

Yosef Garfinkel, Igor Kreimerman, Michael G. Hasel  
and Martin G. Klingbeil

# First impression on the urban layout of the last Canaanite city of Lachish: a view from the northeast corner of the site

## Introduction

The site of Lachish was extensively excavated in the past by three different expeditions. They uncovered major Late Bronze and Middle Bronze Age remains relating to the Canaanite city under the Iron Age layers. It is not our aim here to give a detailed review of these Canaanite levels. This had been done recently in a popular book summarizing the results of the first three expeditions (Ussishkin 2014). This introduction presents only in brief the basic activities and final publications of each expedition:

1. **Starkey's Expedition.** In the years 1932–1938 the British undertook a large scale expedition headed by James Lesley Starkey. After his tragic murder the results of the excavations were faithfully published by members of the expedition. Two volumes are dedicated to the Canaanite city: Lachish II: the Fosse Temple (Tufnell, Inge and Harding 1940) and Lachish IV: The Bronze Age (Tufnell 1958).
2. **Aharoni's Expedition.** In the years 1966 and 1968 a small scale project was directed by Yohanan Aharoni, on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University. He excavated inside and around the Persian Period Solar Shrine. From the Canaanite city only the last phase, Level VI, was uncovered. Since he excavated a rather limited area from this phase only a few fragmentary walls of domestic architecture were found (Aharoni 1975: Pl. 61).
3. **Ussishkin's Expedition.** In the years 1974 to 1994 a large scale project was directed by David Ussishkin, on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University. Canaanite remains from the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Bronze Age were uncovered (Ussishkin 2004), including a new temple from Level VI, designated as the “Acropolis Temple.”

The Fourth Expedition to Lachish took place between 2013–2017. The expedition was co-sponsored by the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Institute of Archaeology, Southern Adventist University, under the co-direction of Yosef Garfinkel, Michael G. Hasel, and Martin G. Klingbeil. Consortium

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**Yosef Garfinkel, Igor Kreimerman**, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem  
**Michael G. Hasel, Martin G. Klingbeil**, Southern Adventist University

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institutions include the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (Philippines), Oakland University, Virginia Commonwealth University (United States), and Seoul Jangsin University (Korea). The excavation work is undertaken in cooperation with the Israel Antiquities Authority, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and the Israel Exploration Society, and is affiliated with the American Schools of Oriental Research.

Four seasons of excavations took place during the summers of 2013–2016. The expedition excavated in three areas (Areas AA, BB, and CC) located in the northeast part of the site. Remains of Level VI, the last Canaanite city, were found in every area, but the most extensive remains were found in Area BB, which will be the topic of this essay. Since we are in an initial stage of research, our study will not present detailed analysis of stratigraphic observations, architectural plans, or pottery assemblages. Instead, we wish to present general impressions and conclusions that will provide a new understanding of the layout and planning of the Canaanite cities of Lachish and especially of Level VI.

## The vicinity of the city and the location of the city gates

Tel Lachish is situated on the bank of the Lachish river, at a point where the river makes a turn, and thus encircles the site from the east and north (Fig. 6.1). The river and the valley provide the city with a number of important advantages:

1. **Water.** Easy access to water is crucial for a city. A 40 meter-deep well was dug at the northeast corner of the site, most likely in the same way a deep water installation was cut down to the water table. Massive water installations are known from Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, and other sites. The water from these installations, however, were probably used for emergency situations, when the city came under siege. Furthermore, the dating of the well is unclear, Tufnell suggested cautiously a Bronze Age date (Tufnell 1953: 93), while Ussishkin advocated a dated not later than Level IV (Ussishkin 2004: 25). Thus, for regular daily life, as well as for herds of animals, the river was probably used as the main water resource.
2. **Agricultural fields.** The population most probably consisted of farmers who cultivated agricultural land around the city. The area around Lachish is quite hilly and the limestone bedrock is exposed on large parts of the area. Even today, with modern technologies like irrigation and extensive use of chemical fertilizers, the hills around the site are not cultivated. Modern agricultural activity in the vicinity is concentrated in the valleys making use of their alluvial soil. In the same way, the Canaanite agricultural activities had to be concentrated in the valley on both sides of the river.



