

To What God?

Altars and a House Shrine from Tel Rehov Puzzle Archaeologists

AMIHAI MAZAR AND NAVA PANITZ-COHEN

RECENT FINDS FROM TEL REHOV SHED A BRIGHT LIGHT ON domestic religious observance in ancient Israel and, like so many archaeological finds, raise unanswered questions, reminding us how little we really know.

At 25 acres, Tel Rehov is one of the largest mounds in Israel. It is located a little more than half way up the Jordan Valley between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee.

Rehov is mentioned in several Egyptian inscriptions. The latest one is an inscription of Shoshenq I at the temple of Amun at Karnak, Thebes. That inscription records more than 150 place names in relation to Shoshenq's military campaign in the Land of Israel, around 925–920 B.C.E. This military campaign is also mentioned in the Bible, where Shoshenq is referred to as “Shishak” and the event is dated by the Biblical historiographer to the fifth year of King Rehoboam's reign, shortly after Solomon's death and the breakup of the United Kingdom into the separate states of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 14:25–28; 2 Chronicles 12:2–9). Surprisingly, Rehov is not mentioned in the Bible, although it must have been an important city in the Biblical period.

Excavations at Rehov have uncovered three superimposed strata representing well-planned and densely built cities dated to the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E.¹ The middle one (our Stratum V) may well be the one mentioned in the Shoshenq inscription. Parts of this city were violently destroyed. Two samples of charred grain found in this destruction were dated by the Carbon-14 method at Groningen University in Holland to between the mid-tenth and early ninth centuries B.C.E., a time span covering Shoshenq's raid.² A later rebuilding of this city (our Stratum



PRECEDING PAGE: ISRAELITE OR PAGAN? Although many house shrines have been found elsewhere, the one excavated at Tel Rehov features a unique element: a lion with its paws extended onto the heads of two human figures. It is not clear how any of these house shrines functioned. They may have held fertility figurines or other sacred objects. It is also unclear who used this particular house shrine—Israelites or Canaanites. Although Tel Rehov was located in the northern kingdom of Israel, the artistic traditions reflected in Rehov’s cultic objects suggest influence of pre-Israelite culture and possibly of a different place altogether (Late Bronze Age Syria). What is clear is that these shrines were used in local, personal and more-obscure forms of ritual activity than the centralized, public religious-political centers in Dan and Jerusalem.

IV) dating to the ninth century B.C.E. was also violently destroyed. This was probably the result of the wars between Israel and the Aramean kingdom of Damascus ruled by Hazael, who invaded Israel between 840 and 830 B.C.E (2 Kings 9, 10:32–33, 13:3,22–24).

The violent destructions of the Strata V and IV cities yielded rich finds, including hundreds of restorable pottery vessels, seals and sealings, clay figurines and some unique cultic objects. Here we will concentrate on altars and shrines, a few of the special cult objects that reflect local religious traditions in this city during the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E.

So far, we have recovered one complete and

THE BEE BUSINESS. Rows of unbaked clay cylinders mark an apiary at Tel Rehov (below left). This style of beekeeping is known from Egyptian pictorial depictions, such as this painting from the tomb of Pabasa (below right). A Weizmann Institute of Science study has confirmed that molecular traces of beeswax are embedded in the Tel Rehov apiary. This is the only apiary ever found in an archaeological excavation in the Near East.

one almost fully restorable clay altar, as well as fragments of about a dozen more. Given that less than 1 percent of the site has been excavated, and assuming that the distribution of altars will remain consistent throughout, we can conclude that there were hundreds of such altars in these two strata. This is supported by the fact that fragments have been found in all excavation areas thus far.

In short, these altars must have played an important role in the daily routine of Rehov’s inhabitants.

The complete altar was found together with a beautiful, painted chalice and other bowls and vessels, about 15 feet from an area devoted to producing honey and beeswax. This apparently was what we might call a cultic corner related to this industry. In this area we uncovered rows of unbaked clay cylinders shaped just like the traditional beehives that are well known in villages throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin, as well as from pictorial depictions from ancient Egypt. Analysis of the clay comprising the walls of these cylinders (conducted by Dr. Dvori Namdar of the Weizmann Institute of Science) has proven this identification. She found molecular traces of beeswax embedded in the clay. As far as we know, these are the only beehives ever discovered in an archaeological excavation in the entire ancient Near East.³

The proximity between the altar and the apiary confirms what we know from other sites: Religious rituals were often performed in direct relation to the production of a certain item, such as copper (as at the Timna mines north of Eilat and at sites in Cyprus) or olive oil (as at Ekron).

