THE BLANK CANVAS

In the remains of a 3,800-year-old palace, archaeologists seek clues about social, political and economic life in ancient Canaan.

BY LAUREN INGENO

In bare feet and socks they dug, from before dawn until dusk.

Inside the ruins of a Canaanite palace, an international team had unexpectedly uncovered a three-foot-long ceramic jar on day two of a six-week expedition in northern Israel. A few more days of digging revealed that the room held 39 others, delicate and cracked but mostly intact. Then the summer 2013 excavation turned into a frenzied race against time.

"It was both a curse and a blessing," says GW professor of classics, anthropology and history Eric Cline. He is co-director of the dig at Tel Kabri, the onetime capital of a Canaanite territory and now one of Israel's most elusive archaeological sites. "This is the type of thing you want to find, and yet, by the time we realized how many jars were in there, we were halfway through the season. Once they were exposed, we had to get all 40 of them up, since they wouldn't have survived the winter."

To complicate matters, the 375-square-foot storage room could accommodate only around 15 people. So the group did something unorthodox: Half of the more than 60 volunteers dug during typical hours—from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m.—while the others worked during the afternoon, enduring the grueling July sun. Shoes and sandals were left behind to prevent damage to the fragile artifacts.

With two days to spare, the group successfully excavated and preserved each of the 40 jars. An initial analysis of organic residues confirmed what the archaeologists suspected: They had struck wine.

Results published this past summer, in the journal *PLOS One*, indicated that the ancient wine contained additives such as honey, cedar oil, juniper and perhaps even mint or cinnamon.

The 40 jars have a combined capacity of around 2,000 liters, or the equivalent of 3,000 wine bottles, meaning the team dug up what could be the oldest and largest palatial wine cellar in the Near East.

"It is a wine cellar that, to our knowledge, is largely unmatched in its age and size," says Dr. Cline.

Scholars have long recognized the importance of wine production, distribution and consumption in relation to ancient civilizations, the researchers write in their paper. However, until now, direct archaeological evidence has rarely been able to support this.

The discovery deepens the intrigue of a 3,800-year-old archaeological site that has baffled Dr. Cline for the past decade. Though relatively unimpressive on the surface, Tel Kabri is best known as one of only four sites in the eastern Mediterranean that seem to bear the influence of Western art, stemming from modern-day mainland Greece and the Aegean Islands.

Tel Kabri also offers insight into the little-understood life of the Canaanites, and just the right amount of mystery: Despite no clear signs of destruction, the site was abandoned after just 300 years of Canaanite occupation, never again to be populated.

"Who were the people who lived there? And why did they leave?" Dr. Cline muses. "Who ruled the palace? And why were they so preoccupied with Aegean art?"

Dr. Cline and a new group of volunteers will seek answers when they return to the site this summer.

MISSING PIECES

To find Tel Kabri, travel north.

The 75-acre site, surrounded by lush plantations of bananas and avocados, is located in the western Galilee region of Israel, less than three miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea and a 10-minute drive from the modern resort town of Nahariya.

Tel Kabri is Israel's third largest site from the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 B.C.), following Hazor and Ashkelon. Much is still unknown about its history, including the city's ancient name. Its main structure, which dates around 1800 B.C., is presumed to be a palace based on its enormity—roughly the size of two football fields—though evidence of a king or queen has yet to be found.

"Somebody had to have the manpower and the money to build it. And usually, only a ruler could do that," Dr. Cline says. "Personally, I think it's royal. But there's no proof for it—yet."

Archaeologists are certain that a Canaanite civilization built and inhabited the palace for about 300 years during the Middle Bronze Age, or in biblical terms, the time between Abraham and Moses. Canaan was a large and prosperous country that included present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel, until the territory was conquered by Israelites during the second millennium B.C.

But Tel Kabri is highly unusual in that after it was abandoned no other settlements were built on top of it. Other archaeological sites might have a dozen or more layers of ruins left by many generations rebuilding on the same spot.

"I don't know why no one ever reoccupied it, especially since there is plenty of water there," says Dr. Cline. "We also don't know how or why it was destroyed. There is no evidence of an earthquake, a fire or any other great destruction. They just stopped living there. It's very strange."

Because of that, Tel Kabri is the only Canaanite city from the Middle Bronze Age that can be excavated in its entirety. And since so little is known about Canaanite society—including its status groups, political structure and economy—excavating one of the world's best-preserved Canaanite palaces is critical to understanding the ancient civilization, says Assaf Yasur-Landau of the University of Haifa, who co-directs the dig at Tel Kabri with Dr. Cline.

"Kabri is also a fantastic case study to learn about the development of Canaanite urbanization and rise of political power," Dr. Yasur-Landau says, "as we can follow the rise of [the] Canaanite palatial elite from its humble beginning at private houses to the rise of the palace, all during the Middle Bronze Age."

