SACRED ARCHITECTURE IN MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE LEVANT

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The present paper investigates the transformations of cult areas and rituals in the Levant during the 2nd millennium BC, offering a summary on the state of research and pondering on the integration of indigenous features and external inputs through the observation of sacred architecture.

Keywords: temples; architecture; open-air sanctuaries; symmetrical temples; irregular temples

1. Introduction

During the 2nd millennium BC, as the cultural interconnections between the Levant and neighbouring territories reached their climax, temples and their paraphernalia became the primary stage where meeting, intermingling and hybridization of different cultural inputs took place. A general classification attests to the existence of three main temple-types: open-air sanctuaries[1] that emerged in the Middle Bronze Age I (henceforth MB I, 2000-1800 BC);[2] monumental long-room or broad-room temples consolidated during a more mature phase of the Middle Bronze Age II-III (MB II-III, 1800-1550/1500 BC); and irregular cultic buildings characteristic of the Late Bronze Age I-II (LB I-II, 1500-1200/1150 BC).[3]

2. Temples and rituals

2.1. *Open-air sanctuaries*

Open-air sanctuaries (fig. 1) were polyfunctional spaces enclosed by *temenoi* that functioned as symbolic liminal elements separating the sacred world from its secular surrounding. They were equipped with shrines, altars, stelae, betyls, votive depots, or high places used for ritual practices that were performed collectively.[4]

Examples of this architectural tradition are to be found in the Levant at the beginning of the MB I, as attested by the eclectic sacred area of Byblos/Jbeil,[5] with the *Temple aux Obélisque*,[6] the *Champ des Offrandes* and the *Énceinte Sacrée*;[7] the road-sanctuary of Nahariyah[8] and the temples of *strata* XIII-IX from Megiddo/Tell el-Mutesellim.[9] Contemporary comparisons are attested in Syria, particularly in the Lower town of Ebla/Tell el-Mardikh, with the Ishtar's Cult Area[10] and testify to the beginning of a cultural

1 Nigro 1996.
2 Temples belonging to the MB I will only briefly be examined, being in part beyond the chronological scope of the present PRIN2017 research; on the matter see D'Andrea 2014.
3 Levantine sacred architecture has been the subject of several extensive studies, see Wright 1944; Seton-Williams 1949; Ottosson 1980; Mazar 1992; Nakhai 2001; Oggiano 2005; Sala 2007; Spreafico 2012; Kamlah 2012; Trow 2015; and more recently Susnow 2021; Ein-Mor - Susnow 2022; Falconer - Fall 2022.
4 D'Andrea 2016, 189.
5 Dunand 1939; 1958; Saghieh 1983; Lauffray 2008; Sala 2015; Nigro 2020.
6 Dunand 1958, 644; Lauffray 2008, 410; Bietak 2019a.
7 Dunand 1958, 271, 393, 481, 899; 1982, 197; Saghieh 1983, 30, fig. 9, pl. VIII.
8 Ben-Dor 1950; Dothan 1956, 17-19; 1981, 74-81; 1993, 1092; Naeth 2012, 187.
9 Loud 1948, 84-91, fig. 398; Dunayevsky - Kempinski 1973, 175-180, figs. 12-13; Kempinski 1989.
10 Marchetti - Nigro 1997; 2000; Pinnock 2008.

ISSN 0393-0300; 2724-587X
e-ISSN 2532-5159
doi: 10.53131/VO2724-587X2024_36

interconnection resulting in shared religious practices that will become even more evident in later periods. In fact, the numerous cult installations found in all these sacred areas, signify that even if these open-air sanctuaries showed architectural differences, ritual offerings, sacrifices, libation and purification activities and perhaps even ancestor worship were commonly performed in all of them.[11] This tradition perdures in the MB II-III, with the High Place of Gezer/Tell el-Jazari, where several monumental standing stones and a basin for ritual ablutions were found,[12] and possibly with the high platform of Jebel el-Rubka[13] and the rural temple of Giv'at Sharett.[14]

2.2. *Long and Broad-room Temples*

Monumental long-room temples are typical of urban settings, and are characterized by imposing dimensions and thick walls, a simple planimetry with an axial entrance, and a latitudinal cella with a niche or a bench at the centre of the rear wall to host the holy statue.

