

**Methodological Comments on the *Low Chronology*:
A Reply to Ernst Axel Knauf**

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In a recent article in BN,¹ Ernst Axel Knauf addresses the methods of those who critique the *Low Chronology* and continue to support the standard Iron Age chronology. He introduces five major methodological errors of those who critique the *Low Chronology*. Ironically, while his points are pertinent to the discussion and he offers a succinct summary of the issues within the debate, he practices the same methodological approaches he criticizes in his essay.

The *Low Chronology*

The term *Low Chronology* was first defined by Israel Finkelstein in 1995. He published two major articles addressing the Iron Age ceramic chronology of the Philistine settlement in southern Canaan and the association of the 10th century BCE ceramic horizon with the United Monarchy.² Finkelstein proposed a drastic redating of the Iron Age ceramic corpus by suggesting that the current dates should be lowered by nearly 100 years. The implications are that all the evidence of state development that was dated to the 10th century BCE (e.g. monumental architecture, gate systems, palaces, etc.)³ should now be dated to the 9th century BCE. Finkelstein does not abandon David and Solomon as some critics appear to imply, he merely proposes that they were nothing more than tribal leaders of chiefdoms in the hill country.

The basic assumption of the *Low Chronology* proposal is that all contemporary sites must exhibit the same ceramic patterning. That is to say, sites in close proximity to each other must have the same ceramic assemblages. Therefore Finkelstein assumes that if Lachish VI and Tel Sera' IX are to be contemporary with Tel Miqne VII, Ashdod XIb, and Geser XIII, they must have Philistine monochrome pottery (see Table 1). Since this ceramic form is not found at Lachish or Tel Sera', Finkelstein assumes that sites with this pottery must postdate Lachish VI and Tel Sera' IX. The result is that strata that were previously dated to the beginning of the 12th c. BCE, should now be dated to the end of the 12th century or beginning of the 11th century BCE. The redating naturally creates a domino effect lowering all the Iron Age strata.

¹ *The Low Chronology* and How Not to Deal With It, BN 101 (2000) 56-63.

² *The Date of the Settlement of the Philistines in Canaan*, TA 22 (1995) 213-239; *The Archaeology of the United Monarchy: An Alternative View* Levant 28 (1996) 177-187. In addition Finkelstein also published a third article addressing the stratigraphy of northern Iron Age assemblages, *The Stratigraphy and Chronology of Megiddo and Beth-Shan in the 12th-11th Centuries B.C.E.* TA 23 (1996) 170-184.

³ For a review of the consensus for the standard chronology see A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (Doubleday, 1990); J. S. Holladay, *The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Political and Economic Centralization in the Iron IIA-B (CA. 1000-750 BCE)*, in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, Thomas E. Levy (ed.), (Facts on File, 1995) 368-398; G. Barkay, *The Iron Age II-III*, in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, A. Ben-Tor (ed.) (Yale University Press, 1992) 302-373; L. G. Herr, *The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations*, BA 60 (1997) 114-183; I. Finkelstein and N. Na'aman (eds.) *From Nomadism to Monarchy (Israel Exploration Society, 1994)*, and C. Meyers, "Kinship and Kingship: The Early Monarchy," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, M. D. Coogan (ed.) (Oxford University Press, 1998) 165-205.

Critiques of the *Low Chronology* were quickly produced by Amihai Mazar and Anabel Zarzeki-Peleg the following year.⁴ Mazar objected to Finkelstein's suggestion to push the date of the Philistine Monochrome pottery beyond the end of the Egyptian presence in Canaan. He notes that this hypothesis is based on a debatable assumption that sites must contain the same forms of pottery. He provided various examples in the archaeological record that demonstrate regional variations occur between sites.⁵ Mazar also expanded the chronological discussion by introducing several important northern assemblages that contradict the redating proposal of Finkelstein. Zarzeki-Peleg brought the northern assemblages into the debate and presented a ceramic typological study of three important northern sites: Megiddo, Jokneam, and Hazor. She concluded that the stratigraphical redating of the *Low Chronology* is not possible based on the ceramic analysis of these three ceramic corporuses.

