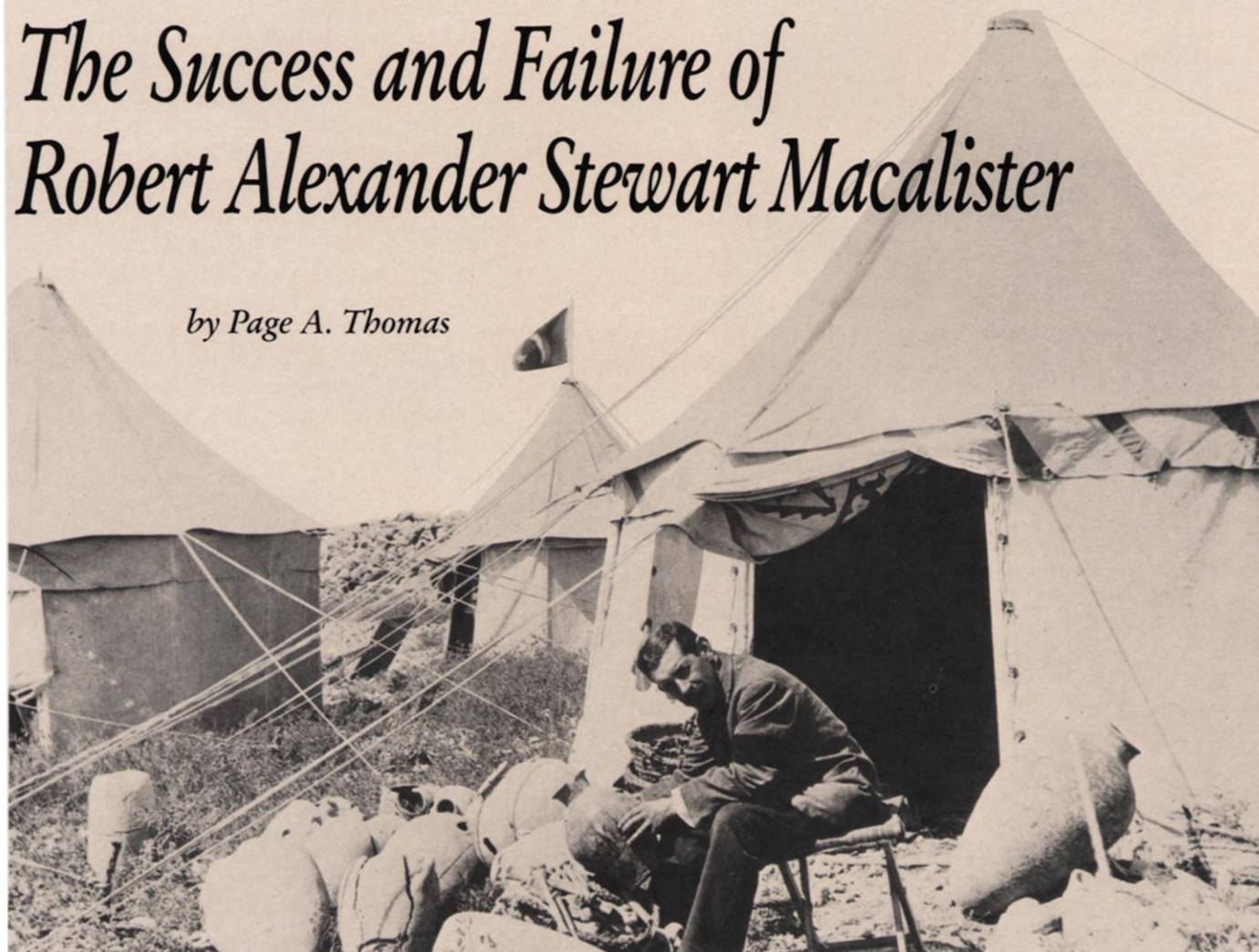


The Success and Failure of Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister

by Page A. Thomas

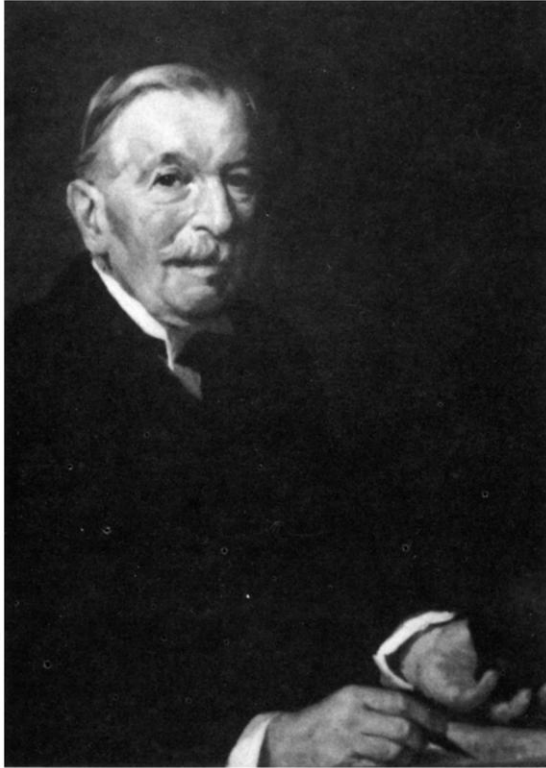


Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister at Gezer around 1905. Photograph used courtesy of David Ussishkin and William G. Dever.

