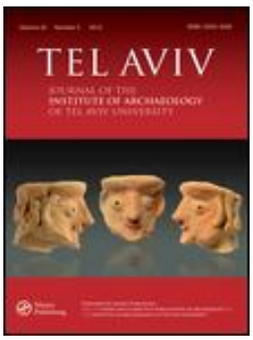

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Lily Singer-Avitz

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The Date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud: A Rejoinder

Lily Singer-Avitz
Tel Aviv University

In a recent issue of this journal, Freud (2008), Finkelstein and Piasetzky (2008), and Na'aman and Lissovsky (2008) responded to my conclusions regarding the date of the pottery assemblage and the historical interpretation of Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Singer-Avitz 2006). In this rejoinder I wish to address some of their comments.

KEYWORDS Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Iron Age pottery, Radiocarbon dating, Iron Age chronology

In an article published in this journal (Singer-Avitz 2006), I reexamined the date of the pottery assemblage from the single-stratum site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. Based on newly-studied pottery evidence from well-stratified Judahite sites, I argued that the date of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud assemblage is later than the generally accepted date (as expressed by Ayalon 1985,1995), and should be assigned to the later part of the Iron IIB period, at the end of the 8th century BCE. A detailed analysis of the pottery types indicates that the bulk of the assemblage consists of Judahite forms and that it shows a marked influence of western Negev and southern Coastal Plain sites, while Phoenician and/or northern forms are not common. Following Na'aman (2001: 267–268), who proposed that the Kadesh Barnea fortress was built as part of Assyrian activity in the peripheral regions of the empire, I suggested that the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud (which is similar in plan and date to Kadesh Barnea) may also have been initiated by the Assyrians, forming part of their effort to control the desert routes and the desert population.

In a recent issue of *Tel Aviv* several scholars related to my article (Freud 2008; Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008; Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008). In what follows I will address some of their comments.

The pottery

Freud (2008) supports Ayalon's original dating of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud pottery (1985, 1995). She argues that Kuntillet ʿAjrud "should be dated between the mid-9th and first half of the

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8th century BCE" (Freud 2008: 172), and that the site "ceased to exist *prior* to the end of Lachish Level III, Beersheba Stratum II and Arad Stratum VIII" (*ibid.*: 172).

Freud accepts that the Kuntillet ʿAjrud assemblage "contains parallels to strata such as Lachish Level III, Beersheba Stratum II and Arad Strata X–VIII, all of which date to the late 8th century" (*ibid.*: 169), but she also compares pottery types from Kuntillet ʿAjrud to forms from earlier strata such as Lachish Levels V–IV, Tel Batash Stratum IV and Arad Stratum XI. Many of these comparisons are wrong. The following are six examples:

(1) Freud compares several bowls from Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Ayalon 1995: Fig. 3: 7, 8 and 9, 10) to Bowl Types B-26 and B-32 from Tel Batash, and states that Bowl Type B-26 appears there mainly in Stratum IV (Freud 2008: 170). However, both bowl types from Tel Batash are not comparable to the Kuntillet ʿAjrud bowls since they are of different types. Furthermore, Bowl Type B-26 at Tel Batash is a typical Iron IIA period item, characterized by red, hand-burnished slip, and by several grooves under the exterior of the rim. This bowl type does not continue into the Iron IIB and is absent at Kuntillet ʿAjrud.

(2) Freud argues (*ibid.*: 169) that I failed to deal with some bowl sherds presented by Ayalon (1995: Fig. 3: 13–14). Nearly all the bowls that Freud compares to these bowl sherds come from Iron IIB strata such as Lachish Level III and Megiddo Level H-3. The earlier comparisons that she mentions are from Tel Batash Stratum IV. As Freud rightly notes, the comparisons from Tel Batash are hand-burnished whereas at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, not a single bowl sherd is hand-burnished. It is therefore clear that these comparisons are erroneous.

