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Wandering Arameans: Arameans Outside Syria

Textual and Archaeological Perspectives

Edited by
Angelika Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir and Andreas Schüle

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Cover illustration: Bronze Horse Frontlet from the Heraion of Samos, Greece,
with an inscription of Hazael, from the Samos Archaeological Museum.
Photograph by Aren M. Maeir.

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Contents

Figures	VI
Abbreviations	VII
Foreword	IX
I. Syria and Palestine	
Jonathan S. Greer – Grand Rapids, USA	
The Cult at Tel Dan: Aramean or Israelite?.....	3
Holger Gzella – Leiden	
New Light on Linguistic Diversity in Pre-Achaemenid Aramaic: Wandering Arameans or Language Spread?	19
Yigal Levin – Ramat-Gan	
“My Father was a Wandering Aramean”: Biblical Views of the Ancestral Relationship between Israel and Aram	39
Aren M. Maeir – Ramat-Gan	
Can Material Evidence of Aramean Influences and Presence in Iron Age Judah and Israel be Found?	53
Andreas Schüle – Leipzig	
Balaam from Deir Allā – A Peripheral Aramean?.....	69
Omer Sergi – Tel Aviv	
The Battle of Ramoth-gilead and the Rise of the Aramean Hegemony in the Southern Levant during the Second Half of the 9th Century BCE	81
II. Mesopotamia and Egypt	
Angelika Berlejung – Leipzig and Stellenbosch	
Social Climbing in the Babylonian Exile	101
Johannes Hackl – Leipzig	
Babylonian Scribal Practices in Rural Contexts: A Linguistic Survey of the Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia (CUSAS 28 and BaAr 6)	125

Takayoshi M. Oshima – Leipzig	
How “Mesopotamian” was Ahiqar the Wise? A Search for Ahiqar in Cuneiform Texts	141
Michael P. Streck – Leipzig	
Late Babylonian in Aramaic Epigraphs on Cuneiform Tablets	169
K. Lawson Younger, Jr. – Deerfield, IL	
Tiglath-Pileser I and the Initial Conflicts of the Assyrians with the Arameans	195
Günter Vittmann – Würzburg	
Arameans in Egypt	229
Index of Bible Verses	281
Index of Places and Proper Names	285
Index of subjects (selected).....	296

Figures

Figure 1: Map of sites mentioned in “Evidence of Aramean Influence in Iron Age Judah and Israel”.	61
Figure 2: Pottery and objects of possible Aramean origin/influence from Tell es-Safi/Gath: a-c) pottery stands found with the fill of the Aramean siege trench; d) glazed vessel found within the fill of the Aramean siege trench; e) incised stone objects discovered on site.	62
Figure 3: View, looking east, of the Iron Age IIA fortifications of the lower city of Gath (2015 season of excavations).	63
Figure 4: The seal of Ahīqam (courtesy Cornelia Wunsch).	114
Figure 5: Distribution of text types.	127
Figure 6: Use of the unorthodox sign values.	128
Figure 7: Use of otherwise unattested sign values.	128
Figure 8: Examples for variation in word choice.	135
Figure 9: Analysis of orthographies and efectiva pronuncia.	147
Figure 10: Names and their definitions in the Uruk List.	149
Figure 11: Chronicles arrangement according to regnal years.	201
Figure 12: Geographic delimits according to A.087.3 and A.0.87.4.	208

Figure 13: Summary of Assyrian fort systems.	211
Figure 14: Map of Assyrian fort systems.	212
Figure 15: Military action against Karduniaš according to A.0.87.4 and the Pakute Inscription.	213
Figure 16: Chronology of the interactions of Tiglath-pileser I and Marduk-nādin-aḥḫē.	221
Figure 17: Depictions of Semites on Egypto-Aramaic stelae: (a) TAD D20.3 (details, from Lidzbarski 1898, II, pl. 28); (b) TAD D20.6 (author's drawing); (c) TAD D20.4 (from Aimé-Giron 1939, Pl. 3 No. 114).	236
Figure 18: Chahapi (detail from stela Berlin 2118; author's drawing).	237
Figure 19: Find-spots of Aramaic texts.	238
Figure 20: Detachment commanders.	239
Figure 21: House-owners at Elephantine (dark grey: Egyptians; middle grey: Iranians; light grey: the "half-Egyptian" Harwodj).	243
Figure 22: a) Genealogy of Yedaniah and Mibtāḥiah; (b) Mibtāḥiah's slaves. Women's names in italics; EGYPTIAN NAMES in capitals.	245
Figure 23: Genealogy of Yehoyishma ^c : Women's names in italics; EGYPTIAN- NAMES in capitals.	246
Figure 24: Graffito of Petechnum in the chapel of Amenophis III at Elkab (author's photograph).	251
Figure 25: Offering table from Saqqara (Louvre AO 4824; author's photograph).	257

