

# Assembling the Iron Age Levant: The Archaeology of Communities, Politics, and Imperial Peripheries

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**Abstract** Archaeological research on the Iron Age (1200–500 BC) Levant, a narrow strip of land bounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert, has been balkanized into smaller culture historical zones structured by modern national borders and disciplinary schools. One consequence of this division has been an inability to articulate broader research themes that span the wider region. This article reviews scholarly debates over the past two decades and identifies shared research interests in issues such as ethnogenesis, the development of territorial polities, economic intensification, and divergent responses to imperial interventions. The broader contributions that Iron Age Levantine archaeology offers global archaeological inquiry become apparent when the evidence from different corners of the region is assembled.

**Keywords** Empire · Ethnicity · Middle East · State

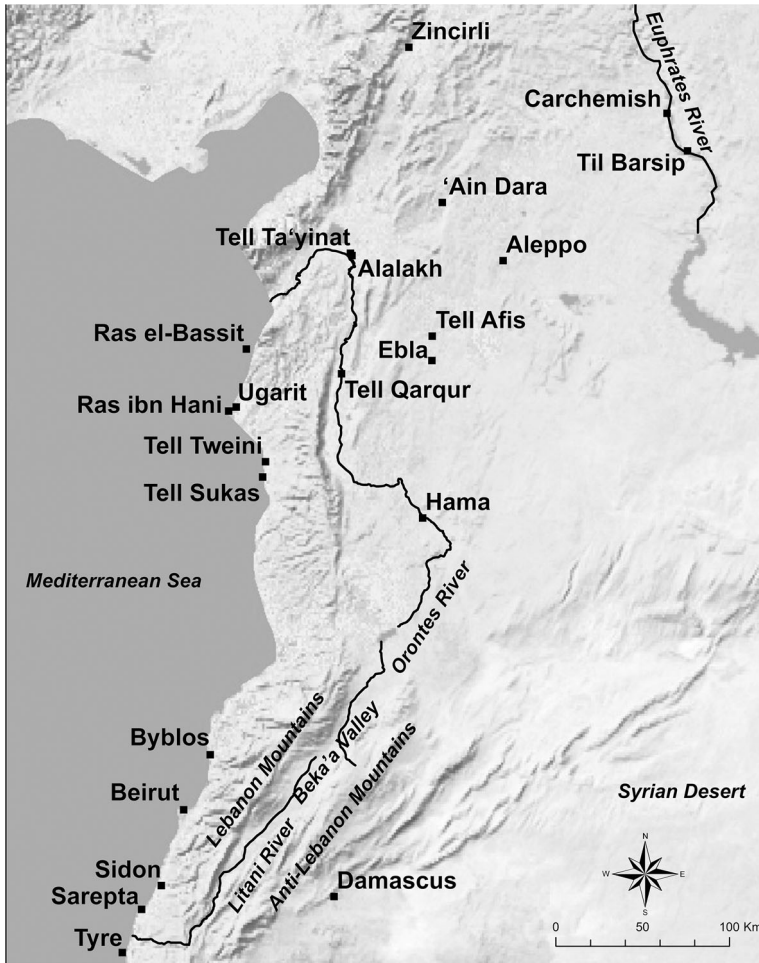
## Introduction

The Levantine Iron Age (c. 1200–500 BC) was a transformative historical period that began with the decline of Bronze Age societies throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and concluded with the collapse of Babylonian imperial rule at the end of the sixth century BC. Sandwiched between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean Sea on the east and west, and Anatolia and Egypt on the north and south (Figs. 1 and 2), respectively, a patchwork of Levantine societies gradually established political polities, only to see them dismantled and reshaped in the wake

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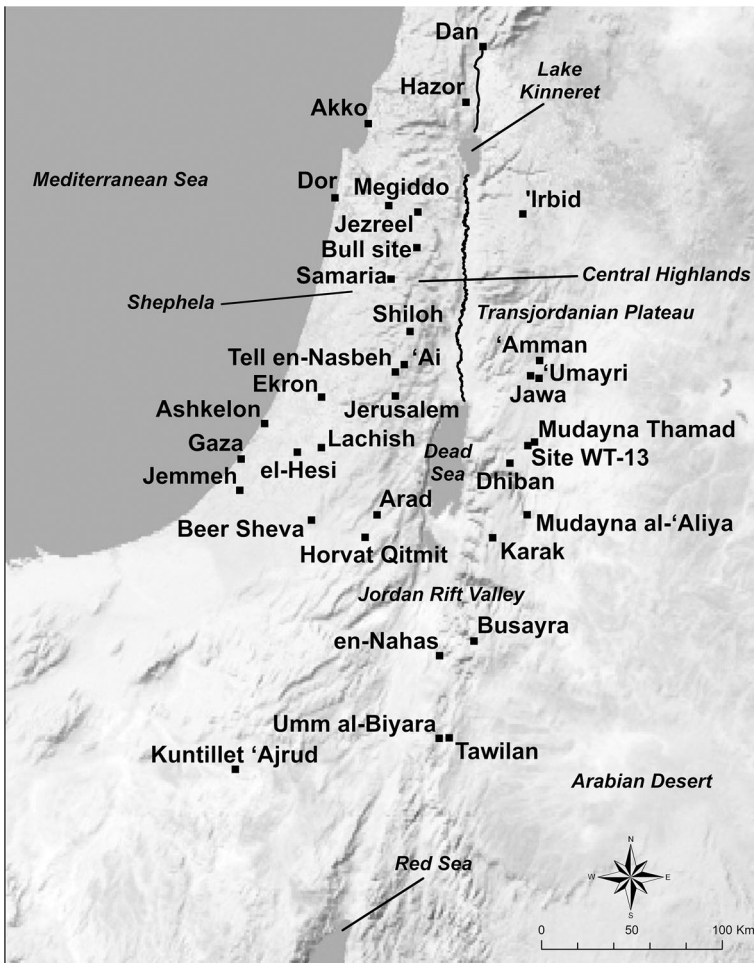
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**Fig. 1** Map of the northern Levant with Iron Age settlements and geographic features mentioned in the text (image: M. Weber)

of Mesopotamian imperialism after only a few centuries. While seemingly paltry in size and complexity when compared to their Egyptian and Mesopotamian neighbors, these societies have arguably seen more attention from Levantine archaeologists and historians than any other time period before or after the first millennium BC. Scholars working in different countries, however, have balkanized the Iron Age Levant into smaller ethnopolitical zones. Such zones often conspicuously fall within the borders of modern Middle Eastern nation-states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, western Syria, and southern Turkey. In part, this segmentation in archaeological research is a consequence of 20th-century geopolitical conflicts between these countries. There have historically been few opportunities for scholars working in different countries to have sustained



**Fig. 2** Map of the southern Levant with Iron Age settlements and geographic features mentioned in the text (image: M. Weber)

interactions with each other, which makes it difficult to advance scholarship on issues that cross national borders (but see Bienkowski and Galor 2006 for a rare exception). Opportunities for collaboration are further complicated when Iron Age archaeological evidence is used to substantiate modern national identities that, in turn, are used to sometimes extend political conflict (Abu El-Haj 2001; Corbett 2014).

This segmentation of Iron Age Levantine research also has led to the development of diverse intellectual approaches to the archaeology of Levantine societies. One such research paradigm is biblical archaeology, a field dedicated to illuminating the historical societies and events described in the Hebrew Bible (or, Old Testament). Besides being a document of faith for modern Judaism and

Christianity, the Hebrew Bible is an important historical source that narrates the rise and decline of Iron Age polities, particularly those in the southern Levant. More than any other paradigm, biblical archaeology continues to dominate North American and Israeli research today (Finkelstein and Mazar 2007; Hoffmeier and Millard 2004; Levy 2010), despite challenges to many of its foundational assumptions about the Bible's historical accuracy. Additional research paradigms exist that are practiced by European, Australian, and Middle Eastern archaeologists working in countries outside North America and Israel. Like biblical archaeologists, these scholars emphasize the documentation of archaeological evidence that can be corroborated with available historical sources. Regardless of their intellectual position, however, all scholars broadly share a commitment to culture historical research paradigms in which archaeological evidence is used to narrate the histories of groups whose identities have been established *a priori* by extant written sources.

Despite having recovered an impressive amount of evidence over the past century, Levantine archaeologists have shown reluctance to position their research within broader archaeological discussions in the discipline. In an age when cross-cultural investigations of human phenomena are as well received as regional studies, it is surprising that Levantine archaeology does not have a larger presence at the table of key discussions in archaeological theory and method. In this article, I take up the task of presenting and commenting on archaeological research on the Iron Age Levant that has appeared during the past two decades. The goal is neither to summarize the field nor present comprehensive histories of specific historical groups (e.g., Israelites, Moabites); scholars have done this in other venues recently (Bryce 2012; Faust 2006, 2012; Lipinski 2000; Macdonald and Younker 1999; Markoe 2000; Porter 2004; Routledge 2004; Yasur-Landau 2010). Instead, I identify key research themes that have arisen across the Iron Age Levant during the last two decades of scholarship and then place them within a broader context of recent discussions in the archaeological discipline.

This article begins with an introduction to the Levant's geography and paleoenvironment, a brief history of research and a discussion of intellectual paradigms, and an overview of research on Iron Age languages and written sources. This introductory material is followed by an exploration of research themes that are presented according to three chronological subperiods that scholars commonly use to divide the Iron Age. The first period, the Iron Age I, begins in the 12th century BC, when Levantine societies were in the midst of a widespread political and economic decline. Research has focused on the ways populations adapted their subsistence practices to these new conditions as well as tracking the new communal identities and political institutions that emerged during this two-century period. The Iron Age II, the second period, begins in the 10th century BC, around the time when competing territorial polities began, or would soon begin, to establish themselves throughout the region. Each polity developed within unique historical and geographic circumstances, making it a productive venue to investigate different strategies of ancient statecraft. The role that religion and ritual played in substantiating these polities is a common research theme as well as what effects polities had on craft production and exchange economies. Iron Age polities were autonomous until the third period, when, in the mid-eighth century, Assyrian and

later Babylonian empires gradually transformed the majority of these polities into clients that served different and shifting imperial interests. The extent to which these imperial interventions transformed Levantine societies and intensified their economies has been a principal research question during this final period. After a brief consideration of future avenues for research, I reflect on how the assembling of Iron Age Levantine societies within a single culture area allows researchers to recognize shared cultural and social characteristics.

