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The Excavations at Biblical Heshbon 1974 Part 2

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The Excavations at Biblical Heshbon, 1974

Part 2/Lawrence T. Geraty

IN ORDER to describe the results of this last summer's excavation in greater detail, we will start from the earliest occupational evidence at Tell Hesban and proceed to the most recent.

Iron I Period

The earliest evidence of occupation attested on the mound so far dates back to the Iron I age (twelfth-tenth centuries B.C.), or in Biblical terms, to the period of the Judges. In 1973, Areas B and C, the areas farthest down the slopes, produced Iron I soil layers, but this past season, in Area B, Iron I architecture was also found in association with these layers. In a ten-foot-deep, forty-foot-long depression, fissure, or channel between two slabs of bedrock lay a major fortification wall built of rough, tightly fitting boulders, which, because of its size and construction, could only have served to defend the Iron I city.

Iron II Period

Until this past season there remained a gap for occupational evidence between the tenth and seventh centuries B.C. But this season a corpus of sherds from the ninth/eighth centuries B.C., or early Iron II period, was stratigraphically isolated in Area C. The same type of pottery was then found in Area B when the upper courses of the eastern header-stretcher wall of the huge water reservoir were dismantled. The adjective "huge" may be justified by the fact that we know the reservoir is at least fifty feet long,

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forty feet wide, and fifteen feet deep; how much larger than that only future digging will reveal. And the fact that this unusual structure is a reservoir can no longer be doubted after this season's discovery of its complicated hydraulic system. Whether the ninth/eighth centuries B.C. date applies to the construction of the reservoir or only its repair, we cannot now be sure. In any case, since it appears to be within the ancient city, it is difficult not to connect it with the pools of Biblical Heshbon mentioned in Song of Solomon 7:4.

Iron II/Persian Period

Previous excavation has shown that the Iron II/Persian period is well represented at the site (again primarily in Areas B and C)—both by soil layers and by impressive architectural remains. When excavated, the reservoir just mentioned was found filled (after a period of abandonment, in the Late Hellenistic period) with soil containing masses of seventh/sixth centuries B.C. pottery. From this fill have come several ostraca (potsherds used for written messages) in previous summers, and this past summer was no exception: a four-line ostrakon turned up with an Ammonite message in Aramaic script. Another rare find in this fill was a 2 3/4-inch-long metal needle preserved from its point to its eye. The romance of archeology grows when one imagines a mother sewing with this needle 2,500 years ago, in the time of Jeremiah!

In 1973, in Area C, we found a major seventh/sixth centuries B.C. wall laid on a rock ledge against a higher shelf of bedrock with another buttress wall placed against

it at a right angle. This season we found an extension of that wall to the south; we can also connect up to its northern end a wall extending into an adjoining square to the east that was excavated in 1968. It is quite possible, then, that we have now found the Iron II/Persian city's zigzag defense wall on the tell's western slope.

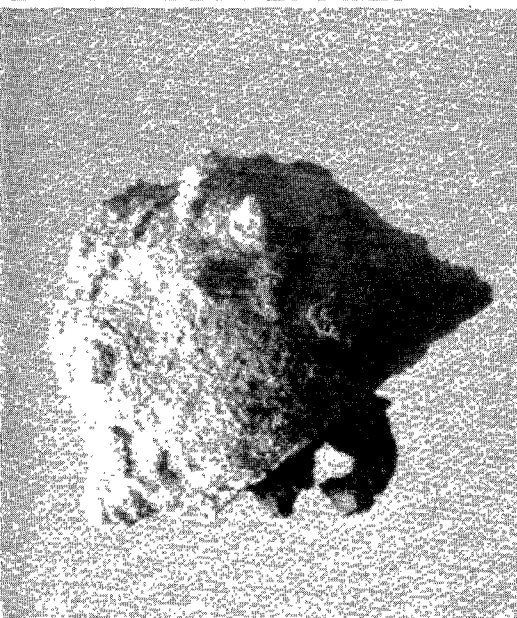
Late Hellenistic Period

Like so many other towns in Palestine during the sixth-fourth centuries B.C., Heshbon too seems to have been abandoned. In fact, it apparently was not resettled until the second/first centuries B.C., probably by the Maccabees. As already stated, it was during this period that the water reservoir was covered with a deep fill belonging to the seventh/sixth centuries B.C. But our primary evidence from this period, known archeologically as Late Hellenistic, is a whole series of usually bell-shaped (often interconnected) storage pits (or wine cellars?) cut into bedrock in Areas A, B, and D. Our geologist informed us that the unplastered pits could not have been cisterns since their rock sides were too permeable, so identification of their exact use awaits further study. Enigmatically, two of these pits yielded thirty-five pyramid-shaped loomweights.

