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ON THE EDGE OF EMPIRES – LATE BRONZE AGE (1500–1200 BCE)

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Explaining culture change in Late Bronze Age Palestine

The archaeology of the Late Bronze Age society in Palestine is an exemplary case of feast and famine. On the one hand, rich archaeological data from numerous excavations and a relative abundance of contemporary documentary records; on the other, a conspicuous scarcity of material culture studies explicitly concerned with sociocultural processes and change (for standard archaeological overviews of the period's culture-history see, e.g., Albright 1960: 96–109; Kenyon 1979: 180–211; Leonard 1989; Mazar 1990: 232–94; for documentary-based historical reviews see, e.g., Na'aman 1982: 173–255; Redford 1992: 125–237). This 'state-of-the-art' clearly reflects the bias of social archaeology in Palestine towards the field of prehistory and the study of unstratified, non-urban societies, leaving the more complex societies of the Bronze and Iron Ages to be explored by traditional, historically-oriented archaeology. No wonder then that written evidence tends to dominate interpretations of sociocultural change in these 'documented' societies, and ideographic rather than generalizing explanations are preferred. Taking the archaeological study of the Late Bronze Age as an example, one can readily see that patterns in the material culture and their changes over time are usually explained by historical events, ignoring the fact that these patterns were created by a social system – Canaanite society – whose behavior and adaptation to a changing socio-political and ideological environment is by no means unique. However, a combination of nomothetic and ideographic elements – namely, cross-cultural perspectives and a scrutiny of the specific historical/archaeological context under consideration – seems most imperative for explaining cultural processes and change. Furthermore, since change occurs along a variety of time scales, the necessity of studying it within different time frameworks should be recognized. Thus, both long-term sociocultural patterns (mainly recognized in the material data) and short-term, particular and unexpected changes (usually documented in written sources) are legitimate subjects for enquiry. The breach between 'historical' and anthropological archaeology can, therefore, be bridged by a conscious dialogue between material and written evidence (Renfrew 1980; Yoffee 1982; Trigger 1984: 287–95; Adams 1984: 79–89; Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992a, 1992c; Levy and Holl, this volume).

Using both archaeological and documentary data resources in a reciprocal examination of culture change in Palestine during the Late Bronze Age (Bunimovitz 1989; see also Knapp 1992b, 1992c), two fundamental socio-political patterns emerge:

1. Sociocultural changes at the end of the Middle Bronze Age reshaped the social landscape of Palestine and had a profound, long-term impact on Canaanite society.
2. The Late Bronze Age social fabric in Palestine was continuously changing due to dialectical relations between Canaanite society and Egyptian government.

In the following discussion the main political, social and economic changes that affected Canaanite society in Palestine during the Late Bronze Age will be concisely examined, in order to illustrate how the 'why?' questions concerning these changes can be elucidated by a close study of the above recognized patterns.

The transition from Middle to Late Bronze Age

During the Middle Bronze Age hundreds of urban and rural settlements had been established all over Palestine. This highly diversified and hierarchical pattern of settlement signifies the zenith of Bronze Age settlement processes in Palestine, and faithfully reflects socio-political and economic developments within Canaanite society during the first half of the second millennium BCE (Broshi and Gophna 1986; Gophna and Portugali 1988; Dever 1987). At the end of the seventeenth century BCE and in the course of the sixteenth century BCE, however, this pattern of settlement changed profoundly, following a long line of destructions and abandonments that laid waste many sites. According to current hypotheses these destructions should be related to the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan by the first pharaohs of
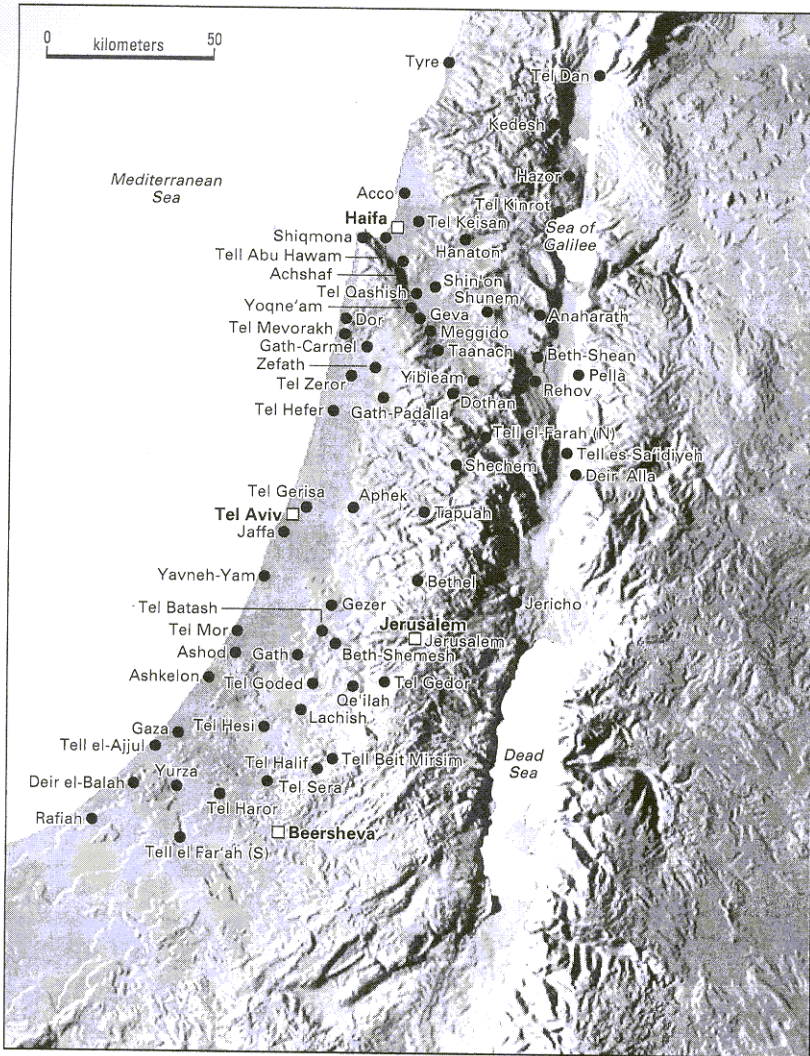
Figure 1   Settlement map of Late Bronze Age Palestine

