Daily Life, Materiality, and Complexity in Early Urban Communities of the Southern Levant

Papers in Honor of Walter E. Rast and R. Thomas Schaub

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Life In the City:
Tel Bet Yerah in the Early Bronze Age

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The concepts of heterarchy and corporate village have lately been employed to strip Early Bronze Age (EBA) walled sites of their long-standing status as towns. This is most succinctly stated by Chesson and Philip (2003:12), who prefer to identify walled EBA sites as being situated at “the more complex end of a continuum of village sites.” The conceptual framework for these approaches, not unlike the earlier “heartland of villages” approach introduced by Falconer (1987), was largely developed in New World studies (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996; Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995), and the evidentiary basis constructed to a considerable degree on evidence from sites at the periphery of the Levantine urban phenomenon or such as have produced limited exposures of EBA remains. Considerable impetus for these ideas has been provided by the Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub’s exemplary publications on the mortuary and domestic assemblages at Bab edh-Dhra, but that is owed more to the scope and quality of these publications than to Bab edh-Dhra being a “classic” EBA site (for one thing, as Ilan [2004] has recently pointed out, no site approaches Bab edh-Dhra in the quality, diversity, and quantity of its mortuary remains). For a more rigorous examination of these ideas, it seems best to take on an extensively excavated site from the “urban heartland” of the Southern Levant. Few sites can better be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the argument for urbanism than Tel Bet Yerah.

Tel Bet Yerah (Khirbet el-Karak) is probably the most intensively excavated EBA site in Israel, Arad excepted. Ten major expeditions and many minor ones have excavated an aggregate area of as many as 10,000 sq meters, revealing a continuous sequence spanning all known phases of the EBA (Greenberg et al. 2006). However, the sad state of publications on the site prevented it from occupying the position it deserved in EBA studies. The recent reinvestigation of Tel Bet Yerah has brought to light a wealth of new data encompassing most aspects of EBA culture: architecture and planning, fortification, material culture, ecology, and even some mortuary remains. The lengthy occupation sequence begins with scattered village settlement in EB IA and ends after the collapse of the EBA town, in what may be termed “final EB III.” This means that settlement at Tel Bet Yerah was endowed with the permanence lacking at many sites, including those most often recruited to exemplify EBA urbanism (Greenberg 2003). The architectural remains from Tel Bet Yerah offer powerful testimony to the existence of a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu), that is, a structure that exists not only as a formal constraint but also as a generative principle of social practice. This operates internally, in the manner in which houses and streets channel interaction within and between families and individuals, and externally, in the manner in which the built environment signals to those living within it or passing

1. It may be of interest to note that Feinman (2000) defines the corporate–network continuum as orthogonal to societal complexity. Thus, evidence for corporate/heterarchical power strategies does not necessarily contradict the definition of a settlement as urban.

2. Undertaken by the author with the aid of grants from the White-Levy Publication Program and the Israel Science Foundation (Grant no. 821).
through it, providing all members of society with a common set of reference points. Geographers have shown how, over time, cultural rules governing the development of the built environment reinforce spatial constraints, favoring certain types of societal interactions over others (Hillier and Hanson 1984; Portugali 1996). Concomitantly, the built environment incorporates external representations of ideas central to the way a society perceives itself. These external representations employ form, size, plan, decoration, etc. as constant reminders of social values and categories, making their very use an ongoing affirmation of the ideas that engendered them.

This contribution focuses on a very limited number of aspects of the walled town at Tel Bet Yerah that seem best to illustrate different faces of urban life and the ways that the daily time-space routines of people living at Tel Bet Yerah might have been affected by the very structure of the town. Addressing mainly the EB II strata (with some input from EB III), these aspects will be presented alternately from an anthropologist’s birds-eye view, and as they might have appeared to a contemporary visitor.

The Layout of the Town

With the Jordan River running to its west, the original mound of Tel Bet Yerah was a tongue-shaped peninsula bordered by the river and the sea (figs. 1, 2). It had been long inhabited by the end of EB I, and it is not unlikely that its prosperous inhabitants constructed some rudimentary fortification across the edge of their peninsula (Greenberg and Y. Paz 2005). But in EB II a significant change took place, and walls, streets, and houses became integrated into an urban whole.

