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All for Archaeology and Archaeology for All: The Tel Burna Archaeology Project’s Approach to Community Archaeology

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Since its start in 2009, the Tel Burna Archaeological Project has had an open-door policy, allowing for anyone of any age to volunteer, with no applied time limit. This inclusive policy has exposed many different types of people to various aspects of archaeological fieldwork and research. The openness of the project is integral to the project’s philosophy regarding archaeological outreach, but poses several challenges. This paper presents the project’s approach to community archaeology, the problems that we have encountered, and our suggested solutions to those problems.

KEYWORDS Tel Burna, Community archaeology, Open archaeological project, Cultural heritage

Introduction

More and more archaeologists have come to realize that archaeological remains are part of every community’s cultural heritage. Because archaeologists must now relate their fieldwork and research to a wider audience than just archaeological specialists, there are now many ‘community archaeology’ projects worldwide (e.g. Merriman 2004; Byrne 2012; Thomas and McDavid 2014), as well as within Israel (e.g. Greenberg and Cinamon 2006, 2011; Ilan and Gadot 2010; Paz 2010). One major goal of many such projects is to enable members of the public to take part in archaeological work and expose their own past and local heritage, reflecting Henson’s (2011, 222) view on the relevance of archaeology: ‘to study the human past is to study ourselves; to realize what it is that makes us human, and that we all share an ultimately common humanity’.

Community archaeology is also gaining importance within academia, and some scholars consider it vital to the survival of archaeology as a whole (Marshall 2002, 218). The specifics of such projects differ from region to region and even from project to project in the same region. Community archaeology can include
educational programmes (schools and outreach), public lectures and presentations, alongside field work such as surveys and excavations, and post-field activities such as pottery reading, pottery washing registration and laboratory work.

Since it began in 2009, the Tel Burna Archaeological Project has opened its doors to the wider public, which has exposed both locals and foreigners to archaeology and to this site. The goal of this paper is to highlight some advantages and difficulties that we encountered during this project. We will first discuss the background of the site and project before describing the project’s approach to community archaeology. We will then describe the details of our open-site policy, and share some of the difficulties we encountered and the solutions we reached in order to create an optimal situation for both archaeological research and cultural heritage.

Tel Burna, Israel: archaeological overview

Tel Burna is located in the heart of one of Israel’s most intensively researched regions, yet until the current project commenced it was one of the few multi-period settlements that had remained unexcavated. The site is located in the Judean Shephelah, along the northern banks of Wadi Guvrin (Figure 1).

The site was first included amongst the biblical sites of the Shephelah in the 1800s, following its mapping during the Survey of Western Palestine, and many researchers identified the site as biblical Libnah (for a complete and detailed review of the early modern research of the site, see McKinny and Dagan 2013). Libnah, one of the

![Map showing the location of Tel Burna and surrounding sites. Wadis (riverbeds) are marked in italics.](image)

**FIGURE 1** Map showing the location of Tel Burna and surrounding sites. Wadis (riverbeds) are marked in italics.
Levitical cities, was an important Judean city in the western Shephelah during the Iron Age II (1000–586 BCE). Regardless of whether Tel Burna actually was Libnah, the site’s importance during the Iron Age was clear to many scholars, such as Aharoni and Amiran, who noted that the summit was likely fortified during this period (Aharoni and Amiran 1955).

Our survey of Tel Burna (Uziel and Shai 2010, 2014) clearly showed that the range of settlements at the site lasted from the third millennium BC to the mid-first millennium BC, when many of the important Judean cities in the Shephelah were destroyed during the Babylonian conquest. We used the results of this survey to both create a chronological sequence of human activity at the site and to define areas of excavation.

During five excavation seasons, we have excavated three areas (Figure 1 inset). The first area (A1) is located along the eastern slopes of the summit, in a section of the upper tel. We placed the second area (A2) at the center of the tel’s summit, where the construction of a fortification system resulted in a nearly square flat area of 70 m x 70 m. The third area (B) sits on a long platform to the west of the upper tel, between the rise of the presumed Iron Age II fortifications on the east and the slope of the natural hill to the west.

