



Investigating Pottery Neolithic socio-economic “regression” in the Southern Levant: Characterising obsidian consumption at Sha'ar Hagolan (N. Israel)



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ABSTRACT

This paper details the characterisation of 34 obsidian artefacts from Sha'ar Hagolan in the Jordan Valley, a major Pottery Neolithic Site of the southern Levantine Yarmukian culture (6400–6000 cal BCE). Employing an integrated approach that melds sourcing data from EDXRF spectroscopy with the artefacts' techno-typological characteristics, we contrast Sha'ar Hagolan's lithic traditions with those of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic southern Levantine sites in the context of alleged socio-economic disruptions in the Pottery Neolithic. The results indicate that community's obsidian consumption habits largely followed deep-time regional traditions (with only the slightest decrease in relative quantities), i.e. the use of Cappadocian raw materials (Göllü Dağ and Nenezi Dağ) to make pressure blades, and occasional projectiles, with only a small proportion of eastern Anatolian products (Nemrut Dağ). While the Sha'ar Hagolan material seems to embody continuity of southern Levantine cultural tradition, other broadly contemporary assemblages attest to the initiation of new procurement networks, and novel modes of consumption that reflect the increasing degree of cultural heterogeneity of the period. Finally, the distribution of obsidian across the site does not support the idea that social distinction at Sha'ar Hagolan was part-based on the preferential access to these exotic resources.

1. Introduction

This paper details the elemental characterisation and sourcing of the obsidian used to make 34 obsidian artefacts from the 8th–6th millennium cal BC Neolithic site of Sha'ar Hagolan in the southern Levant (Fig. 1). Obsidian was an exceedingly rare resource for this community, comprising a mere 0.01% of its chipped stone assemblage. Given that a mere 38 obsidian artefacts were generated from the excavation of a site that housed several thousand inhabitants over a period of ~400 years, most people at Sha'ar Hagolan would never have handled this material (the original publication details 39 pieces but one was shown to be made of flint [see below]). Entire generations may have passed during which no new obsidian tools were imported, or made at the site. Obsidian's rarity at Sha'ar Hagolan can be part-explained by the fact that it was an exotic resource, the nearest sources located some 630 km linear distance to the north in central Anatolia (Fig. 1), its procurement almost certainly involving intermediary exchange rather than expeditions to the quarries. As such, the ownership, transformation and use of such

media may have related more to issues of social capital, than utilitarian concerns (cf. Helms, 1988, 1993).

Undertaking this sourcing project, four primary research aims were in mind. Firstly, we were interested in situating our analyses in a long-term view of obsidian consumption in the region as a means of engaging with prior claims that the Pottery Neolithic [PN] was a period of socio-economic disruption and “retrogression” (Kenyon, 1960: 67–78). In short, does the Sha'ar Hagolan data support the idea of a significant diminishment and/or reconfiguration of obsidian use by southern Levantine populations? By extent, we would be redressing a major research bias, where obsidian sourcing studies have tended to focus on Epi-Palaeolithic (hunter-gatherer) and earliest Neolithic (farming) assemblages as a means of contributing to debates surrounding ‘neolithisation’ (e.g. Carter et al., 2013; Delerue, 2007, inter alia). Secondly, we wished to consider the claim that social distinction at Sha'ar Hagolan was partly constituted through preferential access to non-local goods (Garfinkel et al., 2012: 119); i.e. did the obsidian come from the larger and more complex buildings in association with other exotica?

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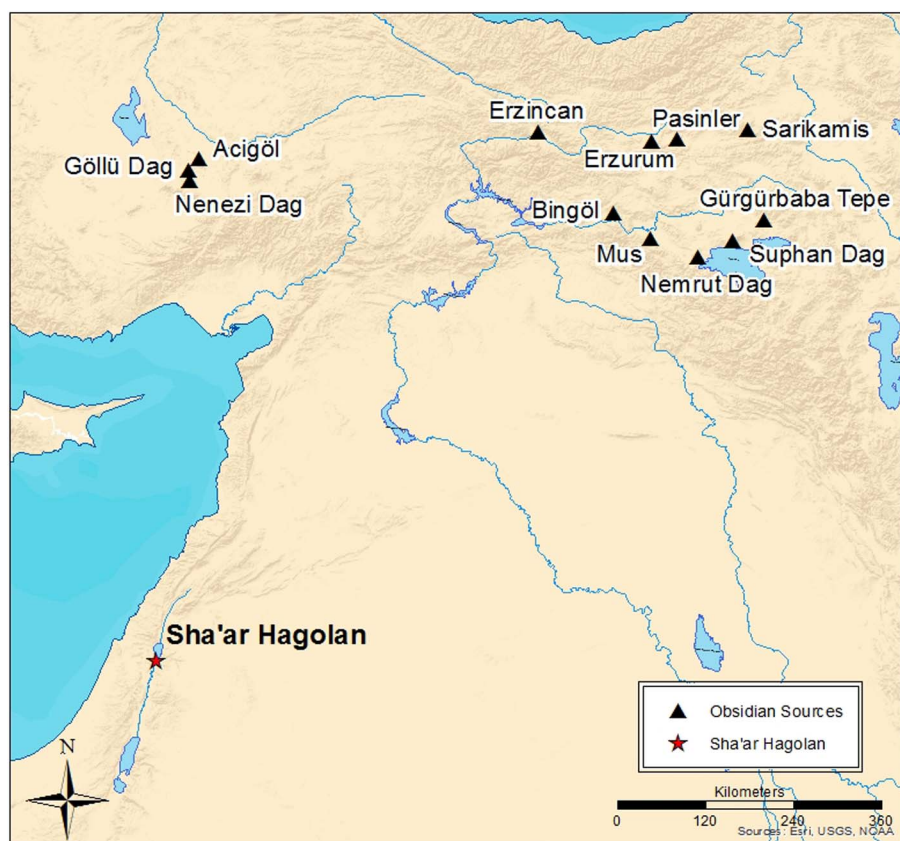


