

# STRATA

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# Strata: Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society

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## Second Preliminary Report of the Excavations at Tell Abil el Qameh (Abel Beth Maacah)

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*Excavations on the border between Israel, Lebanon and Syria at Tell Abil el-Qameh identified with biblical Abel Beth Maacah have been carried out for three seasons (2013–2015). The geo-historical background and the results of the preliminary survey and first excavation season were published in this journal (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013), and the preliminary finds from the second and third seasons are presented here.<sup>1</sup>*

Work in the two areas chosen for excavation in the first season continued as follows: on top of the eastern slope of the mound (Area A) in 2014 and 2015 and an area at the southern end of the lower mound (Area F) in 2014. On the western slope of the lower mound, Area O was excavated for one season in 2014. Two sites on the upper mound (Area B) and on the eastern slope of the lower mound (Area K) were each dug for one season in 2015 (Figs. 1–2). Each of these explorations yielded important information concerning the date and nature of the occupation sequence, spanning Middle Bronze Age II until the early Hellenistic period.

### **Area A<sup>2</sup>**

Area A, in the saddle between the upper and lower tell, is the only area that has been excavated for all three seasons to date and has produced a dense sequence of four or possibly five Iron I Age strata (A2 to A6; see Fig. 3).<sup>3</sup>

### **Stratum A6**

In the northeastern corner of Area A, the top of a north–south wall and a related debris layer to its west was reached. The wall is ca. 75 cm. wide with its eastern face flush with the current top of the tell slope; thus, it is not clear whether this was its original width or whether the outer face had eroded down the slope. While the associated pottery suggests a possible Iron I date, we must excavate further to floor level before making any certain determination.



Fig. 1. Aerial view showing the location of excavated areas (1945, with houses of the Palestinian village, Abil el-Qameh).



Fig. 2. Panorama of the site, looking northeast with the southeastern opening of the Lebanese Beq'a and the foot of the Hermon massif in the background (Photo by M. Cohen).

### **Stratum A5**

The lines of the two walls attributed to this stratum are the same as those of Stratum A4 above. Rectangular basalt ashlar in the earlier walls helped to differentiate between them (Fig. 5). Occupation debris on earthen floors abutted these walls, although the finds were relatively scarce despite clear evidence of destruction from traces of burning, fallen stone and brick.

Apart from these two ashlar walls, a north–south line of stones (Wall 3150) ca. 80 cm high and 90 cm wide was capped by two large, smooth-topped stones that appear to have been added in Stratum A4 (see below). A small stone paving adjoining it on the west of its southern end suggested that this might have been the wall of a tomb, although found empty, possibly as a result of a large animal burrow that damaged this very area.

### **Stratum A4**

Stratum A4 comprises an architectural unit with a unique plan and installations that suffered a violent destruction which left traces of severe burning, fallen bricks and stones, and a large restorable pottery assemblage. As noted above, the walls of this occupation level were built directly above those of Stratum A5, with its earthen floors laid just above the fallen stones and burnt debris of the earlier occupation.

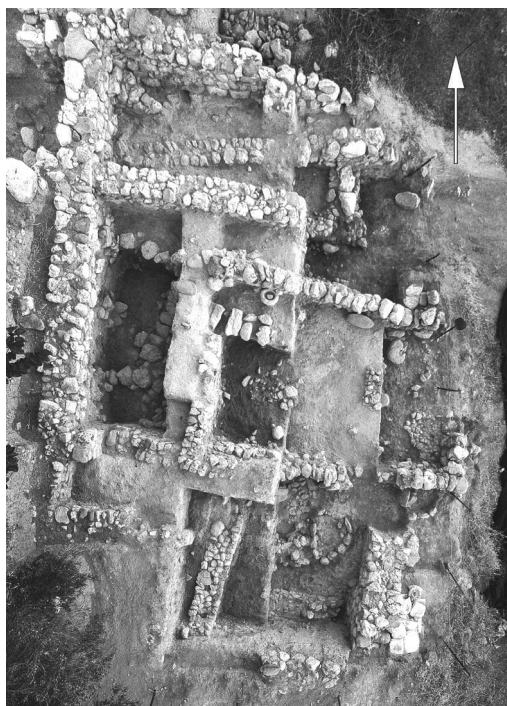


Fig. 3. Aerial view of Strata A2 to A6, showing eastern section of Area A.

