The Achulean hand axe is the oldest object in the collection and belongs to the beginnings of human history, the long era called "Pleistocene" by geologists and "Paleolithic" by archaeologists (Greek palaios, old, and lithos, stone). In the Lower Paleolithic period (1,500,000-100,000 years ago), types of tools were few: choppers, picks, spheroids, and large crudely made hand axes, of which this is an example. In this early period, in Palestine, humans lived mainly in the coastal plain and the Jordan Valley. The site of Ma'yan Barukh lies in Upper Galilee, in the Hula Valley, the northern extension of the Jordan Valley, north of the Sea of Galilee. The people were hunters and gatherers.

The mace head represents a common weapon type of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze periods, and many, made of a variety of stone, have been found on excavations. Mounted on a wooden staff, the mace head was an effective weapon for close combat, as long as the enemy was not wearing armor, and especially not a helmet. Mace heads were also made for ceremonial use, but once armor developed the mace was no longer made for warfare. The flint blade is a well-made tool, belonging to a time when bronze was being more widely used. Flint techniques improved during the 3rd millennium B.C.
Axes were used for short-range or hand-to-hand fighting. The types of axes in use reflect the type of body armor worn at the time. Axes with a cutting edge were used in earlier periods when warriors were protected by a large body shield. Once body-armor began to develop, a new type of axe appeared, one that could be used for piercing. In Palestine and neighboring regions, the "Chisel" axe had superseded the so-called eye axe, a cutting axe, by the Middle Bronze II period. This type of axe is socketed and has a thin and narrow edge to its long blade.

Also characteristic of this period is a short dagger-like straight sword. Used for stabbing in hand-to-hand combat, the blades were strengthened by one or more ribs, as on the museum's example. The leaf-shaped blade dates this example to the Middle Bronze II period. The rivets for fastening the blade to its wooden handle are still preserved.
Shapes of vases and forms of decoration change over time. The large jar from Bab edh-Dhra is handmade. It contrasts with the taut profile of the bowl with combed decoration, made on the potter's wheel and dating approximately 1000 years later. The bowl symbolizes the break in continuity between the Early Bronze Age and the Middle Bronze I period. The arrival of new people, the Amorites, brought new pottery types. The incised decoration of the pottery is characteristic. Made either with a point or with a three- to five-pronged comb, the patterns consist of groups of wavy or straight lines, or short stabbing marks, in groups or singly.

The dish in Tel El-Yahudiyyeh Ware, of Middle Bronze II date, belongs stylistically with a group of pottery vessels that takes its name from a site in the Nile Delta where it was first discovered. Probably made in Palestine, the ware is distinctive, with dark slipped and burnished surface and white-filled punctured designs. This bowl is a particularly elaborate example.

Tel El-Yahudiyyeh Ware was a luxury product that was traded far and wide. It has been found in Egypt, the Sudan, Canaan, and Cyprus, and as far north as Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast. Such widespread distribution is a testimony to the prosperity and political stability of the period.
Lamps were common items of household use, as well as being dedicated in sanctuaries and placed in graves. Usually made of clay and stone, in early times they took the form of an open saucer, as here, with pinched rim to hold a wick, or wicks. Olive oil was the normal fuel. The earliest lamps in the ancient world occur in the Near East.

While remaining essentially an open saucer, the shape of lamps in Palestine in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (2nd millennium B.C.) changed over the long period of time, with some shapes becoming more popular. The four-spouted, or four-wick, lamp was a new type, introduced in the Middle Bronze I period (ca. 2200-1950 B.C.). It continued to be made in subsequent centuries but was less popular than lamps with one spout; by about 1730 B.C. it was no longer made. One-spouted lamps at first had a mouth only lightly pinched, but as time went by the mouth became more deeply pinched and longer. In the period 1400-1200 B.C., a more definite change occurred. The bowl became deeper and larger; the mouth became sharper, and the pinched edges almost closed over. The bowl also developed a definite rim. These developments have been recognized from excavations, and now that lamp typology has been so well established, lamps can help date the levels in which they are found.

