Life-Sized Statues in the Ancient Near East: The Case Study of the Warrior God of Early Bronze Age I Megiddo

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Abstract

This article discusses the question of deities' life-sized statues in the Bronze Age Levant and Mesopotamia. Since well-preserved statues are rare, one must approach the issue through remnants. Here, I discuss evidence for a life-sized statue of a god from an Early Bronze Age I temple at Megiddo, Israel, dated to ca. 3500 BC. The relevant evidence includes an extraordinary copper spearhead and graffiti featuring, among other things, a warrior god with a large spear and a thunderbolt. I suggest that the spearhead is a remnant of the temple's life-size statue and that the graffiti sheds light on cultic activities that took place in the temple. The deity in question is likely to be the earliest manifestation of a warrior god better known later from Canaanite Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible.

Keywords: Life-sized statue; graffiti; Canaanite cult; spear;thunderbolt; emotions

1. Introduction

In this paper, I revisit the Early Bronze Age temple at Megiddo and argue that it likely housed a life-sized statue of a warrior deity. I suggest that graffiti of two male figures with spears in the courtyard and the sizeable spearhead recovered

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in the temple are homologous and should be considered as indicating the same thing. To demonstrate that the spearhead in question likely belonged to a life-sized statue, I follow the methodology applied to a unique bronze spatula found in a Canaanite temple at Lachish (Garfinkel 2020). According to this methodology, three criteria must be met:

1. The item in question must be typologically exceptional; it may be of an expensive raw material or of an unusual size.
2. The context in which the item was discovered must be appropriate (e.g., a temple).
3. The attribution to a god statue must be substantiated by references to other sources, such as iconographic representations of the same object.

The discussion below begins with a brief review of the Early Bronze Age I (EB I) Temple 4050 at Megiddo and the impressive corpus of graffiti in its courtyard, which I argue ought to be understood as acts of communication with the deity. Next, I proceed to discuss two graffiti of male figures holding a spear, which I propose are best perceived as depictions of a deity. Having said that, I argue that this deity is best identified as a warrior god on account of a putative thunderbolt motif. Lastly, I suggest that the spears held by these figures are homologous with the sizeable copper spearhead found in the temple courtyard, which in turn strongly suggests that a life-sized deity statue stood in the temple.

2. Temple 4050 and Graffiti

Megiddo Stratum XIX Temple 4050 is located on the mound's eastern slope and is among the best examples of Early Bronze Age cultic architecture (Loud 1948: 61–65; Epstein 1973; Kempinski 1989: 170–171; Van der Steen 2005; Keinan 2013; Ussishkin 2018: 112–124). Dated to the middle or second half of the fourth millennium BCE, the structure consisted of a few rooms on the west and an extensive enclosed courtyard to their east (Fig. 1). The courtyard was paved with flat limestone slabs (Pavement 4008), which were engraved with graffiti: The University of Chicago expedition uncovered 44, and relatively recent Tel Aviv University excavations uncovered 11 more (Loud 1948: Pls. 271–280; Keinan 2007; 2013). The graffiti are simple, crude, *ad hoc* engravings, depicting a wide range of themes and beings: human figures, domesticated and wild animals, musical instruments, dancing, game boards, and various geometric or abstract patterns. They were produced by worshipers, not professional artists, probably while going through a deep religious experience, perhaps even in a

state of trance. They depicted what they experienced: the god's image, dancing, music, and animal sacrifices.

Their location on the floor also suggests that they were engraved with short-term considerations in mind; they were not designed to remain visible for long. They would be quickly obscured by people standing on them, by mud, dust, or refuse, as well as by later superimposing graffiti. Yekutieli (2005; 2008) claims that much of this superposition pertained to an effort to erase Egyptianizing motifs, expressing the local population's resistance to the Egyptian colonies that operated at the time further south. However, insofar as the engravings were made by believers in a religious context, it is unlikely that they sought to communicate political messages of this kind. Rather, they are best perceived as straightforward communications with the gods (for further discussion, see Klingbeil and Klingbeil 2012; Van Pelt and Staring 2019).

