

Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2011

Number 4

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This year's excavation is finished and I'm home recuperating from the long day and flight. Eight p.m. seems really late to me for a while.

The last week of the excavation, as usual, yielded its surprising results. The tabun that I mentioned in the last report had another beneath it. The photograph shows the stratified relationship of the two. You should notice the approximately 220 degree circle of the upper tabun with about a fourth of the arch of a tabun showing in the lower part of the photograph and clearly beneath the upper one! To find this kind of intact relationship is rare. In addition, notice the grinding stone associated with the upper tabun; it is in the upper part of the photograph. We are excited about the prospects of the results of tests on samples we hope to have analyzed to conclude what exactly they may have cooked in these ovens and perhaps the fuel source that they used. Little is known about the specific cooking and preparation procedures of antiquity and studies of this nature may help us clarify those.



Another important find is the presence of a large, well-built building, a wall of which appears in the upper part of the photograph. Two large stones rest in the surface of the building, but it is not clear that these are column bases—if they are, they are huge, but we definitely have evidence of a column base in the south section of the square (but it cannot be seen because of the angle of the photograph). The definite column base, in addition to a southern closing wall in the adjacent square imply that the large flat stones are not column bases, but why they would embed such massive stones in the surface is a mystery. The surface is not otherwise paved. Quite a number of what might be called “luxury” items were found in the surface—pyxes, chalices, goblets, and decorated jars. It is not clear from what period the building comes. One line of evidence implies that it is from the period of the biblical judges; another implies that it may come from just before the Israelites arrive and is part of a series of governors' residences associated with the Egyptians. Either way, next year's work hopefully will provide some clarification.



From another area, a somewhat crudely fashioned small



bull figurine came to light, probably from the time of the judges. Such a discovery should not be particularly surprising in view of the tendency of the people to worship Baal during that time. We do not know, however, exactly how this artifact was used.

We excavated in this area in 2007 and uncovered a large round structure that at the time was dubbed a silo. We have uncovered more of it along with a substantial wall which joins the structure along its west curve. It remains a mystery, but for most of us, it is clearly not a silo, but a structure for some other purpose. It is a monumental structure, since it is so well made and is apparently designed to impress the viewer. We are not sure from what period it comes, but hope to determine that next year.



The work in an excavation inevitably slows down in the last week as we prepare for the final photographs and ordeal of breaking down the project, but the finds almost inevitably become more intriguing and this year's project has not failed us in that regard.

After the dig, Frank and I traveled around as usual. On Saturday, we went to Herodian Jericho. We hired our Arab driver, Ahmed, to take us (we have employed his services several times in the past, beginning with 2007 when Sharon and I had him take us to biblical Gibeon). He has relatives in Jericho and dug with Kathleen Kenyon in Jerusalem back in the 1960s—he is quite an interesting fellow.

Sadly, the site of Herod's Jericho is badly neglected and the Palestinians would do well to develop it and promote it as a tourist site along with the older, more traditional Jericho remains. The remains that we see are from the Hasmonean period and were taken over and embellished by Herod the Great. The first photo is an overview of part of the "wadi palace," which was connected with a part of the palace to the south by a bridge over the Wadi Qelt. The photo shows a number of column bases around a courtyard beside a reception area. The columns were built of bricks and then plastered to look like marble. Other components of the palace area are in the background and include a series of baths (cool, warm and hot) as well as a dining area. In the left hand side of the photo, you may see some diagonal lines which were part of what is called *opus reticulatum*, a construction design often used by the Romans. It consisted of placing bricks on a 45-degree angle, which were then covered with plaster (the plaster still clings to some bricks in the area).



Jericho was one of Herod's retreats, especially in the winter; Josephus noted that the weather in Jericho was "...so mild that the inhabitants wear linen when snow is falling throughout the rest of Judaea" (*War* 4: 473). The double-pool that appears in the next photograph is where Herod

conspired to have Aristobulus III, the high priest, drowned—a victim of Herod’s paranoia (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15: 53-56).

Near the palace, was Herod’s hippodrome. Only the rough foundations of the theatre end of the hippodrome remains (showing in the bottom of the photograph—the hippodrome would have extended away from the photograph some 315 meters [ca. 345 yards]). Herod knew the people of Judaea disliked him so he decreed in his dying days that leading Jews of Judaea be detained in the hippodrome and executed when he died so that people would shed tears upon Herod’s death. Fortunately, Salome, Herod’s sister ignored the decree and released the people (Josephus, *War* 1: 647-73).

