TEL MASOS
Its Importance in Relation to the Settlement of the Tribes of Israel in the Northern Negev

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Tel Masos (Arabic Ḥirbat el-Meshāš) is situated on the edge of Wadi Beer-sheba, approximately 12 km. east of the modern town of Beer-sheba. The site is one of the largest in the Valley of Beer-sheba, and consists of three separate settlements: the main settlement of the Chalcolithic period (ca 3200 B.C.) and Iron Age I (1200-1000 B.C.), which covers about 15 acres; a smaller settlement 100 meters to the west of about 1½ acres, which includes the remains of a Syrian Nestorian monastery and a caravanserai of Iron Age II (ca 600 B.C.); and the third area, located 600 meters to the southwest of the main settlement, comprising an enclosure of about 4½ acres in which remains from the Middle Bronze Age (18th century B.C.) were found. Though it consists of three separate locations, the whole site is known today by the name "Tel Masos."

The importance of Tel Masos for the understanding of the "Settlement Period" of the Tribes of Israel in Canaan was first recognized by the late Y. Aharoni, while he was conducting surface surveys in the region during the early 1960's. As a result of these

1. The excavated areas of Tel Masos
2. General map of the valley of Beer-sheba and its main transport routes
surveys, excavations in the Valley of Beer-sheba were undertaken, including those at Tel Masos. The site was excavated for three seasons, in 1972, 1974 and 1975, under the direction of V. Abulafia, V. Fritz and the author.

Tel Masos is not a lofty mound containing a single complex of layers from many periods of history, but a group of single-period sites, scattered around several wells. This concentration of settlements indicates the importance of the location in antiquity: here the east-west route passed Wadi Beer-sheba and continues along the north-south path from the Judean hills towards the central Negev and the Arabah.

In course of time, the crossroads shifted from Tel Masos to Tel Maltha, six km, to the east, and back. An examination and comparison of the periods during which the two sites were occupied, enable us to follow the shifting to and fro of the crossroads, which established the periods during which different road systems were used.

THE HISTORY OF OCCUPATION

The earliest settlement discovered by the excavators in Tel Masos dates from the Late Chalcolithic period. The remains of the period dating from the end of the Chalcolithic and beginning of the Early Bronze Age are also completely covered by the settlement of the Iron Age I period (the period of the settlement of the Tribes of Israel—ca. 1400-1200 B.C.). The Chalcolithic settlement is about 15 acres in area. The Late Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age period is also found in Tel Maltha. The two settlements are separated by a large area of open space, the remains of which are the two main settlements along the Wadi Beer-sheba, and one may assume the existence of smaller settlements between those two.

The inhabitants of Tel Masos lived in caves dug in the loess soil. This kind of unfortified dwelling is characteristic of the culture of Beer-sheba. One such cave has been excavated in Tel Masos; its pottery dates back to the Chalcolithic and the beginning of the transitional phase to the Early Bronze Age.

Since the Pottery period a caravanerii or fort existed at Tel Masos, but it was completely destroyed by later building activities, as well as by looting, during this period, and one red-figured Attic shield, testifying to the existence of a settlement during the Middle Bronze Age. It stood at one spot.

The last permanent settlement in Tel Masos before the group of wells turned again into a Bedouin encampment was the Persian monastery built on the ruins of the Persian fort after the Arab conquest of Palestine in A.D. 632. It is well known that the Omeyyad Khalifahs favored the Nestorians and bestowed various privileges on them, in number of instances in Syria, as well as the pottery found at the site, make it possible to date the monastery to the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century. It was serving as a stopping place for travelers and may have engaged in missionary activities. A 12th-century document indicates that the monastery was built by Nestorians at crossroads and that their help to travelers was considered as a missionary activity.

The fact that, from the Middle Bronze Age onwards, there were periods during which the site was not active and the site occupied, testifies to the existence of a route which some central power or government utilized in maintaining the longest gap in the occupation of the site was during the Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 B.C.), supporting the view that the road from the Shefela to Transjordan shifted. It ran from west to east, starting from Tel Gerar (Arabic: Abu Gerer), crossing the periphery of the Shefelon towards Tel Shari'ya, to Tel Halif towards the Judean hills, and extended from there by way of Devir (Arabic: Hedu) to Jabbeel—and to the central part of the mountains towards Jerusalem and Jericho. We will discuss further below in connection with the process of settlement in Tel Maltha the question of why the route through the Valley of Beer-sheba came back into use at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age.

