Conclusions

We have not truly addressed the "why" question, but we at least can see that the assemblage at Et-Tell is that, when one examines the entire archaeological context recovered from the site, there was a well-defined demarcation of the gate area by items of religious significance. When the data has been thoroughly read, the image of the city gate that emerges is one that is as home in the gallery of biblical texts. Far more religious while at the same time employed in a commercial usage.

Background

Situated approximately two kilometers north of the Sea of Galilee and 250 meters east of the Jordan River, the mound of Bethsaida has proven to be one of the largest Iron Age sites adjoining the Sea of Galilee. The city was built in the tenth century BCE as a major urban center (and perhaps the capital) of the Galarians. In 1996, a palace complex that included a large city wall and gate installation was discovered. The uncovering of the city gate and palace of Et-Tell/Bethsaida provides significant material evidence helpful to a comprehensive understanding of the political, cultural, and religious context of the city.

The city gate complex and cult installations appear to have met with a sudden and violent destruction, presumably by the armies of the neo-Assyrian conqueror Tiglath-Pileser III during the campaign of 732 BCE. This destruction preserved a nearly complete preservation of the gate complex. Many bowls, plates, and tripod cups evoke the type of vessels that were discovered at the cultic site at Dan.

Contribution of Research

The discussion of cultic space at the gate has focused on 3 questions:1) What is being used? 2) How is it used? 3) Why? These questions have been approached from both the material record and the literary corpus. This paper focuses more on the material record, particularly the material found in the gate complex area of Iron Age Et-Tell.

What has been found?

The inner four chamber gate at Et-Tell was dominated by slab-like masses both with rounded tops. Both the inner and outer entrances to the gate were flanked on each side with a masonry that was clearly "beheaded" during the destruction of the area.[2] Likewise, the simple outer gate's inner western side had a masonry and presumably another would have found on its eastern side had it been preserved. Along with that the gate plaza contained a plastered step altar with basin and bull-headed stele at the northern side of the entrance to the inner gate, a shallow pool on the southern side, a horned altar on a panel floor with an accompanying pit filled with animal bones on the southern side of the gate. A stepped cultic niche on the northern side of the city gate, a bench to the north of the three step altar, and a cultic niche on the northern part of the northern tower. Along with three architectural features, an assemblage of vessels with probable cultic function was found in the basin of the step altar and the step altar and the other four in chamber 4. The assemblage was apparently systematically destroyed during the fall of the city since the dumps were screened through chamber four and into the central passage of the gate. This careful destruction mirrors the "beheading" of each masonry in the gate complex. The assemblage includes at least six tripod cups, two of which were found in the basin of the altar covered by the hoarded bull-headed stele, and the other four in chamber 4 with a pin with a peg, and various other jars, bowls, juglets, and plates. The assemblage closely matches the one unearthed at Dan's cultic site apart from the large number of vessels found at the northern city gate of the inner gate plaza along with a pit of several meters' depth containing hundreds of animal bones. The remaining chambers of the gate contained evidence of grain storage that functioned over a long period of time and not just as an emergency measure because of impending siege.

How was it used?

There is some debate of the function of the tripod perforated cups. Pritchard had taken them as incense burners, but others have debated their use.[3] The fact that two of those found at Bethsaida were in the basin of the stepped altar has raised the possibility that they may have functioned in some libation ritual rather than in incense offering. The matter, however, is not easily resolved by the recovered material at Bethsaida since the cups were thoroughly cleaned at pottery washing before they were fully recognized. Any residual material would have been washed away in the process. While these were not to appear "burned," since they were only for holiness and not for incense burners per se, one cannot continuously argue one or the other on that basis. From the other elements of the chamber 4 assemblage it is much clearer that some kind of libation and food offering service was being performed at the gate. In particular, the jog bearing the inscription.[4] was the chamber assemblage with the bull-headed figure who has been linked to the ankh-like glyph in the inscription.[5] The horned altar and associated bone pit would also give a fairly unambiguous indication that some sort of sacrificial ceremony was being performed in that location.

Why?

The attempt to reach an answer to the remains of human behavior found in the archaeological material that is recovered through excavation is a nearly impossible task. While ideological patterns may manifest themselves in the material record, one can never be certain that a complex pattern of such patterning has been recovered and/or recognized. Here literary sources may aid in resolving this in concert with the material remains. In this brief study, we must restrict our use of literary sources to a few biblical passages:

2 Kings 23:25ff. associates incense and high places, and masks (unleavened bread) and high places.
Leviticus 26:30 associates high places, incense, and idols
Joshua 8:11 while not associated with high places or gods, mentions incense holder held in the hand
1 Samuel 12:16 associates high places and eating
2 Samuel 24:18 (and others) associates threshing floors and altars

Leshef inscription

View looking toward east of gate

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Further Information

http://users.drew.edu/csavage/
http://www.unomaha.edu/bethsaida/
http://uhweb.hartford.edu/ingr/archive/bethsaida

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