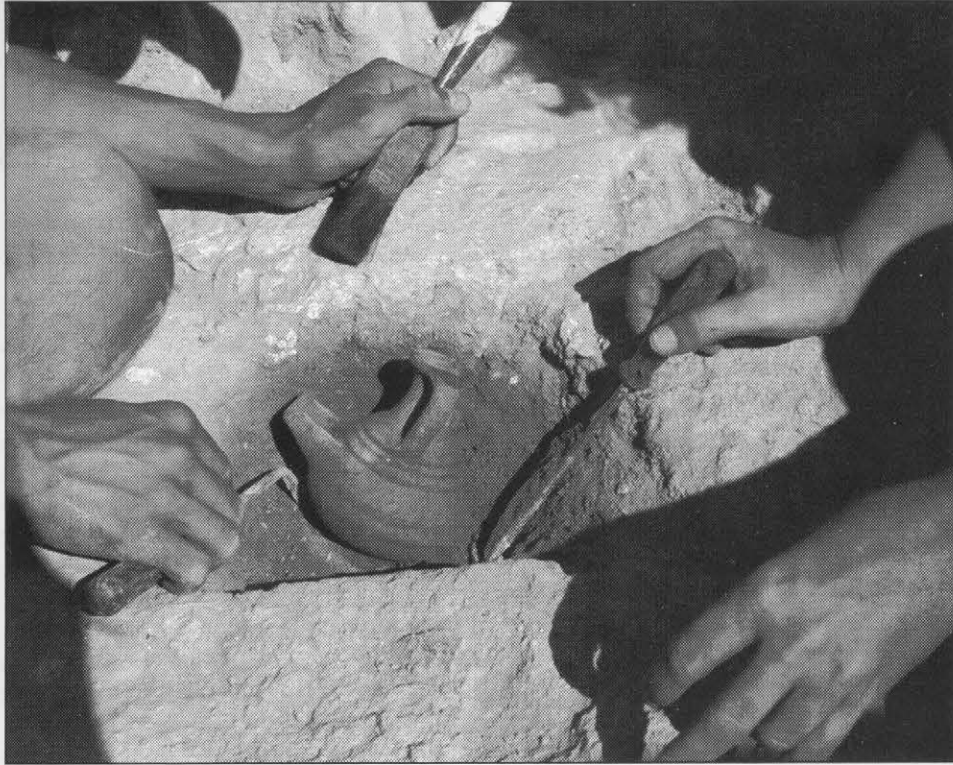


# Unearthing the Past

## An Archeological Dig in Israel



Despite dust, dirt, heat and fatigue, participating in an archeological dig is a unique and rewarding experience. To spend time excavating is to be the first person to uncover fragments of civilizations unseen for thousands of years, and to contribute to our understanding of ancient history.

by **Christine Alden**

Archeology evokes thoughts of everyone's childhood pleasure of playing in the sandbox. The romance and intrigue of the archeologist's work captivates the imagination for a good reason: the act of digging up the past is truly extraordinary. Participating in this activity has allowed me to experience and to acquaint myself with a country and its history through the soil—an angle most conventional forms of travel or research do not offer.

*Christine Alden received her B.A. in English from the University of Toronto. She is returning to the same site in Israel in the summer.*

Battles over the land of Israel, formerly Palestine, predate the current Middle East crisis by thousands of years. Archeologists trace the earliest major land battles in Palestine as far back as the Bronze Age (ca. 3300 BCE). My own introduction to Israel's ancient past took place over the course of two summers spent excavating at the archeological site of Tel Mique-Ekron, an Iron Age Philistine site located between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean coast.

