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Forts or agricultural estates? Persian period settlement in the territories of the former kingdom of Judah

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ABSTRACT
The territories of the former kingdom of Judah were only sparsely settled during the Persian period, as exemplified by the extreme rarity of domestic structures unearthed in excavations. Viewed against this background, the large number of excavated forts and isolated administrative buildings from this period is remarkable, and they apparently outnumber the period's excavated dwellings. Not only is this an extremely unlikely situation, but various lines of evidence, pertaining to specific sites as well as to the phenomenon as a whole, render the possibility that all these structures were forts or administrative buildings extremely implausible. Consequently, this article re-examines the phenomenon within the social landscape of the region in particular, and of the Achaemenid empire in general, in an attempt to embed those unique buildings within the broader demographic and political reality of this time. Given the location of many of the sites and the finds unearthed in them, and in light of the demographic reality in the region and of the broader Achaemenid imperial policy, the article suggests that most of the so-called forts were estates, created in the process of the resettlement of this previously devastated region.

1. Introduction

The territories of the former kingdom of Judah were only sparsely settled during the Persian period. Only one, relatively small excavated settlement—Jerusalem—can be labeled as a town (and barely so; Geva 2012, and references), and even the total **number** of excavated (and even surveyed) villages and hamlets is quite limited. The rarity of settlement remains is well-known, even if only partially addressed, and a few scholars raised various suggestions in order to account for the extreme sparsity of Persian period building remains (see extensive discussion and references below). Viewed against this background, the large number of excavated, and even surveyed forts and isolated administrative buildings from this period is remarkable. It is the aim of this article to reexamine the phenomenon, and to offer an explanation that will embed those unique buildings within the social landscape of the region in particular, and of the Achaemenid empire in general.

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2. Background: The phenomenon of many forts and administrative buildings

The Persian period forts unearthed in the territories of the former kingdom of Judah had received a great deal of scholarly attention (e.g., Stern 2001; Hoglund 1992, 165–205; Fantalkin and Tal 2006; Mazar and Wachtel 2015). Although there is great variation in the information supplied (most were only partially published, see below), the number of Persian period forts and other public/administrative buildings that are known to-date, even after critical reevaluation of past scholarship (bleow), is amazingly high (Figure 1). While, as we will see below, similar structures were identified throughout the country, their concentration in the region of what used to be the kingdom of Judah is much higher,[1] and these structures had received much more attention in past scholarship. We will, therefore, concentrate here on this region, and data from other parts of the country will only be used to supplement the discussion. In the territories of the former kingdom of Judah alone, we can list the following structures (excluding the Negev area, which will be mentioned later), arranged roughly from north to south:

Pisgat Zeev D: A Persian period casemate fortress was built on top of an Iron Age village (Figure 2A). The dimensions of the fortress were some 60 × 70 m, and the entrance was from the north (or west, through a sort of an indirect corridor). The excavator suggests that the structure was built in the early Persian period (Nadelman 1993, 54–55; see also Carter 1999, 132–33).

Har Adar: this is a large structure, with a courtyard surrounded by rooms and an entrance from the east (Figure 2B). In its original, Persian period, plan, its dimensions were 21.8 × 25.8 m (it was later enlarged). The ceramic assemblage unearthed was composed of 45% storage jars, 30% kraters, 12.5% cooking pots and 12.5% bowls. The pottery seems to date to the late Persian period. No imported wares were reported. The metal artifacts include a pickaxe, three needles and a ring with a seal (Dadon 1997). The excavator believed that the site served soldiers, and suggested that its location near an ancient road and not far from the central site of Nebi Samwil testify that the site was embedded within the settlement system on the border of Yehud (Dadon 1997, 75).

Horbat 'Eres: a large building— 21.8 × 24.4/25.5 m —built on the top of a hill (Figure 2C). The center of the building was not well preserved, and while the outer walls were clearly identified, it is difficult to decipher its inner planning. Despite the poor preservation, the excavators suggested that the entrance was from the east. The finds were composed of 65% storage jars, 14% cooking pots, 9.5% jugs, juglets and the like, 6.5% bowls, about 1% kraters, 1.3% hole-mouth jars, and 2.6% oil lamps. The excavators note the complete lack of coastal forms and imported sherds. They note the difficulty of differentiating between early and late within the Persian period, but tend to date the site to the later part of this era (Mazar and Wachtel 2015).

Ramat Rahel: While much of the history of the site at the time is open to interpretation, it is quite clear that the site was a central one during the entire Persian period, and it is likely that it served in an administrative capacity (Lipschits, Gadot and Langutt 2012; Lipschits *et al.*, 2011; see also Fantalkin and Tal 2006, 183, 2012, 153–54).

