

## **Anonymous Referee #1**

Received and published: 23 May 2018

I congratulate the authors on a very nicely presented study. The work is relevant to both local community and a more general scientific community worldwide. The research topic has been well introduced, previous research discussed and relevance of the study clearly highlighted. This was done in very systematic and easy to follow manner.

My main concern with the manuscript relates to the data processing part. This part needs to be redone with respect to detailed comments in the pdf file attached. In the current state of the manuscript, part of the reflectivity seen on the stacked sections looks real, while parts more appear as processing artifacts. This needs to be corrected and I have left specific comments in the pdf file attached.

When it comes to the data interpretation and discussion, both have been done in a very well structured, comprehensive and systematic way. The findings have been thoroughly scrutinized and scientific relevance clearly shown.

Conclusion follows a logical tread with clearly summarizing the main findings of the study and showing its relevance. Same is true for the abstract.

Please also note the supplement to this comment:

<https://www.solid-earth-discuss.net/se-2018-22/se-2018-22-RC1-supplement.pdf>

*Author: Many thanks for the suggestions! In fact the manuscript should not focus on the data processing, instead of the experiments, results, and main findings. The description of the processing is now improved widely following the suggestions. Where not, explanations are carried out below.*

*On the other hand the often used reviewer wording „look real“ or „seems real“ or „looks like a processing artifact“ or not is a subjective statement only. Such subjective statements cannot be cleared by any argumentation, it can be applied every time. It is not constructive and claims in a hidden kind the authors have manipulated the data or carried out a non professional processing.*

*This is seriously not the case, I'm involved in shear wave reflection data processing more than 15 years by >100 km profiling. Some of the reviewers arguments show that he/she is not familiar in shear wave reflection data processing. But I'm very happy of the detailed processing comments, suggestions and questions.*

Content of the supplement:

111

We further show that shear wave reflection seismics has advantages to study highly porous, partly saturated alluvial fans with complex compositions

This is a rather dubious sentence. Shear-wave seismics has advantages over what, P-wave seismics in the same geological setting or compared to the refraction surveys of El-Isa et al. (1995) and Sawarieh et al. (2000) or MASW by Bodet et al. (2010)? If it is the latter, the comparison is not valid.

*Author: In this geological setting shear wave reflection seismic is superior to*

- a) P-wave reflection in terms of resolution, ~ 1.5 m for S-wave, 5-6 m for P-wave.*
- b) In general the reflection method is superior to the refraction method because it handles velocity inversions, where the refraction method fails.*
- c) MASW because it can handle lateral inhomogeneities, while the MASW inversion algorithms are from definition restricted to lateral homogeneous (1D) media only.*

*Here I don't understand why the comparison is not valid, because there is no argument to the statement.*

253

Typically, two records were gained at each source location and stored separately. I assume that the authors here are referring to one positive (+) and one negative (-) polarity? If so, this should be mentioned.

*Author: included.*

265

A variable split-spread source-receiver configuration was applied to enable geometry optimization for the detection of dipping structures, and to facilitate workarounds due to obstacles in the profile track.

This needs to be clarified. A split-spread geometry would imply that your source is located in the middle or around the middle of your receiver spread. Figure 3 shows that the source is located at the end of the landstreamer, which is violating what is stated in the text with split-spread geometry. Has the landstreamer been moved after every shot location by 2 m while the source was kept in the middle of the receiver spread or the source was kept at the tail of the landstreamer? Or was there any other source-landstreamer configuration involved?

*Author: Naming „variable split-spread“ include all source position variations within the receiver spread (not only in the middle or around) and is contrary to a fixed source-receiver configuration. Even if one source position of a profile is at the beginning (Fig 3a) and another at the end of the receiver setup while all others are varying within the receiver setup (Fig 3b), it is a varying split-spread configuration, not off-end or a fixed configuration where source and receivers move up the same interval. It is also clear from the records shown in Fig 5 and 6 that the source-receiver split configuration is always varying. For clarification, we included a reference where the process is explained in detail.*

270

Without differential GPS corrections, the final positioning of the profiles from the 2013 campaign required laborious optimizations by manual corrections based on the known distances along the receiver units. Reliable elevation data could not be restored. What would be the estimated accuracy of the source and receiver coordinates after the manual adjustment?

*Author: relative to the profiling less than 5 cm, absolute 0.5-1 m. We included this.*

284

Examples of recorded shot gathers

I would like to see the corresponding amplitude spectra of the shot gathers shown in Figure 5 and also Figure 6. This would give the reader an idea of the data frequency bandwidth and an overview of the vertical resolution of the data using the mentioned velocities.

*Author: For all records spectra are now included. Spectra are very similar along the profile because it represents the vibrator source.*

284

Bandpass filter (18-20-78-82 Hz)

The selected tapers both on high and low frequency ends of the spectrum are rather narrow. The narrow tapers can cause Gibbs phenomenon or the so called "ringing" in the data. Has that been seen in the data?

*Author: That's correct, but there is no Gibbs effect visible in the spectra in Fig. 5 and 6 and it was also not observed during processing. There is no dominant frequency causing a ringing.*

*But there are harmonic distortions visible in some records in Fig 5 close to the source which reverb the love wave pattern. Due to the low velocities, this pattern disappears after stacking if it is only small. In extended cases, it was suppressed by Vibroseis Spectral Balancing followed by a FK-filter applied to shot gathers.*

303

#### Examples of recorded shot gathers

Apart from the top reflection with an apex of ~150 ms, it is not that easy to see the other reflections using the variable density plots. Could the gathers have been plotted as wiggle plots? Also, the reflections shown at times greater than 200 ms show repetitive nature implying a possibility of "ringing" either due to energy staying trapped between some layers or a crosscorrelation problem. I would prefer to see the shot gathers and the corresponding amplitude spectra after crosscorrelation with only AGC applied without any filters applied.

*Author: It would be the same difficulty using wiggle plots, but wiggle would require more plotting space. Plotting the same number of traces in wiggle would result in a quite black display. It is a highly scattering media and required multifold coverage for statistic S/N enhancement. There is no ringing or other kind of periodic signal visible in the spectra, there is no geology for energy trapping. There is also no problem during vibroseis correlation. Because it makes no sense to include such processing details as additional figures in the paper, I attached the gathers of Fig 5 correlated, AGC 220 ms, filtered and without filter as pdf to demonstrate that the differences are small. If you switch between the sheets you will see the small difference.*

308

#### 4. Data processing

The processed stacked sections shown in Figure 7 and following one show numerous "worm-looking" reflections and, in general sense, reflectivity patterns that do not have a clear justification and confirmation in the shot gathers, apart from a few selected ones. The wormy-looking reflections are more likely a processing artifact of the fk-filter (Baker 1999) or due to improper parameters in the FD migration algorithm than the real feature. The aforementioned, combined with the narrow bandpass filter tapers can cause additional ringing and result in introduction of false reflectivity patterns. This needs to be clarified by showing the shot gathers both before (after crosscorrelation, only AGC) and after processing (With all processing applied) so that the processing effect can be clearly seen on the data.

*Author: I apologize but this comment is highly speculative. It can cause, but I'm sure that all the processing parameters are carefully tested and adjusted in a proper manner not to include filter and/or migration artifacts. To proof this all for this data set as suggested would result in a pure processing paper, which is not the intention of the manuscript. If you are interested in more processing details please read Polom et al. 2013. I included now Fig. 7 to demonstrate the the shot gather processing applied (only crosscorrelation and AGC and all shot gather processing applied) where Love waves disturbed the data and the estimated depth penetration. The „worm-looking“ effect is generally due to the dense lateral spacing used for S-wave acquisition, and the nature of S-wave propagation in the matrix only, this is quite different to P-wave data.*

310

The main data processing flow of the first iteration consisted of Vibroseis Correlation, Vertical Stacking of records, Geometry Installation, Amplitude Scaling, Bandpass Filter, Frequency-Wavenumber (FK) Filter, Interactive Velocity Analysis, Common Mid Point (CMP) Stacking, parallel applied Frequency-Space (FX) Deconvolution and Finite-Difference (FD) Migration. Why was the residual statics not applied? Unless a rather simple velocity model is used, the residual statics should further enhance the reflections. Also, the shot gathers shown in Figures 5

and 6 show clear first breaks as indicated by black arrows. Why were the first breaks not picked and used for refraction static correction, given their strong presence in the data? Why were the first breaks not surgically removed from the shot gathers? Skipping this step may result in them being stacked in the top parts of the seismic section. Please elaborate on this.

*Author: Written above is „main data processing“. Residual statics do not improve the result, because the resulting shifts of  $\pm 3$  ms max are too small to get a significant effect. This was tested at a lot of shear wave data sets and also proofed by other authors operation with shear wave reflection data (e.g. André Pugin, GSC). First break picking for refraction statics calculation does not work above an inverse velocity function situation due to operation on a paved road. This first breaks in the records are not common refractions, picking and inverting them to derive a refractor model would fail. Clearly the first breaks are removed by Top Muting (not Surgical Muting) prior to CMP stacking, I added this detail in the processing sequence now and it is shown in the new Fig.7.*

333

Resulting depth section of profile 1b after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom).

The reflectivity seen in the upper 100 m of the stacked section seems realistic. However, below 100 m, it needs to be justified by showing the events on the processed shot gathers.

*Author: The nature of the few reflectors below 100 m in Fig. 8 remain speculative due to the missing borehole proof. They result from the statistic of 24-fold CMP stacking in mean, not from single shot gathers. Again the desire to proof in detail would result in a special processing paper. Fig 7 and Fig 9 clearly shows that events below 100 m are structural imaging instead of processing artifacts.*

349

Finally, the reflection amplitude responses throughout all seismic sections represent reflection coefficients of nearly 0.1 or less, indicating materials with relatively low contrasts in seismically-sensitive material properties (elastic parameters and density) and hence in shear wave seismic velocity.

In the processing part you mention "Amplitude scaling" and in here you interpret the relative reflection amplitudes. Please clarify if AGC, trace equalization or spherical divergence correction was applied. If the AGC was applied, interpreting the relative amplitude strength is dubious.

*Author: True Amplitude processing was not applied until yet, this would be again stuff for a specialized processing paper. Even only AGC 220 ms is applied for amplitude scaling, the sections show detailed amplitude dynamics resulting from constructive 24-fold CMP stacking. This is common also in hydrocarbon exploration for structure imaging. True Amplitude processing would be required if the target would be AVO analysis or inversion etc..*

381

Resulting depth sections of combined profiles 2 and 2b-2 after post-stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom).

Again, looking at the depths of ca. 100 m and below, the data seems to show migration artifacts. Have different migration algorithms been used and why was FD migration chosen?

*Author: From my opinion again speculative, and again the kind of processing artifacts in charge is not specified. Except profile 2b-2 at the left (East) border, where some migration smilies disturb the imaging, FD migration did a good job. Different migration methods applied to shear wave reflection data were extensively tested since more than 10 years (see e.g. Polom et al. 2010 and 2013), and FD migration (67 degrees algorithm) was found to be a sufficient tool, superior to Kirchhoff post- and prestack time migration methods.*

483

The results presented here show the advantageous imaging capabilities of the method regarding high-resolution structural analysis and depth penetration compared to common refraction seismic methods or common P-wave reflection analysis.

Unless referring to previous reports using the P-wave reflection method, this sentence and the entire comparison is not valid. Please reformulate the sentence by referring to P-wave reflection studies at the sites vicinity (if any), or remove it. It is not valid to compare S-wave reflection surveys with P-wave refraction tomography or MASW.

*Author: The sentence has been modified by referring a P-wave reflection result shown in Ezersky and Frumkin (2013). In particular, the message of the sentence does not compare S-wave reflection with P-wave refraction tomography or MASW, no wording about this. Why this is valid or not is never stated in a paper until yet from my point of knowledge, the proof of this reviewer statement remains missing. From my opinion, each subsurface imaging method can compared by another.*

567

The favourable velocity-frequency relationship of the resulting wavelets and the absence of pore fluid effects enabled a meter-scale resolution and a nearly 200 m penetration depth. The results seen on the stacked sections seem reliable down to ca. 100 m. Without any deeper borehole, the strong reflectivity below 100 m needs to be justified by either referring to reported studies in the site's vicinity indicating the nature of these reflections and confirming their presence in the processed shot gathers of this study to show that they are likely a real feature and not a processing artifact.

*Author: I agree this depth estimation needs improved verification. Due to the absence of a reference borehole of sufficient depth in the surrounding area I added Figure 7 b) of processed shot records from Profile 2.*

575

Combining the reflection amplitude responses  
Have the true amplitudes been preserved during processing?

*Author: see comment to 349*

### **P. Kruiver (Referee)**

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Received and published: 10 June 2018

This paper describes a good example of using S-wave reflection seismics in a setting where classical P-wave reflection would not have resulted in high resolution images. The review criteria are assessed below. After that, suggestions for improvement of the paper are listed.

The review criteria are assessed as follows:

1. Does the paper address relevant scientific questions within the scope of SE? Answer: yes
2. Does the paper present novel concepts, ideas, tools, or data? Answer: yes, application of S-wave reflection seismics in difficult setting to image
3. Are substantial conclusions reached? Answer: yes
4. Are the scientific methods and assumptions valid and clearly outlined? Answer: partly, see comments below.
5. Are the results sufficient to support the interpretations and conclusions? Answer: yes
6. Is the description of experiments and calculations sufficiently complete and precise to allow their reproduction by fellow scientists (traceability of results)? Partly, see comments below.

7. Do the authors give proper credit to related work and clearly indicate their own new/original contribution? Answer: yes
8. Does the title clearly reflect the contents of the paper? Answer: yes
9. Does the abstract provide a concise and complete summary? Answer: yes
10. Is the overall presentation well structured and clear? Answer: yes
11. Is the language fluent and precise? Answer: yes
12. Are mathematical formulae, symbols, abbreviations, and units correctly defined and used? If present: yes
13. Should any parts of the paper (text, formulae, figures, tables) be clarified, reduced, combined, or eliminated? Partly, see comments below
14. Are the number and quality of references appropriate? Answer: yes
15. Is the amount and quality of supplementary material appropriate? Not applicable, no supplementary material.

*Author: Many thanks for the suggestions!*

Suggested improvements for the paper: Section 2.2:

1. Line 183: typo 'experimentss'

*Author: done*

Section 3:

2. The target depth for imaging is not stated. Please explain why the chosen setup is suitable for the target depth.

*Author: Proposed target depth 36-60 m is now included.*

Section 4:

3. The readability of the paper would be improved if a table with processing steps and results of those steps were provided.

