

MARJ RABBA

Yorke M. Rowan

Our knowledge of life in the Galilee during the Chalcolithic period (ca. 4500–3600 BC), in contrast with that of regions such as the Negev, Golan, or Jordan Valley, is limited. The new research initiative launched by the Oriental Institute to explore the late prehistoric landscape of the Galilee is designed to examine the changing relationship of villages, ritual sites, and mortuary practices during this poorly understood time.

In the southern Levant, the late fifth to early fourth millennium BC (in this region, the Chalcolithic period, or the “Ghassulian” after the type site of Teleilat Ghassul) receives considerably less scholarly attention than does the Neolithic period or the later biblical ages. Not long after the fundamental changes of the “Neolithic Revolution,” another transformation took place with ramifications that continue to the present day. Up until the development of pottery during the Late Neolithic and, later, copper smelting during the Chalcolithic, the essential items of life were made by reducing materials such as antler, bone, stone, and wood through carving, striking, pounding, and drilling. The alteration of matter such as clay and metallic ores from one state to another was a profound technological shift that wrought fundamental changes in society beyond simple improvements in efficiency. Before ceramic vessels were introduced, containers of wood and basketry existed. And as important as early smelted metals may have been, metal axes did not replace their flint equivalents, suggesting that the impact as a technological improvement was minimal. In contrast, the rarity and difficulty of producing copper items probably created a value that conferred prestige to those who possessed them.

At about the same time that smelted copper (and gold) first appears in the southern Levant, other fundamental changes provide evidence for new forms of political leadership, ritual centers, possible regional centers, and community cemeteries where novel mortuary practices indicate new perceptions of social identity. Distinctive Chalcolithic material culture includes not only various copper items (axes, awls, mace-heads, scepters, and “crowns”), but also diverse pottery forms made on a slow wheel; schematic “V-shaped” figurines, palettes, mace-heads, and pendants made of exotic rock; and long-distance materials such as shell, obsidian, and ivory. Despite their relative rarity, the increasing investment in such exotic items hints at an important shift in social relations and identity.

Most of this information derives from excavations of Chalcolithic sites located in the Negev, the Jordan Valley, or burial sites located along the Mediterranean coastal plain and low piedmont foothills. Yet in contrast, Chalcolithic settlements in the Golan offer very little evidence for metals or other exotic goods, suggesting different trajectories of change. In the region of the Upper and Lower Galilee, stretching from the Sea of Galilee to the Mediterranean, our limited knowledge of the period is based on preliminary reports of salvage excavations. With one important exception, these are small exposures of settlement sites that provide us with important glimpses of the material culture, but little else.

An important exception is the mortuary site of Peqi’in, a rich burial cave accidentally discovered during roadwork. Hundreds of secondary burials found along with elaborately decorated ossuaries (ceramic or stone boxes for human bones), pottery from different regions, and exotic items of ivory, copper, and basalt attest to the intensive use of this karstic cave. Burial of the dead is much more elaborate during the Chalcolithic than during preceding periods, and the secondary burial of selected skeletal elements (typically long bones and crania) in a new location is well

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known. At Peqi'in, however, ossuary decoration includes a range of modeled heads, beards, headgear, arms, and teeth, more complex and elaborate than any previously discovered, establishing a level of sophistication in the treatment of the dead previously unrecognized. Finds at Peqi'in indicate connections both local and distant. Were those who interred their loved ones here from the immediate region, or did they come from more distant areas? Given the dearth of excavated sites in the region, this question is difficult to answer and is just one of the many perplexing questions we hope to address through a multi-sited, multi-year investigation of the region.

In the summer of 2009, the first phase of this new investigation was launched at the previously unknown and unnamed site of Marj Rabba (Har ha-Sha'avi, west) in order to study the late fifth- to early fourth-millennium BC changes that occurred after the Neolithic period and prior to the appearance of walled towns and urbanism of the Bronze Age. Our goal is to examine material culture in the Galilee for comparison with other areas of the southern Levant in order to better understand the intra-regional and inter-regional connections of the inhabitants, and to obtain samples for botanical and faunal analyses that will allow interpretations of Galilean subsistence and economy during the Chalcolithic. In addition, no radiometric dates are available from a Chalcolithic settlement site in the Galilee, so we hope to obtain dates that will provide linkage to other regional chronological sequences.

