

# THE 1967 EXCAVATIONS AT PELLA OF THE DECAPOLIS

Pella, one of the most important archaeological sites in Jordan, lies on the eastern slopes of the Jordan Valley, twenty-two kilometers south of the Sea of Galilee. Its central archaeological feature is a hundred-foot-high tell more than four hundred meters long and about two hundred forty meters wide (Plates I,II). Surface potsherds, (1) as well as soundings made in 1958, (2) indicate occupation of this mound the Middle Bronze Age until fairly recent centuries, although only excavation will demonstrate whether or not the occupation was (as is likely) fully continuous. On the south side of the mound a strong spring gushes into a broad creek bed; beyond is a towering natural hill called Tell el Husn, (Plate III) on the top and slopes of which are extensive ruins, chiefly Roman, Byzantine and Islamic. On every side of the city are traces of ancient cemeteries. (3)

Advantageously situated near a major intersection of trade routes through the Jordan Valley, Pella is known from historical sources to have had a long history. (4) It is first mentioned under its old Semitic name "Pihilum" in Egyptian texts of the 19th century B.C. (5) Subsequent references in Egyptian annals show that the city prospered throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. It took on fresh vigor in the Hellenistic Period, when its name was hellenized to "Pella"

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1. See Nelson Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine, IV, AASOR, XXV11-XXV111* (1951), pp. 254-257; Prescott H. Williams in "Newsletter No. 4, 1964-1965" of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1965), pp. 7-8.
  2. Robert W. Funk and H. Neil Richardson, "The 1958 Sounding at Pella," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XXI (1958), pp. 82-96.
  3. See the maps and descriptions in Gottlieb Schumacher, *Pella* (1888).
  4. The most detailed history of Pella yet to appear is that of the writer in his *Handbook of General Information* (1966) prepared for staff of the Wooster Expedition. See also E. Honigmann, "Pella," *Real-Encyclopaedic*, ed. Pauly and Wissowa, XXXVII, pp. 348, 349. Further information on Pella's history can be found in W. F. Albright, "New Egyptian Data on Palestine in the Patriarchal Age," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 81 (Feb., 1941), pp. 16-21; "The Land of Damascus Between 1850 and 1750 B.C.," *ibid.*, 83 (Oct., 1941), pp. 30-36; "Two little Understood Amarna Letters from the Middle Jordan Valley," *ibid.*, 88 (Feb., 1943), pp. 7-17; O. Benzinger, "Dekapolis," *Real-Encyclopaedic*, ed. Pauly and Wissowa, VIII, pp. 2415-2417; Fr. Buhl, "Fahl," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II (1927), p. 38 and II (1965), p. 743; Emil Schuerer, *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (1895), s. v. "Pella" in Index. Among the more important ancient works which mention Pella are the Egyptian Execration texts, the annals of several New Kingdom pharaohs, the Stela of Rameses II found at Beth Shan, the Amarna letters, Pliny's *Natural History*, Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, Josephus, *Bellum Jud.*, and *Antiq.*, Stephanus Byz., the *Babylonian Talmud*. Epiphanius' *Adv. Haereses*, Yaqut, Yaqubi and Felix Fabri.
  5. Note especially W. F. Albright, "The Jordan Valley in the Bronze Age," *AASOR*, VI (1926), pp. 13-74.



in honor--it would seem--of the birth-place of Alexander the Great, some of whose soldiers may have settled at this city as colonists. It came successively under Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Maccabean control. In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey captured Pella, ushering in the Roman era and giving to the city a new calendar which began with the year of his liberation of the city. Strongly influenced by the Hellenistic and Roman cultures which accompanied its commercial enterprises, Pella came to be one of the cities of the Decapolis. Remains from Pella's Roman elegance are numerous in the creek bed on the south side of the central mound: the ruins of an impressive **nymphaeum**; a well-proportioned building which appears to have been a Roman temple; a small theater-like building (perhaps an odeon); and a colonnaded street. (6) There is some evidence to suggest that the Roman forum may have been located in the creek bed between the central mound and Tell el Husn.

