From a Fortified Canaanite City-State to "a City and a Mother" in Israel
Five Seasons of Excavation at Tel Abel Beth Maacah

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View of Tel Abel Beth Maacah looking northeast with snow-capped Mt. Hermon in the background. Photograph by John Monson.

Tell Abil el-Qameḥ is the northernmost site in Israel, some 6.5 km northwest of Tel Dan and 30 km north of Hazor. It is approximately 10 ha in area with a prominent upper tell in the north and a flat lower tell in the south (fig. 1). From its vantage point overlooking the northern end of the Hula Valley, the tell commands roads that lead north to the Beqʿa Valley and the Lebanese coast, and northeast towards inland Syria and Mesopotamia (fig. 2).[1]

Two nineteenth century explorers, Victor Guérin and Edward Robinson, were the first to identify Abil el-Qameḥ with Abel Beth Maacah, based on the route of two military itineraries in the Bible. First Kings 15:20 describes how Ben Hadad attacked the northern kingdom in the ninth century B.C.E. and conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel Beth Maacah, and other cities in Naphtali. Second Kings 15:29 records how, a century later, Tiglath-pileser III captured Ijon and Abel Beth Maacah, as well as Hazor and other cities in Galilee and Gilead. The parallel text to Ben-hadad's campaign in 2 Chr 16:4 calls the city "Abel-maim," which probably alludes to its well-watered setting. It might also explain the name of "Abel" itself, which W. F. Albright rendered as a "watered meadow" (Dever 1986: 208, n. 2). Until 1948, roughly one-third of the tell was occupied by the Arab village of Abil el-Qameḥ, reflecting the site's ancient name

and its proximity to flourmills (*qameḥ* = flour) in the nearby gorge of the Tanur waterfall (fig. 3).

A third reference to the city in 2 Sam 20:14–22 describes how Sheba ben Bichri escaped to Abel Beth Maacah after calling for a revolt against King David. Joab besieged the city and was ready to conquer it when a "wise woman" called down from the city walls and negotiated Sheba's surrender by having him beheaded. In her conversation with Joab, the wise woman declared, "Long ago they used to say, 'Get your answer at Abel' (NIV) or 'Let them inquire at Abel' (NRSV) and that settled it. I am one of the peaceable and faithful in Israel. You seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel. Why will you swallow up the LORD's inheritance?" (vv. 18–19). This rather enigmatic statement suggests that the city enjoyed special status as a mediator, perhaps even serving as the seat of a cult in which the wise woman served as an oracle or prophet.[2] This statement about the wise woman recalls the earlier reference to Deborah in Judg 5:7, "because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel."

Occupation on the tell stretches back to the Early Bronze Age; however, the earliest references to the site appear in second millennium sources, including the late group of Execration Texts (eighteenth century B.C.E.) and the city lists of Thutmose III (fifteenth century B.C.E.; Dever 1986: 211–14). These sources call the city "Abel," which suggests that "Beth-Maacah" was added later. One possibility is a takeover of the town by a tribal or kin-based group of this name during Iron Age I, a time of great social,

Figure 1. View of the tell looking southeast with the Huleh Valley behind. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

cultural, and political transition in the region (Mazar 1961: 27; Dever 1986: 214; Younger 2016: 213–19).

Exploration of the Site: Establishing the Occupational Sequence

Despite its prominence in the landscape and in ancient sources, the mound was never explored archaeologically until W. G. Dever carried out a brief survey in 1973. Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem started the current project, beginning with an in-depth survey (2012) and continuing for five seasons to date (2013–2017). These excavations have produced substantial architectural and artifactual remains from MB IIB to the Roman period, with peak periods of occupation during MB IIB and Iron Age I, as well as substantial remains from Iron Age II (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins, and Bonfil 2013, 2015, 2016a).

