



Masada: Mosaic floor and stone bins.

Probably no country uses archaeology as an instrument of national solidarity so consciously as Israel. "Archaeology has supplied a wider view of the biblical past and has discovered trends in Jewish history which have disappeared from literature in the course of time," says the authoritative *Encyclopedia Judaica*. "It is also a vital factor in the linking of Jewish national consciousness to the soil of Israel." A leading Israeli archaeologist states the issue more prosaically: "Archaeology has become the national sport."

Each year, hundreds of students from universities throughout Israel and several other countries (principally the United States) swarm over dozens of the nation's active digs, under the supervision of resi-

dent specialists. With tools as coarse as bulldozers or as fine as brushes, they help strip away the meters-deep rubble that may represent, in its successive layers, as much as 10,000 years of settlement.

Such discoveries have immediate ethnic and religious significance. To the modern state of Israel, the revelations are taken as evidence for strong cultural ties to the Promised Land. To religious scholars, still pondering why all three of the dominant Western religions should have sprung from common roots among the patriarchs of obscure nomadic tribes that apparently moved into the region in the second millennium B.C., archaeology gives hope for filling gaps left by traditional sources.

But historians and anthropologists are also taking a second look at this region. Though Palestine was often just a pawn

ARCHAEOLOGY IN ISRAEL: THE LIVING PAST

New finds may illuminate the cloudy past, but many bear emotional overtones

BY JOHN H. DOUGLAS



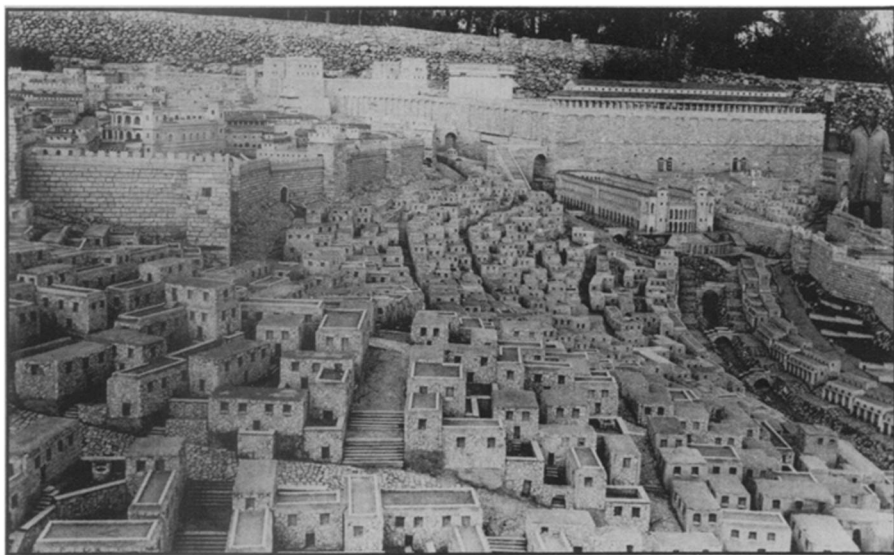
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After the 1967 war, the Israeli Government encouraged archaeologists to launch excavations in the occupied territories. In the Sinai, such efforts have turned up remnants of 800 ancient settlements just along the northern coastal border, including the major trading city of Kassrhit (SN: 11/22/75, p. 326). In the Old City of Jerusalem, researchers first concentrated on determining the structure of the area surrounding the great Second Temple, destroyed by Roman legions in A.D. 70. More recently, fortifications from the time of Solomon's First Temple

shuttled back and forth among the great empires that surrounded it, a new appreciation is developing for the role its inhabitants played in promoting trade among the "superpowers" of the day. Also, as one looks back toward the first coalescing of people into urban societies, the towns of Canaan represent some of the earliest examples of such settlement, revealing the same mysterious blend of sophistication and fragility that is so evident in our own cities.

The active excavations at one ancient city, Aphek, illustrate many of the lessons that can be learned from present archaeological efforts, as well as the inordinate amount of patient physical labor involved. Called Antipatris during Roman times, the 30-acre mound at Aphek contains traces of settlement going back to the third millennium B.C. It is first mentioned in the Bible as one of the Canaanite cities conquered by Joshua, and later as the border town at which the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant.

Last year, archaeologists at Aphek uncovered a 13th-century B.C. tomb containing artifacts that indicate the presence of an affluent Canaanite city at this location on the eve of the Israelite conquest. Pottery vessels of Cypriot and Mycenaean origin attest to a lively international trade, and a bronze dagger and gold earrings indicate a high level of craftsmanship and taste for luxury (at least for some). The first instance of urban planning prior to classical times is evident in the orderly layout of houses, even at the earliest periods. The presence of buttressed city walls dating to the early second millennium flatly contradicts the theories of some specialists that cities did not have such fortifications in the Middle Bronze Age



Three figurines of the Semitic fertility goddess, Astarte, above. Scale model of the ancient city of Jerusalem, facing Temple Mount and Herod's palace, below.

Photos: John H. Douglas

(the time of the Patriarchs).

The discoveries at Aphek also illustrate the continuing debate among scholars over whether archaeological research "proves" the Bible (a matter of acute practical concern to those involved, since some of the excavations in the "Holy Land" are sponsored by quite conservative religious institutions). The co-director of the Aphek dig is George L. Kelm, associate professor of archaeology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the excavation sponsors. He discussed the arguments over the date and authenticity of Joshua's conquest of the Land of Canaan with *SCIENCE NEWS*, saying his own research indicates that the destruction of Aphek took place during the latter part of the 13th century B.C., while a traditional Biblical interpretation would put the date some 200 years earlier. As a result, he says he is beginning to look toward the theory of a "multiple exodus" from Egypt as a "logical compromise."