Abbreviations

For abbreviations see: Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG), 4th edition; Theological Realenzyklopädie (TRE), abbreviations, 2nd revised and enlarged edition, compiled by Siegfried M. Schwertner; Lexicon of Assyriology and Near Eastern Archaeology (www.rla.badw.de).

Foreword

The present volume contains the updated versions of the papers presented at the workshop "Wandering Arameans: Arameans Inside and Outside of Syria", held at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Leipzig in October 2014. The intention of the workshop was to explore Aramean cultures and their impact on their neighbors, including linguistic influence. The idea was to address some of the primary desiderata in current research on the Arameans and so to build a basis for a project proposal submitted to the Minerva Foundation on this and related topics, to be implemented at the University of Leipzig and Bar-Ilan University. The workshop brought together scholars from these two institutions, as well as from the University of Würzburg. In addition to the papers presented at the workshop, we invited four additional contributions to broaden the scope of our endeavor (Greer, Sergi, Gzella, and Younger).

The volume is divided into two sections:

- I. Syria and Palestine
- II. Mesopotamia and Egypt

This division reflects the areas in which one sees the presence of Arameans or of their language, Aramaic, in the first millennium BCE.

One of the outcomes of this workshop was that the "Aramean question" is a broad and complex field that touches on many issues (e.g., the presence of ethnical markers, the category of ethnicity in general, history, settlement patterns, archaeology, epigraphy, religion, and sociology) that calls for interdisciplinary work at a highly specialized level. In this perspective, it became clear that future research has to start from the following assumption: Arameans (including the Aramaic languages) in Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt cannot be treated as a single entity but have to be carefully distinguished. The contributions of this volume show that identifying "Arameans" and defining pertinent identity markers are difficult tasks. The interactions between the Arameans, including the Aramaic languages, and their neighbors were complex and depended on the specific cultural and historical circumstances.

As a result of the 2014 workshop we decided to limit further research to the interaction between the Aramean states in Syria and the states in Palestine from the end of the 2nd to the late 1st millennium BCE. Correspondingly, we put the focus of the projected Minerva Center on the following preliminary working question: can the rise, flourishing, and decline of Aram and Israel, as independent political entities, be attributed to their autonomous decision making or to their interdependency – or to a combination of both factors? Thus, the articles of the first part of this volume became the foundation for our current research, which will be continued within the framework

of the *Minerva Center for the Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times* (RIAB; aramisrael.org).

We are grateful to the authors of the papers in this volume for their contributions from their particular fields of expertise and their inspiring comments and discussions during the workshop. In addition, we want to thank Prof. Michael P. Streck as the editor-in-chief of the “Leipziger Altorientalistische Studien” for accepting our volume into this series. We want to thank Felix Hagemeyer and Philipp Roßteuscher for collecting and editing the essays. We are particularly grateful to Vivian-Sarah Klee, who took on the laborious task of putting the pieces together and of creating the indices. We wish to express our thanks to all our helping hands. Last but not least, our thanks go to the Minerva Foundation and the *Minerva Center for the Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times* that supported the publication process financially.

Leipzig/Ramat-Gan, September 2016

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Can Material Evidence of Aramean Influences and Presence in Iron Age Judah and Israel be Found?¹

Aren M. Maeir – Ramat-Gan

Introduction

Recent archaeological research in the Levant has brought to light new and exciting archaeological evidence on the impact that the Arameans and their culture had in the Iron Age Southern Levant, and in particular on the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah – and most recently, in Philistia as well. This influence, which is at times reflected in the biblical text – is manifested both in multifarious cultural influences – such as material culture, language, and perhaps legal formulae² – but no less importantly, the possibility of evidence that tells of the actual presence and activities of Arameans in these regions during the Iron Age II.

