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The Excavations at Biblical Heshbon 1973

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ANDREWS UNIVERSITY sponsored the third season of excavations at Tell Hesban in Jordan from June 20 to August 15, 1973, with a staff of 57 and about 120 local workmen. The American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), which has done more for the progress of Biblical archeology than any other institution, and Calvin Theological Seminary, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, provided both financial support and key staff members.

As in the two previous seasons of 1968 and 1971, the director was Siegfried H. Horn, dean of the SDA Theological Seminary; and Roger S. Boraas, of Upsala College in New Jersey, served as chief archeologist. Area supervisors were Lawrence T. Geraty and S. Douglas Waterhouse, from Andrews University; Bastiaan Van Elderen, from Calvin; James A. Sauer and Henry O. Thompson, from ASOR; and Dewey M. Beegle, from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Other staff members included teachers and graduate students. Among these the Seventh-day Adventists were: Avery Dick, Michael Blaine, Jack Bohannon, Douglas Clark, Norman Johnson, Asta and Stan LaBianca, Richard Mannell, Paul Moore, Julia Neuffer, Eugenia Nitowski, Hester Thomsen, Leonard Tolhurst, John Wood, Udo Worschech, and James Zachary.

Objectives and Results

This past summer was to have been the last of three projected seasons at Tell Hesban, the important Biblical site of Heshbon that is within view of Mount Nebo and fifteen miles southwest of modern Amman. Our goal was to complete the excavation of the Byzantine church on the summit of the tell and to reach bedrock in areas where work had been previously started. Several soundings elsewhere on the mound were also planned in order to test the validity of our results from the acropolis area where excavation from previous seasons had been concentrated. And for the first time, an archeological survey of the countryside surrounding Heshbon was projected, with the dual purpose of tracing the Roman road from Tell Hesban (Esbu in Roman times) to Tell er-Rameh

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LAWRENCE T. GERATY

(Roman Livias) in the Jordan Valley, and exploring the Wadi Hesban, a deep valley running westward from Heshbon toward the Jordan River. Since no ancient remains of consequence earlier than the seventh century B.C. had turned up on the tell during the first two seasons, it was not expected that anything much earlier would be discovered.

Certain objectives of the season were not realized. For instance, we were unable to complete the excavation of the Christian church, due primarily to the fact that the narthex had subsequently become the foundation for an elaborate Islamic bathing establishment, which itself took most of the season to dig. On the other hand, the new excavations brought to light unexpected occupational horizons that had heretofore eluded us: the Iron I period (12th-10th centuries B.C.), the Iron II/Persian period, the Hellenistic period, and the Abbasid period. This was probably the single most important achievement of the last season in that it took us 500 years closer to the founding of the site, though it still does not give us evidence for the capital of Sihon's Amorite kingdom, which the Israelites are said to have captured in Numbers 21:23-30.

In addition to evidence of earlier occupation, several Roman and Byzantine tombs were discovered in the southwestern ancient cem-

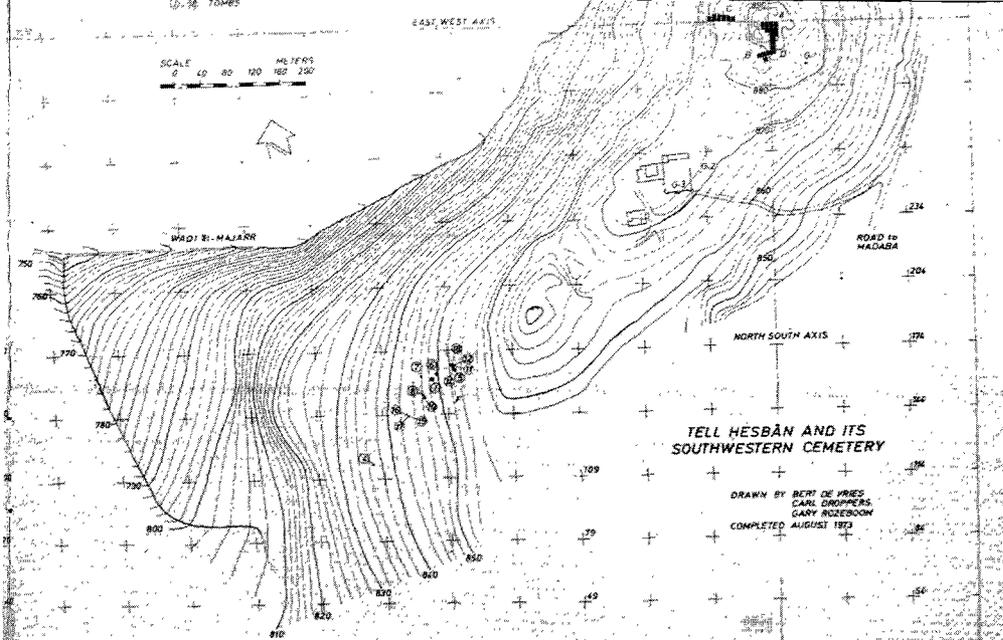
etry of Hesban. Since they had been partially robbed in medieval times, they contained, as expected, disturbed contents.

