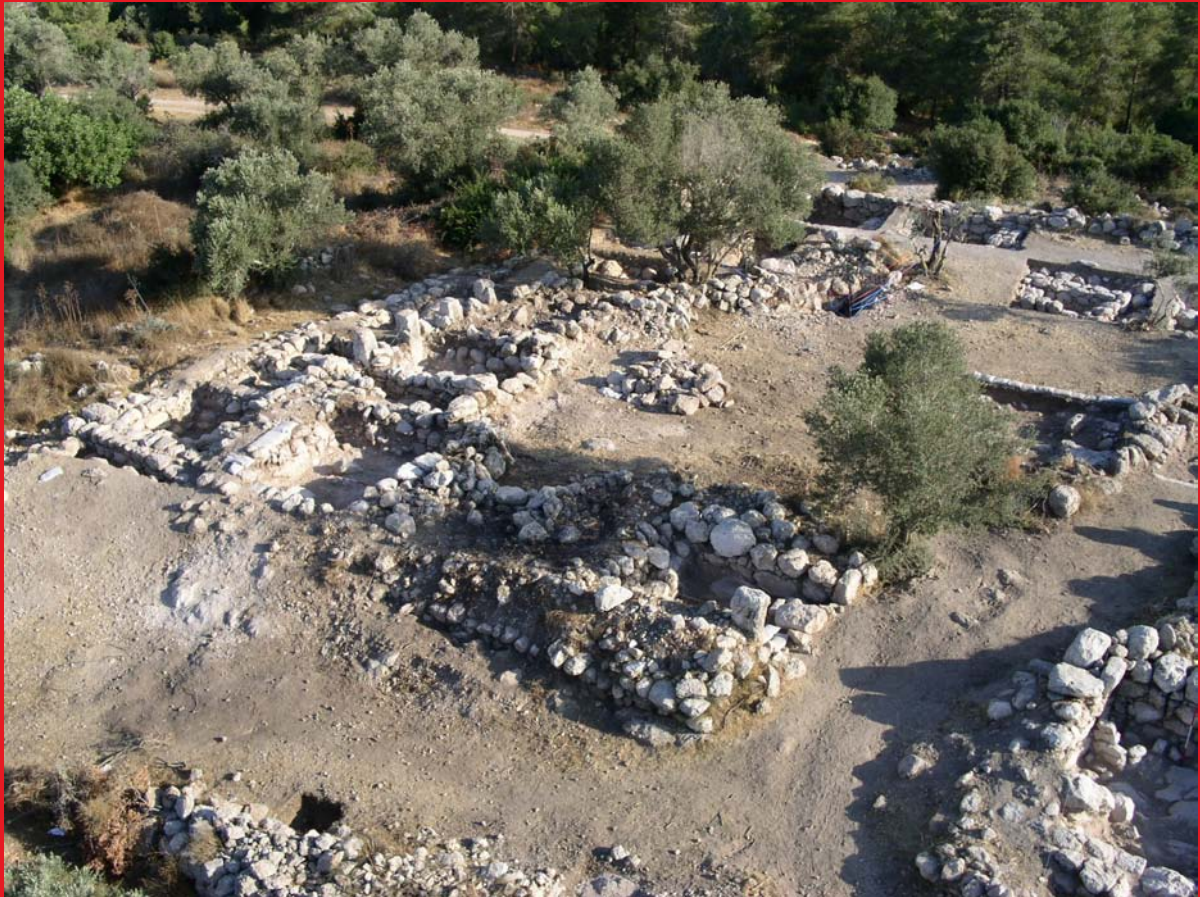


# The Excavations of Khirbet er-Rasm, Israel

The changing faces of the countryside

Avraham Faust  
Adi Erlich



BAR International Series 2187  
2011

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with contributions by

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BAR International Series 2187  
2011

Published by

Archaeopress  
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
England  
bar@archaeopress.com  
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2187

*The Excavations of Khirbet er-Rasm, Israel: The changing faces of the countryside*

