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Forty
Groundbreaking
Articles from
Forty Years of
Biblical
Archaeology
Review



Has Joshua's Altar Been Found on Mt. Ebal?

ADAM ZERTAL



M. WEINBERG

TO APPRECIATE FULLY THE SIGNIFICANCE of the unique altar and cult center we are excavating on Mt. Ebal, one must first understand the archaeological context in which these discoveries were made.

We found the altar and cult center, not in the course of excavating a tell, but in the course of conducting an archaeological survey. The recent history of archaeology in Israel and in adjacent lands has seen a slow movement away from the excavation of large, well-known tells in favor of surveys of larger geographic areas. A survey not only provides a comprehensive background of an area, but it also gives the archaeologist a broader understanding of individual sites discovered during the survey.

It would be difficult to find a better example to illustrate this than Mt. Ebal and the altar and cult center we found on it. To understand what we found, we must understand not only the site itself, but the mountain on which it was discovered and, indeed, how this mountain relates to the surrounding area in a particular time period.

THE HILLS AND FIELDS OF ISRAEL are dotted with stone piles created by farmers clearing their land. When the author explored this mound, only telltale pottery sherds scattered on the surface distinguished it from dozens of other stone-strewn mounds. But the sherds were enough to warrant archaeological investigation at the site.

Digging beneath this particular pile of stones revealed a nine-foot-high structure dating to the early Iron Age, 1220–1000 B.C., the time archaeologists assign to the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan. In Biblical terms, this was the period when the Israelites under Joshua entered the Promised Land. According to the Bible, Joshua built an altar on Mt. Ebal, where all Israel gathered and worshipped. Could the nine-foot-high structure be Joshua's altar?

As the view of Mt. Ebal shows (opposite), even those people who stood not next to the altar, but on the hillside beneath it, would have had a clear view of the altar and of the ritual performed on it.

An archaeological survey is conducted by surveyors who systematically walk over a defined area, so that trained eyes examine the surface of every square meter of land, slope after slope, ridge

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after ridge, field after field, searching for evidence of human occupation. All such evidence is carefully examined, recorded, mapped, and in the case of our survey, programmed into a computer. Sometimes limited excavation is undertaken at key sites. A survey is thus a slow, tedious process; paradoxically, it is at the same time exciting.

Our survey, which began in 1978, intends to cover the area allotted to the Israelite tribe of Manasseh. We expect to complete the survey by 1990.

Incidentally, the altar and cult center on Mt. Ebal have not been our only important discoveries.

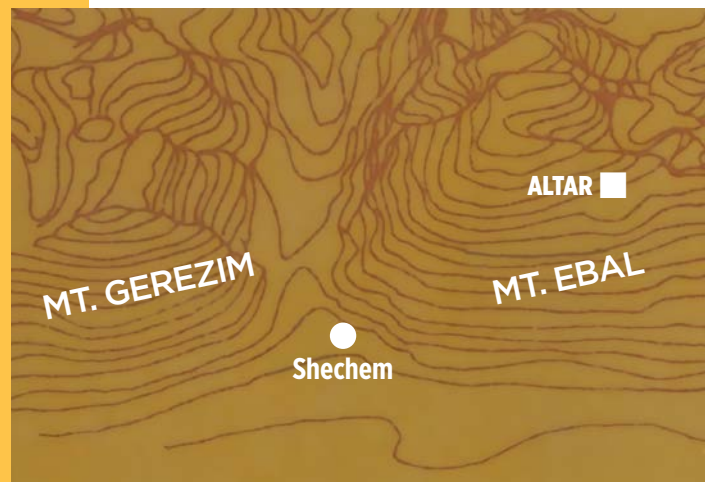
Another was Khirbet el Hammam, which has now been conclusively identified as ancient Nabata, where the First Jewish Revolt against Rome started in 66 A.D. And the city in the stratum just beneath Nabata has been identified as Arubboth, the third district capital of King Solomon (1 Kings 4:10). But this site will be the subject of another article. Let us return to Mt. Ebal.

Our survey of Mt. Ebal itself began in February 1980, nearly two years after we began our survey of Manasseh. Ebal is a huge mountain—about six and a half square miles (18 square kilometers)—in the southern part of Manasseh. It is also the highest mountain in northern Samaria, rising over 3,000 feet (940 meters) above sea level. From its peak, on a clear day, we could see the snows of Mt. Hermon in the north, the mountains of Gilead across the Jordan to the east, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and the hills surrounding Jerusalem to the south. Our survey of this mountain alone took nearly two months to complete.

Mt. Ebal, known from Deuteronomy, chapters 27 and 28, as the mountain where the curses were pronounced, is separated on the south from Mt. Gerizim, the mountain of the blessings, by the deep narrow valley of Shechem.

On a cool spring afternoon in April—April 6, 1980, to be exact—when we had nearly completed our survey of the mountain, we came upon a large heap of stones that was not very different from the thousands of stone heaps we had already found, collected by farmers as they cleared their fields for planting. True, this stone heap was somewhat larger than the typical one, but what really distinguished it was the great quantity of pottery sherds lying around it.

We were immediately able to date these sherds to the early part of the period archaeologists call Iron





ON THE SLOPE of Mt. Ebal, the Israelite altar overlooks terraced rows of olive trees to the east. In the distance, the settlement of Elon Moreh, center, interrupts the ridge line rising toward the summit of Jebel Kebir.

Age I (1220–1000 B.C.), the period during which the Israelites entered Canaan and settled there. Iron Age I also includes the period of the Judges.

Our survey of the territory of Manasseh proved very rich in the number of sites from Iron Age I. To date, we have discovered approximately 160 sites from this period. This was hardly surprising. The Bible tells us that Israel was really born here—in the central hill country and especially near the ancient city of Shechem (Genesis 11:31, 12:6; Joshua 24).

But Mt. Ebal itself was different. Except for the heap of stones mentioned above, there was not a single site from Iron Age I on Mt. Ebal. Here, amidst evidence of dense Iron I occupation in the hill country of Manasseh, in an area identified in the Bible with the new Israelite settlements, was a prominent mountain devoid of any Iron Age sites, except one—our heap of stones. We discovered more than ten other sites on Mt. Ebal, but none of these was occupied in the Iron Age.

It took us two years to raise funds to excavate the heap of stones, and to organize our expedition. But I must confess we did not rush, for we never

dreamed that the site would prove to be the earliest and most complete Israelite cultic center ever discovered and the prototype of all later ones. It took us another two years and three seasons of digging to find out what we were really excavating.

The heap of stones was called *El Burnat* by the local fellahin. It means “the hat” in Arabic. It is located on the northeastern side of Mt. Ebal on a low, stony ridge, on the so-called second step of the mountain. The site is enclosed on three sides by beautiful little valleys, producing an amphitheater-like setting. Here, we began to dig with eight volunteers in September 1982.

We have completed four seasons of excavation; one in October 1982, two in 1983, and the last in the summer of 1984, and we now have a reasonably complete picture of the site.

The central feature of the site, found under the heap of stones, is a rectangular, nearly square structure. Today it stands to a height of almost nine feet. Since it is so beautifully preserved, we conclude that this is probably close to its original height. It is constructed of large, unhewn field stones. The outside measurements are 24.5 feet by 29.5 feet. Its walls are 5 feet (1.4 meters) thick.

Our first season, in October 1982, concentrated on this central structure. Our initial thought was that this was a farmhouse or perhaps a watchtower.



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But it was different in almost every respect from the farmhouse's watchtowers we know from examples all over the country. When we reached the bottom of the structure, we immediately noticed that there was neither a floor nor an entrance. The walls were laid directly upon bedrock. Obviously, we were not dealing with a building that had been regularly lived in.

To explain the structure as a watchtower is even less satisfactory, because there is no reason for a watchtower to be here. Mt. Ebal has always been an obstacle to transportation. All transportation routes have avoided it. There is, thus, no road for a watchtower to observe. And there were no Iron Age settlements nearby.

The strangest feature of the structure was the filling, which, together with the structure, formed a kind of stage. When we excavated the fill within the structure, we found that it consisted of deliberately laid strata or layers of field stones, earth and ashes, one layer on top of the other. The earth and ashes contained pieces of pottery, all from Iron Age I, and animal bones. The ash was of different kinds of burnt wood, principally evergreen oak (*Quercus Calliprinos*).

Getting a little ahead of my story, I will tell you

THE RECTANGULAR ALTAR on Mt. Ebal was once filled with alternating layers of earth, ash and fieldstones. Here, inside the altar's exterior wall, bordering the edges of the photo, we see the excavation of the fill in progress.

When archaeologists removed that fill, they discovered an interior dividing wall, center, extending part of the way across the altar. As the archaeologists continued to excavate, they came to an ash layer (to the left of the dividing wall), which they preserved for a time. To the right of the dividing wall, they continued excavating and reached bedrock. The walls of the altar had been built directly on bedrock.

Sometime after this photo was taken, the area in front of the dividing wall was excavated, and a circular structure on bedrock was revealed (opposite).

that the bones, which were found in such large quantities in the filling, were sent for analysis to the zoology department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The bones proved to be from young male bulls, sheep, goats and fallow deer. Most of the bones had been burnt in open-flame fires of low temperature (200–600 degrees C.). Some of the bones were cut near the joints. The first chapter of Leviticus describes the animals that may be offered as sacrifices. A burnt offering must be a male without blemish (Leviticus 1:3). It may be a

bull (Leviticus 1:5) or a sheep or a goat (Leviticus 1:10). The close match of the bones we found in the fill with this description in Leviticus 1 was a strong hint as to the nature of the structure we were excavating. Although fallow deer were not included in the Biblical description, they are a kosher animal that may be slaughtered and eaten, so it is possible that during the early stages of the Israelite religion, a fallow deer could also have served as an acceptable sacrifice.

But all this analysis of the bones actually occurred much later. At the end of our first season, when the winter rains began, and it turned cold on Mt. Ebal, we still had no idea what this mysterious structure was.

When we excavated under the fill, we found some curious stone-built installations. One installation consisted of a circle made of medium-sized field stones laid on bedrock and located at the exact geometric center of the structure. The outside diameter of the circle of stones was 6.5 feet. The circle of stones was filled with a thin, yellowish material that we have not yet identified. On top of this yellowish layer was a thin layer of ash and animal bones.

This installation as well as the others inside the structure were clearly used in some fire-related activity before the structure was built. It is quite obvious, now, that the installations at the bottom of the structure represent an earlier phase, and the large structure itself represents a later phase—both from the same Iron I period.

Two cross-walls divide the structure. If these cross-walls extended further, they would meet and divide the structure in two. They are too short to meet, however. One of these short walls was built over the circle installation at the center of the structure.

Another curious discovery: two corners of the structure point precisely (within an error of less than one degree) to the north and the south; since the structure is rectangular, the other two corners point nearly but not exactly east and west.

Attached to the structure on the southwestern side were two adjacent, stone-paved courtyards. In each courtyard were stone-built installations, three in one and four in the other. Some of these installations were paved with crushed chalk. They contained either ashes and animal bones, or complete pottery vessels (jars, jugs, juglets and pyxides)—one or the other, but not both.

