



Archaeology: the science of investigation

Excavations in Jordan by the British Museum: part 1

Jonathon Tubb

The site at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh had been known since, presumably, the 1920s or thereabouts, had been included on a field survey of recent survey of Eastern Palestine by Nelson Glick and wasn't really discovered because it is fairly obvious that it's there, I mean it stands up as a fairly prominent mound, one of the most prominent mounds in that part of the central Jordan Valley.

It was the Jordanian Department of Antiquities that suggested to me that I might like to resurrect the permit on the Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, which it obviously lacks, and so I came back to the British Museum with that invitation almost and proposed it to the Trustees and the Director of the Trustees and they, approved it. What happens when you want to excavate a site, certainly in Jordan, is that you have to apply to Jordanian Department of Antiquities for what's called an excavation permit. You have to submit a detailed proposal of what you want to do, why you want to do it and what's called a logistic proposal of how you think you're going to set about doing it.

Excavation permits are issued on an individual basis not on an institutional basis, so in other words if I were to go to, UC Berkley tomorrow I would basically take the excavation with me. The site at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh is what we call a Tell site, in other words an occupation mound and Tell es-Sa'idiyeh is a peculiar one in a way because it is a double mound and so we talk about an upper Tell and a lower Tell. Together, I suppose the two elements is probably in the order of 12-13 hectares so it's one of the biggest sites in the Jordan valley, I would say bigger than Deir Allah, for example.

I'm sure Rupert would agree there is always a question when you take on a site of this size of where you are going to dig to get the maximum benefit. Generally speaking, I mean it's almost self evident in a way, because if you're interested in, let's say, the defences of the site then obviously you are going to need a trench which goes through the upper edge of your Tell. This trench here is almost guaranteed to pick up defensive circuits, city walls and so forth. Beyond that you tend to look for natural features for example, over here, not shown on this plan, but you can see on the contours there is an existing depression and that indicated that it could perhaps be one of the main gateways at that point so we decided to put a trench there. In a very large-scale season such as the 1989 season where we basically had six excavation areas open at once, you need to think about your staffing levels and the sort of people that you are going to take. One of the big operations in '89 was to work on the cemetery area so that meant in addition to your skilled, as it were, excavation field supervisors who were archaeologists, you needed to have human bone specialists, in fact we had two that season, specialists draftsmen experienced in recording skeletal remains, a whole raft of environmental scientists who would look at both the botany and the zoology of the remains, we had a geomorphologist that season too, a finds draftsman, a conservator, it is a part of the responsibility of a foreign expedition to conserve, at least to first aid standards, the objects that are staying in the country, so I suppose that in '89 we had a team of about 25 staff

Rupert Chapman confirms 25

Jonathan Tubb:

Of which I suppose that only about 8 or 9 were excavators, the rest were specialists of various sorts, and we would, on an operation of that scale we would reckon to employ about 100 local workmen. We had examined the possibility of using geophysics in order to determine perhaps where important deposits and buildings might lie, but to be honest it was a

total failure, we tried three methods of geophysics, we used archeomagnetism, ground penetrating radar and, what was the other one
Rupert Chapman
Resistivity

Jonathan Tubb

Resistivity. The difficulty is that on a Tel site like ours the stratigraphy is so unbelievably complex that you cannot simply separate out by geophysics any meaningful units, all of these things are scrambled up together. On a site that has relatively shallow stratigraphy and simple buildings then you may stand a chance. Also we are dealing with mud brick architecture. Sometimes, in some of our phases, not really with very profound stone foundations, if at all and there's very little difference in density between the building material and the earth around it and so it just didn't pick up anything.