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A Visit to Ancient Heshbon

The author takes the reader
on a guided tour of *Tell Heshbân*,
describing what
has been accomplished
in the excavation on the mound.

By LAWRENCE T. GERATY

IF YOU SHOULD VISIT THE SITE of Andrews University's archeological excavations at *Tell Heshbân* in Jordan, you would be in distinguished company. Among the many visitors we had during the 1974 season were several members of Jordan's royal family, including King Hussein's cousin, Prince Raad, who actually worked with us on two occasions. Other visitors included Jordan's former prime minister and elder statesman, Suleiman Nabulsi; the current Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, Ghalab Barakat; and such members of the diplomatic corps as U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Among the many archeologists who paid a visit was Harvard Professor George Ernest Wright, president of the American Schools of Oriental Research, an organization that has probably done more than any other to advance the cause of Biblical archeology.

From Amman to Heshbon. Let me now take you on a guided tour. Our point of departure is Amman, the modern capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In Biblical times, of course, Amman was known as Rabbah of Ammon, the city against which Uriah the Hittite fought while his wife, Bathsheba, kept company with King David (2 Sam. 11). We travel west on the road to Jerusalem, but turn south after about ten miles, just before the road begins its rapid descent from the Ammonite tableland (3,000 feet above sea level) to the Jordan Valley (1,200 feet below sea level). Following what was probably the course of the "king's high way" (Num. 21:22), we soon cross over the *Wadi Heshbân*, the verdant valley through which flows a perennial stream having its source at a major spring—both named for Heshbon.

Just off the road to the east, at *Umm es-Sarab*, a small hill at the head of the valley, was our site G.8 excavated in 1974 by the survey team. The year before we had be-

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gun an archeological survey of the countryside within a six-mile radius of Heshbon that included the tracing of the old Roman road from *Tell Heshbân* (Esbus in Roman times) to *Tell er-Rameh* (Roman Livias) in the Jordan Valley. In 1974 this survey was completed, the team having discovered, sherded, and described 125 archeological sites within this small area! Their other objective in 1974 was to sound (dig) one of these satellite communities of Heshbon in order to test the validity of their method of sherding, that is, seeking to arrive at the occupation history of a given site on the basis of potsherds collected from its surface. They chose *Umm es-Sarab*, both because of its significant location and because Bronze Age sherds (roughly from the time of Moses) had been found in surface sherding the site.

Though Bronze Age sherds were again found when digging at *Umm es-Sarab*, they were only in mixed contexts; only the Early Roman and Byzantine periods were actually represented by strata in the two trenches completed to bedrock. These trenches cannot be seen, because the agreement with the local landlord required our filling them back in with dirt after our work.

The next *tell* we approach across the valley is called *El-'Al* by the Arabs. Traditionally it has been associated with Biblical Elealeh (Num. 32:3, 37; Isa. 15:4; 16:9; Jer. 48:34). As we pass it and round the corner, *Tell Heshbân* comes into full view. It is easily the most prominent mound in the entire region. From its summit one may look for many miles in any direction—due west one can see the Jericho oasis in the Jordan Valley and even as far as the Mount of Olives, which obscures Jerusalem. To the southwest, about five miles away, one sees Mount Nebo, from which Moses viewed the Promised Land (Deut. 34). Six miles to the south one sees Madeba (Num. 21:30; Joshua 13:9, 16; 1 Chron. 19:7; Isa. 15:2), the site of a Byzantine church that contains in its mosaic floor the earliest map of Palestine.

At the Foot of the Mound. As we approach *Tell Heshbân* from the northeast we come into the area depicted on the accompanying topographical map. Just across the road from the *tell* is a huge depression, 250 feet long by 150 feet wide. Our site G.5 turned out to be a Byzantine water reservoir, with a fine cement floor that 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. Probably destroyed by an earthquake, it fell into disrepair and was subse-



From right are entrance hall, reception lounge, access hallway, and bathroom of the southern half of the Area A Mamluk bath complex.



In Area B is a huge Iron Age reservoir possibly mentioned in Song of Solomon 7:4. The eastern wall is pictured here. The meterstick is lying on an abutting defense wall from the period of the judges.

quently covered over. Since the area is now a wheat field, at the end of the dig we had to fill in our six trenches at this site too.

