Schumacher's Shrine in Building 338 at Megiddo: A Rejoinder

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IN a recent issue of *IEJ*, D. Ussishkin published an article[1] in which he claims that Building 338 at Megiddo was 'the finest shrine from the First Temple period known today' (p. 149) and that the large structure discovered in Strata II–I at the summit was in fact a burial structure for this magnificent shrine. This is an extremely interesting claim; however, the study of the data as presented both by the excavators and by Ussishkin himself has led the present writer to rather different conclusions. It also seems that this debate serves as a good example of the impracticality of 're-excavating' Megiddo without the assistance of modern excavations on the mound.

Elsewhere I have pointed to the deficiencies of the final reports of Megiddo and to the fact that the literature attempting to correct them far exceeds in volume the original reports.[2] I would like to add here a third observation, which to my mind is the main source of the problem: the early excavators (like their predecessor, Flinders Petrie) attributed to a particular stratum all remains which were encapsulated between two levels within the walls of an architectural unit, without attempting to isolate from it intrusions such as pits that were sunk from above and contained pottery or other later finds, or even tombs dug into earlier levels. On the other hand, when a stratum was razed and levelled to make way for a new building, the later building was attached to the earlier one, and the gap was not recognized.

The present discussion does not attempt to present a reordering or redating of the remains of Megiddo, but rather to examine the validity of the reconstruction method used by Ussishkin. The central question is whether it is feasible to assemble several discrete elements which cannot be proved to belong together in place, time or character and create a new solid archaeological entity out of them.

In order to prove the existence of the shrine, four groups of finds were brought together, which may be divided as follows:

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[1] D. Ussishkin: Schumacher's Shrine in Building 338 at Megiddo, *IEJ* 39 (1989), pp. 149–172 (hereafter Ussishkin).

[2] E. Stern: Hazor, Dor and Megiddo in the Time of Ahab and under Assyrian Rule, *IEJ* 40 (1990), pp. 12–30.

1) The architectural remains: the *maṣṣebot* or stelae, the 'idol' and the 'offering tables' in Room 340, the stone 'cult installations' in Room 338 and the seven or so Proto-Ionic capitals found near the building.

2) The finds from Rooms 331 and 332 in Building 338.

3) The finds from outside Building 338.

4) The infant jar burials in Building 338.

We shall now examine these finds and their interpretation.

1. The architectural remains

In connection with the so-called *maṣṣebot*, I would like to draw attention to the conclusions of the late Y. Shiloh in connection with these elements in Building 338:

> 'We deny the cultic interpretation which a number of the Megiddo excavators ascribe to structure IA of Megiddo VA-IVB, whose stone pillars they define as sacred standing stones — *maṣṣebot*. The correct interpretation is the architectural one, that the prevailing construction technique was the use of rows of stone pillars, built of monoliths or of links of stone that were so widespread in Israelite houses during the Iron Age. This eliminates their definition as cultic *maṣṣebot*. Fisher and May pursued a similar rationale when they defined the magnificent Building 338 of Megiddo IVA as a temple. The rejection of this definition by Guy and Loud, on the basis of their definition of the structure's plan and the absence of any cultic find inside it, is accepted now by most scholars.'[3]

I heartily endorse this conclusion, and would like to add some additional details relevant to the subject.

Typically there are no *maṣṣebot* in the rooms which were undoubtedly small cultic centres in the tenth century B.C.E., such as Room 2081 at Megiddo (Ussishkin, pp. 170–172) and 'cult room' 49 at Lachish.[4] The location of the pillars in almost the exact centre of Room 340 and their equal distance from one another leave no doubt that they were intended for structural support. (Room 340 is about 4 m. wide, and it may have been a cellar.) The heterogeneity of the pillars should be explained by the fact that they are in secondary use, almost certainly from a previous stage of Building 338 itself (see below). Two of these pillars are monoliths whose height was sufficient for their purpose. Three are made of worked stones of different sizes piled up on one another to reach the height of the monoliths, though some are fallen or missing. Among these should be noted the 'idol' (incidentally, I

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[3] Y. Shiloh: Iron Age Sanctuaries and Cult Elements in Palestine, in F.M. Cross (ed.): *Symposia Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, Cambridge, MA, 1979, pp. 147–148. This view was recently supported by my colleague A. Mazar during the Second International Congress of Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem, June–July 1990, in a debate following D. Ussishkin's lecture on this subject.

