

TEL AZEKAH 113 YEARS AFTER: Preliminary Evaluation of the Renewed Excavations at the Site



Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Manfred Oeming

Tel Azekah (Tell Zakariya) is located in the heart of the Judean Lowlands (the Shephelah), 27 km southwest of Jerusalem, 6 km south of Beth-shemesh, 8 km east of Tell eš-Šafi/Gath, and 17 km north of Lachish (grid reference: 19400 62315, fig. 1).

Azekah's location on the northern edge of a ridge running north-south that divides the region and forms the boundary between the higher Shephelah to the east and the lower Shephelah to the west sets it as one of the main Judahite border localities. It controls and watches over the strategic junction of roads leading from Tell eš-Šafi (biblical Gath) in the west, through the Valley of Ellah, to the Judean Hills in the east, and connects Beth-shemesh in the north and Lachish in the south (fig. 2).

Nahal Ha-Elah (Wādi 'Ajjur) meanders westward from the Judean Hills and encircles Tel Azekah on three sides, creating steep slopes toward the stream on the west, north, and east, circa 127 m above the streambed (see opening photograph). On the south, the tell is joined to the ridge by a low saddle that is only circa 30 m below it. The site can be approached from this side only, and for defensive purposes the saddle was probably artificially lowered in ancient times. Dagan (2011,

72–73) assumed that the city gate should be located on the southern slope of the tell and that the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of Azekah, as indicated by historical documents (see below), also came from this direction.

Tel Azekah is pear-shaped, with its “head” leaning northward. The southeast and southwest corners are rounded, and the eastern side of the site is in the shape of a shallow S. The western side of the site has a rounded closing at the northern end, and the northern corner of the site is also rounded (fig. 3).¹

The maximum length and width of the upper part of the site is 300 m x 150 m. It covers an area of approximately 45 dunams (ca. 11 acres). The surface of the tell is flat, and in its southeastern corner there is a high mound, the acropolis, extending over an area of 6 dunams (1.5 acres). An artificial low terrace surrounds the southern and the southwestern slopes of the tell and seems to be an integral part of it. It covers an area that extends over roughly 13 dunams (3.2 acres), and it was probably part of the entrance disposition to the site and in some periods probably also part of the lower city (see below).

Azekah in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Epigraphic Sources

The name Azekah is not mentioned in second-millennium

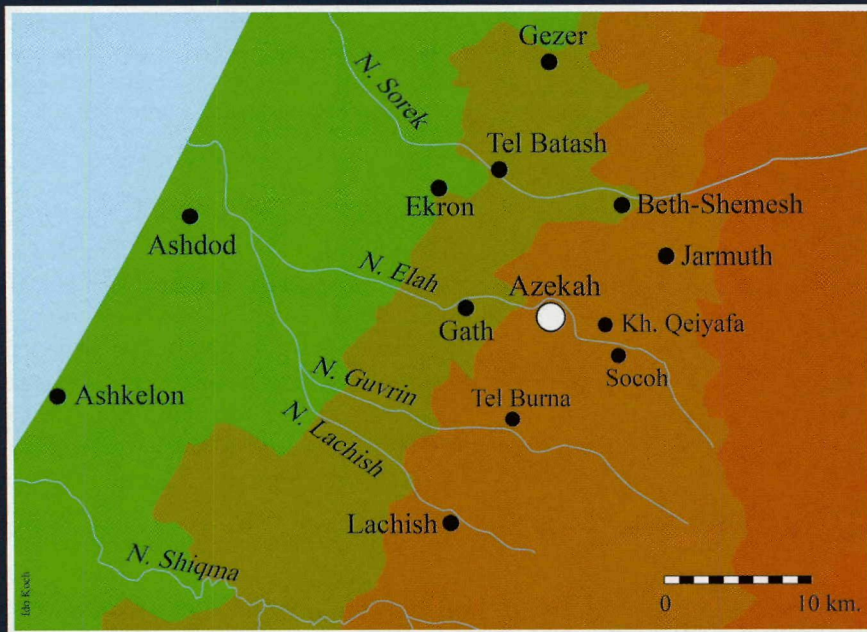


Figure 1. Regional map and the location of Tel Azekah. Prepared by Ido Koch.

historical sources, but it is known from the Hebrew Bible as well as extrabiblical sources as one of the Judahite border towns of the late eighth to early sixth century B.C.E. that faced the territory of the Philistines. As such, it was the first target of the Assyrian army when it attacked Judah from the west. From a text probably dating to Sennacherib's reign, describing his 701 B.C.E. campaign, it is evident that Azekah was taken by the Assyrians (translation by Na'aman 1974):

(3) [... Ashur, my lord, encourag]ed me and against the land of Ju[dah I marched. In] the course of my campaign, the tribute of the ki[ngs of Philistia? I received

(4) [... with the mig]ht of Ashur, my lord, the province of [Hezek]iah of Judah like [...

(5) [...] the city of Azekah, his strong-hold, which is between my [bo]rder and the land of Judah [...

(6) [like the nest of the eagle?] located on a mountain ridge, like pointed iron daggers without number reaching high to heaven [...

again one of the important and fortified cities on Judah's western border. Jeremiah 34:7 states: "When the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish, and against Azekah: for these defended cities remained of the cities of Judah."

