

The Contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa to our Understanding of the Iron Age Period

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The site of Khirbet Qeiyafa is tremendously important for understanding various aspects of the archaeology and history of the Iron Age, and the biblical tradition. It seems to contradict many assumptions which were strongly advocated by scholars of the 'minimalist' schools for nearly 30 years. This article evaluates the contribution of the site to the study of surveys and reconstructing settlement patterns, chronology and the transition from Iron I to Iron IIA, social organisation of Iron IIA in Judah, city planning, pottery repertoire of the 10th century BCE, preparation and consumption of food, household archaeology and writing.

I. Introduction

Khirbet Qeiyafa is located in the western part of the high Shephelah (Israel map grid 14603–12267), on the summit of a hill that borders the Elah Valley on the north. This is a key strategic location in the Biblical kingdom of Judah, on the main road from Philistia and the Coastal Plain to Jerusalem and Hebron in the hill country (Figs. 1–2). Two km. to the west lies Tell Zakariyeh, commonly identified as Biblical Azekah, and 2.5 km. to the southeast is Khirbat Shuweikah, commonly identified as Biblical Socoh. About 12 km. west of Khirbet Qeiyafa is Tell es-Safi, where the central Philistine city of Gath was located. In the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, Gath was a prominent city-state, over 30 hectares in size. It was the largest and the closest hostile political unit to Judah (Maeir and Uziel 2007).

The history of research of Khirbet Qeiyafa can be divided into four phases:

1. *The Nineteenth Century*: A number of European explorers visited Khirbet Qeiyafa (Guerin 1868: 331–2; Conder and Kitchener 1883: 118). Only a few words were dedicated to the place, without any dating.
2. *Most of the Twentieth Century*: The site was neglected and is not referred to in the works of the leading scholars in the field of Biblical historical geography, such as W.F. Albright, B. Mazar, Y. Aharoni or Z. Kallai.
3. *The End of the Twentieth Century*: After being forgotten for nearly 110 years, Khirbet Qeiyafa was surveyed by Dagan (2003) and Greenhut (Greenhut *et al.* 2001:115–117). While pottery sherds from various periods had been identified, no Iron IIA settlement was recognised.

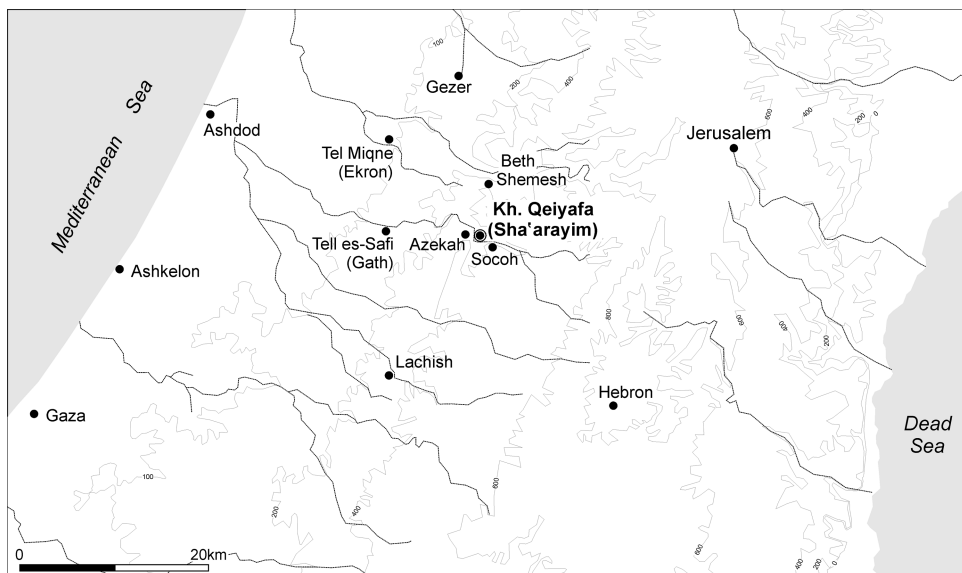


Fig. 1. Map of the southern part of Israel and the location of Khirbet Qeiyafa.



