



*Ruth Ward documenting some of the contents of pit deposit XXXIIIY 11.82 (LBA temple interior).*

## Fortress Temples, Ceremony and the Humble Pit

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### Introduction

The discovery of a pit at an archaeological site is often the cause of much angst among archaeologists. Discreet concentrations of bone, pottery or atypical objects can be telling clues for these habitually shy contexts. Much time, muttering and patient trowelling in the right light assists in locating the cut line of a pit within a seemingly uniform buff deposit. Often labelled 'rubbish pits', their excavation and recording can also result in definitions including 'intrusions' or, depending on the level of treatment they provoke, a nuisance. However, despite these all too personal accounts, studies have indicated that there's more to pits than meet the eye – there's something in 'em!

### Research Background

At least seven buildings identified as 'fortress' or 'Migdol' temples dating to the Middle Bronze Age (MBA, ca. 1800-1500 BC) have been excavated in Palestine since the early 20th Century. These large freestanding buildings share particular design details including a long-room monumental temple style, a single long room, thick walls, symmetrical plan and entrance via a central axis. Often constructed on top of a high podium, they were also located within a distinct temenos precinct. Examples discovered at Shechem and Megiddo set the architectural precedent with more recently discovered types identified at Hazor, Tel Kittan, Tel Haror, Tell el-Hayyat and Pella. Excavation at all these sites confirms more than just one phase of construction, while several reflect a long history

of use. Antecedents of this unique architectural style dating to the Early Bronze Age exist in Syria to the north, as do further MBA examples.

Clear stylistic similarities suggest that parallels may also exist in the practices and ceremonies occurring within these monumental precincts. Why do some temple pits contain complete and rather odd vessels? Do the pits reflect ceremonies, the details of which lie underneath the

sands (or mud bricks) of time? Is there evidence of a belief system unique to the fortress temples alone? Recognising and documenting signs of ritual activity within the pits will reveal various aspects of the core belief systems held during the Second Millennium BC. The role these deposits played within temple confines and court throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Age (ca. 1800-1200 BC) now forms the crux of my doctoral research.

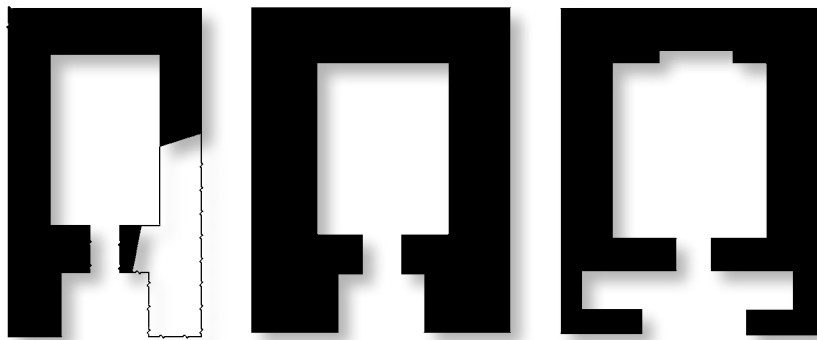
### Research Trip

Much is known of the fortress temple buildings themselves. My research trip enabled me to view the material and excavation archives of several of these at close hand, with particular emphasis on the relevant pit deposits.

I began at the site of Pella where volunteers kindly extracted pottery filled polystyrene boxes from their storage place in preparation for my analysis. Ongoing excavations in the temple precinct have confirmed a comprehensive history of activity within this location over a long period of time (ca. 1800-800 BC). At least seven major building phases have now been identified, built one atop the other, with the most impressive being the enormous MBA fortress temple. Since 1994, the recording of more than 200 pits from MBA/LBA levels in the temple area has enabled their detailed examination. Interestingly, Dr Stephen J. Bourke has discussed some of the more elaborate artefacts excavated from the Pella temple sequence in recent NEAF bulletins (#45, December 2003; #46, October 2004 and #47, April 2005) – note the frequency with which these and other atypical objects are retrieved from pits and other cut features (e.g. plaster lined bins)!

After participating in the excavation season, I spent nearly a week examining and documenting the contents of a long list of pits from these periods. The fortress temple there represents the largest example of this architectural style in Southern Canaan, and as much of the assemblage remains at the site, the time spent was invaluable to my research. It was also a useful opportunity to discuss aspects of my topic with colleagues and Dr Bourke, the excavation Director.

A three-week visit to the USA was planned, however as



*Schematic plan showing architectural comparisons of, from left: Pella, Shechem and Megiddo fortress temples (not to scale).*

only two weeks became feasible, the opportunity emerged to visit Professor Eliezer Oren at Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheba, Israel. This enabled me to view and discuss the collection from the fortress temple excavations at Tel Haror. Located c. 20km west of Beer Sheba, the building there represents an important southern example of this architectural group. Viewing some of the ceramic repertoire from the excavations of 1982-1990 confirmed that regional differences existed from the comparable Pella material. Professor Oren reinforced the importance of the temple pit deposits at the site, from which were excavated whole vessels and even a donkey complete with bronze bridle bit! It was also a good opportunity to meet his doctoral student Pirhaya Nahshoni, who took time off work to assist in me viewing the collection.

