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Edited by

RICHARD S. HESS, GERALD A. KLINGBEIL,
AND PAUL J. RAY JR.

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The Search for Joshua's Ai

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Abstract

The sites of Joshua's Ai, Beth Aven and Bethel, are chronologically and geographically linked by Josh 7:2 and related passages. Joshua's Ai is commonly thought to be located at et-Tell and Bethel at Beitin. Assuming these two identifications to be correct, no viable location for Beth Aven has been suggested. A detailed review of the geographical and archaeological data pertaining to et-Tell and Beitin reveals that et-Tell does not meet the biblical requirements for Joshua's Ai, and Beitin does not meet the biblical and extrabiblical requirements for Bethel. Based on present evidence, the only combination that meets the complex matrix of biblical and extrabiblical requirements for the three sites is to locate Bethel at el-Bira, Beth Aven at Beitin, and Joshua's Ai at the newly excavated site of Khirbet el-Maqatir.

The identification of et-Tell (17485/14710) as Joshua's Ai has been a major problem in biblical archaeology. Excavations at the site have demonstrated that there was no occupation during the Late Bronze Age, the time of the conquest (Callaway 1993: 44). In the words of Joseph Callaway (1968: 312), the most recent excavator of et-Tell (1964–70): "Ai is simply an embarrassment to every view of the conquest that takes the biblical and archaeological evidence seriously." As a result, most scholars have concluded that the biblical account of the conquest of Ai in Joshua 7–8 is nonhistorical. In this essay, I will review the reasons for identifying et-Tell as Joshua's Ai, demonstrate that this site cannot be Ai, and identify an alternate location. An integral part of the study also will be to identify alternate locations for the related sites of Bethel and Beth-aven.

Ai in the Bible

Ai is mentioned in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes with different spellings. The earliest reference is in Gen 12:8, which states: "Then he

Author's note: This essay is dedicated to friend, colleague, and mentor, David Livingston, who pioneered the research on the problem of Ai.

[Abraham] proceeded from there [Shechem] to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.” On his return from Egypt, Abraham again came “to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai” (Gen 13:3). In terms of biblical chronology, this would be ca. 2100 B.C.E. or a little after, at the interface between the Early Bronze and Middle Bronze Ages.¹

The most detailed description of Ai is given in Joshua 7–8, the account of the capture of the site by Joshua and the Israelites during the conquest, around 1400 B.C.E., at the end of the Late Bronze Age I period. More geographical and archaeological information is given for Ai in these two chapters than any other biblical site. Presumably, this would make the identification of the site relatively straightforward (Grintz 1961: 201). Ironically, this has not been the case.

The fact that “the men of Bethel and Ai” are listed among the returning exiles in Ezra 2:28 and Neh 7:32 implies that there was a settlement at Ai at the end of the Iron Age (ca. 587 B.C.E.). It also suggests that these sites were reestablished by the returning exiles early in the Persian period (late 6th century B.C.E.). Aiath in Isa 10:28 also may refer to Iron Age Ai.

The question naturally arises: were all of these settlements named Ai, spread over a millennium and a half, located at the same place? It is commonly assumed that the Ai of Abraham and the Ai of Joshua were one and the same, because both were located east of Bethel (Gen 12:8, Josh 7:2). On closer examination, however, this does not appear to be the case. Abraham’s Ai must have been a major landmark, because it was used to fix his position. Joshua’s Ai, on the other hand, was a small place because only a few men were stationed there (Josh 7:3) and it was smaller than Gibeon (Josh 10:2), or less than ca. 12 acres in size (Broshi and Gophna 1986: 82). From these considerations, it appears that Abraham’s Ai and Joshua’s Ai, separated chronologically by nearly seven centuries, were also separated geographically, albeit both east of Bethel. The migration of place names within a localized area in antiquity was commonplace (Albright 1924: 142, 144; 1939: 14; F. Kenyon 1940: 190; Wolf 1964: 90; Rainey 1978: 10, 1988a: 362; Aharoni 1979: 123–24; Hess 1996b: 225). Iron Age and Persian period Ai only can be located by means of archaeological evidence, because the Bible provides no topographic information on their location(s).

The Meaning of Ai

When the name of Ai is spelled *‘ay*, it is always prefixed with the definite article *hā* (Gen 12:8, 13:3; Joshua 7, 8; Ezra 2:28; Neh 7:32). The definite article does not appear with the alternative (?) spellings *‘ayyāt* (Isa 10:28) and *‘ayyā* (Neh

1. Biblical chronology in this essay is based on an exodus date of 1446 B.C.E. (Young 2003). The approximate date when Abraham entered Canaan can be determined from the genealogical data given in Exod 12:40; Gen 47:9, 25:26, 21:5, 12:4.

11:31). The generally accepted meaning of *ʿay* is “ruin” (BDB s.v.). By this reasoning, *hā ʿay* means “the ruin,” or “the ruin par excellence” (Albright 1934: 11). Jehoshua Grintz (1961: 210), however, points out that the use of the definite article may be peculiar to the tribal area of Benjamin, because it appears with 11 of the 26 place names² listed in the inheritance of Benjamin in Josh 18:21–28. In addition, he disagrees with the meaning “ruin,” maintaining instead that it means “pile or heap of stones” (Grintz 1961: 211; cf. Simons 1959: 270; Kaufmann 1985: 118–19 n. 64). Ziony Zevit (1983: 26; cf. 1985: 62–63) also has a different understanding of *ʿay* and says that it “may refer to some topographical or geographical feature characteristic of the site’s location” (see below, p. 239).

Pre-1924 Suggestions for the Location of Ai

Prior to David Livingston’s work on the location of Ai, first published in 1970, every investigation into the location of Ai began with Beitin (17280/14820), assuming it to be Bethel (see “The Location of Bethel,” pp. 214ff.). The criteria for potential locations for Ai were that the site was located east of Beitin and the element *ai* should be preserved in the modern Arabic name. Several sites were considered as potential candidates (fig. 1). In 1924, however, W. F. Albright published a watershed article in which he endorsed et-Tell as the only viable possibility for Ai. This virtually eliminated all other contenders from consideration and closed the case. In the interest of completeness, we briefly shall review the other pre-1924 suggested sites.

Khirbet Haiyan (17560/14570)

Khirbet Haiyan is located at the southern edge of the small town of Deir Dibwan, 3.7 km southeast of Beitin. Edward Robinson visited the site in 1838 and favored it over et-Tell as the location of Ai because he did not see any evidence of an ancient settlement at et-Tell (1841: 312–13).³ Claude Conder (1878: 108–9, 1881a: 254, 1881b: 222, 1881c: 36–37, 1898: 58; F. Conder and C. Conder 1882) also identified Khirbet Haiyan as Ai, as did Trelawney Saunders (1881: 95–97) and Frants Buhl (1896: 177). Callaway excavated the site in 1964 and 1969. The earliest architecture found was Byzantine (Callaway and Nicol 1966; Callaway 1969b: 239, 1970: 10, 1976: 14). Surface surveys have since turned up a few earlier sherds: Middle Bronze Age (2%), and Hellenistic and Roman periods (32%), out of 112 sherds (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 36*, 183); as well as a few Early Bronze III and Iron Age sherds (Kallai 1972: 178–79).

2. Grintz (1961) listed 10 occurrences, but he left out Ha-Ramah (v. 25), so the total should be 11.

3. There are a number of editions and reprints of Robinson’s travels in Palestine in 1838 and 1852. Here I cite the original 1841 edition, which is available online at <http://books.google.com>.

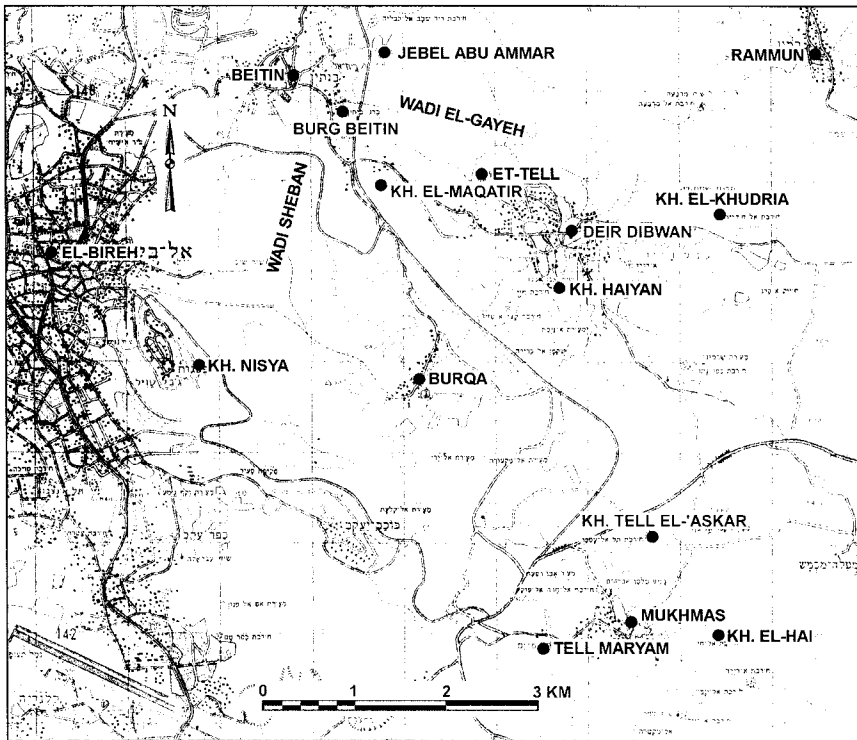


Figure 1. Map of the el-Bira–Beitin–Deir Dibwan area north of Jerusalem. From Survey of Israel, 1:50,000 map, sheet 8-IV (Ramallah), 2001. Modified by B. G. Wood.

Khirbet el-Hai (17740/14200)

Horatio Kitchener (1878) championed Khirbet el-Hai, 7.5 km southeast of Beitin, as a suitable location for Ai. W. F. Birch (1878) endorsed Kitchener's view. Surface surveys indicate only medieval and Ottoman occupation (Callaway 1968: 315; Kallai 1972: 182; Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 38*, 195).

Rammun (17850/14840)

T. H. Guest (1878) regarded the small village of Rammun, 5.6 km east of Beitin, as the best candidate for Ai based on its location and topography. This idea did not gain acceptance (Albright 1924: 142). A surface survey produced six sherds from Iron Age I, with the remaining 20 sherds being from the Hellenistic period or later (Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997: 538–39).

Khirbet el-Khudriya (17743/14660)

The identification of Khirbet el-Khudriya, 4.8 km east-southeast of Beitin, as a candidate for Ai appears to be the result of an error. Victor Guérin (1869: 59, 1882: 238; Grintz 1961: 203) identified a site named Khirbet el-Koudeireh as Ai. The site he described, however, was Khirbet Ḥaiyan (Saunders 1881: 95; Albright 1924: 141; for Khirbet Ḥaiyan, see above). Guérin (1869: 59) referred to Robinson as the first to identify Khirbet el-Koudeireh as Ai, but the reference he gave was to Robinson's suggestion of Khirbet Ḥaiyan as Ai (Robinson and Smith 1856: 575). Based on Guérin's mistaken suggestion that Khirbet el-Khudriya, 1.6 km east of Deir Dibwan, was Ai, Callaway excavated the site in 1966 and 1968. It turned out to be a Byzantine settlement, possibly a monastery (Callaway 1968: 315, 1969a: 4–5, 1970: 10–12; Bagatti 2002: 35–38).

