



'Auja el-Foqa

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ABOUT NOON ON FRIDAY, JUNE 30, 2017, we packed up our equipment after a season of excavations at Khirbet el-Mastarah,* a site hidden in the desert of the southern Jordan Valley, and began driving slowly south through the desert back to the main road. Little was known about this region from archaeological excavations when we launched the Jordan Valley Excavation Project (JVEP) in 2016. Our goal was to excavate a selection of sites from among the hundreds with Iron Age (c. 1200–586 B.C.E.) remains discovered by Adam Zertal during his 14-year survey of the region, from 1980 to 1994. Our first site, el-Mastarah, was an enclosure site probably used

*Ralph K. Hawkins and David Ben-Shlomo, "Khirbet el-Mastarah: An Early Israelite Settlement?" *BAR*, July/August 2018.

by semi-nomadic peoples in the Iron Age to corral sheep and goats. But we wanted something different for our second site.

We had both read Zertal's 2009 survey report on a fortified town called Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa, and we knew that it was located on a high hill in the heart of Ras 'Ain el-'Auja, a village of about 200 Palestinian Bedouin who belong to two big clans, just across the main road south of el-Mastarah. So when we reached the main road, we crossed into the village and drove to the home of one of the village's main leaders. Over tea, he told us that the Bedouin knew the site, and that his village would welcome us if we wanted to work there.

After we had rested awhile, we climbed



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A Desert Fortress on Ancient Israel's Eastern Frontier

the steep southeastern slopes of the high hill behind his family's home until we had reached the summit, about 100 meters (328 ft) above its surroundings. We could immediately see the remains of several dozen structures on the surface of the ground all over the top of the hill. Claude Conder and Horatio Kitchener had visited the site in 1874 as part of the British Survey, but, because the ruins above ground were so well preserved, they concluded that it was "a ruined village, apparently modern." Their description of the site dissuaded other scholars from studying or even visiting it for the next 129 years. It was not until the winter of 2003–2004 that Zertal surveyed it as part of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey. His

ABOVE 'AUJA EL-FOQA. Looking north, this photograph shows a general view of 'Auja el-Foqa with the Bedouin village of Ras 'Ain el-'Auja below, in 2019, before excavations began at the site. During most of the year, the area is very arid. Yet a nearby spring permits survival in this inhospitable—but strategic—region. Situated on a high hill at the edge of the Jordan Valley, the fortress of 'Auja el-Foqa commands a view of the valley, including Jericho and its environs.

intensive survey demonstrated that the primary period during which the site was in use was the Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.), the time of the Israelite monarchy.

During our initial visit, we found numerous pottery sherds from the ninth to eighth centuries B.C.E. lying on the surface that seemed to confirm that assessment. Zertal and his team

had made a plan of the site that included all the visible architectural elements, including parts of a casemate wall that surrounded the site and a tower in its center. As we walked around the site, however, we could clearly see that there were two completely different architectural phases, including an upper phase of well-preserved small rounded single-room houses, ranging from 6 to 9 meters (20–30 ft) in diameter, and underneath a series of thicker, well-built linear structures.

In a few places, there were even earlier remains visible beneath those on the surface, hinting that the site may have been settled before the Iron Age II. On the basis of the remains and the pottery samples, Zertal and his team had concluded that the site had been founded as a small, unfortified village during the

early Iron Age, and that it was later expanded and fortified during the monarchic period, in the eighth century B.C.E.

As we stood in the ruins of 'Auja el-Foqa, we decided that it would be our next excavation project.

We began digging in the summer of 2019, and there were some difficulties at the outset. For one thing, there was no road to the site. The summit on which it is located is not easily accessible—

since it is difficult to climb from most directions. The southern and eastern slopes are very steep and covered with hard flint rocks, while the northern slope is slightly less so, with soft limestone outcrops exposed. We ended up plowing a 4-wheel path up the northern slope, which provided the most moderate ascent.

Another difficulty was the region's aridity. The Jordan Valley near Jericho is one of the hottest places on earth, and summer temperatures can exceed 115–120 degrees Fahrenheit (45–48 degrees Celsius). Since we were staying in Jerusalem (about an hour's drive from the site), we had to leave around 4:00 a.m. so that we could excavate during the cooler morning hours and leave the site to return to Jerusalem by noon. We conducted a second season of excavation in the winter of 2020, during which the temperatures were much more comfortable, averaging

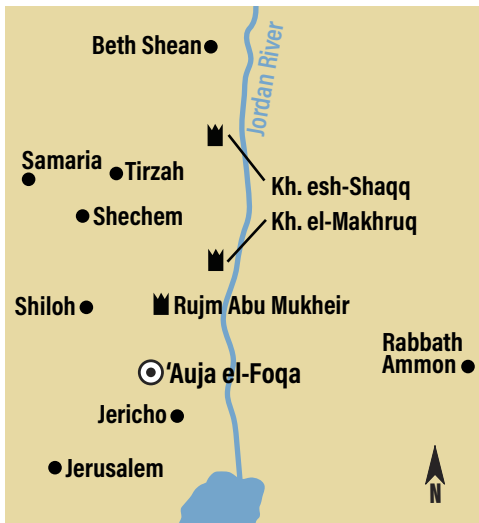
43–68 degrees Fahrenheit (6–20 degrees Celsius); we even had rain on the site. During this abbreviated season, we had a smaller staff, and we stayed in the nearby Moshav Fasaal (a short drive of 15 minutes from the site).