CAN TEL MASOS BE IDENTIFIED?

Two sites in the Valley of Beer-sheba can be identified with certainty: Beer-sheba and the site of Bir Othman. Beer-sheba maintained throughout the entire Roman-Byzantine period in Negev and was carved on into Arabic as Bir el-Sawha. The excavations in Tel sheba, about 3 km. east of the modern town of Beer-sheba, showed that a very important fortress stood at the beginning of the Iron Age and the beginning of the Roman-Byzantine period. The discovery of an ashlar altar confirmed the use of the fortress, which protected the region at the time of the Judean kings.

The so-called settlement is Tel Arad, which is identified with ancient Arad which served as a fortress during the period of the Judean kingdom, and belongs to the Period the Roman and Hellenistic periods. The site continued to serve as a fortress in Roman-Byzantine times, and it is one of the forts of the Roman times. The name has been preserved unchanged by the Bedouins in the vicinity for about 12 centuries, ever since the destruction of the last wave which still existed in the early Arabic period. During the excavations, the identification was confirmed by an offering bowl on which the name of the fortress is inscribed several times.

Tel Masos is situated approximately midway between these two sites and should therefore be identified on the basis of sources relating to either Beer-sheba or Tel Arad.

Biblical sources often mention a town by the name of Hormah alongside Arad. Hormah belonged to the tribe of Simeon, and is apparently the easternmost town of Simeon. In a number of verses in Numbers and Deuteronomy, a tradition seems to have preserved which testifies to the attempt of the Tribes of Israel to invade Canaan from the south, climbing the Judean foothills, and the way in which the Israelites were defeated in their attempt to ascend. According to the Biblical geographer, all of these attempts failed, but none which succeeded was an attack from the opposite direction. In Judges 1 we read:

(16) And the children of the Kenite, Moses father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm trees with the children of Judah into the wilderness of Judah, which lieth in the south of Caleb, and there they went and dwelt among the Amalekites.

(17) And Judah went with Simeon his brother and they slew the Horites that inhabited Zephat and utterly destroyed it. And the name of the city was called Hormah.

Here too, Arad and Hormah are mentioned together.

This passage seems to record an authentic tradition concerning the conflict of two groups of settlers to the Arad-Hormah region. The first were the Kenites, who came together with people from the south of Caleb, and settled in the midst of the Amalekites; the second group were the Simeonites, who, together with another group of people from Judah, were believed by the author of the Book of Judges to have conquered and destroyed an (imaginary?) fort located at Zephat and changed its name to Hormah.

Hormah is mentioned for the last time at the beginning of David's reign, when he ruled in Ziklag as the vassal of the Philistines. He sent spelt which he took from the Amalekites to various towns in the northern Negev and southern Judean hills including Bethel and Hormah (1 Samuel 26:30).

Hormah is not mentioned again in Biblical sources after David's time.

We saw above that the region of the Tel Masos-Tel Maltha crossroads was the place from which people usually went to the Judean hills, and we will therefore try to locate Hormah on one of these two sites.

A most important document concerning
the history of the Valley of Beer-sheba at the end of the 10th century B.C. is the list of towns in the Negev drawn up by Sheshonq I. The list is very detailed and mentions every small village and fort. The region east of Potis (modern Patish) and Beer-sheba (Hagar Abim—Fort of Abraham) in Sheshonq's list up to Arais is well documented, and does not mention Hormah. This is of importance in connection with the question of whether Tel Masos or Tel Malhata should be identified with Hormah. Today the results of the excavations enable us to make the choice. While Tel Masos was settled in the beginning of the 13th century, Tel Malhata was not settled before the beginning of the 10th century. In the middle of the 10th century Tel Masos was already abandoned, while Tel Malhata continued to be occupied till the end of Iron Age II in the 6th century. Thus, the absence of the name Hormah in Sheshonq's list (no 925 B.C.) corresponds to the abandonment of Tel Masos approximately 50 to 70 years earlier. If Tel Malhata had been the settlement called Hormah, it would be mentioned in the Egyptian list, as it was settled at that time and destroyed by the Egyptian army. Thus Tel Masos can be identified with the Biblical Hormah.

