

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-13
Rabi'a Time

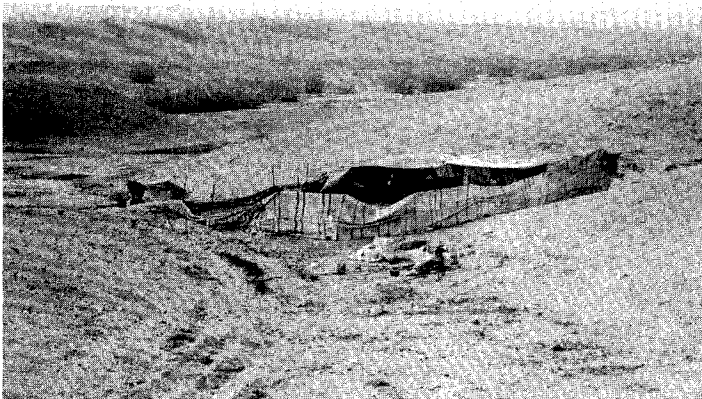
3 Yishay St.
Abu Tor
Jerusalem, Israel
April 22, 1986

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

In late February, the landscape of the northern Negev desert is deceptively verdant. The winter rains, even in this third consecutive year of below-average rainfall, had greened the rolling hills, providing the rich grazing land that the local Bedouin and their flocks of sheep and goats need to survive. Half-concealed in the ravines and gullies that descend toward the bed of the Beersheva Valley were the winter encampments of the family groups that had settled here to

take advantage of the natural richness. But the season they call al-Rabi'a, "the time of the spring pastures," is short, especially in years like this. Within a month or two, the area would be brown, dry, and deserted. The flocks and the families that tend them would move off, following the rhythm of the seasons, toward the summer grazing lands around the perennial springs on the coastal plain.



Bedouin tent by the Beersheva Valley
Winter 1986

I had come to the northern Negev with Dr. Thomas Levy of the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem to learn

about his recent work in the region. For the last nine years, Levy has been exploring and excavating ancient sites around the modern city of Beersheva, and during that time he has developed a deep interest in the diverse cultures and lifeways of the modern inhabitants of this region as well. For in the present, no less than in its long history, the northern Negev is occupied by a patchwork of distinct human communities-- from the Bedouin camps and villages in the far east of the region, to the high-rise apartment blocks and office buildings of Beer-

sheva in the center, to the sprawling kibbutzim on the western plains, to the ancient city of Gaza by the sea.

Each of these distinct human communities, living in varying degrees of coexistence with its neighbors, represents a distinct way of coping with the region's environment, producing its characteristic architecture, customs, and styles. As an archaeologist, Levy is particularly interested in the way in which these cultural adaptations are continually changing, and none of the modern inhabitants of the Negev has undergone a transformation as dramatic as the Bedouin. A century ago, the tribal confederations of the Tiaha, Tarabin, and Azazma represented almost the entire population of this region, living and migrating with the rhythm of the seasons, supplementing their herding with sporadic dry farming and camel transport. But with the decision of the Ottoman authorities to bring the Negev under the control of the central government, and with the progressive modernization that came during the British Mandate and since the rise of the State of Israel, the way of life of the Bedouin has been profoundly changed.

The seasonal encampments of the Bedouin in the Beersheva Valley are, in fact, some of the last vestiges of the old way of living. Throughout the entire region, permanent Bedouin settlements have been established on the former seasonal pastures, and the inhabitants are turning increasingly to intensive agriculture and wage labor to support themselves. As townsmen and villagers, the Bedouin of the Negev no longer need to follow the seasons. With access to fresh water for irrigation piped in from the sources of the Jordan River in the far north of the country, and being closely linked to Israeli economy, many Bedouin now find the advantages of settled life hard to resist. With the dramatic increase in population throughout the entire region, seasonal migration is both impractical and increasingly difficult. Settled life now offers a never-ending Rabi'a time.

For many outside observers, the sedentarization of the Bedouin of the Negev is a sign of inevitable progress, but as I learned from Tom Levy, there is another perspective from which it can be viewed. The region's archaeological remains provide evidence for several periods of extensive settled occupation before the 20th century. In the Byzantine period (4th- 7th centuries AD), this area was dotted with cities, farmsteads, churches, and monasteries. In the Iron Age (10th- 6th centuries BC) and in the Middle Bronze I period (22nd- 20th centuries BC), the Negev was also extensively populated with permanent settlements. Throughout the millennia, it seems, the Negev has been the scene of a continuously shifting balance between settled agriculture and nomadic pastoralism.

