

## ANNUAL REPORT: TEL BET YERAH (ISRAEL) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students and staff preparing area for photography

### GENERAL

A five-week IFR Field School at Tel Bet Yerah, Israel, took place between June 30<sup>th</sup> and August 1<sup>st</sup> 2013. The first week consisted of a travelling seminar, and included lectures on the geography and history of the Jordan Valley and on the method and practice of archaeology. Field trips included visits to active excavations such as Tel Hazor, headed by Dr. Sharon Zuckerman of the Hebrew University, and Tel Abel Bet Ma'acah, headed by Navah Panitz of the Hebrew University and Bob Mullins of Asuza Pacific University; a tour of Islamic Tiberias led by Dr. Tawfiq Da'adli of the Hebrew University; and visits to upper Jordan Valley sites and museums ranging from the Lower Palaeolithic Ubeidiya, to Bronze Age Dan, Classical Bet Shean and the medieval fortress of al-Subeiba (Qal'at Nimrud). There was a little time left over for a fine meal at the "Dag al-Ha-Dan" trout farm and swimming in Lake Kinneret.

The IFR students were joined on July 6<sup>th</sup> by the rest of the excavation team – 19 overseas students, mainly from University College, London, four students from Tel Aviv University, and student and senior staff from Tel Aviv and the UK. This team, totaling about 35 persons in all, excavated four fields on site (headed by Yael Rotem, Mike Lewis, Mark Iserlis, and Hai Ashkenazi), while keeping the fifth field-station – our environmental retrieval tent – going at full steam (headed by Yulia Bondarenko, Alice Berger and Catherine Longford).

Our daily routine consisted of excavations from sunrise (about 5:15 AM) till 12:30 PM and, following lunch and a break during the hottest midday hours, post-excavation tasks: pottery washing, sorting and registration; sieved sediment sorting (picking); mammal bone cleaning and registration and data recording. Students took part in all the activities, including on-site recording and section-drawing. Weekends were devoted to individual travel, with students

making their way to Jerusalem, the Dead Sea and Masada, Tel Aviv, Haifa, the Golan Heights and many other places of interest. Staff and visiting specialists gave short talks on their research:

- Dr. Lior Weisbrod on microfauna
- Dr. Daniella Bar-Yosef on archaeomalacology
- Catherine Longford on archaeobotany
- Alice Berger on archaeozoology
- Hai Ashkenazi on Total Station and GIS mapping
- Dr. Sarit Paz on the EBA transition to urbanism

Prof. Rafi Greenberg added lectures on the Kura-Araxes world and on the Yarmukian culture (in the Shaar Hagolan Museum of the Yarmukian culture).

According to plan, our excavations focused on the three main periods of occupation at Tel Bet Yerah, Early Bronze Ib (c. 3300-3050 BCE), Early Bronze II (c. 3050-2850 BCE), and the earlier part of Early Bronze III (c. 2850 – 2600 BCE). The following summarizes the chief features excavated, according to excavation fields.

#### **AREA SA-S, NORTH (Yael Rotem)**

The earliest stratified levels were excavated in this field: a succession of courtyard floors associated with Early Bronze II and parts of adjoining rooms from the same period; beneath them, we reached the topmost level of the Early Bronze Ib in a small sounding. The outstanding feature in this area was a large roasting pit set in the middle of the courtyard in the middle EB II level.

This sequence of courtyards provided us with very rich environmental assemblages – charred grain and mammal bones, both large and small – as well as a wealth of artifacts. Cooking pots and serving vessels, all of them imported from regional workshops located a distance of 20-30 km from the site, formed the bulk of the ceramic assemblage. Johanna Regev of the Kimmel Center at the Weizmann Institute obtained an excellent sequence of samples for radiocarbon dating; these should help to pinpoint the transition from village to urban life at Tel Bet Yerah.

#### **AREA SA-S, SOUTH (Mike Lewis)**

On the terrace above the courtyards just described, we excavated parts of two rows of rooms and courtyards that seem to belong to two adjoining houses built in Early Bronze II, and occupied well into Early Bronze III. The uppermost excavated phase in this area includes early Islamic structures in two strata. One of these structures was a ceramic pipe encased in a concrete wall that carried fresh spring water to the Umayyad bathhouse located in the eastern part of the excavation. This pipe was evidently laid in a trench carefully cut into the Early Bronze Age layers. The trench was so precisely cut that at one point we found that it had sliced through a pair of Early Bronze Age jugs without otherwise disturbing them. When the concrete was poured, in antiquity, into the trench, it filled the bottom half of one of these jugs, the contents of which had evaporated in the intervening 3700 years.

The rooms and courtyards in this part of the complex contained a wealth of food preparation and cooking installations from both Early Bronze II and III, with a rich trove of restorable vessels.

#### **AREAS SA-M (Mark Islerlis) and GB-H (Hai Ashkenazi)**

In excavations and soundings to the north of the Circles Building we succeeded in delimiting the large paved plaza that occupies a space of about 450 square meters on the north flank of the structure. As in previous seasons, this plaza – a unique feature in EBA towns in the Levant –

continued yielded a wealth of remains, including a rich archaeofaunal and archaeobotanic assemblage, associated with the “Khirbet Kerak” tradition, representing activity carried out in the plaza after the Circles Building was occupied by incoming migrants. Excavations on both sides of the north-south street that borders the plaza provided a vivid illustration of the virtual barrier between the ‘Khirbet Kerak’ settlement in the plaza and Circles Building and the quarter that lay to their west, as little or no ‘Khirbet Kerak’ material came to light in the trenches excavated west of the street.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL RETRIEVAL**

With a full time archaeozoologist and archaeobotanist on board, the “fifth field” at our excavation serviced a sieving station, a flotation tank, and an on-site bone-cleaning lab. Students from all excavation fields spent time in this field, while specialists were able to oversee activity there while fully integrating their work in the excavation itself. About 3500 liters of soil were floated here and hundreds of buckets dry-sieved. Post-excavation activity included intensive sorting of sieved deposits, leading to the discovery of thousands of micro-artifacts representing myriad aspects of daily life at Bet Yerah, from bones of commensal rodents, to seeds of a wide variety of wild and domesticated taxa, to beads of local and exotic origin.

All in all, our four-week season was extremely productive, providing a varied and interactive learning experience – along with lots of fun and new friendships – for everyone involved, staff and students alike.