What at first glance appears to be a wall separating the two courtyards outside the rectangular structure actually rises from the far side up to the main structure at an incline of 22 degrees. This is in fact a ramp leading up to the stage on top of



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CIRCULAR STRUCTURES of small fieldstones. Constructed on bedrock at the exact center of the rectangular structure at Mt. Ebal, the circle (top) was filled with a layer of ash and animal bones. Its location and filling tell archaeologists that it was built sometime before the rectangular structure was erected and was probably used for animal sacrifice.

In the courtyards of the altar, seven other variously shaped stone installations were uncovered, such as the one just to the man's right. Inside these installations, excavators found either complete pottery vessels, which originally probably contained offerings, or animal bones and ashes.

Behind the installation, both the higher level and the slightly lower level ramps are visible, sloping downwards from the top left to the middle right of the photo.





THE EXCAVATED ALTAR is situated on the northeastern slope of Mt. Ebal in the Biblical territory of Manasseh. At this stage of the excavations, the structure in the center of the photo appears as a large rectangle to which a square is attached on its left. The lower horizontal “wall” of the square on the left is, in fact, a ramp leading up to the rectangular altar platform. On either side of the ramp are courtyards. These structures can be easily distinguished in the drawings on pp. 130–131.

In this view from the southeast, a thin wall of fieldstones is barely visible to the left of the courtyards. A thicker retaining wall appears as a line separating the dark area to the right of the altar and the light-colored stone slope. Both the thin wall and the earlier, thicker wall originally looped entirely around the excavated structures to form a sacred area archaeologists call a *temenos*.

Although the territory of Manasseh is dotted with sites that date to Iron Age I, the period when the Israelites settled here, this structure is the only Iron Age I site on Mt. Ebal.

the main structure. This ramp is a bit over 3 feet wide and 23 feet long. It is made of medium-sized field stones. The highest point of the ramp indicates that the main structure was one layer of stones higher than its present elevation, rising to a height of approximately 10 feet. So both the ramp and the excellent state of preservation of the structure indicate it has been preserved to nearly its full original height.

This structure, together with its ramp and courtyards and adjacent area, is surrounded by a thin elliptical wall enclosing about 37,650 square feet (3,500 square meters). We refer to this wall as the *temenos* wall. (*Temenos* is a Greek word meaning “an enclosed sacred place.”) The *temenos* wall stands to a height of about one and a half feet and is made of small field stones. This wall is built on the edge of the slope. About seven feet west and down the slope from this wall is a retaining or revetment wall, which we now assume to be an earlier *temenos* wall, made of very large boulders. The space between the two walls is filled with field stones that support the later *temenos* wall.

During the last excavation season, we located the gateway through the *temenos* wall. It consists of two parallel walls perpendicular to the *temenos* wall, 23 feet apart. Three wide steps lead up the slope and through the gateway. The entrance is beautifully paved with large, flat stones, creating a very wide and precisely detailed processional entrance. No parallel to this entranceway has been found in Iron Age Israel. This beautiful entrance emphasizes the significance of Mt. Ebal as a sacred cultic center.

Within the *temenos* or sacred precinct but outside the main structure, we found different stone installations, in addition to those already described. They are mostly built of small flat stones and are



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arranged in three groups. In some we found pottery vessels but no ashes or trace of fire. Originally, the vessels probably contained some kind of offering. In other installations, we found ash and animal bones but no pottery.

A word about the pottery. In the past few years our knowledge of the pottery of this period in the area of Manasseh has increased greatly. We can now say with considerable confidence that the site on Mt. Ebal consists of two distinct levels, to which two very similar groups of pottery are related. The earlier level is from the second half of the 13th century B.C., and the later from the first half of the 12th century B.C. Much of the later pottery is uniquely adorned on its handles with a reed-hole decoration and a “man’s face” decoration. Both were discovered and studied during our survey in Manasseh, and now we consider these handles to be the clearest indication that the particular stratum in which they are found dates to the Israelite settlement period—especially in the territory of Manasseh.

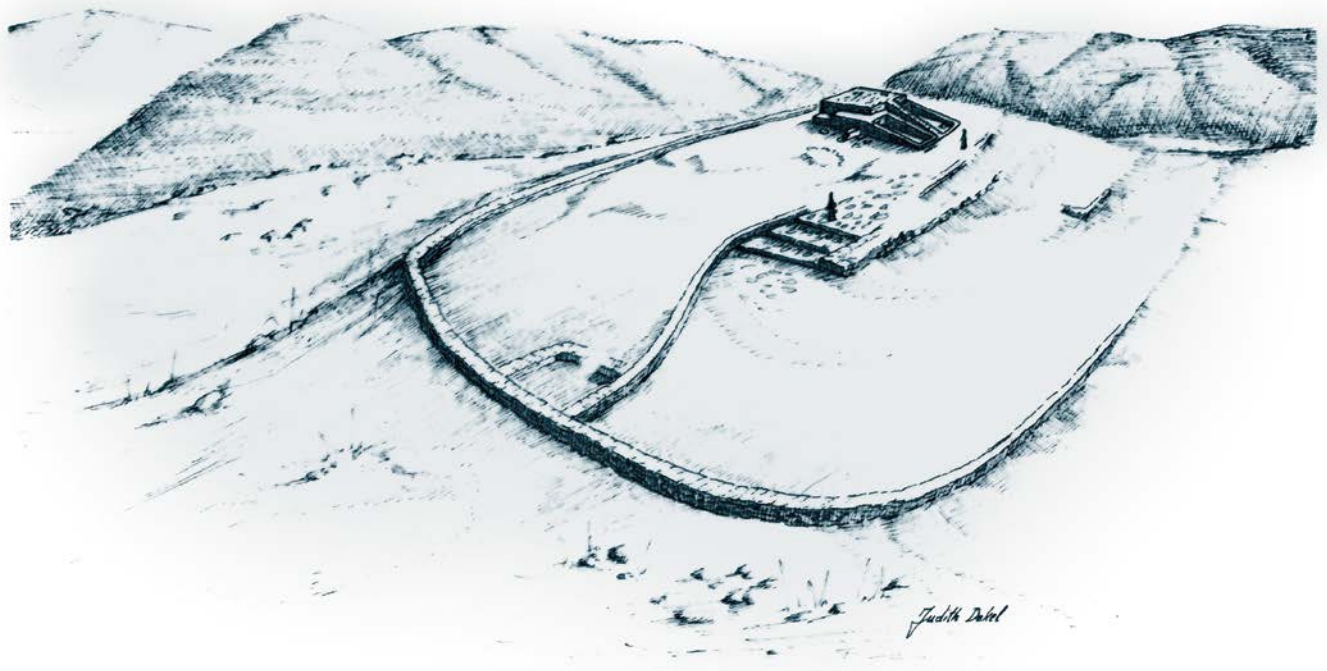
About 70 percent of the pottery vessels are large collar-rim storage jars, which are known to have been the principal storage vessels of the newly settled

A RAMP THREE feet wide, flanked on its left side by a slightly lower ramp, or ledge, makes a gradual ascent to the top of the Mt. Ebal altar. The ledge turns left, or north, when it meets the altar top and gradually widens on the altar’s north side. In this view from the west, we see the 23-foot-long ramp and two courtyards, one on either side of the ramp.

An artist’s reconstruction of the Ebal altar (opposite) shows the ramp with its ledge, the two courtyards and other features: the retaining wall around the sacred precinct and the temenos wall with its wide three-step processional entrance.

Israelites. About 20 percent of the pottery vessels are jugs and chalices. The balance are small vessels, mostly votive, specially made by hand for ritual use. We found only a small quantity of common domestic pottery, such as cooking pots.

In retrospect it seems strange, but the truth is that the finds I have just described did not suggest to us that the structure itself was an altar. That insight came only toward the end of the third season. Up to that time we remained in the dark as to what our mysterious structure was. We looked for parallels by which to interpret it, but could find none; it seemed our structure was unique. Then the



JUDITH DEKEL

light dawned—in a flash.

I remember it vividly. It was a Thursday, the morning of October 13, 1983. A friend of mine, a young archaeologist named David Etam, visited the site, and I gave him a tour. I was explaining the site to him, especially the difficulty we were having understanding the function of the strange central structure that had been filled. David interrupted me: “Why don’t you think the opposite? Why don’t you think that the filling is the important part, rather than the building?”

For months we had been trying to understand the structure by thinking of the filling as secondary. We were concentrating on the outside structure. David’s insight stunned me. I grabbed a Bible and opened it to Exodus 27:8, which describes the portable Tabernacle altar the Israelites were commanded to build in the wilderness: “Make it hollow, with boards. As you were shown on the mountain, so shall it be made.”

Then I went to a Biblical encyclopedia and looked under “altar” and read as follows: “The Tabernacle altar is described as having four walls; it was filled with earth and stones to its full height. On this filling the fire was burned. This construction method is well-known from Assyrian altars. That is why the altar is described [in the Bible] as being ‘hollow with boards’ (Biblical Encyclopedia, Vol. 4, p. 773 [Hebrew]).

Suddenly it all became clear: the filling and the structure were together one complete unit—an altar!

That evening, after a long day of excavating and

washing pottery, I took a piece of paper and pencil and drew a rough sketch of what I thought the structure would have looked like, assuming it was an altar. I showed my sketch to one of the staff. He was dumbstruck. He ran from the room and soon returned with a Mishnah.* He opened the Mishnah to a passage in tractate *Middot* that minutely describes the Second Temple and surrounding structures. The particular edition he was using contained a drawing of the Second Temple altar as it was described in *Middot*. The drawing in the book was almost identical to the sketch I had drawn. Now it was I who was dumbstruck.

Beyond question, our site is a cultic center. The more than 50 installations containing either animal bones and ashes (the remains of sacrifices) or pottery vessels (which must have once contained offerings) seem irrefutable evidence of the cultic nature of the site. The special nature of the bones further supports this conclusion. The isolated location of the site on a prominent mountain further strengthens the case. But the most striking feature of the site is the central structure, which, it seems, must now be interpreted as an altar.

One curious feature of our structure provides well-nigh conclusive evidence that it is an altar. About three feet below the top of the altar is the top of a thin wall that encircles three sides of the altar, in effect creating a kind of ledge attached to

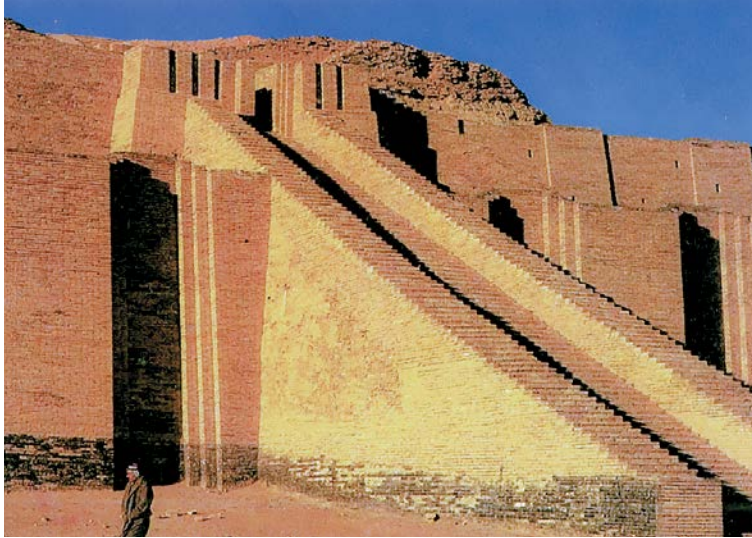
**Mishnah*: (from the Hebrew, to “repeat”) The body of Jewish oral law, specifically the collection of oral laws compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the second century.

