

In Search of Libnah

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Introduction

Too often the search to identify places in the Hebrew Bible assumes a limited sense of spatiality. Certainly, the landscape of the biblical narrative is filled with obscure and little known towns and farmsteads. But the complexity of this landscape is not always accounted for in the search for biblical places. Even in the triangulation of toponyms, scholars take for granted the associated nature of settlements without fully acknowledging what this means. The site-focused nature of excavation work is partly to blame.¹ But the perspectives of cultural contact and geo-political boundaries are often too narrow. Recently, a series of studies has been published that look at the southwestern Levant, taking into consideration the socio-historical complexity of the area.

Noteworthy among these studies is Ron Tappy's description of Tel Zayit as a borderland settlement.² Tappy's study offers an expert regional

¹ Obviously, site identification is not the sole, or even the primary purpose of archaeological expeditions. The research paradigms involved with modern excavations are both sophisticated and complex, yet the problem of site identification is inherent to the fundamental question: "what is a site?" For a basic definition of the archaeological term "tell" and an overview of tell-focused research that prefaces the history of field work in the southern Levant, see Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 9–27.

² Ron Tappy, "Tel Zayit and the Tel Zayit Abecedary in Their Regional Context," in Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter, *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1–40; see also Ron Tappy, "The

analysis by focusing on one site (Zayit), and in the course of his analysis he tentatively suggests that the site might be the location of biblical Libnah. The purpose of our essay is both to complement and challenge Tappy's study by looking at the nature of a complex landscape through the single site of Libnah. The approach is intended to raise certain questions regarding the concept of borders and borderlands, to the extent that they can be raised in regard to the few brief biblical references to Libnah.

To begin, what does the biblical text tell us about Libnah that would relate the site to borders or borderlands? How does such a reading inform the way we examine material remains of Shephelah sites in our attempts to locate Libnah? Can such theories offer a productive means of synthesizing text and artifact in the study of the southern Levant? The present study explores these questions in three ways, beginning with an analysis of all the biblical references to Libnah. The article will then survey the major archaeological sites that have been suggested as the location of Libnah. The survey will conclude with the recent discoveries at Tel Burna, and argue that this archaeological site is the best candidate for the location of Libnah.

Libnah in the Hebrew Bible

The proper noun Libnah appears in two forms in the Hebrew Bible, as an absolute לִבְנָה,³ and as a gentilic לִבְנֵי.⁴ The root (לִבְנֵי)⁵ is typically understood

Tabula Peutingeriana. Its Roadmap to Borderland Settlements in *Iudaea-Palestina*: With Special Reference to Tel Zayit in the Late Roman Period," *NEA* 75/1 (2012): 36–54.

³ The toponym has the form of a feminine noun, which is consistent with the feminine personification of cities in biblical literature. For instance, Libnah governs a feminine verb in 2 Kgs. 8:22 (אָז תִּפְשַׁע לִבְנָה). Note also the feminine possessive suffix in Josh. 21:13 and 1 Chr. 6:42, where Libnah is the referent; cf. Josh 10:30.

⁴ The adjectival noun is a *nisbe* that is typically translated "Libnites." For similar formations of gentilics, note אֲדָרְתֵי (1 Chr 12:5) for אֲדָרָה, and צָרְעָתֵי (1 Chr 2:53) for צָרְעָה. The *yod* ending is not unusual according to the study of Classical Hebrew color-terminology by Roland Gradwohl, *Die Farben Im Alten Testament: Eine Terminologische Studie* (Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1963), 47.

⁵ See, e.g., Brian P. Irwin, "Libnah," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 808. This explanation is found as early as Origen; see R. P. C. Hanson, "Interpretations of Hebrew Names in Origen," *Vigiliae Christianae* 10 (1956): 116. Gradwohl (*Die Farben*, 47) left open the question of whether the "whiteness"

as “white,” which suggests a toponymic meaning such as “white place.” Another possibility is that it is from the same root as לְבִנָּה (“sun-baked brick,” see Gen 11:3), which would suggest a toponym meaning “paved foundation” (or “compaction”). The second root meaning is found in Exod 24:10, as a common noun in the construct form לְבִנַת הַסַּפִּיר (“pavement of sapphire”).⁶ The Greek versions generally render the place name as Λεβνα, although the different manuscripts display variation in their transliterations,⁷ for instance Λοβενα and the spelling Λεμνα (and related forms).⁸

Literarily, the biblical references to Libnah can be broken down into three categories: genealogies (mainly P material, but including other sources), town lists (including the king list of Joshua 12), and incidental references in the books of Joshua and Kings (with parallels in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Chronicles). The sources are consistent in their placement of

refers to either the stone material (presumably used in construction) or the local soil. The former suggestion would relate specifically to the chalky white, Eocene limestone that are found in the lowland hills of Judah (the Shephelah); see Amotz Cohen, “Place Names Whose Origin Is in the Color of the Surroundings,” *Beth Mikra* 54 (1973), 420. For the relationship between toponyms and their physical environment, see Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, ed. and trans. Anson F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 108–9.

⁶ E. W. G. Masterman (“Libnah,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed James Orr [Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915], 1881) cites Exod 24:10 in support of his theory that Libnah’s name was derived from the root meaning “brick.” The paved space (or compaction) reflected in the place name might have been a sacred area, similar to the toponymic element תְּמִנָּה, which probably means “[sacred] enclosure.” See Akkadian *temmēnu(m)*, which is possibly from Sumerian TEMEN (cf. also τέμενος).

⁷ See conveniently the chart of different Greek spellings in A. T. Chapman, “Libnah,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible Dealing with its Language*, ed. James Hastings (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 111.

⁸ Codex Vaticanus reads Λεμνα in Josh 15:42, but Λοβενα in 4 Reigns (2 Kgs 23:31); *Old Testament in Greek*, vol. 1 of *The Octateuch (to be completed in 4 parts). Part 4. Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, ed. Alan E. Brooke, Norman McLean, and Henry St. John Thackeray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 95, and *Old Testament in Greek*, vol. 2 of *The Later Historical Books. Part 2: 1 and 2 Kings*, ed. idem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 383. See also Λομνα in Codex Alexandrinus (2 Kgs 8:22). The Cambridge edition is of course a diplomatic text based on Vaticanus, but the apparatus for each respective citation reveals variant spellings found in the different manuscripts. The place name appears in the MT as לְבִנָּה, with post-vocalic spirantization. The variant orthography found in the Greek transliterations of the toponym indicates that the second radical was plosive, rather than a voiced labial-dental fricative. Phonemically, the Greek -μ- suggests a partial assimilation of the Hebrew -ב-, thus indicating a voiced bilabial plosive (the so-called hard *b*), which was merged into a bilabial nasal -ב- due to the partial assimilation of the weaker consonant. A fricative consonant would not produce this phonological effect.

Libnah in the southwestern Levant, specifically in the Shephelah of Judah. Furthermore, Libnah is found in three separate lists in Joshua (12:15; 15:42; 21:13), and each list assigns the town a cultural identity that is Canaanite, Judahite, or Levite. Of these sources, the Judahite list in Joshua 15 is the most topographically specific, while the Levitical list in Joshua 21 reflects an elaborate and somewhat messy process of relating Libnah and other cities to different lineages (Gershon/Gershom and Kohath).⁹ Thus, Libnah can be seen as a locus of complex biblical traditions and possibly even competing cultural claims.

Levitical Libnah

The genealogical material, which associates Libnah with the Levites, belongs in the main to the P source and Chronicles. The material, however, is complicated and reflects two traditions that can be termed A and B, for sake of convenience.¹⁰ The Chronicler describes the Libnites in a genealogy derived from the A material that is partly revised (Gershom instead of Gershon), and more extensive.¹¹ The B material appears to be independent of the A material, and may represent an older tradition. Although these literary sources cannot provide a more precise location for Libnah, they can offer potential insight into the city's cultural history.

⁹The Levitical material, in particular the city-list of Joshua 21, is often seen as an artificial mapping of an idealized Israel. The classic representation of this hypothesis is found in Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957). This interpretation is based on the assumption that the P source is post-exilic, which then serves as the basis for the study of related genealogical material. See, e.g., Leroy Waterman, "Some Repercussions from Late Levitical Genealogical Accretions in P and the Chronicler," *AJS* 58 (1941): 49-56.

¹⁰For a similar breakdown, see Waterman, "Genealogies in P and the Chronicler," 50-53.

¹¹Space does not allow a full discussion of the questions regarding Gershon, a son of Levi, and the similar form Gershom, a son of Moses. The Chronicler, however, equates Gershom with the three-fold division of Levi's sons (i.e., Gershom, Kohath, and Merari [1 Chr 6:16]), and the two sons of Gershon/m: Libni and Shimei (v 17). The Chronicler then traces a six-generation genealogy from Libni, as the first son of Gershom (vv 20-21). The significance of this genealogical scheme, which appears to be related to the A material of the priestly source, is that in personifying the Libnites as a son, it affirms Libni's position as eldest son of Levi and derives a genealogical line from it that probably included names of smaller clans and families. The Chronicler's reference to Libnah (as Libni) also brings it in line with Gershom, if this name is indeed a tradition separate from Gershom.

