
HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL / אל-עמארנה של תעודות
ASPECTS OF THE AMARNA TABLETS

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HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE AMARNA TABLETS

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The first stage in the historical and topographical study of the Amarna letters was marked by the effort to identify the kingdoms and lands mentioned therein and to locate the sites of the towns. Attention was naturally focused on Biblical place names. The accurate location of kingdoms and lands and the identification of the sites of the Amarna towns is the groundwork for the discussion of the other — and by far more complicated — historical-geographical aspects of the Amarna archive: (1) the delineation of the system of Canaanite city-states; and (2) the relationship between these territorial entities and the Biblical tribal borders. A general sketch of these two problems will be outlined in the following discussion.

1. The Network of the Canaanite City-States

An accurate delineation of the array of the Amarna city-states within a given area is dependent on several considerations: (a) the number of city-states and their relative strengths, as reflected in the written sources; (b) the identification of border towns and neighbouring cities; (c) considerable knowledge of the environmental conditions and economic resources of the investigated region; and (d) the number and size of all the fourteenth-century archaeological sites within the area.

The list of the Canaanite city-states should first of all be composed on the basis of the Amarna letters, since apparently only the rulers of these political units were allowed to correspond with the Pharaoh. The Egyptian topographical lists, on the other hand, include both city-states and small towns located within their territory and must therefore be treated with caution. However, since the Amarna tablets do not supply a complete picture of the territorial situation in the land and there are a great number of blank spots on the map, the Egyptian lists and particularly the Egyptian royal inscriptions may help us to fill in the gaps and give us a clearer picture. The relative strength of the kingdoms may be

deduced from the analysis of the Amarna letters and numerous other Late Bronze Age documents.

In order to demarcate the scope of the city-states it is necessary to identify the sites situated along their borders. Since only few villages and small towns are mentioned in the Amarna tablets, the historical, environmental, economic and archaeological data play a major role in this respect. The importance of these data is so great that only those areas that have been thoroughly investigated and whose physical conditions and archaeological characteristics are well known can accurately be divided into city-states. For this reason, it is only in the Cisjordanian areas — which have been extensively excavated and surveyed — that the demarcation of the territorial and political units can be relatively precise.

The array of the city-states in the Cisjordanian areas as it emerges from thorough investigation along these lines is as follows. The most important kingdoms in southern Canaan were Ashkelon, Lachish, Gath(?) ((Tell eṣ-Şâfi) and Gezer. The latter was particularly strong and influential, controlling the international road leading north-south and the internal latitudinal routes leading to the hill country near Jerusalem. Several small kingdoms were situated near its borders (Rubute, Şabuma, Aphek and possibly Muḥḥazi/Maḥoz and Beth-shemesh), controlled by their powerful neighbour. The central hill country was split up into three major units: Debir and Jerusalem, both in the Judean hills, and Shechem in the mountains of Samaria. The kingdom of Shechem was most powerful, dominating large areas and smaller cities of lesser rank (for example, Tappuah, Tirzah, Dothan and Hopher). The Sharon region was dominated by Gath-padalla (Tell Jett), while Rehob, Megiddo, Shim'on, Acco and Achshaph were the most important kingdoms in the northern plains. North of these plains lies the kingdom of Hazor, which extended from the sources of the Jordan up to the Jarmuk river, including the regions of the Sea of Galilee and west of the Jordan valley. The extensive territory of the kingdom of Hazor is reflected in an Amarna letter (EA 364), in which the king of Hazor was accused of capturing three towns of the king of Ashtaroth in Bashan. The towns (or rather villages) were necessarily situated in the area of the Jarmuk river, since the Golan heights, east of Hazor, were not occupied in the Late Bronze Age. Like the kingdom of Shechem, Hazor dominated an area that included lesser cities (Dan, Abel, Tell en-Na'ameh and Chinnereth). Both Shechem and Hazor may therefore be regarded as the only real territorial kingdoms in the area west of the Jordan (except, perhaps, Gezer). The other city-states had only a "capital" city surrounded by villages and hamlets.

The network of Canaanite states was composed of kingdoms of higher and lesser rank. Many of the small kingdoms, even though corresponding with the Egyptian Pharaoh and ostensibly having independent status, were in reality influenced, and sometimes even dominated, by their stronger neighbours, who were able to dictate policy to them and to intervene in their internal affairs. The Upper and Lower Galilee, parts of the Judean and Samarian hill country and the Negev were barely inhabited in the Late Bronze Age, and thus may be regarded to a certain extent as a kind of no-man's land.

