

Gaza Research Project: 1998 Survey of the Old City of Gaza

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This article presents results of the first season of fieldwork conducted by the Gaza Research Project in 1998. Fieldwork comprised small-scale topographic survey around the old city of Gaza and reconnaissance of other second millennium tell sites in the region, namely Tell Ali Muntar. The primary aims were to examine the chronological and topographical relationship of two proximate tell sites lying at the southern limits of the Levantine coastal plain, between the Wadi al-Hasi and the Wadi Gaza, and to assess the feasibility of excavation of ancient Gaza.

Introduction

The Gaza Research Project (GRP) was set up in 1996 to examine the evidence for settlement in the Gaza region during the second millennium BC and to assess the region's wider external contacts, specifically with Egypt and the Mediterranean world. Our research was predicated upon the assumption that the area was occupied by gateway communities that played an important role in international exchange systems between the Asiatic landmass, Egypt (and Africa) and the Mediterranean basin. We hoped to see specific developments reflecting the special nature of these communities, including an Egyptianising landscape. We conducted a series of separate, clearly defined field projects, in conjunction with a re-examination of earlier excavation material (see, for example, Steel 2002) and with reference to historical documentation where applicable. Due to recent political developments in the region, subsequent to September 2000, fieldwork has been suspended, and many questions concerning the social and economic configuration of the region remain unanswered.

In July 1996 Jo Clarke and Louise Steel carried out a two-week feasibility study in Gaza, to assess whether a field project was viable. Our primary concern was movement of personnel and equipment freely across the tight security borders controlled by the Israeli army, and the nature of the infrastructure within Gaza. Our principle aims may be summarised as follows:

1. to assess accessibility to the Gaza Strip and movement within the Gaza Strip to the archaeological

remains around the Wadi Gaza;

2. to ensure the safety of team members and staff on the project;

3. to arrange adequate secure storage of material arising from fieldwork with the Palestinian Department of Antiquities.

Our primary interest was in the Middle-Late Bronze Age landscape, and as such we visited numerous second millennium sites in the region – 'Ajjul, Dayr al-Balah and Tell al-Sannam (see discussion in Clarke and Steel 2000).¹ We also visited first millennium locales, most notably Tell Ruqaish and the French excavations at Blakhiyah, the first millennium port of ancient Gaza (Humbert and Sadeq 2000). Lengthy discussions with the Director of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities in Gaza, Dr Moain Sadeq, established that our aims were indeed feasible and that the most obvious starting point was the old city of Gaza itself.² We instigated a research project under the joint direction of Dr Sadeq, Dr Steel and Dr Clarke and in August 1998 we undertook our first season of survey in the environs of the old city of Gaza (Clarke and Steel 1999, 2000).

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Location

Ancient Gaza is located approximately 5 km. from the modern coastline, midway between the Wadi al-Hasi and the Wadi Gaza (Fig. 1). It comprises a low-lying mound, some 10 m. in height, covering an approximate area of 100 ha. Gaza has been occupied

