

## Archaeology of Syria-Palestine



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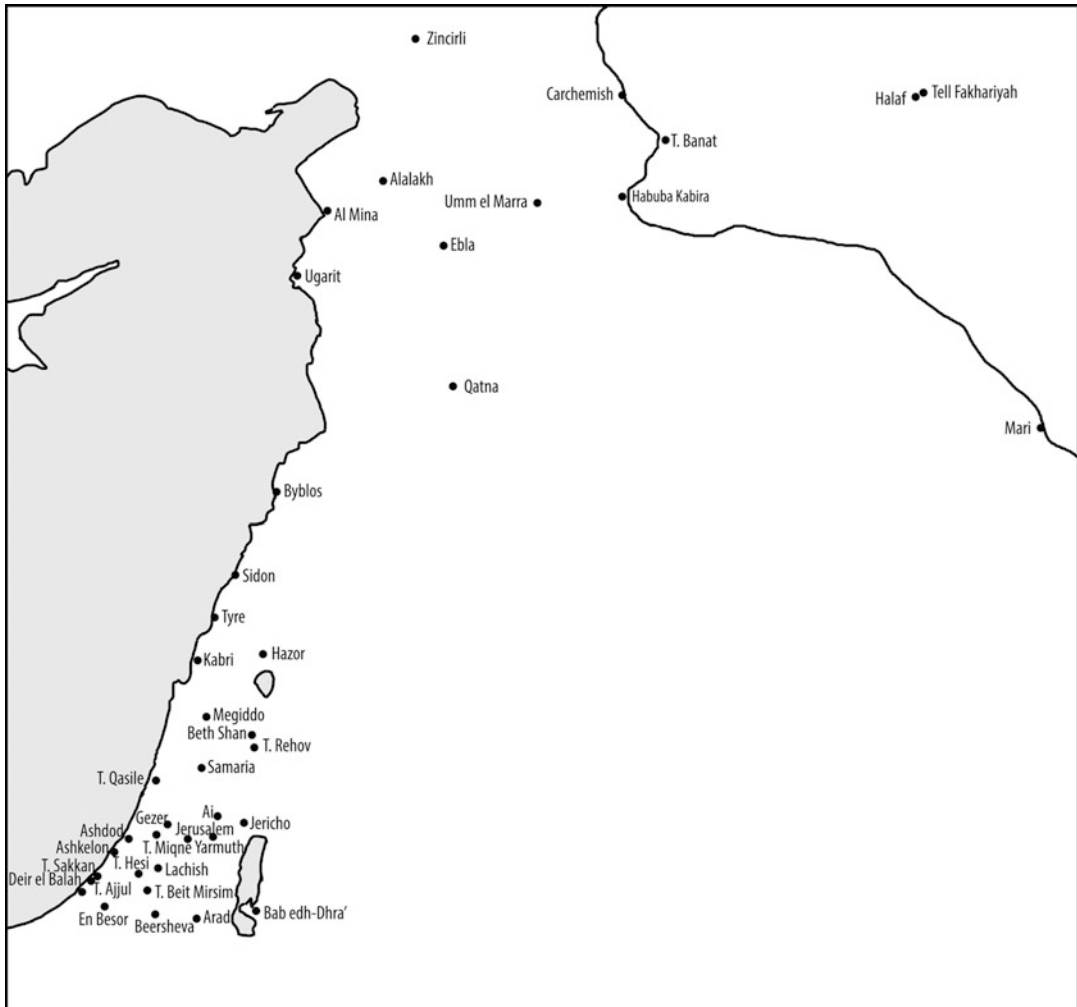
### Introduction

The archaeology of Syria-Palestine (Fig. 1) reveals a complex mosaic of interconnecting cultures with close relations to the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, as well as with the surrounding cultures of the East Mediterranean, during the Bronze and Iron Ages (mid-fourth/third-mid first millennium BCE). As such Syria-Palestine was the ultimate contact situation, a place where individuals from very different social and material worlds interacted closely, sharing ideas and knowledge. The region was home to some of the earliest known fortified towns and cities; in the north these were literate from the mid-3 millennium BC, and texts from sites such as Ebla and Mari provide us with a unique insight into international politics, local religious practices, and social organization. Given the strategic position of Syria-Palestine, it was inevitably witness to countless military campaigns and successive empires between the late fourth and first millennium BC, indeed continuing down to the present day. Detailed and increasingly sophisticated archaeological exploration and

interpretation continues to shed light on Bronze and Iron Age settlement allowing a more nuanced understanding of the lives of the ancient communities in the region.

