MARJ RABBA

Yorke M. Rowan and Morag M. Kersel

Introduction

The 2013 season at Marj Rabba (aka, Har ha-Sha'avi) was intended to be the last at the site. In previous seasons we exposed a large area of architecture, defining several phases of construction indicating variation in site use, delineated site borders through geophysical, pedestrian, and aerial surveys, and recovered a considerable amount of material culture. By the end of the 2013 season, however, we had not reached the bottom of Building 1, the best-preserved structure at the site. We anticipated that the floor levels at the base of Building 1 would be well preserved, due to the quality of the construction, the density of the cobble fill, and the relative depth. In the midst of much regional unrest (the war in Gaza) we returned to Marj Rabba in 2014 for a short, three-week season with a small crew (4 students, 4 staff) in order to concentrate exclusively on finishing Building 1 in Area BB.

Figure 1. Area BB, Building 1 with associated features

2014 Season

The major focus of the short 2014 season was the excavation of the interior of Building 1 (fig. 1). Even with our limited crew size, there was enough labor for targeted excavation around the exterior of Building 1 in order to define better the architectural relationships. This included examining the builders' trenches more completely, removing late walls to reveal earlier phasing, and attempting to clarify connections between Room 1 and other areas.

To the northwest of Building 1 there were late phase walls that had been constructed abutting the corner of Building 1. Previously labeled w914 and w915, these walls, along with the very large and earlier w335B, were at significantly higher elevation and thus later construction than Building 1. Removal of w914 and w915 exposed the northwest corner of Building 1 (partially obscured by w914) and the continuation of the builders' trench. A similar late wall abutting the southwest corner of Building 1 (w304B) was also removed in order to see the construction of Building 1. With the removal of w304B, and the fill levels below, the surprising construction of the southwest corner of Building 1 was revealed (fig. 2). The corner was carefully constructed using clearly selected alternating long limestone blocks (similar to a header bond), unlike the rest of the site.

In previous seasons we observed a smaller builders' trench along the south wall of the Building in H2 (w315B) previously identified as w393B. This very narrow builders' trench was identified by small cobbles clinging close to the lower courses of stone in w315B, clearly disappearing into the east section. Removal of this small rubble builders' trench fill (L418B), revealed a lower continuation of the same construction feature consisting of larger uniform cobbles laid flat along the base of the wall. These stones are not part of wall w315B, but rather were laid right up against it. Probably this is the base of the builders' trench, and these stones

Figure 2. Southwest corner of Building 1, corner of walls w904 and w315/368

are part of the construction of the foundation. A probe, opened at the end of the season along the eastern edge of H2 (excavated as L.434B) revealed no lower course of the foundation.

Because the final excavation levels of 2013 in square G2 were higher than the final excavation levels in H2, the lowest courses of the well-constructed SW corner of Building 1 was not visible. With limited field time, we could not excavate all of G2 down to the same level as H2. Instead, we opened a probe around the corner of the building (intersection of walls w904 and w315). This probe (L.428B) had two goals: first, to expose the entire corner down to the base of the construction and second, to provide a section view of both builders' trenches (along w904 and along w315). Although locus 326B (the builders' trench) clearly cut earlier architecture and coincided well with the construction of the wall, finding a shared bottom to both the rubble fill in L.326B and the bottom of the wall would bolster our interpretation of this feature as a builders' trench. Indeed, as we removed the cobble fill of L.326B, we found that the nice header bond construction of the corner gave way to more haphazard construction, fitting well with an interpretation of these lower courses as subsurface foundations. The end of the dense cobble fill at the bottom of L.326B did indeed coincide with the last course of w904, lending credence to the interpretation as a builders' trench.

