



2013

Has Olishem Been Discovered?

John Gee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Gee, John (2013) "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 22 : No. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol22/iss2/10>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Has Olishem Been Discovered?

Author(s) John Gee

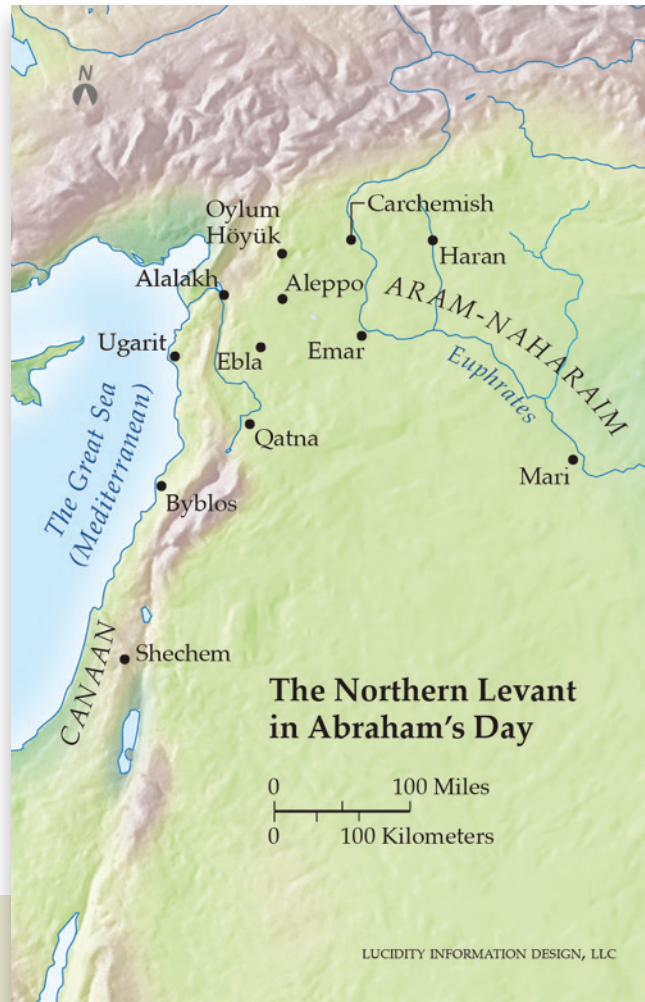
Reference *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 104-7.

ISSN 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

Abstract News reports from 2013 identify the site of Oylum Höyük with both the city of Abraham and the ancient city of Ulišum. The latter has been identified with the Olishem of Abraham 1:10. While the preliminary reports are encouraging, the evidence upon which the archaeologists base their identifications has not yet been published. So while there is nothing against the proposed identifications, they are not proven either.

HAS OLISHEM BEEN DISCOVERED?

JOHN GEE



It is possible that the ruins at Oylum Höyük are associated with Abraham's Olishem. Bob Cronan, Lucidity Info Design, LLC.

FROM THE EDITOR:

Over the years, some LDS scholars, including yours truly, and a few non-LDS scholars have proposed that the "Ur of the Chaldees," of Abraham is to be located in the northern Levant, not southern Mesopotamia. There is as of today no decisive evidence, though, that would force this conclusion. But then, neither is there for the southern candidate. Therefore, whenever new assertions are made, no matter how weak, I have thought our readers may find these claims of interest. John Gee presents here one of the latest assertions, tenuous and no doubt premature though it may be, and explains how it fits into the northern Levant model for Ur of the Chaldees.

On 16 August 2013, a report appeared in the Turkish news service Anadolu Agency in which Turkish archaeologists claim to have discovered the city of Abraham near Kilis in Turkey.¹ The news report claims that “new archaeological excavations have revealed traces of Prophet Abraham’s stay in the vicinity, as well as a treasure from Alexander the Great.”² The report cites as its authority Atilla Engin, an associate professor in the Archaeology Department of Cumhuriyet University. The report does not note that Professor Engin and his dig are associated with the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut and the University of Liverpool in England³ nor that excavations have been proceeding for over twenty years. Professor Engin is reported to have said that “according to a papyrus document from the Iron Age, a lost city which we have found in the region is where the Prophet Abraham lived. It will make great contributions to the region and the country’s tourism.”⁴

The press release continues: “In terms of its size, the Oylum tumulus is one of the largest in Turkey, but more importantly, we are here because it was a significant kingdom in the Bronze Age. Cuneiform documents and seal stamps of Hittite kings obtained during three excavation seasons prove to us that this area was the center of a kingdom. We think that this place is the ancient city of Ullis. Documents from 3,000 B.C. show that this city was very important. But of course we need more documents and findings to prove it. We are still working on it.”⁵ “The name of Ullis is mentioned in ancient Akat documents. It matches with the name mentioned in Hittite documents. In the papyrus documents, this city is said to be the city where the Prophet Abraham had lived. In the Ullis plain, there is a center, which is related to a name, Abraam, but this center was sought in the eastern Mediterranean. We have reached important information about it, too.”⁶ All this tantalizing information surfaces from a press report. We examine the report’s conclusions in light of other available information.

