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Protohistoric Developments of Religion and Cult in the Negev Desert¹

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The Negev Desert has a rich variety of cult types that can be dated back as long as 9,000 years ago. The article focuses on the types that were dominant in the seventh to third millennia BCE, including standing stone *maššebot*, open-air sanctuaries, burial grounds and ‘Rodedian’ sites. Descriptions and interpretations of where these cult types enable a comprehensive view in which desert societies reveal intensive cultic activity and fully-developed creeds signifying that they were not only the forerunners of religious concepts but actually influenced theological development in the settled lands of the ancient Near East.

KEYWORDS Negev Desert, *Maššebot*, Sanctuaries, Burial, Cult, Religion, Neolithic

The Negev Desert of southern Israel comprises ca. 13,000 sq km that varies in landscape and climate, from aridity in the north to hyper-aridity in the centre and south.

A pattern of settlement history of the Negev region was formulated in 1934 by Nelson Glueck based on his survey of the area. This survey established that there had been short periods of activity in the region, interrupted by longer gaps. Until recently, Glueck’s concept (1935: 183; 1968: 11–12, 127; 1970: 11–12, 65) was generally accepted by most scholars. However, as radiometric dates have accumulated, the picture of the settlement history of the desert has changed drastically. For the last 10,000 years, beginning in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, an uninterrupted sequence of activity can be observed, especially in the southern Negev. Until ca. 6000 BCE, the desert populations subsisted on hunting and gathering. Stone-built habitations of hunters-gatherers first appeared in the Late Natufian culture, ca. 11000 BCE (Henry 1976) and the Harifian culture ca. 10000 BCE (Goring-

¹ Editorial note: Throughout the article, references to right and left in the author’s description of standing stones and art representations of deities are given from the perspective of the depicted image; for the reader, the directions are the opposite. Due to lack of space, some text, illustrations and about 25% of the bibliographic citations were not included in the final article. For additional information, see Avner 2002.

Morris 1987, 1991). During the sixth to third millennia BCE the data attest to one enduring, evolving cultural entity in the Negev and Sinai, with some regional variations.² Farming and herding began around 6000 BCE, with the cultivation of cereals and construction of animal pens for goats and sheep (Avner 1998, 2002; Rosen *et al.* 2005; Bruins and van der Plicht 2007). True metallurgy began in the desert in the mid-fifth millennium BCE. Desert people were among the first in the region to develop the unique skill of metallurgy and from that time copper mining and smelting formed important elements of their material culture (Avner 2002; Abdel-Motelib *et al.* 2012; Klimscha 2013). Around 4000 BCE, two important agricultural innovations appeared in the desert—the plough and the threshing sledge harnessed to animals (Avner 1998, 2002; Avner *et al.* 2003).

During the first half of the third millennium BCE (EB II–III), settlement in the desert reached its peak, with hundreds of habitations, corrals and a variety of installations (Haiman 1991b; Avner 1998, 2002; Cohen and Cohen-Amin 1999; Beit-Arieh 2003). In the second half of this millennium, the Near East suffered profound crises, most probably resulting from abrupt climatic change (Butzer 1997; Courty and Weiss 1997; Langgut *et al.* 2014, 2016). In the desert, however, many of the EB II–III habitations continued in occupation into the EB IV (2500–2000 BCE) and many new sites were founded (*ibid.*). This may mean that desert societies survived the crises better than inhabitants of fertile lands, despite the ecological sensitivity of the desert.³ A major change took place around 2000 BCE. While the fertile zone of the Levant recovered from the crisis with the new city-state system of the Middle Bronze Age, the Negev and Sinai seem to be devoid of human presence. Nevertheless, in the Eilat region, artefacts and ¹⁴C dates from several sites indicate continuation of activity, mainly in copper mining and production. A number of ¹⁴C dates from the Negev Highlands also show human activity, in farming (Bruins and van der Plicht 2007).

Another significant aspect of life developed in the desert—the spiritual culture, represented by numerous cult sites. Although currently only about a third of the Negev area has been systematically surveyed archaeologically, over 1,000 pre- and proto-historic cult sites have been recorded, of a variety of types, while additional sites are constantly being discovered. Their numbers, content and association with habitations or with ancient roads indicate that cult and religion were inseparable from everyday life. Therefore, studying these sites and the spiritual realm that underlies them are imperative for understanding the general culture of desert societies. The sites addressed here date to the seventh to third millennia BCE (Table 1, Figs. 1–2); later sites, though numerous, are not dealt with here.

² In a series of publications, Rothenberg (1979: 111–116, 283; Rothenberg and Ordentlich 1979; Conrad and Rothenberg 1980: 26) suggested several versions of identifying two cultures in the desert in these periods: the ‘Eilatian’ and ‘Timnian’. The term ‘Timnian Culture’ has been adopted by some scholars (Henry 1995; Rosen 2010, 2015) but its definition is problematic. For criticism of this view, see Avner 2002: 6–7; for a discussion in favour of one evolving culture, see Avner 2002.

³ Several studies show that the effect of desiccation on ancient societies was not necessarily linear, but depends on the response of each specific society (Rosen and Rosen 2001; Rosen 2007).

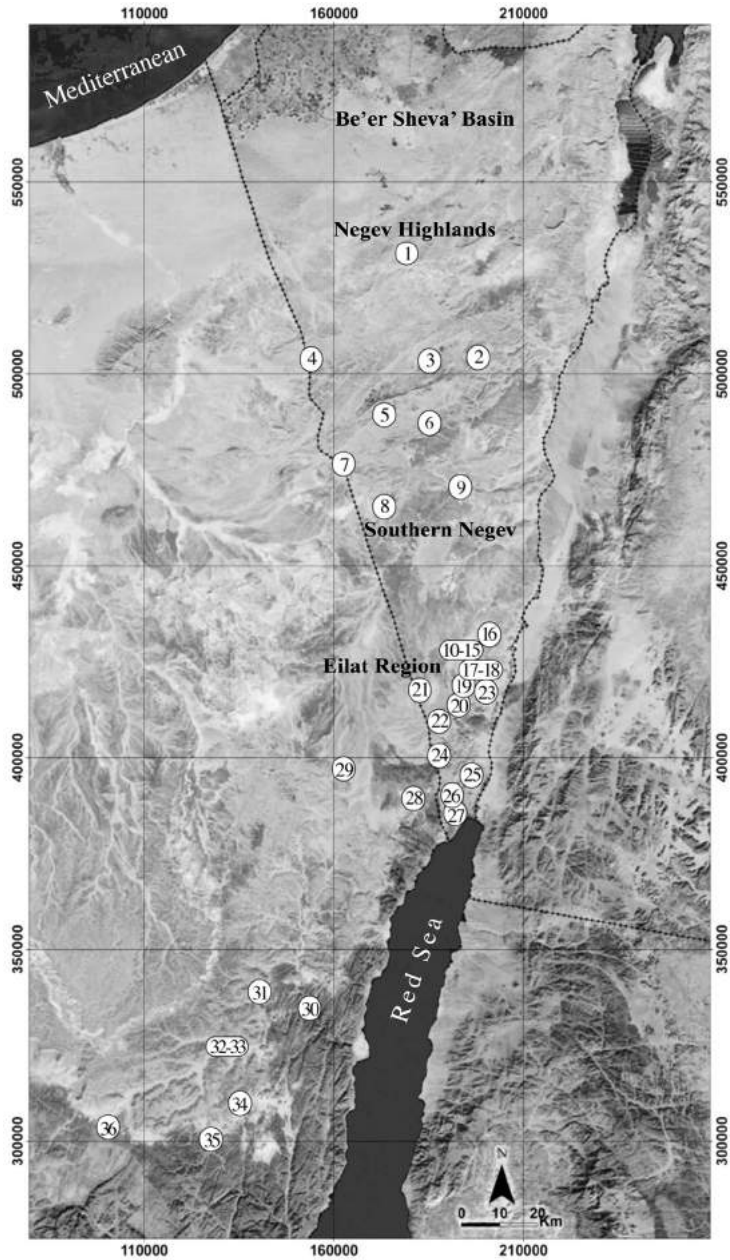


FIGURE 1 Map of cult sites in the Negev and eastern Sinai mentioned in the text, in Table 1 and in the illustrations: 1. Rosh Zin, 2. Ramat Saharonim, 3. Ramon Crater, 4. Ramat Barne'a, 5. Naḥal 'Oded, 6. Naḥal Anaqa, 7. Har Ḥarif, 8. Har Karkom, 9. Har Tzurī'az, 10. 'Uvda 6, 11. 'Uvda 100, 12. 'Uvda 20 (Naḥal Re'uel), 13. 'Uvda 124/IV, 14. 'Uvda 9, 15. 'Uvda 69, 16. Ma'aleh Yitro, 17. 'Uvda 150A, 18. 'Uvda 151, 19. 'Uvda 14 (Naḥal 'Issaron), 20. 'Uvda South, 21. Mitzpeh Sayarim, 22. Har Saguv, 23. Samar, 24. Har Shani, 25. Giv'at Sheḥoret, 26. Naḥal Roded, 27. Eilat, 28. Ras al-Naqeb, 29. Jebel Ḥashem al-Taref, 30. Wadi Watir, 31. Bir Sawaneh, 32. 'Ein Um Aḥmed, 33. Wadi Zalaqa, 34. Wadi Ḥajjaj, 35. Wadi Sa'al, 36. Wadi Daba'iyeh, 37. Abu Khalil (further west, out of the map).

TABLE 1
Radiocarbon dates from excavated cult and burial sites in the Negev and Sinai

Site No.	Site	Site type	Sample #	Material	¹⁴ C BP date	BCE Cal. date, 95.4%	Approx Mean Date	Reference
2	Ramat Saharonim	Sanctuary	RTT 4663	Charcoal	6180±40	5301–4990	5140	Rosen <i>et al.</i> 2007: 19
	Ramat Saharonim	Sanctuary	RTT 4665	Charcoal	5945±45	4938–4721	4810	Rosen <i>et al.</i> 2007: 19
7	Har Harif (L.1)	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	PTA3289	Charcoal	10300±100	10574–9766	10150	Goring-Morris 1991: 212
10	'Uvda 6	Sanctuary	RT628A	Charcoal	6560±200	5887–5062	5600	Avner 2002: Table 1:20*
	'Uvda 6	Sanctuary	RT628B	Charcoal	6400±70	5484–5226	5380	Avner 2002: Table 1:20*
	'Uvda 6	Sanctuary	PTA 3621	Charcoal	6400±60	5482–5231	5380	Avner 2002: Table 1:20*
	'Uvda 6	Sanctuary	RT1739	Ostrich egg	6390±60	5479–5229	5385	Avner 2002: Table 1:20*
11	'Uvda 100	<i>Maṣṣebot</i>	PRI 4401	Charcoal	5884±25	4826–4707	4750	Unpublished
	'Uvda 100	<i>Maṣṣebot</i>	PRI 4400	Charcoal	5878±25	4800–4696	4750	Unpublished
12	'Uvda 20 (Re'uel)	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	PTA2848	Charcoal	8670±60	7937–7582	7640	Ronen <i>et al.</i> 2001: 126
	'Uvda 20 (Re'uel)	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	PTA3137	Charcoal	8629±70	7935–7537	7610	Ronen <i>et al.</i> 2001: 126
	'Uvda 20 (Re'uel)	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	PTA3202	Charcoal	8550±90	7985–7361	7540	Ronen <i>et al.</i> 2001: 126
13	'Uvda 124/IV**	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	RT1419	Charcoal	4370±100	3359–2712	3050	Avner 2002: Table 1:22
	'Uvda 124/IV**	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	PRI 4165	Goat dung	3794±23	2294–2141	2280	unpublished
14	'Uvda 9***	<i>Maṣṣebah</i>	PTA 3646	Charcoal	6960±70	5986–5725	5880	Avner 2002: Table 1:25
	'Uvda 9***	<i>Maṣṣebah</i>	RT3369	Charcoal	4130±90	2896–2486	2750	Avner 2002: Table 1:25
15	'Uvda 150A (IV)	Tomb	Rt699C	Wood	3700±55	2278–1941	2100	Avner 2002: Table 1:27
	'Uvda 150A (IV)	Tomb	RT771B	Wood	3582±130	2336–1613	1900	Avner 2002: Table 1:27
18	'Uvda 151	<i>Maṣṣebot</i>	RT684A	Charcoal	5670±85	4701–4353	4510	Avner 2002: Table 1:26
23	Samar	Habitation, <i>Maṣṣ</i>	RT2716	Charcoal	4080±25	2852–2497	2620	Avner 2002: Table 1:33
26	Naḥal Roded 110	Cult installation	PRI3303	Charcoal	7950±250	7516–6403	6900	Avner <i>et al.</i> 2014: 115
	Naḥal Roded 110	Cult installation	PRI4379	Charcoal	8146±29	7292–7059	7100	Avner <i>et al.</i> 2014: 115
27	Eilat V/27	<i>Tum, Maṣṣ, Sane</i>	RT1215	Charcoal	6400±210	5721–4849	5490	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat IV/16	<i>Tum, Maṣṣ, Sane</i>	RT 989	Charcoal	6470±80	5611–5304	5450	Avner 2002: Table 1:39

