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Angelika Berlejung (Leipzig)
Joachim Friedrich Quack (Heidelberg)
Annette Zgoll (Göttingen)

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In Search for Aram and Israel

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Edited by
Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming,
and Izaak J. de Hulster

Mohr Siebeck

OMER SERGI, born 1977; 2013 PhD; since 2014 Lecturer at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, Tel Aviv University.

MANFRED OEMING, born 1955; 1985 PhD; 1988 Habilitation; since 1996 Ordinarius for Theology, Ethics and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament at the University of Heidelberg; since 2013 vice dean of the Faculty of Theology.

IZAAK J. DE HULSTER, born 1979; 2008 PhD; since 2014 University Researcher at the University of Helsinki.

The Aramaean Involvement in the Southern Levant

Case Studies for Identifying the Archaeological Evidence

Aren M. Maeir, Bar-Ilan University/
Minerva Center for the Relations between Aram and Israel
in Biblical Times

In last two decades, more and more evidence has amassed on the significant impact that the Aramaeans and their culture had in the Iron Age Southern Levant, in particular on the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah – and most recently, in Philistia as well. This is manifested both in cultural influences – for example in the appearance of Aramaean facets in Southern Levantine material culture and languages – but no less importantly, in the physical evidence of the actual presence and activities of Aramaeans in these regions during the Iron Age II.

While in the past the various hints to the activities and presence of Aramaeans in the Iron Age Southern Levant were seen primarily from the historical, epigraphic and biblical sources, recently, steadily expanding amounts of archaeological data are being brought into this discussion. This includes new archaeological finds at sites from various parts of the Southern Levant, but also through a reappraisal of previously found materials.

In this paper I would like to assess some of the evidence that has been discussed, as well as suggest some theoretical parameters which may assist in the identification of the archaeological evidence of Aramaean influences and presence in the Iron Age Southern Levant.

I will start from finds that derive from the excavations that I direct at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, where I have suggested that there is impressive evidence of Aramaean activities (the siege and conquest of the site by Hazael of Aram Damascus in ca. 830 BCE). I will then move on to finds from other sites and regions, and will discuss finds and interpretations – and the implications thereof – from other sites as well.

Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath

Compelling evidence of a wide spread destruction at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, dating to the 2nd half of the 9th century BCE (late Iron IIA), has been extensively published.[1] Likewise, evidence of a siege system which surrounds the site, which has been dated as

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[1] E.g., Maeir 2012; 2013; Namdar et al. 2011.

well to the same time frame, has been demonstrated in numerous publications.[2] We have suggested to connect both the destruction and the siege, to a military campaign of Hazael, King of Aram Damascus, which is mentioned in the biblical text (2 Kings 12:18). Although there is no additional contemporaneous textual evidence, the dating of the destruction and siege system to the 2nd half of the 9th century, the apparent mention in the Zakkur inscription of a similar siege method used by Ben-Hadad, son of Hazael in his siege of Hadrak a few years later, seem to argue quite convincingly for the connection between the siege and destruction and the event mentioned in the Bible. While some have questioned whether or not it is a siege[3] and whether or not it is likely to connect this to Hazael,[4] no other well-argued and logical options have been suggested to explain this unique assemblage of archaeological features.[5]

Nevertheless, the question does remain – how robust is this suggested interpretation – and can one try and define a methodology to be used in other instances, which would strengthen the validity of the suggested connection between the archaeological remains and an event relating to the Aramaeans which is mentioned in the biblical text.

As the conquest of Gath by Hazael is mentioned only once in the biblical text (though with two major versions), the possibility does exist that: 1) this is an imagined, literary event; 2) that even if it is an actual event, the destruction which was excavated and/or the features which we interpret as a siege system at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath are not connected to this event.

Likewise, one could add that it is quite likely to assume that if this was connected to major Aramaean activity at the site, there should be clear material evidence of this activity – such as in relation to the various siege-related features around the site.

Despite these queries – the "Hazael scenario" is still the best, and "neatest" scenario to explain these remains at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath. This is supported by several lines of argumentation:

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[2] E.g., Ackermann et al. 2005; Maeir et al. 2006; Gur-Arieh 2008; Maeir 2009a; Maeir and Gur-Arieh 2011; Gur-Arieh and Maeir in press.