Levy's particular interest is in tracing the origins of these sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary lifestyles, and he believes that he has found them in the changes that took place in the Negev approximately 6500 years ago. It was then, during the Chalcolithic period, that the first permanent agricultural communities were established along the banks of the Beersheva Valley, and it seems that even in their earliest stage of development they contained both a farming and a pastoral component, whose shifting balance would be so

crucial for the region's subsequent history. But knowing precisely when pastoralism and intensive agriculture first emerged in the northern Negev is only the first step toward the goal of understanding why. And it has been Tom Levy's archaeological challenge to reconstruct the changes in the relationship between man and the environment in the Chalcolithic period in the hope that they might shed some light on the character of the changes going on in the region today.

* * *

The archaeological background to Tom Levy's recent discoveries is a story of slow progress, for the Chalcolithic culture was first distinguished under mistaken premises and it took years of digging and research until it could be fitted into its proper place in the history of the Middle East. The story began in 1929, when Father Alexis Mallon, director of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem, was searching the northeastern shore of the Dead Sea for the remains of the divinely destroyed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but discovered the site of Tuleilat Ghassul instead. The thick accumulation of ashes that covered the small hillocks (tuleilat, in Arabic, means "small tells") initially led Mallon to the conclusion that he had discovered Gomorrah. But eight subsequent seasons of digging at the site proved him wrong.

The archaeological remains uncovered at Ghassul were distinctive. Mallon and the other members of his expedition found evidence of a large and flourishing agricultural village founded during the little-known period of transition between the Stone and Bronze Ages-- a period they had great difficulty dating, but which later research showed to have occurred between 4500 and 3200 BC. Although the abundance of flint tools at the site indicated that this was still the inhabitants' primary raw material, the presence of a few copper implements showed that the techniques of metalworking were already known.

The pottery vessels found in the houses and courtyards of the village included types never before encountered: cone-shaped drinking vessels, huge storejars with modeled clay "rope" decoration, and large, two handled clay imitations of filled goatskins, apparently used as suspended butter churns. The many silos and grindstones emphasized the community's settled, agricultural character. And most striking of all was the abundance of artistic expression: elaborate painted decoration on some of the pottery, delicately carved bone and shell pendants, and colorful frescoes of geometric designs and mythological creatures on some of the remaining walls.

This effusion of productivity and creativity was unknown in the previous Neolithic-- "New Stone Age"-- period, and Ghassul clearly represented a significant leap forward in culture, into a stage dubbed the Chalcolithic or "Copper-Stone Age." And as the excavations at other sites proceeded, it gradually became clear that Tuleilat Ghassul was just one site in a much larger cultural complex.

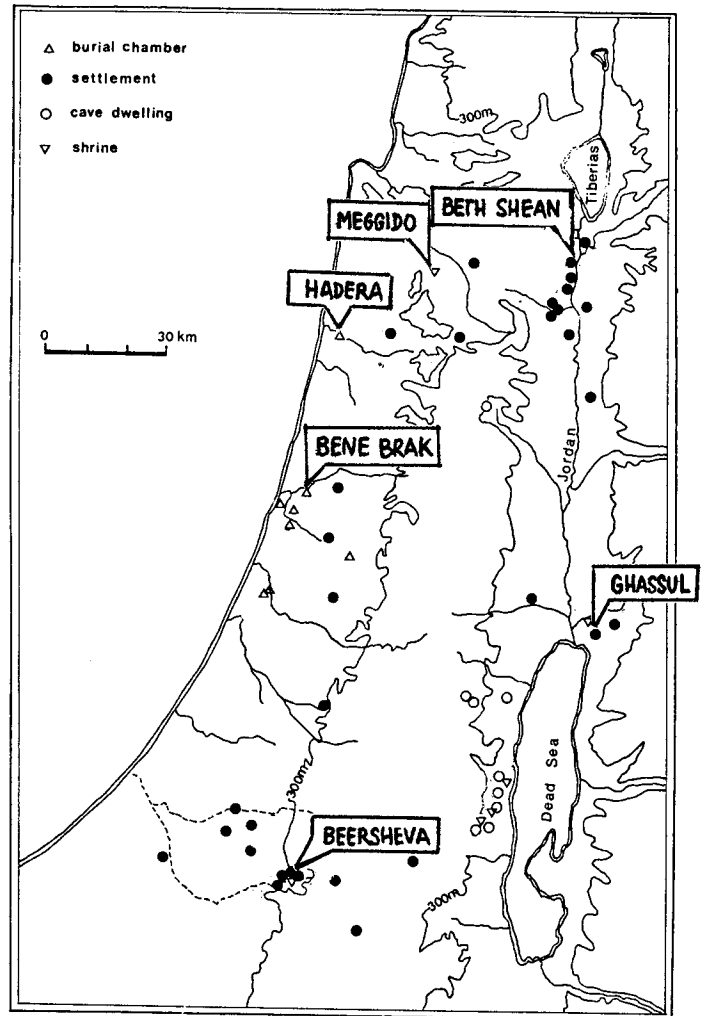
Beginning in the 1930's, development projects on both sides of the Jordan River helped the archaeological progress along. With the

