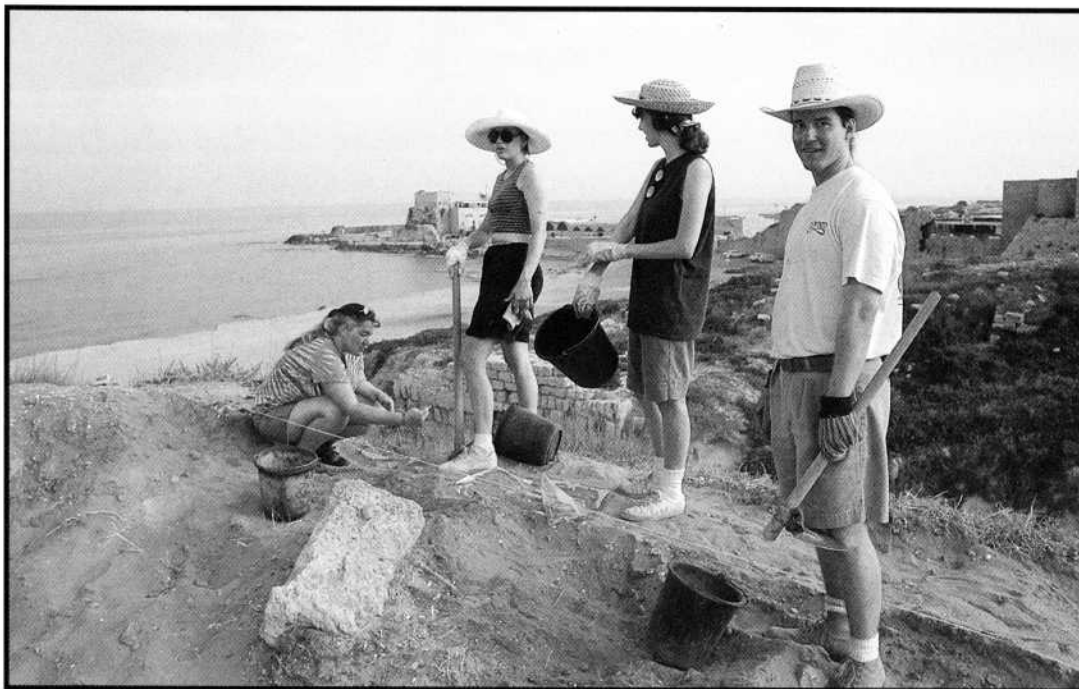


THE WORLD'S BIGGEST SANDBOX

by Michael Waters



Special groups of Sooners spend their summers sifting through the ruins of Caesarea Maritima.

Sand dunes previously covered this area of the Caesarea Maritima dig. The burial ground being excavated by Donna Wessel, left, from the University of Maryland, and Sooners Gail Puckett, Christine Calhoun and Todd Jones is only 150-200 years old but 60 feet below lies an ancient Roman bath complex.

“Boker tov . . . boker tov . . .”

These are the first words of the new day for a select group of University of Oklahoma students who work—and work hard—in a rich and exotic ghost town of the Middle East.

Abruptly at 4:45 a.m., a man with a “booming, bolstering voice,” as one Sooner student describes it, knocks on each door and offers a shout of “boker tov,” the Hebrew equivalent of “good morning.” This will be the students’ daily wake-up call for the duration of their brief summertime stay in Caesarea Maritima, Israel.

These students, who are part of some 200 collegians who come annually from all over the United States, hit the outdoor air by sunrise. For the next several hours, they will measure, sift and shovel through the ruins of past ages in the hot Mediterranean sun.

Their goal is to learn more about the sand-shrouded expanse of Caesarea Maritima, located about 30 miles north of Tel Aviv on Israel’s northwestern coast. This buried city, once a spectacular seaport of the Roman world, was also a stopping point for Biblical figures, Byzantines, Moslems and medieval Crusaders during its 1,200-year existence. Its ruins are more than enough to make an archaeologist’s mouth water.

Classics Professor Farland Stanley, who leads OU’s student contingent to the excavation site each summer, describes himself as having been “overwhelmed” by his first encounter with Caesarea in 1990.