(3) Freud (2008: 170) cites three sherds from Kadesh Barnea that are earlier than the Iron IIB period, i.e., from Substrata 4 and 3c. Two of these sherds originated in the fills of Substratum 3c (Bernick-Greenberg 2007: Fig. 11.27: 3, 14) and one in Substratum 4 (Bernick-Greenberg 2007: Fig.11.1: 2). All the other comparisons from Kadesh Barnea cited by Freud are from the pottery assemblages of Substrata 3b–a, which are similar to the Lachish III horizon and were dated by the excavators to the second half of the 8th century BCE (Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007: 12).[1]

(4) Freud (2008: 170) states that I erroneously classified the bowl published in Ayalon 1995: Fig. 3: 6 and two other bowls published by him (Fig. 3: 4–5) as belonging to the same vessel type. All three bowls are similar to one another: They are open, straight-walled and have a ring-base. This bowl type is very popular in Iron IIB strata at Judahite sites (for similar bowls from Jerusalem, Arad and Tel ʿEton, see Ayalon 1995: 145). Petrographic analyses have indicated that their origins are in the northwestern Negev (Singer-Avitz 2006: 198, Fig. 1: 2). This type cannot be defined as "Samaritan" (Ayalon 1995: 145), or "Samaria Ware" as labelled by Freud (2008: 170).

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[1] The Kadesh Barnea report appeared after the publication of my earlier paper on Kuntillet ʿAjrud. It is noteworthy that at both sites *lmlk* storage jars are entirely missing.

(5) Freud compares a barrel-shaped krater from Kuntillet ʿAjrud, which is probably hand-burnished,[2] to various krater types from Lachish Levels V–IV and Arad Stratum XI (Freud 2008: 170). She emphasizes the surface treatment of the kraters but ignores their forms, which are entirely different. In principle Freud is correct in stating that hand-burnish is more common in strata of the Iron IIA (*ibid.*: 170). However, this observation is correct with regard to open vessels such as bowls and open kraters, but is not a rule with regard to closed vessels. In fact, Freud herself cited a closed krater from Yokneʿam Stratum XII, dated to the Iron IIB period, which is hand-burnished (*ibid.*: 170), and there are numerous other examples at other sites. Justifiably, Ayalon had compared this krater sherd to kraters from Tel Beersheba Stratum II and Ashdod Stratum VII, both dated to the Iron IIB (Ayalon 1995: 153–155).

(6) Freud discusses at length the stepped-rim cooking-pots, citing comparisons from many sites (Freud 2008: 170–171). Indeed, this cooking-pot type is well known in Iron IIB strata (but not earlier) throughout the country (see also Mazar 1995: 106). As a matter of fact, this datum does not contradict my view, and it is unclear why Freud included it in her comments.

Freud concludes that in checking the parallels between Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Arad, the comparisons to items found in Strata XI and X–IX are more evident than the parallels to items retrieved from Stratum VIII (Freud 2008: 172). This statement is wrong. The pottery assemblages of Arad Strata X–VIII are similar to one another and differences between them can hardly be discerned, whereas they all differ from the Stratum XI assemblage (see also Mazar and Netzer 1986; Singer-Avitz 2002; Zimhoni 1997: 203–207). Therefore it would be wrong to connect the Stratum XI pottery to that of Strata X–IX and disconnect the pottery of the latter strata from that of Stratum VIII.

It is also inaccurate to state that "the majority of vessels prevalent at Kuntillet ʿAjrud . . . have parallels in both late Iron IIA and Iron IIB strata (9th and 8th century BCE)" (Freud 2008: 172). It is true that several vessel types that are known in the Iron IIA continue to appear during the Iron IIB period (sometimes with typological variations). I have noted it with regard to some vessel types in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud assemblage, such as lamps with a rounded base, pithoi and storage jars with a carinated shoulder (Singer-Avitz 2006: 201, 202, 203 respectively). However, most vessel types present in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud assemblage are not known in the Iron IIA. In fact, it is noticeable that most comparisons that Ayalon himself refers to are from strata dated to the Iron IIB and not the Iron IIA.

Freud also argues that in aiming at lowering the date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud, I rely on vessel types that appear in small quantities (Freud 2008: 170). The opposite, however, is correct. As reported by Ayalon (1995: 187, Table 1) the Kuntillet ʿAjrud excavations yielded 76 whole vessels. I have discussed all of these vessels, which comprise 29 types (Singer-Avitz 2006: 198). Freud, on the other hand, treats only 11 types.

