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THE PREHISTORIC CULTURE OF BEERSHEBA

by Jean Perrot

Beersheba lies in the center of an extensive semi-desert area which stretches from the Gaza coast to the Dead Sea and the Arabah. This is a vast plain of reddish, gently rolling earth cut by riverbeds (wadis), which the short and violent winter rains can transform into raging torrents. Almost overnight, the parched browns and greys of the desert change to a tender green and the earth is carpeted with flowers.

Embarking upon the reclamation of this difficult region, the Israelis have encountered at every step the traces of their predecessors—the Nabataean merchants who founded the caravan cities shortly before the beginning of our era and the Byzantine agricultural communities which continued to inhabit them. The Israelites, under King Solomon and his successors, the Kings of Judah, built fortresses in the Negev to control the road to Ophir and protect their exploitation of the copper mines in the Arabah. Still further back through the centuries, there are the traces of the Amorites—the contemporaries of Abraham and Hammurabi. Throughout the millennia, history seems to repeat itself; the Negev is inhabited only intermittently by a sedentary population. At times, social, economic or political pressure forced the farmer into the Negev, where he had to exert all his ingenuity to overcome unfavorable conditions. But whenever this pressure disappeared, the sedentary settlers withdrew, leaving only the nomad to roam the abandoned land. Between one wave of population flowing into the Negev and the next, there were centuries of oblivion, when the sands of the desert covered the ruins of civilization.

In the spring of 1951, a young man from Kibbutz Nishmar Hanegev, near Beersheba, led me to the banks of a wadi, where he had found scattered shreds of coarse pottery and flint flakes. Upon examination, it was soon evident that these were the remains of an ancient settlement going back to the fourth millennium B.C., that is, a period of which nothing was known in Southern Palestine.

Our investigations began in June of the same year at Abu Irqayq, on the bank of Vadi Zumeili, with the assistance of the French Center National de la Recherche Scientifique. After the first results, Mr. Claude F. A. Schaeffer, Membre de l'Institut and Secretary General of the Commission for Archaeological Excavations attached to the French Foreign Office, decided on a regular excavation. Surface surveys carried out in this region by amateurs—almost every kibbutz has its small collection of local antiquities and its “archae-

ologist"—had already pinpointed about 50 sites along many of the wadis of the Northern Negev. All the sites were located in similar topographical conditions. In the immediate vicinity of Beersheba, where the underground water table is easily accessible, the sites were clustered closely together. We undertook the complete excavation of two of these sites—the one near Bir Abu Matar and the other near Bir es-Safadi. Since 1952, six seasons of excavations have been carried out in these two sites by the French Archaeological Mission, with the assistance of the Department of Antiquities and a number of Israeli institutions. Our efforts have been richly rewarded and, though the excavation of Safadi is not as yet completed, we already have a fairly good idea of the material civilization and daily life of the people who, fifteen hundreds years before Abraham, and a number of centuries before the Pharaohs reigned in Egypt, were the first inhabitants of the Negev.

We uncovered almost intact their peculiar villages, sunk into the alluvial loam forming the upper part of the terrace of the wadi. The nature of the soil favors this kind of subterranean dwelling, which offers excellent protection against the sweltering heat of the day, the chill of the night and the wind-borne sand. It is not very likely that these villages were built in this almost invisible fashion for reasons of security; the absence of any weapons or fortifications bears witness to a peaceful life such as Palestine enjoyed only rarely during its history. The earliest dwelling, large rectangular rooms opening on a horizontal gallery on the slope of the terrace, reflect perhaps the memory of a still earlier dwelling cut into the rock. Their shape was not well suited to the soft soil and they crumbled rapidly. Soon the inhabitants preferred to build rows of smaller, rounded or egg-shaped underground rooms, connected by tunnels and entered through vertical shafts sunk into the end rooms of each row. Footholds cut into the walls of the shafts facilitated descent and ascent. The shafts also assured the ventilation of these dark little rooms, where fires were kindled on small hearths, and which were lit by primitive lamps.