## Levantine Geography and Paleoenvironment

Despite its broad classification as a Mediterranean climate, the Levant consists of distinct microclimatic zones shaped by topography, precipitation patterns, soil quality, and long-term impacts from human activities such as agriculture and water management. To make sense of this varied landscape, geographers divide the Levant into distinct longitudinal zones that share topographic similarities (Suriano 2014a). In the northern Levant—the area consisting of Lebanon, western Syria, and the Hatay Province—a thin coastal plain gives way to steep mountain ranges with average altitudes between 600 and 1500 masl. East of these mountains are the Orontes River Valley in the north and the Beka‘a Valley in the south, the latter of which sits between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains. Farther east is an area generically referred to as inland Syria that grows increasingly arid up to the Euphrates River Valley in the northern half and the Syrian Desert in the southern half. The southern Levant—consisting of Israel, western Jordan, Palestine, and southern Syria—is segmented from west to east by a coastal plain that gives way to a fertile lowland area, the Shephelah. Farther east are the Central Highlands, with average altitudes between 500 and 700 masl. The topography descends steeply into the Jordan Rift Valley, the lowest terrestrial place on Earth (423 mbsl) and the location of the Dead Sea, before climbing again to the Transjordanian Plateau. The plateau’s rain-fed steppe conditions give way gradually to the semiarid and arid zones of the Arabian Desert, marking the southern Levant’s eastern edge. The only exception to this longitudinal patterning is the arid and semiarid zones in the Levant’s extreme southern end that stretch from the Mediterranean coastline to the Arabian Desert, passing over the Jordan Rift Valley and Transjordanian Plateau.

Water systems fed by highland snowpack, run-off precipitation, and aquifers are located throughout the Levant; the major systems are the Orontes, Litani, and Jordan Rivers. Several minor systems drain from the highlands west to the Mediterranean Sea, carrying fresh water to coastal plain settlements. Wetlands existed in areas before, during, and after the Iron Age, but many were reduced or removed during recent land reclamation projects (e.g., Israel’s Hula Valley and coastal plain; Syria’s al-Ghab Plain). Most soils in the Levant are classified as xeric Red and Yellow Mediterranean that are suitable for rain-fed agricultural production. Arid zones in the extreme southern portion of the Levant and on the region’s eastern edge possess more aridic steppic soils, making agricultural production more challenging, if not impossible, without landesque capital investments. A handful of studies have demonstrated that the agricultural practices of Iron Age societies impacted soil

resources in contrasting ways, although they were neither the first nor the last groups to do so in the Levant (Casana 2008; Cordova 2007; Rosen 2007).

Levantine archaeologists have only recently begun to consider the environmental context in which Iron Age societies developed. Paleoenvironmental proxy data (see Cordova 2007; Issar and Zohar 2004; Rosen 2007 for syntheses) indicate that, like today, much of the region during the first millennium BC possessed a Mediterranean climate with cool wet winters and hot dry summers. Currently, winter precipitation levels tend to be greatest in the northwest corner, declining gradually to the eastern and southern arid zones. Isotope data from  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  levels from speleothems in Soreq Cave, Israel (Bar-Matthews and Ayalon 2004, fig. 12) and Eastern Mediterranean sea cores (Schilman et al. 2001, 2002) indicate that annual temperatures and precipitation amounts were generally lower than today's annual levels and fluctuated gradually over the course of the first millennium BC. Overall,  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  levels from an ocean core indicate that a brief humid phase occurred c. 1650–1050 BC (Schilman et al. 2001, p. 165). This phase gave way to more arid conditions that continued the rest of the first millennium (Schilman et al. 2002, p. 187, fig. 4, table 1). Analysis of lacustrine deposits from Dead Sea cores also indicates a fluctuation between mildly wetter and drier episodes occurring within a relatively dry environment between c. 1000 and 550 cal BC (Enzel et al. 2003, fig. 2A). Lake Kinneret levels also fluctuated during the Iron Age between more arid conditions starting c. 1300 BC followed by moister conditions starting c. 600 BC (Dubowski et al. 2003, pp. 72–73, fig. 6). Additional sampling and testing in the coming decades will refine this rough sketch of Iron Age environmental conditions.

## History of Research and Intellectual Paradigms

The current state of Levantine archaeology is the outcome of a lengthy intellectual history that only partly tracks that of the broader discipline's development from 19th-century antiquarianism to today's eclectic mix of research paradigms. Investigations of Iron Age Levantine societies began around the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century AD, with pilgrims like Helena of Constantinople, mother of Emperor Constantine, and Jerome, an early translator of the Hebrew Bible, visiting Palestine in search of sites and relics described in the Bible (Hunt 1982). Such speculative research continued until the 19th century, when an increased number of European and North American scholars began to document archaeological sites during their visits (Bliss 1906). Usually trained in Classical and Semitic languages, these early explorers used techniques drawn from historical geography, traveling across the region, recording villagers' modern names for ancient sites, and then searching for their modified antecedents in ancient texts (e.g., Clarke 1817; Robinson 1841). Rudimentary excavations took place in the mid-19th century, such as Renan's work in Mediterranean coastal sites (e.g., Byblos, Tyre, Sidon) (Renan 1864) and Warren's in Jerusalem (Conder and Warren 1884). Research intensified during the British-financed Palestine Exploration Fund's survey of southern Levantine antiquity sites that would later be published in the multivolume *Survey of Western Palestine* (Conder and Kitchner 1881; Moscrop

2000). The *Survey* remains a useful resource today as many sites have been damaged or destroyed by development and population growth since their initial identification. Excavation of stratified tell sites containing Iron Age cultural levels began toward the end of the 19th century; among the earliest was a German-led project at Zincirli (Luschán et al. 1893–1943), and Petrie's (1891) and Bliss's (1984) work at Tel el-Hesi. Petrie's and Bliss's work was particularly important as they emphasized the need for stratigraphic excavations in the Levant's large multiperiod tells, and linked better-known Egyptian material culture with the then unknown Levantine ceramic vessel assemblages to date strata. This research led to the creation of the first relative chronology for the Levantine Bronze and Iron Ages that scholars would improve for the next century. Excavations at tell sites with Iron Age cultural levels continued into the 20th century, with the number of projects intensifying during the British and French Mandates of the former Ottoman Empire's Levantine territories after World War I (Matthiae 1977, pp. 1–39; Moorey 1991, pp. 54–86).

The new Middle Eastern nation-states that were founded in the mid-20th century shaped archaeological research for the rest of the century (Abu el-Haj 2001; Corbett 2014; Gillot 2010; Matthiae 1977, pp. 1–39). With the Levant divided between five United Nations-recognized countries often bearing hostilities toward each other, archaeological research became sequestered within individual countries with limited interaction between scholarly communities. This lack of communication remains the status quo in some instances. The excavation of Iron Age cultural levels in large tell sites continued to be the principal means of research throughout the region. Archaeological survey, although common in earlier decades, such as Glueck's (1940) survey of Jordan during the 1930s, Woolley and Lawrence's (1936) survey of the Negev Desert, and the aforementioned British-led *Survey of Western Palestine*, was practiced with more regularity starting in the 1970s. The sophistication of survey techniques improved over time, particularly in terms of attempts to identify smaller settlements on the landscape. Most projects, however, continued to emphasize the documentation of settlements over off-site landscape features. Departments and ministries of antiquities of each country played an important role in identifying and managing Iron Age sites (Kletter 2006; Magee 2012).

Regardless of the large number of projects conducted during more than a century, overall coverage of the Levant remains uneven. Archaeologists have concentrated on specific areas due to historical interests as well as access to sites, such as (from north to south) Turkey's Hatay's Province, coastal and inner Syria, west-central and southwest Jordan, and Israel's southern Sefhelah and southern coastal plain. Areas such as northern Jordan, northern Lebanon, and southern Syria have seen comparatively little attention, although they are by no means unexplored (e.g., Braemer 1984; Thalmann 2010; Vieweger and Häser 2007). Other areas have seen attention in the past, but access is currently limited because of challenging political and economic conditions, such as in southern Lebanon and the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

The intellectual history of Iron Age Levantine archaeology does not synchronize well with the standard narrative of Anglophone archaeology's epistemological



development (Trigger 1989). Late 19th-century Levantine archaeologists designed their research projects using classificatory-historical “culture-history” paradigms that likewise dominated North American and European archaeology until the first half of the 20th century (Willey and Sabloff 1993, pp. 38–213; Trigger 1989, pp. 148–206). Stratigraphic excavations were designed to recover architectural and material cultural corpora that assisted in the reconstruction of social histories of specific groups. Culture history has remained a preferred research paradigm despite advancements in global archaeological method and theory, albeit for different reasons. In the southern Levant, many, but certainly not all, scholars adhere to culture historical techniques because they ally with the field of biblical archaeology, the goals of which range from locating archaeological evidence that will, in effect, demonstrate the text’s historicity (Garfinkel and Ganor 2009), to illuminating the material culture of biblical societies (Hoffmeier and Millard 2004; Levy 2010). These commitments often guide projects’ implicit research designs, determining which and what kind of settlements are investigated, what kinds of evidence are collected, and how this evidence is dated and interpreted. Research questions that address issues related to cultural and social processes often receive less priority, if not ignored altogether. While not all Iron Age Levantine archaeologists will today claim the title of “biblical archaeologist,” biblical archaeology, for better or worse, remains the public face for much of southern Levantine archaeology in Western media, in magazines like *Biblical Archaeological Review* and in cable-television documentaries.

The long-standing commitment of Iron Age Levantine archaeology to culture history, however, does not mean that the discipline was immune to later developments in Anglophone archaeological method and theory during the 20th century. Processual archaeology’s emphasis on the need for interpretive frameworks that prioritized the reconstruction of human behavior over history was indeed discussed in the 1970s among archaeologists working in the southern Levant (Dever 1974, 1981; Wright 1975). The key issue in these discussions—whether or not archaeologists’ personal and scholarly interests in history, particularly biblical history, introduce bias into the interpretation of evidence—still remains unresolved. While processual archaeology did not change the overarching priority that Levantine archaeologists place on culture history, it did lead some projects to employ more empirical research designs (Dever 1981) and more intensive sampling strategies of organic remains. Processual research themes namely concerned with subsistence strategies (e.g., LaBianca 1990; Stager 1976) began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by social evolution (Holladay 1995) in the 1990s. The postprocessual critique of processual archaeology, or what would later become known as interpretive or social archaeology, also was received unevenly in the 1980s. For Iron Age Levantine archaeologists, social archaeology’s emphasis on agency and identity, themes that often required a contingent historicizing of the archaeological record, harkened back to unresolved issues in processual archaeology’s critique of culture history. In some cases, postprocessual themes returned scholars to earlier culture-historical goals of illuminating Iron Age societies described in the Hebrew Bible, this time within the framework of social theory (Faust 2006; Killebrew 2005; Routledge 2004).



