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A Short History of Mulabbis (Petah Tikva, Israel)

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The following article summarizes our current knowledge of the history of Tell Mulabbis (in modern Petah Tikva). As a key archaeological site in the Yarkon River basin, it was inhabited during the Roman, Byzantine, Early Islamic, Crusader, Mamluk and Late Ottoman periods. Based on the published results of recent excavations, older scholarship, and hereto-unnoticed written evidence, the article examines and interprets Mulabbis's material culture within the broader contexts of the region's historical geography. Although possessing important advantages like access to water and arable land, the site was inhabited only intermittently due to malaria and changing economic and political circumstances. Within the framework of Ottoman Archaeology, the article suggests the need to pay closer attention to 'recent' archaeological layers. For example, the few Ottoman material remains published so far, testify to continued cultural exchange and economic ties between Mulabbis, the mountainous interior, and the southern parts of Palestine.

Keywords: Ottoman Palestine; Petah Tikva; Mulabbis; Antipatris; Yarkon River; rural archaeology; Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem

Introduction

Tell Mulabbis is an important archeological site in modern Petah Tikva, Israel. Situated on a low rising mound 37m above sea level and measuring approximately 30 dunams (3 Hectares) in area. Tell Mulabbis is located on the southern edge of the Yarkon river basin, 1.25 km south of the Yarkon River (New Israel Grid, 18886.66750). In recent

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years, the Israel Antiquities Authority conducted several salvage excavations in Tell Mulabbis, in preparation for the construction of the Lev ha-Savyonim residential neighborhood. The following paper reviews the site's history, as it emerges from preceding scholarship, published excavation reports, as well as from newly discovered written sources.

The site of Mulabbis is part of the Yarkon River basin, arguably one of the most fertile and strategically important areas in Palestine's coastal plain. This region has long served as an important stretch of the Via Maris, which passed between the springs of Rosh ha-‘Ayin (ancient Aphek-Antipatris) and the hills of Samaria (Ayalon 1995). Additionally, it was not far from the main road connecting Jaffa with Jerusalem, which gained prime importance since the Roman period (Gihon 1969).

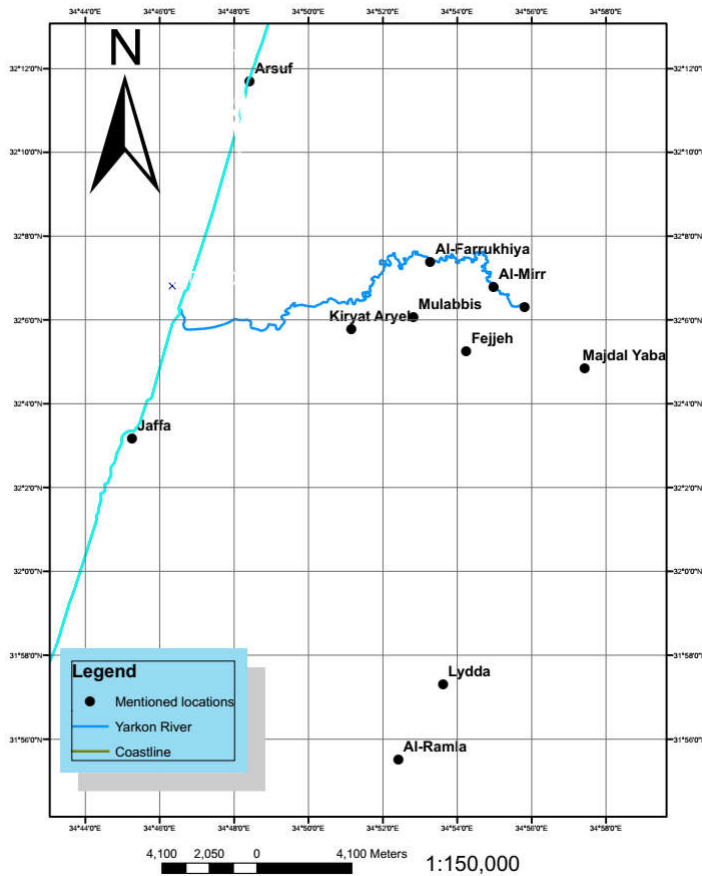


Figure 1. A general reference map.