the Eighteenth Dynasty. It has also been claimed that the geographical–chronological pattern of the destructions points to the southern and inland regions of Palestine as the principle centres of Hyksos power outside the Nile Delta (Weinstein 1981: 1–10). However, a careful examination of the transitional Middle Bronze–Late Bronze Age strata in many sites (Bunimovitz 1989: Chapter 1) reveals that destruction layers from the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries BCE were arbitrarily related to Ahmose or his successors, thus subjugating the archaeological facts to as yet vague historical data concerning Egyptian involvement in Palestine prior to Thothmes III's early fifteenth century BCE campaigns (for the current debate about the interpretation of the Egyptian texts vis-à-vis the archaeological data see Hoffmeier 1991: Dever 1990; Weinstein 1991 and bibliography there).

In fact, the destructions present no discernible pattern and the settlement crisis at the end of the Middle Bronze

Age seems to be a continuous process, which had already begun at the end of the seventeenth century BCE and lasted to the end of the sixteenth century BCE. The early destructions, and at least some of the later ones, may therefore be related to internal instability and conflicts rather than to Egyptian military campaigns (see also Kenyon 1979: 180; Kempinski 1983: 222–3; Bienkowski 1986: 128). It should be remembered that many Middle Bronze sites were surrounded by huge earthen ramparts, sometimes crowned by walls. These were interpreted as formidable fortifications erected as defenses against a potential external threat – in anticipation of Egyptian emancipation from the Hyksos rule and concomitant assaults on the Hyksos 'backup systems' in Canaan (Dever 1985). However, as a social phenomenon (Bunimovitz 1992; Finkelstein 1992) already emerging during the Middle Bronze I (Kenyon/Dever terminology, see Window 1 p. 330), the defenses (better termed 'earth-
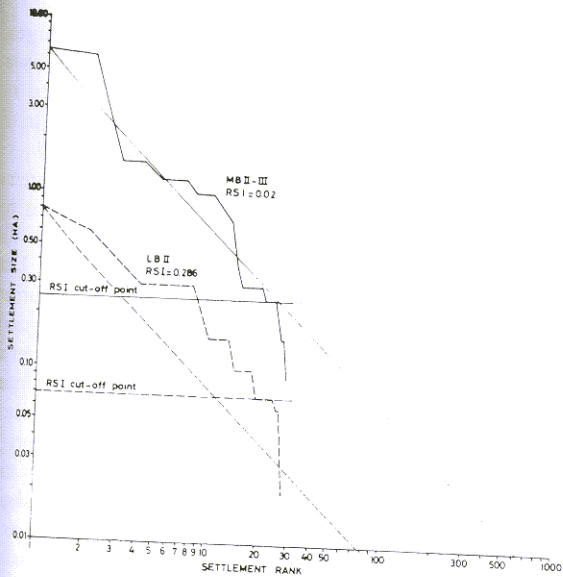
Figure 2　Middle Bronze II—III and Late Bronze rank-size distributions of the southern Coastal Plain (RSI = Rank Size Index)

Figure 3　Middle Bronze II—III and Late Bronze II rank-size distributions of the Central Hill region

works') may point to internal strife and externalisation of problems within the socio-political system. Indeed, traces of hostilities are known from a large number of sites, especially in the Central Hill region, prior to their final destruction; other signs for growing insecurity in this region during the later part of the Middle Bronze Age are also evident (Bunimovitz 1994: 181—86). Obviously, however, not all destructions were an internal Canaanite matter, and the Egyptian annihilation of Sharuhen (Tell el-'Ajjul; but see now Rainey 1993) – the main Hyksos centre in southern Palestine (Kempinski 1983: 146—8) – led to dramatic socio-political and economic changes in that region (see Ilan, this volume).

Further insight into the settlement crisis and socio-political change in Palestine at the end of the Middle Bronze/beginning of the Late Bronze Age is gained by a comparison of the politico-territorial organization in both periods. Contrary to common wisdom, according to which the politico-territorial organization in the Late Bronze Age is inferred from contemporary documents (see Alt 1925 = 1968 for a classical analysis) and projected backwards to the Middle Bronze Age, a reconstruction based on an analysis of the regional settlement systems' rank-size distributions in both periods seems preferable (presented *in extenso* in Bunimovitz 1989: Chapter 2; see also Bunimovitz 1993 for a review and critique of current methods for political reconstruction; Finkelstein 1992: 210–212 is another recent trial of Middle Bronze–Late Bronze Age politico-territorial reconstruction). This method enables the archaeologist to determine the socio-political organization in an examined region – whether centralized government or autonomous polities – by
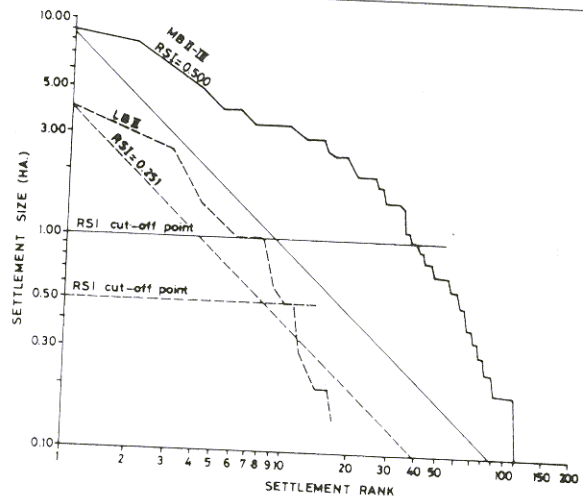
detecting the level of integration in its settlement system (e.g., Johnson 1981; Kowalewski 1982; Paynter 1983).

