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CULT IN CONTEXT

Reconsidering Ritual in Archaeology

Edited by

*David A. Barrowclough
and Caroline Malone*

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THE MEANING OF RITUAL DIVERSITY IN THE CHALCOLITHIC OF THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

Yorke M. Rowan and David Ilan

This paper explores ritual behaviour, religious belief and their nexus to power during the Chalcolithic period (c. 4500–3600 BC) of the southern Levant. Recurring symbolically charged artefacts and their contexts suggest an overarching, region-wide cosmology or religious framework. At the same time, we argue for diverse, coexisting modes of ritual behaviour practiced by different sorts of ritual specialist. The Chalcolithic seems to exhibit the earliest evidence for the incorporation and control of ritual and ideology by the elite as a power strategy.

Chalcolithic social organization

Coming on the heels of the Neolithic, the Chalcolithic period (c. 4500–3600 BC) of the southern Levant is thought by some (Levy 1986; 1998) to have had ranked, hierarchical societies. Diverse, elaborate mortuary practices, prestige items and evocative imagery complement social phenomena such as population growth, localized settlement hierarchy and limited craft specialization. Yet the typical trappings of chiefdoms – monumental architecture, elaborate mortuary displays, elite-controlled craft production and large storage areas with limited access – are largely absent (Bourke 2001, 151; Joffe 2003, 53). These ambiguities have led to debate over whether southern Levantine Chalcolithic society was in fact ‘chiefdom’-like or relatively egalitarian (Gilead 1988). Despite such reservations, the Chalcolithic’s sophisticated metallurgy, craft specialization relying on exogenous resources (copper, basalt, ivory), and rich cave tomb deposits, have induced a number of scholars to adopt the chiefdom model of organization (Gopher and Tsuk 1996; Gal *et al.* 1996; Schick 1998).

It is more likely, however, that different organizational models are applicable to different parts of the southern Levant. Rich caches of copper, ivory and other exotic items would appear to preclude small-scale corporate group organization (‘egalitarian societies’) in the northern Negev, Jordan Valley and coastal plain, for example (Figure 33.1). Most suggestive in this regard is the Nahal Mishmar Hoard,

where over 400 copper objects were cached with human burials (Bar Adon 1980). By the same token, the restricted evidence for metallurgy suggests control over ore sources, technical knowledge or both (Golden forthcoming). On the other hand, the dearth of metals, metallurgy and recognizable prestige items, together with homogeneous, small-scale architectural organization in the Golan suggest little in the way of social or political hierarchy (Epstein 1998, figure 1).

Levy argues that chiefdoms in the Beersheva Valley arose from a need to insure stability and control over arable land and pasture for an expanding population (Levy 1998). Essentially, this model suggests that asymmetrical power relations developed from risk management. Building on Gosden’s (1989) work, Levy (1998, 240–241) posits that the Beersheba valley Chalcolithic was a debt-based society, in which gifting was used to create indebtedness and social inequality.

Emergence of more permanent leadership positions, however, may be rooted in social factors rather than resource constraints. Clark and Blake (1994), for example, argue that in Early Formative Chiapas persistent inequality arose at a time of low population density and little environmental pressure. The Chalcolithic of the southern Levant was also a period of agro-pastoral intensification and increased abundance of goods exchanged between sub-regions. Rather than view emerging elites as a consequence of resource scarcity and resultant conflict, we posit that the opportunity for individuals to wield influence and gain power arose from conditions of *resource abundance*. There are many paths to persistent inequality, but resource abundance is a frequent precondition (Aldenderfer 1996, 17). Ritual practices provided a fundamental avenue for gaining, maintaining and perhaps reifying new positions of more permanent leadership during the Chalcolithic. Earle (1997, 154) feels that public ceremonial events are not an ideal basis for power because of their transitory nature; the absence of capital investment means that ritual performances are soon no more than a memory. This can be true

