

SPECIAL REPORT

The Excavation of et-Tell (Ai) in 1966

G. Herbert Livingston*

For the first time in her history, Asbury Theological Seminary became involved in an excavation in Palestine during the summer months of June and July, 1966. The expedition to et-Tell was led by Dr. Joseph Callaway, Professor of Archaeology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Previously, he had spent seven seasons excavating in Palestine, the last of which had been at et-Tell in 1964.

Besides Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Asbury Theological Seminary, the excavation of et-Tell was sponsored by the Perkins School of Theology and the American School of Oriental Research. Participating institutions were the Nical Museum of Southern Seminary, the Lutheran Theological Seminary, the Harvard Semitic Museum, Furman University, Berkeley Divinity School, and Middle East College, Beirut, Lebanon. A total of twenty-four members from these institutions comprised the staff, including myself and Loal Ames, a student at Asbury Theological Seminary.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

For some time the rocky ruins of et-Tell had been of interest to Palestinian archaeologists because they seemed to fit the geographical details in the Old Testament references to Ai. The first appearance of this place name is in Genesis 12:8a which reads,

. . . and he [Abraham] removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west and Hai on the east. . . (see also Gen. 13:3).

* Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Mention of Ai occurs next in the well-known story of Joshua's efforts to move up the mountainside west of Jericho to capture the central highlands of Palestine. This story is recorded in Joshua, chapters 7 and 8. Defeated the first time, due to Achan's sin, Joshua punished Achan, made a second try to capture Ai, and succeeded. The geographical notations in this story have led some scholars of the Old Testament to believe that the Ai of Joshua's time should be identified with et-Tell also. There is a deep, wedge-shaped valley which cuts up the mountainside from Jericho and at its upper tip passes just to the north of et-Tell. Joshua's Ai is also described as "on the east side of Bethel" (Josh. 7:2).

In Ezra 2:28 and Nehemiah 7:32 there is the notation, "The men of Bethel and Ai . . .," which points to the close association of the two place names in the middle of the fifth century B.C. (cf. Isaiah 10:28).

EARLIER EXPEDITIONS

Professor John Garstang in 1928 was the first to apply the spade to et-Tell, making scattered soundings along the south wall. Mrs. Judith Marquet-Krause excavated several areas on the mound from 1933-1935 but died in 1936 without completing her work. Many of her field notes, drawings, pictures and maps have been published by her husband as field notes without analysis or evaluation.

Practically all of the excavations carried out by the French were centered about the citadel, the sanctuary, the south wall of the ruins, and the Israelite village near the citadel. A few tombs were also cleared.

In none of these diggings was there any evidence of occupation during the times of Joshua or Nehemiah. Only materials from the Early Bronze Age (2900-2500 B.C.) and from the Iron Age (Judges period) were found. A surveyor's map of et-Tell made by the French, however, shows the ruins to cover 27.5 acres. The east wall is shown on the map as a double line of dots, indicating that no evidence of its exact location had been discovered. This fact caused some doubt as to whether the ruins actually did cover twenty-seven acres, and raised the possibility that instead it was in reality much smaller.

THE 1966 SEASON

The goals of the 1966 expedition were to wrest more secrets from the remains of the citadel (Site D), from the Israelite village (Site B), from the south wall complex (Site C), and to engage in digging up a terrace just to the east and below Site B. The new area, Site G, was designated as Asbury Seminary's project and was under my direction. Due to the generous gift of a Texas rancher,

Billy Hanks, Sr., of San Angelo, Texas, work was also begun on a Christian monastery complex called Khudriya, two miles east of et-Tell. Mr. Hanks joined the staff in order to work in these ruins, which were designated as Site F. Dr. Callaway wanted to search the terrace walls, which run north and south in steps down the east slope of et-Tell, for evidences of the east wall, and to examine a ruins close by Michmash known as Khirbet Hai. The question always before the excavators was, "Where was Ai?"

