Such familiar site names as Megiddo, Tell en-Nasbeh, Beth Shemesh and el-Jib both tantalize and frustrate the archaeologist. Poring through the reports published on these sites (and others of the same era) often yields visions of not-quite-comprehensible plans and lists of objects with not-quite-certain contexts. Yet there is just enough material in these reports to draw us back to them again and again because of the treasures at which they hint. Quite frankly, however, the available published reports on sites excavated before the Second World War (and some after) have given us about all they can. The challenge before us is to determine if there is anything really new that can be teased out of these old sites, not from the old reports but from the primary excavation records and the surviving artifacts themselves.

Beyond the fact that many old reports are inadequate today, there are two other good reasons for considering the reappraisal of old site data. First, in an era of ever-rising excavation and publication costs, combined with deep cuts in public funding for archaeological research, and in some regions increasing restrictions on new foreign excavations, the cost of reevaluating an old site is a fraction of the cost of mounting a new excavation. Reworking old excavations may be thought of as an extension of
the trend begun in the 1950s when archaeologists reexcavated sites previously excavated around World War I, with not only the intent of clarifying the results of these earlier digs (such as Tell el-Hesi and Gezer), but also as a way of cutting costs while still making a significant contribution to the field.¹

Second, due to the policies of the Mandate-era departments of antiquities, the records for these excavations and many of the artifacts are housed in museums and universities in the United States and Europe. The basic data for such reappraisals are thus much closer at hand than is a Near Eastern tell. I believe that scholarly organizations such as the American Schools of Oriental Research, university museums and the Biblical Archaeology Society should encourage use of these materials by providing at-large fellowships to allow students and postdoctoral scholars to analyze and publish these collections.²

Why are old reports deficient today? Before setting out to write a new report, it is important to bear in mind the historical realia behind the inadequacies of these original reports. First—and it is far too easy to criticize in hindsight—archaeologists working then were not as rigorous in excavation methodology as they commonly are today. Simply put, they did not dig as cleanly, or record as precisely, as archaeologists do now.³

However, the scholars who labored on those reports were quite capable of producing a better product, but were prevented from doing so by factors often outside their control. First, the excavations begun in the 1920s were generally concluded during the years of the Great Depression, meaning that there was little funding available for archaeological research and publication. Second, even when limited funding was available, the dark days of World War II drew many young scholars away from their tasks.⁴ The war may also have been responsible for the destruction or mislaying of artifacts and excavation records.⁵ Third, many excavations suffered a lack of directorial continuity, either as a result of the death of a director (as in the cases of W.F. Badè at Tell en-Nasbeh and J.L. Starkey at Lachish), or through an excavation’s having a succession of directors (as at
Megiddo and Beth Shean). Even though today excavators attempt to write records and compile data so that anyone can, in theory, write an area report, most excavators would probably agree that the best person to write up an area is usually the individual who supervised its excavation. Finally, the report writers of the 1930s and 1940s lacked the vast amount of comparanda available to us today. For example, when first discovered, the common four-room house type was thought by some to be a temple plan, and it required several years of debate to resolve the issue. For these reasons it is not surprising that the reports that they have handed down to us suffer by comparison. However, it is a great testimony to the character of these excavators and report writers, working under conditions (in the field and out) far more trying than most of us are used to today, that any reports were produced at all.

There is no doubt that much can still be learned from old site data. One has only to look at such recent work as the late Doug Esse’s study of collar rim jars, which drew on extensive unpublished material in the Megiddo archives at the Oriental Institute of Chicago; or Gary Pratico’s work with Glueck’s under-recorded material from Tell el-Kheleifeh (and now with Dothan); or Ron Tappy’s work with Samaria; or my own efforts with the Tell en-Nasbeh material.

How then can we approach this old data? What are the limitations imposed by the excavation and recording methods of those days? Conversely, what can we expect to accomplish? Although the examples cited here are drawn from my work with the Tell en-Nasbeh archives, I believe that they will be generally applicable to other sites of that era, and also to a good number of digs since then which have persisted in using outdated methods, and whose directors may pass from the scene before their work is published.