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[2] In the drawing the krater is shown as hand-burnished while in the figure description it is described as "red slip".

The above arguments raise a question of methodology with regard to the dating of pottery assemblages. An archaeological assemblage can be defined as "an associated set of contemporary artefact-types" which "occur together in definite contemporary association with one another" (Clarke 1968: 230). Typological classification and definition of the vessels in the assemblage should be precise and consistent in order that the "type" will not match a wide range of vessels of different forms. Misclassification renders comparative studies almost impossible. Every vessel type has a certain life span; therefore its duration does not necessarily parallel that of other vessels in the same assemblage. This notion is supported by ethnoarchaeological investigations that have focused on the longevity of pottery vessels, that is, how long a vessel is used before being damaged or broken and discarded. It turned out that many factors affect breakage rates and that longevity of vessels ranges between several months up to two to ten or even fifteen years (to cite only a few studies: David 1972; DeBoer 1974; DeBoer and Lathrap 1979; Nelson 1991). Therefore, dating a pottery assemblage should be based on examination and analysis of all the assemblage components and not on selected vessel types.

Since pottery vessels were in use for a short period of time, it is wrong to assume that some vessels are from the end of the stratum, while others are from the beginning. In this connection we cite Albright (1943: 2, note 1), who stated that:

> It is a fundamental principle of stratigraphy, sometimes disregarded by eminent archaeologists, that most of the intact or reparable pottery from a given stratum belongs to the last period before destruction which brought an end to the stratum in question. The range of such pottery may, accordingly, be fixed as a rule within ten or twenty years.

Albright added that "the pottery from a given stratum tends to belong to the end of the period in question and cannot be distributed freely through its duration" (*ibid*.: 6, note 2).

At Kuntillet ʿAjrud, as at all other Iron IIB sites, there are some pottery types that appear already in the Iron IIA period. Nevertheless, it is clear that the *assemblage* should be dated to the Iron IIB. The interesting question is when during the Iron IIB period Kuntillet ʿAjrud existed.

In Judah, the pottery horizons of Lachish Levels IV and III are well defined: The Lachish IV horizon represents the late Iron IIA and is dated to the 9th century BCE (Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2004; Zimhoni 2004a) and the Lachish III horizon represents the Iron IIB phase and dates to the 8th century BCE (Zimhoni 2004b). Since pottery assemblages represent the last decades of the stratum's life, there is a gap in our knowledge concerning the pottery forms that were in use between the end of Level IV and the final phase of Level III. Thus, we are not familiar with the pottery types dating to the beginning of Level III at Lachish. Yet, at Arad (Strata X–VIII) and at Tel Beersheba (Strata III–II), the stratigraphic sequence is denser than that of Lachish; Strata X–IX at Arad and Stratum III at Tel Beersheba should be contemporaneous with the beginning of Level III at Lachish. Hence Arad X–VIII and Beersheba III–II may help us to define typological developments *during* the Iron IIB.

As discussed elsewhere (Singer-Avitz 2002: 159–160), only a few typological differences can be discerned between the pottery assemblages of Arad Strata X–VIII. At Tel Beersheba, however, there are significant differences between the pottery of Strata III and II. Most pottery types appear in both strata, but only in Stratum II do vessels appear that bear characteristics of the Kingdom of Israel as well as vessels with Phoenician characteristics (Singer-Avitz forthcoming). At Kuntillet ʿAjrud there are several vessels that bear these characteristics. This, too, hints at the late Iron IIB date of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud pottery assemblage.

Radiocarbon dating

Based on 15 ^{14}C samples from Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Segal (1995: 212) reached the conclusion that the site was occupied "from the end of the 9th to the beginning of the 8th century BCE". Meshel, Carmi and Segal stated that the results "match well with the archaeological estimate of the age to ca. 800 BCE" (1995: 211). Using the same data and a new quantitative method, Finkelstein and Piasetzky argue that they can provide a reasonably accurate date for both the construction and abandonment of the site (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008: 176).

