The Tel Burna Archaeological Project – Report on the First Season of Excavation, 2010

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The site of Tel Burna is located in the Shephelah region, which served as a border between the kingdoms of Judah and Philistia in the Iron Age. A fertile area that supported agricultural production, the region became known as the breadbasket of the south. One of the great attractions of digging at Tel Burna is that it had never been excavated, despite its clear regional prominence. In 2009, we set out on our path to conduct a long-term project at the site. We surveyed the entire tell and its surroundings. We walked around collecting artifacts – mostly pottery, but also flint tools and stone vessels – while mapping out the different features (burial caves, agricultural installations and architectural features) that we noted. The results of this fieldwork have confirmed our original hypothesis that the site was intensively settled from the Early Bronze Age throughout until the Iron Age IIB. Probably the most intriguing feature at the site is the upper fortifications, enclosing the entire summit, and creating a flat-topped tel.

The identification of the site is far from clear. Some scholars have claimed that Tel Burna is in fact biblical Libnah. Libnah was a Canaanite town that was conquered by Joshua who allotted it to the tribe of Judah (Joshua 10:29-30; 15:42). The city was chosen as one of the Levitical cities (Joshua 21:13) which points to its role as a border site. According to 2 Kings 8:22, in 9th century BCE, the city of Libnah was involved in the rebellion against Jehoram the king of Judah. Later (2 Kings 23:31-32;2 Kings 24:17-18), King Josiah marries Hamutal from Libnah, in the 7th century BCE, which may indicate the importance of the site along the border and the attempt by this king to create a bond through marriage between the capital and its frontier.

Regardless of the identification of the site, it is clear that Tel Burna lies along the border between Judah and the Philistines in the Iron Age, as well as the border between Bronze Age City-States, making it a prime target for studying ancient borders, one of the projects main goals. We intend to examine the behavior along the border, not just from a political prospective, but also examining how day-to-day life differed along the border. Did the people who lived on the boundary between two competing entities interact more than those who lived within the respective regions – and how is this manifested in the archaeological record? How were they affected by the proximity on the one hand, and the political pressures of their rulers on the other? On a more regional level, were frontier towns used as interfaces between cultures, or as protective forts, placed there in order to defend the mainland?

In June 2010, the first season of excavation (two weeks long) was conducted at the site of Tel Burna (License # G58/2010; M.R. 187500-615000/188500-616500), following the survey season (conducted in 2009 – License # S89/2009; see Uziel and Shai 2010). The excavations consisted of the excavation of 5 squares (K8, R6, S6, T6, V6).

