

ИСТОРИЯ

Mike Freikman, *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem,*
michel.freikman@mail.huji.ac.il

RITUAL BURIAL OF HOUSES: EVIDENCE FROM THE CHALCOLITHIC IN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

Abstract: The Chalcolithic domestic complex at the site of el 'Arbain, located near the well-known megalithic complex of Rujm el Hiri, was excavated by the author between 2007 and 2011. Data collected in the excavation have provided valuable information about both mundane and ritual activities performed by the inhabitants. In this paper I will present basic information on the function of different architectural units of this complex. The paper's main topic, however, is the activities that accompanied the abandonment of this complex. I will show how such activities can be deduced from the archaeological data collected in the field, present comparanda known from different protohistoric sites in this region, and demonstrate that these practices were an integral part of local ritual life.

Keywords: Chalcolith, Israel, ritual, el 'Arbain, Golan Heights.

М. Фрейкман, *Еврейский университет в Иерусалиме,*

РИТУАЛЬНОЕ ЗАХОРОНЕНИЕ ЖИЛИЩ: АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВА ИЗ ЮЖНОГО ЛЕВАНТА

Резюме: Жилой комплекс в el 'Arbain, датируемый периодом халколита и расположенный недалеко от мегалитического комплекса Руджум эль Хири, был раскопан автором этой статьи между 2007 и 2011 гг. Информация, собранная во время раскопок, существенно расширила наши знания о материальной культуре на Голанских высотах в халколитический период. В данной статье я предоставляю информацию о функциях, которые несли разные части этого

жилого комплекса. Однако основная тема данной статьи - действия, сопровождавшие преднамеренное разрушение здания, захоронение его останков и уход его жителей. Я покажу, как свидетельства подобных действий представлены археологическими данными, собранными в el 'Arbain, а также предоставлю подобные свидетельства из других поселений, и продемонстрирую, что подобные действия были интегральной частью местной ритуальной практики в данный период.

Ключевые слова: Халколит, Израиль, Голанские высоты, ритуал, Эль Арба`ин, ритуальное захоронение.

INTRODUCTION

The Chalcolithic material culture of the southern Levant has been well known since the 1930s. As time passes and research progresses, we are discovering how diverse it is in different regions. One of the most unusual manifestations of this culture is the so-called "Golan Chalcolithic" variant, located on the fringe of the southern Levantine cultural space. This culture has many features that are characteristic of this period and resemble those of nearby regions, such as typical pottery and flint typologies and iconographic elements like the well-known prominent nose seen in many anthropomorphic depictions. Despite this, many features are unique to the Golan culture. The best example is the anthropomorphic basalt pillar figures sometimes called "House Gods" (Epstein 1982, 1988).

The Golan Chalcolithic culture was first recorded during a small-scale excavation conducted in the 1960s at Tel Turmus in the Hula Valley (Dayan 1969). At the present stage of research, however, it seems that this culture is mainly concentrated on the Golan Heights. The first Chalcolithic sites were found there during a survey carried out by the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums in the late 1960s (Epstein 1972). Epstein later carried out a more extensive survey and conducted excavations at different scales at ten of the surveyed sites (Epstein 1998). Until now, Epstein's have been the only excavations of settlements belonging to this culture, apart from two further small-scale projects at Tel Turmus (Smithline et al. 1998; Zelin 2000). In fact, Epstein's excavations are virtually our only source of information on this culture (one of the few exceptions is the assemblage of "House Gods," discovered by other surveyors or farmers). Most of our theories and interpretations of this culture, its social organization and its ritual life were proposed by Epstein or are deeply influenced by her ideas. For instance, Epstein claimed that there was virtually no material evidence of activities of a ritual nature except that represented by the basalt pillar figures. These were interpreted by Epstein as

representations of fertility gods, who were worshipped by the inhabitants of the houses in which they were found (Epstein 1998: 230–231). This picture of a very simple religious life within the Golan Chalcolithic culture has not been disputed up to now.

