

Prehistoric funerary precinct excavated in northern Israel

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(1) Phallic figurine, (2) Small symbolic axe made with serpentine, (3) Shell pendants, (4) Engraved token. Credit: Prof. Nigel Goring-Morris

Hebrew University excavations in the north of Israel have revealed a prehistoric funerary precinct dating back to 6,750-8,500 BCE.

The precinct, a massive walled enclosure measuring 10 meters by at least 20 meters, was discovered at excavations being undertaken at Kfar HaHoresh. The Pre-Pottery Neolithic B site in the Nazareth hills of the lower Galilee is interpreted as having been a regional funerary and cult center for nearby lowland villages.

Prof. Nigel Goring-Morris of the Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology, who is leading the excavations, says that the precinct is just one of the many finds discovered at the site this year – including remains of a fully-articulated, but tightly contracted 40 year old adult male.

Accompanying grave goods include a sickle blade and a sea shell, while a concentration of some 60 other shells were found nearby. The sea shells provide evidence for extensive exchange networks from the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Symbolic items include small plain or incised tokens. An entire herd of cattle was also found buried nearby.

While fertility symbols during this period are often associated with female imagery, at Kfar HaHoresh only phallic figurines have been found to date, including one placed as a foundation deposit in the wall of the precinct.

Exotic minerals found at the site include malachite from south of the Dead Sea, obsidian (natural volcanic glass) from central Anatolia, and a votive axe on serpentine from either Cyprus or northern Syria.

"Cultic artifacts, installations and their contextual associations attest to intensive ritual practices in the area," says Prof. Goring-Morris.

Burials at the site now total at least 65 individuals, and display an unusual demographic profile – with an emphasis on young adult males. Graves occur under or associated with lime-plaster surfaced L-shaped walled structures, and are varied in nature from single articulated burials through multiple secondary burials with up to 17 individuals. Bones in one had been intentionally re-arranged in what appears to be a depiction.

The Pre-pottery Neolithic B, ca. 8,500-6,750 BCE, corresponds to the period when the first large village communities were established in the

fertile regions of the Near East when a wide ranging cultural interaction sphere came into being throughout the Levant.

Source: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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