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In Search for Aram and Israel

Politics, Culture, and Identity

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Aram-Maacah? Aramaeans and Israelites on the Border:

Excavations at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ (Abel-beth-maacah) in Northern Israel

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The excavations at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ were initiated by the authors for various reasons. Aside from being one of the last large multi-layered sites of biblical importance in Israel that had yet to be excavated, its location on the Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian border and the very name of the biblical city with which the tell is identified, Abel-beth-maacah, made it a prime candidate to explore one of the lesser-known topics in the archaeology of Israel – the material expression of Israelite-Aramaean relations. After a survey and four seasons of excavation,[1] more questions than answers have emerged. In the following paper, the potential Aramaean affinity of the site is examined in light of the biblical text and geo-historical considerations, and the main results of the excavation to date are briefly presented against this background.

Abel-beth-maacah and Aram-Maacah

Among the textual sources, those which are relevant to the question of whether Abel-beth-maacah was related to the Aramaean realm in the Iron Age are solely biblical, and thus, lack solid chronological or historical grounds. In fact, the biblical references that point to a possible Aramaean connection are not to the city of Abel-beth-maacah itself, but rather to an entity termed 'Maacah,' often cited as a component of the twin kingdoms of Geshur and Maacah, and regarded by the ancient biblical editors, as well as by most present-day scholars, as Aramaean (see further below). Scholars have made a *de facto* connection between the kingdom of Maacah and Abel-beth-maacah, based mainly on the geography and the name.[2] Most recently, Na'aman has pegged Abel-

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[1] The excavations at Tel Abil al-Qameḥ are directed by the authors and Dr. Naama Yahalom-Mack under the auspices of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles; the latter is also the primary and generous financer of the project; Ruhama Bonfil of the Hebrew University is the surveyor and stratigraphic advisor. The project began with a survey in 2012 and four excavation seasons, each lasting four weeks, in 2013–2016, have been conducted up to the time of the writing of this paper, which includes archaeological data from seasons 2013 to 2015.

[2] E.g., Mazar 1961:17 (n3),27; Malamat 1965:80; Arie 2008:35.

beth-maacah as "the capital of the kingdom of Beth-maacah,"[3] while Finkelstein has asserted that "the name Abel-Beth-Maacah refers to an Aramean town".[4] However, close examination shows that the sources do not explicitly state that the former played such a role in the latter, nor that the kingdom of Maacah was necessarily Aramaean. In the three biblical sources that specifically mention the city (2 Sam 20:1–23, 1 Kgs 15:20, and 2 Kgs 15:29), it is regarded as an Israelite city, raising an ambivalent picture about its assumed 'Aramaean-ness' or, at least, how the biblical editors viewed its political loyalty, if not its national-ethnic makeup, at the much later time when these verses were written. This most likely reflects the complex situation of the town's political affiliation that changed over time, a product of its border location.

2 Samuel 20 is the most detailed reference, relating how the Benjaminite Sheba ben Bichri rebelled against King David and fled to 'Abel and to Beth-Maacah' (v.14), where he sought refuge. It is interesting to note the separation of the name 'Abel' from 'Beth-Maacah' here. While it is most likely an editorial error (since the name appears in the following verse without the conjunction), it seems that such a separation might reflect political realities. Indeed, in the second millennium BCE sources, including the early Execration Texts, the list of cities conquered by Thutmosis III, and possibly, the Amarna letters,[5] the name is Abel. Dever took this separation to indicate that prior to the reign of King David, the name of the town was Abel, and that it had belonged to 'the well-known family of Maacah, whose tribal holding lay in northern Transjordan'.[6] He further postulated that when Abel was 'taken from the House of Maacah' by the Israelites (although he does not state when or how this occurred), the name became Abel-mayyim, a rendering which appears in 2 Chronicles 16:4, the parallel account to 1 Kings 15:20; however, Abel-mayyim seems to be no more than a textual variant.[7] Mazar[8] claimed that the name 'Abel-beth-maacah' was the result of the expansion of the 'House of Maacah'[9] from its homeland in the Golan Heights (see below) to a point as far west as the town of Abel. Based on the separation of the names 'Abil' and

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[3] Na'aman 2012:95.

[4] Finkelstein 2013:106.

[5] Mazar 1961:22; Dever 1986:211–214.

[6] Dever 1986:214.

[7] Dever 1986:214. Although most often translated as 'meadow', the name 'Abel' is also related to water (Dever 1986:208, n2, quoting Albright; Younger 2016: Chapter 3); thus, the addition of Mayim (water) to the name Abel might have been a gloss made by an editor who wished to express the lush and well-watered setting of the site. Lipiński viewed this name as proof that Abel-Beth-Maacah is to be identified at Tell el-Qadi (identified by most as Dan), as it sits directly astride the headwaters of the Jordan (Lipiński 2000:372, n144). Abel is, of course, a name commonly found in other Israelite site names, such as Abel-mehola and Abel-shittim.

[8] Mazar 1961:27.

[9] Kuhrt (1995:394) noted that some of the Aramaean kingdoms "bear a name composed with the word house or family (*bitū, beth*) and a personal name", suggesting that "the name of the state was derived from that of an ancestor or a prominent member of a dominant family". However, this does not point to a necessarily Aramaean affinity for the addition of 'Beth' to 'Maacah', as such a designation is known in Canaanite and Israelite names as well. The name 'Maacah' itself is most likely West Semitic and not specifically Aramaean (Younger 2016: Chapter 3).

'Maʿakayu' in the Execration Texts, Younger suggested that they were, indeed, two separate political entities at that time, and it seems that at some early stage, the city of 'Abil' became the capital of the tribal entity, 'Beth-Maacah'.[10]

All of these proposals assume that the town's name was originally 'Abel,' with the appellation 'Beth-Maacah' serving as an addendum that reflects the socio-political tribal/extended family organization up until and including Iron Age I, later to be replaced by a different political structure (specifically for Dever and Mazar, Israelite fortified cities subordinate to the central rule in Jerusalem at the time of the United Monarchy). It is possible that the addition of 'Beth-Maacah' to 'Abel' is a late second millennium or early first millennium BCE development, although it remains unclear which geographical-cultural processes are reflected by this.

Whatever the name's combination represents, there is no direct indication in these particular sources that Abel, or Beth-Maacah, were Aramaean at that time.[11] The story of the rebellion of Sheba ben Bichri in 2 Samuel 20, purportedly taking place during the reign of David, shows that the town self-identified as Israelite, with the Wise Woman of the town using the enigmatic epithet – 'a city and a mother in Israel' (2 Sam 20:19). Although this quite legendary narrative was written at a later date, it was intended to show that Abel-beth-maacah was the northernmost point that one could go from Jerusalem without crossing the border into Phoenicia or Syria and that the town was loyal to Jerusalem, fortified, and perhaps the seat of a local oracle.

The two other biblical references mention the conquest of the city, first by the Aramaean king Ben-Hadad (probably Ben-Hadad I of Aram Damascus) as an outcome of his alliance with Asa king of Judah in the first quarter of the 9th century BCE (1 Kgs 15:20), and later by the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pilesar III in 732 BCE (2 Kgs 15:29). Whether or not one or both of these sources are historically reliable,[12] both events point to the memory of this city as being under Israelite hegemony during Iron Age II, rather than as an Aramaean city. Even so, the question remains if this was indeed the situation, or whether it was a later rewrite intended to belittle Aramaean involvement in the region and/or written down at a time when the Aramaeans were on the wane due to Assyrian aggression in the 8th century BCE.

