

The "Nordostburg" at *Tell Ta'annek* A Reevaluation of the Iron Age IIB Defence System

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Foreword

Almost thirty years have elapsed since the excavations of the ASOR-Concordia Expedition at *Tell Ta'annek* (Taanach) began, which resumed E. SELLIN's Pioneer-Work at the beginning of this century. The archaeological records were accurately published by P. W. LAPP in the preliminary reports (LAPP 1964; 1967a; 1969), but, as a result of his untimely death, an overall examination of the urbanistic and architectural features of the Iron Age remains was undertaken ten years later by W. E. RAST, who published the Iron Age pottery proposing a chronological and stratigraphical sequence of the site (RAST 1978). Although the scientific perspective of the ASOR-Concordia Expedition has produced some outstanding results, such as the exploration of the Early Bronze Age defence system and the definition of the stratigraphical sequence of the Iron Age levels based on pottery assemblages, neither LAPP nor RAST put forward any general reconstruction of the city-plan and of the defensive structures of the Iron Age settlement.

This circumstance probably stems from the fact that the American excavations were concentrated in the south-west quarter of the *tell*. Nevertheless, a limited sounding had also been taken at a building, the so-called "Northeast Outwork" (SELLIN 1904: 30–32, plan II; LAPP 1969: 39–42, figs. 27–28), which was part of the outer defensive system of the Iron Age town. However, the chronological classification of this structure did not lead the archaeologists to trace an overall picture of the site in Iron Age II.

Moreover, and this is the starting point of this contribution, they did not evaluate another larger building, which SELLIN had excavated in the northeast corner of the town, the so-called "Nordostburg" (SELLIN 1904: 21–30, plan I, figs. 15–25). A re-examination of this building in the light of the evidence produced by the American excavations concerning the Iron Age at Taanach could provide new insights about the urban organization of this center, which dominated the southeastern district of the Jezreel Valley.

1. History of the Excavations

The first excavations at *Tell Ta'annek* were carried out by E. SELLIN in the Winter and Spring of 1903. The German archaeologist cut the elongated pear-shaped *tell*¹ with two crossing trenches, running from North-West to South-East (SELLIN 1905: tab. V). After the first two weeks of excavations, SELLIN concentrated his efforts in the central part of the *tell*,

¹ The mound is 320 m long on the North-South axis and 150 m on the East-West one. The highest point is in the middle of the western side, while the northeastern corner is occupied by a lower terrace (LAPP 1969: fig. 1).

where he had discovered an almost square building, which he called "Westburg"². But another large building was brought to light during the first seasons of excavations at Tell Ta'annek: the "Nordostburg", also called "the building erected over a bed of mudbrick" (SELLIN 1904: 21).

This building lies exactly at the northeast corner of the Iron Age town, partly constituting the defensive wall with its eastern front. SELLIN did not recognize he was excavating a public building until he came across the western wall of the complex (SELLIN 1904: 25), so that its central part, which he had explored before, was probably not completely surveyed.

The major problem of the archaeological investigation was represented by the particular stratigraphy of the area. Under the hewn-stone structures of the "Nordostburg", SELLIN exposed a thick layer of clay and mudbricks, which, in the middle and to the east side of the sounding, proved to be mudbrick walls. The excavator reported in the plan (SELLIN 1904: plan I) the different structures of ashlar masonry and mudbrick to be part of the same building, although their orientation and masonry were not always coherent.

After sixty years, the ASOR-Concordia Expedition focused its attention on the southern half of the *tell*, but an important, limited sounding was carried out into the "Northeast Outwork", furnishing a reliable chronological reference point about this structure (LAPP 1969: 39–41; RAST 1978: 41–42).

Moreover, a trench, cut immediately behind the western wall of the "Westburg", revealed in the upper layer the stone foundations of the defensive wall which encircled the Iron Age town (LAPP 1969: 33–34, fig. 10:21). On the basis of stratigraphy, LAPP dated the foundation of this defence line from the third quarter of the XIIth century, but suggested that it might have lasted until the VIIIth century (LAPP 1969: 34). The other structures of the Iron Age cleared up by the American excavations are all from the IA I³. The subsequent periods and especially the IXth century were not enlightened by particular findings, apart from the buildings discovered by SELLIN, which were, unfortunately and without a clear explanation, passed over by modern archaeologists.

2. The "Nordostburg": Main Planimetric Traits and Perimeter

The main architectural grid of the "Nordostburg" (Fig. 1) was composed by ashlar walls, which form the whole perimeter, apart from the central stretch of the eastern side. On the other hand, the inner partition walls were of fieldstones and mud-brick.