Christianity came early to Pella and flourished there. The city reached its greatest size, if one may judge by visible remains today, during the Byzantine period, when churches abounded and residential areas spread to adjoining slopes. By no later than A. D. 451 the city had its own bishop. This era of prosperity was interrupted in the early 7th century by a short-lived invasion of the Persians. Then in 635 Muslim troops defeated a huge Byzantine army on the nearby plain in the " Battle of Fahl " ( or the " Battle of Beisan " ) and Pella came under the sway of Islam. Its pattern of life was disrupted as the Byzantine Empire crumbled, and the city slowly declined for a thousand years until at last it was abandoned. In the 19th century a village again sprang up on one part of the mound, where some two hundred persons still live. The settlement goes by the name " Tabaqat Fahl, " " Fahl " being Arabic equivalent of the ancient name " Pihilum " (7)

The Wooster Expedition to Pella was established by The College of Wooster, in Wooster, Ohio (U.S.A.) to attempt to recover, through the excavation of selected areas at this site, the history of the city. The program, undertaken with the cooperation of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the American Schools of Oriental Research, has been made financially possible through the generous gifts of friends of the sponsoring institution and a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to enable students to participate in the field operations. Dr. Robert H. Smith of The College of Wooster has served as director of the program since its inception. The first season of excavation and related scientific investigations by the Wooster Expedition was conducted in April-May, 1967. The outbreak of war between Israel and the Arab states on June 6 precluded the

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6. John Richmond published a plan showing these ruins in " Pella, " **Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement**, 1934, pp. 18-31. The reader should be cautioned, however, that the location of walls on Richmond's plans are frequently inaccurate .
  7. Edward Robinson, **Later Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions. in the year 1852** (1856) , pp. 320-324, was virtually the first modern scholar to identify Fahl with ancient Pella. On the identification, see the works cited in previous footnotes; also note F. - M. Abel, **Geographie de la Palestine** , II (1938) , pp. 18-19, 131-132, 145-146, 405-406 , etc.; Guy le Strange, " Account of a Short Journey East of the Jordan, " **Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly statatment**, 1885, pp. 157-180 .



carrying out of further excavations planned for that year. The Spring work was, however, highly satisfying in archaeological results. Staff members for the Spring session were Dr. Smith, field director ; Robert J. Bull, supervisor for Area I, the West Church ; Howard C. Kee, area supervisor for Area II, the East Cemetery ; Oliver Unwin, architect ; Vivian Bull, field quarters manager and paymistress ; Robert Barfknecht, engineer ; Feisal al Kudah, representative of the Department of Antiquities ; Louise Barfknecht, registrar and supervisor of the cleaning of artifacts ; Garo Nalbandian, photographer, Margaret Rugg, Karen Kirch, Anne Underwood, Carolyn Seaman, Bobbie Baker, Francis I. Andersen, James F. Daly, Herbert Stetzenmeyer and Barry Bizot, plot supervisors ; Anna Wachter, drafts-woman ; Farouk Abu-Gharbieh, meteorological observer ; Terry Cooke-Davies, pottery draftsman ; Edward Tango, foreman ; and Mohammed Adawi, chief cook. Also scheduled to participate, but prevented at the last minute from doing so because of illness in their families, were Lawrence E. Toombs, Walter Baggaley and Ruth Baggaley. Consultants who have subsequently rendered valued services in the analysis of excavated materials or in conducting related scientific investigations at Pella are Anna O. Shepard (geology), Hans Stampfli (zoology), J. Lawrence Angel (physical anthropology) and Winnie S. Edgecombe (botany).

One of the two major objectives in the first season at Pella was the clarification of the form and history of the West Church. The walls of this tri-apsidal building, which lies west of the central mound, were partly visible prior to excavation. The church proved to be thirty-six meters long and twenty-three meters wide--one of the larger churches of the Levant (See Plate IV). Other churches of this size in Syria and Trans-Jordan are known, or generally assumed, to be cathedrals; since Pella had a bishop from the mid-5th century on, this may indeed have been the case. The church had a handsome colonnaded forecourt thirty-five by thirty-three meters built directly on the west facade.

To obtain stratigraphic evidence about the history of the church, the excavators laid out two series of five-meter plots, north-south and east-west, across the church complex. They left two-meter-wide balks, rather than the customary one meter ones, to facilitate both human and vehicular traffic--a procedure which proved effective. During the course of excavation, some of these balks were removed to create long, open excavation trenches. The north-south series of plots began considerably north of the church, where Richmond's plan had suggested there might once have been a court-yard, and where indeed one or two fallen columns could be seen protruding from the soil. The excavation plots revealed, however, no courtyard north of the church. Below the Islamic occupation were worn Roman and Byzantine sherds which had washed down from the main mound, and below these were sparse Iron I-II sherds. What did appear along the north side of the church wall was an attached dependency which had been occupied in Byzantine and early Islamic times.

