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TEKOA: EXCAVATIONS IN 1968

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Recent archaeological research at the site of the Biblical city of Tekoa has reaffirmed the importance of the unit in the fortification system of southern Judah during the Israelite monarchy. Tekoa is located in the edge of the Judaeen wilderness, about eight miles south, and slightly east, of Bethlehem. To Bible readers its greatest significance lies in the fact that it was the home of the prophet Amos. It figured largely in the period of the Maccabees, and later some aspects of the Jewish rebellions centered there. Considerable Church and monastic occupation during the early Church and Byzantine times, is also known.

A short but intensive season of archaeological work was carried out during the summer of 1968, under the auspices of Wheaton College. The writer directed the project, which included surveys, environmental studies, and the excavation of a number of tombs, together with preliminary work in the clearing of two Byzantine church structures. Before describing the results of the dig, a brief review of the known history of Tekoa may be helpful.

During the Biblical period most of the Wilderness of Judaea was mainly used for pasturage in the spring, and various sections were called after the neighboring villages, as the wilderness of Tekoa, of Ziph, or Maon, etc. The genealogy of the earliest settlers of Tekoa is found in I Chronicles 2:24 and 4:5-7. The sons of Caleb and Ephrathah are said to have occupied Tekoa and several other locations in its vicinity. The site is evidently named after its original settler, Tekoa, the grandson of Caleb. In the administrative organization following the Conquest, Tekoa evidently became a part of the District of Bethlehem (only the Septuagint reserves the first reference to this district--Josh. 15:59a, LXX. The passage reads: "Tekoa [Tekō] and Ephrathah which is Bethlehem. . ."), a relationship which still obtains. David was familiar with the place, and Ira, one of his mighty men, was from there (II Sam. 23:26). When David's son Absalom was exiled for the slaying of his half-brother Amnon, a "wise woman" from Tekoa was engaged by Joab to bring about a rapprochement between him and his father (II Sam. 13:37-14:24).

Soon after the division of the monarchy Rehoboam set about strengthening the fortifications of several cities, including Tekoa (II Chron. 11:5, 6). Evidently Rehoboam's list of fortresses (II Chron. 11:5-12) is to be dated after the invasion of Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt. The 15 fortified towns were strategically located in Judah, with Tekoa and Ziph protecting the approaches from the wilderness. A military engagement between Jehoshaphat and an invading army of Moabites and Ammonites occurred in the wilderness between Tekoa and En-gedi (II Chron.

20:1-28, cf. v. 20). The attackers likely crossed the Dead Sea by means of a ford from the Lisan peninsula, and came into the heart of the wilderness via En-gedi.

The prophet Amos lived at Tekoa, and went from there to minister in the northern kingdom (Amos 1:1 ff.), from which sojourn he evidently returned to finish his life and be buried in his home town. Medieval Jewish tradition points out a cave in the church area of Tekoa as the tomb of Amos, which may probably be the grotto under the earlier Byzantine church known as the Prophetium (memorial church) of Amos. Joachim Jeremias, in his Heiligengraber in Jesu Umwelt, has a most interesting comment on Amos' burying place (pp. 87-88), which we quote in full:

The tradition concerning the grave of the prophet Amos is unusually uniform and stable. According to Amos 1:1 the prophet came from Tekoa. The "Vitae prophetarum" reports that there also, fatally wounded in the head by Amasja and his son, he died and was buried; with the words "hon kai to mnēma autothiei nun deiknutai" [where also on the very spot the tomb is still shown until the present time]. Eusebius verifies this tradition, sub voce Eltheke/Thekona; also the "Anonymous of Petrus Diaconus" mentions the grave of Amos twelve miles from Jerusalem in Tekoa. In the fifth century a monastery was established in Tekoa, in the sixth century Cyrill from Scythopolis mentioned "to prophēteton ton hagou Amōs" that the Madabakarte describes (the shrine of Saint Amos), and the ruins of which are yet to be seen. Thus the Biblical as well as the extra-biblical information leads unanimously to "chirbet tku." The Jewish tradition of Amos' grave has also been taken over without a break by the church.

After the Exile, the people of Tekoa helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 3:5, 27) although some of their leaders were not very cooperative.