Frank has been focusing on a study of the gospel of John in recent years and wanted to visit sites associated with that account. On one of our ventures, we passed a sign leading to the “baptismal site” at the Jordan River. Last fall, Sharon and I along with the HUG group had visited the site from the Jordanian side. It has a rich and early tradition as the location where John baptized at “Bethany across the Jordan” (Jn 1:28; ESV). The Jordanians have developed the area into a baptismal site and the Israelis, not to be outdone, have done more! The first photo shows a relatively pristine view of what the area would likely have looked like in antiquity with the exception of some relatively easy access to the water through the reeds. The second photo is across the “river” from Israel to Jordan. It struck us as strange that the meager fence at the bottom of the photo is all that serves as the “border” between these two modern countries that constantly antagonize each other. Surely there are security cameras around.

Further north we stopped at Tel Rehov, where I had excavated in 1998. It is an impressive site overlooking the roads along the Jordan River (on the next page is a view of the tell from the west). The buildings are almost exclusively built of mudbrick and remains stand upwards of three meters in places (ca. 10 feet; the picture on the next page shows Frank Wheeler walking in the background among the ruins)! Probably the most significant point for most people was the discovery in 2005 and 2007 of a bee hive colony consisting of hundreds of hives! These date to the late 10th and early 9th centuries BC. Many



scholars have argued that the phrase “flowing with milk and honey” only alluded to honey made with dates, but there is evidence now that it could have alluded to natural bee-produced honey as well. Of course, there is the story as well of Samson scooping out a serving of honey from the carcass of a lion (Jdg 14:8-9), although many modern scholars would discount the account’s viability.



Our goal in this region, was not to visit Rehov, however, but to search out the location of Salim, mentioned in the gospel of John as the location near which John baptized. The text states: “John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there,...” (Jn 3:23). William F. Albright suggested that the site of Salim was near Shechem rather than in the Jordan Valley (*Harvard Theological Review* 17/1 [1924]: 193-94). It seems unusual that John would be baptizing in ancient Samaria with the antagonism that existed between the ancient Jews and Samaritans—a fact to which the Samaritan woman at the well alludes when she talks with Jesus (Jn 4:9). It would be more reasonable that the site would be out of Samaritan territory. There is a tell called Tell Shalem (note the similarity of the word Shalem to Salim—not an unusual shift in linguistics) near the Jordan River. We wanted to visit the site. The photograph is from the ancient tell and looking toward the ponds and lakes that now serve as fish hatcheries. As we were driving to the tell we were impressed with the lush and verdent vegetation. It suddenly dawned on me that the word *Aenon* likely derives from the Hebrew and Aramaic word *ayin*, meaning “spring” (which subsequent investigation has confirmed; cf. the entries on “Aenon” and “Salim” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*). The photograph shows one of the springs in the area. Certainly, this would be a viable location for John to baptize—there is much water here! (There are other viable sites that have been suggested for Aenon and Salim; caution should rule the day.)



The last picture is from the site of Jezreel in the Jezreel Valley. It looks east toward the Jordan Valley. At the foot of the large hill on the right is the spring of Harod where Gideon thinned the troops to fight against the Midianites (Jdg 7:4-5). Jezreel was the site of one of Ahab’s homes—perhaps a horse and chariot training facility—beside which Naboth owned a vineyard which Ahab wanted to purchase (1 Kgs 21). Jezebel conspired to have Naboth killed

and deliver the vineyard to her husband. It was also here, likely from this perspective—where the tower of Jezreel would have stood—that Jehu began his overthrow of the Omride dynasty (2 Kgs 9:17). It was also at Jezreel where Jezebel made herself up and looked out the window and chided Jehu for his treason; Jehu in turn commanded that Jezebel be thrown from the window with which some of the court personnel complied (2 Kgs 9:30-37) in fulfillment of the word delivered by Elijah the prophet (1 Kgs 21:23-24; 2 Kgs 9:36-37).



We come to the close of a fascinating season of excavation and study, but evaluation and assessment continues and will for years to come. Some of you have contributed financially to this work and for that I am deeply thankful; I hope you can continue to contribute, we need the help especially with the economic difficulties. Regardless, I value very much your interest and support.

I hope these reports have provided some meaningful glimpses of our work and that they can enrich your lives and understanding of the Bible.

Sincerely,

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