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Assyrian conquest and ruralization: unveiling territorial dynamics in the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*

Andrea Squitieri 

Between 732 and 720 BCE, the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel marked a pivotal moment in the political history of the southern Levant, culminating in the establishment of the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*. The imprint of Assyrian dominance on these regions is evident through various archaeological remnants, reflecting the profound impact of the empire on local communities. This paper intends to delve into the transformation of settlement patterns within these provinces, elucidating their political and economic role within the empire and the extent of imperial territorial exploitation within the dynamic political landscape of the southern Levant. Central to this investigation is the assertion that the Assyrian administration favoured a process of ruralization within the newly formed provinces, characterized by the emergence of distinct 'islands of control'. These are clusters of sites formed by a few administrative centres surrounded by a constellation of farm sites, interconnected by a network of roads. This recurring phenomenon emerges as a consistent motif throughout the Assyrian Empire, underscoring a strategy of territorial organization geared towards efficiently managing agricultural resources.

Keywords Assyrian Empire, southern Levant, settlement pattern, agricultural colonization, ruralization

Introduction

By the end of the 8th century BCE, the Kingdom of Israel, which had controlled much of today's northern Israel in the previous two centuries, fell under attack from the Assyrians, who established on its territories two directly administrated provinces: *Magiddû* (732 BCE) and *Samerina* (720 BCE) (Bagg 2017; Na'aman 1995; Radner 2006). The destruction events connected to the Assyrian conquest were devastating and radically changed the urban landscape of the area: many cities that had flourished in the 8th century BCE were utterly destroyed, others were completely replanned and the countryside suffered destruction and settlement decline (Dever 2007; Faust 2021; Sergi 2023). The local population also changed as the Assyrians implemented a two-way resettlement policy, moving some people from the

newly conquered territories into other areas of their empire and vice versa (Na'aman 1993; Radner 2019).

In recent years a vivace debate, oscillating between two main positions, has emerged concerning the degree of economic investment the Assyrian Empire put into the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*. On one side there are those who propose that the Assyrians were mainly interested in deporting the population out of the conquered territories, with no, or very little, interest in boosting the economic output of the newly created provinces (Aster and Faust 2015; 2018; Faust 2011; 2021; Itach *et al.* 2023). They stress that the conquered territories never recovered from the destruction events; undergoing a period of depopulation and economic depression under Assyrian rule. Other scholars point to the economic recovery experienced by some areas under Assyrian rule, accompanied by the establishment of rural sites, as well as archaeological signs of territorial administration and military control,

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signalling a political and economic interest in this region by the imperial authority (Dever 2007; Itach *et al.* 2023; Knoppers 2004; Tavger 2020; Thareani 2016a; Younger 2015; Zertal 2003). The present paper intends to tackle this debate by looking at the settlement pattern situation in the newly created provinces after the Assyrian takeover, and from this evidence infer the economic and political role of these provinces within the empire. Previously, research has mainly focused on a specific region such as Samaria (e.g., Tavger 2020) or the Hula Valley (Thareani 2019), or has lacked comparison with other regions of the empire, such as the Upper Tigris (e.g., Faust 2021). By gathering archaeological evidence for both the *Magiddû* and *Samerina* provinces, and through a comparison with other imperial provinces, this paper intends to better our understanding of broader patterns of imperial governance and territorial organization within the Assyrian Empire's provinces.

Method and scope of the work

This paper examines the settlement patterns of the Assyrian provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, which roughly correspond to today's regions of Galilee and Samaria. The coastal area from Tyre to Gaza is excluded as it is extensively discussed in Thareani (2016a) for the period covered by this study. By analyzing excavation data, the paper aims to identify thriving settlements, and their locations, within these provinces during Assyrian rule. Additionally, survey data will be used to discern overarching trends in settlement dynamics across the study area. This paper does not delve into issues regarding the identity of the people living in the area, nor into the interaction among local inhabitants, Assyrians and deportees brought from other regions (see e.g., Thareani 2016b; 2023). Instead, it focuses on the geographical distribution of settlements and the factors contributing to the emergence of specific settlement patterns under Assyrian rule. Based on their territorial organization, an interpretation regarding the economic role of the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, particularly focusing on their agricultural output, will be deduced. To provide context for changes in settlement patterns and facilitate their interpretation, a concise overview of the territorial control and agricultural policies of the Assyrian Empire, drawn from information available from other regions of the empire, will be presented. This will be followed by an examination of the settlement dynamics of the study area before the Assyrian conquest, specifically during the 8th century BCE.

In selecting the data for this paper, the distinction between periods before and during Assyrian rule was based on assessments offered by excavators and surveyors. This analysis was supplemented by evidence regarding the presence or absence of wedge-impressed pottery bowls, which serve as a reliable chronological marker of the 7th century BCE, particularly in the Samaria area (Itach *et al.* 2017): these bowls are utilized in the present for their chronological significance rather than determining ethnic affiliations.

Before proceeding, it is worth mentioning, briefly, the issues concerning the chronological framework of the period under analysis. In many publications, the Iron Age IIC period, encompassing much of the 7th century BCE, corresponds to Assyrian rule in the southern Levant. Within this study, however, the term 'Iron Age III' will be used to denote the 7th century BCE (see also Zertal 2003). The preceding Iron Age IIA–B era spans from the 10th to the late 8th century BCE (according to the Modified Conventional Chronology, see Mazar 2011; Sergi 2023). In certain cases, as will be detailed below, distinguishing between the Iron Age IIA–B and IIC proves challenging, especially in survey contexts within the Galilee region. This challenge hinders the ability to provide precise counts of sites inhabiting this area before and during Assyrian rule. Consequently, in these cases, the broader term 'Iron Age II', encompassing the period from the 10th to the 7th century BCE, will be employed.

Strategies of territorial control and the agricultural policy of the Assyrian Empire

Numerous historical and archaeological studies have analyzed the Assyrian Empire's expansion between the 9th and the end of the 7th century BCE through the lens of agricultural colonization (Fales 1990; Parker 2001: 82; 2003; Ponchi 2014; Postgate 1974; Radner 2000; Rosenzweig 2016). This approach suggests that upon acquiring new territories, the empire's primary focus was on establishing rural settlements to cultivate the land. These settlements accommodated both local inhabitants and deportees from other regions of the empire, all of whom contributed to the agricultural output (Oded 1979; Sano 2020). The overarching goal was to sustain the growing needs of the expanding empire, providing food for both the military and the urban populations of the major urban centres. Among these urban hubs, the largest were the Assyrian capital cities situated within Assyria itself: Nimrud (360 hectares), Khorsabad (300 hectares) and Nineveh (700 hectares);

the most substantial cities throughout the Near East at that time (Altaweel and Squitieri 2018: 138–40). In light of the need to manage and enhance agricultural output, the Assyrians elevated the farming way of life to an idealized status, portraying the agriculturalist as an exemplary citizen of the empire (Rosenzweig 2016).

A crucial aspect lying at core of the present study is the archaeological signature that this agricultural colonization left on the ground. Excavations and surveys conducted in the Upper Tigris area (part of the Assyrian province of *Tuṣhan*, modern Ziyaret Tepe) and in the Cizre region (annexed to the Assyrian province of the *maṣennu*), both in south-eastern Turkey (Radner 2006), have revealed the establishment, under Assyrian rule, of many small farm sites gravitating around one or several major centres with administrative functions (Parker 2003; Radner and Schachner 2001; Rosenzweig 2016). Such a proliferation of small farm sites, which goes under the term ‘ruralization’, has also been observed in other parts of the empire, including its core area, Assyria. Surveys conducted in the vicinity of Erbil, ancient Arbela located in northern Iraq, have uncovered a notable surge in the number of sites dating to the Neo-Assyrian period, compared to preceding eras (Ur and Osborne 2016). Interestingly, these newly discovered sites predominantly consist of small settlements, with an average area of only 2.63 ha, indicating a pattern of expansion characterized by modest-sized settlements (Ur and Osborne 2016: 170). Going back to provincial areas, a similar pattern has been observed in the Jazira (eastern Syria) (Morandi Bonacossi 2000; Wilkinson *et al.* 2005) and in the Orontes area (western Syria) (Morandi Bonacossi 2009). The dispersal of many small rural settlements across the countryside, intermixed with a few fortified and administrative centres, seems to be a recurrent theme across specific areas of the Assyrian Empire (Altaweel and Squitieri 2018: 152–59). Texts also support the image of a ruralized imperial landscape. The Harran Census, a group of texts describing the area around the city of Harran (today in south-east Turkey), possibly dating to the reign of Sargon II (722–705 BCE), lists a number of small rural estates pertaining to small villages and hamlets, but, as observed by scholars, no large urban centre is mentioned in the texts (Fales and Postgate 1995: xxxi; Radner 2000: 237).