*Author: I agree, processing sequence is now provided in Table 1*

4. There is Love wave energy present in the seismic data. Have you considered inverting these data (MASW) in order to obtain Vs information about the first tens of meters? In the overview of section 2.2 several MASW studies are reported. In the discussion it is stated that Bodet et al. (2010) reported strong lateral Vs heterogeneity. Yet you use only one mean Vs profile to convert the reflection data from time to depth domain. Knowledge about the amount of variability of Vs in the top tens of meters will inform the reader about the reliability of the reported depths.

*Author: a) Inversion of Love waves can only provide reliable velocities up to max 30 m using this recording setup (0.3 of the spread length). The geophone frequency of 10 Hz would further reduce this depth to nearly 15 m. b) The Love waves here are propagating as subsurface channel waves (similar to in-seam waves) in the shallow subsurface, not as true surface waves. Using a common MASW inversion designed for Rayleigh waves (totally different propagation behaviour) does not fit this wave type, and the lateral velocity and structure variation (e.g. visible in Fig 5 first breaks) does not fit the requirements for MASW inversion (1D layer case). The reported depths are now supported by a processed record example.*

*More detailed velocity results are planned for further papers, which also focus on stratigraphic interpretation.*

5. Line 326: "to derive final depth sections by using mean 1D velocity-time function". How was that derived? The explanation follows much later (lines 347-349). It is clearer

when this section is moved up and a couple of more lines are spent on the explanation. It is too short now.

*Author: I agree, it's done.*

Section 5:

6. Figures 7 – 10: In the text there is reference to certain positions along the lines, but the horizontal distance is not clear in the figures. There seem to be numbers like 200 250 300 in the figure, but rather hidden in the portion above the depth sections and fonts too small. Please add a clear horizontal distance axis in each figure.

*Author: I agree, it's done.*

7. Figure 9: boreholes BH1 and BH2 are too far away (420 m) from the line. I would not show them in figure 9, no added value. To show them in figure 8 and 10 (200 m away) is already on the limit of preferred. 420 m is really too far off.

*Author: I agree, it's done.*

8. Blank line needed after line 442. Move the next line about Figure 11 to below Fig 11 to be in the same paragraph as the sentence starting on line 455.

*Author: I agree, it's done.*

Section 6:

9. Line 505 states that the internal structures such as topsets, foresets and indications of bottom sets are present in the seismic depth sections. It helps the non-geologists reading this geophysical paper if these are indicated in the bottom parts of figures 7-10. And it helps the geologist to recognize these in the geophysical data.

*Author: I agree, it's done.*

10. Line 548: use of only one 1D Vs profile. Please elaborate on why you think this would be a valid approximation even if Bodet et al. (2010) reported strong lateral Vs heterogeneity. Or support this by MASW results for the observed Love waves in your data.

*Author: as explained above in 4., Love waves are not helpful in this case. Using a mean 1D velocity profile derived from the data itself prevents to project velocity artifacts (e.g. from irregular ray pathes) onto the depth sections. This is the most reliable time-to-depth conversion if no other velocity information is available. In fact, the strong lateral velocity heterogeneity reported by Bodet et al. (2010) crashes the reliability of his MASW result, since MASW inversion is only valid in a 1D layer case*

11. Missing in the discussion section: From your results, would it be possible to indicate areas where future sinkholes might develop? If not, what would be needed to be able to do so in the future?

*Author: I agree, I will include words about this. We also already did some time-lapse experiments there, which are required to monitor the subsurface processes. This will be published in an upcoming paper.*

12. You postulate a new combined process model (lines 689-702). What data would you need in order to further support this model? The formation of subsurface channels and loss of cations might be monitored by a combination of time-lapse ERT, IP and SP. The arid environment might pose challenges for these techniques.

*Author: Such kind of electric and electromagnetic investigations including GPR were already done by earlier experiments. Arid is right, it would support, but please remember the high salinity and the clay&mud content in the subsurface, the area was former Dead Sea bottom. Results and simple modelling examples show that a reliable penetration is restricted max to the level of the salt water, from a realistic point of view due to the included salt in the soil restricted to 10-20 m. To verify the model, a core borehole below 50 m is required.*

Kind regards, dr. P.P. Kruiver

Interactive comment on Solid Earth Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/se-2018-22>, 2018.

# Manuscript for submission to Solid Earth

## Shear wave reflection seismics yields subsurface dissolution and subrosion patterns: application to the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site, Dead Sea, Jordan

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**Abstract.**

Near-surface geophysical imaging of alluvial fan settings is a challenging task, but crucial for understating geological processes in such settings. The alluvial fan of Ghor Al-Haditha at the southeast shore of the Dead Sea is strongly affected by localized subsidence and destructive sinkhole collapses, with a significantly increasing sinkhole formation rate since ca. 1983. A similar increase is observed also on the western shore of the Dead Sea, in correlation with an ongoing decline of the Dead Sea level. Since different structural models of the upper 50 m of the alluvial fan and varying hypothetical sinkhole processes have been suggested for the Ghor Al-Haditha area in the past, this study aimed to clarify the subsurface characteristics responsible for sinkhole development.

For this purpose, high-frequency shear wave reflection vibratory seismic surveys were carried out in the Ghor Al-Haditha area along several crossing and parallel profiles with a total length of 1.8 km and 2.1 km in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The sedimentary architecture of the alluvial fan at Ghor Al-Haditha is resolved down to a depth of nearly 200 m in high-resolution, and is calibrated with the stratigraphic profiles of two boreholes located inside the survey area.

The most surprising result of the survey is the absence of evidence for a thick (>2-10 m) compacted salt layer formerly suggested to lie at ca. 35-40 m depth. Instead, seismic reflection amplitudes and velocities image with good continuity a complex interlocking of alluvial fan deposits and lacustrine sediments of the Dead Sea between 0-200 m depth. Furthermore, the underground of areas affected by sinkholes is characterized by highly-scattering wave fields and reduced seismic interval velocities. We propose that the Dead Sea mud layers, which comprise distributed inclusions or lenses of evaporitic chloride, sulphate, and carbonate minerals as well as clay silicates, become increasingly exposed to unsaturated water as the sea level declines, and are consequently destabilized and mobilized by both dissolution and physical erosion in the subsurface. This new interpretation of the underlying cause of sinkhole development is supported by surface observations in nearby channel systems. Overall this study shows that shear wave seismic reflection technique is a promising method for enhanced near-surface imaging in such challenging alluvial fan settings.

**Keywords**

shallow reflection seismics, high-resolution, Vibroseis, sinkholes, Dead Sea, shear waves

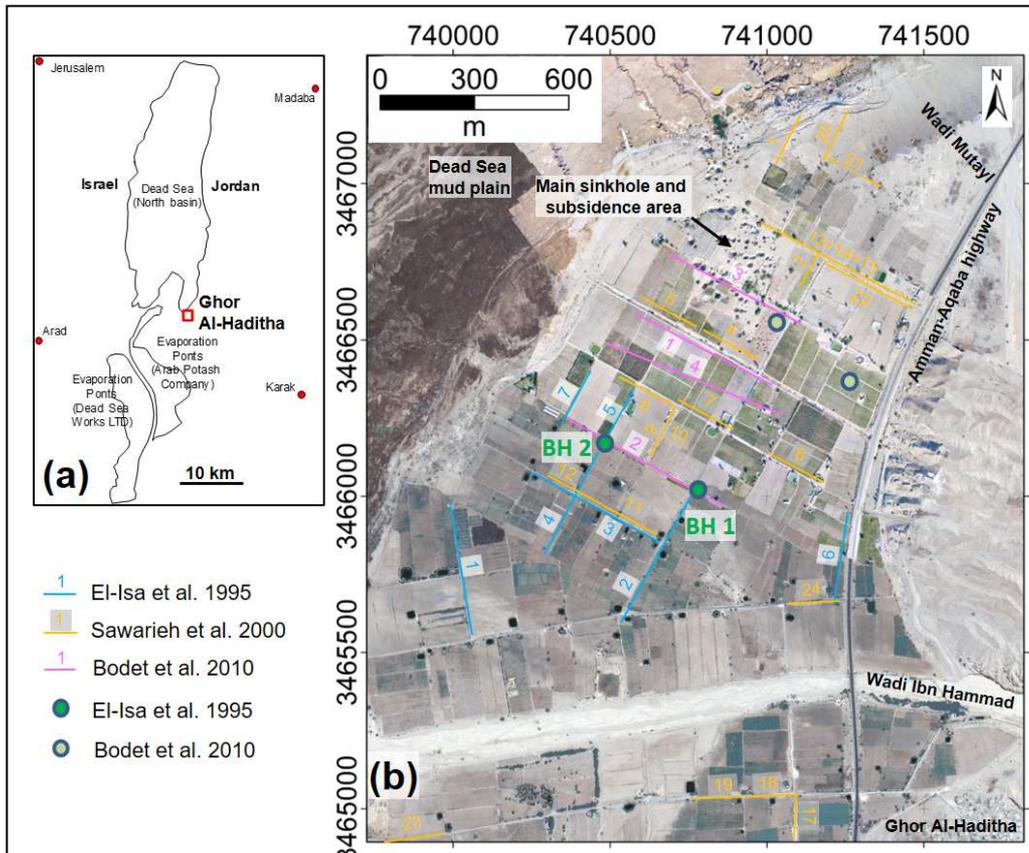
65 **1. Introduction**

Since around 1980 until today, thousands of sinkholes have affected specific areas along the Dead Sea shoreline (Yechieli et al., 2006, Shalev et al., 2006, Abelson et al., 2017), apparently contemporaneous with the rapid decrease of the Dead Sea level (Sawarieh and Alrshdan, 2011). The sinkhole processes continuously disrupt farming areas, houses, industrial sites, and infrastructure, and, therefore, hamper the  
70 future economic development of the whole region. Geological and geophysical sinkhole studies started already in the 1990's at both the western (e.g. Wachs et al., 2000) and eastern (El-Isa et al., 1995) shorelines of the Dead Sea. An early map of the main sinkhole sites was published by Yechieli et al. (2002). The sinkholes typically appear in clusters on either alluvial fans or mud flats. Arkin and Gilat (2000) defined two different classes of sinkholes: a) gravel holes on alluvial fans that consist of highly  
75 permeable gravel and sand layers including some silt, clay and evaporites; and b) mud holes on Dead Sea mud flats that consist of very fine marl, silt, clay and evaporitic minerals like aragonite, gypsum and halite.

An early hypothesis postulated that clay softening, liquefaction and mobilization in the subsurface, due to the dilution of former highly salty porewater by freshwater inflows, generates the sinkholes (Arkin and  
80 Gilat, 2000). As discussed by Ezersky and Frumkin (2013), two other factors may control the location of the sinkholes at the Dead Sea: (1) the presence of a thick, massive salt layer that is exposed to a dissolution front at its edge, and (2) the presence of sub-surface faults that control fresh water inflow into, and thus enable dissolution of, a salt layer. Such controls were suggested on the basis of a variety of methodical approaches (e.g. Yechieli et al., 2002, Diabat, 2005, Closson, 2005, Abelson et al., 2006,  
85 2009, Ezersky, 2006, Frydman et al., 2008, Closson and Abou Karaki, 2009, Ezersky et al., 2010, Ezersky, 2013c, Ezersky and Livne, 2013, Ezersky et al., 2017).

Although many geophysical studies have been carried out at the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site (**Fig. 1a**) in the past 24 years, the subsurface structure and the subsurface erosion (subrosion) processes are still rather uncertain. Since the year 2000, several authors have proposed that a several metre thick, massive  
90 salt layer lies at top depth of 35-40 m below the ground surface at the site, underneath the alluvial fan deposits (Taqieddin et al., 2000, Legchenko et al., 2008, Frumkin et al., 2011, Ezersky et al., 2013 a,b,c, Ezersky and Frumkin, 2013, Ezersky and Livne, 2013, Ezersky et al., 2017). In this shallow salt layer model, chemical erosion (dissolution) of this salt layer by fresh water flow from the eastern mountain range is supposed to generate initial cavities in the subsurface, which subsequently move upwards due to  
95 continuous solution or collapse of material at the cavity top, up to the final collapse of the ground surface. In contrast, Al-Halbouni et al. (2017) presented an alternative conceptual model for Ghor Al-Haditha, based on photogrammetric surveying, historic satellite image analysis and field observations. They propose both chemical and physical subrosion of weak material, which consists both of mud flat (including evaporite lenses) and alluvial fan sediments.

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**Figure 1:** (a) Generalized map of the Dead Sea area. Except the site Ghor Al-Haditha at the eastern border, which is the focus of this paper, the most sinkhole sites are located along the western shoreline of the Dead Sea (see e.g. Yechieli et al. 2002). (b) detailed map of the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site and previous refraction seismic (El-Isa et al., 1995, Sawarieh et al., 2000) and MASW (Bodet et al., 2010) profiling. Boreholes BH1 and BH2 are reported in detail by El-Isa et al. (1995), two other boreholes are reported by Bodet et al. (2010) without any further information. Background is a Pleiades satellite image from 2015 combined with an aerial orthophoto mosaic from 2016.

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Our reflection seismic study resolves for the first time the fine structure of subsurface layers with high-resolution at Ghor Al-Haditha, and thereby contributes to reappraising the different models suggested above. We further show that shear wave reflection seismics has advantages to study highly porous, partly saturated alluvial fans with complex compositions, e.g. compared to P-wave reflection and refraction, which is influenced by the pore fluids, and MASW, which is only valid in a 1D layer case. A particular methodological question of interest is to what extent shear wave seismics can be used to identify dissolution processes at depth and early stages of collapse sinkholes.

## 2. Site of investigation

Ghor Al-Haditha is a small village at the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea in the province Al-Karak of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Fig. 1 a&b). It is located within the Dead Sea pull-apart basin close

120 to the outlet of the Wadi Ibn Hammad valley. Sediments transported down the Wadi Ibn Hammad and the  
neighbouring Wadi Mutayl have formed a connected alluvial sediment plain, which is in contact with the  
border of the Dead Sea. The alluvial plain, current elevation nearly -360 m to -380 m, was formerly  
located at the bottom of the Dead Sea and is dry land since an unknown time. It is now mainly used for  
market gardening, and, for irrigation of the plants, water flowing from Wadi Ibn Hammad and  
surrounding springs is stored in some man-made pools in the area.

