

# A Canaanite Massebah or Stele Found at Khirbet el-Maqatir?

By Titus Kennedy

## Finding the Stone

During the 2009 season at Khirbet el-Maqatir, near the town of Deir Dibwan in the West Bank, a large, worked, semi-upright stone was discovered inside the southwest area of the 2.5 acre (10 dunam) walled fortress.

The specific location was Field A, Square C17, just inside what is believed to be the wall of the fortress.<sup>1</sup> The stone came from Locus 5, which was a rough pavement of limestone packed with earth approximately 12 in (30 cm) deep, with pavement stones measuring generally about 1.5 to 2.5 in (4 to 6 cm) in diameter. The stone was found wedged into the pavement, 12 in (30 cm) at its deepest point (the lower right corner), and leaning to the northwest as if knocked over, with the flat, worked face of the stone facing away from the wall, towards the center of the fortress.

The stone, appearing to be a massebah (standing stone) or a stele (decorated commemorative stone) because of its shape and context, is a carved limestone slab, tan in color, measuring 31 in (79 cm) high, 16 in (40 cm) wide, and 7 in (18 cm) thick, with a flat base and a pointed top.<sup>2</sup> In Canaan, important stones such as orthostats and stelae are often made out of basalt, but two prominent stelae from Ugarit, displayed in the Louvre Museum, are also limestone. The stone was well-balanced enough that when erected on a flat surface, it was able to stand on its own without a trench or any supports. Although the

stone appeared to be extremely weathered, it appears that some type of figure on the main face of the stone was originally carved in bas-relief, and the figure rises from the face 0.6 in (1.5 cm)

high in an even plane. The type of weathering displayed by the stone is a result of exposure to acidic liquids, such as rainwater or even crushed grapes. Because severe weathering is present on both sides, this suggests that the stone was exposed to the elements while standing upright, rather than as a piece in a wall or a floor slab, all of which would display different weathering patterns.

## Dating Considerations

Pottery from the pavement was sparse, likely due to the nature of the site.<sup>3</sup> The sherds found in the immediate context of the stone date predominantly to Late Bronze I, with a minority of Late Hellenistic-Early Roman sherds. The entire locus contained sherds mostly from LB I, with a small minority from both the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Hellenistic-Early Roman periods. The pottery, along with the shape and proposed nature of the stone, indicates that the pavement and the stone extracted from it date to the LB I period.

The stone itself is easily a massebah, or standing stone, but likely could be classed as a stele from Bronze Age Canaan. Masseboth (plural of massebah) from the Bronze



Michael Luddeni

This is the heavy and mysterious stone, interpreted to be a stele with a weathered depiction of a face, discovered at Khirbet el-Maqatir in 2009. It is currently in the storage of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

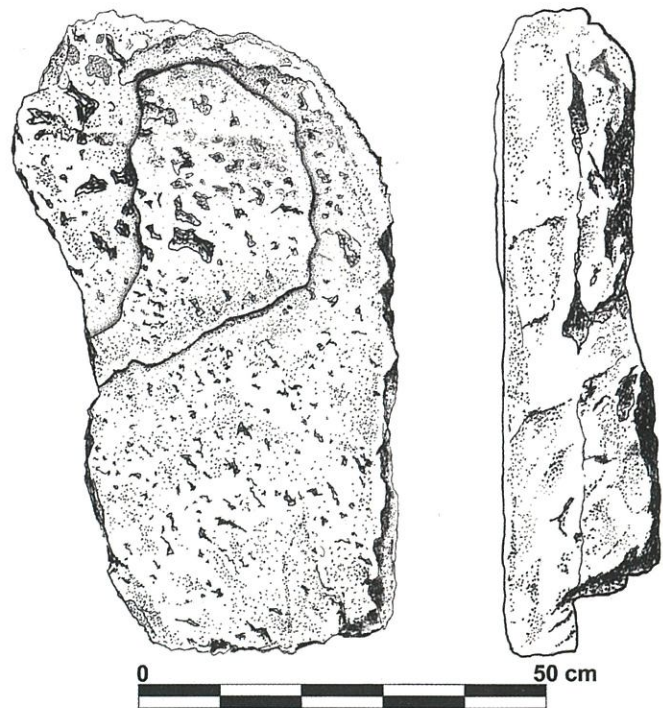


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This stele, on display in Amman, is a unique Late Bronze Age Levantine stele because it contains an inscription. However, scholars evaluating this faded inscription generally regard it to be Egyptian, and thus it probably was inscribed by visiting or resident Egyptians and not local people of the Levant. It is relevant to the stele from Maqatir because both have pointed, uneven tops.

