
Tell Tweini: A Multi-Period Harbour Town at the Syrian Coast

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INTRODUCTION²

During the past eleven years, excavations at Tell Tweini, Syria have focused on different periods visible in the archaeological record. Both the Bronze and the Iron Age periods are well attested and have been examined extensively (Bretschneider – Van Lerberghe 2009; Al-Maqdissi *et al.* 2008). Recently, however, traces of an Early Iron Age settlement, often lacking at neighbouring sites, have been uncovered at Tell Tweini.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the period spanning the time between the end of the 13th and the 12th centuries B.C.E. is known as a period of crisis during which the significant Aegean, Cypriot, Anatolian and Levantine centres deteriorated. Immediately after 1200 B.C.E., the entire Mediterranean region was faced with catastrophic obliterations (Lehmann 2001). Considerable destruction and ash layers have been observed at numerous sites in the Levant. Once important sites at the Syrian coast, like Ugarit, were abandoned and destroyed along with many other Mediterranean cities, never to be rebuilt. For this entire period, known as the Dark Ages, the archaeological and in particular the historical sources are especially scarce.

Based on recently excavated data from Tell Tweini, significant knowledge about the development of urbanisation, architecture, pottery, burial customs and art in the Northern Levant during the post-Ugaritic period can be acquired. Multi-disciplinary studies, combined with an analysis of the architectural structures and archaeological inventory, have allowed obtaining initial information on a complex and obscure period in the history of the Ancient Near East.

TELL TWEINI

The site of Tell Tweini is located on the southern bank of the River Rumeilah in the Syrian coastal plain, approximately 1,5 km east of modern-day Jebleh and 40 km south of Ras Shamra-Ugarit, the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Ugarit