Virtually no extra-biblical sources exist to clarify this matter. Tadmor initially read 'Abel-beth-maacah' as the name that marked the southern boundary of Aram in an inscription on stone from Nimrud during the conquest of Tiglath-pilesar III,[13] but subsequently rejected this.[14]

Various scholars have proposed that the partial word at the end of Line 2 of the Tel Dan Stele was 'Abel',[15] suggesting that the erstwhile battle between the king of Israel and the Aramaeans alluded to in the stele took place at this location. Lipiński went

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[10] Younger 2016: Chapter 3.
[11] Mazar 1961:27; Lipinski 2000:336; Younger 2016 Chapter 3.
[12] Cf. Dion 1997:182–183; Rainey and Notley 2006:197; Finkelstein 2013:76.
[13] Tadmor 1962.
[14] Tadmor 2007:139; see also Dever 1986:222 and Na'aman 2005:40.
[15] E.g., Schniedewind 1996:77; Lipiński 2000:373–374; Na'aman 2012:95, n10; Ghantous 2014: 49.

even further and also reconstructed the word at the end of Line 4 as *'aby(l)* ([the land of] Abil) instead of *'by* ([the land of] my father).[16] This reconstruction is related to his identification of Tell el-Qadi with Abel-beth-maacah, instead of the generally accepted identification with Dan.[17] He consequently correlated Tell Abil el-Qameḥ with Dan.[18]

Apart from the highly speculative and uncertain nature of these reconstructions, even if the name of Abel-beth-maacah did appear in the Dan inscription, it would not securely determine whether it was of Israelite or Aramaean association at that time. Did the king of Israel attack an Aramaean site that Hazael's 'father' was defending, or did Hazael's 'father' attack an Israelite site in order to incorporate it into his kingdom? Was this the battle carried out by the Ben-Hadad of 1 Kings 15:20? If so, then the latter scenario would be more valid than the former. However, this speculation is moot, since the reference to Abel is only conjectural.

In conclusion, the socio-political status of Abel-beth-maacah in Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA (12th–9th centuries BCE) cannot be securely reconstructed based on any of these sources, and various scenarios are possible. In all three direct biblical sources, nothing is explicitly stated about the city being the capital of (or belonging to) the Aramaean(?) kingdom of Maacah. This relationship is an unproven assumption, albeit possible, as the modern scholars quoted above have argued.

We are now left to explore the Aramaean question with the sources pertaining to the kingdom of Maacah.

Maacah and Geshur

Maacah is often paired with Geshur, and both are only explicitly mentioned in the Bible, where they are first described as an independent enclave during the Israelite conquest and settlement, as well as afterwards. Joshua 13:11–13 relates how they were incorporated into the conquered territory of Og, king of Bashan, while Deuteronomy 3:13–14 and Joshua 12:4–5 describe how their border adjoined that of the Israelite tribal territories.[19] Either way, they were considered foreign and separate (ethnically, politically and geographically) from the Israelites in the mind of the biblical writer at a much later date (Josh 13:11, 'the Geshurite and Maacahthite still live among Israel to this day').

The complex and often fuzzy relationship between Geshur and Maacah is expressed in the marriage of Maacah, daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, to King David (2 Sam 3:3). While meant to reflect an alliance between Jerusalem and this northern entity in the 10th century BCE[20] (whether Aramaean or not at this time is not clear from the narrative), it also seems to allude to a symbiotic interconnection between the two

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[16] Lipiński 2000:378, n174.
[17] Lipiński 2000:372.
[18] See note 7 above.
[19] Na'aman 2012:89–90.
[20] Na'aman 2012:90–91.

kingdoms of Geshur and Maacah.[21] It is possible that shared kinship ties and political interests, as well as geographic overlap (for example, the unclear border between the two in the northwest; see below), resulted in their operating (and being identified) as one and the same at certain points in time and during certain events.[22] However, certain narratives, such as 2 Samuel 10, where Maacah joined an anti-David coalition, but Geshur is not mentioned, show that they were sometimes perceived separately. This could be the result of a chronological difference (one kingdom existed while the other did not), or could reflect differences in political affinity at different times during Iron Age II in relation to Israel and Aram.

As noted earlier, Na'aman argues Abel-beth-maacah to be the capital of the kingdom of Maacah, and Bethsaida (et-Tell), the capital of Geshur in Iron Age IIA.[23] This assumption is based on historical-geographical considerations, as well as archaeological data from the latter site dating to the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, but not on any written sources.

The Territory of Maacah

Reconstruction of the physical realm of the kingdom of Maacah is wrought with problems, due to a lack of details in the biblical text, which was probably written down long after the exact location was forgotten and only a vague memory of its general placement remained.[24] In fact, the few hints that may be gleaned from the texts refer to Geshur, and it is only by virtue of their association that conjectures have been proposed about the location of Maacah.

2 Samuel 15:8 states that 'Geshur is in Aram', but this is probably more of a political, rather than a geographical definition or memory.[25] Mazar placed both kingdoms in the Golan Heights, between the hill country of Gilead in the south, Bashan in the east, and Mount Hermon in the north, with the Geshurites in the southern part and the Maacahtites in the northern part.[26] This identification was based on the realm of neighbouring entities, such as the territory controlled by Og, king of Bashan, that ex-

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[21] Lipiński (2006:208) went further and suggested that Geshur and Maacah were simply different names for the same 'small Syro-Hurrian kingdom ruled in the 10th century by Talmay, located on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee'.

[22] Na'aman (2012:91, n4) claimed that it does not make sense for the name of the Geshurite princess to be the same as that of the northern neighbour of Geshur and thus concluded that the name Maacah for the princess was most likely not authentic. The name Maacah in the Bible is multifarious and non-gender-specific, including one of the sons of Reumah the concubine of Nahor (Gen 22:24) (whose grandson was Aram), the daughter of Talmai who was David's wife and mother of Absalom and Tamar (2 Sam 3:3), the daughter of Absalom, wife of Rehoboam and mother of Abijam (1 Kgs 15:2), and the father of Achish king of Gath (1 Kgs 2:39), among others. Thus, the name reflects both the memory of a distant Aramaean ancestry, as well as members of the Judahite royalty (also the mother of King Asa in 1 Kgs 15:13).

[23] Na'aman 2012:94–95.

[24] Na'aman 2012:90.

[25] Pakkala 2010:156–159.

[26] Mazar 1961:16–17.

tended to 'the border of the Geshurites and Maacahtites' (Josh 12:1–6), as well as to Ḥavot Jair (1 Chr 2:23) at a later time.

Another piece of evidence that Mazar used to support this geographic identification is the equation of the 'land of Garu', mentioned in one of the Amarna letters of the 14th century BCE, with Geshur of the Iron Age. The location of the former in the Golan Heights seemed to him to be further proof of its territorial boundaries.[27] However, Na'aman and other scholars objected to this uncritical equation of Garu with Geshur, and concluded that we are left with very little real information with which to reconstruct the border of Geshur, let alone Maacah.[28]

The location of Maacah to the north of Geshur would not include the more westerly location of Tell Abil el-Qameḥ (as well as Dan), so that the affinity between the town of Abel-beth-maacah and the territory of the kingdom of Maacah would have existed only if and when the latter expanded towards the west, as noted above.[29] The same can be said of Geshur, wherein sites on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, such as En-gev, Tel Hadar, Bethsaida (et-Tell) and Tel Kinrot, were beyond the traditional definition of the realm of this kingdom in the southern Golan. The assignment of these sites to Geshur, like those of Maacah, is not based on textual evidence, but rather on historical, geographical, and archaeological considerations.[30] This westward expansion might have occurred in Iron Age I, in light of their interaction with both Israelites and Aramaeans (Maacah towards Abel and Geshur towards et-Tell [Bethsaida] and Tel Kinrot). In any event, the north-western border between Geshur and Maacah is unclear and might have been fluid, depending on the circumstances vis-à-vis the Israelites and Aramaeans.

The 'Aramaean-ness' of Maacah

Two possibilities exist concerning Maacah and Geshur: they were Aramaean entities from the outset[31] or they were Canaanite kingdoms/territories that remained culturally, if not politically, independent and later became satellites of the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus sometime in Iron Age IIA.[32]

The former possibility would suit the scenario of an 11th century BCE Aramaean (tribal?) expansion to the south towards the Lebanese Beq'a and northern Israel from their 'homeland' in northern Syria.[33] The latter possibility would better suit a scenario

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[27] Mazar 1961:18–21; see also n4. In discussing two of the cities ('Ayânnu and Yabilîma) mentioned in this letter, Albright (1943:14–15) identified 'Ayânnu with 'Iyyon, a small Jewish town in the Roman period near Susita, and Yabilîma with Abel-Abila, one of the cities of the Decapolis. Dever (1986: 213–214), however, sought to identify the first as Ijon (Tell Dibbin) in the southern Lebanese Beqa' and the second as Abel-Beth-Maacah (Tell Abil el-Qameḥ), thus linking this Amarna letter even more directly with what he viewed as the territory of Maacah.

[28] Na'aman 2012:91–92.

[29] Mazar 1961:27.

[30] Münger 2013:166–167; see also the reservations expressed by Ilan 1999:185–186.

[31] So Na'aman 2012:89, for Geshur, based on the analysis of the name.

