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THE EARLY BRONZE AGE FORTIFICATIONS AT TELL ES-SAFI/GATH, ISRAEL

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Tell es-Safi/Gath is a multi-period site located on the border between the Judean foothills (Shephelah) and the southern coastal plain in central Israel, which has been subject to survey and excavations over the last two decades. Excavations by Bliss and Macalister in 1899 exposed a fortification system which was dated to the “Jewish period”. In this paper, we present updated data on these fortifications which have led to fresh insights. In two separate excavation areas, we excavated portions of the fortification system that surrounded the site which can now be dated to the EB III of the southern Levant. The EB fortification system influenced the location of later fortifications at the site. The nature of the construction techniques of these fortifications and the character of the settlement which they surrounded suggest that Tell es-Safi/Gath was a major regional urban centre during the EB III and was governed by a centralised administrative hierarchy.

Keywords: Early Bronze Age III, fortifications, Tell es-Safi/Gath, Bliss and Macalister

1. INTRODUCTION

The excavations by Bliss and Macalister at Tell es-Safi/Gath in 1899 were one of the first archaeological excavations of a large multi-period site in the Levant, and as such have an important role in the history of the development of archaeological research in the region (e.g. Avissar and Maeir 2012; Avissar Lewis and Maeir 2015). As this excavation was done under the auspices of and with the support of the Palestine Exploration Society (Bliss and Macalister 1902), the preliminary publications of the excavations were published in the issues of the *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (Bliss 1899a, 1899b, 1900). The current excavations at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Maeir 2012) have uncovered various remains which were also dealt with in the earlier excavations, including aspects relating to the fortifications during various periods of this site. In the present paper, we wish to present a renewed look at the Early Bronze Age (EB) fortifications at the site, based both on the finds from Bliss and

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Macalister's excavations, as well as on the results of the new project. We thought it fitting to publish these results in *PEQ*, in continuation of the preliminary reports that Bliss and Macalister published more than a century ago.

During the EB, fortified cities begin to make their appearance across the southern Levant. A number have been investigated, such as at Arad, Tel Poran, 'Ai, Beth Yerah and Tel Yarmouth (e.g., Amiran *et al.* 1978, 10–12; Callaway *et al.* 1980; Kempinski 1992; Greenberg and Eisenberg 2006; Paz 2006; Gophna 1992; de Miroschedji 1990).

In 1899, Bliss and Macalister uncovered evidence for an extensive fortification system at the archaeological site of Tell es-Safi/Gath (Bliss and Macalister 1902; Avissar and Maeir 2012, 114–16). However, since Tell es-Safi/Gath is a multi-period site, the dating of this fortification has long been an issue of discussion and dissension (see Avissar and Maeir 2012 for summary). The site is located at the western edge of the *Shephelah* (Judean foothills), and overlooks the central segment of the southern coastal plain of Israel. Survey and excavations over the last two decades have demonstrated that Tell es-Safi/Gath was a major urban centre for the region during the Early Bronze Age. It may have been the centre of an independent polity, or perhaps it was hierarchically positioned just under the nearby, slightly larger site of Tel Yarmouth (Maeir 2012; Shai *et al.* 2012; Shai *et al.* 2014). In two separate areas, our excavations have exposed portions of the fortification system that surrounded the site. The use and abandonment of the fortifications are now confidently dated to the EB III, although foundations may lie in the EB II.

In this paper, we present the results of our recent research at Tell es-Safi/Gath which shed light on the nature of the fortifications and examine the implications of their presence for site formation processes. Special attention will be paid to the nature of the fortifications' construction techniques, their locations, and the character of the settlement which the fortification surrounded. We will then present and discuss comparative data on issues such as the reason for the existence of such a large fortified site during the EB of the region, its regional role during the EB III, and how these data illuminate other facets of early urban life during the EB of the southern Levant.

2. TELL ES-SAFI/GATH AS AN URBAN CENTRE

Geographically, Tell es-Safi/Gath is located halfway between the southern Levantine coastal plain and the Central Hills, on the border between the foothills (*Shephelah*) and the coastal plain. The region surrounding Tell es-Safi/Gath features a number of other large and medium-sized archaeological sites with extensive EB occupations. These include Tel Yarmouth to the east, and Tel Erani, Lachish, Tel Hesi, Tel Halif, and Tel 'Ira to the south and southwest (Fig. 1). In size, Yarmouth appears to dominate, but the exact nature of the regional political system is still under investigation (de Miroschedji 1999, 2006, 2009).

Our recent excavations have uncovered evidence that the entire extent of Tell es-Safi/Gath was occupied by a large EB III urban centre. EB III pottery has been recovered in almost every excavated area on the tell. However, much of it is from secondary stratigraphic contexts (Maeir 2012, 12–13). EB architecture and associated artefactual remains are found in each of the excavation areas on the tell (Areas A, E, P and F). Some of the remains are domestic in nature while others are associated with the fortification system. In different places, EB remains are found below either MB or LB strata. The LB covers the entire site and the MB only is found on the west side of the tell. These data confirm the results of the surface collection survey that suggested the size of the settled area of the tell was c. 24 ha during the EB (Uziel and Maeir 2005; 2012, 175–77; Shai *et al.* 2012, fig. 2).¹

The largest exposure of EB architecture is found in the easternmost excavation area (Area E) at eastern end of the tell. In this area, a domestic quarter with several rebuilding stages

