Il presente studio esamina gli scheletri rinvenuti in contesti di distruzione dell’età del Bronzo e del Ferro nel Levante meridionale, nell’ambito dell’archeologia comportamentale e dell’archeologia della distruzione. Sottolinea la rarità degli scheletri in tali contesti e ipotizza che ciò sia dovuto principalmente a due ragioni: 1) gli assedi veri e propri erano piuttosto rari e la maggior parte delle città capitolavano senza combattere, dunque non soffrivano vittime; 2) dopo ogni distruzione le città venivano attentamente ‘bonificate’, in primo luogo per ragioni igieniche. La rassegna dei contesti di rinvenimento degli scheletri mostra che la loro presenza in strati di sopravvivenza dopo la distruzione dipende dal fatto che non fu possibile individuare i cadaveri abbastanza presto dopo la morte oppure che il loro recupero risultava troppo difficile. Essi potevano anche rimanere sul posto in quanto il sito veniva abbandonato e l’igiene non costituiva una seria preoccupazione. In alcuni casi, tuttavia, sembra che gli scheletri siano stati lasciati negli strati di distruzione intenzionalmente, come per una sorta di punizione. L’autore suggerisce infine che l’assenza di armi in contesti di distruzione con scheletri non costituisce una ragione sufficiente per attribuire la distruzione a un evento sismico.

The current study examines skeletons found in Bronze and Iron Age destruction contexts from the southern Levant, within the framework of behavioural archaeology and the archaeology of destruction. It addresses the rarity of skeletons in such contexts, and argues that it is due to two main reasons: 1) genuine siege warfare was rather rare, and most cities capitulated without a battle, and therefore suffered no casualties; 2) after any destruction cities were thoroughly ‘cleaned’, mostly for hygienic reasons. A review of the find contexts of skeletons shows that their presence in surviving destruction layers occurs either because the skeletons could not be found soon after death, or their recovery was too difficult at the time. They may also have remained in these layers because the sites were abandoned, and thus hygiene did not play a major role. Yet, in some cases, it seems that skeletons were left in destruction layers intentionally, as a sort of punishment. Finally, it is suggested that the presence of skeletons in destruction contexts with no accompanying weapons, should not be seen as evidence for an earthquake as the cause of the destruction.

**Parole chiave / Keywords**

Scheletro, distruzione, conflitto, terremoto, Età del bronzo, Età del ferro, Levante

Skeleton, destruction, warfare, earthquake, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Levant
1. Introduction

Unburied skeletons, and especially the presence of skeletons in destruction contexts, have not received the attention they deserve. Two approaches are outlined in the scientific literature concerning this issue. The first one sees skeletons bearing signs of violent trauma, or those found close to weaponry (whether buried or unburied) as good indication for warfare. The second suggests that skeletons found in destruction contexts, with no weapons and no evidence for violent trauma, should serve as good indicators for earthquakes. These arguments have been central in determining the cause of destruction events – whether natural or man-made. As destruction layers play a prominent role in the reconstruction of historical processes, and especially in correlating events known from historical sources with archaeological evidence, the phenomenon of skeletons found in destruction contexts must be scrutinized.

The goal of this essay is to suggest an interpretational framework for skeletons found in destruction contexts. The contexts in which such skeletons are found will be assessed within the framework of behavioural archaeology, and using models that help us understand the destruction and abandonment of sites. The literary sources that discuss burial and non-burial in the ancient Near East can also assist us in our interpretations. Anthropological examination of the skeletal remains is important and will be described, where the data exists. However, in most of the discussed cases it was not conducted.

Since this is a very broad subject, the current analysis will focus on the Cisjordan Southern Levant, from the Middle Bronze to the Late Iron Age, ca. 2000-586 BCE.

2. The Archaeological Contexts of Skeletons

For the current study, all the unburied skeletons found in destruction contexts will be included. Skeletons that were found buried under floors or in clearly-built tombs will be excluded. Isolated bones will not be considered, as they need not be directly related to a destruction event, and their appearance can be the result of other processes.

Generally, two scenarios can be assigned to skeletons found in habitation contexts. The first is a wholesale destruction of a site (A), while the second is a localized destruction event in the immediate proximity of the skeleton, without any signs of destruction trauma in most other areas, the site continuing in occupation with no noticeable break (B).

2.1. Wholesale Destruction of a Site

In the case of skeletons as part of wholesale destructions, these destruction layers are characterized by a number of attributes, such as evidence for conflagration, pottery vessels and other finds that attest to a rapid escape or trapping of the inhabitants, with sometimes weaponry scattered in the destruction debris. These attributes can give us valuable hints regarding the cause and the process of the destruction event. Each of these will be examined in relation to skeletons (see tab. 1 for a summary).

