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Archaeological Surveys and Excavations along the Cross-Israel Highway: An Introduction

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The Israel Antiquities Authority has been involved in the planning of the Cross-Israel Highway from its inception until its opening for traffic in 2008. More than one hundred surveys and excavations were conducted along the projected route in cooperation with the archaeological institutes of Tel Aviv University, Ben Gurion University in the Negev and the University of Haifa. These archaeological endeavors greatly influenced the final route of the highway.

The geographical conditions of the country have not changed since antiquity. The main roads that traverse the country from north to south are now, as in the past, a consequence of the prevailing topography. Thus, the asphalt roads, which were paved during the British Mandate, utilized the earlier Ottoman roads, and these in turn followed ancient routes that had been in use for thousands of years. The planners of the Cross-Israel Highway chose these same routes, which necessitated crossing several rivers, such as Naḥal Afeq, Wadi Milḥ and Naḥal Qishon. The interchanges along the highway are situated at the main junctions of the ancient routes.

In the initial stage of planning, the IAA marked the main tells along the projected highway (e.g., Tell Abu Ras, Tel Ḥamid, Tel Ḥadid, Tel Yoqneʿam, Tel Qashish, Tel ʿAmar and Tel Regev), which were not to be incorporated into the highway under any circumstances. The route chosen was, therefore, one that would not damage the main tells. The planning of a national highway in such a narrow strip, dotted by important tells, was not an easy task. Mostly, the route was planned to circle the borders of the tells. However, it was not always possible to divert the route an optimal distance from the ancient ruins. At Tell Abu Ras and Tel Ḥadid, for example, there was no alternative route that could circle the fringes of the tells; therefore, a tunnel was constructed beneath the tell at Tel Ḥadid.

After the completion of the planning stage, the final route was determined and comprehensive archaeological surveys commenced. These surveys provided information concerning the sites along the proposed route of the highway, including recommendations as to which sites should be excavated and to what extent.

Trial excavations were then scheduled based on the survey results. It was soon realized that the IAA alone would not be able to undertake all the trial excavations within the time constraints of the project. Therefore, the route was divided into several sections, excavated by the IAA and the archaeological institutes of the universities, headed first by Alon Shavit, and later, by the author.

Salvage excavations followed, conducted according to the data obtained from the surveys and trial excavations. During these excavations, it was noticed that in some sites there was no correlation between the data retrieved from the earlier surveys and trial excavations and the finds at the site. Some of the excavated sites, in contrast to the richness of the survey material, yielded only meager finds, while other excavation sites were rich in finds that had not been documented in either the survey or trial excavations. Therefore, the Cross-Israel Highway Company decided to cut sounding trenches in the areas between the sites. These

soundings unearthed several Chalcolithic-period sites that were not noticed during the survey.

With the completion of the salvage excavations, the construction of the highway began. The development works along the road included further digging and quarrying, especially in the section between El'ad in the north and Tel Ḥadid in the south and at the Qiryat Gat Interchange. These works revealed subterranean sites, e.g., burial caves in the El'ad area and residential complexes at Giv'at Oranim and Tel Ḥadid.

The intensive surveys, trial excavations, soundings and salvage excavations revealed sites that had hitherto been unknown, adding valuable information concerning previously documented sites. The sites mapped during the surveys dated from the Hellenistic period onward. Pottery from earlier periods was found only at previously studied sites. Extrapolating from the survey results, it appears that the early-period finds did not survive on the surface. This means that in a hilly region with high annual rainfall an archaeological survey, as thorough as it might be, is limited. Therefore, the data retrieved from the surveys appears to serve as a basis for studies concerning the late periods only. The survey information concerning periods proceeding the Hellenistic period should be used cautiously.