

The Dating of an Early Iron Age Kiln from Tell al-Nasbah*

Jeffrey R. Zorn

Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14850, U.S.A.

In 1927 a kiln was excavated at Tell al-Nasbah, 12 km. north-west of Jerusalem. The 1947 site report did not attempt to fix the dating of this kiln. A reappraisal of the stratigraphic position of the kiln, cut by an offset-inset wall of the early ninth century B.C. and located outside the casemate-like wall of the tenth century B.C., demonstrates that the kiln should be dated no later than the tenth/early ninth century, making it the earliest Iron Age II kiln known in ancient Israel.

The discovery of Bronze and Iron Age kilns is a relatively rare occurrence on archaeological sites, especially considering the huge amounts of pottery which they produced (Killebrew 1989, 101; Wood 1990, 26–32). The main reason for their scarcity is probably due to the noisome quality of pottery firing itself. The smoke and smell from the kilns usually required their siting as far as possible from domestic quarters, while still providing reasonable access to them for the potters. Since few sites have been excavated much beyond their fortification walls, it is perhaps not surprising that so few kilns have been recovered.

For this reason any new light which can be shed on ancient kilns is a welcome addition to our knowledge of the ancient potter's craft. In 1927 W.F. Badè excavated a kiln, given the feature number 106, at the south-west corner of Tell al-Nasbah, c. 12 km. north-west of Jerusalem (Figs. 1 and 2). Tell al-Nasbah is now usually identified with Biblical Mizpah of Benjamin (Muilenburg 1947, 13–22, 23–44; 1954–1955, 25–42). Tell al-Nasbah is in the right general location to be identified with Mizpah and has yielded significant architectural and artifactual remains from the periods in which Mizpah is reported to have been occupied (Iron I through Hellenistic), especially from the Babylonian period when Mizpah served briefly as the administrative center of Judah (Zorn *et al.* 1994, 161–183). Those who would locate Mizpah elsewhere have failed to come up with a suitable alternative identification for Tell al-Nasbah; its massive fortifications and location on the road north from Jerusalem indicate that it was an important site which should have been mentioned by the Biblical authors. Most other candidates can be easily discarded: Ataroth-Addar was a small, fairly unimportant place which occurs

only in border lists; al-Jib is identified with Gibeon; Beeroth is probably al-Birah. The only other major candidate for Mizpah, Nabi Samwil, was recently cleared almost completely to bedrock, and although the results remain unpublished, it seems little from the Iron Age II was uncovered. The identification is important, as the absolute chronology and stratigraphy is pegged to the Old Testament accounts, and lack independent verification.

Kiln 106 is 5.5 m. long by 3.2 m. wide. The wall of Kiln 106 was most well-preserved on the north where it is double-stone work, at least 50 cm. thick. Although its superstructure has not survived, its floor plan is 'key hole'-shaped. The kiln contains six support walls, three on each side of a central chamber, which supported the floor of the firing chamber, on which the pots were stacked. No doubt the fuel was piled in the side chambers and the center aisle. North-west of the kiln is a space marked "ash room". Perhaps the potter dumped refuse from the firings here, or it may be the charred remains of unused fuel.

A much briefer description of this kiln than the foregoing was given in the 1947 site report (McCown, 258), though nothing was said there concerning its stratigraphic position or date. Badè, however, in a not-widely available early preliminary report (1928, 28; not cited in the 1947 report), noted that the town's massive offset-inset wall cuts the western wall of Kiln 106, and that the kiln must therefore pre-date the wall. This is significant in that the offset-inset wall is generally dated to the reign of King Asa of Judah in the very early ninth century B.C. who is said to have "built", i.e. fortified, Mizpah (1 Kings 15:22).

There is some archaeological support for this dating. First, the town subsequently enclosed by the

