



Review

EL-AHWAT, A FORTIFIED SITE FROM THE EARLY IRON AGE
NEAR NAHAL ‘IRON, ISRAEL: EXCAVATIONS 1993-2000

ADAM ZERTAL (ED.)

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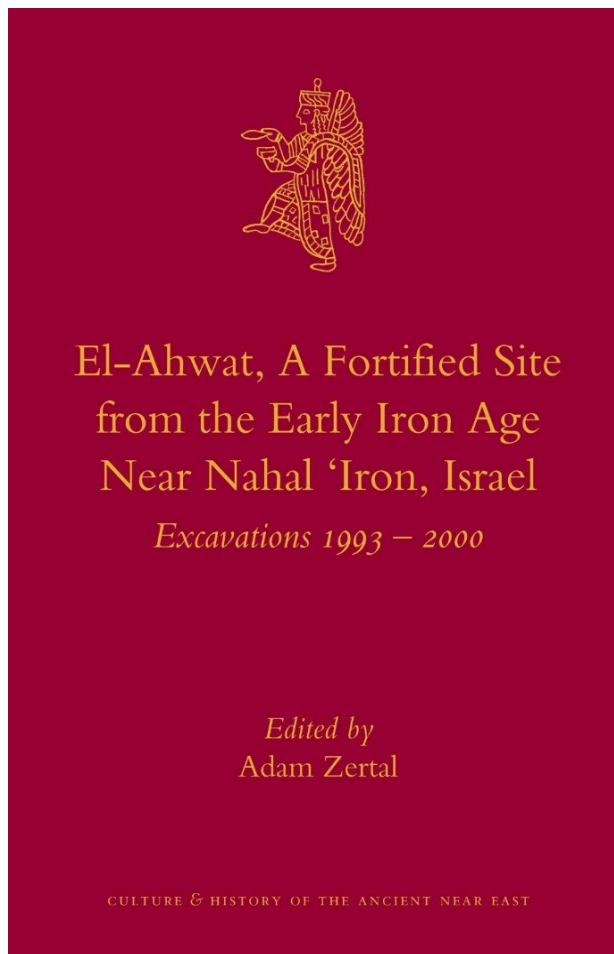
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The unprecedented interconnectivity of the Late Bronze Age (LBA) Eastern Mediterranean has been the subject of a great deal of study in recent years. Colloquia, conferences, articles, and monographs have dealt in depth with the diplomacy, balance of power, and widespread trade that were characteristic of this period, as well as the societal collapses and great migrations that marked its end. However, if one archaeologist’s interpretation is correct, a small site in central Israel could not only fill remaining gaps in our knowledge of Late Bronze–Early Iron communication and migration in the Mediterranean, but turn some of what we think we know on its head.

The site in question is el-Ahwat, a 7.5-acre “city” near Nahal ‘Iron, and the archaeologist is the University of Haifa’s Adam Zertal. A scholar whose previous accomplishments include the exhaustive two-volume, 1,400-



page Manasseh Hill Country Survey publication,¹ Zertal’s most recent work has the paradoxical status of being both long-awaited and almost entirely unheralded. Since 2001,² the author has written exhaustively about his opinion that el-Ahwat housed an Egyptian garrison community of *Šrdn* (‘Sherden’), a Sea Peoples group known primarily from Egyptian New Kingdom records (as well as from several Ugaritic texts) that is believed by some to have originated on Sardinia in the central Mediterranean.

If correct, this interpretation of el-Ahwat would provide direct evidence for a number of “firsts” (for example, it would serve as the first testament to direct contact between the central Mediterranean and the Levant during this period, and the first confirmed site of non-Philistine Sea Peoples settlement in the Levant), while striking a blow against the prevailing scholarly views that the Sea Peoples were largely Aegean in culture and

origin, and that they settled primarily in coastal areas that allowed access to the sea.

