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Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba

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VIII ii 8; *Apio* I 17, 18.) And as far wider circles than the professional scribes could understand the writing,<sup>40</sup> they could read any such texts to which they had access, the last being the controlling factor.

It is submitted, therefore, that the indications of ancient usage contradict any idea of writing not being used for "formal literature" at a date as early as the Judges in Israel and allow, rather, the conclusion that both Canaanites and Israelites had the means to record and read anything they wanted, from brief receipt to lengthy victory poem, from a private letter to a state treaty. Whether they actually did so is not within the power of epigraphic evidence cited to reveal, but it does allow the possibility.

Here we reach the limit of our study. The questions of literacy and its extent inevitably follow from thoughts on the use of writing, but we have been concerned to show simply that writing was theoretically within the competence of any ancient Israelite, not the prerogative of an elite professional class alone, and to show that it was, in fact, quite widely practiced.

## Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba

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Four seasons of excavation have been carried out at Tel Beer-sheba, begun in 1969 as the central educational project of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology. The tell is situated on the outskirts of modern Beer-sheba (Hebrew, Beer Sheva), surrounded by the Hebron and Beer-sheba wadis which meet to its west. Its identification with biblical Beer-sheba is generally accepted since this is the only true city-mound in the vicinity; and the ancient name has been preserved in the Arabic name of the mound, Tell es-Seba'. The only scholar who doubted this identification was Albrecht Alt.<sup>1</sup> From the prominent appearance of the artificial mound he concluded that this was a place of Bronze age fortifications, and the biblical tradition preserved no remembrance of a Canaanite city at Beer-sheba. Alt's argument may be right; however, his observations were wrong. No Canaanite city existed at Tel Beer-sheba. Our excavations showed that the city was founded only in the Iron age; and one of our great surprises was an unusually strong fortification of that period, creating the imposing mound (Fig. 8) which misled the venerable scholar.

40. A warning such as that engraved in the shaft of the tomb of Ahiram would have had no meaning to an illiterate robber or a casual laborer: photograph, etc., in M. Dunand, *Revue Biblique*, XXXIV (1925), Pl. VIII; text in H. Donner, W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften* (1968-69), No. 2).

1. A. Alt, *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, XV (1935), 320ff.; reprinted in *Kleine Schriften* III, pp. 432ff.

#### The Rampart and Glacis

The defenses of the city were examined in a deep trench near the northeast corner of the tell (see No. 4 in general plan, Fig. 14). In order to give the tell its commanding view over the whole area, an artificial rampart *ca.* 6-7 m. high was constructed, surrounded by a moat at least 4-5 m. deep. It was constructed of layers — red wadi-material and pebbles, earth and ashes — and was covered by a steep glacis made of two layers of brick material divided by a layer of ashes (Fig. 9). Huge earthworks of this kind from the Israelite period, reminiscent of the Hyksos fortifications, have been discovered here for the first time. They attest



Fig. 8. Aerial view of the tell.

to the large effort given to the fortification of the city. On the other hand, they may be a special feature used in the southern part of the country. This possibility has been suggested through the discovery of similar earthworks of the Israelite period at Tel Malḥata (Tell el-Milḥ), during excavations carried out by Dr. M. Kochavi in the framework of our Arad and Beer-sheba expeditions. One should ask if these are not the type of fortifications called *ḥgr*, plural *ḥgrm*, in the Shishak list. As Professor B. Mazar has shown, the meaning of *ḥagar* is probably "fort,"

