

## Exploring connections: a new fieldwork collaboration at Tel Bet Yerah (Khirbet el-Kerak)

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*The site of Tel Bet Yerah (Khirbet el-Kerak) in northern Israel has long been recognized as one of the most important Bronze Age urban centres in the region and has been excavated several times over the last seventy years. The Institute of Archaeology has joined a new project of research and excavation of the site, organized by the University of Tel Aviv. Here David Wengrow, the director of the UCL team, describes the 2009 season.*

In summer 2009, thirty-two undergraduates and three masters students from the Institute of Archaeology participated in renewed excavations at the site of Tel Bet Yerah in northern Israel. Tel Bet Yerah is a low, thirty-hectare mound located at the egress of the River Jordan from the Sea of Galilee. Excavated periodically since 1933, the site is already well known to archaeologists as one of the earliest examples of planned urban settlement in the southern Levant (modern-day Israel, Palestine, Jordan), commencing around 3000 BC. The sequence of habitation extends back much further, however, and provides a unique window onto the long-term processes that led to the emergence of urban life in this region. Tel Bet Yerah is also the type-site for Khirbet Kerak Ware, a visually striking ceramic industry introduced to the region around 2800 BC, as part of a much wider spread of cultural influences originating far to the north, in the Caucasus, and also extending eastward into western Iran. It was periodically occupied in later periods, including the Middle Bronze Age, Persian, Hellenistic (when it bore the name Philoteria), Roman and Byzantine, and possesses important early Islamic remains, which are also a focus of current research.

The connection between the Institute and Tel Bet Yerah is not, in fact, an entirely new one. We hold a small selection of ceramics collected from the site during the 1930s, when it was known by its Arabic name (still widely used): Khirbet el-Kerak. Currently housed in Room 209 at the Institute of Archaeology, they appear to originate with James Leslie Starkey (1895–1938), best known for his work at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, and were presented to the Institute in 1956 by Olga Tufnell (1904–1985), to be displayed in the then Palestine Gallery as part of the teaching collection. An earlier donation of ceramic sherds and other small finds from Bet Yerah was made to the Institute by the Palestine Archaeological (now Rockefeller) Museum in the late 1930s (Rachael Sparks, personal comment).

The current UCL expedition to Tel Bet Yerah was led and organized by Dr David Wengrow, with the assistance of Sevinc Duvarci and Ian Cipin (MA Archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East). Our contingent joined the core project staff and students from Tel Aviv University, led by excavation directors Dr Raphael Greenberg and Sarit Paz, and also Taufik Deadle, a PhD candidate in Islamic Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The last archaeological fieldwork project undertaken by the Institute in either Israel

or Palestine appears to have been that of Dame Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978) almost half a century ago, in Jerusalem. The public exhibition “A Future For the Past: Petrie’s Palestinian Collection” (2007), initiated by former Director of the Institute, Professor Peter Ucko, signalled a new phase of UCL involvement in the archaeology and cultural heritage of these countries. Our present involvement at Tel Bet Yerah forms part of a series of wider initiatives made possible by a grant, awarded to David Wengrow by the UCL Futures fund, under the heading “Towards a sustainable archaeology in Israel and Palestine”. Their support, and that of our alumni, is greatly appreciated.

### The beginnings of urban life in the Jordan Valley

Tel Bet Yerah (Fig. 1) has long been recognized as a site of major archaeological importance. Extending over an area of some thirty hectares, it lies at the northern end of the Jordan Rift Valley on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The