However, Zertal's theories about the site's significance and its inhabitants' origin have either been largely ignored, or viewed with a detached skepticism, pending the excavation results' complete publication. With this volume, the full results of the seven-season excavation are now available, and the site can be independently studied – as can Zertal's theories about its significance. The methodically-organized, 27-chapter publication contains over 200 figures, and is comprised of four parts: Stratigraphy, Architecture, and Chronology; The Finds; Economy and Environment; and Conclusions. Though each of the former three contains a valuable detailed review of finds and conclusions related to its subject matter, these portions of the work sometimes feel as though as though they are serving in large part to lay the defensive groundwork for Part Four, wherein Zertal uses the preceding data to defend the conclusions about the site that he has been writing about for the last decade.

El-Ahwat is located on the flat shoulder of a ridge 3/4 of a mile south of the Nahal 'Iron, the ancient route between Egypt and the heavily contested Jezreel Valley in northern Israel, where it overlooks the Sharon plain, Carmel range, and western Samarian hills. Established on virgin soil, the view to the north, west, and south may have provided a strategic benefit that outweighed poor resources like a lack of fresh water and arable soil (pp. 25, 428). The site has two strata: a late Roman and Byzantine farmstead period (p. 41), and a brief (50- to 60-year [p. 262]) second stratum. The excavator dates the latter from the late 13th to early 12th centuries based on pottery and Egyptian small finds, including eight scarabs dating to the 19th dynasty (Chapter 14; pp. 233–263). Zertal's *terminus ante quem* for Stratum II is a scarab bearing the royal title of Ramesses III (p. 53).

El-Ahwat yielded few restorable ceramic finds (Chapter 12), which the excavator credits to the site's abandonment at the end of Stratum II and the leveling of that lower stratum for Roman–Byzantine use (p. 181). The ceramic assemblage contained several forms, though, including bell-shaped bowls of the locally-made northern Phoenician variety (p. 186), and collared-rim pithoi which may have been used for storing water gathered from the nearest source 1/2 km away (pp. 424, 428). Baruch Brandl's note in Chapter 14 that el-Ahwat is only the third site in the Carmel Ridge where collared-rim jars have been found together with New Kingdom scarabs (p. 263) is noteworthy.

El-Ahwat is architecturally divided into four Areas, three of which contained noteworthy features. In Area A was a unique isosceles triangle-shaped “approach” to the city gate (pp. 62–64), the “gate” itself (a small, thin door mounted on a doorpost [p. 62]), and a possible administrative complex (Complex 100 [p. 79]). Area C featured a 510 m² residential complex, within which

were found two oil presses, while Area D contained a furnace, possibly for iron forging (pp. 157, 383).

It is the architectural perimeter that has most contributed to the excavator's conclusions about the site's purpose and inhabitants. El-Ahwat is encircled by an oblong, “undulating” (p. 32) course Zertal refers to as a “city wall,” which contains several large rock mounds that he refers to as “towers” despite their unclear function (p. 38), and despite the likelihood that few actually served as such (save perhaps T1 and T2, which sit outside the “wall” to the west, and T53, which is built into the eastern portion of Area D). Built into the “wall's” structure are four of what the author identifies as “corridors” (p. 412), as are several “igloo-like stone huts” which he identifies as “false-domed *tholoi*” (p. 413).

If Parts 1–3 of this volume lay the groundwork for Zertal's defense of his theories about the site, Part Four does not disappoint, as the author uses the majority of the final section to argue for Sardinian influence on, and Sherden inhabitation of, el-Ahwat. To the author, the uniqueness of the site suggests that “the architects of el-Ahwat...planned the site according to a master plan based on earlier [non-Levantine] architectural traditions” (p. 28). It is the location the author sees as being the origin of these traditions, and the conclusions he draws from it, that make el-Ahwat a controversial site, and this final report a controversial publication. Zertal sees the site's unique features as analogous to the proto-*nuraghe* of Bronze Age Sardinia and the Toreneic Culture of neighboring Corsica (pp. 415–423), and he suggests that this architectural style was brought from the central Mediterranean by Sherden immigrants who were forcibly settled in Canaan by Ramesses III. However, as noted above, the material culture of el-Ahwat is entirely Levantine in nature (with Egyptian small finds), blending hill country and lowland traditions in a site whose architecture is its only truly major unique feature. This stands in marked contrast to the Philistine material culture footprint (to date, the only securely known Sea Peoples culture), which consists not only of distinctive site architecture, but of intrusive ceramic, cultic, and domestic traditions at their major sites.

