A Second Summer in Israel: In a Pit With Sand Flies and Ants

Arlene L. Koegler

On June 21, 1969, seventy-five volunteers arrived at Tell Ashdod, Israel, where several weeks before archaeologists had already begun the fifth session of excavation. Eight weeks later, on August 15, 1969, the volunteers left, and the staff continued piecing together all the bits of information from Areas G, H, K, and M, to "discover" what exactly had been discovered that summer about the Philistines. As one of sixty American volunteers in Israel for the eight weeks, I would like to relate what I learned about Ashdod and archaeology while on the *dig*.

1969 was my second season there. In April of 1968, while in Pittsburgh, after reading an article in the Carnegie Museum Bulletin about Ashdod, I met with Dr. James L. Swauger, Associate Director of the Carnegie Museum, who, at the time, was gathering interested Americans for the 1968 excavation. "... members of the labor force are promised *labor*, eight hours of it under a hot sun in clouds of dust. It is exacting work; demanding muscle, endurance, interest. We are not a teaching expedition. We are digging a site, and its excavation is our goal."

Why excavate Tell Ashdod? 3,500 years ago it had been one of the five main cities of the Philistines and on the Via Maris linking Egypt and Palestine. Two of the five towns, Gaza and Ashkelon, are buried under modern cities. In 1959, when possible excavation sites were being considered by the Israel Department of Antiquities, Gaza was held by the Egyptians. Ashkelon had the disadvantage of having been destroyed so many times within the last 1,000 years that possibly the lower strata were also disturbed. The other two towns, Gath and Ekron, have never been located. Four locations had been suggested for Gath, but there was no way of knowing which was the correct site without first digging at one of the suggested locations.

The *tell*, or mound, of old Ashdod, by contrast, *just stands there*. Tell Ashdod is twenty-three miles south of Tel Aviv, about ten miles north of Ashkelon, and four miles inland from the Mediterranean (see Figure 1). It covers about two square miles, and its highest point is seventy feet above the surrounding area. The city has been known in written records for over 3,000 years.

Asdodi, or Ashdodo, is an old Canaanite name. The oldest reference to Ashdod is found in an Akkadian business text, written in Ugaritic in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, B.C. An Egyptian writing, the Onomasticon of Amenope, lists Ashdod as 'Isdd. In the Old Testament, the city is mentioned several times; the first, chronogically, in Second Chronicles 26:6, when King Uzziah (785–733 B.C.) of Judah "... went out and broke down the wall of Gath and the wall of Jabneh and the wall of Ashdod: and he

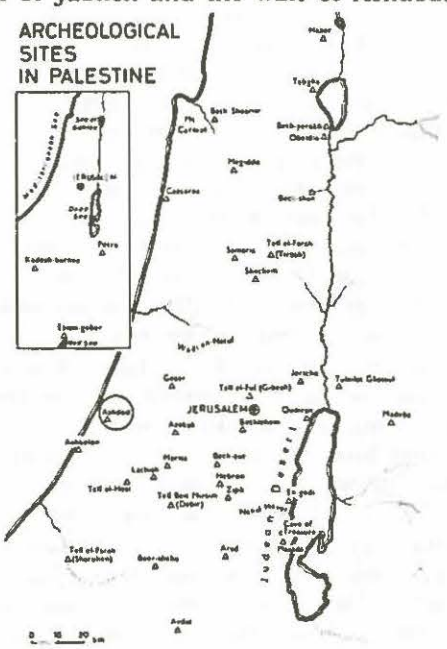


Figure 1. Mazar, *Voices from the Past*, page 6.

built cities in the territory of Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines." Isaiah 20:1, tells of the capture of Ashdod by Sargon II (712 B.C.) of Assyria. During Nebuchadnezzar's time (604-561 B.C.), an unnamed king of Ashdod is listed as one of the men attached to the royal court. Joshua 10:40-48, names Ashdod, and another city, Dor, as the boundaries of the territory of Dan.

