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Excavations at Tel Masos (Khirbet El-Meshâsh)

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON, 1972

Yohanan Aharoni, Volkmar Fritz and Aharon Kempinski

The excavations at Tel Masos are an additional link in the regional study of the eastern Negev that was initiated with the first season of excavations at Arad in 1962. This region is of considerable interest since it is a typical peripheral zone, sensitive to climate, political and population changes. It lies on the edge of the desert—the Judaeen desert on the east and the wilderness of Zin on the south. Despite extensive plains and fertile loess soil, the potential for agricultural growth is limited by frequent years of drought. Water resources are few, found mainly on the banks of the large Naḥal Beer Sheva that drains the entire area and the southern Judaeen hills.

Though the settlement potential of the eastern Negev is limited, its prime importance stems from being a border zone traversed by major highways. The road that leads to Edom, to the Aravah and to the Gulf of Eilat has been one of the principal trade routes of Palestine, and the road leading through the Kadesh-barnea region to Egypt was also of much importance. Control of the eastern Negev was a prerequisite for controlling these routes, and was also essential for the defence of Judah and the remainder of the country. The eastern Negev is a natural and convenient approach route to the country, with no clear-cut line to separate it from the vast desert. The biblical tradition concerning the attempt of the Israelite tribes to penetrate directly from the desert into the mountainous parts of the country, and their disastrous defeat (Num. 14:45; 21:1–3; 33:40) reflects a basic characteristic of this region: the necessity for a defensive military network and a chain of settlements to withstand persistent desert raiders. Thus the changes in settlement are quite drastic, and the eastern Negev can serve as a sensitive indicator for the history of the country during various periods.

The specific regional conditions also determined the character of the settlements in the Negev. Though most of the historical periods are represented here (from the Chalcolithic through the Umayyad times), none of the mounds typical of the north was formed through continuous and protracted occupation phases. The sharp gap between occupation phases, on the one hand, and the limits placed by nature, on the other hand, caused settlement to shift from one site to another in the various periods. Even at the sites themselves, we often find various occupation phases on adjacent hills. The phenomenon of single-period sites facilitates archaeological excavation, as is the case with the Bronze Age city at Arad, much of which was bare of later remains or debris (Aharoni 1967:233–242; Amiran 1970).

Study of the region in the different periods thus involves the excavation of numerous and varied sites—for no single mound can provide material from most of the periods sought. There are four principal, central sites (from east to west):

Tel Arad, Tel Malḥata, Tel Masos and Tel Beer-sheba. To these sites we may add Tel 'Ira (Khirbet Gharreh), north of Tel Masos, where a large city was established in the period of the Israelite monarchy (Aharoni 1958:36-38).

THE SITE

Tel Masos is located 12 km. (as the crow flies) from Tel Beer-sheba, and rises above Naḥal Beer Sheva some 6 km. west of Malḥata. At both sites, the central wells of the region are located alongside the river-bed. Tel Masos is divided into three areas, designated below as the fortress, the settlement and the enclosure.

The fortress (Fig. 1:D) is represented by a small mound, the main topographical feature that aroused the notice of previous surveys here; it lies north of Naḥal Beer Sheva at the junction of a smaller wadi stemming from the north. The mound measures ca. 30 x 50 m. The surface survey revealed that the citadel had its beginnings in the period of the Israelite monarchy. The upper surface is divided into two parts, with the northwestern area 1.50 m. higher than its southeastern area. The presence of some Roman pottery suggested that the raised part represented a Roman structure.

The two other sites were only discovered through a more detailed survey conducted in 1964, and during additional visits that were intended to solve problems raised by the excavation at Arad (Aharoni 1964:172-175).

