

## Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2012

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Our weekend excursion took us to several sights in the vicinity of Beth-shemesh. We were rather tired from the shortened weekend before and the protracted week to compensate for the delay to start, so we tried to be somewhat leisurely in our exploration.

Gezer was our first site to visit. Gezer was first excavated in the early 1900s and then, beginning in the 1960s it was investigated again under the initial direction of my major professor at Arizona, William G. Dever. It is again being excavated in a third project directed by one of my colleagues from Arizona who also one of Dever's students, Dr. Steven Ortiz (teaching at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth). The gate of the city was one of the focal points of Dever's investigation. Professor Yigal Yadin who had excavated Hazor postulated that the structure that had earlier been identified as a Maccabean Castle was in fact part of the gate likely built by Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Part of his rationale for this identification was the similarity of the gates that had been excavated at Megiddo and then Hazor and the fact that 1 Kings 9:15 notes that Solomon had built the walls at Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. His assumption was that the design of the gates would be the same. Dever's investigation clearly demonstrated that the structure was a city gate and not a "castle" as Macalister had inferred. This identification with Solomon has come under severe challenge (which I will not engage in this letter), but the gate demonstrates another feature of ancient city life that is occasionally reflected in the Bible's story—that is the benches in the gate.



Ancient gates were often scenes of social, judicial, and ceremonial gathering. They were not simple structures but often had "rooms" where people might gather. Given the fact that most people would work outside the city and have to pass through the gate, it was relatively easy then to intercept someone for whom you might be looking by waiting in the gate. The book of Ruth narrates that Boaz went to the city gate to meet the next of kin who might have legitimate claim to marry Ruth and when the kin came through the gate he gathered ten of the elders of the city to serve as witnesses to the social/legal proceedings (Ruth 4:1). While gate designs would vary through time, the one pictured shows the "benches" inside the central chamber on the



west side of Gezer's gate. The second photo shows me challenging Dr. Jerry Culbertson, a preacher from Albertville, Alabama, as if I had a dispute with him (he's actually a great guy)!

The third photo is also from Gezer where the four of us—Jerry Culbertson, Faires Austin (Dean of Students at Faulkner), myself, and Dr. Frank Wheeler (Professor of Bible at York)—are standing in front of the “high place.” This is a series of standing stones dating from ca. 1800 BC; they are thought to be where a group of city-state representatives would gather from time to time to affirm their mutual allegiance in case of attack—sort of a NATO kind of thing, but with religious overtones. The time period would be contemporary with some of the Patriarchs of the Bible—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—although more contemporary with the latter two.



We next traveled to the Philistine site of Ekron which is where I started my excavation life in 1985. Regretfully there is really nothing to see at the site; all of the features and elements are severely enveloped in overgrowth and wretched thorny plants.



Libnah was another site on the agenda (see photo of tel). This is a classic tel shape and was the scene of Sennacherib's siege after he finished off Lachish (see Isa 37:8). The current excavations have identified evidence of Sennacherib's activity at the site (which we have also identified at Beth-shemesh as well).

Trips to the south always show sheep in the landscape. All of our previous years's of excavation have enjoyed the association of a bedouin at the foot of the tel who served as our guard as well as enjoying the benefit of his sheep and goats grazing the tel to keep the weeds at bay. This year Israel has enjoyed an exceptional amount of rain. Because of this, Mohammed has been able to access sufficient grazing resources further south near his home so he did not bring his flock this year. It was always interesting to watch his flock wander around the area and his children serving often as the shepherds; the scene was what one would imagine David's work to have been as a boy.





As we were returning from our Libnah visit, a flock of sheep and goats crossed the road in front of us (see photo). They knew exactly where they were going; from this clumped up passage we saw them just a few minutes later scattered over the hillside grazing.

Frank, Jerry, Faires and I have fairly long histories of association with the dig and through the years have bought many of our own tools. One of the main tools is a patish—essentially a small hand pick. The four of us have acquired the same brand of patish, which is usually the choice of others on the dig when we are not using our own. The photo shows the four of us in the “musketeer” pose, but Faires is holding a bucket as if catching the soil that we loosen. Faires gravitates toward the bucket brigade more than the on-his-knees excavating because of the physical difficulties of kneeling.



The work with the monumental building has continued to engage our interest. This year’s work has uncovered a third platform stone and it clearly has been shaped to accommodate some kind of practice involving liquids. If you look at the nearest stone in the series of three, you should notice a depression in the middle surrounded by a groove which in turn is enclosed with a small berm with a channel out of which the liquid would drain. (The stone is tilted in the soil at an angle, which is not particularly surprising after 3300 years of being buried!).



Elsewhere we have discovered fragments of a very substantial wall running in a N-S direction which has two tabuns (clay ovens) immediately to the west of the wall. Regrettably we cannot fully trace the layout of the building since the western side remains unexcavated and there are no plans to do so. This fragmentary nature of the remains and our access to them is a constant frustration. The limitation of financial resources and time compounds to curtail some of the desired investigation.

An unusual surprise was a visit to the storehouse of the Israel Antiquities Authority. This was built about six years ago in Beth-shemesh to house all of the antiquities that the excavations produce in the country. Everything since 1948 is either housed here or under their custody (material excavated before 1948 is under the custody and storage of the old Rockefeller Museum just outside the NE corner of the Old City of Jerusalem). Relatively few people are permitted to visit the warehouse. Multi-tiered storage shelves hold finds from the Palaeolithic through the Napoleonic era (the most modern artifact is a cannon from the time of Napoleon). Frank and I had been trying ever since the building’s opening to find it, but to no avail. We had been given

all kinds of directions and we had driven all over the area—invariably with a fruitless end. Part of the problem was the gross inconsistency in the information that was given. After asking for five to six years where it was or for someone to take us there, I had begun to wonder if it was an Area 51 kind of place that only existed anecdotally. Finally we were able to go—and what a visit it was! A candy store for archaeologists! The guide told us that they currently house approximately 1.5 million items and they receive some 15,000 additional artifacts each year!

The sign shown at the right reflects what part of the problem is to locate the site. While the sign may merely be faded, it remains so for a reason. The building is in an obscure location and not well identified partly because of the animosity that the radical religious elements exhibit against archaeology. They often see our work as desecrating their history and memory of the dead. Fortunately we have had no difficulties at Beth-shemesh, but the rising radical religious fervor may have its eventual impact.

