



Archaeology

“Truth Shall Spring Forth Out of the Earth¹”

The Establishment of Modern Jewish Archaeological
Research in the Land of Israel

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Archaeology has been Israel’s national pastime since this nation emerged out of the ashes of World War II in 1948. While popular interest has waned in recent years, most Israelis, secular and religious alike, maintain a keen interest in the latest archaeological discoveries, especially biblically related finds. Today, most universities in Israel offer a broad range of archaeology study programs. Israeli archaeologists not only dominate the field within Israel, but also hold important teaching positions at universities worldwide. Moreover, Israel’s numerous museums cumulatively house an unparalleled collection of biblical artifacts. This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of Israel’s independence, which is an appropriate occasion to recount how interest in archaeology as a scientific discipline originated and grew

among the Jewish population of Palestine during the early decades of the twentieth century. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, France, Germany, England, and the United States all established or sponsored archaeological research institutes in Jerusalem, a city then under the weakening grasp of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Just a few years earlier, noted Egyptologist Sir William Flinders Petrie had pioneered the use of stratigraphic excavation techniques and was the first to recognize that the hundreds of artificial hillocks dotting the landscape of Palestine were actually the ruins of ancient biblical towns and cities. Once the importance of Petrie’s findings was fully recognized, each of these foreign schools scrambled to obtain excavation rights for the most promising sites. These developments were closely



observed by the *yishuv*, Palestine's Jewish population. Frustration mounted as they watched well-financed foreign expeditions uncover the ancient remains of such sites as Megiddo, Jericho and Jerusalem. Their feelings were best exemplified in an editorial letter written by Tel-Aviv resident David Smilansky in 1912. After hearing archaeologist Carl Watzinger lecture on the German excavations at Jericho as well as discuss a group of Galilean synagogues recently discovered by two German colleagues, Smilansky reacted with this terse assessment: "thus Christian-Germans are working in our historical homeland. Both religious and scientific interests are the driving forces behind their activities. And we, who should be the most interested party in the success of these archaeological excavations, do almost nothing in this field and leave it to whoever else wants it: Germans, Americans, British."²

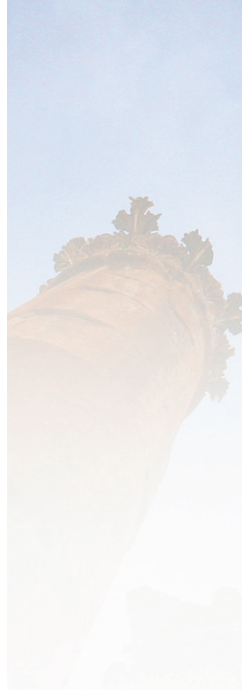
In actuality, while a number of Jewish scholars living in Palestine harbored an interest in archaeology and in organizing an excavation, not one of them was a trained archaeologist. Despite this handicap, a small group of enthusiastic intellectuals met in Jerusalem on November 7, 1913, to establish the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society.³ These first members came together with varied backgrounds and interests, yet all of them shared the same heartfelt need to establish a Jewish archaeology society dedicated to the study of the history, geography, and material remains of *eretz yisrael*, the land of their ancestors. Among those attending this historic meeting was Izhak Ben-Zvi, a labor leader in the *yishuv* who worked tirelessly with David Ben-Gurion and many others in Palestine and abroad to promote Zionism and ultimately to forge a new Jewish nation. Ben-Zvi later served as Israel's second president until his death in

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1963. Ben-Zvi was joined by David Yellin, another leader of the *yishuv* as well as a gifted linguist and teacher. Also present were Abraham Brawer, a geographer and historian who produced the first modern regional geography of Israel; fellow geographer Abraham Luncz; and Jewish historian and topographer Yeshayahu Press. Other notables with close connections to the society were well-known Jewish historian Joseph Klausner and also Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the man responsible for the resurrection of Hebrew as a spoken language. This initial meeting featured a lecture by Press appropriately titled "The History of Research in the Land of Israel." Yellin also addressed the attendees, emphasizing that their responsibility as a "reborn" people was nothing less than to recover and preserve their material past, passing it on to future generations.⁴

The cataclysmic events of World War I suspended the society's activities and changed the face of the entire country, which passed from Turkish over to British control. Nahum Slousch, a noted scholar of Hebrew literature and gifted with a flair for publicity, reestablished the society in 1920. Nevertheless, it remained, as its long-time director Joseph Aviram later recalled, "a small society without means and without archaeologists—but with good intentions and high spirit."⁵ Once Slousch had raised adequate funds through his charismatic appeals to fellow Jews abroad, he conducted the first excavation for the society at Hammath-Tiberias, near the Sea of Galilee.

During clearance work on an ancient synagogue, the excavators uncovered a large seven-branch menorah carved in stone. News of the discovery electrified the Jewish community. For the first time, Jewish excavators had recovered a tangible symbol of their own past—a dramatic



link with their ancient forefathers. Since most of them were immigrants, this discovery served more than ever to tie the Jewish population together with the land, emphasizing the fact that they had, after centuries in the Diaspora, finally returned home. The symbolism of this great find and its effect on the entire *yishuv* cannot be overemphasized. A facsimile of this menorah became the official emblem of the society and continues as such today.

Ironically, Slousch's excavation at Hammath-Tiberias was not the first Jewish-led archaeological expedition in Palestine. That honor belongs to Frenchman Raymond Weill, who began work in 1913 at Jerusalem with the financial sponsorship of Baron Eduard de Rothschild. In 1914 and 1924, he also excavated a group of tombs at Gezer, a biblical city fortified by Solomon (1 Kings 9:15-17).⁶ Weill's work in Jerusalem focused on the southern end of the City of David, the southeastern ridge that formed the ancient core of the city during the Old Testament period. Weill exposed two long, parallel vaulted chambers, which he heralded as the fabled royal tombs of the Davidic dynasty. While debate continues as to the function of these chambers, recently published evidence seems to vindicate Weill's identification. A synagogue dedicatory plaque, which may refer to the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts 6:9), was also discovered by Weill. This plaque remains the only archaeological evidence for a synagogue in Jerusalem during the first century AD.

