The history of Samaria under Neo-Assyrian rule is usually a part of the general description of the land of Israel and the Levant. From these descriptions it seems that the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the region of Samaria is well documented in the various historical and archaeological sources of this period. Numerous studies were carried out about the historical and archaeological aspects of this period in the land of Israel. Nevertheless, much of this research dealt with Judah, and only few researches were conducted on the Samaria region. These studies described the Samaria region as a whole unit, and did not distinguish between sub-units within Samaria. In this paper I will examine the history of the Samaria region after the Neo-Assyrian conquest, the organization of the Assyrian administration, and the extent of its influence in various areas within this region, considering updated data from archaeological surveys and excavations.

Keywords
Samaria region, Neo-Assyrian Empire, Iron Age, Settlement patterns, Deportations, Archaeological surveys, Archaeological excavations
I. The activities of the Neo-Assyrian rule and their influence on the settlement pattern in Samaria

The territory of the Israelite Kingdom was reduced after the campaigns of Tiglath Pileser III in 734-732 BC, and included only the regions of the hills of Samaria and the Jordan Valley, between the province of Magiddu in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. Over a decade later, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II completed the conquest of the diminished kingdom.1 Both in Biblical and Neo-Assyrian sources there is evidence for the destruction the Assyrians caused to the city of Samaria and to the whole of "the land of the house of Omri".2 This conquest definitely damaged the people’s life, disrupted the proper administration; it seems that it caused severe demographic decrease in the settlement. On the other hand, according to the historical sources the region was not completely abandoned. The transition of Samaria, the former capital city of the Israelite kingdom, to the capital of a new Assyrian province, Samerina, is well documented in Neo-Assyrian sources such as the Cylinder inscription and the Nimrud Prism of Sargon II.3 There are some more texts bearing Samaria as the name of the city or the state rather than the name of the province.4 Nonetheless, at least one of these sources, perhaps as a list of the capitals of the provinces or cities of the Neo-Assyrian administration, mentions the city of Samaria together with Megiddo and Dor.5 In addition, two governors of Samerina are mentioned in the Neo-Assyrian Eponym texts as eponyms for the years 690 and 646 BC.6

In addition to the historical and epigraphic sources, there is some archaeological evidence for the Assyrian conquest of Samaria, for the existence of the Assyrian province and for the Assyrian cultural influence, as can be seen in the architecture and the ceramic remains found in archaeological surveys and excavations in the vicinity of Samaria (fig. 1). The city of Samaria was excavated by Gottlieb Schumacher, George A. Reisner and Clarence S. Fisher between 1908 and 1910, and by John W. Crowfoot and Kathleen M. Kenyon between 1931 and 1935.7 In these expeditions the excavators found six layers datable to the Israelite period. Kenyon mentioned a massive destruction layer on top of them and assigned it to the Assyrians.8 Other scholars drew attention to finds that show the city was inhabited also in the seventh century BC during the Neo-Assyrian rule, including a possible new fortification wall.9 Among these finds there are some indications of the Assyrian administration such as a cuneiform tablet with the name of the rab-alāni, the ‘mayor’ of the city, an Assyrian Bulla, a cuneiform cylinder seal, and a fragment of a Sargon’s stela.10 According to Adam Zertal, the destruction level, described by Kenyon, is not so clear, and it appears that the city wall remained in use also after the Assyrian conquest of the city.11

Another site in the vicinity of Samaria with evidence of the Neo-Assyrian administration is Tel el-Far’ah (N), which is identified as biblical Tirzah.12 Excavations at the site were carried by Roland de Vaux between 1946 and 1960.13 De Vaux revealed a fortified city from the ninth and eighth centuries BC which was erected in connection with the