With a small team of students, volunteers, and workers from the nearby town of Sakhnin, excavations at Marj Rabba were conducted from July 6 to August 5, 2009. The site, located about 1 km north of the Roman site of Yodfat, is situated on a saddle between two high points. No architecture was apparent on the site surface, but Chalcolithic material culture predominates, along with an occasional Roman sherd.

Two areas were selected for excavation (see fig. 1). The West Area, located in the forest planted by the Jewish National Fund, was selected to explore one of several large rock piles (cairns). In previous site visits, three or four cairns were identified; Chalcolithic pottery and occasional Roman/Byzantine sherds were found mixed in with the small limestone cobbles of the cairns. The cairn selected for test excavations had a north–south, double-row stone wall visible on the surface, with a possible perpendicular wall forming a corner on the north aspect. This is discussed below under “West Area.”

The East Area, located in a strip of unplanted field, starts to the east of a high power line and continues to the east. This area was selected for initial examination because the land is not privately owned, the area was not plowed recently, and there are no olive trees. The extent of the site remains undetermined and will be more carefully surveyed during the 2011 field season.

East Area

Three and one half squares measuring 5×5 m were opened in the East Area. Squares C1 and D1 were separated by a 1-meter baulk, while square L1 is located 35 m to the east of square D1. In addition, the northern half of square D2 was excavated. Excavation in these areas recovered some modern debris and late Roman or Byzantine sherds in the highly compacted and disturbed upper layer, but below this, only Chalcolithic flint, pottery, and ground-stone finds are found.

Topsoil removal in square C1 quickly exposed large stones that proved to be part of wall foundations. This first wall (L.7) runs east–west in the northern section of the square, consists of large boulders and medium-sized fieldstones, and forms a corner with a north–south wall (L.6). A spindle whorl (B.012) was found while exposing wall L.6. In square D1, additional stone wall foundations continue the east–west line of wall L.7. The western area of the square recovered extremely large amounts of pottery, virtually all Chalcolithic; east of the center of the square,