Geographically, the site of Mulabbis is located at the intersection of different regions, each endowed with its special ecological characteristics. The first region comprises of the eastern part of the Yarkon River basin, whose potential to support settlement by its abundance of water sources and surplus of arable land was marred by widespread malaria-infested swamps (Karmon, 1960 & 1961). The historical heart of this region has long laid in Tell Aphek-Antipatris, at the springs of the Yarkon River (Kokhavi 1988). The second region to the south and to the north of the Yarkon River basin includes the mostly forested but uncultivable *hamra* (red sandy loam) hills (Roll

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and Ayalon 1989, i-ix). Archeological surveys have shown that these two regions supported only sparse and intermittent occupation since early times (Kaplan 1954, 212-213; Ayalon 1991; Gophna et al 2015). Tell Mulabbis historically enjoyed a sizable and stable settlement due to well-drained heavy arable land around the towns of Lydda and later of al-Ramla. Its residents negotiated with, and participated in, economic activities like trade and manufacture in conjunction with these regions.

The early periods

The earliest remains of habitation in Mulabbis were not discovered in Tell Mulabbis itself, but rather at the meeting zone between the *hamra* hills and the Yarkon River basin. Early Israeli Archeologists like Ya'kov Kaplan collected potsherds and flint tools dating from the Pottery Neolithic period (circa. 5500-4250 BCE) , attesting to a lifestyle based primarily on hunting and primitive agriculture. During the MBII (circa. 2000-1550 BCE), Mulabbis was home to a small rural community. Also, in the Iron Age II (circa. 900-586 BCE), a small settlement existed on the site, and during the Persian period (586-332 BCE), it reportedly spread to the adjacent hills (Kaplan 1954, 214).

The site's heyday: The Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods

The later remains of the settlement are found on Tell Mulabbis. The early settlers in Petah Tikva discovered graves dated to the Roman period in Tell Mulabbis (Avitsur 1958, 59-61). The site was continually inhabited during the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods ('Yad la-Gibborim, Petah Tiqwa (Mulabbis)' site, in Gophna et al, 2015), and its stratigraphy and finds parallel those known from nearby sites like Fajjeh (c. 2.6 km southeast of Mulabbis; Hadad 2009).

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Kaplan identified the Roman settlement in Tell Mulabbis with Ogador, which is mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud in a passage discussing the permissibility of drinking wine from villages near Samaritan lands: 'Firstly, they said: "The wine of Ogador, why is it forbidden? Because of Kefar Pagesh, and that of Burgatha? Because of Birat Siriqā, and that of 'Ein Kushit? Because of Kefar Shalem.'" (the text reads: הדא דתני בראשונה היו אומדים יינה של אוגדור. למה הוא אסור מפני כפר פגש, ושל בורגתה מפני בירת (Jer. Talmud, Avoda Zara, iv, 42). Kaplan based his identification on his proposed association of Kefar Pegash with the ancient Pagey (Πηγές), then identified with modern Arab village of Fejjeh. He further suggested that the name of Ogador was preserved in Arabic toponyms for Tell Mulabbis: Tell al-Judur, or Tell al-Jidar (Kaplan 1954, 214-215; Avitzur 1958, 58-59). This identification is improbable; however, since the Arabic toponyms derive from the cadastral term Jidar al-Balad, denoting the fenced area surrounding a village (Petah Tikva's Ottoman land

register, Petah Tikva Municipal Archives).