We discovered the earliest finds in Area B, which dates back to the Late Bronze Age. These include a portion of a massive building and other surfaces related to this building, some of which date back to the thirteenth century BC. The finds inside the building suggest a public function for the structure, including some cult-oriented artefacts such as chalices, goblets, cup and saucer vessels, zoomorphic vessels and ceramic masks. Alongside the typical local Canaanite vessels, we also discovered imported Cypriot and Mycenaean vessels, including Cypriot and Aegean zoomorphic vessels and two imported large Cypriot pithoi. Other finds also hinted at the building’s importance, including a cylindrical seal, a scarab, beads and a large amount of bones – particularly the number of burnt bones. While the excavation continues in this area, our current interpretation of the building and related finds is that it was a public building where cultic activity took place.

The summit is defined by the distinct remains of inner and outer fortification walls. Excavations thus far have revealed a segment of the fortification walls in the north-east corner of the summit that was partially exposed along the perimeter of the upper tel. The fortifications of Tel Burna were in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BC. The discovery of a seventh century BC silo cutting through the inner wall of the fortifications indicated that while the outer wall may have continued to function, the inner wall clearly went out of use by the seventh century BC. The Iron Age II casemate wall reflects the role of this site as a Judean fortified border city during this period (Shai et al. 2012). The location of Tel Burna – midway between Gath, the dominant Philistine city in the Iron Age IIA, and Lachish, the main Judean city monitoring the road along Nahal Guvrin, with visibility all the way to the coastal plain – would explain why the central authority of Judah established a walled site so close to the city of Lachish.

We also discovered remains from the seventh and eighth centuries BC at the centre of the plateau created by the fortifications. A poorly preserved Persian Period (538–323 BCE) layer overlaid this plateau, which contained some reused Iron Age
architecture. The Iron Age IIC remains uncovered at Tel Burna consist of a series of silos and related architectural elements. Six stone-lined silos were cut into the earlier remains (sometimes even reusing the earlier features), and are found across the entire summit. We recovered archaeobotanical remains from the silos through sediment flotation. Our analysis of these remains indicates that the silos were used for storage rather than as refuse pits, and suggests that crop processing did not take place in the direct vicinity of the silos.

The eighth century BC remains also included a large well-built building with a typical Four-Room House plan (see for example Faust and Bunimovitz 2003). This building was only partially exposed but we can already suggest a few interpretations. First, its location inside the fortified area, its size and construction methods, and the discovery of a lamedh-mem-lamedh-kaph-(LMLK)-stamped handle (linked to the eighth century BCE administrative system — see for example Ussishkin 1977) all suggest that this was a public or an elite building. Second, the pottery assemblage is of the typical terminal eighth century BC repertoire, and very similar to Lachish Level III, the 701 BCE destruction of the city by Sennacherib, king of Assyria (Ussishkin 2004). Third, we discovered several pillar figurines in this building. As noted by Kletter (1996), this figurine is typical of Judah. The presence of the Judahite attributes (i.e. the pottery, the plan, the pillar figurines and the finds linked to Judahite administration), together with the well-built casemate wall, indicates that the site was part of regional strategic planning. As mentioned above, the location of the site between Philistine Gath and Judahite Lachish was probably the main reason behind the establishment of this settlement during the Iron Age II.

What is an open archaeological project? What was possible at Tel Burna?

Prior to fieldwork, the Tel Burna Archaeological Project posed several academic research questions and aims, some of which we summarized above. The well-preserved remains at the summit of the tel led to another major project goal: to make the site an open-access site, where remains of a typical town of the Judean Shephelah could be preserved and presented to the public, in order to demonstrate what life was like in the region almost 3000 years ago. A recent M.A. thesis, written under the supervision of the first author, presents possible ways to develop the site for tourism (Sheinin forthcoming).

From the outset, we initiated an open-door policy at Tel Burna. Anyone was welcome to join for as long as they liked with no minimum stay – even including stays on a daily or hourly basis (Figures 2–5).