Such a ruralization process, as observed in some regions of the empire, can be considered as an archaeological manifestation of the agricultural colonization process carried out by the Assyrians. As discussed

below, a similar phenomenon occurred within the Assyrian provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, exhibiting, however, some distinct characteristics that set them apart from the provinces closer to the Assyrian core, as well as from the settlement expansion phenomenon that has been observed outside the Assyrian provincial system.

The Assyrian takeover of the Kingdom of Israel

The Assyrian kings of the 9th century BCE adopted an aggressive policy of expansion that brought under their control a vast territory around Assyria; extending in the east towards the Zagros, in the north towards the Taurus, and in the west up to the Euphrates, thus recovering the territories that the Assyrians had lost in the 12th century BCE (Radner 2014a). King Shalmaneser III (858–827 BCE) also invaded, many times, the area west of the Euphrates, the Levant, in order to collect booty and claim tribute from the local populations; however, no direct territorial control was implemented (Baker 2023). The king also campaigned against the Kingdom of Israel, as shown in the famous Black Obelisk, where the King of Israel, Jehu (841–814 BCE), identified by the inscription, is portrayed paying homage to the Assyrian ruler (Baker 2023; Grayson 1996: 149). Following Shalmaneser III’s death, the Assyrians did not campaign west of the Euphrates until the time of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE). Not only did this king resume military activities within the Levant, but he also applied, for the first time in this area, a policy of annexation, whereby the conquered territories came under direct control of local governors chosen by the Assyrian king (Bagg 2017; Baker 2023; Radner 2014a). After a series of successful campaigns in the northern Levant and along the coast, Tiglath-Pileser III conquered and annexed, in 732 BCE, the Kingdom of Damascus, in southern Syria, and the northern territories of the Kingdom of Israel (Baker 2023). The latter was divided into two: the north became an Assyrian province with the name of *Magiddû*, whose capital city was Megiddo, in southern Galilee, while the southern part of the kingdom was reduced to a vassal state (Bagg 2017; Radner 2006). It has been suggested that Tiglath-Pileser III also created a province on the coast around Tel Dor, however, there is no general consensus about this and it is possible that Tel Dor was included in the province of *Magiddû* (Na’aman 2009; Radner 2006). At the death of Tiglath-Pileser III, most of the Levant had been annexed to the Assyrian Empire, while the remaining areas had become vassal states.

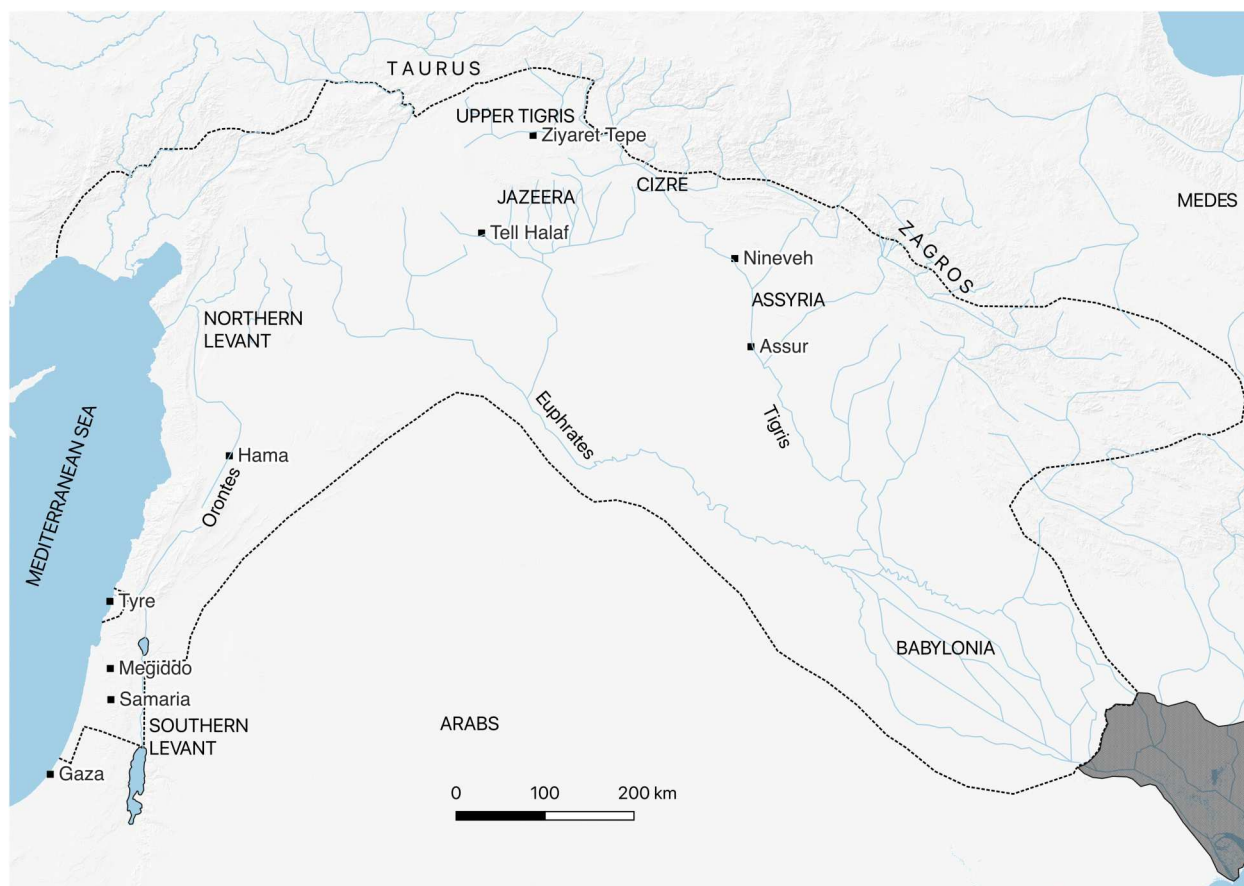


Figure 1 The extent of the Assyrian Empire under king Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BCE). Borders are based on a sketch drawn by Karen Radner.

Local rebellions, however, soon brought about a new wave of military campaigns. The decision of the King of Israel, Hoshea (c. 732–721 BCE), not to pay tribute caused the military intervention of King Shalmaneser V (727–722 BCE), who besieged and conquered Samaria, the capital of the Kingdom of Israel (Bagg 2017; Frahm 2019). The organization of the province, however, fell on the shoulders of Shalmaneser V's successor, Sargon II (722–705 BCE), who established the province of *Samerina* (720 BCE) and made Samaria its capital city (Baker 2023; Frahm 2019). He had the inhabitants of *Samerina* deported to Assyria, Guzana (Tell Halaf, on the upper Khabur river) and to the towns of the Medes (west Iran), while, in turn, people from northern Babylonia (south Iraq) and Hamath (Hama, west Syria), along with Arabs, were resettled in the province (Radner 2019). The Assyrians applied this resettlement policy throughout their empire in order to break local resistance, and to provide labour to specific areas for agriculture and large building programmes (Oded 1979; Sano 2020). The deportations also had profound consequences on the ethnic make-up of the empire, which may be

reflected in the material culture. In the province of Samaria, the appearance of wedge-impressed bowls is commonly taken as an indicator of Mesopotamian people being settled in this area under Sargon II (Itach *et al.* 2017; Zertal 2003). These bowls can, therefore, be used as a chronological indicator for the period of Assyrian rule. Between 732 and 720 BCE the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel was completed and the new provinces, *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, established. After Sargon II, the following sovereigns directed their campaigns against other states in the vicinity of these two provinces. King Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) attacked the Kingdom of Judah in 701 BCE, forcing its king to pay a heavy tribute, while his successor, King Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE), directed his military efforts against Tyre and Sidon (Bagg 2017; Novotny 2023; Sergi 2023). He also invaded Egypt in 671 BCE (Radner 2008) (Fig. 1).

It is hard to say exactly when the Assyrians lost their grip on the territories of the former Kingdom of Israel. It may have happened not long before 612 BCE, when the Assyrian capital city Nineveh was

conquered by a coalition of Medes and Babylonians, causing the collapse of the Assyrian Empire (Novotny 2023).