[3] Ussishkin 2009; 2014.

[4] E.g., Herr 2013.

[5] Ussishkin (2014) repeats and expands his previous (2009) questioning of the identification of the trench surrounding Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath as a siege system. In my opinion, he still does not answer many of the points which were already raised to counter his doubts (e.g., Maeir and Gur-Arieh 2011). Likewise, additional suppositions which he suggests in the latest study are without basis. For example, he assumes that Gath during the Iron Age IIA is unfortified. However, finds from recent excavation seasons so far unpublished evidence to the contrary – both in Area D and in Area F (Chadwick and Maeir in press). Likewise, his lack of reference to the various features of the system, including the location of the sediments which were poured out of the siege trench during its construction along the entire length of the trench, is problematic. In addition, the other features relating to this system – such as the excavated towers, are left unexplained. And finally, his lack of reference to an MA thesis which expands on this issue and extensively presents and discusses much of the relevant evidence, which is available in libraries in Israel (Gur-Arieh 2008; a revised version of which will soon be published as well – Gur-Arieh and Maeir in press), is unfortunate. The fact that he once again cannot propose any other interpretation to this complex set of features – without sufficiently negating the explanation suggested by us – makes his scepticism regarding our interpretation hard to accept.

1. No better historical explanation has been suggested. It should be stressed that the most "logical" explanation for such a siege – the Assyrians – well-known from other military activities (and sieges) during the Iron Age[6] simply is untenable, as the date of both the destruction on the site, and the features surrounding the site are too early (2nd half of 9th century BCE) for the well-documented Assyrian military activity in this area (which commences only in the mid/2nd half of the 8th century BCE). In addition, the use of a trench and related features as found at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath is a method of siege which does not appear to be used by the Assyrians in any other documented siege. Thus, connecting this to the Assyrians is unsound.

2. The historical scenario connecting between the destruction of Gath by Hazael and other developments in the region in the late Iron IIA – "works very well." As extensively elaborated by myself and others,[7] the historical significance of Hazael's campaign against Gath, its destruction, and the ensuing geo-political changes are an event of utmost importance in the Iron Age IIA.[8] There is no reason to assume that the destruction of such a major city – perhaps the largest in the Southern Levant at the time (ca. 45–50 hectares) would not have left substantial material remains. Ussishkin's supposition to minimize the geo-political role of Gath during this period,[9] despite the fact that it is, most probably, the largest city in the early Iron Age IIA Southern Levant (even if one was to assume, mistakenly, that Gath was not fortified at this time) is simply untenable.[10]

3. The apparent similarity between the siege at Gath and the siege which is mentioned regarding Ben-Hadad's siege at Hadrak is significant. As previously discussed, suggestions to interpret *ḥrẓ* in the inscription as referring to tunneling and not to a trench[11] have been shown to be baseless.[12]

4. Possible evidence of some Aramaean-related ceramics – and perhaps a glazed object as well – have been found in the area of the siege trench.[13] To this one can add the Aramaean-influenced "stone reliefs" which were found in the Bliss and Macalister excavations at Gath in 1899,[14] as well as a possible Aramaean style seal found on the surface of Azekah.[15]

5. Finally, the fact that several other sites in the region of Gath have destructions which appear to be contemporaneous to the destruction of Gath (such as at Azekah, Tel Zayit and Gezer) seems to strengthen the claim that the destruc-

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[6] E.g., Yadin 1963; Ussishkin 1982; Nadali 2002–2005; Rey 2012; De Backer 2103

[7] E.g., Maeir 2004; 2012; 2103

[8] E.g., Na'aman 2002; Fantalkin and Finkelstein 2006; Mazar 2007; Koch 2012.

[9] Ussishkin 2014; see as well Faust 2014.

[10] On this, see, e.g. Avissar Lewis and Maeir 2015:117, n. 2.

[11] As originally suggested by Eph'al 2008 and recently reiterated by Ussishkin 2014. See above, note 5.

[12] Maeir 2009a.

[13] Gur-Arieh and Maeir in press.