THE STRATIGRAPHY AND THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS IN THE FIRST ISRAELITE SETTLEMENT

Three main strata have been found at the principal mound of Tel Masos. They have been clearly identified in all the excavated areas of the site, and show similar qualities.

STRATUM III: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SETTLEMENT

This stratum is divided into two phases, III A and III B. The earlier, III B, features cooking pits and baking ovens all over the excavated areas. No trace could be found of buildings of any sort. It seems that this stratum represents the coming of the first Israelites, who chose to settle on the loess hills around the group of wells. The next stage, Stratum III A, features buildings and groups of buildings all over the site. The basic form of building in this stratum is a house which already has the features of the four-room house of Stratum II.

The pottery of these two phases is identical and must be related to the Canaanite pottery from the end of the Late Bronze Age in the southern Shefela.

The climatic conditions in the Valley of Beer-sheba seem to have been different from those existing today. An analysis of the animal bones found in Stratum III showed that sheep and goat accounted for one-third of the animal stock, while cattle made up the other two-thirds. Today, Bedouin farms in the region consist almost entirely of sheep; cattle-herding is rare. The high percentage of cattle shown in the excavations indicates that vegetation was more abundant in the area than it is now, as otherwise the cattle would not have had sufficient pasture.

On the basis of the ceramic evidence, both phases of Stratum III can be dated to the end of the 13th and the middle of the 12th century. The main indications are the carinated bowls, cooking pots and jars from the end of the Late Bronze Age. Since the Philistines reached Palestine only after 1180 a number of Philistine sherds which were found in the last phase of Stratum III indicate that the settlement was destroyed after the middle of the 12th century. The date for the beginning of the stratum is corroborated by the discovery of a scarab marked with the name of Seti II (around 1200 B.C.). It was found on top of the debris of Stratum III, but not in situ.

STRATUM II

The builders of Stratum II planned the settlement on a much grander scale than their predecessors. Sometimes they reused remains of old walls from the previous stratum. There is no proof of the existence of a cultural or ethnic gap between the population of the two strata: the local pottery tradition is carried on, the plans of the houses develop, sometimes based on plans from Stratum III, in area C it seems that the beginnings of the large building (no. 480), built according to the Egyptian-Canaanite plan, was already present in Stratum III, and continued to serve in Stratum II with only minor changes. The same seems to hold true for building no. 419+411, but the stratigraphic details are still not completely clear. The abundant pottery finds enable us to date the life span of Stratum II throughout its two phases, III A and III B, from the middle of the 12th to the middle of the 11th century. Pottery sherds of “Midianite” bowls, similar to those which were found in Timna, are the earliest vessels in this stratum. The vessels were dated in Timna’s to the 11th and 12th centuries; it seems that in Tel Masos they should be dated to the beginning of Stratum II—from the middle of the 12th century. Along with the “Midianite” bowls, locally produced vessels were found, but most of the pottery comes from the end of the stratum. A few
bichrome and black-on-red imported vessels from the Phoenician coast complete the assemblage.

The settlement of this stratum already shows a conscious attempt at layout. The settlement was destroyed either by an enemy attack or by an earthquake.

**STRATUM I**

The remains of Stratum I which lay open for three millennia were almost completely washed away by erosion. From the little that remained, one can discern the following changes: in area C, a fort appeared on top of public buildings nos. 460 and 411. It faced the walls and served as the "strong tower" into which the inhabitants fled in case of a nomad attack. The erection of this fort marked a deterioration in the security situation in the Valley of Beer-sheba, and the beginning of a process which ended in about 950 B.C. with the building of fortified cities all along the valley.

Most of the houses built on top of the ruins of Stratum II show the four-room plan. There is no evidence that the settlement was encircled by a protective belt of houses as was the case in Stratum II (see below, p. 35). It seems that the "strong tower" sufficed for protection.

The pottery finds point to the destruction of the settlement at the beginning of the 10th century, possibly around 990-980, the beginning of David's reign in Jerusalem. At that time the Simeonite Negeb was being neglected, and was attached to the territory of Judah.

