CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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The Shmunis Family Excavations at Kiriath-jearim were undertaken as a joint project of Tel Aviv University and the Collège de France, funded by Sana and Vlad Shmunis (USA). The excavations were directed by Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University and Thomas Römer and Christophe Nicolle of the Collège de France.

The Site

The site of Deir el-ʻAzar (the mound of biblical Kiriath-jearim) is located on a dominating hill above the village of Qaryat el-ʻInab (today the local council of Abu Ghosh), 13 km west-northwest of the Old City of Jerusalem (Fig. 1.1) and less than 1 km north of the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem highway. The hill (Fig. 1.2), 757 m above sea level, commands a sweeping view of large stretches of the coastal plain and the Mediterranean coast (from Jaffa to Ashkelon) in the west (Fig. 1.3), the western neighborhoods of modern Jerusalem in the east and the Judean Mountains in the southeast. The Convent of the Ark of the Covenant (occupied by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition), built in the early 20th century, is located on the summit of the hill (Figs. 1.2–1.4). The terraced slopes below the convent are planted with olive trees. Judging from the spread of pottery on these terraces, the size of the mound can be estimated at 4–4.5 hectares—one of the largest Bronze and Iron Age sites in the central highlands (approximately similar to the area of Tell Balata, the location of Shechem).

The modern construction on the summit of the hill consists of the convent's old building (constructed in 1906), its hostel (which developed gradually starting in the early years of the 20th century) and to their east, the Church of Our Lady of the Ark of the Covenant, built in 1924 over remains (including mosaic floors) of a Byzantine church and monastery (Fig. 1.5; more below). The fact that the entire property belongs to the Order of St. Joseph helped to protect the slopes on the east and north from modern construction. The road that ascends to the convent and several parking lots located on the southern slope (Fig. 1.4), make excavation here difficult. A large school compound was built on the western slope several decades ago (Fig. 1.2); in order to prepare the area for construction, the upper slope was cut several meters deep through earth accumulation and bedrock (Figs. 1.6). In a section created by a road near the buildings of the school the accumulation above the bedrock reaches about a meter or slightly more. Bedrock is exposed in several locations on the slopes of the mound (Chapter 21), while judging from the height of the terraces, in other places several meters of accumulation of remains can be expected.

Identification of Biblical Kiriath-jearim with Deir el-ʻAzar

The identification of the site with biblical Kiriath-jearim is secure, based on the following arguments:

- In the description of the border between the inheritances of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah (Josh 15:8–10, 18:14–16) Kiriath-jearim is located south of Beth-horon (Beit ʻUr et-Tahta), north (in biblical terms, in fact, northeast) of Chesalon (Kasla, grid ref. 154 132) and east of the Waters of Nephtoah (Lifta or Qaluniya [Finkelstein and Gadot 2015]; see Fig. 1.1).

