The Shephelah during the Iron Age
Recent Archaeological Studies

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

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Tel Burna: A Judahite Fortified Town in the Shephelah

Itzhak Shai

Tel Burna, located along the northern banks of Wadi Guvrin (fig. 1), is in the heart of the Judean Shephelah, one of Israel’s most intensively researched regions. Yet, until our current project began, the site was one of the few multi-period settlements in the region that remained unexcavated. As attested by a wide range of evidence (Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian texts; biblical passages), this region served as a borderland in the Bronze and, especially, in the Iron Age, when Judahites and Philistines settled on opposite sides of the border. On account of this, when the current project at Tel Burna was first initiated, one of the main research goals was to study border sites in ancient periods. After six seasons of field work, the preliminary results on the Iron Age remains at the site are presented here, discussing the material culture of the inhabitants and examining how it reflects the role of Tel Burna as a border site.

Biblical Identification

Whenever one investigates a site in this region, the site’s ancient identification cannot and should not be avoided. While more often than not we cannot be certain of a site’s ancient identity, considering the question opens the possibility of linking a ruin with a site mentioned in the texts available to us. Regardless of the problematic nature of the texts, they offer us another source of information on the past. Some scholars (e.g., Rainey 1983: 3; Na’aman 2013) have claimed that Tel Burna should be identified with biblical Libnah, while others such as Tappy argue that Libnah should be placed elsewhere; Tappy (2008: 386) identifies Libnah with the nearby site of Tel Zayit.

The biblical passages refer to Libnah as a Canaanite town that was conquered by Joshua, who then allotted it to the tribe of Judah (Josh 10:29–30; 15:42). The

1. The Tel Burna Excavation Project was initiated and directed by Dr. Joe Uziel and the author. As of 2013, the project is directed solely by the author, while Uziel continues to contribute his ideas, thoughts, and views in the analysis and publications of the finds. Funding for the project was provided by Ariel University and the Samaria & Jordan Rif R&D Center.

2. For an in-depth study of the identification of the site, see Suriano, Shai, and Uziel (in press; cf. also McKinny and Dagan 2013).
city was then chosen as one of the Levitical cities (Josh 21:13), which may point to its role as a border site (Rainey and Notley 2006: 127). According to 2 Kgs 8:22 (and 2 Chr 21:10), Libnah rebelled against Jehoram king of Judah in the mid-ninth century BCE and was besieged by Sennacherib during the reign of Hezekiah in the late eighth century BCE (2 Kgs 19:8; Isa 37:8). Later, a woman from Libnah (Ḥamutal) married King Josiah in the seventh century BCE (2 Kgs 23:31–32; 2 Kgs 24:17–18; Jer 22:11), which may indicate the importance of the site along the border and the attempt by this king to create a political bond through marriage between the capital and its frontier. While there are other candidates for the location of ancient Libnah (including nearby Tel Zayit), the results of the archaeological project at Tel Burna support the identification of the site with biblical Libnah (see below).

Iron Age I

Currently, no Iron Age I remains have been uncovered in our excavations. However, sherds of this period (including Philistine pottery; see Uziel and Shai 2010a: fig. 13:5) were collected during the surface survey, and a few were discovered in the excavations, but without a stratified context. The estimated settled area of the site during this period is 2 hectares (Uziel and Shai 2010a: 234, fig. 12). Therefore, it appears that, although the history of the Iron II settlement of Tel Burna correlates

Fig. 1. Map of the Shephelah, with the location of Tel Burna.
with the Iron II sequence at nearby Lachish, the Iron Age I history seems different—but this conclusion must remain tentative until the details are clarified through excavation. It is important to note that the western slopes of the site were not covered with Iron Age I pottery, which may lead us to the conclusion that, while there was contact between the inhabitants of Tel Burna and the people of the coastal plain (i.e., the Philistines), as indicated by the presence of Philistine pottery, the inhabitants of Tel Burna preferred to live on the summit and the eastern and northern slopes. This preference may be related to their desire for security, since the western slopes faced the most powerful force of the time, the Philistines.