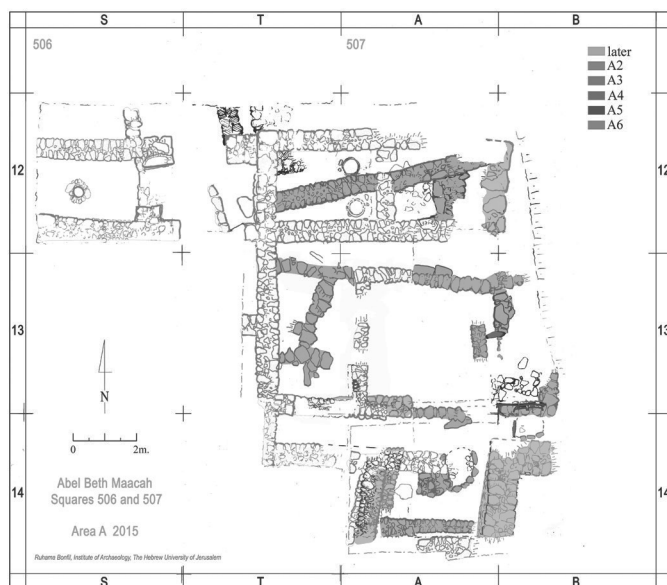


Fig. 4. Plan showing Iron Age Strata A2 to A6.



Fig. 5. Area A, Stratum A4 wall set above Stratum A5 ashlar wall, looking south.

Three spaces divided by four east–west walls have been exposed of the A4 unit. The western side has not yet been reached while the eastern side was mostly eroded down the slope. A curious feature of this unit is that each of its walls is built differently; one is oriented differently than the rest. Nevertheless, all walls clearly delineate these spaces and belong to the same architectural plan.

The southern space contained a one-meter thick layer of burnt destruction, whose debris comprised fallen brick and stone. Considerable amounts of restorable pottery rested on a floor that contained a unique installation west of the northern entrance (Fig. 6). The installation consisted of a semi-circle of stones, along with a square platform of stones (a *bamah?*) to its west, with a round depression or pit between them. A jug was found on the ‘bamah’ and a collared-rim pithos was set in the depression. A well-built stone pavement was found between the ‘bamah’ and the northern wall of the room. The stone semi-circle was open to the north and faced a large smoothed whitish limestone with a deep V-shaped cut in its top face. An almost complete upper grinding stone rested in this cut. Just east of this northern entrance was another stone semi-circle which contained a large round-topped standing stone at its western end. The northern wall was built curiously of loosely-laid stones in a herringbone pattern while the southern wall of this 3.2 m-wide room had a stone foundation and brick superstructure. On the floor of the entrance was found the skeleton of a dog that apparently had died of natural causes here, as this was not an intentional burial.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 6. Area A, Stratum A4 building, cultic(?) installation, looking north.

The central space (3.7 m. wide) was bordered on the north by a wall built in a similar manner as the southern wall (Fig. 7). In line with the southern entrance was another installation that consisted of a stone bench adjoining a round-topped standing stone exactly the same as the one in the southern room. The space was far less burnt but contained a large number of fallen stones, as well as a pit filled with animal bones. The pottery was mostly fragmentary but included part of a small clay bull figurine. Although the southeastern corner of this space was preserved, the eastern wall was eroded due to its position on the edge of the slope.<sup>5</sup> At the western end of this space we exposed lines of large unworked boulders abutted by burnt debris, numerous fallen stones and some restorable pottery. Although the relationship between these walls and debris with that found in the eastern part of the courtyard remains unclear, these walls were probably contemporary.

The orientation of the northern wall of the northernmost space differed from the walls described above. Possibly this is the wall of a yet-to-be uncovered building on a slightly different orientation to the north, that was used by the builders of the A4 cultic unit. The northern space contained burnt debris with fallen bricks and stones, as well as an installation composed of broken pithos sherds surrounding a complete jug, as well as two skeletons near the walls—further evidence of the violent end to this



Fig. 7. Area A, Stratum A4 building, cultic(?) installation with bench and standing stone, looking north; note similar stone in lower right-hand corner.

stratum. The smooth-topped stones laid on top of the earlier A5 wall were west of the head of the northern skeleton.

### **Stratum A3**

Following the violent destruction of the Stratum A4 unit, the area became a domestic occupation composed mainly of large open spaces, ovens, and installations. A new wall (3102) was built directly above the previous wall that divided the southern from the central space of Stratum A4. This wall was abutted on the north and south by whitish earthen floors and two ovens. A fine stone basin was found on the northern floor. The top course of the northern wall of the earlier A4 unit was re-used, apparently as a work platform, since an oven and pithos were found flanking it. No coherent architectural plan was discernable as most of the activity probably took place in open spaces. The total depth of accumulation in Stratum A3 did not surpass 50 cm, with abundant but mostly non-restorable pottery. Other finds included an iron arrowhead and a blade. This occupation was abandoned and the subsequent complex of Stratum A2 was constructed over it.





