



AIN EL MREISSEH
SHIPWRECK PROJECT

Field Report
on the excavation of
the underwater site off AUB Beach
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During August 2013, archaeological excavation was conducted at an underwater site of Ain el Mreisseh in the vicinity of AUB Beach. The site, first noticed in 2008, was theorised to be a possible Iron Age shipwreck site, perhaps dating to the 9th century BC. This date was derived from the shape of a large ovoid anchor in the site, which is reminiscent of Phoenician-age anchors, as well as from ceramics remains, particular that of a sherd with a large handle (Artifact designation AM001). Similar, but not exact, handles are seen on Iron Age I (11th/10th century) collar-rim pithoi from Palestine, such as at Shiloh, on pottery from Megiddo, on ceramics from Dan in the Galilee, as well as on 8th century lamelech jars from Timnah, Lachish, and elsewhere in the southern Levantine coastal plain. Further determinations were made by stylistic parallels to ceramics from the 10th century B.C. restoration of the tomb of Queen Meritamun in Egypt.

At the beginning of the excavation in August 2013, the site was seen to be looted. All the surface artifacts seen in 2008 had vanished, presumably taken by sport divers and fishermen. Excavation revealed, however, that much archaeological material lay beneath the sea floor. This material would prove to be mostly ceramics, with a few metal and wooden objects.

The site, lying in 13 to 14 metres of sea, was excavated using accepted underwater archaeological methods—mostly via handfanning as the project chose to eschew

compressor-driven airlifts in order to avoid too much attention. While this choice slowed progress considerably, no interference from sport divers or fishermen was experienced, except for some sightseers.

A site plan (attached below) was created using the GIS program "Site Recorder 4," which was on loan from the Institute of Nautical Archaeology. Artifacts were plotted into the site plan via triangulation to a set of datum points and/or by photography. The site was divided into sondages, which naturally fell into deeper areas between rock and coral. All artifacts were given numbers beginning with the prefix "AM", desalinated, catalogued, and photographed. Each team member kept a dive log that included daily work goals and results.

Over the month, the site was excavated down to as much as 70 cm below the seabed. 265 ceramic sherds were excavated. The cultural origins for many of these need to be determined, but clearly there are a number of Byzantine, Roman, and Iron Age sherds. One sherd decorated with combing in bands and a zig-zag pattern may be Bronze Age, but this remains to be verified. Most of the sherds are body sherds, but there are a few rims and handles. Many of the sherds are plain, without decoration, but a number contain ribbing, rilling, or combing. Two sherds

containing rims are likely late Iron Age/Persian period. The sherds with ribbing are presumably Late Roman/Byzantine.

Sherds lay in stratigraphic layers, unusual for an underwater site. The initial layer consisted of loose sand, followed by a second layer of sand mixed with decaying organics. Beneath this was a layer of sand and pebbles where a number of sherds of differing ages were found. The next layer down was a layer of gray cobbles. These were mostly clean of marine growth indicating



that they were quickly covered after deposition. Beneath the cobbles was silt that often contained more sherds, some of the Iron Age, but also those of a highly friable nature. These were sometimes covered with a whitish calcareous coating. The friable sherds tended to quickly disintegrate or break apart. They seem to be the remains of poorly fired utilitarian ware. A few rim pieces were found, but no handles. No decorations of any sort could be seen. These sometimes rested on bedrock, indicating their early deposition in the site. A stack of ceramic sherds (AM) was found in the southern end of sondage 8 above the gray cobble layer. This stack of sherds was covered by a large coral head and thus was undisturbed in

a sealed context. They appear to be Roman or Byzantine. No handles or necks were found—they were all body sherds. Below these, under the gray cobble layer was a small stack of the friable sherds resting on bedrock. It seems clear from this context that the friable sherds predate the Roman/Byzantine ones, although without distinctive features their cultural and temporal identifications cannot be immediately determined.

Metal artifacts include a small lead bar, a concreted object that may be a nail, and two pointed objects that may be some kind of styluses of lead. Further study is required to identify these objects and to determine their age.

All the ceramics were given desalination baths and dried. No salt deposits were observed after drying. Except for the gluing of some sherds to form larger pieces, no other conservation measures were conducted. Some artifacts of wood and metal (lead, iron) were kept wet to avoid degradation.

Two large stone objects—a column fragment of granite, and the stone anchor—required no conservation measures beyond surface cleaning.

Artifacts are surrendered to the DGA for storage and for future study by the team, funding permitting. The stone anchor is stored in the archaeology laboratory in Fisk Hall on the campus of the American University of Beirut.

While it is too early to determine the nature of the site, it is clear that the site contains more than the expected Iron Age material, and that Iron Age artifacts for the 2013 season form only a small part of the artifact assemblage. Whether this means the site is a multiple shipwreck site or an anchorage that remained popular throughout many centuries remains to be determined by further study of the artifacts and by continuing excavation of the site in 2014. A wider survey of the Beirut waterfront is also warranted.

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The team included Ralph Pedersen, Lucy Semaan, Rupert Brandmeier, Dorothy Chakra, and Monica Jubaili.

An article on the season will be prepared for publication in BAAL and submitted in the fall of 2013.

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