At the end of 2013, the main room in Building 1 (room 4), was still covered by dense cobble fill (L.391b) that was very difficult to excavate. In the southwest corner of the room there was a round feature with a central standing stone (L.392B) and a small square feature was just beginning to emerge (fig. 3; L.398/422B, including w400b, w401b, and w402b). The primary goal for 2014 was to get below the dense cobble and expose a floor level in Building 1. Early in the season we hit the beginning of a change in the southern half of the room, demarcated by a significant decrease in cobble fill and the emergence of large patches of

Figure 3. Small square feature, L.398B/422B

phytolith rich, whitish material with a very clearly defined upper and lower surface. We initially interpreted these patches as a disturbed floor level that might have been damaged by the collapse of the building. However, this "floor" was very patchy and immediately below it was flat lying pottery in several clusters. We now believe that the initial patchy phytolith rich material is, instead, the remains of the collapse of a mud-lined roof (fig. 4). Patches of this material were inverted, supporting interpretation of roof collapse rather than a disturbed floor. Below the collapsed roof was flat lying pottery; this is the beginning of the actual floor below the collapsed roof. Eventually this floor was identified in almost the entirety of Room 4.

The nicely preserved floor level included the articulated portions of at least four nearly complete vessels. Two large pithoi type vessels were lying in the center (B.6696) and north east of the room (B.6697). One large storage vessel seemed to have been set into the floor (L.431B) and may have had a small intentionally constructed stone lined pit to support it. A smaller storage vessel was found sunk into the western central area of the room (B.6721). Very few tools were found on or near the floor level, with the exception of a slingstone (ballista) found near the southern door to Room 1 (B.6728). However, there was an odd collection of material on the floor that may reflect something about the function of the room. A large concentration of burnt gazelle phalanges was identified sitting just on or above the L.417B floor level, mostly in the northeast corner of the room, under "feature" L.429B (fig. 5). Gazelle bones have been identified in small numbers in other seasons and other areas of the site, but this clustering of gazelle bones is notable for several reasons. First, these bones are all burned in or near a fire. All are charred to some degree, and some have been calcined by direct exposure to fire. This is significantly more burning than is found on other bones at the site, which may have a burning rate below 10%. Second, there are very few total bones

Figure 4. Close-up photograph of possible roof material on floor in Building 1 (photo: A. C. Hill)

Figure 5. Burned gazelle phalanges on the floor level (L.417B) of Building 1 (photo: A. C. Hill)

from these levels, so the relative abundance and total number of gazelle bones is exceptional. For the rest of the site the relative percentage of gazelle bones is only a few percent. For locus 417B it is likely well into the double digits. The total number of gazelle bones identified from thousands of identified bones from previous seasons was 44. There are nearly 100 identifiable gazelle bones from this limited area of L.417B, more than double the rest of the site combined. Finally, there are a few other gazelle parts from L.417B and adjacent loci, primarily metapodia, but the vast majority of gazelle bones in L.417b consist of phalanges and sesamoids. That is, feet are massively over represented in this context. Many of these bones were found in the screen, but at least a few were exposed in situ and in one case there was a nearly complete articulated foot. All of the above suggests that gazelle feet are not ending up on this surface as part of the general palimpsest accumulation of animal remains found elsewhere on site. Like the *bos* (cow) pit found in Area CC, this concentration of a specific species and body part region must represent a specific short-term activity in Room 4 that is not occurring elsewhere. Unfortunately, the behavior represented by this material is less clear than the accumulation of meat rich parts in the *bos* pit from Area CC. In the absence of other data, this seems likely to represent some kind of ritual accumulation.

With a small crew and limited field time, we were not able to excavate the entirety of Room 4 below the level of floor L.417B. The lowest levels of Room 1 (see below) suggested that there should be at least one more floor level in Room 4. To test this, we opened a 1 × 1 meter probe in the southeast corner of H1, abutting both w368B and the east section. The goal of this probe was to expose the lowest course of w368B and find the earliest floor level. After the removal of the packed earth floor of 417B, we came to an intermediate fill level (L.433B). This fill level was notable for containing significantly more human remains than anywhere else