Fig. 8. Passageway between eastern and western units, with buttresses lining outer walls.

## Stratum A2

The entire character of the area changed with the construction of the complex attributed to Stratum A2. This was the first Iron Age occupation beneath topsoil and directly below several flimsy Mandate period agricultural terrace walls (Stratum A1). The complex consisted of a central passageway flanked by well-built stone buildings to the east and west.

The eastern unit consisted of one partially preserved large building (11.5 × c. 6 m.) with rooms built around a central space. The eastern side of the structure is missing due to erosion on the slope of the tell. Additional walls south of the building might be related to an adjoining building or space. Two phases were discerned in the western section, where there are two gaps that might have been entrances leading to the narrow (ca. 2.5 m. wide) western space. Interesting features of this building are three equidistant square stone buttresses adjoining the exterior of the western wall, and which line the passageway between it and the building to its west (see further below). There are few finds on the whitish earth floors, consisting mainly of sherds as well as several complete vessels.

One main space (2 × 3 m.) of the western building, due west of the northern wing of the eastern building, has been excavated so far (Fig. 8). Its well-built stone walls were preserved at least a meter and a half high. Notably, square buttresses identical to the ones



Fig. 9. a: Pot bellows in western Stratum A2 building, sunken in floor with rim lined with stones; b. entire pot exposed.

lining the exterior of the western wall of the eastern building also supported the eastern wall, creating a symmetry that must have been decorative and impressive.

Inside the western space we were able to discern two phases. The upper phase contained debris on an earthen floor that had some restorable pottery and ash, although not definitive enough to suggest a violent destruction. The lower phase contained debris on a hard-to-detect earthen floor into which a large clay pot bellows had been sunk; its rim surrounded with stones (Fig. 9a-b). Inside the pot were found burnt, green-tinted bones and remains of both bronze and iron working.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the way the pot bellows was set on the floor indicates that it was in secondary use, as the opening where the tuyère should have been attached was buried below floor level.

The passageway between the eastern and western buildings (1.7–2.0 m. wide) was lined with buttresses on both sides. Adjoining the wall of the eastern building, just south of the northernmost buttress, was a cultic corner built of smooth oval-shaped basalt stones standing approximately half a meter high, fronted by a low diagonal stone wall, and partly paved with small stones (Fig. 10). This passageway possibly led to a city gate somewhat farther north. A dip in the mound's topography here, where the modern approach road passes to the top of the tell, would have favored such a location.



Fig. 10. Cultic corner within Stratum A2 passageway, looking southeast; note stone buttresses lining walls.

#### Area F<sup>7</sup>

Area F is located at the southern end of the lower mound, overlooking the northern Huleh valley. The central feature excavated in this area is a large tower with a rampart abutting it on the east (Stratum F6, Figs. 11–12). To the north of the tower and rampart three main phases of activity dating to the Late Bronze Age were identified (Strata F5–F3). All three phases abutted the sturdy northern face of the tower and rampart. This fact, along with the large number of Middle Bronze IIB sherds, indicate a Middle Bronze IIB date for this fortification system. The tower was later cut by several Iron Age I pits. Above the latest Late Bronze Age stratum (Stratum F3) were two strata (F2 and F1) dating to the Iron Age I.

#### Stratum F6

The tower (c. 6.5 × 7.7 m.) is composed of at least four courses of small and medium sized roughly-rounded stones, embedded into a hard chalky white ‘cement’, possibly *nari*, framed along the edges by large boulders. The tower was cut by later activity on the west and eroded on the south (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013: 39). From the middle of the eastern wall of the tower, a 3.6 m.-wide stone feature, identical to those stones that composed the tower, extended northeast; its western face lined by boulders similar to those along the tower exterior. Although appearing to be the top of a wide wall, this feature was part of the rampart. This rampart consisted of a single course of stones above layers of dark brown soil and dense whitish chalky *nari* material that continued to the south and east. Iron Age I pits and silos were cut into both the top of the tower, the wall



Fig. 11. Area F, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Iron Age I Strata F1–F6.



Fig. 12. Area F, Middle Bronze II tower and rampart, looking south. Note stones robbed from rampart lining (north of meter stick) to build a later wall nearby (right).

and the rampart; indicating that the Middle Bronze Age fortifications, later used in the Late Bronze Age, went out of use in the Iron Age I.

### **Stratum F5**

The earliest of the three layers attributed to the Late Bronze Age comprises two north–south walls that abutted the northern wall of the tower, and one east–west wall. Associated with these walls on the west was an accumulation of thin red, gray, and white striations on which a small gold disc was found, similar to discs found in the ‘Mycenaean tomb’ at Dan (Biran and Ben-Dov 2002: 173, Fig. 2.136), as well as a group of *astragali* near a bronze rod. A large LBI carinated bowl fragment was found on a beaten-earth floor on the east.

