

2016 TEL BETH-SHEMESH, ISRAEL EXCAVATIONS - Report #3 (and other events)

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It is a volcano shaped cone, but artificially constructed (see below left). Herod the Great built an impressive palatial residence in the desert just south of Bethlehem. It was an engineering feat of dramatic proportions and commands the landscape of the region. One can easily identify it on the horizon from a number of vantage points in Jerusalem; it stands in stark contrast from its surroundings.



We visited the site our third weekend in the country. To this desert retreat, Herod had to incorporate extraordinary measures to supply water, and they included an elaborate swimming pool with an island (see photo below and rectangle in middle). Among the guests he entertained at the site was Marcus Agrippa (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.13), the son-in-law of Caesar Augustus

and who sponsored the construction of the Pantheon in Rome. Herod's building endeavors rivaled the work of the Romans in grandeur and engineering. Josephus indicates that Herod intended the Herodion to be the location of his tomb (*Wars* 1.673; *Ant.* 17:199), but efforts to locate that tomb proved elusive until the determined work of Ehud Netzer located the sarcophagus and remnants of the monument hugging the slopes of the artificially constructed cone. While there are some challenges to the identification of Herod's funerary ruins, an elaborate sarcophagus is on display in the Israel Museum, which came from the Herodion which Netzer postulated was the





one in which Herod was interred (see above left). It was broken and shattered into numerous pieces which Netzer believed resulted out of Jewish resentment after his death and the destruction of his sarcophagus was their vengeance against him.

After Herod died, the site became a focal point during the Bar Kochba Revolt in the 130s AD.¹ The site preserves a number of features associated with the Jewish rebels including a synagogue (above right), elaboration on the cistern and water systems, and foundries. Some have suggested, given the data preserved in the literature about Bar Kochba and the archaeological elements of Herodion, that this may have been Bar Kochba's command post.

On Saturday, we made an excursion to the south—the biblical Negev (cf. Gen. 12:9; 20:1 et al.)—the roaming territory of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Beersheba is one of the major sites in the Negev and was one place where Abraham lived (Gen. 21:31-33 et al.). The Bible will occasionally provide a merism to describe the range of Israel's occupation as "from Dan to Beersheba" (cf. Judg 20:1; 2 Sam 17:11 et al.).



Amos later indicated that Beersheba had become a focal point of pilgrimage for Israelites (Amos 5:5; 8:14). Excavations at the Beersheba uncovered stones of an altar that had been re-cycled to construct other buildings (see left, on-site replica). When reassembled, the stones

¹ "Bar Kochba" meaning "son of the star," was a term given to Simon bar Kosiba by Rabbi Akiba believing that Simon bar Kosiba was the Messiah. The leadership of Bar Kochba resulted in a short-lived independent Jewish state (132-135), which in turn led to a bloodbath by the Romans (under Hadrian's leadership) as they shut down the rebellion (see B. Isaac and A. Oppenheim, "Bar Kokhba (Bar Kokhba Revolt)," in *ABD* [1992], 1: 599-601). It was likely as a result in part of this second major rebellion by the Jews that Hadrian totally destroyed any remnant of the temple in 135 AD and built on top of its remains a temple dedicated to Jupiter (see Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 69.12.1).

formed a perfect “four-horned altar,” which would have been in violation of God’s directive only to bring sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem (cf. Deut. 12). Apparently, Hezekiah decommissioned the use of the altar (the altar in the photo is a reproduction of the original which is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem), using the stones to construct store houses which served to supply food resources for the people of Judah when the Assyrians threatened Judah’s security.

As you approach the reconstructed town, there is a well outside the gate, reminiscent of the one that the Bible says Abraham dug (Gen. 21:25-34). The well that you see today likely is not the one that Abraham dug (see right; elaborately reconstructed well complex with B. Vincent and B. Payne of Montgomery AL posing; it is possible that the Beersheba site that Abraham occupied is not at the current tel, but should be identified with some other site in the vicinity—names of towns often crept from place to place in antiquity).