The Assyrian presence in the southern Levant, from the late 8th century BCE to the late 7th century BCE, left many archaeological indicators on the ground: pottery, stone and metal vessels, seals, burial goods, cuneiform tablets, as well as architecture; all witness the influence of the empire on local material culture (Bagg 2013; Stern 2001: 14–57).

Settlement pattern in the Kingdom of Israel on the eve of the Assyrian conquest

The study undertaken by Broshi and Finkelstein (1992) offered a comprehensive overview of the settlement dynamics of the 8th century BCE spanning the region west of the Jordan River, encompassing this paper's study area. While acknowledging the need for updates in the light of recent archaeological finds, and recognizing certain methodological and chronological limitations, their work serves as a foundational resource for comprehending settlement patterns in the Kingdom of Israel preceding the Assyrian conquests. According to their research, regions such as the Galilee (Upper and Lower), the Hula Valley, the Jordan Valley, the Jezreel Valley and the Samaria area (excluding the coast) harboured a total of 636 sites, sustaining an estimated population of 205,500 inhabitants (Broshi and Finkelstein 1992: table 1). Comparisons drawn with both contemporaneous demographics in the southern Kingdom of Judah and preceding historical periods, led the authors to assert that the 8th century BCE marked the zenith of settlement and population in the Kingdom of Israel, indicative of its economic prosperity and political advancement.

Building on this groundwork, Faust's recent study (2021) surveyed archaeological evidence from the 8th century BCE Kingdom of Israel, identifying prominent centres such as Tel Dan and Hazor, alongside provincial towns like Tell en-Nasbeh, as well as villages and farms. Faust's observations underscore the presence of a diversified range of settlement sizes (Faust 2021: 52–53), comprising small, medium and large settlements dispersed throughout the territory, a contrast to the urban landscape following the Assyrian conquests (Faust 2006: 264–65, and see below).

In another recent work, Thareani focused on Tel Dan and its surroundings before and after the Assyrian conquest (Thareani 2023). Prior to the conquest, during the 8th century BCE, approximately 45 sites were documented in the Hula Valley, with Tel

Dan (20 ha), Tel Abel Beth Ma'acah (14 ha) and Tel Hazor (12 ha) standing out as the largest (Thareani 2023: 133–34). These 45 sites include large, medium and small centres, ranging from 0.1 ha to 20 ha, following a size distribution that further corroborates patterns observed on a broader scale by Faust.

Collectively, this body of evidence paints a picture of the Kingdom of Israel, on the brink of the Assyrian conquest, as a densely populated region, characterized by a diverse array of settlements in varying sizes, encompassing large administrative centres, provincial towns, villages and smaller farms. As discussed below, this urban landscape underwent profound transformation following the Assyrian conquest; the result of realignment of the economic scope of the region once it became integrated into a broader empire.

The settlements, in the Assyrian provinces, of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, and their characteristics

This section details the sites that populated the Assyrian provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* (Fig. 2). The evidence will be shown in geographic order from the north to the south, with a summary table at the end. A discussion of the evidence will be offered in the following sections.

Upper Galilee

Tel Dan and its surroundings

Tel Dan, situated in the Hula Valley, was destroyed in a heavy conflagration as a consequence of Tiglath-Pileser III's conquest (Biran 1994). Evidence for this was found all over the site: the Assyrians destroyed the fortification wall and public areas, as well as the residential quarters (Thareani 2016b; 2019). Following the Assyrian destruction, the city was completely rebuilt and replanned (Stratum Ia), with well-built houses, impressive public buildings and paved streets; in order to serve as a regional centre for the Assyrian administration (Thareani 2016b). In Area T1, a large administrative building was erected (Building T1-3/1), in which Assyrian elements co-existed along with local elements, in both the architectural plan and material culture (Thareani 2016b). Moreover, elite residences were built in the centre of the town (areas M and K), while industrial installations were found scattered throughout the site (Thareani 2019).

Horvat Omrit is located about 3.5 km south-east of Tel Dan. It is renowned for its Roman temple built by Herod the Great c. 20 CE (Overman *et al.* 2021). No



Figure 2 The study area with the sites discussed in the text (dots).

7th century BCE layers have been identified; however, a cylinder seal found in a 1st century CE context was dated to the period of King Sargon II (722–705 BCE) on the basis of palaeographic analysis (Brandl and Grossmark 2021). This find may indicate some activity at the site following the Assyrian conquests. About 2 km to the south-west, the site of Tahunat et Tabkha (south of She’ar Yeshuv) was investigated during a salvage excavation (Hartal and Smithline 2007). In Stratum 4, pottery sherds dating to the

time of the Assyrian conquest, late 8th–7th centuries BCE, were found, including a small Assyrian-style bowl. No buildings associated to this period were identified.

Hazor and Ayelet HaShahar

Hazor Stratum V was destroyed in 732 BCE under Assyrian attacks. The old excavations found evidence for a sparse occupation in Areas A and B, taking place soon after the site’s destruction (Stratum IV) (Yadin

et al. 1960: 58–63). The more recent excavations uncovered walls and installations in Area M, also attributed to Stratum IV (Ben-Tor 2016: 167). In the following Stratum III, also assigned to the Assyrian period, a citadel (Building 3002) was excavated in Area B; this had been built on top of the previous 8th century BCE citadel (Yadin *et al.* 1960: 58–63). The Stratum III citadel continued in use throughout the Persian period, therefore no diagnostic pottery or finds could be retrieved from its floors. In Area M, the more recent excavations (Ben-Tor 2007; 2016:168–69) unearthed a public building, assigned to Stratum III, built on top of the Bronze Age ceremonial palace. The excavator interpreted it as a possible ‘inner citadel or a governor’s house’ (Ben-Tor 2016: 168–69). Evidence for sparse activity, consisting of stone-paved surfaces, assigned to the post-Assyrian destruction period was also detected in Area L (Ben-Tor *et al.* 1997: 283).

About 1.5 km east of Hazor, in the kibbutz Ayelet HaSahar, a small building was unearthed in the 1950s during a salvage excavation (Kletter and Zwickel 2006). While the majority of the pottery collected was dated to the Persian period, the building combines both Assyrian and Babylonian architectural elements (Kertai 2018; Kletter and Zwickel 2006). As pointed out by Kletter and Zwickel (2006: 178), the Babylonian elements in the architectural plan do not necessarily imply a post-Assyrian date for the construction of the building; these elements were already attested in Mesopotamia during, at least, the 8th century BCE. However, based on the architectural and pottery evidence, it is possible to suggest that the building was erected under Assyrian rule and continued to be used throughout the Neo-Babylonian (6th century BCE) and Persian periods (late 6th–late 4th centuries BCE) (Kletter and Zwickel 2006: 175–78; *contra* Kertai 2018). With regard to its use, it has been proposed that it could have functioned as a residency, or a fortress, connected to nearby Hazor.

Bethsaida and Kinneret

North of the Kinneret lake, the site of Bethsaida was destroyed during the Assyrian conquest (Arav 2008: 1615). The excavations revealed a small settlement, dated to Iron Age III, in which structures from the previous period were reused, with very little being built anew. The western rooms of the palace destroyed by the Assyrians remained in use until the Hellenistic period (Arav 2008: 1615).

To the north-west of the lake, the site of Kinneret was also destroyed by the Assyrians (Stratum II). Stratum I, which followed the destruction, contained

a renewed occupation, with, according to the excavator, a citadel which seems to have functioned as a fort (Fritz 1990). Building 737 could have been an ‘Assyrian palace’ (Fritz 1990: 99–102; Kletter and Zwickel 2006); however, no chronological finds were found inside. Singer-Avitz (2014), in her analysis of the Late Iron Age pottery from northern Israel, suggested that Kinneret Stratum I pottery is contemporary to Megiddo Stratum III, dated to the 7th century BCE (discussed below).

Tel Kabri

Although the present paper is not concerned with sites located close to the coast (discussed in Thareani 2016a), Tel Kabri has been included because it was not discussed in Thareani’s study. This site is located near Akko, whose territory was annexed by the Assyrians (Na’aman 1994; Radner 2006). The end of Tel Kabri’s Stratum E4 was brought about by the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 BCE (Lehmann 2002). A small fortress was built soon after (Stratum E3), which seems to have experienced several assaults. The excavator proposed the end of Stratum E3 *c.* 660 BCE, under King Ashurbanipal (669–631 BCE). In the following Stratum, E2, a new fortress was built with a triple casemate wall system. Stratum E2 may, in turn, have been destroyed in 644 BCE, when Ashurbanipal suppressed a local revolt. After this event the fortress was quickly rebuilt before it was ultimately destroyed by the Babylonians at the very end of the 7th century BCE. Most of the Assyrian-style pottery came from Strata E3 and E2 (Lehmann 2002: 85–87).