Finkelstein quickly responded to these criticisms and the debate of the *Low Chronology* was initiated.⁶ The debate has continued in recent literature with critiques of the *Low Chronology* that address archaeological, historical, and anthropological model building.⁷

Knauf's Methodological Comments

Knauf introduces five major criticisms of the work of the *Low Chronology* opponents. While most of his comments are astute, they are also misleading by not fully presenting the data.

"I don't see what I don't want to see"

The first methodological criticism Knauf makes is that those who support the standard chronology do not address the new *Low Chronology* proposal. He cites as an example an article by Block-Smith and Nakhai.⁸ This article summarizes recent archaeological data and interpretations of the Iron Age I in Syro-Palestine. It appeared in a series of articles published in a semi-popular journal with the goal of presenting a broad overview of each major archaeological and cultural horizon. The goal of the article was to present the scholarly consensus of the Iron Age I cultural horizon and not to discuss all the various issues and details of each debate or theory within the discipline. This would have made the presentation disjointed. Granted, a footnote referring to the *Low Chronology* would have been appropriate, but not necessary. A summary article in a popular journal does not create a conspiracy to silence the supporters of the *Low Chronology*.

Knauf's conclusion that the *Low Chronology* is not receiving a fair hearing is not supported by the facts. Most recent articles in academic journals written by archaeologists who support the standard Iron Age chronology either address or refer to Finkelstein's proposal. Perhaps unknown to Knauf is the fact that the American Schools of Oriental Research, the institution that published the journal with the article in question, had Finkelstein

⁴ A. Mazar, Iron Age Chronology: A Reply to I. Finkelstein, *Levant* 29 (1997) 157-167; A. Zarzeki-Peleg, Hazor, Jokneam and Megiddo in the 10th Century B.C.E. *TA* 24 (1997) 258-288.

⁵ A fuller critique of Finkelstein's principal of homogeneity of ceramics between sites has recently been published: S. Bunimovitz and A. Faust, Chronological Separation, Geographical Segregation, or Ethnic Demarcation? Ethnography and the Iron age Low Chronology, *BASOR* 322 (2001) 1-10.

⁶ Bible Archaeology or Archaeology of Palestine in the Iron Age? A Rejoinder, *Levant* 29 (1997) 167-174; and Hazor and the North in the Iron Age: A Low Chronology Perspective, *BASOR* 314 (1999) 55-70.

⁷ A. Ben-Tor and D. Ben-Ami, Hazor and the Archaeology of the Tenth Century B.C.E., *IEJ* 48 (1998) 1-37; A. Ben-Tor, Hazor and the Chronology of Northern Israel: A Reply to Israel Finkelstein, *BASOR* 317 (2000) 9-16; N. Na'aman, The Contribution of the Trojan Grey Ware from Lachish and Tel Miqne-Ekron to the Chronology of the Philistine Monochrome Pottery, *BASOR* 317 (2000) 1-8; D. Master, State Formation Theory and the Kingdom of Israel, *JNES* 60 (2001) 117-131; S. Bunimovitz and A. Faust (2001).

⁸ E. Bloch-Smith and B. A. Nakhai, A Landscape Comes to Life: The Iron Age I NEA (1999), 62-92.

as a keynote speaker at its annual meeting the year after it published the article.⁹ Contrary to Knauf's criticism, a review of the recent literature clearly demonstrates that the *Low Chronology* is getting a hearing.¹⁰ It is also clear that most archaeologists are not convinced by the chronological changes proposed by the *Low Chronology*.