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of Khirbet Qeiyafa at the end of the 2009 excavation season.

4. *Since 2005*: The site aroused interest in 2005, when Saar Ganor noted impressive Iron Age structures under later remains. Since 2007 three excavation seasons have taken place, on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A number of reports have been published (Garfinkel and Ganor 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009; Garfinkel et al. 2009), including a final excavation report for the 2007–2008 excavation seasons (Garfinkel and Ganor 2009).

II. The Iron Age City

While Khirbet Qeiyafa was sporadically used during various periods (Middle Bronze Age, Hellenistic, Roman, and Islamic), the main period of occupation is the very Early Iron IIA. The site of this period was a 2.3 hectare city surrounded by massive fortifications of megalithic stones which still stand to a height of 2–3 m. This city was built on bedrock and was destroyed after a rather short time. Then it was deserted for nearly 700 years, till the early Hellenistic period. Thus, Khirbet Qeiyafa is basically a one period Iron Age site.

About 1000 square metres have been opened, in four different excavation areas (A–D). Areas B–D are located on the site periphery, adjacent to the massive



Fig. 3. The city wall of Khirbet Qeiyafa (Areas B and D).

fortifications. The fortification system includes a casemate city wall and 10 casemates have been excavated so far: four in Area B, four in Area C and two in Area D (Fig. 3). Two identical four-chambered city gates have been uncovered, one in Area B and one on Area C (Fig. 4). Adjacent to the city wall simple dwellings were constructed. Each building used one casemate as the back room of the building (Fig. 5). In each of the four excavation areas, complete pottery vessels were found on floors. Intensive activity took place at the site, as indicated by the large quantities of pottery uncovered in each building and unique finds, including an inscription and various metal objects. The site functioned as a rich urban centre. One would expect mention of a town of such importance in the Biblical records; indeed, we suggest its identification with Sha'arayim, mentioned twice in association with the late 11th century BCE (1 Sam. 17: 52, I Chron. 4: 31–2) (Garfinkel and Ganor 2008b). The Iron IIA city came to a sudden end. Its location on the border between Judah and the Philistine kingdom of Gath suggests that it might have been destroyed during one of the many military clashes that took place in this area.

Khirbet Qeiyafa is tremendously important in terms of various aspects relating to the archaeology and history of the Iron Age and the Biblical tradition. It seems to contradict many assumptions which have been strongly advocated by scholars



Fig. 4. The city gate in Area B, a typical four-chamber Iron Age gate.