© Archaeopress and A Faust A Erlich 2011

ISBN 978 1 4073 0742 8

Printed in England by Blenheim Colour Ltd

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd  
122 Banbury Road  
Oxford  
OX2 7BP  
England  
www.hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

The Khirbet er-Rasm expedition was greatly assisted by a generous donation in loving memory of Elaine Levin Bard by her children and family

To Iris Faust and Amitai Erlich

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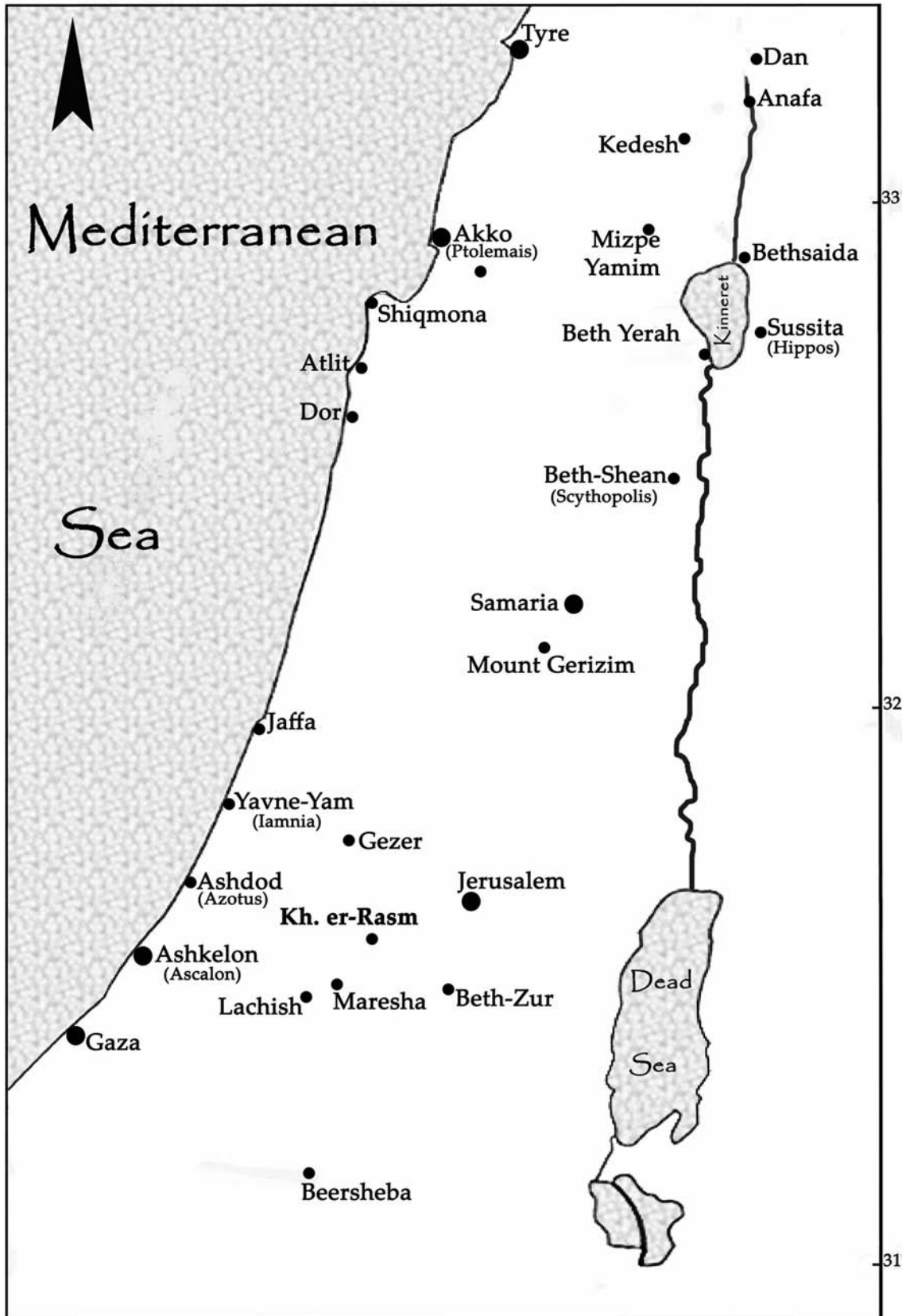
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0.1 Location map of Khirbet er-Rasm

