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A dig can start in the most casual of ways. Our partnership, for example, was hatched during a chance meeting in the summer of 2004. The encounter lasted less than a minute:

Assaf: "Hi, Eric! Good to see you again. Want to reopen the excavations at Kabri with me?"

Eric: "Hi, Assaf! Sure, sounds good to me."

Assaf: "Okay, I'll be in touch."

There was, however, a bit more to the story. For several years, Assaf had been trying to raise the funds to re-excavate Kabri. The site, on the grounds of Kibbutz Kabri about 4 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea, had been excavated from 1988 to 1993 by Aharon Kempinski, a professor at Tel Aviv University, and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier, then a professor at Heidelberg University. They uncovered a monumental Middle Bronze Age IIIB Canaanite palace probably dating to the 17th century B.C.E. (see sidebar on p. 37).

Kempinski died in 1994 and the excavations stopped, but the fame of their discoveries lived on. Most importantly, the palace featured a plaster floor and walls painted in a Minoan style usually found on the islands of Crete and Santorini in the Aegean Sea. Other than Kabri, only three sites outside the Aegean boast such Minoan-style paintings: Qatna and Alalakh, in Syria, and Tell ed-Dab’a, in the Delta region of Egypt. These are arguably the earliest examples of western art yet found in the eastern Mediterranean.

Also drawing us to Kabri was our interest in international trade and the interconnections between Greece and the Levant during the Bronze Age. We were both familiar with the earlier excavations at Kabri; in fact, Assaf had been a volunteer excavator at the site in 1990 and had privately sworn to return someday to conduct his own excavations there. Cementing our partnership was the fact that we have been friends since 1998, when we were both staff members on the excavation at Megiddo, in northern Israel.

Some two months after our casual agreement to try to reopen the Tel Kabri excavation, we sat down for our first serious discussion about the project. We were at an archaeology conference in Atlanta, and we snatched a few minutes alone in the breakfast area of our hotel. Armed with a laptop computer and the results of an electric resistivity survey conducted the previous year by Assaf and a geophysicist from Tel Aviv University that indicated the presence of walls deep beneath the surface of the previous excavations, we jabbered away at each other, oblivious to the passage of time and the fact that the conference talks had already begun.

Like every archaeologist wishing to start an excavation, we faced a vicious circle: To get a dig permit, we needed to show that we had the necessary
funding. To get funding, however, we needed to show that we had the permit in hand. A classic Catch-22! We decided to approach initially a very few institutions—primarily our own universities and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory (INSTAP), a private philanthropic organization—and to promise them that we would return the money if we failed to get the dig permit.

Our next task was to draw up a preliminary budget so that we would know how much money we would be applying for. This was a back-and-forth process that occurred over the next few months, made somewhat easier by our previous experiences in the field (coincidentally, this would be the 19th season of digging for each of us) and by advice from friends who had run their own excavations or who had been in charge of the finances on excavations.

We decided, since we were unlikely to get much money for the first season, that we would call our first foray into the field a preliminary, exploratory season, designed to discover whether there were, in fact, enough remains still extant at the site to warrant a multi-year series of excavations. We would run our exploratory season on a shoestring budget, scraping and scraping, and, if our discoveries merited it, hope for more funding in future years from such places as the National Geographic Society, the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

We came up with a budget we thought would be the bare minimum for running a four-week exploratory season. We submitted our applications to our respective universities and to INSTAP in November and December 2004. By the end of February 2005 we had received both good and bad news: Though all three of our applications were accepted, we had been granted far less than we had hoped for.

Determined to press ahead despite the prospect of surviving on rice and beans throughout the excavation season, we then approached the next few hurdles simultaneously: obtaining the excavation permit from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and lining up housing, food, transportation and tools for our as-yet nonexistent staff and volunteers. We also began discussions with Kibbutz Kabri, because the excavations would take place in the middle of their avocado orchards.

In mid-April 2005, with the backing of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, we submitted an application to the IAA for the permit. Even after we received approval from the IAA's internal council in early May, we still had to get final approval from the Archaeological Council of Israel. By the
AN ARMY TRAVELS on its stomach, and an excavation team can’t dig without lots of nourishment, preferably as good as the fare supplied to the Kabri group.

time that final permission had been received, it was May 26—less than five weeks before the dig was to begin.