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1 The conquest of the city of Samaria is well documented in various sources, and scholars suggested few different reconstructions for its process. see e.g. Olmstead 1904; Tadmor 1958; Reed 1976; Na’aman 1990; Hayes, Kuan 1991; Becking 1992; Galil 1995; Younger 1999; Tetley 2002; Tappy 2007; Park 2012.
2 E.g. Fuchs 1994, pp. 87-88; see also Oded 1987, p. 40; Eph’al 1991.
3 Gadd 1954; Fuchs 1994, p. 34.
4 See e.g. Becking 1992, pp. 106-111.
5 Fales, Postgate 1995; cf. Na’aman 2009, who argued that this list is of trade cities rather than of capitals. According to Na’aman Dor, and one more city of this list, were not at all capitals of provinces.
6 Ungand 1938, pp. 451-452.
7 Reisner, Fisher, Lyon 1924; Crowfoot, Kenyon, Sukenik 1942.
8 Crowfoot, Kenyon, Sukenik 1942, p. 110.
11 Zertal 2003, p. 400.
12 Albright 1931; De-Vaux 1956.
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Three layers from the ninth century BC until before the Assyrian destruction, and another layer from the seventh century; Nevertheless, a new study by Daniel Master showed that the seventh century layer was very scant, including only the coffins and some Assyrian bowls.17 Assyrian bowls and a Mesopotamian style seal impression were found also at the second expedition to Shechem/Tel Balatah.18

In the archaeological surveys carried out not far from Samaria and Tel el-Far’ah (N) Adam Zertal reported about some structures built with Assyrian

14 Chambon 1993, pp. 1300-1301.
17 Master et al. (eds.) 2005, pp. 65-129.
18 Campbell, Wright 1971.
architecture and several sites which he identified as Assyrian military outposts.\textsuperscript{19}

These data are insufficient to establish the nature of the administrative, political and settlement processes that took place in the area of the former Israelite kingdom during the period of Neo-Assyrian rule. Some scholars dealt with these questions in the past, but there was no consensus about them. Bustenay Oded, Bob Becking and Ephraim Stern emphasized the massive destruction of the Neo-Assyrian conquest in many of these sites.\textsuperscript{20} Other scholars, such as Zertal, William G. Dever and Gary Knoppers, argued for a quick rehabilitation of the destroyed sites and for prosperity under the Assyrian administration.\textsuperscript{21}

For establishing what was the real process in the region, in the lack of clear historical evidence one should examine the settlement processes during this period. Two main operations which influenced the processes in the new Neo-Assyrian province should be mainly examined: first, the settling of new population in the territory of the Neo-Assyrian province; second, the question of the intensity of the destruction or the continuity in the different regions within the province. Some of the studies mentioned above referred to some of these aspects, but as of today no treatment was given to all the archaeological data, especially the updated one. Moreover, no inter-regional study was conducted, comparing different sub-regions in the Samaria region.

2. The location of the deportees’ settlements in the province of Samerina

One of the components that affected settlement patterns in the Neo-Assyrian Empire was the policy of deportations of the conquered population. Scholars in the past have shown that due to the Assyrian ideology of ‘saving the whole world’, and as part of their effort to reduce the political power of the local elites, the Assyrian rulers deported the conquered populations to remote regions, and brought new population in their stead.\textsuperscript{22} The cross-deportation of the population from the Israelite kingdom, and from Mesopotamia to “the land of Omri” is described both in biblical and Assyrian sources.\textsuperscript{23} These sources mention deportees from Mesopotamia and from the Arab tribes who were settled at Samaria mainly during the reign of Sargon II, but there are hints also for settling deported population in that region during the reign of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal as well (see e.g. Ez. 4.1-8). There are still arguments about the amount of the deportees among the original population, but it is clear that after the Assyrian campaigns a mixed population was created in the Samerina province.\textsuperscript{24}

An interesting line of inquiry is the location of the places where the new residents were settled. The only city mentioned by name in relation to deportees in the historical sources is Samaria itself, but other sources have “the cities of Samaria” or “the land of Beth-Omri”.\textsuperscript{25}

Additional data come from epigraphic documents. Cuneiform tablets with Mesopotamians names were found at Tel Hadid excavations and in a survey at Khirbet Kusiyah, both located at the western margins of the former Israelite kingdom, and at Gezer, in the northern Shephelah.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, two ostraca with a list of names, most of them of Mesopotamian origin, were found at the

\textsuperscript{19} Zertal 1998; 2003, pp. 387-395.

