

MARJ RABBA

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The Galilee Prehistory Project (GPP) focuses on two broad research themes: the definition and characterization of Galilean sites during the fifth to early fourth millennium BC, and the role of this site and region within the poorly understood late prehistoric sequence from the Late Neolithic to Chalcolithic transition in the southern Levant. Within this approach, our first objective was to identify and excavate a settlement site dating to the Chalcolithic period, generally dated approximately 4500–3600 BC. For this first phase in the Galilee Prehistory Project, we selected a site in the lower Galilee in an area known as Marj Rabba, now the name of the site (also referred to as Har ha-Sha'avi West). Our goals are to record and document the material culture of the site, establish the period of time the site was occupied, and achieve a detailed understanding of the economy of this formative period. Ultimately, our aim is to examine life in the Galilee during a period that witnesses the first evidence for the development of copper metallurgy, dramatic new burial practices, and rich iconographic elaboration in material culture. Evidence for these elements exists in other Chalcolithic sites in the Negev, the Golan, and the Jordan valley, but thus far we have little or no indication of these characteristics in the Galilee.

After four seasons of survey and excavation at Marj Rabba, a glimpse of a substantial agricultural village is beginning to emerge with notable differences to other roughly contemporaneous sites in more intensively investigated regions such as the Golan, the Jordan valley, and the northern Negev. The pottery, flint, and ground-stone artifacts establish the contemporaneity of the site in general to the Chalcolithic, but the ceramic styles and manufacturing techniques argue for local production of most pottery; the same seems likely for the flint. In the final season and post-excavation analysis we will select pottery samples for petrographic examination in the hopes of distinguishing vessels produced from locally sourced clays versus those originating from farther away. We know that some limited exchange occurs at the site for several reasons. First, some pottery has basalt inclusions (identifiable with the naked eye), a rock type not found locally but common in the eastern Galilee and the Golan. Accordingly, we can conclude that a small percentage of the pottery found at Marj Rabba came from areas to the east. In addition, ground-stone fragments of basalt, both coarse grinding implements and finer bowls recovered on survey and in the excavations, probably derive from the basalt outcrops in the Galilee or Golan. Local resources were largely sufficient for the inhabitants of Marj Rabba, but these examples indicate contact with others living in the larger intra-regional areas of the Golan and Galilee.

During our fourth excavation season at Marj Rabba, conducted from July 10 to August 17, 2012, we brought together a team of students, interns, volunteers, and professionals for the fieldwork. Students from the University of Chicago, DePaul University, Johns Hopkins University, and other institutions worked diligently for five weeks, sometimes under very hot sun. Supported by a Jeff Metcalf internship through the Jewish Studies Center at the University of Chicago, Eleanor Shoshanny Anderson and Andrew Billingsley contributed a new element to the fieldwork, and continued their labors in Jerusalem long after the excavation season ended, helping to process the heavy fraction from flotation, to enter data, and

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Figure 1. Rowe-Clark Math & Science Academy students and their teacher Ms. Davis (in glasses) at Marj Rabba

to digitize the plans, notes, and drawings from the field season. In a groundbreaking (pun intended) initiative, we included five high-school students from the Rowe-Clark Math & Science Academy in Chicago. These students, most of whom had to apply for their first passport in order to join the field team, arrived with Bridgette Davis, the intrepid dean of college preparation and persistence at Rowe-Clark (fig. 1). The students and Ms. Davis proved capable, flexible, and energetic, contributing to the project with good humor and hard work. Within a day of arriving in

Karmiel, the students had explored the city and had found the closest New York Pizza venue and the best place to buy their favorite brand of potato chips, bringing them the comforts of home.

In the spring, as part of the efforts to prepare them for the excavation program in Israel, Gil Stein, Yorke, and Morag met with the Rowe-Clark students and Ms. Davis on Saturdays to discuss the Middle East, archaeology, survey, faunal remains, lithics, and pottery. During their summer experience, the Rowe-Clark group visited Akko (the modern city of Acre, one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in the region), Tel Aviv, Rujm el-Hiri (an enigmatic Chalcolithic site in the Golan), Haifa, and ended their trip with a three-day visit to Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, and Masada. In the fall, the students presented a synopsis of their summer experiences to their classmates, which included a critique of hummus, an explanation of the finer points of using a trowel, and the need to drink water and wear a hat. The summer program was a great success, one we will repeat in the 2013 season with a new group of students and another courageous mentor from Rowe-Clark.