While in the past the various hints to the activities and presence of Arameans in the Iron Age Southern Levant were seen primarily from the historical, epigraphic and biblical sources, most 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 (see map, Fig. 1), 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 Aramean influences and presence in the Iron Age Southern Levant.

Iron I Backgrounds

The origins and earliest phases of the appearance of the Aramaic language and culture have been extensively discussed (e.g. Lipiński 2000; Schniedewind 2002; Younger 2007; 2014; Gzella 2015; this volume); importantly, the need to discern the complexity, and regionalism, in the development of the Aramaean cultures – and language – is apparent (e.g. Younger 2014; Gzella this volume). While it seems quite clear that

¹ This paper is an updated, revised, and in some cases expanded, version of Maeir 2016.

² See, e.g., Otto 2013, 343, who suggest the transference of the Assyrian *adē*, adjusted to Judahite contexts through motifs of the Aramean treaty tradition, as appearing in the pre-Deuteronomistic literary layer of Deut 13:2–10; 28:20.

one cannot trace explicit textual references to the Arameans prior to the late 12th cent. BCE, there are some who have suggested hints to Aramaic substrata in some of the north Syrian LB texts (e.g., Zadok 1991, 113–114;³ but contrast, e.g., O’Connor 2004, 468–469; Gzella 2015, 23), and similar continuity may very well be seen in the archaeological record (e.g. Sader 2014, 18–20) – all hinting to the existence of what might be termed “Proto-Aramaic” elements in LB Syria.

A very interesting question to ask is whether there is any possibility of a connection between the initial Aramaic appearance in Syria in the early Iron Age – and that of the Israelite tribes in the southern Levant.

To start with, one should recall the strong biblical traditions and cultural memories of a connection between Aram and Israel in the earliest stages of group definition (see, e.g., Berlejung 2013). In light of this, various suggestions have been raised in the past trying to point out possible evidence of these suggestions. For example, Rainey (2007) suggested that similarities between Aramaic and early Hebrew indicated the NE, inland origins of the Israelites – and a connection with the Arameans – but this has not been accepted by most Semitists (e.g. Hackett/Pat-El 2010). A possible connection has also been postulated (Balensi 1985, 68, n. 21) between domestic architecture in LB Syria and that of the so-called “four room house”; but both the limited similarity between these architectural types – and the very supposition that these houses should be seen as strictly “Israelite” (e.g. Maeir 2013; Kletter 2014) – makes this suggestion somewhat hard to accept.

Additional tantalizing hints of possible connections might be seen from Iron I/IIA Tel Rehov. A series of decorated cultic stands have been reported there – and quite surprisingly, some the best parallels for these objects are from north Syrian LB sites such as Emar (e.g. Mazar/Panitz-Cohen 2008, 76, n. 4). Other “non-local” elements, such as architecture based on wooden beams (Mazar 1999), and later evidence of trade in Anatolian bees (Bloch et al. 2010), both appearing in the Iron IIA, may indicate an ongoing connection, into later stages of the Iron Age as well, between this site (and this region?) – and regions in which the Aramaic cultures flourished.

Whatever the case, these tenuous hints of connections between early Aram and early Israel should be related to with caution – we simply do not have enough solid evidence to make a strong case.

Iron II

The evidence for connections during the Iron IIA and later periods is quite different. Not only is the biblical record much more elaborate about this timeframe, but the

³ See Bodi’s (in press) quite persuasive suggestions regarding the possibility of some continuity between Old Babylonian (18th cent. BCE) Amorites and the earliest known (12th cent. BCE) Arameans.

combination of extra-biblical epigraphic finds and more substantial archaeological remains which may be connected to this question, provides a much broader and solid foundation for this discussion. That said, we should hardly relate to this as a clearly definable answer – as will be seen below.

In the following pages, I will discuss several case studies on whether it is possible, or not, to identify Aramean presence, and/or influence at various Southern Levantine sites.

