

SAMARIA - SEBASTE

Clearance and Excavations

(October 1965 - June 1967)

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The famous site of Samaria, North of Nablus, was considered worthy of development and a program was set up by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, with the assistance of the U. S. Agency for International Development. Excavations and clearance started in October 1965 and were carried on with no significant interruption until June 5, 1967. Dr. Paul Lapp, from the ASOR, kindly accepted the charge of Archaeological Advisor and was replaced temporarily by Mr. R. Dornemann during the fall of 1966. The Jordanian staff consisted of F. Zayadine as archaeologist-in-charge, H. Haddad and H. Qandil as assistants. Laborers from the village of Sabastiyeh and neighbourhood were gradually raised to a crew of 200 men. The technical men, mostly from Balatah (Shechem) had many years of experience in stratigraphic excavations.

The work plan for the two years involved clearance and excavation of the theater area, the Colonnaded Street and the West Gate. The results outlined below are that can be presented until the political situation allows the completion of a final report.

The theater area :

A short campaign in May 1964 had as its aim the rediscovery of trial trench of the Joint Expedition in 1933¹. this work was supervised by Mr. A. Ayash with advisory help from Dr. P. Williams. The success of this phase was difficult to judge since it was hard to determine the boundaries of the trenches of 1933. When work was begun in October 1965, an irregular trench, about 4 metres wide had been cleared. It sloped down from the Hellenistic Fort Wall to the middle of the orchestra and part of the stage was exposed on the eastern side. The new area to be excavated was divided into 7 sections, each of them including 10 squares.

Section V, situated approximately over the fifth **cuneus** of the theater to the west, provided good stratigraphical evidence to date the overlying débris². When this section was excavated

(1) Samaria - Sebaste I, pp. 57 f.

(2) Section V is published in ADAJ, XI, 1966, p. 55

three walls were exposed. In the «communication» published in the *Revue Biblique*¹, these walls could not be precisely dated because of the lack of evidence at that time. We are now able to attribute these walls to their proper chronological horizon.

Wall «A» consisted of large undressed stones, piled against the northern face of the Hellenistic Fort Wall (plate L, a). It was preserved to the length of 4 metres and to the width of 1, 70 m. The study of the material connected with it indicates that this fragmentary wall is part of the foundations prepared for the outer wall of the theater and largely robbed in the Byzantine period.

The next wall «B», situated to the North, was designated as the lower Israelite wall². This has been exposed by the Joint Expedition and assigned to the 9th - 8th c. B.C. We exposed its inner face (plate L, b) which does not show the excellent technique of headers and stretchers of the outer face.

Wall «C» is identified as part of the later addition to the lower Israelite Wall. This addition is about 5,50 m. wide and is quite different from the other Israelite structures: large dressed stones (1m. X 0.30 m.) are laid irregularly, mainly as headers (plate LI, a). Only a small fragment of the outer face is preserved, for the stones were robbed in the Hellenistic period as many pits indicate³. A gold coin of Darius III was discovered in the overlying debris (plate LI, b) and a cracked cooking-pot contained one bronze coin of Ptolemy II. A poor wall «D» was added to the northern face of this later wall, and a water channel was built into it (plate LII, a). The channel runs into a cistern capped by two limestone blocks which formed a square depression cut by a circular mouth. A cylindrical shaft, about two metres deep, was constructed with small stones and covered with thick mortar. The bottom of the cistern was cut into bedrock. The cistern clearance yielded Iron Age II-III and Hellenistic pottery. A similar cistern was discovered in the *ima cavea*.

Remains of wall «C» were discovered by the Joint Expedition but were not clearly identified. In the general plan (III) these remains are called «pre-hellenistic», and in the description of the theater they are believed to be the «substructures of the auditorium⁴». In the communiqué of the *Revue Biblique*, the new wall was thought to have been related to the early

(1) R. B. LXXIII, 1966, p. 576 - 581.

(2) S - S I, pp. 16 f. and p. 108 - 109. The lower Israelite wall is dated to the end of the 8th c. BC (p. 108), but the north-east corner is said to belong to the «earliest Israelite period» (p. 109).

(3) The Hellenistic pottery published in *ADAJ*, XI, 1966, p. 53-43, comes from a pit in the earliest walls.

(4) S - I, p. 58.

Hellenistic defense system¹. When we excavated the foundation trench down to bedrock, the pottery provided a date in the end of the 8th c. B.C. and included a rim of an Assyrian bowl. Thus, the new wall could be dated to rebuilding operation of Sargon II as it is stated in his Annals «The town I rebuilt better than before»².

