

# The 1973 Season of Excavations at Tell Hesbân

by

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The first two seasons of excavations at *Tell Hesbân* were carried out in the summers of 1968 and 1971. They were briefly reported in *ADAJ*, XII - XIII (1967-1968), p. 51-52 and XVII (1972), p. 15-22.<sup>1</sup> The third campaign took place from June 20 to August 14, 1973. The staff consisted of 48 overseas members - of whom about 20 were graduate students - and nine Jordanians. Three of them, Mohammad Murshed Khadija, Ali Moussa Saleh and Ibrahim Hajj-Hassan, all officials of the Department of Antiquities, served the expedition respectively as foreman and representatives of the department.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 150 other Jordanians were employed for field labor and for other duties connected with the expedition.

The expedition was again sponsored by Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and was supported by the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and private donors. As in previous seasons Siegfried H. Horn served as director and Roger S. Boraas as chief archaeologist.

This campaign was planned to be the last of three projected seasons of excavations. It had been expected that during the 1973 season the excavation of the remains of the Byzantine church on the summit of the tell would be completed, and that bedrock in most of the areas excavated previously would be reached. It was also planned to make soundings at various sites in the lower parts of the tell and carry out an archaeological survey of the areas surrounding Hesban with the dual purpose of tracing the Roman road from Esbus (*Tell Hesbân*) to Livias (*Tell er-Rame*) and thoroughly explore the *Wadi Hesbân*. Since no ancient remains of consequence earlier than the 7th century B. C. had turned up on the tell during the first two seasons it was not expected that this archaeological picture would drastically be changed.

At the outset it can be said that we did not succeed to carry out all

University Monographs," vol. VII (1973). A geological survey of the Heshbon area was published by R. G. Bullard in *AUSS*, X (1972), 129-141.

(1) Full preliminary reports of the first two seasons were published in the *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)*, VII (1969), 97-239; XI (1973), 1-144. Other reports of these seasons have appeared in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XXXII (1969), 25-41, and the *Revue Biblique*, LXXVI (1969), 395-398, LXXIX (1972), 422-426. The coins found were published by A. Terian in *AUSS*, IX (1971), 147-160; XII (1974), 35-46; and the pottery by E. N. Lugeneal and J. A. Sauer in *AUSS*, X (1972), 21-69, and by Sauer, *Heshbon Pottery 1971*, "Andrews

(2) Thanks is herewith expressed to Mr. Yacoub Oweis, Director-general of the Department of Antiquities, for having granted the excavation permit, for having loaned Mohammad Murshed Khadija to the expedition, and for a multitude of courtesies extended to the expedition's staff in general and to the director in particular.

our plans. For example, we were unable to complete the excavation of all remains of the church. Furthermore, during the 1973 excavations several new and completely unexpected features came to light, such as remains of the Iron I period consisting of strata of that period in Area C and architectural features in Area B. Also architectural remains of the Iron II/Persian period and the Hellenistic times were found as well as some remains of the Abbasid period which had previously eluded us in the excavations. The survey team was able to trace the course of the Roman road by means of numerous mile stones and by means of ruins of both ancient road stations and guard towers. Some anciently occupied sites not mentioned by previous explorers were discovered and their occupational history established on the basis of ceramic surface finds. Also several Roman and Byzantine tombs were discovered in the southwestern ancient cemetery of Hesban. Since they had been partially robbed in medieval times, though not recently, they contained, as expected, disturbed contents.

To describe the various accomplishments of this season I will start from the earliest times of occupational evidence at Hesban and proceed to more recent periods.

The survey team picked up some Early Bronze sherds on the western slope of *Tell Hesban* as well as on *Gourmeyet Hesban* which is the hill west of the tell, separated from it only by the *Wadi Majjar*. However, no Early Bronze age pottery has so far

been found in the excavations on the tell.