Site No.	Site	Site type	Sample #	Material	¹⁴ C BP date	BCE Cal. date, 95.4%	Approx Mean Date	Reference
	Eilat IV/3	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1926A	Charcoal	6340±60	5469–5217	5330	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/28	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1216	Charcoal	6060±65	5207–4801	4990	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/22	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1214	Charcoal	5980±130	5215–4555	4950	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/18	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1212	Charcoal	5930±80	5215–4555	4900	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat IV/8	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1210	Wood	5710±75	4719–4370	4540	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/16	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1211	Charcoal	5640±60	4613–4349	4480	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/19	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1213	Charcoal	5490±60	4460–4233	4360	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
	Eilat V/1	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT 926	Charcoal	5400±100	4448–3994	4350	Avner 2002: Table 1:39
28	Ras al-Naqeb	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT1948	Seashell	5470±70	4460–4072	4360	Avner 2002: Table 1:44
29	Hashm al-Taref XVII	Sanctuary	RT1947	Seashell	6580±90	5666–5364	5520	Avner 2002: Table 1:47
	Hashm al-Taref VII	Sanctuary	ETH17505	Charcoal	6575±65	5633–5383	5510	Eddy & Wendorf 1999:280
	Hashm al-Taref VII	Sanctuary	ETH17506	Charcoal	6160±85	5311–4853	5160	Eddy & Wendorf 1999:280
30	W. Watir VIII	<i>Maassebah</i>	RT1845	Seashell	5240±55	4232–3963	4040	Avner 2002: Table 1:58
32	'Ein Um-Ahmaad	<i>Nawamis</i>	RT1856	Charcoal	5815±50	4787–4546	4720	Avner 2002: Table 1:59
	'Ein Um-Ahmaad	<i>Nawamis</i>	RT1857	Charcoal	5575±50	4502–4337	4420	Avner 2002: Table 1:59
	'Ein Um-Ahmaad	<i>Nawamis</i>	RT1851	Charcoal	5130±50	4040–3795	3980	Avner 2002: Table 1:59
33	W. Zalaqa T. II	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	PTA 3633	Charcoal	5590±70	4587–4274	4060	Avner 2002: Table 1:63
	W. Zalaqa T. II	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	RT 648E	Charcoal	5440±80	4449–4054	4320	Avner 2002: Table 1:63
	W. Zalaqa T. XII	<i>Tum, Maass, Sane</i>	PTA3645	Charcoal	5690±50	4687–4400	4530	Avner 2002: Table 1:63
36	W. Daba'i'ye	<i>Maassebot</i>	RT 2186	Seashell	6045±65	5207–4788	4960	Avner 2002: Table 1:65
37	Abu Khalil	<i>Nawamis</i>	RT 1353	Seashell	5200±70	4234–3805	4020	Avner 2002: Table 1:59

Dates are re-calibrated following OxCal 4.3 (Ramzey 2017, <https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCal.html>). Dates published here for the first time were prepared by L. Cummings, PaleoResearch Institute, (PRI) Golden Colorado, and measured by the Center for Applied Isotope Studies in Athens, Georgia. Approximate mean dates are based on the dominant peak in the calibration curve. The site numbers follow those in the map, Fig. 1.

* Table 1 in Avner 2002 contains references to earlier publications.

** Dates from 'Uvda 124/IV are the earliest and latest out of 10 dates.

*** Dates of 'Uvda 9 retrieved from samples taken from the shrine, dates from the habitation fall in the 4th–3rd millennia BCE (not presented here).

The theory of religion in general,⁴ and its place in archaeology in particular, has been widely discussed by scholars, resulting in numerous definitions of cultic remains (e.g., Renfrew 1985: 11–26; Biehl and Bertemes 2001: 11–26; 31–52; Laneri 2015: 1–10). The sites addressed here have long been recognized as cultic; their religious nature will become clear in the text that follows. As to interpretation of the prehistoric remains in general, later written sources and anthropological studies are helpful (despite some criticism) following the words of Frazer (1913a V: 109):

...[T]he present is the best guide to the interpretation of the past; for while the higher forms of religious faith pass away like clouds, the lower stands firm and indestructible like rocks. The sacred men of one age are the dervishes of the next, the Adonis of yesterday is the St. George of today....

The following sections include a description and discussion of each of the four major types of cult sites, with implications as to the religious perceptions of the desert societies. Since I have described and interpreted the sites in previous studies,⁵ the discussion here is brief, attempting to present a synthesis of the desert people's spiritual culture. A map of the sites mentioned in the paper is shown in Fig. 1.

Types of cult sites

Maşşebot

The first type of cult site is the *maşşebah* (plural, *maşşebot*—‘standing stone’).⁶ *Maşşebot*, known throughout the world,⁷ are both worked and unworked stones set vertically into the ground; their height may vary from just a few centimeters to several metres. Various hypotheses have been proposed regarding the meaning of standing stones, but for the most part in most of the world they are interpreted as representing ancestors.⁸ In the Near East, however, a collection of biblical and other written sources from a variety of cultures and periods indicate that the *maşşebot* were perceived as abodes for the power and spirit of deities.⁹ In this, they resemble statues of gods—although in concept they are also the opposite of statues (see below).

Desert *maşşebot* form a special phenomenon, with specific characteristics. They first appeared ca. 11000 BCE, but were especially common during the sixth to third millennia

⁴ General theories of religion are many and differ greatly, but this is not the appropriate place to address them. For a brief survey of theories, see, e.g., Parkin 1998. For the complexity of the topic, see, e.g., Boyer 1994.

⁵ For detailed descriptions, discussions and references of cult sites, see Avner 1984, 1993; Arav *et al.* 2016; Avner *et al.* 2014; Avner and Horwitz 2017.

⁶ Other terms for *maşşebot*: *mansub/ansab* (Arabic), *beatyl* (Greek, derived from the Hebrew *Beit-el*), *menhir* (Celtic).

⁷ The first attempt to study standing stones as a global phenomenon was made by J. Fergusson (1872).

⁸ For instance, Fergusson 1872; Albright 1957; Eliade 1978: 114–118.

⁹ For a selection of sources indicating the meaning of *maşşebot*, see Avner 2002: 87–89; Arav *et al.* 2016.

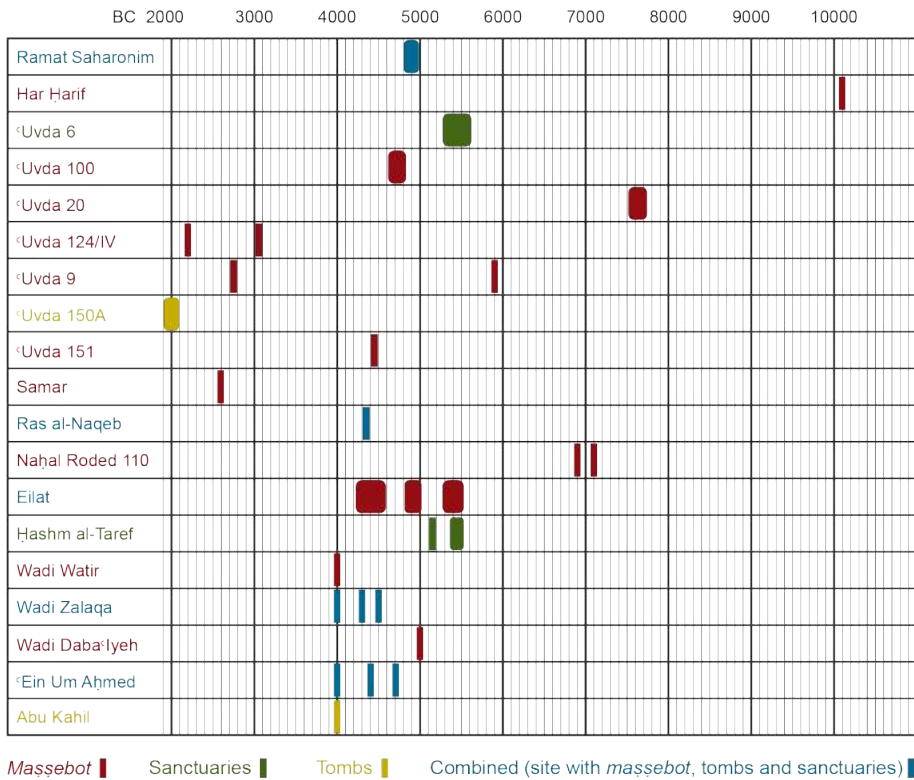


FIGURE 2 Histogram of calibrated BC ¹⁴C dates of the desert cult sites.

BCE. Over 450 *maṣṣebot* sites are presently recorded (keeping in mind that most of the Negev and Sinai have yet to be systematically surveyed). From their very outset in the Natufian and Ḥarifian cultures (ca. 11000 and 10000 Cal. BCE, Table 1.7), two basic shapes of stones—narrow and broad—are distinguished (Fig. 3a, b).¹⁰ Another regularity is that most *maṣṣebot* in the Negev and Sinai (72%) face east.












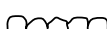


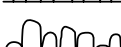

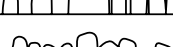

Desert *maṣṣebot* are found either individually or in pairs, triads and groups of five, seven and nine. Several types are discernible in each set, based on different compositions of broad and narrow stones, their relative size and their position within the group (Figs. 4, 5). Interestingly, the same numbers are later found in groups of deities, mentioned in dedicatory inscriptions, in mythological texts and in various kinds of art. Therefore, it is suggested that groups of *maṣṣebot* represented ‘organic’ groups of deities (see examples below), appearing in mythological texts as acting together. An additional group is found at a number of sites, with multiple, random numbers of stones, sometimes next to a pair of larger stones (Table 2). This type is interpreted as representing ancestors, set together with pairs of deities (Arav *et al.* 2016, and see below).

¹⁰ The Natufian site of Rosh Zin was excavated by Henry (1976) and the site of Har Harif (Abu Salem) was excavated by Goring-Morris (1987, 1991). The stone from Har Harif (Fig. 3b) was not identified by the excavator as a *maṣṣebah*, but see arguments in favour of this identification in Avner 2002: 81.

Another dominant characteristic is the specific attitude toward the nature of the stones. The *maššebah* from Rosh Zin (Fig. 3a), probably the earliest known in the world to date (Henry 1976: 318–20), has been deliberately shaped like a ‘cigar’; however, almost all later ones are natural, i.e., unworked. Hence, the absence of shaping cannot be explained by a lack of technical ability, but rather, as the result of a principle, which is later eloquently expressed in the Bible: “and if you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of

TABLE 2

Maššebot by type, with number of sites and percentage of all sites*

Formation		No.	%	total	
Individuals	Single narrow stones		23	11	84 40.0%
	Single broad stones		61	29	
Pairs	Pairs of narrow stones		2	0.9	41 19.4%
	Pairs of broad stones		17	8.1	
	Pairs of narrow and broad stones		12	5.7	
	Pairs of broad and narrow stones		10	4.7	
Triads	Triads of narrow stones		10	4.7	38 18.0%
	Triads with a broad central stone		10	4.7	
	Triads with narrow central stone		3	1.4	
	Triads with smaller central stone		8	3.8	
	Other triads		7	3.3	
Fives	Symmetric five stones		2	0.9	10 4.7%
	Five broad stones		2	0.9	
	Other five stones		6	2.8	
Sevens	Symmetric seven stones		3	1.4	15 7.1%
	Other seven stones		12	5.7	
Nines	Symmetric nine stones		3	1.4	7 3.3%
	Other nine stones		4	1.9	
Multiple	Multiple stones		15	7.1	15 7.1%

* Based on only 210 sites, Avner 2002: Table 12.