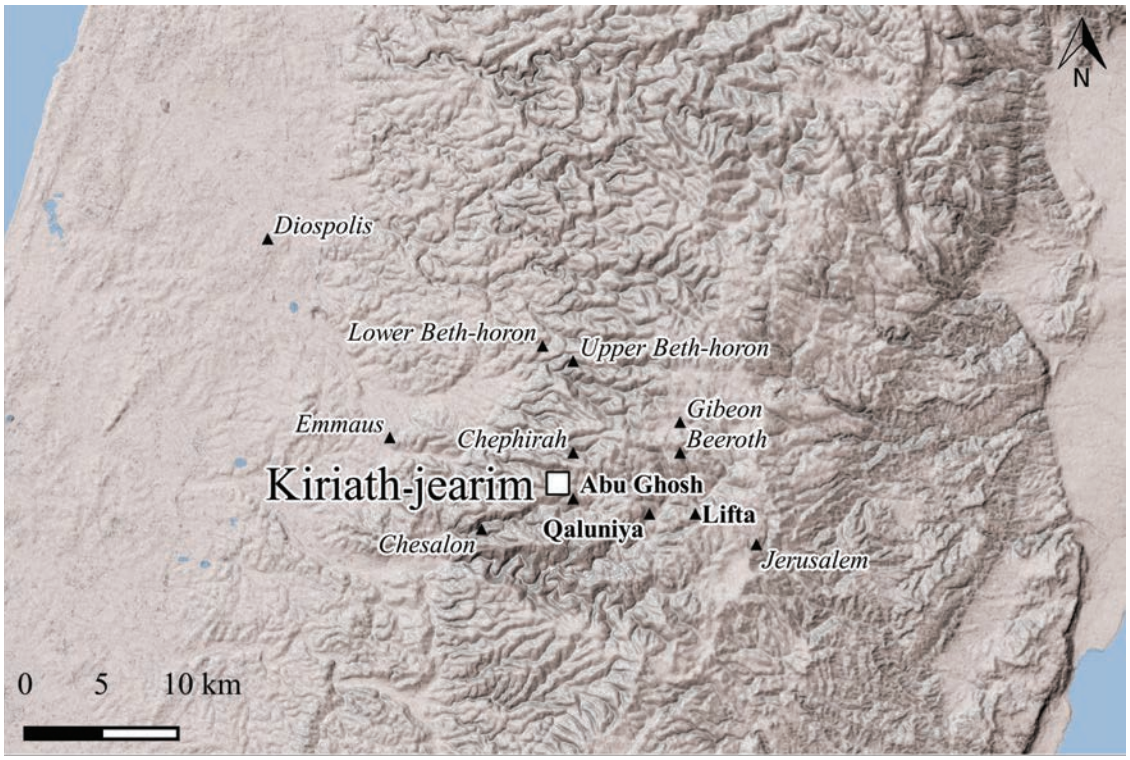

Fig. 1.1: Map showing the location of Kiriath-jearim and main sites in its vicinity

Fig. 1.2: Aerial view of the mound of Kiriath-jearim, looking south (photo by William Schlegel)

Fig. 1.3: Aerial view of the mound of Kiriath-jearim, looking west, in the direction of the coastal plain and the Mediterranean (photo by William Schlegel)

Fig. 1.4: Orthophoto of the mound of Kiriath-jearim

Fig. 1.5: The Church of Our Lady of the Ark, with a Byzantine mosaic in the south aisle

- Eusebius says that "there is a village Kiriathiareim on the way down to Diospolis, about 10 milestones from Ailia" (*Onomasticon* 48:24). In another entry he puts it "between Ailia and Diospolis, lying on the road 9 milestones from Ailia" (114:23). Note that the Roman road from Jerusalem to Lod (Diospolis) passed immediately to the south of the hill (Fischer, Isaac and Roll 1996).
- The Arabic name of the site, Deir el-ʻAzar, seems to be a corruption of "The Monastery of Eleazar," probably the name of the Byzantine monastery, which commemorated the name of the priest who was in charge of the Ark when it was kept at Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam 7:1).
- Preservation of the name Kiriath in the name of the village at the foot of the hill—Qaryat el-ʻInab (currently known as Abu Ghosh; Fig. 1.7).

Deir el-ʻAzar is the only Iron Age site in the highlands west of Jerusalem large enough to fit these descriptions (detailed discussion in McKinny *et al.* 2018).

Past Research and Settlement History

Remains of a Byzantine basilica with mosaics in geometric patterns, possibly dating to the 5th century, were explored at the site in the early 20th century (Vincent 1907: 414–421; Ovadiah 1970: 18–19; Bagatti 2002: 173–177). The church is mentioned by Peter the Deacon, who cited an earlier, anonymous source

(Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994: 100). The Byzantine mosaics can be seen in the narthex and several places inside the modern church (Fig. 1.5; for an early description of the site, see Cooke 1923–1924).

Several Latin inscriptions attest to Roman military activity here:

- An inscription found at the site, now in the church on the summit of the hill, reading "Imperator Caesar Vespasianus Augustus (and) Imperator Titus Caesar, son of Vespasianus Augustus [have erected this building] under Sextus Lucilius Bassus, governor with praetorian rank, for the cohort ..." (Fig. 1.21, right). According to Cotton *et al.* (2012: 11), the inscription "probably attests the building of a camp for a cohort either of the *Legio X Fretensis* or, more likely, for an auxiliary cohors, which was stationed at Abu Ghosh …, under the care of Sextus Lucilius Bassus, the second senatorial governor of Judaea" (see also Fischer, Isaac and Roll 1996: 119).
- An inscription of the Tenth Roman Legion found at the site, now in the church, on the summit of the hill (Fig. 1.21, left; Cotton *et al.* 2012: 26; Fischer, Isaac and Roll 1996: 119).
- An inscription of the Tenth Roman legion incorporated into the wall of the Crusader church in the village of Abu Ghosh below the site (Cotton *et al.* 2012: 25; Fischer, Isaac and Roll 1996: 119).
- A fragment of a funerary inscription of a Roman soldier found near the church of Abu Ghosh reading "Dolens [*sic*] ..., soldier of the cohort ... [is buried here]" (Cotton *et al.* 2012: 38–39).