Even though the prodromes of this temple type can be traced back to the Inland Syria of the 3rd millennium BC, as exemplified by the Red Temple on the Acropolis of Ebla/Tell Mardikh,[15] this tradition becomes particularly popular at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, and permeates in the Levant at a slower pace, becoming characteristic of the MB III period, when it is often attested in the variant with two towers, - instead of two antae -, protruding on the façade, also known as the tower or *migdol* type (fig. 2). The general impression is the following, between the MB I-II while the long-room tradition appears to be firmly established in Syria, the Levant is still in a formative stage[16] where different impulses are yet being negotiated. In the MB I-II, sites of the Jordan Valley, either urban in nature like Pella, phases 1-3,[17] or rural, like Tell el-Hayyat, Phases 5-3,[18] see the diffusion of the *in antis* model characterised by a monocellular building with a squared cella and two off set antae on the front porch; a typology which finds partial similarities in 3rd millennium North-Eastern Syria, where it is attested with a bent-axis entrance, and in MB I-II Shrine G of Ebla.[19] Then, in the MB III the long-room tradition replaces the *in antis* model and spreads in the Southern Levant, clustering from Pella/Tabaqat Fahl, phase 4 *stratum* XXXI,[20] to Megiddo/Tell el-Mutesellim *strata* X-VIIB,[21] Shechem/Tell el-Balatah *strata* XVI-XV,[22] and Tel Haror/Tell Abu Hureyra *stratum* VI-IV.[23]

11 Pinnock 2016, 267-271.
12 Macalister 1903, 7-50; 1912, 381-396; Dever *et al.* 1974; Dever - Bullard - Lance 1986; Ussishkin 2006; Dever 2014.
13 Finkelstein 1995, 359.
14 Epstein 1972; Bahat 1975.
15 Matthiae 2010, 94, figs. 49, 51, 213.
16 D'Andrea 2016, 182.
17 Bourke 2012.
18 Falconer - Fall 2006, 87-95.
19 D'Andrea 2014, 46-50; 2016, 192.
20 Bourke 1999; 2004; 2005; 2012.
21 Loud 1948; Dunayevsky - Kempinski 1973.
22 Wright 1957; 1958; 1965; Campbell 2002.
23 Oren 1997.

Firstly, this signifies that a long dialogue of mutual cultural exchange between Syria and the Levant, with the Jordan Valley as a continuum between the two,[24] had already been established by the end of the 3rd - beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, opening the way for the pinnacle reached in the MB III, when the culture is homogenised and a shared architectural language, exemplified by the tradition of the long-room temples, is finally and firmly codified. Lastly, it becomes apparent that during this more mature phase of the Middle Bronze Age as the Levant reaches the zenith of its urbanism,[25] the *élite* of the city strengthens its hold on rituals and sacred ideology, institutionalising religion and therefore bringing an increased homogeneity in the architectural tradition.[26]

Yet, if in the south the *migdol* long-room tradition appears to be dominant, further north a different elaboration of the same canons of monumentality, axiality and symmetry arises in the form of broad-room temples (fig. 3). These have an entrance along the central axis, a vestibule, and a longitudinal cella, a feature that recalls 3rd millennium BC sacred and domestic Canaanite buildings.[27] One of the earliest examples, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, is found in Byblos/Jbeil with the *Temple à Escalier*;[28] and in Ugarit/Ras Shamra with the Temples of Ba'al[29] and Dagan, whose precise dating in the Middle Bronze Age is still debated, but which remained in use throughout the Late Bronze Age.[30] Here, similarly to the *in antis* model mentioned above, the layout is characterised by the juxtaposition of two different volumes, with a narrower vestibule and a wider cella.

A variation of this type, characterised by an even ratio between vestibule and cella, is attested in Hazor/Tell el-Qedah el-Ghul as well, first in the Lower Town, Area H, during the MB II-III until the LB II, *strata* 3-1a;[31] and during the Late Bronze Age, on the Acropolis, with the "Ceremonial Palace" of *strata* XIV-XIII.[32]

The latter - that has secondary rooms and niches flanking its sides - appears to be an expansion of the more basic type of area H - articulated into a *vestibulum* and a cella with a projecting niche on the rear wall - and that finds more punctual comparisons with Level VII of Tell Atchana/Alalakh,[33] in the Temple of Hadad at Aleppo,[34] and at Tell el-Dab'a, with Temple III of *strata* F-E/3-2.[35] The findings of those sites are of particular interest. In Ugarit the most notorious ones being the stelae dedicated to the gods Ba'al and Dagan, that have been crucial to our understanding of whom these temples were dedicated to.[36] Even if no such telling manufact has been found in Byblos, a similarity in cult paraphernalia, particularly

