# Northern Exposure: Launching Excavations at Tell Abil el-Qameḥ (Abel Beth Maacah)

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*Tell Abil el-Qameḥ, identified with the Biblical site of Abel Beth Maacah, is an imposing site strategically located on the farthest northern border of Israel, a border in antiquity as well as today. In the Iron Age, this boundary separated – and joined – Israelites, Phoenicians and Arameans. In the Bronze Age, it served as a springboard for relations with the great kingdoms in Syria and Mesopotamia. Despite its prominence and strategic importance, the site had never been excavated. Following a survey in 2012 led by the authors, excavation began in the summer of 2013. Iron Age remains exist just under the topsoil in the two areas explored this first season. In the center of the eastern slope (Area A) a series of Iron Age occupation levels were found and in the southern end of the lower mound (Area F) there was a large stone structure that might be a fortification overlooking the Huleh Valley.*

## Introduction

Tell Abil el-Qameḥ is a city of major Biblical and historical importance on the northern border of present-day Israel. It is located just south of the village of Metulla and about 6.5 km west of Tel Dan. The site is approximately 100 dunams (10 hectares) in size and sits astride the narrow defile of Nahal Iyyon, one of the four headwaters of the Jordan River. From its strategic vantage point overlooking the narrow northern end of the fertile Huleh Valley, Tell Abil el-Qameḥ commands roads leading north to the Lebanese Beq'a, inland Syria and Mesopotamia, west to the Lebanese/Phoenician coast, and east to Damascus (Figs. 1–2).[1]

## Identification

The tell was described by a number of prominent 19th century explorers, including Victor Guérin (1880**:** Chapter 102), Edward Robinson (1852: 372) and F.M. Abel (1938). Robinson first identified the mound with Biblical Abel Beth Maacah (Avel Bet Ma'akha),[2] a proposal that has been accepted by most scholars (Dever 1986:

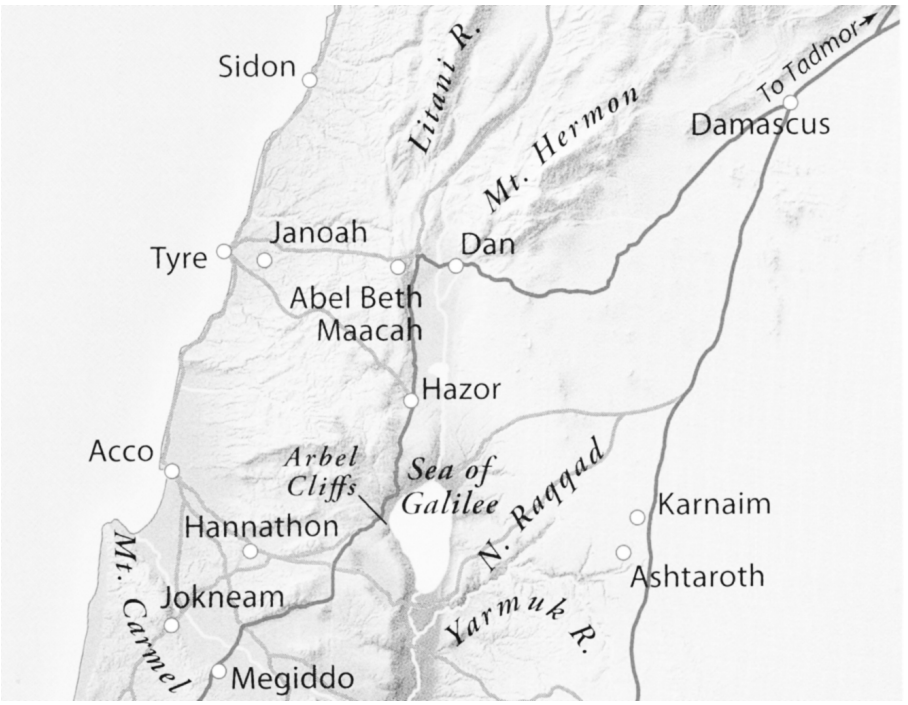


Fig. 1. Location of Tel Abel Beth Maacah.

Fig. 2. View of the tell from the northwest to the east, with the Huleh Valley and Golan Heights in the background (photo by Robert Mullins).

