

A Unique Iron I Installation with a Double Basin and Drain from Tel Abel Beth Maacah

Naama Yahalom-Mack, Matthew Susnow, Carroll Kobs, Rachel Silverman, Robert A. Mullins and Nava Panitz-Cohen*

Abstract

A unique mudbrick installation with a plastered double basin on its top was uncovered in the latest Iron I stratum (A2) at Tel Abel Beth Maacah (Tell Abil el-Qamh), a large site in the northern Hula Valley, Israel. The installation was discovered in a unit that was part of a large, elaborate public complex with an exceptional architectural plan, located in the centre of the site. The installation under discussion appears with other features that bear cultic associations, along with some that can be considered mundane. This article presents the context, focusing on the installation by itself and in tandem with the other features, with the goal of exploring the possible cultic function of this space and of the unit as a whole.

Keywords

Tel Abel Beth Maacah; Cult; Ritual; Altar, Iron Age I; Water purification; Liminality

Introduction

A unique installation was found at Tel Abel Beth Maacah (Tell Abil el-Qamh), a large site in the northern Hula Valley in Israel (Fig. 1).¹ It was discovered in a unit belonging to a large, elaborate public complex with an exceptional architectural plan, located in the

* **Naama Yahalom-Mack, Matthew Susnow, Rachel Silverman** and **Nava Panitz-Cohen**: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; **Carroll Kobs**: Trinity Southwestern University, Albuquerque; **Robert A. Mullins**: Azusa Pacific University, Los Angeles

¹ Excavations at Tel Abel Beth Maacah have been conducted since 2013 with licences from the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel National Parks Authority. Funding was provided by Israel Science Foundation Grants Nos. 859/17 and 520/21, as well as by generous donors. Excavations in Area A were supervised by Fredrika Loew, assisted by Christin Johnson as registrar. Carroll Kobs supervised the excavation of the unit described here, with the assistance of Jeff Kobs. For a summary of excavation results, see Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2018; Panitz-Cohen and Yahalom-Mack 2022. For additional publications and field reports, see <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org>.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2024 The Author(s).

DOI: 10.1080/03344355.2024.2385147

Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

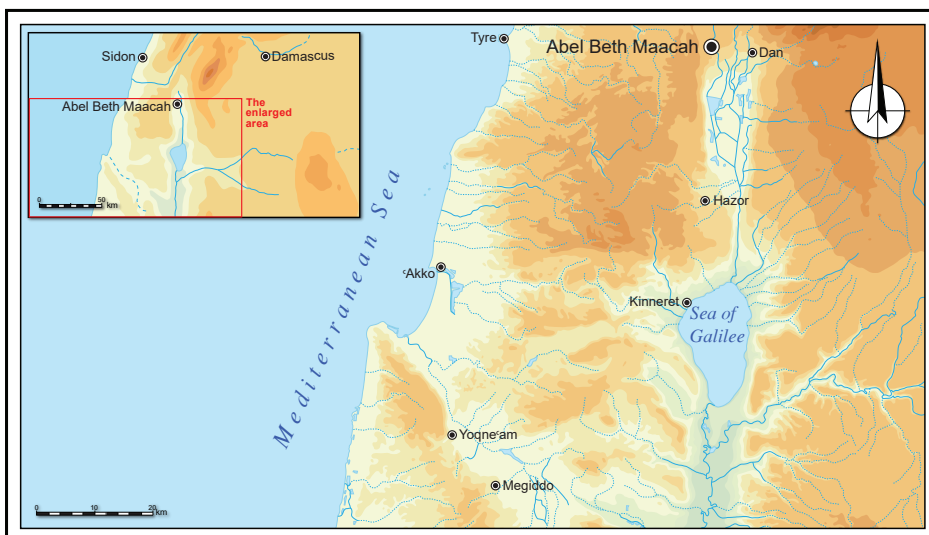


Fig. 1: Map showing location of Tel Abel Beth Maacah (map by I. Ben-Ezra following R. Bonfil)

centre of the site, in Area A, dating to the late Iron I (Stratum A2) (Fig. 2). This complex represents the latest Iron I occupation at the site, ending a robust sequence of five strata, beginning in the 12th century BCE.

This article explores the possible function of the installation, which is analysed on two levels. First, since it is unique, with no known parallels, its individual components are considered against the background of comparable features in the ancient Near East. Second, its relationship to other features in the unit in which it was found is examined. Several features can be described as having arguably cultic associations, while others may be considered indicative of mundane activities. The interpretation and identification of the installation under discussion bear implications for an understanding of the interplay between cultic and mundane spheres and for our ability to understand them as non-dichotomic categories within the broader context of late Iron I cult.

The context

The complex within which the installation was found consists of an eastern and a western building, separated by an entrance corridor with antae flanking the entrance to the latter, stone and brick walls that enclose rooms and spaces of various sizes, monumental stone floors, and features and objects that indicate a combination of various functions, including craft, storage and cult (Fig. 3). The complex was destroyed in a heavy conflagration.

The feature under discussion (6253) was found in the central space (5141) of a unit located in the northeastern part of the western building, which included a unique combination of elements, some alluding to possible cultic activities (Figs. 4–5). On the one hand, this unit is integrated into the building, while, on the other hand, it is separate, judging by the surrounding walls and extant entrances. The outer walls enclose a rectangular area (external dimensions 8×11–12.5 m), containing three main components: 7154, a narrow



Fig. 2: View of the tell and Area A (looking west) (photo courtesy of Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter Project, www.mgketer.org)

space/room on the west that provides access to 5141 via a threshold on the southern end of a well built wall (W6115); 5141, the central and main space; and 4184, a long narrow room on the south with an entranceway accessing 5141.

To date, no closing wall has been identified on the northern side of the unit. A curvilinear row of stones (W10149), one course high, is located along the current northern baulk; it seems to have served as a kind of partition delineating the activities to its south. The entrance to the unit must have been from the north, although it is unclear whether it was through the western space (7154) or the main space (5141), as the northern parts of both remain unexcavated.

The central space 5141

The features in 5141 are well aligned and similarly oriented; they were most likely pre-planned and put in place at the same time, to be used in tandem in some way (see below).