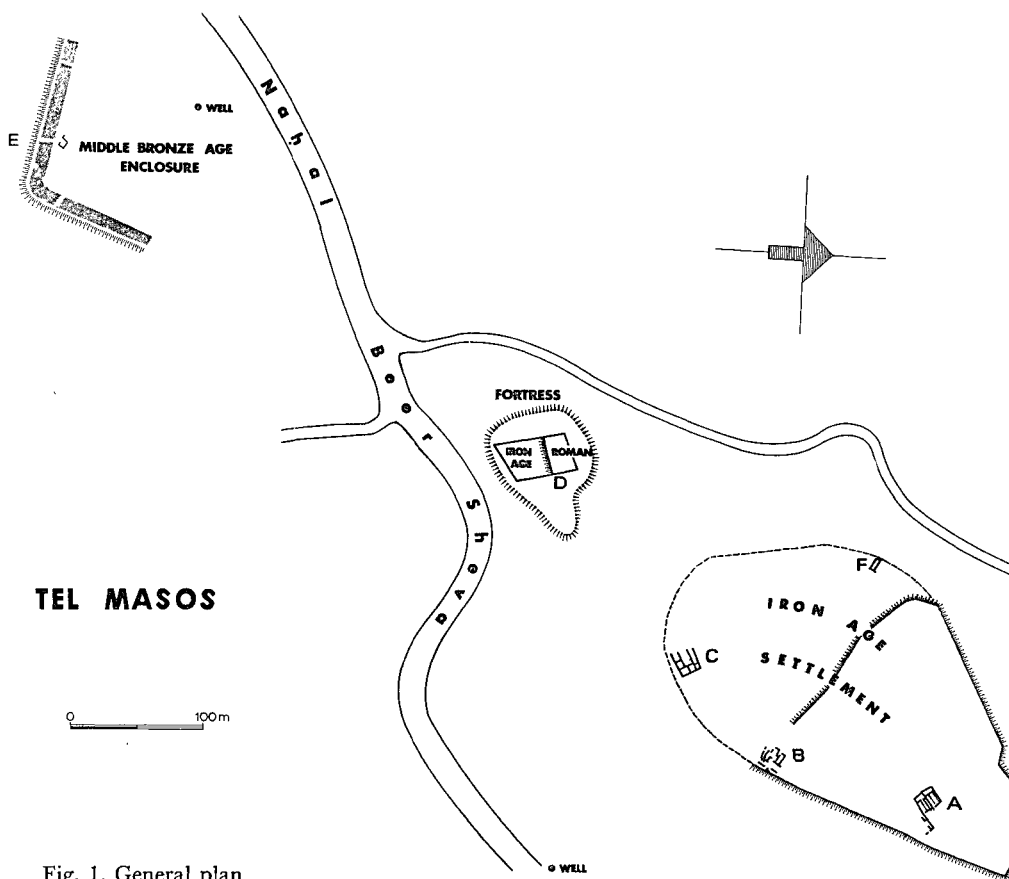


Fig. 1. General plan.

The settlement (Fig. 1: A, B, C, F; Pl. 11:1) is located on a flat hill some 150 m. north of the mound. During the survey, remains of houses, spread over an area of c. 200 x 300 m., were already discernable; pottery found there is mainly of Iron Age I. Near the northern edge of the settlement there is a raised area, apparently the remains of a public building. The northern and central parts of the settlement are defined by a distinct slope with a concentration of stones, giving the impression of the remains of a city wall. Since the southern section of this "wall" passed through the centre of the settlement, we assumed that it predated the Israelite settlement. The "wall" disappeared at the southeastern corner, where we observed the remains of buildings on the surface. This strengthened our impression that the wall preceded the Israelite settlement.