### Definition

Syria-Palestine (also commonly referred to as the Levant) comprises the region of southwest Asia bounded by the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Amuq plain to the north, the Sinai desert to the south, and the upper reaches of the Euphrates river to the east. It can be subdivided into a number of smaller regional entities according to geography and external influences. The two main areas of the northern Levant comprise coastal Syria, lying between the Mediterranean Basin and the Orontes River, and the uplands of inland Syria, between the Orontes and the Euphrates. The Barada river rising in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains watered the Damascus Oasis (al-Ghūṭah) – a large and fertile tract of land supporting settlement from at least the second millennium BC. To the south of the oasis is the basaltic region of Hawran, separating Syria from Transjordan. In antiquity the northern Levant (Syria) fell within the cultural and political orbit of Mesopotamia. The central area of the Levant (modern-day Lebanon) is a narrow coastal strip, the homeland of the Phoenicians; this is bounded to the east by the Lebanon mountains, the Beqaa valley, and further east by the Anti-Lebanon mountains. The southern Levant is



**Archaeology of Syria-Palestine, Fig. 1** Map of Syria-Palestine showing sites mentioned in text

similarly divided into two zones by the River Jordan and Dead Sea. The western zone, Cis-jordan, comprises a wide coastal plain and the highlands of mount Carmel, the Judean Hills, and the hilly region of Galilee. The Jezreel Valley in the northern part of this region provides an important route east-west. This area was the homeland to the ancient Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites and was heavily influenced culturally and politically by ancient Egypt. To the east of the River Jordan lies an area of uplands and plateaus, known as Transjordan.

The chronology of pre-Achaemenid Syria-Palestine (Sharon 2014) is defined by ceramic

seriation – significant changes in pottery styles over time. Absolute dates traditionally derive from cross-dating, using named Egyptian or Mesopotamian artefacts found in sealed contexts, but increasingly radiometric dating is being used to construct a more secure chronological framework (Toffolo et al. 2014). The late fourth-third millennium BCE covers the Early Bronze Age, the Middle and Late Bronze Ages equate to the second millennium BCE, Iron Age I covers 1200–1000 BCE, and Iron II (down to the Babylonian/Achaemenid Empire) largely correlates with the first 500 years of the first millennium BCE. These chronological phases largely

correspond to significant developments in the social organization of the region: urbanization and the development of states through to the emergence of large regional empires.

## Historical Background

The earliest archaeological activity in the southern Levant, in the nineteenth century, was largely inspired by an interest in the Bible (Davies 2004). The pioneer of biblical archaeology was the American clergyman Edward Robinson, who developed an historical/biblical geography of Palestine by matching modern Arabic names to biblical Hebrew names, albeit not always accurately. In 1865 the Palestine Exploration Fund was established with the express aim of surveying Palestine to provide a geographical background to the Bible. Some of their earliest work included the survey of the ancient water system of Jerusalem by Charles Warren, and in 1914 T.E. Lawrence and Sir Leonard Woolley (2003) completed a more detailed archaeological survey of the southern Levant, the so-called wilderness of Zin. Woolley and Lawrence also excavated the (Neo-)Hittite site of Carchemish on the Euphrates for the British Museum between 1912 and 1914.