Figure 1 Tel Bet Yerah (Khirbet el-Kerak), by the Sea of Galilee

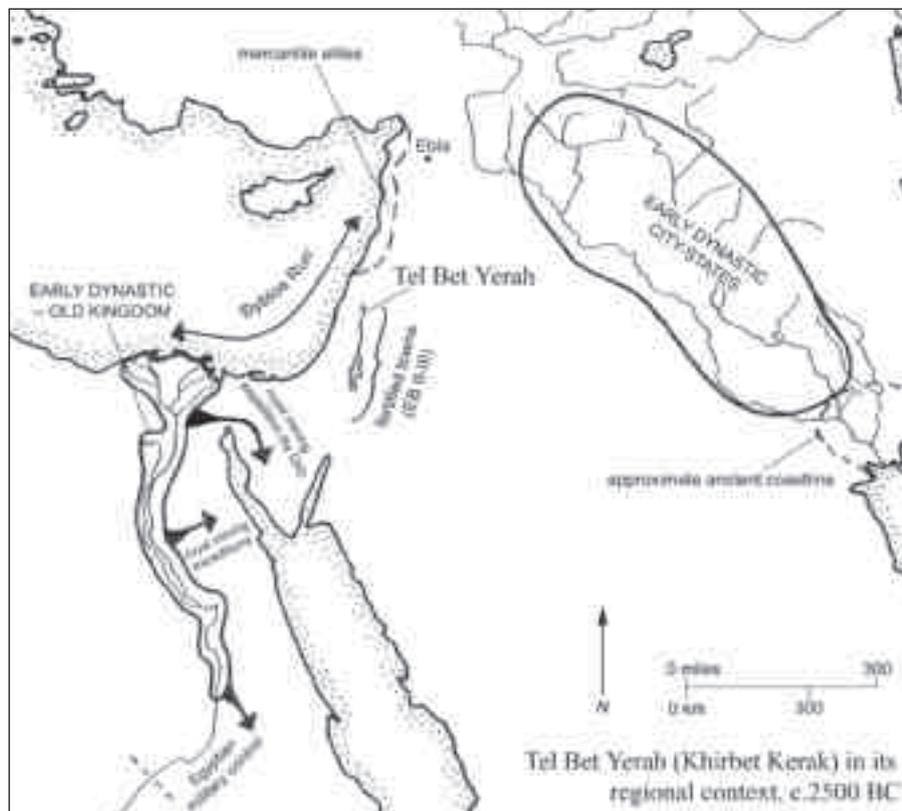


Figure 2 Early Bronze Age Tel Bet Yerah in its interregional context

valley was once flanked by major trade arteries running to the east (the incense and spice route leading from the Red Sea to Damascus) and west (the “Way of the Sea”, traversing the famous ports of the Levantine coast). Previous fieldwork at the site, going back to the time of the British Mandate, established it as one of the first urban centres of the region during the Early Bronze Age, located midway between the great alluvial civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt (Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> It remains a key focus of research into the transition from village to urban life around the Eastern Mediterranean basin in the late fourth and third millennia BC, owing not least to the presence of a unique complex (c.1200 square metres in size) with massive stone foundations and circular storage pits (the so-called Circles Building), the function of which remains enigmatic. Despite the scale of this building, and of the impressive mud-brick wall and gateway that enclosed the Early Bronze Age town, there is little evidence for such “typical” accompaniments of urban life as centralized administration, palace and temple institutions, or literacy. Their absence is a general feature of early urban life in the southern Levant, by contrast with larger polities to the north, such as the kingdom of Ebla, on the Syrian steppe. Much recent research centres upon understanding the alternative mechanisms of social integration that allowed the aggregation of large communities there during the third

millennium BC.<sup>2</sup> One aim of the current fieldwork at Bet Yerah, and the subject of a PhD dissertation under preparation by Sarit Paz, is to approach this problem from the bottom up, focusing upon the detailed investigation of domestic (rather than monumental) contexts, in order to better understand the constitution of a large, planned settlement through long-term changes in the everyday organization of household life. In the course of our field season, however, we were also reminded – in a fairly dramatic fashion – that the answers to these questions cannot be sought on a purely local scale.<sup>3</sup>

**An astonishing find: Tel Bet Yerah and early Egypt**

An undoubted highlight of the 2009 season was the discovery by Institute student Mike Lewis, working under the direction of Sarit Paz, of a fragment of relief carving, bearing exquisitely executed signs, of clear Egyptian origin (Fig. 3). The four centimetre long piece is the first artefact of its type ever found in an archaeological context outside Egypt, and belongs to the same genre of objects as the famous palette of King Narmer. It is remarkable both its in own right, and for its location. Egyptian cosmetic palettes of simpler forms are quite widely documented in the southern Levant, as a result of constant interaction between these regions during the fourth millennium BC. But prior to the discovery of the Bet Yerah Palette, examples with relief decoration – most of

which were produced during a relatively narrow window of time (c.3300–3100 BC, or Dynasty 0) – were known only within Egypt itself, and their use was assumed to have been confined to the early Egyptian elite.<sup>4</sup>