[24] Susnow 2021, 66.
[25] Dever 1987.
[26] Susnow - Goshen 2021, 18.
[27] Sala 2007; Kamlah 2012, 514.
[28] Its precise date is still debated but having changed the viability of the previous 3rd millennium city, it might have been erected at the very end of the Early Bronze Age III or later (Sala 2015, 54).
[29] Schaeffer 1936, 128, pl. XXIII; Margueron 1977, 168; Yon 2006, 108; Al-Maqdissi 2008, 57; Callot 2011, fig. 2; Matoïan - al-Bahloul 2016.
[30] Schaeffer 1935, 154, pls. XIII, XVII; Margueron 1985, 25; Callot 2011, fig. 44; Haydar *et al.* 2013, 460-463.
[31] Yadin *et al.* eds. 1961.
[32] Ben-Tor *et al.* 2017.
[33] Woolley 1955, 59-65, fig. 35, pl. XIV, plan Xa; Werner 1994, 133.
[34] Kohlmeyer 2012, 62, fig. 3.
[35] Bietak 2019b, 48, figs. 3-4.
[36] Schaeffer 1933, 123, pl. XVI; 1935, 155, pl. 3; Yon 1991, 301; 2006, 106, fig. 18.

the retrieval of anchors in the Gublite sanctuary like in the Ugaritic examples,[37] seems to point toward the cult of a sea-related deity and suggests that a male god might have had the divine ownership of this type of temple as well.[38] In Area H of Hazor the retrieval of a fragmentary statue of the Storm God standing on a bull,[39] or in the Ceremonial Palace of Hazor, the discovery of a bronze figurine of a seated male, known as the Reigning Ba'al,[40] corroborates the hypothesis that this specific planimetry might have been paradigmatic of a type of gender-related temple.[41]

In general, despite planimetric differences, both the long-room and the broad-room temple-types examined above, belong to the same architectural language. They are all imposing freestanding buildings that stand as the focal point of the sacred ground and are surrounded by similar outer areas often delimited by *temenoi* and furnished with altars, stelae or betyls, offering and libation tables, and votive repositories. This testifies to the perduring, during the whole 2nd millennium BC, of ritual practices such as: sacrifices, ritual offerings, ablutions and perhaps even communal feasting - as suggested by the pottery fragments and bones' remains found in the courtyard of the "Ceremonial Palace" of Hazor -. Secondly, the relative consistency throughout the Levant of these ritual practices, suggests that the planimetric distinctions of these religious buildings were not motivated by the different activities performed, but were either due to specific deities worshipped in the two temples-types, or were the outcome of interregional inputs - possibly from different areas of Syria or that might have arrived following different paths - that were processed differently in the north and south. This different reception of influxes might have been the result of the presence of different cultural subgroups in the Early Bronze Age,[42] that might have adopted, adapted, and blended traditional and innovative elements, local or external inputs at different paces, absorbing them with different degrees of impact resulting in a coherent architectural tradition, that nevertheless shows both distinct regional differences, - with the choice of a long or broad-room layout -, and at the same time nuanced variations, - as is the case for Byblos and Ugarit broad-room temples vs Hazor-.

2.3. *Irregular Temples*

The second half of the 2nd millennium BC appears to have a less unitary architectural tradition compared to the previous period and shows a greater variety of temple typologies that are less easily classified. Beside the monumental long-room and broad-room temples retained in some inland centers such as Hazor, Megiddo, and Shechem, or coastal sites like Ugarit, it emerges a new architectural *milieu* characterized by smaller cult buildings.

This group includes temples with long-room plan and a bent-axis access (fig. 4), first attested during the LB I in Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir Fosse Temple I,[43] and at Tel Mevorakh/Tell al-Mubarak *strata* XI-IX.[44] The simplicity of the planimetry, contrary to the

37 Frost 1991, 357.
38 Bietak 2019b, 60.
39 Yadin *et al.* eds. 1961, pl. CCCXXIV; Yadin 1972, 95, pl. XXa.
40 Ornan 2011, figs. 1-6b.
41 For the distribution of temples with recognised gender see Bietak 2019b, fig. 23.
42 Bietak 2019b, 60.
43 Tufnell - Inge - Harding 1940; Koch 2017.
44 Stern 1976, 49-50; 1977, 89-91; 1978; 1984.

monumental long or broad-room temples, and the fact that these buildings were located outside the city, emphasizes the impression that this ensemble was likely representative of non-official cults and less *élite* controlled, and diverged significantly from the canons of the city-temples.[45] Still, the presence of platforms and benches inside these sacred buildings, offering areas and drainage systems likely used for libations, and in the case of Tel Mevorakh of a courtyard possibly encircled by a *temenos*, constitutes a similarity with the monumental long or broad-room sacred buildings mentioned above and seems to point toward similar ritual practices, yet performed on a smaller scale. It can also be suggested an association between the bent-axis plan and female divinities,[46] as testified by the discovery of a bronze figurine of a snake found in Tel Mevorakh, possibly linked with Astoreth's cult,[47] and even if the majority of female-related cult objects have been found in Fosse Temple II-III, it can be argued that a goddess cult might have originated from the previous Fosse Temple I.