The Identification of et-Tell as Ai

Robinson (1841: 312–13) visited et-Tell in 1838 but rejected it as a candidate for Ai because he could see no evidence of ancient occupation. Carel van de Velde (1854: 278–79) stopped there in 1852 and readily embraced Finn's earlier suggestion that it was Ai, largely on the basis that there were no other candidate sites between Jericho and Beitin. Other early investigators, such as Charles Wilson (1869–70: 123; 1882), Samuel Anderson (1871: 469–70), Henry Tristram (1884), Arthur Stanley (1888), and Ernst Sellin (1900), also endorsed the et-Tell = Ai equation.

Albright's 1924 article, for all intents and purposes, set the identification of et-Tell as Ai in concrete. His basis was that it is the only Canaanite ruin in the vicinity meeting the topographic requirements of being east of Beitin (Gen 12:8, 13:3; Josh 7:2, 8:9) and in the vicinity of Beitin (Josh 8:17, 12:9). Most scholars have accepted the identification as certain, to the extent that if one wishes to look up et-Tell in an archaeological dictionary or encyclopedia, one must look under "Ai."⁴

4. "Et-Tell indeed is Ai—there is no doubt about this" (van Selms 1936: 208); "Et-Tell . . . unquestionably represents biblical Ai" (Albright 1939: 15); "There is no doubt about the correlation of the Old Testament sites [of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor] with the mounds of ruins at *tell es-sultān*, *et-tell* and *tell waḳḳās*, respectively. In all three cases, there are clear and apparently final archaeological results" (Noth 1960a: 273); "There can be no possible doubt about the identification [of Ai with et-Tell]" (Albright 1963: 29); "The site of Et-Tell, which is certainly 'Ay' . . ." (de Vaux 1969a: 273); "Et-Tell is the only really conspicuous tell in the vicinity immediately east of Bethel, as the Arab name 'et-tell' ('the tell') suggests, and it meets all the topographical requirements of both Gen 12:8 and Josh 7–8. That biblical Ai is to be equated with present-day et-Tell is an obvious conclusion" (Miller 1977: 88); "The identification of et-Tell with the Ai of the Joshua narratives remains virtually assured by its regionally sealed archaeological context . . . and by its geographical

Problems with the Identification of et-Tell as Joshua's Ai

The only information from the Old Testament era concerning Joshua's Ai is what is contained in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, if one wishes to locate Joshua's Ai, one must satisfy the biblical requirements for the site.

Topographical Requirements for Joshua's Ai

The topographical requirements for Joshua's Ai are: (1) that it was near or adjacent to (*'im*) Beth-aven (Josh 7:2); (2) that it was east of Bethel (Josh 7:2); (3) there was an ambush site or sites between Bethel and Ai, west of Ai (Josh 8:9, 12); (4) there was a militarily significant hill north of Ai where "all the people of war . . . camped" (Josh 8:11); (5) there was a shallow valley north of Ai where Joshua and his diversionary force could be seen by the king of Ai (Josh 8:13–14); (6) the site was smaller than Gibeon (Josh 10:2), which was less than 12 acres (Broshi and Gophna 1986: 82); and (7) it was in the vicinity of (*miššad*, "beside") Bethel (Josh 12:9). The only other place in the Hebrew Bible where *miššad* is used to describe the relationship between two towns is Josh 3:16. Here, it says that Adam was *miššad* Zarethan. These two cities are located on the east side of the Jordan Valley. Adam is at Damiyeh and Zerethan is generally thought to be at Tell es-Sa'idiyah, some 18.4 km to the north. Thus, *miššad* need not indicate immediate proximity. It appears that the meaning of the Hebrew root *šad* in *miššad* is related to the Arabic cognate, which means "vicinity," "in front of" or "in the vicinity of" (BDB, s.v.).

Archaeological Requirements for Joshua's Ai

The archaeological requirements include: (1) occupation at the time of the conquest (late 15th century B.C.E., end of the Late Bronze Age I period); (2) being fortified at the time of the conquest (Josh 7:5, 8:29); (3) having a gate on the north side of the site (Josh 8:11); (4) being destroyed by fire (Josh 8:19, 28) and (5) left in ruins after ca. 1400 B.C.E. (Josh 8:28).

Evaluation of et-Tell as Joshua's Ai

It is often assumed that et-Tell meets the biblical topographical and archaeological requirements for Joshua's Ai, with the exception of occupation in the

locus" (Zevit 1983: 28); "All geographical indications in the Biblical text point to the area of Khirbet et-Tell as the location of Ai" (Zevit 1985: 61); "Between Beitin and the desert to its east, there is only one site which could have been referred to as 'Ai — the large mound of et-Tell near Deir Dibwan" (A. Mazar 1990: 331); "East of Beitin only one site can possibly be identified with Ai, and that is the large site of et-Tell, near Deir Dibwan" (A. Mazar 1992: 283); "Albright's identification of et-Tell with Ai was therefore based upon biblical traditions and the topography of the region and was supported by the evidence of an ancient city of the Canaanites which lay under heaps of stones. His location of the site of Ai has not been seriously challenged in the last half-century" (Callaway 1992: 126).

biblical time frame of the conquest (Miller 1977: 88; Rainey and Notley 2006: 125). In actuality, et-Tell does *not* meet the biblical requirements for Joshua's Ai. A number of investigators have expressed doubts concerning the identification, but since there has been no other viable candidate in the vicinity, et-Tell became Joshua's Ai by default. Let us consider how et-Tell measures up to the biblical requirements.⁵

1. *Adjacent to Beth-aven (Josh 7:2)*. Beth-aven has been variously identified as Khirbet Haiyan, Deir Dibwan, Burg Beitin, Burqa, Tell Maryam, or Khirbet Tell el-ʿAskar (see “The Location of Beth-aven” below, pp. 221ff.). None of these sites, however, was occupied prior to the Hellenistic period, with the exception of Tell el-ʿAskar, which was occupied in Iron Age I.⁶ Thus, there is no candidate site for Beth-aven in the vicinity of et-Tell that was occupied at the time of the conquest.

2. *East of Bethel (Josh 7:2)*. This biblical requirement is met by et-Tell, which is 2.4 km southeast of Beitin and ca. 5 km northeast of el-Bira.⁷

3. *An ambush site between Bethel and Ai (Josh 8:9, 12)*. There is a small hill 0.7 km northwest of et-Tell, between it and Beitin, that would provide cover for a small ambush force hiding on the northwest side of the hill. However, the northwest side of the hill is in plain view of Beitin, Bethel according to Albright's model, an ally of Ai (Josh 8:17). Others also have pointed out this shortcoming (Kitchener 1878: 75; Grntz 1961: 203, 211). If Bethel was located at el-Bira, an ambush force could have taken up a position to the southwest of et-Tell, in the valley where the modern Beitin–Deir Dibwan road currently runs or in the Wadi Sheban, and be hidden from both et-Tell and el-Bira.

4. *A militarily significant hill north of Ai (Josh 8:11)*. It appears that Joshua placed most of his army on a hill north of Ai, making the hill the “command post” for his generals (Briggs 2005: 180–81). The small hill 0.7 km northwest of et-Tell would make a suitable command post.

5. *A shallow valley north of Ai (Josh 8:13–14)*. The Wadi el-Gayeh on the north side of et-Tell is very deep and narrow, with exceedingly steep sides. It would not be possible for the king of Ai to see Joshua and his diversionary force in this valley, contrary to Josh 8:14.

6. *Smaller than Gibeon (Josh 10:2)*. At 27 acres (Callaway 1993: 39), et-Tell is more than twice the size of Gibeon, which is less than 12 acres in size (Broshi and Gophna 1986: 82; Wells 1947).

5. In the following discussion, both Beitin and el-Bira are considered as potential locations for Bethel (see “The Location of Bethel” below, pp. 214ff.).

6. Because Khirbet Tell el-ʿAskar is 4.5 km southeast of et-Tell, it is too distant to be considered adjacent to et-Tell.

7. The center of el-Bira at the time of the conquest is assumed to be the acropolis at Ras et-Tahuneh (1702/1462).

7. *In the vicinity of Bethel (Josh 12:9).* Et-Tell's location, 2.4 km southeast of Beitin and ca. 5 km northeast of el-Bira, qualifies it as being in the vicinity of Bethel.

8. *Occupation at the time of the conquest.* Here, et-Tell fails miserably, because it was unoccupied during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Callaway 1993: 40; Grintz 1961: 205, 207, 211).⁸ Because there was no occupation at the time of the conquest, et-Tell fails all five archaeological tests for Joshua's Ai.

In total, et-Tell meets only 3 or possibly 4 of the 12 biblical and archaeological requirements for Joshua's Ai.

Evaluation of Khirbet Nisya as Joshua's Ai

Livingston (Bimson and Livingston 1987: 48–51; Livingston 1994: 159; 1999; 2003: 203–22) has suggested that Khirbet Nisya (17175/14495), located 2 km southeast of el-Bira, should be identified as Joshua's Ai. He (1994: 159) claims "the topography around the site matches every detail given in the account of the destruction of Ai in Joshua 7–8." The following is an evaluation of Khirbet Nisya as Joshua's Ai in light of the above requirements.

1. *Adjacent to Beth-aven (Josh 7:2).* Livingston (2003: 212–13) identifies Khirbet el-Maqatir (17378/14693) as Beth-aven. Khirbet el-Maqatir is 3 km northeast of Khirbet Nisya and separated from it by the deep Wadi Sheban and high hills on either side of Wadi Sheban. One site cannot be seen from the other. Thus, Khirbet Nisya cannot be considered to be adjacent to Khirbet el-Maqatir.

2. *East of Bethel (Josh 7:2).* In Livingston's model, el-Bira (17050/14585) is identified as Bethel (see "The Location of Bethel" below, pp. 214ff.). Khirbet Nisya is 2 km southeast of el-Bira.

3. *An ambush site between Bethel and Ai (Josh 8:9, 12).* There is a valley between Khirbet Nisya and el-Bira, which is hidden from view from Khirbet Nisya by Jebel et-Tawil. As with the ambush site northwest of et-Tell, however, the valley is in clear view of el-Bira/Bethel, the ally of Ai (Josh 8:17).

4. *A militarily significant hill north of Ai (Josh 8:11).* There is a small hill 0.5 km north of Khirbet Nisya that could have served as a military command post for Joshua's generals.

5. *A shallow valley north of Ai (Josh 9:13–14).* The small, narrow valley between Khirbet Nisya and the small hill 0.5 km to the north is too confining to be the scene of military operations of the type described in Josh 8:13–17.

8. Since et-Tell has been extensively excavated, it is unrealistic to believe that a Late Bronze Age phase will yet be found or that the Late Bronze Age phase was subject to "serious denudation," as some have maintained (Allen 1977: 44, 52; Kitchen 2003: 189).

6. *Smaller than Gibeon (Josh 10:2).* Khirbet Nisya is smaller than Gibeon as it is approximately 4–6 acres in size (Livingston 2003: 12).

7. *In the vicinity of Bethel (Josh 12:9).* Khirbet Nisya is 2 km southeast of el-Bira and thus can be considered to be in the vicinity of Bethel.

8. *Occupation at the time of the conquest.* Livingston (2003: 36–43) has identified 17 sherds excavated in 16 seasons between 1979 and 2000 as coming from the time period of the conquest (Late Bronze Age I). Another 22 sherds are possibly Late Bronze Age I in date: 14 from the Middle Bronze/Late Bronze Age transition, 4 from Middle Bronze Age or Late Bronze Age, and 4 dated to Late Bronze Age in general (Livingston 2003: 36–43). The majority of the 39 sherds (31, or 79%) that could possibly be Late Bronze Age I came from the fill of a Byzantine building complex within a later agricultural terrace on the southeast side of the site (Squares 50–54;⁹ Livingston 2003: 30–32, 128–29, site plan). Four additional sherds came from fill in the next lower agricultural terrace to the southeast (Squares 3 and 4; Livingston 2003: site plan), while the remaining four came from fill in agricultural terraces 25–55 m to the northeast and north of Squares 50–54 (Squares 10, 77, 78, 100; Livingston 2003: site plan). The types of vessels represented include: 14 bowls, 8 storage jars, 7 cooking pots, 4 pithoi, 2 jugs, 2 dipper juglets, 1 krater, and 1 lamp, all representing an ordinary domestic repertoire. The quantity, type, and distribution of possible Late Bronze Age I sherds at Khirbet Nisya indicate a limited presence at that time, perhaps a small farmstead.

