

Special Perspective

In this section, the editors of the Alexandrian have invited Ms. Spake to write an essay on her recent experience working on an archeological dig in Israel as part of the Leon Levy Expedition in the summer of 2016.

Archeology Meets History: Ashkelon, Israel

Approximately 6,500 miles away from Troy University lays Ashkelon National Park in Ashkelon, Israel. This national park, for the past thirty years, has been home to the Leon Levy Expedition generously funded by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Levy. With the Levy funding, Ashkelon National Park transformed into an archeological site with references in the Bible, Torah, and Egyptian execration texts. Troy University, a partner school of five years to the dig, sent students from 2012-2016 to better understand archeological practices and develop experience in the field. As a site with continual habitation from the Canaanite era up until the destruction by the Mamluks in the 1200s, Troy students can excavate older sites than those in America. Moreover, each society built upon the previous society and utilized the former materials to build the city up.

When you walk through Ashkelon National Park, you see a glimpse of each society. Surrounding the archeological site are the tall Canaanite walls complete with the world's first rounded arch, the Canaanite Gate, a remnant of Ashkelon's first settlement. When you enter through the Canaanite Gate following the path, a Roman mosaic will greet you. This mosaic was originally on the floor of a Roman dining room; now it is just another remnant of a past civilization. Further along the path, you will come across a Greek basilica from the Byzantine Empire. Tucked behind this, and in a location unsuspecting visitors will miss, is the three horned altar. This altar was centered in a Canaanite room, and three horns were placed on its rounded base. Scholars on the site have tried to understand the meaning of the three horns but have come to no decisive conclusion.

Many civilizations built upon previous ones in Ashkelon. Most locations on site begin with unearthing the Islamic settlement and working down to Canaanite settlements. However, one grid¹ in 2015 was able to dig through the Canaanite level and uncover remnants of nomads. This grid was the only one at Ashkelon to discover any evidence of earlier people than the Canaanites.

Throughout the thirty years of the Leon-Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, Dr. Stager, his crew, and summer school students uncovered artifacts and structures from the Islamic and Roman societies, Byzantine Empire, Egyptian influence, Philistines, Canaanites, and nomadic groups. They uncovered Roman vineyards, a Philistine cemetery, pottery sherds, and puppy graves.² Decades of work uncovered a wealth of information about the past in Ashkelon, Israel.

¹ Dr. Larry Stager from Harvard University created Ashkelon's unique grid system. Each grid is a 100x100 meter square and covers the entire dig site.

² The puppy graves were actual graves of puppies buried during the Philistine era at Ashkelon. So far, no cause of death of the puppies has been discovered nor the reasoning for burying intact puppies.

The biggest discovery at Ashkelon, one that will rewrite history, was the discovery of the world's first Philistine cemetery. During the 2013 season, the assistant director discovered a bone fragment outside the gates of Ashkelon National Park due to a tip from a former Israel Antiquities Authority employer. When the bone was tested, it dated to the Philistine era. The following season, 2014, a dig site was opened with the upmost secrecy because Orthodox Jews do not believe burial sites should be dug up. When former digs or businesses uncovered bodies, Orthodox Jews violently protested. Because of this, the dig site outside the gates of the national park was disguised as dig site for a business, sealed in, and backfilled at the end of the 2016 season. Furthermore, until the final season in 2016, no one except those who dug in this grid, referred to as N5, knew of it or the contents. Those who were in N5 were unable to speak of or hint at their findings in case it compromised the dig and the people.

However, once the news broke mid July 2016 at the end of the Leon-Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, the whole world became aware of the discovery. Throughout the four seasons N5 was occupied, over 150 Philistines were exhumed. Studies on Philistine burial practices, dental health, and eating habits have already begun. Moreover, in depth studies on the Philistines are scheduled to take place and within the next five years, the studies should be completed and published. For the first time, historians and students will have a better understanding of who the Philistines were and not just accounts by other groups, such as the Egyptians.

While not every grid rewrites history, every grid contributes to the knowledge of the past. During the final season of Ashkelon (2016), I was part of the team who excavated in Grid 51. To understand the discoveries made, one must understand archeological methods. Archeology sites are divided into grids, each grid the same width. When the digging starts, you dig from the latest civilization to the earliest. However, archeologists do not dig holes and do not "fish" out artifacts or bones. Rather, archeologists separate their grid into squares³ and go down one layer at a time until the squares represent the same floor layer. By looking at the stratigraphy, essentially lines in the dirt, archeologists determine the various layers; horizontal lines in the dirt ranging from a wide variety such as mud brick, floor, and fill while the vertical lines typically represent walls of sorts. Every line is documented on paper and entered into the computer. Every artifact and piece of bone is documented and cleaned. Every wall or structure is drawn in. Every pottery sherd is washed on the off chance it has inscriptions or drawings on it.