Fig. 1.6: The long, straight, massive terrace delineating the summit of the hill on the west, looking northeast; Also note the deep cut in the accumulation and bedrock to its west, created in the 1980s, when the school on the slope was built

Fig. 1.7: Map of the Survey of Western Palestine, showing Jerusalem on the right and the hill of Deir el-ʿAzar and the village of Qaryat el-ʿInab on the upper left

Gabriel Barkay conducted a salvage excavation at the site in 1995–1996, in preparation for the construction of a new wing of the hostel, located on the western side of the convent. Bedrock was reached ca. 1–1.5 m below the surface. Remains of rock-cuttings and walls were uncovered, but clean loci could not be detected (Schwartz 2018; McKinny *et al.* 2018).[1]

Two intensive surveys were carried out at the site. The first was conducted by Amir Feldstein in the 1980s. The results of this survey, in which ca. 450 indicative sherds (rims, etc.) were collected, have never been published (the pottery is stored at the Israel Antiquities Authority). One of us (I.F.) reviewed the finds twice (with the kind permission of Amir Feldstein). The second survey of the site was carried out by Boaz Zissu and Chris McKinny in 2013 (McKinny *et al.* 2018). One of us (I.F. together with Assaf Kleiman) reviewed the finds (with the kind permission of Boaz Zissu).

Table 1.1 summarizes the pottery results of all works carried out at the site: the salvage excavation by Gabriel Barkay, surveys of Amir Feldstein and Boaz Zissu and Chris McKinny and our own excavation (general impression regarding pottery in both clean and mixed loci).

The four different field studies present similar pictures regarding the settlement history of Kiriath-jearim. The site was inhabited from the Early Bronze to the Byzantine or Early Islamic period. It shows relatively low-level activity starting in the Early Bronze and continuing throughout the Bronze Age and early phases of the Iron Age until the Iron IIA (included). The first peak prosperity at the site can be dated to the Iron IIB and strong activity continued in the Iron IIC. This was followed by a new phase of low-level habitation in the Persian period. Activity intensified in the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. Relative to the fact that the Byzantine remains are close to the surface, the quantity of pottery from this period is small, perhaps indicating that occupation was limited to the area of the monastery. Some activity seems to have taken place at the site in the Early Islamic period.

1 The pottery—mostly from mixed loci—was kindly shown to us by Oron Schwartz.

Table 1.1: Observation on quantity of pottery in previous works undertaken at the site of Kiriath-jearim and from the 2017 and 2019 excavation seasons*

Period	Barkay's salvage excavation**	Feldstein's survey, 1980s***	Zissu and McKinny's survey, 2013†	The 2017 and 2019 excavation seasons††
Early Bronze	A few sherds	Single sherd	A few sherds	Several sherds
Middle Bronze	Single sherd	—	A few sherds	A few sherds
Late Bronze	Single sherd	Two sherds	—	Small number of sherds
Iron I	Two sherds	A few sherds	A few sherds	Several sherds
Iron IIA	Single sherd	—	—	Several sherds
Iron IIB	Very large number of sherds, main period of activity	Very large number of sherds, main period of activity	Very large number of sherds, main period of activity	Large number of sherds, main period of activity
Iron IIC	Reasonable number of sherds	Significant number of sherds	Significantly present	Large number of sherds, main period of activity continues
Persian	?	One sherd	A few sherds	A few sherds
Hellenistic	Large number of sherds	Significant number of sherds	—	Significant number of sherds
Roman	Reasonable number of sherds	Significant number of sherds	Reasonable number of sherds	Large number of sherds
Byzantine	Reasonable number of sherds	Small number of sherds	A few sherds	Reasonable number of sherds
Early Islamic	?	A few sherds	Single sherd?	Small number of sherds
Medieval	?	Single sherd	—	A few sherds

* Additional finds to note: a Hebron *lmlk* handle and a handle with concentric circles among the items collected in the course of the Zissu-McKinny survey; on stamped handles found in the course of our excavations, see Chapter 14.
** Pottery seen at Tel Aviv University, 2017.
*** Pottery seen in the storehouse of the Israel Antiquities Authority in the early 1990s and then brought to Tel Aviv University and rechecked in 2017.
† Pottery seen by Israel Finkelstein and Assaf Kleiman at Bar Ilan University, 2017.
†† General impression of pottery from the excavation.

Topography

The topography of the hill was judiciously studied before fieldwork began and during the two seasons of excavation. This was done in a four-track approach, by:

a. Actual inspection of the terrain;

b. Examination of old aerial photos of the site—images taken by the Bavarian air force during WWI (1918; Fig. 1.8); during the British mandate in 1945 (Fig. 1.9); and by the Israeli air force in 1985 (Fig. 1.10, before the school to the west was constructed);

c. Creation of an orthophoto using a drone and Digital Elevation Model (Figs. 1.4, 1.11);[2]

d. Using seismic and geodetic methods aimed at reconstructing the contour of the original, bedrock topography of the hill (Chapter 21).

2 The orthophoto and the Digital Elevation Model were prepared by Adam Prins of the Megiddo Expedition and the Jezreel Valley Regional Project.