In the A material, the relationship between Libnah and the Levites appears first in Exod 6:16–17, where the Tribe of Levi is divided into three “sons...Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, by their generations,” corresponding to the three sons that accompanied Levi when he entered Egypt in Gen 46:11. The next verse lists Libni along with Shimei as the sons of Gershon “by their clans” (Exod 6:17). The three-part division of Levi is followed in Numbers (3:17–18), where the “names” of Levi’s sons (again Gershon, Kohath, and Merari) introduce a brief genealogical scheme: “the names of the sons of Gershon by their clans: Libni and Shimei.” The genealogy in Exod 6:17 and Num 3:18, where the gentilic form is personified as a son, is followed in Num 3:21–39 with a census that lists clans and their placement encircling the Tabernacle, prefaced by v 20b: “these are they, the clans of the Levites by their fathers’ house.” The reference in Num 3:21 to “the clan of the Libnites” again places Libnah within the lineage of Gershon (“belonging to Gershon...these were the clans of the Gershonites”). As in Num 3:18, Libnah is listed alongside Shimei, but in 3:21 they appear in the determinative state as collective entities (i.e., the construct *משפחת הלִבְנִי*; “the clan of the Libnites”). This is distinct from their singular (undetermined) representation in the previous genealogical lists.¹²

In the B material, Libnah is not listed as a son of Gershon (Num 26:58). Instead it is associated with the clans of the Hebronites, Mahlites, Mushites, and Korahites. The verse Num 26:58 follows a reference to the Gershonites (as a clan of Levi) in v 57, yet Libnah (i.e., the Libnites) appears as a kinship group independent of Gershon and Shimei. Thus, there is no descending order to the genealogical material in B, and the Libnites appear as a group

¹² Jacob Milgrom (*Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991], 19) saw Num 3:18–20 as influenced by Exod 6:16–19, and he suggested that the second list (vv 21–39) was necessitated by a desire to correspond to the list of priests in Num 3:2–3. Martin Noth (*Numbers: A Commentary*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968], 34–35) referred to them as “(derived) collectives” and wondered whether they (the clans) were simply listed together with the clan of the Gershonites (v 21bβ), etc. In other words, the Libnites were originally a separate clan alongside the Gershonites until they were later reorganized into a branch of Gershon/m.

alongside the Gershonites. As in Num 3:21, the genealogical material in Num 26:58 represents a stage that is probably earlier than the A material in Num 3:18,¹³ which is from the P source. The *nisbe* form of the name appears here in the determinative construct-state (משפחת הלִבְנִי, “the clan of the Libnites”) representing a collective entity, rather than a singular persona. Unlike Num 3:21, the genealogical material in Num 26:58 seems to represent a separate tradition that associates Libnah (the Libnites) with gentilics that emanate from southern Judah (the Hebronites and Korahites).¹⁴

The affiliation of Libnah with the Tribe of Levi is also stated in Josh 21:13, where the town (along with Hebron) is allotted to the Levites out of the inheritance of Judah.¹⁵ This tradition is also found in 1 Chr 6:57 (6:42 in MT), which is related to Joshua 21, although the exact nature of the relationship between the two is uncertain (including the question of which text takes priority). It seems, however, that the list of thirteen towns given to Aaron is the earliest core of the passage (Josh 21:13–19), and this list

¹³ Noth, *Numbers*, 209; John Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 192.

¹⁴ Hebron is listed as a clan of Kohath in Num 3:19. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (1 Chr 2:42–50), Hebron and Korah are listed together in a genealogy of place names as descendants of Caleb (with Korah as the son of Hebron). In addition, a seventh century Hebrew ostracoon from Arad (no. 49) lists the “sons of Korah.” The inscription associates the Levitical clan with Judah’s southern periphery during the late monarchy, in relative proximity to Hebron (in the highlands) and Libnah (in the Shephelah).

¹⁵ In light of the suggestion first made by Benjamin Mazar (“The Cities of the Priests and Levites,” in *Congress Volume, Oxford*, ed. G. W. Anderson, VTSup 7 [Leiden: Brill, 1960], 193–205), it is possible that the Levitical cities served as border posts, guarding peripheral areas of Israelite control. This observation is insightful, though it should not be overstated, as the border between Judah and Philistia did not remain static in the Iron II period. The issue of borders in ancient times is widely treated. While in modern times, boundaries indicate the territory of a state, this is not necessarily true of past cultures where borders were more indicative of the control of people rather than places; Ewan W. Anderson, “Geopolitics: International Boundaries as Fighting Places,” in *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 125–36; Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 125–28; Lars Rodseth and Bradley J. Parker, “Introduction: Theoretical Consideration in the Study of Frontiers,” in *Untaming the Frontier in Anthropology, Archaeology and History*, ed. Rodseth and Parker (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 3–21; Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman, “The Archaeology of Border Communities – Renewed Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh, Part 1: The Iron Age,” *NEA* 72/3 (2009): 119.

includes Libnah in the second position following Hebron.¹⁶ The reference to Libnah differs from the genealogical material found in P in that the town is associated with Kohath (not Gershon) and explicitly related to Aaron (Josh 21:4, 9–19). More specifically, the Levitical town lists of Joshua 21 and 1 Chronicles 6 differ in that the connection between the settlements and the Tribe of Levi is not explained through the idea of inheritance. Rather, the town list builds upon a narrative framework (Josh 21:1–4) marked by the verb “give” (√נתן; *Qal* 3 m. pl.).¹⁷

¹⁶ The list of thirteen towns given to Aaron from the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin correspond to the boundaries of the Kingdom of Judah. Josh 21 builds the Levitical town-list around the original core of vv 13–19 in an attempt to construct a larger register that encompasses all of Israel. This is accomplished through a system of 48 towns, four in each tribe that incorporates not only the thirteen Aaronite towns (including Libnah), but also the centers of refuge referenced earlier in Joshua 20. The construction follows the three-part genealogical pattern of the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites, established in vv 4–7 and described in vv 20–42. See A. Graeme Auld, “The “Levitical Cities”: Texts and History,” *ZAW* 91 (1979): 194–206. Nadav Na’aman (“A New Look at the List of Levitic Cities,” *Zion* 47 (1982): 237–52 [Hebrew]) suggested that the thirteen Levitical cities were the original core, stemming from the time of Josiah. See also Nadav Na’aman, *Borders and Districts in Biblical Historiography: Seven Studies in Biblical Geographic Lists*, Jerusalem Biblical Studies, 4 (Jerusalem: Simor, 1986). The general breakdown of four cities per tribe has long been read as an indication that the list is an idealized mapping of ancient Israel. Yet, as J. Maxwell Miller has pointed out (“Rehoboam's Cities of Defense and the Levitical City List,” in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of D. Glenn Rose*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Lawrence E. Toombs, and Gary L. Johnson, [Atlanta: J. Knox Press, 1987], 279), the clustering of cities works against the assumption of artificiality, which would work better if the cities represented a more expansive network.

¹⁷ In fact, the reference to the three clans of Levi in vv 4–7 is framed by the statement “the sons of Israel gave to the Levites” (נִתְּנוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְלֵוִיִּם) in vv 3 and 8. This *waw*-consecutive form also begins the land grant tradition of Kiryath-arba/Hebron and the Calebites in v 11 (continuing into v 12 with √נתן in the 3 pl. suffix form). The land grant tradition here (marked by √נתן) is guided by an insertion marked by the prepositional phrase “to the sons of Aaron” (לְבָנֵי אַהֲרֹן) in vv 10 and 13. In v 10 it starts as a verbal clause (נִתְּנוּ), whereas in v 13 the prepositional phrase begins the sentence followed by נָתְנוּ (“they gave”). Thus, the thirteen toponyms of vv 13–19, which includes Libnah, are the towns “that are called by name” in v 9. The literary framework gives priority to the line of Aaron, through Kohath, and localizes the areas given to this lineage within the boundaries of the Kingdom of Judah.

The reference to Calebite claims on Hebron in Josh 21:11–12 is instructive here. In the Levitical town lists, the place name is typically mentioned with the further qualification: “and her pasturelands.” This clause, which is found with reference to Libnah (in Joshua 21 and 1 Chronicles 6), expresses an areal sense of the settlement that is not found in any other source. Within a multicultural setting, the clause “and her [Libnah’s] pastureland” may represent a special claim to agricultural resources by one specific group. The phrase is formulaic throughout the Levitical city lists of Joshua (and the related sources in Chronicles). The Levitical city lists, however, are multicultural by nature in that they record territory given to one tribe (Levi) from another tribe’s patrimony. This observation stands even if the Levitical lists represent an ideal rather than reality.

The complicated material that associates Libnah with the Levites falls into broader categories: the land grant tradition found in Joshua 21 (and 1 Chronicles 6), and the genealogical material (which is also broken into two groups: A and B). The genealogical material indicates a pattern in which a local appellation is transformed into a single ancestor in order to demonstrate cultural ties. The link between these two categories seems to be the B material (Num 26:58), where Hebron and Libnah are paired, as they are in Josh 21:13 (beginning the list of towns). The list in Josh 21:13–19 has been compared to the list of cities fortified by Rehoboam in 2 Chr 11:5–12,¹⁸ where the two seem to complement each other (though both overlap only with Hebron).¹⁹ The nature of the Levites, as a landless tribe that is dispersed among the tribes of Israel, may indicate a real settlement pattern (as opposed to the long assumed ideal image), where a specific priestly tribe strategically occupies peripheral areas.²⁰

Canaanite/Amorite Libnah

In the Book of Joshua, Libnah plays a small role in the conquest narrative, where it is depicted as a Canaanite/Amorite city-state ruled by an anonymous king. This tradition also locates the town in the Shephelah, and Libnah's relative position can be discerned by the associated place names that occur in Joshua 10, many of which are identifiable in the topography of Judah. Libnah is described as part of a conquest account (Josh 10:29–30) that comes after Joshua's pursuit of the five Amorite kings, which took him "as far as Azekah and Makkedah" (Josh 10:10). These two sites are identified with

¹⁸ Miller, "Rehoboam's Cities of Defense," 273–86.

