

1994

The Journey from Heshbon to Hesban: An Account of the Evolution of the Heshbon Expedition's Scope of Research

Øystein LaBianca

Andrews University, labianca@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/hisban-general-publications>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

LaBianca, Øystein, "The Journey from Heshbon to Hesban: An Account of the Evolution of the Heshbon Expedition's Scope of Research" (1994). *Publications*. 11.

<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/hisban-general-publications/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the General at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

3

The Journey from Heshbon to Hesban: An Account of the Evolution of the Heshbon Expedition's Scope of Research

Øystein S. LaBianca

Professor of Anthropology, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI; head of the Heshbon Expedition's ecology laboratory; author, *Hesban 1* (sedentarization and nomadization); co-author, *Hesban 2* (environmental foundations); co-editor, Hesban final report series.

Introduction

About the reason why the Heshbon Expedition was launched twenty-five years ago there can be little doubt. As its original name "the Heshbon Expedition" suggests, the reason excavations were begun was to see if the site which the Arabs called Tell Hesban—and which many previous explorers had identified as biblical Heshbon—really was the Heshbon of the Bible. Was this the Heshbon of the Exodus—the city of the Amorite King Sihon, whom the Israelites conquered on their march out of the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land (Num 21:21ff)? Was this the Heshbon which was rebuilt and settled by the tribe of Reuben? Was this the Heshbon whose "pools" were like the beautiful eyes of the Beloved in the Canticles (7:4)?

To the team of mostly biblical scholars and seminary students that had been assembled by Siegfried Horn to participate in the first three seasons of excavations, and to the individuals and organizations which had helped to put up the funds for the project, these were surely valid and important questions. Indeed, it is probably safe to assume that had it not been for the light which it was hoped the excavations at Tell Hesban could shed on these questions of biblical history, Siegfried Horn and his team would not have begun to excavate there. As is now well known, what had been sought with the greatest

anticipation by the Heshbon Expedition—positive proof of a 15th century date for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt—turned out to be an elusive quarry (Horn 1982: 8). No inscriptions or small objects were found which might have added weight to this position by establishing some kind of 15th century link to Egypt. Not even in the pottery from the site was there any reason for optimism—all the calls for sherds from occupation strata came from more recent periods (*cf.* Sauer, chapter 18, in this volume). This situation led Siegfried Horn to conclude already in 1971 that "the major and certainly unexpected result of the excavations was that...Tell Hesban, identified since at least the time of Eusebius with OT Heshbon, cannot be King Sihon's capital of Moses' time" (Boraas and Horn 1973: 15; *cf.* Horn 1982: 8).

Thus, having answered—after only two seasons of fieldwork (1968 and 1971)—the question which attracted the team to Tell Hesban in the first place, why did excavations go on for three more seasons (1973, 1974, 1976)? What prompted the expansion of the expedition's scope of research beyond the original concern with questions related to biblical history? What kept the expedition's sponsors from backing out in the face of such changes in the scope of research? These are the questions which I shall try to answer in the present chapter.

Seven Serendipitous Circumstances

Seven, largely serendipitous, circumstances appear to have played a role in assuring the persistence of the Heshbon Expedition despite its disappointing initial findings. These include: 1) an acquaintance with the site's history from literary sources; 2) an inviolable commitment to rigorous stratigraphic excavation of the site; 3) an openness to the participation of natural science specialists; 4) the discovery of significant Roman and Early Christian remains; 5) the launching of the Heshbon Regional Survey; 6) encounters with Jordanians and host-country priorities; and 7) the impact of the "new archaeology." In various ways, these seven circumstances helped move the Heshbon team beyond its initial scope of research toward its expanded focus on studying changes over time in how people provided for their food, water and security needs—*i.e.* on studying changes over time in the local food system.

This expansion of the project's scope of research would not have occurred were it not for the openness of Siegfried Horn to the input that disciplines other than his own might contribute to his project. By inviting and encouraging the participation of humanities scholars as

well as social and natural scientists, he prepared for the beginning of the journey from Heshbon to Hesban. Once it got underway, he let it proceed—aiding it by his nods of approval.

Rather than seeing this new direction as a repudiation of his original quest for biblical Heshbon, Horn saw it as a new and broader perspective from which to approach the site as a whole. He recognized that, by concerning the expedition with the cultural history of all periods represented at the site, a deeper understanding could be gained of events which occurred during particular centuries. He saw, I believe, the relevance of understanding Hesban (in general), for understanding Heshbon (in particular).