An ostrakon discovered in the burned gate of Lachish, dated to the 586 B.C.E. Babylonian destruction, can complete the data from the verse in Jeremiah, since the last Judahite defend-

(7) [Its walls] were strong and rivaled the highest mountains, to the (mere) sight, as if from the sky [appears its head?

(8) [by means of beaten (earth) ra]mps, mighty⁷ battering rams brought near, the work of [...], with the attack by foot soldiers, [my] wa[rrriors

(9) [...] they had seen [the approach of my cav]alry and they had heard the roar of the mighty troops of the god Ashur and [their] he[arts] became afraid [...

(10) [The city Azekah I besieged,] I captured, I carried off its spoil, I destroyed, I devastated, [I burned with fire

Azekah was rebuilt sometime in the seventh century B.C.E., during the rule of Manasseh or Josiah, and in the early sixth century B.C.E., when Judah was attacked by the Babylonians, it was



Figure 2. Tel Azekah and the primary historical roads. Satellite image courtesy of Google Earth.

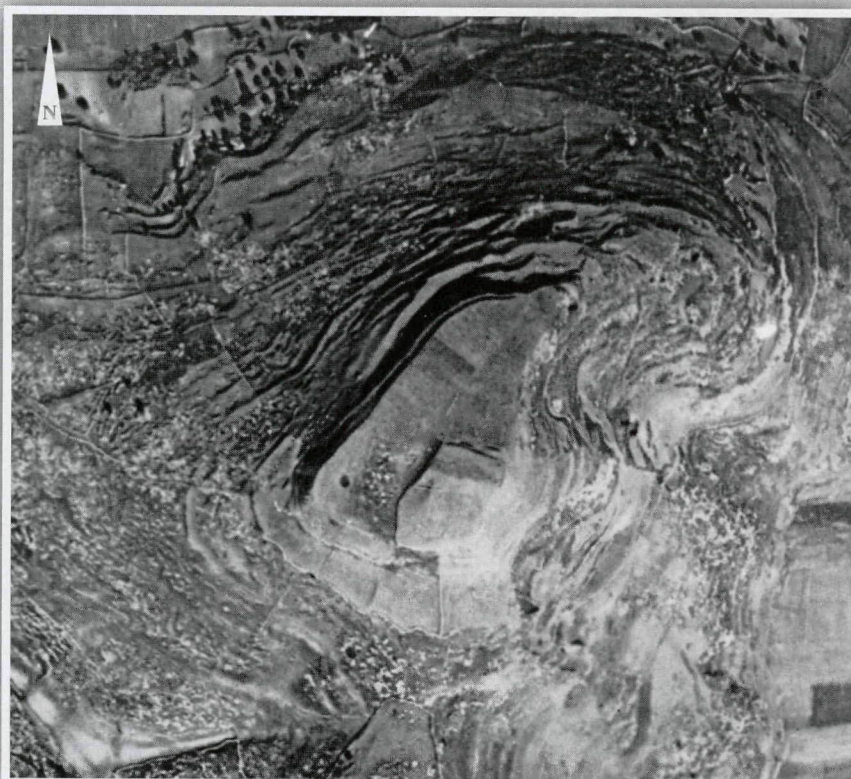


Figure 3. Aerial photograph of Tel Azekah pictured in 1945. Note the agricultural terraces to the south and southwest of the tell. These terraces are part of a lower city surrounding the upper tell.

ers report in the last lines of their letter: “And let [my lord] know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications that my lord has given, for we cannot see Azekah” (fig. 4).

The fact that Azekah was an important stronghold on Judah’s western border was probably the base for a few other biblical traditions that relate to the geopolitical importance of the site and cast it to earlier periods in the history of Israel and Judah.

The historical value of these verses might be questioned, as well as the tradition that sees Azekah as a Judahite stronghold on the border with the Philistines. Nowhere is this tradition more apparent than in the story of the battle between David and Goliath. According to 1 Samuel 17:1, the Philistines “gathered together their armies to battle; they were gathered together at Socoh, which *belongs* to Judah, and pitched between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim.” Saul and the Israelite army were positioned against the Philistines at the Valley of Elah, and after the great victory of David over Goliath, the Philistines fled and were pursued by the Israelites “as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron.”

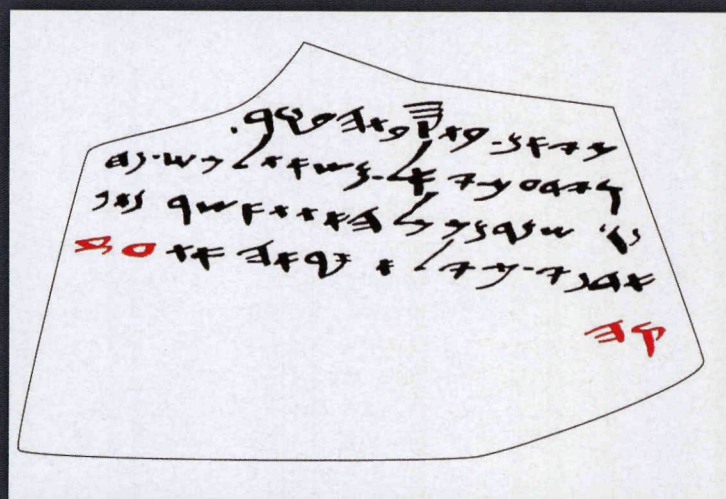


Figure 4. Ostracon number 4 found at the gate of Lachish. After Torczyner 1938.