Tell es-Safi/Gath

Compelling evidence of a wide spread destruction at Tell es-Safi/Gath, dating to the 2nd half of the 9th cent. BCE (late Iron IIA), has been extensively published (e.g. Maeir 2012). Likewise, evidence of a siege system which surrounds the site, which has been dated as well to the same time frame has been demonstrated in numerous publications. Previously I 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 Kgs 12:17.18). Although there is no additional contemporaneous textual evidence, the dating of the destruction and siege system to the 2nd half of the 9th cent., the apparent mention in the Zakkur inscription of a similar siege method used by Birhadad, son of Hazael in his siege of Hadrakh a few years later, seem to argue quite convincingly for the connection between the siege and destruction and the event mentioned in the Bible (e.g., Maeir 2012; Maeir/Gur-Arieh 2011). While some have questioned whether or not it is a siege (Ussishkin 2009; 2014; 2015; Garfinkel et al. 2016) and whether or not it is likely to connect this to Hazael (Herr 2013), no alternative and viable explanations that provide reasonable scenarios for the character of the related remains have been raised.

The question does remain – how robust is this suggested connection to the Arameans – and based on this, can one define a methodology to be used in other instances, which would strengthen the suggested connection between the archaeological remains and an event relating to the Arameans 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; e.g. Hasegawa 2014) – and does not appear in other textual sources, the possibility does exist that: 1) this is an imagined, literary event; 2) that even if it is an actual event, the destruction and/or the siege system at Tell es-Safi/Gath are not connected to it.

Likewise, one could add that if this was connected to major Aramean 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 “neatest” scenario to explain these remains at Tell es-Safi/Gath (see Maeir 2012; Maeir/Gur-Arieh 2011; Gur-Arieh/Maeir in press).

1. No better historical explanation has been suggested. The most “logical” explanation for such a siege – that is was carried out by the Assyrians – is untenable: a) as the date is too early for Assyrian military activity in this area; b) the method of siege does not appear to be used by the Assyrians in other sieges; c) and there is no archaeological evidence at all that would support an Assyrian connection.
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” – and has been broadly accepted.
3. The similarity between the siege at Gath and that which is apparently mentioned regarding Birhadad’s siege at Hadrach is significant.
4. Ussishkin’s (2014; 2015) claim that this could not be a siege system as the lower city of Gath was unfortified has most recently (summer of 2015) been disproven, with the discovery of a major fortification system (and apparent gate as well), well-dated to the Iron Age IIA (Fig. 3). This fortification clearly surrounds the lower city, and along with the already known fortifications used during the Iron Age on the upper tell (in Area F), there is now straightforward evidence not only of the fortified character of Gath during the Iron IIA, but of its substantial and important status. This then only strengthens the logic behind Hazael’s need to besiege and conquer this powerful site.⁴
5. Possible evidence of some Aramean-related ceramics (Fig. 2)⁵ – and perhaps a glazed object as well⁶ – may have been found in the area of the siege trench. On the site itself one can note the decorated stone fragment found by Bliss and Macalister, which appear to have Aramean connections (Maeir 2009). To this one can perhaps add a putative Aramean-style seal found on the surface of nearby Tel Azekah (Gal 2009).

4 It also stresses the important status of Gath prior to the destruction by Hazael, during the 10th and 9th cent. BCE. As previously emphasized (Maeir 2012; Avissar Lewis/Maeir 2015), this and other evidence clearly indicate that Gath served as the major polity in Philistia and the Shephelah during this time period, and clearly had a dominant status in relation to the early Judahite Kingdom. Suggestions (e.g. Faust 2013; 2014; 2015) that Gath was dominated by the Judahite Kingdom at the time cannot be sustained.

5 Somewhat similar ceramic stands have been reported at Iron II sites in northern Syria (e.g., Mazzoni 1992, 127, fig. 12: 2–3; Cecchini 1998, 357, fig. 37: 6–7; Jamieson 2000, 278, fig. 8: 5–7). This said, these objects are rather common in various Levantine Iron Age contexts, so their comparative significance is limited.

6 While exact parallels to this glazed object have not been found, glazed objects are known from the Aramean cultural koine (e.g. Soldi 2012) – very possibly due to Assyrian influences. Most importantly, it should be stressed that this object is very foreign in character in comparison to the material culture of the Southern Levant.

6. 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 [Lipschits, pers. comm.], Zayit [Tappy 2011], Gezer [Ortiz, pers. comm.], Aphek [Kleiman 2015], and possibly at Tel Burna [Shai personal communication]) seems to strengthen the claim that the destruction of Gath was part of a regional military campaign (e.g. Maeir 2004; 2012; Fantalkin/Finkelstein 2006; Kleiman 2016) – befitting the character of Hazael’s activities in the Southern Levant.