A further category of these smaller sized temples is represented by the Stelae Temple of Hazor, established in the dwelling quarter of Area C during the LB I, strata 1b-1a. It was single-celled with a broad-room layout and an axial entrance. Contrary to the bent-axis type, the discovery of the "crescent-disk" depicted on a stela and on a statue, that was a symbol of Ba'al/Hadad,[48] or alternatively the moon-god Sin,[49] suggests that a male god might have been worshipped here, like in the others sacred areas of Hazor, corroborating the association between broad-room plan and male divinities.[50] In this case, even though location and size of this building might suggest it being the home of a "people" cult, the resemblance with the other temples of Hazor and between their cultic paraphernalia, might indicate the involvement, and the regulation of its rituals by the *élite*. In fact, during the LB II, the courtyard that gave entrance to this shrine was partially blocked, possibly signifying a physical and ideological restriction of access to the cultic space, due to a more exclusive and controlled religious ideology.[51]

During the LB IIB, Canaan sees the appearance of another different temple typology, exemplified by the Fosse Temple II-III in Lachish and the Lion's temple in Jaffa.[52] This new tradition is characterized by the adherence to Egyptian's canons following a more direct involvement of Egyptian forces in the Canaanite territories.

Possibly because of Amenhotep III's jubilee,[53] the Fosse Temple II-III of Lachish undergoes a significant renovation, and its plan becomes squared, with four columns in its centre, a raised holy-of-holies along its southern wall, and auxiliary rooms flanking its sides. The peculiarity of its planimetry and the significant presence of Egyptian-style cult objects, shows a strong affiliation with Egypt, and a particular syncretism between the Canaanite goddess Elat and Egyptian Hathor and, in turn, with the deified queen Tiye, whose scarabs

45 Susnow - Goshen 2021, 3.
46 Bietak 2021, 134.
47 Stern 1977, 90.
48 The Bar-rekub Stele from Zenjirli shows a similar symbol together with the inscription "My lord Ba'al of Harran" (Cooke 1903, 182).
49 Yadin *et al*. eds. 1958, 88-89.
50 Yadin *et al*. eds. 1958; 1960.
51 Susnow - Goshen 2022, 167.
52 Kaplan - Kaplan 1975, 23; Kaplan 1993, 655-659; Burke *et al.* 2017, 85-133; Herzog 2008.
53 Sala - Tucci 2019, 52.

have been found in the temple.[54] However, since Lachish maintained its *status* as a Canaanite city, its temple reflects either a voluntary emulation of foreign traits by the *élite*, possibly perceived as symbols of prestige, or a progressive Egyptianization of its society that mirrored the increasing influence of Egypt on the Levant. Jaffa instead, being a proper Egyptian fortress, displays a different situation. Its temple is a small, irregular long-room with two columns on the main axis and an entrance from north. Even if a queen Tiye' scarab has been found here, together with a small percentage of Egyptian pottery, the presence of columns dividing the space into aisles might point toward an Aegean connection, possibly explained by the presence of "Sea People" working as merchants for the Egyptians.[55]

Another result of the Egyptian military conquest is shown further north, in Kamid el-Loz. Its sacred area, at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, retained the general layout of the MB II-III, and was composed of three rooms and a broad-room cella.[56] However, when the site falls under Egyptian's control during the LB II, the temple is enlarged and the earlier planimetry is doubled, possibly hosting the cult of a divine couple, while the nearby palace is reduced, showing the decreased power of local authorities.[57] The religious rite changes as well, during the Middle Bronze Age placing food in saucer-shaped pits on benches was the dominant practice, while burying objects in cultic repositories in the courtyards becomes the prominent feature of the Late Bronze Age ritual activity.

3. Conclusions

The beginning of the 2nd millennium BC appears to be a moment of experimentation and elaboration of different inputs, when local and external features, and elements of continuity and discontinuity with the previous periods are selected, adopted, and merged to create a renewed religious ideology and rituality. Open-air sanctuaries are indicators of local and original sacred architecture, that nevertheless presents common elements with the neighbouring regions, particularly Syria, and testify to the beginning of a shared religious practice.

During a more mature phase of Middle Bronze Age, at the dawn of internationalism,[58] the Levant more deeply enters within a wider historical and cultural *milieu* that embraces the regions of Syria and Palestine.[59] The diffusion of the symmetrical long-room temple testifies the "superimposition" of Syrian traditions onto the indigenous substratum.[60]

However, the canonization of northern architectural features should not be understood as passive emulation of foreign elements, or a complete cultural supremacy of Syria on Canaan. Instead, it should be perceived as the outcome of cross-cultural interactions and entanglements that had already begun at the end of the 3rd millennium BC and that resulted in the selection, negotiation, acquisition and hybridization of practices and architectural traditions, as it is particularly evident by the diffusion of the broad-room temple typology, that blends Syrian axiality and monumentality with the longitudinal layout of Canaanite

54 Koch 2019, 167.
55 Sala - Tucci 2019, 56.
56 Metzger 2012.
57 Metzger 1991; 1993; Heinz 2004a, 569, fig. 11; 2004b, 86; 2010, 99-152; 2016, 91-94.
58 Ilan 1995.
59 Matthiae 1990.
60 Matthiae 2006, 218.

origin. The rise of these monumental temples, broad-room in the north, and long-room in the south, testifies to the varied human response and sometime nuanced outcomes of cultural homogenisation. And at the same time, as the Levant reaches the zenith of its urbanism,[61] the codification of precise canons for religious architecture serve to represent an official, institutionalised cult.