Figure 6. Partially articulated human feet found in probe (photo: A. C. Hill)

at the site. Initially we found a completely articulated pair of human feet (fig. 6) that seemed like they would disappear into the north section of the probe. This would have represented the first human burial discovered at the site. However, they were found not be articulated with a complete skeleton. In fact the left foot did not appear to have articulated metatarsals and phalanges. Instead, these are two feet that were buried before decomposition; either these were removed from the body or the whole individual was initially buried but the rest of the body was later dug up and removed for secondary burial. Additionally, there were several further portions of human in this small probe that were not articulated with these feet and are likely to derive from other individuals. This includes several phalanges and rib fragments. One set of three rib fragments may have also been articulated and represent another body that was dug up for secondary burial with some elements being left behind. We continued down in the probe in H1 to a lower floor level that contained a plastered cup mark (L.436B) similar to those found in areas AA and CC. This lower floor level is at the same elevation as the bottom of the walls outside of the building (probes in H2 and G2) and the lowest floor in Room 1 (see below). It is likely that this represents the earliest use of room 4 and that if any lower anthropogenic layers exist, they would have been the layers predating the construction of the building.

Other Features in Room 4

As mentioned above, we identified an odd small square feature (fig. 3) in the northwest corner of room 4 at the end of 2013 (L.398B, consisting of walls w400b, 401b, 402b). The interior of this feature was further excavated as L.422B, but there was no clear floor surface, and

the "walls" were only standing a single course above the floor. The function of this feature remains unclear. The square feature L.422B mentioned above is abutting the small cell previously excavated in 2013 as L.390B. This feature is interesting for several reasons. First, it is built against a nicely blocked door (door 1) that was intentionally blocked around the earliest use of the building. Subsequently it was built into the small niche formed by the blocked door, the northern wall of Building 1 (w925B) and a small stub wall (w357B). When first defined, it seemed possible that this was some sort of raised platform sitting above the floor in the main room of the building (room 4) for two reasons. First, dense small cobble fill lined the interior. Second, the "retaining wall" creating this feature (w358B) had a nicely finished face on the exterior (into the main room) but a poorly constructed interior face. However, a mace-head (B.6457) was found inside, located near the conjunction of the blocked door, and continued excavation (L.427B) revealed flat lying pottery at a level coinciding with the base of the walls and the floor levels in room 4 (L.417B). Thus this feature may have been a storage area of some variety, rather than a platform.

Room 1

Although Doorway 1 was closed between Room 1 and Room 4 at some early stage of use, the second, Doorway 2 was closed later in the use of the building, probably coinciding with the late addition of walls w304B and w914B. Blocked with larger wall-sized stones at the highest preserved course, below that course the blockage was indiscriminate, relying on medium cobbles similar to that found everywhere else in Building 1. This late blockage was removed and the doorway excavated (L.420B) to the early floor levels. After the doorway was open, a threshold between Room 4 and Room 1 (L.425B) was exposed. During previous seasons, we attempted to expose floor levels in Room 1 despite the dense cobble collapse, similar to that of Room 4. One fragment of a later floor level (L.404B) was encountered in 2013, well above the lowest courses of stone in the walls. That later floor level, occurring somewhere between the initial construction of the building and the late blockage of Doorway 2 and late wall reuse, probably also goes with the two small platforms in the north corners of the room (L.387B and L.388B). This intermediate floor was found only in one small paved patch in the center of the room, along with some flat lying pottery, and some ashy lenses. Dense cobble fill interspersed with the floor level material continued throughout the middle of the room at this level. At the beginning of the 2014 season the remnants of that late floor were removed along with the two platforms (L.413B, L.416B). Excavation of the entire room (minus a small probe in the south from 2013) continued below the floor as L.425B. This locus continued for several centimeters of fill down to the surface of the earliest preserved floor in Room 1 which was not well preserved, sloped from north to south with the first course of construction, and contained only small quantities of flat lying pottery.