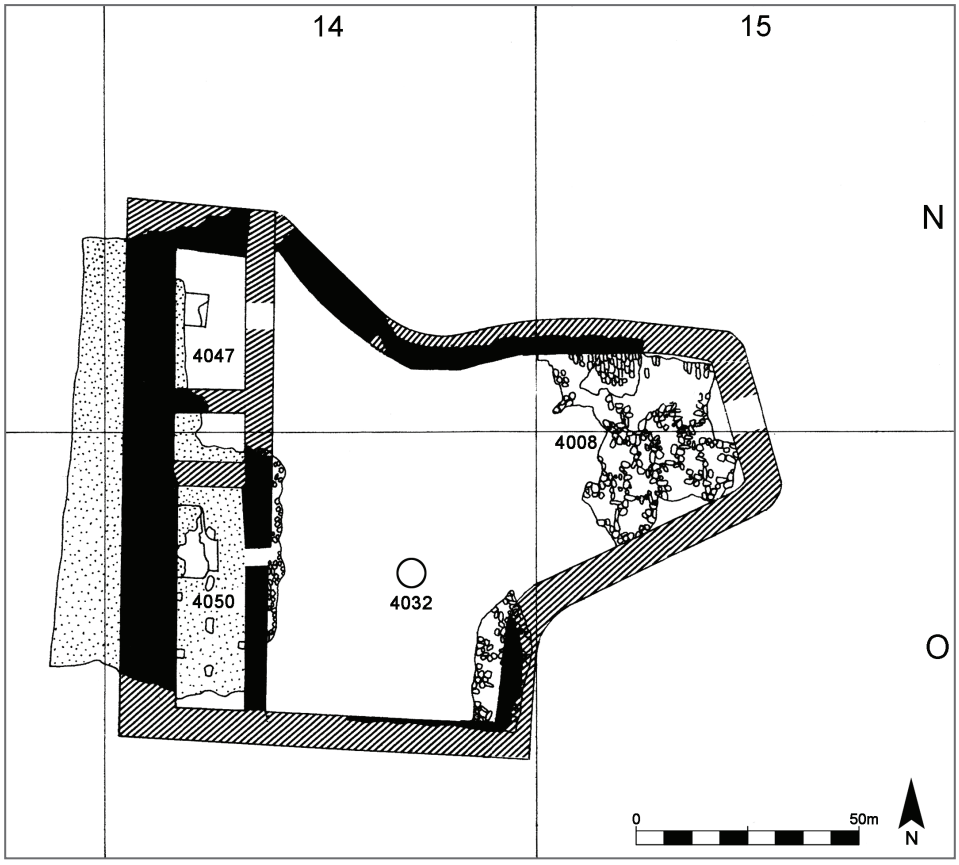

Fig. 1. Early Bronze Age Temple 4050 on the eastern slope of Megiddo (after Loud 1948: Pl. 390).

3. The Graffiti of a Male Figure Holding a Spear

Two items in the Temple 4050 graffiti consist of a male figure holding a spear. One is of indeterminate dimensions; it depicts a standing male figure facing left, wearing a tall hat and a garment, and holding a large spear in his right hand. To emphasize its importance, the spear, which has a prominent central ridge, is larger and more deeply incised than the rest of the figure (Fig. 2:1; Loud 1948: Pl. 273:7). Left of the figure is an elongated motif consisting of a single long vertical line, from which numerous short lines extend. Kempinski (1989: 173) identified this image as a "figure of what might be a female deity holding a spear and facing a plant," whereas Beck (2002: 26) and Schroer and Keel (2005: No. 189) identified it as an image of a human ruler.

The second image was observed on a slab 43 × 25 cm large featuring various motifs (Figs. 2:2, 3; Keinan 2013: Fig. 2.15). Keinan (2013: 36) describes the slab as follows,

> The main element, incised at its center, is a human male figure holding a spear. The figure is facing right, holding the spear in his left hand. Three circles in relief represent the eyes and mouth. In addition, the figure has a pointed beard. His breast is emphasized by two circles in relief. He is wearing a short skirt and a belt with a dagger; the belt has two bulges at its center, and the skirt has three bulges on its right. Incision on the slab seems to depict a bird above a net pattern, on the right half of the slab. A few incisions around it and around the human figure remain unidentified.

