GEZER

Tel Gezer is a rectangular mound located 5 miles (8 km) south-southeast of the modern city of Ramleh. The site is roughly 30 acres (12.1 ha) in size and situated at 738.2 ft (225 m) above sea level. The tell consists of a western and an eastern hill, with a valley between forming a saddle. The northern side of the tell has a steep escarpment, while the southern side has gentler slopes. To the southeast of the eastern hill is a natural spring. The western hill is higher and where the acropolis is located.

Tel Gezer is located in the Aijalon Valley, on the western flank of the northern Shephelah, overlooking the southern Coastal Plain as well as the Aijalon drainage system. The Aijalon Valley is a broad basin that is covered with rich alluvium. While it floods in the wet season, it is an excellent plain for grain when it is dry. Surveys in the Aijalon Valley have shown that the Gezer vicinity was continuously occupied throughout the Iron Age.

As with most ancient cities, the surrounding hills and valleys contained the fields and orchards of the inhabitants. Surveys have revealed that several agricultural installations dotted the landscape. Inside the city, olive presses have been found at Iron Age–I levels as well as Iron Age II. A famous early Hebrew inscription, the Gezer Calendar, is a schoolboy exercise of a farmer’s almanac, listing the seasons (one or two months) of “Gathering, planting, late sowing, cutting flax, reaping barley, reaping grain, pruning, and summer fruit.” It starts from the fall and runs to the end of summer. It is inscribed on a limestone plaque.

The Aijalon Valley is not only a breadbasket but also the most important route leading up to the Judean hills from the Coastal Plain. Within the valley, Gezer’s geographical location is even more
significant because of its proximity to the major north–south route, the international coastal highway from Egypt to Mesopotamia. The intersection of the international and regional highways along with the confluence of the two coastal regions (southern Coastal Plain and Sharon Plain), the hill country, and the Shephelah make this site a critical regional hub, thus providing a natural conduit for the exchange of cultural influences, new ideas, and technological innovations.

History of Excavation. While Gezer was known from biblical, Egyptian, and Assyrian sources, its identification was first confirmed by C. Clermont-Ganneau in 1871, when he discovered one of the first-century B.C.E. boundary inscriptions in the vicinity of the mound. The first intensive exploration of Tel Gezer was conducted by R. A. S. Macalister during the years 1902 to 1905 and 1907 to 1909, under the auspices of the Palestine Exploration Fund. The results of these early excavations were published in three volumes in 1912. Nearly half of Tel Gezer was excavated by Macalister, and, unfortunately, the methods of excavation were very primitive. Macalister dug the site in strips and backfilled each trench, excavating most of the southern tell down to bedrock. While these excavations provided an overview of the major fortification systems, the results are enigmatic and do not allow for an accurate reconstruction of the various cultural horizons of the ancient city. The next excavator was Raymond-Charles Weill, known for his excavations in Jerusalem before and after World War I (1913–1914 and 1923–1924) under the patronage of Baron Rothschild. Sometime during the course of the Jerusalem excavations, Weill excavated lands on and around Tel Gezer that were acquired by Rothschild. In 1934 renewed excavations were directed by Alan Rowe under the auspices of the Palestine Exploration Society. This excavation was terminated after a short season.

The American Gezer Project began in 1964 under the auspices of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion and the Harvard Semitic Museum. William G. Dever led the phase-I excavations (1964–1971), and phase II was led by Joe D. Seger (1972–1974). These excavations distinguished 21 stratigraphic levels from the late Chalcolithic to the Roman period. Dever conducted two additional excavation seasons in 1984 and 1990 to address specific issues that arose in regard to the date of the Iron-Age fortifications. In the twenty-first century renewed excavations on the tell were conducted by a team from the Tandy Institute for Archaeology under the direction of Steven Ortiz and Samuel Wolff. At the same time, the Gezer Water System Project, under the auspices of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the Israel Parks Authority, specifically focused on reexcavating the Gezer water system.