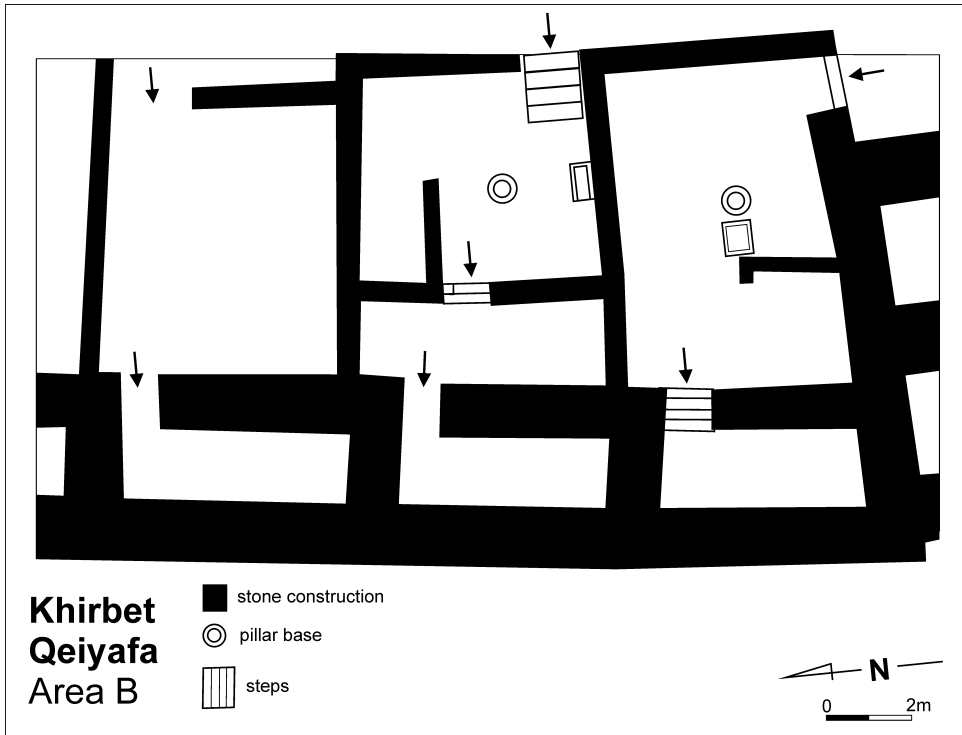


Fig. 5. Schematic plans of the dwelling units in Area B.

of the ‘minimalist’ schools for nearly 30 years. Thus, while the site has been under excavation only since 2007, already numerous different articles have been written against observations or interpretations made by the current expedition (Na’aman 2008a, 2008b, Dagan 2009; Tubb 2010; Finkelstein 2010; Singer-Avitz 2010). This outstanding phenomenon clearly indicates that Khirbet Qeiyafa is indeed a key site for understanding many crucial aspects of its period.

III. The Contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa to the Iron Age Period

Since much data on the site has already been published, here we will evaluate the contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa for understanding various aspects of the Iron Age period.

1. Surveys and Reconstructing Settlement Patterns.

Khirbet Qeiyafa was surveyed by Dagan who identified, based on pottery collected on the site surface, occupation phases from the Iron I and Iron IIB, but no settlement at all from the Iron IIA (Dagan 2008). However, the excavations revealed a different picture: no finds at all from the Iron I, or Iron IIB, but a massive fortified city from

the Iron IIA period. Khirbet Qeiyafa clearly indicates that the surveys completely overlooked the large fortified Iron IIA city at the site (Garfinkel and Ganor 2010). This indicates that Iron Age pottery collected from the site surface should not be dated by centuries, but only to larger chronological units, such as Late Bronze or Iron Age. A further subdivision is apparently wrong and misleading.

In the extensive surveys conducted in the Judaeian Shephelah (from Beth Shemesh to Lachish) hardly any sites from the early Iron IIA were noticed (Dagan 2000). The same picture was reported in various other surveys conducted in the hill country and created a false picture of Judah as an empty land during the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, only becoming a full-blown state in the late 8th century BCE. In the words of Finkelstein: 'The Judahite hill country was also relatively empty, inhabited by a small number of people who lived in a limited number of villages' (2001: 106). Khirbet Qeiyafa shows that the surveys in Judah failed to recognise the early Iron IIA period, thus the reconstructed settlement patterns have no solid basis (see, for example, Finkelstein 2001; Lehmann 2003).

2. *Iron Age Chronology and the Transition from Iron I to Iron IIA*

The transition between Iron I and Iron II is currently under debate. The traditional view of this transition, now designated the 'high chronology', dates this to *c.* 1000 BCE (see, for example, A. Mazar 1990; A. Mazar and Bronk Ramsey 2008). Advocates of a 'low chronology' place the end of the Iron I at *c.* 920 BCE (Finkelstein 1996), and an 'ultra-low chronology' dates it as late as *c.* 900 BCE (Boaretto *et al.* 2005; Sharon *et al.* 2007). Four olive pits from the destruction layer of the Iron Age (IIA) city at Khirbet Qeiyafa were sent for dating to Oxford University and when combined, the calibrated average is 1051–969 BCE (77.8% probability) or 963–31 BCE (17.6% probability) (Fig. 6). Overall results indicate that the transition from Iron I to Iron II began in the Judaeian area in accordance with the high chronology (Garfinkel and Ganor 2009: 35–38). Another approach looks at the total range obtained by these radiometric datings. This leads to the conclusion that the site was destroyed sometime between *c.* 1050 to 915 BCE, so Iron Age I cannot have lasted until 900. In any case the Khirbet Qeiyafa dates clarify that there were fortified cities in Judah during the 10th century BCE (Finkelstein and Piasezky 2010).