Survey data

The Upper Galilee Survey was published in Frankel *et al.* (2001). The surveyors could not establish a distinction between sites occupied in the 8th century BCE and those whose occupation continued or started in the 7th century BCE. Their results, therefore, cannot be used to show continuation of occupation during the Assyrian period. It is noticeable, however, that about 80% of the Iron Age II (10th through 7th century BCE) sites survived into the Persian period (Frankel *et al.* 2001: 128). Whether this indicates continuity of occupation during the 7th century BCE is not clear.

More information is available from the survey conducted in the Akko area, in which the site of Tel Kabri (discussed above) lies. Here, continuity of occupation can be observed after the Assyrian conquest, and, according to Lehmann, ‘a high degree of integration under a central administration’ (Lehmann 2001: 97) was revealed by the data.

Lower Galilee

Tel 'En Zippori and its surroundings

Tel 'En Zippori was destroyed during the Assyrian campaigns. A small site located about 300 metres north-west of 'En Zippori and excavated during a salvage operation, yielded a few walls built directly on the bedrock and pottery dating to the 7th century BCE (Oshri and Gal 2010). According to the excavators, this small site represents archaeological evidence for a re-occupation of this area in the aftermath of the Assyrian conquest.

Horbat 'Ofrat, a small site located about 9 km north-west of Tel 'En Zippori, was also investigated during a salvage operation (Alexandre 2019). Structures and pottery dated to various periods were uncovered, including a few walls and pottery dating to the 7th century BCE (Stratum X) (Alexandre 2019: 74). The pottery evidence suggests that there was a significant Iron Age occupation at the site, which came to an end during the first half of the 7th century BCE (Alexandre 2019: 85). The site seems to have survived the Assyrian conquest and continued afterwards.

Meagre evidence for a 7th century BCE occupation also comes from a site near Yiftachael, located about 4.5 km north-west of Tel 'En Zippori (Gal 2009).

Megiddo

Megiddo Stratum IVA was likely destroyed during Tiglath-Pileser III's campaigns, although the excavators did not identify a clear destruction layer (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 62). Nevertheless, the city was completely levelled and re-planned by the Assyrians in order to suit its new role as the capital of the province of *Magiddû*, which encompassed the Galilee, the Jezreel and the Beth-Shean valleys (Na'aman 1995; Radner 2006). The construction of Megiddo Stratum III can, potentially, be attributed to Sargon II (Peersmann 2000). The new city was designed with an orthogonal street system, surrounded by a wall which had remained in use since the previous Stratum IVA (Herzog 1992: 256). The main public and administrative buildings were located to the north (Area D) (Lamon and Shipton 1939: fig. 89), with other non-domestic buildings being found at the southern edge of the city (Peersmann 2000: fig. 22.3). Most of the city was occupied by domestic buildings; accounting for around 75% of the total available space (Reich 1992). These houses were most likely inhabited by people that Sargon II had deported from other areas of the Empire (Peersmann 2000).

The high percentage of domestic buildings may indicate that the majority of the inhabitants were employed in the specialized production of secondary products (e.g., food, textile, weapons) under the control of the provincial administration.

Tel Jezreel

At Tel Jezreel, located about 5 km north-east of Megiddo, remains of a small settlement were found above the 8th century BCE enclosure (Franklin 2019). Four late Iron Age burials were excavated, one of which was equipped with an Assyrian-style clay bathtub coffin (G.2000), while another (G.1260) yielded a 7th century BCE 'alabaster' palette (Franklin 2019: 200–02; Ussishkin and Woodhead 1997: 32–40; Yezerki 2013). Franklin suggested that this small settlement may have served as a *bīt mardīte* ('road-house') on the way to Megiddo, an official outpost in charge of providing provisions for the army, envoys and transport animals (Franklin 2019: 207; Radner 2014b: 73). It has been suggested that the winery installation, uncovered in the vicinity of Tel Jezreel, may have been connected to the site's role as a *bīt mardīte* (Franklin *et al.* 2020).

Tel Qiri

Located about 9 km north-west of Megiddo, Tel Qiri has yielded 7th century BCE remains in Strata V–VI, in Area D (Ben-Tor and Portugali 1987: 62–67). No destruction layers could be identified, but the settlement underwent a clear change between Stratum VIIA (8th century BCE) and Strata V–VI. An Assyrian-style ceramic bottle was found close to the site surface (Ben-Tor and Portugali 1987: 65). In Area C, Stratum V, a large public building was excavated; its pottery can be dated to the early 7th century BCE (Ben-Tor and Portugali 1987: 103–10).

Yoqne'am

Yoqne'am is located c. 11 km north-west of Megiddo. The 7th century BCE layer (Stratum XI) was in a very poor state of preservation (Ben-Tor *et al.* 2005: 218–19). Nevertheless, it is clear that the site was inhabited at that time, though, as some ovens had been installed on the old city wall, it does not appear to have been fortified. A structure, Building I, belonging to Stratum XI, was built directly on top of the older Building II of Stratum XII (Iron Age IIB) (Ben-Tor *et al.* 2005: 218–19).

Tel Qashish

A few kilometres north of Yoqne'am, at Tel Qashish Area A, Stratum IIB was attributed to Iron Age III.

No destruction layer was detected before this stratum. Here, massive walls were found which may have belonged to a large structure, not fully excavated (Ben-Tor *et al.* 2003: 352–53). In Area B, a large structure made of several spacious units was found close to the site surface and dated to Iron Age II–III (corresponding to Strata III and IIB in Area A) (Ben-Tor *et al.* 2003: 370–72): this piece of evidence points to a continuation of use from the 8th into the 7th century BCE.

Tel Rekhesh

Unlike the previous sites that cluster around Megiddo, Tel Rekhesh is located more towards the east, about 15 km east of modern Nazareth. In Area F, a large building was partially exposed, yielding finds dating to the 7th and 6th centuries BCE (Hasegawa 2020: 36). The excavators concluded that the building could have been founded during the Assyrian period (7th century BCE) and reused during the Neo-Babylonian period (6th century BCE), or, alternatively, it could have been founded during the latter period: both possibilities remain open (Hasegawa 2020; Hasegawa *et al.* 2018).

Survey data

The Lower Galilee survey revealed a dramatic settlement decline during Iron Age III (Gal 1992; 2009). No Assyrian or Assyrianizing pottery was found, and the 8th century BCE sites appear to have been destroyed or abandoned. It seems, from these data, that the Lower Galilee suffered a heavier decline than the Upper Galilee, with only 25 Iron Age II sites out of 57 (43%) showing continuity into the Persian period (Gal 1992: table 2). This picture is slightly modified by the survey conducted in the western Jezreel Valley, in the area around Megiddo. Here, 67 Iron Age II sites have been identified, while 72 have been found dating to the Persian period: most of the Iron Age II sites continued to be occupied during the Persian period (Finkelstein *et al.* 2006: 770).

The Jordan Valley

The site of Beth Shean, in the northern Jordan Valley, suffered a violent destruction at the time of the Assyrian conquests (Stratum P7); there followed a short period of activity when new floors and scanty walls were built, perhaps in the last decades of the 8th century BCE (Stratum P6) (Mazar 2008a: 1621). About 6.5 km south-east of Beth-Shean, during the construction of a road, Assyrian-style objects connected to a burial were found at Tel Qitaf (Amiran 1959): a stone tripod bowl, a stone bowl and clay

bath-tub coffin (Squitieri 2017: 51; Stern 2001: 40). The site does not seem to have been investigated further.

About 4 km south of Beth-Shean, the site of Tel Rehov also suffered destruction by the Assyrians (Stratum III) (Mazar 2008b). In the layer following this destruction (Stratum II), graves were found in Areas A and B. Burial 1135, in Area A, yielded an Assyrian-shaped bottle, found next to the skeleton (Mazar and Ahituv 2011: 267). In Area B, burial 8200 produced the skeleton of a young male of possible northern Syrian or eastern Anatolian origins (based on skull analysis), who had been buried with a long iron sword, an inscribed West Semitic seal, an Assyrian-shaped bottle, an Assyrian-shaped bronze bowl, and some other metal items, including a small fibula (Mazar and Ahituv 2011: 269). Burial 3226 in Area B contained an Assyrian-shaped bottle near the skull. Burial 8209, also in Area B, contained the remains of a child, again buried with an Assyrian-shaped bottle (Mazar and Ahituv 2011: 269). According to the excavator, these graves may have been for Assyrian soldiers or officials; the child burial points to the presence of their families at the site (Mazar and Ahituv 2011: 274). No evidence for a settlement or an administrative complex of the Assyrian period was found in the excavated areas of Tel Rehov, but it is possible that this occupation was on the top of the mound, a situation similar to Hazor (Mazar and Ahituv 2011: 274).

