

An Archaeological Historiography of Khirbet et-Tell and the Ongoing Search for the Biblical City of 'Ai*

Lucas P. Petit

The following commentary, triggered by the wonderful pictures of Leo Boer (Figs 3.1–3.6), deals with Khirbet et-Tell and the search for the Biblical city of 'Ai. Not a Biblical scholar, I found myself, during the writing process, blindfolded in a huge basin filled with Biblical citations, each of them apparently equally important in the identification of the Biblical city. It was difficult studying the different opinions and suggestions when not acquainted with hardly any of the purely biblical arguments. It seems to me to be appropriate at this stage to apologize for my interfering in an almost completely Biblical dispute and for the somewhat coarse use of the data. Additionally, I may have to disappoint some readers. This synthesis will not provide a solution for the still-pending identification of ancient 'Ai, but aims to provide a view from the 'outside', from an archaeologist who admires the archaeological value of an ancient residential house with broken pottery more than the fact that it may have been inhabited by Israelites. Hopefully, it will provoke the reader to reconsider whether or not a correct identification is essential for the understanding of the intriguing occupation history of the Southern Levant.

Environmental setting

Khirbet et-Tell is situated in the highlands of the Palestinian Territories north of Jerusalem and west of Deir Dibwan. Boer's personal notes in 1953 give us an excellent description of the site's location:

'We take the main road to Ramallah and pass Tell el-Ful on our left and Tell en-Nasbeh on our right. Before passing Beitin and reaching et-Tell, we drive over the runway of the airport of Qalandiya and turn right just before reaching Ramallah. It is 7.45 pm. We are halfway between Beitin and Deir Diwan and twenty-two kilometres away from Jerusalem. The

ruins that we are planning to visit are located to the left. To get there, we need to climb the mound, which lies 850 metres above sea level. It is chilly and windy there. Et-tell means 'ruins', and is similar to the Hebrew word Ha 'Ai mentioned in the Old Testament. The ruins are located East-South-East of Bethel (2.5 kilometres) and are described as being located north of Michmas close to Bethhaven (possibly Deir Diwan) (Gen. 12:8; Josh. 8:9; 12:9; 7:2; Isa. 10:28). In the book of Joshua the place is described as a very old ruined town (8:28) and according to Nehemiah (11:31) the region itself was inhabited after the Babylonian Exile.²

Leo Boer's visit in November 1953

Boer's visit in November 1953 occurred in a period in which Khirbet et-Tell was slowly retracting itself from the centre of a heavy dispute between Biblical and non-Biblical scholars about the possible identification of the site with the biblical 'Ai. Many had tried to solve the puzzle, but failed due to too many uncertainties and knowledge gaps. But still, you can almost hear the excitement of Leo Boer in his description of climbing up the steep hill and looking over the excavated wall stumps. It was this site that was 'causing trouble for the exegetes'.

In Boer's notes, it seems clear that he intermixed the things he saw with the things he knew. Those who have visited a previously excavated site know the inherent difficulties in identifying the buildings described in their original publication. Erosion, dense vegetation and deliberate filling can change the outlook considerably. This problem was also noticed by Leo Boer. He mentioned that the excavation units were filled. However, it is not likely that all the trenches of Marquet-Krause (see below) were purposely filled, since she had wanted to return to the site in 1936. Also, the excavator Callaway, who