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# BRAP BEAT

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## Introduction to the Project and Team

By Monique Vincent



Welcome to the *BRAP Beat* Season 2, the newsletter following the excavations of the 2019 Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP). The BRAP is back in the field!

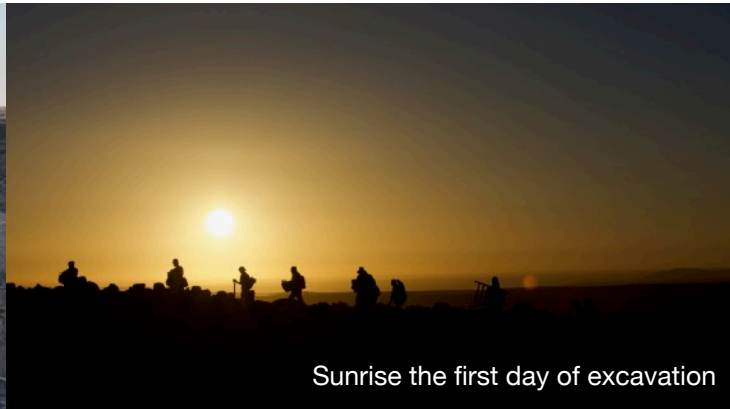
After our first season in 2017 we planned for a longer season in 2019 and here we are. Team members began arriving in Amman mid-June and in record time we were able to load all of our equipment and head down to Karak.

This season the team will top out at 36 people so it was no longer possible for us to stay in apartments in as-Smakiyya. We will miss our wonderful hosts there, though we are excited to see a few familiar faces from as-Smakiyya with our team this season, including our team guard Youssef and our Department of Antiquities representative Arwa.

The team is staying at al-Mujeb Hotel in Karak, a pleasant two-story structure built around a central courtyard. The hotel staff have been very welcoming and eager to merge hotel life and dig life into a schedule that works for all of us. When our day starts with breakfast at 4 AM and ends with quiet time at 8 PM, we know we bring a considerable shift to the usual summer schedule here in Jordan. Our bus driver Mohammad, who drives us to site everyday, feels this perhaps the most keenly.



Sunset tour of Balu'a



Sunrise the first day of excavation

The team was relatively complete by the time orientation began on Friday, 21 June. Team staff provided introductions to the history of archaeological work at Khirbat al-Balu'a, to the methodology used to excavate, and to the culture of Jordan. Nearly half of the team is new to Jordan so they enjoyed hearing from the dig "alumni" about new experiences to expect. We closed Friday night with a tour of Balu'a, enjoying sunset over the wadi and the cool evening temperatures for our first exploration of the site this season.

Saturday the team headed to the nearby Karak Castle to explore the medieval remains and the newly reopened Karak Museum, where some of the artifacts found at Balu'a in the past are on display. The new exhibits are informative about life on the Karak Plateau throughout the ages.

Monday, 24 June, was our first day in the field. Jordan provided an extra warm few days, with temperatures reaching the low 90s by late morning, but morale remained high and everyone was excited to start work. The excavation areas were quickly reopened and backfill removed, and new areas staked out and opened as well. The site toilet and shade tent were constructed centrally. By mid-week everyone had their daily routines established and moving smoothly.

We are excited to introduce the Pathways to Presentation Project this season. Dr. Douglas Clark led a team of workmen to build safe pathways across the site for the first two and a half weeks. The rough basalt stones that tumble across the site are encouraging indicators of the extent of habitation in the past but are not so easy to navigate. With a few tools in hand the team has cleared two-meter wide paths that lead from the central parking area to the three excavation areas. By the end of the second week improved paths connected all of the main areas. The speed of walking across site has picked up considerably! The project wrapped up this week by creating several pathways out to scenic spots overlooking the wadi below the site. The new paths were



Pathways to Presentation



Touring Karak Castle

particularly appreciated by a few representatives from ACOR, including Director Dr. Barbara Porter and Associate Director Dr. Jack Green, when they came out to tour the site for the first time since our work has begun. The American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) provides essential support to excavations in Jordan and we were thrilled to be able to showcase our team's hard work.

