

Preface

It is now almost 70 years ago that Dorothy A. E. Garrod carried out her pioneering investigations of the Carmel Caves (Fig. 1). In the largest of the caves, el-Wad, she unearthed a long cultural sequence, which extended from the Middle Palaeolithic to historical times (Garrod and Bate, 1937). Since this was one of the first Natufian sites to be excavated, what she found in the cave and on the terrace contributed significantly to the way Garrod was to define the Natufian culture in the Levant, as it had first been unearthed in Shukba (Fig. 2; Garrod, 1928, 1929, 1932, 1942, 1957). El-Wad has long since been considered as a main Natufian site, "base camp" or "hamlet" (e.g., Garrod, 1957; O. Bar-Yosef, 1970, 1983; O. Bar-Yosef and Goren, 1980; Henry, 1985, 1989; Byrd, 1989), stretching back to the Early Natufian, for the following reasons: the large size of the Natufian habitation found here (the actual size of which remains unknown because the greater part of the site has not yet been excavated), the occurrence of architecture (rather poorly preserved but the first to be recognized in a Natufian site), the presence of a large cemetery, rich lithic and groundstone assemblages, and the first Natufian art objects ever found anywhere. Many of these are also accepted as indicators of sedentism in a period of incipient agriculture (Garrod, 1957; O. Bar Yosef, 1983; O. Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen, 1989, Belfer-Cohen, 1991a; Henry, 1989; Kaufman, 1992, to cite but a few).

El-Wad has furnished us with one of the longest and most complete Natufian sequences. The detailed description given by Garrod (Garrod and Bate, 1937) has been more recently supplemented by Valla et al. (1986), and today no discussion or research of the Natufian culture is complete without taking the site into full consideration. New data concerning its oldest occurrence — the Early Natufian — came to light during the excavations we carried out in recent years in Chamber III (Weinstein-Evron, 1993a). Some of these data are unlike anything else ever analysed for a Natufian site so far and shed important new light on the Natufian use of both the cave and the region. As such, they substantiate what we knew already but also throw into question some of the earlier assumptions. Against the background of the new information and in view of the burgeoning discussions of the Natufian habitation at the site (e.g., Goring-Morris, 1995; Belfer-Cohen, 1995), several important aspects of Early Natufian el-Wad stand in urgent need of critical reassessment. It is such a reevaluation that forms the focus of our study.

A brief introductory chapter (Chapter 1), providing a description of the site and of previous investigations, is followed by detailed discussions of the present-day environment (Chapter 2), the use of the cave in the 20th century (Chapter 3) and of geophysical investigations carried out at the site (Chapter 4). Chapters 3 and 4, though not directly related to the Natufian habitation, are important as background for future research at el-Wad. While the former is ethnoarchaeological in nature and can contribute to a better understanding of later prehistoric cultures (e.g., Neolithic), the latter proves the potential for further excavation, of layers of as yet unknown age, within the cave.

The Early Natufian of our new excavations in Chamber III is described in Chapter 5. The characteristic cultural material (lithic, bone-tool, and groundstone assemblages) of this relatively early Natufian occurrence accords well with that described in detail by Garrod (Garrod and Bate, 1937), and our main concern here is with documentation and discussion of data (e.g., botanical materials and ochre remains) related to the mode of exploitation of the el-Wad environment by its Natufian inhabitants (Chapter 6). Chapter 7, finally, traces how the efficient exploitation of the abundant natural resources in the surrounding area, together with social and economic connections with other groups, enabled the site to develop into the large and complex Natufian site for which we know it today.

I became involved in el-Wad more or less by chance when, being chiefly engaged in palynological research, I was asked to "clean" certain areas of Chamber III so as to enable the construction there of a path for tourists. Clearly everyone involved, including myself, was convinced that these parts of Chamber III had already been dug by Garrod and therefore no longer held any true archaeological value. The results of the excavation, which I am publishing here, therefore came as a pleasant surprise: what was supposed to have been a final summing up has instead enabled us to penetrate again a bit further into the past, inspiring renewed interest in the site and its Early Natufian inhabitants.