

A Summer Lesson in the Art of Seeing

Photographs and Text By John McDowell

Follow the airport road east of Amman and you will find Tall al-'Umayri.¹ There is a Bedouin tent with a TV antenna pitched on the lower slope, just up from the road. Above the Tall rise the Ammonite hills, and you can see a Ferris wheel. Jordanian families love to picnic among the trees in the cool evenings. Follow the ridge and you come to the Seven Hills Restaurant, where on the patio at the end of the dig season you can, as we did, watch a full moon rise over the Madaba Plain.

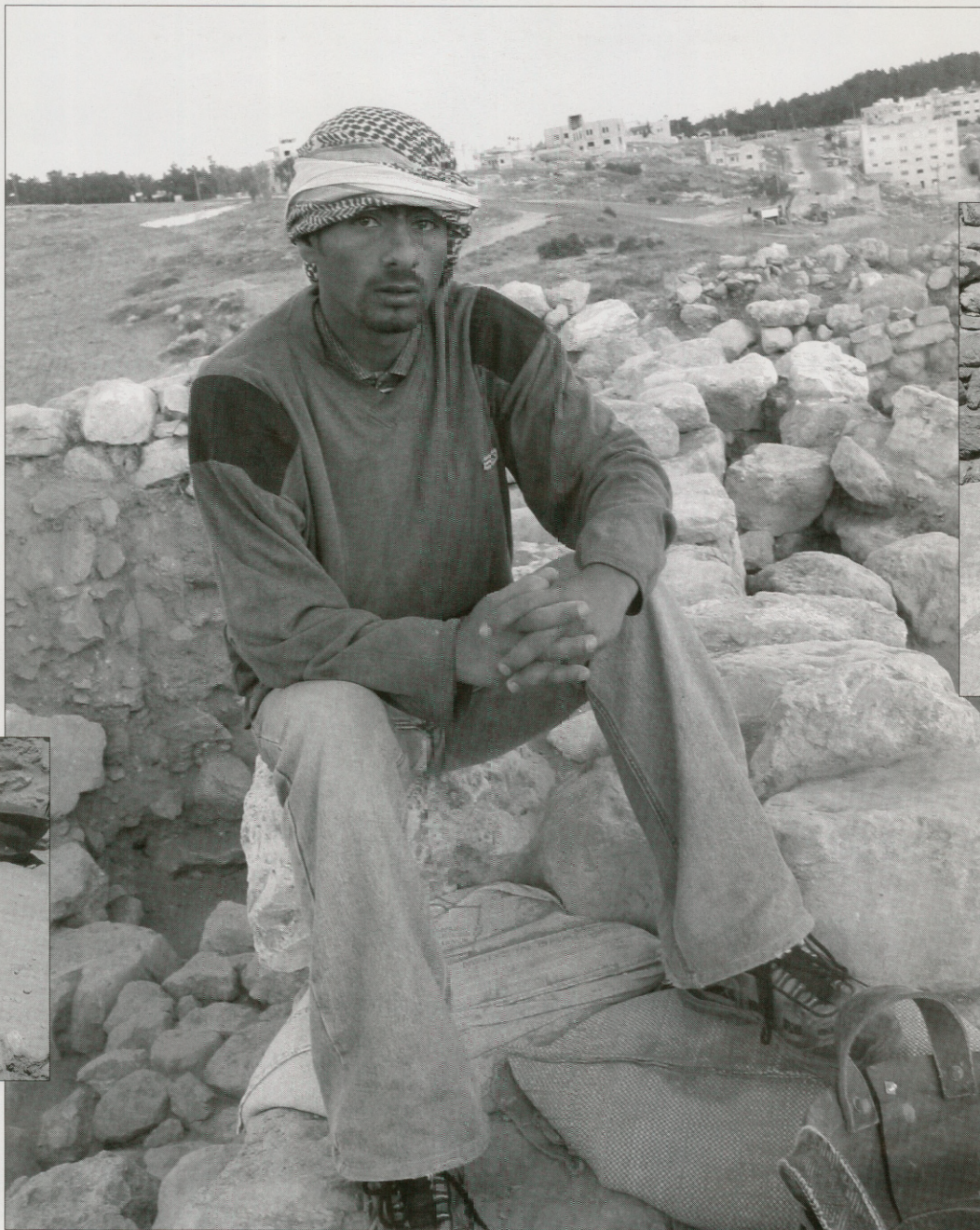


Opposite, top: The Wadi Rum, a favorite place of T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), who called this valley "Vast and echoing and God-like."