3. *The Social Organization of Iron IIA in Judah*

One main issue in the debate concerning the early Iron Age IIA is whether it was a centralised urban society or an unfortified rural tribal community. Traditional scholarship ascribes the building of fortified cities like Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer to the time of King Solomon (Yadin 1958; Dever 1993). In the same way, the fortifications of various other sites have been related to the 10th century BCE (see, for example, A. Mazar 1990). Advocates of the low chronology, however, date the same building activities to the Omride dynasty, placing the early Iron Age fortifications of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer to the 9th century BCE (Finkelstein 1996).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF KHIRBET QEYIYafa

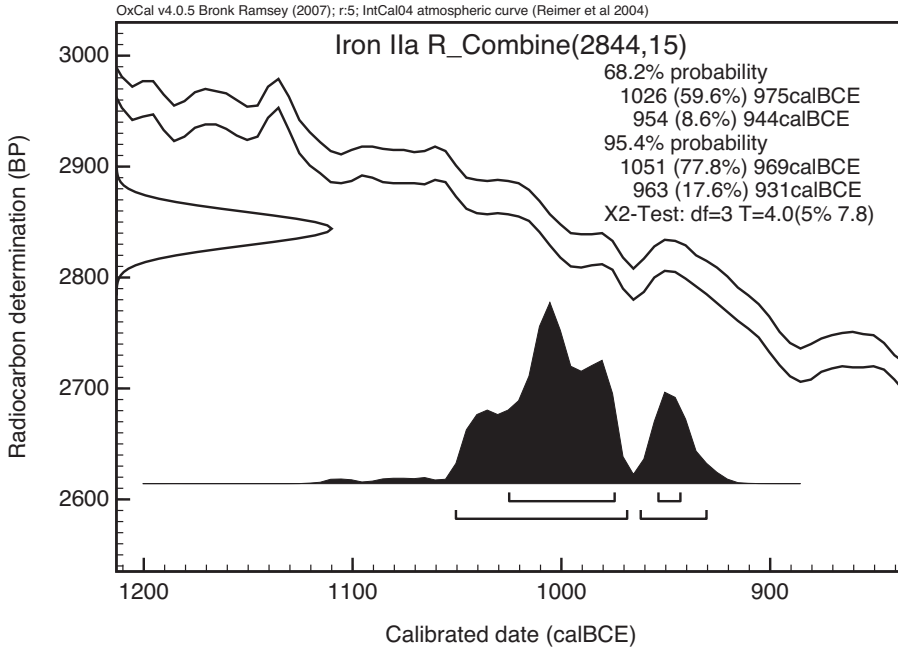


Fig. 6. Radiometric dating of Khirbet Qeiyafa.

In a detailed article, Herzog and Singer-Avitz (2004) have suggested that the Iron Age IIA should be subdivided into two phases in the south. They place several settlements, namely, Arad XII, Beersheba VII, Lachish V, Tel Batash IV and Tel Masos II, in the early Iron Age IIA. These are not fortified cities, but rather enclosures with houses arranged along the periphery of the site. They argue that the first fortified cities were constructed only in the late Iron Age IIA, approximately in the mid-9th century BCE, citing Arad XI, Beersheba VI and Lachish IV in this context. The pottery assemblage of Khirbet Qeiyafa is similar to the earlier group of sites (Kang and Garfinkel 2009a); however, it is associated with a fortified city. Khirbet Qeiyafa, with its massive fortification system built with an estimated 200,000 tons of stone, thus shows that the social organization of early Iron IIA Judah could already have been an urban, centralised society.