The enclosure (Fig. 1:E) is located south of Naḥal Beer Sheva, some 300 m. south of the mound near the southern well. We observed two flanks of a rampart lying at right angles (Pl. 11:2); because of their straight line and their stone mantle, visible here and there, they appeared to be man-made. This seemed to us to be the southeastern part of a ramp enclosure, the larger part of which had been eroded by the wadi. One of the present-day wells is located approximately in the centre of the enclosure. There are a few stone fragments within the rampart, but most of the area seems to be completely eroded. The little pottery gathered there is almost entirely of Middle Bronze Age II.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The first season of excavations at Tel Masos took place over a six-week period in July–August 1972. The work was directed by the authors on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of the Tel Aviv University and a group of German scholars associated with the University of Mainz (sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). Accommodations for the staff were provided at the Beer-sheba Expedition camp. The actual labour was carried out by 60–70 volunteers, mostly students from Germany and other countries abroad, with the help

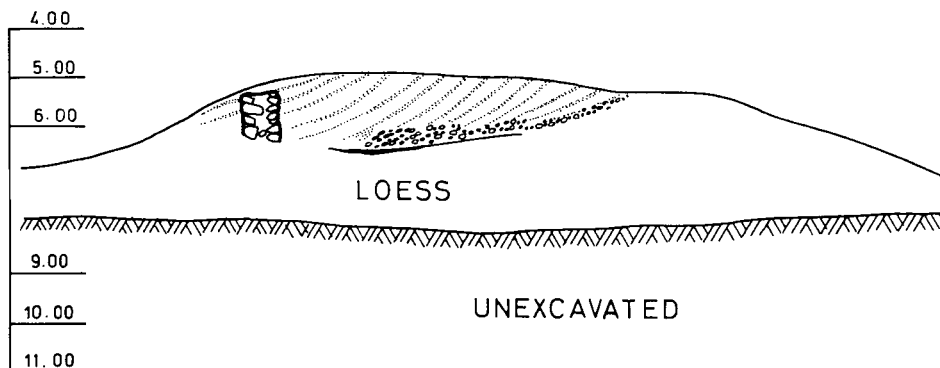


Fig. 2. Section of the Middle Bronze Age II rampart.

of ten Bedouin boys. Besides the authors, the scientific staff included D. Conrad, G. Krautwurst, H. Rösel, F. Crüsemann (all from Germany), G. Barkai, E. Singer (both from Tel Aviv) and J. Gunneweg (from Rome), as well as S. Boneberger and A. Siegelmann (surveyors), M. Lux and A. Hay (photographers) and Avigail Sheffer (registrar).

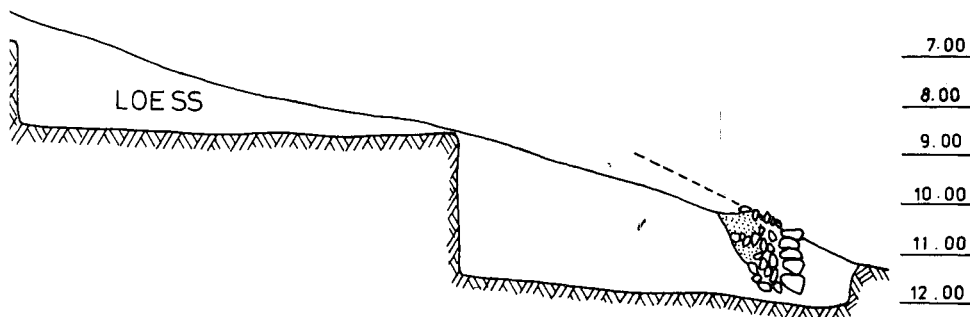
To obtain an overall picture of the site (in preparation for excavation in subsequent seasons), work was divided into three main fields: Area E in the enclosure, Areas A, B, C and F in the settlement, and Area D in the fortress.

THE ENCLOSURE—AREA E (Fig. 2)

Three sections were made with the help of a shuffledozer (two through the southern rampart and one on the east); they revealed a structure typical of the ramparts of the Middle Bronze Age period. The body of the rampart was built of earth piled inward and outward; part of the natural hill served as the core, the outer face was covered with pebbles. A fosse with a supporting wall of large polygonal construction was at the base of the rampart. (Pl. 12:1)

Several concentrations of ashes within the rampart evidently derive from the activities of the builders during its construction; similar instances are known from other such structures in this country.

