

Historical Geography—The Link Between Historical and Archeological Interpretation

by Anson F. Rainey

Current historical research strives to study man in all facets of his life, not only political and religious but also social and economic. In our age of ecological awareness, many new tools are available for gathering and analyzing information about ancient man. These same disciplines may be applied to the nation of Israel and other peoples of the ancient Near East. The rules of these disciplines are often radically different from the standard approaches we are used to employing. This is especially true of historical and archeological interpretation. What has been called "total archaeology" (Dymond 1974: 159–63) in Great Britain, corresponds to "historical geography," when practiced at its best, in Israel. It is basically the coordination of evidence from different lines of investigation to reconstruct the life of Israel and her neighbors.

Environmental Approach — Where People Lived

Physical geography. The geology and natural history of Palestine was a subject of scientific inquiry from the very beginning of modern exploration (Ben-Arieh 1979). That interest has not abated. Today there

are greatly improved methods for analyzing the flora and fauna and the surface morphology of the country. However, our concern is with *man* in this environment, how it affected him and how he affected it. With all his retrieval methods, the archeologist can provide the natural scientist with materials, placed within a relative chronological time-frame, from which to reconstruct the environmental conditions in ancient periods. The problem that confronts us is how to get a representative sample of organic and geological evidence without sacrificing other, equally important goals of excavation.

Archeological survey. Methodology in archeological survey has gone through several stages. The 19th-century scholars looked mainly for toponymy and surface remains. In the period between the wars, the pottery chronology was developed and became a useful tool for dating the occupation levels at various sites. But with it came the simplistic "positivism" which led to numerous false conclusions based on insufficient evidence (Weipert 1971: 129 and n. 5). The legend that south of Hebron there was no settlement worthy of identi-

fication with Debir (Albright 1924: 4–5; 1926: 6; 1932: 77–81), or the view that Kh. Seimunieh could not be the Symeon of LXX Josh 19:15 (Albright 1925: 9–10) are cases in point. Later investigations corrected both of these erroneous impressions and many others.

Modern survey begins with a regional approach. A district, homogeneous in character, is studied as an ecological unit (cf. e.g. Gophna 1978: 136). The individual sites recorded are analyzed, not just from the standpoint of surface sherds, but with reference to their physical setting and overall characteristics (cf. Kochavi 1972: 14). The patterns of site distribution in different periods are sought and correlated with the natural environment.

Material Culture— How People Lived

Nature of the settlement. The details of everyday life in "Bible Lands" have always fascinated the modern reader. Older books on "biblical archeology" dealt with the documentary allusions to material culture, both religious and domestic (Keil 1887–88). Now the objects themselves, including vessels, jewelry, weapons, tools,



Engraving of Tell el-Husn, site of Beth-shean. The artist is W. Tipping. From *The Jewish War of Flavius Josephus*, tr. by Robert Traill, ed. by Isaac Taylor (1862).

cult objects, and also architecture are being retrieved by excavation. The preservation of such finds is subject to chance, of course, which means that the resultant picture will be distorted. Therefore, it behooves the excavators to adopt a strategy that will retrieve the maximum sample possible with the means available. This must apply to architecture as well as small finds and organic materials. Proponents of the "new archeology" would readily support the sifting and flotation of every basket. But the old fashioned "historical archeologist" must insist that a room, a building, or a complex of buildings is still a legitimate object of research, and common sense dictates that such units be excavated in their entirety whenever possible. The need to increase our knowledge about urbanization and community organization requires that excavation be conducted over broad areas to permit such retrieval.

The small objects and organic materials will help to define the economic base of a settlement. The arrangement and size of the structures will indicate something of the social organization. Here is one of the main areas where histo-

ry and archeology should converge. The kind of physical settlements in a certain period should correspond to the social organization depicted in the written sources. For this reason, the archeologist is obligated to go beyond the narrow trenches of Jericho and Jerusalem of past decades and open extensive horizontal areas which will provide a picture of the physical layout.

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Stratigraphic sequence. A popular fallacy of "dirt archeology" is that the stratigraphic sequence is somehow equivalent to the history of a site. Of course, the growth and development of settlement on a site is essential for understanding the changes undergone by any given community. But the chronological process of stratification is not the ultimate goal in itself. The popular slogan is, "We have to get the sequence." Unfortunately, this is the watchword of excavators who

think they're going down in history when they're really just going down in ruins!