The archaeological landscape of Syria-Palestine is characterized by tell sites – mounds formed by the detritus of continuous occupation over many centuries. These dominate archaeological narratives, being the focus of excavations over the past 150 years or so, while the rural hinterland is less well researched. While these tells proved challenging for the nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeologists, they also aided the development of archaeological techniques as demonstrated by Sir Flinders Petrie's excavations at Tell el-Hesi in 1890. Here, Petrie not only introduced the principles of stratigraphic excavations to Palestine but was also able to demonstrate the validity of his ceramic sequence dating by correlating his typological sequence against the stratigraphy of the tell. Important sites such as Megiddo, Gezer, and Ugarit (Minet el Beida and Ras Shamra) were excavated in the early years of the twentieth century, but

archaeologists Gottlieb Schumacher, Robert Macalister, and Claude Schaeffer struggled with the complexities of the multiple layers of occupation and the sheer quantities of artefacts uncovered. At Byblos French archaeologists Pierre Montet and Maurice Dunand excavated the site in arbitrary 20 cm levels, creating an artificial stratigraphy, obscuring details of site formation. Instead, it was Reisner's excavations at Samaria where we see the first real understanding of tell formation and the necessity for meticulous recording, including architectural plans and photography. This was taken forward by William Albright at Tell Beit Mirsim, albeit with a primary focus on pottery context rather than stratigraphy to interpret the results. Kenyon's excavations at Jericho further established the importance of stratigraphy and the use of the Wheeler-style grid system as standard. These approaches to tell archaeology have formed the basis of ongoing excavation in Syria-Palestine throughout the twentieth century up to the present, although regional surveys are increasingly helping to supplement our understanding of human interactions with the landscape (e.g., Wilkinson 2003), alongside some excavation of small, rural sites (e.g., Fall et al. 1998).

Over the past 70 years, modern political events have severely impacted upon archaeological research throughout much of Syria-Palestine. While dam construction in the late twentieth century has obliterated many sites in the area of the Syrian Euphrates, it likewise served as the impetus for systematic archaeological exploration of the region (Cooper 2006, 5–6). More destructive still have been the civil wars in Lebanon and Syria and the intifada in the Palestinian territories. Nonetheless, modern technologies have increasingly been employed to help record, preserve, and protect archaeological remains; for example, satellite imagery has been used to document the damage and destruction of archaeological sites in the Syrian civil war (Casana and Laugier 2017).

## Key Issues/Current Debates

Initial interpretations of the archaeology of the southern Levant were informed by biblical

sources. For example, the destructions at the end of EB III and appearance of new pottery and metal styles in MB I were equated with the Amorite incursions recounted in the Bible (Kenyon 1979, 145–6); similarly the Iron II sites at Samaria, Megiddo, and Beersheva were equated with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (Kenyon 1979, 258–85). More detailed knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of the material record and the application of cultural-historical approaches have resulted in the archaeological narratives being placed within trajectories of social complexity, namely, the emergence, flourish, and decline of civilization. Also significant are more nuanced understandings of the relationship between material culture and cultural identity. The key metanarratives currently used to interpret Syria-Palestinian archaeology are urbanization, secondary state formation, empire, interconnections, and migrations/population movements. There has also been considerable debate over significant material changes in the archaeological record and the decline and collapse of urban centers and state systems, both at the end of the EBA (Kennedy 2016) and at the Bronze-Iron Age transition (Ward et al. 1992).

The EBA in the southern Levant is typically characterized as a period of increasing social complexity, culminating in the appearance of towns in EB II–III (Joffe 1993; Miroshedji 1989). Around 50 fortified EBA centers have been identified in Cisjordan, including Jericho, Ai, and Arad. These range in size between 3 and 25 hectares. The fortified walls had stone bases and mudbrick superstructures built on earthen ramparts and were protected by semicircular or rectilinear towers. The gateways were protected by flanking square towers. Inside the walls there were blocks of houses with courtyards and a network of paved streets. Public buildings are attested in EB III, most notably at Megiddo (Building 3177) and Tel Yarmuth (B1 and B2). These were substantial multi-roomed structures with inner courtyards. Recently, Chesson (2015) has questioned whether these settlements should in fact be identified as urban centers, noting a lack of distinction between the material habitus of rural and non-rural settlements and no evidence for the development of

surplus redistribution economies. Instead she interprets these sites as egalitarian walled communities.