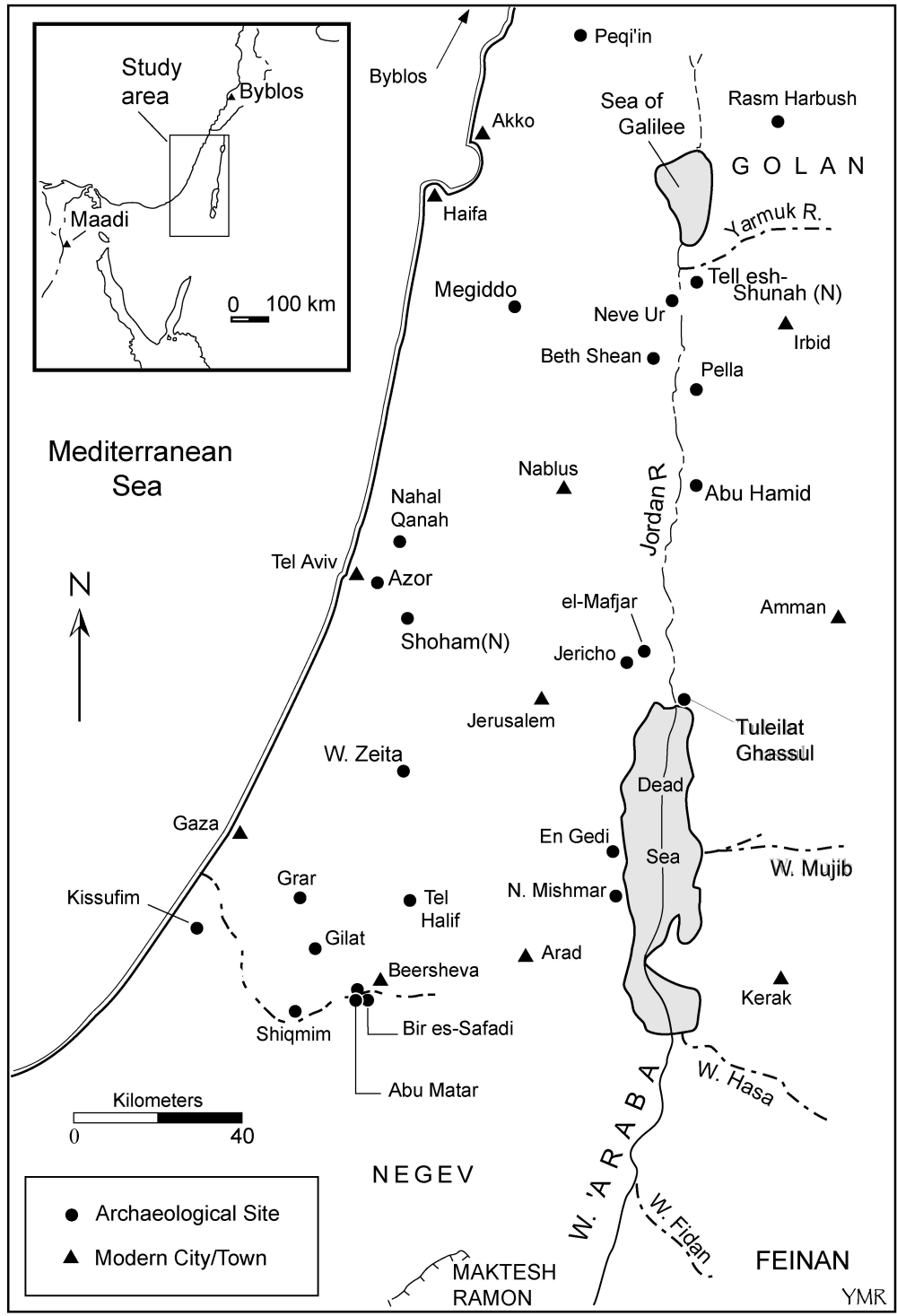


Figure 33.1 Selected Chalcolithic sites in the study area.

for non-capital intensive ritual, but when ritual does entail such investment, ritual becomes a valuable power gathering strategy. This will be demonstrated below.

Religious practice and specialists

Another dichotomous debate concerns 'shamanistic' versus 'priestly' forms of religion in the southern Levantine Chalcolithic. Those who advocate egalitarian social organization argue for shamans and adherents of chiefdom models propose that priests controlled venues of ritual practice. Many scholars have pointed out problems with the loose application of the term 'shaman' (e.g. Kehoe 2000; Bahn 2001; Insoll 2004). Price (2001, 6) points out that shamanism is, and always has been, an externally imposed construction of academics. Nevertheless, it serves as a useful concept which, if defined clearly and applied judiciously, recognizes a pattern of ritual behaviour and religious belief. A shaman may be described as a religious specialist whose powers focus on curing, prophecy and sorcery. Shamans are often held to exert control over weather, animals and enemies. They often act as intermediaries between their community, clan or an individual and the supernatural, particularly during times of crisis such as sickness or death. To do so, they may engage in soul flight, undergo trances or transform to spirit helpers. Shamans typically gain their power through a sudden 'divine' strike or inspiration.