¹⁹ The lists also overlap at Aijalon (here from the Tribe of Dan), which appears in the second batch of cities granted to the other clans of Kohath in Josh 21:24.

²⁰ Jeremy M. Hutton, "The Levitical Diaspora (I): A Sociological Comparison with Morocco's Ahansal," in *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J. David Schloen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 223–34. Although Hutton's comparison involves geologically peripheral areas, rather than cultural boundaries, applied within the specific context of the Transjordan Levitical towns, it is still helpful in understanding Josh 21:13–19 and Libnah's role within this list.

the modern sites of *Tell Zechariyeh* and *Khirbet el-Qom*, respectively.²¹ The information given in Josh 10:10 implies a two-pronged southern thrust through the two main longitudinal routes of the Shephelah: the Chalk Moat, which divides the Shephelah from the central highlands (towards Makkedah / *Kh. el-Qom*), and the lesser fosse that runs along the eastern slope of the ridge that spans Azekah to Tell Judeideh. The biblical account then relates that Joshua launched an attack from Makkedah on Libnah before marching on Lachish (*Tell ed-Duweir*) and Eglon (possibly *Tell 'Aitun*).²² The geographical *realia* contained in the biblical tradition of Joshua's campaigns indicates clearly that Libnah should be sought in the southern half of the Shephelah, within the relative vicinity of Azekah (*Tell Zechariyeh*), Lachish (*Tell ed-Duweir*) and Makkedah (*Khirbet el-Qom*).²³

In Josh 10:30 it is plainly stated that Joshua killed the King of Libnah,²⁴ and this information is found also in a summary list of conquered kings and their cities in 12:15—although the point of this terse, formulaic list is unclear.²⁵ From a literary standpoint, Joshua 10 and 12 are difficult to interpret. The accounts in Josh 10:1–27 and 28–39 may come from different sources; however, they are unified by a geographical logic in which the Israelite conquest sweeps southward across the Shephelah. Furthermore, despite the vague relationship between the literature of Josh 10:29–30 and

²¹ David A. Dorsey, "The Location of Biblical Makkedah," *TA* 7 (1980):185–93; and Ran Zadok, "Philistian Notes I," *UF* 41 (2009): 668.

²² Anson F. Rainey, "The Administrative Division of the Shephelah," *TA* 7 (1980): 194–202; and Hayah Katz and Avraham Faust, "The Assyrian Destruction layer at Tel 'Eton," *IEJ* 62 (2012): 22–53.

²³ In fact, if Eglon is to be identified with *Tell 'Aitun*, located near *Khirbet el-Qom* in the southeastern Shephelah, the account of Josh 10:29–35 may represent some form of military circuit, encompassing the southern Shephelah and focusing on the Nahal Lachish and the southern tip of the Chalk Moat.

²⁴ The conquest account of Libnah described in Josh 10:29–30 implies that the town fell under the ban, although the specific term *בְּרִיחַ* is never used. The pattern of the ban is established with the conquest of Makkedah in 10:28, and the conquest of Libnah continues this pattern by stating that every person was put to the sword (v 30). Yet the term is not made more explicit here. Furthermore, Libnah's conquest account does not contain any reference to the killing of livestock or the destruction of property.

²⁵ James Barr, "Mythical Monarch Unmasked? Mysterious doings of Devir King of Eglon," *JSOT* 48 (1990): 55–68.

12:15, both texts offer a single image of Libnah as a Canaanite/Amorite town that is ruled by a non-Israelite king.

Libnah and the Tribe of Judah

Libnah is referenced in the great city-list of Judah's tribal inheritance, Josh 15:42, which offers more precise details concerning its location. The list probably represents a pre-exilic administrative document, i.e., one that originated in the kingdom of Judah,²⁶ although there is no consensus on its exact date.²⁷ Libnah is placed in the fourth Shephelah district (vv 42–44) alongside Ether and Ashan (v 42) and together with Iphtah, Ashnah, Nezib, Keilah, Achzib and Mareshah (vv 43–44).²⁸ This administrative district most likely straddled the Nahal Guvrin, and a rough itinerary can be detected based on the identifications of Ether (*Khirbet 'Atr*), Nezib (*Khirbet Beit Nešîb*), Keilah (*Khirbet Qila*), Achzib (possibly *Tell el-Beidah*) and Mareshah (*Tell Sandahannah*). This circuit route would have begun in the area of Ether, west of the Azekah-Tel Goded ridge. From this point, the route travelled eastward along the Nahal Guvrin into the Chalk Moat in the area of Nezib and Keilah, before winding west through Achzib and ultimately turning south where it terminated at Mareshah. According to this geographical logic, Libnah should be in close proximity to Ether near the western slopes of the Azekah-Tel Goded ridge.²⁹

²⁶ A. Alt, "Judas Gaue unter Josia," *Palästina-Jahrbuch* 21 (1925): 100–16; idem, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 276–88.

²⁷ There have been several attempts to give a more precise date for Joshua 15 within the historical timeline of the Kingdom of Judah. Alt understood the text to be a document from the reign of Josiah (late seventh century), while others preferred Jehoshaphat (ninth century); see Frank M. Cross, Jr. and G. Ernest Wright, "The Boundary and Province Lists of the Kingdom of Judah," *JBL* 75 (1956): 224–26; Yohanan Aharoni, "The Province-List of Judah," *VT* 9 (1959):39–46; idem, *The Land of the Bible*, 347–52; Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006); Ron E. Tappy, "Historical and Geographical Notes on the 'Lowland Districts' of Judah in Joshua xv 33-47," *VT* 58 (2008): 384–85.

²⁸ Anson F. Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," *BASOR* 251 (1983): 6–9.

²⁹ Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," 11. The district list concludes in Josh 15:44 with the summary statement: "nine cities and their farmsteads." The farmsteads in this case are assigned to the collective total of the district, unlike the "pasturelands" that were specifically attached to Libnah in the Levitical inheritance (Josh 21:13).

The affiliation of Libnah with Judah is curious in light of the brief notice in 2 Kgs 8:22b, which states that Libnah revolted against the Kingdom of Judah during the reign of Jehoram. The revolt of a presumably Judahite settlement against the House of David is a unique event in the historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible, yet it appears in a short redactional note in Kings with no further explanation (cf. however 2 Chr 21:10). The notice in Kings (2 Kgs 8:22b), which is marked by the adverbial particle $\text{׀}\text{׃}$, seems to be motivated by a sense of geographical parity that describes rebellion on the eastern (Edom) and western (Libnah) peripheries of Judah.³⁰ What is left unstated in Kings (particularly the motivation for Libnah's revolt) becomes the subject of theological speculation in 2 Chr 21:10. This verse begins a short literary block that describes the apostasy of Jehoram ending with a description of incursions by the Philistines, Arabian groups, and Cushites (2 Chr 21:16–17).³¹ Thus, the geographical parity of east and west reflected in 2 Kgs 8:22 is used by the Chronicler to frame a condemnation of Jehoram's religious practices (v 11) combined with a related account of prophetic rebuke (vv 12–15). Neither Kings nor Chronicles, however, offers any further information on the revolt, such as its background or its consequences.

A century later, at the end of the eighth century, Libnah appears to be part of the Kingdom of Judah once again. An incidental note found in 2 Kgs 19:8 states that Sennacherib “left Lachish and fought against Libnah” during the Assyrian king's 701 BCE campaign against Hezekiah. The terse account of Sennacherib's military efforts in Judah's lowland hill-country stands in stark

³⁰ Note the *Wiederaufnahme* in vv 20–22a regarding Edom. See Isaac Rabinowitz, “‘Az Followed by Imperfect Verb-Form in Preterite Contexts: A Redactional Device in Biblical Hebrew,” *VT* 34 (1984): 57, where it is argued that $\text{׀}\text{׃}$ combined with the temporal comment at the end of the clause “at that time” indicates concurrent action and not consecutive action between the respective events in Edom and Libnah in 2 Kgs 8:22a–b.

³¹ The implication of 2 Chr 21:16 is that the rebellion of Edom exposed Judah to attack from the east, represented by Arabian tribal groups “that were beside [allied with] the Cushites.” Conversely, Libnah's revolt allowed the Philistines to encroach on the territory of Judah. The point to be made here is not to argue for historical veracity, as the account in 2 Chr 21:10–17 fits the Chronicler's style and theological rhetoric. The importance of the passage is that it reflects a geographical reality that was manipulated by the post-exilic writer.

contrast with the graphic depiction of the Assyrian siege of Lachish seen in the Layard Reliefs and the evidence of widespread destruction attributed to Sennacherib's third campaign that has been unearthed at Lachish and elsewhere in the Shephelah. The mention of pharaoh Tirhakah following the reference to Libnah (2 Kgs 19:9) may indicate that Sennacherib laid siege to Libnah in anticipation of an Egyptian attack from the coastal plain. The Assyrian army's northwards march from Lachish to Libnah is in line with their battle against Tirhakah in the plain of Eltekeh, described in Sennacherib's royal inscriptions.³² Yet the fate of Libnah, like that of Lachish, is not described in the biblical text.

In the last quarter of the seventh century, Libnah again appears in affiliation with the kingdom of Judah as the hometown of a certain Jeremiah, the father of Hamutal who was Josiah's second wife.³³ Hamutal was also the mother of two kings of Judah: Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 23:31) and the last king of Judah, Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:18 = Jer 52:1). Josiah's mother Jedidah was from the town of Bozkath (2 Kgs 22:1), which is unidentified but elsewhere located in the Lachish district of the Shephelah (Josh 15:39). This fact, along with Josiah's marriage to Hamutal, indicates a strong connection between the reformer king and the rural lowland hills of his kingdom. The mention of two locations in the Shephelah, Bozkath and Libnah, within a seventh century context is significant considering that over a generation earlier the area suffered heavy loss during the Assyrian crisis of 701 BCE.