EB II pottery was collected during the survey, but we have not yet reached stratified deposits from this period. Curiously, indisputable MB IIA pottery is lacking, suggesting a gap in occupation at this time. This is interesting in light of the reference to Abel in the late
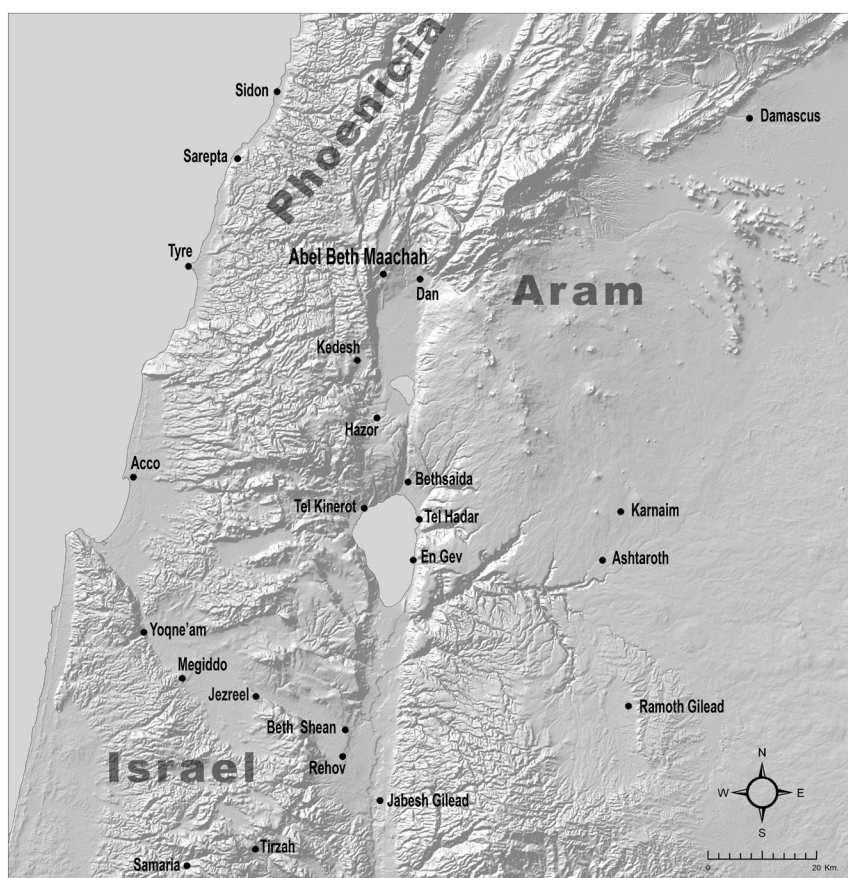

Figure 2. Location of Abel Beth Maacah. Map by Ruhama Bonfil.

Figure 3. Aerial photo of the tell with the village of Abil el-Qameḥ in 1945. Aerial Photographic Archive, Department of Geography, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Photograph by the Royal Air Force.

Figure 4. Sloping rampart layers in Area B on the upper tell with an MB IIB grave cut into them. Hyksos-type scarab mounted on a bronze ring from the grave. Photographs by Robert Mullins and Tal Rogovski.

Execration Texts, although that might refer to the beginning of the MB II town, which could have been in the late nineteenth century B.C.E.

At the summit of the upper mound, a noticeable "bulge" and the faint contours of a rectangular structure are visible in an aerial photo from 1945 (see fig. 3). Unfortunately, a deep "capping" of rubble and two military bunkers prevented us from exploring this intriguing feature, which forced us to find an explanation for this "bulge" from a different angle.