However limited 20th-century Anglophone archaeology's impact was on southern Levantine scholarship, it was even less so in the northern Levant. The national origin of archaeologists, in part, explains these differences in reception. British and North American archaeologists who were exposed to new paradigms in Anglophone archaeology through institutional influences made up the majority of southern Levantine researchers, while European (e.g., French, German, Italian, etc.) teams were more common in the northern Levant. Historical archaeologists based in Europe were largely immune to these paradigm shifts in Anglophone archaeology during the 20th century. This is not to say that northern Levantine research lacked substantial development, or that the researchers were unaware of these discussions, only that statements reflecting on disciplinary epistemologies are lacking in the literature. Instead, rigorous classificatory-historical research continued unabated, with the emphasis on improving excavation techniques and accumulating data that could fill out cultural-historical frameworks. Themes such as political development (Sader 2000), trade and cultural influence (Winter 1976), and cultural responses to first millennium empires (Mazzoni 1995) have been paramount. In the past decade, themes associated with contemporary social archaeology have emerged (Gilbert 2011; Harmanşah 2013; Osborne 2013; Pucci 2008), and North American projects have been established at Tayinat (Harrison 2009a, b) and Zincirli (Schloen and Fink 2009) relatively recently, all of which suggests that northern Levantine scholarship likely will grow more engaged with global archaeological inquiry in the coming decades.

Currently, a pragmatic eclecticism characterizes 21st-century Iron Age research in the Levant as well as in the broader Near East. As is typical currently in global archaeological research (Preucel and Mrozowski 2010), Levantine archaeologists draw on whichever theoretical questions and methodological tools best suit their research designs. Excavation and analytical methods continue to improve in resolution, with an increased emphasis on digital documentation (Casana and Hermann 2010; Levy et al. 2012), faunal and botanical analysis (Lev-Tov et al. 2011; Sasson 2010), the materials sciences (Albert et al. 2008), and radiocarbon dating (Levy and Higham 2005; among others). Research designs, however, continue to be shaped around historical questions, sometimes only implicitly gesturing toward larger social scientific and humanistic issues. The discussion below nevertheless demonstrates how some of Levantine archaeology's key research themes resonate in contemporary global archaeological research.

## Iron Age Languages and Written Sources

One additional reason for the varied intellectual development of Levantine archaeology is the diverse—and often problematic—ways scholars have treated Iron Age languages and written sources in their research. In parts of the northern Levant and throughout the entire southern Levant, Iron Age societies spoke dialects of “Canaanite,” a collection of first millennium BC Northwest Semitic languages that are usually classified into Ammonite, Edomite, Hebrew, Moabite, and

Phoenician (Garr 1985). Aramaic, a related Northwest Semitic language already spoken in Mesopotamia grew so prominent by the middle of the first millennium that it became a lingua franca for Levantine and Mesopotamian societies, as well as the principal language of the Aramaean kingdoms of inland Syria. The Indo-European language Luwian may have continued to be spoken in the Neo-Hittite states of the northern Levant. Commercial contact with neighboring regions also would have brought Greek, Egyptian, North Arabian, and Anatolian speakers to Levantine commercial centers, especially those along the Mediterranean coast.

Recovered epigraphic evidence attests to the prevalence of writing during the Iron Age (Hallo and Younger 1997–2002; Pritchard 1969). The Canaanite dialects and Aramaic were written down in first millennium West Semitic alphabetic scripts that are classified according to regional scripts based on paleography and usage (Donner and Röllig 2002; Naveh 1982). The Luwian script, alternatively, was a hieroglyph system whose origin dates to the second millennium BC (Hawkins 2000; Payne 2012). Most writing took place on parchment or papyrus, materials that do not survive well in the archaeological record. Stone display inscriptions have survived, fortunately, on stelae whose production were sponsored by elite patrons and designed for public spaces. These texts cover a range of topics, including military accomplishments, loyalty to deities, treaties, and other elements of statecraft. A basalt stela from Dhiban, for example, describes how a ninth-century-BC king named Mesha overthrew the Northern Kingdom of Israel and expanded the Moabite kingdom in west-central Jordan, an event that is corroborated in the Hebrew Bible's 2 Kings 3 (Dearman 1989). Aramaic (Donner and Röllig 2002), Phoenician (Donner and Röllig 2002), and Luwian (Hawkins 2000; Payne 2012) inscriptions found in northern Levantine settlements, such as those from Afis, Byblos, Carchemish, Zincirli, and elsewhere, are, at times, the only internal sources available for reconstructing northern Levantine histories.

Extra-Levantine written sources that comment on Levantine societies and events also provide historical and cultural insights. Achaemenid, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian texts discuss military campaigns to, and diplomatic relationships with, the Levant, sometimes in great detail with descriptions of rulers' names, landscapes, cities, and raw materials (Yamada 2000; Younger 1990). Complimenting these descriptions, at times, are visual narratives, such as the stone-carved reliefs that line the walls of palatial throne rooms in the Assyrian capital cities of northern Iraq (Russell 1999). Assyrian sieges of Levantine cities such as Lachish depict the event in much detail, from the initial attack to the capture and deportation of inhabitants (Ussishkin 1983). Other extra-Levantine documents are more mundane but nevertheless insightful, such as imperial records of tribute and taxes paid by Levantine vassals (Fales and Postgate 1995) and letters between Levantine kings and imperial authorities (e.g., Kataja and Whiting 1995).

Although numerous, these written sources must be subjected to proper source criticism before they are used to reconstruct Iron Age history and social life. Many texts were commissioned or written by elites whose intentions were to portray themselves or their ancestors as the narrative's protagonist (Suriano 2014b). Extra-Levantine sources were likewise written from perspectives of power in which writers' goals were often to reiterate imperial authority over Levantine societies. A

related issue is the limited number of written sources authored or commented on by non-elite sectors of society. To be sure, literacy levels increased beyond trained scribal groups beginning in the first half of the first millennium BC, although scholars debate the extent to which levels of this literacy differed substantially across the population (Millard 1995; Rollston 2010; Sanders 2009; Schniedewind 2004, pp. 91–117, 2013, pp. 99–125). Evidence for growing literacy is observed in the large number of “mundane” inscriptions, such as seals and sealings (Avigad and Sass 1997), graffiti (e.g., Deir Allah inscription; Hoftijzer and van der Kooij 1976), and ostraca, broken pieces of ceramic vessels on which people composed letters that were later transferred to more valuable parchment or papyrus. The Meşad Hashavyahu ostrakon, for example, is a letter from a reaper to his superior appealing the confiscation of his garment for supposedly not meeting his grain quota (Naveh 1960; Pardee 2002a, pp. 77–78); the Lachish letters contain correspondence from an officer to his military commander in which he touts his reading abilities (Pardee 2002b, pp. 79–80; Schniedewind 2000; Torczyner 1938).

An additional issue in handling these sources is that several lack an excavated provenience or a documented provenance. In many instances, like the Dhiban inscription described earlier, the source is not found in its original Iron Age use context but has instead been curated by later groups. In other occurrences, inscriptions have been found in the landscape and turned over to government authorities, or illegally excavated and sold into private or museum collections, where they are later studied by scholars (e.g., Ahituv 2003). This lack of information about provenance makes it difficult to use these inscriptions as reliable sources, especially given the large number of forgeries, or suspected forgeries (e.g., the Jehoash Inscription), appearing in private collections and on antiquities market (Rollston 2003, 2004).

Nowhere are authorship, representation, provenience, and provenance more at issue than when the Hebrew Bible is used as a historical source. While modern readers regard the text as a relatively seamless document, biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Hebrew Bible is a collection of sources that were composed and edited separately before being assembled in the canon that is read today. Although many scholars still debate the date and mode of these textual transmissions (e.g., Davies 1992; Lemche 1998), the majority opinion holds that the principal historic texts are the result of scribes who served the Judahite monarchy in Jerusalem, what scholars have called the Deuteronomic School (Knoppers and McConville 2000; Noth 1981). Between the late eighth and early sixth centuries BC, scribes drew from various source materials to create a composite text corresponding to early versions of the Books of Joshua through II Kings. Now lost, these source materials range from epic narratives handed down through oral transmissions to written documents kept in palace and temple archives. Other books of the Hebrew Bible also saw their composition and editing during the first millennium BC, such as Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Torah), a narrative describing, among other things, the origins of the Israelites and the legal framework for their religion; the Book of Chronicles, an expanded version of the Deuteronomic Histories; and the prophetic (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah) and wisdom texts (e.g., Job, Psalms, Proverbs). These texts continued to be copied and edited

over time and were eventually organized by the Middle East's earliest Jewish communities into the canon starting as early as the fifth century BC and into the first half of the first millennium AD.

Given the conditions surrounding its composition, the Hebrew Bible cannot be used as a historical source without careful consideration of what is known about a particular passage's writing and transmission. What modern readers might regard as "history" is in fact a theological treatise for the Deuteronomistic scribes who sought to justify ancient Israel's unique relationship with its patron deity Yahweh and defend the right of the Davidic line to Judah's monarchy. Such caution also is needed when the Hebrew Bible is used as an ethnohistoric source. While passages do comment on Iron Age agriculture, cultic practices, and social structure—helpful information for those writing Iron Age Levantine social archaeologies (Dever 2012; King and Stager 2001)—such observations cannot be anachronistically extended to earlier and later time periods without caveats. One also must keep in mind that scribes produced their texts from privileged positions of power, often residing in urban areas, and may have lacked, or had limited, first-hand knowledge of manual labor, agricultural production, and village social organization.

### **The Decline and Recovery of Iron Age I Levantine Societies (c. 1200–1000 BC)**

The Iron Age I Levant presents a rare setting for exploring how preindustrial societies recovered from political and economic upheavals. On the eve of the 12th century, royal "Canaanite" families ruled over small territorially demarcated city-states from their urban palaces (McGeough 2007; Schloen 2001). Excavations in these palaces indicate that elites were in contact with a number of prominent Eastern Mediterranean groups that participated in intensive maritime exchange with each other in the latter half of the second millennium BC, such as the Egyptians, the Hittites in Anatolia, the Mycenaeans on mainland Greece and the Aegean islands, and Alashiya, most likely located on Cyprus (Cline 2014). These Levantine palace elites also had access to an international network of prestige goods that circulated between these groups as well as with Mesopotamia (Aruz et al. 2008; Feldman 2006). These palace elites were not entirely sovereign rulers despite their wealth and authority. In the northern Levant, first the Mitanni state and later the Hittite Empire held some degree of political sway over these palaces' decisions. In Lebanon, southern Syria, and the rest of the southern Levant, the 18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties of Egypt's New Kingdom exercised some control over palace elites (Higginbotham 2000; Morris 2005; Weinstein 1982). But by the mid-12th century, the Hittite Kingdom had collapsed and nearly all northern Levantine city-states had subsided or were severely weakened. Egypt's control over the southern Levant also weakened during the 12th century.

