

# Writing and Re-Writing History by Destruction

Edited by  
ANGELIKA BERLEJUNG,  
AREN M. MAEIR,  
and TAKAYOSHI M. OSHIMA

*Orientalische Religionen  
in der Antike*

45

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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# Writing and Re-Writing History by Destruction

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Research on Israel and Aram in Biblical Times III

Edited by  
Angelika Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir,  
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## Introduction

*Angelika Berlejung and Aren M. Maeir*

Destructions often write and rewrite history. This is true of “natural disasters” as well as “man-made” catastrophes. But they do not merely destroy existing things and kill people; they also change spaces and times. This can happen so thoroughly that past cultures and their traditions are simply erased from time and space, as if they had never existed. However, particularly in the case of man-made destructions, there is also the method of deliberately destroying in order to eliminate from memory precisely that of which one should no longer know anything about. This can be targeted at one’s own culture and nature, but also at those of others. The spectrum of human destructiveness exceeds that of other creatures’ many times over, and it includes a broad range of acts of violence against human beings, their cultures, identities, their fellow creatures, and their environment.

Terms like genocide, defined as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (9.12.1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide), politicide, democide, mass murder, massacre, terror, or holocaust (on these terms and their definitions see R.J. Rummel; <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/DBG.CHAP2.HTM>) try to grasp and systematize different forms of “death by government.” Even if the phenomenon is more ancient, the modern term ecocide (Arthur Galston 1970), referring to the massive destruction of nature, is co-related as far as the ecological destruction of their natural livelihoods leads to the extermination of ethnic groups (as has happened and is still ongoing, for example, to several indigenous peoples in the Brazilian rainforest). Thus, ecocide can result in genocide; however, ecocide and even ethnic suicide can also occur without the influence of foreign peoples or powers when a population fails to recognize long-term ecological trends or its own contribution to the destruction of their own livelihood and ecology. Ecocide can also result in ethnocide when the ecological destruction of a people’s cultural landscape leads to the forced abandonment of its cultural autonomy.

The somewhat less murderous ethnocide or cultural genocide is the deliberate attempt to destroy the cultural identity of a particular ethnic group without, however, killing its members physically, as would be the case with genocide or democide. This is achieved by banning and/or destroying the respective language, culture, religion, economic system, livelihood, way of life (e.g., forced settlement instead of a nomadic way of life), or form of rule of the corresponding ethnic group.

Repositories of traditions, knowledge, and literature have been targeted throughout history in order to eliminate or change a culture’s memory, identity, and history. Since antiquity, book burning (e.g., Acta 19:19) and all kinds of text destruction and icono-

clasm (i.e., the destruction of images or monuments of relevance for the religious, cultural, or political identity and collective memory) are possible attempts to revise one's own but also other people's past.

The attempts at complete or even pointedly targeted destruction can, therefore, correct and revise history or rewrite it entirely.

The authority to act and the sovereignty of interpretation of past and present events by no means lies only with the destroyer and victor, a de facto government and its rhetoric of superiority. The destroyed and defeated can also integrate the destruction into their own history and its interpretation into their identity construction and memory, making appropriate selections and corrections. For example, the loss of political independence can be dramatized or trivialized by both the victors and the defeated: still, in any case, it affects the social construction of identity and collective memory. The external and internal perspectives can be very different, but they can also converge. Contradictory interpretations are preserved only if they are handed down in some way.

The purposes of a revised interpretation of the past can be very different as well. For example, one can mention the aims to get access to and to redistribute landscapes and resources, to achieve a political, economic, or religious aim, by transferring war-guilt, demonizing an enemy, providing an illusion of victory or divine master plan, establishing networks and connections or de-establishing existing ones, re-projecting constructs of shared origins, shared traditions, or unbridgeable differences. Sometimes, the purpose of a revision of the past is to legitimize innovations, to change the collective memory and identity, and to shift actual social constructions of realities and solidarities according to special intentions in the present. A re-written history mirrors and serves ideological, religious, political, and economic purposes in the present. And destructions can be used purposefully for this purpose, but even if they were not purposefully made (as e.g., an earthquake or collateral damages of marching-through armies), they could be interpreted and functionalized accordingly by the survivors.

