**Khirbet Neged**

Initial Report

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During the months of June 2017 – February 2018, test excavations were carried out in Khirbet Neged (Kh. Nejed), north of the city of Sderot (Permit no. A-8041; map ref. 161550-2255 / 604831-5662; figure 1) prior to construction. The excavation, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and funded by the Sderot Municipal Economic Company, was directed by D. Verga and F. Kobrin (preliminary tests); assisted by Y. Al-‘Amor (administration); A. Fraiberg, H. Hamer, S. Tzur, and D. Biton (area directors); D. Pukshenski, A. Ben-Porat, M. Hemed, A. Nevo, and Y. Figelson (assistant area supervisors); A. Hevroni, A. Tamir, S. Bloch, I. Azoulay, and S. Kisseh (guides); M. Kahan, Y. Shmidov, and M. Kunin (surveying); E. Aladjem (aerial photographs); S. Gal (location map); and A. Peretz (field photography).

Surveys have been conducted in Kh. Neged (some 50 dunams) in the past (licenses no. G-146/1988; S-521/2014), defining the boundaries of the site. Also identified were a winepress, a burial structure, and a church. Excavations carried out at the site exposed remains from the Byzantine period, including a structure, probably for storage (license no. A-7676), a winepress, and two cisterns (some 200 meters south of this excavation; license no. A-7832).

Seven excavation areas were opened (A – G; 5.5 dunams; figure 2). A large rural Byzantine settlement was exposed. In the eastern part of the site these were based on remains from the Late Roman period. The remains of a large Abbasid settlement covering most of the area of the site were also discovered.

**Remains from the Late Roman period** (3rd – 4th century CE). Remains of a massive structure (area E; figure 3) were discovered on the eastern part of a moderately sloping hill. Two entrances were identified in the east and south. The structure’s walls were built of hewn Kurkar stone blocks through dry construction. The structure was only partially excavated due to its location under a Byzantine church marked for preservation. A sophisticated winepress was discovered some 50m south-east of the structure (area F; figure 4). It has a treading floor, at the center of which is a pit for securing a screw press. Fermenting vats were built to the west, north, and south of the treading floor, four of which are wholly conserved. They were connected to the treading floor by lead pipes. The vats were coated in plaster and the treading floor was paved with stone tiles. A pair of round collecting vats were built to the east of the treading floor (3.15m diameter, over 1.5m deep) and tiled with stone tiles in a radial pattern. Smaller, round settling vats were dug at the center of the collecting vats, and also tiled with stone tiles.

North of the winepress two fish ponds were discovered (figure 5), built of kurkar stones and coated inside and out with hydraulic plaster. One pool (5.0 x 5.2m) is well preserved, its western and northern walls preserved to a great height. Spawning cells were built into the four corners of the pool from Ashkelon-type jugs that were laid down in a staggered formation. Only the south-west corner of the second pool survived. Examining the cell content and the sediment collected in them, and the pool floor, will help determine the pool’s function and the type of fish bred in it.

**Byzantine period settlement** (5th – 6th century CE). In the Byzantine period the settlement reached the height of its prosperity: it covered the entire area excavated, possibly even the entire site. Discovered were churches (in areas C and E), dwellings (areas A – D), storage facilities (area C), and industry (areas B, F, and G).

The church at the top of a hill in area E is of the basilica type, only its foundations remain (15.5 x 22.0m, not including the atrium; figure 3). The church has a central apse and two internal ones. In the northern section there is an additional wing that probably contained the baptismal font and also ends in an apse to the east. No evidence of mosaic was found, and it is likely the church was paved with stone tiles, possibly also marble. A few glass mosaic stones were discovered, maybe indicating wall mosaics. At the top of the hill, in area C, scanty remains of a structure in an east-west position were discovered, possibly a small church. The structure is mostly ruined. Stylobates survive, creating three long halls, and some meager remains of an apse.

