

MEGIDDO REVISITED

by Douglas L. Esse

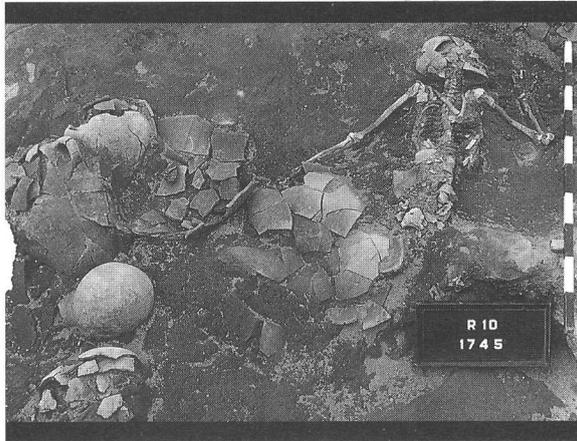


Figure 1. Skeletons in Stratum VI, Megiddo.

Members of the Oriental Institute have long been familiar with the site of Megiddo. Excavated from 1925-1939, Megiddo was the original headquarters of the Oriental Institute in Western Asia and became the showpiece for the Institute during its excavation. Its location at one of the most important junctions in the route connecting Egypt and Western Asia ensured its own importance throughout ancient history. Its biblical connections and potential for elucidating contacts between ancient Palestine and Egypt caused James Henry Breasted to declare Megiddo one of his first priorities for excavation when the Institute began its archaeological fieldwork. The finds from Megiddo serve as the centerpiece for the Oriental Institute Museum's Syro-Palestinian collection.

Since the final publication of Megiddo in 1948, the scholarly world has been inundated with revisions of both the stratigraphy and chronology of every period at Megiddo. Articles and even books have been published in energetic efforts to “correct” what some view as serious flaws in the original publication. The effect of all this effort has meant that when a scholar approached the site of Megiddo, a minimum requirement of research was to incorporate not only the original information from the site report but also all subsequent revisions and extended comments by earlier researchers. A daunting task by any measure.

Although I had made numerous forays into the unpublished plans and photographic archives of Megiddo for material concerned with the Early Bronze Age, I had never seriously attempted a detailed study of any of the important later periods in the site’s history.

While excavating the photo archives in the Institute during the summer of 1990, I came across photos which immediately grabbed my attention. These photos depicted bodies in various contorted positions, obviously killed by falling debris from the buildings in which they were standing. The destruction must have been so swift that they could not flee for safety (figure 1). Although destruction layers are not uncommon in archaeological excavations, it is rare actually to find the bodies of those killed during violent destructions. In addition to these dramatic photos of victims, other photos revealed rooms full of smashed pottery, and in several cases photos of burnt wooden pillars still sitting in place on their flat stone pillar bases (figure 2). Clearly the destruction was devastatingly complete, but which stratum at Megiddo experienced this destruction? These photos were all unpublished, and no one had ever referred to them in any of the revisionist articles with which I was familiar.

Further research established that the violent destruction belonged to Stratum VI at Megiddo, the end of which is dated by most scholars to the latter part of the eleventh century B.C. Almost nothing is known of this stratum. A poorly understood plan is published in *Megiddo*, volume 2, and a couple of descriptive paragraphs are devoted to explaining this important stratum.

It is clear that somehow this stratum was missed in compiling the final publication of the site, and my curiosity now was piqued. Why was such a dramatic destruction not documented more fully? Further research in correspondence between Breasted and the Megiddo excavators has revealed the reason, a tale of intrigue and simple human error.

The greatest exposure of Stratum VI (Area BB) took place during the 1934 season when P. L. O. Guy was director of the Megiddo excavations. Guy, assisted by Robert Lamon and Geoffrey Shipton, exposed the entire stratum for an area of almost 2,000 square meters. The entire stratum was then removed and the next stratum below, Stratum VII, was then exposed. Almost immediately after excavation, an incident occurred which resulted in the firing of Guy as director. Guy then traveled to England to finish his work on the Megiddo tombs, and Lamon was appointed interim director. The following spring, in 1935, Gordon Loud came to Megiddo as the new director of excavations, and from that moment Loud was in charge of all excavations and publications.