Figure 2. A Roman *sarcophagus* from Mulabbis. Used as a trough by Mulabbis's Arab inhabitants during the 19th century to water their herds, it now serves as a planter at a local school (photo courtesy of N. Yaron)

During the first half of the twentieth century, an olive press, iron slag and decorated *sarcophagi* dating from the Byzantine period were discovered in agricultural activities on the *tell* and its surrounding lands. Recent salvage excavations unearthed the remains of an industrial quarter from the same period (Gudovitch 2009). The remains of monumental construction dating from the fourth century CE were also uncovered. Among other finds, a large public winepress and pottery kilns were exposed. The kilns

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had to be fuelled by wood, probably supplied for a time by the oak woodlands that once existed in the region (Lifschitz 1989). According to the excavator, Durar Masarwa:

'The discovery of a pottery workshop supplements our data from previous excavations and is consistent with the discovery of the large public winepress nearby. It is reasonable to assume that the winepress required large quantities of jars for storing and transporting the product and the pottery workshop fulfilled this need. The pottery workshop confirms the supposition that the site was an ancient industrial region, focusing on wine production.' (Masarwa, 2011).

A *tabun*, mosaic floors and extensive stone pavements exposed during Masarwa's excavations attest to the continued existence of the settlement in the early part of the Early Islamic period (Masarwa 2011).



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Figure 3. A Reconstructed Roman-Byzantine wine press, Mulabbis (viewed from the NE).

Bulbus: a Crusader estate

The site of Tell Mulabbis is usually identified with the Casale Bulbus, which the Count of Jaffa handed over to the Hospitaller Order in 1133 CE together with the 'des moulins des trois ponts' (the mills of the three-bridges). This identification was first proposed by the French researcher Delaville Le Roulx, and later accepted by Israeli researchers Michael Avi-Yona, Shmuel Avitzur and Eli Hadad (Hadad 2013). The mills mentioned are probably those of al-Mirr or al-Farrukhiya, a short distance north of Mulabbis by the Yarkon River (Khalidi and Elmusa 1992, 250). Salvage excavations, conducted in 2006 and 2007 in preparation for the construction of the Lev ha-Savyonim residential neighborhood, revealed substantial building remains dating from the Crusader period. Among other things, Hadad unearthed massive foundations of piers supporting a decorated vaulted structure that stood at the summit of the *tell* (Hadad 2013).

Mulabbis: intermittent occupation during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods

At the end of the 12th century, following the destruction and abandonment of the Crusader estate, a water reservoir, divided into two rooms and coated with hydraulic plaster, was constructed on top of the Crusader ruins and on an adjacent plot of land. The remains of a nearby covered drainage channel indicate the location of a possible water source. It seems that this installation was connected to livestock rearing. Hadad (2013) notes that 'numerous animal bones were found around the reservoir and these were probably remains of the local livestock and flocks that grazed in the region and

quenched their thirst there.' Previous excavations by the archaeologist 'Anan 'Azab uncovered collapsed remains of dwellings, comprised of 'different size fieldstones and partly dressed ashlars....mixed with black soil fill that included potsherds that date to the Mamluk period' ('Azab 2008).

Historical sources provide us with important, but hereto unnoticed information about the history of Mulabbis. During the 15th century, Mulabbis was counted among the villages governed from al-Ramla, and thus connected with the social and economic milieu of the Ono Valley. In 883 AH (1478 CE), Sultan Al-ashraf Sayf ad-Din Qaitbay (r. 1468-1496 CE) endowed a quarter of its revenues to two religious institutions which he established: Al-Madrasa al-Ashrafia in Jerusalem and a mosque in Gaza (al-Khatib 2007, 41; compare: Salahiya 1999, 231). At the beginning of the Ottoman period, Mulabbis seemed to have been uninhabited, since the village does not appear in the lists of the *New Daftar-i mufassal*, the Ottoman tax register, dated to 1005 AH (1596/7 CE) (Hutteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 151-156). The historical-geographer David Grossman raises the possibility that Mulabbis was mentioned under the corrupted name 'Milus' (میلوص) (Grossman 1986: 372). Due to the excessively cursive characteristics and the partial lack of diacritical markings of the Arabic-Turkish clerical script in which the *daftar* was written, and the fact that the full list of *mazra'as* (agricultural lands, or seasonally inhabited sites) has not been published so far, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

Local traditions handed down among the first settlers in Petah Tikva and written down by Avraham Ya'ari and Moshe Smilansky, indicate that villagers from hills of Samaria repopulated Mulabbis during the 18th century (Ya'ari 1947, 244). Mulabbis figures on Pierre Jacotin's map, which was surveyed in 1799 (Karmon 1960, 168-170).