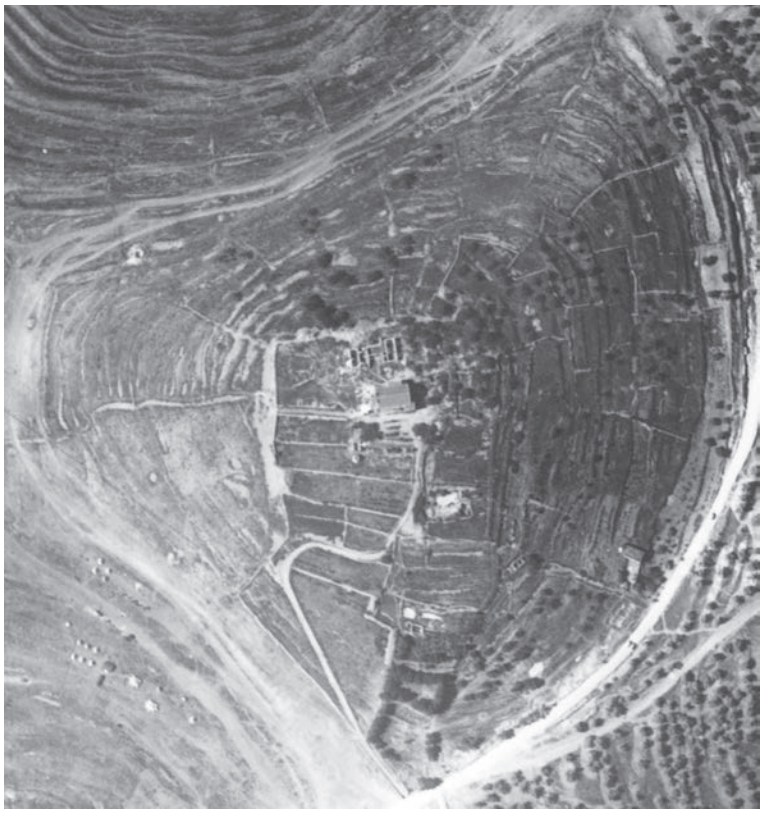

Fig. 1.8: Aerial view of the site, taken by the Bavarian air force in 1918, looking north; note the large western and eastern terraces; the modern building is the convent; to its north are the foundations of the northern sector of the hostel (the church was not built yet)

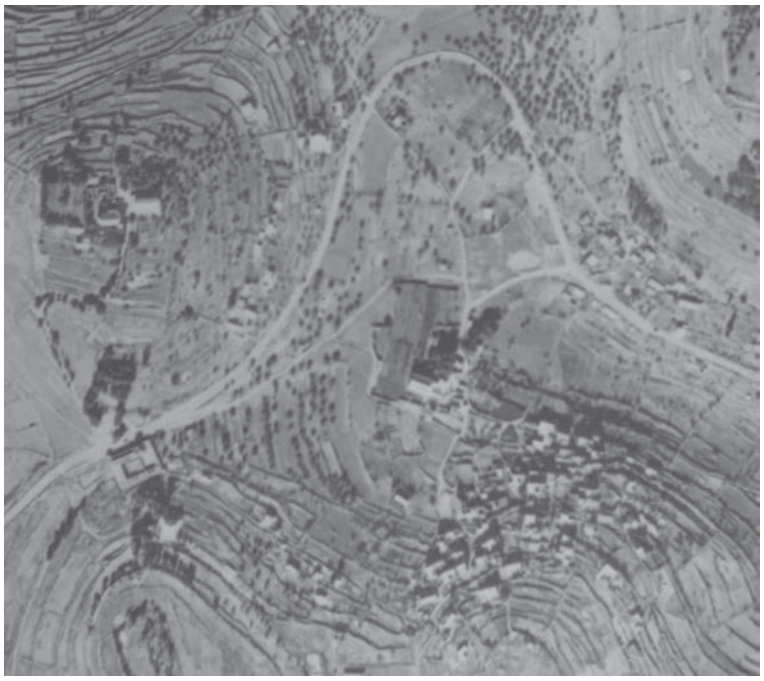

Fig. 1.9: Aerial view, taken by the RAF in 1944, looking north: the site (upper left) and the village of Abu Ghosh (lower right)

Three observations resulted from this undertaking:

1. The top of the hill is broad and flat, a reality created by support terrace-walls that were erected around it. Some of these terrace-walls are modern; for instance, those built to the north, east and south of the modern church had not yet existed in 1918 (they do not appear in the Bavarian air photos, compare Figs. 1.4 and 1.8) and hence were probably built in order to facilitate the construction of the church of the convent in 1924.
2. High and massive old terraces, running south–north and east–west, surround the summit of the hill:

   a. A ca. 100-m-long and ca. six-m-high terrace runs in a straight north–south orientation in the east; it is a prominent feature on the terrain (Fig. 1.12) and is clearly seen in the old aerial images of the site (Figs. 1.8–1.10) and in the Digital Elevation Model (Fig. 1.11).

   b. A ca. 100-m-long and ca. 10-m-high terrace runs in a straight north–south orientation in the west, parallel to the one in the east (Figs. 1.6, 1.8, 1.11; this terrace marks the western boundary of the modern convent's garden).

   c. Two straight prominent terraces can be seen in the southeast, running from east to west (Fig. 1.11). The Ground Penetrating Radar investigation revealed evidence of a massive wall under the parking lot to the south of the convent (Chapter 22), which is in line with the northern of the two.

   d. The 1918 aerial photo (Fig. 1.8) possibly reveals a straight terrace in the north, running from east to west approximately along the course of the modern terrace that supports the hostel of the convent.