The Site Identification of Libnah

Libnah's appearance in a variety of biblical texts offers some indication of its location, yet the precise identification of the biblical city remains an unresolved issue. Libnah is not mentioned in any known extrabiblical

³² See the translation in Mordechai Cogan, "Sennacherib's Siege of Jerusalem," *COS* 2.119B.

³³ 2 Kgs 23:31; 24:18; and Jer 52:1; see also the LXX (2 Supplements 36:2a [cf. 2 Chr 36:2]) adds the information regarding Jehoahaz's mother Hamutal, which also includes her father's name and place of origin (written Λοβεννα). The gentilic form לְבִנְיָ is not used, however. Jeremiah is instead identified as "from Libnah" (מִלְבְּנָה), which may indicate that he was from the village but not from the Levitical tribe.

sources, but the town name does occur in later sources. During the Byzantine Period, Eusebius identified Libnah (Λεβνα) with a town called Lobana (Λοβανα) located near Eleutheropolis (Beit Guvrin).³⁴ Ran Zadok has drawn attention to the listing of a village named *Lubnah* by the early 13th century geographer Yāqūt al-Hamawī,³⁵ as well as the description of a village called *Libnā* in the area during the Mamluk Period.³⁶ Zadok has also suggested that a village listed as *Linā* in the Ottoman census of AH 1005 (1596–1597 CE), is actually *Libnā* due to its proximity to *Tall Ṣāfiya* (Tel Zafit).³⁷ Like the biblical sources, these later sources place Libnah in the lowland hills and it is in this area (the Shephelah) that scholars have searched in their efforts to locate the ancient city.

A previous generation pushed the location of Libnah to the far western periphery of Judah. For example, C. W. M. van de Velde identified *‘Iraq al-Manshiyya* (Tel Erani) with Libnah due to the size of the mound and its proximity to *Umm-Lakhis*, a site near *Tell el-Ḥesi* that he mistakenly thought was Lachish.³⁸ This identification was followed by C. R. Conder and

³⁴ Zadok, “Philistian Notes I,” 666 and Chris McKinny and Aharon Tavger, “From Lebonah to Libnah: Historical Geographical Details from the PEF and Other Early Secondary Sources on the Toponymy of Two Homonymous Sites,” in *Exploring the Holy Land: 150 Years of the Palestine Exploration Fund*, ed. David Gurevich and Anat Kidron (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018), 113. Zadok notes that Jerome translates the village name as *Λοβνα*.

³⁵ Zadok, “Philistian Notes I,” 666–67, citing the translation of Yāqūt in Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Jacut’s Geographisches Wörterbuch* [Yāqūt ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Kitāb Mu‘jam al-Bulān*] (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1866–1873) 4.347. See also McKinny and Tavger, “From Lebonah to Libnah,” 113.

³⁶ Zadok, “Philistian Notes I,” 667. For the latter, Zadok references Ibn Taghribirdi and cites Huda Lutfi, *Al Quds al-Mamlūkiyya: A History of Mamlūk Jerusalem Based on the Ḥaram Documents*, Islamkunliche Untersuchungen 113 (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1985), 120. Lutfi, however, spells the toponym *Lubnā*.

³⁷ Zadok, “Philistian Notes I,” 667, citing Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the late 16th Century*, Erlanger Geographische Arbeiten 5 (Erlangen: Fränkische Geographische Gesellschaft, 1977), 150.

³⁸ C. W. M. van de Velde, *Memoir to Accompany the Map of the Holy Land* (Gotha: Justus Perther, 1858), 330. This identification was followed by Henry Baker Tristram, *The Topography of the Holy Land: A Succinct Account of All the Places, Rivers, and Mountains of the Land of Israel, Mentioned in the Bible, so far as They Have Been Identified, Together with Their Modern Names and Historical References* (London: SPCK, 1871), 4, although he does not cite van de Velde. On the confusion of the name (*‘Iraq*) *‘Iraq al-Manshiyye* with *Tell el-Areini* (Tel Erani in modern Hebrew), see Michael D. Press, “The Arabic Names of Tēl ‘Ērānī and ‘Irāq el-Menšīye,” *ZDPV* 130/2 (2014), 181–93.

H. H. Kitchener, who were impressed by the size of the mound and its steep slopes.³⁹ Although Tel Erani was inhabited during the Iron Age,⁴⁰ its shape and size is comparable with other sites and does not make it uniquely suited for any one particular ancient town.⁴¹ Moreover, the towns listed by these scholars in Josh 15:37–44 are now sought further east in the area that is today defined as the Shephelah.⁴² Conder and Kitchener sought further support for the identification of Erani with Libnah in the “white cliffs” of the mound’s local geography. This would explain the root of the name Libnah. But the appearance of white, chalky formations at Tel Erani are typical of the local geology and are found at sites such as Tel Burna and Tel Zafit. In fact, Albright had once suggested that Zafit (*Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi*) was Libnah for similar reasons,⁴³ although he later abandoned this identification.⁴⁴ Today, *Tell eṣ-*

³⁹ C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, vol. 3: Judaea (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1883), 261–62, and see 259. They do not cite van de Velde. Conder and Kitchener may have been influenced by Charles Warren’s on-site observation (dated June 20, 1867) that the mound “appears to be of Assyrian origin,” though Warren does not equate *al-Manshiyye* with Libnah (Charles W. Warren and C. R. Conder, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Jerusalem* [London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1884], 262). Warren’s report is dated Jun 20, 1867, and was first published in “The Plain of Philistia,” *PEFQS* 3 (1871): 95. See Press, “The Arabic Names of Têl ‘Ērânî and ‘Irâq el-Menšîye,” 183.

⁴⁰ Baruch Brandl, “Erani, Tel,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.256–58.

⁴¹ For the identification of Tel Erani, and the suggestion that it is Beth-leaphrah (Mic 1:10), see Matthew J. Suriano, “A Place in the Dust: Text, Topography and a Toponymic Note on Micah 1:10–12a.” *VT* 60 (2010):433–46.

⁴² The nineteenth century scholars assumed that Lachish was further west, at *Umm-Lakhis / Tell el-Ḥesi*. Today Lachish is identified with *Tell ed-Duwêr*. There have been recent attempts, however, to identify the Shephelah districts of Josh 15:37–44 with archaeological sites that are situated further west; see James W. Hardin, Christopher A. Rollston, and Jeffrey A. Blakely, “Biblical Geography in Southwestern Judah,” *NEA* 75 (2012): 20–35. Indeed, this is one of the factors that led Tappy (“Historical and Geographical Notes”) to suggest that Tel Zayit was Libnah. The boundary list of Joshua 15, however, does not need to serve as a guide for the sites situated around *Tell el-Ḥesi*. In fact, it may only reflect the realities of Judah during the seventh century BCE; see Alt, “Judas Gae unter Josia,” 100–16.

⁴³ W. F. Albright, “Libnah and Gath,” *BASOR* 4 (1921):6; followed by F. M. Abel, *Géographie de La Palestine*, vol. 2. Géographie politique. Les villes. (Paris: Gabalda, 1933), 369; and also G. Ernest Wright, “A Problem of Ancient Topography: Lachish and Eglon,” *BA* 64 (1971): 81.

⁴⁴ W. F. Albright, “The Fall Trip of the School in Jerusalem: From Jerusalem to Gaza and Back,” *BASOR* 17 (1925): 8. For a description of Albright’s visit to Burna and his Libnah identification, see Chris McKinny and Amit Dagan, “The Explorations of Tel Burna,” *PEQ* 145 (2013): 299–300.

Ṣāfi is generally accepted as the location of Gath of the Philistines.⁴⁵ The attempts to identify Tel Erani and Tel Zafit with Libnah stand as examples of the pitfalls of toponymics. Certainly toponymics can serve as a useful tool, but site identification should not be overly dependent upon one factor, nor should it privilege historical assumptions that lack geographical and archaeological support.⁴⁶ A review of the four main candidates for Libnah (fig. 1), Tel Goded (*Tell ej-Judeideh*), Horvat Lavnin (*Kh. Tell el-Beidā*), Tel Zayit (*Tell Zeitah*), Tel Burna (*Tell Bornat*), will show the importance of considering multiple factors in the search for the biblical site.

Tel Goded

Tel Goded / *Tell ej-Judeideh* was excavated as part of the Shephelah expedition of F. Bliss and R. A. S. Macalister at the end of the nineteenth century,⁴⁷ and the materials from this excavation were re-examined by Shimon Gibson almost a century later.⁴⁸ The results of the excavation indicate that the site was settled in the Early Bronze through the Iron Age.

⁴⁵ The identification of *Tell eṣ-Ṣāfi* with Libnah is no longer followed, as the current consensus regards the site as the location of Gath of the Philistines; see Anson F. Rainey, "The Identification of Philistine Gath—A Problem in Source Analysis for Historical Geography," in *Eretz-Israel 12: Nelson Glueck Volume* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1975), 63–76; William M. Schniedewind, "The Geopolitical History of Philistine Gath," *BASOR* 309 (1998): 69–77. The identification of Gath with Tel Zafit has found strong support in the ongoing excavations at that site; see Aren Maeir, ed., *Tell es-Safi/Gath I: The 1996–2005 Seasons*, AAT 69 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012).