The city became less important during the Graeco-Roman period, when it was sometimes referred to as, Azotus. Ashdod, in different periods of time, also came to be under the rule of Herod the Great; his sister, Salome; Tiberius; and, later, Vespasian. Through the period of Arab rule and the Crusades, it is seldom mentioned. It remained as Isdud, a small Arab village, until it was abandoned during the fighting in Palestine in the late 1940s.

Why the importance of concentrating on the Philistine period of Ashdod's history? The Philistine were the ones who brought iron and iron-making techniques into a Bronze-Age land. These *Pelast*, displaced 'Sea People,' from the Greek islands, invaded and settled the Mediterranean coast from Jaffa (old section of Tel Aviv) to Gaza, around the end of the thirteenth century, B.C. Their name was given to the coastal land, Philistia, and later to the whole land, Palestine.

Despite this, not much was known about the Philistines except what their enemies, the Egyptians and the Hebrews, wrote about them. No Philistine writing had been found. The only evidence on which to attach a few assumptions was found at an excavation in Jordan, however, this was discovered at a level just below the Philistine one. It was only in 1969 that a cylinder seal revealed the first writings that could be proven, by the accompanying pottery and by the stratum, to be truly Philistine: but they have yet to be deciphered. Even with this new find, however, only a small number of Philistine symbols are known.

From excavations, one of the things known about the Philistines is that their pottery was similar to that of the Myceneans in both form and decoration. Spirals, stylized birds (some with their heads turned back), and black and red checkered patterns typify Philistine pottery. What is puzzling from the Ashdod excavations is that Philistine everyday ware is colorful and painted, while those used in religious ceremonies are rather drab. Also, the abundance of spouted vessels with holes for strainers gives rise to the idea that the Philistines probably were great beer drinkers!

From the excavations it is also proven that Ashdod at that time was a strong military city. The water supply was constant; until recent times the Nahal Lachish and its tributaries, which were deep enough to anchor ships, ran through here. The nearby Mediterranean coastline is too smooth and unbroken for a natural harbor. Tel Mor, on the northern bank of the Nahal Lachish, and less than a mile from the coast where the modern port of Ashdod is growing, was the port for old Ashdod, as Dr. Moshe Dothan's 1959 excavation at Tel Mor indicated.

Dr. Dothan, now Director of Excavations and Survey of the Israel Department of Antiquities, was one of the archaeologists with whom, in 1959, Dr. Swauger had discussed beginning a new excavation in Israel. Dr. David Noel Freedman, then of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and now Director of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, had originally begun the idea, and Dr. Swauger, with a background of working American Indian sites, became interested and agreed to find the necessary financial backing. The Department of Antiquities supplied the tools and the technical staff, and the Ashkelon Development Corporation contributed both machinery and money.

Along with the sponsorship of both the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the Carnegie Museum, Dr. Swauger also gained the interest of various groups: Gulf Oil Corporation, Koppers Company, A.W. Mellon Fund, United Steelworkers, and others—in contributing money for the Ashdod *dig* which was set to begin in 1962. $42,000 of the first year's funds were supplied through the Smithsonian Institution's share of counterpart funds from the U.S. government.

The actual digging was done in the summers of 1962, 1963, 1965, 1968 and 1969. The first season began on May 2, 1962 and ended on July 15. The workers that year came mostly from the neighboring Moshav Sede Uzziah.

One of the first problems confronting the excavation was to determine the full extent of the Ashdod mound. Cultivation over the years, which had damaged the top strata both on the acropolis and on the slopes of the mound; parts of the *tell* which had been cut out and used for building material; and a Moslem cemetery which cut into the southern part of the mound, all added to the list of problems. Four areas were dug: "A" and "B" were selected to determine the stratigraphy of the acropolis; "C" and "D", out-

side the acropolis, were excavated because several important finds were made there during the survey of the site. A trial trench was dug by bulldozer near the bottom slope of the mound in an unsuccessful attempt to find the city wall.

