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Publication Date

2015

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FUNERARY PRACTICES AND PERSONHOOD: BRONZE AGE BURIAL ASSEMBLAGES FROM TEL MEGIDDO, ISRAEL

Stahl Field Report 2015

Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley
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Introduction

With support from the Stahl Endowment Fund, I conducted dissertation research during summer 2015 on archaeological collections and archives from the site of Tel Megiddo, Israel (Fig. 1). These materials comprise the main dataset for my dissertation, entitled “Transformations in Death: Funerary Practices and Personhood in the Bronze Age Levant”. Tel Megiddo, which is this project’s principal research site, was a major Bronze Age urban settlement with intramural burials that are representative of mortuary treatments that were widely practiced in the region: infant jar burials; single, primary pit inhumations; and multiple-interments of primary and secondary inhumations in pits and masonry-constructed chamber tombs. The burial assemblages examined in summer 2015 were excavated by Megiddo Expedition team members over three field seasons between 2010 and 2014 and are housed at Tel Aviv University’s Institute of Archaeology.

Research Questions

This dissertation project investigates relationships between funerary practices and personhood in the Bronze Age Levant (modern Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey) as a new approach to interpreting the diverse Levantine funerary record. Burials from the 2nd millennium B.C.E. exhibit significant variation in body treatment, burial location and architecture, and materials interred with deceased persons. Near Eastern textual evidence attests that the dead constituted a distinct, meaningful social group that continued to participate in daily life.

How did performance of funerary rituals transform personhoods of the deceased? From a funerary archaeology perspective, the ways in which living communities disposed of human remains and the objects with which they were interred explain post-mortem personhood transformations. These outcomes could range from achieving ancestor status on one end of the spectrum, to complete loss of personhood on the other end. This project employs a multi-scalar framework—incorporating study of individuals and communities—to investigate: 1) mechanisms by which posthumous personhood transformations operated; 2) material traces of interactions between the living and deceased; and 3) how persons were selected for specific treatments following death.

My research situates the roles of deceased persons in ancient Near Eastern daily life, addressing the unresolved issues of if and how ancestor veneration was practiced in the Bronze Age Levant. Beyond the ancient Near East, this project will develop an integrated methodology for assessing mortuary personhood that is grounded in archaeological datasets—osteological, faunal, and artifactual—that are widely applicable in cross-cultural contexts.

Data and Methodology

My study integrates various archaeological datasets holistically in order to reconstruct funerary sequences. These primary data include: 1) zooarchaeology; 2) human osteology; 3) spatial and contextual archaeological data; and 4) burial assemblages. Data collected during summer 2015 mainly focused on this final category, the burial assemblages.

The burial assemblages were excavated from twenty-four burials. The 139 documented objects, most of which were intact, included imported and locally produced stone vessels; metal weapons (Fig. 2); pins, earrings, finger rings, and beads (Figs. 3-4); bone inlay fragments; and scaraboid seals. Ceramic vessels, which comprise the highest percentage of objects in the assemblages, will be studied as a separate artifact type in the second phase of the project in collaboration with ceramic specialists. The object documentation procedures involved three major steps for each artifact: 1) recording metrics and descriptions; 2) obtaining photographs; and 3) researching archaeological context using Megiddo Expedition database and archives.

First, object dimensions were measured with calipers and recorded on spreadsheets organized by burial locus. This specific organizational method was undertaken so that each discrete burial's entire material assemblage could be analyzed together, rather than separating objects by type or material. I also recorded macroscopic observations, including: object type and description; material; surface treatment/decoration; manufacturing technique; condition on a scale of poor to excellent; current storage location; and general notes that fell outside of these standardized categories.

Second, digital images of each object were obtained. High quality photos of most of the objects had already been taken by Megiddo Expedition staff and were generously provided to me. I took additional photos as needed. I also acquired field photographs of the *in situ* artifacts.

Third, archival research involved consulting the Megiddo Expedition digital database and cross-referencing this information with excavation plans and photographs. The database was used to obtain contextual information on each object including locus number; stratigraphic assignments; dates of excavation; spatial data; photograph numbers; and associated finds within the same locus, stratum, and building. The archival work allowed me to link each object to its original excavation context including related finds and features. Additionally, I consulted excavators' field notes—some of which were my own—which is particularly useful for understanding burial taphonomy.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary analyses of this corpus indicate that the burial assemblages varied widely in terms of composition and distribution. These differences are not significant diachronically; the compositions varied in similar ways across two strata. Rather, assemblage variability may correlate to another factor: age-at-death of the interred individuals.

Early observations derived from archival research concern unusual deposits surrounding—rather than within—the burials that may point to post-interment commemoration activities. One example is an unexplained concentration of 108 ceramic stoppers. These artifacts were present in burial fill deposits in much higher than expected accumulations compared to contemporaneous domestic deposits recovered in nearby loci.