The terraces in the east, west and south are prominent features in the Digital Elevation Model (Fig. 1.11). Together with the line seen in the 1918 aerial photo (Fig. 1.8) they seem to delineate a rectangular, elevated, flat platform, ca. 150 × 110 m in size, at the summit of the hill (Fig. 1.13). The view of the site from the north (Fig. 1.14) also points to this possibility, which is also hinted at by the east–west topographic section through the site (Fig. 1.15). Today, the elevation of the flat area above the terraces in the north, southeast and east is approximately the same—753.5 m (Fig. 1.16).

Fig. 1.10: Aerial view of the site, 1985, before the construction of the school on the western slope, looking south (courtesy of the Survey of Israel)

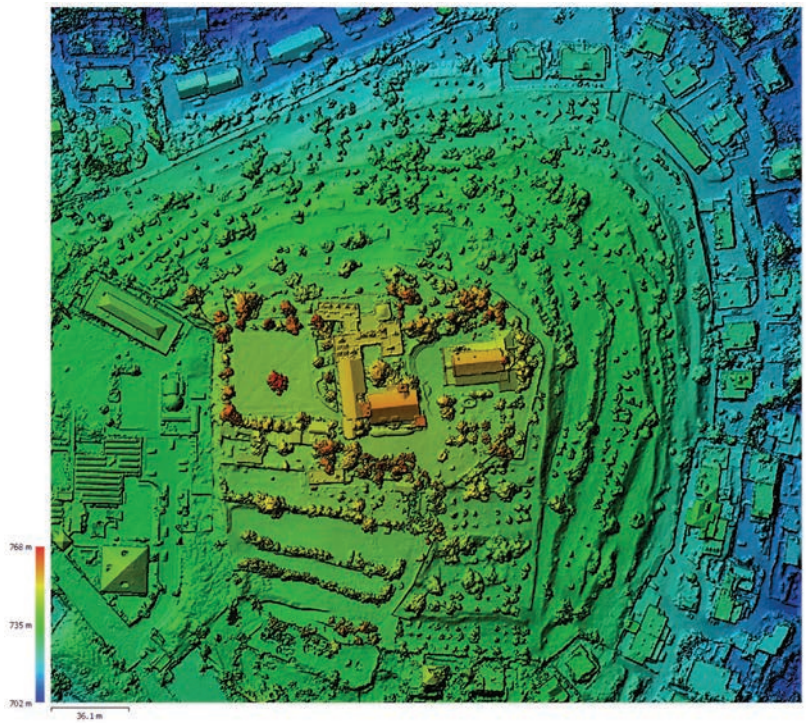

Fig. 1.11: Digital Elevation Model of the mound of Kiriath-jearim; note the straight line of the prominent terrace in the east, creating a right angle with two terraces in the southeast; also note the southern end of the western terrace

3. The seismic and geodetic investigation carried out during the 2017 season indicates the existence of major fills on the summit of the hill that reach a depth of six meters in the southwestern corner of the garden located to the west of the convent (Chapter 21).

The Shmunis Family Excavations

The first season of excavation at the site took place during four weeks in August 2017 (Fig. 1.17). Staff of the excavation consisted of Sivan Einhorn and Margaret E. Cohen (coordinators of the Expedition), Sivan Einhorn and Joelle Cohen-Finkelstein (registration), Rima Abu Seif (administrator), Assaf Kleiman, Zachary C. Dunseth and Juliette Mas (supervisors of Areas A, B and C respectively), and Yana Kirilov, Liora Bouzaglou, Eythan Levy, Erin Hall, Naama Walzer and Omer Ze'evi-Berger (field archaeologists). The second season of excavation took place during four weeks in August 2019. Staff of the excavation (Fig. 1.18) consisted of Margaret E. Cohen (coordinator of the Expedition), Sabine Kleiman and Joelle Cohen-Finkelstein (registration), Assaf Kleiman (supervisor of Area A), Zachary C. Dunseth and Naama Walzer (supervisors of Area B), Juliette Mas (supervisor of Area C), Hadar Azrad, Yana Kirilov and Eythan Levy (field archaeologists). Alona Ruban drew the plans and Yulia Gottlieb, Naama Earon and Itamar Ben-Ezra drew the pottery and other finds. Drone photos were taken by William Schlegel (2017) and Matthew J. Adams (2019). Fifty–sixty students from Israel, France, Switzerland and other countries participated in the dig in each of the two seasons. The entire excavation team was accommodated in the hostel of the convent. The dig at Kiriath-jearim was made possible thanks to the help of Prof. Jean-Louis Ska of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the friendly cooperation of the nuns and staff members of the convent. Special thanks go to Sister Johanna, Sister Valerie, Sister Frida and Sister Monika, and to Malou and her team (Fig. 1.19).

