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## The Rhetorical Functions of Levantine Burial Practices during the Chalcolithic Period: Form, Function, and Symbolism as a Pedagogical Tool

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# **The Rhetorical Functions of Levantine Burial Practices During the Chalcolithic Period: Form, Function, and Symbolism as a Pedagogical Tool**

Moline Tucker Mallamo

## **Abstract**

This undergraduate honors thesis project explores the rhetorical implications of burial practices from the southern Levant during the Chalcolithic period. The purpose of this thesis is to expound upon research that has already been conducted in order to offer additional, and sometimes alternative, theories to what currently exists in the literature. I argue that the forms and functions of the burial techniques were used, at least partially, as “tools” to teach cultural and religious beliefs regarding life, death, and the afterlife to the individuals in the community. The inferred relationship between the materiality and symbology of these burial practices provides clues into the rhetorical lens through which these various artifacts were seen in their original contexts.

## **Introduction**

The Levant (the area of land modernly known as Syria and Israel) during the Chalcolithic Period (roughly 4500-3500 BC) is noted for its complex rituals in mortuary contexts. A number of burial methods were used in the Chalcolithic Levant, including forms of primary and secondary burial. Secondary burial, which is the internment of skeletal remains after initial decomposition takes place, is a hallmark of Chalcolithic Levantine mortuary practice. Ossuaries,

which are containers used to house the remains of the deceased, were typically used as a means of secondary burial. The usual course of action in the case of ossuary usage included a preliminary decomposition period for the remains of the deceased. After the remains had decomposed so that only the skeletal structure remained, the bones would be placed in ossuaries. The Chalcolithic Levant is known for this kind of burial (that is, secondary burial in ossuaries), as well as for its use of burial caves.

Rhetoric is an important lens through which archaeologists and historians may view the past as it provides important clues regarding the meaning and associations of artifacts in their sociocultural contexts. Rhetoric may be thought of as an art that uses language, actions, and other means for a specific audience to strategically convey ideas, with symbolism that the target audience will understand.<sup>1</sup> Particularly applicable to this thesis is the concept of rhetoric as a phenomenon that can be studied and as a practice that produces meaning in very specific cultural or social circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Central to the idea of symbolism in material culture is style. Style is a manner of expression which is dynamic and variable.<sup>3</sup> Style has the ability to “encode greater beliefs or values.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Faithe Selznick, “Definitions of Rhetoric” (PowerPoint, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, April 8, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Faithe Selznick

<sup>3</sup> Britt Hartenberger, “Technological Style and Variation” (PowerPoint, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, November 13, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Britt Hartenberger

For the purposes of this thesis, it may be said that burial practices in the Levant during the Chalcolithic period were intended to provide instruction to the community, and thus persuade their thinking to fall in line with religious and cultural beliefs regarding life, death, and rebirth. These pedagogical strategies, which serve a rhetorical function (that of persuasion), provide valuable insight into the belief systems of ancient Levantine cultures during the Chalcolithic. Furthermore, I will argue that some of these strategies and beliefs were passed down to subsequent generations, and even to entirely different cultures inhabiting the Levant.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Shapes of Burial Jars**

As Nativ and Gopher attest, there is little understanding of the meaning(s) associated with these Chalcolithic burial practices from the Levant as they continue to remain a mystery for archaeologists and historians to decipher.<sup>5</sup> A number of different shapes have been observed when analyzing recovered ossuaries: house-shaped, chest-shaped, burial jars, and rectangular stone basins.<sup>6</sup>

Rhetorically speaking, what might the shapes of the ossuaries used mean for the Chalcolithic Levantine peoples using these artifacts? For the purposes of this thesis, these

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<sup>5</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, "The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 229

<sup>6</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 231.

house-shaped ossuaries are of particular interest. I argue that house-shaped ossuaries may very well have been a way of insinuating that the dead had “returned” back to their ancestral homes. Pearson notes that, “the soul is considered homeless and an object of dread until it arrives in the land of the ancestors; and the mourners remain polluted by the death until they are reincorporated into the world of normal relationships.”<sup>7</sup> More regarding this idea of “returning home” will follow in a subsequent section dealing the Hebrew Patriarchs from the Late Bronze Age (this particular section will discuss the possible ramifications of Chalcolithic era beliefs for subsequent Levantine cultures).