**Fig. 6.1:** Map of Lachish and its close vicinity (after Ussishkin 2004, Fig. 13.1).

3. **Clay.** Most of the buildings in the city were built of mudbrick. The production of mudbricks requires clay and water, and the river is a constant supplier of both. A study of the mudbricks from the site showed that in many cases the materials originated from the alluvial soils down the slope (Rosen 2004). Taking into account the heavy burden of carrying tons of brick into the city, the river bank closest to the site must have been the preferred location of the people of Lachish for the manufacture of bricks.
4. **Road.** The Lachish River is naturally flowing from the hills of Hebron in the east to the costal plain and to Ashkelon in the west. Lachish is situated about one day's walk from Ashkelon (ca. 30 km) and one day's walk to Hebron (ca. 25 km). This was a most strategic location for one of the most important roads in

this part of the country. Even today there is a modern road leading from the coastal plain into the hills that passes by the mound.

With all these advantages, and without any clear resources on the opposite side of the site, the city was likely approached from the valley and the river in the northeast as this became the most important part of the tel. It would follow that the ideal location of the city gate should face the valley at this point where the city is closest to the river, that is the northeast corner of Tel Lachish (Fig. 6.1). Indeed, in this location there is a relatively moderate slope from the top of the tel to the valley. Even today, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority built in this location a path and steps leading to the site. In fact, the first map of Lachish, completed in 1932 by the Department of Antiquities of Palestine for the excavation permit of Starkey's expedition, marked at this point the only path leading up the tel.

As of 2016, the entrance to Second Millennium BCE Lachish (Levels VIII–VI) has not been found. This is in contrast to First Millennium BC Lachish (Levels IV–I), which used a massive gate construction near the southwest corner of the site. Ussishkin suggested that the Canaanite gates were also located near this spot, but had not been located yet (2014:227).

In the Iron Age, Lachish was a Judean city facing Philistia to the west and north. Thus, for strategic purposes the gate had been constructed as far away as possible from the road in the nearby valley, the point where the potential enemy was expected. In the Bronze Age, however, there was a different political landscape, and the valley connected the different Canaanite city states in the region. During this period, the ideal location for the Late Bronze Age gate (if there was a gate) would have been in the northeast corner of the site.

This was a key consideration in the research design of *The Fourth Expedition to Lachish* when we chose to excavate the northeast corner of the site (Fig. 6.2). Indeed no Bronze Age gate has been found, but a simple Iron Age gate was uncovered here connected with the city walls of Levels II and I. This new gate had no chambers or any other type of gate structure, only a 3-meter opening in the city's massive stone wall. This is clearly an official opening, as the city wall ends square on both sides, with massive stones well preserved on the north side of the opening (Fig. 6.3). Remains of a road, paved with flat stone slabs, was found abutting the city wall from outside, and adjacent to the southern opening. Thus, in addition to the western gate of Level II, where the famous Lachish Letters were found, the city had another gate leading down to the valley. We believe that when the Level I city wall was built in the Persian Period, the inhabitants kept this tradition and left an opening in the same location.

It is interesting that the British expedition mentioned a "blocking of a gate" in this area as well (Tufnell 1953, Pl. 11:3). Our expedition located this same blocked area during the initial survey season (Fig. 6.4). Our expedition, however, did not have the time for further investigations of this feature.

