

MARJ RABBA

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The Chalcolithic period (ca. 4500–3600 BC), a key transitional time between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, witnessed the first metallurgy, the first pottery formed on a wheel, and dramatically new burial practices for the dead. Yet in contrast to regions such as the Negev or Jordan Valley, our knowledge of life in the Galilee during the Chalcolithic period is very limited. For example, we have no radiocarbon dates for a Chalcolithic settlement in the Galilee, nor do we have an architectural plan. The second year of excavations at Marj Rabba (also known as Har ha-Sha'avi, west – southwest, lat/long: 749780–226350; northeast, lat/long: 749950–226800) – the initial undertaking of the multi-site Galilee Prehistory Project – demonstrated that this site may be pivotal to a greater comprehension of this under-investigated area and time period. This research initiative is designed to examine the dramatic changes in the relationship of villages, ritual sites, and mortuary practices during this poorly understood period.

In 2009 we discovered intact sub-surface architecture, collected material culture and faunal samples, and sought to determine the depth of anthropogenic strata. Based on the good preservation of architectural features and faunal remains, Marj Rabba shows great promise for expanded, intensive investigation to offer insights into this key transitional era. During the 2010 season the excavation area was expanded and concentrated on the eastern area of the site, with particular effort put into excavation of squares B1, E1, F1, M1, and the northern half of squares E2 and F2.

Squares E1, E2, F1, F2

At the end of the 2009 season, a double-row, large fieldstone wall foundation (wall w7) was excavated which continued into the eastern section of square D1. Squares E1 and F1, and later E2 and F2, were opened in an effort to follow some of the features previously excavated in 2009 in square D1. Additionally, a large circular feature (locus L.23) almost 5 m in diameter and made of small cobbles was only half excavated and was expected to continue into square E1. The 2010 season revealed more architecture, more round features, and evidence for several phases of construction and habitation.

Excavation in both squares E1 and F1 began with the speedy removal of the topsoil by several volunteers and the workmen. There was significant modern material (plastic, bottle glass) mixed in with Chalcolithic pottery and lithics. Early in the season some larger stones emerged in E1 (w203) that appeared to be a continuation of wall w7, the east–west wall from the 2009 excavations in square D1. Additionally, there appeared to be a north–south wall on the western edge of E1 (w204) that adjoins w203 and would be a closing wall for the areas excavated in 2009. In F1 there also appeared an east–west wall (w201) that was assumed to be a continuation of w7 and w203.

During the initial days of topsoil removal, active mole-rat disturbance was noted in E1. This bioturbation continued throughout the excavation in E1 and F1. Daily, it was possible to see dirt and ancient material from different layers being actively pushed up by mole-rat activity (fig. 1). With the amount of ongoing soil disturbance visible in the short time we



Figure 1. Active mole-rat disturbance in square E1 (photo by A. Hill)

were on site and the quantity of burrows visible in subsoil layers, it must be assumed that significant amounts of bioturbation have disturbed much of the original context of finds at all levels.

Within the first week, the simple interpretation of the architectural pattern (continuation of the long wall (w7/w201/w203) with a north-south closing wall (w204) was called into question. At lower elevation but still in the topsoil, W.203 did not seem to continue past the middle of E1, w204 did not seem to actually connect to w203, and w201 seemed to jog north and not line up with w203. There were three well-defined wall fragments that appeared unrelated to each other. Nonetheless, significant Chalcolithic finds, including basalt groundstone fragments, flint axes, preserved bone, pottery, fenestrated basalt stand fragments, and ceramic spindle whorls, were recovered. The density of finds remained high in all areas throughout the rest of the season.

In the initial excavation of square F1 (figs. 2-3) we noticed a dense accumulation of very small pebbles in the western edge of the square. This concentration seemed to have an indistinct round edge. Initially we suspected that this was the fill of a pit, so we gave it a new locus number and excavated it separately. The dense, small pebbles gave way, however, after only a couple of centimeters, to densely packed medium cobbles at the same level with a very regular pattern and distinct edge. Rather than a pit this appears to be a round installation similar to others found throughout D1, E1, E2, F1, and F2. This feature was left in situ and will be removed during the 2011 season to more completely expose the floor level below. These installations were probably silo foundations. In the upper subsoil levels of F1 one of two obsidian blades found this season was pulled from the screen. Preliminary X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis suggests that the obsidian is from the Lake Van region of modern-day Turkey, reaffirming the existence of long-distance trade connections between Anatolia and the Levant during the Chalcolithic period.

