

BRAP BEAT

Introduction to BRAP 2022

By Monique Roddy



Welcome back to the *BRAP Beat*! This series will follow the excavations of the 2022 Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP). We excavate this season from June 26 to August 2 out on the north end of the Karak Plateau in Jordan, returning to Khirbat al-Balu'a for a third major season. We have a team that will peak at 45 participants this season, with 35 currently on site.

We originally planned to excavate Summer 2021, however, COVID-19 meant we shifted gears and "excavated" our records and artifacts stored at the Center for Near Eastern Archaeology at La Sierra University for an intensive two weeks in June. A team of students worked to restore a pithos from the 2017 season at Balu'a, to process pottery from the 2012, 2017, and 2019 seasons, and to help organize the artifacts from these three seasons as part of a fieldwork course taught by Kent Bramlett. Guest lecturers included Susan Penacho, who ran a GIS workshop using data from Balu'a, and Douglas Clark, who presented on cultural heritage preservation and presentation in Jordan. Some of the students also read and discussed theory, methodology, and case studies in Household Archaeology as part of a seminar course I taught. Most of the students who participated in the 2021 BRAP study season are now joining us in the field, connecting the potsherds and artifacts from the lab with the site from which they came.



Sunset tour of Balu'a



An inscription at Karak Castle (Ninow)

So what is new this season? Our larger team is easily accommodated in an enlarged Mujeb Hotel here in Karak. The second floor (4th if you're American!) was under construction during the 2019 season but is now complete. We arrived at the hotel on Wednesday, June 22, and have settled in quickly, spreading out our equipment to transform the hotel's banquet hall to dig lab once again.

Our team this season includes 13 staff members, 11 students registered for credit through La Sierra University (but representing several institutions, including University of Washington, University of California at San Diego, and St. Bernard's STM, each of whom has a staff member on the project), 21 volunteers, and 11 Jordanian workers. 12 team members are returning to the BRAP from earlier seasons, providing a core of experienced hands that help everyone adjust to a new routine. We will work with 4 different representatives from the Department of Antiquities, 3 of whom worked with us in 2019 (Riyad, Manar, and Wisal). We also find many familiar faces among our workers and supporting staff, including Youssef, our site guard, and Amar and Salem who help us transfer our tools to site every morning in their trademark turquoise truck.

We held orientations to Jordan and to excavating on Thursday and Friday. Team members braved their jet lag through sessions by our staff on adjusting to a new culture and on archaeological recording, including using our digital system OpenDig (supported remotely this season by Matt Vincent). Friday evening the team loaded up for their introduction to the site by sunset, a pleasant and golden time to step over and between the many basalt rocks of Balu'a. Saturday morning the team took a break and headed over to enjoy (re)visiting Karak Castle and the

Balu'a artifacts in the museum.



First week of excavations (Ninow)

Sunday, June 26, was our first day in the field. We've shifted this year to match Jordan's weekly schedule, working Sundays to Thursdays, with Fridays and Saturdays off. We are starting strong with enthusiastic students and volunteers! By the end of our first week of digging, square supervisors are getting into the groove of annotating daily progress photos of their areas, describing their walls and earth layers, and using scale rulers to create accurate top plans.

History of Excavations at Balu'a

By Friedbert Ninow

The first archaeological soundings at Balu'a were conducted by the British archaeologist J. W. Crowfoot in 1933. The Committees of the Palestine Exploration Fund and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem had asked Crowfoot to make preliminary soundings on the site to determine whether excavations at this site would be worthwhile. This is what Crowfoot wrote describing the site and its surroundings:

“The rolling plains of Moab looked intolerably dreary at this season; there was not a tree to be seen for miles, the ground was bare of vegetation and the villages few and mean... Balu'ah lies just under this mountain [Jeben Shihan] in a fork between two small tributaries of the Mojib. One of them is a broad featureless depression east of the site; the other, which circles close round it on the north and north west, is an astonishingly romantic little gully with steep sides of pillared basalt rising in tiers of precipitous steps from a tumbled mass of boulders. In the bottom of the gully there are a few dwarfed fig trees, and close to them four or five springs of excellent water which explain why this site was of importance...