[14] Maeir 2009b.

[15] Gal 2009, see also de Hulster, in this volume.

tion of Gath was part of a regional military campaign – befitting the character of Hazael's activities in the Southern Levant.[16]

Can one generalize from these points and extrapolate to other sites, contexts and historical scenarios? I believe that the primary insight – which is hardly something new to any responsible historian and archaeologist, is that one must utilize as many intersecting sets of data, archaeological, historical, biblical and other,[17] and only then argue for the case for the most logical – and robust – suggestion to explain such archaeological remains – and their connection to historical and/or biblical events, and to identify them as being related to the activities of a specific culture and/or polity.

Other Cases

Although I do not intend in any way to discuss or to survey all (and even a wide range) of examples of sites and/or finds which have been connected to the Aramaeans in the Iron Age II, I will mention a few cases of suggested connections with the Aramaeans that have been raised in the past. I don't intend to discuss sites in the Southern Levant that are, for all intents and purposes clearly Aramaean – Bethsaida[18] and Tel Hadar[19] serving as the best examples, but rather mention some of the sites at which a short-termed Aramaean presence has been suggested.

Needless to say, if we are to identify archaeological remains as evidence of the presence of a specific cultural group and/or ethnicity, or even the political and cultural influences of one group identity on another one, it is well-known that one must muster a wide range of evidence to buttress such claims. While this is well-known and oft-repeated in discussions relating to the archaeology of the Iron Age Levant (e.g., vis-à-vis the identification of Israelites, Judahites, Philistines, Canaanites, Aramaeans, etc.), in my opinion, too little attention has been paid to the fact that even if one can identify specific sets of material culture that can be associated with specific groups, such group identities are highly fluid and changing, and as often demonstrated, group identities can easily change – and members of a specific group can have multiple, and even conflicting – identities at the same time.

Thus, for example, going back once again to questions relating to Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath, the *au courant* suggestions which clearly – and explicitly – define between Philistines, Canaanites and Israelites/Judahites in the Coastal Plains, Shephelah, and Judean Hills, drawing clear lines of cultural and ethnic differentiation,[20] in my opinion do not take

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[16] For related destruction in Tel Zayit see: Tappy 2011; for related destruction in Gezer see: Ortiz and Wolff 2012:17. I would like to thank O. Lipschits for providing me information about a possible related destruction in Azekah.

[17] E.g., Dever's (2001:83) well-known "convergences".

[18] E.g., Arav 2013.

[19] Yadin and Kochavi 2008.

[20] Bunimovitz and Lederman 2011; Lederman and Bunimovitz 2014; Na'aman 2010; Faust 2013; 2014; Garfinkel et al. 2012.

into account the flexible, vibrant and ever-changing character of the inter-relations between groups with different and intermixed identities.

While some of these discussions have attempted to infuse the debate with seemingly cutting-edge social perspectives, such as "boundary maintenance", "resistance" and other jargon taken from the realm of social theory, in fact, much of these discussions are lacking in that they are not up-to-date with current social theory. For example, while just about all those who deal with the definition of ethnicity in the Levantine archaeological record relate to Barth as a veritable holy Bible,[21] in fact, the current study of ethnicity, and the complexity of defining cultural and ethnic "boundaries" and the multi-faceted and fluid character(s) of such definitions,[22] warrants substantial caution – and distancing – from facile and simplistic identifications of the supposed archaeological correlates of various ethnic groups and supposed clear-cut boundaries between them.

Returning to our topic, in light of the above, it is clear that any discussion and suggestion to identify the presence of Aramaeans at a site should at the least be very hesitant and careful.

