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Just Another Summer

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Dear Peter,

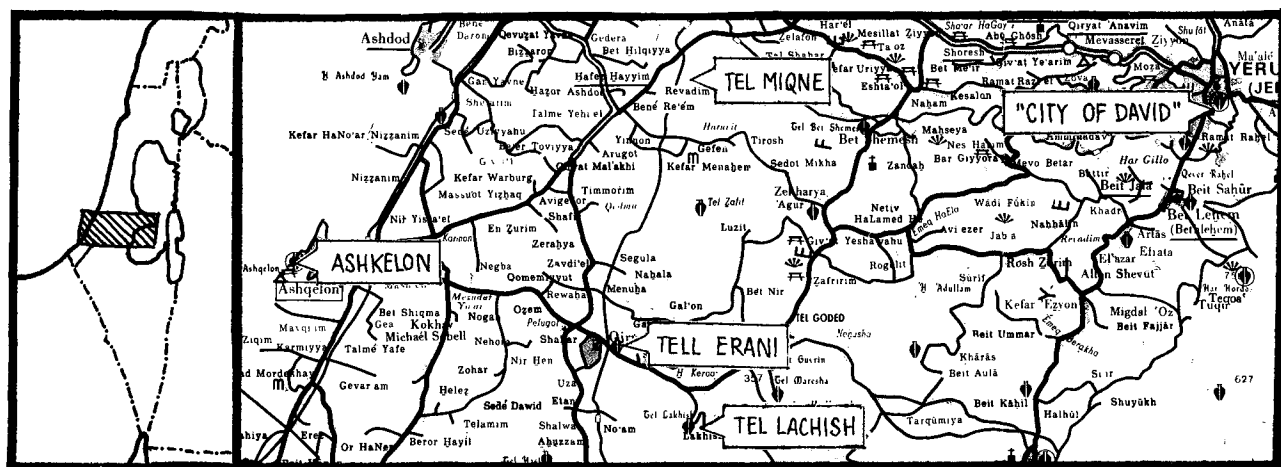
The State of Israel has now passed through its 38th summer of existence, but the most recent, the summer of 1985, was not the happiest of them. The nation was clearly engaged in a struggle to determine its future direction as the opposing factions in the government coalition clashed on almost every pressing national issue. The soul-searching wasn't confined to government circles; in the face of a disturbing series of domestic crises and international incidents, the questions of economic reform, defense strategy, peace negotiations with Jordan, Jewish-Arab coexistence, and religious intolerance all became matters of public concern. Yet an important perspective on these problems seemed to be lacking. New interpretations of the country's long history-- and its impact on the present-- did not play any significant role in the public debates.

This absence of a broad historical context was especially unfortunate, for 1985 was a banner year in Israel for historical research. This summer, more than 30 major Israeli, American, British, French, and German archaeological expeditions fanned out across the country to excavate some of Israel's most important ancient sites. In few other countries was the scale of the work so massive and the results of the digging so potentially meaningful against the current political background. For despite their scholarly detachment from the concerns of the present, the various archaeological teams dealt with the same social and political problems that absorbed the attention of the country's politicians and the population at large.

A close connection between archaeology and modern society shouldn't be surprising. As is the case with archaeological work everywhere, the way in which excavators select their sites and pursue their specific historical problems is often a reflection of the academic, financial, nationalistic, and religious pressures that lie behind the scenes. Archaeologists, like everyone else, are products of their environment and share the political and social preoccupations of their contemporaries. But this summer I sensed the possibility that archaeology could become more than just a symptom of a society's problems; if it can emerge from its intellectual isolation, it may provide a new means of searching for the solutions to those problems as well.

That's why I thought it would be interesting to examine the potential significance of this year's archaeological work in Israel in practical terms. To describe the background and results of all 30 of this year's excavations would be impossible,

so I've selected a geographical cross-section-- five excavations with unique motivations, results, and impact on Israeli archaeology-- all situated within a narrow strip of the country that extends from Jerusalem to the sea.