In fact the earliest strata (or layers) of occupation attested on *Tell Hesban* date back to the Iron I age (12th-11th century B.C.). Aside from Iron I sherds that came to light in various areas of the mound during the previous two seasons, pure Iron I layers were found for the first time this past summer in Squares C. 1 and B. 3. In the latter Square it was associated with a rock fall and the remains of a possible wall. However, the excavated sector was too small to obtain definite architectural data with regard to this earliest occupation of the site.

The Iron II/Persian age is now well represented on the tell, not only by pottery coming from fills as found during previous seasons, but also by formidable architectural structures. In Square C. 3 on the western slope of the mound, an Iron II/Persian wall was laid on a rock ledge against a higher shelf of the rock, and another buttress wall was placed against it at a right angle. Not enough has been uncovered in the space excavated to be certain of its function, but I consider it possible that these wall fragments are part of the Iron II/Persian period city wall and of an adjoining tower structure.

A very intriguing Iron age structure came to light in Square B. 1 at a depth of about ten meters underneath a five-meter-deep fill. This fill contained masses of Iron II/Persian pottery and was put down in Hellenistic times as

indicated by a few Hellenistic sherds found in it. First it was thought that bedrock was reached when a flat, rock-like, hard surface appeared (Pl. LXX). But when later on a potsherd was observed to be embedded in the supposed bedrock, a probe was made. It revealed to our great surprise that the supposed rock actually was a layer of plaster, 30 cm. thick. In fact there were three layers of plaster, one upon the other, each about 10 cm. thick (Pl. LXXI, 1). The uppermost of the three layers was almost as hard as modern concrete. Potsherds embedded in it showed that these layers of water-proof plaster had been laid on bedrock during the Iron age, and may have been the bottom of a water reservoir. Pieces of straw and other plant material embedded in the plaster were so fresh as if they had been cut from a living plant only a day or so ago. One cannot help but be reminded that the Biblical Heshbon was famous for its "fishpools at the gate of Bethrabbim," as attested in Canticles 7:4.

It is also possible that we have uncovered parts of the upper portion of the eastern retaining wall of this water basin. First a wall constructed in header-stretcher fashion of well-cut blocks of stone was excavated in Square B. 2. In its southern part its west face was covered by a thick layer of plaster. Later it was discovered that the continuation of this wall was a bedrock scarp, also plastered on its western face (Pl. LXXI, 2). In the adjacent Square B. 4, two more por-

tions of rock scarp were found, plus a huge rock, now tilted out of place by an earthquake. Its western face had evidently once formed part of the plastered rock scarp already mentioned. The various portions of rock scarp in Squares B. 2 and B. 4 and the plastered header-stretcher wall in B. 2, the western faces of which formed one straight line, had evidently once been a continuous waterproof retaining wall of a water reservoir. Only future excavations will show whether it is correct to connect the thick layer of plaster at the bottom of Square B. 1 with the plastered wall and bedrock scarps in B. 2 and B. 4, of which a sector of about 14 meters in length has so far been uncovered.

From the fill of Squares B. 1 and B. 2 came four ostraca, one containing 11 lines of writing in a good sixth-century-B.C. Aramaic script. It is a list of rations for the king and other high individuals (Pl. LXXII, 1). Another ostrakon has in its preserved part five characters scratched in lapidary style into the vessel before firing. The script on the other two Iron age ostraca is practically illegible.

During the Hellenistic period, when the city was in the hands of the Maccabees the possible water reservoir, already discussed, had probably become leaky - perhaps as the result of an earthquake - and was therefore filled in with debris that contained a great amount of earlier pottery. Evidence of Hellenistic building activity appeared also in other places. The most conspicuous

Hellenistic structure so far unearthed is the perimeter wall, excavated in Square D. 1, which surrounded the acropolis. It was founded on bedrock and remained in use almost to the end of Hesban's history. A Hellenistic/Early Roman context produced an ostrakon which contains some Greek letters and several circles. The writing does not seem to make sense and may be no more than a schoolboy's doodling.