[32] So Mazar 1962:102, for Maacah and Tob; see also Münger 2013:167 and Younger 2016: Chapter 3.

[33] Younger 2007:153.

of Aramaean city-state expansion from the Lebanese Beq'a and southern Syria in Iron Age IIA, and specifically, the conquests of Hazael of Aram-Damascus in northern Israel in the second half of the 9th century BCE[34] and, along with it, the possible annexation of Maacah and Geshur.[35] Ghantous viewed the process as two waves of expansion of Aramaean city-states, with 'Beth-Maacah' and Geshur belonging to the early wave, and the second wave including Beth-Rehob, Aram-Zoba and Aram-Damascus.[36]

1 Chronicles 2:23 tells of the Aramaean conquest of the Israelite 'lands of Yair' (Ḥavot Jair) by 'Geshur and Aram', possibly reflecting a territorial struggle in this border region from a time later than the Israelite conquest.[37] Notably, in this verse, instead of the expected twin 'Maacah', the name 'Aram' appears. However, Mazar pointed out that it is most likely that the kingdom of Aram-Damascus was meant here (since 'Aram' is often the way it is referred to in the Bible), and not necessarily a sign that Maacah is synonymous with Aram.[38]

The story of the battle of the Ammonites against David, and the hiring of Aramaean mercenaries alongside the men of Maacah, can be construed as evidence that Maacah was one of the Aramaean entities, or that it was merely an ally. In 2 Samuel 10:6, we read that the king of Maacah contributed 1000 soldiers to this battle (the least amount compared to the 20,000 of Aram Beth Rehob and Aram Zobah, and the 12,000 men of Tob). In the parallel version in 1 Chronicles 19:6 it states 'Aram-Naharaim, Aram Maacah and Zobah'; however, Mazar surmised that this text is corrupt, and the true reading should be 'from Aram Zobah and from Maacah', based on parallel references in 2 Samuel 10:6 and 1 Chronicles 19:7.[39] This narrative does point to Maacah being in league with eminently Aramaean entities, but not necessarily Aramaean itself. Notably, the kingdom of Geshur is missing from this battle, which suggests that it was an independent entity at the time and apparently remained neutral in this conflict. It is also noteworthy that the Bible proclaims Abel-beth-maacah's loyalty to David in the story of Sheba ben Bichri at purportedly the same time that the men/king of Maacah were taking part in an anti-David coalition. While this inconsistency is probably a result of this story being composed at a later date, it could reflect a situation wherein the city and the kingdom were not necessarily one and the same. Whether an editorial oversight or an historical kernel, this seems to reflect complex Aramaean and Israelite interaction in this border region, or at the very least, the memory of such complexity at a later time.

As the above discussion shows, although most scholars tend to assume that Maacah and Geshur were small Aramaean kingdoms, many questions remain unanswered by the present data. What was the ethnic and political relationship between Abel and Beth-Maacah? Was the town originally populated by indigenous Aramaeans, or were

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[34] Bright 1972:250–253; Lipinski 2007:217
[35] Mazar 1961:25; Arie 2008:38; Na'aman 2012:95.
[36] Ghantous 2014:1.
[37] Mazar 1961:24.
[38] Mazar 1961:24, n28.
[39] Mazar 1961:27.

the inhabitants Canaanites who were politically absorbed into an expanding Aramaean polity? Was it then turned into an Israelite entity after David's defeat of the Aramaeans and hence, the biblical memory? If Aramaean in the Iron Age IIA, was it a satellite of Aram Zobah or Aram Damascus, as Mazar[40] suggested (or of Beth Rehob?), or was it a *bona fide* Aramaean kingdom, with Abel-beth-maacah the 'seat of a local Aramaean dynasty', as Na'aman concluded?[41] What was its status vis-à-vis the northern kingdom of Israel, and what was the chronological framework of these events and processes during the course of Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA?[42]

The Contribution of Archaeology:
Three Seasons of Excavation at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ

Various questions related to the definition, territory, chronology, and socio-political affiliation of the city of Abel-beth-maacah and the kingdom of Maacah were presented above. The standstill that results from the nature of the texts and their present state of interpretation illustrates the importance of archaeological evidence in illuminating, complementing, or negating these interpretations. The archaeological data obtained from the first three seasons of excavation at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ will be briefly presented with these issues in mind.

The Site

The site is located on the present Israeli-Lebanese border, approximately 6 km slightly northwest of Dan, 30 km north of Hazor, 65 km south of Kamid el-Loz (ancient Kumidi), and 35 km east of Tyre (fig. 1). It was identified as the biblical town of Abel-beth-maacah in the 19th century by Victor Guerrin and Edward Robinson, based primarily on the list of cities located along the path of conquest from north to south.[43] First it was the Aramaeans (1 Kgs 15:20) with 'Ijon, Dan, Abel-beth-maacah and all Chinneroth', and then came the Neo-Assyrians (2 Kgs 15:29) with 'Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Yanoah, Kedesh and Hazor'. Another indication is the name preserved in the Palestinian village of Abil el-Qameḥ that occupied the tell and preserved the name Abel, which is not an Arabic word.

The site sits astride the Iyyon river and commands the north-south road running through the Northern Jordan Valley, specifically here, the Hula Valley. The road then continued northwards into the Lebanese Beqa', northwest to the Phoenician coast, and northeast towards Damascus, 70 km to the northeast.

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[40] Mazar 1962:102.

[41] Na'aman 2012:95.

[42] An additional factor that must be kept in mind when analyzing the situation are the Phoenicians, with Tyre only 35 kilometers west of Abel-beth-maacah. The coalescing of the Phoenician nationality at the same time as the Aramaeans and the Israelites in the regions of southern Lebanon, southern Syria and northern Israel, definitely played a role, commercial and otherwise, in the geo-political equation.

[43] Contra Lipiński 2000:372; see above.

The mound is approximately 10 hectares in size, and is elongated in shape on a north–south axis, with a large flat lower part in the south and a gradual ascent to the smaller upper mound in the north (fig. 2). The lower mound is partly a natural hill with a bedrock outcropping that runs along its central spine on a north-south axis, and the archaeological remains found around it. On the other hand, the smaller upper mound in the north appears to be mostly the result of the accumulation of ancient ruins. About one-third of the tell covering the lower slope of the upper mound and the northern part of the southern mound is occupied by ruins of the Palestinian village, Abil el-Qameḥ, which was abandoned in 1948 (fig. 3).

Figure 1: Location map of site and its environs.

Figure 2: View of tell, looking east.

Figure 3: Aerial view of tell with Palestinian village, Abil el-Qameḥ;
(Photo courtesy of Aerial Photographic Archive, Geography Department,
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, taken by the Royal Air Force, Section 23, 1945).

The site was briefly surveyed in the 1960s by Yehudah Dayan (unpublished manuscript, in Hebrew), in 1973 by William Dever of the University of Arizona,[44] and in 1990–1992 by Idan Shaked and Yosef Stefansky (unpublished). A limited salvage excavation at the foot of the eastern slope uncovered several Middle Bronze Age IIB vessels that might have been from a tomb.[45] Byzantine era tombs occupy the southern part of this slope as well.[46]

During a three-day survey conducted by the authors in 2012, sherds from EBA II–III, MBA II, LBA, Iron Age I, Iron Age II, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman-Byzantine, Early Islamic, Crusader, Mameluke and the Ottoman periods were collected.[47] In light of the survey, two areas were chosen for excavation – Area A in the saddle between the lower and upper mounds, and Area F at the southern end of the lower mound. A third excavation area, Area O, on the western edge of the lower mound, was added during the second season and a fourth, Area B on the eastern side of the upper mound and Area K on the eastern slope of the lower mound were added during the third season (see fig. 4).[48]

Area A

During the survey, three phases of superimposed walls and related layers with restorable pottery were visible on the eastern slope above the ascent road to the tell. An intact ring flask was found lying on a basalt slab in the lowest phase (fig. 5). Designated Area A, excavation began at the top of these walls, exposing four Iron Age I strata (A2–A5) and one Late Bronze Age stratum (A6; fig. 6).