However, having remained hopeful that we would get the permit, we had begun, back in March, to send out e-mails and letters to a few friends and acquaintances, saying that we might be reopening the excavations at Kabri and, if the permit came through, would they be interested in participating? Lo and behold, we quickly had nearly 50 people lined up, from the U.S.A., Poland, England, France, Australia, Croatia and Israel. Why did we have such success in getting people interested in working on our site? We believe there were two reasons: We had a “sexy” site that was of interest to many people, and people were willing to travel to Israel again since the violence of the intifada (Palestinian uprising) had moderated.

During those same months, Assaf, aided by his indefatigable graduate student Nurith Goshen, was trying to line up accommodations, a caterer and a bus to transport our team to and from the site. Urged on by Eric, who claimed to be too old to spend another excavation season living in a tent and sharing a communal shower (been there, done that), Assaf and Nurith ventured out on what they would later insist was the most difficult part of the preparations for the excavation season. They were required to visit five different caterers to taste-test their food (eating as many as three lunches in a single day) and to visit various bed-and-breakfasts in the area to check their air-conditioning and try out their swimming pools. It is true that scientific aims are the most important part of a dig, but in order to get the best results we have to keep our excavation team both happy and safe.

The latter is especially important. Excavation is a contact sport. It is, above all, a hot undertaking, even if digging in shaded areas, and it makes one sweat heavily and lose much water. In addition, there are plenty of sharp objects flying around, from pickaxes to pointed trowels. Even a bucket falling into an excavation square, which may be nearly 10 feet deep, can pose a threat. Luckily, we did not have snakes, though Tel Aviv University graduate student Inbal Samet happily reported that she sighted a centipede of a magnitude previously seen only in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. By requiring people to wear closed, sturdy shoes, constantly urging them to drink water and cautioning them to stay far away from anyone working with a pickaxe, we were fairly confident that we would be able to keep our dig-related injuries to a minimum.

And then, finally, after much additional paperwork and checking with the excavation staff and volunteers to make sure they all had their passports, health insurance, airplane tickets and sunscreen (not to mention money for their room and board) the excavation began on July 3, 2005.

During the previous months we, as directors, had been wrestling with a central question: Where on the site would we dig? This is an especially difficult question in the first season. Dig in the right place and you’ll have architecture, nice destruction levels (which tend to preserve remains), perhaps even thick plaster floors and imported pottery from the Middle Bronze Age, as we promised in our grant applications. Choose the wrong place to dig and you’ll be excavating plastic irrigation pipes, foundations of concrete buildings from the time of the British Mandate and archaeological assemblages well dated by modern Israeli shekel coins. Naturally, in the latter case, your chances of receiving future funding and attracting dig volunteers are significantly diminished.

We decided to dig in three separate areas, 12 squares in all, in order to spread the risk. Two areas (D-South and D-West) were close to the earlier excavations of the Middle Bronze Age IIB palace. The third area (D-North) was determined by an electric resistivity survey that indicated some large walls, presumably those of the palace.
KABRI’S MIGHTY PALACE

IN THE 17TH CENTURY B.C.E., Tel Kabri was the center of a prospering kingdom. Located in the western Galilee only 4 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, it was the seat of strong and proud Canaanite rulers. The city was large, almost 10 acres, and was defended by massive earthen ramparts more than 60 feet thick. The ruling family resided in a palace that was a huge labyrinth of rooms and courts, rising at least two stories high, with massive walls up to 12 feet thick, covered with a coat of white plaster.

At the center of the palace was a great hall roofed with cedar logs. The floor was decorated with an elaborately painted fresco, divided into checkered designs of white and yellow squares, with some cactus and iris flowers. Commissioned by Kabri’s ruler, it had been painted by Minoan artisans from faraway Crete. Those artisans had also painted a miniature fresco on the walls of the great hall, showing a city, with sea and boats, similar to scenes depicted by their fellow artisans at the site of ancient Akrotiri on the Aegean island of Santorini. These were a source of great pride to the local ruler, as very few other monarchs could afford such artisans.

The hall was used for festive receptions, hosting nobility and envoys from afar. The ruler’s throne was in the adjoining hall, which had a shiny white plaster floor. The private apartments were on the second floor. In one of them stood a loom with many weights, used for weaving luxurious clothes.

After outliving four generations of rulers or more, the aging but still grand palace came to a sudden end, destroyed in a single day during the 17th century B.C.E. Fire broke out in several places, burning the surrounding mud bricks bright red. The second floor collapsed onto the first, sealing the contents of each room: storage jars, luxurious imported pottery,loom weights, spindle whorls. The ruling family, if it survived, would never return.

