

Khirbet el



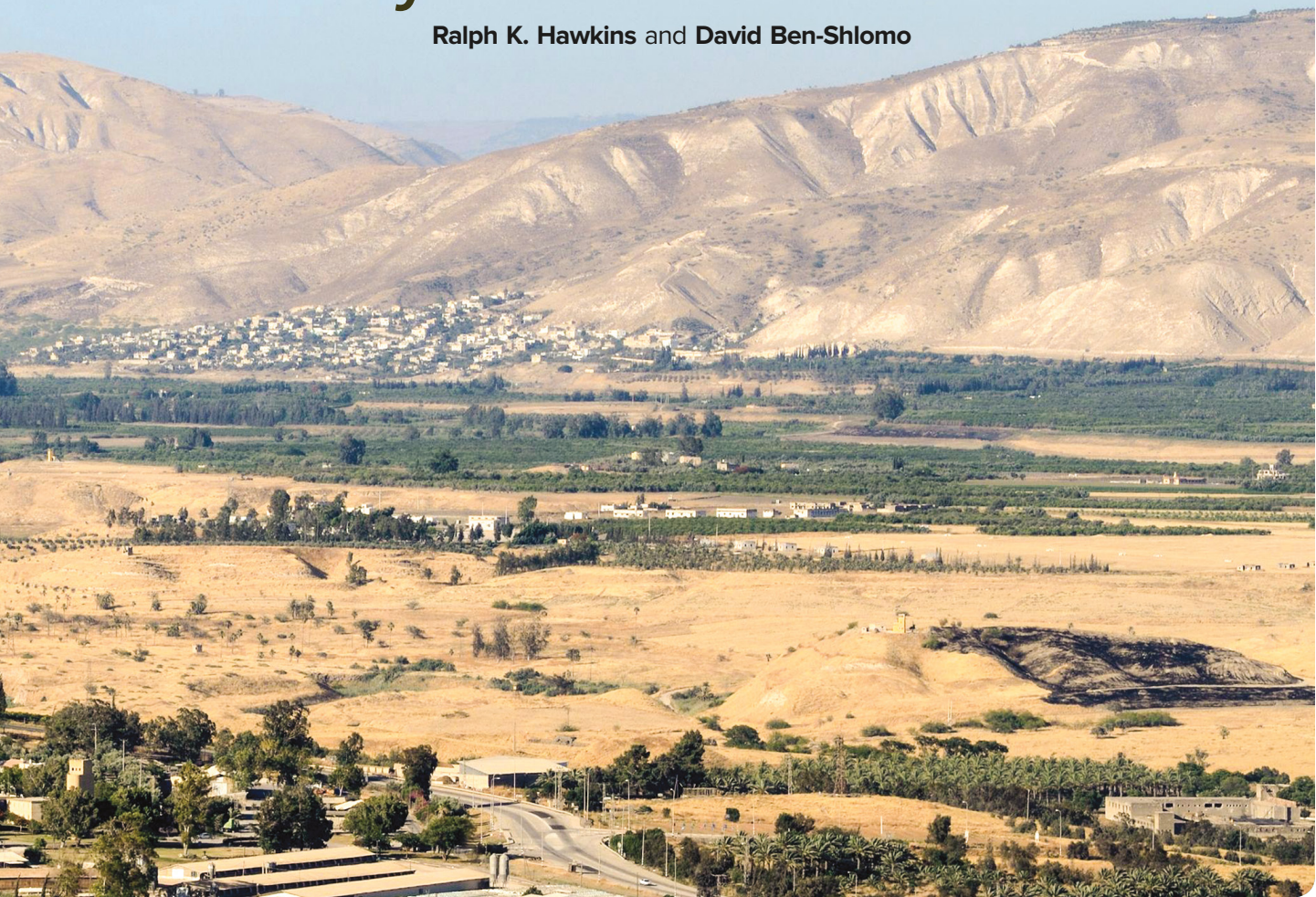
THE ORIGIN OF ANCIENT ISRAEL HAS BEEN under debate since the beginnings of Biblical archaeology. The Biblical Book of Joshua claims that the earliest Israelites came from the east, outside the land of Canaan, and that they entered it by crossing the Jordan River “opposite Jericho” (Joshua 3:16). Many modern scholars, however, subscribe to various permutations of the Social Revolution Model, in which the earliest Israelites were originally

disaffected Canaanites who fled their oppressive overlords in the urban centers in the coastal region and headed for the central hill country. There, they met a few Yahwists—worshippers of the deity Yahweh—who had lived in southern Canaan under Egyptian influence or perhaps had escaped from Egypt. The two groups entered into a covenant with each other and became “Israel.”¹ Most of the models of Israelite origins circulating today are variations on

-Mastarah

An Early Israelite Settlement?

