

# SAMARIA

*Its Rise and Fall.*

Countryside as  
seen from Ahab's  
capital city of  
Samaria.

BY GARY P. ARBINO

WITH THE BRIEF DESCRIPTION in 2 Kings 17:5-6, the biblical historian succinctly records the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; Assyria's army captured Israel's capital city, Samaria. Although the city continued as a provincial center under the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, it never again would be the capital of an independent Israelite kingdom. But what a capital it was! Israelite prophets and archeological investigation both speak to the city's wealth and its rich lifestyle.

First Kings 16 tells of King Omri founding Samaria, the new capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Following his victory in a civil war, Omri, who had been a military commander, ruled from the old capital, Tirzah (*Tell el-Far'ah*, north), for six years. During this time, he worked on his new city set at a site he purchased from Shemer. Recent analysis of data from excavations in the twentieth century has illustrated a complex early occupational history for the site.<sup>1</sup> Examining the archaeology and the biblical text together indicates that the site was occupied in Iron Age I (1200-1000 B.C.), abandoned, and then transferred to Shemer as a family estate.

The site, itself imposing, was an excellent military and commercial choice for a capital. The hill of Samaria rises to about 1,400 feet above sea level and dominates the surrounding countryside, including important trade routes, which it overlooks. Valleys surround it on three sides, making it defensible. Strategically located within the heart of the Northern Kingdom, Samaria controlled Israel. The one thing the site lacked was a good water supply; a stone water system was created to solve this deficiency.

As part of his overall administrative plan, Omri, with his son and successor Ahab, transformed the site into a world-class city and the nation into an international power. The city's name

would become the lasting designation for the entire territory, even to today.

Most of the excavations focusing on the Iron Age II (1000-800 B.C.) have centered on the acropolis, only a small portion of the city.<sup>2</sup> Here archaeologists have uncovered a citadel measuring about 200 by 100 yards. The citadel is a rectangular enclosure surrounded by a casemate (double) wall system. Ahab, Omri's son, reworked the walls and enlarged his father's palace. The casemate fortifications are impressive;

the masonry bears a marked similarity to the highly skilled Phoenician craftsmanship from the era. Inside the citadel were a palace, storerooms, public buildings and courtyards with rectangular pools (see 1 Kings 22:38). The citadel was decorated in the high style befitting an international capital. Hundreds of beautiful Syrian-style ivory fragments, depicting both local and Egyptian motifs and accented with gold foil, were found both at Samaria and at the Assyrian cities of Arslan

## SAMARIAN IVORIES

Although only one of these ivories was actually found at Samaria, the other two likely originally came from Samaria.

Clockwise from the top: Phoenician ivory from Nimrud depicts two seated figures; 9th–8th centuries B.C. Dated to the 8th cent. B.C., one of

the decorative ivories found at Samaria. The figure represented a palm tree.

From ancient Hadatu (now Arslan Tash, Syria). After conquering Hadatu, Assyria established a new palace there and decorated the palace's Phoenician and Aramaean furniture with ivories.



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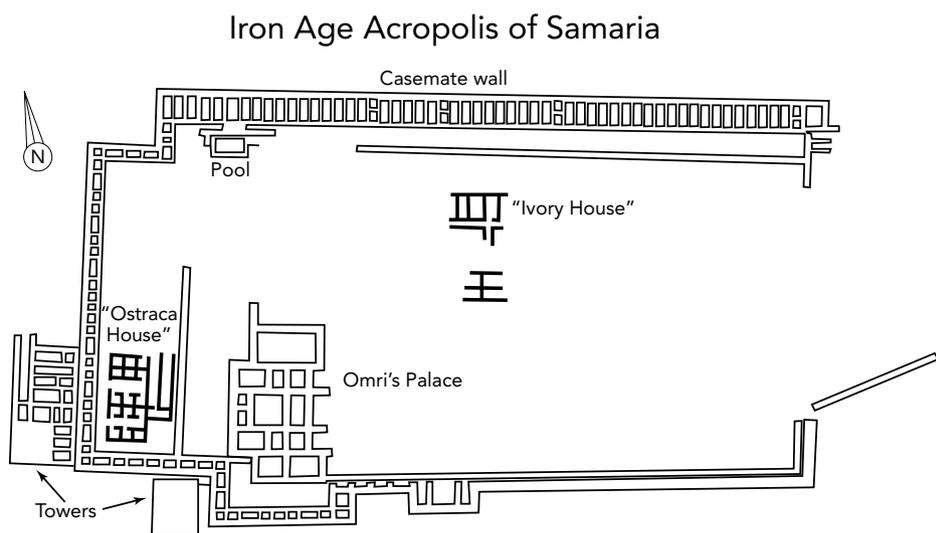


At Samaria, this staircase was originally thought to lead to Ahab's palace. Later research, though, showed it led to the temple of Augustus, built by Herod and enlarged during the reign of Septimus Severus (A.D. 193–211).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (9/26/13)

Tash and Nimrud, where they were probably taken as spoils when Samaria was captured late in the eighth century. First Kings 22:39 and Amos 6:4 mention this lavish decoration, which had become a symbol of the nobility's utter lack of compassion for and abuse of the poor. While international connections and commerce do not necessitate religious infidelity, at Samaria they were part of the overall situation that the biblical writers chastised. Even the dishes were opulent. A beautiful and delicate high-quality red-burnished pottery is known as "Samaria ware" because archaeologists first found it in this city. Although they later found this same pottery in other cities, the finest pieces were in ancient Samaria.

