

# AMMONITES ON CAMPUS

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The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is young (50 years) as nations go. But it sits on history as old as the hills, a history whose origins are lost in the mists of time. Like its mother country, the University of Jordan is a toddler, though in academic circles. The June, 1972, graduation exercises celebrated the University's 10th anniversary. But the students walk on a campus which is also as old as the hills. A handful of the University's 3000 plus students recently had the opportunity to dig into those hills to see just how old they might be, or rather to see how long the human race has been living around this corner of the globe. It came about in this way.

The Department of History and Archaeology is in the Faculty of Arts. But within the discipline of archaeology, recent years have shown an increasing emphasis on the scientific end of things. This is not opposed to the study of the Humanities but rather supplements the traditional concern for human affairs. The core of the scientific approach is the laboratory and the experiment. How do you experiment in archaeology? You set up an outdoor lab where students can practice their digging techniques and try out the theories they've learned in the classroom.



Photo: Dr. Henry O. Thompson

The third year (1971-72) archaeology students at the University of Jordan. From left to right: Safa Hoddad, Jom'a Kryem, Mahmoud Bargawe, Marwan Abu Khalef, Amin Jaber, Khabid Majali, Rose Akeel, Katrina Zriakat;



Photo: Dept. of Antiquities, Jordan

Tell Siran from the north, May 1972.

When you are setting up an archaeological lab, it's convenient to have the archaeology close at hand. The University of Jordan is probably unique in having an ancient tell right in its own backyard. Tell Siran stands off in a campus corner behind the present science buildings and the new hospital. Its 85 dunams are heavily covered with the pines, figs and olives planted in the '40's by the Agricultural Experiment Station which then owned the land. An earlier owner left his name attached to the tell. 'Siran' may mean "sheep fold" but its meaning attaches only to the man and tells us nothing about the tell itself.

Siran is noted on a 1932 map of the area but beyond that apparently no one took it seriously as an antiquities site. The University, however, requires its third year majors in archaeology to do 100 hours of field work to supplement their book learning in the classroom. Here was a place on campus, "ready made" for that field experience. Was it mere convenience however, or was there sufficient merit in the site to make it this open air lab for the scientific approach to excavation? In other words, was it worth digging?

Ancient occupation sites are marked by broken bits of pottery strewn around the surface. These are brought to the top through successive generations of farmers with their plows or builders digging foundation trenches. The painted designs or the

shape of a rim or the quality of its manufacture, all point to the age of each piece. During the winter, the eight students in the third year class for archaeology made a systematic survey of the hill. They found pottery from the Mameluke (12-14th centuries A.D.), Umayyid (7th century), and early Byzantine (5th century) periods, and the Iron Age (6-7th centuries B.C.). Here then was a tell which would give the students training in digging through more than one historical period. Each of the periods at Tell Siran needs more information from this part of the world. The decision was made!

Digging started in mid-April and lasted till mid-May, with this writer as director. The students themselves did the actual digging. It was exhausting work but gave them a feel for what it was all about. Later, supervising others, they would know what the worker was supposed to be doing.

An open area on the flat top of the mound was chosen as the place to dig. Ancient villages perched on hilltops and here the full history of the mound could be revealed. Unfortunately, erosion must have taken its toll for the student diggers found bedrock in 50 cm. All of the fill above bedrock dated from the latest occupation, the Mameluke. The earlier material must be elsewhere, perhaps washed down the hillside. But students did



Photo: Dept. of Antiquities, Jordan

Tell Siran—the excavated areas at the end of the expedition.