During the Roman period when the city was known as Esbus and was a district capital a great building activity must have been carried out as is attested by the extant ruins. Most structures built by the people of Esbus at that time were founded on bedrock as the excavations in several areas revealed. It seems that most remains of earlier structures were removed and new buildings erected on the natural rock. The summit of the mound was during that time crowned by an important public building, perhaps a temple. In Square D. 3 the lowest three steps of a monumental stairway with parts of a stone balustrade were found (Pl. LXXII, 2). Although most of the remainder of this stairway was later destroyed and was therefore missing, another section of this stairway was found closer to the existing Hellenistic perimeter wall which was still in use in Roman times. Some parts of the foundation walls of the public structure on the summit were later incorporated into the Byzantine church, but the remaining fragments of these Roman walls are not extensive and clear

enough to reveal the nature of the original building.

During the Roman period also an L-shaped wall was built on bedrock on the western slope of the mound - our Square C. 1 - which appears to be part of the Roman defense system of the city, perhaps a tower (Pl. LXXIII, 1). The appearance of the surface features of the surrounding area supports this suggestion. Only future excavations at the south and west of Square C. 1 can confirm or correct this interpretation.

One of the large projects carried out during the Roman period was a new road built by the Emperor Trajan to connect the Bosra-Philadelphia-Petra road which passed Esbus, with the already existing Livias-Jericho-Jerusalem road. The tracing of its course was one of the aims of our topographical survey team which was in the field throughout the dig's duration. The team succeeded in reaching its objectives. On the mound of Hesban the remains of the termination of this road were probably found in the form of thick plaster layers which have already been described in the 1968 and 1971 preliminary reports. These layers forming a thick road bed had been found throughout the four Squares of Area B. They seem to have ended at the ascent to the acropolis. This roadbed was frequently repaired and resurfaced by the addition of new plaster layers throughout the Late Roman and Byzantine periods.

Of the finds of the Roman period a mint-new Elagabalus coin minted in Esbus deserves mention. Esbus was an imperial mint only during a very short time during the brief reign of Elagabalus (218-222). Only a few such coins, of which the British Museum Catalogue lists six, are known to exist.

The major witness of the Byzantine period is the Christian church on the summit, a basilica containing ten columns in two rows of five each. The remains of this church had been partially excavated during the previous two seasons, but the western end covered by debris, several meters thick, remained unexplored. We found the remains of this western portion of the church buried under a thick accumulation of Islamic ruins. We opened one new Square at the west end and believe to have exposed parts of the narthex and side annex at the northwest corner of the church. A large part of the Square, however, was filled with an Ayyubid/Mamluk bath installation which because of its well preserved condition was not dismantled and may be restored by the Department of Antiquities. The church experienced several rebuildings during its history, but because of its badly destroyed condition the exact nature and extent of the various phases of building activity is difficult to unravel. The stone-paved courtyard between the church and the acropolis perimeter wall, which we had previously considered to have been of Umayyad origin, is now known to have been constructed in Byzantine times with possible Umayyad repairs.

The picture of the Islamic occupation of Hesban as it was described in previous reports has not greatly changed as the result of the new excavations. However, evidence of an Abbasid occupation has now been found in layers in Square C. 2 and in a stone-lined pit in B. 6. The most interesting new Islamic structure excavated this season is the Ayyubid-Mamluk bath already mentioned. It consists of a furnace room, warm and cold water tanks located above the furnace, a heated tile-floored bath room containing a stone basin into which the warm and cold water ran through pipes in the wall, and a small entrance hall ( Fig. 1 and Pl. LXXIII, 2). The chimney ran through the wall between the entrance hall and the heated bath room. This bath installation is probably the best preserved Mamluk bath that has so far been found in Palestine.

Probes were also laid against the outside and inside faces of the wall of a large ruined structure which had always been above ground and which has usually been considered to be of Umayyad origin. The excavations showed that the visible wall rests on substructures of Ayyubid/Mamluk times which make it certain that the ruined upper wall cannot be earlier.