In 2006, our expedition surveyed the central part of the Golan on behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (fig. 1). During this survey, we rediscovered two chains of houses partially excavated by Epstein at the site of el ‘Arbain (Epstein 1998). We subsequently excavated these two houses during five seasons between 2007 and 2011. The results of this excavation are presented in the following, and further discussion is based primarily on the material recovered during our fieldwork.



Figure 1

DATA

Houses 2, 3, 5 and 6, laid out in two chains, apparently formed a complete domestic complex (Epstein 1998: 137–138). They were enclosed on both east and west by massive walls, which created a large central courtyard. Houses

2 and 5 were fully excavated by us and the courtyard (ca. 60 sq. m) between them was partially excavated. Epstein's Houses 3 and 6 were not excavated, but the outline of their walls could easily be traced on the surface.

The walls of the complex were built directly on bedrock. No stratification could be distinguished inside the rooms, indicating that all of the material belongs to the same period of occupation. Although a few technical additions were made (see below), all of the rooms were used simultaneously during the houses' final period of existence (fig. 2).

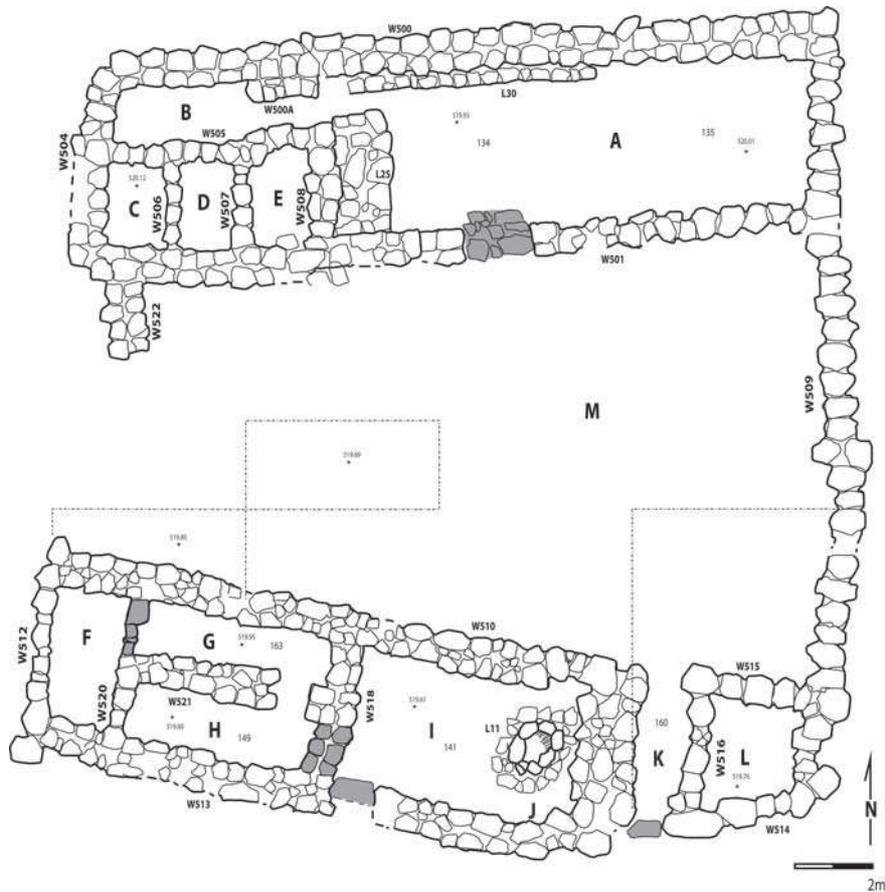


Figure 2

House 2

The large Room A (50 sq. m) occupied most of the area of the northern house, House 2. The floor was probably of beaten earth, since no paving was found. Two benches were found inside the room: a long narrow bench along the northern wall opposite the entrance and another bench against the partition

wall between Rooms A and B. Fragments of many open and storage pottery vessels, as well as fragments of basalt vessels, were found scattered on the floor throughout the room. Fragments of two pillar figures were found near the benches and a stand was found on the northern bench.