* * *

1. Urbanization on a Shoestring: Tell Ahmed el-Erani

From the distance, on a bright summer morning, the town of Qiryat Gath looks like a development planner's dream. Thirty-eight years ago, before the establishment of the State of Israel, this area of the coastal plain was entirely agricultural, occupied only by scattered Arab villages and a few pioneering kibbutzim. Beginning in 1954, however, with the massive influx of immigrants to Israel and an official decision to create an urban center for the region, apartment blocks, schools, shops, and factories gradually rose near a site that had been predominantly rural since the end of the Iron Age. The new town took its name from the nearby mound of Tell Ahmed el-Erani, which many scholars identified with the ancient Philistine capital of Gath. And this summer, as the modern inhabitants of Qiryat Gath, like those of the many development towns throughout Israel, faced the economic problems of inflation, unemployment, and cutbacks in public spending, a new archaeological expedition began an investigation of the circumstances of the rise and fall of the ancient city that may ultimately shed some light on the present economic situation as well.

Tell Erani was initially excavated in the mid-1950's, a project that was as much a massive public works project as an archaeological dig. Under the supervision of Dr. Shmuel Yeivin, the first director of the Israel Department of Antiquities, nearly 200 workers per day dug into the levels of the ancient city, both to uncover the remains of its Bronze and Iron Age cultures and to provide employment for the new immigrants. The initial theories about the site's ancient identity were soon called into question, however, for the Early Iron Age levels were found to contain a disappointingly small quantity of characteristic Philistine pottery. Despite the loss of the Philistine connection, Tell Erani still possessed great archaeological value. It was found to be one of the earliest cities established in the country, as indicated by the wealth of artifacts from Egypt of the Early Dynastic Period, around 3000 BC.

The significance of these finds was enormous, for never before had such a concentration of early Egyptian artifacts been found outside Egypt itself. Their presence in the earliest city levels of Tell Erani suggested intimate Egyptian involvement in the process of urbanization. Yet in the atmosphere of confrontation between Egypt and Israel in the 1950's, that involvement was interpreted as purely military. The rise of the city, Yeivin believed, was brought about by an invasion and military conquest by the Egyptians, and the city that arose here in southern Canaan was therefore just an Egyptian colony.

Times have changed, however, and in the atmosphere of the 1980's, the archaeological interpretation of Tell Erani's earliest levels has taken a different twist. The new excavation team at the site, headed by Professors Aharon Kempinski and Yitzhak Gilead of Ben Gurion University, sees the rise of the city at Tell Erani-- and of urbanization in Canaan in general-- as the result of gradual economic processes, not political decisions or military conquest.

Economics play a role in the scale of the renewed Tell Erani excavation as well as in its theories, for its anthropological approach to the work at the site is not likely to turn up the sorts of spectacular discoveries or Biblical associations that normally bring steady financial support. And, in fact, when I visited the site this summer, the Tell Erani project looked less like a full-fledged archaeological expedition than a college camping trip. Close to the single field tent that served as both expedition laboratory and headquarters were the five carefully dug excavation squares that about a dozen of Kempinski and Gilead's enthusiastic students had given up their weekends to dig.

Their dedication has been rewarded, even if it is on a limited scale, for in their initial probe at the edge of one of Yeivin's massive excavation areas, they have come upon evidence of the site's gradual development from village to city, not a sudden military conquest. At the lowest level of the excavation, the team has uncovered the remains of the first non-urban settlement at the site, a village of herders and seasonal farmers of the Chalcolithic Period (c.4500 - c.3150 BC), identical to the many other Chalcolithic settlements in the surrounding area. What distinguishes Tell Erani from the many other Chalcolithic settlements, though, is the fact that it lies on the main trade route from Egypt to Transjordan and that in the succeeding Early Bronze Age levels (c.3150 - c.2600 BC) there is a steadily increasing concentration of copper tools and weapons and imported Egyptian objects.

Recent excavations and surveys across the border in Jordan have made an economic evaluation of this archaeological situation possible. There, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, some of the earliest exploited sources of copper in the Middle East have been discovered. And that discovery has led to a new understanding of Tell Erani's urbanization and later wealth. Kempinski and Gilead believe that the Chalcolithic settlers at Tell Erani, half-way between Egypt and the copper regions, may have recognized a more lucrative way of life than harvesting barley and raising sheep and goats. Through their increasing specialization in the smelting of copper and its trade to Egypt, the city at Tell Erani prospered as long as its inhabitants could restrict access to the raw materials and process them into finished goods.

