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Chapter One

San Miceli in Sicily: Excavation of an Early Christian Basilica and Village
San Miceli in Sicily: Excavation of an Early Christian Basilica

By: Randall W. Younker and Élisabeth Lesnes

For decades Andrews University has undertaken long-term research projects in Jordan, at Hesban and elsewhere. But new challenges are necessary. So we decided to trade falafels for pasta and launched a new project in the town of Salemi in the province of Trapani in the northwestern “corner” of Sicily.

Our recent move to Sicily was partially motivated by our graduate students, who wanted to explore different periods other than the Iron Age, specifically, issues related to the emergence of early Christianity.
Facilitating this desire to “go west,” one of our Italian colleagues, Dr. Élisabeth Lesnes, part of our team in Jordan, brought our attention to an intriguing site called San Miceli. It had first been discovered in August 1893 when a local farmer found a gold coin. This naturally created a bit of excitement with locals starting to poke holes in the field in hopes of finding more treasures. Instead they found bits of a mosaic and a tomb that yielded two gold earrings. Two archaeology students from the town realized the importance of the finds and, worried about the destruction of the site, notified local authorities. The mayor contacted one of Sicily’s leading archaeologists, Antonino Salinas, director of the National Archaeological Museum of Palermo. Salinas immediately sensed the importance of the finds and organized an excavation.

From September 23 to November 2, 1893, Salinas’ excavations brought to light three superimposed mosaic floors within a basilica and explored 58 graves, of which a dozen were located within the church. The others were scattered in the surrounding land, where he located traces of various buildings from the ancient village.

The basilica was a modest building with an almost square plan, divided into three naves by two rows of five columns or pillars. The apse was centrally located at the western end of the church - not unusual for the
earliest churches. The graves were in a pit with dry stone lining and covered with large limestone slabs. They typically contained a skeleton, more rarely two. The grave goods consisted mainly of hoop earrings, rings, necklaces, buckles, glass and ceramic vases. After completing his excavations, Salinas had the site reburied except for the area of the nave where he consolidated the three superimposed mosaic floors and had a wooden roof built for protection. The site remained mostly undisturbed until the beginning of our own project.

Salinas’ work at San Miceli was eventually published by Bagio Pace in 1917. Pace’s concluded that Salinas had uncovered an ancient Roman/Christian village that was eventually destroyed by Muslims. The basilica of this village was built in the 4th century, maybe as early as the 3rd - before the time of Constantine the Great! Pace also thought the basilica underwent two additional building phases, based on the three superimposed mosaic floors, for a total of three phases. These phases were dated by the inscriptions found in the middle and upper floors, typology of the jewelry found in the various graves, and a few coins. Major shortcomings, however, were the lack of any stratified context for the remains and no systematic study of the ceramics. The dating and historical context of the three phases was completely open and hotly debated for the following century.

Our interest in the site was to not only determine the actual dates for the basilica, including its foundation and destruction, but to determine the origins and occupational history of the surrounding village. Other questions we are pursuing deal with the village’s local economy, the nature of its political, social, and economic relationships with nearby ancient settlements and cities such as Alicia/Salemi (300 meters south), Lilibeo/Marsala (main port to the west), Segesta (to the north), and the ancient identity of our site. Still other questions are burial practices of the village and tracing the
process of the ideological transition from Roman paganism to early Christianity as evident in the material culture.

With the gracious support of Dr. Rossella Giglio (director the archaeological section of the superintendency of Trapani) we began excavations at San Miceli in 2014 and continued in 2015 and 2016. Our international team has included professors and graduate students from Andrews University, Sicilian professors and students from local high schools and universities and volunteers from South American (Argentina, Peru, Brazil), the USA and from Germany, France, and Italy. We opened three fields: Field A to the south to explore the residential area of the village; Field B (the Basilica); and
Field C (the area north of the Basilica where rooms built up against the church were located).