A. Location.

Skeletons have been found in a variety of locations throughout sites. Some were found by gates, such as the six skeletons found crushed at Shechem XV city gate, together with some complete skeletons of animals. In Gezer XVIII, the only skeleton was found in Field IV, in a private building adjacent to the gate and the city wall (fig. 1). In Horbat Rosh Zayit IIA, a skeleton was found in the cistern, just outside the

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6 Seger 2013, pp. 95-6.
were found on the bones of any of the individuals found at Lachish.\footnote{Smith 2004.} In the Late Bronze III/iron Age IA destruction layer at Azekah, four skeletons were found under the destruction debris.\footnote{Kleiman et al. 2016.} In Megiddo VIA, the skeletons were found mostly in Areas CC and K, far from the entrance to the city. Sixteen examples of skeletons are detailed in the report of the University of Chicago, and while two of these seem to have been completely unburied and crushed by the collapse (fig. 2),\footnote{Harrison 2004, figs. 83, 94.} the others were at least partially buried (figs. 3-4).\footnote{Harrison 2004, p. 20, figs. 73, 75, 76, 84, 85, 86, 87, 95.} The renewed excavations

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.jpg}
\caption{A crushed skeleton of a woman holding a basalt bowl. Gezer XVIII, Field IV (Seger 2013: photo III. 47). Courtesy of the Hebrew Union College.}
\end{figure}

\footnote{Gal, Alexandre 2000, p. 22.}
\footnote{Finkelstein, Beit-Arieh 1999, p. 76.}
\footnote{Albright 1938, pp. 57-8.}

entrance to the fort.\footnote{Gal, Alexandre 2000, p. 22.} At Tel 'Ira VII, the remains of two charred skeletons were found lying in a room adjacent to the city gate.\footnote{Finkelstein, Beit-Arieh 1999, p. 76.}

Other skeletons were found in private structures, far away from the entrance to the city. In Tell Beit Mirsim D, between seven to nine skeletons (one of those might be attributed to Stratum E) were found lying face down in a domestic quarter in area SE.\footnote{Albright 1938, pp. 57-8.} In Lachish VI, the skeletal remains of a woman and four children were found by a building in area S. Two of the children were lying on their faces, most probably after they were either thrown down or died while crawling on the ground. Fragments of a single isolated skull of a young woman were uncovered in area D. No signs of direct trauma were found on the bones of any of the individuals found at Lachish.\footnote{Smith 2004.} In the Late Bronze III/iron Age IA destruction layer at Azekah, four skeletons were found under the destruction debris.\footnote{Kleiman et al. 2016.} In Megiddo VIA, the skeletons were found mostly in Areas CC and K, far from the entrance to the city. Sixteen examples of skeletons are detailed in the report of the University of Chicago, and while two of these seem to have been completely unburied and crushed by the collapse (fig. 2),\footnote{Harrison 2004, figs. 83, 94.} the others were at least partially buried (figs. 3-4).\footnote{Harrison 2004, p. 20, figs. 73, 75, 76, 84, 85, 86, 87, 95.} The renewed excavations
I. Kreimerman

Skeletons in bronze and Iron Age destruction contexts in the southern Levant: what do they mean?

FIGURE 2
A crushed skeleton. Megiddo VIA (Harrison 2004: fig. 83).
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

FIGURE 3
A skeleton of a child buried in a storage jar. Note that the storage jar is within the destruction debris. Megiddo VIA (Harrison 2004: fig. 87).
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

FIGURE 4
Two skeletons buried in extended position within the destruction debris. Note the traces of soot around the skeletons, the large pithos lying at the same level, and the different orientations of the skeletons. Megiddo VIA (Harrison 2004: fig. 73).
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago
at Megiddo revealed additional data from this level. In level K-4, in a domestic building destroyed by a fierce conflagration, and covered by a thick collapse of burnt mudbricks, were found the remains of about ten individuals, together with pottery vessels. However, only four to five adults, one child and an infant were found in situ, while just fragmentary remains (sometimes isolated bones) were found of the rest. One of the adults was found in the central courtyard; another adult, a child and an infant in an adjacent room; and another adult in a different room.14 In Aphek A-7, a skeleton was found lying in the debris of a domestic structure.15 In Tel Rehov A3, two skeletons were found in two adjacent rooms of a private dwelling.16 Similarly, in Tel Batash III, in a building that was full of large storage jars of the Imlk type, but did not seem to have a public function, the remains of a single skeleton of a 20-25 years old male were found lying on the floor.17 In the 604 BCE destruction layer at Ashkelon, a skeleton of a young woman was found in a domestic context.18

The rarest occurrences are skeletons found in public buildings. The only likely cases come from Tel Batash. In stratum VII, two skeletons were found in a relatively large structure that was identified as a patrician’s house.19 In the debris of stratum III, in a massive public building, the skull of a two year old child was found, and in a nearby room, a complete skeleton of a woman was found covered by destruction debris.20 In none of these cases were the skeletons found in a palace, a temple or any other clearly administrative building.

