
BRAP BEAT

Introduction to the Project and Team

By Monique Vincent



Welcome to the *BRAP Beat*, the weekly update from the excavations of the 2017 Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP). Over the last two weeks team members have been arriving in Jordan ready to launch a wonderful season of digging and exploration on the Karak Plateau. Most team members were in Amman by Thursday, August 3, for the air-conditioned van jaunt down the Desert Highway to the village where we live. This was much appreciated as temperatures have been running in the high 90s, and the trip through the desert is always a cooker.

The small village of as-Smakiyya is one of the few remaining 100% Christian villages in Jordan and has hosted the various excavation teams of Balu'a over the last forty years. Team members stay in apartments across the village, living in separate flats owned by the local families. The luxury of in-house refrigerators to cool our drinking water has been particularly popular! Life is a little different from the rest of Jordan. Pre-recorded bell and choir music announces the hours of worship in the two village churches instead of the call of the muezzin that many of us have grown used to in Jordan. The people are friendly as throughout Jordan, however, and are eager to invite us to sit with them for tea, Arabic coffee, and grapes fresh from their vines.

Friday, August 4, the team sat down for a series of orientation lectures introducing the excavation members, methods, and goals of the 2017 season, as well as a brief history of the work at Balu'a. Khirbat al-Balu'a is a large basalt site perched on the edge of a wadi feeding into the

wider Wadi Mujib system. The site, over 40 ha (~98 acres) once sat on one of the major north-south routes of movement in the Iron Age. Modern excavations began with Udo Worschech, of the Theologische Hochschule Friedensau in Germany, in the 1980s, and continued under Friedbert Ninow, of the same university, into the 2000s. Friedbert invited American participation in 2010 for a GPS survey of the visible architecture at the site. Initial test excavations of the survey data were conducted in 2012, along with the University of California, San Diego. This summer's excavations are the result of further collaboration, including Madaba Plains Project – Tall al-'Umayri veterans Kent Bramlett and Monique Vincent as co-directors with Friedbert Ninow, who is now dean of La Sierra University's Divinity School.

Orientation closed Friday with a sunset tour of Balu'a, allowing the new team members to explore the vast expanse of the site and the impressively well-preserved architecture. Team members then enjoyed Saturday morning exploring the castle ruins of Karak, where Crusader's and Saladin's armies both took turns expanding a vast and warren-like complex begun in the 12th century.

The first day of excavations was on Sunday, August 6. The team traipsed across the site to their work areas under a sun rising at 5:33 AM. Work will focus this season in three main areas, to be discussed further below. Team members include undergraduate students from La Sierra University and Walla Walla University, masters students from La Sierra University and the Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, a PhD candidate from the University of California, San Diego, and volunteers. The excavation teams are composed as follows (S=Supervisor):

Team Qasr – Craig Tyson (S), Dawn Acevedo, Audrey Shaffer, Vera Kopecky, Noah Bos

Team House – Kristy Swartz (S), Kristina Reed, Carolyn Waldron, David Simplice, Keoni Oliver

Team Wall – Betty Adams (S), Jaime Bennett, Wernfried Rieckmann, Martin Hartlapp, Ian Jones

Other roles include: Kristina Reed as Object Registrar, Audrey Shaffer as Pottery Registrar, and Ian



Jones as Geospatial Manager. The team is further joined by our Jordanian staff, including Arwa Massadeh as Department of Antiquities representative, Mohammad Qaqish as cook, and Yousef Hajazin as team guard.

After six days of excavation in Week One the team is enthusiastic about their progress and the results that are already beginning to appear. The team's daily progress, in photos, can be followed on the BRAP Facebook page: <https://web.facebook.com/BRAPJordan/> and by searching for #BRAP17 on Instagram.

Results of Week One

By Kent Bramlett



Khirbat al-Balu'a

The challenge of the three-week excavation season is strategizing a set of objectives that address our major research questions at Balu'a and that can be accomplished within the timeframe and with the team that we have. We chose to open three fields, each characterized by major architectural features in that area. We have the Qasr (Arabic for "castle"), the House, and the Wall.