Excavations in Field A have revealed three rooms and courtyard of a large “villa rustica” or a farm house. The large central room was entered via a marble threshold and had a fireplace or hearth against its east wall; another room had a stone bin, animal bones and an iron knife and served as a pantry/kitchen. This “villa” seems to have been built in the early 5th century, was destroyed in the second half of the 5th century, then rebuilt and destroyed a final time in the mid-7th century. The dates for the 5th century destruction was determined by ceramic chronology. The final destruction was confirmed by crushed amphorae and two coins of Constans II. The latest coins dated to about 652 CE, suggesting the destruction was shortly thereafter. The town’s destruction may be have been a Muslim raid, a conclusion supported by both Byzantine Christian and Muslim documents.

Excavations in Field B occurred around all four sides of the basilica. To our surprise, we discovered that Salinas’ assumption that there was one church with three phases (based on three superimposed mosaic floors) was wrong; there were actually two churches. The first church had two floor phases, the first built in the mid-4th century (just after 360 CE based on the discovery of several coins of Constantine II (son of Constantine the Great) found immediately below the foundation stones. Then, 50 years or so later (beginning of the 5th century) the parishioners of the first church remodeled their floor. This church continued in use until it was completely destroyed in the late 5th century or early 6th century CE. We suspect the destruction may have occurred during either one of the late Vandal invasions or the subsequent Ostrogoth invasion - both these tribes were Arian Christians, while most people in Sicily, including San Miceli, were Trinitarian Christians.
In the 6th century a church was completely rebuilt over the ruins but with exterior walls inside the wall lines of the first church, and a new mosaic floor of smaller, finer tesserae was constructed. We were able to find an additional patch of the mosaic of this last church in the north nave (a beautiful bird made of red, white, and blue tesserae). This new church survived until the final destruction of the entire site. This occurred in the mid-7th century after 652 CE, possibly by Muslim raiders.

Above: Aerial of Fields B and C showing north walls of the two basilicas and mosaic in north aisle of last phase floor

Left: Detail of new bird mosaic in north aisle
Significant elements found within the church included the **apse** on the west end of the basilica, indicating the church was built prior to the period when the Roman church decided the position of the apse was in the east. The apse would be remodeled and reused until the church’s final destruction in the mid-7th century.

We also found a **baptistery** immediately outside and west of the apse. While the stratigraphy was heavily disturbed by later building activity in antiquity and by Salinas’ excavations in 1893, it appears that the baptistery was constructed when the first church was originally built in the mid-4th century.

Three stone-lined **tombs** were found in the church compound, all covered with large limestone slabs, similar to what Salinas described for the 58 tombs he excavated. Two of the tombs were found in the courtyard at the entry of the church on the east side, while the third was found under the west end of the north nave (near the front of the church). As for the two tombs in the courtyard, one contained a male and female adult, and the other only a male adult. The female in the double burial had silver loop earrings with dangles. A ceramic jug, a finger ring and a coin (possibly a pagan rite still in use by the first Christians to cross the River Styx) were also found in this tomb. The second tomb with the male had no grave goods. In the tomb of the female burial in the north nave near the front of the church were two silver loop earrings with more elaborate dangles. Based on jewelry typology, many scholars have wanted
to date the San Miceli tombs to the time of the last church (6th-7th centuries), but our excavations showed that these tombs were stratigraphically connected with the first church and cannot date later than the 5th century. Some may even date as early as the end of the 4th century.

Also in the north nave were found two shallow burials (not tombs) just under the surface of the second church (destroyed in the mid-7th century). One contained the remains of two very young children (2-3 years old). We assume that these were hasty burials by the survivors of the 7th century destruction, who quickly buried their children and then relocated to a new settlement.

North of the Church our team uncovered five rooms of a building (the North Building) built up against the north wall of the earliest church. These continued in use through the entire existence of the first church and reflected the destruction attested elsewhere on the site in the late 5th century/early 6th century. While we are not yet certain of the activities and purposes of these rooms, several were used for storage. Numerous large amphorae were found in situ under destruction debris that included burnt wood, nails, and ceramic roof tiles.

