The Excavations at Biblical Heshbon, 1974 (Part 1)

Lawrence T. Geraty

Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/hisban-excavations-1974-publications

Part of the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/hisban-excavations-1974-publications/6
MANY times the heavy, worn hammer has been used to pound the spikes through calloused hands into wood. But this time it is different. No fight, no struggle, no pleading, no curses.

This Man lies down on the cross as on a bed. He lays down His life as one would a worn garment. No resentment against the executioners. Just forgiveness, unsolicited forgiveness.

He joins man right at the door of death and tells him that He will meet him beyond death. For this Man makes an exit door to death and an entrance door to life.

The Man is Jesus, the God in crisis. In crisis not because He is in trouble, but because we are in trouble. God in crisis because there are men in crisis. Men like the thief on the cross, men like me. Men who cannot make it without the Man who made it.

Death drained His breath and blood. Left Him a limp, lifeless form. Death took Him, but death could not keep Him.

All for love. All for me.

Rudolf E. Klimes
The staff of the 1974 Heshbon expedition at headquarters.

By now, most readers of this journal will know that Andrews University has been sponsoring the archeological excavation of Tell Hesbân, the important Biblical site of Heshbon situated within view of Mount Nebo and about fifteen miles southwest of modern Amman, the capital of Jordan.

Siegfried Horn, dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, chose the site and directed three successful seasons of work in the summers of 1968, 1971, and 1973. Because all the expedition's objectives had not yet been reached, a fourth season of digging took place this past summer between June 26 and August 14.

Dr. Horn's heavy responsibilities precluded his being there the entire seven weeks. Therefore, as his associate in the Old Testament Department at Andrews University, I was appointed director. Working along with us was a staff of 75 archeologists, including architect-surveyors, photographers, anthropologists, a geologist, and other supporting personnel who came from the United States, Canada, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Jordan.

Lawrence T. Geraty, Ph.D., is assistant professor of Old Testament, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University.

This group was not only international but ecumenical, including, besides Adventists and Muslims, members of the following churches: Christian Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed Presbyterian, Christian, Grace Brethren, Baptist, Reformed Church of America, Methodist, Church of God, and Roman Catholic. Assisting this group, who volunteered their services free of charge (indeed, many paid to come!), were about 150 hired workmen from the vicinity of Heshbon.

The American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), which has done so much for the progress of Biblical archeology, again cosponsored the excavation, as it has since 1968. Other institutions that helped both with funding and key personnel were the Graduate School of Loma Linda University, Calvin College (Grand Rapids, Michigan), Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, Missouri), Grace Theological Seminary (Winona Lake, Indiana), and Hope College (Holland, Michigan). Even then, the expedition's budget could not have been met without the generous gifts of a number of private donors who see value in the excavation's objectives and results.

Staff Members

In addition to the new director, who has been associated with the project since its inception, and Dr. Horn, who served as adviser and object registrar during the dig's last three weeks, other core staff members included Roger Boraas, of Upsala College (East Orange, New Jersey), chief stratigrapher and coordinator of specialists, and James Sauer, of the American Center of Oriental Research (Amman, Jordan), chief ceramic typologist and area supervisor. Other area supervisors were Bastiaan Van Elderen, of Calvin; Harold Mare, of Covenant; Larry Herr, of Harvard; Robert Ibach, of Grace; and James Stirling, of Loma Linda, who also supervised the anthropological research of the expedition. The other specialists were Paul Denton, of Andrews, chief photographer; Bert DeVries, of Calvin, chief architect-surveyor; Harold James, of Andrews, geologist;
Øystein LaBianca, of Brandeis, zoo-archeologist and ethnographer; and Hester Thomsen, of Greater New York Academy, pottery registrar.

