Excavations at Khirbet Iskander, Jordan

A Glimpse at Settled Life during the “Dark Age” in Palestinian Archaeology

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The site of Khirbet Iskander lies in central Jordan on the Plateau, just north of the famed biblical Plains of Moab (Fig. 2). Fifty-six kilometers to the north is the capital city of Amman. Like a majority of Early Bronze (EB) IV settlement sites in ancient Transjordan, it is located near a perennial stream, the Wadi Wala, whose waters flow westward, ultimately into the Dead Sea. The site appears to be strategically located at a major crossing point of the main north-south route today as well as in antiquity. The Roman Road and presumably the biblical “King’s Highway” crossed the Wadi Wala in the vicinity of Iskander, as traders and armies traversed this route between Egypt, Arabia, and Damascus. Due to the presence of a continuous water supply, the area today is able to support rather intensive agriculture, as one assumes was the case in antiquity. The area is verdant and even in summer enjoys quite a lush vegetation.

This is the site I chose in 1981 as the perfect mound at which to test certain new hypotheses concerning the EB IV period, the “Dark Age” in Palestinian archaeology (Fig. 1). Why a “Dark Age”? Since early in this century it has been such a controversial and enigmatic period that this term seemed an apt description. I say seemed because once the dust has settled at the excavations of Khirbet Iskander and other EB IV sites, the picture emerging will be considerably brighter, and indeed, it already is.

The Early Bronze Age (EBA) dates to ca. 3200–2000 B.C., with the EB IV period being the fourth and final phase and dating to ca. 2350–2000 B.C. (Fig. 3). Although the ethnic identity of the population is not known, the peoples are generally thought to be Canaanites, or more properly proto-Canaanites. Broadly contemporary are the Sumerian and Akkadian Dynasties of Mesopotamia, the Kingdom of Ebla in Syria, and the Old Kingdom in Egypt. In the area of Canaan or ancient Palestine (modern Israel and Jordan), the EBA represents the first period when urbanization is widespread throughout the area. Large cities like Megiddo, ‘Ai, Jericho, Arad, Tell el-Far‘ah (N), Tell el-Hesi and Bāb edh-Dhrā‘ generally share some common features: monumental fortifications and gateways, dense domestic occupation, large water retrieval systems, public and cultic facilities, etc. The surrounding agricultural lands support the cities and provide a surplus that, along with many other items, is used in a wide network of trade to anchor the economy of the country. Indeed, numerous foreign objects found in the country point to extensive trade relations and influences from both the south, Egypt, and the north, Syria-Mesopotamia.

At ca. 2350 B.C. (the end of the EB III period), this seemingly prosperous, although perhaps not tranquil, urban era ceases abruptly. All the major tells (mounds) appear to have been either destroyed or abandoned. Thereafter, the archaeologist’s spade has been able to uncover only vast isolated cemeteries and few evidences of settled life besides ephemeral, semi-permanent sites in marginal areas. At about 2000 B.C. with the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, urban life renews itself under the
impetus of strong urban influences from Syria and a recent Twelve Dynasty in Egypt. In the face of such dramatic sociocultural change, it is little wonder that the EB IV period became known as a "nomadic interlude," an "intermediate period," and a "dark age." The significance of the site of Khirbet Iskander can only be understood against the backdrop of the largely non-urban evidence extant for the EB IV period.

Khirbet Iskander, along with a half dozen or so recently excavated EB IV sites in Transjordan, radically altered long-held theories by scholars concerning the peoples who inhabited the land in the last quarter of the third millennium B.C. The fact that today this period is termed variously Early Bronze IV, Middle Bronze I, or the Intermediate EB-MB Period still reflects, however, the lack of consensus among scholars regarding its very nature, its cultural affinities, the ethnic makeup of its population, whether indigenous or intrusive, and so on. On one issue, however, scholars have been united: the virtual non-existence of sedentary settlements categorically defined the people as nomads and the period as a nomadic interlude between the two great urban eras of the EBA and MBA. The burgeoning questions raised by such a phenomenon have likewise been universally addressed: What could have caused such a dramatic cultural break and are the EB IV peoples responsible, and if so, is there a cultural continuity between the EB IIIB and EB IV periods?