The earliest phase reached so far, Stratum A5 is, in fact, an earlier phase of Stratum A4, comprised of walls built of basalt ashlars directly underneath at least two walls of the latter. A large amount of fallen stones and pottery was found in association with these walls, although it is not certain as of yet if this occupation was violently destroyed. Stratum A4 consisted of three rooms along a north–south axis at the eastern end of the area. This layer is equivalent to the uppermost phase of walls found in the section of the eastern slope during the survey mentioned above. The eastern edge of the mound is eroded at this point, while the western part of the Stratum A4 structure is still buried below Strata A-2 and A-3 remains, and the northern and southern ends lie beyond the boundaries of the excavation area.

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[44] Dever 1986.

[45] Stefansky 2005.

[46] Stefansky 1990.

[47] Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013:35–36.

[48] For a preliminary report on the first season of excavation, see Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013. For a preliminary report of the second and third seasons, see Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2016. Field excavation reports for the 2012 survey and seasons 2013–2016 are posted at www.abel-beth-maacah.org.
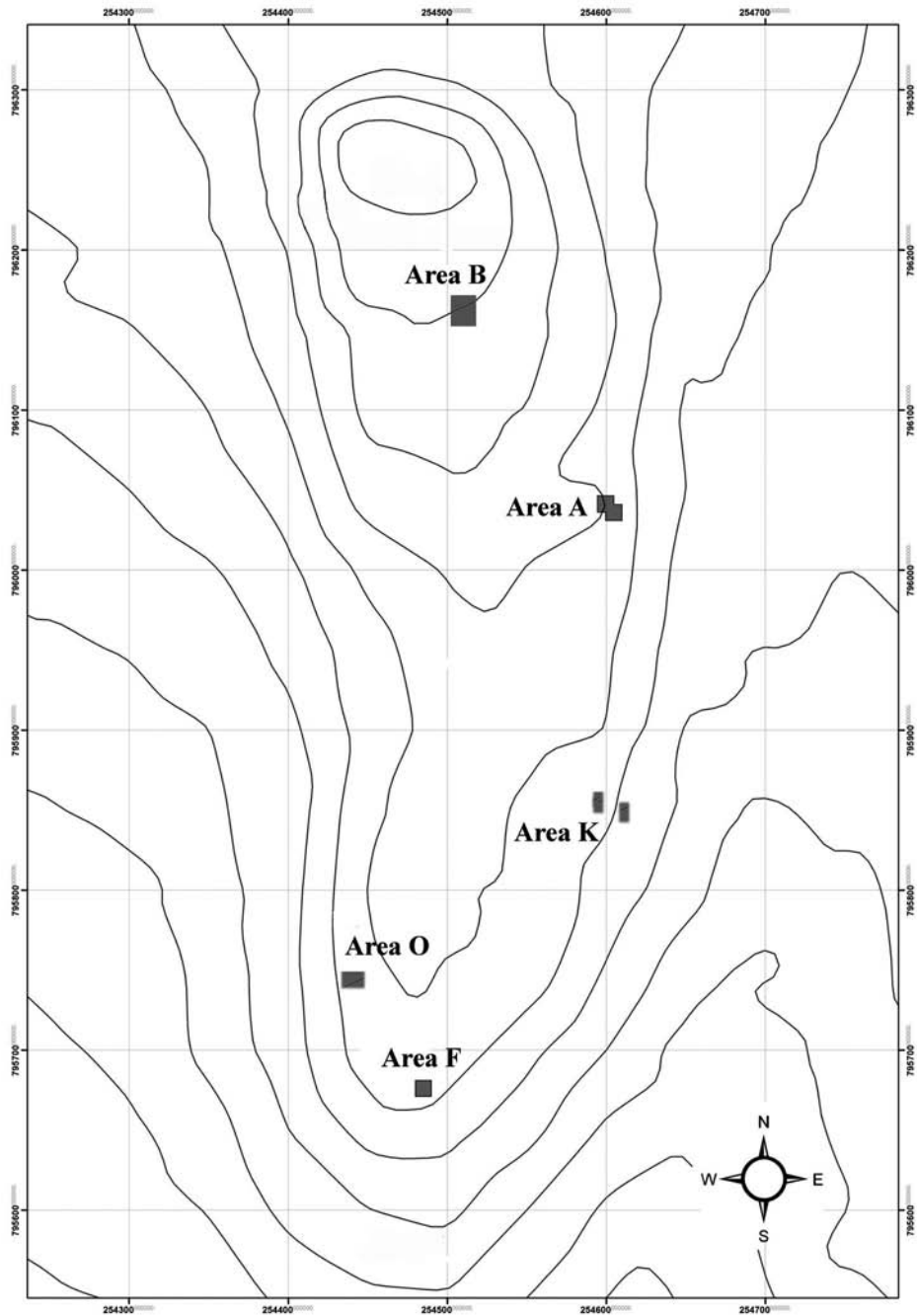
Figure 4: Tel Abel-beth-maacah, excavation areas (2013–2016).

This building was destroyed in a violent conflagration. The southern room contained burnt debris with whole fallen bricks and charcoal and many smashed vessels. The room was occupied by a unique installation composed of a stone floor, a stone bamah (on which a pithos and krater stood) attached to a semi-circle of stones that faced a unique partially worked stone that might have been a maṣṣebah (fig. 7). An entrance in the centre of the northern wall led to a room which was quite empty of finds. In the centre of the room was a round-topped standing stone alongside a low short wall that was possibly a bench. Nearby was a pit with many bones. A similar stone was found in the north-eastern part of the southern room and a complete dog skeleton was recovered in the entranceway between the two rooms. It thus seems that the nature of these rooms was cultic. The northernmost room contained burnt debris and fallen bricks with pithoi and cooking pots like the southern room.

Above the burnt debris of Stratum A4 were rather scanty walls, ovens, installations and debris levels that preceded the substantial building of Stratum A2, which we designated Stratum A3. The nature of this occupation was domestic and it seems to have been rather short-lived. No traces of destruction were found and the pottery was identical to that of Stratum A2; thus, it should be dated to a time shortly before the latter.

Stratum A2 represents the latest Iron Age occupation in Area A. On the east, it contained a large, well-built building with a large central space/courtyard surrounded by rooms on the north and south; the eastern end was eroded due to the slope, while the south-western end was not excavated due to the presence of a tree at that spot. The building had two phases, mainly in the south-western part of the structure. Its size (extant 10 x 12 m) and the nature of construction (solid well-built stone foundations with no brick superstructure preserved) allude to it having been a public building, possibly of an administrative nature, rather than a domestic dwelling.

At a distance of some three meters to the west of this building was yet another very well-built structure, of which part of one room has so far been exposed. Two floors were exposed here, the lowest containing a complete pot bellows (fig. 8); it apparently was not in primary use at this time. Remains of bronze- and iron-working were found inside the pot bellows.[49]

Along the western wall of the A2 courtyard building were three buttresses adjoining the wall at equal distances. Opposite the two northernmost buttresses, lining the eastern wall of the western structure, were buttresses as well. It seems that these buttresses adorned a passageway, perhaps a street or the access of a gateway, running north–south between the buildings, lending an imposing look. Against the wall near the middle buttress of the eastern building was what seems to have been a cultic corner, composed of three stacked stones (an altar?) separated from the passageway by a low screen wall and paved with pebbles.

The buildings did not suffer a violent destruction and seemed to have been abandoned, although a concentration of restorable pottery found in the western building, as well as several complete vessels found in the eastern building, alludes that excavation farther from the erosion line on the east will yield traces of such an event.

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[49] We thank Dr. Naama Yahalom-Mack for this information.

Figure 5: Area A: walls and layers in section on eastern slope,
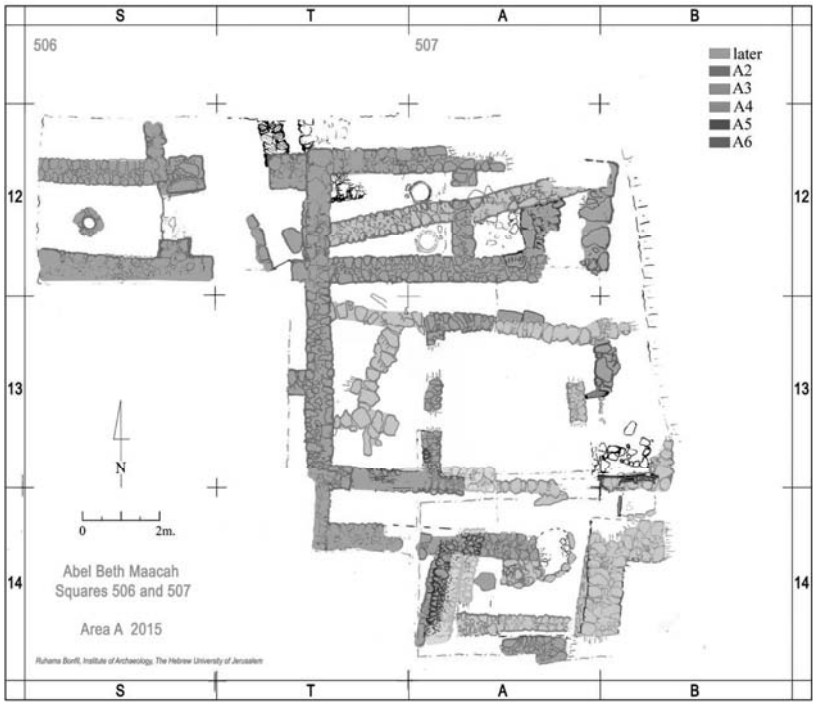with find spot of ring flask on basalt slab at bottom.