In the eastern half of F1 we found a huge concentration of medium to large cobbles covering most of the square. This was a denser and larger concentration of stone than had

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Figure 2. Squares F1 and F2, looking north

been found previously in Area E. After careful cleaning in and around this concentration, we eventually found two walls (w208 and w217) creating a room with w201. Wall 208 and w217 are both well-constructed walls with two rows of regularly sized small boulders. Unlike the walls in squares C, D, and E, these walls do not use occasional large standing boulders that are typically in situ and often more than one course high. There are at least two courses preserved in w208 and w217. The north-south wall, w208, seems to abut the first wall we discovered in F1, w201, even though it is significantly lower. Wall 201 has only one row and one course preserved, is not particularly straight, and appears to be a very late construction. However, there are large boulders that may relate w201 to w208 and w217. Wall 231, below w201, is a better-constructed and better-preserved wall that also appears to adjoin w208. It has an opening that may be a door, and then disappears into the western balk. W.231 appears to line up with the walls from squares C, D, and E much better than w201.

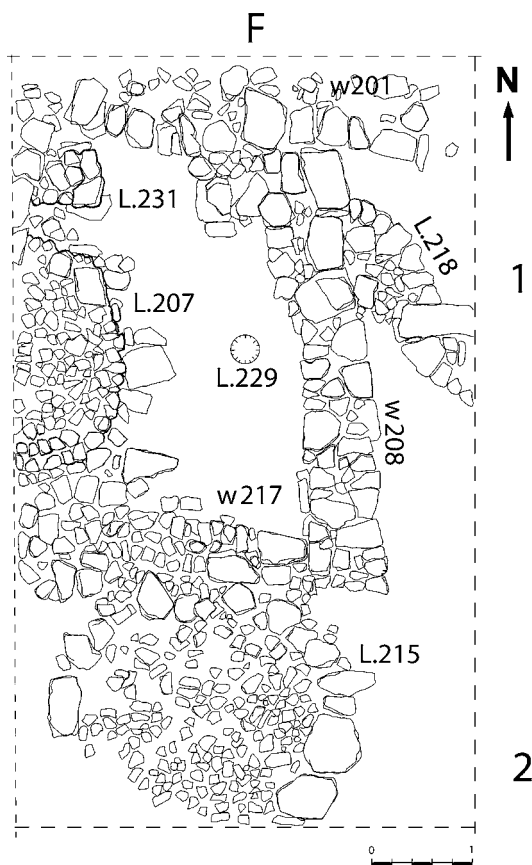


Figure 3. Square F1 and northern half of square F2

On the eastern side of w208, in square F1, we found another wall (w218) that runs diagonally southeast from the corner of w231 and w208 into the eastern section of F1. The purpose of this wall is unclear. It is not as well constructed as w231 or w208. Instead of two clear rows of uniformly sized field stones, this wall has very large stones (which may not be in situ) and some small cobbles in a more haphazard orientation. The wall seems to abut the corner of w231 and w208, but it also might articulate with w201, depending on which stones form part of the construction and which are from later destruction. It will not be possible to understand how this wall relates to the rest of the architecture in F1 without opening square G1 to the east, which we hope to undertake in the 2011 season.

Inside the room formed by w231, w208, and w217 there was a very dense and even distribution of cobbles and boulders at the bottom of L.210, a fill level. After photography and documentation, we removed the dense cobble layer. During removal of L.223, we recovered a nice mace-head fragment in the northwest corner. After about 10 cm and more cobble removal, a harder surface appears to be a floor (L.228), a light gray and very soft mix of silty soil, ash, and charcoal. Where preserved it is often sitting on top of flat sherds and appears to have been applied to them much like plaster. Unfortunately, we could only find portions of this layer in the southwest and northwest corners. In situ portions of the floor were carefully cleaned and photographed. Most of the floor is broken up by rodent burrows (see fig. 1 for evidence of mole-rat disturbance). In the middle of the room we found a small (ca. 26 cm diameter) round pit-like feature (L.229). This was a slightly irregular circle, clearly defined by a very hard irregular dark border (fig. 4). When broken, the boundary that defined L.229 seemed to be made of hard, burned, ash/charcoal/mud floor material. The feature continued approximately 26 cm down and was lined with small flat rocks and contained some fire-cracked small cobbles but very little in the way of finds. Although initially it seemed similar to “cupmarks” found at many Chalcolithic sites (e.g., Shiqmim, Gilat), this feature seems highly fired and unlike the cupmarks.

