

BEIDHA 1983: AN INTERIM REPORT

by
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Introduction

After a sixteen year interval caused by circumstances beyond my control, the excavation of Beidha was resumed in April 1983. The eighth season took place under the auspices of the British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History, but by the time we were in the field, Beidha had become a joint expedition of the British Institute, the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and Yarmouk University. We are deeply indebted and extend our gratitude to Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director of Antiquities for his generous support, enthusiastic encouragement and for his stimulating visit to the excavations, and to the Department of Antiquities for their always available help and friendly co-operation; to Dr. A. Badran, President of Yarmouk University, for the sponsorship of the University, the loan of equipment and its transport to and from the camp; to Dr. Mu'awiyah Ibrahim, Dean of Humanities and Science, University of Yarmouk for releasing Mr. Brian Byrd from his duties in the Centre for Jordanian Studies to join the Beidha team; to Mr. Yusef al-Alami, Director of the Jerash/Petra Project for all his extremely practical and highly appreciated help as well as for his visit to the site. We are also deeply indebted to Dr. C.-M. Bennett and her staff at the British Institute for unfailing help, support, advice and hospitality. We also acknowledge our gratitude to Mr. Niazi Shab'an our Department Representative for all his hard work and friendship.

The expedition was honoured by a visit from H.R. Crown Prince Hassan, who spent a day with us.

The 1967 Season

In 1967 the excavation of Beidha was almost finished and we were sounding the layers below the earliest villages. The work was brought to an abrupt halt by a freak storm that flooded the trenches; an event that was followed closely by the outbreak of war. However, we had found what appeared to be the outer limit of a new quarter of the village lying about twenty-five metres east of the latter. The rest of this area seemed to have been destroyed by later terracing. This quarter consisted of three curvilinear, semi-subterranean structures built in the same style as the earliest houses, but without the wall slots. Each has a carefully laid floor either of large flagstones, clean gravel or small angular stones. The largest has a standing stone in the centre, its sides aligned exactly to the cardinal points, below the floor is a circular enclosure, its perimeter outlined with small sandstone slabs set on edge. Outside the south walls are either a very large boulder with a cup-hole, a huge, shallow, sandstone basin or very big, thin, flat sandstone slabs. As these buildings or enclosures are unlike anything else found on the site, and also because of the standing stone and other very special features this quarter was interpreted as a sanctuary area, perhaps containing graves below or nearby. The finds were scarce but entirely Neolithic in character. Although lying at approximately the same absolute level as Level VI in the village, it was necessary to join the two areas by a trench and a start had been made on this in 1967.¹

The 1983 Season

The aims of the 1983 season were thus fairly clear-cut. Firstly to try to find out the nature of the new quarter. Secondly, to join this new quarter to the village by a

¹ For previous reports on Beidha see Diana Kirkbride, PEQ, 1960, 1966, 1967 and 1968.

trench. Thirdly, to make small soundings inside the village to try to determine the extents of the different main levels at any one period, and to tie up various points left over from the previous work and so on. Fourthly, to try to find the extent of the Natufian horizon that runs below the Neolithic village. This could only be done outside the built-up area as a layer of wind-blown sand almost two metres deep separates the two periods and trenches of this depth in the village would have caused the buildings to be endangered by erosion from below.

Despite having been left open, without maintenance for sixteen years we found the site in an extraordinarily good condition. Some of the sections were weatherbeaten but the majority were still straight and needed only a good clean; a few large bushes were flourishing and removed wholesale where possible; some walls, mostly of Level VI, had suffered serious slippage; aeolian sand to a depth of between 0.10 m. and 0.20 m. covered some of the floors. The initial cleaning did not take as long as we had feared; the site's remarkably good state must be caused by its desert environment.

Four main areas were investigated:

1. Soundings around the "sanctuary" area. Soundings below the floors of two of the three buildings had revealed only sand below one and a series of slight floors below the other. However, there was a thick deposit of a hardened, orange, rusty nature below the earlier, round enclosure which overlies the slight floors. This deposit was found only inside and not outside the enclosures walls.

Results: The adjacent squares to the north proved to contain the remains of Neolithic huts, hearths and camping floors that were earlier than both village and sanctuaries. The largest sanctuary, that containing the standing stone, was founded on these layers and its paved floors cut down through the huts. The lower camp or hut floors run on below the standing stone as we found in our sounding inside the building.

This work was carried down to the underlying soft sand. They had clay

mounds for walls, presumably they had originally superstructures of branches and reeds. The floors were either of stamped clay or fine gravel brought up from the *wadi* bed. Hearths were generally outlined with stones, roughly round and sometimes superimposed. Finds were extremely sparse but all Neolithic: some flints, animal bones, shell and a few shell beads. Some small amounts of charcoal may enable us to date this period.

The impression gained from these somewhat ephemeral remains is that their character is different from the pre-village Neolithic levels sounded below the village itself. The latter contained not only huts, but also big expanses or hardened floors with post-holes in them, areas of hearths some small and others of long standing, and the general accumulation associated with open courts of long duration. These were interpreted as the remains of a semi-permanent camp in use while the inhabitants determined whether or not the region was suitable for permanent occupation, and then while the first proper buildings were erected.