\textsuperscript{20} Oded 1987; Becking 1992, pp. 59-60; Stern 2001, p. 9; 2003, pp. 219-220.

\textsuperscript{21} Zertal 2003; Knoppers 2004, pp. 165-170; Dever 2007, p. 87.
excavations of Tel Jemmeh, in the western Negev. These sites lie next to the international highway that crosses Israel from south to north, along and east of the Mediterranean sea shore, and therefore some scholars assumed that in these cities deportees and Assyrian officials were settled as part of the Assyrian control of this main highway. From these sites the only two within the region of Samaria are Khirbet Kusiya and Tel Hadid. The area near Tel Hadid seems to be significant in the Neo-Assyrian administration. Aphek, situated on the same highway only 15 km north of Tel Hadid, is mentioned in an inscription from the times of Esarhaddon as a city in the province of Samerina where Assyrian troops gathered prior to a battle against Egypt. Moreover, fragments of a royal Assyrian stela was recently found at Ben-Shemen, only 2 kilometers west of Tel Hadid. The significance of Khirbet Kusiya’s area is confirmed by another stele that was found at Kakun, 7 km south of Khirbet Kusiya.

The area between Tel Hadid and Aphek was thoroughly surveyed. These surveys, together with salvage excavations from recent years, have revealed dozens of farmsteads, most of them erected at the end of the eighth century. These farmsteads, some

of which continued to be settled for hundreds of years, are very unusual phenomenon in this rocky region, where no evidence of other periods of occupation and settlement was found. Following this unique phenomenon, and due to the cuneiform tablets, and the nearby highway, Avi Faust suggested that these farmsteads may be connected to the Mesopotamian deportees.

Other archaeological possible evidence for the deportees in the center of the province comes from archaeological surveys. In the survey of the Manasseh Hills, Zertal identified the phenomenon of the wedge-incised bowls. These bowls, found mainly at sites in the vicinity of Shechem, Samaria and Tel el-Far’ah (N), are decorated with a decoration of Mesopotamian tradition, and were related to deportees from Mesopotamia who settled in these sites. If indeed this decoration can be interpreted as an archaeological sign of deportees from Mesopotamia, then there is strong evidence for Assyrian influence in the region of the main cities in the middle of the province of Samerina.

To sum up, it seems that the Assyrians settled Mesopotamian deportees both in the capital city of Samaria and its environs, and in the western foothills, near the international highway. Nevertheless, there is no any archaeological evidence, nor it is implied from the historical sources, to identify deportees at the more southern parts of Samaria.

3. The settlement patterns at Samerina after the Neo-Assyrian conquest – The archaeological evidence

The second main aspect of the Assyrian rule in the province of Samerina to be examined is the extent of the destruction and abandonment caused by the Assyrian conquest, compared to the extent of the continuity, if it existed at all. The historical sources describe the exile of a large mass of population, but admittedly many Israelites remained in the land