Twice a week staff specialists lecture in the evenings on topics related to their work or to the history of archaeological work in Jordan. The first week Dr. Kent Bramlett lectured on the archaeological periods in Jordan and Dr. Craig Tyson presented on the Moabites in historical and literary sources. The second week Dr. Friedbert Ninow discussed the Iron Age on the Moabite Plateau. Then lab staff showed the team their different areas of specialities, including geospatial recording and object and sample processing and photography. This week Dr. Regine Hunziker-Rodewald presented parallels to the figurines found so far this season and Betty Adams, a masters student in the archaeology program at La Sierra University, presented results of her residue analysis on cosmetic palettes, including one from Balu'a! The week closed with a presentation by Dr. Susan Penacho on the use of satellite imagery in monitoring cultural heritage.

June 29 the team headed out on a tour of central Jordan. Their bus wended its way north across the Karak Plateau and then down into the depths of the Wadi Mujeb, a majestic canyon carved deep in the center of Jordan from west to east. It labored up the other side and arrived at the site of Lahun, a sister site to Balua, two possible ends of the ancient trails that led across the Wadi Mujeb. After a stop at the Herodian site of Machaerus the group headed to Madaba, where they feasted at Haret Jdoudna, a delicious traditional restaurant with an array of *mezze* to sample and delight the senses. Dr. Douglas Clark hosted the team in celebration of the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Antiquities and an agreement with USAID/SCHEP/ACOR that allow the Madaba Regional Archaeological Museum Project (MRAMP) to continue its efforts to construct a new museum at the site of the Burnt Palace in Madaba. Dr. Clark took the team on a tour of the new museum site after lunch. After viewing the Madaba Map in the Church of St. George, a Byzantine mosaic map of the Holy Land featuring Jerusalem and other familiar landmarks and cities, the team headed to Mt. Nebo and then back south.

July 6 the team headed north to the Roman city of Jerash and the Medieval castle at Ajloun. Though a blistering hot day in northern Jordan, the team enjoyed exploring the well-preserved and beautifully-presented architecture at both sites. This weekend the team heads to Petra, a highlight for everyone during their time in Jordan!



## Results from the First Three Weeks

### History of Excavations

By Monique Vincent, Kent Bramlett, & Friedbert Ninow

The 2010 and 2012 seasons at Khirbat al-Balu'a recorded details of the site and created a digital map with GPS of the visible architectural ruins. The team established new benchmarks and control points for current and future use, mapping most of the large buildings and perimeter walls. The purpose was to show what is on the surface today and not to interpret



construction or phasing. The architectural map of Khirbat al-Balu'a reveals a densely populated and densely built site. This site was not a small village. It seems to have been the center of the northern Central Karak Plateau (at least during the Iron Age). The mapping revealed a number of roads that channeled the traffic through the city. The overall site covers an area of almost 25 hectares.

Excavation in 2012 of four probes attempted to establish the principle periods of occupation before engaging in larger excavation. One probe revealed a previously unknown Hellenistic phase. Excavation in 2017 opened excavation in three areas of the Iron Age settlement. This excavation was meant to establish the founding date of the central Qasr ("The Qasr") where the famous Balu'a stela was discovered in 1930. Work continues this season to determine the date for this main architectural feature, which will give insight into the earlier phases of the Iron Age. Excavation in 2017 in an Iron Age domestic building ("The House") and the fortifications ("The Wall") collected data that will help create a time frame for the various occupational phases during the Iron Age. The Iron Age remains are the most prominent at the site, stretching over the largest area. These excavations also continue this season and will help us understand more about the social, political, and economic history of this region in the Iron Age.

## The Qasr

By Craig Tyson, Area Supervisor

Last season, Team Qasr had the goal of finding the founding date for the large structure called the Qasr, which sits at the highest point of the site. This structure, which still stands up to 6 meters tall in some places and is built of massive basalt and limestone boulders, was clearly an important building of some sort, though we don't know its function yet. The first step toward understanding the Qasr is to get a solid founding date. We fell short of the goal last season as we ran into two later, Iron II walls during our excavations and were not able to reach the founding level of the Qasr.

This season, we have the same goal. After extending last season's 3 m x 3 m probe to create a 4 m x 4 m probe, we were able to locate the founding level of one of the Iron II walls that ran across the probe. After documenting the wall we removed it in order to create more space in the probe.