The Iron Age Casemate Wall

The summit is defined by the distinct remains of fortification walls that have created a flat, almost square area of 70 × 70 meters (fig. 2). The fortification walls were already partially exposed along the perimeter of the upper tell, and the excavations thus far have revealed a segment of these walls in the northeast corner of the summit (fig. 3). The fortifications of Tel Burna were in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. The discovery of a seventh century BCE silo that cuts the inner wall of the fortifications provides a terminus ante quem for the wall. Although the outer wall may have continued to function, the inner wall clearly went out of use by the seventh century BCE. The Iron Age II wall reflects the role of the site
during this period. The material culture associated with the Iron Age II remains (see below) clearly indicates that this site was under Judah’s influence. Therefore, its location just between Gath (Tell es-Safi), the main Iron Age IIA city of the Philistines (e.g., Maeir 2012), and Lachish, the Judahite administration center in this region (Ussishkin 2004) explains why this casemate wall was constructed. The small summit that was enclosed by the wall was most probably used as a stronghold; on the one hand, it has a clear view toward the north (i.e., to Philistine Gath) and, on the other, it controlled the road running west–east through the Guvrin Valley. This supports the idea that the Kingdom of Judah was active in this region already in the Iron Age IIA (see also Na’aman 2013: 254–55 regarding Libnah; Ussishkin 2014: 14–15)—not only after the destruction of Stratum A3 at Tell es-Safi/Gath (e.g., Fantalkin and Finkelstein 2006: 30–31; Koch 2012: 59–63).

Iron Age IIA

To date, Iron IIA remains have been uncovered in both areas on the summit and its eastern slope (A2 and A1 respectively), exposing parts of a ninth-century-BCE stratum (fig. 4). A surface (L21216) was exposed in Area A1 adjacent to a small installation (L21225) built of field-stones. On top of the installation, several loom weights were uncovered, alongside ninth-century-BCE pottery. Another surface was discovered east of the fortification wall; on it were smashed Iron Age IIA vessels, indicating that the settlement was not limited to the fortified summit during this phase. In Area A2, in the middle of the summit, the ninth-century-BCE remains were found in very small areas excavated beneath the eighth-century-BCE building (see below). Though not very much of this phase has been exposed yet, several points can be highlighted.

3. For a discussion of the casemate wall, its date, and function, see Shai et al. (2012: 141–57).
1. The summit was enclosed by the casemate fortification from at least the ninth century BCE (fig. 3; Shai et al. 2012: 154).

2. The settlement was not limited to the fortified summit but extended outside of the walls. This indicates that the site was not only a stronghold but was also settled beyond the fortified summit, which probably served as an administrative center, due to its location between Lachish, Azekah, and the nearby Philistine city of Gath.

3. Although the pottery assemblage is very limited, it seems much more like the pottery from Lachish Levels V–IV (Zimhoni 2004) than that from Tell es-Safi/Gath Stratum A3 (Shai and Maeir 2012), with certain types, more indicative of Philistine traditions, missing. For example, Late Philistine Decorated Ware (LPDW), which is considered to be a Philistine marker (see, e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al. 2004), is rare at Tel Burna.

4. The location of Tel Burna—midway between Gath, the dominant Philistine city in the Iron Age IIA, and Lachish, the main Judean city, monitoring the road along Nahal Guvrin, with visibility all the way to the coastal plain—would account for investment by the central authority of Judah in establishing a fortified town so close to the regional administrative center of Lachish.

**Iron Age IIB**

Although the summit was fortified and enclosed by a casemate wall, the settlement was not limited to this plateau and was much larger, perhaps reaching its
peak in size during Iron IIB (ca. 8 hectares: Uziel and Shai 2010a: 238; see also Shai and Uziel 2014; Uziel et al. 2014). The main architectural phases dating to the Iron Age IIB (eighth century BCE) were discovered in both of the excavated areas on the summit, A1 and A2.

Area A1

As mentioned above, the casemate wall continued to be in use during this period (fig. 4). This is demonstrated by a surface (21210) that abuts the inner casemate wall (W12006). The pottery found on this surface includes wheel-burnished sherds and typical eighth-century-BCE forms (Shai et al. 2012: 148–49, fig. 10). Hence, it is clear that during the Iron Age IIB the summit was enclosed by a casemate wall.

Area A2

In the center of the tell (A2), a portion of a typical four-room house was uncovered (fig. 5). In several areas, the remains were damaged by later intrusions (mostly modern), but the plan of the building is clear. Its orientation is north–south/east–west and its size is ca. 12 × 15 m. Two massive monolithic pillars were discovered, and it is possible there were at least two more in the original plan of the building. The orientation of the three perpendicular rooms is east–west and the horizontal room is oriented north–south. Smashed vessels were discovered in the northwest corner of the northern room, buried under the accumulation of the destruction level. The vessels represent the ceramic horizon of the end of the eighth century BCE and, therefore, it is tempting to correlate these smashed vessels with Sennacherib’s campaign (701 BCE), although it is too early to determine if the destruction was due to local forces or something more elaborate.

