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The Work of the Heshbon Survey Team, 1973

S. DOUGLAS WATERHOUSE

ONE of the aims of this past season's excavation at Heshbon was to gain an archeological picture of occupational sites in the vicinity of Tell Hesban, with special emphasis on thoroughly exploring the very large valley, Wadi Hesban, which lies to the north and west of the Tell. A small survey team of four was assembled to accomplish this task and, in addition, to attempt to solve the problem of tracing a Roman road known to have ascended from Livias (modern Tell er-Rameh) in the Jordan Valley to Esbus (the Latin designation for Biblical Heshbon).

The Roman Road

While the historical existence of the Roman road had long been known, it had never been completely traced. Classical sources indicate that in preparation for the visit of Emperor Hadrian, the road was constructed around A.D. 129-130, to connect Jerusalem, Jericho, Livias, and Esbus; thereby linking, by means of a highway across the deep gorge of the Jordan, the roads of Palestine with the famous highway of Trajan in the Roman province of Arabia Petraea (where Esbus/Heshban is located).

Since three of the milestone stations along this road were known, marking the fifth, sixth, and seventh Roman miles from Esbus, it was hoped that the survey team could begin their search by ascending from the floor of the Jordan Valley to these known remains of the road. From there the

search team would be in a good position to determine the course of the highway as it makes its ascent toward the high tableland of ancient Moab where Tell Hesban is located. It turned out, however, that the southeastern flank of the Jordan Valley is a "forbidden zone," full of various types of military installations. There was no alternative, therefore, but to start from the unknown; to search from the Tell itself. After giving study and thought to the topographical lay of the land, it was determined that the ancient road from Esbus must first have gone directly southward before turning westward, eventually leading the traveler through the present-day village of el-Mushaqqar, on the westward fringe of the high tableland. This was confirmed by finding a lonely, fragmented milestone lying on its side, more than halfway between the Tell and el-Mushaqqar. Possibly, the monument marked the second Roman mile from Esbus.

From el-Mushaqqar a ridge, bearing the same name as that of the village, slowly descends into the Ghor (the Arabic name for the Jordan Valley). Affording a breathtaking view of the northern end of the Dead Sea and the "plains of Moab" (Num. 33:48), the Roman road traverses the lofty heights of this ridge as it makes its way down to the ruin-mound of the now dead city of Livias. The imposing promontory of Mount Nebo, really not a mountain but a parallel ridge, lying to the immediate south of the el-Mushaqqar ridge, adds to the truly magnificent scenery. Separating the Nebo-ridge from the ridge with the Roman road, the "slopes of Pisgah" (Deut. 3:17; 4:49), today

called Wadi 'Ayun Musa ("the springs of Moses"), form a high green valley in the midst of the desert landscape.

At the base of the first precipitous descent of the ridge of el-Mushaqqar, another milestone station was discovered. It presumably marks the fourth Roman mile from Esbus. Twenty-four milestone fragments, two of them with weathered inscriptions, lie strewn and sometimes half buried in the ground. Obviously the stone fragments had been tumbled about by the repeated "wash" of seasonal rains. (While the region is a very dry desert, winter rains do cause severe local flooding.) The fact that there were at one time fifteen milestones in this location (as proved by the number of fragments with square bases) indicates that the road had been repaired, or reconstructed, at least fifteen times. With each repair work, a new milestone was erected as an advertisement of the political power of the incumbent emperor.

Altogether, the survey team was able to locate five separate milestone stations, marking the second(?), fourth(?), fifth, sixth, and seventh Roman mile from Esbus. At the fifth mile from the Tell is a place called Serabit el-Mushaqqar with twelve milestone fragments. Surprisingly, two of these venerable way-markers are still standing in an upright position. The Latin inscriptions on the milestones have been dated to the years 219, 307, and 364-375(?).

The sixth Roman mile from Esbus is located at a dramatic prom-



The author stands on the eastern defense wall of Khirbet el-Mahatta, possibly Biblical Beth-peor, looking north toward the Plains of Moab.