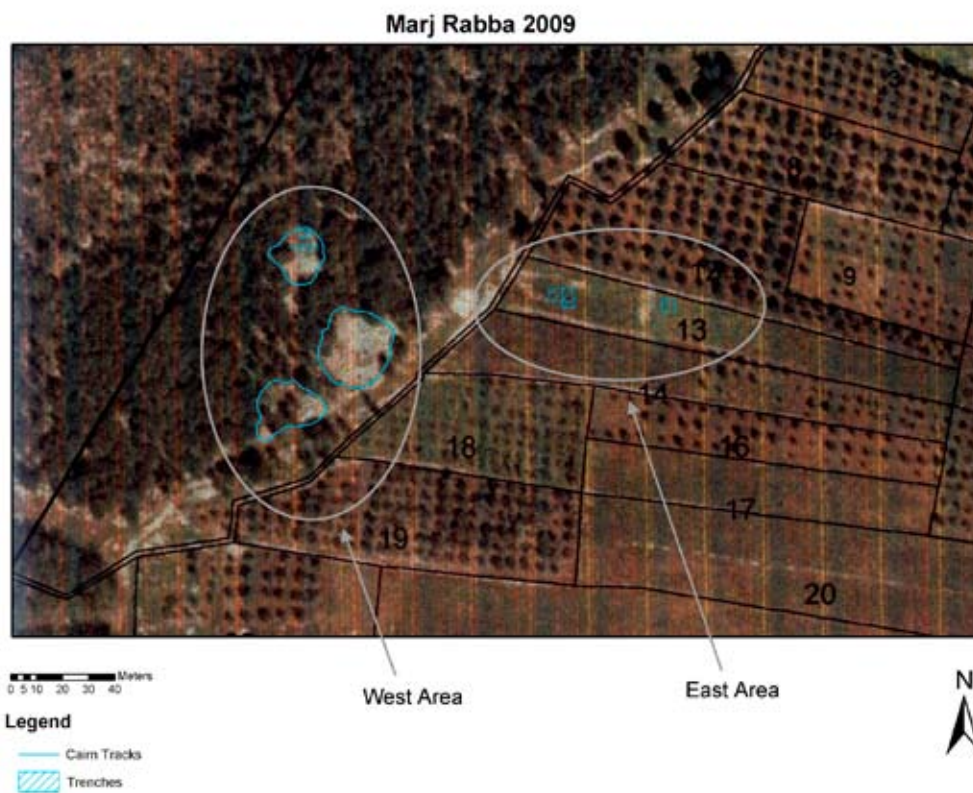


Figure 1. Aerial view of areas at Marj Rabba

another spindle whorl (B.041) was found. The northern half of square D2 was opened (L.14) in order to understand whether large stones exposed in the southern part of D1 are part of an installation, and in the southwest corner of D2, a paved area was constructed using flat mid-sized limestone cobbles (L.27; see fig. 2).

In squares D1 and D2, a curvilinear line of tightly packed smaller fieldstones (L.23) is bordered by a clear line of larger fieldstones (10–20 cm along the southwestern edge, 20–40 cm along the northern edge) extending to 1.7 m to the west from the eastern baulk (fig. 2). Near the eastern baulk of square D1, a fragment of a very large perforated flint disc (fig. 3; L.20, B.058) was recovered on top of the semi-circular feature; bifacially flaked to only 8 mm thick (maximum), the original was probably at least 15 cm long. In the continued exposure of the semi-circular feature (L.23), the fragment of a finely carved bone pendant (B.074), a bead, and a spindle whorl (B.073) were recovered. The large semi-circular feature (L.23; fig. 1) runs along the eastern baulk of squares D1–D2 4.10 m. The northern aspect appears to abut the southern face of wall L.7. Additional excavation of this feature during the 2010 field season, we hope, will determine if there is greater depth to the feature and whether it is circular.

In addition to this semi-circular stone feature, a number of other features were exposed at the interface just below topsoil. Along the southern edge of wall L.7, a small (ca. 68 × 90 cm), shallow (ca. 25 cm) pit probably postdates the wall. Along the western section of square D1, a small (ca. 1.0 m diameter), circular stone installation continues into the baulk. In the center of southern D1 and northern D2, a single course, roughly oval-shaped stone feature (L.26) was oriented

