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Neo-Assyrian Administration in the Southern Levant: The View
from the Aphek-Gezer Region



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Administrative Texts, Royal Inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian Administration in the Southern Levant: The View from the Aphek-Gezer Region

Shawn-Zelig ASTER – Avraham FAUST

The Assyrian empire ruled over the Southern Levant for about a century and had a profound impact on the region's settlement, economy, demography, and even culture and religion. Despite this, however, there are very limited remains that clearly attest Assyrian administration in the region. While various structures were attributed by different scholars to Assyrian administration¹, real evidence for this administration is scarce. Thus, unequivocal evidence for Assyrian administrative activity in the form of administrative documents or royal inscriptions has so far been unearthed only in a few sites, including Ashdod, Samaria, Qaqun, Tel Keisan, Kh. Kusiya, Ben-Shemen, Gezer and Tel Hadid.

With the exception of Samaria, the capital of one of the provinces, almost all the other direct evidence for Assyrian administration is located on the fringe of these provinces or even outside them. Moreover, of the 11 texts found south of the modern Israel-Lebanon border, 10 (over 90%) are located in a small zone such that the two furthest find-spots (Kh. Kusiya and Ashdod) within this group are located only some 75 km apart. As striking as this concentration is,

¹For a comprehensive list, see Ariel M. Bagg, "Palestine under Assyrian Rule: A New Look at the Assyrian Imperial Policy in the West", *JAOS* 133 (2014) 119-144; cf. also Ronnie Reich, "Palaces and Residences in the Iron Age", in: R. Reich – A. Kempinski (eds.), *The Architecture of Ancient Israel: From the Prehistoric to the Persian Periods* (Jerusalem 1992) 202-222. For Hazor, see Ronnie Reich, "The Persian Building at Ayyelet ha-Shahar: The Assyrian Palace of Hazor?", *IEJ* 25 (1975) 233-37; Oded Lipschits, "The Date of the 'Assyrian Residence' at Ayyelet ha-Shahar", *Tel Aviv* 17 (1990) 96-99; Raz Kletter – Wolfgang Zwickel, "The Assyrian Building of Ayyelet ha-Shahar", *ZDPV* 122 (2006) 151-186. For Ramat Rahel, see Ronnie Reich, "On the Assyrian Presence at Ramat Rahel", *Tel Aviv* 30 (2003) 124-129; Elena Cogan-Zahavi, "An Assyrian Building North of Tel Ashdod", *Qadmoniot* 138 (2005) 87-90 (Hebrew). For Tel Qudadi, see Alexander Fantalkin – Oren Tal, "Rediscovering the Iron Age Fortress at Tell Qudadi in the Context of Neo-Assyrian Imperialist Policies", *PEQ* 141 (2009) 188-206. For Gezer, see Ronnie Reich – Baruch Brandl, "Gezer under Assyrian Rule", *PEQ* 117 (1985) 41-54. For Tel Jemmeh, see David Ben-Shlomo – Gus Van Beek, *Smithsonian Institution Excavation at Tell Jemmeh, Israel 1960-1990* (Washington, DC 2014); David Ben-Shlomo, "Tell Jemmeh, Philistia, and the Assyrian Empire During the Iron Age", *Levant* 46 (2014) 58-88.

even more significant is the fact that about half of the finds are located within a much smaller area of some 12 km in the middle of this zone. Thus, about 50% of all the finds, and 60% of the administrative texts, were unearthed in this small area in the southwestern part of the province of Samaria, in the Tel Hadid–Gezer area (Figure 1). The concentration of the existing evidence in a small area on the southwestern periphery of these provinces is surprising, given the almost complete lack of evidence for Assyrian administrative activities in the central part of the provinces. The aims of the present paper are therefore to draw attention to this phenomenon, to articulate it, and to explain the significance of this small region for the Assyrian empire. Finally, we would like to discuss the implications of this peculiar pattern for our understanding of the Assyrian economic exploitation of the region at large.

1. Background

The era of Assyrian rule of the region started at around 734 BCE, with the conquests of Tiglath Pileser III, and lasted until sometime in the second half of the reign of Ashurbanipal (who reigned 669-627), when the empire was weakened and lost its grip on the region². During this century Assyria ruled the Land of Israel directly (with provinces in Megiddo, Samaria and possibly in Dor) and indirectly (where vassal states included Judah, Ekron, Ashkelon, and Ashdod), and had a profound impact on the settlement system, on the economy and demography, and even on religious thought in the region³. Despite this, however, direct evidence for Assyrian provincial and imperial rule is very limited.

²The beginning of the decline of Assyrian dominion in the Land of Israel is subject to debate, the majority of scholars supporting the position noted above: see, for example, Israel Eph'al, "Assyrian Dominion in Palestine", in: A. Malamat (ed.), *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History in World History of the Jewish People* (5 vols.; Jerusalem 1979), IV/1: 276-289, here 281-282. Others argue that the decline began at the very end of Ashurbanipal's reign or even later: see, for example, Abraham Malamat, "Josiah's Bid for Armageddon", *JANES* 5 (1973) 270-271; Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah", *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991) 3-71, here 38.

³Several examples of this discussion follow. Regarding religion, see Baruch A. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism", *Iraq* 67 (2005) 411-27 and Shawn Z. Aster, "The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5-22: The Campaign Motif Reversed", *JAOS* 127 (2007) 249-278. Regarding the economy, see Seymour Gitin, "Tel Mique-Ekron in the 7th Century B.C.E.: The Impact of Economic Innovation and Foreign Cultural Influences on a Neo-Assyrian Vassal City-State", in: S. Gitin (ed.), *Recent Excavations in Israel: A View to the West* (Dubuque: Archaeological Institute of America, 1995) 61-79; Seymour Gitin, "The Neo-Assyrian Empire and its Western Periphery: The Levant, with a Focus on Philistine Ekron", in: S. Parpola – R. M. Whiting (ed.), *Assyria 1995, Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project* (Helsinki 1997) 77-103 (but see below for articles that present a different perspective).