The building had generally a square shape, but the eastern side wall followed the crest of the *tell*, turning westward in its southern half. In correspondence to this deviation a rectangular pillar projected 1.5 m⁴.

The western wall was 23.8 m long and had, in the best-preserved sector, up to three superimposed layers of dressed blocks. The headers covered the whole thickness of the wall, which did not have an inner filling, being simply constituted by the blocks and their revetment.

² The "Westburg" almost surely was the residence of the local landlord in LB I (SELLIN 1904: 43–53, plan III, tabs. XIV–XV, figs. 49–57).

³ Namely they are: the "Twelfth century House", the "Drainpipe Structure", the "Cultic Structure" (LAPP 1969: 34–39).

⁴ In the middle of the northern half of this side there was another little offset.

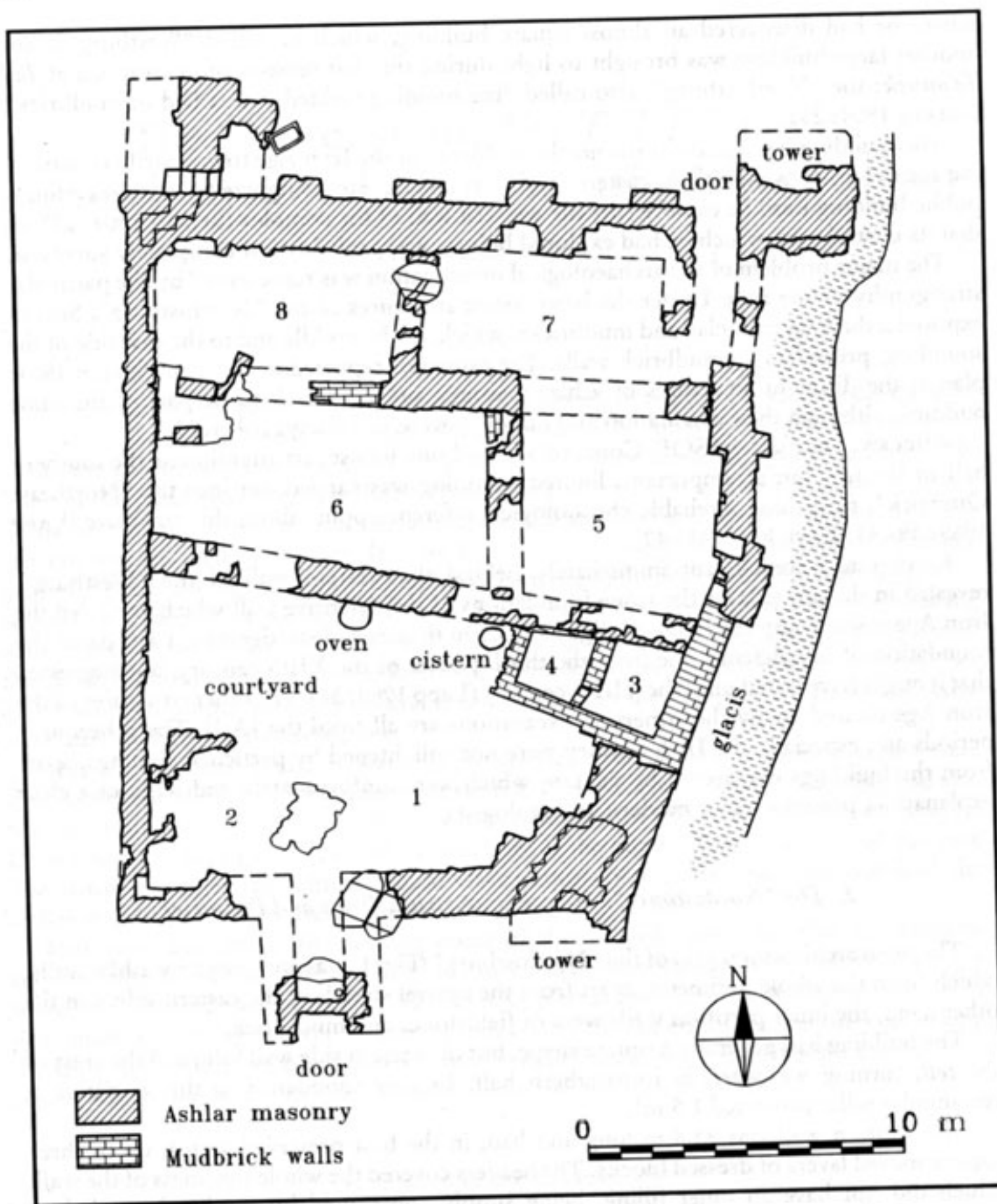


Fig. 1. The "Nordostburg" as reported by E. SELLIN in his plan (SELLIN 1904: plan I).