So far, we have excavated in two areas: Areas A and B. Area A, on the southern part of the site and right next to the casemate wall, was the first. Here, we uncovered four “cells” or rooms inside the casemate wall itself. Some of these included a destruction layer with evidence of fire and plenty of restorable pottery. In addition, several iron and bronze arrowheads were found near the casemate wall, which may provide evidence of a battle at the site.

In the area inside the town, there were hardly any houses attached to the city wall. We know that, in fortified Judahite towns of this period, such as Khirbet Qeiyafa and Beersheba, rows of houses were attached to the city wall that used the casemate cells as rear rooms. In the interior of Area A at 'Auja el-Foqa, however, all we found were a few pits, a stone-lined silo, a tabun, and several other installations in an open area. While there were remains of larger structures, these were evident only inside the town about 40 meters (130 ft) from the wall.

Area B, in the northern part of the site, yielded even more promising results. Since this area is precisely where the less steep slopes ascend to the site from the direction of the spring, it may be the location of the town's main gate. In this area, we began excavating a house, the outlines of which were visible on the surface. To the north of this house lies a flat open area and, beyond that, the northern part of the casemate wall. There is a gap in the casemate, which could indicate that the gate was located here. We also found a destruction layer in several of the rooms of this house, with complete pottery vessels, some fully intact.

However, despite excavating an area of more than 100 square meters (about 1,000 sq ft), we still do not yet have the full plan of this large building. It seems to have been connected to a larger complex, but its southern part is covered by a later structure, which we would have to remove to fully reveal this mysterious and well-preserved building. The later structure resembles several dozen small rounded single-room houses, scattered across the site. During our 2019 season, we excavated half of one of these in Area A and determined, on the basis of pottery, that it probably dates to the Ottoman period (1298–1922). These structures comprise an uppermost phase that was evidently



FRONTIER FORTRESSES. The Iron Age fortresses of Khirbet esh-Shaqq, Khirbet el-Makhrûq, Rujm Abu Mukheir, and 'Auja el-Foqa in the southern Jordan Valley guard Israel's eastern frontier.

BASED ON MAP BY A.D. RIDDLE



COURTESY OF RALPH K. HAWKINS

WATER IN THE DESERT. The major water source for the fortress of 'Auja el-Foqa and its surroundings was 'Ain 'Auja (the spring of 'Auja), which fills the Wadi 'Auja (see left). Today, a modern water channel (see below) brings water from the spring to the village of Ras 'Ain el-'Auja and continues east to the Jordan River. It carries gushing water until late August.

built in the later periods. More excavation and research on this phase are needed.

With regard to the Iron Age settlement, the results thus far indicate that its primary phase of use was during the Iron Age II, in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E., with a possible destruction in this period. On the whole, the site is rich with finds, especially pottery dated to the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. Most of the pottery vessels are closed shapes, such as storage jars and jugs, while cooking pots and bowls are rare (in contrast to many other contemporary sites, where bowls and kraters are the most common pottery types). We found a few chalices, which are sometimes associated with religious rituals. We also



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COURTESY OF MICHAEL FREIKMAN



SKYVIEW/COURTESY OF YOSEF GARFINKEL

CASEMATES AND SILOS. The first spot archaeologists began digging at 'Auja el-Foqa was Area A (see above), which contained part of the city wall, a stone-lined silo, some pits, and several installations. The type of wall surrounding the city is a casemate wall, composed of two parallel walls with hollow cells in between them. During the Iron Age, such cells or rooms were often incorporated into houses abutting the city wall—but not at 'Auja el-Foqa. Nevertheless, the plan and size of these excavated cells is very similar to those at Khirbet Qeiyafa in ancient Judah (see left). The round stone-lined silo, located in the open area near the fortification wall, is also similar to those known from the monarchic period in the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

The fortification of towns with casemate walls and a radial town plan is often linked with the “Judahite” city plan in the monarchic period, but it may be a more universal functional design for military settlements throughout the southern Levant during the Iron Age—and appears in northern Israel, too.

Since the pottery of our site seems to reflect northern styles, it may tentatively be seen as an Israelite site, at least during the late Iron Age II. The casemate wall, along with the location of the site and some of the military appurtenances found therein (e.g., spear tips, arrowheads, and sling stones), probably indicates a strategic and military function. Furthermore, the resemblance of the casemate walls at 'Auja el-Foqa and Qeiyafa and their locations on a border between two political entities link these two sites as political-historical phenomena during the biblical period. This raises questions about the identification, nature, and purpose of 'Auja el-Foqa as a fortified town in the southern Jordan Valley.

found several decorated and imported vessels, along with a relatively large group of iron tools and weapons, as well as stone vessels, possible slingshots, and mud doughnut-shaped objects, which may have functioned as stoppers for jars. Overall, the ceramic styles found at 'Auja el-Foqa are more similar to ones found in the northern Israelite kingdom rather than in Judah.