METHODOLOGY

The actual digging began in a meter-wide trial trench which went to the depth of about eight inches before a change of soil became apparent, and a new strip, one meter wide, was taken down to the same level. This was repeated on across the five-meter-wide square. When this layer had been cleared away, a new trial trench was dug to the next change of soil or to the top of a wall.

Each supervisor of a square was charged with the responsibility of keeping careful records in a book provided for the purpose. Actually it was a college physics notebook. On the left page, which was a graph sheet, a drawing of all structures was accurately drawn to a 1.50 scale. On the right page copious notes were written concerning all details of soil color and texture, structure characteristics, and objects found. Each layer of soil, each structure, each sub-area was numbered. Small tags were made, two to each basket of potsherds gleaned from the soil, while others were to be attached to the sides of the deepening square with nails pushed into the firm dirt of the balk wall. The supervisor must be with his men at all times in order to make sure that the soil was carefully searched for all man-made objects, that these were properly preserved, and that the workers did their job steadily and harmoniously.

Loal and I began our work in Site B in order to learn Dr. Callaway's methods of working before opening up Site G. I was assigned the first square laid out in Site B and Loal was given charge of the second square laid out. A team of four Jordanian workmen and a "Jericho man," a native foreman, did the heavy work.

SITE G

Toward the end of the second week, Dr. Callaway decided that we were ready to open Site G on the terrace below Site B. I was to have overall supervision of this site. Three other members of the staff, including Loal, were to aid me. In practice, it developed that we worked in conjunction with Site B with a shifting of square supervisors and teams of native workers between the two sites as the needs dictated.

Nine squares were laid out in Site G; eight of them were set up in a series of pairs as soon as the wheat stubble and small stones were cleared from the terrace. The goal was to determine whether the Israelite¹ village (Iron Age I, 1200-950 B.C.) of Site B extended into Site G. A scattering of potsherds over the terrace suggested that Israelite buildings might be there. A hump along the east edge of the terrace hinted at a hidden wall beneath the surface of the soil.

Site G not only proved that the Iron Age I village was limited to Site B, but it also yielded a synoptic history of the upper terraces of et-Tell. Nine squares were opened to bedrock which lay about five feet below the surface.

The first inhabitants of the spot cut into the soft limestone to create a fairly level floor. Apparently the original superstructures were of a temporary nature. Remnants of two baking ovens and pieces of broken pottery pressed into the dirt floor were all that survived from that period. Sometime later a heavy stone wall, averaging two feet in width, was built in a roughly rectangular shape around the living area. The dirt floor continued to build up, well mixed with broken pottery, and two more baking ovens were constructed. Almost no personal effects of the inhabitants were left behind. This dwelling was of the Early Bronze Age.

The stone walls were tumbled to the east, apparently by an earthquake. During a period of perhaps 1300 years the tumbled stones of the house walls collected blown and washed-in soil and were completely covered.

After the Iron Age I village on Site B was abandoned, the terrace bearing Site G was left fallow for another 1300 years. Then the Byzantine Christians, who lived at Khudriya, farmed the terrace. They built a thin stone retaining wall several feet to the east of the Israelite wall and filled the space between with small stones gleaned from the field. With the destruction of the Christian village in the middle of the seventh century after Christ, no farming was done in this area until Arabs began to sow grain on the fields in recent years. They constructed another retaining wall about four feet east of the Byzantine wall. The Arab wall is still serving the purpose for which it was built.

Proceeding east-west and near the center of Square nine, there was a stone wall a bit more than three feet wide. On its south side

1. Recently Dr. Callaway has expressed an opinion that this village was not Israelite, but was the village, Ai, that Joshua's troops conquered.

there was an accumulation of dirt bearing broken pottery topped by a plaster floor. On the north side of the wall there was a stone-covered street six feet in width. The street was parallel to the wall and the stones were so laid that they formed rough little steps for donkeys bearing burdens.