⁴⁶ Brief mention should be made of G. W. Ahlström's attempt to identify the remains of *Tell ed-Duweir* (Tel Lachish) with Libnah ("Tell ed-Duweir – Lachish or Libnah?," *PEQ* 115 [1983]: 103–4). Ahlström's proposal never found any acceptance; see Graham I. Davies, "Tell ed-Duweir = Ancient Lachish; A Response to G. W. Ahlström," *PEQ* 114 (1982): 25–28; idem, "Tell ed-Duweir: Not Libnah but Lachish," *PEQ* 117 (1985): 92–96. Ahlström's theories were motivated more out of a reluctance to accept the circumstantial evidence for locating Lachish at *Tell ed-Duweir*, a site-identification that today is considered secure based on the excavated remains (see his "Is Tell ed-Duweir Ancient Lachish?" *PEQ* 112 [1980]: 7–9). Furthermore, Ahlström misunderstood the size and scope of Tel Burna, which was unexcavated at the time. Finally, Ahlström's work is marked by an imprecise methodology that does not take into consideration the relative association of place names within the sources on which he draws.

⁴⁷ Frederick Jones Bliss and R. A. Stewart Macalister, *Excavations in Palestine during the Years 1898–1900* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1902).

⁴⁸ Shimon Gibson, "The Tell ej-Judeideh (Tel Goded) Excavations: A Re-Appraisal Based on Archival Records in the Palestine Exploration Fund," *TA* 2 (1994):194–234.

Although Tel Goded is generally considered to be Moresheth-gath,⁴⁹ Zecharia Kallai (Kleinmann) proposed identifying its remains with Libnah.⁵⁰ Based on the biblical narrative, Kallai argued that Libnah should be in close proximity to Makkedah (which he identified at Tel Erani, rather than Kh. el-Qôm). The description of both sites in Joshua, however, suggests otherwise. In fact, Makkedah and Libnah were located in separate districts in Joshua 15. In the itinerary of Joshua 10 the cities represent the eastern and western peripheries of the Shephelah.⁵¹ Archaeologically, Tel Goded was unfortified during the Iron Age IIA–B, and apparently unoccupied during the seventh century BCE.⁵² Therefore, based on its archaeological remains, Tel Goded is an unlikely candidate for the besieged city in 2 Kgs 19:8, nor should it be considered for the hometown of Hamutal’s family.⁵³

Horvat Lavnin

Horvat Lavnin is a large dome-shaped tell that guards the *Wâdy ed-Dûrseh*. This proposed location for Libnah was based primarily on toponymic considerations.⁵⁴ The site’s Arabic name *Kh. Tell el-Beidâ* means “ruins of the

⁴⁹ Karl Elliger, “Die Heimat des Propheten Micha,” *ZDPV* 57 (1934): 83–152. The identification of Tel Goded with Moresheth-gath is based on its general location and archaeological profile as well as on the schematic evidence offered in the much-later Madeba Map. For alternate suggestions regarding Moresheth-gath, see Yigal Levin, “The Search for Moresheth-Gath: A New Proposal,” *PEQ* 134 (2002): 28–36, who suggests Tel Harisim. For the identification of Moresheth-gath with Tel Zayit, see Nadav Na’aman, “The Shephelah According to the Amarna Letters,” in *The Fire Signals of Lachish: Studies in the Archaeology and History of Israel in the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Persian Period in Honor of David Ussishkin*, ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na’aman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 285 n.10.

⁵⁰ Z. Kallai-Kleinmann, “The Shephelah of Judah,” *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 19 (1955): 226–29 (Hebrew); Z. Kallai, *The Tribes of Israel* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1967), 319–25 (Hebrew). According to Zadok (“Philistian Notes I,” 667), Benjamin Mazar was the first to suggest this identification.

⁵¹ Rainey, “The Administrative Division of the Shephelah,” 194–202; David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁵² See in particular the discussion on the pottery and chronology in Gibson, “The Tell Ej-Judeideh (Tel Goded) Excavations,” 218–30.

⁵³ As Zadok (“Philistian Notes I,” 667–68) has noted, the contemporaneous mention of *Linā* and *Jadīda* in the Ottoman census of AH 1005 makes this identification difficult if the former village is to be identified as Libnah and the latter as *Tell ej-Judeideh* / Tel Goded.

⁵⁴ Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 134, 243, cf. 225; see also Irwin, “Libnah,” 808; and Yehuda Dagan, “Cities of the Judean Shephelah and their Division into Districts based on Joshua 15,” in *Eretz-Israel 25: Joseph*

white mound,” possibly reflecting a Hebrew place name based on based on $\sqrt{\text{לבן}}$ I (“white”).⁵⁵ Although it has never been excavated, surveys of Lavnin have noted the presence of Iron Age material,⁵⁶ including a seventh-century rosette-stamped jar handle.⁵⁷ Geographically, Lavnin’s situation south of the Valley of Elah is appropriate for the listing of Libnah in the fourth district of Josh 15:42–44. Furthermore, its position northeast of Lachish would indicate that Sennacherib’s siege of Libnah (following the fall of Lachish) was intended as an advance towards the central highlands of Judah and ultimately Jerusalem. Yet Lavnin’s position relative to Mareshah and Ether is problematic;⁵⁸ furthermore, Lavnin’s position in the heart of the Shephelah would require a reconsideration of Libnah as a border town.⁵⁹ Lavnin, in fact, is a better candidate for Achzib. This identification fits within the itinerary of place names found in Josh 15:42–44, and is generally consistent with the schematic (and otherwise highly conceptualized) geography of Mic 1:13–15.

Aviram Volume (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society in cooperation with Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel Museum, 1996), 142–143 (Hebrew). The identification is found already in J. M. Monson, *Student Map Manual: Historical Geography of the Bible Lands* (Jerusalem: Pictorial Archive, 1983), see § 9-6; and it is mentioned in Davies, “Tell Ed-Duweir = Ancient Lachish,” 95.

⁵⁵ C. R. Conder, H. H. Kitchener, and E. H. Palmer, *The Survey of Western Palestine. Arabic and English Name Lists Collected During the Survey* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881), 402. The translation of toponyms into Arabic is an uncommon but not unusual phenomenon, Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 12. For example, see Dan = *Tell el-Qāḍi*. It is equally possible that the current toponym is a new Arabic name introduced in the subsequent Islamic periods.

⁵⁶ A. Saarisalo, “Topographical Researches in the Shephelah,” *JPOS* 11 (1931): 98–99; Dagan, “Cities of the Judean Shephelah,” 136–146. Eitan Klein and Itzhaq Shai, “Burial Caves from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages at Horvat Lavnin in the Judean Shephelah,” *TA* 43, (2016): 225–242.

⁵⁷ Jane M. Cahill, “Rosette Stamp Seal Impressions from Ancient Judah,” *IEJ* 45 (1995):232.

⁵⁸ See also Zadok, “Philistian Notes I,” 667.

⁵⁹ Götz Schmitt, “Moreschet Gat und Libna mit einem Anhang: zu Micha 1:10-16,” *JNSL* 16 (1990): 162. Zadok (“Philistian Notes I,” 668) also points out that during the Ottoman period *Beidā* / Horvat Lavnin is in the administrative district (*nāḥiya*) of Hebron, whereas *Linā* (*Lubnah*) was in the *nāḥiya* of Gaza.

Tel Zayit

Recently Ron Tappy suggested that Tel Zayit / *Tell Zeitah* may be the location of Libnah.⁶⁰ To be sure, his suggestion has always been cautious and thoroughly grounded in the local geography. To quote Tappy,⁶¹ “if this site itself [Zayit] is not ancient Libnah, it surely lay close enough to Libnah to have followed its lead in cultural, political, and economic matters.” The suggestion deserves consideration. Tappy cited the previous scholarship that identified Libnah with Tel Burna, but he suggested instead that the biblical city should be sought 4 km further west. In fact, Tel Zayit represents the westernmost of the four Libnah candidates. Prior to Tappy’s excavations, Tel Zayit was considered to be a small village located in the peripheral corridors of Judah and Philistia. For this reason, historical geographers overlooked Zayit as a potential location for Libnah. Tappy’s excavation of Zayit, however, has shown that the site was a prominent settlement during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages.⁶² Tel Zayit features a substantial LB fortification system, and among its more famous remains is an abecedary inscription that dates to the tenth century BCE.⁶³

In addition to his archaeological and geographical rationale, Tappy cited several literary-historical factors in support of his identification, beginning with the east-west itinerary of Josh 15:42–44. Because Libnah was located in the central Shephelah district’s western area, Tappy argued that

⁶⁰ Tappy, “Historical and Geographical Notes,” 386–87; idem, “Tel Zayit and the Tel Zayit Abecedary in Their Regional Context.”

⁶¹ Ron Tappy, “East of Ashkelon: The Settling of the Judean Lowlands in the Iron Age IIA,” in *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J. David Schloen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 461.

⁶² See Ron E. Tappy, “The 1998 Preliminary Survey of Khirbet el-Kharab (Tel Zayit) in the Shephelah of Judah,” *BASOR* 319 (2000): 11, noting that the site, called *Khirbet Zeitah el-Kharab*, was first surveyed by Y. Aharoni and R. Amiran (see n. 72 below). Y. Dagan surveyed Tel Zayit and established that the site was 25 dunams and not 15 dunams; see Tappy, “Survey of Khirbet el-Kharab (Tel Zayit),” 11, citing Dagan’s unpublished MA thesis from Tel Aviv University.

