INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-3
Fighting a Losing Battle

3 Yishay St.
Abu Tor
Jerusalem, Israel
December 26, 1984

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

If you could listen to Dr. Amos Kloner discuss the subject for a few minutes, you'd discover-- as I did-- that the destruction of archaeological sites in certain parts of this country is a problem that's gotten out of control. According to Kloner, farmers and construction crews working in remote areas routinely bulldoze the remains of ancient settlements, with little fear that the budget-strained and understaffed Department of Antiquities will even be aware of what they have done. And just as extensive, according to Kloner, is the damage caused by a new breed of antiquities vandals who regularly ransack ancient ruins and tombs.

Amos Kloner has more than a simple public-spirited interest in this problem; preventing the destruction of antiquities has become a major part of his job. He is a district officer for the Israel Department of Antiquities in a region of the country called the Shephelah, literally, "the foothills," a narrow stretch of territory extending north to south for approximately 100 km between the country's highlands and its coastal plain. From 1948 to 1967, the central sector of this area was divided by the heavily guarded Israel-Jordan cease fire line. But since 1967, with the opening of the border and the rapid development of settlements and agriculture, the central Shephelah has become the scene of some of the most intense archaeological devastation in the entire country.

Because of this situation, Amos has had to take immediate action and one of his most important initiatives has been to recruit a team of local men as "antiquities police." Their task is as difficult as it is potentially dangerous. Eventhough they are equipped with a jeep, guns, and the police power to arrest anyone who intentionally damages an archaeological site, they are often forced into direct confrontations with the many local inhabitants-- both Israeli and Arab-- who view the strict enforcement of the antiquities laws as an attack on their right to the land.

And while the antiquities patrol struggles to put an end to

Neil Silberman is an Institute Fellow studying the political and cultural impact of current archaeological research in the Middle East.

the destruction, Amos has authorized another team to cover the same territory to map, record, and classify just what is left. The only comprehensive archaeological surveys of the area were made by the French explorer Victor Guerin and the British Palestine Exploration Fund more than a century ago. Needless to say, archaeological techniques have been considerably improved during the last hundred years, but it has taken the current threat to the area's antiquities to provide the needed impetus-- and funding-- for renewed exploration.

Although the archaeological destruction continues to be a problem, the survey team has already made some important discoveries. Amos is justifiably proud of the scientific work he has initiated in the central Shephelah and he spends at least a day or two each week monitoring the work in the field. And when I met with him earlier this month at his home in Jerusalem, he invited me to join him on his next visit to the Shephelah to check on the recent activity of both the survey team and the antiquities patrol.

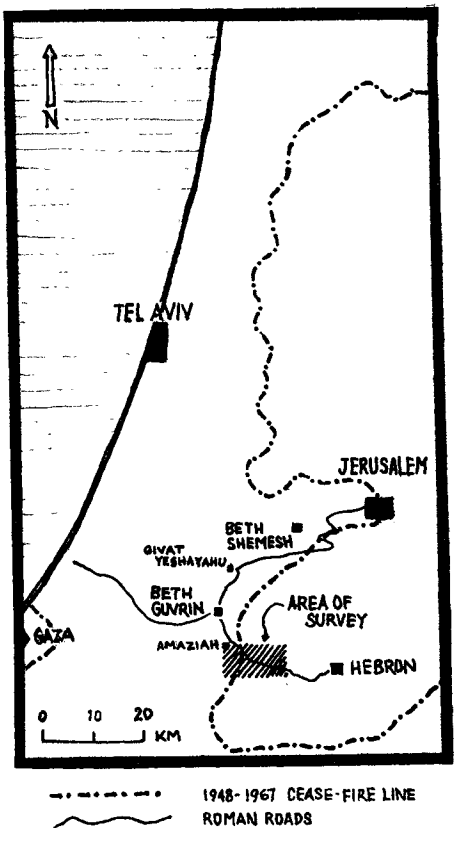
* * *

Amos and I set off from Jerusalem early on the morning of December 5th, and the road we took southward through the Shephelah ran through a patchwork landscape of modern settlements, Biblical landmarks, and archaeological remains. In the vicinity of the modern town of Beth Shemesh, which houses jet-fighter assembly plants of the Israel Aircraft Industries, is Tel Zorah, site of an ancient Israelite settlement and the traditional birthplace of an earlier military resource-- Samson, hero of the tribe of Dan. About 8 km south of Beth Shemesh is the Elah Valley, scene of David's encounter with Goliath, and just beyond that is the imposing mound of Tel Azeqa, where Joshua's forces routed a coalition of Canaanite kings.

