

Nahal Efe and the Neolithic 'conquest' of the Negev

Pilot season 2015

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Introduction

- 1 The first excavations at the Neolithic site of Nahal Efe, in the semi-desert Negev region took place from 1 to 11 December, 2015. This was the first fieldwork season in the Spanish-Israeli undertaking "Nahal Efe project: Human environment interaction during the consolidation of agriculture in the arid margins of the Negev", co-directed by two associate researchers at the CRFJ: Ferran Borrell (Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones Prehistóricas de Cantabria, Spain) and Jacob Vardi (Israel Antiquities Authority, Israel), with the participation of scientists from several other universities and research centres in those two countries (CSIC, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) and in France (CNRS).

Figure 1



Location of the site on a moderate slope of a hill on the left bank of the wadi Nahal Efe.

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The project

- 2 The project is aimed at fine-tuning our understanding of the Neolithic 'conquest' of the Negev, which has barely changed from the interpretations and hypotheses proposed after the pioneering work during the 1970s and 80s and subsequent research in the early 1990s. In this way, it will contribute towards an appreciation of the heterogeneity of the Neolithic period in the southern Levant. The location of the site, between different cultural (and ecological) provinces, will also shed light on the connection between the southern Levant and northern Africa (Egypt) and the diffusion of the Neolithic 'package', if any, to that region. The project is equally focused on understanding human-environment interaction in arid regions. It will therefore explore the regional impact, if any, of major Early Holocene environmental fluctuations/anomalies (RCCs) in the 'conquest' of the arid margins of the Negev and the subsequent development of settlement patterns and subsistence economies during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B. Special emphasis will thus be placed on identifying potential temporal correspondence between changing Early Holocene climates and social dynamics in order to advance in the understanding of social, economic and technical responses by human groups to the diverse constraints imposed by climatic variations in arid regions. Last but not least, it has to be stressed that a long-term excavation at Nahal Efe will provide a social context for one of the most enigmatic and fascinating issues of the Neolithic in Israel, which is the presence (restricted to, *grosso modo*, this region) of elaborate stone masks, one of which was found at the nearby, and unique, site of Nahal Hemar.

Fieldwork: Pilot season 2015

- 3 The site of Nahal Efe was known but had never been excavated previously. Therefore this first fieldwork season has concentrated on determining the size of the site and the topography of the hillside where it is located. In addition, one of the circular stone structures visible on the surface has been excavated and in this way it has been identified as a circular habitation structure, half dug into the hillside. The good state of preservation of structure, about 80 cm. deep in the part less eroded by the hillside, and its floor, partially paved with flat stone slabs, should be highlighted. Inside the structure, the archaeological remains consisted of relatively abundant lithics, including a Byblos-Jericho arrowhead, characteristic of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in the region, several hammerstones and numerous pieces of charcoal. These will allow the radiocarbon dating of the structure, currently being performed at the Weizmann Institute of Science (Israel).

Figure 2



Surveying and mapping the site.

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Figure 3



Detail of the excavation of the Neolithic circular structure.

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- 4 The fieldwork carried out during this first season has confirmed that the site is a large Neolithic settlement, probably dated in the 8th millennium BC, in an excellent state of conservation. These characteristics, unique in the region, indicate the great potential of Nahal Efe for determining the spread of the Neolithic in semi-desert regions of the eastern Mediterranean. It will also enable an appraisal of the potential impact of climate events in the development of the first farming communities in the southern Levant, and the complexity of human responses to environmental changes in this region during the Neolithic.

Figure 4



Dry sieving at the site during the excavation.

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Figure 5



Final recording of the structure.

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