

Research on Israel and Aram

Autonomy, Independence and Related Issues

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Research on Israel and Aram in Biblical Times I

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An Iron Age I Cultic Context at Tel Abel Beth-Maacah

NAAMA YAHALOM-MACK, NAVA PANITZ-COHEN, ROBERT A. MULLINS*

Abstract: The excavations at Tell Abil el-Qameh, identified as the biblical city of Abel Beth-Maacah, have uncovered remains of Iron Age I occupation throughout the site. The fullest and most robust sequence comes from Area A, with three main strata spanning the entire period. In one of these (A4) is a unit whose exceptional combination of features indicates that it was of a cultic nature. This unit will be discussed within the context of the Iron Age I occupation at the site and in relation to selected contemporary cultic contexts. The location of Tel Abel Beth-Maacah in the region considered the interface between Aram-Damascus and the Israelite kingdom, as well as the Phoenicians, during Iron IIA raises questions concerning its ethnic identity and political affiliation in Iron I, a time of great change in the southern Levant.

1. The Site

Tell Abil el-Qameh is located on the northern border of modern Israel, 6.5 km west of Tel Dan and 30 km north of Hazor, sitting astride Nahal Iyyon, one of the headwaters of the Jordan River. The site covers approximately 100 dunams (10 hectares) and is comprised of a small upper tell in the north and a larger lower tell in the south (fig. 1). From its strategic vantage point overlooking the narrow northwestern end of the fertile Hula Valley, the site commands roads leading north to the Lebanese Beqa', inland Syria, and Mesopotamia; 35 km to the west is Tyre on the Lebanese/Phoenician coast and 70 km to the northeast is Damascus.

The identification of the tell with the biblical town of Abel Beth-Maacah was based mainly on the geographic lists in 1 Kings 15:20 and 2 Kings 15:29 which itemize towns from north to south along the route of military campaigns by the Aramean king Ben-Hadad in the 9th century BCE and the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III in the 8th century. The third reference to the site in the Bible, in 2 Samuel 20:14–22, tells of the escape of Sheba ben Bichri to Abel Beth-Maacah after his rebellion against David, emphasizing the great distance between the city and Jerusalem and, perhaps, it being perceived as an Israelite entity at the time when these passages were composed.

* This research was supported by the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (Grant No. 859/17).

In second millennium BCE sources, the site is called ‘Abel’; the suffix ‘Beth-Maacah’ was a later addition, perhaps related to the takeover of the (Canaanite) town by a tribal/kin-based element (Israelites? Arameans? Canaanites from Hazor or elsewhere?), most probably in Iron I.¹ The second millennium BCE sources include the late group of Execration Texts (18th century BCE), Thutmose III’s list of destroyed towns (15th century BCE) and, possibly, the Amarna letters (14th century BCE).²

Tell Abil el-Qameh had been briefly surveyed,³ but it was never excavated until 2013, when a project was initiated by Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, directed by the authors. Five seasons of excavation up to the time of writing (2017) have yielded rich architectural and artifactual remains from the Middle Bronze Age IIB to the late Persian/early Hellenistic period, while the survey (conducted in 2012) showed that occupation at the site began in the Early Bronze II and continued until modern times.⁴



Figure 1: Tel Abel Beth-Maacah, looking east.

2. The Area A Iron I Sequence

Area A is located on the eastern side of the lower tell where it joins the upper tell in the north; a modern approach road cuts the area on its east and north (fig. 2). Each of the three main strata⁵ ascribed to Iron Age I in Area A comprises an entirely different type of occupation. The earliest of these three (Stratum A4) contains a unit with two spaces

¹ MAZAR, Geshur, 27; DEVER, Abel-Beth-Maacah, 214; YOUNGER, Political History, 213–219.

² DEVER, Abel-Beth-Maacah, 211–213; AHARONI, Land of the Bible, 131–133.

³ DEVER, Abel-Beth-Maacah.

⁴ PANITZ-COHEN/MULLINS/BONFIL, Northern Exposure; Preliminary Report; PANITZ-COHEN/MULLINS, Aram-Maacah.