construction and expansion of modern settlements, many Chalcolithic sites were recognized and the finds they contained provided surprising new understandings of the Chalcolithic culture itself. In excavations of burial caves on the coastal plain, at the sites of Hadera and Bene Brak, Professor Eliezer Sukenik of the Hebrew University discovered dozens of "house-shaped" clay ossuaries, or bone containers, accompanied by pottery identical to types known from Ghassul. Throughout the north of the country, Chalcolithic levels were found at the base of the ancient cities of Megiddo and Beth Shean, among others. And with the expansion of the modern city of Beersheva in the 1950's, a unique variant of the Chalcolithic culture was found in the northern Negev as well.

The Chalcolithic sites in the northern Negev were surprising in their size and complexity. Just as was the case with the Chalcolithic sites in the more well-watered regions of the country, the settlements along the banks of the Beersheva Valley supported themselves by a mixture of herding and farming, and they also provided evidence for trade and specialized crafts.

At the sites of Tell Abu Matar, Bir es-Safadi, and Horvat Beter, French and Israeli excavators uncovered Chalcolithic villages that contained workshops for ivory and basalt carving and copper smelting, processes for which the raw materials, not naturally found in the Negev, would have to be obtained by barter or trade.

Yet of all the regions in which the Chalcolithic culture had been found so far, the northern Negev was perhaps the most unlikely, in light of its difficult, semi-arid environment. And the mystery of how the people of that period had been able to support themselves by agriculture-- in addition to herding-- was deepened by the suddenness of their initial settlement. No permanent communities had existed in this region before the Chalcolithic period and a thousand years would pass before it was intensively settled again. The explanations for this phenome-



Early discoveries of the Chalcolithic culture in Israel and Jordan-- after Levant 1978.

non therefore ascribed it entirely to outside influences; many scholars assumed that the sudden leap forward in civilization had been brought into the country by an alien and short-lived race of invaders from Transjordan, or from points even farther to the north.

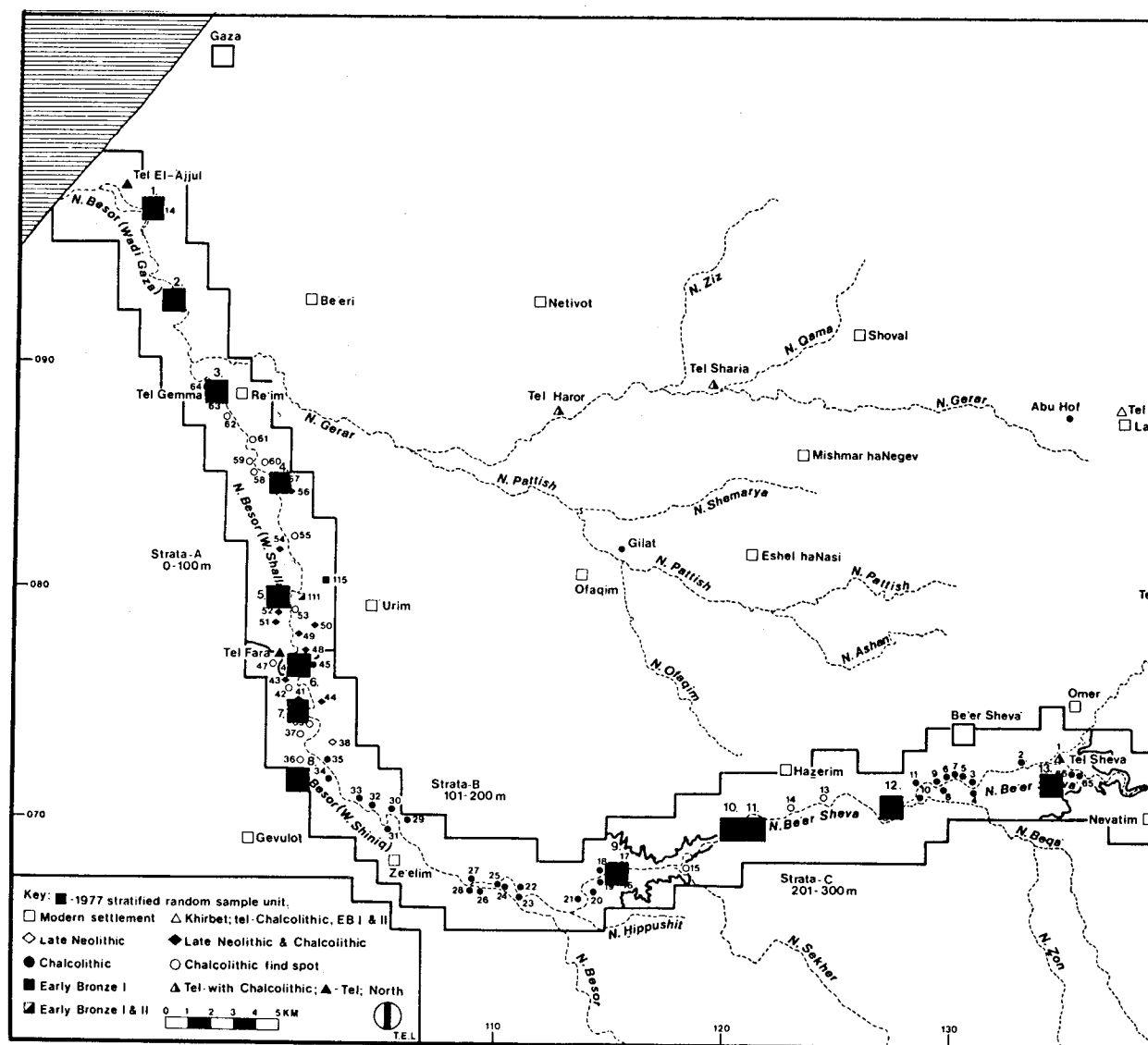
And until recently, few archaeologists believed that the Chalcolithic culture of the northern Negev could, in any sense, be ascribed to local developments. Like the modern sedentarization of the Bedouin of the region, the Chalcolithic interlude was seen as just an historical curiosity, with no local predecessors, entirely influenced from outside. But today, it is becoming increasingly evident that this approach was mistaken. Tom Levy is one of a growing number of scholars who have discovered that an understanding of the interaction of a region's indigenous peoples with the natural environment can provide explanations for even the most dramatic cultural change.