The Neolithic remains near the sanctuaries may have been the living quarters for the area of intense activity as found below the village proper. They show no signs of permanency, but seem to have been in use for perhaps a season or two, then a new hut was built usually partially cutting into an earlier one. We found no accumulation of debris and despite sieving, relatively few finds. This area might also be interpreted as a pre-village hunting camp, although close examination of the finds may throw more light on the subject.

2. Trench Joining the Sanctuary Area to the Village.

This work had been started in 1967, and had revealed the top of a large wall, 2.75 metres wide, coming slightly diagonally from the village and turning sharply south to cut the sanctuaries off from the village.

Results: The part of the wall running back to the village had been robbed anciently until only a scatter of stones on the soft sand underlying the whole site remained.

The excavations here proved thoroughly uneconomic and unrewarding, entailing the removal of about two metres of sand in which a mixture of Nabataean/Roman pottery and some Neolithic flints showed that whatever had been there originally had been removed and the entire area thoroughly churned up. The wall seems to have had two phases. The part running N-S is rougher and could have formed part of the later terracing that had so mauled the site. Some slight evidence and a great deal of hypothesis points towards this interpretation. About four metres south of the point where the wall was standing about a metre high, some very large natural boulders were found. These were over a metre long, one was laid flat in the manner of the huge slabs in the sanctuaries, about five metres away, another had been pushed half over it and a third, also 1.27 metres long and very thick had also been pushed half over and then abandoned (Pl. I:1). It is tempting to suggest that this was the point when the stone-robbers' determination ran out. After removing a large part of the village for their terracing they were faced with the great free-standing stone wall. This was removed until a point roughly coinciding with the large boulders. As the sanctuaries contained even larger boulders and flat slabs they contented themselves with breaking off the top of the standing stone where it rose above the ploughline and abandoned their endeavours. Below this level were the hearths and floors lying directly on the soft sand. Continuing the trench and in view of its unrewarding returns, the width was reduced from ten metres to two metres. At the end against the village deep soundings showed that the third terrace wall of the three main ones that have caused such destruction to the village, cuts straight down and removes every vestige of the buildings leaving only a bare 0.10 m. of tip. In view of this the rest of the trench was abandoned as being unlikely to produce anything in a stratified context, and thoroughly uneconomic as well.

3. The Village.

Because the architectural evolution as

developed at Beidha forms its unique contribution to Neolithic studies, it has become impossible to dig further in the site area without destroying part of this evidence. With this in mind, a series of small soundings were made below floors or in open spaces outside the earliest buildings extent. Two houses whose west walls had long been visible in the eastern section were also fully excavated.

Results: Below the main levels small soundings were made with satisfactory results. For example, Level IV in the north part of the village was founded into the pre-village hearths, in the centre of the village the same appears to have been the case. Level III cuts down into IV in the north part and the pre-village levels lie directly below the floor, but this is not the case in the centre where Level IV runs on below. In the eastern part Level IV has been almost entirely removed by Levels III and II which rest just above Level V which has also had most of the exterior walls removed, and so on.

The excavation of the two houses entailed first removing some 1.50 metres of sand before reaching the wall-tops. These proved to be of the Level IV type of house. One has been cut by the third terrace wall across its eastern side. This house has a fine plastered floor and two platforms of stone boulders. One against the north wall, the other near the centre, a quern lay close by. In the north-west corner is a large stone bowl with a neat stone foundation set in the floor round its base. (Pl. I: 2).

The other house was later, its south wall cutting off the entrance steps to the first described. This house had a small round hearth with a raised sill plastered at one with the floor, a rough stone platform, a quern and various ground-stone implements scattered about the floor. On a level with the top of the wall as left by the later terrace, were the remains of the floor of another house of similar type, though probably of later date. Here was the fragment of a plaster red floor with a quern set into it, a flat flagstone table and only a fraction of the interior wall; the terrace wall cuts straight through at this point.

Other soundings were made along the outside, east, of the terrace wall. Its western part did not cut down to the soft sand, but left about 0.50 m. of tip from the village and a number of superimposed plastered floor fragments with no trace of any walls. In the centre of the terrace wall, as we have seen, the village is entirely cut off. In the east three deep soundings revealed no trace of buildings, but deep tip.

4. The Natufian.

In previous seasons the Natufian had been found in quantity along the talus of the *Tell* weathered by Seyl 'Aqlat, soundings inside the village also showed this horizon to be running at least halfway across the build-up area. Further work here would increase the risk of future erosion.

Results: Soundings were made in the trench joining the sanctuary area to the village. The first was made about twenty-five metres from the village, a very deep and narrow trench, but with no result. The second was made ten metres from the village and carried down to more than four metres, again with no result. Soundings along the talus with Seyl 'Aqlat which had been so prolific in the past showed that the Natufian peters out from a point roughly midway across the village from N-S. The

sounding made below the northern extremity of the excavated area still produced a fair sample of flints, but in nothing like the number and variety of those further south.

The excavation of Beidha cannot be profitably continued. The site has now been fenced and will be left open for the future.

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