“And let [my lord] know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications that my lord has given, for we cannot see Azekah.”

It is not clear from the Hebrew Bible what the situation in the region of the Ellah Valley during the Persian period was, but Azekah is mentioned as one of the places where the children of Judah lived: “Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its villages” (Neh 11:30).

Previous Excavations and Surveys at Tel Azekah

Tell Zakariya (Azekah) was one of the first sites to be excavated in the Holy Land. In 1898 the British archaeologist F. J. Bliss, assisted by R. A. S. Macalister, on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund, received permission from the Ottoman rule to dig at four sites, all situated within a 10 km (6 miles) radius in the Judean Shephelah: Tell eš-Šafi (Tel Zafit, identified with Philistine Gath), Tell el-Judeideh (Tel Goded), Tell Šandahana (Mareshah), and Tell Zakariya (fig. 5).

Azekah was excavated for seventeen weeks over three seasons: nine weeks of excavations were conducted at the site between October 27 and December 12, 1898; five additional weeks were conducted between March 20 and April 22, 1899; and three more weeks between September 7 and 26, 1899. Bliss and Macalister published the results of their excavations in four preliminary reports (Bliss 1899a, 1899b, 1899c, 1900) and in the final publication of the excavations of all four sites (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 12–27).

The excavations focused on three different areas in the upper part of the site (fig. 6): the towers at the southwestern edge of the tell; the fortress in the acropolis; and the open area of the surface of the tell, where Bliss and Macalister planned to dig sixteen shafts along three parallel lines, producing sections in the tell from east to west: A-B, C-D, and E-F, as well as a large 80 x 60 foot (17.6 x 23.5 m) “clearance pit” along the line of Section C-D.

Only the foundations of the towers along the southwestern margins of the tell were uncovered; no connecting walls were discovered between them (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 13–14, fig. 4:III–I). At the site itself, Bliss and Macalister differentiated between two main periods: the “Israelite” and “pre-Israelite” (generally meaning the first and the second millennium B.C.E., respectively; see Bliss 1899a, 17, pl. 1; Bliss and Macalister 1902, pl. 2). The fortress was the main structure excavated by Bliss and Macalister. Since excavations were focused on expos-

ing the walls and towers, the dig was carried out in accordance with their outline, following the inner and outer faces of the walls (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 14–23, pl. 3), disconnecting the walls from probable floors, all around the fortress and in many cases down to the bedrock. Inside the fortress, about half of the area was excavated to bedrock. The excavators believed this fortress was built by King Rehoboam (as described in 2 Chr 11), while the upper part was dated to the Hellenistic period (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 23). Reassessment of

the excavations by Yehuda Dagan (2011, 80–83) maintains that the fortress was constructed hundreds of years later, in the late Hellenistic period (second century B.C.E.), probably above walls and remains from earlier periods. The destruction of the fortress was assigned by Dagan to the emerging Hasmonean state in the days of John Hyrcanus I (fig. 7).

During the twentieth century Dagan surveyed Tel Azekah as part of regional surveys of the Shephelah (Dagan 2000, 46–47). According to his results, the site was settled during the Early Bronze Age II–III, Intermediate Bronze Age, Middle

Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, Iron I and II, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods (see Dagan 2011, with further literature).

The Intensive Surface Survey

In 2009 Tel Azekah was subjected to a thorough above-surface archaeological survey and ground-penetrating geophysical survey, as part of the preparation for the renewed archaeological research of the site (the Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition).

The intensive survey was aimed at identifying more precisely the periods during which the site had been settled and at estimating its size and nature during each of those periods. The expedition also used the survey to locate optional excavation areas for the first season of excavation. While we acknowledge the limitations of a surface survey for establishing the history of a settlement, a one-site survey as ours during which a large quantity of artifacts has been collected makes conclusions derived from the survey much more reliable. At Azekah about 4.13 hectares were surveyed, and 18,111 pottery sherds were collected. The surface was divided into nine areas, based on the topography of the site. Again based on