The method generally used during the interwar years was that promulgated by Clarence S. Fisher. Fisher was primarily an architect, and his methodology was derived from the techniques he witnessed while working with George Reisner at Samaria
from 1909 to 1910. Whereas Reisner was more interested in the relation of debris layers to architectural features and the precise recording of all objects in their proper debris layers, Fisher focused mainly on the relations of architectural features to each other. After a site had been mapped and gridded, excavation began. All objects from their respective squares were recorded as coming from mixed surface material until the tops of walls began to appear; these topsoil objects were given a general square designation and a registration number preceded by an “x” to indicate that they were from mixed debris. Once room walls could be delineated, objects were recorded as coming from the debris of the room; that is, all material from the top of the walls down to the floor and distinct changes in wall construction, such as a door sill or foundation course, were recorded as coming from the same context. If no floor or foundation could be observed, excavation and recording continued until the base of the walls was reached. All objects not found in situ, i.e., from the general room fill, not from a floor, were given a registration number preceded by an “x”; all objects found on floors were given a number without an “x.” When one stratum in an area had been cleared, its walls and floors were removed and excavation of the next stratum was begun. This process was repeated downward until bedrock was reached or the excavation concluded.

Badè’s procedure at Tell en-Nasbeh was similar to Fisher’s except that once surface soil clearance reached the tops of walls—allowing rooms to be defined—excavation in each room continued down until a floor, threshold or the base of the walls was reached. Badè did not differentiate between materials from room fills and in situ floor material; all artifacts were given an “x” number, no matter what their context. This methodology could not help but mix material from later leveling fills with debris from floor surfaces and earlier sub-floor material.

Another drawback of this early methodology was its untidiness. Excavation areas were not swept clean after each pick pass, meaning that most non-stone or non-mudbrick features would usually be missed. Pits, robber trenches and foundation
trenches were not generally isolated. It is thus not surprising that the datings of almost all strata from that era are open to doubt. Albright, who used this same methodology at Tell Beit Mirsim, was able to overcome some of its flaws by isolating key homogeneous and stratigraphically secure loci in order to establish what the typical assemblages from each phase should look like. Extraneous sherds from earlier or later strata mixed in with the debris from the phase being examined could then be discarded. Albright also had the great luxury of working at a site where many strata were separated by thick destruction layers.

Despite the many weaknesses in the methods used in the 1920s-1940s, much can still be salvaged from these sites. This is primarily due to the one real strength of the old excavations: They usually uncovered broad areas of a tell, sometimes even attempting to strip the entire tell one layer at a time. Large contiguous blocks of architecture were the rule, rather than the exception. Thus, while it may not be possible to date every modification to each wall or room, there remains a very good possibility of dating individual strata. And while the lack of detailed artifact records with debris layers means that precise statistical analysis of area functions is invalid, the sheer volume of material excavated means that there is a good chance of finding some rooms with in situ artifacts and installations that can yield conclusive data on area functions. The large-scale clearance of many buildings from a single stratum achieved in that era is our best avenue to the study of social order and hierarchy.

Perhaps ironically, the best method by which to approach these old sites is that outlined above for Albright’s methods at Tell Beit Mirsim. The first step is a complete reevaluation of the site’s architecture. This step has two goals: The first is to disentangle questionable masses of architecture into separate strata; the second is to isolate those key loci that may contain clean and stratigraphically secure datable material. For these goals to be achieved, a detailed examination of each plan, each section and each site photograph must be made, with constant cross-checking between plans, sections and photographs. Any
other written records, such as excavation diaries, should be consulted for "unofficial" insights. Relationships between walls and features missed when the report was written may be noticed at this stage. Also, a thorough grounding in the basic architectural forms of each era will assist in the stratigraphic separation of walls superimposed on a single plan. For example, knowing from experience what a typical four-room house should look like may assist in the identification of such a structure in an undifferentiated mass of walls on an old plan.  

Various issues will have to be faced and overcome during this stage of the work. First, what is the condition of the site plans? Are they all keyed to the same grid? Do they have to be redrawn to a common scale? Is all the architecture for a given area of the tell drawn on one plan or were some attempts made at separating them? Are there features seen in photographs that were not drawn on the plans? Are elevations recorded for the tops and bases of wall stages, for thresholds, for installations and for floors? It will almost certainly be necessary to redraw plans as work proceeds and the architecture is pulled apart and assigned to new strata. Second, what features can be made out in each photograph (and were these features numbered)? How clear are the views and how clean are the features photographed?  

