

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Excavation

*There Abram  
built an altar  
to the Lord.  
Genesis 12:8*

Khirbet Nisya is approximately 1.5 km southeast of el-Bireh. El-Bireh lies about 10 miles by road (16 km) north of the Damascus Gate of the Old City of Jerusalem. A macadam road from the east side of el-Bireh goes to the top of Jebel et-Tawil on which the settlement of Pesagot was established in 1982. Kh. Nisya is situated eastward and below the settlement, about 200 meters away. It is locally considered to be part of Jebel et-Tawil.

Figure 1.1 shows Khirbet Nisya from the air, looking southwest. A path (likely an ancient road) joins the site with the eastern edge of el-Bireh around the north end of Jebel et-Tawil, the mountain at the top right of the photo. Roads remaining from the era of Jordanian control of this area were used in founding the Israeli settlement of Pesagot (not visible on this early photo). In a high aerial view (Fig. 1.2), Nisya is in the center.

Jebel et-Tawil is 907 m above sea level and has a commanding view of the Mount of Olives to the south. The bottom of the Jordan Valley,



Fig. 1.1 Khirbet Nisya looking SW. Pesagot settlement was built around the roads on upper right. El-Bireh is beyond.



Fig. 1.2 Aerial view with roads from el-Bireh used to develop Pesagot.

This high aerial view, taken before Pesagot settlement was established on the mountain, shows several important features. North is to the right. West at top.

### Pesagot

1. The dark colored roads were made by the Jordanian government in preparing for a park. The land was originally controlled by the Jordanian government, not by individuals. When the settlement was established the roads were used as they were found.

2. The highest point of Jebel et-Tawil is found at the small triangle. From there the mountain ridge slopes downward as it goes southeast. The ridge goes off the photo in the lower left-hand corner.

### Kh. Nisya

3. Kh. Nisya is inside the circle, although it does not fill it.

4. El-Bireh is off the photo at the top, or west of et-Tawil. Ramallah is beyond el-Bireh.

For a map showing the location of the armed forces and the topography of Ai, see chapter 15.





Fig. 1.3 Looking westward at Khirbet Nisya with *mevo ha 'ai*, "entrance to "Ai," (to right of photo), the new entrance road to Pesagot on mountain top. Kh. Nisya is on the hill to the right.

including the Dead Sea, is visible to the east. One can see almost to the Mediterranean Sea to the west and far into ancient Ephraim to the north. Its prominence on the landscape suggests that this mountain was a notable place in antiquity. Et-Tawil is highest at its northern extremity, then gradually slopes downward as its ridge extends southward in a gentle curve toward the east. When it finally descends into Wadi Suweinit, the end of the ridge is almost facing eastward. Thus the ridge forms a semi-circle on the west and south sides of Kh. Nisya.

Kh. Nisya sits on a rise with an unnamed valley on the north and east and with a hill beyond it still further north. At the head of this unnamed wadi is the broad east-west Wadi et-Tina which empties eastward into Wadi Sheiban. The latter begins significantly as "Wadi el Aye" (Thomson 1882: 95-96), 1 km south of Beitin and continues almost straight southward until it becomes Wadi Suweinit southeast of Kh. Nisya. Wadi Suweinit is formed by Wadi Sheiban and Wadi el-Ein southeast of the site. Wadi Suweinit then turns southeastward. It eventually becomes Wadi Qelt and exits the hill country south of ancient Jericho through Herod's Winter Palace. A dozen robbed tombs are scattered over the eastern side of et-Tawil. Several times that number may yet be undiscovered.

The spring at the southeast foot of the site remains at a constant level in a limestone holding tank (approximately 1 x 3 m) cut down into bedrock. The depth of water in the tank is at least 2 m. Shepherds use it to water their flocks since it is never dry, even in the dry season, although it fills slowly at that time of year. An abundance of cisterns on the site indicate that water resources other than the spring were necessary.



Fig. 1.4 Small spring with bedrock channel leading to a holding tank.

(Go to page 11.)





Fig. 1.5 Aerial view looking westward. Foreground: Kh. Nisya. Next beyond:



1 Introduction to the Excavation



Pesagot. Then el-Bireh. In the distance is Ramallah.



Fig. 1.6 High aerial view showing the field divisions on Kh. Nisya. (North at top.)



## 1973 Surface Survey

As a result of two articles published by the author in *The Westminster Theological Journal* (1970, 1971), a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, Roy Blizzard, became interested in the investigation and decided to test the proposal that Khirbet Nisya might be biblical Ai. His first visit to the site was in July, 1971 after reading the earlier *WTJ* article (1970). He wanted to confirm or rule out the site as Ai, based on the collection of ceramic evidence, by conducting such a thorough surface survey that there could be no question as to the quantity of evidence used in making a decision.