The excavation was resumed the following summer with several new areas opened. There was no dig in 1964 because, as Dr. Swauger put it, "The U.S. government went out of the archaeology business." No one in the department which distributed funds felt capable of deciding which of the excavation projects should be selected, so no funds were given out.

In 1965, the Smithsonian Institution was designated the organization to decide for the U.S. government which projects were to be financed: the Ashdod excavation received $50,000 that year. The third season was completed. The site was to open again in June, 1967, but since the Arab-Israeli situation was getting tense, the season was cancelled in May, one month before the one-week war.

1968 was the first time that U.S. volunteers were used at Ashdod. The idea for this was suggested by an organization in Milwaukee which wanted to start a tour group for persons interested in Palestinian archaeology. The cost was the same to the Ashdod excavation if volunteers or Israeli labor were used. A clause in the contract for counterpart funds stated that the Ashdod excavation was to be paid, at Israeli wages, a certain amount of money "for workers or volunteers."

"I was dubious about having a large force of what I presumed would be mostly youngsters," was Dr. Swauger's initial reply to the idea of using *volunteers* from America. "Life with an Israeli labor force was simple for me. The Israelis appeared at the site in the morning, they worked, and they left. With an American group I would have to see to housing, meals, transportation to and from the site, insurance, and general welfare. We hadn't had enough Americans during the first three years for these matters to be a burden." Nevertheless he accepted sixty-five *volunteers*—"'paying guests' would be more apt, for these people paid good money for the privilege of slaving as labor through a long, hot summer. They paid the cost of the round-trip transport to Israel, $150 toward general personnel costs, and all their incidentals," Dr. Swauger continued.

The *volunteers* worked out so well, better than any Israeli crews used there previously, that another, much larger group was selected for 1969. By December 1968, over two-hundred persons had applied for the 1969 season.

Who were those finally selected? Our group ranged in age from thirteen to sixty-plus, and included ministers from Washington, North Dakota, Michigan, Maryland and New Jersey; a biophysicist from Chicago; college students from Pennsylvania, New York, California, New Mexico, Canada and England; a secretary from Ohio; a New Jersey sales manager and his wife; high school students; a retired banker and a nun from Pittsburgh, and a graduate student from Honolulu.

We were housed at the bungalow-style Hotel Ashkelon, at Afridar-Ashkelon, and our day went something like this: After a never-changing breakfast of tomatoes, grated carrots, cucumbers, fish, cheese, eggs, bread and coffee, we climbed into the truck which picked us up, each day, for the half-hour ride to the *tell*. From 7:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., we worked with makush (pick), torea (hoe), patish (small hand pick), spachtel (scraper), brush, dentist tools and bare hands. We carried salim (dirt buckets), emptied wheelbarrows, got magnificent sunburns, laughed, joked, sang, uncovered pottery no one had seen for several thousand years, learned how to distinguish a mud floor level from the earth surrounding it, and were exhausted, dirty and sweaty at the end of the day when we collected the tools and pottery buckets. During the day we had two half-hour breaks: one at 9:30, when one had tea, and anything he wanted to bring from breakfast; and the other at 12:30, when we all had lunch, which often included ice cream bought for fifteen *agorot* (about four cents) from the Israeli "Good Humor" boy on his donkey cart. Dr. Dothan's end-of-the-day summary of finds of the previous day, the Ashdod "Show and Tell," was at the headquarters building, just before we stumbled into the truck at 4:00 p.m. Once back at the hotel we could have tea, go for a swim at the beach, take a shower, walk to the Afridar shopping center (five minutes away), take the bus to Migdal Ashkelon, the old city of Ashkelon, or, what was most inviting of all, just collapse and rest until dinner at 7:00 p.m.

Once a week we had an evening lecture and slide presentation by one of the staff members, on some part of Palestinian history. Ami Mazar's "Ancient Water Systems of Israel," Avner Goren's "Explorations in the Sinai," Dr. Dothan's "History of Ashdod," and

Dr. Swauger's "Birth, Care and Feeding of an Excavation," were some of the talks that year. Attendance was voluntary; what each person wanted to learn about archaeology was up to him. It was for each one to *ask, ask, ask*!