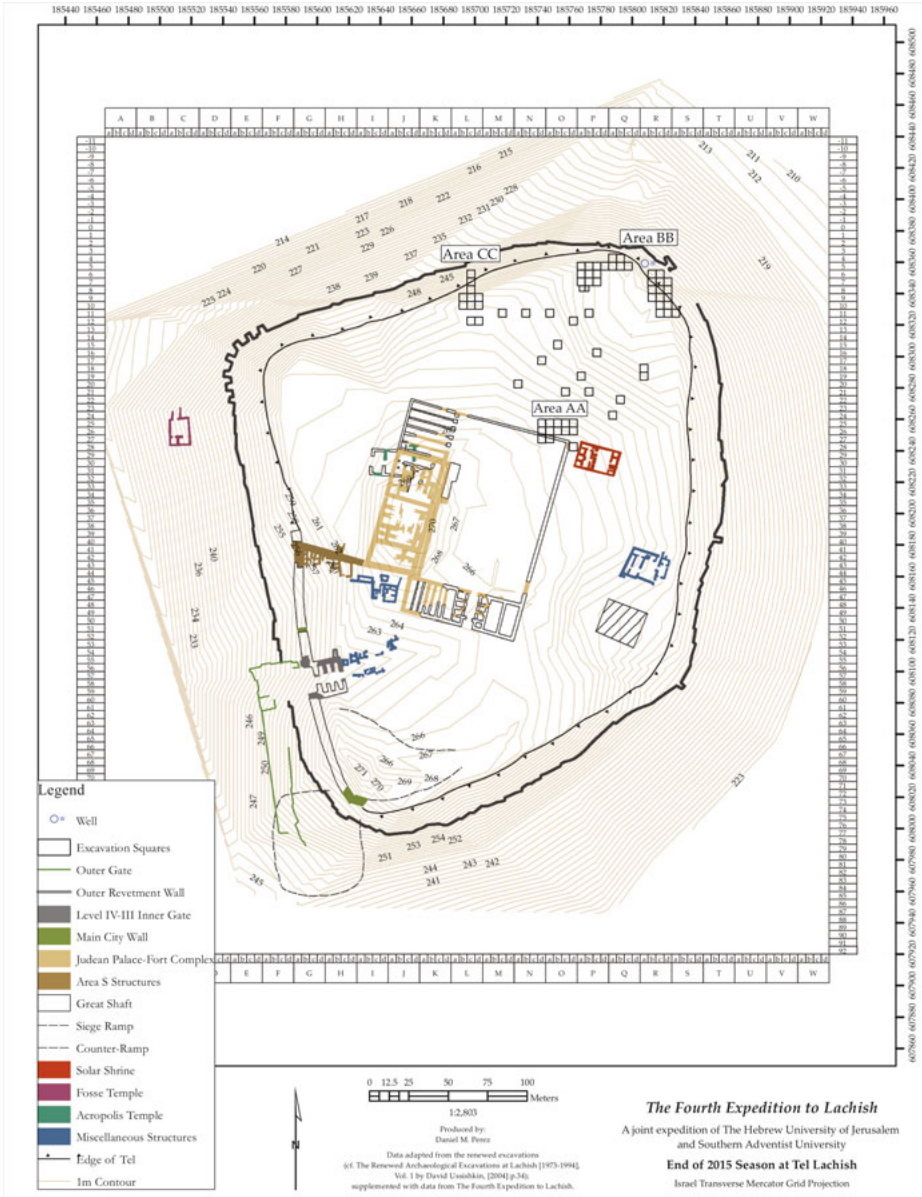


Fig. 6.2: Tel Lachish and the three new excavation areas (AA, BB and CC) as of the end of 2015 season.

To summarize this section, we suggest that based on the site's environs, the newly uncovered Iron Age gate, and the lack of known Late Bronze Age gates elsewhere at the site, that the entrance to the Canaanite city was located in the northeast corner of Lachish.



**Fig. 6.3:** A simple gate in the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, dated to Level II (Iron Age IIc) and Level I (Persian Period).

## The topography of area BB

Area BB is located in a large depression at the northeastern corner of the tel (Fig. 6.2). The gap in elevation between the highest point and the lowest point is ca. 15 meters. To the west in Area CC, at the top of the depression, remains of Level I were uncovered below topsoil, while in Area BB, at one point Level V was below topsoil. Slightly to the east no remains of Level V were preserved and Level VI was found directly below topsoil. This suggests that at some point in time a severe erosion event caused the collapse of this area of the mound and the depression was created. This depression enabled us to excavate Late Bronze Age remains just below the surface without the need to go first through the Iron Age remains and thus a large exposure of the Late Bronze Age levels was possible.

## “Lower City” and “Upper City”

In the confined area of Tel Lachish there are relatively lower areas on the north and east sides, while the southwest part of the site is higher (Fig. 6.2). In this elevated acropolis area the massive Iron Age Palace was built (Fig. 6.2). In the same





**Fig. 6.4:** The point designated by the British expedition as a “blocking of a gate” (Tufnell 1953, Pl. 11:3). The massive wall on the right side of the picture ends in a straight vertical line, indicating its edge. To the left there are poor stone walls, that blocked the area further to the south.

location the partly uncovered remains of the Middle Bronze Age palace were also found (Ussishkin 2004:140–168). It is interesting that the Level VI temple, designated by Ussishkin as the “Acropolis Temple,” is situated on the edge of the higher area, overlooking the lower part of the site toward the north (Ussishkin 2004:215–267). The floor of the main hall of the Acropolis Temple is at an absolute elevation of 266.88 m above sea level (Ussishkin 2004: Fig. 6.2), the floor of the pillared structure in Area S was at 258.68 m (Barkay and Ussishkin 2004: Fig. 8.35). The cache of bronze objects that was found below the Iron Age city gate in Area GE was found at elevation of 255.15–255.40 m (Ussishkin 2004: 626). Similarly, the threshold of the newly uncovered Late Bronze Age temple (see below) was in an elevation of 248.74 m and in a nearby building the floor was at an elevation of 246.22. This shows that the current topography of the tel is to some extent similar to the topography of the site in the Late Bronze Age. The northeastern corner of the city was the lowest point on the site in the Late Bronze Age, while the Acropolis Temple was constructed at the highest point.