Figure 6: Superposition of Strata A2 to A6.

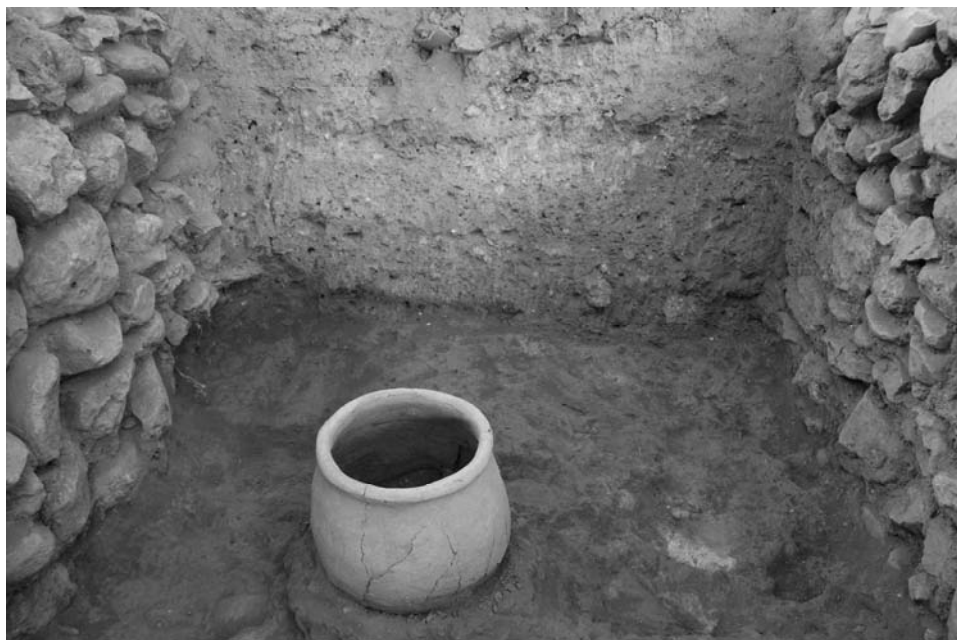Figure 7: Cultic installations on Stratum A4 floor, looking north.

Figure 8: Pot bellows in situ in Area A, Stratum A2.

Stratum A1 is composed of several Ottoman-period terrace walls under topsoil that were built directly on top of the Stratum A2 building. Since the former walls were flimsy and related to recent agricultural activity, it can be said that A2 represents the latest occupation in this field.

Pottery and Other Finds

The pottery found in all four strata (A2–A5) is virtually identical and may be dated to Iron Age I. Many of the vessels found in the destruction debris in Stratum A4 are completely restorable. The predominant vessels are pithoi and cooking pots, while other types of vessels include hemispherical and s-shaped bowls, painted carinated kraters, small oval-bodied storage jars, biconical and piriform jugs, small bag-shaped pyxides, ovoid dipper juglets, and round-bottomed lamps (fig. 9). The pithoi belong to the Galilean wavy-band type and the Central Hill Country collared-rim types, the latter being the most frequent. The cooking pots have a vertical neck and triangular rim, although with a wide typological variety in all strata. One complete cooking jug was found on the floor of the early phase of Stratum A2. A complete jug found on the floor of Stratum A4 has parallels in contemporary strata at Tel Dan and Tel Kinrot.

Among the special finds are a painted petal chalice fragment (Stratum A2), a bull figurine fragment (Stratum A4), an iron blade, and a unique bronze arrowhead.

Chronology

Our assessment at this point is that this assemblage should be dated to the Iron Age I; further study and exposure is necessary to be more precise about the attribution of each stratum within this period. Based on some of the cooking pot rims, as well as the presence of a number of sherds of open and closed vessels with red slip and irregular hand burnish, we attribute the end of Stratum A2 to the transition from Iron Age I to Iron Age IIA, possibly ending in the first third of the 10th century BCE. The destruction of Stratum A4 might be ascribed to the late 12th or early 11th centuries, since there are at least two more phases below this level, one belonging to Iron Age I (Stratum A5) and the layer below that bore the ring flask in the survey belonging to Late Bronze Age Stratum A6.

Area B

Area B at the eastern slope of the upper mound was the only excavation area in this part of the site, mainly due to the heavy overlay of the ruins of the Palestinian village in this section of the tell. Two seasons of excavation so far in this area have yielded substantial remains of the Middle Bronze II, Iron Age I, Iron Age II and the Persian-early Hellenistic period. Late Bronze Age pottery was recovered as well.
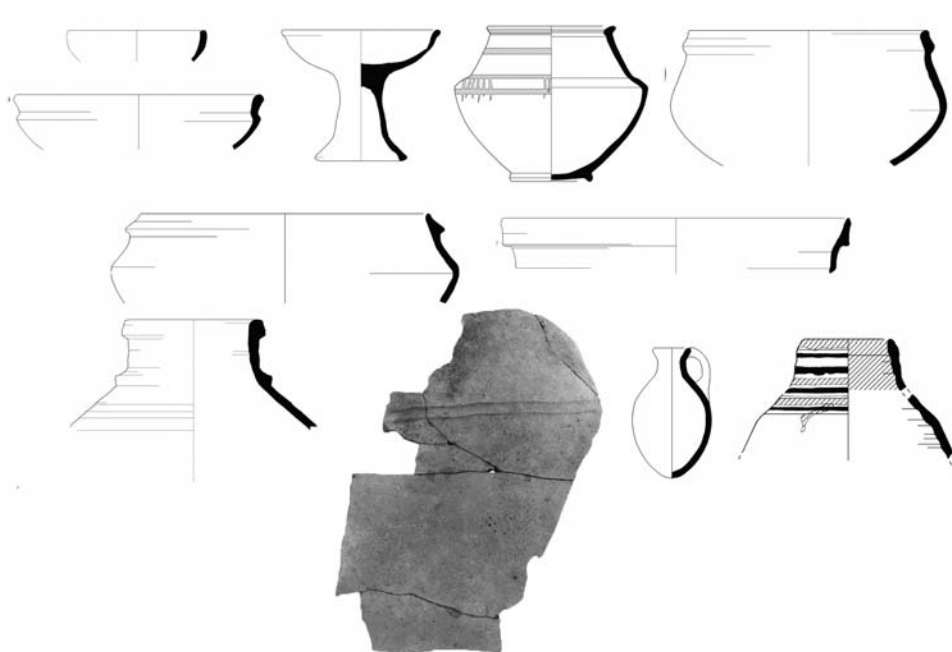
Figure 9: Vessels from Area A, Strata A2–A5.

Figure 10: Area B, Persian/ Early Hellenistic building above Iron Age II remains.

The uppermost layer in Area B comprised a large and very sturdily built building with two phases (fig. 10). Several Phoenician Fine Ware juglets were found on the floors. Below a fill some one meter deep, remains of an Iron Age II building was reached, although it is not yet sufficiently exposed to determine a more exact chronology. To the east of the large outer wall of the Persian/early Hellenistic building was a layer of hard chalky material and collapsed bricks with much burnt debris, bordered on the south by a very large stone wall; the pottery associated with this layer was Iron Age II. An interesting find was a sherd of a storage jar with an incised letter, either a 'bet' or a 'nun'.

Area F

Area F at the southern end of the lower mound yielded architectural remains from the Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I, as well as pottery from Iron Age II and the Persian period.

