



Building a City Wall An Administrative Perspective

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During the Early Bronze Age II/III, Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath was fortified by a city wall. This wall has been exposed now in several areas, stretching from the acropolis in the west (Area F), alongside the central part of the southern ridge (Area P; fig. 1) to the lower slopes in the east (Area J), just below a significant Early Bronze Age neighborhood in Area E. In general, the wall width is approximately 2.5 m, but varies along its length, including periodic offsets that protrude over 0.5 m. The longest stretch of contiguous wall currently visible is 21 m, and a portion of that was exposed all the way to its foundation. This probe revealed that the stone structure itself was comprised of large and medium-sized, roughly-cut, local fieldstones to a height of 10 courses, or 2.4 m (fig. 2). In addition, there was most likely an original mud-brick superstructure on top of the stones as implied by the thick decomposed mud-brick accumulation just outside the wall.

The magnitude of this wall is even more impressive when we consider the size of the EB II/III city, which spans the entire upper tell and is estimated to be approximately 24 ha (Greenfield et al. 2015). While there is some evidence for earlier EB I habitation, Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath became a true city during EB II/III—one of the largest in the region—and that city, from its inception, was enclosed by a massive fortification wall. In some ways, it seems obvious why a settlement should be walled—delineation of space, protection, and so forth—yet, the question remains why the inhabitants of what was one of the early Canaanite cities felt compelled to create such an impressive wall that surely went beyond the basic needs for boundary and defense.

The origin of walled settlements in the southern Levant long preceded the Early Bronze Age. Neolithic Jericho is the first known walled village, with a mud-brick wall constructed to protect people, houses, and stored goods from flash flood waters that periodically threatened the site. In the subsequent Chalcolithic era, the remote, hill-top temple site of Ein Gedi was surrounded by a low-lying wall that served to symbolically demarcate the sacred space. Within the walls was the world of the sacred, and outside the walls that of the profane.

With the rise of fortified cities in the Early Bronze Age, the needs for defense are assumed to have increased. Not only did nomads see the growing urban areas with their great storehouses as even more attractive targets, but cities now had to protect themselves from other cities! Relentless demand for expansion coupled with the ability to raise large armies made other cities greater potential threats than the unsettled populations could ever pose.

While all this is logical, there is little actual evidence at Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath for warfare during the EB II/III. The walls do not appear to have suffered any physical damage and the stone fortifications were still in place thousands of years later during the Late Bronze Age. Where stones are indeed missing, it is most likely due to robbing out in recent centuries. With the exception of several (ceremonial?) maceheads, there are thus far no identifiable weapons of war: no helmets, no shields, no ballista, and no spears. Indeed, evidence for games (see Albaz et al. 2017; Albaz and Greenfield, this issue) is more common than that for violent confrontation. One could argue, of course, that the absence of armaments attests precisely to the efficacy of the fortification walls. Yet, if armies were such formidable forces during EB II/III, we would expect Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath to have participated in the arms race of its day.

The lack of evidence for large-scale military threats and the equipment to counter them forces us to reconsider the meaning behind these monumental walls. Rather than interpreting them as a state's solution to a problem (e.g., external military threats), what if they were rather a manifestation of the state formation process itself?

Archaeologists have long been interested in the rise of state-level society. The first step was to define it, as V. G. Childe (1950) does in his seminal article on the "Urban Revolution." In it, he posits a list of ten traits, which could be verified archaeologically. These include the presence of cities, labor specialization (beyond age and sex), agricultural surplus, monumental architecture, a ruling elite, science, writing, standardized artwork, long-distance trade, and solidarity based on residence rather than kinship. Childe does not rank these ten traits in order of importance nor does he mandate that each one be present in order for a society to have achieved a state-level as a preponderance of evidence would suffice. Finally, he seems to characterize the rise of the



Figure 1. The city wall in Area P, Tell eṣ-Şâfi/Gath; note the offset on upper right; facing west. Photo by R. Wiskin.

state as the inevitable result of increasing stages of social and political complexity from hunters and gatherers to simple farmers to chiefdom-level societies to states.