The fragment was found in a secondary deposit close to the Circles Building, in association with pottery dating to the earlier part of the Early Bronze III period (c.2800–2600 BC). Like a much less elaborate Egyptian palette found at Bet Yerah in the 1950s, it probably antedates its find context by some centuries. It is worked from siltstone, the nearest sources of which lie approximately 700km southwest of the site, as the crow flies, along the Wadi Hammamat: the shortest land-route between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast. Surviving on its surface are delicate carvings of an arm and hand grasping a sceptre and an early form of the ‘ankh’ sign. The signs on the fragment are executed to an extremely high quality, and bear comparison with those on royal palettes and other monuments dating to the earliest phase of Egyptian kingship. Finds of this nature are rare even within Egypt itself.

Recent assessments of foreign relations between the early Egyptian state and its neighbours accord relatively little importance to the northern part of the Jordan Valley, where Bet Yerah is located. This is by contrast with a) the southern coastal plain of modern-day Israel and Gaza, considered to be the focus of an Egyptian colonial movement during the late Early Bronze I period (c.3200–3000 BC); and b) the coastal plain of Lebanon, where the Old Kingdom



Figure 3 Fragment of an Egyptian “ceremonial palette”, late fourth millennium BC



**Figure 4** Khirbet Kerak Ware bowl, mid-third millennium BC

Egyptian state subsequently established close commercial and diplomatic ties, attested by the presence of royal gifts at the maritime city of Byblos. The discovery of the Bet Yerah Palette, as it has come to be known, complicates this picture, and adds support to suggestions that similar relations of elite patronage may have been cultivated with centres in the Jordan Valley, albeit for a relatively brief period in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, before Egyptian interests moved decisively to the northern Levantine coast.<sup>5</sup>

#### **From the Zagros to the Mediterranean: interregional connections in the Early Bronze Age**

No less intriguing than its early Egyptian connections is the status of Tel Bet Yerah as the regional type site of the Khirbet Kerak cultural complex (c.2800–2300 BC): a distinct configuration of material culture with well established links to contemporaneous sites in central Anatolia, the Caucasus (Kura-Araxes culture), and the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran.<sup>6</sup> The remarkable spread of Transcaucasian cultural practices around the northern margins of the Fertile Crescent remains one of the most enigmatic and poorly understood phenomena of Near Eastern archaeology. In the past it has often been explained in terms of the outward migration of groups from a homeland in the southern Caucasus, bringing with them a distinct repertory of equipment for the preparation of food and the conduct of domestic rituals, including ceramic vessels with a striking metallic appearance (Fig. 4) and hearth-boundaries that supported sealed cooking vessels (Fig. 5), and were sometimes ornamented with anthropomorphic features.

