Cult and ritual in Early Bronze Age I Southern Levant: fragmented or connected landscape?

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Abstract

The existence of marked regionalism in the material culture of the southern Levant in the Early Bronze Age I is a long-established fact; however, the nature of the relationships between the different sub-regions is still a matter of debate. The paper analyses the EBI regionalism in the southern Levant from the perspective of cult and ritual in order to investigate the nature of the connections – or the lack thereof – between the various sub-regions also in comparison to the main Late Chalcolithic sanctuaries to have an overall look at the fourth millennium cultic habits. Architectural aspects of the main southern Levantine sanctuaries from this period will be taken into account, as well as the material culture and ritual practices. New data from excavations at Jebel al-Mutawwaq, Jordan, will be included in the analysis. Through the examination of the archaeological data, the paper seeks to recognize differences due to isolation of the different sub-regions from one another and/or similarities which may suggest that there were contacts and connections between the different areas of the Southern Levant in the Early Bronze Age I.

Keywords

Jebel al-Mutawwaq, Early Bronze Age I, Cult, Ritual, Southern Levant
1. Introduction

During the fourth millennium BC in the Southern Levant the Late Chalcolithic occurred (4000-3800 BC) and, after its end, the Early Bronze Age began. The Early Bronze Age I period (ca. 3700-3000 BC) is characterized by new archaeological features compared to the previous period and those characteristics are the expression of new cultural and economic impulses which spread in this period and which determined the development of sedentarism and of the urbanization process during the Early Bronze Age II. For this reason, this period is considered a proto-urban period and understanding its main aspects could allow to retrace the evolution of the Early Bronze Age communities. Early Bronze Age I (henceforth EBI) is divided into two archaeological phases, EBIA and EBIB. While the EBIB phase shows several evidences and archaeological features which preempt the EBII urbanization phase, it is still quite difficult to define the EBIA aspects throughout the Southern Levant because of the high degree of regionalism in this period. Despite that, interactions between different microregions occurred and some similarities between the communities can be observed.

The present analysis, preliminary in nature, examines the cultic aspects of the fourth millennium BC communities to delineate differences and similarities between some of the main Late Chalcolithic and EBI sacred areas and between the EBI ones, to observe the degree of regionalism in this period, for a deeper comprehension of the nature of the religion and the role of the cult in the development of the proto-urban Early Bronze Age I societies. In particular, it aims to understand if the Early Bronze Age I ritual practices denote the regionalism of the period or if it is possible to identify some common aspects between the eastern and the western regions, at least in the cultic aspects.

In this regard, Jebel al-Mutawwaq, located in the Middle Valley of the Zarqa River, in Jordan, is one of the most important sites, because it is the only excavation of an Early Bronze Age I sanctuary in Transjordan; furthermore, during the last five years, the Italian-Spanish expedition at the site, directed by A. Polcaro of Perugia University and J. Muniz of Pontificia Falcultad San Esteban of Salamanca, decided to study all the materials gathered from the sacred area of the settlement, which has been excavated from 2003 to 2005, to better understand the cultic activities in the site.

2. Late Chalcolithic period

In the Southern Levant region, several sanctuaries have been found, belonging to the Late Chalcolithic Period, and it is interesting to notice how many similarities characterized the religious aspects during the two periods in analysis. The best examples of Late Chalcolithic cultic habits are the sacred areas of En Gedi and Teleilat Ghassul.

In the site of En Gedi the sacred area is placed on an isolated hill and is not linked to a settlement, as in the site of Teleilat Ghassul. Here the Area E sanctuary is placed on an isolated zone, but inside the settlement area. Despite that, the planimetrics of the two sanctuaries are similar.

Both of these sanctuaries are characterized by a temenos enclosing a courtyard with several buildings (fig. 1). There was a main building, probably the main sancta sanctorum, and a smaller building, perhaps in the case of Ghassul used as a storage room or as a production place; furthermore, at the center of the courtyard there was in both cases a circular installation for ritual practices. In Tuleilat al-Ghassul, there