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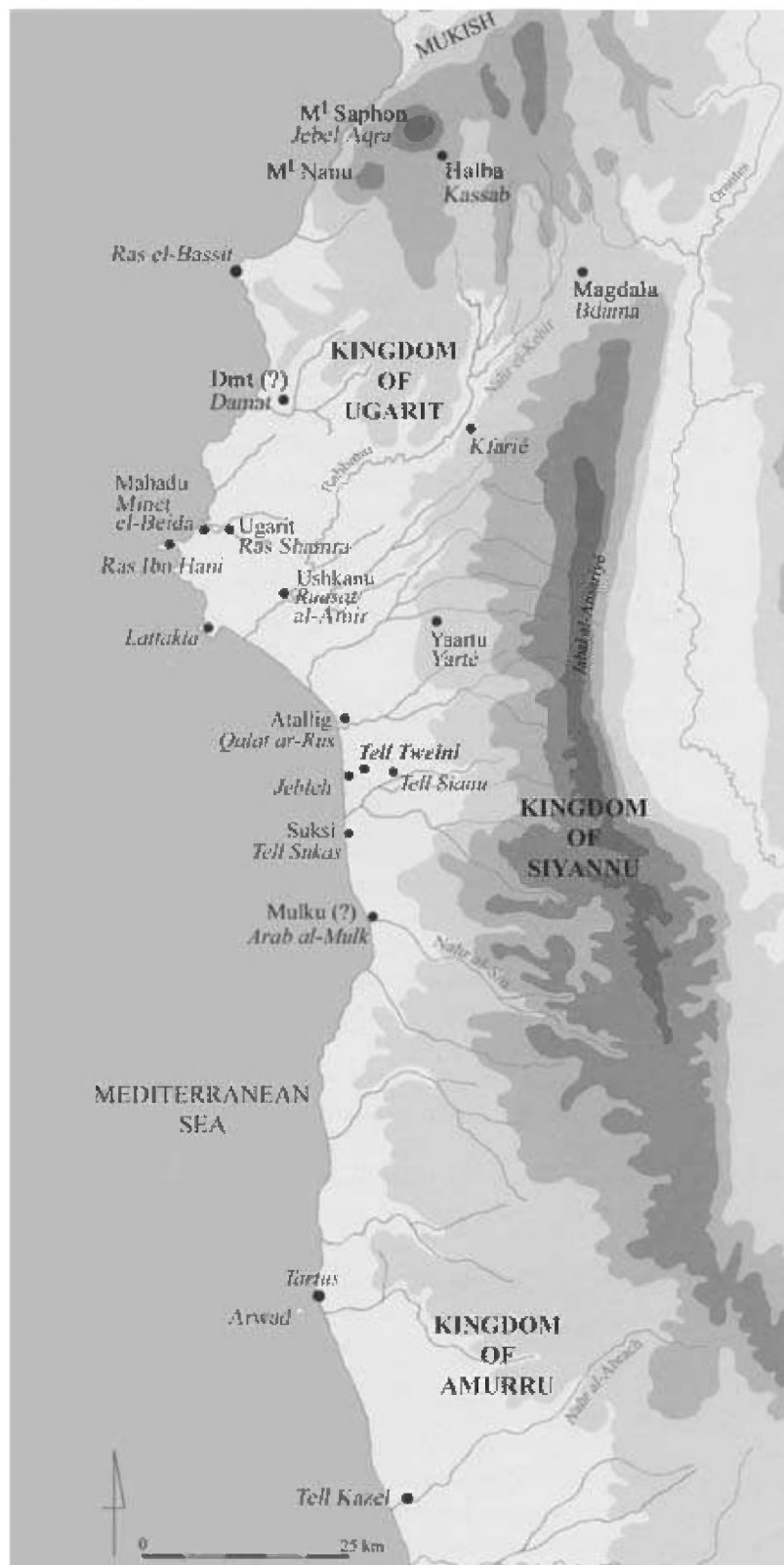
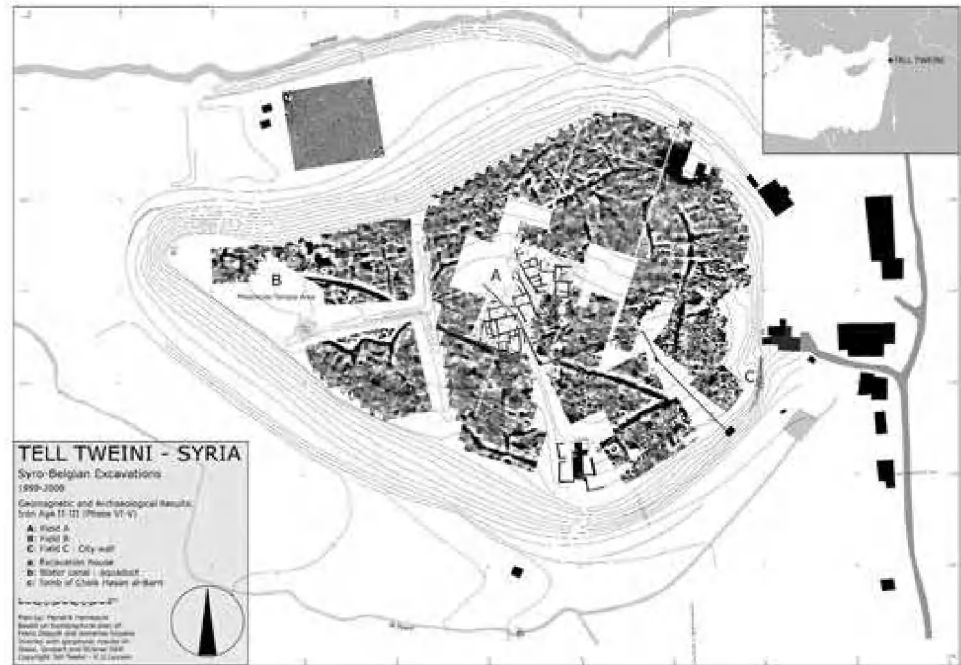


Fig. 1
Coastal Syria in the Late
Bronze Age

Fig. 2
Tell Tweini: Results of the
geophysical survey



(Fig. 1). Since 1999, the site of ca. 12 hectares has been under excavation by the Syro-Belgian team headed by Dr. Al-Maqdissi, Dr. Badawi (Department of Antiquities, Damascus) and Prof. Dr. Bretschneider (Catholic University of Leuven). Work has concentrated on three areas at the summit of the tell (Fields A, B and C). Especially Fields A (central part of the tell) and B (western plateau) have produced a full, uninterrupted archaeological sequence spanning mainly from the Early Bronze Age IV (ca. 2400 B.C.E.) up to the Iron III period (ca. 500 B.C.E.), making Tell Tweini a key site for the Northern Levant concerning ceramic sequences and architectural stratification from the Bronze and Iron Ages (Al-Maqdissi *et al. in press*). The most intensive occupation occurred during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age periods, when a fortified city occupied the site (Figs. 2–3).