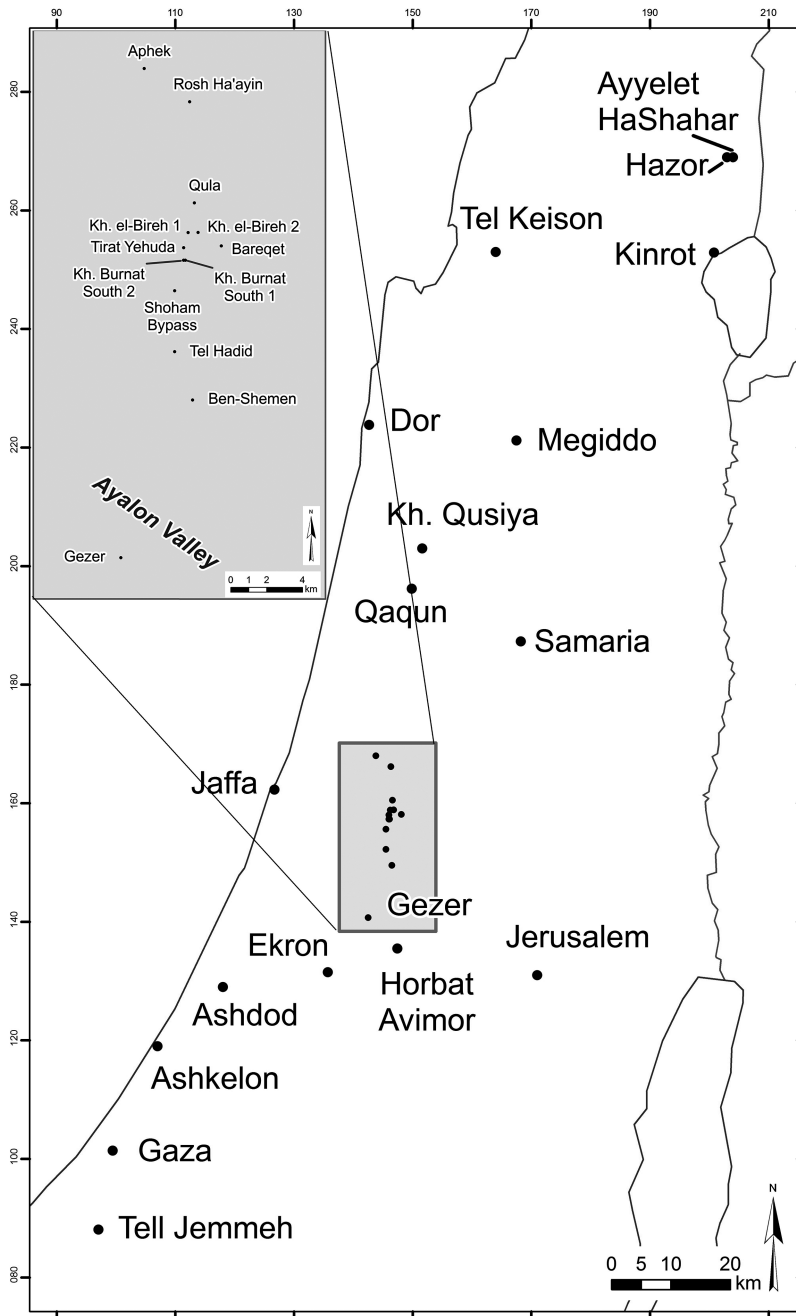


Fig. 1

Fragments of Assyrian royal inscriptions have so far been unearthed only at Ashdod, Samaria, Qaqun and Beth-Shemen⁴. Seven administrative texts were unearthed, of which six are detailed documents, and one is a list. Five of these are complete, or nearly so: one from Samaria, two from Tel Hadid and another two from Gezer⁵. These administrative texts record transactions and preserve administrative discussions. A fragmentary administrative text was discovered at Kh. Kusiya, near Qaqun, and an additional fragmentary administrative text from Tel Keisan has the character of a list⁶. These texts have been studied from a textual and historical point of view, so as to extract the information they contain and integrate this with other sources of knowledge of Assyrian administrative practice. While it is difficult to assess or evaluate the number of inscriptions, their geographical distribution presents a very interesting pattern⁷.

⁴In Ashdod, three fragments were discovered from at least two separate originals: see Hayim Tadmor, "Fragments of an Assyrian Stele of Sargon II", in: M. Dothan (ed.), *Ashdod II–III: The Second and Third Seasons of Excavations* (Jerusalem 1971) 192–197; Wayne Horowitz – Takayoshi Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* (Jerusalem 2006) 40–41. For Samaria, see J. W. Crowfoot – K. M. Kenyon – E. L. Sukenik, *The Objects from Samaria* (London 1957) 35; Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 115. For Qaqun, see *ibid.* 111. Although the Qaqun findings have yet to be published, see M. Cogan, "The Assyrian Stele Fragment from Ben-Shemen", in: D. Kahn – M. Cogan (eds.), *Treasures on Camels' Humps: Historical and Literary Studies from the Ancient Near East Presented to Israel Eph'al* (Jerusalem 2008) 66–69. For Ben Shemen, see *ibid.* Cogan suggests that the fragments from Qaqun and Ben Shemen formed part of the same stele.

⁵In Samaria, three inscribed objects were discovered besides the stele: a) an administrative document, originally published in G. A. Reisner – C. S. Fisher – D. G. Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria I* (Cambridge 1924) pl. 56b and p. 247. This has been discussed by Nadav Na'aman – Ran Zadok, "Two Tablets from Tel Hadid", *Tel Aviv* 27 (2000) 159–188, here 176–177; Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 113–114; b) a cylinder-seal with inscription, originally published in Crowfoot–Kenyon–Sukenik, *The Objects from Samaria*, pl. XV and p. 35; c) a brief and extremely fragmentary inscription on a bulla, originally published in Reisner–Fisher–Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria*, pl. 56a and p. 247, and most recently in Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 112. The Tel Hadid documents consist of two full-length contracts published by Nadav Na'aman – Ron Zadok, "Assyrian Deportations to the Province of Samaria in the Light of Two Cuneiform Tablets from Tel Hadid", *Tel Aviv* 27 (2000) 159–188. The Gezer documents are also two full-length contracts. Originally published early in the twentieth century, the most recent publication is Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 55–59 and the literature cited therein.

