

The City of Samaria

In the early 9th century BC, a new city rose quickly on an outcropping of rock about 1,400 feet above sea level in the hills of the central Levant. It was an unlikely location for even a settlement, forget about a major city. It was a rugged hilltop. It was off the main roads, lacked a natural water source. It was miles from just about everything.

Laborers would have had to carry virtually all of the building materials up the side of the hill on their backs. Stonemasons, craftsmen and laborers would have had to trudge up and down daily. Most cities of the period were built on the ruins of previous cities, allowing the reuse of materials, but here there were no ruins or debris. This was something new, probably Iron Age Israel's first planned city. Someone put time and energy into laying out this city before it went up.

The hill rises to a western summit which workers had to level off by hand. Then they built a steeply sloped retaining wall (a scarp, to use the technical term) that averaged about 10 feet in height and came level to the newly flattened summit. Masons then planned out and cut away rock channels to create a complex tunnel system that connected underground storage rooms and large cisterns. Some of the cisterns were enormous, one capable of holding 500 gallons of water. Then the scarp was filled in creating a level platform that completely concealed the tunnels network beneath.

Workers dug dozens of cisterns, spaced out on the platform and spread over the hillside. Since the hill had no springs or other natural water sources, these were used to collect rainwater during the spring rains. Throughout the season, servants would have had to be running almost constant relays to transfer the collected water to the underground cisterns for later use.

The new city became a production facility. Large oil and wine presses were scooped out of the stone. A grape treading pool was excavated that measured fifteen feet across and thirty feet long. It reached a depth of over three feet, allowing the production treading of 5,000 gallons of wine at a time. The olive presses in the city were likewise impressive. Large open spaces would have been used as threshing floors for grain. The hills around the new city were probably already covered with olive and grape vineyards. The farmers in the fertile Jezreel Valley to the north would have brought a portion of their grains and fruits to be stored as tribute, in case of famine or siege.

The Houses of Ivory

Atop the platform rose a Phoenician style palace complex that the prophet Amos would call *beyt hashen* - "houses of ivory" (Amos 3:15). There are no remains or descriptions of the palace itself, and it was completely destroyed just over a century after its construction; but it must have been magnificent in its day. It is difficult to know just how large the palace complex was, but it was probably built in a style comparable to the one Solomon built in Jerusalem around 950 BC. Solomon's complex was comprised of the following components:

- A main living quarters of around 11,250 square feet (100 cubits by 50 cubits)

- A “hall of pillars” (*‘ulam ha’amudiyim*) measuring about 3,375 square feet (50 cubits by 30 cubits)
- An open hall of some kind (*‘ulam ‘al-peneyhem*)
- A “hall of the throne” (*‘ulam hakite’*)
- And possibly a “hall of judgment” (*‘ulam hamishpat*) of indeterminate size (1 Ki 7:1–12).

The architecture of Solomon’s palace, and one would assume this new palace, had a lot of similarities to the royal palace found at Ugarit, although that complex is approximately 400 years older. The description of Solomon’s palace complex does not include the various chambers and storerooms found in the Ugarit palace, something similar probably would have been included. It also omits the *‘armon*, a secure for the king and his closest advisors that is variously translated as “citadel” or “stronghold” (2 Ki 16:25). These additional spaces would have probably tripled the size of the complex to approximately 50,000–60,000 square feet or 1–1.3 acres. Of course, this calculation is strictly conjecture, but it gets us in the ballpark.

Amos’s description of houses of ivory, which is also echoed in 1 Kings 22:39, probably pertains to a white limestone exterior casing. Since the palace was the highest point for miles around, it would have literally glowed in the morning sun as a beacon to those living on the surrounding hills. Ivory itself was far too expensive to use as an exterior covering, but it was employed in the interior furnishings.

Amos refers to *mittot shen* (“ivory beds” or “ivory couches”). Most of these were carried off as booty when the city was sacked in 722 BC, but some of the panels were recovered by 20th century excavations. Other pieces clearly from Samaria have been found in sites in Assyria. The couches themselves were constructed of wood and are long since deteriorated, but the ivory panels, usually in pairs, have survived. They are engraved with both Egyptian and Canaanite imagery, a style that was popular briefly in Phoenicia. These were costly items which marked the palace as a place of international commerce and trade, but they also served to mark out the royal household as devotees of a particular practice known as *marzeah* (Amos 6:7, Jer 16:5).

