

What Can 792 Teeth Tell Archaeologists About Ancient Israelites?

An ancient [tomb](#) recently uncovered at Khirbet Nisya, eight miles north of [Jerusalem](#), was found with hardly a bone intact. Yet, through careful excavation, this [burial cave](#) tells an amazing tale about the people buried there. The [tomb](#) dates to the time of the [Book of Judges](#) in the [Bible](#).

As might be expected from a damp [cave](#), bodies [buried](#) 3,200 years ago had long since returned to dust. But precise excavation recovered evidence of each individual—their [teeth](#), 792 in total! Carefully, dentist Austin Robbins organized the teeth into individuals and determined 51 individuals were buried in the [cave](#).

Apparently unknown and untouched by man for 3,200 years, the [tomb](#) was rediscovered by [archaeologists](#) from the [Associates for Biblical Research](#) in 1985. A natural limestone [cave](#), it was utilized as a family [tomb](#) for approximately 200 years. Based on items found in the [tomb](#), it is dated to the early 12th century B.C., the time of the [Book of Judges](#).

These individuals were placed on the floor of the [cave](#) without being covered by earth or in a [coffin](#). They were laid to rest with a variety of [funerary](#) objects including household [pottery](#), jewelry and weapons.

Later, when another body was brought for [burial](#), remains of the last body were pushed to the side of the [cave](#). The [tomb](#) became a cemetery and the basis of the Biblical phrase “they were gathered to their fathers.”

But these [teeth](#) had even more to say. They suggested life was hard in those days. Nearly one quarter of the population did not reach age 10. Almost half died before they were 40, and only four reached age 60.

Striking similarities in wear configurations implied a very stable uniform diet throughout the period the [cave](#) was used. No major changes in eating habits occurred during the lifetime of these people. The “flat plane” wear was typical of [grain](#) eaters; and the high degree of wear indicated a relatively coarse [diet](#), probably [wheat](#) and [barley](#). These people really had to chew their food!

This dental-wear pattern also suggested only occasional use of meat in their diet. Yet, archaeological remains from ancient village [houses](#) in the region suggest they regularly kept flocks of [sheep](#) and [goats](#). These [animals](#) were far more valuable to their owners alive, than as a meal. Their value included [milk](#), yogurt, [cheese](#), [wool](#), hair and manure; as well as their ability to reproduce.

Few teeth showed evidence of decay. Minimal decay confined to root surfaces in individuals over 50, suggested good general health for adults.

Dental analysis even shed light on the stature of these people. Jaw bones fragments suggest the average height of males was about 5 feet 6 inches [1.6764 meters].

The inhabitants of this [cave](#) were probably [Israelite](#) villagers. While our investigation of their [tomb](#) suggested they seldom ate meat, the [Bible](#) indicates it was central to their [sacrificial](#) system. Thus, they [gave](#) what was special, not commonplace, to [God](#). Furthermore, offerer and family were often allowed to partake of the [sacrifice](#), themselves. Such a special treat explains why their [religious festivals](#) were joyous affairs.

References

Robbins, Austin. 1995. "Tomb and Teeth: A Dentist's View of Ancient Israelites," *Bible and Spade* 8/4.

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