For more information on lamps, see the Roman section.
These three pottery vases and the stone one illustrate connections between the Aegean, Cyprus, Egypt, and the Syro-Palestinian region in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500-1200 B.C.). The pyxis and stirrup jar copy typical Mycenaean, or mainland Greek, shapes, while the juglet closely matches a type of vase originating on Cyprus. Contacts between these three regions in the Late Bronze Age were extensive. Potters in Palestine used local clays to copy imports. Examples of Cypriote juglets and Mycenaean vases can be seen in the Cypriote and Early Greece exhibits.

Vessels in alabaster, a favorite stone for production of luxury vessels, were imported into Palestine from Egypt, beginning in the 3rd millennium. During the 2nd millennium, and especially during the Late Bronze Age, a greater quantity of vessels was imported, and in greater variety. Palestinian stone workers also began to imitate Egyptian vessels. The material of this vessel, however, indicates its Egyptian provenance. Palestinian stone vessels were carved in a local alabaster, which differs from Egyptian. Local alabaster is calcium sulfate, not calcium carbonate. The method of manufacture also signifies Egyptian workmanship. Interior horizontal drill marks and a shallow central depression show that a rotating drill was used. The Palestinian stone worker preferred to use a chisel, which has often left vertical marks inside the vessels.
Small bronze and terracotta figures of nude females with hands to breasts are often thought to be representations of Astarte, the Near Eastern goddess of love and fertility. They may, however, equally well be worshippers, or votaries, of the goddess rather than the goddess herself. The nudity and the stance apply to both.

The small, seated, male figure is undoubtedly a god, however. This figure wears a conical cap and a cloak with padded hem, which runs from right to left shoulder and down to his lap, crossing over at knee level. He is seated with right hand raised and left hand once extended. (The arm was cast separately and attached. It is now missing, but the attachment hole is preserved.) Representations of seated gods are rare in Palestine. A very similar figure, found on an excavation, has been identified as probably El, the father of the gods who had supreme authority over other gods and humans. He is usually represented with bulls horns. Since the museum's figure lacks these, he should more likely be considered a representation of Reshef, an astral deity, who could destroy men through war and plague.
Household Shrine and Vases
Syria-Palestine, Mt. Nebo
Iron IIC, ca. 800 B.C.
Terracotta, pottery (68.64)

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Saul S. Weinberg, "A Moabite Shrine Group,"
Muse 12 (1978) 30-48

This model of a shrine is decorated with crosshatched triangles, rectangles, and bands in red and black paint over a white slip. The decoration is well enough preserved so that the entire scheme can be restored on paper. Above the doorway are two relief busts of a female figure, presumably Astarte, the goddess of love and fertility, to whom the shrine was dedicated. A figure of the goddess probably once stood in the shrine. Two perforated tripod, or three-legged, bowls and one unperforated one belong with the shrine, as do the two small vases and a vase in form of an animal (rhyton). The animal was made in a two-part mold. It wears a halter formed of strips of clay and an elaborate wreath composed of small pellets of clay. There is a hole just before the tail and another at the mouth.

The group was used for worship in a home or small sanctuary. The shrine is modelled on a temple type found mainly on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and in Cyprus, areas where the Phoenician goddess Astarte was worshipped. The find spot of this and similar model shrines shows that Phoenician influence evidently spread inland to the area east of the Jordan River known as Moab.

The objects found with the shrine constitute important evidence for our understanding of religious ritual. The rhyton, a bull or a horse, was used for pouring libations or for drinking during ceremonies; incense burned in the two perforated bowls. (One of them shows traces of burning.) The two miniature vases, both imitations of Cypriote vessels, attest connections between Cyprus and this area. They may have been offerings to the goddess, or perhaps were also used for pouring libations.