In his introduction, Knauf makes a general claim that a minority of Near Eastern archaeologists already know that the debate is settled and that the *Low Chronology* is correct. This claim would be substantiated if he could supply bibliographic references or even the names of archaeologists who support the *Low Chronology*.¹¹ The only articles in academic journals that produce archaeological data in support of the *Low Chronology* are by Finkelstein. It appears that Knauf has participated in the exact methodological error of which he accuses the opponents of the *Low Chronology* by ignoring articles that critique the *Low Chronology*. Knauf might lament the fact that no other archaeologist has accepted the *Low Chronology*, but he cannot claim that it has been ignored. A general article summarizing the Iron Age I Period does not demonstrate that Finkelstein's proposal is not receiving a fair hearing in the field.

"The negligible minority argument"

The second point of Knauf is to address the claim by the critics of the *Low Chronology* that the theory is not accepted by the majority of archaeologists. Knauf has a point. Just because a theory is not in the majority it does not mean it is wrong, although a major component of scholarship is peer review. Most criticisms of the *Low Chronology* note the fact that few archaeologists have accepted the chronological revision. The irony is that in any field, both major paradigm shifts and unsubstantiated scholarship start in the minority. Usually, unsubstantiated scholarship remains in the minority while new paradigm shifts are adopted by the discipline as they are tested against the data. The question today, in regards to the theory of the *Low Chronology*, is whether it represents one of these initial paradigm shifts in Syro-Palestinian Iron Age archaeology or it will be a theoretical position unproven by the data. The chronological debate will be—and should be—settled by the archaeological data and not by democratic consensus or the voracious attacks and voices of a few outspoken scholars.

"Making a mess"

The third methodological error that Knauf points out is the attempt to make an "intellectual mess." Although Knauf's methodological point is difficult to ascertain, those who have followed the *Low Chronology* debate can grasp his point. Knauf notes that the *Low Chronology* does not get a fair hearing because its opponents have oversimplified the arguments by creating "straw men" targets usually in the guise of name-calling. Thus the tenets of the *Low Chronology* are not debated based on the archaeological record, but by *ad hominem* attacks—usually in the simplified dichotomies of maximalists vs. minimalists, good vs. evil. Knauf notes that this type of argumentation only forces scholarly discussion of the revisionist chronologies into polarized extremes. It is difficult to avoid rhetoric in any scholarly discussion; it is natural to attempt to characterize a position. Knauf has a point here. The critique of the *Low Chronology* should not resort to this type of argumentation. Ironically, after Knauf points out this error among the *Low Chronology* critiques, he then also participates in "intellectual mess-making" by making his own *ad hominem* attacks against the

⁹ I. Finkelstein, *Archaeology and the Biblical Text 2000: The View from the Center*. Wednesday November 15, 2000, Plenary Session. American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meetings, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹⁰ See bibliographic references in footnotes 4 and 7.

¹¹ So far only Finkelstein's colleagues at Tel Aviv, D. Ussishkin and Z. Herzog have publicly supported the *Low Chronology*.

Low Chronology critics. In his attempt to define the methodological positions in the debate, he implies that scholars who hold to the standard Iron Age chronology are theologians and are basing their position on a religious belief rather than an evaluation of the data.¹² The reader is left to conclude that *Low Chronology* supporters are scientists and those who hold to the standard chronology are religious fundamentalists. Is it possible that scholars who hold to the current Iron Age chronology base their positions on the archaeological data and not a theological position? Based on Knauf's rhetoric, it is clear that he does not think this is possible.

Knauf posits a third position between the minimalists who find no reliable historical information in the biblical text and the maximalists who "insist that the Bible always contains reliable historical information unless proven otherwise."¹³ His third position is that of the rationalists, empiricists, or in his term, the scholars. He states: "To disbelieve, again and again, all theories and all evidence and above all, her/his own thoughts and only to work with those items that had stood, again and again, the purgatory of logical and empirical testing, is the basic criterion for being a scholar."¹⁴ Knauf's third position should rightly be a methodological procedure that all scholars follow and not a third theoretical position in the debate. Most scholars hold to a position somewhere along a continuum between the maximalist and minimalist extremes—most would assume that any theory or interpretation of the data should be based on logic and empirical testing.