Although Room B was excavated by Epstein, she published no data on the material found within it. A large, generally flat rock not mentioned by Epstein is incorporated into the room's western wall (fig. 3). It does not seem to have had any structural role; on the contrary, it is simply held in place by small rocks placed around it. This rock is interpreted by the author as a *massebah* (stele). It was placed in the center of the wall in such a way that it was visible to a person passing through the narrow entrance into Room B.



Figure 3

Three small rooms, Rooms C–E, are located in the southwestern corner of House 2. All of these rooms were paved with small flat stones and several fragments of basalt bowls and grinding stones were found in them. Numerous fragments of a well-baked clay installation were found in Room E, along with fragments of holemouth jars showing signs of burning on their exterior. We interpret these rooms as a kitchen containing an oven or similar cooking installation and two small side rooms probably used for storage.

House 5

House 5 was very different in general character from House 2. All of the rooms were paved. The house was partitioned into five spaces, whose relatively small size would have made them inconvenient for dwelling.

Room F was previously excavated by Epstein. The long, narrow *Rooms G and H* yielded seven fragments of grinding stones and one complete grinding

stone, an unusually large number of tools for a single space. One grinding stone is exceptionally large: its working surface is almost one square meter and it weighs more than 200 kg. In our interpretation, collected cereals were processed into flour in Rooms G and H.

Room I was almost empty of finds, other than a silo in its eastern part. This silo is typical of the Chalcolithic, resembling ones found at Tel Turmus (Dayan 1969: 67), the “Silo Site” (Epstein 1998: 109–114), and Tel Te’o (Eisenberg *et al.* 2001). However, because of the local conditions (digging into basalt is an almost impossible task), the lining stones were placed on the floor and a stone structure was built around them to secure the silo in place (fig.2). An almost identical installation was found in House 10 at the “Silo Site” (Epstein 1998: 115–116). A single small, fragmented storage jar was found on the floor of Room I. This space is interpreted as a storage room, in which collected cereals were kept before processing in the nearby Rooms G and H.

The small *Space J* was enclosed by the silo and southeastern corner of Room I. More than 100 flint blades were found in the space, an anomalous occurrence for the local Chalcolithic culture, in which blades are rarely found. Some of them were backed but not retouched and can actually be classified as unfinished sickle blades. This space is interpreted as a specialized workshop for the production of sickle blades.

Space K differed from the other units of the complex in that it had openings in both the southern and the northern wall. Openings in the northern walls of houses are previously unattested in the local Chalcolithic architecture. *Room L* contained a fragmented storage jar and fragments of several storage vessels, none of them decorated. It is clear that Space K, Room L and the eastern enclosing wall are technically later additions, turning the two houses into a single complex. Space K seems to have served as an entryway to the central courtyard created by this addition.

On the basis of the data collected in the field, we can interpret the excavated features as two large units enclosing a central courtyard, which both belong to a single larger complex. The excavations have shown that Houses 2 and 5 are not parts of two separate house chains, as proposed by Epstein (1998: 137–139), but rather parts of the same domestic architectural complex, which was composed of the houses numbered 2, 3, 5 and 6 by Epstein (fig. 4). The northern house served as a dwelling that included a large living room, a small domestic sanctuary, a kitchen and two additional rooms for food preparation. The southern house was very different in nature: it was divided into many small rooms not convenient for dwelling but suitable for performing mundane domestic tasks, such as food storage inside the silo or storage jars and preparing flint tools. The central courtyard likely served for overnight lodging of the herd belonging to the extended family. The

inhabitants of the complex produced surpluses in sufficient quantities to require a basic administration of some sort to track the types and amounts of goods kept in the storage rooms, as reflected by more than a dozen tokens and a sealing found in the excavations.