Fig. 1.12: The long, straight, massive terrace which delineates the summit of the hill on the east, looking northwest

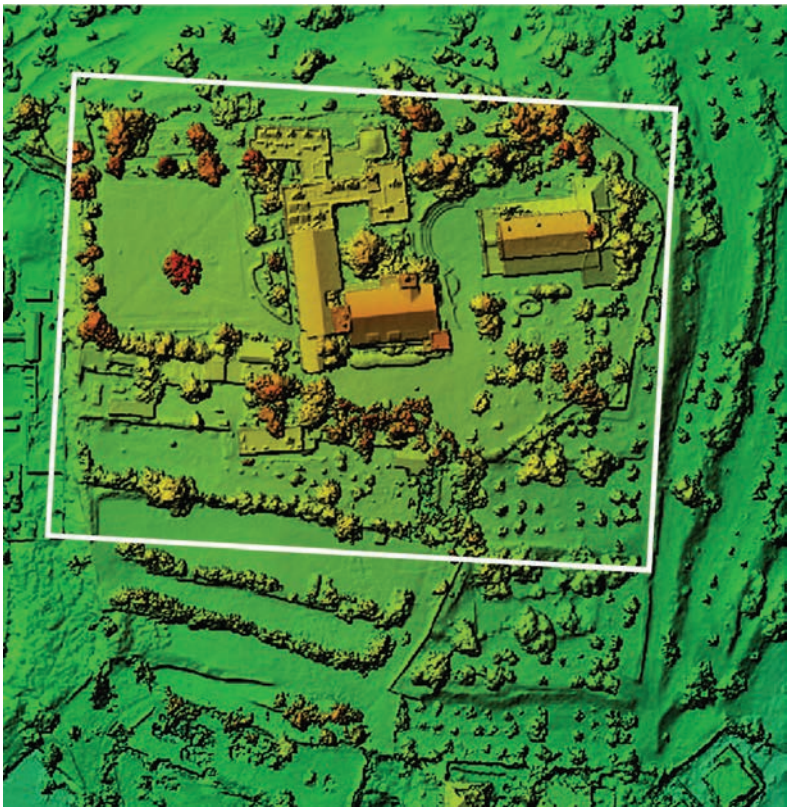

Fig. 1.13: Digital Elevation Model of the mound of Kiriath-jearim, schematically indicating the supposed support walls which created the elevated platform on the summit

Fig. 1.14: View of the site from the north; note the flat, elevated, seemingly man-shaped summit