But the Biblical triumphs of the ancient Israelites comprise only one chapter of the Shephelah's long history, and a succession of later conquerors also left their mark on the land. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all understood that the conquest of this region was vital to their control of both the coast and the hill country and the tangible evidence of their occupation here can be found in the buried levels of the Shephelah's archaeological sites.

Amos himself is particularly interested in the impressive remains of the Roman-Byzantine era, a period of more than six and a half centuries during which the density of population and utilization of the area's resources reached levels that were not equalled until modern times. From 70 to 638 AD, the Roman governors of the imperial province of Palaestina devoted considerable effort and tax revenues to bolster the province's strategic position on the

eastern border of the empire. In areas like the Shephelah, where the Jewish population had been almost completely wiped out in unsuccessful revolts against imperial authority in 70 and again in 135 AD, the Roman governors offered generous land grants to demobilized legionaries, constructed aqueducts and administrative centers, and established a network of highways to insure internal security. As we passed the modern moshav, or collective farm of Givat Yeshayahu, Amos called my attention to a line of five recently restored Roman milestones that had originally been erected during the reign of the Emperor Septimus Severus to commemorate the initial paving of the road that still runs this way.



This road, in fact, was one of the Romans' most important contributions to the history of the Shephelah, for it continued to be used to connect the city of Jerusalem to the southern part of the country long after the Roman rule had collapsed. Through the subsequent centuries of Early Islamic, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman domination, it protected and controlled movement from the hills down to the coastal plain. The most strategic junction of this road system was a Jewish town called Beth Guvrin that had been conquered by the Romans and renamed Eleutheropolis, "City of the Free." In its later incarnations as ed-Darum of the early caliphs, Beth Giblin of the Crusaders, and Beit Jibrin of the Mamluks and Ottomans, the junction maintained its strategic importance.

The most recent change of name occured just 35 years ago, when veterans of Israel's 1948 War of Independence established Kibbutz Beth Guvrin just to the west of the cease-fire line with Jordan, the so-called "Green Line." And with the topographical division between the Shephelah and the hill country becoming a tense line of military confrontation, even the ancient Roman road that crossed it received a new name.

"Back in the 1950's," Amos told me as we turned southeast at Beth Guvrin and drove toward the Hebron hills, "we used to call this stretch of highway 'Texas Road.' It was close to the border then and there was a serious problem with terrorists-- we called them infiltrators then. This was really the Wild West of Israel; every couple of weeks there'd be an encounter between the settlers

and the infiltrators from across the Green Line. Gunfights, murders, and surprise attacks. But that's all in the past now."

Since the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the entire West Bank, the border is no longer guarded or even marked on most maps. As we drove through the open barbed-wire gate of the former border moshav of Amaziah, Amos remarked to me how dramatically the situation here has changed. Amaziah was established in 1955 at the height of the tension and the twenty-five families who worked its fields were in almost continual danger of raids from the Arab villages to the east. But now the people of Amaziah enjoy relative peace and security, and they are no longer the easternmost Israeli settlers in this area. Three years ago, they ceded some of their lands to a new moshav called Sheqef, established on the nearby ridge that was once divided by the Green Line.

Sheqef was the place where we were to meet the two teams from the Department of Antiquities, and when we drove down the main street, past rows of prefabricated houses, barns, and sheds for agricultural equipment, Amos spotted their two jeeps parked in front of the community house. We stopped, got out, and Amos made the introductions: two of the members of the antiquities patrol were settlers at Sheqef, Haim Ben Saadon and Simon Kadoori, both in their twenties. The third member, Ismail Suwaiti, a resident of the neighboring Arab village of Beit Awwah, was away for the morning, but Haim and Simon assured Amos that he'd be back later in the afternoon.

The two members of the survey team were not from Sheqef; they were from the nearby communal settlement of Kibbutz* Gath. They were Yehuda Dagan, a professional archaeologist in his late thirties, and Zvi Katznelson, a man in his seventies who was "a farmer in an earlier incarnation," Amos jokingly said.

The introductions were brief, since Haim and Simon had some problems that they wanted to discuss with Amos immediately and they took him aside to convey the bad news. The territory they patrolled has few paved roads and I overheard something about a broken axle--and about the substantial sum needed to make the necessary repairs. Amos frowned and shook his head in exasperation at the delay this would cause in their work.

---

* There is a clear distinction between a kibbutz and a moshav. A moshav is a cooperative farm in which each member owns his own house and fields, sharing only the marketing of his produce with the other members. A kibbutz, on the other hand, is a commune in which all property, lands, and revenues are held in common.