9. *Fortified at the time of the conquest (Josh 7:5, 8:29).* No architecture from the Late Bronze Age I was found at Khirbet Nisya (Livingston 2003: 29).

10. *A gate on the north side at the time of the conquest (Josh 8:11).* No architecture from the Late Bronze Age I was found at Khirbet Nisya (Livingston 2003: 29).

11. *Destroyed by fire at the time of the conquest (Josh 8:19, 28).* No in situ material from the Late Bronze Age I was found at Khirbet Nisya (Livingston 2003: 29).

12. *Left in ruins after ca. 1400 B.C.E. (Josh 8:28).* No in situ material from the Late Bronze Age I was found at Khirbet Nisya (Livingston 2003: 29).

Although Khirbet Nisya scores higher than et-Tell, it meets only 5 of the 12 required criteria to be identified as the Ai of Joshua (Waltke 1990: 193).¹⁰

9. During the 1985 season, I supervised the excavation of Squares 51 and 53, where 15 of the 31 sherds were found.

10. Another post-1924 theory for the location of Ai is the suggestion of Ben-Zion Luria (1989) that Ai should be located in the Jordan Valley. This cannot be taken seriously, however, because the Jordan Valley is too far removed from the known locus of Bethel, Beth-aven, and Ai north of Jerusalem (Zevit 1983: 33 n. 11).

In order to solve the problem of the location of Joshua's Ai, it is necessary not only to look for a viable site for Ai but also to properly locate Bethel and Beth-aven, because all three sites are intimately related. They form a triad linked together by a complex network of topographical and archaeological parameters. Only one unique set of sites can fulfill the precise requirements set forth in the Hebrew Bible.

The Location of Bethel

Robinson (1841: 125–28) was the first to locate Bethel at Beitin, when he visited the site on May 5, 1838. He gave two reasons why Beitin should be identified as biblical Bethel. The first is that the distance from Beitin to Jerusalem matches the figure of 12 Roman miles between Bethel and Jerusalem given by Eusebius in his *Onomasticon* (Freeman-Grenville 2003: 30). Robinson determined the distance by timing his horse. A Roman mile is equivalent to 1614 yards (Wilkinson 2002: vii), or 0.917 of an English mile, making 12 Roman miles equal to 11 English miles. It took Robinson's horse 3 3/4 hours to travel from Beitin to Jerusalem (1841: 127–28). Using his rule of thumb of three English miles per hour for the rate of travel of his horse (Robinson 1856: 635), he calculated the distance from Beitin to Jerusalem to be approximately 12 Roman miles (1841: 128). Second, the modern Arabic name Beitin preserves the ancient name Bethel, with a well-known change of Hebrew *el* to Arabic *in* (1841: 128). In addition, subsequent to the excavations at Beitin in 1934, 1954, 1957, and 1960, investigators have invoked archaeological evidence to bolster the Beitin = Bethel equation (Albright 1968: 3; A. Mazar 1990: 331; Rainey 2006: 269; Rainey and Notley 2006: 118).

Scholars have uncritically accepted this identification to the present day. Anson Rainey (2006: 270; Rainey and Notley 2006: 116; cf. Ritter 1866: 226; Albright 1968: 1; A. Mazar 1990: 331, 1992: 283) has gone so far as to say “the equation of *Beitîn* with biblical Beth-el is absolutely certain” and (1988b: 68) “the validity of the equation, Beitin = Bethel is unimpeachable. . . . If Bethel is not *Beitîn*, then there is no Historical Geography of the Bible.” The identification is so fixed in the literature, as with et-Tell, that if one wishes to look up Beitin in an archaeological dictionary or encyclopedia, generally one must look under “Bethel.”¹¹

Livingston (1970; 1971; 1989; 1994; 1998; see also Bimson and Livingston 1987: 47–48) pioneered research on the location of Joshua's Ai by first reinvestigating the location of Bethel. He gives the following reasons why Beitin cannot be Bethel and why Bethel must be located at el-Bira.¹²

11. An exception is *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Dever 1992a).

12. For a defense of Robinson's location of Bethel at Beitin, see Rainey 1971; 1978: 9–10; 1980; 1988b; 2006; Rainey and Notley 2006: 116–18.

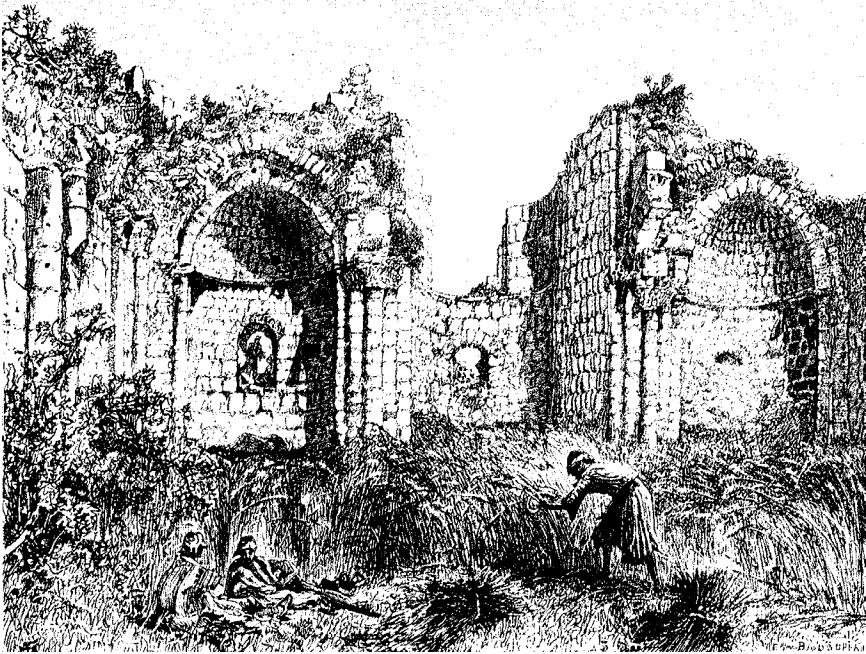


Figure 2. Three apses of the Crusader church in el-Bira, mid-19th century (Conder 1881: 215).

Beitin Not 12 Roman Miles from Jerusalem

Livingston (1970: 33–37, 38; 1994: 154–57; 1998: 78–80; Bimson and Livingston 1987: 47) points out that the location of Beitin is in disagreement with the location given by Eusebius, who located Bethel 12 Roman milestones from Jerusalem (Freeman-Grenville 2003: 30) and about four Roman milestones from Gibeon (Freeman-Grenville 2003: 41). Beitin, however, is 15 Roman miles from Jerusalem and at least 5.5 Roman miles from Gibeon (Chapman and Taylor 2003: 177; Chapman 2003: 117–18). Rupert Chapman (2003: 131) notes, “Eusebius’ statement that Gibeon was four miles west of Bethel is wholly incompatible with the currently accepted identification of Bethel with Beitin.” El-Bira, on the other hand, is 12 Roman milestones from Jerusalem and between 3.7 and 4.2 Roman miles from Gibeon (Chapman and Taylor 2003: 177).

Early Pilgrims Recognized el-Bira as Bethel

El-Bira was the site of the fortified town of La Grande Mahomerie of the Crusaders (Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997: 510), so named

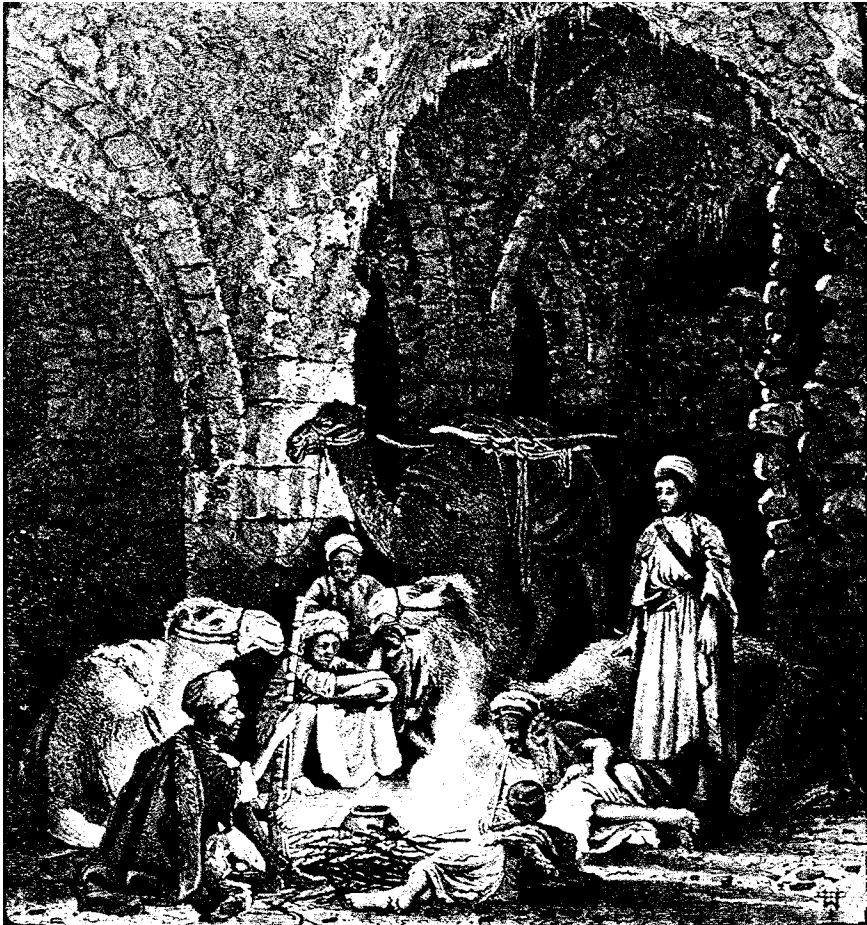


Figure 3. *The khan at el-Bira, mid-19th century (Conder 1881: 216).*

because of the prominent Muslim sanctuary located there. The Crusaders built a church at el-Bira (fig. 2) to commemorate Mary and Joseph's return to Jerusalem to look for Jesus, because el-Bira was one day's journey north of Jerusalem. About 200 m south of the church was a khan (fig. 3). Livingston (1989; 1994: 157–58; 1998: 80–82) reports that an anonymous traveler identified La Grande Mahomerie as Bethel. To this can be added the testimony of John of Würzburg, who traveled to the Holy Land in approximately 1160–1170 C.E. (Stewart 1896: x). He (Stewart 1896: 14) wrote, “But this [Jacob's dream at Bethel] did not take place here [Jerusalem], but a long way off, as he was on his

way to Mesopotamia—to wit, near the greater Mahumeria.” The translator added the following footnote: “Mahumeria the Great is *el-Bireh*, to the north of Jerusalem.”

*Archaeological Findings at Beitin
Do Not Match Bethel*

According to the Bible, Bethel was a national religious center in Iron Age II. In the late 10th century B.C.E., Jeroboam, king of the Northern Kingdom, established a high place there, which included a golden calf, an altar, and a cadre of priests (1 Kgs 12:26–33). In the mid-9th century B.C.E., there was a school of prophets at Bethel (2 Kgs 2:3), and in the mid-8th century B.C.E., Amos 7:13 tells of a “sanctuary of the king and a royal residence” at the site. Josiah destroyed the Bethel high place and altar in the 7th century B.C.E. (2 Kgs 13:15). Livingston (1970: 39; cf. Ross 1941) makes the point that Jeroboam’s sanctuary has not been found at Beitin, a fact readily acknowledged by Albright (1934: 3): “our archaeological results have diverged widely from the expected picture. No trace of the sanctuary built by Jeroboam I and still used in the following two centuries was found, and the constructions of the Iron II proved to be extremely inferior, in general.”