The grandness of the place was, sadly, paralleled by a decline in absolute allegiance to Yahweh. Interestingly, the biblical text never says Omri participated in the worship of Baal specifically, something stated for most all later members of the dynasty (1 Kings 16:31; 22:53); yet his policies and treaties clearly paved the way for this to become a "legal" religion in Israel. Omri is, however, described by the



biblical author's negative formula, that he "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (1 Kings 16:25, RSV), attesting to his continued support for the shrines at Dan and Bethel. Omri's son Ahab built a Baal temple in Samaria for his new Phoenician queen, Jezebel, who became the local patron of the religion (v. 32). As the Book of First Kings demonstrates at length, Ahab's Samaria was utterly syncretistic: a mixture of worship of Yahweh, Baal, and Asherah (vv. 31-33; 18:19; 21:27-29). But even in this state God did not abandon the city;

2 Kings 6-7 records that an Aramean siege of the city was miraculously foiled at Elisha's intervention.

Excavators recovered some 63 potsherds with writing on them (known as ostraca) from the citadel of Samaria. These record shipments of oil and wine and seem to be tax receipts. As evidenced by the types of names found on these documents, they also clearly reflect the syncretistic nature of the population of Samaria during Iron Age II: the names honored both Yahweh and Baal.



Archaeology shows that following his purge and removal of the Omride rulers, King Jehu also worked on building Samaria. Jehu too continued the cosmopolitan quality of the capital. While Jehu is credited with the removal of Baal worship (and turning the Baal temple into a latrine), the biblical writer finally assigns to Jehu the same negative evaluation he gave to Omri (2 Kings 10:28-36). Even during Jehu's reign, Samaria remained syncretistic.

Samaria reached its zenith during Jeroboam II's long and powerful reign (782-753 B.C.; 2 Kings 14:23-29). Against this important king, his policies, and the resultant corrupt society, all centered in Samaria, Amos directed much of his prophetic activity.

Over the course of about 150 years, the biblical writers saw the city of Samaria as the heart of corruption and idolatrous infidelity to Yahweh. This is the charge leveled against Samaria in

the scathing indictment in 2 Kings 17. Of course, the writer of Kings was not alone in denouncing Samaria as the focus of Israel gone bad. Writing in the last years of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah all spoke of the moral and spiritual decay and decadence of Samaria and God's judgment in the form of the advancing Assyrian armies.

Assyria did come. Over the course of more than a decade, Assyria chipped away at the Northern Kingdom, finally capturing the capital. Comparisons of the Assyrian documents and archaeological evidence with the biblical record have resulted in ongoing scholarly debates in the academic community about the details of Assyria taking Samaria.<sup>3</sup> What is now clear is that Samaria was not destroyed, but by 720 B.C. was in Assyrian hands. Much of Samaria's population, especially the nobility and a contingent of the Israelite chariot corps, had been deported to other parts of the empire. New peoples were moved in their place. Second Kings 17:24-41 records how the Assyrian government worked to keep the local religious system in place, returning Israelite priests to Samaria. Yet the biblical writer concludes by pointing out that the new inhabitants

of Samaria worshiped both Yahweh and the gods of their homelands.

According to later biblical texts such as Ezra and Nehemiah, this religious syncretism, along with continued international influence and the mixing of Israelite bloodlines, formed the basis for the tension between those of the north, later known as "Samaritans," and those from Judah, later known as "Jews." This complex situation comes to full flower by the time of Jesus and is reflected in the New Testament. **B**

1. Ron Tappy, "Samaria" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers, vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 463-67; Nahman Avigad, "Samaria (City)" in *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern, vol. 4 (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1993), 1300-1310.

2. See Avigad, 1300-1310; and also James D. Purvis, "Samaria (City)" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:914-21.

3. Ron E. Tappy, "The Final Years of Israelite Samaria: Toward a Dialogue Between Texts and Archaeology," in "Up to the Gates of Ekron": *Essays on the Archaeology and History of the Eastern Mediterranean in Honor of Seymour Gitin*, ed. in chief Sidnie White Crawford (Jerusalem: The W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and The Israel Exploration Society, 2007), 258-79.

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