Fig. 3: Aerial view of the late Iron I complex; the northeastern unit is shaded in the upper centre (photo by Y. Shmidov and A. Wiegmann)

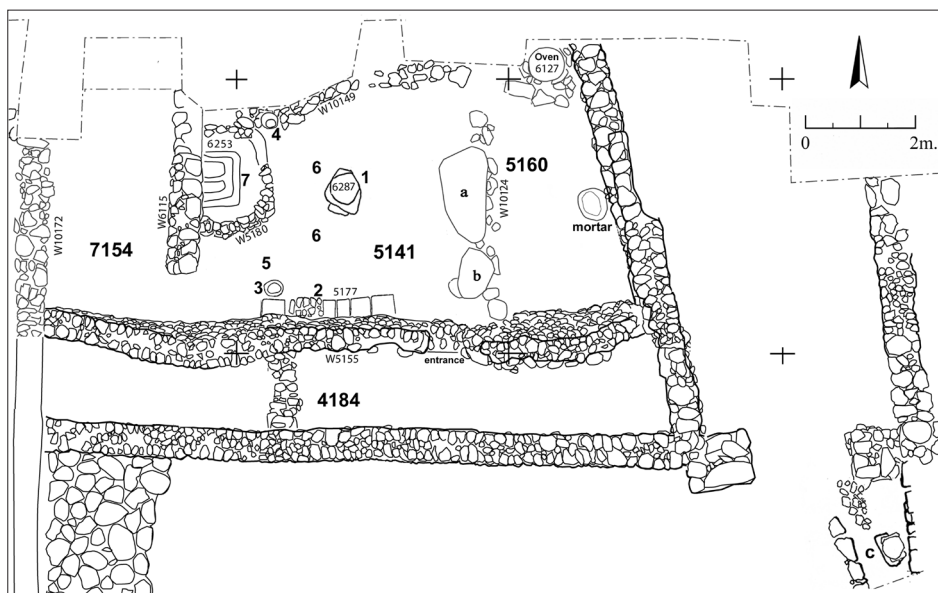


Fig. 4: Plan of the northeastern unit; the descriptions of the labelled features are detailed in the text (drawn by S. Matskevich)

A prominent element somewhat to the east of the centre is two flat-topped basalt stones laid on a north–south axis (Fig. 4, features a and b), dividing the space into a small eastern and a larger western part and situated just east of the entrance to Room 4184 to the south. The northern stone is large and roughly triangular-shaped (1.8 m long). The southern stone is much smaller (ca. 80 cm long).

The stones may have once served as standing stones (*maššebot*), which were either deliberately laid down at one point (prior to the final destruction) or which, alternatively, fell during the destruction.² The fact that they are positioned in a relatively straight line—and that a north–south line of stones (W10124) directly below them seems to be a stabiliser—would favour the former scenario, suggesting that the two standing stones were in secondary use, perhaps as work tables, at the time of the destruction. Another possibility is that W10124 could have been a low partition, contemporary with and functionally related to a similarly low-built wall on the north (W10149; see below). In this case, the latter scenario could be envisioned, where the two stones, which had been upright and positioned near W10124, fell onto the line of stones at the time of the destruction.

To the east of these stones is a space (5160; ca. 2.0–2.5×5.3 m) with two main features: a large mortar (ca. 60 cm in diameter) placed against the eastern wall, and a large oven (6127; 75 cm in diameter) ca. 2 m to the north, set on a layer of stones that raised it above the floor.

In the western part of 5141 (ca. 4.5×3.5–4.5 m)³ there were several features:

² The stones were lifted to view their bottom side, which proved to be rough in the case of the large stone and relatively smooth on the small stone.

³ North–south was measured up to the curvilinear wall (W10149) against the northern baulk. The entire east–west measurement of 5141 is ca. 7.5 m.



Fig. 5: View of the northeastern unit, space 5141 in the centre, looking west (photo by R.A. Mullins)

1. A stack of three large basalt stones, the top one rounded (6287; ca. 45 cm in height; 45–60 cm in width/diameter); on the floor to their west was a small flat-topped stone and just to their east was a complete upper grindstone (Fig. 4, feature 1);
2. A low square stone podium, adjoined on the east and west by brick benches (5177) running along the southern wall (W5155) (Fig. 4, feature 2);
3. A well-worked deep mortar found near the northwestern corner of the bench (Fig. 4, feature 3);
4. A similar mortar, found lying on its side northeast of Installation 6253 (feature 7 below) (Fig. 4, feature 4);
5. A clay cult stand adorned with petals found just north of the southern mortar (Fig. 4, feature 5; Fig. 6);
6. A concentration of at least five pithoi, found smashed to the north and west of the stacked stones (Fig. 4, feature 6; Fig. 7);
7. Installation 6253 (Figs. 9–10), ca. 1.6 m west of the stacked stones, built against Wall 6115 (Fig. 4, feature 7). This last feature, the focus of this article, is described in detail below.



Fig. 6: Clay cult stand; a) *in situ* near the western mortar, looking west (photo by R.A. Mullins); b) following restoration (the fragment above the top of the stand is the hollow pipe-like base of a bowl that had been inserted into the stand's mouth) (photo by T. Rogovski)



Fig. 7: a) Broken pithoi *in situ* in 5141, looking northwest (before exposure of Installation 6253); the stacked stones are exposed in the foreground and the southern mortar is visible to the left; the white strip near the mortar is the location of the cult stand (Fig. 6) (photo by R.A. Mullins); b) a pithos after restoration (photo by T. Rogovski)

Installation 6253

Installation 6253 is located against the centre of 5141's western wall (W6115). It is rectangular, 70 cm high, 1 m wide (north–south) and ca. 65 cm deep (east–west), built of mudbrick and covered with multiple layers of smooth brown mud plaster,⁴ surrounded by

⁴ The layers have progressively deteriorated with exposure, despite conservation measures. In one place, three plaster layers were visible. Beneath the earliest layer, bricks comprising the structure were revealed. Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) analysis of the plaster, following the methodology of Regev *et al.* 2010, revealed the use of unheated clay-rich paste, rather than lime plaster (Silverman 2024).

a low stone wall (W5180) (Fig. 8). The better-preserved northeastern corner is raised and slightly thickened. The southwestern corner is notably thickened; here the plaster was not preserved, revealing the presence of a stone that might have supported a raised corner. The points where the northern and southern sides join the rear wall are also slightly raised. The protruding corners suggest the presence of horns.

The top consists of a sunken area divided into two shallow basins of almost equal size (7–8 cm deep; 21–24 cm wide; 35–38 cm long), separated by a narrow partition (ca. 38 cm long; 7–8 cm wide) built of mud plaster and incorporating a stone where it joins the wall and another stone at the outer basin circumference. The partition was preserved lower on the east; it is uncertain whether this was intentional or was due to a lack of preservation. The basins are covered with a thick whitish layer of crushed lime that continues onto the face of the wall, indicating that both were plastered at the same time.

In the southwestern corner of the northern basin there is an opening (ca. 4–4.5 cm in diameter). This was connected to a small round opening (ca. 5 cm in diameter) on the outer face of the northern side, ca. 20 cm below the top, forming a drainage system that runs underneath the northern basin (Figs. 9–10). Inside the basin there was an accumulation of dark sediment with bits of charcoal.