Mt. Ebal Altar Part of a 2,000-Year-Old Architectural Tradition

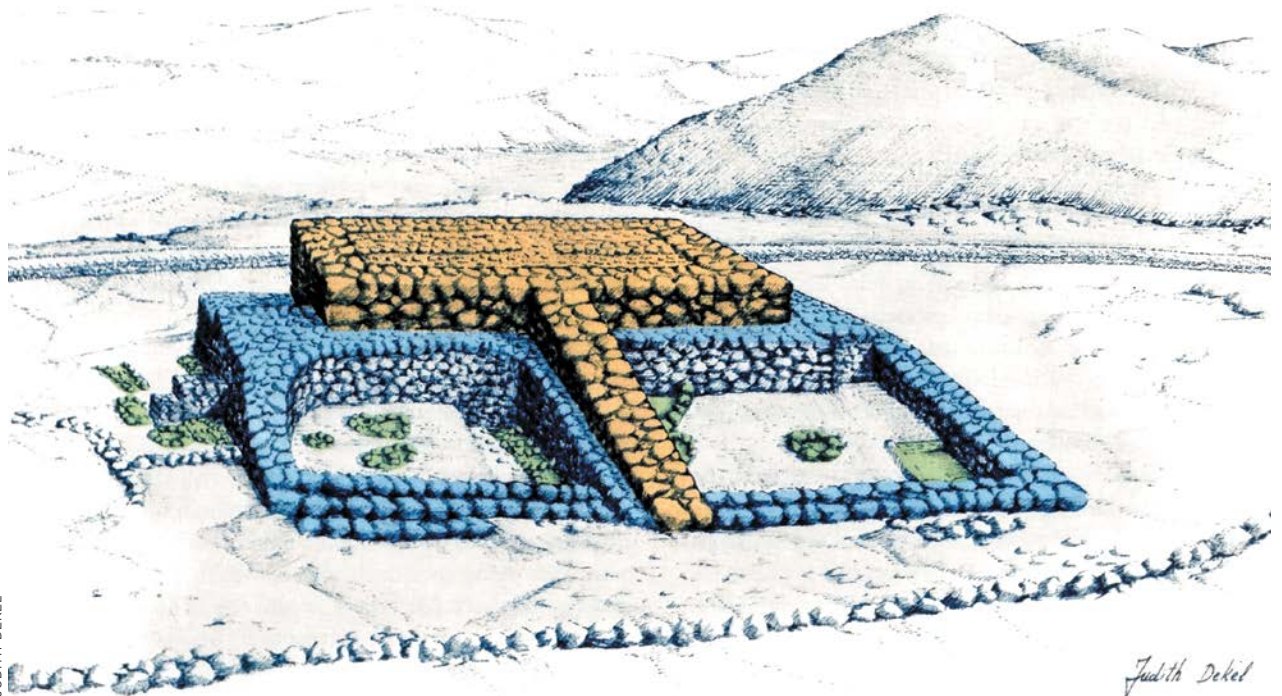
Huge stepped structures called ziggurats are well-known from the third and second millennia B.C. in Mesopotamia. One of the most famous examples is the ziggurat of Ur, built about 2100 B.C. Originally, this ziggurat had four stages or steps; each of the upper three was smaller than the one below. A stepped ramp ascended to all the stages. The first, tallest stage and its steep ramp, seen here, have been restored by the Iraqi authorities to their original

size. Author Zertal suggests that the stepped ledges and ramp of the Mt. Ebal altar reflect architectural traditions of Mesopotamian ziggurats. The altars of Solomon and Ezekiel described in the Bible also resemble Mesopotamian ziggurats. However, the design of the distinctive Mesopotamian ramp was modified in the later Israelite versions. The Israelite ramps were less steep than those of the Ur ziggurat and, as described in Exodus, they did not have steps: "Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar..." (Exodus 20:26).

The persistence for more than 2,000 years of this architectural tradition of ledges and a ramp is suggested by a drawing (right) based on a description in tractate *Middot* of the Mishnah, a collection of oral Jewish laws compiled in the second century A.D. The drawing shows the first-century B.C. altar from the Jerusalem Temple. The similarity of this drawing to the artist's reconstruction of the Mt. Ebal altar (below) is dramatically evident. A plan (lower right) showing an overhead view of the Mt. Ebal altar also indicates the ramp and ledges. In all three renderings, a lower ledge colored blue surrounds three sides of the top of the altar and continues as a narrower, lower ramp along the side of the broad, main ramp. The rectangular structure and the main ramp leading up to it are colored yellow. In the plan and the reconstruction of the Mt. Ebal altar the circular installations are colored green.



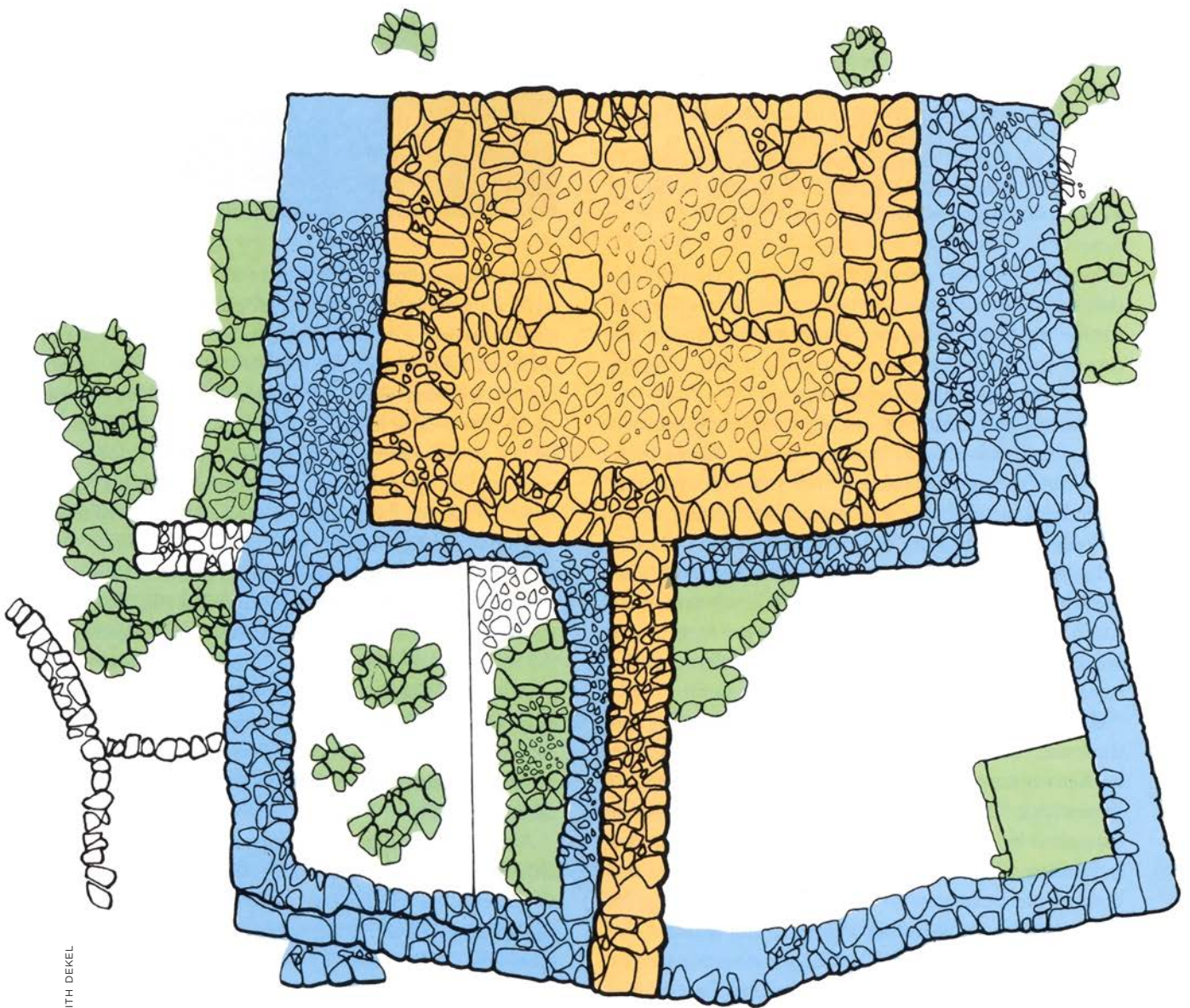
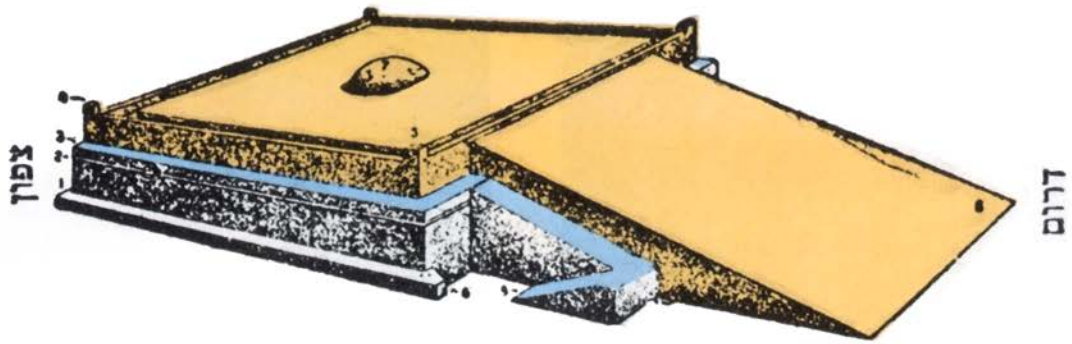
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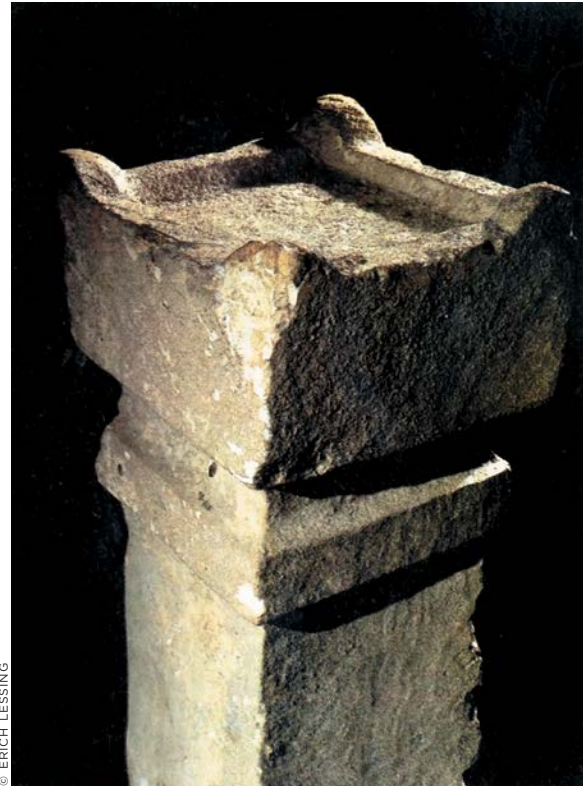
JUDITH DEKEL



DAN COLE

ANIMAL SACRIFICES were made on this Israelite altar from Beer-Sheva (above) and incense was burned on a much smaller altar from Israelite Megiddo (right). Unlike the Mt. Ebal altar, both of these altars have horns at their corners.

