Archaeologists in Israel and Palestine try to focus on science, but their work carries a heavy burden of expectation from religious leaders, biblical scholars, and local people eager to prove their right to this land

Archaeology in the Holy Land

THE HOLY LAND

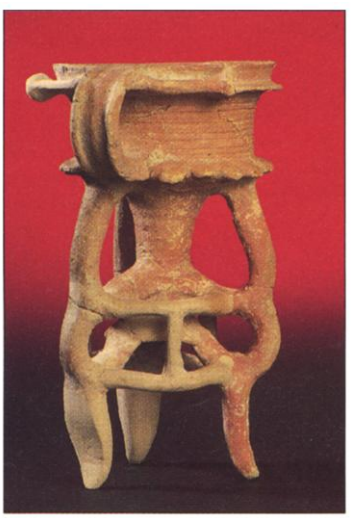
In this special section, *Science* looks at the myriad forces acting on excavators working in the political and religious pressure cooker that is the land of the Bible.

JERUSALEM, TEL AVIV, AND BEERSHEVA—A few years ago, just before Israel turned most of the West Bank city of Hebron over to Palestinian control, an Israeli television station asked Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel Finkelstein to come to the town and tape an interview in front of the Tomb of the Patriarchs. A large group of militant Jewish settlers was refusing to leave Hebron. One of their arguments was that because the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried in the tomb, Hebron was part of the Jewish heritage and thus Jews had the right to live anywhere in the city. Finkelstein explained that in his opinion the patriarchs were not real historical figures and that the tomb buildings were actually built during the reign of the Jewish king Herod the Great, more than 1000 years after Abraham and his kin supposedly lived. "The interviewer then turned to a rabbi from one of the settlements whom they had brought along and asked what he had to say," Finkelstein recalls. "The rabbi said, 'So what do I care if the patriarchs aren't historical? For me it's enough that the Jews have been here for the past 2000 years.'"

The story illustrates the political sensitivities that many Israeli archaeologists have to contend with every day. As excavators in the Holy Land, they work in a region sacred to Jews, Muslims, and Christians. There is probably no other area of the world where archaeology carries such a heavy load of religious and political implications as in Israel and the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which together make up much of ancient Palestine. Within Israel, archaeologists often run into conflicts with religious leaders, not only over their interpretations of archaeological evidence but sometimes over their very right to excavate sites containing human remains (see p. 34). And on the larger geopolitical scale, archaeology in this region has obvious connotations for Middle East politics. The unearthing in recent decades of evidence for early Israelite occupation has made many Israelis wildly enthusiastic about archaeological discoveries and intensified their feelings that they have priority in this land over the counterclaims of Palestinian Arabs.

But as the history of the Middle East in this century has all too painfully demonstrated, the Israelis are not alone in making claims to this soil. And as the Palestinians, in the wake of territorial concessions by Israel, begin launching their own excavations in Gaza and the West Bank, a new generation of Palestinian archaeologists is now wrestling with the issue of how much to allow political and religious considerations to influence their own work (see p. 33). "People come here looking for their roots," says Finkelstein, "and archaeology is the conduit."

Despite the ramifications their work might have for Middle East politics or religious faith, however, most Israeli archaeologists have tried to insulate their studies from political and religious influences. This doesn't mean that they have chosen to ignore the considerable remains left by the Israelites, Canaanites, and Philistines whose exploits fill the pages of the Bible—indeed, some of the biggest digs currently under way in Israel are at prominent biblical sites, such as the Philistine port city of Ashkelon (*Science*, 2 July, p. 36) and Megiddo in northern Israel, a supposed stronghold of King Solomon (see p. 31). But few Israeli archaeologists today would characterize their primary research concerns as proving that Jews have the right to live here or that the biblical stories are literally true. For the most part, archaeologists here employ the same scientific methodology and pursue the same types of research questions--such as settlement patterns, trade and economy, and daily details of ancient life as their colleagues in other countries.



Israelite rites. An 8th century B.C. cult stand from Megiddo.

And contrary to the impression created by the worldwide attention often generated by excavations of biblical sites, most digs here do not concentrate on the biblical period. The great majority of the roughly 200 excavations undertaken here each year are focused on epochs before or after the Bronze and Iron Ages, the respective periods in which Canaanite and Israelite settlements of Palestine are assumed to have taken root. To some extent, this is due to the large number of rescue excavations, most often of Byzantine and

CREDIT: (LEFT) A. MAZAR/THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

Roman sites, which are made necessary by Israel's continuing construction boom. Israel is also a major center of prehistoric research. Over the past 2 decades, Israeli prehistorians have uncovered tantalizing evidence—at sites such as the caves of Mount Carmel and those in the Jordan River Valley—that the Levant may have been a major corridor for movement of early humans out of Africa. And ongoing excavations at Sha'ar Hagolan, just south of the Sea of Galilee, have uncovered one of the Near East's largest Neolithic settlements, which was a center of extraordinary artistic activity (see p. 35).