During the Maccabean period Tekoa was the scene of Jewish resistance to Seleucid control, and provided a refuge for Jonathan and Simon (I Maccabees 9:32ff.); Josephus, Antiquities XIII, i, 2). Josephus also indicates it was the site of a Jewish military camp during the war with Rome (Wars, IV, ix, 5-6). It also figured in the second Jewish rebellion with the leader Bar-Kochba, complaining that "the people of Tekoa" did not comply with his orders.

The literature of the early Church, especially Byzantine historiography, has much reference to Tekoa, which was a religious center on the edge of the great monastic occupation of the Wilderness. A monastery, convent, and a new laura, as well as numerous churches were founded at or near Tekoa, and during the Crusades (ca. A.D. 1132) it became a beneficiary of the Holy Sepulchre. The city is said to have been sacked by a band of raiding Turks in A.D. 1138, and the vast accumulation of ruins on the surface of the tell (city mound) speaks mutely of the occupation during the first millennium A.D.

A small village presently exists on the north slopes of the tell, in an area where Roman occupation was predominant. Thus it is seen from history, as well as from archaeology, that the site of Tekoa was occupied from ca. 1200 B.C. to ca. A.D. 1200, a time duration of some

400 years. Earlier occupation may be discovered, since Middle Bronze (ca. 2100- 1500 B. C.) materials from the site have been reported to the writer by Father S. Saller, of the School of the Flagellation (an eminent Jerusalem archaeologist). If this proves to be the case, the next season's excavations in the lower stratigraphy of the mound should bring confirmation.

The site of Tekoa appears today as a large tell of medium height and somewhat flattish configuration, standing southeast of a small plain, and with hills rising on three sides. On the east the land drops away quite rapidly into the highly dissected wilderness topography. The earlier and later occupation seems to have been primarily on the southern two-thirds of the tell, of which an area of approximately thirty acres has been leased for a period of ten years for archaeological purposes. The northern portion, as indicated above, had densest occupation during Roman times, and is currently the portion carrying the modern village. The entire southern part of the site is strewn with an enormous aggregation of stones, much mounded in appearance, which represent ruined buildings, and which have been lying there since the last destruction of the city.

Of recognizable ruins, the most prominent is a magnificent baptistery from a Byzantine church, which has been noted since the beginning by practically every traveller to the area whose written account of his experience is preserved. It is octagonal in plan, about five feet, four inches in diameter, and four feet, six inches in height, hewn from a single piece of rose colored and marble-like limestone, found in a quarry not too many miles distant. Four opposite sides are decorated with carved symbols of the church--overlapping squares, wreaths, and the fleur-de-lis, which originated in this part of the world, a fact not generally known. The inside of the baptistery is circular in plan, with a step toward a smaller diameter at the bottom. It is equipped with a drain hole, and is positioned over a cistern in the grotto beneath the church structure.

Baptisteries (and baptismal basins) in early Christian times tended always to be octagonal in shape, which shape was a deliberate choice because of the part played by the number eight in the symbolism of numbers. The number seven stood for the days of the Creation--six for the days in which God worked, seven for resting on the Sabbath, and eight for the new Creation which would dawn when the Lord came again. Hence the baptismal font and the house of the font, where eternal life had its origin in the sacrament, received an octagonal plan. During the 1968 investigations at Tekoa an exhaustive study was made of the baptistery, for publication purposes, and it is perhaps the finest one remaining in Palestine, and is experiencing the ravages of time.

The first season of excavations during the summer of 1968 marked the end of an initial period of negotiations extending over four years. First efforts to secure the tell for archaeological investigations were made by the writer in 1964, through Sheikh Abu Sa'alim, owner of part of the northern section of the mound. This man is chief Sheikh of all the Ta'amireh tribes, Bedouin occupants of the Judaean wilderness, who today number more than 15,000, and is an influential leader, being a member of the Jordanian parliament until the war of 1967. The southern two-thirds of the tell is owned by the village of Sa'ir, near Hebron, and is technically village land, owned collectively. Negotiations in such instances are exceedingly complex, theoretically involving every family in the village. However, five of the mukhtars or head men of the village, acted for the whole, though there were certain problems with this arrangement.