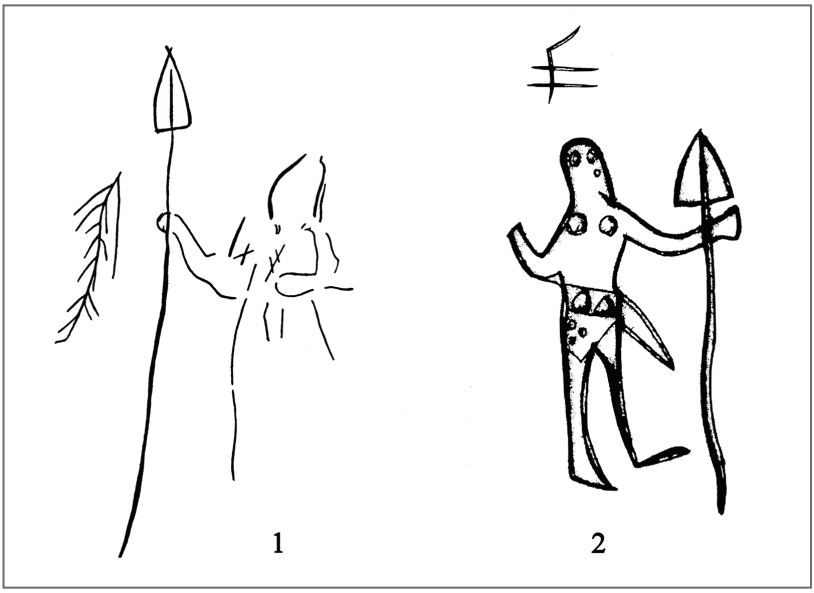

Fig. 2. Two male figures holding a spear with a central ridge spearhead and a thunderbolt motif (after Loud 1948: Pl. 273:7; Keinan 2013: Fig. 2.15).

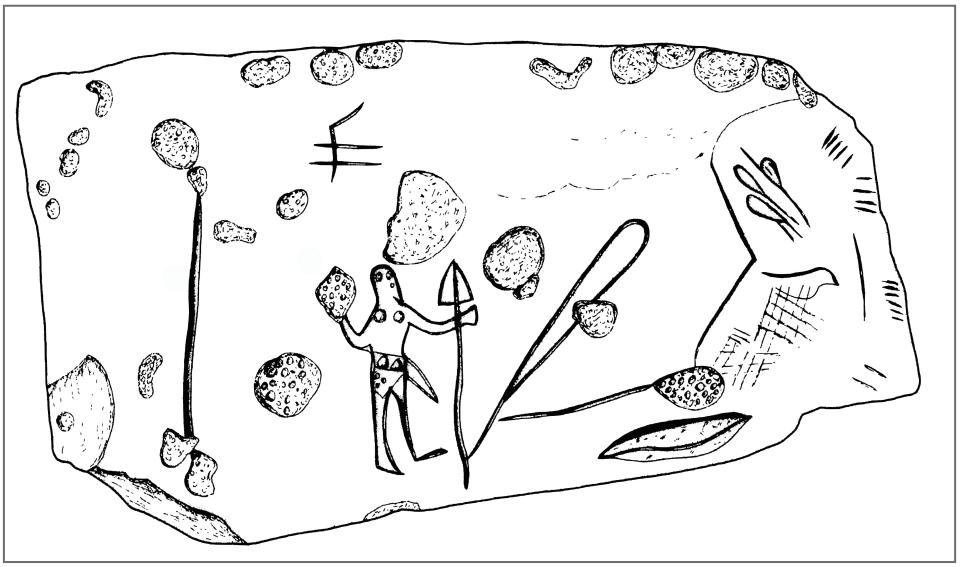

Fig. 3. The slab with the second male figure (after Keinan 2013: Fig. 2.15).

