THE LOCATION OF MEDIEVAL/PRE-MODERN
AND BIBLICAL ZIKLAG

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Most modern attempts to identify biblical Ziklag build on the pioneering work of Edward Robinson. Analysis of the medieval and pre-modern observations made by Father Felix Fabri, in Evagatorium in Terræ Sanctæ, Arabiæ et Egypti Peregrinationem and Sionpilger, and Eugène Roger, in La Terre Sainte, provide support for the identification of biblical Ziklag with Tell esh-Shari'ah (Tel Sera') during these periods. Such a medieval and pre-modern identification provides support for this same modern identification of biblical Ziklag and militates against competing identifications with Tell el-Hesi (Tel Hasi), Khirbet Meshash (Tel Masos), Tell es-Seba’ (Tel Beer-Sheva), and Tell Khuweilifeh (Tel Halif).

The study of biblical geography has advanced greatly since the famous journey of Edward Robinson and Eli Smith through Palestine in 1838. They laid the methodological groundwork for all subsequent studies of historical geography of the region by noting that biblical place names many times were preserved in the then modern Arabic toponyms for the region. With this key observation almost all cities, towns, and villages mentioned in the Bible have been studied, and over the years identifications have been suggested for thousands of archaeological sites known in the Holy Land. Some identifications are certain, others are accepted, while many are debated. In such identifications, it is usually preferred to have an Arabic toponym that preserves a biblical toponym as a key point in argumentation. In this brief note, I wish to examine what appears to be a heretofore neglected aspect of the identification of Ziklag.

Following hard upon the work of Robinson (1841, 48), Karl Ritter suggested that Tell el-Hesi was Ziklag (Ritter 1866, 247). This identification was not made by Robinson, since he found no Arabic village named anything like Ziklag, but follows directly out of Robinson’s note in which he suggested that Tell el-Hesi was the site Felix Fabri visited in 1483 and which was identified to him as Ziklag (Robinson 1841, 48 n. 1; Fabri 1843, 359; 1893, 428–29). Ritter’s identification soon fell out of favour when Tell el-Hesi was erroneously identified with Lachish. Subsequently, all textual arguments for the location of Ziklag have been based on inferences drawn from 1 Samuel 27–28 and 30, Joshua 15.21–32 and 19.1–8, 1 Chronicles 4.24–33, and Nehemiah 11.25–30. From these sources, Ziklag should be at least a nominally Philistine town on the southern to southwestern border region between Judah and Philistia, but in the land of Simeon. Ziklag should also be a leisurely three-day march from Aphek, but still near the Negeb and the Amalekites. In addition, and at a minimum, the site needs to have been occupied in the 11th and 10th centuries as well as the 6th/5th centuries BCE.

In 1935, Albrecht Alt raised a number of points in his discussion of Ziklag, but it was not until 1955 that Isaiah Press (1955, 4, 806–807) made the specific argument that Tell esh-Shari’ah, now Tel Sera’, was Ziklag. In 1982, Eliezer D. Oren provided support for Press’s argument with his discovery of major Philistine remains at that site. In 1973, Frank Crüsemann suggested Khirbet Meshash, now Tel Masos, as a candidate for Ziklag, but most feel that the archaeological history and the geographical location are wrong for such an identification. Subsequently, Joe D. Seger raised the possibility that Tell Khuweilifeh, now Tel Halif, might be identified with Ziklag (1984), following in part a suggestion of Alt (1935,
and later Volkmar Fritz inferred that Tell es-Seba’, now Tel Beer-Sheva, was not biblical Beer-Sheva but rather Ziklag (1993). The views of Seger and Fritz have drawn few adherents. A key point in each of these potential identifications is that no relevant Arabic toponym is known, leaving each identification ripe for rebuttal. Interestingly, however, none of these scholars made use of medieval and pre-modern travel accounts or geographic studies in their argumentation. Two such works seem relevant to the identification of Ziklag.

The famous 17th century scholar Eugène Roger lived for a number of years in Palestine and used his extensive first-hand knowledge of the region to prepare his *La Terre Sainte, ou Description topographique très-particulière des saints lieux, & de la Terre de Promission...* which was first published in 1646 (1992, 190–1).

A cinq lieues des Gaza, vers l’Orient, il y a un village habité de quelques Mores. C’était anciennement la ville de Siceleg de la tribu de Siméon... Toute cette contrée [ed., the larger region around Siceleg within the Simeon tribal allotment] est bien déserte, et tous les lieux habités ne sont que de pauvres hameaux, dans des montagnes couvertes de forêts, où les paysans recueillent force senné qu’ils portent vendre en Egypte, à Ramatha, et autres lieux.

La ville de Bersabée, de la tribu de Siméon, est éloignée de Siceleg de quatres lieues, entre le Midi et l’Orient, et environ de deux lieues des Montagnes de Seïr où finit la Terre de Promission...

