

Tel Kedesh 2008: Conservation Update



Kelsey conservators Suzanne Davis (left) and Claudia Chemello clean coins in the Kedesh field lab.

This summer we stepped out of the Museum for a month each to work on the Kelsey Museum's project at Tel Kedesh in Israel. Together we were on site for a total of seven great weeks, providing conservation support for the entirety of the excavation season. If you read our blog, <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/kelseymuseum.digdiary/home>, you already know a lot about our work this summer, but here's a little bit of background.

We set out for Israel with several goals in mind. Our first priority was, as always, conservation treatment of the artifacts being excavated. As artifacts are dug up each day on site, the trench supervisors consult with the site directors and other specialists to decide which objects are worthy of cataloguing. There are many reasons to catalogue an object—it might be the earliest from a given area, or the latest, or a particularly fine example of its type, or it might be indicative of trade—but once it's catalogued, the team decides whether the artifact requires conservation treatment. This might involve cleaning, as in the case of coins, or mending, as with pottery, or chemical stabilization, as in the case of corroding iron farming tools. The point is, we're not responsible for treating every single object that is excavated, only those that are considered important and that also require treatment. During this season, we treated 201 things (including some architectural features).

Did we have favorites among these 201? We did! Interestingly, our favor-

ites come from the same find. Claudia really enjoyed her work on the terracotta winged figurine discovered in the fourth week. This figurine was found with Suzanne's favorite objects, a set of glass gaming pieces and knucklebones. Another favorite project was our work to stabilize the cracked and crumbling plaster walls on site.

Which brings us to our second major goal for the 2008 season: stabilizing the rare Hellenistic decorated plaster at Kedesh. The plaster walls at Kedesh are variously decorated with incised lines, raised panels, and pigment. Our work involved capping the crumbling top edges of the plaster, providing structural support for loose and fragile areas of plaster, and strengthening cracked sections of walls. We also cleaned the hard layer of dirt off a few postage-stamp-sized areas of wall surface to reveal brilliantly painted decoration. We enjoyed working on the tel with the archaeologists and imagining how beautiful the painted plaster must have been in antiquity. And we especially loved the morning coffee break: the cardamom-flavored coffee generously shared with us by the Druse workmen compensated for the 5 a.m. start to the day.

A slightly less exciting but very important goal was the creation of a database to record all the conservation work at Tel Kedesh. Detailed recordkeeping is an extremely important part of all archaeological and conservation work. In fact, we're already finding that our conservation photographs are being referenced by other members of the 2008 team.

This season we were also able to implement something dear to us as conservators of archaeological material: an educational website about our work. Education about the role of conservation in archaeology is something to which we're committed. The website we created will feature not only our conservation efforts at Tel Kedesh but also other Kelsey field projects, such as the Abydos Middle Cemetery Project in Egypt. With the website, we're hoping to reach not only the Kelsey Museum community but also other conservators, archaeologists, and allied professionals. Plus, we hope to give our readers an insider's look at daily life on a dig. This season, we very much enjoyed working with members of the team to put website entries together, especially the "Find of the Week" feature (if you don't know what we're talking about, go to our site and check it out). We were happy to receive many comments about the website, but we continue to welcome feedback. If you'd like to send us your thoughts, please do. You can write us through links on the website.

If you did read our website's blog, you might have noticed that not everything about working on a dig is fun and satisfying. For us, the biggest challenges were the sheer numbers of artifacts, especially pottery, that needed conservation and the difficulty of performing the fine, time-consuming work needed to clean corroded coins when there are so many other things to do! But the challenges are more than made up for by the collegial team work, excellent food, and beautiful setting of the project.

*Suzanne Davis
Claudia Chemello*



Winged terracotta figurine, glass gaming pieces (upper right), and glass knucklebones found this summer at Kedesh.