His doctoral research was summarized in an article in the *Journal* as an “Intensive, Systematic Surface Collection at Livingston’s Proposed Site for Biblical Ai” (Blizzard 1974: 221-230). In preparation, Blizzard had explored the validity of surface survey work as a means of determining the nature of subsurface remains.

In January, 1973, with volunteers, he collected sherds from approximately half the total area of the site, more than 12,500 sherds during 300 man-hours. Seldom has such a thorough ceramic survey been conducted. This total was raised (for some reason) to 25,000 in his personal communication of June 8, 1988.

From reading the sherds collected, Blizzard concluded that Kh. Nisya had been occupied only in the following periods: Iron Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. Based on the fact that there was not a single “Canaanite” (Middle or Late Bronze) sherd recognized among 12,500 (or 25,000?), he ruled out Kh. Nisya as a valid site for Ai:

I believe we can conclude that there is a high degree of probability that the site was not occupied during the period 2000-1200 BC and is not Biblical Ai. It seems on the surface to be nothing more than an Iron Age site first settled about 1200 BC . . . . No surface evidence indicates even remotely the possibility of Livingston’s suggested site as being Ai (1974:224-25).

In his *Journal* article, however, Blizzard made a statement that cautions against having confidence in his findings: “Following the completion of our collection, one afternoon was devoted to the sorting and examination of the sherds” (1974: 224). Although almost 1,500 diagnostic rims, bases, and handles were used in the final reading, all 12,500 (or 25,000?) muddy, unwashed sherds were sorted and read by one person in one afternoon.

On the other hand, five later surface surveys: one by the Israel Department of Antiquities, three under the author’s supervision, and one by Israel Finkelstein (Finkelstein, Magen 1993: 32, 166, 167, site 184), have produced sherds earlier than Blizzard’s survey *on every occasion*. They include: Chalcolithic, Early Bronze, Middle Bronze II, and Late Bronze ceramics. For Kh. Nisya the Benjamin survey (Finkelstein 1993) reported



MB 2%, Iron I 4%, Iron II 6%, Persian 1%, Hellenistic 19%, Roman 35%, Byz and Early Islamic 33%. The highest concentration of early material came from Blizzard's Area D. Although I commented favorably on the survey at the time it was reported, later sherdings and excavations have reversed our conclusions based on his research.

In 1979 the Associates for Biblical Research requested a permit from the Israel Department of Antiquities to conduct an excavation at Kh. Nisya (map coordinates 17175/14495). At that time there was no record of the site in the archives of the Department of Antiquities. The Department made a surface survey before giving permission to excavate, and reported these periods present: Chalcolithic, Early Bronze I, Iron Age II, Roman, and Byzantine. A permit was granted for 1979 and each season of excavation thereafter.

## Description of the Site

The size of the site depends on the outer limits of settlement during various periods of occupation. Later occupants, in construction activities, may have destroyed earlier outlying buildings and walls, reusing the stones in terraces and elsewhere. Considering the area of the site which has bedrock and other installations compatible with a settlement, its size was about four acres (16 dunams). If, conversely, natural limestone ledges were used as part of a larger settlement, it may have been as large as five or six acres (20-24 dunams) in some periods.

Kh. Nisya is not a "tell" in terms of accumulated debris. Bedrock can be seen at the surface, even in the center of the site. Thus it is a natural hill (Fig. 1.3). The shape of the occupied portion is an elongated oval, oriented toward the northwest (in the direction of el-Bireh), and southeast (Fig. 1.6).

At one time, possibly as late as the Iron Age, there was an accumulation of occupation debris forming a low tell. This is evidenced by the terraces east and south of the site being filled entirely with habitation debris as deep as three meters on the eastern side of the site. As excavation proceeded, it became clear that builders went down to bedrock in the Iron Age II, Persian, Hasmonean-Herodian, and Byzantine periods, re-using the remains of former occupants, and leaving almost no stratigraphy from earlier periods. Therefore, much of the early history of the site must be determined by ceramic types, artifacts and, later, by coins.

Architectural remains are found on the site only from Iron Age II onward. Even then, it is seldom more than one or two courses of walls, usually founded on bedrock. It seems obvious that earlier building materials (especially stonework) were removed from the site for use in construction elsewhere.

As excavation progressed, an increasingly clear picture of the periods of occupation has developed from pottery and artifacts. More than

200 coins (75% of them readable) date from the fourth century BC to the 15th century AD. (See chapter 12 for “The Coins of Khirbet Nisya.”) Ceramics remaining in the soil through the millenia give a more complete picture. The earliest pottery in any quantity is from ca. 2000 BC and continues with only occasional breaks to AD 800, indicating that the site was occupied most of the time for 2800 years. Coins found in the cave where olive oil was made (Area 34, see Chapter 12) are as late as AD 1500. Whatever the reason, Kh. Nisya had a significance in antiquity that caused it to be occupied for a long time.

