

THE NELSON GLUECK BRINGING SCHOOL OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY ARCHAEOLOGY INTO THE EXCAVATIONS AT COMMUNITY: GIVAT SHER, MODI'IN

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On the outskirts of the sprawling new town of Modi'in lies a verdant site of great antiquity – Givat Sher. The low hill is covered with wild oak and pistachia and old almond and olive orchards; it is carpeted with daffodils, anemones, and cyclamen in the spring. But there are also strange stone cairns, rock-hewn cisterns, tombs, and stairways to nowhere on Givat Sher. Most of the year the hill is quiet and empty of people, but at *Pesach*-time and in the month of August, Givat Sher comes alive

with hundreds of people of all ages, social groups, and orientations who come to excavate history's hidden treasure.

The excavation's young staff is comprised of students from different Israeli universities, working under the auspices of HUC-JIR's Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology (NGSBA). We have special requirements for our staff; they must be good field archaeologists, but they must also share our sense of mission: to make archaeology more accessible to

laypeople and to help the local community achieve a sense of rootedness in its surroundings.

Over the past four seasons of fieldwork, both volunteers and archaeologists have developed a feeling of belonging to Givat Sher. But we remember, and remind others always, that other people belonged to Givat Sher and Givat Sher once belonged to them. Archaeology can and should be a tool of multi-vocality, of multiple, even competing narratives about the past and how the past is "created" to in-

form the politics and ideologies of the present.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN ISRAEL, THEN AND NOW

There was a time when archaeology was Israel's national hobby – part of the excitement of building a new country over the foundations of the past. It was one of Zionism's tools for putting down roots. But as the new nation developed and prospered and its existence became a fact, a new generation of Israelis turned to other fields of interest – often



Photos on previous and following pages:

Children from the Nitzanim Elementary School, teenagers, HUC-JIR students, community volunteers, and visitors from abroad participating in the excavation of Givat Sher outside of Modi'in.

involving material prosperity and travel. More to the point, many Israelis tired of Zionist slogans and ethnocentricity, feeling that these have contributed to Israel's ongoing conflict with its Arab neighbors and citizens. Since Israeli archaeology has traditionally been seen as an expression of Zionist ideology, much of the younger generation that grew up in the 1960s and after has shown little interest in the physical remains of Israel's past. One only has to look at the declining visitation numbers at the country's archaeological parks.

This does not mean that archaeology has no attraction. But the attraction lies, as it does in many other western countries today, in the study of ancient people and civilizations as a more general search for human origins and a more inclusive curiosity about the mysteries of the past. Nationalistic archaeology is passé, but the adventure of archaeology is definitely "in."

The adventure of archaeology is the jumping-off point for our Givat Sher Community Archaeology Project, established in the new town of Modi'in. The Nitzanim Elementary School has adopted Givat Sher, which is located within walking distance of the school. Together with the kids, teachers, and parents, we are surveying, excavating, and

reconstructing various elements of the site. Our research format has a landscape archaeology orientation, which means that we collect environmental data and investigate agricultural installations, burial features, and inter-site relations. This will be a long-term project that has already expanded to include other parts of the community – the Modi'in municipality and the Society for the Preservation of Nature are full partners.

THE SITE: HORVAT SHER

Horvat Sher (Umm es-Sur in Arabic) was first mentioned in the publication of the British Survey of Western Palestine, conducted at the close of the 19th century. Since then it has been visited by several archaeological surveyors who reported various features – stone columns, walls, and strange stone edifices of unknown function.

The results of our own surveys, conducted prior to our excavations, have shown that the site is comprised of several concentrations of archaeological remains. At the lower, western reaches of the site, bordering on a small, gentle valley, we have identified the main settlement area. This is a ruin approximately two to three acres in size, with lots of stone heaps, terrace walls, and at least three water cisterns.

Well-dressed stones can be seen in some of the terrace walls, indicating residential use. Sherds collected from the surface of the site teach us that the place was first settled during the Hellenistic (Hasmonean or Maccabean) period, during which time there existed a thriving village with a synagogue at nearby Umm el Umdan. Umm el Umdan was excavated several years ago by the Israel Antiquities Authority and identified tentatively by the excavators as ancient Modi'in of the Maccabees.

The second period of occupation is the end of the Byzantine period (this is also the period during which the Talmud coalesced). A stone lintel with two crosses carved into it must have belonged to a church, so there was clearly a Christian community here. Were there Jews and Samaritans here too?