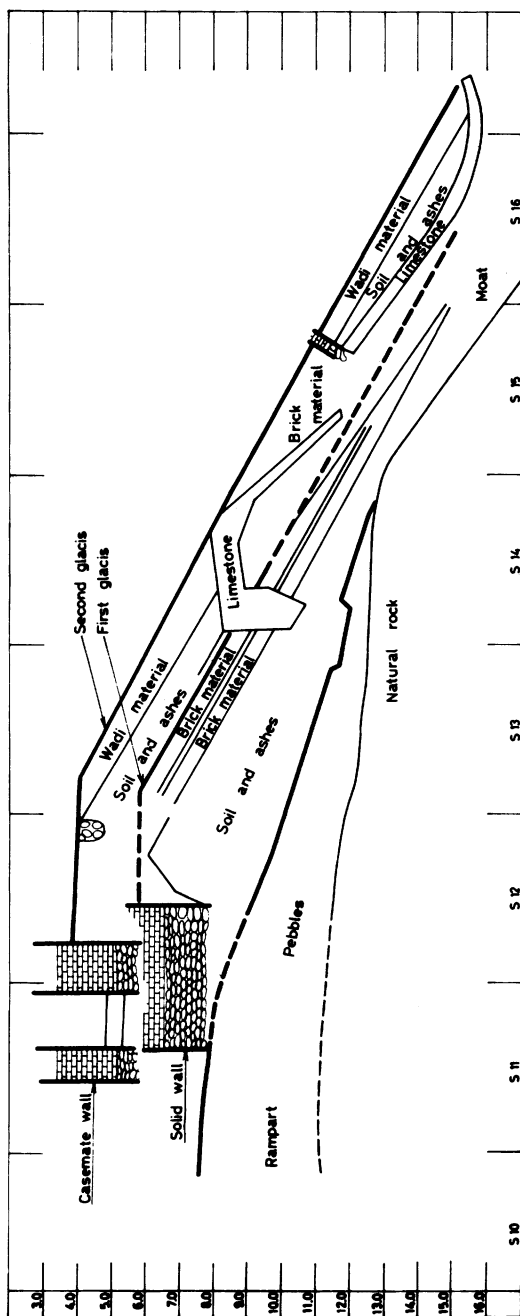


Fig. 9. Schematic section through Iron age fortifications

derived from the root *hgr* — “gird oneself.”<sup>2</sup> Shishak mentions in his list “the Hagarim (forts) Great Arad and Arad of the House of Yeroham (the Jerahmeelite?).” It seems to me very probable that Tel Malḥata was the Jerahmeelite Arad which figures also in the conquest traditions.<sup>3</sup> Thus it becomes probable that the term *hagarim* indicated these special “girding” glacis of the large Negev fortifications.

This brings us to the question of the dates of these defenses. On the floors of the earliest structures built on the rampart, 10th century B.C.E. pottery was found. The same is true at Tel Malḥata, and also the first fortress at Tel Arad was erected in the 10th century. The chain of strong fortifications on the border of the desert originated evidently in the days of the United Kingdom. It is true that a settlement of the 11th-12th century B.C.E. existed at Tel Beer-sheba, but it was probably unfortified. Was this the Beer-sheba of the pre-monarchical period with its patriarchal traditions in which the sons of Samuel judged the people (I Sam. 8:2)?

This is not the only question connected with the historical topography of Beer-sheba. The Iron age city did not continue until the end of the First Temple period but was destroyed about a century earlier, probably during the campaign of Sennacherib. True, sometime later the wall was repaired for a last time by a retaining wall leaning against it; but so far no structures belonging to this latest Iron age phase have been discovered. Either a rebuilding was attempted but not completed, or — and this seems more probable — only a few structures in the center of the tell were repaired together with the wall. In any case, from this time on no true settlement existed on the tell, only fortresses surrounded by some domestic structures. Where was Beer-sheba of Josiah from which he brought the priests to Jerusalem (II Kings 23:8) and where was “Beer-sheba and its villages” mentioned among the villages of Judah in Nehemiah 11:27?

There seems to be only one answer: Iron-age remains have been discovered at various sites in the vicinity of Beer-sheba and especially at the area of the “Old City” of the modern town beneath the Roman-Byzantine Bersabee. Most have been discovered by chance finds. Some are as early as the 12th-11th century and some have distinctive 7th century pottery. These were probably the civilian dwellings near the wells and the arable fields, and only the central royal establishment was on the prominent tell.

2. B. Mazar, *Jubilee Volume Presented to J. N. Epstein* (1950), pp. 316-319 (Hebrew); *idem*, *Vetus Testamentum*, Suppl. IV (1957), p. 64.

3. Y. Aharoni, *BA*, XXXI (1968), 31f.

So far so good, but where was the sanctified well of the patriarchal traditions near which Abraham planted his tamarisk tree (Gen. 21:33)? Comparing it with the Kenite highplace at Arad, surrounded by the civilian settlement, Abraham's highplace might be on the prominent hill surrounded by the riverbeds near which the wells were located.