Opposite, below: Moonrise over the Madaba Plain. *Above:* My daughter, Myken, in front of the Treasury in Petra. This place was used in the Indiana Jones movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.



Below: Carolyn Waldron carefully excavating the vessels found with the shrine. *Right:* Omar, our Jordanian helper for square 7K60.



You have come for a traditional, cultural feast, a *mansaf*, where large platters are brought piled with rice, pine nuts, goat meat, and yogurt. The trick is with your right hand (your left hand is unclean) to form a ball of everything mixed together and then to place it in your mouth without your fingers touching your lips.

Spend a summer in Jordan with the Madaba Plains Project at Tall-'al Umayri and the Indiana Jones image of the swarthy whip-wheeling archaeologist quickly dissolves to Hollywood fantasy. You will come away a little dirtier than when you arrived. But you will also come away with a rich appreciation of a welcoming and diverse country

and with a deep respect for the discipline, insights, and value of Near Eastern archaeology.

Archaeology is about *destruction*: slowly removing layers of dirt and rubble. Often this also means removing walls and floors to allow one to go back in time. This is no wanton destruction: the taking down, the removing, the uncovering is all carefully planned. The area excavated is laid out in grids called fields. Each field is divided into squares.

I worked in Field A, Square 7K60. Everything in a square—every wall, every surface, and each distinctive feature such as a pillar post—becomes a locus. Each locus is numbered and all is marked on a sheet with levels indi-



Clockwise from top: The site where Jesus was baptized near where the present-day course of the Jordan flows. Doug Clark lecturing on his favorite subject: the construction of the Four-Room House. The steps up to Tall al-'Umayri. Baskets, or *gufahs*, used for hauling dirt to the sifts.

cated, the stratigraphy noted, the constancy and color of the earth recorded, and where ratio of pebbles to boulders is measured. All is documented. All is recorded.

Archaeology is about *translation*: translating what is found into data and document. An object, a “find,” has meaning and value largely because of the very careful recording of context. This recording is done by measurement, by photography, by drawings, and by written description. All pottery shards are cleaned and examined: the search is for diagnostics, those pieces that show part of a rim. From that rim a full complete vessel can be drawn. Because over time pottery techniques gradually

changed, the fragments culled from the sifting of each *gufah* (basket) become a map of time.

At the afternoon “pottery readings” the shards are examined and it can be known in what era one is digging. The main periods of focus and interest are from about the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400–1300 B.C.) through the Iron Age (ca. 700 B.C.)—the time of the biblical judges. This translation into data, into information—all the measurements, all the drawings, the photographs, the descriptions of the week’s work—all shift together into the narrative of the site, into what we can know. From this detail in the unearthing of the