Other shapes of ossuary jars have been observed, as well, with some of these shapes being observed in nature. For instance, Nativ puts forth an interesting proposal, namely that some ossuary jars from the Chalcolithic period in the Levant were in fact meant to symbolize cocoons; death would thus become a metaphor for metamorphosis.<sup>8</sup> While it is difficult to trace the exact beliefs in the afterlife held by Chalcolithic Levantine peoples, it can be deduced from cultural remains that there was indeed a view of a life being rebirthed in death. The process of metamorphosis is drawn out by Nativ as he explains how the process of metamorphosis is strikingly similar to the process of decay, namely in the liquefaction of the flesh of the individual as well as the liquefaction of the insect. This liquefaction is the process

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Assaf Nativ, “A Note on Chalcolithic Ossuary Jars: A Metaphor for Metamorphosis,” *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 35, no. 2 (2008): 211.

of transformation from one being to another.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Nativ notes that the beauty of a butterfly may be taken as a metaphor for the beauty of a soul in the afterlife.<sup>10</sup>

### **Fertility / Femininity and Liminality in Burial Practices**

Other nature-based motifs exist in the morphology of ossuaries, one of the most significant being the manner in which certain ossuaries reflect female anatomy. Turning to the concept of fertility motifs in burial, a number of interesting observations can be made. The idea of death as rebirth, connected with fertility and femininity, is further suggested by Chasan and Rosenberg in their observations of decorative figures found in burial contexts. As they explain, the rims of Chalcolithic jars are oftentimes decorated, and can be thought of as “liminal,” meaning that they are both inside and outside of the jar, and are thus seen to be in a state of flux (more to follow in the concept of liminal spaces below). Perhaps most significant is the use of triangles in the decoration of these basalt rims. Triangles, as noted by Chasan and Rosenberg, were symbolic of female fertility.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the rims may represent various parts of the female reproductive system, such as the womb and/or the genitals. That female anatomy is oftentimes symbolically utilized in burial motifs is significant; this practice could be

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<sup>9</sup> Assaf Nativ, “A Note on Chalcolithic Ossuary Jars: A Metaphor for Metamorphosis,” *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 35, no. 2 (2008): 212.

<sup>10</sup> Assaf Nativ, 212.

<sup>11</sup> Rivka Chasan and Danny Rosenberg, “Basalt vessels in Chalcolithic burial caves: Variations in prestige burial offerings during the Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant and their social significance,” *Quaternary International* 464 (2018): 238.

seen as conveying a direct link between the living and the dead, and the rebirth of the deceased into the afterlife.<sup>12</sup> The use of female reproductive and fertility motifs in both domestic and mortuary contexts is further evidence that a link between the living and deceased was seen as ritually significant.

To further analyze this rebirth belief, it should be seen that the connection between vessel rim and female anatomy is critical. The ossuary receptacle would be seen as a “womb” of sorts, in which the deceased would be held in order to enter into the afterlife. The ossuary receptacle, as the “womb,” would be a place where the deceased would be prepared for the afterlife. This is directly comparable to pregnancy, in which the fetus is prepared for life outside the womb. Just as humans enter the world of the living through the womb, so they also enter the world of the dead through a “womb” as well, albeit of a different sort. The rhetorical implications are clear in this case: the community would have been invited to understand the process of death as a process of rebirth in disguise, with the same anatomical features being utilized for the same end. The parallels between the life cycle and what I will refer to as the “death cycle” can be seen in Figure 1. As a whole, one may ascertain that there was indeed a prominent belief in rebirth held in Levantine communities based on these observable comparisons.

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<sup>12</sup> Rivka Chasan and Danny Rosenberg, “Basalt vessels in Chalcolithic burial caves: Variations in prestige burial offerings during the Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant and their social significance,” *Quaternary International* 464 (2018): 238.