## 0.1 Introduction

Kh. er-Rasm (R.P. 14351219) is a small site in the upper Shephelah, about 1 km south-southwest of Tel 'Azekah. The remains include mainly a concentration of ruins on top of the hill, where many walls were visible before the beginning of the excavations, including a row of still standing monoliths. This concentration is surrounded with remains of additional walls, a heap of stones, terraces and caves of various sorts. The site is small and rural in nature, and is not identified with any known historical sites (as indicated also by its name, see Sasson, Chapter 3.12), and this was in part the reason for its exploration (below).

The site was excavated and surveyed in the years 1997–2003. Excavations concentrated on the main area of the ruins (where three areas of excavations, A, B and E, were opened), henceforth the main building. Additional excavation areas were opened on top of structural remains to the south of the main building (Area C), which turned out to be a pyramid-like stone structure, and in one of the caves, which included a small hiding burrow (Area D). The rest of the area, and especially the caves, were intensively mapped and surveyed (though very little pottery was collected during this mapping operation).

Kh. er-Rasm was first settled during the Chalcolithic period, but remains from this period are meagre. The site was then resettled during the late Iron Age I and / or early Iron Age II, but these remains are also very poor, and do not include any architecture (perhaps one wall). More significant remains were dated to the late Iron Age II, and some finds are attributed to the Persian period, but the main period of occupation at the site dates from the early Hellenistic period up to the late second century BCE. The vast majority of the finds at Kh. er-Rasm are dated to the late second century BCE, as this is the time when the site was destroyed, and this is the period for which we have the most data. Some reoccupation took place in the Early Roman period, and from then on the site was abandoned and was used by farmers and herders. During the early years of the State of Israel the site was used as a firing zone, and later on was turned into part of the British Park, where the site is located today.

### STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The present report represents the results of the excavations and the analysis of the finds.

Following this introduction, the first part of the report will summarize the results of the excavations in the various areas and the outcomes of the survey of the caves (jointly with Avi Sasson and Yair Zoran), with detailed discussion of the architecture and stratigraphy (although without any further elaboration, i.e., no discussion of parallels, dating, etc., since this is only possible after the additional finds are discussed).

The second part will include all the ceramic analysis,

including a short chapter on the Iron Age and Persian period ceramic finds (by Itzhaq Shai), a long discussion of the Hellenistic and later pottery forms (by Débora Sandhaus), a chapter on the oil lamps unearthed at the site (by Einat Ambar-Armon), a more integrative discussion of Hellenistic period assemblages (by Débora Sandhaus, Adi Erlich and Avraham Faust), and a report of the petrographical analysis (by Anat Cohen-Weinberger).

The third part will include all the additional reports, i.e., flints (by Ofer Marder), coins (by Rachel Barkay), stone vessels (by Rinat Peshin), metal objects (by Ravit Nenner-Soriano), glass (by Yael Gorin-Rosen), beads (by Deborah Cassuto), bones (by Inbal Shoam, Noa Raban-Gerstel and Guy Bar-Oz), botanical finds (by Ehud Weiss), charcoals/wood (by Nili Liphshitz), shells (by Daniella E. Bar-Yosef Mayer), carbon 14 (by Elisabetta Boaretto), geomorphology (by Oren Ackerman), the result of the ground penetrating radar (GPR) work at the site (by Jessie Pincus Ben-Avraham), as well as a brief discussion of the function of the site in the Ottoman period and under the British Mandate (by Avi Sasson).

The fourth part will include a detailed discussion of the history of the site, based on the above. The section will be divided between discussion of pre-second century, late second century, and post-second century finds. This part will generally progress in chronological order, but will also include the integrative analysis, regarding, for example, the dating of the various phases, the function of the site during the different stages, the economy of each settlement phase, etc., as well as discussion of the site formation processes in relation to abandonment, destruction and collapse, as reflected by the finds at the site.