### **Stratum F4**

Covering the southern end of the F5 wall attached to the northeastern corner of the tower was a pavement of large, well-worked flat-topped stones. These were set into the corner where the tower and stone rampart met. These had been laid somewhat haphazardly and were apparently in secondary use. Earthen layers associated with the walls of this stratum yielded LBII pottery.

### **Stratum F3**

Above the Stratum F4 walls was another system of walls abutting the northern face of the tower and rampart. These indicate the final Late Bronze Age stratum. The easternmost wall was built from the stones robbed from the northern face of the rampart. The corner of two walls was cut by an Iron I silo and pit (see below). A whitish earthen floor abutted the western face of this wall and the upper course of the tower. On this floor was found a concentration of pottery, including a small jug containing a silver hoard. The jug is a local imitation of a Cypriot bilbil with its neck filed down (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013: 40, Fig. 10). This jug apparently had not been buried or hidden as we previously thought, but rested on the floor against one of the large boulders in the northern wall of the tower. The hoard contained 12 items, including five complete and four partial earrings, a silver ingot and some hacksilver, making it one of the earliest such hoards found in the region and marking one of the first appearances of hacksilver found in this region (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, in preparation). This latest Late Bronze II phase of occupation appears to have ended in abandonment, since no traces of destruction in the limited excavation area were found.

### **Stratum F2**

Cut into the top of the tower and rampart, as well as into the walls and layers of Stratum F3, were a series of pits and stone-lined silos dating to the Iron Age I



Fig. 13. Area F, Iron Age I building, silos and pits (left) above and cutting into Late Bronze remains; northern wall of MBII tower on the right; looking east.

(Fig. 13). These features effectively eliminated the fortification system, which had evidently been in use during the entire Late Bronze Age sequence. These silos and pits were relatively uniform, approximately one meter in diameter, although the preserved depths varied between them. The pits which had been cut into the tower did not exceed 40 cm deep, while those cutting into the Late Bronze Age walls and into the Middle Bronze Age rampart were double in size, one meter in diameter by one meter in depth. Notably, some of the pits and silos cut others, pointing to intensive activity during this phase. Some of the pits contained a variety of pottery vessels such as collared rim jars, a pyxis, and a jug, as well as a sporadic collection of flint tools, bones, a bronze needle, and a spindle whorl.

### **Stratum F1**

The latest stratum in Area F was uncovered directly below topsoil, where we found part of a dwelling. An open area or street with stone-lined pits was possibly bordered by yet another building. Due to erosion only its lower stone foundation courses were preserved. We excavated three spaces. The western space was cut on its western end by a later disturbance possibly dating to the Persian period, in which we found two fine bronze fibulae. In this street or courtyard were several stone-lined pits and silos. In one, a complete iron blade was found.



Fig. 14. Area O, Middle Bronze II Strata O1–O3.

A special find that came from below topsoil and above the northern wall of the Stratum F1 building was a fine scarab of the *Mnxprra* type imported from Egypt and dating to the period of Ramses II. It had either been kept as an heirloom in the Iron Age I building or inadvertently found its way to its find spot in the topsoil, not far above the Late Bronze layer in which it would have originated (David, Mullins and Panitz-Cohen in press).

### Area O<sup>8</sup>

Area O, at the top of the western slope of the lower mound yielded three strata: two belonged to Middle Bronze IIB (Strata O2 and O3) and the third to the Late Bronze Age or early Iron I (Stratum O1). The latter was exposed directly below topsoil. A large pit cut into one of the walls post-dates all the activity in this area and seems to belong to Iron I or IIA (Fig. 14).

### Stratum O3

A limited section of the top of a layer of small stones was revealed. These stones continued to the north, south, and west beyond the limits of excavation. A relatively large collection of Early Bronze II sherds, including platters and metallic ware, was found in association with this stone layer. To its east we exposed a surface with an oven and MB IIB pottery. The relationship between this surface and the layer of small stones remains unclear.

### Stratum O2

Stratum O2 contained a large and well-built structure on a northeast–southwest axis, reasonably perpendicular to the slope. Four rooms were exposed, each with



Fig. 15. Area O, looking north; stone walls of the Middle Bronze II Stratum O2 building, with Stratum O1 walls above; note threshold in westernmost wall (left).