The rampart has been preserved for a length of 100 m. on the south and 120 m. on the east, but its original periphery remains unknown. It seems to have protected an area of ca. 15 dunam. On the inner side of the rampart, and apparently also at the centre of the enclosure, there seem to have been structures. To obtain a date for the rampart, we excavated the remains of one of the structures adjacent to its inner face. In our excavation we uncovered two rooms of a building that was largely eroded; in the rooms, two floor-levels were discovered, one running beneath the base of the walls and obviously predating the building. The lower floor-level was ascribed to a phase close to the construction of the rampart; the upper floor-level was ascribed to the walls of the building.



The pottery of the two floor-levels is identical (Pls. 12:2; 13:2-3); typologically, it belongs to the Middle Bronze Age II B.¹

THE SETTLEMENT

AREA A (Fig. 3)

The aim of our excavation in this area was to excavate from the highest area of the settlement towards the supposed "city wall". It was found that the "wall" at the edge of the site was merely a stone fence from a period later than the Iron Age settlement. We have not yet succeeded in ascertaining its function.

Stratigraphy. Three strata (1-3) belong to the Iron Age, and one stratum (4) belongs to the Chalcolithic period.

Stratum 1 contained remains and re-used, thickened walls from Stratum 2. In the northern part of the excavation, a wall that cut the western wall of House 2 was uncovered. In the eastern part of the house, we noted the typical thickening of walls of Stratum 1 and a blocked opening in Room 2; the blocking was built of one row of stones that served as the foundation for brick construction. The height of the stones indicated that in Stratum 1 the floor was raised ca. 40 cm. above the original Stratum 2 floor-level.

Stratum 2 was the principal stratum of the excavation, it included three architectural units: Buildings 32, 42 and 2. In several rooms of Building 2, we found walls and floor fragments of Stratum 3 beneath the foundations of Stratum 2. Of the floor-levels in Stratum 2, a clear level was preserved in Room 5, where an oven of this phase was found built over the corner of a Stratum 3 structure; a clear floor-level was also found in Room 22 where several vessels were found *in situ*.

Stratum 3 was represented by several walls and floors, as well as accumulations of ash ca. 30 cm. thick; the floors passed beneath the foundations of the Stratum 2 walls. Most typical of Stratum 3 were ash pits and ovens. The pits were filled wherever the stone foundations of the Stratum 2 walls passed over them; the Stratum 3 ovens had been cut or covered by these same Stratum 2 walls.

Stratum 4 was represented by occupation levels in square R/10, and by several pits. In square L/10, a brown layer was ascribed to this stratum; it was separated from Stratum 3 by a layer of loess soil.

Architecture. The clearest architectural remains were preserved in Stratum 2. Of the three excavated structures two were found to belong to the type known as the "four-room house." Building 2 was, architecturally, the most complete (see plan Fig. 3; Pl. 14:1); it measures 8.9 x 13.4 m. and has a courtyard with three columns on either side. It bears a remarkable similarity to the "four-room house" at Tell el-Far'ah (N.) (House 410; and see de Vaux 1955, where he relates the destruction of this house to the end of the 10th or the early 9th century B.C.E.).

South of Building 2 and adjoining it is Building 42, similar in plan. Both buildings

¹ Megiddo XI, early phases. This conclusion is based on a stratigraphical-typological analysis of the tombs in Strata X, XI, and XII, carried out by A. Kempinski. In Stratum XII, a group of tombs belongs to MB II A, and the destruction layer to the early MB II B; in Stratum XI, the early group of tombs belongs to early MB II B and the floors and later tombs belong to the mid-17th century B.C.E.; in Stratum X, the tombs are from the mid-17th century to the destruction in c. 1560 B.C.E.

