

The Biblical Port of Akko on Israel's Coast

by AVNER RABAN

Akko is one of the oldest harbor towns along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout its long history, it has often served as an important gateway to the Holy Land from the west, for invaders as well as pilgrims. A rocky peninsula projecting north into the Bay of Haifa marks the site of the Classical and Mediaeval cities. The biblical settlement, however, lies on a large artificial mound about half a mile inland to the east. This low rocky hill on the northern bank of the Belus River has been excavated since 1973 by the Center for Maritime Studies at Haifa University, under the direction of Moshe Dothan.

Preliminary exploration along the edges of the tell in 1973 revealed a significant feature—a large earthen rampart of *terre pissé*, or beaten earth. Sloping layers of sand, ash, mudbrick, crushed sandstone, and beaten earth alternate to form a *glacis* fortification, a steep artificial slope which surrounded and

protected the city. The pottery from the earliest occupational level suggests that the first settlement at Akko dates to the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age II period, around 2000 B.C., whereas the pottery from the top of the *glacis* fortification may be attributed to the second phase of this period in the eighteenth century B.C.

These initial conclusions tally with the widely held belief that the appearance of large fortified city-states coincided with the invasion of the so-called Hyksos warrior princes, the innovators of fighting chariots who swept into the Levant from the north and invaded Egypt as well. Until recently, archaeologists generally agreed that only after the Hyksos invasion—which followed a long period beginning at the end of the Early Bronze Age (2400-2300 B.C.) during which bands of marauding nomads roamed the depopulated countryside—were fortified cities and fully developed urban life restored.

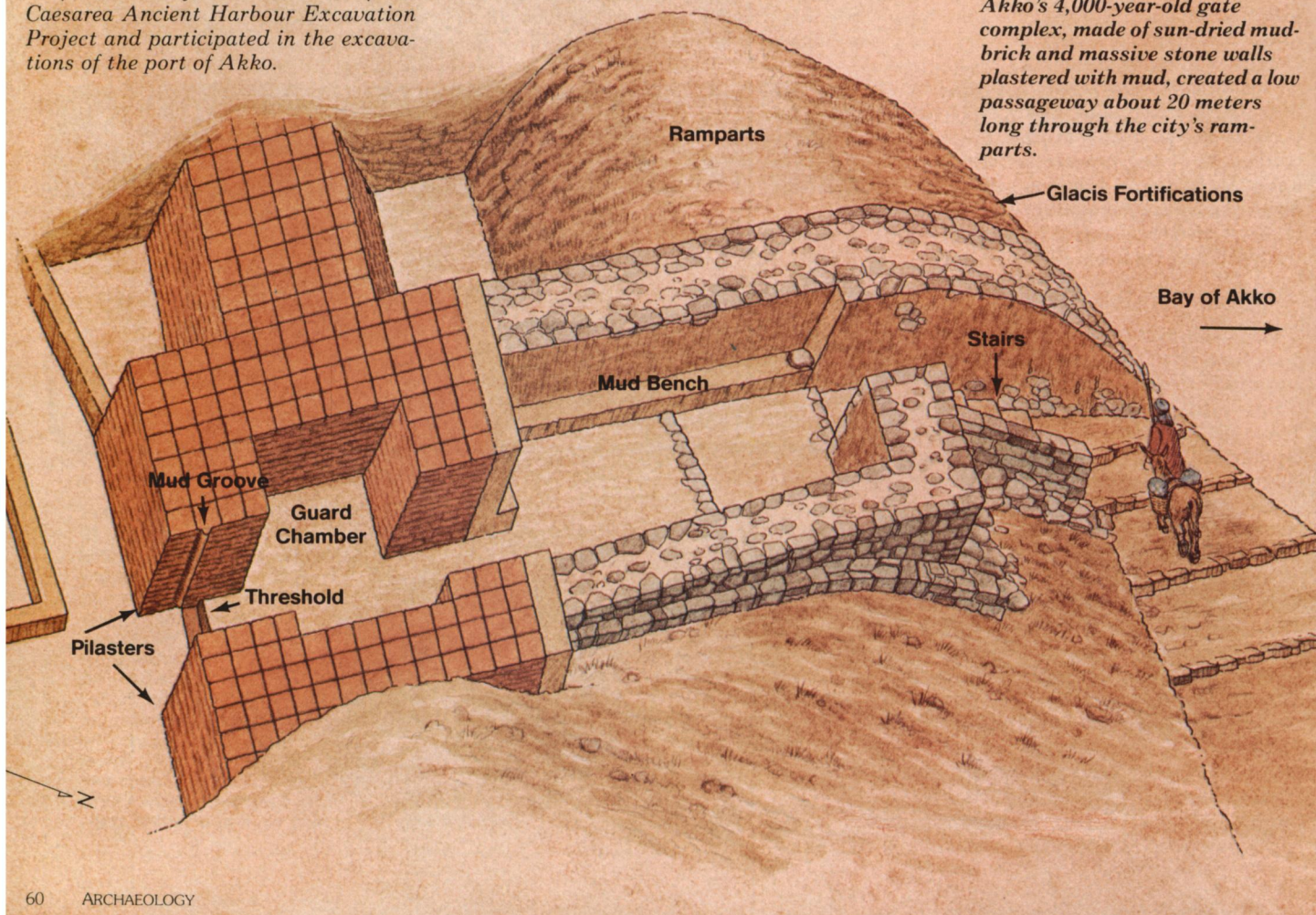
In the last decade, several excavations in Israel—including those at Tel Aphek, Tel Poleg, Tel Dan, Tel Zeror, and Yavaneh Yam—have exposed the remains of walls, ramparts and public buildings which contained pottery from the first phase of the Middle Bronze Age