Acquaintance with the site's history from literary sources. For the possibility that the Heshbon of the Exodus was buried beneath multiple layers of Iron, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Arabic debris, Siegfried Horn and his team had been well prepared (thanks to a study of the site's history from literary sources by Werner Vyhmeister, one of Horn's graduate students at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University). Vyhmeister's study had been commissioned by Horn already in 1966, right after the decision had been made to begin work at Tell Hesban (Geraty 1989b: ix).

By the time excavations were begun at Tell Hesban in 1968, Vyhmeister's thesis had already been completed, and an abridged version had been published (1968). Perhaps the most important way in which this study contributed to the development of the expedition's scope of research was in heightening awareness of the potential contribution which a dig at Tell Hesban could make not only to the history of the Israelite conquest, but also to more recent biblical history and to the history of central Transjordan during Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine times. A first step had thus been taken in the direction of a broader scope of research already before the dig had begun.

Inviolable commitment to rigorous stratigraphic excavation. A second contributing factor to the expansion of the Heshbon Expedition's scope of research was the inviolable commitment; from the very outset of the project, to rigorous stratigraphic excavation of the site. Thanks in particular to the leadership of the chief archaeologist (Roger S. Boraas of Upsala College), well over two dozen 5 m × 5 m squares were excavated over the five seasons of fieldwork. Each square was "probed and peeled" with utmost attention to relationships between layers and the stratigraphic context of walls, installations, pottery, bones and small finds. Consequently, by the end of the fifth season a total of nineteen occupational strata

spanning over three millennia could be clearly distinguished by the excavators.

The great irony of this accomplishment, however, was that none of these carefully separated layers could be dated to the 15th century BC, as had originally been hoped. Indeed, the earliest of them—the Iron I stratum—was assigned a 12th century BC beginning date. As noted earlier, this led Horn to conclude that the Heshbon of the Exodus could not have been at Tell Hesban.

The large quantity of material from the Roman, Byzantine and medieval Arab periods which this commitment to careful stratigraphic excavation had brought to light from more recent periods was, for reasons stated above, not entirely unexpected. Nevertheless, considering the amount of time and energy that had to be devoted to probing and peeling those "non-biblical" layers, it was inevitable that a great deal of reflection, argument and discussion would take place over the expedition's objectives and allocation of scarce resources. What were the goals of the project—to find the Heshbon of the Exodus or to simply dig the site carefully and record whatever was found without regard to any pre-set goals or agendas? This was the dilemma which this inviolable commitment to careful stratigraphic excavation brought to the fore.

Openness to the participation of natural science specialists. Although marginal to the overall project at first, natural science specialists were a part of the Heshbon Expedition from the very beginning. The first such specialist to participate was Robert Little of Andrews University, a physical anthropologist, who had been recruited by Horn to come along and be responsible for processing human and animal remains during the first campaign in 1968 (Little 1969). Over subsequent seasons, others were added, including geologists Reuben Bullard (1972) and Harold James (1976); palaeobotanists Patricia Crawford and Robert Stewart (Crawford, LaBianca and Stewart 1976) and zooarchaeologists Joachim Boessneck and Angela von den Driesch (1978). The palaeobotanical and zooarchaeological specialists had been recruited by the author (then a graduate student in anthropology) who had joined the team in 1971 to assist with processing of plant, animal and human remains (LaBianca 1973; *ibid.* 1978; *ibid.* 1986).

There were two important ways in which these various specialists contributed to the evolution of the project's research design. The first was in helping to bring to the fore the intricate ways in which the cultural history of the project area has been intertwined with its natural history. This was, of course, an inevitable consequence of

their putting their expertise to use in investigating such things as local site formation processes; local sources of clay and building stones; water management practices; present-day soils, flora and fauna; ancient plant and animal remains.

The second was in heightening awareness of the many ways in which observation of present-day practices within the project area could be helpful in sparking insights for use in interpreting the past. This was nowhere more obvious than when it came to subsistence practices, particularly local production and utilization of sheep and goats (LaBianca and LaBianca 1975). The continuity of the archaeological past into the ethnographic present was undeniable: just as the vast majority of the animal bones collected at Tell Hesban were those of sheep and goats, so were the vast majority of the pasture animals owned by present-day villagers. As we shall discuss further below, this heightened awareness of the link between cultural and natural history, and between the archaeological past and the ethnographic present, was a crucial step in the development of the "Heshbon" Expedition into the "Hesban" Expedition.