Another interesting subterranean installation was found in the floor of an Area B cave: a twenty-cubic-yard circular pool. Its Late Hellenistic silt fill produced a finely carved ivory pin and a very clearly inscribed Rhodian jar handle. The latter mentions Aristeidas, a name known to have belonged to a priest of Rhodes in both the third and second centuries B.C. From the pottery and



Top, aerial view of Heshbon's acropolis. The Byzantine church is in Area A, the Israelite reservoir in Area B, major fortifications in Area C, the southern entrance to the acropolis summit in Area D, and G-5 is a Byzantine reservoir to the east. Center, a lead flogging head with iron hook originally connected to chain, from Roman times. Bottom, an inscribed handle on jar imported from island of Rhodes. It mentions Aristeidas, a priest in the second century B.C.



coin evidence, we know this jar handle to have belonged to the latter century.

Early Roman Period

From the first century B.C. to the second century A.D., or roughly the New Testament period, when Heshbon was known as Ebus, extensive building activity must have taken place, since such widespread evidence of it has been found. Apparently belonging to this period is the impressive acropolis perimeter wall built on bedrock and excavated in Area D during the 1971 and 1973 seasons.

Another defense installation built on bedrock, this time a high stone tower with a paved flagstone floor, continued to be uncovered in the two westernmost squares of Area C. Abundant evidence for domestic occupation during this Early Roman period comes from a complex of Area B caves found in bedrock and the exterior soil surfaces associated with them. Connected with the latter was a fine series of ceramic *tabuns*, or baking ovens.

Previous reports have described the long sequence of plaster layers and their soil make-up found throughout Area B, which began in this period and continued without interruption on into the Byzantine period. They have been interpreted as a series of roadbeds for foot traffic or plazas. This past summer two corner stretches of curbing stones were found in association with the earliest of these Early Roman plaster layers in the northwest corner of Area B. The high-quality workmanship on the curbing stones, as well as their position, may indicate they were the bases or pedestals for

shrines on the southern approach to the acropolis.

Across the Wadi Majjar, to the west of the tell, lies Area E, a Roman/Byzantine cemetery. An unusual Early Roman tomb was carefully excavated there this past season. A unique double-spouted black Herodian lamp with a high central funnel was found lying on the forecourt immediately in front of the entrance to the tomb, which was closed with a rectangular stone and caulked shut. Though two whole cooking pots were found *in situ* on the unrobbed tomb's floor inside, to our great surprise no skeletal remains, either whole or decomposed, were discovered. Could this unexpected phenomenon point to a new Roman cult for the dead?

In addition to the three Early Roman burials already mentioned that were excavated by the survey team at Umm es-Sarab (G-8) three miles north of Tell Hesban, there was one further important Early Roman burial site discovered just northwest of the mound (G-10): a family tomb sealed with a rolling stone. Like the first rolling stone tomb discovered in 1971 in Area F, this one had first been broken into by modern tomb robbers. Though they left the interior in disarray, careful work produced a beautiful gold earring, a perfectly preserved bronze fibula, a glass bottle, three Herodian clay lamps, and a Nabataean coin dated to the reign of Rabbel II (A.D. 71-106)—a fact that suggests, despite current opinion, that this type of tomb may postdate the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

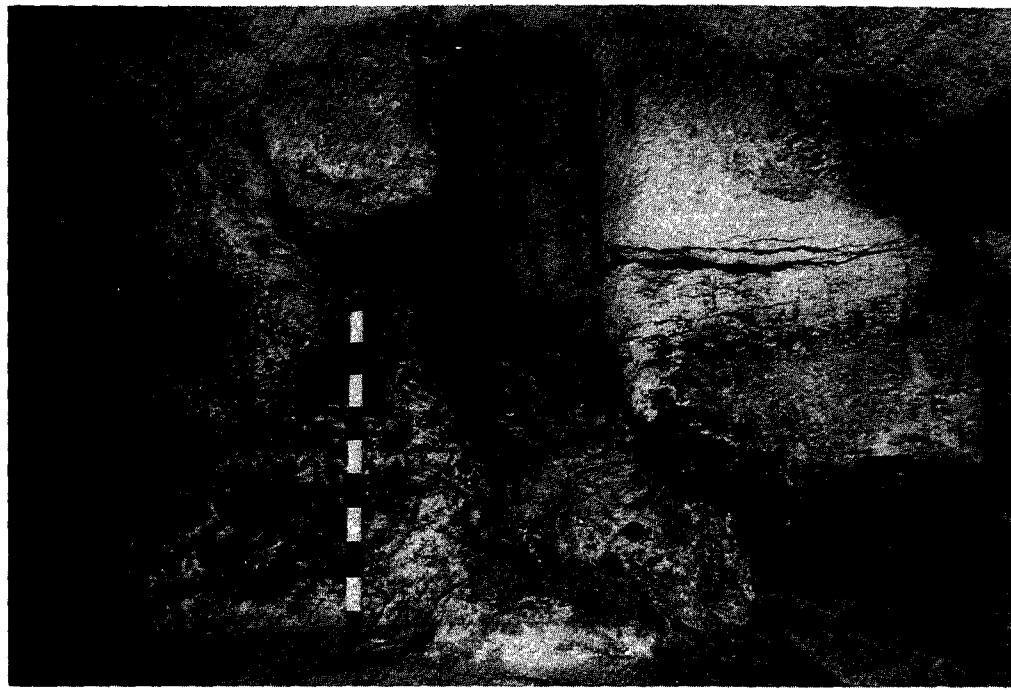
This argument may be bolstered by the architecture of the tomb, which appears to be typologically more advanced than the 1971