207–210), based largely on historical-geographical considerations.[3] The town is repeatedly mentioned in geographical order from north to south after Ijon (Tell ed-Dibbin in southern Lebanon, about 11 km to the north of the site) and before Hazor (around 30 km to the south). We read in 1 Kings 15:20, "Ben-hadad listened to King Asa, and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel. He conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel-beth-Ma'acah, and all Chinneroth, with all the land of Naphtali," and 2 Kings 15:29: "In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and carried the people captive to Assyria". The city is also called Abel Maim in 2 Chron 16:4.

**Ancient References**

Bronze Age references to the site include the early group of Execration Texts, possibly Thutmose III's list of destroyed towns and the Amarna letters (Dever 1984: 211–213). The first Biblical reference to the town is in 2 Samuel 20:14–22 in the context of a call for revolt against David by a Benjaminite named Sheba ben Bichri. The tale of Joab pursuing the rebel far north to Abel Beth Maacah and how the local Wise Woman saved the city from his destroying it, alludes to it as an Israelite city in the 10th century BCE and it having been the northernmost point of the Israelite entity at that time, or somewhat later, considering that this narrative could reflect a time later in the Iron Age II than the reign of David.

Two additional Biblical references to the site are related to its strategic role as a city guarding Israel's northern approaches; Abel Beth Maacah was conquered by Ben-hadad I of Damascus in the early 9th century BCE (1 Kings 15:20) and later by the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 15:29) in 733 BCE.[4] After the Assyrian conquest, the site is not mentioned in any later sources.[5]

While uncertain due to its incomplete state, the conquest of Abel Beth Maacah by Ben-hadad I may be alluded to in the last line of the Dan Stele (House of David inscription), where the letters *aleph* and *bet* have survived (Schneidewind 1996:77; Na'aman 2012:95, note 10).

**History of Exploration**

Despite its obvious importance, Abel Beth Maacah has never been excavated. Yigael Yadin had originally planned to start a project there in the 1950s, but shifted his focus to Hazor instead. History shows that Yadin made a wise choice, but his original intent certainly emphasizes the importance of Tell Abil el-Qameḥ in the mind of this famous father of Israeli archaeology.

Documents in the Israel Antiquities Authority archives refer to periodic visits to the site by Department of Antiquities inspectors from the 1940s to the 1970s,[6]

and visits to the tell by Yehudah Nevo Dayan were recorded and appear briefly in a Hebrew pamphlet on a survey of the Huleh Valley in 1962. The results of a limited survey carried out in 1973 by Prof. W. G. Dever of the University of Arizona were summarily published in a festschrift dedicated to Siegfried H. Horn (Dever 1986).

A small salvage excavation conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority at the base of the southeastern slope during the laying of a pipeline revealed several Byzantine tombs, as well as a group of Middle Bronze vessels that seemed typical of a tomb assemblage (Stefansky 2005).

## Major Research Goals

The significance of conducting excavations at Abel Beth Maacah lies primarily in its potential to fill a major gap in our knowledge about the northern sphere of Israel during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Only two major sites in this region with remains from these periods – Dan and Hazor – have been extensively excavated to date. Other nearby major cities like Damascus, Tyre, and Ijon, either have not or cannot be investigated because modern settlements overlay them or for other reasons. Indeed, the lack of excavated sites in southern Syria is a well-known and lamentable archaeological lacuna. Kamid el-Loz, 35 km north of Abel Beth Maacah in the Lebanese Beq'a, is one of the few sites that have been excavated in the region with any thoroughness and can provide comparative material (Heinz 2010; Marfoe 1998; Metzger 1991, 1993). Relevant remains to the west are also being uncovered in Sidon (Doumet-Serhal 2010) and at Tell el-Burak south of Sidon (Sader and Kamlah 2010). As a result, our understanding of this region is based largely on an important, but limited data set from the much larger sites of Dan and Hazor.

Excavation of Abel Beth Maacah will unquestionably fill gaps in our knowledge on a number of key research questions relating to the Bronze and Iron Ages in northern Israel.

### *The Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Ages*

During the 2012 survey and the first excavation season in 2013, sherds of Early Bronze Age II metallic ware were collected. Exposure of strata related to the Early Bronze Age will be one of the future research goals of our project, adding important data to the topic of the rise of urbanism as it played out on a regional basis, particularly in relation to Dan and Hazor in the Early Bronze II and III.