On the northern side a slightly different method had been adopted. The wall presented an outer and an inner curtain, the core being filled with little fieldstones and mortar. On the outer side, there were rectangular, dressed blocks, while on the inner side a simple layer of carefully placed fieldstones formed the curtain.

One of the most outstanding architectural features of the "Nordostburg" was the

presence of two protruding towers at the eastern and western ends of the northern wall. Of the eastern tower only the rectangular (4×3 m) base was preserved with four layers of blocks. On the western side of this massive foundation there was a hollow, round hole which probably was the place for the hinge of a door leading to the building from the eastern end of the northern front. This passage was not the main entrance of the palace, because it opened towards the outside, being a sort of postern in the more fortified side of the building. In fact, between the two towers, the front of the fort exhibited four offsets, placed at regular intervals of 2.35 m. They projected outward 1.5 m, but only two were actually part of the northern wall, the others being only an outer addition to the main structure⁵.

Although the northwestern tower had been partially destroyed so that only the northern and eastern sides remained, the lower flight of the staircase leading to the upper floors was spared from destruction. It abuts the stones of the northern wall of the palace and allows, on the basis of its elevation, to estimate the hypothetical height of the first floor (3 m).

According to the opinion of the excavator, the eastern side of the building ended with a tower also to the south, because of the presence of a large base. But, in this case, the tower remains within the perimeter and exhibits two inner offsets. SELLIN thought that a fourth tower had occupied the southwestern corner of the palace, even if its foundations seem to be too poorly preserved to confirm this opinion. In fact, this was the only corner which did not need a special defensive structure, because it faced the interior of the town. For the same reason the southern and western walls, which do not show offsets, were probably less high than the northern and eastern ones. Thus, a tentative reconstruction of the heights could be 10 m for the towers, 7 m for the eastern and northern walls and 5 m for the others. The presence of a second floor can be presumed only for the northern half of the fort.

3. Reconstructions of the Entrance System

The southern front of the building presents a breach in the middle. SELLIN suggested it was part of the entrance system of the palace together with the door he discovered 3 m to the south. This reconstructed entryway included Iron Age flagstones that seemed to constitute a second threshold inserted in the middle of the southern wall. The inner jamb of this door might be represented by a wall which was perpendicular to the slabs.

However, SELLIN's reconstruction of the entrance system is difficult to accept because of too many inconsistencies and lack of evidence. The first problem concerns the outer passage. It presents a threshold⁶ preceded by a raised step; the latter could indicate that the preserved threshold is only the inner one, the outer having not been found by the excavator. In SELLIN's opinion, the entryway ran through the outer door, perpendicularly to the front of the building, but the second passage in the middle of the wall had a different orientation, forming an oblique angle and it was shifted almost two meters to the east. Although SELLIN – in his plan – had jointed the two doors with a dashed line, it is immediately evident that these follow two divergent axes and could with much difficulty be part of the same entrance system. A solution might be to consider the slabs in the middle of the southern wall and the oblique inner wall elements belonging to a secondary employ, which might be ascribed to a later occupation of the ruins of the palace. This hypothesis might be confirmed by the fact that

⁵ The offsets were preserved with three layers of ashlar blocks.

⁶ The threshold has a round hole in the southeastern corner, showing that the door opened northwards, i.e. towards the inside of the building (SELLIN 1904: fig. 16).

to some extent seem unusual, but it might find an explanation in the defensive nature of the building.

4. *The Inner Planimetric Organization of the Fort*

The inner partition walls of the "Nordostburg" are strongly damaged and they do not follow a clear pattern. Nevertheless, it is possible to single out several rooms. For the builders the main planimetric problem was the different orientation of the southern half of the eastern side. Since the direction of this part of the perimeter followed the edge of the *tell* exploiting the structures of a previous building, it became necessary to relate rooms oriented East-West with chambers (3, 4) which had a main Southeast-Northwest axis. To achieve this task, the architect shifted the east end of the wall southwards which divides the building into two almost equal halves.

The southern half was the public sector of the "Nordostburg" and probably sheltered an irregularly shaped courtyard, as an oven and a cistern testify. On the east side of this open space were the corner tower and two small chambers, unfortunately preserved only below the original floor level.

The northern half has a more regular subdivision. Along the north side, two similar rectangular rooms could have constituted a residential unit, as indicated by the presence of a bath installation in the middle⁷. The central block, which is the thicker one, was divided into a large rectangular hall and a square chamber.

The displacement of the accesses has not been established by the excavation, so that the circulation can only be imagined. The main entrance led into a hall which opened into the inner courtyard. From the latter it was possible to enter hall 6, the largest room of the fort, which led to the north with room 8 and to the east with the square room 5. The rear-entrance in room 7 was probably a postern, because on this side the palace faced the outside of the town.

