

Iron Age II Israelite Culture in Tel Rehov

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Tel Rehov (Arabic name Tell es-Sarem) is located in the broad junction of the Jordan Valley and the Harod Valley; 3 miles to the south from Tel Beth Shean. The Tel Rehov excavation Project is under the direction of Prof. Amihai Mazar of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since 1997. I have been involved in the Tel Rehov project as responsible for the supervision of Area E in the lower mound of the tel.¹

The purpose of this paper is to report to the audience several of the major highlights of Iron Age II significance of what have been uncovered there and to draw attention for scholarly discussions in terms of the cultural and historical aspects of the Iron Age II period in Israel as excavations progress in Tel Rehov.

¹ It should be noted that this paper's delivery was possible with Director Mazar's kind permission. Also it is possible that some ideas expressed in this paper could have been learned from him whether or not it is footnoted.

Excavated areas and archaeological periods:

Tel Rehov is one of the largest archaeological mounds in Israel (ca. 30 acres).² It is composed of two levels: Upper mound and Lower mound. During the first two seasons (1997 and 1998) of the project, six areas were excavated (Areas A and B in the upper mound; Areas C, D, E, and F in the lower mound). In 1999, only Area B was excavated for solving particular questions in that area but the other five areas lie fallow. In 2000, the normal excavation plan continued.

Pottery repertoire serves as the main indicators of the archaeological or historical period in Tel Rehov. The squares in the lower mound revealed remains from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age II period (late 10th/mid 9th c. B.C.). The community was burnt and destroyed by an external force at least once, sometime during the 10th century B.C. as evidenced in the burnt layers and broken vessels lying on the floors in the lower mound. In the case of Area E, the floors were sealed by fallen roofs in at least two buildings.³ The upper mound shows that the settlement continued until a destruction came (probably by Tiglath-pileser III in 733-732 B.C.) and the end of the 8th c. B.C. after the destruction.⁴ My theme for this paper is on the Iron Age II period of the tel.

² Are there any historical sources that mention Tel Rehov? There are several references biblical (OT) and extra-biblical that mention Rehov. Only two references from Egypt can be securely connected to Tel Rehov in terms of historical reconstruction. The first one is a stele of Seti I (13th c. B.C.) which was discovered in Beth Shean mentions Rehov. Hamath and Pehel (Pella) took Beth Shean and sieged Rehov in rebellion against Egyptian hegemony. In the text, Seti I boasts that he subjugated the rebellious cities of Hamath and Pehel by recovering Beth Shean and freeing Rehov and also that he captured Yenoam. [James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Third edition with supplement. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1969. p. 253]. Tel Rehov is Rehov in this text. The size of the tel, the archaeological period of the remains, the geographical context of the tel in connection to Beth Shean, Pehel (Pella), Hamath, and Yenoam, etc. point toward that direction. The second one is another Egyptian historical source that mentions Rehov in the list of conquered towns in Shishak's campaign to Canaan (ca. 925 B.C.).

³ Amihai Mazar, *The 1997-1998 Excavations at Tel Rehov: Preliminary Report*. IEJ 49: 1-2. pp. 37, 42.

⁴ Then how about the destruction levels at Tel Rehov? Space does not permit a discussion of the chronological phases and building stages of the settlements. But it should be noted that the

Nature of the society

The communities lived in the lower and upper mounds of Tel Rehov during the Iron Age II period were living on agricultural subsistence by and large. They lived on sheep, goats, cattle, olive (fruit and oil), wheat, barley, lentil, etc. With the close proximity to the Jordan River, it is probable they also ate aquaculture. It seems that they also ate river crabs,⁵ but the evidence of fish eating did not turn up so far. Pottery vessels and tools such as flint knives, flint sickle blades, an iron sickle (Area E), numerous grinding stones, etc. indicate the agricultural nature of the ancient society that lived here. Judging by the animal bone remains and considering the ecology of the area, it is reasonable to deduct that they also had animal husbandry.