Fig. 1. Location of Sha'ar Hagolan, and the obsidian sources detailed in the text.

Thirdly, with Sha'ar Hagolan a somewhat anomalous site for the period, regarding population, planning and social complexity, we were interested to see if the community's procurement and use of obsidian was also distinct to that of other southern Levantine PN communities. Fourthly, we wished to contextualise Sha'ar Hagolan's raw material choices and modes of consumption (tools / knapping traditions), within contemporary supra-regional patterns of obsidian circulation and use. In considering how the same raw materials were being used by broadly synchronic populations elsewhere, we hoped to be able to discern distinct 'communities of practice' (Knappett, 2011: 98–123), i.e. networks of people whose common traditions were underpinned by close social relations, articulated via spousal exchange, trade partnerships, and other forms of binding alliances. The latter concern relates to our research group's larger interest in reconstructing socio-economic interaction from the ground-up via a form of 'thick description' characterisation study (e.g. Carter et al., 2005, 2013). Ultimately such an approach enables us to examine how populations became bound together through the development of shared traditions, working under the premise that what we are revealing about raw material and technical choices ultimately part-constituted these peoples' very identity (Dietler and Herbich, 1998: 246–47; Dobres, 2000).

2. Background to Sha'ar Hagolan and the Yarmukian culture

The site of Sha'ar Hagolan is located on the river Yarmuk, a tributary of the great Jordan River in northern Israel (central Jordan Valley), 1.5 km south of the Sea of Galilee (Figs. 1–2). The site was first excavated from 1949 to 1952 (Stekelis, 1951, 1972), followed by a further 11 seasons from 1989 to 1990, and 1996–2004 (Garfinkel and Miller, 2002; Garfinkel et al., 2012). Sha'ar Hagolan comprises the type site for the PN Yarmukian culture, i.e. the first pottery producing communities of the southern Levantine Mediterranean belt (Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine [Garfinkel, 1993, 2002]). Before the excavations at Sha'ar Hagolan, the PN of the southern Levant was largely viewed as a period

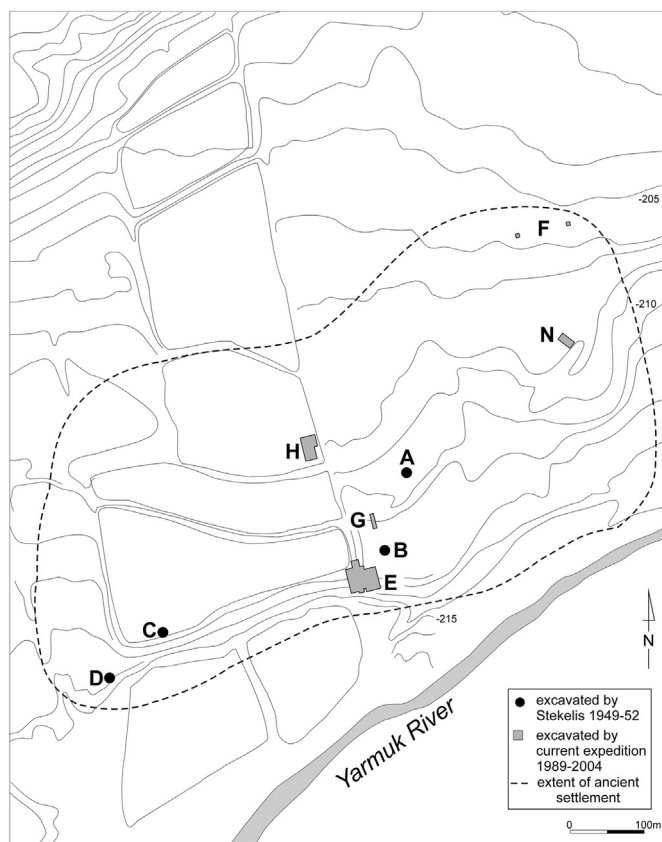


Fig. 2. Plan of the Sha'ar Hagolan excavations.

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