In the first years of the twentieth century, when Palestinian archaeology was just past its infancy, Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister excavated at the important site of Gezer, located on the northernmost edge of the Shephelah at the foothills west of Jerusalem in the valley of Ajjalon. The qualifications he brought to the job were solid: He was intelligent and had already distinguished himself as an archaeologist with his work in England and Ireland. His energy on the job was impressive: Excavating almost continuously between 1902 and 1909, he worked through two-thirds of the thirty-acre site. And his efforts resulted in rich finds, including four city-wall

systems, the famous "Gezer calendar" (a small piece of limestone inscribed with a mnemonic Hebrew poem having to do with the agricultural activities of the twelve months of the year), and a large amount of pottery. Despite his industry and the high regard in which he was held by his contemporaries, however, many authorities now feel that most of what he did at Gezer was wasted.

Macalister's failure at Gezer may at first seem surprising, especially when one considers that after he finished his work in Palestine he returned to Ireland to become the leading figure in Irish archaeology. Why did this able man, whose other work was successful, including other work



Portrait of Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, used courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

he did in Palestine, fail at Gezer? The story is an interesting one.

Macalister was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1870, the son of a distinguished professor of anatomy at Cambridge University. His early education was at Rathmines School in Dublin. His interest in archaeology appeared early, and he published his first paper on the subject when he was twelve. After a period of study in Germany, he took his M.A. degree from Cambridge.

There is no question that he was brilliant and cultivated: He was an accomplished linguist, able to write a good verse in Arabic; a first-rate musician who was organist and choirmaster at the Adelaide Road Church in Dublin; and a popular lecturer known for his lucidity and humor, and sometimes for his flights of conjecture.

Before he went to Palestine, Macalister had studied an early Saxon cemetery near Cambridge and had made an extended archaeological survey at Fahan, near Dingle, on the west coast of Ireland. He was twenty-eight when he was appointed to succeed A. C. Dickie as the assistant field secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) and as associate to the American archaeologist F. J. Bliss. He joined Bliss at Tell ez-Zakariyeh in the fall of 1898, and for two years they worked together at four sites in the Shephelah: Tell eš-Šafi (Gath), Tell ez-Zakariyeh (Azekah), Tell el-Judeideh (Moresheth-gath), and Tell Šandaḥannah (Mareshah, Marisa).

Macalister returned to England briefly when the permit for excavation in the Shephelah expired in the fall of 1900, but when Bliss retired as director of excavations for the PEF, Macalister succeeded him in 1901. He went back to Palestine near the end of that year, and he began excavating at Tell Gezer in June 1902.

His efforts there attracted much attention. Interest in archaeology in Palestine was high, as witnessed by the fact that two other major biblical cities, Megiddo and Taanach, were also being excavated at that time. Macalister kept the project visible with a series of reports published in almost every issue of PEF's *Quarterly Statements* from 1902 to 1909 (eventually edited together and published in 1912 as the three-volume *The Excavation of Gezer*).

At first Macalister gained momentum because he was finding more than anyone ever imagined he would. Eventually, however, as his permit and money were running out, he became discouraged. In 1909, while he was still excavating at Gezer, he was elected the first professor of Celtic archaeology at University College, Dublin. He accepted this position, retiring, except for a brief excavation in 1923 on the hill of Ophel in Jerusalem, from Palestinian archaeology.

Macalister went on to a very successful career at home. He taught at University College, Dublin, until his retirement in 1943. He edited the journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Ireland from 1910 until 1918; and he was elected vice president (1916 and 1921) and president (1924–1928) of that society. He was also elected to membership in the Royal Irish Academy in 1910, becoming its president in 1926. During this period he published a great deal and was the foremost figure in Irish archaeology.

Why, then, has his work at Gezer proven unsatisfactory? Actually there are several reasons. First, although the excavation was the largest undertaken up until that time in Palestine, and although as many as 200 laborers were employed at one time there, Macalister was, in a sense, working alone. He was the sole scientist at the site, and he struggled vainly to handle all the field direction, surveying, drafting, photography, recording, and other technical jobs that are necessary for a successful project.

Second, Macalister was determined "to turn over the whole mound," a tell which is much larger than most in Palestine, before the expiration of his permit. He was convinced that Palestine was in danger of being plundered for its antiquities. In addition, he very much hoped to locate a royal archive. Thus, Macalister worked quickly and, especially in the later years, often carelessly.