Throughout the ensuing years, the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society continued field work, although large scale excavations remained well beyond the society's limited financial resources. Slousch did clearance work among the ancient monuments of Jerusalem's Kidron Valley, which drew the attention of *The London Times Weekly Edition* and provided the society much needed international recognition. While many Palestinian Jews made contributions to archaeology during these early years, two men in particular—Eleazar Sukenik and Benjamin Mazar—must be regarded as pivotal

figures in the emergence of Jewish archaeological research.

Eleazar Sukenik was a young high school instructor in Jerusalem following World War I, where he quickly developed an insatiable interest in Jewish history and antiquities. After taking classes at the American School, Sukenik caught the attention and came under the tutelage of William F. Albright, the school's director. With Albright's recommendation and a modest scholarship from the society, Sukenik studied in Berlin and at Dropsie College in Philadelphia, receiving a PhD in 1926. The newly established Hebrew University awarded Sukenik a research position, where he remained to eventually become a professor. Among the sites that Sukenik excavated were sections of New Testament Jerusalem's "Third Wall" (known from the writings of Jewish historian Flavius Josephus) and the ancient synagogue at Beth Alpha.

While directing work at the latter site in 1929, Sukenik uncovered an elaborate and beautifully preserved mosaic floor that generated a vast amount of publicity, including a *New York Times* headline. The find catapulted Sukenik from a relatively unknown archaeologist to a world renowned scholar and national celebrity. Sukenik demonstrated the awesome potential of archaeology's impact upon society, which deeply impressed itself upon the consciousness of his son, Yigael Yadin, who later became Israel's most celebrated archaeologist. Sukenik's most enduring legacy, however, was his extraordinary efforts to purchase the first group of Dead Sea Scrolls when they became available in 1947. Often at peril to his life, Sukenik acquired three of the priceless scrolls for the Hebrew University and studied them until his death in 1953.

Benjamin Mazar immigrated to Palestine from Germany shortly after completing his PhD in 1927. He immediately became involved with the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society and, like Sukenik, studied archaeology under the inspiration of Albright. With anthropologist Moshe Stekelis, Mazar conducted his first ex-



cavation at Ramat Rahel, south of Jerusalem, in 1931 and then began a long-term project at the extensive Jewish cemetery of Beth She'arim. Mazar lacked Sukenik's archaeological training, but was a superb historian with an extensive knowledge of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources. Mazar taught at Hebrew University for many years, eventually serving as its president. One of Mazar's greatest attributes was his enthusiastic and engaging teaching style. Consequently, Mazar's excavations became the "classrooms" for many of Israel's pioneer archaeologists. His legacy continues today through his nephew and granddaughter, Amihai and Eilat Mazar, two of Israel's leading archaeologists.

Palestine during the British Mandate was marked with political tension, religious strife, and often bloody violence. During these tumultuous times, Jews continued to make *aliyah* (immigration) to Israel (then called Palestine), despite restrictions imposed by the British. These Jewish immigrants arrived with widely diverse cultural traits and languages, so the society aided their assimilation process by conducting a series of lectures and field trips. Called the "Knowledge of the Land Movement" or *yedi'at ha-aretz*, these tours and hikes not only forged a common cultural identity among the various immigrant groups, but also fostered a deeply rooted connection with their history, biblical heritage, and the land itself through the lectures and explorations. Many Israeli archaeologists credit the Knowledge of the Land programs as their first exposure to archaeology.

The Israeli archaeology community today is a quantum leap ahead in growth and sophistication when compared to its inauspicious beginnings in 1913. As we mark Israel's sixty-year anniversary, let us also remember the ninety-five years of Jewish archaeological research in

the Holy Land. May the enthusiasm, resolve, and achievements which characterized these earliest Jewish pioneers continue for many years to come!

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Jewish excavators
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1. This phrase, taken from Psalm 85:11, was adopted from the title of a Hebrew paper by Y. Shavit entitled "Truth Shall Spring Out of the Earth: The Development of Jewish Popular Interest in Archaeology in Eretz-Israel," *Cathedra* 44 (1987): 27-54. The paper recounted the rise of Israeli popular interest in archaeology.

2. This quotation and its context are taken from Y. Shavit, "Archaeology, Political Culture, and Culture in Israel," in *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, ed. Neil Asher Silberman, David Small. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 48.

3. Initially named the "Society for the Reclamation of Antiquities," the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society's Hebrew title is literally translated as "Hebrew Society for the Study of the Land of Israel and Its Antiquities."

4. Janet Amitai, "Israel Exploration Society," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers. (New York: Oxford, 1997), vol. 3, 190.

5. Joseph Aviram, "The Israel Exploration Society," in *Biblical Archaeology Today*, ed. Avraham Biran, Joseph Aviram. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1990), 31.

6. The details of Weill's excavation at Gezer remained a mystery for over sixty years. His assistant, Paula Zilberberg, was entrusted with preparing the material for publication. However, during the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, she was deported, along with thousands of other French Jews, to the concentration camps, where she perished. Moreover, her written records of the dig were never found. Weill's Gezer excavations were nearly forgotten until Israeli scholar Aren Maeir recently gathered the surviving artifacts, which were scattered among museum collections in Israel and France. These were then published, eighty years after they were excavated.