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Note:

WEASELS FROM THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD OF ISRAEL

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During the faunal analysis of the bone assemblage from the Roman–Hellenistic fortress of Sha'ar-ha'Amakim, in an underground water cistern deposit dated to the Hellenistic period (250–150 BCE), we found three complete skulls and a humerus of *Mustela nivalis* (weasel). The site is located to the northwest of Kibbutz Sha'ar-ha'Amakim, at the foot of the southern slope of the Carmel Mountains in the Lower Galilee (1609,2369) (Segal and Naor, 1992). These new finds, the latest recovered in Israel so far, indicate that the weasel was found in the country at least until the second century BCE.

The weasel is a small mustelid of Holarctic distribution (Corbet, 1978; Sheffield and King, 1994) that presently ranges in the Middle East as far south as Lebanon (Harrison and Bates, 1991). It is also found in North Africa: Morocco and Algeria, and a disjunct population (*Mustela nivalis subpalmata*) in the Nile Delta of Egypt (Corbet, 1978). The weasel is currently not found in Israel and the Sinai Desert (Mendelssohn and Yom-Tov, 1987).

Previous fossil and subfossil finds of weasels from Israel were related to the Natufian culture (ca. 9,000 BCE), the Chalcolithic (ca. 4,000–3,300 BCE), the Early Bronze (ca. 3,000 BCE) (Dayan and Tchernov, 1988), and the Iron Age (ca. 1,200 BCE) (Dayan, 1997). Weasels were also found in historical contexts in Jordan, in the Iron Age sites of Tel-Hesbon, and near Madaba (Boessneck and Driesch, 1995) and Deir-Alla, at the outlet of Wadi Zarqa (Jabbok) to the Jordan valley (Es, 1998). Tristram (1866, 1884) lists the weasel as part of the local Israeli fauna, but this has been questioned by Ilany (1979), and no specimens are available to settle this issue. While it is still debatable whether the weasel remained in this country until the past century, the remains from Sha'ar-ha'Amakim attest to its presence at least until the second century BCE.

The three toothless skulls have completely fused sutures and represent three adult specimens. The condylo-basal lengths of the Sha'ar-ha'Amakim specimens (42.85, 39.95, and 38.40 mm; mean = 40.40; N = 3; SD = 2.26) do not differ significantly from the mean of recent Egyptian female weasels from the Nile Delta (*Mustela nivalis subpalmata*) (43.18; N = 4; SD = 1.47; $p = 0.37$ [data from Dayan and Tchernov, 1988]). Weasels have pronounced sexual size dimorphism (Dayan and Simberloff, 1994; Sheffield and King, 1994), so the specimens from Sha'ar-ha'Amakim may either be females of a larger race or else males of a smaller race, much the same as a previously described Iron Age specimen (39.40; Dayan, 1997).

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The weasel remains from Sha'ar ha'Amakim bear no burning signs or cut marks. Except for the humerus, no other post-cranial elements were found. However, the sediments at this archaeological site were not sieved, so small post-cranial elements could have escaped identification. This necessarily limits us in our attempt to reconstruct the depositional history of the weasel remains at Sha'ar-ha'Amakim. Other finds retrieved from the same locus (657 identified bones) include mainly long bone remains of 10 individuals of domestic animals (4 *Bos taurus*, 4 caprines, 1 *Sus scrofa*, 1 complete skeleton of *Canis familiaris*), and 2 skulls and a mandible of *Sorex sp*. It is possible that the weasel finds represent natural deaths rather than culturally related remains. It could be that the weasels found their death at the site during the depositional phase of the site, but they may have also post-dated it, if an abandoned water cistern served as a den or as a temporary shelter. Within its home range, each individual weasel makes use of several dens or other temporary shelters, usually in rodent burrows, rock piles, or other well-concealed sites (King, 1989). Thus, weasels may have had a commensal existence in human habitations, much the same as is reported currently for the Egyptian Nile Delta population (Osborn and Helmy, 1980).

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