5. *The Building Technique: Ashlar Masonry and Mudbrick Walls*

In spite of its hypothetical plan, the palace exhibits a characteristic building technique, especially in the perimetral walls. These are constructed with rectangular dressed blocks placed as headers side by side. The lower layers are always less accurate in dressing and masonry than the upper ones, which are also higher (0,55 m), perhaps because the former were buried below the floor level. Only at the corners and in the projecting pillars are the blocks placed as stretchers and in some places they reached the length of 2 m (like in the northwestern corner), but were typically 0,9 m long. The outer face is normally roughly dressed, while only two stones show the typical marginal drafting with a central embossed convexity (SELLIN 1904, figs. 17–18), which occurs in several public buildings of Iron Age II (VAN BEEK 1981: 74*–76*; REICH 1992: 211–212; STERN 1992).

The archaeologist also attributed to the "Nordostburg" some mudbrick structures, such as the central part of the eastern wall. However, the interpretation of these structures is related to that of the mudbrick layer upon which the palace had been founded. SELLIN noted, in fact, that a great number of these bricks were not *in situ*, but belonged to the collapsed

⁷ It was composed by a circular slab with a carved drain-channel.

structures of an older building, the walls of which extended over a very large area in the lower terrace (SELLIN 1904: 25). Therefore, he singled out some mudbrick walls, assigning them to the building. Apart from the cases of certain stratigraphical superposition, the *criterium* used by the German archaeologist to distinguish the bricks ascribable to the underlying "Lehmschicht" from those of the actual walls of the "Nordostburg", was the general rule of considering the still standing walls as belonging to the palace. However, it is an almost puzzling matter to explain the contemporary use, in the same walls, of two materials, such as mudbrick and stone, which have a completely different static behaviour and structural function⁸. This problem cannot be solved completely, but it might be noted that these differences did not continue in the superstructure, which was entirely of mudbricks⁹.

Looking at SELLIN's plan, a possible non-pertaining wall could be the one closing the passage between rooms 3 and 4. The excavator suggested that these rooms had a vaulted roof (SELLIN 1904: 26, fig. 20). This kind of ceiling probably covered a pair of cellars, which find a later structural parallel in the "Vaulted Building" discovered by G. W. VAN BEEK at Tell Jemmeh (*Tēl Gammā*) (VAN BEEK 1973: 25). This kind of vaulted mudbrick substructure can be regarded as a foreign architectural technique, which spread over into Palestine with the Assyrian conquest¹⁰. The vaulted cellars of the "Nordostburg" are one of the rare Palestinian examples of this technique, and one which was well preserved until the archaeological discovery.

No floor of the palace was found, not only because of the bad state of preservation, but also as a result of the excavation method, which was by means of narrow trenches following the walls. This resulted in the almost complete lack of any reliability in the assignation of the finds, whose original spot was often not clearly reported.

6. *The Defensive System of Taanach in Iron Age IIB and the Function of the "Nordostburg"*

The towers and the offsets, such as the monumental masonry of the outer walls of the palace, testify to the military nature of the "Nordostburg". Also the location at the corner of the town, in a low protruding terrace, indicates that it was a sort of advanced fort¹¹.

The town, which probably achieved an important military role at the beginning of Iron Age IIB¹², had a composite defensive system (Fig. 3). A glacis surmounted by a 4,5 m thick

⁸ An enlightening parallel of the contemporary use of ashlar blocks "carefully integrated" in mudbrick walls is attested in the buildings of Stratum D-6 at *Tell es-Serīa*, which are dated from the second half of the IXth century (OREN 1992: 150*, figs. 12-14).

⁹ The greatest number of bricks measured $0.48 \times 0.34 \times 0.14$ m, but there were also square ones ($0.36 \times 0.36 \times 0.14$ m).

¹⁰ The Assyrian origin of this technique is proved not only by the plan of the building of *Tell Jemmeh* (*Tēl Gammā*), but also by the findings inside it, which included the so-called "Palace Ware" (VAN BEEK 1983).

¹¹ In the northwest corner of the town there was a building across from the "Nordostburg", called "Nordburg", unfortunately extremely damaged (SELLIN 1904).

¹² Notwithstanding the scarce amount of data from Taanach, the comparative evidence from Megiddo to the North-West and Jesreel (*Tēl Yizre'el*) to the North, shows that in the XIth century the two neighbour towns had a strongly fortified character. Taanach instead exhibits a quite different urban organization, especially because its urban pattern was highly dependent on the defensive line of the Early Bronze Age, which, with its massive walls, determined the later perimeter of the *tell*. However, the center should have had a relatively important military role, being the southern vertex of a polygon of centers (Megiddo, Taanach, Jesreel, Jenin (*Ġenīn*)), which controlled the road network and the royal estates of the southeastern enclave of the Jezreel Valley (NA'AMAN 1981).