By utilizing all of the data we have collected so far, we can offer the following tentative historical reconstruction. San Miceli was originally a Roman farmhouse or a waystation between the port of Lilybaeum to the west and Segesta to the north, initially founded in the 3rd century BCE. It then grew into a small village. We estimate that it reached a population of about 495 people by the 1st century CE and maintained this level for the next few centuries. Sometime around 250 CE, Christianity penetrated inland to San Miceli - probably via a family or small group of around 10 persons. Using demographic formulas that suggest about 56% of the Roman Empire had converted to Christianity by 350, we estimate that the Christian population of San Miceli around this time reached about 280 out of 495 citizens at this time.

Some of these residents, like the wealthy lady buried near the altar in the church, were patrons of the Christian population and likely took the lead in constructing the first Christian basilica in San Miceli. This church survived until the mid-7th century when, after a devastating raid which destroyed the church and most of the village, the
survivors left San Miceli and established a new home elsewhere, possible at the small Late Roman settlement of Segesta, which resisted until the end of the 7th century, or at Alicia which became Salām under the Muslims (today’s Salemi). Future seasons will hopefully both confirm this broad outline and fill in additional details.

*Randall W. Younker is Professor of Archaeology and History of Antiquity at Andrews University. Élisabeth Lesnes is Research Associate in Medieval and Classical Archaeology and Professor at ITT Marco Polo in Palermo*
Chapter Two

The Big Bad Wolves of the Ancient Near East Speak: Royal Apologetic in Context
The Big Bad Wolves of the Ancient Near East Speak: Royal Apologetic in Context

By: Andrew Knapp

There are two sides to every story—even when the public comes together to cry foul against a certain party. Take the story of the three little pigs. Every child knows that the pigs are innocent victims of the ruthless and insatiable big bad wolf. But the villain also has a tale to tell. Ancient Near Eastern kings felt the same way.

In Jon Scieszka’s masterful True Story of the Three Little Pigs, Alexander T. Wolf informs the audience, “Nobody knows the real story, because nobody has heard my side of the story.” He was baking a cake for his grandmother’s birthday and visited his neighbor, the first pig, to try to borrow a cup of sugar. Afflicted with a cold, the wolf accidentally sneezed, blowing the pig’s pathetically constructed domicile down, and so on. Every alleged misdeed of the wolf is justified but he is eventually framed by the third pig and arrested.

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs is an apology (or apologia), in which an accused party presents a defense against accusations of malfeasance. Such fare has become common with the success of Wicked (the apology of the Wicked Witch of the West), Hoodwinked (an apology for another big bad wolf, in this case from the Little Red Riding Hood story), and Maleficent (the evil witch from Snow White).
But such other-side-of-the-story fictional retellings trade on a real phenomenon common to all human societies. The term apology (in the sense of self-defense, not an admission of guilt) derives from Plato’s *Apology*, his account of Socrates’s defense against the charge of corrupting the youth.

Several royal apologies—defenses of a monarch’s conduct during his rise to the throne and reign—have survived from the ancient Near East. Usurpers in particular needed to explain how their seizure of power was justified. Given the sweeping authority possessed by many ancient kings, this may be surprising, but while ancient Near Eastern civilizations were uniformly autocratic, no monarch—however tyrannical or despotic—could rule without the acceptance of the governed. When confidence in a king waned, questions about his legitimacy inevitably arose; if they reached a critical mass he would be removed from power, one way or another.

Ancient Near Eastern monarchs understood the importance of establishing a narrative. In a world where dynasties were perceived as having a divine mandate, regime change involved ousting a king who had been established by the gods. This never occurred peacefully; the incumbent was typically murdered, often with his progeny, since no one wanted young scions to avenge their father and reclaim the throne. Even the most successful coups established a new regime on a foundation of conspiracy and assassination. No matter how hated the previous monarch was, this opened the new ruler up to criticism about his fitness for office. Kings might have had absolute authority, but they
were expected to be pious, upright individuals, not murderers.

