

STRATEGIC LOCATION AND NATURAL SURROUNDINGS

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The ancient tell of Ramat Raḥel is located on a prominent peak 818 meters above sea level, midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Fig. 1.1). It is one of the highest mounds in the Jerusalem hinterland and is part of a range that sits to the east of the Repha'im Valley (Fig. 1.2).

The southern, western and northwestern slopes of the tell are relatively steep and difficult to climb while the gradients of the eastern and southeastern inclines are much more moderate. The tell is primarily composed of soft Senonian chalk of the Menuha Formation coated by hard Nari rock, and has areas containing chert exposures of the Mishash Formation. Throughout the site's history the exposed local Nari rock was the primary raw material used for construction, a fact manifested by the many quarries found there.

Unlike ancient Jerusalem, which was erected on a hill relatively lower than its surroundings and far from the main road, Ramat Raḥel was established on one of the most visible and prominent peaks south of Jerusalem (Figs. 1.2–1.3). The location offers excellent views to the north (Mount Zion and modern-day west Jerusalem), to the west (the Repha'im Valley) and to the south (Mount Giloh and Bethlehem). It controls two of the main roads that connect Jerusalem to other parts of the country: the "King's Road," which leads north to Jerusalem from Beer-sheba, Hebron and Bethlehem; and the road that leads west in the direction of Beth-shemesh and passes through the Repha'im Valley. An additional parallel road east of the "King's Road" is marked on PEF survey maps. This road begins 2 km north of Ramat Raḥel and encircles the hill from the east. We assume that this easterly road actually preserves the ancient path people used on their travels here.

Ramat Raḥel's only strategic weakness historically was its lack of control of the Judean Desert outskirts to the east. It should thus come as no surprise that a small Iron Age fort was found and excavated ca. 2 km east of the site, which in ancient times served as a defensive outpost of the main center (see Eisenberg and De Groot 2006).

Ramat Raḥel's strategic importance was manifested in modern times during the 1948 War of Independence, when it served as the fledgling IDF's forward post in the area, protecting Jerusalem against the Egyptian army advancing from the south.

Ramat Raḥel also benefits from its proximity to the fertile Repha'im Valley, with its rich alluvium soil and moderately terraced slopes. Historically one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the Jerusalem landscape, this broad valley was vital to the city's economy. The growing archaeological data from Ramat Raḥel itself is underscored by the many agricultural installations and small farmsteads found in the region. The data confirms that the periods during which the Repha'im Valley flourished agriculturally are those same periods that saw significant construction and occupation at Ramat Raḥel (Gadot 2015).

In addition to its clear strategic advantage as an observation post, Ramat Raḥel is also a regional landmark. By broadcasting it across space, palace architecture functioned throughout history as a conspicuous landscape symbol that served to reflect the might of the political rule.

In the renewed archaeological research of Ramat Raḥel, we examined the extent of the spatial visibility of the royal edifice with its garden and tower (see Chapter 17). We found it indeed to be a

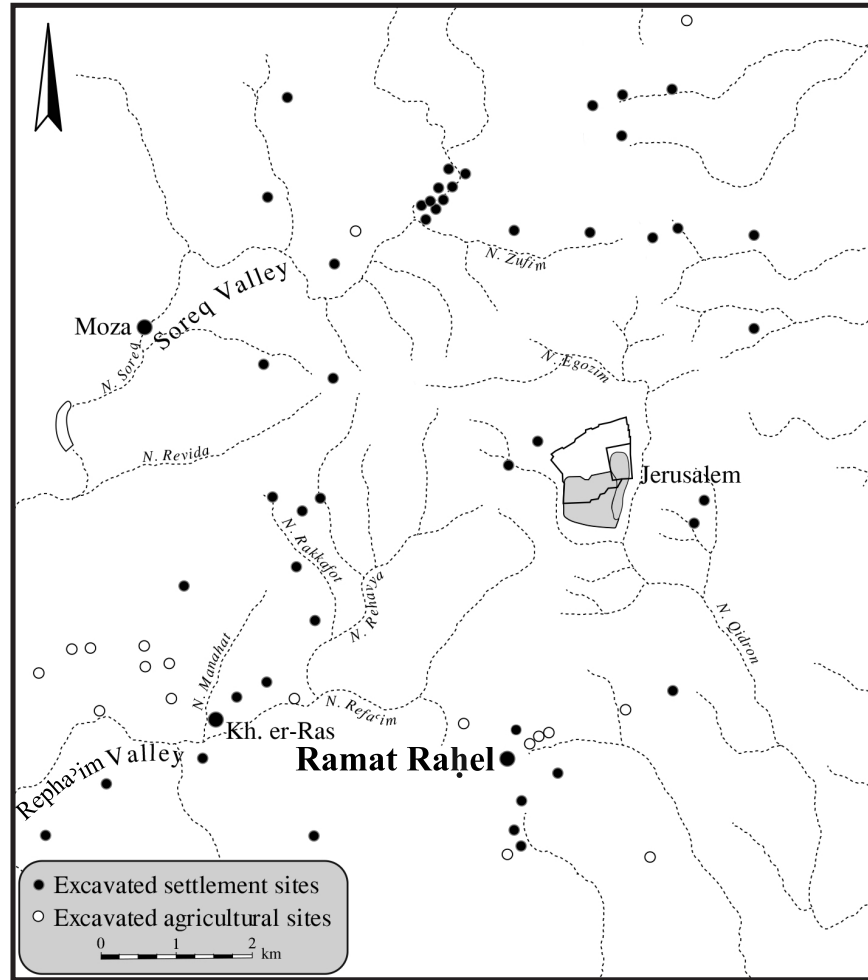


Fig. 1.1: Ramat Raḥel, Jerusalem and the location of all excavated sites dating to the Iron Age and Persian period in the surrounding hills.

projecting landmark visible across the Jerusalem landscape, especially prominent from every vantage point within the Repha'im Valley (Fig. 1.4). The royal structure is visible from the Mount Scopus mountain range in the north, from the southern outskirts of Bethlehem and even from the eastern area of Tekoa and Herodium that border the Judean Desert in the direction of the Dead Sea. It is clear that this location communicated might and control.