Remains of residential structures were found in area B – the wall stones were mostly looted, with very little remaining above foundation level (figure 6). A regulated plan of the buildings on an east-west axis can be discerned. The foundations were built of local kurkar stone, while the walls were built partially of stone and partially of cast mud. In areas A, B, and D a few sections of yards survived, mainly paved with natural stone and at times with hewn panes. Despite the state of preservation it is sometimes possible to discern inner courtyards in areas A – D, and yards with household activity in area A. In areas C and D rows of Gaza jugs were found that had been laid upside down on the ground with their bases missing. The rows of jugs are a continuation of stone walls or create a form of partition wall. Research tends to view this phenomenon as an attempt to build separation walls from the residents’ surplus jugs. Two structures in area B are unusual to the site’s structures. They are massively built, and possibly served a security role due to their proximity to a large structure (11.5 x 41.0m; figure 7) – a storage shed built on an east-west axis, of which mainly the foundations and a few stone tiles on the floor survive. The structure’s external walls were built of hewn kurkar stones and plastered on both sides. A caulking layer was added on the southern wall to prevent water penetration. The wall’s stones were dissembled for secondary construction and in several sections of the southern wall only the caulking layer remains. A row of column bases was discovered on the structure’s axis. These held up the ceiling and were spaced 3m apart. Parts of the ceiling were discovered in landslides excavated inside the structure. Identifying the structure as a storage shed is based on parallels with similar buildings exposed with their contents such as an estate discovered to the north of Ashkelon (Israel and Erickson-Gini, 2013).

Two winepresses were discovered at the site, one south of area B and another in the industrial area of area G. The winepress in area B was found completely in ruins apart from remains of the treading floor foundations. A pair of collecting vats and a settling pit remain from the area G winepress. The round collecting vats (3m in diameter) are carefully built and paved in stone tiles in a radial pattern; in the center of the floor is a settling pit, also made of stone tiles. A square settling pool was built between the pair of collecting vats. East of the winepress and near it landslides and garbage pits from a workshop were discovered. It probably was active when the winepress was no longer in use. Industrial waste of pottery manufacture was found in the collecting vats. Among the deformed vessels that were not completed or were damaged were mainly Gaza type jugs and kraters. Pottery samples were taken to identify the source of the clay.

**Abbasid period settlement** (9th – 10th century CE). In area C, an open mosque was found above the remains of the small church. Residential structures were also found spanning the entire excavation area. The mosque (figure 8) cancelled out the church – a partition wall was built width-wise in the western part of the church, and a *mihrab* (prayer niche) was built in the southern wall. The northern wall was dismantled: two pilasters were built in its place with an arch between them, serving as an opening. The walls and floors of the mosque were plastered with a pale grey plaster and the *mihrab* was tiled with stone tiles. A whole lamp uncovered in the *mihrab* and a few potsherds discovered in the structure date the mosque to the 9th – 10th century CE.

In all excavation areas in which Byzantine structures were exposed, Abbasid period structures were also exposed (figure 6). Dwellings of this period were built above the storage structure in area B and above the large church in area E.

The preservation of dwellings is very poor. The chronological gap can clearly be seen in the deep accumulations between the relics of both periods. In general it seems that the remains of the Abbasid period are more meager than of the Byzantine period. The walls’ foundations are narrower and built of smaller stones. It seems that a large part of the walls were built of cast mud.

The excavation shows that the settlement was abandoned in the 11th century CE, after which the settlement structures were dismantled down to their foundations in order to build other settlements in the area during the Ottoman period. A study of the excavation results that expose diverse aspects of daily life: residence, worship, and industry, could expand the knowledge regarding the settlement’s function in the Western Negev, in the hinterland of the main coastal towns of Ashkelon and Gaza, at the end of the Classical period and in the early Middle Ages.

Israel Y. and Erickson-Gini T. 2013. Remains from the Hellenistic through the Byzantine Periods at the 'Third Mile Estate', Ashqelon. *῾Atiqot* 74:167–222. Jerusalem.

1. Location map.
2. Excavation areas, aerial view to the north.
3. Church with an earlier structure below it, view to the east.
4. The winepress in area F, view to south-east.
5. Fish ponds, view to north-west.
6. Remains of structures from the Byzantine and Abbasid periods in area B, view to the east.
7. The large storage structure in area B, view to the south.
8. The mosque in area C, view to the south.