Indiana Zorn and the Web Site of Tell en-Naṣbeḥ

For some time I have felt that the World Wide Web will be the next great vehicle for allowing scholars to publish preliminary (even final) reports of their research, more general popular articles, reference materials (such as site bibliographies), databases, and solicitations for volunteer help which both lay and professional audiences would find useful. The cost of the software and hardware necessary to produce Web sites is dropping daily, and many universities and museums have technology which members of their staff/faculty can use for this purpose. Most material which scholars will put on the Web will initially consist of already existing text and illustrations, requiring primarily personal initiative to translate it into an Internet resource.

Recently, I set out to produce a scholarly Web site for my work on Tell en-Naṣbeḥ. My goal was to produce something quickly which was simple and easy to navigate, fast loading, which contained useful material, and which had a professional appearance. I did not want to be bothered with having to learn HTML code. Fortunately, there is a growing volume of Web-authoring software which hides all the tiresome code and offers the user a more word processing-like environment. These programs still have some quirks (often it is not possible to fine things up just the way you want without investing a great deal of time; previewing your work on your own browser is a must) and are at about the level that word processors were in the early 1990s. I chose Microsoft FrontPage 97 after evaluating a number of software reviews; now however, half a year after my purchase, there are likely other programs which will do the job just as well.

The most important part of the project was designing the flow of the site. My basic structure is a tree-like hierarchy leading off an initial main menu; for example, an article on Tell en-Naṣbeḥ, my CV, a site bibliography, or an archive of video clips. This structure guided me in the selection and organization of the material I would use. I adapted and expanded an earlier article that I had written about Tell en-Naṣbeḥ for the main text to appear on my Web site and began evaluating possible illustrations.

I wanted illustrations that would clarify main points and be a representative sample of the site material. Fortunately, I own a scanner and a good photo paint program so it was easy for me to produce all the illustrations at home. I wanted clear illustrations which would load quickly. Nothing is more frustrating than sitting on the end of a modem waiting for a graphic to load. I converted my original .pcx format scans into .jpg format (which creates much smaller files) with my paint program. I decided not to incorporate the illustrations directly within the text because even though they would individually be small, cumulatively they would dramatically reduce the loading of the page to a crawl. Instead I created a series of hyperlinks which take users to a separate page to view each graphic, after which they can return to the text. This was the most complicated set of pages to lay out; my other initial pages were almost exclusively text-based. Although my main menu page is very simple, I spent extra time enhancing its visual appeal as a lure to draw visitors into the site.

Once this basic set of pages was operational, I decided to explore an aspect of Web-authoring with which I was still unfamiliar: the use of video clips. Nothing captures the imagination like moving images. Through the kindness of the Bade Institute of Biblical Archaeology I was able to borrow and use a VHS tape made from a B&W film shot at the site in 1935. I felt that these clips were especially important as few such images survive from the Golden Era of Biblical Archaeology. Cornell has a helpful staff in its computer lab which has facilities for creating video captures. Once I had the feel for the equipment, it took me an afternoon to capture the nine clips now on my site, and another afternoon to set up and test the pages. Size again was an important criterion, since file size increases exponentially as image size grows. I made my clips as small as possible while still providing a clear image. I transferred the files to my home machine via a Zip drive. At this point, even with all my care to keep image sizes small, I ran out of space on my assigned server. A few polite inquiries garnered me a great deal more space on another university server.

Once I had tested my pages with my browser and was confident that everything worked, I loaded it on to my server (using FTP). It was most gratifying to have a complete “publication” after only a few weeks of part-time labor. This is one of the key benefits of the Web: instant virtual publication.

However, now I had to publicize my new Web page. First, I contacted all of the existing scholarly Web sites which I knew related to the ancient Near East and asked their owners to add a link to my site. Next, I contacted http://www.adame.com, which is an automated program that helps an author register his/her site with virtually all the major search engines, and was walked through the program in about half an hour. For example, you can now locate my site simply by doing a search with Lycos for “Naṣbeḥ.”

I encourage all readers of Near Eastern Archaeology to visit my site at http://www.arts.cornell.edu/jz33/naṣbeḥ.htm. It is by no means the fanciest site I could have constructed, but it does well the job I intended for it in the time I allowed myself to develop it. Surf’s up!

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The HTML code "behind" the screen image.