

## Harding University Greece, Fall 2010 (Report #4)

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It seems like an eternity since I last wrote, but only 23 days have passed, 19 of which were on a trip to Egypt, Jordan and Israel. In view of the array of sites we have seen, I will divide the report into two parts; the first will focus on Egypt and the second (report #5) will be about Jordan and Israel.

Our departure was early on November 1—the day after most of us participated in the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the marathon. None of us ran the 26+ miles and most of us only participated in the 5K run (for Sharon and me it was a 5K walk, but we had a great time). The intensity of the events of the day (not so much the walk, but the accompanying hubbub) made for some tiredness that lingered to the day of our departure to Egypt. Arriving in Egypt we immediately (well, if you can call anything in Egypt as immediate) went to the Cairo Museum. The museum opened in 1902 and houses a huge collection gathered from the long history of excavation and exploration in Egypt. Sadly, the museum has experienced little updating and most of it has no climate control and dust is all over. The irony in this is that they will not permit any photography by tourists. It was quite frustrating to see the artifacts and not be able to photograph any of them—even without flash!

Our visit was for about 3 hours duration, which for most of the students was probably more than enough, but Sharon and I were able to see a number of features that we had never seen before. One was a wooden statue of a man, dating from about 2600 BC. The eyes were a kind of stone and were so perfectly placed that it looked like he could see you! Rather eerie. In my opinion the artistry unequivocally rivaled that of the artistry of the “charioteer” at Delphi.

In the evening we took a sleeper train from Cairo to Luxor which was a wild experience in itself. We were served a meal on the train, not quite to the standards of an airline meal and then made the effort to sleep overnight. The toilets on the train consisted of a “normal” seat, but the bottom dropped straight off onto the tracks—you might call it the “direct deposit” system. The romance walking along a train track suddenly faded! We managed to “sleep” well enough that we were not totally exhausted, but we were a bit jaded through the day.

In Luxor we boarded a cruise boat that would serve as our floating hotel for the next four nights and it was a very welcome change from the train. It was easy to imagine a classic 1920s-1930s cruise, visiting the sites along the way.

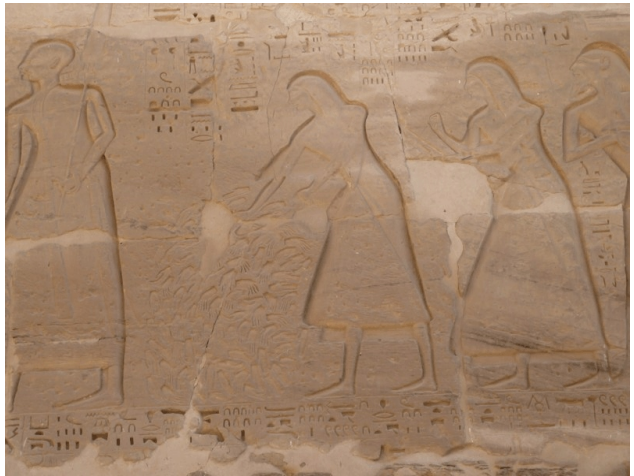
One of our visits was to the Luxor temple at night. The photograph shows the opening pylon with the rows of sphinxes lining the road. This row of sphinxes lead northward just a few kilometers to the Karnak complex



which we also visited.

Later we visited the Valley of the Kings which had interred the remains of the kings of the New Kingdom down to Ramses IX. It was here that the intact tomb of Tutankhamun was discovered in 1922. The Egyptians require a special, additional fee to enter his tomb and it is not elaborately decorated. It does, however, have Tut's mummy in the room. The body was recently returned to its resting place (and open to display in a sealed glass chamber) after being treated to deter its deterioration. We chose not to pay the cost but instead visited three other tombs that were part of the entry fee and which were much more elaborately decorated. The amount of work expended to make these burial chambers is mind-boggling. One wonders how much more the Egyptians could have accomplished if the people had been working with something more productive to society and culture in general.

In the afternoon we visited an alabaster shop where they demonstrated how the ancient people would produce the stone pieces (we have discovered imported alabaster pieces in our excavations at Beth-shemesh). Later we visited the mortuary complex of Ramses III who fought against the Sea Peoples as they migrated into the eastern Mediterranean world (the Sea Peoples included the Philistines as part of the tribal confederations). He portrays his battle against them on the walls of the temple. One of the peculiar scenes is of a man counting the amputated hands of the deceased and piling them up (see accompanying photo). There is an allusion to this ancient practice in the book of Judges when the people of Succoth ask Gideon: "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand,...?" (Jdg 8:6)—essentially asking "Have you killed them already?"