The Qasr is the defining feature at the site of Balu'a. It was constructed of massive basalt and limestone blocks and still reaches an impressive height of more than 20 feet in places. But there has been no confirmation of the date of construction or use. It may date to the time of the kings of Moab in the Iron Age. Or it may have been constructed later; a Nabataean extension was added in the first century AD. The reason the Qasr hadn't been excavated yet is easy to see when one stands beside it: the massive stones fallen inward and outward block access to the interior or exterior walls. Many of the basalt and limestone blocks weigh over a thousand pounds each, some in the multiple thousands.

Our simple objective is to date the construction and use of the Qasr! With the cooperation of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DOA) on several levels (our dig representative, the local district director, and the regional director), we obtained the assistance of heavy equipment from a nearby town. After finishing photogrammetry on the area we selected along the north face of the structure, the Qasr team painted identification numbers on about sixty of the large fallen blocks. Along with the 3D photogrammetric model this would allow us later to reconstruct digitally how they had fallen, and maybe one day, to conduct a restoration program on the Qasr. Wednesday was action day. A large tractor pulled back and removed the



Team Qasr



blocks clearing the way for us to excavate the earth and debris under the stones. Our plan is to dig down to the foundation level, and from the pottery and, potentially, 14C samples associated with the construction of the foundations, obtain a date when the building was built.

Work by the Qasr team the remainder of the week cleared a debris layer sloped up against the wall that mostly contained Iron II pottery. However, a piece of 1st century Roman glass and a 1st century Nabataean sherd indicated that the debris had

accumulated there long after the end of the Iron Age (6th century BC). While washing pottery back in camp so it could be identified better, Craig found a pottery sherd with writing inscribed on it. I have preliminarily identified the inscribed letters as early Nabataean and translated it as: “oil 10 [measures].” The sherd belonged to a jar that was inscribed with its intended contents and volume before the pottery was fired, evidently for industrial production or trade.

The House team is continuing excavation at an area begun in 2012. A small area of one room was uncovered then but the building is much bigger as can be seen from visible wall lines on the surface. That season found the house had been destroyed by fire and that it dated roughly to the Iron II (1000-550 BC) period. Our objective in this field is to excavate more of the house down to its original floor and establish a good chronology for the pottery that may be found in the house. We also expect to excavate below parts of the house to determine whether there was earlier settlement in this part of the site. We want to establish with more certainty the periods when Balu‘a was inhabited. The preservation of this house is extraordinary. The walls are preserved to over two meters (6.4 ft) in height. Work this week revealed what seems to be a lintel over a doorway still in situ (in its original position). Very few Iron Age houses are preserved above the doors! It is not directly in the area currently being excavated and we might not get to it this season. Even before the house team has reached the floor, they have made some interesting finds. An iron spear tip, carnelian bead, and lunate earring are among the small finds. The next few days will be exciting as the team clears the floor and reveals what was encapsulated under the destruction debris for 2600 years.

The Wall team is working in an area that separates the upper city from the lower city, the lower city being a huge



eastward expansion that seems to have been built and occupied only in the later years of the Moabite kingdom. Traces of wall lines visible amid piles of rock and rubble show that a large wall originally existed here. Probably this was the exterior city wall before the expansion was constructed. We selected a place along the wall where we could see parallel lines indicating a passageway crossing through. Could this be a gate? Gates are exciting places to dig because they were important places in ancient cities where the elders gathered and visitors shared news. Sometimes places of worship and monumental inscription were located in or near gates. As the wall team cleared and excavated this first week, it became apparent that things were a bit more complex and that we must have two phases to the wall. The passage now appears to be a gap between two towers that were constructed over the remains of an earlier fortification system. Does the earlier wall run under the towers and through the gap—meaning there was no passage here in the earlier city? Could the earlier wall be a casemate wall? The width of the wall is 23 feet which seems far too wide for a solid wall. We eagerly await new information from the wall team.

Carolyn Heads Home

On Friday morning, August 11, team member Carolyn Waldron fell on her way to breakfast and broke her patella (knee cap) clean in half. She was rushed to the Arab Medical Center in Amman where she needed surgery to rejoin the patella and anchor it back in place. This was a long and painful day for Carolyn but she received excellent medical care from her Jordanian nurses and doctors. Carolyn heads home this week from Amman, where she has been enjoying the hospitality of the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) while starting physical therapy with Dr. Mohammad. Carolyn will be greatly missed by the entire team. We will miss not only her role as first aid and receipts manager, but her “attitude” every day.