⁵ An earlier Iron Age I occupation, denoted A5, was detected below the floors of Stratum A4 (see figs. 5, 6); however, it has been insufficiently exposed to date and its nature is not yet clear. It possibly represents an earlier phase of the cultic unit. Below its floor, an earlier stratum (A6), also minimally exposed to date, belongs to the Late Bronze Age.

exposed to date that appear to have had a cultic function;⁶ it was violently destroyed and burnt. The subsequent occupation (Stratum A3) comprises mainly an open area with numerous ovens and installations. The third and latest (Stratum A2) is characterized by a complex of large, well-built buildings, apparently public in nature, with evidence of storage, metallurgical, and cultic activity. Following the violent end of this occupation at the end of Iron I, the area was rebuilt, and the remains include large stone walls that do not yet comprise a coherent plan, and whose associated layers and floors are attributed to Iron IIA.

The Iron Age I strata in Area A constitute one of the densest occupation sequences of this period.⁷ Based on the results of radiocarbon dating and on the pottery sequence, the three main strata in Area A can be placed within the accepted date of Iron Age I, from the 12th to the early 10th centuries BCE. The A4 building dates to the late 12th century BCE and first part of the 11th century BCE. Excavations at nearby Tel Dan revealed three main Iron I strata (Strata VI, V and IVB), while Hazor was largely abandoned at this time (Strata XII–XI).



Figure 2: View of Area A; center: upper tell on the north and Naphtali Hills in the background, looking northwest.⁸

⁶ In this paper, we use the definition offered by PRESS (Problem, 367) to define cult: “religious ritual... involved with worship of a deity.” In this sense, while ritual can be religious or secular (following RENFREW, *Archaeology of Cult*, 14–15), cult is necessarily related to religious ritual.

⁷ Iron I remains were revealed in all excavation areas to date: two main strata in Area F at the southern end of the tell, ceramic and architectural remains, and at least one stratum in Area B on the upper tell. Much Iron I pottery was collected in Area O on the western edge of the lower tell, as well as all over the mound during the 2012 survey.

⁸ Photo courtesy of <https://biblewalks.com/sites/abelbethmaacah.html> (last updated 10 June 2018).



Figure 5: Photo of the cultic unit, north on bottom; Figure 6: Photo of the cultic unit, looking west.

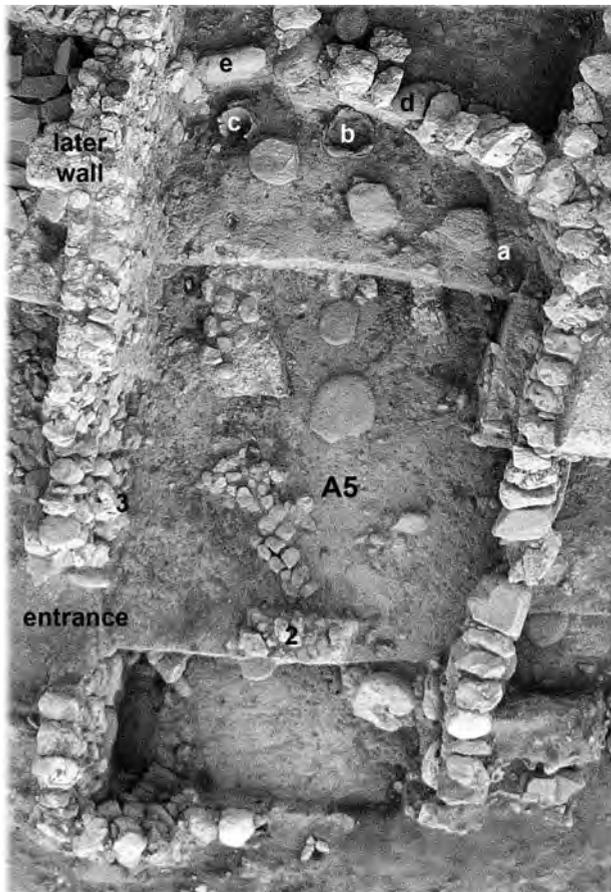


Figure 7: The northern room, west on top.

