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CONTENTS

129 VERED ES Hed and SHAY BAR: An Innovative Analysis of Infant Burials from the Chalcolithic Site of Fazael 2, Israel

141 IZHAQ SHAI, DEBORAH CASSUTO, AMIT DAGAN and JOE UZIEL: The Fortifications at Tel Burna: Date, Function and Meaning

158 WAYNE HORBOWITZ, TAKAYOSHI OSHIMA and FILIP VUKOSAVOVIĆ: Hazor 18: Fragments of a Cuneiform Law Collection from Hazor

177 LILY SINGER-AVITZ: Khirbet Qeiyafa: Late Iron Age I in Spite of It All

186 AARON DEMSKY: An Iron Age IIA Alphabetic Writing Exercise from Khirbet Qeiyafa

200 RONNY REICH: A Fiscal Bulla from the City of David, Jerusalem

206 MITKA Ratzaby Golub: The Distribution of Names on Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: A Comparative Study

223 SHMUEL ASHTUY: A Rejoinder to Nadav Na‘aman’s ‘A New Appraisal of the Silver Amulets from Ketef Hinnom’

233 CHRISTOPHER A. ROLLSTON: Epigraphic Notes on the Ossuary of Mariam, Daughter of Yeshua: Limning the Broad Tableau

244 NOTES AND NEWS

248 REVIEWS
ABBREVIATIONS

AASOR Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research
ADAJ Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan
AJA American Journal of Archaeology
AfO Archiv für Orientforschung
BA The Biblical Archaeologist
BASOR Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BT Babylonian Talmud
CAD Chicago Assyrian Dictionary
CIS Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum
DJD Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DSS Dead Sea Discoveries
EI Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies
ESI Excavations and Surveys in Israel
IAA Reports Israel Antiquities Authority Reports
IEJ Israel Exploration Journal
JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL Journal of Biblical Literature
JCS Journal of Cuneiform Studies
JE A Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
JNES Journal of Near Eastern Studies
PEQ Palestine Exploration Quarterly
PT Palestinian Talmud
QDAI Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine
RA Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archéologie Orientale
RB Revue Biblique
RE Pauly-Wissowa’s Realencyclopaedie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft
RQ Revue de Qumran
VT Vetus Testamentum
ZA Zeitschrift für Assyriologie
ZDPV Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins

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The Fortifications at Tel Burna: 
Date, Function and Meaning

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ABSTRACT: The first two seasons of work at Tel Burna have focused on revealing a
segment of the fortification walls partially exposed along the perimeter of the
upper tel. The discovery of a seventh-century BCE silo cutting the inner wall of the
fortifications provides a terminus ante quem for the wall. This discovery, in
conjunction with other finds from the excavations, presents us with a unique
opportunity to explore the significance and meaning of fortifications and the forti-
fied towns along the western border of ancient Judah.

INTRODUCTION

TEL BURNA is located in the Judaean Shephelah, along the northern banks of Nahal
Guvrin, slightly north of Lachish (fig. 1). Despite the clear prominence of the
summit, covering an area of 70×70 m. (fig. 2) and its lower city, covering an area
of 16 hectares (Uziel and Shai 2010), and the results of regional surveys (e.g.,
note of the significance of the site in the Bronze and Iron Ages, Tel Burna was
never excavated prior to the commencement of our project in 2010. The high-
resolution survey conducted as the first stage of the current project1 (Uziel and
Shai 2010) showed that the site was first inhabited in the Early Bronze Age and
settled intensively in the Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Iron Ages and
suggested that the fortifications (fig. 3) date from the Iron Age II. Although dating
an architectural element on the basis of survey data may be problematic, the fact
that 77% of the sherds collected on the surface of the summit, enclosed by these
fortifications, date from this period (Uziel and Shai 2010: 238) hinted towards the
dating of this feature.

1 The excavations are affiliated with the Institute of Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University
and are partially supported by the Kushitsky Fund and Dr. Simon Krauthammer Chair
in Archaeology, as well as by private donations. We would like to thank Prof. Aren M.
Maeir for his constant support of the Tel Burna project, from its onset, in every way
possible. Plans are by J. Rosenberg; pottery drawings by Y. Rodman and A. Karasik;
aerial photography by Skyview; field and find photos by A. Dagan and M. McKinny.
Fig. 1. Map showing location of Tel Burna

