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C. Mervyn Maxwell
Andrews University

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Recommended Citation

Maxwell, C. Mervyn, "Digging Up the Past - Part 1" (1970). *Faculty Publications*. 3870.
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One workman breaks soil with a pick while another scoops it into a "goofa" basket. Both look for potsherds—"the silent timepieces of archaeology."

Digging Up the Past

Why Heshbon Was Chosen for
Excavation by the 1968 Andrews
University Archaeological Expedition

by **C. Mervyn Maxwell**

Professor of Church History
Andrews University

It will be with keen anticipation that the Andrews University Archaeological Expedition will begin its second season of digging at Heshbon, Jordan, on June 22, 1970.

Just why hopes will be so high on that occasion I shall explain in a moment. But first—why *Heshbon*?

Everyone has heard of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jericho; an archaeological expedition to one of these well-known sites would be understandable. Why Heshbon?

When Dr. Siegfried Horn, Professor of Archaeology and History of Antiquity at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and director of the largest archaeologi-

cal expedition ever to work in Jordan, invited me to participate in the first "dig" at Heshbon in 1968, this question immediately arose in my mind.

Dr. Horn gave me several answers. Surprising as it may seem, one of the major reasons for selecting Heshbon was pragmatic; the site was available. There are hundreds of hills (called "tells" by archaeologists) in the Near East marking the unexplored ruins of Biblical cities and towns; but for a variety of reasons not all of these can be dug. The first site Dr. Horn examined some years ago with a serious eye to making it the object of an expedition turned out to be



Dr. Bastiaan Van Elderen, of Calvin Theological Seminary, rests his foot on one of three pillar bases visible in Area A before excavating commenced.



Four pieces of Late Bronze Age pottery are the source of great anticipation for the 1970 dig.

the property of a score or more of Arab families. Gaining permission to dig into it could have consumed years of negotiations. His second proposed site proved to be too close to fortifications on the tense Arab-Israeli frontier; the hapless villager who kindly volunteered to accompany him to the place in a taxi was promptly jailed by local police when he returned home, and Horn's anxious efforts to secure his release were in vain. On the other hand the hill of Heshbon (Tell Hesban), proved to be owned by the government, which was quite willing to grant a permit for its exploration. Furthermore, the mayors (mukhtars) of the local hamlet were eager to supply manpower to assist with the work.

The second major factor in the selection of Heshbon was historical. Heshbon, mentioned in nineteen different Bible passages, enjoys the distinction of being the first city that Moses and the Israelites adopted after their Exodus from Egypt in the second half of the fifteenth century B.C.

The Bible says that after the Israelites had wandered forty years in the Sinai Peninsula, subsequent to their departure from Egypt, they were at last given the signal from

heaven to advance into Palestine, their ultimate destination. Their route of travel took them through the hill country on the east side of the Dead Sea into what is now known as Jordan but was then known as Moab. A local strong man called Sihon, an Amorite chieftain, had recently set himself up as king over the various tribes of people scattered sparsely through this south-central area of Jordan and had taken Heshbon as his capital.

After the Israelites had advanced into the most southern tip of Sihon's newly conquered lands, they sent a diplomatic mission to his headquarters at Heshbon, politely requesting permission to pass through his kingdom on their way to Jericho to the west and promising strictly to refrain from raiding his people's precious food and water supplies as they progressed.

But Sihon misinterpreted Moses' request as a threat and challenged him to battle. The Israelites beat him decisively, then followed up their victory with a lightning conquest of the entire territory; and in this way, the Bible reports, "Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages." Numbers 21:25, RSV.

Leafing through the Bible one

finds that Heshbon after its conquest was rebuilt as a labor of love by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and then presented as a gift to members of the priestly tribe of Levi. Numbers 32; Joshua 21. It was still an Israelite city in the days of King Solomon, half a millennium later, and in his famous love poem the great king romantically likens his sweetheart's beautiful eyes to the deep and sparkling "fish pools in Heshbon." Song of Solomon 7:4.

In the turbulent centuries that accompanied the decay of the ancient Israelite hegemony Heshbon was regained for a while by the Moabites, the very people who had possessed it in its earliest days before Sihon rose to power. When Christ was born, Heshbon was a military outpost belonging to King Herod, the tyrant who attempted to kill Christ shortly after His birth. Soon afterward the Romans took it over and made it a provincial market town. In time it was Christianized, and in the fourth and fifth centuries the acts of the famous Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) recorded the fact that bishops from Heshbon were in attendance.



