

The Sacred Precinct of Bethsaida/Et-Tell

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Tripod cup with perforations



Stele found in situ



Chamber 4 assemblage



3 step altar at Et Tell-Bethsaida



Bowl with pentagram marking



Bowl with ancient plaster repair

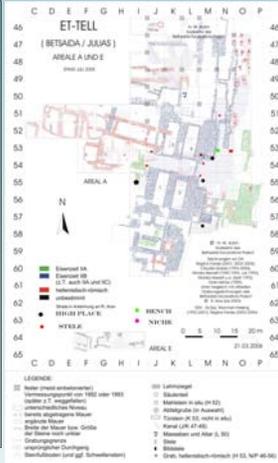


Fragment of horned altar

Background

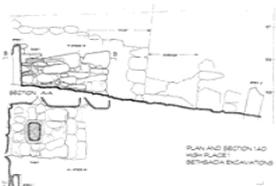
Situated approximately two kilometers north of the Sea of Galilee and 250 meters east of the Jordan River, the mound of Bethsaida has proven to be one of the largest Iron Age sites adjoining the Sea of Galilee. The city was built in the tenth century BCE as a major urban center (and perhaps the capital) of the Geshurites. 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 comprehension of the perplexing cultural and religious context of the first Temple period in neighboring Israel and Judah.

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 provided a nearly complete preservation of the gate complex. Many plates, bowls, and tripod cups evocative of the types of vessels which were discovered at the cultic site at Dan were unearthed in the gate chamber 4.



Research Hypothesis

This study engages in the process of constructing a portrait of Iron Age worship at the city gate. Drawing from archaeological evidence at Et-Tell/Bethsaida, it attempts to reconstruct a perspective of the ancient inhabitants of Geshur through their material practices which are indications of their sense of "place" both ideologically and geographically. They were involved in creating, accommodating, and resisting the competing influences and powers that shaped their world.



View looking toward east of gate

Acknowledgments

Christine Dalenta, University of Hartford, photography
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Contribution of Research

The discussion of cultic space at the gate has focused on 3 questions^[1] 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 project 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 demarcated by slab-like masseboth with rounded tops. Both the inner and outer entrances to the gate were flanked on each side with a masseba that was clearly "beheaded" during the destruction of the area.^[2] Likewise, the simple outer gate's inner western side had a masseba and presumably another would have found on its eastern side had it been preserved. Along with that the gate plaza contained a plastered three step altar with basin and bull-headed stele at the northern side of the entrance to the inner gate, a shelf high place on the southern side, a horned altar on a paved floor with an accompanying pit filled with animal bones on the southern city side of the gate, a stepped cultic niche on the southern tower of the inner 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 these architectural features, an assemblage of vessels with probable cultic function was found in the basin of the three step altar and chamber 4 of the gate. This assemblage was apparently systematically destroyed during the fall of the city since the shards were scattered throughout chamber four and into the central passage of the gate. This careful destruction mirrors the "beheading" of each stele 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 toppled bull-headed stele, and the other four in chamber 4: a pitcher with inscription, a bowl with pentagram, and various other jars, bowls, jugs, and plates. The assemblage closely matches the one uncovered at Dan's cultic site apart from an oil lamp stand.^[3] A fragment of a large basalt horned altar was found on a flagstone plaza in the inner city plaza of the gate 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.

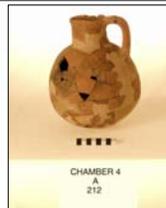
How was it used?

There is some debate of the function of the tripod perforated cups. Pritchard had named these as incense censers, but others have debated their use.^[4] 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 removed in the process. While these two do not appear "burned," since they were possibly only holders for incense and not incense burners per se, one cannot convincingly argue one way or the other purely 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 jug bearing the inscription $\text{Q} \text{B} \text{S} \text{L}$ ties 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 motivation from the remains of human behavior found in the archaeological material that is recovered by excavation is a nearly impossible task. While ideational patterns may manifest themselves in the material record, one can never be certain that a complete corpus 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 shall restrict our use of literary source to a few biblical passages:

- 2 Kings 23:5ff. associates incense and high places, and meals (unleavened bread) and high places.
- Leviticus 26:30 associates high places, incense, and idols
- Ezekiel 8:11 while not associated with high places or gates, mentions incense censer held in the hand
- 1 Samuel 9:12ff. associates high places and eating
- 2 Samuel 24:18 (and others) associates threshing floors and altars



Pitcher with inscription



Leshem Inscription

Bull-headed Stele at 3 step Altar



Conclusions

We have not truly addressed the "why" question, but we at least can see that the assemblage at Et-Tell seems to fit well with the biblical account of practices at high places. Most important is the recognition that material culture reflects behaviors and attitudes held in common. That is, the patterns we discover in the material culture can allow us to see what was held in common, the consensual culture. This evidence from the material culture shows a shared symbolic world-view between Et-Tell and the Israelite context of the biblical material.

Because of the nature of archaeological argument from the slim residues of cultural behaviors found in limited numbers of recovered artifacts, one need be circumspect when interpreting toward a given hypothesis. The danger is always to argue selectively from the record ignoring data that does not fit one's desired view of the context. Also, one may tend to attach a substantiation of behavior to a particular class of artifact that may outweigh any reasonable alternative explanation.

Even with that caveat in mind, what is clear at Et-Tell/Bethsaida 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 at home in the gallery of biblical texts. Far from being dominated by a military and defensive modality, one finds a use of the area that is religious while at the same time employed in a commercial usage.

Further Information

- <http://users.drew.edu/csavage/>
- <http://www.unomaha.edu/bethsaida/>
- <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/mgarhive/bethsaida>

Bibliography

- [1]Tina Haettner, Blomquist, *Gates and Gods Cults in the City Gates of Iron Age Palestine: An Investigation of the Archaeological and Biblical Sources*, Coniectanea Biblica. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1999), 12. She discusses the identification of gate cults by means of the first two questions.
- [2]Ahistorom indicates that the manner of the destruction of an object can indicate its function or stature: "One indication that the seated figure may have been a god, however, is that the statue was acrophalous; the head had been cut off. This suggests that the destroyers of the temple conceived of the statue as a god. His power should be destroyed, and therefore his head was cut off. cf. Deuteronomy 12:3." G. W. Ahistorom, "Heaven on Earth—Al Hazor and Arad," In *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*, edited by Birger Albert, Pearson, Series on Formative Contemporary Thinkers (Missoula, Mont.: Published by Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion and the Institute of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1975), 72
- [3]See Avraham, Biran, *Biblical Dan* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, 1994), Illustration 205.
- [4]James Bennett Pritchard, *Tell es-Sa'idieh Excavations on the Tell, 1964-1966*, University Museum Monograph (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1968). For variant possible uses of the tripod cup see Kjell, Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) or Wolfgang, Zwickel, *Räucherkerl und Räuchergräte* [sic] *Exegetische und Archäologische Studien Zum Räucheropfer Im Alten Testament*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990)
- [5]Carl Savage, "The Leshem Inscription," in *The Bethsaida Excavations Project Reports & Contextual Studies* (Kirkville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press, forthcoming).