The site of Beersheba provides a wonderful example of town planning. Streets run parallel to the exterior fortification wall with houses and structures running parallel to these features. Among the structures are a series of storage houses that were chocked full of storage



vessels (see left), again anticipating Sennacherib’s threat to the region. A huge argument in biblical studies is what were these three-part buildings were used for? Some argue they were storage buildings—as was the case with the Beersheba example. Others argue that they were stables (this is the usual interpretation of the same style of building at Megiddo and Hazor). Interestingly, we have discovered this year at Beth-Shemesh the same design building. The projects at Beersheba, Megiddo² and Hazor did not attempt to run tests on the residue and soil of the buildings to see if we might be able to

² The renewed excavations at Megiddo conducted some tests, but the findings which included evidence of the presence of dung, demonstrated that dung was all over the place on the site, perhaps as a part of the mud brick construction (see D. Cantrell and I. Finkelstein, “A Kingdom for a Horse:...” in *Megiddo IV*, vol. 2 [Tel Aviv, 2006]: 645). There is little question but that the Megiddo structures were stables.

determine their use, but we hope at least to determine the use of our building at Tel Beth-shemesh!



The last item of interest to note is the elaborate water system. It consisted of a deep depression from the top of the tel (see left) into a series of caverns to which the inhabitants channeled water. Beth-shemesh has a similarly sophisticated cistern design, as do a number of ancient sites.

Our next stop was for lunch at McDonald's, which is one of the few restaurants open on Sabbath in Israel. After lunch we headed east to Arad, a site with well-preserved ruins from the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3500-2800 BC) and in the Iron Age when Israel and Judah flourished.

The Bible mentions that the king of Arad captured some Israelites during Israel's sojourn to the Promised Land (Num. 21:1). Later the Israelites managed to kill the king of Arad during their conquest of Canaan (Josh. 12:14). While excavations have identified an inscription indicating that the site was called 'Arad,' they have not yielded results to coordinate with these biblical narratives, but it is possible that another ruin in the vicinity was named Arad at the time of the narratives.



With the Iron Age remains, the site seems to have been primarily a military outpost, but like much of Israel and Judah, the inhabitants built worship sites to rival the Temple of Jerusalem (see left). Arad preserves one of the best examples of *illicit* worship available in the form of a tripartite temple. This consists of an outer court with an altar for burnt offerings, a "holy place" to receive various offerings on benches, and the "holy of Holies" where the representation of the divine would appear. The entire system was decommissioned by Hezekiah in his

reforms and attempts to eliminate rival places of worship throughout Judah (along with Beersheba). The effort to decommission the worship, however, left elements of the worship in place since they buried the components under fill debris. The excavation uncovered two incense altars and the standing stones in the “holy of Holies (see right),” and the altar of burnt offering. The restoration work has restored these to their original locations (the incense altars and standing stone are reproductions of where they believe the items stood—the original artifacts are in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem).



Inscriptions from Arad during the final days of Judah political turmoil as dispatches were sent from place to place. One fear was of a potential attack from the Edomites (who had already established themselves in the vicinity to the south of Arad). Obadiah³ certainly indicts the Edomites for their tacit participation, if not overt participation in the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah.

It was an enjoyable and somewhat tiring weekend, but a good change of scene to refresh us for the week’s work.

During the subsequent week, we further articulated and clarified the character of the Level 3 stables/storehouses as alluded to above. One of the major efforts will be to submit samples for micro-analysis to determine if the soil possesses residue of uric acid and/or animal dung. These data should offer insight into the probable function of the structures.



Toward the end of the week, a student from Boston discovered a fertility plaque figurine dating from the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age I (see me holding at left; a more “modest” form of the figurine drawing now graces our season’s t-shirt). Regrettably, it was in fill debris and could not be evaluated more precisely. Later in the week, a student from Canada identified a gold pendant during the sifting process. The gold item consists of a disc, about the diameter of a dime; it depicted a sun disk with rays radiating from it. It had a loop at the top to attach to a chain as a necklace (we found none of the chain). The design on the item is

³ Some scholars would place Obadiah in the 9th or even 8th century BC; I, however, believe the oracle to have occurred at the end of Judah’s existence, just after Jerusalem fell in 586 BC.

intriguing in that the name of our site is “Beth-Shemesh,” meaning “house of the sun.” The name of the site implies the worship of the sun in some fashion, but whether we can legitimately connect this name with the design on the pendant is merely speculative. In my 23 seasons of excavation, this is the first gold item that has come to light while I was part of the expedition. It was indeed exciting. We are curious if the gold item had any connection with the queen whose palace we are uncovering—the disc was found very near the remains of that palace. We must wait and see!

