CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE LATE BRONZE TO IRON AGE TRANSITION IN ISRAEL’S COASTAL PLAIN:
A LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE

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Dedicated to the scholar who turned “longue durée” into a Hebrew term.

Introduction

More then eighty years of intense research have passed since the founders of modern Near Eastern archaeology gathered in Jerusalem to crystallize the periodization of ancient Israel (Palestine Exploration Fund 1923). The accumulated mass of unsynthesized archaeological evidence convinced scholars like Albright that it was time to offer a broad and unified periodization for the country such that would avoid “confusion that could lead only to chaos unless the use of centuries was substituted for that period [Iron Age, Y.G.]” (Albright 1949: 112).

The scores of papers discussing the transition between the Late Bronze and the Iron Ages that have been published in the elapsed time (e.g., Albright 1931: 120–121; 1939: 11–23; Wright 1961: 114; Oren 1985: 37–56; Kempinski 1985: 399–407; Ussishkin 1985: 213–230; Dever 1992: 99–110; 1993a: 706–724; 1993b: 25–35; Finkelstein 1995: 213–239; 2003: 189–195) demonstrate how far we are from a broadly accepted scheme so optimistically envisioned by Albright and his colleagues. There is still dispute over the date for the end of one period and the beginning of the next,¹ and there is no agreement on the

¹ See, for example, Ussishkin (1985) who claims that the end of the Late Bronze Age should be dated to the collapse of the Egyptian control over the land at 1150 BCE, as opposed to Mazar (1990: 290) who ends the Late Bronze Age in the more traditional date of 1200 BCE, although he acknowledges the continuation of the Egyptian hegemony over the land for another fifty years.
differences in material culture (Kempinski 1985; Wood 1985: 553), let alone an accepted reconstruction of the process or the chain of events leading to the transition between the two periods.²

Dever has summarized the state of affairs in two public lectures. In the first he claimed that “these changes were so varied from site to site that a regional approach is necessary; no single typology or paradigm will comprehend the overall shift from Bronze to Iron Age” (Dever 1992: 107–108).

In the second lecture he added a proposal for future research:

> We can make a start by comparing presumably early Israelite sites with early Iron I sites that are demonstrably Philistine, as well as those that appear to represent continuing Canaanite influence and culture. (Dever 1993a: 718)

Israel’s central Coastal Plain (The Yarkon-Ayalon basin) is a case in point: It is a confined geographical region in which Canaanite (Aphek, Tel Gerisa), Israelite (Izbet Sartah), Egyptian and Egyptianized (Jaffa, Aphek, Tel Gerisa), and Philistine (Aphek, Tel Gerisa, Tell Qasile) settlements existed side by side simultaneously. This cultural and ethno-cultural meeting point in a geographically confined unit can be studied in two ways: synchronically, to explore the way different cultural groups interacted and influenced each other; and diachronically, to follow the changes that occurred in the region between the 13th and the 10th centuries BCE. In this article I aim to pursue the latter. Against an environmental background I will present seemingly contradicting trends of continuity and change in the material culture and the economical, social, and political structures existing in the region. The accepted view is that in the period under discussion the region passed from Canaanite to Egyptian, and then to Philistine control. Against this historical-political reconstruction, the material culture typifying the sites in the region shows many lines of continuity. An explanation for these contradicting trends will be sought, and finally an evaluation offered of its implications for the way this transition should be envisioned.

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² The state of art in the debate over the transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I is not unique. See, for example, the discussion over the Middle Bronze Age-Late Bronze Age transition: Seger 1975; Dever 1987; 1990; Bunimovitz 1992.