In the process, our very own Vera Kopecky discovered the top of a large pithos (storage jar), which we then excavated fully. In the end, the jar measured slightly over a meter tall and was about 60 cm wide at the widest part. It dates to the Iron Age IIC (ca. 600 BCE). While the jar did have cracks in it, we were able to disassemble it and bring it back to camp for cleaning. The soil inside was gathered for analysis back at camp and yielded about 260 liters! The pithos pieces will eventually be reconstructed by Naif Zaban of the ACOR Conservation Cooperative here in Amman, Jordan, before handing over the pithos to the Department of Antiquities.

This week and next our efforts will be focused on dating and then clearing the remaining Iron II wall that stands in the probe. With a little luck, we will begin removing that wall early next week, at which point we will have to come up with a process for getting the rather large stones up out of the probe which is now nearly 2 m deep.



Iron IIC Pithos

## The House

By Stephanie Selover, Area Supervisor

Before we began excavations in the domestic area (House A) of Khirbat al-Balu'a we noted that the 2017 excavations has been disturbed by a robber's trench. At the end of the 2017 season, a large and intact door lintel was discovered, but was unfortunately located along the western balk, and so the open doorway beneath was left intact and closed. This proved to be too appealing, due to its similar appearance to the opening of a built stone tomb. A large amount of earth inside the door was disturbed, revealing only a stone rubble layer beyond, which likely dampened our robbers' enthusiasm. They also excavated through our



The doorway in the House

backfill dirt, getting down to the floor levels excavated in 2017. We thus began the 2019 season by cleaning the old excavations, in order to recreate the actions of our off-season visitors.

Once we began to excavate House A, we opened three new rooms: Room 1 to the east of the 2017 room (now called Room 2), Room 3 to the west of Room 2, and Room 4 to the south of Room 2. We hope to reach the Phase 2 floor levels in all three rooms by the end of the season. Thick layers of topsoil covered all three trenches, but then all three room areas were found to be quite different in nature. Room 1 has a large amount of brick and tabun fragments, along with ceramic stoppers, basalt ground stones and mortars, and more recently, a blue glass bead. We are now getting close to a stone rubble layer, which may be directly above the floor. In Room 3, the earthen rubble has proved to be a dense layer of burnt and unburnt bricks and stone rubble. Surprisingly, this room also contains large amount of what appears to be copper slag, along with ceramic stoppers, basalt grinding and pounding stones, spindle whorls, two figurine fragments (of a bull and a female), perforated seashells, and a frit bead. We are now coming upon some interior architecture, as the earthen debris becomes more burnt. Finally, in Room 4 we have come upon a very large stone rubble layer that has covered nearly the entire trench. The pottery found within this rubble is of a far more mixed nature than the other two rooms, with material ranging from the Bronze Age to the Roman era. We believe this may be evidence of a second story over our house, given the very high number of large stones found in this nearly meter thick layer. At the midpoint of the season, we are quite excited to see what comes next as we get closer and closer to the floors.

## The Wall

By Dawn Acevedo, Area Supervisor

Our 2019 season began with backfill on one side and a field of boulder tumble on the other – an expected but still slightly daunting start to our mission. Nevertheless, our fun-loving team set right to work with laughter and determination equally matched by our incredible local workers! By the end of week one, nearly all of the backfill had been removed from the eastern square (opened in 2017) and 9 clay loom weights extracted for a grand total of 45 loom weights from this square!

Meanwhile, boulders on the western side of the wall were cleared to a manageable level that allowed us to begin to see our new square and imagine its potential. At the end of week two, the western square was level and four courses of the massive fortification wall had been exposed. In our square to the east, our team excavated nearly a meter of fill – mostly chunks of hardened mudbrick destruction debris – exposing charred beam holes in our balk and what appears to have been a burnt surface. The third week was equally exciting as three smaller walls began to emerge in the square to the west revealing a small room, while the Phase 1 – Phase 2 transition noted in the 2017 season on the outside of eastern square appeared inside of the casemate room. We have high hopes for what will be revealed during the second half of this season as we continue to excavate at the wall!