In the southern Coastal Plain, the Middle Bronze II–III rank-size distribution (Figure 2) points to the existence of a large, comparatively integrated urban system – a united polity (cf. Dothan 1973: 14–17; Seger 1975: 44*–45*; Kempinski 1983: 60–4, 210–11, 222–3). This region was rapidly populated and urbanized during the Middle Bronze III (Gophna and Portugali 1988; Herzog 1989: 34–7), prospered economically, and shows the highest concentration of Hyksos royal name scarabs (Weinstein 1981: Figures 2–3) – probably an indication of administrative integration under Sharuhen. In contrast, the Late Bronze Age rank-size distribution, as well as the Amarna letters, testify to a low degree of socio-political integration – a cluster of semi-autonomous city-states. A similar situation of socio-political fragmentation prevailed also during the Late Bronze Age in the Jezreel Valley, but the rank-size distribution hints that in the Middle Bronze III the valley was more integrated, probably controlled by two main polities only: Megiddo and Shim'on (see also Finkelstein 1992: 212). In the Central Hill region the rank-size distributions (Figure 3) testify to diametrically opposite conditions, in which the settlement system was more integrated in the Late Bronze Age than in the Middle Bronze III (Bunimovitz, 1994: 187–93). Indeed, a locally-clustered pattern of Middle Bronze settlement has been identified in the central and northern parts of this region (Finkelstein 1985: 164–5; Zertal 1988: 188–90, 197), and Alt's perception of large Late Bronze Age territorial polities there (1925 = 1968) is fully supported by modern research (Na'aman 1986a, 1992).

The above observations make the great crisis at the end of the Middle Bronze Age more intelligible in terms of the socio-political structure that facilitated disintegration and collapse, disregarding its specific agents. Thus, negative

interaction (i.e., competition over natural and human resources; warfare) between the peer polities that shared the Central Hill country may explain the chronic insecurity and instability in this region as well as the 'domino effect' which marked the collapse there (cf. Renfrew and Cherry 1986). Concomitantly, the disintegration of the large southern Coastal Plain polity can be reasonably explained by the destruction of its political and administrative 'capital' – Sharuhen.

Settlement patterns

It is now well established that the most powerful class of data in sociocultural explanations is settlement pattern. This may be taken as a material manifestation of the entire mode of production, and as shown above, of the social and political organization. An examination of the Late Bronze Age settlement pattern in Palestine (see Figure 1) and any changes to it is, therefore, essential for a better understanding of society in this period. However, traditional approaches to the subject were qualitative and accompanied by an implicit assumption that the Late Bronze Age settlement pattern remained stagnant for almost 400 years. Gonen's (1984) quantitative study of Late Bronze settlement data was therefore a breakthrough, but due to its limited data base and methodological drawbacks (e.g., lack of regionality, chronological ambiguity, etc.), a more detailed analysis based on a larger data base seemed imperative (Bunimovitz 1989: Chapter 3). According to data gathered from excavations and surveys all over western Palestine, the minimum number of Middle Bronze III sites is estimated at 550, presumably not all of them contemporaneous. Breaking the settlement map into subregions and examining the change in site number in each of them confirms the well known country-wide decrease in number of settlements during the Middle Bronze–Late Bronze transition, and discloses few distinct patterns of recovery during the rest of the period.

However, the full meaning of these patterns becomes clear only when one realizes the negative impact of current terminological concepts on our understanding of settlement processes in the Late Bronze Age. Thus, a perception of time as a series of discrete successive units – each possessing its unique cultural content – rather than a continuous flow (cf. Plog 1973: 189), is imposed on the material data from the end of the Late Bronze Age and creates dichotomies such as Late Bronze/Iron Age I, Canaanites/Israelites, Highlands/Lowlands. The result is an artificial splitting up of coherent and continuous cultural processes between the Late Bronze and Iron I periods (cf. Ussishkin 1985; Kempinski 1985; London 1989). In light of this insight, it is evident that many new settlements were established in most of the country's regions mainly during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE. But it must be emphasized that this settlement growth was not the

culmination of a 'natural', continuous recovery process spanning the fifteenth to fourteenth centuries BCE (*contra* Gonen 1984), but rather a unique change related to cultural processes which characterized the last phase of Egyptian dominance in Canaan (below).

Another important issue concerning settlement patterns and sociocultural change in Late Bronze Age Canaan is the relative share and importance of different sectors in the settlement hierarchy. According to recent claims the Late Bronze Age was a time of dramatic weakening of the urban fabric and a shift from urban centers to dispersed, small rural communities (Gonen 1984; London 1989). However, a close inspection of Middle Bronze III/Late Bronze settlement data, including information about rural settlements located in recent field surveys, renders a different interpretation of the evidence. Though it is true that many of the large urban centers which formed the backbone of settlement in Middle Bronze Age Canaan dramatically diminished in size, it should be emphasized that they remained urban in character.