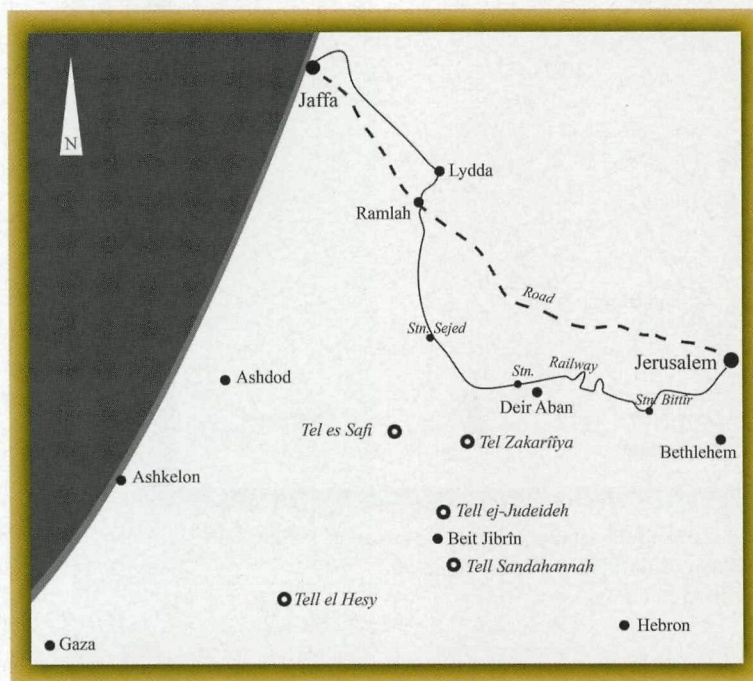


Figure 5. The mounds of the Shephelah. After Bliss and Macalister 1902.

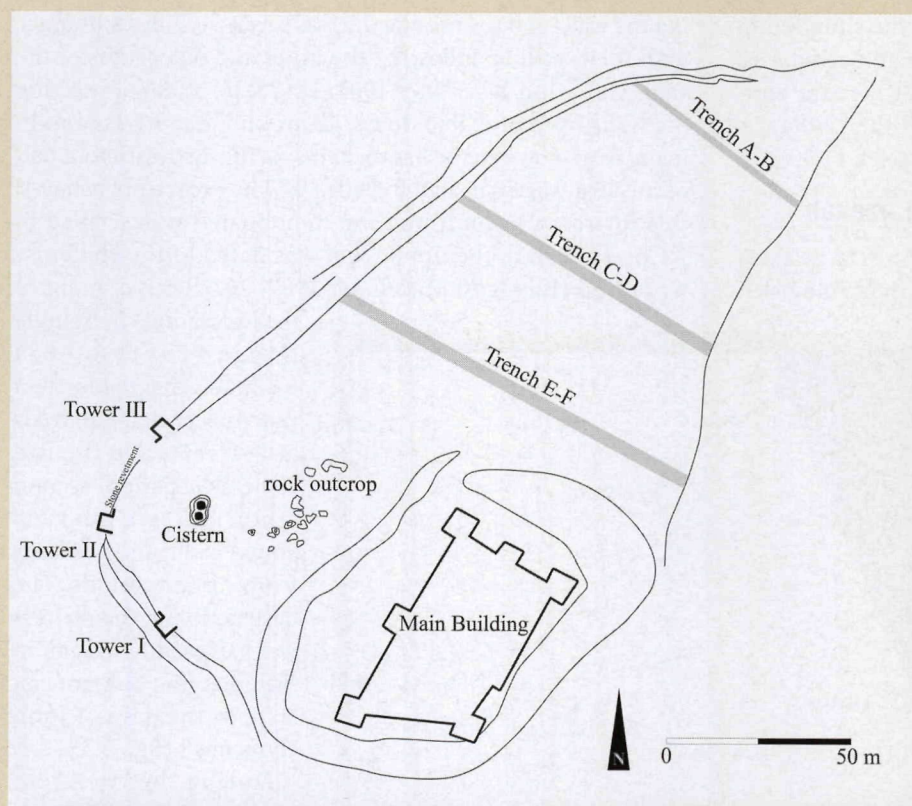
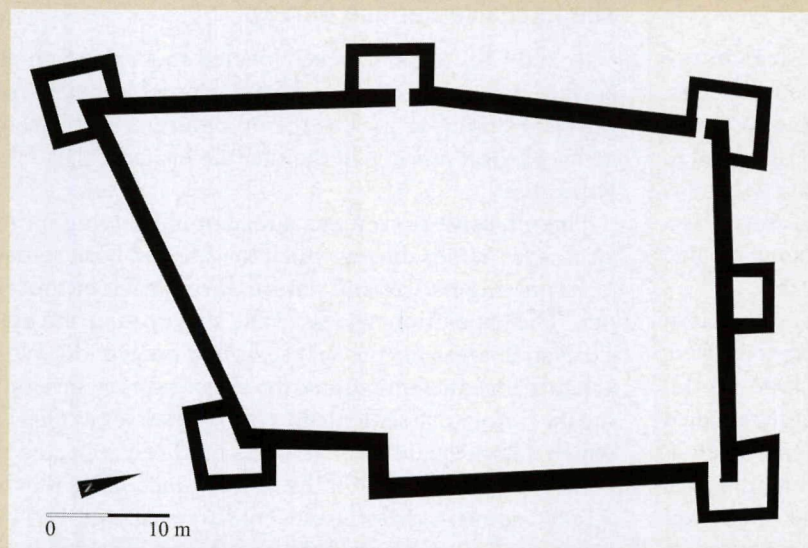


Figure 6. Plan of the summit of Tel Azekah and the citadel, with an indication of the location of the excavations by Bliss and Macalister. After Bliss and Macalister 1902.