The Beer-Sheva altar stands three cubits high (5 1/4 feet), like the altar described in Exodus 27:1, on which the Israelites offered sacrifices when they were camped in Sinai. The Megiddo incense altar is only 27 1/2 inches high and 16 inches square.



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the outer wall of the altar. As this ledge goes from the northwest side to the southwest side, it gradually widens from about two feet until it reaches a width of 7.5 feet. This ledge also curves around the corner formed by the intersection of the altar and the ramp and continues down one side of the ramp.

There is absolutely no functional explanation for this thin wall or ledge. Obviously it was not built to strengthen the main structure, whose walls are made of large stones. These walls of large stones were certainly not supported by a thin wall on the outside. Moreover, the archaeological evidence indicates that the thin wall was built at the same time as the thick inner wall against which it leans; the thin wall was not a later addition.

The puzzle of this thin wall or ledge was again solved by reference to the description of the Second Temple altar in tractate *Middot* of the Mishnah. According to this description, the square Second Temple altar had two ledges surrounding it. The base of the altar was 32 cubits wide. One cubit from the base, the altar narrowed to 30 cubits, leaving a two-cubit ledge around it, or as the Mishnah calls this ledge, a “surround.” Five cubits higher, the altar again narrowed to 28 cubits, leaving another two-cubit ledge or surround. The ledge created by the second narrowing curved around and down the ramp leading up to the altar. The Mishnah calls it a “small ramp,” made for the

priest to ascend to the “surround.”

This is exactly what we have at our site, except that there is only one ledge or step instead of two. The step or ledge of our altar even curves around and goes down the ramp, thus creating a beautiful “small ramp” attached to the main one.

Of course, the Second Temple altar was built a thousand years or more after our altar, but it now seems beyond doubt that the Second Temple altar, as described in *Middot*, preserved ancient traditions of Israelite altar construction.

Although the Biblical description of the Tabernacle altar built by the Israelites in the wilderness is not absolutely clear on this point, there is a hint that it, too, was constructed with a narrower block set upon a wider base. The Bible speaks of this altar’s having a “ledge” (Exodus 27:5). Ezekiel’s description of the future Temple’s altar is clearer. It will have a number of ledges, creating a stepped tower (Ezekiel 43:14).

As early as 1920, the great American archaeologist William F. Albright suggested that the Israelite altar had a Mesopotamian origin, ultimately based on the well-known ziggurat, a huge multi-stepped temple that some have suggested is the model for the Tower of Babel. The Bible tells us that the Judean king Ahaz, in the latter part of the eighth century B.C., ordered a new altar to be built for the Jerusalem Temple, based on the plan of an altar

he had seen in Damascus, where he had met the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 16:10–16). This, too, suggests Mesopotamian influence on the Israelite altar.

Sacred traditions tend to endure. The two ledges on the Second Temple altar as described in the Mishnah may well preserve a very ancient tradition. And the ledge surrounding much of our altar on Mt. Ebal may also reflect this tradition of the Mesopotamian altar built up with ledges.

Yet another detail of our altar suggests its Mesopotamian roots. The four corners of our altar point north, south, east and west. In Mesopotamia, all sacred structures were oriented so that each corner was directed to a point on the compass. By contrast, the Second Temple was oriented so that its sides, not its corners, faced the four directions of the compass. The Temple altar had this same orientation. We are not told the orientation of the First Temple—Solomon's Temple—but it, too, probably faced east. The altar associated with Solomon's Temple doubtless followed the same orientation as the Temple itself. Why this difference in orientation between our Mt. Ebal altar and the Temple altars? Perhaps altars associated with temples were oriented differently from open-air altars not associated with temples. Other explanations, however, are also possible.

At this point, it may be instructive to consider what we know about altars from the Bible and how our altar illuminates or is illuminated by these passages.

Altars are frequently mentioned in the Bible. There are two principal types: the small incense altar and the large altar for burnt offerings. Archaeologists have uncovered many incense altars. Each is square, carved from a single stone and small—never measuring more than about a foot and a half in any direction. A depression on the top held the burning incense presumably used in the temple. Some incense altars have horns at the upper corners; others do not.

The burnt offering altar was much larger and was used for animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifice was at the core of Israelite cultic activity. Comparatively few burnt offering altars have been found in archaeological excavations in Israel, however. As we shall see, our Mt. Ebal altar is one of only three Israelite burnt offering altars ever discovered, and of these ours is both the oldest and the most complete.

There seem to have been two kinds of burnt offering altars—one associated with a temple where, in the Near Eastern religious purview, God dwelled. The other might be called an independent burnt offering altar, because it was not associated with a temple.

Although the subject is not free from controversy, it appears that the independent altar is part of what the Bible describes as a *bamah* or high place, probably an open-air cultic center where sacrifices were offered. For example, in 1 Kings 3:4, we learn that King Solomon went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place (*bamah*); on that altar Solomon presented a thousand burnt offerings. There God appeared to Solomon in a dream.

If this analysis is correct, our Mt. Ebal altar is an independent altar (not associated with a temple), the central structure in a *bamah*.

It might be helpful briefly to place our altar in a general context of ancient Near Eastern altars that have been found throughout the region—in ancient Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Anatolia, Greece, Cyprus and the Aegean Islands. In Israel, altars have been found from the Early Bronze Age (3150–2200 B.C.) to the late Iron Age (800–586 B.C.). From the Bronze Age, altars have been found at Megiddo, Shechem, Hazor and Nahariya. From the Iron Age, a Philistine altar was found at Tel Qasile, and Israelite altars were discovered at Tel Arad and Beer-Sheva.

From this very considerable archaeological material, we get some idea of what ancient altars were like, but only a partial idea as to the form of an Israelite altar. In general, Near Eastern burnt offering altars, like our Mt. Ebal altar, are square or rectangular structures of considerable size. They are built of worked and squared ashlar blocks. Sometimes they have horns at the upper corners (as at Beer-Sheva and Kition in Cyprus), and sometimes they do not (as at Arad).

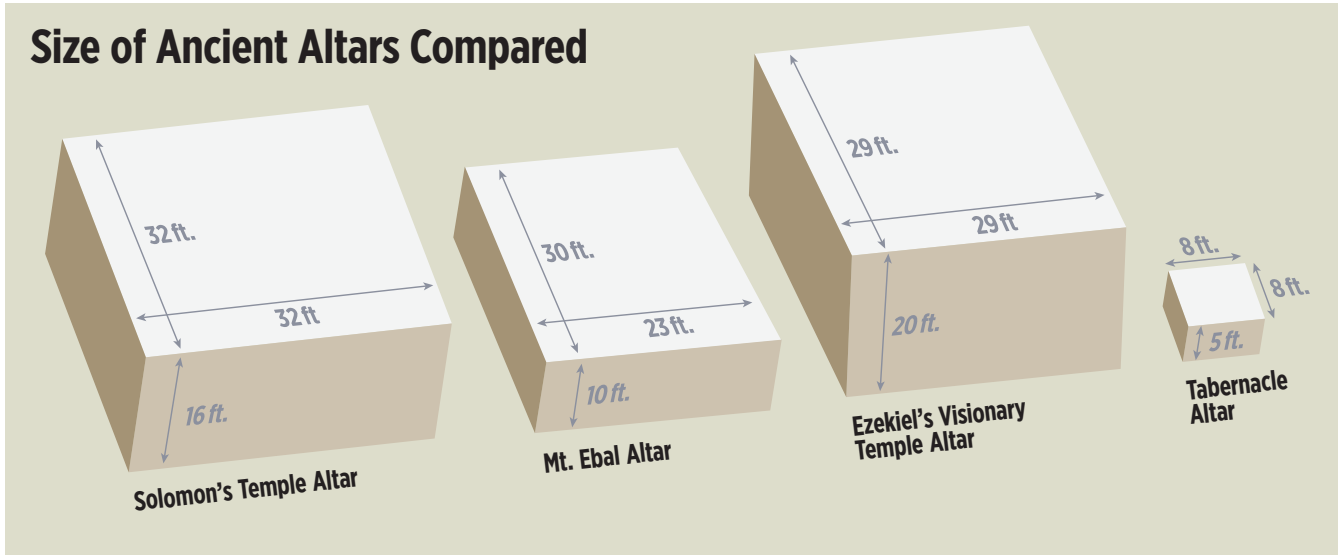
Altars were ascended by stairs—at least this is true in cases where the means of ascent have been preserved. Unfortunately, until now, no ascent to an Israelite altar has been discovered in a preserved state, but the ramp on our Mt. Ebal altar indicates a strict adherence to the law in Exodus 20:26, which requires a ramp rather than steps.

In many cases, Near Eastern altars are stepped; that is, they are built in square or rectangular layers, each one higher and smaller than the one beneath. This is especially the case in Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Syria.

Some altars, like ours, have outer stone frames and are filled on the inside with earth or pebbles. This is true of altars in Greece and Assyria, and it may also be true of the Israelite altar at Arad. We cannot be sure about the Arad altar because a section has never been cut through it that would reveal what lies inside the outer stone frame.

The size of ancient Near Eastern altars varies from about 3 feet on a side (Alalakh) to about 20 feet on a side (temple 2A at Shechem). It is difficult

Size of Ancient Altars Compared



to tell their original heights because they are not usually well preserved. Before our altar was discovered, the height of the highest preserved altar was about five feet.

Our altar fits well within the pattern established by these other altars, although it is the best preserved and stands almost to its original height (ten feet). Our altar apparently did not have horns, or they were not preserved.

Every other ancient altar that has been discovered thus far, however, was connected with a temple, or as at Beer-Sheva, was in a city where we may suppose a temple existed in connection with the altar (2 Kings 23:8). With the possible exception noted below,* our altar alone seems to have been an independent altar in the countryside, not associated with a temple or a settlement. This is probably because the Mt. Ebal altar and its associated cult site were built at a very early period in the development of Israelite cult and religion; at that time, there was no temple. Moreover, the Mt. Ebal cult center lasted for only a relatively short time. It is unlikely that a temple could develop in such a short time. Even at Shiloh, which was the site of the successor to the Mt. Ebal cult center, no temple was built.

It may be interesting to compare the size of our altar to other altars mentioned in the Bible—the Tabernacle altar in the wilderness, the altar in Solomon's Temple, and the altar associated with

Ezekiel's future Temple. As the table (above) shows, the Tabernacle altar was much smaller than the other two; the Mt. Ebal altar is closer to the larger ones.

While the Biblical altars are all square, ours is slightly rectangular. Many other Near Eastern altars are rectangular, and it may be that independent Israelite altars not associated with temples were rectangular rather than square.

The Bible makes it clear that there were many independent Israelite altars. During the religious reforms of King Hezekiah (eighth century B.C.) and King Josiah (seventh century B.C.), these outlying ritual centers were suppressed and destroyed, in order to centralize the cult in Jerusalem.

In terms of height, and in terms of width and length, our altar is closer to the altar in Solomon's Temple and in Ezekiel's visionary Temple than to the Tabernacle altar.