and Iron Age periods in the southern Levant are usually unworked or simply worked into a typical rounded, tapering shape. “A massebah is a stone (or several stones) arranged in a certain prescribed form to which a cultic meaning was attached, or set up to commemorate an important event” (Negev 1996: Massebah). Although the difference between a massebah and a stele is somewhat muddled, in the context of Near Eastern archaeology a massebah is generally a plain commemorative stone, while a stele contains pictures and/or text (Kipfer 2000: 337, 534). Egyptian and Mesopotamian stelae consistently demonstrate this distinction, along with the more limited number of stelae from the Levant. The stone from Khirbet el-Maqatir was at least moderately worked, making the entire face flat, a simple bas-relief carving on the face, a flattened bottom, a

tapered top, and balance given to the stone to allow easy upright standing. Part of the left side of the stele from about 26 in (65 cm) down to the base appears to be broken off, including the extreme left edge of the relief. Although there was no inscription present on the stele from Maqatir, this is to be expected if it dates to the Late Bronze Age. Local stelae from the southern Levant in the Iron Age, specifically Iron Age II, are known to have inscriptions. This includes the Tel Dan Stele, Mesha Stele, Melcarth Stele, Sefire Stelae, Stele of Zakkur, and the Amman Citadel Inscription, among others (cf. Hallo and Younger 2000). In contrast, stelae from the Bronze Age Levant are decorated only with illustrations carved in relief, excepting the unreadable Balu’a Stele from Ammonite territory, which may have only been inscribed because of heavy Egyptian influence or perhaps even because it was worked on by Egyptians scribes who, as some epigraphers believe, inscribed the stone with Egyptian hieratic (Martin and Ward 1964: 8–9; Routledge 2004: 82–85). Clear examples of Egyptian stelae discovered in the Late Bronze southern Levant come from Beth-Shan Level VI (Ahlström 1994: 207). According to their inscriptions, these basalt stelae were in commemoration of military campaigning by the Pharaoh Seti I (Hallo and Younger 2000: 25–27). Yet, these stelae are distinct from the Levantine examples, since they were clearly crafted and erected by Egyptians. A locally made, unpublished stele, dating to the 18th–17th centuries BC from the Levant, contains an inscription of what is thought to be the name Puhik or Pihak—1 line with 3 letters, P or G, H and K in Proto-Sinaitic. A lack of inscriptions on stelae from this period follows the trend



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In this drawing, the outline of the face can be more clearly seen. Specifically, features such as the long, curving beard, mouth, nose, recession for the eyes, and some type of headwear can be made out—with a little imagination.



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**Hazor moon stele.** This Late Bronze Age stele from Hazor in northern Israel, with a worshipper's arms raised to the moon disk, demonstrates both the use of bas relief imagery on a stele and a religious function for stelae of the Late Bronze Levant. The stele, now housed in the Israel Museum, was part of a group of standing stones discovered in a Canaanite temple.

of any written material from the Late Bronze southern Levant being extremely rare. Two contemporary comparison examples for the Maqatir stele come from Late Bronze Age Ugarit and Hazor, in which cultic material is carved on the stelae in relief. A stele from Ugarit housed in the Louvre depicts a god with a plume headdress, while a stele from Hazor now housed in the

Israel Museum depicts what appears to be a worshipper with arms raised towards a cultic symbol, possibly a crescent and disk and dedicated to a moon god (Yadin 1958: pl. XXIX:1–3).<sup>4</sup> A third example comes from the previously mentioned Balu'a Stele, which is housed in the Jordan Archaeological Museum on the Amman Citadel. Dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age, this stele would be roughly contemporary with the stele from Maqatir, and located just to the east of it, still in the southern Levant. The Balu'a Stele is made from basalt, and although the figures carved in relief show the work of a skilled artisan and the once present inscription suggests the work of a scribe, the stone itself is not completely symmetrical; the top is somewhat pointed and leaning towards the left side, similar to the object found at Maqatir. Thus, all three of these examples share many similarities with the stele from Maqatir. All are free standing with a flat base (some stelae, notably from Egypt and Mesopotamia, have a protruding "stand" about half the width of the stele extending from the base like a post that would be inserted into a hole, a characteristic which the Maqatir stele shares in primitive form), carefully worked on the front face but rough on the back, carved in bas-relief, tapered on the top, and medium sized. Three are lacking any inscriptions (that on the Balu'a Stele may be due to the Egyptians), and are made of basalt or limestone. Finally, all are from the Late Bronze Age southern Levant.