B. Evidence for Conflagration

The evidence for conflagration, when found, is not always uniform throughout the site. In some sites the entire city was burned, except perhaps for some

14 Gadot et al. 2006, p. 97; Nagar 2006, tab. 22.1; Gadot, Yasur-Landaau 2006.
15 Kleiman 2015, pp. 180-1, fig. 6. It should be noted that only limited remains of the stratum were uncovered, and it is not clear where the entrance to the settlement was and the settlement’s size is unknown.
16 Mazar 1999, p. 32.
18 Stager et al. 2011, p. 41.
19 Mazar 1997, p. 65.

loci related to open spaces, such as courtyards or a street. In other sites, only the public buildings were burned, and in other cases the evidence for fire was found only next to the fortifications.21 Although destruction layers showing signs of a complete and thorough destruction by fire are relatively rare, it is at such sites that skeletons are nearly always found, whereas they are rarely found in sites that were only partially burned. Tel Batash III is the only case of a destruction layer that is evident throughout the entire site, and where some of the buildings were burnt. However, the skeletons were actually found in unburnt loci.

C. Restorable Pottery and Finds

Destruction level skeletons have always been found with large amounts of pottery and small finds. Studies that have focused on abandonment processes demonstrated that, generally speaking, the more ‘de facto refuse’22 is found in a structure, the more rapid is the abandonment. The presence of various pottery vessels, metal objects and, in the case of Gezer XVI-II, Lachish VI, Megiddo VIA and Ashkelon XII, of hoards in the same destruction layers – the most valuable objects that were possessed by a family – demonstrates that such layers were either very rapidly abandoned or not abandoned at all. This should come as no surprise, since if the inhabitants of the sites had a very short time to escape, their first reaction would have been to run away out of the buildings. In this respect, the presence of skeletons could serve as an indication for a very rapid destruction, with probably almost nothing missing from the original assemblage of the find context. Nevertheless, one could also expect a different situation, in which individuals were first executed and their house was then looted by the executors, although in none of the discussed sites was such evidence observed.23

D. Abandonment

Destructions tend to have different outcomes. In some cases, sites quickly recover and are rebuilt following the same plan, while in other cases the sites
seem to be rebuilt relatively quickly but following a new plan. Some sites could be abandoned for a long period of time, or at least considerably decrease in size, and the vast majority of the destruction layers that are accompanied by skeletons come from sites in this category. The only exception seems to be Tel Batash III that was not completely burned, and was reconstructed soon afterwards following the same town plan.24

E. Ranged Weapons
What one would expect to see from the archaeology if a siege battle occurs, of skeletons accompanied by massive amounts of arrowheads or sling-stones, is rather rare.25 A few examples come from Tel Batash VII, dating to the LBA IIA, where two skeletons were found in the destruction debris of Building 315. One of them was found with two arrowheads lying nearby. The remains of the other, from a male about 20-25 years old, with additional arrowheads, were found in the destruction debris of the building.26 In Tel Aphek A-7, two arrowheads were found next to a skeleton, and they may also suggest conflict.27 The fort of Ḥorbat Rosh Zayit IIA was violently destroyed, and dozens of arrowheads were found at the entrance. The destruction debris sealed a cistern located on the outside of the north-western corner of the fort and, just below the destruction debris, a burnt skeleton was found.28 Thus, in this case, there are ranged weapons in the destruction debris, but these were not found in association with the skeleton. Notably, no skeletons accompanied by ranged weapons were reported from any Assyrian or Babylonian destruction layers.29

F. Skeletons of Executed People?
The next nearest thing to evidence for conflict is skeletons of people that seem to have been executed from a short distance. These are characterized either by visibly missing body parts or the grouping of individuals in close proximity to each other and lying in the same position. Needless to say, the evidence here is not clear-cut, and only an examination of the skeletons can perhaps determine the cause of death.30 In Tell Beit Mirsim D, six to eight skeletons were found. Since six of them were lying face down (fig. 5) in close proximity to each other, it was suggested that they had been executed.31 In Tel Rehov A3, two skeletons were found in two adjacent rooms of a private dwelling. One of them was found in a contracted position with no skull, while the other was holding its contracted legs.32 In Ashkelon XII, a skeleton of a woman was found. Due to radiating fracture lines observed on the cranial vault, seemingly caused at the time of death, it was concluded that the death of the woman was caused from a blow with a blunt instrument.33