The news report has apparently been translated from Turkish, though not necessarily into the most felicitous English. For example, the “Akat documents” seem to be Akkadian documents. An inscription of the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin says that he conquered Ebla and “Ulišim.” The latter name is often normalized to a hypothetical Neo-Assyrian

nominative: Ulišu (or Ulishu), which, through further modification, must be the Ullis mentioned in the report.

The site in question, Oylum Höyük, is located just a few miles east of the city of Kilis. Oylum (which is the name of the modern town around the tell) is about thirty-five miles north of Aleppo and only two miles from the border between Syria and Turkey. The site has been more or less continually occupied from Chalcolithic times to the present.

Being a major city in the general region of Ebla is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for this to be the site of Ulišum.

A 2012 report on the Early Bronze (3300–2000 BC) and Middle Bronze (2000–1600 BC) Age levels and a surface survey of the site are perhaps more modest and detailed than the news reports. The site is the largest archaeological site of the Kilis plain during the Early Bronze and Middle Bronze periods.⁷ Indeed it is “one of the largest settlement mounds in Southern Turkey and dominates the plain of Kilis.”⁸ So, “according to its strategic location and imposing size, Oylum Höyük must be regarded as the centre of the Kilis Plain and the adjacent lands in modern Syria during the Bronze Age.”⁹ It was the major city or town of the area and almost twice the size of the next largest site in the Kilis Plain.¹⁰ Thirty-eight Middle Bronze Age sites are known in the Kilis Plain north of the Qoueiq River.¹¹ For those proposing that it is the site of Ulišum mentioned in the Naram-Sin inscription, being a major city in the general region of Ebla is a necessary but not a sufficient condition.

Another necessary condition for identification with Naram-Sin’s Ulišum is a destruction layer in the Early Bronze IV period. “The building layer ended in a conflagration that destroyed most of the walls, and left hardly any intact inventory in the rooms except for ground stone implements such as querns.”¹² The city had burned to the ground and was abandoned until the Middle Bronze II period.¹³

The site was surrounded by a fortification wall, attributable to the Bronze Age, built of “huge irregular basalt blocks” that are comparable to “other Bronze Age sites in Northern Syria west of the Euphrates.”¹⁴ The wall is about 50 meters from the mound and enclosed part of the valley.¹⁵ Another

Middle Bronze Age fortification wall was higher up the slope.¹⁶ Contemporary sites in the Habur region, such as Tell Chuera and Tell Beydar, also have upper and lower citadels that are “typical of many of the northern Syrian centers.”¹⁷ Despite the fortification walls, the city seems to have been destroyed twice during Middle Bronze II times.

Oylum Höyük is the largest site in the Kilis plain and clearly dominated the whole plain in the Middle Bronze Age.

One of the features of the Middle Bronze Age city is a form of plumbing in which “ceramic pipes laid perpendicular to the walls served as water drains.”¹⁸ This is a step up from most sites in northern Syria, which used stone channels.¹⁹ Despite these technological improvements, the area seems to have been a bit poorer,²⁰ which might account for the use of less-expensive ceramic rather than stone.

One of the striking features of the Middle Bronze Age city is that people were buried “hidden under the floors, or integrated in the walls.”²¹ This feature, however, is typical for Middle Bronze Age sites in northern Syria where “burials under house floors were common.”²²

Excavations are ongoing, and “the excavated part represents only a miniscule aperture, when compared to the mound at large.”²³ The evidence from the Bronze Age “remains partly patchy and includes gaps.”²⁴

The recent excavation report says that “no radiocarbon dates are available, neither exist textual data to determine the historical importance of Oylum.”²⁵ This seems to contradict the news report. Although the publication date for the report is 2012, the information may not reflect finds from even a couple of years before that. Tablets in Old Babylonian script were found in the 2011 excavation season in the Middle Bronze I level.²⁶ Typically, there can be a ten-year lag between the discovery of an inscription and the publication of the inscription.

Oylum Höyük is the largest site in the Kilis plain and clearly dominated the whole plain in the Middle Bronze Age. The site would explain the wording in the Book of Abraham that “Potiphar’s Hill [was] at the head of the plain of Olishem” (Abraham 1:10).

Olishem (phonetically similar to Ulišum) is mentioned in this scripture only because the whole plains took their name from the city; apparently Ur was located in the plains, but the text never says that Abraham was at Olishem. Nothing precludes this site from being Abraham’s Olishem, but nothing requires it to be either. Ur should be in the same plain and about five to twenty miles from Olishem.