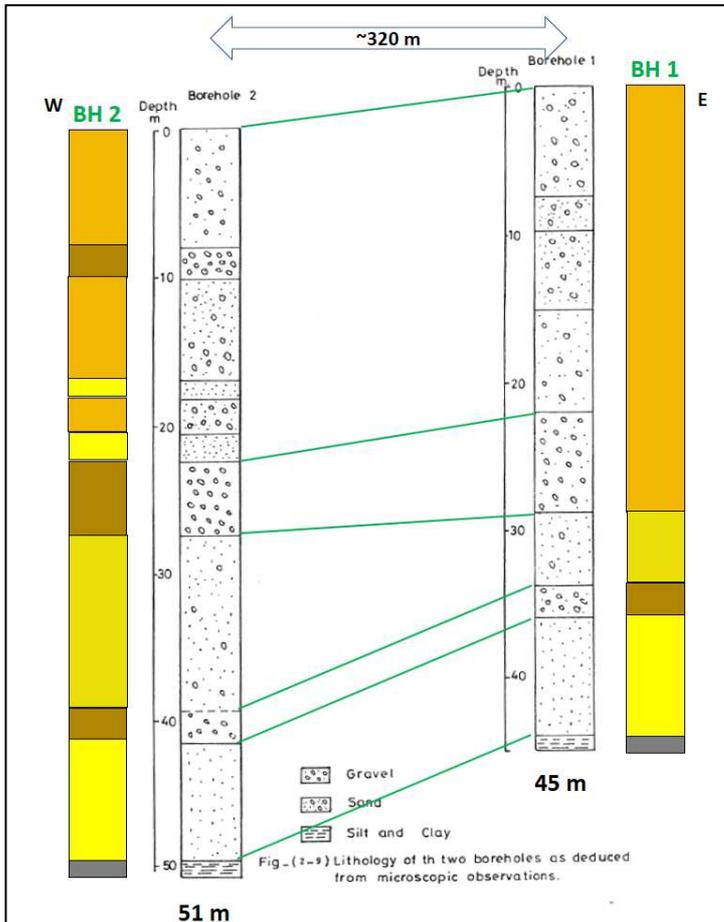
125 Khalil (1992) published the geological information of the area (geologic map sheet Ar Rabba at 1:50000  
scale). The bedrock underlying the alluvial plain is not exposed, but on structural grounds it probably  
comprises limestone (some dolomitic or silicified), marl, chalk, and phosphorite of the Ajun and Belqa  
Groups of Late Cretaceous (Turonian – Campanian) age, and possibly also sandstones of the Ram and  
Kurnub Groups of Cambrian and Early Cretaceous ages, respectively. The depth to bedrock under the  
130 alluvial fan is unknown. West of Ghor Al-Haditha, the Lisan peninsula rises in the Dead Sea and uplifts at  
a rate of nearly 9 mm/year by salt diapirism related to an underlying Usdom evaporate formation of Plio-  
Pleistocene age (Taqiuddin et al., 2000, Fiaschi et al., 2017). The alluvial plain consists of semi-  
consolidated sands and gravels, interbedded with layers of silt, clay and marl (El-Isa et al., 1995,  
Sawarieh et al., 2000), all of which are considered part of the lacustrine Lisan Marl Formation of Late  
135 Pleistocene age. This sedimentation mixture was also observed during the survey in shallow outcrops of  
1-2 m depth along new water pipeline constructions in the whole area, and at the flanks of up to 20 m  
deep young sinkholes. The alluvial plain also comprises younger, unconsolidated alluvial gravels and  
sands, especially around the modern wadi outlets. Together with the interbedded marl, evaporites, silt and  
clay layers exposed in the adjacent mud flat (former Dead Sea bed), these younger semi-poorly  
140 consolidated materials likely correspond to the Ze'elim Formation of Holocene age (Abou Karaki et al.,  
2016)

## 2.1 Borehole information

Two boreholes (BH1 and BH2) were drilled at the Ghor Al-Haditha investigation site in January-  
February of 1995 (**Fig. 1b**), and the drillings and sample analyses were firstly described in a report of El-  
145 Isa et al. (1995). Bodet et al. (2010) reported two additional boreholes (**Fig. 1b**) from 2006, but without  
further descriptions and not mentioned in other reports and publications. **Figure 2** shows the borehole  
lithology of BH1 and BH2 based on a detailed microscopic analysis of cuttings (El-Isa et al., 1995).  
There, the lithology is described as an alternating sequence of sand and gravel, with a “silt and clay” bed  
at the bottom down to 51 m and 45 m depth, respectively. Nothing is mentioned about a massive salt  
150 layer.

Several papers have subsequently presented lithologic cross sections for the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole  
area, in which a thick (>2-10 m) pure salt layer is postulated to lie at between 30 m and 45 m depth below  
the surface (e.g., Taqiuddin et al., 2000, Frumkin et al., 2011, Ezersky et al., 2013 a,b,c, Ezersky et al.,  
2017). The abovementioned boreholes, the reported depths of which vary from one paper to another, are  
155 used to support this finding, although no detailed descriptions of the boreholes, no details about the

drilling method used, and no lithologic bars are provided. Because the indication of possible massive salt layers is important for comparison with our results, we point to these inconsistencies here.



**Figure 2:** Lithologic columns of the boreholes BH1 and BH2 from microscopic analyses, referenced to their surface elevation (black and white columns are originals of El-Isa et al. (1995)). The coloured, generalized columns are used for the figures of this paper. The main dip tendencies of the units toward the west are visible by the green connecting lines. The annotated borehole depths below the columns follow the written text in El-Isa et al. (1995).

## 180 2.2 Previous geophysical surveys

Numerous, unpublished studies were carried out in the Ghor Al-Haditha area by the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (MEMR), Jordan (until 2014 the Natural Resources Authority, NRA) subsequent to the first occurrence of the sinkholes (Sawarieh, pers. comm., 2013). Early refraction seismic experiments that used standard compression wave (P-wave) techniques were conducted in August-  
 185 December 1994 by the University of Jordan (El-Isa et al. 1995, blue lines in **Fig. 1b**), combined with first hydrology and other geophysical studies. The equipment used is only poorly documented, seismic source was a 7 kg sledgehammer. Then, hydrology and hydrochemistry work was accompanied by extended seismic refraction (orange lines in **Fig. 1b**) and ground penetration radar (GPR) surveys in February 1999 (Sawarieh et al., 2000, Abueladas and Al-Zoubi, 2004). Seismic equipment was a 350 kg weight drop source and a Bison Geopro 8024 24-channel recorder (10 m geophone interval). The refraction seismic  
 190 surveys indicated the thickness of the alluvial deposits of more than 70 m, a possible salt intrusion body below (at least 70 m deep) at one profile location (profile 5 of Sawarieh et al., 2000, **Fig. 1b**), and also

sinkhole-causing cavities at relatively shallow depth (less than 20 m). Except the one location suspected for a salt intrusion body, the seismic velocity of the deepest refractor below 40-50 m depth was reported  
195 to vary from 2245 ms<sup>-1</sup> to 3300 ms<sup>-1</sup> in all profiles, and seismic velocities above this are in general less than 2500 ms<sup>-1</sup>. Unfortunately, the acquired seismic data of the 1994 and 1999 campaigns are irrecoverable.

Soon after the 1999 surveys, Batayneh et al. (2002) applied GPR to assess the potential of sinkholes of the Ghor Al-Haditha area and to determine the location of the filled sinkhole features within relatively  
200 dense and more resistive materials. Barjous et al. (2004) carried out a FDEM (Frequency Domain Electromagnetic) survey, supplemented by DC resistivity methods (Wenner and Dipole-Dipole arrays), and conventional geological mapping techniques. During this work a systematic EM survey was applied on the Wadi Ibn Hammad alluvial fan.

More recent investigations carried out between 2005 and 2008 used a multi-method approach of transient  
205 electromagnetic (TEM) sounding, magnetic resonance sounding (MRS), GPR, and electric resistivity tomography (ERT) (Camerlynck et al., 2012). In 2007, these included also a seismic survey along 4 profiles targeted to combined reflection, refraction tomography, and Multi Channel Analysis of Surface Wave (MASW) data analysis (e.g., Dhemaied, 2007, Bodet et al., 2010, Keydar et al., 2011, Ezersky et al., 2013a, magenta lines in **Fig. 1b**). For this seismic survey, a Geometrics recorder with a 24-channel  
210 geophone (4.5 Hz resonant frequency) spread in 5 m intervals and a sledgehammer source (mass not reported) was utilized. MASW results are published in Bodet et al. (2010) (profile 3) and Keydar et al. (2011) (profiles 3&4). MASW results and interpretations of profiles 3 and 4 are published in Ezersky et al. (2013b), Ezersky and Frumkin (2013), and Ezersky et al. 2017. The limit of reliable depth penetration was reported as 60 m (maximum Half Space Depth), following the empirical formula  $Z_{\max}=0.5L$  of Park  
215 et al. (1999) and Rix and Leipski (1991), where L is the total source-receiver spread length of 120 m. Results of profile 3 (magenta line 3 in **Fig. 1b**) show shear wave velocities of mainly less than 400 ms<sup>-1</sup> from surface to  $Z_{\max}$ , while profile 4 (magenta line 4 in **Fig. 1b**) images a high velocity layer of more than 800 ms<sup>-1</sup> from nearly 30 m depth to  $Z_{\max}$ , which was interpreted as the shallow salt layer. A reflection seismic analysis result of profile 4 in Ezersky and Frumkin (2013) shows no reflection response of the  
220 proposed shallow salt layer, however. Refraction tomography analysis results are reported to be of insufficient resolution (Camerlynck,et al., 2012) and are later on shortly mentioned in Ezersky et al. (2017) only.

Three further MEMR geophysical surveys undertaken in 2009 and 2010 with GPR, Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT) and Time Domain Electromagnetic (TDEM) with NanoTEM technique, provide the  
225 most recent information about the sinkhole area in Ghor Al-Haditha (Alrshdan 2012). These newer results depict geological and groundwater conditions, the salt-to-freshwater interface, and the limits of safe and vulnerable zones. Alrshdan (2012) also discusses the mechanism of sinkhole formation suggesting that the freshwater inflow acts as the major player, which dissolves cementing evaporite minerals and the fine materials within the alluvial fan, leaving weak alluvial layers and cavities which develop to sinkholes  
230 later on.

To shed more light on these different models and to provide an independent database for the detailed mapping of the postulated salt layer, its morphology, and synclinal structures expected at its top, we started high-resolution shear wave reflection seismic surveying in 2013 at Ghor Al-Haditha. The target depth of the survey was initially focused to the proposed salt layer depth of 35-60 m and in maximum to 100 m depth.

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### 3. Shear wave reflection seismic equipment and survey

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A shear wave landstreamer (Inazaki, 2004, Pugin et al. 2004, 2007, 2013) consisting of 95 transverse horizontal (SH) geophones (10 Hz resonance frequency) in 1 m intervals was used as receiver unit, connected to a Geode (Geometrics Inc., 4 units of 24 channels each) recording system. Transverse horizontal (SH) waves were generated by the seismic micro-vibrator source ELVIS (Polom et al. 2011, Krawczyk et al. 2012, Polom et al. 2013). **Figure 3** shows the equipment in operation on site. The small size (nearly 1.5 m<sup>3</sup>) and weight (nearly 600 kg) of the whole equipment enabled air cargo transportation to Jordan.



**Figure 3:** Photos of the shear wave seismic reflection acquisition campaign carried out in October 2013.

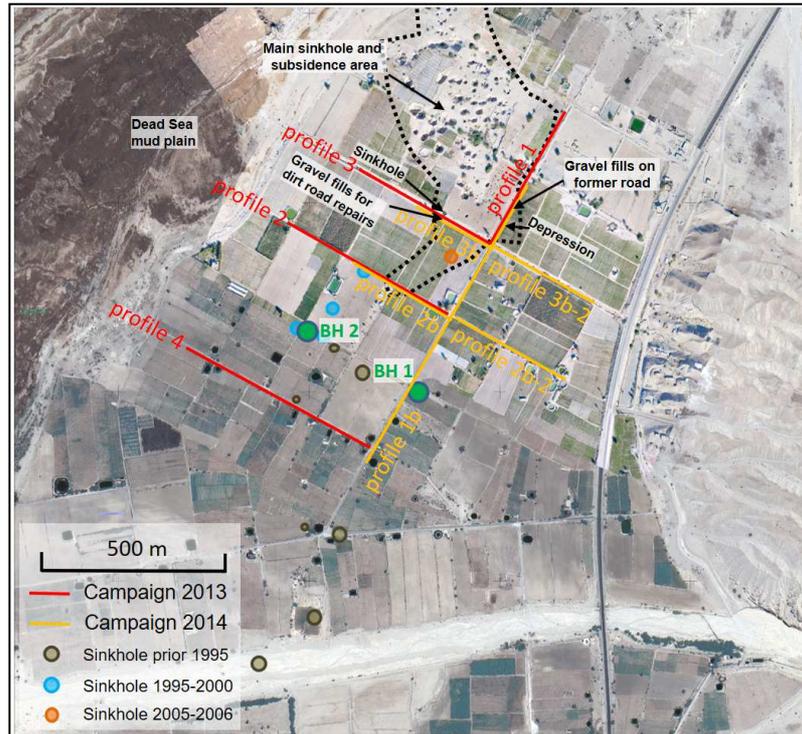
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(a) Wheelbarrow-mounted shear wave source system on asphalt pavement at start location of profile 2. (b) Recording car, towed land streamer and source during operation on profile 3. (c) Land streamer towed by the recording car during acquisition on profile 2. Colour paintings on the road surface were used for location numbering along the profiles. (d) Sledge-mounted horizontal geophone in SH (particle movement perpendicular to profiling direction) configuration along profile 3.

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The source signal (sweep) was set to 20-120 Hz (20-80 Hz during the survey extension in 2014) linear frequency modulated of 10 s duration (Crawford et al., 1960). Data recording was set to 12 s duration and stored uncorrelated to enable processing of uncorrelated data later on, if required. In the field, vibroseis

255 correlation processing was applied for immediate quality control. After initial tests on site, the source  
interval was set to 2 m to increase the statistical redundancy due to challenging, disturbed subsurface  
conditions, noticeable by strong wave field scattering in the recordings. Typically, two records were  
gained at each source location **by alternating the source polarity** and stored separately. Only during times  
of stronger wind disturbances the number of records per location was increased to four. In the 2013  
260 km of profile length. In 2014, 2000 records (9.14 Gb) at 1144 source locations were recorded along 2.1  
km of profile length (see profile locations in **Fig. 4**).