These very complex, multi-faceted, and multi-layered interrelationships were the subject of the Annual Conference of the *Minerva Center for the Relations Between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times* (RIAB; [www.aramisrael.org](http://www.aramisrael.org)) held in Leipzig on May 14–17, 2018.

Writing and Re-Writing History by Destruction – with certain stress on the latter – was the topic of the meeting of an international group of scholars whose work is oriented on the area of Syria-Palestine-Mesopotamia, in the past and present. The idea was to study the topic from a multi perspective and interdisciplinary approach: Archaeological studies, Ancient Near Eastern studies, and biblical studies focused on the destructions of ancient sites in Israel and Judah, mainly committed during the first millennium BCE, by the Assyrian, Egyptian, and Babylonian armies. The concrete dimensions of these destructions as tangible in the archaeological records and settlement history – as well as later resettlements – were illuminated in the archaeological section of the conference. The perspective of the defeated Israelites, Jerusalemites, and Judeans, who had to handle the loss and destruction of their political independency, economic resources, and cultic centers, are set down in great detail in the biblical writings of the Old Testament and in post-biblical literature, indicating that the destructions of the past were a culture and identity generator of the first rank. The connection

between past destructions and their interpretation in the present, by writing and re-writing history, is especially evident in the prophetic writings, which not only intended to support actual discourses of their respective present, but also to offer possible models for the future, including aspects of anthropology, theology, cult, ritual, theodicy, education, ethics, morality, social, and religious organization, even discussing a possible future of the Davidic dynasty – all oscillating between trauma and hopes.

Examples of re-writing history by destruction in Assyria demonstrated that the Neo-Assyrian Empire used destructions as an intentional and structural method, with practical use and symbolical meaning, for constructing an overarching international empire according to their strategic intentions and imperial ideology. The *longue durée* of this kind of re-designing the past in order to design the present according to actual interests are highlighted in the research on the destruction of cultural heritage and persecutions in modern times until today. It is interesting to note that the change of governments and their “official” religion does not necessarily result in destruction, revisionist activities, or immediate persecution of the conquered populations and their culture. The Arab Muslim conquest of areas which had been Aramaic speaking and/or Christian for centuries shows that there were several phases of convivency of the different languages, religions, and cultures, which only developed after some centuries and social changes into anti-sentiments and persecution. That governmental attempts to counteract their own destabilization and failure can become very dangerous and life-threatening for ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities and their cultural heritage can be observed during the last decade of Ottoman rule over Anatolia and Mesopotamia, and the current Turkish policy, that still intentionally destroys, neglects, or delays urgent repair and conservation works on the architectural, sacral, and secular heritage of the annihilated or expelled Christians, who are still wiped out of the country’s history and landscape.

Our collective memory is filled with images, experiences, emotions, stories, and memories of all kinds of past and actual destructions and their consequences. The world community even became the witness to the destruction of our shared world cultural heritage in Syria by ISIS (Baalbeck, Palmyra) and the Turkish army (Ain Dara). Even if these atrocities against the World Heritage Sites could not be prevented, the memory of the history for which they stand should not fade.

With this conference and this volume we wanted to lay the groundwork for future research on the policy of destructions, their intentions and their intended and sometimes even not intended side effects. In our conference and in this volume, we do not propose an in-depth study of the topic, but we hope to have contributed to the study of the phenomenon of writing and re-writing history by destruction, a strategy and phenomenon which apparently belongs to the human condition, and which already has a very long history, still has an impact on our present, and regretfully, will presumably have a future, as long as humankind exists.