The fifth part of the monograph will include a historical discussion of Hasmonean policy in the late second century in light of the findings at Kh. er-Rasm, followed by a summary of the history of the site.

Since we found the analysis to be integrative, we have decided to combine the bibliography and publish only one list of references at the end of the book, and not, as is sometimes done, at the end of each chapter.

### BACKGROUND: HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND METHODS OF EXCAVATIONS

In 1996, as an outgrowth of his MA thesis on *The Rural Settlement in the Land of Israel during the Period of the Monarchy*, Avraham Faust began looking for a small Iron Age II rural site that could be excavated, in order to shed light on this neglected settlement sector. After consultation with teachers and colleagues, including Prof. Shlomo Bunimovitz, Dr. Yehuda Dagan, Prof. Zeev Safrai and Prof. Amos Kloner, the site that was chosen was Kh. er-Rasm – a small site about one km south-southwest of Tel 'Azekah. The survey conducted by Dagan, who discovered the site, produced relatively large quantities of Iron Age pottery, and a row of monoliths that was still standing (as it still

is today), all leading us to view the site as appropriate for investigating the Iron Age II rural settlement (although there were finds from other periods as well, including the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods; Dagan 1992b:131, site 100).

The actual excavations at Kh. er-Rasm materialized in 1997, as part of a joint project of the Martin (Szusz) Department of the Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University (BIU) and the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The larger project, which included several excavations, was initiated by Prof. Zeev Safrai of BIU and Eli Shenhav of the JNF, and was intended to allow youth who come to the JNF youth centers to work in an archaeological dig. Three excavation projects were planned, one in the south, one in the center and one in the north. Kh. er-Rasm was suggested by Avraham Faust as an appropriate site for the central district of the JNF, and the suggestion was accepted. Prior to the excavations we began an architectural survey of the walls, many of which were easily observable without excavations.

The first short season of excavation (about one week in June and an extra day in September) took place during 1997 (G57/1997). During this season we opened only a few squares in Area A (on the western part of the main building). Since we were working mainly with youth, progress was very slow, and only in half a square (working with a few students) did we penetrate below the upper level of what we later understood was a massive wall fall. Here we found in-situ Hellenistic pottery. At the same time Adi Erlich became a co-director of the dig. Previously she took part in other projects in the Judean Shephelah, flanking Kh. er-Rasm from the north (Tel Beth-Shemesh) and south (Maresha), therefore she was highly interested in excavating another, still smaller site in that region. Although Erlich agreed to join the dig before the discovery of the Hellenistic pottery, the latter turned out to be the major occupational phase in the main building, which increased her interest in the Kh. er-Rasm project.

The following seasons were also short, and progress was very slow since most of the workers were youth, and it was imperative not to penetrate too deep without proper control. The 1998 season (G155/1998), took place during the second week of October, and the 1999 season (G131/1999) took place in September (again, for about a week).

This gradually changed. The 2000 season (G50/2000), while also short (one week in August) was carried out with a relatively larger number of students (about 30) from BIU, and a few volunteers. Excavations at Area A expanded, and we opened two additional excavation areas (Area B, in the southeast corner of the building, and Area C, south of the main building, in what turned out to be a pyramid-like building).

The 2001 season (G96/2001) was longer and larger than previous ones (probably the same scope as all the previous seasons together). The season lasted two weeks, with the

participation of about 50 students from BIU and a few volunteers. Excavations continued in Areas A, B and C, and a new area (Area D) was opened in one of the caves, including a hiding burrow.

The final season of excavation was carried out during 2003 (G27/2003). This season lasted three weeks (with about 30 students each week), and was the largest season as it served as BIU's field school for this year. During this season excavations continued in Areas A, B and C, and a new area was opened in the northern part of the main building – Area E. We estimate that this season accounted for over 50% of the entire excavations, and hence its importance.

