

We Dig Dirt: *Archeology at Tell 'al Umayri* | BY JOHN MCDOWELL

We dig dirt. We haul dirt to sifts. We sweep dirt. We move rocks. We measure and draw rocks. With hand picks and trowels we peel away layers of time. We are narrative seekers. We've been coming here every other year since 1984. There is still a lot more to dig (Fig. 1: *View of the Tell*, next page).

Early morning is the best time on the tell—the air, night-cooled, still welcomes. We arrive before sunup and the first, most pressing task is to photograph each dig field before the sun arrives to cast shadows (Fig. 2: *Setting up for morning photos*). I rush to set up camera and tripod, while square supervisors sweep dirt. The purpose here is to document each day's progress. Archaeology works only because of careful and consistent documentation.

The photos are numbered and placed in a database so what happens is remembered as each layer of earth is peeled away. The recovery of architecture and objects requires the removal of earth—a 5 cm layer at a time. Archaeology is the careful science of destruction. The destruction, the moving of stone and dirt is so that we can in fact recover, record, analyze, preserve—make known what has been buried for three thousand years.

Once photos are done, a variety of activities begin. Depending on what stage each square is at—some commence digging and sifting right away—others take elevation levels; some might draw top plans of significant features.



Fig. 3: *Learning to dig*



Fig. 4: *So Many Guffas for Olivia Jenson*



Fig. 6: *Anita Burns demonstrates her technique*

The right way to dig is with a steady rhythm of pick and then trowel (Fig. 3: *Learning to Dig*). The dirt is scooped into a guffa. The guffa is then dumped into a sift, a counter is clicked, (Fig. 4: *So Many Guffas*) and then the dirt is sifted; we look for pottery shards, bone, flint and anything that might be made by humans: a seal for example (Fig. 5: *Stamp Seal*). In actual practice, to get the digging done, there are those who will go to all sorts of lengths (Fig. 6: *Anita Burns*). To support the recovery of objects and architecture, a lot of associated data is needed for analysis for understanding to be successful. This includes measurements of various types: soil color



Fig. 7: *Matt Vincent with his GPS*



Fig. 5: *Stamp Seal*

We peel away layers of time. We are narrative seekers.



Fig. 1: View of the Tell

analysis, GPS data, elevations, and placement measurements. Archaeology is always about paying attention to details (Fig. 7: *Matt Vincent with his GPS*, previous page).

This involves drawing top plans of the square—drawing every rock and feature before peeling away another layer. All the data, along with photo-

graphs, are eventually entered into a large database.

A second breakfast of falafel and schwarma sandwiches arrives at 9:30 (Fig. 8: *Second Breakfast*, page 40).

All gather in the tent and eagerly eat. Kent Bramlett, the chief archaeologist, then performs the ritual slaughter of the watermelon and, following tradi-

tion, we stand on the edge of the tell spitting seeds and seeing who can throw their rind the farthest (Fig. 9: *Aran McDowell enjoying watermelon*, page 40). Some rest and try to sleep. All too soon, Doug Clark, the dig director, hurries us back to the trenches. Soon dirt and rocks are again being removed. Work in the field ends



Fig. 15: Fire place in the house

Sometimes the ancients left few and frustrating clues. Archaeology is the writing of a mystery novel or, as Doug Clark says, it's a game of Clue on steroids.

around 12:30 pm. Final notes are taken. Tools, equipment, and water bottles are gathered up. Tired and covered with the finest of dig-dirt patina, we head to the buses and back to camp for a quick yet wonderful and blessed shower before lunch at 1:00 pm where finds of the day are announced.

During the morning, usually well

before second breakfast, Doug, Kent, and Romel Gharib (the representative from the Department of Antiquities of Jordan) make the rounds to talk to the field supervisors about what is emerging, what has been found, where to continue digging. There is often discussion about surfaces and walls (Fig. 10: *Making the Rounds*, page 41).

That which is
lost is found.
It is why
we dig dirt.



