

The Qadisha Valley Early Prehistory Project, Northern Lebanon

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The Levant is an area of considerable environmental diversity, ranging from the thickly forested coastal mountain habitats which extend from Lebanon through north-west Syria to southern Turkey, to the dry steppe and desert environments in the south and east. Our knowledge of the Epipalaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities which inhabited the region through the late glacial period (24-12,000 cal BP) and of the development and spread of Neolithic farming communities through the early post-glacial (12-7,500 cal BP) is heavily biased to regions which were either open woodland, steppe or oasis habitats through these periods. The Qadisha Valley Project was initiated to expand our knowledge of adaptations to an area which is thought to have been forested through much of this time range. The valley drains the highest sector of the Lebanese Mountains to the south-east of Tripoli which rise to over 3,000 m within 30 km of the sea. At the present day, the valley has a broad spectrum of environments ranging from evergreen and deciduous oak forest at low and middle elevations to cedar forest and sub-alpine habitats closer to the summits. The composition and elevation of the various vegetation zones will have varied through the period under consideration.

The project was begun in 2003, with a geomorphological and archaeological survey of various sectors of the valley, and traces of Palaeolithic and Neolithic occupation were found at various elevations. Of particular interest was a cluster of sites found at Moghr el Ahwal, which is located at about 620 m overlooking the steep-sided Qadisha ravine. Close to this village is a limestone outcrop, known locally as Timsah or 'Crocodile' Rock, which is about 80 m in length and pierced by three caves. Substantial numbers of Palaeolithic as well as Neolithic and later stone tools were found in the ploughed olive groves around the rock,

some of which were thought to derive from the caves. In the period since 2003, three seasons of excavations have been undertaken in two of the caves.

During summer 2004, excavations were undertaken across the front chamber of the small central cave (Cave 2) which measures c. 11 m wide by 3-5 m deep. The prehistoric deposits were shallow (no more than 50 cm), but held in place by a high rock sill across the front of the cave. As in the other excavations, all deposits were coarse and fine sieved and samples were processed through a flotation machine to collect carbonised plant remains. Three main phases of prehistoric occupation were found although there were also traces of earlier and later material. The earliest well documented phase was Geometric Kebaran (Middle Epipalaeolithic) from which we obtained a single radiocarbon date of c.14,900 BP. The occupation was spread across the cave, but particularly well preserved at the eastern end where there was also a partial human burial. The burial comprised just the articulated left leg and foot and right lower leg of an adult and it had two polished stone pebbles in association. Human remains from this period are poorly known, although Lisa Maher (Cambridge) has recently documented a cluster of similarly dated burials with grave goods from Uyun al Hammam in northern Jordan and some of these were also partial or secondary burials.

Remnants of Natufian (Late Epipalaeolithic) occupation were found on the western side of the cave. Although we obtained no radiocarbon dates, it was characterised by its stone tool assemblage and also by a fragment of a bone sickle haft similar in form to examples from the Galilee and Mount Carmel area over 200 km to the south. Cutting into the Natufian deposits were a number of shallow pits containing disarticulated juvenile and adult human remains, but there was no evidence of crania. Two radiocarbon dates were obtained on the human bones of c. 9,700 BP which places them in the mid to late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, a period in which skull separation after burial is well attested. Surprisingly, there was no clear evidence of occupation from this period in the cave, but it is possible that the communities

were living or camping in the open areas adjacent to the Rock and using the cave as a cemetery. Traces of Pottery Neolithic, Early Bronze Age and later periods were also found in pits and in the surface levels of the cave.

Yvonne Edwards (University College London) has just completed a detailed study of the faunal remains from Cave 2 identifying over 35 species of mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian and fish. In the Geometric Kebaran and Natufian phases the large mammals are dominated by wild goat, which probably came from the adjacent crags, but there are also substantial numbers of roe deer, fallow deer, red deer and wild pig indicating a forested environment. Fox, hare, mole rat, chuckar partridge and tortoise are also common. Rarer species include, wild cattle, equids, gazelle, bear, hyaena, badger, wild cat, marten, polecat, porcupine and hyrax.

During summer 2005 and 2008, excavations were undertaken in the largest of the three caves (Cave 3) which measures c. 5-8 m wide by 30 m deep. Four separate trenches were excavated, but the most rewarding for prehistoric material was a 13.5 square metre trench (Area C) close to the main cave entrance. Three main phases of prehistoric occupation were found but it should be noted that the excavations did not reach bedrock and there could be older material. The earliest well documented phase was Kebaran (Early Epipalaeolithic) which extends the record at Moghr el Ahwal back to the coldest and driest episode of the last glacial and it yielded two radiocarbon dates of c. 19,000 and 20,200 BP. The overlying occupation with well preserved activity areas was Geometric Kebaran with a single date of c. 16,100 BP. The upper phase was Natufian with a date of c. 14,100 BP and this contained a small stone bin with a plaster base as well as an upturned mortar. Plaster is common from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in the Near East, but there are also a few earlier examples from Natufian sites including Hayonim Cave, Mallaha and Saflulim in the southern Levant. Traces of Geometric Kebaran and Natufian material were also found in the other excavated trenches

in Cave 3 but they had been disturbed by later occupation. One significant find from a derived context was a small fragment of a uniserial bone harpoon similar in form to Natufian examples from Kebara cave in the Mount Carmel area. There were also traces of Neolithic activities, but there were no well preserved contexts from this period in the excavated areas.

The analysis of the finds from Cave 3 are still in progress, but the combination of evidence from the two caves, has provided important new insights into the human occupation of the forest environments of the coastal mountains of the central-northern Levant through periods from which there has been very little data. There is virtually no excavated information from this time range from the coastal mountains of north-west Syria or adjacent areas of southern Turkey, and in the case of Lebanon the only available data has been from pre-1975 excavations at four sites in the Wadi Antelias and Nahr el Kelb just north of Beirut, two of which have since been lost to quarrying. There are interesting parallels between the artefact assemblages from Moghr el Ahwal and contemporary sites in the Galilee and Carmel areas over 200 km to the south indicating cultural interaction with this region, but the subsistence base is much more focused on the use of forest and mountain resources, which would have required their own distinctive adaptations. It is hoped that further field research will be possible in this region which will build on these initial results and also open up our knowledge of the Neolithic and the beginnings of farming in this region which remains very poorly known.

The analysis of the chipped stone tool assemblages from Moghr el Ahwal is being undertaken by Corine Yazbeck at the Lebanese University and the study of the animal and human bones by Yvonne Edwards in collaboration with Andrew Garrard and Simon Hillson at University College London. Other specialists working on the material include Katherine Wright (ground-stone assemblages), Gassia Artin (shell beads), Assaad Seif (ceramics),

Susan Colledge (plant remains) and Martin Bates and Richard Macphail (sediments and micromorphology).

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Publications on Project

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