tomb: vaulted ceiling, "picture" molding around the walls, isosceles-triangle lamp niches within circles, and the mixture of loculi and arcosolia for burials. Another interesting feature of the new tomb was the fact that the rolling stone's track was cut entirely out of solid rock, as opposed to the 1971 tomb, where the outside wall of the track was artificially built up. So far, these two tombs at Heshbon are the only known representatives of the rolling-stone type east of the Jordan River.

Late Roman Period

The archeological evidence suggests that Esbus continued to thrive during the 2d-4th centuries A.D. Though further excavation is necessary to tell for sure, it is possible that during the Late Roman period a pagan temple adorned the acropolis; at least several imposing walls from this period in Area A may now be so interpreted. The temple would have been oriented toward the east, preceded by a paved platform and a stylobate wall that would have supported four columns. This very temple may appear on the rare Elagabalus coin minted at Esbus c. A.D. 220 and found at Heshbon in 1973.

Leading up to this temple from the south was the monumental stairway discovered in Area D in 1973. Beneath this stairway an entire Late Roman room (or house?) was excavated last summer—all four walls and the doorway being intact and bedrock serving as the floor, though one wonders what happened in two of the corners, which were cut into two of the subterranean Hellenistic storage pits already mentioned. A sobering object found here from this period was a lead flogging head,



A view from inside a Roman tomb. Notice how the entrance is blocked by a rolling stone.

still covered with sharp points that could inflict serious wounds when applied in the Roman manner.

Byzantine Period

The most noteworthy architecture on the mound from the 4th-7th centuries A.D., or Byzantine period, is the basilica-type Christian church in Area A excavated largely in previous seasons. A further attempt was made this last summer to locate its narthex, but as has been mentioned, it was apparently covered with the Islamic bath to be described later. To the south of the church (in Area D), further excavation was carried out beneath the adjoining flagstone paved courtyard, which indicated a Byzantine date for this imposing structure (though it may well have been repaired in the Umayyad period).

A Byzantine object from Area C worthy of note is a Greek ostrakon that came from a Byzantine soil-and-rock fill inside the Early Roman tower already discussed. Unfortunately, it is broken and contains only two and a half Greek letters, possibly the genitive ending of a proper name.

The major 1974 discovery from this period came in a long-noticed depression next to the wadi across the Na'ur-Madeba road east of the mound (G-5) where

another huge water reservoir and its embankments were sounded in six locations. The floor of the reservoir was a fine layer of cement with a cobblestone-and-cement foundation. A second layer of cement may represent a much later (Ayyūbid/Mamlūk) use. These cement layers ran up to the reservoir's four walls, constructed of squared stones set in cement and at least partially battered against their respective virgin-soil embankments. The positions of the stones in the upper preserved courses of the walls would indicate the reservoir's usefulness may have come to an end with an earthquake.

Umayyad Period

The only installation of note excavated this past season from the Umayyad period, seventh/eighth centuries A.D., was found cut through one of the Byzantine church's mosaic floors in Area A: an unusually well-preserved ceramic baking oven, six feet in diameter and three feet deep, complete with a stone and plaster-built pipe opening into its western side, which may have served either as a flue or as an aperture through which fuel could be added. Two beautiful glass seal impressions came from Umayyad contexts—one from an adjoining

square and the other from G-6, a sounding on the tell's western slope. Each contains a short inscription—both of which are in an early Arabic script.

Though Abbasid occupation from the eighth/ninth centuries A.D. has been uncovered in previous seasons, nothing of significance turned up in 1974.