Ralph K. Hawkins and David Ben-Shlomo



HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

this theme of indigenous origins, which has come to predominate in the academy.²

Models of indigenous origins have been based, in part, on the assumption that there is no evidence for early Israel during the Iron Age I (c. 1200–1000 B.C.E.) in the eastern part of the land of Israel, especially the Jordan Valley, lying in the Rift Valley, about 700–1,300 feet below sea level and one of the hottest places on earth.³ Until recently,

THE JORDAN RIVER VALLEY has been desirable territory for millennia. According to the Biblical account, when the Israelites first entered Canaan, they crossed the Jordan River and occupied the Jordan Valley in eastern Israel. A recent archaeological survey uncovered nearly 70 sites with pottery from the early Israelite settlement period (c. 1250–1000 B.C.E.) in this area. Taken on June 12, 2012, this photograph shows a section of the valley in northern Israel with the mountains of Jordan in the background.

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POINTING TO EL-MASTARAH. Adam Zertal—standing next to Ralph K. Hawkins—points to Khirbet el-Mastarah in 2007. Zertal had surveyed el-Mastarah and recommended it as a site that might provide new information about early Israelite origins.

however, these areas were among the lesser-known and lesser-researched regions of the country. The Iron Age period of the Jordan Valley was almost completely unknown archaeologically. The reasons for this have to do with location, difficult conditions for exploration, and other factors.

In 1978, Adam Zertal launched a survey of the traditional tribal territory of Manasseh to bring fresh data to an old debate. Manasseh is a vital territory because it extends from the Jordan Valley to the Mediterranean coastal plain and, thus, provides a cross-section of western Palestine. Zertal conducted the survey of Manasseh continually until his death in 2015* and covered more than 966 square miles on foot, which is about 80 percent of the central hill country area. The survey discovered hundreds of Iron Age I sites, thus producing a wealth

*Benny Arubas, Shay Bar, and Hershel Shanks, “Archaeologists on Crutches,” *BAR*, March/April 2016.

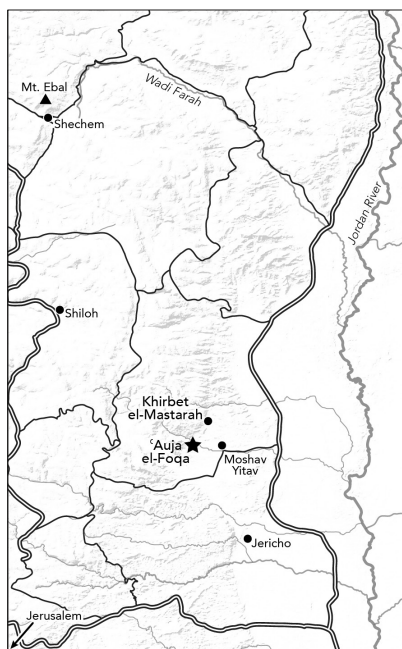
of data about the early Israelite settlement in the highlands from c. 1250 to 1000 B.C.E.

One revolutionary aspect of the survey has been its exploration of the valleys and desert fringes of eastern Manasseh, a broad area encompassing 193 square miles. The survey of this region was carried out over 14 years, from 1980 to 1994, with more than 500 days of step-by-step fieldwork invested in the process. In the Jordan Valley, Zertal discovered 69 sites with pottery dating to the early Israelite settlement period (c. 1250–1000 B.C.E.). Most of these sites are simply large rings of stones, probably used to house sheep or goats. A handful of them are more complex and include additional structures abutting the enclosures. For reasons we will discuss below, Zertal associated those who established these new sites with the early Israelites.

I (Hawkins) had known Zertal since the mid-1990s and for four seasons had been a volunteer on his excavation at el-Ahwat, where he ran a field-school. He often lectured on the early Israelite settlement, and I became fascinated by the subject. In 2007, we spent a week together, during which Zertal drove me around the Jordan Valley and showed me a number of sites that the survey team had discovered. I told him I wanted to work on a site that might contribute something new to our understanding of early Israelite origins and asked him if there was one he would especially recommend. He pointed off to the horizon and told me to go dig at Khirbet el-Mastarah.