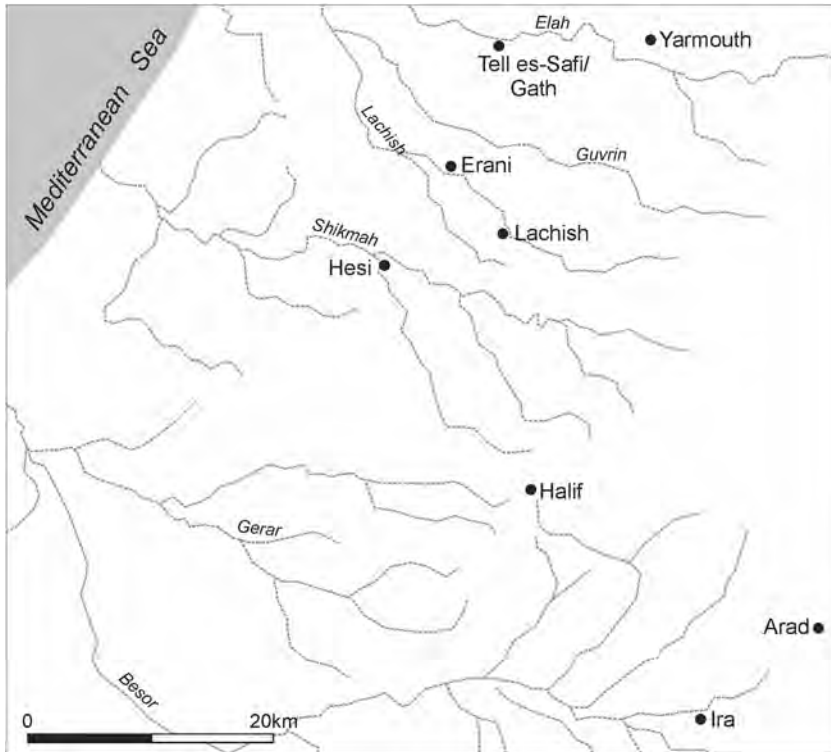


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Tell es-Safi/Gath and surrounding EB sites.

dating to the EB II (Stratum E7) and EB III (Strata E6 and E5) was uncovered (Shai *et al.* 2014). The buildings of the three phases seem to have a basic rectangular plan that consists of small rooms with no pillars. The structures descend in elevation from northwest to southeast. It appears that they were built to follow the natural slope of the tell, as the entire area slopes to the east (Shai *et al.* 2014, 26).

Three architectural phases, E5a, b and c, are dated to the late EB III. Several houses separated by a narrow street or alley have been exposed. Three of the houses are found to the east of the alleyway. They are small rectangular structures, composed of dirt floor small rooms (for living and storage) and what is interpreted as a courtyard. They have adjoining walls which makes it difficult to see clear divisions between them. To the west of the alley, there is a house of a different nature. Only a corner of it has been exposed to date since it extends into the deep (6 m) balk immediately to the west. One long and narrow room had a stone floor, while the other contained what are interpreted as hearths for food preparation. While there is no evidence for elite architecture or behaviour at this end of the site, it is clear that the inhabitants were not poor. They had access to expensive exotic items, such as hippopotamus ivory, non-local stone (from the Galilee or the Golan), imported Egyptian mace heads, and other items. They also used a cylinder seal made of ivory (Maier *et al.* 2011) and sacrificed an expensive animal (a female donkey) as an offering during the rebuilding of their houses (Greenfield *et al.* 2012). There is a great deal of occupational continuity in this area since the stone walls of the later EB III houses were built directly on top of the mud-brick superstructures from the earlier EB III houses.

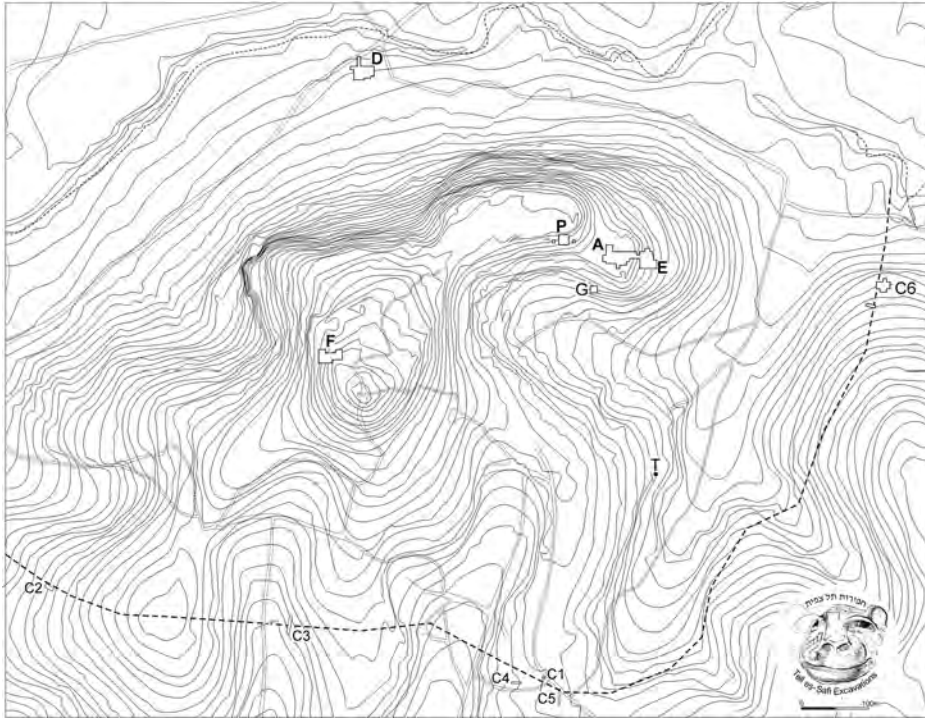


Fig. 2. Map showing the site with the location of the excavation areas discussed in text.