* * *

Tom Levy's first encounter with the Chalcolithic remains of the northern Negev came in 1977, when, as a graduate student in archaeology at the University of Sheffield in England, he realized that there was a great deal to be learned about the period besides its impressive sites and artifacts. Having participated in environmental investigations of the rise of settled agriculture and complex society in such diverse archaeological locales as the Rincom Valley of Arizona and the Greek islands of the northern Aegean, he was anxious to discover if an environmental approach would shed some new light on the Negev as well. His plan was to undertake a detailed archaeological survey of ancient sites and their locations along the 110 km length of the most important seasonal drainage system of the region: the Beersheva Valley and its continuation to the coast as it joined the outlet of the Besor Valley.

Earlier scholars had noted that the Chalcolithic period brought a great population rise to the area, a fact made clear by the sheer number of Chalcolithic, as opposed to earlier Neolithic sites. But none had tried to determine the relationship of the population rise to the environment, to see into which areas the growing population had spread. Levy believed that this distinction would be highly significant, for the valley system he planned to investigate passes through three quite different environmental zones.

Along the coastal plain, the land is level and well-watered, providing the best conditions for settled agriculture. Several perennial springs in the area buffer the effects of the meager and sometimes irregular rainfall, and the extremes of temperature and dryness are relatively moderate. Farther east, however, the foothill zone is semi-arid. Before the advent of irrigation, agriculture here was difficult, except in the immediate vicinity of the valley bed, with its high ground water level and seasonal floods. And at the eastern end of the area, the conditions are even less hospitable. The landscape, greened only briefly in winter, becomes increasingly rugged as it drops off steeply toward the western shore of the Dead Sea.



Western section of Levy's 1977-9 survey. Black blocks are the initial survey areas. Site #18 is Shiqmim.

Levy's 1977 survey of selected sections along the valley confirmed his initial assumptions, and a more comprehensive exploration, undertaken in 1978 and 1979, filled in the details. The distribution of the sites of the various periods did, in fact, show a clear preference for particular environments. While the Neolithic sites were all located near the springs on the coastal plain, the Chalcolithic sites-- some more than three times larger than those of the preceding period-- were located for the most part in the bed of the Beersheva Valley as it passed through the semi-arid foothill zone. The only Chalcolithic sites near the coast were small settlements, apparently seasonal encampments, just satellites of the larger communities. And while it was clear that the population centers had shifted inland, Levy was at pains to understand why the people of the Chalcolithic

period had chosen the marginal foothill territory.