Throughout the years, the excavations were accompanied by a survey of the entire site, and all the caves and additional features were located and mapped. We should note, however, that the survey was primarily architectural. Pottery was collected in the excavations area, and only rarely from the surface. Hence the survey finds, as discussed in some parts of this monograph, are very limited in number.

There were several changes in the excavation's sampling procedure over the years, and these must be acknowledged. Since during the first season of excavations progress was very slow, and to a large extent we excavated topsoil, sieving was done only randomly (usually 1 out of 10 buckets). In the main seasons, however, when we had reached occupational debris, we attempted to reach total sieving in those layers. In the final season of 2003, we attempted 100% sieving, also within the heavy wall-falls.

Similar changes took place in other aspects of the work as well. For example, during most seasons we kept very few soil samples for later analysis (flotation and chemistry), in 2003 we kept at least two buckets from every locus for flotation (all of which were examined) and soil analysis. While the unequal distribution of the sampling procedure over the years might pose a problem for spatial analysis, the fact that the 2003 season was probably as large as all other seasons combined (or even larger) made up for this deficiency, and allowed us to use the findings for spatial analysis.

Needless to say, throughout all seasons all the finds were collected and kept, including every piece of bone, shell, charcoal, seed, non-local stones (including flints), etc., even if later proven too small for analysis (e.g., tiny bone fragments) or indistinct (e.g., most of the flint fragments).

It turned out that although some human activity took place at the site during the Iron Age, and it is likely that the central building was originally erected at the time, the site is dated mainly to the Hellenistic period. While this should caution us against over-reliance on the data from surveys, it does not impact the importance of the dig. Planned excavations of a small site in the countryside can produce a wealth of information, and can compensate for the urban bias of the *tel minded* Near Eastern archaeology. Most of the site at Kh. er-Rasm is well preserved, and we hope that the slow



and careful excavations allowed us to extract the most of the available information. We strongly believe that the data included in this report are of great importance to the study of the Hellenistic period in southern Israel.

Moreover, given the usual treatment of small rural sites in the recent scholarship, when they are simply “counted,” with the size estimated very roughly and then “multiplied” by a certain coefficient in order to “calculate” the number of inhabitants, we find the results of the excavations at Kh. er-Rasm to be very revealing, as they show that small sites in the countryside change their character over the years, and hence caution us against simply treating all such sites as similar.

The excavation of small sites can provide a wealth of information about various aspects of life, including “grand” history (see Chapter 5.1), and most important – it can teach us the history of the people who are otherwise left out.

Given the overemphasis on large sites and impressive buildings, we feel that excavations of smaller sites have a greater potential to contribute to our knowledge, as each excavation provides significant additional data about this relatively unknown settlement sector, whereas the excavation of larger sites simply adds a little to our already large database. We hope that the present report will support this claim.

### 0.1.1 Human Activity at Khirbet er-Rasm: A Chronological Table

<i>Period</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Architectural Phase (main building)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Chalcolithic	Flints (and pottery in Dagan’s survey) – very limited amounts	-----	Limited settlement
Iron Age I\Iron Age II	Pottery (and perhaps a wall) – limited amount	Phase 0	Limited settlement
Late Iron Age II	Pottery and architecture – limited amount	Phases 1, 1a	Founding of the main building
Persian period	Pottery (and probably usage in the building) – limited amount		Limited activity
Early Hellenistic period	Pottery, architecture and hewing of caves	Phases 2a, 2b	Reusing the main building (an estate?)
Second half of 2nd century BCE	Pottery and architecture	Phase 2c	After the collapse of the cave system. Reuse of the building
End of 2nd century BCE	Pottery and architecture	Phase 3	The blocking of doorways and abandonment of the building
Early Roman period	Pottery and architecture	Phase 4	Limited reoccupation, and construction of the pyramidal structure
Late Roman and onward	Scattered finds	-----	Occasional usage by shepherds and farmers

### 0.1.2 Acknowledgments

Over the years we have benefited greatly from the help of many young people in the context of JNF National Service and the JNF Trailblazers, as well as students from Bar-Ilan University and archaeologists, who have participated in the dig. We would like to thank them all.