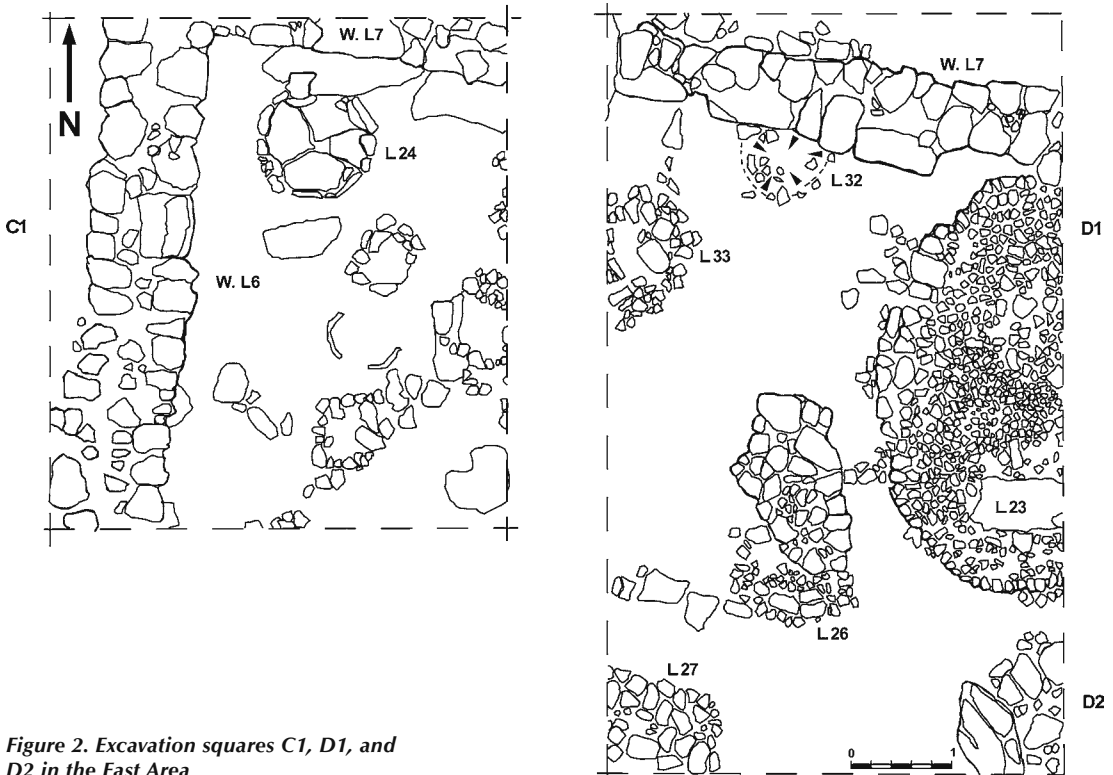


Figure 2. Excavation squares C1, D1, and D2 in the East Area

roughly north–south (1.8 m north–south; 1.0 m east–west). The eastern edge of the feature is well defined by six angular fieldstones, while the other edges of the feature are less definitive. We remain uncertain if we exposed the base of the feature at season’s end and will continue to excavate it during the 2010 season.

Probably contemporaneous with L.26, a paved area (L.27) in the southwestern part of square D2 consisted of a single layer of flat limestone cobbles, which continues into the unexcavated area. Both this paved section (L.27) and the central feature (L.26) may be later than the stone arc feature (L.23); both appear to be only single-course features very near to the ground surface, while the bottom of L.23 is not yet exposed and may have greater depth. Addressing this problem will be of primary importance for the 2010 excavations. For the present, we assume that all are contemporaneous with walls L.7 and L.6.

An elliptical limestone slab-lined pit (L.24; see fig. 2) in square C1 measured 1.17 m (north–south) by 1.03 m (east–west) and was approximately 0.45 m in depth. The interior bottom of the pit was paved using four flat limestone slabs (top: 468.82; bottom: 468.54 above mean sea level). Stones used for the wall lining were between 10 and 36 cm and ranged from 3 to 15 cm in thickness, with small fieldstones wedged in between the larger slabs. The feature may have functioned as a silo; bags of sediment were kept for flotation. Although few artifacts were found inside the feature, at the top, a broken basalt grinding slab or handstone was found. The most completely preserved feature, this pit or silo is apparently built against the bedrock on which wall L.6 rests. Just to the south of it, a large flat limestone slab possibly served as a working surface. Farther to the southeast, in square C1, a feature appears to be the remains of a built surface, or possible hardened layer for a working surface L.26. The feature consisted of flat limestone slabs (ca. 15–20 cm) tightly packed together and lying flat (ca. north–south, 75 cm × east–west 60 cm). On top of



Figure 3. Perforated flint disc.
Scale 1:2

these stones, a very hard layer was constructed by pouring on a mudbrick-like material. Although it does not appear fired or even heat treated, the similarity to plaster is strong. The edges of this feature appear to be largely defined by rodent intrusions.

Summarizing the excavations in square C1, features L.24, L.25, L.30, and L.31 all appear to be contemporaneous. Based on the use of the bedrock for the construction of L.24, and the construction of wall L.7 on the bedrock, this suggests that these features were used at the same time as the structure defined by walls L.7 and L.6. Further excavation will be necessary in order to determine if additional surfaces or features predate these features. However, it seems clear that at least some of the features in squares D1–D2 must be later uses of the area (e.g., L.27, L.26).