Middle Bronze Age IIB

As was true of Hazor, the entire mound of Abel Beth Maacah was occupied during the Middle Bronze Age and the city protected by impressive fortifications. So far, the evidence for these fortifications has been limited to the lower tell. By contrast, a sloping rampart exposed in Area B in the upper tell (fig. 4) may have supported a major structure(s) on the summit (fig. 5). Two burials were dug into the sloping rampart layers, one of an adult wearing a fine scarab mounted on a bronze ring and the other of an infant in a storage jar.
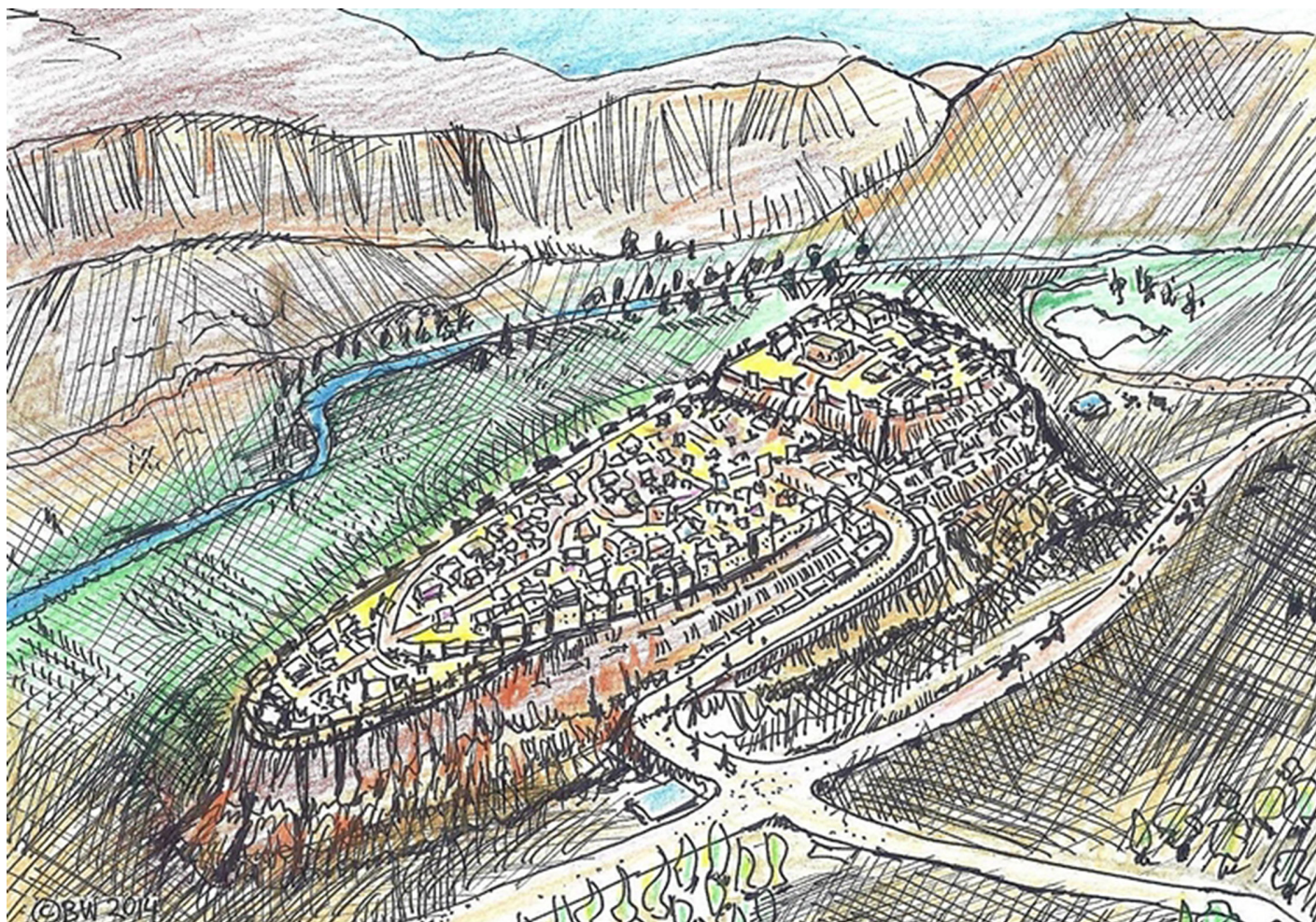
Figure 5. Reconstruction of the city during the MB IIB with a postulated public building on the summit of the upper tell supported by the rampart. Illustration by BibleWalks.com

Figure 6. Aerial view (2017) of Area F at the southern end of the lower mound and showing the MB II fortifications. The "hole" in the middle is the mouth of the corbelled drainage installation. Buildings to the north (bottom of photo) date to the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Figure 7. Above: Jug containing the LB IIB silver hoard in situ. Below: The jug and the extracted silver hoard after cleaning. Photograph by Gabi Laron. Conservation by Miriam Lavi, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Similar rampart burials were identified at Tel Dan from this period (Ilan 1996).