LOST AND FOUND

Tel Kabri was first discovered in the 1950s, when members of Kibbutz Kabri found 3,000-year-old stone artifacts near a local spring. In 1961, the Middle Bronze Age palace gained attention again, when the national public water company stumbled upon it while installing a pipeline.

Aharon Kempinski of Tel Aviv University and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier of Heidelberg University led the first comprehensive dig at Tel Kabri in the mid-1980s.

In 1989, the archaeologists uncovered an elaborate, painted floor in the palace's ceremonial hall. It depicted a red checkerboard motif, with pictures of irises and crocuses painted into the squares in a distinctive Aegean style.

Before the discovery, Aegean-style artwork—characterized by breezy depictions of nature, fluid figures, and bright colors—had never been found beyond the Aegean Islands, which includes Crete and the Cyclades, and the Greek mainland. Regional artistic influence in Canaan typically came from Mesopotamia to the north, where present-day Iraq is located, not from the Aegean Sea to the





Tel Kabri, in Israel, is one of four sites in the eastern Mediterranean—along with sites in Egypt, Syria and Turkey—that seem to bear the influence of Western art.



Zach Dunseth, BA '09, removes dirt from wine jars found at Tel Kabri. More than 100 GW students have learned to dig at Tel Kabri and Megiddo.



Eric Cline, co-director of the dig at Tel Kabri and a professor of classics, anthropology and history.

west.

The archaeologists also uncovered around 2,000 colorful fragments. The fragments have string impressions, which artists once used in fresco painting as guiding lines—a technique not commonly found in eastern Mediterranean art. The archaeologists compared the fragments found at Tel Kabri with other Aegean wall paintings that depicted similar motifs, colorings and line shapes. They were then able to reconstruct hypothetical miniature frescoes, which showed hill and sea landscapes.

To date there are only three other sites where Aegean-style artistry has been found—Tell el-Dab'a in Egypt, Qatna in Syria and Alalakh in Turkey.

"In archaeology we refer frequently to what's called a *koiné,* a Greek word meaning 'commonality.' We're wondering if there was some kind of artistic koiné, where people in the eastern Mediterranean were looking to the Aegean for influence, for whatever reason," Dr. Cline says.

The Tel Kabri excavation project came to a sudden halt when Dr. Kempinski died in 1994. Though he never saw his final published findings, the archaeologist considered the Tel Kabri site to be "one of the most important in Israel," Dr. Niemeier writes in the introduction of *Tel Kabri: The 1986-93 Excavation Seasons.*

The site remained untouched until 2003, when Dr. Yasur-Landau of the University of Haifa returned to the western Galilee to conduct remote sensing at Tel Kabri. He discovered that the palace was twice as large as Dr. Kempinski had originally thought.

When he approached Dr. Cline about the possibility of reopening the site, the offer was too good to pass up: Dr. Cline had never led his own dig. And the excavation would give him the rare opportunity to open a window into the Canaanites and their interaction with the Aegean world.

"Assaf came to me in 2004 and said, 'You want to reopen Kabri?' And I said, 'Sure, I'll be in touch,'" says Dr. Cline. "That was that."

Since excavations restarted, taking place every two years since 2005, each digging season at Tel Kabri has proved more successful than the last. On the summers that Dr. Cline is not excavating at Tel Kabri, he co-directs another dig in Israel, at Megiddo—the site commonly known as Armageddon, considered to be the crown jewel of biblical archaeology. For more than 6,000 years, the city dominated international traffic, as it was located above the most important land route in the ancient Near East. Within its 25 layers of settlements, archaeologists have uncovered chariot stables, gold jewelry, monumental temples and remarkably engineered water systems.

With Kabri, though, it's precisely the lack of layers and context that makes it significant.

"At Megiddo we're more filling in the gaps," Dr. Cline says. "At Tel Kabri, it's really a blank canvas."

A LINK TO GREECE

During the 2009 and 2011 excavations, Dr. Cline and his team uncovered more fragments of Aegean-style painted wall

ALL: ERIC CLINE



An aerial view of Tel Kabri, a 75 acre site in northern Israel that houses the ruins of a Canaanite city dating to around 1800 B.C., during the Middle Bronze Age INSET **Team members remove debris from one of the wine jars.**

DIG SITE: SKYVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY / INSET: ERIC CLINE



Residue analysis of the jars found a hallmark of wine, as well as additives like honey. Just before the dig season ended, other chambers were discovered with more jars that now await the team s return.

ALL: ERIC CLINE

plaster and another painted floor.