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Avraham Ya'ari claims that malaria and disputes with neighbouring nomadic tribes led to the abandonment of the village (Ya'ari 1947, 243-244). Both Jewish and Arab sources ascertain that Mulabbis was settled again by the Abu Hamed al-Masri clan, of Egyptian origins at some point before the middle of the 19th century. On 22 June 1870, French explorer Victor Guérin visited the village, describing it as a small village with a population of 140 persons, and surrounded by fields of watermelon and tobacco (Guérin 1875: 372). The surveyors of the Survey of Western Palestine also visited Mulabbis in 1874, and described it as a 'mud hamlet, with a well' (Conder and Kitchener 1882, 252). These accounts refer to the latest stage of habitation on the site (Ya'ari 1929, 13-14; Ya'ari 1947, I, 243). In 1878, Mulabbis became the first village in Palestine to be acquired by Jews with the intention of establishing an agricultural colony in 1878, establishing the *moshava* (colony) of Petah Tikva on its lands.

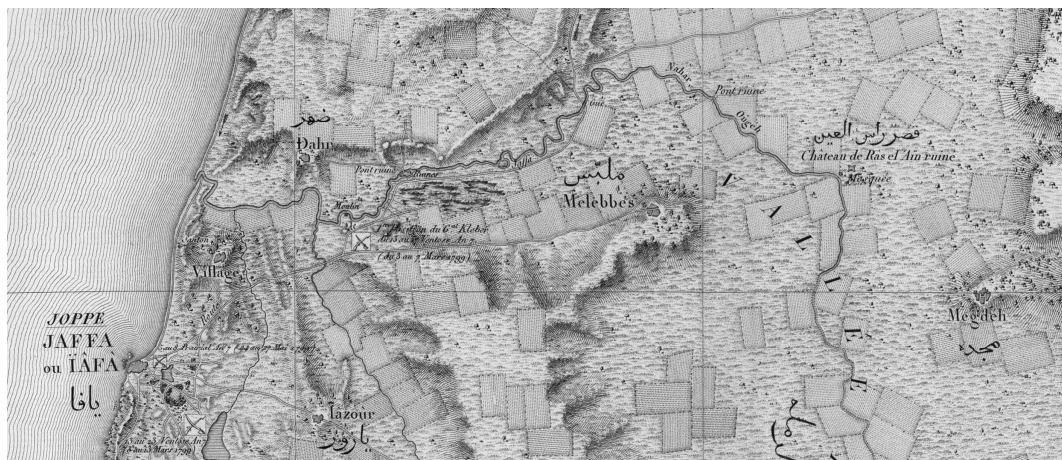


Figure 4. Mulabbis and the Yarkon River Basin on Jacotin's map (1799)

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Figure 5. Mulabbis and the Yarkon River Basin on SWP's map (1878)

Uzi Baram, Linda Carroll, and Bethany Walker have demonstrated that the archeology of the Ottoman period does not receive sufficient attention and its exploitation for historical research is limited (Baram and Carroll, 2002; Walker 2009). Also, in Israeli archeology, Ottoman strata are often overlooked, or worse, even removed by mechanical means without proper documentation. This might be explained, in part, by the fact that Late Ottoman findings dating after the year 1700, do not enjoy the protection afforded to 'antiquities' under Israeli law (Baram 2002). Another reason for this neglect is the political association of these material remains with the *Arab other*, with competing national claims over Israel/Palestine (Baram and Carroll, 2002; Kletter, 2006). However, during the excavation of the earlier strata on Tell Mulabbis, a number of Ottoman refuse pits were discovered. The excavators unearthed fragments of water jars and a clay pipe dated to the late 19th or early 20th centuries. These and other finds testify to the continued use of the water reservoir in the Ottoman period. The excavations revealed that the village consisted of adobe buildings of the village built on

stone foundations. The excavators further reported surface finds of Grey Gaza Ware, also characteristic of the period (Salem 2009).

