

In Palestinian city, diggers uncover biblical ruin

22 JUL 2011 - NABLUS, West Bank (AP) — Archaeologists unearthing a biblical ruin inside a Palestinian city in the West Bank are writing the latest chapter in a 100-year-old excavation that has been interrupted by two world wars and numerous rounds of Mideast upheaval.

Working on an urban lot that long served residents of Nablus as an unofficial dump for garbage and old car parts, Dutch and Palestinian archaeologists are learning more about the ancient city of Shekhem, and are preparing to open the site to the public as an archaeological park next year.

The project, carried out under the auspices of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities, also aims to introduce the Palestinians of Nablus, who have been beset for much of the past decade by bloodshed and isolation, to the wealth of antiquities in the middle of their city.

"The local population has started very well to understand the value of the site, not only the historical value, but also the value for their own identity," said Gerrit van der Kooij of Leiden University in the Netherlands, who co-directs the dig team.

"The local people have to feel responsible for the archaeological heritage in their neighborhood," he said.

The digging season wrapped up this week at the site, known locally as Tel Balata.

The city of Shekhem, positioned in a pass between the mountains of Gerizim and Eibal and controlling the Askar Plains to the east, was an important regional center more than 3,500 years ago. As the existing remains show, it lay within fortifications of massive stones, was entered through monumental gates and centered on a temple with walls five yards (meters) thick.

The king of Shekhem, Labaya, is mentioned in the cuneiform tablets of the Pharaonic archive found at Tel al-Amarna in Egypt, which are dated to the 14th century B.C. The king had rebelled against Egyptian domination, and soldiers were dispatched north to subdue him. They failed.

The city also appears often in the biblical narrative. The patriarch Abraham, for example, was passing near Shekhem when God promised to give the land of Canaan to his descendants in the Book of Genesis. Later, Abraham's grandson Jacob was camped outside the walls when a local Canaanite prince raped his daughter, Dinah. Jacob's sons sacked the city in vengeance. The body of Jacob's son Joseph was brought from Egypt hundreds of years later by the fleeing Israelites and buried at Shekhem.

Two millennia ago, the Romans abandoned the original site and built a new city to the west, calling it Flavius Neapolis. The Greek name Neapolis, or "new city," later became enshrined in Arabic as Nablus. In Hebrew, the city is still called Shekhem.

Nablus has since spread, and ancient Shekhem is now surrounded by Palestinian homes and car garages near the city's eastern outskirts. One morning this week, a garbage container emitted smoke from burning refuse not far from the remains of the northwestern city gate in a curved wall built by skilled engineers around 1600 B.C.

A visitor can walk through the gate, passing through two chambers before emerging inside the city. From there it is a short walk to the remains of the city's temple, with a stone stele on an outdoor platform overlooking the houses below.

The identity of the city's residents at the time remains unclear. One theory posits that they were Hyksos, people who came from northern Syria and were later expelled from Egypt. According to the Bible's account, the city was later Canaanite and still later ruled by Israelites, but archaeology has not corroborated that so far, van der Kooij said.

A German team began excavating at the site in 1913, with Nablus under the control of the Ottoman Turks. The dig was interrupted by World War I but resumed afterward, continuing sporadically into the 1930s under British rule. Much of the German documentation of the dig was lost in the Allied bombings of WWII.

American teams dug at the site in the 1950s and 1960s, under Jordanian rule. Israel conquered Nablus, along with the rest of the West Bank, in the 1967 Mideast war.

Over the years, the site fell into disrepair. The neglect was exacerbated after the first Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s, when Nablus became a center for resistance to Israeli control.

Its condition further deteriorated after the second, more violent, uprising erupted in 2000, drawing Israeli military incursions and the imposition of roadblocks and closures that all but cut the city off from the outside world. In recent years, with the Western-backed Palestinian Authority increasingly asserting security control over the cities of the West Bank, Israel has removed some roadblocks and movement has become more free.

Visitors to Nablus are still rare, but the improvements helped convince the archaeologists that the time had come to resume work.

The new excavations and the establishment of the archaeological park are a joint project of the Palestinian Tourism Ministry, the Dutch government and UNESCO. The project began last year and is scheduled to end with the opening of the park in 2012.

In Israel, archaeology, and especially biblical archaeology, has long been a hallowed national pursuit traditionally focused on uncovering the depth of Jewish roots in the land. For the Palestinians, whose Department of Antiquities was founded only 15 years ago, the dig demonstrates a growing interest in uncovering the ancient past.

The department now has 130 workers and carries out several dozen rescue excavations every year on the sites of planned building projects in areas administered by the Palestinian Authority, said Hamdan Taha, the department's director. Ten ongoing research excavations are being conducted with foreign cooperation.

All of the periods in local history, including that of the biblical Israelites, are part of Palestinian history, Taha said.

Digs like the one in Nablus, he said, "give Palestinians the opportunity to participate in writing or rewriting the history of Palestine from its primary sources."