Third, and most important, is the method of excavation employed by him. Macalister's only training for excavating in Palestine had come from his work with Bliss from 1898 until 1900. Bliss was the pupil of Sir Flinders Petrie, who was the first person to classify pottery systematically so as to indicate its date. Bliss had been sent to Egypt by the PEF for six months to study Petrie's method

of excavating, especially the way of identifying the age of pottery. Petrie himself had only worked in Palestine at Tell el-Hesi (his Lachish) for six weeks in 1890. When his workers deserted him for the harvest he returned to Egypt, leaving the PEF with a permit to dig but without an excavator. In Egypt, Petrie informed Bliss that he (Petrie) had extracted all the secrets the site would yield by the trench method and that it was up to Bliss to cut down the mound itself, layer by layer. Bliss, in his *Development of Palestine Exploration* (1907; p. 275), remarks—after digging for only two years, and only on the northeast corner of the tell—that “pending the development of the law of X-rays or the practical application of the mysterious fourth dimension, such piecemeal removal of a town is the only possible condition for the exhaustive examination of an underlying

Macalister, hoping to find a royal archive at Gezer, worked quickly but carelessly.

occupation.” Such was the genealogy of Macalister’s training in the methods of field excavation in Palestine.

At Gezer, Macalister used the trench method. Beginning at the eastern end, he dug a single trench forty feet wide that ran the entire length of the tell. He then dug a similar trench next to this one and dumped the debris from it into the first, eventually filling it. He continued this process with subsequent trenches, working his way across the tell. Each trench was dug down to bedrock, as deep as forty-two feet in some areas.

The problem with this approach is that it makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of the tell’s stratigraphic levels. Its shortcomings are perhaps best illustrated by comparing it to a method that was developed later and used in subsequent excavations that were conducted at Gezer in the one-third of the tell that Macalister wasn’t able to turn over. These excavations have employed the American “balk-debris layer,” which is an adaptation of the Wheeler-Kenyon method. Excavations are conducted within five-meter squares. The unexcavated areas between squares, called balks or catwalks, preserve a record of the stratigraphy.

Careful record-keeping, which indicates the position of each find three-dimensionally, is also a part of this approach, and this is another methodological area in which Macalister has been severely criticized. For instance, William G. Dever, who directed much of the modern work at Gezer, has said,

If Macalister had observed and recorded the find-spots of objects . . . and had related the finds to the plans . . . we could have used our more precise knowledge of the date of certain key items to redate most of the architecture in the various levels and

thus could have salvaged much of the material dug by him. As it is, it is irrevocably lost.

Macalister was aware of these methodological issues. Concerning the trench method, he says, in a 1904 report to PEF:

There are many drawbacks to pitting various sections of the mound with disconnected trenches, the chief being the difficulty of establishing the connection of corresponding strata, especially when a different number of strata are found in the debris of the mound in different places.

Apparently, however, his haste, and possibly the complexity of the stratigraphy, convinced him to continue using the method.

On the question of recording find-spots, perhaps it was also haste that led him to say, “The exact spot in the mound where any ordinary object chanced to lie is not generally of great importance.”

Thus, the excavations of Macalister at Gezer were not successful, and it is easy to sympathize with subsequent excavators for the frustrations he caused them. In his defense, however, it should be noted that at the time Macalister was working, most of the techniques of Palestinian archaeology that were eventually to yield such a wealth of knowledge had not yet been developed or refined. Also, the excavation of a tell, with its many stratigraphic levels certainly requires different, though not necessarily superior, skills from those used by Macalister so successfully in Ireland. Finally, the mistakes of Macalister, although important ones, should not be allowed to obscure what he did accomplish in Palestine. In addition to his finds at Gezer, he should be remembered for his drawing and description of Khirbet Shema^c near Safed; his work on the caves of Mareshah; his identification of Tell Hum as ancient Capernaum; his location of Sychar at Tell Balatah rather than ^cAskar or Nablus; his identification of Taricheae as Kerak; his sharing in the identification of Laish (Dan) with Tell el-Qadi; his recognition of Tell Bel^cameh (Ibleam) as an important site for excavation; and his conclusion that Zer^cin was not the site of Jezreel.

Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister died at his home in Cambridge on April 26, 1950, at the age of eighty. Despite the problems with much of his work in Palestine, the following statement, taken from an obituary in *Quarterly Statements*, still has much truth to it:

His name will always be associated with the excavations at Gezer, an excavation which might almost be said to mark the beginning of scientific archaeology of Palestine.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Dever, W. G.
1967 Excavations at Gezer. *The Biblical Archaeologist* 30: 47–62.
Dever, W. G., and others
1971 Further Excavations at Gezer, 1967–71. *The Biblical Archaeologist* 34: 94–132.