Pour la ville d’Ascalon, qui était une des cinq satrapies, et était située à la rive de la mer, à sept lieues de Gaza.

Unfortunately, the precise distance of the historic *lieue* was not universal. According to R. J. Julien, in his *Atlas Géographique et Militaire de la France* (1751) as quoted by Frederic Seebohm (1914, 127), the common *lieue* was 4444 metres in length, but local variants ranged from the *lieues* of Beauce and Gastinois at 3291 metres to those of Gastogne and Provence at 5846 metres. Thus, to start one must approximate the *lieue* of Roger. Assuming that one travelled by main road from Gaza to Ashkelon (29,368 m), and not as the crow flies, then the distance of the *lieue* used by Roger going northeast from Gaza was roughly 4195 metres, which is on the shorter end of the spectrum. (Note that Chevalier d’Arvieux called the distance six *lieues* in 1659 (1735, 71), or about 4900 metres per *lieue*.)

When one uses this estimated *lieue* as a base line and attempts to locate Siceleg, based on the relationships between early 17th century Gaza and Beer-Sheva (42,963 m), one sees that Roger’s estimated *lieue* is simply too short and needs to be lengthened to at least 4775 m to make it work were it a straight line from Gaza to Beer-Sheva, and to about 5400 metres to work given the angles described by Roger. A *lieue* of 5400 metres is within Julien’s parameters, but on the high end. Issues with distances may reflect the difficulty in judging distances in Palestine, or anywhere for that matter, in the 17th century when the distance was usually estimated by the time it took to go the distance. Nonetheless, all potential distances ascribed to *lieues* for our region fall within the parameters established by Julien (1751) as described by Seebohm (1914) for 18th century France.

With these *lieue* issues in mind, according to Roger one goes roughly east (actually closer to east south-east) from Gaza about five *lieues* to Siceleg and then one turns and goes about four *lieues* to the southeast (actually closer to south south-east) to arrive at Beer-Sheva. The location defined in this manner for Siceleg, then, is probably to be seen along the banks of Wadi esh-Shari’ah in the vicinity of Tell esh-Shari’ah. It is 26,564 m from Tell es-Shari’ah to Gaza and 21,605 m to Beer-Sheva. On the basis of Roger’s evidence, therefore, the general Tell esh-Shari’ah region is the best place to look for the poor medieval and pre-modern Arabic village of Siceleg (Fig. 1).

Given Roger’s account, one should go back to Fabri, both the account that was referenced by Robinson (1843, 1893), as well as his far briefer *Sionpilger* (1999), to determine whether Fabri’s Sicelech and Roger’s Siceleg might refer to the same location. During the
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Fig. 1 Map of the location of Ziklag.
afternoon of 28 August 1483, Fabri noted that he and his party were travelling roughly in a southern (actually southwesterly) direction on the road from Hebron to Gaza with the mountains of Judah to the east and the sea to the west. At sunset, they reached a caravanserai at Sukkariyeh and spent the night (Fabri 1893, 427–28). During this entire day, Fabri had noted the direction he was going and major changes of direction, for example, south and west out of Hebron, or the Vale of Eshcol running north and west, or turning south when he left the mountains (Fabri 1893: 422–428).

On the morning of 29 August 1483, Fabri does not note a change of direction. In Sionpilger, Fabri wrote, ‘Soon after the morning mass, the pilgrims made their way to the road and headed through the land of Palestine down to [nider] the city of Sicelech’ (translation of Fabri 1999, 215). This suggests that Fabri did not turn and that he went on or downhill or to the south toward Sicelech. The account in Fabri’s Wanderings is more detailed in what was seen (Fabri 1893: 427–29).

On the twenty-ninth [August] we rose with the dawn, loaded our camels, saddled our asses, and set out over a flat, barren country, where we saw many villages and the ruins of ancient cities. At noon we came to a region which swelled into mountains and little hills, among which there rose one pretty high mount above the others, which was excellently well fitted to receive a castle and fort; so that our nobles said that if there were any men of war in this land, they would never let this mountain be without a castle. But when we came to the foot of the mount and looked upward at it, it seemed to us that on the slope there lay stones from ruined walls. So I and others left our asses below, and hurriedly climbed up to the top of this mount, where we found the remnants and ruins of strong walls, not of a castle, but of an ancient city; for, indeed, the city of Ziklag [ed., Sicelech in the Latin] once stood here. . . . So we stood upon that mount, and looked far and wide over Palestine — towards the Great Sea, towards the mountains of Hebron, towards the mount of Ephraim, and towards the Egyptian desert, the four quarters of the heavens. When we had seen this, we departed from Ziklag, and went down towards Gaza . . .