2.2. Skeletons Found within a Localized Destruction Context

Two skeletons were found in localized destruction contexts in Beth Shean R-4: one of a child, attributed to stratum R-4b, the other of an adult, attributed to stratum R-4c. In Beth-Shean VI (N3b/S4), two skeletons were found in two distinct places, one in building SF and the other in building SP. The first was lying on its back (no age or sex were specified), and the other was of a 30 year old male, found lying in an extended position, the hand resting on the pelvis, with his skull turned and facing

24 If the identification with the biblical Timnah is correct, then we know from Sennacherib’s prism that the city was transferred to the kingdom of Ekron.
25 In addition to the examples below, it was reported that a few skeletons were found trapped in Hazael’s destruction layer at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Namdar et al. 2011, p. 3472; Zukerman, Mazar 2012, p. 201), but the report on the skeletal remains and the metal objects is yet to be published.
29 This notion cannot be taken as a general rule beyond the southern Levant, as a good counter-example comes from the seventh century BCE destruction layer in Nineveh. At the Halṣi gate, a few slaughtered skeletons of adults and children were found lying among several arrowheads, some of them clearly causing the death of the individuals (Syronach 1997; Pickworth 2005).
30 For instance, a skeleton that was found in a cave by the water-system of Megiddo and was considered to be an executed guard (Lamon 1935, pp. 8.9), was shown to be a part of a disturbed burial (Zarzecki-Peleg 2016, pp. 176-177).
31 Albright 1938, pp. 57-8.
32 Mazar 1999, p. 32.
33 Smith 2008, p. 533; Stager et al. 2011, p. 41.
34 Mullins, Mazar 2007, pp. 55, 81.
I. Kreimerman

Skeletons in bronze and Iron Age destruction contexts in the southern Levant: what do they mean?

A collapse of large rocks (fig. 6). An anthropological examination showed that some fracture marks were made when the bone was fresh, and did not start to heal. Thus, it was concluded that the rock collapse either brought about the death of the individual, or it occurred soon afterwards. Around the woman there were some broken pottery vessels.  

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**Figure 5**
A skeleton facing down with thigh bones flexed upon the abdomen, and the legs flexed upon the thighs.
Tel Beit Mirsim E-D  
(Albright 1938: pl. 20a)

**Figure 6**
A crushed skeleton of a woman, holding her hands in front of her face.
Tel Dor G/7 or G/6b:  
Courtesy of the Tel Dor Excavations Project

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36 Stern, Sharon 1993, pp. 126-50; Stewart 1993; Sharon, Gilboa 2013, pp. 411-2.
3. How Common are Skeletons in Destruction Contexts?

In the preparation of this study, 146 destruction layers, spanning from the Middle Bronze Age until the Late Iron Age (ca. 2000-586 BCE), were examined. However, only in 16 of these were skeletons found lying within the destruction debris, as stated in the archaeological reports. This means that only in about 11% of the destruction layers were skeletons discovered, although a possible increase in this number cannot be ruled out as the excavation of such layers continues. As well as this small percentage, in those layers where they were found, they were few in number, and only at Shechem XV, Megiddo VIA, Lachish VI and Tell Beit-Mirosim D were more than two skeletons reported. Nowhere have situations like those seen at Hasanlu IVb from Iran, or Wādī ed-Dāliyeh, of the Persian-Hellenistic period, been observed. At these sites, 246 and more than 200 skeletons, respectively, were found. The rarity of skeletons in destruction layers seems to stand in contrast to the vast literature that mentions the slaughter and execution of enemies in times of battle, as well as to common sense, that assumes that conflict (and especially siege warfare) and natural disasters must have brought about the death of many individuals.

The scarcity of skeletons can be explained in one of two ways. The first is to argue that in most destruction events no people were killed inside the city, while the second is that people were indeed killed, but their corpses were removed afterwards. As we shall see, the combination of these explanations may explain our finds.