Today, the nearest well is about one kilometer from the tell, but the course of the riverbed changes and with it the location of the dependent water level. We may assume that the royal citadel demanded a safe water provision; and indeed, evidence for this was produced by the

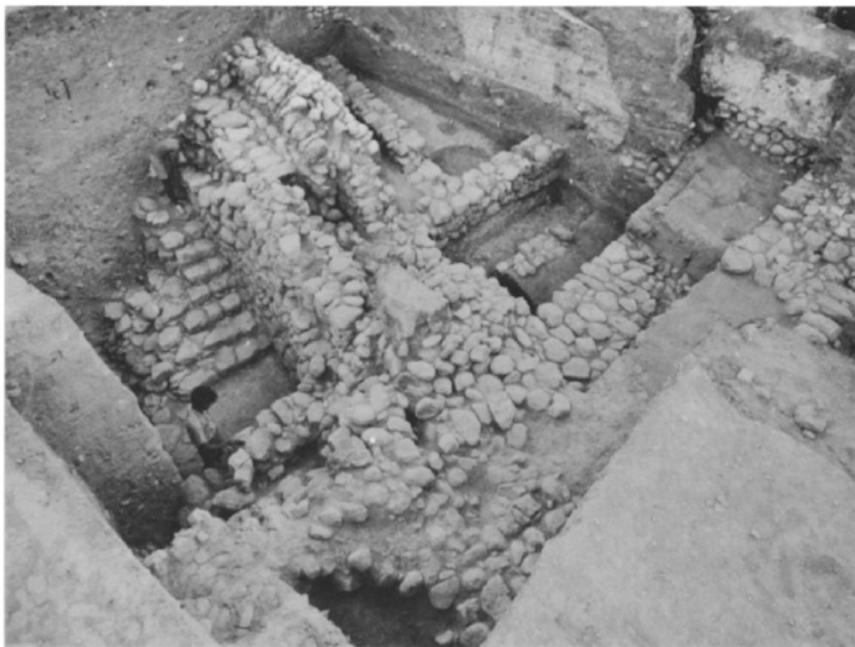


Fig. 10. Steps leading to water system (left); the city walls (right).

excavation. At the eastern corner of the city, a shaft, *ca.* 17 m. square, was discovered, encircled by a flight of broad steps (Fig. 14, No. 3). So far, only one corner of it has been excavated (Fig. 10) which resembles the entrances to the water systems at Megiddo, Hazor, and other sites, which led through tunnels to a water source. This makes it very probable that in antiquity the water level of the wells was near the tell.

If the venerable highplace related to Abraham was on the tell, may we perhaps assume that the new citadel of Beer-sheba was called "Fort of Abraham" and that this is the "*hgr 'brm*" of the Shishak list?



Fig. 11. The two superimposed city walls: beneath the horizontal scale is the solid wall, above it the casemate wall.

#### The City Walls

Two successive walls were uncovered, both built on the rampart with sun-dried bricks on stone foundations (Fig. 11). The earlier is a solid wall *ca.* 4 m. thick with offsets and insets. Houses and floor levels attached to it contain typical hand-burnished ware of the 10th century B.C.E. It existed during two strata (V-IV); after its final destruction, early in the 9th century, a casemate wall was built on its foundations and strengthened by a new, higher glacis made of layers of grey soil and wadi material and resting on limestone revetments. The width of the casemates is identical with that of casemate walls discovered at other Iron age sites like Samaria, Hazor, Ramat Raḥel, Tell Beit Mirsim, and Arad, i.e. 1.6 m. (three cubits) for the external wall and 1.05 m. (two cubits) for the internal wall. It also existed during two strata (III-II) and was destroyed by a conflagration dated towards the end of the 8th

century. Hundreds of intact pottery vessels were found in the destruction level and among them the distinctive 7th century types are absent, like the high disc-base lamp, the metallic groove-rimmed cooking pot, and the pink spiral-burnished "folded-rim" bowl.