The sudden abandonment of the Early Bronze Age city at Tell Erani around 2600 BC has long been as much of a puzzle as its establishment. In the 1950's, Yeivin believed that it too was the result of an Egyptian military campaign. But here again, economics rather than warfare may have been responsible, as indicated by the recent discovery of a large number of copper mining and working settlements in southern Sinai dating

from the period during which the city at Tell Erani collapsed. Professors Kempinski and Gilead now believe that there may be a direct connection between these two phenomena: once the Egyptians discovered their own sources of copper and Tell Erani lost its monopoly and market, its urban organization fell apart.

For the time being, the Tell Erani excavation is a tiny project among giants, yet I came away from the dig believing that it may have more to offer Israeli archaeology than many other sites with more dramatic historical associations and more famous Biblical names. For if the discoveries of modern archaeology are valid for the remote past, they should also be valid for the present. And if the rise and fall of cities on the southern coastal plain of Israel are dependent on factors of economics, trade routes, and commercial interaction with the surrounding countries, then it might be worthwhile for the managers and planners of the Israeli economy to see if the achievements and failures of "development" towns here is a story that has been enacted before.

2. Masada II?: Tel Lachish

They were mourning the death of a great figure in Biblical Archaeology at the Tel* Lachish excavations this summer. Dr. Olga Tufnell, the assistant director of the British excavations at the site in the 1930's, died in London, and with her passing a unique link between successive generations of Palestinian archaeologists was broken. Tufnell was one of the few British archaeologists active here during the period of the British Mandate who maintained close and cordial relations with her scholarly successors. When Tel Aviv University resumed the Lachish excavations in 1973, she offered all possible advice and assistance and her visit to the site in 1983 not only marked the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the British excavations, but it also signified how far the nature and results of Biblical Archaeology had come during the intervening half-century.

In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the investigation of the Biblical city of Lachish was the beginning of what is now known as Biblical Archaeology, for it was the first Biblical city whose historical existence was confirmed by archaeological finds. Until the 19th century, it was known only from the Bible (2 Kings 18:3, Isaiah 36:1, 2 Chronicles 32:27) as a prominent Judean city besieged and conquered by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BC. But in 1846, the pioneering British explorer A.H. Layard began to excavate the site of Sennacherib's capital of Nineveh near the city of Mosul in modern Iraq. And in the palace of Sennacherib, he discovered a vivid wall relief of the conquest of Lachish that was the first confirmation of the historical accuracy of the Biblical text. That confirmation caused a sensation in England, and the reliefs from Nineveh, carefully detached from the walls of the Assyrian palace and transported to London, became the centerpiece of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851.

When archaeological excavations began in Palestine later in the 19th century, Biblical scholars were naturally anxious to investigate the ruins of Lachish to see what they could contribute to a better understanding of Sennacherib's famous siege. For decades, however, this goal was frustrated by a bitter disagreement over precisely which of the dozens of tells in southern Palestine represented the ruins of Lachish.

* The spelling of tel with one "l" is not a typographical error; it represents the Hebrew-- as opposed to the Arabic-- spelling of the word.

By 1932, most agreed that the imposing mound called Tell ed-Duweir in Arabic was the Biblical city in question and the British excavations there did uncover dramatic evidence of the Assyrian siege. On the southwestern slope of the mound, the excavators unearthed a massive tumble of boulders that they believed represented the collapse of the city's fortifications, and in the rubble, the crest of a metal helmet that closely resembled the type worn by the Assyrian infantry. But many questions remained unanswered. The evidence of the conquest of the city was not clearly connected to a specific occupation level within the city and so its historical context remained unclear.

In 1973, Dr. David Ussiskin, director of the Tel Aviv University expedition to Lachish, adopted a far more analytical approach in the renewed excavations. His strategy was to study the minute details of the Assyrian palace reliefs and to see if the various elements depicted could be identified at the site. The southwestern slope of the mound was the obvious place to begin such an investigation, since that was where his British predecessors had discovered the most dramatic evidence of the siege. And since this is the least steep of the tell's sides, it was also the obvious place for the Assyrians to have mounted their assault. As the excavations proceeded, the Israeli team uncovered clear evidence to bolster this theory. The thick layer of boulders that the British believed represented the collapse of the city wall was actually a huge rampart erected by the Assyrians to support the five armor-plated siege engines depicted on the Nineveh palace reliefs.