Fig. 16. Iron IIA seal.

a somewhat different width that ranged from 2.5 to 3.5 m. The building continued to the east and north, while the southern part was badly eroded. Each wall had an entrance which allowed access between all the rooms. In the easternmost room, the skeleton of a large elderly man was found lying on his chest near a large pithos.<sup>9</sup> Whether this was a burial or if the pithos fell when he met his death is unclear. This phase yielded several infant burials in storage jars as well.

### **Stratum O1**

The architecture of Stratum O1 was relatively fragmented due to its depth directly below topsoil. The orientation of the walls was the same as Stratum O2 and they were built directly on top of the latter. The architecture from this phase included the western end of a room that continued beyond the border of the excavated area in its eastern end, and a segment of a wall in the west. A well-made tripod basalt mortar was found on an earthen floor abutting this wall, surrounded by upside-down bowl and jug disc bases. This encircling appears to have been intentional.

### **Activity Post-dating Stratum O1**

The large pit which cut the threshold of the westernmost wall of Stratum O2 contained restorable pottery that appears to be Iron Age I or early Iron Age IIA. This assemblage consisted of several cooking pots and storage jars, as





Fig. 17. Area B, Persian-Early Hellenistic massive building above Iron II remains.

well as a bowl. A small stone seal (Fig. 16), which has parallels to similar seals in secure Iron IIA contexts, was found in the topsoil at the eastern edge of the excavation area (Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, in preparation). These finds point to ongoing activity in this area following the latest preserved building from Stratum O1.

### **Area B<sup>10</sup>**

Area B, near the northern end of the site is the only excavation area in the upper mound. This is mainly due to the ruined overlay of Abil el Qameh, the abandoned Palestinian village, which we chose not to disturb, in addition to the damage to the summit by a military bunker. On a flattened terrace in the middle of the eastern slope of the upper mound this area (see Fig. 15), was selected for excavation because of a large north–south wall identified during the 2012 survey that appeared to have belonged to an ancient building, although it had probably been reused as an agricultural terrace wall in modern times (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013: 36; <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/report-2012>). Below topsoil we

encountered the poorly preserved corner of two walls and two round pits (Stratum B2) that we were unable to securely date. A substantial architectural stratum below this clearly related to the large ‘terrace’ wall that consisted of three sub-phases belonging to the late Persian/early Hellenistic period (Stratum B3a-c). Below this building were remains tentatively attributed to the Iron Age II (Strata B4–5) on the basis of the ceramic evidence.

### Strata B4–B5

Only sporadic elements of this stratum have been revealed to date and they do not yet comprise a comprehensive plan, and no floors have been identified. These remains may be divided into two sections: those excavated below the Persian/early Hellenistic building of Strata B3 and those remains excavated to the east of this structure.

In a probe below the lowest floor of the Stratum B3 building we encountered a dark-earth fill that mostly contained Iron IIB pottery. This fill rests above a stone wall, oriented northeast–southwest, that appears to be the top of an Iron Age II structure.

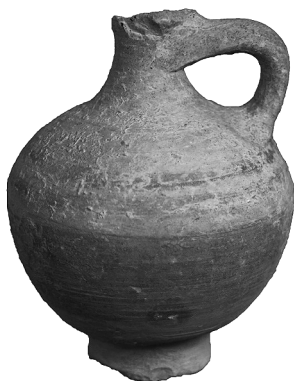
The area to the east of Wall 3701 was severely eroded such that *in situ* debris was reached only about 50 cm below its foundations. On the northern edge of this area was an oval-shaped brick construction containing gray-black ash and whitish chunks of rock. This installation continued to the north, clearly covered by a Stratum B3 stone floor. This layer, designated Stratum B4, covered an even earlier layer of burnt earth and collapsed mudbricks, apparently the top of a destruction designated Stratum B5. The skeleton of a child, who had apparently met a violent death, was found in this earlier burnt debris. The pottery, mostly Iron IIA and IIB, included strainer jugs, carinated red-slipped and hand-burnished bowls, and a small fragment of a Cypro-Phoenician juglet. Another find was a storage jar sherd with a large letter incised in it before firing, possibly a bet or a nun.<sup>11</sup> Several Iron I sherds, including a wavy-band pithos, were found as well.

### Stratum B3

Excavation of the large north–south wall (3701) made of very large boulders and preserved two courses belonged to a large building with three phases. The entire area to its east had been eroded down to the top of the Iron Age level (see above). The sole exception was a patch of stone pavement abutting its northeastern face.

In the earliest phase (B3c) earthen floors abutted the western face of Wall 3701, as well as two fine stone foundations. On top of this layer, in Stratum B3b and B3a, pebble floors were laid. On the upper pebble floor were three Phoenician semi-fine ware juglets which date this context to the late Persian/early Hellenistic period.<sup>12</sup> Part of a stone pavement abutted Wall 3701 on its northeastern end; however, it is too

Fig. 18. Phoenician semi-fine ware juglet, Stratum B3.



fragmentary to know whether it was used during the entire occupation. This building continues to the west and north, but it is eroded on the east and cut by later burials (Stratum B1) on the south.