The site of Tell el-Hammah, about 12 km south of Beth Shean, yielded at least six occupational phases along Terrace M that have been ascribed to Iron Age III (Cahill and Tarler 1993: 561). Among the buildings uncovered, which had been erected on 8th century BCE structures, one had walls 1 metre wide. A small section of this building's plaster floor was uncovered; a cobble pavement was laid down in front of its eastern façade (Cahill and Tarler 1993: 561).

Survey data

Survey data are available for the southern Jordan Valley, where, during the Iron Age III, the population was, apparently, very sparse and almost no Iron Age III sites have been found. This very sparse occupation persisted throughout the Persian period (Zertal and Bar 2017: 89).

Samaria region

Northern Samaria

The city of Samaria, capital of the Kingdom of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians in 720 BCE and

transformed into the main centre of the newly created province of *Samerina*. Unlike Megiddo III, however, the archaeological remains of such a transformation are scanty. This scarcity is most likely due to construction undertaken in the Persian period, which heavily damaged the 7th century BCE layers (Tappy 2007).

Nevertheless, an Assyrian seal, a stela attributed to Sargon II and a cuneiform tablet addressed to the local governor, were found at the site (Avigad 1993). Assyrian-style ceramics were collected from Building Period VII, which originated in the middle of the 7th century BCE; this does not, however, represent a new phase of construction, rather a thick layer of debris (Stern 2015; Tappy 2007).

To the north and west of the city of Samaria, within a distance of *c.* 20–25 km, several small sites have been identified yielding finds which can be assigned to the 7th century BCE. These are discussed below.

At Tel Dothan, in Area L and Area A, several burials cutting the 8th century BCE levels, based on the material they yielded, were dated to the late 8th–early 7th century BCE (Master *et al.* 2005; Yezerski 2013). Among them, an adult skeleton buried with an Assyrian Palace Ware bowl in Area A12; an infant burial in Area 112 accompanied by an Assyrian bottle jar, plus six more burials belonging to the same period (Master *et al.* 2005: 112–13).

At Khirbet Qrud, a rectangular central courtyard and many water cisterns were identified in association with Iron Age III pottery (70%), including six sherds of wedge-impressed bowls (Itach *et al.* 2017).

At Khirbet el-Haj Hamadan, courtyards, stone walls and many cisterns were observed in association with pottery from Iron Age III (60%) and the Persian period (10%) (Itach *et al.* 2017).

At Jellamet Wusta, architecture similar to that seen at Megiddo III was found (wide courtyards surrounded by halls) in association with pottery belonging to Iron Age III. The architecture suggests that this site was possibly a small administrative centre (Zertal 2003) (Fig. 3.A). At nearby Merajjim, there is architecture that may be connected to the Assyrian presence, although the pottery is mostly dated to the Persian period (Zertal 2003).

At el-Qa'adeh, pottery belonging to Iron Age III (20%) and the Persian period (70%) was found in association with a large complex (*c.* 70 × 70 m) composed of a wide inner courtyard surrounded by rooms (Zertal 2003: fig. 9). An outer wall protected the entrance, with an underground cistern located on the opposite side. Iron arrowheads of Assyrian type were also reported (Zertal 2003: 393). This site has been interpreted as a military camp (Fig. 3.B).

At Tell el-Far'ah North (ancient Tirzah), the excavator attributed Level VIIe to the 7th century BCE (Chambon 1984: 47–48). He states that following the destruction of Level VIId, the city was quickly re-occupied and 'Palace 148' of Level VIId was reused without major modifications. To the north of it, a new building was erected (Locus 112) measuring 10 × 8 m. The excavator proposed that the site became an Assyrian garrison.

At Wadi Seiyad, all of the ceramics were dated to Iron Age III. Five sherds of a wedge-impressed bowl were also found (Itach *et al.* 2017). Terrace walls and a single cistern were recorded, without any building remains (Zertal 2004: Site No. 241, 476–77).

At Arqan Allawi, several water cisterns, a terrace wall and a small rectangular building were found; three-fifths of the ceramics were dated to Iron Age III, two-fifths to the Persian period. Six sherds of wedge-impressed bowls were collected (Itach *et al.* 2017).

At Kedumim, the excavations could not establish a clear stratigraphy. The pottery seems to belong to the end of the Iron Age, probably from the 7th century BCE, and the Persian period (Tavger 2020: 188).

Shechem Stratum VI is dated to the period following the Assyrian conquest (Campbell 2002: 295–99). At the East Gate, evidence for re-fortification was found, and domestic facilities were erected inside the fortifications. These domestic structures ended in a violent destruction. The pottery from Stratum VI continues the previous tradition, but shows also influence from Mesopotamia (including locally made Assyrian Palace Ware). An inscribed seal found in a Hellenistic fill was assigned to Stratum VI based on palaeographic analysis (Campbell 2002: 295–99).

At Khirbet Umm Qatan, an Iron Age III complex was found, consisting of courtyards surrounded by rooms and halls, which may have covered, based on the architecture, an administrative function (Zertal 2003: 390) (Fig. 3.C).

South-eastern Samaria

At the site of Khirbet Meras ed-Din, a fort site was established in Iron Age III. An enclosure wall, about 400 m in length, surrounded an area of about 10 ha, protecting a northern fort, composed of two large courtyards, a southern fort, made of two courtyards surrounded by rooms, and winery installations (Zertal 2003: fig. 8) (Fig. 3.D). Wedge-impressed bowls were also found (Itach *et al.* 2017).

At Horvat 'Eli, a farmstead, potentially founded in the 8th century BCE and continuing during Assyrian rule, was uncovered: it is also possible that it was