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ontory called Khirbet el-Mahatta, a place of special significance. Classical authors, notably Eusebius and Jerome, point out that it was from this vantage point that the traveler from Livias could take a side path to 'Ayun Musa and Mount Nebo. Eusebius further points out that it was here that the infamous Beth-Peor (Deut. 4:46) was located, the high place of Baal, where Balaam, overlooking the Israelite encampment on the plains of Moab (the southeastern floor of the Jordan Valley), tried to curse, but instead blessed Israel (Num. 23:28). It also was here that Israel, through the influence of Balaam, was led into a most grievous sin (Num. 25:1-3; 31:16; Ps. 106:28; Micah 6:5; Rev. 2:14). This identification of the sixth milestone station with Beth-Peor tallies very well with the information given in Scripture. The author of Deuteronomy 34:5, 6 explicitly states that Moses died in the land of Moab and was buried by the Lord opposite to Beth-Peor. The ridge el-Mushaq-qar with its western promontory, Khirbet el-Mahatta, is the only ridge directly facing the burial place of Moses; that is, the region of Mount Nebo and the slopes of Pisgah.

Khirbet el-Mahatta, with its strategic view of the Ghor, today lies treeless and desolate under the burning desert sun. The extensive ruins of a comparatively large Roman fortress, with its walls, gates, and towers, are now all that remain of this ancient, heathen place of worship. In a

place that once resounded with life, there is now quietude—a calm that is disturbed only occasionally by wandering Bedouins with their camels, donkeys, sheep, and goats.

The discovery of a number of milestone stations did establish, of course, the definite route of the Roman road. The remains of the road itself are almost nowhere visible, except on the el-Mushaq-qar ridge. There, still very much in evidence, is the worn bed of what once had been an intensively traversed highway. Here and there, marking the edges of the route, are rows of tightly fitted curbstones. Occasionally one may spot what is left of worn-down cobblestones. Where measurements could be taken, the average width of the road turned out to be six meters. The ruins of numerous ancient "rest-stations" and guard towers also attested to the direction and course of the road.

The city of Livias, identified by classical sources with Biblical Beth-haran (Num. 32:36; Joshua 13:27), is on linguistic grounds associated with the modern name Tell er-Rameh (Geth-haram became Beit er-Ram and then Tell er-Rameh). In recent decades, however, this identification of Beth-haram/Livias with modern Tell er-Rameh has been called into question because repeated "sherding"—collecting ceramic remains—on the mound has failed to produce any pottery fragments dating before the Roman era. This season, however, the Heshbon survey team did turn up earlier occupational evidence leading us back in time to at least 1200 B.C. This newly acquired historical data helps fix the traditional identification of Tell er-Rameh, and also helps to establish the locality from whence the Roman road first begins its ascent from the Ghor.

Exploration of the Wadi Hesban

The results of the Wadi Hesban exploration turned out to be no less intriguing than that of searching for the Roman road. The Wadi showed a varied and checkered history, sometimes differing markedly from the excavation results obtained from Hesban. In fact, the

only place where a parallel pottery repertoire to that of the Tell was discovered was found to be at the source of the Wadi, at a place called Umm el-Qanafid.

Besides the Byzantine and Roman periods, times of heavy population, the periods most prominently represented along the floor of the valley are the Iron Age (time of the Hebrew kings), Middle Bronze I (time of Abraham), and the Early Bronze/Chalcolithic Age. The remains of ten dolmens (large megalithic structures thought by some to have served as ancient tombs) were noted on the southernmost flank of the valley, within walking distance from Tell Hesban. Most scholars now date these unusual structures to the Neolithic period, though they cannot be dated with certainty. The dolmens look like houses. They are constructed of stones of such stupendous size that neither earthquake, violent weather, nor the vicissitudes of centuries have had any serious effect in demolishing the buildings. Many still remain standing in their original positions. Folk memory associates these "stone houses" with the prodigious labor of a long-gone giant race.

Approximately two miles north of Hesban lies an interesting low Tell. Called Umm el-Isarab, it commands the eastern approach to Wadi Hesban. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that the survey team was able to obtain a number of ceramic fragments from this site that probably date to the Middle Bronze/Late Bronze era. The broken sherds are known to be earlier than the Iron Age, but not as ancient as the Early Bronze Age. This rare type of ware has so far turned up only in burial caves and, unfortunately, never in a controlled, stratified, archeological context. Nevertheless, it is exciting to realize that the ware seemingly dates from an era that so far is all too sparsely represented among Jordan's known historical sites. Needless to say, the finding of what must for now be labeled as a "possible" Late Bronze Age hamlet has great significance for the establishment of historical data relating to the Hebrew conquest of Transjordan and Canaan.



Roman milestones on the Ebus-Livias Roman road, at a site overlooking the Jordan Valley on the right and the Dead Sea on the left.