

THE LAND OF ISRAEL ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWS –DECEMBER 2019

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THE LARGEST NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT IN ISRAEL REVEALED IN MOTZA

A large Neolithic Period Settlement was excavated by the Israel Antiquities Authority at Motza, five kilometers west of Jerusalem. The site is located on the banks of the Sorek Stream, near natural springs and close to a fertile valley optimal for long-term settlement. The excavations revealed large buildings with alleys running between them, evidence of advanced planning. Some rooms were used as living spaces, some as public facilities, and others for ritual purposes. The finds include thousands of flint arrowheads used for hunting, axes for tree-felling, along with sickle blades and knives. Several small finds were also discovered as burial offerings in the belief that they would be used by the individual in the afterlife. Numerous graves were found in and amongst the houses. The offerings include stone-made objects, some from obsidian, others from sea shells. The offerings testify that already during the Neolithic Period, the residents of this site conducted exchange relationships with faraway places and provide insight to the city's trade networks. According to Dr. Hamoudi Khalaily and Dr. Jacob Vardi, excavation directors on behalf of the IAA, "This is the first time that such a large-scale settlement from the Neolithic Period (9,000 years ago) is discovered in Israel. At least 2,000 – 3,000 residents lived in the settlement".



Photo: Eyal Marco, Israel Antiquities Authority.

A MASSIVE CITY FROM THE EARLY BRONZE AGE AT EIN ASAWIR

A city spanning over 650 dunams, large enough to accommodate around 6,000 inhabitants, was excavated by the Israel Antiquities Authority at Ein Asawir (En Esur), in the Northern part of the Sharon. The excavation, directed by Itai Elad, Dr. Yitzhak Paz and Dr. Dina Shalem, revealed a planned city from the Early Bronze Age, around the end of the 4th millennium B.C.E., but evidence of an earlier Chalcolithic city (about 7,000 years old) was also discovered beneath the EB houses.

Next to the site are two springs which offered an abundant water supply and were used for agricultural cultivation of the surrounding land. The city contained well-planned streets, residential and public areas, and a fortification wall. A large ritual temple was found in the public area of the site. Situated in the temple's courtyard was a large stone basin for holding liquids used during religious rituals. Inside the temple a facility containing burnt animal bones was revealed, evidence of sacrificial offerings. Along with the bones were several rare figurines, including a human head, and a seal impression of a man with lifted hands standing beside an animal. According to the directors, "The Early Bronze Age is a fascinating period in the history of ancient Canaan, one in which the rural population gives way to a complex society living mostly in urban settings. The residential buildings, diverse facilities and the public buildings are evidence that an organized society and social hierarchy existed at the time".



Photo: Assaf Peretz, Israel Antiquities Authority.

GARUM FACTORY NEAR ASHKELON

Vats used to produce fish sauce (garum) that are among the few known in the Eastern Mediterranean, were recently uncovered by the Israel Antiquities Authority in Ashkelon. The excavation, directed by Dr. Tali Erickson-Gini, has revealed evidence of 2000-year old Roman and Byzantine culinary preferences. The ancient Roman diet was based largely on fish sauce. Historical sources refer to the production of special fish sauce that was used as a basic condiment for food in the Roman and Byzantine Eras throughout the Mediterranean basin. They report that the accompanying strong odours during its production required its being distanced from urban areas. In our case the installations were discovered approximately 2 km. to the east from the ancient city of Ashkelon. The Roman site was eventually abandoned and in the Byzantine Period, during the 5th Century C.E., a monastic community settles at the site, making a living from wine production. Three winepresses were found next to a decorated church. A large kiln complex, where wine jars were produced, was located nearby. These appear to have been used for exporting wine, which was the primary income for the monastery.

According to Dr. Erickson-Gini: “The site, which served as an industrial area over several periods, was again abandoned sometime after the Islamic conquest of the region in 7th c. C.E. and later nomadic families, probably residing in tents, dismantled the structures and sold the different parts for building material elsewhere.”



Photo: Assaf Peretz, Israel Antiquities Authority.

THE 'STEPPED STREET' IN THE CITY OF DAVID POSSIBLY CONSTRUCTED BY PONTIUS PILATE

A 2,000-year-old street that may have been commissioned by Pontius Pilate for pilgrims has been uncovered in Jerusalem by archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority in the last few years. The 'Stepped Street' is situated in the City of David and stretched between the Pool of Siloam in the south and Temple Mount in the north. Parts of the street has been known for over 50 years, however exactly when it was built was unclear. Previous archaeological data suggested it was constructed at some point between the reign of Herod the Great, around 37 B.C., and that of Herod Agrippa II, who died around 100 C.E. In a recent research, published by Nahshon Szanton, Moran Hagbi, Dr. Joe Uziel and Dr. Donald T. Ariel from the Israel Antiquities Authority, 100 coins that had been found in latest excavations trapped beneath the paving slabs of the street were analyzed. The latest of the coins found dated to between 17 and 31 C.E., during the period when Pontius Pilate governed Judea.

The street was found beneath layers of destruction from the Great Revolt against the Romans, in which Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E. It was paved with stone slabs and about 10,000 tons of quarried limestone rock, a task that would have required a huge amount of time and skill. Compared to other streets from the time, this walkway would have been very grand, adding weight to the idea it served as a pilgrim route. According to Dr. Donald T. Ariel "Statistically, coins minted some 10 years later than 30 C.E. are the most common coins in Jerusalem, so not having them beneath the street means the street was built before their appearance, in other words only in the time of Pontius Pilate. He may have had the street built in order to reduce tensions with the Jewish population in the city at the time".



Photo: Shai Halevi, Israel Antiquities Authority

SYNAGOGUE MOSAIC REVEALED IN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

Fragments of a mosaic depicting animals were uncovered during an excavation of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, Haifa University, at a synagogue in the ancient settlement of Majdolia in the Golan Heights. The excavation, directed by Dr. Mechael Osband, uncovered a synagogue active from the first century C.E., after the Second Temple was destroyed, to the end of the third century C.E. Only the fragmented bottom layer of the mosaic was preserved. The fragments that were uncovered point to the floor of the synagogue once being colorful and filled with geometric shapes. The central hall's mosaic was found to be complex and rich in shapes and colors, and despite its state, designs of footprints of birds and other animals could be identified.

According to Dr. Osband: "In the third century we see an interesting combination of the already established tradition of synagogues, following the destruction of the Second Temple, with new artistic elements that will later become widespread, such as colourful animal mosaics. The discovery had vast importance to the historical record, as most experts assumed that the Jewish settlement on the Golan Heights ceased following the First Jewish–Roman War in 67 C.E. and the destruction of Gamla, a central trade and commerce hub in the area, during that period. This new find strengthens the notion that the Jewish settlement in the area continued even after the war."