1999 Field Season Yields Spectacular Finds at Tel Kedesh

This past summer saw the first full field season at the Museum’s newest excavation site, Tel Kedesh in the Upper Galilee of modern Israel. This project is jointly sponsored by the University of Michigan and the University of Minnesota. It is funded by the two universities, private donations, and a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The 1999 season was one of surprises and spectacular finds, which confirmed our assessment of the site as an ideal place to learn more about Hellenistic Phoenicia but also led us to upgrade our identification of the site’s status in the Hellenistic era from mere farming village to major administrative center.

The Site
As described in previous reports, Kedesh is a large tel site, nearly a kilometer long from north to south and rising some 120 feet above the surrounding apple orchards of northern Israel’s kibbutz Malkiya. It dominates a fertile upland valley in the Anti-Lebanon range, where the temperate climate and bountiful natural water sources have supported farming villages from the Early Bronze Age to modern times.

According to the Old Testament, Kedesh was one of the great Canaanite cities, whose population joined in early battles against the Israelites (Joshua 12). By New Testament times, ancient literary references to Kedesh seem to indicate that it had devolved from a large urban center and strategic stronghold to a rural village in the far eastern hinterland of the Phoenician city of Tyre. Medieval sources mention Kedesh only occasionally. By the time of Israel’s 1948 War of Independence, Kedesh housed a few farmsteads, a cemetery, and a grazing field.

Hellenistic and Early Roman Kedesh
The new Michigan/Minnesota excavations concentrate on the Phoenician village of Hellenistic and Early Roman times. This was an exuberant era of conflict and change marked by interaction and exchange among peoples brought forcibly into the Greek orbit by Alexander’s conquest of the East. The participation in the economic prosperity that came in the wake of Alexander. This led to quarrels among themselves over the increased commercialization of their culture, sparking the Maccabean uprising and the establishment of their religious kingdom. Subsequently, the area endured the heavy-handed rule of Herod the Great and the Roman procurators. Eventually, the Jews united in battle against the mighty Roman Empire—and finally saw their dream of independence crushed by Roman legions, ending with the brutal destruc-

Small oil flasks (amphoriskoi) and an unguaentarium found in the northwest corner room of the large building excavated this summer at Tel Kedesh.

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Notes from the Director

As we start another year at the Kelsey I look forward to the range of activities and opportunities that our rich collections and lively community of scholars and friends will produce. The Museum continues its active program of fieldwork in the Near East, with Janet Richards’ excavations in Upper Egypt just getting underway as I write. Janet and her team will spend three months investigating the Middle Kingdom cemetery at the important royal center of Abydos and will return in December to report on the finds. My own season at Kedesh in Israel this past summer was even more productive than I had hoped (see story on pages 1, 3–5).

On the exhibitions front, Terry Wilfong will work this winter on the publication of his Music in Roman Egypt show, and Robin Meador-Woodruff will mount an exhibition of the early twentieth-century panoramic photographs that are some of the Kelsey’s great archival treasures (story at right). Elaine Gazda is busy putting together her large show on the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii and the Maria Barosso watercolors that Professor Kelsey himself commissioned. This complex undertaking will be featured in our spring Newsletter. In the area of publications, the upcoming issue of the Bulletin of the University of Michigan Museums of Art and Archaeology will be entirely devoted to research on the Kelsey collections and Kelsey-sponsored fieldwork.

We have had one major staffing change over the summer. Our conservator, Geoff Brown, left us to take up the directorship of the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona. Geoff had been taking care of the collections since 1990, and it was under his leadership that we built the SAFE, the climate-controlled facility that now protects our fragile collections. Geoff was the moving force behind this project, and all of us who value the collections owe him a great debt of gratitude for it. We wish him well in his new endeavors.

Sharon C. Herbert, Director

Exhibition of Panoramics

The exhibition Surrounded by the View: Panoramic Photographs from the Kelsey Museum Archives will open on January 14, 2000. The show is curated by Robin Meador-Woodruff.