Digging in narrow trenches not only destroys valuable evidence of structures sliced in half; it may not even reveal all the occupation periods in a given site. Twenty meters away, another trench may reveal other chronological periods that were missed in the first. Concerning Kenyon's narrow, trench-based interpretation of Samaria, Albright remarked, "Archaeology can advance only by putting tentative stratigraphic results to experimental test, not once but repeatedly" (1958: 23). It is much better to work systematically down through broad areas comprising several squares each and spaced at several strategic points on the mound. The sequence will gradually emerge and meanwhile, continued surface sherding will give some picture of what may be expected in future seasons.

**Historical Interpretation —
Who the People Were**

The evidence of ecological and archeological research is still mute. To complete the picture, the information resulting from those disciplines must be coordinated with

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whatever written records are available. It is precisely at this point, the need to forge a link between the text and the material remains, that historical geography can sharpen the focus.

Site identification. For an individual site, one needs to achieve at least a feasible identification in order to know which historical allusions ostensibly pertain to it. Toponymy, supplemented by philological analysis of the geographical indications in historical texts, is still the primary guide to locating an ancient settlement (Rainey 1976). When the historical texts call for a town of a certain nature, e.g. a fortified city with a local monarch and perhaps a temple, then one has to look for a physical mound where the remains of installations appropriate to such a community may be preserved. A good case in point was Beth-shean, where the Arabic reflex of the ancient name had moved from the original tell to a nearby ridge. Here the Survey of Western Palestine found the Arab village of Beisan (Conder and Kitchen 1882: 104–5, the name having passed through a modification in the Talmudic period, Beishan, *Y B. Mes.* X, 12c; *Pesah.* 50b). During the University of Pennsylvania excava-

tions on Tell el-Husn, beside Beisan, a stele of Seti I was found containing the name of the ancient town (written *Bi-ta-ša-al*; Kitchen 1969: 12, line 9), thus confirming what most scholars had long known, that the city from Old Testament times had been located on that mound. At one time, Conder had argued that the tell and others like it in the Jordan Valley were not town sites at all but rather the remains of ancient brick factories (1878: 46–47)!

Edward Robinson identified biblical Ophrah with modern et-Taiyibeh strictly on the basis of the historical references (Robinson 1897: I, 447). Years later Hartmann (1911) defined the principle of euphorism at play here, the conscious alteration of a name sounding too much like Arabic *ifrit*, “demon,” to its opposite, et-Taiyibeh, “the favored.” *Territorial history.* But there will be many instances when an ancient site cannot be identified historically with any certainty. Here again, historical geography can make a contribution. The cornerstone of all modern historical-geographical research is “the history of territorial divisions,” a method established by Albrecht Alt (1925 :2; 1953 :90; 1966 :136). It is simply

the study of territorial units in the light of their own respective occurrences in the historical sources. Although Arad is mentioned only a few times in the Bible (Num 21:1; 33:40; Josh 12:14; Judg 1:16), and never in a context that clearly refers to the period of the monarchy (perhaps *eder* in Josh 15:21), its fortunes as a Negev town may at least be surmised from the history of that southern administrative district of Judah (Aharoni 1967: 394, 400–1). The various occupation levels and destructions found at Arad can thus be coordinated with the sequence of conquests and resettlements throughout Judah’s history.

Furthermore, the coordination of “territorial history” derived from written sources with the results of an intensive survey in the field can produce a better perspective on the life and history of the ancient inhabitants.

Coordination. It is at this point, where one attempts to correlate the evidence of historical and archeological (including archeometric) research that our most serious problems arise. There is a limit to what one may expect, given the present state of knowledge. Palestinian archeology has not been overly blessed



Nineteenth-century engraving showing the ruins of Samaria. From W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (1859).

with epigraphic finds. Rarely is the name of an ancient site discovered in an inscription coming out of the ground. Even when that has happened, e.g. at Gezer, Gibeon, Beth-shean, Dibon, and Arad, the Arabic toponym was already proof of the identification. Thus far, only Lachish has been confirmed by an indigenous inscription when the biblical name was not preserved locally.

Neither is it usually possible to assign a particular stratum to a definite historical period such as a king's reign. Nor do we find direct evidence for the identity of the enemy who brought about some destruction level.

The archeological evidence is generally "dumb." One may not assume that it will "prove" or "disprove" an identification or historical interpretation. When a site is properly excavated, there are, nevertheless, some kinds of evidence that may contribute to a historical conclusion: (1) the layout of a settlement in particular phases may indicate something of the social organization prevailing at any given time; (2) important building projects, which may leave substantial remains, usually indicate that some political authority was enjoying

sufficient prosperity to be able to carry out public works; (3) massive destruction levels are probably the work of an enemy from outside. Such elements as these are often the subject of written records, both biblical and nonbiblical.

