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The Shephelah during the Iron Age

Recent Archaeological Studies

". . . as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the Shephelah"
(1 Kings 10:27, 2 Chronicles 1:15)

edited by

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Four Seasons of Excavations at Tel Azekah: The Expected and (Especially) Unexpected Results

Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Manfred Oeming

Geopolitical Locations and Historical Sources and the Expected Archaeological Results Based on Them

Tel Azekah (Tell Zakariya) is a pear-shaped mound encircled on three sides by Nahal Ha-Elah (Wādi ʿAjjur). The mound is ca. 127 m above the stream, atop steep slopes on the west, north, and east. On the south, at a drop of ca. 30 m, it is joined to a ridge by a low saddle.[1] On this saddle, a lower city grew around the southern slopes of the tell during the Late Bronze Age, adding about 13 dunams to the 45-dunam site.

Both the size and the strategic location of Azekah in the heart of the Shephelah positions it as one of the main border sites between the coastal entities in the west (e.g., Philistines) and the hill entities in the east (e.g., Judah). It regulated and safeguarded the strategic junction of roads that led from Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (biblical Gath) in the west, through the Valley of Elah, to the Judean Hills in the east, and connected Beth-Shemesh in the north and Lachish in the south.

Despite its size and importance, the name "Azekah" is not mentioned in any second-millennium BCE source. Since it was already well-fortified by the Middle Bronze Age (and possibly even before that; see below), and was both substantial and rich in the Late Bronze Age II–III, it might have become known as "Azekah" (and cf. Isaiah 5: 2) only when it became part of Judah—that is, not before the end of the 9th century BCE (and see below). If this is the case, it will remain for future research to determine the name by which the site was known in the second millennium BCE.

According to Josh 10:10–11, 15:33–35, Neh 11:30, and 2 Chr 11:9, Azekah was an important stronghold on Judah's western border. The first book of Samuel (1 Sam 17:1) designates it as the location of the legendary battle between David and

1. The site can be approached from the south only, and for defensive purposes the saddle was probably artificially lowered in ancient times. Already Dagan (2011: 72–73) assumed that the city gate should be located on the southern slope of the tell and that the Assyrian and Babylonian armies, as indicated in historical documents, also attacked Azekah from this direction.

Goliath: The Philistines "gathered their armies for battle; they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim." Saul and the Israelite army were positioned against the Philistines at the Valley of Elah, and after the great victory of David over Goliath, the Philistines fled and were pursued by the Israelites "as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron."

With Azekah as a major site on the western border of Judah, it is easy to understand why the Assyrian army chose it as the first target of its 701 BCE attack. The Azekah Inscription, discovered in two fragments in the library of Ashurbanipal, was identified in 1974 as a single tablet by Nadav Naʾaman.[2] It describes an Assyrian campaign by Sennacherib against Hezekiah, King of Judah, including the conquest of Azekah. The text further describes Azekah's strong fortifications, which were "[like the nest of the eagle?] located on a mountain ridge, like pointed iron daggers without number reaching high to heaven [. . . [Its walls] were strong and rivaled the highest mountains, to the (mere) sight, as if from the sky [appears its head? . . . . (lines 6–7, according to Naʾaman's 1974 translation). The inscription also mentions the siege and conquest of the city and that a siege ramp was built as part of it: "[by means of beaten (earth) ra]mps, mighty? battering rams brought near, the work of [. . .], with the attack by foot soldiers, [my] wa[rriors . . . [. . .] they had seen [the approach of my cav]alry and they had heard the roar of the mighty troops of the god Ashur and [their] he[arts] became afraid [. . . ." Sennacherib also describes the results of this war and how "[The city Azekah I besieged,] I captured, I carried off its spoil, I destroyed, I devastated, [I burned with fire. . . .]" (lines 8–10, according to Naʾaman's 1974 translation).

A much-diminished Azekah was rebuilt sometime in the late 7th century BCE, probably after a long settlement gap (Koch and Lipschits 2013: 64–66), and by the early 6th century BCE, when Judah was attacked by the Babylonians, it had again become one of the strong, fortified cities on Judah's western border. According to Jer 34:7, ". . . when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah; for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained." An ostracon discovered in the burned gate of Lachish, dated to the 586 BCE Babylonian destruction, completes the data from the description in Jeremiah, since the last Judahite defenders report in the last lines of their letter (Lachish Ostracon IV; ANET: 321): "and let (my lord) know that we are watching for the fire signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah."

Conclusions: Based on the geopolitical location of the site and on the biblical and extrabiblical sources, second-millennium BCE Azekah was barren territory. There would be nothing to find. The main discoveries to be expected would come from the Iron Age—the Iron IIB and IIC. Possibly, based on the mention of Azekah in Neh 11:30 and also 1 Chr 11:9, with textual indications for the existence of

2. See Naʾaman 1974, as against the attribution of the inscription to the time of Tiglath-pileser III or Sargon II, and see there further literature.

Azekah as a border site within Yehud, there would also be material evidence from the Persian and the Early Hellenistic periods.

Previous Archaeological Excavations at Azekah: The Anticipated Archaeological Results of the Renewed Expedition

Tell Zakariya (Azekah) was one of the first sites excavated in the Holy Land. Between October and December, 1898, March and April 1899, and again in September, 1899, F. J. Bliss, assisted by R. A. S. Macalister, excavated the site for 17 weeks on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund. Bliss and Macalister published the results of their excavations in four preliminary reports (Bliss 1899a; 1899b; 1899c; 1900). Two years later, they published the final reports of the four excavations they had excavated in the Judean Shephelah: Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (Tel Zafit, identified with Philistine Gath), Tell el-Judeideh (Tel Goded), Tell Ṣandahana (Mareshah), and Tell Zakariya (Bliss and Macalister 1902; on Azekah, see pp. 12–27).

A detailed study of the unpublished field diaries and plans from Bliss and Macalister's excavations (Napchan-Lavon 2014) revealed that, in contrast to the common "archaeological legend," according to which the fate of Azekah had been similar to that of nearby Mareshah (which, from the archaeological point of view, had been completely destroyed), Bliss and Macalister's excavations at Azekah were focused on only three areas on the upper part of the tell: three trenches and one pit in the open area of the surface of the tell, the towers at the southwestern edge of the tell, and (mainly), the fortress on the acropolis.