Excavation Results. The Hebrew Union College excavations defined 26 major strata. While there is evidence of occupation in the Chalcolithic period and Early Bronze Age, these were meager occupations, probably local villages around the spring.

Bronze Age. During the Middle Bronze Age II (1550–1530 B.C.E.), Gezer enjoyed its zenith. The fortifications tell the story. A solid 12.2 ft (4 m) thick wall was built around both hills. Earlier excavations (Macalister and Rowe) found nine towers in this wall, with an estimate of 25 total. The wall was constructed of large, roughly dressed stones (cyclopean) with a mud-brick superstructure. On the western hill, the Hebrew Union College excavations revealed a major tower and gate system. A typical three-entryway Middle-Bronze city gate was built on the south slope of the western hill, flanked on the west with a massive bastion (51.2 by 98.4 ft [15.6 by 30 m]). A glacis composed of dike and fill layers was added to the outside of the city wall. This is one of the largest defensive systems known in the southern Levant.

Just north of the gate and plaza, an urban water system consisted of a rock-cut shaft connected to a sloping tunnel that extended to a large natural cavern. Excavators of this water system postulate that this natural cavern had an exterior opening, probably accessible from outside the city. The inhabitants would have known of the cavern and built the tunnel to access the water during times of siege.

This city contained a cultic “high place” (possibly originating from the end of the third millennium B.C.E.). This is a north–south row of 10 monoliths
found in the northern half of the central valley. These monoliths ranged in height from 3.3 ft (1 m) to over 9.8 ft (3 m). A large stone block with an impression for a basin or as the base for another monolith was located west of the line and in the center of the monoliths. Many theories have been proposed for these stones. Many argue that they were used as part of a general tradition of erecting masseboth (standing stones) to commemorate an event (Gen 28:18–22, 35:9–15), burial markers (Gen 35:9–21, 2 Sam 18:18), or a covenant relationship (Gen 31:49, Exod 24:3–8).

The massive Middle-Bronze building activities are evidence of political organizations, especially for the mobilization of corvée workers, used to support a centralized bureaucratic apparatus. While scholars debate the relationship of these city-states, most realize that these were functioning polities; some even suggest that they were early examples of state formation. Gezer played an important role in the expanded settlement system of the Middle Bronze–IIA period. During the mid- to late seventeenth century B.C.E. Gezer became the main center of the region. These dramatic changes correspond with the emergent polity of the Hyksos in the Egyptian delta and their influence throughout the southern Levant. This city was violently destroyed by Thutmose III (r. ca. 1504–1450 B.C.E.) about 1468 B.C.E.

The Late Bronze Age experienced a partial abandonment during the fifteenth century B.C.E. This correlates with Egyptian texts of the New Kingdom that mention deportation of several slaves from foreign lands brought to Egypt (e.g., Thutmose III and especially a raid by Thutmose IV [r. 1419–1410 B.C.E.]). From the fourteenth century B.C.E. a fragment of an Amarna tablet was found by Macalister, who originally dated it to the Assyrian period. Several scholars have proposed that Macalister uncovered palace-like complexes that date to the Late Bronze Age (possible locations are on the eastern slope of the acropolis and Macalister’s Canaanite Castle in the northern bay of the saddle). The more certain finds come from the Hebrew Union College excavations, which uncovered Palace 14120. From the thirteenth century B.C.E. the Tandy excavations uncovered a Late Bronze Age pillared building overlooking the south slope of the tell. This building was violently destroyed, possibly as a result of the campaign of Pharaoh Merneptah (r. ca. 1236–1223 B.C.E.).

Iron Age. The Iron Age I period at Gezer is well attested. Occupation has been found on the acropolis and the eastern slope of the western hill (e.g., field II and VII of the Hebrew Union College excavations and field W of the Tandy excavations). It is probable that some of the finds from Macalister’s excavations on the southern hill also date to this period. A series of domestic structures were found on the acropolis by the Hebrew Union College excavations (a granary, two courtyard houses: Northeast House, Northwest House). The pottery is a mixture of local traditions with some Philistine wares. Based on comparison with sites in the heartland of Philistia, Gezer was probably a mixed population of Canaanites and a few Philistines.