It is well known that public structures were not only built to serve functional purposes but also to symbolize and communicate the power and the values of their builders and to transmit them to the population in the city, the neighboring villages and the passersby. One of the main factors that influenced this perception of the

structures is their location in the urban landscape (Rapoport 1976; Lawrence and Low 1990; Maran *et al.* 2006). The Acropolis Temple was a prominent building when approached from the lower parts of the site, located more than twenty meters higher than the other buildings, as might be expected from an Acropolis Temple. It communicated the power of the gods of the city and probably also of the ruling class that built it. If the entrance to the unfortified city was from the southwest corner, at the location of the Iron Age gates, the population would have entered the city in more or less the same height as the temple, and it would not have had an impressive visual impact on the people entering the city.

In the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, in the lower city, our expedition uncovered two public, monumental buildings: a citadel and a temple. The citadel is located on the eastern side of the corner, overlooking the valley. The temple is located on the northern side of the corner. The two buildings are located about 30 meters from each other.

## The citadel

As early as 1933 the British expedition uncovered a small segment of a massive stone wall in the northeast corner of Tel Lachish. It had been understood as part of the Iron Age fortifications built on top of a Late Bronze mudbrick wall (Tufnell 1953, Pl. 11:2). This wall was never excavated from the inside, so its length, date and function remained unclear. Our expedition cleaned and excavated areas around this wall from both, the outside and the inside (Figs. 6.5, 6.6). Now it is evident that it is a massive wall of 11 meters in length, built from large stones, standing for nearly 2 meters in height, and 1.5 meters in width.

The excavations from outside the wall clarified that the foundations of the wall were sunken inside foundation trenches, in the north and south. These foundation trenches were cut into an earlier, very massive Middle Bronze mudbrick building. After the construction of the wall, the foundation trenches were filled with small stones.

The excavations from inside the wall were carried out in a rather small test pit, adjacent to this massive wall from its west. To excavate a larger area here there is a need to dismantle the Iron Age city wall and the gate, mentioned above. At this stage of our work we have only excavated a relatively small test pit, inside the gate opening. The location and size of the test pit are dictated by the location and size of the gate opening (Fig. 6.7). At first, we uncovered under the Level II gate floor a layer characterized by Iron Age pottery, decorated by red slip and irregular hand burnish. These are remains of Level IV or V. Under this level, from the top of the massive stone wall, and for about half a meter down, destruction debris with only Late Bronze pottery was uncovered. The assemblage collected so far does not include imported Cypriote pottery, so it is probably dated to Level VI. Our excavations clarify that, *contra* to the earlier publication, this wall is not an Iron Age city wall





**Fig. 6.5:** The outer face of a massive stone wall in Area BB, on the eastern slope of the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, dated to the Late Bronze Age.



**Fig. 6.6:** Aerial photo of the massive stone wall in Area BB, on the eastern slope of the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, dated to the Late Bronze Age.



**Fig. 6.7:** Test pit dug under the Iron Age gate opening, exposing debris levels abutting the massive stone wall from inside the city.

built on top of Late Bronze remains, but a massive Late Bronze Age building, built on top of massive Middle Bronze building.

As most of the Late Bronze architecture at Lachish was built with mudbricks, this stone wall is outstanding in its monumental construction. Thus we suggest that Canaanite Lachish built a prominent citadel on the northeast corner of the site, at the closest point to the river. This massive stone building probably stood for a few floors as a symbol of power and to emphasize who is the landowner in this place. The monumental citadel was built in this location to see and to be seen. Every person and every caravan moving in the valley, below the city, could not ignore this landmark, and would have had to pay tributes to the king of Lachish.

