

GALILEE PREHISTORY PROJECT

Excavations at Tel Nes (Tell es-Sanjak)

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In 2016, a variety of sites were considered for the next phase of the Galilee Prehistory Project. Our interest was to select a site contemporaneous with Marj Rabba, representing a different environmental zone or a different functional purpose. After visiting a number of sites and many discussions with archaeological colleagues, the site of Tel Nes (Tell es-Sanjak) was selected for preliminary investigation.

Tel Nes (originally, Tell es-Sanjak) is located near the modern community of Elifelet, Israel, on the IAA Rosh Pina Map No. 18 (Site No. 241), Lat. 32°57'29.23", Long. 35°33'36.74" (Israel Grid: SW - Easting 252681, Northing 762508 to NE - Easting 252833, Northing 762780). The volcanic cone of Tel Nes is situated in a large basalt region (geographical unit #5 on Stepansky's survey), a barren and rocky zone in the southern section of the Rosh Pina survey map. Tel Nes stands out in the local landscape and, as noted by Stepansky, there is a fortification extending around the top of the hill ca. 100 × 200 m (fig. 1).



ABOVE: Figure 1. GoPro image of Tel Nes, looking north.



LEFT: Figure 2. Photo of fortification wall along edge of Tel Nes.



RIGHT: Figure 3. Initial opening of squares F1 and F2 on lower southern slope of Tel Nes.

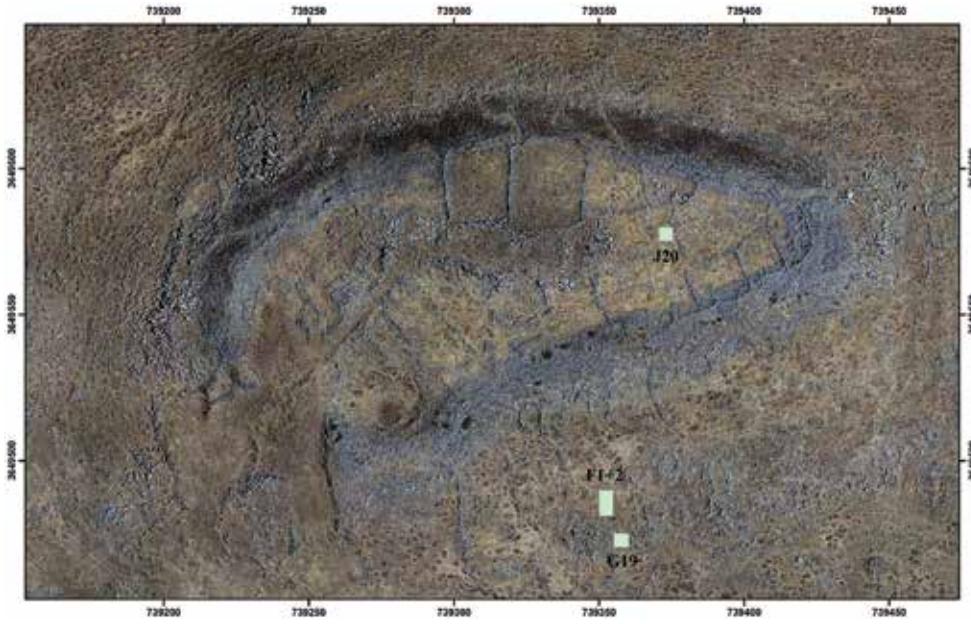
This well-constructed wall is still visible in places, particularly on the northern aspect, and is thought to date to the Iron Age (fig. 2). The Iron Age identification is based on sherds recovered during the IAA survey by Stepansky and colleagues. Other major features of the site include a large pool or cistern, visible in the digital elevation model (fig. 4), a bulldozer cut on the southwestern side of the mound, and walls of rectangular features on top and along the shoulders.

Our interest in the site was primarily focused on the southern slopes of the hill, where various walls are visible, including possible terrace walls, courtyards, and rectangular structures suggestive of the Chalcolithic period based on size and shape. Chalcolithic sherds of dark red ware with basaltic inclusions (i.e., “Golan ware”) were notable in this area, although they are also common atop the hill. Lithic finds on the surface were very rare, and few were clearly late prehistoric.