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1 For discussions about the Chalcolithic chronology see: Braun et al. 2013, Bourke et al. 2001; Rowan, Golden 2009; Rowan, Ilan 2012.
2 A strong climate change occurred between Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I and the environmental change imposed societal changes different from region to region. Varied subsistence systems determined different settlement patterns and several patterns of mobility through the micro-regions (Hourani 2010; Clarke et al. 2015).
3 For a discussion about the Early Bronze Age chronology see: Regev et al. 2012; Regev et al. 2014.
4 For a detailed analysis about the reorganization of Southern Levantine settlements during the Early Bronze Age see: Harrison, Savage 2003; Chesson 2003; Philip 2008.
5 For a definition of regionalism see: Greenberg 2002, pp. 5-7.
6 For En-Gedi excavations see: Stern 2007. For the Area E sanctuary of Teleilat Ghassul see: Seaton 2008.
is a large open semicircular altar with a sort of proces-
sional road leading to it; differently, in En Gedi, there
is a circular installation interpreted also as ceremonial
water basin. The absence of a settlement linked to the
En Gedi shrine indicates that the sanctuary was used
by all the communities of the area as a regional san-
cuary; instead, the presence of a settlement in Teleilat
Ghassul indicates that the sanctuary was used by the
community who was living there. Despite this fact,
the two sanctuaries present also strong similarities in
the material culture, indicating a sort of religious koi-
ñe in this period, even if the Late Chalcolithic seden-
tary communities of Ghassul could have had proper
distinctive characters.

Figure 1
a. Plan of the En-Gedi shrine (after Stern 2007, p. 31);
b. Plan of the Area E Sanctuary at Teleilat al Ghassul (after Seaton 2008, Pl. 9)
3. Early Bronze Age I period

At the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, the regions of Southern Levant show different cultural features and social organizations; it is possible to recognize dissimilarities also in the location and function of sacred areas.

For example, the site of Hartuv does not show evidences of a proper settlement, but a sacred area on the top of the hill was identified, which could have been some kind of regional sanctuary as the Late Chalcolithic site of En Gedi. Hartuv, which is in the Palestine region of Shephelah, rises near the Sorek river.7

The settlement is a mono-phase site of the Early Bronze Age I with three sub-phases. The second sub-phase (Stratum II) revealed a public complex in the Area A (fig. 3: a).8 The complex is characterized by a central courtyard (L114) in the northern portion of the area, and by two large perpendicular rooms (L.234 and L152) and two narrow elongated rooms (L.163 and L.173). Inside the sanctuary L.152 there is a row of standing stones/massebot on the inner facade of the southern wall W.150. The standing stones could have had a structural function even if they are just on one of the walls. More probably, some stones used to build the walls of the complex could have been originally part of a row of standing stones; in fact, two broken pillar bases in the western portion of the room seem to be broken standing stones. Thus, probably, this could have been originally a cultic open area with a row of standing stones (Stratum III). An open sacred area was replaced by a built cultic complex.9 The plan of the temple is similar to Late Chalcolithic sacred buildings and to temples of the following period, for example Ai and Yarmouth.10 Examples of ritual standing stones are known already from the Late Chalcolithic Gilat.11 No materials on the floors of the complex were found; probably it was peacefully abandoned. In fact, in the same period, at the end of the Early Bronze Age I, many other sites in the Shephelah region were abandoned. During the Early Bronze Age II new fortified settlements, as Tell Yarmouth, were founded.

Most of the pottery sherds found in Hartuv are identified with local South Levantine pottery even if some Egyptian vessels (probably imported from Southern Canaan) are recorded.

As said before, also in the Early Bronze Age I period it is possible to recognize not only isolated sanctuaries, but also sacred areas inside the settlements, as showed by the sites of Megiddo, Jericho and Jebel al-Mutawwaq.

The site of Megiddo, around 20 km south of Haifa, has been investigated by several archaeological expeditions.12 Concerning the fourth millennium sacred area on the tell, it was identified on the eastern terrace of the tell, in Area BB, facing Ain el-Kubbi spring (fig. 2). The first phase (Stratum XIXB/J-2) was constituted by a cultic open area (locus 4008), the presence of several fragments of cornets dated this area to a Late Chalcolithic/EB IA phase.13 During the phase J-2 (corresponding to Stratum XIX), dated to EB IB, in the same area, a temenos and a broad-room structure were built.14 The broad-room building (15.5 × 5.5 m) was badly preserved but two rows of pillar bases on the main axis were identified. The ritual function of the structure is suggested by the presence of some graffiti on the stones of the forecourt floor.15 During the phase J-3 (corresponding to Stratum XIX), buildings 4050, 4047 and the installation 4034 were built inside the temenos. Building 4050, built on the top of the previous J-2 phase building, was a broad-room building (13.2 × 4.2 m) and the entrance was locat-

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7 For the report of Hartuv excavations see: Mazar, De Miroschedji 1996.
8 The absolute chronology for the main phase (Stratum II), after radiocarbon analysis, is 3506-3409 BC (see Mazar, De Miroschedji 1996, p. 27).
10 For the plan of the building at Ai, see Callaway 1972, p. 21; for the plan of the building at Yarmouth see De Miroschedji 1988, p. 39.
12 The main archaeological expeditions at Megiddo were conducted by the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (1903-1905), the Oriental Institute of Chicago and the Tel Aviv University.
14 Finkelstein, Ussishkin 2000, pp. 53-55.
15 Loud 1948; Finkelstein, Ussishkin, Cline (eds.) 2013.
Cult and ritual in Early Bronze Age I Southern Levant: fragmented or connected landscape?