In Area F, at the southern end of the lower mound, a well-built stone "tower" was incorporated into the stone-and-earth rampart layers (fig. 6). Adjoining this wall on the north was a room containing a deep stone-corbelled drainage pit fed by a channel from the north, a feature that points to the high level of urban planning. Curiously, no traces of the fortification system have been detected so far in Area O some 50 m to the north. The MB IIB remains here include a well-built house with two phases and a large courtyard with at least six infant burials in storage jars and an adult burial in a pithos.

The discovery that Abel was both fortified and highly urbanized in MB IIB raises questions about its rank in the regional settlement hierarchy, given its proximity to the mega-city of Hazor and the fortified city of Dan not far down the road. Was Abel a city-state in its own right and/or was it dominated by Hazor?

The Late Bronze Age

The transition from the Middle to Late Bronze Age appears to have been peaceful. There were no traces of destruction in the latest MB IIB phase, and in Area F, Late Bronze Age structures sat directly on MB IIB remains.

Figure 8. The discovery of the ring flask in 2012. Photograph by Anabel Zarzecki-Peleg. Photographs by Robert Mullins and Tal Rogovski.

All three Late Bronze Age strata can be attributed to LB I, LB IIA, and LB IIB. A salient feature is that the Late Bronze remains abutted the MB II fortifications, which continued in use. Late Bronze Age remains are also evident in Area A, but so far, the exposure is limited.

By all appearances, Abel did not suffer the same wholesale destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age as did its neighbor, Hazor; moreover, there was uninterrupted continuity into Iron Age I, when Tel Dan suffered partial destruction. We recovered a high-quality scarab from the time of Ramses II in this sequence (David, Mullins, and Panitz-Cohen 2016), as well as a small silver hoard stashed in a jug on the latest Late Bronze Age floor (fig. 7). Chemical and isotopic analyses of the silver show that it probably originated from the Aegean. Another interesting find attributed to the Late Bronze Age was an intact painted ring flask found during the survey in Area A (fig. 8).

Iron Age I

Iron I occupation is found in all excavation areas, though Area A has produced the densest sequence. This is significant in light of the virtual abandonment of contemporary Hazor (Ben-Ami 2001), and while the stratigraphy of Abel is comparable to Dan in this period (Ilan 1999), the latter was less urban in nature and may have focused largely on bronze working.
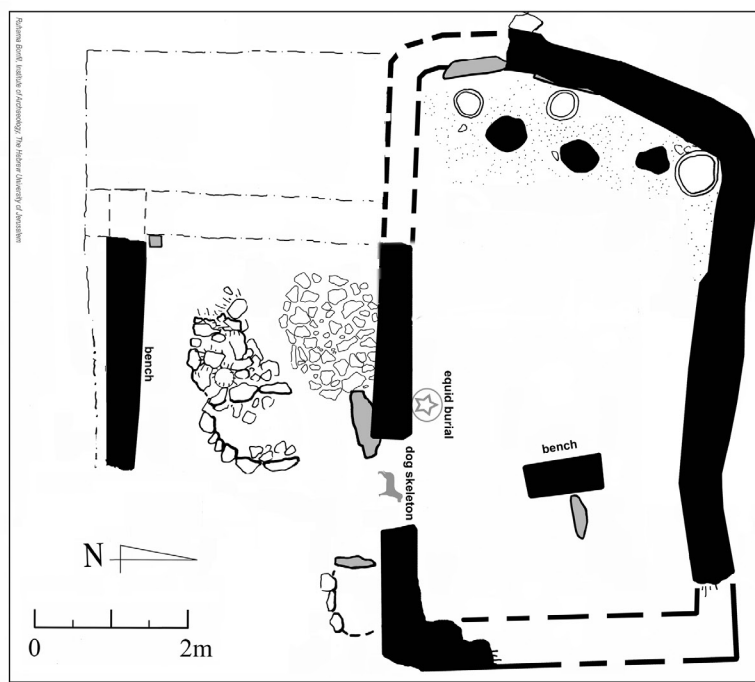
Figure 9. Early Iron Age I cultic structure in Area A. The light-gray features are standing stones of various types. Photograph by Robert Mullins. Plan by Ruhama Bonfil.