Figure 7. Plan of the fortress at Azekah. After Bliss and Macalister 1902.



topography (fig. 8), six of the areas were further divided into survey fields, and each field was given a serial number. This division enabled us to determine the chronology of each field, irrespective of the other fields, and we could thus trace the shifting of the settlements on the surface of the mound in various periods. Although the sizes of the fields were different (50–500 m²), we made sure that the time invested at each field was relatively the same.

Thus 114 fields were surveyed by groups of three to seven surveyors who walked across each field in parallel lines and collected every sherd or artifact they found. All the pottery was washed and sorted, the indicative sherds were marked and kept for analysis, and the others were returned to the site. The information was stored in an electronic database created especially for this research with Filemaker software. The database was designed as a field card catalogue so that it would be easier to approach the data of each field separately.

After all the pottery was studied and the database was completed, maps were created using GIS showing the distribution of the pottery on the terraces of the mound in various periods. These maps helped in defining the spread of the settlement at the site in each period and its size in relation to other periods.

The results of the intensive survey at Tel Azekah show that there were two settlement peaks at the site: the Late Bronze Age and the Iron II. Remains were also found from the following periods: Early Bronze II–III, Middle Bronze IIA, Persian, Late Hellenistic and Early Roman, Late Roman, Byzantine, Early Muslim, and Ottoman (Emmanuilov 2012).

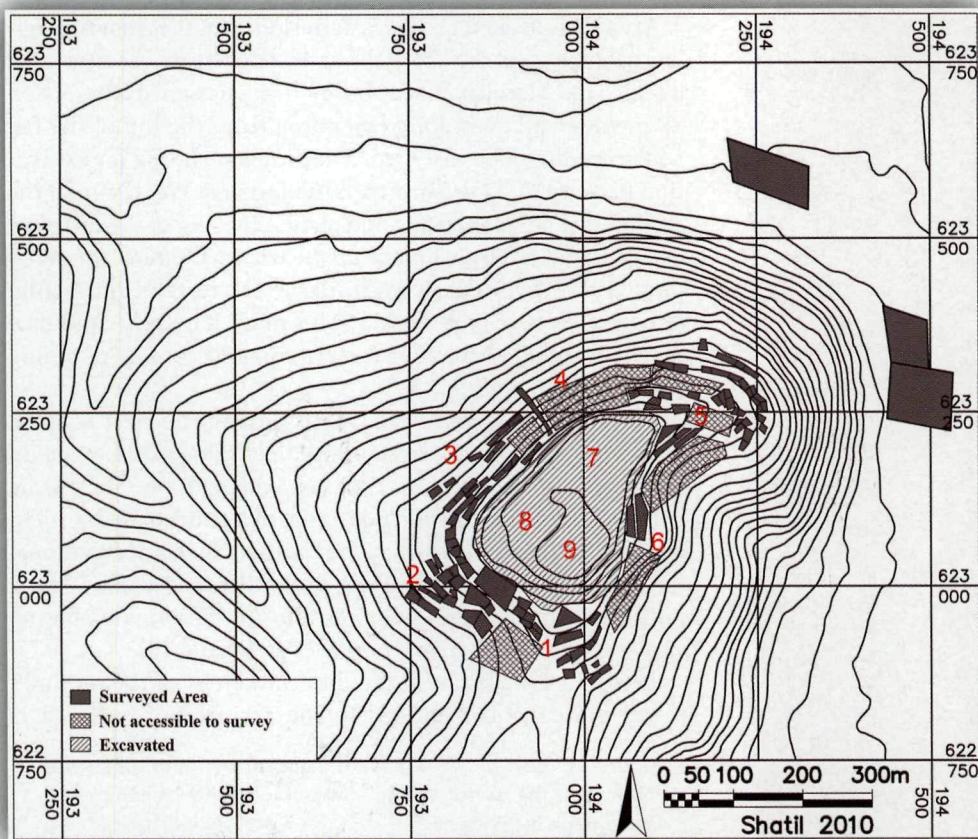


Figure 8. Plan of Tel Azekah with an indication of all survey fields and areas that were not surveyed. Prepared by Shatil Emmanuilov.

Along with the surface survey, a geophysical survey by means of Electrical Resistivity Tomography (2D/3D) was conducted by Dr. Stefan Hecht on behalf of the Geographical Institute of Heidelberg University. By means of different resistivity values, it was possible to distinguish the uppermost layer of loose sediments from the underlying bedrock. Vertical anomalies of different resistivity values provide evidence for buried wall remnants. The geophysical survey showed that there is a fortification wall surrounding at least the western side of the surface of the mound and that there are some architectural remains under the surface of the

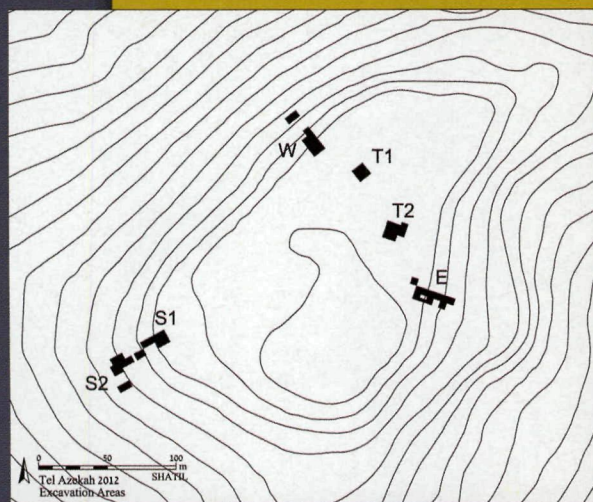


Figure 9 (left). Plan of Tel Azekah showing the five excavation areas. Prepared by Shatil Emmanuilov.