Finds from the excavations at the large and important sites of Hazor and Dan in Upper Galilee have demonstrated that the cultural affinity of this region

Fig. 3. British Mandate-era aerial photo of the tell, with the village of Abil el-Qameḥ (Aerial Photographic Archive, Geography Department, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, taken by the Royal Air Force, Section 23, 1945).

was directed to the north and northeast, towards Syria and Mesopotamia, particularly during the Middle Bronze Age and also during the Late Bronze Age. The relationship of the material culture of Hazor to important northern kingdoms, such as Yamḥad, Qatna, and Aram-Damascus is pronounced, as is the difference between the Upper Galilee sites and those not far to the south, such as Beth-Shean and Megiddo.

The relatively small size of Abel Beth Maacah when compared to Hazor makes it a prime candidate for the study of the settlement hierarchy in the region during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Did sites like Abel Beth Maacah represent a middle tier in this well-known hierarchy and what are the socio-geographic implications of such an arrangement? Was second-millenium BCE Abel Beth Maacah part of the kingdom of Hazor during these periods and what was its relationship to the large nearby site of Dan? Determining this relationship will allow us to investigate the nature of the settlement and material culture of large cities and smaller satellite towns and to explore whether this relationship was consistent during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Data recovered from excavating Abel Beth Maacah can also address the question of whether the sequence of occupation in the second millennium BCE was similar to that at nearby Hazor and Dan. These sites have continuity from the Middle to Late Bronze Age destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age, followed by a gap and poor settlement in Iron Age I.

*The Aramean Question*

The location of Abel Beth Maacah on the northern border of Israel and the various references to Aramean entities in the region indicate that the site has great potential to study Aramean cultural and political influences.

Among the independent Aramean states that arose in Syria, adjoining the borders of Israel, according to the Bible are Aram-Zobaḥ, Aram Beth-Reḥob and Aram-Maacah (2 Samuel 10:6, 8 and 1 Chronicles 19:6; see also Joshua 13:11, 13). While identified as an Israelite city in the Bible, a viewpoint supported by the conquest of the city by Ben-hadad I of Damascus as mentioned above, the latter reference to Aram-Maacah is intriguing. As Na'aman (2012) has argued, Abel Beth Maacah may have been the capital of the Aramean kingdom of Maacah. The late Haim Tadmor also persuasively argued that Abel Beth Maacah represented the traditional southern border of Aram (Tadmor 1962).

Thus, the excavation has the potential to clarify and broaden our understanding of the Aramean entity in northern Israel, adding to the relatively patchy present knowledge, even at sites with clear Aramean affinity, such as et-Tell (Bethsaida) and Tel Hadar. Although texts confirm the active involvement of Arameans in the region, in fact, we know very little about them 'on the ground'. Excavation might reveal pottery or other aspects of material culture that may be associated with the Aramean entity. This provides an opportunity to further explore the question of the material culture of the Arameans, who are well documented in texts, but remain elusive in the archaeological record. Deepening our knowledge of the Arameans also has implications for our reconstruction of the involvement of the Assyrians in the kingdom of Israel, as they were the adversaries of both Israel and Aram.

*The Phoenician Question*

The city's location on the branch road of the International Trunk Road (Via Maris) leading north to Ijon (Tell ed-Dibbin) in the Marj 'Ayyun Valley, as well as roads leading northwest to Sidon and west to Tyre, will provide an opportunity to study the nature of cross-cultural ties with coastal Lebanon of the Bronze Age and Phoenicia of the Iron Age. The late Anson Rainey long argued that the Tyre-Damascus road which passed by way of Tel Dan and Tell Abil el-Qameḥ was the "Way to the Sea" mentioned in Isaiah 8:23. This only emphasizes the vital role played by Abel Beth Maacah at the juncture of these important roads. Excavations at the site will provide a prime opportunity to clarify the nature of the Phoenician connection, particularly in light of Biblical texts that describe close economic, political and cultural interaction, as well as affinities in pottery and other items of material culture noted between sites in Phoenicia and the Upper Galilee.