Incidentally, the Second Temple altar was much larger than all these altars. Although slightly different figures are given for the Second Temple altar in the various sources—the Mishnah, Josephus, and the newly published Temple Scroll from the Dead Sea caves—all agree that it was much larger than the altars described in the Bible.

After discussing all these technical data, important as they are, and proving that we are dealing here with a burnt offering altar in an Israelite cult center, we come now to the most intriguing question: Is this altar related to the Biblical traditions which describe Joshua's building of an altar on Mt. Ebal?

The building of an altar on Mt. Ebal is described in two places in the Bible, once in Deuteronomy, when the Israelites are commanded to build the altar after they pass into the Promised Land, and again in the book of Joshua, when the altar is actually built.

In Deuteronomy 27:1–10, Moses, in some of the

*The possible exception is an open-air cult center also from the period of the Judges. This site was found very recently. It was investigated by Amihai Mazar, who has already written a report for BAR readers ("Bronze Bull Found in Israelite 'High Place' from the Time of the Judges," BAR, September/October 1983). This cult center was built on a mountain, as was our site. It was surrounded by an elliptical wall, as was our site. But if it had an altar, it was preserved only in a single stone about four feet long, three feet high and about one and three-fourths feet thick.

most dramatic and awe-inspiring words in the Bible, commands the people to build the altar:

Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Keep all the commandments which I command you this day. And on the day you pass over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall set up large stones, and plaster them with plaster; and you shall write upon them all the words of this law, when you pass over to enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you. And when you have passed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you this day, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God of unhewn stones; and you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God; and you shall sacrifice peace offerings, and shall eat there; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly." And Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, "Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the nation of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you this day."

With this commandment, Israel has become the people of the Lord.

The ceremony on Mt. Ebal is described in Joshua 8:30–35:

Then Joshua built an altar in Mount Ebal to the Lord, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, "an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool"; and they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as homeborn, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant

of the Lord had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

In Deuteronomy 27:11–13, we are told that half the tribes are to stand on Mt. Gerizim for the blessing of the people, and half on Mt. Ebal for the curses. The curses are recited in Deuteronomy 27:14–26; then in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 come the blessings, followed by additional curses in Deuteronomy 28:15–68.

If the people follow the Lord's commandments, they will be blessed; if not, they will be cursed. As foretold in Deuteronomy 11:22–29,

If you diligently keep all these commandments that I now charge you to observe, by loving the Lord your God, by conforming to his ways and by holding fast to him, the Lord will drive out all these nations before you and you shall occupy the territory of nations greater and more powerful than you. Every place where you set the soles of your feet shall be yours. Your borders shall run from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea. No man will be able to withstand you; the Lord your God will put the fear and dread of you upon the whole land on which you set foot, as he promised you. Understand that this day I offer you the choice of a blessing and a curse. The blessing will come if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day and the curse if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God but turn aside from the way that I command you this day and follow other gods whom you do not know. When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to occupy, there on Mount Gerizim you shall pronounce the blessing and on Mount Ebal the curse.

After these references to Mt. Ebal, the name Ebal is never mentioned again in the entire Bible.

A question may arise concerning the identification of our Mt. Ebal altar with the one described in the Bible because our altar is not on the very peak of Mt. Ebal. Mt. Ebal descends in what may be described as four very wide terraces or steps. Our altar is on the second step from the top. Moreover,

PHOTOS BY M. WEINBERG



Evidence for Dating the Mt. Ebal Altar

In the fill of the Mt. Ebal altar, along with bones and pottery sherds, we found an Egyptian-style scarab (above). Within an oval frame, the scarab displays a geometrical pattern consisting of a four-petal rosette and, between the petals, four branches. From each branch comes a uraeus (an Egyptian cobra).

This scarab is very rare; only five known parallels exist—one from Egypt, three from Israel and one from Cyprus. All these parallels date this special find to the period between the reigns of Ramses II (19th dynasty; 13th century B.C.) and Ramses III (20th dynasty; beginning of 12th century B.C.).

This scarab fixes the earliest date for the construction of the Mt. Ebal altar; it could not have been built before the 13th century B.C. Moreover, because this scarab comes from a stratigraphically sealed locus, together with a well-dated pottery sequence, it has even greater chronological significance—it gives us an approximate date for the original erection of the altar and cultic center.

Other distinctive pottery forms buttress the argument for a 13th–12th century B.C. date for the Ebal altar. Collar-rim jars were commonly used storage vessels during the settlement period and are dated by archaeologists to the 13th through the 11th centuries B.C.

Excavators discovered a collar-rim jar in a circular stone installation in the altar's courtyard. Since they found no ashes in the vessel, they assume that it once contained a non-burnt offering.

Pottery handles decorated with designs of reedholes (top left) and a “man’s face” (center left) were discovered during the survey of the territory of Manasseh. The clearly recognizable handles are now used as indicators that the strata in which they appear date from the Israelite settlement period.

—A.Z.



Mt. Gerizim cannot be seen from our site.

On the other hand, the Bible itself hints that Joshua's altar was not built at the top of the mountain. In Joshua 8:30, we read that Joshua built the altar *b*-Mt. Ebal. The Hebrew letter *beth* (pronounced "b") usually means "in" rather than "on top of." This might suggest that the altar was not built on the top of Mt. Ebal. In Deuteronomy 27:4, where the instructions are given to build the Mt. Ebal altar, we find the same verbal construction, with a *beth*.

By contrast, in Deuteronomy 11:29, where the instructions for pronouncing the curses are given, we are told that they are to be pronounced *al* Mt. Ebal, that is, on Mt. Ebal.

For a Biblical archaeologist, a comparison between the Bible and archaeological finds is always inspiring, but like a mine field as well. Is the cultic center altar unearthed by us on Mt. Ebal the one mentioned in the Bible? How can one judge such a fundamental issue? What criteria should we use for such a judgment?

The main problem, I suppose, is that archaeology has not always corroborated the Biblical stories of Joshua's time. At Jericho, Ai, Arad, and other sites, archaeology does not corroborate what the Bible tells us. No evidence from the period of Joshua has been found at these sites.

With respect to the Mt. Ebal altar, however, all the scientific evidence fits very well with the Biblical description. The three main factors that correlate precisely are the period, the nature of the site, and the location. True, no inscriptions have been found as yet. But apart from that one point, it may be said with all scientific restraint that there must be a connection between the

strong, important and authentic Biblical tradition that identifies Mt. Ebal as a central Israelite cultic center and the gathering place of the Israelite tribes, on the one hand, and the site unearthed by us, on the other. There are still debates about most of the issues: Who was Joshua? When did the Israelite tribes enter the Land? Did they enter from the east, as the Bible states?

But this rare case, where Biblical tradition and concrete archaeological evidence coincide, cannot be ignored. We have on Mt. Ebal not only the complete prototype of an Israelite altar, but moreover, a site that might prove to be directly related to the Biblical traditions concerning Joshua's building of an altar on Mt. Ebal.

We have a few more seasons of work at least before any further conclusions can be drawn. Certainty as yet eludes us; all the evidence has still not been analyzed. For the moment, we leave the reader to reach his or her own conclusion. As scientists, we must say that the case has not yet been proven. 📖

Related Reading

Aharon Kempinski, "Joshua's Altar—An Iron Age I Watchtower," BAR, January/February 1986. See also Zertal's response: "Different Interpretations—How Can Kempinski Be So Wrong?" BAR, January/February 1986.

Aren M. Maeir, ReViews: "The 'Joshua's Altar' Debate," BAR, July/August 2013, reviewing Ralph K. Hawkins, *The Iron I Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

For an article about the excavations on Mt. Ebal's twin peak, Mt. Gerizim, see Yitzhak Magen, "Bells, Pendants, Snakes and Stones," BAR, November/December 2010.

SUSSITA

THE SPADE HITS SUSSITA

BAR Article – “Sussita Awaits the Spade”–Leads to Excavation

ARTHUR SEGAL
AND
MICHAEL EISENBERG

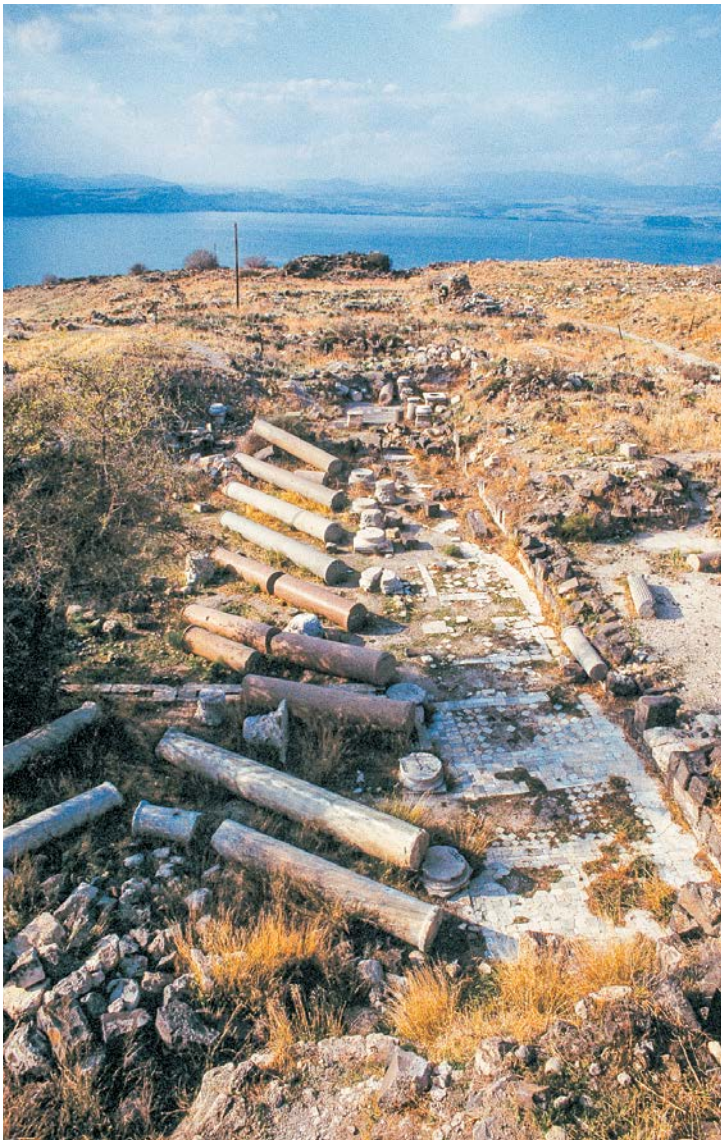
FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, I (Arthur Segal) sat in my study reading an article in BAR by Vassilios Tzaferis about Sussita, a dramatic site overlooking the Sea of Galilee that had been destroyed in a violent earthquake in 749 C.E. and had never been resettled. The columns of a church at the center of the site were still lying on the ground like toothpicks, just where they had fallen 1,250 years ago.

