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**Merneptah's  
Wrath**  
and the Destruction  
of Gezer





# Pharaoh's Fury

## Merneptah's Destruction of Gezer

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THE MERNEPTAH STELE, which most scholars date to c. 1208 B.C.E., provides the earliest known reference to Israel outside the Bible. But while history books focus on the stele's reference to Israel having been "wasted without seed" during Pharaoh Merneptah's campaign into southern Canaan, the bigger prize was almost certainly the prominent Canaanite city-state of Gezer, located in the Judean foothills about 20 miles west of Jerusalem, which the stele says was "captured" during the same campaign. Indeed, in a companion inscription carved on the walls of the Temple of Amada in Upper Nubia (located near Egypt's modern border with Sudan), Merneptah (r. 1213–1203 B.C.E.) brags not about conquering Israel but rather being the "subduer of Gezer."

Gezer was a frequent target of the New Kingdom Egyptian pharaohs as they marched through Canaan to control its trade routes

**WRATHFUL PHARAOH.** Son and successor to the great Ramesses II, Merneptah (r. 1213–1203 B.C.E.) continued Egyptian dominance over the southern Levant. To quell rebellious elements in the region, he mounted a military campaign to Canaan that ended tragically for Gezer. This fragmented granite statue of the pharaoh, which was once painted in brilliant colors, comes from Merneptah's mortuary temple in Thebes.









**TEL GEZER** overlooks the fertile Aijalon Valley of the Judean foothills. Located on a major trade route between the central hill country and the Mediterranean coast, the site was occupied from prehistoric times to the Roman era. During the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.E.), Gezer was a prominent Canaanite city-state and a frequent target of Egypt's New Kingdom pharaohs who sought to control Canaan. The mound consists of a western and an eastern hill, separated by a saddle. Recent excavations along the southern slope of the site's western hill (circled above) have revealed dramatic new evidence of the city's destruction at the end of the 13th century, likely at the hands of Pharaoh Merneptah.

and extract taxes from local city-states. The earliest reference to Gezer comes from the Temple of Amun at Karnak, where a commemorative relief lists it as one of the Canaanite cities conquered by Thutmose III (r. 1479-1425 B.C.E.). Similarly, at his mortuary temple at Thebes, Thutmose IV (r. 1400-1390 B.C.E.) mentions taking Hurrian captives from Gezer. Gezer is also mentioned several times in the 14th-century Amarna Letters, and at least eight letters written from the city were delivered to the Egyptian royal court.\*

Unfortunately, very little of the Late Bronze Age city known to the New Kingdom pharaohs has been uncovered, even though Gezer has

been repeatedly excavated over the past century and more.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, despite Merneptah's boast, archaeologists have found little evidence of the 13th-century city that the pharaoh claims to have subdued. Our recent excavations, however, are beginning to fill in this picture.

Gezer is strategically located in the Aijalon Valley of the Judean foothills. The site overlooks Israel's southern coastal plain, along which ran the ancient Via Maris, the major north-south route that led from Egypt to Mesopotamia, and it guards one of the primary routes leading from the Mediterranean coast to the central hill country. The rectangular-shaped mound, roughly 30 acres in size, consists of a western and an eastern hill, separated by a slight depression or saddle.

\* Hershel Shanks, "The Trowel vs. the Text: How the Amarna Letters Challenge Archaeology," *BAR*, January/February 2009.





The renewed Gezer excavations, which we directed from 2006 until their completion in 2017, were focused primarily on issues related to the chronology, history, and layout of the site's later and better-known Iron Age city (associated by many with King Solomon's building campaign, mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15–16).<sup>\*</sup> The surprise find, however, was the exposure of a large building, dating to the late 13th century—the very end of the Late Bronze Age—that was completely destroyed by fire.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Hershel Shanks, "The Sad Case of Tell Gezer," *BAR*, July/August 1983.

**MERNEPTAH'S VICTORY STELE**—also called the Israel Stele, since it provides the earliest historical reference to "Israel" (highlighted in blue)—boasts: "Canaan is seized by every evil, Ashkelon is carried off, and Gezer is seized, Yenoam is made as (though it) never existed, Israel is wasted without seed." Until recently, however, little archaeological evidence had been found to support the pharaoh's claims. Gezer's name (highlighted in yellow), spelled *Q'tch'r* in Egyptian, is followed by two hieroglyphic signs that designate it as a foreign city.

Buried in the debris were three individuals who were not able to escape the building's destruction. Now, for the first time, Gezer has provided a snapshot of the devastation wrought seemingly by Merneptah's campaign into Canaan.

The building sits on the southern slope of Gezer's western hill. We exposed nearly 15 by 20 meters of this large complex, though much more of the structure appears to have eroded down the southern slope of the tell. The building is an example of a "patrician house," a well-attested type of Late Bronze Age structure characterized by a series of large central rooms surrounded by smaller side rooms. Similar patrician buildings, which archaeologists have typically associated with a site's wealthy or elite classes, were excavated at nearby Tel Batash (biblical Timnah) and Tell es-Safi (ancient Gath).



MARY LEVINE



Gezer's patrician house consists of two large rectangular main rooms (A and D) with three adjoining smaller rooms (B, C, F) to the south and a cobbled courtyard (E) to the east. The northern main room (D) includes a central wall with two engaged pillars that likely served as a room divider and ceiling support. A cobble stone pavement covered the floor. In the room's north-west corner, we found an Egyptian amulet with the cartouche of Thutmose III, possibly an heirloom commemorating the great pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty.