Knowing the fragility of his situation and the need to shape his narrative, a successful usurper would take to the airwaves, so to speak, to justify his takeover. Several ancient Near Eastern usurpers disseminated royal apologies, propagandistic retellings of their seizure of the throne, Justifying their actions and legitimizing their place on the throne. Several such apologies have survived, which testifies to how critical this propaganda was and how thoroughly it was disseminated.

Although royal apologies take different forms, the underlying rhetoric is remarkably similar for texts that span a wide geographic region over more than a millennium. Two motifs that appear in nearly every apology are divine election, the idea that the new ruler was specially chosen by a deity and elevated to kingship, and the unworthy predecessor, a series of charges against the ousted ruler showing how he had disqualified himself from kingship through impious acts. The usurpers discussed above each emphasize these motifs in their respective apologies. Hattusili, for example, invokes divine election by stating, “Ishtar, my lady, gave the kingship of Hatti to me. So I became king, and she took me, a prince, and Ishtar, my lady, released me for kingship.” He mentions Ishtar forty-six times in the text, nearly always in the context of her “providence” on his behalf. With regard to the unworthy predecessor, Hattusili portrays his predecessor Urhi-Tessup as an irreverent, paranoid king. Urhi-Tessup repeatedly stripped Hattusili of his lands despite the latter’s unimpeachable loyalty; only after seven years of suffering such humiliation did Hattusili, after consulting the gods, take action to oust his nephew.

Darius likewise asserts his divine election, invoking the deity Auramazda so routinely that the unwary reader is almost hypnotized by statements such as “by the favor Auramazda I am king; Auramazda granted me kingship.” Darius’s delegitimization of his predecessor via the unworthy rival motif is more interesting. After the Persian king Cambyses died, his brother Bardiya was crowned. Darius, with the backing of a small
court cabal, then murdered Bardiya and assumed the throne—or so most scholars believe. According to Darius’s apology, the true Bardiya had been killed long before, and the alleged Bardiya whom he slew was actually an impostor named Gaumata. Historians have no way of proving or disproving Darius’s account and I am skeptical. Regardless, the rhetoric is easily understandable. Darius justified, even celebrated (“No one dared to act against Gaumata the magus until I came”), the assassination as the removal of a diabolical fraud.

Usurpers from a variety of civilizations and periods appealed to the same means to justify the coups that placed them in power. On the one hand, the specific shared rhetoric among the disparate apologies reveals much about ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. These texts underscore the necessity of divine patronage to establish a ruler’s legitimacy and the importance of at least a pretense of piety. On the other hand, the fact that ancient Near Eastern usurpers took pains to convince the public of their propriety should not surprise us, as this type of self-defense is common to politicians throughout history. A cursory glance at recent American politics reveals that even legitimate rulers (and would-be rulers) often need to defend themselves against accusations of malfeasance. The unworthy predecessor motif seen frequently in ancient Near Eastern apologies resonates closely with the delegitimization of one’s predecessor’s administration in contemporary politics.
Ancient Near Eastern apologetic has special relevance for biblical studies. Many scholars have detected hints of royal apologetic in some historiographical passages of the Hebrew Bible, such as the accounts of Solomon’s consolidation of power (involving the slayings of many political opponents) after his intrigue-fueled coronation in 1 Kings 1-2, and Jehu’s murderous coup in 2 Kings 9-10.

But the most fascinating such narrative is that of David’s rise to power depicted in 1-2 Samuel. The origin of the Samuel text has long perplexed scholars: Why is David’s rise given such an extended and detailed treatment? Why is the text so defensive? The text of Samuel resulted from a complex process of redaction and transmission of original sources, but many scholars suggest that the present narrative drew extensively from propaganda disseminated by those closely associated with David.

