



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# THE NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY FOUNDATION BULLETIN

NUMBER 60

May 2019



## Pella in Jordan 2017

### From Canaanite Town to Medieval Medina

By Stephen Bourke

*The just-completed 2019 season at Pella (our very successful 40th anniversary season) will be reported in a forthcoming edition of the Bulletin.*

#### Introduction

Excavations at Pella (Tabaqat Fahl) continued over a six-week period between 8 January and 15 February 2017, the twenty-ninth season of Sydney University excavations in conjunction with the Dept. of Antiquities Jordan.

Work this season concentrated on four main areas, all previously worked, although one (Area XXVIII) not for twenty years. The main effort on the south side of the main mound (Area XXXII), continued the exploration of two major architectural complexes, the Iron Age 'Civic Building' (Trench XXXIIF), and the Bronze Age 'Palatial Residence' below it (Trench XXXIIBB).

In a new development (Area XXVIII) some 15m to the west of the Palatial Residence excavations, we opened two new 9 x 8m trenches (Trenches XXVIID and E), to begin explorations in the region of what

we hope will prove to be the western rooms of the Bronze Age 'Palatial Residence'.

Towards the centre of the main mound (Area XXIII), we continued work on the Hellenistic 'town house' complex, expanding work some 5 x 4m to the east of 2015 exposures, while completing work in the original 15 x 5m exposure (Trench XXIIID). A new initiative (Trench XXIIIF), some 15m south of Trench XXIIID, began the exploration of a large Mameluke era (c. 1250–1500 CE) 'civic compound', probably a secular counterpart to the nearby mosque (Area XVII), dug more than thirty years ago.

Finally, excavations continued on the east summit of Tell Husn (Area XXXIV), this year concentrating on earliest strata at the base of the thousand-year long (c. 3700–2700 BCE) Early Bronze Age sequence (Trenches XXXIVE and F).

# Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are

By Karyn Wesselingh

Written over 200 years ago by Jean Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826), the title statement is probably true for much of recent human history. Can what you eat define your cultural identity? As Australians, most of us would consider vegemite consumption as a strong indicator of cultural identity. A season at the Australian dig at Pella would not be complete without jars of vegemite gracing the table: it is one of the things that identifies us as Australian.

It was this association with diet and identity that I was trying to define when I studied the animal bones from Jebel Khalid in Syria, where an Australian team has excavated for more than 20 years until the Civil War broke out in 2011; and where I was lucky enough to spend two seasons working on my research. The site is situated on a rocky outcrop on the west bank of the Euphrates River and affords wonderful views up and down the river. This expansive view of the movements along the river was undoubtedly the reason why the Seleukids built a settlement here in the early 3rd century BCE.

The civil war has prevented further fieldwork and has resulted in the looting and destruction of the stores and parts of the site itself, but fortunately the majority of animal bones had been processed and studied. Animal bones are one of the most common finds from sites in the Near East and I analysed over

10,000 fragments during my time at Jebel Khalid. I was specifically looking at variations in the species recovered from the various areas of the site. There were very few fish bones overall, and given Jebel Khalid's location on the river, we could have expected fish to have been part of the diet. Most of the bones were collected by hand—so many of the small fish bones would have been missed—but analysis of results for each individual area showed that all of the fish bones had come from trenches on the Acropolis. I also looked at the results of the animal bone studies from previous seasons and found that overall there were at least ten-times more fish bones found on the Acropolis and Palaestra than for all other areas of the site. In addition, the diachronic analysis of the fish bones from the Acropolis has found that they were all recovered from the earliest phases of settlement.

One possible explanation for this pattern of distribution is that there was a regional prohibition on fish consumption that was embedded in the local indigenous culture. In the early days of settlement those people occupying the Acropolis and utilising the Palaestra identified strongly with Greek culture and were therefore not bound by any local food taboos. But in subsequent generations, as there was a merger of traditions, and a cultural identity that was more aligned with the local cultural norms, this taboo was adopted by the community at Jebel Khalid.

There is no evidence of long term occupation of the site prior to the Hellenistic period. The excavated structures including the Housing Insula,

*View from the Acropolis Palace at Jebel Khalid.*





Some of the fish bones recovered from the Acropolis Palace at Jebel Khalid.

Acropolis Palace, Temple and Palaestra, were initially constructed during the early phases of settlement. These buildings for the most part were constructed to a Greek or Hellenistic plan. This is not unexpected as the original inhabitants of the site were believed to have been soldiers from the Seleukid army, settled in the area to observe and monitor this river crossing. However, such major construction work as this would have required the use of local labour and we can see this local influence in both the architecture and the material culture. The temple is probably the best example of this cultural fusion with its modest Greek hexastyle amphiprostyle pseudo-Doric exterior but with a Near Eastern broad tripartite interior. From the early days of settlement there was a desire to appear Greek while paying some homage to the local traditions.

This 'Greekness' appears to have been reflected in the animal bones especially those areas that more closely align with Greek culture, such as the Acropolis Palace and the Palaestra. The Acropolis Palace, in its construction and material finds, made heavy allowance for receptions and entertaining. The governor and his men were expected to behave socially as Greek Macedonians banqueting on all kinds of meat. The animal bones from the Acropolis show a wide variety of animals, including domestic sheep, goats, chicken and pigeons, and wild fauna such as deer, onager and fish, were consumed as would have been expected from settlers with a Greek/Macedonian cultural identity. In Classical Greece the meat diet was often varied and included fish and other wild species. Fresh fish was considered a luxury item in ancient Greece.

If the Greek/Macedonians were prepared to eat fish, especially in the early days of settlement, why was fish consumption not apparent in the other areas of the site where the cultural fusion was more

evident, such as the Housing Insula? If the literary evidence, documented more than 400 years after the abandonment of the site, is to be believed, there was a taboo against the consumption of fish imposed by the regional deity Atargatis.

Atargatis, or the Syrian Goddess (so called by Lucian in his book *The Syrian Goddess*), was one of the principal deities of the region. At nearby Menbij, Lucian (c. 125–180 CE) comments on the presence of a temple and pond dedicated to Atargatis. The pond was filled with sacred fish including one fish adorned with gold jewellery. The Temple is now a football field, but the pond was still evident as late as 1909 when Gertrude Bell passed through and watered her camels there.

This association of fish with Atargatis and a prohibition against eating fish has been noted in other ancient texts. Athenaeus (born late 2nd century CE) notes that *'the Syrian Queen, Gatis ...announced that no one was to eat fish except Gatis'*. Porphyry (c. 234–305 CE) comments that if the Syrians ate fish they would suffer *'loss of self-control, their feet and belly swell'*. One could suggest that this was a protective taboo given that you might become quite sick from eating fish in such a warm environment if it is left for any period of time.

While the original Greek/Macedonian settlers ate fish, over time, with subsequent generations, perhaps the link with Greece and Greek identity became weaker and the occupants of the Acropolis came to identify more strongly with local traditions including the fish taboo, imposed by Atargatis. Ultimately they may have chosen to follow the local religious custom by not eating fish. In doing so they demonstrated that perhaps their cultural identity was more closely aligned to the local culture: they became Syrian Greeks. ■