Fortunately, the survey team had no such problems. Yehuda and Zvi were to be our guides in a tour of the area and Amos and I climbed into their jeep, leaving Haim and Simon behind at Sheqef to deal with the mechanical problems of theirs.

* * *

Despite being considerably younger than his partner, Yehuda was very much the leader of the survey team. Born and raised at nearby Kibbutz Gal'on, a small settlement that had repulsed an attack by the Egyptian army in 1948 and had later served as the base for the Israeli capture of Beth Guvrin, Yehuda has spent nearly his entire life living and working in the Shephelah. After finishing his degree in archaeology at Tel Aviv University, he returned to the area to become a member of Kibbutz Gath. And when Amos hired him to conduct the archaeological survey, he asked Zvi, a retired member of the kibbutz, to help him with the work.

As Zvi checked the supplies for the day's trip, Amos and Yehuda decided which sites we should visit and discussed the recent work of the survey. December is the best month of the year for this type of exploration, Amos told me, since the first rains of the winter had washed away the surface dust. Later in the rainy season, the growth of a thick groundcover of thistles and weeds would make looking for potsherds impossible and many ancient settlement sites that would otherwise be spotted would be completely lost. The day was clear, crisp, and sunny as we bumped along the rocky track that led down from the ridge of Sheqef. On both sides were agricultural fields whose newly plowed furrows exposed the thick reddish soil that had been covered with fieldstones until bulldozers had recently been brought in to push them away.

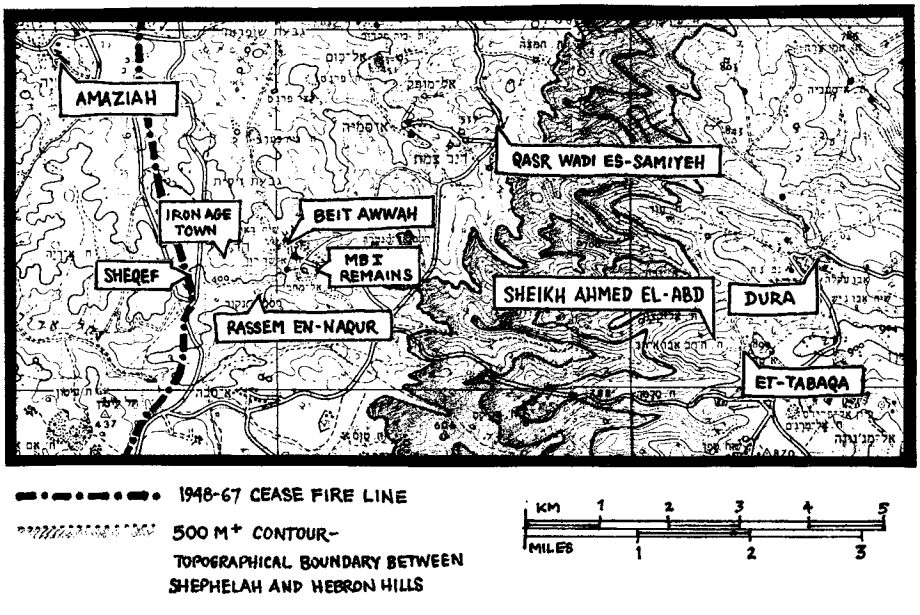
Zvi Katznelson (left) and Yehuda Dagan

Yehuda drove the jeep up over a small

hill and we came to a stop. From this vantage point, just across the Green Line from Sheqef, he wanted to give us a general introduction to the sites we would see and the methods by which he and Zvi had worked. We climbed out of the jeep and circled him as he unfolded a detailed topographical map of the area on which he had marked dots of different colors to designate the ancient settlements of the various periods that he had found.

"So far we've found archaeological remains from three main periods," Yehuda told us, "Middle Bronze Age I, Iron Age, and the Roman-Byzantine Era. The most important conclusion I can make at this point is that this area was much more intensively settled in those periods than we imagined it to be." The precise boundaries of the survey extended across the former Jordanian border, from the level of the Shephelah up to the plateau of the central mountain range, here called the Hebron Hills. And although Zvi and Yehuda had explored only about 6 square kilometers out of a total of 60, they had already discovered more ancient sites than were previously known in the entire area.

Opposite us in the valley was another low hill that appeared to be covered with the same sort of fieldstones that the members of Sheqef had cleared away from their new fields. But as Yehuda pointed out the various details, I began to recognize the doorsills, corners, and even main streets of a sizeable ancient town. Time and nature had caused the stone structures to collapse and blend into the bare landscape of the surrounding hillsides. But Yehuda had been able to identify it as a large Iron Age farming village, from the time of the Biblical Judean kings. The shape and color of the pottery sherds scattered among the ruins confirmed the date of the site's abandonment-- at the time of the Babylonian conquest and destruction of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC.