The architecture itself is problematic, as well. While Zertal may be correct that the site's 600 m long, 6 m high, 5 m thick “city wall” and “towers” served as fortifications, the “patches and sections” (p. 412) in which it was built suggest that it is neither as cohesive nor as temporally constrained as he imagines. The awkward contouring of rooms to the “wall” lacks the appearance of planned construction, as can be seen in gaps and overlaps between the structure and the site's internal architecture (e.g. W3410, W4313, and L3328). The unique “approach” in Area A2 seems too awkward – and too likely to have caused logjams between outer and inner entrances – to have been a planned

feature of the Iron Age city, particularly if the site served as a base for chariot warriors, as the author has suggested elsewhere (see below). As its remains rise above the entirety of Stratum II, it may even be that what now appear as remnants of massive fortifications were constructed as retaining walls or terraces during the Stratum I occupation.³

A significant portion of Part Four is dedicated to a partial review of the evidence for the Sherden in the Near East at this time. Unfortunately, the selection of evidence is incomplete, and the author's interpretation is highly selective. For example, the Great Harris Papyrus, which lists the Sherden among the invading Sea Peoples who were defeated by Ramesses III and supposedly settled in Egyptian strongholds (p. 431), serves as a key rationale for Zertal's identification of the site and its inhabitants. Unmentioned, though, is the fact that P. Harris I does not align with the inscriptions at Medinet Habu, written at least twenty years earlier, which contain no mention of the Sherden among the invaders.

Zertal also references the *Onomasticon of Amenope*, a ca. 1100 BCE list of peoples and places in the Near East that mentions three Philistine cities followed by three Sea Peoples groups (Sherden, Sikil, and Peleset), as evidence that Ramesses III had settled the Sherden to the north of Philistia and of the port city of Dor, which the roughly contemporary *Tale of Wen-Amon* refers to as the "Harbor of the Sikil" (pp. 432–433). However, the *Onomasticon* is a cryptic text which is both filled with lacunae and lacking any real context regarding its orientation and order. Thus, any attempt to use it as more than a *terminus ante quem* for the presence of these groups in Canaan – let alone as a map of Sea Peoples settlements – is a risky endeavor at best.

As noted above, the chronology of the site is also problematic. Though the author places the ceramic and glyptic evidence from el-Ahwat firmly in the late 13th and early 12th centuries, recent radiocarbon analysis returned a date range of 1057–952 BCE for the site, suggesting that the dates of inhabitation should be lowered by up to 200 years.⁴ Even if the early date of 1057 is treated as the final year of the site's inhabitation, the 50–60 year duration proposed by Zertal would put el-Ahwat's founding in the final quarter of the 12th c. – at least a half century short of the author's proposed *terminus ante quem* for the site. Zertal argues that the ¹⁴C dates should be ignored based on what he sees as a close correlation between the material finds and corresponding Egyptian chronology (Ch. 3).

El-Ahwat's potential Sardinian connection brings with it another chronological problem. While the construction of hybrid, "Canaanized" proto-nuraghe could have been carried out by individuals who had traveled to Sardinia in the Late Bronze II and

brought that "template" back with them to the Levant, Zertal argues that the uniqueness of this site is "better explained by 'colonies' of immigrants, who brought with them some of their old traditions, rather than by influence derived through trade" (p. 423). However, proto-nuraghe of the type that Zertal suggests as the inspiration for el-Ahwat's fortifications date to the 18th–16th centuries BCE. Following this time, in the early–middle Nuragic period, there is little evidence on Sardinia of foreign contacts. While communication with the wider Mediterranean, including the Aegean and Cyprus, grew rapidly in the local Final Bronze Age, Sardinians traveling abroad at this time who sought to build in the nuragic tradition likely would have constructed the corbel-vaulted dwellings being built in Sardinia at that time, rather than the "false-domed tholoi" Zertal sees at el-Ahwat.⁵ Further, even in the Middle and Final Bronze Ages on Sardinia, there is almost no evidence for weapons, armor, or any other accouterments of a warrior culture of the type associated with the Sherden.⁶