4. City Planning in the Iron Age

The planning of Khirbet Qeiyafa includes the casemate city wall and a belt of houses abutting the casemates, incorporating them as part of the construction. This is a typical feature of urban planning in Judaeen cities of the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, and is known in the cities of Beersheba, Tell Beit Mirsim, Tell en-Nasbeh and Tel

Beth-Shemesh (Shiloh 1970, 1978; Herzog 1997). Khirbet Qeiyafa is the earliest known example of this city plan and indicates that this pattern had already been developed in the very early Iron IIA period.

5. The Pottery Repertoire of the Early Iron IIA

As Khirbet Qeiyafa was left suddenly, destroyed either by enemies, earthquake, or another reason, large quantities of restorable pottery vessels are found on the floors of each excavated room. This rich assemblage is in contrast to the other published assemblages of this period, which usually include a small number of sherds, but not complete vessels, as can be seen in Arad Stratum XII, Beersheva Stratum VII and Tel Batash Stratum IV. The Khirbet Qeiyafa painted pottery known as ‘Ashdod Ware’ enables us to subdivide this pottery tradition into two groups, earlier (Ashdod I) and later (Ashdod II) (Kang and Garfinkel 2009b). This situation reveals that a one period site can contribute much more than tell sites to our understanding of a specific short period of time. At the end of the project, when hundreds of restorable vessels will be available, Khirbet Qeiyafa will become the type site for early 10th century BCE pottery.

6. Preparation and Consumption of Food

Khirbet Qeiyafa is different from the nearby Philistine centers of Tel Migne (Ekron) and Tell es-Safi (Gath) in two main aspects. First, pig bones were entirely absent at Khirbet Qeiyafa, while their presence in these Philistine sites indicates that they were consumed by the Philistine population (Kehati 2009). Second, pottery baking trays which were found at Khirbet Qeiyafa are unknown at Tel Migne and Tell es-Safi (Kang and Garfinkel 2009a). Khirbet Qeiyafa demonstrates that two different populations co-exist in the Iron Age in the Shephelah, and that the Qeiyafa population is clearly not Philistine.

7. Household Archaeology

Three well preserved dwellings were excavated in Area B. Parts of two other buildings were excavated in Area C. In each house the entire architecture was preserved, which provides a well-defined ground plan for each building. On the floors of each room various installations, large quantities of pottery, and stone tools were found. The excellent state of preservation gives a vivid picture of how the households were organised. The expedition aims to uncover c. 20 complete houses along the city wall. Our models for a large horizontal exposure are the excavations of R. Amiran at Early Bronze Age Arad and Y. Aharoni in Iron Age IIB Beersheba. The Khirbet Qeiyafa excavations will create a database for household archaeology of an early 10th century BCE settlement for the first time in the archaeology of the Iron Age.



Fig. 7. Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (Megavision laboratory).

8. *Writing*

The most prominent find from Khirbet Qeiyafa is an ostrakon, an inscription written with ink on a broken pottery sherd (Figs. 7–8) (Misgav et al. 2009a, 2009b; Yardeni 2009a, 2009b, Ahituv 2009; Demsky 2009, Bearman and Christens-Barry 2009a, 2009b). While most inscriptions from this time period are rather short, the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon is a five-line inscription with nearly 70 letters. Many of the inscriptions from this period lack provenance or stratigraphic context, yet the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon was found directly on the floor of a house and is securely dated to the early 10th century BCE. For these reasons, it is of tremendous importance for understanding the development of both script and language in the Iron Age.