2.1.1 The Northern Room

All four walls of the northern room are known; it measures ca. 4 x 7 meters (fig. 7). The southern wall is constructed of unworked stones that were rather loosely laid in a kind of herringbone pattern; in it is an entrance leading to the southern space, described below. Part of the eastern wall is eroded down the slope. The northern wall is constructed like the southern wall; a unique feature is that its western end forms a round ‘corner’ with the western wall of the room, such that, in effect, they are one and the same curved wall. Incorporated into the middle and southern end of the western part of this wall are two standing stones: one is a large rectangular stone made of the “Kefar Giladi conglomerate,” laid on its wide side (marked “d” in figs. 7, 8) and, to its south, is a narrower, roughly rectangular basalt stone, laid on its narrow side (marked “e” in figs. 7, 8). It is possible that the pair of standing stones were set first and at a later stage, the stones of the wall were added around them.

Features in this room include (see letters in figs. 7 and 8 for no. 1):

1. Along the western wall of the room was a row comprising two ovens⁹ and a sunken storage jar base, each filled with ash; each of these was adjoined by a large, slightly angled, flattened stone that perhaps served as a work surface. The northern oven (marked “a”) was set in the round ‘corner’ and the well-preserved middle oven (marked “b”) was built against the large wide conglomerate stone (marked “d”). The sunken storage-jar base (marked “c”) was set in front of the narrower basalt stone (marked “e”) at the southern end of the wall. The large rectangular stone and its oven were oriented in the same line as the bench and its associated standing stone in the east of the room (no. 2 below).
2. In the eastern part of the room was a north–south stone bench, 1.0 meter-long, 0.40 m wide and 0.25 m high (marked “2” in figs. 7, 9). It was adjoined on the east by a large, oval-shaped standing stone with a round top and flat bottom, set perpendicular to it (marked “1”, fig. 9). The bench was in line with the entranceway, ca. 1.3 meters to its south, as well as in line with the middle oven and the large rectangular standing stone, as noted above.
3. A concentration of equid bones was found against the southern wall, just west of the entranceway (marked “3” in fig. 7).
4. A fragment of a small ceramic bull figurine was found on the floor.

⁹ We term these two installations ‘ovens’ because they are round and their walls are composed of thick low-fired clay typical of ovens. However, their function could have been for some other pyrotechnical purpose other than cooking or baking. Analysis of the burnt content might point to their function.

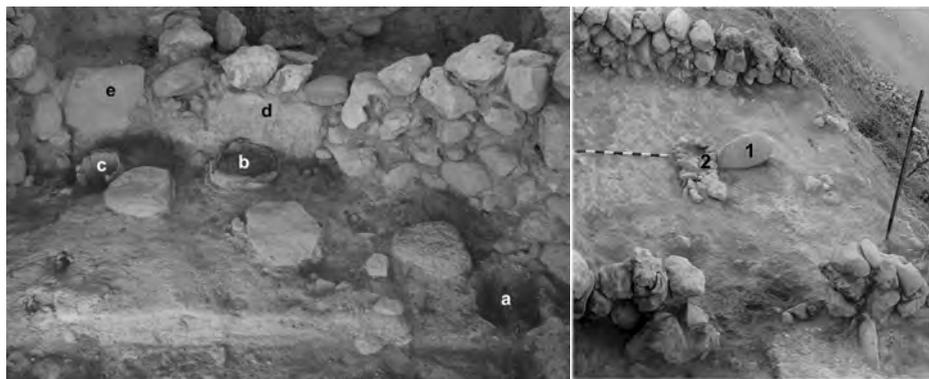


Figure 8: View of ovens and standing stones along the western wall of northern room, looking west; Figure 9: Stone bench and standing stone in the northern room, looking north; note entrance leading to southern space with standing stones flanking it.

2.1.2 The Southern Room

Only the northern wall of the southern room is known at this point. The eastern part of the room is eroded on the slope and the southern and western closing walls should be sought beyond the present limits of the excavation, although it is possible that this originally had been an open space.

The room was full of burnt debris and collapsed mudbricks that contained restorable vessels, including bowls, kraters, cooking pots, jugs, pyxides and pithoi. A number of features were found on the floor (the following are the numbers and letters marked in fig. 10):