*The Assyrian Conquest*

Possible evidence documenting Tiglath-pileser III's attack on Abel Beth Maacah as part of the Neo-Assyrian monarch's western campaigns mentioned in 2 Kings 15:29 (and possibly in an Assyrian source) will be explored. British Mandate-era aerial and present-day photos (Figs. 2 and 3) show a large buried structure (possibly a citadel) at the northern end of the tell, corroborated by Dever's 1973 survey. Leading up to the feature on the northwestern slope are faint traces of what might be a siege ramp. Thus, Abel Beth Maacah might present an opportunity to excavate the Neo-Assyrian conquest of a prominent northern Israelite city, described in 2 Samuel 20:19 as "a mother in Israel" (presumably an idiom for an important city). To date, Iron Age II siege ramps or systems have been excavated only in the south, at Lachish and Tell es-Safi (Gath), and the potential of Abel Beth Maacah to yield further evidence of this aspect of ancient warfare is intriguing.

*Cultural Crossroads and Borderlands*

As is evident from the discussion above, the geographic location of Tell Abil el-Qameḥ at the crossroads of important east–west and north–south roads, and its strategic position at the intersection of political and ethnic Iron Age kingdoms and entities (Aram, Phoenicia, Israel), make the site a prime candidate for the study of ethnicity and borders, in which the emphasis is placed on dynamic relations between groups and how material culture crosses the border (or doesn't) based on complex mechanisms of identity, interests, interaction, and resources. Identification of an ethnic or national group, such as the Arameans, is not done by merely ticking off items on a check list of traits, but is rather the consequence of ongoing manipulation by the members of the group, within particular contexts, in order to differentiate between "them" and "us".

The archaeology of borderlands provides evidence for aspects of social interaction that elite, pious scribes may have overlooked; it can show how people defined ethnic borders by developing adaptive material culture and created a 'middle-ground' in border zones. An analysis of utilitarian and symbolic objects, buildings, monuments, and adoption (or rejection) of foreign goods and customs will illuminate how processes of identity construction were negotiated between Canaanites, Hurrians and Egyptians in the Bronze Age, and Israelites, Arameans and Phoenicians in the Iron Age. This information can help refine our understanding of what was essential to each.

*Late Antiquity and the Village of Abil el-Qameḥ*

As already noted, Persian, possibly Hellenistic, Roman-Byzantine, Early Islamic, Crusader, and Ottoman pottery was recovered, mainly in the center of the tell in an area occupied by the remains of the Arab village of Abil el-Qameḥ. Several

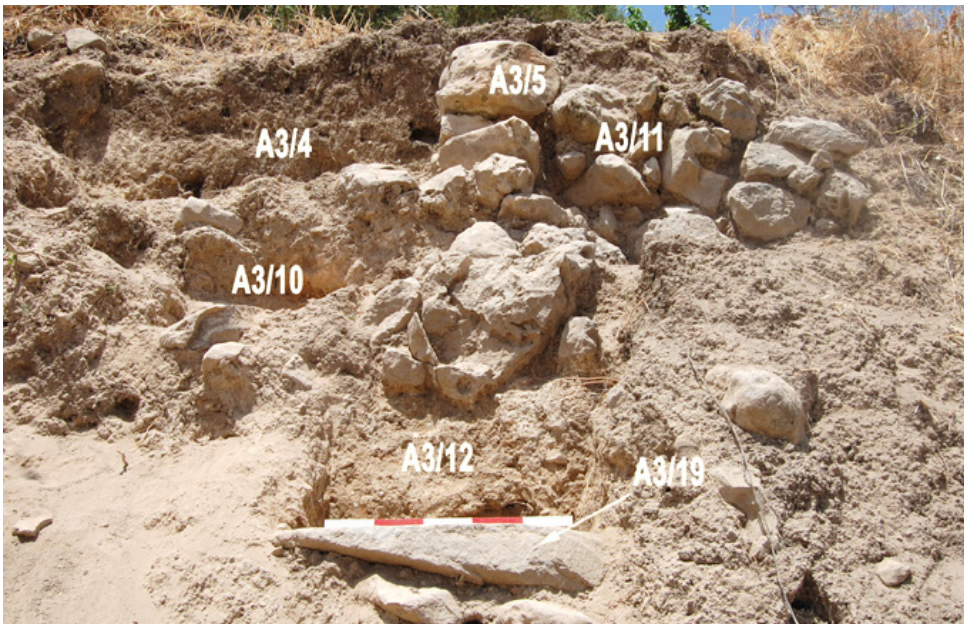


Fig. 4. Series of walls in section above eastern access road to the tell, Area A (photo by Anabel Zarzecki-Peleg).