Kh. Abu et-Twein: The site is often mentioned as a 29.5 × 31 m fort that functioned in the Persian period for imperial purposes (Hoglund 1992, 191–97). The site was excavated, however, and it is quite clear that it was built in the Iron Age, and was only reused in the
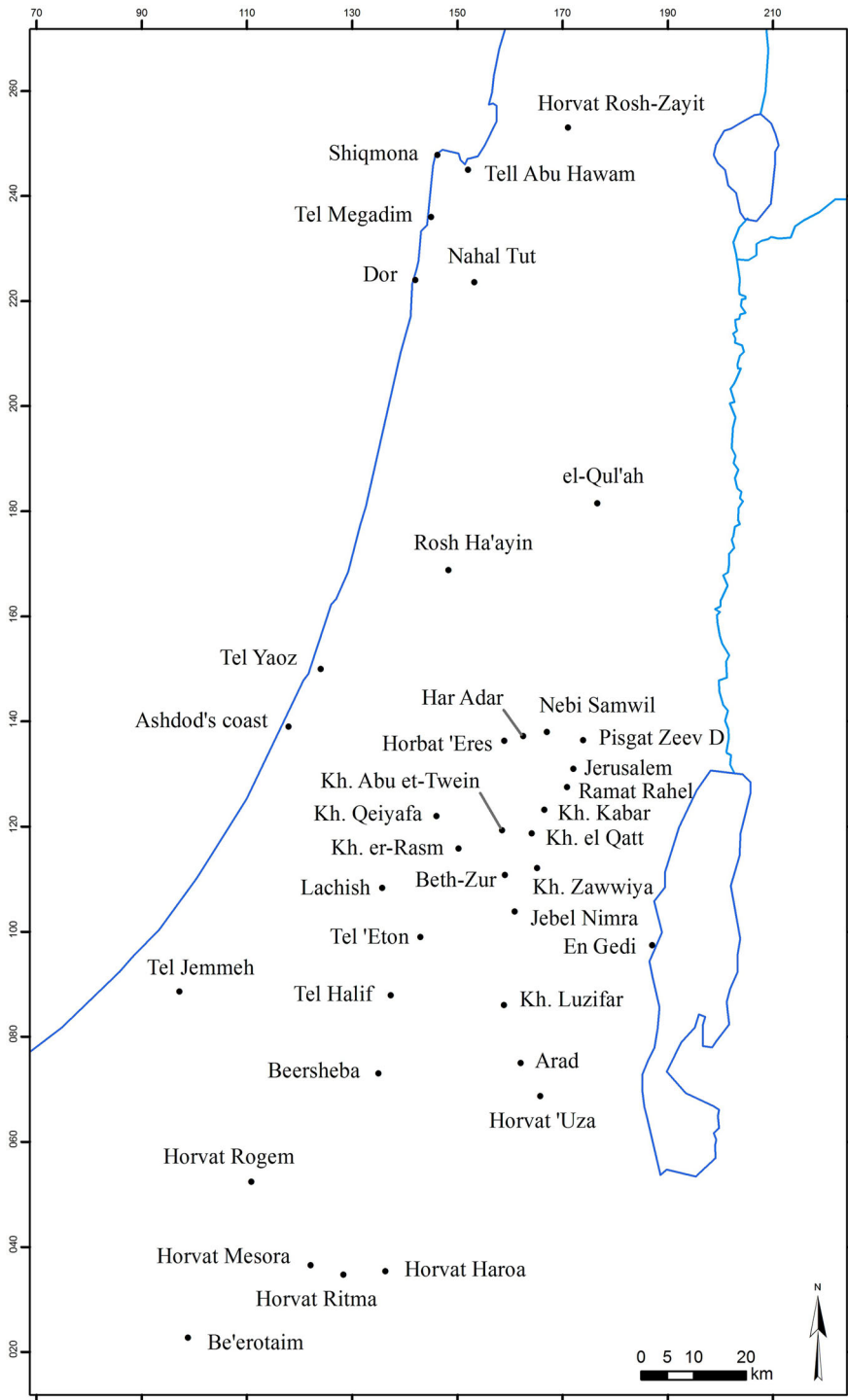
Figure 1. A map showing the sites mentioned in this article (prepared by Yair Sapir)
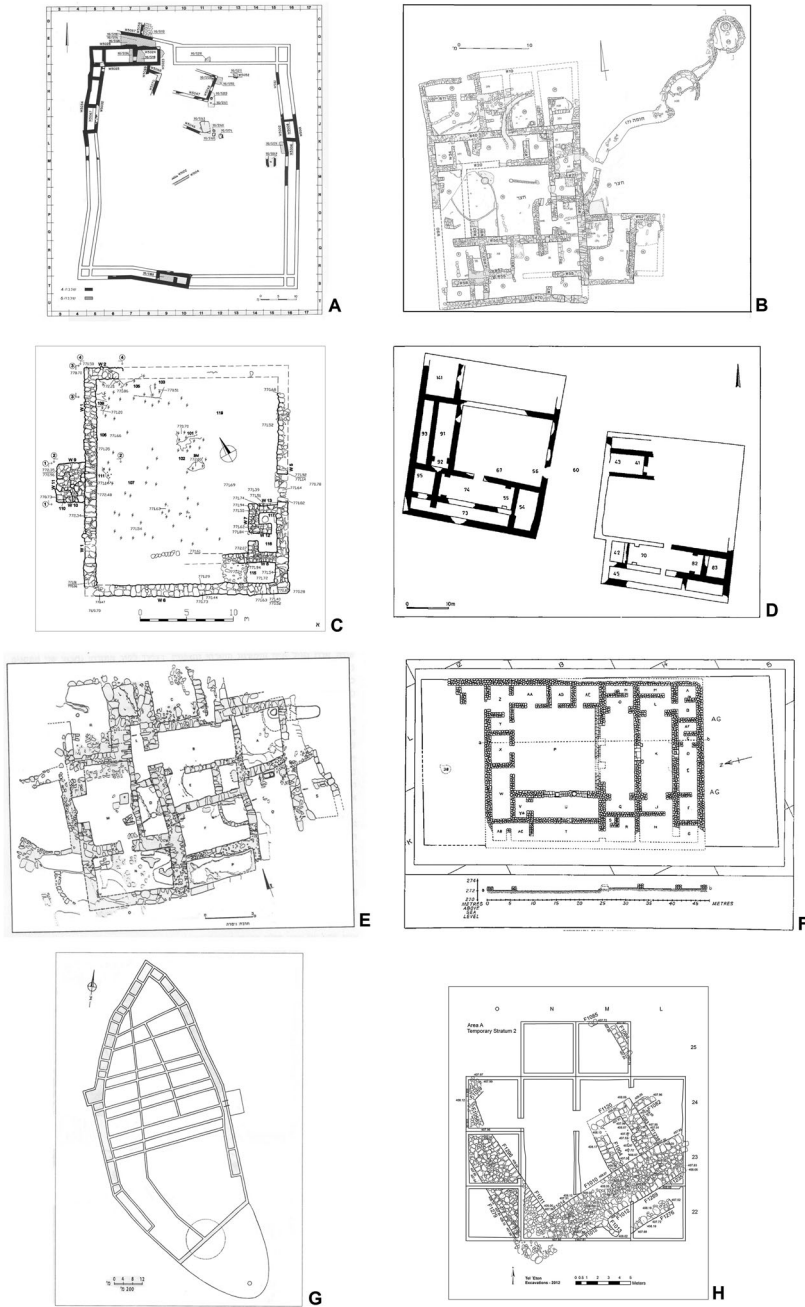
Figure 2. (A) Pisgat Ze'ev D (based on Nadelman 1993: 50, fig. 62). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority; (B) Har Adar (based on Dadon 1997: 64, fig. 1). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority; (C) Kh. 'Eres (based on Mazar and Wachtel 2015: 216, fig. 2a). Courtesy of Amihai Mazar, Ido Wachtel and the Israel Exploration Society; (D) Beth-Zur (based on Reich 1992: 114, fig. 2). Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University; (E) Jabel Nirma (based on Hizmi and Shabtai 1994, fig. 1). Courtesy of Hanania Hizmi; (F) Lachish (based on Tufnell 1953, pl. 119). Courtesy of the Welcome Library London; (G) Tel 'Eton (based on Faust, Katz, and Eyal 2015: 107, fig. 4). Courtesy of the Tel 'Eton Expedition; (H) Kh. Luzifar (based on Baruch 1996: 100, fig. 2). Courtesy of Yuval Baruch

Persian period (Mazar 1982; Faust 2012a, 237–40; see also Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 237, note 6), perhaps even in a different plan. It is difficult, therefore, to assess the function of this site in the Persian period, and in my view it is doubted whether it should be included in this list.

Beth-Zur: Reich (1992) suggested that a Persian period citadel stood at the site. Its width was about 33 m, and while its length cannot be determined with certainty due to Hellenistic construction that covered the building, he estimated it as some 41 m (Figure 2D). Reich compared the plan of this structure with that of the residency in Lachish (below), although he noted some differences. He also suggested that an additional residency stood to its east, but the plan was less clear (Reich 1992). Notably, Carter (1999, 154–57) rejects this interpretation, mainly on the basis of the meagre ceramic finds from the Persian period, and supports the excavator's conclusion that there was only a village at the mound during this era.[2]

Hebron (Jabel Nimra): Salvage excavations at Jabel Nimra revealed parts of a large public building, but its exact plan cannot be determined (Figure 2E). The rich ceramic assemblage includes a rython and a stone seal, whose motifs are borrowed from the Achaemenid repertoire. The excavators believe that the seal is an original one, and not a local imitation, and that it served officials. Also discovered were metal objects, including agricultural implements, jewelry, and household items, as well as a few imported ceramic sherds. No details on the percentage of the ceramic vessels were supplied. Charcoals that were unearthed in the building were examined and belonged to local types of wood. It appears that the building had two Persian period phases, and that it existed throughout the era (Hizmi and Shabtai 1994).

En Gedi: A large building was excavated on the southern slope of the mound. The building is irregular in form, and was composed of a large number of rooms (Stern 2007, 193–96). The pottery covers the Persian period, and the Attic wares cover the fifth-fourth centuries, and are more abundant in the second half of the fifth and the early part of the fourth centuries (ibid., 231). Most scholars argue that the building had an administrative purpose (e.g., Fantalkin and Tal 2012, 154–155, who also attempt to down-date the building).

Kh. Qeiyafa: The excavators defined the site as "A Late Persian–Early Hellenistic Administrative center" (Garfinkel, Ganor and Hasel 2014, 13). This centre was composed of three large buildings, and a few smaller ones, surrounded by a wall. The interpretation is supported by Fantalkin and Tal (2012, 158). Still, the architecture is quite different from that of most other buildings discussed here. Furthermore, the different buildings might have been built and used at different times (Sandhaus and Kreimerman 2015). The site was established at the fourth century BCE (ibid.).

Lachish: A large residency (36 × 50 m) was unearthed at the top of the mound (Tufnell 1953; Fantalkin and Tal 2004, 2006, 2012; Cole and Seger 2009, 13*-14*) (Figure 2F). Tufnell dated the building to the fifth century BCE, but since the majority of the many imported sherds unearthed by both the British expedition and the Israeli one date to the first half of the fourth century BCE, Fantalkin and Tal (2006, 2012, 135–45) date the residency to this time. They explain the earlier material as heirlooms. Still, one must remember that more material is expected from the final phase of a stratum (than from its earlier phase; see more below). We should therefore be very careful before

discarding the evidence regarding the earlier occupation only because the material is sparser than the finds from the later phase.

Tel 'Eton: the foundations of a massive building were unearthed at the top of the mound (Figure 2G), and it appears that the size of the building was some 19 × 19 m. The outer walls were about 3 m. wide. In addition to the fort, pits and evidence for the reuse of structures were unearthed in other parts of the mound, probably remains of a village. The main ceramic finds (from all areas, and see more below) were storage jars (47%), cooking pots (20%), mortaria (9%), kraters (9%), jugs and juglets (8%), and bowls (4%). Imports were present, and account to 1.6% of the rims unearthed. The Persian phase was dated to the fourth century BCE, continuing into the third (Faust, Katz and Eyall 2015).