Urbanism in the Late Bronze Age was, therefore, different in scale and appearance, and the period's settlement data obviously needs its own set of concepts and cultural criteria (other than size) for determining the function of sites. Separating the Middle Bronze III and Late Bronze settlements into 'urban' and 'rural' sectors, according to their respective sets of criteria, clearly demonstrates that despite the dramatic settlement crisis at the end of the Middle Bronze Age each sector kept its relative share within the overall number of sites and the total settled area. Obviously then, Palestine was no less urban in the Late Bronze Age than during the preceding period. However, further elaboration of these conclusions by an analysis of the regional urban/rural distributions of settlement sites brings into relief an essential social difference between the two periods. While in the Middle Bronze Age a few large urban centers dominated a wide rural hinterland, the moderate Late Bronze Age cities controlled a much diminished rural sector. Indeed, during most of this period hardly any rural settlements existed in the highlands and in few other regions of the country. Thus, contrary to current hypotheses about peasant movements and revolts during the Late Bronze Age (e.g., Mendenhall 1962; Gottwald 1979; Freedman and Graf 1983), the dichotomy epitomizing social relations in this period was not between city dwellers and peasants but between the sedentary (especially the sparse urban elite) and non-sedentary sectors of the population (below).

Politico-economic change

In a series of recent studies, the paradox of both prosperity and decline reflected in the Late Bronze Age material culture from Palestine has been addressed and debated (Bienkowski 1986: 136–55, 1989; Knapp 1989a, 1989b).
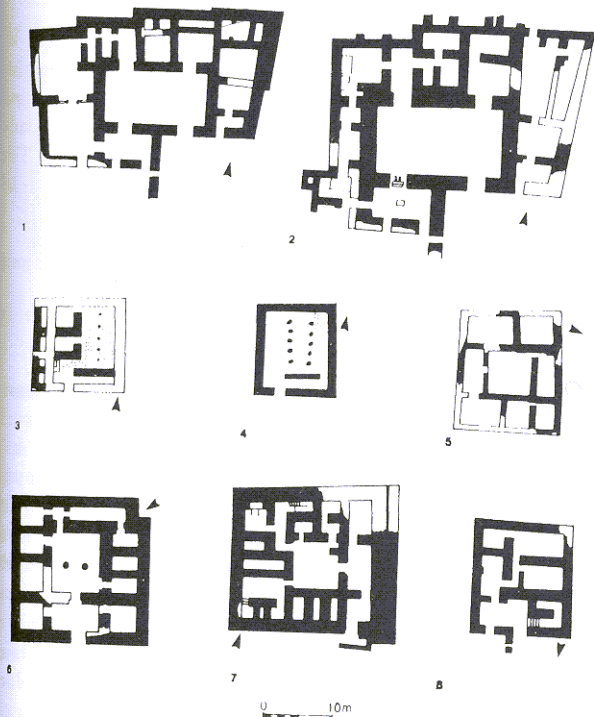
Figure 4 Late Bronze Age palaces (1—2. Megiddo), patrician houses (3—4. Tel Batash, 5. Tel Halif) and 'Governors' Residencies' (6. Beth-Shean, 7. Tell el-Farah (S), 8. Tel Aphek)

Figure 5 Late Bronze Age temples (1, 3—5. Hazor, 2. Tel Mevorakh, 6. Megiddo, 7, 8. Beth-Shean, 9. Lachish)

How can the demographic and settlement crisis, analyzed above, as well as the gradual degeneration in certain aspects of the period's material culture (Albright 1960: 101; Kenyon 1979: 199–200; Bienkowski 1986: 110–11, 150–2, 1989: 59; Knapp 1989a: 136–42) be reconciled with the remains of elaborate palaces and patrician houses (Figure 4; Oren 1992), temples (Figure 5; Mazar 1992: 169–83) and graves (Gonen 1992)? And how can one explain the rich assemblages of Cypriot and Mycenaean pottery (Plate 1; Gittlen 1981; Leonard 1981) and other important or locally-made luxury items (ivories, jewelry, faience vessels, etc.; Plate 2) unearthed in many Late Bronze governmental, religious and funerary contexts in terms of the cultural impoverishment envisaged?

Two hypotheses have been put forward in order to answer these questions. According to Bienkowski (1986: 137–56, 1989), the main causes of decline in Late Bronze Age Canaan were the diversion of resources to pay for the upkeep of the Egyptian colonial administration and the Egyptian control of trade. This decline, however, was localized due to the nature of Egyptian colonial presence: while key strategic areas under direct Egyptian control (mainly the densely populated Coastal Plain and northern valleys) flourished, the more marginal areas of Palestine and Transjordan (especially the hill regions) – not receiving any substantial benefit from agricultural surpluses and trade profits – were in economic recession.
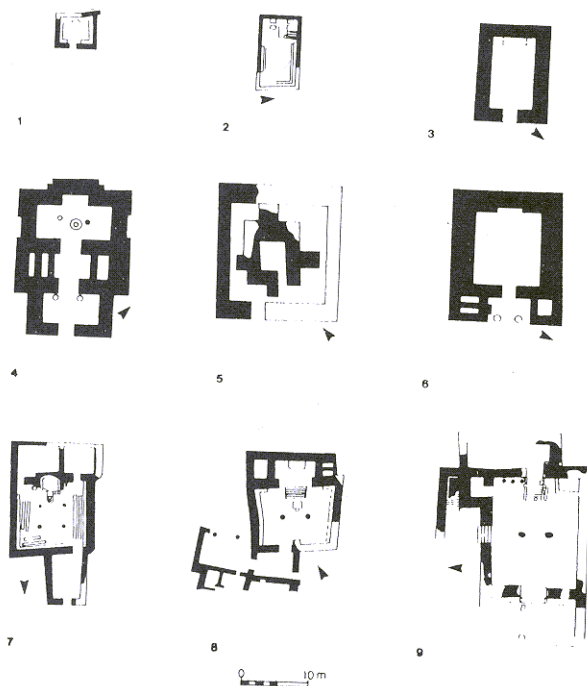
Knapp's explanation for the Late Bronze Age material culture decline in Palestine (1989a, 1989b, 1992b, 1992c) is couched in a more holistic approach to the politico-economic structure of the country and its changes during the Middle Bronze II–Late Bronze II periods. In his opinion, the Egyptian conquest of Canaan, and especially Thothmes III's administrative and military policy, altered the politico-economic and material base of the southern Levant profoundly: the formerly independent, economic-ally-competitive polities became imperially dominated vassal city-states. Furthermore, the Middle Bronze Age complex network of hierarchical settlements and markets, dendritic rural hinterland and presumed gateway communities (see Ilan this volume, Chapter 18) had collapsed, leaving behind a few urban centers to function as nodes on the caravan routes of a major international trade system extending from western Asia to the eastern Mediterranean. During both periods, however, power relations ensured the flow of subsistence goods and luxury items into urban centers. But whereas peripheral Middle Bronze areas had retained sufficient wealth to ensure their livelihood, the Egyptian imperial demands on Late Bronze Age polities – aimed at extracting maximum possible tribute with the minimum effort – may have exceeded the productive capacities of all but the most resilient, self-sustaining urban centers. Thus, the archaeological record reveals an apparent collapse – abandonment of villages and decline in many urban centers – as well as prosperity in other urban centers.