1. Abutting the western part of the northern wall was a stone pavement, measuring ca. 1.2 x 1.5 m; on the east it abuts the standing stone (marked “3”) and on the south, the platform (marked “5”).
2. To the east of the entranceway was a round-topped standing stone (similar to the one associated with the bench in the northern room, described above), set on a north–south axis and surrounded by small stones (marked “2”).
3. Flanking the entrance on the west was a large worked white limestone with an angular cut in its upper eastern side (marked “3”); a basalt upper grindstone was found resting in this niche.
4. Some 50 cm to the south of the large standing limestone (marked “3”), and directly in line with it, was a semi-circle of ten small and medium stones, its open end facing the stone (marked “4”). Its western side abuts the small stone platform (marked “5”). Between these two elements was yet another small, round-topped standing stone and pithos (not in the photo).
5. Some 50 cm to the south of the stone pavement (marked “1”) is a small squarish platform built of loosely laid unworked stones, ca. 60 x 60 cm and ca. 25 cm high (marked “5”). It abuts the western side of the stone semi-circle (marked “4”); between the two was a depression in which a pithos had been set, its base still *in situ* (marked with a circle).

6. An east–west wall on the southern end of the excavated space seems to be a bench or screen wall (marked “6”); its eastern end is cut by a later wall and its western end had a mud superstructure (marked “a”), preserved ca. one meter high, that is shaped like a pillar.
7. On the floor of the entranceway was the articulated skeleton of a dog (marked “7”).
8. Adjoining the mud ‘pillar’ (“a”) was a narrow trapezoid standing stone (marked “e”), one meter tall, found fallen to the north; it originally had been attached to the pillar by a layer of white plaster (see fig. 12).
9. A complete deer antler was found on the stone floor of the room (fig. 11).



Figure 10: The southern room, north on top; note area on the left (west) with stone slabs and two standing stones.; *Figure 11:* Deer antler from the stone floor of the southern room (photograph by Tal Rogovski; conservation by Gali Beiner, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem).



Figure 12: Western part of the southern room with two standing stones, looking west at section with stones and pavement above Stratum A4 destruction debris; note narrow trapezoid standing stone, fallen to the right (north).

2.1.3 Post-Destruction Activity

As noted, the unit described above was violently destroyed and the subsequent occupation (Stratum A3) was of a different nature. However, remains found in the western end of the northern room suggest that there had been some activity between the time of the destruction and the main occupation of Stratum A3. These remains include a fine slab floor set on a layer of white plaster (marked “d” in figs. 10 and 12); these slabs seem to have been in secondary use. On its southeastern end was a circle of stones set right on the mud ‘pillar’. On its east was a lower step, also plastered, with a pair of standing stones (marked “b” and “c” in figs. 10, 12). The southern stone is considerably taller than the northern one. The space between these two stones is just in line with the small platform in the A4 room, one meter lower.

This activity was clearly built on top of the destruction debris that filled the southern room, while being covered by Stratum A3 architecture and floors. It seems that whoever built these elements was well aware of the features in the destroyed room and deliberately interacted with them. Thus, we tentatively understand this as an interim phase, perhaps denoting people who returned to the ruined shrine and attempted to venerate the ruins by this activity.

3. Discussion

3.1 Defining the Cultic Nature

Identifying cultic activity in the archaeological record is a difficult and elusive task and remains widely debated from textual, historical, archaeological and anthropological points of view.¹⁰ There have been various attempts to create a ‘checklist’ of operative criteria by which one can identify a cultic setting by defining the material correlates of the ritual, mainly through architecture and artifacts,¹¹ as well as in the landscape.¹² Extensive analyses have produced typologies for cult places in Israel and the Levant in general during the Bronze and Iron Ages, running the gamut from temple buildings with formal standardized plans controlled by ruling elites to domestic-household or industrial-setting cultic places/corners to open-air locations (“bamot”), and variations in-between.¹³ These categories are based on the biblical and other Ancient Near Eastern texts, alongside archaeological data (and much less so on anthropological data), sometimes separately and sometimes interrelated. There is little consistency in this regard and, in some cases, the criteria for the identification of cult and its place, level, type or association are chronologically and regionally ambiguous.¹⁴ Recent studies have shown how some of these typologies have a tendency to assume a dichotomy of ‘official/public’ versus ‘domestic/private’ (popular), despite the likeliness that cultic activity and venues operated on various levels of organization and reflected a social pluralism that the biblical text tends to negate or judge.¹⁵ An individual, a family, or a kin group could have simultaneously participated in multiple levels of cultic practice – family, local, or state – with or without an interface between the different contexts.