The destruction was total. Not even the name of the site was preserved. The mysteries of the palace and the identity of its builders lay buried in the ground, as well as the reasons for its destruction. Was it caused by the hand of an enemy, a shattering earthquake or simply an errant ember from the palatial hearth? Why was the palace never rebuilt or the site refortified?

Kabri kept its secrets patiently for 36 centuries, until excavations began in the late 1980s. Those excavations had to be discontinued due to the death of one of the dig directors, but with our renewed dig, we hope to unravel Kabri’s mysteries.—A.Y.L. and E.H.C.

Our goal of reaching the palace floors in all three areas seemed realistic, given that we had four full weeks to dig. Our area and square supervisors, completely trusting our scientific authority (actually, hunches), immediately took up pickaxes and began digging through the topsoil, aiming for the destruction debris on the palace floor a foot or two below.

Sometimes it works. In D-West, area supervisors Michal Beniada and Dan Warner and their team promptly disappeared from sight in a flurry of pickaxes, only to emerge a week later having exposed the tops of two monumental walls, each about 12 feet thick! In another three days, the walls were fully exposed and could be drawn by the architect.

Sometimes, however, things can be much messier. In D-North, under a lush tropical canopy of the avocado trees, we expected, based on the top of levels of walls in the previously excavated parts of the palace, that the walls would start to appear about 2 feet below. We were reassured by the results of the electric resistivity survey, which we thought indicated the presence of these same walls. No problem.

We began to get a little concerned when, after four days, we had removed 2 feet of topsoil but still had not found any walls, only plastic bags, bottle caps and wires. A consultation with the elders of Kibbutz Kabri confirmed that the area had been plowed to a depth of nearly 3 feet when the avocado trees were planted decades earlier. No problem. “We should find the walls right below the area damaged by plowing. It may take a few more days,” we told the area supervisors, as the mounds of excavated dirt piled ever higher.

Four days later, midway through the second week of digging, we were nearly 5 feet below topsoil. Big problem. No walls. Surely we should have found something by now. Does the palace even exist where we are digging? Have we been led astray by some blurry geophysical images? We can hear music coming from the trenches: The volunteers are singing the blues, but they are too deep to be seen from the outside.

Finally, on a Tuesday, an hour before the end of the workday, Philip Johnston, an undergraduate from Wheaton College, working with a pickaxe, and Natan Ben Ari, an undergraduate at Tel Aviv University, lifting buckets from the bottom of the trench that was now nearly 8 feet deep, hit pay dirt. Phil’s pickaxe exposed a concentration of pottery resting on a thick, white plaster floor. The floor of the palace has been reached, and it is covered by a destruction level, no less! And just above the floor is some imported Cypriot ware of at least two types, which will help us date the destruction and perhaps even the floor and the palace as well.

It turns out that the palace’s plaster floor is simply deeper than we had expected (perhaps the palace was built as a split level). And now, as if to make up for teasing us, the site gives up another secret. In one of the squares, part of the plaster floor is missing; we dig a small probe to see what lies below. To our amazement, we find the remains of an earlier, Middle Bronze Age IIA structure, possibly palatial, lying immediately below our Middle Bronze IIIB palace. We’ve got two palaces for the price of one. The

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volunteers are ecstatic. The directors are simply nerve-racked. We throw a spontaneous middle-of-the-dig party that evening.

In our exploratory season, we met with success beyond our expectations. Most importantly, we were able to establish that enough of the Middle Bronze Age IIB Canaanite palace is still present to merit a multi-year excavation of the site. We also discovered that the palace was almost twice as large as originally estimated by the previous excavators (10,000-13,000 square feet rather than 6,500) and extended further to the north, east and west.

The destruction deposits, including restorable local pottery, burnt organic material and imported Cypriot pottery, will provide data for the date of the violent destruction of the palace.

The palace lies immediately above the Middle Bronze Age IIA structure. If the latter is indeed an earlier palace, it would be one of the very few examples of palatial remains from its time in Israel—approximately the 18th century B.C.E.

Other interesting finds included the first gold object ever discovered at the site, as well as a possible cultic libation installation with numerous intact and restorable vessels.

Now we are starting the process all over again: applying for more funds and the annual permit. We hope that our discoveries during the 2005 season will pique the interest of funding organizations and that we will get enough grant money (and the permits) to go back for a five- or six-week season with 100 volunteers each year for the next few years. Stay tuned!

Photos courtesy of the authors.