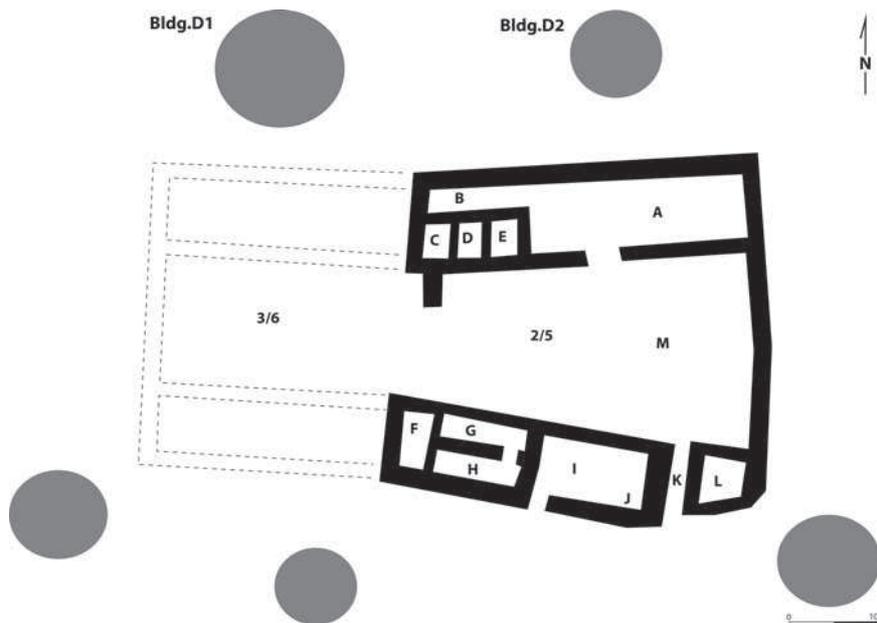


Figure 4

No enclosing wall was found between the courtyards of Houses 2/5 and the nearby Houses 3/6. Instead, a massive wall similar to the eastern enclosing wall of Courtyard 2/5 was identified (but not yet excavated) at the western end of Houses 3/6. Hence, this domestic compound differs from Epstein's unanimously accepted model of the chain houses, reflecting a more complex social organization.

However, the way in which the domestic complex ceased to exist is even more fascinating. This huge complex was suddenly left by its inhabitants for no apparent reason, although data collected at the site may throw some light on this picture.

1. After the complex was abandoned, it was not resettled. The only exception is the crude fence built on top of its walls in a much later period. This did not disturb any of the original Chalcolithic material, which remained sealed under a 35–50 cm-thick layer of heavy debris mixed with basalt stones. The walls collapsed into the house immediately after it was abandoned, or very soon afterwards. Parts of the northern wall were found collapsed directly on

the floor (fig. 5). All of the sediment between the walls is a typical heavy dark-brown basaltic soil. As there was virtually no anthropogenic activity after the site was abandoned, the only source of later debris would be eolian dust blown in from the surroundings. This sediment, which is found trapped between the stones of the nearby megalithic structures, is entirely different in nature, being light yellowish in color and fine-grained. Fragments of pottery vessels found on floors in the excavation were in situ, showed no signs of displacement, and were not weathered by natural forces, such as alluvial processes or the strong winds common in this area. It is quite probable that the space between the walls was intentionally filled with soil before the complex was completely abandoned. Thus, the material collected from the floors and courtyard reflects the scenario at or very near the time of abandonment.



Figure 5

2. The sediment found in lower layers of the debris shows evidence of intense heat that fired patches of clay. Traces of straw and wooden poles are visible in this clay. These patches of clay apparently represent the roofs that collapsed into the structure together with the walls during the destruction. In addition, half of the flint debitage and tools bear “potlid” scars caused by exposure to high temperatures. Fired clay was found in large amounts only in the northern house, but burnt flint fragments were equally scattered in the southern house and the courtyard, indicating that the whole complex was damaged by fire. It is inconceivable that a wattle-and-daub roof could have

survived in the harsh, humid climate of the Golan Heights for more than a few years after maintenance had ceased (Zuckerman 2009: 53–54). Thus, the consumption of the house by fire apparently took place almost simultaneously with the abandonment of the complex.

3. All pottery and basalt objects found in the excavation were collected and all of the excavated sediment was sieved through 2 mm mesh screens. Thousands of fragments of pottery and flint and basalt tools were found on the floors of both houses, all of which were transported to the laboratory. As the house was sealed immediately or soon after its abandonment, we may reasonably claim that the collected assemblages reflect the actual amount, location and position of artifacts at the time of this event. Careful recording and analysis of these features led us to an interesting conclusion. Although the pottery was found in situ on the floors and some vessels could be regarded as “complete” or “almost complete” (i.e., a complete or almost complete profile was reconstructed), many pieces were missing and the vessels were generally fragmented (Chapman 2000). Three such vessels were found: a large decorated storage jar in Room A, a medium-sized storage jar in Room L, and a large profile section of a small jug on the floor of Room I. However, only ca. 15–40% of the overall amount of sherds belonging to these vessels were found on the floors. This is an especially important observation considering that in all of the rooms the contexts were sealed by the collapsed walls and were not disturbed during later periods.