With a brain full of pits and pots from Pella and Tel Haror, my next port of call was Arizona, USA. Surrounded by remarkable mountain ranges and cactus deserts, Phoenix is the home of Arizona State University where Professor Steven Falconer, director of excavations at Tell el-Hayyat let me view the material from the site's fortress temple sequence. Located just 5km southwest of Pella, excavations from 1982-1985 revealed a sequence of four building phases and many associated pits. A week's accommodation at a colleague's house was generously organised along with study space at the university. Professor Falconer spent much time discussing the excavations and allowed me to pull out bag after bag of pottery for viewing. In addition, he provided access to the site excavations database enabling me to isolate areas for study quickly. Not only was the week greatly beneficial to my research but I also got to meet many University colleagues.

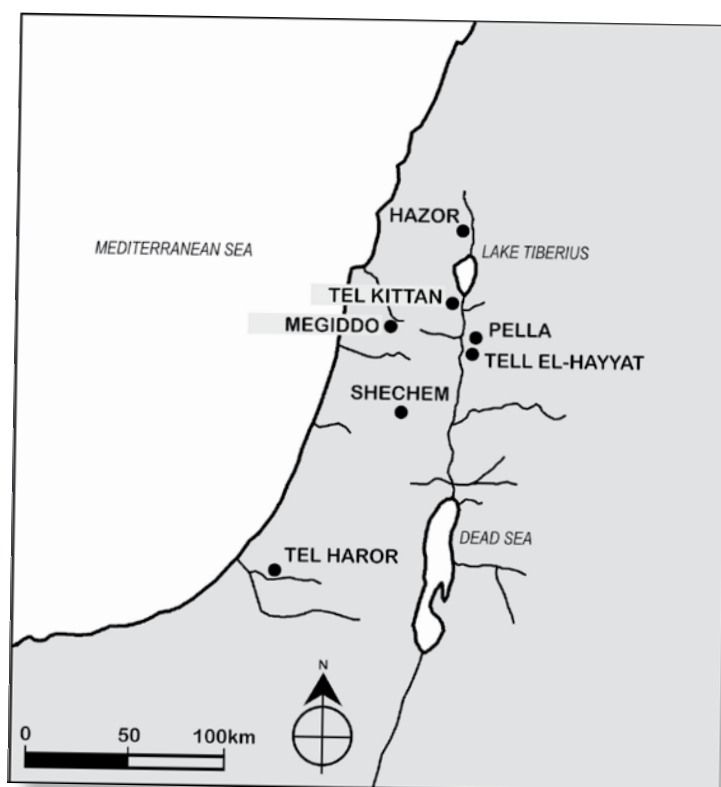
A week in chilly Chicago came as something of a shock after balmy Arizona. Large sheets of melting ice drifted down the city river and Lake Michigan looked decidedly frosty! I spent the entire week in the snug basement of the Oriental Institute Museum trawling through the archive and material of the 1935-1939 excavations at Megiddo, directed by Gordon Loud. Hand inked plans, photographs and typed records with annotated notes over 70 years old revealed keys to the pit deposits of the fortress temple sequence uncovered there. Insights into an era of early excavations revealed details of visits by other prominent archaeologists, rain, and labour strikes. The Museum Archivist, John Larson and Keeper of Collections, Helen McDonald were extremely accommodating and not only had the collection ready for my arrival but also located particular records or objects upon request. I was also very

fortunate to meet Raymond Tindel, the Museum Registrar almost on the eve of his retirement.

Every stage of this unique research visit provided an opportunity to view and discuss archives and collections pertinent to my research and I returned to Australia with a 'fortress temple full' of work to do!

I would like to thank the NEAF for granting me funding to facilitate this research trip, without which it would not have been possible. In addition, I wish to thank my referees, Professor Alison Betts and Dr Stephen Bourke for supporting my NEAF application. I am extremely grateful to Dr Stephen J. Bourke, Professor Eliezer Oren and Professor Steven E. Falconer for granting me access to their site archives and assemblages and for their gracious time and important discussion. Thank you also to Dr Raymond Tindel, Ms Helen McDonald and Dr John Lawson of The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago for facilitating my research of the Megiddo archive and collection. I am also grateful to Professor Elizabeth Brandt and her daughter Ana for their hospitality in Phoenix. Finally, I wish to thank Sam Gibbins for her endless assistance throughout this visit.

*Ruth Ward*



*Map of sites mentioned in text.*