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29 Tel Jemmeh is located far to the southwest and certainly cannot be related to as one of the “cities of Samaria”. Gezer, on the other hand, is closer to the Samaria region and was referred by some scholars as part of Samerina (e.g. Reich, Brandl 1985; Na’aman 2016, p. 276). However, there is no any real evidence that connect Gezer to Samerina. Geographically, Gezer is located on the Shephelah, and between it and the Samaria Hills there is the deep valley of Ajalon. Gezer was apparently conquered by Tiglath Pileser III and came under Neo-Assyrian rule twelve years prior to the establishment of Samerina, and therefore could not be referred to as one of the “cities of Samaria”. More likely it was under direct Assyrian control (Aster, Faust 2015, p. 298, n. 14) and connected to Assyrian administration at Megiddo (Cogan 2013, pp. 13-14) or Philistine (Finkelstein 2002; Rainey, Notely 2006, pp. 230-236).
30 Borger 1956, 111.
31 Cogan 2008. For the geographical and political significance of the Aphek-Hadid region during the Neo-Assyrian period see Aster, Faust 2015, pp. 297-301.
32 Cogan 2008, pp. 67-68.
34 Faust 2006; Aster, Faust 2015, pp. 302-303.
together with the new deported population, as implied in the Biblical sources (Jer. 3; 31; II Chr. 30).
The existence of the former Israelites citizens and the continuity of settlement and occupation at
the sites in the Samaria region should be examined archaeologically. Few excavations at some sites and
thorough surveys have been conducted in this area, and their results can shed light on the issue under
discussion.

4. Archaeological excavations at Iron Age II sites in Samaria region

As I showed above, the main cities in the centre of the province, Samaria and Tel el-Far‘ah (N), suffered
destruction by the Assyrians, but the occupation of those cities did not cease. We can also observe some rehabilitation and Assyrian influences, although the settlement in these sites was poor in
comparison with the time of the Israelite kingdom. Tel Dothan is another meager settlement that
survived the Assyrian destruction with signs of Assyrian activity (see above). In addition to these sites, few
more sites with an Iron II occupation were excavated throughout the years, and can broaden our perspec
tive on the influence of the Neo-Assyrian conquest. The sites are presented from north to south:

Tell es-Ṣufan – A small tell, located 7 km southeast of Samaria and 4 km northwest of Shechem, which was recently identified as “Beth-millo” (Judg. 9.6). A rescue excavation was conducted at the site during the early seventies of the twentieth century by Zeev Yeivin. Yeivin reported of buildings from the ninth and the eighth centuries BC. Above it he described two layers with some granaries but no other structures, which he dated to the “end of the Israelite period” and the “Persian-Hellenistic period”.

Shechem – Biblical Shechem, which was identified with Tel Balatah, was excavated during the years 1913-1914 and 1926-1934 by an expedition headed by Ernest Zelin. A second expedition was held between 1956-1973 by Ernest Wright, Joe Seger and William G. Dever. Four layers which were exposed in the excavations were dated to the Israelite Kingdom. The last layer contained a massive destruction layer which was related to the Neo-Assyrian conquest. Above it, the excavators reported of a layer with a minor continuity, which ended in additional destruction. This layer is where the ‘Assyrian Bowls’ and the seal impression were found.

Kedumim – A rural site located 11 km west of Tel Balatah, which was excavated by Yitzhaq Magen during the years 1979-1982. The small scale of the excavations did not help in setting a clear stratigraphy of the site, but the pottery contained remains from the end of the Iron Age, probably from the seventh century as well, and from the Persian period.

Khirbet Jen‘ein – A small rural site located above the Kanah stream, in the western hills of Samaria, which was excavated by Ibrahim el-Fani and Shimon Dar during the years 1978-1982. The excavators discovered many four-rooms houses surrounded by cisterns and installations, all dated to the Iron Age II. Dar claimed that the pottery should be dated to the eighth and seventh centuries BC, but from a reexamination of the pottery it seems that the site was not inhabited during the Assyrian period: presumably the site was deserted during the conquest of Samaria.

‘Eli – A small rural site located three kilometers northwest of Shiloh, which was excavated in a salvage operation by Hananya Hizmi in 1992.

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36 McKINNY, TAVGER 2017. The site was first surveyed by the Shechem expeditions teams who identified it as ‘Ophrah or Migdal-Shechem, both mentioned at the same chapter at the book of Judges. See BÖHRL 1931, pp. 65-67; NANDARÁSKY 1964.

37 UNNAMED 1973; The site was re-excavated recently by a team from en-Najah University. See ABU ALSAUD, QOBBAJ 2018; ABU ALSAUD 2019.