Was Rehov a rural village or an urban city during the Iron Age II? It is difficult

communities that lived in the upper and lower mounds before and after destructions were all within the span of the Iron Age II.

First, then who was responsible for the destruction of the settlements (of the Iron Age IIA) in the lower mound (Areas C and E)? The Old Testament and an Egyptian inscription both help us. The OT mentions, without pinpointing the name Rehov, that Shishak's campaign swept through Judah five years after the death of Solomon (1 Kgs 14:25-26; 2 Ch 12:2-4). However, Shishak I's own inscription from the Amon temple in Luxor states that his campaign continued through the Transjordan and Rehov and Beth Shean, Shunem and Megiddo before turning back to south. (Yohanan Aharoni, et al., Macmillan Bible Atlas. Completely revised third edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company. 1993. p. 91). The destruction evidence in Tel Rehov was probably caused by this campaign.

Secondly we need to look at the destruction phenomenon in the upper mound. After the settlement in the lower mound of Tel Rehov was ceased to exist by destruction, the settlement continued to exist on the upper mound until about mid 8th century B.C. Areas A and B in the upper mound witnessed violent destruction. The cause of this destruction is tentatively attributed to the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser III's attack in the region. [James B. Pritchard (ed.) *op. cit.*, pp. 282-284; Yohanan Aharoni, et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111]. The Old Testament and the annals of the Assyrian king both mention this attack. The OT states that the Assyrian army took "Ijon, Abel Beth Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh and Hazor" and also "Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali" (2 Kgs 15:29; 1 Ch 5:26). The year it took place was 733 or 732 B.C. Probably the massive mudbrick wall in Area B was constructed without stone foundations in a hurry to withstand the advancing Assyrian army (A. Mazar, *op. cit.*, p. 37, 42).

⁵ A. Mazar, *ibid.*, p. 23.

to answer this question because the dividing line between the two concepts is fluid. I cannot cover all aspects of this issue, but at least several factors lead us to think that Rehov was not a simple village but an urban community/center.

The first indicator is a specialized industry. It seems that there was other industries than subsistence economy in Rehov. In Area E, beads and red stone chips were plentiful. These were probably produced in the process of jewelry making and might indicate that there was some kind of industry in this area.

Second clue is town planning and size of the buildings. During the Iron Age II period, the inhabitants of Tel Rehov built houses and installations without stone foundations using large unbaked mudbricks (ca. 35 cm wide, 55 cm long and 17 cm thick in Area E and similar in other areas). No stone structures have been discovered during the excavations.

In the lower mound revealed large mudbrick buildings in Areas C and E. In addition, a mudbrick built podium was excavated (see below) in Area E. In Areas C and E in the lower mound, the large building were constructed in an organized manner by a master plan. In the case of Area E (Stratum 1), the buildings were laid out in such a way the open courtyard, the cult facilities, the mudbrick building were perpendicular to each other in the northwest-southeast axis. This was not accidental, but a clear evidence of the town planning. We have not found a city wall or a city gate yet in the lower mound during Iron Age IIA. Judging by the thoughtful town plan and the size of the buildings, there should be an enclosure wall and a gate. Perhaps they will turn up in the future excavations.

In the upper mound as well houses were built with mudbricks without stone foundations. Here also no stone-built structures have been excavated. In the case of Area B in the upper mound, a very large city wall was constructed which was destroyed in the mid-8th c. B.C. This mudbrick wall survived sixteen courses in

some segments and 8 - 9 m wide. It is an offset-inset wall. To build a city wall to such magnitude, it requires a centralized administration. In the 1999 excavation in that area the excavators discovered a large mudbrick building below the city wall. This building was constructed during the 9th c. B.C. It is not difficult to surmise that there was a centralized administration.

The third evidence is foreign relations. Rehov shows good evidence of significant foreign connections in Iron Age II context. There are intact pottery vessels from outside such as Cypriot Bichrome jug (Area C), Phoenician jug (Area E), and partially restorable Phoenician jar (Area E). There are also many sherds of foreign made pottery vessels from Phoenicia (Area B) and Cyprus. There are also scarabs, seals, and seal impressions.