The site had been surveyed at the end of the 19th century by the German engineer and excavator Gottlieb Schumacher, who located the main street, a city gate, the remains of walls and towers, as well as a monumental Roman structure. In 1937 members of Kibbutz Ein Gev, led by the redoubtable Mendel Nun, an expert on the entire region surrounding the Sea of Galilee and now in his ninth decade, identified the two anchorages of the city. After Israeli independence in 1948, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) built a frontier outpost here facing the Syrian border, unfortunately causing considerable damage to the site. In the 1950s a rescue excavation of areas exposed by the IDF uncovered a church, baptistery and what was probably a monastery.¹ In the 1990s an Israeli-German expedition conducted a number of surveys and trial excavations over the traces





PRECEDING PAGES: COMMANDING a dramatic view of the Galilee, Sussita sits atop a thousand-foot-high hill. A zigzag road leads to the site from the west. The oblong-shaped site is 2,000 feet long and 700 feet wide. During the New Testament era, Sussita was a member of the *Decapolis*, a group of ten cities governed according to the principles of a Greek city-state (*polis*). A stunning cross (inset) is preserved on the chancel screen marking an area at the end of the southern aisle of the Northwest Church, where rites for saints were held (see p. 576).



GARO NALBANDIAN

LIKE FALLEN MATCHSTICKS, the columns of an ancient church lie on the ground on the ridge of Sussita, about a mile east of the Sea of Galilee. The columns had been toppled by an earthquake in 749 C.E. This photo served as an illustration in a 1990 BAR article entitled “Sussita Awaits the Spade,” which noted that although the site had been surveyed in the past it had never undergone a major excavation. That article spurred Arthur Segal to propose to his colleagues that they lead a dig at the site. After six seasons of excavation, he and his co-author report on their discoveries in the accompanying article.

of the aqueduct leading to Sussita and its internal water system.² But that was it. No major excavation of the site. The BAR article was tantalizingly entitled “Sussita Awaits the Spade.”*

As I finished reading the article, I asked myself how it could be possible that no one was interested in excavating one of the best-preserved and most beautiful classical sites in the country. A few days later, I proposed to my colleagues at the University of Haifa that we adopt Sussita as a project of our Department of Archaeology. We have now finished our sixth season of excavation, and it is time to report to BAR readers.³

Sussita is located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret in Hebrew), a little over a mile from the shore. The site itself is flat with an oblong shape about 2,000 feet long and 700 feet wide. A saddle on the east links it to the Golan Heights. The site has many advantages. It is close to the lake, but rises a thousand feet above it. It is near the road that circles the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and at the same time dominates it, so the inhabitants of Sussita could view and exert control over the entire area that spreads to the east and southeast of the lake. At the base of the steep northern and southern slopes run the Ein Gev stream and the Sussita stream.

The crest of the mountain contains a little over 20 acres and is surrounded by a strong wall that follows the line of the cliffs. In some places the wall passes over the edge of the abyss and actually appears to be part of the cliffs. The city had two gates, one at the eastern end and another at the western end. Within, a network of streets intersects at right

*BAR, September/October 1990.

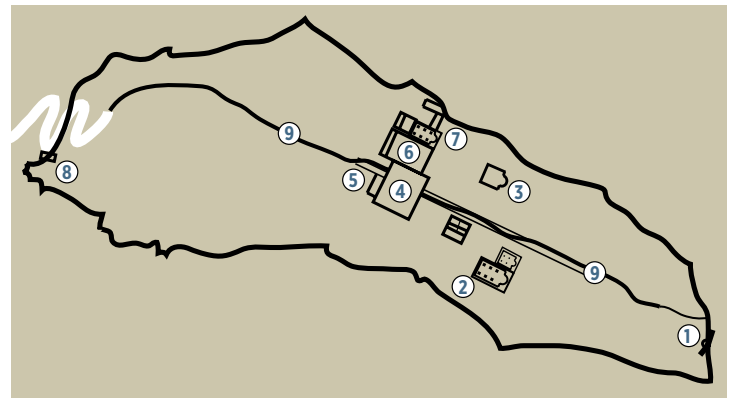


DUBY TAL/ALBATROSS



THE HEART OF SUSSITA appears in this aerial view taken from the north; in the foreground is a church that the excavators call the Northwest Church [7] (see photo, p. 575); beyond it, in the center of the photo, is the temenos of the city's main sanctuary during the Hellenistic period [6] (late second century B.C.E.) (see photo, p. 573); and at top is the *decumanus* [9] and the forum [4] (see photos, pp. 570–571).

The plan at right shows Sussita's major features: the *decumanus*, or the major east-west road [9]; the east gate [1]; the Cathedral [2]; the Northeast Church [3] (see photo, p. 574); the forum [4]; the *kalybe* [5], an open-air temple that featured a statue of the emperor; the Hellenistic compound [6] (see photo, p. 573); the Northwest Church [7]; and the west gate [8].



angles creating *insulae* in which public buildings and residential quarters were constructed. Even today, a visitor can clearly see the main thoroughfare of the city that traverses its entire length from east to west. This street, the *decumanus maximus*, was lined with impressive columns, some of which are still at the site.

Sussita traces its origins to the period after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., when his empire was divided among the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria, leaving them to fight over the hinterland between. Palestine changed

hands several times. Pottery from our excavations found beneath a Hellenistic compound indicates that the site was first inhabited by the Ptolemies in the third century B.C.E. Whether it was a semi-urban settlement or simply an outpost fortress is still uncertain, although the latter seems more likely. When it was captured by the Seleucids (we also found pottery from this level), it was given the name Hippos. The full Greek name was Antiochia Hippos. This suggests that a semi-urban settlement was established only in the Seleucid period, most



likely by Antiochus III or Antiochus IV.

In the last half of the second century B.C.E., the successful Jewish revolt against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (a victory still celebrated in the Jewish festival of Hanukkah) led to the creation of the first independent Jewish state since the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. A series of Hellenistic Jewish kings known as the Hasmonean dynasty then ruled the country. One of the last Hasmonean rulers, Alexander Jannaeus, conquered the area of Hippos between 83 and 80 B.C.E., according to the ancient historian Josephus,⁴ and the city became known as Sussita, which means “Horse” in Aramaic (just as the earlier name, Hippos, means “horse” in Greek). We really can’t account for this name.

The short-lived independent Jewish kingdom was brought under Roman rule by Pompey in 63 B.C.E. Pompey renewed the settlement of Hellenistic cities like Sussita east of the Sea of Galilee and included them in *Provincia Syria*, which he founded.

Sussita was subsequently included in the group of ten cities known as the *Decapolis*, literally “ten cities.” These cities formed a broad settlement bloc stretching from Philadelphia (today Amman) in the south to Damascus in the north, and from Beth-Shean in the west to Canatha (today Kanawat, in Syria) in the east. Beth-Shean, incidentally, is the only city of the *Decapolis* west of the Sea of Galilee. The cities of the

THE FORUM IS shown in a general view in the photo (above), while the photo at upper right shows the remains of several columns and a cracked column base; at lower right is a semi-circular base for a statue or a memorial plaque.

The forum was a grand public space; it was paved with basalt flagstones and was lined on at least two sides with colonnades. The columns were made of gray granite and supported a roof, thus providing a shaded walkway along the edges of the forum. The bases that supported the columns were round and made of white marble; they sat on square pedestals made of local limestone. The semi-circular statue base, which measures 6 feet in diameter, was also made of limestone. Such semi-circular bases are common in Greece and Asia Minor but have never before been found in ancient Israel. The decision to erect a statue or plaque in Sussita’s forum could only have been made by the city’s council and indicates a high level of local governance.

Decapolis, contrary to widespread view, never created a city league based on the model of the Delian League formed by Athens against the Persians in the fifth century B.C.E. The *Decapolis* was instead merely a group of cities that, besides their shared location within a certain geographical area, conducted their lives according to the principles of a *polis** and

*A polis (city state in Greek) was an independent entity in which every citizen, i.e., an adult male being a member of an “ecclesia” (general assembly), could elect or be elected to any of the city’s governing bodies, but mainly to the *boule*, the city council, whose members (200–700, on average, according to the size of the population), elected the officials, especially the *strategoi*, who ran the city’s affairs.



HERSHEL SHANKS



HERSHEL SHANKS

constituted an outstanding Greek cultural entity in an area that was mainly Semitic.

Herod the Great ruled Judea as a Roman vassal monarch (he was confirmed by the Roman Senate) beginning in 37 B.C.E. Shortly thereafter, Augustus, the Roman emperor, extended the borders of the Herodian kingdom, transferring Sussita, among other areas, to Herod's rule. The citizens of Sussita were bitterly vexed at this decision; they wished to remain part of *Provincia Syria*.⁵ After Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., Sussita reverted to the Province of Syria.⁶

But the city continued to be home to a Jewish minority,⁷ and a number of Jewish villages existed around Sussita as the hub.⁸

Relations between Jewish Tiberias on the southwestern shore of the lake and Hellenistic Sussita were

of trade and competition. The term used for Sussita in a Jewish source as the “bane of Tiberias”⁹ must have originated from the competition between the two cities.¹⁰

Although the references are scant, it is safe to assume that Sussita, like the other cities of the Decapolis, flourished and thrived during the second and third centuries C.E. as the *Pax Romana* brought quiet, open borders and wide-ranging commercial links. The main public buildings, the ruins of which are much in evidence in the urban landscape of Sussita, were most probably erected during this time, expressing the city's pride as well as loyalty to the Roman Empire.

In the Byzantine period (beginning in the fourth century C.E.), ancient Palestine was divided into three districts. Sussita was one of the cities of *Palaestina Secunda*, which included the Galilee, and most of the population was Christian. From the writings of the church fathers, we learn that, in this period, the city was the seat of an *Episcopus* (bishop). The five churches located so far in Sussita confirm the range and depth of Christianization that the city underwent.

Archaeological evidence shows that the transition from the Byzantine to the early Arab period (the Umayyad Caliphate) in the seventh century C.E. was not accompanied by a destruction. The churches continued to exist and flourish even during the seventh and early-eighth centuries. The wealth of Umayyad pottery and coins found in the area of the Northwest Church confirms the continued existence of this church until the mid-eighth century C.E.

Sussita came to an end in a catastrophic earthquake in 749 C.E. The destructive force of this earthquake is evident in the fallen columns, crushed walls and the small finds scattered over the area, all testifying to the fact that the shock was sudden and devastating. The city was abandoned and has never been inhabited since.

Now let's take an archaeological tour of the city. We enter by the eastern gate—over the saddle from the Golan Heights. (The route to the western gate that faces the Galilee follows a zigzag, snake-like route to overcome a thousand-foot difference in height over a steep and rocky slope in less than one mile; it is not in use today because it is so steep and dangerous.) The road over the saddle is carved into soft limestone and on both sides are clearly visible remains of mausoleums, or, to use the Greek or Latin plural, *mausolea*. Building stones from these structures (mostly limestone, some basalt) are scattered about, surveyed but unexcavated; sections of architraves, engaged half-columns, capitals and bases, all fashioned with great care, testify to the

“GOOD LUCK AELIUS CALPURNIANUS” begins a 13-line inscription in Greek that covers one side of a white marble column found in Sussita’s forum plaza. The man was a high official in the Roman provincial administration; the inscription also mentions his wife, Domitia Ulpia, and bears a date of the Pompeian era that corresponds to 238/239 C.E. The inscription refers to Domitia as “Matrona Stolata,” a title that suggests that she was granted the right to conduct her financial and legal affairs independently of her husband. The inscription indicates that the provincial administrative system of the Roman Empire had successfully spread Greek Hellenistic culture to Sussita, just as it had spread it in scores of cities throughout its domain.



magnificence of the original structures. Pieces of sarcophagi are also strewn about. This was no doubt the burial place of the city’s elite.