Finkelstein and Piasetzky divide the radiocarbon readings into two groups, interpreting the first as originating from the wood used in the construction of the site and the second one as used in the end-phase of its activity (2008: 178). The calibrated average date for the first group (i.e., date of construction) is 818–801 BCE, and for the second, later group (i.e., the end of the site) is 754–544 BCE (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008: 178). Following historical and biblical considerations, they relate the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud to the trade initiative of Hazael or to the recovery of Israel during the reign of Joash (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008: 182). They conclude that the ^{14}C data together with historical considerations indicate that the site functioned between ca. 795 and 730/720 BCE (*ibid.*: 2008: 184).

I wish to comment on three aspects related to Finkelstein and Piasetzky's interpretation of the radiocarbon data for Kuntillet ʿAjrud:

(1) Most of the ^{14}C samples from Kuntillet ʿAjrud were taken from wood samples, identified as Tamarisk, a tree with a lifespan of 150 years and more (Waisel and Alon 1970: 96). As we do not know if the wood samples were taken from the inner rings of the tree or from the outer ones, any calculation of precise dates based on them is unreliable and can lead to a significant error.

(2) Most of the wood samples from Kuntillet ʿAjrud originated in two loci: Nos. 8 and 256 (Segal 1995: Table 1). These loci are located next to each other and form parts of a single unit—the southern storage room (see plan at Ayalon 1995: Fig. 2). It seems that this space was divided by the excavator into several loci solely for technical reasons. There is no archaeological justification to divide the samples from this unit into two groups, since they mostly originated from the wood beams used to support and strengthen the roof and the walls (Segal 1995: 208). All the beams were used

to construct the walls, and many of them could even have originated from a single tree,[3] while none appears to represent material used in the end-phase of the site's existence as Finkelstein and Piasetzky suggest (2008: 178). The two groups do not necessarily indicate a time difference in the life-time of the site; rather they may indicate samples that were taken from the inner and outer rings of the same tree.

(3) Due to a flat part of the calibration curve, the abandonment of Kuntillet ʿAjrud could be dated to a broad range of 754–544 BCE. Following "broader historical consideration" Finkelstein and Piasetzky conclude that the site was abandoned in 730/720 BCE (*ibid.*: 183–184). Their conclusions are based on contradictory assumptions. On the one hand they argue that under Assyrian domination, the Edom–Beersheba Valley route replaced the Darb el-Ghazza as the main thoroughfare for Arabian goods and that this was the reason for the desertion of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. On the other hand they claim that the fort of Kadesh Barnea, which—as they assume—served the Assyrian interests in the area, was constructed after the abandonment of Kuntillet ʿAjrud (*ibid.*: 183–184 and note 3). If the Assyrians replaced the old route with a new one, why did they construct the Kadesh Barnea fort? Whatever the interpretation may be, it is clear that the Stratum 3 pottery assemblage at Kadesh Barnea is very similar to that at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, and it is reasonable to assume that both sites were contemporaneous and were even abandoned at the same time.

The circumstances of the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud

Na'aman and Lissovsky suggested that the enclosure at Kuntillet ʿAjrud was built in this particular place due to a sacred tree or a sacred grove that grew in its vicinity. Likewise, they raise the possibility that the site was abandoned as a result of the demise of this sacred tree or grove, which caused the site to lose its attraction (Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008). This conjecture can neither be verified nor contradicted (*ibid.*: 190). I therefore wish to restrict myself to several archaeological and historical comments raised in their article.

(1) Na'aman and Lissovsky do not accept my suggestion that Kuntillet ʿAjrud served as a way station (they use the term "caravanserai"), built as part of Assyrian activity in the peripheral regions of the Assyrian empire. They further state that the comparison between Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Kadesh Barnea and Tell el-Kheleifeh is misleading (2008: 187). To support this assertion Na'aman and Lissovsky argue that Kuntillet ʿAjrud is located off the main trade road of the Darb el-Ghazza, and that therefore it is unsuited for supervising the passing caravans (2008: 187, 201).

