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TARSHISH IN THE MOUNTAINS OF LEBANON: ATTESTATIONS OF A BIBLICAL PLACE NAME

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In a recent article entitled, “Magdalūma, Migdālīm, Magdoloī, and Majādīl: The Historical Geography and Archaeology of the Magdalu (Migdāl),” I have suggested that a number of site names preserving the Arabic term *mājdal* can be identified with the locations of military observation towers constructed throughout the Levant particularly between the Middle Bronze Age and the Iron Age. It was in the course of the preparation of that study that I encountered not one but two occurrences of the famous biblical place name Tarshish (see 1 Kgs 10:22; Isa 23:1ff.; Ezek 27:12; etc.). The name has been preserved as both that of a small village located in the mountains 25 km east of Beirut at 1400 m ASL (DZ 1562.2153)¹ and as the name of the small settlement of Majdāl-Tarshish located at 1440 m ASL 2 km to the northeast of Tarshish across the Nahr el-Rhamka (DZ 1567.2173).²

My initial impression was, naturally, that both of these settlements must have been named relatively recently and that these names were simply an attempt to provide these isolated and otherwise insignificant towns with a Phoenician or more specifically a biblical cultural heritage.³ A similar phenomenon is, of course, attested in the state of Israel

¹ Aaron A. Burke, “Magdalūma, Migdālīm, Magdoloī, and Majādīl: The Historical Geography and Archaeology of the Magdalu (Migdāl),” *BASOR* (forthcoming 2007).

² Elie Wardini, *Lebanese Place-Names (Mount Lebanon and North Lebanon): A Typology of Regional Variation and Continuity* (Louvain: Peeters, 2002): 229, 266.

³ For a complete discussion of biblical references, see M. Koch, *Tarschisch und Hispanien: historisch-geographische und namenkundliche Untersuchungen zur phönizischen Kolonisation der iberischen Halbinsel* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984).

where many towns and settlements, such as Tel Aviv and Qiryat Gath, have been given place names derived from the Hebrew Bible within the last one hundred and fifty years. However, such an explanation does not adequately account for the fact that Tarshish was also a productive element in the naming of a second site located nearby.

While the occurrence of the first of these two names, had it been an isolated example, would have been intriguing, the additional attestation of Majdāl-Tarshish, which relates in a functional manner to the first place name, warranted a closer examination of the context of their occurrence. As my earlier study reveals, *mājdal* place names preserve Middle and Late Bronze Age place names with the element *magdalu* (e.g., Ugaritic), as well as Iron Age place names with the element *migdāl* (Hebrew and Phoenician). Such names appear to reveal the locations of military observation towers from these periods. In the context of the two place names in question, it can be concluded that Mājdal-Tarshish was a satellite settlement of Tarshish, and that it served most likely as its eastern observation post over the road that crosses the mountains between Beirut and the Beqa Valley.

With regards to the occupation of either of these sites or the region around them, insufficient data are at present available.⁴ The only settlements within five kilometers of either of these sites that featured any archaeological data whatsoever are either prehistoric (Paleolithic and Neolithic) or Roman. Therefore, until the specific occupational history of either of these sites is revealed it is not possible to suggest more than that the two sites in question fit a pattern of settlement particularly characteristic of the Bronze and Iron Ages.

It may be unnecessary to note that locating the legendary land of Tarshish in the mountains east of Beirut is unlikely given the indications regarding its location provided by biblical references to Tarshish. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that an older (Bronze Age) place name, which was derived from the Phoenician hinterland, was later applied (during the Iron Age) to a Phoenician colony in the west, the most logical explanation for the occurrence of this name in later biblical sources. With regards to their location, it is curious that Lebanese Tarshish and what could be identified as its “daughter” settlements were located inland from Beirut, rather than any of the other major Phoenician settlements. That Beirut is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is also a curious fact in light of its proximity to Israel and

⁴ See map 5 in Gunnar Lehmann, *Bibliographie der archäologischen Fundstellen und Surveys in Syrien und Libanon* (Berlin: Leidorf, 2002).

its prominence during the Late Bronze Age. In the absence of greater archaeological information for these two sites, the question that might be asked, therefore, is how the biblical references to Tarshish could shed light on Beirut or its colonies?