“If you’re well-versed in the history of it, you realize you’re standing in a wonderful, incredible place. Herod the



ABOVE is the front section of one of two great first-century Roman aqueducts on the Caesarea Maritima site, built and maintained by the Roman legions to bring water to the city of 100,000. Each seven miles long, the aqueducts are probably the best preserved of this size ever discovered.

AT LEFT, OU students Dallas Cody Barnett, left, Oklahoma City, and Julie Hokin, Highland Park, Illinois, clear away the area around a fragmented pot from the fifth-sixth century, A.D., unaware they are sitting directly over a Byzantine well.



Great built the city to be one of the largest Roman harbor towns. Saint Paul was imprisoned here for two years. Saint Peter made the first gentile Christian converts here. This is where Pontius Pilate had his headquarters.”

Gail Puckett, a letters graduate who worked with Stanley’s team at the site in 1991 and 1992, adds, “These are the

things you grew up learning about at school and in church. Being able to put your hands on (the remnants of that time) it just takes your breath away.”

Stanley’s enthusiasm for the project has drawn some 60 OU students to Caesarea in the last four years. The Sooners are well known among the diverse cast of student teams that form

the consortium of 10 to 15 American universities participating annually. In fact, a 1992 television special on Caesarea Maritima, part of the Arts and Entertainment channel’s “Travel Quest” series, featured the Oklahoma team.

Stanley notes proudly that OU’s students “are always singled out for their hard work and congeniality.”

Traci Brannon, a senior letters major who spent four weeks at the site in 1992, agrees. “Everybody wants an Okie in their trench. They know the Oklahomans are really hard workers.”

In addition, Stanley says, the Sooners “can really handle the Israeli heat.”

The mid-90s temperatures of the excavation site necessitate each day’s early start. After the 4:45 a.m. wake-up and a cup of coffee, students begin their work at around 5:30. Following some three hours of site work, the excavation teams pause for breakfast at a nearby restaurant that caters to the tourists who flock to the digs.

The students resume their digging at 9:30 for another three hours, but the blistering afternoon sun requires their work be moved indoors. The students

Pursuing policy goals and dreams of grandeur, King Herod built a Roman-styled seaport intended to rival ancient Alexandria.

acquaint themselves with chores such as pottery washing and various types of lab work for the remainder of the day.

All of these activities—plus nightly lectures and weekend tours of Israel's many historic locales—add up to a supervised hands-on learning laboratory in excavating an ancient ruin. For a two-week stay, the students pay round-trip air fare of approximately \$1,800 and living expenses, receiving in return course credit and an unforgettable experience.

They help uncover and map ancient walls and structures, exhume ancient burials, and locate pottery, inscriptions, household items, and other bits and pieces of the city's glory days. To hear the students describe it, working at Caesarea is a scholar's chance to play in the world's biggest sandbox.

"It's a wonderful thing for the University to be involved in," says Puckett,

who now is studying law at OU.

Puckett's encounter with Caesarea became a family affair. After making a two-week trip to the site in 1991, she returned in 1992 with her husband, Jim, and teenage son, Chad. Puckett praises OU and former College of Arts & Sciences Dean Rufus Fears for finding financial assistance for students wishing to make the trip. She also notes that OU gave advance college credit to Chad, a high school senior at the time.

Students have received loans, grants and Honors Program funding to help pay for passage to Caesarea. Stanley is searching for new private sources of money to help at least 30 students make the trip next summer.

The professor describes Caesarea as one of the top five excavation sites in the region, if not the world.

Caesarea Maritima's prominence dates from the time of its construction,

which took place over a 12-year period starting in 22 B.C., at the behest of Herod the Great. Although described by historians as a bloodthirsty tyrant, Herod also was an administrative genius who ruled Judea as a client of Rome, shortly before the time of Christ.

Pursuing policy goals and dreams of grandeur, Herod built a Roman-styled seaport intended to rival ancient Alexandria. The completed city boasted an immense rectangular harbor facility that jutted toward the sea. Its use of hydraulic concrete (poured liquid into the sea to harden *in situ*) and a sophisticated system for siltation control has led scholars to describe Caesarea as one of the greatest achievements of Roman engineering.