Over the last years the Tell Tweini project has been focusing on five key issues:

- 1) The origins of the settlement and its development into an important regional centre during the third millennium B.C.E. (Early Bronze Age).
- 2) The reduced occupation of the site in the early second millennium B.C.E. and its implications for the political, historic and economic situation at that time (Middle Bronze I).
- 3) The revival of urban life between 1800 and 1600 B.C.E. (Middle Bronze II).
- 4) The integration of Gibala's community into the Kingdom of Ugarit in the mid- and late second millennium B.C.E. (Late Bronze Age).
- 5) The reorganisation and process of state-formation in the beginning of the Iron Age II period.



Fig. 3

Field C: City wall at the eastern edge of the tell

Second half of the third millennium B.C.E.: The first city

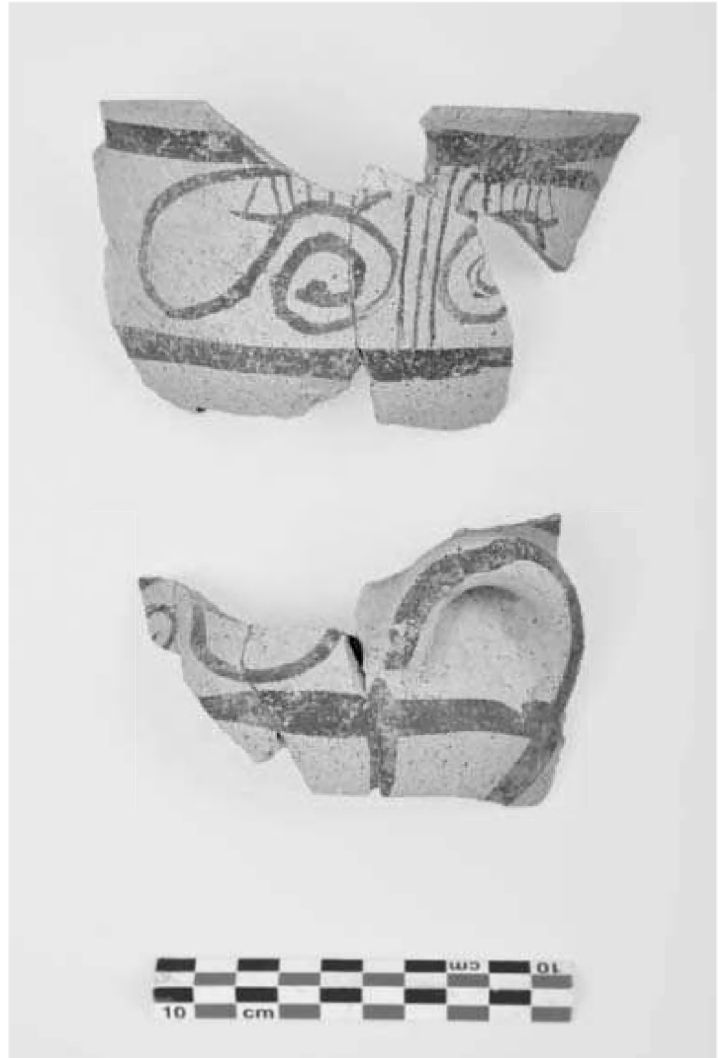
During the later Early Bronze Age, coastal Syria was characterised by the transition from agriculturally based to complex urban societies. The first urbanisation of Tell Tweini occurred during the Early Bronze Age IV period and is represented by a sequence of two main architectural levels including mudbrick constructions (Bretschneider – Van Lerberghe 2009: 17–19). Since the Early Bronze Age, occupation is only known from rather small soundings, while the urban structures of the earliest settlements remain largely unknown.