Figure 10 (right). Aerial picture of the mound showing the locations of areas E, T1, T2 and W1. Areas S1 and S2 are located further to the south. Photograph by SkyView.



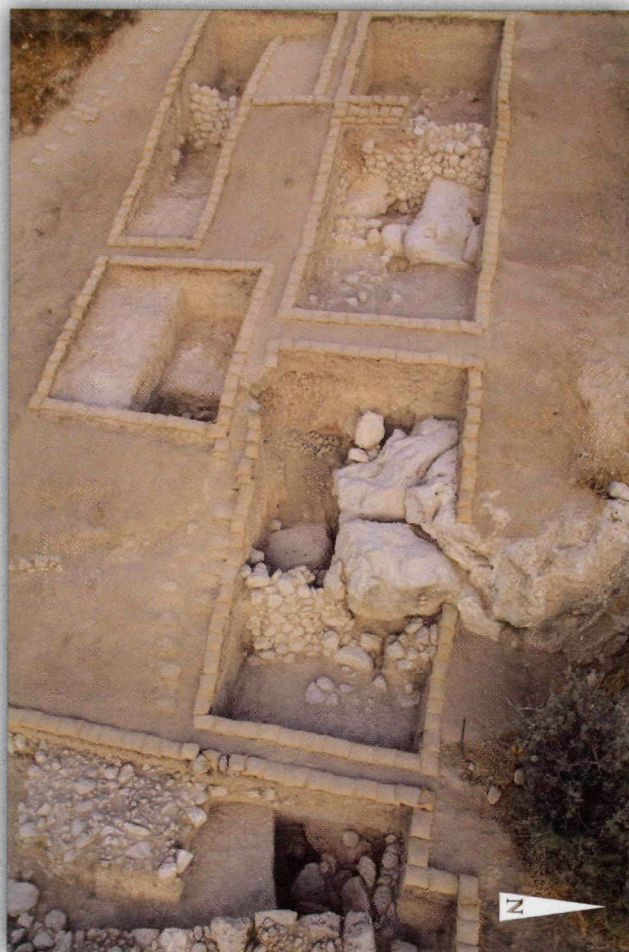


Figure 11 (above). Aerial picture of area E1 at the close of the excavations. Note the two parallel supporting walls. Photograph by SkyView.

Area E1 is located on the eastern slope, southeast of the Hellenistic fortress at the acropolis of the tell, which was excavated by Bliss and Macalister (see above). It was designed as a section 10 m wide and 30 m long extending from the top of the tell and down the slope eastward. The area was chosen for excavation because of its proximity to the fortress. We designed the section in a manner that would allow exposure of the different occupational levels that make up the tell. In addition, the aerial photos also revealed incongruities in the terrain, suggesting structures beneath the surface. This made it a likely candidate for the location of the tell's eastern fortifications or retaining systems.

Eleven squares were excavated during the first season, revealing, as expected, a retaining/defensive system made up of supporting walls and earth fills and dating to the Hellenistic period. Other remains include a massive and isolated Roman building located at the eastern foot of the tell and occupational levels dating to the Hellenistic, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods. Hitherto the section did not reveal remains dating earlier than the Hellenistic period (figs. 11 and 12).

Areas T1 and T2 are located in the center of the mound's lower plateau (as opposed to the acropolis). Area T1 is

Figure 12 (below). Area E1: An isolated building located at the foot of the eastern slope and dating to the Roman period. Photograph by SkyView.



lower southern terrace. These results, among other reasons, helped us decide where to plot excavation squares and areas.

The Renewed Excavations

The renewed Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition was conducted at the site from July 15 to August 24, 2012. Since Bliss and Macalister refilled their excavation trenches, no architectural remains are visible today above the surface of the tell. Further, given that the documentation of previous excavation trenches across the tell is poor, we lack basic knowledge of the sequence of the layers at the site and of the city plan and extent in each of the periods it was settled. In short, there were basic questions about the site's history that had to be dealt with prior to more sophisticated archaeological research. Therefore, we chose to plot the first excavation areas so they would address these very basic concerns. Three sections 10 m wide were excavated along the southern (Area S1), eastern (Area E1), and western (Area W1) slopes. Area S2 was opened at the southern lower terrace of the site, and Areas T1 and T2 were excavated at the top of the mound (see figs. 9 and 10).²



Figure 13 (left). Area T2 as seen from above. Photograph by SkyView.

Figure 14 (right). Area T2: The grinding installation and the destruction debris around it. Photograph by Oded Lipschits.



located in the western sector of the plateau's center (closer to Area W1) and now includes four squares. Area T2 is located in the tell's eastern sector (closer to Area E1) and includes six excavation squares. Areas T1 and T2 are planned in a manner that will allow a wide exposure of the site's upper layers (in contrast to the sections of Areas E1, W1, and S1). Depending on preservation, we hope to gain spatial exposure of the architecture and of the habitation remains within the architectural context.