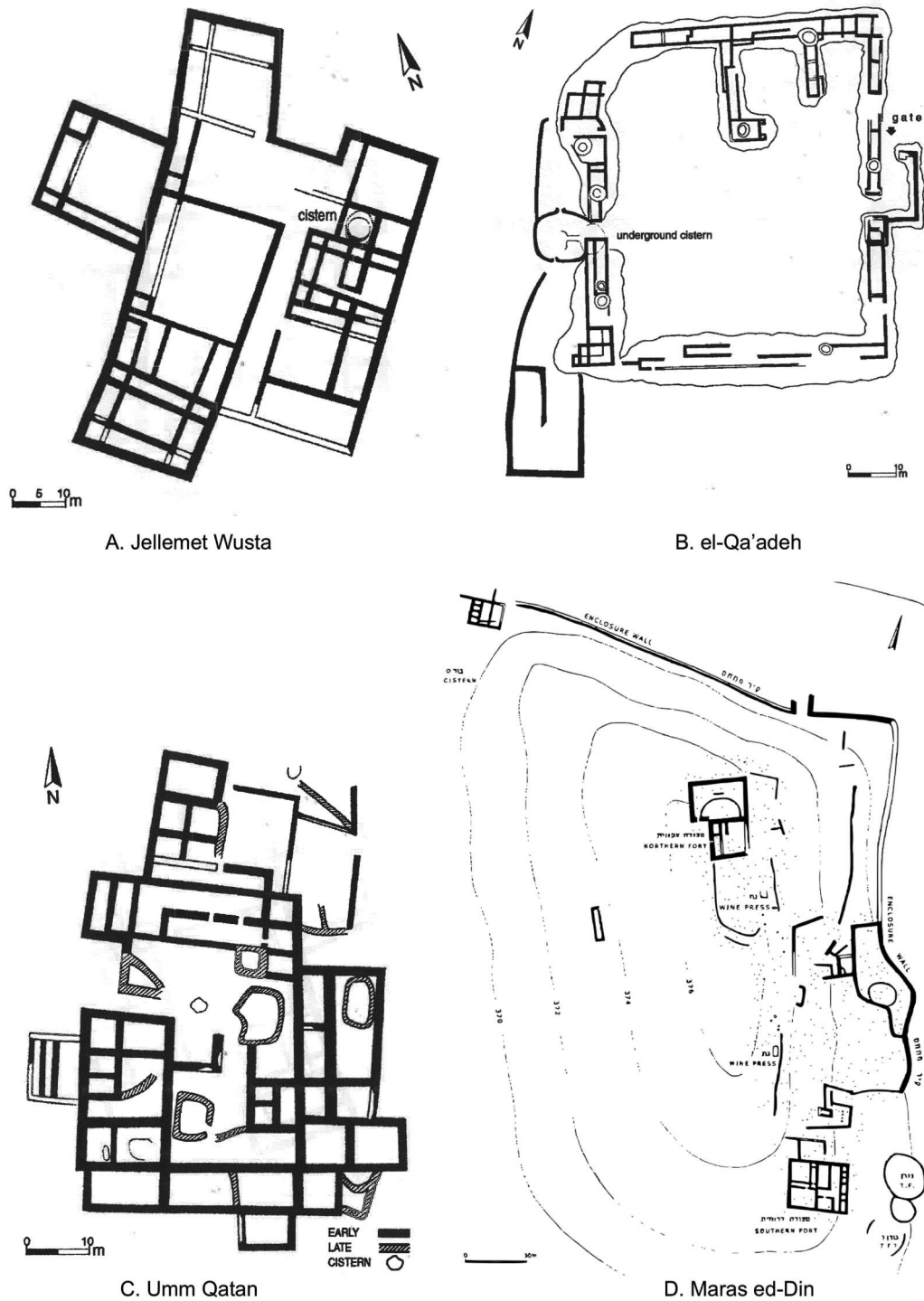


Figure 3 Plans of the sites Jellemet Wusta (A), el-Qa'adeh (B), Umm Qatan (C) and Meras ed-Din (D) (after Zertal 2003: figs 6–9).

founded at the end of Assyrian occupation (Hizmi 1998; Itach *et al.* 2018).

At Shiloh, after a period of abandonment, some activity was renewed in the 7th century BCE, meagre traces of which were identified in the eastern sector (Finkelstein *et al.* 1993: 389). At the end of

the Iron Age, some buildings were constructed on the natural terrace to the north of the mound (Finkelstein *et al.* 1993: 389). The settlement at Shiloh probably persisted after the Assyrian conquest (Liviyatan-Ben Arie and Hizmi 2014), but remains are sparse.

At Jibeit (or Giv'it), a new site was, potentially, established here in the 7th century BCE (Ilan and Dinur 1987); however, the evidence is not clear and it is possible that the new site is dated after the Assyrian period (Faust 2021: 81).

Finally, at Tell Sheikh Diyab a new site was founded in the late 8th century BCE: two fragments of wedge-impressed bowls were uncovered (Itach *et al.* 2017).

South-western Samaria

The area extending around Aphek and Gezer (part of the Samaria foothills) has already been recognized in previous literature as playing a strategic role under Assyrian administration (Aster and Faust 2015: 297–301; Faust 2021: 87–88; Finkelstein 1981). Gezer was likely destroyed by Tiglath-Pileser III (Dever 1993: 505). In the stratum following the destruction (Stratum V), architectural remains are scarce, although several walls were uncovered, including a cover-stone for a door socket in a typical Assyrian style (Reich and Brandl 1985: fig. 5), and a 2-m-deep silo (Ortiz and Wolff 2012: 16). The most notable finds are two cuneiform tablets reporting legal documents (Dever 1993: 505), four Assyrian-style cylinder seals and Assyrianizing pottery. All these finds point to the existence of an Assyrian administrative centre at Gezer (Ornan *et al.* 2013; Reich and Brandl 1985).

At Tel Hadid, located about 10 km north of Gezer, 7th century BCE pottery was found in a large building, along with a cuneiform tablet reporting a sale of property (Beit-Arieh 2008: 1758). A pillared building yielding 7th century BCE pottery was uncovered, along with another building also dating to the 7th century BCE, in which an olive-oil press and another cuneiform tablet were found (Beit-Arieh 2008: 1758). These finds point to the strategic importance of this site under Assyrian rule (Koch *et al.* 2020; 2021; Na'aman and Zadok 2000). The site's significance was further emphasised by Aster, who suggested the presence of a *bīt mardīte* ('road-house') near Tel Hadid (Aster 2015), indicating the site's important role in the transportation networks. Orbiting around Gezer and Tel Hadid, are the small sites of Rosh Ha'ayin and Horbat Avimor; located to the north and south of Gezer respectively. They appear to have been farm-sites occupied during Iron Age III (Avner-Levy and Torge 1999; Golani 2005; Shadman *et al.* 2015). To them, should be added another 19 excavated Iron Age III farmsteads, also located in the Aphek-Gezer area: their reports have yet to be fully published (Faust 2021: 87).

Survey data

The survey data from the Samaria region show an overall decline in settlements in the transition from Iron Age II to Iron Age III. In the northern part, the Manasseh area, 95 sites have been dated to Iron Age III, against 238 to Iron Age II (Zertal 1993: 1312). Overall, Iron Age III sites tend to concentrate around the cities of Samaria, Shechem and Tel el-Far'ah North.

In the southern part, the Ephraim area, no distinction could be made between Iron Age II and Iron Age III sites, but the decline is, nevertheless, visible, as out of 190 Iron Age II sites only 90 survived into the Persian era (Finkelstein 1993; Tavger 2020; Zertal 2003; 2008). Note that the same trend has been observed in the southern Jordan Valley (see above). The exception is represented by the Aphek-Gezer area, located to the south-west, where a settlement surge has been observed during Iron Age III (Finkelstein 1981). The distribution of wedged-impressed bowls, diagnostic for the 7th century BCE, is wider than the Iron Age III sites identified in the Samaria surveys, but they seem to follow a similar pattern, as most of the finds concentrate north of the city of Samaria (Itach *et al.* 2017: figs 8–9).

Table 1 provides an overview of excavation and survey findings across the study area. In examining excavation data, it becomes evident that many discoveries stem from salvage excavations, primarily yielding pottery fragments and sparse artefacts datable to the 7th century BCE. However, notable exceptions arise in the form of isolated public structures, burials, and agricultural and military installations displaying Assyrian influences or originating under the era of Assyrian rule. From the 8th century BCE, a discernible shift in the urban landscape becomes apparent, with Assyrian provinces now dominated by farmsteads, modest military outposts, and small administrative centres. Tel Dan, Megiddo and Samaria emerge as focal points, having undergone, at least the latter two, a profound urban reorganization under Assyrian governance, signifying their pivotal economic and administrative significance. This transformation is striking, as the heterogeneous urban fabric of the 8th century BCE, characterized by diverse sites of varying sizes, gives way to a landscape dominated by three principal cities alongside numerous smaller centres.

Survey data corroborate this trend, indicating an overall decline in settlements within the Galilee and Samaria regions, including the Jordan Valley, during the transition from the 8th to the 7th century BCE,

Table 1 The archaeological evidence collected for this study summarized

| REGION – SITE | EXCAVATION EVIDENCE | SURVEY DATA |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Upper Galilee | | Occupation in the 7th century BCE not clear, with the exception of the Akko region. |
| Tel Dan | Urban replanning — provincial centre | |
| Horvat Omrit | Scarce | |
| Tahunat et Tabkha | Scarce | |
| Hazor | Possible inner citadel or governor's house | |
| Ayelet HaSahar | Residency or fortress | |
| Bethsaida | Scarce | |
| Kinneret | Fort or 'Assyrian palace' | |
| Tel Kabri | Small fortress | |
| Lower Galilee | | Settlement decline, with the exception of the area around Megiddo. |
| Near Tel 'En Zippori | Scarce | |
| Horbat 'Ofrat | Some architecture | |
| Yiftachael | Scarce | |
| Megiddo | Urban replanning — provincial capital | |
| Tel Jezreel | Burials with Assyrian influences — <i>bit mardite?</i> | |
| Tel Qiri | Public building | |
| Yoqne'am | Public building | |
| Tel Qashish | Two large public structures | |
| Tel Rekhesh | Public building (7th or 6th century BCE) | |
| Jordan Valley | | Settlement decline persisting till the end of the Persian era. |
| Beth Shean | Scarce | |
| Tel Qitaf | Burial with Assyrian influences | |
| Tel Rehov | Burials with Assyrian influences | |
| Tell el-Hammah | Public building | |
| Northern Samaria | | Overall settlement decline across the whole Samaria region, with the exception of the Aphek-Gezer area (to the south-west). |
| Samaria | Urban replanning? — provincial capital | |
| Tel Dothan | Burials with Assyrian influences | |
| Khirbet Qrud | Courtyard with water cisterns | |
| Khirbet el-Haj Hamadan | Courtyard with water cisterns | |
| Jellamet Wusta | Public building — possible administrative centre | |
| Merajjim | Scarce | |
| el-Qa'adeh | Courtyard with water cisterns — military camp? | |
| Tell el-Far'ah North | Public building — Assyrian garrison? | |
| Wadi Seiyad | Scarce | |
| Arqan Allawi | Water cisterns and a building | |
| Kedumim | Scarce | |
| Shechem | Domestic structures | |
| Khirbet Umm Qatan | Courtyards with rooms — administrative centre? | |
| South-eastern Samaria | | |
| Khirbet Meras ed-Din | Fort site with enclosure wall | |
| Horvat 'Eli | Farm site | |
| Shiloh | Scarce | |
| Jibeit | Scarce | |
| Tell Sheikh Diyab | Scarce | |
| South-western Samaria | | |
| Gezer | Cuneiform tablets and Assyrianizing items | |
| Tel Hadid | Cuneiform tablet and public buildings | |
| Rosh Ha'ayin | Farm site | |
| Horbat Avimor | Farm site | |
| Further 19 sites | Farm sites | |