There is evidence that this neighbourhood and its houses continue to the west and extend at least under the entire excavation area of Area A (Greenfield *et al.* 2012; Shai *et al.* 2014). In Area A, immediately to the west of Area E, there have been several hints as to the existence of EB III levels beneath the Iron Age and Late Bronze Age remains. For example, large quantities of EB pottery have been uncovered in the Iron Age levels in this area. In addition, architectural elements dating to the late EB were excavated below the remains of an Iron I temple on the westernmost side of the area (Eliyahu-Bechar *et al.* 2012, 256; Maeir 2012, 27–28; Maeir *et al.* 2013, 12–13). Therefore, it can be assumed that the EB levels exposed in Area E continue west under the later levels in Area A.

Unfortunately, there are very limited exposures of EB occupation areas in other parts of the site since they are deeply buried beneath later deposits as one moves to the summit of the tell in the west. But, if we consider the nature of remains in contemporary urban centres, we would expect to find a variety of public and private spaces and structures. These could include features such as palaces (e.g. Yarmouth; de Miroschedji 2001, 2003), temples (e.g. Megiddo; Adams *et al.* 2014), a large centralised grain storage facilities (Bet Yerah; e.g. Mazar 2001), etc. We expect that the palace and other major administrative centres would likely be found at the western end of the site, near the summit of the upper tell which, as topographically higher, affords superior view, air, and height.

Tell es-Safi/Gath in general is divided into two major parts — a crescent shaped “upper city” located on the elevated portions of the tell, which was the focus of settlement during most periods, and a lower city situated to the north, which was settled primarily in the Iron Age. The “upper city” can be divided into several parts (Fig. 2): (1) the summit on the upper city’s west

side which is currently crowned by the remains of a Crusader castle (“Blanche Garde”), with Area F on its northwestern edge; (2) a large, relatively flat area in the centre of the tell, where the Mamluk and Ottoman period Arab village of Tell es-Safi was located, with Area P located on its southeastern side; and (3) an easterly facing appendage, which starts with an extensive, relatively flat terrace (Area A), and then slopes to the east including Area E, but perhaps in earlier times the settled area extended even further to the east. The large-scale erosion of its eastern half exposed the large underlying EB occupation and allowed us to explore it at the edge of the erosional zone. We assume that while the eastern section was largely residential, the summit of the site most likely accommodated the elite zones. As to other parts of the city — we do not have sufficient data at this point to determine this.

3. THE FORTIFICATION REMAINS

Clear-cut evidence for fortifications has been found in two of the current excavation areas (Areas F and P; see Fig. 2) but with suggested evidence for additional sections in other parts of the site (see below).

3.1 Area F

Area F is located on the upper west side of Tell es-Safi/Gath, on the west-facing slope one terrace below the summit of the tell (Fig. 3). The EB fortification wall in Area F (Wall 96908) is located in the westernmost squares of the area, on the lowest part of the slope which meets the cliff. Excavated remains of this EB wall run for 21 m in a northwest to southeast orientation. The structure is a massive wall foundation, constructed of field stones measuring 30–80 cm on average. The wall foundation is consistently 2.7 m in width (five 54 cm cubits). The foundation consists of several courses of dry laid field stones, and varies from 2 to 2.5 m in height. It is assumed that a brick superstructure must have existed atop the foundation, since a wall of only 2–2.5 m in height would be of no practical effect. Evidence for the mud-brick superstructure can be found in the thick sedimentary debris along the exterior face of the wall. This debris contained only EB ceramic typo-chronological remains.

Two outlets were discovered along the outer face of the wall foundation in Area F, both constructed as integral components of the wall itself. These outlets protrude from the face of the wall exactly 54 cm, or one cubit. On the northwest end of the excavated area, an entire outlet was exposed, which measured 3.25 m in length (effectively six 54 cm cubits). This exactly parallels the measurements of the outlet found in Area P on the lower east side of the tell. A 1.25 m section of a second outlet was revealed on the southeast end of the area, when a portion of a MBII glacis covering it was removed.

Some 12 m north of the trench, another outlet in the wall line is clearly visible along the cliff edge. It was observed in 1899 by Bliss and Macalister, and is marked by the letter “b” on the plan prepared by Bliss (Bliss and Macalister 1899, 188; [Avissar and Maeir 2012](#), fig. 2B.2). In 2013, this outlet was measured at 3.25 m in length. The wall appears to extend to the north, turning slightly so that it follows the current cliff line. Protruding stones along the cliff edge immediately to the north suggest that at least part of the wall may have eroded down the cliff, but only excavations at the edge of the cliff face can demonstrate if this is so.

There is clear evidence in this area that the stone foundation of the EB fortification wall was used as the foundation for later fortifications in this area. MB II occupants repaired the EB stone foundation, laying new stones to repair areas that had eroded or were robbed, and rebuilt the mud-brick superstructure. A MB II glacis (96809) was constructed to rise above and cover the outlets of the EB foundation. Domestic rooms from the LB and IA are oriented at right angles to the EB wall line. This alignment suggests that the MB II fortification wall,

