ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

(from ESV Study Bible)

Archaeology and the Reliability of the Old Testament

Definition of Archaeology

Archaeology may be defined as the systematic study of the material remains of human behavior in the past. It includes written documents and objects of everyday life that are preserved in a fragile or ruined condition. In reality, as archaeologist Stuart Piggott famously remarked, archaeology is the “science of rubbish.” Indeed, archaeologists spend their time and efforts in long-forgotten heaps of ancient refuse: broken pots, shattered buildings, and crumbling documents.

The Purpose and Aim of Archaeology

The aim of archaeology is to discover, record, observe, and preserve the buried remains of antiquity and to use them to help reconstruct ancient life. In fact, archaeology is merely one of numerous disciplines that contribute to the understanding of ancient times and ways. Other fields, such as paleography and epigraphy (the study of ancient writing systems and inscriptions), history, linguistics, numismatics (the study of coins), and literature are also utilized to recover antiquity. Archaeology can paint only part of the picture; it is not exhaustive. For example, the site of Megiddo has been heavily excavated since the end of the nineteenth century, and yet only a slice of it has been unearthed. What archaeology provides for the reconstruction of ancient life at Megiddo is piecemeal and fragmentary. One cannot expect a complete picture through archaeology alone.

Archaeology in the lands of the Bible has a checkered past. It began in the mid-nineteenth century with Western pioneers who traveled throughout Palestine on horseback, compass in hand, attempting to identify and mark ancient sites from the time of the Bible. Actual excavation did not begin until the end of that century and, unfortunately, much of the work was no more than treasure-hunting. The object often was to recover as many valuable relics as possible in the shortest time. Early archaeologists would not hesitate to use gunpowder to blast open a pyramid or a burial chamber. Mummy hunters in Egypt literally waded through piles of discarded coffins to reach their prey. Much has changed since those early days. Today excavation is systematic, scientific, and multidisciplinary.

Much of archaeology in the lands of the Bible focuses on sites that have been occupied for hundreds and even thousands of years. The site of Megiddo has occupational remains dating from the Neolithic period (c. 5000 B.C.) to the Persian period (5th–4th centuries B.C.). Such settlements are called “tells” (from the Arabic word; cf. Hb. tel, “heap, mound,” Josh. 8:28; 11:13; Jer. 30:18; 49:2), which are artificial mounds. The first settlers would come to an area and build there, usually for three reasons: defense, a dependable water source, and a reliable food source. When the first settlement was destroyed by any of a number of causes, succeeding builders normally built a new settlement directly on top of the previous rubble. After each settlement, the mound would grow higher and thus be of greater strategic value. A tell, then, is
like a layered cake in which each layer was put down sequentially, the most modern period being on top. The goal of the archaeologist is to disassemble in reverse the layers of the tell, and then to reconstruct the history and culture of the people who lived there; in other words, to dig up the story that is hidden in the mound.

Three primary categories of remains are uncovered through excavation: pottery, architecture, and various other small finds. Of the three, pottery is especially important for archaeology because of its durability and changeability. Pottery is found in every layer of a site because it lasts, and each layer has its own distinctive and typical pottery. By comparing pottery from different sites, archaeologists are able to derive a dating sequence and order for those locations.

The Relationship of Archaeology to the Biblical Disciplines

No greater dilemma exists in archaeology in the land of the Bible than the question of what motivates excavation. What is the relationship of biblical studies to the scientific discipline of archaeology? What is the place of the scientific disciplines in archaeology? Is there a place for “biblical archaeology” today?

Historically, archaeology in Palestine has been uniquely the work of biblical scholars. Many of the archaeology pioneers of the nineteenth century were trained in and motivated by biblical studies. Edward Robinson (1794–1863), often considered the father of scientific topography and archaeology of Palestine, was primarily trained in Hebrew and the OT. The first systematic excavators of Palestine were biblical scholars such as W. F. Albright, N. Glueck, and G. E. Wright. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, there was a loud call from the scientific community for a distinct separation between biblical studies and archaeological research. The argument was that the relationship between the two is largely artificial, and now it was time for archaeology to stand on its own as a scientific discipline. It is only natural, however, that the two disciplines work hand in hand because they are a source of knowledge and discovery for each other.