Priests, in contrast, more commonly inherit their power or derive it from the codified, ritual knowledge necessary to conduct public rites for the benefit of a community or village. These rites may be calendrical or performed at critical junctures in ecological cycles (e.g. Lessa and Vogt 1979, 301).

Ritual specialists without formal office (such as shamans) are found in many societies other than hunter-gatherers, ranging from agrarian societies (e.g. Toro diviners and spirit mediums of east Africa [Childs 1998]) to industrial nation-states (e.g. Korea, Kendall 1996). Shamans can exist in sedentary, complexly organized societies. Priests and shamans coexisted among some Native American Plains groups and among the Navaho (Lessa and Vogt 1979, 301). Their practices may operate within a larger religious system (Walter 2001; Winkelman 1992).

Ritual was practiced in a variety of contexts in the Levantine Chalcolithic: within households, in special places within villages and in formalized, extramural spaces. This variety suggests a diversity of coexisting ritual specialists, shamans and priests, operating within the framework of a common religious worldview. Two examples, from very different structured environments of the Levantine Chalcolithic, illustrate a common material culture and

iconography on the one hand, and different forms of ritual practice on the other. These are both sites with a largely ceremonial nature. Many further parallels and an even greater diversity could be drawn from large domestic sites, such as Shiqmim, and from mortuary contacts, but these will be discussed elsewhere (Ilan and Rowan in prep.; Rowan and Ilan in prep.).

Sacred places, sacred rites

Ein Gedi

The small complex at Ein-Gedi contains four primary components: a courtyard, two broad rooms and a gatehouse situated on a remote promontory overlooking the Dead Sea, between two springs, Ein Gedi and Ein Shulamit (Ussishkin 1980, figure 1). In the center of the courtyard a shallow circular stone feature was possibly a pit, although Mazar (2000) has proposed that it demarcated a sacred tree, a phenomenon known from later temples. In the main rectilinear (c. 19.70 m × 5.2/5.50 m) broad room a stone bench or ledge abutted each of the long walls. Directly opposite the entrance, a semi-circular, single course, stone feature abutting the northern long wall encompassed a white non-local crystalline limestone drum (altar?). A ceramic bull, or ram, carrying two churns was recovered nearby (Ussishkin 1980, figure 11). The broad room floor was perforated with a series of small shallow pits (c. 50–70 cm) containing ash, charcoal and one of the few complete vessels: a fenestrated pedestal bowl, upside down atop two ibex or gazelle horns. Many other such horns were recovered in this room.

In addition to mollusca, animal bones and horns (ibex?), excavations recovered two pendants, two beads, and a predynastic Egyptian alabaster jar fragment; the last item, found near the central courtyard basin, is a unique import for the period. The majority of the assemblage consisted of fenestrated, pedestal bowls and the pointed bases of 'cornets'. A total of at least nine fenestrated pedestal bowls were recovered at Ein Gedi, most in the broad room. This is a substantial number in contrast to other, much larger excavations at domestic sites, and it underscores the ritual centrality of this form.

The large number of cornets is also significant. Cornets are infrequent at most sites, particularly those in the Beersheba Basin, such as Shiqmim, Abu Matar, and Bir es-Safadi (Levy and Menahem 1987; Commenge-Pellerin 1987, 1990). The uneven distribution of cornets at different sites may reflect chronological, regional or cultural factors, but the high frequency of cornets at Ein Gedi is probably indicative of ritual performance.

The Ein Gedi complex is isolated and lacks the debris of domestic production (pottery, cooking, flint knapping, etc.). This small assemblage highlights three repeated elements:

ceramic fenestrated stands, ceramic cornets, and ruminant horns. Virtually all researchers agree that Ein Gedi functioned as a specialized ritual complex (most recently for example Levy 2006, Mazar 2000, Ussishkin 1980), or even a 'temple' (Gilead 2002, Ottoson 1980), but does this necessarily imply formal roles of religious authority? Given the rather formalized nature of its construction, the focusing devices and the lack of evidence for continuous activity, this compound probably included ritual specialists who cared for the structure, performed rituals, and provided instruction to visitors.