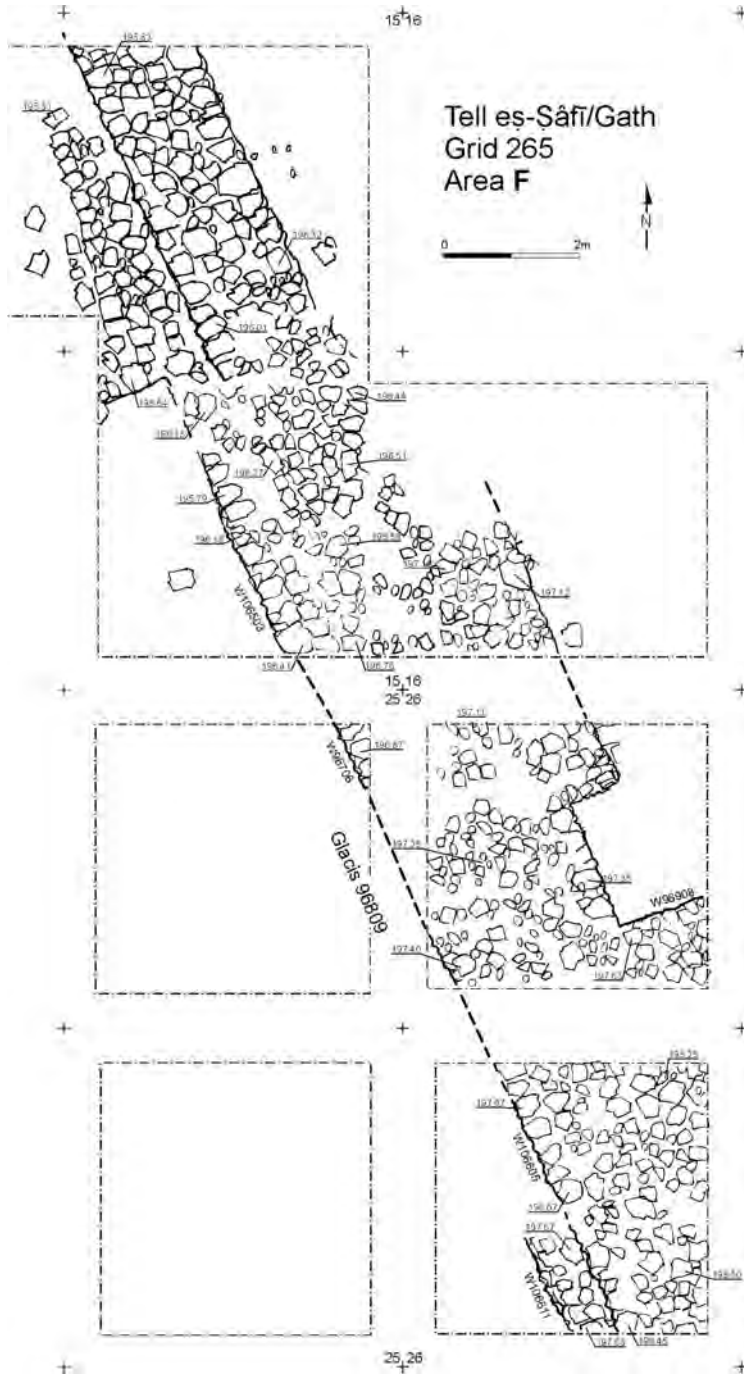


Fig. 3. Plan of the fortification wall in excavation Area F.

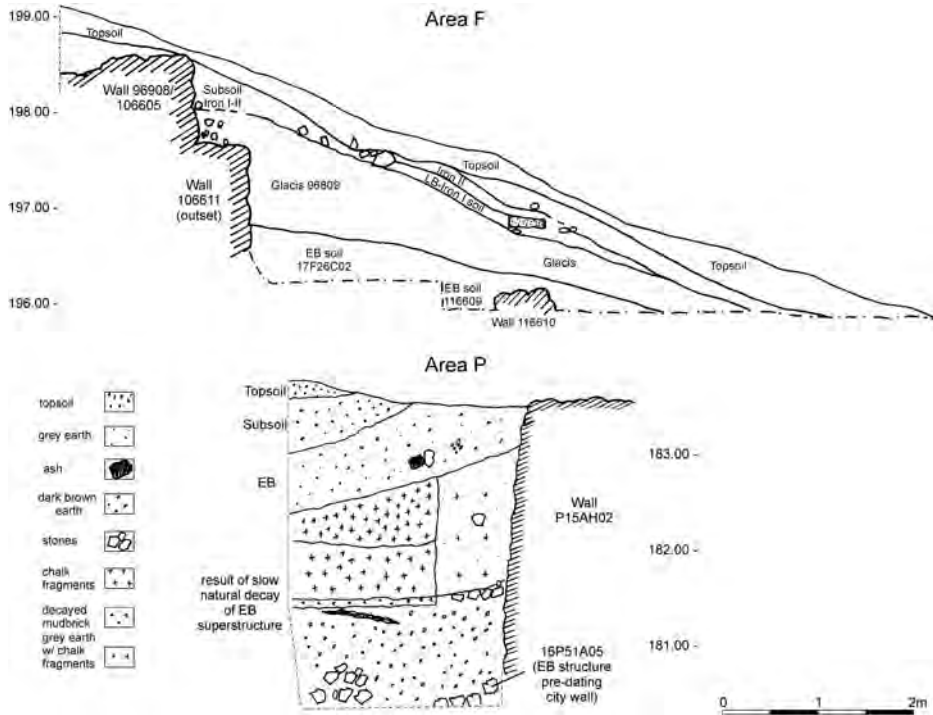


Fig. 4. Sections drawing of the fortification wall in excavation Areas F (section south – squares 26C/25D) and P (section west – square 51A).

atop the EB foundation, remained in use during the LB and IA. Following the Iron IIA, the wall superstructure eroded down the western slope.

The foundation of the city wall in Area F (96908) is dated to the EB based on the ceramic remains collected from the soils immediately beneath and in front of the wall. Beneath the crushed *kurkar* glacis (96809, see Fig. 4) was a deposit of dark brown clay (116609). The foundation of the city wall was sunk into this dark soil, which covered the first course of the outset (106611). It should be stressed that the only ceramic material recovered from the dark soil was dated to the EB (Fig. 5). This dark deposit of soil extends for approximately 4 m to the west of the face of Wall 96908. Wall 116610 is a partially exposed wall that appears to be topped by mud brick and is founded in dark EB soil at an elevation lower than Wall 96908. Given the clean EB soils surrounding this feature and running under Wall 96908, we assert that the large city wall was established in the Early Bronze Age and above and on top of earlier EB structures that were no longer in use.