Agreements acceptable to all were finally reached, and 120 dunams (30 acres) of the old site were leased. Then negotiations were carried out with the Jordanian government's Department of Antiquities for a license to excavate. When finally nearly everything was in readiness for field work, the six-day war of 1967 intervened, and Tekoa was now found in West Bank land under military occupation by Israel. This new situation involved further negotiations, this time with the Israeli Department of Antiquities, for their permission and license to excavate which was obtained in the spring of 1968, after a visit to the field, and several months of communication.

Although surveys had previously been made, the first major field work consisted of excavations begun in July 1968, in connection with the newly established Wheaton College Summer Institute of Archaeology. The students and personnel of the Institute participated in the field work, as well as other persons who joined the Tekoa Archaeological Expedition only for the field program. Staff members consisted of Prof. James E. Jennings, Akron Bible Institute (Akron, Ohio), Supervisor of Field I (the Byzantine and church area); Rev. Ronald G. Haznedl, Minister of the 2nd Presbyterian Church of Aurora, Illinois, Architect (and appointed Supervisor of Field II, a cut through stratification of the tell, which was not accomplished during the first season of work); Dr. John J. Davis, Grace Theological Seminary and College, Supervisor of Field III (the tomb area); Mrs. M. H. Heicksen, Household Supervisor and Nurse; and the writer, Director and Archaeologist. The Department of Antiquities Representative and our Foreman, was Abu Khalil' and our cook, Melia Shemali. Several of the students carried out staff responsibilities under the guidance of the Director: Greg D. Neilson, Minneapolis worked as Artist; and David C. Engel, Wheaton College, did field work in geology. About sixty national workers, both from the Ta'amireh peoples, and the village of Sa'ir, were employed in labor as pickmen, hoemen, and basket carriers.

Messrs. Samir Harb and Suleiman Ayyoub, Civil Engineers in Bethlehem and Jerusalem assisted with the instrument surveys. Mr. Ya'akov Meshorer, Military Governor of Antiquities of the West Bank, and Dr. Abraham Biran, Director of Antiquities for Israel, as well as Dr. Eliahu Zohar, Director of the Israel Geological Survey, and others all gave unreservedly their assistance and encouragement. Fine fellowship was had with the many field archaeologists who were active in Israel during the 1968 season, who showed much interest in the site, as well as Father S. Saller, of the Franciscan School of the Flagellation, and Pere R. deVaux, of the Ecole Biblique, in Jerusalem.

Much of the field equipment was obtained from Dr. Joseph P. Free, the excavator of Dothan, and the remaining part purchased by the Expedition. A splendid facility for the Expedition headquarters, as well as for the Summer Institute of Archaeology, was leased in Jerusalem. This is a new three-story building, located at the old Mandelbaum Gate, with space to accommodate about forty persons, plus classrooms and other working areas in addition to the storage of field equipment.

Results of the 1968 field season included the excavation of some five tombs, both from the Iron II period (900-55 B. C.), and Herodian Roman times. A large tomb from the Iron Age had no fewer than eight separate burial chambers, and produced a good corpus of pottery, plus some skeletal material. The latter was of interest because of marked pathology in numerous



Baptismal font--Byzantine period.



Surface of Tekoa showing Byzantine and Crusader ruins.



Entrance to Iron Age tomb.



Baptismal font--Byzantine period.



Church apse in process of being cleared.