Urbanization is a later phenomenon in the northern Levant (Cooper 2006), dating to EB III–IV (the latter half of the second millennium BCE). Unlike the southern Levant, here there is clear evidence for settlement hierarchy, with large central places surrounded by smaller satellite settlements in the hinterland. The urban centers, or citadel cities, are characterized by a walled upper town, the location of the palace and temples, and a lower town fortified by walls built on a rampart. A number of these cities have been excavated, most notably Ebla (Matthiae 1981). There is also clear evidence that these towns functioned within an early state system, as is evidenced by Palace G at Ebla and its important archives (some 17,000 documents written in the cuneiform script), which document a redistribution economy, treaties, and trade with other towns, and also literary texts. There is some evidence for gift exchange between Ebla and Old Kingdom Egypt in the form of a Pepi I inscribed stone vase fragment. Mari on the Euphrates (Margueron 2014), which lies at the interface between Mesopotamia and the Levant, was an important mediator of cultural and economic influence in Syria and in particular was in close contact (not always peaceful) with Ebla. Culturally, Mari was situated within the Mesopotamian sphere of influence, as is indicated by the lapis lazuli bead inscribed with the name of Mes-ana-pada, ruler of Ur, found in palace P1, and the fine stone sculptures dedicated in the Temple of Ishtar. There is also evidence for attached craft specialists in the palaces, who produced luxurious goods from traded commodities (lapis lazuli, gold, and silver). These might be placed in elite burials, such as the royal tombs located on top of the acropolis of Umm el-Marra. Here finds included silver drinking equipment and jewelry made from gold and semi-precious stones (Schwartz et al. 2006).

There is an apparent break between the urbanized communities of the EBA and MBA-LBA. Many EBA towns were abandoned – this has been variously attributed to climate change (Kennedy 2016) or military activity, such as the

sack of Ebla by the Akkadian rulers – but by the second millennium BC, urban centers flourished along the coast of the Levant and in the region of the Syrian Euphrates, characterized by a new material habitus (architecture, metal objects, and pottery). These changes are commonly associated with the Amorites (Amurru of Akkadian texts and Martu in Sumerian) – a population group identified from Mesopotamia to Syria-Palestine (Burke 2018). In the north we see the development of cities controlling substantial territories, such as Ugarit (Yon 2006) and Alalakh (Woolley 1955); these typically comprised a fortified acropolis and a walled lower town. Fortified urban centers, chief among them Hazor, Lachish, and Megiddo, flourished in the south in the MBA (Burke 2018, 265–71, 287–8, 290–6). Burke's recent study (2018) of MBA fortifications from around the region demonstrates the interconnectedness of the urban centers throughout Syria-Palestine and the communication of ideas and practices over a wide area. Solid mudbrick walls 3–4 m wide with stone foundations were built on large freestanding earthen ramparts, or a glacis (an artificial slope created of earth on existing mound or hill, the outer slope covered with lime). There is clear evolution of the massive gateways from the four-pier bent axis structures of MBIIA gate to the standard four- and six-pier gate in MB IIB. Also common throughout the region in the MBA and LBA was the *migdol* (tower) temple.

The fortified towns of the MBA and LBA were dominated by monumental impressive palaces, located on the upper citadel in Syria. The east Syrian palaces, most famously that of Zimri-Lin at Mari with its many courtyards, demonstrate Mesopotamian influence. In western Syria, including Ebla and Alalakh, a different architectural tradition develops asymmetrical palaces, with hypostyle halls, royal burial vaults (*hypogaea*), and the widespread use of basalt orthostats and cedarwood columns. Several MB palaces, Qatna and Alalakh in the north and Kabri in the south, were decorated with Aegeanizing wall paintings (Brysbaert 2008). At Alalakh there is a prototype of the *bit hilani* type palace, comprising a wooden-pillared portico at the entrance to reception room approached by a

broad but low flight of steps. The LBA palace at Ugarit combined the traditions of east and west Syria; covering an area of around 1 ha and protected by a sloping glacis, it comprised some 100 rooms, courtyards, a garden, and intramural dressed royal tombs. The palaces identified in the south in the MB-LB, for example, at Hazor and Megiddo, tend to be smaller than their Syrian counterparts, but similar in overall design. Patriarchal houses, large structures with open courtyard, a pillared hall, storage rooms, and an upper floor are common in LBA sites in the southern Levant, such as at Tell Beit Mirsim.