We begin our itinerary at the southeast gate (fig. 3), excavated by P. Bar-Adon (1953). This would have presumably been one of a number of gates allowing access through the thick mud-brick fortifications protecting the southern flank of the mound. The fortifications were a massive affair, compris-
at a conservative estimate—some 16,000 cubic meters of mud brick. Some of this mud brick would have been obtained by quarrying along the base of the mound, leading to the enhancement of the effect created by the fortifications. The actual appearance of the walls—the state of their maintenance—would also have been an important component of the “punch” carried by the fortification system. A high level of repair would serve as an accurate measure of the potency of the governing body—corporate or otherwise; obvious disrepair could well signal an internal crisis.

The gate appears to be a direct-entry gate, communicating with the interior of the city via a broad paved street. At least two distinct phases were observed in the gate, both of which are dated to EB II. The continuation of the pavement a few meters south of the line of the fortification wall indicates that there might have been an external gate structure, not preserved. Although no gate-towers were found,
it is possible that the top of the broad fortification wall served as foundation for flanking towers, rising perhaps to a height nearly equivalent to their breadth (7–8 m).

At the gate, a small shrine located at the right doorpost served as a reminder that the threshold was not to be crossed casually. The shrine consisted of a large pierced stela, fronted by three flat-topped basalt blocks, presumably serving as offering tables. It might have been dedicated to a local patron deity, similar to those whose symbols appear on roughly contemporary seals from Mesopotamia and on the Libyan (Cities) palette from Egypt (Postgate 1994:33), thus implying the crystallization of a sense of identity for the enclosed settlement. Alternately, it might have served as a less specific apotropaic device. Favoring the former possibility is the curious concentration of similar stelae—clearly intended to represent anchors—in and around Tel Bet Yerah (Vinogradov 1993; 1998). Far too large to have seen actual use on boats, the pierced stones nonetheless must have been associated with seafaring, testifying to an intimate relationship between Bet Yerah and Lake Kinneret.

The artist’s reconstruction in fig. 4 interprets EB II elements found in the gate area and adds an imagined superstructure. It is intended to convey a sense of the possible visual effect of the approach to the gate—vital for an appreciation of the cognitive impact of the transition to an urban environment.

3. The liminal aspect of gates, recently considered in detail by Blomquist (1999), emerges from the more general issue of boundaries and thresholds, introduced by Douglas (1966) and since discussed at length by anthropologists (for an overview of architectural issues, see Parker Pearson and Richards 1994: 24–9).
This effect was carried over to the interior of the town. Our imaginary visitor, after having paid due obeisance at the gate, would have followed the well-paved street due north for about thirty paces before reaching an intersection with an equally well-paved E–W street (see fig. 3). These relatively wide streets (2–2.5 m) appear to have formed a grid, since elements of at least ten paved streets have been found in different parts of the mound in EB II and III contexts, all of them oriented N–S/E–W. Furthermore, even minor alleys were oriented similarly, as were the domestic units themselves. Between the streets and alleys, the residential areas formed, at least in the southern part of the town, a dense agglomeration of houses and enclosed courtyards. Not all parts of the mound were equally crowded, however. A number of excavation areas reveal possible unoccupied or sparsely occupied zones in the southwestern and central parts of the mound. To the north, at the highest point of the town—where settlement at Tel Bet Yerah began in the EB IA—we might expect the public buildings to have been located. Evidence for these is presently hidden beneath the later EB III structures—the Circles Building (Granary) and adjacent public structures for which tantalizing hints were found in excavations of

Figure 4. Artist’s rendering of the EB II gate. Note small shrine at right gatepost. Towers are conjectural. Drawing by Dov Porotsky.
1946 and 1953. With the town extending a thousand meters due north from the gate, about 220 meters west and perhaps 100 meters east, Bet Yerah was big enough to lose one’s way in and populous enough for variations to emerge in the development of different quarters of the town.

Fig. 5 provides a rooftop view of the densely built southeast quarter, with its orthogonal grid of streets and alleyways and presumed direct access to the lakeshore (see below). Similarly dense settlement is indicated in the area excavated by Ussishkin and Netzer in 1967. Here, the authority of a late EB III municipal planner is demonstrated in the transition between Local Strata 3 and 2 (both EB III), with a new paved E–W alleyway laid out in an arbitrary manner atop earlier domestic remains (fig. 6).

