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Subsistence and Social Life on the Edge of Empires: The Dhiban Project's 2013 Season

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## SUBSISTENCE AND SOCIAL LIFE ON THE EDGE OF EMPIRES: THE DHIBAN PROJECT'S 2013 SEASON

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### *Stahl Field Report*

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How did past Middle Eastern communities who lived in resource-scarce environments cope with the external demands of empire and the internal requirements of subsistence? Tall Dhiban, a 12.5-hectare deeply stratified tell settlement located in a semi-arid environment in west-central Jordan, provides an ideal setting for answering this question at different moments in Middle Eastern history. Since 2004, the author has conducted archaeological research at Dhiban alongside his co-directors from Knox College and the University of Liverpool. They lead an interdisciplinary team of researchers drawn from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Thanks to the Stahl Fund, who has generously sponsored portions of the 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2013 field seasons, the Dhiban Project is now beginning to answer its key research questions.

Three areas were excavated during the eight-week 2013 season. Area L is located on the tell's highest point and contains stratified Iron Age, Classical, and Middle Islamic settlement evidence. This season, the project largely completed the excavation of Middle Islamic buildings that were part of a larger village that developed from the Mamluk empire's economic intensification efforts. Radiocarbon dating indicates that these buildings were founded in the late thirteenth century and abandoned as early as the late fourteenth century CE. The project is also excavating a monumental Iron Age building that sits below these buildings' foundations.

In Area S, a second field that saw activity this summer, the project excavated the upper story of a Late Antique (i.e., Late Byzantine/Early Islamic) period building that collapsed during a large-scale burning event. This destruction has been tentatively dated by limited radiocarbon testing to the late sixth or early seventh century CE. Additional testing may push this date slightly earlier. The bottom story will be excavated next season. Finally, in Area W, research continued on an ancient water reservoir. Excavations determined that the feature was first constructed in the Iron Age and then reused several centuries later during the Classical period settlement. This feature, like the hundred of cisterns littering the tell's surface, indicates how seriously Dhiban's communities took the capture and storage of precipitation.

Organic and inorganic evidence was collected from all areas, including ceramic, metal, and glass artifacts, animal bone and carbonized botanical samples. This evidence will help answer the project's principal research questions on subsistence, production, and social life at different moments in Dhiban's history. How, for instance, did the abandoned remains of older settlements provide resources with which new communities could build a subsistence infrastructure? Multiple excavated features reveal how new settlements adapted and reused architectural elements to construct new features. The large water reservoir in Area W is an outstanding example of this borrowing from later time periods. But other subtler clues abound in the reuse of old wall

foundations and building materials and the cleaning of cisterns for renewed water capture. This iterative process of construction, abandonment, and rehabilitation over several millennia meant that even though Dhiban was positioned in a semi-arid resource scarce environment, it grew into a place that could sustain larger populations with complicated production needs.

The Dhiban Project consisted of 45 members during the 2013 season. Graduate/post-graduate students from the University of California, Berkeley (7), University of Liverpool (4), Bryn Mawr College (3), Brown University (1), the University of Pennsylvania (1), and several other institutions. Twelve undergraduates participated in the Dhiban Archaeological Field School, a Berkeley Summer Abroad program. Ten Dhiban community members were hired to assist the project. Besides the Stahl Fund, support for the season originated from other sources at Berkeley as well as a British Academy Small Grant. The Dhiban Project would especially like to thank the Jordanian Department of Antiquities for their ongoing support of their research. Research on excavated materials continues throughout the academic year. Annual reports are published regularly in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* and other scholarly venues. For more about the Dhiban Project, visit [www.dhiban.org](http://www.dhiban.org).



**Figure 1.** Room dating to Dhiban's Middle Islamic settlement in Field L. Looking north



**Figure 2.** A ceramic bottle excavated in the upper story of a collapsed Late Antique building in Field S.



**Figure 3.** A thick plaster lining sealed the interior of an Iron Age reservoir in Field W.