

THE MOLLUSKS FROM GANE ṬAL

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This report discusses 358 malacological remains excavated at Gane Ṭal (see Arbel and 'Ad, this volume). The shells were retrieved manually and identified to species level. The assemblage includes 354 Mediterranean shells and 4 land snails (Table 1) from the following periods: Early Roman (n = 8), Byzantine (n = 345) and Mamluk (n = 5). The stratigraphic designations were determined by the excavators (see Arbel and 'Ad, this volume).

Distribution

The malacological evidence from Gane Ṭal indicates that the use of shells from the Mediterranean Sea occurred during the Early Roman, Byzantine and Mamluk periods, as reflected by the presence of *Naria spurca*, *Tonna galea*, *Bolinus brandaris*, *Hexaplex trunculus*, *Glycymeris nummaria*, *Acanthocardia tuberculata* and *Cerastoderma glaucum*. This is to be expected at a site which is located about 17 km from the Mediterranean coast. The majority of the shells were collected from the shore and worn. Several species—*Tonna galea*, *Bolinus brandaris*, *Hexaplex trunculus*, *Acanthocardia tuberculata* and *Cerastoderma glaucum*—showed no signs of use or alteration, and were therefore probably accidentally brought to the site with other species like *Glycymeris nummaria*, or were brought back to the site as souvenirs.

Table 1. The Mollusks from Gane Ṭalⁱ

Origin	Species	Period			Total
		Early Roman	Byzantine	Mamluk	
Mediterranean	<i>Naria spurca</i>	1			1
	<i>Tonna galea</i>		1		1
	<i>Bolinus brandaris</i>		1		1
	<i>Hexaplex trunculus</i>		1		1
	<i>Glycymeris nummaria</i>	6	333	2	341
	<i>Acanthocardia tuberculata</i>	1	5	1	7
	<i>Cerastoderma glaucum</i>		2		2
Land snail	<i>Helix engaddensis</i>		2	2	4
<i>Total</i>		8	345	5	358

ⁱ Dates are based on the stratigraphic analysis (see Arbel and 'Ad, this volume).

Four shells of the land snail *Helix engaddensis* were found at the site. This is one of three edible land snails (*Helix* sp., *Levantina* sp. and *Theba pisana*) that were consumed in the Near East since prehistoric times (Bar 1977). However, the shells found in Gane ʿal bear no signs of such use and their existence at the site might be natural, as *Helix engaddensis* burrow in the ground.

Construction Material

Most of the shells (341 specimens) belong to one species—*Glycymeris nummaria*. Of these, 280 were found with plaster inside their valves, indicating that they were used as a coarse aggregate (instead of gravel) in construction material (Fig. 1:1).¹ The plastered shells were found in accumulations between Byzantine-period walls (L1551, L1554, L1573, L1580, L1607 and L1633), in accumulations in a cistern (L1068), in a floor foundation (L1583), in a water channel (L1589) and just beneath the surface (L1601). Shells replace gravel as aggregate mainly at coastal sites, where they are easily available and brought to the site along with sea sand. Parallels are found in sites from the Bronze Age (Bar-Yosef Mayer 2005) and the Crusader period (Ktalav, in press).²

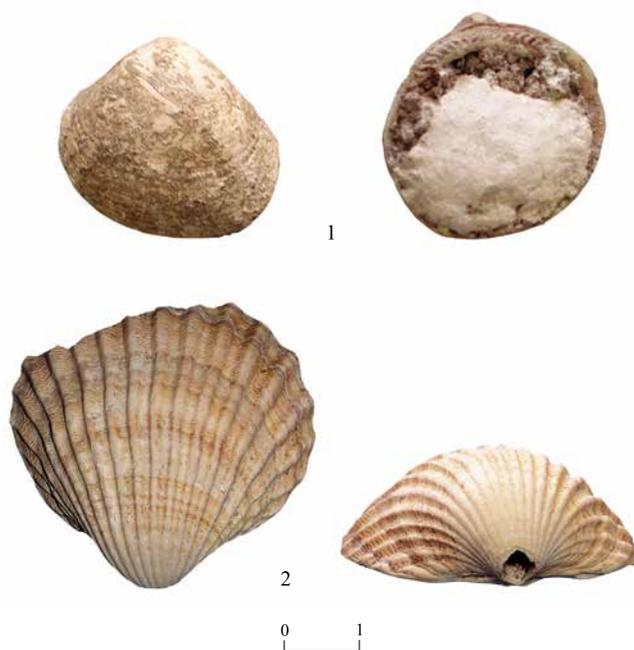


Fig. 1. *Glycymeris nummaria* (1) and *Acanthocardia tuberculata* (2).

¹ Photographs were provided by Amir Gorzalczany

² Additional mollusks from Naḥal Siah (Permit Nos. A-1/88, 87; A-22/89; A-65/91; A-54/92) have been analyzed by the author.

Amulets and Ornaments

One complete shell of *Naria spurca* was found in an accumulation (L1067) in a cistern dating from the Early Roman period. The shell is complete and had not been artificially manipulated. Cowries are known to have symbolic meaning as amulets for fertility and against the evil eye. Since sterility has often been believed to be caused by the evil eye via envy or jealousy, cowries may be assumed to be apotropaic against harmful agents. This belief exists in many cultures around the world, but it is strongest around the Mediterranean, the Middle East and northwest India (Safer and Gill 1982). The shell from Gane Ṭal could have been used as an amulet or it could have been collected from the shore for the beauty of its shape.

A single worked specimen of *Acanthocardia tuberculata* was found in a Byzantine layer in Area E1 (L1605). The top of the shell was artificially perforated and was probably used for personal adornment (Fig. 1:2).

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that the main use of the shells, especially *Glycymeris nummaria*, took place during the Byzantine period as construction material. The shells were brought from the Mediterranean coast, a distance of approximately 17 km from the site. Two shells, *Acanthocardia tuberculata* and *Naria spurca*, might have been used as ornaments or amulets.

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