# WEAPONRY AND WARRIOR BURIALS: PATTERNS OF DISPOSAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

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Abstract

*Burial, at its most basic level, simply represents one method utilized by the living to dispose of deceased humans. This disposal is influenced by the values and ideals held by a society; the resultant interment and the objects that accompany it are therefore reflective of those views. The 'warrior burial' tradition in the early second millennium BCE in the southern Levant provides a corpus of material relating not only to the disposal of a particular group of humans, but also the specific objects associated with them: the weaponry. The metal weapons that identify this category of burials, and their placement with the deceased – their disposal – may be analyzed on multiple levels, such as the intrinsic economic value of the metals themselves, the value of the labor and technological skill required to produce the weapons, the value placed on their acquisition, and the value of the social status and/or niche in society they provided for their owners.*

*The phenomenon of a single burial with associated weaponry is most common in Palestine during the Intermediate Bronze Age through Middle Bronze Age I, and slowly declines during the later phase of the Middle Bronze Age. Paradoxically, therefore, the disposal of valuable metals with a deceased individual occurs most frequently during a period in which there is the least evidence for conspicuous wealth in Canaanite society, while the practice declines and ultimately disappears when Middle Bronze Age culture reaches the zenith of its development. This shift in mortuary practice implies a change in views regarding treatment of this specific category of the dead and their metal weapons, and hence the 'value' that may have been ascribed to them, and reflects changes in Canaanite society that accompany the development of urban culture in the Middle Bronze Age.*

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## Introduction

The archaeology of consumption and disposal may encompass many traditions and be reflected in numerous ways throughout the archaeological record. Questions of consumption and disposal become questions of value, namely the ideology and beliefs vested by humans in other humans and in their 'things'. These values inform the objects and ideas people choose to utilize, how they do so, and with what frequency – in short, their consumption. How objects are deposited and/or discarded, or how ideas change, develop, and/or are discarded, represents their disposal. In short, consumption and disposal are driving forces in human activity. While discerning trends in consumption and disposal through spatial patterning within the archaeological record may be readily ascertained, the translation of those details into broader patterns of understanding about the values and beliefs they reflect, however, is more difficult to identify and problematic to assert.[2]

Did, for example, a store-jar that is found broken in a courtyard or other living space within a settlement have the same 'value' to the community that manufactured and used it as did a store-jar placed at the feet of an individual in his or her grave, even if, according to current ceramic typology, these store-jars are otherwise identical? Ceramic typologies provide vast amounts of data regarding chronology, stratigraphy, and seriation, yet little about the understanding of the 'value' of the store-jar itself. In this example, the use of a store-jar in a courtyard and its placement in a burial not only reflect different aspects of 'consumption' of the object (and its contents, which in and of themselves must be vested with 'value'), but the disposal is clearly vested with different meaning as well. Clearly, this goes beyond the basic truism that context matters, and addresses questions of human choice.

Storage jars are far too ubiquitous in the ceramic repertoire as well as in the numbers and locations in which they are found to use as a method of interpreting value, and extrapolating from this the customs of the human society from which they came. Narrowing the subject of examination to the identification of a specific category, however, and preferably to one bounded in both time and space, opens a window through which questions of consumption and disposal, and their related categories of value and belief may be examined further.

One of the obvious categories that meet these criteria is burial (Fig. 1). At a most basic level, burial represents a specific method utilized by the living to dispose of deceased human remains. Again at a basic level, this disposal is necessary in any location where humans congregate, for reasons of health, odor, and a host of other, fairly self-evident, reasons. Disposal of a deceased human through burial, however, may often be, and usually seems to be, vested with considerable meaning and significance, reflective of the values and ideals held by the society in which that human lived. When

2 As Prof. Ozdoğan noted in his opening lecture for this session, archaeology currently has such plethora of details that the sheer amount of this data often acts to the detriment of our understanding of the general picture of the past.

a human is buried without attention to accompanying ritual and belief, it tends to be an unusual circumstance (for example, disposal of plague victims, massacre, murder, etc.) and stands out as contrary to the accepted norm. Burial practices, therefore, as the deliberate disposal of humans and objects, reflect a set of beliefs intrinsic to the community to which each individual belonged.