Work at Aphek involves about 150 students, mostly archaeology, history or Bible majors from Israel, the United States and Germany. They work in the field each morning, then clean and sort the finds each afternoon. In the evenings they attend lectures (some receive college credit for their work), and once a week current progress from the various sites is reported. Excavation is now in its fourth season.

While some of the questions in the back of archaeologists' minds as they dig pertain to specific events, recorded in Scripture and elsewhere, others concern the broader uncertainty of how the extremely diverse peoples of the Palestine area ever managed to coexist at all. The narrow fertile strip between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea served, for thousands of years, as a warpath for empire-building armies and as a crossroads for commerce, during times of peace. Not surprisingly, each invasion—peaceful or otherwise—left its mark.

One continuous challenge, which particularly irked the Biblical prophets and which intrigues modern researchers, was the exchange of worship customs among the various cultures. Though the First Commandment forbade the Israelites to make images of pagan gods, lovely little figurines of the Semitic fertility goddess Astarte are common finds in their houses during the Old Testament period. Researchers at Dan, traditionally the northern border town of Israel, believe they may have found the mound on which Jeroboam (first king of the northern 10 tribes after the division of Israel) erected a golden calf, presumably to emphasize religious independence from the Temple at Jerusalem, in the South. At Beersheba, the traditional southern border town, archaeologists recently found most of the parts of a horned stone altar, probably dismantled during the religious reforms of the Judean king Hezekiah (who had just

watched the northern tribes deported to oblivion by Assyria and was understandably intent on solidifying religious and political control of Judea in Jerusalem).

To the archaeologist in the field, the thought that his work may have unfathomable political or social significance may be as remote as Einstein's fears of nuclear war while first speculating about the equivalence of matter and energy. But in Jerusalem, the past exerts itself as an overwhelming political force. To Muslims, it is the site of Mohammed's ascension, and shortly before King Faisal's assassination he told an interviewer his great desire was to worship in Jerusalem before he died. To Christians, it is the site of Christ's resurrection, and the



Horned altar excavated at Beersheba.

remains of three centuries of bloody crusades aimed at retrieving His tomb are still quite evident. To Jews, it is the rightful resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, and even today signs on Temple Mount warn the faithful not to enter lest they tread unknowingly on the place where the Holy of Holies once stood. In this context, it is hardly surprising that purely technical archaeological questions (such as whether the Holy Sepulcher is where the Protestants or where the Catholics say it is) take on emotionally charged overtones.

As Israelis look to the past, they can also identify with their ancestors in more mundane matters. Never a rich country, and usually surrounded by antagonists, Palestine became a natural crossroads for trade. Archaeologists digging at Tell Sera' (probably the Biblical Ziklag) have found imported Egyptian pottery and glass from a century before the Israelite conquest, together with the first records of taxes paid under Egyptian control. So important is this continuing work, that the head of the excavation, Eliezer D. Oren of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, says it may prove to be the "missing link" between what is known from earlier Egyptian records and what is known later, from the Bible.

Commerce often resulted from the inability of a country to supply all its own needs. Until the time of David, the Philistines held a virtual monopoly on iron smelting, which placed the Israelites at a disadvantage when it came to sword

fighting, since bronze is considerably more fragile. But the sale of nonstrategic iron implements, such as plowshares, seems to have taken place in the same cautious manner as trade under present-day detente.

The scope of international trade increased spectacularly when the Phoenicians apparently reacted to Assyrian onslaughts by establishing safer colonies around the Mediterranean. They were masters at glassmaking, textiles and fine metalwork, and excavations at Samaria have revealed carvings that were probably part of the "ivory house" executed by the Phoenicians for the Israelite King Ahab. The ivory carvings display both the craftsmen's skill and their knowledge of Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs. However, Ahab carried detente too far when he humored his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, by building a temple to her god, Baal. Religious strife resulted, and the whole royal family was massacred.

Second only to the Temple, Israelis reserve their deepest emotional expression for Masada, the mountaintop fortress where 960 zealots staged the last, fatal Jewish defense against Roman legions after the fall of Jerusalem. As the destroyed Temple's remaining Western Wall has become a traditional place for refugees of a dozen nations to come to pray with tears, at Masada, young soldiers climb to swear their allegiance to the modern state of Israel.

Masada was excavated mainly in the mid-1960's by the well-known Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin. Amidst the mosaic floors and sculptured columns of a sumptuous palace, built by the paranoid Herod the Great about the time of the birth of Christ, archaeologists found simple stone bins erected by the zealots. They also uncovered the dozen huge water cisterns (with capacities up to 140,000 cubic feet each) that enabled the defenders to survive during their two-year battle, cut off entirely from the outside world.

It is to these ruins that Israeli soldiers now return to hear the words supposedly spoken by the ancient zealot leader, El Azar, urging a suicide pact when defeat was imminent: "Come! While our hands are free and can hold a sword, let them do a noble service. Let us die unenslaved by our enemies, and leave this world as free men in company with our wives and children." Then the ceremony ends with the soldiers chanting in unison, "Masada shall not fall again!"

Clearly, the passions of the Middle East are rooted in the depths of an almost unimaginable past. Archaeology not only has illuminated some of the glistening artifacts and intricate historical recesses of that past but also may provide a basis for understanding an old Arab king's final wish and the young Israeli soldiers' fervent vow. Probably only from such understanding can come peace in this troubled region. □