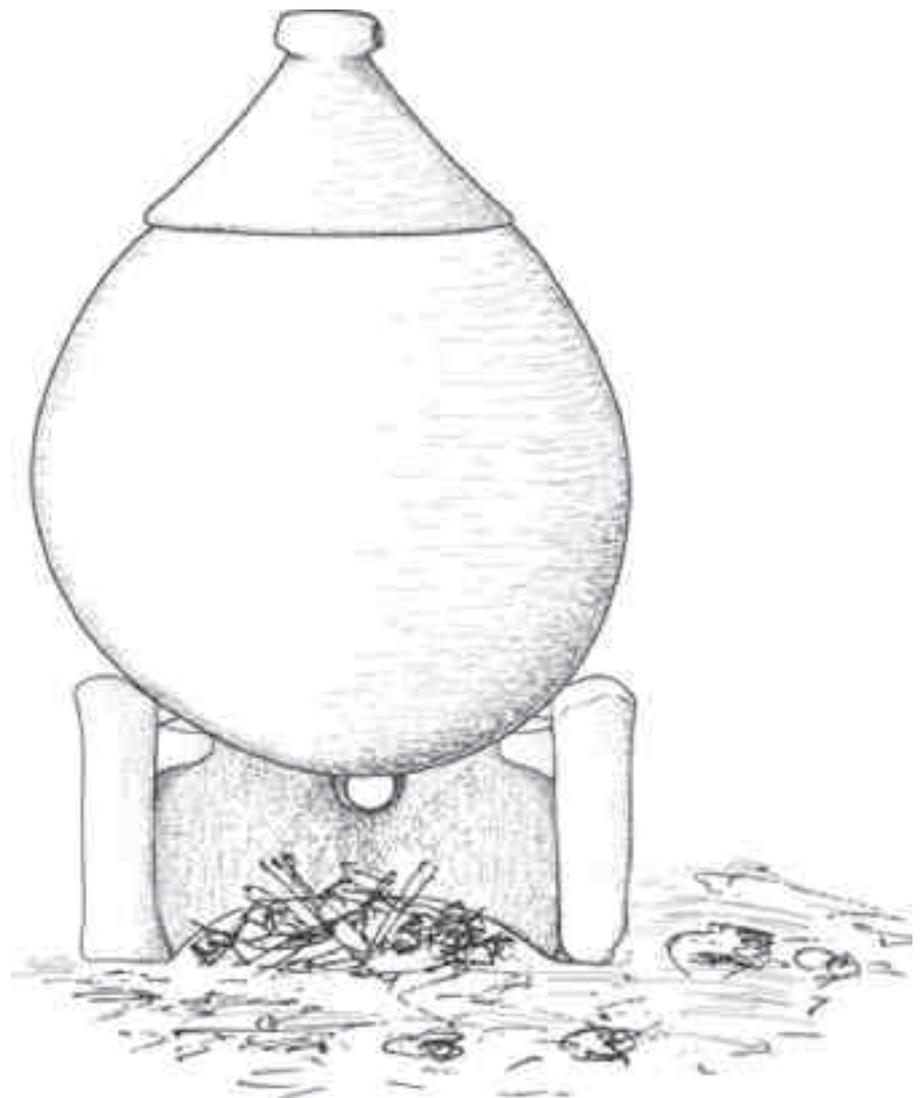
Current work at Tel Bet Yerah forms one of a growing number of projects

(e.g. at Arslantepe, in eastern Turkey and Shengavit in southern Armenia)<sup>7</sup> that are seeking to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of cultural transmission that lie behind this

phenomenon, looking particularly at the interplay of local and interregional factors. Staff members from Tel Aviv University are engaged in detailed analysis of the technological procedures used to make Khirbet Kerak ware, including petrography, experimental replication of firing techniques (which took place on-site), and their comparison with methods used elsewhere in the Transcaucasian network. Other current research focuses upon the archaeological criteria used to establish past migrations, as opposed to other mechanisms for the transmission of cultural practices over large areas.<sup>8</sup>

#### **The archaeology of early Islam**

In addition to questions of urbanization and interregional connections in the Early Bronze Age, a special focus of the 2009 excavations was the large fortified complex that has been tentatively identified by experts in Islamic history as part of al-Sinnabra: a site of economic and strategic importance during the early expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), and the winter resort of *Mu'awiya*



**Figure 5** Reconstruction of "Transcaucasian" cooking practices, on a portable hearth boundary (or "andiron")



**Figure 6** Mosaic associated with the fortified Early Islamic complex

and other early Muslim rulers.<sup>9</sup> At its greatest extent the Umayyad Empire reached from Spain to Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> At Tel Bet Yerah, colourful mosaic floors – which may date to this period, or slightly earlier – were discovered decades ago but concealed from view for their protection. This season's work included the uncovering and careful re-recording of these remarkable surfaces (Fig. 6). They are associated with a massive structure, built on deep foundations, and equipped with an elaborate bathing house, which has been compared to the great baths of Hisham's Palace (Khirbet el-Mafjar) at nearby Jericho,<sup>11</sup> where a team from the Institute's Centre for Applied Archaeology is currently undertaking fieldwork with Birzeit University. Some of its foundation walls showed severe cracking, perhaps related to the massive earthquake of AD 749 that destroyed many sites along the Jordan Valley. A further aim of the 2009 season's work, and an ongoing target for the future, was the identification of stratigraphic and ceramic evidence to allow a more precise dating of this structure, which must have been an impressive monument before it was razed and its stones carted away for re-use outside the site.

