For six weeks this Summer I was fortunate enough to be part of the Leon Levy excavation in Ashkelon, Israel. The dig, which has been ongoing since 1985, seeks to better understand the cultures and lifestyles of the people inhabiting the tel in the major post-Neolithic stages of settlement, namely the Canaanite era (Bronze age), the Philistine era (Iron age), the Persian era (circa 550 to 330 BCE), the Hellenistic era (330 to about the first century BCE), the Roman era (first century BCE to 324 CE), and the Byzantine Era (324 to about 630 CE in this area of the Levant). While later Arab, Crusader, and Islamic peoples would continue to inhabit and settle Ashkelon until about 1191, these eras were not part of our main focus of study during the excavation; in grid 51, where I worked, our goal was to reach the 604 BCE destruction layer of Nebuchadnezzar II, which is when he demolished the city.

I had been on two digs previously, both from the Late Roman period, and thought of myself as kind of a veteran when it came to archaeological grunt-work. Yet the sheer professionalism and enthusiasm exuberating from Professor Birney, the Wesleyan professor who took me under her wing and coordinated my grid, as well as the other staff members and square supervisors showed me just how little I knew. Having worked with monumental architecture before, I presumed that we would dig until we either A) hit a sweet artifact, or B) hit a stone (or marble) floor. Needless to say, the staff members politely showed me otherwise. There were subtle, yet undeniable striations in the soil which could suggest as mud brick floor (which, yeah, I smashed many of), dirt accumulation demonstrating how long people inhabited the room for, ash or charred materials signifying a burn layer or industrial work, and finally could demonstrate holes or disturbances in floors demonstrating construction or robber trenches. These lessons were crucial for me in understanding how archaeology is done as well as understanding the overall grid.

In addition to dirt accumulation on a micro scale, I didn’t understand why archaeological finds always tended to be underground, which sounds stupid but baffled me nonetheless. As Prof. Birney showed us through her sublime artwork, the tel is formed from layers upon layers of occupational debris and components of buildings. As the settlement goes through periods of desertion, buildings crumble while dirt naturally accumulates around the sides, concealing part of the walls beneath the soil. Finally, as these walls are completely or partially obscured, later peoples occupying the area used the original wall sections as foundations for their new walls, and the cycle begins anew. Eventually, the levels of occupation seem to “rise” above the earlier levels.

While the tel formation lesson answered one of my biggest questions, the daily lectures and on-site conversations with the staff taught me so much not only about archaeological theory and practice, but about the history of Ashkelon itself. Due to its unique placement between the major influences of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, whilst its unique Philistine culture often put it at odds with the nearby Jews, Ashkelon’s history was intertwined with an overall history of the Levant and Middle East as a whole. The lectures were very interesting, teaching me about so many different people all fighting for control of the same piece of land, and I managed to stay awake for most of them.
As for the actual travel experience in Israel, it was, and I am not exaggerating, THE most fascinating adventure I’ve ever had. Ashkelon itself seemed a bit like a depressing, concrete, boring beach town (not to be too harsh… it wasn’t without its charm), but the excavation site itself was amazing, and the views atop the ruins overlooking the sea were unforgettable. The weekend trips, though, were my absolute favorite part. The old city in Jerusalem, the capital of the world it seemed to me, was the same as it had been 2,000 years ago, only the street vendors had a more modern selection of goods. Acre, Caesarea Maritima, Jaffa, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Lakesh, Masada, Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee, Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the list of places I was able to visit was frankly amazing in only 6 weekends. While the taxis could be expensive and the Israeli’s never seemed to understand the concept of waiting in lines, the people were the nicest I have ever met (one stranger actually gave me a ride in his car to the post office when I couldn’t find it). About halfway through the dig, some militants from Gaza fired about a dozen rockets toward Israel over about a week, though I never felt in danger at all, and the rockets were either taken down by Israel’s missile defense or landed harmlessly in the desert. For being so close to Gaza I did not feel threatened once on the trip. Surprisingly, neither the Jews nor the Arabs I met on the trip were as hateful of the other culture as I would have thought, and in Jerusalem I often saw them doing business with each other and sharing jokes. It seems the vast majority of the people in the area just want peace.

If I could sum up my entire experience in one moment, it would be one very special morning in the grid toward the end of the season. We had been hosting one of the excavation’s primary donators, Ms. Shelby White, and the day looked as if it would be another quiet morning while we all tried our best to look busy in front of such an important VIP. However, come breakfast time, one of Shelby’s compatriots had actually brought a waffle maker, and somehow, somehow, in the middle of this dusty field, we feasted that fine morning on waffles and Nutella. Never have I tasted a breakfast item so wondrous; t’was the taste of glory. Maybe I’m getting carried away, but there, right in the middle of the workday and among the ancient ruins, I had a great group of people, as nerdy as I was and twice as awesome, and I’ll never forget that day.

I miss you already Ashkelon Dig 2012!