Plate 1   Mycenaean pottery from Tel Dan. (© Tel Dan Expedition, The Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem)

Seemingly contrasting, due to their different perspectives (specific/short-term *vs.* holistic/long-term) and interpretation of Egypt's economic and imperial motives in Canaan, the above hypotheses would be better considered as complementing each other. Thus, while the economic aspects of the Egyptian occupation of Canaan and the burden imposed on the local rulers and population are still a matter of debate (Ahituv 1978; Na'aman 1981; see also Redford 1992: 209–13), Bienkowski's and Knapp's analyses reflect the complex pattern of economic decline and survival in Late Bronze Age Canaan. In this context, it seems that the costly palaces, temples and wealthy elite burials unearthed in the main urban centres should not be simplistically interpreted as symbols of localized prosperity, but as evidence for conspicuous consumption aimed to maintain power relations within an economically-impoverished and socially-unstable country (Plate 3; below).

Social organization

The most prominent features in the socio-political landscape of Palestine during the Late Bronze Age were the few urban settlements (such as Megiddo, Gezer, Lachish). Though much smaller and less impressive than the enormous Middle Bronze Age cities, contemporary texts leave no doubt that most of them were centers of petty kingdoms or city-states. Consequently, important insights concerning the material manifestation of their socio-political attributes can be gained from cross cultural research of city-states and small-scale states – a neglected field in anthropological archaeology until recently (see e.g., Griffeth and Thomas 1981; Renfrew and Wagstaff 1982).

According to the Amarna Letters, in the fourteenth century BCE Palestine seems to have been divided between 15–17 major city-states. Almost all of these central places

are identifiable, and by employing both a variety of documentary sources (the Amarna Letters; other Egyptian texts; biblical descriptions of Israelite tribal allotments) and archaeological data, their territories were ingeniously delineated by Na'aman (1986a, 1988, 1992). This reconstructed politico-territorial map brings into relief two interesting spatial qualities:

1. The average on-ground distance between each of the main city-states and its nearest peers is about 35 km.
2. The territories of these polities are roughly of the same size range, well below 1000 km².

These qualities, as well as the small number of main political centers, concur with the Early State Module (ESM) pattern that has been observed in many early civilizations – a cluster of 10–20 autonomous centers with a mean distance of about 40 km between them, each dominating a modular area of approximately 1500 km² or less (Renfrew 1975: 12–18; Figure 6). According to the politico-territorial reconstruction presented earlier, it seems that the Late Bronze Age ESMs in Palestine crystallized during the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries BCE, following the socio-political upheavals at that time (*contra* Finkelstein 1992: 212).

The limited territorial extent of the ESMs was attributed either to increasing costs of administration with increasing distance from the central place (Cherry 1978: 424–5), or to the ability of rural populations to avail themselves of center services (Johnson 1987: 115-16). In any case, a radius of about 20 km (a one day round-trip distance in the pre-automobile era) apparently formed in early complex societies the boundary both for direct administrative control of rural populations, and for the participation of such populations in the central places' economic and social activities. It seems that in Late Bronze Age Palestine, where lesser city-states and even towns could enjoy political autonomy within a distance of a few hours' ride from the major city-states (Na'aman 1986a, 1992), the reduced scale of the ESMs is a faithful reflection of the social constraints that inhibited territorial and organizational growth – demographic decline, sparseness of rural settlements and a contracted urban elite.

Indeed, population shortage seems to have troubled the Canaanite city-states during the Late Bronze Age. Since early complex societies relied on human resources as the main means of production and source of income (e.g., Claessen 1978: 549–54), the dearth of sedentary population coupled with the compulsory need to share its meagre labor resources with the Egyptian government (Na'aman 1981: 178–9), presented a serious problem for the Canaanite urban elite and generated a vicious circle. In order to maintain rule and status, great material investments were needed (for the connection between power, ideology and material culture see, e.g., Miller and Tilley 1984; Whitelam 1986; Trigger 1990) and thus the

Plate 2   An ivory plaque from the Late Bronze Age palace at Megiddo (© Israel Antiquities Authority)

burden imposed on the subjects became heavier; these subjects, in turn, reacted time and again by deserting the established social system – thereby depleting it. Under these circumstances, political and economic power meant having control of as many human resources as possible, and this seems to have been the prime motive behind the endless attempts at territorial expansion, border disputes and ad hoc coalitions which epitomized the interaction between the Canaanite city-states (cf. Marfoe 1979: 16–18).