In 1919 and 1920, photographer George R. Swain accompanied Francis Kelsey on an expedition that circled through Europe and the Mediterranean area to document sites of interest to classical history scholars, as well as to identify potential sites for future excavations. Among Swain’s photographic equipment was a Cirkut camera, one of the earliest rotation cameras manufactured for commercial use.

With this camera, Swain produced a series of magnificent panoramic views of many of the sites he and Kelsey visited. The photographs were apparently never formally displayed, nor were many, if any, of them published—an oversight that will be remedied in part by this exhibition.

This unique portion of the Museum’s photographic archives will be accompanied by a brief introduction to the cameras available to Swain at the time. In addition to his photographic activities, Swain was an avid diarist, and illuminating comments drawn from his journals will make these vistas come alive for visitors to the galleries. We look forward to introducing you to Mr. Swain’s amazing photographs.
during these years. We are also seeking
to expand the very meager body of
evidence on the material culture of
Hellenistic Phoenicia and thereby
augment our understanding of the
complex intermix that constituted
Hellenistic culture(s).
While all the ancient mentions of
Kedesh indicated that the site was ideal
for these purposes, sad experience has
shown that the actual archaeological
remains do not always live up to their
ancient press. Our preliminary season
in 1997 was designed to check on the
preservation of the Hellenistic remains
and their accessibility, while our 1998
magnetometric survey was meant to
give us a sitewide preview of what lay
below the surface (a kind of archaeo­
logical MRI).
As reported in the 1998 Newsletter,
this preliminary work showed the site
to be quite promising for our purposes.
In the 1997 probes we found that
Hellenistic remains were well preserved
and very accessible, in fact the latest
things preserved below the modern
surface in the southern and western
sectors of the tel. The most notable was
a house dating to the time of the
Maccabees (second century B.C.E.) with
a wide array of intact and nearly intact
household objects, including cooking
pots, perfume juglets, loomweights, and
a mortar and pestle left on the floor.
Some vessels had been made in the
immediate vicinity, while others were
imported from the Phoenician coast.
Finding so many vessels essentially
intact is unusual, and we suspected that
the inhabitants must have fled the
premises in a hurry. After some time
back in the library we connected these
finds with a battle between Jonathan,
the Hasmonean commander, and
Demetrius, the Syrian Greek king,
which ended in a rout of the Greeks at
Kedesh in the year 145 B.C.E. (I Macca­
First Hints of Administrative Center
The architecture and finds in the 1997
probe were consistent with the small
rural settlement implied by the extant
Hellenistic references to the site. The
1998 magnetometric survey, however,
gave us our first clue that there might
be something more to Hellenistic
Kedesh. The survey revealed the
presence of what appeared to be an
enormous building at the southern end
of the tel, about 45 feet to the east of the
house mentioned above. The building, if
the walls indeed proved to be part of a
single integrated structure, would be
approximately 170 by 120 feet, with a
series of rooms arranged around the
perimeter, hardly a humble farmer’s
abode. Since magnetometry does not
give a good sense of the depth of the
images it produces, the possibility
remained that the large building was
something of a mirage and with
excavation would prove to be a melange
of smaller, superimposed but chrono­
logically discrete structures.
Building on the information gained
from the 1997 and 1998 expeditions, we
were able to design a three-year
excavation plan that would explore both
the large southern building and
neighboring houses as well as sample
the occupation history of other sectors
of the tel. The 1999 season was the first
of the projected three-year campaign.
building make use of large column drums reused from an earlier structure. This implies that it was not the first monumental building on the site and, coupled with other finds from the Persian period, leads us to believe that the Hellenistic building may succeed an earlier, Persian-period public structure.

If indeed Kedesh is the Upper Galilee’s administrative center in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, this would solve a problem that has long puzzled archaeologists and historians. Up until the Assyrian invasion of the late eighth century B.C.E. the nearby site of Hazor had filled this administrative role, but excavations have shown that Hazor never regained this status after the Assyrian conquest, and the location of regional administration in the Upper Galilee is unknown.