In Plot F, which straddled the north wall of the church, the excavators probed until they reached the bottom of the foundation of the church. In contrast to the walls of the church, which consisted of massive rectangular stones laid in courses of unequal height, the foundation consisted of rubble stone which



had been laid in a narrow foundation trench. The upper twenty-five centimeters of the foundation stones had had mortar poured around them to give stability to the wall above. The foundation was approximately the same width as the wall above it, which averaged approximately one meter.

This plot and others within the church itself yielded, as excavation proceeded, a clear general picture of the history of the church. Even though the interruption of the work by the June War left many detailed questions unanswered, the church appears to have been constructed in the fifth or early sixth century, when both the city and the Christian community at Pella were expanding and the need for a large new church would have been most acute. In this first phase, the West Church was quite handsome. Its interior was decorated with a dado of blue-veined white marble imported from Asia Minor, the clamp-holes for which showed that it had extended to a height of six or seven feet. Some of the polished marble slabs of this dado appeared in Plot K, reused as flooring of the church during a later phase. Although the original paving of the church had been badly damaged by earthquake and robbing, parts of it survived. Some segments of paving consisting of geometric designs executed in red limestone, white marble and black slate were found near the central apse. A fragment of mosaic flooring appeared in the central aisle. Carpet-like, it consisted of a large central panel containing a colorful vine-and-animals motif and a border with alternating panels of geometric designs and animals such as an ibex, a bear, a goat and a goose (Plate VI).

One of the most important discoveries of the 1967 season was a limestone sarcophagus found in the north apse of the church. A burial there was not totally unexpected, since the north apse frequently served as a reliquary in Syrian - Palestinian churches. Removed only after careful stratigraphic study of the debris had been made, the sarcophagus (Plate V) stems from a little-known school of Palestinian sarcophagus-cutting which goes back to Greco-Roman times and is related to the ossuary tradition of Cisjordan. Inside was a well-articulated, though much deteriorated, skeleton, which proved to be that of a man over six feet tall. Only a small part of the skull had survived. Amid the bones were fragments of a decayed linen shroud, but no burial objects at all. Clearly this was an important man to the Christian community of Pella, perhaps a bishop or even a saint. The bones from the sarcophagus have yielded a radio-carbon date which falls within phase 1 or phase 2 of the church (see below).

Certain aspects of this interment, along with anomalies of the wall- construction of the north apse, raise the possibility that the remains of an earlier church may lie beneath the Byzantine building. Immediately below the sarcophagus were exclusively M B II potsherds, a fact which may indicate the presence of a Bronze Age cemetery beneath the church, long-forgotten by the time the Byzantine building was constructed .

The first phase of the history of the West Church may have ended with destruction and looting by the Persians around A.D. 610 or the Islamic army in A.D.635. The damage included the removal of the marble facing on the walls. Phase 2 began when Pella's Christians repaired the damaged church, but this time they



could not afford to use fine, large slabs of marble. In every way the church was less opulent than it had earlier been. Phase 2 apparently came to an end with an earthquake a century or so later which shook the upper part of the church considerably, though possibly not enough to cause the collapse of the roof.

This decline continued in Phase 3, when the Christians again repaired the church. Their increasing poverty is all too evident. In many places marble facing was entirely replaced by plaster. Probably to be attributed to this phase was the construction of a flimsy buttress to support the earthquake-shaken arches of the north and central apses. The floor of the northern apse was apparently raised at this time. This phase may also have ended with an earthquake, since there is evidence that during Phase 4 the entire upper part of the church no longer existed. The cause of this removal is not entirely clear; perhaps the damage which had ended Phase 2 gradually grown worse until, for safety, the officials of the church were obliged to reduce the church to a one-story structure.

The fourth and final occupational phase of the church saw the building in ruins. The upper part was gone and the floors had silted over. One or both of the previous earthquakes had seriously damaged the flooring; now earth was used to level the floor where necessary, and some flimsy remodeling of the interior was undertaken. A crude gallery, or perhaps a roof, was constructed of reused columns and stones, with a stairway ascending to it; small pier-bases cut from stones from other parts of the building were laid along the lines of the original piers. Some of the staff suspected that this construction may have been for the purpose of converting the building into a mosque. By the end of phase 4, which came with another earthquake in perhaps the 9th or 10th century A.D., the building had become a barn.