Gilat

Gilat is a 12 hectare site located at the interface between the northern Negev and more humid coastal plain. Architecture and stratigraphy are rather disturbed through multiple Chalcolithic reoccupations, but the assemblage from Gilat is remarkably rich (Levy *et al.* 2006; Commenge *et al.* 2006a; 2006b). Amongst the highlights are zoo- and anthro-pomorphic figurines, the remarkable Gilat Lady and the Ram with Cornets in particular, (e.g. Alon and Levy 1989; Commenge *et al.* 2006b Figures 15.1–6).

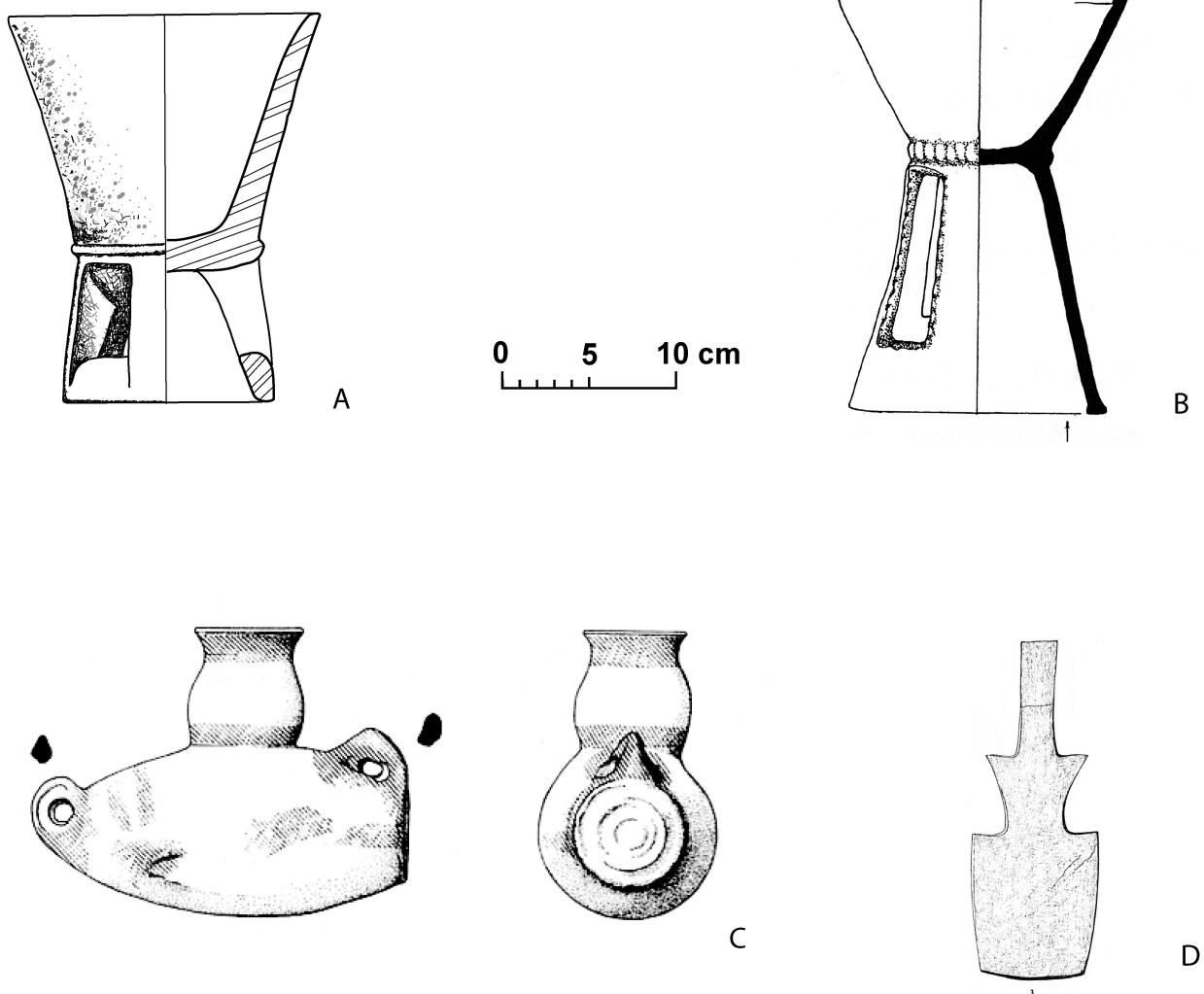


Figure 33.2. Chalcolithic artifacts. A: basalt pedestalled, fenestrated stand from (after Rowan 1998: Fig. 30A); B: ceramic pedestalled, fenestrated stand (from Epstein 1998:22.1); C: miniature churn from Kissufim (from Goren 2002: Fig. 4.5.3); D: sandstone violin-shaped figurine from Gilat (from Commenge *et al.* 2006, Fig. 15.16.3).