Scholars have traditionally described the sudden political and economic changes in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean as a "collapse" phenomenon similar to those found in other past societies such as the Maya, the Romans, and Indus River Valley societies. Historically, the most popular explanation for the Late Bronze Age

collapse concerns the Sea Peoples, groups of refugees who were displaced from various locations around the Mediterranean Sea (Gitin et al. 1998; Killebrew and Lehmann 2013; Oren 2000; Yasur-Landau 2010). Hittite, Levantine, and Egyptian written sources describe them as violent attackers, and the excavated destruction and abandonment phases found along the Mediterranean Coast (e.g., Ugarit) attest to the widespread havoc described in the texts. Other scholars have attributed the decline in political, economic, and social complexity to multiple factors that converged around the same time. Even before the arrival of the Sea Peoples, local populations who were attached to Canaanite palace economies were defecting and joining groups who lived beyond the palace's reach. The decline in external support from Egypt and the Hittites meant that palace elites had few resources to deter these defections. To make matters worse, according to multiple environmental proxies, the eastern Mediterranean was already experiencing increased arid conditions that may have disrupted local and regional exchange networks (Drake 2012; Kaniewski et al. 2010; Langgut et al. 2013, 2014).

Early researchers initially interpreted the Levantine evidence from 12th-century-BC settlements as the one that mimicked broader patterns in the eastern Mediterranean, that is, the widespread demise of political and economic institutions followed by a “dark age” that saw little development. This regional interpretation helped foster a historical “collapse” narrative that was comprehensive for the entire eastern Mediterranean. A Levantine “Dark Age” also made sense for early researchers given the limited amount of evidence for sedentary societies like those documented in the centuries before and after the Iron Age I. However, as evidence from 12th- and 11th-century settlements has been identified in recent years, the collapse/dark age paradigms have been eclipsed by research that focuses on the various ways groups adapted to new political, economic, and environmental conditions (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999; Herr and Najjar 2008, pp. 311–320; Klengel 2000; Porter 2013). Evidence from throughout the Levant indicates that groups recovered at different rates and followed different trajectories of development. In the northern Levant, large settlements on Syria's coast such as Alalakh and Ugarit saw no efforts to reestablish a population, although smaller rural settlements appeared nearby such as Ras Ibn Hani, Ras el-Bassit, and Sukas, all near Ugarit. Farther inland, at settlements like Tell Afis (Cecchini and Mazzoni 1998) and Hama (Phase F) (Fugmann 1958; Riis 1948; Riis and Buhl 1990), there was no gap in settlement activity. By the 11th century, settlements in northwestern Syria and southeastern Turkey indicate that Neo-Hittite “rump states” emerged from the remains of the more centralized New Kingdom Hittite state. These kingdoms would continue to develop over the next several centuries at settlements such as Carchemish (Hogarth 1914; Woolley 1921; Woolley and Barnett 1952) and Tayinat (Harrison 2009a, b).

Farther south, dispersed populations of what are believed to be pastoral nomadic groups began to settle down in the 11th century, although the archaeological evidence is unfortunately limited. These groups, who Neo-Assyrian written sources collectively describe as the Aramaeans, later founded several small states between inland Syria and the Euphrates River (see below). Likewise, Phoenician towns located on the Mediterranean coast, many of which had already seen settlement

activity in the Bronze Age, reestablished themselves as maritime entrepôt as early as the 12th century in cities such as Sarepta (Sounding Y: Stratum E [Anderson 1988]; Sounding X: Period VI [Khalifeh 1988]), Sidon, and Tyre (Strata XIV–XIII) (Bikai 1978). Inscriptions from Byblos (e.g., ‘Ahirom’s sarcophagus, Yaḥimilk inscription; Donner and Röellig 2002) suggest the port city also was well established by the 10th century (Dunand 1937–1939, 1954).

Populations in the southern Levant also followed distinct pathways in their development. Many settlements that had experienced destruction and/or abandonment at the end of the Late Bronze Age saw resettlement at less intensive levels, like Megiddo (Strata VIIA, VIB, and VIA) (Finkelstein et al. 2000, 2006, 2013; Harrison and Esse 2004; Loud 1948) and Hazor (Stratum XII–XI) (Ben-Tor et al. 2012, pp. 7–51; Yadin et al. 1989, pp. 25–30). New groups widely attributed to the Philistines and the Tjekker, segments of the migrating Sea Peoples who played a role in the Late Bronze collapse, settled the southern coastal plain between modern Gaza and Akko after being subdued by the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses III. Their presence is most obvious in the distinct Aegean-influenced assemblage in coastal and inland settlements like Ashkelon (Periods XVIII–XV) (Stager et al. 2008, p. 217), Dor (Gilboa and Sharon 2008), and Ekron (Stratum VII–IV) (Meehl et al. 2006), among others. Written sources and rank-size settlement data indicate that the Philistines organized themselves into five city-state-like territories with dominant towns ruling over smaller settlements in their vicinity (Yasur-Landau 2010, pp. 282–334). Evidence for Sea People groups settling in the northern Levant also has become more visible in recent decades. Scholars point to the abundance of Aegean-inspired ceramic vessels found in settlements along the Mediterranean coastline such as those in the Amuq Valley (Janeway 2006–2007; Lehmann 2013).

Another new pattern observed in the southern Levant is the expansion of small settlements into environmentally marginal contexts, namely the Central Highlands, west-central and southwestern Jordan, and southern Israel, where soil quality and precipitation patterns were less ideal than neighboring regions. Settlements like Beer Sheva (Stratum IX–VIII) (Herzog 1984), Shiloh (Stratum V) (Finkelstein et al. 1993), and ‘Umayri (Field B) (Clark 1997, 2000, 2002) practiced a combination of rain-fed agricultural production and animal husbandry (Hopkins 1985; Lev-Tov et al. 2011). Scholars have long understood these settlements to be antecedent to the Israelite communities mentioned in Joshua, Judges, and First Samuel in the Hebrew Bible (Dever 2003; Faust 2006). Regardless of their ethnic identities, these settlements exhibit similar architectural styles and material cultural forms, indicating a degree of interaction and integration across space.

### **Ethnicity, Politics, and Subsistence**

As discussed above, the Iron Age I was hardly a dark age lacking historical development as earlier scholars had assumed. Groups adapted to new political and economic circumstances, some choosing to organize themselves in large nucleated settlements while others chose smaller settlements that were dispersed across the landscape. In the southern Levant, in particular, scholars have sought to explain the social and cultural mechanisms that motivated these different pathways of

development. Ethnicity has been a popular rubric with which to explain the emergence of new and broadly shared identities that integrated populations within different collectives. In most cases, scholars link material assemblages with specific groups mentioned in historical sources (e.g., Israelite, Philistine) and then chart their distribution over space (Killebrew 2005). Israelite ethnicity, for instance, is linked to domestic architectural designs (e.g., the so-called “four room pillared buildings”), large ceramic jars with slight “collars” at their base, and an absence of pig husbandry (Dever 2003; Faust 2006; Ji 1997). Philistine and Phoenician ethnicities also are linked to ceramic vessel assemblages, the former with Aegean-inspired shapes and designs that were carried with them from their homeland (Mountjoy 2013; Stager 1995; Yasur-Landau 2010). Ethnic identities such as “Luwian” or “Aramaeans” in the northern Levant are ascribed to artistic styles on carved stelae and orthostats, although scholars often disagree on which elements should be assigned to which groups (Sader 2010, p. 296).

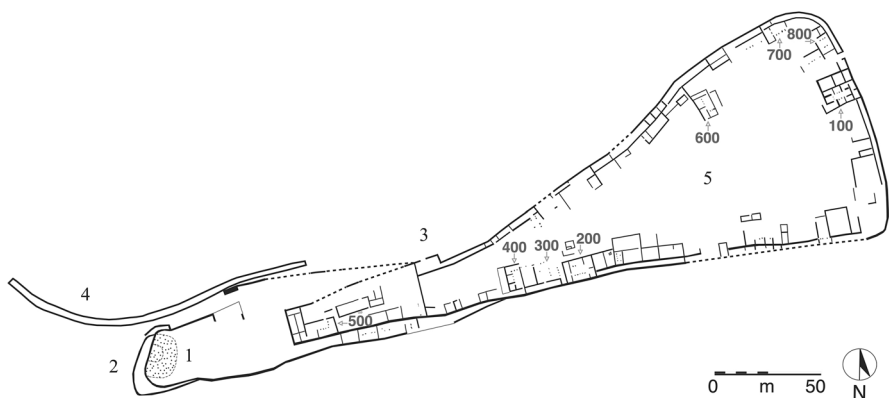
These attempts to identify ethnic groups have faced the difficulties that all archaeological investigations of group identities face. Indeed, more recent scholarship has questioned whether or not the “pots equals peoples” equation offers enough precision to identify groups in the archaeological record (Porter 2013, pp. 42–49; Routledge 2000, pp. 64–65). “Israelite” assemblages, for instance, have been found distributed beyond the enclaves described in the Hebrew Bible, indicating that these cultural forms were broadly shared across the region. Evidence also is lacking to explain why specific ethnic identities were expressed in ceramic vessel forms and vernacular house plans. Scholars also point to problems with the ways that written sources are used to spatialize identities across the Iron Age I landscape (Coote 1990; Coote and Whitelam 1987; Thompson 1992). This skepticism does not deny the emergence of new collective identities during the period but rather critiques the assumptions drawn from problematic written sources that are used to classify groups in the archaeological record. There is currently an air of uncertainty regarding how best to move forward with this investigation of ethnicity in the Iron Age I. One productive step is to consider alternative modes of identity. Meyers’s (1997) research on early Israelite women, in which she examines the archaeological and written evidence for women in the Central Highlands, is one fruitful direction. Themes based on personhood, occupation, and locality cry out for investigation and would further substantiate how diverse the Levantine social world was during the Iron Age I.

However much this balkanization of the Levant into ethnic enclaves lacks analytical precision, it still serves as a useful disciplinary nomenclature in which scholars can communicate their findings. Still, ethnogenesis frameworks insist that identity alone fostered social cohesion and propelled political and economic development regardless of the material circumstances in which these populations developed. To anchor these identities within more materialist frameworks, scholars have employed an assortment of ideas from political anthropology, social evolution, and ethnographic studies of recent Middle Eastern societies (Flanagan 1981; Frick 1985). Because written sources describe some Israelites and Aramaeans as semisedentary, scholars have classified the group’s social organization using the social evolutionary category of tribe, in which members organized themselves



according to kin-based segments that affiliate with other segments through a shared patronym (Lipinski 2000; Sader 2010; Van der Steen 2004). These understandings of tribes and their political structure are inspired by the notion developed in ethnographic research (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940; Peters 1960). Scholars resist, however, more recent ethnographic research in the Middle East that acknowledges how fluid segmentary identities can be when they are mobilized around particular events like feuds and marriage alliances (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 30–71; Dresch 1986; Porter 2013, pp. 55–57). An alternative approach explains Iron Age I political organization in terms of chiefdom models (Flanagan 1981; Frick 1985; Miller 2005), again drawing on ethnographic research to define a political system based on kinship but also demonstrating inequality and leaders who more often inherit than earn their authority (Earle 1997). Miller (2005), for example, used settlement survey and site-size data to conduct gravity model analysis of settlement patterns in the Central Highlands. Based on this evidence, Miller determined that the political organization of some subregions developed faster than other areas. Mendenhall (1976, 1983) and Gottwald (1983) interpreted the Central Highland's subsistence-based settlements as collectives of disenfranchised peasants who revolted against the Late Bronze Age Canaanite palaces, settled in marginal territories, and later developed an Israelite identity. While the historical evidence for such a wide-ranging revolt is limited, and the analogy of "peasant" in precapitalist contexts is perhaps anachronistic, these scholars did acknowledge the Central Highland population as indigenous to the Levant, an idea that is now largely a scholarly consensus.