**Specialization and Differential Consumption**

Another aspect of the emergence of an urban environment at Bet Yerah is the evidence for economic specialization and, more significantly, differential access to products. Large numbers of stone fishnet weights (fig. 7) were found in EB I and II contexts, implying direct access to the lake shore perhaps before and certainly after the construction of the southern fortification wall. This could indicate the importance of fishing as an economic basis at the site. The stone-workers of Bet Yerah provided other specialists with tools of their craft: basalt spindle whorls for weavers, basalt tournettes for potters (including unfinished items: see fig. 8), and great quantities of semi-perforated and perforated cobbles whose function eludes us.

The most graphic indication of specialization comes, however, from a potter’s establishment located about two blocks away from the gate. Here, in Area EY—a 250 sq m area excavated by Eisenberg and Yogev in the 1980s—no fewer than 14 tournette elements representing at least 10 different tournettes dating to EB II and III were found. In one of the phases of EB II, in a pit at the very southern edge of the excavation, Yogev discovered a group of unbaked clay artifacts including scraps of coils, figurine fragments, strange ad-hoc artifacts, and some unbaked bowl fragments of a recognizable type (fig. 9). In this
same area, the excavators found a number of Canaanite flint blades bearing a wear pattern identified by Christine Lemorini (personal communication) as consistent with the working of leather-hard clay.

Petrographic examination has established that the pottery manufactory can with certainty be associated with an assemblage of standard-ware ceramics comprising the bulk of the pottery assemblage in the southern part of Bet Yerah in EB II and III (fig. 10). Lamp-bowls, inverted rim bowls of various sizes, spouted vats, jugs, mugs and small to medium-sized jars, all covered in a smeared red slip, characterize the “southern workshop” through several stratigraphic phases, both antedating and postdating the introduction of Khirbet Kerak ware in EB III. The impact of this manufactory, or barrio workshop, is particularly noticeable when we compare the southern assemblage to those of more northerly areas. In EB II, North Canaanite Metallic Ware—functionally overlapping all products of the southern potter—was dominant in assemblages from various north-tell locations. Thus, in Areas SA and GB near the acropolis, Area UN in the center–east, and in the various cuts made by the Chicago expedition, Metallic Ware accounts for well over 50% of the diagnostics. Standard-ware pots are relatively infrequent. In Area EY, however, near the south edge of the site, NCMW never exceeds the 25% mark and
is overshadowed by the products of our barrio potter. Keeping in mind that NCMW was imported in great quantities to Bet Yerah, as it was to as many as 150 sites in northern Canaan (including sites well south of Bet Yerah; Greenberg and Forat 1996) and was far superior in quality to the standard local ware, the different preferences of consumers within the site takes on added significance. The southern potter was actively resisting the dominance of NCMW—a dominance that virtually did away with local ceramic traditions in most regions of northern Canaan—with the support of the local community, who preferred his/her products to those circulated in the northern part of the mound. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the “upper town” shunned the southern potter, whose existence would never have been suspected on the basis of evidence from the northern part of the mound. The differential distribution of standard-ware ceramics in EB II foreshadows a similar EB III phenomenon—the uneven distribution of Khirbet Kerak Ware in the early phases of its arrival at Tel Bet Yerah (more on this below). Developed specialization and differential patterns of consumption are consistent with a heterogeneous makeup of the population.

**Demographic Patterns**

At approximately 30 hectares, of which perhaps half were closely built-up, the population of Bet Yerah numbered four to five thousand souls. This number is well above the upper threshold tradition-
ally ascribed to villages and must have been composed of a considerable number of lineages or “houses,” in the sense proposed by Chesson (2003), forming horizontal divisions within the community. The presence of the “barrio potter” noted above can help provide a sense of what these horizontal divisions might have signified.

In its original New World setting, barrio can mean both village and neighborhood, quarter, or city ward. “Barrio” therefore conveys the sense of the neighborhood as a village within the city. Esse (1991:150–52) has shown that the EB I countryside in the regions to the south and west of Tel Bet Yerah was composed of numerous villages. By EB II, many of these had disappeared, their populations apparently absorbed by the larger sites. Large agglomerations such as Bet Yerah would therefore have been composed of smaller units representing a specific village or village cluster, and people within these wards would have maintained kinship ties and probably some form of group identity based on their place of origin. The southeast gate, through which our visitor entered, might thus have been associated with the inhabitants of the southeast quarter—their region of origin or their chief occupations (Valley Gate, Potters’ Gate, or Fishers’ Gate). The streets of this quarter would have had a character of their own, easily discernible from that of the other quarters. The presence of such heterogeneity is not in itself a strictly urban characteristic, but alongside the other elements of disparity within the social fabric, it strengthens the case for a more complex and integrative entity than that usually associated with village life.