The average Israelite in David’s day presumably would have known little of what landed David on the throne beyond the fact that Saul fell in battle to the Philistines (1 Sam 31)—a group with whom David had recently been allied, and in whose ranks he had even marched to that very battle (1 Sam 29)—and that David took the throne after a war with Saul’s son, Ish-Baal (2 Sam 3-5). Moreover, David possessed both Saul’s regalia (2 Sam 1) and Ish-Baal’s head (2 Sam 4). Many undoubtedly would have connected the dots and assumed that David had orchestrated all of these events for his own gain. It makes sense that David would have commissioned apologetic propaganda to explain what “really” happened and assert his innocence in everything.
Assuming the propaganda disseminated widely, as was its purpose, it stands to reason that these stories of David would have been well known and would have eventually filtered down into the Hebrew Bible. The fact that the biblical narrative goes out of its way to place David in incriminating situations only to absolve him each time strengthens this reconstruction, as do comparative examples. The David narrative shares many motifs with other royal apologies from the ancient Near East— the unworthy predecessor and divine election, for example, are everywhere in the David narrative in the besmirching of Saul’s character and in the leitmotif that “Yahweh was with him [David],” respectively. These were the ultimate defense for a king that many historians have come to see as a big bad wolf.

Andrew Knapp is acquisitions editor in Biblical Studies at Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. He holds a Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University.
Chapter Three

Göbekli Tepe: Neolithic Gathering and Feasting at the Beginning of Food Production
Göbekli Tepe: Neolithic Gathering and Feasting at the Beginning of Food Production

By: Jens Notroff & Oliver Dietrich

A few kilometres northeast of modern Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Turkey, the tell of Göbekli Tepe is situated on the highest point of the otherwise barren Germuş mountain range. Rising 15 metres and with an area of about 9 hectares, the completely man-made mound covers the earliest known monumental cult architecture in the ancient Near East. Constructed by hunter-gatherers right after the end of the last Ice Age, they also intentionally buried it about 10,000 years ago.

Göbekli Tepe has been known to archaeologists since the 1960s, when a joint survey team from the Universities of Istanbul and Chicago under the direction of Halet Çambel and Robert Braidwood observed numerous flint artefacts littering the surface of the mound. However, the monumental architecture remained undetected, and was eventually discovered by Klaus Schmidt on a grand tour of important south-eastern Turkish Neolithic sites in 1994. In addition to the high density of flint tools and flakes, his eye was caught by large limestone blocks which...
reminded him of another nearby Neolithic site where he had worked several years before: Nevalı Çori – where, among others, a building with monolithic T-pillars was discovered for the first time. These peculiar T-shapes reminded Schmidt of the worked stone peeking out of the surface at Göbekli Tepe. Excavations at this site began the next year.

In about 22 years of ongoing fieldwork, the German Archaeological Institute and the Şanlıurfa Museum have revealed a totally unexpected monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe, dating to the earliest Neolithic period. No typical domestic structures have yet been found, leading to the interpretation of Göbekli Tepe as a ritual centre for gathering and feasting. The people creating these megalithic monuments were still highly mobile hunter-foragers and the site’s material culture corroborates this: substantial amounts of bones exclusively from hunted wild animals, and a stone tool inventory comprising a wide range of projectile points. Osteological investigations and botanical studies show that animal husbandry was not practiced at Göbekli Tepe and domesticated plants were unknown.

Top: Aerial of Göbekli Tepe showing the excavation areas. (E. Küçük, DAI)
Middle: Aerial of main excavation area of Göbekli Tepe, older monumental enclosures in the lower center. (E. Küçük, DAI)
Bottom: Schematic plan of main excavation area (plus Enclosure E). (K. Schmidt & J. Notroff, DAI)
It is currently possible to distinguish two different phases at Göbekli Tepe although this will undoubtedly change with continued research. The site is characterised by an older layer dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) A period (ca. 9,600-8,800 calBC) which produced monumental circular huge T-shaped pillars arranged in circle-like enclosures around two even taller central pillars and a younger layer, early and middle PPN B (c. 8,800-7,000 calBC) in date. It consists of smaller rectangular buildings containing often only two small central pillars or even none at all. These may be reduced variations (or later adaptations) of the older and considerably larger monuments, of which four were excavated in the main excavation area in the mound’s southern depression. Notably these structures, labelled Enclosures A, B, C, and D, were apparently backfilled intentionally at the end of their use-lives. Enclosure D, the best preserved of the circular buildings, serves to give an impression of the general layout and set-up of these enclosures.