From this point we turn up into the little Arab village of *Hesbân* on the right. Ten years ago they had no paved roads, electricity, or running water, but the money the villagers have received from working for the expedition, coupled with a progressive government, has brought these amenities and new prosperity. Before it is completely lost, the old or traditional culture of the present-day villagers is being described and studied by an ethnographic team connected with our expedition. Our paved road takes us onto a saddle between the *tell's* two high points. On this saddle, impressive medieval structures still remain, now used largely for grain storage. From here we turn northeast on a rough dirt track toward the acropolis where most of our digging has been concentrated.

Area B. Leaving our car behind, we hike up onto a fairly level shelf of ground, where we come upon our Area B. Looking down into the squares, or trenches, some as deep as 30 feet, we see the earliest evidence of occupation so far attested on the mound. It dates back to the Iron 1 age (twelfth-tenth centuries B.C.), or in Biblical terms, to the period of the Judges. In a ten-foot-deep, 40-foot-long depression between two slabs of bedrock we see a major fortification wall built of rough, tightly fitting boulders, which, because of its size and construction, could have served to defend only the pre-Solomonic city.

This particular wall runs perpendicularly into a 50-foot stretch of continuously plastered retaining wall and cut bedrock, the eastern edge of a huge water reservoir whose foot-thick, cementlike plaster floor was first found some 30 feet down in an adjoining square to the west. One can also see remnants of a complex hydraulic system that kept

the reservoir filled with water at least as early as the ninth/eighth centuries B.C. (on ceramic evidence) if not earlier. One naturally remembers the passage in Song of Solomon 7:4, "Thine eyes [are] like the fish pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim." This may very well be an instance where archeology and the Bible complement each other.

Apparently the reservoir was no longer used by the second century B.C. because it was then filled in completely. You can still see a major fortification wall built through this area shortly thereafter in the Late Hellenistic period as well as a massive lime kiln from the Byzantine period, probably used in connection with the construction of a Christian church on the summit. And to the east of the reservoir you can see the remains of numerous habitation caves and storage pits carved out of bedrock, most of which were probably destroyed in 31 B.C. by the same earthquake that destroyed the Qumran community, which preserved the Dead Sea scrolls.

Over all the above features to be seen in Area B is a sequence of plaster layers and their soil make-up (still to be seen in section, in the sides of the squares) which the supervisor has interpreted as a series of roadways first built in Early Roman times and continuing for 400 years into the Byzantine period. This route probably served as the major approach to the acropolis, and one may still see the remains of bases or pedestals that may have been for shrines along the original roadway.

Area D. As we climb the path to the acropolis along the east edge of the excavations we pass our Area D, the ancient southern access route. We can see more of the caves and storage pits cut in bedrock that we already saw in Area B and remnants of Roman architecture. Left standing is part of a flight of monumental stairs from Late Roman times that originally led right up to a gateway through the acropolis perimeter wall—an imposing cyclopean wall that we can still see. North of the wall one sees a fine stretch of flagstones, which served as a courtyard in later Byzantine times. In still later times, there were vaulted rooms here that probably served as part of a caravanserai, the remains of which can now be seen only in the balk (side of the excavated square).

Foundations of a Church

Area A. As we reach the summit proper (our Area A), the most obvious architectural remains belong to the foundations of a Christian church from the Byzantine period (about the fourth-sixth centuries A.D.). In plan, it is a typical basilica, its apse oriented toward the east, with a wide nave separated from the two side aisles by stylobate walls, each provided originally with at least five columns. Under the church in the northeast corner, one sees a doorway leading to a large cave, over which the church was built. The cave's exact use is still undetermined, though we have not lacked for imaginative suggestions!

The only mosaic floor associated with the church that has not been entirely removed is a section at the church's northwestern corner. This section was cut in the seventh/eighth centuries A.D. to make a hole six feet in diameter. In this pit, the Umayyad Arabs built a large *tabun*, or ceramic oven, complete with stone-and-plaster pipe opening into its western side. The

latter may have served either as a flue or as an aperture through which fuel could be added.