Area of the survey

For the last two and a half millennia, the village has remained

a Biblical ghost town and Yehuda hastened to tell us that it is not the only one he has found. On the summits of hillocks throughout the area, there are other Iron Age villages in equally remarkable states of preservation. The reason for this phenomenon, he believed, was a dramatic change in settlement patterns after the Iron Age. During the later Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods, the inhabitants did not reoccupy the earlier hilltop villages; they constructed their houses on the slopes of the hills or in the valleys, closer to their fields. And after the Byzantine period, all of the ancient sites remained undisturbed, since there were apparently very few settlements in this area at all.

Yehuda found practically no trace of Early Islamic, Crusader, or Mamluk occupation at any of the sites he had located so far. This indicated that there had been a dramatic drop in population here, lasting from the time of the Muslim conquest of the country in 638 AD until at least the 16th century. For the subsequent centuries of Ottoman rule, up to the British conquest of Palestine in World War I, there were likewise no substantial signs of occupation, but there were some vivid local traditions that confirmed the negative archaeological findings-- and also explained what was going on here now.

"During the last two hundred years," Yehuda told us, "this area was mostly uncultivated and unoccupied." The only Ottoman presence was a small garrison at the road junction at Beth Guvrin and because of the absence of the influence of the central government, the mukhtars, or village chiefs, of the town of Dura in the Hebron Hills became the virtual rulers of the hill country and the adjoining Shephelah. The Dura mukhtars, the most notorious of whom was Sheikh Abd er-Rahman Amr who ruled in the middle of the 19th century, eventually extended their control as far as Hebron on the east and Beth Guvrin on the west. They exacted a tribute from the local Arab farmers that was so heavy that it effectively discouraged the establishment of new villages or even the expansion of the few existing fields. "So there just weren't many people here to disturb or damage the archaeological remains," Yehuda said.

But that situation suddenly changed with the imposition of a strong central government by the British Mandatory authorities. The mukhtars of Dura lost most of their power and a sudden exodus of fellahin formerly tied to the fields of the town resulted in the establishment of scores of new villages throughout the entire area. In fact, on the eve of the 1948 war, the fugitives from Dura had established 99 "daughter villages" in the surrounding territory, many of them on the sites of ancient settlements that had been unoccupied for more than 1300 years.

The 1948 war and the abandonment of the Arab villages to the west of the Green Line within the new State of Israel brought a sudden halt to this territorial expansion. But since 1967, with the border reopened and Israeli settlements like Sheqef springing up in the vicinity, the region's antiquities are in greater danger than ever before.

The problem that Yehuda and Zvi-- and the men of the antiquities patrol-- are facing is far more serious than the careless neglect of the area's archaeological heritage. "What's really going on here these days," Yehuda informed us ominously, "is a battle for land."

* * *

In order to illustrate this point, Yehuda had a site he wanted to show us about a kilometer to the south of the Arab village of Beit Awwah. We got back into the jeep and drove to a spot marked on the maps as a site of ruins called Rassem en-Naqur, but which appeared at first glance to be nothing more significant than an olive grove, newly planted by some village residents.

A series of terraces containing neatly planted young olive trees extended down the sloping hillside, each terrace surrounded by a stone retaining wall. When we began to walk through the terraces I quickly saw that this grove was actually built over the recently destroyed remains of a very ancient site. The stones of the terrace walls included many ancient architectural elements, some of them bearing the scrape marks of a bulldozer's scoop. And the soft, newly turned soil was filled with thousands of sherds of ancient pottery vessels: storejars, bowls, and cooking pots.

The fragments of heavy storejars with horizontal ridges and prominent handles were characteristic of the Byzantine period and were readily datable to the 4th-7th centuries AD. And as we walked among the olive trees, Amos reached down to pick up a thick chunk of marble whose significance he immediately recognized. Calling Yehuda over to see it, he identified it as a fragment of a marble chancel screen, a typical artifact of the elaborate Byzantine churches of Palestine.

Yehuda, in the meantime, had found a clump of cemented stone tiles that had once been a part of a mosaic floor. In another section of the olive grove were the remains of a neatly plastered water channel, now partially covered by one of the retaining walls. Nearby, Amos spotted an opening into the ground covered by the thick underbrush; he unhesitatingly crawled into it and when he emerged from the darkness a moment or two later, he pronounced it to be an ancient water reservoir.

