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Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship: Final Report

Dusky boulders, deep purple flowers, and small trees with twining branches dotted the land rolling gently away from Tel Gezer's steep sides. A dusty dirt track zig-zagged its way up the tel, continuing from the slightly larger path at the base of the tel that our bus used. The early morning sun, just rising, glossed the leaves of the olive grove on the left, and a light wind made the prickly grasses and empty seed pods sway. A snake popped its head out of a barely visible hole in the ground, then quickly disappeared, and I smiled to think of the toad I found in our square yesterday, staring reproachfully from its burrow as we excavated.

In those moments, when I walked up the tel at dawn and drank in the vista around me, I realized the incredible realities archaeology has the power to unlock. I was not the first to hike that tel, nor was I the first to view the items we found in our square – beads, figurines, chert, pottery. By trying to understand Tel Gezer and the people who lived there through participation in the four week Tel Gezer Excavation and Publication Project in Israel, led by Dr. Steve Ortiz and Dr. Sam Wolff, I engaged directly with history. Instead of just reading about the story, I became an active part of the story – the next chapter.

As an Archaeology and Creative Writing major who aspires to pursue archaeology while writing historical fiction, being able to touch items that had last been

handled in the time of King Solomon – or even before! – represented a tangible connection that made the past suddenly present. Simply reading about history offers an overview, but because such general information often loses the intimate details of individuals, the past can seem dull or ordinary. However, the people who lived, worked, and died at Tel Gezer were as innately human as you or I, making their concerns and joys as interesting as any recently written memoir.

What struck me most about the actual practice of archaeology, as opposed to learning about archaeology via the classroom and textbooks, was the contrast between the methodical nature of excavation and its inherent destructiveness. Archaeology is orderly deconstruction, chaos with a purpose, systematic disassembly without a trace of haphazardness. Reading about archaeology in a book can never capture how disturbing an item that someone had lovingly created and used is a somewhat sacred act. Studying an object, removing it from its relevance, and distilling it down to just another numbered artifact seemed almost callous – until I remembered that the effort was to understand, to piece together history, to rediscover relevance so that an important cultural piece did not simply disappear into a pile of backfill.

Working at the tel may not have been easy, but it was fulfilling. We woke at 4:15AM every day, eating first breakfast by 4:30AM and arriving on the tel soon after. We worked until lunchtime, taking a break for second breakfast (much more substantial than the first). Just when lifting a pick-axe one more time felt impossible, fruit break was called, giving just the right amount of encouragement to survive until lunch while at the same time providing one more burst of energy. Our day continued with pottery washing, which gave everyone a chance to relax and chat together while at the same time taking a

closer look at the most recent finds. Our evening lecture, regularly delivered by guest speakers from other excavations in Israel, gave us a deeper understanding of Tel Gezer's history and how Tel Gezer fit into other ancient Israeli sites. Sometimes I would meet with my square supervisor, along with the two other students digging with me, to discuss how to create a top-plan, or the right way to record notes, or the procedure for properly preserving a piece of material culture until it arrived back at the dig house at the end of the day. Some evenings I spent time in the dig house, helping preserve all the material culture finds discovered as we progressed in excavation. By the end of the dig, I was doing far more than moving dirt and hauling goofas; I could effectively take notes, record finds, take measurements, and add information to the top plan.

Our weekends were far from restful, as we spent the time touring Israel. Masada, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Hazor – the list is endless. Each site offered a new perspective and a better understanding of issues I had learned about in classes. I will never forget my excitement when I recognized important architectural features or specific finds from pictures in my textbooks, or when I remembered the importance of a site before the tour guide mentioned it. Instead of feeling tired from the long hours on the tel and the walking on the weekends, being in Israel excited and energized me. In my spare time, I hiked nearby trails, finding a medieval fortress and Byzantine mosaic. Other times, I visited nearby monasteries or museums. I may have spent four weeks in Israel, but it was not nearly enough time to experience everything Israel had to offer.

I am indebted to the Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship, as I could not have experienced this trip without the award. In addition to my first archeological dig, my trip to Israel was also my first flight and my first international

travel experience. I am blessed to have been given the opportunity to experience this dig, as it has not only solidified my drive to enter graduate school and pursue my interests, but it has also given me a new sense of confidence in my ability to travel abroad. Digging in Israel is an experience that has marked me for life, and I am excited to continue following my desire to understand history on a more intimate level through archaeology.