When Zertal died on October 18, 2015, I realized that nearly 10 years had passed since he told me to dig at el-Mastarah. I recognized that it was time to do so and began looking for a partner. A friend introduced me to David Ben-Shlomo, who had just finished a dig at Hebron and was also interested in the idea of a project that might contribute to the discussion about early Israelite origins. Together, we formed the Jordan Valley Excavation Project, with the goal of excavating a series of sites that the survey of Manasseh had discovered in the Jordan Valley. We began with a dig at Khirbet el-Mastarah in the summer of 2017.

From the beginning, this site was intriguing. Its name,



MAP BY AD RIDDLE



HIDDEN IN THE HILLS. Surrounded by hills on three sides, the site of Khirbet el-Mastarah sits in the middle of a wadi (behind the tree in the above photo) in the desert north of Jericho. Completely concealed by its surroundings, Khirbet el-Mastarah appropriately means “the hidden site.” It was primarily occupied during the Iron Age (c. 1200–586 B.C.E.).

“Mastarah,” is derived from a root that means “to hide,” with the name literally meaning “the hidden site.” Located in the desert, about 4 miles north of Jericho, off the main roads and away from reliable water sources, the site is indeed hidden. It is positioned in the fork of a wadi and surrounded by hills on three sides, which completely masks it from its surroundings.

The 2.5-acre site consists of a number of enclosures and small structures. With a team of about 15 students and volunteers from the U.S., Canada, Israel, China, and Australia, we dug six test trenches in the main site and three in two subsidiary sites, and we excavated a total of 14 complete 5-by-5-meter squares, along with six partial squares. Altogether, we excavated an area of about 400 square meters (more than 4,300 square ft).

El-Mastarah contains three types of architectural units: large rounded enclosures (about 10 ft in diameter), small rounded or oval enclosures (usually 6–10 ft in diameter), and small rectilinear rooms (usually

about 4 by 6 ft). The walls, which are built of rubble stones typically about 1.5 feet in size, were each only a single course in height and usually only one row thick. Our excavation areas included rounded enclosures, oval units that were either smaller enclosures or may have been part of smaller structures, walls, open areas, and several areas where there were a lot of large stones but no clear, definable architecture. One oval unit that we excavated had an entrance with a large flat stone that served as a threshold. Inside another unit, one of our volunteers found two large basalt grinding stones. These appear to have been *in situ* on a floor. She also found a few bones, all from sheep or goats. However, most of the excavated areas were almost entirely devoid of finds, and we were therefore unable to establish a firm date for the architecture.⁴

Our pottery repertoire contained fragments of two kraters that date either to the Late Bronze Age II (1400–1200 B.C.E.) or the Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.). There were also 26 Iron Age sherds, eight of which came from cooking pots. Three of these date to the early Iron Age I (1200 B.C.E.) or the beginning of the Iron Age II (1000 B.C.E.). This is interesting, since a large proportion of cooking pots was also noted in the Iron Age assemblage at several of the “sandal” sites (i.e., sandal- or foot-shaped enclosures) discovered in the Jordan Valley.*

*See Ralph K. Hawkins, “Israelite Footprints,” *BAR*, March/April 2016.

Our aim at el-Mastarah had been to determine the date and function of the structures that were already visible above ground before we excavated. However, the lack of pottery sherds in direct association with the structures prevented us from establishing the date of their construction and use. They seem to have been built in the same period, since there was no evidence that the structures cut into or overlay each other. Based on the sherds found by the survey and during the excavation, it appears that the site was founded in the Middle Bronze Age II (2000–1550 B.C.E.), functioned mostly during the Iron Age (1200–586 B.C.E.), and was reused during later periods, especially the Roman period (37 B.C.E.–324 C.E.).

But we could not date the structures. Everywhere we dug, when we reached 0.5–2.5 feet in depth, we reached a sterile layer with no finds at all. This raised an important question: Why were the structures sterile? Why was there no development at the site? This is particularly surprising when we remember that this region was said to be highly fertile in the first millennium B.C.E.

In looking for answers to this puzzle, we began researching current Bedouin settlements and various ethnographic studies, and we found that animals are often housed in enclosures while the people live in tents around them.⁵ In such cases, the Bedouin sometimes live at some distance from the enclosures. We also examined the survey reports of the other Iron Age I enclosures and composite settlement sites in the Jordan Valley and found that there was a paucity of pottery and material finds at these sites as well, which suggests that they were seasonal settlements.⁶ We concluded that the inhabitants

of el-Mastarah might not have lived in the enclosures, but instead corralled their cattle there while they lived in tents around the site, possibly at some remove.

