

## **TELEILAT GHASSUL in JORDAN**

Teleilat Ghassul is a 20 hectare prehistoric mound first settled at the end of the Late Neolithic around 5000 BCE, and occupied throughout the Chalcolithic period of the Fifth Millennium BCE. It is the type-site for the Ghassulian cultural phase in the Southern Levant. It is five kilometres from the north east shore of the Dead Sea in the south Jordan Valley. The slightly later EB I period dolmen site of Adeimeh is situated 4km to the south. Teleilat Ghassul is the subject of flagship research by the University of Sydney, which excavated the site between 1967-77 and 1994-99, following initial excavations by the Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome between 1929-38 and 1959-60.

Teleilat Ghassul is one of the largest Chalcolithic sites in the Southern Levant, dating from c4900—3800 BCE. With a combination of broad area architectural exposure, deep soundings, and extensive botanical, zoological, and material-cultural data sets, Teleilat Ghassul is a significant source for our understanding of increasing social and economic complexity in the late pre-urban Chalcolithic period. Teleilat Ghassul is providing important new information about the earliest production of olive oil, and other secondary products such as fibre and dairy. The site is also adding to our understanding of Chalcolithic cult and religious practice, art and pyro-technology.

The history of exploration of the site includes campaigns by the Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome, and British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem/University of Sydney, and the University of Sydney.

You can view the Teleilat Ghassul objects in the Nicholson Museum Collection/Chau Chak Wing catalogue at:

[https://www.sydney.edu.au/museums/collections\\_search/#search-results&view=thumbnail&id=db96&modules=ecatalogue%3Benarratives%3Beevents%3Beparties&keywords=Teleilat%20Ghassul&offset](https://www.sydney.edu.au/museums/collections_search/#search-results&view=thumbnail&id=db96&modules=ecatalogue%3Benarratives%3Beevents%3Beparties&keywords=Teleilat%20Ghassul&offset)

	Director	Year	Dates	Features
PBI	Mallon	1929	Jan	Discovery of site
PBI	Mallon	1929-30	24 Nov-28 Dec, then 4 March to 5 April	Tell 1 and Tell 3, plus smaller excavation on Tells 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12. Neuville joined the second season, which focussed on Tell 1.
PBI	Mallon	1930-31	20 Nov -31 Mar	Sondages
PBI	Mallon	1931-32	29 Nov -24 Mar	Tell 3, paintings ( <i>Notables Scene, L'Oisseau</i> ) reached virgin soil in some places, Wadi Djarafa extension
PBI	Mallon	1932-33	27 Nov -2 Apr	Tell 3 enlargement, Adeimeh.
PBI	Mallon	1933-34	25 Nov – 5 Jan	Death of Pere Mallon
PBI	Koeppel	1936	3 Feb – 19 Mar	Tell 3, IVA and IVB
PBI	Koeppel	1938	3 Jan - 1 Mar	Tell 3, wall paintings, bad weather
PBI	North	1959-60	4 Dec – Feb 20	Connection Tell 1, 2, 3, in Areas A-E, 'Tiger' Mural
BSAJ	Hennessy	1967	Jan 16- March 16	Area A deep cut, Phases A-I (Hennessy 'Zig-Zag' fragment A VIII)
BSAJ/ Uni Syd	Hennessy	1975		Area A I-III only, Area E Trenches 1-X (incl. Sanctuary A) and Area F I-II, G I, H I, M I
BSAJ/ Uni Syd	Hennessy	1977	Jan - Feb	Expansion Areas E XX-XXII and F III-V, AXVI
BSAJ/ Uni Syd	Hennessy	1977	Oct-Nov	Area A (Hennessy 'Procession'), Area E (Sanctuary B)
Uni Syd	Bourke	1994	5 weeks	Area A X-XI, H II, E XXIII, G II.
Uni Syd	Bourke	1995	14 Jan - 3 March	Area A X-XII, H III, E XXIV, G II, N I-II, P I.
Uni Syd	Bourke	1997	4 Jan - 8 Feb	Area A XI-XIII E XXV-XXVI ,H III-IV, G II-IV, N I, Q I-II
Uni Syd	Bourke	1999		A XI-XIII, E XXV-XXVI, N I-III, H III-IV, Q I-III, G II-IV, NI-III.

**Table: Archaeological Research at Teleilat Ghassul**

(References: Lee 1973:19-28; Koeppel 1940:vi; Hennessy 1969, 1982, 1989; Bourke et. al. 1995, 2000, 2007. See Select Bibliography, below)

### Wall Paintings

Teleilat Ghassul has produced a breathtaking series of wall paintings. These include (from PBI campaigns) the 'Ghassul Star', 'Notables' Tiger Fresco', and 'Oiseau' & 'Spook Masks' frescoes, and from Hennessy/Bourke campaigns the 'Zig-Zag' fragment, 'Processional Scene' (now in the Jordan National Museum), and the 'Garland' fragment.

Bernadette Drabsch revisited the question of the original composition of the fragmented 'Procession' painting for her Newcastle PhD, and has produced a proposed new composition (Drabsch 2015), that brings new insights into the nature of social and ritual practice and socio/political hierarchy.

