

**THE HOLY LAND**  
**PREHISTORY**

# Unearthing Monuments of The Yarmukians

Despite the headline-grabbing biblical remains in this region, prehistorians are digging up a wealth of artifacts from earlier peoples

shifts over different time periods," says Arlene Rosen, an archaeologist at University College London who worked in Israel for many years. "Now all this research has come to a halt."

In 1998, in an attempt to calm the situation, the Israeli government appointed five Orthodox rabbis to the nation's Archaeological Council, a 38-member body of archaeologists and other experts that advises the IAA on granting excavation permits. Unlike the ultra-Orthodox activists, who argue that any disturbing of burial sites goes against Jewish law, Israel's Orthodox rabbis have generally agreed that bones can be removed so that digs can go on. But they still insist that they must be reburied without being studied. But this attempt at a compromise has not stopped the demonstrations. Last June, for example, an altercation between demonstrators and an archaeological team conducting a rescue dig at a construction site near the Ben Shemen interchange in central Israel prompted the police to shut down the dig temporarily and arrest two of the archaeologists.

"When a bulldozer hits a grave, what do they want us to do?" says Moshe Kochavi, an archaeologist at Tel Aviv University and chair of the Archaeological Council. "We can let the bulldozer destroy the grave, or we can let the archaeologists dig it." But Smith says that whatever their objections to disturbing Jewish remains, the religious leaders should have no say about what happens to non-Jewish remains: "What right do they have to assume authority over Phoenician, Canaanite, Bronze Age, or prehistoric peoples?"

But ultra-Orthodox leaders see things differently. "We have nothing against archaeology per se," says Rabbi David Schmidl, a leader of Atra Kadisha ("Holy Sites"), one of the main groups involved in organizing the protests. On the other hand, he told *Science*, according to Jewish law "it is forbidden to disturb the rest of these bodies. It angers the soul." Schmidl compares the controversy in Israel to the debates in North America between archaeologists and Native American activists, who have insisted on the return of Native American remains so they can be reburied (*Science*, 26 February, p. 1239). As for non-Jewish graves, Schmidl says, "it is a little less problematic to move the bones, but any grave deserves the proper honor."

Archaeologists and anthropologists had hoped that the new government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak would be more sympathetic. So far, however, the government has not shown any sign of making this a priority issue. "For politicians, it is a very minor issue they can give way on," says Smith. In the meantime, she adds, "a branch of science that has a major contribution to make is being stamped out."

—MICHAEL BALTER

**KIBBUTZ SHA'AR HAGOLAN**—For any visitor to Israel, the ruins of Megiddo and Hazor or the cobbled streets of Jerusalem are a vivid reminder that the Holy Land is sacred to three major religions. Yet hidden away in caves and fields, usually well off the tourist path, prehistorians have found plenty of evidence that this fabled land was a major crossroads of human civilization long before the biblical period. Over the past decade, in the fields of this kibbutz just south of the Sea of Galilee, archaeologists have been excavating a splendid example: an 8000-year-old village built in stone that may have been the capital of the Yarmukians, one of the earliest Neolithic (New Stone Age) peoples to settle in modern-day Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.

In part, the 1990s dig has confirmed what earlier excavations here had shown: The Yarmukians were among the most talented artists of the Neolithic period, producing finely engraved pottery and beautiful, intricately carved figurines stunning enough to be displayed in art museums. Indeed, some of the more than 300 figurines unearthed here over the years were exhibited in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art last fall. But the excavations are also challenging the conventional view that the Yarmukians were seminomadic and pastoral, occupying their settlements only part of the year. Instead, the past few years of digging have uncovered the foundations of three monumental stone buildings, one of which measures 3200 square meters—one of the largest Neolithic structures ever discovered—as well as paved streets and alleys, all indications of a highly stable community.

The Yarmukians were first discovered in the 1930s, when early Jewish settlers at this site near the banks of the Yarmuk River—a tributary of the river Jordan—began plowing up figurines and a characteristic type of elaborately decorated pottery. When this same pottery began showing up at other sites of

similar age, such as early settlement levels at Megiddo in northern Israel and Byblos in Lebanon, it became clear that it represented an ancient culture that had spread fairly widely in the Near East. But excavations at Sha'ar Hagolan by Israeli archaeologists during the 1950s failed to uncover any monumental buildings. Instead, the earlier team concluded

from various large pits they found that the Yarmukians had lived in circular huts half buried in the ground, which was consistent with findings at other Yarmukian sites.

Thus the monumental buildings, which have been found only at Sha'ar Hagolan, might mean that this site had a special significance. "Sha'ar Hagolan might have been the territorial center" of Yarmukian culture, says archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who is co-directing the excavations along with independent archaeologist Michele Miller of New York City. Garfinkel adds that the buildings, along with the well-defined streets and alleys, are evidence of

highly organized communal activity. And Brian Hesse, an zooarchaeologist from the University of Alabama, Birmingham, who is studying the remains of animal bones here, says the dominant animal appears to be domesticated pig, with a "surprising" lack of fish and other aquatic animals even though the village was right next to a river.

Garfinkel says he has no idea what the purpose of the monumental buildings was, although he hopes to uncover more evidence in the coming years of excavation. As for the figurines, he assumes—as do most archaeologists who study figurines from Near Eastern sites—that they served some sort of religious purpose. But whatever their meaning, Garfinkel adds, "these are the most beautiful figurines in the ancient Near East. A lot of energy and symbolic thinking went into making them."

—MICHAEL BALTER



**Ancient artistry.** This figurine is one of more than 300 found at Sha'ar Hagolan.