Interpretations of urbanization and state formation are closely intertwined within narratives of external (imperial) influences from the pristine states of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The earliest evidence for colonial activity dates to the late fourth millennium BCE and is usually attributed to trading endeavors for raw materials. Egyptian Dynasty 0 colonies have been identified in the southern Levant in EB I, at sites such as En Besor, Arad, and Tell Sakan, apparently established to control trading activities (Van den Brink and Braun 2003). These are characterized by Egyptian style architecture, locally made Egyptian pottery, and sherds marked with a *serekh* (one of the Egyptian king's royal names written inside a palace façade), including several Narmer *serekhs* (Braun 2009). Several fortified Late Chalcolithic sites on the Syrian Euphrates have been identified as Uruk colonies on the basis of their southern Mesopotamian architecture, material culture (including the characteristic bevel-rimmed bowl), and bureaucratic paraphernalia (numerical tablets, bullae, and seal impressions) (Stein 2014). The best known of these is Habuba Kabira. These “colonies” represent the earliest documented territorial expansion by the Egyptians and the city states of ancient Mesopotamia into the Levant; while both examples provide evidence for administrative activity and a need for protection, in the form of fortifications, it is not possible to demonstrate imperial governance over the wider hinterland.

The LBA (c.1600/1550–1200) can be characterized as an age of Empire, with three great powers competing over the territory of Syria-

Palestine: Egypt, Mittani, and the Hittites. A destruction horizon separating MBA and LBA strata at several sites in the southern Levant has commonly been attributed to 18th Dynasty Egyptian military activity following the expulsion of the Hyksos (Toffolo et al. 2014, 240–1). There was an apparent urban decline in the southern Levant in the LBA, and the region is characterized by smaller city-states, a change that has been attributed to Egyptian imperial activity. The main phase of Egyptian expansion was in the Thutmosid period in LB I. Both Thutmose I and III reached the Euphrates in their military campaigns, but for the most part, Egyptian military and imperial activity centered on the southern and central Levant. Here a number of Egyptian residences and military establishments have been identified dating to LB II (19th Dynasty), including Beth Shan, Tel Rehov, and Deir el-Balah. These are characterized by distinctive Egyptian architecture and locally made Egyptian pottery. There are also numerous examples of Egyptianizing clay coffins at sites such as Beth Shan, Deir el-Balah, and Lachish, which have been attributed to burials of Egyptian officials (Steel 2018, 21–2). Although Egyptian officials were undoubtedly active in the southern Levant, for the most part, imperial rule was mediated via the local petty rulers, many of whom are recorded in the Amarna letters (Moran 2000).

The kingdom of Mittani was a significant power in the northern Levant during the earlier LBA (fifteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries). Their power base was the upper Khabur plains, and their capital of Washukanni has been identified with Tell Fakhariyah. Archaeologically, Mittani remains elusive, their only clear cultural markers being the distinctive Nuzi ware and Mittani-style cylinder seals (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 329). They were superseded in the late fourteenth century by the Hittites, under the reign of Šuppiluliuma I (c.1350 BCE), whose power base was Hattusas (modern-day Boğazköy) in the central Anatolian plateau. The Hittites controlled the region through local vassal kings; materially, they have left little mark in the archaeological record and physical evidence for their domination primarily comes from textual sources, as, for

example, the Hittite seals, bullae, and cuneiform texts from the archives Ugarit (Yon 2006).