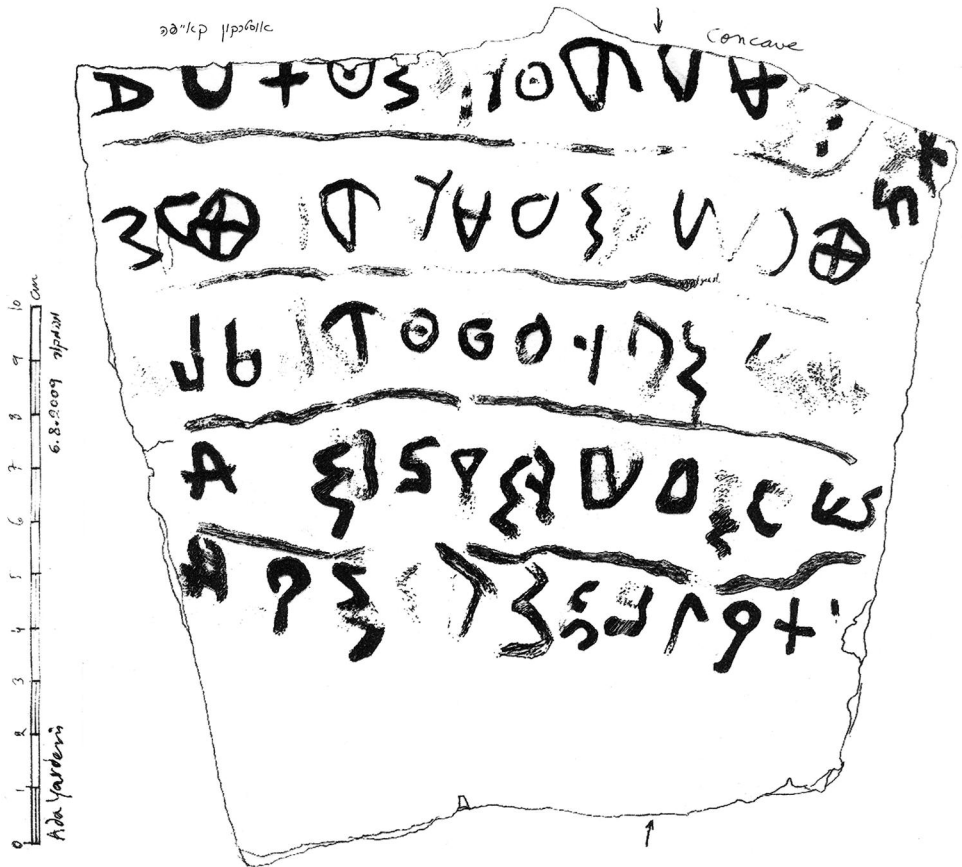


Fig. 8. Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (technical drawing by Ada Yardeni).

The script of the ostrakon is in the Canaanite tradition (so-called ‘Proto-Canaanite’). According to the studies of F. M. Cross, this script went out of use during the middle of the 11th century BCE, but the Khirbet Qeiyafa inscription demonstrates that this script was used until the beginning of the 10th century BCE. A comparative study of the script on other inscriptions, like the ‘Izbit Sartah ostrakon and metal arrowheads, which were traditionally dated to the 12th–11th centuries BCE, now enables us to date these items to the late 11th-early 10th centuries BCE. The language of the inscription is now under dispute. If we accept the reading *’al ta ’as* (לאַ שַׁעַת לֹא) = ‘do not do/make’) in the beginning of the first line, then the language is Hebrew. Other possible languages could be Canaanite, Phoenician, Philistine or an unknown Semitic dialect. According to the expedition interpretation of the site, its location, architecture and diet, it was part of the kingdom of Judah. Thus, the inscription is more likely to represent very early Hebrew.

Now with the publication of the ostrakon, scholars from all over the world will be able to reexamine it and improve its reading and its meaning. One article has already been published (Puech 2010) and others have announced that they are currently preparing new publications (C. Rollston, G. Galil, and A. Lemaire). Undoubtedly, the importance of this inscription will generate dozens of articles in years to come. We can only hope that these studies will contribute to a better understanding of this rather enigmatic text.