Fig. 2. 3D reconstruction of the tel and its surroundings based on topographic data and aerial photography (view from the west; prepared by Gal Avraham)
Several scholars have suggested Tel Burna as the location of the biblical city of Libnah (e.g., Albright 1921; Rainey and Notley 2006: 127; Zadok 2009). This was primarily based on the geographic location of Libnah in the third administrative district of Judah, together with Maresha and Eter (Josh. 15:42), and corroborated by its mention alongside Lachish and Maqedah in the southern Shephelah (Josh. 10:29) and by its mention as a Levitical/asylum city in the region (Josh. 21:13). None of these sources, however, provide data as to the specific location of Libnah; thus, others argue for a different location for Libnah (e.g., Dagan 1996, who proposes Horvat Lavnin; Tappy 2008 who proposes Tel Zayit, west of Tel Burna; see also Mazar 1974; Rainey 1980; Zadok 2009). Regardless of the location of Libnah, the position of Tel Burna along the border between Judah and Philistia, in conjunction with the extensive survey and excavation data, indicate that this site was a prominent settlement in the Iron Age, particularly in the Iron Age II, when the site reaches its largest size (8 hectares; see Uziel and Shai 2010).

THE EXCAVATIONS

Thus far, our excavations have produced substantial evidence for Late Bronze and Iron Age occupations. We excavated 14 squares in three areas (fig. 4): three squares on the terrace just west of the summit (area B), five squares in the centre of the upper tel (area A2), and six squares forming a section along the eastern slope of the summit (area A1). The eastern section in Area A1 was excavated in
order to establish the various stratigraphic layers of the summit and to further reveal parts of the substantial fortification system.

Work in the eastern section in area A1 has exposed a casemate fortification system in four of the squares (fig. 5). This is composed of two parallel walls (W13002 and W12006), running north–south and connected by a perpendicular wall (W21206). The outer fortification wall (W13002) is c. 2 m. thick, with six courses of large field stones exposed (fig. 6). Although we have yet to reach a clear surface outside the external wall, excavations east of this wall have produced significant amounts of restorable Iron II pottery (see below). The inner parallel line of the fortification (W12006) is built of large field stones (1.5 m. wide), of which four courses have been exposed to date. Although no surface has yet been reached in the area between W13002 and W12006, the pottery from the fill almost entirely dates from the Iron Age II.
With the walls lying c. 2 m. apart, the entire fortification system is c. 5.5 m. thick. Based on the topography and surface survey, this fortification enclosed a square area (c. 70×70 m.) and the entire length of the wall was 280 m.; while today
Fig. 7. Plan of eighth-century remains at Tel Burna
it stands to a height of approximately 2 m., it was certainly considerably higher in antiquity.

Two surfaces have been exposed to the west of W12006. The earlier surface (L21216) had a small installation (L21225) built of field stones, upon which several loom weights were uncovered, alongside ninth-century BCE pottery (see below, fig. 9). The later surface (L21210) may be dated to the eighth century BCE on the basis of the pottery found there (fig. 7; see below, fig. 10).

The inner wall (W12006) is cut by a later silo (L12007; fig. 8). The silo — one of five such silos discovered so far in the excavations — is lined with field stones (W12008) and has yielded seventh-century BCE pottery (see below). This indicates that the wall must pre-date the intrusive silo and would have clearly been out of use by the time the silo was constructed in the seventh century BCE. Thus, it provides a firm terminus ante quem for the fortifications.

THE POTTERY

The earliest pottery assemblage exposed in relation to the fortification walls dates from the ninth century BCE. Found on floor L21216 and in installation L21225, alongside a concentration of loom weights, its most significant type is a small carinated bowl with a plain rim, red slip and interior burnishing (fig. 9:1), similar to bowls from Tell eš-Şafi/Gath Stratum A3 (Shai and Maeir 2012: fig. 14.6:1),
Lachish Level IV (Zimhoni 2004a: fig. 25.29:6) and Tel Batash Stratum IV (Mazar and Panitz-Cohen 2001: pl. 5:16). Another common type is a rounded bowl with ridges below a flattened rim (fig. 9:2). The vessel is red-slipped and hand-burnished, typical of the late Iron Age IIA. Parallels can be found at Tell eš-Šafi/Gath Stratum A3 (Shai and Maeir 2012: pl. 14.11:3), Lachish Levels V–IV (Zimhoni 2004a: fig. 25.19:15) and Tel Batash Stratum IV (Mazar and Panitz-Cohen 2001: pl. 1:9). Typical late Iron IIA kraters (figs. 9:3–6) are large, with a hammerhead rim and red slip with burnish on the interior and upper exterior; they sometimes bear multiple handles. These vessels are comparable to kraters from Lachish Levels V–IV (Zimhoni 2004a: fig. 25.41), Tel Ḥamid VI–VII (Shavit 2003: pl. 4:4) and Tell eš-Šafi/Gath (Shai and Maeir 2012: pl. 14.11:10). Finally, jars with a short neck and wide shoulder were found (fig. 9:7, 8) these are similar to examples from Tell eš-Šafi/Gath (Shai and Maeir 2012: pl. 14.11:11), Gezer Stratum VIB (Gitin 1990: pl. 11:6–9) and Ashdod Stratum VIII (Dothan 1971: fig. 38:4).