Already between October and December 1898, Bliss and Macalister dug 16 test pits along three parallel lines in the open area of the surface of the tell, sectioning the tell from east to west: Section A–B (northernmost), Section C–D (central), and Section E–F (southernmost). In the pits excavated in the northern row, there was a clear distinction, about 2 m below the surface, between the "Jewish" and "Phoenician" periods. Bliss and Macalister observed in their notebook that in the pits in the two other rows a wider variety of pottery types was unearthed, including, according to their analysis, "Jewish," "pre-Israelite," "Phoenician," and "Amorite" fragments (Napchan-Lavon, Gadot, and Lipschits 2014: 86–87). These definitions are different from the official publication, where Bliss and Macalister identified two main strata above bedrock: the lower stratum was identified as "pre-Israelite," while the upper strata were identified as "Jewish" (Bliss 1899a: 17, pl. 1; Bliss and Macalister 1902: pl. 2). Only one more area was excavated in the upper part of the tell: in the north of the site, a trial pit was excavated, approximately 30 × 20 m, reaching a depth of 3.5 m on average (Napchan-Lavon, Gadot, and Lipschits 2014: 81). Only a few of the pottery vessels, bronze, iron and stone objects, and coins that were recorded in the finds list registered the exact location and depth (and cf. Napchan-Lavon 2014: 129–44); some of them were also published in the preliminary and final reports. Study of these finds, and combining them with the few available details concerning their location and level, may demonstrate that there are clearly three different

levels of occupation discovered in Bliss and Macalister's excavations on the upper plateau: Early Bronze Age II–III, Late Bronze Age I–II, and Iron Age II. The presence of Early Bronze material close to bedrock can be found in only one location; the appearance of Late Bronze material is clear, as is the Iron Age level on top, found in nearly all the excavated pits, at a depth of between 0.6 and 1.8 m (Napchan-Lavon, Gadot, and Lipschits 2014: 87).

The towers at the southwestern edge of the tell were assigned by Bliss and Macalister (1902: 13–14) to the Roman/Byzantine period. From the unpublished material, however, and since no indicative ceramic finds or other materials are mentioned in the diaries as having come from this area, it is unclear on what they based their conclusion (Napchan-Lavon, Gadot, and Lipschits 2014: 89–90).[3]

The area most thoroughly excavated by Bliss and Macalister was the fortress on the acropolis. It is therefore the best-documented area among the unpublished material preserved at the PEF and also in the published reports. The fortress's walls and towers were trenched, disconnecting the walls from occupation levels on both the internal and external sides, making it almost impossible to associate any floors with the fortress walls. However, this method created a clear outline of the building. Four "Clearance Pits" were excavated inside the citadel, exposing many walls and floors and revealing many small finds that were carefully described in the field diaries, in most cases, however, without a clear description of the location of the finds. Based on the interpretation of the evidence from the fortress, Bliss and Macalister (1902: 23) summarize the occupation of the tell:

> Though not founded in the earliest period, it was already inhabited when Joshua entered the land, and was fortified in Jewish times, possibly by Rehoboam; during the Seleucidan period the acropolis was strengthened by the addition of towers, and finally, after a brief occupation in Roman and Byzantine times, the place was deserted.

For many years, this dating was unanimously accepted by scholars.[4] However, from the descriptions of the masonry in the field diaries and notebooks, it is clear that the walls of the structure were not of homogenous construction. Furthermore, in certain places, the fortress's walls rest on bedrock, while in others they seem to rest on debris and remains of earlier buildings. The majority of *lmlk* stamped handles found at Azekah were discovered inside the fortress, as were several lamp-in-bowl and bowl-in-bowl foundation deposits that date to the Late Bronze or early Iron

3. In his reanalysis of the excavation results, Dagan (2011) suggests, contrary to Bliss and Macalister, an Iron I–II date for these towers. From the section drawings in the published reports, he deduced that the foundations of these towers do not resemble those of the walls of the fortress (which he dates to the Hellenistic period; see below). In the renewed excavations of the northern tower, it became clear that this tower is part of the Middle Bronze fortifications (and see further below).

4. See, e.g., Avi-Yonah and Yeivin (1955: 289–90); Stern (1971: 133–37; 1993: 124); Aharoni (1987: 266); Seger (1997: 243); Negev and Gibson (2001: 64).

Age. In a number of places in the walls and towers, drafted and bossed stones appear, typical of the Hellenistic period (Geva 1985: 28, fig. 4; Sharon 1987: 21–42; Dagan 2011: 81–83), and the large rock chambers found within the fortress have been reinterpreted as ritual baths or *miqwaot*, typical of the end of the Second Temple period (Reich 1990: 281–82; Zissu 2006: 88; Dagan 2011).

It seems that these features were also noticed by Bliss and Macalister. From a purely archaeological perspective, they managed to identify four main occupational levels within the fortress, and they also dated the occupation levels at the site accordingly. The earliest level was dated to "the pre-Israelite period," and among the objects attributed to this level was a vessel containing assorted Egyptian jewelry, including two scarabs, one with the name Thutmose III, the other with the name of Amenhotep II (Bliss and Macalister 1902: 22–23). Based on these finds, we can date this phase to the Late Bronze Age II–III. The second level, corresponding to Bliss and Macalister's "late pre-Israelite period," included a crude plaster floor that contained handles with *lmlk* stamp impressions of the two-winged scarab variety. The level above this contained a second plaster floor of higher quality than the earlier floor, containing jar handles with four-winged *lmlk* stamp impressions. This level was also dated to "the late pre-Israelite period" (Bliss and Macalister 1902: 22–23). It appears that these two levels should be dated to the Iron II (perhaps parallel to Lachish Levels IV–III and II). The latest level was attributed to "the Jewish period" (Bliss and Macalister 1902: 20–22), and it can safely be dated to the Hellenistic period.

Conclusions: After studying the published and unpublished material from the Bliss and Macalister excavations, we may conclude that it is possible to reconstruct the settlement history of Azekah according to their discoveries. Settlement began in the Early Bronze II–III, and the finds from this period can be found very close to the natural bedrock. In the Bliss and Macalister excavations, there is no evidence for the existence of the site in the Intermediate and Middle Bronze Age. On the other hand, there is evidence of a large and significant occupation level during the Late Bronze Age (I–II[?]), as indicated by the many scarabs and Egyptian-style artifacts found in the excavations. Again, there is no evidence of settlement at the site in the early Iron Age; there are, however, many finds and much evidence for at least two different phases during the Iron II. The Hellenistic period is evidenced by the large fortress, but it is not clear from Bliss and Macalister's excavations if and to what extent the occupation at that time extended beyond this central building.