During the Late Bronze Age, as the role of the Levant as the cultural crossroad interconnecting the Mediterranean and the Near East intensifies, and the Levantine political, and socio-economic landscape experiences a moment of fragmentation,[62] the variety of temple typologies is greatly accentuated, expressing the structural disparity of this new reality and heterogeneity of inputs received. Particularly during the LB II the direct governance or indirect influence of Egypt is reflected by the integration of foreign elements in sacred architectures. This process points to religious syncretism used as a mean of political governance and more generally attests to the intermingling of cultures. However, in those major centres that maintained their political autonomy, the monumental symmetrical temple tradition perseveres, while smaller sites, possibly following the diminished power of their local rulers, see the diffusion of a less official architectural tradition represented by the bent-axis temple. Although between the monumental temples and the less imposing irregular temples the architecture shows a great morphological variety, there is uniformity and cohesion of ritual practices, that seems to reflect a shared ideology operating and manifesting itself differently in various settings. Distinctive elements of cult, such as courtyards and *temenoi*, betyls, cult installations or *favissae*, codified at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC attests to a well rooted belief system that it is transmitted to the Iron Age and in the Phoenician religious ideology. Particularly the model of "*temenoi*, shrine, and field of stelae" elaborated in the open-air sanctuaries of the MB I, will travel to the Ma'abed of Amrith,[63] arriving to the Western Mediterranean, in the Kothon of Motya.[64]

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61 Dever 1987.

62 Gonen 1984; 1992; Bunimovitz 1995; 2019; Savage - Falconer 2003; Panitz-Cohen 2014; Greenberg 2019, 272-357; Susnow 2021, 18.

63 Dunand - Saliby 1985.

64 Nigro a cura di 2004, 68-86; 2005, 48-57, 93-124; Nigro 2012, 305; 2014, 90-91.

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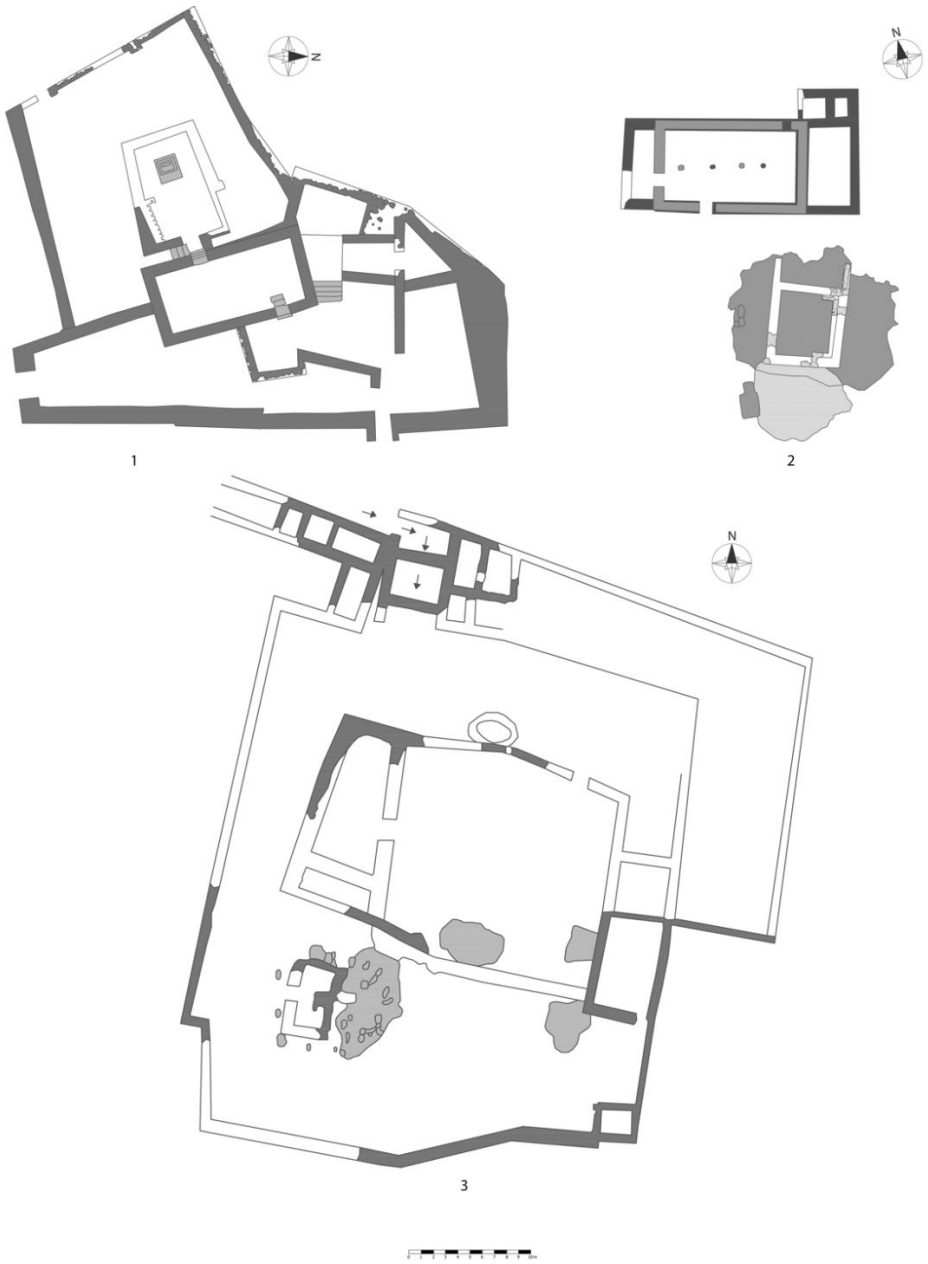

