

Summer Stint in the Soil

By Jeremy Cohen

When George Washington University Professor, Tel Kabri Excavation Co-Director, and impromptu limerick enthusiast Eric H. Cline notified me of his “just having happened to stumble upon” my first post on the Penn Museum website, I realized that I had a tangible audience for my story. [25 June 2015]

This summer, I took the advice of classics professors (“text comes alive in the dirt”), former students (“studying abroad, if done right, is one of the most worthwhile college experiences”), and my family (“spend time in Israel as a twenty-something”), as I found myself digging precise trenches just miles south of the Lebanese border.

My path to Tel Kabri consisted of some targeted Internet searching and peppering my professors with questions. “Of course I know Eric Cline,” Prof. Jeremy McNerney told me in office hours. “He and I played cards together in Athens.” A few months later, I was on a nine-hour voyage across the Atlantic: seated in *Clássica*, drinking Italian coffee, and on my way towards an archaeological site located just a few kilometers from the Mediterranean coast. On the lands of Kibbutz Kabri, every other year for the past decade, Professor Cline has led a team of colleagues, post-docs, and students



Picture of Jeremy and other students at Tel Kabri

1. Estimates of the Middle Bronze Age's exact dates vary, but they hover around 1700 B.C., which was precise enough for publication in the *New York Times*. (See note 9.)
2. For more on the actual history of the place, see Cline's and Yasur-Landau's (very readable) article "Poetry in Motion: Canaanite Rulership and Aegean Narrative at Kabri" in *EPOS: Reconsidering Greek Epic and Aegean Bronze Age Archaeology*, ed. Morris and Laffineur (Liege,

from U.S. institutions and the University of Haifa on coordinated excavations of a pre-biblical, Minoan-era¹ Canaanite palace. Their aim was to find residue of the oldest wine in the world at the same site where Israeli archaeologists discovered a Minoan-style fresco in the 1980's.² Instead of mosaic tiles, our all-hands-in-trench findings emerged as fired Canaanite clay.

Walking to a Tel Aviv station, I checked to ensure my suitcase had all the essentials: handy trowel, thick textbook, field notebook; lightweight clothes, long-sleeved, and open to receiving a plethora of dirt stains.³ I am not one to wake before dawn's rosy-fingered arrival. But starting on that first dig-morning, around 4:45, I arose before *l'élévation* of the sun *levantin*. Accompanying me on that fateful bus were roughly thirty undergrads and graduate students, roughing it with hiking boots and water jugs, trowels and pencils. Many students hailed from Cline's own GW or Andrew J. Koh's Brandeis. Yet, I found myself immediately welcomed as "Jeremy, from Penn!" by both professors—each having a red-and-blue Ph.D.—leading to easy conversations. For

Professor Assaf Yasser-Landau, formerly of the 1980s New Wave music movement and now of the maritime and coastal archaeology program at the University of Haifa, consistent mutual reference to Kafka or *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* accomplished similar geniality. They all lent credibility to the suspicion that such a person has to be perhaps a little odd, dedicating a life to the palatial economics and intercultural trade of the Bronze Age Mediterranean. As they watched us work through six-hour shifts, taking notes or photographs or turns with the pick-axe, professors smilingly sold graduate programs (and/or personality cults). Many word games, logic puzzles, and contrived allusions later, Assaf assured me I might just be idiosyncratic enough for the profession.

Whether I was qualified for the dig's manual labor was another matter entirely. My "un-apologetically lanky" physique may have helped me blend into Tel Aviv bars, but my muscles sure paid the piper—pick-axing, crouching, balancing, carrying, emptying, and high-fiving—at the local rate of 12 Israeli new shekel/day, or whatever an after-shift non-iced coffee (with ice) cost at the local gas station. It was rewarding work, though, worth the increased appetite for hummus and penchant for falling asleep at 8:30 pm. And what a tan! Armistice lines ran along my legs, upper arms, and lower neck, separating two Euxenine shades between which only a 1028-pack Crayola could distinguish.

Still, the work went ever on, as the self-described Clininites more deeply and widely delved into proto-Canaanites' palatial storerooms. Depending on your politics within the archaeology community and willingness to accept data collected by first-of-its-kind, on-site residue analysis, you may well nod toward Kabri's claim of "world's oldest-known palatial wine cellar." Indeed, even if you are skeptical of *The New York Times*' public-interest journalism⁴ and member-updated Web pages,⁵ there is still great merit in discovering wine residue. Especially if said residue is indicative of recipe-based mixology, in dozens of storage jars housed within several

2007). For a lot more on the history of the *archaeology* of the place: Kampinski, *Tel Kabri: The 1986-1993 Excavations* (Tel Aviv, 2002).

3. N.B. I welcome endorsements for "savvy traveling" on LinkedIn.

4. John Noble Wilford, "Wine Celler, Well Aged, Is Revealed in Israel," *The New York Times*, 22 Nov 2013.

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel_Kabri

6. Viz. UCLA doctoral student Alison Crandall, behind-the-scenes workhorse of ARCHEM. For those interested: http://jchp.ucla.edu/Protocols/Residue_Sampling.pdf.

separate rooms, adjoining uniquely paired Syrian-style architecture and Aegean-style frescoes, all abandoned enigmatically some 3,700 years ago. And if the wine's derived ingredients imply trade with far-flung parts of Asia in the early second millennium BCE. The jury is out until Koh's⁶ final lab reports are in, along with the triad's subsequent publications.

All in all, it was exhilarating stuff, made more so by sleeplessness and more than one double shift. I still keep in contact with some of the other students, who are pursuing various permutations of geology, ancient history, classical languages, and literature. Some were graduate students, who offered valuable advice on the initial postgrad forays into academia. Some were peers, exploring intellectual opportunities at respective institutions. One was a rising high school senior who, sure of a future in archaeology, subsequently visited me at Penn a few weeks into the semester.

Feeling four-millennia-old pottery and soil affirmed a personal interest in a world otherwise accessed only via Wikipedia pages, Penguin translations, or Ancient Greek grammars. Four incredible weeks leave me with a more holistic approach to and appreciation of antiquity.