### **Stratum B2**

A very patchy remnant of the corner of two walls was revealed abutted on the north and east by round, empty pits. While this stratum apparently post-dated the Persian/early Hellenistic building, no associated finds were available to date it.

### **Stratum B1**

Several rectangular and oval burials were dug into the remains of the Stratum B3 building at its southwestern end, but they contained no datable material and the skeletal material was poorly preserved. Comparison to similar burials at Tel Dan suggests that they probably date to the Mameluke period (pers. comm. David Ilan).

### **Area K**

A limited probe was conducted on the central eastern slope where there is relatively easy access to the summit of the northern part of the lower mound. This area was chosen due to the topography suggestive of the location of a city gate, and the presence of several large stones on a north–south axis in topsoil. These we found to be part of an approximately three-meter wide stone wall abutted on the east by a thick layer of sterile whitish chalky material that might have been part of a rampart laid against the city wall's exterior (eastern) face (Fig. 18). The western face of this wall seems to have a protruding outset. The wall can clearly be traced in the topsoil towards the south. To the north, there is a rise in the mound, ca. 4



Fig. 19. Area K, view of the top of fortification walls, looking south.

meters high. This elevated area continues to northwards until Area A. We surmise that it might be the continuation of the large public complex uncovered in that area further to the north. However, it is not yet certain that the fortification wall from Area K and the building complex found in Area A are related.

No datable pottery was found here except for a number of very worn Early Bronze II sherds. The wall's position on the slope and the chalky 'rampart-like' material against its eastern face suggest that it might have belonged to the Middle Bronze Age fortification system that was revealed in Area F, although further work is necessary to securely date it, as well as to clarify whether there had been a gate and a tower here, and to which periods they belonged.

## Summary and Conclusions

### The Middle Bronze Age II Fortifications

Traces of the fortification system were only detected in Area F. The architectural remains attributed to the Middle Bronze Age apparently belong to the latter half of this period, including the tower and rampart in Area F and the two phases of the building in Area O. The top course of the stone wall tentatively thought to belong to Early Bronze II could instead be part of the Middle Bronze IIB fortification, though different in form than in Area F. A similar situation exists at nearby Tel

Dan, where the Middle Bronze II fortifications are not uniform (Biran 1990; 1994: 59–73). The impressively wide stone wall revealed in Area K, with the chalky white plaster-like material against its eastern face, might indicate that this is part of the Middle Bronze Age fortification system. Alternatively, the fortification in Area F could be a local feature, meant to overlook the Huleh valley to the south and to serve as a deterrent for attacks from that easily accessible area.

Besides their defensive function, Middle Bronze Age fortifications were certainly symbols of competition and power in peer polity interaction (Bunimovitz 1992; Ilan 1998; Uziel 2010). This latter possibility seems to be supported by the proximity of other heavily fortified Middle Bronze IIB sites, such as Dan, Hazor, and Kiryat Shemona (Gadot and Yasur-Landau 2012). Whatever the extent, nature, and precise date of the Middle Bronze II fortifications in Area F, the evidence indicates that they were reused during the Late Bronze Age, when the buildings were set against the northern face of the tower and rampart. Only in the Iron Age I, when numerous pits and silos cut the surviving top of the tower and rampart, did this system cease to function.

### **Scope of the Iron Age Occupation**

The finds corroborate our conclusions from the first season of excavation in 2013 that occupation on the lower mound terminated at the end of Iron Age I. Important new information gained during the 2015 season includes the exposure of Iron Age IIA and IIB remains in the upper mound to the north, although we are not yet able to determine the nature and scope of this occupation. Traces of destruction and large amounts of pottery from these periods indicate that this was not a scanty occupation, although more exposure is necessary. Iron I and Late Bronze pottery recovered in fills and debris layers in Area B and in the survey on the upper mound, indicate that this area had been occupied during that time as well. Although we conclude at this point that only the upper mound was occupied in Iron Age II, in fact, further excavation in other parts of the lower mound might reveal remains of this period, in light of the pottery and the Iron IIA seal from Area O.