## The temple

The second significant building located on the northern side of the northeast corner of Tel Lachish is a temple. It is dated to Level VI based on the pottery, stratigraphy and radiometric dates. Only the western side of the building survived since large parts of its eastern side was eroded downslope (Fig. 6.8). Nevertheless, the preserved parts of the building indicate the typical symmetrical plan of Canaanite temples, with two towers and two pillars on its façade. Such temples are known from



**Fig. 6.8:** Aerial photo of the temple in Area BB, on the northern edge of the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, dated to the Late Bronze Age (Level VI).

Hazor, Megiddo and elsewhere (Mazar 1992). Very rich assemblages of pottery and metal objects had been unearthed in the destruction debris of this building. Other impressive objects are three large bronze bowls, gold jewelry, and two bronze smiting god figurines. The recently published Canaanite inscription was also uncovered in this building (Sass et al. 2015).

## The transition between Level VII and VI

The destruction of Level VII was not uniform. This is clearly seen both from the excavations of the previous expeditions and from our new results. While some areas produced evidence for a fierce conflagration, accompanied by a large amount of restorable pottery, in other areas no evidence for fire or a burnt destruction was observed (Tufnell, Inge and Harding 1940; Barkay and Ussishkin 2004: 347–51; Ussishkin 2004: 60–62, 191–98).

After the destruction of Level VII, some significant changes in the layout of the city occurred. In most areas there is no direct architectural continuity between Levels VII and VI. Although the structures of both levels were built in the same orientation, hardly any walls or buildings were reused. The most significant change is that the Fosse Temple went out of use with the destruction of Level VII (Ussishkin 2004: 59–61). The Acropolis Temple, on the other hand was dated to Level VI, although it is possible that an earlier temple, although of a different plan, was present in Level



VII as well (Ussishkin 2004: 191–200). The newly discovered temple in the north-eastern corner of the site was built only in Level VI, and no remains of an earlier temple or any other cultic activity were found below the floors. In Area S, a domestic structure of Level VII was replaced by a new public pillared building in Level VI (Barkay and Ussishkin 2004: 344–361). The situation with the newly uncovered citadel is less clear as the floor levels were not yet reached.

These observations demonstrate a significant change in the city during the transition between the two levels. Cultic activity was apparently no longer conducted outside the city (i.e. the “Fosse Temple”), but was concentrated inside at the Acropolis Temple and the newly excavated Late Bronze temple in the northeast. Furthermore, the significant change in the plan of most of the buildings and sometimes of areas that were previously designated as private into public suggests a change in the social organization of the city.

## Summary

Remains of Level VI were found in all our excavation areas: AA, BB and CC. The most prominent are the citadel and temple in Area BB. These monumental buildings suggest that the northeast corner of Tel Lachish, neglected thus far in previous expeditions, was an important location in the Canaanite city (Fig. 6.9).

As the northeast corner is the closest one to the road, fields and water-sources, it is most probable that this was the location of the city gate, or entrance, of Bronze Age Lachish. The location of a temple near the gate may continue a tradition already documented at Shechem in the Middle Bronze Age (Dever 1974) and is followed by the Iron Age tradition of cult rooms near city gates (see, for example, Blomquist 1999; May 2014; Garfinkel, Ganor and Mumcuoglu 2015; Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2016; Ganor and Kreimerman 2017; In Press).

If the entrance to the city was in the southwest corner of the site how would the citadel function during an emergency situation in the valley below? Would the soldiers cross the entire city, and encircle the tel to be in the area they were guarding? There is no tactical logic in this situation and the citadel would lose its imposing function. But if there was a gate nearby, the soldiers could reach the valley in a few moments.

Our suggestion that the Canaanite city of Lachish had a gate, and a main entrance, in the northeast corner, takes into account all the above mentioned observations and new discoveries.

In the Level VI reconstruction of the city after the violent destruction of Level VII, the inhabitants chose to build a new temple at the northeastern corner of the site. The gate was probably located between the temple and the citadel. Thus, when a person entered the city there was probably an open piazza in front of him. Further



**Fig. 6.9:** Aerial photograph of the northeast corner of Tel Lachish. (1) The Level VI temple (2) the Levels II–I gate (3) the estimated location of the Bronze Age gate or entrance (4) the Late Bronze Age citadel (5) the well (6) the location of the blocked gate identified by Starkey (7) the modern road that leads from the valley to the tel.

to his left (to the east) the citadel was located, representing the power of the king. Further to his right (to the west) the temple was found, representing the power of the gods. When he raised his eyes to the upper city, he observed a mirror image: the palace of the king and the Acropolis Temple of the god. In this way, the entire world order was present at the entrance to the Canaanite city of Lachish.

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