The two types of city walls found at Beer-sheba are well-known from other Iron age sites. Their succession and dating, however, shed new light on the old debate about their alternative use. At Hazor we discovered a 10th century casemate wall overlaid by a 9th century solid wall. That was the foundation of Professor Yadin's theory that in the period of the United Kingdom only casemate walls were built, and that after their collapse under the blows of the new Assyrian battering ram, solid walls became the standard fortification of the two kingdoms until their end.<sup>4</sup> However, at Beer-sheba we now have an early solid wall and a 9th-8th century casemate wall, both in a well-planned and strongly fortified royal city. Thus it becomes clear that both types of walls were used throughout the period of the monarchy, and evidently the choice was made in accordance with local considerations.<sup>5</sup>

#### The Israelite City

Apart from one deep section, our main efforts were directed towards the uncovering of the latest Judean city, i.e. the one surrounded by the casemate wall (Fig. 8). A word is appropriate here about the techniques of modern Israeli archaeology, developed over the last two decades, which we used. Its essence is to combine minute techniques of three-dimensional observations with the large-scale opening of complete areas. Our excavation was done on a large scale; up to 250 people worked on the tell in eight separate areas. No modern excavation should neglect the observation of the debris with the help of the remaining balks, but these debris should not become an objective by themselves, hiding the architecture and hampering the assembly and restoration of the complete contents of any excavated unit. Every balk, therefore, was taken off after a clear floor level had been reached, and of course only after it had been drawn with the help of photographs. Every sherd was dipped and examined for inscriptions before washing, and all sherds of any room with broken vessels were kept for restoration. The results are numerous Aramaic and some Hebrew ostraca, hundreds of complete vessels from

4. Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* (1963), p. 322.

5. Actually, Yadin's hypothesis seemed doubtful from the beginning. Casemate walls continued to exist at Beth-shemesh and Tell Beit Mirsim, new casemate walls were constructed in the 9th century at Samaria and in the 7th century at Ramat Rahel and Arad. Notwithstanding, Yadin has suggested a complete re-stratification of Megiddo in accordance with his assumed rule. At another place I have dwelt on the impossibility of these suggestions, since the solid wall was definitely constructed with the Solomonic gate, no other wall has been detected in the vicinity of the gate, and Yadin's "casemate walls" at the east are in reality rooms of a palace and a continuous line of houses: see *Eretz Israel*, X (1971), 53-57 (Hebrew). Accordingly, Yadin has now partly retreated from his suggestion agreeing that the solid wall did indeed exist together with the Solomonic gate: cf. *BA*, XXXIII (1970), 88.



the floor levels of the various rooms and strata, and last but not least, a good part of the Iron age city-plan with its various buildings and quarters.

This large-scale exposure could easily be achieved around the periphery of the mound where only a few later buildings covered the earlier city. It is more difficult at the center of the tell where fortresses were erected in the Persian-Hellenistic period and later in the Roman period. The Roman fortress, which belonged to the *limes* fortification of the Roman Empire, was completely uncovered during the third season (Fig. 8), and part of it was removed in the fourth season. Some destruction of the earlier levels was done by Persian and Hellenistic pits and silos dug



Fig. 12. The Stratum III gate: the gateway and street with water channels.

around the fortress. They too, however, yielded their harvest of some 40 Aramaic ostraca from the 4th century B.C.E. They contain dates, personal names of Jewish, Edomite, and Arabic origin and lists of various products, such as wheat and barley, probably distributed to the garrison of a Persian fortress.

The Iron age city is relatively small. Its area consists of about 10 dunams, compared with about 65 dunams at Megiddo. (There are roughly four dunams in an acre.) However, its defenses were of unusual strength, and a glance at the city plan emerging from the various excavated sections leaves no doubt that this was a well-planned city from its very inception. It is true that the uncovered buildings belong to the latest 8th

century city; however, wherever earlier strata were exposed, they showed the same type of buildings with only minor changes. It seems that the overall plan of the city had been preserved as laid out in the days of the United Kingdom.

The city plan was dominated by a circular street, starting from the gate and encircling the whole city, with rows of buildings on both its sides. The external houses leaned against the city wall, and the case-mate rooms served as units of the buildings. The completely excavated houses (Fig. 14, Nos. 5, 6) have a uniform layout. They are typical "four-room houses" with one broad and three long rooms, divided by a row of pillars.

Two superimposed gates were discovered, belonging to the two successive city walls (Fig. 12). Both were similar in plan, containing a 4-m. broad gateway flanked on each side by two gate rooms (Fig. 14, No. 1). The earlier gate, however, was broader and more massive and was equipped with a projecting tower about 5-6 m. broad. In the open area between the tower and the gate threshold, a well-dressed round incense altar was found (Fig. 13) which probably derives from a *bamah* alongside



Fig. 13. Stone altar found at the gate entrance.

the gate entrance. During the purification of worship by King Josiah "from Geba to Beer-sheba" he also "broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate" (II Kings 23:8). A most remarkable fact is that the plan of the early gate closely resembles the gate at Dan which was recently excavated; there, too, a *bamah* was found next to its entrance. With these discoveries it becomes probable that the two cities were similarly fortified in an early stage of the United Monarchy, whence derives the classical biblical definition "from Dan to Beer-sheba."