Archaeological Surveys in Azekah: The Anticipated Archaeological Results of the Renewed Expedition

In the late 20th century, Dagan surveyed Tel Azekah as part of the regional surveys of the Shephelah (Dagan 2000: 46–47; 2011, with further literature). His general observations, based on the collection of pottery from the site's slopes, was that Tel Azekah was settled during the Early Bronze II–III, Intermediate Bronze Age,

Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, Iron I and II, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.

In 2009, Tel Azekah was subjected to a thorough archaeological survey and ground-penetrating geophysical survey as part of the preparation for the Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition and plans for the renewed archaeological research of the site (Emmanuilov 2012). A geophysical survey, using Electrical Resistivity Tomography (2D/3D), was conducted; it showed the existence of a fortification wall surrounding at least the western side of the surface of the tell and some architectural remains under the surface of the lower southern terrace.[5] The intensive archaeological survey was aimed at identifying more precisely the periods during which the site had been settled and at estimating the size and nature of the site during each of those periods. The surface was divided into nine areas, based on the topography of the site; six of the areas were further divided into survey fields. This division enabled each field to be defined chronologically, independent of the others, and to trace the shifting of the settlements on the surface of the mound in various periods. The results of the intensive survey showed that there were two settlement peaks at the site: in the Late Bronze Age and in the Iron II. These results went hand-in-hand with the results of Bliss and Macalister's excavations, as described above. In addition, the Early Bronze II–III remains reinforced Bliss and Macalister's discoveries just above bedrock from the same period, as well as their Late Hellenistic and Early Roman finds. However, the finds from the Middle Bronze IIA, Persian, and Late Roman, Byzantine, Early Islamic, and Ottoman periods (Emmanuilov 2012) had no parallels in Bliss and Macalister's published and unpublished materials.

Archaeological Expectations Based on Historical Sources and Previous Archaeological Investigations: Interim Conclusions

There is good reason to anticipate that careful study of available historical sources, together with a comprehensive assembly and analysis of finds from previous excavations and the results of modern archaeological surveys, will facilitate a detailed reconstruction of the settlement history of Azekah.

The results of this preliminary study demonstrate that the earliest phase of settlement at the site was from the Early Bronze II–III. Evidence was found for a limited settlement in the Middle Bronze Age (Emmanuilov 2012: 57, Table 1) and possibly even earlier, during the Intermediate Bronze Age (Dagan 2011: 76–77, Table II). On the other hand, there is evidence of a large and significant occupation during the Late Bronze Age, when the settlement area was expanded to the Lower Terrace in the southern part of the site. The strength of Azekah in the Late Bronze Age, based especially on the presence of Late Bronze sherds in the lower city, came as a surprise, since there are no historical documents supporting the existence of such a large and important site during that period.

5. The geophysical survey was conducted by Prof. Olaf Bubenzer and Dr. Stefan Hecht on behalf of the Geographical Institute of Heidelberg University.

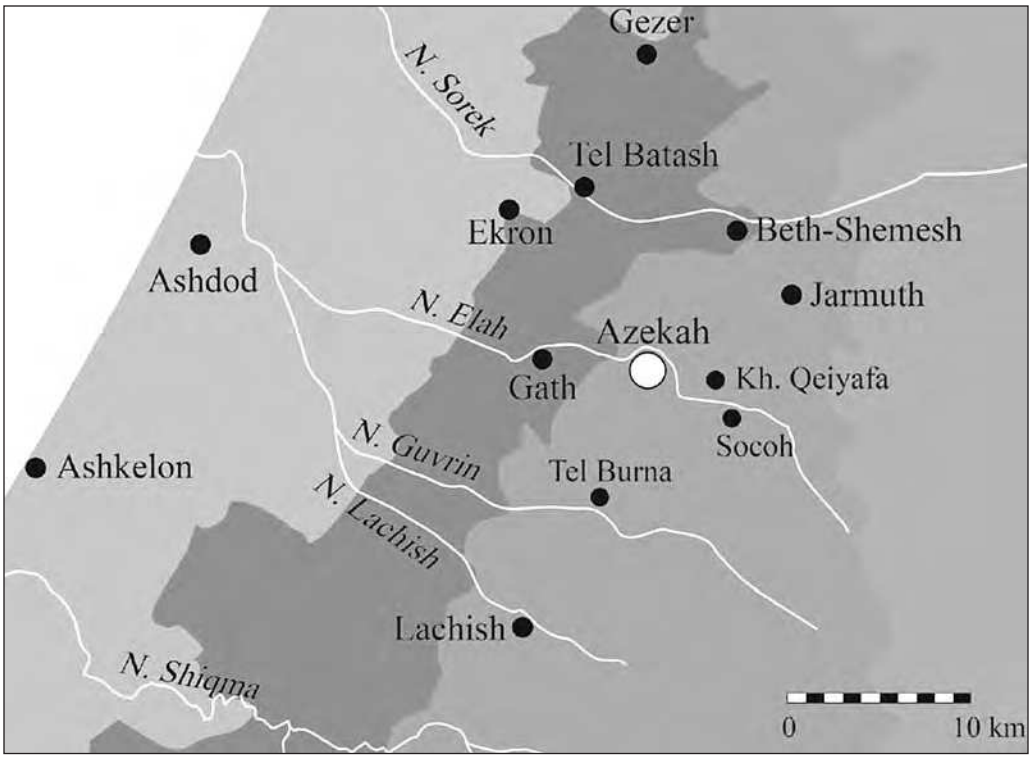

Fig. 1. The location of Tel Azekah.