In preparation for the excavation season, we visited the site with two RTK GNSS receivers (EMLID REACH RS). The units allow point collection at approximately centimeter accuracy so that we could establish benchmarks and collect other data points. In addition, this enabled the quick collection of data on ground control targets we set around Tel Nes. These targets allow us to accurately georeference orthophotographs and digital elevation models (DEMs) generated from imagery collected by a drone, which was flown over the hill for four flights (figs. 4–5). Using the Emlid Reach units, we established benchmarks, a grid system, and laid out corners for excavation squares. This was completed prior to the planned excavation field season.

For this exploratory season, our field team was small, with a total of eight people (including directors Rowan and Kersel). This included project members with previous experience working with GPP and the Eastern Badia Archaeological Project (Heidkamp and Hanson), and two University of Chicago Metcalf Interns, Jennifer Feng and Nathaniel Downey. Ms. Feng also represented the GPP at the Oriental Institute Research Fair on June 1, when Yorke Rowan was already at Wisad Pools, Jordan, for the Eastern Badia Archaeological Project field season.

On July 6th, our first day in the field, we opened two 5 × 5 m squares, F1 and F2, clearing vegetation, and then beginning excavation of the disturbed topsoil with picks and hoes (fig. 3). Although total retrieval of archaeological material is the goal, we did not sieve the first few centimeters of disturbed loose topsoil in favor of expediency. Throughout our excavations we found preservation of bone material to be extremely poor and virtually no preserved carbonized remains that might allow for radiocarbon dating. After a few centimeters of digging, we began to sieve all excavated matrix. Excavation of these disturbed sediments continued for the next week in L.004 (F2) and L.005 (F1), removing rocks and sediment that became increasingly blocky and dense with greater



ABOVE: Figure 4. Digital Elevation Model (DEM) of Tel Nes highlighting walls atop and along lower slopes. BELOW: Figure 5. Orthophoto of Tel Nes with excavation squares.



0 0.5 1 2 Meters



ABOVE: Figure 6. Orthophoto of squares F1 and F2 after two weeks of excavation.

depth. This sediment included Chalcolithic sherds as well as sherds from other periods: Iron Age and later. Very few flint tools or debitage, and no animal bones, were recovered.

In sq. F2, between the north-south wall #1 and #2, locus L.008 was a similar rocky matrix to that found throughout the square, with Chalcolithic sherds mixed with other, later period sherds, many of them worn and smoothed. Despite the absence of change in the matrix, L.008 was created as a distinct locus because of the depth from the ground surface and possible appearance of bedrock. On the eastern side of wall #2, to the eastern baulk of the square, a similar matrix was given locus number L.009 (fig. 6). Many fist-sized rocks are found throughout the sediment.

In sq. F2, L.006 was assigned in the northwestern section of the square, between the eastern baulk and to the west of the NS wall #1, where a debris layer of sherds and small cobble rubble was identified. L.007 was the excavation of a layer sloping downward from north to south (following the general slope of the hill), with a series of battered, small stones and large pottery sherds embedded in a denser matrix (fig. 7). This matrix seems to directly rest over, and on, sloping and uneven bedrock. A similar phenomenon appears in the northern sections between the two walls, #1 and #2, below L.008. This same phenomenon appeared in the eastern section of the square, where Chalcolithic sherds were exposed (fig. 8; L.007) and left in situ with the small cobbles, a large cylindrical pestle (?) of basalt, a small handstone, and to the south, a metal object that appears greenish and uncorroded (fig. 9). The metal copper colored object may have a broken tip, but the lack of typological similarity to prehistoric artifacts (e.g., a chisel or awl) and precise symmetry suggests that it is much more recent than the Chalcolithic in date, probably historical. This layer did not appear to be an original surface or floor, but the result of collapse or a destroyed feature redeposited downslope, possibly on the uneven and highly eroded bedrock. Although some ceramics appear likely to be Chalcolithic, others are likely later in date. Similar processes were also likely the cause of the deposits exposed on the northern aspect of the square. Embedded in a deep crevasse of this bedrock/small cobble area, a shattered ceramic vessel appeared wedged in between the bedrock and these small fist



ABOVE: Figure 7. Sherds embedded in rocky matrix next to shallow wall. MIDDLE: Figure 8. Chalcolithic "Golan ware" pottery sherds. BOTTOM: Figure 9. Metal object in situ, possibly historical or recent.