In addition, we placed no age limit on the potential participants, which led to interaction between old and young visitors, local and foreign, experienced and beginners. This proved to be difficult in certain cases. One issue was that some volunteers (e.g. very young and elderly volunteers) had trouble climbing the steep mound. Currently, we are attempting to drive these volunteers up the mound in order to facilitate their arrival. The above mentioned M.A. thesis (Sheinin forthcoming) outlined a plan to make the site wheelchair accessible. Another issue arose when
several small children arrived with only a single adult to supervise. This issue was more difficult to overcome, and as a result we now require that each adult bring no more than two small children at a time. Despite these issues, our intention of

FIGURE 2  A father and his child working together in one of the squares.

FIGURE 3  Parents and children sifting.
FIGURE 4 A daily explanation of the site, the excavation method and safety instructions for new volunteers.

FIGURE 5 The director (I.S.) explains the meaning and importance of the head of a figurine, just discovered, to the volunteers.
opening the excavation to all who were interested remained. Several facets of reasoning underpinned our approach.

The site belongs to everyone— an archaeological site is an asset of cultural heritage and as such, its history is part of everyone’s past. This is particularly felt in rural settlements surrounded by archaeological sites (such as in the Shephelah region), where local populations feel a close tie with the region’s history and often visit and study nearby historical locales. When fully integrated into the project, local community members can help to protect the site against looting because they are near the site year-round, not just during fieldwork seasons. For example, one of our regular volunteers, Ido Ginaton, is a local kibbutz member with a strong connection to archaeology. Beyond participating in fieldwork almost every season, he continues to both research the site and collect information on past looting of nearby burials.2

By opening the project’s doors with no minimum stay requirements, participants are able to overcome some of the financial and logistical difficulties of participation (i.e. paying for a week’s stay in order to dig, and taking extended time off work). Removing the age requirements creates excavation opportunities for children with an interest in archaeology, and the lack of financial commitment makes it easier for their parents to allow them to participate.

The involvement of both locals and the wider community makes the site and its past a part of both of their worlds, creating various circles of belonging to the site and to the past as a whole. This links well with conservation and reconstruction needs. One case in point is the preservation of the Iron Age II fortification system (Shai et al. 2012) that encloses the site’s summit. As a monumental structure, it is something that is easy for everyone to recognize as being outstanding and impressive, and thus worthy of conservation.

This approach has the potential to attract more volunteers, not in the sense of manpower, but rather as a community of learners who want to gain knowledge about the past and take part in this study (Chirikure and Pwiti 2008, 467).

Despite our optimism above about the open philosophy of the Tel Burna project, we have encountered many difficulties, particularly with regard to the balance between opening our doors, keeping a robust scientific excavation methodology, and avoiding damage to the remains. We found that some on-site activities are easier to undertake than others when working with untrained volunteers, for example surface survey (Uziel and Shai 2010), cleaning of agricultural installations and even digging shovel test pits (Shai and Uziel 2014). In the case of surveys, after we had given volunteers a brief explanation of our method and goals, they were able to help with collecting artefacts from the surface immediately. Cleaning agricultural installations and shovel test pits require more careful work, yet the risk of dismantling or damaging remains is still minimal. Furthermore, because one of our core staff supervised the work on test pits and agricultural installations, there was little chance that artefacts would be lost (Figure 6).

Full excavations are more challenging because excavators can easily destroy archaeological remains— particularly those of the pre-Roman period, which are often smaller and more fragile— if they are not careful. An untrained eye will not distinguish between a stone wall and the collapse around it, or a beaten earth
floor and the fill below and above it. Therefore the specific challenges inherent in the site itself, and in the type of archaeology we are trying to accomplish, necessarily limited the ‘openness’ of our ‘open project’ at Tel Burna.

