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A NOTE ON THE DATE OF THE 'GREAT WALL' OF TELL EN-NAŞBEH: A REJOINDER

Jeffrey R. Zorn

In a recent issue of *Tel Aviv* (1998:131–133) Hayah Katz proposed a radically new down-dating for the massive offset-inset wall at Tell en-Naşbeh into the 8th century B.C.E. or later. The traditional date accepted by most archaeologists is early 9th century B.C.E., based on the assumed equation of the Naşbeh wall with the fortifications said to have been erected at biblical Mizpah of Benjamin by King Asa of Judah according to 1 Kings 15:22.

Katz is correct in noting that the key *archaeological* data for dating the wall, either ceramics taken from a cut through the wall itself, or from the fill layers poured up against it, are lacking in the original Tell en-Naşbeh report (McCown 1947; Wampler 1947). Long years of perusing the Badè Institute's archives in Berkeley have convinced me that the sherds Badè is said to have recovered from a cut through the wall (Badè 1928:17) were never drawn or otherwise recorded. A deep sounding to bedrock made against the interior of the offset-inset wall was undertaken in "Rooms" 220 and 221 in Squares AB25–26. In theory the lowest material against the wall might provide an approximate date for the construction of the wall, but for reasons discussed below this material is of little use.

Katz's new dating of the wall is based on two factors (1998:132). First, is the suggested similarity in the town plan of Tell en-Naşbeh Phase B (according to the analysis of McClellan 1984:53–69; this is Stratum 3C according to this author's reanalysis of the site's stratigraphy¹) with Tel Beersheba II, Tell Beit Mirsim A2 (hereafter TBM) and Beth Shemesh II, all claimed to date to the 8th century.² The second factor is the presence of oil presses, of a type Katz dates generally to the 8th century, in several of the buildings which pre-date the construction of the wall.

There are several problems in this analysis which must be addressed. First, Katz provides no reason for dismissing the 1Kings account. The reference to the construction of the Mizpah fortifications is an almost parenthetical afterthought to the main interest of the account, the war between King Asa of Judah and King Baasha of Israel. It is minor comments such as these,

¹ The reanalysis appears in Zorn 1993a:114–115, 147–151, 154–161; see the summary in Zorn 1993b:1099–1101; see Zorn 1998; 1997a; 1997b for additional data on the settlement plan and fortifications

² Katz's page reference to my dissertation (1993a) is incorrect. It appears to be a reference to my summary article in *NEAEHL* (1993b), which is not cited in Katz's bibliography.

devoid of historical or theological tendentiousness, which historians usually accept as primary data. If this verse is to be discounted as an historical datum, reasons must be adduced.

Second, Katz asserts that at Tell en-Naşbeh the houses of the typical Iron Age ring-road settlement were built “into or up against the casemate defensive system which encircled the site” (1998:132), as though the casemate wall was originally a free standing structure (possibly something like the casemate wall at Hazor is being imagined). This is not strictly true. The “casemates” are integral parts of the adjoining buildings; they are extra-broad back rooms of three- and four-room houses arranged as a defensive band along the periphery of the settlement. The construction technique of these casemates is not uniform. Their internal dimensions are not standard from house to house, nor are the widths of the internal and external walls uniform. For this reason I adopted the more cumbersome but accurate term “casemate-like wall” in my discussions.

This settlement plan is then compared to the three sites mentioned above which Katz dates to the 8th century. However, the dating to TBM A2 and Beth Shemesh II is not fairly represented. Because both sites were excavated early in this century when excavation and recording methods were rougher (especially Grant’s work at Beth Shemesh), precise dates for sub-phases are impossible to achieve. TBM A2 is generally dated ca. 925 to 701 B.C.E., while Beth Shemesh II is dated even more broadly to ca. 1000 to 586 (Mazar 1990:372–373). In fact, in the latest summary presentation of the renewed excavations at Beth Shemesh the excavators date the massive, solid “Strong Wall” to the 10th century (Bunimovitz and Lederman 1997:75). Thus their plans can be said to provide equally solid evidence for dating Tell en-Naşbeh Stratum 3C to the 10th century (my preference), or to the 8th. While Tel Beersheba II does indeed date to the later 8th century (Herzog 1993:173), it should be noted that the town plan seems to have followed the same constructional lines all the way back to Stratum V, which, like the initial stages of TBM A2 and Beth Shemesh II, is dated to the 10th century (*ibid.*:170–171, 173; Mazar 1990:373).

