Investigating Yavneh’s widespread drug scene – from 3,000 years ago

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Before the central Israeli town of Yavneh became a residence for police officers and IDF officers, it featured a varied drug scene, including many different kinds of intoxicants and hallucinogens. Long before. These substances were used 3,000 years ago, during the Iron Age, and were an integral part of culture and ritual for the Philistines, a people that lived in central and southern Canaan, as well as other peoples in the area.

The use of mind-altering plants and potions as well as hallucinogens was very common in ancient cultures. The common presumption is that they served as an important part of mystic and spiritual rituals, and gave users intense, ecstatic experiences. Also, the substances are believed to have been used as anaesthetics for religious rituals that involved physical pain.

Lab technologies that have been developed over the years, and currently being utilized by archaeologists, have made it possible to find traces of these materials after thousands of years, and recreate them. Analysis of findings from a decade ago in Yavneh is an example of the use of this new technology. The findings represent the oldest evidence of the use of plants from the Hyoscyamus family as intoxicants. Research on the plants will be presented during an exhibition at Hebrew University, in coordination with the Israel Antiquities Authority. The exhibition, "Sex, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll," will examine the three subjects from an archaeological perspective.

The Philistine incineration pit in Yavneh was discovered by accident, a few hundred meters from the Tel Yavneh archaeological site in the southern part of the city, during construction of a public park. In 2002, the pit was properly excavated by the Israel Antiquities Authority, and archaeologist Dr. Rav Kletter, who then worked for the authority and is currently a professor at the University of Helsinki, along with a professor from the University of Madrid, and Dr. Irit Triffer from the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv.

In the pit, which was excavated to a depth of two meters, researchers found thousands of clay pieces that were used for rituals. They also found other ritual objects, including small altars of stone and clay, as well as bowls and other vessels. According to the researchers, some of the tools and objects found were used with the intoxicants and hallucinogens. Kletter and his associates initially thought that the pit was connected to the religious site at Tel Yavneh (many findings from which were published in the book "Yavneh 1" in 2010). The wide array of ritual objects found in the pit were given to Dr. Dewri Mandar and Dr. Alan Amrami from the Earth Science institute at Hebrew University, who analyzed the findings, revealing new trace elements.

An altar supported by lions, one of the antiquities discovered in Yavneh.

Leoal Kletter

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of the intoxicants used during the ritual ceremonies. "The assumption is that the ritual ceremonies included much use of the mind-altering plants," explains Namdar, adding that "the biggest problem is that botanical material like flowers and plants do not survive so many years. In order to identify them we look for the molecules in the pores of the clay vessels, where some of them might survive. By dissolving the organic materials we manage to isolate the specific molecules, and can classify them.

Using this method, the researchers identified molecules from plants belonging to the Hyoscyamus, a common plant in the area, known for its intoxicating qualities, which Namdar claims is still used by many Bedouin for its intoxicating effects. "It’s an old plant, and it has been documented in literature that Bedouin often chew it, to this day," she says. When it comes to hallucinogens, according to Namdar, identifying traces of them is more difficult. "In some objects, the material was too deteriorated to identify, as it had apparently been heated. We presume that they included nutmeg, which is known as a hallucinogen, and used today to produce Ecostacy," Namdar says.

According to Namdar, the field of "sensory archaeology" is just getting started, and there is a lack of information about it. At the same time, she says confidently that aside from intoxicating plants and nutmeg, the ancient rituals utilized a wide array of drugs. "We need more information," she says. "The closer we get to finding, the more we compare them to other cultures that existed in the area, the more questions we can answer, for example – what kind of drugs did they get from across the sea, and what was made locally? In this case it was the Philistines, but there were neighboring cultures that used similar materials and objects.

"We’re checking more and more objects from the ancient periods and cultures that lived in this area to learn more about the religious rituals and the substances they used," she explains.