The identification of the siege ramp provided a vivid new understanding of the progress of Sennacherib's conquest of Lachish. The excavators discerned two main phases in the battle as they dug into the rampart itself. First, the Assyrians constructed a lower ramp to break through the city's outer line of fortification, and when that was breached, they continued to pile boulders and crushed stone further up the slope in order to break down the main Judean defense lines on the summit. Ussiskin's team retrieved hundreds of small artifacts from the rubble that confirmed the intensity of the battle. Iron arrowheads (some of which were bent by impact), sling-stones, and scales of armor were found in the greatest concentrations at the top of the slope. And while these merely expanded the evidence uncovered by the earlier British excavations, the Israeli team also recognized an aspect of the conflict that was completely unknown before.

Immediately inside the city, the surface levels opposite the siege ramp were suspiciously high. The British excavators believed that this accumulation was another area of collapsed fortifications, but when the Tel Aviv expedition began to dig into the layers, they found an intentionally-constructed "counter-rampart" built against the forward face of the Assyrian siege ramp. It now seems that in the final stages of the siege of the city, after the Assyrian rams had broken through the city wall, the people of Lachish frantically piled hundreds of tons of earth into the breach, partially destroying their own city as a last attempt at its defense. This element of the battle did not appear on the official depictions of Sennacherib's great victory; the king apparently had no desire to memorialize the defensive efforts of his Judean foes. Like the defenders of Masada almost 800 years later, the people of Lachish tried to forestall their inevitable conquest by the world's greatest superpower, and like them also, their desperate defense tragically failed.

This historical lesson has provided an emotional theme for the Israeli excavators that the previous British excavators at the site could not appreciate. To Professor Ussiskin and the other staff members, Tel Lachish is not just a rich archaeological deposit, it is a direct link to their country's history. As Ussiskin recently wrote in the journal Biblical Archaeologist, speaking for the younger generation of Israeli

scholars, "this connection with the Old Testament, with the Biblical sources, is deeply emotional, and it gives us special satisfaction, even happiness, when working in the profession of archaeology." To speak of "happiness" in connection with the conquest of Lachish may sound ironic, yet there is no question that there is a certain satisfaction to be gained from seeing the circumstances of that Biblical tragedy clearly for the first time.

The Tel Aviv University dig at Lachish will continue for several more seasons; at the time of my visit this summer, the team was concentrating on the excavation of the interior areas of the city destroyed during Sennacherib's conquest. And it is there, among the burnt and looted buildings, that their work can differ most dramatically from that of their predecessors. By beginning to examine the changes in the economic and social life of Lachish in the late 8th century BC, the excavators may be able to discover the underlying reasons why the Assyrian siege of Lachish took place. And by combining personal involvement with modern, analytical archaeology, the team may soon provide an object lesson on the links between society, culture, and military confrontation that may shed some new light on the situation in which the State of Israel finds itself today.

3. Every Last Detail: Tel Miqne-Ekron

Tel Miqne is a world apart from Tel Lachish in a number of ways. The mound itself is a sprawling low rise, barely distinguishable from the surrounding kibbutz cotton fields, not a towering citadel like Lachish. Miqne's most famous ancient inhabitants were also quite different; they were not Judeans, but the Bible's favorite villains, the Philistines. Most significant of all, the remains of the city's destruction at the hands of a hostile enemy have already provided the evidence for which the excavators of Lachish are still searching. The subtle details of agricultural installations and economic systems-- rather than conventional historical illustrations-- are the building blocks of Tel Miqne's emerging social and economic history.

The joint American-Israeli expedition to Tel Miqne is the result of a fortunate confluence of interests: Professor Sy Gitin, director of the American-sponsored W.F. Albright Institute for Archaeological Research, was anxious to resolve the longstanding tension between American and Israeli field methods, and Professor Trude Dothan, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was equally anxious to pursue her career-long investigation of the material culture of the ancient Philistines. These two scholars have brought together a wide-ranging staff of specialists to investigate every facet of the archaeological record. And in addition to supervising the work of excavation and analysis, they have established a field school at their excavation camp to train a new generation of Israeli and American archaeology students in the principles of a shared excavation technique.