The second major objective of the season was the East Cemetery, which lies along the slope of a hill east of the main mound (Plate I). The excavators explored eight plots stratigraphically. This approach revealed that the East Cemetery was never used as a residential area prior to Byzantine and early Islamic times, when barns and hovels were constructed on the slope. The persons utilizing the slope in this way cannot have been entirely ignorant of the fact that it was a cemetery; presumably they did not care. It is possible that these people were newcomers to Pella after the Muslim conquest of 635, who paid little attention to the earlier culture of the city.

In Plot A, late Byzantine or early Islamic potsherds appeared uniformly near the surface, along with a segment of crude wall 50-60 cm. wide, behind which was a packed-earth floor which showed considerable use. Ashes and debris from fires lit inside this building were thrown down the slope, where they constituted a distinct layer. The room must have been fairly large, for a pier made of stones and mud brick stood in its interior.

Immediately below the Byzantine level (which constituted a single soil layer of uniform texture and color) were fragments of Middle Bronze-Late Age pottery extending to bedrock. Here the excavators discovered two tombs. Tomb I had a well-executed rectangular doorway leading to a domed chamber eight feet in diameter and six feet high. Inside were more than one hundred objects from



the end of Middle Bronze times and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. The tomb had the familiar assemblage of funeral goods: bowls, storage jars, platters, toggle pins and bone inlay pieces. One significant jar was of bichrome ware (Plate VII). Another jar was found tightly sealed by an upright goblet (Plate VIII). The tomb contained few objects of gold, and only two inscribed scarabs. There had been at least half a dozen burials, the bones of which were in considerable disorder. The tomb may, though not necessarily, have been robbed in antiquity; the entrance was sealed only with a pile of stones. Tomb 4 was a little earlier, from the latter part of the Middle Bronze Age. Only a few complete pieces were obtained from this tomb, but many forms could be reconstructed from the fragments which were found.

Between Tombs I and 4 was a trumpet-shaped libation tube of pottery, similar in ware to that of Tomb I. When excavated, it proved to be set in a stone-filled cylindrical cutting in the bedrock about a yard in diameter and almost as deep. The inside of the tube showed heavy calcium incrustations which suggested that milk-offerings may have been poured into the tube as libations to the dead.

Most interesting, and certainly most complex, of the tombs excavated was Tomb 7 in Plot H. An inscribed lintel fallen from the doorway of the tomb (Plate IX) contained an important five-line Greek text beginning, "Tomb belonging to Iohannes." (The spelling of the name is noteworthy.) It goes on to speak of a signal honor which Iohannes received in the year 584 (that is, A.D. 522) when he became some sort of magistrate of the Arab people. (The text is unfortunately somewhat eroded here and at other places.) One of the funerary objects in this tomb was an intriguing mother-goddess figurine of white plaster (Plate X), the features of which originally were outlined in black paint. The style suggests affinities with other Syrian-Transjordanian figurines going back to the Early Bronze Age. The tomb proved to have been used as a dump in mediaeval times, and yielded a wide range of painted and glazed potsherds dating from the twelfth century down to perhaps the sixteenth or even seventeenth century A.D. The earliest pottery in this dump stands generally within the Mamluk tradition, although it shows some local characteristics in decoration. As might be expected, much of this mediaeval pottery was handmade. To complicate the history of this tomb, the floor of the chamber, with its original sixth-century objects and the mediaeval debris, collapsed at a later time in a late Roman tomb below it, which contained a limited but interesting repertory of terracotta lamps and glass bottles. The Arab-Israeli war intervened before the staff could complete the excavation of this tomb.

The excavations of the first season of The Wooster Expedition to Pella have only scratched the surface of this important site. Each bit of archaeological information which has come to light has raised new and vital questions which the excavators will want to answer in future seasons. Excavation needs to continue in both Area I and Area II, and a major stratigraphic probe must be commenced on the central mound. Because Pella is now in a military zone, the next season of excavation cannot yet be scheduled, but work will resume at the earliest possible time.

**Robert H. Smith, Director**