### **Public and Domestic Occupation in Iron I**

An interesting study in contrasts is the nature of the Iron I remains in Area A as opposed to those in Area F. In the latter, what appears to be a domestic building with numerous pits and silos was revealed under topsoil. In Area A, on the one hand, a well-built complex that appears to have been of a public, possibly of an administrative and industrial nature, was revealed just under topsoil. Moreover, the two phases of Iron I in Area F comprising the aforementioned building and several superimposed pits and silos, were built directly over and cutting into the

latest Late Bronze Age level. On the other hand, in Area A, there are at least four major architectural layers dating to this period, one of which suffered from an intense violent destruction (Stratum A4) that was not detected in Area F. While the sparser Iron I remains might be the result of severe erosion and later agricultural activity on the southern end of the mound, it seems that anthropocentric and functional reasons lie behind this difference, which makes this an interesting topic for further exploration.

### **The Aramean Question**

A key research question that guides our excavation agenda is related to the Aramaeans. The first secure mention of these people is in an inscription by Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) that reveals these people at an early stage of their transition from a non-sedentary rural-pastoralist lifestyle to a settled and national entity. This process took place against the background of the new socio-cultural order that followed the collapse of the Late Bronze Age urban system. This crisis provided opportunities for new ethnic elements, like the Aramaeans, to eventually establish themselves as territorial states. This process was paralleled by the northern kingdom of Israel, so the geo-political interaction between the two entities was intertwined from the start (Berlejung 2014: 341–342).

The Aramaean core territory was in northern Syria, but by the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, they consolidated their political power in southern Syria into territorial polities establishing the kingdom of Aram-Damascus, as well as the kingdoms of Aram Zobah and Bit Rehov in southern Lebanon. The Aramaeans became politically engaged in the northern parts of modern Israel and Jordan, although the scope and nature of this involvement remains uncertain and a topic to be further explored.

Two small kingdoms, Geshur and Maacah, are especially pertinent to our agenda as they are mentioned only in the Hebrew bible. Apparently, these local tribal chiefdoms became incorporated into the realm of Aram-Damascus in Iron Age IIA. The name ‘Maacah’ is particularly intriguing for us, as scholars have surmised that Abel Beth Maacah was the capital of the kingdom of Maacah (e.g., Mazar 1961: 17, note 3, 27; Arie 2008: 35; Na’aman 2012: 95; Finkelstein 2013: 106).

The Hebrew bible’s narrative about these processes of expansion, occupation, collaboration, and confrontation does not help to clarify the picture owing to the late date of the edited texts and to a paucity of archaeological data. This lack is abetted by the lacuna of excavated and published sites in the Iron Age Aramaean centers in Syria and Lebanon, and compounded by the lack of comprehensive publication of finds from those sites considered to have been within the realm of the kingdom of

Geshur, such as En Gev, Tel Hadar, Bethsaida (et-Tell), and Tel Kinnerot (Tell el-Oreime; Naaman 2012; Berlejung 2014: 345–351). The data from Iron Age II Tel Dan, a key site for understanding the Aramaeans in northern Israel, and possibly part of the kingdom of Maacah, still remains largely unpublished. Thus, the new excavations at Abel Beth Maacah afford a prime opportunity to explore Aramaean presence, political influence, and cultural impact in northern Israel during the Iron Age, particularly in light of the present lacuna of excavated or published data from southern Syria, the heartland of the Aramaeans (Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, *in press*).

The main excavated data that has potential to shed light on these issues includes identification and dating of the occupation sequence, architectural remains, and ceramic finds relating to the Iron Age I and II.<sup>13</sup>

We now know that the entire mound was occupied in the Iron Age I, when the Aramaeans made their first documented appearance by that name and when the Hebrew Bible first mentions the tribal(?) entities of Geshur and Maacah (Josh 12: 4–5; Josh 13: 11–13; Deut 3: 13–14). At that time, the occupation at Abel Beth Maacah was extensive, comprised of well-built public buildings in one area, and dwellings with multiple storage facilities in another. This suggests some level of zoning. The long-lived Iron I sequence covered all of the 11<sup>th</sup> and probably at least part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Such intense occupation far surpasses that of Hazor, which was no more than a village, or even a temporary way stop for pastoralists at that time. A comparison with nearby Dan shows similarity in the occupation sequence, with a suggested correlation between the violent destruction of Stratum A4 and that of Dan Stratum V. Following this, it is possible that Dan Stratum IVB can be equated with our Stratum A2. But what were the relations between Abel Beth Maacah and Dan in Iron I? Two large sites with dense occupation so close to each other must have competed for resources and for political dominance. In any event, it is clear that the focus of urban occupation in Iron Age I shifted to the upper Galilee from the area of Hazor in the southern Hula Valley. Possibly, Abel Beth Maacah might have been the main urban entity at that time, although we cannot say with any certainty at this stage whether the political organization followed that of the Late Bronze city-state system, or if a new order was established.

