In 705 B.C.E. Sennacherib ascended the throne of Assyria. The king was soon faced with a revolt organized by Hezekiah king of Judah. An alliance against Assyria was formed between Judah, Egypt and the Philistine cities in the Coastal Plain, possibly with Babylonian support. Sennacherib met the challenge. In 701 B.C.E. he marched to Phoenicia, Philistia and Judah, and succeeded in reestablishing Assyrian supremacy in those regions.

Based on the detailed information in the Hebrew Bible and the Assyrian records it seems that the main course of the campaign can be reconstructed in different ways. The following reconstruction seems to me the most plausible. Sennacherib and his powerful army marched on foot from Nineveh, the capital of Assyria to the Phoenician cities situated along the Mediterranean coast. He received there the tribute of various vassal rulers and continued his advance southwards to Philistia. Sennacherib then defeated in open battle a large Egyptian expeditionary force, and reestablished Assyrian rule in Philistia.

At this point Sennacherib turned against Hezekiah and Judah. Upon arriving in Judah, Sennacherib’s attention was focused primarily on the city of Lachish rather than on the capital Jerusalem. Lachish was the most formidable fortress city in Judah, and its conquest and destruction were the paramount task facing Sennacherib when he came to crush the military powers of Hezekiah. In fact, the conquest of Lachish was apparently of singular importance and considered by Sennacherib as a great Assyrian military achievement.

The biblical texts inform us that Sennacherib encamped at Lachish and established his headquarters there during his campaign in Judah (2 Kings 18:14, 17; Isaiah 36:2; 2 Chronicles 32:9). He conquered and destroyed various Judahite cities, and from Lachish he sent a large task force to challenge Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Eventually, as related in both

1 See M. Cogan’s article in this volume, 51–74.
the Hebrew Bible and the Assyrian annals, Jerusalem was spared, and Hezekiah came to terms with Sennacherib. Hezekiah continued to rule Judah—now weakened and reduced in size—as an Assyrian vassal, and paid a heavy tribute to the Assyrian king.

Lachish and Jerusalem were the most important cities which were militarily challenged by Sennacherib during his campaign to Judah. The events that transpired in these cities are documented in the historical chronicles, and their material remains have systematically been studied by archaeologists. In the case of both cities, an analysis of the archaeological data helps in interpreting the written sources and in understanding better the events of 701 B.C.E. For both Lachish and Jerusalem we shall briefly review the topography of the city, the settlement of the time, the Judahite government center and the fortifications as well as the pattern of the Assyrian military challenge—all helping to elucidate the nature of the events in each city and the Assyrian strategic intentions.

LACHISH ON THE EVE OF SENNACHERIB’S CAMPAIGN

Tel Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir), the site of the biblical city, is one of the largest and most prominent ancient mounds in southern Israel. The mound is nearly rectangular, its flat summit covering about 18 acres (Fig. 1). The slopes of the mound are very steep due to the massive fortifications of the ancient city constructed here. Extensive excavations were carried out at Lachish by three expeditions. The first excavations were conducted on a large scale between 1932 and 1938 by a British expedition directed by James Starkey. In 1966 and 1968 Yohanan Aharoni, at that time on the staff of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, conducted a small excavation, limited in scope and scale, in the ‘Solar Shrine’ of the Persian period (Fig. 1, location 12). Finally, systematic, long-term and large-scale excavations were directed by me on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University between 1972 and 1993.

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3 See Y. Aharoni, Investigations at Lachish; The Sanctuary and the Residency (Lachish V), Publications of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University 4 (Tel Aviv, 1975).