Traditionally, the methodological debates between American and Israeli archaeologists have centered on a difference of emphasis. The approach of the Israelis has long been what is called the "architectural" method; that is, to uncover complete building complexes over a large area and to trace their structural history. For Americans, stratigraphy-- the superimposition of successive layers of settlement-- has been more important, so they have often concentrated on deep vertical sections rather than extensive horizontal areas. In recent years the two techniques have begun to merge, and the excavation of Tel Miqne has already shown that each of the methods is only partially effective and that the cooperation of both, working together, is absolutely necessary.

Most scholars now believe that Tel Migne was the site of the Philistine city of Ekron, one of the five Philistine capitals, and the center of the cult of the mysterious god Ba'al-zebub.^{*} But that identification is only the start of the archaeological problem, for the scattered, hostile Biblical references to Ekron offer little reliable information on the development of the city, its relationship to the nearby Israelite settlements, or the precise nature of its cult. In the case of Tel Migne, therefore, the process of discovery is, in a sense, the reverse of that of Tel Lachish. There, the Biblical references provided a framework for understanding the archaeological findings, while at Tel Migne, archaeology must now provide a framework for understanding the city's fragmented and incomplete written history.

Nowhere at Tel Migne is this clearer than in Field III SE, an extensive area of excavation on the southern slope of the tell. The work of the first two seasons concentrated on a deep section on the northeastern slope of the ancient city, where the excavators uncovered a complex series of superimposed levels that revealed evidence for the first appearance and settlement of the Philistines around 1200 BC. The work on the southern side of the tell, although still in its early stages, has already brought to light remains of the final stages of the Philistines' culture and its destruction by the Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar in 603 BC.

The finds from Field III SE were dramatic; immediately beneath the thick layer of ash and collapsed walls that marked the Babylonian destruction, the team located the ruins of a huge agricultural processing center for the manufacture of olive oil. Even before the beginning of the excavation, the stone basins of 88 olive presses were found lying on the surface around the perimeter of the city, but here a complete press and its associated installations were discovered for the first time. The fact that this complex was in operation at the time of the city's destruction was obvious; near the presses were heavy stone weights used for downward pressure in the olive crushing, and near them, the charred remains of the wooden levers of the oil presses themselves.

The end of the city must have come quickly, during the harvest season, for the rooms adjoining the presses were filled with rows of oil storage jars that were crushed by the collapse of the building's upper stories and walls. In one of these rooms came a surprising collection of cult-related objects: a cache of iron agricultural tools, a stone platform for offerings, and an altar for incense or sacrifice. And it was this connection between cult and harvest, and between harvest and destruction that provided a challenge of interpretation that neither the Israeli "architectural" method or the American "stratigraphic" method could deal with alone.

For the most part, archaeologists (of all nationalities) have not questioned the ethnic distinction between Israelites and Philistines so vividly maintained in the

* The satanic associations of this god are relatively late, archaeologically speaking. They derive from a passage in the Gospel of Matthew (12:24), where Jesus calls him "Prince of the Devils," a religiously motivated condemnation of the survival of the ancient folk religion of Canaan. At the time of the Philistines (c.1200 - c.600 BC), the god was a widely-worshipped agricultural deity, probably still known by his original title, Ba'al-zebul, "the princely lord." The transformation of the name to Ba'al-zebub, "Lord of the Flies," appears for the first time in the Second Book of Kings (1:2-3), where it, too, may express religious condemnation in the form of a play on words.

Bible, but the finds from Tel Migne are now hinting at a complex system of interaction between the two groups. The last recorded king of Ekron, Ikausu, bears a distinctively Philistine name, reminiscent of the name of the Philistine king Achish who reigned during the Israelites' wars with the Philistines around 1000 BC. Yet it now seems that the continued hostility of the Israelites to the Philistines may be more literary than historical, for the scale of the olive press complex uncovered at Tel Migne indicates that Ekron may have served as a regional center for the manufacture of olive oil. And since the most abundant olive-growing regions lie in the hills to the east, in Israelite territory, the Philistine center obviously provided a vital market and service to the Israelite (or, more properly, Judean) farmers in the surrounding territory at the end of the Iron Age.