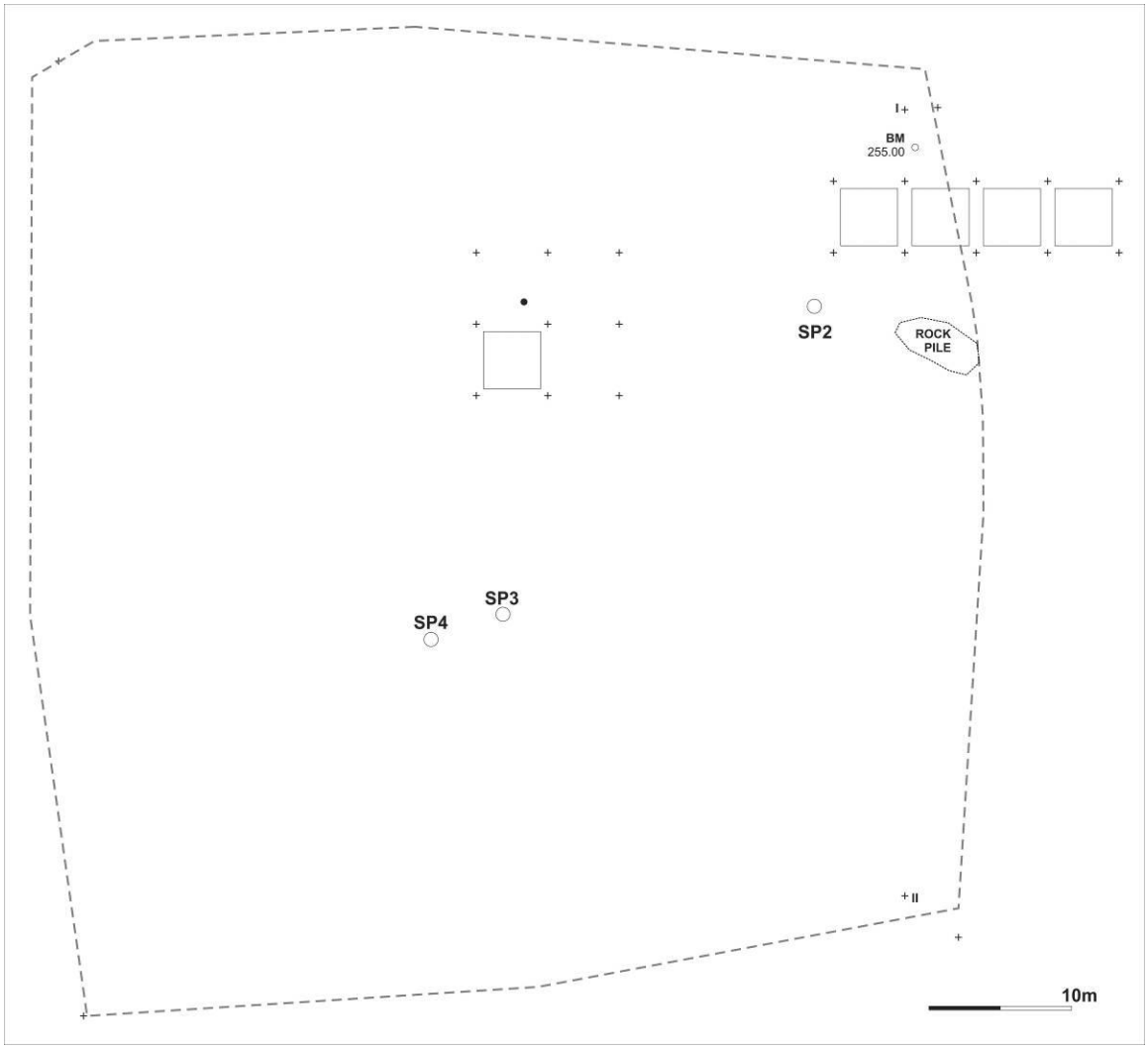


Figure 1: Tel – Burna – Squares Excavated

In addition to these squares several other activities were undertaken:

- The northern side of the summit was cleaned of thorns, in order to reveal the fortification system, which was partially visible on the surface and which encloses the entire summit (and see Aharoni and Amiran 1955). Two parallel walls were uncovered. The upper wall is built of large hewn stones – the lower wall of large field stones. Both walls are very well built, and can now be dated to the Iron Age II (see below excavations in Squares S6 and T6).



Figure 2: View of North Side of Summit with Fortification Walls

- A series of shovel test pits were excavated on the summit and its slopes (many of these were excavated in November 2010). The pits were 1m in diameter and 20cm deep. The purpose of these pits is to collect data using different survey methods, in order to compare the different methods and help develop single-site survey methodology for multi-period sites. A total of 53 such pits were excavated.