I. Re-Writing History by Destruction  
The Archaeology of Ancient Israel and Judah



# Destruction Events

## Their Identification, Causes, and Aftermath – Some Test Cases

*Amihai Mazar*

Very few general studies concerning destructions in the southern Levant have been published.<sup>1</sup> The following is a quotation from a paper authored by the late Sharon Zuckerman:

Destructions are highly visible in the archaeological record – they “freeze” a site at one moment of its existence, and create a window into the dynamic past. The collapsed buildings, the broken vessels and objects on the floors, the layers of ashes and burnt wooden beams all bear witness to the dramatic end of a settlement ... This is the “disaster movie” scenario, jokingly invoked as every archaeologist’s most desirable find. But treating destruction as a single isolable event in the history of a site is misleading. Destruction and abandonment phases identified at a site should be placed within two larger frameworks: that of the site’s temporal development on the one hand, and that of the wider social, political, cultural and ideological context on the other. This idea forms the basis of abandonment studies, which aim to study sites’ destruction and abandonment as complex social phenomena ... Given the ubiquity and prevalence of destruction layers in ancient Near Eastern tell sites, it is surprising that a systematic treatment of this phenomenon is largely neglected and that there is no conceptual paradigm for dealing with it.<sup>2</sup>

Zuckerman goes on to analyze the process of destruction of three Late Bronze cities, Lachish, Megiddo, and in particular Hazor, using terminology used in Aegean and Meso-American archaeology such as “crisis architecture” and “termination rituals.”

Yet such fatal destructions like that of Hazor is only one of several types or grades of destruction that can be defined in the archaeological record. Israel Finkelstein defined three grades of destruction phenomena at Megiddo and other sites and Igor Kreimerman suggested an alternative typology of destructions for the Late Bronze Age.<sup>3</sup> Other studies were devoted to specific severe destruction events, like David Ussishkin’s study of the conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib, Aren Maeir’s study of the siege system and destruction at Gath, and Assaf Kleiman’s analysis of destruction events that may be related to Hazael.<sup>4</sup>

Defining the cause of destruction is not an easy task, and in many cases, different explanations are proffered to account for a single destruction event. The sacking of a city by enemies is often taken as the default explanation for a destruction layer, although it is not an obvious explanation, since not all conquests ended in destruction and

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<sup>1</sup> ZUCKERMAN 2007; FINKELSTEIN 2009; KREIMERMAN 2016; IDEM 2017b.

<sup>2</sup> ZUCKERMAN 2007, 3.

<sup>3</sup> FINKELSTEIN 2009; KREIMERMAN 2016; IDEM 2017b.

<sup>4</sup> USSISHKIN 1982; MAEIR 2012, 25–49; IDEM 2016; NAMDAR *et al.* 2011; KLEIMAN 2016.



not every destruction means a conquest.<sup>5</sup> It was noted by several scholars that a city could be captured without being physically destroyed or perhaps suffered only from partial destruction. It was also pointed out that destructions could be caused by social upheaval in urban societies, due to either extreme socio-economic exploitation of the population or drought, famine, and plagues, which could lead to riots and collapse of the traditional governmental structure and annihilation of symbols of power such as palaces, temples, or administrative structures. Such factors have been elicited to account for various destruction events worldwide, examples from the Mediterranean region include the end of the Mycenaean palatial system or the destruction of Hazor at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Archaeology can do no more than hint at causes for destruction events, and they can hardly be confirmed with any certainty.

In the following, I will briefly discuss several questions and issues related to destructions in the archaeology of the southern Levant, based on my own experience in the excavation of four mounds – Tell Qasile, Tel Batash, Tel Beth Shean, and Tel Rehov – with occasional references to other sites as well.