Other attempts to explain the emergence of these Iron Age I identities in their material surroundings focus on subsistence practices. Concomitant with the decline of the Late Bronze Age palace system was the abatement of institutions that sponsored, or at least stimulated, regional exchange economies. Many Iron Age I Levantine populations reoriented their production practices as a result. Ruralization occurred throughout the Levant in which small multihousehold settlements



**Fig. 3** A plan of Khirbat al-Mudayna al-'Aliya, an Iron Age I agro-pastoralist settlement in west-central Jordan (image courtesy of B. Routledge)

positioned themselves across the landscape and based their production routines on agropastoral strategies that prioritized settlements' needs for food and materials (Finkelstein 1986; Finkelstein et al. 1997; Marfoe 1979; Routledge 2000). Those settlements where faunal evidence has been sampled reveal that animal husbandry practices were organized at local levels and based on sheep, goat, cattle, and sometimes pigs; wild animals and fish supplemented diets (Hesse 1986; Lev-Tov 2006; Lev-Tov et al. 2011, table 2; Sasson 2010). Paleoethnobotanical studies of plant remains, admittedly limited in their number, demonstrate a reliance on cereals, namely wheat and barley, olives, grapes, and fruits (Kislev 1993; Porter et al. 2014). This trend in ruralization extended beyond the fertile areas of agricultural production into more marginal environments where production was challenged by poor soils and lower amounts of precipitation (Porter 2013).

Aside from these reorientations in regional economies and widespread trends in ruralization, there was some continuity in craft economies, although certainly not at the level of quality and sophistication seen in the previous Late Bronze Age. Recent research in southwest Jordan has identified settlements in and around the Wadi Aravah such as Khirbat an-Nahas that extracted and refined copper from the quarries adjacent to their settlements (Levy et al. 2014). The scale of production at these sources indicates that miners were supplying the region with more than enough raw materials to produce copper and bronze tools. Likewise, the number and quality of finished goods excavated or dated to 12th- and 11th-century contexts indicate that craft production using ivory, metal, and stone materials continued. Some monumental stelae associated with elites in emerging Aramaean and Neo-Hittite polities attest to stone carving traditions in place by the 11th century (Gilbert 2011). In Lebanon, Phoenician settlements (e.g., Sarepta; Pritchard 1975) exhibit evidence of continuity in craft industries that grew in the later centuries of the Iron Age, particularly ivory production (Feldman 2014).

Altogether, current archaeological evidence indicates that the political, economic, and social development of Iron Age I populations took place at uneven rates across the Levant. This diversity is so great that it is misleading to generalize about changes within particular regions. One effect of the ethnicity, political, and to some extent subsistence paradigms discussed above is that researchers impose scales on their evidence that are too broad to produce satisfying, empirically supported observations. Consequently, notable differences between households and settlements are often downplayed or ignored altogether in order to normalize data across broader categories of analysis like ethnic group (e.g., Philistine) or subsistence category (e.g., pastoralism).

A community perspective that considers how the relationships between Iron Age I households formed settlements can correct for many of these issues. I recently demonstrated this approach in the Iron Age I settlements of west-central Jordan, where households came together to found communities on the edges of Jordan's Wadi al-Mujib canyon system, an area bearing semi-arid conditions (Fig. 3; Porter 2013). The analysis of architectural, faunal, paleobotanical, and ceramic vessel evidence demonstrated that production practices were organized at different scales, with some tasks managed at the household level while others were coordinated by the entire community. Despite a degree of communalism, differentiated levels of

household wealth were observed, indicating that some families were more successful than others in accumulating material wealth. These arrangements between households only lasted two or three generations as settlements were gradually abandoned after less than a century of occupation. Although designed specifically for the agropastoral settlements of west-central Jordan and the Central Highlands, this community perspective is transferable to Iron Age I settlements in other regions. Given the relative lack of integration in most areas, investigations that at least begin their analyses at the household and community scales—in other words, at local resolutions—are best suited to understand how these populations emerged in the decentralized world of the 12th and 11th centuries.

### **Levantine Statecraft in the Iron Age II (c. 1000–750 BC)**

The Iron Age II Levant saw the rise of multiple self-governing territorial polities, therefore making the region a productive, although often ignored, venue for investigating preindustrial states, a perennial theme in archaeological research. During this period, political and economic complexity generally increased across the region. Each polity, however, followed a distinct trajectory structured by historical, geographic, and environmental factors. In northwest Syria and south-central Turkey, polities such as Carchemish already had begun to develop during the Iron Age I, while others, such as Bit Agusi, Gurgum, Kammanu, Pattina, and Sam'al developed during the Iron Age II (Bryce 2012). Territorial polities also developed farther south in west-central and southwestern Syria, such as Hamath, with its capital at modern Hama, and Aram, with its capital at Damascus. Phoenicians developed polities with limited territory that were administered from cities like Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos on the central Mediterranean coast (Markoe 2000). Multiple polities also emerged in the southern Levant, where the Jordan Rift Valley was often a border between them (Herr 1997). Gilead, Ammon, Moab, and Edom, from north to south, respectively, developed east of the valley, while ancient Israel and Philistia developed on the western side. According to written sources (e.g., I Kings 12), the short-lived kingdom of ancient Israel separated into two polities around 920 BC, a northern kingdom that retained the name Israel (referred to in scholarship as the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and a southern kingdom named Judah. Philistia remained a collection of city-states, although their territory was reduced in the Iron Age II to areas around the southern coastal plain of modern Israel. Each polity eventually lost its territorial sovereignty to the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, the first falling in the mid-ninth century (Bit Adini) and the last falling in the early sixth century (e.g., Judah and Tyre).

Although Iron Age II Levantine polities never attained the size and complexity of their Mesopotamian and Egyptian counterparts, many did develop features that scholars attribute to archaic states or polities (Feinman and Marcus 1998; Smith 2003; Yoffee 2005). In most instances, a divinely sponsored king managed a centralized political and economic administration whose power radiated from a capital center over a territory. The histories of these polities can be pieced together using written sources including state-sponsored inscriptions that describe the

military and building accomplishments of kings (e.g., the Mesha Inscription, the Luwian inscriptions of the Neo-Hittite polities; Hawkins 2000) as well as chronicle-like narratives found in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., I and II Kings; I and II Chronicles). Of course, careful source-critical methods must be applied when working with this information. Capital and associated administrative settlements exhibit a suite of architectural evidence that includes palaces, temples, gates and fortifications, storage facilities, and civic spaces. Such settlements include Aleppo, the ‘Amman Citadel, Busayra, Dhiban, Jerusalem, Carchemish, Megiddo, Samaria, Tayinat, and Zincirli, among many others.

Aside from piecing together each polity’s history, scholars have sought to explain how each developed within the historical, cultural, and environmental conditions in which they were placed. Many scholars implicitly or explicitly assume that shared ethnic and religious identities offered the “natural” cohesion to motivate constituents to align their loyalties with powerful families who controlled religious centers and resources (Herr 1997; Sader 2000). Other scholars have sought to explain the emergence of these political entities, suggesting they followed a social evolutionary pathway from diffuse tribal segments to more organized chiefdoms to eventually archaic states (Dever 1997; Finkelstein 1999). This modeling of the evidence tends to follow unilinear pathways, rather than the more nuanced perspectives that have appeared in social evolutionary research in the past two decades (e.g., Feinman and Marcus 1998). There are exceptions, however, where scholars have adopted perspectives that are more sensitive to the evidence and its context. Joffe, for instance, argues that Levantine polities were ethnicized secondary states created by local elites who borrowed the political form from more developed states in Mesopotamia (e.g., Assyria) and fostered new communal identities through the sponsorship of state cults (Joffe 2002, p. 456). LaBianca and Younker draw on the ethnographic literature of tribe and segmentary lineage systems to argue for supratribal polities in Ammon, Moab, and Edom (LaBianca 1999; LaBianca and Younker 1995; Younker 1999). Citing the resilient practice of organizing geographically disparate households under broader tribal identities throughout Jordan’s history, they argue that segments created regional alliances for the sake of meeting severe economic and political challenges (LaBianca and Younker 1995, p. 408). The result was a flexible and fluid tribal kingdom that exhibited many features of archaic states (e.g., kings, capitals, territory, state cult) but also preserved local political formations. LaBianca and Younker’s supratribal model is similar in some aspects to those models developed in ancient New World societies that recognize that archaic states did not always extinguish opportunities for lateral collaborations between segments operating beneath the state’s reach (e.g., Blanton 1998; Feinman 2001).

Joffe’s and LaBianca and Younker’s approaches appreciate how Iron Age Levantine polities do not easily fit into the ready-made cross-cultural definitions of archaic states. But they stop short of explaining how polities convinced or coerced their subject populations to participate in these political forms. The key to this authority partly resided in the fact that Levantine social organization was arranged in a nested hierarchy that extended from the oldest male resident of a nuclear family to the king who represented the population in a covenant agreement with the

polity's patron deity. Reminiscent of the patrimonial mode of authority described by Weber (1968, pp. 1006–1028), this political system was present in second millennium BC Levantine societies, although it was not employed at the territorial extent seen in the Iron Age (Schloen 2001; Stager 1985). In such a hierarchy, the Iron Age king was understood as a symbolic “father” over constituent households. Subjects rationalized their place in society as well as the authority of leaders over them using metaphors of house and kinship. Routledge has refined this concept of nested identities, drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony to argue that leaders used public buildings, inscriptions, and administrative practices to create a symbolic order that legitimized their authority and transformed their political rule into a moral order (Routledge 2004). He demonstrates how Mesha, a ninth-century Moabite king, united dispersed tribal segments under his rule using careful rhetoric in his royal inscription as well as the construction of palaces and fortifications at key settlements like Dhiban. Following Routledge's emphasis on hegemony, I argue that Edomite kings in southwest Jordan took similar steps to instill their authority, but facing limits to their power, they were required to redistribute portions of their wealth and promote the local deity Qos in order to shore up support from diffusely settled segments (Porter 2004). In a different but equally productive direction, Osborne (2013) challenges the implicit notion that Levantine polities exercised authority evenly across their reported territories, using an example from the polity Patina in southern Turkey and northwest Syria to demonstrate how the state exercised what he calls “malleable territoriality,” a flexible relationship between authority and space. While different in their theoretical frameworks, all of these explanations reveal that although the political apparatuses typical of archaic states existed in the Iron Age II Levant, the extent to which subjects were integrated into the everyday management of their polity was limited. Ordinary people likely encountered the state's power during festivals, military conscription, corvée labor projects, and tax collection. In the state's absence, local conditions played an important role in structuring social and political organization.

