CHAPTER THREE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF SACRED FEASTS AT TEL DAN

Having argued that the cult of the Northern Kingdom, as described in the Hebrew Bible, was essentially Yahwistic and traditional in its inception and perpetuation—notwithstanding the critique of many Southern Yahwists—attention is now turned to faunal and material evidence of sacred feasting at Tel Dan in an attempt to potentially illuminate one important aspect of this religion as practiced at Dan. Yet before any synthesis of the biblical and archaeological data is considered (Chapter 4), the archaeological remains will be explored here as an independent source apart from the biblical narrative with an eye toward answering two questions: 1) is there evidence that eating events charged with religious significance took place in Area T at Tel Dan in the Iron II period? 2) If so, what specific characteristics of these events can be deduced from the archaeological evidence?

INTRODUCTION: TEL DAN AREA T

Tel Dan (Tell el-Qadi) undoubtedly boasts some of the most impressive cultic remains in the southern Levant in the Iron II period.1 Though the final reports for the Iron Age strata are still forthcoming,2 preliminary publications of the excavations carried out in Area T (Fig. 4) from 1968–

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1 Though remains of other impressive Iron Age II sanctuaries have been recovered in the southern Levant—such as an apparent temple at Arad (see, further, p. 110, n. 46 [bottom]) and smaller shrines at Lachish, Megiddo, and other sites (see, conveniently, Nakhai 2001: 176–200; Faust 2010; also see Zukerman 2012 on the Lachish shrine)—in most cases these shrines are smaller and embedded within other structures whereas the Tel Dan precinct is seemingly a much larger, independent complex (on the likelihood of a temple on the northern platform in Area T, see pp. 108–16, below) recently dubbed a “supra-regional sanctuary” (so Albertz and Schmitt 2012: 237–39, 244). While some have questioned the cultic nature of certain elements of Area T, specifically the large podium of T-North (see, e.g., Barkay 1992: 312; Sharon and Zarzecki-Peleg 2006: 153–55; Zwickel 2010: 416; cf. the comprehensive and compelling critique thereof in Davis 2010: 52–60), this study provides support for the cultic nature of the area as will be stated explicitly in the discussion of pp. 80–82 and developed in Chapter 4, below. For other temples from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages in the region, see Kamlah 2012.

2 See p. 1, n. 3, above.
1993 under the direction of Avraham Biran (director of the Tel Dan project from 1966–1999) describe a large sacred precinct dating to the Iron Age II with temple-like architecture. Features include a massive 18 × 18 m raised podium with a 5.25 × 8 m stepped porch in T-North (Biran’s “bamah”), upon which most likely stood a large superstructure, and a 4.75 × 4.75 m platform in T-Center that was apparently a monumental four-horned altar, indicated by a single horn of proportionate size found nearby in secondary use in a later phase. The area is hemmed by side chambers on the west and apparently by similar structures on the east, which together delineate a courtyard 45 m wide and at least 60 m long. In the earliest phase (Biran’s IVA), the excavators suggest that storehouses

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3 Though this study focuses on the central precinct of Area T, Tel Dan, in general, is rich in Iron II cultic remains. For an important survey of evidence for gate cults at Dan, see Blomquist 1999 (especially, pp. 57–69), as well as comments in Biran 1998; cf. Biran 1994a: 235–54.

4 Though Biran originally suggested that the earlier Stratum IVA structure was rectangular (ca. 18 × 7 m), Davis 2010: 65–66 (citing personal consultation with R. Voss) concluded that it was also 18 × 18 m, precisely the same proportions of the Stratum III platform.

5 While one cannot be certain that a superstructure existed upon the podium, it seems likely (so R. Voss, personal communication) and a transition in the excavators’ opinion in this direction may be marked by comparing earlier reconstructions of an open-air platform (Biran 1975: 320–21, with illustration on p. 319) with later ones that show a superstructure on at least part of the podium beginning in Stratum III (Biran 1994a: 188, illustration 149). Davis 2010: 52–60, 64–68, in consultation with R. Voss, strengthens claims of a superstructure on the basis of the thickness of the walls and evidence of rebuilding efforts in Stratum III while suggesting that the front of the building may have been an open courtyard (see, his p. 68); still, it seems just as likely that the front was also enclosed due to the fact that the foundation walls are of the same thickness in that section.

6 On the altar and its horn, see the cautious discussion of Zevit 2001: 187. The exact proportions of the altar apart from the stairs are difficult to determine, as the altar was reused, altered, and dismantled in subsequent phases of activity. In some of the more detailed plans examined for this study, the second tier of the altar structure itself is shown to be 0.25 m more narrow than the 5 × 5 m base, thus it is reconstructed here as a 4.75 × 4.75 m structure. According to Davis 2010: 69–77, this central structure did not necessarily serve as an altar in Stratum III, but rather as a platform upon which symbolic pillars were occasionally erected marking a transitional space between the entrance to the complex and the raised podium. Yet such a view does not preclude envisioning sacrificial activity there and, further, the fact that a large horn was found in secondary use nearby strongly suggests that it was an altar in certain phases (see Biran 1994a: 202–3), as Davis agrees. Indeed, if the structure served as an altar in a later phase, it is most likely that the earlier structure upon which it was built also served the same function—i.e., as an altar, and it is understood as such in this study in each phase.


8 The extent of the length of the courtyard in the earlier phases has not yet been determined, though it does not appear to have extended much beyond the 60 m. See Biran 1994a: 159–209.