The Shifting Frontier Model

In contrast to the maximization and stabilization strategy undertaken by the urban elite in order to survive, other sectors of Canaanite society responded more flexibly to the political and economic changes that took place in Palestine during the Late Bronze Age. Their adaptational strategy and its dialectical relations with local power and Egyptian governmental policy in Canaan can be described and explained by what I have termed 'The Shifting Frontier Model' (Bunimovitz 1989: Chapter 5, 1994: 193–202.

Following Owen Lattimore's (1940) and Robert Adams' (1974, 1978) frontier researches in China and Mesopotamia, it should be recognized that the ecological and social frontier of Palestine can oscillate within very broad limits, depending on the strength of the central ruling power. A panoramic view over the country's history reveals that in times of public security and development the frontier was pushed southward and eastward, and the lowlands enjoyed settlement stability and prosperity. However, in the absence of such conditions, they rapidly became frontier zones, populated by nomads and other non-sedentary groups (see e.g., Amiran 1953: 192–209; Amiran and Ben-Arieh 1963: 162–6; Hütteroth 1975; for an analogous situation in Syria and Jordan during the nineteenth century AD, see Lewis 1955, 1987). The collapse of the socio-political system in Palestine (especially in the Central Hill country) at the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the takeover of Canaan by the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty

Plate 3   A bronze plaque from Hazor depicting a Canaanite noble or king (© Hazor Expedition, Hebrew University)

brought about far reaching changes in the socio-political structure and in settlement patterns: the frontier 'came down' from the hilly regions to the Coastal Plain, the Shephela and inner valleys, and bands of 'Apiru – outcasts and various groups of nomads/pastoralists (for the derogatory meaning of this term in the Amarna Letters, see Na'aman 1986b: 275–6; Marfoe 1979: 9–10) – which descended from the hills, roamed there without interference (Na'aman 1982: 235–6; Marfoe 1979: 15). This situation
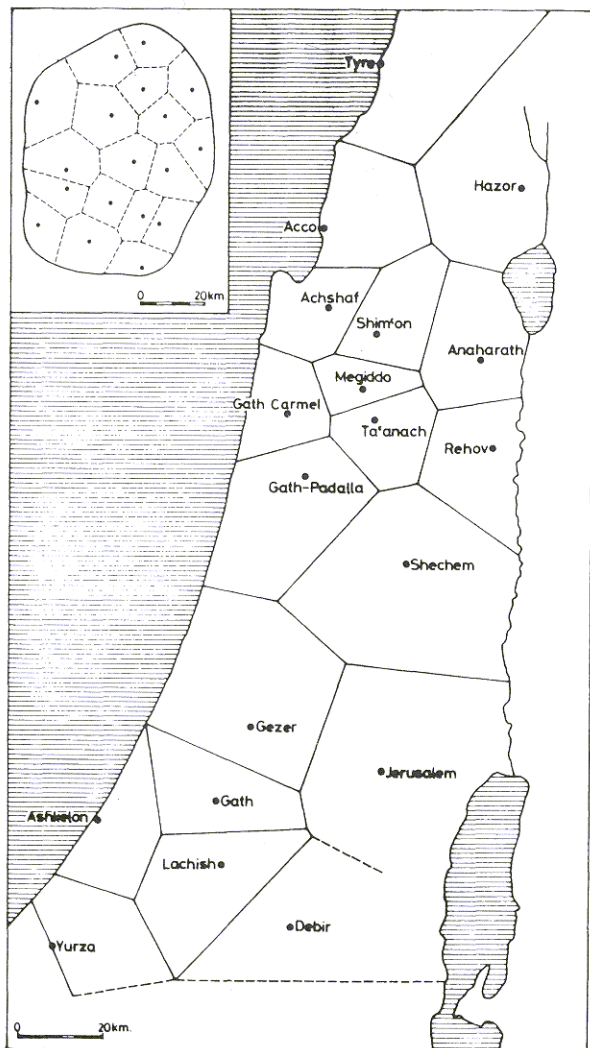
Figure 6   The spatial configuration of the Late Bronze Age city-states in Palestine compared to Renfrew's ESMs model

Figure 7   The Egyptian capture of Ashkelon by Ramesses II or Merenptah

founded settlements (e.g. 'Izbet Sartah – Finkelstein 1986; Tell Beit Mirsim B1–2 – Greenberg 1987) have usually been attributed to the Israelite Settlement.

Bridging the divide

The foregoing analysis aspired to exemplify, through the specific case study of the Late Bronze Age society, that archaeological research of 'documented' complex societies in Palestine can go beyond the limits of descriptive culture-history set by former generations of researchers. However, as already emphasized, anthropologically-oriented explanations, usually based on cross-cultural analogies or general models, should be context related. For Syro-Palestinian archaeologists, the post-processual battle-cry: 'back to historical context' actually depicts a familiar, daily reality; but unfortunately, the tyranny of the historical context in this field of study has been so powerful that broader, cross-cultural or long-term perspectives were denied. This seems to be the main reason for the provinciality of Levantine archaeology – namely, its persistent reluctance to take advantage of its tremendously rich archaeological, historical and ethnographic data in order to produce, test and improve general, worldwide archaeological models and theories. As shown above, certain anthropological conjectures concerning social processes such as socio-political disintegration of early states (Cowgill 1988), formation of secondary states via historical succession (Price 1978), continuous construction of social boundaries (Eisenstadt 1988), etc., can be examined in light of the specific socio-cultural changes taking place in Palestine during the Late Bronze

completely changed following the revolution in both the nature and extent of Egyptian involvement in Canaan during the reign of the Nineteenth and Twentieth dynasties. A close examination of historical analogies (e.g., Lewis 1955, 1987), Egyptian sources, and archaeological data suggests that, as a consequence of the vigorous measures taken by the pharaohs of these dynasties (annexation and direct rule – Figure 7; erection of a network of 'Governor's Residencies' in the main city-states – see Figure 4, Plate 4; punitive expeditions against non-sedentary groups – Plate 5; economic exploitation of the country, etc. see, e.g., Weinstein 1981: 17–23; Singer 1988 and bibliography there), public security was restored, the frontier retreated, and non-sedentary groups resettled in the lowland regions, the piedmont and the hill country. Some of these newly-

