

The Life, Death and Long After-life of a Canaanite Temple

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The phenomenon of conservatism and long-endurance of sacred space is well-known in the multi-period *tells* of the Ancient Near East, and was demonstrated and analysed in many regional and temporal case-studies. Temples were erected in the same place for centuries and even millennia, and sacred precincts retained their basic plan and ritual significance despite political and cultural transformations evident in other aspects of ancient societies. But can a temporal space continue to function as a sacred space, and serve as a link in the unbroken chain of cultic significance of place, even in the absence of newly constructed cultic structures following the destruction of previous ones? Can an ‘anti-monument’ be sanctified and preserve the sacred nature of obsolete sacred monuments?

Based on several cases known in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE, I will argue that space can retain its sacred significance despite, or because, the original sanctuary located therein is violently destroyed and no other structure is built in its place. The actual ruins can be converted into a sacred space, carrying a powerful message of awe and fear, for the people living in their shade. In such cases, the physical remains of ruined sanctuaries can become the locus of ‘ruin cults’ and ancestors worship, and form a major tool in on-going process of recreating the collective memory of society through ritual and veneration of the past.

In my paper, I will discuss a specific case-study in the context of the second millennium BCE eastern Mediterranean. A monumental ceremonial precinct was erected at the heart of the acropolis of the city of Hazor, the largest Canaanite kingdom in the southern Levant, in the Late Bronze Age (16th-13th centuries BCE).

This sanctuary, like the other temples of Canaanite Hazor, was destroyed in a violent conflagration in the 13th century BCE. The site remained deserted for some 150 years, until an ephemeral occupation of flimsy huts and storage pits was erected on the acropolis in the 11th century BCE, and following it a large well-planned Israelite city and administrative center existed there in the 10th-8th centuries BCE. Throughout these later settlements, the huge mound of Canaanite ruins in the center of the densely-built city continued to exist, with no further clearing or rebuilding. It served as the locus of 'ruin cults' in the 11th century BCE, and was physically enclosed within a wall separating it from the rest of the structures during the 8th century BCE, until Hazor's final demise by the Assyrians.

The persistence of this sacred space, in its various forms, through the transformation from Canaanite to Israelite Hazor, will serve as the background for the discussion. The general implications of this case for the study of the conversion of sacred spaces in archaeology will also be addressed.

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Among my current research interests are the archaeology of cult and ritual, Household archaeology in the Bronze Age southern Levant and aspects of interconnections and cultural influence in the eastern Mediterranean.