Thanks also to renewed interest in the study of nomads from the ethnographic present and from earlier periods as portrayed in textual materials, our perspective on the role of nomads in culture change has altered markedly. We need no longer rely upon the movements of bands of nomads in seeking explanations for culture change, even drastic culture change. More promising and feasible areas of investigation offer a topic to which I will return in the conclusions. The remainder of this article will be devoted to a discussion of the new category of archaeological data recently discovered that fairly demands a reassessment of the EB IV cultural complex, permanent sedentary settlements, the prime example of which is the site of Khirbet Iskander.

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In the past, historical interpretations, in particular those concerning movements of Syrian nomadic peoples called Amorites, have been appealed to as a means of explaining the dramatic social and economic readjustments seemingly manifested in the archaeological record at the EB III/EB IV horizon. Today, due to a recently expanded data base of archaeological materials from the period, particularly from the area to the east of the Jordan River, we now know that our perspective on this elusive and enigmatic culture has in the past been distorted by the very nature of the excavated remains. Censured work on the EB IV cemeteries predominating in western Palestine has, up to the present, given us an incomplete view of the culture in its totality.

The Expedition

In 1981, with a small team of five people and a small budget, I set out to investigate the site. We already knew that EB IV occupations existed on the mound, thanks to Nelson Glueck's survey of Eastern Palestine in the 1930s and to Peter Parp's soundings in 1955. The extent of occupation, however, as well as the complete stratigraphical profile was yet to be determined. Glueck's description of the site was particularly tantalizing. He describes Iskander as a large important site with domestic houses appearing within an impressive fortification that included square towers at the corners. He also notes a large wall cutting across the mound at the center from east to west, as well as an extensive cultic area or cemetery to the east, based on his observations of numerous standing monoliths, or menhirs, and circles of stone (Fig. 4).

This intriguing description would normally have suggested an urban center, although that inference was never drawn for this EB IV site. Parp's recovery of multiple EB IV ploughing, substantial walls, and paved courtyards likewise drew little response from scholars working in the field. Although the standing remains that Glueck observed are no longer visible, surface survey and the excavation of two soundings in 1981 confirmed both Glueck's and Parp's earlier conclusions. In the short span of four weeks, I recovered enough data to formulate a specific problem-oriented research design for a long-term investigation of this important settlement site. Succeeding work was designed to test the hypothesis that, contrary to the prevailing view of EB IV society, a significant level of sedentism did exist in this period, and in fact, perhaps even town or urban centers. To anticipate my conclusions, three successful seasons of work have brought to light evidence which overwhelmingly substantiates this view. The primary
concerns of this expedition are thus clearly defined: in Phase 1 to study the nature and extent of sedentary occupation in the EB IV period, as revealed at Askendi, and in Phase 2 to illuminate organizational continuities and discontinuities from the previous urban EB II–III society. The significant results of our Phase 1 excavations of 1982 and 1984, primarily from Areas B and C, are presented here.

The Site

Turning to a look at the description, Khirbet Iskander has revealed itself as an imposing sedentary settlement, although the mound itself is not large (Fig. 5). It is about 200 meters high and covers an area of 2.7 hectares (about 7.78 acres). Based on the current expedition’s three fields (nineteen 5.0 x 5.0-meter squares) and Farr’s earlier work, it is clear that occupation extended across the entire mound. We have uncovered dense multilayered domestic occupation (Areas A, B, C), monumental defensive and public structures (Areas B, C), as well as two cemeteries (Areas D, E). In Area B, the northwest corner tower and a long stretch of the northern perimeter wall, still visible in Ghouch’s time, have been excavated (Fig. 6). Much to the surprise of everyone, this defensive structure dates to the EB IV period. Even I was expecting an earlier (EB III) date, since deep soundings have shown that the site may have been occupied throughout the EBA. The day that EB IV sherds were recovered from the foundation trench of this fortification, however, proved us all to be quite happily wrong! That is, since EB IV is the latest occupation on the site, there is no question as to the date of the wall.

The wall is 2.5 meters wide (ca. 7 feet thick) and the tower at its greatest width is 4 meters (ca. 11 feet). It still stands to a height of nearly 3 meters and is composed of large field stones. Its superstructure would have been made of mudbrick, since a great deal of mudbrick debris has been found in the area. Thanks to good relations with the Bedouin living on the site, we have been able to trace this wall, upon which they built their house, across to the northeast corner. Our goal for the 1987 season is to determine the complete line around the perimeter of the site. Farr’s excavations along the eastern stretch uncovered a stretch of wall, and we should be able to investigate the southern line due to the recent road cut at the southern edge which revealed a series of wall lines. By the end of the 1984 season, further excavation showed that this tower was erected immediately above what appears to be the corner of a domestic house; thus, we believe, EB IV.