**Figure 2**
a. Plan of the phase J-2 in the Area BB, Megiddo (Ussishkin 2015, fig. 8); courtesy of the Megiddo Expedition  
b. Plan of the phase J-3 in the Area BB, Megiddo (Ussishkin 2015, fig. 10); courtesy of the Megiddo Expedition

**Figure 3**
a. Plan of the sacred area at Hartuv (after Mazar, De Miroschedji 1996, fig. 6);  
b. Plan of the shrine 420 at Jericho (after Nigro 2005, fig. 3.41)
ed on the long side. Inside the building, four pillar bases on the main axis were located and, in front of the entrance, a stone quadrangular platform was located. In front of it a barely hemispherical clay installation with some hollows on the surface, maybe for some cultic activities. The building 4047 was a smaller building where probably some productive activities were performed, as suggested by the preservation ware found in the structure. In the forecourt of the sacred area, a circular platform with a hollow on its surface was placed, probably for some ritual activities linked to the temple.

The plan of the EB IB sacred area of Megiddo is similar to the plan of En Gedi shrine suggesting that EB IB Megiddo was influenced by the Late Chalcolithic model.

The site of Jericho is located inside an oasis along the southern Jordan valley, about 10 km north of the Dead Sea.

The site has been investigated by different expeditions, led by Garstang during the ‘30s and Kenyon during the ‘50s. The current one is directed by Lorenzo Nigro from Sapienza University of Rome.16

In 1936 Garstang identified the Early Bronze Age I temple, built on the northern terrace of the site, in an area separated from the domestic quarter by a demarcation wall. The temple was called “Babylonian shrine” by Garstang, because its entrance was on one of the longer sides in a non-central position (fig. 3: b). The temple was dated to final Early Bronze Age Ia, corresponding to the Sultan IIIa phase and was used also during the Early Bronze Age Ib (Sultan IIIb phase). The temple 420 was a roughly rectangular room with a latitudinal orientation.17 The building had thick walls and the entrance was on the northern side. On the inside, the temple had plastered platforms along each side and a 1,6 m wide platform linked to the NW short wall, right of the entrance, interpreted as a podium. On the platform there were some cupmarks, maybe for offerings. Inner walls of the buildings and platforms were plastered. Probably the temple had an external courtyard because its walls seem to continue further the building. The walls had stone foundations and a mudbricks wall. During the Early Bronze Age Ib the sacred area was enlarged through East and a second room was added (447 with platform 422) with an uncertain function.18 The area in front of the temple was not excavated and it is not possible to be sure that there were some open area installations. Inside the temple area some small pillars and standing stones were found. It is supposed that the temple 420 was a sacred place inside the settlement that may be interpreted as a domestic shrine similar to the shrine 671 from Tell el Farah North dated to the Early Bronze II.19 The pottery repertoire from the temple 420 is mainly made of simple ware, like cups, juglets and jars. It is noticeable the presence of line painted and band slip decorations which are typical decorations of the Early Bronze Age IB phase. It is important to notice the presence of some applied decoration with serpent shape.20

The settlement of Jebel al-Mutawwaq, in the Zarqa region of Jordan, around 30 km north of Amman and 7 km South-East of Jerash, was partially excavated by a Spanish archaeological expedition from the University of Oviedo under the direction of the professor Juan Tresguerres-Velasco from the ’90s until 2010. After that, since 2012, the site has been investigated by an Italian-Spanish joint expedition.

The settlement rises on a mountain located at the confluence between the Zarqa River to the south and a seasonal river on the west side, the wadi Qmeid. This geographical feature, with the proximity to two water springs on the base of the mountain favored the occupation of the settlement around the second half of the fourth millennium BC, corresponding to the Early Bronze Age I.21

The site is known for the presence of 18 ha village, larger than other sites in this period (fig. 4). Furthermore, the settlement was enclosed by a demarcation wall, which is uncommon during the

16 John Garstang conducted the excavations for the University of Liverpool between 1930 and 1936 (Garstang 1936), Kathleen Kenyon directed the University College of London expeditions at the site between 1952 and 1958 (Kenyon 1981). During 1997 Sapienza University of Rome with Lorenzo Nigro started new excavations at the site (Nigro 2005, 2010).