Mentioned only furtively in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are extra biblical references to these kinds of festivals throughout the Levant and into Mesopotamia. The feast was some sort of cultic celebration. The actual rites of the festival were apparently not committed to inscription, and there are all kinds of theories. The most likely is that *marzeah* was a sort of exclusive rite, a sort of men’s club. Wealthy men were initiated into the cult, which was devoted to a particular deity and may have had to do with a memorial for the dead. The festivals were characterized by excesses of every kind, all devoted to the patron god.

If the festival involved a memorial to the dead, this may have been a leftover from much earlier practices. Many sites in the Levant feature burials of family members in the floors of houses and then the storage of their bones nearby. Built into the platform of Samaria were two large tombs, possibly meant for the same purposes. The tombs have long since been emptied of anything valuable, and the decorations have deteriorated beyond recognition.

A City on Guard

Some kings build great works to demonstrate their power and wealth. Others build great structures to project an image they do not yet possess, hoping to realize greatness. This was not one of those projects. The edifice might have been “ivory” but the purpose of his city was not ornate. The remote location, the hidden

storerooms and cisterns, the steep scarp around the palace - all of these things hint at a much more practical purpose.

This was the palace of the Omride kings of Israel, begun by Omri in his sixth year as king of Israel and completed by his son Ahab early in his own reign. Omri called the city *Shomron* - “the watching place” or “the place of vigilance.” This was a fortress to keep watch over the northern borders of the kingdom where threats loomed. We know it by the Greek pronunciation, Samaria.

At the time that Omri took power in 875 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel had endured a cycle of usurpation and assassination for nearly fifty years. In 931 BC, another general Jeroboam son of Nebat had led a secessionist movement, rejecting the rule of the House of David, which had ruled over a united kingdom since about 1000 BC. The House of David remained in power in the south, forming a close relationship with the Egyptians that secured their own southern borders.

The House of Jeroboam was not as fortunate. While Jeroboam died peacefully, his son Nadab was killed by a usurper, Baasha. Baasha ruled for twenty-four years and passed power to his own son, Elah. But history repeats itself. A discontented general named Zimri killed Elah and took the throne for himself.

Omri, an old war-hardened general, was with his troops in Gibbethon far to the south. When the army heard about Elah’s death, they declared for Omri and marched on the capital of Tirzah. The city fell without much of a fight and Zimri burned down his house, killing everyone in it, rather than face Omri’s justice.

Omri spent the first four years of his reign fighting a civil war against another claimant, Tibni son of Ginath. At the end of the war, he was proclaimed king by all of Israel and embarked on a twelve year reign.

In theory, his kingdom comprised the fertile Jezreel Valley from Mount Carmel to just beyond the Jordan River as well as much of the central highlands and much of the coast from Carmel to Gaza. In reality, Omri inherited a very loose confederacy of independent petty kings and tribal leaders who paid little heed to the king except in crisis.

The kingdom Omri inherited was in disarray. In theory, his kingdom spanned from the lower Galilee in the north to Philistine and the Sinai in the south and from the Jordan Valley in the east, to Mt Carmel on the Mediterranean coast in the west. In reality, his power was centralized in the vital Jezreel Valley and the coastal settlements.

The only real enemies Israel had were to the north, across the Jezreel Valley and north of the Sea of Galilee. Immediately across the Jezreel Valley was the kingdom of Aram-Damascus under Hadadezer I¹. Beyond them, lurking on the margins was the Neo-Assyrian kingdom which was expanding in every direction during the 9th century BC, grinding smaller kingdoms under the wheels of their powerful war chariots.

Omri selected the site of his capital with these new threats in mind. If necessary, he could sally forth from his hilltop fortress and ride against the chariot armies sweeping across Jezreel. Or, if the force was

¹ Called Ben-Hadad in the Biblical text

overwhelming, he could retreat behind his walls, scorch the vineyards and grain fields around his city and wait for the invaders to starve or the campaigning season to end. He chose well, and the site remained the capital of the kingdom until its eventual conquest by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

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