Here, too, the spear is larger than the figure, and the spearhead has a prominent central ridge. Ultimately, Keinan suggested that the image is of a human male, possibly associated with an Egyptian Horus falcon at the extreme edge of the slab (Keinan 2013: 42). However, the sign above the figure, which is most likely associated with it, remains unidentified. From the top down, this mark consists of a diagonal line, a vertical line, and two short perpendicular crossing lines.

4. The Warrior God and the Thunderbolt Motif

Interestingly, except for Kempinsky, scholars conceived the anthropomorphic depictions described above as signifying human beings. However, insofar as the graffiti in question are media of religious communication, conceiving them as depictions of the god associated with the temple seems more likely. Given the images' pose and the spear in their hands, a warrior god is most probable. Such gods are often depicted in an aggressive pose, holding a weapon; in the Late Bronze Age Levant, they are often considered responsible for the weather, especially winter storms, and come to be known by the name of *Baʿal*. Perhaps, the most detailed representation of this warrior god is provided by the famous limestone stele from Ugarit, which depicts Baʿal in a standing position with a dagger in his belt and facing to the right (Schaeffer 1939: Pl. 32:2). He is brandishing a weapon in his raised left hand while holding a down-pointing spear in his left.

Notably, the spear's shaft is irregular and features various upwards bifurcations. Some scholars interpret it as a vegetal motif (e.g., Cornelius 1994: 137, Note 2); however, a more widespread reading, which also communicates with Baʿal's designation as a storm god, is that it is a stylized thunderbolt (Schaeffer 1939: 64, Pl. 32:2; Kapelrud 1952: 20–21). Hence, the stele depicts Baʿal holding a thunderbolt while descending from the sky. Somewhat similarly but closer in style and circumstances to the case from Megiddo is a Late Bronze Age graffiti of a warrior god in the Acropolis Temple at Lachish (Ussishkin 2004: 259–260, Figs. 6.57–6.62). It depicts a male figure wearing an elongated crown and brandishing a spear with a prominent spearhead. A few vertical and horizontal lines above the head, to its right, may represent a thunderbolt.

The thunderbolt's association with Baʿal also echoes throughout Ancient Near Eastern sources. Thus, for example, in the texts from Ugarit, Baʿal is described as a god who possesses lightning and thunder: "Seven lightnings (*brqm*) he had, eight storehouses of thunder were the shafts of his lightnings" (Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartin 1995: 115, 1.101; Pardee and Pardee 2009). The concept of the thunderbolt as God's spear is also expressed in the Old Testament (Day 1979; Klingbeil 1999; Pardee and Pardee 2009). Ps 29:3 reads, "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters" (NRSVUE), and Hab 3:11 reads, "The moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear." The original Hebrew word for *flashing* (*brq*) is the same as that for thunderbolt, and so the text would be better translated as "your thunderbolt spear."

With this in mind, we may reconsider the curious abstract markings that accompany the anthropomorphic figures engraved onto the EB I Temple at Megiddo and propose that they represent thunderbolts. According to this reading, these standing figures are early depictions of the Levantine warrior and storm god featuring its two principal attributes: the spear and the thunderbolt.

5. The Megiddo Spearhead

Recently, Avrutis (2012: 228) has pointed out that the spearheads depicted in the temple's graffiti likely indicate an exceptionally large copper spearhead, which was found by the Oriental Institute's expedition to Megiddo in the 1930s (Fig. 4). This spearhead is 57 cm long, has a prominent central ridge and two barbs on its lower part. Metallurgical analysis indicates that it is made from 99.94% copper with additional silver plating near the tang (Loud 1948: Pl. 283:1). The

spearhead was found with some 400 faience and shell beads (Loud 1948: Pls. 207:1, 283:1) inside a circular white-plastered installation (L4034). Although initially assigned to EB I Stratum XVIII (Loud 1948: 66, Fig. 148), subsequent stratigraphic analysis has demonstrated that this rounded installation belongs to Stratum XIX and was located in the courtyard of EB I Temple 4050 (Finkelstein and Ussishkin 2000: 25–74; Ussishkin 2018: Figs. 6.9, 6.14).