⁶The Khirbet Kusiya text was published in Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 100–101, and clearly is a fragment. Although only a few words are legible, these indicate that it was a detailed document rather than a list. The Tel Keisan fragment appears to be a ration list. Although it is unclear whether it belongs to the Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian period, the stratigraphical evidence suggests the former. It was originally published in Marcel Sigrist, "Une tablette cunéiforme de Tell Keisan", *IEJ* 32 (1982) 32–35; see the discussion in Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 98–99. Another text discovered at Tel Jemmeh has also been identified as an administrative document. Written in alphabetic script and consisting of a list of personal names whose precise significance remains unclear – possibly being deportees. As Sargon's well-known decree in SAA 17, 2 attests, official Assyrian documents were customarily written in cuneiform. For the text, see Joseph Naveh, "Writing and Scripts in Seventh-Century BCE Philistia: The New Evidence from Tell Jemmeh", *IEJ* 35 (1985) 11–15; Shmuel Ahituv, *HaKetav VeHamiktav: Handbook of Ancient Inscriptions from the Land of Israel and the Trans-Jordanian Kingdoms from the First Commonwealth Period*, Heb. (Jerusalem 2012) 337–340.

⁷Besides the texts noted above, several inscribed seals and bullae and a *lamaštu* plaque

Thus, the presence of both administrative and royal texts (1 of each genre) at Samaria, which served as the capital of a rebellious Assyrian vassal state (between approximately 739 and 720 BCE) and then as the central city of an Assyrian province, is expected, and the importance of the site is indeed reflected in other Assyrian inscriptions⁸. This is also true of Ashdod, where a royal inscription was found, as Sargon's inscriptions indicate that it was a city-state of importance. Surprisingly, however, five texts are concentrated in the Tel Hadid–Gezer region. The four administrative texts from Gezer and Tel Hadid (out of seven in the entire country), and the fragment of royal inscription found at Ben-shemen were all found within a limited geographical area of some 12 km in length. Quantitatively, these five texts represent almost half of the total find of cuneiform texts from the period of Assyrian rule in the Land of Israel (and 60% of administrative texts). Qaqun, one of the other sites at which a cuneiform inscription from this period was found, lies some 28 km to the north of Aphek (below), and Kh. Kusiya is 7 km further north, both along the international highway (see Figure 1). Thus, with but one fragmentary exception (Tel Keisan), the finds are located in the small Tel Hadid–Gezer area, or within some 30–45 km distance from it, mostly along the international highway.

This overrepresentation of this small geographic area in the distribution of cuneiform texts from the period of Assyrian rule requires explanation. It is difficult to explain the distribution of these texts only as the result of chance. Sites which must have been of far more importance to the Assyrian administrative system, such as Megiddo, have been extensively excavated, and yet no inscriptions from the period of Assyrian rule have emerged⁹. And the same applies to various buildings that were interpreted as Assyrian administrative

were also discovered. These being intended to be mobile, their findspots are less significant than those of other documents. Although listing them here, we have excluded them from our geographic analysis. In addition to the Samarian bulla and seal, another seal was found at Tel "Beer-sheva": see Anson F. Rainey, "The Cuneiform Inscription on a Votive Cylinder from Beer-sheba", in: Y. Aharoni (ed.), *Beersheba I: Excavations at Tel Beer-Sheba, 1969–1971 Seasons* (Tel Aviv 1973) 61–71; Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 44. A *lamaštu* plaque was found in open country south of Tel Burna: see M. Cogan, "A *Lamaštu* Plaque from the Judean Shephelah", *IEJ* 45 (1995) 155–161. An inscribed cylinder seal was discovered on the coast near the Wingate School south of Netanya: see Hayim Tadmor – Miriam Tadmor, "The Seal of Bel Asharedu: A Case of Migration", in: K. van Lerberghe – A. Schoors (eds.), *Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East: Festschrift E. Lipiński* (Leuven 1995) 345–355; Horowitz–Oshima, *Cuneiform in Canaan* 153.

⁸ See C. J. Gadd, "Inscribed Prisms of Sargon II from Nimrud", *Iraq* 16 (1954) 173–201, here 179–180; and below.

⁹ Megiddo appears to have been the only city actually built by the Assyrians: see E. Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods (732–332 B.C.E)* (New York 2001) 48. The city having been excavated extensively, the lack of administrative documents is intriguing.

buildings like Ayyelet HaShahar, Hazor and Kinrot¹⁰. Thus, we should inquire (1) why were over 90% of the inscriptions found within a 75 km zone in the southwestern part of the Assyrian provincial area, and (2) furthermore, why were about 63% (7 out of 11) of the finds located in a limited strip along the western edge of the Samaria mountains, which has no royal cities or known district capitals; finally, and perhaps even most striking (3), why were five of the texts (46%) located within a 12 km area (Tel Hadid-Gezer), in the south-westernmost edge of the empire!

2. The Strategic Importance of the Aphek-Tel Hadid-Gezer Region

The Aphek-Tel Hadid-Gezer region, which incorporates both the south-western tip of Samaria's foothills as well as the rich alluvial soil of the Ayalon valley, is of significance for a number of reasons.