Kloner (left) and Dagan, examining artifacts at Rassem en-Naqur

Although Yehuda had brought us here, he was far less experienced in Byzantine archaeology than Amos and we all listened to Amos's conclusions on the nature of the site. It was, according to him, clearly a prosperous Byzantine agricultural monastery, most probably subservient to one of the large church establishments in Eleutheropolis, as Beth Guvrin was then called. The only previous evidence of the extent of Byzantine settlement in this area, Amos noted, was a cruciform baptismal font found among the buildings of the nearby village.

There are many historical sources that describe the political and religious events in Palestine during this period-- pilgrims' itineraries, the writings of the Church Fathers, and geographical texts. But from an archaeological standpoint, not much has been uncovered of Byzantine civilization in the Shephelah except for a few churches and some other very fragmentary remains. The farm at Rassem en-Naqur provided the possibility to learn about the agricultural basis of the prosperity of that period-- at least until the olive grove was planted here a few weeks ago. Since olives are one of the few cash crops that are raised almost exclusively by Arab villagers, the study of ancient farming methods has been pre-empted by the economic realities of the present day.

* * *

Amos suggested that Yehuda take the fragment of the chancel screen and the mosaic and a few representative sherds of Byzantine pottery, bag them, and label them to record at least a typical selection of artifacts from the destroyed site. Now that the ancient settlment levels were bulldozed and the hill was planted with olive trees, the Department of Antiquities could do little more than to

protest to the village authorities. As Amos explained when we got back into the jeep, it's very difficult to obtain a criminal conviction for the destruction of antiquities unless the accused has been caught in the act.

Driving away from Rassem en-Naqur, we headed up an unpaved road toward the village of Beit Awwah itself. As we drove past more newly planted olive groves, Yehuda said he wanted to show us something, but he didn't want to stop. Scanning the line of the terrace wall that fronted on the roadway, he suddenly pointed out two stone columns embedded in the wall.

"Those are the markers for Mile Twelve," he told us, "milestones placed on the Roman road from Eleutheropolis to Hebron. The distance is right, so they must have been found half-buried in the ground somewhere near here."

Although Yehuda admitted to Amos that he had not checked the stones for inscriptions that might provide the precise date of the construction of the road, he insisted that it was probably wiser not to show too much interest in these monuments. He had already suffered some bad experiences by showing too much interest in ancient stones. On two occasions, once on the Israeli side of the Green Line and once in former Jordanian territory, he had moved milestones to check them for inscriptions only to find on his return to the spot that they had been destroyed or taken away.

When we entered the village of Beit Awwah, I could understand Yehuda's concern. Many of the houses were constructed of ancient stones fitted into modern concrete. Yehuda began to tell us the story of the village's establishment and the phenomenon of the inhabitants' reuse of antiquity made perfect sense. Beit Awwah was founded about 40 or 50 years ago by members of the Masalmi clan of Dura who had fled because of a blood feud, or so the local tradition says. What they found on their arrival were just the remains of some ancient settlements, so they began to construct their new agricultural community from the beautifully hewn stones they found in the neighboring fields.

The 1948 war affected Beit Awwah severely; much of the land that supported its existence was suddenly out of reach on the other side of the Green Line. But because it possessed the strategic position as the easternmost of the "daughter villages" of Dura, Beit Awwah became one of the most important centers for the infiltrators who used the village as a staging ground and headquarters for attacks against the Israeli settlements in the vicinity.

Now, however, the village has returned to agriculture and its present population of 5500 is only slightly less than that of Dura

itself. This growth in population has spurred an urge for the more intensive cultivation of the surrounding fields. But the title to the land is a questionable one, since, as Yehuda informed us, most of the land was registered as the property of the Jordanian government and its status under Israeli administration is unclear.

Beit Awwah street scene

The villagers of Beit Awwah are therefore taking matters into their own hands. Here, the tradition of "squatters' rights" can provide a powerful claim. Under the law of the Ottoman Empire, the use of a piece of property for dwelling or agriculture could establish de facto and eventually de jure title to that land. Although the Ottoman regulations were for the most part abolished in 1922 with the introduction of more western ideas of land tenure by the British mandatory authorities, the custom still possesses some force. The idea now seems to be if a local resident clears previously unused land and plants crops on it, the Israeli authorities will be unlikely to take it away.

As we drove down the main street of the village, we got some very peculiar looks. The children of the village were all out on a school holiday-- it was Mulid en-Nabi, the prophet Muhammad's birthday-- and it seemed as if the appearance of an Israeli jeep was not a particularly welcome sight. We continued through the center of the village, with its few shops displaying used furniture, fresh vegetables, and huge sacks of grain. There were traces of antiquity throughout the village; I spotted the apse of a Byzantine chapel used as an enclosure for goats and a large burial cave now serving admirably as a shed for dairy cows.