At Dan, the companion national religious center to the north (1 Kgs 12:29), excavations have revealed a strongly fortified city, including a monumental gateway, paved roadways, and plazas. On the city acropolis was an elaborate sacred precinct comprising a high place, altar, storage rooms, and many cultic objects (Biran 1994: 165–254). Nothing akin to this has been found at Beitin, although not from lack of trying. Throughout the four seasons of the excavation (July 6–September 15, 1934; May 26–July 30, 1954; July 11–August 30, 1957; and May 26–July 19, 1960), the top priority was to find the cultic area and city fortifications of Iron Age II (Kelso 1968: 4, 37). Probes were made throughout the site and beyond in an effort to locate evidence for Jeroboam’s Bethel, but not a single Iron Age II formal cultic object was found at the site.¹³ In view of the abundance of such finds at Tel Dan, one would expect to find at least something representative of a national cult center if Beitin were indeed Bethel.

What was found from Iron Age II? After diligently searching the site for four seasons, only remains of ordinary domestic structures were found in five excavation areas (Kelso 1968: pls. 6, 86b, 92b, 94b, 120). Clearly, Beitin in Iron Age II was nothing more than a small agricultural village. William Dever (1997c: 300–301) provides a sober and honest assessment of the findings at Beitin: “The [excavation] report offers scant material for the entire [Iron Age II] period, leaving the biblical accounts of Bethel’s importance in the divided

13. A few common Iron Age II domestic figurines were found (Kelso 1968: 83), but nothing was found that could be construed as coming from a public religious center.



Figure 4. Aerial view of Ras et-Tabuneh at el-Bira, view southeast. The trees in the left center mark the location of the artificial platform (courtesy Israel Finkelstein).

monarchy without a context.” The contrast between Tel Dan and Beitin could not be more striking.

Unfortunately, a modern scholarly myth has grown up around the site, leading to exaggerated claims. James Charlesworth (2000: 49), for example, has written that Beitin was fortified throughout Iron Age I and II and Beth Nahai (1997: 173) maintains that the platform for Jeroboam’s high place was found there. There is no evidence for either of these claims. Rainey and Notley (2006: 118) write, “Beitin has all the archaeological evidence one needs to confirm that it is a proper site for biblical Bethel.” In actual fact, there has been no evidence found at Beitin that would suggest that it should be identified as Bethel.

Proximity to Roads

Beitin is not on a main road as would be expected of a major city such as Bethel (Livingston 1970: 29–30, 38; 1998: 82–83). In contrast, el-Bira is a living town with a good spring and lies on the natural crossroads for the entire area (Livingston 1970: 42; 1998: 82).



Figure 5. Retaining wall of the platform on the summit of Ras et-Tabuneh at el-Bira (photo by Michael Luddeni).

Bethel = Beitin Is Not Certain

Livingston (1970: 32–33, 38) maintains that if the modern arabic name Beitin derived from the ancient name Bethel, which is not entirely certain (Soggin 1972: 102–3), the name could have migrated from elsewhere.

No Ruins to Equate with Bethar

The Bourdeaux pilgrim (333 C.E.) wrote, “Twenty-eight miles from there [Nablus] on the left of the road to Jerusalem is the village called Bethar, and a mile from there is the place where Jacob slept on his way to Mesopotamia, and the almond tree” (Wilkinson 1999: 27).

The place where Jacob slept is obviously a reference to Jacob’s dream recounted in Gen 28:10–22, which resulted in changing the name of the place from Luz, “almond tree,” to Bethel. As Livingston indicates, if Bethel is located at Beitin, there is no ruin one Roman mile north that can be equated with Bethar (1989; 1994: 158). If, on the other hand, Bethel is placed at el-Bira, the turnoff to Beitin (= Bethar) is one Roman mile to the north.



Figure 6. Top of the artificial platform on the summit of Ras et-Tabuneh at el-Bira (photo by Michael Luddeni).

The Archaeology of el-Bira

Although excavations at el-Bira have not been possible, several surface surveys of the acropolis at Ras et-Tahuneh (fig. 6) have been conducted. Pottery from the Early Bronze Age, Middle Bronze Age, Iron Age I, Iron Age II, and Roman and Byzantine periods has been found, with the highest percentage, 69%, being from Iron Age II, the time when Bethel was a national religious center (Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997: 512–13). Livingston (1994: 159; 1998: 83) suggests that Ras et-Tahuneh was possibly where Jeroboam built the high place. The top of the hill is an artificial platform (fig. 5) strewn with Iron Age II pottery. It looks very much like a high place (fig. 6).

El-Bira Lacking a Biblical Identification

With its strategic location, abundant water supply, acropolis, and occupational profile, it is evident that el-Bira was an important town in the biblical period. Robinson identified it as Beeroth, but this identification has been rejected. Recent investigations indicate that Beeroth was located at Khirbet el-

Burj (Finkelstein 2008: 13 and references there; cf. Livingston 1970: 39–41; 1998: 80), leaving el-Bira bereft of a biblical identity.

On the basis of the historical-geographical information and the small amount of archaeological work at the site, el-Bira is the most promising candidate for Bethel.

The Location of Beth-aven

The location of Beth-aven has been a scholarly conundrum, because investigators have been unable to suggest a viable site. The reason is clear: since the inception of historical-geographical research in Palestine, Beitin has been incorrectly identified as Bethel, thus obscuring the correct location of Beth-aven.

Biblical Requirements for Beth-aven

The first mention of Beth-aven, which means “house of wickedness,” in the Bible is in Josh 7:2. There it states that Beth-aven was *‘im*, or adjacent to, Ai. Because Ai was east of el-Bira/Bethel, Beth-aven then should have been east of el-Bira/Bethel as well. From this passage one can conclude that Beth-aven was occupied at the time of Joshua (late 15th century B.C.E.), was close to Ai, and was east of Bethel.

Beth-aven is referred to a second time in the book of Joshua in the description of the northern border of the tribe of Benjamin: “On the north side their boundary began at the Jordan; then the boundary goes up to the shoulder north of Jericho, then up through the hill country westward; and it ends up at the wilderness of Beth-aven. From there the boundary passes along southward in the direction of Luz, to the shoulder of Luz (the same is Bethel)” (Josh 18:12–13a, RSV). Here we learn that Beth-aven was north of Bethel. Since it was both east (Josh 7:2) and north (Josh 18:13a) of Bethel, in reality it must have been northeast of the site.¹⁴

The next reference to Beth-aven is in the account of Israel’s battles with the Philistines recorded in 1 Samuel 13 and 14. In response to Jonathan’s attack on the Philistine outpost at Geba, the Philistines assembled their forces, “and they came up and camped in Michmash, east of Beth-aven” (1 Sam 13:5b). The Philistines were coming from their territory along the Mediterranean coast, so they evidently first passed Beth-aven and then continued eastward to Michmash, most likely located at Khirbet el-Ḥara el-Fauqa, 0.4 km northwest of modern Mukhmas (Arnold 1992b: 814). Beth-aven was therefore located west

14. Biblical Hebrew did not express intermediate points on the compass. There are no candidate sites for Beth-aven northeast of and reasonably close to Beitin, providing additional evidence that Beitin cannot be Bethel.

of Michmash and was occupied at the time of Saul in the mid-11th century B.C.E. Because of Jonathan's bravery in attacking the Philistine outpost at Michmash, the Israelites were victorious that day. As the Philistines retraced the route back to their homeland, "the battle spread beyond Beth-aven" (1 Sam 14:23b). Beth-aven is then mentioned in Hos 4:15, 5:8, and 10:5. No locational information is given in these verses and, in any case, nearly all scholars take Beth-aven here to be a pejorative name for Bethel.

Scholarly Opinions

A number of suggestions have been made for the location of Beth-aven, only one of which meets the biblical requirements. The confusion on this subject is best illustrated by the changing views of Albright. He first suggested the village of Burqa as the location of Beth-aven (1924: 145). Following René Dus-saud, he revised the location to et-Tell 15 years later (1939: 16–17), and 24 years after that to Deir Dibwan (1963: 29).

Khirbet Haiyan (17560/14570)

Wilson (1869–70: 126) appears to be the first person to attempt to locate Beth-aven. In 1870 he suggested that Khirbet An was Beth-aven. He located Khirbet An "some distance below the village [of Beitin], and lower down the same valley, westward from Michmash and not far from Et-Tel (Ai)." Wilson was most likely referring to Khirbet Haiyan on the southern edge of modern Deir Dibwan, because there is no site named Khirbet An in that vicinity. Sellin (1900: 1–3) and George Smith (1899) also thought Beth-aven could be at Khirbet Haiyan. Although west of Mukhmas, Khirbet Haiyan is east of el-Bira/Bethel rather than northeast as the Bible requires. In addition, excavation and surveys have shown that the site was not inhabited in the 15th and 11th centuries B.C.E. (Callaway and Nicol 1966; Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 36*, 183; Na'aman 1987: 13).

Deir Dibwan (17580/14640)

Adolf von Schlatter (1893: 240–42) suggested the village of Deir Dibwan as another possibility for Beth-aven. Others who adopted this identification were Smith (1899), F.-M. Abel (1938: 268), and Albright (1963: 29). However, Deir Dibwan does not qualify as Beth-aven because it is located east of el-Bira/Bethel, not northeast, and was unoccupied in the 15th and 11th centuries B.C.E. (Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997: 533).

Burg Beitin (17333/14771)

Gustaf Dalman (1911: 14) suggested that Burg Beitin on the southeast edge of Beitin could be Beth-aven. He believed Beitin to be Bethel and, because Beth-aven was next to Bethel, Burg Beitin was a logical candidate. Klaus-Dietrich Schunck (1963: 150, 155 n. 14) made the same proposal. Burg Beitin is

indeed northeast of el-Bira/Bethel and west of Mukhmas as required by the Bible, but it cannot be Beth-aven because it was not occupied until the Byzantine period (Albright 1928: 9; Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997: 522; Na'aman 1987: 13).

Na'aman (1987: 17) put forward a similar theory. He believes that Beth-aven was the name of the sanctuary of Bethel, located east of Beitin at a site other than Burg Beitin yet to be found. A detailed survey of the area after 1987, however, failed to produce a candidate to match Na'aman's theory (Finkelstein and Magen 1993; Finkelstein, Lederman, and Bunimovitz 1997).

Burqa (17415/14480)

Albright (1924: 145) thought that perhaps the modern village of Burqa was Beth-aven. To my knowledge, the only other scholar to give credence to this possibility is George Howley (1979: 318). Burqa cannot be Beth-aven, however, because it is located southeast of el-Bira/Bethel, not northeast, and was not occupied prior to the Hellenistic period (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 35*, 179; Na'aman 1987: 13).

Et-Tell

In view of the almost universal acceptance of et-Tell as the site of Joshua's Ai, it is surprising that a few scholars have placed Beth-aven there. The first to do so was Dussaud (1937: 134–41). He was followed by Albright (1939: 16–17), Yehezkel Kaufmann (1959: 118), Grintz (1961: 231–16), and Götz Schmitt (1980: 51–58). Sellin (1900: 1–3) also thought that et-Tell could be the location of Beth-aven. Although et-Tell is northeast of el-Bira/Bethel and west of Mukhmas, excavations have shown that it was not occupied in the 15th century B.C.E. (Cooley 1997) and therefore does not qualify to be Beth-aven.