The installation is surrounded by a low semi-circular stone wall (W5180), three courses high (ca. 35 cm high; 20 cm wide). Facing the installation's eastern (front) side is an opening with a stone threshold (55 cm wide).⁵ The area between the wall and the installation (25–30 cm wide) was coated with mud plaster similar to that covering the installation, although this was poorly preserved; liquid from the northern basin would



Fig. 8: The western part of 5141, looking west; note the plaster on the installation and the wall behind it (photo by R.A. Mullins)

⁵ Several stones are missing from the wall to the north of this threshold.



Fig. 9: Installation 6253, looking southwest; note the drain in the northern basin, the opening on its northern side and the raised corners (photo by R.A. Mullins)

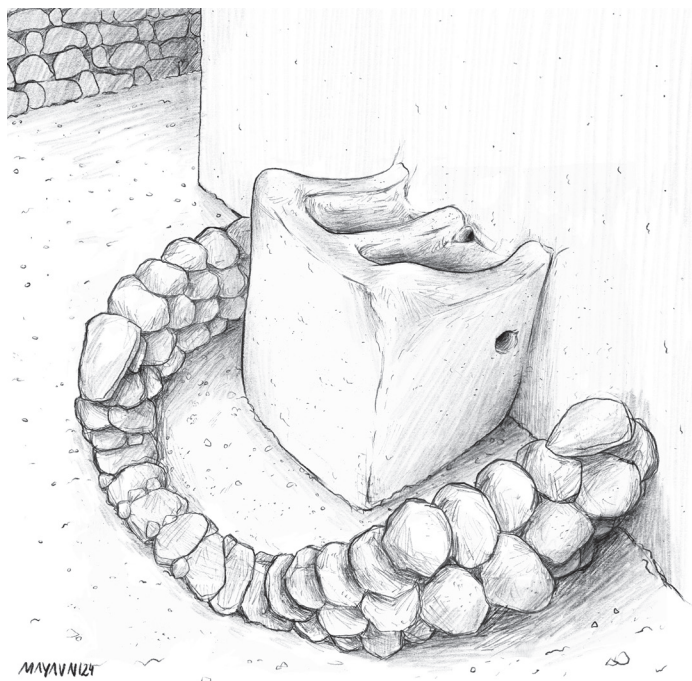


Fig. 10: Isometric reconstruction of Installation 6253, looking southwest (drawing by M. Avni)

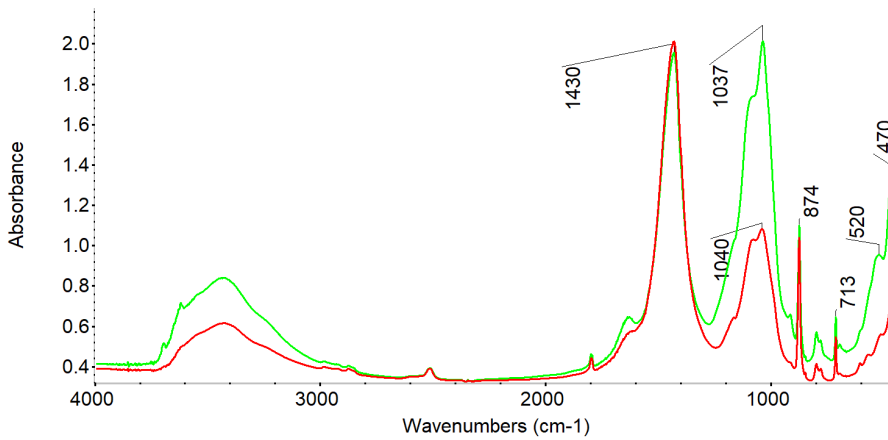


Fig. 11: FTIR spectra of sink sediment sample 61752 (red) and control unheated sediment sample (green) from an unrelated nearby locus; signs of low-temperature heating in the sink sample are as follows: the absence of OH peaks in the 3600 cm^{-1} range compared to the control; the clay peak is shifted slightly leftward from 1037 cm^{-1} in the control to 1040 cm^{-1} , and the 513 cm^{-1} peak is less prominent than in the control; additional peaks indicate the presence of calcite (1430, 875, and 713 cm^{-1}) and quartz (unlabeled doublet)

have flowed via the drain into this narrow space. The sediments in this ‘canal’ were dark and lightweight.

Several sediment samples were examined for mineral composition and signs and extent of heating, using Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR),⁶ following criteria described in Berna *et al.* (2007). Samples were taken from inside the northern basin (61719, 61752), inside the side drain (71646) and the narrow canal between the basin and W5180 (71574, 61811). All samples are composed primarily of calcite, clay and quartz (Singer 2007: 106). No peaks indicated the presence of organic material other than that seen in standard soil samples. The clay component of only the two samples from the northern basin shows clear signs of low-temperature (ca. 500° C) heating (Fig. 11) as structural water, and Al-O-H and Si-O-Al peaks of the clay are reduced or eliminated (Berna *et al.* 2007). These two samples have traces of carbonate hydroxylapatite, implying the limited presence of ash or degraded bone material (Weiner 2010: 84; Karkanis 2021). This composition suggests a mixture of components that accumulated during the destruction event rather than as the result of any particular human activity. The dark-coloured lightweight sediment from the surrounding canal showed no signs of heating.

Discussion

The plastered installation described above is exceptional, with no known parallels from other sites or periods. It stands as a raised platform with a double basin and a drain, abuts a wall, is partitioned off by a low wall, possibly features horns on the corners, and lacks traces of burning. In order to shed further light on the installation’s significance and

⁶ Nicolet iS5 (Thermo Scientific), with Omnic 9 software (Thermo Scientific).

possible uses, the discussion addresses its appearance as a raised plastered platform, the presence of a double basin, its elevated corners and the partition wall. The article then proposes that the function of the installation involved liquids and discusses the broader context within which it was situated in an effort to explore the possible functions of 5141.