The road from the center of the village toward its eastern outskirts came to a dead end overlooking a broad valley that marked the final topographical division before the start of the Hebron

Hills. While Zvi remained behind to watch over the jeep and its contents, Amos, Yehuda, and I climbed a ridge through yet another newly planted olive grove to get a better look at the landscape.

"It's amazing how this valley is changing almost daily," Yehuda told us as he pointed out several agricultural fields that he claimed were not there only a few weeks before. But the real reason he had brought us here was not to bemoan the current frenzy of agricultural expansion, but to talk about the remains he has found from one of the most mysterious periods in the history of the country, the Middle Bronze Age I, which lasted from approximately 2200 to 2000 BC.

The MB I period is mysterious primarily because the arts of civilization seem to have regressed during that time. For the 650 years before the beginning of the MB I period, the cities of the Early Bronze Age had flourished, but around 2200 BC, they were all suddenly abandoned and put to the torch. Scholars have customarily ascribed this wave of destruction to nomadic invaders from the surrounding deserts or the northern Syrian steppes, who, after laying waste to the centers of urban civilization, were unwilling or unable to occupy them themselves. The conventional archaeological wisdom characterized these MB I people as wandering pastoralists, unfamiliar with the techniques of settled agriculture, who roamed with their flocks on the fringes of the arable land.

Dagan inspecting MB I sites east of Beit Awwah; to the east, the Hebron Hills.

As in so many other subjects of archaeological interest, however, these conventional ideas are now under attack. Recent studies of the MB I period have concluded that it actually possessed some important points of continuity with the preceding Early Bronze Age and it may not necessarily represent the conflict of hostile cultural groups. Although the population became much more dispersed and the inhabitants

apparently relied much more on raising sheep and goats than on farming, these new modes of life and the abandonment of the Early Bronze Age cities may have been due to gradually changing economic or environmental factors within the country, rather than a violent invasion from outside.

This new understanding has been strengthened by Yehuda's recent finds in the area. The topographical boundary between the Shephelah and the hill country, it seems, marked the division between the arable and non-arable land during the MB I period, and the archaeological remains he has discovered on either side of that division reflect differing yet complementary ways of life. In the highlands to the east, he has found the normal type of MB I pastoral encampments, while in the rich valleys below, he has found a number of settled agrarian villages of the MB I period, whose inhabitants, like the people of the preceding Early Bronze Age, spent their lives raising crops in their fields.

The recent use of bulldozers, though, is now endangering this valuable archaeological evidence. Several of the MB I farming villages that Yehuda has mapped and from which he has collected pottery have already been destroyed. Yet the fact that the people of Beit Awwah are expanding beyond the traditional planted areas is, in itself, evidence of a significant archaeological process. In the age of mechanized agriculture, the boundary between the arable and unarable is much harder to find.

* * *

During the time that we were exploring the fields and ruins around Beit Awwah, the day had gotten pleasantly warm, but as we drove up through the hills toward Dura, all of us bundled up in our winter coats. And the change in landscape was as striking as the change in temperature; from the rolling hills and fertile valleys of the Shephelah, we were now driving in some very rocky, not to say mountainous terrain.

Here and there along the roadside, we passed bright yellow bulldozers spewing thick black smoke as they tried to budge some particularly stubborn boulders in the preparation of new agricultural fields. We were climbing from an altitude of about 500 meters above sea level in the vicinity of Beit Awwah to the 900 meter level on the mountainous plateau. The reason for this side excursion was to see another of Yehuda's newly discovered MB I settlements, but as we turned off the main road and drove through the tiny Arab village of et-Tabaqa, he assured us that we were also in for a spectacular view.

I've always been fascinated by 19th century European explorers' accounts of their experiences among the Palestinian peasantry, for these explorers had the quaint notion that the living inhabitants of the country-- not only the ruins-- preserved some important traditions from ancient times. The pictures of traditional Palestinian village life drawn by these explorers tended toward the romantic, but as I saw the mode of life in the village of et-Tabaqa, I realized that the traditional lifestyle of the fellahin was not so romantic after all.

This region, Amos and Yehuda told me-- as if I couldn't tell from simple observation-- is one of the most remote in the entire country. The stone houses on both sides of the main street of the village were without electricity and beside each stood a bee-hive shaped mud oven for baking bread. And while the main street of Beit Awwah had at least the benefit of asphalt, et-Tabaqa's was only a rutted dirt track bounded by a high stone wall on both sides.

When we had driven through Beit Awwah, there was obvious curiosity about our presence, but here there was outright surprise. Everyone in the village came running out to the wall as we passed by their houses: veiled women with babies, children, and the few men too old to work in the cities or fields.