The Iron Age II A phases were destroyed in a violent event (Hebrew Union College stratum VIII, Tandy stratum 9). This destruction was found in almost all excavation areas but predominantly those from the acropolis down to the southern slope of the western hill. The most likely suspect is the renewed campaign by Siamun (r. 984–965 B.C.E.) of the Egyptian Twenty-First Dynasty. The Tandy excavations uncovered a clay storage stopper with a seal containing iconography common to Siamun.

In the tenth century Gezer B.C.E. was refortified with a southern six-chambered gate and a city wall that encompassed the complete tell. The gate itself was well built with large, hewn limestone boulders and ashlar masonry at the entrance. The gate had two towers attached to its outer face with a casemate wall attached to the gate complex. Each chamber contained plastered benches, and a large stone basin was in the first northern chamber. A plastered downspout drain was at the rear corner of the gate. A well-designed water-drainage system was installed shortly after the construction. The floor surface was raised and a central water channel, 3.3 ft (1 m) in depth, was cut running down the center of the street. This was covered with slabs.
While the gate systems functioned as fortifications, it is clear that they also served a social function, particularly in the Iron Age. Within the gate, chambers created areas for meeting, as evidenced by benches that lined the walls. The first chamber to the right, as a person entered the gate complex, had a large water basin. The biblical text notes the importance of the gate in daily life as a place where the elders judged (Deut 21:19, 22:15; Amos 5:22; Ruth 4:1–11), a market (2 Kgs 7:1), and a public square for assemblies (1 Kgs 22:10, Isa 29:21, Amos 5:10, Jer 38:7, 2 Chr 32:6).

A water system is located north of the six-chambered Iron-Age gate. This is an oval reservoir 45.9 to 55.8 ft (14–17 m) in diameter. It was hewn into the bedrock to a depth of about 59 ft (18 m). A stairway was hewn into the walls and descends to the floor of the pool. There are not enough data to determine if this was a reservoir to catch water or a shaft that was dug to the water table.

It appears that a casemate wall adjoined both sides of the gate complex, but a single wall line was constructed around the rest of the city. The casemate wall system consists of two parallel lines that extend from the gate, about 98.4 ft (30 m) in length. The casemate is constructed of two rows of large unhewn stones with a central row of smaller chinking/fill stones. The casemate rooms (ca. 16.4 by 4.9 ft [5 by 1.5 m each] were separated from each other by divider walls (width ca. 4.9 ft [1.5 m]).

A large stone glacis was built up against the outer line of the Iron-Age casemate wall. The stones of this glacis are smaller than the stones of the Middle Bronze–II glacis. The glacis continues 29.5 ft (9 m) downslope from its upper limit to the lowest exposed levels. The glacis slopes at ca. 15 degrees but is steeper toward the east. The stones in the Iron-II glacis merge into a system of retaining walls and crib walls that were exposed for ca. 82 ft (25 m).
As well as the casemate and gate complex, a city wall and outer gatehouse were added at a later time. The outer wall consists of a single wall line ca. 4.9 ft (1.5 m) thick with ashlar towers and bastions. The Iron-Age fortification system was first constructed in the tenth century B.C.E. and continued in use until the eighth century B.C.E., when it was destroyed by Tiglath-pileser III (r. 745–727 B.C.E.).

Adjoining the gate to the west were two building complexes: guardrooms and an administrative building to the west of these guardrooms (Palace 10000) excavated in 1984. It is clear that there was a large administrative quarter with public buildings in the area west of the city gate. Pottery typical of the Iron Age II (red slip hand-burnished bowls, kraters, cooking pots) was found in these levels, and the Hebrew Union College excavation found evidence of a destruction that should be associated with the campaign of Pharaoh Shoshonk I (r. ca. 935–914 B.C.E.).

