Tell Yaqush

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The first season of excavations at Tell Yaqush, Israel, began on May 1, 1989. Sponsored by the Oriental Institute, the excavations at Yaqush are carried out in the context of previous Oriental Institute projects in the Jordan Valley.

The activity of the Oriental Institute in the Jordan Valley stretches back to 1951, when Pinḥas Delougaz and Richard Haines excavated a Byzantine church at the site of Khirbet Kerak (ancient Beth Yeraḥ), located on the shores of the Sea of Galilee ten kilometers north of Yaqush. During that season, Delougaz excavated a trial trench through the edge of the mound just east of the church and discovered Early Bronze (EB) Age remains. In 1963 and 1964 the Institute conducted excavations concentrating on the Early Bronze remains at Khirbet Kerak, one of the largest cities in Palestine during that period. Concurrently with this project, Delougaz excavated an extensive EB cemetery at the mouth of Naḥal Tabor. This cemetery is almost certainly the village cemetery of Early Bronze Age Yaqush just one kilometer to the east.

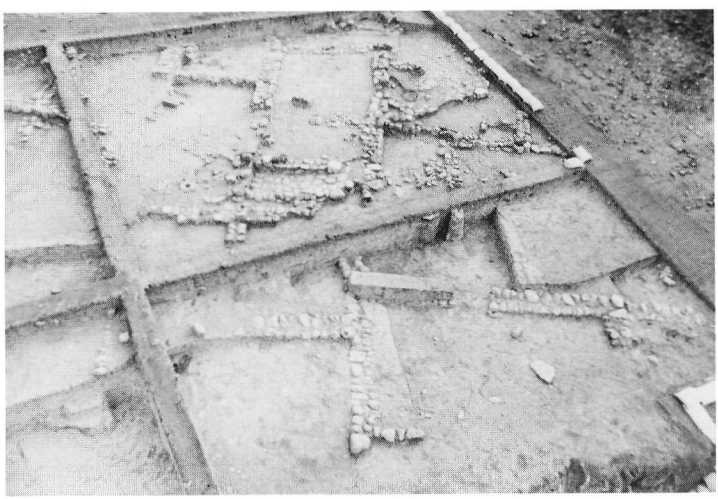
Tell Yaqush was a medium-sized village (2-3 hectares) that flourished from the mid-4th millennium to the late 3rd millennium B.C. In archaeological terms, the site was occupied throughout the Early Bronze I-III periods. Fortunately for our research goals, the site was abandoned at the end of the Early Bronze Age and was never significantly disturbed in the following millennia.

Yaqush is located on the very edge of the broad terrace (the *Ghor*) that lies at the foot of the hills of Lower Galilee, providing a view from the site of the much lower floodplain (the *Zor*) of the Jordan River. Situated at 216 meters below sea level, the climate is hot and dry, although as a result of intense irrigation by the nearby kibbutz, the surroundings today are green and lush from avocado, date, and mango orchards that border tomato and corn fields.

In ancient times the site was strategically placed on a major inter-regional trade route. It lay equidistant from the major Early Bronze Age cities of Beth Yeraḥ to the north and Beth Shan to the south. Directly across the Jordan River to the east was the large Early Bronze Age site of Shuneh North. Especially important for Yaqush was its proximity to one of the best fords across the Jordan River. This ford was of major importance throughout antiquity. Roman milestones indicate that the Roman road passed into Transjordan at this point. The Roman bridge was later supplanted by a bridge known as the Jisr al-Majami, and modern Kibbutz Gesher takes its name from the nearby crossing point (*gesher* means "bridge" in Hebrew).

◆ These geographical factors dictated that Yaqush was integrated into the dominant regional economic structure. Nearby urban centers must have exerted a powerful if not a direct influence on Yaqush, its economy, and its social structure. One of my major research goals is to examine the degree to which the process of urbanization affected the social and economic life of villages in the hinterland. What was the effect of these newly emergent urban centers on rural life?

◆ Detailed intrasite architectural studies represent one way in which the social and economic effects of urbanization on village life can be documented. Because the village of Yaqush was never re-occupied after its abandonment in the latter part of the 3rd millennium, it offers an excellent opportunity to recover much of the village plan. Measuring social differentiation through the study of architectural units requires extensive clearance of relatively undisturbed architecture from one chronological phase, as opposed to limited deep soundings more suited to answering questions of relative chronology. In particular, we will examine domestic architecture and intrasite variations (e.g., specialized cultic or public architecture, industrial areas, elite residencies, granaries, village layout, and planning) as possible markers of status or family structure.



A general view of one of the excavated areas at Yaqush. In the upper portion of the photograph is a complete house from about 2500 B.C. (EB III). In the lower portion of the photograph is an almost complete house from approximately 2900 B.C. (EB II).

A second research problem of the project is the study of the nature of site specialization and how site function may have changed through time. Rather than seeing the individual site as developing organically and in isolation from other sites, the project intends to examine architectural, ceramic, lithic, faunal, and botanical remains to determine whether site specialization may have developed as a result of increased economic demands from nearby urban centers. We wish to test the proposition that the economic and political centralization of an urban site like Beth Yeraḥ, only ten kilometers away from Tell Yaqush, most likely led to increasing specialization of animal and agricultural cropping practices at the village level, as rural sites like Yaqush reacted to the burgeoning demand for agricultural products from a more urban populace.

◆ Yaqush is the perfect outdoor laboratory in which to test these propositions. The preservation of the ancient remains is excellent. Not more than 10-20 centimeters below the surface, undisturbed remains of structures from the Early Bronze Age were exposed over a large area. Because the village was located on a fairly steep natural slope of soft marls, the topography and erosion patterns have allowed the recovery of structures from all three of the major EB subdivisions. These conditions not only provide extensive architecture for intrasite comparisons within periods, but also offer opportunities for comparisons between periods. Thus we can record changes in the social and economic structure of the village through time, as they are reflected in the architecture. One of the goals of the Yaqush expedition, therefore, is to gain as much lateral exposure of each period as possible.