The Rehov altar, which stands about 1.5 feet tall, resembles a city gate, the significance of which eludes us. Perhaps it was meant to conjure the image of a gate leading to the deity to whom the offering was made. The upper tray or “roof”



GENE KRITSKY, COLLEGE OF MOUNT ST. JOSEPH



PRAYING FOR HONEY. Unearthed near Rehov's apiary—along with other ritual items—this altar might have been used in the context of the beekeeping industry. Measuring 1.5 feet high, this altar was constructed haphazardly, with scant attention to detail. Offerings were placed, and possibly burned, atop its four-horned, palm branch-incised roof. Signs of burning that appear on other parts of the altar may reflect an intense fire in the surrounding building. The altar resembles a city gate, the significance of which remains unknown.



of the altar protrudes slightly beyond its walls. It is enclosed by a low parapet that rises to rounded horns in each of the altar's four corners. Each of the horns is incised with palm tree branches. Traces of burning are visible in the center of the tray on top of the altar, indicating that it had been used to burn offerings. It should be noted, however, that signs of burning were found on other parts of the altar as well, the result of a fierce fire that destroyed the building in which it was found. Between the window-like openings—three above and two below—in the altar's "tower" is an incised schematic palm tree. On either side of the two lower windows, a mold-made figure of a nude female goddess was applied.

Surprisingly, the clay altar is quite sloppily made. The fabric is coarse and relatively low fired. The windows are carelessly cut in an asymmetric arrangement. The female figures, too, are rendered with little concern for detail; they are attached at

NUDE FEMALE GODESSES once peered out of the windows of a clay altar. The fine workmanship and careful attention to detail contrast sharply with the city-gate altar found near the apiary. Although less than 1 percent of Tel Rehov has been excavated, altar fragments such as these have been found throughout the site, suggesting that hundreds of altars existed in this area in the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E.

different levels, contributing to the asymmetric and rather haphazard look of the altar.

In a room of a building from Stratum IV (ninth century B.C.E.) denoted Building F, to which we will return below, we found a few fragments of another altar, including fragments of nude female goddesses that once peered out of the altar's windows. In this case, however, the goddesses are well-made, with a careful attention to detail that reveals a high level of artistic skill.

Another altar from Stratum IV has already been published in *BAR*.^{*} It was located in an open air

sanctuary (a *bamah*), serving a neighborhood or a group of families. Six triangular windows were cut into each side of this altar, three in an upper panel and three in a lower panel. The panels are created by horizontal rope-like appliqué on the sides of the altar. The upper surface of the altar bears traces of burning. The parapet and (presumed) horns of the altar are missing. It appears to have been destroyed intentionally; we found it smashed to pieces and cast onto a refuse pile. This intentional damage may have been carried out during the destruction of the town as one of the ways to denigrate the holy places of the local inhabitants.

Fragments of still other altars found throughout the excavation yielded not only torso fragments of female figurines but also horns similar to those on the gate tower altar. One such horn must have belonged to an altar twice as large as the complete one described above.

Incidentally, these clay altars are usually referred to in scholarly literature as “cult stands,” yet from a functional point of view they don’t differ from the horned stone altars known from the tenth–seventh centuries B.C.E. in Israel, Judah and neighboring lands. Such clay altars are rare: Only a few were found, the most similar at Pehel (Pella), east of the Jordan River, a few miles from Tel Rehov. Decorated “cult stands” from Megiddo and Taanach may also be interpreted as altars used in domestic religious practices.⁴

What was sacrificed on these altars? Stone altars of similar size have been explained in various ways. In a study of such altars found at Philistine Ekron, Professor Seymour Gitin of the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem contends that only incense was burned on them, while Professor Menachem Haran of The Hebrew University argues that they could have been used for the sacrifice of various offerings, including animal meat.⁵

To what deity were the sacrifices offered? And what was the accompanying ritual? We shall return to these questions below.