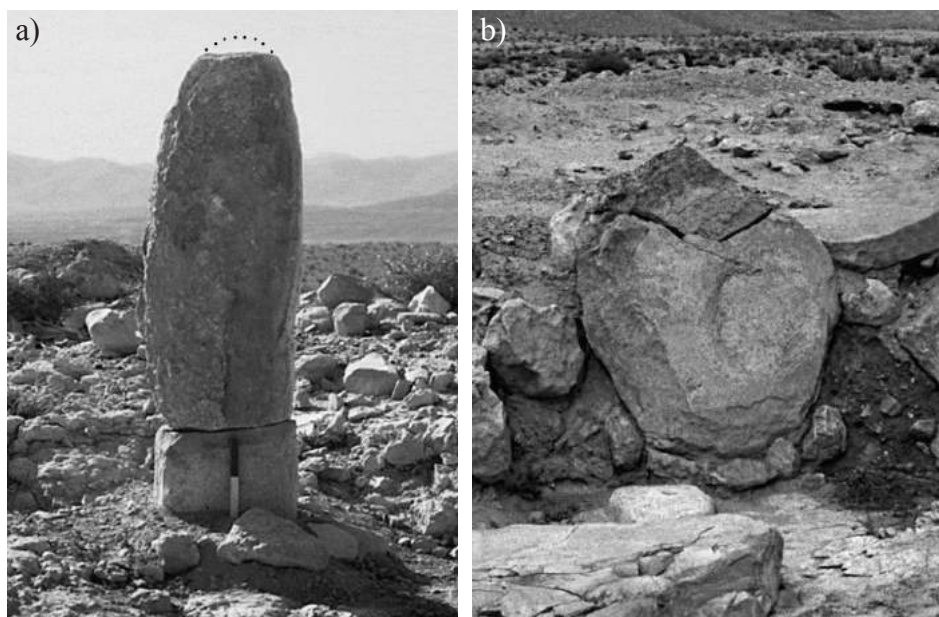


FIGURE 3 The earliest *maššebot* in the Negev. (a) Natufian, at the site of Rosh Zin, Negev Highlands, excavated by D. Henry (1976), looking from the southeast (top has fallen); (b) the Ḥarīfian site of Har Ḥarīf (Abu Salem), looking from the southeast, excavated by N. Goring-Morris (1987, 1991).

hewn stones; for if you wield your tool upon it you profane it” (Exod 20:25). This implies that ‘complete stones’ were perceived as appropriate for building the altar and the Temple itself (Deut 27:5–6; Josh 8:30–31; 1 Kings 6:7). In a like manner, the desert people also considered the ‘complete stone’ appropriate to represent the aniconic gods. Unlike the peoples of the sown lands, prehistoric desert inhabitants probably did not believe that they could construct their gods, i.e. create statues (cf. Exod 20:4–5; Deut 4:28), so they developed a distinctive theology of abstract presentation of gods, later known in the Israelite, Nabataean and Islamic religions, at least the latter two, all with desert origins.

The cultic role of the *maššebot* is further supported by excavations of shrines, which revealed several types of altars, basins, pavements, offering benches, offering goods and remains of sacrificed animals (Figs. 3–7; Avner and Horwitz 2017).

In addition to the basic identification of *maššebot* as deities, they can be identified by gender; the distinction can also be made between broad and narrow stones. There are many examples in ancient art where a broad figure represents a goddess and a narrow figure a god. In one dominant type of pairs, the narrow, taller stone is set on the right (see n. 1), and the broad, shorter one on the left (Fig. 4a). The right-left positioning of the stones is reminiscent of the way gods and goddesses, kings and queens or noble couples are presented in ancient art (Fig. 8a–c).¹¹ This also finds expression in the bride’s

¹¹ A random collection of 125 pairs from ancient art books of the Near East showed that 89 pairs (71%) were presented with the female standing on the male’s left side, while in most cases of the female standing on the male’s right side, the female was the senior (for discussion and references on left and right in art and anthropology, see Avner 1993: 174–175).

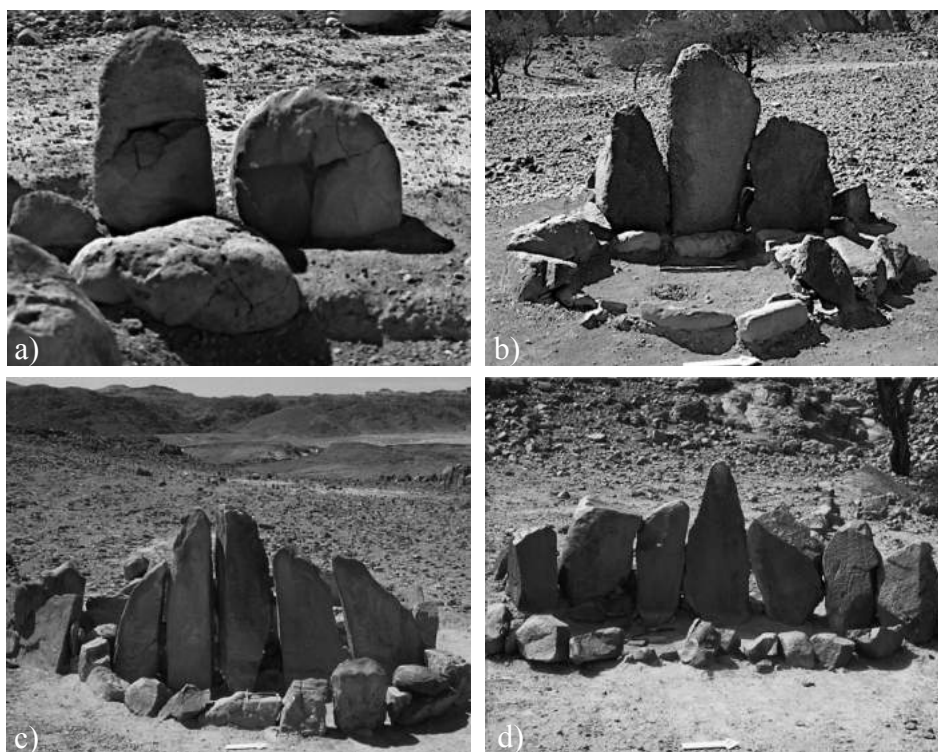


FIGURE 4 (a) A *maṣṣebot* pair at Giveʿat Shehoret, Eilat region, with a taller narrow stone on the right (both are cracked and the tops fallen); (b) a *maṣṣebah* triad at Bir Sawaneh, eastern Sinai, with a central narrow stone; (c) a group of five at Wadi Dabaʿiyah, eastern Sinai, with symmetric narrow stones (up to 2.05 m high, the second from left found tilted forward); (d) a group of seven at Wadi Saʿal, eastern Sinai, symmetric, with a narrow stone in the centre (third stone from right found fallen).

words in the Song of Songs (2:6 and 8:3): “his left arm is under my neck and his right arm hugs me” (Fig. 8d). Hence, the arrangement of the stones may mean that in these cases the taller, right stone, the ‘male’, is perceived as senior while the ‘female’ on his left is secondary. A different hierarchy is seen in another type of pair, in which a broad, larger stone is set on the right side while a smaller, narrower stone is set on the left. This type of pair may represent a senior mother goddess and her child (Fig. 9a–d). The placement of the smaller stone, or secondary figure, on the senior’s left, is shared by both types of pairs.

Noteworthy in the desert is a broad stone flanked by two smaller ones (Fig. 10a–b). This group can be compared to many examples in art of a mother goddess flanked by her two children, in various levels of symbolism (Fig. 11a–d). Altogether, the few examples presented here indicate that for the prehistoric desert people, the mute, unworked stones represented ‘organic’ groups of deities. These, in turn, point to the existence of a complex pantheon and complex, unwritten mythology.



FIGURE 5 Wadi Sa'al, eastern Sinai, an eneade (group of nine) with a broad central stone (the central stone found tilted forward).



FIGURE 6 Ma'aleh Shaḥarut, eastern 'Uvda Valley, two larger and 59 smaller *maṣṣebot* (restored, 12 stones were found standing upright).

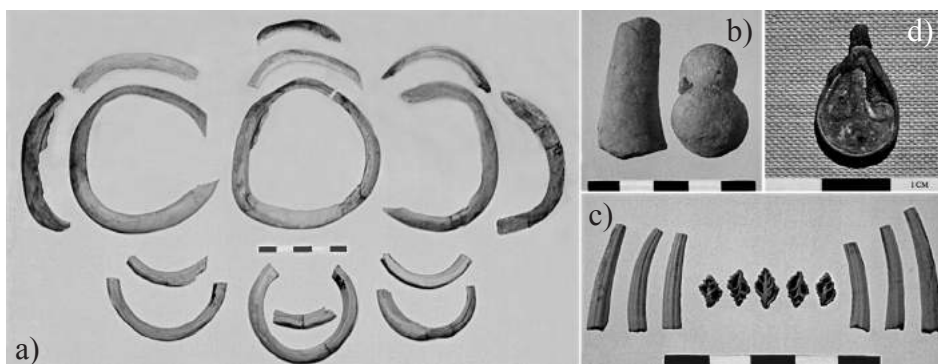


FIGURE 7 Finds from *maṣṣebot* sites: (a) Wadi Watir, eastern Sinai, bracelets made of *lambis* shells; (b) Wadi Watir, naturally shaped stone; (c) Wadi Watir, *dentalium* shells and small cut conchs; (d) Eastern 'Uvda Valley, silver pendent with a relief of a double spiral on both sides (dated to the Iron age but found in a fifth–fourth millennia BCE *maṣṣebot* site).

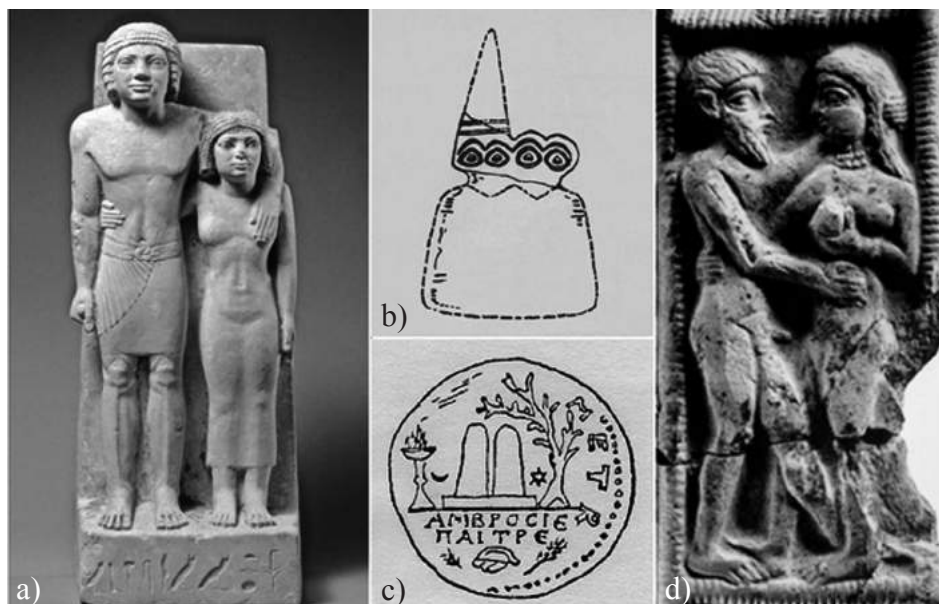


FIGURE 8 Artistic presentation of pairs of human/divine couples and *maṣṣebot* with the male on the right side and the female on the left: (a) Egyptian couple, Memi and his wife Sabu, 4th Dynasty (Metropolitan Museum 48.111); (b) double figurine from Tell Brak, Iraq, presenting a male figure with a high hat and a female to his left (Mallowan 1947: Pl. LI: 42); (c) Hellenistic coin from Tyre area, with a shrine of a sacred tree, incense burner and a pair of *maṣṣebot* identified as Melqart (crescent) and Ishtar (star) to his left (Hill 1910: Pl. 33: 14); (d) Akkadian votive bed (Seibert 1972: 27).



FIGURE 9 (a) Mitzpeh Sayarim, Eilat region, a pair of a broad, large *maṣṣebah* with a smaller one to her left. (b–d) Artistic presentations of a senior female with a child: (b) copper figurine from Byblos, Late Bronze (Negbi 1976: Pl. 5); (c) a Coptic wall painting of Isis and Harpocrates from Karanis, Egypt (Grabar 1966: No. 190); (d) Teleilat Ghassul, Chalcolithic pendent with a tree and a cross, representing a mother goddess and a dying and resurrecting god (Mallon 1931: Pl. 1:4, and see explanation in Avner 1993: 175).