Byzantine-period tombs were identified by the Israel Antiquities Authority during the laying of water pipes southeast of the tell. Additional rock-hewn tombs that apparently date to this period were identified on the southeastern slope during the 2012 survey (Stefansky 1990; Panitz-Cohen, Bonfil, and Mullins 2012: 32, 36).

Scattered ruins of the small village of Abil el-Qameḥ, possibly established as early as the 13th century CE, and occupied by Christians and Muslims until its abandonment in 1948, are visible in the topsoil, on the lower southern slope of the upper mound, and on the saddle between the upper and lower parts of the site (Fig. 4). The northern end of the mound served as the village's cemetery and the lower tell in the south served as agricultural land, as did some of the slopes which had been terraced. While not the focus of our immediate research agenda, the remains of the village and the Late Antiquity strata are slated to be explored in the future as an integral part of the occupational sequence of the site, emphasizing the *long durée* of occupation on this tell, certainly the result of geographic determinism in light of the strategic position of the site and the fertile well-watered region around it.

**The 2012 Survey**

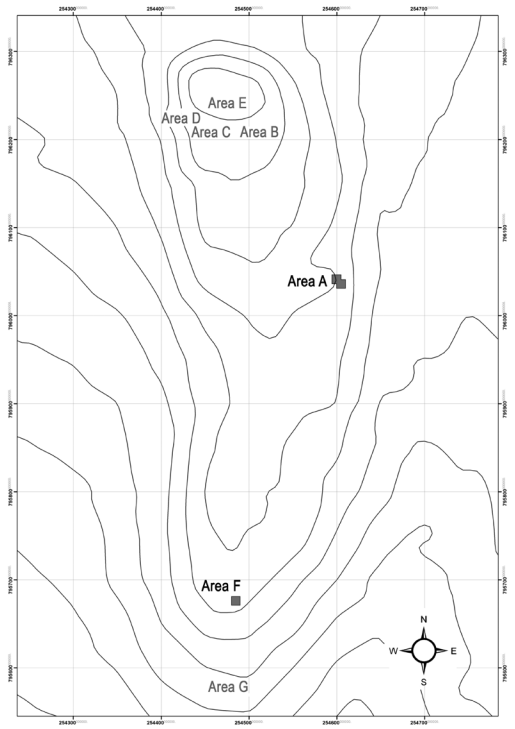


Fig. 5. Topographic map of the tell showing survey areas from 2012, with Areas A and F chosen for excavation in 2013 (map by Ruhama Bonfil).

In May 2012, the authors conducted a four-day survey with the participation of staff and students of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Azusa Pacific University, Jerusalem University College, University of the Holy Land, and local residents from the area. The survey combined an extensive walking survey with some shallow excavation in seven areas (Fig. 5).

One of the drawbacks of a walking survey is that later pottery can get washed down from higher up and give a false reading of when a particular area was occupied. By digging down up to 20 centimeters in select areas we were able to determine the various occupational phases with greater chronological precision.[7] This methodological approach enabled us to more wisely choose potential excavation areas for the first full season in June 2013 (Panitz-Cohen, Bonfil and Mullins 2012).

In three of the areas probed during this scratch survey (Areas A1, A3 and F), several architectural phases and associated pottery apparently dated to the late Iron Age I (11th century BCE) and Iron Age (10th – 9th centuries BCE) were recovered not far below the topsoil. The probe in survey Area A/3 included a series of superimposed walls visible in the section created by the access road to the tell in Area A (Fig. 5). Several restorable vessels including a painted

Fig. 6. Iron Age I ring flask found in the bottom of the section seen in Fig. 4, during the 2012 survey (photo by Moshe Cohen).

carinated krater and an intact ring flask were found by scraping and clarifying this section (Fig. 6). Three very large stones visible in topsoil in Area F proved to have Iron Age cooking pot rim sherds around them, as well as a jar handle marked with an "X" and other sherds. Probes in Areas B, C, E and D of the 2012 survey yielded mainly pottery dating to the Medieval to Ottoman periods, with sporadic earlier sherds. Walls of buildings were identified in Areas D and C, while a large north–south terrace wall in Area B might have been built of ancient stones. Traces of the cemetery of Abil el-Qameḥ were identified under topsoil in Area E (Panitz-Cohen, Bonfil and Mullins 2012; 24–27).