During the 2012 season, we focused the energies of our team on three primary objectives. In Areas AA and BB (fig. 2) we explored the earlier building phases and associated strata; in some cases, this required the removal of the circular stone features exposed in earlier seasons, which are associated with the latest preserved architectural phase. In Area CC we expanded the area to the east in the hopes of exposing architectural elements and associated strata, floors, and features. Finally, we opened a small test excavation in Area DD in order to test the results of our surface survey, which suggested that the site extends to the southwest.

Excavations

In 2012, Area AA consisted of four 5.0×5.0 -meter squares, and four 2.5×5.0 -meter squares. The three previous seasons of excavation in Area AA exposed a large area of architecture throughout the area, including numerous large stone circles near the ground surface. Since this and the related later phase architecture had been carefully exposed, drawn, and photographed, a goal of the 2012 season was to remove these later architectural elements in



Figure 2. Aerial view of Areas AA and BB, taken from the quadcopter

order to expose the earlier strata of architecture and hopefully contemporaneous features and surfaces.

Area AA sustained more damage than in previous seasons due to heavy winter rains. Despite barbed-wire fencing, some damage by animals was also evident, both to the ancient features and the section walls of the excavation areas. After extensive cleaning, we began to remove some of the stone circles in order to expose earlier layers. Our first priority was the excavation of circles L.215 and L.226 (see *Oriental Institute Annual Reports* for 2010–2011 and 2011–2012), which each filled nearly one-half of a square. This allowed us to bring squares E2 and F2 to the same excavation level, more equivalent to those reached in 2011. These circles lacked additional layers of stone construction, confirming our earlier tests that suggested we have only the base of these structures.

In 2011, we sectioned an additional stone circular feature (L.207), removing half down to the floor level of the earlier room in squares F1 and E1. This season we carefully removed the other half, which suggested that there was mud-brick deposited below the feature before the stone circle was constructed. In several excavation steps, we eventually lowered this area to the associated room floor (fig. 3), indicated by the pottery found lying flat in the surface.



Figure 3. Aerial view of room and floor in Area AA, after removal of circular stone features

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Finally, we removed the two other original, largest circles in Area AA, L.23 and L.225. Circle 23 was the largest of the stone circles, measuring nearly 5 meters in diameter. Like other circles, the edges were carefully laid by creating a double row of larger cobbles, while the interior was filled with a rubble of small cobbles. We took a number of soil samples from on top and within the matrix of these circles. Despite the generally poor preservation of botanicals in the region, we hope that careful sampling and flotation by our archaeobotanist Philip Graham will allow for the identification of cereals or weeds.

New Architecture

This season we concentrated on deeper excavation in one portion of Area AA in an attempt to understand earlier phases of occupation and construction. We selected square D2, since it was already clear of other later architecture. Very soon we uncovered large blocks that were apparently part of a wall that matched wall w.7, one of the first walls uncovered in squares C1 and D1. This new wall is made of regular and nicely faced large boulders on one side, and more regularly utilized field stones on the other side. Since this feature appeared to be parallel to wall L.7 and disappeared into the unexcavated section of square D2/C2, we opened this area to define another architectural unit in Area AA. Unfortunately, a tidy corner connecting this wall was not easily identified because a large pit cut the wall (fig. 3). A large stone-lined pit cuts wall w.6 along the eastern edge in square C2; two V-shaped bowls in the pit suggest that it was a later intrusion that can be dated to the Chalcolithic period. Wall w.6 does not form a corner in the middle of square C2, instead continuing into the southern excavation section. We know from the geophysical work (ground-penetrating radar) conducted in 2011 by Thomas Urban of Oxford University that dense architecture continues into the adjacent field to the south. Additional wall segments in this area will need to be explored during 2013 in order to make sense of architecture. In terms of recovered finds, most artifacts were domestic refuse — pottery, flint tools and debitage, and a few decorative items. A single mace-head was discovered in the southwest, immediately adjacent to pit L.136A.

In Area BB, a number of different walls appear to be built at a different orientation than

those of Area AA (fig. 4). In the middle of Area BB (squares G1/H1), walls w.904, w.925, w.922, and w.315B establish the most complete room exposed at Marj Rabba. Excavation of the room interior removed a great deal of rock rubble, suggesting that the walls were constructed entirely of stone (rather than stone foundations with a mudbrick superstructure). The room is not yet fully excavated and will be further excavated in 2013. By the end of the season, a stone pavement (L.329B) was found in the northwest



Figure 4. Area BB, overhead view of room and associated features

corner of the room, and a possible living surface (L.336B) was found in the room. We do not seem to have the base of the walls yet, however, so this may be only the latest preserved floor in the room, with other earlier floors below. Walls w.904 and w.922, running roughly northwest-southeast, abut the south face of wall w.925, a long wall running across the northern edge of Area BB. On the southern end of the room, cross wall w.315B was partly obscured by a later stone circle (L.316B), built around and atop the corner formed by the juncture of walls w.922 and w.315B. Another possible stone circle (L.308B), partly destroyed or rebuilt, was exposed farther to the east in Area BB.