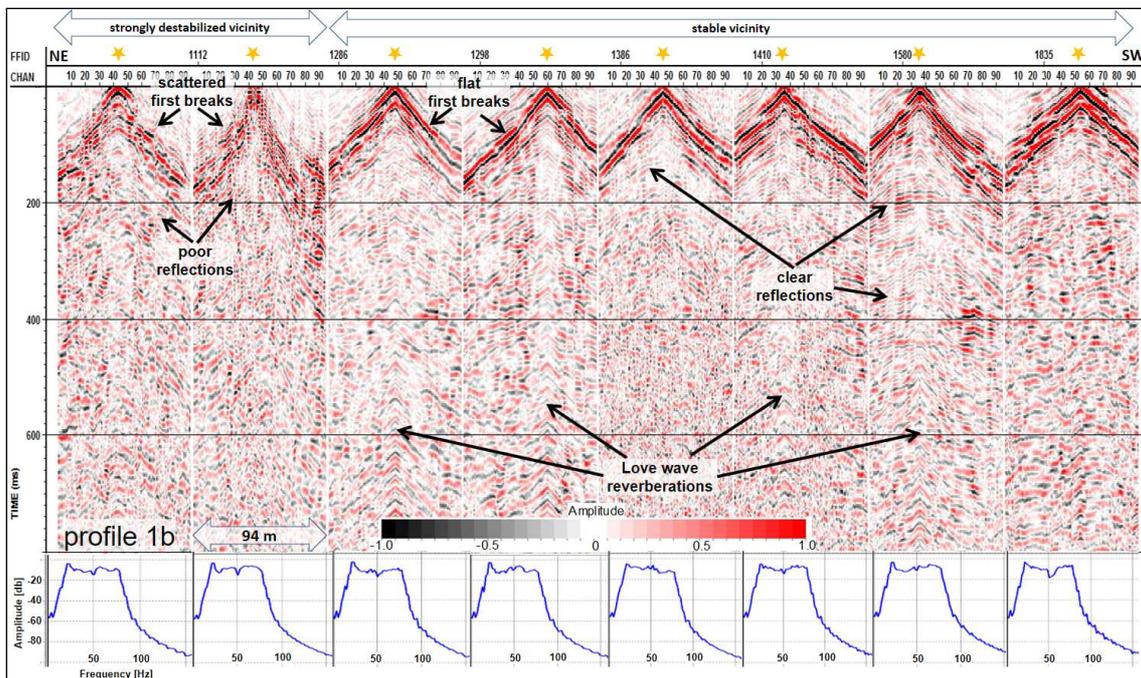
**Figure 4:** Map of the shear wave reflection seismic profiles acquired in 2013 (red lines) and 2014 (yellow lines). Green circles denote the locations of the boreholes made in 1994 (according to report of El-Isa et al. (1995)). Older refilled sinkholes are denoted by brown circles (after El-Isa et al. (1995)), blue circles (after Sawarieh et al. (2000)), and orange circle (after Bodet et al. (2010)). The dotted black polygon marks the updated outline of the main sinkhole and subsidence area after Al-Halbouni et al. (2017).  
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A variable split-spread source-receiver configuration (Polom et al. 2016) was applied to enable geometry optimization for the detection of dipping structures, and to facilitate workarounds due to obstacles in the profile track. To reduce the proportion of Love surface waves during recording, profiles were carried out mostly either on asphalt paved roads or on dirt roads covered by compacted gravel, so that high shear wave velocities at the surface disable the excitation of Love surface waves. In 2013, geodetic surveying of the profile tracks was performed by using a handheld GPS system. Without differential GPS corrections, the final positioning of the profiles from the 2013 campaign required laborious optimizations  
270 by manual corrections based on the known distances along the receiver units. **The horizontal accuracy was improved to less than 5 cm for the profiling, and 0.5-1 m for absolute positioning.** Reliable elevation  
275

data could not be restored. During the 2014 campaign, the positioning method was improved by using a Differential GPS system, leading to precise elevation data of 10 cm horizontal and 15 cm vertical error.

280 All seismic data recorded were checked and pre-processed in the evening of each recording day by using the VISTA 10.028 (GEDCO Inc., Calgary, CA) seismic data processing software on a notebook computer (DELL Precision M65) for quality-control purposes and a first interpretation. Detailed inspections of correlated raw records showed strong Love wave scattering on profiles 1 and 3 that indicated a low velocity layer close to the surface, even though the dirt road construction at profile 3 was modified some years ago by gravel infill after a heavy damage caused by sinkholes and related subsidence.

285 Selected record examples along profile 1b illustrate the typical range of signal propagation responses at the Ghor Al-Haditha site (**Fig. 5**).

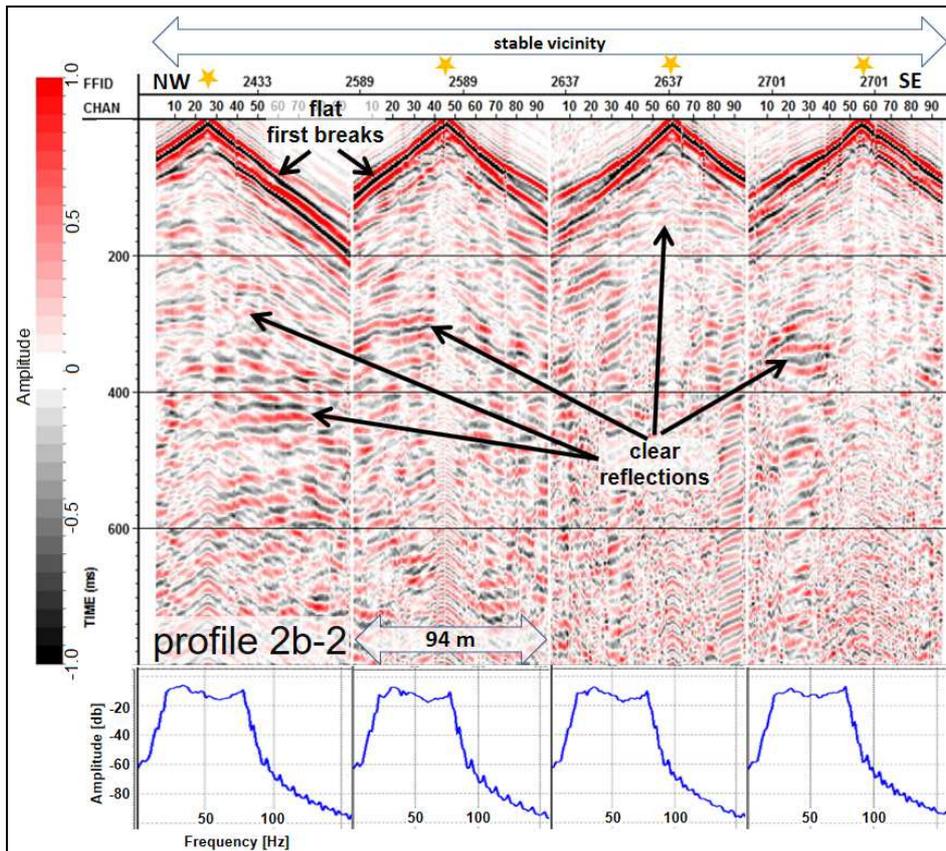


290 **Figure 5:** Examples of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-76-82 Hz) applied) in time domain along profile 1b. The positions of the seismic source are labelled by orange stars. FFID denotes the record number along the profile, CHAN denotes the geophone number along the landstreamer unit. Arrows at top denote the condition of the ground surface observed along the profile. In the NE, close to the sinkhole affected area, first break and reflection signals are weak due to the strong wave scattering in the subsurface caused by material loosening and cracking. The situation improves towards SE, where no sinkholes or other subsidence features were present during profiling and the road surface was in good condition. **Below mean amplitude spectra of the time window 0-400 ms (estimated 0-70m depth) for each record are shown.**

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300 In the Northeast sector of the profile, close to the main sinkhole area, a typical scattering of the wave propagation is visible. The wave propagation behaviour is mostly asymmetric regarding the receiver distance to the source position, which indicates heterogeneous subsurface structures. In the middle sector, even though an asphalt surface pavement of apparently continuous integrity, Love wave propagation was

partly indicated (note area of Love wave reverberations marked on Fig. 5), probably caused by poor road construction. In the Southwest sector, clear reflection events were detected already in the single recordings. Along profile 2b-2 (Fig. 6) selected record examples show a better data quality compared to profile 1b: flat first breaks and a range of clear reflection events occur. This is surprising, because the road quality along profile 2b-2 did not differ to that of the southwest sector of profile 1, and both roads are of obviously similar age.



**Figure 6:** Examples of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-76-82 Hz) applied) in time domain along profile 2b-2 (labelling as in Fig. 5). Good signal quality of first breaks and reflections mirrors a rather unaffected signal propagation in the subsurface, which correlates to the sinkhole-unaffected vicinity at surface. Reflection signals up to 400 ms in time represent layer responses from 70 m depth (applying  $350 \text{ ms}^{-1}$  shear wave propagation velocity). Below mean amplitude spectra of the time window 0-400 ms for each record are shown.

#### 4. Data processing

Reflection imaging was carried out by following a general processing sequence described by, e.g., Krawczyk et al. (2012) and Polom et al. (2013). The main data processing flow of the first iteration consisted of Vibroseis Correlation, Vertical Stacking of records, Geometry Installation, Amplitude Scaling, Bandpass Filter, Frequency-Wavenumber (FK) Filter, Interactive Velocity Analysis, Common Mid Point (CMP) Stacking, parallel applied Frequency-Space (FX) Deconvolution and Finite-Difference

(FD) Migration. Subsequently, depth conversion was applied by using a mean 1D velocity function. Background of data processing applied is reported in Aki and Richards (1980) and Yilmaz (2001). Since Love wave reverberation patterns are a widely observed disturbance effect in the whole data set (c.f., Fig. 5), elimination of such patterns was one of the main processing steps undertaken to enhance the desired reflection response. This required several iterative loops during the main processing sequence to improve the final result. The main data processing was carried out in two iteration sequences mainly by using VISTA 10.028 (GEDCO Inc., Calgary, CA) seismic data processing software. The first sequence was carried out to establish the main database and to extract the main structures in the data. In the second iteration sequence, the time section results were used to improve the processing flow in detail towards the specific reduction of imaging artefacts and to stabilize the processing velocities for later use during depth conversion. It included reduction of harmonic distortions in the near source area and Vibroseis Spectral Balancing (Pugin et al. 2009) in a Vibrogram transformation domain (Polom 1997). Furthermore, the results of the velocity analysis were improved. To derive final depth sections a mean 1D RMS velocity-time function (shown in Fig. 8) for all profiles was derived from the reflection seismic data set and applied to all profiles. Due to the lack of any reference velocity-depth function e.g. from VSP logging, the 1D solution was chosen as first depth approximation to prevent the projection of lateral velocity irregularities (e.g. due to irregular wave ray paths close to sinkhole affected areas) onto the depth sections, which would result in structure imaging distortions. The detailed processing sequence is listed in Tab. 1.

1. Vibroseis Correlation (using the recorded pilot sweep)
2. Bad Trace Elimination
3. Vertical Stack (2 records of alternated polarity at each source location)
4. Geometry Assignment (Crooked Line Binning)
5. Amplitude Scaling (AGC 220 ms)
6. Bandpass Filter (18-20-76-82 Hz)
7. Vibroseis Spectral Balancing in the Vibrogram domain – convolution by synthetic sweep operator 15-130 Hz linear, 11.5 s (2013 data), 15-90 Hz linear, 12.5 s (2014 data) (same frequency gradient as the pilot sweep), AGC 1000 ms, correlation by the synthetic sweep operator
8. Topmute – interactive, elimination of first breaks
9. FK-filter, polygon mode to remove Love wave and harmonic residulals
10. CMP Sort
11. Interactive Velocity Analysis (every 40 m)
12. Normal Moveout Correction
13. CMP-Stack (mean 24-fold, max 30-fold)
14. Trace Energy Normalization
- 15.1 FX-deconvolution
- 15.2 Finite Difference (FD) time migration, 67 degrees algorithm
16. Time-to-depth Conversion of 15.2 (using a mean 1D velocity function derived from RMS stacking velocities)
17. Elevation Statics to -367 m a.s.l.

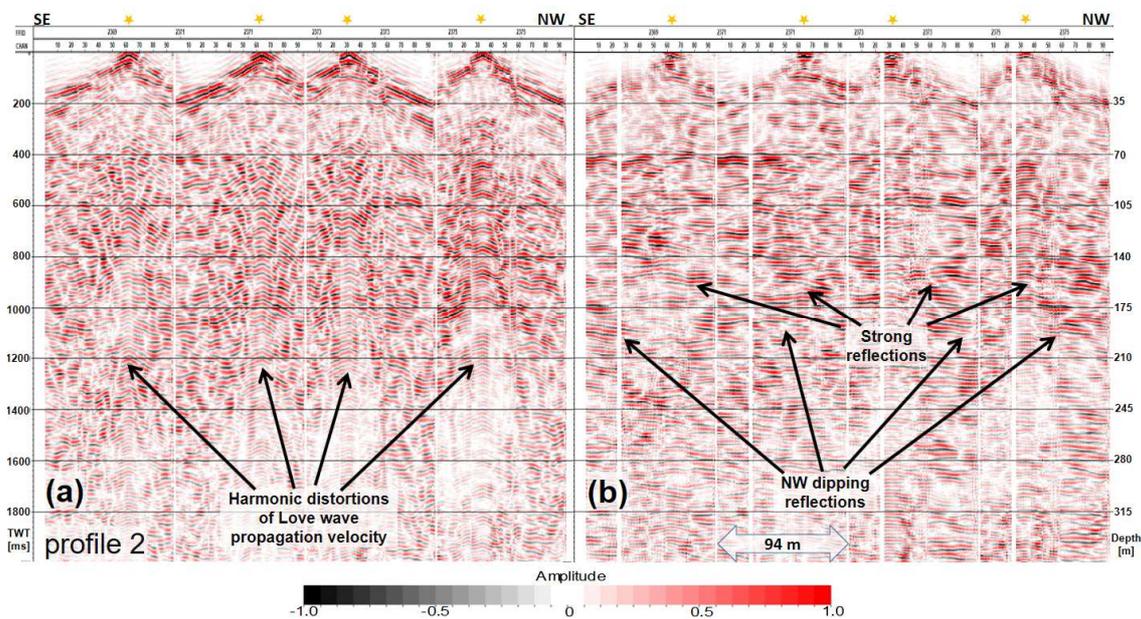
**Table 1:** Reflection seismic processing sequence.