Raised plastered platforms

Installation 6253 is significantly elevated, plastered, and built against a wall. Several contemporary plastered platforms built against walls appear elsewhere in the Southern Levant. In Iron I Philistia, such platforms are often found in cultic contexts, such as corners within domestic contexts (Ben-Shlomo 2019: 9–10). In Building 350 at Tel Miqne/Ekron (Dothan 2002: 3), a plastered mudbrick platform (at least 1 m high) was built into the corner of Room B opposite the entrance, indicating that this was the focal point of activities in the room (*ibid.*: 3).⁷ While platforms of all kinds can be found in contexts not related to cult (e.g., pertaining to domestic or production activities), they are also found within temples spanning the Bronze Age.⁸ In the Late Bronze Age, platforms were found in numerous temples (both in standardised monumental temples and in irregular temples), located against the back walls and often elaborated with steps, such as at Megiddo (Temple 2048; Loud 1948: Figs. 247, 261), Hazor (Area A Northern Temple; Bonfil 1997), Beth-Shean (Temple 58066; Mazar and Mullins 2007: 114, Fig. 3.19), Tel Mevorakh (Stern 1984) and Lachish (Fosse Temple; Tufnell, Inge and Harding 1940), among others. This tradition within temples continued into the Iron Age, as can be seen at Iron I Tel Qasile (Mazar 1980: 13–49) and in the small cult room (49) in Lachish Stratum V (Aharoni 1975: 26; Zevit 2001: 213–217).⁹ An intriguing example of a plastered platform is an unusual installation (539) at Ashkelon in Iron I Building 572 (Grid 38). Plastered and set against a wall, it is somewhat conical with a squarish base. Unlike Installation 6253, the top of Installation 539 at Ashkelon is flat, with four horns at the corners (Master and Aja 2011: 136–142, Figs. 2, 6). The excavators suggested that this is an altar, albeit not within a temple context.

While in temple contexts, these platforms are thought to be the main focal point of the cult and likely the location of a statue or potentially for placing offerings (cf. Deposit 181 on the back platform of Fosse Temple III; Susnow 2021: 132), Installation 6253 does not appear to be the main focal point of 5141, for reasons further developed below. More significantly, the two basins, the drain and the surrounding partition wall make this installation stand out not only as different in appearance but apparently as different in function and significance.

⁷ In the adjacent Room C, a smaller mudbrick platform was built into a corner (Dothan 2002: 3). Although Dothan (2003) originally considered this structure to be a temple, Ben-Shlomo (2019: 4) suggested that it was a public building and further proposed that if the raised platforms and associated finds relate to cult, they should be understood as domestic cult.

⁸ In the Early Bronze Age, see, for example, Temple 4040 at Megiddo (Loud 1948: Fig. 184).

⁹ See, farther north, a podium in the temple at Tell Ta'yinat (Mierse 2012: Fig. 40).

The two basins

Throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Levant, basins—like the platforms discussed above—are found in different contexts. In the Northern Levant, basins are well documented in Middle and Late Bronze temples and non-cultic spaces (Otto 2018), and the same holds true for the Southern Levant. Although morphologically different than the installation under consideration, basins—generally of stone—have been found in many temple contexts, such as at the High Place at Gezer (Dever 2014: 29–30, Figs. 16, 31), the Level VII temple at Beth-Shean (Rowe 1940: 8, Pls. VI, XLIIIA:1–2)¹⁰ and Temple 2048 at Megiddo (Loud 1948: 105, Figs. 247, 254).

Double-basin installations are attested less frequently but certainly appear in Bronze Age contexts, often in cultic settings. A group of basalt basins/offering tables was found in the Area H Orthostat Temple at Hazor; two of them were double basins, with two compartments side by side separated by a central partition (Yadin *et al.* 1961: Pl. CCCXXXII:3–4). It has been suggested that these may relate to libation offerings (Yadin 1972). In Area F at Hazor, a very large rectangular limestone feature (2.4 m long; 0.85 m wide; 1.2 m high), referred to by Yadin as an altar, was found in an open-air cultic precinct located among seemingly domestic architecture (*ibid.*: 101). The stone feature comprises two large chambers or basins (of uneven depth) on its upper surface (Yadin *et al.* 1960: Pl. XXXIX). A partition between the two basins had a small passage allowing liquids to flow from one to the next, and, although broken, there was likely a channel that allowed liquids to drain from the larger basin and flow to the ground (*ibid.*: 131–132; Yadin 1972: 100–101). This stone feature was associated with many animal bones (Susnow, Bechar and Yasur-Landau 2020: 131; cf. Zuckerman 2012: 104–105), suggesting that its use pertained to animal sacrifice and that the basins were for holding blood. At Alalakh, two basins were found in the forecourt of the late LB Temple I; one of these was a large basalt double basin (Woolley 1955: 83, Fig. 34a, Pl. XI:b; cf. Otto 2018: 401–402, Fig. 7d). Additional basins with two or more compartments were found near the Level I and 0 temples (Woolley 1955: Pl. XIII:b). Another example of a double basin was recovered at Gezer, likely from a Bronze Age context (Macalister 1912: Pl. CCXXIV:14).

Double basins are also known from non-temple contexts. In Late Bronze Age Tell Munbaqa/Ekalte, for example, decorated terracotta double basins were found in private houses, placed in front of the main room's altar or pedestal in spaces within which household cult was conducted (Otto 2018: 404–405, Fig. 10). These basins were not considered altars themselves, but functioned in association with them.

There is, therefore, a clear tradition—stemming back to at least the Late Bronze Age—of basins and, in some cases, double basins, appearing within cultic settings. At the same time, these features also appear in non-cultic contexts, either used for mundane purposes or, at times, within demarcated spaces that serve some cultic function. Regardless of morphology and context, these basin and double-basin features are almost always free-standing and do not appear as central focal points (e.g., they are not placed against a rear wall or opposite and in line with the entrance). It seems plausible that one possible

¹⁰ Two basins, placed in corners, were found within the Level VII temple.

function of these basins relates to liquids. Installation 6253, however, is not free-standing; furthermore, its drain is not commonly featured on other basins. It is also important to note that while double basins are quite uncommon in the Late Bronze Age, they are even less well known in the Iron Age, and thus, Installation 6253 stands out from these other examples.

Altars and horns

The possibility that the corners of Installation 6253 protruded recalls similar features known in the Southern Levant, predominantly on clay and stone altars in the Iron II (Gitin 2002; see also Maeir, Hitchcock and Horwitz 2013 for a two-horned altar from Tell eš-Safi/Gath). Since the raised corners do not appear to have served any practical function, they can be assumed to have some symbolic purpose. Horns, in general, are well-known features of altars and other objects throughout the ancient Near East, including in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, as well as in Minoan, Mycenaean and Cypriot contexts (Gitin 2002: 99, with references). Horns appear as a cross-cultural metaphor for power, strength and potency, as well as being signifiers of the divine (e.g., Asher-Greve 1995–96; Ornan 2005: 41). Gitin (2002: 96–97) traced the Iron Age horned-altar tradition back to Late Bronze tower models, known mainly in the Northern Levant at Emar, Mumbaqaat and Tell Faq'ous (Müller 1997: 258, Fig. 2a,e,f,i; for Southern Levantine examples, see Katz 2006: Pls. 17, 25, 38, 41). It is, therefore, possible that the horns mimicked these towers.

