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There’s a sense that we've become one of the family, the ajrama. Large empires, these empires had traceable effects on the lives of farmers and nomads throughout the region. In the 1970s, Biblical archaeology began to examine the lifestyles of local residents to find both the influences and practices that remained the same over time.

LaBianca began working with the Madaba Plains Project at Tell Heshbon 30 years ago as part of his doctoral research. His thesis discussed the cycles of history in the Heshbon area, expressed through the relatively recent food systems theory. This theory is a way of understanding the archaeological record through an analysis of the processes residents used to acquire food, water, and security. “If you understand how people made their living and lived their daily lives,” says LaBianca, “suddenly you get interested in animal bones, pieces of pottery, all kinds of things that are essential to the daily lives of people.”

Food systems may indicate a boom or bust period, but does not explain the reason behind these economic fluctuations, an omission that may be explained through the examination of great and little traditions. LaBianca cites the example of water transport as an intersection of food systems and great and little traditions. “Construction and maintenance of aqueducts requires labor and organization on a scale that only an elite ruling class can provide. Cisterns, on the other hand, can be built and maintained at the household level without a ruling class. Whereas great traditions involve universalized collective knowledge, little traditions are based solely on localized indigenous heritage and knowledge.”

“Deciphering Layers of History”

Biblical Archaeology of the Common Man

Different country with different people who have different cultural values, there were always familiar traits, beliefs and characteristics to latch on to. I rarely felt like an outsider and quickly considered Jordan my ‘home’ for the duration of my visit,” she says.

The Madaba Plains excavations contribute to a broader understanding of the history of Palestine as a whole. As vice president of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), LaBianca works with teams of archaeologists across the country to reconstruct and understand the rise and fall of empires while learning about their rulers and history, and explore characteristics and key finds of each archaeological period.

The Madaba Plains’ contribution to the DAHH website will involve the efforts and talents of a wide range of professionals—not only archaeologists to excavate, but artists to draw and interpret their finds, and photographers and videographers to chart and document progress. In order to bring these talents together, the newly established Jordan Field School has been created from a partnership between the Madaba Plains Project and Andrews University.

The Jordan Field School will offer classes in architecture, communication, behavioral sciences and anthropology, religion and history, which can be combined to fulfill degree requirements. LaBianca explains: “It’s more than just digging—it now includes film, photography, art, ethnography.. The Jordan Field School is a way for faculty and students to work together on bridge building, as we meet people in other cultures and come to learn about their way of life.”

But the Field School is much more than just a tour. Its long-term goals include academic training for Jordanian students, English classes for local residents, and a lasting partnership with the community and nation of Jordan to improve the long-term economic and social well-being of the area. Andrews University faculty and students quickly become a part of the Jordanian community, staying in locals’ homes and building friendships that last for years. “There’s a sense that we’ve become one of the family, the ajrama. The Jordanian people are memorable for their hospitality and willingness to embrace us as individuals regardless of the politics.”

These friendships and on-site partnerships make cultural ambassadors of the faculty and students, says LaBianca. He quotes the words of Mark Twain: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” The Field School works closely with local archaeologists and maintains respect for the host country, two practices still relatively uncommon in Middle Eastern excavations that take place in an intersection of international development and archaeology.

Much more than an excavation of old pottery, the work at Tell Heshbon builds bridges between the past and present, the East and West, and results in intercultural relationships beneficial to both countries and deadly to stereotypes. 1. http://dasah.ucsd.edu/DAHH/ (under development).