

Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh -- 2015 and Other Musings -- 1

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Our project was scheduled slightly earlier this year hoping to take advantage of school schedules and some other issues, but our attendance/participation is slightly down. The economy in Canada and the general uneasiness in the Middle East have certainly impacted our recruitment.

The departure from Little Rock, through Chicago, through Newark to Tel Aviv was uneventful, but inevitably makes for a long, tedious, tiring flight. I rendezvoused with Frank Wheeler of York College and Jerry Culbertson of Faulkner University to make our way into Jerusalem.



On Saturday, we visited the Rockefeller Museum located just beyond the northeast corner of the Old City of Jerusalem. The museum was funded by John D. Rockefeller and opened under the auspices of the "Government of Palestine, Department of Antiquities" (photo left)—this holds some interesting implications in the modern political tug-of-war of the Arab-

Israeli conflict.

The building was opened in 1938 and J. L. Starkey, who was excavating at Lachish was on his way to the opening ceremonies when he was ambushed and killed. It is my understanding that the murder has never been solved. It is a beautiful building (photo below right) and rich with history. It was the repository for the Dead Sea Scrolls before the area came under Israeli control in 1967.

Last time I visited the Rockefeller Museum they did not permit photographs at all, but this time they did but without flash! I had a ball!!!! Admittedly some of the photographs are difficult to take because of glare, but I



managed to secure a number of photos that I had wanted for a long time.

I was surprised to see a ring with the cartouche of Tutankhamun inscribed on it (photo right). This was found in the excavations at Tell el-'Ajjul during the 1930s after his tomb was initially discovered in 1922.



Another important collection was a cache of jewelry that had been discovered years ago Elihu Grant expedition at Tel Beth-Shemesh. Among the jewelry items was an orange colored seal (see photo right). For several years, this was the logo on the t-shirts that volunteers to our excavation wore (since then we have gone through several permutations designs).



A very sobering image of ancient surgery was a skull from Lachish (excavated in the 1930s). This skull was of an individual who had died during the siege of the town at the hands of the Assyrians in 701 B.C. Probably unrelated to the battle, the person had suffered from a head ailment of some kind and sought relief through this surgical procedure called trephination(photo right). You will note the saw marks on the skull. The procedure has a long history in humanity, extending well before the biblical period. Quite a number of people who underwent the surgery survived as evidenced by the skull area closing with new growth—our example here did not.



In the courtyard were two columns and a manger from the stables of Megiddo—probably dating from the time of Ahab (photo left). The manger is the basin in the middle and the two columns show tethering holes for horses. The traditional manger of the Christmas cards with baby Jesus shown in a wooden structure is almost certainly erroneous. Wood was much too valuable to use for trivial things like mangers and stone was certainly more easily accessible.



A major event in the history of Israel was a military campaign by Shishak of Egypt against Rehoboam during the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign (1 Kgs 12:25; 2 Chr 12:2-9). Excavations at Megiddo uncovered a fragment of a stele that bears Shishak's cartouche thus indicating his campaign into Israel. The photographs of the stele fragment rarely give any perspective of size of the fragment (photo left); I was quite surprised when

I saw how large it was—clearly it was a monumental inscription!

After a very rewarding day, Jerry Culbertson, Frank Wheeler and I rested for a while in the courtyard of the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research (photo right). I was privileged to be a fellow at the Albright a number of years ago, doing research for my dissertation. This courtyard has been the scene and meeting place of some of the greatest archaeologists to have worked in the area.



That afternoon we stopped at Emmaus Nicopolis. A 4th-6th century church building preserves a baptistery designed for immersion. There were also some tombs from the first century. The tomb entrance is small—about three feet high, but once inside you can stand up (photo right). Radiating from this central chamber was a number of chambers into which the survivors of the deceased would push the stone boxes containing the bones of their loved ones (photo below left). These stone



boxes are called ossuaries and usually measure about 2.5-3 feet long, about 1.5 feet high and 1-1.5 feet wide.

BETH-SHEMESH EXCAVATIONS

Our excavation began on Sunday, as usual, and our first major task of the day was to begin to clean up the site for excavation. Israel had experienced a good bit of rain over the winter and the weeds this year were exceptionally plentiful. Compounding this is the fact that the Bedouin who lives at the bottom of the *tell* usually drives his sheep and goats up onto the tell to graze, this, of course helps keep the growth under some control. Because of the rain and plentiful growth, it was not necessary for him to drive his flocks as far to find forage, so our *tell* suffered a bit more because of the rain. Weeding and cleaning usually takes about two days. The two photos show a before (below left) and after (below right) shot.



Last year, Mr. and Mrs. Mark Lanier of Houston, Texas contributed a quadricopter drone for us to use in our work. Additional contributions from them have permitted us to increase



the efficiency of the drone. The assistance to our ability to take aerial photos is dramatic. One photo shows Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman beaming in prospect of using the drone for the day. The other photo shows them along with Omer Zeevi monitoring its progress in the photography maneuvers. In the photo to the left, I am explaining to Allison Robinett of Oklahoma Christian University some of the benefits and features the drone will offer us in our work.



Work for the first week is often consumed with cleaning the squares, people adjusting to the new time schedules, and for many of them, learning how to use the tools properly. Our excavation is a teaching setting and volunteers often come with no experience. We are happy, then, to teach them about how archaeology works. Usually by about the third

day, the volunteers are all getting the hang of the routine and the tools so we can proceed with greater efficiency in the project.



Among other finds were the two shown here. The “Eye of Horus” would normally have been difficult to see in the excavation process and this one was found in the sifting process (left). It measure about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long, is made of blue glazed faience and has a hole drilled through the length of it. It was considered a charm of good luck. Probably this was imported in some way from Egypt. Given the level and layer that we were excavating at the time, the date for the amulet is attributed to the 12th century B.C.

Another find of potentially great importance was the discovery near the surface of the storage jar shown in the photo with Eryn Coward of the University of Lethbridge. With the exception of the very top of the jar, which was chopped off in later construction, the jar is very well preserved and was full of soil. We hope there will be residue of the original contents of the jar, perhaps permitting identification of its contents as well as a sample for radiocarbon dating. The jar comes from our Level 4, dated to ca. 1050-950 BC—essentially the time that the Israelites are forming into a kingdom under Saul and David.



A final observation about our site: in 1 Samuel 6, when the Philistines returned the ark of the covenant to Israelite territory, the Bible states that it came first to Beth-shemesh. Verse 13 states: “Now the people of Beth-shemesh were



reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, the rejoiced to see it” (ESV). The final photo shows thistles on our site, with our Bedouin watchman’s tent at the foot of the hill. The field is sown in wheat and the combine is busy toward the back of the field cutting the grain. Our project has begun, as it usually does, just at the time of year that the events of the biblical narrative occurred. It is always thrilling to think about the events that unfolded in this region.