Despite this extraordinary level of visibility, our analysis demonstrated that Ramat Raḥel cannot be seen from the City of David ridge, regarded by most scholars as the heart of ancient Jerusalem, nor can it be seen from the Temple Mount. Visual contact between the capital city and Ramat Raḥel is blocked by the Armon Hanetziv ridge, the construction place of the British High Commissioner's Residence which is currently occupied by U.N. headquarters (UNTSO). Armon Hanetziv overlooks the City of David and the Temple Mount from the south (Fig. 1.5). To demonstrate the seemingly obvious choice of a ruling entity, in stark contrast to the ancient empires, the British Empire decided thousands of years later to build its governmental center on the Armon Hanetziv ridge, which controlled the city from the south. The location was chosen not only for its strategic military advantage, but as a clear political declaration and ongoing reminder to the denizens of the city that it was they who were in charge (the ridge and the neighborhood are still called "Armon Hanetziv," literally, the palace or mansion of the commissioner). Clearly, when choosing this hilltop instead of Ramat Raḥel, the project architects were cognizant of its commanding



Fig. 1.2: Ramat Raḥel hilltop and the southwestern neighborhoods of Jerusalem (Sky View 2013).



Fig. 1.3: Aerial photo of the site and the nearby kibbutz (courtesy of 'Survey of Israel' 2018. Prepared by Omer Ze'evi).

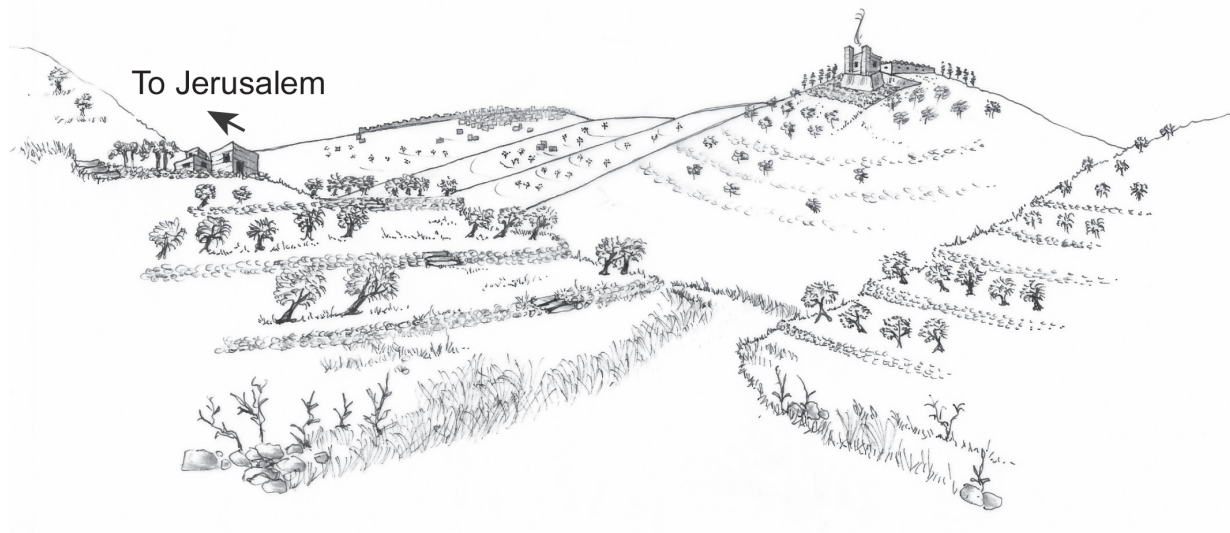


Fig. 1.4: Ramat Raḥel as viewed from the Repha'im Valley (drawing: Nirit Kedem).



Fig. 1.5: View from the City of David towards the ridge of the British High Commissioner's Residence; the site of Ramat Raḥel lies behind it further to the south.

presence in the landscape and were concerned with its spatial communication with the surrounding settlements—above all Jerusalem, which was the capital city of the Kingdom of Judah, traditional seat of the Judahite monarchs and the site of the Temple.

It is thus no coincidence that the founders of Ramat Raḥel built the edifice on a hill from which it *would not be seen* from Jerusalem. The decision to build a significant administrative site, clearly chosen for visibility, on a more southerly ridge and not with the ridge immediately to the south of Jerusalem,

carries much weight in any discussion of who originally built the site and why. We suggest therefore that the visual concealment from both the capital center and the Temple is deliberate and not mere coincidence. It should for that reason be examined and explained. It is our opinion, as expressed in many earlier publications, that the power of the foreign empire is clearly demonstrated and expressed, but wisely does not overshadow the capital, the religious center, and thus the honor of the local regime.

Along with the strategic, political and even economic advantages of Ramat Raḥel's location, it is important to emphasize the absence of a natural, significant and stable water source in the immediate environs. While domestic water cisterns were exposed throughout the site, clearly a central and more elaborate system was required for gathering and storing rain water for both royal and public buildings erected here throughout the Iron Age, the Persian period, and probably even the Hellenistic period.

REFERENCES

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