The northern part of the region forms an essential pass for the international highway connecting Egypt with Syria-Mesopotamia (sometimes erroneously called the "way of the sea"). Aphek lies on the springs of the Yarkon, and from there westward the river and adjoining swamps created an impassable obstruction. About 1 km to the east of Aphek, however, are the western slopes of the Samarian hills, forcing all the possible routes to converge in the narrow Aphek pass (between the springs and chalky hills of western Samaria)¹¹. Aphek was therefore situated at one of the most important passes from imperial perspective, as any empire that wanted to cross the region and use it as a springboard into nearby areas had to pass through it. Tel Hadid, located some 16 km to the south, was also near this strategic location, and was itself situated less than 1 km from the western slopes of the Samarian hills and 2 km from Nahal Ayyalon/Wadi Salman¹².

More important, perhaps, is the fact that this area was the edge of the territory that was ruled directly by the Assyrians. This is where the Assyrian provinces ended, and from here southward were the semi-autonomous regions of Judah and Philistia.

As a consequence of these two factors, in the period of Assyrian rule of the Land of Israel, this region performed three important functions.

¹⁰ See, for example, Kletter–Zwickel, *ZDPV* 122 (see n. 1). For additional buildings and references, see n. 1.

¹¹ See, for example, Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible: A Study in Historical Geography* (London 1957).

¹² The wadi still overflows its banks today, creating muddy and impassable conditions in a small area where drainage has not been installed between Ben Gurion airport (2 km NW of Tel Hadid) and the town of Or Yehuda. For its additional significant geographical features, see below.

- 1) It served as an area for the passage of troops and administrators to Philistia, Judah and points south (i.e., Egypt). Assyrian troops were active in Philistia and in Egypt or its border regions repeatedly from 734 until the conclusion of Esarhaddon's ill-fated Egyptian campaigns, and the majority of troops and supporting administrators necessarily passed through this area (below we will see that this geographical feature had additional consequences increasing the importance of the region)¹³.
- 2) This region served (from 734-732 BCE) as the southernmost outpost of Assyrian imperial administration, facing Philistia, Judah, and to some extent Egypt. After the Assyrian conquest of Megiddo (in 733 or 732) and Gezer (almost certainly between 734 and 732) by Tiglath Pileser III, the main route between these sites (of which the area under discussion forms the southern section) remained under Assyrian control¹⁴. For about a decade (732-722), it bordered on the truncated kingdom of Israel, and for a longer time, the vassal kingdoms of Judah, Ekron, and Ashkelon¹⁵, and was close to the vassal kingdom of Ashdod. All of these kingdoms participated in rebellions against Assyrian control, and Ashdod was particularly active in repeatedly fomenting

¹³ Although Esarhaddon was the first Assyrian king to successfully invade Egypt, he was not the first to express interest in doing so. Tiglath-Pileser III, the first Assyrian king to invade Philistia, describes his 734 invasion of that region as a campaign against Egypt. Reaching its borders, he was able to establish Assyrian control over the nomads of northern Sinai. In Summary Inscription 8, line 22', he describes how he subdued the territory of the Meunites (nomads of central Sinai) in the region *ša šapal* ^{KUR}*Muṣri* (lit.: "below the land of Egypt") (Tadmor, "Fragments of an Assyrian Stele of Sargon II" [see n. 4] 178). Eph'al translates this as "south (lit.: below) Egypt", understanding his conquests of northern Sinai as conquests of Egypt: Israel Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent, 9th-5th Centuries B.C.* (Jerusalem 1982) 91. This tallies with Summary Inscription 7, lines 3-4 (Hayim Tadmor, *Inscriptions of Tiglath Pileser III, King of Assyria* [Jerusalem 1994] 158) and Summary Inscription 11, line 4 (ibid. 194), which includes Egypt amongst the Assyrian conquests. Tiglath-Pileser III's use of such designations to create the illusion of a successful campaign against Egypt indicates that the route to Egypt was important to Assyria as early as 734 BCE.

¹⁴ The conquest of Gezer is recorded in a Tiglath-Pileser III relief with an epigraph: see Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem 1994) 210. Although the date of the conquest is unknown, geographic logic suggests that it formed part of the 734 campaign to Philistia or that of 733-732 to Damascus and Israel, the only campaigns Tiglath-Pileser III is known to have conducted in the region. Although Aphek formed part of the province of Samaria during Esarhaddon's reign (see below, note 17), the Aphek pass can be assumed to have lain under direct Assyrian rule between 732 and 720. Although Samaria was still an independent kingdom at this point, Gezer and Megiddo had been conquered by Assyria. The fact that Aphek later was placed under the control of the governor of Samaria has no bearing on the earlier period. All Assyrian communication with Ashdod and Gezer had to pass through this area.

¹⁵ Cities in the Jaffa region were under control of Ashkelon in 701, according to Sennacherib's description of his third campaign (RINAP 3/1, Sennacherib 4, line 41.)

rebellions during the years of Sargon's rule¹⁶. The region between Aphek and Gezer was the last "secure" region under direct Assyrian control on the main route southwards, before troops moving in this direction entered areas under the control of the truculent vassals. This can be demonstrated by Esarhaddon's descriptions of his campaign against Egypt, where he specifically mentions the gathering of troops at "Aphek that is in the district of Samaria"¹⁷. Since Ashkelon was in open rebellion against Esarhaddon, and an ally of Tirhakah, no suitable stopping place for Esarhaddon's army in the region southwest of Aphek could be contemplated (Gezer itself was not on the highway, and was located slightly to its east).

Military logic would require that Assyria exert maximal effort to maintain control of this important area and deter any attempt by vassals to extend their control northwards. Troops would have been concentrated in this area, to be ready for any move southward into one of the Philistine kingdoms or Judah (and for a short period of time also eastward into Israel). The presence of these troops would not only be required by operational considerations, but also by the principle of deterrence: maintaining troops close to the borders of Philistia, Judah, and Israel deterred rebellion in these vassals. Such deterrence would not require the presence in this region of all the troops needed to suppress a rebellion: staffed supply bases¹⁸ and the capacity to fairly rapidly move large numbers of troops into this region could deter rebellion, and avoid the need for costly campaigns.