Plate 4   The 'Governor's residency' at Tel Aphek (© Tel Aphek Expedition, Tel Aviv University)

Age. It seems, therefore, that Colin Renfrew's optimistic vision (1980: 297), addressed over a decade ago to American archaeologists, carries also a message for Syro-Palestinian archaeology:

when the interest is in general processes of change, [the Ancient World's] data are exceptionally rich. There is therefore a brilliant opportunity for anyone who can command the data and scholarship of the Great Tradition while employing the problem-orientation and research methods of current anthropological archaeology. There is no doubt in my mind that the principal development in at least the earlier part of the next century . . . will be the incorporation of some of the new strengths of anthropological archaeology into the Great Tradition, thereby bridging the Divide [between the two], to the great benefit of both sides.

Plate 5   A victory stele of Seti I from Beth–Shean Height = 2.45 m (© Israel Antiquities Authority)

WHEN DID THE LATE BRONZE AGE BEGIN? – PROBLEMS IN DEMARCATION AND TERMINOLOGY

The beginning of the Late Bronze Age was dated by Albright (1960: 84, 96—9) to ca. 1550 BCE on both historical and archaeological grounds — the occupation of Canaan by the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty and the first appearance in Palestine of Bichrome Ware. However, according to G.E. Wright (1961: 91, Charts 6, 7), the material culture typical of Late Bronze I appeared at only ca. 1500 BCE. More recently, J. Seger (1975: 45*) and W.G. Dever (1987: 149) claimed that the historical and archaeological demarcation line between the Middle and the Late Bronze Ages should be lowered further — to the reign of Thothmes III. Dever even suggested that both Middle Bronze IIC and Late Bronze I should be renamed 'Middle Bronze III', corresponding to a revised historical/archaeological subdivision of the Middle Bronze Period: Middle Bronze I = Early Bronze IV, Middle Bronze IIA = Middle Bronze II, Middle Bronze IIC–Late Bronze I = Middle Bronze III (1987: 149—50), in correspondence with Kenyon 1966: 53, n. 5). He further elaborated (and complicated) his terminology by suggesting a 'Transitional Middle Bronze III/Late Bronze 1A Phase', ca. 1550—1450 BCE (1990, especially n. 3), later redated to ca. 1500—1450, following the currently favored 'lower' Egyptian chronology (Dever 1992; for the recent debate concerning Syro-Palestinian Middle Bronze chronology vis-à-vis Egyptian chronology, see also Bietak 1991; Dever 1991.

Since other scholars (e.g. Tuffnell 1958: 6, 67; Kantor 1965: 23; Kempinski 1983: 223—4) prefer to begin the Late Bronze Age ca. 1600 BCE, more than 100 years earlier than Dever, the confusion about the Middle Bronze/Late Bronze transition seems to have reached an unprecedented peak (for comparative chronological charts see Leonard 1989: 6—7; Dever 1992: Figure 1). As a result, the validity of traditional archaeological criteria for demarcating the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (mainly pottery and patterns of settlement) is suspect and should be reconsidered.

Plate 1.2   A group of Late Bronze Age I local and Cypriot pottery from a burial near Shechem (© Israel Antiquities Authority)

Pottery   As local pottery exemplifies undisturbed continuity between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Plate 1.1), new types of pottery (mainly imported) – 'Chocolate-on-White' (Plate 1.2) and Bichrome Wares, Gray/Black Lustrous juglets, and certain types of Cypriot pottery – serve to indicate the beginning of Late Bronze I (Plate 1.2). However, a close examination of these *fossiles directeurs* reveal that their appearance in Canaan is not accompanied by any noticeable cultural change. Moreover, it seems that the importation/local production of all 'fine' wares is another manifestation of the commercial and cultural prosperity of Palestine during the reign of the Fifteenth ('Hyksos') Dynasty (for convenient discussions concerning the above pottery types, most of which appeared *before* the end of the Middle Bronze Age, see Leonard 1989: 10—11; Oren 1969; Gittlen 1981: 49—51).

Pattern of settlement   Because of the cultural continuity between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, it has been claimed that the destructions and changes in settlement patterns — allegedly resulting from the conquest of Palestine by the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty — should indicate the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. However, as argued elsewhere in this chapter, this settlement crisis — whatever its causes — was a prolonged process, starting in the late seventeenth century BCE and continuing into the reign of Thothmes III. Therefore, fixing the beginning of a new period at a certain point within these time limits seems to be arbitrary.

Since neither 1600/1550 nor 1500 BCE marks an unequivocal cultural change that merits special designation from an *archaeological* point of view, a different solution to the problems of demarcation and terminology concerning the Middle and Late Bronze Ages is suggested. In accordance with current practical use of limited chronological/cultural frameworks in the study of the Iron Age in Palestine (e.g., the tenth, eighth centuries BCE, etc.), the *historically*-based terminological framework of the Late Bronze Age should be set aside. Reference to archaeological entities typical of the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries BCE etc., will thus prevent the artificial separation of cultural processes into 'periods' imposed on the material culture. To achieve this aim, the study of the Late Bronze Age material culture (including field research and publication) should be intensified.

Plate 1.1   Local Canaanite pottery from Tel Aphek (© The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

LATE BRONZE AGE BURIAL CUSTOMS

The 'Archaeology of Death' — the study of mortuary practices of past human societies — accompanies the discipline throughout its development. In recent decades, however, an unprecedented interest in the *social* aspects of mortuary practices — especially in the social correlates of funerary material remains — became one of the most conspicuous research fields of social archaeology (for an overview and bibliography see, e.g., Chapman and Randsborg 1981).