First half of the second millennium B.C.E.: The city of the dead

Some tombs, dated to the Middle Bronze Age II, were found in direct relation to the excavated houses (Hameeuw – Jans 2009: 75–82). During this period it was a custom to bury the dead underneath the floors of the dwellings. An extraordinary find from this period was a communal tomb dated to ca. 1700 B.C.E. The grave contained the skeletons of 42 adults and 16 infants. Used as grave goods were 160 well-preserved ceramic vessels including a large quantity of Cypriote imports, plates and dishes, several bronze pins and a figurine. Another inhumation consisted of the grave of a woman and her child accompanied by a sheep's head. In Field B, the remains of three men were recovered from a silo. Among others, the grave goods included a fenestrated axe, quite typical of this period. Similar axes have also been discovered at Sukas, Ugarit and Byblos and date to around 1800 B.C.E.

Fig. 4

Late Helladic III C Early
ceramic from the Late
Bronze Age II destruction
level 7A



Second half of the second millennium B.C.E.: Harbour town of the Ugaritic Kingdom and new foreign settlers from the Aegean?

During the Late Bronze Age II period (14th and 13th century B.C.E.), Tell Tweini was part of the Kingdom of Ugarit and is mentioned as Gibala in the treaty between the Hittite king Muršili II and Niqmepa, king of Ugarit. Gibala was the southernmost harbour town of the Ugaritic Kingdom, close to the border with the Kingdom of Siyannu. The material culture of the Late Bronze Age parallels that of Ugarit and illustrates a massive occupation with imports from all over the Eastern Mediterranean. It includes a Hittite-Luwian hieroglyphic inscription and a wide range of Cypriote and Late Helladic ceramics. A set of 14C dates (Kaniewski *et al.* 2010) and sporadic finds of locally produced Late Helladic III C Early ceramics (Fig. 4) date the fall of the Late Bronze Age city of Gibala (Jung *in press*), prob-



Fig. 5

Ceramic of the Late Bronze Age II destruction level 7A (locus 185). Above right: handmade and burnished cooking pot found together with LH III B kylix (above left).

ably caused by the “Sea Peoples”, to around the first quarter of the 12th century B.C.E., simultaneously with the fall of the capital Ugarit. Contrary to Ugarit, Tell Tweini was directly resettled by “newcomers” after a fire-destruction visible in the archaeological record as an ash layer, labelled level 7A. Within this destruction level, an important new ceramological trait appears, namely handmade and burnished cooking pots (Fig. 5). This ware also appears in the Early Iron Age levels 6GH and 6EF (Vansteenhuyse – Bretschneider *in press*).

The production of local Late Helladic IIIC has been well documented for the Philistine area in the Southern Levant but evidence is mounting that this might also have been the case at e.g. Amurru (Tell Kazel; Badre 2006), the Ugaritic region (Du Pied 2008) and the ʿAmuq Valley (Janeway 2008; Harrison 2009).

Early Iron Age

The stratigraphical research of the area forming part of the Acropolis (Field A) was part of a large-scale architectural investigation identifying a public building ensemble (Fig. 6). This area was recognised based on a geomagnetic and topographical survey conducted in 2004, while the peripheral, topographically lower area in the western part revealed more evidence from later period activity. The location of a series of trenches in the southeastern part of the summit of the tell offered the possibility to assess the date and nature of occupation in this area, at the same time allowing a better, diachronic understanding of the topographical organisation of the Late Bronze and Iron Age settlements of Tell Tweini. Excavations confirmed the existence of three monumental buildings in the public zone (Figs. 7–8). Buildings A, B and C were developed during different construction