- 3) Tribute from Philistia, Judah and Egypt would necessarily have flowed through this area. As is well known, vassal states were required to send tribute-bearing emissaries to appear before the king in the Assyrian capital every year¹⁹. The tribute was not delivered individually by each vassal. Rather, emissaries from proximate vassal states made the journey together and reached the Assyrian capital as a group. This is clear, for example, from SAA 1, 110, which dates to

¹⁶ Andreas Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen 1994) 86-90/132-135, 196-198/219-222.

¹⁷ Rykle Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons* (AfO Beiheft 9; Graz 1956) 111. This has been published more recently in RINAP 4, text 32, line 16'.

¹⁸ *ABL* 414 (SAA 1, 177) depicts just such an arrangement in Northern Syria, the local governor requesting sufficient staff to adequately maintain a post-station (*bīt mardīte*) at Hesa along the road leading southward to Damascus.

¹⁹ The tribute was a means of expressing a vassal's loyalty to the king of Assyria, the delivery ceremony being designed to highlight this fact: see J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome 1974) 121-128.

the years surrounding 716 BCE²⁰. It describes how tribute-bearing emissaries from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab, and Ammon arrived together in Calah in one group. From the fact that these emissaries all arrived together, we learn that a common caravan, departing from a single staging area, was organized, so that all of the emissaries could enter the presence of the king together. Therefore, emissaries from Egypt, Philistia, and Judah would all have travelled through the Aphek-Gezer region, bearing tribute, on an annual basis (perhaps the emissaries from the Transjordanian states joined the convoy somewhere in Southern Syria). It is unthinkable that the Assyrians would have allowed a convoy carrying such valuable goods to travel unescorted, exposed to the threat of brigands²¹. Troops to escort the convoys must have been available in this specific region, on an annual basis, during the spring period of travel. But from where did the caravans with the tribute of Judah and the Philistine cities depart? It is most likely that the starting point was in the common border area, at the edge of the area of direct Assyrian control. The most appropriate place of course is the Tel Hadid-Gezer region, i.e., it is most likely that this is where the caravans met their escorts and left for the ceremony²².

The importance Assyria attached to control of this area led it to concentrate there both military and administrative personnel, and to establish centers housing these personnel at places such as Tel Hadid and Gezer, and probably also in or near Tel Aphek. Those centers provided secure passage for Assyrian forces, convoys and emissaries crossing the region, housed forces reflecting Assyrian might and deterring rebellions in the adjacent regions, and served as storage facilities for the tribute from the vassal states to the south. It is likely that Gezer, a large site which historically served a royal city since the Middle Bronze Age, would have served as a more significant center, with an army and a commander and probably a residency²³. Tel Hadid

²⁰ Postgate (ibid. 117-118) dates this text to between 720 and 715 in light of the governor named. Gershon Galil, *Israel and Assyria* (Heb.) (Haifa 2001) 86-87 dates it to post-716 on the basis of the fact that Egypt is included amongst those bringing tribute.

²¹ SAA 1, 175 describes the reality of attacks on valuable convoys, even in areas under Assyrian provincial administration (between Damascus and Assyria).

²² For the importance of roads, see also Mario Liverani, "The Growth of the Assyrian Empire in the Habur/ Middle Euphrates Area: A New Paradigm", *SAAB* II/2 (1988) 81-98, here 91. His argument that the ninth-century Assyrian empire existed to the extent that the Assyrians were "capable of shifting between one Assyrian center and another, and of transporting material goods from non-Assyrian centers" appears pertinent for subsequent centuries.

²³ Cf. Reich-Brandl, "Gezer under Assyrian Rule" (see n. 1); W. G. Dever, *Gezer: Crossroad in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem 1998) 188-189 (Hebrew).

probably served as a local center, at a lower level in Assyrian administrative hierarchy²⁴.

3. Royal Inscriptions, Administrative Documents and the Significance of the Tel Hadid–Gezer Area

This reconstruction is further supported by the different distribution of the Assyrian royal inscriptions and administrative texts.

Royal inscriptions were erected at locations to which the Assyrians had ready access, and at which the Assyrians wished to communicate Assyrian power. In particular, Daniele Morandi has noted the tendency of the Assyrian empire to establish a specific type of stele containing annalistic accounts of military conquests along routes taken by the army²⁵. He labels these stele “stelae of military intervention”. The stelae fragments found at Qaqun, along the highway to the north of the area discussed and at Ben-shemen, seem to fit this category and thus they indicate the travel of army units along this route.

Cuneiform administrative texts, such as the four found at Gezer and near Tel Hadid, on the other hand, are evidence not of the temporary presence of military units passing through territory, but of a longer sustained presence of individuals who record their business dealings in cuneiform²⁶. These individuals bought land from local residents, loaned money, and recorded all these transactions in cuneiform. The decision to use cumbersome cuneiform writing shows beyond doubt that they were dependent on the central Assyrian administration because such documents could be adduced only in legal proceedings conducted under the aegis of this administration. These individuals were probably Mesopotamians who were settled in this region in order to provide services for the Assyrian supply posts. The practice of settling Mesopotamian families in the West, in immediate proximity to such supply posts, is recorded in an Assyrian administrative letter, SAA 1, 177²⁷.

²⁴ Shawn Zelig Aster, “An Assyrian *bīt mardīte* near Tel Hadid”, *JNES* 74 (2015) 281-288.

²⁵ Daniele Morandi “Stele e statue reali assire: localizzazione, diffusione e implicazioni ideologiche”, *Mesopotamia* 23 (1988) 114-117, 146-147.

²⁶ That the administrative texts of the Neo-Assyrian period found in the Land of Israel outnumber the fragments of monumental inscriptions by approximately a two-to-one ratio might indicate the importance of the former in understanding the Assyrian presence, but the number is too small to reach definite conclusions.