This fortification is the first known for the EB IV period in the southern Levant. As such its very existence will have profound ramifications regarding the socioeconomic and political organization of at least a component of EB IV society. Nomads do not build such walls; even pastoralists who may be sedentary part of it all do not build such walls. Our goal in this year is to explore the potential of such an opportunity by investigating the stability of the population and its economic base. The existence of this fortification can now be added to a growing list of EB IV archaeological data whose antecedents lie in the preceding indigenous urban EB III culture. Irrespective of the prevailing view that the EB IV peoples are pastoral nomads, there is no doubt in my mind at least that this fortification presupposes the establishment of a developed urban tradition and affirms cultural continuity with the EB III population.

Vessels emerging from the debris of a storeroom of pottery. (Photograph by Edith Skinner)

The Storeroom

As significant a find as this was, it was overshadowed somewhat by the discovery of what we believe is a gate, by two cemeteries in the vicinity, and by two phases of a domestic complex of buildings. The most memorable day of an excavation are undoubtedly those when a turn of the trowel reveals an unexpected treasure. Such a day occurred in 1984 in the burning heat of a July morning when shots of joy beckoned the director over to Area B in the northwest sector of the mound. I arrived to find a staff member brushing away the dust from a group of large intact storage vessels. Thereafter, on a regular basis, I was called over to view a series of vessels as they emerged from the pit in what turned out to be a storeroom of pottery vessels (Fig. 7). Some 30 whole or restorable vessels were recovered, along with 60 buckets of pottery now in the process of being restored.

There are more than a few interesting aspects to the discovery of this storeroom. For one thing, this hole represents the first corpus of stratified domestic whole vessels to be discovered in this period. Whereas, hitherto our view of the ceramic traditions of the EB IV was restricted to tombs and tombs, now there exists a clear opportunity to study the ceramic needs of domestic life and to compare the two. Our clearly phased pottery at the storeroom site will be invaluable aid to chronologically anchoring funerary vessels previously dated by comparative typological methods.

Although large store jars (some over 100 centimeters high) predominated, there was a surprising number of lovely carinated bowls, small cups, ribbed platter-bowls. Simple spouted lamps, cups, and jugs. Many were decorated with a burnished red slip, while others were of plain grayish-white deco- rated round the neck with incisions of various kinds. Typical of this period, all the pottery is handmade, though rims and necks were finished on a tournette, or slow
Bronze Age ancestry of these vessels is strikingly noticeable, once again pointing to the uninterrupted cultural development from EB III to EB IV. The number and kind of vessels found in situ raises a question as to the purpose of this storeroom. It was obviously not merely a store for foodstuffs since everyday domestic utensils such as lamps, cups, bowls, and 'gaups' were included in the repertoire. It is also unlikely that one family would require such an extensive supply of pottery. Would this storeroom supply the demands of an extended family in this particular compound? Or is there a potter's workshop nearby? This subject must remain open until further excavation clarifies the relation of this room to contiguous areas.

This storeroom belongs to the earlier of two clearly separated phases of a domestic complex recovered thus far (Fig. 8). The northern extent of this room lies just within the fortification in Square B8 while its southern boundary extends into Square B7. Along the southern wall of the storeroom ran a bench of wide flat stones upon which more storeroar rested. Standing nearby on its own flat space was an immense pithos jar with several bands of rope-moulding decorating the body, a vessel immediately dubbed 'Bag Bertha' by those who excavated it (Fig. 9). This tradition of rectangular 'broadroom' (door is on the long side) houses with benches is a common feature of the Early Bronze Age and, as with fortifications, represents another important link with the preceding indigenous urban traditions.

It should be noted that the eastern wall of the storeroom bounded with the outer fortifications wall, thus proving conclusively that in this phase, the settlement was surrounded to the east by a defensive structure. No actual stratigraphic links have as yet been discovered between the outer fortifications and the uppermost complex of buildings. Taken with the evidence mentioned earlier of a pre-fortification EB IV phase as indicated by a house lying immediately below the Northwest tower, it may tentatively be concluded that three EB IV phases have so far been discovered: the earliest EB IV settlement was unfortified, the second settlement which included the storeroom was linked to the fortifications, and the third and latest settlement seemingly represents a post-fortification phase. The continuous and uninterrupted development of these occupational phases mitigates against descriptions of this period as one of semi-nomadism. To be sure a partly pastoral, partly sedentary social organization does manifest itself in much of the archaeological remains throughout the area, however, such a model overlooks the important evidence of permanently established agrarian communities now coming to light at sites like Khirbet Iskander.