The building's other main room (A), positioned in the center of the complex, was likely used as an industrial space. Like Room D, it was divided into two areas by a central partition wall. The western half of the room appears to have been used for storage. The eastern half contained a large stone vat with a shallow depression in the bottom, and, just a few feet away, a flat, rounded stone with a smoothed upper surface. A stone roller and fragments of large storage jars were found throughout the room, suggesting the possible presence of an olive press. Room A also held several remarkable

finds, including restorable pottery, a scarab of Amenhotep III (r. 1390–1353 B.C.E.), and a unique cylinder seal featuring the Canaanite god Reshef battling enemies and taking captives. The complex's smaller auxiliary rooms (B, C, F), which could be accessed only from the main industrial room (A), were probably used for storage, as evidenced by the many storage jar sherds that were discovered, especially in Room F.

While we were able to excavate only a portion of the building (the rest having eroded away), its size, layout, features, and finds suggest

**THE LARGE "PATRICIAN HOUSE" excavated at Gezer shows evidence of having been destroyed in a violent conflagration. Dating to the late 13th century, this wealthy house probably fell victim to Merneptah's military campaign into southern Canaan. Although its walls and plan are poorly preserved, the expansive complex featured a pillared main room (D), a large industrial area, perhaps used to process grains and olives (A), three smaller side rooms (B, C, F) that were likely used for storage, and a cobbled courtyard (E). The building's size and layout, together with recovered artifacts, suggest it was the residence of one of Gezer's wealthier families. The dig volunteers visible in green and pink shirts provide a sense of the building's scale.**



TEL GEZER EXCAVATION PROJECT, S. WOLFF





**DEADLY DEVASTATION.** The skeletal remains of three people who died in the collapsing patrician house are a gruesome witness to the violent end of Late Bronze Age Gezer. Found under layers of debris, ash, and fallen stones, the remains are those of an adult male, who died under the collapse of the pillared room (above), and another adult and child who fell together in the house's adjoining industrial space (right; the child's remains, barely preserved, are visible next to the adult's left leg, just below the north arrow in the photo).

it was likely the residence of a wealthy, elite family, perhaps one that had some connection to the Egyptian administration in Canaan. The industrial room may also provide evidence that the family was engaged in small-scale industrial activities, perhaps producing and storing olive oil or processing cereals.

Although there is much we still do not know about this structure, one thing is clear: It was violently destroyed, as evidenced by the destruction debris found throughout the complex. This ashy debris was sometimes 3 feet thick and included collapsed stone walls, fallen and burnt mudbrick, burnt timbers, and the broken remnants of crushed pottery vessels.

But what really brought to life the brutal end of Late Bronze Age Gezer was the discovery of the remains of three people—two adults and one



child—who died as the building burned and collapsed around them. The remains, which were discovered in the complex's two main rooms, were surrounded by ash and covered by debris. One of the adults and the child were found together in the industrial room, the adult lying on its back with arms upraised and the child lying close by, near the adult's left leg. Both bodies were so badly burned that it was impossible to identify whether they were male or female. The other adult, preliminarily identified as a



**FANCY FINDS.** Among the objects discovered in the main rooms of the destroyed house was a cylinder seal (above) featuring Reshep, the Canaanite plague and war god, battling enemies and taking captives. Pottery (right) and radiocarbon evidence date the house's destruction to the late 13th century, when Pharaoh Merneptah launched his devastating campaign into Canaan.

male, was found in the southwest corner of Room D, possibly hiding to escape the destruction or trying to make his way to the next room to reach his companions. His remains, which were far better preserved, showed that he died curled up on his right side, his arms outstretched. Collapsed stones were found both beneath and on top of his body, implying that the building was already collapsing when he fell, with more of the structure falling on top of him.

When did this terrible destruction happen? Initially, we dated the building to the 14th century, based primarily on the discovery of the Amenhotep III scarab seal mentioned above. Upon further analysis, however, we found that the building's pottery, which included both local and imported wares, dated to the 13th century, and materials from the destruction debris were radiocarbon dated to the end of the same century. Given the date of the building and the evidence for massive destruction, we believe it was most likely destroyed by Merneptah during his campaign into the southern Levant.

Why did Merneptah attack Gezer? Although the nature of Egypt's control over Canaan is still



debated, scholars agree that Gezer was central to Egyptian activity in the region. As indicated by the Amarna Letters and analysis of Late Bronze Age settlement patterns, Gezer dominated many of the towns and villages along the coastal plain, including the port of Jaffa.

We know from excavation that in the final days of Ramesses II's rule (r. 1279–1213 B.C.E.), the Egyptian governor's estate at Aphek as well as the administrative center at Jaffa were violently destroyed. Some scholars attribute these destructions to the Canaanite king of Gezer who might have sought to take advantage of Egypt's perceived weakness during the waning years of Ramesses II's reign.<sup>3</sup> It would then be conceivable that Ramesses's son and heir, Merneptah, responded to this unrest with a devastating campaign against Gezer and like-minded rebellious groups—including early Israel—who posed a threat to Egyptian control. Our excavations now offer a glimpse of the pharaoh's wrath. ■

<sup>1</sup> The site's first excavator, R.A.S. Macalister, identified several Late Bronze Age buildings on the tell's acropolis in the early 20th century. The later Hebrew Union College excavation (1965–1973), led by William Dever, uncovered a palace which they dated to the Late Bronze Age IIA (c. 14th century B.C.E.), but which likely dates to the Late Bronze Age I (c. 1500 B.C.E.).

<sup>2</sup> For our in-depth summary, see Steven Ortiz and Samuel Wolff, "A Reevaluation of Gezer in the Late Bronze Age in Light of Renewed Excavations and Recent Scholarship," in Aren Maeir, Itzhak Shai, and Chris McKinny, eds., *The Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Southern Canaan* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 62–85.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Yuval Gadot, "The Late Bronze Egyptian Estate at Aphek," *Tel Aviv* 37 (2010), pp. 48–66.