Leaving the village behind us, we drove out to a ridge overlooking the Shephelah, passing scattered groves of ancient olive trees. Near an isolated group of houses, we left our jeep on a dirt road beneath the summit and started the climb to the top, where Yehuda had found the MB I settlement.

The sky here was cloudy and threatening to rain-- and to continue the winter season that had begun a few weeks before. As we made our way up the rocky slope along a winding footpath, we came upon a small field plowed with irregular furrows, with the first sprouts of winter wheat poking through the surface like grass. Wondering whether I should walk across the furrows, I turned to Amos, who turned to Zvi, the retired farmer from Kibbutz Gath. "Never mind," he told us, as he walked ahead himself, "these sprouts are very strong."

"This is how all the fields in this country used to be," he continued, "small enough to be plowed and planted by a single farmer after the first rain. The fellahin used to wait for that sign to begin the winter agricultural season, but now it just doesn't pay to work that way."

Zvi's explanation of the change in the agricultural regime of the area suddenly made me understand that all the bulldozing we had

seen was neither a destructive urge to level ancient settlements, nor a crude hunger for land. Faced with the increasing dependence of the West Bank on the Israeli economy, the people here must now raise crops for income, not for subsistence alone. The simple economic fact is that in order to make enough money to support a family, a farmer's fields have to be much larger than the traditional plots-- a size that only a bulldozer can clear and a tractor can plow. So in all but the most remote areas, the traditional farming methods of the Palestinian fellahin are being abandoned and are being supplanted by a new way of life.

When we finally got to the top of the hill, Yehuda's promise of a spectacular view was fulfilled. Stretched out before us was a landscape encompassing almost the entire coastal plain of the country, from the Gaza Strip on the south to the northern suburbs of Tel Aviv. From an altitude of about 850 meters above sea level, the thirty miles to the coast appeared like an undulating blanket of green fields and hills, dotted with modern settlements and towns. It was a commanding view in every sense of the word, and the scanty MB I remains that Yehuda showed us were a decided anticlimax.

The only other sign of human occupation on the summit of this ridge was the very delapidated maqam, or shrine, of a local figure of legend, Sheikh Ahmad el-Abd, "Ahmad the Slave." According to tradition, he was the guardian of the agricultural prosperity of the region and he appeared to the people of the surrounding villages as a benevolent apparition, wearing a glowing green turban. As late as the 1920's, his barakeh, or power to promote good fortune, was held in such high regard by the local people that they regularly stored their plows and farm implements in his maqam.

The shrine of Ahmad el-Abd with boulders of MB I settlement in the foreground

But the Slave seems to have lost

his power these days; the interior of the shrine was filled with rubbish and the dome was badly in need of repair. "It's the same story with almost all the maqams of this area," Zvi told us, "the people really don't seem to care about them anymore."

* * *

"I have just one more site I want to show you," Yehuda told us as we drove down through the hills on the main road from et-Tabaqa toward Beit Awwah below. "And when you see it, you'll understand the real battle we're fighting here."

So far in our tour of the area, Yehuda had shown us a wide range of periods and settlements, but one era he had so far neglected was what archaeologists working in this country call the "Second Temple Period." This was the last period of ancient Jewish autonomy, during the 300 years from the time of the successful Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid dynasty of Syria in 167 BC, continuing through the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 BC), and concluding with the ill-fated risings against Rome in 66-70 and 132-135 AD. The remains of the thriving local culture of this period have been found throughout the country and at sites like the palace-fortress of Masada and the Upper City of Jerusalem, they are regarded even by non-archaeologists as national shrines. Little is known of the nature of the Second Temple Period remains in this area of the Shephelah, and the site that Yehuda now wanted to show us was what he described as an extensive farming complex of that period, which he found to the north of Beit Awwah in a valley called Wadi es-Samiyeh.

The bulldozers had been working here recently and new fields of reddish earth lay on both sides of the road. But side by side with these new agricultural enterprises were small plots of the traditional type. Spotting a familiar landmark, Yehuda pulled the jeep off the road and parked near an isolated farmhouse. Zvi remained behind again to watch the jeep and Amos and I followed Yehuda up into the fields past an ancient-looking well. As a dog in the yard of the farmhouse strained at its tether and barked at our approach, Yehuda almost apologized for the fact that there was not as much to be seen here as there had been only a few weeks before.