Figure 10. Detail from the southern space of the cultic structure seen in figure 9. A semi-circle of stones face a well-cut limestone standing stone placed inside the entranceway. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Figure 11. Aerial view (2017) of the late Iron Age I building complex in Area A. Note the stone flooring in the large courtyard and the burnt area on the left, which is a cultic context (see fig. 12). The thick wall segments above the Iron I building date to Iron IIA. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Each of the three primary Iron Age I strata in Area A is entirely different in character, though all of them contain the same pottery assemblage. This includes a share of Canaanite forms that continued into Iron Age I, like painted carinated kraters alongside typical Iron I shapes such as collared-rim jars, wavy-band pithoi and pyxides.

The earliest Iron I stratum contains a cult structure based on its features (fig. 9). The northern unit had a curious rounded wall in the northwest corner that enclosed a row of three ovens fronted by large flat stones. Additional features included a pit with the bones of an equid, a small clay bull figurine, and a stone bench abutting a rounded standing stone. An entranceway leading to a space to the south contained an articulated dog skeleton, possibly a burial. This space contained a variety of standing stones (one of which is seen in fig. 10 faced by a stone semicircle), a complete deer antler, and a small stone *bamah*. This context was violently destroyed by fire, leaving behind a large pottery assemblage. A new level of largely domestic occupation consisting of open spaces, ovens, and installations was built over it. The occupation ended peacefully and above it was the final Iron I stratum in this area, characterized by a large, well-built complex of buildings (fig. 11).

This extensive complex, still under excavation, consists of a courtyard building on the east, which is badly eroded due to the slope, and a large courtyard on the west, its north side bordered by rooms. A north–south passageway lined with stone buttresses and a small cultic corner separates these buildings.

The western part of the courtyard is paved with large stones, and at the eastern end, where a narrow passageway leads into it, a complete pot bellows was found in secondary use (see sidebar). A cultic area in the western unit included features such as a stone altar, benches, a large fallen stone (*maṣṣebah*?), stone mortars, a deer antler, and a cylindrical cult stand (figs. 12, 13). The entire compound exhibited signs of violent destruction by fire, including several complete crushed wavy-band pithoi.

Iron Age IIA

The Iron Age IIA occupation followed on the heels of the latest Iron Age I stratum. While the exposure is still limited, the remains are impressive and consist mainly of public structures of substantial stone construction, revealed so far in the center and north of the site (Areas A and B). In the southern part of the mound, most traces of this period are found in pits containing Iron IIA pottery, as well as a burial, close to the find spot of an Iron IIA seal depicting dancers (fig. 14; Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2016b).

In the upper mound (Area B), situated directly above the Iron I remains, was part of a large casemate structure consisting so far of three rooms running northwest to southeast (fig. 15). This angle is not congruent with the current slope of the tell or with the rectangular contour visible in the 1945 aerial photo; however, we believe that it contributed to the prominent "bulge" of the upper mound. The layout and dimensions of the casemate rooms recall the citadel in Area B at Hazor, as well as Palace 6000 at Megiddo, and bit hilani palaces at Zincirli.

Special finds from the casemate rooms include a beautifully painted Phoenician storage jar (fig. 16) and a unique faience head of a bearded male (see sidebar). The pottery includes red-slipped and hand-burnished vessels, in addition to a large number of open and closed Phoenician Bichrome ware forms—all pointing to a date in Iron IIA. In 2014, a large sherd depicting a single incised letter came from the debris around two stone-lined silos related to this building.[3] A head of a Phoenician-style figurine was found inside one of the silos to the north of the casemate structure (fig. 17).