The survey team was able to trace the course of the Roman road by means of numerous milestones and ruins of both the ancient road stations and guard towers. Some ancient sites unmentioned by previous explorers were discovered and their occupational history established on the basis of ceramic surface finds. A fuller treatment of what the survey team accomplished will appear in *The Ministry* next month.

To describe the various accomplishments of this last season we will start from the earliest times of occupational evidence at Hesban and proceed to more recent periods.

The survey team picked up some Early Bronze sherds on the western slope of Tell Hesban as well as on Gourmeyet Hesban, which is the hill west of the tell, separated from it only by the Wadi Majjar. However, no Early Bronze age pottery has so far been found in the excavations on the tell.

In fact the earliest strata (or layers) of occupation attested on Tell Hesban so far date back to the Iron I age (12th-10th century B.C.). Aside from Iron I sherds that came to light in various areas of the mound, pure Iron I layers were found in Areas B and C, the areas farthest down the slope.



A contour map of Tell Hesban showing where the expedition work was concentrated: Areas A-D and sounding G.1 on or near the acropolis, Area F in the cemetery, and soundings G.2 and 3 in the modern village between those points.



A view of the acropolis of Tell Hesban from the northeast. Note the three types of dwellings on the side of the mound today: cement houses, caves, and a Bedouin tent.

The Iron II/Persian Period

The Iron II/Persian age is now well represented on the tell, not only by pottery coming from fills as found during previous seasons, but also by formidable architectural structures. In Area C on the western slope of the mound, an Iron II/Persian wall was laid on a rock ledge against a higher shelf of the rock, and another buttress wall was placed against it at a right angle. Not enough has been uncovered in the space excavated to be certain of its function, but it is possible that these wall fragments are part of the Iron II/Persian city wall and of an adjoining tower structure.

A very intriguing Iron age structure came to light in Area B at a depth of about thirty feet, under-

neath a fifteen-foot-deep Hellenistic fill that contained masses of Iron II/Persian pottery. First it was thought that bedrock had been reached when a flat, hard, rock-like surface appeared. But when a potsherd was observed to be imbedded in it, a probe revealed that it consisted of a one-foot-thick layer of plaster consisting of three distinct layers. The uppermost layer was almost as hard as modern concrete. Potsherds imbedded in it showed that this layer of waterproof plaster had been laid on bedrock during the Iron age, and may have been the bottom of a water reservoir. One cannot but be reminded that the Biblical Heshbon was famous for its fish-pools at the gate of Bath-rabbim, as attested in Song of Solomon 7:4.

It is also possible that we have uncovered parts of the upper portion of the eastern retaining wall of this water reservoir. First a wall constructed in header-stretcher fashion of well-cut blocks of stone was excavated to the east of the plaster. In its southern part, its west face, too, was covered by a thick layer of plaster. Later it was discovered that the continuation of this wall was a scarp of bedrock, also plastered on its western face. To the south, two more portions of rock scarp were found, plus a huge rock, now tilted out of place by an earthquake. Its west-

ern face had evidently once formed part of the rock scarp already mentioned. It was also plastered. These various portions of rock scarp and the plastered header-stretcher wall had evidently once formed one continuous waterproof retaining wall of a water reservoir, of which a sector of about forty-five feet long has so far been uncovered. Only future excavations will show whether it is correct to connect the thick layer of "flooring" plaster with the continuously plastered wall and bedrock to the east.

From the associated fill in Area B came four more ostraca (potsherds used for written messages), one containing eleven lines of writing in a good sixth century B.C. cursive Aramaic script and another one containing five characters scratched in lapidary style into the vessel before firing. The script on the other Iron age ostraca is illegible.