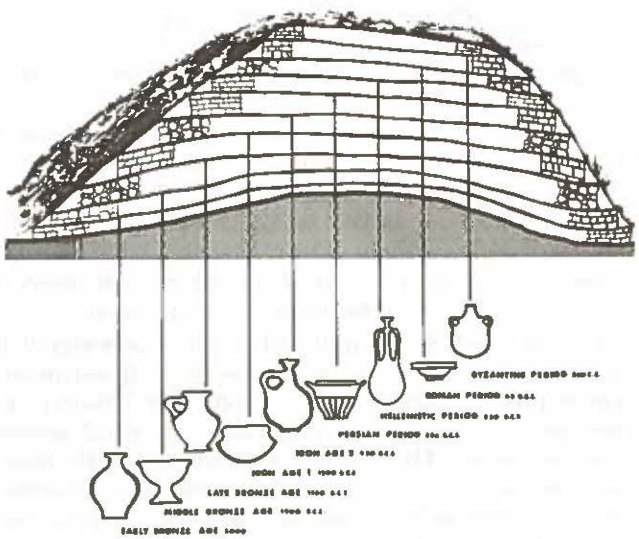
Fridays and Saturdays were free days for us, and most of us traveled to other parts of Israel. Bus fares were cheap; *sheruts* (long-distance taxis) and rental cars were more expensive. Since Israel is a relatively small country it is possible, in eight weekends, to climb Masada, swim in the Dead Sea and in the fresh waters of Ein Gedi and Sachne, walk through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, wade through Hezekiah's water tunnel, stand in the Crusader fortress at Belvoir (overlooking the Jordan Valley), visit a camel market at Beersheba, look at the zodiac mosaic floor in the synagogue (built in the fifth century, A.D.) at Tiberias, wander through the ruins at Hazor and Megiddo, and see Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Haifa and many other places.

That year we had many visitors at the *tell*: a few were experts, some were amateur archaeologists, most were neither. The question most often asked, especially by the third group (those interested but baffled persons who knew nothing about archaeology), was: "How do you know what you're doing out here?"

Each area of the site is first arbitrarily marked off into five-meter by five-meter squares, with one meter remaining between squares on which to walk. This one-meter-wide space is called the *balk*. In most British-run *digs*, and at the *dig* at Gezer, the balk is never removed. No matter how far one digs, or what parts of structures are uncovered within the square, the balk remains untouched even if it means not finding the continuation of an unexpected wall which might extend, end, or turn a corner within it. The result is a clear gridwork of squares over the entire area.

A site dug by an Israeli is a different matter. Visually, an area is very confusing. Squares exist in some places and not in others. Balks may have been partially or completely removed. All the visitor sees is an apparent jumble of various high and low levels. It is neatly cut, but confusing. However, the archaeologists will have found out what they wanted to know, and that is more important than having a symmetrically balanced site.

A second problem in trying to understand what was happening at Tell Ashdod was that different strata were being uncovered in different squares at the same



Section through a Tell, Showing the Accumulation of Habitation Levels.

Figure 2. Mazar, *Voices from the Past*, page 16.

time. The entire site was not worked by first uncovering everything from the Roman occupation, for instance, and then, two weeks later, unearthing everything in the next level down. Instead, workers would be discovering Persian pottery from a sixth century, B.C., floor in one square, while those in the adjacent square would have had passed that level several days before and were now down to the ninth century, B.C., level.

Part of the reason for that was: if the slope of the *tell* was being excavated, as was Ashdod's Area "H", the higher part was automatically "younger" than that farther down (see Figure 2). Because of erosion and because a mound tends to pyramid as the various peoples build their cities upon it, digging one meter through the surface near the top of a mound will not be the same as digging down the same distance near the bottom of the mound. One may find objects from 1,000 B.C., at the higher place, and 1,300 B.C., at the lower square.