Based on a combination of the survey results and the literary historical sources (Biblical, Egyptian and Assyrian), the early periods represented on the tell are Early Bronze II–III, Middle Bronze II, Late Bronze I–II, and Iron I–II. Sherds from the Persian, Hellenistic(?), Roman-Byzantine, early Islamic, and Crusader periods were also recovered, mainly in the center of the mound where the small Arab village of Abil el-Qameḥ covered about one quarter of the site until 1948; the extent of the village is clearly visible in British Mandate-era aerial photos and maps.

**The 2013 Excavation**

Following the discovery of the rich potential of the site as understood from the results of the 2012 survey, the first season of excavation took place from June to July 2013, lasting for four weeks, with the participation of almost 40 team members from various institutions.[8] In the wake of the results of the 2012

Fig. 7. Iron Age walls in Area A, to the south; Ottoman period terrace wall in lower right.

survey, two areas were chosen for excavation based on two considerations: first, whether they contained early-period finds just under the topsoil and second, whether they were beyond the confines of the village remains. Area A is on the eastern edge of the saddle between the lower and upper mound and Area F is on the southern end of the lower mound.

**Area A**

Four squares were opened, positioned above the system of walls that had been visible in the section above the access road to the tell, as mentioned above. The uppermost layer was composed of sterile agricultural topsoil, reaching a depth of c. 0.70 m in the south of the area, and contained an Ottoman-period agricultural terrace wall or plot fence on the border of a cultivated field, built haphazardly of small field stones. This wall was built directly on top of the uppermost of three phases containing well-built stone wall foundations and related occupation layers (Fig. 7). The nature of this occupation appears to be domestic as an oven and installations were found (Fig. 8). The pottery recovered from the related debris is mostly comprised of cooking pot sherds and large fragments

Fig. 8. Oven and domestic installations in Area A (Azusa Pacific University student Rachael Johnson in photo).

of collared-rim jars, including rims and shoulders of the typical Central-hill country type (i.e., Amiran 1969: Plate 77:4–11). A number of body fragments bear a parallel double low-relief ridge reminiscent of the so-called Wavy-Band or Tyrian pithos (i.e., from Dan: Biran 1994: 137, Fig. 96). Thus, our tentative conclusion is that at least the two lower phases excavated this season in Area A may be attributed to the Iron Age I. This was a surprising result, as the Iron Age I intact ring flask found in the 2012 survey was associated with the lowest layer in the aforementioned section; our excavations showed that the accumulation above this element, at least one meter thick, is apparently all to be dated to Iron Age I as well. If this proves to be correct (further analysis of the pottery and stratigraphy is necessary), this would be a substantial occupation dating to a period that was hardly represented at Hazor and not very developed at nearby Dan. The nature of the ceramic assemblage is also intriguing, comprised mainly of cooking pot and pithos fragments, although not an assemblage found *in situ* on a floor and might represent a fill. It is possible that remains of the 'missing' Iron Age IIA and IIB will be exposed when Area A is extended in future seasons to the west, since the squares excavated this season were close to the erosion line of the eastern slope.

Fig. 9. Large stone structure in Area F, looking south, with later walls to the north and west.

**Area F**

Area F was chosen for excavation owing to the three large stones found in topsoil during the 2012 survey; four squares were opened around these stones (Fig. 9). Just under topsoil, it became clear that they comprised the northeastern corner of a massive structure composed partially of similar large stones and partially of a concentration of rounded field stones, set in a very hard white chalky matrix. This structure was found to continue to the south and west, where it apparently was cut by later activity in the form of pits and some architecture. Later activity, including stone-lined pits and various installations of complex sub-phasing, were found to the north of this structure. Some pits were cut into the stones of the structure as well. While a large amount of pottery was recovered from these contexts, it was not well stratified on a floor, so we are left with a mix of various periods, ranging from the Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age II; several Early Bronze Age II and Persian period sherds were found as well. The exception to this is a beaten-earth and lime floor exposed in the northwestern square, which abutted the northern face of the large stone structure; on this floor were a number of finds, including several basalt ring weights, parts of a collared-rim jar and a complete jug, as well as a small jug that contained a silver hoard composed of earrings and ingots (Fig. 10). The date assigned to the context in which this jug was found is Late Bronze

Fig. 10. Small jug with silver hoard from Area F (photo by Gabi Laron).

