Choosing the Site for the Church's First Archeological Dig

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Choosing the Site for
The Church’s First

BEFORE describing the work and results of Andrews University’s first archeological expedition, I want to explain why archeological enterprises in Bible lands are important and how they contribute to Biblical studies. Every reader of religious literature is impressed by the large amount of information extant shedding light on the Bible—on its customs and culture, history, prophecies, geography, and religion. Much of this information has been acquired through the archeologist’s unearthing of ruined sites in Bible lands during the past century. Accumulated archeological evidence has illuminated numerous obscure passages, supplemented many historical facts, and verified or supported numerous stories of the Bible. While acknowledging the value of their contribution, we can hardly say that the archeologists have completed their work and have exhausted potential sources of new information and useful evidence. So long as problems of ancient Biblical history still await solutions, archeological work must continue.

From the time Biblical archeology began, Seventh-day Adventists have been grateful for its contributions, and in their books and articles, as well as in their evangelistic discourses, have made wide use of the discoveries of archeology to explain and defend the Bible. In recent years Seventh-day Adventists have taken a more active part in archeological pursuits, especially through their Theological Seminary. In 1941 the Seminary joined the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) as a corporate member. This research institution with schools in Jerusalem and Baghdad has for a number of years played an active role in the exploration of Bible lands. Its famous director for many years was Prof. W. F. Albright, of Johns Hopkins University.

The 1937 catalog of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary listed for the first time a professor of Eastern antiquities and archeology, Lynn H. Wood. In order to obtain field experience Dr. Wood spent a year in the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, during which time he took part in the excavations of Ezion-geber and Khirbet Tannur, which were under the direction of Nelson Glueck, now president of Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio.

When Dr. Wood retired in 1951,
History of Andrews University's First Archeological Expedition—1

By SIEGFRIED H. HORN

Archeological Dig

I was appointed to take over his chair and am still teaching courses in archeology in the Theological Seminary. During the years, I have visited the Bible lands many times for research work and to act as guide for academic tours. As a staff member of the Drew-McCormick Archeological Expedition I took part in the excavations of Biblical Shechem, of which the readers of the REVIEW AND HERALD have been informed in earlier articles.

From time to time various supporters of the SDA Theological Seminary made the suggestion that with its strong interest in archeology this seminary should take a more active part in the explorations of Bible lands. This suggestion became more tangible a few years ago when several board members of the Archeological Research Foundation of New York pledged to support three seasons of archeological work under the sponsorship of Andrews University at some site in Palestine. The offer was accepted by the board of the university in the spring of 1966, and I was authorized to lay plans for excavations to begin in the summer of 1967.

Why Heshbon Was Chosen

Several years ago the director of the Department of Antiquities of the Kingdom of Jordan suggested to me the citadel of Amman as a possible site of excavations. This site appealed to me greatly, since Amman, the ancient Rabbath-Ammon, had been the capital city of the Ammonites in Old Testament times. Soundings made there in the past had revealed it to be a fruitful archeological site. Among the discoveries was a stone on which were inscribed eight lines of Phoenician characters. The discoverer, Mr. Rafiq Dajani, deputy director of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, recently entrusted me with the publication of this inscription. However, in 1966 I was informed that the citadel of Amman was no longer available to foreign archeologists and was reserved for the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. Therefore I had to look for another site. I had several places in mind and also asked certain prominent scholars, among them Martin Noth and Père de Vaux, for suggestions.
For several weeks in the early summer of 1966 I traveled through Palestine examining prospective sites. At one place I found the villagers adamantly opposed to archeological work. At another I discovered that the site in which I was interested was owned by several landlords and that to obtain a lease or grant would have involved tiresome and long negotiations, probably also much money. One appealing site lay in a military restricted area, and another was too far from inhabited areas from which to obtain labor and water.

But there was one site to which I returned again and again, a site with which I had already fallen in love when I saw it for the first time in 1953—Heshbon, the capital city in Moses' time of Siyon, king of the Amorites. In 1966 I found that a new asphalt road had been constructed that passed the mound of Heshbon, giving the site a higher profile than it had formerly been quite inaccessible. I also learned that the mound was Government owned, so that I could work there without having to rent or lease it, and I discovered that the local villagers and the elders were extraordinarily friendly and eager for me to come and excavate.

The mound of ancient Heshbon is large and prominent, even slightly higher than neighboring Mount Nebo, from which Moses viewed the Holy Land before his death. Furthermore, it had never been touched by an archeologist, and this cannot be said of many sites of similar importance. Famous cities of antiquity, especially royal capital cities, are either still inhabited and therefore difficult to excavate (for example, Jerusalem and Damascus) or have already been explored (for example, Samaria, Petra, and Shechem). Heshbon, therefore, posed a real challenge and practically invited me to come and open up its treasure house.

Four-fifths of the mound's surface is covered neither by houses nor fields. In its vicinity live people eager to work as laborers; the Government was willing to grant me a permit of excavations. The mound was easy of access and only half an hour's drive from the large and modern city of Amman, the present capital of Jordan.