We have two pieces of inscriptional evidence for Ulišum. The earliest comes from a record of conquests of Naram-Sin, who was a ruler in Babylon during the Akkadian period (2254–2218 BC), where Ulišum is listed as being in the general area of Ebla and near the Mediterranean Sea.²⁷ The second is in execration texts from Egypt during the reigns of Sesostri I²⁸ and Sesostri III.²⁹ While the execration texts from the reign of Sesostri I seem random, the texts from the reign of Sesostri III follow the coast from north to south with incursions inland following routes of travel. Ulišum comes in the following sequence: Ebla (*ybzj*), Ridu (*ryti*),³⁰ and Ulišum (*3wš3mm*).³¹ This sequence would place Olishem northward of Ebla (Tell-Mardikh) by two major Middle Bronze II cities. Oylum Höyük is in the correct vicinity for Ulišum.

Scholars dated the papyrus mentioned in the news article to the Iron Age, which puts it much later than Abraham. Without archaeological context or content of the papyrus to judge, it is difficult to know what to make of the claim.

If indeed tablets in Hittite from the site identify it as Ullis, then it is probably the Ulišum that Naram-Sin attacked and is a likely candidate for Olishem. If Oylum Höyük is Olishem, then Ur of the Chaldees should be one of the dozens of Middle Bronze II sites in the Kilis plain. We await further discoveries and publications. At present, given the many uncertainties, we can regard this identification as promising but not proven. ■



John Gee is a senior research fellow and the William (Bill) Gay Research Professor at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University and chair of the Egyptology and Ancient Israel section of the Society of Biblical Literature. He is the author of numerous articles on Egyptology and has edited several books and journals.

NOTES

1. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/prophet-abrahams-lost-city-found-in-turkeys-kilis.aspx?pageID=238&newsID=52591&NewsCatID=375>, accessed 4 September 2013.
2. See note 1.
3. <http://www.dainst.org/de/project/t%C3%BCrkei-oylum-h%C3%B6y%C3%BCk?ft=all>, accessed 4 September 2013.
4. See note 1.
5. See note 1.
6. See note 1.
7. Atilla Engin and Barbara Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," in *Looking North: The Socioeconomic Dynamics of Northern Mesopotamian and Anatolian Regions during the Late Third and Early Second Millennium BC*, ed. Nicola Laneri, Peter Pfälzner, and Stefano Valentini (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 93-104.
8. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 93.
9. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 94.
10. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 98.
11. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 99. Only twenty-nine are listed on pages 99-100.
12. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 95.
13. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 95-96.
14. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 94.
15. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 94.
16. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 94-95.
17. Mark W. Chavalas, "Syria and Northern Mesopotamia to the End of the Third Millennium BCE," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 135-36.
18. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 96.
19. Peter M. G. Akkermans and Glenn M. Schwartz, *The Archaeology of Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 312.
20. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 97.
21. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 96.
22. Akkermans and Schwartz, *The Archaeology of Syria*, 312.
23. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 96.
24. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plains," 94.
25. Engin and Helwig, "The EB-MB Transition in the Kilis Plain," 94.
26. See Engin Özgen, Atilla Engin, Bora Uysal, H. Kübra Ensert, Filiz Ay Şafak, and Aydoğan Bozkurt, "Oylum Höyük, 2011," *Kazi Sonuçları Toplantısı* 34/1 (2012): 324, and 329 Resim 2.
27. Naram-Sin b 5.2.13 (=UET I 275.2.13), in Hans Hirsch, "Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 20 (1963): 74; English translation in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 1:52-53. For the phonetics, see John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 75-76, 92-93n113.
28. Kurt Sethe, *Die Ächtung feindlicher Fürsten, Völker und Dinge auf altägyptischen Tongefäßscherben des Mittleren Reiches*, Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-historische Klasse 1926, no. 5 (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1926), 38, table 12 b5. For the date of the texts, see Georges Posener, "Ächtungstexte," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975-89), 1:68.
29. Georges Posener, *Princes et pays d'Asie et de Nubie* (Bruxelles: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1940), 86.
30. Alfonso Archi, Paola Piacentini, and Francesco Pomponio, *I nomi di luogo dei testi di Ebla* (Roma: Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria, 1993), 340, 416; Marco Bonechi, *I nomi geografici dei testi di Ebla* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1993), 222, 276; John Gee, "Overlooked Evidence for Sesostris III's Foreign Policy," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 41 (2004): 30.
31. Many have sought to read this toponym as Jerusalem. This has phonetic problems and does not match the trajectory of the routes in the execration lists. For the phonetic problems, see Gee and Ricks, "Historical Plausibility" 75-76, 92-93. It also might have archaeological problems; see Ammon Ben-Tor, "Do the Execration Texts Reflect an Accurate Picture of the Contemporary Settlement Map of Palestine?" in *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. Yairah Amit, Ehud Ben Zvi, Israel Finkelstein, and Oded Lipschits (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 68-70.