Because of these general improvements, some structures in the near surface down to 50 m became weaker than in the first iteration. This is a compromise result of combining shallow velocity results affected by

wave propagation along irregular, non-straight ray paths (due to the disturbed shallow subsurface structure) with more regular straight ray path responses from deeper levels (later travel times).

345 **Figure 7** shows a comparison of processed shot gathers of profile 2 in an area of good subsurface reflectivity (profiling distance 325 m in **Fig. 9**) after step 5 (a) and after step 9 (b) of the processing sequence in **Tab.1**. Analog to the time scale on the left vertical axis a depth scale is added on the right axis based on a mean shear wave velocity of 350 m/s to visualize the raw time-to-depth relationship. The record set shows continuous and partly strong reflector elements which are partly covered in (a) by harmonic distortions (so called herring bone or Chevron pattern) propagating with Love wave velocity of nearly 200m/s from the source position. After step 9 of the processing sequence this covering pattern is removed from the data, showing the reflector structures behind this pattern. Such disturbing pattern typically result from poor road constructions where the sub-base layer is not properly performed.

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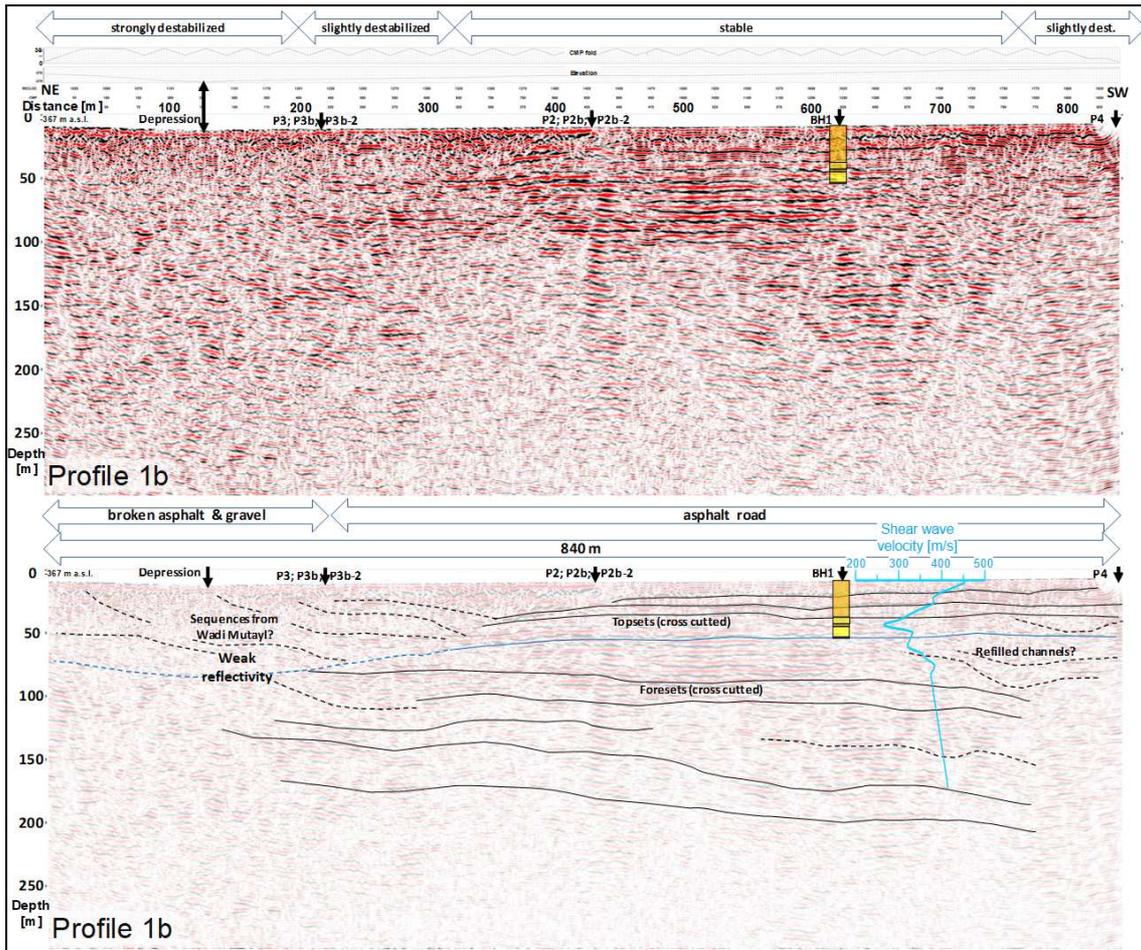


355 **Figure 7:** (a) A consecutive set of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-76-82 Hz) applied) in time domain in an area of good reflectivity along profile 2 (labelling as in **Fig. 5**). Parts of the records are disturbed by harmonic distortions centred to the source position and propagating with Love wave velocity (~200 m/s). In (b) the disturbing pattern is removed, uncovering the reflection events below. For a raw time-to-depth estimation a depth scale is added to the right based on a mean velocity of 350 m/s for body shear waves. In (b) also Top Mute is applied.

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### 5. Resulting depth sections and structure correlations

The main NE-SW-trending profile 1b has transparent and strongly layered segments between ground surface and 200 m depth (**Fig. 8**).



365 **Figure 8:** Resulting depth section of profile 1b after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation  
of the main structure elements (bottom). Arrow bars at the top of the upper image denote the surface  
instability/stability as observed along the profile, while arrow bars below denote the road surface situation  
along the profile and the profile length. Black arrows at top indicate joints to crossing profiles. The  
370 top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 is shown as the blue line along the profile, since it is the first layer  
detected at depth that is prone to subsrosion. Also shown is the 1D shear wave velocity-depth function  
(interval velocity) derived from seismic data in this area; this function was used for time-to-depth  
conversion of all profiles.

375 The depth section of profile 1b refers to a reference level of -367 m a.s.l. and it includes annotations of  
joints to the other profiles, remarks about the surrounding area (top), and information on the road  
construction (bottom). The location of borehole BH1 which is nearly 10 m SE of the profile is projected  
perpendicularly into the profile and shown with a simplified lithology (see **Fig. 2**). The mean 1D velocity  
380 function used for time-to-depth conversion is given as interval velocity in depth (Dix, 1955) beside the  
borehole BH1. It shows estimated shear wave velocities in the range of 250-450 ms<sup>-1</sup> down to depths of  
about 170 m. Finally, the reflection amplitude responses throughout all seismic sections represent  
reflection coefficients of nearly 0.1 or less, indicating materials with relatively low contrasts in

seismically-sensitive material properties (elastic parameters and density) and hence in shear wave seismic velocity.

385 The main area of sinkhole activity is located immediately northwest of profile 1 (see **Fig.4**). This activity has strongly affected the road construction along this part of profile 1b, northeast of its intersection with profile 3 (**Fig. 8**). A depression with several fractures is visible here along the road surface (**Fig. 4**), but without any sinkhole activity until yet. In detail, this part of the road crosses the south-eastern limit of a major sinuous depression that runs down to the former Dead Sea shore and that hosts the smaller scale

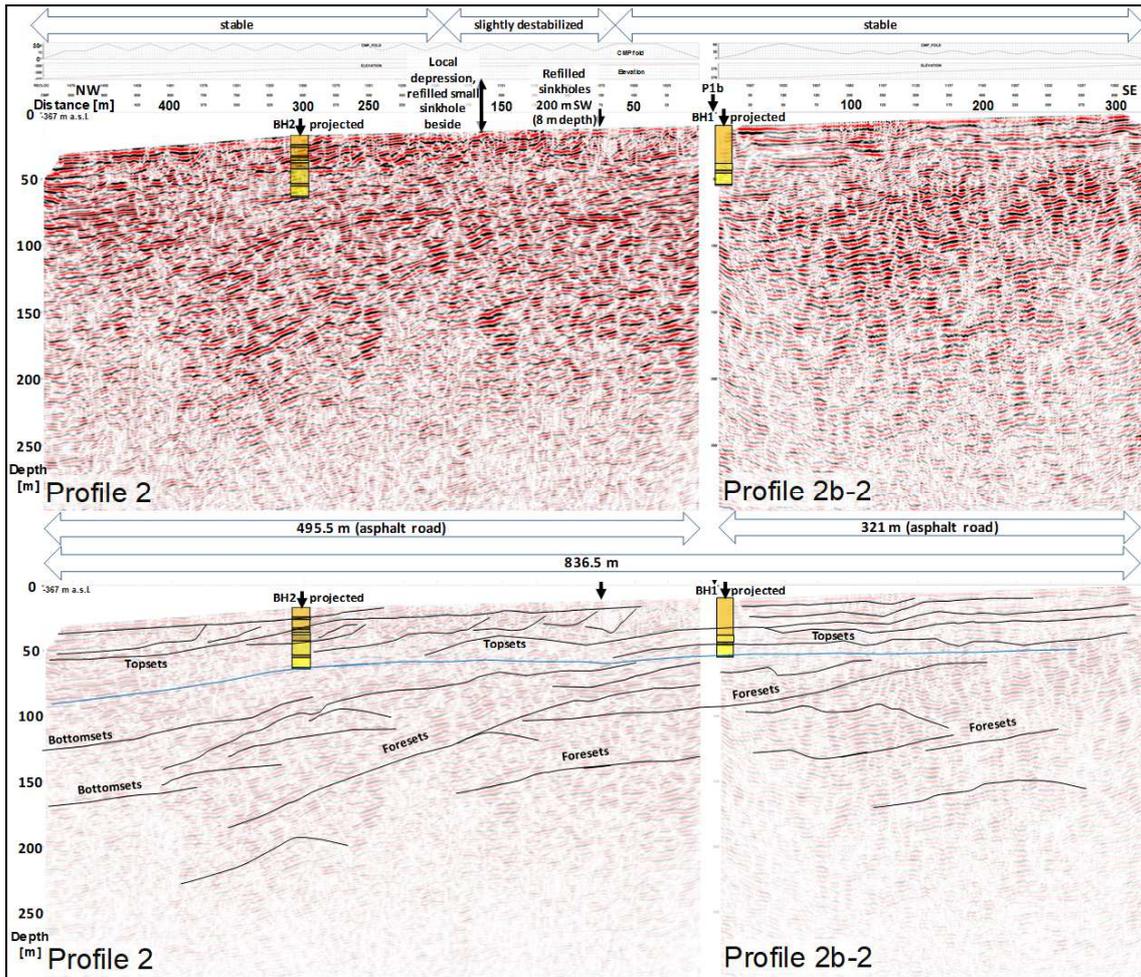
390 sinkholes (for details see Al-Halbouni et al. (2017)). Several gravel infills on the former asphalt surface in the past enable the usability of this part of the road. Further along profile 1b, to the southwest of its intersection with profile 3, the road stability continuously increases. The road surface is essentially unaffected by subsidence along the area denoted as stable along the southwest half of the profile 1b. Within this stable area, from the intersection of profile 1b with profile 2 to the borehole BH1, a

395 continuous reflectivity pattern is visible below 50 m reference depth (i.e. nearly 45 m below the ground surface). The top of this pattern nearly correlates with the depth of the „silt and clay“ layer detected 44 m below the ground surface in borehole BH1. The bottom of the nearly horizontal pattern reaches to nearly 100 m depth below reference level along much of the profile, although SW of the BH1 location the pattern extends downward to 230 m depth within a V-shaped structure. NE of the intersection of profiles

400 1 and 2, the pattern becomes weak and disappears NE of the intersection of profiles 1 and 3. Also SW of borehole BH1 the horizontal pattern weakens and bowl-shaped structures become more dominant. Overall, the pattern widely correlates with the stable part of the road, where no sinkholes have occurred yet. Above this pattern, around the borehole BH1 location, nearly horizontal layers occur which show finer subdivided structures resolved down to meter scale. This finer layered structure also abruptly

405 disappears NE of the intersection of profiles 1 and 2, i.e. as one approaches the main sinkhole area. The combined depth sections of profiles 2 and 2b-2 are shown in **Fig. 9**. The profiles were both acquired on asphalt road. Also shown in **Fig. 9** are the simplified lithological bars of boreholes BH1 and BH2 as projected perpendicularly into the profile plane from their true locations nearly 200 m to the SW (c.f., El-Isa et al., 1995). Due to this relatively large projection distance, the lithology bars may not precisely

410 reflect the lithology in the profile plane. The sections show a nearly horizontal layering down to 50 m depth below the reference level of -367 m a.s.l. in the SE part of the combined profile, which changes laterally to less well organized but mainly NW-dipping structures in the NW part of the combined profile.



**Figure 9:** Resulting depth sections of combined profiles 2 and 2b-2 after post-stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see **Fig. 8**. Lithology of boreholes BH1 and BH2 is projected perpendicular into the profile from 200 m distance, and therefore may not show the precise layering signature. Except the top 40 m the main characteristics down to 200 m show stacked sequences of NW-dipping reflectors, which are interpreted as NW-prograding alluvial fan sequences. The interpreted top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is shown by the blue line.