## I. Total vs Local Destructions

In a large-scale excavation with several excavation areas spread throughout the site, it is easy to identify a major severe destruction event. Such an event would, in many cases, include thick layers of destruction debris, including burnt mudbricks or stone collapse, often accompanied by severe conflagration, mainly inside buildings, with lesser signs of fire in streets and piazzas. Often the destruction was abrupt, and we find numerous artifacts on floors or in the fallen debris. In cases of total destruction, such evidence would be identified in almost each of the excavation areas. Examples from my own excavations are the destructions at Tel Beth Shean ca. 1140–1130 BCE, Tell Qasile, Stratum X ca. 1000 BCE, Tel Rehov, Stratum IV ca. 830 BCE, Beth Shean ca. 732 BCE, and at Tel Batash in 605 BCE. Such total destructions have been attested in a good number of cases and, in the Iron Age and later periods, they can often be correlated with historical events. Clear examples are the destructions of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and in 70 CE. In both cases, destruction layers were located in almost every excavation area in the city.

Notwithstanding extreme cases such as these, in many cases the definition of destruction is much less clear: ash layers or restorable pottery on a floor accompanied by stone fall or brick debris are often defined by archaeologists as a “destruction layer,” but as already noted by others, such phenomena, when appearing only on a local scale, are insufficient to designate a total or even a partial destruction of a site. In archaeological publications we may often find mentioning of destructions which are insecure, but nevertheless are cited in subsidiary literature as a secure identification and sometimes lead to misleading historical conclusions. In addition, in excavations with limited exposure, in which a specific period is known from only a single excavation area,

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<sup>5</sup> KREIMERMAN 2016, 236–37.

it remains unknown whether a destruction in this particular area represents the fate of the entire site. I will present three examples of this problem.

At Tel Batash, Late Bronze Age remains were excavated mainly in Area B, a 300 m<sup>2</sup> large area, and to a lesser extent in Area A, a narrow step trench along the slope of the mound. In Area B, a sequence of five destruction layers, accompanied by clear evidence of fire and conflagration, was found, starting with Stratum X of the sixteenth–fifteenth centuries and ending with Stratum VIB of the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The three intermediate strata (IX–VII), dating from the fifteenth–fourteenth centuries BCE, ended in particularly severe destructions. This is a rare case of such intensity of destruction events in a time period of some 300 to 400 years. Can we deduce from the findings in Area B that the entire town was destroyed five times during the Late Bronze Age? Or might this series of frequent destructions have been restricted to Area B, caused perhaps by local events such as casual fire, which did not affect the rest of the town? We cannot be sure unless another significant area from this period is excavated sometime in the future.

A second example is the case of Tel Rehov.<sup>7</sup> During the first seasons of excavation we revealed tremendous destruction of Stratum V of the Iron Age IIA in a 10×10 m area in the south-eastern part of Area C. Radiocarbon dates pinpointed the destruction to the last quarter of the tenth century BCE, and we suggested identifying this destruction with the one caused by Shoshenq I who mentions Rehob in his list discussed below.<sup>8</sup> Only when we expanded the excavation areas during subsequent excavation seasons, we realized that this destruction layer, albeit severe, is a local feature and that in most of the excavated areas the transition from Stratum V to Stratum IV was a peaceful one. I will return to this particular destruction later in this article.<sup>9</sup>

A third example is taken from Megiddo, where Israel Finkelstein, Eran Arie, and Mario Martin defined a destruction event in Area H phase H-11, which is in-between the two well-known destructions of Stratum VIIA in the mid twelfth century BCE and the tremendous destruction of Stratum VIA ca. 1000 BCE, detected in every excavation area.<sup>10</sup> The excavators admitted that the Phase H-11 destruction cannot be observed in any other excavation area at Megiddo, but nevertheless suggested that this destruction had also brought an end to the nearby Canaanite palace of Stratum VIIA, and therefore suggested to lower the destruction date of the palace to the Iron Age IB (late twelfth and early eleventh centuries BCE), instead of the Iron IA (or LB III according to their terminology), around the mid-twelfth century BCE. This argument is not convincing. It seems that the destruction of Stratum H-11 was a local feature in a domestic area that happened to occur earlier in the duration of Stratum VI, yet its correlation to the destruction of the palace remains unproved.