#### **Cultural heritage in Israel and Palestine: contemporary issues**

UCL students (Figs. 7 and 8) participated in all aspects of the fieldwork at Tel Bet Yerah, receiving training in *tel*-excavation, surveying, and recording. They also visited other major sites (such as the Bronze Age city of Hazor) and attended a rigorous course of evening lectures, covering topics such as Early Bronze Age urbanism, the archaeology of early Islam, and the relationship between archaeology

and nationalism in the modern Middle East. Dr. Greenberg, who is responsible for renewing archaeological activity at Tel Bet Yerah, has been at the forefront of recent debates concerning the future of cultural heritage in Israel and Palestine. He has also played a lead role in assessing the impact of military occupation upon the archaeology of the Palestinian West Bank, including the compilation of a comprehensive GIS database documenting archaeological activity in that region since 1967.<sup>12</sup> A further consequence of this new collaboration, and of the UCL Futures project, is the arrival at the Institute of Adi Keinan, whose PhD research focuses upon the implications of that database for regional antiquities policy and cultural heritage. Her work, supervised by Tim Williams and Andrew Bevan, is sponsored by the prestigious Bonnart-Braunthal Scholarship, which supports research



**Figure 7** UCL undergraduate Leah Acheson Roberts, excavating the foundations of a Late Byzantine/Early Islamic building



**Figure 8** The 2009 team, on the final day of excavations

"into the nature of racial, religious and cultural intolerance with a view to finding a means to combat it".

We anticipate another season at Tel Bet Yerah, with our colleagues from Tel Aviv University, in 2011. 2010 looks set to be a much smaller affair, probing previously unexamined parts of the site, and exploring the potential of geophysics with new partners from UCLA's Cotsen Institute for Archaeology, and the Centre for Advanced Spatial Technologies at the University of Arkansas.

#### Notes

- 1 R. Greenberg *et al.*, *Bet Yerah, the Early Bronze Age mound. volume 1: excavation reports, 1933–1986*. (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006).
- 2 For a representative sample of recent debates, see 'Urbanism' in the *Early Bronze Age Levant*: a special issue of the *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* **16.1**, 2003.
- 3 See further, D.L. Esse, *Subsistence, trade, and social change in Early Bronze Age Palestine* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1991).
- 4 For Levantine contexts, see P. Jacobs, "A cosmetic palette from Early Bronze Age III at Tell Halif", in *Retrieving the past: essays on archaeological research and methodology in honor of Gus W. van Beek*, J.D. Seger (ed.), 123–34 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996); for a wider consideration of Egyptian cosmetic palettes, D. Wengrow, *The archaeology of early Egypt: social transformations in north-east Africa, 10,000–2650 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 5 See especially the contributions by Raphael Greenberg and Pierre de Miroschedji, in *Egypt and the Levant: interrelations from the 4<sup>th</sup> through the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium BCE*, E.C.M. van den Brink and T.E. Levy (eds) (London, New York: Leicester University Press, 2002).
- 6 See G. Philip, "Complexity and diversity in the southern Levant during the third millennium BC: The Evidence of Khirbet Kerak Ware", *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* **12.1**, 26–57; and for the wider context of the "Transcaucasian" dispersal, P.L. Kohl, *The Making of Bronze Age Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 7 See, for instance, G. Palumbi, "Red-black pottery: Eastern Anatolian and Transcaucasian relationships around the mid-fourth millennium BC", *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* **40**, 80–134, 2003; G. Areshian, "Early Bronze Age settlements in the Ararat Plain and its vicinity", *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* **37**, 71–88, 2005.
- 8 For this, and other current research, see the latest edition of the journal *Tel Aviv* **36.2**, 2009, devoted to relations between the Levant and the Caucasus in the Early Bronze Age, with contributions by Bet Yerah staff members Mark Iserlis and Sarit Paz, and others.
- 9 See [http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/ar/01-02/is\\_whitcomb.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/ar/01-02/is_whitcomb.html); and also G.R.D. King, "The distribution of sites and routes in the Jordanian and Syrian deserts in the Early Islamic Period", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* **17**, 91–105, 1987.
- 10 For a summary, see G.R. Hawting, *The first dynasty of Islam: the Umayyad caliphate A.D. 661–750* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).
- 11 See R.W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar: an Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).
- 12 R. Greenberg & A. Keinan, *The present past of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Israeli archaeology in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 1967* (Ramat Aviv: S. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies, 2007); *Israeli archaeological activity in the West Bank 1967–2007: a sourcebook* (Jerusalem: Emek Shaveh, 2007).