²⁷ The letter states that the *rab kallê* (commander of messengers) and *rab raksê* (commander of recruits) who are in Hesa cannot manage the roadside provisioning center (*bīt mardīte*) adequately. The letter requests that 30 (!) families (literally, houses) be settled in Hesa to enable the center to function. Previously, a group of craftsmen or engineers (*kitkittê*) had been in Hesa. Perhaps the request in the letter to replace these by families indicates the end of the period when construction of facilities was required, and the beginning of a period in which the center needed provisions from settled farms, whose farmers were loyal to Assyria and could be relied on to provide these provisions.

By settling these individuals, goods and services were provided to the supply posts by individuals who would necessarily be loyal to Assyria, rather than by locals who might be truculent. Settling the area with loyal individuals would also prevent raids on the supply posts by hostile parties. The tablets, therefore, attest to the significance of the region for the Assyrian empire. That more than half of the administrative texts, reflecting actual Assyrian presence, were discovered in this 12 km zone (25 km if Aphek is included), and that half of the royal inscriptions, reflecting military presence and royal propaganda, were discovered in it and slightly to the north along the international highway, is a clear manifestation of the importance of this otherwise marginal region. This is not to say that earlier empires (such as the Egyptian in the Late Bronze Age) did not use the important roads in this region as part of their military activities²⁸. But under Assyria, the region achieved an unparalleled significance, for the reasons discussed above. Furthermore, previous empires did not settle this region with loyal farmsteaders who would provision their messengers and troops and, as we will presently see, the Assyrian did. That Assyria did so testifies to the relative complexity of its imperial administration.

Before studying the implications of the above for our understanding of the nature of Assyrian rule in the region, we would like to present some supportive evidence for this interpretation of the role of the region in Assyrian administration.

4. Farmsteads in Western Samaria

As observed since the 1970's, many farmsteads were established by the late Iron Age on the western slopes of Samaria, from the Aphek area to the Ayalon valley²⁹. The sites were first identified in surveys, and many were subsequently excavated in salvage excavations over the years (resulting from the high rate of development in the area, and especially the building of the cities of Shoham and Elad, the expansion of Rosh Haayin, and the construction of the Cross-Israel Highway 6), greatly enhancing the available information on this phenomenon. Interestingly, Faust recently observed that this limited and ecologically inferior region on the western slopes of Samaria (Samaria's foothills) is the only one in the Assyrian provinces in the Land of

²⁸ Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia 1979) 152-185.

²⁹ See, for example, Israel Finkelstein, "Rural Settlement in the Foothills and the Yarkon Basin in the Israelite-Hellenistic Periods" (MA thesis, Tel-Aviv University, 1978) (Hebrew); see also Israel Finkelstein, "Israelite and Hellenistic farms in the Foothills and the Yarkon Basin", *Eretz-Israel* 15 (1981) 331-348 (Hebrew); Avraham Faust, "Farmsteads in Foothills of Western Samaria: A Reexamination", in: A. M. Maier – P. de Miroschedji (eds.), *"I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times": Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN 2006) 477-504.

Israel where we see an increase in settlement in the 7th century (compared with the 8th century)³⁰.

While this growth is insignificant demographically, it is nevertheless intriguing, as all other regions in those provinces experienced severe settlement decrease. Samaria's foothills are a narrow strip (less than 10 km wide), just to the east of the alluvial valley, stretching to the east of Aphek and southward toward the Ayalon valley (i.e., just to the east of one of the main branches of the international highway). The area was sparsely settled in earlier epochs, due to the lack of both water sources and large tracts of arable land. Still, dozens of farmsteads were established at the time discussed here in this strip, in what appears to be a hinterland of Aphek and Tel Hadid, and a large number of them were excavated, including Qula, Kh. el-Bireh 1, Kh. el-Bireh 2, Tirat Yehuda, Bareqet, Kh. Burnat South 1, Kh. Burnat South 2, and the Shoham Bypass³¹. Those farmsteads were architecturally very different from other 8th century buildings and farms in the region³², and we have suggested elsewhere that they were most likely settled by people from outside the highlands, partially at least by peoples who were exiled to the region from the outside³³. This concentration of farmsteads just to the east of the international highway, adjacent to the area in which Assyrian garrisons and transport and communication centers were concentrated, matches the information presented above on Assyrian policy in settling deportees in farmsteads near such centers. The farmsteads formed an agricultural hinterland for the small Assyrian centers in the area, and this explains their unique distribution, in an area that was hardly ever settled before. After all, this is the first time in history when the Aphek–Tel Hadid–Gezer area achieved such a geopolitical importance.

³⁰ Avraham Faust, "Settlement, Economy, and Demography under Assyrian Rule in the West: The Territories of the Former Kingdom of Israel as a Test-Case", *JAOS* 135 (2015) 765-789.

³¹ See, for example, Ze'ev Yeivin and Gershon Edelstein, "Excavations at Tirat Yehuda", *Atiqot* 6 (1970) 56-67 (Hebrew); Etan Ayalon, "Bareqet (Modi'im)", *ESI* 1 (1982) 6; Ronit Oren – Na'ama Scheftelowitz, "Khirbet el-Bira", *ESI* 20 (2001) 50*-51*; Na'ama Scheftelowitz – Ronit Oren, *Trial Excavations in the Khirbet el-Bira Region* (Tel Aviv 1996) (Hebrew); Uzi Dahari – Uzi 'Ad, "Shoham Bypass Road", *ESI* 20 (2000) 56*-59*; Faust, "Farmsteads" (see n. 29); see also Avraham Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation* (Atlanta 2012) 57-60.

³² Cf. Shimon Riklin, "Bet Arye", *Atiqot* 32 (1997) 7-20 [Hebrew]; Shimon Dar, "Hirbet Jemein – a First Temple Village in Western Samaria", S. Dar – Z. Safrai (eds.), *Shomron Studies* (Tel Aviv 1986) 13-73 [Hebrew]; Karen Covello-Paran, "Excavations at Horbat Malta, Lower Galilee", *Atiqot* 59 (2008) 5-86; Avraham Faust, "The Rural Community in Ancient Israel during the Iron Age II", *BASOR* 317 (2000) 17-39; A. Faust, *The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II* (Winona Lake 2012).