All scholars would agree that the chronological revisions of the *Low Chronology* should be empirically tested using the archaeological record and, to a lesser extent, the historical data. This is a simple task to determine whether the *Low Chronology* best explains the archaeological data. All one needs to do is a comparative ceramic analysis of the major stratigraphical changes proposed by the *Low Chronology*. Basically, Finkelstein only needs to demonstrate that Lachish VI is more similar to Qasile X than to Qasile XI; or that the Gezer X assemblage has been misdated to the 11/10th century BCE and should be moved down to the end of the 10th century BCE. The ceramic analysis can be tested for other assemblages (e.g. Ashdod, Ashkelon, Taanach, Tell Beit Mirsim, Ekron, Tel Michal). Table 1 summarizes Finkelstein's ceramic reappraisals. It is easy to empirically test his hypothesis by examining the ceramic evidence. Interestingly, in the *tour de force* articles that introduced the *Low Chronology* revision, simple ceramic comparisons were not provided (e.g. pottery plates and/or ceramic distribution tables). In defense of Finkelstein his articles were introducing a larger framework of his Iron Age ceramic revision and this empirical data would have diminished his major theoretical points. Nevertheless, Finkelstein should present a major article or monograph of the primary data so scholars can judge the tenets of the *Low Chronology*. The initial foundation for the revision of the *Low Chronology* was the absence of Philistine monochrome at Lachish. Now that the Lachish data has been published¹⁵ it is time for the empirical analysis that Knauf proposes to be offered. The burden of proof rests on anyone who challenges the standard chronology by presenting the empirical data. This data is easily accessible to Finkelstein. There are several projects in the field and in publication stages that can provide the data (e.g. Tel es-Safi, Beth Shemesh, Tel Miqne-Ekron, Ashkelon, etc.). Finkelstein does not need to utilize this new data; he can go to published reports and demonstrate his thesis by simply producing the ceramic comparisons of key assemblages.

¹² Knauf, p. 59.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ O. Zimhoni, *Studies in the Iron Age Pottery of Israel: Typological, Archaeological and Chronological Aspects* (Tel Aviv University, Institute of Archaeology 1997).

Table 1: 5 Phases of Finkelstein's *Low Chronology*

Late 13th-early 12th c. BCE	Early 12th — ca. 1130 BCE	Late 12th — beg. of 11th c. BCE	11th c BCE, poss. early 10th	10th c BCE
LB II	Post Myc IIIB; Pre-Monochrome	Monochrome	Philistine Bichrome	
Aphek X12*	X11	GAP	(X10, X9)	
Jaffa	'Lion Temple'	GAP		
Tel Mor 7	Mor 6-5	GAP	4	3*
Ashdod XIV*	GAP	XIIIb	XII	XI*
Gezer XV	XIV	XIII	XII	XI X IX*
T. Beit Mirsim C	B3	GAP	B2	B1
Lachish VII	Lachish VI*	GAP	GAP	V*
Tel Sera'	IX*	GAP	VIII	
Tel Miqne	VIIIA*	• VII	(VI - V)	IV*
Ashkelon	GAP	• Occupied		
Tel Masos			(II, II)	I
T. el Farah-	Cemetery 900	GAP		*
Tel Haror	B6-5	GAP	(B4-2)	
Beersheba	————	————	IX VIII	VII
Arad	————	————		XII
T. el-Jarishah	GAP			*
T. Zippor III	GAP	GAP	II	
Tel Batash VI	GAP	GAP	V	
Halif VIII	GAP	GAP	VII---→	
Tell Jemmeh	GAP	GAP		*
Deir el-Balah		GAP		
Megiddo	VIIA	GAP	(VIB)	VIA* VB
Beth-Shean	Lower VI (S3)	GAP	GAP	S2*
Hazor	GAP	GAP	GAP	XII XI X
Jokneam	GAP	GAP	XVIII	XVII