Special thanks are due to the students and the professionals who worked with us over the years and were part of the Kh. er-Rasm expedition:

Naomi Akiva, Einat Armon, Tehila Atkins, Mechael Azband, Eyal Baruch, Rishona Fine, Michal Gamarsani, Uzi Leibner, Michal Meishar, Anat Michaeli, Rachel Sagir, Itzhaq Shai, Rinat Shaki, Rotem Shelef, Aran Yardeny and Yair Zoran served as area supervisors and area supervisors’ assistants. Help in registration and documentation was given by Tamar Almog, Yifat Ast, Deborah Cassuto Eti Sa’ada, Yael Suweid and Mi Yeong-Im. Administration was handled by Uri Rice. Surveying and measurements were conducted by Dan Behar, Jay Rosenberg, Roni Saban, Yehuda Shapira and Yair Zoran. Help with the metal detector was provided by Moshe and Yuval Lopan and Rami Chen. Pottery restoration was carried out by Dina Castel. Yulia Rodman drew the pottery. Ravit Nenner-Soriano prepared the plates. Some of the people who analyzed the finds (below) also participated in the field work, including Avi Sasson and Oren Ackerman. Much of the lab work was done by Debi Cassuto, and later by Pirchia Eyal. Some of the plans were prepared or modified by Michal Klein,

who also prepared most of the maps. Graphic assistance was provided by Silvia Krapiwko and Einat Ehrlich. The isometric reconstructions were done by Rachel Bordowicz, and the English was edited by Miriam Schlusseberg and Aviva Levine.

The diverse finds were analyzed by various experts, whose reports are included in this monograph. This include Débora Sandhaus (Hellenistic pottery and later pottery), Einat Armon-Ambar (oil lamps), Itzhaq Shai (Iron Age Pottery), Anat Cohen-Weinberger (petrography), Ofer Marder (flints), Rachel Barkay (coins), Rinat Peshin (stone vessels), Inbal Shoam, Noa Raban-Gerstel and Guy Bar-Oz (faunal remains), Ehud Weiss (botanical remains), Nili Liphshitz (wood), Daniella E. Bar-Yosef Mayer (shells), Elisabetta Boaretto (Carbon 14), Oren Ackerman (geomorphology), Ravit Nenner-Soriano (metal objects), Yael Gorin-Rosen (glass) and Deborah Cassuto (beads). Ground Penetration Radar work was carried out by Mnemotrix Systems, Inc. (and the report was compiled by Jessie Pincus Ben-Avraham). Avi Sasson and Yair Zoran documented the caves and Avi Sasson also contributed a chapter on the role of Kh. er-Rasm during the Ottoman period.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the above, as well as to Prof. Zeev Safrai for his help in initiating the project and throughout the work, and to Prof. Amos Kloner, Prof. Joshua Schwartz, Prof. Andrea Berlin, Dr Boaz Zissu, and Prof. Shlomo Bunimovitz for their help and advice, and to Dr Yehuda Dagan for bringing the site to our attention and for his advice and information. We would also like to thank Prof. Aren Maeir for reading an earlier draft of

this report and commenting on it. Special thanks are due to Dr Shimon Cooper of the Sociology and Anthropology department at Bar-Ilan University.

We would also like to thank Eli Shenhav, the JNF archaeologist, for his immense support in initiating the project and during the first season of excavations. The JNF staff was very helpful during all the stages of the excavations, and we would like to mention Meir Malka, Dani Mador, Yigal Sitri, Meir Cohen and Iris Bernstein. Special thanks are due to Eli Ben-Shitrit, the warden of the British Park, for his assistance.

We would also like to thank Profs. Amihai Mazar, Moshe Fisher and Shimon Dar, as well as to the Israel Exploration Society and the Israel Antiquities Authority for allowing us to use illustrations.

