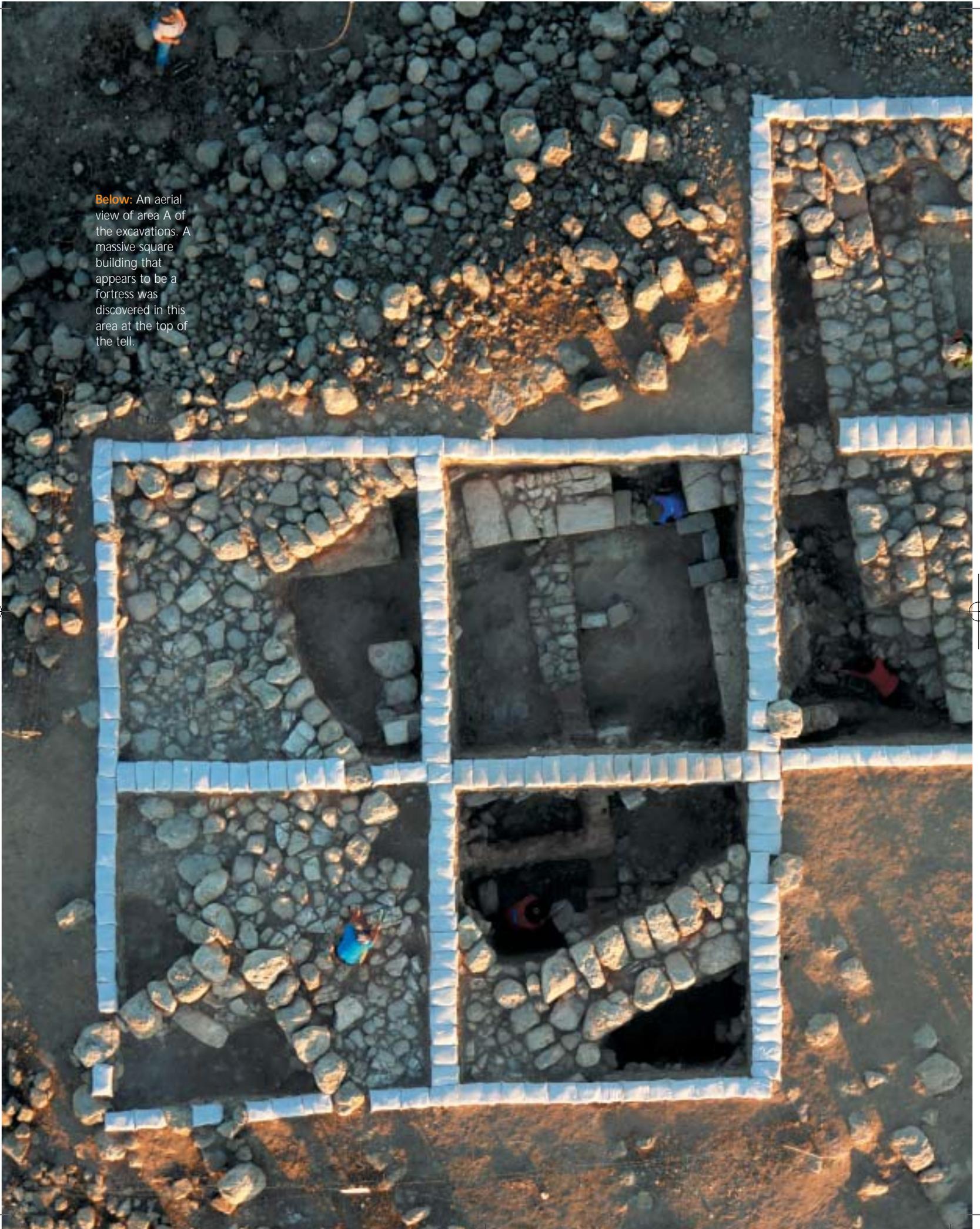


**Below:** An aerial view of area A of the excavations. A massive square building that appears to be a fortress was discovered in this area at the top of the tell.