Today, a proper balance is necessary between archaeology in Palestine and biblical studies. While there have been some attempts to use archaeological finds to deconstruct ancient history and the life-setting of antiquity, the aim should rather be reconstruction: a harmonization in which biblical studies, archaeology, and other disciplines are used to recover and to understand the way people lived in the times and lands of the Bible. A prime purpose of archaeology is to shed light on the historical and material contexts in which the stories of the Bible took place. Thus, archaeology provides a life-setting for biblical texts. In that regard, archaeology can be a confirmatory tool, especially when the textual and archaeological evidence converge.

A good example of how archaeology illumines the Bible is the case of the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak and his invasion of Israel and Judah at the close of the tenth century B.C. This attack is mentioned in 1 Kings 14:25–26: “In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king’s house. He took away everything.” Extrabiblical sources confirm that this attack did take place, and they provide a wider understanding of it than what is recorded in the Bible. At the temple of Amun at Karnak, Shoshenk I (Shishak) built the Bubastite Portal, and on it appears a relief of Shishak’s invasion of Palestine. The relief contains the names of various sites on the campaign route that were either captured or destroyed.

One conclusion that may be drawn from the Bubastite Portal is that Shishak’s invasion of Palestine included more than a campaign against Jerusalem, and was leveled against the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah. Another important point is that Jerusalem is not mentioned
on the relief. Why not? It is likely that it does not appear because it was not captured. King Rehoboam of Judah eluded Jerusalem’s capture by paying heavy tribute to the Egyptians (as is recorded in 1 Kings 14:25–26). In this case, the biblical evidence illumines archaeological finds.

Archaeology provides even further insight into this invasion. One of the cities listed as either captured or destroyed by Shishak is Megiddo. At the site of Megiddo, excavators uncovered a stele (or inscribed pillar) of Shishak on which is written two common titles for Shishak. Stelae like this one were commonly set up by pharaohs to claim a region as a vassal (or subject) state. In addition, there is a “destruction layer” at Megiddo that can be associated with the campaign of Shishak. Further evidence for this association appears at the site of Ta’anach, where a huge destruction layer covered the site. The pottery sealed beneath the destruction is the same as that of the destruction layer at Megiddo. Ta’anach was also mentioned as a city subdued by Shishak in the relief of the Bubastite Portal. It is indeed compelling to relate the destruction layers at Ta’anach and Megiddo to the Shishak campaign of the late tenth century B.C.

Archaeology complements both the Hebrew and Egyptian written sources as well in regard to the historical event of Shishak’s invasion of Israel and Judah. A fuller picture of the event is painted by bringing these separate sources together. And this convergence is not unique: the biblical authors set events like the invasions of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar in their proper chronological framework and setting (cf. 2 Kings 18:13; 19:16; 24:1–10; 1 Chron. 6:15; 2 Chron. 32:1–22). These events are confirmed and filled out by contemporary ancient Near Eastern texts—the prism of Sennacherib for the former campaign, and the Lachish Letters for the latter. Excavation work has also brought to light numerous destruction layers at Judean sites that reflect both of those campaigns.

As for the bearing of archaeological study on the historical reliability of the OT, what has been the result of many decades of archaeological investigation? The answer is simple: archaeology has time and again supported and confirmed the biblical record, and many such examples are mentioned in the notes in this Study Bible.

Archaeology and the Reliability of the New Testament

Christians have often looked to archaeology to provide confirmation of the biblical record, which it indeed can. Yet the main advantage of archaeology lies in its ability to bring twenty-first-century readers into physical contact with the cultures in which Jesus and his apostles lived and ministered.

Archaeological Methodology

Archaeology today stands at the intersection of science and the humanities. Gone are the days when the amateur could take a spade and go hunting for treasures. Modern archaeology requires careful procedures, meticulous recording techniques, and a vast array of scientific technologies. Yet after all the data has been accumulated, the most interesting jobs entail interpreting the evidence.

Excavations at NT cities often uncover large structures such as monuments, tombs, and buildings (whether residential, civic, or commercial). These can be quite interesting, yet the smaller finds are often equally (if not more) illuminating. Such small finds include inscriptions, coins, papyri, figurines, and day-to-day artifacts (e.g., pottery, glass, furniture, and remnants of clothing). Visual art (such as mosaics, frescoes [paintings on moist plaster], friezes [carved
Archaeological digs proceed slowly, layer by layer, in well-marked squares in order to understand each square’s relative chronology. Written records, drawings, and photographs accompany every square. While sophisticated dating procedures can be employed (such as radiocarbon), the primary techniques of dating archaeological strata typically still rely on pottery finds (both their form and their fabric) or on datable coins and inscriptions. The type of building can be identified by its architectural style, but this may not yield results as precise as those provided by the firmer dates of coins and inscriptions. Most dating methods require some degree of interpretation. It is important to realize that many excavated structures and artifacts from a city may stem from a time before or after the NT; although these can still be pertinent to understanding the cultures of the apostolic period, caution should be employed when correlating them with the NT.