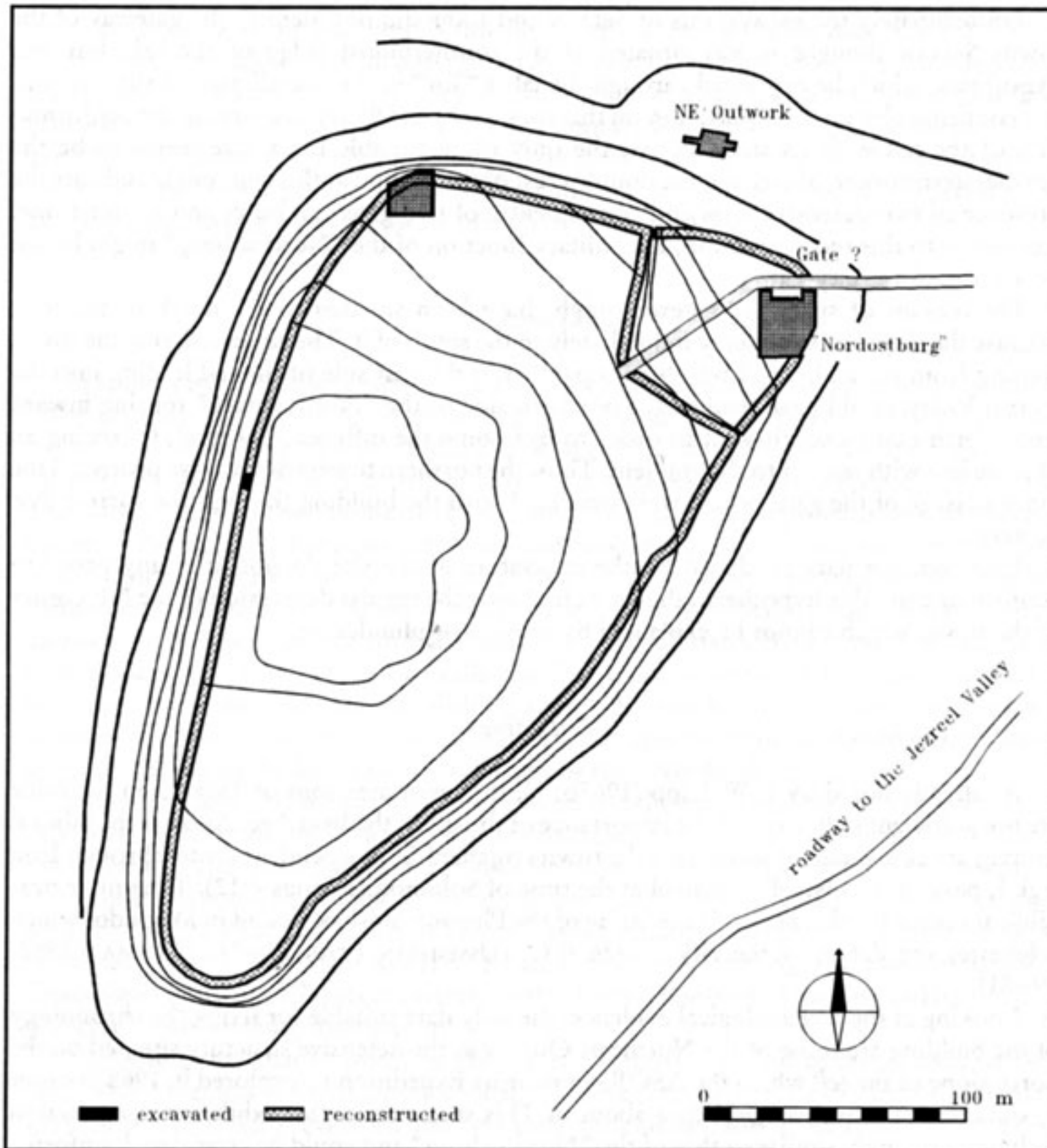


Fig. 3. Hypothetical reconstruction of the defence system of Taanach and the possible location of the city-gate in front of the "Nordostburg" in the Lower Terrace.

stone wall running along the crest of the *tell* (LAPP 1969: 33–34, fig. 10) encompassed the settled area. Furthermore, an outer line of defense works extended to the northern sloping shoulder of the *tell*. This line was headed by a large tower or bastion, which SELLIN called "Nordostvorwerk", a structure characterized by a masonry identical to that of the "Nordostburg" (LAPP 1969: 39–42, figs. 27–28). This outwork, built directly on the bedrock, projected outwards reinforcing the foot of the glacis and faced a paved open area extending outwards. The northeast corner of the town was occupied by the fort we are dealing with, which probably sheltered a garrison.