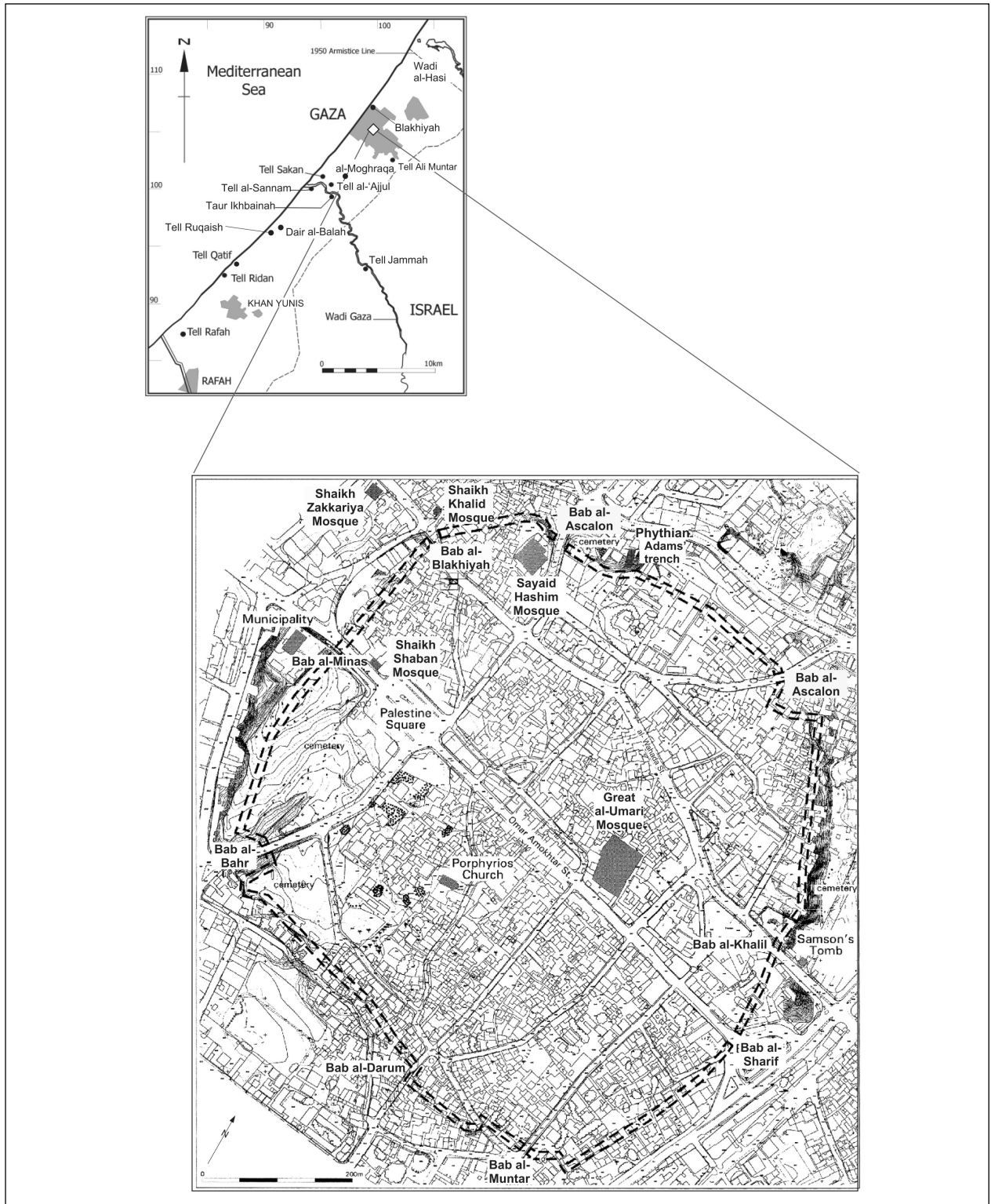


Figure 1. Map of Gaza region showing location of ancient Gaza and plan of the old city of Gaza, indicating the line of the city walls and the possible location of Phythian-Adams' excavation trenches.

continuously since antiquity and the ancient remains are overlain by the old city of Gaza. Urban sprawl, dating from the period of the British mandate to the present day means that the modern city of Gaza now extends 5 km. west towards the sea and over the ancient port of Blakhiyah (Humbert and Sadeq 2000), some 1.5 km. east to subsume the ancient site of Tell Ali Muntar, and approximately 2 km. to the north to link up with the Jabaliyah refugee camp. To the south, Gaza remains relatively undeveloped but the Municipality has begun to extend the outer municipal boundaries over areas of farmland and sand dune. The western extent of Gaza is built on substantial areas of ancient compacted sand dune, which cover the coastal region from Tel Aviv to Rafah in the south (*Atlas of Israel*, 1980). Sand dunes can reach up to 20 m. in height impeding the location of archaeological features. Beneath the dunes, the characteristic soil type is a reddish-brown sandy soil, the Kishash Formation (Munro, personal comment, June 2000), which is relatively fertile.

Historical background

Gaza is located at the eastern end of the land-bridge between Egypt and Asia (the so-called *Ways of Horus*) that was used as a thoroughfare for international exchange from at least the third millennium BC (Oren 1973, 1987). The site is first named in Egyptian texts of the MB-LB transition (Katzenstein 1982) and it became the seat of the New Kingdom Egyptian governor of the region. Gaza remained an important city throughout the early first millennium B.C., as one of the five cities (Pentapolis) of the Philistines. Given the important strategic position of Gaza at the crossroads between Egypt, the Asiatic hinterland and the Mediterranean, the town has been successively conquered throughout its history. Historical records refer to conquests by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III, in 734 B.C., by the Babylonians and King Nebuchadnezzar in 603 B.C., and by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. In 58 B.C. the city passed into Roman rule and occupation expanded from the tell down to the coast, with the establishment of the port of Maiumus Neapolis. The city remained a prominent economic centre under the Byzantine Empire. In A.D. 635–636 Gaza came under Islamic rule, and the city was successively governed by the competing Early Islamic dynasties. For a brief interlude (1149–1167) Gaza was controlled by the Crusaders as part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1516 the city became part of the Ottoman Empire. These cumulative histories of occupation have left their mark upon the monuments of Gaza.