North of this building, there is a pavement (25404) made of flat field-stones in an area of 6 × 2 m. It is bordered by Building 32417 on the south and Wall 25406 on the north. The latter was built with a row of pillar bases and, most likely in a later phase, was filled with smaller field-stones in between the pillar bases. A door socket is located east of the wall leading to a beaten-earth floor (25405). Smashed complete vessels were found on the floor, as well as a concentration of about 30 loom-weights next to an installation made of 3 carved chalk stones placed on their narrow side and covered with plaster. This may have been part of a domestic installation used for textile production.

Iron Age IIC

Above the eighth-century-BCE remains is the last Iron Age II stratum, which dates to the late Iron Age. This phase was found in Areas A1 and A2 and consists of silos and related architectural elements (fig. 6). The silos are lined with stone and in few a cases cut into the earlier remains, as is clearly demonstrated in Silo 15006, which used the earlier eighth-century-BCE pavement (25404) as its base. The silos
Fig. 5. Plan of the Four-Room House.
yielded archaeobotanical remains that were recovered through the flotation of sediments. The diameter of most of the silos is ca. 1 m, yet one silo (32101) is exceptional: it is built of medium-sized field-stones, with a diameter of almost 2.5 m and a depth of 1.25 m.

Archaeobotanical analysis of Silo 32101 yielded 16 different crop taxa and 32 wild plant taxa (Shai et al. 2014: 127–28, table 1). Fig seeds occur in the largest quantities. The second most abundant crop residue is barley, which is followed by linseed and wheat grains. The latter show characteristics both of free-threshing and emmer wheat grains but most probably represent a tetraploid wheat form. So far, chaff remains have not been discovered, except one rachis internode of barley. This implies that the silos were used for storage and that the residues found are not due to their use as refuse pits; in all likelihood, then, crop-processing did not take place in the immediate vicinity of the silo.

The pottery assemblage includes types that are well attested in the late eighth century BCE, side by side with forms that are typical of the seventh century BCE (for a detailed description, see Shai et al. 2014). This is due to the nature of the sediment in the silo, which seems to have been backfilled after it ceased to be used at the end of the Iron Age or perhaps even later during the building activity that took place during the Persian period. Additionally, three stamped jar-handles were found in Silo 32101: one of the LMLK type, one of the Rosette type, and a private or official seal (see below and Shai et al. 2014).
The Finds

Ceramic Assemblage

The ceramic repertoire reflects the three main Iron Age strata: Iron Age IIA, IIB, and IIC. It should be noted that these three assemblages include the whole range of classes—storage, cooking, and serving vessels. The assemblage is typical of Iron Age II Judah, as implied by the LMLK and Rosette seal types, the cooking vessels, a lamp with raised disc-base, the decanter, the Judean folded-rim bowl, and so on. However, it is also important to note that a few of the cooking vessels are made of highly fired clay with silty and rounded sand quartz. The quartz grains look like beach sand found on the coast; nonetheless, this sand could have been added intentionally as temper in order to improve the quality of this vessel for use as a cooking pot; alternatively, perhaps the provenance of this vessel is coastal. The provenance study⁴ revealed various groups of pottery representing sources in the Judean Shephelah but possibly also on the neighboring coastal plains and central hills.

Stamped Handles

Several stamped handles of the common Judean style were found, including a LMLK type,⁵ a Rosette type, and a private or official seal bearing the names לְעָזָר/חֶבְי (fig. 7). The letters are consistent with the standard forms seen in the

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⁴. The petrographic analysis was conducted by Dr. David Ben-Shlomo and supported by the Samaria and the Jordan Rift Regional R&D Center.
⁵. For a recent discussion and assessment of the function and dating of the LMLK seal impressions, see Lipschits et al. 2010; 2011; cf. also Ussishkin 2011; 2012; Lipschits 2012.
eight and seventh centuries Hebrew seal impressions. This set of names, ʿĒzer and Ḥaggî, appears on jar handles from two other sites in the Shephelah: Azekah and Gezer. While these other two may be stamped with the same seal, the stamped handle from Tel Burna is somewhat different. The fact that these seals come from the same area (the Shephelah) and time period (Iron Age II) suggests that they belong to a single person by the name of Ezer. The name Ezer occurs as a patronymic for a name that appears on various seals found at Beth-Shemesh and Lachish, which read “belonging to Ṣāpôn [son of] ʿĒzer” (Barkay and Vaughn 1996: 42–44). The occurrence of this name in multiple seals and as a patronymic on similar seals may indicate that this person held an important role within the kinship-based social network of Iron Age Judah.