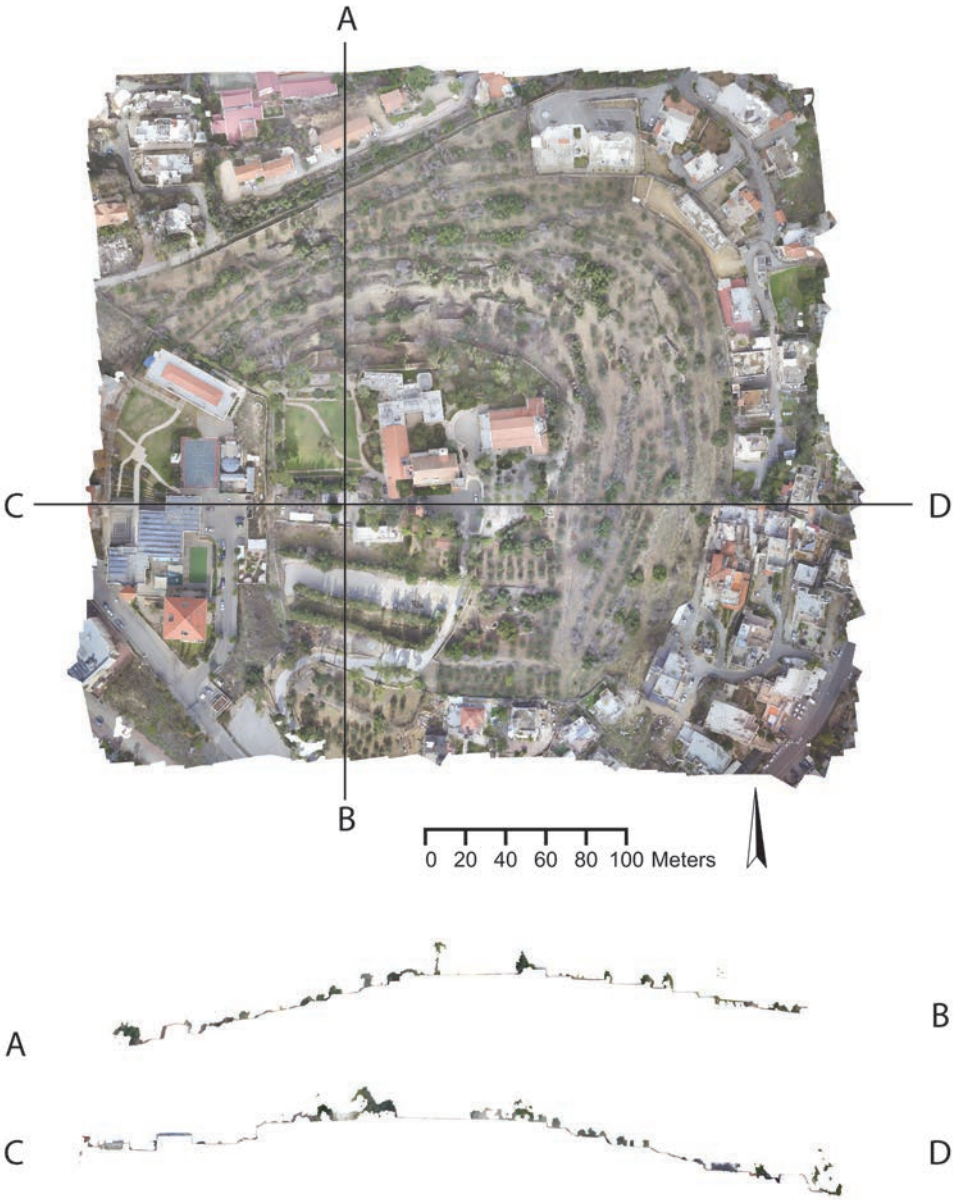

Fig. 1.15: Topographical sections through the site (courtesy of Matthew J. Adams)