Because the complete excavation of a large site can take many decades, knowledge of most ancient places is limited. For example, even though the ancient cities of Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth have each been under excavation for over a century, much remains to be done in all of them. Thus, there should be caution concerning arguments from silence (claiming that because something has not been found, it does not exist). Furthermore, excavations have historically focused on the monumental architecture of those who were rich, while smaller residential structures (often constructed of short-lasting materials) may be underrepresented.

**Interpreting Archaeological Finds**

When there are varying opinions about a discovery, these usually occur at the level of interpretation. One of the initial interpretative acts of an excavator concerns “site identification”—discovering the ancient name of a known archaeological site. The identification of a particular locale synthesizes modern local traditions, ancient written sources, and the actual finds at that place (esp. inscriptions and coins). Sometimes biblical sites are hard to find, or more than one possibility exists. For example, both Cana (John 2:1) and Bethany across the Jordan (John 1:28) have more than one possible location. Fortunately, most NT towns are fairly well identified.

Particular architectural features within towns also require identification. Structures such as theaters and stadiums are fairly obvious, and baths have special features (such as particular heating systems), but understanding the use of other buildings may be complex. For example, the architecture of temples is often straightforward, but determining which deity was worshiped where can be difficult (e.g., the great temple in Corinth has been variously identified with Apollo or Athena). What was the purpose of a given civic building? Which set of shops in Corinth housed the meat market? In some cases, ancient literary sources may help (such as Pausanias’s *Description of Greece*, essentially a 2nd-century A.D. tour guide), but often interpretation involves intricate arguments based on specific features.

Even ancient inscriptions can raise questions. Do any of the extant Sergius Paulus inscriptions relate to the governor of Cyprus in Acts 13:7? How does one interpret the unusual Greek reference to the “place of the Jews who also fear God” in Miletus (see note on Acts 20:17)? At times a name appears, such as the name “Caiaphas” on the side of a richly decorated ossuary (Jewish bone reburial box), and the identification with a NT person seems probable (see John 18:24). On other occasions, some media personalities are too quick to correlate ancient finds with NT figures. Many names mentioned in the NT were common, such as the Jewish
names Jesus, Joseph, Mary, James, and Matthew. Thus, when someone claims that the bones of Jesus Christ have actually been found in one of a few extant Jerusalem ossuaries labeled “Jesus son of Joseph,” skepticism is warranted, given that hundreds of people would have been so named in antiquity.

Certainly, archaeology involves scientific methods, but archaeological interpretation also requires professional competencies and a good bit of wisdom. Perhaps the best advice for those interested in archaeology would be to encourage them to read reliable sources and not to rely heavily on exciting new finds reported first in the popular media.

Archaeology and the Historicity of the NT

Many historical features of the NT can be supported from the archaeological record, and in fact one overwhelming result of archaeological research into the NT period has been to give strong confirmation to the NT writings’ historical accuracy. For example, the Gospel of John evidences an amazingly accurate awareness of the geography of Palestine. John’s descriptions of ancient Samaria have been confirmed by archaeology, including Samaritan worship on Mount Gerizim (4:20) and the location of Jacob’s well (4:6). Concerning Jerusalem, John’s Gospel carefully depicts the pool of Bethesda (5:2) and Solomon’s colonnade (10:22–23), which archaeology has been able to authenticate. Also, discoveries in 2005 helped confirm John’s portrayal of the pool of Siloam (9:7).

The book of Acts has been shown to well represent the geography of antiquity. Nearly every town in the book has been identified, and many cities have been excavated. The Acts record of Paul’s travels to Rome, including his shipwreck, presents one of the most detailed and useful travel accounts from antiquity (Acts 27). Luke, the author of Acts, even knows the correct terms for specific governors—as shown by uncovered inscriptions mentioning the proconsul Gallio (18:12), the asiarchs of Ephesus (19:30–31), and the politarchs of Thessalonica (17:1, 6).