Levy, the primary excavator, argues convincingly that the site was a regional pilgrimage center (Alon and Levy 1989; Levy *et al.* 2006). One indicator is the so-called 'torpedo jars' (large, thick-walled, cylindrical, amphora-like vessels) found only at Gilat and made of non-local clays. Gas chromatography analysis of torpedo jars samples by Burton identified lipids consistent with olive oil transport (Burton and Levy 2006). Probably cultivated for the first time during the Chalcolithic (Neef 1990; Zohary and Hopf 1993), olive oil was almost certainly a valuable commodity. Pottery from Gilat shows more diversity of form than is typical at Chalcolithic sites, including miniature versions of standard vessels as well as forms unknown or absent at other sites. These include vessels such as cylindrical basins, tubular beakers, pointed bases, chalices on stems, as well as closed forms, such as miniature churns (Figure 33.2c) and the 'torpedo jars' (see Commenge *et al.* 2006a). Like most Chalcolithic sites, the majority of ceramic vessels (*c.* 70%, Goren 2006, 371) recovered from Gilat were made of locally available clays, but petrographic study indicates that relatively high percentages of a few forms were imported, quite unlike other Chalcolithic sites (Goren 1995, 295; Goren 2006, 371).

The rich assemblage from Gilat, derived primarily from pits and fills, incorporates many stone maceheads, including a few early predynastic Egyptian examples, and a large corpus of palettes and spindle whorls, some of non-local minerals (Rowan *et al.* 2006). Six pieces of obsidian were traced to Anatolia and are unique for the period, save for one piece from Ghassul (Yellin *et al.* 1996). The mollusc shell sample, much larger than at most other sites, includes Nile, Red Sea and Mediterranean species (Bar Yosef Mayer 2006). Hundreds of ostrich egg shell fragments were found and one cache included the intentional burial of four whole ostrich eggs grouped together in a shallow pit (Levy *et al.* 2006, plate 5.35). A burial of an aged dog, accompanied by a complete, atypical, double-handled tubular beaker, represents one of the earliest of a canine with mortuary goods (Levy *et al.* 2006, plate 5.58; Grigson 2006, plate 6.3b). In stark contrast to typical settlement sites, hundreds of ceramic and basalt fenestrated stand fragments (Figure 33.2a, b) occur (the nearest basalt source is 2–3 days journey away [Amiran and Porat 1984; Rowan *et al.* 2006]). One of the most distinctive artefact categories is the 'violin shaped figurine' (Figure 33.2d). Seventy-six were recovered from Gilat, more than all other Levantine sites combined (Commenge *et al.* 2006b). These are probably schematic renditions of the female form, as testified by two examples with breasts (one each from Peqi'in and Shiqmim), usually rendered in stone. The contours resemble the frontons on a number of ossuaries (secondary burial containers), a theme we will explore in greater detail elsewhere (Rowan and Ilan forthcoming).

Except for one stone example, there are no ossuaries at Gilat. But burials abound in all strata – a minimum of 91 individuals found in pits, silos, mortuary structures and fills. Burials were primary, though scattered bones and incomplete skeletons were common (Smith *et al.* 2006). A collective burial in a large, shallow, mudbrick-lined pit – perhaps initially intended to be a silo – contained the complete skeletal remains of nine individuals (Smith *et al.* 2006, figures 8.3–4b). Below was a layer of animal bones and sherds just above the paved floor of the structure (Levy *et al.* 2006, figure 5.20). About one meter away and stratigraphically linked to the burial structure was a mud-plastered pit containing a complete basalt fenestrated stand (similar to Figure 2a) and burned gazelle horn cores (Levy *et al.* 2006, figure 5.21), a combination of elements reminiscent of the Ein-Gedi deposits. To this we should remember that cornets are a significant component in both assemblages. The similarity of cornets to horns has been noted (Cameron 1981, 24–25); they may have an overlapping or related function.

