

The Amman Airport Excavations, 1976¹

by

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With the new runway and apron extensions in construction at the Amman Airport threatening to cover more of the area around the airport «temple» with asphalt, funds were supplied by the Department of Civil Aviation under His Excellency Sharif Ghazi and permission was given by the Department of Antiquities under Mr. Yacoub Oweis for a short salvage excavation from Aug. 18–30 directed by this writer with Lawrence T. Geraty as Project Advisor and Nazmieh Ridha as the Department of Antiquities representative. Thanks must go to Mr. Kenneth Fenske on loan to Alia from Pan American Airlines who introduced us to the urgency of the project, and to Mr. Yusef Alami whose support smoothed the way for us.

Most of the equipment and some of the staff were taken over from the Hesban excavation, just concluded, while the rest of the staff came from the foreign community in Amman.

The goals of the project were three-fold: 1. To investigate the area surrounding the «temple» for any signs of other structures or occupation. 2. To gain as full a picture as possible of the ecology of the region during Late Bronze times. 3. To discern any possible hints regarding the function of the building.

Since previous excavations had completely excavated the «temple» building itself, we concentrated all our work outside the structure. One long trench made up of

three 2 X 5 m. squares was laid out to the north of the temple, east of the trenches dug by Hennessy in 1966. During a previous visit to the site we had noticed some stones that seemed to be aligned and seemed to corner about five m. to the north of the «temple». We now hoped to investigate this possibility by intersecting what we thought might be a south wall of another building. In the square nearest the temple we re-investigated the foundation trench of the «temple» hoping to gain sealed ecological material. We found nothing here to negate Hennessy's conclusions as to the stratigraphy of the «temple». Square A. 3, farthest from the temple building soon reached virgin soil and seemed to lie beyond the remains we were seeking in Square A.2. To uncover the rocks that were found in A.2 it was necessary to expand two more meters to the east and to open a new square on the west. When this was done an irregular rock-tumble was uncovered, lying on virgin soil with two north-south running lines of stones having the appearance of walls, but which may only have been structuring lines for what we would propose to have originally been a structured rock pile for a purpose discussed below. No E–W walls or surfaces connected these stone lines.

Within this pile of uncut field stones stratigraphically connected with the «temple» sherds were found from vessels similar to those found within the «temple», that is, local and imported Late Bronze Age wares. Mycenaean and Cypriot base-ring

1. For a full bibliography of previously published materials on the airport «temple» see V. Hankey,

«A Late Bronze Age Temple at Amman,» in *Levant* VI, p. 131, note 4.

vessels were evident but not nearly as frequent as the local wares. Many fragments of calcite vessels imported from Egypt as well as bowls carved from basalt-like rocks such as gabbro were found in ample numbers. One bronze arrowhead or dagger was discovered within the rock debris.

We also laid out a trench one meter wide by 12 meters long extending to the east from the southeast corner of the «temple». This was done to connect the «temple» with a 160 meter long trench dug to a constant 60 meter depth by the airport construction engineers. With this we were able to connect the virgin soil beneath the temple with the virgin soil in the trench and prove that the «temple» was isolated from buildings at least on its eastern and northern sides.

A third trench was laid out to the south to check for any indications of structures in that direction. The pattern found here was that found in the other sectors as well where the finds were deeper and more frequent close to the «temple» but steadily diminished the farther we moved away from it until they completely disappeared.

Investigation of other trenches and bulldozing activity of the runway builders proved to us that there remains no sign of any other occupation in the vicinity of the «temple» during the Late Bronze Age. Frank Koucky's geological investigations, however, found signs of human occupation stratigraphically beneath the «temple» in the north. Analysis of some of the flints found may indicate that there was a small neolithic site at the airport. No pottery or other artifacts beside flints were found in this material.

Part of the lure of the site for us was the fact that it was a one-period site having the

possibilities of shedding much light on the ecological environment of LB central Trans-Jordan. We thus took pollen samples from all sealed loci, and froth-floated a sample from every soil locus for seeds and micro-fauna. All bones and shells were saved as well. Unfortunately, the high alkalinity of the soil has probably destroyed much of the organic materials originally within the soil.

While in Amman, a preliminary analysis of the bone material was made by Prof. Boessneck of the München Zooarchäologische Institut with most interesting results. 95% of the bones by weight and number were human, all showing definite signs of burning. Not one of the animal bones seems to have been burned, however. When this is put together with the fact that the stones of our rock pile showed frequent signs of burning on one side of the stone we are led to suggest that the function of the stone pile was that of a large pyre for the burning of human bodies. Since most of the human bones seem to have been from adults, the picture is not one of child sacrifice, but more probably that of cremation.

It should be noted in this respect that the large numbers of fine ceramic vessels, bronze weapons, and gold jewelry found in previous excavations can be considered typical tomb furniture of the time. The «temple» building itself may thus have been a ritual center for the ceremonies connected with the dead and their burial as well as a repository for the prospective tomb furnishings. Seen in this light the problems of recognizing the temple's isolation become mute since nomadic tribes or settled groups from nearby (Amman is now known to have had a Late Bronze settlement) could easily have kept it up as well as supplied it. One would also be led to

suggest that there may be some LB tombs in the immediate area, perhaps buried far underground.

Under the aegis of the Department of Antiquities and the Department of Civil

Aviation, the site is being reconstituted and set up as a tourist attraction for airplane passengers as they enter and leave the apron area of the airport.

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