Recent excavations at the port of Blakhiyah, Gaza, have indicated the importance of the region during the first millennium BC (Burdajewicz 2000, 35–39; Humbert and Sadeq 2000, 105–119) and illustrate its strong affiliations with Egypt (Burdajewicz 2000). Gaza continued to be the major port in the region during the Graeco-Roman period (Glucker 1987; Bauzou 2000, 47–69), playing an important role in the trade in spice and perfumes with Arabia (Kasher 1982, 65 and 69). The importance of Gaza during the Roman and Byzantine periods (Glucker 1987) is suggested by representations of the city on the Madaba map and mosaics from Umm al-Rasas in Jordan (Piccirillo and Alliata 1994). This is further supported by various archaeological discoveries in the vicinity of Gaza and architectural remains on the tell itself (Ovadiah 1993, 466–7; Humbert *et al.* 2000; Saliou 2000). Many fine Mamluk and Ottoman monuments illustrate the continued importance of Gaza during its later periods of occupation (Sadek 1991). In contrast, the earlier occupation of Gaza, during the second millennium BC, has not been the focus of explicit archaeological enquiry and thus is more elusive. The only archaeological soundings undertaken were confined to the extreme northern limits of the mound (Phythian-Adams 1923a, 1923b). These uncovered a series of walls, the earliest of which was associated with Late Bronze Age pottery, including imported Cypriot White Slip and Base Ring wares (Phythian-Adams 1923b, 29). Whether this corresponds to the earliest occupation at the site however, still awaits confirmation.

Aims of the 1998 season

The 1998 field season was designed to assess the feasibility of excavation of ancient Gaza and had five specific aims:

1. to correlate nineteenth century maps of Gaza and its environs with an up-to-date photogrammetric map;
2. to undertake limited topographic survey of areas of archaeological interest and to update and confirm details on the photogrammetric map;
3. to try to identify and map Phythian-Adams' excavation trenches and to identify possible areas for future excavation;
4. to undertake surface collection where practicable;
5. to explore the general relationship of Gaza with the surrounding landscape, in particular the proximate site of Tell Ali Muntar.

Demographic constraints shaped our recording strategy. Given the density of modern occupation over the surface of the tell and around its base (Fig. 2) it was immediately obvious that we could not



Figure 2. View of the old city of Gaza from north-east showing north-east cemetery and density of modern occupation on top of the tell.



Figure 4. View of Phythian-Adams' excavation trenches on north-west slopes of ancient Gaza.



Figure 3. Exposed northern face of ancient Gaza, showing slump of Late Antique material.

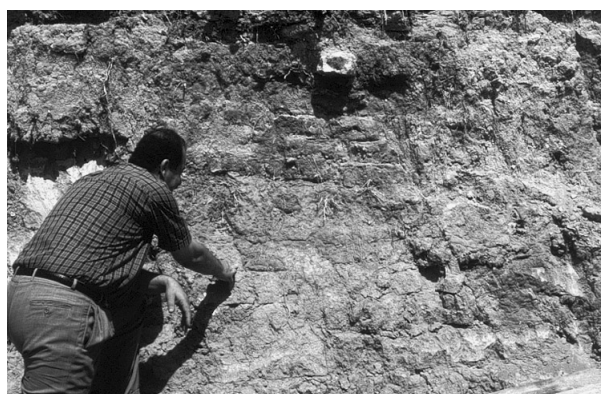


Figure 5. Exposed mud brick, Tell Ali Muntar.

undertake surface collection. This and funding constraints also limited the topographic survey. Our best potential strategy was to undertake a detailed reconnaissance survey to identify pockets of open land where either topographic survey or surface collection would be possible and might give meaningful results. Initially, a significant amount of data collection and desk-based research was undertaken in order to collate and reconcile the various nineteenth and early twentieth century maps of the city and to construct a base map which would accurately show earlier features in relation to the modern street plan. The end result was the production of a 1:5000 map, which super-imposed the line of the city walls and gates extant in the nineteenth century, and the location of important Islamic monuments on to the modern street plan of the old city of Gaza (Fig. 1).

A reconnaissance survey of the tell was then conducted in August 1998 to identify possible areas for

future excavation. Given the crowded modern occupation over the tell, it was decided that we would concentrate our efforts on the exposed slopes. The most appropriate area where archaeological material was clearly visible was along the northern slope of the tell (Fig. 3). Here mixed deposits of Late Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman material were exposed.³ This material, however, appears to have been pushed over the sides of the tell during later construction activity. This phenomenon was also noted by Phythian-Adams (Phythian-Adams 1923a, 13). There were no examples of sherds earlier than the Late Roman period.