The data collection and archival documentation completed during summer 2015 constitutes the first phase of the research project. A major outcome of this phase is the creation of a burial assemblage catalogue, compiled in collaboration with Megiddo Expedition co-director Mario Martin, which will be published in the dissertation and as part of the forthcoming *Megiddo VI* excavation report. The project involves further

analyses and detailed comparative research of published archaeological, faunal, and osteological datasets spanning an additional twenty Levantine sites.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Stahl Endowment Fund and Ancient History & Mediterranean Archaeology Summer Travel Grant for funding research travel expenses. I am grateful to the Megiddo Expedition directors for granting me permission to research the collections and to my excavation colleagues for facilitating the project. I am especially thankful to Prof. Israel Finkelstein, Dr. Mario Martin, Dr. Robert Homsher, Assaf Kleiman, Sivan Einhorn, Rachel Kalisher, Zach Dunseth, and Lee Oz for their collaboration and support.

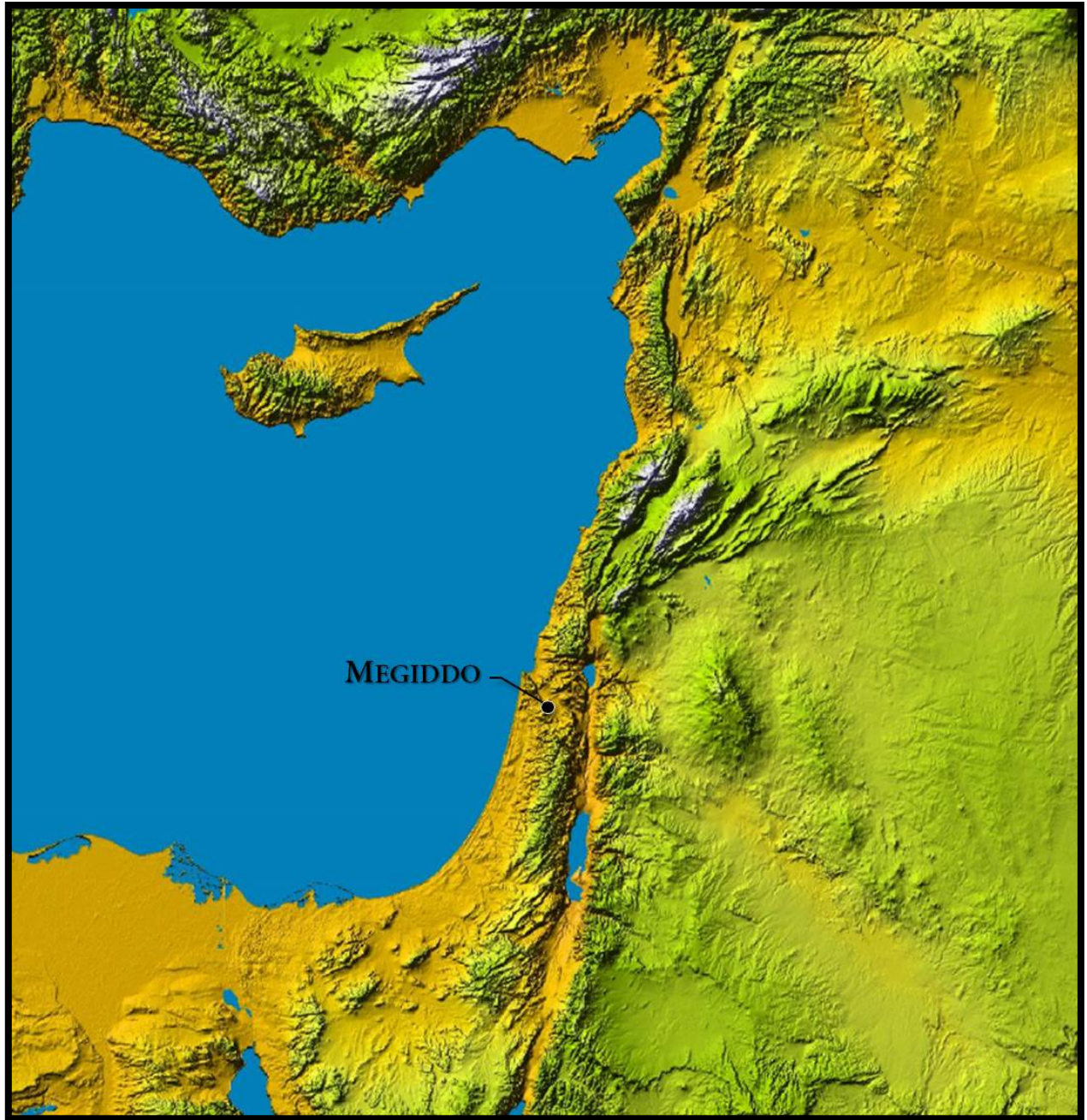


Figure 1. Map of the Levant with location of Tel Megiddo. Adapted from SRTM image, NASA/JPL/NIMA.



Figure 2. Bronze dagger excavated from Burial 10/K/100. Courtesy Megiddo Expedition.



Figure 3. Gold earring excavated from Burial 14/K/067. Courtesy Megiddo Expedition.



Figure 4. Faience beads excavated from Burial 14/K/200. Courtesy Megiddo Expedition.