;
- measure long bones for specific age at death;
- possibly examine teeth or bones for chemical traces indicative of birthplace origin.

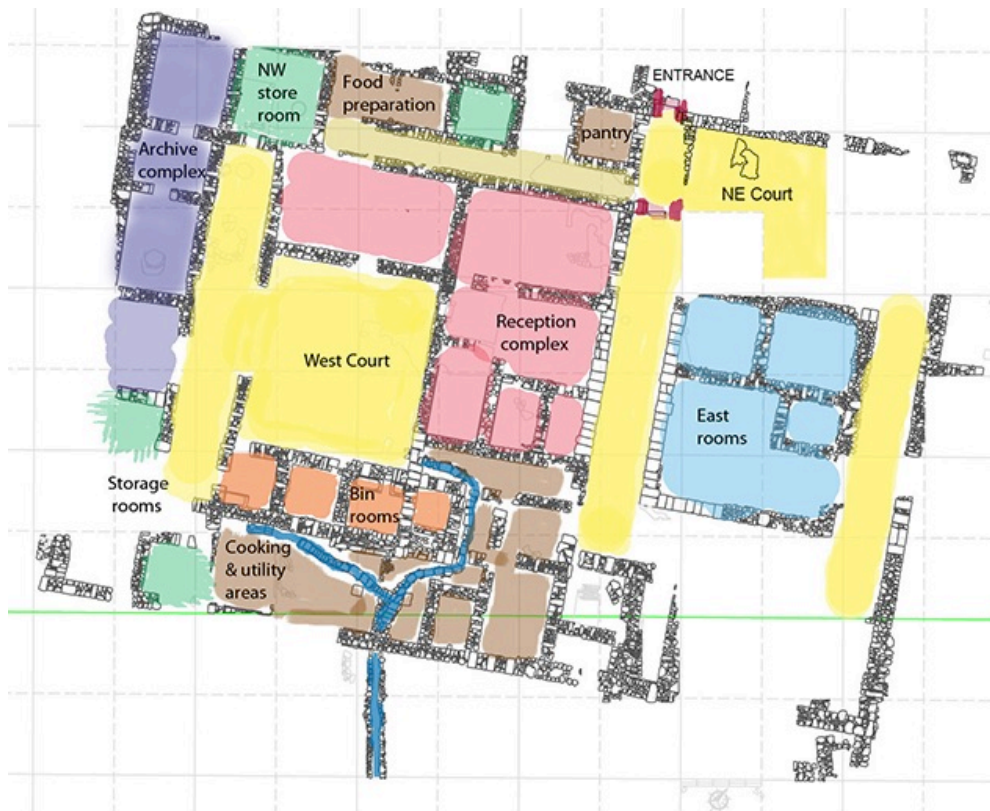


Fig. 1. Plan of the Persian-Hellenistic Administrative Building at Tel Kedesh.



Fig. 2. View of the northernmost room of the three-room Archive complex, looking north. The burial was found up against the north wall, directly across from the doorway, slightly above floor level.



Fig. 3. Infant burial in situ. Note cracked wall stones, indicative of fierce burning.



Fig. 4. Blocked doorway into the room, as found.