### **The Excavation Team and the Daily Grind**

Under the direction Dr. Seymour Gitin of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archeologi-

cal Research, and Dr. Trude Dothan of the Institute of Archaeology at Hebrew University (both in Jerusalem), the excavation team—including both staff and volunteers—numbers about 100 people in a given season, making the dig at Ekron a relatively large undertaking. The project is a joint American-Israeli-Canadian venture, financially supported by various academic institutions and private donors. With the aid of the Dorot Foundation in New York, an excavation camp has been established three kilometers from the site at the neighboring Kibbutz Revadim. Staff and volunteers live in the camp during the seven-week excavation season with their workshop facilities close at hand.

Directors Gitin and Dothan operate a summer field school at the site where volunteers learn excavation techniques and theory, as well as the routine of processing and recording the discovery of artifacts. In addition to field work, volunteers attend lectures about the archaeology of Palestine which place the finds at Tel Mique-Ekron in historical perspective.

Each day of the five-day work week begins with a lecture, after which the rest of the morning is spent washing, reading (determining type and date) and marking pottery. Field work at the *tel* (the Hebrew word for occupational mound) lasts from 12:30 p.m. until 8:00 at night. During the welcome cool evening, staff members have important data recording and other paperwork to do, while volunteers have readings to prepare for the next morning's lectures.

For many people who have never excavated before, archaeology conjures up images of tedious hours spent dusting a surface with a toothbrush. While such fine work is necessary at times, often hard physical labor is required, leaving one exhausted at day's end. Several hours of picking through and shovelling layers of debris may reveal a delicate find, which only then must be uncovered carefully, using small trowels and paint brushes.

## Ekron: A Philistine Capital

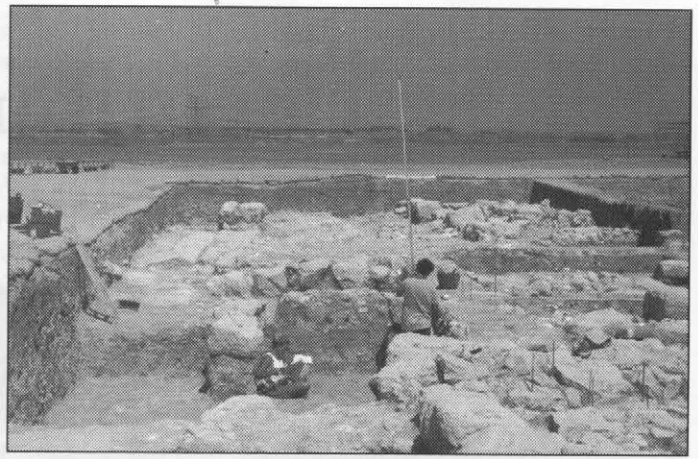
The Philistines, people believed to be of Aegean descent, settled in the land of Canaan. Among their five capital cities was Ekron, mentioned in the Old Testament books of Joshua, Judges, I Samuel and II Kings. Biblical descriptions of the location of Ekron led to its discovery at the site of Tel Miqne. Ekron lies 20 kilometers inland from the Mediterranean Sea towards Jerusalem, and was inhabited from the Middle Bronze Period (2000 BCE) to the end of the Iron Age (603 BCE). Excavations have determined that the Philistine occupation—with which this project is concerned—occurred between 1200 BCE and the destruction of the site in 603 BCE.

The main focus of study at Ekron is the Philistine civilization during its transition from Canaanite culture (ca. 1200 BCE), to its later assimilation into Israelite culture (ca. 1000 BCE). The interaction between the Philistine settlements and those of the neighboring Israelites is of great interest, since Ekron lies on the border between the ancient land of Philistia and that of Israel/Judah. Ekron was an unusually large city for its time. Covering almost 50 acres, the site is too vast and resources too scarce to allow for excavation of the whole area. In the past ten seasons of work, excavators have uncovered only three percent of the entire *tel*.

If we think of a complete understanding of the excavation site as a finished puzzle, then each find forms one piece. As pieces of the puzzle are brought to the surface, we attempt to assemble them to understand the whole picture. The information gathered about the Philistines at Ekron contributes to studies of Palestine, and sheds light on work underway at various other Philistine and Israelite settlements. The focus of inquiry shifts from season to season as new questions arise—the answers all lie buried in the ground.