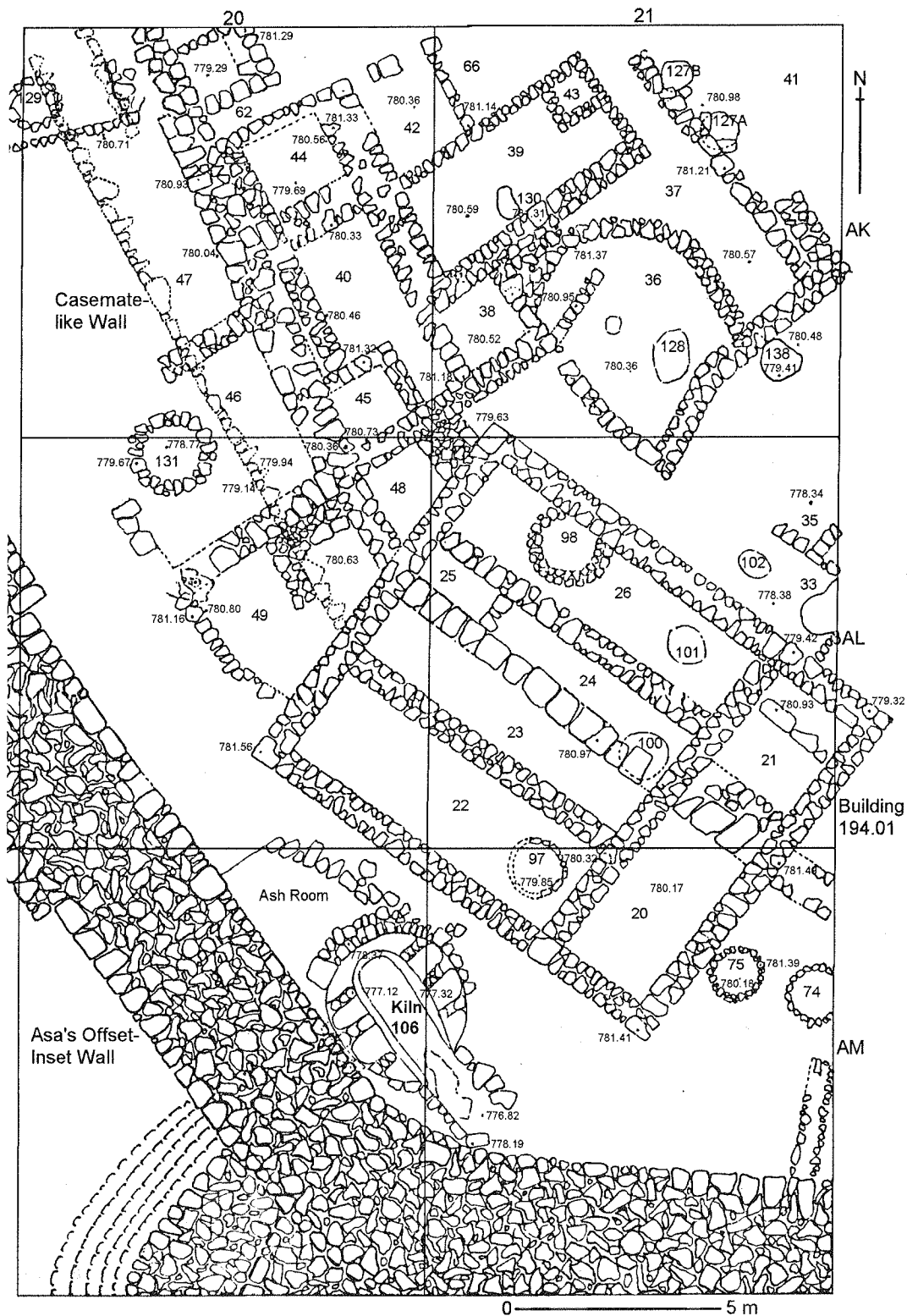


Figure 1. South-west corner of Tell al-Nasbah showing Kiln 106.



Figure 2. *Photograph of Kiln 106 from the north-east looking south-west.*

Stratum 3B offset-inset wall (see the revised stratigraphy in Zorn 1993b, 1098–1102) had defences formed by the back broad rooms of a nearly continuous band of houses along the periphery of the settlement (Stratum 3C). A section of this casemate-like wall is visible in Fig. 1 in AK–AL/20–21, to the east of Kiln 106 and below four-room Building 194.01. This Stratum 3C town was constructed over a phase characterized by scores of rock-cut silos (Stratum 4). These silos are typologically and functionally similar to the stone-lined bins found at many Iron I sites (Herzog 1992, 232; Finkelstein 1988, 264–266), and also at Samaria where the earliest occupation of the Iron Age is characterized by rock-cut silos and other agricultural installations (Stager 1990, 93–107). Moreover, a few of these Nasbah silos contained pottery of only Iron I (e.g. Wampler 1947, pls. 64:1469, 75:1737 from Silo 116; pls. 13:226, 60:1401, 62:1434 from Silo 225).

Second, the casemate-like wall construction of Stratum 3C tends to be a characteristic of the “Settlement period” and of the period immediately

following in the hill country (Herzog 1992, 233–238, 268; Finkelstein 250–254, 263); this type of fortification is generally replaced in the tenth/ninth centuries and following by either solid walls or true casemate constructions. The offset-inset wall of 3B is the first (and only) fortification system to follow the less formal defenses of Stratum 3C. The border zone between Israel and Judah witnessed various cross-border incursions following the breakup of the United Monarchy in the late tenth/early ninth centuries (e.g. 1 Kings 14:30; 15:7; 15:16–23). The period from the second quarter of the ninth to the mid-eighth century tended to be a time of co-operation and even alliance between the two kingdoms (e.g. 1 Kings 22:4, 2 Kings 3:7; 8:26). Tell al-Nasbah sits in a very exposed position on the main north/south route along the spine of the hill country where it is both open to attack and able to control this road. The date of the replacement of the Stratum 3C defences by the massive offset-inset wall of Stratum 3B should reasonably be placed soon after the division of the kingdom, when the border was most threatened, rather than later.