Tel Halif: remains of a building from the Persian period were unearthed in Field II, and around it were "pits, bins, and scatters of artifacts" (Cole 2015, 42). According to the excavator (Seger 1993, 558), "the substantial size of the walls suggests that they may have been part of a large storehouse, barrack, or military building erected on the summit of the tell during the Persian administration of the region". In a more detailed publication, Cole and Seger (2009, 15*) compare the remains with what they call "the hilltop multi-wing-sytle complexes", like those uncovered at Tell Jemmeh and En Gedi, and conclude (p. 17*) that "Tel Halif's strategic location … necessitated at least a modest representation of Persian authority be stationed there. The site's assets … have rendered it an accommodating locale for a small Persian garrison". Cole (2015, 43) suggests that Tel Halif might have functioned as a Persian period center, overseen by a minor Persian official, for the collection of agricultural products or livestock. He adds that (Cole 2015, 44) the site "may simply have held the working farmhouse estate of some local headman", but finds it less likely given the finding of many figurines. The site was apparently in existence throughout the Persian period (Cole 2015, 72–77).

Additional sites in this region were only surveyed, but due to the state of the remains and the large number of Persian period sherds uncovered, they were also identified as forts. Those include the following:

Kh. er-Rasm: This structure was discovered in the emergency survey on the slopes of Mount Hebron. The size of the structure is some 27 × 29 m. The finds are dated mainly to the Persian period (Kochavi 1972, 46).

Kh. el Qatt: The site was only surveyed, and a square fortress (about 30 × 30 m) was discovered with a courtyard in the center. Many date the fortress to the Persian period (e.g., Kochavi 1972, 50, site 79), although in my view the Iron Age sherds that were identified suggest that it might have been initially built in the Iron Age (Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 237, note 6; Faust 2012b, 145). Given the large quantities of Persian period pottery, however, it was clearly still in use in the Persian period.

Kh. Kabar: A site that was surveyed only. A number of fortresses were identified one on top of the other, the earliest of which was dated to the Persian period. Only one wall of this fortress was identified, and it was traced to a length of 30 m (Kochavi 1972, 40–41, site 26).

Kh. Zawwiya: the site was surveyed only, and a fortress (some 22 × 23 m) was identified (Kochavi 1972, 51–52, site 85). No additional information was supplied, and not much can be gleaned from the reconstructed plan that was published.

Kh. Luzifar: a large building, some 80 × 50 m, that was discovered in an archaeological survey in the southern Hebron highlands (Figure 2H). Over 90% of the finds are dated to

the Persian period, and only a few sherds were dated to the Iron II and the Hellenistic period. The publication does not provide details of the percentage of the various types of finds, but notes that storage jars constitute over 70% of the finds, and that five imported sherds were also discovered. Baruch believes that the site functioned as a fort, built for imperial purposes and that it might have served as a road station (Baruch 1996).

To this list[3] one can add sites in other parts of the country, along the international highway, including e.g., Nahal Tut, Rosh Ha'ayin, Ashdod, and Tell Jemmeh (partial list). *Nahal Tut*, located at one of passes which crossed the Samaria-Carmel ridge, is a large building, some 55 × 55 m (Figure 3A) that existed in the late fourth century BCE (Alexandre 2006; 2015). Storage jars comprised 80.6% of the finds, bowls 8.6%, cooking pots 6.7%, jugs and juglets 3.3%, and lamps 0.8% (Alexandre 2006, 153).[4] Still, only a small part of the structure was excavated, and thus it is possible that the finds represent only one wing, and not the finds in the building as a whole. East of *Rosh Ha'ayin*, a large building was unearthed in excavations recently (Hadad *et al.* 2015). The building is rectangular (61 × 30.5 m), consisting of systems of rooms in the north, center and south of the building, and two courtyards in-between them (Figure 3B). The ceramic assemblage was sufficient to date the structure to the later part of the Persian period, but not in order to quantify the types. Near *Ashdod's* coast, on the strategic southern coastal plain, a square building, some 29 × 29 m was discovered (Figure 3C). According to the excavator, the site existed mainly in fifth century BCE. The preliminary publication does not provide much information on the finds within the building, but the symmetry of the construction, and protrusions at the corners, which resemble towers, do support the military interpretation (Porath 1974). At *Tel Jemmeh*, a few phases, covering the entire Persian period, were unearthed. During the erliest phase a large building, some 38 × 29 m, was uncovered (Stern 1982, 22–25; Fantalkin and Tal 2006, 181, 2012, 158–59; for the unclear nature of the results, see also Ben-Shlomo 2014, 1064). There were additional public or administrative building in the northwestern Negev, but this area is beyond the scope of the present discussion, and for our purposes it is sufficient to point toward the above examples.

Additional forts were identified in the Negev highlands, including the forts at Horvat Rogem, Horvat Ritma, Horvat Haroa, Horvat Mesora and Be'erotaim. The Persian period site at *Horvat Rogem* apparently existed during most of the Persian period (Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004, 160–72), but its exact plan was not identified.[5] Three additional forts, however, had identical dimensions and similar inner planning. *Horvat Ritma* (Figure 3D; Meshel 1977; Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004, 185), *Horvat Haroa* (Figure 3E; Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004, 176–85), and *Horvat Mesora* (Figure 3F; Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004, 172–75), were all 21 × 21 m large, with rooms around a square courtyard. Another site, *Be'erotaim*, was also square, but the dimensions were smaller, covering some 15 × 15 m. (Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004, 185–88). Cohen-Amin (2004, 189–93) reports that the largest group in the Negev forts' ceramic assemblage were storage jars, which comprised 34.57% of the assemblage. Bowls comprised 22.49%, juglets 13.08%, cooking pots 8.41%, oil lamps 6.5%, kraters 5.6%, pilgrim flasks 2.8%, amphoras 1.86%, while jugs and imports were rare. It is possible that additional forts or administrative buildings existed at Arad (Aharoni 1981, 8; Herzog 1997, 245–49) and Beersheba (Aharoni 1973, 7–8; see also discussion in Fantalkin and Tal 2006, 184).
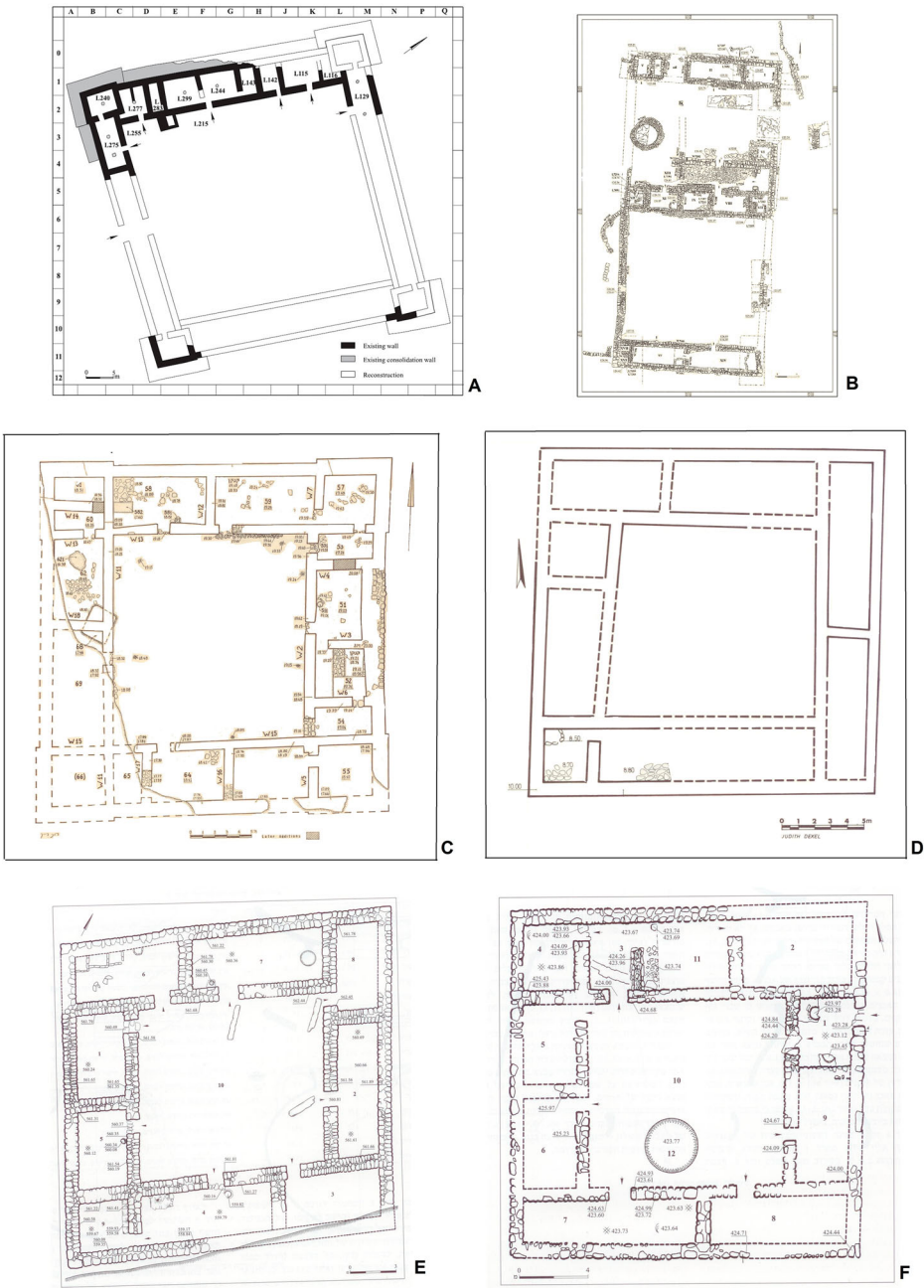
Figure 3. (A) Nahal Tut (based on Alexandre 2006: 140, plan 3). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority; (B) Rosh Ha'ayin (based on Haddad *et al.* 2015: 52, fig. 2). Courtesy of Amit Shadman and the Israel Exploration Society; (C) Ashdod (based on Porath 1974: 44, fig. 2). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority; (D) Horvat Ritma (based on Meshel 1977: 117, fig. 4). Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University; (E) Horvat Haroa (based on Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004: 177, fig. 108). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority; (F) Horvat. Mesura (based on Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004: 173, fig. 105). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority

3. Discussion: Common explanations for the forts

The widespread presence of forts and administrative buildings in the territories of the former kingdom of Judah is known for quite some time, and was explained in various ways based on the available data at the time and on the broader views of the relevant scholars on the history of the era. Given its better known history (due to Bible), many of those studies focused on the province of Yehud, but they can be used to learn about the larger region. In light of their common interpretation as forts and administrative buildings, the structures were attributed to either the empire or the provincial governance. The Persian empire was divided into satrapies (ruled by satraps, which were often members of the royal family), which were in turn divided into provinces (*medintha* or *phwa*). Each province had its capital, where the governor resided (Jerusalem in the case of *Yehud*). The provinces were most likely divided into districts (*pelekh*), which were perhaps divided into sub-units (Stern 2001, 366–72; Rappoport 2004, 122–23; see also Briant 2002). The province of Yehud was part of the satrapy "beyond the river" (*abar nahara*). Taxes were paid both to the local governor, and to the empire, and some of it was stored lcoally (Rappoport 2004, 123–24; Briant 2002). Thus, different scholars attributed the discussed structures to either the local province, or the empire at large. Stern (1977, 22, 1982, 250), for example, explained the forts that were known at the time as forming a line along Yehud's border. Stern (1977, 23) purposely discussed only the major sites, which helped him delineate the boundaries of Yehud, and consequently ignored other sites. The purpose of the forts, according to Stern, was defensive, and they were supposed to control the province's borders. Hoglund (1992, 203–5), basing his argument on a larger data set (including many sites that were erroneously dated to the Persian period) claimed that the forts do not cluster along the province borders. Based on his re-dating of many sites[6] to the mid-fifth century BCE, he suggested that the forts were built by the Achaemenid empire, rather than by the province, and "they represent an imperial response to the strategic challenges presented by the Egyptian revolt" (ibid., 203). According to this reconstruction, the forts were not related to the provinces and hence the latter's borders were irrelevant for the forts' distribution. Rather, the forts were erected by the empire, and served imperial purposes. More recently, Tal and Fantalkin (2006, 186–89, 2012) discussed the finds in many sites, following their reanalysis of the residency in Lachish, and re-dated many of them to (roughly) the first half of the fourth century. They connected the construction of the forts to the revolt in Egypt, which required the empire to invest in defensive structures in the area that was, after all, fairly close to Egypt. The forts' abandonment was attributed to the recapture of Egypt by the Persians, which made the existence of the forts obsolete (see also Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2007, 86–90). Most recently, Mazar and Wachtel (2015, 240–41) re-examined the issue briefly, and following their excavations at Kh. 'Eres noted that the location of some forts cannot serve any imperial purpose. They suggested that "It is more likely that such fortresses were built as a local initiative of the province's administration, in an effort to demonstrate its control, to protect its borders, and to serve as strongholds for local garrisons and administrators" (p. 241). This analysis, however, brings us back to the beginning of our overview, i.e., connecting the structures with the province rather than the empire, and exhibit the difficulties involved in explaining the structures.

3.1 The chronology of fortified structures

We will expand on some of these themes below, but we should also note that while many of the buildings are indeed dated to the fourth century, this is not the case with all of them. The difficulties of dating different phases within the Persian period are well known (e.g., Lipschits and Tal 2007, 36; Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 239). Still, as can be seen from the above discussion, we can cautiously state that despite a peak in the later part of the period (on which we will comment below), the buildings cover the entire Persian period.

Thus, it appears that (of the excavated sites discussed above) Pisgat Zeev D, Ramat Rahel, Beth-Zur (whatever was its nature at this time), Jabel Nimra/Hebron, Ein Gedi, Lachish and Tel Halif, were established already in the early part of the Persian period. Only one of the sites apparently did not continue into the later part of the Persian period (Pisgat Zeev D), whereas Har Adar, Horbat 'Eres, Kh. Qeiyafa and Tel 'Eton, were established later in this period, joining the existing sites.

There is, therefore, a concentration of fortified or administrative structures in the later part of the Persian period. Still, this cannot be taken as indicating any concentrated effort on behalf of the empire or the province. Rather, it results from two, completely non-related factors. (1) the larger number of fortified building in the later part of the Persian period reflects the overall settlement and demographic situation in the Persian period, and the region's gradual demographic recovery as time evolved (see also Carter 1999; Faust 2007, 2012a, 119–48, and references; see also Meyers and Meyers 1994); (2) This is also a result of formation processes, in which the final phases of occupation are much better represented in the archaeological record than earlier ones. Notably, events of destruction and abandonments (especially the former) leave much more material remains within the archaeological site than the process of daily living, during which most of the garbage and broken vessels are thrown-away. The main evidence for the site's period of existence (prior to its abandonment or destruction) are floor raisings which are quite thin, and typically produce only tiny sherds. However, during events of destruction, and even abandonment, all (or most) of the remains are left at the site, becoming part of the archaeological record (regardless of post-depositional processes). Thus, a large amount of material is available for future discovery (Beit Arieh and Cresson 1991, 132; Beit Arieh 2007, 53–54; Faust and Erlich 2011, 204–205, 211–14; Faust and Katz 2012:51–53; see also Schiffer 1987, 89–98). As a consequence, surveys and even excavations will expose more finds from the final phases of an occupation than from its period of uninterrupted existence. Given that the Persian period was mainly an era of gradual developments, most of it left only limited material remains. The end of this era was more troubled, and was accompanied with unrest and events of destruction and abandonment (e.g., Fantalkin and Tal 2006, 2012, and references), hence leaving far more extensive material imprints (note that Alexander's take-over was also not completely peaceful; Berlin 1997, 4; see also Alexandre 2006, 2015).

Notably, the two different factors are not mutually exclusive, and are rather complementary. And both contributed to the fact that more sites are known from the fourth century BCE than from the fifth. The phenomenon in which many fortified or large public or administrative buildings dominate the architectural landscape is, therefore, not limited to part of the Persian period, and it covers this entire epoch.