Our other aim was to locate the original excavation trenches of Phythian-Adams, which was not made explicit in his publications (Phythian-Adams 1923a, 1923b). Given the extensive development of the tell since the 1920s it was possible that the trenches no longer existed, however a number of cuts into the sides of the tell were identified in the region of the north cemetery and adjacent to the western Bab al-Ascalon (Fig. 4). These were significantly collapsed and overgrown, and were currently being used as a rubbish dump, so it was not immediately apparent that they represented Phythian-Adams' trenches. Visibility was further obscured by the densely packed modern houses in the immediate area around the base of the tell. The present configuration of these cuts, therefore, significantly hampered the retrieval of archaeological material. Even so, we were able to survey the northern face of the tell to establish whether the cuts we had noted were excavation trenches or modern bulldozer cuts. This confirmed that they corresponded to the size and description of Phythian-Adams' trenches, and we have marked them as 'possible' trenches of Phythian-Adams on the accompanying plan of the city (Fig. 1).

Although the majority of the surface of the tell is densely covered by modern building the area directly overlying these cuts is occupied by the UNRWA schoolyard, one of the few open spaces within the limits of the old city where further excavation work might be possible. Even so, the financial constraints involved in clearing the area for such work and health and safety considerations (particularly with regard to the undercutting of any modern foundations) make such a project largely unworkable. Moreover, while it would be possible to test Phythian-Adams' excavation sequence, it is unlikely that such fieldwork on the extremities of the tell would answer more pertinent questions concerning the archaeological sequence of Gaza, most notably the date of its foundation. Our assessment of the site of ancient Gaza ultimately indicated that archaeological fieldwork of the site, especially with the aim

of examining its occupation during the second millennium BC, is essentially unviable.

Site evaluation of Tell Ali Muntar

We also undertook a small reconnaissance survey of the nearby mound of Tell Ali Muntar, 1.5 km. to the south-east of Gaza (Clarke and Steel 2000, 190–91). The site, which had been identified as a possible second millennium locale by Eliezer Oren during the North Sinai survey (Oren, personal communication 1996), is small. It covers an area of not more than 100 m² but it stands at least 10 m. higher than Gaza and from the summit the surrounding region is clearly visible. The strategic importance of Tell Ali Muntar is known from accounts of British occupation during the First World War (Kender, personal communication 1999, 2002).

Mud brick was exposed in sections on the tell (Fig. 5) and a collection of pottery was made on the surface.⁴ This comprised sherds of Late Roman/Byzantine, and Ottoman date. The earliest material identified was Middle Bronze II, including diagnostic storage jar fragments and bowl rims. The apparent absence of Late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Hellenistic sherds does not necessarily indicate that the site was unoccupied during these phases, as the site had not been intensively surveyed. The presence of Middle Bronze Age sherds might indicate that the site of Tell Ali Muntar was occupied at least as early as ancient Gaza, and possibly even earlier. At the very least it can be deduced that both sites were either simultaneously occupied, or that settlement shifted between the two throughout antiquity.

Discussion

The economic, chronological and spatial relationship between Gaza and Tell Ali Muntar, and their relationship with the other documented settlements of the Gaza region, are fundamental to our understanding of internal demographic and socio-economic development of the southern coastal Levant during the third and second millennia BC. Although Gaza was the pre-eminent site in the region during the Roman and Byzantine periods (Glucker 1987), it may not have been so during earlier periods. Other sites, in particular those around the estuary of the Wadi Gaza, appear to have had greater strategic and economic importance during the second millennium BC, such as Tell al-^cAjjul and the concurrent site of al-Moghraqa (Steel *et al.* 2002; and this volume).

Tell Ali Muntar has strategic importance as the highest point in the Gaza landscape, and its proxim-

ity to the coast assured it an important place in the settlement pattern of the region. If established in Middle Bronze II, Tell Ali Muntar is typical of the defensive centres of the period. The exact relationship between Ali Muntar and Gaza still needs to be clarified to see whether it truly replicates the model of shifting settlement proposed for the area around the estuary of the Wadi Gaza. It is hoped that future fieldwork will clarify some of these points.

Notes

¹ This site is largely characterised by first millennium occupation, and we indeed identified Red Burnished pottery of eighth century date (we are grateful to Jean-Baptiste Humbert for the identification). However, Professor Eliezer Oren (personal comment, July 1996) confirms that he identified some LBA activity at the site, which he visited as part of the North Sinai Survey.

² In 1998 the Gaza Strip was still politically unpredictable and although the situation was changing rapidly, it was agreed that fieldwork should be confined to areas directly under the jurisdiction of the Municipality where the situation was more stable.

³ The pottery was analysed in the field and was not removed from the site, as this was not within the remit of our survey permit.

⁴ The quantities of later period pottery eroding out from the scarp were not collected but were identified in the field and a photographic record of the scarp was made.

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