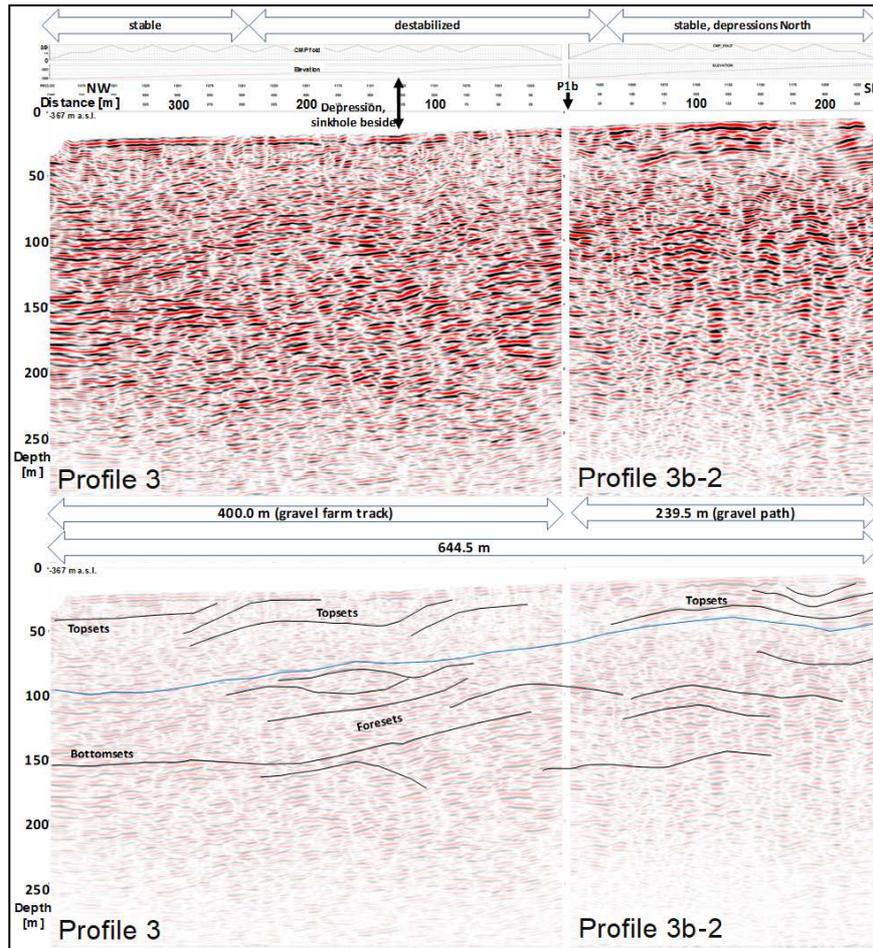
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Below 50 m depth the main structural dip is towards the NW and is divided into several dip sequences visible down to nearly 250 m. Along profile 2, between profiling positions 75m and 200 m, there is a slightly more disorganised seismic response above 50 m depth (i.e. from 30-35 m below the ground surface). This is spatially associated with a local depression and related cracks in the road. At least one sinkhole formed directly adjacent to this part of road prior to 2000 (Sawarieh et al., 2000) and was subsequently filled in. Along profile 2b-2, at profiling position 125 m, a striking stack of bowl shaped structures is visible from the surface down to nearly 75 m depth. Along this part of the profile and for at least 300 m on either side of it (i.e. towards NE and SW) no sinkhole activity was reported in the past. The combined depth sections of profiles 3 and 3b-2 are shown in **Fig. 10**. The boreholes BH1 and BH2 are not included in the profile plane due to the distance of nearly 420 m from their true positions further SW.



**Figure 10:** Combined depth sections of profiles 3 and 3b-2 after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see Fig. 8. The interpreted top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is shown by the blue line. The centre part of the profiling track was repeatedly affected by recent sinkhole activity directly beside in the NE. For farming access it was refilled with gravel along more than 250 m, which was subsequently again affected by sinkholes and subsidence. This may cause the weaker reflection signatures in the upper 50 m if compared to profile 2 (Fig. 9). The main reflection pattern signature is similar to profile 2 and 2b-2, showing NW dipping events. In the SE of the profile a V-shaped structure is visible close to surface, filled with nearly horizontal reflection events, which is interpreted as a refilled channel side-cut. Due to the wide subsidence area NE of profile 3 the top of the “silt and clay” layer (blue line) was continued to NW starting from profile 1b instead using the projection of BH2.

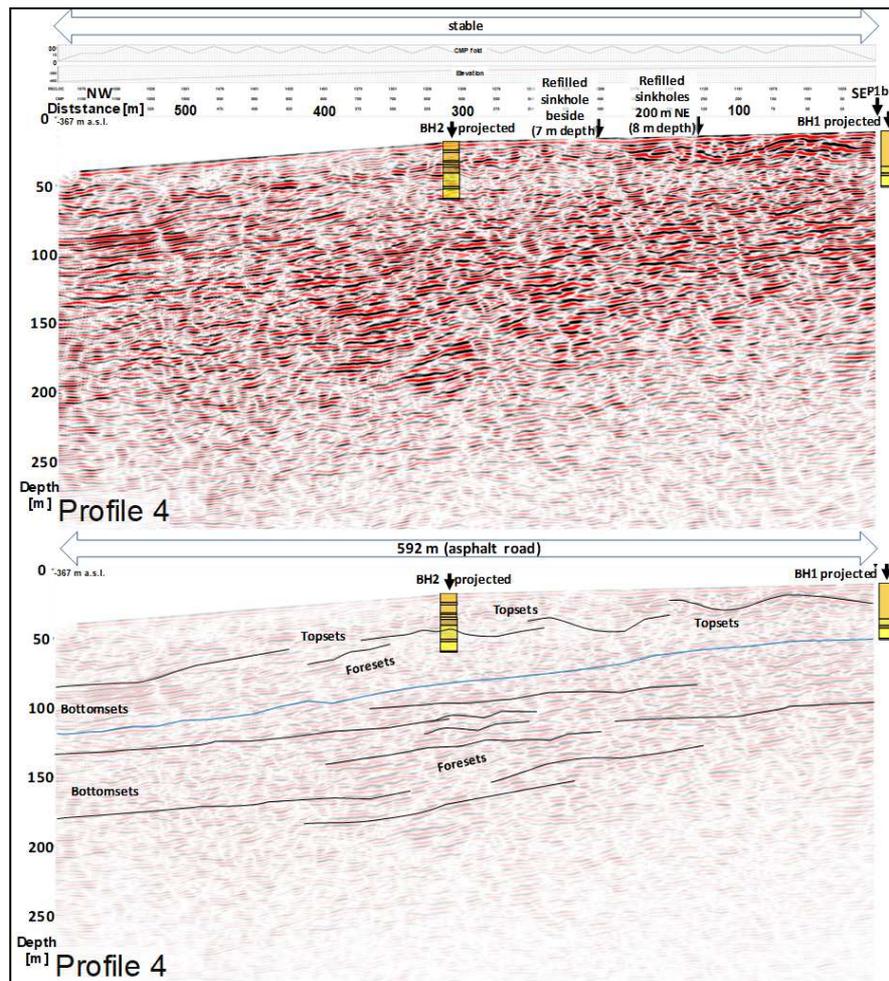
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Profiles 3 and 3b-2 were acquired on a gravel farm track and on a gravel path, respectively, both close to a parallel drainage channel. A 250 m long segment of the farm track along profile 3 was refilled extensively in the past. The main area of sinkhole activity lies immediately northeast of this refilled section of profile 3 (see Fig. 4), and indeed a recent sinkhole (formed in 2008) was located directly beside the track during data acquisition.

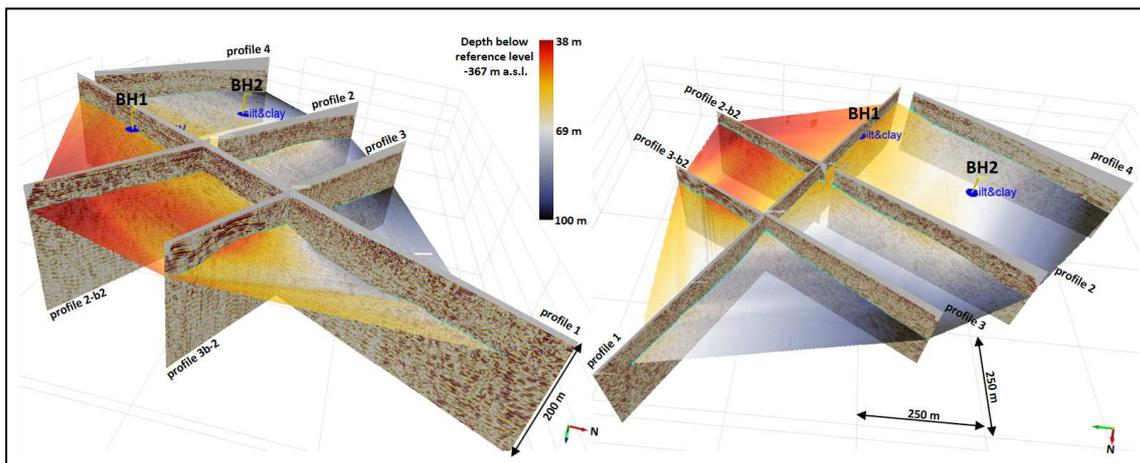
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NE of profile 3b-2 no sinkhole activity was reported in the past. Due to the different surface conditions, and probably caused by the sinkhole activity directly beside profile 3, these sections slightly differ in seismic signature. Profile 3b-2 shows some undulating layer structures of continuous amplitudes to 50 m depth below reference datum (40-45 m below the ground surface), which change at the NW end of the profile to NW-dipping sequences. In the very SE part of the profile, a bowl-shaped structure sequence is dominating down to 80 m depth, but without any indication of deformation at the surface. Profile 3 shows mainly NW-dipping structural elements without significant amplitude variations, especially above 100 m depth. Only small bowl-shaped structures are visible.



**Figure 11:** Depth section of profile 4 after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see **Fig. 8**. Lithology of boreholes BH1 and BH2 is projected from 200 m distance perpendicular into the profile. In contrast to profile 2, more gently NW-dipping events are present to 150 m depth, indicating less transportation energy of the alluvial material or an apparent structure dip. The top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is interpreted by the blue line. Bowl shaped signatures close to the surface in the SE indicate sinkhole-caused subsidence and/or refilled channel side-cuts. Significant reflection amplitudes of a stronger reflector pattern close to the NW end at nearly 90 m depth may indicate an evaporite-rich lense included in the alluvium-lacustrine deposits.

465 The depth section of profile 4 (**Fig. 11**), which again includes projections of boreholes BH1 and BH2  
 (both in reality located nearly 200 m NE of the profile plane), shows mainly slightly NW-dipping  
 structural signatures. Bowl-shaped structures are restricted to the top 50 m of the SE part of the profile,  
 which lies less than 200 m SW of where sinkhole activity was reported by El-Isa et al. (1995) and  
 Sawarieh et al. (2000) in the 1990-2000 decade. One sinkhole of 7 m depth was reported to have formed  
 470 beside the road prior to 1992. No surface damages were reported for the road track itself, however, and no  
 depressions, cracks or repairs were visible at the surface during data acquisition. At the NW end of the  
 section several continuous events of higher amplitudes occur nearly 50 m below the surface.



**Figure 12:** 3D representation of the 2.5D profiling grid (c.f., sections in **Fig. 8-11**, restricted to 200 m  
 depth (no vertical exaggeration). Boreholes BH1 and BH2 are included as yellow bars representing the sand  
 and gravel sequence above the detected „silt and clay“ layer, the top of which is marked by a blue  
 475 disc along each well shaft. Light blue lines along the profiles mark the interpreted continuation of the top  
 of this layer starting from BH1 along profile 1 and subsequently continued to the crossing profiles. The  
 constructed horizon by triangular interpolation represents the derived top of the “silt and clay” layer  
 below the reference datum of -367 m a.s.l. based on the drilling and seismic results. At the deepest parts  
 480 towards the Dead Sea border the top of this layer reaches nearly -467 m a.s.l., which is 60 m below the  
 level of the current alluvium/mud-flat transition of -407 m a.s.l. calculated by Al-Halbouni et al. (2017).

**Figure 12** shows a 2.5D grid of the profiles shown in **Fig. 8-11** including the continuation of profile 1b  
 along profile 1. Also integrated are the simplified columns of boreholes BH1 and BH2. The reference  
 485 level at the section top is -367 m a.s.l. The image illustrates that a direct projection of borehole BH2 to  
 profiles 2 and 4 needs to be carefully handled due to the projection distance of nearly 200 m.  
 Nevertheless, the results of the profiles 2 and 4 both show main structural dips towards NW, which fit the  
 dip tendency of the lithology detected in the boreholes (**Fig. 2**). Blue markers included along the borehole  
 shafts in **Fig. 12** determine the top of the „silt and clay“ layer below the alluvium sequence consisting of  
 490 gravel and sand. Since this „silt and clay“ layer is the only one detected in the lithology bars of the  
 boreholes that is prone to act as an aquiclude sensitive to subsrosion, and it also fits the general structural  
 dip, it was obvious that this layer probably extends across the whole area. To interpolate the top of this

layer in space (light blue colour in **Fig. 8-11**), it was traced from borehole BH1 along profile 1b and profile 1, from where it was further continued to profiles 2 and 2b-2, profiles 3 and 3b-2, and profile 4, with respect to the perpendicular projection of borehole BH2 into the profiles 2 and 4. Subsequently, these layer continuations along the profiles were triangularly interpolated in space to get an impression of the probable layer extent and topography. Regarding the lithology of boreholes BH1 and BH2, the constructed horizon represents the estimated base of the upper alluvial gravel and sand unit. The lithology of this upper alluvial unit shows no sequence prone to subsidence, and neither the borehole lithology nor the seismic reflection responses give indications for any included massive salt layers or extended salt lenses. Therefore, the subsidence as origin of the sinkhole process on the exposed alluvial fan is estimated to occur mainly below this constructed horizon within the area of the seismic survey. The deepest part of this constructed horizon reaches -467 m a.s.l towards NW, which is 60 m below the level of the current alluvium-to-mud-flat transition of -407 m a.s.l. at the former shoreline of the Dead Sea in the 1960s (as calculated by Al-Halbouni et al. (2017)). It therefore represents a different subsidence level to the present mud-flat surface, which indicates that alluvium and “silt and clay” sequences may lie below the presently exposed mud-flat.

## 6. Discussion

The shear wave reflection seismic survey acquired at the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site in 2013 and 2014 was the first comprehensive shallow seismic investigation of the sinkhole phenomena area since the refraction seismic investigation campaigns carried out by El-Isa et al. (1995) and Sawarieh et al. (2000), respectively. The results presented here show the advantageous imaging capabilities of the method regarding high-resolution structural analysis and depth penetration compared to common refraction seismic methods or common P-wave reflection analysis. In this section, we discuss firstly the general outcomes of our application of the S-wave reflection method to an alluvial fan setting and secondly the implications for the nature of processes leading to sinkhole development at the Ghor Al-Haditha site.

### 6.1 The application of the shear wave reflection seismic technique to alluvial fan setting

The S-wave reflection method is especially advantageous in the area close to the Dead Sea border, because wave propagation is restricted to the matrix only, and so it is not affected by the pore space content, whether that is air in the shallow unsaturated zone or fresh- or salt water in the deeper parts below the ground water level. Therefore the groundwater level itself does not act as a physical interface during wave propagation, as it is in general the case for common P-wave methods. In the S-wave profiles acquired in the area, no influence and no response of the ground water level to the wave propagation was detected. Furthermore, wave propagation velocities of S-waves ( $V_s$ ) are in general significantly smaller than those of P-waves ( $V_p$ ). The  $V_p/V_s$ -ratio ranges from nearly 1.7 for an ideal elastic medium (e.g. perfect consolidated rock) to more than 10 (Yilmaz, 2015) for unconsolidated sediments (e.g. Holocene alluvium and soft clays). This leads to a significantly improved resolution when using S-waves,

depending on the grade of matrix consolidation. In the case of the Ghor Al-Haditha site, this results into a resolution improvement factor of 8-10 below the ground water level, when one postulates a similar seismic signal frequency bandwidth for P- and S-waves.