Empire continued to shape the Levant during the Iron Age, although this has not received the same attention in the archaeological literature. The geopolitical landscape of the Early Iron Age was greatly transformed following the collapse of the LBA centers c.1200 BCE (Ward et al. 1992; Yener 2013). Other than Sheshonq I's attack on the southern Levant, c. 925 BCE, recorded on a stele fragment from Megiddo and on the Karnak Temple List (Kitchen 1986: 432–47), Egypt had ceased to be a major power in the region. The major imperial power that emerged in the region in the first millennium was Assyria. Between the reigns of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE), the Assyrian rulers launched successive attacks on the major cities of the Levant, taking prisoners and tribute, which they recorded on the walls of their palaces. State formation continues to be a theme in the Iron Age, as, for example, Moab in Transjordan in Iron II (Routledge 2004).

The key debates shaping Iron Age research in the southern Levant have been migrations and ethnicity or identity (Yasur-Landau 2014; Finkelstein 1988). These narratives are embedded in archaeological interpretations of the relationship between material culture and cultural identity and also in more nuanced understanding of social praxis and lifeways. A key example of this is the identification of the characteristic bichrome Philistine pottery in Iron I strata with a migrant Aegean population (Dothan 1982; Yasur-Landau 2014). This debate is now increasingly underpinned by understandings of transculturalism (Hitchcock 2011) or cultural hybridity and how this resulted in the reinvention of Aegean architecture, especially hearth buildings at Tel Qasile and Tel Miqne (ancient Ekron), religious practices, and diet, in particular the consumption or otherwise of pig. Finkelstein (1988) has explored the formation of early Israelite identity (or ethnicity). He opposes the traditional view, strongly influenced by biblical narratives, that the rise of early Israel in the first millennium BCE resulted from a population shift from the Canaanite lowlands into the highlands during

Iron I. Instead, drawing upon a detailed examination of the archaeological record (architecture, pottery, and foodways) in the highlands both east and west of the River Jordan – which he situates within a *longue durée* understanding of fluctuations in settlement patterns in the wider region – Finkelstein argues for population and cultural continuity in the highlands between LBA and Iron I, suggesting that the Israelites were settled pastoral nomads. Iron I is poorly known in Syria, but by Iron II, new political groupings have emerged in the region, chief among them the Neo-Hittites in the north and the Phoenicians in the central Levant. Examples of the *bit hilani* palaces are attested at Zincirli, Alalakh, Carchemish, and Tell Halaf (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 368–73); monumental architecture at these sites is adorned with sculptures of lions and sphinxes and relief carvings demonstrating a strong Hittite influence.

Despite the perceived focus on impressive monumental structures (fortifications, palaces, and temples) and as a corollary emphasis on social complexity in the literature (as discussed above), there are numerous examples of well-excavated domestic structures throughout the region. Accordingly, there is a growing interest in social archaeologies informed by theoretical perspectives to explore daily life and the activities of the ancient populations of the regions. This has resulted in nuanced discussions of household archaeology, which focus on how people created and negotiated domestic spaces, looking in particular at the material residues of behavioral patterns (Yasur-Landau et al. 2011; Foster and Parker 2012). Equally, there has been greater interest in gender, with an emphasis on the social and economic roles of women within and beyond the household (Meyers 2003; Budin and Turfa 2016). Issues of memory, identity, and ancestor cult have been explored at several EBA sites, including Bab edh-Dhra in Transjordan (Chesson 2007) and Umm el-Marra (Schwartz 2007) and Tell Banat (Porter 2002) in Syria.

## International Perspectives

A key theme in recent scholarship has been interconnections within and beyond Syria-Palestine (e.g., Aruz et al. 2013), in particular as a result of flourishing trade routes connecting the region not only to Egypt and Mesopotamia but equally to the Mediterranean world. Access to the exotic shaped and defined the material culture and identities of the communities of the region. Particularly close were the social and economic ties binding Byblos and Egypt, a relationship which stretches back to the EBA. These are perhaps best illustrated by the eight rock cut shaft tombs identified as royal tombs, contemporary with the Egyptian 12th Dynasty. There was selective adoption of certain Egyptian features in these tombs, including personal adornment, faience fragments from an Egyptian-style coffin, and the use of Egyptian hieroglyphs and titles, suggesting detailed knowledge of Egyptian practices.