38 WRIGHT 1965; CAMPBELL (ed.) 2002.

39 CAMPBELL, WRIGHT 1971.

40 MAGEN 1993.


42 UNNAMED 1982a; DAR 1986.

43 See DAR 1986, pp. 38-40; for the new analysis of the finds see YEZERSKI 2013, p. 94.

44 HIZMI 1996.
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site contains two buildings established in the eighth century BC, but has also pottery and other finds from the seventh and sixth centuries, including Neo-Assyrian style bowls, wedge-incised bowls, arrowheads of Irano-Scythian style, etc. The finds from the site were recently re-examined, and it was suggested that the site was inhabited by Assyrian soldiers, maybe as an outpost.45

Shiloh – Biblical Shiloh, which was identified at Kh. Seilun, was excavated by a Danish expedition headed by Aage Schmidt and Hans A. Kjær between 1926 and 1932, and later by Israel Finkelstein, Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman between 1981 and 1984.46 The Danish report described much of the material dated to the Iron Age II, but later analysis showed that most of these finds should be re-dated to the Iron Age I.47 Finkelstein claimed that there are only scanty remains from the Iron Age II, which he dated to the seventh century.48 New excavations at the site in the past ten years, conducted by Hananya Hizmi, Reut Ben-Arie, Ofer Gat, Binyamin Har-Even and Yonatan Adler, contradict Finkelstein assumptions, as Iron Age II is exposed in almost all the areas – in the west, in the east and even in the far north, and the pottery is dated to the eighth century, with only Persian period layers above it, without any clear signal of the seventh century BC.49

Khirbet Kl’a – A rural site located on an elevated hill on the southern bank of the Shiloh stream, in the southwestern hills of Samaria. The site was surveyed and excavated by David Eitam during the late 1970s and the early 1980s.50 The site is a one-layer site with structures, some of them designed as a four-rooms house, many olive presses and a surrounding wall, all which he dated to the Iron Age II. In the survey Eitam claimed to have found seventh century BC Judahite pottery, but in the excavation he discovered signs of destruction to be dated to the eighth century BC, without remains of later activity.

Khirbet Deir Dakla – Another rural site located above the Shiloh stream, in southwestern Samaria, 6 km west of Kh. Kl’a, which was excavated by Binyamin Har-Even at 2006.51 This site also had some living houses, olive presses and a surrounding wall, but some of the residential quarters were outside the wall. According to the excavator the site was erected in the tenth century BC, but most of the finds were from the eighth century, when the site suffered destruction.

Khirbet Hudash – One more rural site which is located at the southern bank of the Shiloh stream, inside of the modern settlement of Beit-Arieh, 2.5 kilometers southeast of Khirbet Deir Dakla. This site was surveyed by Eitam in the late 1970s, and was excavated by Shimon Riklin during the years 1991-1994.52 As the two other sites in this area, Kh. Hudash also contains many structures surrounded by a wall, some of which with a four-rooms house design, and many olive presses. The excavation of one of the structures revealed a destruction at the end of the occupation of the site during the eighth century BC.

Khirbet ed-Dweir – Another rural site, located 2 km south of Kh. Deir Dakla and west of Kh. Hudash, which was excavated by Binyamin Har-Even at 2005.53 The excavation revealed two structures, one of them of the four-rooms house type, olive-oil presses and a surrounding wall. Har-Even dated the occupation of these structures to the eighth century BC, with abandonment at the end of it.