Open-air sanctuaries

The second type of cult site is the open-air sanctuary. These are fairly large but low and modest structures; their courtyards are delineated on the desert surface by one course of small stones, in one to four lines, with no sign of any superstructure (Figs. 12a–c, 18–22). Presently, 223 open sanctuaries are recorded in the Negev and eastern Sinai; ten have been partially or wholly excavated. Like the *maṣṣebot*, their numbers allow



FIGURE 10 Triads of *maṣṣebot* with a larger and broad stone in the centre: (a) Naḥal Roded, Eilat region, seventh–sixth millennia BCE (the central stone found fallen); (b) Naḥal ʿOded, southern Negev Highlands, Byzantine (one small stone broken (cf. Avni 1996: 37); (c) Naḥal ʿOded, in an Early Islamic open mosque (cf. Avni 1996: 40).

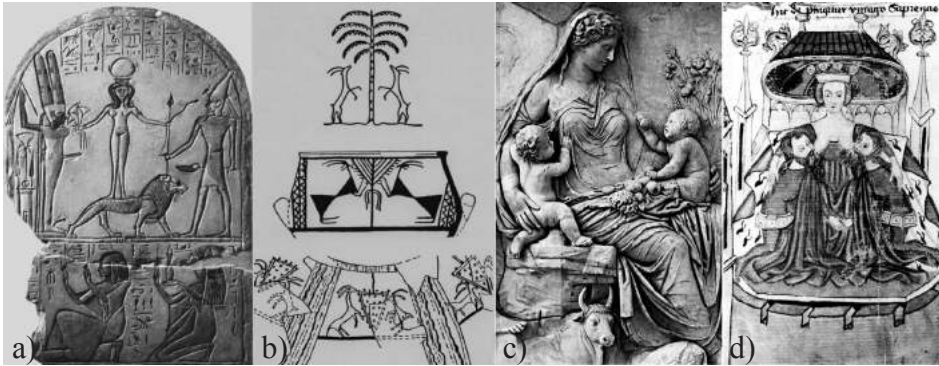


FIGURE 11 Artistic presentations of triads of deities dominated by a goddess: (a) Late Kingdom Egyptian stela with Min, Qudshu and Reshef (cf. Pritchard 1969: 163); (b) Late Bronze pottery decoration from Lachish and Megiddo, with a tree or a pubic triangle flanked by two ibexes (Tufnell, Inge and Harding 1940: front page; May 1935: Pl. 41: J); (c) section of *Ara Pacis*, Rome, late 1st century BCE, a goddess and two babies (Galinski 1992: 458); (d) medieval Italian manuscript, Sophia Sapientia nursing two monks (Neumann 1974: Pl. 174).



FIGURE 12 Three dominant types of open-air sanctuaries: (a) Ḥashem al-Taref XII, eastern Sinai, rectangular, with an elongated cell in the back and a *maṣṣebah* in its centre; (b) Ḥashem al-Taref IV, with a circular cell in the center; (c) the Ramon Crater, circular, with a fallen *maṣṣebah* inside.

identification of repetitive patterns and frequency of characteristics. Several features help identify them as sanctuaries: they are very different from habitation sites; their low construction level points to a symbolic nature; they incorporate *maṣṣebot*, stone basins and sunken altars (Fig. 13a–c); they contain unique artefacts (Fig. 14a–d) and ‘stone

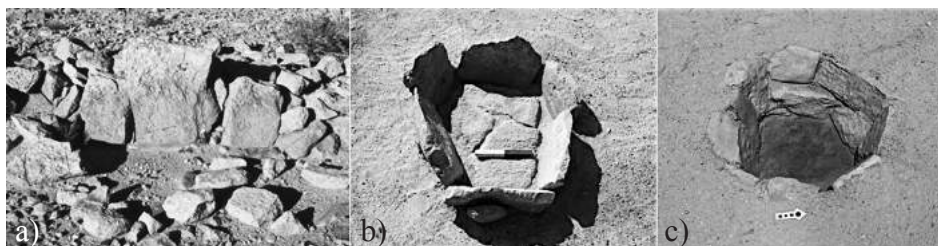


FIGURE 13 Stone features in open sanctuaries: (a) Ramat Barneʿa, western Negev Highlands, a triad of *maṣṣebot* with a central larger broad stone, incorporated in an elongated cell (cf. Fig. 10); (b) Har Shani X, Eilat region, a built basin in an open sanctuary courtyard; (c) ʿUvda 6, a sunken feature (altar?) in an open sanctuary courtyard.

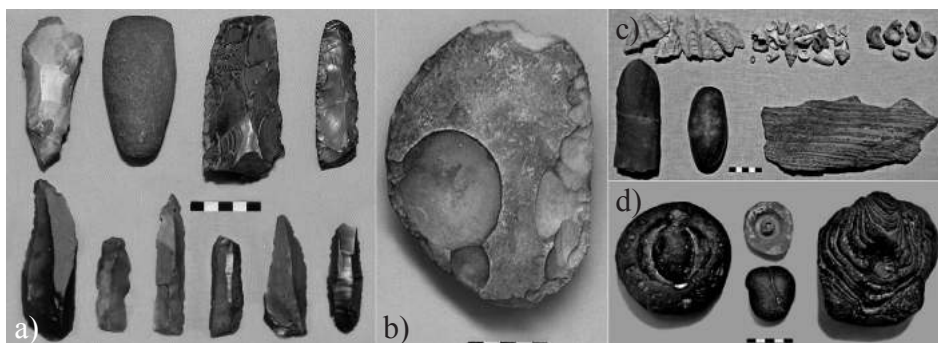


FIGURE 14 Finds from open sanctuaries: (a) Har Tzuriʿaz X, southern Negev, including basalt axe and PPNB blades; (b) Upper Naḥal ʿEteq, Eilat region, a large tabular scraper; (c) Har Shani, Eilat region, seashells, fossils and stones of special shapes and colours; (d) Har Tzuriʿaz VI, stones of special shapes.

drawings' (Figs. 15, 16).¹² Like the *maṣṣebot*, their dominant orientation is towards the east (ca. 75%), mainly in the direction of the winter sunrise.¹³ Radiometric dates presently available from open sanctuaries are from the sixth and fifth millennia BCE (Table 1.2, 10, 27, 28, 29, 33, Fig. 2). Nevertheless, in some sanctuaries, flint items

¹² Stone drawings are of great artistic interest and allow some mythological interpretation (Avner 2002: 113–115).

¹³ When *maṣṣebot* are incorporated in the elongated cell of sanctuaries (Figs. 12a, 13a, 18a, b) they are oriented in the same direction, much like many independent *maṣṣebot* shrines. At the site of Ramat Saharonim, where four pairs of open sanctuaries were built, Rosen suggested that the long axis of the elongated cells are aligned with the winter sunset, symbolizing death (Rosen and Rosen 2003; Rosen *et al.* 2007). In my opinion, this interpretation is incorrect and the Saharonim sanctuaries, like many of their type, are oriented towards the winter sunrise and actually bear symbolism of life and fertility. The orientation of the open sanctuaries should be determined as perpendicular to their long axis, i.e., towards the winter sunrise. When *maṣṣebot* are incorporated in the elongated cell of sanctuaries (Figs. 12a, 13a, 18a, b) their orientation is necessarily the same, much like the majority of independent *maṣṣebot* shrines. For more on the orientation of the open sanctuaries and *maṣṣebot*, see Avner 2002: 66, 78–79, 101–102 and Tables 11, 14.

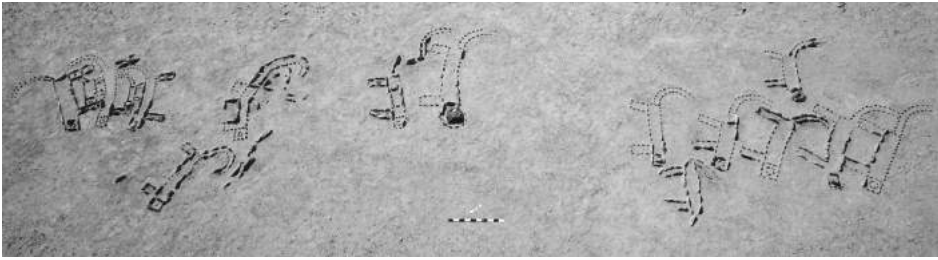


FIGURE 15 ‘Uvda 6, Remains of 15 leopards and one oryx made of vertically set flagstones east of the open sanctuary, a vertical view (small stones denote restoration).



FIGURE 16 Rock drawings from the Jebel Ḥashem al-Taref open sanctuaries, eastern Sinai, Pair XVII, nine unreal, mythological animals.

of the seventh millennium BCE (PPNB) were also found, while other finds indicate continuation through the third millennium, even the early second millennium BCE (Middle Bronze Age). All open sanctuaries were built next to roads (Figs. 12c, 17), while clusters of sanctuaries were built next to road junctions. Some sanctuaries were built on burial sites, also located next to roads (Fig. 27, and see below).

Open sanctuaries are generally found as singles, but also in pairs and triads. The most common types are pairs consisting of the two dominant types. One is rectangular, ca. 20×10 m on average, with an elongated cell at its rear, 60–80 cm high (Fig. 12a). *Maššebot* are found incorporated in the centre of some of the elongated cells, facing east, either as singles, pairs or triads (Figs. 12a; 13a). The second is smaller, with no elongated cell but with a circular cell in the centre (Fig. 12b) that may contain a *maššebah*. To date, 26 pairs of sanctuaries, consisting of these two dominant types are known from five different sites (Avner 1984, 2002: Table 14, Fig. 5: 158; Rosen 2015). All these pairs follow the same pattern: the smaller sanctuary is built on the left side and is set slightly back (Figs. 18a, b; 20).

There must be some underlying concept to the consistency of the ground plan of these pairs; their arrangement follows the same left to right order of the dominant pairs of *maššebot* (Fig. 4a). The set back position of the smaller sanctuary is similar to the

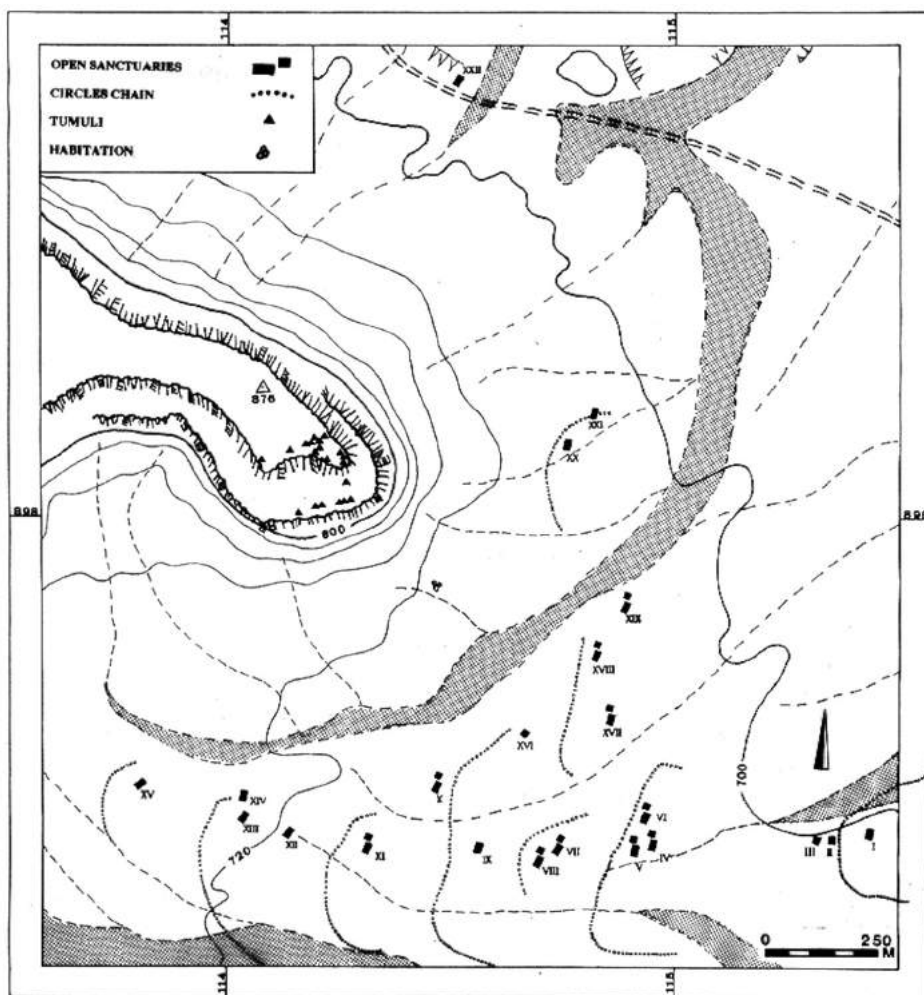


FIGURE 17 Map of the Hashem al-Taref cluster of open sanctuaries, and a burial ground on the mountain top. East–west ancient road runs north of the mountain, north–south road is out of the map to the right. Notice the chains of circles behind the sanctuaries, bearing a symbolic function (see discussion in Avner 1984: 122; 2002: 100).

presentation of some pairs of kings and nobles, e.g., Menkaure and Khemerernebty, the king and queen of Egypt, mid-3rd millennium BCE (Boston Museum of Fine Arts 11.1738, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/king-menkaura-mycerinus-and-queen-230>). This positioning of the smaller sanctuary bears another level of symbolism—it aligns the circular installation of the smaller sanctuary with the elongated cell of the larger one (Figs. 18b, 20). Combinations of circles and alignments are known in the desert in many forms of stone monuments, as well as in rock art. In short, the alignment may represent male power while the circle represents the female (Avner and Avner 1999). Hence, the pairs of rectangular sanctuaries could have been built for a pair of deities, male and female, in the ‘standard’ left to right order.