Unfortunately the excavations of SELLIN and LAPP did not identify the gateway of the town; SELLIN thought it was situated at the southernmost ridge of the *tell*, but this hypothesis, which he expressed through the label "Tor" in the overall plan of the city, was not confirmed by LAPP's excavation on this spot (LAPP 1969: 39). Observing the conformation of the *tell* with its steep slopes, the only place suitable for a gate seems to be the northeastern corner. Moreover, the double crest of the mound at this spot might indicate the presence of two defensive lines and consequently of two gates, an outer and an inner one. According to this reconstruction, the military function of the "Nordostburg" might be the protection of the city-gate.

For reasons of space the gateway might have been situated to the north of the fort, because the slope rises suddenly immediately to the south of it. The street entering the town, coming from the main road which runs parallel to the east side of the *tell* leading into the Jezreel Valley, could have flanked the northern side of the "Nordostburg" turning inward from north-east to south-west in order to overcome the difference in level, following an oblique line with respect to the gradient. Thus, the northern towers might have protected the inner passage of the gate, which was connected with the building through the narrow NE postern.

However, the data produced by the excavators of the site do not offer any proof to confirm or deny this hypothesis, the only clue being the regular depression of the NE corner of the town, which cannot be explained by erosion or plundering.

7. Dating

As already noted by P. W. Lapp (1967b: 2), the seven mentions of Taanach in the Bible are not sufficient indicators of the importance of the site in the Iron Age. As far as the biblical sources are concerned, it seems that the town remained an independent center through Iron Age I, passing into Israelite control at the time of Solomon (I Kings 4:12). The only extra-biblical source for this period is the Stelae of the Pharaoh Shishak, found in Megiddo, which celebrates the defeat of the city in 926 B.C. (USSISHKIN 1990: 71–74; NA'AMAN 1992: 79–81).

Looking at the archaeological evidence, the only data suitable for fixing the chronology of the building are those of the Northeast Outwork, the defensive structure situated on the north slope of the *tell* which the ASOR-Concordia Expedition re-explored in 1968 in order to obtain some chronological data about it. This structure in fact exhibits a construction technique strongly similar to that of the "Nordostburg" and could be considered, unfortunately only on the basis of this single architectural reason, coeval to it: A continuous row of carefully dressed headers is displaced along the perimeter of this kind of bastion.

LAPP dated the Northeast Outwork to the second half of the IXth century¹³, an opinion confirmed by RAST, who assigned the pottery repertory of the building to Period III (RAST 1978: 41–43, fig. 71), corresponding, in terms of absolute chronology, to the time span 890–780 B.C.¹⁴. After Shishak's campaign, Taanach had a scattered occupation, but at the beginning of the IXth century the settlement increased in size again. However, the town was

¹³ LAPP also suggested that the ashlar blocks had been reused in the structures (1969: 39).

¹⁴ R. E. TAPPY (1992: 233) has recently proposed enlarging the limits fixed by RAST for Period III (875–800) on the basis of a comparative study of the pottery assemblages of Samaria, Taanach and Gezer.

never abandoned as the continuous utilization of the city-walls testifies (LAPP 1969: 34). Furthermore, the addition of an outer defensive line at the northern foot of the mound shows that in the second half of the century Taanach underwent an increase in population and a renewal of its strategic importance. The contemporary foundation of the casemate fortress at *Tēl Yizrā'ēl* (USSISHKIN 1992: 53) and the complete reconstruction of Megiddo IV (KEMPINSKI 1989: 95–98, plan 12), makes it possible to recognize a renewed interest of the Israelite kings towards the southeast branch of the Jezreel Valley¹⁵.

8. Conclusions

In spite of its significant extension and masonry, scholars have not taken into account the "Nordostburg" of Taanach either among the palaces, the fortresses, or the "patrician houses" of the Iron Age (DEVER 1982: 275; REICH 1992: *passim*), and also the excavators of the site have taken little interest in it since the first discovery by SELLIN (GLOCK 1978: 1147). This sort of *damnatio memoriae* can be explained with the remote publication and uncertain dating of the building due to its extremely bad preservation state. However, this building is of outstanding interest, not only because it makes it possible to reconstruct the northern fortifications of the town, but also because it dates from an obscure period in the history of Taanach. It is indeed highly probable that the building dates from Iron Age IIB, as the typical masonry of its perimetral walls testifies. Unfortunately, in fact, the construction technique is the only clue for establishing a tentative date for the fort, because there is an absence of ceramic finds in SELLIN's archaeological report and the published objects almost certainly belong to the layers cut by the walls of the "Nordostburg"¹⁶.