Adaptation, it gradually emerged, was the answer. Levy found that the intensive Chalcolithic movement eastward was the combined result of population pressure and agricultural innovation, not the arrival of an alien race. The increase from 11 sites of the Neolithic period to 57 of the Chalcolithic indicated how dramatically the population had risen, far outstripping the carrying capacity of the land around the coastal springs. A gradual expansion eastward resulted, Levy believes, not from invasion, but from the simple need for more farmland. And as he began to explore and map the Chalcolithic sites along the banks of the Beersheva Valley, he found that in the 5th millennium BC, necessity was already the mother of invention. The new inhabitants of the valley had constructed a complex of terrace walls and water diversion systems to maximize the irrigation potential of the seasonal floods.

This environmental interpretation of Chalcolithic agriculture confronted Levy with an unexpected question, for the intensive exploitation of the floodplains of the valley would have prevented their use for the grazing of flocks. In the previous Neolithic period, there was adequate pasture land for year round grazing, but the Chalcolithic settlements were situated in a much drier area. In the late spring, the livestock would have to be kept away from the fields in the valley, and would have been unable to survive in the surrounding dry plain. The only solution would have been for the people of the Chalcolithic period to graze their flocks on the coastal plain as their Neolithic predecessors (or ancestors?) had done. But the distance to the summer grazing grounds from the main villages now required the services of specialized herders, and Levy came to the conclusion that the seasonal camps of the Chalcolithic period on the coastal plain were evidence of the emergence of the process of seasonal migration that survives among the Bedouin of the Negev today.

This finding was ironic, for since the beginning of western exploration in the Middle East, many scholars had viewed pastoral nomadism as an extremely primitive stage of human development, just one rung above the Stone Age hunter-gatherers on the natural ladder of progress upward toward sedentary, agricultural life. But the results of Levy's survey along the Beersheva Valley contradicted that neat evolutionary theory; he was convinced that specialized pastoralism was a development resulting from an advance in the techniques of sedentary, floodwater agriculture. And as he began excavations at the site of Shiqmim, one of the largest Chalcolithic sites in the valley, he found confirmation for this hypothesis-- and some new indications of the striking complexity of the cultural milieu in which specialized pastoralism was born.

* * *

If I had been expecting an impressive ancient ruin-- remains of fortifications, palaces, or temples-- I would have been disappointed by my first glimpse at the site of Shiqmim. But as I soon learned, the site possesses a different kind of impressiveness. Stretching

over nearly 25 acres of the northern bank of the Beersheva Valley, this huge Chalcolithic village is among the largest and best preserved in the entire area. Levy's excavations have revealed a tracery of low walls just below the surface, delineating a congested area of houses and courtyards. And as he explained to me as we walked through the excavation areas, this was just the residential nucleus of a much larger community. To the east, on a series of natural hillocks, were areas for workshops, and on the opposite bank and slightly downstream were several subsidiary Chalcolithic sites, all connected to the regional center at Shiqmim.

The village at Shiqmim-- its modern Hebrew name given for the sycamore trees that still grow in the vicinity-- was actually discovered twice. In 1977, at the end of his first season of exploration in the valley, Levy came upon it unexpectedly and was amazed at the quantity of Chalcolithic pottery fragments, flint tools, and architectural elements visible on the surface of the valley bed. Unlike the Chalcolithic sites closer to modern towns and settlements, Shiqmim hardly seemed disturbed since the time of its abandonment. Yet Levy was not the first archaeologist to be impressed by its richness; when he discussed his discovery with David Alon, the local officer of the Israel Department of Antiquities, Levy learned that Alon had mapped the site and collected some of its surface pottery more than twenty years before. Chalcolithic research had, of course, progressed substantially since the mid-1950's, and with the possibility that Shiqmim provided for testing some of Levy's new hypotheses about the nature of the Chalcolithic culture and economy, the two scholars decided that the time had come for an extensive excavation there.

The dig began slowly, in 1978, with a trial probe on one of the eastern hillocks, and in the following year, with the excavation of a large building in the central village itself. The initial results were encouraging; the discovery of a large room containing a cache of complete Chalcolithic pottery vessels and the remains of a furnace for copper working encouraged them to expand the excavation areas. And with the support of the National Geographic Society, and with a large team of volunteer diggers and archaeological specialists, they returned to Shiqmim in 1982 to begin three years of extensive excavation, during which they gradually uncovered more than 2100 square meters of the site.

Although that area represents only slightly more than 2% of the total extent of the Chalcolithic settlement, Levy and Alon have already gained a clear impression of its central planning and distribution of specialized compounds for crafts and domestic activities. In sharp contrast to the more haphazardly constructed villages of the Neolithic period, all the structures so far uncovered at Shiqmim are aligned on a uniform NW-SE axis, at one point divided by a carefully planned street. And the evidence of the individual artifacts, although in many respects similar to those from the other Chalcolithic sites near Beersheva, emphasized the unique character of the culture at Shiqmim. Several previously unknown pottery types showed the innovativeness of the local potters, and a small, human-shaped statuette, similar in style to an ivory figurine found at Bir es-Safadi, was

skillfully carved from imported black basalt.