Recognizing that the architecture in square F1 continued to the south, we opened the northern half of square F2. Very quickly we noticed an apparent ragged circle of very large cobbles. This turned out to be a large round feature (L.215; see figs. 2–3) consisting of a large cobble border filled with uniformly sized medium cobbles. Although the circle is not particularly well preserved (some boulders have moved from the line of the circle, and some gaps exist), the feature is well defined. The border of L.215 is very close to w217, but because they do not abut the relationship between L.215 and the architecture in F1 remains unclear and will be clarified in the 2011 season.

Another round feature, very similar to L.215, was found in square E2. Eventually we came down on part of another round feature that has a diameter of approximately 2 m (L.226). This is similarly constructed with a border of larger fieldstones and a densely packed inner fill of medium cobbles. Less than half of this feature is in square E2; the rest disappears into the south section and the balk between E2 and F2.

Although some aspects of the dense cluster of features in square E1 remain unclear, there are at least four phases of construction (figs. 5–6). L.23, the large round feature, is the earliest and also largest feature. Unfortunately, it does not appear to be complete because the northeastern corner disappears just inside square E1. Next, L.230 is built on top of L.37, possibly reusing one edge of the earlier feature. Locus 225 may be contemporary with L.230 or might have been built during a similar phase. Then, the pit feature, L.214 (fig. 5b), cuts all three of these earlier features, Loci 23, 225, and 230. Finally, significantly later there is



Figure 4. Locus 228: room inside square F1 looking south. Arrows indicate preserved floor surface



Figure 5a. Squares D1, D2, E1, and E2. Circled areas highlight circular loci; cf. fig. 6



Figure 5b. Locus 214, looking north

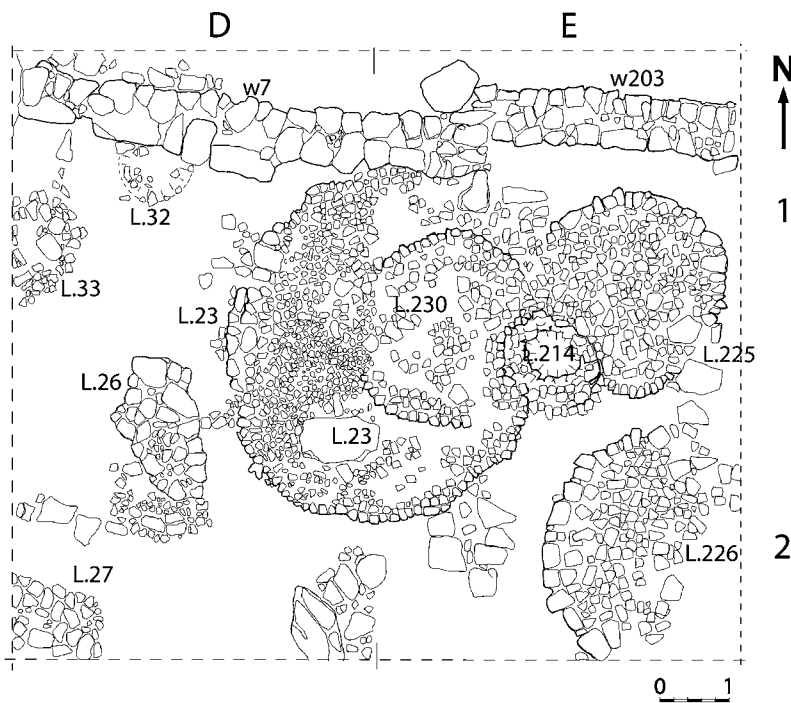


Figure 6. Squares D1, E1, northern halves of D2, E2

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the ephemeral wall construction w204. It is our hope that in season 2011 we will come to a better understanding of the function of these enigmatic features.

At the end of the season, as we dug into the subsoil level that contains all the large round features, we found that w203 continues. Wall 203 runs east–west across the entirety of square E1. North of w203 there continues to be a layer of dense cobbles, similar to the fill found north of w7, in D1 and C1. About 2 m from the western edge of square E1, w203 jogs to the north; it also only exists at a lower level after the jog (ca. 30–40 cm lower) and the construction method shifts. West of the jog, the wall continues, constructed in the same manner as in squares C1 and D1 with very large boulders in two rows, but often irregularly placed and with little uniformity of stone size. After the jog there are few large boulders and the rows are much more neatly and uniformly placed (similar to the walls in squares L1 and M1). Wall 203 disappears into the eastern balk and in both elevation and orientation seems to line up with w231. It remains unclear what the construction phases were for the wall. There is clearly a difference in construction at the jog, but whether w231 or w7 is constructed earlier may only be answered through further excavation. At the very end of the season we were just beginning to get some larger stones that might be a north–south wall adjoining w203 right at the jog. If this exists, then it would likely be a closing wall to w231, w208, and w217, making a complete room, running under all of the round features in E1. This would make the room in F1 an earlier phase than those in E1. This will be investigated in the 2011 season.