Other EB I spearheads have been recovered from the Kfar Monash hoard (Hestrin and Tadmor 1963; Philip 1989; Tadmor 2002; Sebbane 2003) and a burial at the site of Nesher Ramla (Avrutis 2012: 227). However, they are usually shorter than the item from Megiddo, which the excavators described as a ceremonial sword (Loud 1948). Indeed, its exceptional size renders it too heavy to be useful in battle and thus was more likely meant to impress its audiences. The presence of silver also suggests that this object's function was a ceremonial one.

Fig. 4. The 57 cm-long copper spearhead with a central ridge found in the courtyard of Temple 4050 in Megiddo (after Loud 1948: Pl. 283:1).

Thus, the temple in Megiddo seems to have possessed a massive spear, which had no functional value and was designed primarily to impress. Insofar as this is, indeed, the same spear depicted in the graffiti, it stands to reason that it belonged to a life-sized figure of a warrior god.

6. Discussion

In this paper, I argued that a life-sized statue of a warrior god holding a large spear stood in the EB I temple at Megiddo. However, while numerous texts (Berlejung 1998; Dick 1999; Bahrani 2003; Hurowitz 2003; 2006; Walls 2005; Hundley 2013), including the Old Testament (e.g., Isa 44:9–15; Hab 2:18–20; for a discussion, see Weeks 2007), widely attest that statues were foci for religious rites throughout the Ancient Near East, such items were rarely preserved, and there is some controversy concerning their size. Some scholars argue that while large statues may have been embellished with gold, silver, and precious stones,

they were mainly made of wood and textiles and thus did not survive in the archaeological record (Berlejung 1998:58–59; Hurowitz 2003; 2006; Benzel 2015). These statues were relatively lightweight, transportable, and could be carried out in religious processions. Had they been carved in stone, they would have been too heavy for such purposes. On the other hand, others argue that so long as there is no direct evidence for large, life-sized statues, they may not have existed in the first place, and a cautious approach is prudent. The present paper argued that the coincidence of relatively detailed graffiti and a sizeable spearhead renders a life-sized statue in EB I Megiddo likely.

While I cannot expect these observations to settle the debate, it is worth recounting some additional corroborative evidence for life-sized statues in the Ancient Near East. Particularly notable is the apparent distinction of two size categories of god statues in Assyrian reliefs (Fig. 5). According to these reliefs, there were large, life-sized statues and relatively small, ca. 60 cm-tall statues (Berlejung 1998: 58). Similarly, Hundley (2013: 214) recently concluded that "From the little evidence available, we may tentatively suggest that cult images varied from 30 to 60 cm (12–24 inches) for peripheral and lower deities to life size for primary cult images in major temples, that is, human size."

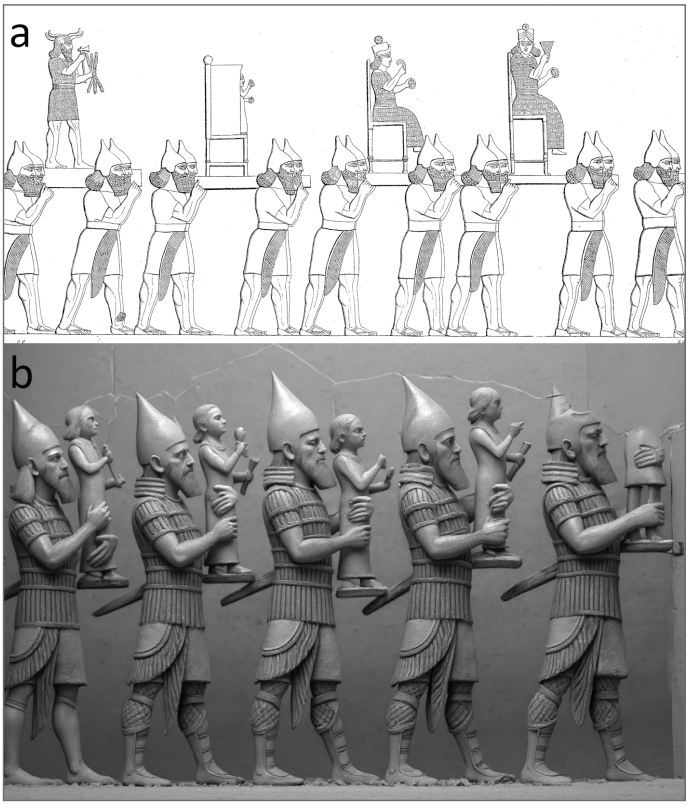

Fig. 5. Assyrian reliefs of soldiers carrying deity statues from looted cities: (a) life-sized statues (after Layard 1856: Fig. 65) and (b) small statues (an AI-processed rendition after Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: Pl. 451).