In particular, the 'warrior burial' tradition (Fig. 2) in the southern Levant in the early second millennium BCE provides a specific category of interment relating not only to the disposal of a particular group of humans, but also to a specific category of objects: the weaponry. The metal weapons that identify this corpus, and the fact that they were interred with the deceased – their disposal – may be analyzed on multiple levels, including the intrinsic economic value of the metals themselves, the value of the labor and technological skill necessary to produce these objects, the value placed on their acquisition, and the value of the social status and/or niche occupied by their owners. While all burials reflect ideology, human custom, and/or belief, the 'warrior burials,' because of the very characteristics that makes them so readily identifiable, provide a very specific window through which to examine Canaanite Bronze Age society as the custom appears, develops, and then disappears.

The phenomenon of 'warrior burials' in southern Levantine society is most common during the Intermediate Bronze Age,[3] and stands out as one of the notable characteristics of that era. Significantly, however, the tradition continues into Middle Bronze Age I and stands as one of the indicators that helps to link the latter era with the earlier one (Cohen 2009). It is not until the latest phases of MB I, and more notably in MB II, that the single burial of an adult male accompanied by metal weapons gradually disappears from Canaanite mortuary traditions, to be replaced instead by multiple interments, as well as a decrease in the quantity of weapons placed in the tombs. Notably, this trend is roughly contemporaneous with the rise of urbanism in the southern Levant, marked by the appearance of large urban centers, more standardized material culture, increased trade and foreign contacts, and advances in metallurgy.

The data regarding 'warrior burials' in Canaan is well known, encompassing a far broader geographic area than is included within this study. Rather than repeat these data here, the emphasis instead is on the significance of these burials for examining questions concerning the 'value' of the humans and the metal weapons that accompanied them in their graves and the possible implications this has for understanding the processes and development of urban culture in the second millennium in the southern Levant.

## Intermediate Bronze Age

The pattern of the 'warrior burial' in the Intermediate Bronze Age is well-known and well-documented (Philip 1995b; Garfinkel 2001). Characterized by a single male

3 Please note that the terminology and nomenclature utilized in this article is as follows: Intermediate Bronze Age, Middle Bronze I, and Middle Bronze II.

individual, interred with multiple metal weapons, the 'warrior burial' stands out in this era as indicative of the conspicuous consumption of what must have been costly and possibly also relatively rare items. While there is some evidence for local metallurgy in Palestine during this era (Philip 1991, 1995a), the acquisition of many of these items most probably would have been through contact with those regions that could produce them, namely Syria and the northern Levant, especially as the antecedents of the 'warrior burial' tradition itself lies in these regions (Garfinkel 2001; Garfinkel and Cohen 2007; Philip 1995b). There is little evidence for established trade networks in the southern Levant at this time, and the lack of a widespread use of metal in Palestine in other contexts highlights the weapons as significant objects.

Other than these burials, however, there is little other evidence for much societal wealth in the Intermediate Bronze Age. The 'warrior burial' tradition, therefore, highlights the careful disposal of a specific class of individual with the concurrent disposal of the objects that marked them in society. The removal from society of these items, which were most probably vested with both value and significance, indicates that the importance of marking these individuals in their graves may have outweighed the intrinsic value of the items themselves. It may also be suggested that the status of the individual, and his value in society superseded hereditary considerations, as otherwise the metal weapons might be expected to pass down to a male relative instead of being interred with the individual. The importance of marking this 'warrior' status post-mortem overrode considerations of kinship, and the disposal of these weapons and their owners suggests a system in which status and maintaining that status post-mortem held a greater significance than keeping those weapons in use.

## Middle Bronze Age I

The custom of the 'warrior burial' continues into Middle Bronze Age I, although it is less frequently attested. While there are clear typological changes between the Intermediate Bronze Age and MB I weapons (Philip 1989), the overall concept of the burial remains the same (Fig. 2): a single male individual interred with his weapons that, presumably, denoted status, value, meaning, and reflected the importance of these concepts in the society that disposed of the deceased and his possessions in this highly specific manner.

Simultaneously, however, in MB I mortuary traditions begin to exhibit a change from single to multiple burials, most notably in areas that first mark the beginnings of urbanism in Canaan such as the coastal regions and larger urbanizing sites. While the custom of single burial continues at sites such as Gesher (Garfinkel and Cohen 2007), Efrata (Gonen 2001), and Hagosherim (Covello-Paran 1996), among others, these sites at which single burials have been excavated are located outside the primary regions in which urbanism is first attested in MB I (Cohen 2007, 2009). As such, conservatism

in burial tradition is one of the markers of continuity between the Intermediate Bronze Age and MB I (Prag 1974; Cohen 2009).