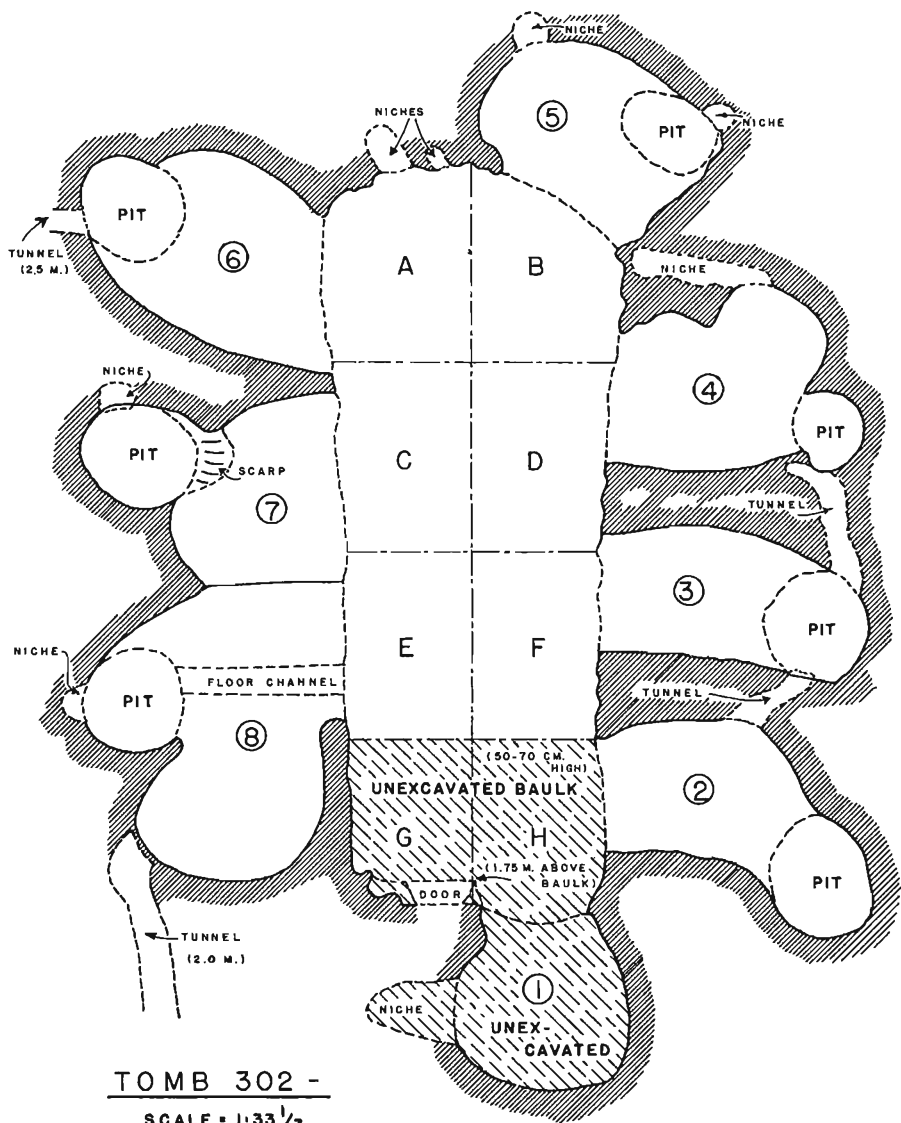
bone specimens. Evidently the inhabitants of Tekoa during this time were afflicted with arthritic and related troubles. The Iron II pottery, contemporary with Amos, provided good insight into some of the cultural aspects of his times, and contained specimens which filled some gaps in the archaeological knowledge of this period. A pretty fair seriation (style changes in sequence) was obtained for both pottery lamps and bowls. Of special interest from the Roman tombs were several fragments of different-sized Herodian measuring cups, standard for use in trade and measurement at that time. These were made from soft stone, with a regular straight-tapered body, and with square-shaped handles.

Two buildings were partially excavated, both church structures from the Byzantine period. Additional work is needed before generalizing statements may be attempted, although the apses and other features of one of the buildings suggest that it may have been the famous Prophetium (Memorial Church) of Amos. A large bibliography of Tekoa was researched in Jerusalem and the extensive early Church literature concerning Tekoa points out their belief, as also indicated earlier in this article, that the tomb of Amos was located in the grotto beneath this church. Additional excavation should reveal one of the finest and most extensive complexes of Byzantine structures to be had in Palestine.

One of the most important phases of the 1968 season was the survey work completed, both the engineering survey of the mound, and also the environmental surveys in the geology, hydrology, floral, faunal, and settlement patterns of the surrounding area, as well as of the site itself. The location of Tekoa in the edge of the Judaeian wilderness presents unusual opportunity for securing data of significance to a complete functional interpretation of its culture at given points in time, and the historical significances developed should prove of assistance to Biblical students of the period of the Divided Monarchy. The ten-year lease now held should enable us to take advantage of the enormous archaeological potential we now know Tekoa to hold.

