Evidence of Peace and War in Persian Period Yehud

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1 Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, while researching the origins of coinage in the Levant, the writer encountered a number of anomalies within the corpora of the Phoenician mints. Coins struck at Sidon, Tyre, Byblos, and Aradus all presented some problems, including variation in weight standard, shifts in ethnics, and variant inscriptions. The writer proposed some solutions built upon the premise that in the course of over two centuries of Persian rule, the Phoenician city-states were sometimes disloyal and engaged in rebellion.

Scholars have recognized for years that there was a massive revolt by the Egyptians in the 460’s BCE. However, there were also some smaller revolts along the eastern Mediterranean coastline in the fourth century, particularly in the 370’s and associated with a certain “Evagoras” of Cyprus, and another revolt of “Tennes” in the 350’s BCE.1 These revolts are thought to be attested in the archaeological record at certain sites, where destruction layers have been identified, containing carbonized timbers and other evidence of massive conflagration as a result of warfare and destruction. Weaponry may be associated with these layers as well. The wall and gate system at Megiddo may have been destroyed at this time,2 and Stern discussed a similar destruction layer at Lachish, where stratum 1, which included the gate and residency, was constructed between 450 and 350 BCE3 and could be associated with the revolt of Tennes, in which Persian forces may have fortified a strongpoint in southwestern Yehud. This is the same time period as the final destruction of the Persian-period stratum at En-Gedi as well.4

What can we learn of peace and war when we study sites such as Lachish or En-Gedi, where excavators assume there is destruction evidence from the mid-fourth century? Perhaps we must first ask what truly constitutes evidence of peace or war. Furthermore, how can we better study issues of military and foreign policy in the empires of the ancient Near East? Israel Ephal has made a number of suggestions based on his assumption that there are “constants”

in the study of military history which enable us to use analogy as a “means of sharpening the definition of various aspects of military reality.” Analogy will enable us to reassess Persian military policies in its western empire, although we will not attempt to reconstruct specific battles or engagements. There is too much variety and unpredictability in warfare to enable us to be specific.

2 Archaeological Evidence of Peace and War

Archaeological field work involves the controlled, systematic excavation of sites and the detailed recovery of artifacts. When an archaeologist finds retaining walls, large defensive walls surrounding a site, caches of weapons, or the mutilated bodies of the victims of violence, there are “clear indications of warfare.” Sir Mortimer Wheeler’s excavations at the Maiden Castle in Britain produced a graphic picture of Romans storming an Iron-Age British hill-fort. Piecing together a picture from historical sources and his excavations, he was able to determine the sequence of the battle and its bloody aftermath.

In ancient Israel, we may consider an obvious example of warfare. Lachish was the second-most important city in pre-Exilic Judah, after Jerusalem. It is identified with Tell ed-Duweir and was occupied in the period of the Divided Monarchy. Strata IV–III are related specifically to the archaeological, historical, textual, biblical, and Assyrian pictorial data concerning the conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib, ca. 703–701 BCE. Excavations have revealed a complex defensive system comprised of two walls built of mudbricks laid on stone foundations. The city’s gate complex included both an inner and outer gateway, similar to gates at Megiddo, Dan, and Timnah. The entire site was heavily fortified and seemingly impregnable to opposing forces. David Ussishkin believes that these walls date to fortifications constructed initially by either Asa or Jehoshaphat in the early ninth century. A large palace or governmental building sat atop the mound in the center of the city, at its highest point.

Lachish was a city prepared for war. Fortunately for the historian and the archaeologist, Sennacherib recorded his version of the events at Lachish not only in his prism inscription, but also on the Lachish reliefs found at his palace.

5 Eph'al 1984: 106.
7 Wheeler 1966: passim.
8 Mazar 1990: 427ff.
9 Mazar 1990: 473.
10 Ussishkin 1982.