Rehov is located in a strategic point in the meeting area of the N-S and E-W trade routes. Commercial enterprise during the Iron Age II between Israel and Phoenicia is mentioned in the Bible (for example, in connection with Solomon and Ahab-Jezebeel).

Ethnicity:

The ethnic identity of the people who lived in Tel Rehov during the Iron Age II is difficult to grasp. In Area D in the western slope of the lower mound, the ceramic evidence testify that the Canaanite culture was continuous from the 13th c. B.C. through the 11th c. B.C. at this point of excavation.⁶

In the following Iron Age IIA context there is change in pottery repertoire. Pottery is also bearing some indications as to the ethnicity of a site although it is hard to make decisive references. Numerous pottery vessels (store jars, cooking pots, bowls, juglets, chalices, etc.) were recovered from the buildings of Iron Age II contexts in most areas. Most of these vessels were broken, but many were

⁶ A. Mazar, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

restorable.

In the lower mound, red slipped burnished vessels and the so-called “hippo” jars indicate the dating to Iron Age IIA secure. There were other types of storage jars and also cooking pots. In Area E, numerous chalices were found in destruction debris. There were also small amount of vessels from outside world, such as Cypriot Bichrome jug and Phoenician jug, in the Iron Age II contexts.

During Iron Age IIA, the Israelites were dominating in the land, Rehov presents nothing to identify as Israelite. It is probable that it was inhabited by Canaanites under the Israelites’ political domain judging by the material culture it has revealed so far. Or it is that perhaps the Israelites maintained the Canaanite Baal cult here. This means that either there was no particular difference in material culture between the Israelites and the other ethnic groups in the region or it was inhabited by people groups other than Israelites.

Open cult site:

Among the interesting finds are a cult precinct in Area E (Stratum 1) in the lower mound. This is a best example of a cult site in the Iron Age II context so far excavated in Israel. In all probability it seems that this is a *bamah* which is conventionally translated as “high place” in English.⁷

In 1997 a pottery cult stand was found in broken pieces in square E15. It was made of clay, ca. 50 cm tall, and was square in shape. The front side of the stand has two rows of triangular openings and the upper part of the front is incised with round marks (reed impressions). It seems that there were corners or horns on the

⁷ *Bamah* is a Hebrew word for sanctuary or shrine (cf. 1 Kings 14:23). The conventionally translated term “high place” sometimes misleads; however, “sanctuary” or “shrine” is a much better translation. Perhaps it would be more acceptable to use the Hebrew term *bamah* without translation.

top surface. It now shows only the marks of broken off. The team's excitement over this find is understandable because this kind of discovery is rare in the context of Iron Age IIA. Similar clay cult stands were found in Taanach and Pella.⁸

A large stone slab sitting on five small supporting stones were found close to the cult stand. Judging by its intentional construction and its nearness to the cult stand, it is most likely that the slab served as an offering table. Also an oven was located near the stone table for cooking meals. Several clay figurines were excavated in the vicinity where the stand was uncovered. One of the two human figurines is clearly the Astarte figurine. A few clay animal figurines came to light in the same area. There was also a bronze figurine which seems in the shape of a bull head. Among the pottery vessels, many chalices were found in the vicinity which might indicate their use in cultic settings.

The cultic nature of this area (in Area E) was further enhanced when we uncovered in 1998 an installation. It is built with mudbricks forming a kind of podium or platform. It is over 1 m high. The top surface was paved with small stones covering a 1m x 1m square surface. In fact, this is the only stone-lined installation in Tel Rehov. On the southern edge of this stone pavement are four larger rocks, three of which are still standing and the fourth one is lying low. These stones remind of us "standing stones" called *masseboth* in Hebrew. A large red burnished bowl was retrieved from the top of this stone paved installation. Perhaps it was a "sacred bowl" in front of the deities (cf. Zech 14:20).