The fragments vary in quality and size but add valuable information about the artistic plan of the palace and its sources of artistic influence. Of these, the most intriguing collection is five bright blue fragments, which, when pieced together, depict part of what is likely an animal painted in black ink. Dr. Cline says the blue paint is the first of its kind found in Israel from the Middle Bronze Age. Without all of the pieces, he is not certain what the image once depicted. Judging by the thinness of the lines and the precision of the brushstrokes, it's clear to the researchers that this is the work of a skilled artist.

Who traveled all the way from the Aegean Islands or Greek mainland to paint the walls and floors at an eastern Mediterranean palace? And more important, why? Dr. Cline admits that he may never be able to definitively answer those questions, but he can make some educated guesses.

In the Middle and Late Bronze Age, rulers in Egypt and the ancient Near East often sent artisans on short-term loan to each other, so it's possible that Aegean rulers were part of a similar exchange network in the east.

Despite its prominent position as a gateway community, Kabri was only a "secondary player" compared with other commercial cities, such as Hazor, Dr. Cline and Dr. Yasur-Landau write in a 2011 paper published in the *American Journal of Archaeology*. The archaeologists suspect that the Kabri rulers wanted to show that they belonged to a "cosmopolitan" Mediterranean club and had connections to places outside of the Near East.

Recent excavations at Tel Kabri also revealed that the palace underwent significant architectural renovations, which resulted in the creation of a much larger building. The palace's fresco fragments were found facedown in the palace, which suggests that the Aegean-style art was torn down and discarded after the remodeling. Some of the art was even reused, seemingly without sentiment, as patching on the plaster floor.

"It's as if they thought, 'Well, this is garbage, and we have a hole that needs to be filled here, so let's just use it here,'" Dr. Cline says.

Aegean art may have simply gone out of style, or perhaps a new ruler moved in. Politics could also have been at play, but Dr. Cline says the paintings just as likely could have been removed for functional reasons. In Greece, he says, frescoes stuck easily to the stone walls used there. By contrast, the Tel Kabri palace walls are made of mud brick, which does not hold plaster as well. Once the frescoes began to peel, the Canaanites may have decided to rip them off the walls.

TO BE CONTINUED

In summer 2013, with grants from National Geographic, the Israel Science Foundation, Bronfman Philanthropies and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, Dr. Cline and his excavation team were tasked with investigating the palatial economy of Kabri—to look at the haves versus the have-nots—by comparing findings from inside and outside of the palace.

The archaeologists aimed to locate the western edge of the palace, but were surprised to instead hit the remains of a storage room, where they found the 40 wine jars. To date, it is the largest concentration of restorable pottery found in the palace and the only place on site where an entire room full of artifacts has been discovered. The early testing of organic residue in the jars, by Kabri dig colleague Andrew Koh of Brandeis University, found the presence of tartaric acid—a "surefire" marker of red wine, he says.

"This wasn't moonshine that someone was brewing in their basement, eyeballing the measurements," Dr. Koh said when the team announced their initial findings in fall 2013. "This wine's recipe was strictly followed in each and every jar."

Many of these ingredients, like honey, mirror the additives that are detailed in ancient 1700 B.C. texts from Mesopotamia.

"We have a physical manifestation of what you can read about," says Dr. Cline. He admits that it is not necessarily an indication that the wine found at Tel Kabri was imported from the Euphrates. "But it is still cool that something we've known about only from texts for decades, we now have scientific proof of its existence."

The additives of the Kabri wine suggest the Canaanites had a sophisticated understanding of the botanical landscape and skills necessary to produce such a complex beverage, the researchers wrote in their new study. And while 3,000 modern bottles of wine seems like a large collection, it is not enough for widespread distribution, they note. The number of jars as well as their location next to the palace's ceremonial room indicates that the archaeologists found the private reserve of a ruler.

What other relics are hidden in the palace ruins? And how will the new discoveries help to tell the history of Tel Kabri? When the excavation team returns in June, there will be plenty to look forward to.

Just days before the archaeologists wrapped up their last season, in the summer of 2013, they discovered two doors in the storage room leading to other chambers, one to the west and one to the south. In those rooms they spotted even more ceramic jars. "Those are the first things we'll go after," Dr. Cline says.

If the jars contain something other than wine, perhaps olive oil or wheat for instance, that could for the first time shed significant light on the Canaanite economy, he says. He's hopeful, and the excitement is palpable in his voice—in spite of the knowledge that the rubble may keep as many Canaanite secrets as it gives up.

"What it boils down to is that we need a time machine," says Dr. Cline. "They can't come back to tell you if you're right or wrong." GW



Two of the 40 three-foot-long ceramic jars discovered during fieldwork in the summer of 2013.

For more on Tel Kabri, ways to support the dig and details on participating in fieldwork this summer, visit *go.gwu.edu/digkabri.* **Applications are being accepted on a rolling basis until March 1.**