Also at Ashdod, the area supervisors may have decided to concentrate on solving problems in one square of the area and therefore may have transferred

workers there from another square. Work did not progress at the same rate in each section of the area.

A third difficulty in understanding what was going on at Ashdod was that there were no easily recognizable structures, such as the stone buildings or their remains at Masada, Megiddo, Pompeii, or other places. A visitor saw only brownish-gray, or, if it was at the Philistine level, red bricks and dirt foundations. The only stone structures found were wall foundations.

The archaeological techniques used on the site may differ from those used elsewhere. At Gezer, for example, the work went very slowly. No more than two centimeters of earth was dug at one time. Each bucket of dirt was sifted. The workers were on the *tell* five hours each day and then had classes in the afternoon and evenings (Gezer was also a teaching area for future archaeologists). Because there was a twenty-year lease on the site there was not the problem of time.

Ashdod was dug faster. There were only five seasons in which to excavate. Then, as with Indian sites in the United States, Ashdod remains abandoned for another generation, or until newer techniques and more information give other insights.

Some archaeologists believe that the Ashdod method (of digging) is catastrophic. There is no sifting. It is possible, therefore, that many small beads, scarabs, or cylinder seals end up unnoticed in the dump pile. Dr. Swauger, though, thinks that the techniques used at Ashdod were "about ninety percent correct" for what the archaeologist wanted to find out. They knew something about the area, so searching through each handful of earth was not necessary. With any type of digging something will always be missed. A bulldozer was used in 1962, and again in 1968, because, on both occasions, they were digging outside the mound and wanted to find the city wall quickly. "Who wants to spend 612 years digging with a teaspoon to find it?" They knew it was more than five meters down to virgin soil.

The 1969 season at Ashdod was to focus on the Late Bronze (1500–1200 B.C.), Iron I (Philistine: 1200–950 B.C.) and Iron II (Israelite: 950–600 B.C.) periods, although other periods were dealt with.

Area "H", where I was first assigned, was on the slope of the acropolis. It was here that the excavators uncovered clay figurines belonging to the early cult of Astaroth or Astarte, the earth-mother goddess, known in various parts of the Near East. The early

Ashdod cult objects, figurines or heads of figurines, were stylized and schematic—flat heads, protruding round blobs for eyes, and the barest indications of ears or a nose. One of these figurines, incorporated into a chairlike structure and recalling Egyptian seated statues, is unique in Palestinian archaeology and is now in the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem. The figurine, dubbed "Ashdoda," was found in 1965.

Area "K", my next assignment, had previously been worked down to the sixth century stratum, where were discovered many smashed vessels which may have been part of the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar's troops. Since Area "K" was the highest point of the *tell*, it was thought the most likely spot to find the large public buildings, especially the Temple of Dagon, the Philistine male deity. It was to this temple that the Israelites brought their Ark of the Covenant of Jahweh. The Israelites, as the conquered people, had to bring the symbol of their god before that of the victorious Philistines. On the first night in the Ashdod temple the wooden image of Dagon is said to have fallen. After being placed upright it fell again the second night, and broke. At the same time a plague of rats spread over Philistia. The bubonic plague broke out first in Ashdod. The Philistines attributed this to the presence of the Ark, and sent it to Gath. Of course, the bearers of the Ark unknowingly brought the plague there with them. The Ark was sent to Ekron, and the same thing happened. The Philistines associated the Ark both with the outbreaks of pestilence in Egypt and with their own troubles.

I began that season working with Art Hayes, Charlie Whiston, and Mary Joy Haywood, in unopened square Q8, at the bottom of the slope of the mound and next to the trench of Area "H". Ami Mazar, Area "H" supervisor, had explained that somewhere, four or five meters down, we would find the earliest city wall since it had not been found the previous year by the bulldozer cut.