3.2 Exacerbating the problem: "fortressland", or where are the settlements?

As noted above, the number of forts and public structures is extremely high, and this is even more remarkable when one remembers the paucity of other types of building remains from this period. As we will see below the dearth of evidence on mounds is well-known, but even salvage excavations produced relatively little evidence of settlement in the discussed region. Fragmentary remains of isolated structures were identified for example at Ramat Beit Ha-Kerem (Davidovich *et al.* 2006), Kh. ʻAlona (Weksler-Bdolah 1997, see also Faust 2012a, 42), and Highway 9/Jerusalem (Avner and Eirikh-Rose 2007), some activity was observed also at Kh. Jarish (Amit and Cohen-Amin in-press) and Kh. abu et-Twein (Mazar 1982, and see above), and it is possible that a small hamlet was identified at Kh. er-Ras (Gadot 2011) and a village at Malhah (Zehavi 1993).[7] Most of these remains were unearthed in sites that continued to exist from the Iron Age, but usually in a greatly diminished form, and it is very difficult to identify the plans of the structures, let alone generalize about them.[8] What is important for our purposes, however, is to reiterate that the remains unearthed in salvage excavations are not only limited in number, but are of isolated structures and tiny settlements and that, furthermore, hardly any houses were excavated in their entirety, exposing the poor nature of the remains. Those finds comprised the local settlement in the Persian period, and should be acknowledged, but their number and significance is extremely low when compared to both the settlement in the region in other periods and the number and size of the fortified and central buildings of the Persian period. These findings, therefore, do not change the gloomy settlement picture referred to by scholars, both before and after these sites were salvage excavated. Indeed, the paucity of remains was noted by practically all scholars who studied this era. Over 30 years ago, for example, Stern (1983, 120) noted that architectural remains are meagre, and that following dozens of years of excavations the very limited data that was accumulated is surprising (see also Stern 2001, 461). The lack of substantial finds continues to prevent scholarship from discussing archaeological details, such as town planning (e.g., Stern 1997, 25; 2001, 461–62), prompting scholars to offer explanations to the phenomenon (Carter 1999; Stern 1983, 119–120, 1997, 25; 2001, 461-62; Lipschits 2001; below). Before referring to those explanations, and in order to exemplify the extent of the problem, I should point out that not only is it difficult to speak about Persian period town planning in the discussed region (above), but hardly any houses were excavated in their entirety, and we know very little even about domestic activities at this time. Thus, Stern, in his monumental 2001 volume, has only slightly over one page devoted to Persian period "residential structures", and most of this brief discussion focuses on public buildings! (Stern 2001, 468–69). In the past, when excavations concentrated on mounds, some scholars suggested that the cities were all destroyed by the end of the Iron Age, not recovering before the Hellenistic period, and that at the time discussed here people lived only in small and insignificant settlements (Albright 1960, 142; Kenyon 1965, 296–97, 302). Stern himself (2001, 461–62) attribute the "scarcity of finds" to three factors: (1) to the fact that Persian period occupation was typically the upper stratum on mounds, and was therefore exposed to "erosion and other depredations" (p. 461); (2) when settlement was not abandoned, the Persian period remains were damaged by later building activities (p. 461–62); (3) at most sites, the mound was occupied by a palace-fort or other building (p. 462). And Lipschits (2001) suggested that the dearth of architectural finds

should be attributed to the Persian imperial policy in the highlands, which only allowed settlement in villages.

None of these suggestions, however, even begins to explain the phenomenon (as admitted even by Stern 1983, 120). The idea that life reverted to villages could have made sense when Albright and Kenyon were writing, before the great advent of salvage excavations, which compensate for the "urban bias" of Near Eastern archaeology (Faust and Safrai 2005, 2015) and brought to light hundreds of rural sites. Still, the Persian period is extremely underrepresented. The three explanations raised by Stern also do not solve the problem. First of all, the dramatic decrease in architectural remains was much more significant in the highlands (Lipschits 2001, 46–47; Stern 2001, 462, 466), and the finds from the same period in the coastal plain were relatively numerous. This should be sufficient to disprove all three explanations, since they do not differentiate the highlands from the coastal region, and according to which the decrease in both the highlands and lowlands should have been to the same degree. Clearly, the finds attest to a much higher degree of human activity in the coastal plain, and the decrease in the highlands is a "real" phenomenon that begs an explanation. Moreover, destruction of earlier remains by later activity is something that should not influence the Persian period remains more than the remains from other periods, and late Iron Age remains should have been damaged by these processes as well. And the same applies to exposure. If there was a settlement in the Persian period, some remains were expected to be found even under these conditions. That this is not the case also invalidates those hypothetical reasons as being responsible for the dearth of Persian period remains. The third explanation brought by Stern actually contradicts the first two, as it shows that when there was human activity, it was indeed identified. The scarcity of finds in so many sites cannot, therefore, be attributed to the above. We should therefore ask ourselves why are larger buildings often found, while "regular" dwellings are so rare. Furthermore, the above-mentioned salvage excavations takes place in the countryside (outside the mounds), and none of the above hypothetical explanations apply to them. Still, the Persian period in the highlands is extremely underrepresented, as acknowledged by Stern himself. Indeed, this led Lipschits (2001) to suggest that the dearth of architectural finds should be attributed to the Persian imperial policy in the highlands, which only allowed settlement in villages. Such policy, however, is not attested anywhere, and only the scant remains in the highlands led Lipschits to suggest it. Furthermore, even if the Persian empire had a policy that prevented the establishment of cities in the highlands, houses leave the same kind of remains whether built in an urban or rural setting. The relative lack of domestic architecture (cf., Stern 2001, 468–69), even in salvage excavations, cannot be attributed to any of the above suggestions. The above attempts to explain the phenomenon only show how grave the problem is, but the explanations offered clearly fall short of explaining it.

The simplest explanation for the rarity of finds in Judah is that there was indeed relatively little settlement in the Persian period (Carter 1999; Faust 2012a). Indeed, at the peak of the Persian period the settlement was at most one third of that of the late Iron Age (see even the figures of Lipschits 2005, which appears to exaggerate the significance of the Persian period remains; Faust 2012a, 128–31). This means that during most of the Persian period the number of inhabitants was probably much lower, most likely in the range of 15–30%, beginning with the lower figure in the early Persian period, and reaching

the higher one toward the end of this era (Faust 2012a, 119-48; see also Carter 1999; Meyers and Meyers 1994).

This, however, only emphasizes the disproportionate significance of the sites or structures that were interpreted as public structures and fortresses, which amount to a significant portion of the existing sites; perhaps even the majority of the excavated ones. The problem of the relatively high presence of forts is farther exacerbated if Lipschits (1999, 185) is correct in suggesting that the Persian empire "did not maintain a large army or civil service" in Yehud, because it "based their rule on the local population there". If so, then the relative large number of forts is all the more astonishing!

We believe, however, that a closer look at the data at hand will eliminate some of the problems the above-mentioned creative explanations attempted to solve. Yet, before proceeding and presenting a broader reconstruction of the Persian period social landscape that account for the discussed structures, we would like to point to a number of additional problems that the interpretation of all the above structures as forts or administrative buildings creates.

3.3 Problems with the forts' hypothesis

Are these structures really administrative buildings where Persian imperial (or provincials) officials lived/worked, or forts in which a standing army was stationed? It appears that a number of considerations cast serious doubts on this common interpretation.

First of all, the buildings are not uniform in any way, not in dimensions nor in planning, and many of them are simply rectangular structures with a courtyard (and some, like Kh. Qeiyafa, do not even share this characteristic). One needs only compare the uniformity of most of the above-mentioned Negev sites, i.e., Horvat Ritma, Horvat Haroa and Horvat Mesora, all completely square, and most with an identical dimensions of some 21×21 m. (Figure 3D-F), with most sites discussed above. Not only are all the Negev buildings of identical size, but they share a similar inner planning and proportions. The fort at Ashdod (Figure 3C), which was of different dimensions, was also square, with protrusions at the corners, apparently built in the tradition of ancient Near Eastern fort construction. A quick look at those nicely built and symmetrical structures show how different they are from most highlands rectangular structures, which are not uniform in any way, and have only superficial resemblance to one another, and even less to the "real" forts just mentioned.

Furthermore, the distribution of the structures does not make sense if we would like to view them as administrative building and forts. Thus, the contemporaneous (late Persian period) Kh. 'Eres and Har Adar are located in a remote area, just 4 km. apart (Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 237). We will see later that there is no logic in the mere location of Kh. 'Eres, but it is very clear that there is no sense in locating two contemporaneous forts in such a close proximity to one another. The same applies to Tel 'Eton and Tel Halif (13 km apart). Those structures are located on the road that connected the Beersheba valley and the valley of Ayalon, and hence the location of a fort there could make sense. But not only is it doubted whether this road was important enough to serve the royal administration, and hence enjoy road services (note that even Roll and Tal 2008, in their detailed study of the roads of this region do not reconstruct a road there!), but even if this was the case one such structure would be sufficient to guard this road, and (or) provide road services (for the importance of communication in the empire, see recently Briant 2012; Waters 2014,

111-113; Colburn 2013, and references). There was no need for build and maintain two forts or administrative buildings in such proximity (especially in such a sparsely settled area; Faust, Katz and Eyall 2015; see also Faust *et al.* 2014, 68–69).