### Agricultural Terraces

It is obvious from installations for processing grapes and making olive oil that Kh. Nisya was, for all periods, an agricultural village. Grape pressing floors, wine storage pits, a plethora of sherds from wine jars, and a large cave installation, used for centuries for processing olives into oil.

Vineyards and olive groves produced the raw materials on the terraces on every hillside in the area. It appears that many have not been used for decades; some not even for centuries. On the southeastern and lower northern portion of the site there are 6-8 acres of abandoned terraces. One of the volunteers counted 26 consecutive unused terraces east of the site.

At the outer edges the walls have collapsed and the soil and rock have eroded, often down to bedrock. (See photos on page 16.) No cultivated trees are found on them, not even a trace of earlier ones. Grain cultivation on the site ceased in 1983. Fortunately, this situation has simplified excavation. Also, no dwellings are near the site.

Although water resources are scarce, a number of cisterns supplemented by the small spring on the southern edge of the site were apparently adequate enough for the community.

### Description by Fields

The site was divided into Fields with letter designations: A, B, C, D, M, P, Q, S, and T (Fig. 1.6). These are on the site plan. The term “Area,” instead of “Square,” describes excavated portions of the Fields.

Looking at each field, Field A consists of the northwest extremity of the site. It appears to have been an industrial area in antiquity with pits for wine storage cut into bedrock, an unusually large number of very large cisterns, perhaps a tanning installation, two kilns, and nearby a large grape-pressing floor (Area 83) with associated catch basins.

Southeast of Field A, Field B is dominated by an unusually large watch tower with a room underneath. Beside it is a floor with steps and pillar bases that of an unfinished building.



Field C, southeast of Field B has possibly the remains of a chapel, or a monastery. Several broken pieces of items common to a church include part of a chancel screen and parts of reliquary.

Field D is the area around the Iron Age I Tomb 65 at the southeast extremity of the site.

Field M is on the western edge of the site with two well-preserved white mosaic floors.

Field P is south of Field M The mikveh and olive oil “factory” are located here.

Field Q is an open flat area next to Field S.

Field S in the center of the site consists entirely of a large warehouse-like structure which were likely workrooms for the community.

Field T are the terraces southeast and east of the site.

Several items that appear in the field descriptions should be mentioned. Loci may be abbreviated, e.g., L1.20. The area number is to the left of the decimal and the locus number to the right. On the plans, loci are written only with a locus number since the area number is outside each area, usually at a corner. Walls are abbreviated W, e.g., W1.02 is Wall 2 in Area 1.

## Periods of Occupation

Periods represented by excavation and surface surveys are: (Chalcolithic?), (Early Bronze?), (Middle Bronze I?), Middle Bronze II (from beginning to end), Late Bronze I (and II?), Iron Age I and II (to the end), Persian, Hellenistic, Early Roman, (Late Roman?), Early and Late Byzantine, Early Islamic, and Ayyubid/Mamluk.

The first three, as well as Late Bronze II, and Late Roman appear in parentheses with a question mark because, although some evidence for them was found in surface surveys, we have found only traces of them while excavating. Therefore, we cannot be certain the site was occupied in those periods.

## IMPORTANT NOTE

### For Periods Without Remaining Architecture

Since the primary purpose of the excavation was to determine whether Kh. Nisya was occupied at the times necessary to match the biblical pattern for Ai; and since little or no architecture remains from the early periods (MB, LB, and IA), we will show considerable unstratified ceramics to demonstrate that the site was occupied then. Ceramics for the early periods at Kh. Nisya are not found in datable strata except for small pockets in the deepest loci.

### Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Periods

Two surface surveys recovered ceramics from the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Periods. One was by the Israel Department of Antiquities in 1978 (unpublished). It is not known, however, where the survey was conducted—that is, whether it was conducted on the site itself or was a regional survey. In the other survey conducted by our staff, the earliest pottery was Early Bronze (Fig. 3:1), including a ledge handle from the area above the spring, where one might expect early occupation.

### Middle Bronze I Period

Three sherds represent this period (Plate 3:2-4). Two with small decorative incisions have parallels at Lachish (Tufnell 1958 Fig. 4:204, 233), Wadi Ed-Daliyeh (Lapp & Lapp 1974 Pl. 6:2,3; 8:4,5,12), and Bethel (Kelso 1968 Pl. 31:2,22). However, the incisions on the sherd in Plate 3:3 are on a carination and not, as usual, just below the neck. Plate 3:4 is paralleled at Bethel (Kelso 1968 Pl. 31:24). Although similar combing is found again in the Byzantine period, the ware of this sherd is definitely Middle Bronze.

We can not conclude from this, however, that occupation occurred during Chalcolithic, Early Bronze, or Middle Bronze I.



Fig. 1.7 Two views of unused terraces at Khirbet Nisya on the southeast portion of the site.