### What Lies Hidden in the Earth

Israel's ancient sites are rich in pottery. When found in pieces these fragments are called pottery sherds; at Tel Miqne-Ekron, we gather thousands of such sherds a day. Pottery provides some of the most important clues to solving mysteries—for example, certain pottery wares and types of ornamentation existed only at certain periods in history. Knowledge of this typology is therefore instrumental in ascertaining the chronological history of a site.



On site at Tel Miqne-Ekron.  
[Christine Alden]

Similar to the way that modern cities re-pave roads over many years and reconstruct on the same site, ancient cultures used thoroughfares for centuries, making minor repairs and laying new ground when needed. At Ekron, a wide avenue runs through the town center, and the many roads which were subsequently constructed over a few hundred years form a layer more than a meter thick. By determining the date of the pottery found in each layer, we can then date each phase of the road and the length of time it was in use before a new one was constructed over top of it.

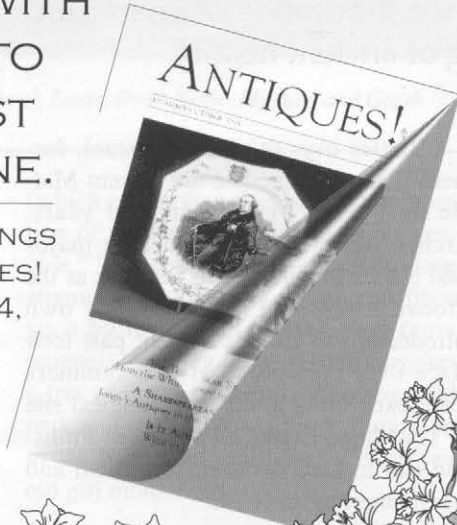
Over time, the trademark pottery of the early Philistine settlement evolved into the simpler pottery of the neighboring Israelite cultures. Early Philistine pottery featured elaborate black and red designs of birds, fish, spiral patterns and antelope. These motifs are typical of the Late Bronze Age pottery of Cyprus and the Aegean, which provides evidence of the Philistines' origins. For unknown reasons, the Philistines ceased to produce this type of pottery after 1000 BCE. Instead, they turned to simple red "slipped" pottery without elaborate designs, a modest style typical of Israelite and Judean cultures.

Partial or complete reconstruction of an object is possible if the pieces have not scattered too far after destruction. The discovery of an intact vessel is relatively uncommon, and is therefore particularly exciting. For an eager volunteer, excavation of this sort can be painfully slow.

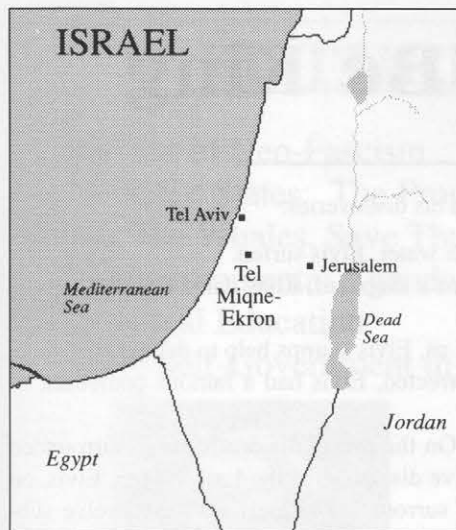
My first lesson in patience came during the excavation of a pilgrim flask of the eleventh century BCE. As we were

## WELCOME SPRING WITH A SUBSCRIPTION TO CANADA'S NEWEST ANTIQUES MAGAZINE.

SEND \$16 FOR 1 YEAR (A SAVINGS  
OF 21%) PAYABLE TO: ANTIQUES!  
HUDSON BAY P.O. BOX 75114,  
20 BLOOR ST. E.,  
TORONTO, ON M4W 3T3  
OR CALL (416) 944-3880  
FAX: 944-3872







[Electromap, Inc.]

digging, a smooth red piece of pottery caught my eye. Exposing the flask seemed to take forever, because archeological method requires the excavation of the entire area in question, not just the immediate area around the artifact: one cannot simply barrel down and make arbitrary pits in the ground, although it is certainly tempting when an exceptional find is within reach.