### Identifying the Relief

Perhaps the most interesting and yet most difficult question involves the identification of the relief on the face of the stele. The relief appears either to depict the moon in crescent form, which was a common motif on stelae throughout Canaan and Mesopotamia, or possibly the head of a man or god. The proposed crescent moon on the Maqatir stele would open to the left, while on the aforementioned stele from Hazor the crescent opens towards the top of the stele. As the edge of the relief is broken off on the left side, it is impossible to know if the missing edge of the proposed crescent is pointed. If this is the motif on the stele, it may have been carved in homage to the moon god of Canaan, Yarikh—the god for whom the city of Jericho is thought to be named. Khirbet el-Maqatir is located in close geographical proximity to Jericho—less than 10 miles walking distance—and thus, use of some of the same gods is not only possible, but probable. Alternatively, the figure in relief on the stele may be a crude or severely weathered head of a god or a man wearing a hat. The figure in relief may show the hat, forehead, nose, mouth, chin, and beard. A parallel comes from a stele found at the Ras Shamra acropolis. It is a serpentine stele carved in bas-relief from the Late Bronze Age, and is thought to depict El, father of the gods, and a worshipper. The head of El on the stele from Ugarit wears a hat, and has a prominent, elongated, and slightly curved beard, very similar to the shape on the Maqatir stele and typical of depictions of Canaanites in Egyptian art. The hat on the stele from Ugarit is admittedly much more elaborate than the proposed hat on the Maqatir stele, but this could be due to the skill of the artist. Another explanation for the "hat" is that it could be simply hair or hair with a headband, typical of other artistic renditions of Canaanites. Yet, the depiction of gods rather than men is a more popular motif; this may be the



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**Ugarit stele of a plumed god.** This stele from Ugarit, like the stele from Maqatir, is made of limestone. Although basalt was a common medium for significant stone objects such as stelae, limestone, as this example demonstrates, was not unheard of. This stele from Ugarit depicts a god, which may be another feature in common with the stele from Maqatir.

preferred hypothesis. Still, because the figure in relief is unclear, the identification must be treated with uncertainty.

Concerning the function of the stele, there is not enough data for anything other than a tentative hypothesis. Khirbet el-Maqatir in the Bronze Age appears to have been an outpost, not a town, and there is very little cultic material that has been discovered at the site (cf. Wood 2000: 123–30). One cult stand and one infant jar burial were discovered in excavations at the site. Though the cultic material is extremely limited, it does indicate that there was at least some small scale religious activity occurring at the site. Stelae from this period in the southern Levant appear to be only of a religious nature, in contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia where they also served as boundary markers, or in an administrative or historical context. Because the stele is slightly asymmetrical at the top and the carved relief is unclear, it could have been crafted by an amateur, broken (intentionally or accidentally), defaced, severely weathered, the top left asymmetrical by design (cf. the Balu'a Stele), or any combination of the five. Since the site appears to be only a small outpost, it seems plausible that a professional was not employed in crafting the stele, and thus it is not as polished as those of major urban cultural centers such as Ugarit and Hazor. However, time may have also taken a serious toll on the stele, both through weathering and damage done by people. Regardless, it does seem to add to the evidence suggesting that Khirbet el-Maqatir was inhabited by Canaanites in the Late Bronze Age, and that these Canaanites engaged in religious practices similar to those in other cities of the southern Levant.

In ancient Hebrew there is no distinction between standing stone and stele—the word *massebah* is used for both, even for an obelisk (cf. Jer 43:13), as the word comes from a root meaning to stand or take a stand. The first *massebah* that is mentioned in the Bible occurs in Genesis 28:18, when Jacob sets up a *massebah* in Luz and renames the place Bethel, where the “Jacob’s ladder” dream takes place. Later, Jacob makes a covenant with Laban, and a *massebah* is erected as a witness that they formed a covenant (Gn 31:44–53). Jacob again erects *masseboth* in Genesis 35:14 and 35:20, the first as a marker or memorial of where he spoke with God, and the second as a memorial gravestone for his wife, Rachel. During the time of Moses, God gives the Israelites prohibitions about Canaanite religion, and specifically mentions that they are to break the *masseboth* of the Canaanites into pieces (Ex 23:24). And yet, just after this, Moses erects a *massebah* for each of the 12 tribes of Israel (Ex 24:4). The difference is clearly the function and design of the *massebah*. While the Israelites were allowed to erect memorial stones to commemorate some event or represent a person or a group, such as the 12 tribes or the *massebah* of Absalom (2 Sm 18:18), they were prohibited by God from setting up a *massebah* or stele as a religious object or a representation of a god. Although Israel, like the Egyptians, Hittites, or Akkadians, often set up commemorative or memorial stones, the prohibition was against carving statues and images out of these stones and worshipping them (Lv 26:1). At times, disobedience in this arena was clear, such as the mention of the *massebah* of Ba’al which King Ahab had made (2 Kgs 3:2), or when the Judeans under Rehoboam built high places, *masseboth*, and *asherim* (1 Kgs 14:23), which were clearly emulating pagan religious practices. At other times,