One of the reasons for the original choice of this site for excavation was related to the writer's special field of research in settlement patterns and ancient demography. Continued and acute criticism of the population figures given in the Old Testament gave rise to a conviction that some kind of field work should be undertaken to throw light on these problems, and with some considerable experience in this type of research, we have for several years carried on active investigations in the Near Eastern regions. Conclusions are yet impossible, but the information presently at hand suggests that populations during the Biblical period were considerably larger than previously suspected. Problems of local climates, their change and influence on settlements throughout the Biblical lands are closely related. Tekoa was selected in part to obtain data on small to medium-sized settlements in areas marginal to the desert, and the work done there thus far indicates it to be eminently suited or qualified to meet this objective.

Plans are under way for a continued series of excavations each summer, and great anticipation is held for the next "dig." We have learned something of what to expect from the excavations--the tomb fields will continue to be exploited, as they provide the most detailed



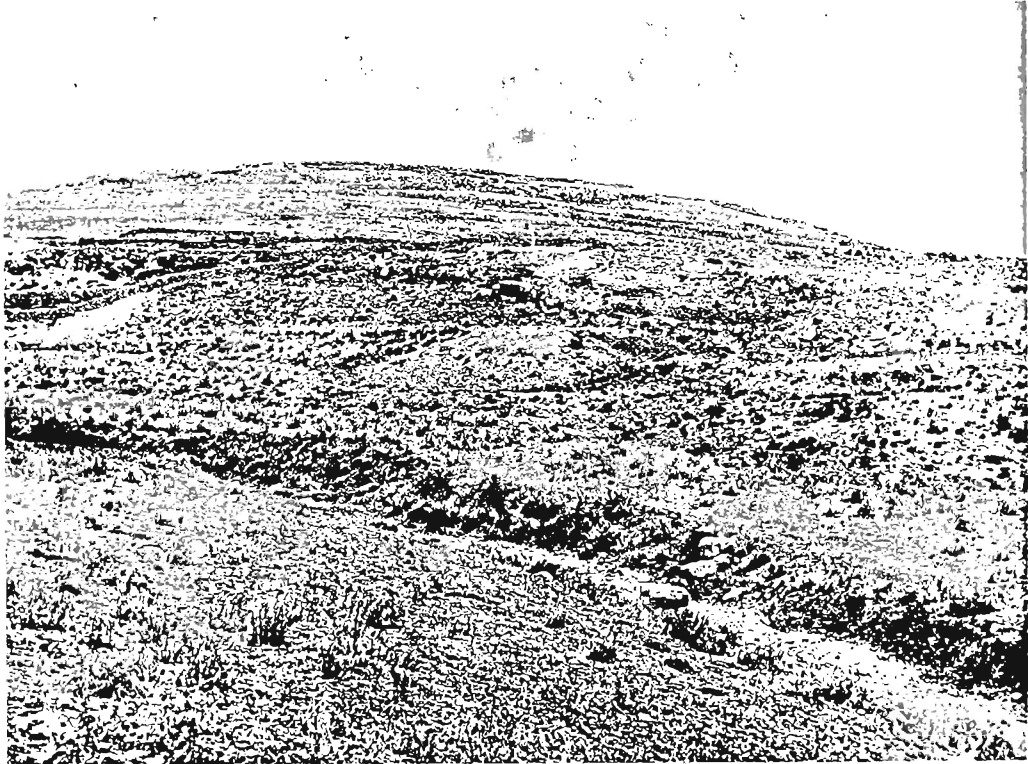
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evidence of material culture from the earlier periods; a deep cut will be made through the occupation levels at the highest part of the tell, which should inform us concerning the total period of occupation; and the excavations of the church buildings already begun will be carried on to conclusion. The latter are sure to provide fascinating, and perhaps even spectacular discoveries.

A burden common to most projects of this type is the finding of sufficient funds to finance each season of the work, and the Tekoa Archaeological Expedition is no exception. Costs of field work have greatly increased in recent years. Usually such research is only made possible through institutional help; occasional grants for scientific work; and especially through assistance from private donors, who find this a rewarding investment in scientific and Biblical knowledge. The Wheaton College Institute of Archaeology will conduct its second summer program in 1969 (June 10 to August 16) at Jerusalem, and the excavations at Tekoa will be carried on concurrently. The scope of this season's work will be directly related to the support obtained up to the time of departure for the field. Participation in such a project is a rare adventure indeed, including as it does involvement in the history of past ages, and also experiencing history in the making, in a part of the world which is a focal point of interest both for the Bible student, and for the public at large.



Mound of Tekoa