While horns often adorn altar corners, it is unclear whether they should be considered indications of sanctity.¹¹ Indeed, by the Iron II in the Southern Levant, many stone and clay altars that were likely used for burning incense (Gitin 2002: 101–103; but cf. Haran 1995: 33–35, 37) were adorned with horns. At the same time, however, many altars that seemingly had the same role within the cult did not have them. This would suggest that although bearing symbolic portent, i.e., acting as a focusing device, indicator of significance, or, as proposed by Milgrom (1991), an extremity signifying *par pro toto* the object in its entirety, horns were not intrinsic or automatic marks of sanctity.

While horns might be present, Installation 6253 should not be considered an altar. In the Bronze and Iron Age Southern Levant, altars are found *outside* temples in associated courtyards within a temenos and are always free-standing (e.g., not against walls). While in the Iron Age altars were found in more diverse contexts, they were still free-standing.¹² Furthermore, no examples have basins or drains. As is well documented, altars are a means of caring for and feeding deities (e.g., Milgrom 1991); as such, they are flat on the top

¹¹ Gitin (2002: 96) perceives horned altars as bearing intrinsic sanctity and therefore as being capable of transmitting that sanctity to physical space. However, *sacred* indicates something set apart, and in most Iron Age altar contexts, cult is not separated from, but integrated with, other activities, whether industrial or domestic.

¹² An exception to this may be Arad (Herzog 2002).

because they serve as surfaces upon which offerings were placed.¹³ Since Installation 6253 is not free-standing, does not have a flat top and does not seem to be built in relation to something that could be considered as pertaining to a deity, it should not be considered an altar. Nevertheless, since horns seem to have been overwhelmingly related to cult, if the corners of Installation 6253 were indeed horned, this could support such an alternative cultic interpretation.

Wall 5180 surrounding the installation

One final feature to be addressed is the semi-circular Wall 5180 that surrounds the installation. When considering the possible function of Installation 6253, this low wall may have been set to prevent the drained liquids from entering the rest of 5141, although, in fact, the threshold in the front would have allowed some liquids to pour through. At the same time, it may have served as a partition to separate the activities relating to the installation from the rest of 5141, making it less accessible and its use more exclusive. It is also possible that it served both purposes.

Stone walls of this type were used to form a small temenos delineating desert cult sites associated with standing stones from their surrounding landscape (Avner 2001). In fact, within the same late Iron I complex in Area A, a similar low partition wall surrounded a stacked-stone feature (Fig. 4, feature c; Fig. 12a) very similar to the one from 5141. This feature was located in the passage separating the complex's two buildings and directly opposite the entrance to the western building. A fragment of a painted petalled chalice (Fig. 12b) found next to the stacked stones supports the suggestion that this corridor context likely served as a cultic corner, the low stone wall demarcating the space from the rest. Notably, these stacked stones had an earlier phase, indicating continuity in the use of the same space for ritual or cult.

A proposed function for Installation 6253

As noted above, initial studies indicate that the activities related to Installation 6253 did not involve high-temperature burning or extensive heating. The preliminary assessment is that the faunal assemblage of 5141 does not diverge from general bone assemblages from other contexts and that there is no indication of preference for sides or body parts, as might be expected within a cultic setting.¹⁴ There is thus no indication of animal sacrifice nor visible evidence of remains of blood from the basins or drain.¹⁵

¹³ In Mesopotamia, various terms refer to altar-like objects, including *garakku/girakku*, *barasiggû*, *guhšû*, *maškittu/malkittu*, *paššûru* and *paṭîru* (see in *CAD*). Offerings vary from food to burnt offerings and, rarely, animal sacrifice. In general, they served as offering tables upon which prepared meals were displayed before the gods. All appear to be free-standing (Sallaberger 2012); this is supported by the archaeological record.

¹⁴ Theo McLeod Kassebaum, personal communication; on distinct faunal assemblages in cultic settings, see Greer 2013.

¹⁵ It should be noted that biomarkers for blood have rarely been studied in plaster. See Pecci 2013 for the identification of broad biochemical groups.

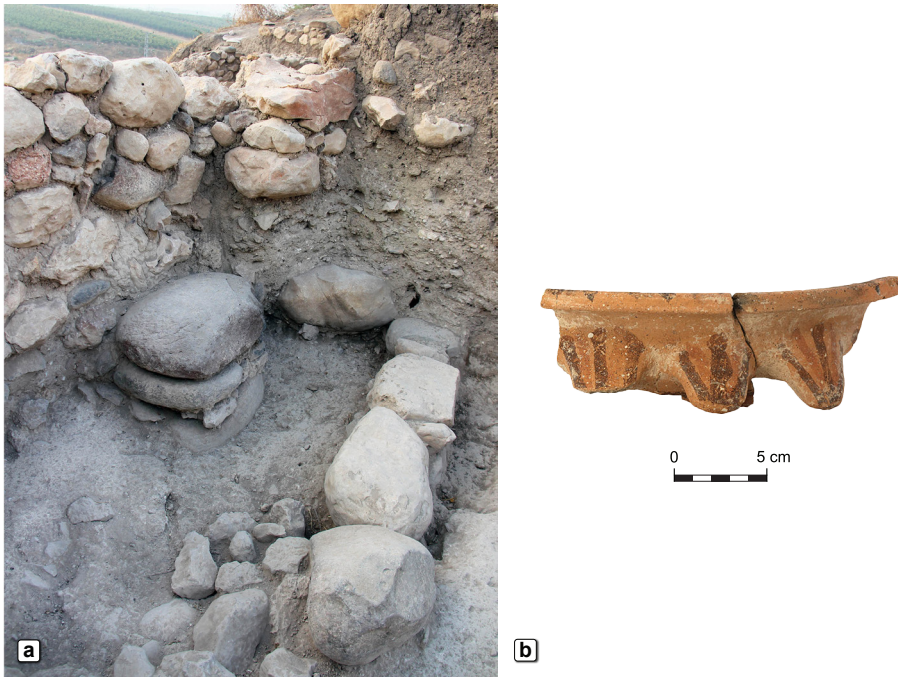


Fig. 12: a) The stacked-stone feature in the entrance corridor to the Stratum A2 complex, looking southeast (photo by R.A. Mullins); b) the petalled chalice fragment found nearby (photo by D. Silverman)

Considering the presence of the basins and drain, it is clear that liquids were used in the northern basin at the very least, if not in both.¹⁶ No traces of colour were identified that could suggest that the installation was used for activities such as dyeing or pressing, and, in any event, the relatively small size of the basins precludes large-scale production activities. While blood has already been tentatively ruled out, other liquids considered in this context may be oil, wine, beer and water, which were certainly used in mundane contexts but also in rituals, whether in temples or non-cultic settings.

Throughout the ancient Near East, oil is known to have been commonly used in rituals, for example, to be rubbed on various objects and installations, such as tables and altars. Libation rituals involved pouring liquids—typically beer or wine—to the ground and over objects (Klingbeil 2018: 229–230, 233–234).¹⁷ There are, however, no known examples of such activities having been conducted on large, permanent and stationary installations, like the one under discussion.