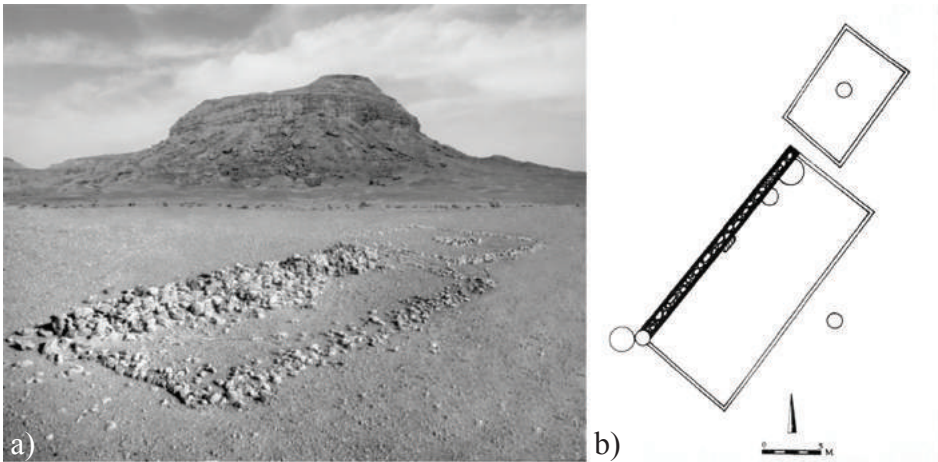


FIGURE 18 Jebel Ḥaṣhem al-Taref: (a) Pair of open sanctuaries XI; (b) pair of open sanctuaries VI.

Another type of pairs consists of two circles,¹⁴ either even or uneven in size (Fig. 19). Following the above interpretation, these were probably built for pairs of goddesses, similar to pairs of broad stones (Fig. 25c) and to pairs of goddesses in ancient art and mythology (see below). Interestingly, to date no male pair of open sanctuaries has been found.

Triads of open sanctuaries are also known, in three different combinations. One is a ‘male’ sanctuary with two ‘female’ ones to his left (Fig. 20). Second is a row of three circular, ‘female’ sanctuaries (Fig. 21) and the third is a row of three square, ‘female’ sanctuaries (Fig. 22). The second and third are similar in appearance to triads of broad *maṣṣebot* and triads of goddesses in ancient art and mythology.¹⁵ Further implications of the open sanctuaries are given below.

Burials

Burials are the third type of cult site, comprising several types of burial grounds, with a variety of tomb types. A great deal of time and thought was invested in some burials—more than was invested in the houses of the living—and this suggests that burial was an intensive religious activity.

¹⁴ One may see the circular open sanctuaries as tent bases, but there are clear differences between the two. Hundreds of tent camps in the Negev, dated from the fifth millennium BCE to the 15th century CE show a consistent pattern. They contain up to 40 tent bases, all are circular, 3–4 m in diameter, of cleared desert surface with some rocks scattered around, used in the past for tying the tent ropes (Avner 1998: 152–154, Fig. 7; 2002: 12, Fig. 2: 11). The circular open sanctuaries are 6 to 28 m in diameter, marked by an ordered, uninterrupted low wall of stones, often different from the immediate surroundings (Fig. 12c). In addition, the circular open sanctuaries, like all others, are built adjacent to ancient roads (Fig. 12c), while habitations and tent camps are usually kept some distance from them.

¹⁵ For a quick reference to lists of goddess triads in various cultures, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_deity



FIGURE 19 Naḥal Anaqa III, southern Negev, a pair of circular open sanctuaries built to accommodate a pair of goddesses, and a short elongated cell of a type popularly called 'Jacob's Ladder'.



FIGURE 20 Har Tzuri'az X, southern Negev, a triad of open sanctuaries built to accommodate a god and two goddesses (total length 57 m).



FIGURE 21 Ramon Crater, Negev Highlands, a triad of circular open sanctuaries, built to accommodate a triad of goddesses, with two short 'Jacob's Ladders', total length 39 m.



FIGURE 22 Naḥal Anaqa I, southern Negev, remains of a triad of square open sanctuaries built to accommodate a triad of goddesses, with poor remains of three short 'Jacob's Ladders'.

Many desert graves are simple piles or scatters of stones, often overlooked. In two cases, however (southwest 'Uvda Valley and Har 'Uziyahu), limited salvage excavations uncovered well-built stone 'beds' 15 cm below the surface. The most common burials are the *tumuli*, of which there are several types. In Sinai, 22 fields of *nawamis* tombs were discovered. *Nawamis* are very well built circular structures, with a small doorway facing west; many of them have a complete, preserved roof (Fig. 23a, b). Excavations of *nawamis* tombs have yielded numerous artefacts, dated to the fifth and fourth millennia BCE (Table 1.32, 37).¹⁶ *Nawamis* tombs are also found at several sites in the Negev; a few are square in shape (e.g., Haiman 1991a: 70).

Another type is tombs in rock shelters. These are also well-built and are mainly found around 'Uvda Valley (Fig. 24a, b). They are dated by their artefacts to the beginning of EB I (mid-fourth millennium BCE).¹⁷

The Eilat burial ground¹⁸

The Eilat burial ground, dated to the sixth and fifth millennia BCE (Table 1.27, Fig. 2), was discovered in 1978, on the western fringe of the modern city, 2 km west-northwest of the Red Sea shore and adjacent to an ancient road junction. Eleven simple graves were found, 20 *tumuli* tombs, two open-air sanctuaries and additional cult installations. The tombs were robbed in antiquity and heavily damaged in modern times, so the original

¹⁶ Goren 1998.

¹⁷ A 1985 salvage excavation of the tomb and three adjacent tombs followed a looting operation. Finds that survived the looting included a fragment of an early EB I jug typical of the Bab adh-Dhra' tombs, beads made of sea shells, bone and faience, some human and animal bones and many plant remains. The other tombs in the rock shelter date to a later period (Table 1.15).

¹⁸ Short reports on the site were published following the excavation (Avner 1990, 1991). In 1997 a monograph on the sites has been submitted to the IAA, but remained unpublished. For a synopsis of the monograph see Avner 2002, App. 1). Analysis of the human remains is now in press (Eshed and Avner). A plan and photos of the site are included in the publications mentioned above.

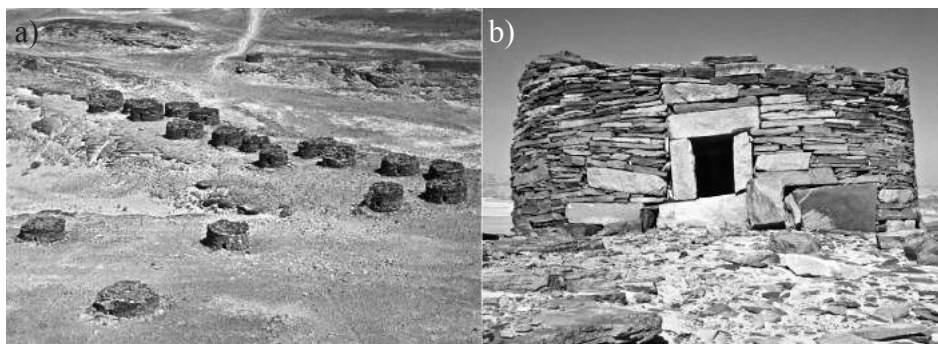


FIGURE 23 (a) Part of a “village” of *Nawamis* tombs at Wadi Hajjaj, eastern Sinai, viewed from west, 4–6 m in diameter each, all doorways face west; (b) single “*Namus*” tomb.



FIGURE 24 Ma'aleh Shaḥarut (‘Uvda 150A), eastern ‘Uvda Valley, a tomb in a rock shelter: (a) view from the air, from east, the arrow points to the tomb; (b) closeup of the tomb (the right upper four rocks are restored).

number of elements at the site is unknown. In 1988 a salvage excavation was carried out at the site prior to construction of a new neighbourhood.¹⁹

Three simple graves were excavated; all contained a stone ‘bed’ 20 cm below the surface, corresponding in size and shape to a flex position interment (Fig. 25a). They contained only meagre finds and bone splinters, suggesting that they had served as temporary, primary burials. The *tumuli* tombs, on the other hand, were well-built with large rocks that had been rolled up to the tops of the hills. The tombs contained one to four burial chambers 1.5–3.0 m across, supported from the outside by additional stone belts and covered by a stone heap

¹⁹ Following the dig, eight *tumuli* tombs, the two open sanctuaries and four cult installations were moved and reconstructed outside a new neighbourhood that was built on the site (see below).



FIGURE 25 The Eilat burial ground: (a) Grave 1, a stone bed fitted to a flex position interment; (b) Tomb V, anthropomorphic *maṣṣebah* with a ‘nest’ of six skulls (one is below); (c) Tomb V after reconstruction outside the new neighbourhood, with a single and a pair of *maṣṣebot* on the eastern perimeter, and four *maṣṣebot* within the tomb. All *maṣṣebot* were originally found *in situ* standing upright.

(*tumulus*). Since skeletal remains of several deceased were found in each tomb, it seems that single-chamber tombs served nuclear families, while clusters of tombs or multi-chamber tombs served extended families. Most bones in the tombs were found disturbed, but in two cases bundles of long bones were found laid parallel, indicating the original order of the secondary interment. Skulls or skull fragments were always found separated, on the western side of the chambers, often near a stone ‘pillow’. In Tomb V, a ‘nest’ of six skulls was found, clustered at the foot of a *maṣṣebah* (Fig. 25b). In Tomb XV, parts of two skeletons, of a woman and a child, were found in a flex position. They had probably been buried together a few months after death so some of the bones remained articulated.

Two types of *maṣṣebot* were found in the tombs, neither of which should be seen as tomb markers. One is a broad *maṣṣebah* set on the eastern perimeter of the tombs and facing east, pairs in four tombs, a single one in another tomb, some with stone offering-benches or a semi-circular cell in the front. The second type comprises single *maṣṣebot*, a pair and a triad of narrow stones, set within the tombs, detached and facing north (Fig. 25c). All the *maṣṣebot* were natural, unworked stones carefully selected according to their shapes and proportions; one was clearly anthropomorphic, although unworked.

Remains of hearths were discovered next to several tombs; most are ca. 0.5 m in diameter and 10–20 cm thick; one was 2.1 m in diameter. Sixty-six hearths were uncovered surrounding *Tumuli* IV and V scattered over an area of 15 × 40 m (Fig. 26a).

A special type of stone installation was discovered on the eastern side of the same tombs. One was better preserved, well built, set 70 cm into the ground, with a pavement of small flagstones at the base. The remains of a Juniper tree trunk, 30 cm long and 14 cm wide was found on the pavement (Fig. 26b). The wood was radiocarbon dated to ca. 4540 BCE (Table 1.27); originally it most probably protruded above ground and served as a sacred tree.