A second cemetery on a slope south of the city served the rest of the inhabitants. They used a totally different system of burial. Here, the graves form a system of rock-carved tombs. Unlike the *mausolea*, however, each tomb has a central burial chamber in which three of the walls (all but the entrance wall) have burial niches (*loculi*) carved into them. The number of niches in each burial chamber varies from three to eleven. The burial chambers were usually sealed by doors made of dressed and ornamented stone, the broken pieces of which still lie around.

The existence of two cemeteries, one for the wealthy people of Sussita and one for the rest of the residents, reflects in a clear, spatial way the social relationships of the *polis*. We hope one day to excavate both of these cemeteries.

The East Gate has a single passageway, about 10 feet wide with towers on either side, one round and one square. The round tower was incorporated into the city wall, creating a killing field in front of the passageway. We have also exposed a section of the city wall into which the round tower was integrated.

Two Prominent Citizens

εὐτυχῶς·
 Αἰλῖος Καλπουρ-
 νιανὸς ἀπὸ
 κορνουκ(λαρίων) τοῦ κα-
 θολικοῦ δ() καὶ
 Δομέτια Οὐλ-
 πία ματρ(ῶνα) στολ(ᾶτα)
 σύνβιος αὐ[τοῦ]
 τὸν πρεσβέα
 τῇ κυρίᾳ πα-
 τρίδι· ἔτι
 βτ
 Δεῖος ἥ .

“Good Luck Aelius Calpurnianus, the former cornicularius (in the office) of the procurator summanum nationum, and Domitia Ulpia, matrona stolata, his wife (erected the statue of) the ambassador, to the native city. In the year 302 (in the month of) Dios (day) 8.”



The wall is built of carefully dressed ashlars with delicate margins and smooth, slightly raised bosses that are typical of the first century C.E. and have been discovered in *Provincia Arabia*, Syria and the northern part of Israel. Hence, we feel comfortable dating the gate to the first century C.E. The towers probably rose to a height of three stories, with the upper one serving as a station for catapults.*

This round tower—including the method of construction, the way the layers were placed and the type of stone dressing—closely resembles the round towers at Tiberias and Gadara (on the Sea of Galilee), which are better preserved and therefore easier to visualize.

Inside the gate a few flagstones hint at a plaza that led to the eastern end of the *decumanus maximus*. We intend to excavate this area in the near future.

The *decumanus maximus*, the main street of the city, traversed the full length of the city. On either side the street was lined with a colonnade of gray granite columns imported from Aswan in Egypt. Each column weighs nearly five tons and is about 15 feet high.

The importation of hundreds of columns and

*The Roman Army used several types of siege weapons for discharging missiles. The largest was the *onager*, also called a *scorpio*. This siege machine could hurl massive stones. The Jewish historian Josephus states that at the siege of Jerusalem the machines of Legio X Fretensis hurled stones that weighed a talent (more than 50 pounds) a distance of two furlongs (about 1,400 feet [*The Jewish War* V, 6,3]). The smaller machines, to which the Roman architect Vitruvius gives the general term of catapult (*catapulta*) were of various sizes. The smaller ones were called *scorpiones* and the larger, *ballistae*. (See G. Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* [London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1985, 3rd ed.], pp. 243–244.)

SACRED SPACE. This area, across the *decumanus* from the forum, was home to several of Sussita's religious structures over many centuries. Shown here is the area from the Hellenistic period (late second century B.C.E.), when it served as a *temenos*, or religious compound. The surviving column bases, column drums and elegantly carved Corinthian capitals (believed to be the earliest ever found in Israel) testify to the area's past grandeur. The Hellenistic temple here was made of limestone and was likely destroyed in 83 B.C.E., when the Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus conquered the city. A smaller temple, made of basalt, was erected on the site during the Roman period, probably at the end of the first century B.C.E. or early C.E. Atop the ruins of that temple, in the late-fifth or early-sixth century C.E., rose a Byzantine-era church (see photos on p. 574) that used many of the building stones of its predecessors.

their installation along the colonnaded street (as well as in the forum; see below) must have been extremely expensive, not to mention the logistic and engineering skills required for their transfer up to the site and subsequent erection. The ability of a medium-sized city like Sussita to plan, finance and carry out such a project surely arouses admiration. It was probably undertaken sometime in the second century C.E.

Near the midpoint of the *decumanus maximus* was the urban center of Sussita. Adjoining the *decumanus maximus* on the south lay the forum; on the northern side was the main sanctuary (*temenos*) of Sussita. This compound continued to function in its original capacity from the Hellenistic down to the Byzantine period, when a church—what we call the Northwest Church—was built upon the remains of pagan temples.



BEARING CONSULAR ROBES and a crown, a figure decorates a coin minted in about 601 C.E. (below). Coins are crucial for dating the Northwest Church; this one belongs to the Byzantine era, but most of the recovered coins date to the Umayyad, or early Arab, period (630–750 C.E.). From the numismatic evidence, the excavators determined that the Northwest Church continued to function even after the Muslim conquest of the Holy Land and was not destroyed until the earthquake of 749 C.E.

Found just last summer, the elegant Byzantine-era structure at left is called by the excavators the Northeast Church and lies just 150 feet from the Northwest Church (see plan, p. 569). Though smaller than its counterpart, the Northeast Church also is divided into thirds by columns and features a semi-circular apse at the end of the central nave.



In the summer of 2005, we excavated the junction between the forum and the *decumanus maximus*. There we uncovered a pair of piers, facing each other and meticulously executed in basalt stone. They apparently belonged to a decorative gate that must have stood here proclaiming to passersby that they were about to enter the forum.

The forum is paved with basalt flagstones. Colonnades lined two sides of the forum (north and east; the southern side remains unexcavated). The columns supported entablatures, above which were roofs, creating shady roofed promenades along the northern and eastern sides of the forum. The columns were made of the same gray granite as the columns lining the *decumanus maximus* and were crowned with Corinthian capitals of white marble. The columns were placed on Attic bases made of white marble, which in turn were set on square pedestals made of local limestone. The use of three types of stone so different from each other

was hardly fortuitous. The architects clearly showed great sensitivity for the aesthetic aspects of the forum layout.

On the southern part of the forum, a well-preserved stairway leads to an underground water reservoir with impressive barrel-vault roofing. The bottom part is carved into the rock surface, the upper part is built of limestone. It is one of the largest and best-preserved reservoirs in the area. Water was brought into the underground reservoir from an aqueduct more than 15 miles long. Some of the stone piping is still visible, especially near an eastern gate of the city, as are fragments of a built channel that passes under the *decumanus maximus* on its way to the reservoir under the forum plaza.

In the northern part of the forum plaza between the fallen columns lying on the pavement, we discovered a D-shaped (semicircular) podium of limestone about 6 feet in diameter. Podiums (*podia*) like this are widespread in Greece and Asia Minor, but were

A COLORFUL MOSAIC decorates the Northwest Church. Its floor contains simple floral and geometric patterns, and the walls, columns and even the capitals were colored. Painted plaster covered the walls, and some even bore murals depicting flowers, fruits and leaves.

never before found in Israel. They served mostly for statues or memorial tablets to commemorate the exploits of one of the citizens or of some high-ranking visitor. Such a monument in the central city plaza could not be the act of an individual. The decision to place this kind of monument in a public area could only have been made by the city council, the *boule* of Hippos-Sussita. The Sussita podium is clear testimony to the organization of its urban government and cultural character.

Fronting on the plaza on the west side were two monumental structures. One appears to have been a decorative gate. All that remains of it are the foundations, and its exact design is unknown.

The other structure, however, is a monumental building built of basalt ashlar of superior quality. Even before excavation it stood to a height of more than 10 feet and was the best-preserved structure on the site. What purpose it served has been a puzzle. Gottlieb Schumacher, who surveyed the building in 1885, thought it was a synagogue. More-recent scholars speculated that it might be a *nymphaeum*—a large, decorative, architecturally intricate fountain—like the *nymphaea* that graced so many Roman cities (for example, Beth-Shean). This suggestion was based on the decorative eastern façade of the building, in the center of which is a semi-circular niche nearly 20 feet wide. The lower part of the niche is stepped; the upper part, which did not survive, was a half-dome, with some of its stones lying scattered at the foot of the building.

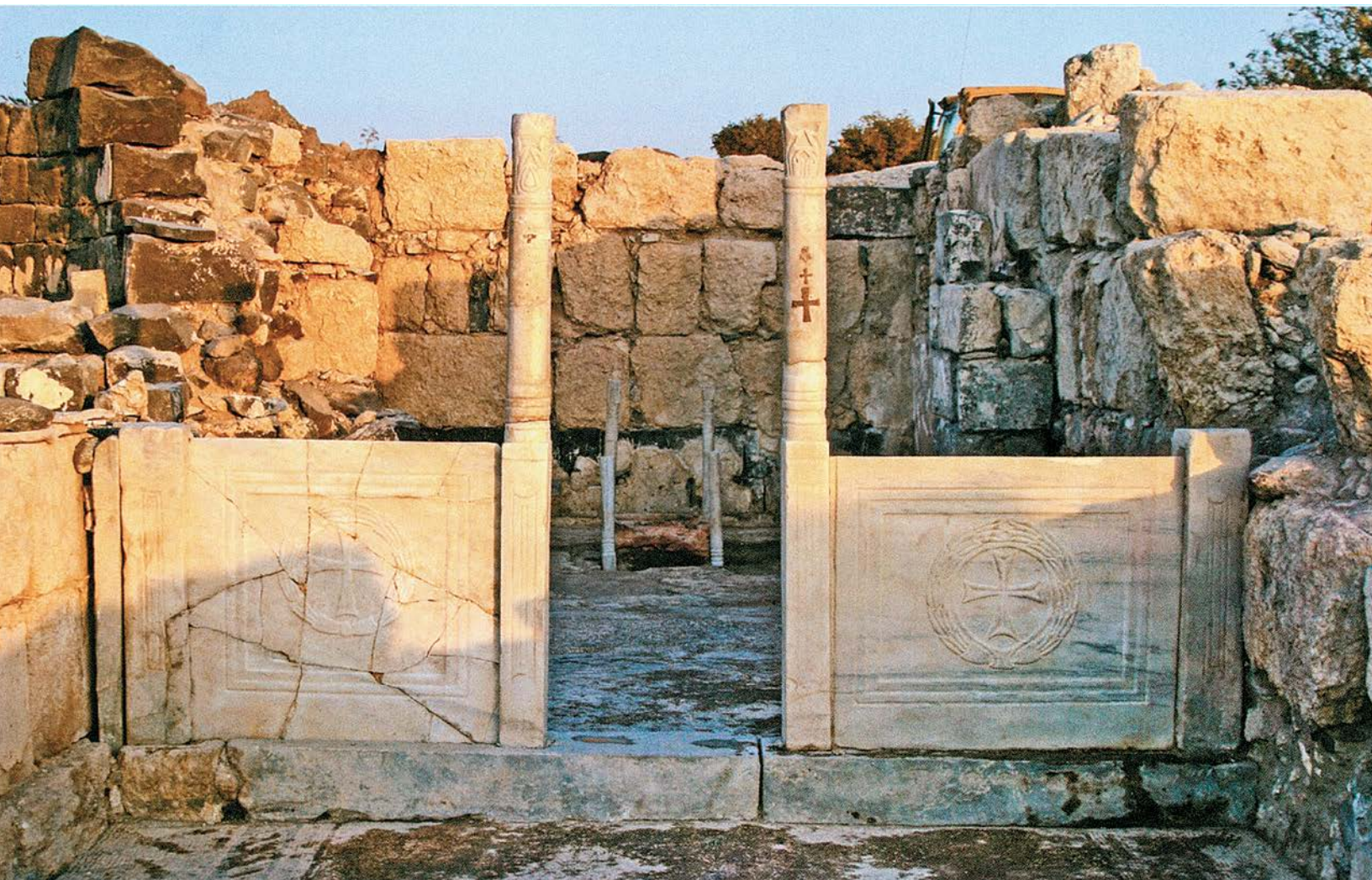
At first we, too, thought it was a *nymphaeum*, but we soon found that neither there nor in its immediate vicinity was there any kind of water installation, pipes or channels that would indicate its function as a *nymphaeum*. In addition, the building did not have a decorative water pool typical of all *nymphaea*.