In the Roman-Byzantine cemetery on the southwestern slope of *Tell Hesban* several tombs were excavated (Pl. LXXIV - LXXV). The history of their use and robbing in medieval times and consequent resealing was studied through careful stratigraphic excavations of their fill.

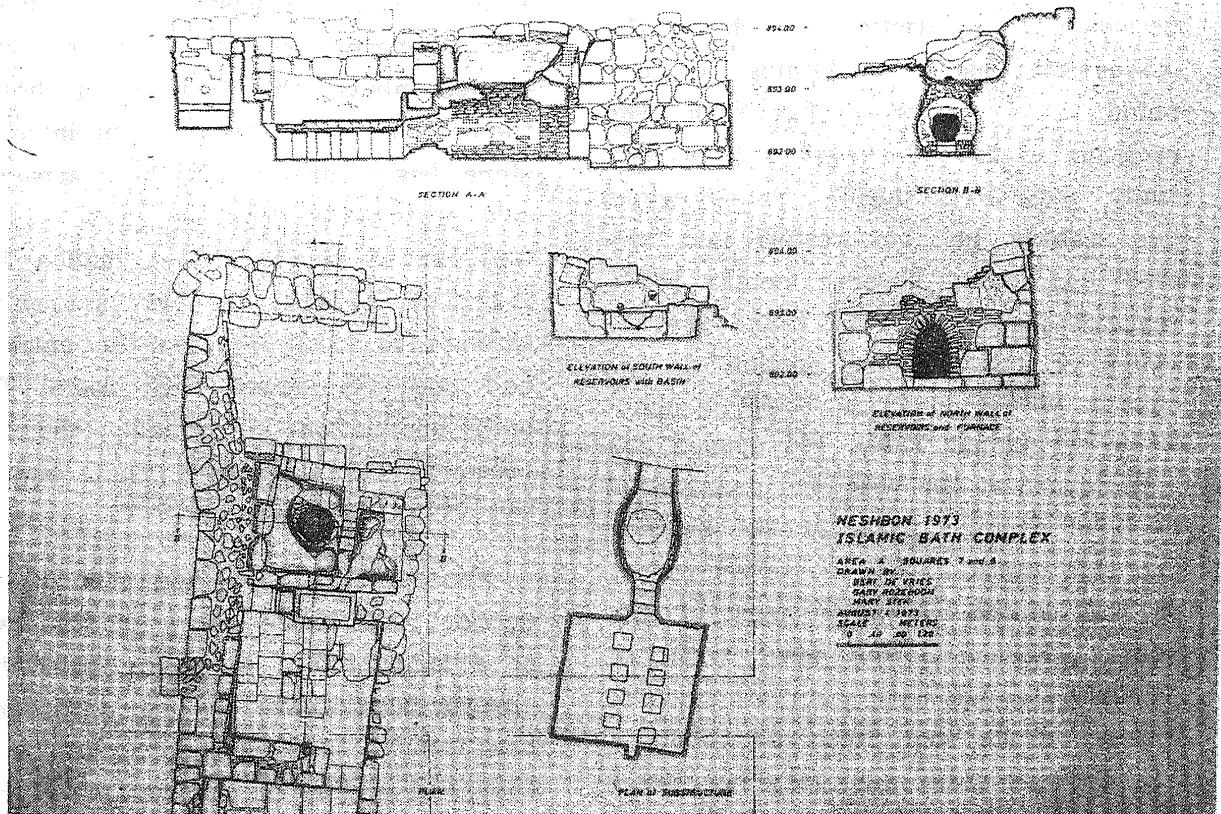


Fig. 1.: Architectural drawings of the Islamic bath installation discovered in Square A. 7.

Because of the many unexpected discoveries made during the third season of excavations and because many problems arisen from this last summer's work must be solved by further dig-

ging, at least two more seasons of excavations are needed at *Tell Hesban*. The next expedition is planned for the summer of 1974.

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