In late EB II, local abandonments within the city testify to some sort of crisis and to a loosening of the neighborhood network. The vacuum—the interstices between the existing households—was soon filled by a new element, the bearers of Khirbet Kerak Ware and its associated cultural package. While the full argument concerning Khirbet Kerak Ware distribution is presented elsewhere (Greenberg

Figure 8. Tournettes from Area EY, one pair well-worn (left), the other unfinished (photo by P. Shrago).
2007; Iserlis 2009; Paz 2009), the picture emerging from the study of domestic quarters in Area UN in the center of the mound, and in Areas BS and EY in its south is of an uneven distribution of Khirbet Kerak Ware in the earliest part of EB III. It is found chiefly in open areas, in structures abandoned in late EB II and in specific houses. Other, coeval, houses exhibit an obvious aversion to this ware. The rules governing the distribution of Khirbet Kerak Ware have, at this point, a strong segregative component. Gradually, over the five or six phases of EB III observed in various parts of the mound, Khirbet Kerak Ware becomes more evenly distributed. It becomes an integrative element. The overall picture is therefore of a relatively open or plural society, able to absorb new populations and brook contradictions while maintaining its organic integrity.

Conclusions

Our virtual tour through the site of Bet Yerah has introduced us to a number of salient features. The repeated evidence of well-paved streets and the maintenance of the N–S/E–W orientation emerging
from the baseline formed by the monumental southern fortification are testimony of the presence of a potent ordering principle, or architectural template, of considerable spatial and temporal extent. They also indicate the existence of some kind of municipal authority able to maintain public structures and impose formal spatial constraints on preexisting networks of interaction. The streets, buildings and fortification served as external representations of the ordering principle and thus were both its products and its producers, reinforcing it through practice of daily routines that made it necessary and self-evident.

The sheer size of the settlement—1000 meters in length by well over 300 meters in width in its southern half—and its population of thousands put it well beyond the face-to-face threshold (Mann 1986:43–44; Dunbar 1992), allowing for the emergence of cultural, and perhaps ethnic, variation between different parts, or quarters, within the settlement. Specializations testify to an integrative economy and there are hints for segregation between northern and southern quarters suggesting horizontal and possibly vertical subdivisions in society. Despite its heterogeneity, the identity of the town was maintained, apparently without interruption, for the greater part of the 3rd millennium, indicating the existence of a viable ideological template able to contain the contradictions that accompanied the development of what must be characterized as an urban society. This characterization is not merely semantic: The definition of sites as “urban” has important implications for the study of the external interactions of south Levantine settlement. An understanding of the late-fourth- to early-second-millennium sequence as one of urbanization, collapse, and re-urbanization implies a connection with events in the Syro-Mesopotamian sphere, beginning with Uruk or North Mesopotamian urbanization, through mid-third millennium urban resurgence in Syria, late-third-millennium crisis and early-second-millennium regeneration. The “village continuum” view allows for consideration of the southern Levant almost as a closed system (Philp 2001: 217). It establishes a relatively narrow bandwidth for oscillations in social organization and ultimately rests on assumptions concerning the constraints imposed by the environment on political development (Marfoe 1979; Joffe 1993). It therefore views “urban collapse”
and “urban regeneration” as perhaps overstated descriptions of fluctuations or variations in the self-organization of village societies (Philip 2001: 168).

Granted that Tel Bet Yerah is urban, can it be considered representative of the southern Levant as a whole? The answer must be an equivocal yes and no: Yes—because we have good reason to believe that there were other similarly structured entities, perhaps not as large but containing most of the elements found at Bet Yerah, albeit in different proportions. These similarly structured entities might include EB III Tel Yarmut, with its sophisticated fortifications and gateway, its intricately planned palace, and what must have been an attached ceramic industry (Miroschedji 1999), EB II–III ‘Ai, with its acropolis, massive fortifications, and developed external relations (Callaway 1975), and other sites of that ilk. No—because care must be taken with typological generalizations, and each site has to be sized up on its own merits. But even as things stand, a distinction has to be made between walled villages like Tel Qashish (1.5 ha.) and a place such as Bet Yerah, the 20+ hectare site of Dan, or the palatial site of Yarmuth, with its overwhelming evidence for royally sponsored construction. People lived differently at the large sites. Their lives were structured by their built environment and by a set of social relations different to that of the village. In this sense, Tel Bet Yerah and other sites of its stature were indeed already urban.

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