Sailors reaching the city's docks were greeted by the sight of a grand staircase leading up to a temple dedicated to the worship of Augustus Caesar. The temple was constructed atop an artificial mound of dirt, beneath which were 12 vaults—36 feet high by 30 feet wide by 100 feet deep—creating storage areas called *horreum* for the benefit of ships bearing goods and merchandise.

"The town had all the things that a major Roman city would have, and then some," Stanley says.

Beyond the harbor and the temple, a voyager to Caesarea during its Roman period would discover a colosseum larger than Rome's, hippodromes for the chariot races, an amphitheater, and shops and houses gracing Caesarea's columned streets. Its well-designed aqueducts and sewage systems ably supported a diverse population of merchants, traders, soldiers, government officials and slaves, together totaling



Second-year OU law student Gail Puckett enjoyed her 1991 trip to the dig so much that she returned in 1992 with husband Jim, at left above, and son Chad, here excavating a Byzantine cistern. Then in high school, Chad received advance credit at OU, where he is now a freshman.



The facade of the temple platform was built above storage vaults where ships in King Herod's time unloaded their cargoes. Further excavation revealed the fourth-fifth century steps leading to the temple. Twelve of the huge vaults have been discovered so far.



Only the mouthpiece and first two notes remain of the flute uncovered by a crew of OU students. The late Roman relic originally was probably 12 to 15 inches long.

some 100,000 to 150,000 people.

Stanley says that in recent years the student archaeological teams have discovered evidence of a large Roman bath complex, the foundation for an octagonal building that housed an early Christian church and a small cath-

edral built by Crusaders. Excavations have also uncovered evidence of a Mithraea, a religious building dedicated to the worship of a Persian goddess, built from a converted harbor storage chamber.

However, Stanley emphasizes, the

city's rise under King Herod is only a small part of its captivating, and sometimes tragic, story.

In addition to its visitations by Saint Peter, Saint Paul and Pontius Pilate, Stanley notes that the city played a major role in the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 A.D., and that "20,000 Jews were killed in a single hour" during that time. Later, post-first-century Christian church fathers Origen and Eusebius turned the city into a center of church scholarship.

Caesarea's fortunes rose and fell under the rule of successive occupiers—the Byzantines in the fifth and sixth centuries, Islamic armies that arrived in the seventh century, and Christian Crusaders who occupied and reoccupied the city several times beginning in 1101.

Earthquakes eventually destroyed much of the harbor, which unknown to Herod, had been built on a fault line. Moslems finally destroyed what remained of the city in 1291 to prevent further attempts by European armies to seize the holy lands of Palestine.

The site lay dormant until 1892, when Bosnian Muslims fled there from southeastern Europe. Their settlements were dismantled in the 1940s and the area was abandoned until the first wave of scholars arrived to begin excavating the area in the early 1960s.

Caesarea's patchwork history presents a mammoth challenge to archaeologists, Stanley says. Mediterranean winds have covered the various stages of human occupation with tons of sand, and an excavator sometimes is required to dig deep when looking for the remnants of a particular era.

"When we excavate, the first thing we do is get beneath the Bosnian presence, and immediately beneath it is the Crusade period," Stanley says. "That's because nobody's been there since the Crusade period. When you push the Crusade period away, you immediately find evidence of the several stages of Islamic occupation.

"Next you come to the Roman stages of occupation. At all the sites I've worked, you have to dig anywhere from one to 10 feet deep. On the first site I worked, we dug 15-to-18 feet deep before we finally got down to the Hellenistic period, right before the time of Christ."

Caesarea Maritima's diverse pattern of settlement is responsible for

the fascinating array of artifacts found on the site.

Jason Rhodes, an OU senior who is a veteran of two summer trips, discovered a portion of a small Byzantine-era flute made of bird bone. "I found it in our trench right next to the temple platform, about one meter down." How

Caesarea's patchwork history presents a mammoth challenge to archaeologists.

did the team know that what Rhodes had discovered was a flute? "I picked it up, and a musician who was in our group blew a couple of notes out of it."

