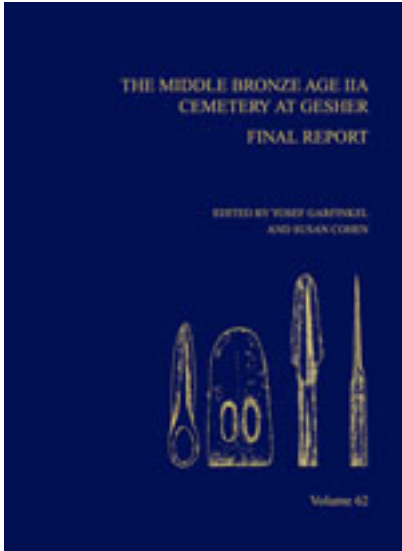


RBL 03/2009



**Garfinkel, Yosef, and Susan Cohen, eds.**

***The Middle Bronze Age IIA Cemetery at Gesher: Final Report***

Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research 62

Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2007.  
Pp. xvii + 149. Cloth. \$74.95. ISBN 0897570758.

Ralph K. Hawkins  
Kentucky Christian University  
Grayson, Kentucky

This volume is the final report of five seasons of excavation (1986–1987, 2002–2004) at the site of Gesher, a small Middle Bronze Age IIA cemetery located in Israel’s central Jordan Valley. Yosef Garfinkel excavated fifteen burials in 1986–1987, and Susan Cohen conducted three additional seasons there in 2002–2004. The preface notes that the site is unusual in that, while the material culture is clearly “typologically consistent with a very early MB IIA date, it also proves to have significant differences from that commonly found at larger urban sites in the more central region of Canaan.” In addition, “many of the burial customs evident in the cemetery show continuities with practices more commonly associated with the preceding EB IV/MB I period” (xv). This mix of traditions at Gesher is illustrative of a transitional EB IV–MB IIA period in the interior of Canaan. This final report “outlines the nature of the finds from the cemetery and highlights the information regarding Canaanite mortuary customs and material culture gained from the excavation of this small but significant site” (xv).

Chapter 1, “Introduction,” co-authored by Garfinkel and Cohen, presents information about the site location and setting, stratigraphy and site formation process, history and excavations of the site, the methodology, and the significance of the site. The small site is located about 12 km south of the Sea of Galilee and about 1 km west of the Jordan River, at Israel map reference 202/223 (fig. 1.1, p. 2). The cemetery is located just south of Nahal

Tavor on the slope that leads down from the upper terrace of the Jordan Valley. A Neolithic site existed at Gesher for a very short time, after which the site lay unoccupied for about six thousand years, when it began to be used in the MBA IIA as a cemetery. The archaeological remains were buried under an accumulation of several meters, which caused the site to remain hidden despite the survey carried out in the region in the 1950s. Gesher was only discovered when the Israeli army undertook road construction in the area in the 1970s. The discussion of the significance of Gesher outlines the aforementioned data that point to the transitional nature of the site, which “has considerable significance for both mortuary and cultural studies of MB IIA development in Canaan” (8).

Chapter 2, “Finds from a Cemetery in Nahal Tavor,” is a translation of an independent Hebrew article by Orna Hess that was first published in *‘Atiqot* in 1990. The article presents and examines the materials collected from the surface of Gesher following the disturbance of the site by the military, including bowls, juglets and jugs, a jar, and a spearhead (11–13). The typological discussion of the finds pointed to an early MB IIA date and pointed to the significance of the site, “since it is one of the few known sites in the region that are dated to this phase of the MB II” (13).

In Chapter 3, Y. Garfinkel and S. Cohen report on “The Burials.” This chapter, which examines twenty-three graves and four depositions without skeletal remains, is the longest in the book and consists of a detailed examination of each of the graves, including its stone construction, the skeleton, and the related grave goods. When applicable, four types of illustrations supplement the text: a plan of the remains; field photographs of the burial *in situ*; technical drawings of the finds; and photographs of the finds. Following the discussions of the twenty-three graves and four depositions without skeletal remains, the authors undertake a detailed analysis of the primary burials (56–57), the secondary burials (57), and the depositions without skeletal remains (57–60). Seven of the burials at Gesher are typical of a type of interment generally characterized as “warrior burials”; since these graves were undisturbed and preserved mostly intact, they “present the possibility of examining this custom in more detail” (60). A detailed examination of these graves is therefore undertaken (60), followed by a thorough examination of their shared characteristics (60–63). After a brief discussion of the grave architecture at Gesher (63–65), the authors discuss twelve aspects of the burial process in connection with the deposition of the offerings that are suggestive of “the social order of the community buried at Gesher” (65). These aspects of the burial process can be summarized as follows: the body was prepared by being placed in a flexed position; the location from which the corpse was transferred is unclear, although it is surmised that Gesher may have been utilized by a group that used the area seasonally; each grave was dug into the soft local sediment, a task that could have been accomplished by a small group of people in a day’s work; the body was placed in the burial chamber; bodies were generally arranged with the

head facing to the east and the legs to the west; the burials lack the mortuary furniture common in other MBA burials, but sometimes the heads of the deceased were placed on flat medium-sized stones that may have been intended to symbolize beds; the deceased were provided for through the placement of food and offerings in ceramic vessels inside the graves; while no beads, jewelry, or other artifacts indicative of status were found at Gesher, bronze weapons were found in seven of the burials, typical of the pattern of “warrior burials,” along with one toggle pin and a perforated bone; the entrances to the burial chambers were blocked with local stones; sometimes additional offerings were placed on top of these stones; the shaft was filled in; and, although there is no clear indication that the graves were marked, the reopening of Grave 10 “indicates that there was some means of identifying the location of earlier burials” (67). Following this analysis, Garfinkel and Cohen conclude that