ABOVE:
Figure 10. Smashed
vessel wedged close to
wall 2, resting on bedrock.

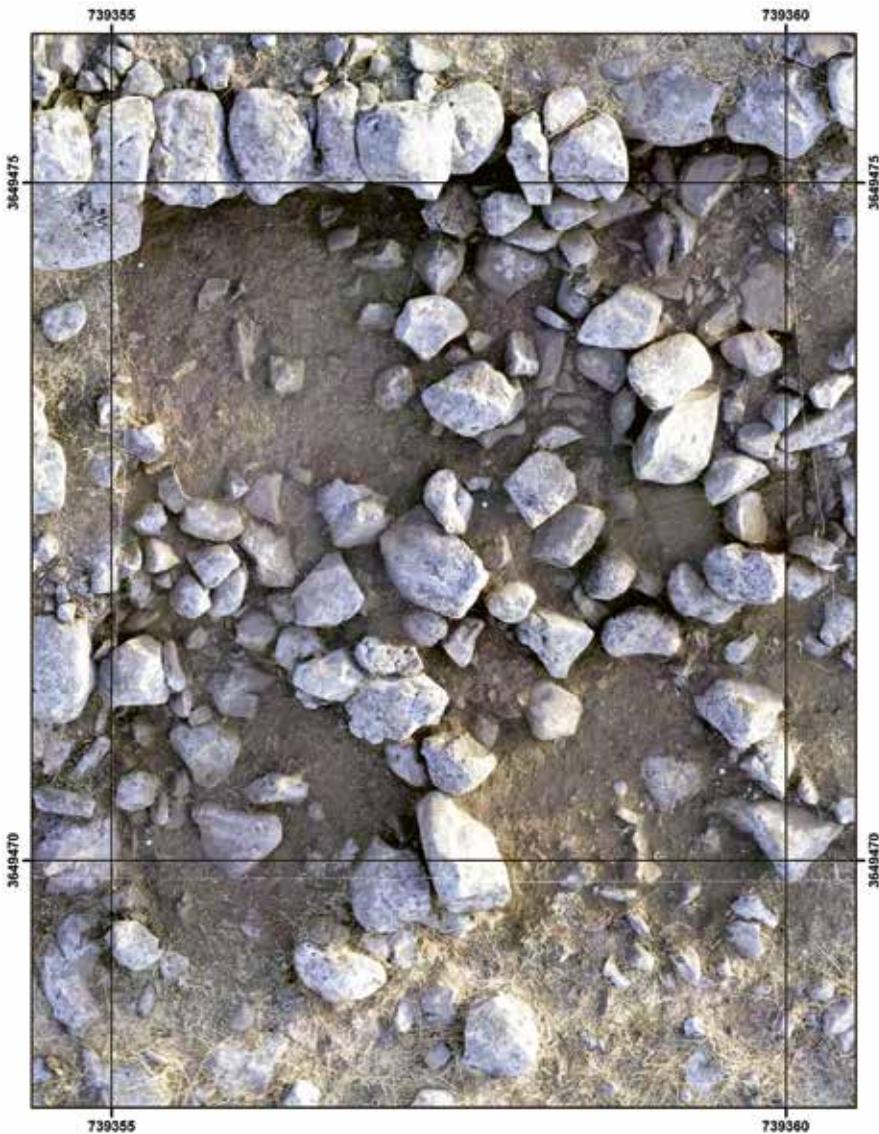
sized cobbles in L.010 (fig. 10). The vessel (L.010 B.1061), possibly a Middle Bronze (?) holemouth, is a pale undecorated and very soft ware, apparently broken in this spot. It is extremely friable and fragile. One fragment of a possible human phalange was recovered during excavation and will be examined by a physical anthropologist for confirmation.