The reddish-brown brick debris and stone rubble that covered the fallen storeroom and scattered much of the storeroom's contents give dramatic witness to the density of the storeroom phase. Whether due to hostile or natural forces, a destruction substantive enough to have toppled the superstructure of the defensive fortifications did occur. It likewise brought to an end, at least so far as we know at this corner of the mound, the domestic residences of this phase. Given the proximity of the site to the great Jordan Rift Valley, it is not out of the question that an earthquake caused this destruction. In light of a distinct layer of burning and ash in association with mudbrick debris, however, as well as the charred and friable nature of the fallen stone, a destruction by fire seems the better explanation at this point. The 1987 season should clarify this question. Whatever the nature or level of destruction, there is no evidence for any ensuing period of abandonment. Rather, we see an immediate erection of new buildings, with some walls of the storeroom phase being reused.

Finally, we must discuss the broad horizontal exposure of the superstructure of the E II site of EB IV settlement on the mound. Whole or partial broadroom houses were found in all areas of the site in EB IV. In the north, the EB IV-III E site of Arad regarding the largest houses at the site. A facade or cooking oven was found built up against the western wall. A rebuild of the oven plus patches of ash nearby attest the continued use of this house as a kitchen or perhaps a kitchen and living room. A portion of a broadroom house to the west in B2 also included a tabun, though of a different construction. Ethnographic research would seem to indicate that one cooking oven reflects one family, and that ovens found in contiguous areas generally reflect an addition to the nuclear family. The large saddle querns and grinding equipment found in this area point to the grinding of grain into flour and the general domestic use of these two areas. Built up against the B2 house on the west were a series of small square storage or work areas or possibly pens for very small animals. As further evidence that this constitutes a post-fortification phase, we anticipate that the B2 house once removed in the summer of 1987 will prove to have been erected atop the fortifications.

Adjoining the B1–B6 house to the east, yet another broadroom appeared in B5–B7, above the level of the storeroom of pottery. This house differentiated itself from the others by its inner partitioning of 3 or 4 rooms. If it is difficult to decide conclusively on the number of houses, it is because without further horizontal exposure we cannot be sure that these structures are not rooms within a larger complex. At this point we can only comment on the dense build-up in the area, on the well-constructed walls that are generally aligned north–south, and on the use of common walls as a building technique.
The Gate Complex

In 1982 while surveying the site, I noted a particular concentration of walls at the southeast corner of the mound that indicated a possible gateway or entrance into the town. Our strategy was to open a new field, Area C, and to excavate only the eastern half of this presumed gateway. What we uncovered was half of a passageway, plus a room constructed of large boulders, whose western edge was lined with a bench of large flat slabs. To the south was what appeared to be the fortification that Ghezek had noted as cutting across the center of the mound from east to west (Fig. 10) At this point we could only speculate as to the nature of this monumental structure.

With expectations high in 1984, however, we returned to excavate the western sector of this building complex. Patrolling excavation gradually uncovered the corresponding western flank that, though not completely symmetrical, matched the eastern structure in all the important details. What we believe to be the first EB IV gate discovered is a complex comprising two large guardrooms juxtaposed on either side of a 2.0 meter wide-well-constructed passageway. Both guardrooms extend to the south and bend with the Ghezek east-west wall, which appears to be a subsidiary fortification crossing the site in the middle. The passageway is lined with a row of benches on either side. The lack of symmetry is seen in the interior of the two rooms, for the western room appears to be partitioned, while the eastern room is a single room with, however, a beautifully paved surface (Fig. 11).

Although there are no parallels in EB IV with which to compare this structure, it does bear a resemblance to earlier EB IIA single entrance gates having juxtaposed guardrooms. If in the 1987 season further excavation to the west should show these two structures not to be guardrooms to a gate but merely several of a number of houses just inside the Ghezek wall, we still must question the more monumental construction used in this area. At the very least it would seem to indicate a public organizational complex of some sort for different from anything uncovered elsewhere on the mound. The discovery of stores to the east of the eastern wall is a typical feature to be found in the area of a gate. To our surprise upon the removal of the north balk between the two rooms, we discovered steps leading up to a level platform and an open area beyond leading into the upper town.