Our cruise continued along the Nile and we were able to enjoy the life along the river in many ways as it would have appeared in biblical times. The photo shows a man filling his water containers in the river after which he will load them onto the donkey-driven cart to his left. Many such images of everyday life appear along the river. Many of the houses are still made out of mudbrick. It was not unusual to see folks riding their donkeys in the fields and on one occasion I saw a man plowing with his cows (regretfully I did not have my camera ready to snatch that one). We are certainly a blessed people, but it is interesting to see the contentedness of the people in spite of



their plight.

After reaching Aswan, we visited a number of sites, but one of the most interesting to me was a cruise on the Nile (in a motorboat) through what had been the old cataract. The cataract area is navigable in a relatively small boat, but the area is grown up with lush vegetation along the banks. This was the traditional southern border of Egypt and served as a natural barrier for the folks from the south who might try to invade. The desert was normally difficult, and the rapids on the river were too dangerous to try to navigate, so this helped ancient Egypt to develop relatively unmolested.

An island just north of the rapids is called Elephantine and was the scene of an exilic period Jewish temple, probably built by refugees who left Judah during the time of Jeremiah. Excavations on the island have yielded ruins of the religious area, but more importantly are numerous papyrus manuscripts including correspondence to ancient Jerusalem and Samaria in which the Jewish people seek permission to rebuild a temple that the Egyptians had destroyed. Some of this correspondence was written in 407 BC and was addressed to the sons of Sanballat who is mentioned in Nehemiah as a ringleader against Nehemiah (cf. Neh 4 et al.). Regretfully we were not able to visit the island itself, but to see the island from the river was still thrilling.

Our train ride from Aswan back to Cairo was longer, but somewhat more comfortable. We had a room on the end of the car, over, if not beyond the wheels and I think the wheels were out of balance—when we reached a certain speed the whole end of the car shook rather violently. I had visions of the wheel disintegrating and shattering through the floor of the car and finding ourselves flying off the rails. But.... it didn't happen.

Naturally we visited the routine sites of the pyramids and the sphinx, but this time we were able to go closer to the sphinx than I had ever had opportunity before. It was great. I had wanted to go to the stele between the paws of the sphinx to see up close the commemoration of Thutmose IV and his "Dream Stele" in which he conveys his dream to clean up and restore the sphinx—an operation that has been done many times through history.

Eventually we headed east to make our way into the Sinai desert and eventually to Jordan and Israel. On the way, however, there were still many sites to visit.

The site of Tanis gained its modern notoriety in a reference in *Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark* as the location for the ark of the covenant. The site was associated with Shishak of the Bible, although there is no direct evidence at the site of his presence. A tomb and stone sarcophagus, however, remains and is probably associated with Shishak II (more accurately in Egyptian Sheshonq II). He had been buried in the sarcophagus in a silver coffin which Sharon and I were able to see in our 2006 trip to Egypt. This later Shishak's tomb had jewelry which had belonged to the biblical



Shishak. By the way there is no actual link of Tanis with the ark. (see a link at [www.nationalgeographic.com/guides/history/ancient/tanis-egypt.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/guides/history/ancient/tanis-egypt.html)). The terrain, however, looks very similar to that in the movie and it was easy to imagine a search for the “well of the souls.” I was able to climb into the sarcophagus and “assume the position” of the deceased.

Our trip took us along the traditional route of the Exodus to an oasis called Marah (Ex 15:22-25). The bitter waters were sweetened when Moses threw a log into the spring. While we cannot be sure this was the actual site of the event, it was moving to get a feel for the change in topography and the challenges that were inevitably to face the Israelites (the photo is at Marah).



Our migration took us to one of the traditional sites of Mt. Sinai (the tradition of this site dates back only into early Christian years). I have always wanted to climb the mountain, but my knees were not going to let me do that and I wanted to reserve my resources to climb the “high place” at Petra (and it was a good thing that I skipped Mt. Sinai—I would not have been able to do both).

As we journeyed through the desolate wilderness, it was sobering to think about a group of people wandering through this for forty years. The photograph reminded me of a rag-tag group of folks eeking out their existence in a forbidding environment. In some ways, it is understandable that the Israelites grumbled, but they were in the unique position to experience first hand the mighty works of God! I wonder what I would have done!