The ruins are as gloomy and desolate as the plain on which they stand...

Balu'ah has therefore had a long history. At times it has been a place of some importance, but if we may judge from the complete absence of cut stones now on the site and from the small amount of accumulated debris, it never reached the same level as some other sites in Trans-jordan, both early and late... As a site for future excavations Balu'ah does not appear to the writer to be attractive” (J. W. Crowfoot, “An Expedition to Balu'ah,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 66:2 [1934]: 76-84).

For many years the site remained untouched by archaeologists. Only in 1986 did German archaeologist Udo Worschech (Theologisches Seminar Darmstadt & Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, Germany) begin his first soundings at the site. The discovery of an inscription that contained the word “king” increased interest in the site (see image above). With the introduction of the BRAP in 2012 a new phase of research has turned its focus on Balu'a.



Inscribed stone from Balu'a

BRAP 2022 Excavations

By Kent Bramlett

Our return to Balu'a after three years of anticipation brings with it certain hopes and objectives for the present season. The preservation of multiple occupation periods at Balu'a offers the potential to construct a better understanding of Iron Age Moab, and perhaps, also the preceding and subsequent periods as well. We are working toward refining our understanding of the ceramic typological developments on the Karak Plateau and will use short-lived 14C samples to date horizons that produce assemblages of ceramics that were used together, such as on house floors or fortification rooms.

Another broad objective this season is to obtain more data from the previous excavation areas to either support or modify our tentative conclusions on the sequence of construction and occupation in the main part of the city and the phasing and function of the fortifications separating it from the eastern expansion. Exploration of areas in the Islamic settlement will expand our understanding of the later centuries at Balu'a and lead to better conceptualizing this region's importance in trade and pilgrimage routes throughout time.



The Qasr

By Craig Tyson, Area Supervisor

The 2022 season of excavation at the Qasr aims to confirm the construction date of the Qasr by exposing another section of its foundation. This season we also aim to expose larger sections of two Iron Age buildings that were uncovered in 2017 and 2019 close to the northern wall of the Qasr. This first week of the season was spent cleaning the area of inter-seasonal debris and a large pile of rocks left from last season. Team Qasr, which includes Maggie, Mary, Sam, Joseph, Suleiman, and Jamal, is now poised to clarify the date of the Qasr and its relation to the adjacent buildings in the coming weeks. Charles Hughes-Huff joins this year as co-area supervisor and will be writing reports for the second half of the season.



The House

By Stephanie Selover, Area Director

In House A, we began the week by cleaning up the earth that had filled the 2019 excavations through a combination of backfill, erosion, and robber trenches. Rooms were filled with large amounts of rubble and one of the major walls along the northern edge of the house was partially destroyed during the off



Team House (Ninow)

season. Both of the new doorways exposed in 2019 attracted attention and were partially dug out. We decided to leave the large fallen boulders of the wall in place in hope that the wall can be partially reconstructed in the future.

Once all of the rubble was cleared we opened three areas in the House. The two doorways exposed in the 2019 season lead to a new room that Oliver, Carolyn, Megan and Naif will investigate. We were able to clear topsoil and find the first locus by the end of the week, revealing a large amount of stone rubble and a possible new wall in the middle of the space. Michaela, Craig, Asante, and Ahmad opened an “L”-shaped area that flanks Room A1 in order to better understand this space, which has been assumed to be the entry into the house. In 2019 this area revealed a high amount of burnt rubble and a fire feature/tabun, as well a number of parallel walls. We would like to see how these walls continue and to hopefully get a better idea of the use of this space. By the end of the first week, we had clarified the edges of the walls and begun to remove topsoil in the rest of the area. Finally, in the western series of small rooms, Dagmar, Kacey, Stelle, Majid, and Hassan are clearing out the earth not yet excavated in the 2019 season to reveal a possible third room. We intend first on clearing all rooms to the second major phase of use and then working to expose the earlier phase, which was minimally exposed in the 2012 probe directly above bedrock.