The considerations involved in an attempt to draw borders for the city-states may be illustrated by two cases: the kingdoms of Jerusalem and Lachish. The western border of Jerusalem ran along the western fringes of the Judean foothills. Zorah and Aijalon (EA 273:16-24), as well as Manahtu (EA 292:28-40), formed part of the kingdom of Gezer, Jerusalem's western neighbour. Keilah was located on Jerusalem's southwestern border and was either an independent city or a border town of the kingdom of Gath(?).¹ Debir (Khirbet Rabûd) was Jerusalem's southern neighbour. However, according to the surveys conducted in the Judean hills, no Late Bronze Age settlement was discovered along the main road leading from Jerusalem to Hebron and only two isolated sites were found west of this line. Part, or even most of the area between Jerusalem and Debir may therefore be regarded as no-man's land, occupied only by nomadic groups. Indeed, many burials of these groups were uncovered in Hebron and Khirbet Judûr south of Jerusalem and in Gibeon to the north of it.² The nature of the relations between the kingdom of Jerusalem and the neighbouring tribes cannot be established. The city of Bethel was Jerusalem's closest neighbour on the north, and we may assume that Bethel was a small independent city-state lying near the border of Jerusalem.

The size of the nuclear territory governed directly by the king of Jerusalem was relatively modest — a fairly narrow strip between the

- 1 In his letter to the Pharaoh, Shuwardata claimed that Keilah belonged to him (EA 280:9-15): "The king, my lord, sent me to make war against Keilah. I have made war; everything is well with me; my town has been returned to me." 'Abdi-Heba, on the other hand, never claimed that Keilah was his town. One may suggest that Keilah originally belonged to the king of Gath(?) (Tell eš-Şâfi), its elders then took advantage of the political rivalry of the Amarna period and started manipulating among the quarreling neighbouring city-states, thus acquiring a semi-independent position.
- 2 R. Gonen, "Burial in Canaan of the Late Bronze Age as a Basis for the Study of the Population and Settlement," unpublished Ph.D. thesis (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 85-87, 92-94, 228-230 (in Hebrew).

foothills and the Jordan valley.³ Most of the settlements were concentrated on the roads leading up from the Shephelah via the “valley of Sorek” and the “way of Beth-Horon”. The area of the kingdom of Jerusalem is not dissimilar to that assigned to the tribe of Benjamin in Joshua 18:11-20, and it is not impossible that these later borders evolved from those of the earlier period.

As for Lachish, the uncertainty concerning the identity of its neighbouring kingdoms and the lack of clear identifications for the Late Bronze Age sites situated in the Shephelah are the main obstacles in an attempt to delineate its territory. Tentatively, we may suggest that the kingdom of Lachish extended between the western fringes of the Judean foothills in the east and the territory of Ashkelon, near Tel ‘Erani and Tel Qeshet, in the west; and between the Govrîn river and its tributaries in the north and the Adoraim river in the south. If so, it spread over roughly 250 square kilometres. Most of its settlements were located around its periphery, whereas there were hardly any near the capital city, Lachish. This distribution pattern is typical to many other city-states and is the outcome of their agricultural economy, which was based on the cultivation of field crops and on animal husbandry. The fields and pasture land in the neighbourhood of the capital city were exploited by its inhabitants, whereas the rest of the agricultural lands in the peripheral areas were cultivated by the inhabitants of the smaller towns and villages.

The territorial scope of several other city-states (for example, Gezer, Shechem, Megiddo, Shim'on and Hazor) can be established along the same lines of research (see below). The demarcation of the other territorial units is yet to be investigated. In light of the many excavations and archaeological surveys conducted in the Land of Israel, a more exact delineation of the array of Canaanite city-states is the main challenge for future students of the historical-geographical aspects of the Amarna tablets.

3 A. Alt, “Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina,” *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (München, 1953), I, pp. 107-108, suggests that Jerusalem was a tiny state. Z. Kallai and H. Tadmor, “Bit Ninurta = Beit Horon: On the History of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Amarna Period,” *Eretz Israel* 9 (1969), pp. 138-147, regarded Jerusalem as a large political unit extending over the entire Judean hill country. For a detailed discussion of the borders of the kingdom of Jerusalem and their relation to the scope of the inheritance of Benjamin, see N. Na'aman, “The Political Disposition and Historical Development of Eretz-Israel According to the Amarna Letters,” unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Tel Aviv University, 1975), pp. 104-118 (in Hebrew).