Grid 51 has been dug in for many, many seasons. It is situated directly across from Grid 50, the grid that includes the Mediterranean Sea shoreline. At the beginning of the 2016 season, we met up in our grid groups and were assigned squares. Every week we all rotated around the whole grid, working in new squares with new people. The main objective across the whole grid was first to dig to the destruction layer, 604 BCE when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar burned Ashkelon to the ground. Getting to this layer was challenging. In the first square I was in, to get to 604 BCE we first came upon a late seventh century BCE sewer and wall, both of which had to be carefully documented and photographed before we removed it. In the same square, we happened

³ Each square, like the grid system is unique to Ashkelon. The squares are 10x10 meters and cover the entire grid.

across a few puppy burials, believed to have been in the same timeline as the puppy burials discovered in Grid 50.

In addition, the layer right above the destruction layer was a pottery splat layer. As the city was burning to the ground, people paid no heed to pottery while running for their lives. The result was massive splats of pottery sherds. While digging through the pottery splat layer, my square mates and I came across large numbers of bones. We put all the bones in bone bags (bags with holes punched in them) and sent them to the zooarcheologists on site. When the results came back, we found that one of the bones was a piece of a baby's skull. Soon, we reached our goal of getting to the destruction layer.

Under the destruction layer in the same square I started in, rock acted like concrete; I broke two pick-axes attempting to bust through the layer. The dig director came to investigate the phenomenon and suggested using a sledgehammer. I had the honor of wielding the sledgehammer, and we slowly busted through a layer of ancient cement. Under the cement were compacted seashells. Examining the cement, seashells, and similar findings a square over, the grid directors came to the conclusion it was an ancient wine vat. Once we dug through the cement, the wine vat became apparent as well as the ancient grape seeds surrounding it.

When we rotated squares, I ended up in the square in the far corner. During 604 BCE, this square was the back room in a shop. How do we know that? The stratigraphy revealed it was a room, and the column base unearthed verified this. Moreover, we found pottery splats, gold, beads, scales, weights, and a receipt on a pottery sherd. Through these artifacts, the square and grid supervisors both reached the same conclusion that it was a back room of a shop.

Outside the back room, more evidence of a shop was uncovered. Black dirt was dug up, believed to be ash from a kiln of sorts, and specialists were brought in to take samples of the ash to determine the temperature reached. Near the kiln, I unearthed a unique artifact, an artifact no one knows the meaning of: a small clay replica of a Philistine boat about the size of a hand. The site director was impressed by the discovery as very few Philistine boat replicas have been discovered on a global scale, and the ones that have been unearthed were discovered in a funeral context; this one was not. A day later, another half boat was discovered. Still, no purpose for the boats has been discovered; they remain an enigma.

The last square I dug in the middle of the grid provided an interesting history. Once the dirt was brushed clean, (there is such a thing as clean dirt) there were faint lines indicating this area could be something. When the grid instructor saw this, he ordered a probe dug; a small hole in the ground used to see stratigraphy and determine if there could be anything of value. The probe showed that this area was the ancient street of 604 BCE. Part of the basis for this conclusion was the horizontal lines on the side of the probe indicating a wall; ancient streets were walled in. The artifacts found on the other side of the wall indicated it was a street. Moreover, on the other side of the probe, there was evidence for a robber's trench, an area where walls once were but later civilizations used the material for their buildings. The robber's trench was evident by the stratigraphy as well as the deep layer of dirt fill. My partner and I dug the robber's trench all the way though to make sure nothing of value was missed. In the robber's trench a clay figurine head

was discovered, as well as a worked bone spindle. Everything else was a simply sandy dirt or pottery sherd, indicating it was in fact a robber's trench.

Through the six weeks of grueling work, the grid supervisors were able to place a complete picture of the grid in each time period unearthed and place for in context with the rest of the dig site. The wine vat connected to other grids, the puppy burials showed continuity with Grid 50, and all of the grids nearby showed similar aspects to Grid 51, representative of an ancient market place along a shore. The material culture, pottery, architecture, and stratigraphy showed the marketplace across many grids. In Grid 51 you have a road, a shopkeeper's house, a potential shop area, and part of wine production. When you take Grid 51 and place it within the dig, it is apparent it was one of many market areas in ancient Ashkelon. To see how a piece of worked bone or a line in the dirt contributes to knowledge of the past is astounding. All of the material culture, the pottery, the bones, and the architecture create history. The archeologists see all of this and reconstruct the past. Once they can see what happened in their grid or how people lived or what the building was used for, the historians bring it into a larger picture. It takes both archeologists and historians to recreate the past and understand it in a regional and global picture.

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