

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE 2012 EXCAVATION SEASONS AT SHIKHIN
SUBMITTED TO THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY

by
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Project Website: <http://www.samford.edu/shikhin/>

Introduction

In May and June of 2012 the team opened eight probes and half-probes in two archaeological fields on the northern hilltop of Shikhin.

In the 2011 survey, waypoint A1.69 marks large architectural fragments in a terrace wall that borders the western edge of an olive grove on the crown of the northern hill. Five column drums (estimated diam. 0.7 m) sit in the western terrace wall; at least one is an upside down column base (0.9 m). Two pieces of carved molding also came from this wall, along with two fragments of Ionic capital. The architectural remains most likely come from a public building that occupied the crown of the hill to the east of A1.69.

The 1988 (USF Excavations at Sepphoris) and 2011 survey teams both located evidence of pottery manufacturing east of the ancient clay pit that is still visible on the northwestern slope of the hill. We decided that we would do our best to locate the kilns during the 2012 excavation season.

Accordingly, we opened up two fields of excavation: Field I at waypoint A1.69, and Field II on the next terrace to the north and around four meters lower in elevation. We placed Field I to catch the building associated with the column fragments. ITM point 225999 – 741527 marks the northwest corner of Area I.1. We located Field II using a gradiometer. ITM point 226079 – 741640 marks the northwest corner of Area II.1. The 5 x 5 meter squares of both fields are part of the same, contiguous archaeological grid that overlies Shikhin and Jebel Qat.

Field I

Field I consisted of seven probes and half-probes laid out over the western terrace wall and extending east and north. We hypothesized that the terrace wall itself could be built on ancient foundations. That turned out not to be the case.

Square I.1 sat over two of the most prominent column fragments visible in the terrace wall, which were the northernmost two. The team excavated a northern 1 x 2 meter half-probe to a depth several centimeters below the top of the upside-down column base and learned that it was founded on dirt. The latest pottery found under the column base was a single sherd dating to the late Byzantine period. We are not confident that we know the founding date of the wall.

The team of Square I.2 to the east of I.1 opened a 1 x 2 meter half-probe in the northern half of the square. They excavated to probe down to quarried bedrock. Some time in the

Byzantine period—probably Byz 1—the area in the eastern part of the square was leveled with rough blocks of stone and earth to form an outdoor courtyard or work surface that probably is associated with the building to the east.

Squares I.3, I.4, and I.5, and I.6, and I.7 uncovered the remains of a building with plastered floors and walls. The building had several rooms and was probably founded in the third or fourth century CE. It most likely went out of use not long after it was built, since the LR period probably marks the last period of the village of Shikhin, even though we find some evidence of activity on the hill in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods. The builders made use of an earlier building (most likely a house) in the east, the southwestern corner of which was located in square I.7, by laying a plaster floor up to its western wall. Square I.7 was not completely excavated, so we can only hypothesize that the eastern building dates to the first century. In any case, it is the earliest structure we found in Field I.

I.3: The team of I.3 excavated the entire square down to quarried and cut bedrock, leaving most of the remains of plaster floors that they uncovered. Wall 3007 was a single course of stones one row wide laid over 3–5 centimeters of soil, to the north of and following a trough cut by quarrying, and running northwest to southeast. The trough is a continuation of the cut bedrock in I.2. The wall contained spoils, including one section of a door jamb. The northern edge of the trough and the southern edge of the wall formed the foundation trench, which yielded four Late Roman sherds and one lamp fragment of the “Northern Stamped” type of the 3rd–4th centuries. **This is the only foundation trench excavated to date in the entire field, so it allows us to give a relative and tentative date for every other contiguous feature in the field.**

Made up to and onto the northern face of Wall 3007 were two sections of plaster floor laid over bedrock, which contained both circular holes and a single carved square hole, indicating that some sort of apparatus once stood there. The two sections of floor might have been contiguous at one time but are now separated by a section of un-plastered bedrock. In the northeastern section of the square we uncovered a second plaster floor above this floor and laid over about 30 cm of cobbles and earth, which placed it at the same height as the top of the stones of Wall 3007. The team sectioned through this upper floor, but the Middle Roman date of the soil under the plaster makes its dating inconclusive. The plaster itself was sterile. There was a slight upturning at the western edge of the upper floor, which suggested that it was once made up to stones that formed a wall or bench perpendicular to Wall 3007.

One feature of the bedrock in this square invites the hypothesis that W3007 was in fact a low bench just inside and against the north face of a wall that is now completely robbed out. Immediately south of W3007 there is a narrow threshold carved into bedrock, measuring around 66 cm wide, which comes out to 2.2 Roman feet, right at half the width of some of the thresholds in the Field V basilical building at Sepphoris, excavated by the USF team.¹ It accommodated a single-leaf door that opened to the north via a hinge in the east. The builders must have founded the wall that it pierced along the uppermost portion of the quarried bedrock. One entered the building from the south and stepped north onto a narrow bench (W3007). Originally, one then stepped down from the bench about 30 cm to a plaster floor. Later, the bench was incorporated into a higher floor laid over the original floor.

