

Tell Irbid and Its Context:
A Problem in Archaeological Interpretation*

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Introduction

Tell Irbid is located on the northern east bank of the Jordan river and forms the center of the modern city of Irbid. Up until recently, it was one of the largest tells in the region, measuring approximately 350.00 m by 400.00 m. Municipal development needs have meant the removal of portions of the tell over the last few years. Yarmouk University's Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Municipality of Irbid, and the Department of Antiquities have cooperated in the excavation of portions of the tell (LENZEN et al. 1985; LENZEN and McQUITTY 1983; 1984; LENZEN 1986; LENZEN and GORDON 1986; LENZEN and KNAUF 1986). Along with the *rās* or hilltop of Beit *Rās*, ancient Capitolias of the Roman Period and five kilometers north of Irbid, Tell Irbid (576.985 m above sea level) dominates the surrounding fertile plateau. The two sites, Irbid and Beit *Rās*, were interconnected in antiquity much the way they are today (LENZEN and KNAUF 1986; 1987).

Definition of the Problem

Tell Irbid presents an archaeological methodological problem as well as an interpretation problem. If it is to be placed within a viable historical framework, both of these problems must be adequately solved. The archaeological problem presented by Tell Irbid is the result of the type of archaeology which can be undertaken; that is, salvage and rescue archaeology. The second problem is a result of the lack of literary documentation relative to the site.

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The realization that Tell Irbid may have been an important site in antiquity was first made by W.F. ALBRIGHT (1929: 10) during the annual spring trip of the American School in Jerusalem in 1929; this was re-affirmed by NELSON GLUECK in the 1940's (GLUECK 1951: 153f). This is not to mitigate the observations of the nineteenth century explorers, notably GOTTLIEB SCHUMACHER (1890) and SELAGH MERRILL (1881) who recorded visible remains at the site and made ethnographic notes as well. The latter were most interested in the remains of Roman or classical antiquity in this region of Jordan; whereas the former were most interested in the relationship of sites to the biblical record. Because the ancient name of the site, that is, in this case, the biblical name, was not known, archaeological interest was never kindled. This in conjunction with the modern occupation and the size of the site did not encourage more recent archaeologists as, e.g., SIEGFRIED MITTMANN (1970), to undertake excavations or a detailed survey of the site and its surroundings.

In 1958, RAFIK DAJANI (1966), working for the Department of Antiquities, conducted a salvage excavation of four tombs on the eastern side of the tell. He dated the tombs to the Late Bronze/Iron Age with the result that Irbid became known as a site dating to that period, confirming both ALBRIGHT's and GLUECK's observations. As the city of Irbid expanded around the tell, salvage excavations were continued. That is, archaeological work carried out when a site is under immediate danger: when there is a lack of time, not necessarily a lack of skill. The present excavations began in these circumstances as well; however, by the end of the 1984 season, the northwestern section of the tell was preserved by the Municipality of Irbid for further archaeological work, making the 1985, 1986 and future seasons possible. However, it will never be possible to determine the complete profile of the occupational layers of the site. This is primarily due to the fact that the site has been continuously occupied and is presently by municipal and private buildings. The presence of these buildings on the summit of the tell means that the area available for excavation is limited, thus not providing an adequate horizontal understanding of the occupation.

Solutions to the Problems

Solutions to the problems of the interpretation of the archaeological data presented by the previous excavations and those that are presently taking place on the tell rest with an understanding that the data obtained from salvage and rescue excavations is as valid as the data obtained from long-term research excavations. Also, if the available literary documentation is utilized, and an integrated approach is taken, it may be possible to begin to write a history of Irbid.

Archaeological data is sparse concerning the occupation of the tell and the surrounding immediate area from the period following ca. 800 B.C. to the present. The modern structures on the northwest side of the tell are founded directly on the ca. 800 B.C. soil layers (LENZEN and GORDON 1986). The majority of the data relative to the post-800 B.C. period is ceramic and does not come from stratified contexts, but rather from wash and survey (LENZEN and McQUITT 1986). One is, therefore, faced with a gap in the archaeological record which can never be filled completely and is only adequately dealt with by literary documentation.