"We find all sorts of artifacts that people carried in their daily lives," Stanley says. "Combs, ivory hairpins, small instruments

used for makeup, for example."

Other discoveries help the staff better understand the structure of the city's buildings and monuments. Stanley recalls one firsthand find that, he says, "brought out the child in me.

"When we were digging in 1992, my assignment was to evaluate the date for the grand staircase that led from the inner harbor up to the temple. And in the process, I decided I'd also excavate inside a cistern that was located immediately next to it.

"It turned out this cistern dated back to the time of the Islamic occupation. And, as we excavated, we came across very large preserved timbers that were used as a framework for a type of cement that had been poured into a foundation for some huge, unknown structure." To Stanley's delight, the timbers turned out to be cedar wood that had been laid in place by Herod's engineers at the beginning of Caesarea's existence.

In addition to the original wood used in building the city's structures, Stanley also recounts several important stone-carved inscriptions discovered on the site, shedding light on the story of particular segments of the city.

In an earlier 1962 excavation, an inscription bearing the name of Pontius Pilate was found—the only known evidence of Pilate as a historical personage outside the New Testament. Another recently uncovered inscription bids good wishes to those who enter the bath complex, and still another denotes the site of an ancient "copy shop" where, Stanley says, "for a price you could get a duplicate made of your will or the ownership deed to your land."

While some discoveries are mainly of interest to scholars and students, one recent find catapulted the Caesarea excavation into the national news spotlight.

In June 1993, two students from Concordia College in Minnesota examined a hollowed-out grinding stone found beneath the mosaic floor of a Roman villa. When they reached inside the stone, "they couldn't believe what they found," Stanley recalls, "and neither could we." Secreted within the stone were a total of 99 gleaming 24-carat gold Roman coins, slightly less than quarter-sized, all minted between 344 and 395 A.D., and all in perfect,



The heralded discovery of uncirculated Roman gold coins (approx. 344-395 A.D.) by students of Concordia College's Olin Storvick, left, drew the attention of a CNN team headed by the Jerusalem bureau chief Charles Hoff, right, OU journalism 1963-66.



AT TOP: An overview of the dig along the Caesarea Maritima shore, with a late 1800s minaret in the background at right, gives testimony to the layers of different civilizations that have inhabited this site since the first century.

BELOW: Lisa Dennis and Christina Smith excavate a ninth-century Islamic cistern with walls of hydraulic plaster.

AT RIGHT: A mosaic inscription in the floor of a late Roman bath complex translates "Happiness, Health to Those Here."

uncirculated condition. *The Biblical Archaeological Review* heralded the discovery as the No. 1 find of the year.

While valuable discoveries are required by law to remain in Israel, the excavated area abounds in fragments of ancient pottery and other materials, providing students with an unusual fringe benefit of their stay—souvenirs of antiquity.

Puckett recalls, "Both years I went, I brought home Roman pot handles to give to friends, and they loved them. That was a big deal to me as well. Just knowing that somebody in a different part of the world, in a different time, put their time, effort, and love into making these things—and I get to bring them home!"

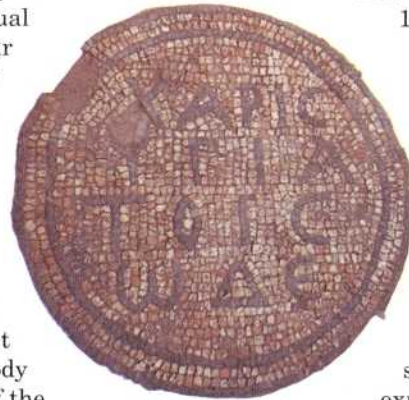
Sometimes OU students also bring back new attitudes toward their lives and careers. Rhodes, who was a zoology major at the time of his first trip, said he went to Caesarea because of "Professor Stanley's stories about the site." Now, after two trips, he has altered his educational direction to include a double major—zoology and letters, the interdisciplinary program operating out of the classics department.