Besides human bones, finds in the tombs included Late Neolithic arrowheads (two of the ‘Haparsa’ type and one microlunate made of transparent quartz); many flint tabular scrapers; a polished stone axe; grinding stones; fragments of 15 sandstone bowls, two of which were decorated in relief; seashells and coral fragments; hundreds of beads of various types and one copper bead; copper nodules and other minerals; bones of sheep/goat, wild animals and fowl. A number of finds reached the sites from eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia, probably also

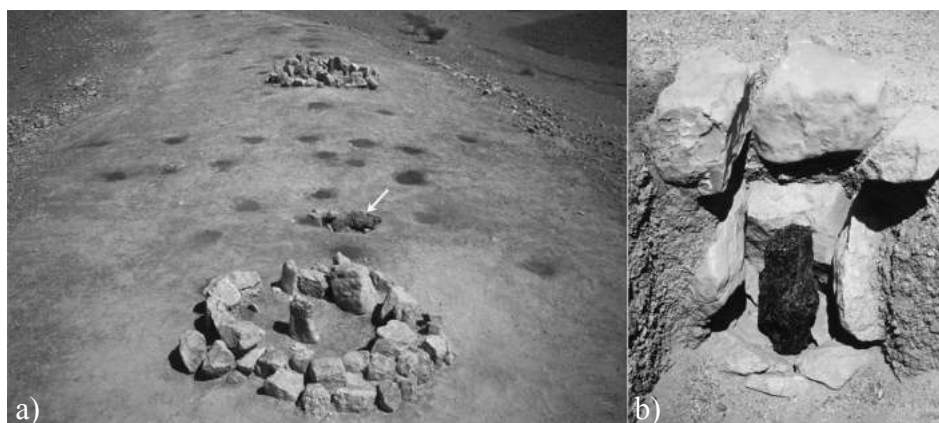


FIGURE 26 The Eilat burial ground: (a) Tombs IV and V, with a scatter of 66 hearths (the arrow points to the sacred wood installation); (b) the sacred wood installation following the removal of one wall and excavation.

from Egypt and Arabia. Ten ^{14}C dates, from the hearths and from the sacred wood, ranged from ca. 5490 to 4350 BCE (Table 1.27). The artefacts and animal bones indicate that the society that owned the cemetery was agro-pastoral and had also practiced some hunting and held quite a lot of property. An osteological study indicates that they enjoyed good health and longevity, and engaged in a minimum of violence (Eshed and Avner in press).

The open sanctuaries measured 14.4×12.5 m and 10.1×3.8 m. The larger of the two contained a square installation in the centre, surrounding a broad *maṣṣebah*; the smaller one contained a cluster of 99 *maṣṣebot* on its eastern side, most of which had fallen. A pair of *maṣṣebot* was 65 and 55 cm high while all the rest were only 10–30 cm high (Fig. 27).

Although many *tumuli* tombs have been excavated in the Near East, the small and damaged burial site in Eilat provided several unique features that enabled analysis of the burial customs and perception of life and death of the desert society. Following excavation, a study was undertaken on these issues (see n. 21), which we mention briefly here.

Unlike the diversity of mortuary customs in contemporaneous burial sites in the fertile lands, the Eilat burial ground presents a great deal of uniformity, along with significant innovations in burial customs. It is one of the first cemeteries in the Near East to be a totally extramural, independent institution,²⁰ and the first to show heavy investment in tomb construction.²¹ The tombs are built above ground, on hilltops, and can be seen from a

²⁰ Earlier cemeteries, which are probably independent, are the Natufian Raqefet Cave (Yeshurun, Bar-Oz and Nadel 2013) and the PPNB Kfar HaHoresh (Goring-Morris 2000; Goring-Morris and Horwitz 2007). In the Late Neolithic submerged sites of Neve Yam, the burial area was selected on the edge of the village (Galili *et al.* 2005, 2010; Galili and Rosen 2011), so it was not fully extramural. Other contemporary burials are intramural (e.g., Galili *et al.* 2005, 2010).

²¹ In three Late Neolithic sites, stone-built tombs were found: Neve Yam (Galili *et al.* 2010), Tel Roim (Eshed and Nadel 2015) and Tabaqat al-Buma in Jordan (Banning *et al.* 1992). However, these tombs are small and simple compared to those of Eilat; interments were made in shallow pits, covered by a low pile of stones, with no real architecture.

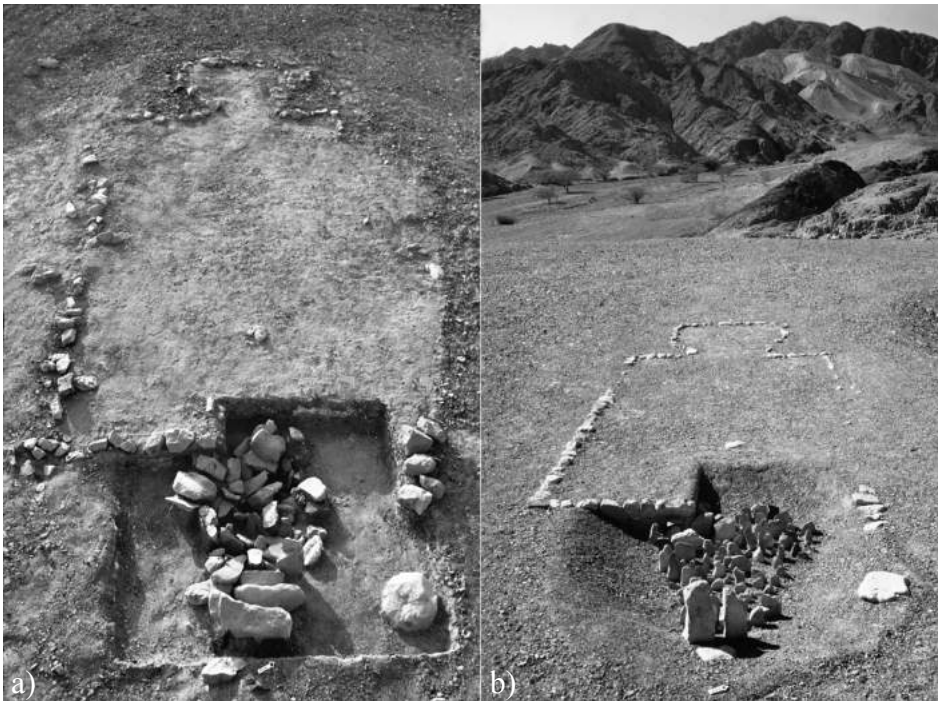


FIGURE 27 The Eilat burial ground, Open Sanctuary II: (a) during excavation; (b) reconstructed, outside the new neighbourhood.

distance, thereby declaring ancestral territory. It is the first cemetery to integrate *maššebot* in the tombs, combining two types, broad stones on the eastern perimeter of the tombs, facing east, and narrow ones within the tombs, facing north (Fig. 25c). The Eilat burial ground is the first to present secondary burial for all deceased, as well as burial offerings or utilities for all, including children. It is also the first with numerous hearths around the tombs—providing the remains of sacred meals shared by the living and their ancestors, a custom later known as the Mesopotamian *kispu* and similar practices in ancestral cults.²²

In addition to these innovations, the site presents several symbols, mainly of female fertility. The circular, hill-shaped *tumulus* tomb symbolized a womb, from which the deceased would be reborn.²³ The doorways of the tombs and *maššebot* on their perimeter

²² At some sites hearths were found in burial context. At Neve Yam, two hearths and three seed assemblages were found up to 18 m away from tombs, interpreted as the remains of ritual meals (Galili *et al.* 2010: 41, 43, Fig. 7). For the *kispu*, see, e.g., Bayliss 1973; Finkel 1984; MacDougal 2014. To date the earliest dated remains of mortuary feasting are from the Natufian H̄ilazon Tachtit Cave, ca. 10000 BCE (Munro and Grossman 2010). The finding of tens of hearths around the Eilat tombs, however, is at present unique.

²³ Identification of a tomb as a womb appears in several anthropological studies. One brief example is from South Africa: “...The corpse is tied up in such a manner that it more or less represents a fetus in the womb...the chief mourner enters the round hole (representing the womb)...” (Ngubane 1976: 276).

all faced east toward the rising sun, perceived as radiating life and fertility. The pairs of broad *maššebot* represented pairs of goddesses, and actually preceded various mythologies across the Near East in which pairs of goddesses were involved in revival of dead young gods: Inanna and Ereshkigal from Sumer, Shapshu and ʿAnat in Ugarit and Isis and Nephtys in Egypt (another version, but still pertinent, is the Greek myth of Demeter and Kore/Persephone). Three single, broad *maššebot*, one attached to Tomb XV, one set in an independent cult installation and one (broken) in the larger open sanctuary, also represented fertility goddesses. The many cowrie shell pendants found in the tombs are another well-known female fertility symbol (e.g., Eliade 1952: 125–126, 138–143; Kovacs 2008, esp. 4, 23, 41). The sacred wood was a major symbol of a goddess, the *Asherah* in Ugaritic and biblical texts,²⁴ which is often manifested in ancient art (e.g., Fig. 11b); the open air sanctuaries are also identified as ‘female’. A male symbol may be the stone alignment pointing to Tomb II, similarly to larger stone alignments in many *tumuli* fields in the Negev and to the elongated cells in the larger open sanctuaries of the pairs (Figs. 18a, b, 20; Avner and Avner 1999). Based on ancient texts, and on archaeological and anthropological parallels, the narrow, detached *maššebot* inside the tombs are interpreted as representing the ancestors, mainly males, as do the many small *maššebot* in the smaller open sanctuary, next to a pair of larger ones that represented a pair of deities (Figs. 27a, b; cf. Fig. 6).²⁵

In sum, we see here a clear dominance of life and female fertility symbols that were lacking in earlier burials. What was the meaning of these innovations in burial customs and the rich fertility symbolism? A possible answer is that the site represents a new theological-philosophical perception of life and death, a *cyclical* perception, as opposed to the common, prevailing *linear* perception of a one-way passage from the short life on earth to the eternal afterlife.²⁶

This interpretation may be considered too bold, but the cyclical perception finds support at other desert sites, one of which is addressed here. Of the single broad *maššebot* in the Negev, 27% face west and they are the only ones thus oriented. If the rising sun in the east radiates life and fertility, its setting in the west is perceived in many cultures as the orientation of the netherworld. Hence, these broad *maššebot* combine two opposite symbols: female fertility, through their proportion, and death through their orientation. One case effectively illuminates this duality. Next to Habitation Site 9 in the ʿUvda Valley, a shrine was excavated with a broad *maššebah* facing west. At its foot a hearth was found, which served as a simple altar, and rendered a radiocarbon date ca. 5880 BCE (Table

²⁴ For the *Asherah* in Ugarit and in the Bible, see Wiggins 1993; Dever 2005.

²⁵ For the distinction between *maššebot* for gods and for ancestors, see Avner 2002: 86–91; Arav *et al.* 2016: 18–20.

²⁶ For the netherworld as a *land of no return* in Mesopotamia, see, e.g., MacDougal 2014: 75–76, 81–105. For the netherworld as a blessed eternity in Egypt, see: Lesko 1995 and Spell 125 in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, ending with the words: “...he shall not be turned back through any gateway of the West (i.e., netherworld)...” (Faulkner 1993: 34). In the Bible, death was also perceived as final (Prov 2:19–20, Job 7:9–10, 14:12–14, 16:22); only in the 2nd century BCE a clear indication occurs for the perception of resurrection (2 Macc 7:11, 23), and see Xella 1995.

1.14). A trio of grinding stones was also found in front of the *maṣṣebah*, laid upside down (Fig. 28). Similar trios of grinding stones were uncovered in front of two other nearby shrines with broad *maṣṣebot*. These finds suggest that the grinding stones were part of the cult paraphernalia used for preparation of flour and baking bread, to be sacrificed to the goddess that dwells in the stone. Ancient texts describing such rites, dedicated to goddesses, are known from various cultures throughout the Near East (Weinfeld 1972; Wild 1977; Olyan 1987; CAD 8: 110), including a Hebrew one. Jeremiah (7:18) criticized the people of Jerusalem, saying: "... the women knead the dough to make cakes to the queen of heaven". Based on the above data, one can imagine a cult ceremony performed in front of the broad 'female' *maṣṣebah*, addressing the fertility of the cultivated soil, which is also perceived as a female entity that endows the grains. Nevertheless, this *maṣṣebah* faces west, to the realm of the dead. The dichotomy of the symbols can be understood as complementary against the background of a cyclical perception of life and death, as interpreted in the Eilat burial ground.

The Eilat burial ground demonstrates that burial was an important issue for the desert people, who intensively interlaced it with theology, mythology and profound thoughts about life and death.

The desert cult sites compared with sites in the settled lands

Comparison of the desert cult sites with the contemporary (or later) ones in the settled Near East yields intriguing results. Following is a short discussion of each type of site described above.