[4] Y. Aharoni: *Lachish*, V, Tel Aviv, 1975, pp. 26–32.

suspect that the 'carving' on its side may be natural); from its position, and from the way it is cut at the top (Ussishkin, p. 164, Fig. 7:7), it is clear that it served as a building stone. The fifth pillar was made of field stones piled up on one another, a common Israelite building technique.[5]

There are also two stone slabs that 'obviously' served as offering tables (Ussishkin, p. 156); however, these are the stone basins often found on the floors or beside the pillars of Iron Age houses. They vary in size (larger ones are found in public buildings like Building 338, city-gates, etc., and smaller ones in residential units), and their function in everyday activities is clear. One of many possible examples will suffice: a room excavated at Tel Beer-sheba in a dwelling house of Stratum II (eighth century B.C.E.), which contained pillars and two of these stone basins.[6]

Thus far the *maṣṣebot*, 'idol' and 'offering tables'; there remain two square ashlar foundations in Room 338 which 'may have formed parts of cultic installations' (Ussishkin, p. 157). I believe that they are part of an industrial installation, as were the approximately seven Proto-Ionic columns that Ussishkin himself admits were in secondary use. This type of capital is now well known and has been found at eight sites, including Megiddo: Dan, Hazor, Samaria, Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel, Rabbat Ammon and Meidebiyeh.

Wherever the stratigraphy was clear and sufficient evidence was found, these capitals were always found in association with secular buildings: royal palaces as at Ramat Raḥel, Samaria and probably Rabbat Ammon, or palaces and forts occupied by royal officials as at Hazor (unless Yadin was mistaken as to the nature of the fortress in Area B).

2. *The finds from Rooms 331 and 332 in Building 338*

We shall now turn to the cultic finds said to have been discovered within Building 338. One assemblage was 'assumed' to have been found in Unit A, i.e. Room 332 (Ussishkin, p. 163), though later the assumption is treated as a fact. The assemblage includes the broken upper part of a stone altar, obviously not *in situ*, and some five sherds of one pottery stand (?).[7] More sherds were recovered by Fisher from the adjacent Room 332; according to Ussishkin (p. 163) it seems 'in fact quite possible that they were uncovered on the room's floor', but Fisher was capable of distinguishing a floor. In any case, the presence of a few artifacts not *in situ* does

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[5]   Secondary use of architectural parts in general and particularly monoliths was a common practice in the Iron Age; see e.g. E. Stern: *Excavations at Tel Mevorakh (1973–1976), Part One: From the Iron Age to the Roman Period* (Qedem 9), Jerusalem, 1978, p. 46.

[6]   Y. Aharoni: *Beer-sheba*, I: *Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba*, Tel Aviv, 1973, Fig. 2, Pl. 13.

[7]   At second glance it seems possible that these sherds may be identified as parts not of a cult stand but of a pottery bath, typical of late Iron Age strata, particularly Strata III–II; P.L.O. Guy and R.M. Engberg: *Megiddo Tombs*, Chicago, 1938, Fig. 87, from Tomb 37, Kiln 22; R. Lamon and G.H. Shipton: *Megiddo*, I, Chicago, 1939, Pl. 18:91.

not indicate that the whole building was a shrine, especially since, as Ussishkin himself notes, all the other finds from within the building were everyday items: bowls, cooking pots, a flask, jugs, juglets and one or two stone mortars.