3.2 Area P

Area P is located slightly to the southeast of the centre of the tell, just to the west of Area A. The excavated remains of the EB fortification wall (Wall P15AH04) extend 23 m in an east-west direction along the southern face of the tell (Fig. 6). The width of the wall is approximately 2 m, but varies between 1.6 m and 2.18 m across its length. Nine courses of stones create a

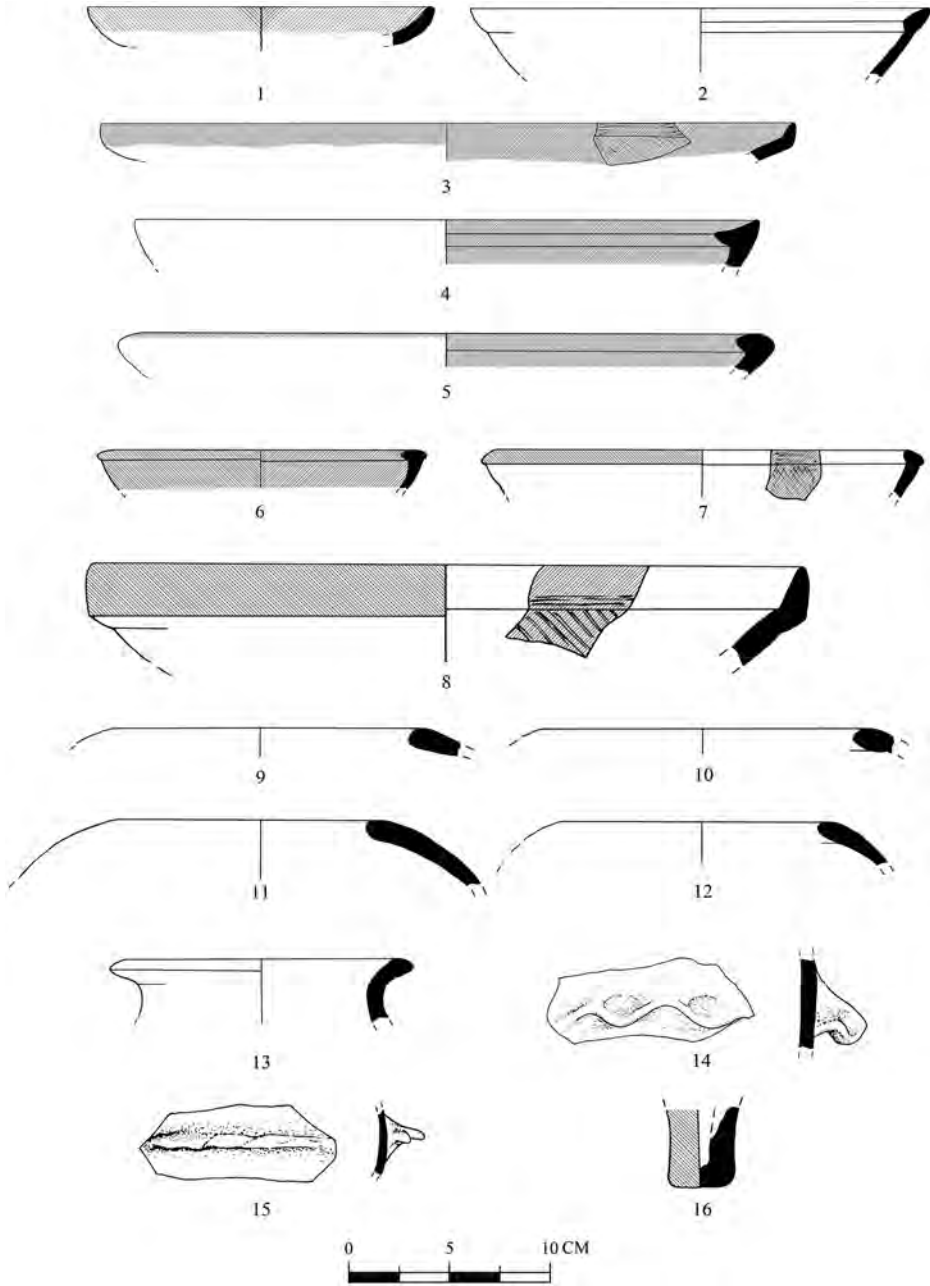


Fig. 5. EB III pottery from excavation Areas F and P.

massive dry-stone wall that stands to a height of 2.35 m. Thus far, no intact evidence of a brick superstructure has been found. However, large fragments of eroded mud brick are present within the thick sedimentary layers accumulated outside of the wall; these sedimentary

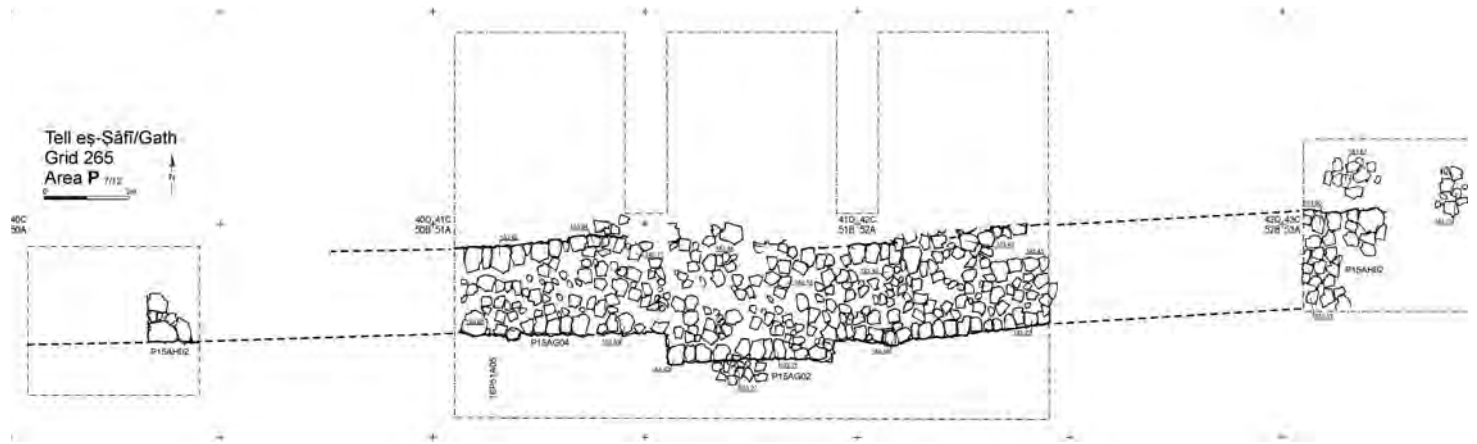


Fig. 6. Plan of the fortification wall in excavation Area P.