Another notable case in point is a 1.4 m-high stone statue from Mari of a goddess holding a vase. It was found inside the palace adjacent to the entrance to a royal shrine (Parrot 1958: 109; 1959: 5–9, Figs. 4–8). This is most likely the same goddess depicted in a fresco inside the palace, anointing Zimrilim to be king. In this scene, the goddess holds a vase and pours a liquid, probably oil, to ordain the king (Margueron 1992). A second notable case is the remains of an 80 cm-tall basalt statue of the storm god standing on a bull from the holy of holies of the Area H temple at Hazor. These remains comprise two fragments: the bull and the god's anthropomorphic torso (Beck 1989: 335–337, Pls. CCCXXIV, CCCXXV). In the publication, these fragments do not look particularly impressive. However, after restoration in the Israel Museum laboratories, a sizeable statue emerges (https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/394217-0).

Furthermore, remnants of at least two additional life-sized statues have been uncovered in association with Levantine Bronze Age temples. One includes a large ivory hand, about two-thirds of a human size, and a small ivory eye inlay, which were found in a pit (pavissa) near the Late Bronze Age Fosse Temple at Lachish. The hand is complete and includes the palm, fingers, and part of the arm, where a narrow protrusion was designed to fit into a socket. Tufnell, Inge, and Harding suggested that the hand was part of a composite statue, which was made mainly of wood (Tufnell, Inge, and Harding 1940: 61, Nos. 7–8, Pl. XVI:7–8). Another instance consists of a bronze and silver scepter head uncovered in the holy of holies of the Late Bronze Age northeast temple of Lachish (Garfinkel 2020). Given these observations, it seems that the likelihood that Bronze Age temples housed life-sized statues was high. In fact, the numerous small god and goddess figurines encountered throughout the region (Negbi 1976; Seeden 1980) were probably small-scale replicas of sizeable cult statues (Hadley 2000: 200–202; Moorey 2003: 63).

Having discussed the statues, let us now devote some thought to the second prominent feature of our paper: the graffiti. The term usually describes crude incisions made by ordinary people as opposed to the work of professional artists or scribes. Graffiti have been documented over millennia and across the globe, featuring both figurative motifs and inscriptions (Baird and Taylor 2011; Keegan 2014; Lovata and Olton 2016; Ragazzoli et al. 2018; Škrabal et al. 2023). Often, graffiti is associated with temples (e.g., Frood 2013; Warren 2014; Ray 2023; Verhoeven 2023) or religious experiences. The graffiti of a temple structure in the hills north and east of Vari in Attica, Greece, is a case in point. An inscription accompanying it divulges a link to the Acropolis of Athens (Langdon and Rookhuijzen 2024). Graffiti are preserved in medieval churches in England, Finland, and the southern Levant (Ratilainen 2011; Champion 2014; Re'em et

al. 2022). Dated to ca. 3500 BCE, the EB I graffiti in Megiddo Temple 4050 is likely one of the oldest known to date.

Temple graffiti are undoubtedly emotionally imbued, a feature which has been receiving increasing attention from archaeologists lately (e.g., Tarlow 2012; Neuman and Tomason 2021). In the context of a sacred place, people often seek contact with supernatural powers, especially under circumstances of illness, infertility, drought, social and economic difficulties, and the like. In Megiddo, numerous motifs and scenes were depicted, including two renditions of the impressive life-sized statue of the god with its accompanying thunderbolt symbol. The statue itself was likely made from wood and other organic materials and, consequently, has not survived.

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