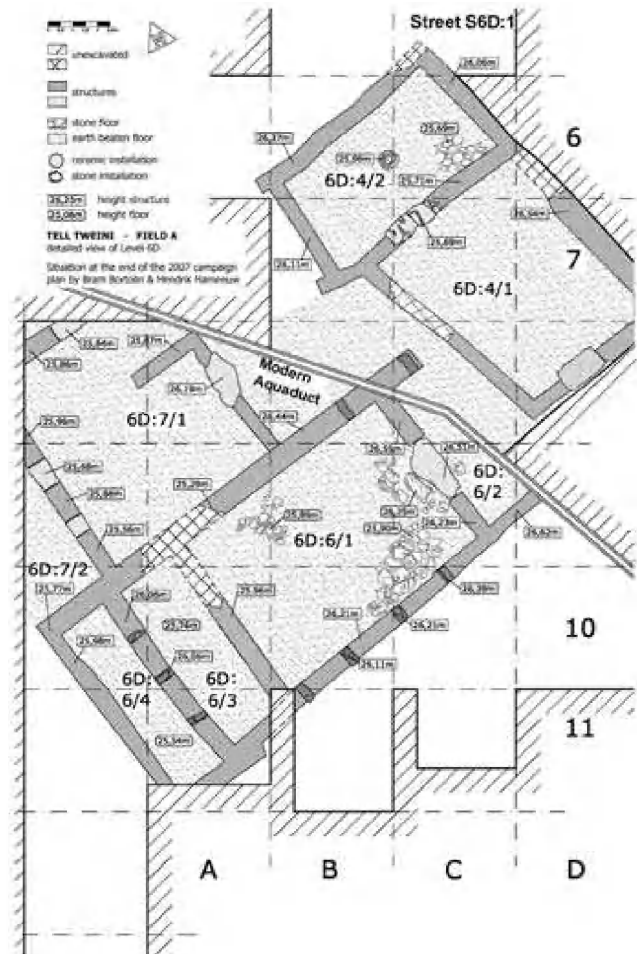
Fig. 6

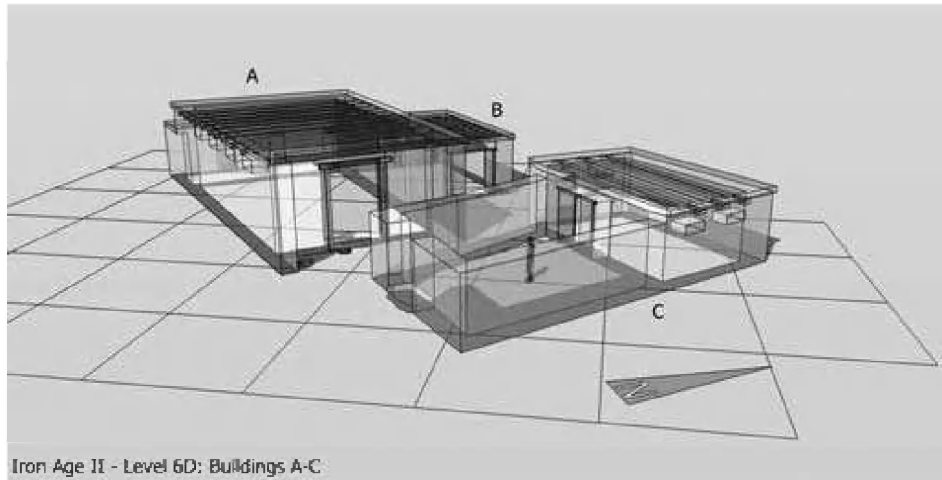
Field A: Late Bronze Age II to Iron Age II occupation



Fig. 7

Field A: Buildings A, B and C. Situation of level 6C-D (beginning of Iron Age II)



**Fig. 8**

Field A: Buildings A,
B and C (Reconstruction:
B. Bortolin and
H. Hameeuw)

phases ranging from the beginning of the Early Iron Age I to the Iron Age II (ca. 1200–750 B.C.E.).

Throughout the period of assumed collapse – the so-called Dark Ages – architectural features and ceramic evidence illustrate a transition and a continuity at the site of Tell Tweini, allowing the characterisation of both social and urban changes. During the most recent excavation campaigns, several clusters of Early Iron Age (6GH and 6EF) architecture have been identified across different areas within the city walls, especially underneath the Iron Age II Building A and its close surroundings (Fig. 9). The earliest Iron Age I urbanisation of the 12th century B.C.E. (level 6GH) at Tell Tweini is marked by the creation of a new city, constructed on the destruction debris (Level 7A) of the Late Bronze Age town. In several locations Late Bronze floors and walls have been partly reused.

