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Religious Practices and Cult Objects during the Iron Age IIA at Tel Reḥov and their Implications regarding Religion in Northern Israel

This article presents evidence relating to religious practices, cult objects and iconography revealed in the excavations at Tel Reḥov in the Jordan Valley and dated to the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E. This evidence includes an open-air sanctuary, pottery altars, a model shrine, clay figurines, amulets, seals and a few inscriptions. Two buildings of special significance are also discussed and interpreted.

Introduction

The focus of the present article is on aspects of religious practices at Tel Reḥov during the Iron Age IIA (10th–9th centuries B.C.E.) and the light they shed on religious activity in this period in northern Israel.

The Site and Its Excavation

Tel Reḥov (often spelled Reḥob; Arabic: Tell es-Ṣarem; Israel map reference: 197.207) is a 10 ha mound, located in the middle of the Beth-Shean Valley between the Gilboa Ridge and the Jordan River, 5 km south of Tel Beth-Shean. The tell is identified with ṭḥb, a city mentioned in several Late Bronze Canaanite and Egyptian sources. The only written record of the name from the Iron Age is in Shoshenq I’s list of conquered cities (ca. 920 B.C.E.), where ṭḥb is mentioned after Beth-Shean. The name Reḥov (Hebrew for “piazza” and “street”) is mentioned as a toponym in several biblical sources (Josh 19:28–30, a city in the Plain of Acco; 2 Sam 10:6,8, the name of an Aramean state in Syria). However, no biblical source refers to Reḥov in the Beth-Shean Valley.¹

¹ Over the years, it has occasionally been suggested to us that Aram Beth Reḥob (2 Sam 10:6), or its parallel term ṭḥob (2 Sam 10:8), refers to our city. However, the term Aram
Over course of eleven excavation seasons between 1997–2012, we revealed the archaeological profile of the city since its foundation as a Canaanite city during the Late Bronze Age I (15th century B.C.E.) until its conquest by the Assyrians in 732 B.C.E. (fig. 1). The city continued to exist throughout the Iron Age I, albeit with many changes and reconstructions. The excavations defined eight LB–Iron I strata with several sub-phases, and it may be assumed that Reḥov continued to be an autonomous city with both an indigenous local population and an independent regime throughout this period, when it dominated the fertile lands of the valley south of Beth-Shean. Such continuity can be observed in other sites along the Beth-Shean and Jezreel Valleys as well as in the northern coastal plain; it is likewise reflected in the Hebrew Bible (Josh 17:11–13; Judges 1:27).

The Iron IIA City: An Outline

The Iron Age IIA, dated broadly to the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E., is the main period exposed and studied at Tel Reḥov. An area of almost 2000 m² of the 9th-century city (Stratum IV) was excavated (encompassing nearly 2% of the mound), as was an area of almost 1000 m² of Stratum VI (ca. 1% of the city area). These are the largest areas of this period excavated in northern Israel, and they yielded a substantial amount of architectural remains and artifacts. Correlation of local strata in eight excavation areas suggests

Beth Rehob, which combines the other names in the list of David’s enemies, makes this suggestion unlikely in my opinion.


Conclusions

Tel Reḥov yielded evidence of four types of religious activity during the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E.:

1. A unique open-air sanctuary in Area E, perhaps identified with the biblical term *bamāḥ*. This sanctuary could serve a cluster of families, perhaps a clan living in the northeastern part of the city, and may have been used in an ancestor cult, in which standing stones constituted an important component.

2. Cultic activity related to industry in the apiary in Area C.

3. A variety of cult objects are indicative of domestic religion and religious iconography: pottery altars (which were particularly common in the city), a model shrine, clay figurines, libation vessels, ceremonial chalices, and Egyptian amulets and seals. Domestic cult appears to have been particularly common at Iron IIA Tel Reḥov.

4. The exceptional case of Building CP, which, in our opinion, was related to the presence of a specific person. This person may have been the ‘man of god,’ seer, and healer Elisha.