In the centre two colossal pillars, measuring about 5.5 m, are founded in shallow pedestals carved out of the carefully smoothed bedrock. This central pair of pillars is surrounded by a circle formed of similar, but slightly smaller pillars which are connected by stone walls and benches. While these surrounding pillars often are decorated with depictions of animals like foxes, aurochs, birds, snakes, and spiders, the central pair in particular illustrates the anthropomorphic character of the T-pillars. They clearly display arms depicted in relief on the pillars’ shafts, with hands brought together above the abdomen, pointing to the middle of the waist. Belts and loincloths underline this impression and emphasize the human-like appearance of these pillars. Their larger-than-life and highly abstracted representation
is intentionally chosen and not owed to deficient craftsmanship, as other finds like the much more naturalistic animal and human sculptures clearly demonstrate. This suggests that whatever the larger-than-life T-pillars are meant to depict and embody is on a different level than the life-sized sculptures in the iconography of Göbekli Tepe and the Neolithic in Upper Mesopotamia.

Top: Inside Enclosure D: one of the enclosure’s central pillars (P18) in front of the original backfilling sediment, illustrating the mighty layer forming the mound. (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI)

Lower Left: Pillar 43 in Enclosure D whose rich decoration clearly indicates an apparently narrative character of many of the reliefs. (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI)

Lower Right: 3D-model of Pillar 18, one of the central pillars of Enclosure D, illustrating the anthropomorphic character of the T-shaped pillars with the depiction of arms, hands, a belt and loincloth. (Scan & model: HS Karlsruhe)
Top Left: Detail of Pillar 18 showing hands, belt, and loincloth in relief. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)

Top Right: One of the limestone heads found at Göbekli Tepe, the breaking edge in the neck area indicating that these once were part of larger, life-sized sculptures. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)

Middle Right: Collection of life-sized naturalistic limestone heads from Göbekli Tepe. (Photos: N. Becker, DAI)

Bottom Right: Collection of plaquettes bearing iconographic symbolism from Göbekli Tepe. (Photo: N. Becker, DAI)
While naturalistic and abstract depictions find their most monumental manifestation on the T-shaped pillars, there are others. Similar and clearly related iconography also occurs on functional objects like so-called shaft straighteners, on stone bowls and cups, as well as on small stone tablets which apparently do not have any other function than to bear these signs. Furthermore, these objects are not restricted to Göbekli Tepe and the few other sites with T-shaped pillars in its closer vicinity, but are known from places up to 200 km around the site. A spiritual concept seems to have linked these sites to each other, suggesting a larger cultic community among PPN mobile groups in Upper Mesopotamia, tied in a network of communication and exchange.

Ethnologic and historic analogies emphasize the importance of regular gatherings and collective activities as means of maintaining social cohesion in hunter-gatherer communities. Gatherings also serve other purposes like the exchange of information, goods, and marriage partners. Such large-scale gatherings naturally need to be established in locations that are known and easily accessible for the participating groups.

Distribution of sites with T-shaped pillars, limestone stelae, and a shared iconography in Upper Mesopotamia. (Map: K. Schmidt, updated and modified by O. Dietrich, DAI)
The topographical situation of Göbekli Tepe as a landmark overlooking the surrounding plains, seem a perfectly suitable central space for these groups and people inhabiting the wider region. Large communal tasks executed as collective work events, reflected in the apparently continuous construction activity at Göbekli Tepe, provided a unifying reason for people to come together. Additionally ethnographic studies provide more examples demonstrating that work forces necessary for such collaborative projects can be gathered with the prospect of lavish feasts.

