DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN PUBLIC AND RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS: A CASE STUDY FROM LATE BRONZE AGE II
TELL EŠ-ŠAFI/GATH

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Introduction

The excavations at Tell eš-Šafı/Gath, Israel (Maeir 2003; 2008; Fig. 1 herein) have uncovered, inter alia, assorted evidence dating to the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE) from various parts of the site. The site, which is identified as Canaanite Gath, is one of the more important Canaanite city-states during the Late Bronze Age as attested in the Egyptian documents dating to the period (Uziel and Maeir 2005: 57–58 and further literature there). During the 2000–2006 seasons, a large building (Building 66323) dating to the LBIIB was excavated in Area E (Shai et al. forthcoming) on the eastern slopes of the tell (Fig. 2). Approximately 240 m² of the eastern side of this building were excavated; this is but a portion of the original structure, however, as it clearly continues to the west (under the eastern side of Area A) where it is buried below later accumulations that have not yet been fully excavated (Fig. 3).

The size of the building and its ground plan raise many questions as to its function: was it a private dwelling or a public building? If public, what was its function (e.g., palace, storeroom, temple, etc.)? If it was a residential structure, can its size and finds attest to the social and/or economic status of its residents? Is such a differentiation (between public and private) even justified? Can the identification of the character and function of Building 66323 contribute to our understanding of the urban nature of the city of Gath in particular and of the LB urban centers in Canaan in general? This paper attempts to identify the function of Building 66323, and, in turn, addresses the issue of the identification of structures as public or private.

In order to undertake this difficult task we shall first review briefly some of the literature relating to the definition of buildings as private or public, in order to establish a list of features that might be expected in a public structure. We will then analyze the ground plan of Building 66323 and the artifacts found in connection to it, and compare Building 66323 with other structures from LB Canaan.
Figure 1. Location of Tell eš-Šafi/Gath.