The Excavations at Deir ʿAlla in Jordan: 3rd Season

Author(s): H. J. Franken

Source: *Vetus Testamentum*, Oct., 1962, Vol. 12, Fasc. 4 (Oct., 1962), pp. 378-382

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1516930

THE EXCAVATIONS AT DEIR ʿALLA IN JORDAN: 3RD SEASON

BY

H. J. FRANKEN

Leiden

The third season of the Dutch excavations at Deir ʿAllā began on Jan. 2, 1962 and lasted the customary three months. The team which was led by the author consisted of students from Leiden, Utrecht and Wageningen, and for half the season there was also one from Boston. The team was lucky in once again obtaining the services of William BALL, the draughtsman and S. SCHOLTEN, the photographer. The study of the pottery techniques was furthered by a Leiden potter and a school film was made of our activities by E. D. PFEIFFER of the Netherlands School Film Foundation [1]).

We arrived in Deir ʿAllā to find a three roomed village-type house under construction for our use on the camp site. This proved most serviceable, providing a kitchen, store room-cum-sick bay, and registration room. For making this possible we have to thank Saleh MUASHER Bey, our landlord. Once again it is a pleasure to record our gratitude to the Dept. of Antiquities, Jordan for all their friendliness and help.

The aims and objects of the expedition are set out in *V.T.* Vol. X, 4, p. 386, and these were in no way altered this season except with regard for the Late Bronze period. Tempting though it was to press on down to the lowest shrine levels, the decision was taken to resist this temptation and to concentrate on the chronology and stratigraphy of the Iron Age levels first. It was felt that digging in such a restricted area that was then open could lead to serious damage to the shrine without producing so much as the total ground plan. The shrine area was therefore partially filled in to protect it from the elements, and

---

[1]) The expedition was again entirely sponsored by the Dutch Organization for the Advancement of Pure Scientific Research.

the upper area of excavation was enlarged, so that when the Iron Age levels have been dug away a large enough area should be free round the shrine to ensure that the maximum amount of information about the L.B. shrines can be extracted. It was also deemed wise to give the staff another season's field work before plunging into the very considerable problems concerning the digging and interpretation of strata in the massive burnt level which we know covers the L.B. levels on the tell. To the west of the series of furnaces uncovered in Trench D during the first season, an area of 24 m. by 10 m. was excavated down to this burnt level.

The work this season produced the most unexpected situation. Based on work from the past two seasons, we expected a gradual transition from the later Iron Age levels to E.I 1. But in the first week it turned out that the previous season's work had ended immediately above a completely different archaeological situation. We had been uncovering town levels and underneath there was no trace of a fixed settlement. The metal furnaces of Trench D belong to these earlier levels. Two sharply separated periods of the early I.A. can now be clearly distinguished, each with its own pottery repertoire and quite different both architecturally and as regards small finds [1]).

In these earlier levels of the early Iron Age, a complete break is shown with the underlying L.B. levels. They represent a completely new culture. In the whole area uncovered, only two insignificant walls were revealed. These are certainly not house walls and are probably courtyard walls. Not a single house was found though it is clear that along the southern side of the area we must be near to buildings in several places because we are digging in fallen mud brick. The whole area is covered with a thick deposit of courtyard levels. Layers of straw or straw mats (the remains are too fragmentary to be able to distinguish with certainty) lie between layers of burnt clay debris. This debris is sometimes as much as a centimeter thick but is generally much finer. A possible explanation for these straw strewn levels is offered below.

Dug into these courtyard levels were a great number of pits. This is a consistent feature of each superimposed courtyard level.

---

[1]) This report has, of neccessity, been written directly after the season in question, and before any of the new finds have been worked out. However the author feels that even an inconclusive annual report is better than none and offers his apologies to any reader who is irritated by the uncertainties expressed in this article.