4. The state of preservation of the ground stone vessel assemblage collected at the complex was even more striking. In all, 24 vessels were collected by the end of the 2010 season, all made from basalt. The items include 18 grinding stone fragments and six bowls of different sizes and shapes. This assemblage is characterized by the following features:

a. All of the receptacles were made of basalt, the most common and durable stone in this area.

b. All of the receptacles were significantly damaged or fragmented.

c. The location of fracture lines is noteworthy. One might logically assume that the basalt vessels broke during accidental falls and that the breaks would occur at the vessels’ weakest spots (Chapman 2000: 67). However, this is not the case at el ‘Arbain. Most receptacles broke in half at their approximate center, their thickest and therefore strongest section, while the vessels’ more fragile edges remained mostly undamaged (fig. 6). In contrast, the largest grinding stones were not broken in half but their edges showed numerous traces of damage (fig. 7). Basalt is an exceptionally durable raw material. It has been proposed that the abundant pillar figures at these sites are often found broken into pieces on the floors because they had fallen from shelves or benches. We tested this theory by dropping basalt rocks similar in size and shape to these

figures from different heights. No damage similar to that seen on the original objects was reported during the experiment (Freikman 2011).

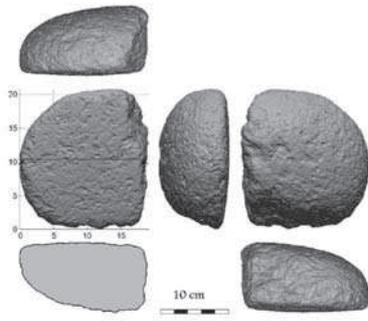


Figure 6 a

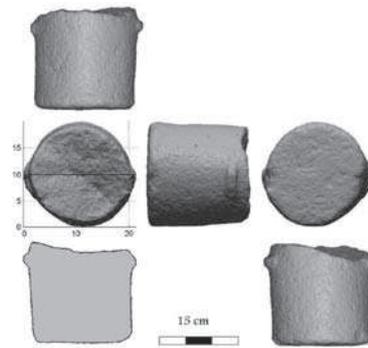


Figure 6 b



Figure 7

d. All of the grinding stones were found upside-down or lying on their sides on the floors (fig. 8). While this observation may be meaningless in regard to smaller objects, this is not the case for the larger ones. The three largest grinding stones, weighing dozens or hundreds of kilograms, could not have been overturned by chance.



Figure 8

e. Surprisingly, all of the basalt objects were fragmented. Since the material enclosed between the walls was undisturbed after abandonment and the weight of the fragments is significant, it is hard to explain the missing pieces as resulting from natural forces. Thus, these fragments were intentionally removed from the site.

To summarize, all of the features listed above point to the intentional destruction and possible removal of parts of these objects immediately or very soon after the house was abandoned.

5. At least six of the entryways were blocked with small to medium-sized basalt stones. While in most cases the stones were simply piled up in the passageway, in at least one case they were carefully placed in the entrance up to a height of four to five rows (fig. 9). In one example, a basalt grinding stone fragment was found among the blockage stones between Rooms G and H. We assume that the passageway leading into Room B was treated similarly, but that the blockage was destroyed by natural forces or was not discerned by the previous excavators.

6. Two objects found inside the complex are of special interest. Both are similar, naturally elongated slabs weighing more than 10 kg each. Each bears the same pattern of long, narrow removal marks on the end (fig. 10). Such damage could be inflicted only by pounding these objects on some other hard surface (likely basalt). All of these damage marks appear on one side of the



Figure 9

slabs. Their form and location suggest that they were intentional and that these two stones were used as *ad hoc* tools for breaking other basalt vessels. In most cases, the energy created by the stones' mass and momentum was enough to break each vessel into two or more pieces by striking exactly in its center.