The Wall

By Owen Chesnut, Area Supervisor

We had a successful first week excavating at the Wall. A great group of students and volunteers moved many, many large stones and made a lot of progress towards our goals. In one square Jaime, Paul, Daniel, Yasser and Awwad are investigating a tower built on top of the Iron Age casemate fortifications. Our goal is to determine the tower’s date and function in order to better understand the fortification system at Balu’a. We cleared the top of the tower of fallen stones and vegetation and by the end of the week began to excavate down between its walls. In our second square Shaun, Sam, Sully, and Hamid are attempting to expose a cobblestone floor found in a small

probe during the 2019 season west of the Iron Age casemate wall. We hope to find occupation levels on top of the floor that will better help us understand the stratigraphy of the Iron Age and clarify the phasing of the fortification system. This week we cleared the top of two walls making up part of a building constructed against the casemate wall and made significant progress removing the rubble and rock tumble between those walls.



Team Wall (Ninow)

The Islamic Village

By Ian Jones, Area Director

New for 2022, BRAP is starting investigations of the large Islamic-period village in the southwestern portion of the site. During this season, excavations in the Islamic village will focus on a room in the large khan or road inn at the site's southwestern edge and a nearby Islamic period house. While surface pottery tells us that both the village and road inn were occupied during the Middle (1000-1400 AD) and Late (1400-ca. 1950 AD) Islamic periods, our main goal this season is to begin to clarify the chronology of the road inn as it relates to the chronology of the village, which will help us understand both the road inn's position at the edge of the village and what role it would have played in the day-to-day lives of Khirbat al-Balu'a's Islamic period villagers.

On the first day of the project, our team—Peter, Jadah, Roma, Saraa, Amar, Salem, and occasionally our bus driver, Khalid (who is really getting into archaeology!)—cleared the uppermost layer of rock collapse from both areas, and after this we opened excavations in the road inn. During



Team Islamic Village (Ninow)

the first week, we focused primarily on removing topsoil and a lot of rock collapse. We closed the week on Thursday by defining the room's main entrance into the road inn's large central courtyard. Very close to the surface we've already uncovered an architectural mystery. Each corner of the room has a series of stone platforms that seem to form steps (visible to the lower right of the team in their photo). We aren't yet sure whether these were steps, storage features, part of a larger architectural feature, or something else, but they do seem to be a later addition to the room, as the northeastern platform blocks an earlier exterior doorway. We will continue to excavate these features next week to clarify the stratigraphic relationship of the platforms and the building's main walls.

The 2019 Pithos Update

By Monique Roddy & Geoffrey Hedges-Knyrim

In 2019 the Qasr team unearthed an Iron IIC pithos (large storage jar) buried under the floor of a house. Though the pithos was nearly complete, it was broken and needed restoration. We brought the pithos to ACOR, the American Center for Research, in Amman where Naif Zaban of the ACOR Conservation Cooperative was able to restore the pithos. We were not able to return and pick up our pithos until this summer, but we did so our first full day in the country and on Wednesday brought it down, with permission of the Department of Antiquities, to the Karak Museum for eventual display. We also had two small Iron II bowls found in the House that were restored by Naif and also



The 2019 pithos buried in a floor



Naif Zaban with the Iron IIC pithos.
Photo courtesy of Barbara Porter.

returned to the

Karak Museum. Several objects from Balu'a are already on display in the Karak Museum and we hope to see our pithos and bowls set up in the Iron Age room soon!

Preliminary analysis of samples from the pithos have shown preservation of plant remains identifying legumes, including *Cicer arietinum* (chickpea), and cereals, including *Hordeum vulgare* (hulled barley) and *Triticum aestivum* (bread wheat). Weed seeds found in the pithos so far include *Lolium spp.* (ryegrass) and *Hordeum spp.* (wild barley). The preservation of these samples were so far not the result of a single event like a fire, but only analysis of the remainder of the pithos samples (total of 30 samples) will confirm this. Geoffrey is currently in the process of submitting an NSF grant to fund sorting, radiocarbon dating, and isotopic testing of the plant remains.