Discretion must be exercised when utilizing artefacts (e.g., clay or stone altars, chalices, kernoi, figurines, etc.) or architecture (e.g., benches, standing stones, ‘bamot’, etc.) that are most likely of cultic function in one context to *a priori* denote a cultic nature for another context.¹⁶ Another caveat is the ambiguity involved for objects found in a

¹⁰ E.g., for the southern Levant and Israelite religion, see COOGAN, *Of Cults*; GILMOUR, *Southern Levant; Early Israelite Religion; Ancient Near East*; ZEVIT, *Religions*; ALPERT-NAKHAI, *Archaeology*; HESS, *Israelite Religions*; FAUST, *Israelite Cult*; ALBERTZ/SCHMITT, *Family*.

¹¹ GILMOUR (*Early Israelite Religion; Ancient Near East*) also employs a criterion of “continuity.” However, several scholars (e.g., PRESS, *Problem*) have noted that this is not as necessary a condition, as quite a large number of cultic contexts do not continue over time (KAMLAH, *Temples*, 511); e.g., DEVER, *Material Remains; Contribution of Archaeology*; RENFREW, *Archaeology of Cult*; HOLLADAY, *Religion in Judah*; ZEVIT, *Religions*, 82–84; PRESS, *Problem*.

¹² BARROWCLOUGH/MALONE, *Cult in Context*.

¹³ E.g., HARAN, *Temples*; HOLLADAY, *Religion in Judah*; RENFREW, *Archaeology of Religion*; GILMOUR, *Southern Levant; Early Israelite Religion; Ancient Near East*; WRIGHT, *Archaeological Correlates*; ALPERT-NAKHAI, *Archaeology*, 161–200; ZEVIT, *Religions*, 652–658; DEVER, *God*; ALBERTZ/SCHMITT, *Family*, 220–241.

¹⁴ FAUST, *Israelite Cult*.

¹⁵ E.g., PRESS, *Problem*, 373–374; ALBERTZ/SCHMITT, *Family*, 221–223; UEHLINGER, *Distinctive or Diverse*, 7–9.

¹⁶ COOGAN, *Of Cults*; HOLLADAY, *Religion in Judah*; BLOCH-SMITH, *Maššebot*; Real *Maššebot*, 66; PRESS, *Problem*, with a focus on figurines; ALBERTZ/SCHMITT, *Family*, ch. 3.

ritual setting that can also have a domestic or secular function, such as loomweights or cooking pots.¹⁷ A case in point are the ubiquitous standing stones or “maššebôth” which are thought to have a ritual significance, mainly as a proxy for the deity and/or as the focal point of worship.¹⁸ They also filled a role as ancestral markers or for commemoration of events and people (although such functions, even if secular, can have cultic connotations).¹⁹

When examining the Stratum A4 unit in light of the above brief discussion, we tentatively conclude that its nature was, apparently, cultic. The numerous standing stones that do not have a structural function (‘maššebôth’), special faunal elements (an equid burial, a possible dog burial, a deer antler, and several rare species found in the faunal assemblage, such as polecat), benches and a platform (‘bamah’²⁰), as well as the small bull figurine, are all known features in cultic contexts. Less common features include the rounded wall that incorporates a pair of standing stones, and the arrangement of the ovens/storage-jar-base installation and stones along this wall. Obviously, there was careful planning in the orientation of all these features, although no one clear orientation to a particular direction can be cited; both north-south and east-west alignments are found in the two spaces.

The pottery in the two rooms belongs to types that can also be found in a household context. Yet, as noted above, this in and of itself is not a reason to rule out a cultic function, since such vessels might have been used for ritual cooking and serving, specifically feasting, or the storage of surplus for use in the cult. For example, a typical household pottery assemblage was found alongside cultic installations in a building of unique architecture at Tel Rehov in the 9th century BCE.²¹

3.2 Comparative Iron I Cultic Contexts

The known cultic contexts of Iron Age I are characterized by diversity, and include buildings (e.g., Dan, Tell Qasile, Beth-Shean, Beth-Shemesh, Shiloh), cultic corners or shrines in buildings of various functions (e.g., Ai, Tell el-Umayri, Hazor Area B),²² and open-air enclosures (e.g., Hazor Area A, the Bull Site, Mt. Ebal).²³ A brief look at the Iron I cult contexts in neighboring locations (Dan and Hazor) and at selected sites (the Bull Site and Tell el-Umayri) that contain elements comparable to some of those found in the unit described here demonstrates the similarities and differences.