Square L.1 (5 × 5 m) was located 35 m to the east of square D1 and opened in order to understand the depth and stratigraphic development of the site. A large amount of rock tumble was visible across the square below the topsoil. In the northeastern corner of the square, wall L.12 runs to the southwest. Constructed of a double row of stones, in a single spot, three courses remain. The wall is well built and abuts a later addition of a single row of stones (L.34)

forming a curvilinear formation that runs into the southern baulk. L.34 was approximately 2.0 m in length and 0.50 m wide and appears to be a later addition to and reuse of wall L.12. To the north in the center of the square, a curvilinear wall fragment (L.5) consists of about seven stones and may have been the northern continuation of the structure. Bottom elevations of these two wall fragments are very similar (L.34, 468.08/ 10; L.5, 468.07/ 13 above mean sea level). In the center of the two curvilinear features (L.12, L.34), a cluster of stones (L.10) may have been a destroyed wall fragment or wall collapse. Abutting the western face of wall L.12, four carefully placed flat stones (L.35) remained in situ, where they were either the last traces of a paving, or, more likely, the remains of an interior bench. These extended 90 cm along the wall, to a width of 35 cm.

Below the stone line in the center of the square, an additional wall (L.18) running east–west was discovered. This wall, preserved as a single row (ca. 1.7 m long × 0.60 m wide) but three courses (at least), runs under wall L.12. By the end of the season, we remain uncertain whether the lowest course of the wall is exposed.

In the northern section of the square, a wall (L.22) was exposed in the northern profile running east–west to nearly 3 m, apparently parallel to wall L.18. Similar elevations would suggest that they are contemporaneous. Both walls will need further excavation, which necessitates opening a square to the north for wall L.22, in order to clarify their purpose and relationship to each other and the presumably later wall L.12.

At least three phases were exposed in square L.1. The single-row walls, L.34 and L.5, represent the latest phase with preserved architecture. The cluster of stones removed from the center of the square in L.10 may also belong to this phase. Below this phase, the more substantial well-built wall foundation L.12 and the associated “bench” feature (L.35) appear to be earlier and possibly reused by the later walls (L.34 and L.5). The earliest phase seems to be represented by the

parallel walls L.18 and L.22. We have no exposed bedrock yet, so presumably the site continues below the foundations of these two walls.

West Area

In the area designated as Marj Rabba West (a series of three rock piles – cairns), two trenches were placed on cairn 1 (see fig. 1). Trenches 1 and 2 were placed adjacent to or straddling a north–south wall (designated L.501) visible on the surface of the cairn.

Trench 1

Two separate units were oriented perpendicular to the wall thus straddling the east and west faces of the wall (fig. 4). A 2×10 m trench was laid out, with one unit (2×3 m) to the east of the wall (L.500) and another (2×7 m) to the west of the wall (L.503) at the highest point of the cairn. Late Roman/Early Byzantine sherds were visible as well as flint and some fragments of basalt ground stone. Removal of the top layer of stone began on both sides of the wall (L.501). L.500 was assigned to the “topsoil” (a misnomer to describe the matrix because the matrix comprises mainly small stones and a minimal amount of sediment, about 5 percent) on the eastern side of the wall and L.503 on the western side of the wall. Very few finds were discovered at this level: modern metal was noted in L.500 to the east of the wall, and a basalt fragment and a Chalcolithic sickle blade were recovered from L.503 to the west of the wall. One piece of Chalcolithic pottery also was found at approximately the same elevation in southeast area, close to wall L.501.

On the east side of wall L.501, L.502 was assigned to the next stratigraphic change — which consisted of larger rocks and less soil. To the west of the wall, the stratigraphic change below the surface contained more dirt and fewer rocks (L.504). As work progressed it became evident that L.504 was the matrix sitting directly above the bedrock. Very few artifacts were found; a few lithics and three pieces of Chalcolithic pottery were recovered from the fill (L.504) directly above bedrock. A decision was made to excavate the remaining extent of the trench to the west in order to cover the entire east–west expanse of the cairn. The area was taken down in order to expose the entire cross section of the cairn and was assigned L.506 (same as L.503, approximately 85 percent rocks and the remainder soil).

