

DOUGLAS L. ESSE

DECEMBER 1, 1949–OCTOBER 13, 1992

Douglas L. Esse, archaeologist, professor, and foremost authority on the Early Bronze Age Levant, died on October 13, 1992, at home with his family in Hyde Park, after a long battle with stomach cancer. He was forty-two years old.

I knew Doug for more than a decade and a half: first as a student at the Oriental Institute, then as a colleague in the field and in the classroom, and throughout as a very best friend.

He began his field work in 1975 at Tel Dan and Tel Qiri in Israel and continued to develop as a stratigrapher and strategist in the following year, when he joined our staff at Carthage. By the time we launched the excavations at Ashkelon a decade later, where Doug served as associate director and as director of the lab in Jerusalem, he had become one of the very best excavators I have ever known. Few archaeologists could excavate the backfill of robber trenches the way he could and retrieve in negative form so many coherent building plans.

Through his meticulous excavation and recording, he was able to recover dozens of unbaked clay cylinders at Ashkelon, which when found in rows indicated they had fallen from a vertical loom in a weaving factory. Since this type of loom weight is totally alien to the Canaanite culture, these homely artifacts have become valuable documents for tracing the Philistines back to their place of origin; these mud cylinders are found in abundance at Minoan and later Mycenaean sites.

Doug received his M.A. in 1977 and his Ph.D. in 1982 “with distinction” from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. I had the privilege of serving as primary reader of his doctoral dissertation, which he revised and published last year as a book, *Subsistence, Trade, and Social Change in Early Bronze Age Palestine* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, No. 50). It is a tour de force, a grand synthesis that analyses the rise and fall of civilization in Palestine from about 3500 to 2200 B.C. Using the material from Beth Yerah excavated by Professors P. P. Delougaz and Helene Kantor in 1963 and 1964, Doug shows us how to move from the particular to the general, from potsherds to international trading networks, as he turns “heaps of broken images” into patterns that give us glimpses of the unbroken reality behind the sherds and scraps of evidence.

The renowned archaeologist William Dever graciously sent Doug an advance copy of his review of the book, now published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Dever proclaimed Doug's book a masterpiece of archaeological analysis and exposition—a model for us all.

His most succinct and theoretically sophisticated statement of the problem appears in "Secondary State Formation and Collapse in Early Bronze Age Palestine," published in the proceedings of an international colloquium held by the CNRS in Israel. There Doug explains how Egypt catapulted Canaan into its First Urban Age through economic stimulus. Commenting on the proceedings, the distinguished prehistorian Jean Perrot considered this piece the highlight of the conference.

In 1987 Doug was well on his way toward the summit of academic success: he was appointed Assistant Professor of Syro-Palestinian Archaeology at the Oriental Institute. Just two years later he was diagnosed with cancer. Nevertheless in 1989 he launched the Oriental Institute expedition to Tel Yaqush in the Jordan Valley, where for three seasons he and his students investigated Early Bronze Age lifeways. At the same time he continued to teach, to research, and to publish. He was an excellent teacher, regarded with affection and esteem by students and colleagues alike.

Whether digging in the field, or through old explorers' accounts of the Holy Land, or Ottoman tax records or whatever, Doug was a virtuoso in seeing how bits and pieces fit together to provide fresh insights.

By digging into the Research Archives of the Oriental Institute, Doug discovered a prosperous Canaanite city at Megiddo (Stratum VI), built at the beginning of the eleventh century B.C. and destroyed at the end. The original excavators from the Oriental Institute had published only a small portion of this stratum in *Megiddo II: Seasons of 1935-39* (Oriental Institute Publications, Vol. 62). The confusion resulted in part from major staff changes made in 1934 by the inimitable founder and director of the Institute, James Henry Breasted.

From the original plans and unpublished photographs of the excavations, Doug was able to recover streets and pillared buildings, along with dozens of crushed collared-rim jars and the skeletons of numerous individuals who had perished in the fiery destruction. From this startling evidence he was able to reconstruct the plan of the city and recover some of its history. It appears that Megiddo continued to prosper as a Canaanite city well into the Iron Age, including among its ruins some presumed hallmarks (such as pillared houses and collared-rim pithoi) of the early Israelites. Doug began to explore the meaning of these discoveries in an article published in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* just before his death. All future studies dealing with the emergence of Early Israel and its relation with Canaan must take these new discoveries into account.

During the last three years, even though cancer was wracking his body, Doug somehow managed to continue his Early Bronze research at Tel Yaqush in northern Israel. During the last exciting season at the site, Doug's father, Doug's wife Ann, his son Joey, and daughter Allison (ages nine and six) participated in the excavations. Throughout the long ordeal, his priorities and passions never changed: family, friends, and archaeology, in that order.

I talked with Doug almost every other week during the past year. Just a month ago, embattled but not embittered by the cancer, he told me about the articles he was writing, and alas, never finished, and the classes he would be teaching next year. Highest on his list of priorities was the publication of his excavations at Yaqush, followed closely by publication of his new discoveries about Iron Age Megiddo (tentatively titled *Megiddo Stratum VI: The Iron I Period*) and a volume dealing with tombs excavated by Kantor and Delougaz (to be issued in the series Oriental Institute Publications, with the title *Nahal Tabor: An Early Bronze Age Cemetery in the Northern Jordan Valley, Israel*). His spirit and courage were indomitable right up to the end.

Ann, his wonderful wife of twenty-one years, put beside him in the coffin a Marshalltown trowel and three Early Bronze Age potsherds—the tool of his trade and the artifacts that he was able to transform into documents by which he read the past. T. S. Eliot asks us:

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, you cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images, where the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water.”

Doug loved the “Waste Lands”—the mounds of ruin with their “stony rubbish” and “heaps of broken images.” In both his profession and his life (they were inseparable) Doug knew that the truth of existence, the truth of reality, is not some absolute proposition about truth, nor ultimate despair, but something in between, a quest (whether in archaeology or in life) for something beyond the broken images of past and present, a quest for the unbroken reality behind the broken images.

We will sorely miss Doug Esse, the best and brightest of his generation of archaeologists, the kindest and most gentle person of any generation.

Lawrence E. Stager
Dorot Professor of the Archaeology of Israel
Harvard University