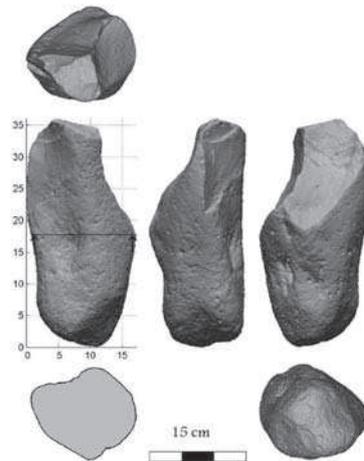


Figure 10

However, even these sizeable tools were not capable of breaking the largest grinding stones, and consequently they were made non-functional by removal of their edges in a series of strong impacts. This conclusion correlates with analysis of the damage patterns on the pillar figures (Freikman 2011).

DISCUSSION

The archaeological record of el 'Arbain helps us to reconstruct the sequence of actions performed by the inhabitants during the abandonment of the complex. First, after leaving the complex, they broke the pottery and stone vessels and took most of the fragments away from the site, possibly for burial nearby (see below). Later, all passages leading into the houses and connecting the rooms were blocked with stones, the walls were dismantled until they collapsed, and the house was set on fire. It is probable that after the complex had burned down the space between the walls was intentionally filled with soil.

However, the identity of the people who destroyed the house, and the reasons for their actions remain unknown. Different factors may underlie the desertion of the complex; these could include natural forces like an earthquake, accidental destruction of some kind such as fire, external aggression, or intentional seasonal or final abandonment by the inhabitants. Some possible factors are outlined below.

1. Evidence of an earthquake or accidental fire would include fragments of broken vessels that were sealed by the collapsed stone walls. However, by the time the walls collapsed and the fire started, the vessels had been broken and mostly removed from the house and the entryways had been blocked. Since it is unlikely that these inhabitants could predict natural disasters, we can safely exclude these scenarios.

2. The possibility of violent destruction of at least part of the Chalcolithic settlement cannot be completely excluded. However, no evidence of such a scenario was retrieved at el 'Arbain, or indeed at any Chalcolithic site in the Golan Heights or nearby (Epstein 1998: 132–133). It is also hard to explain the existence of blocked passageways and fragmented pottery and basalt vessels in the context of such a scenario.

3. In regard to temporary abandonment, Epstein already proposed that inhabitants of the local settlements were pastoralists and that occupations were limited to certain seasons. The sealing of the house entrances fits this theory perfectly. Moreover, it is possible that a natural disaster occurred while the house was sealed and ruined it, and that the inhabitants never resettled there.

However, this scenario cannot explain the periodic and deliberate destruction of pottery and basalt vessels, which in the latter case required significant time and energy to produce.

4. Finally, it seems that our data are a better fit for the scenario of intentional abandonment and destruction of the house. The sealed entryways could indeed be reopened if the inhabitants returned. However, they were not satisfied with blocking the passages, since after they had broken most of the vessels in the structure it was filled with earth and incinerated. The destruction of virtually all vessels in the house clearly indicates that their intention was not to return. We can explain the sequence of events in complex 2/5 at el 'Arbain only as the intentional destruction of the houses and their covering with earth. In other words, the former inhabitants actually buried their dwelling.

Destructive acts such as those observed at el 'Arbain are not unique to this site but are known from many sites of the protohistoric Near East. The blockage of house passages before abandonment is attested at the Neolithic sites of Beidha (Kirkbride 1966: 16) and Čayonü in Anatolia (Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1998: 590). This behavior is well understood and continued into modern periods; it is comparable to locking the doors before finally leaving a house today.

Thick ash layers were found inside many of the excavated houses in Arpachiyah in Iraq (Campbell 2000), as well as ČatalHöyük (Meskell 1999: 50–56) and Čayonü in ancient Anatolia. According to the excavators of the Neolithic site of Opovo in Serbia, many houses at the site were intentionally burned down during their abandonment (Tringham and Conkey 1998: 38).

