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Digging Up the Past - Part 2

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The ruins of a sixth-century Christian church showing pillar bases which formed a part of it. To the right is the apse where a mosaic was found. The north wall stood a few feet beyond the pillar bases.

GEORGE J. UNGER

Digging Up the Past--2

What is it like to be a member of an archaeological expedition? What kind of people take part in one? Just how do you go about digging up an old city? Why are the ruins found in *hills*? Why do archaeological pictures of buildings ordinarily show only the foundations?

I used to ask these common questions myself. As a professor of church history but a rank amateur in archaeology I found answers to them while participating in the Andrews University Excavation at Heshbon, Jordan, in the summer of 1968.

First of all, the people: *What kind of people take part?* The "foreign" (that is, non-Arab) members

of our expedition were forty-two Americans, Englishmen, and Canadians. The director was Dr. Siegfried Horn, since 1951 chairman of the department of Old Testament at Andrews University, a Seventh-day Adventist institution in Berrien Springs, Michigan. His chief archaeologist was Dr. Roger Boraas of Uppsala College in New Jersey, and the four associate archaeologists under him were Dr. Dewey M. Beegle of Wesley Theological

Heshbon's Exciting Heritage

by C. Mervyn Maxwell

Professor of Church History
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Seminary, Washington, D.C.; Phyllis Bird, graduate student at Harvard University; Dr. Henry Thompson of New York Theological Seminary; and Dr. Bastiaan Van Elderen of Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Each of these archaeologists is a scholar in his own right and had had previous experience assisting in other digs in Palestine. Each is an individual. Phyllis Bird, spry and energetic in her thirties, is an ordained Methodist minister, and has nearly completed a grueling course at Harvard University. Hank Thompson, stoically braving the wind-borne dust in the dirtiest part of our dig, was the omnivorous reader, a scholarly paperback ever near at hand. Dewey Beegle, always the teacher, did outstanding service training his understudies. Bastiaan Van Elderen, my imme-

diate supervisor, is a big mild-mannered man, deliberate and thorough. Roger Boraas, emphatic, energetic, attractive to young people, and a good singer, maintained a constant vigilance on all scientific procedures. Siegfried Horn, true to his Teutonic background, was impeccably organized, a strong leader, courteous and unflappable.

Most of the rest of our staff consisted of seminary students and their wives. These young people had volunteered to come, some mortgaging their future to pay the expenses. The wives arrived expecting to assist in office record keeping, but when it became evident that Jordanian regulations required us to hire a very large contingent of Arab workmen, Dr. Horn asked the girls if they would like to act as section leaders over platoons of Arab workers. They agreed courageously and did an excellent job. The Arabs, too, we must add, in spite of their national custom of keeping a woman in the home, accepted the leadership of these American young women and cooperated splendidly.

Our force also included official photographers, engineers and surveyors, and full-time record keepers.

As for the Arab workmen, we hired more than a hundred and forty. The Jordanian government required us to spend a fixed amount of money for the privilege of digging in their country, and most of this was to be spent on wages; hence the large crew. While most of these national workers were unskilled, three were highly competent archaeologists assigned to keep an eye on us and make sure we didn't abscond with any precious objects. Other Arabs had had many years experience assisting as laborers in other archaeological expeditions; and the Arab superintendent, Mustafa Tawfiq Mustafa, was a man among men, genial, energetic, well-organized, and brooking no nonsense. He would be a success wherever he might live.

If at first all the Arabs seemed indistinguishable, they soon became individuals, of course. Some were lazy and would work only when coaxed to. Some got sick easily;

one, the father of six children under eleven years of age, died one night and was promptly buried the next morning in a dusty grave in an open field nearby, his body reverently turned southward toward Mecca. Some men were quarrelsome; one brought a gun one day to shoot another Arab who had annoyed him. Luckily the brother of his intended victim grabbed his hand in time and in true Wild West fashion discharged the pistol six times into the ground. (The village Mukhtars then held a council and discharged the offender.) But many other Arabs were hardworking, cooperative, and eager to please. Several were boys of high school age, mischievous like all lads, but glad to be doing something useful and eager to show off their English while teaching us Arabic. Little Joseph, the eldest son of the man who died, was outstanding in his own sweet way. We hired him to take his father's place in order to help his family over the shock. Too small to do much work, he had a heart and a will to do any chore assigned him, and a smile that competed with the sunshine.

How is an archaeological team organized? To the four experienced associate archaeologists were assigned four "areas," one to each. Area B, for example, was marked out on a flat surface on the south side of the hill, and its team was instructed to probe downward as rapidly as possible in order to determine in the shortest time how many "occupation levels" there were under the surface. What they found would indicate how many civilizations, known to us from written records, had actually left their traces in stratified soils, foundations, and other signs of human occupation. It was in this area, described in last month's article, that the exciting discovery of Late Bronze Age pottery was made during the last two days of the dig, a discovery that may upset all current archaeological interpretations about the dating of the Exodus in favor of a strict Biblical chronology.