The destruction of a city could be caused by a number of factors, such as natural disasters – especially earthquakes – accidents and conflict. Earthquakes did not always end with casualties, let alone many, as sometimes people could escape before the structures collapsed. Furthermore, the number of casualties depended not only on the magnitude of the earthquake and the quality of construction of the buildings, but also on the time it occurred within the day. Naturally, there were more casualties if the earthquake struck during the night, when all the residents were in their homes, than during the day, when some of the inhabitants were outside the settlement in the fields. Thus, the scenario of a destruction layer that resulted from an earthquake, with no or few casualties is a plausible one.

In the case of military conflict, one should note that skeletons should be expected only in two cases. The first is when siege warfare occurred, and the second if a massacre took place after the city capitulated. However, cities could also be taken by other means, such as peaceful negotiation, after which the city surrendered, the use of stratagems and tricks, capitulation after a field battle, or a prolonged siege. Therefore, actual siege warfare was relatively rare and most cities eventually capitulated. Finally, it should be remembered that people could escape a city, and that it could have been completely abandoned out of fear of the approaching army. Thus, it is not at all surprising that skeletons are absent from most of the military destruction layers. Similarly, in cases of accidents or social revolt in the city, it could be expected that many of the inhabitants would have tried to escape.

However, even when casualties were present, hygiene played a major role. Usually, settlements that were destroyed as result of a natural disaster were quickly rehabilitated. Thus, in order to prevent the outbreak of diseases, corpses were recovered. The same applies for rehabilitation after a battle. In many cases, the fleeing inhabitants of captured cities left supplies that could be utilized by the conquerors. The possibility can therefore not be excluded that sometimes the conqueror and his army may have decided to dwell for a short period of time in the city, thus requiring the removal of corpses.

Furthermore, one must remember the importance of proper burial in the ancient Near East, for in order to get integrated in the community of the

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37 Cross 1963; Lapp, Lapp 1974, p. 7-29; Muscarella 1989; Danti 2014.
38 Hamblin 2006; Richardson 2007; Vidal 2014.
40 Kreimerman 2016.
dead, the person must be buried. With no such burial, and especially when the body was left lying in the field, scavenged by wild animals, the individual concerned, it was believed, would not get peace and might even become a ghost. Moreover, the proper burial of soldiers that died in battle was seen as extremely important. Egyptian literary sources mention that special efforts were made by officials to bury soldiers, especially when the deceased had no relatives who could take care of the operation. Indeed, evidence for a mass burial of Egyptian soldiers that were killed in battle was found in tomb MMA 507 in Deir el-Bahri.

Due to the religious importance of burial, leaving unburied bodies could serve as a punishment for the residents of an unlawful city. Consequently, literary sources that discuss war in the ancient Near East, mention the scattering and prevention of burial of the corpses of defeated enemies. In many instances, the mutilation or display of the corpses, piled up in front of city gates, or placed on stakes around the city, are also described. The mutilation of corpses after death is well known from many cultures. In some extreme cases, when the desecration of a nation was sought, the exhumation and mutilation of the bones of long-past deceased rulers was also practised. In fact, threats concerning the prevention of burial and the mutilation of corpses were included in various treaties.

Based on the above, in the case of a siege battle which resulted in casualties, the following reconstruction of events can be suggested. First, the conqueror carefully collected the corpses of his soldiers, and either buried them or sent them back to their homeland for proper burial. Next, the corpses of the soldiers and inhabitants of the defeated city were collected, either by the conqueror, for gruesome display of various sorts, or for hygienic considerations, or by the remaining inhabitants of the city in order to bury their own.

The notion that cities were intentionally and thoroughly ‘cleaned’ of corpses after they were conquered is clearly attested in a number of cases, the best examples being Lachish III and Ashdod VIII. Lachish, the second largest city in Judah, was conquered by Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, in 701 BCE. The evidence for the event is compelling. The siege ramp that was constructed by the Assyrians was found, with hundreds of arrowheads and dozens of sling-stones next to it and by the city gate, attesting to the battle that took place. The city was then put to the torch. The event is also documented in the Hebrew Bible and in a relief found in Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh. There can be no doubt that during the intense fighting that took place, both sides suffered casualties. However, up to now, the past three expeditions that excavated the site have not reported even one skeleton from the destruction layer. Nonetheless, in four caves near the city mass burials of ca. 1500 individuals were found, piled up one on top of the other.