Additionally, the structures are not all located where forts are supposed to be built. Kh. ʿEres, as already noted, is not located near any road, and does not really protect anything. It is located in a remote hilly region, that did not provide protection to the empire against outside invasion, nor did it help in the recapture of Egypt (see also Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 241). And even if one wishes to claim that the forts belonged to the local province, their role is still a mystery. What would the governor in Jerusalem benefit from positioning soldiers in Kh. ʿEres? Unless he wanted to guard the immediate agricultural lands, a point to which we shall return below.

Additionally, there are simply far too many administrative buildings. Given the paucity of settlement remains from this period, one can doubt whether so many administrative structures and even forts were needed to control the region. Not only was there no need for so many structures, but even more problematic is the question who manned them? Furthermore, if those structures served as forts and administrative buildings, someone had to pay the soldiers who dwelt there (doing what?). This was a heavy burden on a sparsely populated province, and not the king nor the governor could benefit from these structures that did not control any significant population, and many of which were not located in strategic locations, and did not defend the province nor the empire. Not the king nor the governor were likely to pay for the maintenance of these structures.

We should also remember that the finds unearthed in the sites are by no mean related to the military. No military items were reported in the vast majority of sites—no weapons (usually not even arrowheads, and see below) nor administrative documents or paraphernalia—and the finds seem domestic and related to agriculture and the storage of foodstuffs. While we do not possess detailed information on the finds in most of the sites, the existing data clearly support this generalization. Thus, the metal objects uncovered at the sites are not commonly connected with military uses, and are related to daily life and agriculture. At Nahal Tut, for example, 88 metal artifacts were unearthed, many related to agriculture and others to daily life, including an iron pick, iron shears, ploughshare and plough rings, pickaxes and scythes, along with iron and bronze nails, metal chain, spatula, buckle, and more (Alexandre 2006, 174–176). Of the 88 items, only a few could be related to the military, and Alexandre (2006, 175) wrote that "Weapons are rare and include a small spearhead, an arrowhead and … a catapult arrowhead", adding, however (p. 151), that these finds "attest to the fate of the fort, rather than the activities carried out within it" (see also Alexandre 2015, 59). At Horbat ʿEres, bronze nails and a bronze fibula were found (Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 235), and at Hebron (Jabel Nimra) the finds include an iron hoe, a bronze spoon, rings, bracelets, a knife, nails, and more (Hizmi and Shabtai 1994, 78–79). At Har Adar, a pickaxe, three needles and a seal were discovered (Dadon 1997, 69). The same applies also to the ceramic assemblage in most of the sites, which strongly support the accumulation of foodstuffs. Thus, the percentage of storage vessels at the discussed sites is always more than 45%, usually much more, reaching 70% at (the surveyed site of) Kh. Luzifar, and even 80% at Nahal Tut.[9] This greatly differs from the percentage of storage vessels in the Negev fortress, which were really part of the Persian administration, and where the

percentage of storage vessels is only 34.6%. More striking is perhaps the rarity of bowls and open serving vessels in the discussed structures: 12.5% at Har Adar, 6.5% at Kh. 'Eres, 13% at Tel 'Eton (mostly mortaria),[10] and 8.6% at Nahal Tut, versus 22.5% at the Negev forts. While data from Persian period "real" forts is meagre, the higher frequency of bowls in forts is usually matched by the data from other periods. The data from the Iron Age Phoenician fort in Horvat Rosh-Zayit (Gal and Alexandre 2000, 198), for example, clearly resemble that of Persian period forts in the Negev, with 35% storage jars (the percentage practically identical to that in the Persian Period Negev forts), and 17% bowls (lower than the Negev forts, but much higher than the other Persian period sites discussed above; we should note that imported bowls were not included, and should they be added, the number of bowls will slightly increase; e.g., Gal and Alexandre 2000, 88, 91-92). Additionally, bowls constituted 28% of the finds at the late Iron Age fort at Horvat Uza (Freud 2007, 119).[11] And the percentage of serving open vessels at the Hellenistic and Roman strata at this site are even higher: 79% in the Hellenistic period (Fischer and Tal 2007, 216) and 39% in the Roman period (Fischer and Tal 2007, 232). While this is not meant to be a thorough examination, the overall pattern presented here seems quite straightforward, at least as far as the Persian period sites are concerned. The extremely low percentage of bowls in the discussed sites clearly sets them apart from real forts in this period (at least), and the high percentage of storage vessels clearly reveals them for what they are (more below).

That the discussed structures are not forts, and are not even part of a single system, can be also be learnt from consistent regional differences between them. Thus, at sites in Yehud, for example at Kh. 'Eres (Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 239), Har Adar (Dadon 1997, 69–71), Kh. Qeiyafa (Sandhaus and Kreimerman 2015, 267–69), and Pisgat Zeev D (Nadelman 1993), no imports were reported, in line with the tradition within the Judean cultural realm where imports are very rare and sometimes completely absent (see recently Sandhaus and Kreimerman 2015, 267–69).[12] In sites that were situated outside Yehud, for example at Tel 'Eton, Jabel Nimra, and Kh. Luzifar, which are located at what later became the province of Idumaea, imports were always present (Faust, Katz and Eyall 2014, 112–113 Hizmi and Shabtai 1994, 74–78; Baruch 1996, 105). This seems to suggest that the finds relate to local costumes within each region and even sub-region, in accordance with the local norms, rather than empire-wide behavior (as can be expected from soldiers in forts; see more below).

We must note that the Persian empire clearly had forts, which were manned with a standing army and mercenaries (Head 1992; Cook 1983, and more below). But a standing army and mercenaries were expensive, and could not have manned all the structures that were identified as forts in territories of the former kingdom of Judah. There were soldiers and mercenaries in other forts, located along the coast and major highways, as well as in the Negev. But as we have already noted, those buildings (for example at Ashdod, Horvat Ritma, Horvat Mesora, etc.) are built in a completely different manner from most of the above-mentioned sites, are far more uniform and massive, and their strategic (rather than tactical) location is also suitable for forts. This is where "regular" soldiers, or standing army, are to be looked for. Not, for example, at Kh. 'Eres, or Har Adar.

Given the great disparity between the architecture of most of the Persian period fortified/administrative structures and the finds unearthed within them and the architecture and finds in the "real", square forts, can we suggest something on the nature of these buildings?

3.4 Toward a solution: A discussion of administration and land-use in the Persian empire

While most of the discussed sites in the Judean highlands and the Shephelah were not forts and were not part of the Persian administration, it seems as if a broader look at the Achaemenid administration and military, and by extension also settlement patterns, might direct us toward a solution to the puzzle posed by the data.

Tuplin (1987) noted that estates of various sorts were common in the Persian empire. The king and the royal family had large estates (1987, 133–34) and so did the governors (1987, 134–35) and officials in the various satrapies (p. 135). The available sources indicate that governors had large estates, sometimes extremely so, and large estates were given also to members of the royal family and to other nobles, high officials or people who gave service to the king, and those supplied them with income (e.g., Tuplin 1987, 133–35; Fried 2015, 151–52; Dandamaev 1967, 37–42). Estates, however, were also allotted to communities of soldiers and even deportees (Tuplin 1987, 135). Given the structure and sparse population of some parts of the Achaemenid empire, land was given not only to elite individuals, but also to groups. Those were known as *hadru*, and were headed by foreman that was "responsible for the allocation of fiefs or shares among members" (Fried 2015, 152). Those groups were responsible for the cultivation and the land and served as military reserve. In places like Babylonia that were depopulated previously, this was also a mean by which deportees were integrated into the local economy (Jursa 2010, 46). Fried (2015, 152) suggested that a similar situation prevailed in Judah, which as we have seen was also greatly depopulated at the time.

As the strict division between administration and the military is a modern phenomenon, and since we have seen that some of the estates were given in return for military service, it would be worthwhile also to examine the structure of the Persian army which seem to present a complementary picture. According to Head (1992, 12) the troops in the provinces "can be considered under four headings", including (p 13): (1) cavalry; (2) "in some provinces there were forces of foreign military colonist, rendering military service in exchange for landholding"; (3) garrison troops, often mercenaries from other regions or outside the empire; (4) local troops called specifically for campaigns. Categories 1 and 3 are extremely important for the maintenance of "regular" armies and forts, and supporting the regime's policies on a daily basis. Category 4 supplemented them, aiding in campaigns or other "high intensity" operations. More important for our purposes, however, is the second category, that of military colonists, who in exchange of land supplied military service. Head (p. 13) notes that "Throughout the Achaemenid period, many troops were supported by grants of land in exchange for which they owed military service", i.e., some sort of militia, "a reserve force holding land in exchange for military obligations" (p. 12). Head (ibid.) discuss a number of examples, from Anatolia and Babylonia, concluding that despite earlier precedents, "the systematic settling of foreign soldiers … seem to be Persian innovations".