During this architectural study it should be possible to isolate the four most important types of deposits for dating the strata: First, sealed cisterns, silos and bins that have clear associations with larger architectural complexes. Most of the material in these features should date from near the end of the stratum's use. A similar type of deposit is the sub-surface feature cut across by a wall or installation. The cutting feature must, of course, be contemporaneous with or postdate the latest material in the cut feature. Second, we should pay attention to rooms that either photographs (most often) or plans (rarely) indicate contain in situ deposits. Later fills might distort the dating of the feature, so only those objects which can be clearly determined to come from the floor may be used. This stage of the site reappraisal will yield most of the evidence for room/area
function analysis. Third, as excavation proceeded, walls of the building were removed in order to reach the remains below. While the artifacts from one wall may be insignificant in terms of the number of diagnostic sherds, a few dozen sherds from all the walls of an entire building may be significant. Fourth, in excavations where floors sealing earlier deposits were noted, the material from below the floors will afford important *terminus post quem* for the reanalysis.

As work on the architecture and stratigraphy continues, the degree to which the earlier interpretations of the excavators will have to be modified, or completely abandoned, will become clear. Is the original stratigraphy basically sound, or will rephasing of many buildings be necessary? Will new terminology have to be adopted to distinguish between the earlier work and the reanalysis? The original Tell en-Nasbeh stratigraphy was set out in Roman numerals; to avoid confusion, the revised stratigraphy uses Arabic numerals.

Once the architecture has been analyzed, the features have been assigned to their respective strata and the key loci have been identified, the artifact records must be consulted. Difficulties likely to be encountered include a complete lack of records for some artifacts that appear in photographs and poorly drawn artifacts. As an excavation proceeds, recording standards may change. The number of artifact records for the 1926 season at Tell en-Nasbeh is only one percent of that for the 1935 season; in the early seasons, pottery wares were described by only a handful of colors ("red-brown"), but by the end more than a score were employed ("mottled light orange brown"). It is important to remember that the standards for pottery drawing were different at that time than they are today, and the old drawings will normally not be as precise or include as much detail regarding slips, burnishing or sometimes even painted decoration. Most importantly, the examination of the records may turn up assemblages of intact vessels not recorded in any photograph. These assemblages may then prove critical for the dating of the feature in which they were found. If a site
typology was established, it will be necessary to check the attribution of each vessel to its proper type. If a typology was not established, it will be necessary to create one.

An important issue: How much of the pottery to publish in drawings and photographs? Except for material from tombs, sealed cisterns, sherds from wall make-up and in situ material, the great majority of the ceramic material will come from stratigraphically uncertain deposits. The best approach may be to publish all the material from the key loci and then publish only one example of each type otherwise not attested in the key loci; this will insure that readers will know at least all the types found at the site. The rest of the material may be summarized in tables or, if there is a great amount of material, in a computer-readable format.

This raises an ancillary issue: Since the reasoning behind the sherd selection process used in these old excavations is usually unknown, most statistical tests of the material that are not based on simple presence/absence will be invalid.

Another issue: How broad a search through the available ceramic parallels should be made? Since most of the old site’s material will be of vague stratigraphic attribution, most of the pottery will have to be dated through comparisons with more recent, tightly controlled excavations. Only the most certain examples from the most up-to-date excavations should be used for these cross-site comparisons. The old site itself will probably add little to the ongoing refinements in ceramic chronology.

Non-sherd artifacts present a special problem for the reappraiser, as no single archaeologist can be an expert in every artifact category from every period. Perhaps the most sensible approach is to publish a cheap, basic illustrated catalogue of all such material, with full notes as to the context of each piece, and leave the analysis of the material to those who have a special interest in it. If a team has been established to work over an old site, and specialists are available, a more detailed presentation will be possible. In these old excavations, a special effort was usually made to collect all non-sherd artifacts. It may be
possible to suggest some rudimentary functions for certain rooms (and possibly buildings) if there is a high incidence of objects with collateral functions. For example, a room from which loom weights, spindle whorls and needles were recovered might have been used for weaving. Or an incense stand, specially shaped and decorated pottery and figurines may suggest cultic use. While we may not know in which corner of the room the grain was ground, the presence of an oven shows at least that cooking activities took place there.