More important than evidence of artistic expression, however, was Levy and Alon's reconstruction of the village economy. The finds in some of the buildings, whose varying size apparently signified varying importance or function, reinforced the emerging picture of the country's first truly complex society. Even in some of the simpler domestic structures, the discovery of agricultural tools, grinding stones for grain, flint tools for butchering, and flint scrapers and copper awls for leatherworking provided evidence of a community that possessed the technology and the craft specialization that enabled it to prosper in a difficult, semi-arid environment.



Dr. Levy (center) explains the layout of the Chalcolithic village to visitors.

The settlement layers so far excavated represent only the last stages in Shiqmim's existence; a small trial trench dug in 1982 to test the total depth of accumulation revealed that the Chalcolithic village here had a long history. In contrast to the earlier interpretations of the Chalcolithic culture in the Negev as a relatively brief phenomenon, the excavation team at Shiqmim found that beneath the modern surface lie 23 superimposed layers of settlement. And Carbon-14 tests performed on samples

of organic material from various parts of the village translated that depth of accumulation into calendar years. For almost a millennium, from approximately 4200 to 3300 BC, the village was repeatedly rebuilt and expanded, as the inhabitants both utilized and transformed their environment.

Floodwater agriculture, as Levy had initially suspected, was the main reason for the changes here. Among the botanical specimens recovered from the excavated levels were samples of barley, lentils, and emmer wheat. A recent advance in archaeobotanical analysis added new understandings of the nature of Chalcolithic agriculture; an examination of phytoliths-- microscopic silica formations that coalesce in the cells of living plants and which remain in the soil even after the plants themselves have decayed-- revealed the distribution and character of the food plants produced at Shiqmim.

Dr. Arlene Rosen, one of the pioneers of phytolith analysis, examined soil samples from Shiqmim and came up with some unexpected insights. The first fact to emerge from her analysis was the preponderance of barley over the other cultivated plants. Although barley is today mostly used for livestock fodder in the Negev, it apparently provided the Chalcolithic farmers with a crop for human consumption uniquely resistant to the dangers of the Negev's climate. Since barley matures early in the spring, unlike late-ripening wheat, it is harvested before the onset of the devastatingly hot and dry early summer winds. And even more striking was Rosen's analysis of the structure of all the grain crops: the phytoliths they produced were, surprisingly, multi-celled.



After the floods: even today, water remains in the bed of the Beersheva Valley long after the end of the rainy season.

This condition, I learned, is produced when grain crops mature in waterlogged fields, when the silica-rich standing water increases the accumulation of that substance within the plant cells. Such a situation would at first seem improbable in the Negev, where the grain naturally ripens long after the end of the winter rains. But Tom Levy sees this condition as a confirmation of one of his most basic hypotheses. If the inhabitants of the

village had indeed constructed diversion and storage channels in the valley bed to maximize the effects of the seasonal floods, their crops would have matured with an artificially enhanced water supply.

One conclusion led to another. If, in late spring, at the beginning of the dry season, the valley terraces surrounding the village were filled with crops ready for harvest, there would have been mounting pressure for the members of the community to find adequate grazing land for their livestock. A classification of the hundreds of animal bones recovered from the village showed that herding was an important part of the village economy. Ninety-four percent of all the bones recovered in the excavation were of domesticated sheep and goats. And the only way that this livestock could be raised, and at the same time kept away from the fields, was-- as the survey had already suggested-- that a portion of the community would move westward with the sheep and goats toward the perennial springs on the coastal plain.

The results of the first four seasons of digging at Shiqmim (a fifth is planned for the autumn of 1986) have convinced Levy more firmly than ever that specialized pastoralism, of the type still practiced by the Bedouin of the Negev, emerged as the result of indigenous developments in the Chalcolithic period. And as the excavations have also shown, herding was but one of a number of specialized trades. The metal workers, potters, carvers, leather workers, farmers, and herders all played their assigned roles in the complex village economy. That was not the only innovation. Levy has also discovered that Chalcolithic specialization was accompanied by a surprising change in social organization.