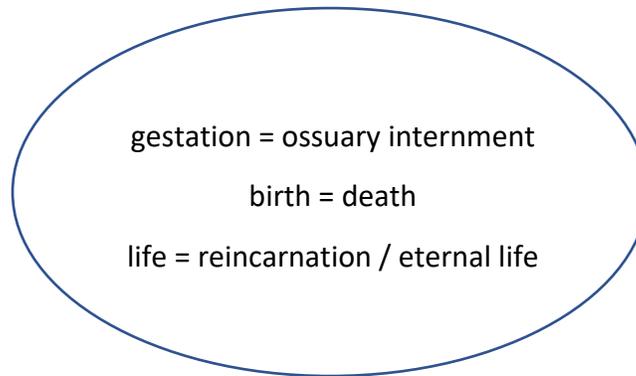


Figure 1: Parallels between the life and death cycles

### **Symbolism of Material Artifacts and Liminality in Burial Practices**

From the archaeological record, it would appear that there is a certain transition that occurs in mortuary practices. For instance, ceramic vessels used as ossuaries seem to disappear in later time periods. Instead of using ceramic ossuaries, which Nativ and Gopher explain would have been difficult to transport due to their size and fragility, it appears that bones started being placed directly on “benches” in caves.<sup>13</sup> The theory proposed by the researchers suggests that ossuaries, being “cumbersome” and “fragile,” might have been abandoned because they could have been seen as inhibiting the ability of the community to move forward after an individual’s death.<sup>14</sup> Nativ and Gopher explain that there may have been a certain “liminal

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<sup>13</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 233.

<sup>14</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 241.

period,” which would end after the completion of secondary burial. This liminal period is described as being a time when “the corpse, society, and the spiritual / cosmological order were in a state of flux.”<sup>15</sup> The article states that the period before secondary burial, that is, when the body is decomposing, is a period of time in which the relatives of the deceased would “endure various taboos and prohibitions.” The fact that rums, as mentioned above, have been suggested to be part of the “liminal space” is significant. The womb may then be seen as a liminal space in and of itself, a space in which there is a cross over from one realm to the next, which is seen in the process of childbirth.

Caves may also be considered as liminal spaces.<sup>16</sup> In my interpretation, caves would also be seen to be a type for the womb. In a further analysis, it could be said that the cave is symbolic of the womb of the earth itself. If humans are seen to be made from the clay of the earth, how much more appropriate for them to return to the womb of the earth at their death. The similarities between this concept and the myth of Namma (provided below), are striking. The idea of the earth giving birth and then reaccepting the dead points possibly towards a belief in rebirth. The liminality of caves is particularly interesting from a ritualistic point of view. The impenetrability of these caves may have perhaps been a marker of a different dimension of sorts, in which the one penetrating the cave was also entering into a different realm.

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<sup>15</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 241.

<sup>16</sup> Uri Davidovich and Micka Ullman and Boaz Langford and Amos Frumkin and Dafina Langgut and Naama Yahalom-Mack and Julia Abramov and Nimrod Marom, “Distancing the Dead: Late Chalcolithic Burials in Large Maze Caves in the Negev Desert, Israel,” *BASOR* 379 (2018): 113.

## The Rhetorical and Symbolic Use of Clay

Clay is an integral aspect of many creation accounts from peoples around the world. Many Near Eastern creation accounts speak of man being made out of clay or soil. It appears that Levantine peoples during the Chalcolithic period held certain beliefs regarding clay, especially in terms of life, burial, and subsequent rebirth: “Clay and related terms such as dirt, earth and sand, became a metaphor for life in Mesopotamian literature, Ugaritic poetry and the Old Testament.”<sup>17</sup> The use of clay in the making of ceramic ossuaries is thought to be an important component to the ritualistic process of burial and subsequent rebirth.

A particularly intriguing example of an ancient Near Eastern creation story in which clay is featured can be found within the Mesopotamian myth of Enki and Namma. In this particular myth, the minor, or lesser gods, urge mother Namma to help relieve them of their work of the earth. In order to provide them with assistance, Namma gives birth to the first humans. What is particularly interesting about this account is that, in order to create humans, Namma kneads clay and places it in her womb. It is from this clay that the first humans are born.