Relative to area excavated, burial density at Gilat is much higher than at any other settlement site of the period. The burials do not seem to cluster spatially (though many were concentrated in open, plaza areas in the southeast of the site), nor were patterns in age, sex or other criteria detected (Smith *et al.* 2006). The combination of horns and fenestrated vessels next to burial features suggest that mortuary rites were a central function of the site and perhaps part of the pilgrimage process. At the same time, these and other components have parallels in the Ein Gedi deposits, which, though not directly associated with burials, are ritual (and perhaps mortuary) in nature.

Despite the intriguing and exotic nature of the assemblage excavated at Gilat, there is little evidence for formal roles of authority; no monumental construction, no concentrated storage area, no evidence for restricted access and no burials with prestige goods. Palaeopathological examination reveals some of the poorest health for a southern Levantine Chalcolithic population (Smith *et al.* 2006). Gilead (2002) argues that Gilat was more domestic in nature and inhabited by either shamans or a religious society. Although he doesn't define these terms, his point is important: this site is vastly different from the Ein Gedi sanctuary. Gilat includes a large quantity of prosaic material culture, with an assemblage of standard flint waste typical of most Chalcolithic villages (Rowan 2006). If Gilat was indeed a pilgrimage center, and we agree with Levy's interpretation, mortuary rites were part of the package. This suggests two centers of ritual practice, quite different in nature. Are they contemporaneous sites serving different populations, different purposes, or controlled by different types of practitioner?

Concluding remarks

The Chalcolithic is a period of transition when the egalitarianism apparent in the Neolithic was being supplanted by a more ranked society, at least in some regions. At the same time, the formal elements of ritual architecture (i.e. ‘temples’), rather clearly defined by the Early Bronze Age (EBA), were not yet codified. The Ein Gedi complex may represent a prototype (cf. Kempinski 1972). Unlike the subsequent EBA however, the Chalcolithic displays a range of ritual structures and practices, from sites of singular ritual function to complex sites with domestic, mortuary and internal ritual practices, demonstrated by Ein Gedi and Gilat respectively. This diversity in ritual practice makes it unlikely that permanent, formalized ritual authorities dominated the religious and social landscape.

The formalized space of the Ein Gedi structure, which functioned as a ‘temple/sanctuary/ritual space’, lacks those elements that we might associate with chiefly attempts to legitimise authority. Ritual equipment abounds, but the valuable, prestige ‘cultic’ items such as basalt vessels, copper maceheads and standards, ivory, and palettes are all missing, save the single imported Egyptian fragment. Given this context, we would suggest that an effort to legitimise authority needs to be demonstrated, not assumed. Not all religious phenomena serve to legitimise elite authority.

By the same token, the existence of some centralized, formalized ritual activity is likely. Chiefly power and rule is often legitimised through access to the sacred and the divine; some chiefdoms are described as theocratic societies. Such elites may have existed during this period, perhaps in restricted regions such as the Beersheba drainage system, or perhaps they characterize a later phase of the Chalcolithic as it merged into the EBA in the mid fourth millennium BCE. Our internal chronology lacks the resolution to warrant firm conclusions.

For the time being, rather than view the Chalcolithic as a period of either chiefdoms with priests, or one of corporate group societies with limited, context-specific religious practitioners – shamans – we posit multiple forms of religious practice. Ritual was not the exclusive tool of elites, nor was it solely *ad hoc* and shamanistic. The rituals of priests were probably different in expression from those of shamans, though overlap is certainly likely. Both operated within an overarching religious belief system with a common iconography.

This system was oriented around otherworldly concerns that incorporated, in addition to recurrent iconography, ritual items such as cornets, fenestrated stands and horns, all of which occupied diverse spaces for ritual practice in variable modes. We have moved beyond the simplistic equation of the ‘odd’ with ritual, but we have some ways to go before we successfully re-connect ritual practice with

context. We are reminded of the Hopewell Complex of the Ohio River Valley: both are rich in iconography and exotic goods manufactured by specialists, frequently deposited in mortuary contexts. Yet both lack the clear evidence for chiefdoms. What is really interesting about the Levantine Chalcolithic is that we may be observing the actual genesis of more locale-specific, occasion-specific categories of religious leadership and ritual practice – priests. In any event, it is time to move beyond the opposed extremes of shamans vs. priests, a dichotomy that reflects implicit neo-evolutionary models and simplistically conflates the diverse practices of different communities into caricatures of religious reality.

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