Square B1

Square B1 (fig. 7) was opened to explore the area immediately west of wall w6 in square C1, which was discovered in the 2009 field season. The intent was to uncover information pertaining to the construction of the wall and, perhaps, on the unique features found in C1 last



Figure 7. Square B1, looking north. Bedrock with sediment

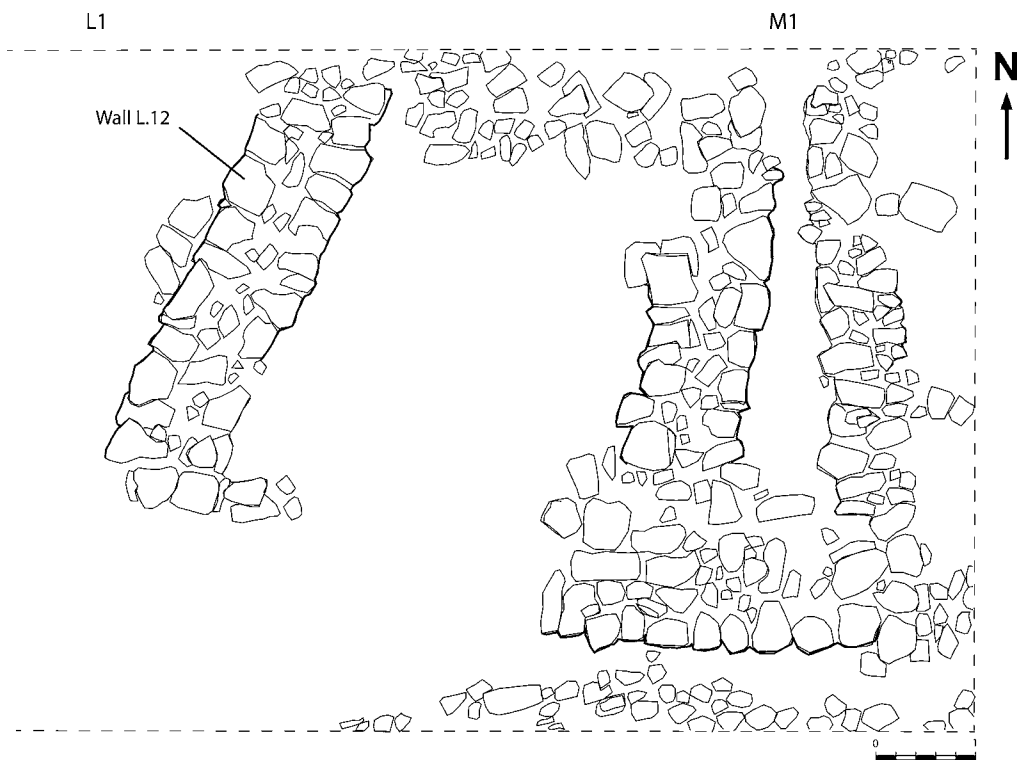


Figure 8. Squares L1 (2009) and M1



Figure 9. Removal of topsoil in square M1. Exposure of possible walls. View toward north

year. Square B1 did not yield any architecture, yet there were quite rich cultural deposits, much of which was defined by mudbrick debris. Despite our best efforts, no convincing bricks were found in the square. Thus, B1 appears to have functioned as an extra-mural space during the Chalcolithic period. A great deal of bioturbation from both small animals (mostly rodents) and roots was present. Material from modern, Roman, Chalcolithic, and the Neolithic periods (one flint arrowhead) were found. Still, over 99 percent of the recovered artifacts dated to the Chalcolithic period.

Square M1

During the 2009 excavations in the East Area, one 5 x 5 m square was opened approximately 35 m to the east of the main excavation exposure. That square, L1, exposed a well-built wall (w12) with a double row of large cobbles, a small bench or pavement fragment (three stones to right of wall, farthest to right of in fig. 9). Wall 12 (see figs. 8–9) runs from the northeast corner of the square toward the southeast, terminating about one meter before the southern baulk.