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50 Ussishkin 2004a.
52 Ussishkin 1982.
53 Risdon 1939; Ussishkin 1982, p. 56-8. Only 695 crania and 56 mandibles were examined, so there is no data for the rest of the bones, and it is not clear if the sample is representative. It is apparent, however, that crania were more common than other bones in the tomb, yet Risdon makes a compelling argument, suggesting that whole bodies were thrown into the burials (Risdon 1939, pp. 104-6). Some of the bones were damaged by fire; on one skull evidence for a wound that could cause the death of the individual was found. According to an examination of the crania, 51.8% of the deceased were male, 39.4% were female and 8.8% were children (Risdon 1939). So, although there are some indications that the mass burial is a result of the conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib, it cannot be proven beyond doubt. Others suggested that the mass burial should not necessarily be attributed to the Level III destruction, but could be associated with that of Level VI (Eph’Al 2013, pp. 32-3), or even to a different event (Zimhoni 1997, pp. 160-4). Yet, even if one of these suggestions is true, the burial cave still testifies to a process of clearing the city of corpses after a fierce destruction. Additionally, it is clear that the city of Level III was cleared of corpses, even if they were not placed in these particular burial caves.
In Ashdod VIII, most probably conquered by Sargon II, the king of Assyria in the late eighth century BCE, no evidence for a siege battle was discovered, but a fragment of a victory stela that Sargon set up in the city was revealed. No skeletal remains were found in the destruction debris but the remains of a few mass burials, of a total of 3000 individuals, were found under the floors of structures in Area D. This suggests that the casualties of the campaign were found and granted proper burial within the city. Similarly, no skeletons were found in the destruction debris of Beersheba II and Bethsaida V, which were also destroyed in the eighth century BCE and show clear signs of a battle. Another noteworthy case is a cave burial of a soldier, found in the Samarian highlands, who was most probably killed in one of the Assyrian campaigns. The individual was killed by a few blows from a sharp object, possibly a sword, and his right hand was cut and probably taken as a trophy. In another case, from Middle Bronze Age Jericho, six skeletons were found in a burial cave, all of them killed from blows by blunt objects, the three males had missing right hands. These two cases attest to the formal burial of individuals who were killed in combat.

All in all, the ‘cleaning’ of the city of corpses was thorough. In order for this to happen it had to be done before the city was burned. Otherwise, the collapse layers of burnt mudbricks, that could easily reach two meters, would have made it much harder to find and recover the corpses trapped underneath.

Although it would have preserved the skeletons underneath for later archaeologists to find. Accordingly, at least a few hours had to pass between the conquest of a city and its burning, and hence, the burning of a city should not be seen as an unthoughtful and random decision, but as intentional and well-planned.

4. Why are Skeletons Found in Destruction Contexts?

When considering the cases in which skeletons were found, it is evident that they are predominantly found on sites that were completely and thoroughly burned, and were later abandoned. Each of these three features, namely the presence of skeletons, the complete burning of a city, and its subsequent abandonment, are relatively rare in the archaeological record. In the vast majority of destruction layers, evidence for conflagration appears only in a few areas, with the site later rehabilitated. This is especially interesting, as abandonment of a permanent residential site is not a trivial action. Cities are not mere places of residence, but also function as mechanisms for the preservation of the social order. Each person, each family, has its social status, its house and its land. Moving to a new site might mean giving up on all three. For this reason, abandonment was generally chosen only in extreme cases, especially as a result of environmental changes, subsistence stress or a detailed study of 695 of the skulls showed that only 3 were burnt (Risdon 1939, p. 105). This suggests that the skeletons were collected before the complete burning of the site, since otherwise, signs of fire on a significantly larger number of skeletons would be expected. The evidence of a few burned skeletons could represent individuals who were exposed to fire during fighting, as most probably happened at the gate complex and in Area R (Ussishkin 2004a, pp. 732-42; Ussishkin 2004b, pp. 518-9).

Thus, the idea that the reason for the absence of skeletons from the city of Ugarit is due to their lack of burial and disintegration (Vidal 2014, p. 73) should be rejected. As many of the areas in the city burned down (Yon 1992, pp. 117-8; Vidal 2014, pp. 70-2), if there were any human remains there, they would be relatively well preserved under the debris of burnt mudbricks. It seems more plausible that, similar to the Assyrian and Babylonian destruction layers, the city was cleaned of bodies before it was put to the torch.

I. Kreimerman

Skeletons in bronze and Iron Age destruction contexts in the southern Levant: what do they mean?

West & East
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22

Anno II – 2017
epidemics, or alternatively, following pressure from immigration or conflict. This means that skeletons are mostly found in sites the inhabitants did not intend to return to, and thus the destruction debris was less thoroughly cleaned and some skeletons were not rescued. This could happen either because the skeletons were covered by very thick debris, or if none of their family members returned to the site.