Robert Little (pictured here in 1968) offered his specialized scientific expertise as physical anthropologist—participating in the 1968-71 and 1976 seasons.



Øystein S. and Asta S. LaBianca teamed together in 1973 to study human and animal bone remains.

The discovery of important early Christian remains. From the perspective of sponsors and others who had shown interest in and lent support to the quest for biblical Heshbon, the discovery of important early Christian remains at Tell Hesban went a long way toward assuaging their disappointment on learning that Sihon's Heshbon was not likely to be found at the site. Among the discoveries which sparked the most

enthusiasm, in this regard, were the remains of an early Christian church on the summit of the tell which included several layers of beautiful mosaic floors, and the intact rolling stone tombs located in the necropolis areas southwest and north of the tell (Van Elderen, chapter 11, and Waterhouse, chapter 19, in this volume). Along with numerous other tombs, the southwest necropolis of Heshban also produced a large quantity of whole pottery jars, glass and jewelry objects—all of which helped keep enthusiasm for continued work at Tell Hesban going.

Launching of the survey of the Heshbon region. While the official reason for why the survey of the Heshbon region was launched in the summer of 1973 was in order "to trace the Roman road from Ebus to the Jordan and to obtain an archaeological picture of the occupational sites near Tell Hesban" (Waterhouse and Ibach 1975: 217), the unofficial reason was to begin the search for an alternative candidate for the Heshbon of the Exodus (*cf.* Ibach 1978a).

This survey, which eventually covered most of the territory within 10 km radius of Tell Hesban, had one particularly important

consequence for the development of the project's scope of research: it led to heightening of interest in the hinterland correlates of changes observed on the tell. In other words, the ruins and pottery produced by the survey as it criss-crossed the hinterland of the tell provided opportunities for comparisons and contrasts to be made between what was happening on the tell and what was going on in the nearby hinterland.

Over the three seasons that it was carried out, such comparisons became increasingly important to attempts to understand both the finds from the tell and those produced by the survey. The survey, therefore, helped broaden the project's scope of research from being concerned primarily with Tell Hesban as an isolated tell, to becoming concerned with the tell of Heshban as a part of a larger region.

Encounters with Jordanians and host-country priorities. Like all other foreign expeditions, the Heshbon Expedition was indebted to the Department of Antiquities of Jordan for permission to excavate at the site. Furthermore, during each field season at least one Department of Antiquities inspector was assigned to work with the team whose role it was to make sure that the dig was being carried out in accordance with Department of Antiquities' laws. Other Jordanians were also hired, including a foreman, several archaeology students from the University of Jordan, and, of course, hundreds of local workmen. In addition to such staff members, the project saw a steady flow of visitors as well—the majority of them from Jordan. These included members of the royal family, namely King Hussein, Crown Prince Hassan and Prince Raad, the Royal Chamberlain.

A consequence of these regular encounters with Department of Antiquities officials and other Jordanians was that the dig leadership and many members of the core staff became increasingly sensitized to and aware of the priorities of their hosts. The Jordanians, for example, were very enthusiastic about the careful work which was being done in uncovering the ruins of Tell Hesban's medieval or Ayyubid/Mamluk settlement.

Frequently noted, in this regard, were the pioneering efforts of James Sauer, the expedition's pottery expert, in refining the ceramic typology of the Arab periods on the site (Sauer 1973c). Also often singled out for special attention and affirmation by many Jordanians was the work that had been done in excavating and preparing architectural drawings of the Islamic bath complex on the summit of the tell (de Vries 1986). Thus, although the manner in which our Jordanian hosts communicated their priorities was usually subtle and always polite, their observations played a pivotal role in the evolution

of the project's scope of research.

Impact of the "new archaeology." Throughout the decade when fieldwork was being carried out at Tell Hesban (1968-1976) new ideas about how archaeology should be done were being hotly debated in the United States and Great Britain (Binford 1962; Binford and Binford 1968; Renfrew and Bahn 1990). At the heart of this debate was a deep desire to make archaeology more scientific. According to this "new archaeology" perspective, archaeologists needed to learn to think more like anthropologists. They needed to become concerned with questions of how and why cultures change, not merely content themselves with describing the finds from a succession of historical periods.