Age-early Iron Age I, a period in which other silver hoards have been recovered, such as at Beth-Shean (Thompson 2009) and Dor (Stern 2001). The relationship of the surface with the jug and other finds to the northern wall of the large stone structure remains unclear at this point; it seems that this surface is not the original floor. Further excavation is needed to clarify this relationship.

At this point, we can summarize that in Area F there had been a major stone structure, possibly a tower that was part of a fortification, occupying this southern perimeter of the mound and overlooking the Huleh Valley. Various later activities were conducted using the walls of this 'tower'; at least one of these occupation layers appears to date to the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age I. However, these conclusions are tentative at such an early stage of our work and much further study and excavation are needed.

## Conclusions

In light of the uncontested identification of this tell with the site of Abel Beth Maacah, and given its relation to the Biblical and extra-Biblical sources, along with the promising results of the first excavation season, it is quite certain that answers to some of the questions posed at the beginning of this article may be addressed with the data obtained from excavating this important and imposing site. This is the northernmost site ever excavated in the Land of Israel and the first season of excavation has shown the potential contribution it will make in filling the gaps in our knowledge of the society and history of this pivotal region.

## Notes

1. Map reference: New Israel Grid 058524/805452.
2. According to the rules of the Israeli Academy of the Hebrew Language, the correct transliteration of the name of the Biblical site from the Hebrew אָבֵל בֵּית־מַעֲכָה would be Avel Bet Ma‘kha. When the name is applied to a tell, it becomes Tel Avel Bet Ma‘akha. In the King James version of the Bible, the name is spelled Abel-beth-maachah. We have adopted the simpler spelling of Abel Beth Maacah (which appears in modern maps) for publication. The authors thank Aviva Schwartzfeld of the Israel Antiquities Authority Publications Department for this information.
3. But see Lipinski 2006: 238–244 for a different opinion, identifying Tell Abil al-Qameḥ with Dan.
4. A possible reference to the site in the annals of Tiglath-pileser III was initially proposed by Tadmor (1962: 114, note 4) and supported by Dever (1986: 215–216; 2007: 79); however, this reading was subsequently rejected by Tadmor (Dever 1986: 215); see a summary and rejection of this reading by Riddle (2013).
5. Note a suggestion by Kaplan (1966) that a 4th century CE Greek inscription on a border stone discovered in 1951 near Kibbutz Ma‘ayan Baruch (2 km southeast of Tell Abil al-Qimh), reads BEΘAXWN, and can be reconstructed as pertaining to BEΘ[M]AXWN, which he suggests is an abbreviated form of the name Beth Maacah (lacking the Biblical word ‘Abel’).
6. The authors thank Sylvia Krapiwko and Arieh Rochman-Halperin of the Israel Antiquities Authority for their kind help in accessing these documents.
7. The authors wish to thank Joe Uziel of the Israel Antiquities Authority for his advice concerning this type of probe survey.
8. The excavations, co-directed by the authors, were made possible by the very generous support of friends and alumni of Azusa Pacific University, and funding from Cornell University (the Institute for the Social Sciences, the President’s Council of Cornell Women, and the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies), initiated by Professors Lauren and Chris Monroe. The participation of Ph.D. students led by Prof. John Monson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School made a major contribution to the excavation. Ruhama Bonfil of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem served as the field surveyor. For details online, see www.abel.beth.maacah.org and www.facebook.com/AbelBethMaacah.
9. Area A was supervised by Ido Wachtel, assisted by Carroll and Jeff Kobs, Aviv Toren and Fredrika Loew (registrar). Area F was supervised by Ortal Haroch, assisted by Dianne Benton, Leann Canady, Itamar Weissbein and Adva Danon (registrar).

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