* * *

Looking down on the Beersheva Valley from one of the high chalk ridges that line its course, it was easy to see why Tom Levy is so enthusiastic about the possibilities for continued excavation at Shiqmim. Although the floodplain is now deeply eroded, the late winter rains had greened its remaining surface, providing rich grazing grounds for the local Bedouins' flocks of fat-tailed Awassi sheep. The construction and maintenance of agricultural installations would have made the environment even richer in the Chalcolithic period. But Levy had not brought me up to the ridge to speak of archaeological potential or even to admire the landscape. He wanted me to see some of the most important archaeological discoveries he has so far made at the site: a series of pits and stone circles, the remains of the first Chalcolithic cemetery discovered in the northern Negev.



View of the Beersheva Valley from the cemetery near Shiqmim.

The burial customs of the Chalcolithic period had long presented an archaeological problem, for the most characteristic form of burial of that period-- the deposit of bones in house-shaped, clay ossuaries-- was known only from discoveries in caves along the northern coastal plain. No permanent settlements had been discovered in the vicinity of these cemeteries, and that fact had led some earlier scholars to suggest that the caves contained the burials of communities of primitive, wandering pastoralists from the Negev who deposited the remains

of their loved ones in their seasonal grazing grounds. But Levy, having come to the conclusion that only a small part of the community was engaged in seasonal migration, and were not in the least primitive, found that the discoveries in the cemetery at Shiqmim confirmed how permanent and elaborate the social structure of the inhabitants was.

In 1979, when Alon and Levy first discovered the cemetery, which lies approximately 200 meters northwest of the village, they were surprised by the unusual form of its monuments-- not caves, but low stone circles covered by a thin layer of soil. A similar, yet overlooked mode of Chalcolithic interment had been found decades before at the large cemetery near Tuleilat Ghassul in Jordan, and surviving examples, built in stone, from the same period in southern Sinai provided a likely reconstruction: tomb monuments in the form of cylindrical burial chambers, covered by flat roofs.

Earlier excavations of Chalcolithic burial deposits had concentrated on the artistic or utilitarian value of the grave goods, without trying to fit them into a larger social context. Levy, however, was anxious to see if any variation could be determined among the tombs in the cemetery, variation that might reflect the presence of special status or hierarchy. And in performing a detailed analysis of the finds in this cemetery, he was eventually able to suggest that the Chalcolithic specialization of crafts and intensive agriculture was accompanied and perhaps even directed by a clearly defined, hereditary leadership.

Among the 22 grave circles excavated in the cemetery, Levy found four distinct classes, each determined by the size, the elaborateness of construction, and the types of offerings that each contained. The largest of the grave circles was by far the most impressive; it was constructed entirely of blocks hewn from the nearby bedrock-- not haphazardly collected stones, as was more common-- and its offerings included items that were not found in any of the other monuments of the cemetery. The discovery of fragments of a clay ossuary in this grave circle put to rest the theories of a communal migration. And the fact that the ossuary contained the bones of an adult female suggested the prominent role that women may have played in this society.

Equally revealing was the fact that a child's bones were included among the burials in this circle, and the offerings that surrounded them were the most elaborate of all. They included shell pendants, carved in the same trapezoidal shape as pendants found at Tell Abu Matar near Beersheva, and which might, Levy suggested, be the symbol of a select social class or clan. In the earlier Neolithic period there had been no great disparity in the quantity of grave goods or the quality of burial, but customs had apparently changed. The fact that the most lavish burial at Shiqmim was given to a child seemed an indication of inherited status, as a member of the chosen clan that stood at the pinnacle of an emerging social pyramid.

These discoveries were only a beginning, for in 1982, three years after the first cemetery excavation, Levy and Alon returned to the ridge to uncover more of the cemetery site. Clearing an area more

than double the size of their first excavation, they uncovered 14 more grave circles with clear signs of social stratification. And they also discovered a previously unknown type of funerary structure that provided evidence of an elaborate, if grisly Chalcolithic ritual.

Ten stone-lined pits were dug at various points in the cemetery, each of them large enough to accommodate the body of an adult. Although they contained the characteristic bowls found in all of the grave circles, none of them-- even after careful sifting of their contents-- yielded even the tiniest fragment of human bone. Their function in the cemetery was therefore quite puzzling, but the secondary nature of Chalcolithic burial offered a key to solving the mystery. Since the vast majority of Chalcolithic burials were jumbled deposits of bones from which the flesh had apparently already decayed, it was evident that there must have been an elaborate process of exposure and slow deterioration of bodies, connected with religious ideas of a metamorphosis in an afterlife. The stone-lined pits at Shiqmim could have served as the place of this ritual, and in the construction of such specialized religious structures, the Chalcolithic culture once again showed itself to be surprisingly advanced. Along with pastoralism, craftsmanship, and social hierarchy, institutionalized religion had apparently emerged at this period, sanctifying the entire social order on which the life of the community was based.