layers contained exclusively EB ceramics. At present, these strata are understood to represent the eroded remains of the EB mud-brick superstructure.

A single outset, which was constructed as an integral part of the wall itself, was discovered along the outer face of the wall in Area P. The entire length of the outset was exposed, which measured 3.25 m in length (effectively six 54 cm cubits); this corresponds exactly with the length of the outset excavated in Area F. The Area P outset protrudes from the face of the wall exactly 54 cm, which also corresponds to the dimensions present in Area F.

Also common to Areas P and F is the way in which the immediate architecture relates to the fortification wall. As in Area F, the architecture in Area P is oriented to the wall line. To date, this architecture includes a nicely preserved LB alley way running parallel to the wall, and well-built structural walls running perpendicular to and abutting the interior of the fortification.

Excavations at the east end of Area P suggest that the wall continues toward the east. The angle of the wall does not appear to indicate that it turns to the north immediately afterwards and surrounds only the middle plateau. However, it is not yet clear if the wall continues to the east to circumscribe Areas A and E.

A probe trench (1.8 × 1.2 m) was dug adjacent to the exterior face of the large stone base of the fortification wall (P15AH02) with the purpose of reaching the base of the wall and dating its construction. While the levels on the interior side of the wall (i.e., north of the wall) yielded LB material (related to domestic structures that were built alongside of and perpendicular to the interior face of the wall), the levels (below topsoil and subsoil) adjacent to the outside of the wall (i.e., south of the wall) yielded exclusively EB material from the top of the stone wall to its base (Figs. 4 and 6). The probe has thus far descended 2.35 m. The layers in the upper half of the profile slope southward with the natural slope of the tell. The sediment is mainly composed of a brown earth, which gives way to a greyer soil containing more small and large bits of chalk. The lower half of the probe consists mainly of reddish earth that appears to be the result of decayed mud brick. This is a good example of reverse stratigraphy in that the lower deposit (reddish layer) was probably the original mud-brick superstructure which collapsed first and was ultimately covered by a layer that contained fragments of the stone foundation (the greyish layer). Throughout the entire probe, the finds were sparse and consisted mainly of small EB III ceramic fragments (Fig. 5), suggesting that this material is the result of the weathering of the wall superstructure downslope as it collapsed subsequent to the abandonment of the EB city.

Architecturally, the probe revealed nine courses of Wall P15AH02. The probe went below the base of the wall in order to expose its stratigraphic relationships. The most surprising find was that the city wall had not been constructed on bedrock. Rather, an earlier structure (16P51A05), consisting of two parallel lines of stones oriented north-south, appears to continue underneath the wall. This partly exposed feature was tentatively dated to the EB III (based on the associated ceramic assemblage). The large stone fortification wall itself is clearly built on top of an earlier (possibly EB III) structure, which was most likely destroyed in the process of creating a level surface for the newer wall.

3.3 *Bliss and Macalister's Wall*

To the fortification remains noted above, we may add the city wall that was traced by Bliss and Macalister in their excavations of the site in 1899 (Bliss and Macalister 1902). They exposed a line of fortification wall in several locations, on the summit (not far from Area F) and also on the southern edge of the summit and on the slope towards Area P (Fig. 7; Bliss and Macalister 1899, 188; see Avissar and Maier 2012, fig. 2B.2 for a revised version of Bliss and Macalister's map). According to their report, the wall was 12 ft wide and they dated it to the "Jewish Period".² This date aside, our excavations suggest that significant portions of the fortifications excavated

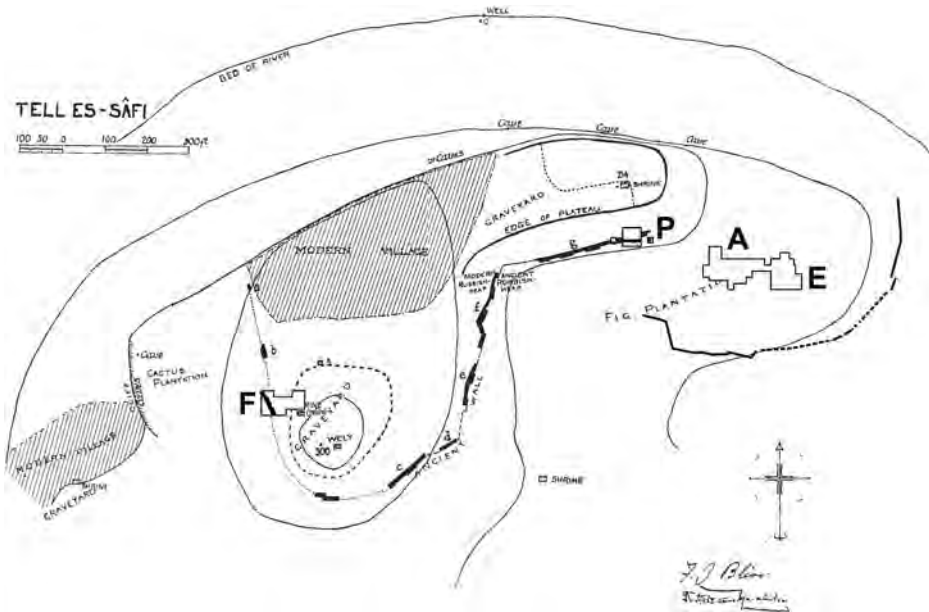


Fig. 7. Plan of Bliss and Macalister's fortification wall (redrawing).

by Bliss and Macalister can be associated with our recently discovered system of fortifications in Areas F and P, which date to the EB.