Figure 12. Detail of the heavily burnt cultic area seen in figure 11 with the fallen cult stone on the left, cracked round "altar" to the right, basalt mortar on the upper right, and crushed Iron I wavy-band pithoi in between. The partially buried cult stand seen in figure 13 lies near the mortar. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Canaanite smiths used ceramic pot bellows during the second millennium B.C.E. to force air onto crucibles in order to heat their contents, usually copper and tin or bronze scrap. The smith then poured the molten metal into a mold. In the courtyard of the late Iron I building complex in Area A, a complete pot bellows in secondary use was found sunk into the ground with stones circling its rim where it apparently served as a hearth. Thanks to the use of a magnet, iron hammerscales (tiny flakes of oxidized iron that fly off the surface of objects during forging) were detected in the sediment inside the pot, possibly making this the earliest evidence for iron working in the region. Sediment from the vessel, analyzed with an X-Ray Fluorescence instrument, also contained copper, suggesting that both copper and iron were forged here. Additional bronze bits and fragments of bronze-working paraphernalia, including tuyères, suggest that bronze remelting was also practiced nearby. At neighboring Tel Dan, bronze working was a substantial part of the economy. Remains were found in a dedicated artisans' quarter and in association with private dwellings throughout the tell. The pot bellows from Abel Beth Maacah has close parallels at sites along the Phoenician coast during LB II and Iron I, suggesting shared bronze-working traditions.

Photograph by Tal Rogovski.

Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Figure 13. The cult stand from the destruction seen in figure 12. Note the bottom of a funnel or bowl that was inserted inside the mouth of the stand. Holes in both lined up to join them together. Photograph by Tal Rogovski.

Figure 14. Iron Age IIA seal with dancing figures found near an Iron IIA burial in Area O, located at the southwestern edge of the lower tell. Photograph by Gabi Laron.

So far, there are no clear traces of Tiglath-pileser III's conquest of Abel at the end of the eighth century B.C.E., nor were there many pottery forms typical of this chronological horizon.

Between Canaanites, Israelites, Arameans, and Phoenicians

Following the destruction of Hazor in the thirteenth century B.C.E., the region underwent a fundamental change in the Iron I, with Abel Beth Maacah emerging as the main center in the northern part of the Hula Valley. We postulate that the inhabitants were primarily local Canaanites, perhaps joined by refugees from Hazor and migrants from other locales, including those known later as Israelite and Aramean. Over time, these elements reorganized local social and political kinship-based structures to emerge as the dominant elite (Portugali 1994: 211; Sergi 2015).

By a later stage of Iron IIA, there is textual and archaeological evidence for a more structured political organization, with the territorial kingdoms of Aram-Damascus and Israel flanking the region on the north and south vying for control of this buffer zone. While Abel Beth Maacah was a thriving city with substantial public buildings, the identity of its population

Figure 15. Aerial view (2017) of the Iron IIA casemate structure in Area B, the upper mound. Note the stone-lined silos to its north, possibly a courtyard. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Figure 16. Partially restored Phoenician Bichrome jar from the western room of the casemate structure seen in figure 15. Photograph by Tal Rogovski. Restoration by Ora Mazar.

Photograph by Gabi Laron.

Among the finds in the easternmost room of the imposing Iron Age II casemate structure on the upper mound was the broken-off faience head of a bearded male. The head measures 5.5 × 5 cm and has carefully executed features, including glossy black tresses combed back from a headband painted in yellow and black and a manicured beard of similar style and color as the hairdo. The almond-shaped eyes and the pupils are lined with black and the pursed lips lend the figure a look that is part pensive, part stern. The surface is light green due to the addition of copper to the quartz paste. There are no exact parallels to date, although bearded figures of different styles from the same chronological horizon at Tel Dan and Tel Yoqneam indicate that such depictions were known in northern Israel. On the one hand, the head reflects how the Egyptians depicted Asiatics as seen, for example, in the excellent example of a faience plaque from the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu. On the other, there is a strong affinity to Syrian and Assyrian art as seen on the stone sarcophagus of Ahiram from Byblos. Note also a general resemblance to some carved Phoenician ivories. Was this the head of a royal figure or a dignitary? Was it an heirloom from New Kingdom Egypt? Was it an object commissioned by local rulers? Was it meant as tribute to signify a political alliance? This unique piece is undergoing technological analysis and in-depth iconographic and contextual study, and a detailed report will appear soon. As his first official public appearance, we are very happy to display him in the pages of *Near Eastern Archaeology*.

remains an enigma. It is clear that unequivocal ethnic labels are unattainable in the archaeological record, so we are exploring ways to understand the cultural, economic, and political associations of the site, and how it changed during this critical period via the macro- and micro-archaeological finds.