Tell Maryam (17550/14185)

The most popular candidate for Beth-aven in recent years has been Tell Maryam, 7 km southeast of el-Bira. Zecharia Kallai (Kallai-Kleinmann 1956; Kallai 1986: 128 n. 68) made this suggestion in 1956. Others who have favored this location are Yohanan Aharoni (1979: 256, 431), Howley (1979: 318), Robert Boling (1982: 222), and Patrick Arnold (1992a).

Tell Maryam is the least qualified of the possible sites for Beth-aven. It is southeast of el-Bira/Bethel rather than northeast, it is too far from the candidate sites to be considered adjacent to Ai, and it was not occupied prior to the Hellenistic period (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 35*, 180; Na'aman 1987: 13). Its small size (0.5 dunam [1/8 acre]; Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 35*, 180) precludes it from being a settlement of any significance.

Khirbet Tell el-ʿAskar (17670/14305)

Kallai (1991: 175–77) recognized the shortcomings of Tell Maryam, so in 1991 he abandoned the identification in favor of Khirbet Tell el-ʿAskar, 1 km

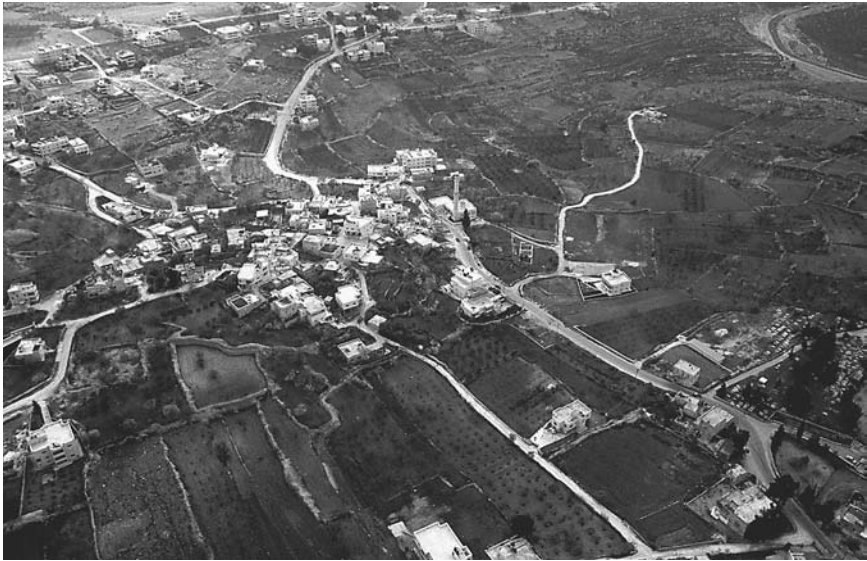


Figure 7. Aerial view of Beitin, view east-southeast. The Middle–Late Bronze Age fortress is located in the open area in the lower left center. On the left edge is the curving, paved road shown in fig. 8 (photo by Randy Cook).

north-northeast of Mukhmas. He chose the site by default,¹⁵ and it fares little better than Tell Maryam. It is southeast of el-Bira/Bethel, not northeast, and is east rather than west of Mukhmas. In addition, it is located too far from the candidate sites for Ai, and a survey of the site did not produce evidence for occupation at the time of Joshua in the 15th century B.C.E. (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 37*, 187–88).

Beitin

The best-suited of the possible sites for Beth-aven is Beitin, 3 km northeast of el-Bira. Because nearly all scholars have identified Beitin as Bethel, it largely has been overlooked as a possible candidate for Beth-aven. Early on, one of the pioneer explorers in Palestine, Conder (1878: 335; 1881b: 221), recognized that the Hebrew name Beth-aven may be preserved in the modern Arabic name Beitin. In his opinion, however, Beth-aven was simply another name for Bethel, which he considered to be located at Beitin. Beth-aven and Bethel cannot be

15. “There is no other identification that can seriously be considered for this site [Beth-aven] . . . there are hardly any other candidates available” (Kallai 1991: 176).

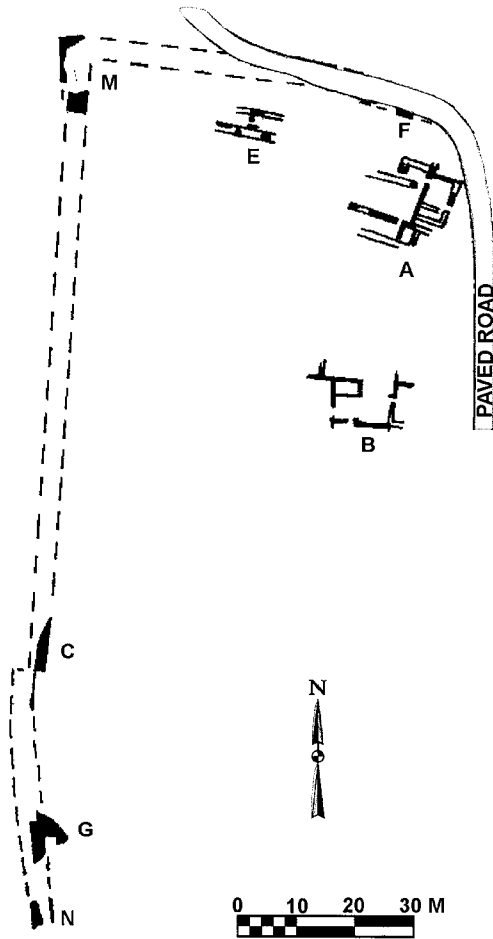


Figure 8. Plan of the Middle-Late Bronze Age fortress at Beitin (plan by B. G. Wood, based on Kelso 1968: pl. 120, in conjunction with pls. 102b [Area N], 94a [Area G], 11 [Area C], 102a [Area M], 91a [Area F], 85b [Area E], and 3 [Areas A and B]).

two names for the same place, however, since they are referred to as two distinct and separate locations in Josh 7:2 and 18:12–13.

After locating Bethel at el-Bira, Livingston (1994: 158) was the first scholar to suggest that Beitin possibly could be Beth-aven.¹⁶ Chapman (2003: 121; cf. Chapman and Taylor 2003: 178) endorses this possibility: “if Bethel = el-Bira,

16. He has since changed his opinion and now believes that Beth-aven should be located at Khirbet el-Maqatir, in conjunction with his location of Joshua's Ai at Khirbet Nisya (Livingston 2003: 212–13). As pointed out above, however, Khirbet el-Maqatir does not fit the requirement of being adjacent to Khirbet Nisya.

Late Bronze I pottery from Beitin

No.	Plate no. in Kelso 1968	Area	Locus	Description
1	53.22	A	52	Jar, brownish buff ware, fairly well levigated, buff surface.
2	51.25	B	Sub 162	Vase, fine pink ware, pink surface.
3	53.27	A	55	Bowl, reddish buff ware, gray in center, minute white grits, buff surface.
4	56.11	A	57	Pithos, dark gray ware, coarse grits, buff surface showing large white grits.
5	51.21	B	161	Vase, fine buff ware, buff surface.
6	49.7	A	62	Bowl, reddish ware, gray in center, buff surface.
7	52.9	A	63	Bowl, brick red ware, red surface.
8	52.13	A	60	Juglet, reddish buff paste, well levigated, fine grits, pinkish buff surface.
9	54.11	A	52N, below Iron I foundations	Juglet, dark gray ware, reddish brown to dark gray surface, partly smoked, pronounced wheel marks on outside.
10	55.7	A	51	Juglet, slightly skew, pinkish buff surface.
11	51.26	B	167	Bowl, medium fine reddish buff ware, pink buff surface.
12	50.16	A	58	Cooking pot, brownish buff gritty ware, reddish brown surface, smoked.
13	53.30	B	Sub 148	Cooking pot, dark gray ware, white grits, red brown surface, smoked.
14	53.29	B	Sub 153	Cooking pot, dark gray gritty ware, brown surface.
15	53.28	A	55	Cooking pot, dark gray gritty ware, surface red inside, brown to gray outside.
16	53.25	B	W of 146	Cooking pot, brick red ware, gray core, reddish brown surface.
17	52.21	B	Sub 162	Cooking pot, red ware, gray core, white grits, red brown surface showing white grits.
18	54.15	A	60	Cooking pot, light brown ware, gray core, reddish buff surface, smoked.
19	55.4	A	60, below LB II pavement	Cooking pot, reddish brown ware, dark gray in center, surface red-buff inside, dark red-brown outside.
20	50.7	A	52	Cooking pot, brownish gray ware, gray core, white grits, surface dark red buff, smoked.
21	55.1	A	58N	Cooking pot, brown ware, dark gray in center, very fine grits, brownish buff surface, smoked.
22	52.14	A	54	Cooking pot, red gritty ware, dark red surface.
23	54.16	A	58	Cooking pot, dark brown ware, white grits, brown surface, smoked.

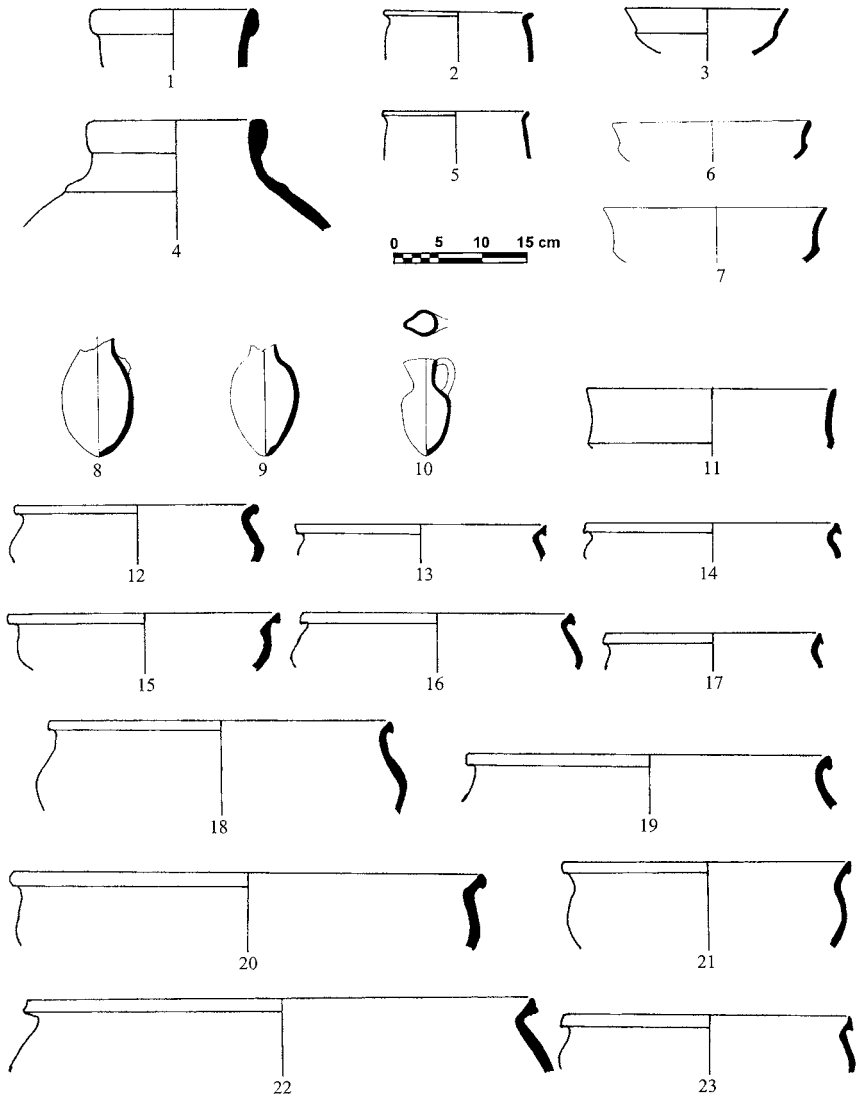


Figure 9. Late Bronze I pottery from Beitin.