That's why the destruction of the city at the hands of the Babylonian armies in the autumn of 603 BC can now be seen as a tragedy for both peoples, not just-- as the prophet Jeremiah would have us believe-- as divine vengeance wreaked by God's agent on the Israelites' enemies. The oil press complex at Ekron was never reconstructed, and in the succeeding period, with the Babylonian conquest of Judah, the entire region lapsed into decline. In retrospect, the Biblical references to the idolatrous appeal of Ekron's god Ba'al-zebul to the Israelites can now be seen in a new light. Perhaps this "idolatry" can now be understood as a function of the economic interaction between Israelites and Philistines.

With the Tel Migne excavations now concluded for another season, the Israeli and American specialists involved in the project are beginning their analysis of the pottery, animal bones, olive pits, ash material, and other remains in the industrial complex in an attempt to reconstruct the life of the city at the time of its death. Other scholars will soon have the benefit of their findings for a reassessment of the traditional ideas about ethnic interaction at the end of the Iron Age. More important, I think, is the practical lesson they'll be offered: how an archaeological dig can begin, not only with a specific historical problem, but with the even more difficult task of getting the adherents of two separate approaches to history to work together effectively in the field.

4. Against All the Odds: Tel Ashkelon

Every archaeologist who has ever attempted to excavate the seaside mound of Ashkelon has taken a professional risk. The archaeological richness of the site is almost legendary; from the time of its establishment in the Middle Bronze Age (c.2000 BC) to the end of its permanent occupation during the Third Crusade (1192 AD), layer after layer of floors, rubble, and new constructions raised its plateau to its present height of more than forty feet above the surrounding terrain. The records of its history are equally congested: from the time of its conquest by the pharaohs of New Kingdom Egypt, through the campaigns of Joshua, who failed to capture the city, through its existence as a major harbor for the Philistines, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Fatimids, and Crusaders, Ashkelon remained a center of interest and fascination for many peoples*, a

* Not many other ancient cities, for instance, have vegetables named after them. In the Middle Ages, when European traders and pilgrims landed at Ascalon (as it was known in Latin), many took a special liking to a peculiar type of green onion that grew in the vicinity. When they brought it back to Europe, they gave it the name of its birthplace. It is still known as the scallion today.

bustling emporium for the entire Mediterranean world. The tightly-packed archaeological and historical evidence contained in the city's ruins makes it one of the most intriguing-- and difficult-- sites for excavation in the entire country. But Professor Lawrence Stager of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute and director of the new excavations is determined to succeed at Ashkelon where others have failed.

Stager's predecessors have left a long trail of disappointments behind them, for during almost two centuries of archaeological work in this country, Ashkelon's ruins have withstood even the most determined archaeological attacks. In 1815, Lady Hester Stanhope, an intrepid if eccentric English explorer, searched the site in vain for an ancient treasure that she had been led to believe was buried there. In more recent times, just after World War I, an expedition of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem arrived at Ashkelon to excavate the Philistine levels, but they learned, at great cost and to their great disappointment, that the succeeding strata of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, early Islamic, and Crusader occupation were so thick and had caused so much damage to the earlier levels that it was fruitless to attempt the excavation of a single level from this complex tell.

Professor Larry Stager's enthusiasm is undimmed by pessimistic talk of his predecessors' failures; he is convinced that he can uncover valuable new evidence about the development of ancient civilization at Ashkelon. In the 63 years that have passed since the last full-scale excavation, archaeological techniques have significantly improved. What's more, the new American expedition is supported by generous funding, and with their plans to dig at the site for the next decade, they can allow themselves the luxury of a slow and painstaking descent through the thick layers of superimposed debris. Like the earlier excavators, Stager and his team have high hopes of discovering new evidence about the Philistines, whose advanced, Aegean-inspired culture stands in sharp contrast to the negative Biblical accounts. The first season of digging this summer yielded only a handful of fragments of Philistine pottery, yet there was no cause for disappointment. The Americans have already made a number of discoveries that challenge the accepted understandings of other ancient peoples as well.