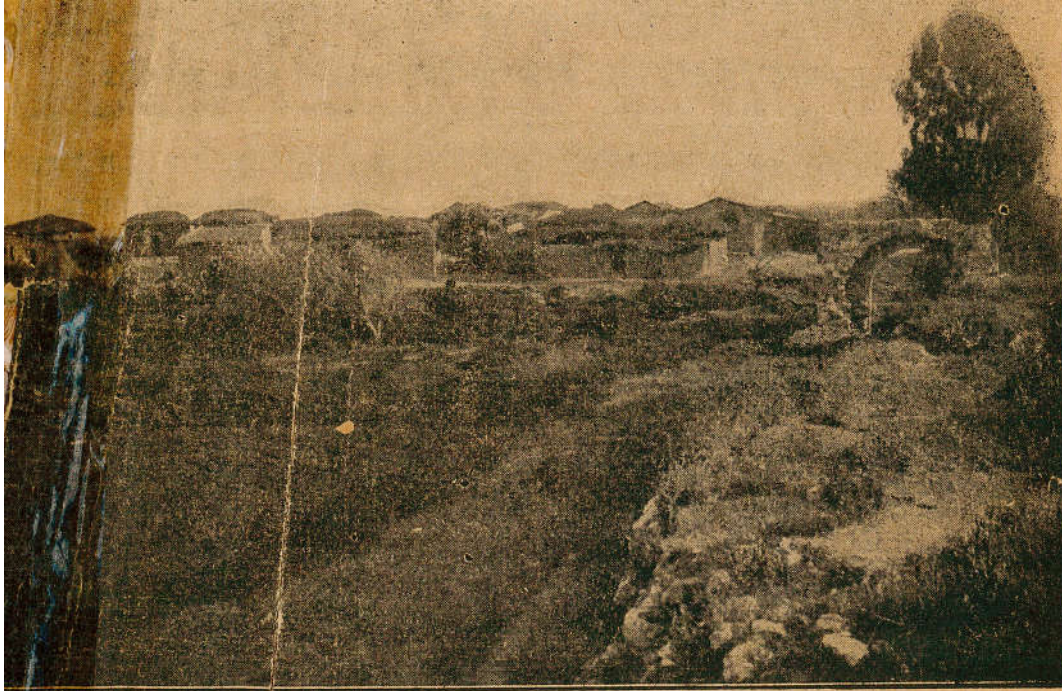


Figure 6. An Arab village near Petah Tikva, said to be Mulabbis (c. 1880)

While there have been an increase in the number of similar endeavors in the Bulgaria, Turkey Greece, Jordan (Corbett 2014; Petersen 2017), little use has been made so far of archeological findings to illuminate and illustrate the history of Palestinian village life in the Late Ottoman period (for one typical example for its absence, see Davis 2010).

Most of the scholarship published in recent years pertains to the major cities like Jaffa, Acre and Jerusalem (for example see Petersen 2002; Simpson 2008; Bersche 2009;

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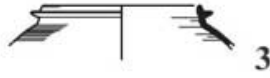
Burke, Strange-Burke and Peilstöcker 2017) or focused on the architecture of selected structures, and to the inscriptions accompanying them in the countryside (for example see Petersen 2001; Sharon, 1999-). Moreover, geographical-historical discussion on the regional level tended to over-simplify the complexities of changing demographic milieu in the region (Grossman 1994).