Zertal presents his theories about el-Ahwat's Sardinian connection in a much more measured fashion here than in some of his previous publications.⁷ Interestingly absent is any discussion of Zertal's theory that el-Ahwat was the biblical *Harosheth Haggoyim*, the base of the Canaanite King Jabin's 900-strong chariotry, and that Sisera of biblical fame (Judges 4–5) was actually a Sherden warrior of central Mediterranean extraction.⁸ The only mentions of chariots in this volume (by the reviewer's count) came in Chapter 17, which deals with a possible fragment of a miniature chariot linchpin.⁹

The final publication of el-Ahwat is valuable for its straightforward presentation of the architecture and material culture of this short-lived site. Though several passages can be read as defenses of Zertal's conclusions about the site's influences and chronology, the finds are allowed to speak for themselves to a sufficient degree that scholars will now be able to draw their own conclusions about el-Ahwat from the material itself, rather than relying on the excavator's assertions.

Further, whether or not the site truly represents an architectural link with the central Mediterranean and the first material evidence of non-Philistine Sea Peoples settlement in the Levant, el-Ahwat is a unique site in many ways. Not least of these are its layout, its remote location, and its brief Iron Age duration, which allows it to serve as a rare single-stratum snapshot of settlement. As such, though its legacy may be that of an outside-the-mainstream (and ultimately unsupported) argument for a Sea Peoples presence in central Israel, this publication still holds value for those studying settlement, architecture, and change in the hill country culture of Iron Age I Canaan.

Notes

- ¹ Adam Zertal, *The Manasseh Hill County Survey*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004, 2007).
- ² Zertal, "The 'Corridor Builders' of Central Israel: Evidence for the Settlement of the 'Northern Sea Peoples,'" in Vassos Karageorghis and Christin E. Morris (eds.), *Defensive Settlements of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean After c. 1200 B.C.* (Nicosia: Anastasios G. Leventis Foundation, 2001), 215–232.
- ³ Israel Finkelstein ("El-Ahwat: A Fortified Sea People City?," *Israel Exploration Journal* 52.2 [2002], 187–199) has previously compared the "corridors" in the "wall" to highland field towers used for storage and for habitation.
- ⁴ Ilan Sharon, Ayelet Gilboa, A. J. Timothy Jull, and Elisabetta Boaretto, "Report on the First Stage of the Iron Age Dating Project in Israel: Supporting a Low Chronology," *Radiocarbon* 49.1 (2007), 1–46, esp. Table 8.
- ⁵ Gary S. Webster, *A Prehistory of Sardinia: 2300-500 BC* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 18–22; Emma Blake, "Constructing a Nuraghic Locale: The Spatial Relationships Between Tombs and Towers in Bronze Age Sardinia," *AJA* 105.2 (2001), 145–161; Robert H. Tykot, "Villages of Stone: Sardinia's Bronze Age *Nuraghi*," *Archaeology Odyssey* 6.2 (2003), 42–59; pers. comm., Dec. 2011.
- ⁶ Luica Vagnetti, "Western Mediterranean Overview: Peninsular Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia at the Time of the Sea Peoples," in Eliezer Oren (ed.), *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum), 306–326, esp. 319.
- ⁷ Zertal, *El-Ahwat: A Fortified Sea Peoples Site Near Nahal Iron, A Preliminary Report of the First Three Excavation Seasons 1993–1995* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1996) (Hebrew); "El-Ahwat: 1993–1996," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 110 (1999), 32*–34*; 2001; "Philistine Kin Found in Early Israel," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28.3 (2002), 18–31, 60–61; "Queries & Comments," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28.5 (2002), 8, 10, 12–14, 70–71; "Sardinians in Israel?," *Archaeology Odyssey* 6.2 (2003), 52–53; "Sticking to the Facts: Adam Zertal Counters Israel Finkelstein," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 30.2 (2004), 22–23; "Ahwat, El," in Ephraim Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2008), 1563–1565; *Sisera's Secret, A Journey following the Sea-Peoples and the Song of Deborah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2010) (Hebrew); "Archaeological Mystery Solved" (Press release, University of Haifa, July 1, 2010), retrieved from <http://newmedia-eng.haifa.ac.il/?p=3309>
- ⁸ Zertal 2010
- ⁹ The linchpin is also referenced on pp. 5, 51, and 427.