That this may have been the case at Göbekli Tepe is further corroborated by a closer look at the massive amount of filling material of the enclosures, which consists of limestone rubble, flint artefacts, fragments of stone vessels, other ground stone tools, and in particular an impressively large numbers of animal bones – above all gazelle and aurochs. These remains hint at the consumption of enormous amounts of meat, most likely during feasts framing these large-scale meetings and communal activities, including monument construction.

Repetitive feasting at Göbekli Tepe may have played an essential role not only in creating and strengthening social bonds among the individuals and groups meeting there, but must also have stressed the economic potential of these hunter-gatherers to repeatedly feed such large crowds. In response to this pressure, new food resources and processing techniques may have been explored, subsequently paving the way for a complete change in subsistence strategy. In this scenario, the early appearance of monumental religious architecture motivating work feasts to draw as many hands as possible for the execution of complex, collective tasks is changing our understanding of one of the key moments in human history: the emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry – and the onset of food production and the Neolithic way of life.

Jens Notroff and Oliver Dietrich are research assistants in the Göbekli Tepe project of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), excavations at Göbekli Tepe are carried out in close cooperation with the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Museum. Archaeobiological research is conducted by the Institute of Palaeoanatomy, Domestication Research and the History of Veterinary Medicine, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. The project is funded by the DAI and the German Research Foundation (DFG). For more insight into ongoing research at the site see the their blog at “The Tepe Telegrams.”
Chapter Four

Silk Textiles in the Southern Levant
Silk Textiles in the Southern Levant

By: Orit Shamir and Alisa Baginski

Silk, natural protein fibers produced by insect larvae, is first known from archaeology in China by the fourth millennium BCE. Valued for its drape, sheen, and ability to be dyed and woven into intricate patterns, silk spread widely across the Old World. But this process was related not only to the silk’s properties but the spread of peoples, trade, and other technologies, some seemingly unrelated.

The Hebrew word for silk, meshi, is mentioned in the Bible only once (Ezekiel 16:10; 16:13). Although Jewish historical sources of the Roman and Byzantine periods mention silk many times, there are few archaeological finds besides imported textiles from the Byzantine period. A turning point in the history of the Negev occurred around 400 CE, a period of prosperity related to the advent of Christianity and pilgrimage, which enabled the purchase of imported silk textiles. These were probably produced in Egypt where linen textiles were decorated with wool or in more rare cases – in silk.

At Nessana, four small silk fragments in compound weave were found in the ruins of a Byzantine house. One has an upper part of a roundel with a pearl border, a pair of reversed birds of prey with spread wings and pearl collar standing on half palmettos among ivy leaves. A single silk textile from the late Byzantine period (no later than 636 CE) was also found in a building at ‘Avdat, some 50 kilometers south of Be’er Sheva. The main field of the fragment is divided by light-colored double stripes into panels which contain cartouches with floral devices.

The textile was produced in Egypt, since ‘Avdat served as a way station on the road connecting Egypt with Syria. This silk textile resembles a group of decorated silk tunics found at Antinoë in Egypt and serves as an important benchmark demonstrating the high degree of weaving skills in the region just before the Islamic conquest.

The Early Islamic period (seventh-eighth centuries CE) yielded three silk textiles from Nahal ‘Omer. The site is located approximately 40 kilometers northwest of Petra on the western edge of the `Aravah. Two hundred fifty one textiles were found at the site made of cotton, linen, wool, hair and silk.
Nahal ‘Omer appears to have been a farming village on the Spice Routes joining Petra, in the Edom Mountains of modern Jordan, and the mercantile outlets on the Mediterranean Sea, notably Gaza and El Arish. These routes also led to Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, parts of the Persian Gulf, and the sea-routes to India, as well as to Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and from there all the way to China. The caravans carried a variety of trade goods as well as spices, which were a major commodity during the Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods.

Sixty one textile fragments, most made of wool, and 10 small bundles of woolen fibers, were also uncovered at ‘En Marzev, dated to the Early Islamic period (late seventh–ninth centuries CE), a date confirmed by Carbon-14 analysis (787–896 CE). One example, a white cotton textile, was decorated with red cotton bands alternating with shiny silk threads wound with silver strips that have disintegrated. It appears that precious metals may have been used in combination with fibers in order to produce luxury fabrics for political and religious elites.