AREA B

In this area, we attempted to examine the houses that seemed to be built on the eroded "city wall." Here too, it was revealed that the "wall" was no more than a late structure, and that part of it was eroded by a branch of the wadi that bisected the area. The whole area, therefore, was heavily eroded, making stratigraphical analysis of the various strata difficult (see below).

Stratigraphy and architecture. The stratigraphy revealed in Area A proved to be applicable as well to Areas B and C. In *Stratum 1* we discerned the same phenomena as in *Stratum 1* of Area A: thickening of *Stratum 2* walls, and foundations built higher than those of *Stratum 2*. It was difficult to ascertain the various architectural units here; in an attempt to isolate the various elements, we discovered a building of *Stratum 1*, close in plan to the "four-room house" of Area A, *Stratum 2*. In several rooms floor fragments from *Stratum 1* were uncovered, some were covered with numerous sherds. The floors generally were found ca. 15–20 cm. below the surface, and thus many of the vessels had been partly destroyed by erosion.

Stratum 2 was evidenced by several walls and floor fragments.

Stratum 3 was represented in Area B only by pits and a few walls.

AREA C

Stratigraphy and architecture. This area was selected at an elevated spot near the southern corner of the settlement. On the surface we had observed building remains, including two rows of columns on the east; there were two principal strata: 1 and 2, each distinguished by various architectural criteria; but both strata are represented by what appears to be a public building.

In *Stratum 1* we discerned walls ca. 2 m. thick, belonging to a fortified structure, apparently a fort or a tower. In the outer walls there were offsets spaced ca. 2 m. apart. The plan of the fort was rectangular; the western edge has not yet been cleared. The rooms were paved with stone that partly covered the wall of *Stratum 2*.

In *Stratum 2*, it was evident that part of the broad northern wall of the *Stratum 1* fort was actually a remnant of a public building of *Stratum 2*, with smaller walls. On the east, the wall of the *Stratum 1* fort passed over a row of rooms of the *Stratum 2* structure; the eastern wall of the later was comprised of columns. Facing the courtyard, between the wall of columns on the east and the northern wall, there were three rows of adjoining rooms. On the southern side of the building there appears to have been an additional row of rooms, which have been excavated; two brick silos stood in the courtyard. These suggest that at least part of the public building was used as a granary.

Finds and chronology

Stratum 1 was typified in the three areas by chalices, juglets, store-jars and cooking-pots which, typologically, can be ascribed to the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 10th century B.C.E. The pottery of *Strata 2–3* displays few typological differences, and it should be noted that small quantities of Philistine ware were found in these two strata (Pl. 15:4–7). Espe-

cially characteristic is the stirrup-jar, found in Locus 61 (Stratum 2) in Area A (Pl. 15:6); this vessel has a white slip and is painted (as is typical of Stratum XI at Tell Qasileh). Locus 34 in Area A is typical for Stratum 3: the locus included a pyxis, several jugs and juglets, store-jar fragments and limestone seal (Pls. 13:1; 15:2). In square P/9, unfortunately not in a clear context, we found an Egyptian scarab from the period of Rameses II or later (Pl. 15:1). It has been ascribed by Dr. Giveon to the reign of Seti II. This find is of considerable significance. If we do not consider this scarab to have remained in the possession of a Judahite family from the end of the period of the Egyptian empire, it may provide us with a *terminus a quo* for the founding of the settlement—late in the 13th century B.C.E.

The corpus of the finds indicates the following chronology: Stratum 4 belongs to the Chalcolithic Age. It seems that within the network of the Beer-sheba culture a settlement had existed at the site. Stratum 3 should be ascribed to the late 13th through mid-12th century B.C.E.; Stratum 2 to the mid-12th—mid-11th century B.C.E.; and Stratum 1 to the end of the 11th century B.C.E.