Some recent howlers. By way of illustration, we have selected some negative examples, where the application of sound historical and geographic reasoning would have prevented certain impossible interpretations derived from archeological evidence. First, it should be stressed that too often the opinion of an excavator has usurped the place of true archeological evidence.

The question must be asked, "What is an archeological fact?" The "positivism" of the Albright school mentioned above is, in practice, based more on personal opinions than on actual finds. The walls and floors, pots and implements, and even the bones and organic materials derived from excavations are only mute evidence. To be useful historically, they must be interpreted. This process of evaluation and interpretation is *at least* as subjective as the study of written documents!

One case in point is the excavation of Samaria. When the Joint Expedition began their work in the

1930s, they started from the assumption that Omri's purchase of the hill from Shemer (1 Kgs 16:24) precluded the existence of any settlement prior to Omri's first fortified city (Crowfoot, Kenyon, and Sukenik 1942:1). But the very nature of the linguistic relationship between Shemer and the name Shomron would suggest just the opposite. Note, for example, the intimate symbiosis between towns and eponyms in biblical genealogies (1 Chr 2 and 4; also for Manasseh in which Samaria was located, Num 26: 30-33; Josh 17: 2-3; 1 Chr 7:14-19; Aharoni 1979: 363 for the Samaria ostraca).

On the archeological side, scholars have objected to the Joint Expedition's methodology and chronology. For once, both Aharoni and Amiran on the one hand (1958: 179-80) and Albright (1958: 21-23) and Wright (1959: 20-23) on the other, were in agreement that Kenyon's method of dating architectural phases by the sherds in the fills under the floors has led her to a serious chronological error. They further agree that there was a village of the 10th century B.C.E. on the hill prior to the Omride building project. The result is that Kenyon's dating for the first three



Solar temple uncovered at Lachish. Photo by Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr.

pottery phases is generally a half-century off (Avigad 1978: 1042–3). No wonder then, that F. James, under Kenyon's influence, is led to the amusing but hardly convincing interpretation of Iron Age Beth-shean. She wants us to believe that the Egyptian stele of the 19th Dynasty had been standing in a temple during David's reign; the Israelites are supposed to have knocked down such stelae in anger over the attack by Shishak (James 1966: 149; cf. Kempinsky 1975: 215)!

A similar error is Kenyon's dating of the ceramics at Lachish and Beer-sheba (1976), compounded by Starkey's misguided personal feeling about the pottery of Lachish Strata III and II (1937a: 175–6; 1937b: 235–6) and Albright's subjective impressions about Tell Beit Mirsim (1937: 26). The Starkey-Albright interpretation led to the creation of a fictitious Babylonian campaign against Judean cities in 597 B.C.E. (Rainey 1975). Kenyon later posited another campaign, by some unknown enemy, this time against Beer-sheba, "... neither by Sennacherib nor by Nebuchadnezzar, but [dated] to somewhere in the middle of the seventh century" (1976: 63). This is a historical impossibility to anyone familiar with

the reign of Manasseh as it is depicted in the sources. Her method for reaching this fantastic conclusion is indeed astounding. She compares the pottery repertoire of *Beer-Sheba I* (Aharoni 1973), which was mainly a homogeneous collection from the storehouses, with a chance assemblage in a burial cave at Lachish and another tomb group in Jerusalem. From these heterogeneous, hardly comparable groupings, she dares to draw statistical conclusions. In fact, she is admitting that the *types* of vessels are the same! It is the predominance of one vessel at Lachish as against its relative scarcity at Beer-sheba and elsewhere, that forms the basis for her chronological pontifications. And she has the *chutzpah* to say "... the time has come to look at the straight archaeological evidence independently from that of written history" (1976: 63)!

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In short, the dating of Israelite pottery both at the beginning and end of the monarchical period has been based on Kenyon's interpretation of her ceramic and architectural phases at Samaria. But in each case, the 10th century and the 8th–7th centuries B.C.E., we have been offered incredible historical results, from an Egyptian stele presumably venerated at Beth-shean under David and Solomon on the one hand, to a hopeless conglomeration of phony military campaigns on the other. It is high time that scholars of biblical history assert their right to be heard and raise their voices in protest against such nonsense.

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