Fig. 9: Aran
McDowell
enjoying
watermelon



Fig. 12: Dr. Clark
and Dr. Al-Sa'ad



Fig. 11:
Jar rims
and pottery
on floor of
house #4



Fig. 8: Second breakfast

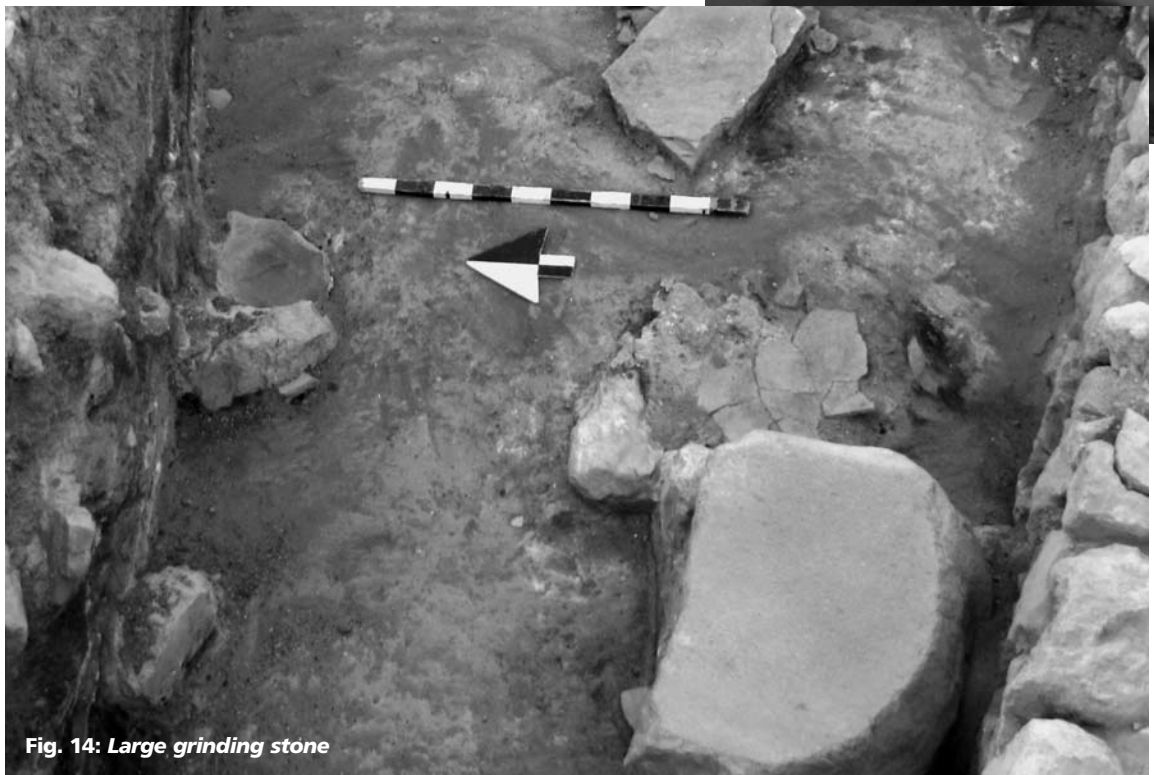


Fig. 14: Large grinding stone



Fig. 13: Canty Wang at her sift

The details form the bedrock of the narrative we are chasing. Sometimes the ancients left few and often frustrating clues. Archaeology is the writing of a mystery novel or, as Doug says, it's a game of Clue on steroids. While the metaphors are illuminating, what we are really trying to do is piece together the gripping narrative of our human past. For 'Umayri this means, in particular, understanding who the people were who lived here, how they lived, and then recording and preserving what one does find. What is found is most often fragmentary—what was

left behind after the move out of the house, whether by choice or force. This season we worked on uncovering a fourth house of what once was an early Iron 1 village, from around 1200 BC (Fig. 11: *Finds in House*, opposite). Archaeologists are not Indiana Jones treasure seekers. They simply want to know the answers to questions such as: Who lived here and when? How did they live? How did they build, cook, worship, and how did they die? Such are the questions the answers to which build the story layer by layer.