During the ninth century B.C.E. the city changed. The six-chambered gate became a four-chambered gate, and the nature of the administrative quarter changed drastically. Instead of large administrative buildings, there were small domestic units. Building 52136 was rebuilt with some modifications. This city was also destroyed, probably by the Aramean campaigns. The character of the administrative quarter was changed again during the mid-eighth century B.C.E. The guardrooms continue in use, along with the four-chambered gate; but the domestic complexes of the ninth century B.C.E. became large administrative buildings. Buildings A and B were typical Iron-Age tripartite public buildings, while Building C was an industrial complex with an olive oil installation. These administrative buildings were built immediately next to the rebuilt casemate city wall line. This change in city plan is best attributed to Uzziah’s (r. ca. 791–739 B.C.E.) expansion toward the Philistine coast (2 Chr 26).

While most of the buildings in the administrative quarter were excavated by Macalister, the domestic quarter was untouched until the Hebrew Union College and Tandy excavations. Both of these excavations found evidence of an intense conflagration attributed to Tiglath-pileser III’s campaign of 733 B.C.E. The ceramic assemblage contains types typical of Judean sites as well as coastal assemblages, illustrating that Gezer continued to reflect a site on the border zone between the hills and coast.

During the Iron Age the typical house at Gezer was rectangular and consisted of four rooms. A central room with *tabuns* (ovens) was flanked by two parallel rooms on either side. These three rows of rooms were separated by pillars. There was a back room perpendicular to these three rows of rooms. This broad back room functioned as a storage room. Such a house would have had a second story. To the northwest there is an eighth-century B.C.E. domestic quarter with several typical Iron-Age four-room houses built next to each other and a separate house set by itself that is considerably larger than the other houses, 1,453.1 ft² (135 m²), illustrating the variation in wealth during this period.

**Persian, Hellenistic, and Maccabean periods.** The Persian period at Gezer is known only from tombs and material culture. The last occupation at Gezer was during the Hellenistic period. Naturally, one of the key questions is whether there is any archaeological evidence for the Seleucid and Hasmonean occupations. Several coins dating to Demetrius II (r. 145–139 and 129–125 B.C.E.) were found, one with the name Antiochus VII (r. 138–129 B.C.E.). In addition, several Rhodian jar handles were found, one with the stamp *SIMIIOU*, “of Simon,” in Greek. Large quantities of Hellenistic pottery were uncovered. Most of the lamps were of the folded-over type, typical of the late second century B.C.E. All major excavations have exposed a well-developed town plan of Gezer during the Hellenistic period. Most of the occupation appears to be on the east slope of the western hill to the eastern hill. There is also evidence of a Jewish household where a possible *mikvah* (ritual bath) was found.

Several Gezer boundary stones from this period have been found. These are bilingual inscriptions, with *Alkios* (private name) written in Greek and “the boundary of Gezer” written facing the inscription in Hebrew. There are 12 inscriptions, the latest found by the Gezer survey project. These inscriptions illustrate a multiethnic population, the
impact of Hellenization, and the division between public and private fields. It is also possible that they reflect the influence of the Maccabees and their concern for the application of Jewish law in agriculture.

**Gezer in Historical and Biblical Sources.** Gezer is referred to in Egyptian and Assyrian texts and in the Bible.

**Egyptian and Assyrian texts.** The earliest reference to Gezer is in Thutmose III's topographical list (no. 104) on the walls of the Temple of Amon at Karnak. This contains a scene commemorating his victories. While not mentioned in the so-called annals of his campaigns, most scholars postulate that Gezer would have been conquered by Thutmose III's first campaign (Battle of Megiddo) to control the traditional coastal highway and check any expansionist policies of Mitanni. A short inscription of Thutmose IV from his mortuary temple at Thebes mentions Hurrian captives from Gezer (ANET, p. 248).