³³ Faust, "Farmsteads" (see n. 29); Zadok–Na'aman, "Assyrian Deportations" (see n. 5).

5. The Evidence from the Aphek-Gezer Region and Other Sites and its Implications for Understanding Assyrian Imperial Economy in the Southern Levant

This concentration of Assyrian administrative and royal inscriptions in the Tel Hadid–Gezer area in particular, and along the main coastal road in the Land of Israel in general might help us understand the larger processes of Assyrian administration in a region that includes both recently subdued provinces and truculent vassal states, and reveal the economic significance of the various regions. The Assyrian empire benefitted economically from the vassal states by extracting tribute, and from the regions it ruled directly (i.e., the provinces) by extracting the corn tax and customs duties (below). The economic benefit to the Assyrian empire of different regions in the land of Israel needs to be considered based on the relative importance of each source of income.

When examining all sets of data, it appears that the hill-country of Samaria, which forms the majority of the territory of the Assyrian province of Samerina, was of little economic value to Assyria. This can be seen not only by the dearth of administrative texts and royal inscriptions unearthed in this wide area, but also from the textual evidence pertaining to this province. Thus, in SAA 1, 220, an otherwise unknown Assyrian official named Ariḫi writes to inquire about the “corn tax” (^{SE}*nu-sa-ḫi*) of the land (not the city) of Samaria, which had not been paid³⁴. The writer twice asks for a report on whether the tax exists or not, and states that he has been requesting this report since last year. He furthermore states “nothing (i.e., no income) has been brought in”. This indicates the relative poverty of Samaria after the deportations. Little income could be derived from the land, and few taxes could be extracted. It appears that the extant taxes were not siphoned off by local officials lining their own pockets, rather than remitting the taxes to Assyria, since Ariḫi states that these officials (*bēl piqitāte*) are inactive and “stand and do not move”. The simplest explanation for this letter is that the land did not produce much taxable wealth. Among Samaria’s main crops in the Iron Age were olives and grapes³⁵. Both of these require significant investment of human-power to produce the oil and wine. Grain was also grown in the intermontane valleys,

³⁴This tax was paid by all inhabitants of Assyrian provinces, but not vassal states (see Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription* 189). This letter thus appears to have been written after Samaria’s annexation.

³⁵See, for example, David Eitam, *The Production of Oil and Wine in Mt. Ephraim in the Iron Age* (M.A. Thesis, Unpublished, Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, 1980 [Hebrew]); Avraham Faust, “The Interests of the Assyrian Empire in the West: Olive Oil Production as a Test-Case”, *JESHO* 54 (2011) 62-86, and literature cited therein.

and it also requires significant human effort to till the land, to harvest the grain, and to process the grain until it can be stored in silos³⁶. It is probable that the decrease in population as a result of death in the wars and in starvation and epidemics during the wars and following them, and to some extent also from deportations (which followed the annexation of Samaria)³⁷, along with the devastation of the land itself during the war³⁸, were responsible for the decrease in the taxable wealth of the land.

Although deportees arrived in Samaria by the end of the eighth century³⁹, it took some time before these deportees were able to produce agricultural surpluses, and they were far fewer than the population lost as a consequence of the war. This can be seen from another letter (SAA 1, 255), which describes how the river that runs past the city of Samaria has dried out and it is the Assyrian officials themselves who are setting men to dig wells. Furthermore, the letter contains an unusual mention of an Assyrian official in charge of seed-grain. Normally, farmers maintain their own supply of seed grain from year to year, and the mention of such an official suggests that it belongs to the period when the residents of Samaria had not yet achieved independent sustainable agriculture, or at least shows a drastic decrease in the population's production capabilities⁴⁰. Were the residents not new settlers (or severely harmed and drastically reduced local population), it is hard to imagine why an

³⁶ See, for example, Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake 1987); Yehuda Felix, *Agriculture in Eretz-Israel in the Period of the Bible and the Talmud: Basic Farming Methods and Implements* (Jerusalem 1990 [Hebrew])

³⁷ For the various mechanisms of demographic decrease following sieges and conquests, see I. Eph'al, *Siege and Its Ancient Near Eastern Manifestations* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997 [Hebrew]) 37-39, 57-65; Henry W. F. Saggs, *The Might that was Assyria* (London 1984) 248; John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London 1994); P. B. Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington 1999); Paul Erdkamp, *Hunger and the Sword: Warfare and Food Supply in Roman Republican Wars (264–30 B.C.)* (Amsterdam 1998). See also the detailed discussion in Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period* 140-143, and many references in Faust, "Settlement, Economy, and Demography" (see n. 30).

³⁸ For causes of the devastation of the countryside, see the detailed discussion in Avraham Faust, "Settlement and Demography in the Seventh Century Judah and the Extent and Intensity of Sennacherib's Campaign", *PEQ* 140 (2008) 185, with many additional references. See also D. J. Wiseman, "The Assyrians", in: John W. Hackett (ed.), *Warfare in the Ancient World* (New York 1989) 49, 51; M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge 2004) 37; Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* 71, 73; Eph'al, *Siege and Its Ancient Near Eastern Manifestations* 54-55.

³⁹ II Kings 17:24 and Ezra 4:9-10, which mention the deportation of Babylonians to Samaria. (On Ezra 4:9-10, see Richard C. Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report in Nehemiah's Archive: Multiple Introductions and Reverse Chronological Order as Clues to the Origin of the Aramaic Letters in Ezra 4–6", *JBL* 125 [2006] 641-685, here 676-679.) Deportations of Arab tribes are mentioned in Sargon's annals, published in Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II aus Khorsabad* 110, lines 122-124.

⁴⁰ Such an official is mentioned nowhere else in Assyrian administrative records. Despite the text's fragmentary nature, which precludes precise determination of the official's duties and location, his presence in a letter discussing the digging of a well in Samaria fits with the overall picture that emerges from SAA 1, 220 and the geographical distribution of the texts.