When parts of the later gate were dismantled, one of the outstanding projects of the Israelite city was discovered, namely, the central canalization leading towards the gate. Channels covered by stone slabs were found built beneath the street surface (Fig. 12); they were fed from plas-

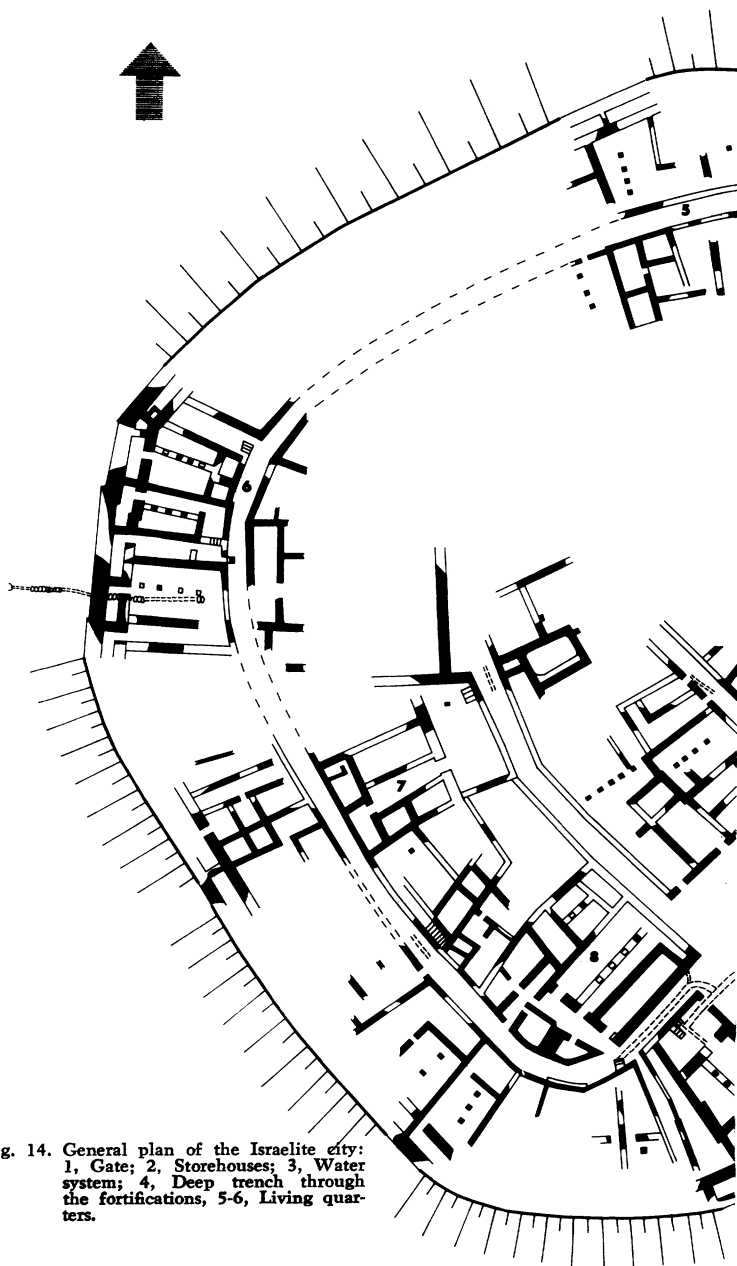
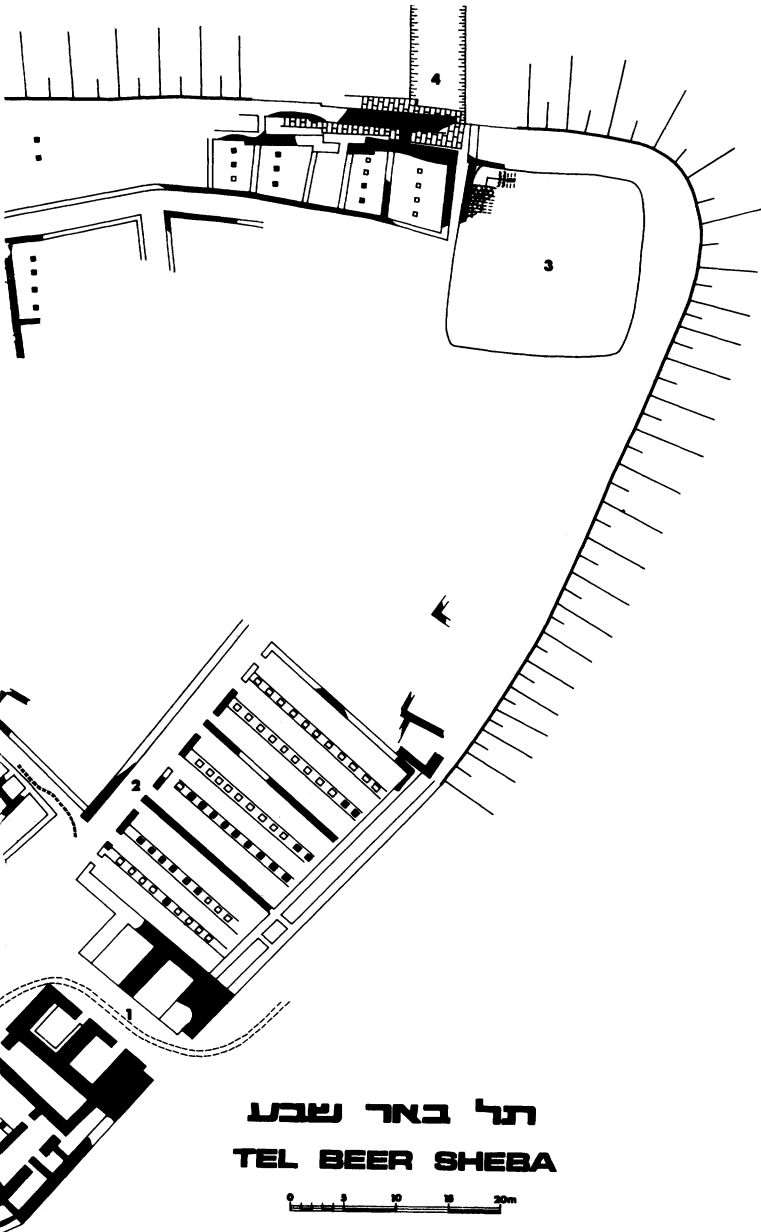