### Religion and Ritual Practices

Like many ancient complex political organizations (Emerson 1997; Fogelin 2007; Inomata 2006; Routledge 2014), religion and ritual played a pivotal role in legitimizing the authority of these Iron Age II polities and integrating populations within a single ideological program. Atop the hierarchy of nested households sat a sponsoring deity that was believed to participate in a covenant relationship with the king and his peoples. The deity agreed to protect and guide his people so long as they built and maintained his temple, offered prayers and sacrifices at regular intervals, and carried out his requests. Versions of this theological agreement between a god and his worshippers already were present in the earlier second millennium BC Bronze Age, as is evident in ritual texts and in temples at settlements such as Ugarit and Hazor (Yadin et al. 1989, pp. 212–275), among other places. Despite the decline in social and political organization, Iron Age I societies continued these ritual practices, even in less formal contexts such as rural open-air shrines (the “Bull Site”) (Mazar 1982), cult rooms (‘Ai) (Marquet-Krause 1949,

p. 23), and household shrines (‘Umayri House B) (Clark 2000). By the beginning of the 10th century BC and in the following centuries, ritual cults grew more centralized in the capital cities of Iron Age polities. The monotheistic rhetoric used in monumental royal inscriptions (e.g., the Mesha Inscription) and in portions of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., 1 Kings 8) indicates that political leaders promoted orthodox theologies that concentrated ritual practices toward a single deity (e.g., Yahweh in Israel, Kemosh in Moab) at a designated temple, usually in a polity’s capital city. Such an ideological alignment would have helped motivate and maintain leaders’ authority over their territorial polities, one more hegemonic element that created a moral order placing the king as the peoples’ representative in divine matters.

The proliferation of theophoric elements in personal names that were recorded in texts and cut in seals during the Iron Age II is one indication that these temple cults were successful among Levantine populations. By placing a theophoric element in a child’s name (e.g., Bēnāyāhû, “Yahweh has created [the child]”), parents expressed their piety to the cult of a particular deity (Albertz and Schmitt 2012, pp. 245–386). Tigay (1986) demonstrated in an extensive review of inscriptions excavated in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Judah that an overwhelming majority of personal names contained theophoric elements related to Yahweh. I observed a similar increase in the use of the Edomite patron deity Qos in naming practices as the polity grew more established starting in the eighth century (Porter 2004, tables 1 and 2).

Excavated temple complexes in large settlements such as ‘Ain Dara (Abou-Assaf 1990), Aleppo (Kohlmeyer 2000), Tayinat (Haines 1970), and Dan (Biran 1994, pp. 159–233) were another indication of how well established these cultic institutions were in the Iron Age II. These buildings were designed along a single axis that proceeded through multiple chambers until reaching a rear “holy of holies” where a deity’s statue resided. In some instances, stone carved statuary and reliefs of deities and mythical creatures lined the gateways and interiors—e.g., ‘Ain Dara (Abou-Assaf 1990, figs. 19–62) and Aleppo (Kohlmeyer 2000, figs. 8–24). Features such as sacrificial altars and ritual equipment such as incense burners and figurines point to the activities that took place within these contexts.

Notwithstanding this evidence for the centralization of state-sponsored cults in political capitals, archaeological research in recent decades has determined that ritual practices were not confined to these temple complexes, nor was the official cult necessarily accepted by all of the polity’s subjects. Holladay (1987), Zevit (2001), and Nakhai (2001) have devised categories, each in their own way, in which they sort evidence for cultic activity according to the nature of its context (domestic, communal, etc.) and scale (cult “corner,” shrine, temple). For instance, small shrines built adjacent to public spaces—e.g., Arad (Amiran et al. 1997, pp. 182–201), Lachish Room 49 (Aharoni 1975, pp. 26–32), Megiddo Shrines 2081 (Loud 1948, pp. 45–46, 161–162, fig. 388) and 340 (Ussishkin 1989), Khirbat al-Mudayna on the Wadi al-Thamad (Daviau and Steiner 2000)—and near major roads have been identified in the Negev Desert—Horvat Qitmit (Beit-Arieh 1995), Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in northeastern Sinai (Meshel 2012), and Site WT-13 near Dhiban, Jordan (Dolan 2007). Cult corners appear in domestic spaces, which attest to the practice of household rituals that occurred alongside other quotidian practices (Albertz and Schmitt 2012). Daviau (2001) observed the commingling of ritual equipment with

nonritual objects in collapsed houses at Jawa and argued that rituals occurred on their roofs. Earlier scholarship interpreted this evidence for ritual practices in household contexts as proof of an antagonistic division between state-sponsored ideological orthodoxies and local heterodox practices. More recently, Albertz and Schmitt (2012) have argued that this evidence for substate cult practices should be understood in less stark terms and choose instead to see this diversity as evidence for internal religious pluralism.

## Iron Age II Economies

Economic development was another substantial effect of political centralization during the Iron Age II. Levantine archaeologists and historians have identified a wide variety of subsistence and craft production activities that not only bolstered kingdoms' economies but also supported local and international market exchange practices. As in the earlier Iron Age I, the principal mode of production in the Iron Age II was agriculture and pastoralism that took place in small and medium-sized settlements distributed across the rural landscape (Faust 2000). Faunal and paleobotanical evidence indicates that village economies were based on a suite of products that could include grain, olive, and grape production, sheep, goat, cattle, and pig husbandry, fishing, hunting, and trapping (LaBianca and von den Driesch 1995; Lev-Tov 2000; Lev-Tov et al. 2011; Sasson 2010). Of course, a settlement's location in the Levant's diverse environmental zones played an important role in determining which crops and animals were emphasized. Levels of output were likely designed to meet household and community subsistence demands first and foremost, with some product set aside for later contributions to state coffers and regional markets. More rigorous sampling and analysis of faunal and botanical evidence are needed in order to appreciate the diverse arrangements of agropastoralist economies across the region.

Pyrotechnic craft industries intensified beyond levels seen in the Iron Age I, the most ubiquitous being the production of ceramic vessels and figurines. Forms ranged from large ovoid jars that could be used for large-scale transport and storage to everyday kraters, pots, jugs, and bowls used for cooking and serving (Amiran 1969; Lehmann 1998; Gitin 2015). The burnishing of smaller vessels and the application of red and white slips to their exteriors and interiors was common in the Iron Age II. The crafting of hand- and mold-made terracotta figurines of human and animal forms also intensified during the Iron Age II and continued into the Iron Age III. Research on these figurines is extensive (Press 2012; Pruss 2010), with particular emphasis placed on Judean pillar figurines in which a hand- or mold-made human head was placed on top of a cylindrical body and its hands positioned below the figure's breasts (Darby 2014; Kletter 1996). Metal technologies show patterns of continuity as well as change. Silver, gold, and especially bronze production technologies that were established in the previous Bronze Age continued into the Iron Age. These metals were often reserved for the crafting of prestige items, such as the decorated so-called "Phoenician" bowls found throughout the Mediterranean Basin during the first half of the first millennium (Feldman 2014, pp. 111–137; Markoe 1985). By 1000 BC, however, iron was the material used to craft everyday



tools and weapons (Brown 2014; Bunimovitz and Lederman 2012; Eliyahu-Behar et al. 2012; McNutt 1990; Waldbaum 1978). Knowledge of smelting and casting techniques became more broadly distributed across the region. Unlike copper, which is found in very specific locations in the Levant and Cyprus, low-quality ore was more broadly distributed across the landscape, making the raw materials easier to access.

Craft industries that produced what could be defined as “luxury” objects also intensified during the Iron Age II and III. Alongside the aforementioned metal bowl described above, archaeologists recovered physical evidence of other luxury goods that include textiles (Cecchini 2000; Friend 1998), engraved shells (Brandl 1984; Reese and Sease 2004), and various types of jewelry (Golani 2013; Limmer 2007). Ivory plaques and furniture inlays carved with elaborate images have been by far the most studied Levantine luxury item (Feldman 2014; Gansell et al. 2014; Herrmann 2005; Winter 1976, 2005). Despite the abundance of evidence for craft industries, particularly ceramic vessels that are well preserved in the archaeological record, little research has been dedicated to determining the scale at which these industries were organized or the degree to which producers were attached to state bureaucracies or other economic sectors (e.g., agriculture) (*sensu* Costin 1991). A surprising dearth of excavated workshops is but one barrier to answering these and related questions (but see Bunimovitz and Lederman 2012; Eliyahu-Behar et al. 2012; Horwitz et al. 2006; Pritchard 1975). In fact, many luxury objects have been recovered well outside the Levant, in elite contexts in Mesopotamia and the Aegean, which attests to their desirability on the international market (Feldman 2014).

Until recently, most scholars assumed these agropastoralist and craft industries exclusively served either local subsistence economies or centralized command economies managed by individual kingdoms. Written sources indicated that Iron Age II kingdoms, like many premodern states, depended on their constituents to support their bureaucracies through material and in-kind contributions. Various passages from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., I Kings 9) suggest that people were expected to pay taxes to the kingdoms’ coffers, offer regular sacrifices of agricultural practices to temples, participate in *corvée* labor projects, and serve in the military. Archaeological evidence substantiates such a command economy. Large buildings for storing food products and other goods were constructed in administrative settlements, such as at Beer Sheva (Aharoni 1973, pp. 23–30), Hazor (Yadin et al. 1960, pp. 6–19, plates CC, CCI), and Megiddo (Lamon and Shipton 1939, pp. 32–47). Epigraphic evidence attests to the state-sponsored bureaucracy that developed to manage the kingdom’s collection strategies. Seals made from precious stones as well as sealing impressions on objects list the names and sometimes the position of the administrators (Avigad and Sass 1997). Starting in the mid-ninth century BC, ostraca that record transactions between producers and the state became increasingly common. For instance, in a small archive in a palatial warehouse in Samaria, one of the capitals of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, 64 “receipts” were recovered, many of which record the year it was received in the king’s reign, the names of the givers and receivers, the place of origin, and the amount and quality of oil and wine that was submitted (Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, pp. 423–497; Kaufman 1966;

Lemaire 1977; Reisner, n.d.). Although originally dated to King Ahab's rule in the early ninth century BC, subsequent reanalysis of the ostraca and their archaeological context place the evidence in the early eighth century BC during the reign of King Jereboam II (Kaufman 1982; Tappy 2001, pp. 496–503).

In a similar example of a command economy from Judah, a redistribution system using large, multihanded jars was established around 700 BC. Jars were stamped on the handle with a distinctive seal bearing the expression *lmlk*, or “for the king,” and a settlement's name (e.g., Hebron) between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea (Avigad and Barkay 2000; Ussishkin et al. 2004, pp. 2133–2147). Scholars originally assumed that Judah's royal administration under King Hezekiah developed this system to prepare for the coming Assyrian siege between 704 and 701 BC (Na'aman 1986). However, a more recent analysis of the evidence indicates that the *lmlk* system began earlier in the eighth century and continued well into the seventh century and was part of Judah's redistribution system that collected and moved materials around the kingdom (Lipschits et al. 2010). More research is needed on the organization in the northern Levant and Jordan in order to determine how other kingdoms organized their economies.