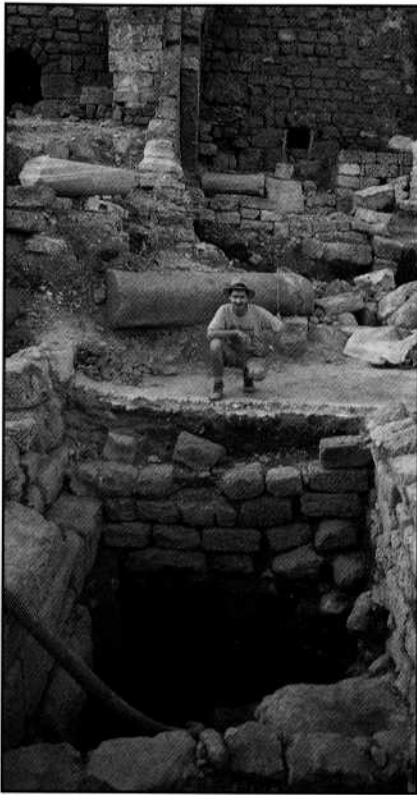
And, although the search for archaeological treasures provides fun and adventure, the young archaeologists-in-training benefit most directly from the project's valuable educational component. Richelle Mitchem, a senior

anthropology/archaeology major who went with one of the 1992 groups, said one of the most prized aspects of her experience was the instruction Stanley gave to students on site.

"One time I found the surface of a tessellated floor—basically a square tile floor—and Professor Stanley stopped to explain to us how you could tell when the floor was made by the shape and size of the tiles," she says. The floor, it turned out, dated back 1,500 years, to the Byzantine era.

While the collegiate excavation teams concern themselves with the vestiges of antiquity, they are scarcely aware that they are working in a region of the world known for its turbulent political environment. Stanley insists—and the students agree—that their surroundings are nearly as safe as the classroom, their work more likely to be interrupted by inquisitive foreign tourists than by political upheaval.





In excavating a Byzantine cistern, Stanley discovered wooden beams used by Herod's builders as framing for the hydraulic concrete that formed the harbor.

Students also are surprised to find that, in some ways, Israel is not so very different from home.

"Most people don't know how beautiful it is there," says Lisa Dennis, a senior letters major who spent three weeks in Caesarea last summer. "I expected to find desert and isolation. Instead, there were big, beautiful trees and fields of grass. And on the bus to Jerusalem, I looked out the window and saw someone on a John Deere tractor baling hay, so sometimes I felt like I was right at home!"

Most of the memories the students bring back to Oklahoma are destined to last a lifetime. Christina Smith, a senior letters major, concludes, "I'd love to do it again." She is quick to add, however, that two to four weeks on a dig is no leisure trip. "But I'd recommend it to anyone who likes to work."

There is plenty of work left to be done. Stanley says that of the 4,000 acres comprising the ancient city, only some 15 acres have been uncovered thus far. "We believe it'll take 200 more years of digging to fully excavate this site."

In addition to the summer visits by the student teams, approximately 100

Russian immigrants are hired at the site as public-works employees for the Israeli government. Skilled divers excavate underwater in the vicinity of the harbor.

Stanley says that while participation in the summer project attracts 95 percent students, "We have pilots, nurses, physicians and architects—all sorts of people in all professions—who just want to come help. A number of OU alumni and other interested Sooners have been a part of Stanley's crew.

"You want to go? You can. No jacket required."

The OU professor, who has been named to the Caesarea consortium's permanent staff as area supervisor, insists that his own involvement will go on as long as he can make it to the site. "As long as God gives me good health and we keep our license with Israel, I'll be going back there. I hope I'll have another 20 or 30 years of work, until the end of my career. It's a wonderful place."

Untold archaeological treasures still slumber beneath the sands of Caesarea Maritima. But their wake-up call is coming.

"Boker tov . . . boker tov . . . " 



Farland Stanley, seated at right, gathered part of the 32 Sooners who comprised his diverse 1992 Caesarea Maritima team for a photograph. Although 95 percent of the summer archaeologists are students, this group included the Pucketts (pictured on preceding pages) and experienced world travelers Sue (front row in slacks) and Lloyd Rayl (back in pith helmet and sunglasses).