Fig. 14. General plan of the Israelite city:  
1, Gate; 2, Storehouses; 3, Water  
system; 4, Deep trench through  
the fortifications, 5-6, Living quar-  
ters.



תל באר שבע  
TEL BEER SHEBA



tered gutters in the walls of the houses. The channels become larger as they approach the gate; beneath the gateway itself the height of the channel is 70 cm. This sophisticated and unique canalization system apparently was intended to conduct rain for storage in central cisterns.

#### The Stores

To the right of the gate a complex of three large adjoining buildings identical in plan was uncovered (Fig. 14, No. 2). Each is about 17 m. long and has three long halls divided by two rows of pillars with shelves in between (Fig. 15). The two external halls have a stone pavement; and the inner hall has a slightly raised mud floor laid on a deep fill of gravel, earth, and ashes.



Fig. 15. The royal stores.

The contents of these buildings leave no doubt that they were royal storehouses for cereals, wine, and oil. In one of the halls alone, more than 100 intact pottery vessels were found (Fig. 16), many of them typical store-jars; but other types of domestic vessels were found as well. It seems probable that in every unit the various products from a certain district were kept and that they were also prepared here for distribution and use. A Hebrew ostracum found in one of them allows some insight into the royal administration. It reads: "15 (the date of the year or the day?); from Tolad b (ath measurements) . . . , Beth Amam . . ." These are two cities mentioned in the Bible in the region of Simon together

with Beer-sheba (Joshua 15:26 — Amam; 15:30, 19:4 — Eltolad; I Chronicles 4:29 — Tolad). Evidently some product (probably wine) was brought to the royal store from these two localities of the Beer-sheba district.

This complex of adjacent stores resembles in plan and detail the famous Megiddo "stables." Professor J.B. Pritchard's reassessment of the Megiddo stables<sup>6</sup> has found a quick and convincing confirmation. His main argument was that no evidence of any equipment for horses was found in the Megiddo structures, and all over the ancient Near East horses were evidently kept in open enclosures. It is now clear that this



Fig. 16. Vessels from one of the stores.

was the typical plan of stores, and it seems that the Megiddo "stables" may be placed with the other myths created by modern archaeology.