On the western side of the podium, a black round mark of 0.15 m in diameter was discovered. When excavated, it was filled with charcoal remains. It was 0.2

⁸ A. W. McNicoll, et al., *Pella in Jordan 2. Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement 2*. Sydney. 1992. pp. 97-100. Plates 70-71.

m deep. It seemed that a wooden pole was standing here before being burnt. Would it have been an Asherah pole?

It should be noted that there was a room next to the podium. It was carefully constructed to match exactly with the western edge of the mudbrick podium (altar). The floor of the room with pottery vessels and grinding stones was sealed by fallen roof. This room was part of a building complex. It was a room to serve the cult (cf. 1 Sam 9:13).

What could this mudbrick podium be? Its location is important because it is next to the spot where the cult stand and the stone table were found in 1997. Was it an altar? Mazar and I differ in this regard. He thinks the cult stand was an altar but the podium was not but a cultic (unspecified) platform. I disagree.

They both were altars for many reasons: (1) multiple altars could have been placed in one cultic place both in Israelites' and Canaanites' cultic places (Num 3:31; 23; 2 Kgs 11:18; 21:4). Therefore, there is no problem to have a cult stand and a podium as multiple altars; (2) altars were "built (*bnh*)" with clay or brick or stone or bronze or acacia wood covered with bronze, etc. Our mudbrick podium is like an "altar of earth" (Ex 20:24) or "altars of brick" (Isa 65:3); (3) Some altar were used to have sacrifices on top and others were used to have sacrifices in front (Deut 26:4; Zech 14:20). Perhaps the cult stand was an altar to have sacrifices on top of it being placed in front of the larger brick built podium (= larger altar); (4) there were altars for witnessing and for memorial of special events (Gen 33:20; 35:7; Ex 17:15; Josh 22:28; Jdg 6:24). In this case no sacrifices were placed on the altars.⁹ Our podium fits this well. There are standing stones (*masseboth*) on top of the podium. Standing stones could have been symbols of deities or symbols of special events as in the cases of Jacob's Beth El

⁹ R. D. Haak, Anchor Bible Dictionary I. Edited by D.N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday. 1992. p. 164.

stone (Gen 28:18-19) and Samuel' s Ebenezer (1 Sam 7:12).

In my assessment, the stone table was an offering table, the clay cult stand was a sacrificial altar, and the mudbrick podium was a memorial altar. Thus this open cult precinct (*bamah*) had multiple altars.

In addition to the mudbrick podium (altar), also a row of six round installations (ca. up to 1 m in diameter and ca. 50 cm deep) were found near the mudbrick podium (altar). They were made of whitish color clay. Thus, they were different than the usual style of ovens (*tabun*) which are frequently discovered in archaeological contexts in Israel. Nothing was found in them to help us to determine what they could have been. They are not water proof; when a bucket of water was poured into them, it seeped out slowly. As their function was enigmatic to us, so variety of suggestions as to their usage have been made by fellow archaeologists: silos, ovens, bird cages, etc. These round installations, however, could have been vessels used in connection to the local cult to prepare “sacred meals” for the rituals before cooking them in the adjacent ovens.

There is additional evidence to substantiate the determination of this area as a *bamah*. According to the study of animal bones at Tel Rehov by Mary Craig, approximately 50% of the animal bones retrieved in Area E is from the capra ibex which is from the wild goat family native to the Levant. In modern times, they are concentrated in the En Gedi region, but in antiquity they were also found in the Jordan Valley. Animal bones found concentrated within the boundary of the mudbrick podium (altar) in discussion.

