

TELL YAQUSH

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The Early Bronze Age site of Tell Yaqush, Israel, is located in the upper Jordan valley just west of the Jordan River, across from the Early Bronze site of Tell esh-Shuneh (North) on the east bank of the Jordan. Yaqush lies near a major ford across the Jordan, at an ancient crossroads of trade and communication. The exceptional preservation of small finds and complete architectural units and floors spanning the Early Bronze I, II, and III (ca. 3500–2200 BC) makes it an essential site for understanding the cultural development of the region in this earliest “urban” period, both in terms of larger social and economic processes that affected the entire Near East and on the local level. The Early Bronze village at Yaqush was ca. 2.5 hectares (6 acres) in size at its maximum extent, in contrast to the much larger (ca. 20-hectare/50-acre) Early Bronze city of Beth Yerah (Khirbet Kerak) 10 kilometers to the north, providing a key comparative point to larger Early Bronze Age urban sites in the region.

Excavations at Yaqush were initiated by the late Douglas Esse, who specialized in the archaeology of Early Bronze Age Palestine and who directed substantial excavation seasons at the site in 1989 and 1991 on behalf of the Oriental Institute. The project was then interrupted by Esse’s tragic illness and death. David Schloen, Esse’s successor at the University of Chicago, directed a small four-week exploratory excavation in 1995 and a six-week, large-scale excavation season in 2000 in order to continue Esse’s project, but David’s own fieldwork focuses on other sites and on later periods. The Yaqush project therefore did not achieve the scale and duration initially planned by Esse. The four seasons of investigation at the site, however, yielded a large corpus of valuable and well-excavated material dating to the Early Bronze I, II, and III. This material and related field notes, plans, photographs, and drawings are now entrusted to Yorke Rowan, who has primary responsibility for the publication of a final report volume on the Oriental Institute’s excavations at Tell Yaqush.

In 2012, Yorke received a publication grant from the Shelby White and Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications for Tell Yaqush, which was renewed for a second year. Unlike many “legacy” excavations, the careful attention in the field to systematic recording, maximal retrieval methods, and comprehensive retention of finds by the teams put together by Esse and Schloen will facilitate the final publication. Although substantial effort is still needed to analyze and write up most categories of material culture, considerable progress has been made on various aspects of the publication. Final plans are already prepared. Much of the Early Bronze II and III pottery is illustrated and digitized, and other artifact illustrations are completed, including drawings of special finds and some flint tools. A fifty-page written summary of excavations on the summit and eastern mid-slope has been completed by Egon Lass (who participated in Esse’s excavations in 1989 and 1991), summarizing the excavated contexts and their stratigraphic relationships. This will provide the basis of the chapter on stratigraphy in the final report volume.

During his National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship at the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research [AIAR] in Jerusalem, Yorke began coordinating and working with scholars on the material, now housed in a shipping container on the AIAR campus. A few years ago, all the excavated material was moved to this shipping container and dissolv-

ing bags, boxes, and labels replaced and organized on shelves. During the academic year, study of material was initiated. The Early Bronze (I) ceramics were studied by Yael Rotem, a PhD student at Tel Aviv University specializing in the Early Bronze Age, particularly in the Jordan valley. Approximately half of the botanical samples were shipped to the University of Connecticut for identification and analysis by Dr. Phil Graham and his students. A portion of the faunal remains were studied by Dr. Austin “Chad” Hill (Christian-Albrechts University, Kiel); the remainder will be studied in the United States. In addition, the ground stone and many small finds were studied by Yorke with the assistance of his intern, Blair Heidkamp (Wooster College).

These are the first steps to complete the remaining analyses and illustrations needed to produce a final publication, tentatively entitled “Tell Yaqush: Excavations of an Early Bronze Age Village in the Jordan Valley (1989–2000),” to be published in the Oriental Institute Publications series of the University of Chicago and edited by Yorke and David Schloen. In the years since excavations were conducted at Yaqush, a number of related sites have been published and a great deal of information about the Early Bronze Age has become available, to which the Yaqush results must now be added in order to complete the picture. A high-quality final publication will become an essential reference point for those interested in the southern Levantine developments during the Early Bronze Age. The publication of this well-preserved Early Bronze community will inject fresh data into the debate concerning how best to understand urbanism in the context of the southern Levant.