As a professor, I had a three-week break between the end of my spring semester and the beginning of the summer semester. As fate would have it, the excavation dates at Khirbet el-Maqatir fit perfectly into that time frame. I supervised the excavation of two squares that were artifact-rich. The stratigraphy was Byzantine, Hasmonean, and Late Bronze. There was a great spirit among the volunteers; all knew that we were “digging the Bible.”

Dr. Wood asked me to head up the excavation and publication of the Byzantine remains at Khirbet el-Maqatir, and I agreed to take on this challenge. This will complement the Early Roman/Byzantine building that David Graves and I have been excavating (under the supervision of Dr. Steven Collins and Gary Byers) at Tall el-Hammam. The most impressive Byzantine remains at Khirbet el-Maqatir is the church/monastery complex. The Master’s College IBEX (Israel Bible EXtension) group, led by Todd Bolen, worked a few days on the monastery back in 1999; outside of that, it has been awaiting the trowel for about a millennium and a half. A team of fifteen people worked with me on the church during the first week of January, 2011. I will return in May/June 2011 to continue the project. Of note, there are a very few *tesserae* (mosaic tiles) lying around, which portends that there may be intact mosaics awaiting discovery. These mosaics could hold the key to identifying beyond a doubt the identity of the site. Memorial churches were built to commemorate biblical events, so stay tuned for more details.

— Scott Stripling, Square Supervisor

obedience to God’s commands to destroy masseboth or stelae used in pagan worship was exacted with fervor, as is the case with Jehu destroying the masseboth of the house of Ba’al and the massebah of Ba’al (2 Kgs 10:26–27). The massebah of Ba’al would have been similar to the Ba’al stele from Ugarit currently housed in the Louvre Museum—a finely crafted standing stone with the image of a pagan god. It is evident that to erect a stone massebah or stele merely as a memorial was allowed. The massebah or stele discovered at Maqatir, however, was clearly shaped and an image was carved onto it. Although the figure in relief is unclear and the exact context of the stele is not yet understood, comparisons with other Canaanite stelae and texts mentioning the standing stones or stelae of gods suggests that the stele from Maqatir was of a religious nature. The command to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7:5 that when they enter the land of Canaan they must, among other things, “smash their masseboth” (standing stones or stelae), was necessary because

of the pagan religious function of this type of massebah or stele. The result of often disobeying this and other similar commands is seen later in the blatant religious syncretism found in the book of Judges, when the Israelites began to emulate the religious practices of Canaan. The stele found at Maqatir, on the other hand, appears to be smashed on the left side, and was discovered in a position that suggested it was knocked down, some stones placed over it, and left on the pavement inside the wall, as if invading Israelites obeyed God and destroyed one of the major types of pagan religious symbols in ancient Canaan. If Khirbet el-Maqatir, one of the candidates for Ai, is in fact the city of Ai destroyed by Joshua and the Israelites, then the presence and desecration of this stele would mesh perfectly with the narrative of Israelite conquest in the book of Joshua.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Object number 572, discovered May 29, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>The specific type of limestone is travertine, formed by the precipitation of calcium carbonate.

<sup>3</sup>Khirbet el-Maqatir is not a layered tel, but a shallow site which has been exposed to weather and disturbed by agricultural activities. Thus, most of the site does not contain clear archaeological strata, and sherds from more than one time period are often found together in the same locus.

<sup>4</sup>16th–14th century BC limestone, from the Ras Shamra acropolis. Additionally, there is a Late Bronze Age stele of Ba’al Hadad, also without an inscription, from the Ugarit acropolis at the Louvre, although much larger and better preserved. The object from Hazor is a basalt stele from the Stelae Temple of Area C in the Lower City of Hazor, dated to the LB II.

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