Assyrian official would be in charge of seed-grain. The letter, therefore, seems to describe a period in which new settlers had arrived in Samaria. That they required significant assistance from Assyrian officials to produce enough food to sustain themselves is clear from the fact that the Assyrians are involved both in providing seed-grain and in digging wells.

The gloomy economic situation in Samaria, and in other provinces in the region, can be seen also from an examination of the archaeological evidence. Settlement was very sparse when compared to that of the 8th century BCE⁴¹, the olive oil industry, for example, lay in ruins⁴², and the center of production moved southward, to the semi-independent regions of Judah and Philistia. There is total absence of any evidence for international trade in Samaria⁴³.

Notably, the corn-tax was the main tax collected from the provinces, and the above clearly shows that the province of Samaria (and apparently also the other provinces in the region) was of little economic significance in this respect. Given the limited production in the provinces (exemplified not only in the corn-tax but also in the olive oil production that moved southward, see above), it is likely that the major economic benefit accruing to Assyria from control of subdued territory were customs duties⁴⁴. This further explains why the Assyrian administration was concentrated in the Aphek–Tel Hadid–Gezer region, which was quite small in comparison to the rest of the provinces. This is, after all, exactly the area where caravans could be taxed, and this enhanced the importance of this region for the Assyrian empire. Thus, it appears that the major source of income from the new provinces in the territories of the former

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion and many references, see Faust, “Settlement, Economy, and Demography” (see n. 30), and many references.

⁴² See, for example, Zvi Gal – Rafael Frankel, “An Olive Oil Press Complex at Hurvat Rosh Zayit”, *ZDPV* 109 (1993) 128-140; Eitam, *The Production of Oil and Wine* (see n. 35); Faust, “The Interests of the Assyrian Empire in the West” (see n. 35).

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the economy of the period, with a wealth of references, see Avraham Faust – Ehud Weiss, “Judah, Philistia, and the Mediterranean World: Reconstructing the Economic System of the Seventh Century B.C.E.”, *BASOR* 338 (2005) 71-92; see also Avraham Faust – Ehud Weiss, “Between Assyria and the Mediterranean World: The Prosperity of Judah and Philistia in the Seventh Century BCE in Context”, in: T. Wilkinson – S. Sherratt – J. Bennet (eds.), *Interweaving Worlds: Systemic Interaction in Eurasia – 7th to 1st Millennia BC* (Oxford 2011) 189-204.

⁴⁴ In theory, such duties belonged to the central administration. SAA 1, 179 r. 7-12, however, indicates that local officials also frequently benefited from such customs duties. Herein, Bel-liqbi – the Assyrian governor in Supate in Northern Syria – complains that a toll collector appointed by the central administration has been placed at the city gate of Supate, another being sent to another town in the district. This caused a diminution in his revenues due to the departure of the Arabs who controlled the caravan trade from the region, and he therefore asks the king: “Am I less loyal than a toll collector?” In other words, why is the toll collector allowed to interfere in the governor’s collection of customs, the latter holding his post due to his loyalty to the king and the customs collections thus being his due? Customs were therefore evidently collected on occasion by the governor.

kingdom of Israel were customs duties, rather than income from agricultural activities.

If we summarize the economic significance of the southern Levant for the Assyrian empire, we may suggest that the main income of the empire was from tribute from the vassals. When examining the economic contribution of the annexed territories, the above suggests that their major contribution to the income of the empire was from duties taken from caravans passing through the provinces (ironically, the source of this income was also outside the provinces themselves). Taxes from the annexed provinces in the southern Levant appear to have been very limited in quantity, and Assyria did not concentrate its efforts there. Assyrian administration was focused on the area that guaranteed both the tribute and the custom duties, and the distribution of administrative texts and royal inscriptions in the Aphek–Gezer region reflects this situation, adding to the above-mentioned strategic significance.

6. Conclusions: Assyrian Control of the Aphek-Gezer region

The concentration of Assyrian administrative texts and royal inscriptions in a limited area in the southwestern edge of the empire, i.e., the Tel Hadid–Gezer area, and along the nearby highway, is representative of the importance of this small area for the empire. In the first place, as we noted above, the Assyrian central administration invested in the region because of its strategic importance. This investment consisted of establishing supply posts in the region, settling loyal settlers to staff and provide for these posts, and maintaining troops there. The region also served as the starting point for campaigns against Egypt or the vassals to the south, and as a place for gathering troops as a show of might toward Judah and the Philistine cities that could perhaps prevent additional campaigns. This was also the region into which the tribute from the southern vassals was brought, and where it was stored until it was shipped to the north. Notably, tribute was of great importance, and hence the significance of the region for both storing the tribute until its shipment to Assyria as well as preventing rebellions that would prevent its future collection. Since this region was so important for passage of troops and for road stations, it is likely that the Assyrians stored provisions for Assyrian troops and messengers there⁴⁵.

In addition, the region and the international highway (see also the finds at Qaqun and Kh. Kusiya) were important also for extracting custom duties from traders passing on the important trade route in the region, which served

⁴⁵These provisions derived from the corn tax; see discussion in Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription*, 198.

Philistia, its ports, and the access to Egypt⁴⁶. Traders need both security from attacks by brigands and supply posts at which they can obtain provisions. In other words, there is a certain synergy between the type of facilities the military needs and those traders need. Thus, the central administration and perhaps also the provincial governors had an interest in providing these. All of these factors explain why the region was the focus of Assyrian activity, why supply posts were established, and why we find such a large number of cuneiform texts in this region.

This also sheds light on the relative economic insignificance of the role of other parts of the province. This area, which was part of the province of Samaria, was of importance mainly because it bordered on the semi-independent, or autonomous regions to the south, which appear to have supplied the empire with more wealth (from tribute, from custom duties, and sometimes also from booty) than the provinces themselves.

Dept. of Land of Israel
Studies and Archaeology
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat-Gan
Israel 5290007

⁴⁶This is without regard to the question of who extracted those duties — the provincial governor or the central administration (see note 44).

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