In addition to this wall, the southern face of a wall (L.22; not shown on plan) was visible in the northern profile of the square, running east–west for almost 3 meters. The relationship between these two walls was unclear at the end of the season. With the goal of exposing any structures connected with w12, square M1 was opened. Removal of the dark topsoil exposed many stones, with the probably traces of walls, collapse, and random stones. The focus was primarily in the southern half of the square, where an east–west wall foundation appears, and where the dark, blocky, dry topsoil appears to dip lower than in the northern aspect of the square. During excavation of this locus, a small greenstone bead was found near the eastern face of w22. In this same area, some mudbricks were recognized in situ, probably part of the collapsed superstructure of w22. Also of interest, large pottery sherds at a relatively similar level in the northeastern corner of the square excavated together may fit together. We don't believe that this represents a surface, but probably only the fortuitous interface between the bottom of the plow zone and the archaeological layers.

By season's end, we believe that three different wall foundations were visible. One is an east–west wall line in the southern part of the square, and running parallel to the southern section of square M1. This wall seems substantial, but may not continue to the west as far as square L1. Instead, the wall may form a corner with a slightly curvilinear wall in the center of the square, running roughly north–south. More perplexing, another north–south wall is very close to the curvilinear wall, and thus may represent two different phases of building. Additional excavation is necessary to understand these walls, which were intentionally not exposed in order to protect them for full excavation in 2011.

Future Directions

After two seasons at Marj Rabba, we have at least six and possibly seven enigmatic round installations in squares E1, F1, E2, and F2. There seem to be two construction methods (with and without large fieldstone borders) and the diameter of the features ranges from as little as 2 m to as much as 5 m. The function of these installations remains unclear. There is no in situ evidence that these installations had any kind of superstructure, but they are very near the surface and so it is likely that plowing destroyed the upper portions of these features.

One potential function could be as silos, similar to those found at Tel Tsaf, although some of the Marj Rabba features are larger. Unfortunately, botanical preservation at this elevation is poor and although soil was removed from these installations for flotation, no preserved botanical remains have yet been recovered. We hope future seasons may clarify this question by uncovering lower and better-preserved installations.

Acknowledgments

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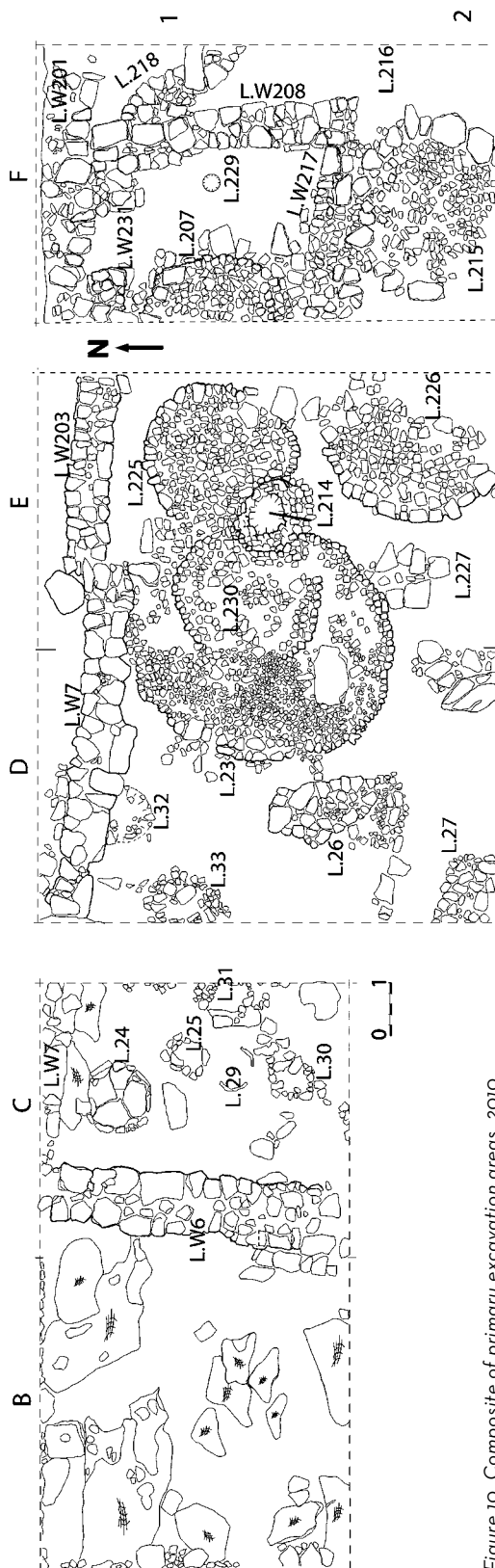


Figure 10. Composite of primary excavation areas, 2010