Several times, perhaps as a result of prolonged draughts, the subterranean villages of Beersheba were temporarily abandoned. The galleries were walled up, the shafts blocked and all visible traces of dwellings smoothed away, so that whatever the people could not carry away with them remained well hidden in the underground houses. Sometimes the inhabitants stayed away longer than they expected, or even did not return at all, and thus left us to find some of their houses complete with furniture and domestic installations: basins, hearths, and bell-shaped grain pits closed with a flat stone.

When the subterranean rooms caved in, the people preferred to build a round or oval house in the pit or hollow thus formed on the surface. Built of bricks on stone foundations, these houses were roofed, at surface level, with beaten earth supported by wooden beams. They are an interesting intermediate stage between the subterranean dwelling—of which this new type preserves the advantages and general arrangements, while providing better security—and the rectangular houses which still later are built right on the surface, similarly fashioned of mud-bricks on stone foundations. It seems that this is the building method finally preferred by the inhabitants in their series of attempts at finding a solution to their housing problem. To this last phase at Safadi belongs a large structure measuring 21 m. by 6 m. It must have served as a public building, although we do not know for what purpose; its situation at the center of the village points to a social organization approaching that of the "cities" of the Bronze Age.

Indeed, the economic organization of the village corresponds to this degree of development. Due to the stability of the natural environment—the presence of some terrestrial molluscs suffices to prove that the climate of that time was the same as today—its economic life can be reconstructed with remarkable accuracy. Hunting is no longer of much importance, while agriculture and cattle raising provide almost the entire food supply. In normally rainy years, the wadis of the Negev preserve sufficient moisture to allow extensive cereal cultivation wherever the soil is fertile. In addition to various agricultural tools made of stone and bone—picks, hoes and sickles—we have found in the grain-stores of the Abu Matar and Safadi remains of wheat, barley and lentils. Most of the small cattle consisted of sheep and goats; the dog, the pig and the ass were known, as well as a dwarf ox, a working animal adapted to regional conditions.

Handicrafts were well developed, and each village seems to have specialized to a certain degree in a particular craft—pottery making, weaving, basket-making, manufacturing objects of hard stone, bone and ivory. The first specialized craftsmen appear at Abu Matar, where remains of copper smelting and manufacturing were found.

The presence of a copper industry at Beersheba before the end of the fourth millennium B.C., a time when metal was almost unknown in the Nile Valley, is even more surprising when it is remembered that copper ores are not found in the vicinity. The smiths of Beersheba had to travel more than 100 kilometres to the rich copper ore deposits of Wadi Feinan, south-east of the Dead Sea. They brought back with them only these fragments of malachite

which are richest in copper content. These were pulverized on flint anvils, and after reduction with charcoal, smelted in earthen furnaces; primitive bellows were probably used for obtaining the necessary high temperatures. After refining in crucibles, the metal was poured into moulds for making mace-heads, axes, points and jewelry.

The people of Beersheba were artists of no mean ability in addition to being clever craftsmen. Their sense of beauty finds expression even in the most ordinary objects. The graceful pottery vessels are often decorated with red painted geometric motifs. More costly vessels, made of basalt, include beautiful bowls and stands with a hollowed-out foot. Ornaments are very numerous—rectangular palettes of polished marble, used for crushing black, red and green face-paints, stone and ivory bracelets, beads of frit and shell, pendants of mother-of-pearl, bone and turquoise. Two ivory pins with decorated heads, the one representing a bird and the other a human figure, show an artistic sense fully revealed in a series of remarkable ivory figurines. Ivory carving seems to have been of particular importance among the crafts practised at Bir Safadi, where we have the good luck to uncover an ivory carver's work-shop, complete with workbench, tool—a copper awl still in its bone handle—and raw material, an elephant tusk. Elephants are known to have existed in Syria up to the 8th century B.C.; however, the possibility cannot be excluded that the ivory may have been imported, perhaps from Africa, together with the large shells from which beads and other ornaments were made. Our figurines are not dissimilar to the early predynastic sculptures of Upper Egypt, but the style of the Beersheba ivories is different and they are generally superior in execution. The figurines apparently represent a worshipper standing in ritual nakedness before a divinity; they bear witness to religious conceptions which also find expression in schematic representations of humans, animals and sexual symbols and which are probably connected with a fertility cult. Curious assemblages of pebbles—always grouped in multiples of seven—may perhaps point to ancestor worship. These pebbles were found on the floors of the dwellings, and are marked in red paint with various signs—crosses, darts, squares, pictographs.