Up at the top of the mound, for instance, very close to the starting point of the long dig downward toward the Philistine levels, the excavators have cleared a large area of the Byzantine city (c.350 - c.650 AD) that has provided an unexpected insight into the texture of life in the Holy Land during the early centuries of Christianity. Most scholars, taking the chronicles of the Church Fathers at face value, are accustomed to thinking of the Byzantine period as a grimly pious time. But the value of modern archaeology is that it sometimes provides evidence of aspects of history that were omitted from the official records. And one such case has come from the excavation of an unusual bathhouse complex, dated to the 5th century AD.

At first, this bathhouse seemed similar to the countless other bathing establishments found throughout the Late Roman world. Mosaic pavements covered the floors of its rooms and courtyards, some of which also contained plastered pools. But as the debris covering the floors was excavated, it gradually became clear that this establishment may have provided its customers with more than just towels, soap, and water. In one of the rooms, the excavators found an explicit, pornographic oil lamp, showing a naked Byzantine couple in a particularly compromising pose. And when the main entrance of the building was cleared of the overlying rubble, it was found to bear a painted inscription that made the building's function quite clear. A hand-lettered Greek sign next to the main entrance may have lured otherwise pious Byzantine pilgrims and sailors from the path of righteousness with the seductive suggestion: "Come in and Enjoy Yourselves!"

Out near the line of the Crusader fortifications, another unexpected and highly revealing find came to light. The towering walls of the Crusader city are dramatic testimony to the intensity of the 200 year struggle waged between the forces of Islam and Christianity for control of this port city, and the excavators hoped that a careful examination of the successive destructions and rebuildings would document the stages in the conflict. According to the medieval sources, the control of Ashkelon passed back and forth repeatedly, and with almost every change in fortune, the city walls were destroyed. Yet it now seems that the battle lines for Ashkelon might not have been drawn so tightly. When the team began to excavate a section of the wall near the eastern gate, they discovered a small church built into the inner face of the rampart that suddenly challenged some of the most fondly held preconceptions about the bitter cultural enmity between Crusaders and Saracens.

The church was built according to the usual plan of other 12th century AD Crusader churches, with a high, central apse flanked by small chapels on both sides. The inner wall of the apse bore a huge fresco of the Virgin Mary, who was invoked as the city's protectress, and the excavators found that the side chapels were decorated with frescoes as well. These additional frescoes bore painted inscriptions commemorating donations for the upkeep of the church. That in itself was not surprising, it was rather the ethnic associations of the dedications that attracted the excavators' interest. For in addition to the expectable Greek and Latin memorials was an inscription praising the piety and devotion of the congregation in well-formed Arabic script.

The previous excavators of Ashkelon gambled their funding and future on their single-minded attempts to get down to the level of the Philistines. The attraction of that ancient people for modern scholars arose from the Philistines' unique cultural contradiction to the conventional understandings of Biblical history. Stager and his team are also intent on uncovering the Philistine city, but in their first season of digging at Ashkelon, they may have discovered the secret of archaeological success. The new excavations have already begun to show that many ancient people have their unexpected facets, and if the team is able to savor the surprises of every level of the city, they will be different from all the previous excavators. They will have taken the gamble that the massive ruins of Ashkelon offer and they will have won.

5. The Birth of a Monument: Jerusalem, "The City of David"

The hottest archaeological ticket in Jerusalem this summer was an invitation to the grand opening of a national park. Jerusalem's city planners and politicians-- as well as its archaeologists-- thronged down to the southern slope of the Temple Mount to hear speeches by the mayor and the minister of education about what a great addition to the national heritage the "City of David Archaeological Garden" would be. Within a few days of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the restored and landscaped remains of the Early Iron Age city of Jerusalem became one of the capital's most popular tourist spots. No less important, the successful completion of these excavations at the traditional site of King David and King Solomon's palace and citadel marked a temporary triumph in a modern religious struggle whose ultimate outcome is still very much in doubt.