The presence of materials relating to the Judahite administrative system dating to both the Iron Age IIB and IIC demonstrates beyond any doubt that the site was controlled by the Kingdom of Judah during this period.

Judean Pillar Figurines

Several Judean pillar figurines were found; the best-preserved (fig. 8) example has a face formed in a mold. This technique is common in the Iron Age II and can be found, for example, in Jerusalem (e.g., Darby 2011: 304–7; 2014; Ben Shlomo and Darby 2014). As noted by Kletter (1996), the Judean Pillar Figurines are typical of Judahite material culture, and their distribution clearly defines the border of the kingdom (see also Byrne 2004). It has also been shown that Judean Pillar Figurines usually were locally made, at each site (see, for example, Kletter 1999; Darby 2011: 308; Ben Shlomo and Darby 2014). Furthermore, the presence of several such
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figurines at Tel Burna suggests that the inhabitants of the site shared ritual practices or beliefs with other Judahite centers.

Loom Weights

As mentioned above, the remains of textile production facilities were exposed in two locations. The first was in Area A1 and is assigned to the Iron Age IIA. The second was discovered in Area A2 and is associated with Iron Age IIB. In addition to the loom-weight concentrations, these contexts also include the remains of installations. The earlier installation (L21225) was built of small field-stones that defined the area of the loom-weights. It is worth noting that installation L21225 abuts the inner casemate wall, which supports the conclusion that the fortification should be dated at least as early as the ninth century BCE and that domestic daily life activity took place in the area enclosed by the wall. The second (and later) installation (L42308) included about 30 loom-weights and 3 chalk stones covered with plaster. The purpose of the latter seems to have been to serve as a drain for liquid that may have been used in textile production. If this is the case, then we may have evidence of industrial or at least non-domestic textile production, but it is too early to be certain that this conclusion is correct.

Discussion

Thus far, the excavations at Tel Burna have revealed evidence of an Iron Age II Judahite town. The town was established at least by the ninth century BCE, and it was during this period that the summit was enclosed by a casemate wall. It seems that the main reason behind this construction was the strategic location of the site between the main Iron IIA Philistine city in the region, Tell es-Safi/Gath, and the main Judahite administrative center in the Shephelah, Lachish. Accordingly, even though the settlement was limited to the summit, the town could have easily served as a stronghold with a clear view toward Philistine Gath and to the west over the coastal plain.6

The large four-room house located on the summit is well-dated to the eighth century BCE and, along with the presence of the LMLK and “private” stamped handles, verifies that Tel Burna was at this time part of Judah both culturally and politically. Moreover, the stamped handle that bears the names ʿĒzer and Ḥaggî, which are also found at other sites in the Shephelah (Gezer and Azekah), probably means that this person was an officer of the administration who was active in the region.

The site continued to be settled in the last century of the Kingdom of Judah, as attested by the series of silos and some other architectural elements. This supports the suggested identification of the site with biblical Libnah, because, according

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6. For a suggestion about the line of Judahite fortresses including Tel Hesi and Tel Erani, see Master et al. 2014.
to the biblical testimony, Josiah’s wife came from Libnah (e.g., 2 Kgs 23:31–32; 24:17–18; Jer 22:11; see Suriano et al. in press).

The Iron Age sequence at Tel Burna strengthens the idea that it was a border site located on the western frontier of the Kingdom of Judah. The long life of the casemate fortification wall (at least 200 years) supports this conclusion; it is significant for understanding the site’s role during the biblical period and for identifying the biblical name of the city.

Stable carbon isotope analysis on ancient cereal grains has recently developed into an independent tool that permits the analysis of whether water stress played a role during the grain-filling period of the plant in antiquity (e.g., Araus et al. 1997; Fraser et al. 2013; Riehl and Shai 2015). Although low δ13C values in arid and semi-arid environments indicate water stress, high δ13C values may be due to naturally available moisture, irrigation, or other unknown factors (Fraser et al. 2013). Stable carbon isotope data from Tel Burna indicate optimal soil moisture availability in the surroundings of the settlement, which actually increased in the Iron Age IIC when compared to the previous Iron Age IIB (Riehl and Shai 2015). These favorable conditions enabled profitable cultivation even of crop species with high water requirements, as indicated by the archaeobotanical remains from storage facilities.