Who were these people and whence did they come? The skeletons unearthed at Beersheba belong to two different races: one is Proto-mediterranean and is known to have been established in Palestine since earliest times; the other is Armenoid (Anatolian), which was known in the Middle East up to the present, only in the Sumerian cemetery at Kish, and which thus makes its first appearance in Palestine. Of the four individuals belonging to the first group, three

—a man and two women—were simply thrown into a disused grain-silo after the man had died a violent death. The fourth skeleton—a woman—was found in another silo, lying contracted on its side. The burial customs of the second, Armenoid, group were different: the long bones were collected after the flesh had wasted away, and were placed against the wall of the funerary chamber, with the skull on top. The main racial characteristics of the Armenoid race are the short, broad skull, the long straight nose in line with the forehead, and the abundant hair of beard and head. This is exactly how the Beersheba ivory figurines appear. An interesting relationship between race and culture may be glimpsed here, and it might perhaps be suggested that an Armenoid group played a primary role in introducing into Palestine this new element which we call the Beersheba culture.

The Beersheba cultural complex is indeed new. Entirely different from that of the indigenous settled population, it still bears the mark of its recent nomadic origin. In 1930, when it was first discovered at Teleilat Ghassel in Transjordan, North-East of the Dead Sea, by an expedition of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, this culture appeared strange to Palestinian archaeologists and aroused prolonged controversies. Today, its origins appear less mysterious. The excavations at Beersheba have shown the existence of continuous relations with the Transjordan plateau, from where hard stone (particularly basalt) and copper ore were brought. Metallurgical crafts as practised at Beersheba could only develop in the vicinity of the rich copper deposits of Wadi Feinan. These and other points, which require confirmation by new investigations east of the Dead Sea, as well as more general anthropological considerations, suggest the eastern border before it came to Palestine. There, in a region where the Egyptian-African influence is attested by rock-drawings from the end of the preceding period onwards, they must have picked up those elements of their culture which are derived from predynastic Egypt. This is far more likely than tracing back these elements to direct contacts between the Beersheba people and Lower Egypt, of which we have so far no reliable evidence whatsoever. In any case, in view of the probable position of Beersheba in the sequence of Palestinian cultures, these contacts should be sought in protodynastic times rather than in the distant cultures of Mahasna and Badari.

It seems as though, towards the middle of the 4th millennium B.C., population groups east of the Jordan, which were already well on the way to sedentary settlement, began migrating westward. We do not know the reasons for this migration, which may have

included the entire periphery of the Syro-Arab desert—this is also the time when the Sumerians make their appearance in the lower valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. These population shifts may be compared to the expansion of the Amorite peoples at the end of the 3rd millennium, or the movement, one thousand years later, of the Aramaeans. Palestine appears to have been invaded peacefully north and south of the Dead Sea. The newcomers established themselves gradually in the Northern Negev and in those parts of the country which, like the Jordan Valley and the coastal dunes, were less favorable to settlement than the central hill-country and consequently less densely inhabited by the indigenous population. There they found living conditions and natural surroundings not very different from those they had left.

The disappearance of the Beersheba people a few centuries later was apparently just as sudden as their arrival and the reasons were probably much the same. In addition, the poor soil and marginal conditions of this region set a limit to the growth of the population and inhibited the normal development of this culture. Unable to grow, it must have lost vitality and faded rapidly. Perhaps these difficulties, together with a change in general conditions, led to a return to nomadic life. In the present state of our knowledge, we can only offer conjectures. It is certain, however, that when what we call the Bronze Age begins in Palestine, even before the first historic dynasties establish themselves in the valleys of the Nile and the Euphrates, the Negev once again becomes uninhabited.

Jean Parrot was Head of the French Archaeological Mission in Beersheba, excavating successively, from 1951 to 1957. The lecture was delivered at the Annual Public Lecture Series on the Land of the Bible sponsored by the New York University Institute of Hebrew Studies.