The construction method of the wall as described by Bliss and Macalister (1902, 30–31; Avissar and Maeir 2012, 114) is different from that of the walls exposed in Area P and F by the current project. Bliss and Macalister describe their wall as constructed of field stones on either side and filled with soil (1899, 195). While not an accurate description of the construction method, Bliss and Macalister's account may represent impressions one might have after a hurried excavation of the wall. In Area F, the 21 m segment of the excavated city wall appears to be well constructed of large field stones, just as Bliss and Macalister describe. The centre, however, is also constructed of similarly large stones – not a soil fill as indicated by Bliss and Macalister.

What Bliss and Macalister have identified as a soil fill atop the stone wall, we interpret as an effort to level the top surface of the wall prior to the addition of a mud-brick superstructure in the Middle Bronze Age. Across its entire length, the wall is covered by a deposit of degraded mud brick that is almost devoid of pottery. Underneath and intermixed in the bottom levels of this soil is a layer of small stones that were probably placed on the wall to fill gaps and to level the wall for bricks. This surface preparation, which enabled the addition of a mud-brick superstructure in the MB, is likely Bliss and Macalister's "soil fill".

They also identified a clear section of inset-outset wall, similar to the excavated fortification in Area F and P, which was described and drawn by them in at least two specific locations (points e and g) and possibly a third (point b). The length of these outsets are listed as ranging from 30 to 34 ft, and the intervals between as ranging between 28 ft and 35 ft, 9 in. (Bliss and Macalister 1899, 194). The maximum projection of these buttresses never exceeded 2 ft (approximately 61 cm).

In some locations, Bliss and Macalister also identified a thin, plaster-like treatment on the face of the city wall. They note that it was made by grinding up the local limestone (1899, 195).

A similar phenomenon has now been identified in Area F, where our excavations have discovered a white plaster-like substance covering a portion of the northern outset.

The rapid pace of Bliss and Macalister's excavations, coupled with unclear and incomplete publication, make it difficult to confirm or deny their dating of the city fortification system. Their oversights also leave significant questions about the methods and locations used to obtain their measurements. In the case of the wall's width, the location of the measurement taken by the team is unknown. It is unclear if Bliss and Macalister's measurements included the width of an outset, and whether or not it might include the width of a domestic wall built abutting the interior of the city wall (a situation discovered in the current excavations in Area F). Other elements in their publication, such as the extreme length of the buttresses, are not as easily explained and deserve further inquiry. Ultimately, the present evidence — the line of the wall, its construction method, the presence of a white plaster facing, and the presence of consistent buttressing — seems to indicate a strong association between the recently excavated EB wall segments in Areas F and P and the wall discovered in 1899.

3.4 *Other inferred evidence for EB fortifications*

While the fortification line has been amply demonstrated for the western and central parts of the tell, it is unclear whether the easternmost end was also encircled by fortification. There is some evidence that suggests that this area of the site might be encircled by the EB fortification system. One should note the presence of a line of protruding large stones along the easternmost perimeter of the site, approximately 65 m to the east of Area E. Here, a row of similarly sized large stones (boulder-sized) extends for 20 m in a north-south orientation at the lowest point on the slope (Figs. 7 and 8). This line of boulders becomes deeply buried as it moves around the bend toward the southeast, but is visible once again slightly further to the southeast within a looter's pit (most probably one of the robber pits dug by the late Moshe Dayan; see [Maeir 2012](#), 95–96). This line has not yet been excavated, but it is hypothesised to represent the remnants of another potential segment of the EB fortifications, based on the high levels of EB ceramics found in the immediate vicinity of the boulders. Strengthening the case for dating the line to the EB is the minimal Iron Age architecture present in Area E, and the complete absence of Iron Age architecture to the east of Area E. Therefore, we currently assign a preliminary date for this large boulder line to the EB. If this hypothesis is supported by the results of future excavations, then Areas E and A would indeed be included within the fortified part of the city.

4. TELL ES-SAFI/GATH'S POSITION IN THE REGIONAL HIERARCHY

The presence of such an extensive and substantial fortification system at Tell es-Safi/Gath during the EB III suggests that there was some sort of centralised administrative structure within the city. Although Early Bronze Age society in Canaan did not adopt writing, there are several lines of evidence which suggest that they had a “standardised symbolic system” which would have been part of the administration, both for governing and for controlling the distribution of goods and labour ([Shai and Uziel 2010](#)). At Tell es-Safi/Gath, these include cylinder seals, pot marks, and architecture.

Cylinder seals: Determining the use of cylinder seals as an administrative tool depends on the types of seals, their context, and distribution. Though it seems that cylinder seals were not used for administrative purposes in the southern Levant during the Early Bronze Age I ([de Miroschedji 1997](#)), they were probably used for this purpose during the subsequent EB II and III ([Flender 2000](#); [Greenberg 2001](#); [Braun 2004](#); [Joffe 2001](#), 359–60). At Tell es-Safi/Gath, a seal made of hippopotamus ivory, which depicts a lion in dense vegetation, was



Fig. 8. View looking north of inset offset of EB wall east of excavation Area E.

discovered in Room 114805 (Phase E5c) in Area E. The seal was produced by a highly proficient artist on non-local material, which hints at the value of the object and the high social status of the owner (Maeir *et al.* 2011; Shai *et al.* 2014, 38–39).