This lowest preserved floor in Room 1 (L.425B) was not the earliest anthropogenic level in Room 1. In the northern half of Room 1, the earliest floor level was sitting on sterile clay-rich soil. In the southern half, however, anthropogenic deposits continued below the base of the walls. These anthropogenic deposits had clearly defined margins that did not relate to the extant architecture of Building 1. Since we know that the construction of Building 1 cut down into earlier phasing, as seen by the builders' trench, it is unsurprising to find disturbed earlier contexts sitting immediately below the earliest floor levels in some places. Additionally, in the northeast corner of the room, below the last floor level was the bottom of an earlier pit (L.430B) cutting into the sterile soil levels. Only the very bottom of this rubble

filled pit was preserved as it was also cut by the construction of Building 1. Charred botanical remains may allow dating of this earliest level of the site.

Discussion

The goals of the 2014 Marj Rabba excavation season were modest and our crew was small. We knew that we had not reached the bottom of Building 1, so our primary goal was finding intact floor levels, identifying the earliest levels of the building, and recovering datable material at those levels. Unlike in previous seasons and areas, there were no complex stratigraphic relationships to decipher. Almost all loci excavated this season related to Building 1, with the exception of some earlier phases at the bottom of Room 1. One interesting outcome of the 2014 season in Building 1 is the potential evidence for ritual practices in this area of the site, which might testify to differential use of Building 1 versus other buildings. Although a few random human remains (several phalanges and a mandible) were found in different areas of the site during past seasons of excavation, Building 1 had the only articulated remains, and significantly more total human bones than the rest of the site combined. The fact that we only dug a subfloor locus inside of Room 4 in a small 1 × 1 m probe, but still found so much human material suggests that the subfloor in the rest of the room would likely have yielded significantly more remains. This higher density of human remains, along with the evidence for intentional retention of low utility, wild animal remains (gazelle feet) suggest that there is something going on in Building 1 out of the ordinary for the rest of the site. Additionally, the evidence for burial practices from this room that suggests complete individuals may have been buried and then dug back up may tie Marj Rabba to the regional burial customs we know of from secondary burial sites like Peqi'in.

Although there is much that could be explored further with continued excavation at Marj Rabba, the conclusion of the 2014 season is a very good stopping point for the current excavation. We have uncovered a significant portion of extant architecture, across 362.5 square meters, recovered a significant material cultural assemblage of stone tools, pottery, animal bone, bone tools, etc., and intensively surveyed the unexcavated extent of the site. Answering additional questions about architectural and social differentiation across the site and between phases would require significant additional investment in time, as well as access to excavation permission for other areas of the site.

Har ha-Sha'avi (West): Conservation and Re-burial of Site

After the sixth and final season of excavations at Har ha-Sha'avi (west), the decision was made to cover up the excavated areas of the site. In past seasons, the opened excavation areas in the west area (among the trees, in the large stone mound) and Area DD (a single 5 × 5 m square) were re-filled at the end of the season.

With completion of drawing, photography, and notes, a local labor force was hired, who filled sand bags with the sieved sediment from the site. The filled sand bags were used to support the tops and sides of walls, particularly those preserved at more than a single course (fig. 7). Some walls were also covered with the finer sediment using the work force, particularly walls that were deemed most delicate. In addition, body sherds, which had been collected for all six seasons, were returned to square B1 (excavated, but without architecture), and reburied during the process described below. After the walls were supported, and the fencing and barbed wire were removed, a JCB loader was hired. The JCB operator has worked for the

Figure 7. Sandbagged walls and features prior to reburial of the site

Israel Antiquities Authority, and thus was very experienced and knowledgeable about the steps necessary. First, the fine sediment from sieving, which lacks rocks, was used to pour around the walls and cover the smaller features. This minimized damage to the architectural features as they were covered. Next, the JCB operator removed piles of rock that collected on tops of the back dirt piles. In this way, the less rocky back dirt was used to fill in the spaces between the walls. Finally, the JCB operator pushed the remaining back dirt across the site in order to level the field.