17 Nigro 2005, p. 44.
Early Bronze Age IA, and had a wide megalithic necropolis out of the village enclosure on the rest of the hill. Inside the village, a sacred area has been identified, named Temple of the Serpents, and investigated between 2003 and 2005.

The sanctuary is located in one of the most visible and high points of the southern slope of Jebel al-Mutawwaq (fig. 5).

It is composed of a main oval building (Building 76), with north-south orientation, five small independent rooms with an entrance corridor on

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22 The wall which encircled the village of Jebel al-Mutawwaq was just a demarcation wall, not a defensive wall, and defined the area of the village from the necropolis. In 2013, a small portion of the wall was investigated and the material culture dated the wall to EB IA (see Muñiz, Polcaro, Alvarez 2017a). Some other examples of demarcation and defensive walls were attested during EB I but they have been mainly dated to EB IB (see Paz 2002).

23 The settlement had two main occupational phases, both pertaining to EB I. The first phase is dated to EB IA and the second phase is dated to EB IB. The EB IB phase has been detected in the Area C, precisely in dolmen 534 and 535 (see Polcaro, Muñiz 2018). The chronological phases have been identified mainly through the pottery repertoire (see Casadei 2018). C14 analysis were performed on olive seeds coming from the Temple of the Serpents and the results are 5290–5040 BP = 3340–3090 BCE (Beta Analytic 194526) and 5270–5170 BP = 3320–3220 BCE (Beta Analytic 194527), see Fernandez-Tresguerres 2005, 2008.

due to its monumental architecture it is clearly the main “sancta sanctorum” of the sanctuary.

The plan of the sacred area buildings is similar to the domestic buildings. The construction technique seems the same as in the rest of the settlement, using large stones without mud-brick or pebble inside the walls, but the delimitation slabs of Building 76 are much more monumental than the private buildings.

The material culture of the Temple of the Serpents is not totally known yet because the Italian-Spanish team is still studying the materials from the past excavations. Despite that, it is possible to notice that some rooms of the multicellular complex inside the temenos and House 75 show a prominent presence of necked and holemouth storage jars, and it is an important datum because in the same rooms there were many grinding stones, tabulars and fan scrapers26 (fig. 6).

These data suggest that some production activities were performed in the sacred area and it is possible to delineate a sort of differentiation in the functional designation of the different sectors of the area. In Teleilat al Ghasul, a production area near the Area E sanctuary was identified, probably linked to that. This kind of activities is typical of a sedentary society, in which the sacred area is also used for other community activities, such as food production.27

Considering the cultic aspect, it is important to notice that many applied serpent figurines dec-

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26 For a preliminary analysis of the distribution of pottery sherds in the temple see: Casadei 2018, pp. 289-290.
Age I buildings, the “Babylonian shrine” in Jericho and the Hartuv complex have a broad-room plan, as the Late Chalcolithic sanctuaries had. Furthermore, the Jericho shrine has the inner platform inside the main building, as the temple of En Gedi, but the spatial organization of the sacred area of the Temple of the Serpents at Jebel al-Mutawwaq is more similar to En Gedi and Ghassul sanctuaries than Hartuv and Jericho. In fact, there is an open courtyard enclosed by a temenos which contains the main building, i.e. the temple, and other functional buildings for ritual activities. A dissimilarity between the sanctuaries is the position of the sanctuary: En Gedi was on an isolated tell, as the sanctuary of Hartuv, during the Early Bronze Age I; on the contrary, the main sacred area of Ghassul was within the settlement and, in addition to this sanctuary, there was another sacred area inside the domestic quarter. Thus, there was a ritual activity linked to a sedentary community. Probably the sites of Jericho and of Jebel al-Mutawwaq had that kind of cultic activity linked to the settlement.

The Late Chalcolithic sacred areas, as En Gedi and Ghassul, were the model for EB I temples but the socio-economic aspects and the EB I regionalism determined the different development of the same traditions in different areas.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to notice some discontinuities and some continuities between the cultic contexts of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I; furthermore, the similarities and dissimilarities between EB I contexts may have been the result of the different Chalcolithic traditions from which they emerged and developed the traditions.