Discovery of Storage Vessels and Bullae

The most spectacular Hellenistic finds of the 1999 season come from the area of the northwest corner of the large building, where we excavated part of the corner room and all of the room to its east. The latter turned out to be a magazine for the storage of wine and probably grain and oil as well. Fourteen massive jars (5 feet tall) stood in place along the walls. Most were locally made, but one was imported from the Phoenician coast, and three others were wine amphoras from the Greek island of Rhodes. The amphora handles bore stamps of local officials, whose dates of office fall within the decade prior to 146 B.C.E.

The jars, and the room, had been damaged in antiquity; there were smaller vessels found in pieces, clearly thrown

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Significance of Bullae

Bullae such as those found at Kedesh were used by private individuals and by public officials as a way to ensure the validity of various documents in the Hellenistic world. In some instances, an official would have rolled up a piece of official correspondence written on papyrus, tied it with twine, pressed a small piece of clay around the twine, and then stamped that piece of clay with his signet. These sorts of bullae are the equivalent of ancient envelopes: They ensured the security of a communication, as well as identified the sender. Bullae are also used to identify the signers and witnesses (up to six) of various legal contracts, such as land sales, loans, wills, and marriage contracts.

The cache of bullae found at Kedesh brings to thirteen the number of such Hellenistic archives found in the ancient world—from Carthage in the west to Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in the east. No other such archive from this period has ever been found in Israel or indeed anywhere in the southern Levant. In fact, the Kedesh bullae constitute the fourth largest Hellenistic corpus found in the Near East to date—and thousands more are to be expected from the yet-unexcavated portion of the room.

The bullae are quite small—on average 2-3 centimeters in height and less than a centimeter in width. They carry on their unstamped surface the impression of the papyrus and the string against which they were pressed. Many preserve partial fingerprints of the individual who stamped them. They vary in the type of clay and especially in the type of symbols and pictures they carry. There are easily recognized Greek gods and goddesses in familiar poses, such as Aphrodite bathing or an armed Athena striding; there is Hermes with his caduceus. More complicated narratives are also represented, such as Zeus in the form of an eagle carrying off the hapless Ganymede. Some carry one of the official symbols of the Seleucid kings, the anchor; others bear the symbol of Tanit, a Phoenician fertility deity, and Phoenician lettering. There are many portraits, heads of Hellenistic monarchs as well as what appear to be private portraits of older men; others bear motives that hint at Persian and Egyptian influences. The entire array encapsulates the complicated cultural milieu that existed within the Hellenistic Near East.

Looking Ahead

What is next for the Kedesh project? We plan to excavate two more seasons at the site and have already begun analysis of the bullae. We are working to raise the money to conserve, record, and study this amazing windfall. It will take many years to wring every bit of information possible out of these rare finds, but the first step is to recover the remainder left in the room so we will have the complete archive. Our initial research goals of studying the day-to-day life of a border settlement and adding to our understanding of Hellenistic Phoenicia remain in place. The previous characterization of the site as an out-of-the-way village now clearly needs revision, but it is even more apparent that the ground-eye view we can recover from Tel Kedesh will illuminate aspects of this region's history that never made it into the books.

Sharon Herbert, University of Michigan
Andrea Berlin, University of Minnesota
Calendar of Events

Exhibitions:
- Music in Roman Egypt
  Closes December 12
- The Archaeology of Ethnicity:
  Recent Finds from Tel Kedesh, Israel
  October in the Ancient Near East Gallery
- Surrounded by the View: Panoramic Photographs from the Kelsey Museum Archives
  Opens January 14, 2000

Lectures:
- A Planned World in Early Egypt
  by John Baines, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago
  October 11, noon, 3050 Frieze Bldg.
  Sponsored by Department of Near Eastern Studies, Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, Interdepartmental Program in Classical Art and Archaeology

- Problems of Urban Design in the Forum of Pompeii
  by John Dobbins, University of Virginia
  October 12, 4:30, 2175 Angell Hall
  Cosponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America

- Search for the Battle of Actium
  by William Murray
  April 4, time and place tba
  Cosponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America