After a few hours, we reached the bottom level of the flask and began brushing the dirt away. Once we had fully exposed the artifact and swept it meticulously, the site photographer took several photos for recording purposes. And only then could I pick up the flask which had lain untouched for almost 3,000 years.

Similarly lengthy procedures reveal a cache of jewellery, precious metals, figurines, gaming pieces, tools, tableware, cooking implements, pieces of animal bone, and carbonized grains—all of which are usually found within their associated architectural structures, such as houses, temples, industrial buildings or streets. Virtually all finds, whatever their size or intrinsic value, contribute to our understanding of the Philistine culture.

For instance, store jars were used to transport items of trade such as olive oil or wine, and often these jars would bear a stamp impression near the handle to indicate the place of origin and the supplier of the enclosed product. The excavation of a fragment of that storage jar bearing the impression suggests a probable trade link

between the Philistines at Ekron and another settlement. If the stamp bears a date, then we can establish the period of trade, and possibly the date of other objects found in that same area.

After the cessation of field work, archeologists analyze the vast amounts of data gathered during excavation. Chemical analyses of materials such as rock, metals, wood, soil, or pottery clay determine the sources from which the Philistines obtained supplies; the places of origin of these materials also help archeologists establish patterns and routes of trade. Analyses of soil samples reveal various grains that were part of the Philistines' diet. All of this information contributes to the study of the region as well as to an understanding of Ekron.

Major historical events such as invasions and destructions of towns are well documented in Egyptian historical accounts, and, sometimes, in the archeological record as well. The cultural transition of Ekron from a Canaanite town to a Philistine city-state is poorly understood, and is now the focus of a large portion of current excavations.

The end of Ekron's existence as a functioning city is, however, quite well known: around 700 BCE Ekron fell under Assyrian control, though the city continued to flourish. Historical accounts indicate that Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army swept through the area during military campaigns and destroyed Ekron in 603 BCE.

A massive burnt layer of rubble makes Ekron's demise easily identifiable. Beneath the destruction debris lie the crushed remains of once-whole pottery, caved-in ceilings and rooms, and charcoal embers which once formed the architectural supports of the city. It is easier to gather information from complete destructions, which preserve the last moments of a civilization, than it is to capture its evolution over decades buried among layers upon layers of earth. Ironically, the best understood periods are

generally those that ended the most tragically.

## Unlocking the Mysteries of the Land

In modern jargon, the term Philistine is pejoratively applied to one who lacks culture. However, artifacts discovered in Ekron and other Philistine sites, such as ornately decorated pottery, handcrafted jewellery or cultish figurines, reveal a culture characterized by distinctive craftsmanship. The absence of substantial evidence of the Philistine language continues to mystify archeologists, but provides incentive for future research.

The experience of excavating reveals the cycle of prosperity and hardship evident as a city expands, industrial productivity increases, and artisanship develops and flourishes. The burnt layer of rubble which lies over the final phase of occupation at Ekron seals the traces of



This is what lies hidden in the earth: pottery discovered at Tel Miqne-Ekron. [Christine Alden]

a culture which endured for six centuries, but has remained buried for over 2,600 years.

It is a unique opportunity to play a part in unlocking the mysteries of ancient cultures. As summer vacations go, excavating may be one of the most interesting alternatives available. Certainly a hands-on experience provides a remarkable introduction to understanding Israel and the battles which have long characterized its history. Running one's fingers through the dirt brings one closer to understanding the mysticism of this holy land, which for centuries people have fought to settle and possess. ●