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The success of the application to the alluvial fan setting at Ghor al-Haditha is seen in the well-resolved shallow subsurface structure imaged in the seismic profiles, which show in general mainly NW dipping (i.e. lake-ward-dipping) reflectors typical of a prograding alluvial fan sequence into a lacustrine environment. The internal structure is complex and includes typical fan-delta elements such as topsets, foresets, and indications of bottomsets. Especially profile 2 in **Fig. 9** shows typical dip structures of a Gilbert-type delta (Gilbert, 1885). Intercalated, more-horizontal structures indicate lacustrine deposit layers. The topset structures, the intercalated lacustrine deposit layer and the dip directions fit the lithology of both boreholes BH1 and BH2, which show NW-dipping alluvial sand and gravel above an obviously lacustrine-type deposit denoted as "silt and clay" (**Fig. 2**). Below the blue line (**Fig. 8-11**), stacked foreset structures dominate in profiles 2-4, connected to bottomset structure indications in the NW. Due to the absence of borehole information for depths greater than 51 m below the ground surface, more detailed interpretations remain speculative and require further investigations. With respect to the fluctuations of the Dead Sea level (Bookman (Ken-Tor) et al., 2004) in the past, several levels of included lacustrine-type deposits in the fan architecture are most probable and these may have a complex distribution in three dimensions. For instance, the refill of eroded alluvial channels on the fan surfaces by lacustrine deposits may be a mechanism for inclusion of soluble fine material in the alluvial fan structure. Furthermore tectonic induced level variations of the whole fan structure, caused by the sinistral transform fault movement, cannot be excluded.

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Since wave propagation is controlled by the matrix only, effects of grain size coupling play a key role in the wave propagation of S-waves in contrast to P-waves. In contrast to P-wave velocity, which usually increases with depth in the case of a fluid-saturated pore space, S-wave velocities often decrease with depth, e.g., if the grain cementation reduces or the pore pressure increases with depth, respectively, as both factors result in reduced grain contacts. A further reason for velocity function decrease with depth is the influence of a high-velocity layer at the surface, which is the case operating on an asphalt road surface. This effect is visible in the 1D velocity-depth function in **Fig. 8** in the range 0-10 m below ground surface. Diminished grain coupling can also arise from mechanical damage, e.g. by fracturing, subsidence and subsosion, which leads to breaks in the direct (geometrical) wave paths. In contrast to P-waves, where such breaks may be short cut due to the wave propagation through the pore fluids, decoupling between grains causes additional paths for S-waves, leading to enhanced wave energy scattering and an apparent velocity reduction.

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In the Ghor Al-Haditha data, enhanced wave energy scattering was observed in areas close to sinkhole activity, leading to transparent zones of weak reflectivity in the seismic sections (e.g., **Fig. 8, 10**). In the northeast part of profile 1b in **Fig. 8**, the zone of scattered reflections is imaged up to 60 m depth below the reference level of -367 m a.s.l. (i.e. nearly 50 m below the ground surface), indicating the depth range of the destabilized alluvium. Profile 3 in **Fig. 10** shows the continuation of this low reflectivity zone to 70 m depth below the reference level (i.e. nearly 50 m below the ground surface) in the centre of that profile.

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Beside the transparent zones of strong wave field scattering, buried syncline structures imaged in profiles 2b-2 (**Fig. 9**), 3b-2 (**Fig. 10**) and profile 4 (**Fig. 11**) are in the depth range of 30-60 m below ground surface. These synclines probably indicate ancient or recent subsidence by sinkhole activity caused by  
570 subsrosion below the syncline centres at different horizons. The structures are targets for time-lapse monitoring by shear wave reflection seismics in the upcoming years to evaluate changes in the reflectivity response in detail.

The effect of apparent velocity reduction was also observed, leading partly to irregular interval velocities values less than zero. Such velocity irregularities can be caused by curved ray paths instead of straight  
575 rays which are the base of the CMP concept in reflection seismic. Subrosion affected zones (e.g. cavities) in the subsurface may cause the shear waves to propagate around in stiffer material instead passing them along a straight path. Whereas this velocity problem is of minor importance for the CMP stacking, processing the velocity functions of the individual profiles required careful handling during the time-to-depth conversion, where such zones of irregular velocities would locally compress the depth sections,  
580 leading to a distorted structure imaging. Since the discrepancies could not be eliminated due to missing additional velocity information, e.g. by well logging, the final depth conversion was carried out by using a stabilized 1D velocity function for all profiles (**Fig. 8**), derived as mean function from profile parts with sufficient reflection responses. Therefore, the resulting depths have to be handled with an estimated error range of up to 20%.

As well known in hydrocarbon exploration and shallow seismic operations using the seismic refraction,  
585 reflection, borehole and other seismic methods, there are no stand-alone seismic properties that enable the detection of the lithology or the grain size of a layer. This holds also for other geophysical methods and their combinations. Such conclusions can only be reached if seismic results are calibrated by comprehensive borehole coring in the investigation area. Since the borehole descriptions of BH1 and  
590 BH2 are based on the analysis of cuttings only, precise lithology depths and the information about grain size derived from the boreholes are in principle poor, and no information is available below the borehole bottoms due to the missing well logging. The alluvial fill rate can be estimated relatively by the borehole lithology profiles and by the seismic structure dips, but must be handled with care since geochronological data are limited and the area is close to an active, main sinistral strike-slip transform fault. It is to be  
595 expected beside the lake level variations that tectonic overprints may have changed the whole sedimentation structure over time, even though there was no main fault structure detected in the seismic data.

In summary, the S-wave reflection seismic method achieved advantageous high-resolution imaging results of the alluvial-lacustrine deposit structure at the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site, which are superior  
600 to common near-surface seismic investigation methods. The favourable velocity-frequency relationship of the resulting wavelets and the absence of pore fluid effects enabled a meter-scale resolution and a nearly 200 m penetration depth. Furthermore, and unlike the refraction method, the shear wave reflection method is independent of an obligatory increasing velocity-depth function. In the case of the sinkhole affected subsurface structure at Ghor Al-Haditha, where strong vertical and lateral subsurface

605 inhomogeneity occurs, it is not free from shortcomings, and, similar to other geophysical methods, it requires borehole calibration to verify precise depth imaging, especially.

## 6. 2 Implications of the shear wave reflection seismic results for sinkhole formation

Combining the reflection amplitude responses and the detected borehole lithologies of BH1 and BH2 (Fig. 8-11) results in no indication for an extended massive salt layer of several meters thickness in the depth range 35-52 m below the ground surface, as proposed e.g. by Taquieddin et al. (2000), Frumkin et al. (2011), Ezersky et al. (2013 a,b,c) and Ezersky et al. (2017). If a massive salt layer of thickness more than 2 m would be present in the shallow subsurface down to 200 m depth, which is our estimated limit of stable imaging, this would result in strong seismic reflection responses in our profiles. A reflection coefficient of nearly 0.5 has to be expected for an alluvium-salt interface, if one assumes mass densities for alluvium ( $\sim 1900 \text{ kgm}^{-3}$ ) and salt ( $2200 \text{ kgm}^{-3}$ ) and if one assumes the mean shear wave velocity range of 250-450  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  in the alluvium, as detected during data processing, and of at least 1000-1600  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  for a massive salt layer, as reported by Ezersky and Livne (2013) for the boreholes MN-5E and EB-3E at the western Dead Sea shore. In contrast, the reflection amplitude responses visible below 52 m depth are similar to the reflection amplitude responses above 52 m depth, which represent reflection coefficients of nearly 0.1 and less. We also find no indication of anticlinal structures, as has to be expected from salt diapirism or salt pillows below 52 m depth. Finally, there is no structure or amplitude indication for a hard rock basement below the alluvial-lacustrine sequence as imaged in the profiles down to depths of about 200m. Such low  $V_s$  values and reflection coefficients are typical for poorly-consolidated alluvial and lacustrine siliciclastic deposits, and are consistent with the existing borehole information at Ghor Al-Haditha. Similar low  $V_s$  velocities for alluvium and silty clay layers ( $V_s$ : 100-600 m/s) were reported at the western Dead Sea shore (e.g. Ezersky and Livne, 2013, Gorstein and Ezersky, 2015, Ezersky et al., 2017), as proven by in-situ tests in logged boreholes and laboratory tests on related samples. The previously-derived MASW results at the Ghor Al-Haditha site (Bodet et al., 2010, Keydar et al., 2011, Ezersky et al., 2013b, Ezersky et al., 2017) also show  $V_s$  of 200-400  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  from surface to nearly 50 m depth (magenta profile 3 in Fig. 1) and to nearly 30 m depth (magenta profile 4 in Fig. 1). Assuming a mean  $V_s$  value of 300  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  and taking into account the 4.5 Hz low frequency limit of the geophones used for the MASW survey (see the fundamental mode low frequency limit in Ezersky et al. (2013b), Fig. 4c), such low  $V_s$  values restrict the data-driven maximum Rayleigh wavelength to 62 m ( $V_R \sim 0.93 V_s$ ). This results to a maximum MASW investigation depth of 31 m according to e.g. Park et al. (1999), Rix and Leipski (1991), Park and Carnevale (2010), in contrast to the rule-of-thumb maximum depth estimation of 60 m (0.5 of the spread length) based on the survey spread length of 120 m. The significance of the high velocity layer of  $V_s > 800 \text{ ms}^{-1}$  reported to lie below 35-40 m in MASW profile 4, which is the only reported S-wave evidence for the proposed shallow salt layer at the Ghor Al-Haditha site, must therefore be handled with precaution. The strong lateral  $V_s$  inhomogeneity reported (Bodet et al., 2010) is additionally in contrast to the required 1D layer structure along the spread; such inhomogeneity is well known to cause impaired inversion processing results for the MASW method (Forbriger, 2003).

Due to the significant difference in propagation velocities of P- and S-waves, the S-wave velocity results in this study are not comparable to the P-wave refraction velocity results of the previous studies of El-Isa et al. (1995) and Sawarieh et al. (2000). El-Isa et al. (1995) detected a deepest refractor layer of  $V_p$  max. 2500-3300  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  at 40-50 m depth in nearly all of their profiles. In the profiling tracks which were repeated by Sawarieh et al. (2000) using a similar acquisition configuration, max. P-wave refraction velocities  $V_p$  of 2500  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  and 3130  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  were detected for similar depths, but predominantly the detected velocities were around 2150  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  in nearly 40-50 m depth. In only one of 24 profiles (No. 5, **Fig. 1**) of Sawarieh et al. (2000), in the northwest outside the study area of El-Isa et al. (1995) and close to profile 3 of our study, Sawarieh et al. (2000) detected a P-wave velocity of 3948  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  in 70 m depth, which was interpreted as a salt diapir. Directly beside their profile 5, in their profile 4 (**Fig 1**), Sawarieh et al. (2000) detected a maximum velocity of 2245  $\text{ms}^{-1}$  in 40 m depth. The area of profile 4 was subsequently affected since 2000 by massive sinkhole activity and subsidence, which prevented further investigation, whereas the area of profile 5 remained unaffected until today (see **Fig. 1** and **Fig. 4**). For the Ghor Al-Haditha site, these observations of sinkhole development are in direct contradiction to predictions of the salt layer edge model as suggested e.g. in Ezersky (2017) and as based on the abovementioned P-wave refraction velocities.

Overall, the P-wave velocities reported for the depth interval of 40-60 m in past studies are by themselves not indicative of a laterally extensive, thick, massive salt layer at that level. Regarding borehole-defined salt layers on the western shore of the Dead Sea, the overview by Ezersky et al. (2017) notes that P-wave velocities for adjacent alluvial and lacustrine sediments range from 2000-2900 m/s, while P-wave velocities for the salt layers themselves range from 2900-4500 m/s. The velocities reported for Ghor Al-Haditha area in the 30-60 m depth level thus overlap with the mid-upper end of the range expected for semi-consolidated, water-saturated, alluvial or lacustrine deposits and with the lowermost end of the range expected for compacted salt, and are thus lithologically ambiguous. Moreover, the interpretation of such velocities in terms of a massive salt layer is not supported by borehole data available at Ghor Al-Haditha for the relevant depth interval.

Another hypothesis in discussion (Ezersky et al., 2017) states the shallow salt layer proposed previously at Ghor Al-Haditha could not be detected in our study, because it was already completely dissolved in the period 2006-2013 - i.e. before our survey. This hypothesis would additionally postulate that the lithology description of BH1 and BH2 carried out in 1994 may have been flawed, because any salt encountered was probably immediately dissolved by the freshwater bore fluid during the drilling process and so did not remain in the analyzed cuttings. This latter postulation cannot be assessed since details of the drilling operation and especially the bore fluid are not documented in El-Isa et al. (1995) or elsewhere. Nonetheless if the proposed >10 m thick shallow salt layer (e.g. Taquieddin et al., 2000, Ezersky et al., 2013) was completely subroded in 2006-2013 from the surrounding area of BH1 and BH2 (see **Figure 1b**), subsequent extensive sinkhole development as well as more distributed subsidence of several meters have to be expected in this area. Actually, this was not the case; the area has been essentially stable since 2006 (see **Fig. 4** here and **Fig. 4** in Ezersky 2013a).

680 The most significant horizon in both boreholes for which documentation exists is the “silt and clay” layer  
with its top below ground surface at 43 m in BH1 and 49 m in BH2, respectively, because this is the one  
detected in the boreholes that is most prone to subsidence. The drilling of boreholes BH1 and BH2 both  
had been stopped after nearly 2 m within this layer because it was interpreted as base of the sand and  
685 gravel sequence, and because it was supposed to act as aquiclude regarding hydrogeological aspects (El-  
Isa et al., 1995). Profile 1b (**Fig. 8**) shows a change of the main reflection pattern at the location of  
borehole BH1 from nearly the top of this layer (ca. -420 m a.s.l., 50 m below surface) to 110 m below  
reference depth (ca. -470 m a.s.l., 100 m below surface). So it is obvious that the thickness of this layer is  
either more than 2 m, or that this layer is part of a stacked sequence including several „silt and clay“  
690 layers below. Since the depth range of the “silt and clay” layer was always below the Dead Sea level, the  
sedimentation of this layer occurred in the lacustrine evaporite-rich environment of the Dead Sea during  
the last 10 ka BP (Bookman et al., 2004). In analogy to exposures of lacustrine deposits visible in the  
sides of 1-8 m deep freshwater channels that were carved recently into today’s mud plain (e.g. Al-  
Halbouni et al., 2017) there may be also thin evaporite layers (<1 m thick) embedded in this “silt and  
clay” sequence below the alluvial plain.