* = destruction
 • = monochrome
 () = bichrome

Knauf makes an excellent methodological point—where is the empirical evidence? The irony is that Knauf does not present the empirical data or critique the proponents of the standard chronology based on the archaeological data. He instead bases his critique on the methodology of the *Low Chronology* critics instead of the empirical data. No field project has come out in support of the *Low Chronology* revisions.¹⁶ In fact, empirical data has now been presented demonstrating that the *Low Chronology* does not offer a better interpretation of the archaeological ceramic data.¹⁷

“The dense stratigraphy argument”

The fourth criticism Knauf defines is what he calls the “dense stratigraphy argument.” This argument states that the *Low Chronology* cannot be viable because it forces several major strata into a single century (e.g. see table 1, Gezer and Hazor). Knauf is correct in noting that adding several stratigraphic layers to a cultural horizon at a particular site does not

¹⁶ The one exception is the Megiddo excavations under the direction of Israel Finkelstein.

¹⁷ Zarzeki-Peleg (1997), Mazar (1997), Ben-Tor (1999, 2000).

negate the *Low Chronology* hypothesis. It is something that should be considered, but it does not provide a datum or a point in the discussion.

Knauf fails to point out that the converse of the argument is also true. One of the initial benefits that Finkelstein proposed for the support of the *Low Chronology* was the solution to the 9th century gap found at many sites. He concluded that the Iron Age I was too dense and if we moved some strata down a century, the problem of the 9th century is solved.

The archaeological record reflects human behavior. Human behavior is not systematically consistent throughout time. We cannot say that each decade represents one stratum of a site and that all sites will be consistent. Human behavior is complex and hence the archaeological record is complex. Just because the *Low Chronology* places too much strata for Iron Age Hazor, it does not negate the hypothesis. If the “dense stratigraphy argument” is wrong for the critique of the *Low Chronology*, it is also wrong for the support of the *Low Chronology*.

The Negev site argument

Knauf notes that a serious argument against the *Low Chronology* is the association of the Iron Age Negev Highland sites with the campaign of Shishak. Underlying the argument is the dating of red slip burnished pottery. Knauf briefly summarizes the discussion but dismisses its usefulness because not enough pottery from key sites has been produced to speak of ceramic distribution and frequency models. This is indeed confusing. If Knauf is referring only to the Negev sites, his point is well taken. If he is referring to the whole of Palestine, then it is incongruous that he apparently accepts the *Low Chronology* reappraisal when he admits that there is not enough ceramic data to make any conclusions!

Conclusion: What needs to be done

Knauf concludes that the chronological and/or regional significance of the burnished red slip ware cannot be addressed for the time being, because we do not have the empirical data. Most scholars familiar with Iron Age ceramics note that this is a major ware of the cultural horizon. If we cannot conclusively date the pottery, how is Knauf confident that the *Low Chronology* is correct and the debate is settled? This present author agrees with Knauf that the Iron Age I/II transitional strata are key for the dating of the penetration and distribution of red slip pottery in Palestine.¹⁸ Knauf wisely notes that complete ceramic analyses of various sites need to be produced in order to determine the chronology of archaeological cultural horizons and to reconstruct history based on the archaeological data. Fortunately, there are some ceramic analyses that have been produced that can contribute to what Knauf calls an “empirical cultural science.”¹⁹ Perhaps it is time for both sides to focus on the ceramic data. Science needs both inductive and deductive research designs to test various models and interpretations of the data. It is time to set aside grand inductive models of cultural change and the various attempts to force the data into these models. Perhaps deductive approaches that start with the empirical data first and then offer interpretations of history should be the focus of field archaeologists studying ancient Palestine and not the vogue model building and theorizing found in biblical studies.

¹⁸ S. Ortiz, *The 11/10th Century B.C.E. Transition in the Aijalon Valley Region: New Evidence From Tel Migne-Ekron Stratum IV* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona 2000).

¹⁹ A. Mazar, *Excavations at Tell Qasile, Part II* (Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University, 1985), Ortiz (2000), Zimhoni (1997).