There do not appear to have been enough earlier communities in the region to provide a source for the population associated with these new sites. In the Late Bronze Age, the Jordan Valley was almost completely uninhabited, and the Manasseh Hill Country to its west was likewise only sparsely populated.⁷ When Iron Age I sherds were found at 69 sites in the Jordan Valley, most of which were founded on virgin soil where there had been no preceding settlement, it seemed to contradict the idea of indigenous demographic shifting and suggested instead the entry of new population groups from outside the land. Pointing to similarities between the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age I pottery types found in the Central East Jordan Valley, on the one hand, and those found in the Central Hill Country on the western side of the Jordan, on the other, Zertal and Shay Bar of the University of Haifa suggest that this new population may have entered ancient Canaan from Jordan.⁸ Whether or not this was the case, the rise in settlements in the Jordan Valley was clearly part of a settlement phenomenon that spanned both sides of the Jordan River during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age—a phenomenon that was probably connected with the tribes of Israel.⁹

If sites like Khirbet el-Mastarah are early Israelite settlement sites, Zertal and Bar have suggested that they should change how we think about the architecture of early Israelite settlements.¹⁰ Up until now, it has been assumed that the earliest Israelite settlements were in villages made up of a circle of houses, whose rear walls served as a sort of enclosure wall for the village. This model, however, is based on the study of a small number of sites like Izbet Sartah, at the boundary of the Sharon Plain, and other sites from later periods. The earliest settlement, however, might have occurred in the east, in the Jordan Valley, at small, rural sites like el-Mastarah, where the settlers corralled their sheep and goats in enclosures while they lived in tents around them. Were this the case, the Israelites may have established sites like Izbet Sartah, where they lived in a ring of houses that formed a dwelling enclosure, later in the settlement process.

OVAL ENCLOSURE. Khirbet el-Mastarah contains mostly small rectangular structures and circular enclosures, which were likely used to corral animals. The oval enclosure (left) abuts a structure.





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RECTILINEAR RUINS. El-Mastarah contains several rectilinear rooms, which average 4 by 6 feet. Built of rubble stones, the walls stand about 1.5 feet tall. Above, Sam Otto crouches beside a low wall made of a single course of stones.

At the end of our excavation season at Khirbet el-Mastarah, we visited the nearby site of Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa, a well-preserved fortified city on a hill about 2 miles southwest of el-Mastarah. The British survey had visited the site in 1874 and, once they reported that it was the ruin of a modern village, no one bothered to visit it again for nearly 130 years. The survey of Manasseh visited the site in 2003 and conducted a thorough survey, followed by a detailed report of their findings.¹¹ However, the site has never been excavated.

'Auja el-Foqa is on a high hill isolated by steep slopes, rising about 100 meters above the valley below. We climbed the stony peak and found the settlement surrounded by a casemate wall with more than 20 casemate rooms in it. The remains of a tower are located at the center of the site, as

well as numerous buildings across the site, including what may be the remains of a four-room house. The structures are well preserved, with walls standing up to 6.5 feet in height. In a number of locations on the site, we could see the remains of earlier structures underneath those on the surface. Ninety percent of the pottery collected dates to the Iron Age, and the survey concluded that the site was a fortified town during the Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.). However, the site may have been founded earlier, as the earlier structures indicate.

Zertal identified 'Auja el-Foqa with the site of Ataroth, mentioned in the description of the Manasseh-Ephraim boundary in Joshua 16:5, on the basis of its location and name.¹² The name Ataroth means “crown,” and the site crowns the hilltop. Shmuel Ahituv of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev has recently proposed identifying 'Auja el-Foqa as Na'arta, a central administrative site in the Jericho region mentioned in a recently discovered seventh-century B.C.E. papyrus as the source of a shipment of wine to Jerusalem.¹³ In either case, the site was clearly a military and administrative



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KHIRBET 'AUJA EL-FOQA. Two miles southwest of Khirbet el-Mastarah lies the fortified city of Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa, dated to the Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E). Perched on a high hill, the site contains numerous well-preserved structures. Above, Mary Hawkins stands outside the remains of a tower at the site's center. In some structures, earlier remains are visible underneath the remains visible upon the surface (see left), which hints that the site may have been settled earlier than the Iron Age II. Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa may illustrate a later stage of Israelite settlement—while Khirbet el-Mastarah represents an earlier one.

center in the Jordan Valley and may yield important evidence about the administration of Judah in this region during the Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.).