While previous scholarly tradition has tended to view MB I as markedly different in all respects from the preceding era (e.g. Dever 1987, Gerstenblith 1983, Kochavi 1989), it is instead suggested here that there is considerable continuity in those regions that were the slowest and/or latest to experience the forces of urbanism. In short, it is those regions in the periphery – both geographical and chronological – of MB I Canaan that continued previous subsistence patterns and cultural traditions longer into MB I than those regions which experienced the forces of urbanism more fully, such as the coastal plains; it is these regions, and traditions, such as burial customs, that aid in illustrating the processes of social and economic change. These continuities are apparent in patterns of subsistence and settlement (Cohen 2009), and also in the mortuary traditions such as the 'warrior burial' phenomenon. While the custom as a whole continues, other aspects of the 'warrior burial' show the influence of other social and economic developments in Canaan and provide insights into changing value in Canaanite society.

One area where this may be noted is in weapon typology and metal composition. While it is often stated as a general truism that the use of tin-bronze marks the transition from the Intermediate Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age, there is considerable evidence that both alloys were in use in the earliest phases of MB I. In his examination of the burial from Beth Shean, Oren (1971: 130) noted the mix of metallurgical content in early MB I contexts. More recent work by Philip (1991, 1995a) and Shalev (2007) have also focused on the metallurgical content of weapons, their distribution in the southern Levant, and the potential ramifications of these discoveries.

For example, the analysis of weapons from the Gesher cemetery revealed a range of composition from arsenical copper to tin bronze (Shalev 2007: 112-113), all in the same single-period site. It is of particular interest to note in this context that the one socket axe from Gesher, a form that is usually typologically associated with later phases of MB I (Philip 1989), found in Grave 14 (Figs. 3a and 3b), is also composed of arsenical copper rather than tin bronze (Shalev 2007: 112). This mix of metal composition in the weapons from the site suggests a gradual change, and hence an overlap as well, in the types of technologies and materials to which the population that utilized the cemetery had access. This also implies a gradual transition in metal technologies and/or trade, rather than an abrupt change in general lifestyle. This development can most probably be linked to the rise of urban culture and the accompanying increase in trade and foreign contacts, but access to new metals and technologies took place gradually.

These analyses have made it clear that during MB I the inhabitants of the southern Levant utilized a mix of both arsenical copper and tin-bronze, and that both metallurgies could be in use simultaneously at a single site. While tin bronze is clearly metallurgically superior to copper in terms of hardness and other use-specific activities, Philip (1991) has suggested socio-economic considerations also played a significant

role in determining alloy composition. For example, surface treatment or the aesthetic appearance of the object – the copper objects have an exterior silvery sheen which cannot be produced on an object made from tin-bronze (Philip 1991: 95-96) – may have figured significantly in the meaning and/or value that the weapon might have held, which would supersede the purely technological advantage of one composition over the other. From that, it may be argued that these social considerations were themselves determined by changing social and economic circumstances associated with the rise of urbanism in MB I. The pattern of single interments, which, as noted above, are most common in those regions least strongly linked with the rise of MB urban culture, and the warrior burials such as those in the Gesher cemetery that include weapons of varying metallurgical compositions, reflect those processes in the region. This suggests that an increased access to metals and technologies may have vied with traditional views of use, prestige and status, and these differing trends are visible in the corpora of weapons from MB I warrior burials.

## Middle Bronze Age II

In MB II the frequency of single interments declines rapidly, multiple interments are more frequently attested, and the phenomenon of the individual 'warrior burial' disappears from the archaeological record.[4] While mortuary assemblages still include metal weapons – now predominately if not exclusively of tin-bronze – they appear in far fewer numbers, and the overall burial context has changed such that one individual interred with his possessions can no longer be separated consistently or specifically from the individuals around him. In short, the mortuary focus on the individual warrior disappeared, and was replaced by a different system of interment that highlighted different values as significant in the disposal of humans and their possessions.