Beitin may be Beth-aven, which is linguistically possible.” Livingston pointed out that the Pilgrim of Bordeaux (333 C.E.) located a village named Bethar, which the translator John Wilkinson (1981: 155 n. 3) equated with Beth-aven, 1 Roman mile north of Bethel.¹⁷ The turnoff to Beitin from the main north-south Roman road is exactly 1 Roman mile north of el-Bira. With Bethel at el-Bira, this would place Beth-aven at Beitin. Beitin is northeast of el-Bira/Bethel and west of Mukhmas as required for Beth-aven, but does the archaeology of the site support this identification?

Albright (1928) made a sounding at Beitin in November 1927. He was fortunate enough to encounter the inside face of a fortification wall (fig. 8, Area C). Major campaigns were then carried out in 1934 under the direction of Albright and in 1954, 1957, and 1960 under the direction of James Kelso. Unfortunately, Beitin was poorly excavated and not well published (Dever 1992a).

Sufficient work was done, however, to demonstrate that a small fortress existed at the site in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Kelso 1968: 10–19). The north, west, and south walls of the fortress were located. They were made of well-built courses, 3.5 m wide, and founded on bedrock. The south wall was not plotted on the site plan or related to the other walls in the excavation report, so it is difficult to determine the north-south dimension of the fortress with accuracy. It was found just to the north of the Deir Dibwan road. From the aerial photo (fig. 7), it appears that the distance from the northwest corner of the fortress to the south wall is ca. 200 m. The east wall was not excavated, but the excavators believed it was located beneath a paved road ca. 70 m east of the west wall (Kelso 1968: 18). If this is the case, the fortress was quite small, about 75 × 200 m or approximately 3.7 acres (fig. 8).

Abundant pottery from the Late Bronze Age I was found at Beitin (fig. 9). Particularly diagnostic is a type of bowl with interior concentric circles painted in red that was prevalent at this time (Kelso 1968: pls. 34.25, 34.27, 34.28, 34.32–34; M. Dothan 1971: 81; Yadin 1972: 32; Yadin et al. 1960: 94; 1989: 14, 233, 306; Ben-Tor et al. 1997: 79, 84). In addition, there are abundant Iron Age I remains from the time of Saul (Kelso 1968: 32–35). Thus, Beitin meets both the geographic and archaeological requirements for Beth-aven.

The Location of Joshua's Ai

Albright (1963: 29) claimed there is no other site in the region other than et-Tell that could be Ai. He wrote: “Since the writer has scoured the district in question in all directions, hunting for ancient sites, he can attest the fact that there is no other possible site for Ai than et-Tell.” With such a strong endorse-

17. In the third edition of *Egeria's Travels*, however, Wilkinson (1999) did not include the footnote equating Bethar with Beth-aven.



Figure 10. Aerial view of Khirbet el-Maqatir, view north-northwest. The west half of the Late Bronze Age I gate can be seen in the upper center, left (photo by Todd Bolen).

ment from Albright, most scholars accepted the et-Tell = Ai identification without question. Callaway (1968: 315) made a similar assertion: “There is no Late Bronze Age evidence in the region east of Bethel [= Beitin] that I can find,” as did Mazar (1990: 331): “Between Beitin [= Bethel] and the desert to its east, there is only one site which could have been referred to as ‘Ai’—the large mound of et-Tell.”

A site has now been found in the region that has Late Bronze Age remains, Khirbet el-Maqatir. The same day Robinson visited Beitin, he also visited Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1.5 km southeast of Beitin. Local inhabitants told him it was the location of Ai. After inspecting the remains of a Byzantine church on the summit, Robinson (1841: 126) concluded, “there is not the slightest ground for any such hypothesis. There never was anything here but a church; and Ai must have been further off from Bethel [= Beitin], and certainly not directly in sight of it.” Had Robinson walked 200 m down the southeast slope of the site he might have changed the course of Palestinian archaeology. There, also missed by Albright and Callaway, in clear view, is abundant evidence for early occupation, including ancient walls on the surface. When

Sellin (1900: 1) visited Khirbet el-Maqatir in 1899, he also was told it was the site of Ai: "Women of Ramallah, who were searching for snails, called it Khirbet Ai." Investigators of the location of Ai have overlooked these notices, as well as the ruins at Khirbet el-Maqatir.

Evaluation of Khirbet el-Maqatir as Joshua's Ai

Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir from 1995 to 2000 by the Associates for Biblical Research, under my direction, have provided the necessary evidence to identify the site as Joshua's Ai (Wood 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2001). Khirbet el-Maqatir meets the requirements for Joshua's Ai as follows.¹⁸

1. *Adjacent to Beth-aven (Josh 7:2).* Khirbet el-Maqatir is 1.5 km southeast of Beitin/Beth-aven and separated from it by a very shallow valley, the beginning of the Wadi el-Gayeh. The sites are in clear view of one another.

2. *East of Bethel (Josh 7:2).* Khirbet el-Maqatir is 3.5 km northeast of el-Bira/Bethel.

3. *An ambush site between Bethel and Ai (Josh 8:9, 12).* Between Khirbet el-Maqatir and el-Bira/Bethel is a very deep valley, the Wadi Sheban, which could easily accommodate a large ambush force. It is out of sight of both Khirbet el-Maqatir and el-Bira/Bethel due to a ridge between Khirbet el-Maqatir and the wadi and a series of hills between the wadi and el-Bira/Bethel.

4. *A militarily significant hill north of Ai (Josh 8:11).* Jebel Abu Ammar 1.5 km north of Khirbet el-Maqatir is the highest hill in the region, providing a commanding view of the battle area around el-Bira/Bethel and Khirbet el-Maqatir.

5. *A shallow valley north of Ai (Josh 8:13-14).* The Wadi Gayeh between Khirbet el-Maqatir and Jebel Abu Ammar is shallow and easily visible from Khirbet el-Maqatir.

6. *Smaller than Gibeon (Josh 10:2).* The Late Bronze Age I fortress discovered at Khirbet el-Maqatir is small, about 3 acres in size.

7. *In the vicinity of Bethel (Josh 12:9).* Khirbet el-Maqatir is 3.5 km northeast of el-Bira/Bethel and thus is in the vicinity of Bethel.

8. *Occupied at the time of the conquest.* Abundant pottery from the 15th century B.C.E. has been found at Khirbet el-Maqatir (see "Late Bronze Age Pottery from Khirbet el-Maqatir" below, pp. 231ff.).

9. *Fortified at the time of the conquest (Josh 7:5, 8:29).* A small fortress dating to the Late Bronze I period has been found at Khirbet el-Maqatir, with walls 4 m thick.

10. *Gate on the north side of the site (Josh 8:11).* The gate of the Late Bronze I fortress at Khirbet el-Maqatir is on the north side (see fig. 13).

¹⁸ Peter Briggs has done a detailed assessment of the suitability of Khirbet el-Maqatir, as well as et-Tell and Khirbet Nisya, as Joshua's Ai (2005).

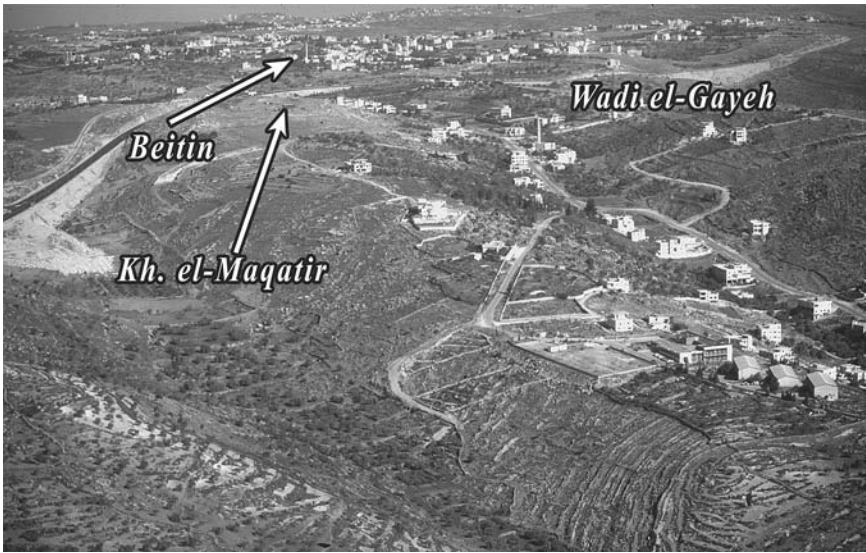


Figure 11. Aerial view of Khirbet el-Maqatir, Wadi el-Gayeh and Beitin, view northwest (photo by Randy Cook).

11. *Destroyed by fire at the time of the conquest (Josh 8:19, 28).* Abundant evidence for destruction by fire has been found at Khirbet el-Maqatir in the form of ash, refired pottery, burned building stones and calcined bedrock.

12. *Left in ruins after 1400 B.C.E. (Josh 8:28).* The east half of the Late Bronze Age I fortress at Khirbet el-Maqatir was largely robbed out due to the construction of a 2nd–1st century B.C.E. Hasmonean fortress in this area. The western half was heavily robbed out as well, by the builders of a Byzantine monastery on the summit of the hill 200 m northwest. The foundation of the west half of the gate and remnants of the west half of the fortress, however, are still present and in ruins yet today (fig. 10).

All 12 of the criteria for Joshua's Ai are satisfied at Khirbet el-Maqatir. The site of Ai evidently was known in Jerome's day (early 5th century C.E.). He stated: "It is between Bethaun [Beth-aven = Beitin] and Bethel [= el-Bira] . . . now it is desert, but the site is still shown" (Freeman-Grenville 2003: 41). Khirbet el-Maqatir is located between Beitin/Beth-aven and el-Bira/Bethel (fig. 1).

Late Bronze Age I Pottery from Khirbet el-Maqatir

The Late Bronze Age I ruins at Khirbet el-Maqatir are immediately below the surface and badly disturbed as a result of subsequent activity at the site and exposure to the elements. In spite of the fragmentary nature of the remains,

however, it was possible to determine the date and approximate layout of the Late Bronze Age I fortress. Pottery from two loci in Square Q17 is presented in fig. 12. Square Q17 was a flagstone pavement just inside the gate (see fig. 13). Numbers 1–4 are from Locus 10, a paved surface, and nos. 5–23 are from Locus 12, a clay bedding beneath the flagstones. These two loci therefore represent the final use and building phases of the pavement and, presumably, the fortress. Following fig. 12 is an evaluation of the pottery.

Late Bronze Age I pottery from Khirbet el-Maqatir, Square Q17

No.	Type	Locus	Description
1	Store jar	10	Paste: 10 YR 6/1; many fine and few small white, few medium ceramic; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior 7.5 YR 6/4, fine combing beginning 6 cm below base of neck.
2	Jar/jug rim	10	Paste: 7.5 YR 7/6; many fine and occasional small-medium white, some small red ceramic, few small sand, occasional large wadi gravel; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior as paste, exterior 2.5 YR 6/6 slip.
3	Squat jar base	10	Paste: 2.5 YR 6/8; many fine and few small white, occasional small red and black ceramic; gray core; hard. Surface: interior as paste, exterior 7.5 YR 8/2 slip.
4	Cooking pot	10	Paste: 2.5 YR 5/8; many small, medium, large white; some small, medium sand; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste; bottom is fire blackened.
5	Pithos rim	12	Paste: 7.5 YR 7/6; many small and medium white, many small and medium wadi gravel; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
6	Pithos	12	Paste: 2.5 YR 6/6; many medium white, many medium wadi gravel, some medium red ceramic; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
7	Jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; many small, medium large white; some small, medium, large wadi gravel; occasional small, medium red ceramic; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
8	Jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/8; many small and medium wadi gravel, some medium white; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
9	Jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 6/6; many fine and few medium white, few medium wadi gravel, occasional small red and black ceramic, occasional organic; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
10	Jug rim	12	Paste: 7.5 YR 7/3; many fine white, few small wadi gravel; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
11	Krater rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/4; many small and medium white, few small and medium organic, occasional small red and black ceramic; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior as paste, exterior 5 YR 8/1 slip.
12	Jar/jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; many fine and occasional small white, occasional small red ceramic; gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.