East of wall L.501, a new layer with more earth and fewer rocks was noted below L.502 and designated L.505 (but rocks continue to constitute approximately 50 percent of the total matrix). Very few artifacts were recovered from this locus — a small number of chipped flint items and some very friable Chalcolithic pottery and a couple of late-era sherds were recovered. A Chalcolithic basalt fragment was recovered in this locus (505). This side of the wall L.501 is completely different from the east side (L.505). On the east side, the bedrock is underneath a hard-packed clay-rich sediment with pottery and flint. There were fewer rocks. In general there was a higher concentration of lithics in east side of wall L.501, while most of the pottery was recovered from the west side of locus, adjacent to wall L.501.

Trench 2

A second trench (3×4 m) was placed at the end of the northern end of wall L.501 in order to investigate a possible wall (L.511) running perpendicular (east–west) to the western face of wall L.501. The locus excavated across the top layer of T2 was assigned L.508, where three basalt fragments were recovered. Shortly after excavation started, bedrock began appearing at the bottom of this trench and indicated that this wall (L.511) rests directly on bedrock. T2 was expanded 1.0 m north in order to expose the corner of wall L.501 and wall L.511. Continued work in T2 on

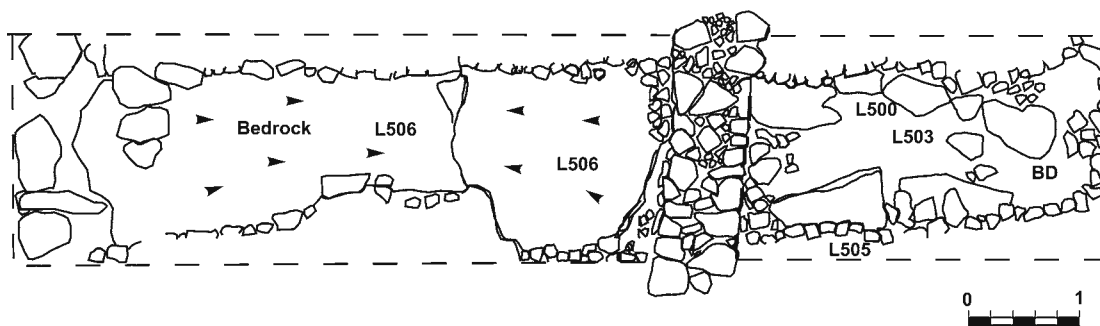


Figure 4. Trench 1, excavation unit in the West Area

the north side of the wall L.511 and in the corner where wall L.511 and wall L.501 meet exposed bedrock on the north side of wall L.511.

Walls L.511 and L.501

Wall L.511, which runs east–west and abuts the western face of wall L.501, is constructed of larger limestone blocks sitting directly on bedrock. The immediate corner of L.501 and L.511 also appears to sit on bedrock, but as wall L.501 progresses southward (toward T1), smaller stones and sediment are sandwiched between the bottom of the wall and bedrock.

Dating of the walls and their function remain obscure. Very few finds associated with the walls were recovered, making the determination of age difficult. Various visitors to the site posited differing opinions as to the date ranging from Hellenistic to Chalcolithic. The only sherds recovered were late Roman/Byzantine and Chalcolithic, while the basalt and flint artifacts all date to the Chalcolithic. A few faunal remains (in very poor condition) were recovered. The wall and the cairn remain enigmatic, and although the material culture remains allow a tentative Chalcolithic designation, the function is far from understood. With greater resources, more extensive excavations may be attempted in order to understand better the relationship between Areas East and West (if a relationship exists), to date the cairns, and to understand their function.

Conclusions and Plans for Future Research

The first field season at Marj Rabba confirmed the great potential of this site for investigations of the Galilee during the Chalcolithic period. The site, probably a small village with inhabitants who relied on crops such as wheat and possibly olive, as well as animal husbandry of goats, cows, and pigs, promises to establish the baseline for understanding the material culture of the Chalcolithic period in the Galilee. Our preliminary work demonstrates that preservation of architecture is good; material culture such as basalt and ceramic vessels, flint tools, and ground stone will also provide comparative analyses to complement the faunal study. At the same time, we may face tough problems, such as poor preservation of plant remains. Establishing absolute dates is an essential component of linking this village to the larger corpus of fifth- to early fourth-millennium sites in the southern Levant and is just one of the challenges we will face in future excavations.

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