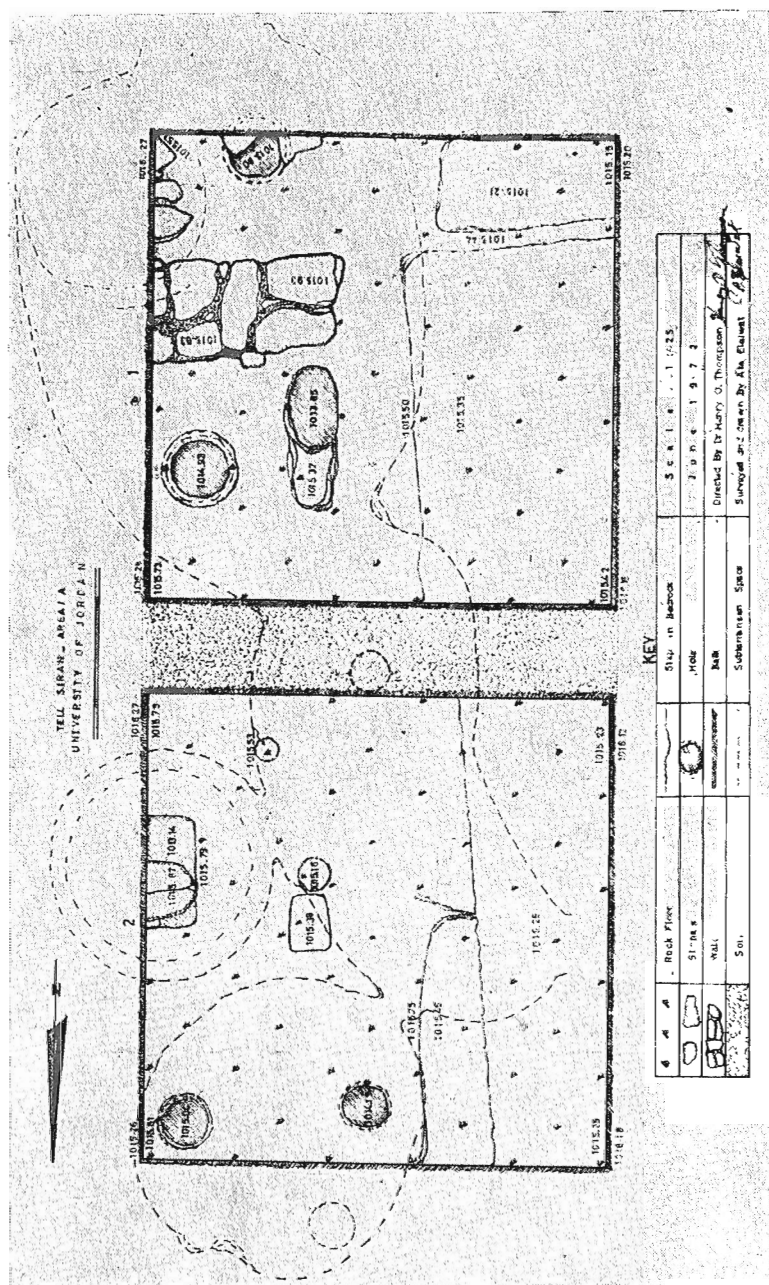


Photo: Dept. of Antiquities, Jordan  
 Fig. 1. Tell Siran, May 1972.  
 The excavated areas showing the cisterns and underground rooms.