Eighth-century pottery was found in various areas of the summit, including the upper surface relating to the inner wall of the casemate fortification (L21210). Hand burnishing is almost completely replaced by wheel burnishing (fig. 11).
Typical forms include Judaean folded-rim bowls (figs. 10:2–3), other bowl types (fig. 10:1,4–5), closed cooking pots with a ridge around the rim (fig. 10:6), kraters (fig. 10:7), holemouth jars with ledge rim (fig. 10:8) and lmlk-type jars (figs. 10:9–11). The eighth-century repertoire resembles that of Lachish Level III (Zimhoni 2004b), Tel Batash Stratum III (Mazar and Panitz-Cohen 2001) and Tell eṣ-Ṣafì/Gath Stratum A2 (Avissar and Maeir 2012). Note that a single two-winged
lmlk-stamped handle (fig. 12) was found in an unstratified fill; thus, it cannot be attributed with certainty to either the eighth- or seventh-century context at our site (for recent debate on the dating of these stamped handles, see Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010; Ussishkin 2011).

The seventh-century BCE pottery originates almost exclusively from the five silos excavated — including silo L12007, which, as aforementioned, cuts the fortification wall. Forms include bowls (fig. 13:1,2), lamps with raised base (fig. 13:3), storage jars with short necks (fig. 13:4,5), cooking pots with ridged rim (fig. 13:6–7), holemouth jars (fig. 13:8) and storage jars (fig. 13:9–10). These forms can be compared with vessels from other sites in the region, such as Lachish Level II (Zimhoni 2004b) and Tel Batash Stratum II (Mazar and Panitz-Cohen 2001).
FORTIFIED SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE BORDER

From the above data it is clear that the fortifications of Tel Burna were in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. While the outer wall may have continued to function, the inner wall clearly went out of use by the seventh century BCE, as noted above. The site was most likely destroyed by Sennacherib in the late eighth century BCE and the fortification walls, or at least the inner wall of the casemates, not rebuilt when the site was resettled in the seventh century BCE.

The fortified sites along the western border of Judah appear to have been a strategic placement along the conflict zone with one of their primary adversaries — the Philistines. Such fortifications, dating from the Iron Age IIA, have been found throughout the Shephelah. One example is Khirbet Qeiyafa, located in the western
part of the high Shephelah on the summit of a hill bordering the ‘Elah Valley to the north. This site controls the main road from Philistia to the hill country. Excavations have revealed a well-planned settlement, including an elaborately built fortification wall (Garfinkel and Ganor 2009: fig. 1.1). The base of this wall consists of cyclopean stones, some weighing 4–5 tons, and its upper part is constructed of medium-sized stones (Garfinkel and Ganor 2010: 67). On the basis of the stratigraphic observations, the pottery assemblage and \(^{14}\)C analyses, the excavators date the construction of the two gates and the casemate wall to the early Iron Age IIA, the first half of the tenth century BCE (Garfinkel and Kang 2011 and references therein).\(^2\) It seems that this would be the earliest fortified Iron Age site in the western Shephelah. Its location on what would appear to be both a physical and a political border between the lowlands and the highlands in this early stage of the Iron Age, overlooking a major route to the southern mountains of Judah, raises several issues, including the identity of the builders of this enclosure. While the excavators associate the site with the kingdom of Judah or even the United Monarchy, others suggest that it was a Philistine or Canaanite stronghold (Na’aman 2008; although note that the option of the site being Philistine has been recently abandoned, see Na’aman 2011). Whereas the undecorated pottery assemblage (Kang and Garfinkel 2009a; Garfinkel and Kang 2011) cannot be interpreted as Philistine, the presence of Late Philistine Ware (Kang and Garfinkel 2009b) may point to Philistine influence or even possible domination. If this was the case, the site would most likely have been under the jurisdiction of the city of Gath, an indication of the powerful role this Philistine city would have played in the early Iron Age II. However, the location, architecture, dietary habits, undecorated pottery and other aspects of material culture, as well as the possible use of the Hebrew language found on an ostracon (Misgav, Garfinkel and Ganor 2009; Yardeni 2009), indicate that this was, in all likelihood, a Judaean site (e.g., Garfinkel, Ganor and Hasel 2011).