¹⁶ As only one of two basins has a drain, the installation possibly had multiple side-by-side functions (for example, the northern compartment related to liquids, while the southern one could have been used for placing or manipulating non-liquids or for containing objects to be washed). As noted above, the partition between the basins is lower in the east; if this is not the result of preservation, it could suggest some flow between the two.

¹⁷ Libation rituals involving water were suggested to have been performed in Iron II entrance (gate) contexts (Arav 2011).

Water, however, could very well have been used in Installation 6253, for example for washing and cleaning various objects, perhaps even hands or other parts of the human body, for mundane purposes, or in ritual.¹⁸ The latter possibility is reinforced by the fact that the installation was partitioned off by W5180 from the rest of 5141 and by its location at the entrance: purification rituals involving water are known to have been conducted near entranceways. The concentration of pithoi near the installation might have been receptacles for a constant supply of water.

Matters of purity and impurity were ubiquitous among various societies of the ancient Near East during the second and first millennia BCE. They were integral aspects of everyday life, as well as cult. To facilitate status changes from impure to pure, various rituals would have been performed that required purifying agents, often water (Frevell and Nihan 2013: 13–14, and various contributions therein). In fact, rituals related to liminality and the transformation of personhood and status of ritual actors often appear in the form of ablutions at liminal points, such as thresholds (on liminality, see Susnow 2022: 3–6).¹⁹ Examples of threshold rituals have been documented at several sites in the Southern Levant, within cultic, palatial and domestic settings (Zuckerman 2007; Faust and Katz 2017: 20–21; Susnow 2022) and comprise a well-known phenomenon throughout the ancient Near East (Susnow 2022: 6–7). The location of Installation 6253, near a threshold and immediately within the entrance, would have positioned it perfectly for such liminal activities.²⁰

Installation 6253 in its broader context

While the function of Installation 6253 was considered above on the basis of its morphology and characteristics, its relation to the other features in the unit to which it belonged plays a role in the decipherment. The following discussion is preliminary as it focuses on the architecture and features—not fully understood or excavated—and lacks the insights to be gained from analysis of the finds, particularly the pottery, and their spatial distribution, which is currently underway.²¹

Alongside the unique combination of features and finds with arguably cultic associations (the stacked stones, stone podium, benches and cult stand), other features

¹⁸ Analytical methods do not definitively rule out the possibility that blood was used in the installation (see above, n. 15).

¹⁹ Various works in the Hebrew Bible indicate that water purification rituals took place at thresholds or entrances of sacred places (e.g., the Tabernacle, the Jerusalem temple), the water of which was stored outside the entrances in large basins (e.g., Exod 29:4, 30:17–21, 38:8; 1 Kgs 7:23–40). Similarly, the main ritual actor according to the Ugaritic ritual texts—the king—is required to frequently cleanse himself (Ugaritic: *rhš brr*; note the same root for ritual cleansing as in the Hebrew Bible), plausibly with water at or near the temple entrance in preparation for participation in ritual, as can be seen in a number of the sacrificial rituals (e.g., KTU 1.46:2, KTU 1.109:2, KTU 1.112:11,16, KTU 1.105:20, KTU 1.119:5, KTU 1.106:26 and KTU 1.87:3; see Pardee 2002).

²⁰ Note a similar position of a double basin found immediately inside the entrance of the Middle Bronze Age Temple D at Ebla (Otto 2018: Fig. 1d).

²¹ Susnow, Panitz-Cohen and Yahalom-Mack, in preparation; see also Booth *et al.* 2022.

(an oven, grindstones, mortars²² and pithoi) represent storage and food-preparation activities. These are typically known in households, but given the context under consideration, may have been related to non-mundane activities. The two large basalt stones in the centre of 5141 may fit either category, as potential *maṣṣebot* (which may originally have been standing) or repurposed as work tables. The relationship between the two categories (cultic and food processing) should not be considered a dichotomy; it remains to define and assess the type and degree of interaction between them.

This interaction echoes a commonly observed Iron Age trend that indicates a robust integration of cult with craft or industrial activities, e.g., the presence of horned altars in non-temple contexts at Tel Migne/Ekron (Gitin 2002: 113–115), Tell eṣ-Šafi/Gath (Maier, Hitchcock and Horwitz 2013: 21–22) and Tel Rehov (Mazar 2020: 653–654).²³ The cultic paraphernalia in these cases seem to have been used to procure the success of the large-scale production. However, at Abel Beth Maacah, such a configuration is not viable, as no extensive craft or systematic production activities could be identified in the unit. The various features in 5141 display an integration of functions, most likely in a mutually operative relationship.²⁴ One may envision a scenario in which the pithoi served to store water used in conjunction with the installation, with the grindstones, mortars and oven playing a role in food preparation, which may or may not have been related to the cultic activity in the space.

As has been shown, there are indications for cultic use of 5141, although the purpose of the unit on the whole remains unknown, particularly because the northern parts of 5141 and 7154 remain unexcavated. The possibility that the unit was a temple may be considered; although very tentative, a broad similarity to the irregular temples of the Bronze and early Iron Ages (Mazar 1992) may be pointed out.²⁵

Summary and conclusions

To summarise the salient points concerning Installation 6253 and its place in 5141:

1. The morphology of its top, with the shallow plastered double basin and drain, argues for it having been used in conjunction with liquids and their drainage;
2. The lack of soot, colour, tint and abrasion precludes any incendiary use or role in activities involving grinding, pressing, or dyeing;

²² The interior of the small mortars flanking Installation 6253 did not show traces of use wear, while the interior of the large mortar in the eastern end of 5141 was somewhat smoothed, and a pestle was found nearby.

²³ On the integration of cult and production during the Bronze Age, see Susnow and Yahalom-Mack 2023.

²⁴ Significantly, this recalls similar associations in an earlier, 11th-century BCE (Stratum A4), context that had an integration of cultic furnishings with quotidian activities (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2019: 239).

²⁵ This subject will be further evaluated by the authors in an upcoming study, based on the analysis of the pottery and small finds from the unit.

3. The possibility that horns had adorned the corners of the installation suggests that it may have served some cultic purpose;
4. If Installation 6253 indeed had a cultic use, a viable function could be related to purification rituals;
5. Its position against a wall precludes it from having been an altar, and its location near the entrance makes it less likely that it was the focal point of cultic activity, but instead that it was situated in a liminal space;
6. Installation 6253 and other elements, both of cultic and mundane nature, point to 5141 having been a multi-functional space in which a variety of activities were performed in tandem.