But, try as they might to distance themselves from religious influences, many of Israel's leading archaeologists have recently been caught up in new and sometimes fractious debates over the proper relationship between archaeology and biblical scholarship. They have come under attack from a group of European biblical scholars called "biblical minimalists," who assert that figures such as Kings David and Solomon may never have existed and that the sprawling Israelite kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem, they are supposed to have ruled was not a historical reality. These scholars have taken archaeologists to task for being guided too much by the Bible in their research (see next story).

To some archaeologists, this controversy is regrettable. "We fought so hard to make archaeology here a respectable discipline and to free it from these kinds of emotional issues," says William Dever, an archaeologist at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "And now we are back in the middle of it again." Yet it may just be that, when excavating in the Holy Land, politics and the Bible simply go with the territory. "The power of religious and nationalistic symbols should not be underestimated," says Steven Rosen, an archaeologist at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva. "They will continue to play a role in Israeli archaeology, just as they do in most archaeologies around the world."

—MICHAEL BALTER

THE HOLY LAND ▶ THE BIBLE

Baedeker's Guide, or Just Plain 'Trouble'?

Despite efforts to focus on scientific questions, excavators in the Holy Land continue to be embroiled in debates on the Bible's historical value

JERUSALEM AND TEL AVIV—Once upon a time, a great wise king named Solomon ruled over Israel. The wealth and power of his kingdom knew no equal. He built massive fortifications at strategic cities such as Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer and raised up an enormous gold-laden temple at Jerusalem. Solomon had at least 700 wives and 300 concubines, including a pharaoh's daughter, and carried on a brief dalliance with the Queen of Sheba. As for his legendary wisdom, "All the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind." How do we know? The Bible tells us so. Unfortunately, however, there is no other direct evidence that this great king ever lived. Biblical scholars have dated Solomon's reign to the 10th century B.C. But if the Egyptians were aware of this mighty ruler on their eastern flank, they did not mention him in any of their numerous surviving 10th century inscriptions. Despite more than 150 years of archaeological excavations in the Holy Land, no trace of Solomon has ever been unearthed.

This and other contradictions between what the biblical texts say and what excavators have dug up has made most archaeologists working here wary of using the Bible as any kind of field guide. In fact, over recent decades archaeologists in Israel have been steadily shifting away from answering questions posed by the Bible to questions of trade and economy, technology, and social issues in ancient societies. On the other hand, it is hard for archaeologists to ignore the Bible as a historical text. Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem, Hebron, Gaza, Ashkelon—all of these modern cities were also backdrops for vivid episodes in the Old and New Testaments, and all contain traces of those ancient times. And now, despite years of trying to keep the Bible at arm's length, archaeologists find themselves on the other side of the argument, accused by a new school of biblical scholars of having become biased by the holy book. The result has been a lively and sometimes acrimonious debate among, and between, archaeologists and biblical scholars. Some argue that archaeology and biblical studies should divorce completely and go their separate ways. Others counter that such a drastic step would cut archaeologists off from one of the few historical sources they have.

The Bible and the spade

Although archaeologists working in Israel today struggle to keep their distance from religious and political questions, that has not always been the case. Until the mid–20th century, most major excavations in Palestine were carried out by Christian scholars out to prove the biblical stories were literally true or at least to put them into a historical context. Foremost among them was the American William F. Albright, who worked in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s and whose name is most closely associated with what came to be called "biblical archaeology." With the establishment of Israel in 1948, archaeology in Palestine took on a distinctly nationalistic form. The first generation of Israeli archaeologists, many of whom were ardent Zionists, began digging up ancient Israelite sites with feverish enthusiasm. The most prominent of these pioneers, the late Yigael Yadin—the commander of Jewish forces during the Israeli war of independence, who later became a professor of archaeology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem—pursued an explicit agenda of searching for Jewish roots in Palestine. In the 1950s and 1960s, Yadin excavated ancient sites such as Hazor and Masada (site of the Jewish zealots' last stand against the Ro-

CREDIT: THE KOBAL COLLECTION

When Solomon met Sheba. Did Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida play fictional characters?