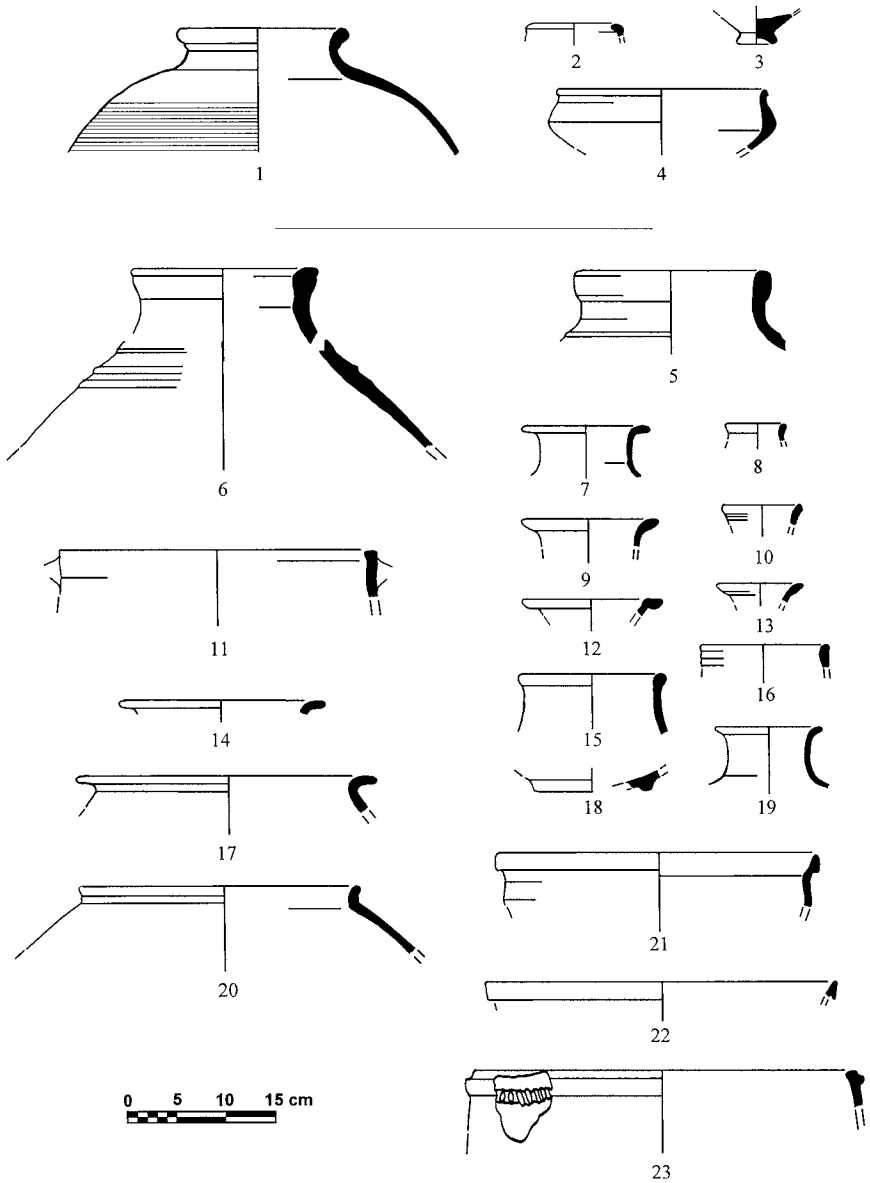


Figure 12. Late Bronze Age I pottery from Khirbet el-Maqatir, Square Q17, flagstone pavement inside gate: 1-4, Locus 10, surface of pavement; 5-23, Locus 12, clay bedding below pavement.

Late Bronze Age I pottery from Khirbet el-Maqatir, Square Q17

No.	Type	Locus	Description
13	Jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 6/1; many fine and occasional small white; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
14	Globular bowl rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; some fine and few small white, some small black ceramic; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
15	Jar/jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 6/6; many small and medium white, many small and medium wadi gravel, occasional small red ceramic; no core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
16	Jar rim	12	Paste: 7.5 YR 7/4; some fine white, few small red and black ceramic; no core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
17	Globular bowl rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; many fine and occasional small white, few small and medium wadi gravel, few small and medium red ceramic; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
18	Krater base	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; many small and medium wadi gravel, some small and medium white, occasional small and medium red ceramic; black core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
19	Jug rim	12	Paste: 5 YR 7/6; some small red ceramic, few fine and occasional small white; light gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
20	Globular bowl	12	Paste: 7.5 YR 7/4; many fine and few medium white, few medium and large wadi gravel, few small red ceramic in slip; gray core; hard. Surface: interior as paste, exterior 2.5 YR 6/8 slip.
21	Cooking pot rim	12	Paste: 2.5 YR 4/8; many small, medium and large white; some medium organic; black core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
22	Cooking pot rim	12	Paste: 2.5 YR 5/6; many small wadi gravel, some small crystal; dark gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.
23	Cooking pot rim	12	Paste: 2.5 YR 6/6; many small and medium white, many small and medium wadi gravel, some very small crystal; gray core; hard. Surface: interior and exterior as paste.

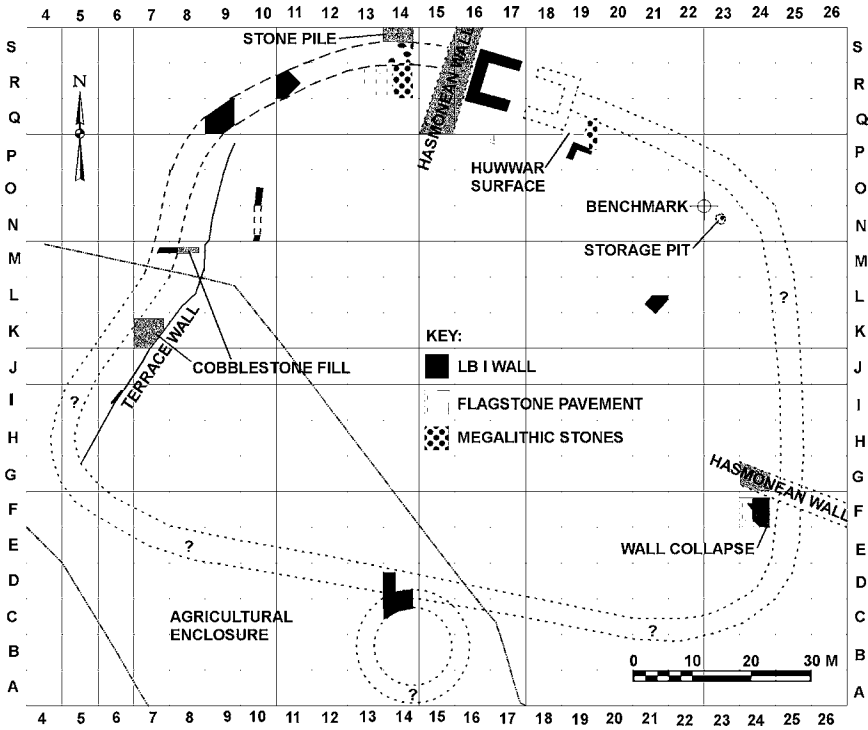
Fig. 12 Pottery Parallels

1. Store jar. Store jars and pithoi, 5 and 6, are ubiquitous at the site because they were used to store provisions for the fortress. Parallels: Gezer XX (MBII/III) (Dever et al. 1974: pl. 12.20), Shechem XVB (MB IIIC) (Dever 1974: fig. 13.11), and Beth Zur Locus 280 (LB I) (Sellers et al. 1968: fig. 3.8). These exemplars illustrate the development of store jar rims from being heavily profiled in MB II/III to little or no profiling in LB I.
2. Jug/jar rim. No known parallels.
3. Base of a squat jar or jug. Parallels: Jericho Tomb 5 Level G (MB III A–B) (Garstang 1933: pl. 20.6), Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 122.3), Jericho Tomb 5 Level C–D (LB IA) (Garstang 1933: pl. 22.3), Megiddo IX (LB IA) (Loud 1948: pl. 49.14), and Gezer Tomb I.10A lower burial (LB IB) (Seger 1988: pl. 21.12).

4. Cookpot, an early form of an LB cookpot. Parallels: Abu al-Kharaz IV/2 (MB IIID) (Fischer 2006: fig. 99.3), Beit Mirsim D (MB III–LB I) (Albright 1933: pl. 13.10), Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary A (LB IA) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-4.40), Gezer Cave I.10A Cistern Phase (MB III–LB IA) (Seger 1988: pls. 31.29, 30), Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 59.2), Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary B (LB IB) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-7.35), Hazor Cistern 702I, Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 138.2), and Pella V (LB IB–IIA) (Hennessy et al. 1983: figs. 5.4 and 10).
5. Pithos. Pithoi, such as 5 and 6 from the construction phase, had their beginning in the MB period (Cole 1984: 73; Bonfil 1992; Raban 2001: 496–97, 503, 506; Yannai 2006) and continued in use into the Iron Age, when they became the preferred storage container, often referred to as a “collared-rim store jar” in reference to the ridge at the join between the neck and body of the vessel (Raban 2001: 494), in the Iron I villages. Parallels: Hazor Area A, Str. 8, Locus 644C (MB fill) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. II.22.33), Jericho 33 (MB III) (Kenyon and Holland 1982: fig. 138.10), Abu al-Kharaz IV/2 (MB IIID) (Fischer 2006: fig. 39.1), and Beitin Locus 57 (LB) (fig. 9.4 in this essay).
6. Pithos. Parallel: Shechem XVII (late MB II) (Cole 1984: pl. 36.j), although our Khirbet el-Maqtarir example, being later, has less profiling of the rim.
7. Splayed-rim jar typical of the “Chocolate-on-White” class of vessels prevalent in the Jordan Valley in the late MB and LB I periods (Fischer 1999: figs. 3.1, 9.7, and 10.1 and 3; Fischer 2003: figs. 6.1, 2; 7.1; and 8.2). Parallels: Abu al-Kharaz IV/2 (MB IIID) (Fischer 2006: fig. 41.1), Jericho Tomb 5 Level E (MB IIID) (Garstang 1933: pl. 22.12), Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 123.1), and Abu al-Kharaz VI (LB IB) (Fischer 2006: fig. 66.8).
8. Cup rim. Parallel: Hazor 3 (MB III) (Yadin et al. 1961: pl. 259.15).
9. Everted jar rim. Parallels: Ajjul H6–7 (MB III) (Fischer and Sadeq 2002: fig. 22.7), Ashdod XXII (MB III) (Dothan and Porath 1993: fig. 3.5), Shechem XVB (MB IIIC) (Dever 1974: fig. 13.13), Shechem XVA (MB IIID) (Seger 1974: fig. 4.19), Pella VB (LB IB) (McNicoll et al. 1992: pl. 34.13), and Abu al-Kharaz VI (LB IB) (Fischer 2006: fig. 66.9).
10. Jug rim. Parallels: Shechem XVA (MB IIID) (Seger 1974: fig. 5.32), Megiddo IX (LB IA) (Loud 1948: pl. 49.15), Abu al-Kharaz VI (LB IB) (Fischer 2006: 66.4), and Megiddo VIII (LB IB) (Loud 1948: pl. 57.6).
11. Krater rim and handle. Parallels: Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 113.2), Hazor XV (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1961: pls. 236.16 and 289.2), Megiddo VIII (LB IB) (Finkelstein, Ussishkin, and Halpern 2000: fig. 9.11.6), and Shiloh V (LB IB) (Finkelstein, Bunimovitz, and Lederman 1993: fig. 6.34.7).
12. Jar/jug with a distinctive rim that occurs only in the LB I period. Parallels: Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 55.1), Halif X (LB IB) (Jacobs 1987: fig. 5.9), Hazor Cistern 702I, Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 140.12), and Pella VB (LB IB) (McNicoll et al. 1992: pls. 34.2 and 35.26).
13. Everted jug rim. Parallels: Jericho 38–39 (MB IIIC) (Kenyon and Holland 1982: fig. 126.11), Shechem XVA (MB IIID) (Seger 1974: fig. 5.32), and Hazor XV (LB IB) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. III.16.18).