I had the privilege of being present

in a meeting with the new Director General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, Dr. Ziad Al-Sa'ad (Fig. 12: *Dr. Doug Clark and Dr. Ziad Al-Sa'ad*).



Fig. 10:
Making the rounds

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A: I find it where I am. I am often asked why I've stayed nine years at such a small school. I just love the place. I love the quality of relationships in a small faculty team that works together to do a whole lot with very little. I love watching kids snorkel in high mountain streams to observe trout habitat. I love having students in my living room studying for a test. I love being a place where everyone is crazy. Crazy enough to try things like Kohl's Cares [contest] and do it heart and soul. Most of all I love being in a place I know God called me to.

Q: *Looking forward, what do you see as the continuing role of Adventist Christian education? How is Mt. Ellis taking part?*

A: Adventist schools are part of the ministry of the church, and, as such, their primary role is to build the kingdom in the lives of young people. This is not about recruiting foot soldiers for the kingdom, but rather helping the kingdom find a home in individual hearts. The other primary function of Adventist schools, in my view, is the equipping of future leaders of the church. I believe this is happening in fantastic ways. When I compare the students in our schools right now with my generation that passed through in the 1980s, I feel strongly that we've come a long way in terms of discipling students and equipping leaders. I'm very optimistic about the future based on the students I see. I am often disappointed by the apathy in the North American church toward our schools just at the time when I believe they are doing their best work.

I also hope that our Kohl's Cares effort and the vast support it received awakened new energy and commitment to all of our sister schools around the country.

Finally, I want to say, "Thank you, thank you," to everyone who worked so passionately for our school during the Kohl's Cares Campaign. The journey was better than the destination. It bonded the school to its local community, Adventist constituency, and alumni. It energized our faculty and students. I hope that it also provided some inspiration for people to work passionately for their own local schools. If our school could pack a little snowball and start an avalanche, so can yours. You can make your school great. ■

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What became clear in listening to him is that 'Umayri, a relatively small site without the grandeur of the Roman city of Jarash or of the great temple in Petra, nevertheless is significant to Jordan because of the domestic architecture—the best preserved four-room house in the whole of the Levant—and because of what it reveals of the Bronze and Iron Ages in Jordan, eras that are not as well represented as the later Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. What is revealed at 'Umayri, especially during the late thirteenth century BC, becomes an important chapter in the narrative of ancient life in Jordan.

Canty Wang, recent La Sierra graduate, put what we do this way: "We are the garbage cleaners of ancient history. The pieces one finds connect people of today with people of the past. This process of connection broadens our human understanding. Today most of us are focused on the present and the future—our jobs and what we will do or accomplish. It becomes important then to understand ourselves backwards through time" (Fig. 13: *Canty Wang at her sift*, page 41).

The time spent on the dig becomes an experience like no other—rising at 4:15 am, the living conditions, the constant digging, the short showers, the routine day after day—it's exhausting, but, yes, a big part of the experience is finding things. Excitement comes after a lot of hard work, when a door to a small shrine, a seal, or even the Mother of all Grinding Stones emerges from the dirt (Fig. 14: *Large Grinding stone in House*, page 40). Indeed, the thrill of holding a seal impression with a finger print of some person alive here thousands of years ago, or to find a hearth inside a home—the ashes still there of a distant fire where someone, a mother say in 1200 BC, bent over a fire to make food for her family—is hard to quantify (Fig. 15: *Fireplace in house*, page 39). In archaeology we seek such moments again and again. That which is lost is found and made real again. It's why we dig dirt.

We'll be back next season on the tell, *insha 'allab!* ■

References

1. Arabic for, "Hopefully, if God wills."

John McDowell is the Director of the Honors Program and Professor of English at Pacific Union College. He has wide ranging interests—from art to archaeology. At 'Umayri he was the dig photographer. His art can be viewed at jmcowellart.com.