After removing the weeds and stubble from the ground and from what was to be the balk, we began by leveling our square: five centimeters at a time—one person wielding the makush, two filling dirt buckets, and one emptying the wheelbarrow. The first half-meter was surface material: Byzantine glass, red burnished Roman ware, parts of Herodian oil lamps, incised Persian bowl rims, etc. This top layer, however fascinating to us, was never much value to the archaeologists because so many pottery periods were mixed together. What unpainted pottery we found, though, went into a plastic bucket, which the area assistant later tagged and registered.

Every time another layer of five centimeters was dug, another pottery bucket was used. At the end of the day these buckets were taken to headquarters and filled with water to loosen the dirt from the pieces. The next morning the pottery workers emptied them onto separate tables. It was only after the washing that small markings such as potters' seals on jug handles were noticed.

Each layer was dug, searched for artifacts, and recorded in the same way. Painted pieces were kept separate from the main bulk of pottery, as were other special finds. We learned that subtle color or composition changes in the dirt we were digging meant "Caution" and/or "Alert Your Supervisor." Gray would indicate an ash pit or kiln underneath, red might mean a brick wall coming, patches of white could turn into a layer of plaster above a floor, or as happened in Area "K", a speck of green could become a copper spiral bracelet just below.

By the end of the first two weeks we had found a wall cutting diagonally across one of the corners of the square. Parts of other structures began to emerge. Some of these were continuations of things found in adjoining squares. When these walls and such appeared, they were drawn on the area map by the supervisor, recorded by the excavation's photographer, and measured by the surveyor. It was only as long as these finds were useful in clarifying information found in other parts of the area that they remained; then Ami would instruct us to "Deeg, deeg, deeg to the past," and we would remove them.

As we kept getting lower in the square the different strata and the walls we had removed became very noticeable in the balk. The reason for keeping the sides straight and perpendicular to the bottom of the square was so the stratification would be clearly visible. Markers for important finds and for identified strata were usually nailed into the balk at the appropriate places. At Ashdod, the stratum number conveniently corresponded to the century B.C., to which it applied; therefore, "XI" on the balk meant both the eleventh stratum and eleventh century B.C.

After several weeks in Area "H", I was transferred to Area "K", and placed under the supervision of Avner Goren—where I was to remain for the remainder of the season.

By August, Area "K" abounded in archaeological puzzles. In some squares, Stratum XVIII and Stratum IX were never found; Strata X-XII measured about a meter in some places and only several centimeters in others, with no evidence as to why it was so. There were so many adjacent and overlapping walls in the center section of the acropolis that that section was referred to as "the patio."

Working in Area "K" was made very interesting for me because besides uncovering a lot of pottery and numerous walls, I also found a ninth century, B.C., juglet; a schematic cult-figure head; a Kernos head (one of several animal forms used as spouts on a hollow clay ring for pouring libations); several storage jars, and a human skeleton.

In the last two work-weeks of the season, an incense burner with four musicians and a fifth figure as part of its side, was found in Area "K". This vessel and several others suggest that here was a cult area, or sacred place.

A meeting with the press, an exhibit of the most valuable finds of the season, and final explanations and summaries of the year's work were held on August 14, 1969. Although the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the Carnegie Museum will eventually be given enough objects to have representative collections, all finds remained in Israel. The only pieces which Ashdod workers could take with them from the *tell* were those discarded in the pottery dumps near the headquarters, after the sorting by the staff. Contrary to the policy on most excavations, photographing of finds was permitted throughout the season, although until the staff published its report we were to use all pictures and slides only for our own viewing.

Coming to Israel only with a fascination with antiquity and a vague general knowledge of the Near East, I left after the second season with the feeling that I had absorbed volumes of history. Finding a stirrup jar on the *tell*; traveling on a weekend to a place related to that period, and then discovering something else which added more to the picture, was an exciting thing.

That summer, when the reporters from *Maariv*, Israel's largest newspaper interviewed some of us, they asked me, "Why did you come halfway around the world for eight weeks *again*?" I have written this article keeping their question in mind. I hope that you have sensed my reply.

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