In the early Iron Age, the site was again home to a relatively small occupation, but it grew significantly in the Iron Age II, when there was a second settlement peak—and this is much more understandable in light of the biblical and extra-biblical sources. Based on historical reconstruction, we may hypothesize that Judahite settlement at the site began only after the destruction of nearby Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (biblical Gath) in the second half of the 9th century BCE. Azekah developed as a central Judean border city in the late 9th and into the 8th century BCE (similar to Lachish Levels IV–III) and was destroyed in the Assyrian campaign of 701 BCE. It was probably restored in the late 7th century as a fort on the renewed Judean border in the Shephelah (similar to Lachish Level II) and was destroyed again in the Babylonian campaign of 588–586 BCE. It continued to exist as a border town in the Persian period; in the Hellenistic period, it was a large fortress. However, it is not clear if and to what extent the occupation at that time extended beyond this central structure (Emmanuilov 2012: 68, fig. 31). In the Roman period, the settlement continued below the tell itself, and no other buildings were erected on the summit of the tell until the present. It was used as agricultural land and was constantly cultivated, and the marks of the plow can be seen on the upper part of the stones that were excavated just a few centimeters below the topsoil. In the 1970s, the Israel

Defense Forces used the summit of the hill for training; their presence is marked by signs for trenches that were used as field toilets, as well as other earth-works, such as the fill of a large pit on the top of the mound, which may have served as the central water system of the site.

Based on this information, one can understand why Keel and Küchler (1982: 826–27) understood Azekah as a place with only some traces of settlement in the Early and the Middle Bronze Ages, but it is hard to understand why they reconstructed what amounted to not much more than a guard-post from the Late Bronze Age. During the Iron Age, they reconstructed a fortified city connected to the administration and army of the Kings of Judah.

The Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition: Plans and Actual Field Work (2012–2015)

When they finished excavating, Bliss and Macalister refilled their trenches, leaving no architectural remains visible above the surface of the tell. And since documentation of their excavation trenches is poor, we have no basic knowledge regarding the order of the layers at the site, of the city plan, and/or the extent of settlement in each of the periods. Thus, there were basic questions about the site's history that had to be dealt with prior to more sophisticated archaeological research. As a result, we chose to plot the first excavation areas so they would deal with these very basic concerns. Three 10-m-wide sections were excavated along the southern (Area S1), eastern (Area E1), and western (Area W1) slopes. Area W2 was added in 2013, 50 m south of Area W1, in order to gain more information on the stratigraphy and fortifications of the western slopes, and Area W3 was opened in 2014 around Bliss and Macalister's Tower 3 , in order to connect it to the Middle Bronze fortifications. Area E3, located on the southeastern corner of the tell, was added in 2015. The excavations were organized to create a section toward the east, searching for the fortifications of the site and possibly also a siege ramp that was used by Sennacherib in his assault on the city. Area S2 had already been opened in 2012, on the southern lower terrace of the site, in order to study the history of the settlement in this sector, and Areas T1 and T2 were excavated at the top of the mound. These areas were designed to be wide sectors, exposing each layer extensively. Area N was opened at the northern corner of the site, very close to the pit that was excavated by Bliss and Macalister. The excavations in this area were intended to expose the flat, wide area at this strategic location of the site, which had a view of and controlled the main junction of roads below the site, as well as to expose the northeastern corner of the site's fortifications from the various periods. Many other small trial pits were excavated as part of the training of the M.A. students in our summer educational courses, especially along the line of the presumed fortifications on the eastern and southern slopes of the site.

Four seasons of excavations have been conducted at the site thus far (2012–2015; the results of the fifth season, conducted in the summer of 2016 are not

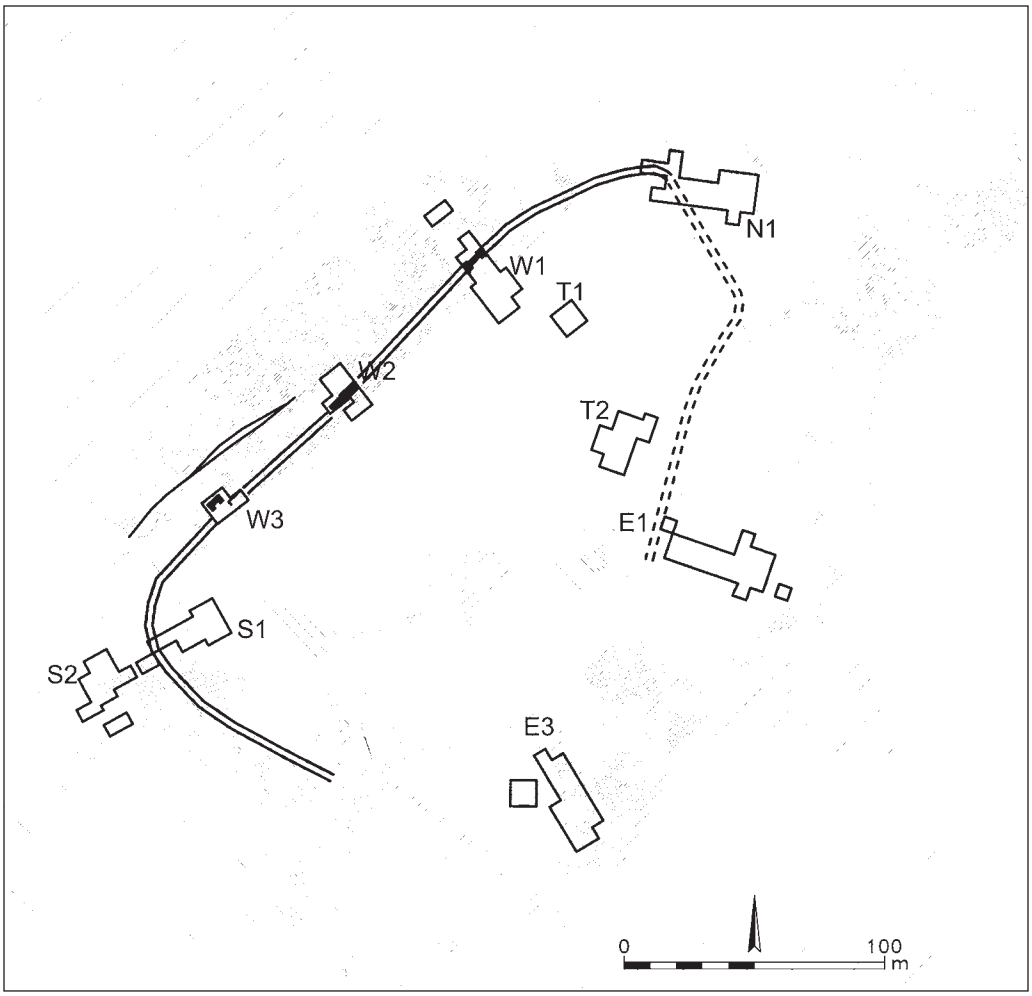

Fig. 2. Tel Azekah: Excavated Areas

included in this paper). Other unexpected results surprised us during these seasons, along with the more expected results, as indicated in the preliminary study of the site.