3. The finds from outside Building 338

All the other 'cultic' finds come from outside Building 338. Two pottery stands come from the vast open area west of the building; their connection with Building 338, or even their exact date, cannot be established. Two more assemblages were found somewhere (the exact location is not known) 'south of Building 10' (see Fig. 1), that is in an area more than 30 m. away from Building 338 without a reliable level, and on the other side of the large Building 10. To the south of Building 10 is another large construction (IA), also interpreted by the excavators as a shrine because of its *maṣṣebot*. It is unclear why these two assemblages should belong to Building 338 and not to one of the two other buildings between which they were uncovered.[8]

4. The infant jar burials in Building 338

Six infant jar burials were uncovered by Schumacher. Three of them (Ussishkin, Pl. 19:E) were found embedded in the walls of Room 340 (in one corner). The other three, one of which is illustrated by Ussishkin (Pl. 19:F), were found at a higher level, possibly even above the walls. Near each group were found smaller vessels (see below). These burial jars were laid in small pits certainly dug from above, like many other burial jars of this kind discovered at sites along the coast of Palestine and Phoenicia during the late Iron Age and later.[9] They were probably deposited here, as at many other sites, in a period when Building 338 was no longer in use, and the open area served partly as a cemetery.[10] The two groups also seem to differ in date. The three lower jars belong to two types: the jar in the centre appears earlier but continues to the very end of the Iron Age, while those on the left and right do not appear before the eighth century B.C.E. Moreover, the jug which appears in the photograph with the jars, whose rim is almost entirely missing, should be dated to the very end of the Iron Age or even later. As for the upper jars, which were not dated by Ussishkin, they belong to the Persian period on the basis of the sack-shaped body and somewhat twisted handles, and are definitely

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[8]   As was in fact suggested by Ora Negbi: Israelite Cult Elements in Secular Contexts of the Tenth Century B.C.E., *Abstracts of the II International Congress on Biblical Archaeology*, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 74–75.

[9]   I shall mention here for example the tombs at Tell er-Ruqeish, Tell el-'Ajjul, Tell el-Far'ah (S), Tel Zeror, Atlit, Akhziv and Khaldeh.

[10]   The existence of burials in a city's centre during a period of abandonment is a well-known phenomenon. Note the group of tombs of the Persian period in the centre of Area A at Hazor; Y. Yadin *et al.*: *Hazor*, II, Jerusalem, 1960, pp. 29–30; see also E. Stern: *The Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period*, Warminster, 1982, pp. 68, 264.
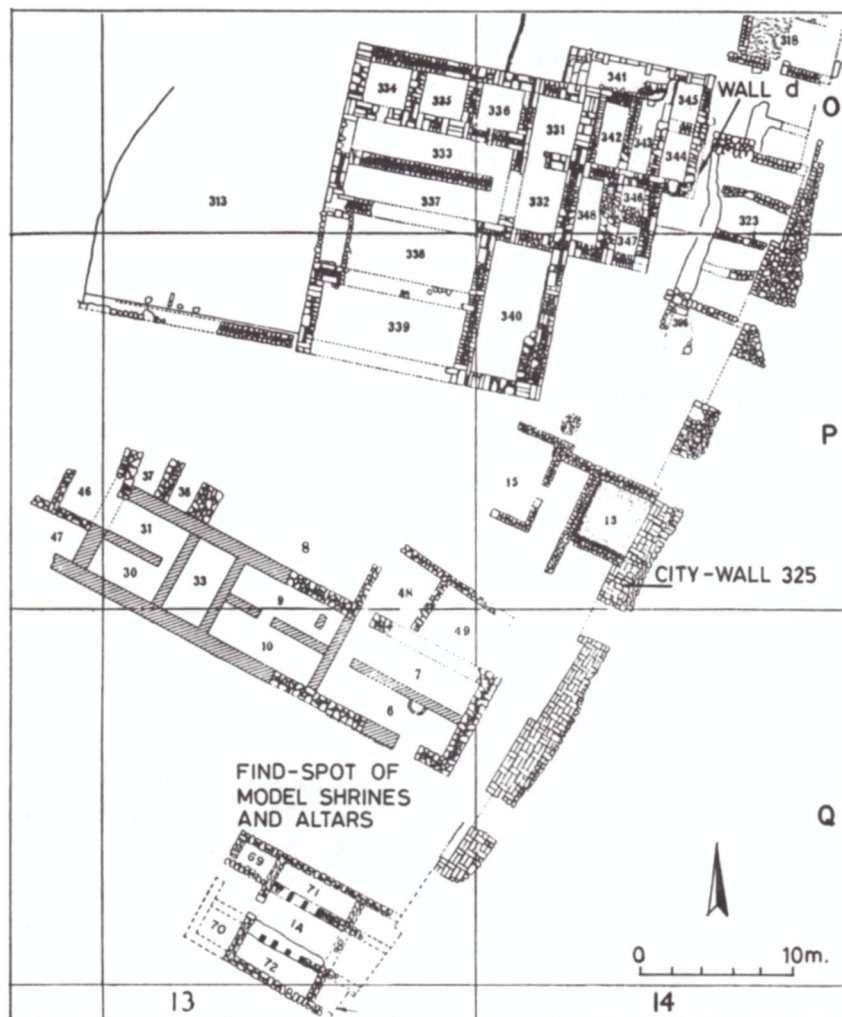
Fig. 1. Buildings 338, 10 and 1A and city-wall 325, after Ussishkin, p. 152, Fig. 2.