SITE B

There was not simply one Iron Age I village on Site B, but seemingly several were built one upon the other. The latest village had cobblestone streets. All of them were poverty-stricken and water-starved. Practically every house had a cistern. A number of shaped sling stones (see Judges 20:16), a few simple storage jars, a few moulded clay animal figures, and a few trinkets were the only items left behind by the inhabitants of the village when it was abandoned.

A terrace wall on the east side of the Iron Age I houses at first appeared to have been built at that time, but an extension of my square B XV through the terrace wall proved that it was constructed by the Byzantine Christians who lived at Khudriya two miles to the east, and 1300 years later.

Beneath the terrace wall, Iron Age I house walls were found. These were built upon Early Bronze walls. A free-standing limestone pillar was uncovered in this extension still in upright position well set in a stone-lined foundation hole.

The final two days of my work in the excavation were spent supervising the clearing of dirt from the base of this standing pillar and the emptying of an Israelite water cistern which had been cut into the limestone bedrock nearby.

SITE F

Site F was laid out over the remains of the Christian monastery at Khudriya. Still rising above the ground was a large square stone baptismal font. A depression in the shape of a cross had been carved into the stone from the top. Individuals could crouch in this depression, or infants could be placed here for baptism. Floors of beautiful mosaics had been laid out in patterns of Christian symbols. The colors in these mosaics were created with blue, red, yellow and white stones. The main walls and many rooms were uncovered. Coins, pottery and ornaments were discovered in the ruins.

Fifteen tombs were cleared of their contents. These tombs were found near Khudriya and dated from the Middle Bronze Age II (1750-1550 B.C.), the Herodian Age (time of Christ), the Roman period (until about 300 A.D.), and the Byzantine period (300-600 A.D.). The

tombs had been entered previously but yielded lamps, glassware, pottery, and ossuaries, besides coins.

RESULTS

Briefly, the summer's operation may be classed as a success. It yielded the following results and challenges for future activity.

While excavating the five sites on or near et-Tell, the staff visited a ruins near Michmash called Khirbet Hai. Examination of pottery pieces at the site revealed that Khirbet Hai had been the home of Mamluk Muslims of about the twelfth century A.D.

One afternoon Dr. Callaway, Dr. Schoonover of Perkins School of Theology, and I spent two hours examining the lower terrace walls of et-Tell for the east wall of the Early Bronze city. It had never been located. Finally, working along a broad terrace, we spotted evidences of the Early Bronze wall in three places, mostly at the base of terrace walls. The stone work was distinctive and correlated with that known around the acropolis, where the sanctuary and the citadel were located. The discovery of the afternoon confirmed the tentative lines for the wall drawn on the French map of 1935.

Evidence accumulated so far shows that et-Tell covered an area of 27.5 acres and at the start was built on the bare limestone outcropping which can still be seen on the hills close by. A date of about 2900 B.C. seems to mark the beginnings of the city. Everything points to the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom as the architects and the rulers of the original city. Et-Tell sits at the crossroads of the ancient east-west and the north-south trade routes of Palestine, so it served as a strategic point of control.

The Egyptians built the city with powerful walls. At the western tip, just back of the sanctuary, the stone walls are still almost sixty feet thick. The walls at Site C on the south side are a complex of three structures. The great inner wall is about twenty feet wide, with two parallel outer walls, giving a combined width of almost forty feet, being twelve feet high.

The high point of et-Tell is at the west end. There one has a breathtaking panorama of Jerusalem on the south horizon, the Dead Sea and the Jordan River valley yawning wide and deep to the east, and rugged, barren hills to the north. Here is situated the palace citadel of dressed stone masonry laid in brickwork pattern.

In the citadel's four-hundred-year history there were at least two major destructions. The first resulted from an earthquake and the second from violent conquest, leaving in its wake the remains of ashes and chaos. The end of the citadel and of the city came soon after the building of the Great Pyramids of Egypt and the decline of

the Old Kingdom. The upper part of the city remained in ruins without inhabitants for about 1300 years.

Dr. Callaway is planning another expedition to et-Tell in the summer of 1968. It is anticipated that the results of that season will answer many questions about Ai. Asbury Seminary hopes to again participate.