Throughout the years, modifications were made to Childe's list of attributes (for a recent example see Smith 2016), yet it is more common now to speak of state formation as a process, viewing the rise of cities as part of a dynamic negotiation between social constructs and physical reality (see Philip 2003; Wilkinson et al. 2014; Spier 2016). Nevertheless, the basic premise of inevitability went unchallenged until recently when M. Liverani (2006) undertook a review of cuneiform tablets from Uruk in southern Mesopotamia that shed light on the emergence of statehood in "real time" (3200-3000 B.C.E.). In so doing, he concluded that the process of state formation was not inevitable, but rather there was something qualitatively different about the state from that of the chiefdom-level society that preceded it. The cornerstone to this transformation was the establishment of an agricultural surplus that was both substantial and notably used "not for consumption within the family, but for the construction of infrastructures and for the support of specialists and administrators, the very authors of the revolution itself" (Liverani 2006: 6). In other words, states are distinguished from complex chiefdoms not just by the size of their surplus, but by how the surplus is employed. In the former, much of the surplus is converted into

conspicuous consumption for the ruling elite. In the latter, conspicuous consumption is communal. An entirely new administrative class is supported, which in turn is responsible for investment in the state's infrastructure.

The dramatic increase in agricultural production is due to technological innovation. At Uruk, this meant improvements to irrigation, re-organization of land allotments and field dimensions, improved plows and sledges, the use of animal traction, and mass-produced tools for harvesting. All told, Liverani (2006: 19) estimates that the yield may have multiplied five to ten times. Similar increases were observed in animal husbandry as people concentrated their efforts on secondary products such as wool or milk instead of simply consuming the animals as meat.

These technological innovations spread to the southern Levant as well by the Early Bronze Age. While rainfall mitigated the need for extensive irrigation canals, yield was improved by the usage of oxen to assist in plowing, seeding, and threshing of cereals. Moreover, oil and wine production became integral to the economy for the first time. Unlike annual crops such as wheat and barley, horticulture requires long-term investment prior to realizing economic dividends. It can be years, even decades, before the orchards or vineyards reach their maximum potential. As in Mesopotamia, the southern Levant benefitted from changes in animal husbandry. Beyond the city limits, pastoralists



Figure 2. Section of the city wall that was fully exposed as a result of a deep probe. Photo by R. Wiskin.

raised large flocks of sheep and goats for their secondary products. Again, this was a huge economic boon. Over the course of a lifetime, a sheep or goat yields exponentially more wool or milk, respectively, than it does meat.

This surplus did not just happen on its own. It was the result of the coordinated efforts of a new managerial class, which rose to oversee the increased agricultural production and then supervise the redistribution of this surplus to both itself and to communal infrastructure projects such as temples, palaces, and city walls. The vast majority of people, who remained farmers and herders, did not personally share in the bounty of their increased production as this was taken by the state in the form of taxation. Moreover, the general population was obligated to pay a labor tax in which they worked seasonally for many weeks either on government-run building projects or in the newly created government run agro-pastoral ventures (e.g., royal farms), which were especially lucrative for the government as the costs of running them were relatively low (that's the advantage of free labor!). Liverani (2006: 34) estimates that the net profits in this sector were about 67 percent.

While this overall system does seem rather exploitative and most likely required a certain amount of reeducation and resocialization of the populace at large (see Paz and Greenberg 2016: 197–98), for the inner core of administrators, comprising no more than ten per cent of the population (Spier 2016: 133), the benefits were obvious. They ran the state bureaucracy from their perch as newly minted urban residents, living in close proximity to other administrators, separated from the peasant majority. Fed from state coffers, their “labor” was to collect the taxes, redistribute it, and supervise large-scale projects. One such project, of course, was the construction of the city walls. With a stated purpose of defense and outlining of urban limits, the walls came to

symbolize administrative and organizational prowess, technical knowledge, and, most significantly, the power to control labor. Just as a pyramid in Egypt was more than a burial and a ziggurat in Mesopotamia was more than a sacred space, the fortification wall at Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath was more than a defensive structure. In all these cases, grandiose monumental structures announced to people near and far that the administrative class had arrived, controlled vast resources, and was here to stay. This wall was their *raison d'être* (see Albaz, Greenfield, and Maeir, this issue).

The fortification walls of Tell eš-Šâfi/Gath leave no mistake that the “urban revolution” was at its core an administrative revolution.

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