Considering the architectural features, it is interesting to notice that Jebel al-Mutawwaq is the only sanctuary among the mentioned sites which has a curvilinear plan. Even though the curvilinear plan is one of the characteristic features of the Early Bronze Age I buildings, the “Babylonian shrine” in Jericho and the Hartuv complex have a broad-room plan, as the Late Chalcolithic sanctuaries had. Furthermore, the Jericho shrine has the inner platform inside the main building, as the temple of En Gedi, but the spatial organization of the sacred area of the Temple of the Serpents at Jebel al-Mutawwaq is more similar to En Gedi and Ghassul sanctuaries than Hartuv and Jericho. In fact, there is an open courtyard enclosed by a temenos which contains the main building, i.e. the temple, and other functional buildings for ritual activities. A dissimilarity between the sanctuaries is the position of the sanctuary: En Gedi was on an isolated tell, as the sanctuary of Hartuv, during the Early Bronze Age I; on the contrary, the main sacred area of Ghassul was within the settlement and, in addition to this sanctuary, there was another sacred area inside the domestic quarter. Thus, there was a ritual activity linked to a sedentary community. Probably the sites of Jericho and of Jebel al-Mutawwaq had that kind of cultic activity linked to the settlement.

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29 Polcaro 2019.
About the ritual traditions and religious behavior, it is interesting to notice the presence of the serpent feature in different contexts (fig. 7). The Late Chalcolithic sanctuaries have pottery decorations with serpent shape applications on the surfaces of the jars. At En Gedi, the snakes have a band painted body, while at Ghassul snakes have a pointed incisions decoration. At Jericho there are some examples of the serpent decoration on pottery sherds similar to the Ghassulian one. At Hartuv there are no examples of serpent decorations. At Jebel al-Mutawwaq, the snakes with pointed incised body are typical of the Temple of the Serpents, and they are generally placed on the jars with the mouth on the rim of the vessels as if they were to drink from the jar.

Considering just the plan of the sacred areas mentioned in this paper, Jebel al-Mutawwaq seems to be a “compromise” between the Late Chalcolithic and the EB I traditions. In fact, the spatial distribution of the buildings in the Temple of the Serpents is similar to the plan of En Gedi shrine and Teleilat Ghassul sanctuary, but the buildings have a double-apsed plan according to EB I tradition.

Taking into account the chronological phases in Jericho, it can be noticed that the Shrine 420 was built after the domestic area and probably the shrine can be dated to a late phase of EB I when a tendency to build rectangular buildings developed.

At Hartuv, the main phase of the cultic complex...
It is interesting to consider what happened in the Wadi az-Zarqa valley in EB II. In fact, Jebel al-Mutawwaq was abandoned at the end of EB I, and the city of Khirbet al-Batrawy arose. During the EB II occupational phase of this site, corresponding to excavators’ Phase 4, a temple was built in area F. The building was a broad-room temple including cella L.500 (12.5 × 2.7 m), a courtyard L.504 and a circular platform S.510. The entrance to the temple was opened around at two third of the length of the southern façade wall. Inside the

Figure 8
A view from west of the Early Bronze Age II-III temple at Khirbet al-Batrawy (after Nigro 2012b, fig. 5)

(stratum II) was EB IA but architectural features and material culture are quite different to the other analyzed contexts probably because of the Egyptian presence in some Southern Canaan sites.

Thus, the analysis of ritual aspects of the Early Bronze Age I testified the strong regionalism of the Southern Levant during this period. It is possible to recognize some similarities which could mean that the different Early Bronze Age I cultic activities come from common traditions of the Late Chalcolithic, which were the model for the rituals and the architectural aspects of the sacred areas both in the East and in the West sides of the Jordan River. On the other hand, despite the regionalism, it is not possible to exclude the possibility that some kind of contacts was performed between different regions.

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The plan of the building and the organization of the sacred area in Batrawy, is similar to the other temples analyzed in this contribution. The plan of the building is elongated and the entrance is located on the long side, as Late Chalcolithic and EB I temples. Furthermore, the presence of a forecourt and of a cultic platform in the forecourt testify that Late Chalcolithic cultic traditions were the model for EB I Jebel al-Mutawwaq Temple of the Serpents and, also for the EB II Khirbet al-Batrawy broad-room temple.33

33 The broad-room cella represents the classic Early Bronze Age type of Palestinian sacred architecture (SALâ 2008) and the Late Chalcolithic temples are its original model. A consistent parallel for EB II temple of Khrber al Batrawy is the EB II-III temple in Bab edh-Dhra (Rast, Shaub 2003, pp. 157-166, pp. 321-335).
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