I would like to briefly examine three such cases:

1. *Dan*: Various scholars have suggested that one can identify an Aramaean phase at Tel Dan, corresponding to the conquest(s) of Dan by the Aramaeans during the 9th and 8th centuries BCE.[23] While the conquests of Dan by the Aramaeans are historical events without doubt, supported by the biblical text and epigraphic sources (e.g., the Tel Dan Stela), the argument that one can find significant evidence of an Aramaean presence at the site is much more difficult. Very little material evidence to such an Aramaean presence can be noted, and I follow Jonathan Greer's assessment that even though we have not yet seen the fully published materials from the Dan excavations, as of now, the evidence does not convincingly argue for an extended Aramaean presence at the site (save for a single Aramaic inscription – but note that Israelite inscriptions are more common).[24] That said, we currently cannot without any doubt deny this possibility; hopefully we will be able to have a better assessment once the excavations are published fully.[25]

2. *Hazor*: Edward Lipiński has suggested that Hazor, Stratum VIII, should be identified as "Malaḫa", which according to an inscribed pearl found in Ashur (taken as booty from Aramaean Damascus), was a royal Aramaean city.[26] Likewise, Israel Finkelstein suggested that after conquering Hazor, Hazael rebuilt Stratum VIII with a massive fortification and a large citadel – which he

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[21] Barth 1969, at times with a smattering of other "standard" quotes – such as Emberling (1997), Jones (1997), and Sparks (1999).

[22] For reviews of some of these issues, see, e.g., Nestor 2010; Curta 2011; Skinner 2012; Knapp 2014.

[23] E.g. Noll 1998; Athas 2003; Arie 2008.

[24] Greer 2013; See as well Davis 2013 who assesses the cultic manifestations of Iron Age Dan to be Israelite.

[25] See now also Thareani, this volume.

[26] Lipiński 2000:351.

suggests to see as being related to the *bit-hilani* type structure.[27] He went on to suggest that the site continued to be settled by the Aramaeans in Stratum VII as well, and with the destruction of this level, with the rebuilding of Stratum VI, was the site was again settled by the Israelites. Once again, while one cannot negate the possibility that there was an Aramaean presence in Hazor, Strata VIII–VII, the evidence for this is hardly "overwhelming".[28] To start with, the ceramic repertoire, as far as can be seen, does not indicate an Aramaean presence (but one has to admit that the ceramic typology of Iron II southern Syria is not well-known). Likewise, the few Aramaic inscriptions in this stratum can be explained as deriving from other circumstances. And finally, even if the citadel building is to be identified as a *bit-hilani* type structure,[29] it is not that clear that such structures are a clear indication of solely an Aramaean presence (since such buildings may exist in both the Luwian and Israelite contexts).[30] Thus, Lipiński's suggestion to identity Hazor as an Aramaean royal city, and Finkelstein's identification of Aramaean levels at the site are hard to accept without further, definitive evidence.

3. *Kinneret*: Various suggestions have been raised to see the settlement at Kinneret, which was founded in the late Iron Age I as being Aramaean. I though concur with Münger's scepticism regarding these interpretations.[31] As he has demonstrated, based on the current state of our knowledge of the material culture of terminal LB/early Iron Age northern Canaan, and the various material correlates of early Iron Age Kinneret, it is best to see the inhabitants of this site as "Late Canaanites" – and not to specifically identify them as Aramaeans – and for that matter, as "Geshurites".[32]

Summary

From the above can be seen that although there are possibilities to identify Aramaean presence – and for sure influence – at many sites in the north of present-day Israel in the Iron Age, many of the suggested identifications cannot be seen as being of sufficient "robustness" – to enable us to accept this suggestions without hesitation.

This said though, it should be clearly stated that the present state of knowledge on the regional material cultures of northern Israel, southern Syria and northern Jordan during the Iron Age I–II is insufficiently known (as opposed to other regions of the Iron Age Southern Levant). And as such, it may very well be that in the future, with a clearer view of the regional subtleties of these regions during the Iron Age, a more

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[27] Finkelstein 2000.
[28] See as well Ben-Tor 2001.
[29] But see Lehmann and Killebrew 2010
[30] For Luwian, see, e.g., Novák 2014: 267.
[31] Münger 2013.
[32] See my comments on this in Maeir 2015, regarding the problem of the very identification of a Geshurite Kingdom, specifically, but not only regarding Arav 2013.

nuanced understanding of the shifting cultural and ethnic identities at the various sites in these regions will be revealed.

The full publication of more excavations, and the results of recently started ones (and in particular at Tel Abel-beth-maacah),[33] may provide us with these *desiderata*.

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[33] See Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, this volume; see also Panitz-Cohen et al. 2013.

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