The large city at Tel Reḥov was established as a Canaanite city in the Late Bronze Age, and the Canaanite nature of its population was maintained at least until the end of the Iron Age I, as evidenced by the material culture. It appears that the indigenous population of Canaanite origin persisted as the city’s main population throughout the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E., when it became part of the Israelite entity – perhaps part of the United Monarchy, the existence of which is still hotly debated – and certainly part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel beginning in the late 10th century B.C.E. During the 9th century, the local population presumably gradually accepted much of the new Israelite identity and ideology, and Israelite families may have settled in the city and intermingled with the old population. With regard to religion, the archaeological finds described in this paper indicate that Canaanite traditions prevailed: standing stones, representations of the female fertility goddess, the possible depiction on local seals of a god striding on mountains, the use of a model shrine, and perhaps a depiction of a Canaanite myth on that shrine. In terms of diet, like most Canaanite societies of the second millennium, the locals did not raise pigs, but did not ban them, as evidenced by a few pig bones found at the site, probably from boars hunted in the Jordan Valley.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Schmitt, “Typology,” 221, rejects Holladay’s view that the domestic cult in Israel represented “non-conformist,” “foreign” cultic practices, whereas the official state temples
With regard to the types of cultic objects uncovered, Tel Reḥov is no different from other sites in the Northern Kingdom, in particular Megiddo (decorated ‘cult stands’/altars, figurines), Taanach (decorated ‘cult stand’/altars), Pella (pottery altars), Tell el-Farʿah (model shrine, clay figurines) and Khirbet ‘Atarus in Transjordan (‘cult stand’/altar with human figures). The Iron IIA cult objects at these sites represent local variations, at times with rich iconography, based on Canaanite traditions yet without direct parallels to the earlier Canaanite art (such as the cult stands from Taanach; the altars from Megiddo, Tel Reḥov, Pella, and Khirbet ‘Atarus; and the shrine from Tel Reḥov). These local manifestations of Canaanite iconography were particularly strong in the Jezreel Valley and the central Jordan Valley. Tel Reḥov is notable for the relatively large number of cult objects uncovered, and in the unique, local artistic depictions. Along with the other sites mentioned above, Tel Reḥov provides a window into the physical aspects of religion in northern Israel in the 10th–9th centuries B.C.E.

Various efforts have been made to classify and evaluate religious practices, cult places, and temples in the Southern Levant, and particularly in Iron Age Israel, ranging from domestic cult to public and official religious practices. The cult places and cult objects uncovered are of limited value, since they reflect only the physical aspects of religion and cannot provide insight into the identity of the gods/goddesses worshipped or into deeper aspects of religious beliefs. The latter cannot be known without written sources; however very few written documents have been uncovered from this period. The biblical narratives relating to this period often reflect the theological agenda of later authors. For example, a major question is the extent to which Yahwism was accepted at Tel Reḥov in this period. The only theophoric component on names from Tel Reḥov inscriptions is El. However, if our claim that the Nimshi family was based at Reḥov is correct and if Jehu was indeed a member of this particular family, his Yahwistic name (whether given to him at birth or

represented the actual Israelite religion. Schmitt correctly observes that cult objects in Israel are of types that are common in local tradition and throughout the Levant. As shown by Schmitt, Holladay’s definition is based on the Deuteronomistic judgment of what is legitimate and illegitimate in Israelite religion, a judgment that is of course irrelevant to the time and place discussed in this paper.

See references in n. 13 above to earlier works by Holladay, Dever, Zwickel, Zevit and Schmitt. Holladay classified the cult places in Israel into four categories: national sanctuaries, town sanctuaries, neighborhood shrines, and domestic areas of religious activities. While the first and last categories are clearly defined, the second and third are less clear. I would suggest merging these two categories into one, allowing for variation. Zwickel provides a somewhat different typology, adding open-air sanctuaries and small chapels. Schmitt suggests a detailed formal typology, which, in my view, is unjustified, given the diversity in each sub-type.
adopted later in life) is the only evidence for the acceptance of Yahwism in this region during the 9th century B.C.E.

Illustrations

Fig. 1: Topographical map of Tel Reḥov and excavated areas.
Fig. 3: Four pottery altars from Tel Reḥov; 1) from the Area C apiary; 2) from the Area E sanctuary; 3–4) from Building CP.
Fig. 4: Partly preserved façade of an altar(?) from Building CF, showing females (goddesses?) in apertures.
Fig. 5: Pottery model shrine from Area C, Stratum IV.
Fig. 6: Selected clay figurines from Strata VI–IV at Tel Reḥov. 1: A reclining female figure, Stratum VI; 2–4: drummers figurines; 2 and 4 from Stratum IV; 5 from Stratum VI.
Fig. 7: Seal impressions of the Iron IIA “Tel Reḥov style” on jar handles, perhaps showing a god striding on mountains? Nos. 1–2, 4 from Tel Reḥov Area C Strata V–IV; No. 3 from Beth Shean; No. 5 surface find from Tel Reḥov. Nos. 4–5 show the figures in tête bêche composition.