### Alexis Mallon and Robert Koepfel, PBI, 1929-1938

The idea that the site may have been the location for the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah partly motivated the original PBI excavators. It soon became obvious this was not the case, as Father Alexis Mallon and (after the untimely death of Mallon), Robert Koepfel made two major exposures (around 100 x 40 metres) of settlement. Virgin soil was reached at 5.5 metres depth in very small soundings, and four occupation levels (I-IV) were identified. Field work was challenged by the extensive earthquake cracking through the site's stratigraphy.

The word '*Ghassulian*' was coined to describe the distinctive ceramic and lithic assemblages.

Sensational wall paintings were found in rooms in Tell 3, including the 'Ghassul Star', 'L'Oiseau', and 'Notables' processional scene, along with vibrant geometric designs and so-called 'Spook' masks. Room 78, on the highest point of Tell 3 revealed a cluster of cornets associated with wall paintings, which led to suggestions of a cultic purpose for painted rooms. Whilst its significance was not recognised at the time, the PBI site plan of 1929-1932 shows the outline of what the University of Sydney Excavations were later to reveal as a Sanctuary Precinct on Tell 5.

### Robert North PBI, 1959-60

Robert North returned to Ghassul on behalf of the PBI in 1959/60 with the aim of stratigraphically linking PBI Tells 3, 2 and 1. North discovered the 'Tiger' fresco in a context identified as cultic near the other PBI discoveries on Tell 3, but the scene has been reinterpreted by Drabsch as a landscape with superimposed 'spook masks'.

### Basil Hennessy, BSAJ/University of Sydney, 1967-1977

Basil Hennessy spent 4 seasons at Teleilat Ghassul (1967, 1975, and two in 1977). His purpose was to '*check the stratification of the site which has long confused workers in the*

*Chalcolithic of Palestine*' which he achieved through careful excavation of the complex stratigraphy. Hennessy identified ten major building phases A-I, identifying that earthquake cracking was responsible for the disturbance which had troubled PBI campaigns.

Hennessy found evidence of a greater ceramic and flaked stone complexity and change through time than had previously been understood, arguing for occupation at Ghassul to have spanned the Late Neolithic to the Late Chalcolithic (4600BC – 3600BC; Hennessy 1982:57) Hennessy made links between Ghassul and Late Neolithic settlements at Jericho, and strong parallels between the upper levels and the Beer-Sheba Chalcolithic assemblages.

Hennessy called the upper four levels at Ghassul (D-A) the classical Ghassulian assemblage, with cornets, pastel-painted decoration, fan-scrapers, chisels and wall paintings (Hennessy 1969:viii). His reports (1969, 1977, 1982, and 1992) consistently argued that the significance of the site was in its evidence of internally generated culture, and sustained continuity through more than 10 levels from the Late Neolithic to the late Chalcolithic, dating from 4600-3600BC (1977:16, 1982:57).

Based on the 1975 discovery in Area E of a Walled Sanctuary area enclosing two long-room Sanctuary buildings, Hennessy designated Teleilat Ghassul a cult centre especially in its latter stages of occupation.

Stephen J. Bourke, University of Sydney, 1994 - present

Bourke re-opened excavations in 1994, undertaking further work in the Area E Sanctuary, Area G, the Hennessy Deep Cut Area A, and new areas including Area Q.

The Sanctuary at Teleilat Ghassul – Area E

Hennessy commenced work on Mound 5 - Area E - in 1975 having previously identified the long enclosure wall and surface indications of the precinct, leading him with *'little doubt that the area was a cult centre, especially in the final stages of occupation'* (Hennessy 1977:10). Sanctuary A and Sanctuary B were investigated in 1975-1977, first excavations in late 1975 revealed two broad-room structures (with entrances in the middle of the long side), each housing unique cultic objects including fenestrated stands, basalt objects, a double kernos, and a hollow zoomorphic figurine. (You can read more about this figurine in the Oct 2017 copy of Muse). <https://www.sydney.edu.au/museum/news/muse-magazine-and-other-publications.html>

These structures were enclosed by a right-angled temenos wall, delimiting the sanctuary area to its north and east, with much of the east and all of the west and south walls lost to erosion.

Hennessy's 1977 excavations had begun to investigate the Sanctuary forecourt area. Bourke's campaign (1994, 1995, 1997, and 1999) aimed to understand the Sanctuary Temenos interior and extra-temenos Industrial Area to the north of the wall, while further investigating the courtyard framed by Sanctuaries A and B.

A semicircular Altar-Arc with altar-stone, and paved avenue, was exposed along with further cult materials inside the altar-arc. The paved avenue connects the door of Sanctuary A with the altar arc, and beyond it to the point of sunrise over the Moab hills in the distance.

The Area E Sanctuary represents a departure from domestic shrine configurations within residential areas as discovered by Mallon, and unlike the broad-room structure in Hennessy's Area A, is a 'greenfield' development beyond the residential area of the site. It would have taken centrally organised resources to construct and maintain this public infrastructure, and thus points to increasingly complex socio-economic and political dynamics at this large Chalcolithic site.

Bourke's recent work at Ghassul has added valuable dimensions to the broad area and stratigraphic soundings of Hennessy and taken advantage of more recent developments in analytical and radiometric technologies to deepen our understanding of the changes to the environment and economy through time at Ghassul.

Teleilat Ghassul contributes valuable data, from one of the few large residential Chalcolithic sites, into the changes in a large late pre-urban society, charting the development of value-adding or 'secondary products' such as dairy, olive oil, textiles, long-distance trade and the impact of early copper production on the economies and trade relationships of the region.

(Peta Seaton 2021)

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