Another, even later Arab structure (from the Mamluk period just after the Crusades), now hides the narthex of the Christian church. By far the most interesting structure we have found from this particular period, it is the best-preserved Mamluk bath complex ever discovered in Jordan. You can see a furnace room, warm and cold water tanks situated above and to the side of the stoke hole, a heated tile-floored bathroom containing a stone basin into which the water ran through pipes in the wall, a U-shaped hallway leading into this bathroom from an audience room or lounge complete with plastered bench, platform, and niches for footwear, and finally 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 so well preserved—one wall preserved even to the height of the door lintel—the national Department of Antiquities has already fenced it off and is laying plans to restore it for visitors.

On three sides of this bath and at a lower level are several imposing walls from the Late Roman period that may have belonged to a pagan temple that then adorned the acropolis. It, too, 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 (Roman Heshbon) about A.D. 220 and actually found here in 1973. The Area D monumental stairway already mentioned would have led up to this temple from the south.

Area C and the Soundings. Looking down the steep slope to the west, you can now see Area C, the remaining sector on the acropolis under excavation. In the easternmost squares is a Mamluk domestic housing complex, complete with plastered floors, fine thresholds, courtyards for animals, cisterns, and so forth. But as we move to the west, where the depth of occupation becomes deeper (and earlier), we see clinging to the contours of bedrock the remnants of what was probably the Iron Age city's zigzag defense wall, at least as late as the seventh/sixth centuries B.C., or roughly the time of the prophet Jeremiah. In the westernmost two squares of Area C is another installation that may have been defensive in character. Built in the Early Roman period, or time of Jesus, it also follows closely the contours of bedrock, but appears to be a high (perhaps two

storied) stone tower with a paved flagstone floor, entered from the west. Future excavation should clarify its extent and purpose.

From our vantage point in Area C, we can see a number of scattered soundings, or small trenches, opened up to check *Tell Hesbân's* occupation history elsewhere on the mound, but Squares G.6, 7, and 9 provided no new evidence for periods not already represented on the acropolis. On both sides of the *Wadi el-Majjar*, a dry stream bed, one can see the locations of our Cemeteries E and F, where a great variety of Roman and Byzantine tomb types were discovered in 1971 and 1973. Those excavated in 1974 will be discussed in the next article. We explored this region also for Iron Age tombs (from the Biblical period), paying particular attention to caves, since at Mount Nebo, not too far away, Iron Age burials had been found in caves. F.19-23 on the accompanying map represent our cave sites, which, though interesting for the Mamluk period, produced no earlier evidence of occupation, let alone Iron Age burials.

More Work to Find the Answer

A Problem. As we walk back to our car for the ride back to Amman, it is interesting to speculate on the reason why no evidence predating 1200 B.C., or the period of the Biblical Judges, has been found at *Tell Hesbân*. Because of the important role Sihon the Amorite and his capital Heshbon played in the conquest narrative (Num. 21) and subsequent traditions stemming from that historical event, one would expect late Bronze Age (about 1500-1200 B.C.) remains at *Tell Hesbân*—that is, if we have the right site for Heshbon and if we properly understand Biblical history.

Since I see no good evidence to doubt these conclusions, I would propose one of the following solutions to our problem: because our few squares are scattered over a large site, we may have missed the Amorite city. Realizing this, we have sought to broaden our examination of the mound by opening up probe trenches in several scattered areas and we will continue to do so when we return for a fifth season at Heshbon in 1976. However, based on what we have found so far, the results do not seem promising. We must remember, of course, that much ancient evidence is missed through the accidents of either preservation or discovery; over such matters, unfortunately, archeologists have no control!

The most plausible hypothesis that explains our current data, however, is the conclusion that King Sihon's capital was not actually at *Tell Hesbân* but at an unexcavated site nearby, and that after the Israelites destroyed it and at some later time decided to rebuild it in the period of the Judges, they moved the name of the old city (Heshbon) to a new site in the vicinity and built there (the mound the Arabs now call *Hesbân*). Such situations were common in ancient times—Jericho being one example: Old Testament Jericho is at *Tell el-Sultan*, New Testament Jericho at *Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq*, and modern Jericho is at a yet different site.

Whatever the right answer is, it will only come with more work. In the meantime, we have learned much about the people who *did* live at *Tell Hesbân* from the time of the Judges on; some of the high points of our discoveries we will share with you in the next and final article. □

To be concluded



This rare third century A.D. coin minted at Esbus (Heshbon) depicts the façade of a temple which may have been discovered in Area A in 1974.