The clearest case comes from Megiddo VIA. Only two skeletons among the ones found by the Chicago expedition, and four to six others from the renewed excavations, seem to have been completely unburied (fig. 2). The rest were at least partially buried. In some cases, a skeleton’s head or body was covered by a vessel as part of a symbolic burial. In other cases the skeletons were first rescued, and then reburied within the debris, either in an extended position, but with no burial offerings and with no consistent orientation (fig. 4) or, in the case of children, in storage jars (fig. 3). Because the skeletons were given a formal burial we know that they were searched for and found by contemporaries, with an effort made to rescue them from the destruction debris. If there was an intention to return to the site, those skeletons would have been removed and buried outside the site, or under the floors of rebuilt houses. So, the uniqueness of Megiddo’s destruction does not lie in the number of casualties, but with their treatment and the choice to bury them within the destruction layer.

These considerations do not apply in the cases of clearly executed individuals. The destroyers of a site were aware of the presence of the skeletons in the destruction debris. For this reason, it could be assumed that these skeletons were left in the destruction layer intentionally, perhaps in order to punish the executed individuals with no burial. These occasions are among the best evidence for conflict as the cause of destruction.

In the case of skeletons found together with ranged weapons, it is clear that the cause for destruction was military activity. Yet, since these are ranged weapons, the conquering army might have not been aware of the deceased individuals. Thus, there is no way to determine whether these skeletons were left in the destruction debris intentionally, or if they were simply not found due to the rapid destruction process.

Mostly, however, skeletons were found with no evidence for execution and no ranged weaponry. Of course, it is clear that this group is over-represented, as not in all cases was an anthropological examination carried out, and sometimes death could have been caused by injuries that hurt soft tissue, that would not be reflected on the skeleton. Yet, clearly, such skeletons were found in a number of destruction layers from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE that undoubtedly resulted from military activity. As these skeletons are isolated cases, it is most likely that they were not rescued, either because the skeletons were not found or their recovery was considered to be too difficult. This idea is further supported by the fact that many skeletons were found at the city gate – the place where the battle occurred and that could collapse during the battle itself – and in domestic structures. Public buildings usually contained more wealth than private structures, and thus, were more likely to be thoroughly searched for goods before or after any destruction. The case of Shechem XV, where skeletons of both humans and animals were found together in the destruction debris, clearly points to a sudden collapse of buildings that probably caused their death. It is otherwise difficult to explain why animals would be intention-

63 Tomka, Stevenson 1993; Nelson, Schachner 2002
64 Harrison 2004, figs. 83, 94.
65 As mentioned above, the report does not describe in detail what type of remains were found of each individual, and as this study does not count isolated bones, the exact numbers cannot be determined. See Gadot et Al. 2006, p. 97-101; Gadot, Yasur-Landau 2006, p. 591; Nagar 2006; Cline 2011, p. 59. In addition to fragmentary remains, these facts could point to the possibility that only some of corpses were recovered, with isolated body parts remaining in the destruction debris.
66 At least one example of such a child burial is known from the Oriental Institute excavations (Harrison 2004, 8) and another from the renewed excavations.
67 Unless, of course, the execution was part of a ritual. However, in this case, one would expect to find such evidence in tombs (e.g. Hughes 1991; Baadsgaard et Al. 2011; Recht 2011; Vidale 2011). The presence of such remains in a destruction layer would mean that the destruction occurred when a ritual was taking place. It has been argued that one such case occurred in 17th century BCE Crete, but this idea is not widely accepted (Hughes 1991, pp. 13-7; Bonnechere 1993; Postelthwait 1999).
ally executed, or be in the vicinity of fortifications at the time of a battle. In these cases, it cannot be determined, on the basis of the skeletal remains alone, whether the destruction resulted from disaster or conflict. However, as the same sites were usually thoroughly burned and later abandoned, conflict should be preferred as an explanation.

Finally, skeletons found within the context of a localized destruction, attest to a very sudden event that affected the site, but did not cause its ultimate destruction. It seems probable that it was this localized destruction that caused the death of the individuals, who were also covered by a thick debris layer. After this localized event, the individuals may not have been found, or their rescue may have been considered too risky a task. The partial nature of these destructions, the lack of signs of conflagration in most places, the notion that the collapse was most probably a rapid one, and the quick recovery of the settlements, could tentatively suggest that these events resulted from earthquakes, or local disasters such as building collapse.

5. Summary and Conclusions

In this study, it has been argued that in the Bronze and Iron Age Near East, after a city was destroyed, whatever the cause for its destruction, every effort was made to remove bodies from the destruction debris, and grant the deceased a proper burial. This was the case, unless the individuals were executed and the prevention of their burial was considered as part of a punishment.