The uniqueness of the configuration and features in the northeastern space, as well as the sprawling public complex to which it belongs, may be understood as an expression of a newly formed political and economic urban elite during the Iron I, employing known features from the local Canaanite culture alongside a transformation of innovations that would make the local population feel comfortable, on the one hand, but consolidate their control with the use of novelties, on the other hand (see discussion in Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2019).

Whatever the function of the installation and whatever its context, they are part of the exceptional, robust Iron I trajectory at the site, and their investigation constitutes an important component in unpacking that story. The violent destruction at the end of the Iron I brought about the end of the complex and this unique unit within it, replaced in the Iron IIA by an entirely different occupation, town plan, material culture and cultic phenomena (Susnow *et al.* 2021).

Contributors

Naama Yahalom-Mack: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9296-8435>; corresponding author's email: naama.yahalom@mail.huji.ac.il

Matthew Susnow: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; matthew.susnow@mail.huji.ac.il

Carroll Kobs: Trinity Southwest University; ckobs@sbcglobal.net

Rachel Silverman: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; rachel.silverman@mail.huji.ac.il

Robert A. Mullins: Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, Azusa Pacific University; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4789-3761>; ramullins@apu.edu

Nava Panitz-Cohen: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1961-6860>; email: panitz@mail.huji.ac.il

Disclosure statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Abbreviations

- CAD Gelb, I., Jacobsen, T., Landsberger, B. and Oppenheim, A.L. 1956. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago.
- KTU Dietrich, M., Loretz, O. and Sanmartin, J. 2013. *Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit* (3rd ed.). Münster.

References

- Aharoni, Y. 1975. *Investigations at Lachish: The Sanctuary and the Residency (Lachish V)* (Publications of the Institute of Archaeology 4). Tel Aviv.
- Arav, R. 2011. Evidence for Water Rituals at Bethsaida. *Eretz-Israel* 30: 357–369 (Hebrew), 156* (English summary).
- Asher-Greve, J.M. 1995–96. Reading the Horned Crown: A Review Article. *Afo* 42–43: 181–189.
- Avner, U. 2001. Sacred Stones in the Desert. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27/3: 30–41.
- Ben-Shlomo, D. 2019. Philistine Cult and Religion according to Archaeological Evidence. *Religions* 10/2, 74: 1–28.
- Berna, F., Behar, A., Shahack-Gross, R., Berg, J., Boaretto, E., Gilboa, A., Sharon, I., Shalev, S., Shilstein, S., Yahalom-Mack, N., Zorn, J. and Weiner, S. 2007. Sediments Exposed to High Temperatures: Reconstructing Pyrotechnological Processes in Late Bronze and Iron Age Strata at Tel Dor (Israel). *JAS* 34: 358–373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2006.05.011>
- Bonfil, R. 1997. Middle Bronze Age to Persian Period. In: Ben-Tor, A. and Bonfil, R., eds. *Hazor V: An Account of the Fifth Season of Excavation, 1968*. Jerusalem: 25–161.
- Booth, S., Shatil, A., Panitz-Cohen, N., Yahalom-Mack, N., Kobs, C. and Mullins, R.A. 2022. The Buck Stops Here: Deer Antlers in Iron Age I Cultic Contexts at Tel Abel Beth Maacah and Their Implications. In: Hoffmeier, J.K., Averbeck, R.E., Howard, J.C. and Wolfgang, Z., eds. *'Now These Records Are Ancient': Studies in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History, Language and Culture in Honor of K. Lawson Younger, Jr.* (ÄAT 114). Münster: 79–108.
- Dever, W. 2014. The Middle Bronze Age 'High Place' at Gezer. *BASOR* 371: 17–57.
- Dothan, T. 2002. Bronze and Iron Objects with Cultic Connotations from Philistine Temple Building 350 at Ekron. *IEJ* 52: 1–27.
- Dothan, T. 2003. The Aegean and the Orient: Cultic Interactions. In: Dever, W.G. and Gitin, S., eds. *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*. Winona Lake: 189–213.
- Faust, A. and Katz, H. 2017. The Archaeology of Purity and Impurity: A Case-Study from Tel Eton, Israel. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27: 1–27.
- Frevel, C. and Nihan, C., eds. 2013. *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*. Leiden.
- Gitin, S. 2002. The Four-Horned Altar and Sacred Space: An Archaeological Perspective. In: Gittlen, B.M., ed. *Sacred Time, Sacred Place: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*. Winona Lake: 95–123.
- Greer, J.S. 2013. *Dinner at Dan: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sacred Feasts at Iron Age II Tel Dan and Their Significance* (CHANE 66). Leiden.
- Haran, M. 1995. Altar-ed States: Incense Theory Goes up in Smoke. *Bible Review* 11: 30–37, 48.
- Herzog, Z. 2002. The Fortress Mound at Tel Arad: An Interim Report. *Tel Aviv* 29: 3–109.
- Karkanas, P. 2021. All about Wood Ash: Long Term Fire Experiments Reveal Unknown Aspects of the Formation and Preservation of Ash with Critical Implications on the Emergence and Use of Fire in the Past. *JAS* 135: 105476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2021.105476>
- Katz, H. 2006. *Architectural Terracotta Models from Eretz Israel, from the Fifth to the Middle First Millennia B.C.E.* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Haifa). Haifa (Hebrew with English summary).