Maṣṣebot

1. The area of the Negev (along with the southern Judean Desert and part of eastern Sinai) is only about 1% of the Fertile Crescent of the Near East. Yet the number of sixth to third millennia BCE *maṣṣebot* sites found there is almost ten times higher than those known from the entire settled Near East (450 vs. 48, plus 42 sites on the desert fringe).²⁷ If *maṣṣebot* incorporated in open sanctuaries, tombs and other cult installation were counted as well, they would outnumber those of the settled lands even further.
2. While *maṣṣebot* first appeared in the desert as early as 11000 BCE, in the settled lands they first appeared at a few sites around 7000 BCE but they became common only from ca. 2000 BCE. In the fertile zones the cult of *maṣṣebot* became very rare during the classical periods and disappeared with the coming of Christianity (early 4th century CE), while in the desert the cult continued uninterrupted into the Early Islamic period (Avni 2007, and see Fig. 10: b, c). The desert *maṣṣebot* actually exhibit a firm tradition that persisted for over 12,000 years.

²⁷ It could be argued that the larger number of *maṣṣebot* sites in the Negev, compared to those in fertile zones of the Near East, is the result of better preservation of ancient remains in the desert and better coverage of the area by surveys. However, both points cannot explain the disparity in numbers, certainly not the second one, since most of the Negev has not as yet been covered by a systematic archaeological survey.



FIGURE 28 ‘Uvda Site 9, a broad, Late Neolithic *maṣṣebah* facing west, with hearths and a trio of grinding stones (found resting upside down).

3. The desert *maṣṣebot* are much more consistent in all criteria quantitatively analyzed than those of the settled lands (e.g., orientation, lack of shaping, numbers in groups and attached features).
4. The *maṣṣebot* attest to the birth of aniconism in the prehistoric desert religion. Much later, in the first millennium BCE, this trend also appeared in other Near Eastern religions (Ornan 1993; Mettinger 1995; Hendel 1997).

What do the above points imply? A possible answer is that *maṣṣebot* were basically a desert cultic element that was later adopted by settled land societies. If this is true, it may mean that the desert inhabitants, although inferior in material culture, had the power to influence the settled populations in the sphere of cult and theology.

Open sanctuaries

There are several similarities between properties of the desert open sanctuaries and those of built temples in the southern Levant; four are addressed here:

1. All quadrangular open sanctuaries in the desert (152 out of 223) are broad structures, i.e., the front and back walls are the longer ones, and this is also the principal plan of almost all Chalcolithic and Early Bronze temples in the settled lands (Fig. 29).
2. Open sanctuaries occur in pairs and triads. In the Negev and eastern Sinai, 26 pairs of a fixed pattern were mentioned above, while 11 pairs of Chalcolithic–Early Bronze temples are known farther north.²⁸ In five of them, the smaller temple stands perpendicular to the larger one, on the left side (Fig. 29: 1–5). Three others are built aligned, still with

²⁸ Not all were identified before as pairs. For details and references, see Avner 2002: 115–119.

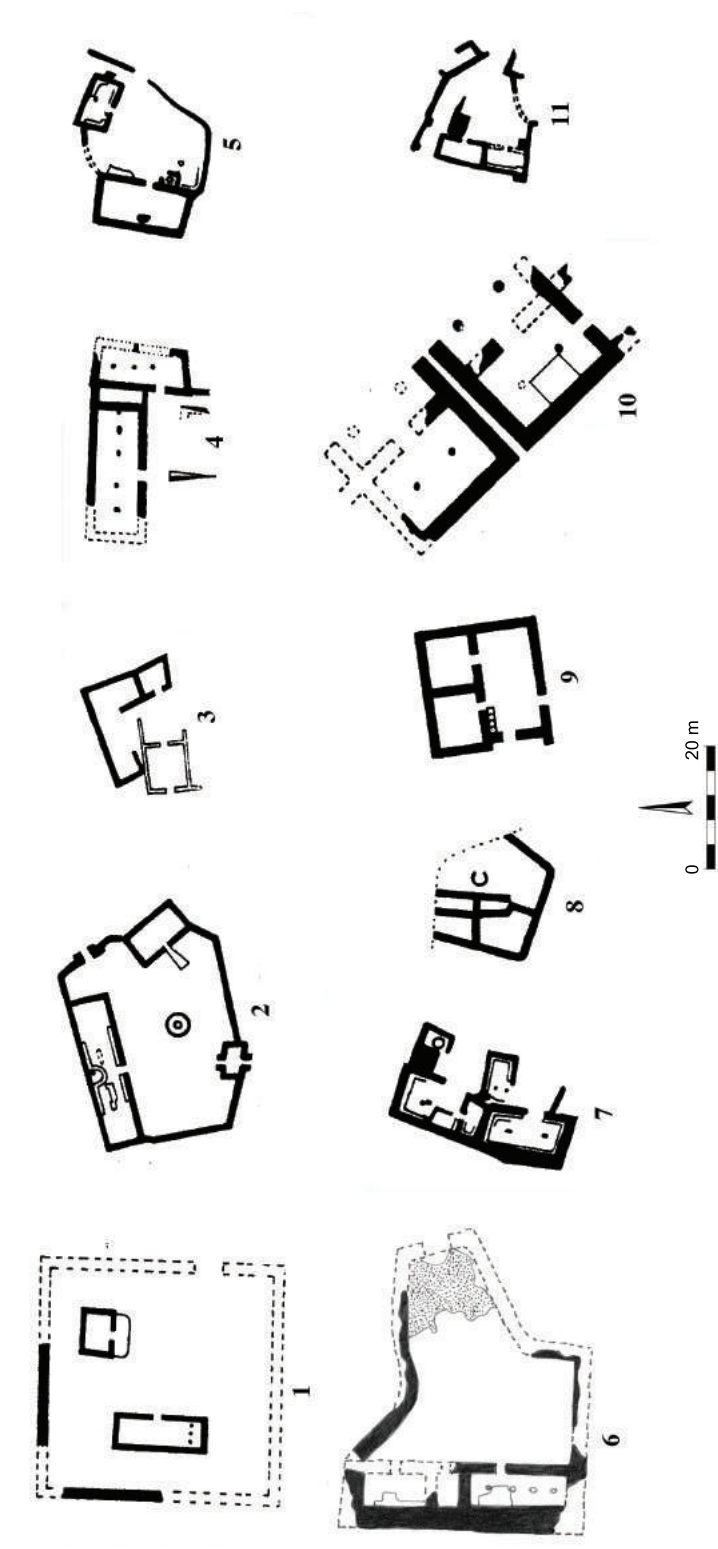


FIGURE 29 Plans of Chalcolithic and Early Bronze 'twin temples': 1. Tuleilat al-Ghassul (Seaton 2008: 182), 2. Ein Gedi (Ussishkin 1980: 6), 3. Gilat (Alon and Levy 1989: 177), 4. Hartuv (Mazar, de Miroschedji and Porat 1996: 6), 5. Arad (Amiran *et al.* 1980: 8), 6. Megiddo XIX (Laud 1948, Figs. 137, 390), 7. Arad (Amiran *et al.* 1980: 8), 8. Gezer (Macalister 1912: 189), 9. Byblos (Saghieh 1983: Pl. 25: 2), 10. Megiddo XV (Laud 1948: Fig. 180), 11. Arad (Amiran *et al.* 1980: 8).

the smaller temple on their left (Fig. 29: 6–8); additional three pairs are also aligned, but even in size (Fig. 29: 9–11).²⁹ Much like in the desert open sanctuaries, not one pair of temples is built in a reversed left–right size order. Another detail is found in two pairs of built temples. In the main twin temples of Arad (EB II, Fig. 29: 7), the back wall of the larger hall (Temple 1894), on their right, is 1.8 m thick, while that of the smaller hall (Temple 1831) is only 1 m thick, despite the fact that they were built as one unit (Amiran *et al.* 1978: 38, Pl. 191). In the twin temples of Megiddo XIX (EB I, Fig. 29: 6) the back wall of the larger structure, on their right (Temple 4050), is 3.2 m thick while that of the smaller one (Temple 4047) is 2.8 m thick (Laud 1948: 61, Figs. 137, 390).³⁰ Both back walls are more than double the thickness of the other walls. Possibly, the thick walls of the built temples at Arad and Megiddo bore the same symbolism as that interpreted for the elongated cell of the larger sanctuary of the desert pairs (see above).

3. Triads of open sanctuaries are found in the desert (Figs. 20–22), and triads of temples are known at three Early Bronze sites: Byblos XIV (Dunand 1958: 632–648, Pls. 21–63), Megiddo XV (Laud 1948: 84; Finkelstein *et al.* 2013: 73) and Tell Ziraqun, Jordan (Ibrahim and Mittmann 1987). In both areas, the triads were most probably built for triads of deities, similar to triple temples in later periods.
4. ‘Stone drawings’ are found next to some open sanctuaries (Figs. 15, 16). Despite differences in technique and content, they bear a general similarity to the engravings on the stone pavement east of the Megiddo temple of Layer XIX, with images of animals and humans (Laud 1948, Pl. 271–282; Keinan 2013; Yekutieli 2008). In both areas they were probably made as a part of the ritual activity.

The built temples are dated to the fourth and third millennia BCE, while the open sanctuaries first appeared in the desert in the seventh millennium BCE.³¹ This may mean that ideas underlying the ground plan of both the open sanctuaries and built temples were actually born in the desert. Here too we may be seeing an influence of the desert over the settled lands.

One more possible point of interaction between the regions should be mentioned. Clusters of open sanctuaries built near road junctions (up to 33 at one site [Jebel Hashem al-Taref]) may have accommodated thousands of people during religious events. This is a number far above any estimated population in the surrounding desert region and

²⁹ Amiran *et al.* (1978: 38–41; 1980: 8–9) described a sacred precinct, consisting of three elements: a main pair of sanctuaries, a small pair and a ‘ceremonial hall’ with an additional service building (Nos. 5, 7, 11 in Fig. 29). This identification was rejected by Yeivin (1973: 164–166) and Mazar (1990: 126); however, in my opinion, three pairs of sanctuaries can be identified in the complex (see discussion in Avner 2002: 118).

³⁰ The difference in thickness of walls is not mentioned in the reports of the new excavations at Megiddo (Finkelstein *et al.* 2013) since the original brick construction of walls was washed away by rains since the excavation by Laud (1948) and replaced by a stone wall by the team of the Megiddo National Park (Ussishkin 2015: 69).

³¹ Most ¹⁴C dates currently available are of the sixth and fifth millennia BCE (Fig. 2) but in some, PPNB flint blades were found. One site is the trio of open sanctuaries of Har Tzuri‘az IX (Fig. 20).

may indicate pilgrimages to the sites from a wide-ranging area. In addition, in some of these sanctuaries, a few pottery sherds from the settled lands were found (at 'Uvda 6, Jebel Hashem al-Taref and Har Tzuri'az from Late Neolithic to Middle Bronze), as well as alabaster fragments from Egypt (Har Tzuri'az VI). Thus it is possible that pilgrims reached these sites from outside the desert as well. Pilgrimages to desert sites is known in later periods: to an unknown desert location in the Iron Age through Kuntilet 'Ajrud (Meshel 2012), to Saint Catherine, southern Sinai, from the 4th century CE (Stone 1982; Caner 2010) and to Mecca (Peters 1994), but the clusters of open sanctuaries seem to offer the earliest indications for the attractiveness of the desert to pilgrimages from the green lands.

Burials

Burial was an important issue for the desert people, and one that stimulated rich symbolism, theology and mythology. If the interpretations suggested above for the various elements in the Eilat burial site are acceptable, it may mean that the desert people preceded the fertile land dwellers by several millennia with their new, cyclical perception of life and death. For them, the deceased continued to 'exist' as ancestors and as full members of their families, sharing events with the living until their time came for rebirth.³²

To sum up, the three general types of cult sites addressed above, *maṣṣebot*, open-air sanctuaries and burials, demonstrate that the desert was rich with cult sites. The presently available finds and radiometric dates create the impression that there was a flourishing of cult sites in the desert during the sixth millennium BCE. The suggested explanation for this has been that the great development in the desert spiritual culture actually followed the major material shift—from hunting and gathering to farming and herding—around 6000 BCE (Avner 1998, 2002; Rosen 2015). This explanation, however, is no longer sustainable due to the discovery of hundreds of mountain cult sites dated to the seventh and sixth millennia BCE.

Neolithic mountain cult sites

In the southern Negev, mainly in the Eilat region, another type of cult site has come to light during the last 15 years, usually located on mountains, where no habitations are found. These sites consist of small, low stone installations, circular or oval in shape (1.5–2.5 m across) with elongated cells (ca. 1 × 4 m). Several installations may be found at a single site, often in pairs, in which the elongated cell points to a circle (Fig. 30). To date, 372 such sites are recorded in the southern Negev, while only seven contemporary habitations are known in the same area (Avner *et al.* 2014). Since the densest cluster of sites was found in the mountains around Nahal Roded, we have termed them 'Rodedian'. To date, no such sites have been published from other surveys in the surrounding mountainous regions—in the Sinai, Negev Highlands or southern Jordan. However, occasional visits by the author to the two latter regions did produce some sites of this type.