¹⁷ BLOCH-SMITH, Real Maššebot, 30–31; ALPERT-NAKHAI, Varieties.

¹⁸ BEN-AMI, Early Iron Age, 132; KAMLAH, Temples, 522.

¹⁹ GRAESSER, Standing Stones; AVNER, Masseboth Sites.

²⁰ The definition of the term ‘bamah’ is ambiguous. It usually is taken to mean an elevated, open-air sanctuary; however, this term has also been used to denote “an artificially raised platform upon which religious rites took place” (ALPERT-NAKHAI, Archaeology, 162) or even may refer to a cultic building as a whole (ALPERT-NAKHAI, Archaeology, 162–163, 194, note 3).

²¹ MAZAR, Culture.

²² ALBERTZ/SCHMITT, Family, 172–173.

²³ GILMOUR, Early Israelite Religion: 5–27; ALPERT-NAKHAI, Archaeology, 168–176.

3.2.1 Dan and Hazor

The two main Iron I contexts of a cultic nature known to date in the close vicinity of Tel Abel Beth-Maacah (henceforth, ABM) are at Dan and Hazor.

At Dan, a small building identified as Sanctuary 7082 (Stratum V), apparently to be associated with nearby metal workshops, as well as a number of *maṣṣebot* (Strata V–IVB), are the main expressions of cult in this period,²⁴ alongside a number of cultic vessels (including a “shrine model”) and objects. There is no resemblance between the architecture and paraphernalia of Sanctuary 7082 and the cultic unit at ABM, although the general use of *maṣṣebot* is common at both sites.

At Hazor, the occupation which followed a hiatus after the destruction of the Late Bronze Age city, is sparse and short-lived, and is dated to Iron IB (Stratum “XII/XI”).²⁵ Two cultic venues were found to belong to this phase.

One is a unit in Area B, where a few cultic vessels (fenestrated chalice, stands) and a jug with bronze items, including the figure of a Canaanite-style seated deity, were found.²⁶ Its attribution to cultic activity was originally based on these finds, mainly the deity figure. Doron Ben-Ami proposed an alternative interpretation of a large stone in the southwestern corner of the main room of the unit which had been understood by Yigal Yadin as a bench,²⁷ but should be seen as a *maṣṣebah* that had been deliberately laid down after it had originally served as the focus of cult. The metal items deposited in the jug could have been scrap destined for recycling and were not a cultic hoard²⁸ or a *favissa*.²⁹

The second Iron I cultic installation at Hazor was found in Area A and is defined as an open cult place. It comprises a 70 cm-high basalt *maṣṣebah* fronted by three slab stones, understood as offering tables; to its north was a circle of ten small standing basalt stones, some of which were elongated and taller than others.³⁰ This recalls the semi-circle of stones in the southern room at ABM, which also has ten stones, some taller, although it seems to have been open on its northern end. The three ‘offering tables’ might recall our three stones in the northern room, two of which front standing stones.

Despite these very broad and general affinities, there are also major differences, in addition to a chronological discrepancy of a half a century or more, between the two Hazor cult installations and the ABM unit. Elements such as standing stones and stone slabs are common at various Iron Age I sites, as well as in the previous period, such as those found at Hazor itself in the Late Bronze Age.³¹

²⁴ ILAN, *Northeastern Israel*, 132–133.

²⁵ BEN-TOR, *Canaanite Metropolis*, 126–131.

²⁶ YADIN, *Hazor*, 256–257; YADIN et al., *Hazor III-IV*, 80–81; BEN-AMI, *Early Iron Age*, 125–127.

²⁷ BEN-AMI, *Early Iron Age*, 126–127.

²⁸ ALPERT-NAKHAI, *Archaeology*, 172.

²⁹ BEN-AMI, *Early Iron Age*, 127.

³⁰ BEN-AMI/BEN-TOR, *Iron Age I*, 8, 11–13.

³¹ E.g., the *Stelae Temple in the Lower City*; BEN-TOR, *Canaanite Metropolis*, 130.