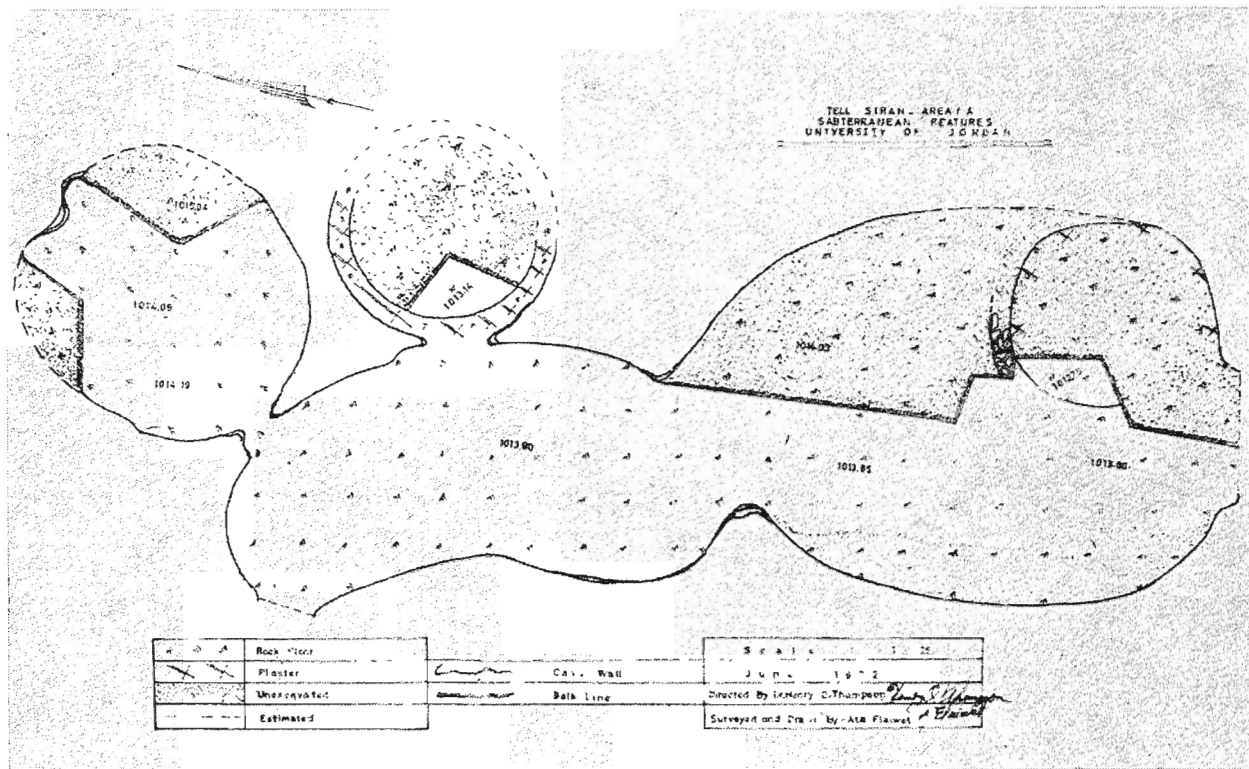


Fig. 2.—Tell Siran, May 1972.  
Plan of two cisterns and two underground rooms. The door leading outside (presumably) is at the lower left.

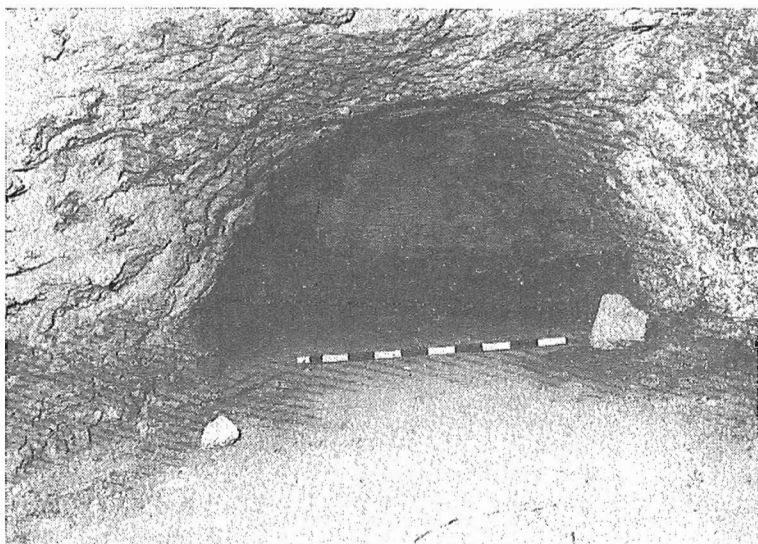


Photo: Dept. of Antiquities, Jordan

Tell Siran—the underground room with a vaulted ceiling.