This brief study of Mulabbis, both as an archaeology and because of its location, contributes to our knowledge about rural life in the region of Jaffa. It shows that Mulabbis was part of a wider space of consumption and population movements with links to the wider Levant and beyond. Similarly, it expresses the *longue durée* of human habitation of the Yarkon River basin stretching from the Neolithic to the Late Ottoman period through more modest, but perhaps more representative a site, than nearby towns like Jaffa or Aphek-Antipatris. The material remains of past lives, as excavated under the spade of a careful and honest archeologist, can recover for us traces of the world of peoples and societies often overlooked by contemporaneous written sources and modern research alike.

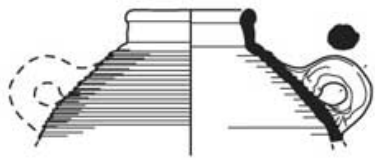


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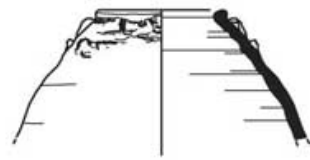
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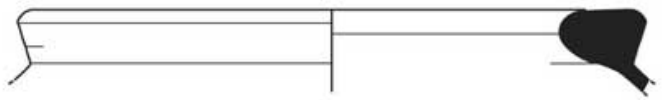
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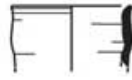
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Figure 7. Pottery recovered during D. Masarwa's excavations in Mulabbis (courtesy of excavator and the Israel Antiquities Authority)²

Conclusion

The archaeological excavations conducted at Tell Mulabbis, as well as various historical sources, shed light on the physical characteristics of the settlement at each period. The finds agree with established chronologies of other sites in the Yarkon River basin, such as Fajjeh and Kiryat Aryeh, and thus consolidate the historical picture as it arises from a multitude of micro-historical explorations of individual sites. During the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, the site was a major manufacturing village, which participated in an extensive wine industry that flourished in the Petah Tikva region. Later on, during the Crusader period, a large building was erected on the site. This building possibly formed part of the Bulbus estate, which belonged to the County of Jaffa, as mentioned in Crusader sources. At the beginning of the Mamluk period, a water installation was constructed atop the ruins of the Crusader edifice, serving a modest hamlet dating from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

² Pottery finds dating to the Byzantine period (sixth–seventh centuries CE): a bowl (Fig. 7:1), a cooking pan (Fig. 7:2), a cooking pot (Fig. 7:3), a baggy-shaped jar (Fig. 7:4), a Gaza jar (Fig. 7:5) and a pithos (Fig. 7:6), Pottery finds dating to the end of the Byzantine–beginning of the Umayyad periods: (Fig. 7:7), a jar (Fig. 7:8) and a lamp (Fig. 7:9). Pottery finds dating to the Ottoman period dating: a Grey Gaza Ware jug (Fig. 7:10) and a red-slipped smoking pipe (Fig. 7:11).

The published remains of the material culture of Mulabbis at the Late Ottoman period comprise mainly of Gaza Grey Ware, manufactured in bulk in a region between al-'Arish and Gaza (Israel 2006). Ottoman clay pipes, also found in Mulabbis, are the physical traces of a leisure culture that included tobacco consumption and smoking. Although modest, the findings reflect the material and cultural conditions prevailing in neighboring villages such as Majdal Yaba (Tsuk et al. 2016).

The written sources indicate that the history of the village of Mulabbis dates back to the Mamluk period and the beginning of the Ottoman period. However, archaeological finds and the local traditions testify to its intermittent occupation, probably caused by a combination of malaria and changing economic and political circumstances, as in previous periods of its history.

The similarities between the material culture in Mulabbis and neighboring sites suggests the possibility that it belonged to more than one settlement zone. Mulabbis is located at the point of contact between the Yarkon River and the *hamra* hills, and hence its importance for future comparative studies of this region. The network of roads that existed during the Late Ottoman period attests to continued contacts with its areas: the mountainous hinterland, the coastal plain and the Gaza- al-'Arish region.

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