At the same time, there is evidence that points to exchange economies that operated alongside and perhaps beyond the reach of the polities' administrations. Levantine archaeologists have just begun to follow their counterparts in other culture areas in their attempt to understand preindustrial market economies in terms of neo-institutional and network models (Feinman and Garraty 2010; Garraty and Stark 2010; Hirth and Pillsbury 2013; Nakassis et al. 2011). Holladay (1995, 2006) and Master (2014) have argued separately for largely unregulated economies in which everyday products as well as luxury goods were traded at locations such as city gates. Evidence for such transactions occurs in the ubiquity of “receipts” written on *ostraca*, seals, and especially weights (Kletter 1998). Identifying contexts for these informal exchanges in the archaeological record is rare, although a seventh century BC (i.e., Iron Age III) market street was identified at Ashkelon (Stager et al. 2011). International exchange networks also crossed through the Levant, bringing materials to Mediterranean emporia. Incense and spice circulated on routes that originated in southern Arabia and spread into the Levant and Mesopotamia (Zimmerle 2014). This evidence for formal and informal multiscale exchange economies in the Iron Age is promising and should be a priority for upcoming research.

### **Mesopotamian Imperialism in the Iron Age III (745–530 BC)**

Beginning in the mid-eighth century BC, the Levantine polities that had established themselves in the Iron Age II were gradually dismantled, first by the Assyrian empire based in northern Iraq and later by the Babylonian empire based in southern Iraq. The Levant would remain a periphery for these and subsequent empires, as Achaemenid Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Mamluk, Ottoman, British, and French imperial forces each took their turn dominating the area's peoples and resources. Despite the long engagement of Iron Age Levantine societies with first

millennium BC imperialism, the region has been largely overlooked in global archaeological discussions investigating the relationship between archaic empires and their peripheries (Alcock et al. 2001; Areshian 2013; Sinopoli 1994). In many ways, the Levant played the role of a typical imperial periphery, offering raw materials, finished products, and human labor for empires to extract and providing a buffer between the imperial cores and threatening political entities such as the Egyptians and Greeks. Yet Iron Age Levantine societies also experienced the effects of empire in different ways and at different levels of intensity. These differences are partly due to historical circumstances. Polities in the northern Levant were obviously closer to the Assyrian and Babylonian political cores than those in the southern Levant, which brought the former into more frequent contact with the empires. But other differences are due to the fact that each empire designed specific administrative policies according to each vassal's circumstances. Written sources (e.g., chronicles, letters) reveal that imperial administrators often planned how best to reorganize each vassal so that it achieved some aspect of the empire's economic or military goal. Consequently, this strategic positioning of empires led to different kinds of relationships with their peripheries.

The first encounter of nearly all Iron Age Levantine societies with the Assyrian and Babylonian empires took place through violence and often displacement. After expanding their territorial powers into eastern Syria and southern Iraq during the ninth century BC, the Assyrian armies turned their attention to the Levant, crossing the Euphrates River in frequent campaigns beginning in the eighth century BC to conquer new territory or to suppress rebellions in already conquered provinces. These bloody campaigns were detailed in the royal annals of Assyrian kings (e.g., Grayson and Novotny 2012; Leichty 2011; Tadmor and Yamada 2011) as well as in the stone reliefs that decorated the walls of Assyrian palaces (e.g., Curtis and Reade 1995; Russell 1999; Ussishkin 1982). Levantine written sources (e.g., II Kings 17) often corroborate the violent threat of empire, and archaeological excavations confirm that these bloody events were not hyperbole. Evidence for violent destruction has been identified at Iron Age Levantine settlements such as Lachish (Level III) (Tufnell 1953; Ussishkin et al. 2004, pp. 695–767) and Hama (Level E1) (Fugmann 1958, pp. 150–269; Riis and Buhl 1990) among many, many others. These destruction contexts can often be dated with precision to specific military campaigns that are described in imperial sources. Burned buildings rich in objects from the final moments of the settlement's existence often characterize these destruction levels, as do weapons and the bodies of victims killed during the siege. Once a settlement was destroyed, a significant amount of the remaining population was deported and relocated to another corner of the empire (Oded 1979). These deportations guaranteed that local political powers could not reorganize themselves to contest the empire's presence at a later date. These deportations also moved groups with particular skills to areas of the empire where they would best serve the empire's economic goals. Similarly, conquered groups from other realms were relocated to the Levant, dramatically changing the ethnic composition of several regions.

## Economic Intensification Under the Assyrian Empire

Of the two empires that controlled the Levant during the Iron Age, the Assyrians made the most dramatic changes to the region's societies and their landscapes, changes that the Babylonians and Achaemenid Persians would inherit in later centuries. Upon conquering a polity, the first step of the Assyrians was to establish it as a vassal state that was required to offer political allegiance to the empire and pay large amounts of tribute to the imperial coffers. If these obligations were not met, the Assyrian army would return to depose indigenous leadership, deport additional populations, and then establish a new province administered by an appointed Assyrian official or a loyal local elite. At some point between 733 and 720 BC, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was split into two provinces, Megiddo in the north and Samaria (Samirina) in the south (Stern 2001, pp. 42–57). Prominent settlements that were destroyed during Assyria's campaign were often rebuilt as capitals for new Assyrian provinces. Til Barsib, located at a strategic crossing point on the Euphrates River, was established as an Assyrian royal city renamed Kâr-Shalmaneser, after the Assyrian king who conquered the city in 856 BC. Excavations identified an



**Fig. 4** Plan of Megiddo Stratum III–II when the settlement was the regional capital for the Assyrian Province of Megiddo: (1) elite residences with central open courtyards and reception halls, (2) gate, (3) public granaries, (4) entrance to passage leading below ground to water, (5) domestic residences established around streets (modified from Herzog 1992, p. 256)

Assyrian palace that was constructed on the acropolis (Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936, pp. 8–74) as well as elite residential structures in the lower town containing Assyrian architectural elements and prestige goods such as carved ivories (Bunnens 1997). Megiddo, a major administrative center for earlier Israelite kingdoms, was entirely rebuilt with open-court palaces, houses, and granaries organized along a well-ordered grid system (Stratum III) (Lamon and Shipton 1939, pp. 62–87). Other prominent settlements saw the construction of new buildings and infrastructure, activity that sometimes expanded the overall size of settlements, such as Ashkelon (Stager et al. 2011) and Ekron Ib (Gitin 1997). Complimenting these settlements were military garrisons that were positioned throughout the Levant to manage relocated populations and defend imperial borders and resources from Egyptian military incursions such as Tell Jemmeh (Ben-Shlomo and Van Beek 2014), Tell Qudadi (Fantalkin and Tal 2009), and other locations (e.g., Tel Sera', Tell al-Sheikh Zuweid, and Rishon le-Zion) (cf. Stern 2001, pp. 25–27).

Archaic empires often had transformative economic effects on their peripheries, disrupting local subsistence economies, reorienting old or stimulating new regional commercial routes, and demanding new levels of output of raw and finished products for consumption in the imperial core (Morrison 1994; Sinopoli 1994). In this way, the Assyrian empire's effects on Levantine economies were similarly transformative. The output of raw materials and finished goods intensified in strategic areas, particularly in the seventh century BC. Grapes and olives were harvested and pressed for wine and olive oil, and sheep and goat husbandry focused on materials for textile production. Excavations at the coastal plain city of Ekron (Stratum Ib), a settlement that grew eightfold in size to at least 85 ha in the seventh century BC, identified an industrial neighborhood with buildings containing olive presses and looms that were positioned in the shadow of a large building bearing Assyrian architectural elements (Complex 650) (Gitin 1997). The recovery of highly stylized ivory objects, often furniture inlays, from Assyrian palaces in northern Iraq indicate that the empire placed a high premium on finished prestige objects originating from workshops in the northern Levant (Feldman 2014).

Although these patterns indicate an intensification of economic output in the Assyrian's Levantine periphery, it should not be assumed that these changes were uniformly experienced across the region. Surveys and excavations have identified significant differences in settlement patterns between the adjacent Provinces of Megiddo and Samaria. Aside from the reconstruction of Megiddo (Stratum III) (see below), the provincial capital, most major settlements that were destroyed during the Assyrian campaigns were either poorly rebuilt or left unoccupied (e.g., Dan, Hazor, Jezreel). Landscape surveys have failed to identify smaller rural settlements (Gal 1992), which suggests that the area remained undeveloped following the Assyrian's deportation of local communities. This pattern contrasts with the Province of Samaria, where a series of small, unfortified towns and villages emerged in the decades following the reconstruction of Samaria as the region's capital. This repopulation and expansion of the provincial settlement system is attributed to an Assyrian relocation program that settled new groups in the area who had previously lived in Mesopotamia and Iran. These new arrivals appear to have

thrived in Samaria, intensifying their use of the region's rich agricultural lands for the production of grains, grapes, and other agricultural products.

Assyrian imperialism also made an impact on Levantine architectural and material cultural forms, another sign of the intensity in the relationship between northern Mesopotamia and the Levant. Many of the major Levantine cities that had been destroyed during the Assyrian conquest were partly or entirely rebuilt, often with buildings and fortification systems that reflected styles seen in Assyrian cities in northern Iraq. Excavations at Megiddo (Stratum III) revealed a rebuilt well-planned town with regularly spaced streets, large public silos, and a water system (Fig. 4; Lamon and Shipton 1939, pp. 62–87). Public buildings (e.g., 1052, 1369, 1853) on the city's northern edge consisted of a typical Assyrian design of a large central courtyard surrounded by rooms, one of which served as an audience hall that mimicked the larger version seen in the palaces of Assyrian capitals such as Nineveh and Nimrud. Such halls are found in large public buildings throughout the Levant and were the likely places from which Assyrian governors or sponsored local elites wielded power (Ayelet Ha-Shahar; Busayra Building B). Assyrian architectural styles are also reflected in buildings that may have played a religious role, such as Complex 650 at Ekron (Gitin 1997) and Busayra Building A (Bienkowski 2002). Assyrian cultural influence also is present in the increase in cuneiform writing practices, burial practices, and material culture, including stone, ceramic, metal, and glass objects (Stern 2001, pp. 14–41). One should exercise caution, however, in understanding these buildings and objects as exact replications of those found in the Assyrian heartland. Instead, such cultural forms are best characterized as “Assyrianizing,” as a close look reveals that they combine Assyrian and local Levantine forms and styles. Such hybrid objects are unsurprising in imperial peripheries like the Iron Age III Levant, as the commingling of imported populations with local societies likely fostered such mixing. Nevertheless, what were perceived as imperial forms were still highly valued, so much so that local producers attempted imitations of Assyrian forms using local, sometimes cheaper, materials (Routledge 1997).