Six strata have been excavated in Area F to date, in an extremely tight sequence at a depth of ca. 2.0 meters to date (fig. 11); no destruction was noted between any of the strata, apart from some burning in one square at the end of Stratum F2.

The earliest element (Stratum F6) is a fortification system consisting of a large tower and a rampart/wall. The excavated part of the tower measures 6.5 by 7.7 m and comprised four layers of widely spaced, roughly rounded field stones set into a white cement-like matrix that was lined on the north and northeast by extremely large worked boulders; the western side of the tower is damaged and the southern part appears to have collapsed and fallen down the slope beyond the limit of excavation. Adjoining the south-eastern face of the tower and running towards the northeast was a rampart composed of layers of dark brown soil and densely packed small chalky fragments. The northern end of this rampart was capped by a 3.0 meter-wide layer of stones, identical in make-up to those that comprised the tower. It was lined with large boulders on the north, so that from the top, it looks like a wall (fig. 12). Some of these large boulders were robbed and re-used to build a later wall running catty-corner to the rampart 'wall'.

A complex series of walls and layers abutted the northern wall of the tower, representing three strata (F5 to F3). These walls and related floors or debris layers utilized the northern wall of the tower and the rampart 'wall', and it seems that the fortification itself was in use during these three strata. On a Stratum F3 floor was a small jug that contained a silver hoard, found resting against the northern wall of the tower (fig. 13).

The two latest strata, F1 and F2, consisted of a building exposed just under topsoil, and which included many pits and silos, most lined with stones. Many of these pits cut into the top of the Stratum F6 tower and rampart, indicating that at this time, the fortifications were no longer in use. The building (Stratum F1, two phases) was well built and had traces of stone floors. The excavated part consists of a narrow row of three rooms, two large and one small, on a northeast to southwest axis. The organization of this building recalls a casemate wall, especially in light of its position near the edge of
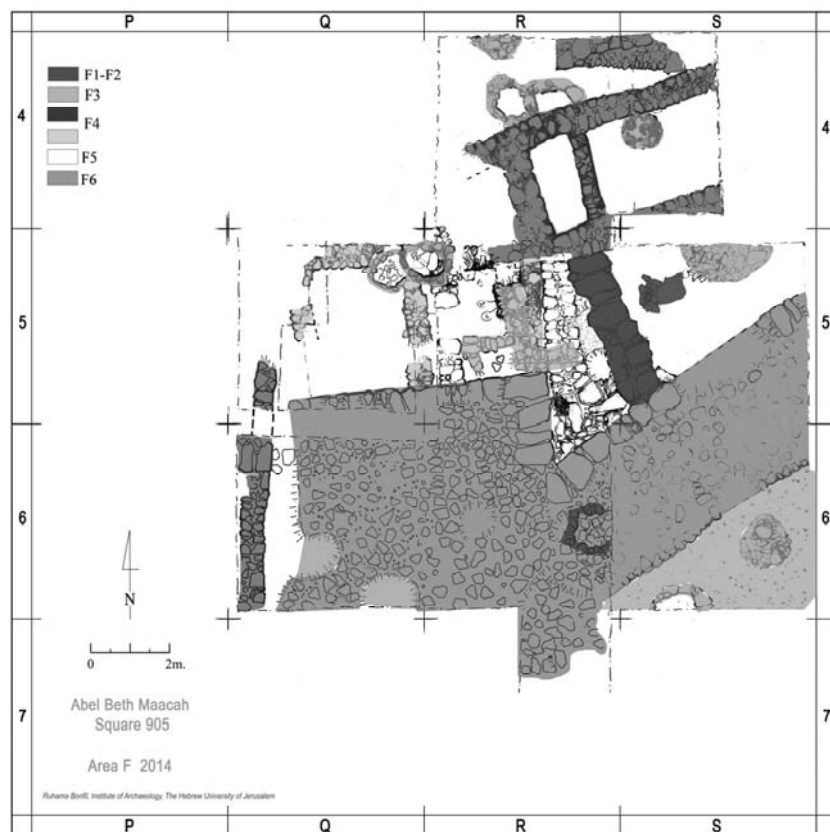
Figure 11: Area F, Strata F1 to F6.

Figure 12: Late Bronze II and Iron I activity north of Middle Bronze tower and rampart, looking south.

the mound and just north of the Middle Bronze-Late Bronze fortifications. However, the width of the walls and the fact that there seems to have been an entrance in the north wall of the eastern room, appears to rule this out, although further exposure is necessary. A street or courtyard ran to its north, containing a large number of silos and pits.

Pottery, Chronology, and Other Finds

No *in situ* pottery associated with the Stratum F6 fortifications has yet been excavated. However, numerous Middle Bronze Age sherds were found in various loci and, in light of the nature of the fortifications and the fact that the structures built against its northern wall in secondary use date to the Late Bronze Age, they are tentatively dated to the Middle Bronze Age IIB, although this might change when excavation reaches associated floors.

   The pottery recovered from Strata F5 to F3 is largely fragmentary, and for the most part, can be dated to Late Bronze Age I to II. Diagnostic pieces include carinated bowls, thickened-rim storage jars and painted kraters, as well as sherds of Cypriot White Slip and Base Ring wares. The jug which was found on a Stratum F3 floor and contained the silver hoard (fig. 13) appears to be an imitation of a Base Ring (bilbil). Another interesting find from Stratum F3 is the lower part of a potter's wheel, identical to one found in the Late Bronze Age II potters' workshop associated with the Area C temple at Hazor.[50]

Figure 13: Area F, the jug and silver hoard as found (left); right: after cleaning by Miriam Lavi, Conservation Laboratory, Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (photos by Gabi Laron).

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[50] Yadin 1975:50–51.

The pottery from Strata F2 and F1 can be dated to Iron Age I. Diagnostic pieces include pithoi (collared-rim and wavy-band types) and cooking pots (vertical rim with triangular exterior, no handles), as well as jugs and pyxides, some of which were intact or almost complete, and restorable vessels that were found in the pits or silos; the assemblage is virtually identical to that found in Area A. One small Philistine Bichrome sherd and many Phoenician Bichrome sherds were found in the Stratum F1 building and its environs as well.

A great deal of pottery was found in the north-western corner of the area, where there appears to have been a sizeable pit or some other type of disturbance. The earliest pottery in this context is dated to the Middle Bronze Age IIB and the latest to the Persian period. A large number of Phoenician Bichrome sherds belonging to open and closed vessels, red-slipped and hand-burnished sherds, and several Iron Age IIB bowl and cooking pot rim profiles, as well as a warped-handled Persian period coastal storage jar, were found here.

Special finds include a circular disc made of gold sheet, identical to those found in the Mycenaean tomb at Dan,[51] a bronze rod, and a group of astragali (one painted red) in Stratum F5, the aforementioned silver hoard in Stratum F3 (Late Bronze Age IIB), a complete iron blade from a pit in Stratum F1, a Ramses II scarab in topsoil above the Stratum F1 building,[52] and two Persian period bronze fibulae in the disturbance.

Area O

Area O consists of three squares located on the western end of the lower mound about 50 meters north of Area F (fig. 4). Architectural remains were revealed just below topsoil, and a total of three strata (O1–O3) were detected (fig. 14).
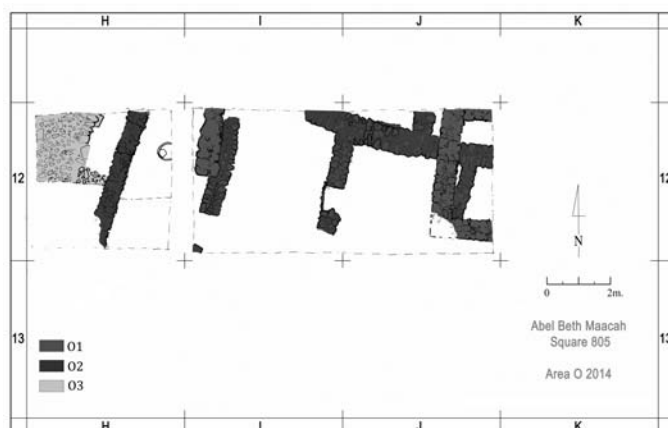

Figure 14: Area O, Strata O1 to O3 (by Ruhama Bonfil, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

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[51] Biran and Ben-Dov 2002:173.
[52] David, Mullins and Panitz-Cohen 2016.