Fig. 1 - Temple aux Obélisque, Byblos (n. 1) (after Dunand 1958, fig. 767); Nahariya (n. 2) (after Dothan 1956, fig. 1); Area BB *stratum* XII, Megiddo (n. 3) (after D'Andrea 2014, fig. 2).

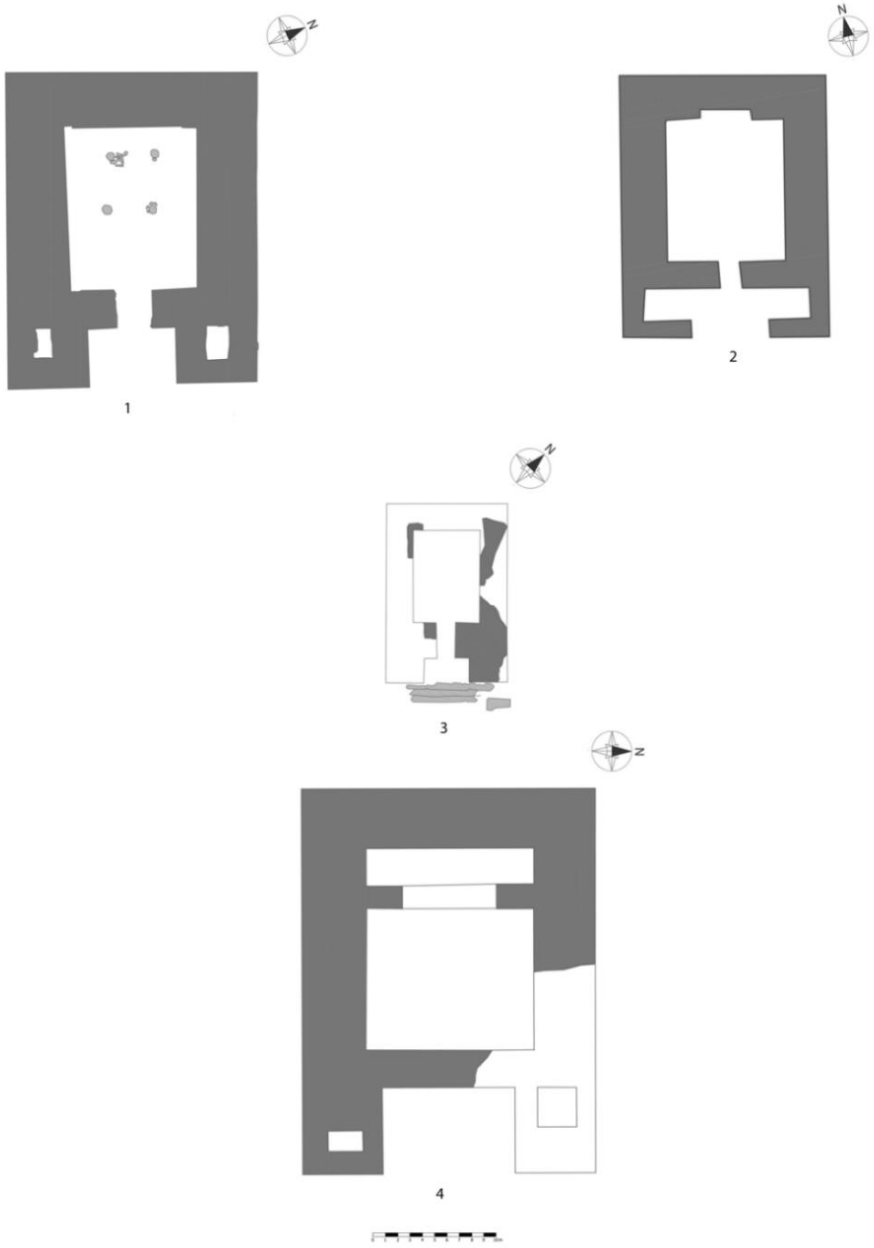

Fig. 2 - Shechem (n. 1) (after Cambell 2002, fig. III:62); Temple 2048, Megiddo (n. 2) (after Kempinski 1989, fig. 5); Tel Haror (n. 3) (after Oren 1997, fig. 8.8); Fortress Temple, Pella (n. 4) (after Bourke 2012, pl. 1).