The site was called Qasr Wadi es-Samiyeh, "the castle of the Samiyeh Valley," and despite Yehuda's description of the settlement's ancient prosperity, all I could see when we reached the top of the hill was a tumble of stones surrounded by heaps of freshly turned earth. It was if a bulldozer had completely destroyed the complex of structures; the huge stones that had once been the main walls of the building were completely dismantled and the openings

to the ancient rock-cut tomb chambers in the vicinity were completely dug away.

But as I quickly learned from Amos and Yehuda, this was not a case of a bulldozer's destruction in the preparation of an agricultural field. Amos picked up a fragment of a recently smashed storejar from a pile of similar fragments that seemed to have been intentionally discarded on the ground. Amos then rummaged through the pile to find a sherd of a stone measuring vessel typical of the Second Temple Period, and recognized by scholars to have conformed to Jewish purity law. "So this is all they left us," Amos said with a frown.

In order to explain what he meant by that statement, Amos pointed out to me the carefully sifted piles of earth that lay by the tumbled building stones. Nearby were accumulations of stubbed cigarette butts indicating that some person or persons had been digging here steadily over an extended period of time.

"By working at a site like this for a week or two, professional antiquities robbers can make a good living for themselves," Amos explained. "They're only interested in marketable items and at a site like this they could find dozens of ancient coins. But in order to get them they have to dig up every bit of the site."

I later learned just how handsome a living could be made from antiquities robbing, for after I got back to Jerusalem, I inquired at some antiquities shops how much the various Second Temple coins were worth. I learned that even the commonest bronze coins of the Maccabean and Herodian periods could bring $5 to $50 each, depending on their condition; the coins minted during the Second Revolt against the Romans, from $50 to $250; and the real treasure was the silver shekels of the First Revolt against the Romans, which are worth from $500 to $1500, with especially rare examples bringing ten times that amount.

The value of these coins is a function of their desirability to collectors in Israel and throughout the world who have come to associate them with the most heroic chapters of ancient Jewish history. But for the people of the region of Wadi es-Samiyeh, they have a much more concrete significance; with the average yearly per capita consumption on the West Bank listed by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics as $1200, the coins looted from illegal excavations are very hard currency indeed.

As we walked back down to the jeep on the roadside, we passed along the edge of one of the small agricultural plots, where a farmer was laboriously turning the earth with a small plow pulled by

Archaeologists and farmer
in Wadi es-Samiyeh

a submissive-looking donkey. Amos strolled over to the farmer and politely identified himself as an officer of the Department of Antiquities.

The farmer looked startled to be asked whether he knew anything about the illegal destruction of the ancient settlement at the edge of his field. He pulled the donkey to a stop and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know anything about destruction," he told Amos. "I come here every morning from Dura. I just mind my own business and work the land."

* * *

When we got back to Sheqef, the three men of the antiquities patrol were waiting for us. Haim Ben Saadon and Simon Kadoori, the young Israeli settlers, were now joined by Ismail Suwaiti from Beit Awwah, the third member of the team. During the day, Haim had managed to get a tow truck from a neighboring town to take the patrol jeep away for the necessary repairs. For the time being, at least, the patrol would be grounded. Eventhough Ismail had brought new reports of robbing and destruction of antiquities in the vicinity, there was nothing that they could do right away.

Amos seemed uncharacteristically discouraged when we started the trip back to Jerusalem and he frankly admitted to me his fears that despite all his efforts, the attempt to stop the destruction of the area's antiquities was having little effect.

"They're really getting so clever these days," he told me, referring to the antiquities vandals and thieves. "They know exactly when I'm in the area, and you can be sure that if I were approaching a site where they were working, they'd be gone by the time I got there."

When we got back to the Elah Valley, where David fought Goliath, Amos turned off the highway to check on the condition of a recently discovered Roman milestone. We drove slowly up and down the side road, but Amos could not locate the column that he had seen lying there only a week before. "Someone must have picked it up and taken it," he said with resignation, "It's probably cemented in a wall now or lying in somebody's yard."

To a certain extent, Amos Kloner may be justified in his pessimism that nothing can be done to stop the destruction of antiquities, for he is struggling against economic conditions beyond his control. For the farmers and builders of the Shephelah, ancient remains are troublesome obstructions to their livelihood, which can easily be swept away. And for the antiquities robbers of the area, the coins and other artifacts are a valuable resource, whose exploitation can yield handsome rewards.

But the situation is not just one of the force of pure economics triumphing over a noble, if futile attempt, to preserve the country's archaeological heritage. There are two sides to the coin of antiquities destruction. By ignoring their own connection to the area's antiquities-- and by feeding the archaeological fascination of others-- the Arab villagers of the central Shephelah may be waging a losing battle themselves.

* * *

Best Regards to All,

Neil

Received in Hanover 1/7/85