In this way, the presence of skeletons in destruction contexts could be due to one of the four following reasons:

1. The skeletons were not found soon after death.
2. The skeletons were buried under a thick debris layer and their recovery was considered to be too difficult.
3. The site was abandoned, and thus the skeletons were symbolically buried within the debris.
4. The skeletons were left intentionally unburied as a punishment.

The evidence for the first two reasons is usually that of isolated skeletons found in the destruction debris, sometimes, but not necessarily, accompanied by ranged weaponry. Among the layers mentioned above, the cases of Shechem XV, Gezer XVIII, Lachish VI, Rosh Zayit IIA, ’Ira VII, Dor G6b/7, Beth Shean R-4b/a, and maybe also Batash VII, as well as the unburied skeletons of Megiddo VIA and Beth Shean VI, seem to fit such a scenario. Such skeletons attest to the suddenness of the destruction and to their close proximity to it. Consequently, it could be assumed that the finds assemblage in their vicinity might represent the activities that took place in the building a short time before the destruction. However, one cannot deduce that the assemblage for the entire site faithfully represents the activities that took place before its destruction, as both earthquakes and destruction as a result of human activity could have variable effects on buildings at one and the same site.68 The evidence for the third case – the abandonment of sites – is seen in skeletons found in the destruction debris but with clear signs of at least a partial burial. The only case that could be safely attributed to this category is of Megiddo VIA, although the partially buried skeleton of Beth-Shean VI may also belong to this group.

For the first three reasons, the mere presence of skeletons cannot reveal the cause for destruction. For those possibly unburied intentionally, however, the cause is usually evident from either the concentration of skeletons, the missing parts, or the skeletal trauma caused by sharp objects, attesting to conflict as a clear cause for the destruction. The layers that belong to this group are Beit Mirsim D, Rehov A3, Ashkelon XII and possibly Batash VII and III.

It is worth noting that the presence of skeletons with no accompanying ranged weapons cannot be considered to be clear evidence of a natural disaster or an accident as the cause of destruction, either.69 This is because such skeletons have also been found in definitively military destruction layers. In

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68 For earthquakes see Stiros 1996, pp. 135-9; for the variability in military destruction layers see Stronach 1997; Wileman 2009, pp. 64-5; Stager et Al. 2011; Arav 2014.

fact most of the destruction layers that contained crushed skeletons evidently resulted from conflict. Only the wider, actual, context of the destruction can serve as a hint for its cause.

Above all, the scarcity of skeletons in southern Levantine destruction layers makes clear the importance that Bronze and Iron Age people attributed to death and the proper burial of a person. This is a feature of most destruction layers, especially those related to military activity, clearly indicating the fact that a certain period of time must have elapsed between the conquest of a site and its destruction. Thus, destruction should not be seen as a random action executed in the course of conquest, but rather an intentional and well planned post-conquest enterprise.

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TABLE 1

The contexts of skeletons in destruction layers in the southern Levant from the MBA to the end of the IA (ca. 2000-586 BCE). Note that skeletons mostly appear in wholesale destruction layers, that show fire, *de facto* refuse and consequent abandonment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Hoards</th>
<th>Long-range weapon in association with skeleton</th>
<th>De facto refuse</th>
<th>Abandonment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale destruction of the site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shechem XV</td>
<td>MB III</td>
<td>Gate</td>
<td>8?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gezer XVIII</td>
<td>MB III/LB I?</td>
<td>By the gate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beit Mirsim D</td>
<td>MB III/LB I?</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>6–8</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batash VII</td>
<td>LB IIA</td>
<td>Patrician house?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lachish VI</td>
<td>LB III</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>5–7</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azekah</td>
<td>LB III</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megiddo VIA</td>
<td>IA IB</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>8–13</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosh Zayit IIA</td>
<td>IA IIA</td>
<td>By the gate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphek</td>
<td>IA IIA</td>
<td>Private house</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell es-Safi A3</td>
<td>IA IIA</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reḥov A3</td>
<td>IA IIB</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batash III</td>
<td>IA IIB</td>
<td>Private houses + Public building</td>
<td>3?</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ira VII</td>
<td>IA IIB</td>
<td>By the gate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashkelon XII</td>
<td>IA IIC</td>
<td>Private houses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Localized destruction |
| Beth-Shean R-4b/a | MB IIB | Private houses | 2   | partial | -      | -                                             | +              | -           |
| Beth-Shean VI     | LB III | Private houses | 2   | partial | +      | -                                             | +              | -           |
| Dor G6b/7         | IA IB/ IA IIA | Private houses | 1   | -      | -      | -                                             | +              | -           |
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