Area C was located on a concave western slope in light of the reasonable deduction that the main Roman highway from Jericho, at-

tested by historical records and extant Roman milestones, might have entered Heshbon at that point. It was hoped that Roman gateposts would come into view as we dug down. What was found instead was some fifteen feet of a loose powdery soil that had washed down during the centuries from the top of the hill. As the daily wind from the Mediterranean, seventy-five miles to the west, blew in hour after hour, gritty dust particles swirled into the eyes of the workers in this area. But their pains were rewarded by a continuous stream of interesting objects, the exotic refuse of ancient civilizations, shimmering twisted-glass bracelets, polished bone and ivory ornaments, corroded bronze and iron instruments, dozens of coins, and thousands upon thousands of pieces of broken pottery.

Area D, at the very top of the hill, was selected in the expectation of uncovering a stepped street with the remains of buildings on each side of it, and this is exactly what was found there.

Area A, just to the north of Area B, on a leveled-out place only a few feet below the actual summit, was chosen because of the presence there of three pillar bases in a row, mostly covered by soil but plainly visible nonetheless, with several broken pillar columns lying in disarray at their side. Here was intriguing evidence suggesting an ancient Roman basilica or early Christian church. And we were not disappointed. In the first few days of digging we uncovered remains of an outer wall to the north of the pillar bases and the curved stones of an apse oriented toward the east, all related to each other to form a "floor plan" of a Christian church. Within the apse we made one of our most interesting single discoveries, a portion of a mosaic floor composed of a multitude of tiny brightly colored tiles making up a design of some kind of deer with a flowering tree in the background. This mosaic has now been authoritatively dated in the last quarter of the sixth century A.D.

This mosaic provided us with unexpected publicity. Newspapers in Greece and Ethiopia and as far

away as California carried the story, and it was broadcast over the American radio. One American paper reported that our excavation had uncovered a Christian church and jewels valued at \$600,000! Evidently, 600 A.D. was understood to mean 600,000 American dollars. A friend of mine said that he heard another report on his car radio while traveling in Wyoming, stating that we had uncovered a Christian church "dating from 6000 B.C."—which is six thousand years before there were any Christians!

But let us look now at the actual excavating process in detail. After the areas were decided upon, squares within them were marked off with strings, and digging began. Each of the seminary students, closely directed by his area supervisor, picked up a light hand pick in one hand and a small trowel in the other and dug easily into the surface, sweeping the loosened soil to one side with the trowel. All continued to do this until they found something of interest—a buried foundation, for example, or an ancient floor, perhaps—or until they had dug out a shallow "probe trench" one meter wide clear across the square containing nothing of special interest. The next step was to call in a pick man, an Arab workman who loosened up larger quantities of dirt. Then another Arab, the hoe man, gathered the loosened soil into local baskets made of used tires and called "goofas"; the goofa man then lifted these baskets and emptied them into wheelbarrows; and the wheelbarrow man wheeled the dirt off to the custody of the dump man. Prestige quickly attached itself to the different jobs in a descending hierarchy, with wheelbarrow man at the bottom. While some men were willing to do any job required, others were reluctant to tackle any task below their normal status.

A full meter separated one square from an adjacent one, and as the digging progressed, the walls (balks) of the squares were kept as nearly vertical as possible with the aid of specialized Arab workmen (Jericho men), trained by years of assisting in other archaeological digs, in order to reveal

clearly by the changing colors of the soil the various occupation levels we had dug through.

Along with the careful digging went a continuous process of photographing, measuring, drawing, surveying, analyzing, discussing, and writing everything down. Archaeology has been paradoxically but aptly defined as "the destruction of evidence." Before anything of significance is removed, it must first be thoroughly recorded. This helps explain why two years will pass between each of the three projected expeditions to Heshbon. This much time is needed to evaluate and publish the results of each dig.

Why are the ruins of ancient cities found inside hills? Basically the reason is that hills in ancient times provided an obvious advantage for military defense, and so cities were built on top of them. Besides this, as buildings grew old or were destroyed by earthquakes, fires, and wars, the stones out of which they were made were removed by the people and used to create other buildings. Dust and sand blown by the ceaseless daily winds gradually covered the foundations and inexorably raised the hill bit by bit. Sometimes a wash-out from a higher part of the hill covered ruins left below.

What I have just said also helps to answer the question, *Why is it that archaeological photographs of "walls" usually show only foundations?* During the centuries people have removed the stones from walls to make new buildings out of them. Foundation stones were left only because they were hard to dig out of the ground. Where they were not hard to dig out, they were removed along with the rest of the stones. Some of the foundations we uncovered were far from complete.

What is a typical day like in the life of an archaeologist? The day began at a quarter to four in the morning when Mrs. Vivolyn Van Elderen, our matron, rang the bell of the Adventist Mission School in Amman where we slept and made our headquarters. First breakfast was served on the mission veranda at 4 o'clock while the air was chilly and dark. By 4:30 we were dis-

tributed and packed into our seven vehicles (mostly Volkswagen microbuses) and were on our way south for the twenty-minute ride to Tell Hesban. At 5 o'clock Mustafa, our Arab superintendent, blew the whistle at the top of the mound, and the one hundred and forty workmen joined us for the labors of the day. By 8:30, four and a half hours after first breakfast, we were ready for second breakfast. We could tell the difference between these two breakfasts because at the first one we ate uncrisp Kellogg's Corn Flakes, local bread, peanut butter, and little curved spotted bananas; at the second breakfast we ate uncrisp Kellogg's Corn Flakes, local bread, peanut butter, and eggs.