Structural elements, such as the corner towers and the perimetral offsets, demonstrate the defensive function of the building, which protruded from the perimeter of the *tell* in the lower terrace. That such a terrace was also the place of the city-gate cannot be proved, but this hypothesis could cast further light on the function of the fort, which might be compared with the Palaces 8000 and 10000 of Gezer¹⁷, two buildings recently re-explored by W. G. DEVER to the west of the Iron Age IIA–B gateway (DEVER 1985: fig. 18). The two palaces of Gezer were, like that of Taanach, inserted in the defense line behind the gate and had an inner courtyard with working installations.

The assumption that in Iron Age IIA the site suffered a period of difficulties, while its neighbour Megiddo enjoyed a period of flourishing (DEVER 1982: 275), fits only partially with the archaeological evidence and concords with an opinion of W. F. ALBRIGHT (1949: 117), who believed in an alternate development of the two sites during the Iron Age, which P. W. LAPP has already discussed (1967b: 9). Actually, the two sites show a similar behaviour, especially in the IXth century, when Taanach experienced a new urban growth, testified by its massive defensive works on the northern shoulders of the *tell*: the "Northeast Outwork" and the "Nordostburg".

¹⁵ The historically recurrent strategic and economic importance of this highly productive geographical niche has been rightly pointed out by N. NA'AMAN (1981: 81ⁿ; 1992: 81).

¹⁶ A cylinder seal and a fragmentary painted bowl (SELLIN 1904: 27–28, figs. 21–22). Only a *faience* scarab could be ascribed to an IA IIB deposit (SELLIN 1904: 28–29, fig. 23).

¹⁷ R. A. S. MACALISTER had already pointed out the similarity between the masonry of the "Outer Wall" of Gezer – which, although erected in LB II, was rebuilt in IA II (DEVER 1986) – and that of the "Northeastern Fortress" of Taanach (MACALISTER 1905: 117).