Third, the presence of moveable olive oil presses (dated to the 8th century again by comparison to TBM and Beth Shemesh!) at Naşbeh provides at best evidence only for the existence of the town in the 8th century (if the presses are to be dated so late), not for the period in which the town was constructed. The buildings in which the presses were installed could be decades, even centuries earlier than the presses themselves.

To summarize: there is nothing in the settlement plan of Tell en-Naşbeh which demands an 8th century date for the construction of the offset-inset wall. The olive presses at best only indicate the existence, not the construction, of the town in the 8th century.

What can be said with certainty about the Naṣbeh fortifications? The original Stratum 3C town was protected by the casemate-like wall described above. Later a new fortification system, the offset-inset wall under discussion, was constructed downslope from the original town so that the destruction of the back rooms of homes of the town's citizenry along the periphery of the site would not be necessary. This offset-inset wall was connected to a massive inner (4-chambered) and outer (2-chambered) gate complex. The construction of these fortifications, and contemporary ancillary modifications to the town, are Stratum 3B. The inner gate went out of use at the beginning of the 6th century. From that point until the destruction of the town toward the end of the 5th century, only the outer gate continued to function as a defensive feature with the offset-inset wall in Stratum 2 (Zorn 1997a).

Because Tell en-Naṣbeh had only negligible settlement in Early Bronze I, the Iron Age town was constructed on bedrock. Between the casemate-like wall of 3C and the 3B offset-inset wall was only the steep natural slope of the stepped limestone hill. In order to make this a useable space, vast amounts of fill were dumped into the area between the two walls. The storage bins, which circle the southern intramural part of the site and even the inner four-chambered gate, are constructed on this fill. The tip lines of the fill are visible in two photographs from the original report (McCown 1947: Pl. 73:5–6), that show the area of the probe in "Rooms" 220–221 mentioned above.

The latest material in the fills laid up against the base of the offset-inset wall should provide an approximate date for the construction of the wall system, since they usually contain material contemporary with or earlier than the construction of the wall. However, there are several problems with this approach. The first is that the area was not excavated stratigraphically, i.e., not according to the slope of the tip lines themselves, but in arbitrary levels. This must have led to the mixing of materials from the living surfaces of the intramural space with the constructional fills below. Still, since the cut reached a depth of ca. 5.5 m. below the tops of the preserved buildings, it might be expected that the lowest levels reached would provide some uncontaminated ceramics.

Indeed, there are artefact records for the lowest point reached, but they are of only the most general sort. Usually only the basic type of vessel is given (e.g., "cooking pot") without any reference to the series numbers developed by Wampler. There are a few references to types of painted decorations, but again usually only with vague references to "red and dark brown lines". Virtually none of the material from these deep probes was drawn or photographed. Most unfortunate of all is that hardly any of this material was saved so it is impossible today to recheck the data.

The most that can be said is that fills of Level II (III being the lowest) in “Room” 220 contained some red and dark brown banded Bichrome pottery (but whether Philistine or Phoenician is uncertain) and also one Cypro-Phoenician Black-on-Red juglet of Wampler’s type 874. This is hardly enough on which to hang the dating of the wall system.

A final dating for the construction of the great offset-inset wall at Tell en-Naşbeh based on archaeological data must await renewed excavations at the site. The one area on the published 1:400 site plan adjacent to the offset-inset wall which Badè seems to have left virtually unexcavated is in Squares Y11–14. An east-west trench across this area would provide the necessary vertical sections to establish a correlation between the original casemate-like wall (and the dwellings within) and the offset-inset wall, and their ceramic materials for dating both wall systems.

Pending such an excavation we are left with 1Kings 15:22 as the best historical peg for the Tell en-Naşbeh fortifications. A date in the 9th century is indeed very satisfactory. Megiddo IVA with its inner four-chambered gate and offset-inset wall, generally taken to be the work of the Omride dynasty of the 9th century (or perhaps earlier for the wall), provide good parallels to the Tell en-Naşbeh fortifications. A four-chambered gate and solid wall combination known from Beersheba V, are also from the 10th–9th century. There are thus no reasons at present to abandon the traditional 9th century date of the Tell en-Naşbeh wall for an 8th century date; such historical and archaeological evidence as there is tends to favor the traditional date.

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