The use of clay to create ossuaries could very well have been a rhetorical / pedagogical tool as well as being a ritualistic one. By using clay to create ceramic vessels in which to bury the dead’s remains, peoples of the Chalcolithic Levant would have been reminded of the creation stories with which they would have undoubtedly been quite familiar. Clay is seen as

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<sup>17</sup> Dina Shalem, “Motifs on the Nahal Mishmar Hoard and the Ossuaries: Comparative Observations and Interpretations,” *Journal of the Israel Prehistoric Society* (2015): 232.

the “stuff” from which humans are made, how appropriate it would be for the dead to return to their origins (the earth). This is seen in two primary ways: firstly, the ossuaries in which the dead were placed were made of clay; secondly, the ossuaries were often placed in the earth (underground or in a burial cave). These practices serve to reinforce the concept of man returning to the ground from which he came. This returning to one’s place of origin (the earth, in this case) thus leads to the ability to be reborn as another creation (the belief in reincarnation). Indeed, the extensive use of clay for burial purposes may in fact be tied in to beliefs regarding reincarnation, as Ilan and Rowan have postulated.<sup>18</sup>

The use of clay to rhetorically communicate beliefs regarding life can be seen in burial practices of human remains, but is also perhaps applicable to the area of grain storage. There is apparently a direct belief amongst the peoples of the southern Levant regarding the birth, life, death, and rebirth of various organisms, including humans, animals, and plants. This is illustrated by the ancient grain silos and storage jars of the southern Levant, which are argued to be similar to urns used in the Chalcolithic period, as has been observed by Rosenberg, Garfinkel, and Klimscha.<sup>19</sup> This idea of grain storage and mortuary internment is not solely relegated to the Chalcolithic Levant. The Sudanese Nuba funerary practice involves “graves cut in the shape of a grain storage pit [that] have their floors covered with a scattering of grain.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> David Ilan and Yorke Rowan, “Expediting Reincarnation in the Fifth Millennium BCE: Interpreting the Chalcolithic Ossuaries of the Southern Levant,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 38, no. 3 (2019): 255.

<sup>19</sup> Danny Rosenberg and Yosef Garfinkel and Florian Klimscha, “Large-scale storage and storage symbolism in the ancient Near East: a clay silo model from Tel Tsaf,” *Antiquity* 91, no. 358 (2017): 896.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999), 25.

Chasan and Rosenberg point out that Levantine Chalcolithic societies were agrarian, and thus fertility would have been a major focus for these communities as their entire lives would have depended upon it.<sup>21</sup> This observation is also made by Epstein, who makes a point of clay figurines found in burial contexts pointing toward a cultic understanding of fertility, agriculture, and food production.<sup>22</sup> For instance, both at Giv'atayim and at Azor, clay laden donkey figurines were found.<sup>23</sup> That agricultural motifs such as laden donkeys are found within funerary contexts provides clues that the concept of farming was pertinent to every area of life (and death).

### **Status Signaling in Burial Practices**

From a rhetorical point of view, it is plausible that burial methods were intended to send messages regarding social status. Nativ and Gopher share an interesting hypothesis, namely that burial cave “cemeteries” in the northern region of Israel were representative of unity due to their monolithic nature; this would mean that these burial sites were “indivisible, absolute, and therefore eternal” due to their “singularity.”<sup>24</sup> These northern burial caves were likely

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<sup>21</sup> Rivka Chasan and Danny Rosenberg, “Basalt vessels in Chalcolithic burial caves: Variations in prestige burial offerings during the Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant and their social significance,” *Quaternary International* 464 (2018): 238.

<sup>22</sup> Claire Epstein, “The Significance of Ceramic Assemblages in Chalcolithic Burial Contexts in Israel and Neighboring Regions in the Southern Levant,” *Levant* 33, no. 1 (2013): 83.

<sup>23</sup> Claire Epstein, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 242.

representative of “the past,” in other words, one’s ancestors and general familial lineage. “It is tempting ... to postulate that each cave / site represents a particular lineage or kinship group, reinforcing one’s ties to the ancestors and structuring identity.”<sup>25</sup> This postulation is quite likely, especially when considering that this kind of mentality is well-documented in the ancient Near East (see section entitled, “Effects of Mortuary Rhetoric in Subsequent Belief Systems” for discussion).

The southern caves, on the other hand, were likely representative of the “communal structure” of the society in which the inhabitants were once living.<sup>26</sup> I take this to mean that the north was attempting to create links with family members from the past, whereas the south was attempting to recreate the societal structure of the living to be mirrored amongst the deceased. It ought to be mentioned, however, that cemeteries are often representative of ideals rather than the reality present in that society.<sup>27</sup> What might this observation suggest to us regarding the ideals of the northern and southern regions of Israel, respectively? I would argue that the northern group would likely have been more concerned with familial ties, and would have more of a cultic reverence for ancestral figures. The southern group, by comparison, would likely have been more concerned with persons’ established roles in their own contemporary society. The emphasis may very well have been on the individual and less on the family, whereas the north seems to have focused more on family ties and identities. Of

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<sup>25</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 236.