Potters' marks: A very large assemblage of ceramics with potters' marks have been recovered from the later EB III in Area E. These are matched now by their presence in other less intensively investigated areas of the EB occupation on the site. Recently, Kisos (2014) conducted an in-depth study on this subject using the entire EB III potters marks assemblage at Tell es-Safi/Gath. She suggested that as writing was not yet used in Canaan, it may be that such marks should be seen as a step before writing. They may have been used to convey messages from the polity's administration to various classes of the population. This was done by the marking of ceramic vessels used in daily life. Ceramic vessels were a medium that was available to everyone, and thus would be very convenient to convey these messages. The presence of these potters' marks is not limited to EB Canaan, but extends to vessels originating in Canaan that have been found in Egyptian royal contexts (e.g. Knoblauch 2010, fig. 5:g). This implies the use of these symbols in cross-cultural contacts with other administrations.

Architectural planning: The use of both the Mesopotamian cubit (Milson 1988) and the Egyptian cubit (de Miroshedji 2001, 471–75, 2003) in architectural features is attested at a variety of

sites in Canaan. Although de Miroschedji stresses that the use of architectural plans does not necessarily correlate with writing, it is very likely that the employment of architectural plans signifies a familiarity with the use of symbols. Furthermore, employing the Egyptian cubit in Canaan points to an intimate knowledge of Egyptian technology and perhaps administrative practices, which makes it all the more difficult to understand why writing was not used. One may suggest that the palace at Yarmouth was planned by an Egyptian craftsman. However, the lack of direct contact between the two regions during the Early Bronze Age III seems to suggest otherwise. At Tell es-Safi/Gath, we detect the use of a different cubit of 54 cm as early as the Early Bronze Age. This is well-attested by the width of the fortification walls both in Area P and Area F. Chadwick (2013) is suggesting that this cubit is the local Canaanite and later Israelite (and Philistine) unit, used in Israel throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. As such, the 54 cm cubit that was used at Tell es-Safi/Gath during the Early Bronze Age is the earliest known indication for this later unit of measurement.

The size of the site is also of importance. As mentioned above, the settlement was *c.* 24 ha during the EB III.³ Comparing the size of Tell es-Safi/Gath with other sites in southern Israel (Uziel *et al.* 2014, 297–99, table 1 and fig. 2) shows that the two largest cities or urban centres in this region were at Tel Yarmouth and Tell es-Safi/Gath (Uziel *et al.* 2014, 303).

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that EB III Tell es-Safi/Gath was a large fortified city. Based on the combination of EB finds across the entire surface of the tell, fortifications at the western end and central areas of the site, and an extended area of domestic occupation in the east (Areas A and E), we suggest that the EB occupation extended across the entire tell. This would have encompassed an area of at least 24 ha (as attested by the surface survey; Uziel and Maeir 2005, 2012). While a large portion of this area was enclosed by a fortification, it is unclear whether the easternmost parts (Areas A and E) were surrounded by an additional line of fortification that has not yet been clearly identified (but perhaps hinted at in the easternmost line of rocks described in the previous section), or were extra-mural unfortified neighbourhoods.

Given the short distance (*c.* 11 km) between Tell es-Safi/Gath and Tel Yarmouth, the presence of an extensive fortification system and large urban settlement at Tell es-Safi/Gath requires the reconsideration of the roles of and relationships between these two sites within the regional system. While de Miroschedji (2006, 2009) posits that Tel Yarmouth was the primary polity centre in the southern part of Israel, we believe that this view may need to be modified for a number of reasons. First, while the size of a site does not offer a one-to-one correspondence to its importance, the size of Tell es-Safi/Gath during the EB III clearly indicates it was a large urban centre. If we assume that the entire tell was enclosed and the settled area corresponds to the distribution of EB surface remains, the overall area that was enclosed by the fortification system is about 24 ha. It is not yet clear if the entire city was within the enclosed area, or whether it also included extra-mural neighbourhoods (*i.e.*, Areas A and E). Second, this kind of fortification suggests that these were troubled times. If Tel Yarmouth dominated the region and Tell es-Safi was a secondary centre, it is unlikely that it would have required such a large fortification so close to Yarmouth. An urban entity of this size surrounded by such a large-scale fortification system would quickly have become a competing centre of power and wealth in the region, especially given the close proximity of the two sites (see also Uziel *et al.* 2014, 303). Third, the size and scale of the fortification suggest that some kind of centralised bureaucracy had to exist in order to build and maintain it.

There are indications that some bureaucratic activities took place at Tell es-Safi/Gath (such as the cylinder seal and pot marks) which were not as common at Tel Yarmouth. The use of the local cubit measurement system on the fortifications also reflects the presence of

centralised order in the planning of this settlement. To this one can add that while the Egyptian cubit was in use at Tel Yarmouth, the different measurement unit of 54 cm in use at Tell es-Safi/Gath perhaps reflects a stronger connection between Egypt and Yarmouth. However, Tell es-Safi/Gath was by no means isolated from the larger world. There are several Egyptian or Egyptianising objects from the site (such as faience beads – [Eliyahu-Behar et al. 2015](#)). All told, the evidence of the fortifications at EB III Tell es-Safi/Gath, along with other finds from this period, indicate the overall importance of the site during this period. With all likelihood, the site was a major player in the geo-political matrix that existed in southern Canaan at the time.

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NOTES

¹ It should be noted that there is an extensive lower Philistine city on the terrace above the Elah Valley riverbed just to the north of the tell.

² Based on the importance of the site during the Iron Age, [Avissar and Maier \(2012, 117\)](#) dated it to the Iron Age IIA.

³ It seems that this was already the case in the EB II, as Stratum E7 in Area E is dated to this phase ([Shai et al. 2014, 23, 28](#)).

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