albeit with localized deviations. The Lower Galilee appears to have experienced a more pronounced decline compared to the Upper Galilee, with the west Jezreel area demonstrating continuity, likely attributed to the influence of Megiddo. Similarly, in the Samaria region, a decline in settlements between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE is observed, with surveyed settlements clustering to the north and east of Samaria city. Conversely, towards the south-east and the Jordan Valley, a notable decrease in settlements

is evident during the 7th century BCE. Noteworthy is the anomaly of a settlement surge in the Samaria foothills towards the south-west, between Aphek and Gezer, contrary to the prevailing trend.

These findings underscore a significant transformation in settlement patterns and urban dynamics during the period of Assyrian rule, re-shaping the socio-political and economic landscape of the region, an interpretation of which will be offered below.

Discussion of the evidence: ruralization and 'islands of control'

Collectively, the findings from both excavations and surveys unveil two crucial observations. Firstly, in the aftermath of the Assyrian devastations that befell many cities in the Kingdom of Israel, the subsequent occupations of the 7th century BCE are notably small, as revealed by the excavations (Table 1). Survey data show an overall decline in the number of settlements across most of the provincial areas, with some local exceptions. Overall, the landscape of the Assyrian provinces appears more ruralized than previously. There are notable exceptions in the form of Tel Dan, Megiddo and Samaria: these stand out as the sole remaining major cities exerting dominance over the territory in the aftermath of the Assyrian conquests.

Secondly, a distinct pattern emerges in the distribution of sites during the 7th century BCE, with sites forming clusters or 'islands' where the archaeological evidence underscores Assyrian territorial control (Fig. 4). These 'islands' are formed by small sites organized around either, a provincial centre (Tel Dan), a provincial capital (Megiddo, Samaria), or a local administrative centre. Such small sites may have functioned as farmsteads, small forts, or outposts controlling the communication roads, all of which depended on their respective administrative centres.

In the Upper Galilee, this clustering phenomenon can be observed around the two centres of Tel Dan and Hazor, each surrounded by smaller sites. Tel Kabri was most likely associated with the 'island' rotating around Akko and Tel Keisan, the latter being an important administrative centre under Assyrian rule, as evidenced by the texts found there (Zilberg 2015). The situation north of Kinneret Lake is less clear, although the site of Kinneret itself, where a public building (a fort or even an 'Assyrian palace') was unearthed, may have functioned as the local administrative centre. In the Lower Galilee, a clear cluster emerges around Megiddo, the capital city of the Assyrian province. The orbiting sites around Megiddo, Tel Qashish, Yoqne'am and Tel Qiri, may have functioned as rural settlements for agricultural production, while Tel Jezreel possibly functioned as a *bīt mardūte* for the control of the communication road. The small sites of Horbat 'Ofrat, Yiftachel and the site near Tel 'En Zippori did not yield much evidence concerning the 7th century BCE. They may have been part of Megiddo's cluster. Tel Rekhesh, where a public building could be dated to the 7th or the 6th century BCE,

may have formed its own cluster more towards the east.

In the northern Jordan Valley, another cluster can be observed as the Assyrian influence is visible at Tel Qitaf, Tel Rehov and Tell el-Hammah. Burials with Assyrian influence at Tel Qitaf and Tel Rehov may indicate the presence of a settlement where a more substantial Assyrian-period occupation may be located (Mazar and Ahituv 2011). Perhaps this settlement was on Tel Rehov itself, or at Tell el-Hammah, where a large 7th century BCE building was unearthed.

Moving towards the Samaria region, there is a concentration of 7th century BCE sites gravitating around the city of Samaria, the capital city of the Assyrian province. The 'island' around the city of Samaria seems to extend as far as Shechem and Umm Qatan to the east, Kedumim to the south and Tel Dothan to the north. The sites gravitating around Samaria were farmsteads, military outposts (el-Qa'adeh and Khirbet Umm Qatan), or small administrative centres (Jellamet Wusta) (Zertal 2003). In the city of Samaria itself Assyrian-period architecture is not so substantial as in Megiddo III, but this may have been due to later building works.

Towards the south-east, another 'island', encompassing Khirbet Meras ed-Din, Horvat 'Eli, Shilo, Jibeit and Tell Sheikh Diyab, may be identified. Here, it is possible to suggest that Khirbet Meras ed-Din, interpreted as a fort, was the main centre around which the other sites gravitated. Finally, the Aphek-Gezer 'island' which extended around Gezer and Tel Hadid. The cuneiform texts unearthed at both sites, coupled with 7th century BCE architecture and finds, show the importance of this area when under Assyrian administration, for safeguarding the provincial border and collecting tribute from the nearby vassal states (Aster and Faust 2018; Brandl and Itach 2019). The excavated sites of Horbat Avimor and Rosh Ha'ayin, in addition to the small sites in this area identified in survey and excavation, likely gravitated around Gezer and Tel Hadid.

It is noteworthy that in her study of the coastal area from Tyre to Gaza, Y. Thareani (2016a) reached a similar conclusion: although here the political situation is more complex because the coastal area was not annexed entirely by the Assyrians and some sites remained under indirect control, nevertheless, the author noted that the 'Assyrian military invasions [of the coastal area] were followed by the formation of 'Assyrian islands'. Thus, the nature of Assyrian control did not involve vast swathes of land but