These are just examples of what were probably local destructions that did not impact the entire city or settlement. We should take note of such events, which were

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<sup>6</sup> MAZAR 1997; IDEM 2006b; MAZAR/PANITZ-COHEN 2019.

<sup>7</sup> For Tel Rehov, see also O. Sergi's contribution in this volume pp. 61–78.

<sup>8</sup> BRUINS/VAN DER PLICHT/MAZAR 2003.

<sup>9</sup> MAZAR 2016, 106; IDEM 2020, 123–24; MAZAR/PANITZ-COHEN 2020, Vol. II, 186.

<sup>10</sup> FINKELSTEIN/ARIE/MARTIN/PIASETZKY 2017.

probably local, cannot be related to historical circumstances and in most cases were followed by rehabilitation of the destroyed section of the settlement and did not interrupt the continuity of the local material culture.

Tel Batash (biblical Timnah) also provides an example of partial vs total destruction. I refer to the destruction of Stratum III, which we attributed to Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BCE. The town is mentioned in Sennacherib's annals, and the excavation has shown that indeed it was partially destroyed during the 701 BCE events; yet the evidence of destruction was uncovered only in certain buildings, while most of the other structures, such as the city wall and gate, the street system and some of the dwellings survived, with some changes, in the subsequent Stratum II of the seventh century. This is very different from the consequences of Sennacherib's campaign elsewhere in Judah, such as at Lachish, Beth Shemesh, Tell Beit Mirsim, Tel 'Eton, Tel Halif, and Beer Sheba which were completely annihilated by Sennacherib, and most of them remained unsettled during all or most of the seventh century BCE, except Lachish and Beth Shemesh which were resettled perhaps after an occupation gap; at Beth Shemesh outside the mound proper.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Causes of Destructions: Earthquakes vs Human Hand

Earthquakes are another explanation often provided for destruction. Obvious examples are mostly identified in later periods such as the destruction of Scythopolis/Beth Shean and some other cities by the severe earthquake in 749 CE. In Bronze and Iron Age contexts, however, the identification of earthquakes is more difficult. At Megiddo, six possible earthquakes were suggested between the late fourth millennium and the seventh century BCE.<sup>12</sup> The evidence consists of tilted walls, cracks in walls, and heavy destructions. However, as the authors of the article published in 2006 admit, such interpretations are fraught with difficulties. For example, in the case of Megiddo VIA, the heavy destruction and human skeletons uncovered in the southern part of the city led the University of Chicago excavators, to suggest in 1939 that the city had been destroyed by a severe earthquake, and his explanation was accepted by Aaron Kempinski, Marco, Agnon and Finkelstein, and Cline,<sup>13</sup> while others like Ussishkin, Harrison, and Finkelstein who (changed his opinion), suggested a military conquest as the cause of this same destruction.<sup>14</sup> This is an example of how uncertain such explanations can be. The destruction of Megiddo VIA is one in a chain of destructions that occurred more or less at the same time in large parts of the Land of Israel: these include Tel Masos in the northern Negev; Khirbet Qeiyafa in the Shephelah; Tell Qasile

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<sup>11</sup> For recent studies of the Shephelah in the Iron Age see the collection of essays in LIP-SCHITZ/MAEIR (eds.) 2017; for Tel Batash, see MAZAR/PANITZ-COHEN 2001, 273–83. For Tel 'Eton see KATZ/FAUST 2012. For Sennacherib's destruction of Lachish, see I. Kreimerman's contribution in this volume, pp. 39–60 below.

<sup>12</sup> MARCO/AGNON/FINKELSTEIN/USSISHKIN 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; Cline (2011) who discuss the subject in detail and cites previous literature.

<sup>14</sup> HARRISON 2004, 108; FINKELSTEIN 2013a, 34; USSISHKIN 2018, 309–11.

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