Dr. Dewey Beegle, of Wesley Theological Seminary, points out features of a lime-kiln found in Area B.



GEORGE J. UNGER

The Moslems moved in, however, about A.D. 630, and gradually the residents of Heshbon exchanged their Christianity for Islam and their cathedral for a mosque. The fortunes of the town slowly ebbed away. Mention of it all but disappears from the available literature. A biographer of Saladin wrote in A.D. 1184 that during the Crusades Saladin encamped one night "close to a village called Heshbon." An Arabic geographer of the sixteenth century referred to it as the capital of a fertile district, but added that it was "a little town." By 1800, after twelve hundred years of Arab occupation, Heshbon ceased to be inhabited. Today only a tiny village numbering two or three hundred souls occupies the environs—but an almost uninterrupted occupation of 3,400 years (from the fifteenth century B.C. to the twentieth century A.D.) is not an unimpressive record. Heshbon has certainly chalked up a history interesting enough to deserve excavation.

A third major reason for choosing Heshbon, and one closely related to the foregoing, is its keen archaeological significance. Because so little scientific digging has been done in the area east of the Jordan River, there is yet very much to be learned about the "ceramic chronology" of the area, the science of dating archaeological levels by the various styles of pottery fragments found in them. Furthermore, as the first city Moses conquered in the Jewish migration from Egypt to Palestine, Hesh-

bon may hold a secret to one of the most disputed problems in Biblical chronology, the true date of the Exodus and the birth of ancient Israel as a nation. But this paragraph needs elaboration.

One of the questions most frequently asked of archaeologists is, "How can you tell for sure that a particular series of ruins was built in Roman times, let us say, and not in some other age?" There are actually several clues. The quality and style of the stonework is one indication; the presence of coins among the ruins, bearing the name and date of a ruler, is another and obviously one of the best ways of dating a "find." But coins are fairly rare, and stonework can be deceptive; the rough foundation of a peasant's cottage can hardly be expected to reflect the craftsmanship of a city temple. But all the soil of ancient cities abounds in broken pottery, with the result that the commonest and most useful tool used in dating discoveries turns out to be the lowly potsherd.

Through the centuries fashions in tableware and kitchenware have not remained the same. Shape, color, thickness, relative purity of the clay, and the general level of craftsmanship have changed time and again. The current popularity of melmac plastic dishes attests such a change of fashion in our own times. Pottery dishes, cookware, waterpots, and storage vessels break easily, but the resultant pieces (potsherds) do not decay; they remain in the ground, and the soil of ancient cities is filled with

them. We uncovered at least two hundred thousand potsherds in our seven weeks of digging in 1968.

Near the surface we found pieces of Arabic pottery, some of it made in molds and glazed, and some unglazed and painted with rough geometric designs. As we dug deeper we began to uncover Byzantine potsherds, and underneath these, Roman. The most easily identifiable Roman pieces were fragments of the fabulous terra sigillata ware, expensive stuff with a thin creamy-yellow center and a burnished bronze glaze. Still lower we came to Iron Age III potsherds, some of which are thick, rough-looking pieces with a pink exterior and a coarse gray interior spotted with white, dating from around 600-332 B.C. Below these we found Iron Age II ware from around 900-600 B.C., and under them, Iron Age I potsherds, dating from 1200-900 B.C.

Each evening we studied the pottery which had been dug up the previous day and had by then been carefully washed and dried, searching for indications of the age of the various occupation levels we had been digging out. The most significant pieces were retained and carefully labeled for further study. We selected and saved over 12,000 pieces of pottery and threw back on our refuse pile on the hill many thousands of others. University students will study these potsherds and write doctoral dissertations on them. "Ph.D.'s in broken dishes" they may be, but for that very reason highly useful for the interpretation of the way people lived in times long ago.

I have referred to only three or four of the most obviously characteristic pottery styles. In addition to these there are many additional styles in each period, styles that resemble very closely other styles popular in other periods. This is where the challenge comes in: to learn enough about all these styles so that each one can be recognized at once as belonging to a given era, or century, or even quarter of a century. With such information, future archaeologists at Heshbon and at other sites in Jordan can hope to know with certainty the

true age of any occupation level they happen to be digging out at a given moment. A glance at any handful of potsherds will let them know.