It was tempting to associate a large breach in the Hellenistic Fort wall with the sack of the city in 107 B.C. by John Hyrcanus. But many Byzantine Sherds pointed to a late stone robbing operation. At any rate, it is difficult to state that the lower Israelite Wall was in use with the Hellenistic tower³ since its addition wall «C» was largely robbed in the Hellenistic period when the round tower was built. It seems likely that the Omride wall was exposed when the foundation trench of the tower was dug and was considered worth keeping in this limited area, though certainly not in the whole of its extension.

We are able to add but very little to the history of the theater, although we excavated nearly the whole area (PL. LII, b). From the upper circle some very poor substructures were found. The eastern **aditus** was completely destroyed. Only foundations of the outer wall could be seen to the East and a few steps, probably part of the stairway which once lead to the second storey. A sounding dug in the orchestra to look for an earlier phase hit bedrock after about 5cm. During the restoration of the **ima cavea**, however, most of the substructures of the late Roman seats appeared to be seats of smaller size. It is very probable that a Herodian theater was built in the same area but the evidence is still very poor⁴.

The Colonnaded Street and West Gate

Halfway along the colonnaded street a clearance was started in December 1965, with an attempt to rediscover the soundings of the Joint Expedition⁵. Our trench reached 50 X 15 m. and was dug down to the level of the Roman street. In this large area only 7 monolithic columns were found in situ, standing by the northern side of the street (PL. LIII, a). Very few flagstones of the original street could be seen near the columns. One doorway of a Roman shop was exposed on the southern side, and was similar to those found by the Joint Expedition.

Intensive Byzantine occupation has disturbed the Roman street : to the North, small, ugly houses or shops were built in between the monolithic columns. Their floors were covered with a limy débris, very rich in glass sherds and coins, mostly dating to Constantius Gallus. A

(1) R. B. LXXIII, p. 577.

(2) Ancient Near Eastern Texts, p. 284

(3) S - S I, p. 16

(4) Ed. Frézoules, «Recherches sur les théâtres de l'Orient syrien», in Syria, 1959, p. 220.

(5) S - S I, pp. 50 f.

new street overlying the Roman floor was paved with rough stones and was connected with the Byzantine buildings. To the south, a Byzantine room has reused the nicely preserved doorway of the Roman shop, (pl. LIII) but had a smaller entrance to the East, connected with a paved courtyard. A bathroom, accessible by a flight of 7 steps, lies, for a good part, under the modern road and belongs to the Byzantine occupation. It had a floor of white, squared mosaics.

This occupation ended in the Late Byzantine period, according to the coins. A thick layer of burn covered the whole area. This may be associated with a destruction of the site in the time of Justinian in 529 A. D. by the Samaritan revolt¹ or by the 551 earthquake.

In the Ommeyyad period, the street was mainly adapted to agricultural use; large retaining walls for terracing crossed the area from East to West. One house situated to the West was connected with the Arab occupation.

The West Gate is now approached by a new road ascending the western slope of the hill. This approach road was built from the dump of our excavations as part of the Department's Development Program. The old excavation dumps which obscured the West Gate have been removed so that the two large round towers which flanked the gate now dominate the approach. A large segment of the Herodian wall and a small tower are exposed to the North, and the Herodian stone-dressing technique of four margins and high bosses can be examined. Near the south round tower a large trench had provided a complete stratigraphy from the Byzantine period down to the time of Omri. The lowest courses on which the round tower was founded were Omride, and it is probable that the West Gate of the Israelite period was in the same place.

Temple of Augustus :

Built by Herod the Great in 25 B.C., this tetrastyle monument was standing on the summit of the hill. We reexcavated part of the magnificent stairway, twenty five metres wide, the temple forecourt, the altar, and part of the temenos. When the war broke out we were in the process of cleaning and consolidating the ruins of the temple and the fragments of the Omride palace beneath it.

Iron Age tomb :

In February 1967 an important Iron II tomb was discovered south of Samaria at the property of Ahmad esh-Sha'er, called Manshara. Three articulated rock-cut chambers contained over 200 pots and objects. Most of the funeral deposit can be dated to the end of the 9th c. B. C. The tomb is published in the October 1968 issue of the *Revue Biblique*.

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(1) see F. M. Abel, *Histoire de la Palestine II*, pp. 355 f.