later than the lower ones (the jug with the strainer said to have been found with them is of a different period). A lamp and a jug which are 'definitely later in date' are also mentioned (Ussishkin, p. 170).

The above leads to the conclusion that Building 338 was never a shrine but was rather one of the palaces of Israelite Megiddo. It may have had a small 'cult corner' in one of its stages, though even this small cult place cannot be located with certainty. It also seems that Building 338 was built in the early part of the Iron Age and was destroyed once or twice during its existence, as demonstrated by the

scattered ash layers found within it as well as the stones in secondary use. It was destroyed for the last time before the end of the eighth century B.C.E., probably at the time of the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel. Later, between the late eighth or seventh centuries B.C.E. and the early Persian period, and before the erection of the fortress of Stratum II, the area served in part as a cemetery for people who knew nothing of the buried building remains.

If Building 338 was not a shrine, it was not necessary to 'bury' it under such a monumental structure as the Stratum II fortress (which is in fact not aligned with the building; Ussishkin, p. 168, Fig. 8).[11] The proximity of the walls of the fortress to those of Building 338 may be explained in a simpler, though less dramatic, way. After a long period of abandonment during the Assyrian and Babylonian periods, and after city-wall 325 had gone out of use, the Stratum II fortress was built as the sole defence of the site, and naturally the preferred location was the highest point of the mound. For this large undertaking the whole area was razed and levelled, more deeply at the sides where rooms were built, and less deeply in the centre where only a floor was laid. All building remains and burials of previous periods were removed, except for a few which were buried somewhat deeper; even so, the upper part of the upper burial jar was cut away. It so happened that the Stratum II fortress remained the uppermost building on the mound. When Schumacher began his excavations at Megiddo it was preserved only a few centimetres below the surface, and below its floor level (there is not a single vessel that can securely be attributed to this huge building, either today or by the excavators). According to Ussishkin's picturesque description of this area: 'The site of the shrine — in the area of the mound where shrines were located since prehistoric times — rose as a tumulus at the highest point of the mound, and nothing was constructed here till the abandonment of the settlement' (Ussishkin, p. 170). It seems to me that the constructors of the Stratum II fortress knew nothing of Building 338, which was first built some 500 years earlier (or 600 years according to Ussishkin's dating), and was destroyed and abandoned some two or three centuries earlier.

[11]   The plan of this fortress fits very well those of other Persian period fortresses discovered at various sites, particularly those at Hazor, Strata III–II, and at Tell Jemmeh; Stern (above, n. 2), pp. 28–30; idem (above, n. 9), pp. 53–55, Figs. 53–54.