Heshbon is an especially good site for studying ceramic chronology because its long history of occupation presents an extensive sequence of pottery changes.

Really significant pottery at Heshbon focuses primarily on none of the many occupation eras named above, I hasten to add, but on pottery remains from the era which underlies Iron Age I and is known by Palestinian archaeologists as Late Bronze Age. (Incidentally, the names refer to the metal commonly used by the people at the time they made the pottery; the pottery itself is, of course, made of clay, and not of iron or bronze.)

Such digging and surface examination of sites as has been carried on in recent years in the Middle East has led to the conclusion that there were no cities in existence in Jordan in the fifteenth century B.C. To put it a different way, the Late Bronze Age in Jordan, the century or two surrounding 1400 B.C., has provided no concentrations of Late Bronze Age potsherds suggestive of a populated city. This is most important for the interpretation of the Bible, because it is precisely within the fifteenth century B.C. that the Bible says the Exodus occurred and Moses led the Israelites against Heshbon. A careful study of 1 Kings 6:1 points to the date 1445 for the Exodus, and to the date of 1405, forty years later, for the conquest of Palestine. On the other hand, concentrations of Iron Age I pottery, dating from the thirteenth century B.C., have been found in sufficient quantity to suggest cities. Careful Biblical archaeologists in recent decades

have argued like this: "The Bible says that the Israelites attacked cities. This evidence must be historically reliable. But there were no cities to be attacked in the fifteenth century B.C. when the Bible says the Exodus occurred, while there were cities in the thirteenth century. Something must be wrong and it is easy to suppose that it is the Biblical date that is wrong. Therefore the Exodus must have taken place in the thirteenth century, as the concentrations of pottery suggest, rather than in the fifteenth century, as the Bible says."

As we began to dig in 1968 the thought was ever in our minds: If our expedition should discover within the ruins of Heshbon a concentration of Late Bronze Age pottery, it would show for the first time that there was at least one city in existence in Jordan in the fifteenth century B.C.—the very city of Heshbon itself! Could we hope to find such a concentration of potsherds during the succeeding seasons of excavation? in 1970 perhaps? or in 1972?

The most characteristic Late Bronze Age pottery is known as "bichrome ware." It has designs on it painted in two colors (bichrome), red and black, and is easily recognized.

In the deepest part of our excavations the digging crew came across large quantities of Iron Age III pottery (600-332 B.C.), many thousands of pieces in fact. Then considerable quantities of Iron Age II (900-600 B.C.) turned up. Then pieces of Iron Age I (1200-900 B.C.). It was most impressive to reflect on the age of these mute time-pieces that had been silently counting the centuries for over 3,000 years.

We were getting down very close to the Late Bronze Age, much

closer than we had dared hope we might reach in our first season's work. Was it possible—?

And then it happened. On the last Wednesday afternoon—we were due to quit on Thursday—a workman deep down in Area B bent over and picked up a broken potsherd and handed it to his supervisor. The supervisor, a trained archaeologist, handed it at once to a young assistant and said, "Take this to Dr. Horn." Dr. Horn took one look at it and knew at once what it was. It was decorated with red and black stripes. It was Late Bronze Age bichrome ware!

Later that afternoon a second piece was found, and on the next day, two more.

To be sure, it takes more than a swallow to make a spring. We haven't yet found enough Late Bronze Age pottery to prove conclusively that Heshbon existed as a city in the fifteenth century B.C. A troop of ancient nomads encamped on the site for a week or two could account for four scraps of broken pottery. But so far as pottery dating is concerned, the odds are now clearly on the side of a fifteenth-century Exodus.

As excavating resumes next summer, interest in the depths of Area B will be intense. And if, as there now seems definite reason to hope, a large number of Late Bronze Age potsherds come to light, the Andrews University Archaeological Expedition will be in a position to make a real contribution to Biblical studies, and Heshbon will have shown itself a very wise choice for an archaeological expedition.

This is why the 1970 dig will begin with such great anticipation.

Next month: What is it like to be on an archaeological expedition? Why are the ruins of ancient cities found in hills? How can you tell how old a buried ruin is?