Four summers ago, chanting crowds of bearded, black-coated protestors tried everything in their power, including violence, to shut the City of David excavations down. Their contention was that the area was the site of a medieval Jewish cemetery and that the digging there was nothing less than the callous desecration of ancient Jewish graves. In response, a panel of the country's most prominent archaeologists

and historians proved convincingly that there was never a cemetery at the site of the excavations, but their opponents refused to accept the evidence. The Sephardi and Ashkenazi chief rabbis issued a demand for an immediate end to the excavations and even threatened to excommunicate the minister of education if he refused to carry the order out.

Naturally, the real issue at stake was more than just the few bone chips that the protestors claimed they found in the piles of earth dumped down the slope by the excavation team. The struggle was for political and spiritual power within modern Israel, for the exclusive religious prerogative to interpret Jewish history and the significance of the Biblical text. For centuries the rabbinical authorities had reserved for themselves the right to speak definitively about Kings David and Solomon and about their glorious ancient city. But now they found themselves face-to-face with competing scholars trained in the subtleties of ancient pottery and architecture, not religious texts. And what was worse, the impious curiosity of the archaeologists was defended by barricades and riot police.

Professor Yigal Shiloh, the director of the excavations, emerged from the confrontation as the spokesman for academic freedom in the face of a religious attack. He and his colleagues at the Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University, having failed at their attempts at reason, obtained a Supreme Court ruling that overturned the initial rabbinical ban on the dig. In the atmosphere of an impending government crisis, Israel's attorney general arranged a compromise between the opposing parties that permitted a resumption of work at the site. And even though not a single medieval Jewish grave was uncovered in the subsequent seasons of digging, the leaders of the protest-- the ultra-orthodox faction that calls itself Naturei Karta, "The Guardians of the City"-- were not satisfied. Their continuing vandalism, even now, at the City of David Archaeological Garden serves as clear warning that they see the archaeologists as their spiritual enemies.

The conflict between religious fundamentalism and archaeology is underway in many Middle Eastern countries, but in Israel it has taken an uncharacteristic form. Throughout the Muslim world, religious opposition to excavations has been directed mainly against investigations of the Jahiliya, or pre-Islamic period; the excavation of Islamic remains (with the exception of cemeteries) is seen as commendable validation for the ancient splendor of the Faith. In Israel, the problem is different, for the excavation of remains of the Biblical periods is seen as an insidious challenge to traditional religious authority. And in a sense, there is some logic to that viewpoint, for the City of David excavations, among many others, have subtly changed the historical scheme of things. By placing the remains from the time of David and Solomon in a continuum that extends from the Chalcolithic period to the present, they have robbed the Biblical period of its previous chronological sanctity.

Every visitor to the City of David Archaeological Garden can see the continuum clearly as he or she wanders through the carefully landscaped and labelled building remains. The ruins of every period of Jerusalem's long history rise from those of their predecessors and form the foundations for the ruins above them. Taken together, these layers forge the separate cultures and historical periods into a single monument to the city's continuity. Maybe there is good reason for the fundamentalists' battle with archaeologists in Jerusalem. The impact of archaeology is to break down the barriers of sectarian interpretation and to link the country's cultural development with ancient civilization everywhere else in the world.

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Each of the excavations I visited this summer represented a unique perspective on some of the most pressing problems facing Israeli archaeology-- and society-- today. Each excavation attacked more than a specific historical problem; its approach to the interpretation of artifacts and settlement levels reflected the new archaeological concern with understanding the mechanics of ancient societies rather than just historical events. The fact that the same problems of economics, military conquest, and ethnic interaction are facing the State of Israel holds out at least the possibility that archaeologists may be able to play a role in understanding the mechanics of modern society as well.

I don't mean to say that archaeology can be a miraculous cure-all for a modern society's problems. It's just that there seemed to me to be the discussion of new ideas in at least some of the excavations in Israel this summer that contrasted with the general political atmosphere. The attempt at finding new solutions and understandings to age-old questions may not transfer easily from the Bronze or Iron Age to the present, but I think that it would be worthwhile for archaeologists in Israel-- as elsewhere-- to apply themselves to the practical application of their work. Otherwise, archaeology is in danger of becoming increasingly insulated and irrelevant, and the summer of 1985, like all the recent summers, will be remembered as just another season of digging in the ruins without having accomplished any lasting changes at all.

Best Regards,

Neil

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