

By **Brian N. Peterson**

As a member of the ABR archaeological team, the last day of our dig seasons has been particularly fruitful for me as a budding archaeologist. This certainly has been the case in the last two years of my work at Khirbet el-Maqatir. The now-famous Amenhotep II scarab—named the #1 archaeological discovery of 2013 by *Christianity Today*—was found in my square (P21) by Destry Jackson on the last day of the 2013 dig. Yet, without us really realizing it, this past year may have had nearly as important a discovery on our last day.

The 2014 dig started out with a bang. On day two, one of my Lee students, Bradley LaChapell, discovered our second scarab dating to the Hyksos period (c. 16th century BC). He picked it out of the sift from P20, one of three squares my team was assigned to excavate this past season. The excitement generated by this discovery pushed us forward with anticipation for the rest of the dig. From that point onward, my team of devoted diggers sifted every *guffa* of dirt that came out of our squares, searching for any valuable artifacts. While my team was blessed



Michael Luddeni

Lee University students **Madison Vaught** and **Bradley LaChapell**. Madison found the ram's head while sifting on the last day; Brad found our second scarab on day two of the dig

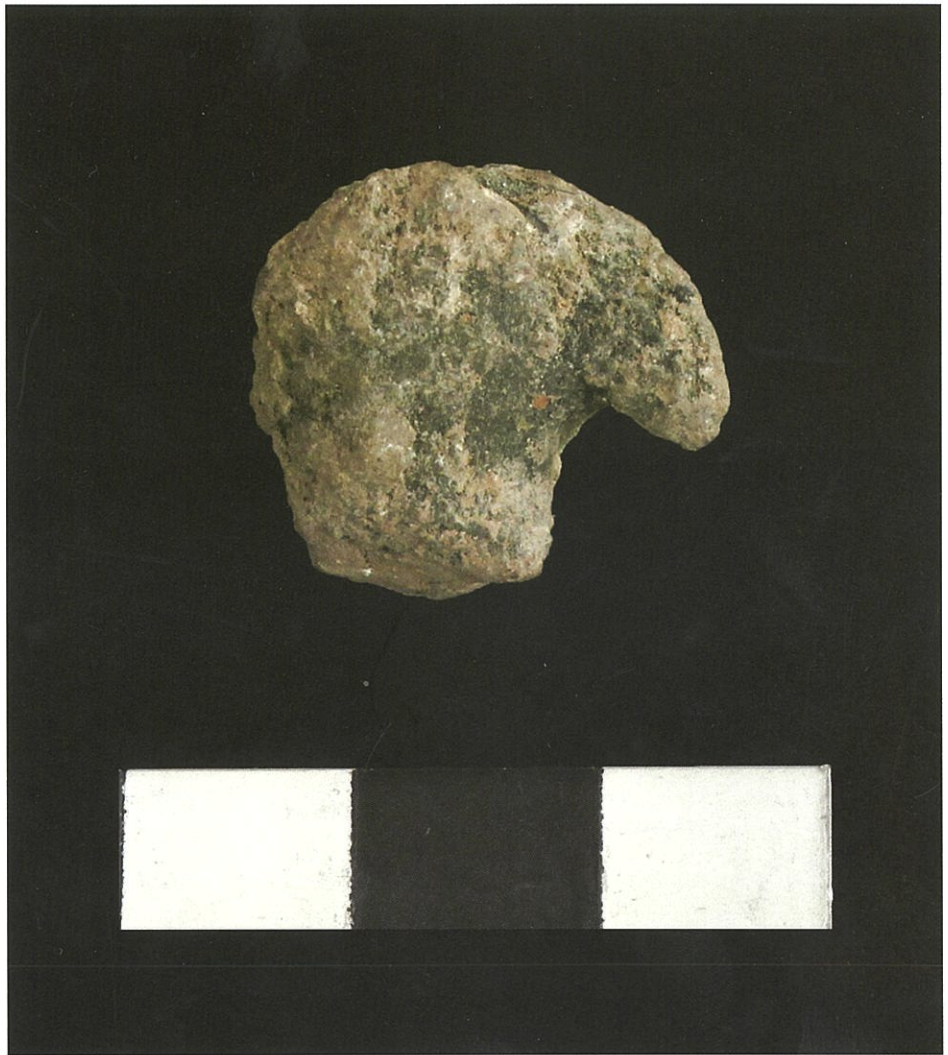


to discover the second scarab, certainly a significant find, perhaps we overlooked the importance of a key artifact that was, again, discovered on the last day of the 2014 dig.

Madison Vaught (who just happens also to be my TA at Lee University) spent almost an entire month in Israel as part of our Lee Israel Tour and Archaeological Team. On Friday, May 30, 2014, the last day of the 2014 dig season, she handed me a piece of shaped/worked, corroded metal that appeared to be a head of some sort of a zoomorphic (animal-shaped) figure. Madison and Bradley (see above) had been meticulously sifting material out of squares P20, 21 and 22 for most of the two weeks of the dig. Their devotion to this type of detail had yielded the Hyksos scarab, coins, and now this strange piece of metal shaped like a falcon or a ram's head. While at the time we were not sure what importance the discovery would have to our dig, I am now convinced, after having it professionally cleaned, that it may be just as significant in proving the accuracy of the biblical account of the destruction of Ai, as was the Amenhotep II scarab, if not more so. Let me explain.