#### The Sanctuary

Two parallel radial streets lead from the gate to the center of the city. Though excavations in this area are still in an initial stage, it is already clear that the main public buildings stood here on raised ground. One of them is a large "four-room house," which extends from the peripheral street towards the center of the tell (Fig. 14, No. 7). A unique group of cult objects was found in its debris. Apart from beads and

6. *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century* (Glueck Vol.) ed. J.A. Sanders, (1970), pp. 268-276.

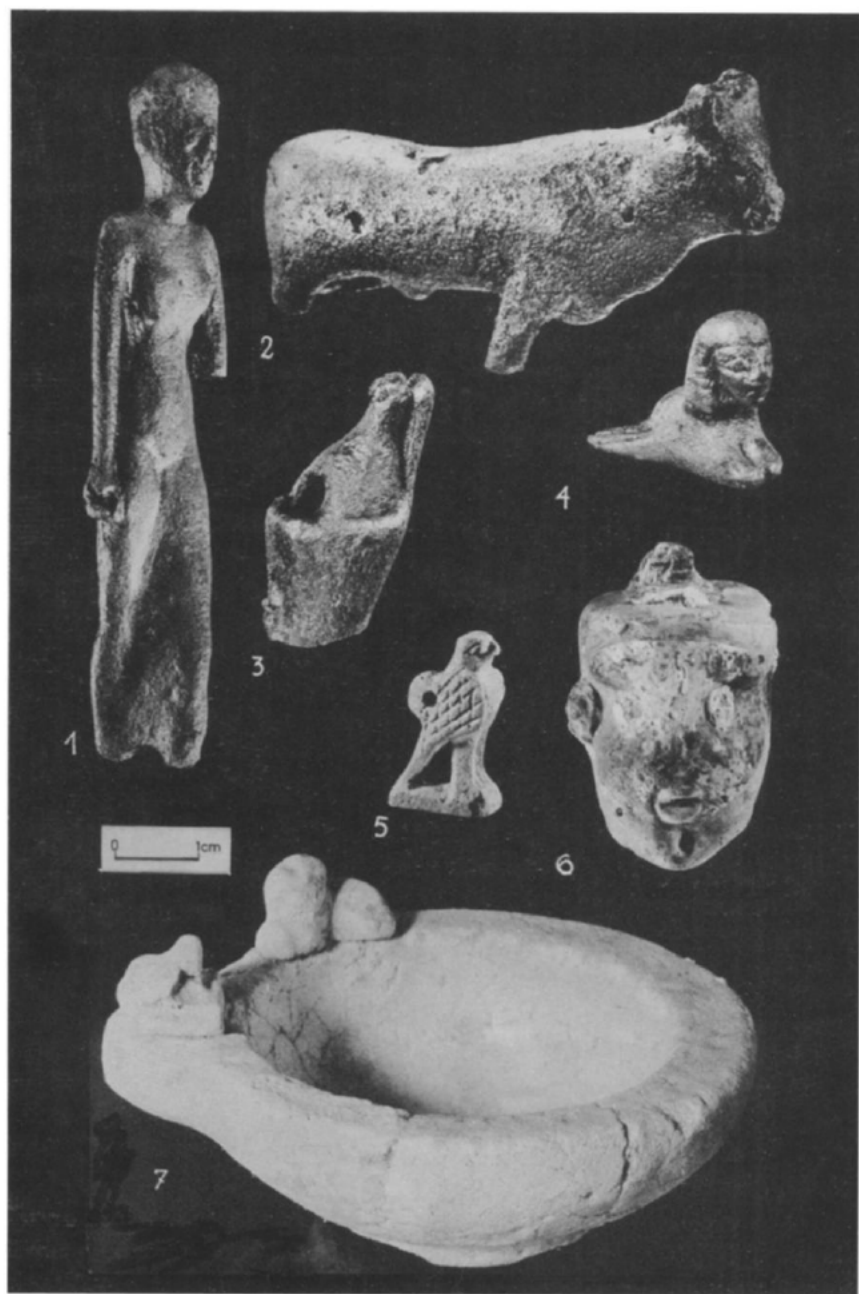


Fig. 17. Cult objects of bronze, (1-4), bone (5), glass (6), and faience (7).