In the same building (Building F of Stratum IV) where the altar fragments with the finely detailed nude figurines were found, there was another extraordinary find: a cult object usually defined as a “model shrine” or a “house shrine.” This is a clay box 15 inches wide and 11 inches tall with a flat base and convex roof. Above its façade with an open doorway is a rope-like appliqué, possibly depicting a snake. Above this, on the roof of the box, we see a scene composed of an animal and two human heads molded in clay. The animal’s legs

⁴Amihai Mazar and John Camp, “Will Tel Rehov Save the United Monarchy?” *BAR*, March/April 2000.



A VIOLENT END, NOW RESTORED. This altar had been deliberately smashed to pieces and tossed onto a rubbish heap. It may have been destroyed by invaders intent on crushing holy sites as a means of subjugating the local people. Ninth-century Rehov met a violent end during Israel’s wars with Hazael and the Aramean kingdom of Damascus between 840 and 830 B.C.E. The parapet and horns of the altar have never been found.

and paws are disproportionately large in relation to its body. Its two front paws clutch at the top of two human heads on either side. Although it is difficult to identify this creature, we can assume it’s a lion, especially because of its open mouth and dangling tongue, which are leonine motifs commonly found in ancient Near Eastern art.

Grasped by the animal’s claws, the human heads on either side of the creature are elongated with slightly gaping mouths, as if writhing in pain. It is difficult to determine their gender, though it seems they are male. There are no known parallels to this scene. The entire creation seems to have been a local product, tailor-made for a specific local ritual.



WHAT MEN OR GODS ARE THESE? A ninth-century B.C.E. “house shrine” from Tel Rehov. A lion (identified by its dangling tongue) sprawls atop, its paws positioned on two human heads. Who are these figures? Does this scene reference some unknown ritual? Are these figures characters from a lost local mythology? The depiction is unparalleled and baffling.

We cannot know if a mythological or some other narrative prompted this dramatic scene.

The object itself is similar to a well-known group of domestic house shrines.^{6*} The earliest, a shrine from the Middle Bronze Age found at Ashkelon, contained a statue of a calf made of silver-plated bronze.^{**} Other house shrines have been uncovered at various sites dating from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age I and II in Syria and Israel.

How did these house shrines function? It is difficult to say. Perhaps they held fertility figurines or other sacred objects or cultic paraphernalia.^{***}

Building F, in which the altar fragments with female figures and the “house shrine” were found, is interesting for other reasons: Its plan is unique. Adjoining the western side of the main room were four small consecutive rooms, each of which was lined with benches. In the innermost room was a large heavy clay crate that may have been used to store valuables. It was found with its lid upside down next to it, as if it had been emptied hastily before the fiery destruction of the building.

A storage jar found in the same building bears an incised inscription that includes the name *nms*h—Nimshi, a name identical to that of the father or grandfather of King Jehu, the founder of the dynasty that ousted the Omride dynasty in the kingdom of Israel in the ninth century B.C.E. (1 Kings 19:16; 2 Kings 9:2). Thus, this unique building was of particular significance, though its function remains a mystery.

The most difficult question for us to answer is, Who produced the altars and the house shrine found at Tel Rehov? From a geographical perspective, Tel Rehov was clearly in the northern kingdom of Israel during the late tenth and early ninth centuries B.C.E. We have traced the artistic and cultic functions of these objects, however, to the second millennium B.C.E. in Israel and Syria, before the emergence of the Israelites. It can be assumed that although Rehov was part of the United Monarchy and the northern kingdom of Israel, much of its population remained Canaanite and retained traditions—particularly of northern origin—that were hundreds of years old. This affinity is expressed in other aspects of the material culture of Rehov in the tenth–ninth centuries B.C.E., such as the architectural plan of the buildings (for example,

*See Hershel Shanks, “The Untouchables—Scholars Fear to Publish Ancient House Shrine,” *BAR*, November/December 2005.

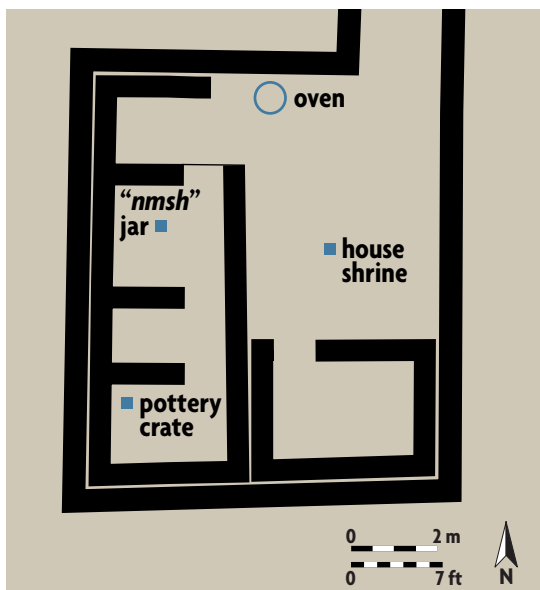
**See Lawrence E. Stager, “When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon,” *BAR*, March/April 1991.