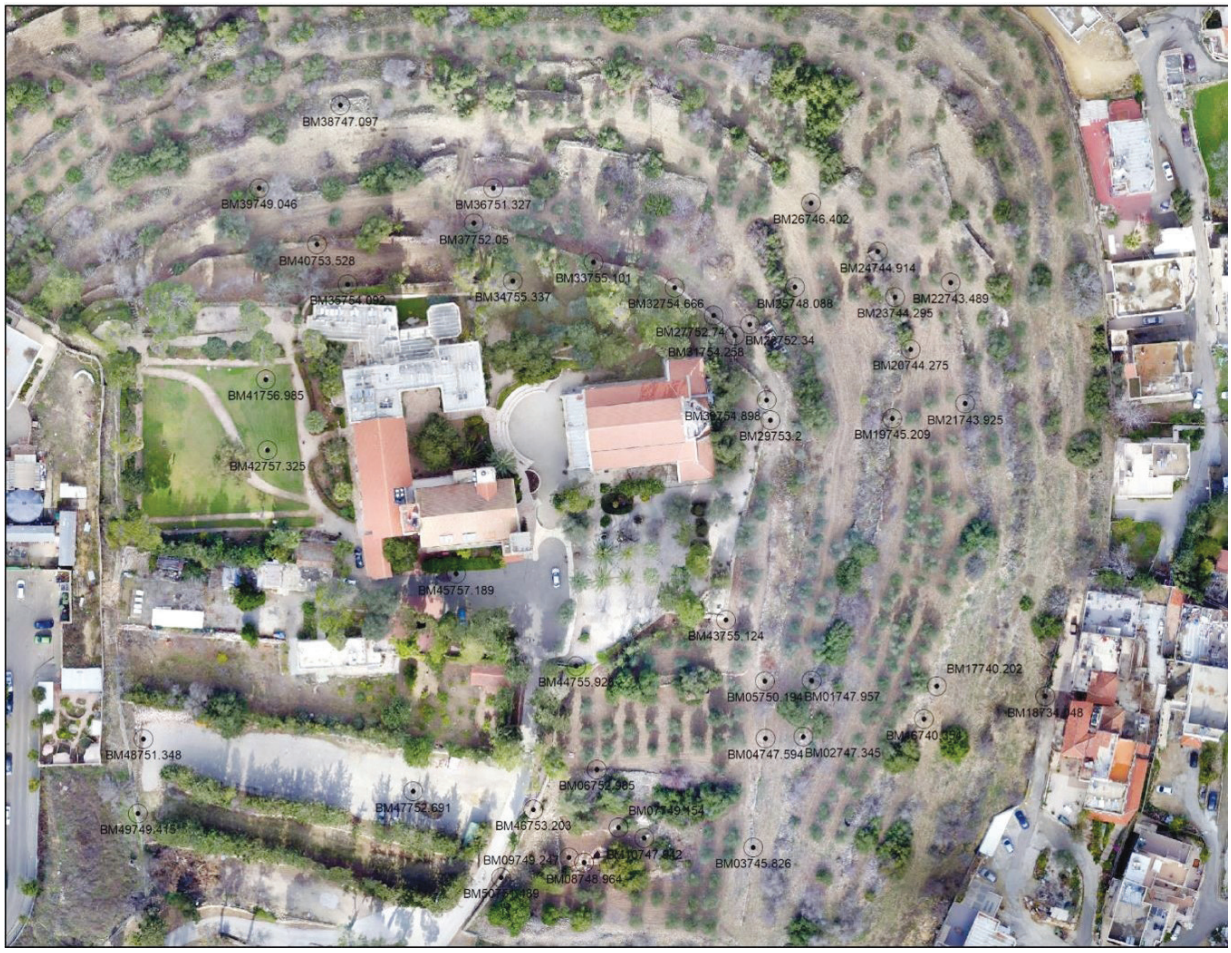

Fig. 1.16: Orthophoto of the summit, showing elevations above sea level

Two considerations dictated the selection of areas for excavation. The first was strictly archaeological. Regarding the exceptional topography features discussed above, had an elevated rectangular platform existed at the site in antiquity, it would have made a unique, monumental architectural layout. In order for there to have been a flat platform of this type there must be significant filling operations between the sloping bedrock and the walls supporting it. Hence, the walls must have been massive—stone built, thick and high, possibly with support on their outer side in order to prevent collapse.[3] It was therefore deemed essential to invest effort in checking out the possibility of a large ancient podium at the summit of Kiriath-jearim; and if indeed such a podium existed, to try dating it.

The second consideration was practical. The entire site of Kiriath-jearim is the property of the Convent of the Ark of the Covenant of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition and hence the dig at the site and the location of the areas would require the convent authority's consent. Obviously, work could not be carried out on the premises of the convent, that is, on the summit of the hill. In fact, the evidence of erosion (bedrock close to the surface in Barkay's excavation, as in most highland mounds), as well as filling operations in antiquity (revealed by the seismic-geodetic work—Chapter 21), demonstrated that even if excavation on the summit were possible, it is doubtful that it could provide significant results.

3 For Iron Age podiums in the territory of the Northern Kingdom, see Finkelstein 2000; Finkelstein and Lipschits 2010.

Fig. 1.17: Directors of the excavations, from right to left: Thomas Römer, Israel Finkelstein and Christophe Nicole

Fig. 1.18: Staff picture, 2019; front row (from right): Assaf Kleiman (with Yermi Kleiman in his hands), Christophe Nicole, Israel Finkelstein, Thomas Römer, Eythan Levy, Juliette Mas and Zachary C. Dunseth; back row (from right): Sabine Kleiman, Margaret E. Cohen, Yana Kirilov, Naama Walzer and Hadar Azrad

Fig. 1.19: The directors with the nuns of the convent and of the order of St. Joseph of the Apparition. From left to right: Sr Valerie, Margaret E. Cohen, Sr Frida, Sr Valentina, Israel Finelstein, Sr Muna, Christophe Nicolle, Sr Bishara, Thomas Römer and Sr Monica

Fig. 1.20: Areas of excavation

Fig. 1.21: Roman inscriptions found at the site

Taking into consideration the topographical features of the hill, the need to check the existence of an ancient podium and the sensitivities of the convent, three areas were chosen for excavation (Fig. 1.20):

Area A, located on two flat terraces immediately to the north of the convent, with the aim of checking out the possibility of an east–west support wall on the northern side of the summit.

Area B, on the southeastern slope, aimed at checking out the southern end of the large eastern terrace.

Area C, on a flat, broad terrace on the lower eastern slope, aimed at investigating the nature of the site beyond the supposed summit platform.

The registration method at Kiriath-jearim follows that of the Megiddo Expedition (Finkelstein, Ussishkin and Halpern 2000: 11–12). It is based on a three-tier hierarchy, from the locus through the pottery bucket (PT, considered a "find") to four categories of other finds that are related to the pottery bucket, i.e., artifact (AR), vessel (VS), laboratory item (LB) and flint item (FL). The locus number consists of three components: season, area and sequential number. For instance, 17/C/12 means the season of 2017, Area C, locus number 12. Finds are registered in the same way. Their number includes the locus number with the addition of two letters indicating the type of find (PT, AR, VS, LB or FL) and its sequential number within the locus. For instance, 17/C/12/AR3 represents artifact number 3 in Locus 17/C/12. Walls are registered in a somewhat similar way: 17/C/WL11 signifies Wall 11 in Area C, season of 2017.

The results of the excavation, described in this report, shed light on the history of Kiriath-jearim, especially in the Iron IIB–C, late Hellenistic and early Roman periods and on themes far beyond Kiriath-jearim, related to the history of Ancient Israel, Jerusalem and Judea and to biblical historiography.

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