So far, the site's main feature is the well-built Iron Age casemate wall. It was built according to the same basic plan as the casemate wall at Khirbet Qeiyafa, a site in the Shephelah (Judean foothills) that has been interpreted by its excavator as a Judahite stronghold from the time of kings Saul and David and probably served as a western defense against Philistia.

As for the site's identity, Zertal identified it as biblical 'Ataroth (Hebrew: עטרוֹת), mentioned in the description of the boundary between Manasseh and Ephraim in Joshua 16:6–7, which lists a series of sites between Shechem and Jericho. The text states that the boundary “goes down from Janoah to Ataroth and to Naarah, and touches Jericho, ending at the Jordan” (Joshua 16:7). Zertal based his identification on the site's location north of Jericho and its name, which means “crown,” reflecting its position on a hilltop.

Archaeologists Shmuel Ahituv, Eitan Klein, Amir Ganor, and Shay Bar, however, claim that 'Auja el-Foqa is the city of Na'arah (Hebrew: נַעֲרָתָה), which is also mentioned in Joshua 16:7. Some base their identification on a mention of Na'arah found in the unprovenanced, and

AREA B. Archaeologists at 'Auja el-Foqa have partially excavated Area B in the north part of the site. There they found an Iron Age house, which had been destroyed in the ninth or eighth century B.C.E., and open leveled areas to the north, which might be part of a gateway area and path into the site.



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IRON ARROWHEAD. Found near the city wall, this iron arrowhead might indicate a battle waged between the Ammonites and Israelites at the site of 'Auja el-Foqa in the ninth or eighth century B.C.E.

possibly forged, “Jerusalem Papyrus,” which was seized by the Israel Antiquities Authority's Robbery Prevention Unit in a sting against a band of looters who had been operating in the Judean Desert in recent years.* Whether the Jerusalem Papyrus is authentic or not, the fact that 'Auja el-Foqa is the only site with Iron Age remains before Jericho on the biblical border, as defined

*See Christopher Rollston, “The King of Judah, Jars of Wine, and the City of Jerusalem,” *Bible History Daily* (blog), published on October 25, 2017. Rollston concludes that the papyrus is a modern forgery.



COURTESY OF MICHAEL FREIKMAN



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PRISTINE PRESERVATION. Archaeologists at 'Auja el-Foqa found many complete pottery vessels within a house in Area B. These come from a destruction level dated to the ninth or eighth century B.C.E. Erik Waaler, a volunteer at the dig, helps uncover some from one of the house's rooms (see above). At right is a complete jar from the house with a doughnut-shaped stopper on top.



TAL ROGOVSKI

the site faces Transjordan and the Ammonite kingdom east of the Jordan River. According to the Bible, there had been conflict between the Israelites and the Ammonites since the days of the pre-monarchic judges (e.g., Judges 10:6–12:15). They were at war intermittently throughout the reigns of Saul and David (e.g., 1 Samuel 11; 2 Samuel 10–12). All these conflicts would have involved traversing the area north of Jericho and south of Wadi Far'ah. In fact, two important roads crossed the Jordan River in this area: one near Jericho and the other at Wadi Far'ah.

In this vicinity, the Manasseh Hill Country Project surveyed three Iron Age fortresses with watch towers, all located at strategic passes overlooking key Iron Age II roads that connected Transjordan and the Jordan Valley with Israel. These three sites shared a similar architectural layout and may have been part of a royal fortification system designed to shore up Israel's eastern border. In light of the geopolitical situation, it makes sense that 'Auja el-Foqa could have served a similar purpose on the eastern frontier as some claim Khirbet Qeiyafa did for Israel's western border: a local administrative and a military center of the southern Jordan Valley during the Iron Age II, in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E., with a possible destruction in the same period.

by Joshua 16:7, suggests that identifying it with Na'arah is probably correct.

But why was the fortified city built in the first place?

On a local level, it may have controlled the nearby spring of 'En 'Auja, a major water source for the region of Jericho and Wadi Far'ah, and protected it from local semi-nomadic populations or external enemies. It may have also provided aid in territorial disputes between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Further, it might have been part of an administrative or military system during the Iron Age that governed the region, although it is not clear whether it belonged to the kingdom of Israel or Judah.

On a broader level, it probably guarded the eastern frontier against enemies such as the Arameans, Ammonites, and Moabites. Notably,

centuries B.C.E., with a possible destruction in the same period.

The need for further excavation is clear, both because of the site's well-preserved remains from the Iron Age and Late Antiquity and its special location in the southern Jordan Valley, a region poorly understood in terms of archaeological research, especially with respect to the monarchic period. In future seasons, we will continue to look for the gate and excavate more architecture inside the site, including some large structures that may have had administrative or storage purposes.

We plan to be back in the field at Khirbet 'Auja el-Foqa in May and June of 2022, and we invite you to join us in this pioneering work in the Jordan Valley. To learn more, visit our project website (www.jvcp.org). 