By the end of our 2017 season, we were struck by the fascinating picture that had begun to emerge in the Jordan Valley, a region that up until recently has been virtually unknown archaeologically. Khirbet el-Mastarah may be representative of an early Israelite settlement when the Israelites were a nomadic or semi-nomadic people in the region, and Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa when they were a state-level society. Within a range of just a couple of miles, we may be able to see the evolution of early Israel from a domestic-scale culture to a political-scale culture. This picture corresponds with the Biblical account

of Joshua through Kings, which portrays the early Israelites in eastern Manasseh camping in Gilgal, near Jericho (Joshua). Later, it depicts them settling down and building houses in the highlands (Judges). And, finally, it recounts their development into a kingdom (Samuel–Kings).

In 2019, we plan to begin excavations at Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa, and we invite you to join us in this pioneering work in the Jordan Valley. To learn more, go to our project website (www.jvep.org). 

¹ For an overview of the various models of early Israelite origins, see Ralph K. Hawkins, *How Israel Became a People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), pp. 29–48.

² Most recently, Dever states, “all current models ... focus on

communities had found shelter. This could have happened at almost any point during the seventh century.

Although the compilation of songs, complaints, and narratives likely dates to the seventh century B.C.E., the surviving papyrus was produced during the fourth century B.C.E. How do we account for the time lag between the original compilation and its transcription in Demotic?

In the most plausible scenario, the Aramaic-speaking diaspora communities had brought the compilation with them at the time they migrated to southern Egypt, and their descendants, more than two centuries later, decided to produce a new copy of it. But why did they choose Demotic rather than the more obvious Aramaic writing system? Did the Egyptianized Arameans think Demotic had more prestige than Aramaic? Or had the Aramaic script become illegible to them? We might never know.

At any rate, the scribes had an overtly poor understanding of the text. They put word dividers where they should not be, thereby cutting words in the middle or, conversely, joining two words into one. But let's not be too hard on them. If it had not been for their work, we would never have a reason to marvel at what truly is one of the most fascinating papyri from Egypt. It is one of the ironies of history that what may well be the richest source on the religion of the Aramean people has come down to us from Egypt. 📖

¹ For a complete edition of Papyrus Amherst 63, see Karel van der Toorn, *Papyrus Amherst 63, Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 448 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2018).

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indigenous origins somewhere within Greater Canaan.” See William G. Dever, *Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), p. 232.

³ See, for example, Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, p. 152.

⁴ For a detailed account of the excavation, see David Ben-Shlomo and Ralph K. Hawkins, “Excavations at Khirbet el-Mastarah, the Jordan Valley, 2017,” *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* 1.26 (2017), pp. 49–82.

⁵ See Benjamin A. Saidel, “The Bedouin Tent: An Ethno-Archaeological Portal to Antiquity or a Modern Construct?” in Hans Barnard and Willeke Wendrich, eds., *The Archaeology of Mobility: Old World and New World Nomadism* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, 2008), pp. 465–486.

⁶ Adam Zertal and Shay Bar, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey: From Nahal Bezeq to the Sartaba*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 62.

⁷ For the Jordan Valley, see Zertal and Bar, *Manasseh Hill Country Survey*, vol. 4, p. 58. For the Manasseh Hill Country, see Adam Zertal, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey: The Shechem Syncline*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 53–54.

⁸ See Zertal and Bar, *Manasseh Hill Country Survey*, vol. 4, p. 61. For a summary of the debate about the derivation of the ceramic traditions, see Hawkins, *How Israel Became a People*, pp. 147–152.

⁹ See Hawkins, *How Israel Became a People*, pp. 121–135.

¹⁰ Zertal and Bar, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey*, vol. 4, pp. 62–63.

¹¹ Adam Zertal, Dror Ben-Yosef, Oren Cohen, and Ron Be’eri, “Kh. ‘Aujah el-Foqa (Ataroth)—An Iron Age Fortified City in the Jordan Valley,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 141.2 (2009), pp. 104–123.

¹² Zertal, Ben-Yosef, Cohen and Be’eri, “Kh. ‘Aujah el-Foqa (Ataroth),” pp. 120–121.

¹³ Shmuel Ahituv, Eitan Klein, and Amir Ganor, “The ‘Jerusalem’ Papyrus: A Seventh-Century BCE Shipping Certificate,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 67.2 (2017), pp. 168–182.

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