Remaining staff members (mostly teachers, ministers, and students) supervised and recorded the progress of digging or served in supporting roles both in the field and at headquarters. Among these were: Michael Blaine (Southern California Conference), Paul Bonney (Grand Rapids Junior Academy), Glenn Bowen (AU), Kerry Brandstater (LLU), Suzanne Brandstater (PUC), Theodore Chamberlain (LLU), James Cox (AU), Trevor Delafield (Wisconsin Conference), Gerald and Shirley Finneman (Nebraska Conference), Douglas Fuller (AUC), Kevin and Inge-Lise Howse (AU), Henry Lamberton (Upper Columbia Conference), Robert and Melissa Lloyd (Oregon Conference), Richard Mannell (AU), David Merling (AU), Kathleen Mitchell (Michigan State University), Orlyn Nelson (AUC), John Reeves (LLU), Ralph Stirling (Loma Linda Academy), and George Terzibashian (Middle East College).

This large group was housed at the Amman Training Center for Palestinian Refugees, an institution sponsored by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, located between Amman and Heshbon. The convenient facilities there served well for our headquarters.

Objectives of Fourth Season

Objectives of the fourth season of operations included completing, if possible, the excavation of the Byzantine church on the acropolis of the tell (Area A). This involved locating the narthex at its western extremity. On a level shelf of the tell to the south (Area B) more work needed to be done before what looked like a water reservoir could be confidently associated with the pools mentioned in Song of Solomon 7:4. Especially the foot-thick plaster “flooring” found thirty feet down in one square had to be connected up with the fifty-foot stretch of continuously plastered retaining wall and cut bedrock in adjoining squares to the east. This same area contained the best hints of the earliest occupational evidence so far discovered at the site—Iron I (twelfth–tenth centuries B.C.); these hints begged for further excavation.

Between Areas A and B lay Area D, the southern access route to the acropolis. In addition to reaching bedrock in its squares and exploring several unentered storage cisterns, an important goal was to connect stratigraphically, if possible, its monumental stairway discovered in 1973 with the Area B plaster layers found in 1968 and 1971 and subsequently interpreted as resurfacings of a roadway or plaza.

Our primary objective in Area C on the mound’s western slope was to clarify the extent of previously uncovered Iron Age and Roman fortifications.

Since a great variety of Roman and Byzantine tomb types had been discovered in the Areas E and F cemeteries in 1971 and 1973, we hoped this season to locate tombs from the Iron Age or Old Testament period. We also planned several soundings elsewhere on the tell and in its vicinity (Area G) to see whether their archeological history would agree with that already discovered on the upper part of the ancient mound where excavation from previous seasons had been concentrated.

In 1973 we began an archeological survey of the countryside within a six-mile radius of Heshbon that included the tracing of the Roman road from Tell Hasbân (Esbus in Roman times) to Tell er-Râmeh (Roman Livias) in the Jordan valley. Another objective of the 1974 season was to complete this survey and then to sound one of Heshbon’s satellite communities in order to test the validity of the survey team’s method of suggesting the occupation history of a given site on the basis of potsherds collected from its surface.

Results in Terms of Objectives

As usual, these many objectives for the new season were only partially realized. The narthex of the Christian church in Area A proved as elusive as it did in the 1973 season and mostly for the same reason: it was apparently covered by an extremely well-preserved Mamlûk bath complex that was (as it turns out) only partially excavated in 1973. Unexpectedly the team assigned to these squares this season spent most of its time uncovering what proved to be the front half of the
Heshbon Excavations Bibliography (English)

This list has been prepared for the convenience of those readers who are not familiar with the history and results of the three previous seasons of excavation.

After 1968 Season:


After 1971 Season:


Geraty, Lawrence T. "Heshbon—a Case of Biblical Confirmation or Confrutation?" Spectrum IV:2 (Spring, 1972), 29-41.

Horn, S. H. Series of articles on 1971 season, Review and Herald, Dec. 30, 1971 (4-6); Jan. 6, 1972 (6-8); Jan. 13, 1972 (11-12); Jan. 20, 1972 (9-11); Jan. 27, 1972 (8-10).


After 1973 Season:


Horn, S. H. Series of articles on 1973 season, Review and Herald, March 21, 1974 (4-6); March 28, 1974 (8-10).