In Area CC, some of the most substantial architecture exposed at Marj Rabba appears notably different from that found in Areas AA and BB (fig. 5). In previous seasons, the exposure of walls, pavement, a pit, and other features indicate the possibility of better preservation and multiple building phases and well-preserved mudbricks. For the 2013 season, we hope to further expose walls to the east, in squares N1 and N20. Below a number of highly disturbed sediments, a new, incomplete wall (w.507C) appears to run approximately 2.5 meters from squares M1/M20, roughly perpendicular to wall w.606. Unfortunately, the juncture between these walls is missing, although further excavation in 2013 may reveal some connection.

To the north of wall w.507C, the mottled matrix seemed to include mudbrick material, possibly the superstructure from this wall. A hard-packed mudbrick feature extended from the wall's end, continuing into the eastern section of the square, at the approximate base of wall w.507C. This suggests a mudbrick surface or foundation on which the wall was built.

To the north of this wall and mudbrick feature was a surface (L.516C) associated with “paving” stones (L.513C) and a hearth (L.512C). The hearth, a tightly packed series of small stones approximately 1 meter in diameter, included fire-cracked rock. The entire matrix was collected for flotation.

The “paving” stones, a small concentration of flat stones, continue into the eastern baulk. These apparently overlay very hard mudbrick, similar to that described below wall w.507C. Given the limited areal extent (ca. 32 × 25 cm), this feature could easily be the remains of a platform, work surface or some other installation. The remains of a poorly preserved floor beneath the paving stones may have extended to the west; pieces of the floor were laminated, suggesting multiple phases of re-use.

The preservation of these features near the ground surface slowed excavation in Area CC, but also hinted at the potential for greater preservation at deeper levels. We will focus on this area during the 2013 season in the hopes of gaining an understanding of the architectural features and their stratigraphic relationships.



Figure 5. Area CC, end-of-season overhead view

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Survey and Area DD

Preliminary analysis of the 2011 site survey results demonstrated areas with high concentrations of surface material. As part of the project strategy to determine the extent of the site, a test area was designated as Area DD. The highest density of surface artifacts was in a privately owned olive grove, so we placed a 5 × 5-meter square immediately south of that area, about 130 meters south and 10 meters west of the current excavation areas. Initial artifact collection from the 5 × 5-meter square yielded three buckets of lithics, ceramics, and ground stone.

The ground in this area is unlike the main areas of excavation. Dense, clay-rich sediment is tightly compacted and difficult to break up; sieving was virtually impossible. After a few days of digging, we narrowed the excavation area to only one quadrant (2.5 × 2.5 m), the northeast corner of the square. One meter below the ground surface, the dark, packed clay sediment exhibited no stratigraphy and very few artifacts. At 1.05 meters below the surface, a rim fragment of a Chalcolithic basalt vessel was recovered, and some limestone appeared at about the same depth. A slight change in matrix was also visible, lighter in color with small chalk inclusions, corresponding to smaller cobbles. A crude or possibly damaged wall (L.701D) running northeast–southwest, was exposed at this level in the sondage (fig. 6) and we suspect that the change in matrix may mark the original topsoil level buried later by 1 meter of overburden; this may have been an intentional fill brought in to level out the area. The top of the wall, about 1 meter below the ground surface, was apparently built on the bedrock. Very few artifacts were recovered from this depth, although a few Chalcolithic sherds and a basalt fragment confirm the dating of the wall. This supports the suggestion that the site extended at least this far, as suggested by our surface survey analysis.

Future Directions

Excavations carried out during summer 2013 will mark the end of investigations at the site of Marj Rabba. There are still a number of questions that we need to answer, and these will be the focus of our inquiry during July and August of 2013. We will focus efforts in Areas AA, BB, and CC on clarifying stratigraphic relationships and phasing of the site. In addition, we hope to excavate the site to bedrock, at least in some places, in order to understand a full stratigraphic development of the preserved strata. Our program of intensive recovery of paleobotanical remains and flotation will continue in the hopes of more conclusive evidence for the types of plants being exploited in the area. We will also complete the extensive survey of the area, intensively field-walking two areas skipped in the 2011 pedestrian survey.



Figure 6. Area DD, view of wall w.701D

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