Large quantities of imported Cypriot and Aegean pottery found at sites along the Levantine coast, between Ugarit in the north and Tell el-'Ajjul in the south and inland as far as Transjordan, attest to the importance of maritime trading connections during the LBA. This was apparently available to the mercantile classes and was readily incorporated in social practices within settlement and funerary contexts throughout the region (Steel 2012). These vessels were exchanged in mercantile trade (also evidenced by several shipwrecks in the Mediterranean). High status gift exchange between rulers in the LBA is illustrated by the so-called International Style (Feldman 2008). This refers to portable luxury objects found in elite contexts, which were made of valued materials such as ivory, alabaster, gold, silver, and faience and characterized by a mix of forms and motifs from the Aegean, Egypt, and the Levant so that their places of origin are unclear. Examples from the Levant include faience animal cups (*bibru*) from Ugarit and Hazor and the Megiddo ivories found in the twelfth-century palace.

Traditionally, it was accepted that following the collapse at the end of the Bronze Age, there was a breakdown in maritime trade until the eighth century, a period that has been described as a Dark Age. Today there is clear evidence that the Levant and Cyprus continued to be involved in exchanges throughout this period. The adoption of iron has been demonstrated to be the result of the close cultural and economic relations between Cyprus and the southern Levant (Philistia) in the twelfth century (Sherratt 1994). A more detailed knowledge of the Phoenician ceramic typology, based on soundings at Tyre, clearly demonstrates that the earliest phase of Phoenician expansion west to Cyprus dates to the eleventh century (Bikai 1987), which is reiterated by evidence for Phoenician activity in the Aegean as early as the tenth–ninth centuries. By the eighth century, the cities of Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos were establishing colonies in the west Mediterranean in their search for metals to supply the Assyrian empire. Evidence for Greek trading, and possibly even colonial, activity in the northern Levant is more controversial. Woolley famously identified the port site of Al Mina (Luke 2003) as a Greek (Euboean) colony, based on the large quantities of Greek pottery (primarily decorated drinking equipment) found there from the late eighth century. The material habitus of the site (architecture, burials), however, does not support resident Greeks, and current opinion is that the pottery represents imports brought by enterprising Phoenician (?) traders.

## Future Directions

To date our understanding of the archaeology of Syria-Palestine has been based on meticulous recovery and analysis of the material remains. Ceramic typologies, architectural studies, stratigraphic sequences, and faunal analyses, to name but a few, form the bedrock of the debates and narratives outlined above. Interdisciplinary research, drawing on developments in biological and chemical sciences, is increasingly playing a significant role in archaeological research, enhancing our understanding of the Bronze and

Iron Ages in the region. Harvey Weiss' (2015) ongoing exploration of the dramatic climatic events at the end of the third millennium BC is particularly relevant to current concerns about climate change in the Anthropocene. Archaeological survey is being enhanced by the application of online satellite imagery, which facilitates the mapping of environmental features for a more nuanced understanding of settlement patterns. This has been used for example to explore pastoral herding patterns in southern Syria (Ansart et al. 2016). DNA analysis is providing more information about ancient populations. Most recently, a study of ten skeletons from the Philistine site of Ashkelon has helped to resolve the issue of population movements at the end of the Bronze Age (Feldman et al. 2019). Results indicate that the DNA of twelfth-century skeletons had similarities with ancient Cretan DNA. There was, however, limited genetic impact on the Iron Age population at the site, and there is virtually no trace of the European DNA in skeletons dating to the tenth–ninth centuries. These are just a few of the scientific developments transforming Syrian-Palestinian archaeology in the early twenty-first century.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Archaeology of Ancient Egypt](#)
- ▶ [Archaeology of Cyprus](#)
- ▶ [Archaeology of Empire in the Ancient Near East](#)
- ▶ [Archaeology of Jerusalem \(Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Antique\)](#)
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- ▶ [Jericho, Archaeological Site of](#)
- ▶ [Megiddo and the Megiddo Expedition](#)
- ▶ [Petrie, William Matthew Flinders](#)
- ▶ [Site of Mari](#)
- ▶ [Stratigraphy in Archaeology: A Brief History](#)
- ▶ [Urbanism in the Ancient Near East](#)

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