Can though 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 (Dever’s [2001] well-known “convergences”), 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 Examples

I would like to mention a few examples of sites and/or finds which have been connected to the Arameans in the Iron Age II. I won’t discuss sites in the Southern Levant that are, which are most often related to, for all intents and purposes clearly Aramean – with Bethsaida (e.g. Arav 2013), Tel Hadar (Yadin/Kochavi 2008) and Ein Gev (e.g. Sugimoto 2015) serving as the best examples⁷ – but rather mention some of the sites at which less clear evidence of an Aramean presence has been suggested.

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, Arameans, 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.

⁷ But it should be stressed that while it is often assumed that these sites are Aramean (supposedly being affiliated with the Aramean Kingdom of Geshur), this is a supposition which has not been explicitly proven.

Thus, for example, going back once again to questions relating to Tell es-Safi/Gath, various suggestions (by, e.g., Bunimovitz and Lederman, Na'aman, Faust, Garfinkel) which clearly and explicitly define between Philistines, Canaanites and Israelites/Judahites in the Shephelah, drawing clear lines of ethnic differentiation, in my opinion do not take into account the flexible, vibrant and ever-changing character of the inter-relations between groups with different and intermixed identities (for a detailed discussion on this issue, see now Maeir and Hitchcock 2016).

Returning to our topic, in light of the above, it is clear that any discussion and suggestion to identify the presence of Arameans at a site should in the least be very hesitant and careful. Just as Gzella (2015, 48–49) has pointed out that the Aramaic language, and for our interest especially in its early stages, is actually comprised of various dialects within a “dialect continuum”, so the archaeological evidence which is at times used in a simplistic manner to define between Arameans and non-Arameans on the one hand, and different groups of Arameans on the other, should be viewed with extreme caution.

I would like to examine four such cases:

1. Dan: Various scholars (e.g. Noll [1998], Athas [2003], Arie [2008]) have suggested that one can identify an Aramean phase at Tel Dan, corresponding to the conquest(s) of Dan by the Arameans. While the conquest(s) of Dan by the Arameans is 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 Aramean presence at the site is much more difficult. Very little material evidence to such an Aramean presence can be noted, and I follow Greer's (2013; this volume) assessment that even though the finds from Dan have yet to be fully published, as of now, the evidence does not appear to indicate an extended Aramean presence at the site. Although the famous BYTDWD royal Aramaic inscription was found at Dan, Israelite inscriptions are much more common. Likewise, the cultic praxis evidenced in the various Iron II stages appears to be Israelite – and not Aramean (see as well Davis 2013). 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.
2. Hazor: Edward Lipiński (2000, 351) has suggested that Hazor, Stratum VIII, should be identified as “Malaha”, which according to an inscribed pearl found in Ashur (taken as booty from Aramean Damascus), was a royal Aramean city. Likewise, Finkelstein (2000) suggested that after conquering Hazor, Hazael rebuilt Stratum VIII with a massive fortification and a large citadel – which he suggests to see as being related to the bit-hilani type structure. He went on to suggest that the site continued to be settled by the Arameans 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 Aramean presence in Hazor, Strata VIII-VII, the evidence for this is hardly “overwhelming.”

To start with, the ceramic repertoire, as far as can be seen, does not indicate an Aramean 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 (and this far from clear – it is more likely a “central hall tetra-partite” structure – following Lehmann and Killebrew’s [2010] definition), it is not that clear that such buildings are a clear indication of solely an Aramean presence (since such buildings exist in both the Luwian and Israelite/Judahite contexts). In fact, as noted by Novak (2014), the complex inter-relationship between architectural traditions of various cultures – Neo-Hittite, Luwian, Aramean and Southern Levantine – during the Iron Age, makes it difficult to pinpoint a cultural/ethnic identity based on the supposed appearance of a certain building type (what is true to the “four room house” with its many examples – is for sure true with a monumental building type of much more limited appearance)