695 The mineralogy of the clay material in the „silt and clay“ layer in BH1 and BH2 was not determined by  
El-Isa et al. (1995). The clay material was only described to be of green colour, this would be an  
indication for illite (also called French clay), which is typically described to be of dark olive-grey colour  
and contains portions of potassium and water. Sawarieh et al. (2000) described several fine material  
outcrop sequences in sinkholes at the Ghor Al-Haditha site as marl and clay both of greenish grey colour.

700 This is similar to the composition of Dead Sea mud sampled at the eastern shoreline by Khlaifat et al.  
(2010) which typically consist of >40% fine carbonates (aragonite, calcite, CO<sub>2</sub>), up to 20% clay, 20%  
quartz, and additionally halite, water and further minerals in fractions. The absence of another source for  
such fine material layers forces the assumption that the majority of silty-clayey fine material layers  
included in the alluvial fan is Dead Sea mud, probably in different mineral compositions depending on  
705 the environmental conditions during sedimentation. Due to the high content of included marl and  
evaporites, all these layers are prone to dissolution and subsidence instead of acting as an aquiclude  
consisting of pure clay. Such kind of dissolution and erosion processes can be observed today in the mud  
plain all around the Dead Sea, where freshwater channels from the highlands or springs meet the Dead  
Sea shoreline, forming erosion channels in the mud plain, both on the surface and in the subsurface (Al-  
710 Halbouni et al., 2017).

This solution process may be in places amplified by a physical effect well known for the so-called “quick  
clays” in Nordic countries (Geertsema, 2013). “Quick clays” are originally deposited in a salt-rich marine  
environment in the Northern hemisphere during glaciation where they formed an electrostatically bonded  
double-layer structure including a cation (e.g. sodium) between two clay particles. When these clays  
715 become no longer subjected to salt water conditions (due to isostatic uplifts in Nordic countries, due to  
decrease of the Dead Sea level in our study area) and fresh water infiltrates these clays washing away the  
cations, the clay particles do not remain in a stable bonded structure and change to a liquid behaviour.  
Such a process was previously proposed by Arkin and Gilat (2000) for the Dead Sea sinkholes, although

720 the relatively low clay content of up to 20% detected in the fine material sediments around the Dead Sea  
(e.g. Khlaifat et al. 2010) indicates that such a process accounts for only a minor portion of the subsrosion  
process.

In line with Krawczyk et al. (2015), we therefore propose a new, combined process model based on both  
chemical and mechanical erosion: the fine material stacks of marl, silt and clay within the alluvial fan  
change progressively from solid to liquid behaviour in the contact area of the fresh water inflow due to  
725 (chemical) leaching of the carbonate and evaporite particles first. Secondly, the clay particles are  
mechanically destabilized and eroded along the path of the subsurface water flow after loss of the  
(physical) stabilizing cations of the double layer structures. This process results in rapidly growing  
subsurface channels and cavities in very short times, continuously amplified by the increasing  
(mechanical) kinetic energy of the water stream as documented for a spring by Al-Halbouni et al. (2017).  
730 Thirdly, even alluvial material at the subsrosion interface gets washed out. The cavities extend horizontally  
and grow upward until the gravitation force of overlying alluvial stratum exceeds its bonding forces. This  
initializes a sudden sinkhole. The process is controlled by the long-term, seasonal and ephemeral  
movement of the salt- fresh water interface (Salameh and El-Naser, 2000, Alrshdan, 2012), the volume of  
the fresh water flow and its velocity, the volume of buried soluble and/or mechanically erodible material  
735 and its mechanical properties within the alluvial fan.

## 7. Conclusions

The shear wave reflection seismic study at the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole investigation site was the first  
experiment where this geophysical investigation method was applied in the environment of the Dead Sea.  
The achieved depth sections demonstrate that the technique can be applied in alluvial fan deposits in arid  
740 areas, which opens new feasibilities for shallow subsurface exploration of the Dead Sea sinkhole problem  
in high-resolution.

In general, the profiling results show a complex contact area between the high-energy prograding alluvial  
fans of the Wadi Ibn Hammad and Wadi Mutayl and the low-energy lacustrine sedimentation  
environment of the Dead Sea. All available outcrop and borehole lithological data show no evidence for  
745 any thick massive salt layers in the shallow subsurface of the survey area down to 51 m depth below  
ground surface. This range can be extended with the new seismic data, which do not give any indication  
of a thick (> 2 m) compacted salt layer down to 200 m depth below the ground surface. Furthermore,  
there are no structural indications of diapiric uplifts in the survey area. Also, since the hard rock basement  
was not detected down to that depth, the thickness of the Pliocene-Recent alluvial-lacustrine sequence is  
750 >200 m.

Based on the shear wave reflection seismic results, and supported by the drilled stratigraphy, our new  
model for the sinkhole process at the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site suggests that the dissolution of small,  
distributed inclusions of marl, silt, clay, and evaporites within the alluvial fan is enhanced by freshwater  
intrusions from the eastern wadis. Furthermore, we propose that such chemical erosion in the subsurface  
755 exists in a feedback with mechanical erosion of weak material, especially silt and clay, and with higher

flow velocities of poorly consolidated alluvial material also. The process is not restricted to the depth of the “silt and clay” layer detected in the boreholes BH1 and BH2 and outlined in the area, it can also affect shallower or deeper layer-like inclusions of weak, soluble, non-massive lacustrine material. Consequently, geophysics-based mapping of areas prone to sinkhole hazard at the Dead Sea should consider different lithological controls on the location of sinkhole development.

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Areas of future sinkhole development may be indicated by time-lapse monitoring using shear wave reflection seismic. The observation of time dependent structure changes in the subsurface and changes of irregular velocity zones caused by disaggregation or cavity formation recommends as a tool to indicate ongoing sinkhole development. This aspect will be the focus for investigations in upcoming experiments.

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**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

## 8. Acknowledgements

The investigation was operated in the framework of the DEad SEa Research Venue (DESERVE), a virtual research institute of the Helmholtz Association, designed as a cross-disciplinary and cooperative international project of the Helmholtz Centres KIT, GFZ, UFZ, and their partners. The authors gratefully acknowledge the DESERVE Virtual Institute for continuous financial support of the investigations. The geology group of the Jordan Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (MEMR) - formerly Natural Resource Authority (NRA) of Jordan – provided professional logistic support during equipment shipping and data acquisition, as well as by their excellent field camp infrastructure at Ghor Al-Haditha, enabling a fast access to the investigation area. Special thanks to Alexandra Carina Gassner, and Khalil Abu Ayyash for the support during the project. We are grateful to Damien Closson providing us a high-quality copy of the El-Isa et al. (1995) report. We thank one anonymous reviewer and Dr. P.P. Kruiver (Deltares) for critical review and helpful suggestions and comments to improve the manuscript.

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## Figure Captions

1020 **Figure 1:** (a) Generalized map of the Dead Sea area. Except the site Ghor Al-Haditha at the eastern border, which is the focus of this paper, the most sinkhole sites are located along the western shoreline of the Dead Sea (see e.g. Yechieli et al. 2002). (b) detailed map of the Ghor Al-Haditha sinkhole site and previous refraction seismic (El-Isa et al., 1995, Sawarieh et al., 2000) and MASW (Bodet et al., 2010) profiling. Boreholes BH1 and BH2 are reported in detail by El-Isa et al. (1995), two other boreholes are reported by Bodet et al. (2010) without any further information. Background is a Pleiades satellite image from 2015 combined with an aerial orthophoto mosaic from 2016.

1025 **Figure 2:** Lithologic columns of the boreholes BH1 and BH2 from microscopic analyses, referenced to their surface elevation (black and white columns are originals of El-Isa et al. (1995)). The coloured, generalized columns are used for the figures of this paper. The main dip tendencies of the units toward the west are visible by the green connecting lines. The annotated borehole depths below the columns follow the written text in El-Isa et al. (1995).

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**Figure 3:** Photos of the shear wave seismic reflection acquisition campaign carried out in October 2013. (a) Wheelbarrow-mounted shear wave source system on asphalt pavement at start location of profile 2. (b) Recording car, towed land streamer and source during operation on profile 3. (c) Land streamer towed by the recording car during acquisition on profile 2. Colour paintings on the road surface were used for location numbering along the profiles. (d) Sledge-mounted horizontal geophone in SH (particle movement perpendicular to profiling direction) configuration along profile 3.

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**Figure 4:** Map of the shear wave reflection seismic profiles acquired in 2013 (red lines) and 2014 (yellow lines). Green circles denote the locations of the boreholes made in 1994 (according to report of El-Isa et al. (1995)). Older refilled sinkholes are denoted by brown circles (after El-Isa et al. (1995)), blue circles (after Sawarieh et al. (2000)), and orange circle (after Bodet et al. (2010)). The dotted black polygon marks the main sinkhole and subsidence area after Al-Halbouni et al. (2017).

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1045 **Figure 5:** Examples of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-78-82 Hz) applied) in time domain along profile 1b. The positions of the seismic source are labelled by orange stars. FFID denotes the record number along the profile, CHAN denotes the geophone number along the landstreamer unit. Arrows at top denote the condition of the ground surface observed along the profile. In the NE, close to the sinkhole affected area, first break and reflection signals are weak due to the strong wave scattering in the subsurface caused by material loosening and cracking. The situation improves towards SE, where no sinkholes or other subsidence features were present during profiling and the road surface was in good condition. Below mean amplitude spectra of the time window 0-400 ms (estimated 0-70m depth) for each record are shown.

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**Figure 6:** Examples of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-78-82 Hz) applied) in time domain along profile 2b-2 (labelling as in **Fig. 5**). Good signal quality of first breaks and reflections mirrors a rather unaffected signal propagation in the subsurface, which correlates to the sinkhole-unaffected vicinity at surface. Reflection signals up to 400 ms in time represent layer responses from 70 m depth (applying  $350 \text{ ms}^{-1}$  shear wave propagation velocity). Below mean amplitude spectra of the time window 0-400 ms for each record are shown.

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**Figure 7:** (a) A consecutive set of recorded shot gathers (AGC of 220 ms window, amplitude scaling and bandpass filter (18-20-76-82 Hz) applied) in time domain in an area of good reflectivity along profile 2 (labelling as in **Fig. 5**). Parts of the records are disturbed by harmonic distortions centred to the source position and propagating with Love wave velocity ( $\sim 200 \text{ m/s}$ ). In (b) the disturbing pattern is removed, uncovering the reflection events below. For a raw time-to-depth estimation a depth scale is added to the right based on a mean velocity of  $350 \text{ m/s}$  for body shear waves. In (b) also Top Mute is applied.

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**Figure 8:** Resulting depth section of profile 1b after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). Arrow bars at the top of the upper image denote the surface instability/stability as observed along the profile, while arrow bars below denote the road surface situation along the profile and the profile length. Black arrows at top indicate joints to crossing profiles. The lithology of borehole BH1 is projected from 10 m distance perpendicular into the profile. The interpreted top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 is shown as the blue line along the profile, since it is the first layer detected at depth that is prone to subsidence. Also shown is the 1D shear wave velocity-depth function derived from seismic data in this area; this function was used for time-to-depth conversion of all profiles.

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**Figure 9:** Resulting depth sections of combined profiles 2 and 2b-2 after post-stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see **Fig. 8**. Lithology of boreholes BH1 and BH2 is projected perpendicular into the profile from 200 m distance, and therefore may not show the precise layering signature. Except the top 40 m the main characteristics down to 200 m show stacked sequences of NW-dipping reflectors, which are interpreted as NW-prograding alluvial fan sequences. The interpreted top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is shown by the blue line.

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**Figure 10:** Combined depth sections of profiles 3 and 3b-2 after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see **Fig. 8**. The interpreted top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is shown by the blue line. The centre part of the profiling track was repeatedly affected by recent sinkhole activity directly beside in the NE. For farming access it was refilled with gravel along more than 250 m, which was subsequently again affected by sinkholes and subsidence. This may cause the weaker reflection signatures in the upper 50 m if compared to profile 2 (**Fig. 8**). The main reflection pattern signature is similar to profile 2 and 2b-2, showing NW dipping events. In the SE of the profile a V-shaped structure is visible close to surface, filled with nearly

horizontal reflection events, which is interpreted as a refilled channel side-cut. Due to the wide  
1095 subsidence area NE of profile 3 the top of the “silt and clay” layer (blue line) was continued to NW  
starting from profile 1b instead using the projection of BH2.

**Figure 11:** Depth section of profile 4 after post stack FD time migration (top) and interpretation of the  
main structure elements (bottom). For annotations see **Fig. 8**. Lithology of boreholes BH1 and BH2 is  
1100 projected from 200 m distance perpendicular into the profile. In contrast to profile 2, more gently NW-  
dipping events are present to 150 m depth, indicating less transportation energy of the alluvial material or  
an apparent structure dip. The top of the “silt and clay” layer in BH1 and BH2 is interpreted by the blue  
line. Bowl shaped signatures close to the surface in the SE indicate sinkhole-caused subsidence and/or  
refilled channel side-cuts. Significant reflection amplitudes of a stronger reflector pattern close to the NW  
1105 end at nearly 90 m depth may indicate an evaporite-rich lense included in the alluvium-lacustrine  
deposits.

**Figure 12:** 3D representation of the 2.5D profiling grid (c.f., sections in **Fig. 8-11**, restricted to 200 m  
depth (no vertical exaggeration). Boreholes BH1 and BH2 are included as yellow bars representing the  
1110 sand and gravel sequence above the detected „silt and clay“ layer, the top of which is marked by a blue  
disc along each well shaft. Light blue lines along the profiles mark the interpreted continuation of the top  
of this layer starting from BH1 along profile 1 and subsequently continued to the crossing profiles. The  
constructed horizon by triangular interpolation represents the derived top of the “silt and clay” layer  
below the reference datum of -367 m a.s.l. based on the drilling and seismic results. At the deepest parts  
1115 towards the Dead Sea border the top of this layer reaches nearly -467 m a.s.l., which is 60 m below the  
level of the current alluvium/mud-flat transition of -407 m a.s.l. calculated by Al-Halbouni et al. (2017).

## Table Captions

**Table 1:** Reflection seismic processing sequence.

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