A careful perusal of the correspondence in the archive files shows that by 1934 Breasted was becoming impatient with the slow pace of excavation at

Megiddo. Although Guy was removing dirt at what would be considered today a furious pace (using up to 250-300 workmen a day), his ambitious attempts at stripping the entire *tell* meant that he was slow in reaching earlier levels. One particularly revealing letter from Breasted indicates that he (Breasted) was especially interested in reaching the levels of the “Egyptian Imperial Period” (the Late Bronze Age), and his letter clearly illustrates his frustration with Guy’s patient excavation of the later Iron Age levels. Although Guy’s firing was officially triggered by a specific incident concerning a staff member’s behavior at the Haifa docks, it was evident that Breasted’s growing frustration was the real cause of his dismissal.

Because Loud came in with an unequivocal mandate to explore the Bronze Age levels of Megiddo, he moved quickly and with what many would regard as undue haste. Because the 1934 season had been directed by Guy, who was not present to protect and ensure the publication of the material from Stratum VI, the material from Stratum VI became almost forgotten. Much of the pottery had been drawn, supervised by Shipton, during the interim between Guy’s dismissal and Loud’s arrival. This pottery was then included in the final publication. No work had been done on the stratigraphy, however, and so almost nothing was said about Stratum VI in the final publication. This explains the detailed presentation of pottery and objects from Stratum VI with almost no discussion of their context.

The abundance of material from Stratum VI has languished for too long in the dark cabinets of the Institute archives. It deserves a complete and thorough publication, and it is this project that I have undertaken. With the assistance of John Larson, Photo Archivist for the Museum, I have located roughly fifty unpublished photographs (including aerial views), all the original plans with detailed levels, section drawings, level books, locus information, and pottery-type cards. With this material we have a treasure trove of information to begin the reconstruction of the dramatic results from Stratum VI.

The most striking find was the discovery that the excavators located and counted every vessel-type excavated in Area BB. This means that we can put every vessel back in its original room and begin to reconstruct what may have been different functional uses for each room. Although the excavators recorded



Figure 2. Megiddo, Stratum VI. Remains of burnt wooden pillars on stone bases.

only complete vessels, we are still able to get a very good picture of how space was used at the site during this period.

Also, knowing how much pottery of a particular type was found can provide interesting results. One of the major store jar types at Megiddo is what scholars call the "collared rim store jar," so called because of the strip of clay around the base of the neck that resembles a collar. Because the clay strip is at the base of the neck rather than the rim, I prefer the term "collared *pithos*." Only six examples of this jar are reported in the final publication. A check of the locus cards, indicates, that at least fifty-five collared *pithoi* were recovered at Megiddo.

The significance of this jar-type lies in the fact that this *pithos* was ubiquitous in the hill country during the time that the Israelites were settling in the land, and the jars were probably made by potters from the hill country region. Because of the appearance of this *pithos* at Megiddo, some have suggested that the site was Israelite. Although I am convinced the site was "Canaanite" in the late eleventh century for both stratigraphic and ceramic reasons, the presence of more than fifty *pithoi* indicates a lively exchange between the peoples of the lowland sites like Megiddo and those from a highland tradition which includes Israelites and others. Ideology may have drastically affected Israelite/Canaanite relations, but business was business! Commercial relations seem to have flourished.

Although Lamont and Shipton received official permission from Breasted to publish the results of the 1934 excavations of Stratum VI in a separate volume in the Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization series, the projected publication never materialized. They became overwhelmed by the fast pace of excavation of Bronze Age levels at Megiddo, and Stratum VI was left behind.

That situation is now being rectified, and I am currently at work on reproducing more complete plans indicating exactly where "all the bodies are buried" at Megiddo in Stratum VI. This work will culminate in the final publication of this important stratum in the Oriental Institute Publications series. All photos pertinent to the stratum, including aerial views and photos from other areas, will be included in the volume, along with tables of quantities of pottery types and their exact locations. This publication will provide all researchers with a much more enlightened view of both Megiddo in the late eleventh century B.C. and the nature of Canaanite settlement in one of its last preserves in the western Jezreel Valley before the complete conquest and unification of the region by Israel under David.

The late eleventh century B.C. was an exciting time, with competing political movements struggling for ascendancy. Israel was becoming strong under increasingly active leadership from its judges and its first king, Saul. The Philistines had been in the land for more than a century, and they were expanding their power north into the Jezreel Valley and possibly into the Jordan Valley. Canaanites still controlled pockets of agriculturally rich lowland areas. Whether Megiddo fell victim to one of these competing political interests and was violently destroyed because of it, or whether it was destroyed by earthquake as seems more probable, we still do not know. Either way, however, the investigation of the site's remains during this period provides a fascinating glimpse into the well-preserved remains of an eleventh century B.C. society.