The Expected Archaeological Results

The Early Bronze Period

The surveys conducted by Dagan and by our expedition predicted that the site was first settled during the Early Bronze Age. It is therefore no surprise that finds dating to the Early Bronze Age were found all along the western and southern slopes of the tell in Areas W1, W2, W3, S1, and N. Except for Area S1, the finds were always from earth fills sealed by the Middle Bronze fortifications. Analysis of

the pottery's typology helped us to determine that the site was settled during the EB IIIA–B periods, parallel to Tel-Yarmuth Phase B-III/II and C-IV/II and Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath Phases E5 and E6 (de Miroschedji 2006; Greenfield, Shai, and Maeir 2016). Some of the finds may hint at earlier settlement, dating to the EB II, parallel to Phase C-V at Tel Yarmuth.

The finds from Area S1 are exceptional. In this area, we exposed a well-made crushed lime floor. Under it, we found two articulated skeletons of donkeys that had been slaughtered and intentionally buried (Sapir-Hen, Gadot, and Lipschits forthcoming). The donkeys had died while young, and their corpses had been buried whole. The sacrifice of donkeys is a well-recorded Early Bronze Age phenomenon (see Arnold et al. 2016 for earlier references), but in most cases the animals were adults. The Azekah sacrificial burial is exceptional: it consists of two apparently special donkeys (as in all other cases): the two are quite young specimens, sacrificed well before they could have served for transport. Future expansion of the excavated section may help to better understand their context.

No Early Bronze finds were found in Area E1, which is on the eastern slope of the tell. This was already noted in the survey (Emmanuilov 2012: fig. 26). Our explanation is that the eastern slope is an expansion of the site that began in the Late Bronze Age, when Azekah expanded beyond the Middle Bronze fortifications (see below), continued in the Iron Age, when a city wall was built at the edge of the site as it existed in this period, about 10 m to the east of the assumed location of the Middle Bronze fortifications (still to be confirmed in the field), and especially in the Hellenistic period, when the eastern side of the tell was reshaped (see below).

All of this (still quite theoretical) reconstruction indicates that the site did not expand much to the east during the Early Bronze Age, and the top of the natural hill was much smaller than in the post-Middle Bronze period. Determining the nature of the site and whether it was fortified or not during this period awaits further excavation.

The Late Bronze Period

Following our preliminary survey and its results, and based on the reanalysis of Bliss and Macalister's excavations, we realized that during the Late Bronze Age the site had reached its peak. Therefore, the fact that occupational remains dating to this period had already been found in eight of the ten excavated areas did not come as a surprise. Though we already had some evidence of the existence of the site during the LB I and LB IIA, the excavations at Tel Azekah have yet to expose occupational layers from these periods. Two exceptional finds that attest to human settlement at the site should be mentioned in this respect. The first is a sherd of a White Slip II Type 2 Cypriot krater found in a fill in Area W1. This is a very rare find in the southern Levant, securely dated to Late Cypriot IIB, which corresponds to the Levantine LB IIA (Yasur-Landau et al. 2014). The second is an Egyptian bifacial plaque found out of context in Area S2, exhibiting iconographic motifs dated to the mid-18th Dynasty (Koch et al. forthcoming). These two discoveries, though found

out of context, may be interpreted as evidence for social stratification at Tel Azekah during the LB II.

The main data from the Late Bronze Age derives from Area T2, located on the top of the mound, and Area S2, located on the lower terrace that surrounds the western and southern slopes of the mound, possibly an extramural quarter of the town. In Area S2, the chief finds dating to the LB IIB include remains of buildings that were constructed inside an abandoned rock-cut ditch dating to the Middle Bronze Age. The earliest occupational levels (S2-8, S2-7) consist of walls and floors. The limited exposure of these occupational levels does not allow reconstructing any clear plan, and thus the nature, function, and exact date of the buildings remain unknown. In the absence of pre-LB II pottery, the only conclusion that can be reached is that the buildings do not pre-date the 14th century BCE.

The next occupational level, dated to the LB IIB, is characterized by the erection of a large building in the rock-cut ditch (S2–6). The building consists of two longitudinal rooms separated by a massive wall made of unworked boulders. This building was enlarged during the next occupational level (S2–5), by establishing a row of pillars on the western end of the western room. The pillars were laid on the edge of an artificial "step" in the rock-cut bedrock, thus creating a third longitudinal room to their west. Even though the exact nature and function of these buildings (the "boulder building" of Phase S2-6 and the "pillar building" of Phase S2-5) could not be determined, the use of large boulders together with the extent of the buildings imply that they were not merely of a domestic nature. Mud-brick debris and a few *in situ* broken vessels found on the floors of the latter "pillars" building indicate that it was destroyed sometime during the LB IIB. Other finds that can be associated with this phase include a scarab of Ramses II found out of context in Area N1 and other items that can be dated to the 19th Dynasty (Koch et al. forthcoming).

During Phase S2-4, the entire formation of the building changed: the rock-cut ditch was filled with earth and stones, burying the former buildings under it and creating a leveled space in which an open-air paved plaza was built. The plaza included a cistern and a stone-built silo. A new building, which probably functioned as a warehouse, was erected next to it. Both the public plaza and the adjacent building were found under thick destruction debris dated to the LB III, probably during the second half of the 12th century BCE.[6] This destruction should be equated with a destruction layer also encountered in Areas T1, W2, and E3, located on the upper mound (below). Following the destruction of the public plaza, the extramural quarter was abandoned and its habitation resumed only in the Iron IIB.

The most dramatic exposure of the end of the Late Bronze destruction was in Area T2, where we unearthed a destroyed architectural compound (Building T2/F627). The structure includes two main parts: a northern room and an area that was

6. While some scholars prefer to use the term Iron IA when referring to the second half of the 12th century BCE (e.g., Mazar 1990), we prefer to use the term LB III, because it reflects the continuation of Canaanite culture and of the Egyptian governing system.