Excavations in squares F1 and F2 both suggest that walls 1, 2, and 3 do not have additional courses, and that the deposits are relatively shallow. Wall #3, in particular, may be part of the terrace wall system. The function of north-south walls #1 and #2 remain unclear, although they seem contemporaneous with each other and wall #3. The walls rest primarily on sediment and exhibit little attention to construction detail, continuing across the slope rather than meeting to form the corner of a room as originally suspected. Thus they do not seem to be part of walls that had a substantial superstructure, nor do they seem part of domestic structures.

A new square was opened directly below the prominent terrace wall (wall #4) to the south of squares F1 and F2. Square G19, a 5 × 5 m square laid out during the pre-season survey, was selected as a possible spot where we hoped earlier deposits may be preserved by the overburden when the terrace wall was created. A second terrace wall (wall #5) comprised of a series of large boulders bisecting the middle of the square was identified. An abundance of volunteer wild wheat may be the legacy of terrace farming suggested by the manipulated landscape. As with squares F1 and F2, vegetation was first removed across the area. Ample material remains, from Chalcolithic pottery, to glass, metal, and a few lithics were recovered. The base of a Chalcolithic cornet (L.012 B.1052) was recovered when sieving began, and a large amount of pottery was recovered. Many rocks — from small to large — were removed, and some large boulders appeared. Where excavation was possible around the large boulders, we continued to discover mixed cultural material. Much of this material was Chalcolithic, but not all of it was prehistoric. Few stone tools were recovered in the small number of chipped stone finds recovered, although analysis is not yet complete. In the final days, there was little evidence for in situ deposits of any kind, and certainly no Chalcolithic features or deposits (fig. 11).

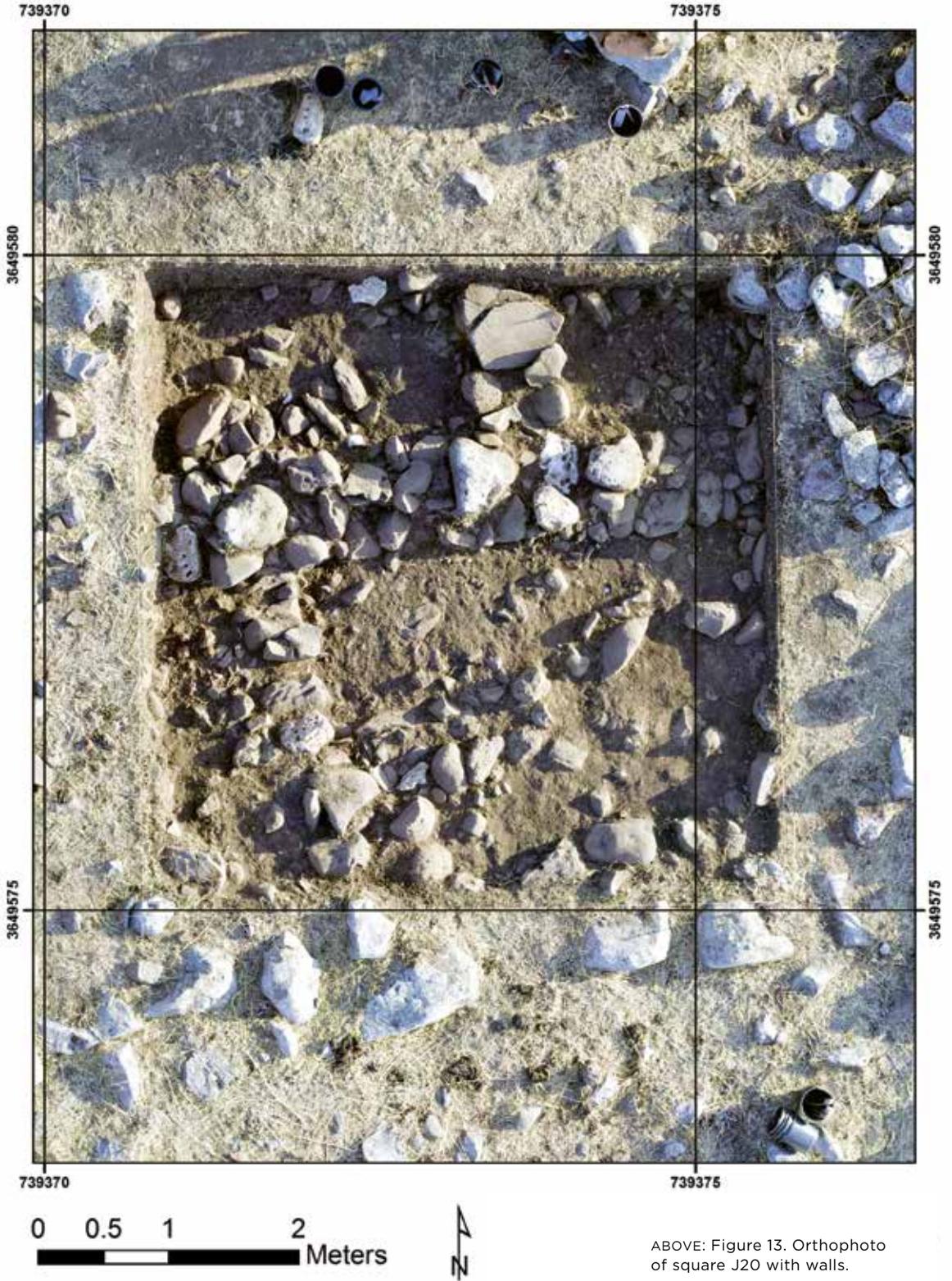
With these limited in situ cultural features on the lower slope, the decision was made to open a square atop the hill. Square J20 (5 × 5 m) was situated along the edge of a line of stones on the south aspect of the summit. After removing vegetation and manure, excavation of topsoil began in L.014 (fig. 12). Sherds were plentiful, both Chalcolithic and later periods. Unlike squares F1, F2 and G19 downslope, many chunks of burned brick were recovered, suggesting more in situ cultural deposits than discovered in the other squares.