1. Literary Evidence From the Recent Past to the Eighth Century B.C.

Since 1910 Irbid has been the seat of a Sar^viyah court; that is an Islamic civil court. This accounts in some part, as well as the period following 1918, for the development on the tell summit and the vicinity. Up until recently, the sides of the tell, particularly the southern, had houses closely built together, all of which were built in the period following 1910.

In the nineteenth century, the remains of the qal^cah, castle, built by Sinan Pasha were still seen by SCHUMACHER. Sinan Pasha was the governor of Damascus during the sixteenth century for one year (A.H. 996-997/A.D. 1588-1589). The castle may be one indication of the importance of Irbid during the Ottoman period, although it was listed only as a village within the Nāhiyat Banī Jumah, part of the Qaḏa Haurān in the sixteenth century tax registers. In A.D. 1743, a "deputy

governor" is attested for Irbid (RAFEQ 1966: 159). This may signify that the seat of the government within the Qaḏa ^CAjlūn was transferred to Irbid earlier than A.D. 1851, the date usually given for this event (LENZEN and KNAUF: fc.).

Tabarī, the Arab historiographer writing in the early tenth century A.D., mentioned Arbad as the place where the Caliph Yazīd b. ^CAbdalmalik died (A.D. 724). Arbad is probably a hyper-correction of the vowel pattern of Irbid into classical Arabic according to the af^Cal-pattern. Tabarī located Irbid/Arbad in the region of Damascus (LENZEN and KNAUF: fc.).

From the ninth through the eleventh centuries A.D. Irbid was known as: Arbad and Irbil. The sound change from Irbil to Irbid is not difficult: the lateral voiced /l/ became the voiced dental stop /d/. Irbil preserves the classical name of Arbela for the site. Arbad may be associated with classical Arabic arbadu, meaning "ashy grey" (KNAUF and LENZEN 1987). This is not a far-fetched association in that the tell was surrounded by a basalt wall until recently (LENZEN and McQUITTY 1984).

Irbid's fame in western scholarship has come from its identification as Arbela of the Roman period. The only literary reference in Greek or Latin comes from Eusebius' Onomasticon, dating to the early fourth century A.D.:

"Arbela is a certain village on the other side of the Jordan within the boundaries of Pella, a city of Palestine..."
(SMITH 1973: 58).

Eusebius must have been referring to the provincial boundaries earlier than the fourth century; for according to a Greek inscription dated to A.D. 239, Arbela belonged to Provincia Arabia and not to Palaestina Secunda as Pella did (LENZEN and KNAUF: fc. fn. 31). It is likely that Eusebius' reference is also prior to the designation of Capitolias as a city of the Decapolis in A.D. 97/98, when it apparently took precedence over Arbela (LENZEN and KNAUF 1987).

Archaeological remains for the Roman and Byzantine occupation of Irbid are derived from SCHUMACHER's and MERRILL's accounts. They noted a Roman mausoleum in one of the present main streets of Irbid and an inscription. Other evidence comes from the Department of Antiquities excavations of tombs in the vicinity of the tell and at Bārha, located west of Irbid; as well as from random finds by the citizens. This data is considered by some as not scientific or objective, as the provenience of the material culture remains is unknown and can never be determined. It is, however, the only data that may ever be available which points to a first through sixth century occupation of the site; and thus, it cannot be ignored.

The name of the site - Irbid/Irbil/Arbela - can be traced one more step. Arbela is a semitic name, not a Greek name, with the locative ending /-a/. The element /el/ indicates a clan or tribal name. There is a reference to a Beth Arbel in Hosea 10:14. Unfortunately the reference "all your strongholds will be devastated, as Shalman devastated Beth Arbel" remains enigmatic (LENZEN and KNAUF: fc.). At the least, it preserves the memory of a paradigmatic destruction and the name of the site from the eighth century B.C.; and, from this reflects the importance of the site.

2. The Archaeological Record

The early occupation of the site is, unlike the later occupation, well-documented archaeologically. The phases of this occupation are tentatively defined as:

Phase 1: ca. 1100 - 800 B.C.

Phase 2: ca. 1200 - 1100 B.C.

Phase 3: ca. 1700 B.C.

Phase 4: ca. 3200 B.C.

Phase 5: ca. 3500 B.C.

Two major areas of the site have been excavated: Area A on the northern side of the tell and Area C on the northwestern side. All of the phases are not represented in each of these areas.