3. Tel Kinrot: While various suggestions to see the settlement at Tel Kinrot which was founded in the late Iron I as being Aramean, I concur with Münger’s (2013) recent assessment, that as of now, in the current state of our knowledge of the material culture of terminal LB/early Iron Age northern Canaan, and a review of the various material correlates of early Iron Age Kinrot, it is best to see the inhabitants of this site as “Late Canaanites” – and not to specifically identify them as Arameans – and for that matter, as “Geshurites.”
4. Deir Allā: The famous plaster texts from Deir Allā have generated an extensive amount of discussion on various issues, inter alia, on the classification of the language of the inscriptions. While some have argued that it should be classified as an Aramaic dialect⁸, strong arguments against this have been raised⁹. Based on an acceptance of the identification of the as Aramaic, there have been various proposals to explain possible “Aramaic scenarios” for the writing of these texts – whether as evidence of an Aramaic occupation of the site as part of a supposed “Aramaic Empire” in the late 9th cent. BCE (for Hazael’s “empire” – see e.g. Galil 2007), or as the result of Aramaic refugees who reached the site (e.g. Lemaire 1991; Wolters 1988). To this another hypothesis might be added – that the inhabitants of the site were of Aramean origin – arriving in the region during earlier stages of the Iron Age (see Lemaire 2007; 2015, 32).

8 E.g. Hoftijzer/van der Kooij 1976 et al.; Lemaire 1991; 2007, 286; 2015, 31–32; Lipiński 2000, 362.

9 E.g. Greenfield 1991; Ahituv 2008, 434; Kottsieper 2009, 406–407; and most recently, see Patel/Wilson-Wright 2015.

This though is also somewhat hard to accept. Asides from the difficulty in identifying the language of the inscription as Aramaic (see various studies noted above; see as well Gzella 2015, 87–91, this volume), there is very little, if at all archaeological evidence of an Aramean connection. Ibrahim/van der Kooij (1991) have quite clearly shown that the material culture of Stratum XI at Tell Deir Allā, in which the plaster texts were found, are very much at home in the southern Levantine material culture traditions, both of Cis- and Transjordan (save for two brief Aramaic inscriptions found on vessels). Similarly, both in the earlier Iron I (Franken 1982) and in the Iron IIB-IIC (Groot 2011), the pottery styles and technologies are of local Southern Levantine character – with strong connections with other Transjordanian sites. Thus, it would appear that the overall evidence makes it hard to accept an Aramean “story” behind the Deir Allā texts. A local Cis- or Transjordanian cultural connection is much more likely.¹⁰

Nevertheless, if one accepts a possible connection between the Jordan Valley and Aram in the early Iron Age (as cautiously noted above regarding Tel Rehov), perhaps one can wonder whether some of the linguistic similarities between the Deir Allā plaster inscription and certain Aramaic characteristics, might be the result of earlier cultural and linguistic connections in this region, which only partially survived into the Iron Age II (as suggested by Gzella 2015 and in this volume).

Summary

We have seen that although there are possibilities to identify Aramean presence – and for sure, influences – at many sites in the north of present-day Israel during the Iron Age (mainly Iron II but perhaps also Iron I), many of the suggested identifications are insufficiently “robust” – to enable us to accept this suggestions without hesitation.

This said though, it should be clearly stressed 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 are far from sufficiently recognized (as opposed to other regions of the Iron Age Southern Levant).

Central to this issue is the fact that what is most likely the most important Aramaic kingdom vis-à-vis Aramaic/Israelite relations – Aram Damascus – is for all intents and purposes, an archaeological *tabula rasa* (e.g. Burns 2007; Sader 2014, 34–36); unfortunately, in light of current geopolitical upheavals, it does not appear that this lacuna will be rectified in the foreseeable future. Only when more archaeological data is available (such as from the new excavations at Abel Beth Maachah; see now Panitz-

¹⁰ See as well Hutton 2011, 163–167 who argues that the religious manifestations seen at Deir Allā are to be seen as of local Trans-Jordanian character, even if Aramaic influences can be seen.

Cohen et al. 2013; 2015), will we be able to begin to create a more comprehensible view of the regional subtleties of the Aramean material culture during the Iron Age. This in turn will hopefully lead to a more nuanced understanding of the shifting cultural and ethnic identities at the various sites in the Southern Levant at which Aramean influences were manifested.