Given the city's proximity to various Aramean polities, many assume that it was also Aramean, perhaps even the capital of a small kingdom, based on the name "Aram-Maacah" in 1 Chr 19:6 (Arie 2008: Na'aman 2012: 94–95); but this is difficult to prove from the available evidence. Aside from the name, Maacah, there is no direct evidence for the existence of this kingdom or for its sister, Geshur, ostensibly located south-southeast of Maacah. There is no mention of the kingdom of Maacah in extrabiblical sources and the archaeological evidence does not reflect any particular political organization or cultural features that would support such a claim at this point (Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2016a).

As to the possibility of an Israelite identity at this time, aspects of the material culture at Abel Beth Maacah such as pottery and the casemate structure are comparable to Hazor Strata X–VIII and to Megiddo Strata VA–IVB, raising the question of whether the Israelite kingdom controlled the upper Hula Valley, and if so, when? The excavators of Hazor, Yigael Yadin and Amnon Ben-Tor, conclude that it was an Israelite city during the entire Iron Age II. Others, like Israel Finkelstein (e.g., 1999), claim that the Arameans took over Hazor in the late ninth century with Israelite hegemony only returning to the region during the reign of Jeroboam II in the early eighth century. Arie (2008) has similarly argued that Dan was abandoned during the tenth and most of the ninth centuries to become part of the kingdom of Aram-Damascus towards the end of the ninth century. Again, such arguments lack solid material culture support and are largely based on assumptions concerning the extent of Aram-Damascus' sphere of political influence. Our evidence points to a robust occupation during the ninth century B.C.E. at Abel Beth Maacah, but we are unable to say that it "belonged" to this kingdom or that. The interests of the northern kingdom of Israel were just as viable as those of Aram-Damascus in the region and we must consider different political scenarios when assessing the allegiance of this border city. Moreover, political allegiance is not necessarily consonant with ethnic or cultural identity.

Finally, the wavy-band pithoi and pot bellows in Iron I contexts together with the plethora of Phoenician Bichrome pottery and figurines clearly demonstrate close relations with the Phoenician coast. By all appearances, the inhabitants of the northern Jordan Valley were just as invested in enterprises with its western neighbors as they were in the political strategies of the northern and southern territorial kingdoms of the time.

While more pieces of the puzzle await future discovery, it is clear that Abel Beth Maacah played a pivotal role in the regional geopolitical scene. In light of the unfortunate absence of excavations and publication in southern Syria, Abel Beth Maacah has the potential to fill some of the gaps in

Figure 17. Macey Wright of Indiana Wesleyan University holds a Phoenician-style figurine head found in one of the silos seen on the left. Photograph by Robert Mullins.

Figure 18. View of the tell in the expanse of the northern Hula Valley, looking east towards the majestic Hermon massif. Photograph by Moshe Cohen.

our knowledge of this intriguing region, which lay at the interface of Israel, Aram, and Phoenicia in the Iron Age (fig. 18).

Notes

1. Ruhama Bonfil is the surveyor and stratigraphic advisor and Oren Gutfeld of Israel Archaeological Services provides the logistics. Participating institutions include Asbury Theological Seminary, Cornell University, Indiana Wesleyan University, The Pillar Seminary, Trinity International University, and the University of Arizona. The project is affiliated with the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research. Area Supervisors for all seasons include Ido Wachtel, Netanel Paz, Fredrika Loew, Ariel Shatil, Ortal Harosh, Dean Rancourt, Christopher Monroe, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, and Leann Pace.

2. Thanks to Izaak J. de Hulster of Helsinki University and Gottingen University for his research on the phrase "a city that is a mother" to be included in his forthcoming article.

3. This letter is either a *bet*, *nun*, or *mem* depending on the stance of the sherd. We thank Heather Dana Davis Parker for this information.

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