The filling of the inner spaces of a house prior to final abandonment is attested at several Neolithic sites in the Near East. Some houses in Beidha were partially filled with clay and stones by the last residents (Kirkbride 1967: 96). Houses at ČatalHöyük were “buried by filling with clean soil” (Mellaart 1962: 51). According to the excavator of Can Hasan, House 2 at this site was deliberately filled with stacked mud bricks (French 1963: 35). The filled houses at the site of Aşikli were cleared of their contents and, according to Özdoğan and Özdoğan (1998: 589), were deserted and deliberately buried by their former owners. The same hypothesis is very convincingly proposed by these authors for Čayönü (Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1998: 590). While the application of this scenario at el 'Arbain is unproven, it is supported by these analogous examples from different sites.

It is more difficult to explain the destruction of vessels and the subsequent disappearance of their fragments from the site. The intentional destruction of ritual objects (sometimes in combination with their burial in pits) is known as early as the Upper Paleolithic (Pettitt 2011: 140). Plaster anthropomorphic statues were reportedly buried at Jericho, 'Ain Ghazal and Tel Ramad. A

fragment of such a statue was found with six modeled skulls in a pit and was interpreted by the excavator as a foundation deposit (de Contenson 1969: 27). At 'Ain Ghazal, fragments of three modeled skulls, first interpreted as a single statue (Rollefson and Simmons 1988: 94), were found buried in a pit (Garfinkel 1994: 163). A large cluster of fragmentary statues was found at Jericho (Garstang *et al.* 1935: 166). Photographs (Garstang *et al.* 1935: pl. LII:a, b) clearly show that these groups of fragments (190 and 195) were also buried in two pits, a fact later shown by Garfinkel (1994: 164).

Nativ and Gopher (2011) recently analyzed ossuary assemblages discovered in different burial sites in the southern Levant. They clearly showed that ossuaries and burial jars were fragmented “during the Chalcolithic period while the cave still fulfilled its original mortuary function” (Nativ and Gopher 2011: 238). Moreover, they explained the absence of large portions of once complete vessels by their removal from the burial sites and their further circulation “among the living as well” (Nativ and Gopher 2011: 239).

Intentional destruction and fragmentation of objects is also known in the mortuary context. A bow that was placed inside the burial in the “Cave of the Warrior” was broken before the ceremony (Schick *et al.* 1998: 128–129). Stone bowls placed on top of bodies at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) site of Kfar Hahoresh were shattered into pieces (Goring-Morris, personal communication).

The famous hoard discovered in a cave in Nahal Mishmar (Bar-Adon 1980) contained more than 450 metal objects, including copper mace heads, scepters, axes and other items. No clear traces of usewear or damage were found on any of them, with the exception of one class of object. These were defined as crowns by Bar-Adon (1980) or as the more neutral term “rings” (Moorey 1988: 179). Significant damage inflicted on at least four of the objects involved breaking off details that were soldered to the upper part of the rings. The damage was considered by Tadmor (1986: 256–258) and Moorey (1988: 179) as apposition to the rest of the hoard. Moorey raised the possibility that these objects were intentionally defaced.

The ritual center of Gilat yielded a large assemblage of pottery vessels, many of which were clearly ritualistic in nature and brought to the site as offerings. According to the excavators, most of the 114 burners and torpedo jars were intentionally broken and fragmented (Alon and Levy 1989: 199, 204).

Fragmentary V-shaped bowls were found together with the bones of buried skeletons at the site of Kissufim (Le Mort and Rabinovich 1994: 95). As all of the fragments were found in a sealed burial context that had not been disturbed since interment, it is clear that these bowls were deposited in an already fragmentary state or were intentionally broken on the spot and partially removed from the site.

A fragmentary state of preservation of more than 100 cornets was observed by Perrot (1992: 101*) at the Chalcolithic cave of Umm Qatafa.

Some ritual objects found in the Neolithic Nahal Hemar Cave were found in a fragmentary state (Arensburg and Hershkovitz 1988). Garfinkel (1994: 171) proposed that at least some of these were already broken when brought to the cave for burial. Unfortunately, because the cave had been severely damaged by looters, this theory cannot be substantiated. Deliberately broken plates were scattered through a room at Arpachiyah (Campbell 2000: 10).