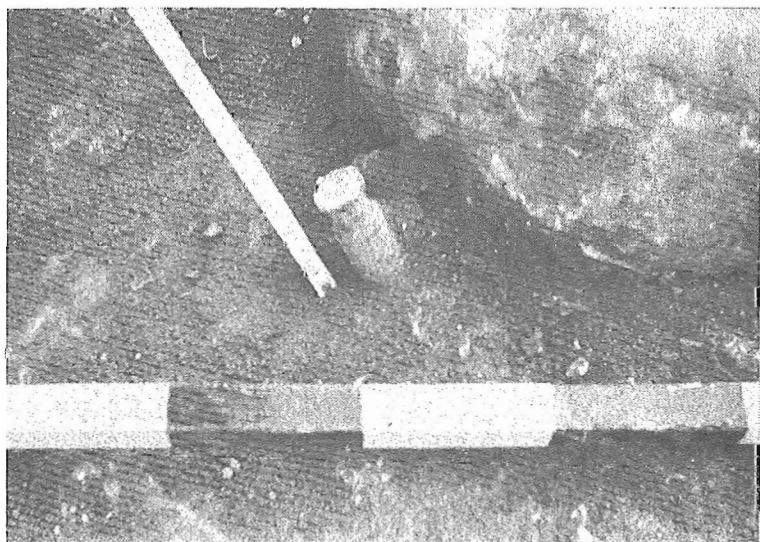


Photo: Dr. Henry O. Thompson

Tell Siran, 1972—the bronze artifact with the Ammonite inscription, as found.

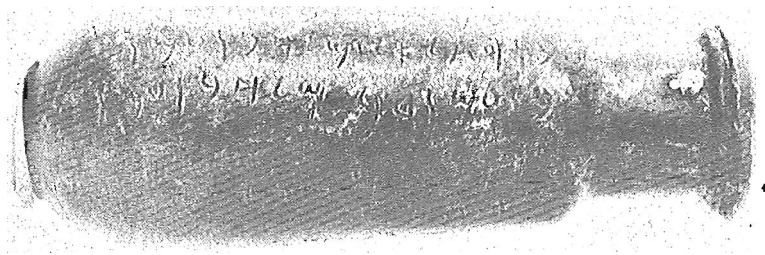


PHOTO. DEPT. OF ANTIQUITIES, JORDAN  
Tell Siron, 1972—the bronze artifact with the Ammonite inscription.

get their training—in digging, in drawing and recording, in washing, sorting and registering the potsherds so important for a profile of the site's history.

Bedrock interestingly enough did not stop their digging, for they found a series of cisterns. Several shallow ones may have been for grain storage while the bigger ones were for water. One of these had plastered walls and two thirds of the way down, a plastered bench big enough to sit on. The bench stirs the imagination. Perhaps the children crawled in here and dabbled their feet in the pool below. At some point in history, four of these cisterns were enlarged and connected to form two underground rooms. The larger one is somewhat irregular in shape and has a subsidiary wall coming out into the middle—perhaps the remains of one of the earlier cisterns. The second room has a smoothly vaulted ceiling ranging from 75 cm. to 1 m. high. The door from the bigger room is only 75 cm. high, while on the opposite end is a door leading to the west. This door is also small, less than a meter in height. It is still blocked. The slope of the overlying bedrock suggests that this door leads to the outside, where its entrance is still hidden. Perhaps it has always been hidden. The rooms are too small for normal human living and too much work to cut out for ordinary sheep pens. Maybe they were primitive bomb shelters—places of refuge in time of war or bedouin raids.

Among the artifacts discovered in the digging, one is of outstanding interest. It is of bronze, shaped like a bottle, 10 cm.

long, weighing 273 grams. It was covered with corrosion when it was found and seemed to merit no special attention. It might be a weight for a balance scale, though its real function remains unknown. In due time, it was taken along with the other materials to the conservation section of the Department of Antiquities, co-sponsor of the dig. Here it was cleaned and for the first time, its greater significance came to light. Letters appeared on the sides of the bottle. They are in the Phoenician script of the 6-7th centuries B.C. This script was common throughout the eastern Mediterranean world in that period.

Dr. Fawzi Zayadine of the Department of Antiquities made the initial translation. The inscription is Ammonite. It names three Ammonite kings. And while it is short, it is the first complete Ammonite inscription ever discovered! That makes it a pretty rare piece. A technical study will be published soon but in the meanwhile, the preliminary translation gives the general meaning of the text. It's about the works of Amminadab, King of the Ammonites, son of Hasiel'l (or Pusiel'l), King of the Ammonites, son of Amminadab, King of the Ammonites. The first Amminadab is probably the one mentioned as an Ammonite king in records of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal who led military campaigns through this area about 667 B.C. This Amminadab built a vineyard, a garden, a temple (?), and cisterns. The inscriber finished scratching with the tip of his penknife by giving a kind of benediction or blessing which we can all appreciate. It is hoped that Amminadab might "enjoy many days and long years".