It can be suggested that all individuals, regardless of status, were buried with basic provisions; either, as suggested above, as sustenance for the afterlife or as part of the funerary banquet. The additional items, including the bronzes or any further ceramics, may then be indicative of some level of the wealth or status of the deceased, such as the warrior burials discussed above. In general, the variation between graves is slight. Unlike rich tombs uncovered in various Middle and Late Bronze sites, at Gesher the overall picture is rather simple and the cemetery reflects a rather egalitarian society (p. 67).

Subsequent chapters include examinations of the skeletons (ch. 4), the pottery (ch. 5), the bronzes (ch. 6), a metallurgical analysis (ch. 7), an analysis of the organic materials (ch. 8), the bone beverage strainers (ch. 9), and the faunal remains (ch. 10).

In the final chapter (ch. 11), “Gesher in MB IIA Context,” Cohen brings the report to its conclusion by exploring the significance of Gesher for mortuary and cultural studies of MB IIA development in Canaan. Because of the location of the site in the central Jordan Valley, Gesher, along with its burials and accompanying material culture, “present an opportunity to examine the beginning of MB IIA in an area removed from the coastal regions and the characteristics of urbanized MB IIA culture so readily apparent there.” Gesher, therefore, “provides a window into the transition from EB IV/MB I and the nature of the earliest phases of MB IIA” (131). This concluding chapter assesses the importance of Gesher through the discussion of three aspects of the site, including the possible nature of the settlement associated with the cemetery, other MB IIA mortuary sites in Canaan in comparison with Gesher, and how the cemetery at Gesher illustrates the transition between EB IV/MB I and MB IIA. No settlement has yet been discovered that can be associated with Gesher, although it is possible that either one remains to be discovered under the alluvia of the nearby Jordan Valley plains or that an associated site

has been destroyed through modern activity. The character of the cemetery itself, however, may point to a less sedentary population that may have utilized it seasonally, a phenomenon that is common throughout the preceding EB IV/MB I period in Canaan. It may be that Gesher continues this trend. Cohen goes on to compare other MB IIA burial sites with Gesher, including Afula, 'Ain es-Samiyeh, Beth Shan, Efrata, Gibeon, Hagosherim, Kefar Szold, Khirbet Kufin, Moza, Munhata, Rehov, Safed, and Wadi et-Tin. Through the comparison, Cohen shows that "there are few similarities between the cemetery excavated at Gesher and other mortuary sites not closely associated with large urban settlements" (136). While Hagosherim and Rehov, which are in close proximity to Gesher, share some parallels, there are few close parallels to the Gesher cemetery. These differences highlight the early nature of the material culture at the site and its significance for illustrating the transition from EB IV/MB I to MB IIA.

In discussing the EB IV/MB I–MB IIA transition, Cohen notes that there have been few sites available to provide evidence concerning this transitional period (136). Tell el-Hayyat and Aphek both yielded early material, but only from sherd evidence. The material remains from the Gesher cemetery, therefore, make valuable data available pertaining to the nature of this transitional period. Based on the idea that mortuary sites without associated settlements are representative of nonsedentary groups, and the paucity of evidence for social stratification in the burials and their extant culture, Cohen suggests that the Gesher cemetery may have been used "by a mostly egalitarian population that traveled seasonally in the region around the site, possibly to access the variety of resources available there" (136). The population that used the Gesher site constituted an early, nonurban phase of the MB IIA.

Many factors related to the methods of interment employed at Gesher identify the site with an earlier period, including the use of single interments, secondary burials, warrior burials and their accompanying weapons, and the presence of the faunal offerings in the graves. All of these methods have antecedents in the EB IV/MB I but either become less common or disappear completely in the MBA. At the same time that the methods of interment resemble earlier EB IV/MB customs, the material culture from the cemetery is clearly MB IIA in nature. The Gesher cemetery, therefore, exhibits features and configurations typical of both the EB IV/MB I and the MB IIA. Cohen concludes:

The material excavated at Gesher illustrates a composite social structure in the central Jordan valley region, in which new factors and influences appear but older practices and societal frameworks continue as well. It is therefore suggested that, rather than viewing EB IV/MB I sites as bridging the gap between the urbanism of the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, the mix of traditions found at Gesher instead

illustrates a transitional EB IV–MB IIA period, evident in the interior of Canaan.  
(137)

The information published in Garfinkel and Cohen's final report on Gesher adds to the data about Canaanite burial customs and augments the body of early MB IIA material culture that correlates with trends and customs that originated in the foregoing period. The transitional period between EB IV/MB I and MB IIA has rarely been attested at other sites. This small cemetery at Gesher, therefore, has big implications for identifying this cultural era in Canaan. Those working within the MBA will find *The Middle Bronze Age IIA Cemetery at Gesher: Final Report* to be an important contribution to this field of study.