Combining this background with the unique demographic reality in Judah, which was only sparsely settled at the time (above) suggests that this was an ideal region in which to create estates of various types, and this was a very good region in which land could be given to both (1) nobles and (2) groups of settlers. This, for the following reasons:

1) it is easier, even for a king, to allot land in sparsely settled regions rather than in densely settled ones;

2) moreover, and elaborating on the former, in sparsely settled regions it is easier to give good quality lands;

3) the region was in need of more settlers, to settle and secure it, and even to provide more taxes for the empire.

It is likely, therefore, that many (although not all) of the discussed sites represent those mechanisms. While data is insufficient to decide the role of each and every site, we can, generally speaking, differentiate between (1) "real" forts, (2) estates, as discussed above, (3) administrative buildings, housing officials within settlements, and (4) without settlements.

Archaeologically speaking, (1) real forts, which also served administrative purposes of course, were square, or at least rectangular structures, sometimes with tower-like corners, that were built following what looks like a master plan (see also Faust 2012b, 178–189). The finds in them should reflect, among other things, the presence of soldiers, either through the finding of military objects, or through the use of space which might indicate the presence of mostly male population, and usually the absence of typical objects identified with women in domestic contexts like looms and small, domestic ovens (see also Singer-Avitz 2011). In light of the above discussion, we can add that in Persian period sites that served as forts one can expect to find vessels that were used for food consumption in the frequency of some 20% and more.

Estates (group 2, above), are expected to be less uniform in construction, although can follow some general outlines (see also Faust 2012b, 185–188). As far as the finds in the estates are concerned, one can expect to find less weapons, and more evidence of agricultural activities. Based on the data presented above, storage seems to have been more prominent in this type of settlement than in others, with storage vessels comprising at least 45% of the assemblage, and frequently much more, reaching even 70% and 80% (at least in the Persian period). Vessels for food consumption, by contrast, are relatively rare (6–13%). In very upscale estates one can expect evidence of grandeur and wealth (and more vessels for consumption are expected to be found there), but it is doubted if this is relevant for the present case study (more below). In private estates, real grandeur is not to be expected, but even if the owner lived elsewhere, one can still find differences between the overseers and the workers. In more communal estates (i.e., estates in which communities lived) such differences are less likely to be found.

As far as administrative buildings that housed officials (nos 3 and 4, above), one should remember that forts (no. 1) could also serve in this capacity. In such cases, one could expect to find, in addition to evidence for military forts (above), also evidence for a high ranking official, along with objects testifying to wealth, status, and usually also foreign origins (to enhance the status and legitimacy of the official). In addition to forts in which a high official was present, one could find buildings whose primary function was administrative, and in which similar evidence is expected to be found, perhaps along with some evidence of imperial administration (documents, seals, etc.). Such buildings can be located both within settlements (no. 3) or outside them (no. 4).

We must note that in many cases the boundaries between the various types can be blurred, for example due to the presence of soldiers in administrative buildings, the

presence of high ranking officials in forts, and even due to the fact that many settlers were also soldiers (above), hence making the distinctions far from clear-cut. Still, when different groups of structures can be identified (and grouped) on the basis of their architecture and the finds unearthed in them—and this is clearly the case here—we should examine them in light of the division into different "pure" types, suggested above. Viewed in this light, we believe all four types can be identified in the archaeological record of the Persian period in the discussed region. Thus, category (1) includes, for example, the above-mentioned forts in the Negev or Ashdod. Category (3) includes the buildings unearthed in Lachish, En Gedi, Beth-zur, and others. Category (4) includes, for example, the structures at Ramat Rahel and Rosh Ha'ayin. Category (2), which is the focus of this article, includes, for example, Kh. 'Eres, Har 'Adar, Pisgat Zeev D, Tel 'Eton, Tel Halif, Kh. er-Rasm and Kh. Luzifar (the exact nature of some sites, for example, Hebron/Jabel Nimra, is less clear).

Most of the sites that were interpreted as forts were therefore centres of estates. Some of them were settled by population that was gradually encouraged (one way or the other) to move to this area. It appears that estates for various types (private and communal) were erected all over the Persian empire, and in all the administrative units that encompassed the territories of the former kingdom of Judah. The best known example of this policy are probably the returnees to Yehud, but it should therefore be noted that transferring the descendants of the exiled Judeans (real or fictive) to what was at this time the province of Yehud was not only a "benefit" that allowed them to "restore" former glory (only relatively few, of course, took advantage of this opportunity), but also an imperial need (for discussing the returnees within a broader framework of Persian policies, see now Silverman 2015). And it appears that similar settlement took place in other provinces. In light of the above, one can assume that some of these estates were in reality the centers or settlement of new settlers, which were located in or around them, while others were estates of officials or noblemen that resided in the nearest town (Jerusalem in the case of Yehud).

Indeed, the location of the sites identified above as estates fits nicely with agriculture and with the production of surpluses on the one hand, as (not surprisingly) they are typically located above valleys with good soils and lands. On the other hand, the structures are located on hilltops, sometimes high and sometimes not, which are both defensible (a requirement, given the sparse settlement in the region) and prominent, suitable for such estates. The finds attest storage of foodstuffs, which is in line with agricultural production, and the metal implements are mostly related to agriculture and hardly ever to the military. Given the sparseness of the settlement in the area, those estates, could take advantage of the relatively primary land in each mirco environmental unit, and could easily produce surpluses even in areas that in other, more densely settled periods, were regarded as economically marginal.

It must be stressed that the discussed structures are fairly big, and did not serve as a dwelling of a family or as a farmhouse. The size of the structures discussed here was in the range of 500 m^2 (the smallest) to 4200 m^2, and almost all were in the area of at least 1,000 m^2.[13] Although dwellings often vary greatly in size, they were always much smaller; we already noted that the data on Persian period dwellings is insufficient, but during the Iron Age II, for example, most urban dwellings were in the range of 40–70 m^2, housing the urban poor. The houses of the middle class, in the range of 60–100 m^2, and even the upper classes, in the range of 100–240 m^2, were also much smaller than the structures discussed here (for Iron Age structures, see Faust 1999, 2012b; Faust et al. 2017, and many references).

This clearly shows that the Persian period structures were not the adobe of a nuclear or even an extended family, and that they housed far more peoples. The structures, therefore, corresponds with what can be expected from the above-described estates, both those that were owned by royalty or by a friend of the royal/provincial court and those owned by a groups of soldiers/settlers. In the first instance, the overseer resided at the estate, with his family, along with some workers, and perhaps even their nuclear families (we must stress that not in a single case did we find evidence for real wealth, as can be expected in estates in which the owners lived; for a general discussion on communities, absentee landlords, and how to identify different types of activities see Trigger 2003; Magness-Gardiner 1994; Faust 2003, 2005, 2012b, 159–77, and references). In the second case, the whole community resided in the building. In both cases, it must be stressed, it is likely that additional, flimsier, structures were built outside the main building, usually in an unexcavated area. Sometimes the many Persian period pits around the main structures (along with a few walls and parts of structures) are all that remained of those flimsier construction (cf., Cole 2015, 42; Faust *et al.* 2015).

The partial data available regarding the Persian period (resulting from partial excavations, partial publications of most of the sites excavated, and the lack of more problem oriented research and especially excavations) mean that any conclusion should be viewed as tentative, and that a more problem-oriented research, including field work, is needed before a more detailed analysis will be possible. We hope to pursue this line in the future, and all we can say at this stage is that it is highly likely that at least some of the discussed structures served as centers of estates.