- Klingbeil, G.A. 2018. Libation Rituals in the Ancient Near East. In: Garfinkel, Y., Ganor, S., Hasel, M.G. and Klingbeil, M.G., eds. *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 4: Excavation Report 2007–2013: Art, Cult and Epigraphy*. Jerusalem: 219–239.
- Loud, G. 1948. *Megiddo II: Seasons of 1935–39* (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 62). Chicago.
- Macalister, R.A.S. 1912. *The Excavation of Gezer, Vol. III*. London.
- Maier, A.M., Hitchcock, L.A. and Horwitz, L.K. 2013. On the Constitution and Transformation of Philistine Identity. *OJA* 32: 1–38.
- Master, D.M. and Aja, A.J. 2011. The House Shrine of Ashkelon. *IEJ* 61: 129–145.
- Mazar, A. 1980. *Excavations at Tell Qasile, Part I: The Philistine Sanctuary: Architecture and Cult Objects* (Qedem 12). Jerusalem.
- Mazar, A. 1992. Temples of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and the Iron Age. In: Kempinski, A. and Reich, R., eds. *The Architecture of Ancient Israel: From the Prehistoric to the Persian Periods*. Jerusalem: 169–189.
- Mazar, A. 2020. Socioeconomic, Historical, and Ethnographic Aspects of the Apiary. In: Mazar, A. and Panitz-Cohen, N. *Tel Rehov: A Bronze and Iron Age City in the Beth-Shean Valley, Vol. II: The Lower Mound: Area C and The Apiary* (Qedem 60). Jerusalem: 639–658.
- Mazar, A. and Mullins, R., eds. 2007. *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean 1989–1996, Vol. II: The Middle and Late Bronze Age Strata in Area R* (The Beth-Shean Valley Archaeological Project Publications 2). Jerusalem.
- Mierse, W. 2012. *Temples and Sanctuaries from the Early Iron Age Levant: Recovery after Collapse*. Winona Lake.
- Milgrom, J. 1991. *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible 3A). New York.
- Müller, B. 1997. Remarques sur les ‘Maquettes Architecturales’ de Syrie. In: Castal, C., al-Maqdissi, M. and Villeneuve, F., eds. *Les maisons dans la Syrie antique du IIIe millénaire aux débuts de l’Islam: Pratiques et représentations de l’espace domestique*. Beirut: 256–267.
- Ornan, T. 2005. *The Triumph of the Symbol. Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213). Fribourg and Göttingen.
- Otto, A. 2018. Basins in the Temples of Ebla, Syria and Upper Mesopotamia: An Essential Cult Requisite? In: Matthiae, P., Pinnock, F. and D’Andrea, M., eds. *Ebla and Beyond: Ancient Near Eastern Studies after Fifty Years of Discoveries at Tell Mardikh: Proceedings of the International Congress Held in Rome, 15th–17th December 2014*. Wiesbaden: 397–420.
- Panitz-Cohen, N. and Yahalom-Mack, N. 2022. Tel Avel Bet Ma’akha (Abel Beth Maacah)—2018–2021. *Hadashot Arkheologiyot—Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 134.
- Pardee, D. 2002. Ritual and Cult at Ugarit (Writings from the Ancient World 10). Atlanta.
- Pecci, A. 2013. Almost Ten Years of Plasters Residue Analysis in Italy: Activity Areas and the Function of Structures. *Periodico di Mineralogia* 82/3: 393–410.
- Regev, L., Poduska, K.M., Addadi, L., Weiner, S. and Boaretto, E. 2010. Distinguishing between Calcites Formed by Different Mechanisms Using Infrared Spectrometry: Archaeological Applications. *JAS* 37: 3022–3029. doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2010.06.027
- Rowe, A. 1940. *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth-Shan Part I: The Temples and Cult Objects* (Publications of the Palestine Section of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania 2). Philadelphia.
- Sallaberger, W. 2012. Das Opfer in der altmesopotamischen Religion. In: Lang, A. and Marinković, P., eds. *Bios–Cultus–(Im)mortalitas: Zu Religion und Kultur—Von den biologischen Grundlagen bis zu Jenseitsvorstellungen: Beiträge der interdisziplinären Kolloquien vom 10.–11. März 2006 und 24.–25. Juli 2009 in der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München* (Internationale Archäologie—Arbeitsgemeinschaft, Symposium, Tagung, Kongress Band 16). Munich: 135–143.
- Silverman, R.C. 2024. *Identification of Lime Plaster in Iron Age Southern Levant through the Use of Infrared Spectroscopy* (M.A. thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Jerusalem.

- Singer, A. 2007. *The Soils of Israel*. Berlin and Heidelberg.
- Stern, E. 1984. *Excavations at Tel Mevorakh (1973–1976) II: The Bronze Age* (Qedem 18). Jerusalem.
- Susnow, M. 2021. *The Practice of Canaanite Cult. The Middle and Late Bronze Ages* (ÄAT 106). Münster.
- Susnow, M. 2022. Liminality and Canaanite Cultic Spaces: Temple Entrances, Status Transformations and Ritual in Threshold Contexts. *PEQ* 154: 2–21.
- Susnow, M., Bechar, S. and Yasur-Landau, A. 2020. Hazor Rulership and Ritual Manipulation. *PEQ* 152: 121–146.
- Susnow, M., Marom, N., Shatil, A., Panitz-Cohen, N., Mullins, R. and Yahalom-Mack, N. 2021. Contextualizing an Iron Age IIA Hoard of Astragali from Tel Abel Beth Maacah, Israel. *JMA* 34: 58–83.
- Susnow, M. and Yahalom-Mack, N. 2023. Metalworking in Cultic Spaces: The Emergence of New Offering Practices in the Middle Bronze Age Southern Levant. *Tel Aviv* 50: 194–215.
- Tufnell, O., Inge, C. and Harding, L. 1940. *Lachish II (Tell Ed Duweir): The Fosse Temple* (The Wellcome-Marston Archaeological Research Expedition to the Near East Publications 2). London, New York and Toronto.
- Weiner, S. 2010. *Microarchaeology: Beyond the Visible Archaeological Record*. Cambridge.
- Woolley, L. 1955. *Alalakh: An Account of the Excavations at Tell Atchana in the Hatay, 1937–1949* (Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London 18). London.
- Yadin, Y. 1972. *Hazor: 'The Head of All Those Kingdoms' (Joshua 11:10)* (The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1970). London.
- Yadin, Y., Aharoni, Y., Amiran, R., Dothan, T., Dothan, M., Dunayevsky, I. and Perrot, J. 1960. *Hazor II: An Account of the Second Season of Excavations, 1956*. Jerusalem.
- Yadin, Y., Aharoni, Y., Amiran, R., Dothan, T., Dothan, M., Dunayevsky, I. and Perrot, J. 1961. *Hazor III–IV: An Account of the Third and Fourth Seasons of Excavations, 1957–1958, Plates*. Jerusalem.
- Yahalom-Mack, N., Panitz-Cohen, N. and Mullins, R.A. 2018. From a Fortified Canaanite City-State to 'A City and a Mother' in Israel: Five Seasons of Excavation at Tel Abel Beth Maacah. *NEA* 81: 145–156.
- Yahalom-Mack, N., Panitz-Cohen, N. and Mullins, R.A. 2019. An Iron Age I Cultic Context at Tel Abel Beth-Maacah. In: Berlejung, A. and Maeir, A.M., eds. *Autonomy, Independence and Related Issues: Proceedings of the First Annual RIAB Center Conference, Leipzig, June 2016* (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 34). Tübingen: 233–250.
- Zevit, Z. 2001. *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches*. London.
- Zuckerman, S. 2007. Late Bronze Age Scoops: Contexts and Function. In: Crawford, S.W., Bentor, A., Dessel, J.P., Dever, W.G., Mazar, A. and Aviram, J., eds. *'Up to the Gates of Ekron': Essays on the Archaeology and History of the Eastern Mediterranean in Honor of Seymour Gitin*. Jerusalem: 313–330.
- Zuckerman, S. 2012. The Temples of Canaanite Hazor. In: Kamlah, J., ed. *Temple Building and Temple Cult: Architecture and Cultic Paraphernalia of Temples in the Levant (2.–1. Mill. B.C.E.)* (ADPV 41). Wiesbaden: 99–125.