

Household and Death in Ba`ja, I.

Short report on the Field Season 2016.

Site Location and Objectives of Season

The 11th field season of the Ba`ja Neolithic Project took place at the late Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Ba`ja (ca. 7250 BCE), situated in the remote sandstone mountains north of Beidha village (Wadi Musa). The waterless and rugged location is accessible only by climbing through a narrow *siq*, requesting a lot of logistic investment and physical strength by the team.

By the 2016 season, a third phase of the long-term project started: to test the site's potential for a deep-knowledge research on *Household and Death* in Jordan's late 8th millennium BCE. Sedentary village life was still at its beginnings, and it was characterized by acceleration and agglomeration processes in architecture, crafts, social structures, and value systems (representing the so-called Mega-Site-Phenomenon).

The village life of that time is characterized by a spatial relationship between households and burials, often interpreted by archaeological research as sub-floor burials in inhabited houses. It was one of our feasibility study's aims to clarify this understanding since previous excavations at Ba`ja and nearby Basta hardly could support this, but found other sorts of household - burial relationships. The main objective of the season, however, was to locate sufficiently available archaeological layers suitable for the *Household and Death* study, and to evaluate their potential for the planned long-term project.

This season's intense scientific sampling programme at the site was headed by Dr. Marion Benz, Freiburg University, also deputy director of the project.

Significant Results

- 1) In the site's deeper stratigraphy, not really investigated in previous seasons, we have intense evidence of formal burials and household depositions. Several new spots were located in Area C, attesting such expected evidence on an even larger scale. Two graves and three household depositions were already excavated during this season.
- 2) It became clear that we deal at Ba`ja with intramural cemeteries and intramural depositions of buried – most likely terminated – households. The latter are represented by household items (both item assemblages of the same class or single occurrences) and related activities (e.g. dense ash-layers with animal bones showing traces of butchering), animal skeletons, remains of specialized household production (sandstone ring and bidirectional blade production) etc. It is obvious that these are not the ordinary mixed household dumps, since items are not used up or broken and reflect their original association: rather they were shifted collectively from their primary context, forming another new primary context, that of household closures, or – in other words – representing acts of ex-commodification.
- 3) The two formal burials excavated represent one with two infants (one a few months old, one between 1 and 2 years, no grave goods), and one with a single burial of probably an elite person in a stone chamber marked by a unique flint dagger, a basalt pestle, a stone vessel's rim fragment, and a bone spatula above a stone pavement and inside an ordinary plaster floor sealing of the grave. Aside of having a basalt mace-head, beads and arrowheads as grave goods, the dead wore two upper arm rings from mother-of-pearl on either side, one of a unique composite type with 4 more rings of a clayish material. All burials in that room were deepened into the natural soil deposits on which the site rests, and were sealed by one – or

two successive – plaster floors built by stone rubble succeeded by a small pebble layer, succeeded by a plaster coat.

4) This season provided further evidence of early vessel making in Ba‘ja. While sherds of a plastic material, most likely “sun-dried” and secondarily fired, were encountered already in 1997 in a nearby cooking/ baking area, this season we identified an *in situ* vessel of some 50-60cm height with a roundish bottom (diam. < 30 cm) as well as a grit-tempered sherd which technologically is close to primitive pottery. This evidence dates back the advent of plastic vessel making in the area (similar evidence from nearby Basta) to the 8th millennium BCE.

5) By excavating half a square down to bedrock in Area B-North, the ground plans of two house units were completed. The record of a previously excavated section in Area B-South provided further insights into the high-energy events (earthquake?, successive landslides) once interrupting the site’s occupation before finally being given up around 9000 BCE.

6) For the site’s protection and management several assessments were carried out at the locality. In short, a concept should consider a backfilling of all excavation areas by stone rubble from the excavation (since sifted sediment is not sufficiently available on-site), except for one area to be consolidated for presentation to visitors. However, it is a sincere logistic and costly effort to backfill the site’s open excavation areas, and the study tourism value of the site has to be questioned for having a dangerous and exhausting access.

The single-period and well-preserved site of Ba‘ja offers a unique opportunity to reach deep knowledge about the beginnings of sedentary and producing life modes, and how value systems emerged and developed under these conditions. These insights may reflect the Neolithic legacy and basic ingredients inside our own presence and future.

Hans Georg K. Gebel
Ba‘ja Neolithic Project, director

Project Information

Project Name: Ba‘ja Neolithic Project in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities, Amman (DoA)

Duration: August 6th- September 4th, 2016

Director: Dr. Hans Georg K. Gebel

Team Members: 8 + 1 / *Number of Workmen:* 8-15

Sponsoring Institutions: German Research Foundation and ex oriente at Free University of Berlin

DoA Representative: Khalid Tarawneh



Fig. 1. Intramontane location of Early Neolithic Ba'ja, north of Beidha/ Wadi Musa (Photo: C. Purschwitz).



Fig. 2. Ba'ja 2016: Area of an intramural cemetery (Photo: H.G.K. Gebel)



Fig. 3. Ba'ja 2016. Intramural burial of an elite person. (Photo: M. Benz).



Fig. 4. Ba'ja 2016: Items from marking the elite person's burial: flint dagger, bone spatula, basalt pestle, stone vessel rim fragment, a broken arrowhead. (Photo: H.G.K. Gebel)



Fig. 5. Ba'ja 2016. Burial of two infants. (Photo: M. Benz).