***See William G. Dever, “A Temple Built for Two,” *BAR*, March/April 2008.



the lack of pillared four- and three-room types so common in Israelite architecture) and the building techniques (brick construction without stone foundations, which are not found in other Israelite architecture). The continuity of the Canaanite population in the Beth-Shean and Jezreel Valleys is often noted in the Bible. For example, the Book of Judges tells us, “But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth-Shean or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to


THE PLAN OF THE BUILDING where the Tel Rehov house shrine and nude goddesses were found is unusual: Four consecutive small rooms, each lined with benches, flanked the western side of the building’s main space. The finds suggest that the building had some cultic function or perhaps was a storeroom for cultic objects. Not only was the house shrine excavated here, but in one of its rooms, a heavy clay crate was found with its lid off and flipped over next to it, as though it had been emptied and abandoned in haste. This offers a glimpse into the fiery end to this building and others of Rehov in the ninth century B.C.E.



A ROYAL CONNECTION? A storage jar in Building F bears the inscription *nmsh*, or Nimshi, the same name as the father or grandfather of the Biblical King Jehu, founder of the house that ousted the Omride dynasty in the ninth century B.C.E. Although scholars are not sure of Building F’s function, this inscription suggests a royal connection.

live in that land. When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely” (Judges 1:27–28).

It may be that this Canaanite population retained its traditional religious practices, worshiping deities like Baal and Asherah. No doubt, at the time of the Israelite Monarchy, the worship of Yahweh was slowly adopted by this local population. The struggle between the emerging Israelite religion and the worship of Canaanite deities is a prominent theme in the Biblical narrative—for example in the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 19).

The altars and house shrine from Tel Rehov were probably used in the local private cult practiced in homes and workshops; offerings were made for both personal well-being and industrial success. Such private religious practices, serving individual families or local communities, stood apart from the royal, official religious centers like the Temple in Jerusalem or the royal shrine in the northern kingdom of Israel at Dan.[†] Popular religion in Israel is well known from various archaeological finds such as the many fertility figurines found in both Israel and Judah,[‡] but the popularity of pottery horned altars and the unique depiction on the house shrine from Tel Rehov are unparalleled elsewhere. 

All uncredited photos courtesy of the authors.

ENDNOTES ON PAGE 76

[†]See Hershel Shanks, “BAR Interview: Avraham Biran—Twenty Years of Digging at Tel Dan,” *BAR*, July/August 1987.

[‡]Hershel Shanks, “Idol Pleasures,” *BAR* September/October 2000.

 biblicalarchaeology.org/BAR

▶ See more images from the Tel Rehov excavations.

AUTHORS WANTED

Leading subsidy book publisher seeks manuscripts of all types: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, scholarly, juvenile, and religious works etc. New authors welcomed. Send for free 32-page illustrated booklet

A-83. Vantage Press
419 Park Ave S.
New York, NY 10016

Off-Beat Archaeological Tours of the Holy Land

Private and unique archaeological tours in Israel and Jordan by an Israeli Archaeologist with extensive guiding experience (Hebrew University, Tour guide courses, TV productions etc.)