The ceramological material displays a continuation of the local material into the Iron Age without the common imported Late Bronze Age wares from Cyprus or the Aegean world. The handmade and burnished cooking ware remained in use. Typical for Level 6G-H, the earliest Iron Age level, is a red fabric covered in white slip and red paint (Fig. 10). It relates to decorated pots from Iron I at Ras Ibn Hani, Ras el-Bassit (Courbin 1986: fig. 14; Du Pied 2008: 169, fig. 6b-c) and Tell Kazel (Badre 2006, fig. 13:3). The white-slipped vessels, all amphoroid craters, at Ras Ibn Hani are restricted to “Fer 1 phase 1”. Important is that at Ras Ibn Hani some vessels carry bichrome decoration, which is not the case in Tell Tweini where red paint is used exclusively. The decoration includes triple bands in zigzag, checkerboards and grooved handles with red paint. It remains limited to craters from Tell Tweini. The term Syrian White Slip is being proposed for these vessels (Vansteenhuyse *in press*).

The precise date of the end of occupation level 6GH remains unresolved so far. During the second half of Iron Age I (level 6EF), a great number of rooms and

Fig. 9

Field A: Early Iron Age I
structures of level 6GH
beneath Building A



Fig. 10

Syrian White Slip crater
from Early Iron Age
Level 6G-H



Fig. 12

Field A: Storage vessels
of Early Iron Age level
6E-F



Fig. 13

Field A: Storage vessels
of Early Iron Age level
6E-F (1050–1000 B.C.E.)



also large amounts of cylindrical shaped loom weights and jar stoppers in clay. Three bronze arrowheads complete the archaeological record in this area.

The loom weights (Fig. 14) may be regarded as cultural markers of foreign settlers who can be linked to the “Sea Peoples (migration)” as they are also present in the Cyprus and Philistine settlements in the Southern Levant (Yasur-Landau 2010).



Fig. 14

Loom weight of Early Iron Age level 6E-F (1050–1000 B.C.E.)

Two monumental Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions mentioning the “Land of Palistin”, uncovered in the Temple of the Storm God at the Aleppo Citadel (Hawkins 2009; Harrison 2009), seem to confirm the formation of foreign policies in the Northern Levant, possibly partly stimulated by changing climatic conditions.

Recently published results of palynological, sedimentary and paleo-ecological research at Tell Tweini linked to a pollen-based reconstruction of the ecosystem have convincingly suggested an abrupt climate change in the period between 1200 and 850 B.C.E., and especially during the Early Iron Age levels at Tell Tweini (Kaniewski *et al.* 2008). The increasing aridity of the region, due to rising temperatures, must have had great impact on the human and animal populations, influencing agricultural practices. Economy in particular and society in general would have been forced to adapt. Environmental changes should therefore be taken into account while examining the transitional period of the Early Iron Age at Tell Tweini since they may have had repercussions for the study of the claimed collapse and societal development.

First millennium B.C.E.: Assyrians and Phoenicians

With the construction of Building A at the beginning of Iron Age II, a tradition of public buildings developed in the southern part of Field A. Excavations and a geomagnetic survey revealed a well-preserved plan of the city during the Iron II/III period (ca. 900–500 B.C.E). By the end of the 8th century B.C.E., a significant architectural renewal occurred at the centre of Tell Tweini. Production of olive oil and wine became the main economic activity of the town and oil presses and re-

fining installations were found in many houses. The public buildings in Field A lost their original (sacred?) function and were divided into small chambers where specific economic and commercial activities took place. These architectural and functional developments could be the consequence of the international politics in the 8th century B.C.E., when the Syrian coast came under Assyrian control.

CONCLUSION

The harbour town of Tell Tweini was occupied from the Early Bronze Age IV until the Iron Age III. During the most recent campaigns, the focal point has been the transition between the Late Bronze and the Early Iron Age.

After the destruction of neighbouring Late Bronze Age cities, an event visible also in the destruction layer (7A) of Tell Tweini, several massive architectural structures dated to the Iron Age I (levels 6GH and 6EF) seem to emerge at the site without an actual hiatus. The tradition of ceramic shapes and pastes of the Late Bronze Age seems to have known a continuation during the Iron Age I (level 6GH), but the architecture shows a new kind of urbanisation with a different structural orientation. New 14C results and the fact that level 7A holds Late Hellenistic IIIIC Early ceramics allows dating the destruction to the first quarter of the 12th century B.C.E. This date is comparable to the fall of Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, Tell Kazel and many other sites probably destroyed by the Sea Peoples.

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