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**TELMASOS AT ITS PEAK**

Stratum II is the main stratum in Tel Masos, the settlement reaching its peak during its life span. It is also the best excavated and enables us to observe the first time the way in which an important settlement was planned and built during the 12th and 11th centuries B.C.

The principal guideline for the builders in Stratum II was the idea of enclosing the center of the settlement by a belt of buildings on the edge of the hill. By joining the outer houses together a defense belt evolved. This method of fortification arose from early forms of defense. It is also found in nomadic camps, which tend to be encircled by a chain of tents, protecting the center of the camp. The early nomadic settlers may have used the same type of camp structure while they were still in their semi-nomadic state before settling in Tel Masos. Indeed, in Stratum III some features indicate that the fringe of the settlement may have been encircled by a belt of this kind.

The defense belt has been well identified in area A. We can discern the main details of the construction: the belt of buildings stretches along the outskirts of the settlement; the outer court of each house is defended on both sides by its neighboring houses. In area A the belt is interrupted by a public building which is also flanked on both sides by protruding structures which project towards the slope of the hill, and thus defend the building's outer courtyard. The thick walls, and the remains of a staircase podium on its west side, indicate that the building had several stories and may have served as a local fort to which the people fled when threatened by danger.

This kind of defense was precarious and could withstand only attacks from small groups of nomads. Since the doors of the houses opened onto the outside of the settlement, a stronger attack could easily break in through these openings. At that period, no attempts to seriously fortify the settlement in the manner used during Iron Age II are discernible. After the year 1000, however, new defense structures developed: the four-room houses were built facing inward so that
their banks served as a casemate wall for the waterfront defense.

The basic building unit of Stratum II is the four-room house. It contains three storage rooms, a living room with an open inner courtyard, and a small court yard. This plan evolved from the three- to four-room houses in Stratum III which, in turn, seem to have originated from the basic plan of the tenth century BC. The semi-nomadic Canaanite population before these settlements. The temple, similar to the contemporary Peqin four-room house, consisted of a large room on its broad side towards an outer courtyard.

The four-room house of Stratum II is similar in its main lines to the typical Israelite houses which served both the urban and rural population throughout the Iron Age II. Those found in Tel Masos are the earliest known examples of this type of house, and represent well documented evidence of the process of development of this type of dwelling from the semi-nomadic to final settlement.

The main question that arises is why did the settlement wave sweep into the region of the Valley of Beer-sheba precisely at the end of the 13th century B.C.? There is only a partial answer. We may assume that the region of the southern Judean hills gradually became overpopulated, partly because of natural increase, partly because of the arrival of new immigrants from Transjordan (the tribes of Judah and Caleb). This region was classic ground for a semi-nomadic way of life in the Late Bronze Age, and the Canaanite urban settlements were restricted to areas that lay along the one main route through the Judean hills. With the growth of the semi-nomadic population, the food supply in the area was no longer sufficient, and some groups descended from the mountains into the fertile Valley of Beer-sheba. At this time the valley was more hilly than it is today, and richer in vegetation.

The excavation of various tribes and clans in the mountainous area, some of them old inhabitants and some newcomers—the latter presumably more aggressive—caused a serious deterioration in the security situation. The main trade route shifted to the same area, creating more opportunities for the new valley settlers. So it was that the road which had been abandoned in the 17th century at the end of the Middle Bronze Age again came into use at the end of the Late Bronze Age in the 13th century.

Acknowledgments
The excavations were carried out under the auspices of Tel Aviv University and the University of Mannheim. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft generously funded the work. It is a pleasure for me to thank all members of the excavation team who contributed to the information used here: V. L. H. Desbrosses, P. Marcolini, Th. Stahel (both from Mannheim), G. Schmidbauer (Mannheim), B. Zinssen, M. Gilboa, L. Singer, A. Lipo, E. Chtarchov, J. A. C. Drey, L. Nadel, K. Zinsbooi (all of Tel Aviv); D. Ilana (Copenhagen). Judith Gekler drew the plans, Hoda Jaron translated the text into English, and Asharun Hay was the photographer.

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