<sup>26</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 242.

<sup>27</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 242.

course, the persons belonging to these societies (that is, the northern and southern groups), would most likely not have been consciously aware of these implications; rather these “notions,” as Nativ and Gopher refer to them, were likely more of a subconscious reality for the Chalcolithic populations in question.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, there appears to be a direct correlation concerning the number of individuals buried between ceramic ossuary use and direct cave burial. Typically, only one individual will be found in a ceramic ossuary, whereas multiple individuals will be found in a group burial style in caves.<sup>29</sup> It is thought that there may be a system of classification used in the manner in which persons were buried. For instance, the possibility of cave “assignments” being a way to create certain identities among those interred is entirely plausible.

While some differences do exist, Nativ and Gopher observe that practices in the northern region of Israel shared commonalities with the southern region in terms of their mortuary behaviors. They do stress, however, that the practice of creating identities amongst caves and their inhabitants is more plausible with the southern region than with the north, mainly because the use of multiple caves for burial purposes is relegated to the southern region.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, circulation of ossuary fragments was a practice of the southern region, whereas the northern region’s inhabitants seemingly did not circulate ossuary fragments. This particular observation indicates that inhabitants of the northern region did not see ossuary jars

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<sup>28</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 243.

<sup>29</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, 241.

as absolutely necessary components to the burial process. As postulated by Nativ and Gopher, the north was more concerned with creating unity and a sense of connection within the context of time and space, whereas the south was seemingly more concerned with creating structures that were comprised of various “components.”<sup>31</sup>

Chasan and Rosenberg, like Nativ and Gopher, observe that the objects found in the burial caves are most often fragmentary.<sup>32</sup> It must be noted that when basalt fragments found in Chalcolithic burial sites are pieced together, they very rarely recreate a complete vessel. The hypothesis assigned to this phenomenon includes the possibility that whole basalt vessels were purposefully fragmented during funeral rites, with some of these fragments left with the deceased while other fragments would have been taken back with the living to form a possible “link” with the dead.<sup>33</sup> I believe that this hypothesis may account for the phenomenon of ceramic potsherds being buried with the deceased, as is noted in the article authored by Nativ and Gopher. In this instance, it could be thought that there is little difference in the reasoning behind the broken ceramic vessels and the broken basalt vessels.

Epstein observes that Chalcolithic burials were generally not individual, nor were the skeletal remains found anatomically articulated.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the fact that these remains are

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<sup>31</sup> Assaf Nativ and Avi Gopher, “The Cemetery as a Symbol: a Reconsideration of Chalcolithic Burial Caves in the Southern Levant,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21, no. 2 (2010): 242.

<sup>32</sup> Rivka Chasan and Danny Rosenberg, “Basalt vessels in Chalcolithic burial caves: Variations in prestige burial offerings during the Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant and their social significance,” *Quaternary International* 464 (2018): 237.

<sup>33</sup> Rivka Chasan and Danny Rosenberg, 237.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Epstein, “The Significance of Ceramic Assemblages in Chalcolithic Burial Contexts in Israel and Neighboring Regions in the Southern Levant,” *Levant* 33, no. 1 (2013): 81.

not found in articulation is to be expected given that secondary burial was practiced. After initial decomposition of the body, the bones would be gathered up and interred for final burial. These burials were generally apart from regular dwelling spaces, and were typically found in natural caves and formations that were more difficult to access.<sup>35</sup> It is my view that this difficulty of access is in fact ritually and symbolically significant. The fact that the bones cannot be accessed without great difficulty might well have been symbolic of the world of the dead, which the living cannot access. This kind of belief is not uncommon in various cultures throughout the world. An interesting example is found in Greek mythology in the story of the River Styx, which forms a marked boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead (in the case of the Greeks, Hades). As previously stated, this kind of belief in a divide or chasm of some kind between the living and the dead is rather common, and there is reason to believe that various communities in the Chalcolithic Levant also held similar beliefs considering the emergence of advanced funerary rites during this time.