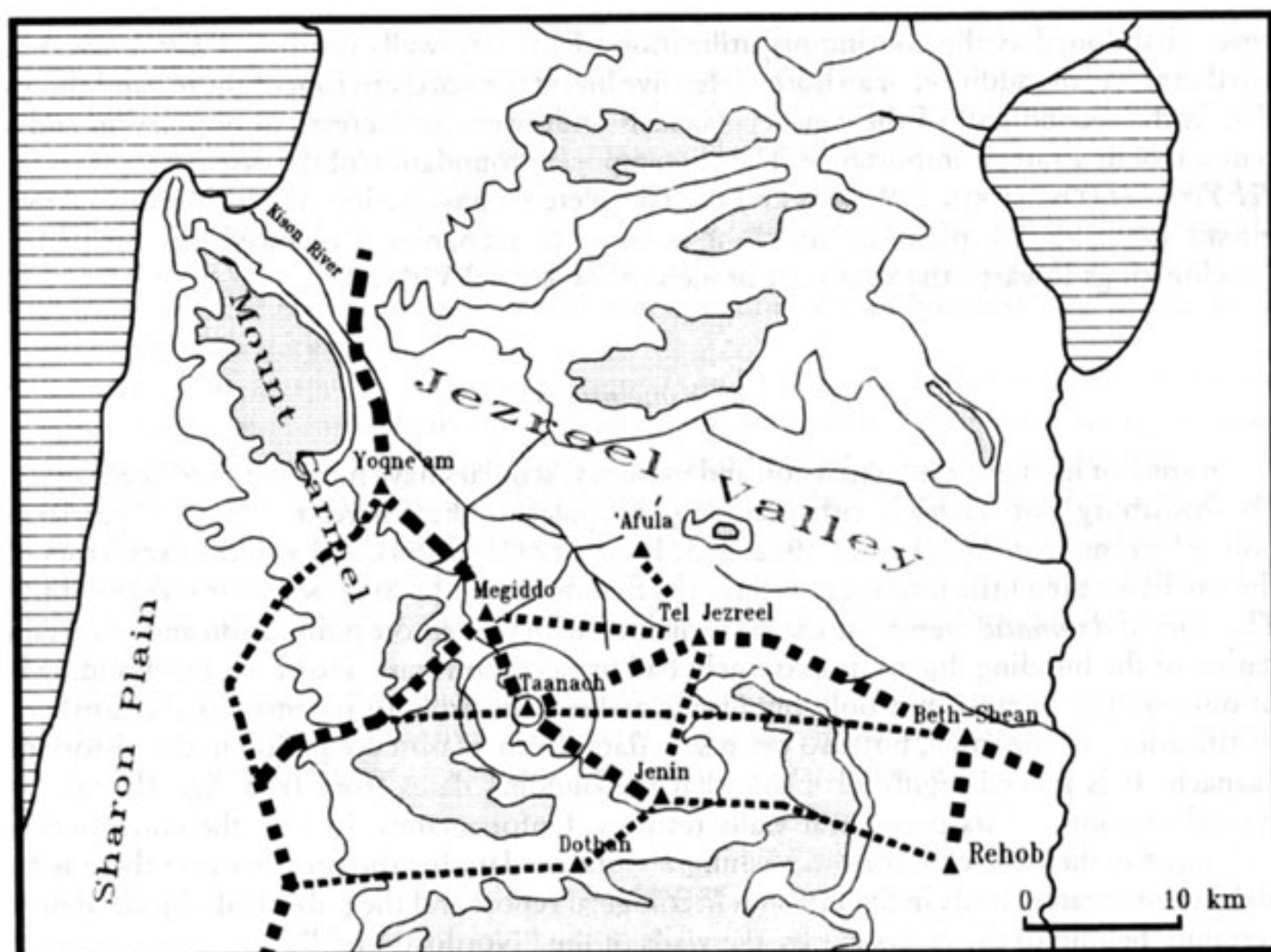


Fig. 4. The road network in the southern Jezreel Valley: the countryside and the roads under Taanach control.

However, in this period, the urban patterns of the two «daughter» towns were different, because Megiddo was strongly characterized by military and administrative buildings, while Taanach seems to have been a less specialized center, which probably sheltered the farmers of the southeastern estates of the Jezreel Valley (LAPP 1967b: 10). The recent excavations at *Tēl Yizrā'ēl*, the central site of the valley, have brought to light a casemate enclosure with corner towers (USSISHKIN 1992: 50–53, fig. 3), which has been ascribed to the building activities of Omri (882–871) and Ahab (873–852). This monumental structure represents the adoption of a typified planimetric scheme, which finds its most famous example in the monumental Royal Enclosure of Samaria (*SAMARIA-SEBASTE I*: pl. II). It is possible that the foundation of the “Nordostburg” and the related defensive outworks of Taanach took place in the stream of this political and urban reorganization of the centers surrounding the Jezreel Valley undertaken by the Israelite kings. It is perhaps not an accident that, in spite of their different planimetry and function, the construction techniques of the royal buildings of Samaria¹⁸, Megiddo¹⁹, *Tēl Yizrā'ēl*²⁰ and Taanach of this time are almost the same.

¹⁸ A good parallel is furnished by the structures related to the hypothetical gate of the Royal Enclosure (*SAMARIA-SEBASTE I*: fig. 8). As R. E. TAPPY demonstrated with an accurate examination of the pottery repertoires the buildings of “Period II–III” (*SAMARIA-SEBASTE I*: 97–103, fig. 47; TAPPY 1992: fig. 19) can be assigned to the House of Omri’s kings and to the Reign of Jehu, which correspond to Period III of Taanach (TAPPY 1992: 232–233).

The presumable extension of the town (16 acres), the presence of a consistent defensive system, with northern fortified works, and, on the other hand, the attestation of a "Cultic Structure"²¹ in the inner town (SW2-7 2-8, SWS1-7 1-8), are all proofs that in Iron Age IIB Taanach was an almost completely built-up town and that it still had an important role in the control of the road linking Megiddo and Jenin, i.e. the first of the two centers guarding, the *Via Maris* crossing the Carmel, and, the latter, the highway leading from Jerusalem and Samaria to the Jezreel Valley²² (Fig. 4). Furthermore, Taanach was the city-guard of the shortcut, which connected directly the Sharon Plain with Beth-Shean, (DORSEY 1991: 115, map 5) passing through Jalama (*Galāme*).

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¹⁹ The most significant parallel to the construction technique of the "Nordostburg" in Megiddo could be represented by the "Building 338" (LAMON 1939: 47-61, figs. 57-66); see especially LAMON 1939: fig. 63 and SELLIN 1904: fig. 18.

²⁰ USSISHKIN 1992: 23-29, 35-40, figs. 12, 25.

²¹ This structure was built in the Xth century B.C., but remained in use also during the IXth century, after Shishak's destruction, as is proved by the pottery found on the youngest floor (LAPP 1967b: 18, fig. 10).

²² The so-called "National Highway", which passed to the east of the Carmel Range *via* Tell Dōtān and Jenin (*Genin*) (DORSEY 1991: 117-146, maps 6-8).

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