Assuming that the archaeobotanical remains at Tel Burna represent local crop production, they indicate relatively favorable growing conditions during the Iron Age II (Riehl and Shai 2015: 524–25). The typical Mediterranean set of crop species—olive, grape, and fig—is well-represented, accompanied by wheat, barley, pulses, and linseed (Shai et al. 2014; Riehl and Shai 2015). Cereals usually represent the dominant proportion of seed finds in agricultural sites not involved in trade. At Tel Burna, cereals account for only slightly more than 50% of the seeds. The crop species at Tel Burna occur in relatively equal amounts, although fig seeds may be somewhat overrepresented at the site due to their numerous seeds per distribution unit, indicating a broad-spectrum economy rather than highly specialized monocropping. We recognize neither a focus on a specific crop plant, which would be expected with surplus production conveyed to a regional or supra-regional trade network, nor do we see environmental fluctuation toward poorer conditions in the time from Iron Ages IIB to IIC, which could have led to an abandonment of individual crop species. Any indication of highly specialized agriculture or even a collapsing economy at Tel Burna is, therefore, lacking.

In particular, the finds of linseed (Riehl and Shai 2015: 530–31) provide an illuminating insight into crop-production patterns. The comparatively large number of flax seeds and a ubiquity of 100% at Tel Burna make it clear that the plant was an important crop species at this location. The presence of oil-rich linseed may indicate that it was a preferred ancient product for consumption, for seed for sowing, its use as an oil crop, or for growing flax for linen production. The two varieties, flaxseed and linseed, differ slightly in their water requirements, but they are both drought-susceptible and require at least 400 mm of annual precipitation to thrive.
Seed flax requires approximately three times more available water than wheat or barley. As a general tendency, it can be noted that warmer and drier climate conditions stimulate seed growth in flax, whereas moister and cooler conditions foster length growth in the fibers. Flax is mentioned in the Bible on several occasions but always in relation to textile production and not as an oil crop, which would support the argument that agro-ecological conditions were sufficiently moist. The critical water requirement period for flax is from flowering to just prior to seed ripening, which takes approximately 3 months. In the course of the growing season, crop water use may be as high as 410 mm. Thus, flax cultivation at Tel Burna would have been possible without additional irrigation. Even if irrigation would have been necessary to buffer against inter-annual rainfall variability, the fact that linseed is ubiquitously represented at the site indicates that water availability should not have been a major problem during Iron Ages IIB and IIC (Riehl and Shai 2015: 532).

When we set out to study the site, one of the primary research questions that interested us was the role of borders in the southern Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages (Uziel and Shai 2010b). The results of the excavations thus far clearly point to Tel Burna being a Judahite site. This conclusion is supported by the architecture, as seen in both the four-room house (e.g., Bunimovitz and Faust 2003; Faust 2012: 213–29; and see Maeir’s [2013] critique) and the casemate fortifications (e.g., Shai et al. 2012 and additional references there), the pottery assemblage, the administrative system as reflected in the presence of the stamped jar handles, and the pillar figurines. This is particularly remarkable in light of the results of the excavations at Tell es-Safi/Gath, where the excavations yielded only a few pillar figurines in a large exposure of Iron Age IIB strata (e.g., Dagan 2014). Furthermore, stamped jar handles also were found at Tell es-Safi/Gath. Thus, it seems that it, too, site was part of the Judahite administration system in the late eighth century BCE (e.g., Maeir 2012). As such, while the Judahite affiliation of the inhabitants of Tel Burna in the eighth century BCE is clear, one may wonder who the inhabitants of Gath during the eighth century BCE were. Although it is possible that the presence of seventh-century-BCE remains at Tel Burna, in contrast with the lack of such remains at Gath (e.g., Maeir 2012; although note two Rosette handles found in the survey: Uziel and Maeir 2005), has contributed to our sense that Judahite cultural attributes are more common at Tel Burna. Nonetheless, further study and comparison of both assemblages, as well as expansion of the excavations of the Iron Age II strata from both sites, may lead to interesting assessments concerning the populations at both sites and the effects of political control and proximity to borders on local material culture.
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