³² For a time I was uncertain if a cyclical perception of life and death could coexist with ancestral cult. However, at least in the Pacific Islands both beliefs do coexist (Frazer 1913b).



FIGURE 30 Har Assa, Eilat region, a regular pair of Neolithic cult installations, after shallow cleaning.



FIGURE 31 Ma'aleh Yitro, eastern 'Uvda Valley, a trio of small perforated *maššebot* set at the narrow, eastern end of an elongated cell.

Several kinds of stone objects have been found in the Rodedian sites: 'regular' small *maššebot* (n=268) up to 60 cm high, mainly as singles but also as pairs and triads, and some in groups of five and seven. Numerous perforated *maššebot* (n=184), unique to these sites, usually singles, were often found fallen, but there was also an *in situ* triad (Fig. 31), and many naturally perforated limestone stones (n=827), brought to the sites on the igneous mountains from some distance. Also unique to these sites are stone anthropomorphic images (n=331, Fig.

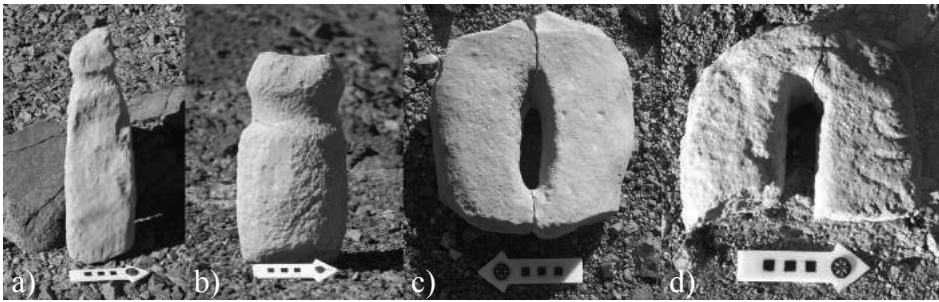


FIGURE 32 Examples of stone object from Neolithic cult sites above Naḥal Roded, Eilat region: (a) anthropomorphic image with a hammered neck; (b) anthropomorphic image, hammered all over; (c) broken ‘vulva’ stone; (d) broken ‘vulva’ stone with engraving of a snake.



FIGURE 33 A pair of miniature houses next to a Neolithic cult site above Naḥal ‘Eteq, Eilat region.



FIGURE 34 Buried stone objects at Neolithic cult sites in the Eilat Mountains: (a) above Naḥal Roded, a vase-shaped installation and an anthropomorphic image with head down; (b) Har ‘Amram, the top of perforated *maṣṣebah* as found; (c) same as (b), after excavation.

32a, b) and stones with elongated perforations (n=34, Fig. 32c, d). Stone bowls of various types and sizes have also been found (n=41), as well as small ‘vase-shaped’ installations built into the ground (n=68) and miniature houses, found either as singles (n=8), pairs (n=3, Fig. 33) and triad (n=1). At several sites, regular and perforated *maṣṣebot* were found deliberately buried vertically in the ground, up to their tops; some were buried upside down (Fig. 34a–c).

In short, the sites seem to represent two symbolic aspects. One is fertility, signified by the stones with elongated perforations (“vulva”-shape) and by the very combination of the elongated cell pointing to the circle, bearing male and female symbolism (cf. Avner and Avner 1999). Second is death, signified by the burial of stone objects and by setting them upside-down. The combination of death and fertility is actually well-known in anthropological studies as relating to ancestral cult. The anthropomorphic images may have represented the ancestors, perhaps also phalli, while the miniature houses were built for the ancestral spirits. The role of the perforated *maṣṣebot* is as yet unclear, but the regular ones most probably represented deities, similar to those of the independent shrines.

The ‘Rodedian’ sites are presently dated to the seventh and sixth millennia BCE, i.e., both to the Pre Pottery Neolithic B and Late Neolithic, based on flint assemblages and radiocarbon dates (Avner *et al.* 2014). Only two ¹⁴C dates are currently available, from a large ash spot next to one site above Naḥal Roded, ca. 6900 and 7100 BCE (Table 1.26, Fig. 2). Hence, the early date of the ‘Rodedian’ sites, as well as the PPNB flint items from some open sanctuaries, challenge the previous explanation given to the profound religious development in the desert. Now it seems that the ‘eruption’ of cult sites *preceded* the major economic-cultural change in the desert from hunting and gathering to farming and herding by a full millennium.³³

Discussion: the desert spiritual culture

As the above overview demonstrates, the desert is exceptionally rich in cult sites: hundreds of *maṣṣebot* shrines, over 200 open sanctuaries, hundreds of ‘Rodedian’ sites, many hundreds of *tumuli* tombs and more. Some types of cult sites are not mentioned here and, as noted, since much of the area of the Negev, Sinai and southern Jordan have not yet been systematically surveyed, these numbers are far from final. In addition, even in surveyed areas, in the Negev Highlands, for example, additional cult sites of all types are found during occasional visits. Thus, the desert is actually richer in cult sites than we actually know. The density of cult sites in the desert is higher by far than that of the settled lands. An attempt to explain this paradox through better preservation of remains in the desert is unsatisfactory. The strong impression is that, fewer people in the desert built many more cult sites (though modest) than their neighbours in the settled lands.

By the sixth millennium BCE, or even the seventh, desert religion appears highly elaborate and rich, with an array of types of cult sites and installations, consistent characteristics of *maṣṣebot* (numbers in groups, orientation, lack of shaping, etc.), repeating patterns of open sanctuaries, repeating patterns of ‘Rodedian’ sites with their large numbers of stone objects, and well-defined burial customs. It seems that desert inhabitants developed an actual, well-established religion, not just a ‘symbolic behaviour’ or ‘belief system’.

³³ A similar question arises regarding the sequence of developments in the Levant farther north during the tenth–seventh millennia BCE, whether the ‘religious revolution’ followed the agricultural one (e.g., Childe 1935a, b; Bar-Yosef 2001), preceded cultivation (Cauvin 2000a, b; Schmidt 2000: 48, 2012: 226–242, 256) or whether both revolutions were simultaneous (Watkins 2010, 2011). No consensus has been reached on this question, which also depends on another debated issue: was the advent of agriculture a slow process (Bar-Yosef 2001, 2014; Groman-Yaroslavski *et al.* 2016) or a fast one (Abbo *et al.* 2010).

From the above characteristics, one point should be further discussed—the repeating numbers in groups of *maššebot*, and the pairs and triads of open sanctuaries. As previously stated, these numbers of *maššebot* in groups (Figs. 4–5 and Table 2), indicate a complex pantheon, with many ‘organic’ groups of deities (gods may participate in different groups in different circumstances). The various combinations of *maššebot* are already present in the ‘Rodedian’ sites, in the seventh millennium BCE. The pairs and triads of open sanctuaries, representing the concept of pairs and triads of deities, also first appeared in the seventh millennium BCE. Necessarily, these indicate a complex pantheon and an elaborate, unwritten mythology, which were fully illuminated only later, when writing began, when groups of gods, of the same numbers as in the *maššebot* sites are presented in dedication inscriptions, myths and art (see examples in Avner 1993).

The early occurrence of a complex pantheon in the desert should not be taken for granted. Studies of ancient Near Eastern religions show that during pre- and proto-historic periods, people usually appealed to a single deity, mainly to a goddess (e.g., there are thousands of prehistoric female figurines and statuettes but small numbers of their male counterparts). Only when human societies reached the social organization level of a city, with an established hierarchy, were they able to similarly imagine the world of their gods, with hierarchy and complex pantheons (e.g., de Miroschedji 1993, 2011). This view is not entirely correct; at least in Çatal Hüyük, in the seventh millennium BCE, where pairs of goddesses were presented in wall reliefs, where lines of seven bucrania may have represented a group of seven male gods, and other examples (Mellaart 1967; Hodder 2006). Another correction is that male symbols, i.e., phalli, are also found in Natufian and Neolithic cultures (e.g., Orrelle 2014: 70–72). Still, representations of groups of deities (through *maššebot* and open sanctuaries) are far more common and consistent in the desert, beginning in the seventh millennium BCE. So, the question arises, how could the desert societies create complex pantheons three or four millennia before they became common in the settled lands?

Presently, we have no clear answer to this question. However, it should be noted that contemporaneous with the appearance of ‘Rodedian’ sites, cult installations and buildings and ritual artefacts are found in the broader region of the southern Levant. For example: sanctuaries with *maššebot* are known in Jericho (Kenyon 1957: Pl. 17) and ‘Ain Ghazal;³⁴ cult installations with *maššebot* appeared at Beidha (Kirkbride 1968a: 92–96; 1968b: Pl. 28a), es-Sifiya (Maḥasneh 2000), Shaqrat al-Mazyad (Jensen *et al.* 2005: 119, 124) and al-Baseet (‘Amr 2004);³⁵ burials rich with symbolism are found at Kfar HaHoresh (Goring-Morris 2000, 2005; Goring-Morris and Horwitz 2004; Simmons, Horwitz and Goring-Morris 2007); and many anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines are found

³⁴ Rollefson 2000: 181–183; Kafafi 2013. For plaster statues at the same sites, see Tubb and Grissom 1995; Schmandt-Besserat 1998, 2013; Grissom 2013.

³⁵ A shaped, narrow stone set in a room at Beidha was not identified by Kirkbride (1968b: Pl. 24a) as a *maššebah*, but in a conversation with her in March 1983 she accepted this interpretation. Originally she dated this room to the Natufian stage of the site, but it was not included in the final report on the Natufian Beidha by Byrd (1989). In a letter from March 2001, Byrd attributed the room to the earliest Neolithic phase of the site.

in PPNB sites.³⁶ All these, and more, are only part of a broader and profound cognitive, cultic and artistic development that actually began in the Natufian culture (e.g., Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1998; Shaḥam and Belfer-Cohen 2013; Orrelle 2014: 50–51) and greatly intensified through the subsequent Neolithic phases.³⁷ Does this mean that desert societies were influenced by developments in the north? Not necessarily. The *maṣṣeḇot* seem to have been ‘born’ in the desert; the ‘Rodedian’ sites and the open sanctuaries are also unique to the desert.

In all four cult type sites addressed here, the desert people preceded the settled lands in developing major theological ideas. Although they were undoubtedly inferior to their neighbours materially, they seem to have had the power to influence them in the realms of religions and theological concepts.

What was it that made the desert people so influential in this domain? A possible answer is that the desert environment merged two different impacts on its inhabitants. One is the glamour and openness of the desert, a force that inspired and stimulated the ‘religious experience’.³⁸ Examples of the people’s awareness of desert backdrop are the spacious landscapes viewed from *tumuli* fields built on hilltops, the view of the Arabah Valley and the Edomite Mountains (Jordan) seen from the tombs in the rock shelters of Ma‘aleh Shaharut (Fig. 24) and the vistas viewed from many ‘Rodedian’ sites. The other aspect is the hardship of desert life. Desert people inhabited a world of uncertainty, particularly with regard to rainfall; they were highly dependent on natural forces, i.e., the gods. This motivated them to intensive religious activity, which in turn led to religious creativity, and from there to an established religion that eventually empowered them to influence others. What was the path for this assumed influence? Though desert societies seem quite independent culturally, they did maintain contacts with the settled lands. This is true even for remote sites, e.g., imported goods in the Eilat cemetery. Another possible channel could be pilgrimage into the desert. People from the settled lands who reached the desert were probably exposed to its unusual religious experiences.³⁹

After all, explanations offered here to the religious aspects of desert life should be taken as temporary and insufficient. There is still much to study about the spiritual world of ancient desert societies and their role in the cultural processes of the Near East.

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³⁶ E.g., Makarewicz and Austin 2006: 21–22; Verhoeven 2007; Shcmandt-Besserat 2013.

³⁷ Watkins 2010; Schmidt 2000. To avoid expansion of the article I refrain from addressing the magnificent finds from Gūbekli Tepe, Nevali Çori and Jarf al Aḥmar.

³⁸ For the meaning of ‘religious experience’, see Taves 2005.

³⁹ Glamour is certainly not the property of the desert alone. However, I often witnessed stronger emotional reaction of people exposed to desert settings. An example for another aspect of ‘desert experience’ is the “voice of thin silence” in which Elijah found God on Mount Ḥoreb (1 Kings 19:12).

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