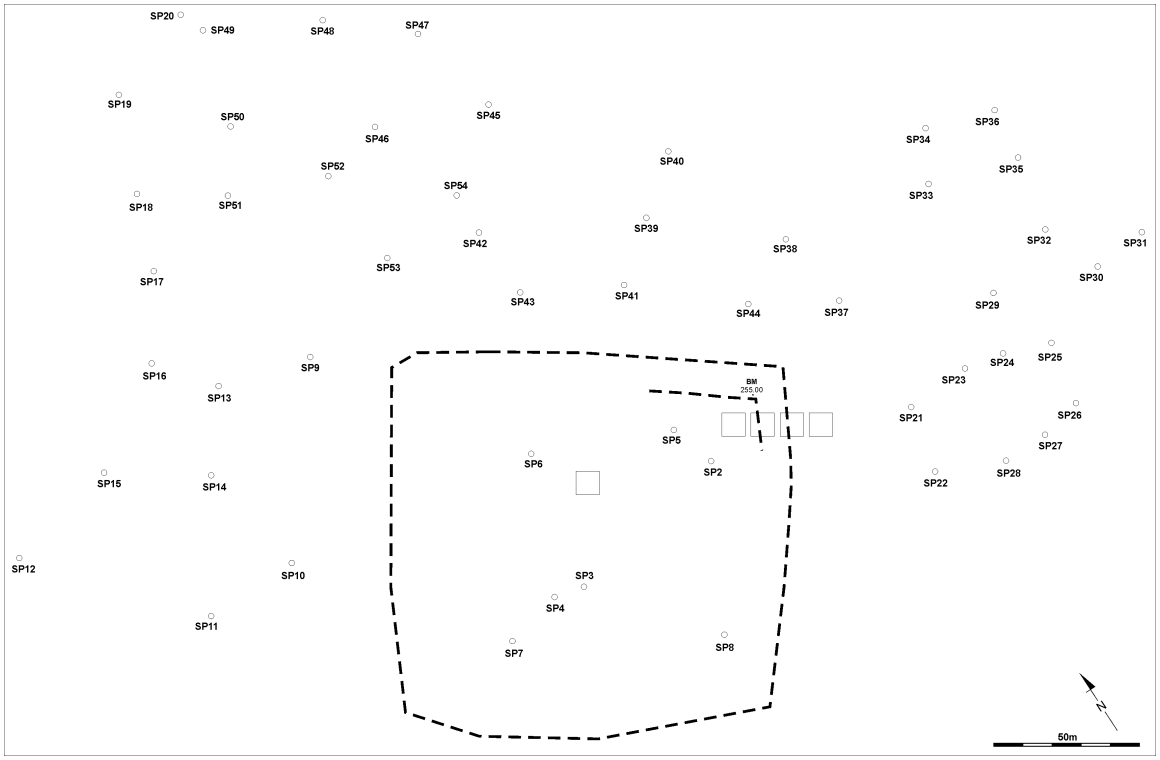


Figure 3: Map Showing Location of Shovel Pits

- Several agricultural excavations were cleaned and documented along the northwest extension of the tel.

The excavations were divided into two areas – a single square at the center of the upper tel (K8), which was placed on a wall (W15002) that was visible on the surface, and four squares forming a section along the upper tel's eastern slope. The section was excavated in order to begin to establish the various stratigraphic layers of the summit, as well as to excavate part of the fortification system, in order to date it.

Square K8

The excavation of Square K8 is not complete and will need to continue in 2011, in order to better define the various features thus far uncovered. To date, two features can be defined with a great degree of certainty. The first is a wall (W15002) that was visible on the surface. The wall runs east-west, and is built of very large field stones. Approximately 5m to the north of the wall, a pillar base is also visible on the surface (within the confines of Square K7). Whether the two features relate awaits further excavation, to be conducted this coming season. Three courses of W15002 have been uncovered thus far. While no surface has yet been discovered relating to this

wall, the pottery in the square dates exclusively to the 9th-7th Centuries BCE, hinting at the wall's date.

The second feature excavated in the square is a silo (L15006) in the southeast corner of the square, lined with field stones (W15005), and dating to the 7th Century BCE. Half of the silo was excavated, in conjunction with Lior Wiesbord, who wet sieved all of the sediment in search of microfauna (part of the ERC project headed by I. Finkelstein). The floor of the silo was reached, built of slabs of stone. This silo is one of four silos thus far uncovered (see below).



Square R6

In square R6, at least one more stone-lined silo was found in the southeast corner of the square (L11004; W11003), with a possible third silo in the northeast corner. These silos await excavation this coming season. In addition, a wall (W11006) has begun to appear, running north-south, in the center of the square. The nature and date of the wall remains unclear.

Square S6

The excavation of square S6 uncovered the inner line of fortification (W12006), running north-south. The wall is 1m wide and is built of Large field stones. To date, three courses of the wall have been excavated. While no surface has been found relating to this wall, the pottery on both sides of it dates to the Iron Age II, suggesting a date for it. That said, a more firm *terminus post quem* can be given, as the wall is cut by an additional silo (L12007). Here too, the silo is lined with field stones (W12008). Half of the silo has been excavated (again, in conjunction with Lior

Wiesbord, who wet sieved all of the sediment in search of microfauna), and while the surface of this silo has not been reached yet, the pottery is also of a 7th Century BCE date, meaning that wall must pre-date this.



Figure 4: Squares S6 (left) and R6 (right), showing silos and Walls 12006 and 11006

Square T6

In Square T6, we discovered the out fortification wall (W13002). Six courses of large field stones, with at least three faces, have been uncovered thus far. Large amounts of Iron Age II restorable pottery was found outside of the wall, although no surface has been reached relating to this wall.



Figure 5: Wall 13002 in Square T6

Square V6

A structure, consisting of a wall (W14005) and a surface (L14006), with smashed Iron IIA vessels was uncovered in Square V6. The structure's east side seems to have eroded away, as it does not reach Wall 14004 in the middle of the square. Both walls run north-south, however there construction is quite different. Wall 14005 is built of small-medium field stones, while Wall 14004 is made of large boulders. The latter's function and date is still unclear.



Figure 6: Square V6 – Surface 14006 and Wall 14005, with Vessels in Situ



Figure 7: Close up of Storage Jar on Surface 14006

Summary and Future Plans

The first season at Tel Burna began revealing the Iron Age levels, including the fortifications and a series of silos. They provide the first step in a long-term investigation of the site's history, particularly stressing its location along the Judean-Philistine border.