II (2100-1900 B.C.) period, which predates the Hyksosite era (1780-1570 B.C.). A number of archaeologists have suggested that such finds indicate the existence of fortified cities and *glacis* in the twentieth century B.C. Others, however, dismiss this theory for two reasons. The ambiguous stratigraphy at many sites does not take into account the possibility that pottery from an earlier time may have been dumped into *glacis* when they were built. In addition, historical documents from Egypt point to the military supremacy of the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs over rural Canaan. The Egyptian pharaohs presumably would not have tolerated fortified cities in their Asian territories.

New evidence from Akko, however, may help resolve this controversy. During the past three years, an extremely well-preserved stretch of Akko's fortifications was uncovered on the northwestern slope of Tel Akko. In 1977 a bulldozer cutting a drainage channel exposed the top of a massive stone wall at the point where the western slope curves to the northeast. Remarkably, Middle Bronze IIA pottery sherds were found in this shallow stratigraphical context, suggesting that at a very early stage Akko's fortifications stood here almost to their original height. Closer to the edge of the tell was a layer of sand fill and its sloping mud covering. Further to the southeast the later occu-

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Akko's 4,000-year-old gate complex, made of sun-dried mud-brick and massive stone walls plastered with mud, created a low passageway about 20 meters long through the city's ramparts.



pational level became thicker.

Before exploring this level, archaeologists cleared a series of deep pits which had been cut through walls and floors of settlements dating from the Middle Iron Age (1000-800 B.C.) down to Hellenistic times (third century B.C.). These pits contained rich deposits of broken pottery vessels which belonged mainly to the classical Persian (550-330 B.C.) and Hellenistic periods, including Phoenician jars, trichrome vessels, Attic black-glaze ware, and Rhodian and other Greek amphoras. Among the hundreds of stamped Rhodian amphora handles, none was found which could be dated later than the beginning of the second century.

Undisturbed levels below the pits indicate that this part of the tell was sparsely settled during the first half of the Iron Age (1200-900 B.C.). Iron Age Akko did not flourish as a harbor town before the Assyrians conquered the southern Levantine coast in 734 B.C. Even more interesting were the layers of ash, remnants of domestic architecture, and thick deposits of murex shells which continue from the thirteenth through the twelfth centuries B.C. Rarely in Israel can continuous occupation be traced through the Mycenaean IIIB (13th century B.C.) and Mycenaean IIIC (1200-1050 B.C.) periods. The gap of a few generations usually observed between the final settlements of the Philistines and other Sea Peoples does not occur at Akko.

A mudbrick gate

Beneath the crushed murex layer were thick levels of loose sand which sloped and thinned out toward the inner part of the tell. This fill was laid on a hard, well-leveled gray floor leading to a long narrow gate complex made of sun-dried mudbrick and massive stone walls plastered with smooth mud on the inner face. This gate, just under 20 meters long, creates a low passageway through the rampart fortification. Outside the gate is an open square with a beaten gray floor; the entrance itself is through a pair of pilasters leading into a brick chamber measuring three square meters. On the face of both pilasters is a preserved mud groove which almost certainly held the wooden door jambs in place. A square ditch cut into the floor between the pilasters evidently held a wooden threshold. The entrance is only 1.8 meters wide, far too narrow to allow wheeled vehicles to pass through the gate. The side walls of the brick guard chamber are preserved intact to a height of almost three meters.