Third, Ann Killebrew (1989, 102) notes that kilns deteriorate quickly when not in use. Thus little, if anything, of Kiln 106 should have survived if it were left exposed for any length of time. This suggests that the offset-inset wall must have cut the kiln wall soon after it went out of use. The kiln was further preserved by the vast amounts of debris poured into the area between the two wall systems; this fill was used to support storage bins and drains which carried runoff away from the original Stratum 3C town. Some of these bins are visible in Figure 1 to the east and north of Kiln 106 (numbered 74, 75, 97 and 131).

This evidence suggests the following scenario: Stratum 4 (silos) is an Iron I settlement, fairly closely followed by Stratum 3C (casemate-like wall system) belonging to later Iron I/early Iron II. Kiln 106 belongs with Stratum 3C since it lies just beyond the bounds of that settlement (the location of the kiln beyond the casemate-like wall accords with the theory that kilns are generally sited outside of the settlements they served), placing it not later than the late tenth/very early ninth centuries. Stratum 3C in turn is soon enclosed by the offset-inset wall of 3B which most likely should be a ninth-century construction.

A final point to note: Kiln 106 could not have been in use at the same time as the four-room building (Building 194.01) to its east (*contra* Badè 1928, 28–29). This building, preserved only at its foundations, is built partially on the fill described above which covers Kiln 106; thus the building is later than both the fill and the kiln. Building 194.01, ascribed to Stratum 2, is similar in size and form to several other four-room buildings of Stratum 2 which are also constructed over the remains of Stratum 3 (Zorn 1993a, 163–164, 167, 172–173; Zorn 1993b, 1101–1102). Two of these buildings were found with *in situ* pottery on their floors. The massive pithoi from Building 125.01 near the north-central part of the mound (Wampler 1947, pl. 6:89–90), probably installed when the building was constructed, date to the late seventh/early sixth centuries; the smaller storage jars found in the Building 110.01 adjacent to the outer gate (Wampler 1947, pls. 18:311–312, 19:313) date the terminus of Stratum 2 to about the end of the fifth century. Stratum 2 thus dates from the Babylonian period to about the middle of the Persian period (Zorn forthcoming).

Iron Age kilns previously known are either dated to the Iron I period, or, if they have been assigned to Iron II, to the eighth century and later (see Killebrew 1989, 134, for a summary of the dating of Late Bronze and Iron Age kilns). The above data demonstrate that Kiln 106 belongs to the tenth/early ninth centuries B.C., making it the earliest well-

dated kiln of the Solomonic or immediate post-Solomonic period known up until now.

Notes

* This article was prepared during my time at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Jerusalem, as a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow. Much of the material presented here may be found in the author's Ph.D. dissertation (Zorn 1993a, 363–364, 901–902). I would like to thank the Badè Institute of Biblical Archaeology for permission to use the illustrations reproduced here; I especially thank Mr Kevin Kaiser, Coordinator of the Badè Institute, for providing me with the photograph in Figure 2.

Bibliography

- Badè, W.F. (1928) *Excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh, 1926 and 1927: A Preliminary Report*. Berkeley.
- Finkelstein, I. (1988) *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*. Jerusalem.
- Herzog, Z. (1992) Settlement and Fortification Planning in the Iron Age. Pp. 231–274 in Kempinski, A. and Reich, R. (eds) *The Architecture of Ancient Israel*. Jerusalem.
- Killebrew, A. (1989) *Approaches to Reconstructing the Ancient Potters' Craft During the Late Bronze and Iron Ages in Eretz Israel*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
- McCown, C.C. (1947) *Tell en-Nasbeh I: Archaeological and Historical Results*. Berkeley and New Haven.
- Muilenburg, J. (1947) The Literary Sources Bearing on the Question of Identification. Pp. 23–45 in McCown, C.C. *Tell en-Nasbeh I: Archaeological and Historical Results*. Berkeley and New Haven.
- (1947) Survey of the Literature on Tell en-Nasbeh. Pp. 13–22 in McCown C.C. *Tell en-Nasbeh I: Archaeological and Historical Results*. Berkeley and New Haven.
- (1954–1955) Mizpah of Benjamin. *Studia Theologica* 8, 25–42.
- Stager, L.E. (1990) Shemer's Estate. *BASOR* 277/278, 93–107.
- Wampler, J.C. (1947) *Tell en-Nasbeh II: The Pottery*. Berkeley and New Haven.
- Wood, B.G. (1990) *The Sociology of Pottery in Ancient Palestine. The Ceramic Industry and the Diffusion of Ceramic Style in the Bronze and Iron Ages*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 103. Sheffield.
- Zorn, J.R. (1993a) *Tell en Nasbeh: A Re-evaluation of the Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age and Later Periods*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- (1993b) Nasbeh, Tell en-. *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 3, 1098–1102.
- (forthcoming) An Inner and Outer Gate Complex at Tell en-Nasbeh.
- Zorn, J.R., Yellin, J. and Hayes, J.L. (1994) The M(W)SH Stamp Impressions and the Neo-Babylonian Period. *IEJ* 44, 161–183.