Thus far we have exposed occupational remains dating to the Hellenistic period and Iron Age in Area T1. Area T2 also

has substantial remains of a destruction layer dating to the Late Bronze II (figs. 13 and 14).

Area W1, located in the northwestern part of the site, was opened in order to create a 10 x 35 m section into the steep northwestern slope of the site. The main objectives of the area were to provide a stratigraphic sequence of the site and to try to locate the boundary of the site and its fortification lines, which could be the cause for the steep escarpment.

In total, nine squares were opened during the six weeks of the first season. The squares were plotted along the entire section from the upper surface of the tell and down to a lower



Figure 15. Area W1, looking east. Note the city fortification wall. Photograph by SkyView.

terrace at the foot of the tell. As expected, the main feature exposed was a solid city wall built of mudbricks positioned on stone foundations. As yet the date of the wall cannot be determined. Occupational remains dating to the Early Middle and Late Bronze Ages as well as the Iron Age have been exposed (fig. 15).

Area S1 is located on the southwestern slope of Tel Aze-kah—from the upper plateau down to Area S2. The area is a section 10 by 30 m. The goal of the excavations in Area S1 (as in Areas E1 and W1) is to expose the stratigraphic sequence of the southern portion of the site. Based on the area's location at the site, we also expect to expose the fortification line of the site and possibly the approach toward a presumed southern or southwestern gate.

Nine squares were excavated, revealing mainly a well-built architectural complex dating to the Late Bronze Age. Other remains, found at a topographically lower part of the section, date to the Early Bronze Age. By the end of 2012 season we

had no information regarding the fortification in this area (fig. 16).

Area S2 is located on the southwestern side of a flat terrace that surrounds the western and southern slopes of the mound. The prior surveys in this area, both above ground and ground-penetrating, raised the possibility that the terrace is part of a “lower city” that existed here during the Late Bronze Age, possibly also during the Iron Age. Another objective for excavating this area is to locate the ascent toward the presumed southern or western gate.

During the first season we opened seven excavation squares located in two clusters. The main result of the 2012 excavation is that the presumed existence of a lower city was confirmed, as public architectural features were found in all the squares just below the slopes. The finds include fragmented architectural remains, among them a water cistern. The remains were dated both to the Late Bronze Age, from which a destruction level was exposed, and to the Iron Age (fig. 17).

The Main Results of 2012 Season

To our delight, we were able to find substantial results in all five areas. It should be noted that, as this season was only the first, the results are preliminary, especially in regard to the dating and nature of the many features revealed. The Late Bronze Age is the most notable period. Architectural remains dated to this period were found in four of the five areas excavated. This seems to confirm the prediction made on the basis of the surface survey that the site reached its zenith during that era.

In Area T2 at the top of the tell, we exposed a building that was violently destroyed. It was probably a domestic unit, but it is too early to determine its exact character. A layer of burnt mudbricks covered the remains of a grinding installation located inside a roofed space. Dozens of intact and restorable bowls, kraters, cooking pot, juglets, jugs, jars, and pixies, alongside clay stoppers, a bead necklace, Egyptian-styled amulets and scarabs, and metal and stone objects were found resting on the floor surrounding the installation. The remains of at least one person caught under the collapsing building were found, hinting at the sudden nature of this catastrophe. More



Figure 16. Aerial view of Areas S1 and S2. Photograph by SkyView.

remains of what seems to be the same Late Bronze destruction were also exposed in Area S2, at the southwestern lower terrace. The nature of the architectural unit in Area S2 is still unclear, but it seems to include a paved public piazza and a water cistern. Large numbers of storage jars found in the destruction of this building indicate that at least one space of this unit functioned as a storage capacity.

A third architectural unit dating to the same period was found in the upper section of Area S1. This unit was built along the southern slope of the tell and used at least one terrace wall to support its different floor levels. It included in it a unique, stone-made staircase. Next to it, an extraordinary preserved set of burnt wooden beams was revealed. The set of beams consists of four horizontally laid beams, probably part of a roof that reached a line of three vertical beams used as poles to support the roof. The floors of the unit were not exposed this season, but since only Late Bronze pottery was found, the date of its abandonment/destruction is certain.

In area W1 we exposed a city wall. This wall, found in a northeast-southwest orientation, is about 4 m wide and includes a stone foundation for a mudbrick superstructure (each brick is 40 x 40 cm); 9 m of the length of the wall was exposed. We have not determined the date of the wall's original construction or when it was terminated. The fills and earth accumulation in Area W1 contained mainly Late Bronze pottery but also Early and Middle Bronze remains. Although it is tempting to connect the wall with the Late Bronze Age, the most substantial period at the site, it is important to note that the continuation of the wall was not revealed in Area S1, nor did we find a similar wall along the eastern slope (Area E1). It is therefore possible that the line of fortification is restricted to the northern parts of the tell and was therefore built when the site was smaller. In this case a Middle Bronze date for the wall seems to be more reasonable.