After breakfast work resumed until 1:30 p.m. The Arabs, whose breakfast had consisted of only a kind of tortilla and tomatoes, became rather tired during the hot dusty hour and a half after twelve, and by 1:30 we were all ready to call it a day. The weather, incidentally, was not intensely hot as people usually suppose. Some days were hot, indeed, but some mornings were so cold that the young seminary wives suffered real discomfort until the sun warmed things up. Heshbon is 3,000 feet above the level of the Mediterranean and 5,000 feet above the deep Jordan Valley. Visits by distinguished guests occasionally enlivened the day. Once Crown Prince Hassan inspected our digging. On two occasions the American ambassador, H. M. Symmes, came by with his family.

By 2:30 we were back in Amman ready for the leisurely main meal of the day. Then showers—if there was enough water—and the rest period. At 5:15 came pottery reading time, when the potshards from the previous day, by now carefully washed and dried, were studied for indications of the age of the layers we had been digging out. At 6:30 we ate again, a lighter meal, our fourth for the day. We were well fed on the expedition; nevertheless most of us lost weight, and by the end we were all more or less physically tired. In the evenings we heard lectures, or wrote letters

home, or played scrabble. By 9 o'clock everyone was in bed and the lights were out.

Saturdays and Sundays were free, as the Adventists observed the Sabbath and the others observed Sunday. On Saturday nights the seminary students gathered around Roger Boraas and sang, first a religious song and then an old-time secular song, and then a hymn again. This lasted for a whole hour; perhaps for two hours; and once for four hours nonstop. Their lovely harmonies are a cherished memory.

This leaves one final question, *Weren't you pleased to be along? Wasn't it all very exciting?* To tell the truth, the answer is, "Yes, certainly; but not all the time by any means!" It is true that we dug down through a vast succession of civilizations, but we got our history of the past all in reverse. Archaeology is like opening a book at the back and proceeding toward the front, paragraph by paragraph. Or it *would* be like this if it were possible to open up an entire tell all at once. That, of course, would be prohibitively expensive. Only a few carefully supervised scientific probes can be conducted here and there over a hill. So archaeology is more like reading fragments of a book, here and there, or a page now and then, in reverse. A story read like this cannot always be fascinating. In order to be sure that we were interpreting each find correctly before removing it and digging beneath it, hours and hours were

spent in what seemed at the time to be a vain attempt to solve the unsolvable. This process on a day-to-day basis can be tedious, even downright dull. And with sand blowing into one's eyes, and the temperature uncomfortably cold in the early morning and wearisomely hot in the afternoon, the story can be not only dull but annoying and irksome. More than once I wished myself back home getting something done.

But I found that this is a common feeling among archaeologists in the field. It is part of the price they pay to uncover the history of Bible times. One experienced professor in our group remarked, "You know, it's a funny thing, but by next Christmas we'll all want to come back!" Even our director, Dr. Horn, reminded me of a statement he had published years before: "I dislike every minute of a dig, but I wouldn't be anywhere else."

In spite of the discomforts, as the pieces came together excitement grew. Like any good continued story—even a continued story in reverse—the 1968 chapter closed at its highest point of interest. In one square where I worked we were able to look back at the cross-section of the layers down through which we had dug and recall that in the uppermost layer we had found Arabic pottery and in the layer just below it, Byzantine pottery; below that, Roman pottery; then Hellenistic; and then, in the lowest layer between that and bed-

rock, Iron Age pottery, just as it was "supposed to be" according to any good textbook on archaeology.

During our last week some of our most interesting finds came to light. Area Supervisor Phyllis Bird said to her workers, "Clear up that rough space in the corner of your square so we can leave the place looking neat." Three or four inches below the surface they came across a Roman kitchen with a beautiful tiled floor and a ceramic oven. The same supervisor asked another team to clear up another irregular spot; and, as they did so, they came across an almost complete skeleton of a woman. Indeed as our time drew to its close, we began to wonder, as we walked onto the mound each morning in the chill dawn light, "What exciting discovery will we make today two more inches below the surface?" And of course on our last two days we came across that Late Bronze Age pottery I mentioned in last month's article that was so highly significant, fragments of dishes and kitchenware that may have been dropped and broken by the Amorite subjects of King Sihon in their nervousness at the report that Moses was camped at Mount Nebo and had dispatched his ambassadors to their king.

To take part in this expedition and share in the rich history of the past was truly fascinating. To share in the discovery of evidence to help justify the Biblical chronology for the date of the Exodus was most rewarding indeed. ◇◇◇

GEORGE J. UNGER



This portion of a brightly colored mosaic was found on the floor of the sixth-century church uncovered at Heshbon.



A team of staff members and workmen headed by Phyllis Bird, a graduate student from Harvard University.