⁶³ Ron E. Tappy, P. Kyle McCarter, Marilyn J. Lundberg, and Bruce Zuckerman, “An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century B.C.E. From the Judaean Shephelah,” *BASOR* 344 (2006): 5–46.

the city would have had strong cultural ties to Philistia.⁶⁴ These cultural ties would explain instances such as the revolt of Libnah in 2 Kgs 8:22.⁶⁵ In fact, the background of Tappy's identification of Tel Zayit with Libnah is his literary analysis of Joshua 15. The reference to Philistine cities in Josh 15:45–47, according to Tappy, is a redactional insertion that replaced western territory Judah lost to the Philistines following Sennacherib's punitive campaign against Hezekiah. In light of these factors, Tappy drew upon the archaeological data at hand and placed the history of Tel Zayit (as Libnah) within a larger cultural framework of borderland theory. Accordingly, the remains of Zayit were understood as part of a rich history of cultural interaction at a site (Libnah) situated in an area shared by both Judahites and Philistines.

The main problems with the identification of Zayit at Libnah, however, are the lack of Iron Age fortifications and the absence of any occupation level associated with the seventh century BCE.⁶⁶ While it is possible that Libnah played an important role in Philistine–Judahite interaction, the reference to its revolt and the Assyrian siege together imply that the city was fortified. Additionally, as the hometown of Hamutal, a wife of Josiah, Libnah should have been occupied during the seventh century. Tel Zayit in fact may represent the location of Moresheth-gath (rather than Tel Goded), due to its substantial Late Bronze Age remains, and the equation of Moresheth-gath with Mu'rashti of the Amarna Letters.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See Tappy, "Historical and Geographical Notes," 386 n. 32, citing Anson F. Rainey, "The Administrative Division of the Shephelah," 195.

⁶⁵ Tappy, "Tel Zayit and the Tel Zayit Abecedary in their Regional Context," 1–40.

⁶⁶ Na'aman, "The Shephelah According to the Amarna Letters," 285 n.10.

⁶⁷ Tel Goded, the most popular candidate for Moresheth-gath, does not have any Late Bronze Age remains. The identification with Tel Zayit was made by Na'aman ("The Shephelah According to the Amarna Letters," 285) and is based in part on Mu'rashti's association with Gimtu (Gath).

Tel Burna

Albright was the first to identify Libnah with *Tell Bornat* / Tel Burna (M.R. 188.615), a medium-sized mound located in the western periphery of the Shephelah.⁶⁸ Karl Elliger and Anson Rainey followed Albright's suggestion, both observing that Burna's location fit the biblical accounts that featured Libnah.⁶⁹ In particular, Burna's location in close proximity to Kh. el-'Atr (Ether) and nearby Mareshah is consistent with the list of cities found in Josh 15:42–44.⁷⁰ Although the site remained unexcavated until 2010, surveys produced Iron II material. The Arabic toponym *Tell Bornat* means "mound of the hat," but a recent study by Chris McKinny and Aharon Tavger has shown that the earliest references to the tell in 19th century maps record the site name as *Tell Bulnad* or *Bulnard*,⁷¹ beginning with Van de Velde in 1852 who first referred to the cite as either "Tell-Bûlnab, or Bûrnâb." Since none of these names have any meaning in Arabic, McKinny and Tavger suggest that the orthography reflects a corruption of the toponym Libnah that began with metathesis (*Lubnah* > **Bulnah* > *Bulnad* / *Bulnab* and variants). Eventually, through the confusion of the consonants *l* and *r*, the place name became normalized as *Bornat* ("hat") masking the ancient toponym.⁷² If this

⁶⁸ Albright, "Fall Trip of the School in Jerusalem," 8. For a description of Albright's visit to Burna and his Libnah identification, see McKinny and Dagan, "Explorations of Tel Burna," 299–300.

⁶⁹ K. Elliger, "Josua in Judäa," *PJ* 30 (1934): 60–63; Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," 10–11.

⁷⁰ Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," 11. It should be noted that Tappy drew upon these same factors in support of Zayit, which is to be expected given the relative proximity of Burna and Zayit. Götz Schmitt, one of the editors of the Tübinger Bibelatlas (part of TAVO), visited Tel Burna on September 26, 1979, but he felt the site was too small to be Libnah ("Moreschet Gat und Libna mit einem Anhang: zu Micha 1:10-16," 162). Schmitt was unaware of the lower mound's full extent and based his assessment primarily on the upper mound. More recently Gunnar Lehmann, and Hermann Michael Niemann ("When did the Shephelah become Judahite?" *TA* 41 [2014]: 88) have rejected the identification of Burna with Libnah because it is too far north. This is based on their understanding of the Libnah revolt as well as their interpretation of the Shephelah during the ninth century (see below).

⁷¹ McKinny and Tavger, "From Lebonah to Libnah" 115–16. Similarly, the Nahal Guvrin is called *Wadi Bulnak* in Charles Warren's unpublished "Reconnaissance Map of Philistia" (1867), see McKinny and Tavger, "From Lebonah to Libnah," 115, fig. 6.5.

⁷² McKinny and Tavger, "From Lebonah to Libnah," 116.

toponymic suggestion is correct,⁷³ it adds further justification for the identification of Tel Burna as Libnah, which is based largely upon historical-geographical and archaeological considerations.

The archaeological remains of Tel Burna were investigated by Yohanan Aharoni and Ruth Amiran in 1955 as part of a wider survey of the Shephelah.⁷⁴ Based on this survey, Aharoni and Amiran suggested that the standing architecture visible on Burna's upper tell were the remains of Iron Age fortifications.⁷⁵ Subsequent surveys recovered a rosette-sealed handle.⁷⁶ Furthermore, an Akkadian *lamashtu*-type plaque was discovered along the western slopes of the mound.⁷⁷ The current excavation project at Tel Burna, which began in 2010, has confirmed Amiran and Aharoni's Iron Age dating of the fortifications.⁷⁸ The project has revealed Iron II remains throughout the upper mound in Areas A1, A2, B2, and G. Although the excavations have yet to confirm whether the shape and form of the upper mound originated during the EB or MB periods, it is evident that the Iron Age defensive works were built atop an earlier fortification system. These fortifications, along with other remains, strongly support the suggestion that Tel Burna is the location of biblical Libnah.

⁷³ The theory of toponymic confusion finds support in Michael Press's study of Tel Erani ("The Arabic Names of Tēl 'Ērānī and 'Irāq el-Menšīye," 181–93). Press has shown that Western explorers confused the Arabic name of Tel Erani (*'Iraq al-Manshiyye*) with the former Arab village that once stood by (*Manshiyye*), resulting in *Tell el-Areini* in modern maps. In another example, an uncited emendation of a Talmudic text led to errors in maps and gazetteers marking the area of Ashkelon; Michael D. Press, "A Note on 'Yagur of the Talmud,'" *Liber Annuus* 52 (2013): 357–61. These cases are not direct parallels but they provide examples of how mapmaking errors become passed down over time and even compounded.

⁷⁴ Yohanan Aharoni and Ruth Amiran, "A Survey of the Shephelah Tells," *BIES* 19 (1955): 222–25 (Hebrew).

⁷⁵ Aharoni and Amiran, "A Survey of the Shephelah Tells," 225.

⁷⁶ Yehuda Dagan, "The Settlement in the Judean Shephelah in the Second and First Millennium B.C.: A Test Case of Settlement Processes in a Geographic Region." (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University).

⁷⁷ Mordechai Cogan, "A Lamashtu Plaque from the Judaeen Shephelah," *IEJ* 45 (1995): 155–61.

⁷⁸ Joe Uziel, and Itzhaq Shai. "The Settlement History of Tel Burna: Results of the Surface Survey," *TA* 37 (2010): 227–45; Itzhaq Shai, Amit Dagan, Deborah Cassuto, and Joe Uziel, "The Fortifications at Tel Burna: Date, Function and Meaning," *IEJ* 62 (2012): 141–57.

While the on-going excavation continues to probe the full extent and nature of these structures, certain factors allow for a general historical understanding. The earliest Iron Age evident phase in Area B2 is the tenth century BCE,⁷⁹ represented in the stratigraphy and pottery assemblage with types well dated to this period. The subsequent construction phases date to the late ninth (including typical pottery with hand burnishing and red slip) through eighth centuries, and several epigraphic finds discovered in A2 can be associated with the eighth century. The epigraphic materials include five *LMLK* sealed jar handles and a private seal.⁸⁰ This level was followed by a smaller phase that is datable by seventh century pottery types, including a lamp with a thick base (fig. 6:3) and cooking vessels (fig. 6: 6-7). This phase is marked by the construction of several large stone-lined pits and a building next to the outer fortification wall (in the NW corner), which cancelled the inner fortification wall. Additionally, four rosette sealed jar handles were discovered in A2 (bringing the site's total to five). Although the context of the rosette sealed handles do not allow for a precise date, the general time-period of these iconographic seals (late seventh or early sixth) establishes a rough framework for understanding the last construction phase at Burna.⁸¹

The work in Areas A1 and B2 along the eastern and western slopes of the upper mound, respectively, is focused on the fortifications. Like the monumental architecture in Area A2, the massive fortifications in A1 and B2 originate in the tenth/ninth century and span the eighth century. The summit (70 X 70 m) was fortified in the Iron Age II. These fortifications, which have been exposed in Areas A1, B2 and G, include a casemate system with an outer wall that is roughly two meters thick. While the inner casemate wall went out of use in the seventh century BCE, the outer wall was still used, as evident in Areas G and B2.