During the fourteenth century B.C.E. the city of Gezer expanded, but most of what is known comes from historical texts. Gezer and its rulers figure prominently in the El-Amarna archives. The earliest text, sent from Pharaoh Amenhotep III (r. 1417–1379 B.C.E.) to Milkitu, ruler of Gezer, asked for 40 beautiful female cupbearers in exchange for a shipment of merchandise. Several texts from Milkitu illustrate that he was a major player in the Late-Bronze Canaanite city-states, either displaying his loyalty to pharaoh or encountering problems with other Canaanite rulers. Provenience studies of cuneiform tablets from the southern Levant suggest that Gezer might have been a Late Bronze–Age scribal school or center.

Gezer is also mentioned in the famous "Israel stela," which records a campaign by Merneptah in the late thirteenth century B.C.E. Merneptah celebrates this campaign in another inscription found at Amada where he brags of being the "subduer of Gezer." It is possible that Gezer is mentioned in Sheshonk I's city list. The name of a city between Gaza and Rubuti is broken in the inscription, and the city has been interpreted as Gezer.

A relief of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III on the walls of his palace at Nimrud depicts the siege and capture of a city called Ga-as-re (Gezer). This was part of his campaign in Philistia in 734–733 B.C.E.

**Gezer in the biblical tradition.** According to biblical tradition, Joshua defeated the king of Gezer, who was part of a Canaanite coalition (Josh 10:33). Gezer remained in Canaanite hands throughout the period of the Judges (Josh 16:10, Judg 1:29), even though it formed the boundary for Ephraim's tribal allotment (Josh 16:3) and was assigned as a Levitical city (Josh 21:21). David fought against the Philistines near Gezer (2 Sam 5:25, 1 Chr 20:4). Gezer was conquered by Egypt and given as a dowry to Solomon.

Gezer is most famous for its association with the building projects of Solomon. The text associates the building of Gezer with Hazor and Megiddo as well as a note that an Egyptian pharaoh captured Gezer, burned the city, killed the Canaanites, and
gave it as a dowry to a marriage between his daughter and Solomon (1 Kgs 9:15–16). Emphasis has been placed on the archaeology of these three cities, distorting the literary analysis of the text. It is clear that this note about a pharaoh (1 Kgs 9:36) is parenthetical and separates an original archival list of building projects throughout the kingdom including projects from Hazor in the north to Tamar in the wilderness. Most scholars have noted that this account is part of a section of various fragments of text associated with Solomon’s statecraft, construction projects, and conscripted labor (1 Kgs 9:15–28).

It has been interpreted as a summary statement of Solomon’s activities that follows a description of Solomon’s building of the Temple and Palace (1 Kgs 9:1–9). This is similar to other accounts of kings where the author provides a summary statement at the end of their reigns.

Gezer is well known in the books of Maccabees. Various references in 1 Maccabees note that Gazara was a Syrian outpost of the Seleucid dynasty. In 160 B.C.E., after the death of Judas Maccabeus, Bacchides, a Seleucid general, fortified the city and placed a garrison there (1 Macc 9:52). It was not until the reign of Jonathan Maccabeus (r. ca. 160–143/42 B.C.E.) that the Jews were able to gain an upper hand. Simon (r. 143/32–135/34 B.C.E.), Jonathan’s brother and successor, won national independence from Demetrius II. He sieged the fortress of Gezer and won. He expelled the inhabitants with loyal “keepers of the law” and placed John (Hyrkanus) in charge of the new Jewish garrison (1 Macc 13:43–53).

Assessment. The Gezer region continues to play an important role in history even up to the modern period. The geographical dynamics and strategic location in the Ajalon Valley have made this site a contested border and prized city for the various local polities in the area as well as major states that wished to dominate the southern Coastal Plain. In addition, archaeological research of the site has continued to influence historical reconstructions and theoretical models of the past as well as biblical interpretation.

[See also Cities, Villages, and Towns, Bronze and Iron Age; Hazor; Megiddo; and Shephelah.]

Bibliography


Ortiz, Steven M. “Reading between the Lines: Uzziah’s Expansion and Tel Gezer.” Review and Expositor 106, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 361–383.


Steven M. Ortiz