These pits resemble the problematical pits found the previous season dug into the slope of the tell in Lower Trench D. They are a similar shape and also remain enigmatic owing to the absence of finds in them. The shape of these pits is difficult to explain. Their openings are circular, and they are pear shaped, being larger at the bottom than at the top. Had they been dug into rock they could be equated with other Iron Age pits such as the wine cellars at el-Gib or the libation pits in some of the tombs at Samaria. The most acute problem attached to these pits is the question of how they achieved their shape, dug as they are not in firm rock but fairly loose clay debris. A pit is normally U shaped with if anything the opening wider in circumference than the base. It is hardly credible that these pits were originally shaped this way, because even if such a pit were successfully dug, without the sides capsizing, anyone walking near such a pit (unless he were extremely wary) would be sure to break down the undercut edge. The fill of these pits offers little clue as to their use. Apart from a very few pottery fragments they contain nothing but wind blown debris. It is possible that if the unprotected yards were left open to the elements for a considerable period each year, the shape of the pits (or indeed the pits themselves) could have been formed by the wind. This suggestion was offered by Miss N. DREW who had seen rocks similarly hollowed out by the wind in the Egyptian desert.

If this interpretation is on the right lines, the following explanation may be offered for these courtyard levels. It would seem that the earliest inhabitants of Iron Age Deir ʿAllā did not live on the tell, but that they came and worked the metal furnaces for a certain period of the year, abandoning it and their work when the temperature of the Jordan valley made work at a furnace unbearably hot. The straw levels mentioned above could then be interpreted as attempts to make walking backwards and forwards over the slippery surface of the tell easier during the rainy season. It would have been neccessary for these metal workers to have a constant supply of mud bricks ready for re-building their furaces which would very soon disintegrate from the great heat required to smelt bronze. The pits could perhaps be connected to the excavating of clay in order to make the mud-bricks. To this may be added that pottery was more abundant in these levels than those of the later Early Iron Age, but that there were practically no other objects at all except tiny fragments of corroded bronze and iron. Another interesting fact is that there was a far larger proportion of flint sickle blades found in these levels than

the following levels, which belong to a settled town. It is possible that the nomadic metal workers came to Deir ʿAllā with the first rains of the year, sowed their fields, and worked at the furnaces until the harvest was ripe, when they gathered it, and departed till the following year. This pattern of seasonal cultivation was regularly followed by Arab beduin until about 1950 when the land round Deir'Allā was systematically irrigated, thus making a settled community possible.

It may be that an earthquake put this mode of life to an end. An enourmous crack in the surface of the tell occurs in the highest of these yard levels. Broken pots and part of a human skeleton was recovered from where they had tumbled into this fissure. Immediately after this earthquake, the tell was abandonned for some time. A layer of wind blown earth covers the west side of the area, and this sterile layer corresponds with the filling of the pits.

This period is followed by the earliest Iron Age town, walled and with its own, different, pottery tradition and different culture. A further extention to the excavation area was made 20 m. by 3 m. along the south side of the E-W datum line. The purpose for this extension was to see if the transition from hand burnished to wheel burnished ware could be traced in a firm stratigraphical context. All the wheel burnished ware which had previously been found came from the very badly disturbed upper levels of the tell which had been cut into by the Arabic graveyard. This new trench is linked with the main area, and a fair amount of E. Iron II pottery was found. On first sight this seems to be rather late in the period, i.e. 8th-7th century B.C. No break between E. Iron I and II is yet discernable in the stratigraphy, although it is likely from the evidence of the pottery that there is a gap in occupation between the two periods.

From the E. Iron II area, very close to the surface, several almost complete pots were found, somewhat different in shape to those of the same period from Palestine, and there were also fragments and one almost complete example of a pottery type resembling the famous Assyrian governor's dinner service of PETRIE's in form, but differing in ware, being less hard and fine. Another remarkable find from this level is a spherical, duck-egg blue faience bottle. These complete and partially complete objects were recovered from pits.

Because of the strange nature of the tell stratigraphy, registerable finds this year were almost as scarce as they are on an average Western European excavation. However there was plenty of work for the

technical staff in the repair, registration drawing and photogaphy of the contents of the LB rooms, P 601 and 602, which were cleared in the last week of the second season.

A large number of pots were built up, and these formed the basis for the annual division of finds. Both Amman Museum and Leiden have received a good representative collection of L.B. II pottery and finds. The pottery repertoire was not wide, and the most frequent forms were shallow bowls and plump water jugs. One interesting find was a lamp which, out of context, could at first sight be mistaken for an Iron Age II lamp. As it is, there can be no doubt of its L.B. date as it was found on the floor of the room packed in by scores of L.B. II pottery. It remains a warning to typologists. It has been decided not to dig in 1963, but to use that year in preparing the publication of the Iron Age levels, and to return, 'insh'allah, to the L.B. levels in 1964.