Stratum O3 was only exposed in a very small probe at the western end of the area. It contained what seems to be the top of a wide wall, composed of small stones bordered on the east by larger stones. The western edge was beyond the excavation boundary and no floors have been found as of yet. Early Bronze Age III pottery recovered nearby might be associated with this feature, possibly the city wall from that period, although it might belong to the Middle Bronze Age fortification system uncovered in Stratum F6 in Area F to the south.

Stratum O2 was part of a building that continued beyond the borders of the excavation area to the north, south and east. Four parallel walls with stone thresholds were exposed, showing this to have been a very large and well-planned structure, oriented perpendicular to the cusp of the mound. Floors with restorable Middle Bronze Age IIB pottery related to these walls. Finds included two baby burials in storage jars and the skeleton of an elderly man lying on his stomach. A smashed pithos lay nearby, perhaps indicating the violent end of this stratum. Alternatively, this could have been a burial in a pithos that subsequently broke and the skeleton tumbled over by its side. The exposure here was too small to draw any solid conclusion. Notably, no traces of the impressive fortifications found in Area F just to the south were uncovered here, either because the Stratum O2 building is built above them or possibly, the Stratum O3 wall noted above belongs to this system, but it was built differently in this part of the tell; a similar phenomenon was noted in various segments of the Middle Bronze fortifications at Dan.[53]

Stratum O1 was represented by the western end of a room that lay directly over the easternmost room of the Stratum O2 building, and an additional wall to its west. Between these architectural remains is what might have been a courtyard, containing a large three-legged basalt mortars surrounded by several upside-down jug or bowl bases. The small amount of pottery collected from stratum O1 contexts points to a Late Bronze IIB-Iron Age I date, although the close proximity of these strata to topsoil that was heavily plowed precludes a secure dating at this point.

To the west of the threshold in the westernmost wall of Stratum O2 was a concentration of pottery that appears to have been in a pit, which cut the edge of this threshold (fig. 15). It is not certain whether this concentration is contemporary with Stratum O1, or later. Three partially restorable storage jars and a number of bowls and cooking pots came from this context, which also contained a number of red-slipped and hand-burnished open and closed vessel sherds. This pottery may be ascribed to Iron Age I or to the transition from Iron Age I to Iron Age IIA, similar to Stratum A2 in Area A.

Just under topsoil, above the Stratum O1 wall, we found a small stamp seal showing what appears to be three dancers or worshippers (fig. 16). It may be dated to Iron Age IIA based on comparative material.[54]

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[53] Biran 1994:67–70.
[54] Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2016.
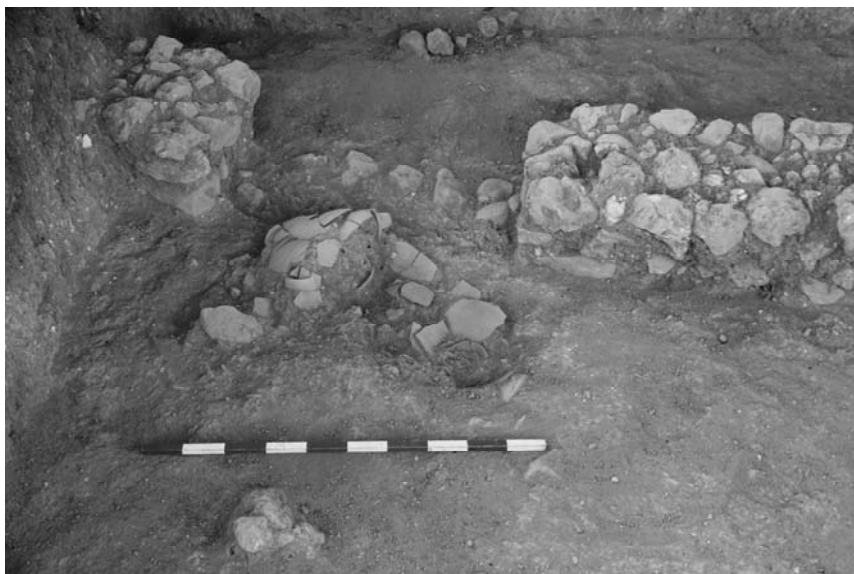
Figure 15: Concentration of Iron I/IIA pottery in pit, looking east.

Figure 16: Iron IIA seal, Area O.

Area K

Area K was opened on the northern end of the eastern slope of the lower mound, at a spot where access to the tell was easiest and thus, a likely candidate for the location of a gate (see fig. 4). The top of a 3.5 m-wide stone wall on a north–south axis was revealed, with a chalky layer abutting part of it on the east, possibly representing a rampart similar to that in Area F. No pottery was recovered to date that would date it, so that it is as yet impossible to determine the date of this fortification and whether there is a gate in this area.

Summary of the Occupation Sequence

Data concerning the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Persian period occupation gleaned from the survey and first two seasons of excavation may be summarized as follows:

Early Bronze Age II–III: pottery sherds (metallic ware, platters) and possible evidence for fortifications (Area O).

Middle Bronze Age IIB(?): fortifications, including a tower and a partially stone-topped rampart (Area F); a large building revealed under late Late Bronze Age/Iron Age I remains with possible traces of destruction (Area O); representative pottery including carinated bowls, large kraters, cooking pots, baking trays, storage jars, pithoi, and juglets.

Late Bronze Age: at least three strata of a tight sequence of occupation, with no traces of destruction; re-use of the Middle Bronze II fortifications; representative pottery including carinated bowls, painted kraters, cooking pots, jugs, storage jars, Cypriot imports and imitations; a silver hoard (Areas F and A).

Iron Age I: a dense Iron I sequence (four phases) of well-planned and well-built structures; no fortifications; violent destruction in the middle(?) phase (Area A); peaceful transition from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age I with no gap; two construction phases and numerous pits and silos; no fortifications (Area F); representative pottery including pithoi (collared-rim, wavy-band and Gailiean types) and cooking pots (the main bulk of the assemblage in all areas), hemispherical and S-shaped bowls, round-rimmed and carinated kraters, piriform and biconical jugs, Phoenician Bichrome sherds; other finds include iron and bronze blades, fragments of a petalled painted chalice and a bull figurine, a pot bellows with traces of metallurgical activity (Areas A, F, O).

Iron Age II: lower tell apparently unoccupied during Iron Age II; typical Iron Age IIA seal (Area O); two phases of architecture with associated Iron II pottery (Area B); Iron Age IIA–IIB pottery sherds including red-slipped and hand-burnished open and closed vessels, Phoenician Bichrome, Black-on-Red Cypro-Phoenician, 'Samaria' bowls, stepped-rim cooking pots with handles, cooking jugs, strainer jugs, coastal and Hippo storage jar rims (Areas A, B, O, F).

Persian Period: pottery, including warped-handle storage jars and mortaria, and two bronze fibulae (Area F); two phases of a massive building with associated pottery attributing it to the late Persian/early Hellenistic period (Area B).

Preliminary Conclusions and Future Research Questions

The Middle and Late Bronze Ages

The excavations have allowed us to place Abel-beth-maacah more securely on the geopolitical map of the second millennium BCE in the Northern Jordan Valley. Both Hazor and Dan were fortified during the Middle Bronze Age IIB, so it appears that Abel

was yet another unit vying for resources and status in this region at that time.[55] The presence of several nearby large fortified city-states, each surrounded by villages and an agricultural hinterland (dominated by the metropolis of Hazor), raises questions about the settlement hierarchy, economic subsistence, and political affiliation that will require further analysis.