### **Effects of Mortuary Rhetoric in Subsequent Belief Systems**

One of the main measures of effective pedagogy is the lasting impact it will have on its subjects. With this in mind, the question may be postulated: What effects do these various mortuary practices have on subsequent Levantine communities and religious groups? How might Levantine peoples have been shaped by these beliefs from the Chalcolithic age? I would

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<sup>35</sup> Claire Epstein, "The Significance of Ceramic Assemblages in Chalcolithic Burial Contexts in Israel and Neighboring Regions in the Southern Levant," *Levant* 33, no. 1 (2013): 81.

argue that these ideas (regarding life, death, and rebirth) were most surely passed down through generations and that these beliefs can be inferred from later artifacts and historiographies from the same area in different temporal periods (e.g., the Late Bronze Age, roughly 1500-1200 BC).

The first two chapters of Genesis provide an account of the creation process, including that of humans: “then the LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”<sup>36</sup> This idea of humans being formed from clay harkens back to the concept present in the myth of Namma, who births humans from clay she has placed in her womb. Furthermore, the concept of returning to the earth is also echoed in Genesis, and throughout the Scriptures: “[u]ntil you (humans) return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dirt and to dirt you shall return.”<sup>37</sup>

If we return to the shapes of various ossuary jars, such as those recorded by Nativ and Gopher, interesting inferences may be made. I argue that house-shaped ossuaries may very well have been a way of insinuating that the dead had “returned” back to their ancestral homes. This is a thought process that is arguably defined in ancient Near Eastern texts such as the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). Instances of this can be found throughout the Scriptures and, while it is difficult to pinpoint the exact timeline in which some figures, such as the Patriarchs, lived, there is no doubt that the stories recounted give valuable insight into the broader cultural context of the southern Levant in ancient times.

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<sup>36</sup> Genesis 2:7 (New American Bible)

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 3:19 (New American Bible)

One such instance of this concept of “returning home” to the ancestors is illustrated in one of the promises that God makes to Abraham: “You (Abraham), however, shall join your forefathers in peace; you shall be buried at a contented old age.”<sup>38</sup> This is further elucidated farther along in Genesis: “Then he (Abraham) breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, grown old after a full life; and he was taken to his kinsmen.”<sup>39</sup> The importance of burial is further attested in the case of Joseph, the son of Jacob: “Moses also took Joseph’s bones along, for Joseph had made the Israelites swear solemnly that, when God should come to them, they would carry his bones away with them.”<sup>40</sup> The fact that Joseph commands that his bones be brought up from Egypt at the time of the Exodus to return to Canaan is significant; clearly, he believed that the resting place of his bones was important and he wished to return to his homeland of Canaan, the land to which his great-grandfather Abraham had migrated after leaving Ur of the Chaldees.

If we return again to Nativ and Gopher’s hypothesis, namely that burial cave “cemeteries” in the northern region of Israel were representative of unity due to their monolithic nature, we can find some compelling evidence of these practices being continued in the Southern Levant during the age of the Patriarchs (likely dated to the Late Bronze Age). These northern burial caves were likely representative of “the past,” in other words, one’s ancestors and general familial lineage. The researchers contend that “[i]t is tempting ... to postulate that each cave / site represents a particular lineage or kinship group, reinforcing one’s ties to the ancestors and structuring identity” (236). This postulation is quite likely,

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<sup>38</sup> Genesis 15:15 (New American Bible)

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 25:8 (New American Bible)

<sup>40</sup> Exodus 13:19 (New American Bible)

especially when considering that this kind of mentality is well-documented in the ancient Near East. For instance, in the Torah we find the story of Abraham burying his people (to include his wife Sarah) in the cave at Hebron. This site is still a point of pilgrimage for the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to this day. Furthermore, the story of Joseph (as mentioned above), is yet another example of this practice being carried out.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are many inferences that can be made regarding Chalcolithic burial practices in the southern Levant by implementing rhetorical theory, including persuasion and pedagogy. These inferences constitute a possible answer to the questions that have been posed by various scholars in the field of Near Eastern archaeology, such as, but not limited to, “Why were burial practices in the Chalcolithic Levant so highly ritualistic?” and, “What lasting effects (if any) did these practices have for subsequent communities inhabiting the southern Levant?” While there are a number of different ideas proposed herein, the main argument presented is that these practices were in fact pedagogical tools used in order to pass on ideas and beliefs regarding life, death, and the afterlife.

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