MB II mortuary remains reveal an increase in grave goods and other signs of more conspicuous wealth in society (e.g. scarabs, jewelry, imported ceramics) (Hallote 1995). It may be suggested that as ease of metal acquisition increased with the establishment of international trade routes, together with advances in metal technologies, the overall value of metal decreased, and the prestige and/or necessity of being disposed with it declined as well. As such, marking value may have shifted to other methods of expression, especially in mortuary traditions, as they express the values and beliefs of the living. The decline of the 'warrior burial' also coincides with the construction of the majority of the large fortifications of MB II; the change in military considerations

4 Increased excavation of MB II rural sites might very well change this perception, as suggested by the excavation of three single primary MB II burials at the site of Tel Zahara (Cohen and Więckowski 2007, in press). While none of the burials from Tel Zahara are 'warrior burials', the location of three primary single burials associated with a small, rural MB II site in the Jordan Valley suggests that primary burial may have a longer chronological life-span in the Middle Bronze Age in Canaan than previously understood.

of the society, and probably the practice of warfare as well, may have influenced the decline and subsequent value of the individual practice and status of the 'warrior' (Hallote 1995: 114). The increase in ceramics found in MB II mortuary contexts, and especially those forms linked to ritual meals with the deceased, also suggest that feasting and other group social rituals achieved a more prominent place in mortuary traditions than they held earlier in the Middle Bronze Age.

## Conclusion

Burial customs, the disposal of the dead, illustrate beliefs held by the living members of society, and emphasize how living humans of that society choose to represent themselves. The 'warrior burial' phenomenon in Bronze Age Canaan, the consumption and subsequent disposal of a specific group of humans marked by a specific class of object, provides a window into shifting ideas of wealth and value contemporary with changing social and economic conditions in Palestine. The trajectory of these burials indicates a continuity between the Intermediate Bronze Age and the early phases of MB I that is roughly contemporaneous with the rise of urbanism throughout the region, while the ultimate decline of the practice is contemporary with the rise of the fully urbanized and complex society of MB II.

The increase in more disposable wealth, probable adjustments in military tradition and practice, and the advances in metallurgy visible within the trend of the corpus of 'warrior burials' are all factors of the processes of urbanism as attested in Canaan. Urban development in any culture ultimately re-structures a society at all levels; cities and 'urban' culture are not simply super-imposed on pre-existing traditions and practices. Rather, the society must adapt its subsistence, settlement, ritual, and other means of existence to meet new developments; in so doing, these modifications affect both consumption and disposal of objects and ideas, as well as conceptions of value. The 'warrior burial,' which exemplifies a gradual transformation in Canaan while retaining its overall tradition as a whole before disappearing in the face of MB II urban culture, illustrates these changes in human patterns of consumption and disposal, and ultimately changes in human values, linked with the rise of urban culture in Canaan.

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Fig. 1: General view of a single, primary burial, dating to MB I (Gesher Grave 19).