Excavation of L.014 in square J20 quickly produced features and walls just below the ground surface. One feature included chunks of burned or fire-hardened brick material, along with a few flat stones aligned north-south. The fragment of a clay figurine animal (L.014 B.1078) was found in the center of the square. Additional rocks appeared as we excavated, and a wall (wall #6) was identified running east-west (fig. 13). With that wall, new loci were defined. On the northern side of



ABOVE: Figure 11. Orthophoto of square G19 along terrace wall on lower slope of Tel Nes. RIGHT: Figure 12. Opening square J20 on top of Tel Nes, Blair Heidkamp (graduate student, University of Cincinnati) and Nathan Downey (University of Chicago Metcalf intern).







ABOVE: Figure 14. Dense broken pottery with ceramic loomweight. BOTTOM: Figure 15. Ceramic loomweight found with broken ceramic vessel. Photograph by Nathaniel Downey.

the wall, a dense area of broken pottery (L.015 B.1094), more than one vessel, was discovered in the northeastern corner of the square, north of wall #6 (fig. 14). One large pottery vessel (L.017 B.1095, 1096) was found in the area of L.016, to the west of wall #7. The vessel was found with at least two ceramic loomweights (L.016 B.1097; fig. 15); large sherds of the vessel remain in the western profile after excavation.

On the northern side of wall #7, a possible wall (wall #8) may have also continued to the north. These walls are quite shallow and probably represent the basal foundations destroyed by their proximity to the surface.

By our last day of excavation, cultural deposits clearly continued below the levels we achieved. This square, and area, has great potential for future excavation, with much better preservation of features and artifacts. This should be of great interest to specialists in the Iron Age.

Few in situ walls or features were found during the excavations at Tel Nes. Most wall stones in squares F1, F2, and G19 were exposed from the ground surface, and do not require reburial. As

there are no in situ ancient cultural features, and the excavations were shallow, there is nothing to preserve. On top of Tel Nes, the wall (or possibly, two) exposed in sq. J20 would erode if left exposed, and might attract looters. As a consequence, this square was backfilled with sieved sediment, covering all walls and features.

The poor condition of ceramics, low frequency of diagnostic Chalcolithic material culture, and absence of in situ prehistoric remains indicates that the lower slopes of Tel Nes are not promising for future research into the prehistory of the site. Although the Iron Age remains atop the hill are in a good state of preservation, with promising in situ features just below the ground surface, this should be conducted by a scholar with expertise and interest in this period.