

ANNUAL REPORT: Abel Beth Maacah 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

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Amphora with 425 astragali (animal knuckle bones) found during 2018 excavation season in an Iron IIA context. Astragali were used for divination in antiquity. The vessel was found on an elevated podium in Area A, reinforcing the cultic function of the find.

Excavations at Tel Abel Beth Maacah in the summer of 2018 concentrated in two areas: Area A on the northeastern part of the lower tell and Area B on the southeastern slope of the upper tell. Both areas have been excavated intensively in previous seasons and the goals this year were to expand our knowledge of the Iron Age I and II occupation that is strongly evident in both areas.

The major achievements in this area included the exposure of massive brick wall from the Late Bronze Age. Only the eastern face of this wall was exposed, however, and this appears to have belonged to a monumental building or was possibly part of a city wall. Notably, this wall was exposed directly below the earliest Iron Age I layer (Stratum A5) with no traces of destruction between them. Another major achievement in this part of the area was completing the excavation of the Stratum A4 cultic building, dated to the early Iron I (later 12th-11th centuries BCE). The meticulous work by the IFR students allowed us to determine the extent of the building, as well as to expand excavation to the south, revealing a massive destruction. Thus, the IFR students got to excavate "classic" archaeological contexts and gained experience in unraveling complex stratigraphic problems which characterized the area they worked in. The western balk of the area in which the IFR students excavated, standing some 3 meters high,

demonstrated clearly the stratigraphy of the area as excavated for the past six seasons and we allocated time in the field to discussing this section and the stratigraphical sequence of the excavated area. The contribution of the IFR students was to expand our knowledge of the unique Iron I cultic building and to expose the transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Ages, a very important research topic these days, especially in the region where Abel Beth Maacah is located.

In the western part of Area A, major achievements included the exposure of more of the Stratum A2 (late Iron Age I) unique public building complex and its various sub-phases. Worth mentioning is the northern room in which cult-related artefacts such as a cult stand and offering table, were exposed last season, along with several large pithoi that were possibly imported from Lebanon. Additional unique features include an elevated plastered installation whose top was a shallow plastered basin divided into two; the entire feature was surrounded by a lower stone wall. This building was destroyed in a massive conflagration during the 10th century BCE.

An important contribution of the 2018 excavations in Area A was to expand our knowledge of the hitherto relatively unknown Iron IIA, whose layers, constructed immediately on top of the destroyed late Iron I public building, were barely known up until this season. We have now exposed much more architecture and finds related to this period, including at least two phases that we date to the 10th - 9th centuries BCE. One fascinating context dated to this period comprised a stone pavement or podium on which an elevated stone circle served as a pedestal for an amphora which contained no less than 425 astragali (see photo above). Astragali are animal knuckle bones often used in antiquity for divination. This find is intriguing when considering the biblical reference in 2 Samuel 20 citing Abel as a place where "inquiry," probably in the form of divination, once took place. The bones, originating from sheep, goats, and deer (but not pigs!) will undergo a series of analytical investigations, including DNA sequencing, strontium isotope analysis, 3D scanning for a morphological study and additional analyses. This amazing collection has the potential to shed light on issues such as paleoclimate, herding and butchering practices, as well as the economy of cultic practices.

Excavations this season in Area B in the upper tell revealed additional information on the massive casemate structure that yielded several Phoenician finds and the famous bearded male head faience figurine. The room where the figurine was found was excavated fully and we obtained a better understanding of the construction of the building. A massive wall in the south-eastern edge of the building may mark its end on this side and there is a general indication that the continuation of the building should be sought to the south. Many questions regarding this significant massive 9th century building remain to be explored in future seasons.

Detailed field reports of each excavation area will be posted within two months on the expedition website (www.abel-beth-maacah.org). The report of Area A will include a section on the sub-area excavated by the IFR team. In November 2018, the yield of the 2018 season will be presented at two conferences: one at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (by Dr. Naama Yahalom-Mack) and the other at the ASOR Annual meeting in Denver, Co. (by Dr. Robert Mullins). Pottery restoration of the burnt destruction context excavated by the IFR students will take place during the coming academic year, as will radiocarbon dating (C14) of charred organic remains from these contexts.