Top: ‘En Marzev location.
Middle: A cotton textile decorated with red cotton bands (alternating with shiny silk, S-spun threads wound with silver strips, ‘En Marzev.
Bottom: A cotton textile decorated with red cotton bands alternating with shiny silk, S-spun threads wound with silver strips, ‘En Marzev.
Some of the differences in quality between the textile finds from Nahal ‘Omer and ‘En Marzev may be attributed to their findspots. While the finds from ‘En Marzev originated in structures that were abandoned in an orderly fashion, those from Nahal ‘Omer were found in a waste dump, representing an accumulation of objects discarded over years of habitation.

The most important silk textiles assemblage in the Southern Levant to date was found near Jericho at Qarantal Cave 38 and dates to the Medieval period (9th-13th centuries CE). Textiles were found only in one of the cave’s connected spaces.

Among the 800 textiles the most significant are the silk fragments. The textile remains are torn, cut, and patched, and many have been reused, sometimes more than once. It can be assumed that most of these fragments were parts of clothing such as tunics, trousers, and coifs although no complete garments were found. Others could be recognized as bags, wrappers, and strips for tying. Textiles in antiquity were too costly to throw away. When a garment reached a state where patching was no longer feasible, it was cut into pieces and remade into another garment or used as patches or in decorations (as a majority of the reused ones in Cave 38 were).
Many such textiles originating in Egypt have been dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. These were all luxury fabrics woven on sophisticated looms such as the drawloom, a technical apparatus for mechanical patterning. Such products have been discovered in Egypt, for example at Antinoë.

During the Byzantine period and after the Islamic conquest, centers in Syria already produced compound textiles; some have even been preserved as relic covers in the treasuries of European churches. A few were found in excavations near Rayy (Iran) together with other compound silk fragments attributed to Byzantium, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Iran. The craftsmanship is very fine, indicating that they were expensive luxury items affordable only by the upper classes. The Cave 38 silk fabrics could have been imported from Syria, Byzantium, Mesopotamia, or Persia. A few other medieval textile assemblages have been discovered, for example, at ‘Avdat, Kasr el-Yahud and at Judean Desert caves. However, none of these assemblages is as rich and diverse as the one in Cave 38 and none of them have silk textiles.

Top: Cave 38, Silk 3/2 twill, a pocket.
Middle: Cave 38, Silk, weft-faced compound tabby, octagon with stylized plant and geometric motifs.
Bottom: Cave 38, fragment of a tunic with a gore and narrow panels stitched together.
Why was such a large quantity of used and reused textiles stored in the cave? It can be assumed that the people who stored them were rag collectors or merchants who collected them for the paper-making industry. Paper had been introduced by the Arabs from China through Central Asia in the eighth century CE. It became popular in the Middle East using mainly textiles as its raw material, along with date-palm leaves and fibers from basketry and cordage. The paper was made by breaking down different organic materials into fibers, which were then soaked in water and separated using a fine netted sieve.

The principles for manufacturing paper were known in China but for a long period the secret of its discovery stayed within the borders of the Chinese Empire. It was only the wake of the Islamic conquests that the paper industry expanded, first to the Near East, and later Europe. The Arabs’ massive use of cotton as a raw material in the paper-making industry was one of the most important changes, which utilized the waste products of the local cotton-based textile industry. Though this industry is likely to have consumed most textiles in antiquity, we are fortunate that samples have been preserved in sites like Cave 38.

Orit Shamir is Curator of Organic Materials, Israel Antiquities Authority. Alisa Baginski is retired senior lecturer of textile history and retired curator of the textile study collection, Shenkar College of Textile Technology and Fashion, Israel.
Alex Joffe is the editor of the *Ancient Near East Today*. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

Cynthia Rufo is ASOR’s Archivist and Website Manager.
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