A Legacy of Publication: William Frederic Bade and Tell en-Nasbeh

JEFFREY R. ZORN

Long-time readers of BAR are familiar with names such as Albright, Petrie, Glueck, de Vaux and Kenyon, pioneers who helped shape the field of Biblical archaeology. There are, however, a number of scholars who made important contributions in their day but who are often as little known to professional archaeologists today as they are to lay readers. William Frederic Bade is one of these.

Bade spent five seasons (1926, 1927, 1929, 1932 and 1935) excavating the eight-acre site of Tell en-Nasbeh, seven miles northwest of Jerusalem, the site usually identified as the Biblical town Mizpah of Benjamin. Mizpah was an important site in the period of the Judges and the early Monarchy. The tribes of Israel gathered there for their war with Benjamin (Judges 19-20); along with Gilgal and Bethel, it was on Samuel’s yearly circuit (1 Samuel 7:16), and Saul was elected king there (1 Samuel 10:17-24).

By the time Bade finished, he had excavated approximately two-thirds of the site, most of it down to bedrock. Tell en-Nasbeh is the most broadly excavated site of its size ever investigated. It has much to teach us about how an ancient society organized itself spatially.

Bade was born in Carver, Minnesota, on January 22, 1871, the eldest of the ten surviving children of William Bruns and Anna Voight Bade. His earliest years were spent on a farm in the Midwest. He graduated from Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1892; in 1894 he was ordained by the Moravian Theological Seminary. Like many students, then and now, he worked to put himself through school; for him this meant giving music lessons and serving as an organist. He soon learned Hebrew, but desiring to know more about the early sources of the Bible, he spent two years at Yale learning Arabic, Akkadian, Ethiopic and Aramaic. Eventually he came to read 14 languages and to speak fluent German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Arabic. In 1898 he received a Ph.D. from the Moravian Theological Seminary and until 1902 served as professor of Hebrew and Old Testament literature there. In 1902, at the age of 31, he was invited by the president of the Pacific Theological Seminary (later
the Pacific School of Religion) to become the school’s professor of Old Testament literature and Semitic languages, a post he held until his death in 1936.

Bade’s scholarly life in Berkeley falls into three broad, overlapping phases: his early years as a professor of Old Testament (1902-1914), the John Muir years (1914-1924) and the Tell en-Nasbeh years (1925-1936).

Bade taught the then still new, and very radical, documentary hypothesis, which seeks to identify the sources used to create the Pentateuch. His most significant work of this period is The Old Testament in the Light of Today, which made available in English ideas that before were only found in German.

In addition to being an Old Testament professor and archaeologist, Bade was a humanitarian. During the First World War, he served as California state chairman of the Commission for Relief in Belgium and northern France. When an earthquake hit Yokohama, Japan, in 1923, he led the effort to raise a relief collection at his school.

Bade’s most significant non-scholarly activity was as a naturalist. In 1903, the year after he moved to California, he became a member of the Sierra Club, a membership he maintained for the rest of his life. Not only did he participate in many of the club’s outings, but he also contributed articles to the Sierra Club Bulletin and served as its editor from 1910 to 1922. From 1919 to 1922 he was also president of the Sierra Club.

Bade was a friend of the famous naturalist John Muir and worked closely with him on projects to preserve wilderness areas in California. After Muir died in 1914, his daughters asked Bade to be their father’s literary executor. When he accepted the task, he had no idea how immense the project would be. Though large sections of Muir’s correspondence had perished, Bade persevered with the same meticulous patience that marked all his work. In the end his efforts produced The Writings of John Muir, published in eight volumes, and The Life and Letters of John Muir, a biography in two volumes.

The royalties from these publications subsequently helped fund Bade’s excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh.

Bade arrived in Jerusalem on February 11, 1926. At the suggestion of William F. Albright, he soon visited Tell en-Nasbeh. Both then interested in the identification of the site as Mizpah, and Bade quickly decided to excavate the site. In six short weeks he was able to obtain all the licenses, funding, workers, staff and quarters to begin his work (a cry from today’s digs, which can require years before they are ready to take to the field).

In the course of the excavations, a total of 572 rooms and 387 bins, caves, cisterns, silos and tombs were cleared within the town, and another 71 tombs were excavated outside the walls. Bade uncovered a massive offset-inset wall and inner-outer gate complex, probably the work of King Asa of Judah, as recorded in 1 Kings 15:22. Although not recognized as such until recently, Bade also excavated remains from the Babylonian period (586-539 B.C.); in fact, Tell en-Nasbeh is the only site that has yielded significant material remains from this otherwise unknown phase in the material cultural history of the area.

Thousands of artifacts were described, drawn and photographed. Pride of place must go to the seal of Jawazannah, which shows a rooster in a fighting stance (one of the earliest representations from Israel of the chicken) and reads “Belonging to Jawazannah, the Servant of the King.” This is quite possibly the Jawazannah mentioned in 2 Kings 25:23 and Jeremiah 40:8. Tell en-Nasbeh has also provided us with rich collections of official stamp impressions and objects such as plow points, slings stones and jewelry. Recent neutron activation analysis has shown that the Philistine pottery found at Tell en-Nasbeh was locally produced, not imported from the coastal plain.

Slowly Bade and his assistants invented their own methods of excavation and recording, essentially a variant of the methods advocated by Clarence S. Fisher, the foremost archaeological architect of his time. These methods were described in Bade’s 1934 Manual of Excavation in the Near East. This is the most extensive presentation of Fisher’s basic methods ever published and so holds an important place in the history of archaeological techniques. While parts of the work deal with the organization and motivation of paid workers, other sections deal with artifact drawing and registration and architectural analysis. Tell en-Nasbeh was also the first excavation to make a film of its work, beating the Gezer expedition by 40 years.

As a rallying point for supporters, Bade founded the Palestine Institute in 1928 at the Pacific School of Religion. In 1941 a permanent building was erected to house the institute and the materials from the excavation. In 1976 it was renamed the Bade Institute of Biblical Archaeology.

By the time of his death, in 1936, Bade had published a series of preliminary reports on the site and articles on several of the more important artifacts. The institute he founded continued the work of analysis and publication. Despite delays caused by the Great Depression and World War II, the final report of Bade’s Nasbeh excavations appeared in 1947. This has remained the standard work on the site until the 1990s, when I began my reappraisal of the excavation archives and artifacts.

Bade was not a great archaeological innovator or intuitive investigator like Albright. This is probably why he is so little remembered today. Bade did, however, make important contributions to Biblical archaeology. These lay in his abilities as an excavation organizer, keen observer and meticulous recorder (according to the standards of his day); his prompt preliminary reports; and his skills as an editor and as an assimilator and disseminator of the theories of others (both in Old Testament studies and archaeology). The revised understanding of the Nasbeh material that will appear in an upcoming issue of BAR would have been impossible without the detailed and systematically organized and preserved excavation records and artifacts housed in the Bade Institute.

Jeffrey Zorn is adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University.

Authors

Nadav Na’aman (“Cow Town or Royal Capital?” p. 43) is professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University. He co-edited From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel (1994).

Amos Nur (“Earthquake! Inspiration for Armageddon,” p. 48) is the Wayne Loel Professor of Earth Sciences and Professor of Geophysics at Stanford University. Co-author Hagai Ron is a research scientist at the Geological Institute of Israel. Nur and Ron produced the award-winning documentary video The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Earthquakes in the Holy Land.