Many other examples could be cited of historical aspects of the NT also found in the archaeological record. Inscriptions mention NT figures such as Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:1) and Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1). The synagogue of Capernaum has been found beneath another structure from late antiquity (Mark 1:21). Crucifixions were performed with nails, as the Gospels indicate (Matt. 27:32), and such nails survive. The cities addressed in Revelation 2–3 often have historical features that line up well with aspects of their biblical description.

Furthermore, archaeology occasionally provides the scholar with new discoveries of biblical manuscripts. Archaeologists are partially responsible for the fact that there are now thousands of Greek manuscripts of the NT and even more manuscripts of early NT translations. All these manuscripts, some from a time close to the age of the apostles, have made the NT the best-attested set of writings from antiquity (see the article on The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts).

Archaeology and NT Cultural Contexts

A fuller understanding of the meaning of the NT can be achieved by learning more about the world in which its human authors and recipients lived. Biblical interpretation begins with understanding the original meaning of each passage before applying it to one’s contemporary life or situation. The original meaning was targeted toward people in particular cultures; the better those cultures are understood, the more accurately the NT can be interpreted. Archaeology can assist in this cultural understanding. In fact, while archaeological finds occasionally confirm the
The historicity of the NT, archaeological discoveries regularly provide insights into ancient culture. Moreover, archaeology serves as a reminder that NT events occurred in real time-space history.

If one were to tour with Paul the great Roman-era cities of his day, familiar features would appear at every juncture, and these can be reimagined with the aid of recent excavations. The shops and markets indicate a general prosperity in the cities. The civic structures show the power of Rome yet also suggest how it often worked through local governments. The theaters and odeions (buildings for music and recitations) testify to artistic endeavors, as do the many works of mosaic, fresco, and sculpture. The stadiums and their hero sculptures boast of athletic achievement. Baths, gymnasia, and latrines evidence both the cultural aspiration to cleanliness and the training of youth. And all these theatrical, artistic, athletic, and civic functions were intricately tied to the cults of the pagan religions. More than anything, the modern reader would probably be shocked at how many pagan religious structures (from small niches to monumental temples) are found at seemingly every turn.

Inscriptions that exhibit Jewish symbols, names, and synagogue references significantly illustrate the great expanse of the Jewish Diaspora (Jews living outside the land of Palestine) throughout the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean world. Many synagogues have been found both inside and outside of Palestine. Jewish cultic objects, inscriptions, and other excavated remains increasingly reveal the complex interplay that existed between Jew and Gentile in Galilee. From Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, the structures of Jesus’ day are being unearthed.

Aspects of daily life can be understood by examining everything from the most mundane pot to the huge homes of the elite (whether in Jerusalem, Pompeii, or Ephesus). Christians adapted some homes to serve as churches (1 Cor. 16:19). Clothing and personal aesthetics are displayed in art and are attested in the occasional preserved find (such as 2,000-year-old sandals from the Judean desert). Pottery, glass, furniture, and other artifacts help explain how people lived. Animal bones, ancient seeds, and farm tools reveal agricultural practices. Coins illustrate rulers and the symbols they valued.

Ancient tombs testify to views of death. The Roman world had a range of burial practices—from cremation, to shallow graves, to family cave-tombs, to monumental mausoleums. Some Jewish family tombs clearly employed rolling stones as doors (see Mark 15:46). Jewish people would reuse their burial niches, and around Jerusalem they might rebury the skeletons in ossuaries (reburial boxes). People were often buried alongside cultural objects (perhaps viewed as special to a person or as needed in the life to come)—these tomb remains are frequently some of the best-preserved small objects from any excavation. Modern osteologists analyze excavated skeletons for such matters as age, gender, general health, and cause of death.

Papyri (such as those from Oxyrhynchus or Tebtunis) provide ancient letters and legal documents not otherwise passed down in the literary record. These give a “behind the scenes” view into how people lived. Other excavated writings allow access to previously unknown literature. Especially important have been texts from post-NT Gnosticism (found at Nag Hammadi) and the extensive collection of Jewish manuscripts from Qumran, Masada, Nahal Hever, and Murabbaat.

More could certainly be said about how archaeology has enhanced the knowledge of the cultures in which NT people lived. Yet this article should suffice to show that archaeology, in addition to its significant contribution in supporting the historical reliability of the NT, renders an even greater service by inviting readers into the world of Jesus and his followers.  

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