Alongside the system of city-states in Canaan, the Egyptians established a network of garrison cities to supervise, administer and rule the territories under their control. This network, which is mainly known from the Amarna letters, appears to have been set up by Thutmose III, after his conquest of greater Canaan. The location of the Egyptian garrison cities seems to have been conditioned by strategic and economic considerations. Four of them were situated on the coast — Gaza and Joppa in the south and Ullasa and Šumur in the north. One or two cities were located on the major caravan route linking Mesopotamia and Syria with Canaan and Egypt (Beth-shean and possibly Yeno'am). Another such city, Kumidi, lay on the major crossroads of the Beqa', connecting north and south, Sidon and Damascus. In all of these garrison cities (except Kumidi),⁴ the city-state ruler was deposed and replaced by an Egyptian official, who assumed administration for the city, in cooperation with the local institutions (EA 102:22-23).

2. Canaanite City-States and Biblical Tribal Borders

Another aspect of the delineation of the city-states' borders concerns the relationship of the territories of the Late Bronze Age kingdoms to those of

4 R. Hachmann, "Arahattu — Biriawaza — Puhuru," in R. Hachmann, ed., *Kamid el-Loz 1971-74* (Bonn, 1982), pp. 139-158, has recently suggested that Kumidi was a Canaanite city-state up to the time of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), becoming an Egyptian garrison city only in the course of his reign. Arahattu was Kumidi's last king, whereas Puhuru was the first Egyptian governor appointed in Kumidi. This theory, however, is open to criticism. Hamašša, who is mentioned in Arahattu's letter (EA 198:15: "The king, my lord, should ask Hamašša whether I am a loyal servant of the king, my lord."), is more likely to be the Egyptian governor of Kumidi than the Egyptian royal messenger to Mitanni. The naming of an Egyptian official serving in Canaan as a witness who will vouch for the loyalty of a vassal ruler is amply attested in the Amarna letters, whereas no royal messenger ever appears in this context. Therefore, Hamašša, the Egyptian messenger to Mitanni, should be dissociated from the person bearing his homonym, who served as Egyptian governor in southern Syria; see W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, 2nd revised edition (Wiesbaden 1971), p. 249, with earlier bibliography. Furthermore, the assumption of radical measures taken by Akhenaten to improve and entrench Egyptian hegemony over Canaan is without parallel in the Amarna letters. The overall impression is rather to the contrary. The Pharaoh was trying to maintain the administrative set-up initiated by his predecessors but did not initiate any changes. Hachmann's suggestion is not supported by textual evidence, and it is more likely that Kumidi was an Egyptian garrison city even before the Amarna period, being the seat of both a local king and an Egyptian governor.

the Israelite tribes as reflected by the boundary descriptions of the book of Joshua. Alt was the first scholar to examine this problem in detail, demonstrating that the Israelites settled in the hill country, mainly in regions that belonged to the large political units but had been only slightly affected by the spread of the city-state network.⁵ Specifically, he compared the “nuclear” inheritance of the House of Joseph in the hill country of Samaria with the territory of the kingdom of Lab’ayu of Shechem.⁶ We have already suggested that the inheritance of Benjamin was similar in its main outlines to the “nuclear” territory of the kingdom of Jerusalem as reflected in the Amarna letters. The borders of the kingdom of Gezer — between the Egyptian garrison city of Joppa in the west and the foothills in the east and between the Jarkon river and Ajalon river in the north and the Sorek river in the south — more or less correspond with the area encompassed by the town list of Dan (Josh. 19:41-46) as well as that of the second Solomonic district (1 Kings 4:9).⁷

The borders of the kingdom of Hazor as described above — between the sources of the Jordan and the Jarmuk river and between the Jordan valley and the mountains of Upper Galilee — correspond well with the main outlines of the inheritance of Naphtali (Joshua 19:32-38). In order to delineate more accurately Hazor’s and Naphtali’s western border we would like to suggest that the city of Rimmon, which is mentioned in the border description of Zebulun, Naphtali’s western neighbour, is a slightly corrupted form of Biblical Maron (due to a methathesis of the letters). The city of Marom/Maron should be identified with the rocky, high mound of Tell Qarnei Hittin, located east of the Beth-netophah valley, on the main road connecting the Jordan valley with the Jezreel and Acco plains, where Late Bronze Age II and Iron Age II fortifications and settlements were uncovered in an excavation probe.⁸ Canaanite Marom/Maron was a small independent city situated in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries on the border between the kingdoms of Hazor and Shim’on. In the system of the tribal boundaries it marked the borderline between Naphtali and Zebulun.