Fig. 3. A skeleton from the destruction of Building T2/F627 from the end of the 12th century BCE.

partitioned into three sub-spaces to the south, with evidence of several sub-phases of floor-raising. The ground plan, as far as can be inferred from its fragmentary nature, generally recalls the design of the pillared buildings or "patrician houses" that were popular during the Late Bronze Age (e.g., Mazar 1997: 157–69).[7] An analysis of the formation process shows that the northern room was roofed and that the upper area of the house was used for storage (Metzer 2015: 127–28; Metzer, Gadot, and Lipschits forthcoming). On the ground floor, in the middle of the room, an elaborate grinding installation with an adjacent collecting vat was built. This specialized architecture points to the exceptional function of the room, which is further emphasized by the pottery objects and other finds from this area.

The destruction of Building T2/F627 was severe and complete. To date, four skeletons have been unearthed beneath the destruction. More than 100 complete vessels were unearthed in the destroyed building. The assemblage includes almost the entire range of pottery that can be found in southern Canaan during the LB IIB and III (Metzer, Gadot, and Lipschits forthcoming). A few vessel types make it possible, however, to narrow down the timeframe to the LB III, parallel to Lachish VI and close to the end of the 12th century BCE. It is important to note that missing

7. To the north of the building at Area T2, evidence of another structure belonging to this phase was exposed; the relation to Building T2/F627 needs further investigation.

from the assemblage are Egyptian or Egyptianized ceramic items and Mycenaean IIIC 1b pottery.

Five scarabs, eight amulets, a bulla, and a conoid seal were found in this complex (Koch et al. forthcoming). Three of the scarabs and three of the amulets were found together in the same context, close to the remains of a single skeleton (T2/L220). Another concentration of finds includes one scarab and four amulets, found in the northeastern section of Area T2, close to the remains of another skeleton (T2/407). An additional scarab was found in the courtyard, located in the center of the complex, and an additional amulet was found in a room located in the southeast. A concentration of items such as these by the sides of the two skeletons most probably indicates that they were used by these individuals and thus raises questions regarding the reception and adaptation of Egyptian amulets by the local population (Koch et al. forthcoming).

Another part of the destroyed city was exposed in Area E3, where the southeastern corner of the Acropolis was exposed. The architectural context of this destruction is presently unclear. The only wall that was part of the structure was destroyed; it was made of very large worked stones and seems to have been of a public nature. The collapse includes stones, burned mud brick, smashed pottery vessels, and charred wooden beams. In between the stones of the collapse, a standing stone was identified. We believe that the destroyed structure, along with other finds unearthed in the topsoil, was part of the city's acropolis and served cultic purposes.

The Gap in the Iron I

Following the 12th century BCE destruction, Tel Azekah remained abandoned for more than two centuries (the Iron I). The chronological gap was already noticed in the survey, when the absence of Philistine Bichrome style pottery (Philistine 2) was observed. After four excavation seasons, no such pottery, not even residual sherd material, has been uncovered. Azekah seems to suffer a fate similar to that of Lachish (Ussishkin 2004: 62–64, 70–71), unlike that of Beth-Shemesh (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2009: 120–21; Lederman and Bunimovitz 2014: 65) and Gezer (Dever et al. 1970: 23–24; Dever et al. 1974: 50–55; Dever 1986: 60–87; Ortiz and Wolf 2012: 12), both of which were destroyed at the end of the Late Bronze Age but were then resettled during Iron I.

Evidence for Iron Age IIA

Resettlement of Azekah began in Iron IIA. The survey results did not suggest the existence of a large settlement during this period. Materials were found only in Areas T1 and T2, on the top of the tell, and their nature is still unclear. In Area T1, the finds were exposed just below a modern trench that cleared all later elements. The finds include a destruction layer with burned material, construction stones, slingshots, and intact vessels dating to Iron IIA. In Area T2, the finds include a domestic building, possibly of the four-room type, and a garbage pit nearby, filled

with a large amount of restorable pottery. A lamp and bowl deposit was found under the building's floor, reflecting a well-known Canaanite habit that may suggest that, although the site was not settled for a long time, it was still occupied by descendants of the local population. Further investigation of this phase is needed before we can conclude that these finds are from the early or late Iron IIA; but in any case, these finds date prior to the destruction of Gath.

The Iron IIB and C

Fragmented remains dating to the Iron IIB were found in most of our excavation areas. The spread of the finds fits the survey results, which collected Iron Age pottery from all of the survey's fields. On the other hand, we expected to find the Iron IIB city in complete ruins, as was the case at Lachish and other sites in the Shephelah. But a clear destruction layer was found at this stage in two areas only. Because these remains were damaged by building activities dating to the Persian and Early Hellenistic periods, it is difficult to interpret their nature. Domestic architecture was found in Areas T1, T2, W1, and S1. The structure that was built during the Iron IIA in Area T2 was rebuilt along slightly different lines. In Area T1, we uncovered a small structure built of mud-brick walls, with a destruction layer on its floor. The best-preserved remains were found in Area S1, where parts of a building were unearthed. One of the building's rooms was used for weaving, and a perfectly preserved loom structure was found, burned and fallen in place. The loom's burned wooden beams were found beautifully articulated, together with 34 clay loom-weights, arranged in 2–3 rows; both of these discoveries marked the alignment of the loom. Pottery vessels found smashed on the floor, including among other vessels a torpedo jar and a *lmlk* jar, help date the destruction to the end of the 8th century BCE.

Remains of more public architecture were found in Areas S2 and E3. In Area S2, the lower city, habitation was renewed after a long break and included an open public space. The exact nature of this area will only be understood after further excavation.

Area E3, in the southeastern corner of the site, may possibly be the location of the Assyrian siege ramp, described in the "Azekah Inscription" (above, p. 2). Aerial photographs and measurements enabled us to compare the Azekah ramp to the one at neighboring Lachish, which was constructed with the same topographic and military logic in the same location, in Lachish's southeastern corner. With support from the German–Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development (GIF, Grant number 1238), we began a three-year project in 2015. Two massive walls were exposed at the base of the slope (they were thus not likely part of the city's fortifications). The first was ca. 3 m wide and oriented north–south; we traced it for 15 m. The second wall is ca 2 m wide and had been built perpendicular to the slope. Its northwestern face abuts the first wall. Due to their similar size and alignment, we suggest that these two walls are part of the same system or a large

Fig. 4. A building from the Iron IIB and C in Area S1.

structure that might be connected to the site's lower fortifications or to activities carried on by a besieging army. Only continued excavation at the site will enable us to learn more about the architecture of this area and to understand the function of the walls and the period during which they were built.