3.2.2 The Bull Site

The Bull Site, located in the northern part of the Samaria hills, is defined as an open-air cult place by Amihai Mazar,³² although others have questioned this interpretation.³³ Its only architectural element is a circular wall that had apparently encircled the precinct, although it is preserved only partly on one side. Inside the enclosure, a large rectangular worked stone was found lying on its narrow side, fronted by a pavement. This was considered to be a *maṣṣebah*, which apparently was the focus of the cult.³⁴ This is the only example of a rounded wall in a (probable) cultic setting in Iron Age I.³⁵

3.2.3 Tell el-Umayri

There are several contexts defined as cultic at this site, located in the Madaba Plain in Jordan. One is a raised cultic niche with standing stones in one of the rooms of a Late Bronze Age building, which is defined as a temple (or as a “palace with a shrine”).³⁶ This might recall the postulated post-destruction activity in our unit. Another context, dated to the early Iron I (first half of the 12th century BCE), is defined as a “house with a cultic corner” (Building A). It included several features that recall those in the ABM unit: a stone pavement and standing stones, a small altar, and a tall standing stone against a wall not far from an entranceway. The pottery repertoire was largely domestic and included pithoi and cooking pots.³⁷ Note also the partially rounded “perimeter wall” found to the southwest of this context, although it cannot be securely shown to be contemporary with the so-called “cultic” corner located at a distance to its north.³⁸

3.3 Whose Cult?

The description of the two cultic contexts at Hazor and the Bull Site enclosure as Israelite³⁹ presupposes that these were the people who patronized these facilities. This has led to the conclusion that standing stones, as well as other elements, such as pottery stands and *kernoi*, were an integral (and dominant) part of early Israelite religion and, in fact, have often become a hallmark for the identification of Israelite cult in the (early and later) Iron Age. This is basically a circular argument and a degree of caution should be exercised when assigning a national or ethnic label to cultic contexts and paraphernalia at this time, particularly in the region under discussion.⁴⁰ Standing stones are a well known phenomenon in Bronze Age Canaanite cultic contexts that continued into

³² MAZAR, Bull Site.

³³ E.g., COOGAN, Of Cults; but see MAZAR, On Cult Places.

³⁴ BEN-AMI, Early Iron Age, 131–132.

³⁵ The apsidal building found in Area H Ashdod, Stratum XIII–XII (DOTHAN/BEN-SHLOMO, Ashdod IV, 23–25), had been originally interpreted by Dothan as having a cultic function, but this interpretation has been contested (PRESS, Problem, 380).

³⁶ HERR, Stone Age, 77–801.

³⁷ HERR, Iron Age I House; Stone Age.

³⁸ HERR, Iron Age I House, 62, fig. 1; Stone Age, 82–83.

³⁹ MAZAR, Bull Site; BEN-AMI, Early Iron Age.

⁴⁰ Cf., COOGAN, Of Cults.

the Iron Age, and were utilized by different people and belief systems, given that the stones could potentially signify different ideas.

While the Late Bronze Age is characterized by formal temple buildings of distinctive types, associated primarily with elites and found mainly in urban contexts, the Iron Age I saw a diversity of cultic contexts, as noted above. This diversity is part of the process of decentralization that characterized the period following the breakdown of the old order of Canaanite city-states, which saw the gradual emergence of a new political and cultural order.⁴¹ Thus, we should not pigeonhole the ethnic identity of all Iron I cultic contexts as Canaanite or Israelite, but rather view them as part of this process of renegotiation of the political, social and cultural affiliation of indigenous people and newcomers. Following the destruction of Canaanite Hazor, sometime in the 13th century BCE, the Hula Valley experienced far-reaching demographic, cultural and socio-economic changes. It may be surmised that urban refugees from Hazor, along with rural Canaanite villagers and groups of tribal/kin-based pastoral-nomads or semi-nomads, were regrouping and seeking new subsistence means and places to settle.⁴² Some might have been the same “Israelites” who settled the Upper Galilee (and possibly, the Central Hill Country). Others, designated “Arameans,” emerged in Syria as an historical entity in the 11th century BCE (cf., the inscription of Tiglath-pileser I), at a time of Assyrian weakness.⁴³ These people were on the move within Syria itself,⁴⁴ as well as towards the west and the south, at a time when the local Canaanite and “Israelite” elements mentioned above were in the process of establishing a new order in this region.⁴⁵ Thus, the Hula Valley became a “melting pot” for the forging of new identities and political alignments during the Iron Age I, as it has been for various episodes in the past.⁴⁶