**Weighing up the pros and cons of open archaeology**

The title of this section is erroneous in its essence because weighing up the pros and cons suggests that there is an option to be decided upon – that is, whether or not to integrate the wider public into the archaeological world. But in reality there is no option because archaeology cannot survive as the inheritance of the few. Its connection to communities must be made stronger. That said, there is no doubt that different projects have approached this challenge in various ways. One common strategy is to integrate local schools into nearby archaeological projects, with different classes participating in fieldwork and schools hosting lectures by the archaeologists. This is the most common system used in Israeli projects, where schools and children are assumed to be the best candidates to serve as the backbone of community archaeology. This assumption is based on the fact that children have free time to spend on archaeology, especially if it is part of their school requirements. Fieldwork has an impact on school children lasting many years (Barker et al. 2001, 2) and indeed fieldwork is a memorable learning experience. Participating in an archaeological dig enhances this experience because it combines fieldwork outside the classroom with history, geography and environmental studies (Malone 2008, 15) and in our case also biblical studies. Still, schools have several limitations, as there is not always a nearby school willing to take part in the project and the target audience
is quite limited. Furthermore, as it is the school and not the child who is initiating participation in the dig, the challenge of exciting the children is more difficult and the children can develop negative attitudes towards archaeology. For example, in one instance, an entire field season was planned around the participation of a school at a nearby kibbutz. In preparation for their fieldwork, staff on the dig gave the children several lectures at the school. Despite much planning and effort, the institution could not find the proper funding and cancelled immediately before the season. Although this could have caused great problems at our end, our open-door policy allowed other volunteers to participate so we still made much progress during the season. We have made other school connections since then and students from these schools participate on a regular basis.

The interest and participation of students from one school, an hour’s drive from the site, has led to at least one additional joint collaboration. Moshe Sharett Junior High School is located in Kefar Saba, which is about an hour’s drive from the site. This group comes every year for one day of digging, and we visit the school at least once. The day starts at around 8 am and the children are given a brief tour of the site and an explanation of the dig methods and tools, including safety instructions. They join us also in the post-field activity, washing pottery and participating in the pottery reading. This is one of the highlights of the day, as they see the beginning of the analysis process.

Because the Tel Burna project welcomes the participation of individuals for any amount of time, we have opened up the excavations to a wide variety of people, many of whom return on a regular basis. Because they return consistently, these individuals can help new volunteers understand the archaeological concepts they have already learned. For example, returning volunteers often help guide newer participants in practical field methods.

Furthermore, having different kinds of participants (schoolchildren, archaeology students and professional archaeologists) exposes each type of participant to different ways of seeing archaeology. For example, by placing archaeology students alongside the professional supervisor, the volunteers have another person available to answer questions and learn about other views and opinions. Furthermore, the children, especially, inject a certain amount of excitement into the work through their natural curiosity. We also strive to integrate participants from local kibbutzim and villages, all of whom have vast experience and knowledge of the geography, economy and landscape of the region. This broad mix of participants overcomes the danger of inexperience among volunteers because they are always in the presence of both professional archaeologists and experienced volunteers.

Regular volunteers come from both local (kibbutz Beit Nir, Galon, Lachish) and distant (Rehovot, Kefar Aviv, Jerusalem, etc.) locations. Most of these volunteers come alone every year, some participating for several days. Their age and background varies, ranging from retirees who dreamed of participating in archaeological excavations to people taking leave from their jobs in order to participate. A unique and fascinating example of one volunteer is Mr Jeremy Szanton, who joined us in the field from our second year onwards. Having a previous interest in pottery through his profession as an art teacher, he trained and acquired the skills in order to become the project’s pottery restoration artist!
Despite our successes in broadening our participant base, unfortunately, the sector of Israeli society that has participated to date is limited. While we welcome anyone with the permit to reside in Israel—regardless of race, religion or gender—most of our volunteers belong to the Israeli middle or upper class. Furthermore, the schools willing to take the time to join the archaeological excavations are also, for the most part, from the same socioeconomic areas. This division of volunteers exists almost certainly because these groups have more economic freedom to take time out for non-work activities, not because they have an above average interest in archaeology. Volunteers have not yet included members from several sectors of the population that we would welcome (e.g. Arab, ultra-Orthodox, Ethiopian).

In addition to local non-academic volunteers, academic institutions and students from both Israel and abroad participate in the project. Students from Ariel University, with which the project is affiliated, come to Tel Burna to dig and earn academic credits. International collaborations bring scholars from the United States (U.S.), Germany, the Czech Republic, Canada and elsewhere. Like most academic excavations in Israel, volunteers and students from abroad come for at least one week. Some return every year and others come just once for the experience. The nationality, age and background of the students varies greatly, as participants from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Europe and America, from different cultures and with different traditions, work together and gain knowledge.