I.4: Square I.4 was quite disturbed and the team did not completely excavate it. They also excavated no foundation trenches. One stone of a wall that appears to be the continuation of Wall 3007 extends from the southern part of the west balk. A floor that appears to be a

¹ The southern thresholds of the Field V peristyle at Sepphoris measure 1.20m/4 Roman feet. E-mail correspondence with James F. Strange, 7 November 2012.

continuation of the lower plaster floor of I.3 emerges from the northern part of the west balk and is made up to the southern face of stones of Wall 4013. Wall 4013, therefore, probably also dates to the Late Roman period. This hypothesis is strengthened by the LR date of the soil excavated north of Wall 13, which probably originally lay under a plaster floor that was made up to the wall's northern face. Wall 4013, therefore, served as an interior wall. The threshold in W4013 appears to be made of two pieces from different thresholds. Its interior width is 83.14 cm or 2.8 Roman feet, which seems unusual; if it operated as a threshold in W4013, it held a wide, single-leaf door that opened to the south.

I.5: Square I.5 contained an extension of Wall 4013 and the extension of the plaster floor in the northeastern corner of I.4, badly damaged in I.5 like it was in the eastern part of I.4. I.4 had contained some pottery-rich soil, and the excavation of I.5 showed why. The plaster floor in I.5 probably was originally made up to the western face of the upper course of Wall 5004. The gap between the floor and the wall was first interpreted as a foundation trench, but it became clear that the floor originally met the wall because the deep deposit of fill beneath the floor was made up to the western face of Wall 5004. The team excavated this fill to a depth of over 1.10 m, and it turned out to be one of the most important finds of the season, for it was simply filled with waste from pottery production. The date of most of the pottery buckets from this fill, which was excavated in three loci, was Late Roman, with one Byz 1 sherd in the highest soil locus, which is not a sealed locus because of the missing plaster floor.

As noted, Wall 5004 turned out to be the western wall of an earlier building, which we tentatively identify as a house. The team also uncovered the southern wall (Wall 5005), so we have the southwestern corner of the putative house. We did not reach a foundation trench for either wall, but we did discover that Wall 5004 was founded on cut bedrock. A large stone with chinkers sat at the western, vertically-cut face of the bedrock, which suggests that it blocked the entrance to an underground chamber. The material from the interior of the house dated to the Late Roman period, and that probably dates when the putative house went out of use and the building with plaster floors was constructed to its west and south. The team opened the entire 4 x 4 meters but did not finish excavating the square.

I.6: Square I.6 was also greatly disturbed, perhaps by plowing, and certainly by a tree that had been burnt out—probably an olive tree of the grove in which we were digging. The team opened the southern 1 x 2 meter half-probe and did not completely excavate it. They uncovered the remains of a plaster floor that is probably a continuation of the floors in I.4 and I.5. The floor sat over more than 60 cm of fill. Like I.5, this square yielded much pottery waste, particularly in the northeast. Two lamp molds were also recovered, as was one piece of a potter's wheel, the latter from the fill beneath the floor.

I.7: Like I.3 and I.4, Square I.7 revealed a line of stones running northwest to southeast and built over bedrock (Wall 7003; the Area Supervisor and Associate Director of the dig, David Fiensy, is reluctant to identify this feature as a wall). One stone emerging from the western end of the southern balk is probably the continuation of Wall 4013. Like the walls of Squares I.3 and I.4, however, Wall 7003 is preserved in one course of a single row of stones founded on a few centimeters of soil over worked bedrock. There is no foundation trench for the feature, and we did not excavate under any of its stones. Both soil loci excavated in the square dated to the Late Roman period. One Persian sherd and one silver Persian drachma (found by eye in the sifter!) came from the square, which indicates a presence on top of the hill during the Persian period. A cavity in bedrock and partially obscured by the south balk may be a cistern opening, which indicates that the area was an outdoor space or a courtyard that was covered over by the building.

The team excavated the entire half-probe to bedrock.

Summary of Field I

It is not clear that we uncovered ruins of the large building associated with the large column fragments in the terrace wall. Our working hypothesis is that the western building of Field I served pottery production in some way, perhaps as a storehouse, and that it was built up to the western wall of a pre-existing house. In future seasons we will need to remove some balks and continue excavating I. 4 and I.5, as well as open new squares to the north, east, and south.

Field II

We designated Field II as the result of a gradiometer survey conducted about midway in the dig season. On the terrace immediately north of and one terrace lower than the olive grove of Field I the gradiometer detected a magnetic field higher than the field of the rest of the hill.

II.1: Late in the season we opened a probe over the spot at which we detected the highest reading. The team opened a 1 x 2 meter half probe in the south of II.1 with inconclusive results. They found no evidence of burning or pottery waste. They did uncover part of a plaster floor similar to the floors found in Field I, as well as a corner of an installation formed by standing plaster. The soil over these installations dated to the Late Roman period with a significant number of Persian sherds (12 total).