Even with these limitations, it is still possible to clarify not only the stratigraphy and architecture of a site, but also questions of social organization, economy and political organization, and foreign influences. My most recent work on the Nasbebeh material has focused on the site's chronology. Photographs from the excavation archive show in situ storage jars in an expanded version of a four-room house, just inside the two-chamber gate. It was only 54 years after the Nasbebeh excavations concluded that stratified parallels to these jars were uncovered in a mid-fifth-century B.C. context at Tel Michal. In another four-room house of the same stratum, three huge, ovoid hole-mouth pithoi were found; these are of the type found only in the Babylonian destruction levels at Jerusalem and Lachish. With these two data points it has been possible to date fairly well the beginning and end of this stratum, thus establishing the existence of a Babylonian-Persian period at Tell en-Nasbebeh. My reevaluation of the site also made possible further studies of the town's population density, of Mesopotamian burial practices at the site, of aspects of Babylonian-period administration as attested by stamp impressions, of the town gate system, of wedge-decorated pottery, among others.44

Old sites still have a few things to teach us if we have the patience to sift through them and can restrain ourselves from the impulse constantly to open new excavations. Even though many early excavations were published, the ways in which the reports were presented sometimes make it impossible to test the excavators' conclusions. A new report that systematically pre-
sents all the pertinent data from an old excavation so that other scholars can test both the original excavator's conclusions and those of the new analysis is a major contribution in its own right. Given the much more painstaking approaches used in excavation today, it is especially important that we learn as much as we can from these old sites, many of which were cleared on a massive scale. They have much to teach us, especially about the planning of settlements and the social constraints on the founding of new settlements or the expansion of old ones.

I would like to thank Drs. Ilan Sharon and Ron Tappy for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper. I especially profited from Ron Tappy's remarks on the issues he had to confront when dealing with Kenyon's material from Samaria. Any errors or omissions are mine alone. This paper was prepared during my time at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Jerusalem, as a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow.

NOTES


3The recent creation of the Shelby White-Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications at Harvard University, with the explicit mission of providing funding for analyzing and publishing unpublished excavations, may do much to encourage and make possible the kind of projects advocated in this paper.


Ron Tappy (personal communication) surmises that the large amount of stratigraphically worthless pottery that Kenyon chose to publish from Samaria, when her field notes indicate that pottery from many well-controlled contexts had been excavated, is due to the loss of the better collections during World War II.

Fisher began the work at Megiddo and was followed by P.L.O. Guy and G. Loud. Fisher likewise began the work at Beth Shan and was followed by A. Rowe and G.M. FitzGerald.


Fisher, *Excavation of Armageddon*, pp. 28-39. G.E. Wright (“Archaeological Method,” p. 126) believed that Fisher did not understand the complexity of the debris layers that made up a tell. However, Fisher’s use of an x number to indicate materials from fills that should be treated with “caution” and not be mixed in with floor deposits shows that he did grasp the nuances of tell formation.

W.F. Bade, *Manual*, pp. 17-18, suggests that Badè understood Fisher’s distinction between artifacts from fills marked with an x and those from floors; however, pp. 38-42 indicate that in practice Badè essentially used x as a replacement for “#.

Albright, *Tell Beit Mirsim*, p. 9: “All problems of the attribution of walls to accompanying strata were attacked by considering the pottery context above adjacent floor-levels, below such floors, under foundations, in walls which were being broken up for the purpose of clearing away an excavated stratum, etc.”

This is not true of excavations in the Wheeler-Kenyon method, where the clearance of only parts of rooms is the rule. However, at Samaria Kenyon did record all the proper stratigraphic contexts for her finds. This allowed Tappy to reconstruct her locus assemblages and thus test the theories she advanced in her report.


The 1947 Tell en-Nasbeh report received extremely favorable reviews when it appeared. See Zorn, "Tell en-Nasbeh," pp. 6-7, for these reviews. However, the feelings of those who since then have attempted to work with the Tell en-Nasbeh material has been ably stated by Lance: "In short, each dig report must be tediously deciphered before one can use it properly; sometimes, as in the case of the publications of Tell en-Nasbeh, cracking the system is virtually impossible" (Lance, *The Old Testament and the Archaeologist* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981], pp. 51-52).