

PALESTINE LETTER

WHILE extending a street on the north side of the Y.M.C.A. building in Jerusalem in May 1947, the Palestine Office of Public Works came across ruins buried in the soil of what was till recently an olive-orchard. Mr. Johns, Director of Excavations for the Department of Antiquities, who had to supervise the unearthing of these venerable remains, disclosed traces of a monastic establishment erected on ground macadamized with rubble from a quarry and with fragments of pottery. Some arch-stones, broken away from two arches of dressed stone, large brimmed tiles, stumps of columns, mosaic with garlands and geometrical designs; all this provided as many evidences of a rural foundation as were previously furnished by the excavations of 1932. After a lapse of fifteen years therefore we are now supplied with additional information. The work carried out in 1932 to prepare a sports ground for the Y.M.C.A. was the occasion of the discovery, not merely of a group of rich tombs of the third century but also of a suburban monastic foundation. The dead of this monastery rested in long rows of trenches cut in the surface limestone, while, for the living, amenities were provided such as a mill, a wine-press and baths. The establishment was occupied from the fifth to the eighth century; it is possible that a mosaic covered part of the installation during the early Middle Ages. The Greek epitaph found in this place fifteen years ago enables us to identify the establishment as a "vicariat" designed to be the graveyard and also the farm of some important monastery inside the city.

The epitaph referred to is that of an Iberian bishop, very probably called Samuel. It informs us that his tomb belongs to the monastery after being bought from the Tower of David. This last detail must certainly refer to the first monastic foundation made by a Georgian prince named Peter, who became a monk during the fifth century. This fiery monophysite originally erected some cells near the Tower of David, that is to say, in the immediate neighbourhood of the present Citadel of Jerusalem, on the street that leads to St. James'. A chapel, now a mosque under the name of el-Yakoubieh, marks the site.

It is not easy to decide exactly what were the relations between the convent of the Tower of David and that whose remains have been found near the Y.M.C.A. What was the name of the latter? It is likely that it was called St. Nicholas.

In the list of Georgian monasteries drawn up by Tsagareli we notice two under the name of St. Nicholas. The first is in town. After becoming Greek property as did so many Georgian establishments, it still exists under the name of the bishop of Myra at the end of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, opposite the Casa Nova of the Franciscan Fathers.

An Iberian inscription about this foundation was discovered there in 1881. It was an invocation to St. Nicholas on behalf of a Georgian!

princess who became a nun in this place, changing her name from Helen to Elizabeth (1625). The second monastery of St. Nicholas was outside the walls, not far from Holy Cross, and distinct from that of St. Simeon (today, Catamoun). The ruins discovered near the Y.M.C.A., less than a mile from the famous monastery of Holy Cross, well-known for its Georgian paintings and mosaics, may well be those of the suburban sanctuary of St. Nicholas.

It was likewise in the course of road-making that a wine-producing establishment of the Byzantine period was discovered in May 1942 at Colonieh. The workmen, engaged on linking up the Jaffa road with the bridge of Colonieh, unearthed from a neighbouring field planted with olive trees, a pavement of considerable extent, composed of a mosaic and the plan of an important establishment which was at the same time both monastic and agricultural. *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, will publish later a description of the discovery and the plans. We will confine ourselves here to pointing out what particularly struck us as significant during the course of a visit to the place. We were given full permission to examine the site, the interest of which could not have been foreseen and which few people have visited on account of the speed required in carrying out such work on a busy highway. Few travellers approaching the bridge realize that they are treading on historic ground! The establishment consisted of a series of rooms for the personnel, the lodgings of the clergy and a chapel with narthex. A mosaic inscription at the entrance to the sanctuary announced that it had been erected for the salvation, peace, long life and protection of the archdeacon Bassus, of count Peter, of the priest Cyriacus and of the devout followers of Christ, Theodora and Maria. The most interesting part is the wine-press and its series of receptacles with sides of mosaic. Among the objects worthy of mention we may note fragments of an altar-stone and of columns, a Byzantine lamp with inscription and some potsherds of Byzantine and Arab manufacture. Finally there is evidence to show that this Byzantine building was put up on a site previously occupied by another construction. There is nothing surprising in this for we know that Mosa, four miles from Jerusalem, was given to 800 veterans of the army of Titus, which is why the place is called Colonia.

The second campaign directed by the Reverend Father de Vaux in the summer of 1947 at Tell el Far'ah, seven miles NE. of Nablus, confirms and amplifies the results obtained from the first campaign (see *SCRIPTURE*, 1947, p. 76f). It is becoming increasingly clear that the site was inhabited from about 3,500 B.C. Not long after that date an important city developed, the levels of which followed one another at short intervals. These building levels are separated from one another by layers of ashes, implying the destruction of the city by fire at various times. At the beginning of the third millennium B.C. a rampart was

built around the inhabited area which was doubled by an advance wall—the two together forming a fortification nearly forty feet thick. The site appears to have been then abandoned for nearly a thousand years. The area which was re-occupied towards the year 1,800 B.C. seems to have been smaller and to have been confined to a part of the *tell* not yet explored. The area which has so far been examined was then used as a graveyard. Soon, houses were built, but remained few in number and ill-protected by the crumbling rampart of a bygone age. The site was apparently abandoned a second time about 800 B.C.

The most remarkable result of the campaign is the discovery of an ancient necropolis in the caves near the *tell*. In these tombs were discovered many hundreds of vases and different objects which belong to the Chalcolithic period, between 3,300 and 3,100 B.C. This collection is, in the opinion of the Director of Excavations, Père de Vaux, by far the richest that has ever been found in Palestine, dating back to this remote epoch. Several of these tombs were used again towards the seventeenth century B.C., and have likewise furnished us with rich material from the Middle Bronze Age.

Turning now to the exploration of Beth Yerah, directed by an Israelite Society, at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, we find ourselves supplied with very full information (through the reports of Messrs. Stekelis and Avi-Yonah) on the succession of archaeological strata at this site, excavated in 1945-6. The oldest layer, which has not so far shown signs of houses, exhibits excavated pit-dwellings about fifteen feet in diameter where one finds pottery of the Upper Chalcolithic Age. Early Bronze is represented by some square buildings and by a rampart of mud bricks over twenty-five feet thick. Bronze II may be distinguished by buildings raised on foundations of basalt. The longest period of occupation was that of Bronze III and was followed by a long gap implying that the *tell* was deserted until the Hellenistic period—an age which is represented by traces of a street alongside which are to be seen the remains of some buildings. The exploration has completely uncovered a bath-house of Roman type and a detailed plan of this has been published.

We record here a remark extracted from the account which sheds a good deal of light on the condition of the towns bordering the Sea of Galilee and influenced by the variations in the level of its waters: "The various levels so far described are separated by layers of water-worn gravel mixed with molluscan fauna and water-rolled potsherds. These layers of gravel are of varying thickness, 5-10 cm.; the thickest layer separates Beth-Yerah IV (i.e. Early Bronze III), from the Hellenistic period. It has been suggested that these layers are evidence of repeated floodings, which in every instance put an end to a phase of settlement. The inhabitants returned, however, to the *tell* after every flood, until the longest and most persistent one, that is the one which followed Beth-Yerah IV, drove them from the *tell*, which remained abandoned till the Hellenistic period." *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society*, Vol. XIII, page vi.

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