Out of this concern with making archaeology more scientific—more explanatory—emerged new ideas about how best to do archaeological fieldwork. For example, archaeologists needed to learn more about how the archaeological record was formed in the first place, so they needed to become more concerned with the present—to study present-day communities to see how their daily activities were being reflected in the things they made, abandoned and/or discarded. This study of how people's way of life is reflected in their material culture remains came to be known as ethnoarchaeology.

It was also not enough to simply dig an isolated site. Archaeologists needed to adopt a regional perspective—to do surveys of entire regions to get a better understanding of the environmental and economical factors which played a role in shaping changes over time at a particular site. This regional perspective, in turn, had to be augmented with greater efforts to save and study environmental and economical data produced by excavations. To this end more specialists had to be brought on board archaeological teams: geologists, soil scientists, palaeobotanists, zooarchaeologists and ethnoarchaeologists.

Although this "new archaeology" perspective—with its emphasis on scientific explanation, systemics, ethnoarchaeology, and multi-disciplinary cooperation—originated among archaeologists concerned primarily with advancing the study of prehistoric sites, it gradually began to spill over into and influence classical and biblical archaeologists as well, including the team working at Tell Hesban.

The first two members of the Heshbon team to come directly in contact with promoters of the "new archaeology" perspective were Roger Boraas and the writer. Boraas encountered it initially through reading Clarke's (1968) *Analytical Archaeology* (Boraas, personal

communication). Later, during the spring of 1973, he had the opportunity to become personally acquainted with some of its practitioners at the Institute of Archaeology in London. While there he visited the environmental archaeology laboratory of H. N. Jarman, where he was introduced to froth flotation as a technique for studying plant use in antiquity. This experience inspired him to support introduction of froth flotation procedures as a means to collect carbonized seeds during the 1974 season at Tell Hesban (Boraas, personal communication).



Excavation of the local tombs provided a great number of bone samples for analysis, as this 1976 photo of Bjornar Storfjell in front of Tomb F.38 indicates.

The writer's initial encounter with the new archaeology occurred at Harvard University during the 1972-1973 school year. During a one-year stint as a special student in the Department of Anthropology he had occasion to hear many of the chief proponents of this new perspective lecture and to read and discuss their writings with faculty and fellow graduate students. While at a seminar in archaeological method and theory taught by Ruth Tringham, he heard the pros and cons of the "old" and the "new" archaeology critically assessed and de-

bated. He also received training during that year in the discipline of zooarchaeology from Richard Meadow and Barbara Lawrence of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

There were thus at least two members of the team who had become personally acquainted with some of the leading proponents of the new archaeology agenda. Others, such as Lawrence Geraty, James Sauer, and Larry Herr—all students and subsequently graduates of the program in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard—were becoming increasingly aware of this new agenda as well. This was due not only to their being at Harvard, but to the fact that among certain of their peers in the American Schools of Oriental Research (notably William Dever), the new archaeology agenda was being zealously promoted (Dever 1988b). Upon becoming director of the expedition in 1973, Geraty increased significantly its commitment to anthropological concerns and methods, including expansion of ethnoarchaeological research in the village of Hesban (Boraas and Geraty 1976; *ibid.* 1978).

The extent of the new archaeology's impact on the Heshbon Expedition's scope of research should not, however, be exaggerated. Although, as we have seen, there was among some members of the core staff an awareness of the new archaeology agenda, this never led to any kind of major sea change in how the goals of the project were articulated or in how fieldwork was carried out. It seems instead that it was a case of a fortuitous coincidence that the new archaeology movement should come along when it did.

Its most important legacy, as far as the Heshbon Expedition is concerned, was in helping to foster a climate of openness and tolerance of experimentation—in fostering a subtle sense of new possibilities—among the expedition's leadership. It supplied, at the very least, an additional rationalization of sorts for continuing the many concurrent lines of research which had been started at Tell Hesban, despite the questionable relevance of most of these inquiries to the original mission of the Heshbon Expedition.