Figures

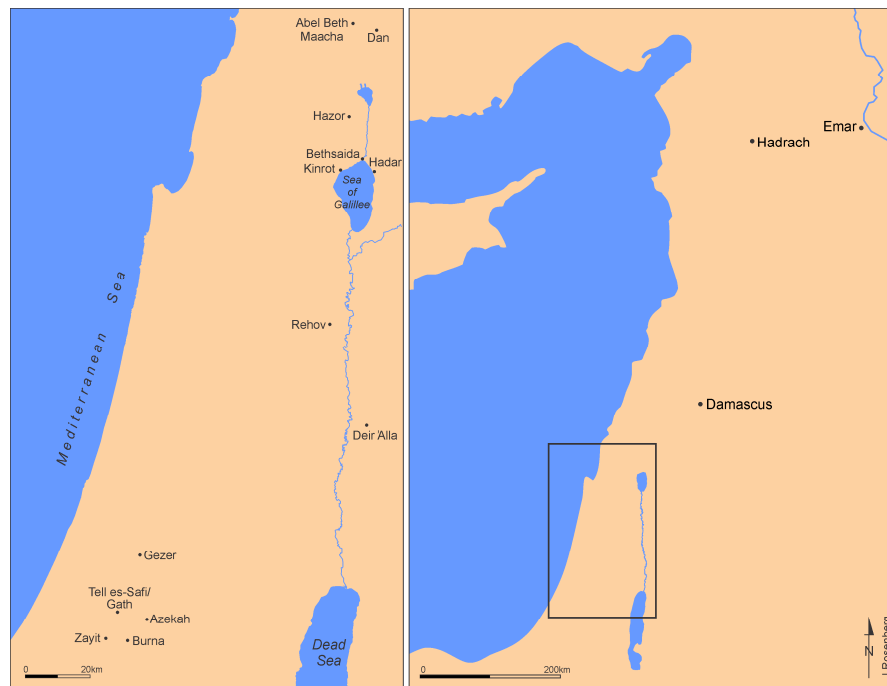


Figure 1: Map of Sites Mentioned in “Evidence of Aramean Influence in Iron Age Judah and Israel”.

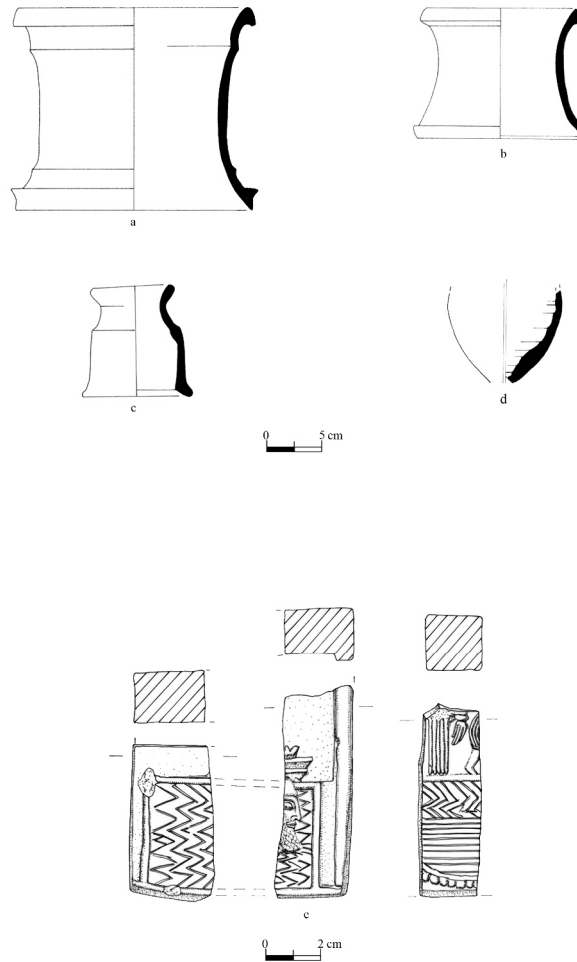


Figure 2: Pottery and Objects of Possible Aramean Origin/Influence from Tell es-Safi/Gath: a-c) pottery stands found with the fill of the Aramean siege trench; d) glazed vessel found within the fill of the Aramean siege trench; e) incised stone objects discovered on site.



Figure 3: View, Looking East, of the Iron Age IIA Fortifications of the Lower City of Gath (2015 Season of Excavations).

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