4 Summary and conclusions

A detailed examination of the many Persian period structures that were interpreted as forts and administrative buildings against the background of the settlement data from Judah and the Negev on the one hand, and the available information on Achaemenid army and land-use policies on the other hand, strongly suggests that most of the so-called forts served as centers of estates. Each such site was probably either (1) given to a relative or "friend" of the king or the governor as an estate, or (2) settled by a community of people, probably from outside the region. In the first case, the owner probably did not stay in the estate year round, but this is from where he got his (relative) wealth, even if residing in the nearest town (Jerusalem, in the case of Yehud). Each such estate served as a centre, where the landlord stayed when he visited the place, where the overseers stayed year round with the workers (some of them at least), and where the surpluses were stored before being shipped to the centre where the estate owner lived. Other estates were settled by communities, probably in exchange for military service. Given what is known from the various textual sources (biblical, and mainly non-biblical) it is likely that many of the settlers in both the "privately" owned and the "communal" estates were people from outside the region, who were given land in remote and sparsely settled areas in order to benefit them on the one hand, but to settle these regions on the other, and increase both security and production for the empire. Given how sparse settlement was at the time, it was clearly a good locus for the creation of such estates, which were common throughout the empire. Viewed against this background, it is likely that some of these settlement were the home of some of the people we know (in Judah) as

the returnees, but there were probably similar groups elsewhere.[14] We have seen that the structures covers the entire Persian period, but their frequency grows with time, and this probably reflects the rate of estates' establishment on the one hand, and probably the immigration of population to the region on the other.[15]

The estates were situated on high places for protection, as they were located in sparsely settled areas and could attract robbers, as well as some hostility from the local population that did reside in the area, and most likely resented the newcomers which received good quality lands. At the same time, however, the sparsity of settlements in these areas meant that the estates could exploit the primary land, which made it easy for them to produce surpluses. Whatever was the exact social reality in each specific case, it is likely that many of the above-discussed buildings were centers of agricultural estates, that together with the (sparse) "regular" Persian period sites unearthed comprised the settlement system of this era. The available data is clearly in line with this suggestion, but additional structures, and especially more wide-scale, problem-oriented excavations of such sites, are needed to support it, or in order to elaborate, correct, or even dispute it.

Notes

1. Regardless of the question whether this concentration reflects an ancient reality, or results from biases that affect modern scholarship.
2. Fantalkin and Tal 2006, 182–83 are not explicit on this matter, but appear to accept Reich's suggestion, or at least the administrative nature of the site as a whole, see also Fantalkin and Tal 2012, 155-58.
3. The above list does not include all the sites that were identified in the past as Persian period forts, and is selective. Hoglund (1992, 165–205), who is partially responsible for the reinterest in the subject, attributed a Persian period date to additional structures, many of which were probably not settled at this time, e.g., el-Qul'ah [S]), or did not function as forts in the Persian period, e.g., Kh. Abu et-Twein. At el-Qul'ah (S) no Persian period whatsoever were reported (Hoglund 1992, 199–200; Kallai 1972, 165, site 9). At Kh. Abu et-Twein (Hoglund 1992, 191–97) only a limited amount of Persian pottery was unearthed, and following the excavator (Mazar 1982) it is quite clear that the building (if indeed a fort) was built in the Iron Age, and was only reused, perhaps in a different plan, in the Persian period (see extensive discussion in Faust 2012a, 237–40; see also Mazar and Wachtel 2015, 237, note 6). We will comment on this further below.
4. A recent publication (Alexandre 2015, 60) suggests that storage jars comprised some 75% of the assemblage, but does not supply an additional figures. The difference is immaterial for our purposes.
5. The site had both Iron Age and Persian period phases, but since the excavations did not reach the floors in most rooms, the excavators could not identify the plan of each phase. The overall size of the structure, however, was rougly 45 × 28 m (based on the plan on p. 161. The figures are rounded, as the plan is not completely regular, and exclude the towers). The excavators note the large percentage of Persian period imports, and the finding of 47 camel bones, indicating that the site was connected with trade.
6. Not only did Hoglund discuss sites in which no Persian period pottery was unearthed (above), but his redating of other sites to the fifth century was based only on historical reasoning, and is not supported by the archaeological data (see also Fantalkin and Tal 2006).
7. Bocher and Freund (2017) suggested recently (in a conference presentation and a published paper) that a few additional Iron Age sites continued to exist into the early Persian period. While the addition of a few tiny sites to the early Persian period list would not change the overall settlement picture, it must be stressed that their attempt to change the date of some of the sites is based on very problematic methodology, and should probably be rejected.

Bocher and Freund based their suggestion on the observation that a small number of forms unearthed in a few Iron Age farmsteads are slightly different from the typical Iron Age forms of this period, mainly in material, and claimed that the difference is chronological. The differences, however, are not only minor, but refer to a very small percentage of the assemblage, and are therefore likely to reflect localized production centres. This is supported by the concentration of the discussed sites mainly to the south of Jerusalem. Furthermore, an understanding of archaeological formation processes casts strong doubts on the logic behind the new suggestion. As noted above, the last phase of occupation is the one that produces the vast majority of the finds. If the sites under discussion would have existed in the early Persian period, most of the forms unearthed were supposed to be from this period. That no typical Persian period forms were usually unearthed suggests that even if the minor differences should be interpreted as chronological, the discussed sites exceeded the other Iron Age sites by a few years only (otherwise these forms must have been far more differentiated and far more numerous). In addition, the underlining logic behind the restudy of the material is very problematic, since it takes an assemblage and breaks into different forms, hence artificially "spreading" it across a much longer period. Taking an assemblage and treating it as it was unearthed in a survey inevitably results with skewed periods of occupation. If, for some reason, one doesn't want to attribute the minute differences to localised production centres, and opt for a chronological difference, the most that can be suggested is that the discussed sites ceased to exist not in 586 but rather in 575 BCE or the like, but not much later. Notably, as an off-shoot of the Ramat Rahel project, Bocher and Freund's study suffers from relying on the assumption that this central site was a center for the collection of taxes and that many of the small Iron Age sites were its satellites. A systematic study of the data, however, reveals that the small sites were not connected with Ramat Rahel, which at least during the Iron Age was a center of production in its own right (see Moyal and Faust 2015, and references).

8. In the coastal plain more remains of buildings are known, for example at Shiqmona, Tel Yaoz, Megadim, Dor, and Tell Abu Hawam. Most of the structures, there, however, were only partially excavated, or remained unpublished (e.g., Elgavish 1994, 82; Fischer, Roll, and Tal 2008; Broshi 1993; Stern 1995; Balensi, Herrera and Artzi 1993, and references), hence limiting our ability to reach general conclusions even in this region.

9. Since Kh. Luzifar was only surveyed, it is likely that sherds from large vessels are somewhat better represented (compare Faust and Katz 2012, 174, 179, 181), and this might have somewhat increased their percentage in the collected assemblage (tough they must have been significant to start with). At Nahal Tut a large part of the site was not excavated, and it is possible that specialized activity in the excavated areas skewed the results. Still, even if the percentage of storage jars should be somewhat decreased, it would still be very high.

10. It is possible that this figure is slightly higher because the data refer to the entire site (and not only the fortified structure) but even so the percentage is still much lower than in "real" forts.

11. The author noted (Freud 2007, 119 note 2) that the statistics relates only to the published data (and not to the complete corpus), but there is no way to calibrate the data and (with caution) we refer to the data as is.

12. Note that in a few sites in Yehud some imported sherds were found, but those were mainly body sherds, which should not be included in any statistics (as local body sherds are not counted nor reported) and, furthermore, in many sites not a single imported sherd was found, exemplifying the rarity of this pottery in Yehud (the few body sherds, and even fewer rims, uncovered in the region, only exemplify the rarity of this pottery). Detailed discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper (see recently Sandhaus and Kreimerman 2015, 267, 269). For possible Iron Age roots of this tendency, see Faust 2006a, 49–64, 2006b and references; see also Gilboa, Sharon and Bloch-Smith 2015, regarding the Israelite phase at Dor, and Faust and Katz 2017, 13, for some of the qualities of pottery in this regard.

13. There is no consensus regarding a universal density coefficient (and even whether there is one), and figures vary (e.g., Naroll 1962; Brown 1987; Ember and Ember 1995; and references). Still, whatever coefficient one wishes to use we are discussing many dozens of peoples that resided in

each structure, and sometimes perhaps even more. The comparison to Iron Age dwellings (below) only strengthen this conclusion.

14. The absence of imported pottery in sites in Yehud versus its presence in sites in the region that became Idumaea and in real forts, renders the biblical description of the returnees (to Yehud) as Judeans or Jews (the exact terminology is irrelevant for our purposes, see, e.g., Grabbe 2004; Rappoprt 2004; Berlin 2013), descendants of the exiled from Judah, very likely (i.e., even if among them there were also others, which is more than likely, the majority were probably such, and the others adopted this identity).

15. In addition to formation processes which slightly biased the data (especially this collected from surveys).

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