FORTRESS—AREA D

In the Iron Age II period, a fort was built ca. 150 m. south of the site at the juncture of Naḥal Beer Sheva and a small wadi.

Within the fort, two main areas were opened: one in the upper part, where Roman remains were visible on the surface, and the other on the low terrace, where Iron Age remains were thought to be (Pl. 14:2).

It was ascertained that the Roman fort was merely a private structure of the Roman period, evidently an unfortified villa. Fragments of measuring cups and remains of Herodian stone tables suggest a 1st century C.E. date for its construction. The plan is that of a series of rooms surrounding a central courtyard. So far, two rooms have been cleared. They are connected by an ornamented doorway with pillars. At one wall were two decorative pilasters with remnants of plaster.

On the lower terrace, immediately beneath the surface, we uncovered two rooms that seem to have been built in a later stage. Beneath these rooms, after excavating through debris for a thickness of about a metre, we came across the wall-tops of the Iron Age fort. Beside them was a thick layer of ash and sherds typical of the late 7th and early 6th century B.C.E.; this pottery was identical with that from the destruction levels at En-gedi, Arad and Tel Malḥata, but is completely missing at Tel Beer-sheba, which had been destroyed earlier. Among the finds of the Iron Age worth noting are several sherds of Eastern Greek ware, as well as a sherd of an Assyrian glass bottle (Pl. 15:3). The destruction level of this fort provides us, for the time being, only with data on the end of the fort; the date of its construction has not yet been established.

CONCLUSIONS

After one season, the results of the excavations at Tel Masos already enable us to ascertain the nature of the settlement in the various periods and to complement our knowledge of the history of the eastern Negev. The Chalcolithic

period is represented at all four excavated tells, but we cannot yet evaluate its precise character at each site. In the initial stages of the Early Bronze Age there was a large urban centre at Tel Arad. To date, no EB III–IV or MB I (Kenyon's Intermediate EB–MB) remains have been found in the eastern Negev. In the Middle Bronze Age II, enclosures surrounded by ramparts were erected at Tel Masos and Tel Malḥata. Since excavations at Tel Malḥata have not yet reached the earliest stratum, it is not definitely known whether the two enclosures were erected simultaneously or whether the one at Tel Masos had been constructed first. In any event, it is clear that the enclosure at Tel Masos was only in use for a short period, and that the one at Tel Malḥata continued to be used till the beginning of the Late Bronze Age.

The existence of Middle Bronze Age II settlements at the two sites, ca. 6 km. apart, suggests that during this period these two settlements on the eastern bank of Naḥal Beer Sheva were associated with the chain of fortified settlements (Tell el-Far'ah[S.], Tell el-Jemmeh and Tell el-'Ajjul) along the western outlet of this wadi. It would seem that the founding of settlements in the eastern Negev was connected with the trade route running eastward along Naḥal Beer Sheva, and represents an attempt to control the nomadic tribes in this region.

Again, no remains of the later phase of the Late Bronze Age have been found. Early Iron Age I is represented both at Tel Arad and at Tel Beer-sheba, but during this period the central, large settlement seems to have been at Tel Masos. The area of the latter is surprisingly large and the structures are extremely well-planned and built. Its early date is equally surprising; the three occupation strata extend over the 12th and 11th centuries, and may even have started in the 13th century B.C.E.

The large Israelite settlement at Tel Masos terminated late in the 11th or early in the 10th century B.C.E. Later, in the 10th century B.C.E., strong fortifications were erected at Tel Arad, Tel Malḥata and Tel Beer-sheba (we cannot yet say whether the fort at Tel Masos was built at the same time). It was now the turn of Beer-sheba to be the main fortress, and a second large, fortified town was erected during the period of the Judaeen monarchy at Tel 'Ira (Khirbet Gharreh; Aharoni 1958:36–38). Tel Beer-sheba probably was destroyed during Sennacherib's campaign in 701 B.C.E., yet the three forts to the east continued on till the end of the First Temple period.