Proceeding through another pair of pilasters, one reaches a descending floor of a much larger and longer chamber. Its side walls are of massive stone almost two meters thick which serve as retaining walls for the rampart on either side of the gate. The gate is asymmetrical—the entranceway through the mud-

brick chamber is off-center to the east, and the exit through the outer chamber is off-center to the west. At the external face of the rampart's retaining wall, archaeologists discovered the surface of a sloping glacis which apparently was formed during the construction of the wall. The wall continued above the surface of the glacis, with a diminished width of 1.4 meters. It is likely that this wall supported a roof over the gate. The side walls of the gate's forechamber, measuring 4.2 meters by 6.8 meters, were carefully plastered with smooth mud, a material which could not have survived weather changes unless it was protected by a roof. This plaster also covers part of the mudbrick inner chamber.

Along the inner face of the western retaining wall is a compact mud bench reminiscent of biblical writings which mention judges or elders sitting by the city gate. This wall continues to the north for several meters outside the gate. Its external end was shaved off diagonally when the later glacis slope was leveled. At its external face, the surface of the glacis slopes inward toward the city. The offset course of the rampart on the western side of the gate may have provided an indirect approach to the gate complex, running along the foot of the eastern part of the glacis. This construction design parallels the Middle Bronze IIA gate at Megiddo.

Two earlier floors were discovered beneath the floor of the gate's outer chamber, each about 60 centimeters lower than the one immediately preceding it. The ascent through the gate appears to have been too steep because of the terrain, so it was modified at a later time. This alteration raised the floor level just outside the gate, requiring a mudbrick extension of the eastern wall. At this later stage, the ramp descending out from the gate seems to have been rebuilt on the same axis as the passage through the gate to create a direct approach.

The earliest ramparts

Excavation below the floors of the exterior chamber revealed that the steep terrain was created by an earlier, precipitously sloped rampart. This rampart was constructed totally out of compact black mud, and its course deviates to the left of the later glacis by 30 degrees. The foundation of the western stone wall was laid directly on the earlier glacis and continued below the lowest floor of the gate for more than two meters. When the gate was no longer used, the ends of the eastern and western stone walls were chopped off diagonally.

The exceptional preservation of the sun-dried brick and the mud plaster for almost 4,000 years indicates that the removal of the second floor and roof of the gate and the addition of the sand fill occurred at about the same time,

perhaps within a month of each other in the summer. These alterations—heightening the rampart, filling in the gate, and fixing its entrance elsewhere—clearly were made by people who had decided to strengthen their fortifications. The refortification of their city has left an invaluable legacy for archaeologists. Only because the glacis completely covered the gate has the complex been so well preserved.

The three floor levels in the gate's exterior chamber indicate that they were used over a considerable period of time. Changes in town planning and floor levels near the gate inside the city reinforce this conclusion. Archaeologists discovered the top of the earliest black glacis and at least one floor level that was laid on this rampart running beneath the gate. The builders of the gate subsequently laid continuous layers of black ash, about five centimeters thick, to serve as a moisture-absorbing base for the mudbrick structure. Inside the city and perpendicular to the mudbrick gate structure, at least three successive floors were laid. The first two formed a narrow street which was later blocked by a stone wall.

A large quantity of pottery was collected from the various floors, from the top of the earliest black rampart to the sandy fill of the third rampart and above its mudbrick covering. Even after careful study, however, it was not possible to draw any certain distinctions between the earliest and latest groups. Comparison with recently published material from the Middle Bronze Age palace of Tel Aphek suggests that the earliest rampart at Akko dates from the beginning of the twentieth century B.C.

The discovery of the gate and three successive lines of fortification of the rampart and glacis type at Akko, all apparently predating the Hyksosite period, must put an end to the long and often bitter arguments about the introduction of this type of fortification into Palestine. These remarkable discoveries may well help reconstruct a new historical picture in which full-scale urbanism, at least in the northern coastal regions of Palestine, existed by 2000 B.C.—suggesting that the generally held theory of a total break in urban life in Palestine between the Early and Middle Bronze Ages should be reconsidered. Perhaps the transitional period between the Early and Middle Bronze Ages should be viewed as being shorter, and not completely distinct in the northern coastal regions. Evidence for the presence of a Middle Bronze Age II fortified city in Palestine, however, does not completely invalidate the earlier theories. It is more than likely that more than one way of life existed in this region around 2000 B.C. At the same time the people of Akko were building and fortifying their city-state, the nomads of the region were tending their flocks in the nearby hills. □