We finally decided that the structure was a *kalybe*, an open-air temple, in which a statue of the emperor stood in the niche. Buildings of this kind have been discovered in many cities throughout the region, invariably erected at sites in city centers and facing public streets or the main colonnaded thoroughfare.



What is uniquely common to *kalybe* structures, wherever they might be, is that they are open buildings with a broad façade and a central niche for the emperor's statue. In contrast to temples dedicated to the gods, the *kalybe* temples were not set up in sacred compounds separate from the rest of the city area, but were erected with an explicit link to the forum or to the colonnaded street. The emperor's statue was in full view for all to see. This type of temple was an innovation in the urban panorama in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire. The salient presence of these *kalybe* temples in the very heart of the city and their accessibility and relationship to daily city life are all blunt and powerful expressions of the presence of imperial rule represented by the image of the emperor.

Just how closely Sussita was integrated with Rome is demonstrated in an unusual inscription discovered in the forum plaza. It was found on a white marble column a few yards from the semicircular podium. We have finally deciphered it; the text is printed in the box on page 572. The 13-line Greek inscription mentions a high-ranking official in the financial administration of the province, most probably *Provincia Syria-Palaestina*, named Aelius Calpurnianus and his wife Domitia Ulpia. It is dated according to the Pompeian era, the equivalent of 238/239 C.E. These two Sussita citizens with Roman names and belonging to the city nobility commemorated themselves in Greek. Aelius Calpurnianus's family



apparently received Roman citizenship during the reign of the emperor Hadrian (whose family name was Aelius), while his wife, Domitia Ulpia, was granted Roman citizenship during the reign of Trajan, whose full name was Marcus Ulpius Traianus (hence the name Ulpia). Domitia also bore the Latin title “*Matrona Stolata*.” The precise meaning of this title is still unclear; it seems to record her special status as an independent woman who is permitted to conduct legal and financial affairs in her own name, without her husband’s authorization.

In any event, this inscription clearly indicates that some Sussita citizens had attained the highest ranks in Roman provincial administration. It also reflects the degree to which Sussita had absorbed Greek Hellenistic culture within the system of Roman provincial administration. This phenomenon is not unique to Sussita alone, but appears in other cities of the Decapolis, as well as in other parts of the Roman Empire. Indeed, not long

ago a Latin inscription was found at Caesarea that mentions a certain Valerius Calpurnianus, perhaps a relative of our Aelius Calpurnianus. It is difficult not to speculate on the enormous success of the Roman Empire in creating around the Mediterranean basin a unified and standard system of administration that was one of the central components of its cultural uniformity during the second and third centuries C.E. Roman administration in the eastern provinces of the empire rested upon urban nobility in hundreds of *poleis* that fostered Greek cultural identity but that also saw themselves as an inseparable part of the Roman Empire.

On the other side of the *decumanus maximus*, opposite the forum, was an extensive religious compound or *temenos*. We have excavated only a small part of this area, but enough to reveal that, during the Hellenistic period (late second century B.C.E.), there was already a temple there. The column bases, column drums and Corinthian

CARVED WITH CROSSES, a chancel screen (photo at left) demarcates an area at the end of the southern aisle of the Northwest Church as a *martyrion*, where rites for saints were held. The photo at right shows a track on which a chancel stood. Beyond the chancel screen, four small columns (below) frame a red limestone *reliquarium*, which held the bones of a saint.



capitals are mute testimony to what once stood here. To the best of our knowledge, these Corinthian capitals are the earliest ever found in Israel. The Hellenistic temple was probably destroyed when Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonean ruler of Judea, conquered the city around 83 B.C.E. Later, as early as the first century C.E., a smaller temple was built here of basalt stone, instead of the limestone of the earlier temple. Over the ruins of the Roman temple, a Byzantine church was erected at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. It made extensive use of the building stones from both the Hellenistic temple and the Roman one.

The Byzantine church over the ruins of the ancient temples symbolized the victory of Christianity over paganism. A substantial part of the church walls were built of large limestone blocks from the Hellenistic temple; the columns of the church were set on marble bases that had once belonged to the Roman temple.

This church (we refer to it as the Northwest

Church) consists of a prayer hall and a courtyard atrium in front that is paved with basalt flagstones. Parallel with its four walls were four porticoes of columns that created a central courtyard and four shaded corridors. The column drums are fixed upon Attic bases crowned with pseudo-Ionic capitals. The architecture of the prayer hall and atrium resembles that of many contemporaneous churches and synagogues in the Galilee, Golan and Hauran regions. But we were astonished to find, near the southernmost of the three doorways leading into the prayer hall, a theater seat made of basalt. What is a theater seat doing in a Byzantine church? It probably came from Sussita's theater, which has not yet been located. We have an idea where it is, and we intend to excavate there to test the theory.

The central entrance to the church leads into the nave, the two secondary entrances lead into the aisles, separated from the nave by rows of columns. At the end of the nave is a semi-circular apse.

Unexpectedly, the two aisles are not the same. At the end of the northern aisle is a small apse, while the end of southern aisle is rectangular. This lack of symmetry in the internal arrangement of the prayer hall is very rare in churches of this region. In its earliest phase, the church was monoapsidal. On the north and south side of the central apse there were two rectangular shaped chambers. At a later stage a small apse was added to the northern aisle, while the shape of the south chamber remained unchanged.

In the central apse was a podium (the *bema*) that was separated from the rest of the prayer hall by a chancel screen placed between chancel posts. The church furniture—of white marble—is mostly well

preserved and has been reconstructed and placed in its original positions.

The floor of the prayer hall is paved with a colorful mosaic of simplified floral and geometrical patterns. The remains of the plaster on the walls, columns and even the capitals reveal that they were colored, giving the interior of the church a bright, attractive look. Some of the walls were covered not only with layers of ordinary painted plaster but also with simple murals, such as leaves, fruits and flowers. The dominant colors were red, blue, green and yellow.

A chamber south of the central apse served as the *martyrion*, where rites for saints were held. Entry into this chamber is through a doorway between two chancel screens and tall posts that created a kind of gate. On one of the two tall posts, three silver crosses remained undamaged and in their original locations *in situ*. Other finds in the *martyrion* included a bronze oil lamp in the shape of a dove which hung on a chain and two round bronze candelabra (in Greek, *polykandela*).

Near the eastern wall of the *martyrion* was a red limestone *reliquarium*, a receptacle for preserving the bones of a saint. On top of it was another smaller *reliquarium* with a gabled lid made of marble. In the center of the lid was a hole in which we found a bronze stick used for anointing ceremonies.

An annex to the church functioned as a *diakonikon* for storing food and tools. Among the metal findings here were sickles, scissors, an almost perfectly preserved Umayyad bronze decanter, scores of oil lamps and coins. A few of the coins were from the Byzantine period but most were from the Umayyad period. These coins are extremely important for dating the church. The church apparently continued to function throughout the Umayyad (Arab) period, only to be destroyed in the earthquake of 749 C.E. The collapse of the arches that supported the roof of the *diakonikon* and the way in which the amphorae and jars were scattered when they fell from wooden shelves evidence a life that ended abruptly.

To conclude on a somewhat mundane note, in our 2005 season we discovered in what we call the Northeast Church¹¹ (about 150 feet from the Northwest Church) an amulet assuring its wearer that he or she will have healthy digestion and no stomach problems. It consists of a medallion made of hematite and set in a beautifully executed gold frame with one Greek work engraved in the center—“Digest” (*Pepte*).

The excavation of Sussita is still in its initial stages. The first six seasons have unearthed only a small bit of what is hidden at the site. You are invited to come and uncover it with us. 📍

Uncredited photos courtesy of Hippos-Sussita Excavations.

¹ These excavations were conducted by Claire Epstein, Emmanuel Anati, Michael Avi-Yonah and Aaron Shulman.

² Participating in this project were Ze'ev Meshel, Tsvika Tsuk, Z. Felbush and Y. Peleg.

³ The excavations were conducted by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa in cooperation with the Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the National Museum in Warsaw, and the Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota. The project is headed by Prof. Arthur Segal and the co-directors of the Sussita expedition are Prof. Jolanta Mlynarczyk, Dr. Mariusz Burdajewicz and Prof. Mark Schuler.

⁴ *Antiquities* 13:394–397.

⁵ *Antiquities* 17:217; *War* 1:396.

⁶ *Antiquities* 17:320; *War* 2:97.

⁷ Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 12:4; Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hasbana* 2:1.

⁸ Tosefta, *Shevi'it* 4:10; Tosefta, *Obalot* 18:4.

⁹ *Lamentations Rabba*, Buber edition, 46a.

¹⁰ Jerusalem Talmud, *Shevi'it* 8:3.

¹¹ The Northeast Church was excavated by a team from Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota, headed by Prof. Mark Schuler.

The 15th season of ongoing excavations at Hippos/Sussita concluded in 2014. The project was directed by Arthur Segal and codirected by Michael Eisenberg, both of the University of Haifa's Zinman Institute of Archaeology, until 2012, at which time Eisenberg took over as sole director.

Since publication of the BAR article, the excavations have revealed the city's main forum, an odeion (a small, theater-like structure) and the remains of a high-quality mausoleum in the necropolis that dates to the second century C.E. According to Eisenberg, dozens of such mausoleums were built on both sides of the saddle ridge for the city's wealthy inhabitants.

The first volume of the excavation report is now available: Arthur Segal, Michael Eisenberg, Jolanta Mlynarczyk, Mariusz Burdajewicz and Mark Schuler, *Hippos (Sussita) of the Decapolis: The First Twelve Seasons of Excavations (2001-2011), Volume I* (Haifa: The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, 2013). The second volume is due to be published in 2015.

Related Reading

Vassilios Tzaferis, “Sussita Awaits the Spade,” BAR, September/October 1990.

Mendel Nun, “Ports of Galilee,” BAR, July/August 1999 (see p. 458 of this book for another article by Nun).

Michael Eisenberg, Archaeological Views: “What's Luck Got to Do with It?” BAR, November/December 2010.

Michael Eisenberg and Arthur Segal, “Hercules in Galilee,” BAR, November/December 2011.