This account raises interesting questions. To date, I have examined 243 pilgrim travel accounts spanning the period 1095 through 1699 and only in the two accounts here discussed is a physical location for Ziklag even mentioned. Were Ziklag on a normal pilgrim route, I believe it would have been mentioned far more often.

Most medieval and pre-modern travellers who went from Hebron to Gaza via as-Sukkariyeh (or vice versa) followed the old Islamic imperial postal route and passed from as-Sukkariyeh to Mulakis (Umm Lakis) to Gaza (see, e.g., Popper 1955, 47), or, more particularly, from as-Sukkariyeh to Aqlan to Mulakis to Bureir to Simeis to Nejd to Timreh to Beit Hanun to Gaza. To judge from the evidence of Robinson (1841, 44–50), Van de Velde (1854, 139–47; 1858, 448), and Poujoulat (1841, 244), such a trip took about six hours. It seems to have taken Fabri’s party four or five hours to reach Sicelech and then another three or four to reach Gaza. This is two or three hours above the norm. Thus, for the various reasons just discussed, it would seem likely that Fabri’s party, for whatever reason, followed a generally southwestern path to the region of Tell esh-Shari‘ah (24,842 metres, about four hours) where they turned west-northwest to enter Gaza from the east (26,564 metres, probably four or five more hours). This would be a longer trip (in line with Fabri’s chronology) and passes through the same region that Roger described for Siceleg.

It is hard to imagine that Fabri would have adopted the idea that he was visiting biblical Ziklag unless someone told him this, and it seems likely, therefore, that Fabri and his party visited the hamlet identified as Siceleg in 1483, just as did Roger some 135 years later. If we equate the location of Fabri’s Sicelech with Roger’s Siceleg, then we must consider its location on the basis of Fabri’s account, and Fabri’s description of the site itself.

Fabri’s description of Sicelech sounds like a description of a tell; he even called it an ancient city. There is an issue, however, with the line that Stewart translated, ‘we came to a
region which swelled into mountains and little hills' (Fabri 1893, 428). This seems an odd description for this region. The Latin in question is *regionem collibus et monticulis tumorosam* (Fabri 1843, 359) and a better translation might be ‘a region swollen with hills and mounds’. Such a description aptly describes the topography of the ‘Tell esh-Shari’ah region, and Fabri’s account of the tell at Sicelech is in accord with what one can see today. Assuming that Roger’s Siceleg and Fabri’s Sicelech are the same location, then the sole site meeting Fabri’s description of the tell is Tell esh-Shari’ah.

This brief note has examined the description of Roger’s Siceleg and Fabri’s Sicelech and concluded that they are the same site. By joining their descriptions, it is possible to suggest that Tell esh-Shari’ah was most likely viewed as biblical Ziklag by the few medieval and pre-modern travellers who ventured there.

What, however, did the local Arab inhabitants of the region call the site? Did the hamlet and tell have an Arabic name, and did the guides simply identify it to the travellers using the Vulgate name Sicelech/Siceleg? This is certainly possible. Or, was the Arabic name of the village so close to the Vulgate’s Sicelech/Siceleg that the travellers simply called it by the Vulgate name? I am strongly inclined to accept the latter possibility because Fabri provided both local Arabic names and biblical identifications whenever they appear available throughout his texts. It seems likely to me, therefore, that an Arabic toponym very close to Siceleg was still in use in the early 17th century and that it described Tell esh-Shari’ah as well as a neighbouring poor medieval and pre-modern Arabic village.

If this is so, then the Arabic toponym Siceleg was either missed by Robinson, Tobler, Guérin, and the surveyors for the Survey of Western Palestine in the 19th century, or, more likely, it had probably gone out of use by that time. Clinton Bailey’s study of the Rutaymat and Wuwaydat Bedouin (1985: 48) suggests that they arrived in this region in the late 16th and 17th centuries and Amnon Cohen (1973: 147) noted that village life had ended in this region by the 1720s. Such events could easily account for the abandonment of the hamlet of Sicelech/Siceleg and the loss of its name by the 19th century when western scholars began to arrive in the region.

The recovery of a medieval and pre-modern tradition locating biblical Ziklag at Tell esh-Shari’ah along with a neighbouring Arabic village can be used to argue in support of the identification of Tell esh-Shari’ah with biblical Ziklag. In addition, the possibility that these same texts preserve an Arabic toponym that sounded to Fabri and Roger like Sicelech/Siceleg appears strong. If this is so, and an Arabic toponym Sicelech/Siceleg was used to describe Tell esh-Shari’ah and a neighbouring Arabic village during medieval and pre-modern times, then modern scholars can use that name to argue in support of the identification of Tell esh-Shari’ah with biblical Ziklag. These same arguments militate against the possible identifications of Ziklag with Khirbet Meshash, Tell Khuweilifeh, and Tell es-Saba’.

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