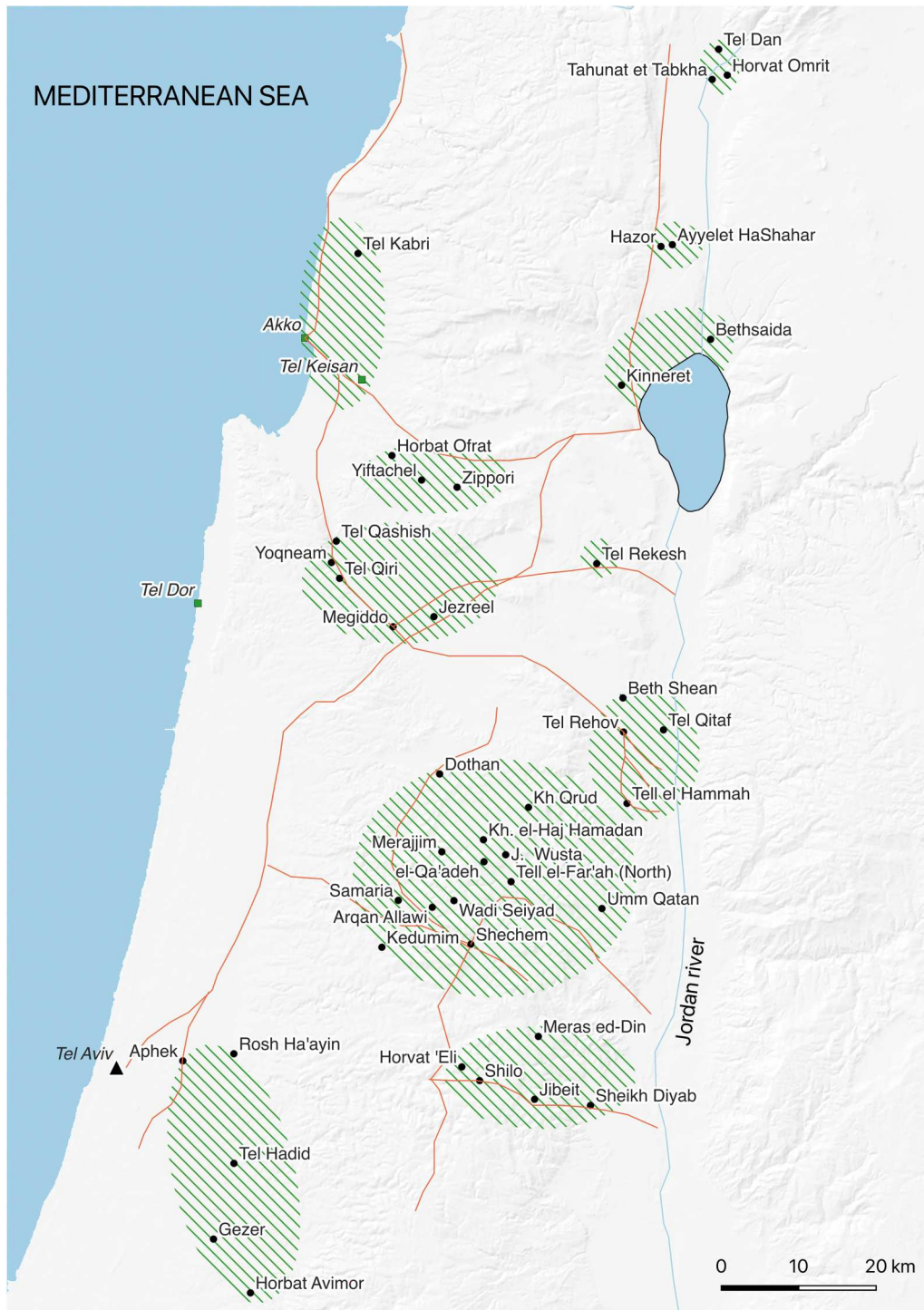


Figure 4 The ‘islands of control’ (lines in a hash pattern) in the Assyrian provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*. Continuous lines show the Iron Age road network, (after Dorsey 1991: maps 10–12 [only the main roads have been used]). Squares indicate sites mentioned but not discussed in the text.

rather a network of communications among Assyrian strongholds’ (Thareani 2016a: 96).

Before delving into the implications associated with ruralization and the emergence of ‘islands of control’ when understanding the economic and political

function of the Assyrian provinces, it is worth highlighting the interconnected nature of these identified clusters. As depicted in Fig. 4, the ‘islands’ discussed above seem to have been interconnected via main roads, which also linked them to the coastal area.

The economic role of the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* in the light of the results

In the preceding section two main aspects emerged from our investigation into the settlement patterns within the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*. These aspects are: an extensive ruralization of the landscape, alongside the emergence of clusters of sites, termed ‘islands of control’, spread across the provincial expanse.

To grasp the significance of this phenomenon, it is worth revisiting the evidence elucidated at the outset of this paper concerning the impact of agricultural colonization as implemented by the Assyrians in the Upper Tigris, Jazira and Orontes regions.

In those territories, the proliferation of small settlements across the landscape, coupled with the near disappearance of medium-sized sites, and the strategic concentration of settlements around prominent provincial hubs, have been interpreted as direct outcomes of the imperial agricultural policy. With analogous settlement patterns manifesting across the territories of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, it is plausible to infer that these provinces were subjected to a territorial strategy, crafted to effectively manage the agricultural economy. A significant difference, distinguishing *Magiddû* and *Samerina* from other imperial provinces, is that the survey data from these regions seem to suggest that settlements not only diminished in size, but also decreased in number, at least for the most part, with only a few exceptions (namely the Akko region, the Megiddo area and the Apeh-Gezer area). Hence, the crucial question looms: who reaped the benefits of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*’s agricultural economy? While the northern provinces, intricately linked to the Assyrian heartland, could readily channel agricultural surpluses to Assyria, the core of the empire, where the huge and ‘hungry’ Assyrian capital cities lay (Parker 2013: 133–36), such logistics were likely unfeasible for the distant south-western provinces (see Faust 2021: 271). This may explain the settlement decline observed in many parts of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*: their agricultural output was not conceived to serve the needs of the large cities located in the imperial core area.

Nonetheless, the ruralized expanses of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* could have served as vital sources to sustain the local urban population, including administrators, mainly residing in Tel Dan, Megiddo and Samaria, as well as the Assyrian military apparatus. The provisioning of sustenance to the military deserves particular attention. Administrative records underscore that the regular supply of provisions

emerged as a paramount responsibility of Assyrian governors across the empire (Fales and Rigo 2014; Marriott and Radner 2015). Historical assessments indicate that the Assyrian army made recurrent forays into the southern Levant every six years, a cadence necessitating reliable logistical support (Bagg 2013). This frequent presence of the Assyrian military in the southern Levantine provinces is conceivable, as these provinces represented a strategic buffer area against the Phoenician and Philistine cities on the coast, the growing Egyptian power under the 25th dynasty and the desert tribes, including the Arabs, who roamed the desert. During the 7th century BCE, the rulers of Assyria strategically leveraged the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* as logistical bases for military campaigns (Radner 2008: 308), facilitating both offensive manoeuvres into surrounding territories and the reception of supplies.

If the ruralization of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* was geared towards supporting the local population and the army, the observed clustering of settlements not only expedited the flow of agricultural produce to the administrative hubs, but also helped the efficacy of military oversight. Both aspects would have also benefitted from the road system interconnecting such ‘islands’.

According to a viewpoint championed primarily by A. Faust (2021) and echoed by other scholars (Itach *et al.* 2023), the territorial structure observed within the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* hints at a pervasive economic downturn, purportedly stemming from what is construed as deliberate neglect by the Assyrian administration towards these peripheral domains of the empire. Especially when compared with the territorial organization of the previous Kingdom of Israel, the reduced economic output of the Assyrian provinces becomes evident (Faust 2011). However, the economic output of these provinces can be explained when taking into account the different political and economic perspectives that distinguish a regional state, such as the Kingdom of Israel, from a large empire. Unlike a regional kingdom, the Assyrian Empire of the 7th century BCE could tap into various sources of agricultural goods scattered throughout its vast territory (Ponchia 2014): it had the ability to tune the economic output of a particular area towards specific needs. The provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina* generated agricultural produce that supplied the local population, maintained the soldiers stationed in the area, as well as supplying the Assyrian army which frequently crossed the region. Rather than a lack of interest in the economic potential of the southern Levantine

provinces, what is observed is a strategic use of local resources to serve the imperial agenda effectively.

Conclusions

The Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel during the late 8th century BCE triggered significant shifts in the region's settlement patterns. This study has illustrated that the Assyrian territorial strategy implemented in the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, established upon the remnants of the Kingdom of Israel, manifested as clusters of sites, termed 'islands of control'. These 'islands' comprised a rural landscape overseen by the principal cities of Tel Dan, Megiddo and Samaria. This territorial approach mirrors a broader *modus operandi* adopted by the Assyrians across their empire to manage agricultural production. In *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, agricultural yields primarily served the local populace, including administrators and the Assyrian military.

Two final considerations need to be made. First, it is important to bear in mind that the ruralization process is a complex phenomenon influenced by diverse economic and political dynamics. In certain areas outside the Assyrian Empire's direct control, such as the Judean Desert (Judah), the Eastern Kerak Plateau (Moab) and the southern Jordanian Plateau (Edom), the Late Iron Age saw the development of a more rural environment (Bienkowski 2023; Mashiach and Davidovich 2023; Porter *et al.* 2014; Routledge 2004: 199–201). Unlike the provinces of *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, however, this transformation did not occur at the expense of pre-existing large- and medium-sized settlements. In *Magiddû* and *Samerina*, there is a distinct shift from a more-urbanized to a more-ruralized landscape under Assyrian rule, contrasting with the gradual settlement expansion observed in the aforementioned vassal state areas during the Late Iron Age. While the influence of the Assyrian Empire on settlement expansion in these vassal state regions cannot be entirely dismissed, as it may have spurred local policies to ensure tribute payments (Bienkowski 2023), other factors may have contributed to this phenomenon, although discussing them in detail exceeds the scope of this article (see e.g., Routledge 2004: 202–10 for a discussion regarding Moab).

The second consideration that deserves to be made, and is somewhat connected to the first, concerns the role of climate, something that could be addressed in future research. The fact that areas such as the northern Jordan Valley experienced settlement decline from the start of the 7th century BCE throughout the Persian period, only to recover in

the Hellenistic period, may indicate that, alongside the political and economic dynamics discussed in this paper, climate/environmental changes may also have played a role in the settlement patterns observed in some of the areas covered by this study.

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