

Tel Beth-Shemesh Report, 2012

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As usual, the last week of the dig was hectic. We are always trying to penetrate further into the levels as well as tidy things up for the final photographs and make sure that we have recorded everything appropriately.

While our goal ultimately is to reach the Late Bronze Age palace (which will apparently not occur for probably two more years), our attention was often diverted to the monumental building that initially came to light last year, but which was further exposed this year. The building dates from the 11th century (and perhaps into the late 12th). It has substantial walls and everything about it points to some kind of ritual/cultic function. The date would put it in the early period of the Israelites, but there has been nothing explicit to indicate this. There is a fairly clear effort of the ancient Beth-shemesh inhabitants to differentiate themselves from the recently arrived Sea Peoples (think here “Philistines”) and the theories to explain this differentiation vary with the scholar who presents the data. For those who subscribe to any credibility from the Bible, this would be the arrival of the Israelites and their influence upon at least some of the Canaanites to join forces with them (cf. for instance the Gibeonites who quickly aligned with the Israelites; Josh 9).

The monumental building (which, for the time being we accommodatingly refer to as “the temple”), has three large flat stones, two of which have evidence of some kind of liquid association. I described the eastern-most stone last week. In the far western end of the building we found an extremely high concentration of animal bones. A similar concentration occurred in the narrow passage between the eastern wall of the structure and a large revetment wall which clearly was designed to highlight a large circular stone structure (a “high place”?).



A high concentration of painted vessels was found around the middle stone. Among these were at least six chalices along with other elaborate vessels designed to hold liquids. At least one of these, called a pyxis, is being tested to determine what might have been the contents of that specific vessel. One of the challenges from the work is that few of the painted vessels are fully restorable! We do not know what happened to the other fragments.



We had brainstormed to try to figure out how the building might have been used. One theory suggests that animals were slaughtered on the stones and the blood flowed from the stone(s) into vessels and then the bodies of the animals were placed on the round platform to be picked clean

by nature and the wild animals.

I question the accuracy of this interpretation in view of the fact that there appears to be no evidence of blood stains (or any stains) on the stone, the circular structure preserved no evidence of either burning on its surface or bones within the stones. Admittedly it may have been covered with a plaster surface which has since deteriorated, but even that is open to question since there is no evidence of the “high place” having been plastered.. The classic round open “altar” at Megiddo (while predating our structure by over thousand years) had burned bones scattered among the stones. Additionally, the Mt. Ebal site which is much closer in time to our structure also preserved bone evidence within the matrix of the stones.

Another suggestion is that there may have been some kind of water/libation offering associated with the structure. Interestingly, the Bible notes two episodes of water being poured out to the Lord at times that are roughly contemporary with the time of our monumental building. One was when Samuel gathered Israel in anticipation of a battle against the Philistines: “So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day...” (1 Sam 7:6). The other is a bit later when David longs for water from the well at Bethlehem apparently while he was in hiding at the cave of Adullam in his flight from Saul. Three of his “mighty men” broke through the ranks of the Philistines who apparently had custody of Bethlehem and they drew water from the well and brought it to David. David refused to drink it and “poured it out to the Lord...” (2 Sam 23:16). Admittedly a weakness of this interpretation to our monumental building is the fact that these episodes are described to have taken place in basically open areas and not in a monumental, ritual structure (although the episode at Mizpah may have involved a building of some kind, but this is not stated).

A third interpretation tentatively proposed is that the cup basin within the stones was designed to hold an asherah pole. These artifacts apparently represented the fertility goddess, Asherah. A weakness of this interpretation is that the small basins seem to be too shallow to hold a pole unless the pole was stabilized in the ceiling somehow, for which we have no evidence.

Ultimately we are stymied by the building, but its ritual orientation seems clear and we will certainly continue the investigation.

Professor Amihai Mazar of Hebrew University visited and almost immediately and without any prompting of interpretation, noted that the building must have had a ritual function. Mazar stated that he had never seen any buildings laid out like the one we had discovered.

Descriptions to Professor Dever, my major professor and now retired from the University of Arizona, prompted the same assessment of the function of the building.

Another interesting find was a small stamp seal in a layer dating to the late 12th/early 11th century BC. It shows a figure of an animal facing right and you might note the figure of a



person on the right edge of the seal. Interestingly some of the students interpreted it as a figure of Samson and the lion—an episode that is narrated in the book of Judges (14:5-6, 8). The Bible notes that Samson killed a lion with his bare hands. The seal became a centerpiece of the T-shirt for the year, but it is questionable if the seal was intended originally to commemorate the event narrated in Judges (although the episode would have occurred just a little earlier than the date of the layer of soil in which the seal was found).

We are anxious to return to the site next year, but our investigation may take a different turn as we pursue the finds surrounding the Late Bronze Age “palace” that has already yielded a number of unique and tantalizing finds. WE NEED MORE PEOPLE AND MONEY!!!!

(because of the length of this “final” report, I have split it into two parts –DW.M)