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods (and probably already in the Persian period), we again find forts at each of these mounds (except at Tel Masos, where a villa was built in Herodian times). The central settlement in the Roman—Byzantine period was at Khirbet Kseifeh, between Arad and Tel Malḥata, then called Moleatha (Avi-Yonah 1949:157). The latest phase of use of these structures at all the sites was in the Umayyad period.

Of the four sites, virtual agreement among scholars exists only with regard to the identification of biblical Beer-sheba (Tell es-Seba^c) (but see, e.g., Alt 1935:320 ff.). Nelson Glueck was the first to raise the question of the identification of Canaanite Arad, since archaeological surveys failed to reveal any Middle or Late Bronze Age remains at Tel Arad (later also corroborated by the excavation). This led some scholars to doubt the existence of this town in the Canaanite

period (Glueck 1959:114–115; Mazar 1965). Another suggestion based on Shishak's topographical list places Canaanite Arad at Tel Malḥata, with the assumption that in the Israelite period the name of Arad was applied to two sites—Arad Rabbah and Jerahmeelite Arad (Aharoni 1964:170 ff.).

The identification of Canaanite Arad is related to the identification of Hormah. Is the connection between the two sites merely a literary one (Albright 1924:155 ff.; Fritz 1966), or, alternatively, was there an actual geographical link (Aharoni 1964; Mazar 1965) requiring us to seek them in close proximity to one another?

In the discussion of the identification of the eastern Negev sites Tel Masos has more or less been neglected, since it was merely regarded as a small fort; the sites around the small central mound were entirely overlooked. At one time Albright considered identifying it with Hazar-Shual (1924:157 f.), one of the settlements in the Beer-sheba district; this was entirely unfounded.

The identification of Tel Masos with Hormah (Aharoni 1964: 172–175) has become possible in the light of our new information. Hormah was one of the settlements of Simeon (Josh. 19:4; 1 Chron. 4:30), also mentioned in the Negev district of Judah (Josh. 15:30). Its importance at the end of the 11th century is indicated by its mention in the list of settlements to which David sent booty from the Amalekites (1 Sam. 30:30). Hormah is mentioned here alongside the Jerahmeelite and Kenite towns which, apparently, should be sought in the eastern part of the Negev (Aharoni 1958).

The earliest references to Hormah are less clear. In several instances the Bible derives the name of the town from the root *ḥrm*, 'bann, dedicate,' and links it with the Canaanite defeat of the Israelites (Num. 14:45; Deut. 1:44) or the Israelite defeat of the Canaanites (Num. 21:3). The last mention links the site with Arad (and cf. Num. 33:40). According to Judg. 1:17, Simeon conquered Canaanite Zephath and changed its name to Hormah. The tradition of its conquest probably caused it to be included in Josh. 12:14 (but see Fritz 1969), though there is no explanation for the name Zephath. Mazar and Grdseloff suggest that Hormah is mentioned in two Egyptian sources of the period of the Middle Kingdom: in the later Execration Texts (no. 1-*ḥzm*) and in the inscription from Wâdi Meghara in Sinai, from the reign of Amenemḥet III, mentioning twenty *'amu* of *ḥzm* (Mazar 1954:22).

The history of Tel Masos fits well the various data on Hormah. The large settlement from the period of the Judges would suit its importance during this period, and its proximity to Beer-sheba should explain why it was included under the tribe of Simeon. On the other hand, it is not far from Arad, as is indicated in the conquest traditions. Furthermore, the Middle Bronze Age enclosure would warrant its mention in the Egyptian sources of that period, and thus the kernel of the tradition of its pre-Israelite past. If this identification is substantiated, it would be of considerable chronological significance: it would indicate that the relatively short-lived enclosure was in use in the days of Amenemḥet III (c. 1842–1797 B.C.E.) and that the later Execration Texts (Posener 1940) are approximately of this same period.

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