

FOUNDATIONS OF CIVILIZATION

Link to Literature

James Michener (1907–1997) was 40 years old when he launched his writing career. He soon became one of the most popular modern American novelists. *The Source* is one of his many novels that probe the history and culture of a people—in this case, the ancient Israelites. The novel's setting is an archaeological site in Israel called Makor, which means "source." As the fictional archaeologists uncover artifacts from various eras, Michener tells the story of the region during that time period. In this excerpt, Michener introduces Makor. ♦ *As you read, think about what it would be like to make exciting archaeological discoveries. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

From *The Source* by James Michener

It was Makor, a barren elliptical mound standing at the foot of one of the projecting spurs and rising high in the air. It was difficult to believe that it was for real, for it had two strange characteristics: its top plateau was quite flat, as if some giant hand had smoothed it down; and the visible flanks of the mound were perfect earthen slopes, each a glacis [gradual slope] forty-five degrees in angle, as if the same monstrous hand had stuck out a finger to round off the edges. It looked unnatural, like a fortress without walls, and this impression was augmented by the harsh rocky spur that rose to the rear, by the hills that rose behind that, and by the rugged mountains which backed up everything. The mound was thus the terminal point of a chain of fortifications, the lowest of four descending steps, and it was perfectly placed both for its own protection and for guarding the important road that passed its feet.

Its full name was Tell Makor, which signified that the local citizens knew it was not a natural mound, laid down by tectonic forces, but the patiently accumulated residue of one abandoned civilization after another, each resting upon the ruins of its predecessor,

reaching endlessly back into history. From the bare rock on which the first community of



**Michener
in the Holy Land**

Makor had been built, to the grassy top, was seventy-one feet, made up of fallen bricks, ruptured stone walls, broken turrets, bits of prehistoric flint, and, most valuable of all, the fragments of pottery that would, when washed and inspected by Dr. Bar-El, tell the story of this solemn, yet exciting spot.

"We've picked the best tell in the country," Dr. Cullinane assured his team, and he took from his briefcase the preliminary maps made from the aerial photographs in which a grid of rectangular squares, ten meters to the side, had been superimposed upon the tell; and at that moment the three archaeologists in the jeep could feel that their will was being imposed upon the mound and would finally squeeze from its secret inner places the remnants of the once vital existence. Yesterday Tell Makor had been a beautiful elliptical mound sleeping on the road from Akko to Damascus; today it was a carefully plotted target where not one pickaxe would be applied aimlessly.

Source: *The Source*, by James Michener (Random House Inc., 1965).

Questions to Think About

1. What is Tell Makor? Why is it significant to the archaeologists?
2. What type of artifact is the most valuable? Why?
3. **Analyze Information** Why does Dr. Cullinane think he and his team have selected the best tell in the country for their archaeological dig? Use information from the excerpt to support your answer.