Levy's survey and the Shiqmim excavations have therefore begun to reveal a new picture of the Chalcolithic culture of the northern Negev. Its complex social and economic structure was apparently not due to an invasion from outside the country, but to the evolving processes of adaptation to a difficult environment. The evolution of society along the Beersheva Valley-- and the emergence of pastoralism and other specializations within it-- was clearly a far more complex process than many earlier scholars were willing to believe.

* * *



The Bedouin village of Laqia.

Toward sunset, on the day of my first visit to the northern Negev with Tom Levy, I gained an unexpected modern perspective on the cultural, social, and economic changes he had begun to reconstruct at Shiqmim. Our short stay at the modern Bedouin settlement of Laqia, just a few miles northeast of Beersheva, provided

a glimpse at another culture in transition; the inhabitants, primarily of the al-Assad, Abu Abdun, and Qadeirat as-Sana tribes, have begun to adapt themselves to the advantages and burdens of a dramatically new way of life.

Scattered over the hillside is a collection of structures that illustrates the transition: modern concrete villas rise among corrugated metal sheds and shelters; a new clinic and school stand only a few meters away from traditional Bedouin tents. We had come to pay a visit to one of Laqia's leaders, a well-known folk healer, and we found him awaiting our arrival-- standing by the entrance to the shiq, or guest tent, a tangible sign of the Bedouin tradition that has not been abandoned yet.

We joined the other guests inside, sitting cross-legged on goat-hair carpets, leaning back on overstuffed cushions as our host ceremoniously offered us cigarettes and began to prepare small cups of sweet tea. The conversation was polite and cautious; though we had many questions to ask, they could not be asked bluntly. This was not an archaeological dig. Both Levy and I wanted to learn about the changes now occurring in village, the effects of settled life on traditional customs. And we learned that the changes were viewed with little regret, as necessary and inevitable. The former seasonal migrations have been replaced by a new way of living; many of the inhabitants now concentrate on intensive farming and specialized trades. Some are richer, some are poorer, but all, it seems, now have a stake in the development of their community.

The construction of the first permanent mosque in the village was a subject of general interest. Our host and the other guests explained that it would bring still more changes, for when the building is completed, there are plans to hire a full-time prayer leader or imam. This institutionalization of religion has already had an impact on the people of Laqia. "More and more of the young people are becoming religious," one of the guests told us, clearly providing an unspoken comparison to earlier times.

The talk quickly moved from the present to the past; our host knew of Levy's special interest in the area, and he wanted to offer us some of his own archaeological expertise. On a nearby hill, in the village cemetery, he told us, is the shrine of a holy man who had come here from Arabia centuries ago. Today this ancient figure is regarded as the founder of the community, an attribution that has become more important since the establishment of the permanent settlement. Many people, our host informed us, now go to his shrine for blessings, guidance, and favors. And he urged us, before leaving the village to pay a visit to the shrine ourselves.

We followed his advice, and when we arrived on the hill overlooking the valley, the rectangular structure was indeed unmistakable. Partially covered with green fabric, in the sacred color of Islam, it also bore an accumulation of white banners tied by recent visitors to memorialize the vows and prayers made at the spot. This holy man's tomb clearly provided the people of the village with a focus of reverence; around it were many traditional Bedouin graves-- small clusters of stone and unidentified heaps of earth. But as at Shiqmim in the Chalcolithic period, social changes were evident in the cemetery at Laqia. The transition in the way of life of the inhabitants found a correspondence in their way of death.



Posthumous status in the cemetery of Laqia.

Two gleaming white tombs of recent notables of the village, with their names and dates inscribed on their polished headstones, towered above the other, simpler graves. If this were an archaeological site and not a living community, it would be easy enough to come to conclusions about the effects of sedentarization, economic specialization, and the emergence of social hierarchy. And perhaps such conclusions would be justified, for the changes that the people of Laqia are now experiencing provide some striking resemblances to those of the past.

The same need to adapt constantly to the human and natural environment that, in the Chalcolithic period, created a pastoral way of life in the northern Negev is now bringing that way of life to an end. The pressure of growing population, the adoption of new technologies, and inevitable changes in social organization have accompanied the establishment of the permanent Bedouin settlements. The yearly migrations are over. Yet though these changes have superficially broken the people's connection with the seasons, I could sense that a different connection endures.

For more than 6000 years, the concept of Rabi'a, the time of the spring pastures, guided the rhythm of life here. But what Tom Levy has discovered for the Chalcolithic period is also true for the present. One stage of human existence gradually transforms itself into another through the necessity to survive. And the transformations experienced by a region's inhabitants are themselves just seasonal movements. Like Rabi'a itself, they are tacit recognitions of new ways of using the natural abundance that the environment provides.

Best Regards,

Nal

Received in Hanover 5/1/86