The Challenge of Integration

A consequence of five summers of multi-disciplinary fieldwork at Tell Hesban and vicinity was that a huge quantity of information was assembled which now needed somehow to be fitted together into some kind of coherent picture. The challenge was how to interpret 19 successive archaeological strata spanning over three millennia of human occupation at Tell Hesban; how to integrate this stratigraphic information from the tell with the 148 archaeological sites recorded

by the Heshbon Regional Survey; how to make sense out of hundreds of thousands of pottery pieces, tens of thousands of animal bones, and hundreds of small objects of all kinds. Might it somehow be possible to see these diverse finds as being interrelated in some way—as being part of some underlying complex dynamic whole?

To this end, none of the traditional research approaches of biblical archaeologists were found to be adequate. For example, it was obviously not possible to make sense out of all this data by limiting the scope of research to looking at one particular historical event—in our case the nature and date of the Exodus. Nor could all this information be interpreted by limiting the scope of research to studying one or two historical periods—for example, the Late Bronze and early Iron periods. Equally unsatisfactory was a scope of research which was limited to analyzing one particular type of data—say inscriptions or pottery or bones.

A much more encompassing scope of research was needed, one that was not focused on one particular historical event, a certain historical period, or one type of data. An approach was needed which went beyond these traditional approaches—one which was capable of integrating data collected by means of both survey and excavations from multiple historical periods and from multiple specialized studies of particular types of data. As we have explained elsewhere, one such approach is provided by food systems research (LaBianca 1990; 1991).

Food System Research

Food System Research (FSR) is concerned with people's quest for food in the broadest sense. In scope, therefore, it involves the study of the entire spectrum of activities ranging from food procurement practices to management of food wastes. Furthermore, the temporal scope of FSR begins in prehistory, and extends through the present and has implications for the future.

A definition of the food system concept which is consistent with this scope is as follows: a food system is a dynamic and complex unity consisting of all of the interconnected instrumental and symbolic activities carried out by people in order to procure, process, distribute, store, prepare, consume, metabolize, and waste food.

The chief justification for FSR is that, for most of human history, the daily lives of men, women and children have been structured by activities related to the various aspects of the quest for food mentioned above. While disciplines such as agriculture, economics, food science and nutrition have tended to focus on various isolated

aspects of food systems, such as distribution (economics) or metabolism (nutrition), FSR gives primacy to making explicit the interconnectedness of these different aspects. Furthermore, FSR is explicitly concerned with changes in food systems over the long term. With respect to both of these goals, FSR seeks to fill gaps which have been created and maintained as a consequence of the traditional disciplinary divisions of labor with respect to the study of food.

Three concepts are pivotal to FSR, namely the *food system* (defined above), *intensification*, and *abatement*. Whereas the first of these three concepts makes explicit the integrative perspective of FSR, the latter two enable cumulative research on how food systems change. They do so by providing constructs for thinking about the direction of change, whether in the direction of greater or lesser intensity respectively.

As has been explained elsewhere (LaBianca 1990; *ibid.* 1991), the integrative power of FSR is vast. For example, it provides a common frame for analyzing finds from all periods, including remains of buildings, walls, pottery, animal bones, seeds, and small objects—assuming that in various ways these were in some way tied to the quest for food. It provides a common frame of reference for analyzing entire regions as well as individual sites, thus connecting the results of survey research with that of site excavations. It provides a common objective for specialists of all kinds to contribute toward: namely elucidating the ways in which their particular specialty—be it lithics, pottery, animal bones, or carbonized seeds—contribute to reconstructing the direction of change of a particular local food system at various points in time. It provides a window on the nature of local social organization during successive centuries. Finally, it provides a window on the interaction between wider world-system events and changes taking place in local regions and communities.

Conclusion

We have thus come to the end of our story about the journey from Heshbon to Hesban. As we have seen, this is a story of how a team of archaeologists managed to transform their scope of research from a narrow focus on biblical events associated with the city of Heshbon to a broad focus on changes over time in how successive generations of people occupying the tell of Hesban went about providing for their food, water and security needs.

Significantly, this expanded focus has not diminished the importance of the original quest for biblical Heshbon, but what it has done is located this original question in a broader context. That is to

say, it has made it possible to compare the process by which the Hesban region was settled during the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages with similar processes during previous and succeeding centuries.

HESBAN

After 25 Years

edited by:

David Merling
Lawrence T. Geraty

A Publication of the Institute of Archaeology/Horn Archaeological Museum