The importance of Azekah before the 701 BCE Assyrian campaign, and probably the settlement gap at the site in the first half of the 7th century BCE, can be confirmed by the discovery of the *lmlk* stamp impressions found there; all of the recognizable stamped handles are early types, and none are late types (Lipschits, Sergi, and Koch 2011: 30 and p. 33 n. 19).[8]

Iron IIC finds at Azekah are very rare and are usually found in later mixed fills. We did not expose any structures that can be dated to this period, and the only place that we have a clear pottery assemblage is from the water cistern in Area S2.

8. Bliss (1899a, 1899b, 1900a) reported finding 17 *lmlk* stamp impressions at Azekah. Only 11 of these were drawn (Bliss 1899a: 104, pl. V:1–9; 1900a: 13). Eight have four-winged emblems (and thus belong to the early types). Three additional stamps bear two-winged emblems, and at least one has an undivided place-name and thus belongs to the early type as well (Bliss 1899b: pl. V:9). In their final report, Bliss and Macalister (1902: 107) counted a total of 13 *lmlk* stamp impressions bearing four-winged emblems. We therefore conclude that out of the 17 *lmlk* stamp impressions found at Azekah, at least 14 should be considered as early types and the rest as unidentified.

Pottery vessels dating to this period were found in the fill inside the cistern, and they indicate the last time the cistern was in use for storing water. However, even without many Iron IIC finds, it is clear that Azekah was a regional center during that period. To date, ten rosette stamped handles have been found at the site, and though this cannot be considered a massive number of handles, it is still the second most numerous quantity found at sites in the Judean Shephelah.[9]

The current understanding of the site at the end of the Iron Age is that, just like Lachish, the size of settlement was very small, probably restricted to the fortress, with an access to the cistern in the lower area.

Unexpected Archaeological Results

The Middle Bronze Age

One of the major discoveries at Azekah is the unearthing of the city's Middle Bronze Age western fortifications. Although the topography of the tell's western slope indicates that there is a fortification wall buried below the surface (see already Dagan 2000: 200), the actual date and nature of the fortifications were unknown and the very few finds dating to the Middle Bronze Age in the initial survey did not suggest that the site was large enough to be fortified. The city wall had already been exposed in our first season of excavations in Area W1. We then continued to trace the wall farther to the south (Areas W2 and W3) and farther to the north (Area N1). At this stage, it is unclear how the wall continues southward and northward. In both cases, our assumption is that the current southern and eastern slopes of the tell do not represent its Middle Bronze Age contour and that the site was probably smaller at that time. The survey already indicated that the Middle Bronze site, like the earlier Early Bronze settlement, did not extend all the way to the eastern slope. This is now supported: we did not discover any eastern fortification line in Area E1 that can be understood as completing the eastern fortifications. If the wall is not completely eroded, then it must be located farther west than the top of E3, in an unexcavated part of the upper surface of the tell in what we surmise is very close to the eastern squares of Area T2.

The size and complexity of the fortifications makes their exposure very difficult and demanding. In Area W2, for example, we exposed two parallel wall lines but it is unclear if the walls are contemporary (and, furthermore, whether one of the walls is a structural element) or that they date to two different periods. Clearly,

9. A further indication of Azekah's importance is the exceptional find of four unique stamped handles: sub-types IA5 (Bliss/Macalister 1902: pl. 56, no. 43z), IC7 (no. 35z), IC11 (no. 37z), and IIIB10 (no. 39z), according to the typology of Koch and Lipschits (2013). All the Shephelah sites yielded 51 rosette stamped handles, which is about 21.5% of the corpus. Of these, 24 were retrieved at Lachish (10.5% of the corpus). For the finds at Azekah, see Bliss and Macalister 1902: pl. 56: 35z–44z. A tenth rosette stamped handle was found at Azekah during a survey that was conducted by S. Emmanuilov in June 2009; see Koch and Lipschits 2013: 59.

Fig. 5. Middle Bronze mud-brick fortification wall in Area N.

many more years of excavation and research are needed to reach firm conclusions in regard to this specific question and in regard to the composition, technique, and date of the fortifications in general. It seems, however, that at this stage some conclusions can be carefully proposed.

To date, 10 meters of the wall in Area N1, 8.5 meters in Area W1, 13 meters in Area W2, and 6.5 meters in Area W3 have been exposed. As is demonstrated by the long section of the wall exposed in Area W2 the wall was not built in a straight line and includes insets and offsets. The wall reaches a width of 3 m and is built of a stone foundation and a mud-brick superstructure. Its outer face is made of well-worked stones, while the inner fill is made of field-stones. Approaching the base of the wall from the west is a glacis. It consists of a compacted layer of crushed lime rock sealing a thick layer of chalk stones from above. Further below the earth fill, pottery sherds dating to the EB III were found.

Rectangular mud bricks were placed on top of the stone foundation. These were exposed in all areas. The best preserved mud bricks were found in Area N1, where they are in a standard size of $0.4 \times 0.4 \times 0.12$ m, set in regular courses. On the outer surface of the mud-brick wall, a line of whitish material was visible; it was probably a coating to prevent damage to the edges from rain water. A sample of this material

was sent for examination, and the results suggest that it is made of high-quality lime, similar to the substance that was found in the Middle Bronze Age mud-brick gate at Ashkelon.[10]

A basic and preliminary calculation of the number of mud bricks used to build the city-wall shows that one running meter of the wall (3 m wide and with the assumption of 3 m height) required 900 bricks. The minimal length of the wall was about 700 m. This means that 630,000 bricks were needed for the wall alone (without the towers and a gate). Every mud brick weighs about 5 kg; thus, 3,150 metric tons of mud had to be brought to the site, probably from the Elah Valley below and to the east of the site. Add to this the enormous number of mud bricks that were needed for houses and structures on the site and there is a ready explanation for the raising of the level of the site by more than 2 m between the Middle Bronze Age and Iron IIB.