Ayyūbid/Mamlūk Period

After a gap from the ninth-twelfth centuries A.D., Tell Hesban was again settled by Arabs, this time in the Ayyūbid period (twelfth-thirteenth centuries A.D.) which led without any apparent break at our site right into the Mamlūk period (thirteenth/fourteenth centuries A.D.). Though we are gradually making progress at separating the ceramic horizons of these two periods, they are so much alike that we have so far continued to lump them together. Each area on the mound has produced remains from these periods.

This past summer, caves that showed use in the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk period were excavated in Areas D and F, while a very well-preserved domestic housing complex from the same period was uncovered in Area C. From that complex came a ceramic base inscribed in Arabic with an Islamic text. Another structure, preserving an arch from the period, was found in sounding G-6.

The most interesting find from the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk period, however, is the well-preserved Area A bath complex already mentioned. The northern half consisted of a furnace room, warm- and cold-water tanks located above and to the side of the furnace, a heated tile-floored bathroom containing a stone basin into which the water ran through pipes in the wall, and a hallway

leading into the bathroom; these were all excavated in 1973.

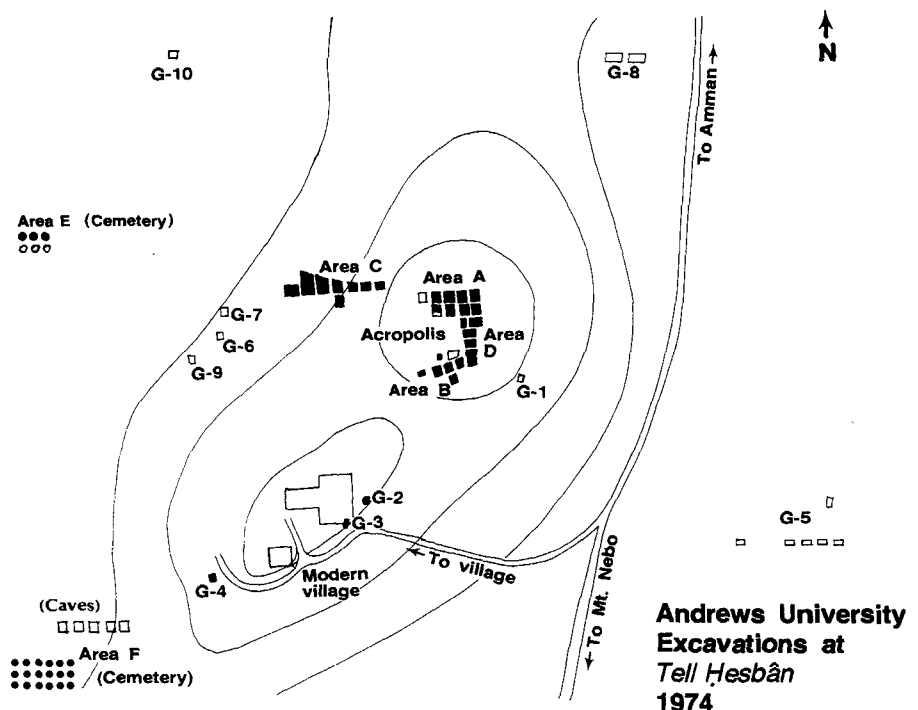
The southern half remained to be uncovered in 1974 and consisted of an audience room or lounge complete with plastered bench, platform, and niches for footwear, and an entrance hall entered through a fine threshold. Built of hewn stone, basalt and limestone tiles, and plastered throughout, the entire complex (50 feet long and 20 feet wide) is an example of fine workmanship. It is the first complete Mamlūk bath found in Jordan, and since it is so well preserved (one wall preserved even to the height of the door lintel) the national Department of Antiquities is making plans to restore it.

Among the more than four hundred objects from the 1974 season that were registered, and in addi-

tion to the ones already mentioned above, 37 legible coins (from the Ptolemaic, Maccabaeen, Nabataean, Phoenician, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Ayyūbid, and Mamlūk periods), and 27 whole pots (7 from tombs and 20 from the tell proper—coming from the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, and Mamlūk periods) will probably prove to be the most important. In addition to these objects, thousands of pottery and bone fragments were registered, and hundreds of scientific samples were taken for further study.

This brief report is enough to indicate how profitable the 1974 season proved to be, both in terms of what was actually found and in terms of the job we now know remains. A fifth expedition is planned for the summer of 1976.

Concluded



A schematic plan of Heshbon, showing previously opened squares or tombs in black, while those begun in 1974 are white. Notice the expanded nature of the work in this past season.