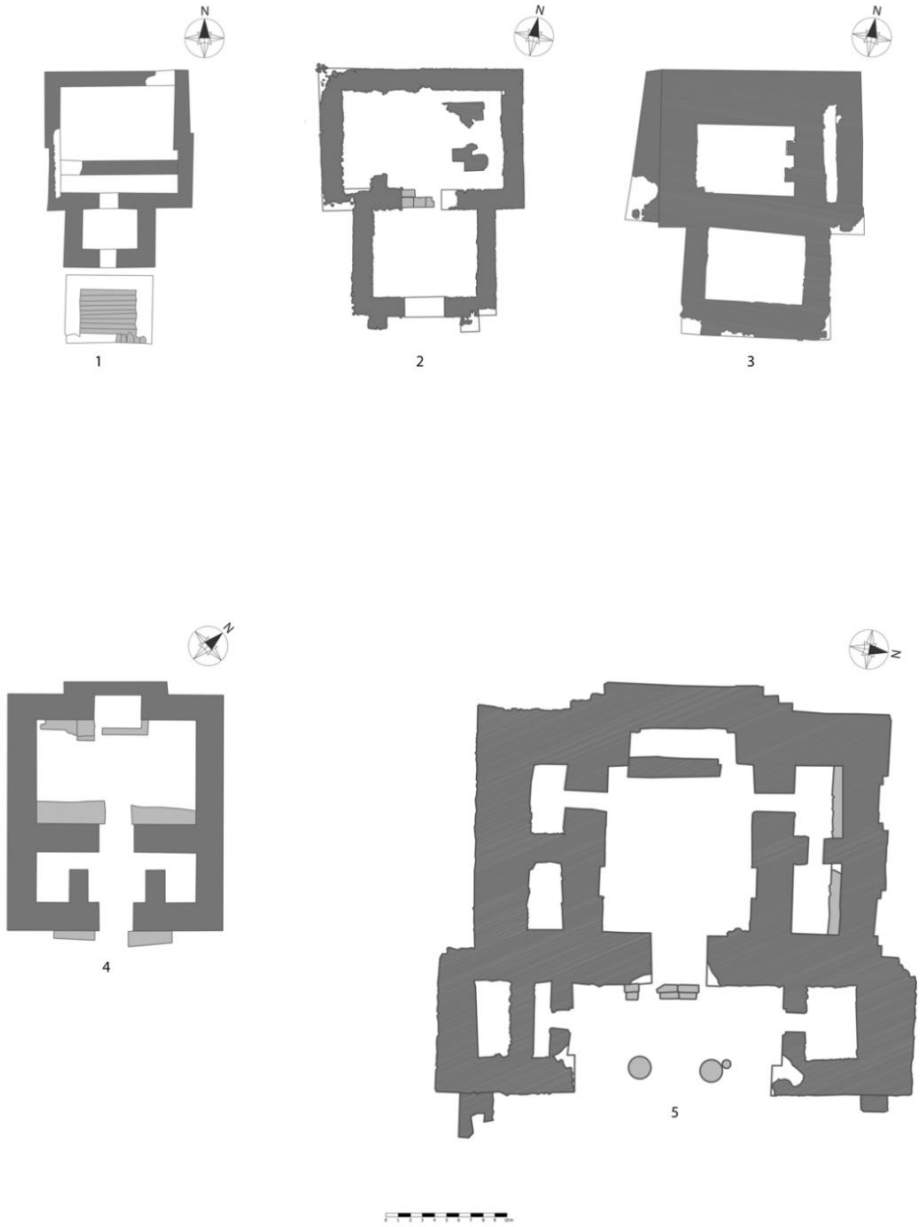

Fig. 3 - Temple à Escalier, Byblos (n. 1) (after Lauffray 2008, fig. 216a); Temple of Ba'al, Ugarit (n. 2) (after Callot 2011, fig. 2); Temple of Dagan, Ugarit (n. 3) (after Callot 2011, fig. 44); Orthostats Temple, Hazor (n. 4) (after Yadin *et al.* eds. 1961, pl. XXXVIII); Ceremonial Palace, Hazor (n. 5) (after Ben-Tor *et al*. 2017, pl. 4.23).