5 Alt, “Die Landnahme,” pp. 121-125.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 124; *idem.*, “Erwägungen über die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina”, in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Münich, 1953), I, pp. 127-129.

7 For a detailed discussion of the borders of the kingdom of Gezer and their relation to the scope of the inheritance of Dan, see Na’aman, “Political Disposition,” pp. 78-87.

8 Z. Gal, “Terl Rekhesh and Tel Qarnei Hittin,” *Eretz Israel* 15 (1981), pp. 215-221 (in Hebrew); for the identification of the site, see Na’aman, “A New Look at the List of Levitic Cities,” *Zion* 47 (1982), p. 247 (in Hebrew).

In the plain of Jezreel, the Kishon river marked the border between the kingdoms situated at the foot of Mount Carmel on the western side (Taanach, Megiddo and Jokneam) and those located to its east (Shim'on and possibly Anaharath). The Kishon river was likewise the boundary between the inheritance of Manasseh in the west and the tribal territories of Issachar and Zebulun in the east. The former's border was demarcated by a list of cities — including Megiddo and Taanach — and their daughter villages (Joshua 17:11; see Judges 1:27). These territorial units correspond well to the array of Canaanite city-states situated in the western Jezreel plain. The city of Jokneam is conspicuously absent from the list of Manasseh's towns, though it certainly belonged to its inheritance (see Joshua 19:11). One may suggest that Jokneam was a small independent city-state located on the border between the kingdoms of Megiddo and Shim'on, being ignored in the description of Manasseh's allotment since it was not considered as a city which had "daughter villages."

According to this territorial reconstruction, the kingdom of Shim'on, whose capital was located at Tel Shimron (Khirbet Sammūniyeh), bordered the independent cities of Marom/Maron and Jokneam on its northeastern and southwestern borders. In the south it dominated the plain of Jezreel along the Nazareth hills and in the north it commanded the Lower Galilee hill country bordering on the non-inhabited areas of Upper Galilee. Its area thus more or less corresponded to the territory of Zebulun's inheritance, which encompassed the Nazareth hills and the surrounding plains (including the Beth-netophah valley) between "the brook which is east of Jokneam" (Joshua 19:11) on the southwestern side and Maron (Rimmon) on the northeastern side.

Finally, we may note that the inheritance of Issachar — between the Kishon river and the Jordan valley and between Mount Tabor and the plain of Beth-shean — may well correspond to the territory of the kingdom of Anaharath, whose capital was located at Tel Rekhesh (Tell el-Mukharkhash).

The similarity of so many Late Bronze Age kingdoms to Biblical tribal allotments or parts of them, which were delineated and registered only in the tenth century B.C.E.,⁹ should now be investigated. In order to explain it, we may first of all cite what was written by Alt in his pioneering article,

9 W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1942), pp. 123-124; Z. Kallai, *The Tribes of Israel: A Study in the Historical Geography of the Bible* (Jerusalem 1967; in Hebrew); *idem.*, "The United Monarchy of Israel — A Focal Point in Israelite Historiography," *IEJ* 27 (1977), pp. 103-109.

“The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine”: “Throughout history territorial divisions, ultimately dependent on the lie of the land, are extremely persistent; even changes of population hardly ever overthrow them completely but bring about at most, minor alterations. In studying their development, then, it is always best to cover as long a period as possible... by looking outside any period where the source material is deficient.”¹⁰ It goes without saying that the territorial division of the city-state system is deeply entrenched in the lay of the Land of Canaan. Moreover, many city-states continued to exist from the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries and up till the end of the Late Bronze Age, both their external borders and inner cohesion persisting along the same lines for hundreds of years. Several Canaanite entities, under this or other political form, continued even until Iron Age I. The territorial units in the plains of Acco, Jezreel and Beth-shean may have survived with only minor changes until the tenth century and were therefore included as enclaves within the tribal borders. Most of the kingdom of Gezer remained outside the confines of the Israelite settlement, thus maintaining its distinct “Canaanite” character in Iron Age I. It was probably dominated by the Philistine kingdom of Ekron, and when conquered and annexed to the Judean kingdom by David, it was organized as a separate administrative district along its traditional borders (1 Kings 4:9). In the system of tribal boundaries it was assigned to the tribe of Dan, whose families had settled on the eastern fringes of the allotment.