Danny Herman info@danny-the-digger.com
Yehudah st. 64, Modi'in +972-54-6040200
ISRAEL, 71700



www.danny-the-digger.com

GALLERY BYZANTIUM
"Treasures Past and Present"
Jerusalem Cross
11th century.
14kt with Sapphire \$250
Silver with Garnet \$55.95
Order Online and receive
10% OFF your first order!
Enter code: BAR at checkout!
www.gallerybyzantium.com
1-800-798-6173

MONASTERIES OF THE LONELY DESERT

WINTER 2008-2009

**14-Day Program including a
Week Long Red Sea Cruise aboard
62-passenger M.S. MONET**

Explore the remote Christian Monasteries of the Egyptian Desert, visit the land of Pharaohs in Luxor, discover the Rose-Red City of Petra and the Greco-Roman City of Jerash in the company of our distinguished scholar... aboard exceptional M.S. MONET

For more information call
Elegant Cruises & Tours
800-683-6767

www.elegantcruises.com, info@elegantcruises.com

Rehov Notes

continued from page 47

¹The excavations at Tel Rehov have been conducted since 1997, under the direction of Amihai Mazar on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with the generous support of Mr. John Camp. Area C, where most of the finds described in this article were found, is supervised by Nava Panitz-Cohen. See A. Mazar, "The 1997-1998 Excavations at Tel Rehov: Preliminary Report," *Israel Exploration Journal* 49 (1999), pp. 1-42. This and other publications of the finds from Tel Rehov can be found at www.rehov.org.

²A. Mazar, H. Bruins, N. Panitz-Cohen, and J. van der Plicht, "Ladder of Time at Tel Rehov: Stratigraphy, Archaeological Context, Pottery and Radiocarbon Dates," in T. Levy and T. Higham, eds., *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science* (London: Equinox, 2005), pp. 193-255.

³A. Mazar, D. Namdar, N. Panitz-Cohen, R. Neumann and S. Weiner, "The Iron Age Beehives at Tel Rehov in the Jordan Valley: Archaeological and Analytical Aspects," *Antiquity* (in press).

⁴Somewhat similar horned altars dated to the 13th century B.C.E. were found at sites in Syria

along the northern Euphrates. (J. Bretschneider, "Götterw in Schreinen: Eine Untersuchung zu den Syrischen und Levantinischen Tempelmodellen, ihrer Bauplastik und ihren Götterbildern," *Ugarit Forschungen* 23 [1991] pp. 13-32; B. Muller, *Les «Maquettes Architecturales» du Proche-Orient Ancien* [Beirut, 2002]; H. Katz, "Architectural Terracotta Models from Eretz Israel, from the Fifth to the Middle of First Millennium B.C.E.," Ph.D. thesis, Haifa University, 2006.) However, the time gap between the 13th and the 10th centuries B.C.E. raises the question whether there is indeed a connection between the two phenomena. Is it possible that artistic and cultic traditions originating in Late Bronze Age Syria would be preserved in tenth-ninth centuries B.C.E. Israel, and if so, why?

⁵M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, MN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), pp. 235-238; S. Gitin, "Incense Altars from Ekron, Israel and Judah: Context and Typology," *Eretz-Israel* 20 (1989), pp. 58-59; S. Gitin, "New Incense Altars from Ekron: Context, Typology and Function," *Eretz-Israel* 23 (1992), pp. 45*-49*.

⁶Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel, A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London-New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 328-343; Katz, "Architectural Terracotta Models from Eretz Israel, from the Fifth to the Middle of First Millennium B.C.E."

AUTHORS



Meshel

Ze'ev Meshel ("Wilderness Wanderings," p. 32) is senior lecturer in archaeology for the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, where he has worked since 1975. He led the excavation of the well-known desert site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud and is an expert in the Sinai and agriculture of the desert. His current research focuses on desert fortresses and water supply.

Amihai Mazar ("To What God?" p. 40) is professor at the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he holds the Eleazar Sukenik Chair in the Archaeology of Israel. He has directed the Tel Rehov excavations since 1997. **Nava Panitz-Cohen** is area



Mazar



Panitz-Cohen

supervisor for excavations at Tel Rehov. As research assistant to Amihai Mazar, she has also helped research and publish reports on Tel Batash and Beth Shean.

Hananya Hizmi ("Archelaus Builds Archelais," p. 48) is the deputy archaeological officer for the District of Judea and Samaria at the Israel Antiquities Authority and a Ph.D. candidate at Bar Ilan University. He has directed numerous surveys and excavations throughout Israel. He directed the dig at Archelais from 1986 to 1999.



Hizmi

Kenneth Atkinson ("The Salome No One Knows," p. 60) is an associate professor of religion at the University of Northern Iowa. In addition to excavating at various sites in Israel and Turkey, he has published numerous books and articles and is currently working on *Queen Salome: The Forgotten Ruler and the Mysterious Women of the Dead Sea Scrolls*.



Atkinson