To the south, the city wall bonds with "Tower 3," excavated in the past by Bliss and Macalister and erroneously dated to the Roman period (see above). The tower is made of three massive walls built of large worked stones and set deep into the slope and earlier layers. Eight courses of the wall have been exposed thus far. The tower might have served as a buttress, projecting westward from the line of the wall and protecting an ascent leading up toward a presumed gate. It is still unclear how the wall continued south of Tower 3 and how it is connected, if at all, with Towers 1 and 2.

The dating of the city wall is still undetermined. The best method for dating a city wall would be to expose its inner side and its relation to architectural units built in relation to the wall or units being cut by it. Currently, we have managed to expose the inner face of the wall only in one area (W1) and, unfortunately, no architecture was found approaching the wall from the inside. In Areas N1, W2, and W3, the inner faces have not yet been exposed. We do, however, have supportive evidence from Area W2 that the fortifications date to the Middle Bronze Age. The first indication is a jar burial of an infant, found cutting into the mud bricks of the city wall. A cylindrical juglet that served as a burial gift was placed in the jar next to the infant and dates to the end of the Middle Bronze or the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. This proves that the wall was already standing at the time of the burial. More supportive evidence was found in a section that we cut into the glacis, where we found pottery that is mostly dated to the Early Bronze Age but some of which also dates to the Middle Bronze Age. Based on these finds, the building of the city wall should be dated to the MB IIa or IIb. It is possible that it was built along the lines of an earlier wall (from the EB III), but this remains to be determined.

10. We wish to thank Mrs. Aliza van Zweden of the Israel Antiquities Authority for examining the mud bricks and sharing her knowledge with us.

The Late Persian / Early Hellenistic Period

Only 1.7% of the sherds collected during the preliminary survey date to the Persian–Hellenistic period, and so our expectations were that the tell was only sporadically inhabited during this era. Thus, we were quite astonished to find that in most areas the first upper layer is dated to the Persian–Hellenistic period. Our excavations exposed a relatively large village or town dating to the 4th–3rd centuries BCE. Remains of this settlement were found in Areas N1, W1, W2, and S1.

Three identifiable buildings have been exposed thus far: one in Area W1, one in Area N1, and one farther to the south in Area S1. These buildings each seem to consist of a central wide courtyard that was surrounded by built wings. The courtyard of the house in Area W1 includes at least five stone-lined silos, and we therefore named the structure "Granary Building." The courtyard of the building in Area N1 includes an oven and a kiln. The nature of the building exposed in Area S1 is less clear, because we have only found its southeastern corner. The three buildings are located along the perimeter of the tell. Farther east and into the central areas of the tell we found only open grounds and garbage pits; it seems that it was an open space during the late Persian–early Hellenistic Periods.

More finds from the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods were found in Area S2, in the lower terrace of the site. The water reservoir that was already in use in the Late Bronze period and continued in use in the Iron IIB was reused in the late Persian–early Hellenistic periods (Stage S1–2) as a burial area: remains of at least 16 people, some of them children and infants, were laid there, together with burial offerings. The use of this area as a burial place implies that the site at this period was concentrated only in the upper tell and that the lower terrace was outside the town limits.

Chronologically, the buildings in Areas W1 and S1 were built into earlier Iron Age architecture, destroying the remains of what preceded them. This was probably also the case in Area N1. Since most of the Persian-period pottery that was found at Azekah was dated to the Late Persian period (Shatil forthcoming), it appears that there was a settlement gap at the site in the 6th century BCE and that the site was small and limited in size and population during the Early Persian period. The buildings were finally abandoned during the 3rd century BCE (Shatil forthcoming). The inhabitants left behind mostly large storage jars that they could not carry, similar to the abandonment process that took place at nearby Kh. Qeiyafa during this same period (Sandhaus and Kreimerman 2015: 254, 263–66).

Late Hellenistic / Late Roman Periods

Following the abandonment of the upper tell during the 3rd century BCE, and possibly after a short gap, settlement at the site was renewed but this time only on its eastern slopes. Finds from Area E3 show that the slopes were used for the construction of a domestic quarter that existed from the 2nd century BCE and until the

Bar Kokhba Revolt in the second century CE. The upper tell was mostly abandoned, except for the fortress that crowned the highest point on the tell.

The Expected and the Unexpected Archaeological Results: Some Final Thoughts

Based on the excavations at Azekah thus far, we can summarize some general conclusions regarding expected and unexpected results in the light of large-scale excavations at major sites. First, we can demonstrate that there are actual archaeological materials from periods that, based on clear historical data, we expected to find. This is especially true for the Iron II. It might be that, based on the historical sources (as in the case of the Iron IIB), the expectation of finding a large city will not materialize and that the archaeological results will confirm that only a small site (or possibly only a citadel) existed in this period; but in this case, it is probably a question of reconsidering the historical sources, interpreting them, and building the right expectations based on a revised interpretation. The absence of historical sources, however, means nothing, and the finds from the Middle Bronze and Late Bronze Ages, as well as from the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic periods, are good examples. As we learned from our experience at Ramat Rahel, even in periods that are very well documented, the absence of information about a site should not be used to prove anything about the site.

Furthermore, we can demonstrate that there are actual archaeological discoveries from periods that we expected to find based on archaeological surveys and the careful study of previous old excavations, especially from periods for which we have very strong and clear indications, like the Early Bronze, the Late Bronze, and Iron IIB. Even the size of the settlements from these periods could be deduced, based on the location of the finds in the survey's fields. However, the absence of finds in surveys means nothing, and the evidence from the Middle Bronze Age and from the Late Persian–Early Hellenistic periods provide good examples of this fact.

The combination of historical research, finds from surveys, and analyses of old excavations helps to close some of the gaps in our knowledge regarding expected and unexpected finds. But we are especially cognizant that, in the case of Azekah, the absence of evidence of all sorts (limited historical sources, building techniques, nature of fortifications, etc.) means nothing, especially when it comes to the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Persian–Early Hellenistic periods. It seems that these two periods, each with its unique nature, deserves special attention and greater theoretical exploration and inquiry in order to understand the reasons for the gap that exists between archaeological surveys and historical documents on the one hand and the results of excavations on the other. To do this, however, is already beyond the scope of this summary.

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