Our ABR conservator, Orna Cohen (who also did the conservator work on the famous "Jesus Boat" in Galilee as well as for the dig at Hazor), came to the conclusion that the ram's head appears to have been severed cleanly from its now-lost body. This becomes important when viewed in light of other proposed Israelite destruction levels related to the Conquest era. For example, at Hazor in northern Israel, a number of decapitated images have been discovered.<sup>1</sup> However, these images were made of either stone or ceramic. Because of the lack of inherent value of stone and pottery, in many cases both portions of the images were tossed aside, only later to be found by archaeologists, photographed and catalogued. However, our discovery of only a copper/bronze figurine head may be telling of the Israelite invasion.

Bronze, in particular, is listed among the valued objects that the Israelites were supposed to devote to YHWH at Jericho (Jos 6:19, 24)—the taking of which cost Achan his life (Jos 7:16–26). Unlike at Jericho, at Ai the people were allowed to keep plunder (cf. Jos 8:2, 27). We can assume that because bronze was among the devoted things at Jericho, it was also among the plunder at Ai. The desirability of copper/bronze as plunder would have made the bronze image, whose head Vaught found, valuable to the Israelite soldiers. Yet the conquerors were still faced with the almost certain probability that this was an idol figure, the association with which had been strictly forbidden by God (Ex 34:12–14; Dt 7:4–6). Indeed, according to YHWH's command,



Michael Luddeni

The ram's head found at Khirbet el-Maqtir in 2014, prior to cleaning.

sacred pillars and images in Canaan were to be destroyed (Dt 12:3). In order to adhere to this injunction and at the same time be able to take the valuable bronze plunder, the Israelites did as they would do at other places: they decapitated the image as a symbolic way of showing the weakness and insignificance of the Canaanite deities. YHWH's decapitation of Dagan in Ashdod (1 Sm 5:4) is a fitting parallel to the process that would have been used earlier by Israel during the Conquest. Once the figurine was ritually "neutered," the image could then be melted down and repurposed. The loss (or possibly intentional discarding?) of the small bronze head (approx. 2.2 cm x 2 cm) in the haste of the battle (note the frenetic pace of the battle in Joshua 8) is entirely conceivable. If my hypothesis is in fact the case, we may never find the body of the figurine. Now while it is possible that the body of the figurine has been plundered by modern looters using metal detectors, the fact that it was found under roughly 4 feet of heavy tumble leads one away from such a conclusion.

Furthermore, if my theory is correct, the first evidence of decapitated idol figures associated with the Israelite conquest is not in Hazor, but rather the Israelites' earlier battle (5–7 years earlier) at Ai! The decapitating practice therefore began when





Orna Cohen

A close-up of the ram's head after being cleaned by conservator Orna Cohen.

the children of Israel were allowed to take plunder, and perhaps may be directly connected to the furor of the battle that day. One must also keep in mind that the first rout that the Israelites faced in the conquest of Canaan occurred at Ai, where they lost 36 men (Jos 7). When Ai finally fell, the Israelites would have been in the mood for avenging the loss of their fellow soldiers only a few short days earlier. This feeling of vengeance is evinced in the intense burning the city of Ai experienced—a fate visited upon only three cities of the Conquest: Jericho, Ai and Hazor (Jos 6:24; 8:28; 11:12–13 respectively). This conflagration has been well documented at the site of Khirbet el-Maqtir, both in the abundant refired LBI pottery and in the intense burning of bedrock in the city gate complex.

Adding support to this theory is the fact that this ram's head was found in the same area as both scarabs and several examples of LBI fine ware and refired LBI pottery. I estimate that the excavation level of the ram's head (874.34m) is very close to the level of the Amenhotep II scarab (874.40m) and was found only a couple of meters to the east of where the scarab was found. According to Dr. Wood, it is indeed possible that these squares (Q21, P20–22) were the epicenter/home of the old Ai fortress, where perhaps the commandant/"king" lived. As such, one would expect a valuable bronze figurine to be found in this location. What is more, the infant burial discovered in 2009 is only two squares to the southwest of the squares where these

three important artifacts have been found.

My time at Maqtir, first as a laborer, then a square supervisor, and now as a field archaeologist has taught me some valuable lessons. First, never underestimate the value of good sifting procedures. Many of our important artifacts have been discovered this way. Second, always take every archaeological discovery seriously as you reconstruct a site's history. My research and future publication of the discovery of a Roman die by Lee student Cameron Hunter is a clear example of this latter point—our site certainly was sacked by the Roman Tenth Legion (stay tuned for a later *Bible and Spade* issue on that). Third, even though the process of archaeology is arduous and meticulous, one must stay focused until the very last minute of the dig season has ended. For me, the last day of a dig will always be filled with anticipation and expectancy. My above-noted theory regarding the "Vaught" ram's head is just another example of what drives me as an archaeologist to return year after year to dig in the sands of time.

Obviously much more research needs to be undertaken before we can have more definitive proof of the value of the bronze head. Fortunately, this winter I was awarded an Appalachian College Association grant to continue my research on the ram's head at the University of Toronto in Canada. My hope is that my research will corroborate my preliminary theory and add another nail in the coffin of the naysayers. Hopefully I will have more to say about the "Vaught" ram's head in the near future.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Amnon Ben-Tor and Maria Teresa Rubiato, "Excavating Hazor—Part Two: Did the Israelites Destroy the Canaanite City?" *BAR* 25, no. 3 (May/June 1999): 22–39 and/or Yigael Yadin, *Hazor: The Rediscovery of a Great Citadel of the Bible* (New York: Random House, 1975), 102.

**Brian N. Peterson** (PhD, St. Michael's College University at the University of Toronto) is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Lee University in Cleveland, TN. He is a Field Archaeologist for ABR's excavations at Khirbet el-Maqtir, Israel.