ARCHAEOLOGY

# Tel 'Eton:

## A Biblical City in the Shephelah

A team from Bar-Ilan University spent the past two seasons excavating Tel 'Eton in the eastern Shephelah. Most scholars identify Tel 'Eton as biblical Eglon, which is mentioned in the Book of Joshua. The excavations have yet to prove this definitively, but they have found there was a large, important city at this site during the biblical period.

> by Avraham Faust

Aerial photographs: Sky View

Dedicated to the Residents of the Eastern Lachish Region

**T**he expanses of the southeastern Shephelah are among the most beautiful and best preserved areas in Israel. Narrow roads wind between fields and orchards, giving one the feeling that time has frozen here. There are many archaeological sites from a wide range of periods and most of them have been excellently preserved. One of the largest of these sites is Tel 'Eton.

Tel 'Eton is a biblical-era site that covers some 15 acres. It is located slightly west of the Trough Valley, the unique geographical unit that extends along the line where the slopes of Mount Hebron descend to meet the Shephelah, the Judean lowlands. The site is about 11 kilometers southeast of Tel Lachish and some two kilometers south of Moshav Shekef on the old patrol road, near the point where it intersects Nahal Adorayim.

The settlement at Tel 'Eton was located near the



junction that controlled a number of important roads: the south-north road that ran through the Trough Valley and connected the Beersheba Basin with the Ayalon Valley as well as several roads that connected the coastal plain with Mount Hebron and met at the foot of the tell. The tell's location in Nahal Adorayim and next to a series of valleys had another advantage for residents: proximity to fertile farmland.

### Identifying the Site

Most researchers identify Tel 'Eton as the town of Eglon, which is mentioned several times in the Bible: in the description of the tribe of Judah's territory

**Above:** A storage jar is unearthed at Tel 'Eton.

**Facing page:** The slopes of Tel 'Eton. Note the terrace lines which probably reflect ancient walls.

(Joshua 15:39) and in the account of the Israelite conquest, where it is mentioned as being located between Lachish and Hebron. "From Lachish, Joshua proceeded with all Israel to Eglon; they encamped against it and attacked it. They captured it on the same day and put it to the sword, proscribing all the people that were in it, as they had done to Lachish. From Eglon, Joshua marched with all Israel to Hebron and attacked it" (Joshua 10:34-36).

This description of Eglon's location is the main reason for its identification as Tel 'Eton. The current excavations have not contributed to resolving this issue yet.



### Research at Tel 'Eton

A large cemetery is located on the hills surrounding the tell. Most of the tombs were plundered in the past few decades, prompting a team of archaeologists to conduct a salvage excavation in the cemetery. Their findings included a tomb from Iron Age I containing bichrome Philistine ceramics and a tomb from the period of the Monarchy (Iron Age II) decorated with engravings, including a depiction of a lion.

Prof. David Ussishkin conducted small-scale salvage excavations at Tel 'Eton in the mid-1970s. A small group of excavators headed by Dr. Eitan Ayalon exposed remains from two well-preserved

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The survey uncovered a few ceramic sherds from the Early Bronze Age, which may have been when the first significant human settlement existed at Tel 'Eton.

layers from the period of the Monarchy.

In 2006, a team from Bar-Ilan University began an excavation and survey of Tel 'Eton and its surroundings. With the assistance of a team from Wheaton College headed by Daniel Master, the tell was divided into 39 units, based on its topography. Each unit was then surveyed and a small shovel test was conducted in each unit. The vast majority of the pottery found is dated to the Iron Age II.

### Atop Tel 'Eton

Two strata were uncovered in area A, at the top of the tell. The upper stratum included the remains of a massive, 20 X 20 meter square building. The building's outer walls were 3-3.5 meters thick. Due to its size and location, it is believed to have been a fortress which controlled the area. Since only the foundations remain, it is difficult to determine when the building was constructed and used.