During the Late Bronze Age, the region was dominated by Hazor in the south and Kumidi in the north, with Dan and Abel being smaller, but substantial city states. Both sites reused Middle Bronze Age II fortifications. The dense and continuous sequence of Late Bronze Age II occupation at Abel, and its apparently peaceful transition to Iron Age I, adds substantially to our knowledge of this period in the Northern Jordan Valley and differs from the scenarios at Hazor and Dan. It also affords us with the opportunity to further study Egyptian involvement in the region between the metropolises of Hazor and Kumidi, the latter an Egyptian governmental center. The Late Bronze Age IIB silver hoard is one of the earliest found in Israel and isotope analysis conducted on several of its pieces shows that the site had far-reaching connections.[56]

Iron Age I

Following the destruction of the major Late Bronze Age cities of Hazor, Kumidi and Dan, as well as the departure of the Egyptians, the situation changed. In Iron Age I, Hazor (Strata XII–XI) was only sparsely occupied; Dan (Strata VI–IVB)[57] and Kumidi[58] were villages. Although limited in its exposure to date, the substantial occupation noted at Abel-beth-maacah (Strata A5–A2 and F2–F1), with its dense stratigraphic sequence and large public buildings, points to the possibility of it having been the major urban centre in the Northern Jordan Valley at that time, or at least vying with Dan for that status.[59] Both were apparently unfortified, and it is possible that both sites suffered from the same destruction event, seen in Stratum V at Dan and Stratum A4 at Abel-beth-maacah. This would suggest a correlation between Abel-beth-maacah Stratum A2 and Dan Stratum IVB (and Hazor XI?), an occupation phase that most likely ended around the time of the transition from Iron Age IB to Iron Age IIA, parallel to Megiddo Stratum VIA and, in absolute terms, sometime in the first half of the 10th century BCE (980–950), following Mazar's modified chronology.[60] Notably, the violent destruction suffered by Megiddo VIA and the partial burning of Dan IVB was not as notable in the excavated parts of Strata A2 and F1 at Abel-beth-maacah,[61] although some restorable pottery and burning was recovered from this stratum and more exposure is required to determine the nature of its end.

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[55] Probes and surveys show that Tel Kedesh should also be counted among these large sites. Note the suggestion that the Middle Bronze Age IIA fort uncovered in Kiryat-shemona, ca. 5 kilometers south of Abel-Beth-Maacah, might have been a satellite of Abel (Nativ 2012:78).

[56] Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, forthcoming.

[57] Ilan 1999:147.

[58] Heinz 2010:29.

[59] For Dan see: Ilan 1999:162,169.

[60] Mazar 2005.

[61] For Dan IVB Ilan (1999:55) suggesting an earthquake.

When considering the Iron Age I population of Abel-beth-maacah, we tend to think that it comprised indigenous Canaanites, possibly joined by new population elements, who may be termed Israelite, although the presence of collared-rim pithoi is not to be considered an ethnic marker. These, and other developments, could have been the result of changing economic strategies and not necessarily, or only, migration. Phoenician pottery, mostly closed Bichrome vessels, was probably the result of developing trade connections and not settlement or political ties. It is possible that the town of Stratum A4 was destroyed by Aramaeans encroaching southward from the coalescing polities of Beth-Rehob and Aram-Zobah in the Lebanese Beq'a and southern Syria, respectively. An alternative scenario would be a Canaanite town, perhaps joined by people migrating from the north (Aramaeans?), and attacked by the settling Israelites. Natural causes, such as an earthquake, should be considered as well.[62] The question of who rebuilt the town (Strata A2/F1) would relate to the agent of destruction: Aramaeans, Israelites, the indigenous Canaanites, or possibly a mixture thereof. The border location of Abel-beth-maacah made it a prime arena for territorial clashes between fledgling polities during this critical period of state formation.

The chronological and socio-political relationship of the 'Abel-beth-maacah-Dan block' to the other major Iron Age IB site, Tel Kinrot, some 40 kilometers to the south on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, may be briefly noted; Tel Hadar, across the lake, should be considered as well. The former was a fortified, well-planned urban centre,[63] while the latter was a central storage and distribution centre.[64] Preliminary comparison of Abel-beth-maacah to Tel Kinrot shows that several traits are shared, while others differ. Both are densely settled urban entities. While Kinrot was fortified, it seems that Abel-beth-maacah was not. The remains in Areas A and F show buildings flanking streets, which might prove comparable to the fine urban planning at Tel Kinrot. Similar pottery shapes include Phoenician Bichrome and collared-rim pithoi, although wavy-band and Galilean pithoi, common at Abel-beth-maacah, are missing at Tel Kinrot, and types such as the two-handled storage jars or storage jars with three handles (found at Tel Hadar as well) that Münger regarded as reflecting Syrian traditions,[65] are so far lacking at Abel-beth-maacah, although this might be the result of the present limited exposure. In the faunal assemblage at Tel Kinrot, cattle predominated over sheep-and-goat,[66] while the preliminary faunal data from Iron Age I contexts at Abel-beth-maacah show the opposite pattern.[67] While cattle is well-represented (22%), pigs were rare; the same pattern was noted at Tel Kinrot and Dan.[68] What can be said at this point is that the new data from Abel-beth-maacah puts it on the map as one of the contenders for the replacement of Hazor as the major city in the Iron Age I in the

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[62] See footnote 61 above.
[63] Münger 2013.
[64] Yadin and Kochavi 2008.
[65] Münger 2013:156–161.
[66] Münger 2013:166, n91.
[67] Marom 2014.
[68] Ilan 1999:109.

Northern Jordan Valley, while Tel Kinrot has been hitherto considered the only such candidate.[69]

The data being collected will allow us to explore the question of the affiliation of Abel-beth-maacah with the purported early stage of the kingdom of Maacah, and whether it fulfilled a role as its capital at that time, be it Aramaean or otherwise. Münger does not view the data from Kinrot as supporting an affiliation with a 'Geshurite polity' in Iron Age IB, but rather reflecting a 'variegated and complex' late Canaanite society with many culturally diverse features.[70] It seems that there was a similar situation at Abel-beth-maacah, although further exposure of the Iron Age I material culture (and data from regional surveys) is necessary in order to explore this question.

Iron Age II

Concerning Iron Age IIA, Arie had proposed a gap, or a limited rural village, at Dan and down-dated Stratum IVA to the late 9th and early 8th centuries BCE.[71] Strata III and II were attributed to the 8th century BCE, ending in the Assyrian destruction of 732 BCE. In light of this, an historical scenario was proposed wherein Hazael conquered the virtually uninhabited Dan and built it as an Aramaean urban centre (Stratum IVA).[72] Arie suggested that at this time (late 9th century BCE), the Aramaean monarch also rebuilt Abel-beth-maacah, with Dan serving as the new center for the former area of the southern Aramaean kingdoms of Geshur and Maacah, which Hazael united and annexed to his 'new great kingdom of Aram-Damascus'.[73] Subsequently, Joash reconquered the city and rebuilt it as Israelite, until its destruction by Tiglath-pilesar III in 732 BCE (Strata III–II).

Another scenario was proposed by Ghantous, wherein Iron Age I Dan (Strata VI–IV) belonged to "the Aramaean kingdom of Beth-Maacah and then to the Aramaean kingdom of Beth Rehob".[74] This phase ended with the conquest of the city by Omri in the first half of the 9th century BCE and then by Hazael's re-conquest of it in the mid 9th century, while Stratum III represents Hazael's city. Stratum II is again Israelite, conquered by Joash or Jeroboam II in the second quarter of the 8th century BCE until the Assyrian conquest.

The excavations at Abel-beth-maacah may contribute to the confirmation or alteration of these and other proposed Iron Age II scenarios, although at the present stage,

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[69] E.g., Finkelstein 2013:30.

[70] Münger 2013:167.

[71] Arie 2008.

[72] It is interesting to try to understand why the Omrides neglected occupying the supposedly uninhabited Dan and Abel-beth-maacah, two important border sites, just at the peak of their political and military expansion, when they were building forts and administrative centers along the border of their kingdom, reaching as far north as Hazor, but no further (Finkelstein 2011:239). In fact, it seems that this neglect might have been one of the factors that allowed Hazael to conquer those two sites and annex them to his kingdom, according to Arie's scenario.

[73] Arie 2008:38.

[74] Ghantous 2014:37.

any conclusions are preliminary. To date, no occupation stratum post-dating the Iron I was uncovered in the lower mound. Although red-slipped and hand-burnished pottery, as well as other types that suit an Iron Age IIA date (including Black-on-Red), were found, they were not *in situ* and might belong to the end of this period. The evidence for a stratum parallel to Dan IVA is just beginning to emerge. Future excavation, both in more central areas of the lower mound, and especially in the upper mound, might provide data that will help to clarify the picture. At the present time, it seems that the Iron Age II occupation at Abel-beth-maacah was limited to the northern part of the site. Whether there was Aramaean involvement in this town and its nature remains a central research question. We are thus, as of yet, unable to shed light on the scenarios proposed by Arie, Ghantous, or other scholars, or to offer one of our own. Methodologically, we attempt to examine the material culture of the site regardless of what we surmise the political or ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants were, acknowledging the gap between political affiliation and material culture.

We have only just begun to scratch the surface of this large and important site, and at this point, we have more questions than answers.

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