It is against this background that we view the Iron I cultic unit at Abel Beth-Maacah described in this article as a possible manifestation of these processes. It utilizes well-known Canaanite ritual elements, such as standing stones and benches, and combines them with several unique and innovative elements, such as the rounded wall and the way it incorporates the pair of standing stones that are related to the installations at their feet. The careful, interrelated orientation of all the elements in the unit is also a striking feature, as is the wide variety of standing stones of different shapes and stone types. It is notable that alongside this variability, a pattern can be discerned: most of the stones are broader than they are tall. Only two are of opposite proportions: the trapezoid stone in the southern room is tall and narrow, and the basalt stone in the southern end of the round wall in the northern room is narrower than it is wide. Standing stones, particularly when they appear in pairs, are often engendered, with the low, broad stone on the right

⁴¹ GILMOUR, *Early Israelite Religion*.

⁴² BERLEJUNG, *Arameans Outside*.

⁴³ YOUNGER, *Late Bronze Age/Iron I*, 133–134; *Political History*; BERLEJUNG, *Arameans Outside*.

⁴⁴ AKKERMANS/SCHWARTZ, *Archaeology of Syria*, 368; BRYCE, *Ancient Syria*, 100.

⁴⁵ KUHR, *Ancient Near East*, 401; JOFFE, *Rise*; SCHNEIDWIND, *Rise of Aramean States*; BERLEJUNG, *Arameans Outside*, 342, 345; YOUNGER, *Late Bronze Age/Iron I*, 152–153; *Political History*.

⁴⁶ GREENBERG, *Early Urbanizations*.

considered female and the taller, narrow one on the left, male.⁴⁷ Thus, it might be possible to understand the rectangular conglomerate stone as the female and the narrower basalt stone to its south (left in the eyes of the viewer inside the room) as a couple. The same can be said about the pair of standing stones set in the western part of the room that we understand as post-destruction cultic activity in the southern room. Here, too, the southern (left) stone is taller and narrower than the one to its right. Although it is generally accepted to interpret standing stones as representations of the deity, we ponder whether the preponderance of carefully worked broad standing stones and the pairing of stones in this unit (including the assumed post-destruction veneration) reflect a cult that centered around a female figure. We very tentatively suggest that the role of the “Wise Woman” in 2 Samuel 20 as an oracle of local fame might be related to these remains in some way: “In the past they would always say, ‘Let them inquire in Abel,’ and that is how they settled things. I represent the peaceful and the faithful in Israel. You are attempting to destroy a mother and a city in Israel. Why should you swallow up the Lord’s inheritance?” We suggest that a possible meaning of “mother” in this context should be understood as a female “oracle” and that the Wise Woman is, in fact, referring to herself when she beseeches Yoav to spare her city – and the long-lived cult practices in it.

3.4 Geo-Political Context of the Cult

Studies have emphasized how the processes of state formation that resulted in the establishment of Iron Age territorial kingdoms typically involved local kin-based dynasties who gradually gained power after subjugating competing groups, mainly through the accumulation of wealth and the control of resources.⁴⁸ These processes were accompanied by the deliberate creation of a shared cultural memory, with an emphasis on the realm of cult, aimed at underpinning the nascent political organization and consolidating the power base and economic aspirations of the new elites.⁴⁹ It is possible that the cultic unit at Abel Beth-Maacah is a manifestation of at least some of these processes, reflecting cultural continuity from the Canaanite Late Bronze Age as it re-organized and adjusted to the shifting regional demographic, ethnic, economic, and political changes over the course of Iron Age I. These changes culminated in the new political order – and concomitant religious identities – of the Iron IIA territorial states of Israel and Aram, two polities who both clashed and cooperated in this border region on both a cultural and a national level.

⁴⁷ AVNER, *Protohistoric Development*, 11–13. Note that the right-left definition is from the perspective of the stones themselves; it would be left=male and right=female from the perspective of the viewer.

⁴⁸ PORTUGALI, *Theoretical Speculations*, 211.

⁴⁹ MARFOE, *Transformation*, 3; FINKELSTEIN, *State Formation*; FLANNERY, *Process and Agency*; JOFFE, *Rise*; ASSMAN, *Cultural Memory*; SERGI, *State Formation*.

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