Other substantial remains found in this first season date to the Hellenistic period. These remains were found mainly in Area E1, and they include a system of two retaining walls built along the eastern slope and an earth fill in between the

two walls. The upper wall was located on the upper part of the slope, and it includes six surviving courses that were built in a stepped formation. A second retaining wall was built 10 m below the upper wall and parallel to it, thus indicating that they were built as part of the same retaining system. Their orientation indicates that they were associated with the fortress. A large volume of earth fill was dumped in between the walls that probably served as underground supporting walls and were not seen above ground. Pottery and coins found in the earth fill date this system to the Late Hellenistic period.

In a number of locations behind and below the retaining system, there appears to be an ash layer containing pottery vessels, coins, and other material culture items. This layer seems to be part of occupational debris dating to the Hellenistic period. It must predate the erection of the supporting walls, but its exact nature will be revealed in the coming seasons.

Other remains from the Hellenistic period, preserved in a very fragmented nature, were found in Areas T1 and T2, just below the surface. The coins collected with these remains seem to date to an earlier phase of the Hellenistic period than the remains of both layers in Area E1. Other than that we did not reveal Hellenistic remains in Areas W1, S1, and S2, indicating that the site was confined to the eastern portion of the tell in those periods, mainly around the citadel. It is interesting to note that Area E1 is also the only area where Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic remains (architecture or pottery), were found, indicating that from the Hellenistic period onward the site was located only at the eastern and northern sections of the mound.

Other periods not as well represented: Early Bronze II–III pottery was found in substantial amounts in Area W1 and the topographically lower squares of Area S1. A domestic architectural unit from the Iron II was found in Area T2. Other scant remains were found in Area S2, the lower terrace. Notably, pottery dating to the Iron IIA and Iron IIB was found in all areas of excavation, indicating that the main remains from these periods is yet to be exposed.

This first season of excavations has given us a profound insight into the nature of the site and its history. It has revealed the material culture of the site and the different periods the site was settled. We hope to spend many more seasons exposing the secrets of the tell that is Azekah. In the years ahead we will deepen our excavations and research, expand the existing areas of excavation, and open new areas, exposing Azekah once again after 113 years and revealing the site once again two thousand years after its initial destruction and desolation.



Figure 17. Area S2: The paved piazza and the entrance into the water cistern, looking south. Photograph by Oded Lipschits.

Notes

1. Many cave openings are visible on the surrounding slopes of the tell, some of which were surveyed by Macalister (1899, 25–36; 1900, 39–53). On the northeastern slope there is a rock terrace in which ancient water cisterns were hewn.

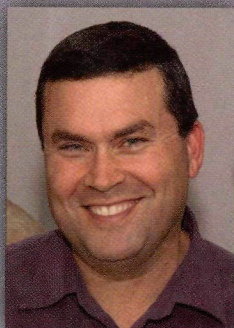
2. The Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition is directed by Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Manfred Oeming under the auspices of the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University and the Theological Seminary (Wissenschaftlich-Theologisches Seminar) of Heidelberg University. The area supervisors were Efrat Bocher (Area E1), Keren Ras (Area S1), Omer Sergi and Robert R. Cargill (Area S2), Ido Koch (Area T1 and Area T2), and Boaz Gross (Area W1). Assistant area supervisors were Christopher Bodine, Carly Crouch, Parker Diggory, Arian Goren, Sarah Hirshberg, Sara Levavi, Sabine Metzger, Madhavi Nevader, Carolyn Patterson, Andrew Pleffer, Shimrit Salem, Nitsan Shalom, Limor Torbatti, and Michal Weinberger. Liora Freud was registrar and pottery expert, Shatil Emmanuilov surveyor, and Ilan Abecassis and Shahar Krispin administrators. More than two hundred students and volunteers took part in the six-week excavation season.

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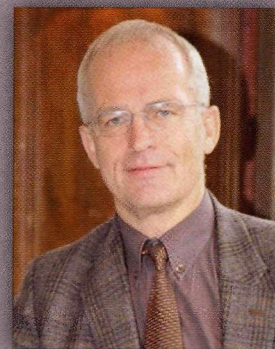
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Oded Lipschits is the Head of the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology and the Head of the International M.A. Program “Archaeology and History of the Land of the Bible” at the Alkow Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, Tel Aviv University. He is co-director of the Ramat Rahel Excavations Project, author of *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Eisenbrauns, 2005), and co-author of *Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Stamp Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah* (Eisenbrauns, 2011).



Yuval Gadot, from the Institute of Archaeology at Tel-Aviv University, is co-director of the Azekah excavations and the Archaeological Director for the European council-supported research program “Ancient Israel: The Exact and Life Sciences Perspective.” Gadot also heads the “Kings Valley Project: Excavations and Surveys at Nahal Rephaim.” He is co-author of *Aphék-Antipatris II: Remains on the Acropolis* (Tel-Aviv University, Nadler Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series, 2009).

Manfred Oeming is a professor of Old Testament Theology at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg, Germany. He is the co-director of the Ramat Rahel Excavations Project and the author of *Einführung in die Biblische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt, 2003), translated into English as *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (2006).



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