Lachish was clearly the primary Judaean entity in the Shephelah in the Iron Age II (see Barkay and Ussishkin 2004). The city’s extensive fortification system was constructed in Level IVd (ninth century BCE), and the site continued to be fortified until its final destruction by the Babylonians, albeit with extensive changes following the Level III destruction and rebuilding (for Level II, see Barkay and Ussishkin 2004: table 9.1). The establishment of the fortification system and Palace B in Stratum IV indicates that the city had become a major administrative centre of the kingdom of Judah at that time (Barkay and Ussishkin 2004: 416–417, 423). Barkay and Ussishkin (2004: 423) have noted a direct correlation between the thickness of the wall and the city’s political administrative

\(^2\) The date of Kh. Qeiyafa may be debatable (e.g., Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2010; Garfinkel, Ganor and Hasel 2011; Garfinkel and Kang 2011), but for the purpose of this study the precise dating is not critical.
standing. Thus, the fortification at Lachish was two *kanim* thick (c. 6.3 m.), less than that of Jerusalem during the eighth century BCE (which was 2.5 *kanim*, or 7.8 m., thick), but thicker than that of Tel Batash (which was 8 cubits — approximately 1.3 *kanim*, or c. 4 m. — thick). In line with this discussion, the wall at Tel Burna is, as aforementioned, c. 5.5 m. thick — slightly thinner than that of Lachish. Other casemate systems discovered include Beer Sheba (approximately 4 m.; Aharoni 1973: 10), Tell Beit Mirsim, of approximately the same size, and Beth Shemesh (see below). Therefore, the casemate system at Burna is slightly thinner than other casemates, but not as thick as the solid walls of the primary Judaean centres.

Interestingly, Bunimovitz and Lederman (2001) note that the ancient city of Beth Shemesh was also fortified by a casemate wall (and has other markers of central government; see Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011: 39–40, fig. 4), from as early as the tenth century BCE (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011: 40–41). Neighbouring Tel Batash Stratum IV, which dates from the early Iron Age IIA, was not fortified (Mazar 1997: 254–255). There, the fortification system was constructed only in Stratum III and subsequently partially destroyed by Sennacherib in the late eighth century BCE; it later continued to be used in the seventh century BCE.

Naturally, borders serve as contact zones for neighbouring cultures and political entities. It is here that we can observe the development of national identities and their symbolic ethnic markers. It is also where we expect to see fortifications, meant to guard the border, on the one hand, and to demonstrate, on the other hand, a political entity’s strength both externally, towards its neighbors, as well as internally, indicating administrative control. In fact, it has already been suggested that the casemate walls and city gates built in the time of the United Monarchy were a symbol of power for this rising political entity (Whitelam 1986; although note that the date of these structures is highly debated). Williamson (1996: 49) suggested that the ninth-century BCE fortifications at Jezreel were a display of King Omri’s power to the local population. In the case of the border with Philistia, there is no doubt that the building of fortifications was not only a symbol of power for the Judahites but a display of power facing the opposing Philistine forces. In this sense, the structures would have been of both functional and symbolic importance (e.g., Uziel 2010). Interestingly, no fortifications of the Iron Age City at Gath have been revealed to date (Maeir 2012: 19–43). While this may, of course, be due to the limited exposure of the excavations thus far, the dismantling of the fortifications at a later period, or the possible reuse of earlier fortifications in the Iron Age (Welch 2011), it is possible that the rulers of Gath were sending a clear message of rebuttal to the forts being built by Judah, implying that the great city of Gath had no need for fortifications, since, as the most powerful force in the region, they had no reason to fear military attack. If this was the case, it is possible that the size of the Iron II city of Gath — 50 hectares (Uziel and Maeir 2005) — would have been a clear implication that size and topography did count (e.g., Maeir 2003).
In sum, Judaean settlements in the western Shephelah began to be fortified in the early Iron Age IIA. This is evident at sites such as Khirbet Qeiyafa and Beth Shemesh. Later, in the late Iron Age IIA, Lachish, as the most important Judaean city in the region, also became fortified. As more cities and towns were fortified during the Iron Age II, the casemate-wall fortification system became a common phenomenon in this region. The fortifications uncovered at Tel Burna are in keeping with this picture: they include a casemate wall built during the Iron Age IIA (probably sometime in the ninth century BCE) and used throughout the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. Along the western border of Judah one finds a series of fortified settlements that share the same objective: to protect the main roads to the central hill country and to demonstrate to the people of the region, on both sides of the border, the power of the central administration.

Although the excavations at Tel Burna have only just begun, the extensive casemate fortification system exposed thus far is plainly indicative of the significant role this site must have played during the Iron Age II. The location of Tel Burna — midway between Gath, the dominant Philistine city in the Iron Age IIA, and Lachish, the main Judaean city, monitoring the road along Nahal Guvrin, with visibility all the way to the coastal plain — would account for the investment of the central authority of Judah in establishing such a large walled city so close to the city of Lachish.

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