◆ We encountered the EB I period (3500-3100 B.C.) in two areas. An EB I house was badly damaged by modern military activity. The preserved portions of the house indicate, however, that the structure was more than ten meters long, with two interior subdivision walls. The end walls of the western end of the house were at right angles to one another, but the eastern exterior wall had a pronounced curve, suggesting that the house was originally apsidal in plan. Similar apsidal houses have been found at other EB I sites, and we hope to recover more of the plan of this structure next season. The foundations of the walls were constructed of large field stones, laid without mortar in a herringbone fashion, and were preserved to a height of four courses. The stone foundations of this house were sealed by an EB I floor of beaten earth, indicating that the EB I period at Yaqush will provide at least two architectural phases.

A five by five meter probe fifteen meters to the east also yielded EB I occupation. The probe will be expanded in the 1991 season to link up with the main excavation area to the west. Already, however, the stratum exposed there yielded the remains of a mudbrick building that had undergone a terrific conflagration. Smashed vessels covered the floor of the building near its doorway. The bricks from the building's walls were fired to an almost vitrified state, and fragments of roofing were clearly preserved, sealing a layer of destruction debris 75 centimeters thick.

◆ The EB II period (3100-2650 B.C.) marked the beginning of urban life throughout ancient Palestine. Yaqush remained a village, however. Several successive phases of EB II occupation were excavated at Yaqush including a

A discussion of stratigraphy at Tell Yaqush. In the background are the hills of Galilee. The Crusader fortress of Belvoir on the mountain peaks guards the Jordan Valley and the entrance to the Nahal Tabor.

street and a good portion of a house with a broad room, typical of Early Bronze architecture throughout the rest of the country. The entrance of the house was flanked by mudbrick walls still standing four courses high. From the pattern of brick tumble, it is highly likely that the house was destroyed in an earthquake, sealing the debris on the courtyard.

◆ The doorway to the EB II house was clearly visible, with a carved basalt door socket just inside the entrance on the left hand side. The building itself measured seven by five meters, with a possible subsidiary room extending to its east. Set into the floor was a large flat stone that served as a pillar base.

The EB III levels at Yaqush (2650-2250 B.C.) were remarkably well preserved considering their proximity to the surface. The best preserved house had a partially paved courtyard to its west. In the courtyard was a large basalt grinding stone, as well as a basalt mortar set into the beaten earth surface. Nearby was a small unbroken pottery bowl. The house was subdivided into three rooms. One room was completely paved with large field stones, and two rooms had stone pillar bases. An exit to the east led to a small cooking oven in a partially paved courtyard. Four restorable vessels and one unbroken jug were recovered from this complex.

◆ An area excavated farther up the slope was dominated by a street with an almost completely preserved EB III building to its west. A small five by five meter probe of the steep slope just east of the street revealed a jumble of

cobble-sized stones into which a stone-lined pit had been cut. This pit contained several restorable vessels from the transitional Middle Bronze/Late Bronze Age, one of the few signs of any activity later than the EB at Yaqush. The mass of cobbles rested on EB III occupational debris.

The EB III levels at Yaqush have produced an enormous quantity of the very distinctive pottery known as "Khirbet Kerak" ware, a pottery assemblage that was plentiful at Khirbet Kerak (Beth Yeraḥ), but also is well known from the Oriental Institute excavations in the ʿAmuq plain in what is today the Turkish Hatay province. Similar pottery has been found in various forms in Anatolia and Transcaucasia. All the major forms of the assemblage were present at Yaqush, including the distinctive red and black small and large bowls, andirons (one with an appliqued face), large potstands and knobbed lids. Two complete lids with loop handles have their closest parallel with lids from the Elâziğ region in east-central Turkey.

◆ We still await the results of the specialist reports on the botanical and faunal remains. The agricultural subsistence base of the village is indicated, however, by the overwhelmingly dominant presence of sheep, goat, and cattle in the faunal record. Over two hundred flint sickle blades were recovered, as well as numerous basalt mortars, pestles, and grinding stones.

Investigations of village subsistence strategies and the changes in village life through time require a multi-disciplinary approach. The Yaqush excavations involve specialists in ancient fauna, botany, malacology, lithic technology, and soil analysis to document as fully as possible the economic basis of village life in the Early Bronze Age. The field staff is composed of archaeologists from the University of Chicago, the University of Arizona, and the University of Alabama, assisted by Druze workers from the Golan. Accommodations were provided by Kibbutz Gesher, located just across the highway from the site, whose members were helpful and supportive of the project.

◆ The first season of excavations at Tell Yaqush revealed a 5,000 year old village of remarkable preservation and potential. The site was inhabited throughout the thousand year period of the Early Bronze Age, and it provides an excellent opportunity to recover artifacts in their architectural context without later disturbance. The goal of the Yaqush expedition is to place the village in its larger context by integrating it with the previous Institute excavations at Khirbet Kerak (Beth Yeraḥ) and the Naḥal Tabor cemetery. During the 1991 season we intend to expand the areas opened in the first season and to begin to sample the site for areas of specialized economic and industrial activity.

The Yaqush excavations are funded primarily through the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. I extend my thanks to the National Geographic Society for providing a research grant for the first season of excavations. In addition, I would also like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Albert Haas of Chicago who have supported the project in many ways. The results of the first season of excavations at Yaqush will be published in a preliminary report to appear in 1990 in a supplement to the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. The final report will be issued as an *Oriental Institute Publication*. We anticipate a total of five seasons of excavations at Tell Yaqush.