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47 E.g. Shiloh 1974.
49 The preliminary results of the new excavations at Shiloh were only partially published. For the Iron Age II remains, see Livyatan-Ben Arieh, Hizmi 2014, pp. 117-121; Gat 2015, pp. 38-40. I wish to thank Binyamin Har-Even and Yonatan Adler for sharing data from their excavations from the eastern edge of the site, which were not published yet.
50 Eitam 1979; Unnamed 1982b.
51 Har-Even 2011.
52 Eitam 1979, 1992; Riklin 1997.
53 Har-Even 2012.
'Ofarim – An Iron II Age farmhouse located 3 km south of Kh. ed-Dweir, near the modern settlement of 'Ofarim. A salvage excavation conducted at the site by Shimon Riklin in 1991 revealed one large structure with pottery from the eighth century BC.54 No clear seventh century BC pottery was reported, and it is safe to assume that the site was also abandoned during the Neo-Assyrian conquest.

Khirbet Marjame – this is a large site, in the southeastern part of the region at the desert fringe, which was excavated by Amihai Mazar in 1975 and 1978.55 This site was inhabited through the Bronze Age, Iron Age I and Iron Age II until the eighth century BC, and was never rebuilt again. Mazar did not find any signs of destruction at the site, but Matanyah Zohar, who conducted a small salvage excavation in the lower part of the site in 1980, mentioned some arrowheads above an eighth century floor, and interpreted it as a proof of the Neo-Assyrian conquest of the site.56

Bethel – Biblical Bethel, which was identified with the tell in the midst of the village Beitin, in the southern edge of Samaria, was excavated by William F. Albright and James C. Kelso in 1934, 1954, 1957 and 1960s.57 Kelso argued that the Iron Age town was destroyed during the Neo-Assyrian conquest, but other scholars claimed that the city survived the conquest, and was inhabited during the seventh and sixth centuries as well.58 Nevertheless, recently Finkelstein and Lili Singer-Avitz went through the pottery from the excavation and claimed that the finds from the Neo-Assyrian period are very meager, and that probably it was influenced by Judah and not by the Assyrian Empire.59

E.P. 914 – A small site which is located only 900 m east of and above Bethel, and was suggested to be the high place of the cult of Bethel.60 In 2016, I conducted a small scale excavation at the top of the site and found much Iron Age pottery, dated to the ninth and eighth centuries BC, without any signs of seventh century material (fig. 2).

The picture of the settlement in the Samaria region to be reconstructed from these excavations is rather complex. On the one hand, the main sites in the center of Samaria, although having suffered some sort of destruction, continued to be inhabited after the Assyrian conquest. It seems that although there was a meager settlement, some rehabilitation had occurred at these sites. In Samaria, Tel el-Far’ah (N) and Tel Dothan there is clear evidence of the Assyrian influence, and probably the occupation at this sites was connected the Neo-Assyrian activity. Shechem and Tell es-Ṣufan were also damaged during the conquest, but a meager settlement followed in the seventh century as well. The results of Shiloh and Bethel excavations are still debated, and more research should be done to shed light on the question of the occupation of these sites during the seventh century. The only main site where there is clear evidence for destruction and complete abandonment of the site due to the Assyrian conquest is Khirbet Marjame.

On the other hand, one must not forget that these main sites served as urban centers, and therefore continuation of inhabitation should be expected even after destructions. The fact that after the destruction the settlement in these cities was in great decline shows that the rehabilitation was not intensive. Moreover, in the rural sector no rehabilitation is evident at all. Six out of eight rural sites which were excavated ceased to exist probably after the Assyrian conquest, three of them bearing traces of destruction layer from this time.

54 Riklin 1993. Riklin mention that the site was in use also in the Hellenistic period.
56 Zohar 1980.
57 Kelso 1968.
58 Lawrence Sinclair in Kelso 1968, pp. 75-76, suggested that the destruction of the city should be dated to the end of the Neo-Babylonian period or to the time of Cyrus. For arguments of a seventh and sixth centuries’ occupation of the site see also Dever 1971, pp. 463-469; Stern 2001, pp. 9, 321; Blenkinsopp 2003, pp. 94-95; Lipschits 2003, p. 348; Knoppers 2004, pp. 163-164. For suggested connections between Bethel of the seventh century BC and the kingdom of Judah see Eshel 1989 (due to a LMLK seal impression that he found at a tour at the site); Stern 2001, p. 139.
60 For the archaeological survey of the site and the suggestion of its identification see Tavger 2015.
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5. The archaeological surveys’ evidence