⁷⁹ Late Bronze remains were uncovered in Area B1, Itzhaq Shai, Chris McKinny and Joe Uziel, "Late Bronze Age Cultic Activity in Ancient Canaan: A View from Tel Burna," *BASOR* 374 (2015): 115–33. Libnah, however, is not mentioned in any LB source.

⁸⁰ Itzhaq Shai et al., "A Private Stamped Seal Handle from *Tell Bornāt / Tēl Burnā*, Israel," *ZDPV* 130 (2014):121–37.

⁸¹ Cahill, "Rosette Stamp Seal Impressions from Ancient Judah," 230–52.

Tel Burna's archaeological profile is consistent with the biblical description of Libnah, beginning with the fact that the site is a fortified border town. The interpretation of Libnah as a feature of borders and borderlands is outlined in detail by Tappy in his discussion of Tel Zayit. Tappy's prompt comes from the writings of Gloria Anzaldua.⁸² Anzaldua's work was literary and by nature synchronic, thus its focus was on the status of one particular group as it exists in its current setting. The extensive history and culture of the southern Levant during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages, however, requires a diachronic approach that focuses on borders and borderlands as categories created by different socio-political forces. In their important 1999 essay, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron argued that borderlands were products of dynamic processes, rather than static space.⁸³ Accordingly, the concept of borderland was one part of a larger history that began in a region contested by imperial powers, the American west, with Native Americans caught in the middle. The transition from borderland to border was a critical factor in Adelman and Aron's work, as borderland interactions that accompanied European colonialist efforts eventually gave way to a stricter demarcation of borders created by the rise of nation states, effectively curtailing such interactions. In other words, borderlands and borders are not the same, with the later representing a stringent sense of control created within a well-defined geopolitical setting.

Given this concept of borders versus borderlands, it is important look at the dynamic processes that transformed the landscape of the region during the Iron Age. This process began in LB, with the decline of Egyptian hegemony over the region. During Iron IIA, the area encompassing the

⁸² Notably her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), which describes the problems of identity among the Latino communities situated at the U.S.-Mexico border.

⁸³ The discussion in Adelman and Aron begins with the work of Herbert Eugene Bolton's concept of borderlands. Bolton's "borderland" was a response to the American exceptionalist concept of "frontiers" that was popular among historians in the first half of the 20th century and typically associated with the work of Frederick Jackson Turner. The shift from frontiers to borderlands as a guiding concept transformed the study of the American West, changing it from an idea of manifest destiny to one of extended cultural interaction.

western Shephelah and the eastern corridor of the coastal-plain became fractured with the emergence of the Philistine and Judahite/Israelite states. The historical transformation of this area during the ninth century is debated among archaeologists. On the one side, some have argued that the presence of Gath kept Judah's western expansion in check during the ninth century. Thus, Hazael's mid-ninth century destruction of Gath (Zafit Stratum A3) represents the threshold for understanding the rise and development of Judahite sites in the Shephelah.⁸⁴ The excavation of Tel Burna, however, challenges this theory. The fortifications of Tel Burna's Areas A1, B2, and G were constructed during the early Iron Age IIA. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest that the destruction of Safi Stratum A3 predates the construction and development of sites in its nearby vicinity, such as Lachish (Level IV)⁸⁵ or Tel Burna. From a larger perspective, settlement continuity from the ninth-to-eighth centuries at several Judahite sites provides strong indication that the Shephelah of Judah began already in the early ninth century if not already in the tenth.⁸⁶

Another explanation is that the development of fortified Judahite sites in the Shephelah during the ninth century was in response to the powerful Philistine city of Gath. Accordingly, the fortifications of Tel Erani and Tel Hesi represent a westward expansion of Judah's border into the inner coastal

⁸⁴ Lehmann, and Niemann, "When did the Shephelah become Judahite?" 77–94. One theory is that Libnah's revolt is associated with Jehoram's western expansion during the ninth century, following Hazael's destruction of Gath; see Omer Sergi, "Judah's Expansion in Historical Context," *TA* 40 (2013): 231–32.

⁸⁵ See also recently Yosef Garfinkel et al, "Lachish Fortifications and State Formation in the Biblical Kingdom of Judah in Light of Radiometric Datings," *Radiocarbon* 61/3 (2019): 695–712.

⁸⁶ Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah in the Ninth Century BCE: Text Analysis Versus Archaeological Research," *TA* 40 (2013): 256. The arguments for the Shephelah of Judah's late-ninth century development are often tied to historical assumptions regarding eighth century Jerusalem. Accordingly, Judah's control over the western foothills did not occur until after Jerusalem's rise (and expansion) in the late eighth century. The problems with this explanation, however, are beyond the scope of this essay; see Nadav Na'aman, "When and How did Jerusalem Become a Great City? The Rise of Jerusalem as Judah's Premier City in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries BCE," *BASOR* 347 (2007): 31–56; idem, "The Growth and Development of Judah and Jerusalem in the Eight Century BCE: A Rejoinder," *RB* 116 (2009): 321–35; see also Joe Uziel and Nahshon Szanton, "Recent Excavations Near the Gihon Spring and Their Reflection on the Character of Iron II Jerusalem," *TA* 42 (2015): 233–50.

plain during the Iron IIB.⁸⁷ The fortifications of Tel Burna, would also belong to this border, representing a northeast-to-southwest trajectory with Hesi. Following the Assyrian conquest of the Shephelah in the late-eighth century, Judah's borders receded from the coastal plain.

At first glance, the archaeological picture of Tel Burna (and Tel Zayit, for that matter) suggests tensions with the biblical depiction of Libnah. To begin, the border that runs between Tel Hesi and Tel Burna does not conform easily with Judah's western boundary as described in Joshua 15. But the written record of borders, especially in an idealized format, represents a static image of an otherwise dynamic entity. It should be noted also that the place name Libnah does not occur in any Late Bronze Age sources. The toponym is noticeably absent from the El-Amarna corpus, which bears witness to other sites that would have been in proximity to Libnah (Gezer, Gath [=Gimtu], Keilah, Lachish, and possibly Moresheth-gath [=Mu'rashti]). This might indicate that the place name Libnah was the product of a cultural process specific to the first millennium BCE; note, for example Laish-Dan in the north.⁸⁸ On the other hand, the nearby site of Azekah is also absent from the Amarna Letters, despite the fact that it was inhabited during the LBA.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the socio-historical background of the Iron Age provides us

⁸⁷ Jeffrey A. Blakely and James W. Hardin, "Southwestern Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E.," *BASOR* 326 (2002): 11–64. This border included also Tel Qeshet, Tel Milh, and Tel Sheqef. See, Jeffrey A. Blakely, James W. Hardin, and Daniel M. Master, "The Southwestern Border of Judah in the Ninth and Eighth Centuries B.C.E.," in *Material Culture Matters: Seymour Gitin Festschrift*, ed. John R. Spencer, Robert A. Mullins, and Aaron J. Brody (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 33–51. According to Blakely, Hardin, and Master (ibid.), this border was first proposed by G. Ernest Wright, "A Problem of Ancient Topography: Lachish and Eglon" *HTR* 64 (1971): 437–50. It is important to note, though, that the final reports of Tel Erani and Tel Hesi have yet to be published, therefore the interpretation of this fortified line awaits corroboration.

⁸⁸ In particular, the appearance of Libnah should be set against a socio-political background where cultural identities were assigned according to emerging states. See also Itzhaq Shai, "Understanding Philistine migration: city names and their implications," *BASOR* 354 (2009): 15–27. The other possibility is that the site had two names. See similarly, for Zafit and Gath, Stefan Wimmer and Aren M. Maeir, "'The Prince of Safit?' A Late Bronze Age Hieratic Inscription from 'Tel Es-Sâfi'/Gath," *ZDPV* 123 (2007): 37–48.

⁸⁹ Sabine Kleiman et al., "Late Bronze Age Azekah – an Almost Forgotten Story," in *The Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Southern Canaan*, ed. Aren M. Maeir, Itzhaq Shai, and Chris McKinny, *Archaeology of Biblical Worlds* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

with the ability to synthesize the archaeological data of Tel Burna with the complicated image of Libnah found in the Hebrew Bible.

During the Iron Age IIA, the fortification of Tel Burna /Libnah, played a role in Judah's efforts to establish its border over-and-against Gath of the Philistines. The revolt of Libnah, albeit briefly noted (2 Kgs 8:22), would have revealed the sensitive nature of this border. While there is no account of how Judah regained Libnah, Hazael's destruction of Gath in the mid-ninth century would have given Judah the opportunity to stabilize its control over the western Shephelah. The integration of Libnah into Judah's boundary system continued into the late-ninth through eighth centuries. There is no reference to Libnah in any biblical traditions during this period, until 701 BCE. At this time Libnah was prominent enough to warrant its mention during the Assyrian crisis, following the destruction of Lachish. In addition to the late-eighth century destruction in Area A2, artifacts such as the *LMLK*-stamped handles and the Assyrian *lamashtu* tablet add further corroboration to the site's activities during the Assyrian crisis of Hezekiah reign, as well as the years that followed.

Burna was reoccupied later in the seventh century. This aspect of seventh-century Burna is reflective of the wider regional setting. The strict political boundaries of the Iron IIA-B were no longer necessary during the Iron IIC due to demise of Gath and the decline of the Assyrian empire. In other words, Burna's location shifted to what can be called a borderland during the seventh century. The Judahite resettlement of the Shephelah (and Libnah) was principally achieved through non-military means, as reflected in the political marriages of the seventh century kings Amon (to Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah from Bozkath) and Josiah (to Hamutal, the daughter of Jeremiah from Libnah). It is likely that during the seventh century Libnah's place became fixed in the idealized boundary system of Joshua 15, as the borders reflected here do not expand further eastward. Without delving further into the thorny issues concerning the dating of the P, we would also

suggest that the literary source's complicated reference to Libnah and the Libnites stems from this period of resettlement and reclamation.