The inhabitants of this Iron I town might have been:

1. Local Canaanites who continued to occupy the site despite the havoc at the end of the Late Bronze Age (as noted above, the evidence in Area F shows a non-violent end to that occupation);
2. New population elements, of unknown identity or
3. A mixture of local and new populations.

The pottery recovered from all the Iron I phases is similar, although more study and a fine-tuning of the typology is required. The corpus comprises large numbers

of pithoi (both collared rim and wavy band) and cooking pots with a variety of rims (but no handles), as well as other typical Iron I forms like hemispherical bowls, painted carinated kraters, piriform jugs, and pyxides. A relatively substantial amount of Phoenician Bichrome sherds has been found, mainly closed vessels. Several forms that are only typical of the northern regions were found here, particularly a one or two handled jug/amphora that also appears at Tel Kinrot, Tel Dan, and Tel Hadar. Our ultimate goal is to examine this rich assemblage on a quantitative basis and to seek comparisons at sites in southern Lebanon and in Syria, with a particular focus on the pithoi, which appear to have affinities with these northern regions as well as the southern parts of Canaan. Study of the ceramics, as well as other datasets, have the potential to shed light on social, cultural, ethnic and economic issues in this border region, located in the interface between Israel, Syria and Lebanon in antiquity as in modern times.

## Notes

- 1 The excavations were conducted under the auspices of Azusa Pacific University, Los Angeles and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with the project generously funded by the former. R.A. Mullins and N. Panitz-Cohen are co-directors and R. Bonfil is the surveyor and stratigraphic advisor. Omer Sergey of Tel Aviv University is a research partner, in association with the project's participation in the Minerva Center for Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times, jointly with Bar Ilan University (Aren Maeir) and the University of Leipzig (Angelika Berlejung). Participating institutions include Asbury Theological Seminary, Cornell University, Indiana Wesleyan University, Trinity International University, and the University of Arizona. Logistics were provided by Oren Gutfield of Israel Archaeological Services.
- 2 Area A was supervised by Ido Wachtel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Fredrika Loew of Cornell University was the registrar; assistant supervisors were Kenton Williams, Carroll Kobs, Jeff Kobs, Kevin Crow, Dianne Benton and Aviv Toren. For a detailed field report of the 2013–2014 seasons, see <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/2014-excavation-report-area-a>.
- 3 The numbering of the Iron Age strata begins with A2, since A1 pertains to several flimsy terrace walls of the recent Ottoman-British Mandate period in topsoil.
- 4 We thank Nimrod Marom (University of Haifa), who examined the dog skeleton *in situ*, for this information.
- 5 In the 2012 survey, three superimposed strata were discerned in the slope below Area A which were the impetus for choosing this area for excavation (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013: 34–36, Fig. 4; <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/report-2012>). The southern wall of the central room of the Stratum A4 unit is part of the uppermost of these three layers, built on top of a north–south wall comprising the middle layer of the three (designated Wall A3/11 in the survey). This latter wall was built above the large basalt stone on which an intact ring flask was found in the survey that represents the lowest layer of the three (*ibid*; Fig. 6).



- 6 We thank Naama Yahalom-Mack of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who examined this installation, for this information.
- 7 Area F was supervised by Ortal Harush of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Adva Danon of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Claire Mackay of the University of Saskatchewan were the registrars; assistant supervisors were Dean Rancourt, Itamar Weissbein, Leann Canady, Scott Booth and Lisa Marsio. For a detailed field report of the 2013–2014 seasons, see <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/2014-excavation-report-area-f>.
- 8 Area O was supervised by Christopher Monroe of Cornell University; Ariel Shatil of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was the registrar and assistant supervisor. For a detailed field report of the 2014 season, see <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/2014-excavation-report-area-o>.
- 9 We thank Noa Kuriansky and Marina Faerman for identifying the skeletal remains.
- 10 Area B was supervised by Ariel Shatil of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, assisted by John Harmon, Margot Murray and Josh Errington.
- 11 We thank Heather D. Davis Parker and Nadav Na'aman for their help in the identification of this letter.
- 12 We thank Jennifer Gates-Foster, pottery analyst of the Omrit excavation team, for identifying these vessels.
- 13 An archaeobotanical study conducted by Melissa Rosensweig of Miami University and analysis of the rich faunal collection conducted by Nimrod Marom of the University of Haifa are geared to trace patterns of plant and animal utilization, on both an intra-site and on a regional scale, in an attempt to identify those variables likely to express socio-cultural issues, such as ethnicity and political organization. This has the potential to help us delineate the area of the supposed Aramaean kingdoms of Geshur and Maacah, and to view environmental factors and subsistence strategies as an expression of national-cultural identity.

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