Ancient roads in desert areas were not properly laid out, and therefore scholars attempt to reconstruct them on the basis of topographical, archaeological and textual considerations. In Sinai, where the archaeological evidence is meagre, it is

[3] Significantly, most samples, which were identified by Nili Liphschitz (Meshel, Carmi and Segal 1995: 210), are of Tamarix x5 wood, while only one sample which originates from surface (RT-1832) is of Tamarix x4 (Segal 1995: Table 1).

difficult to determine the exact course of the ancient routes. This includes the Darb el-Ghazza—one of the main ancient thoroughfares that led from the Arabian Desert to the Gulf of Eilat and to the southern Coastal Plain. Meshel (1978) was aware of the fact that Kuntillet ʿAjrud is situated some 10 km west of the Darb el-Ghazza and assumed that the location of the site was determined by the adjacent wells and by the crossroads of the Darb el-Ghazza and Wadi Quraiya—the latter being a natural west to east route. Meshel added that Kadesh Barnea, too, is not situated directly on the Darb el-Ghazza (Meshel 2000: 103). On the other hand, Ilan, when trying to reconstruct the course of the Darb el-Ghazza, concluded that both Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Kadesh Barnea are located along the route (Ilan 1980: 62). Significantly, several years ago Na'aman stated that Kuntillet ʿAjrud had been built as a way station for caravans along the Darb el-Ghazza (Na'aman 1985: 215–216). He later specified that though the site is located 15 km west of Darb el-Ghazza, it had served as a centre for caravans passing on the way to the Gulf of Eilat (Na'aman 1993: 232). With the absence of sufficient data it is difficult to decide this issue. However, we can safely assume that both sites, located at important desert water sources, were associated with this important desert road.

(2) The ground-plan of the Kadesh Barnea fortress resembles that of Structure A at Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Cohen and Cohen-Amin 2004: 197; Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007: 12; Hadley 2000: 110) as well as that of Tell el-Kheleifeh, although the Kadesh Barnea and Tell el-Kheleifeh complexes are much larger. As all three sites are (a) located along the main trade route; (b) dated to the same period; and (c) based on similar ground-plans, why should one accept Na'aman's notion (2001: 267–268) that Kadesh Barnea and Tell el-Kheleifeh were built as part of Assyrian activity in the peripheral regions of the empire, and yet exclude Kuntillet ʿAjrud from this logic?

(3) Na'aman and Lissovsky suggest attributing the initiative to construct the building at Kuntillet ʿAjrud to Jeroboam II, before the arrival of the Assyrians in southern Palestine (2008: 201). They support their proposal by comparing the construction of the remote site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud by an Israelite king to the establishment of three military-commercial centres by Ashurnaṣirpal II in places located far-away from his kingdom (2008: 201, note 10). The Assyrian phenomenon of establishing military/administrative centres far from their homeland (mainly for economic purposes) is known from the days of Ashurnaṣirpal II, and later on during the reigns of Shalmaneser III (Tadmor 1975: 38), Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II (Na'aman 1979, 1995; Oren 1993). However, there is no evidence for the proposal that this Assyrian policy was adopted—and only in a single case—by one of the kings of Israel.

Na'aman and Lissovsky are right when they state that "the exact circumstances in which a . . . king constructed the building . . . in this remote place are open to various scenarios, none of which can be verified with any degree of certainty" (2008: 201). However, if we accept Na'aman's idea that Kadesh Barnea and Tell el-Kheleifeh were built as part of Assyrian activity in the peripheral regions of the Assyrian empire (2001: 267–268), then

the foundation of Kuntillet ʿAjrud, too, could well have been connected to this scheme of construction. Finally, it should be noted that Na'aman and Lissovsky (2008: 201) accept the conclusion that the Kuntillet ʿAjrud pottery belongs to the Iron IIB period and is similar to that of Lachish III and Tel Beersheba II. However, they are not convinced that the three strata are contemporaneous. A detailed explanation why the Kuntillet ʿAjrud assemblage should be dated to the end of this period is given above.

To summarize this rejoinder, it appears to me that my conclusions with regard to Kuntillet ʿAjrud stand and should not be altered to concur with the arguments presented by the above scholars. The Kuntillet ʿAjrud pottery assemblage should be considered parallel to those of Beersheba II and Lachish III, and Kuntillet ʿAjrud should be regarded as a way station along the trade route from Eilat to the Mediterranean coast, founded probably as a result of Assyrian initiative and abandoned at the end of the 8th century BCE.

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