The Hellenistic and Roman Periods

During the Hellenistic period, when the city was in the hands of the Maccabees, the possible water reservoir was covered by a deep fill. Evidence of Hellenistic building activity appeared also in other places. The most conspicuous Hellenistic structure so far unearthed is a perimeter wall that surrounded the acropolis. It was founded on bedrock and remained in use almost to the end of Hesban's history. A Hellenistic/Early Roman context produced an ostrakon that contains some Greek letters and several circles. The writing does not seem to make sense and may be no more than a school-boy's doodling.

During the Roman period when the city was known as Esbus and was a district capital, great building activity must have been carried out. The many extant ruins from this period reveal that most structures built by the people of Esbus were founded on bedrock. In the process of erecting new buildings on the natural rock, it seems that most remains of earlier structures were removed. The summit of the mound was crowned during that time by an important public building, perhaps a temple. In Area D, the southern entrance to

the acropolis, the lowest steps of a monumental stairway with parts of a balustrade were found. Although most of the remainder of this stairway was later destroyed and was therefore missing, another section of this stairway was found closer to the existing Hellenistic perimeter wall, which was still in use in Roman times.

During the Roman period an L-shaped wall in Area C was likewise built on bedrock. It appears to be part of the Roman defense system of the city, perhaps a tower. The appearance of the surface features of the surrounding area supports this suggestion. Only future excavations can confirm or correct this interpretation.

One of the large projects carried out during the Roman period was a new road built by the Emperor Trajan to connect the Bosra-Philadelphia-Petra road, which passed Ebus, with the Livias-Jericho-Jerusalem road. The tracing of its course was one of the aims of our topographical survey team, which was in the field throughout the seven weeks of the dig's duration. The team succeeded in reaching its objectives. On the mound the remains of the termination of this road were probably found in the form of thick plaster layers that have already been described in the 1968 and 1971 preliminary reports. These layers forming a thick roadbed had been found throughout Area B. They seem to have ended at the ascent to the acropolis. This roadbed was frequently repaired and resurfaced by the addition of new plaster layers throughout the Late Roman/Byzantine periods.

Of the finds of the Roman period an Elagabalus coin minted in Ebus deserves mention. Ebus was an imperial mint for a very short time only during the brief reign of Elagabalus (218-222). Only a few such coins, of which the British Museum Catalogue lists six, are known to exist.

The Byzantine Period

The major witness of the Byzantine period is the Christian church on the summit, a basilica containing ten columns in two rows of five each. The remains of this church had been partially excavated during the previous two seasons, but the western end had

remained unexplored. We found the remains of this western portion buried under a thick accumulation of Islamic ruins. We opened new work at the west end and believe we have exposed parts of the narthex and side annex at the northwest corner of the church. A large part of this new area, however, was filled with an Ayyubid/Mamluk bath installation, which because of its well-preserved condition was not dismantled and may be restored by the national Department of Antiquities. The church experienced several rebuildings during its history, but because of its badly destroyed condition the exact nature and extent of the various phases of building activity is difficult to unravel. The stone-paved courtyard between the church and the acropolis perimeter wall, which we had previously considered to have been of Umayyad origin, is now known to have been constructed in Byzantine times with possible Umayyad repairs.

The Arabic Period

The picture of the Islamic occupation of Hesban as it was described in previous reports has not greatly changed as the result of the new excavations. However, evidence of an Abbasid occupation has now been found in areas B and C. The most interesting new Islamic structure excavated this season is the Ayyubid/Mamluk bath already mentioned. It consists of a furnace room, warm and cold water tanks located above the furnace, a heated tile-floored bathroom containing a stone basin into which the warm and cold water ran through pipes in the wall, and a small entrance hall.

Probes were also laid against the outside and inside faces of the wall of a large ruined structure in the present village that had always been above ground and that has usually been considered to be of Umayyad origin. The excavations showed that the visible wall rests on substructures of Ayyubid/Mamluk times, which make it certain that the ruined upper wall cannot be earlier.

In the Roman-Byzantine cemetery on the southwestern slope of Tell Hesban where last season a

Roman tomb sealed by a rolling stone was found, several more tombs were excavated. The history of their use and robbing in medieval times and consequent re-sealing was studied through careful stratigraphic excavations of their fill.

Altogether, the 1973 season proved to be very profitable, both in terms of what was actually discovered as well as in terms of the intriguing new possibilities that now demand more seasons to pursue. A fourth expedition is planned for this summer.

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