### **Babylonian Imperialism: Destruction and Divestment**

Assyria's power throughout the Near East waned in the late seventh century and the empire was eventually toppled in 612 BC by a coalition of forces, including the Babylonians based in southern Iraq who would go on to inherit much of Assyria's provincial domains. Babylonian rule of the Levant lasted only 70 years, yet their effect on the region was substantial and different in many ways from their Assyrian predecessors. The early Babylonian kings such as Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar resumed military campaigns to the Levant, where they quashed rebellions, deported populations to lower Mesopotamian cities like Babylon and Nippur, and exacted tribute from their new vassals (Lipschits 2005; Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003; Stern 2001). Destruction levels dated to the late seventh or early sixth century Babylonian campaigns have been identified at major settlements throughout the southern Levant such as Ashkelon (Stager et al. 2011), Ekron (Stratum Ib) (Gitin 1997), Jerusalem (Lipschits 2005), and Lachish (Level II) (Tufnell 1953;



Ussishkin et al. 2004). Destruction levels in the northern Levant have not been as readily identified, a possible sign that the region transitioned more easily to Babylonian rule compared to the southern Levant, where Egyptian political influence had come to replace the Assyrians in the final decades of the seventh century. However, Nebuchadnezzar reports to have laid siege to Tyre in Lebanon for 13 years, an event attested by the multiple rock-carved reliefs and inscriptions in Lebanon that Nebuchadnezzar's artists created during his campaign (Da Riva 2010).

The destruction of these prominent settlements, coupled with the Hebrew Bible's description of a devastated "empty land" (e.g., 2 Chronicles 36:21; Jeremiah 25:11) led earlier scholars to assume that Levantine population levels were so low that archaeological evidence would be lacking for most of the sixth century BC (Barstad 1996). A careful reassessment during the past decade has identified sufficient amounts of evidence (Faust 2012; Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003; Stern 2001, pp. 303–350; Zorn 2014), although it remains true that sedentary settlement was not as intensive as in previous centuries nor was it evenly distributed across the region. Settlement activity in the northern Levant has been detected in settlements along the Mediterranean coast as well as slightly inland at Mardikh, Shaykh Hamad, and Sukas, among others (cf. Lehmann 1998, fig. 2, Assemblage 5). Some areas in the southern Levant seem to have escaped Babylonia's wrath and in fact supported substantial populations during the sixth century. Several substantial new buildings were constructed at Tell en-Nasbeh, the ancient city of Mizpeh located north of Jerusalem (Zorn 2003). Many settlements in modern Jordan continued into the sixth century, such as al-'Umayri, where large public buildings have been excavated. Edomite settlements in southwest Jordan also show signs of continuity through at least the first half of the sixth century, such as the monumental buildings at Busayra (Areas A and C, Integrated Phase 2) (Bienkowski 2002, pp. 475–482) and possibly the smaller agricultural villages of Umm al-Biyara (Phases 1 and 2) (Bienkowski 2011, pp. 139–40) and Tawilan (Integrated Stages 1–5) (Bennett and Bienkowski 1995, pp. 102–103). This meager evidence for limited settlement activity during the sixth century confirms that the Babylonians desolated much of the southern Levant with no subsequent attempts to reestablish political or economic organization (Faust 2012). More archaeological research is needed, however, to understand how those surviving communities adapted the new political and economic conditions in the wake of relative imperial neglect. This neglect continued until 530 BC, when the Achaemenid Empire based in southwest Iran toppled the Babylonian Empire, subsequently inheriting, reviving, and to some extent expanding the imperial system that the Assyrians had established centuries earlier (Kuhrt 2007; Lipschits and Oeming 2006; Stern 2001).

## **Avenues for Future Research: Sampling and Dating Archaeological Contexts**

This panorama of recent archaeological research on Iron Age Levantine societies demonstrates that the region possesses a rich archive of cultural developments that ally with several enduring themes in global archaeological research. Several



methodological issues call out for attention, particularly issues pertaining to sampling. Landscape survey projects since the early 20th century have successfully identified and documented large numbers of ancient Iron Age settlements throughout the Levant, from single-building farmsteads to large urban centers. Still, most archaeological projects remain confined to larger settlements, leaving smaller farmsteads and villages underexplored. This is especially true in the northern Levant, where remote sensing projects have investigated Iron Age landscapes (Casana 2007; Osborne 2012) but have conducted only limited excavations in non-elite domestic contexts in settlements such as Tell Mastuma (Iwasaki et al. 2009; Wakita et al. 2000), Tell ‘Acharneh (Fortin 2006), and Tell Afis (Cecchini and Mazzoni 1998; Mazzoni 1998). In the southern Levant, some limited sampling of Iron Age II and III farmsteads has yielded important information on agropastoralist economies under Levantine polities and the empires that came to dominate them (Faust 2000; Routledge 2004, pp. 192–201; Stager 1976). The number of projects remains limited, however. These smaller settlements require sampling through excavation because modern architectural development, particularly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, will eventually destroy this evidence.

Another pressing sampling issue is the need to prioritize the retrieval, study, and publication of Iron Age organic remains, particularly faunal and carbonized botanical evidence. This is not to say that such evidence has been overlooked in the past or goes completely uncollected today. Indeed, brief faunal and archaeobotanical reports have regularly been published, usually in southern Levantine excavation projects. These reports, however, often rely on limited quantities of specimens that are retrieved using judgment-sampling methods of select excavation contexts (e.g., a storage bin, a storage vessel). These studies are useful for determining the presence and absence of plant species or animal types that align with some archaeologists’ interests in linking cuisine practices, ethnic identities, and food prohibition laws in late biblical texts (e.g., pig prohibitions in Leviticus 11:7) (Finkelstein 1996; Hesse and Wapnish 1997). Yet these same studies often fail to observe statistically significant patterns in plant and animal economies that more intensive sampling strategies of randomly selected contexts can yield, such as cropping strategies, animal butchering, and wild animal hunting. While exceptions do exist (LaBianca and von den Driesch 1995; Lev-Tov 2000; Lev-Tov et al. 2011; Sasson 2010), very few syntheses are available at this time from which it is possible to make statements about agropastoral economies at the site-specific or regional levels, especially during the Iron Age II and Iron Age III. In the northern Levant, the situation is even more acute, with very few published studies available to evaluate plant and animal economies (e.g., Crawford 1999; Frey and Marean 1999; Wachter-Sarkady 1998; Wilkins 1992, 1998).

A related challenge is determining how best to proceed with the dating of Iron Age archaeological deposits. Iron Age Levantine archaeologists have never coordinated their chronological frameworks, although much discussion has occurred over the discipline’s history (Aharoni and Amiran 1958; Albright 1943, 1949, pp. 110–112; Bunnens 2000; King 1983, pp. 282–283; Mazzoni 1990, 2000; Wright 1961, pp. 73–77, 94–100). Most scholars still organize subregional chronologies around historical events whose dates are coordinated with better-known calendars in

Egypt and Mesopotamia, or calculated using written sources that, in turn, can be observed in the archaeological record, often in settlement destruction layers. Believing their material culture sequences to be accurate, Levantine archaeologists have often avoided the use of radiocarbon dating methods, in spite of the growing precision in technologies over the decades. The rise of high-precision AMS technologies for testing carbonized evidence, however, has led a minority of Iron Age archaeologists to prefer radiocarbon dating methods to the traditional relative dating schemes (Levy and Higham 2005).

Radiocarbon dating methods have been most successful in the dating of cultural deposits that fall between 1200 and 800 BC, that is, the Iron Age I and early Iron Age II. Unfortunately, a consistently flat area in the radiocarbon calibration curve called the Halstatt Plateau complicates the analysis of samples dating between 800 and 400 BC unless “wiggles matching” statistical techniques are used to link dates to the calibration curve (Christen and Litton 1995; Ramsey et al. 2001; Van der Plicht and Bruins 2001). Researchers are required to use discretion when selecting samples for testing, such as choosing short-lived samples (e.g., charred seeds) over those that had potentially longer lives (e.g., wood). Archaeologists also need to be cautious about the interpretations of contexts from which samples are tested, acknowledging that burnt materials often represent the last, rather than the first, moment in a context’s use, and therefore offer only a *terminus ante quem* date. Finally, as the amount of tested samples increases from the centuries prior to the Hallstatt Plateau, Levantine archaeologists should consider how their refined chronologies could synchronize with those in adjacent areas in Anatolia, Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia.

## Conclusion: Assembling the Levant

Research during the past two decades has increased our knowledge of Iron Age Levantine societies. This research, however, has gone largely unrecognized in broader discussions taking place in global archaeology. This lack of acknowledgment is partly due to the lingering question concerning whether or not Iron Age Levantine societies—and potentially all past Levantine societies—should ultimately be assembled within a single culture area rubric. Global archaeological and historical reconstructions often characterize the Levant, not as its own culture area but as a “corridor” between culture areas in Europe, Africa, and Asia, a bridge through which humans, animals, and cultural practices moved during the Pleistocene and Holocene Eras. Still other perspectives liken the Levant to a perennial periphery with lucrative Mediterranean emporia, an agricultural breadbasket, and a territorial buffer between nervous empires in Egypt, Europe, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. These perspectives place Levantine societies outside standard narratives of “civilization,” rendering them “people without history” (sensu Wolf 1997), passive in their ability to make lasting contributions to world history. A very careful review of the evidence, however, reveals that Levantine populations made substantial and lasting contributions to human history, from early Neolithic

innovations in agriculture and animal domestication to the development of world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Nevertheless, calls for a broader definition of the Levant from historians and archaeologists are surprisingly rare (but see Steiner and Killebrew 2014, pp. 51–68), signaling that scholars are reluctant to embrace the idea. One may reasonably argue that there is, after all, little evidence to confirm that past Levantine societies understood the region as a unified geographic or cultural entity. Consequently, such reasoning suggests, scholars would be better to structure their investigations according to parameters defined by ancient societies rather than arbitrarily draw borders around areas that were unrecognizable in the past. Indeed, Levantine archaeologists have implicitly subscribed to what are purportedly emic understandings of Iron Age culture areas in their research. Problems arise, however, when statements describing political borders and territorial claims in Iron Age written sources are used uncritically to define research areas within categories such as “Ancient Israel,” “Biblical Moab,” and “Phoenicia,” to name only a few. I argue, alternatively, that the prioritization by Levantine archaeologists of their ancient subjects’ claims to territory has contributed to the balkanized conditions of current research beyond those described in the introduction. Temporarily suspending these concerns with borders and assembling groups within a single culture area can lead scholars to recognize the cultural and historical conditions that Iron Age Levantine societies held in common. I have focused my discussion here largely on the shared experiences of the Bronze Age “collapse,” the organization of territorial states during the early first millennium, and the subsequent dismantling of these states by foreign empires. These and other research themes that span Iron Age societies will only become more recognizable as archaeological research continues throughout the Levant.

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