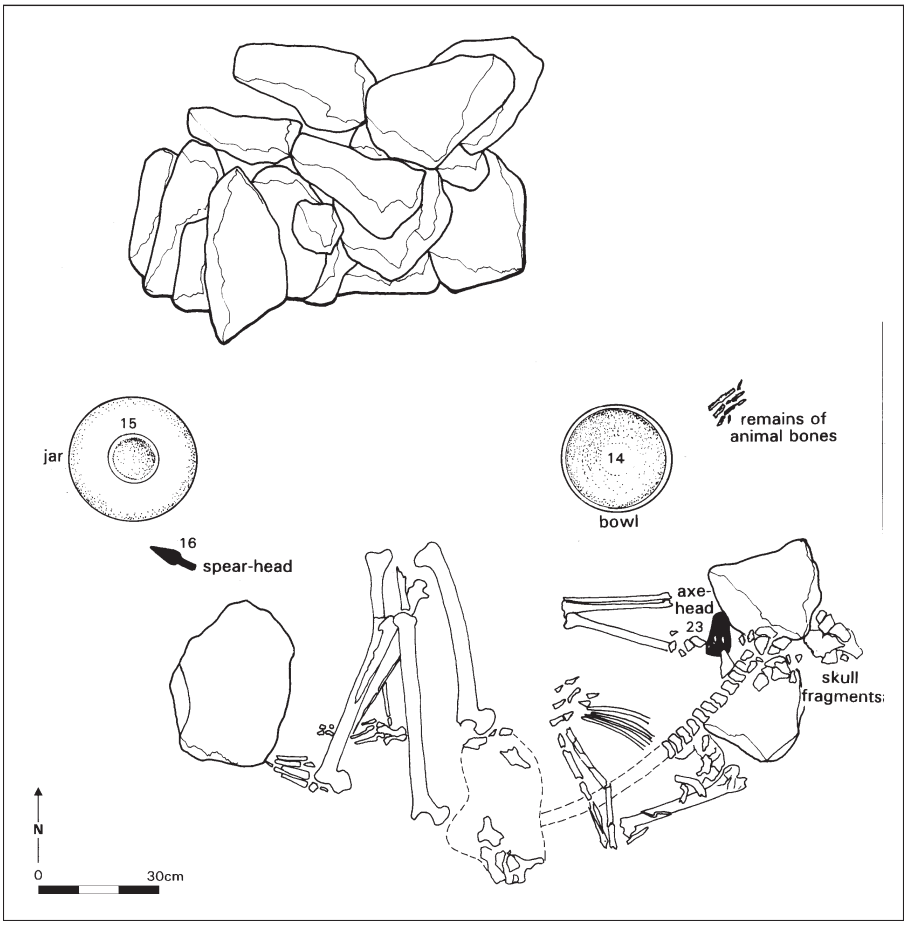


Fig. 2: General view of a ’warrior burial’ (Gesher Grave 2).

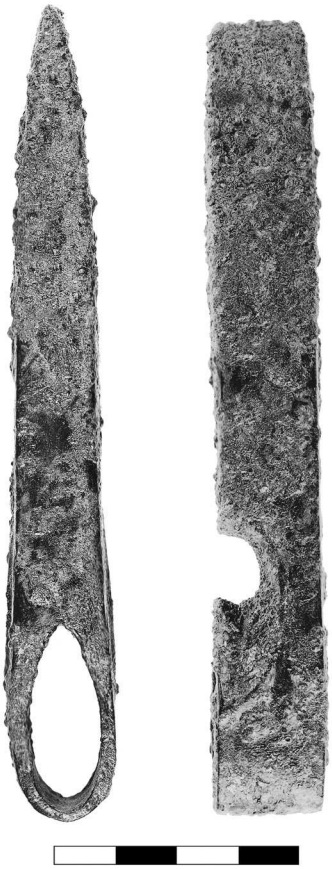

Fig. 3a: Socket axe from the Gesher cemetery.

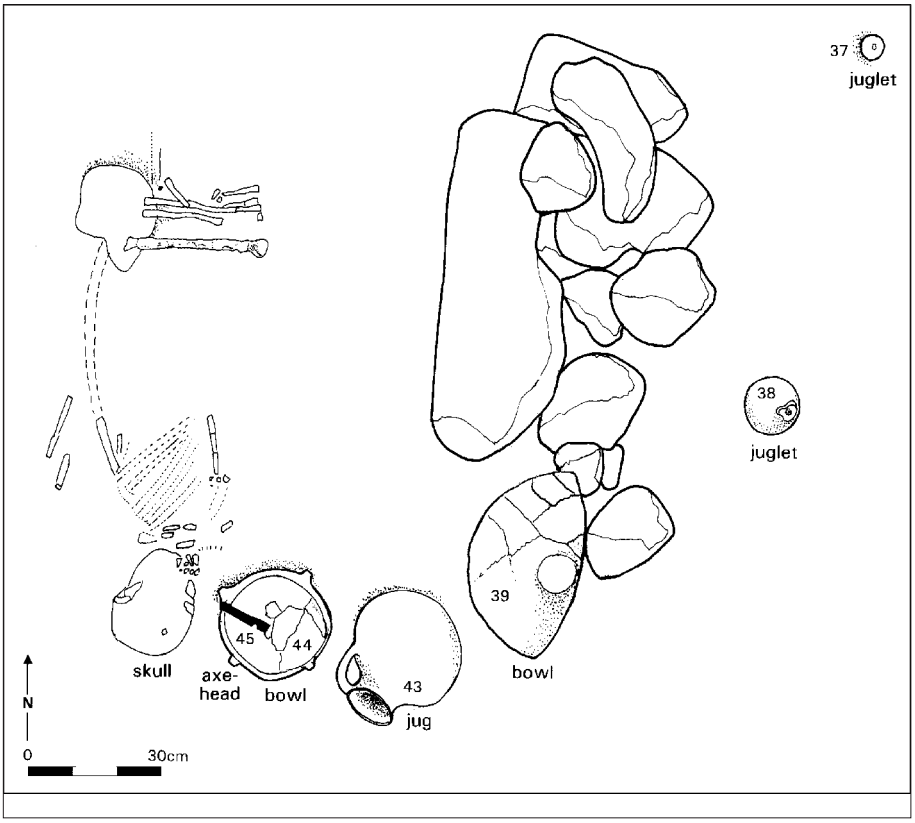


Fig. 3b: Grave 14 from the Gesher cemetery, with the socket axe in a bowl.