One major problem with an open-door policy is that it creates a backlog of laboratory work, as most groups and walk-ins prefer fieldwork. Pottery washing is particularly challenging, and because this task is quite tedious, volunteers often leave prior to the washing. Although we constantly stress the importance of laboratory work, we do not force the volunteers to take part in it. Instead, we minimize this issue by recruiting laboratory workers from weekly volunteers, small groups looking for non-field archaeological experiences, and students. In addition, we offer special perks (like the swimming pool) to those who return to the base camp to help with the afternoon activities. We have found this particularly useful in recruiting families. To date, we have managed to create a situation where, by the end of each summer season, all finds are cleaned and sorted—although this is often at the expense of full-time volunteers (that is, those who participate for a week or more, and reside in the excavation camp). We are continuing to explore solutions to this sort of challenge.

One of our duties is not only to expose the public to archaeological work, but also to present our work and results in both Hebrew and English. We do this in various ways: field tours, public lectures, popular articles, news reports and an ongoing blog. Our blog, found at http://telburna.wordpress.com/, presents the result of fieldwork, laboratory analyses and other activities. It also includes news and updates, a brief explanation of the site, its story and the story of our researchers and staff. An additional section presents publications that have resulted from work at the site. We are sometimes troubled by the possibility of presenting finds in a public forum and having them published without our permission. However, we can take other steps to prevent this, including the quick scientific publication of finds, and the use of low-quality photographs without scales. Thus far this has proved satisfactory.
It is no small challenge to open the doors of a scientific research project. It is, however, a must if we are to view human history as something that belongs to all. It is this approach that led to the open-door policy of the Tel Burna Archaeological Project. While we have had some difficulties, our experience clearly shows that there are many advantages, and the more projects there are that regard this aspect of archaeology as of utmost importance, the broader the influence will be. We will not see large-scale results overnight.

In Israel’s not so distant past, archaeology played an important part in nationalism and patriotism. Those attitudes shifted over time both as a result of archaeologists in the region taking more of an interest in research and less in cultural heritage, but also as a result of shifts in attitudes towards technological developments, which form a significant portion of both Israeli economy as well as daily life. Therefore, archaeology became less involved in people’s lives and its importance to the general public dwindled. By reaching more people through archaeology, we can re-awaken the importance of the region’s past. The wider the net of volunteers, crossing social, economic and ethnic boundaries, the wider the net of those being reached will be. Our contacts with people like Ido and Jeremy (mentioned above) have created archaeological ambassadors who speak of their experiences, share them with others and even bring other volunteers to enjoy those same experiences. Connections with the local community have already yielded important results in the sense of protecting the archaeological site and its remains, and, as noted earlier, bringing to light information about items looted from the site in the past. While legislation in Israel protects sites from looting, the distance of the site from cities and large towns, as well as the lack of human presence for much of the year, creates opportunities for looters. Although the Israel Antiquities Authority makes every attempt to prevent such looting, it is the local community (particularly farmers and herders) who protect the site’s ancient past, especially as they have developed a feeling of being connected with the site itself.

Notes

A casemate wall is a fortification common in the Iron Age in Israel, where two parallel walls are connected by perpendicular walls, forming small chambers. These chambers could then be filled with rubble during times of war in order to form a very thick wall.

Recently, thanks to Ido’s research and information he received from a friend from his kibbutz, we were able to locate the Late Bronze Age cemetery and identify one of the looted burial caves. The cave was looted during the 1970s, but some of the leftover broken vessels were collected by the locals. The vessels were given to the Tel Burna Archaeological Project in order to study and publish the material.

References


**Notes on contributors**

Itzhaq Shai finished his PhD at Bar Ilan University and was a post-fellow at the Harvard University and a junior research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University. He is the director of the Tel Burna Archaeological
Joe Uziel received his PhD on the Middle Bronze Age in the southern Coastal Plain of Israel from Bar Ilan University in 2008, and was co-director of the Tel Burna Archaeological Project from 2009 to 2011. Since 2011, Joe has worked for the Israel Antiquities Authority, directing numerous excavations in Jerusalem.

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