Well-preserved walls that were over 1.5 meters high were found underneath the fortress-like building. Stones, mud bricks, arrowheads, and many other objects were found between the walls. This is evidence that the city was destroyed by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE, perhaps during the days of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king who led a military campaign against Judah in 701 BCE and destroyed many sites in the Shephelah. The walls were part of a grand building whose cornerstones were carefully curved and whose ground floor covered some 180 square meters. Judging by the parts uncovered so far, it may be similar to the famous building known as the western tower at Tel Beit Mirsim, which is only a few kilometers south of Tel 'Eton. Thus far, a significant part of the



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**Below:** A general view of Tel 'Eton from the air.

**Facing page:** At work in Tel 'Eton.

(plastered) central courtyard and some of the surrounding rooms have been uncovered. It appears that there was a second story above the rooms.

One of the smaller rooms has been almost completely excavated. The findings from the ground floor included many broken storage jars and other vessels, as well as a few animal horns. A significant number of the jars still held their contents – olives, grapes, lentils, and grains. Garlic cloves also were found – they apparently had been hanging on the walls and fell when the building was destroyed.

It appears that the structure was initially a public building and later served as the home of wealthy residents.

### An Agricultural Terrace

The recent excavations included a section that was a continuation of the area excavated in the 1970s. The upper half meter contained only soil, small stones, and small pottery sherds, mainly from the Iron Age II (1000-586 BCE), but also some pottery from the Byzantine period (324-638 CE). In most of this area, a layer of large and medium-sized stones was

uncovered next. Walls were discovered underneath them. It seems that the upper layer was a Byzantine-era terrace and that a significant part of the tell was used for agriculture during that period. The layer of stones underneath it may have been placed there as part of Byzantine earthworks, but further excavations must be conducted in order to confirm this.

The findings underneath the terraces were varied. In the east, an Iron I (1200-1000 BCE) layer with Philistine pottery was unearthed, while in the center of this area a number of rooms from the period of the Monarchy (Iron Age II) were unearthed. Persian remains, including two ostraca, were discovered in the western part of the section. In another excavation area, on the northern slope, a series of Persian Period (538-333 BCE) pits, dug into the Iron Age stratum, was uncovered.

### The Cemetery

The Bar-Ilan team also has begun to survey the tell's surroundings. The most significant finding is the large, dense cemetery. Hundreds of graves already have been found and it is likely that there are sever-



al thousand. All the tombs identified so far had been robbed earlier; the robbers also destroyed many of the graves in the process.

The cemetery appears to have been used from the end of the third millennium BCE. Tombs also have been found from various stages of the Bronze Age, Iron Age I, Iron Age II, and later periods.

### Human Settlement at Tel 'Eton

There is not yet clear evidence as to when humans first settled at Tel 'Eton. The survey uncovered a few ceramic sherds from the Early Bronze Age (3500-2200 BCE), which may have been when the first significant human settlement existed. Nothing has been discovered from the Intermediate Bronze Age (2200-2000 BCE) and only a few items have been found from the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BCE). The number of findings from the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BCE) is greater and they are similar to those from the Early Bronze Age. It appears there was a significant settlement at Tel 'Eton during that period, though its size and characteristics are still unknown.

The oldest items uncovered up to now in the excavations are from Iron Age I and include bichrome Philistine pottery. Relatively few strata from that period have been discovered in the Shephelah thus far, meaning that Tel 'Eton could play an important role in increasing our understanding of that period as well as of the complex relations between the Israelites and Philistines at the time.

Most of the finds thus far are from Iron Age II, mainly from the eighth century BCE, and it appears there was an important city at Tel 'Eton during that period. Judging by the destruction at the site and the large quantity of arrowheads, the Assyrians conquered and destroyed the city at the end of the eighth century BCE.

It seems that the site was not settled again during the Iron Age. A small settlement existed during the late Persian Period and the early Hellenistic Period, mainly during the fourth century BCE and perhaps for a short time after it. During the Byzantine Period, a large part of the tell was used as agricultural land.■

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**Acknowledgments:** The expedition was greatly assisted by the Lachish Regional Council. We would especially like to thank Mayor Danni Moravia, as well as Meir Dahan, Yaron Meshulam, and Avi Cohen. We were also assisted by the residents of the region, especially Gadi Eilon and Eitan Rosenblat from Shekef.