Conclusion

In order to resolve the problem of Libnah's location, it is necessary to build a proper context. The problem cannot be resolved by any single factor. The use of toponymics for example has only provided a false lead for locating Libnah, first at *Tell eṣ-Ṣāfi* and then at *Kh. Tell el-Beidā*. Instead, a contextual approach is necessary, synthesizing multiple factors: literary, geographical and archaeological factors, as well as toponymic considerations. The biblical descriptions provide not only a proximal location for Libnah, the southwestern area of the Shephelah, but suggest that the settlement was well-founded and fortified. The archaeology of Judah's lowland hills (the Shephelah) together with the coastal plain (Philistia) provides additional data for examining Libnah's socio-political role during the first millennium BCE. Both Tel Zayit and Tel Burna provide excellent candidates for the location of Libnah, particularly in light of the city's history as a border site as well as a location within a larger borderland setting. Tel Burna's archaeological profile, however, best fits the details of the biblical description of Libnah, first as a fortified site during the Assyrian crisis of 701 BCE and then as a seventh century settlement during the reign of Josiah.

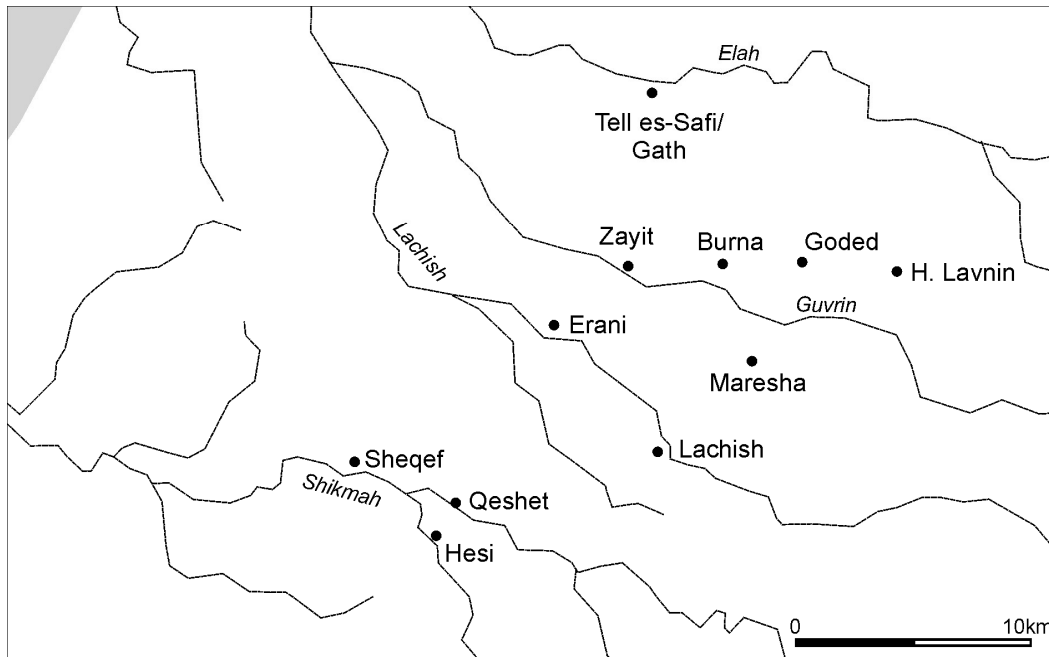


Fig. 1: Map showing the Judean Shephelah, with the four sites identified as Libnah.



Fig. 2: Aerial view of Tel Burna.

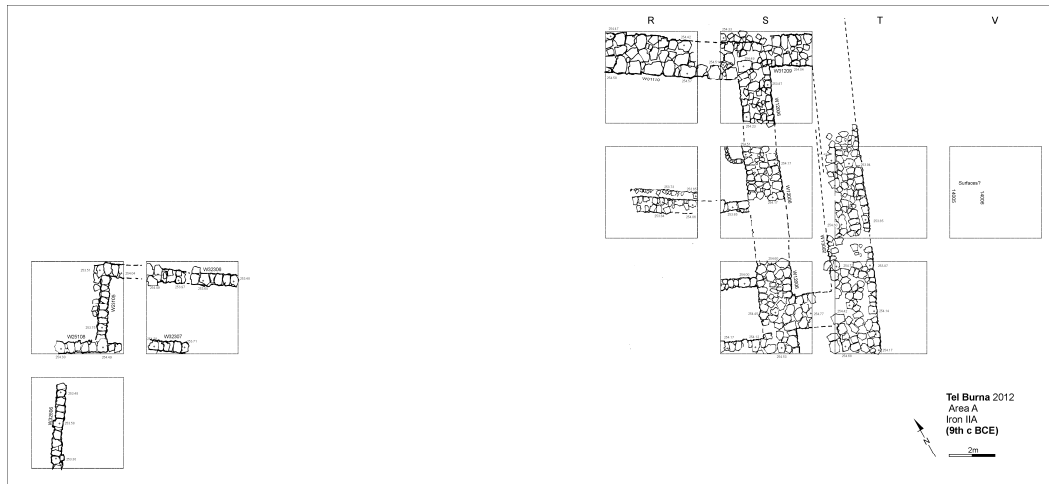


Fig. 3: Plan of the Iron Age Casemate fortifications of the summit at Tel Burna.



Fig. 4: View of the outer wall of the fortifications, as exposed by the excavations along the eastern slope of the summit.



Fig. 5: View of the 7th Century BCE silos at Tel Burna.

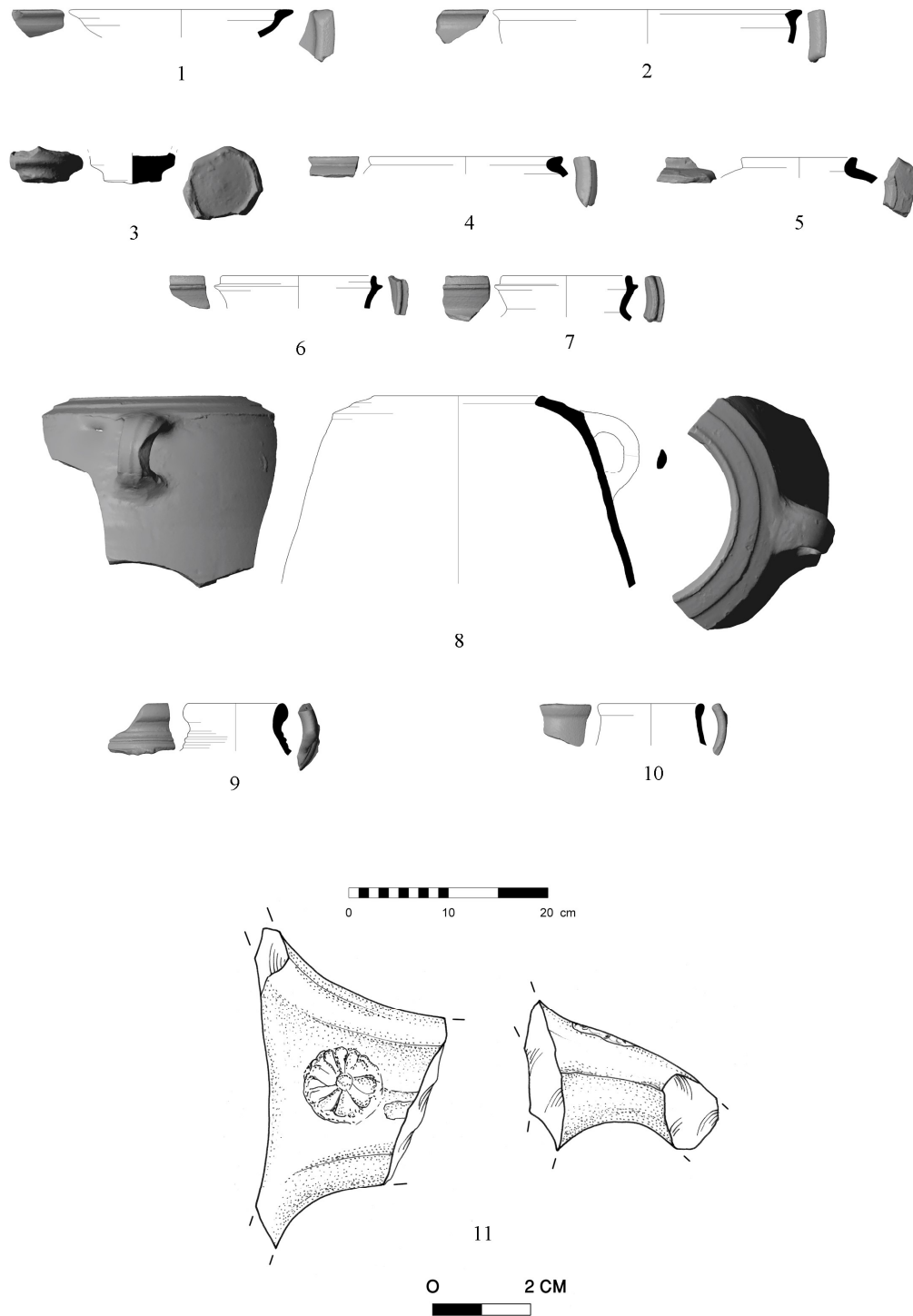


Fig. 6: 7th Century BCE pottery discovered at Tel Burna, including a Rosette stamped handle.