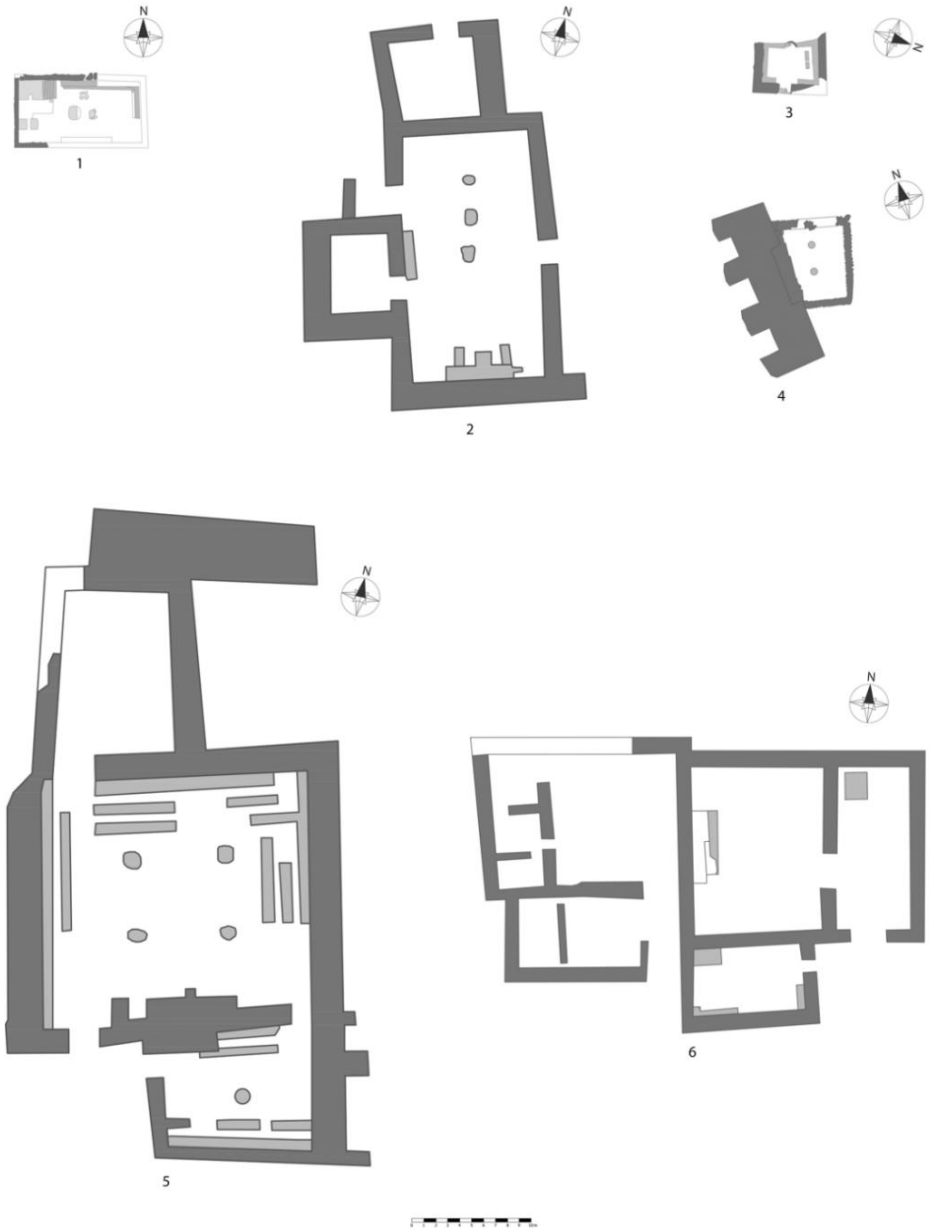

Fig. 4 - Tel Mevorakh (n. 1) (after Stern 1984, fig. 24); Fosse Temple I, Lachish (n. 2) (after Bietak 2002, fig. 2); Stelae Temple (n. 3) (after Yadin *et al.* eds. 1958, pl. CLXXXI); Lion's Temple, Jaffa (n. 4) (after Burke *et al*. 2017, fig. 2.33); Fosse Temple II, Lachish (n. 5) (after Bietak 2002, fig. 3); Kamid el-Loz (n. 6) (after Metzger 1991, pl. 19).