14. Globular bowl with splayed rim. Parallels: Hazor XIV (MB III) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. II.9.2), Beit Mirsim D (MB III–LB I) (Albright 1933: pl. 14.3), and Hazor XV (LB IB) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. III.15.25).
15. Biconical jug, a type that began at the end of MB and continued into LB II. Parallels: Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary A (LB IA) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-4.43), Hazor Cistern 7021, Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 140.16), and Shechem XIV (LB IB) (Toombs and Wright 1963: fig. 23.12).
16. Jar rim. Parallels: Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary A (LB IA) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-4.46) and Gezer Cave I.10A Lower Burial (LB IB) (Seger 1988: pl. 31.24).
17. Large globular bowl with splayed rim. Parallels: Beit Mirsim D (MB III–LB I) (Albright 1933: pl. 14.3) and Hazor Cistern 7021 Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 140.17).
18. Large bowl/krater base. Parallels: Hazor Cistern 7021, Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 137.4) and Megiddo VIII (LB IB) (Loud 1948: pl. 61.23).
19. Fine ware jar/jug rim and neck. Parallels: Beth Shemesh IVa (LB I) (Grant 1934: fig. 2.3), Lachish Fosse Temple I (LB I) (Tufnell, Inge, and Harding 1940: pls. 51.274 and 56.374), Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 122.2), Megiddo IX (LB IA) (Loud 1948: pl. 49.7), Abu al-Kharaz VI (LB IB) (Fischer 2006: fig. 66.8), Hazor 2 (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 124.14), Hazor Cistern 7021 Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 141.12), and Megiddo VIII (LB IB) (Loud 1948: pls. 57.5 and 58.1).
20. Large globular bowl with everted rim. Parallels: Hazor XVI (MB III) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. II.8.2), Abu al-Kharaz IV/2 (MB IIID) (Fischer 2006: fig. 37.6), Beit Mirsim D (MB III–LB I) (Albright 1933: pl. 14.2), Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary B (LB IB) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-7.19), and Hazor Cistern 7021 Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 137.2).
21. Cookpot, typical of LB I. Parallels: Gezer XVIII (LB IA) (Dever, Lance, and Wright 1970: pl. 30.1), Hazor post-XVI (LB IA) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: figs. II.14.24 and 15.11, 12), Deir ‘Alla Sanctuary B (LB IB) (Franken 1992: fig. 7-7.34), Gezer Cave I.10A Lower Burial (LB IB) (Seger 1988: pl. 33.25), Hazor 2 (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1961: pl. 265: 7), Hazor XV (LB IB) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: fig. II.26.18), and Shiloh V (LB IB) (Finkelstein, Bunimovitz, and Lederman 1993: fig. 6.36.3).
22. Cookpot, typical of LB I. Parallels: Abu al-Kharaz V (LB IA) (Fischer 2006: fig. 119.4), Hazor post-XVI (LB IA) (Ben-Tor et al. 1997: figs. II.14.24, 25 and II.15.11), Gezer Cave I.10A Lower Tomb Construction Phase (LB IB) (Seger 1988: pl. 33.3), Hazor 2 (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1961: pl. 265: 9), Hazor Cistern 7021, Level C (LB IB) (Yadin et al. 1958: pl. 139.18), Michael Locus 293 (LB IB) (Herzog, Negbi, and Moshkovitz 1978: fig. 14.7), Miqne XA (LB IB) (Killebrew 1996: pl. 2.5), and Rabud LB4 (LB IB) (Kochavi 1974: figs. 4.7, 9).
23. Flat-bottomed cookpot, an MB type. Parallels: Beit Mirsim D (MB III–LB I) (Albright 1933: pl. 13.4) and Jericho 35b (MB III) (Kenyon and Holland 1982: fig. 146.8 and 1983: fig. 172.13).

The pottery from Loci 10 and 12 in Square Q17 indicates that the fortress had a short life span, with a destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age I.



THE LB I FORTRESS AT KH. EL-MAQATIR, 2000

Figure 13. Plan of the Late Bronze Age I fortress at Khirbet el-Maqatir following the 2000 season (courtesy B. G. Wood).

The Significance of Ai in the Late Bronze Age I

It goes without saying that Ai must have been of strategic importance at the time of the conquest, otherwise the Israelites would not have singled it out as the first target in the highlands. It must have played a crucial role in the overall strategy for conquering Canaan. Following the conquest of Ai (Joshua 7–8), the Israelites carried out a campaign in southern Canaan (Joshua 10), followed by a northern campaign (Joshua 11). It appears that it was first necessary to eliminate Ai prior to launching the southern campaign.

The major power in the central hill country during the Late Bronze Age was the city-state of Shechem (Wood 1997: 245–46). It controlled the area between the city-state of Megiddo in the north and the city-state of Jerusalem in the south (Campbell 1960: 19–21; Wright and Campbell 1988: 461; Toombs 1992:

1183). Biblical evidence suggests that the Israelites were working closely with the Shechemites in carrying out the conquest of Canaan (Wood 1997: 246–47; 1999b: 22).

The Wadi el-Gayeh forms a natural east-west boundary between the territories of Shechem and Jerusalem. This same wadi later became the border between the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin (Josh 18:12–13). Khirbet el-Maqatir/Ai was situated on the south side of Wadi el-Gayeh, while Beitin/Beth-aven lay just 1.5 km away on its north side. Why were there two fortresses in such close proximity to one another?

I suggest that Khirbet el-Maqatir/Ai was the northern border fortress for the southern Jerusalem city-state coalition. From Khirbet el-Maqatir to Jerusalem, 15 km to the south, there is clear line-of-sight communication. Beitin/Beth-aven, on the other hand, was the southern border fortress for the city-state of Shechem to the north. The two fortresses were observing one another across the “no man’s land” of the Wadi el-Gayeh. Being associated with Shechem, Beth-aven would presumably be on friendly terms with the Israelites. Ai, conversely, would have provided early warning to Jerusalem in case of attack from the north and so was strategically important to the Israelites. Therefore, it was chosen by the Israelites as the first central hill country site to be attacked. Beth-aven could have provided logistical support in this undertaking.

With this reconstruction, the pattern of the conquest becomes clear. After gaining a foothold in Canaan by capturing Jericho, the overall strategy was to expand the holdings of the city state of Shechem, perhaps with the understanding that the Israelites could settle within the borders of the newly enlarged territory. They first defeated the border fortress of Ai at the northern extremity of the southern coalition, opening the way for a southern campaign. After the southern area was secured, the Israelites moved north to Hazor, where they engaged a coalition of northern kings, with the area under the control of Shechem being completely bypassed (Wood 1997: 246–47).

If we are correct in our location of Beth-aven, the border between Benjamin and Ephraim in this area can be traced. It would have passed from the southeast, coming up from Jericho, along the Wadi el-Gayeh to its beginning at Beitin. From there, it would have gone southwest, most likely on the west side of el-Bira because Bethel was included in the tribal area of Benjamin (Josh 18:22). The border then proceeded to Lower Beth Horon (Beit ‘Ur et-Tahta 1582/1446; Josh 18:13b; Peterson 1992), 12 km west-southwest of el-Bira.

Locating the Ai of Abraham and the Ai of Ezra and Nehemiah

Relatively little is known of Abraham’s Ai and the Ai of Ezra and Nehemiah. Abraham’s Ai was east of Bethel, with a hill (*har*) between the two (Gen 12:8). It

seems to have been a well-known landmark because it was used to indicate Abraham's location. The 27-acre Early Bronze Age site at et-Tell, 4.8 km east-northeast of el-Bira/Bethel, was the major city-state in the central hill country in the Early Bronze Age (Na'aman 1992b: 280; Finkelstein 1994: 172). The impressive ruins there would have been a landmark in Abraham's day and thus the most logical candidate for Abraham's Ai. There are several hills between el-Bira and et-Tell that could have been Abraham's camping place, including Khirbet el-Maqatir with its Byzantine monastery (Bolen 1999).

Because men of Bethel and Ai returned to their settlements after the captivity (Ezra 2:28, Neh 7:32), it follows that Bethel and Ai were occupied in the Iron Age II and Persian periods. The fact that Bethel and Ai were lumped together in the lists of returnees suggests that the two communities were in close proximity. Since no Iron Age II or Persian-period pottery has been found at Khirbet el-Maqatir, it is unlikely that it was the Ai of Ezra and Nehemiah. Both Beitin and Khirbet Nisya were occupied during the Iron Age II and Persian periods (Kelso 1968: 36–38, 52; Livingston 2003: 65–86) and are close to el-Bira/Bethel, so it is possible that one of these sites was the Ai of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹⁹

Summary and Conclusions

The identifications of Bethel, Beth-aven, and Joshua's Ai have eluded researchers since the beginning of historical-geographical research in Palestine. A misidentification of Bethel resulted in the misidentification of Joshua's Ai and a masking of the correct location of Beth-aven. This, in turn, has led scholars to doubt the veracity of the biblical account of the conquest of Ai recorded in Joshua 7–8. Statements such as the following are commonplace: "There is no evidence of a second-millennium Canaanite city at this spot [that is, et-Tell] or at any other site in the region. This constitutes unequivocal archaeological evidence for the lack of correlation between the story in Joshua 8, with all its topographic details, and a historical reality corresponding to the period of the conquest" (A. Mazar 1992: 283).

A careful analysis of biblical and extrabiblical evidence places Bethel at el-Bira, Beth-aven at Beitin, and Joshua's Ai at Khirbet el-Maqatir. These are the only three locations that satisfy the complex matrix of interlocking biblical requirements for the sites. Significantly, prior to the influence of modern scholarship, local tradition placed Ai at Khirbet el-Maqatir, a fact overlooked by previous investigators.

19. Israel Finkelstein (2008: 9) disregards Kelso's statement (1968: 38, cf. 52) that "rude walls, probably sheepfolds" from the sixth century B.C.E. were found at Beitin and fails to mention the finds at Khirbet Nisya. Consequently, he concludes (2008: 13), "Ai of the list of returnees is a riddle."

Finally, a word about the derivation of the name *ʿay. Zevit* (1983: 26, 1985: 62; cf. Moscati 1980: 39, §8.46) has pointed out the relationship between Hebrew *ʿayin* and Arabic *ghayin*. He (1983: 26) states, “Arabic *ġ-y-y*, ‘to hoist (a standard)’, *ġāyat*, ‘extreme limit, utmost extremity’, suggest that the Hebrew name *ʿay* may refer to some topographical or geographical feature characteristic of the site’s location.” Abraham’s Ai (et-Tell) and Joshua’s Ai (Khirbet el-Maqatir) are both located on the southern edge of the Wadi el-Ġāyeh. The wadi possibly marked the northern extremity of the territory of Jerusalem. It is conceivable that the names of the two sites derived from the name of Wadi el-Ġāyeh.