The existence of writing at such an early stage of the Iron Age is significant for it implies that historical data could have been documented and passed on from the early 10th century BCE until the Biblical narrative was finally formulated.

9. Historical Geography: Is Khirbet Qeiyafa Biblical Sha‘arayim?

Another aspect relating to Khirbet Qeiyafa is its ancient name. Do we have enough solid data for the complicated task of site identification? Various suggestions had been proposed in scientific and popular publications (Adams 2009). The current expedition accepted the name Sha‘arayim which appears three times in the Biblical tradition. Of these, in two cases it is mentioned in the context of the Elah valley and in two cases in association with King David. In addition Khirbet Qeiyafa has two city gates, and the term Sha‘aryaim means ‘two gates’ in Hebrew (Garfinkel and Ganor 2008b).

10. The Early Kingdom of Judah

According to the Biblical narrative, King David was first a ruler in Hebron for seven years. Later he conquered Jerusalem and moved there to establish a new capitol. The archaeological picture of Jerusalem in the 10th century BCE is obscure and fundamentally different suggestions and interpretations have been raised (A. Mazar 2006; E. Mazar 2007; Finkelstein *et al.* 2007). Hebron is also a difficult site to excavate, and the few expeditions who worked there did not find any meaningful remains from the early 10th century BCE (unlike the description of Chadwick 1992 and Ofer 1993). So far there are no clear archaeological data regarding the period of King David in the two major cities of his kingdom. This lack of data rightly raises serious questions concerning the nature of the political structure in the 10th century BCE. The traditional view points to a single, powerful, centralised authority in Jerusalem that controlled the entire country (see, for example, B. Mazar 1986; A. Mazar 1990; Master 2001; Stager 2003), while others suggest various local, autonomous forms of organization (see, for example, Finkelstein 1996; Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2004).

The Khirbet Qeiyafa excavations have completely altered this situation. Now we have a fortified city in Judah located within one day’s walk from Jerusalem and one day’s walk from Hebron. The distance between these three cities corresponds well to the expected distance between central cities in a kingdom. Khirbet Qeiyafa probably functioned as the third most important city in the early kingdom of David. Its strategic

importance is not only the relative distance from Jerusalem and Hebron, but also its location on the border between Judah and Philistia, opposite Tell es-Safi (Gath), a very large Philistine city during this specific period (Maier and Uziel 2007). Khirbet Qeiyafa, with its position on the main road leading from the Coastal Plain into the hill country, functioned as a ‘gate city’ to the kingdom; a check-point on the western border of Judah. In a similar way Khirbet ed-Dawwara (Finkelstein 1990) probably functioned as a border city on the northeastern border of the kingdom in the same period. While Jerusalem and Hebron remain problematic, Khirbet ed-Dawwara and Khirbet Qeiyafa provide significant data for the early kingdom of Judah.

11. Archaeology and the Biblical Narrative

Another debated issue in Iron Age archaeology is the historicity of the Biblical narrative concerning the United Monarchy and the period of Kings David and Solomon. In the early days of research, the Biblical narrative was viewed as an accurate historical account (see, for example, B. Mazar 1986; Yadin 1958). However, serious doubts have been raised about this tradition since the 1980s, suggesting that the Bible is merely a literary compilation dating from centuries later (see, for example, Davies 1992; Thompson 1999; Van Seters 2009). In the latter approach, King David is considered a purely mythological figure. Although the inscription on the Tel Dan stele clearly indicates that David was indeed a historical figure (Biran and Naveh 1995), but it is unclear whether he was the ruler of a large empire or only a small local chieftain.