The Small Finds, Coins, and Pottery

We found three fragments of stone vessels, two in Field I (Square 4) and one in Field II. In I.7 we found what appeared at first to be a sherd inscribed with Hebrew or Aramaic characters, but now we are less sure about that identification. This artifact will require further analysis. The most important find of the 2012 season was the evidence of pottery production in squares I.4, I.5, and I.6. In addition to the pottery production waste, we found fragments of a potter's wheel and kiln floor, and what might be fragments of other parts of the kiln. We found wasters and clinkers of several different forms, including lamps. We also found fragments of lamps that had not been used before being broken, and parts of lamp molds (only parts of bottom sections were found). We will need to begin cataloging wasters and clinkers in future seasons.

COIN PROFILE (preliminary reading)

Persian	Hellenistic	Tyrian 2-1 c. CE	Hasmonean	Jewish Agrippa II?	Procurator Nero/Festus	Late Roman Const. II	Islamic	Unknown
2	1	4	5	1	1	1	1?	2

The coin profile at Shikhin brings up some questions, but one has to bear in mind that any conclusions we reach must be in the form of testable hypotheses. This is because of the few and small excavation fields, the shallow deposition, and the fact that people have mined Shikhin for coins for decades. According to one oral report, robbers have taken simply thousands of coins from the hilltop. If we compare coins to pottery by date, we get the following profile.

COINS AND POTTERY COMPARED

Pottery

	Iron	Persian	Hell 1	Hell 2	Rom 1	Rom 2	Rom 3	Byz1	Byz 2	Isl 1	Isl 2
No.	4	23	15	106	1595	642	451	27	5	3	0
%	0.1	0.8	0.5	3.7	55.6	22.4	15.7	0.9	0.2	0.1	0.0

Coins (preliminary reading)

		Persian	Hell 1	Hell 2	Rom 1	Rom 2	Rom 3	Byz1	Byz 2	Isl 1	Isl 2
No.	0	2	0	10	2	0	1	0	0	1?	0
%	0.0	11.1	0.0	55.6	11.1	0.0	5.6	0.0	0.0	5.6	0.0

The pottery percentages match well with the findings of the two survey seasons. There is a small, perhaps transient presence on the hill during the Late Iron and Persian periods. We see a significant increase in the Late Hellenistic period and a sharp surge in the Early Roman period. The pottery declines in the Middle and Late Roman periods and drops off in the Early Byzantine period. We found very few Late Byzantine sherds. The excavation unearthed the first Islamic pottery found at the site, as well as one coin that might be from the Early Islamic period (it has not yet been cleaned and identified), but there is very little evidence, and we found no indication of activity after the Early Islamic period. This evidence suggests a small, perhaps transient presence on the hill in the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The picture of the chronology of the hill's occupation will no doubt become clearer as we expand the excavation in Fields I and II and as we open more fields on other parts of the hill.

The preponderance of pottery from the excavation (57%) dates to the ER period. Indeed, the Roman periods account for 94% of the pottery collected. By contrast, only three coins date to the Roman periods, whereas ten (57%) coins date to the Late Hellenistic period. If this pattern continues in future seasons, we will need to develop a hypothesis to account for this data.

Conclusion

After a single excavation season, Shikhin is confirming some things already known, but also providing a view of what is in store for us. The excavators are confident that Shikhin will sharpen our understanding of Galilean village life in the Roman period, the categories of Judaism and Hellenism, and ultimately the world in which earliest Christianity and the Judaism of the Talmuds emerged. Accordingly, we plan to return in 2013 to continue excavations in Fields I and II, with the possibility of expanding the excavations to other parts of Shikhin and Jebel Qat.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Appendix: Additional Information

Project Staff

Director: Prof. James Riley Strange, Ph.D., Samford University

Associate Director: Prof. Mordechai Aviam, Ph.D., Kinneret College, and Director, Institute of Galilean Archaeology

Associate Director: David Fiensy, Ph.D., Kentucky Christian University

Zoarchaeologist: Dr. Carole Cope, Ph.D.

Glass Historian: Mrs. Joan Keller, M.A.

Restorator: Mr. Yehoshua Drei

Senior Archaeological Consultant: Prof. James F. Strange, University of South Florida

Ceramics Consultant: Prof. Dennis Groh, Ph.D., Illinois Wesleyan University (retired)

Surveyor: Prof. James Riley Strange

Architects: Profs. James Riley Strange and James F. Strange

Photographer: Prof. James Riley Strange

Registrar: Prof. Beverly Cushman, Ph.D., Westminster College

Camp Manager: Mrs. Carolyn Strange

Area Supervisor: Prof. C. Thomas McCollough, Ph.D., Centre College

Area Supervisor: Prof. David Fiensy, Ph.D.

Area Supervisor: Dr. Constance Groh, Ph.D.

Area Supervisor: Mr. Randy O'Neill

Area Supervisor: Mr. Aaron Carr

Area Supervisor: Ms. Claire Oldfather

Volunteers

David Bayless, Joseph Clark, Kay Clemments, Yotam Fridman, Maggie Johnson, Olivia Leftwich, Michael Leung, Carlos Lugo, Claire Oldfather, Adam Quinn, Laura Snyder, Rachel Smith, Rachel Stivers-Bender

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