

THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN PERIODS AT
TELL HESBÂN, JORDAN

Author: **Larry A. Mitchel**. Th.D., 1980.

Adviser: Lawrence T. Geraty.

(Larry A. Mitchel is currently a professor in the Department of Theology at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California 94508.)

The site of Tell H̄esbân, 9 km. north of Madaba, Jordan, was excavated by Andrews University, in cooperation with the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (five seasons, 1968 to 1976).

Evidence from the site suggests that it was first occupied in Iron Age I (ca. 1200 B.C.) and continuously thereafter, except for two gaps in occupation (6th century to ca. 198 B.C., and A.D. 969 to 1200). This present research has limited itself to Tell H̄esbân Strata 15 through 11 (ca. 198 B.C. to A.D. 363). Research has been based primarily on the records and remains of the five seasons of excavation, but has included a search for cultural parallels from other Palestinian and Syrian sites, as well as an attempt to place Tell H̄esbân (Roman Esbus) in its historical setting in the periods represented by each stratum. A more complete description of culture processes must await the completion of specialist reports now in progress.

Tell H̄esbân Stratum 15 (ca. 198 - 63 B.C.) has yielded architecture interpreted to be primarily a military post or fort, around which a dependent community gathered. Building efforts on the summit of the mound resulted in the nearly complete filling of the Stratum 16 reservoir in Area B, suggesting that the latter was already out of use, or more likely that its large water capacity was not needed by the small number of inhabitants in the fort community. Evidence for the nature of the economy, while tenuous, suggests a mixed farming strategy, which comports well with the practice in this period of establishing military/farming outposts.

During the period represented by Stratum 14 (ca. 63 B.C. - A.D. 130), the overall size of the settlement seems to have grown somewhat. Apart from the continued use of the fort on the summit, no intact buildings have survived. A large number of underground (bedrock) installations were in use during Stratum 14, though later destruction or clearing and building work may have biased our sample. The small amount of relevant data suggests that mixed farming continued to be practiced by the community. The stratum was closed out by what has been interpreted as a disastrous earthquake, perhaps (maybe even likely) to be dated ca. A.D. 130.

Stratum 13 (ca. A.D. 130 - 193) began with a major building effort occasioned by extensive earthquake destruction, especially evident in Areas B and D (south of the summit). A series of three or four rooms built on a north-south line in Area D have been interpreted as an inn built around an enclosed courtyard, with its entrance through Square D.4. If indeed an inn, this structure suggests the rising importance of travel for Ebus, though the mixed farming economy appears to have continued through the period of Stratum 13.

Stratum 12 (ca. A.D. 193 - 284) represents a continuation of the culture of Stratum 13. The inn continued in use, in part rebuilt. But on the summit of the tell a large public structure was built, partly following the lines of earlier walls. This structure is interpreted to be the temple shown on the reverse of the so-called "Ebus Coin," minted at Aurelia Ebus under Roman Emperor Elagabalus (A.D. 218 - 222). It is during this period that evidence suggests a shift to a predominantly crop-production economy which persisted through the Byzantine period.

Stratum 11 (ca. A.D. 284 - 363) is characterized by another building program. The Stratum 13-12 inn was replaced by a stairway which in turn replaced the earthen ramp of Stratum 13-12 as the southern access route to the summit. On the temple grounds a new colonnade was built in front (east) of the temple, perhaps a result of Julian's efforts to revive the state cult.