Parts of the kingdom of Anaharath likewise remained outside the confines of the Israelite settlement until the tenth century. The Israelites occupied the basalt heights of Ramoth Issachar and the valleys only in the time of the United Monarchy; the list of cities of Issachar (Joshua 19:18-21) should be dated to this time.¹¹ In Iron Age I Issachar settled, together with Manasseh, in the northern Samarian hills,¹² but in the tenth

10 Alt, “Die Landnahme,” p. 90. The passage was cited from the English translation of the article, “The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine,” *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford, 1966), p. 136.

11 Z. Gal, *Ramat Issachar: Ancient Settlements in a Peripheral Region* (Tel Aviv, 1980), pp. 85-98 (in Hebrew); *idem.*, “The Settlement of Issachar: Some New Observations,” *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982), pp. 79-86.

12 Gal, *ibid.*, pp. 82-83; Y. Kutscher, “Where did the Tribe of Issachar Live?” *Tarbiz* 11 (1940), pp. 17-22 (in Hebrew); W. Herrmann, “Issakar,” *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 37 (1963), pp. 21-26; Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (London and Philadelphia, 1967), p. 233; T. Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel*, *BZAW* 142 (Berlin, 1977), pp. 174-175.

century some of his clans apparently moved to the eastern Jezreel valley and Lower Galilee. The author of the system of tribal boundaries assigned the territory of the kingdom of Anaharath to Issachar, whose families had only recently settled in parts of it.

In the light of these examples, it is important to emphasize that there is a profound difference between the reconstructed network of Canaanite entities and the system of tribal boundaries as described in the book of Joshua. The first set of borders represents the actual delineation of historical units functioning politically for hundreds of years. In the demarcation of their borders, we have taken into account certain territorial gaps between the borders of neighbouring kingdoms that were created by natural topography, environmental conditions and historical events, which resulted in a lack of inhabited settlements in these areas. The system of tribal borders, on the other hand, is a work of historiographic character, recorded as part of the description of the conquest and settlement in the book of Joshua and served as a kind of legitimation for the Israelite hold on their newly conquered territories. It divided the entire Israelite kingdom into tribal allotments with no gaps whatsoever, lumping together authentic tribal areas with artificial non-tribal regions according to a well-planned scheme of its author. The attachment of both the former Canaanite city-states in the Jezreel and Beth-shean plains and the coastal Sharon to the inheritance of Manasseh, the assignment of the territory of the kingdom of Gezer to the Danite families situated on the eastern fringes of the inheritance, or the apportionment of the areas of the kingdom of Anaharath to the recently settled clans of Issachar — these are three examples illustrating the logic according to which the system of tribal borders was conceived. It is clear that the boundary delineations are quite different from the real tribal borders both in their scope and their internal divisions. One may therefore ask, what is the tribal reality behind the designations “Naphtali” and “Zebulun,” whose inheritances correspond well with the Canaanite kingdoms of Hazor and Shim'on. It would be better to assume that the boundaries of the former Canaanite kingdoms — such as Jerusalem, Gezer, Taanach, Megiddo, Anaharath, Shim'on and Hazor — which were deeply entrenched in the political and territorial reality of hundreds of years, persisted even after the destruction of the Canaanite kingdoms. They were designated by the compiler of the boundary lists by the names of Israelite tribal elements who dwelt in certain parts of their confines. The only exception seems to be the tribes of the House of Joseph (Manasseh, Ephraim and Benjamin), who settled throughout the kingdoms of Shechem and Jerusalem, the long-

established borders of these political units being their real tribal boundaries. It is therefore important to emphasize how different the tribal borders of Joshua 13-19 are for the real disposition of the Israelite tribes at that time. This marked difference is, in my opinion, the key to understanding several well known contradictions that exist between the system of tribal boundaries and other Biblical sources.

Summing up, it is suggested that the border descriptions of the Israelite tribes may be employed — side by side with the Amarna tablets — as important sources for the reconstruction and delineation of the array of Canaanite city-states in the Late Bronze Age.¹³

13 For an expanded Hebrew version, see N. Na'aman, "The Canaanite City-States in the Late Bronze Age and the Inheritances of the Israelite Tribes," *Tarbiz* 55 (1986), pp. 463-488. For further investigation of several problems raised in this paper, see idem., *Borders and Districts in Biblical Historiography: Seven Studies in Biblical Geographical Lists* (Jerusalem 1986).