amulets, it contained ostrich eggs, a faience bowl, a terracotta figurine of a bird, a head of colored glass (Fig. 17, No. 6), the lower part of a miniature sphinx, and the spout of a decorated incense-burner, made of bone. With them, various bronze objects were found, including a handle with the head of an animal, a bull, the double crown of Egypt and a goddess in Egyptian style (Fig. 17: 1-3). The most intriguing find among them is a cylinder seal of Assyrian-Babylonian style of provincial workmanship (Fig. 18). On it is depicted a deity on a raised platform with a worshiper standing in front of him. The accompanying cuneiform



Fig. 18. Votive cylinder seal and its impression.

inscription states that the cylinder was dedicated to a certain deity by one *Rimut-ilani* son of *Adad-idri*.<sup>7</sup> We do not argue that this was a son of *Adad-idri* (Hadadezer), king of Damascus in the 9th century according to the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III; but it seems probable that the donator of this cylinder was a king of one of the Aramaic kingdoms of Syria or Trans-Jordan.

A pit which had been dug into the street was found just outside the building. It resembles the refuse-concealment pits (*favissae*) usually found around sanctuaries. Apart from further beads and amulets, in-

7. The inscription will be published by Prof. A.F. Rainey.





Fig. 19. Krater with incised Hebrew inscription, reading *qdš*=holiness.

cluding a beautiful falcon (the image of Horus — Fig. 17:5), it contained a small stone incense altar and a decorated faience libation bowl (Fig. 17:7). A miniature bronze sphinx was found in another room farther east (Fig. 17:4).

Mention should also be made of a large number of zoomorphic vessels and animal figurines found in the various houses, probably connected with rituals. In one house, an Iron age krater was found with an inscription of three Hebrew letters: *qdš* meaning *qodesh*, "holiness" (Fig. 19).

These rich and unique finds, all connected with cult and rituals, make it probable that an area in the center of the tell was dedicated to a sanctuary. May I recall the description of the Arad temple, published in *The Biblical Archaeologist* some years ago.<sup>8</sup> This first temple to be

8. BA, XXXI (1968), 18-32.

discovered in an Israelite royal establishment raised the question of the purpose and theology of temples in the period of the Monarchy, a question further pursued with the new examination of the Lachish shrine.<sup>9</sup> The Arad temple was, in my opinion, a legitimate Israelite-Yahwistic sanctuary, not only because of its location in a prominent place in a royal Israelite fortress, but also because of its continued use from the 10th to the early 7th century and its contents which stand in remarkable agreement with Mosaic laws.

My tentative suggestion was that there was an institution of border sanctuaries for which many biblical allusions can be found. This proposal deals with a most fundamental question of biblical history, i.e. the early stages of Israelite worship. I concluded my article in the hope that a similar sanctuary may have existed at Beer-sheba; and with its discovery and excavation, the various hypotheses may be put on a firmer basis.

Beer-sheba already appears as a sanctified site in the patriarchal stories (Gen. 21; 26; 46). The clearest evidence is found in the words of Amos, who denounced the worship at Beer-sheba and compared it with the temples at Dan and Bethel (Amos 5:5; 8:14), the two cities on the extreme borders of the northern kingdom.

It seems to me that with the discovery of the rich group of cult objects a basic fact seems certain, namely that there was a sanctuary at Beer-sheba as well. However, already with the first finds the striking differences from Arad stand out. At Arad not a single foreign and pagan cult object was found; everything pointed towards a pure, legitimate Israelite worship. At Beer-sheba the rich and unique group of cult objects is basically pagan and shows strong Egyptian influences. How is it possible to explain this striking contrast?

For the moment we may ask only questions. Was the more central and venerable shrine at Beer-sheba exposed to strong foreign influence, and was this perhaps a reason why Amos singled it out in his wrath? Or was it the other way around — was the Arad sanctuary perhaps an exception, due to its puritanic, conservative Kenite priesthood (Judg. 1:16)? Or is this perhaps a last stage in the history of the city under the alternate Assyrian and Egyptian dominations, similar to the later history of Bethel (II Kings 17:25 ff.)?

It is our hope to continue the excavations at Tel Beer-sheba until at least some of these intriguing questions will have been clarified.

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9. Y. Aharoni, *Israel Exploration Journal*, XVIII (1968), 157-169.