Khirbet Qeiyafa is located between Khirbet Shuweikah, commonly identified as Biblical Socoh (Hasel 2009) and Tell Zakariyeh, commonly identified as Biblical Azekah (2 km. to the west). In the Biblical narrative, the battle between David and Goliath is located ‘between Socoh and Azekah’ (I Sam. 17). The chronology and geography of Khirbet Qeiyafa thus enable a convergence of mythology, history, historiography and archaeology. Our suggested identification of Khirbet Qeiyafa as Biblical Sha‘arayim, a city that is mentioned in the Bible in a historical context only in the late 11th century BCE, has far reaching implications for the Biblical texts relating to the period of King David. If correct, it shows that the Biblical tradition preserves historical data and cannot be dismissed as a mythological story invented centuries after the relevant period.

Moreover, the ostrakon clearly indicates that writing was indeed practiced in Judah during this period and hence, that historical knowledge could have been documented then and preserved for generations.

12. Methodological Aspects

The archaeology of the Iron Age tends to concentrate on large, multi-period tell sites. Currently the main Iron Age excavations in Israel all focus on major tells, listed from north to south; Dan, Hazor, Bethsaida, Dor, Megiddo, Tel Rehov, Beth

Shemesh, Tell es-Safi, Ashkelon, and Tel Zayit. Khirbet Qeiyafa, in contrast, is a one period Iron Age site, built on bedrock. On some parts of it there are later remains, but these cover only a limited part of the site. The advantages of excavating Khirbet Qeiyafa are clear:

- (a) Features could be noticed before excavation because they were not covered. The entire city wall and two city gates were noticed before excavations;
- (b) A large part of the Iron Age layer can be excavated in a rather short time as there is no over burden from later periods;
- (c) The excavation area can be enlarged according to the spread of the architecture, and not in artificial trenches marked on the site surface before the excavations begin.

This points to the need for a paradigm shift in choosing archaeological sites for academic research.

13. Timely Publication

One of the main shortcomings of archaeology is the very slow progress in the publication of excavation reports (Shanks 1996). For example, the important Iron Age remains at Arad and Beersheba which were excavated from the late 1950's and the early 1970's, have still not yet been published to any large extent. The Khirbet Qeiyafa expedition made a decision to publish a final excavation report after every two excavation seasons. One final report has already appeared. This is a volume of 304 pages presenting the 2007–2008 excavation seasons with seventeen chapters written by nineteen scholars (Garfinkel and Ganor 2009). A second volume reporting on the 2009–2010 excavation seasons is currently planned. The fieldwork is planned so that significant architectural units will be exposed for each volume.

IV. Discussion

After only three seasons of excavations Khirbet Qeiyafa has already contributed tremendously to the poorly known transition period of the Iron I to Iron IIA. The results indicate that the previous interpretations of this period must now be re-evaluated based on new data and one cannot continue to assume the myth of an empty land in Judah. The many minimalist assumptions were based on the supposed silence of the archaeological record and the poorly conducted surveys which failed to recognise the existence of this period. If the Iron IIA city was missed in previous surveys at Khirbet Qeiyafa where only a thin Hellenistic layer covered it, one can imagine what was missed at sites with a more extensive burden of later periods.

Several questions remain for future excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa. Will there be any evidence for public buildings, cultic activities, and burials? What were the trade connections with other regions in the Levant and beyond? Will further inscriptions be found to clarify the issues of script and language? Were there

workshops for the production of metallurgy, pottery, and other objects at the site? What further insights will be gained for centralization and administration?

Whatever future discoveries bring to light, Khirbet Qeiyafa is already a fascinating site from a relatively poorly known period. While most of the data on the kingdom of Judah come from strata dating to the 8th–7th centuries BCE (Lachish, Beth Shemesh, Arad, Tell Beth Mirsim, Jerusalem) little is known about the 10th century BCE. Khirbet Qeiyafa contributes tremendously to this poorly known period in a large variety of aspects, as summarised above.

We can only hope that at the conclusion of the excavations the site will become a park open to the public. The ancient city should be preserved and reconstructed and a management plan should be created and put into practice. This would enable the public to come and see a small but important settlement from the time of King David.

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