However, there was another reason why I chose Heshbon as a site for archeological exploration. Since only a few sites east of the Jordan have thus far been explored, I felt that excavations there were more urgently needed than exploration of new sites west of the Jordan. Many sites on the western side have been excavated—Jericho and Bethel, Gibea and Shechem, Megiddo and Samaria, Jerusalem and Hebron, Lachish and Ashdod, to mention only a few—but the area east of the Jordan has received only slight attention.

Yet, the Transjordan area posed historical problems that were crying for solutions. For example, surface explorations by Nelson Glueck before World War II led him to conclude that there was no sedentary population in the area before the thirteenth century B.C. Consequently, he dated the Exodus not earlier than the thirteenth century. Yet, the Biblical data seem to require a date for the Exodus in the fifteenth century. Even for the time of the Hebrew kings, when Heshbon should also have been a flourishing city, the potsherds picked up on the surface of the mound seemed to furnish scant evidence. Given the skill of searching, Nelson Glueck found one Iron Age (times of the Hebrew kings) potsherd. Years later Bernhard Anderson found a few more. Only stratigraphic excavations could show whether Heshbon was a settled city in the Late Bronze Age (middle of the second millennium B.C.) and whether it was a city of any consequence in the Iron Age period.

It was for these reasons that Heshbon was chosen as the site to be excavated in a series of archeological seasons, the first of which was to take place in the summer of 1967. The cooperation of the ASOR was obtained, which meant that its scholars would assist me, that its headquarters buildings in Jerusalem and its research library there could serve our expedition as headquarters, and that we could use its excavating equipment and tent camp.

The Abortive Attempt of 1967

A large staff of volunteers was gathered. Several archeologists who had worked with me at Shechem indicated they would assist me, and one as the expedition's chief archeologist. Surveyors and photographers, an anthropologist, and certain college teachers and students from several countries applied for places on the staff, the understanding being that each paid for his transportation and maintenance.

All plans were laid to begin work at Heshbon June 5, 1967. I arrived in Jerusalem several days ahead of time and found a few staff members already there. The tent camp of the ASOR was transferred to Heshbon, and all arrangements with the Government and the local people were made. But ominous war clouds were hanging over the whole Near East. Eight days before the excavations were to begin I advised all staff members who had not yet left their home countries to postpone their journey. In the meantime, with tensions rising, on Sunday, June 4, I sent telegrams canceling the expedition and had the tent camp brought back to Jerusalem. The next day, Monday, June 5, the day when our work should have begun, the Israeli-Arab war broke out and caught me in Jerusalem. Later during that day, while a fierce battle raged in the Holy City, I flew by taxi with the family of the director of the ASOR to Amman and remained there until, with many other foreigners, I was evacuated to Tehran, Iran, a week later, by the United States Air Force.

The 1968 Expedition

I returned to America defeated, wondering whether, with the whole Near East in turmoil and with the ASOR headquarters, equipment, and tent camp in Jerusalem inaccessible to me east of the Jordan, it was worth while to lay new plans. However, the time of indecision and disappointment soon passed. Prof. G. Ernest Wright, president of the ASOR, promised to raise money for new equipment to be used on the east bank of Jordan, the Government of Jordan renewed the concession to excavate Heshbon, and President Rich-
ard Hammill, of Andrews University, pledged his support for a renewed venture. Some who had pledged money to support the expedition indicated that they would continue to help, and many of the 1967 staff members were eager to try again in 1968.

Since two key members of my staff were involved also in the Shechem excavations, the 1968 season of which was scheduled in June and July, I had to schedule the Heshbon expedition so that it would follow the Shechem dig. This explains why we started as late as July 15. A special difficulty was created by Syria’s remaining closed to American and British citizens, forcing staff members who drove cars, which were needed by the expedition to Amman, to make a week-long detour through eastern Turkey, western Iran and Iraq, in part over incredibly bad roads.

But in the end all difficulties were overcome. A large staff of 42 members, traveling by various means, assembled at Amman and carried out the Heshbon expedition according to plans, excavating at the site for seven weeks, from July 15 to August 30. Since the money provided by the ASOR was insufficient to purchase a complete tent camp for a major expedition and the political tension in the country seemed to make it advisable to spend the nights in a city, permission was sought and most graciously granted by the president of the Middle East Division to use the Adventist school building in Amman as headquarters.

It is a pleasure to take this opportunity to express my own and my fellow staff members’ deep-felt gratitude to F. C. Webster, president of the Middle East Division, and to W. J. Clemens, president of the Jordan Section, for allowing us the use of the school. The facilities were a real godsend. This courtesy made our stay pleasant and materially aided in the success of our work.

The auditorium of the school served as dormitory for our 30 men. Five classrooms provided offices for registry operations, the architects and photographers, director and anthropologist, and sleeping quarters for women; the open hall in front of the classrooms was used as a dining hall; a room underneath a stairway was converted into a darkroom for the photographers; the kitchen and storeroom were the domain of our cook and his three assistants; the back yard provided space for our pottery washers and dryers, and the front yard space for the seven automobiles that gave us mobility—five VW buses, one Volvo limousine, and an old Chevrolet carryall, bought for the ASOR, which did a grand job as truck.

(Continued next week)