This finding is different than in other areas of Tel Rehov where the animal bones were mainly from sheep, goat and cattle. Another interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that the collected evidence is mostly horn cores and skulls, not the legs or other body parts. What was the reason for catching these wild animals

which are very swift in their habitat? Craig conjectures two explanations for this: (1) the horns were used for cultic activities and the horn cores survived due to their calcium content; (2) there was an industry in the *bamah* area to make art objects, jewelry, tools, utensils, etc. with ibex horns.¹⁰ This is a very interesting phenomenon which most likely has to do with animal sacrifice in cultic activities.¹¹

It is hard to imagine this open area was something other than a cult place (*bamah*). The cult stand, the stone offering table, the mudbrick altar with standing stones (*masseboth*) and a service room, six round clay installations for sacred meal preparations, ovens, human and animal figurines including a bronze bull head, young wild goat bones, and many chalices, etc. encompass all of the ingredients to fulfill the conditions of *bamah*. For example:

Judah did evil in the eyes of the Lord ... They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree (1 Kgs 14:22-23). They (the Israelites) worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced. ... [T]hey built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. ... They worshiped idols, though the Lord had said, "You shall not do this" (2 Kgs 17:7-12).

This *bamah* was a local shrine for the community which existed in the boundary which we designated as Areas E and F also possibly Area C in the lower mound. It is an exciting discovery indeed because no such comprehensive example of *bamah* was found before from the Iron Age

¹⁰ Verbal communication with Mary Craig.

¹¹ Amihai Mazar, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

contexts in Israel,¹² comparing those in Hazor and Tel Dan.

Sociological issues:

The first issue is whether the cult was involved in the administration of the town. The clue is town planning and size of the buildings. The entire *bamah* area was laid out in an organized manner according to a master plan. It was laid out in such a way that the open courtyard, the cult facilities, and the mudbrick buildings were perpendicular to each other in the northwest-southeast axis. This was not accidental, but a clear evidence of town planning. To build a town or a precinct this way requires a centralized administration. Therefore, it is not difficult to surmise that there was a centralized administration responsible for building this cultic precinct. Was the cult the beneficiary or the enactor?

The second issue is whether there was a specialized industry controlled by the functionaries of the cult. It seems that there were other industries in addition to a subsistence economy in Rehov. In the *bamah* area, beads and red stone chips were plentiful. These were probably produced in the process of jewelry making and might indicate that there was some kind of industry in this area. In addition, as mentioned above, a large quantity of wild ibex horn cores were found in the *bamah* area. Was there an industry in this area to make art objects, jewelry, utensils with ibex horns? Future excavations should clarify whether there were such industries using beads and animal horns. If so, in what manner did the cult functionaries get involved in this activity?

The third issue has to do with foreign connections. In the boundary of the *bamah*, many sherds of foreign pottery vessels from places such as Cyprus and Phoenicia were found. In a room sealed by destruction, an intact Phoenician jug

¹² A. Mazar notes that the cult sites in Megiddo, Taanach, and Lachish do not compare to the *bamah* of Rehov (A. Mazar, *Ibid.* p.28).

was recovered. In the open space to the northeast of the mudbrick altar, a beautiful Phoenician jar was found. Its base is missing. Thus the *bamah* area shows good evidence of significant foreign connections in Iron Age II context.

Rehov is located in a strategic point in the meeting area of the N-S and E-W trade routes. Commercial enterprise during the Iron Age II between Israel and outside countries is mentioned in the Bible. In the northern kingdom, Ahab and Jezebeel mixed the Baal cult and the national economy as part of their major political agenda during this period. It will be very interesting to see what insights the archaeological evidence in this cult area will reveal on this issue of religion and economy.

Conclusion:

Tel Rehov's top layers are containing Iron Age II remains without much of other periods' remains lying on top of them. Thus it is a very ideal site to investigate the ancient life during the Iron Age. Also the architectural remains such as buildings, walls, and installations, and pottery repertoire, and other special finds are indicating that Tel Rehov will continue to yield archaeologically meaningful relics in the coming excavation seasons. As Amihai Mazar estimates, the site will probably play a key role in understanding the life and culture of Iron Age in general in the northern region of the Holy Land.¹³

In recent years there has been an active debate regarding the chronology/history and material culture during the Iron Age II (the United and Divided Monarchy). Archaeological discoveries in Tel Rehov will shed an important light on these particular academic/archaeological issues in the coming years.

¹³ A. Mazar, *op. cit.*, p. 42.