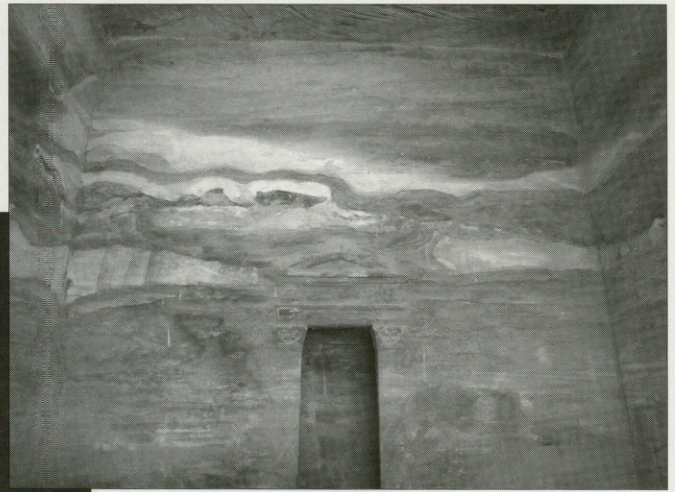
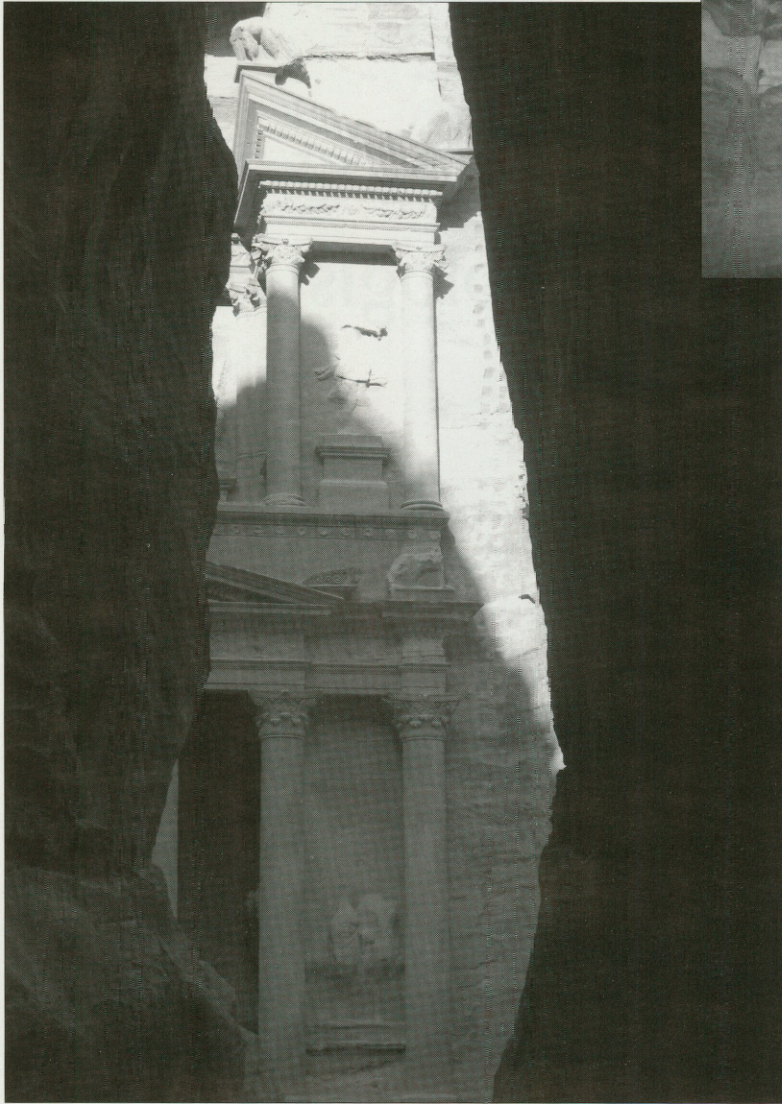
site one learns more about the peoples who lived here and what they did.

Archaeology is about *people's everyday lives*, not always the grand recorded events. Here is what is left of a jug that stored grain. Here was found a cluster of grinding stones. Here an earring. What is found tends to be mostly that which was lost, discarded, thrown away, forgotten: a bead, a bowl, an oil lamp, a jar stopper, a spindle whorl, a needle for sewing. What is found and saved is most often that which was lost or discarded.

Archaeology in the end is about the discipline of *seeing*. For the novice coming up the stairs to the site,

there appears to be little more than a warren of stone walls that make a scattering of rectangles. To the archaeologist, the scene is quite different. Here people lived. The archaeologist can see where at great personal cost and labor people built homes. One sees where people made food, kept livestock, built defenses, had personal places of worship, stored food, where there was a commercial center, where they worshiped in a temple.

Given the experience of the summer, I can better appreciate the meaning of 1 Samuel 16:7: "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Seeing



*Opposite, far left: The Monastery: a Nabataean temple in Petra. Opposite, left: Roman columns at the Temple of Artemis in Jerash. Left: The first view one has of the famous tombs in Petra. Above: Inside the Treasury Tomb in Petra. Below: The *cardo* or main street in Jerash.*



the heart means seeing with understanding. Living and working in another culture and working with people from diverse parts of the world helps with seeing the heart of things.

So, too, with archaeology, when one sees with understanding what once appeared to be a simple piece of rock or shard of pottery becomes something of value: an important part of the narrative of what happened here at Tall al-'Umaryi so many centuries ago. Learning what happened at Tall al-'Umaryi becomes an important part of bridging the gap of time and culture between the world of the Bible and our world in need of knowing who we are.

Notes and References

1. A tall is an archeological mound that may or may not be excavated.

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