The last settlement of the site existed in the medieval period, when it must have been a small farmstead, probably occupied by Muslim peasants. Today the area is a semi-wild olive grove, perhaps planted just prior to the 1948 war by peasants from the neighbouring village of Salbit, who fled with the onset of war (the site of Salbit is now occupied by a religious *kibbutz*, Sha'alabim).

Our research is still in its infancy. We now have our eye on the hill to the east where all the ruins reported by the explorers of old are found. Here we can make out stone-fenced enclosures and a great many agricultural installations – wine and oil presses, cisterns, terrace walls, and threshing floors. The many stone huts and caves may have been dwellings. The date of these features is unknown, but our work in the coming years should provide answers.

HOW COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY WORKS AND WHO IT WORKS FOR

We have conducted three seasons of full-fledged excavation. Generally we dig with the Nitzanim Elementary School kids in the spring, just before *Pesach*, and then again in August. So far, approximately 2,500 people have gotten their hands dirty. We estimate return visits at about 20%, though this figure increased toward the end of our last August season. The summer season continued the Nitzanim project but also opened it up to the whole town and to guests from outside the Modi'in area.

The idea of community archaeology is that almost anybody can dig. It takes an hour or two to learn how to use the tools and a couple of days to learn to use

BRINGING ARCHAEOLOGY INTO THE COMMUNITY

(continued)

them well. Most people can dig reasonably effectively with just a little tutoring and end up enjoying it immensely. We are careful not to put neophytes into contexts where they might do damage and it is probably true that, here and there, we probably do lose some information to less-than-professional techniques. But we have no doubt that this small sacrifice is worthwhile given the benefits.

The Givat Sher dig is serving other communities beyond the Modi'in region, including HUC-JIR's students and faculty. The students in the Year-In-Israel Program dig in at least two different frameworks. One of these is an enrichment program for students who chose to spend a week in the field, learning the nitty-gritty of how field archaeology works. The other framework is that of the program's Land of Israel course in which all the students come to dig for a day, to get at least a taste of what archaeology is about. The students will have other opportunities to be in the field with us, and may especially want to join in when we work with the Modi'in public. This can be a good opportunity to practice Hebrew and to rub shoulders with "just folks."

We see the Givat Sher project in a broader context too. The World Union of Progressive Judaism has its own excavation (in fact, it now has several, through the NGSBA). Congregations and any other affiliated organizations can contact us at ngsba@huc.edu to arrange a day of archaeological adventure. We can dig in conjunction with or without the Modi'in community, and the modest fees will help us maintain our program.

The program is now open to other organizations in Israel and abroad. Our excavations at Tel Dan and Lod now operate according to this model as well, to some extent. An excavation is a great place for building bridges between different constituencies and for just making friends.

WHAT WE HOPE TO ACHIEVE WITH COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

Over the last few decades, archaeology in Israel has become an elite, academic pursuit. But archaeology should be for people, not just for a select few. Why shouldn't more people be part of the fun? Moreover, should we academics really be the only ones to determine the research agenda, to ask the questions to be investigated? What we pro-

pose is to reverse the roles of the public and the professional; we the archaeologists can be public servants and enjoy a different kind of dialectic. The kids from the Nitzanim Elementary School and the Talmud Torah students ask the research questions and we provide possible paths to arrive at answers. It's teamwork, rather than hierarchy.

The outcome of this should have positive repercussions for cultural resource management (CRM) in Israel. Funding for archaeology has been cut by the government and a significant part of our historical heritage is being decimated by development and antiquities theft. By creating new cadres of people who enjoy and identify with archaeology we are building a foundation for the future of our field. Archaeological enthusiasts will report and prevent vandalism and support museums and other heritage projects. Perhaps one of our diggers will one day be a government minister.

Archaeology can help build community by creating an emotional connection and identity with a place of antiquity. Fieldwork also creates new relationships, often between people with little else in common; it's like summer camp.

This social dynamic has great potential for conflict management, at least on an interpersonal level.

The archaeology of ethnic or national identification has not gone away. It's still here and it still motivates important sectors of Israeli society. Does this mean that nationalistic archaeology is illegitimate? Not necessarily. Archaeology that identifies with a particular narrative is negative only when it claims exclusivity or sole ownership of the past. We feel that we can accept nationalistic identification and interpretation as long as other narratives are not excluded.

Community archaeology at a site with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim strata is a means of examining competing narratives and those narratives' implications for the political present. This theme will be especially important in our excavations at Tel Dan and our new project at Lod, where Arabs and Jews have begun working together in the hope of creating a new reality, from under the ground.

We will report on these adventures in future issues of the *Chronicle*. ■