Pivotal to the understanding of the occupational history is the destruction phase, Phase 2, dated to the period between 1200 to 1100 B.C. In the three seasons of excavation in Area C, it has been this phase and the structures associated with it which have been elucidated. The destruction extended over 100.00 m to the southeast beyond and including Area C. In some places, the depth of the destruction was over 4.00 m. The configuration of the structures indicates a two-storied building and tower in the southeast, a two-storied structure with five rooms to the north, and an outside perimeter wall. The finding of the cultic objects in 1985 led to the conclusion that this complex was a sanctuary from the end of the Bronze Age, beginning of the Iron Age. The style of the cultic vessels, both in form and decoration, as well as the storage jars (LENZEN: fc.) have attributes both of the Late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age. The ceramic remains do not fall comfortably into one category or the other, but rather into an understanding of the gradual change of the ceramic tradition. Further excavation of the destruction and the associated structures in 1986 confirmed this gradual change of the ceramics. No further evidence was found confirming or refuting the possibility of the structure having been a sanctuary. If, indeed, the structure was not a sanctuary, it was, at least, a major public structure from the period. No evidence was found in any season indicating that the destruction was caused by other than natural means. Only two arrowheads have been found and no human skeletal remains. The layers of the destruction are either level, as in the roof, or tilted by the pressure of the upper storey or walls falling against walls. There is no juxtaposition of layers to indicate an earthquake. It would appear that the only interpretation available is an intense conflagration.

The destruction loci do not continue to the north of Area C; no comparable layers were found in Area A during the 1984 (LENZEN and McQUITY: fc.) or 1986 season. The destruction was localized to the northwestern end of the tell. During the 1984 excavation, rebuilding of the basalt city wall was noted; and, was dated, based on the ceramics, to the period immediately following the destruction.

Occupation of the tell continued following the destruction - there was no hiatus. The nature of the occupation changed from public to domestic and minor industrial in Area C; whereas, in Area A it presently appears that the nature of the occupation continued in much the same manner. The horizontal exposure in Area A does not allow for a detailed analysis of this data. Mudbrick structures were no longer favoured by the inhabitants in Area C, but rather stone structures. It is tempting to equate the early Iron Age industrial installation in Area C with the making of wine. This installation consisted of vats at different levels and channels to these vats. Certainly the region was famous for its wine during the fourth through eighth centuries A.D. as evidenced by the Trichora cities of Gadara/Umm Qais, Capitolias/Beit Ras, and Abila/Tell Ābil (LENZEN and KNAUF 1987). By the equation it is possible to suggest that ancient Irbid's name may have been *Gintōt "winepresses" (no.93 on Thutmosis' III. itinerary through Transjordan, if indeed this is arranged north to south; LENZEN and KNAUF in prep.). Admittedly, this may be a facile equation. Be that as it may, until epigraphic data is found in situ at the tell, it is at least a viable suggestion.

Earlier occupation of the tell has been found in both Areas A and C. The ca. 1700 B.C., Middle Bronze, occupation is represented by mud structures on the inside of the basalt wall in Area A. The structures were eroded and reused in antiquity (LENZEN and GORDON 1986). Earlier occupation dating to ca. 3200 B.C., the Early Bronze I period, has been excavated below the tower in Area C; and, minimal evidence for Chalcolithic occupation was found during the 1984 season (LENZEN and McQUITTY: *fc.*).

Conclusions

The integration of the available data from every source possible may begin the process of identifying the importance of Tell Irbid throughout antiquity. The process may be a difficult one, if not painful, for it means eliminating biases on more than one level. First, Irbid's history relative to the biblical record is only significant from the outsider's

point of view. That referrent, therefore, cannot and does not frame the research relative to the site. One must, therefore, have a wider view of the history of the ancient Near East than that provided by the biblical record. Second, the continuous occupation of the tell and the region means that it cannot be viewed as separate from its surroundings. An understanding of its role as Arbela, for example, probably under the administrative control of Beit Rās/Capitolias does not mean it reverted to a village, but rather assumed a different, as yet not totally explained, role vis-a-vis Beit Rās/Capitolias. Third, the incompleteness of the archaeological record need not be apologized for or excused. The situation as it is must be accepted, placed within a viable framework, and utilized to its fullest.

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