Financial support was given by the Institute of Archaeology and the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University. Equipment was provided during the first seasons by the JNF. Additional financial support was given by the Krauthammer Chair in archaeology, the Moskovitz Chair for the Study of Historical Land of Israel, and the Rivlin Institute, all at Bar-Ilan University.

The Kh. er-Rasm expedition was greatly assisted by a generous donation in loving memory of Elaine Levin Bard by her children and family. This contribution enabled much of the data processing and analysis, and we are grateful to the Bard Family for their contribution.

Avraham Faust and Adi Erlich

## 0.2 Geographical and Environmental Background

Kh. er-Rasm is located in the upper Shephelah, about one km south-southwest of Tel 'Azekah, and about half a km west of the western part of the Elah Valley. This is a central location, near some of the region's main sites and especially main routes, as the Elah Valley had served as a main junction throughout history (see also Chapter 4.2). It should be noted that the valley itself contains large tracts of arable lands.

The site is located on a salient hill, and although Tel 'Azekah and Kh. Shiqlon are higher in terms of absolute elevation, Kh. er-Rasm is still much higher than its immediate surroundings, with excellent observation over most of the region, including to the direct east (hindered today by high trees on the eastern part of the hill), west, north and south.

### 0.2.1 Environmental Background: Conditions of the Area in General

#### *Oren Ackermann*

The site is located in the upper Shephelah, at an elevation of 328 m above mean sea level (a.m.s.l.). The Shephelah (lowlands) is part of the Israel mountain ridge stretching from north-northeast to south-southwest. The ridge is composed of several geomorphological sub-parallel strips. According to Bar et al. (2006) these strips are as follows (from east to west):

1. The Mountain Plateau, with summits ranging from 750 to 1020 m a.m.s.l.;
2. The Western Mountain Front, characterized by steep slopes ranging from 400 to 800 m a.m.s.l.;
3. The Higher Shephelah, with summits ranging from 320 to 480 m a.m.s.l.;
4. The Lower Shephelah, with summits ranging from 180 to 320 m a.m.s.l..

The Coastal Plain (with elevation of less than 150 m

(a.m.s.l.) borders the lower Shephelah in the west. A slope of approximately 60 m in height separates these two regions.

The geological stratigraphy of the Shephelah is primarily composed of white chalk with chert lenses covered by a thick calcrete crust, known locally as *nari* (see also Chapter 2.5). The chalk is of the middle Eocene Age, being the Shephelah group Maresha and Adulam members of the Zor'ah formation.

Relics of Neocene and Pleistocene sediments cover the Shephelah group by the following formations: Ziqlag, composed of bioclastic limestone and coralline and algal reefs; Beit Nir, composed of conglomerate altered to *nari*; Pleshet (in the lower Shephelah), composed of Calcareous pebbly sandstone; Ahuzam and Nahshon, composed of conglomerate of river terraces (Buchbinder 1969; Bar et al. 2006).

The pedological structure of the area is primarily composed of two soils types:

Brown *rendzina* soil, found on the *nari* crust, and pale *rendzina* soil, found on soft chalk (Dan et al. 1972; 1976; 2007; Singer 2007).

The climate is Mediterranean sub-humid, characterised by a hot, dry summer and a cool, rainy winter. The mean temperature in January is 11°C and the mean temperature in August is 26°C. The rainy season generally lasts from October to May, and the mean annual rainfall is 350 to 400 mm (Department of Surveys 1985; Gonen and Tahal 2004).

The vegetation is composed of a variety of Mediterranean formations: dwarf shrubs, shrubs and a large variety of herbaceous species. The most abundant species are: *Quercus calliprinos* (Kermes Oak); *Pistacia lentiscus* L. (Lentisk); *Phillyrea latifolia* (Mock privet; Jasmine box); *Ceratonia siliqua* (Carob); *Rhamnus lycioides palaestinus* (Palestine buckthorn); *Sarcopoterium spinosum* (Thorny burnet); *Thymelaea hirsute* (Gnidium); and *Hyparrhenia hirta* (Thatching grass) (Enviroplan 2004).



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ISBN 978-1-4073-0742-8