In Palestine, Late Bronze Age burials were usually considered as a primary source of data for burial customs, as well as for contemporary material culture, e.g., pottery, metal artifacts, jewelry, etc. More ambitiously, a recent study (Gonen 1992) endeavored to analyze synchronic and diachronic burial patterns in Late Bronze Age Canaan in order to identify and interpret spatio-temporal cultural processes.

The burial types of Late Bronze Age Canaan fell into two main categories: indigenous and foreign. The first category, which represents the local population, is by far the dominant one — both in number and distribution. It includes cave burials for multiple interments, pit burials for individual interment (Figure 2.1), and intramural burials. The second category is comprised of various types of burials, each limited in number and geographical distribution. The introduction of foreign burial customs is believed to be only incidental, with little bearing on the major burial trends in Canaan during the Late Bronze.

According to Gonen's analysis, the indigenous burial customs of the Late Bronze Age show a clear regional differentiation: while in the mountainous regions and western foothills of the country cave burials for multiple interment were preferred, pit burials for individual interment were the most common burial type in the Coastal Plain. The inner valleys and main urban centres are characterized by a mixture of burial customs. A spatio-temporal examination of the above two major burial customs practised in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age reveals two parallel trends — the spread of pit burials along the Coastal Plain and into the inner valleys; the receding of cave burials into the hill regions.

As an explanation for these cultural processes, Gonen put forward the hypothesis that the socio-religious values in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age were affected by Egyptian cultural norms due to the long, intensive period of Egyptian rule in Canaan. She further suggested that the receptivity of the local population to the Egyptian values and norms depended on the degree of regional accessibility. Thus, the Egyptian cultural impact seems to be felt most strongly along the land communication routes between Egypt and the regions to the north and northeast of Palestine, i.e. in the lowlands which were under firm Egyptian control. Adopting essential components of the Egyptian burial customs, the lowlands population gave up the long-practised communal burials in favor of individual interment in pits.

Contemporaneously with the 'progressive' trends evidenced in the Coastal Plain and inner valleys, the mountain-dwelling people of Canaan continued to bury their dead according to the old customs of their ancestors. They did not replace cave burials for multiple interments, and no other custom penetrated the hilly regions. Due to their poor accessibility, these areas remained outside the sphere of Egyptian influence and became strongholds of traditionalism and resistance to change.

Another process noticed by Gonen is the dwindling and disappearance of intramural burials. This indigenous custom, mainly practised in the urban centers of Canaan during the Middle Bronze Age, was replaced in the Late Bronze period by formal cemeteries outside settlements.

The analysis of Late Bronze Age burial customs in Canaan raises many intriguing questions concerning culture change during this period. Since Egyptian burials in Canaan — mainly of the anthropoid coffins type (see chapter opening photograph) — are known only from Egyptian governmental centers such as Deir el-Balah, south of Gaza, and Beth-Shean (though a few more examples are known from Lachish and Pella), how they came to affect the indigenous burial customs is far from self evident. Egyptian mortuary practices and ideas, however, may have diffused into Palestine via the expelled Semites ('Hyksos') or through the Egyptian indoctrination of Canaanite princes (Redford 1992: 198). The social upheavals in Canaan at the end of the Middle Bronze Age/beginning of the Late Bronze Age most probably also affected traditional burial customs. Thus, the shift from collective family chamber tombs to individual interments seems to be a normal response to changing circumstances: destruction and abandonment of many settlements, demographic decline, social disintegration, disorder, and a growing number of uprooted and other parasocial elements within the lowlands. In such a social atmosphere, when many were dispossessed of their forefathers' tombs, people must have been less assured of their security of habitation and less inclined to cut new family tombs (cf. Mee and Cavanagh 1984: 57–61). It is of great interest, however, that the two contrasting sectors within the Late Bronze Age Canaanite society — the urban elite and the semi-nomadic pastoralists of the mountainous regions — both of which seem to be alert to their geneological succession, continued to bury their dead in communal family tombs throughout the period.
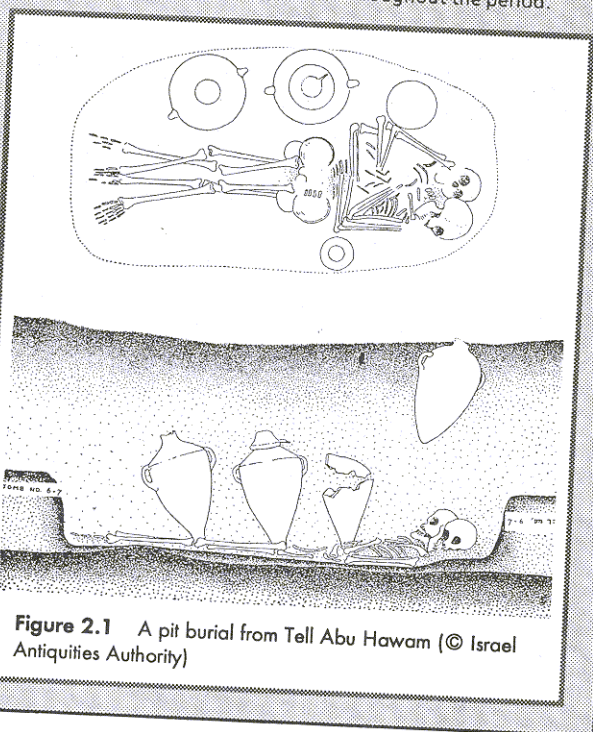

Figure 2.1 A pit burial from Tell Abu Hawam (© Israel Antiquities Authority)