

Pella—Cradle of Civilization?

By Emily Lodge

Here in the area of the Fertile Crescent where human life began between 500,000 and 1 million years ago, archaeological discoveries are for the first time calling into question whether Mesopotamia was the only cradle of civilization or if perhaps the Jordan River Valley predates their neighbors to the east. Dr. Stephen Bourke, research scholar at the University of Sydney, Australia, spoke this week at the Royal Cultural Center in Amman, Jordan, about his thirty years of work at Pella, sixty miles northwest of Amman at an event hosted by the Australian Embassy and King Abdullah's uncle, HRH Prince Hassan.

Bourke began his talk by showing slides of the earliest free-standing sculptured monolith in the Middle East, dating around 14,000 years ago. From the same Natufian village site came a tool kit containing flint pieces and a double-edged sickle ("Gillette claims to have invented it but actually the idea dates to several thousand years ago").

In 3400 B.C., 1000 years before the pyramids, massive terrace walling and fortifications were crafted at the top of the nearby fortress hill of the Tell Husn, indicating it is one of the earliest complex urban centers known to the region.

Maritime trade with Cyprus and overland trade with Turkey has been established as early as 2800 B.C. by carbon dating organic materials found in association with copper spearheads and axes.

Pella's Middle Bronze Age city walls were built around 4000 years ago. They were four meters thick and over ten meters high, and over 1.5kms long. Large tomb deposits with over 2000 objects were associated with the city.

Probably the most significant discoveries relate to the appearance of new pyrotechnology in the sixteenth century B.C., namely glassmaking and iron/mild steel working. This predates previous discoveries in Mesopotamia and Egypt. There is also alabaster and faience brought from Egypt, and from one tomb evidence of a musical instrument—a tortoise shell used as a sounding box for a lute, found laid across the body of a musician, one of the earliest such finds in the Middle East (1600 B.C.)

From 1450 B.C. are embossed copper rams and bulls, ivory work, fragments of gold, and other indication of cult practices and, significantly "the earliest known representation of a king in Jordan" dating to 1400 B.C. There is lapis lazuli from Afghanistan indicating significant commerce eastward as well as painted ceramic vessels hinting at much greater east-west contact than generally acknowledged.

Pella was in 1350 BC the center of Egyptian administration for the north Jordan region, and after a period of collapse, a new civilization grew up in the iron age after 900 B.C. which featured a massive mud brick and stone building (probably a palace), with twenty-seven rooms currently exposed, featuring, weaving, cooking, grain and oil storage. Associated tombs are wealthy, with bronze and iron weaponry, much pottery and ivory.

Iron age Pella was destroyed in 800 B.C., probably by enemy action. In later times, Pella, re-named for the capital of Alexander the Great's homeland, may have been re-occupied by Alexander's Macedonians but the settlement certainly flourished again by 200 B.C. Roman Pella is mainly known through its rich tombs featuring much beautiful glassware.

In the Byzantine period, a 6th c AD one of the three main churches at Pella produced a reliquary under the altar still containing the relics that made it holy. On nearby Tell Husn, the Byzantine fortress was the place where Christian forces surrendered to the triumphant Islamic armies after the Battle of Fahl in 635 A.D. In 749 AD a massive regional earthquake destroyed Pella and all surrounding cities, but preserved much evidence of daily life, including one tomb containing a man dressed in Chinese silk with gold dinars fallen from the threaded garment, and much pottery and metalware.

In later Islamic times a 9th century A.D. caravanserai and a 14th century A.D. mosque were uncovered before the site was abandoned in the early Ottoman period. Bourke's team continues the work begun by Professor Basil Hennessy in the 1970s and 80s. Bourke hopes to continue his work in Jordan, in particular, by looking for the city founded by Alexander the Great and the famous 'City Temple' recorded on Roman Imperial coinage.

Prince Hassan, speaking to dignitaries that included scholars from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, concluded the evening gracefully by speaking of a common heritage of this region without boundaries—a tribute to the interaction of cultures in the entire fertile crescent. These discoveries, he said, were important because of two kinds of truths, the truth of faith—Moses, Jesus and Mohammad and “that which is less certain, the truth of historical enquiry, and the truth of our identity.”

Hassan said that he hoped to create a Standing Heritage Commission which would be a shared commitment to what “binds us together—a cosmic oath, the children of Abraham, in such a way that the roots of civilization are recognized and the lessons learned, history being cyclical.” He hoped that future research would unveil more information about the meaning and purpose the Decapolis, the ten cities of the Roman period, linking among others Pella, Jerash and Amman, known in Roman times as Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

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