And just what purpose did the Ghezek wall serve? Was it a boundary to the town in a certain phase? Could it delineate an upper town from a lower town? Was it erected after the major fortifications went out of use? What is the relationship between the Ghezek wall and the outer fortifications? These and other questions serve to guide our field objectives for the following season.

The Cemeteries

Finally, a word about the two cemeteries discovered in 1984. As Ghezek suggested, the numerous menhirs to the east of the site did indeed prove to be standing in a vast field of caved and shaft tombs, which we named Cemetery E. These large monolithic slabs of stone (the dimensions of the one standing menhir across the wall to the south is 2.90 meters high and 1.50 meters wide) have never been satisfactorily explained, although always assumed to be of cultic nature. Since the western sector of this cemetery is now under cultivation, the possible relationship of the menhirs to tombs cannot be determined. To the east, beyond the cultivated area, our "grave-diggers" excavated two coves with skeletal and cultural remains. In one very small case, there appeared a row of EB IV vessels at the opening behind which excavation uncovered two skulls (one an adult's, the other a child's) with a pile of bones laid in between (Fig. 12). In this period, skeletal remains may be articulated or disarticulated. A second chamber tomb contained three adult burials with seven EB IV vessels and a grinding stone.

A vast cemetery (D) located across the wall to the south of the site, containing perhaps hundreds of shaft tombs, was also discovered in 1984. A shaft tomb consists of a 1.0 to 2.0 meter deep, usually round shaft cut into the side of a hill and a round or square chamber. Normally a large stone blocks the entrance to the chamber. Of the five shaft tombs excavated, three contained multiple disarticulated burials and large quantities of pottery, one in fact had close to 50 vessels. One of the expedition's primary goals for the 1987 season is to increase our sample of excavated tombs from both cemeteries in order to provide enough data for a comparative analysis of their respective burial customs.

Conclusions

In this article I have endeavored to build a case, based on Khirbet Iskander but corroborated by other sites, for a not inconsiderable level of sedentarization in the EB IV period. Whereas formerly the model of pastoral nomadism seemed to comprehend the totality of archaeological remains during this period, new data suggest the utilization of more complex adaptive strategies by at least a component of the population. This is not to say that pastoral nomadism was not more widespread in EB IV than in previous periods. Clearly a major demographical and organizational shift occurred ca. 3200 B.C. with the abandonment of a well-documented urban system. In the post-EB III period, there is a dramatic relocation of the population away from established agricultural centers. The suggestion being made is simply that pastoral adaptation is only one apparent subsistence strategy in the period and that little consideration has been given to the sedentary agrarian populations, which must have been of equal importance. New or revised models must be formulated to
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explain the diversity of archaeological remains now coming to light in the EB IV period. The excavation of a range of sites, from seasonal one-period sites to multiphased ones with urban traditions, demonstrates an almost unlimited number of adaptations to the environment along a continuum between purely sedentary and purely nomadic adaptive strategies.

Three seasons of excavation at the site of Khirbet Iskanter have given us a view of EB IV culture not hitherto seen. Its fortifications, monumental structures, dense multiphased continuous occupation liken it more to Early Bronze urban traditions than to the traditions of pastoral nomads. It would seem a good move methodologically to approach EB IV settlement sites with a new perspective, one that seeks to determine the degree of sedentism practiced rather than one that views all the evidence in terms of pastoralism. This approach will help us to understand the part that sedentism played in the social matrix of the period and should provide insights concerning sociocultural variations from the preceding EB III period.

Given the graphic evidence for uninterrupted cultural continuity between EB III and EB IV, and considering the clear evidences for the continuance of urban traditions, it is no longer tenable to view the transformation of the indigenous Early Bronze urban culture as abrupt as heretofore assumed. This new perspective on that critical transition should, at the very least, suggest not an invasion but a more gradual urban regression which, based on the abandonment of numerous EB II sites, had begun already at that time. By studying the internal consistencies and inconsistencies in the archaeological record of the EB II–III, we may perhaps identify those factors that triggered the ultimate demise of widespread urbanization and forced dwellers of the urban centers either to move to sites where a type of sedentism survived or to readapt to a pastoral mode of subsistence. Whatever the outcome of future research, one thing is clear: the Khirbet Iskanter excavations have indeed shed some light on the "Dark Age" in Palestine.

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Bibliography


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