The distinction between the settlement continuity in the main sites and in the sites which ceased to be settled can be explained as the difference between urban cities and rural sites. Nevertheless, the fact that a main city like Khirbet Marjame in the southern part of the territory ceased to exist and that rural sites like Kedumin and ‘Eli, which are closer to the center of the province, have some evidence of inhabitation during the seventh century, can raise the possibility that the difference is not only due to the type of the sites, but rather to their geographic location.

The study of the results of the archaeological surveys which were conducted in the Samaria region from the early 1980s till today\(^\text{61}\) shows that the rural sector in the southern areas experienced a significant drop in settlements after the Assyrian conquest, while the sites in the northern areas continued to be inhabited until the Persian era. The comparison between the settlement patterns from the Iron Age II and the Persian period (figs. 3-4), as reflected

\(^{61}\) For the survey of Adam Zertal at the northern and eastern parts of Samaria see ZERTAL 2004, 2008; ZERTAL, MIRKAM 2016; ZERTAL, BAR 2017. For the survey of the southern parts of Samaria see FINKELSTEIN, LEDERMAN (eds.) 1997. For an in depth study of the results of these surveys concerning the Iron Age II and the Persian Periods see TAVGER 2012, pp. 35-59.

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**Figure 2**

ninth and eighth century BC pottery from E.P. 914 (Graphics - A. Harel)
Figure 3
Iron Age II sites in the Manasseh Hill Survey (courtesy Adam Zertal)
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**Figure 4**
Persian Period sites in the Manasseh Hill Survey (courtesy Adam Zertal)
Figure 5
Iron II rural sites in South Samaria (Graphics - Y. Sapir)
in the survey of the Manasseh Hills, shows that most sites in the region of Samaria, Shechem, and Tell el-Far‘ah (N), about 75 percent, continued to exist during the periods of the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian rule, while in the eastern and southern parts there was a big decline. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the center of the province under the Assyrian control was not only a region for settling a new deported population, as Zertal suggested, but also a region of continued settlement, on behalf of the Neo-Assyrian administration. Moving south, the demographic picture changes dramatically. In these surveys, only 30 percent of the Iron Age II sites attests continuity from the Iron Age II to the Persian period, while most sites were destroyed or abandoned, probably after the Assyrian conquest. The southernmost sites from these surveys, between Bethel and Shiloh, suffered from an even deeper decline, and the percentage of the continuity after the Assyrian conquest is less than 20 percent.

62 There are some methodological problems when trying to date precisely the time of the abandonment in surveyed sites. The material which is collected at the surveys does not come from stratified layers, and the dates are based mainly on ceramic typology. The exact dates of the various types is hard to receive, and it seems that some of the the “eighth century” pottery could have continued to be in use also in the first half of the seventh century both in Judah (e.g. see Finkelstein 2012, 204-205; De Groot 2012, 162; Gadot 2015, 8; Freud 2017, 93-97; Lipschits 2019) and in the Northern Kingdom (Singer-Avitz 2014). Nevertheless, when adding the historical data to the picture, it seems safe to assume that the mass abandonment of sites in the southern parts of Samaria, compared to the continuation in the north, was caused by the Assyrian conquest. A recent study (Tavger 2018, 393-397) of the pottery from the survey of the Southern Samaria region demonstrates that most of the sites which attest continuity from the Iron Age II to the Persian Period, contain also what considered as “Iron IIC” pottery, while Iron Age II sites which were not occupied in the Persian Period, lack these pottery types. Although these “Iron IIC” types represent only the second half of the the seventh century (see Lipschits 2019), it is difficult to accept reconstruction of abandonment only in the mid of the seventh century, and only in the Southern parts of Samaria, without reasonable historical reconstruction.