Intentional breakage was also proposed for objects found in Kissonerga-Mosphilia (Goring 1991: 49–51). These broken figurines as well were found in a large depositional pit together with many other objects.

Considering that in all of these cases the fragments were discovered inside pits in sealed contexts, it is likely that the vessels were fragmented elsewhere and that the burial of the fragments held some kind of significance.

It is interesting that in none of these cases are there signs of violent destruction of the site (cf. Ben-Tor 2006). The actions of breaking the vessels and burning and then filling the houses were performed by the owners of the property. Thus, these destructive acts were dictated not by hatred or religious fanaticism but by different factors. Moreover, it seems that these actions were differently motivated at different sites. Most of the destroyed or buried vessels found at el 'Arbain and many other sites (with the noteworthy exception of the Nahal Mishmar hoard) show signs of intensive usage. They were broken after they had been used for a considerable period and were no longer needed. This contrasts with a different type of intentionally destroyed object. Zoomorphic clay figurines found at the Neolithic sites of Sha'ar Hagolan (Freikman and Garfinkel 2009), 'Ain Ghazal (McAdam 1997) and Hajji Firuz Tepe (Voigt 1983: 193–195) were damaged before they were dried and fired (Freikman and Garfinkel 2009: 6); in other words, they were specially manufactured in order to be destroyed.

What happened to the missing fragments of pottery and stone vessels? Several possibilities are listed below, although a combination of these factors or additional explanations are also possible.

1. They could have been deposited in places that had special meaning for people, such as mountain tops (Chapman 2000: 57–58). While such a scenario cannot be completely ruled out, no such examples have been found in the Near East.

2. Fragments could have been deposited within burials. Of the numerous megalithic structures around el 'Arbain, some have previously been dated to the Middle Bronze I Age (Epstein 1985). However, six of these structures in the immediate vicinity of el 'Arbain were recently excavated by the author and no material in situ that postdates the Chalcolithic was found. In one case,

a fragment of a typical Chalcolithic handle was found between the stones of the tumulus surrounding the dolmen. It is noteworthy that it was made from the yellowish clay typical of the southern Golan Heights (Epstein 1998), more than 30 km south of the site. Only a few tiny fragments of this material have been recovered from sites of the central Golan Heights. Further extensive excavations of megalithic burials should clarify the extent of this practice.

3. Fragments of vessels may have been considered valuable and thus traded or exchanged between different sites or regions (Chapman 2000: 60–62). The large quantities of fragments of similar objects found at Gilat, Umm Qatafa and Mitzpeh Shalemmay attest to such practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Data collected at the site of el ‘Arbain have contributed to an improved understanding of the lives of the site’s inhabitants as well as reconstruction of the sequence of actions during the abandonment of their house. This event was clearly a long, complex and highly formalized process of deliberately destroying the house’s contents and then the house itself. People invested significant resources and energy in the systematic destruction of their own households, the results of their hard work. The reasons behind these actions, however, remain unknown at this stage of our research.

In the region as a whole we see many examples of houses being destroyed and buried, only to be replaced by similar constructions nearby or even on the same spot. In fact, these houses were buried in a similar way to their human owners. It is possible that these houses were considered to be living creatures like their inhabitants and thus shared the same destiny. In any case, it is clear that these activities must have been dictated by a well-established doctrine of the afterlife embedded in a relatively complex set of religious beliefs. This doctrine was strong enough to cause these people to destroy the fruits of their own efforts: their houses and well-crafted tools.

The partial list of comparanda presented here shows that the destructive practices recorded at the site of el ‘Arbain were common in the ancient Near East. The ritual destruction and burial of both mundane and ritually significant objects, together with complete houses, was well integrated into late prehistoric life across this entire region. Similar actions have been observed at different sites ranging from Europe to the southern Levant over millennia, from the PPNB to the Chalcolithic period. Although the picture of these practices is far from complete, it is becoming clear that the religious life of the Golan Chalcolithic culture was much more complex than was previously known. Further research on these issues will undoubtedly clarify this picture.

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