63 For this approach as an explanation to the phenomenon of the western foothills see Aster, Faust 2015.

64 See e.g. Gitin 1995; Na’aman 1995, pp. 113-114; 2001, p. 275; Van De Mieroop 2007, pp. 252-259; Fales 2008.

6. Conclusions

The archaeological data from the excavated and surveyed sites in the Samaria region show that the influence of the fall of the Israelite kingdom and the establishment of the Neo-Assyrian province on its ruins is complex and differs according to geography. The gathered evidence indicates that the focus of the Neo-Assyrian activity was mainly in the centre of the province and to the north, in the area surrounding the capital city Samaria and the two main neighbouring cities, Shechem and Tell el-Far‘ah (N). Evidence of administration comes from these locations, the Mesopotamian deportees probably were settled there, and most of the settlements in these areas continued to be settled after the Assyrian conquest. It seems that the Neo-Assyrian rule invested in these areas, and tried to rehabilitate the damaged cities and their periphery when establishing the provincial administration. On the other hand, in the southern and eastern parts of the province there is neither evidence of Neo-Assyrian administration nor of foreign population, and a demographic crisis is viewed: apparently the Assyrians neglected these areas. An exception is visible in the southwestern parts of Samaria, where evidence of foreign population and Neo-Assyrian administration were found. This exception can be explained as a product of the Neo-Assyrian policy at the strategic places along the international highway, near the border of the Empire. The case of the Province of Samerina can shed light on the attitude of the Neo-Assyrian Empire toward the provinces in its periphery. In recent years there has been a debate on the level of the Assyrian investment in the peripheral states conquered by the empire. Some scholars, based mainly on literary and historical sources, argued for a wealthy era of ‘Pax Assyriaca’ in the Southern Levant. Other scholars attributed the growth in the economy of Philistine and Judah in the seventh century to Phoenician or Egyptian influences, and some claimed that...
the policy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire was not different from that of the Babylonian Empire, a policy of destruction of the conquered states and not of investment or economical rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{65}

The case of Samerina shows that both approaches should be combined. It is true that there is no evidence for an economic prosperity in the peripheral provinces in the southern Levant under Neo-Assyrian rule. Most areas conquered by the Neo-Assyrians were destroyed and were not rehabilitated. Like the southern and eastern parts of Samerina, other areas in the former Israelite kingdom that were conquered earlier by Tiglath Pileser III and became part of the Neo-Assyrian province system suffered a sharp decline. The main cities of Beth Shean and Tel Rehov were destroyed or completely abandoned, and the dense settlement in the Beth Shean valley and the Lower Galilee was almost totally destroyed.\textsuperscript{66}

However, we cannot say that the Assyrians did not invest in their newly established provinces. As I have shown above, there is evidence of an Assyrian investment in the center of the province of Samerina, and of some influences on the settlement patterns around the capital city Samaria, Tell el-Far‘ah (N), Shechem and their vicinity. A similar picture can be seen in the province of Magiddu, where clearer evidence of Neo-Assyrian administration and architecture was exposed in the main cities Megiddo and Jezreel, and the percentage of continuity in the settlement after the Assyrian conquest at their vicinity was high.\textsuperscript{67}

This picture sheds light on the policy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the peripheral provinces. After destroying the cities in the states they had conquered, they established new provinces, concen-

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\textsuperscript{66} For Bet-Shean see Mazar 2008; For Tel Rehov see Mazar, Ahituv 2011; For the rural settlements at the Lower Galilee see Gai 2009. For an exception at the Upper Galilee, where only 20% of the sites ceased to exist after the Neo-Assyrian conquest according to the results of archaeological survey, see Frankel et al. 2001.

\textsuperscript{67} For Neo-Assyrian Megiddo see Peersman 2000; The high percentage of continuation were found at the regional surveys of Nahal ‘Iron and of the Jezreel Valley. see Gadot 2006; Finkelstein et al. 2006.
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