What is a ‘House of a God’?

By Matthew Susnow

In the ancient Near East, there was a long tradition of calling temples “houses of the gods.” But what is a house, as opposed to a temple, and what is the relationship between the two? References in Late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit in Syria and a letter found at Amarna in Egypt (sent from the king of Byblos) clarify that temples were referred to as houses. This was probably also the case during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages in a region further south known as the southern Levant or Canaan (ca. 1950–1150 BCE), although there are few texts from the region. Later Iron Age sources, such as the Hebrew Bible, Phoenician and Punic inscriptions, and Aramaic texts, continue the tradition.

But was this actually the case? Did Canaanites call, and in turn, perceive, the temples of the gods as houses? When exploring this question, it seems pertinent 1) to document temple and domestic architecture of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and 2) to investigate how these respective spaces were actually used (Fig. 1).
To address the latter question of how temple space was actually used, a spatial analysis of the finds from every Canaanite temple in the region must be conducted, the results of which must then be compared to those from Middle and Late Bronze domestic units.

This method leads to two remarkable conclusions. First, in no case did temple architecture mimic the architectural plans of their domestic counterparts. This can easily be noted in the layouts of temples from sites such as Hazor, Nahariya, Megiddo, Beth Shean, Tell el-Hayyat, Tel Mevorakh and Tel Nami (Fig. 2). Temples did NOT look like houses (Fig. 3).
Second, the repertoire of activities in temples is starkly different than in homes. Temple activities emphasized consumption and feasting. This contrast is particularly evident at temples such as the Southern Temple at Hazor, the road-side sanctuary at Tel Mevorakh, and most conspicuously, the Fosse Temple at Latish (Fig. 4). Even the Middle Bronze Canaanite-style migdal temple from the Hyksos capital of Avaris (Tell el-Dab’a) in Egypt demonstrated this trend. On the other hand, Canaanite homes contained much larger amounts of cooking and storage, features almost lacking altogether in most temples. Temples, therefore, were NOT used like houses. One exception to this is the small rural
temple from Tell el-Hayyat in the Jordan Valley, which had comparatively large amounts of vessels related to storage and cooking.

Fig. 4: Comparison of average temple and household assemblages, with emphasis on bowls (consumption), cooking and storage.

These two observations suggest a dialectic between temple and house, and between sacred and profane. This should not be so surprising. Temples should be different than houses. Are temples not spaces set aside for special activities related to deity worship?

Maybe it is simplistic to assume the linguistic terminology of “house” that appears in texts should be directly reflected in architectural plans of temples.

In Mesopotamia, however, temples were indeed constructed with plans similar to domestic layouts and had generally the same type of functions as houses, with the obvious addition of demarcated space dedicated for and activities related to religious worship (Fig. 5). There, the religious function was not the sole role of the temple. The same is true of Hittite temples. In both contexts, temples were institutions, acting as administrative complexes that extended beyond their role as spaces for cultic activities. However, this is not the case with temples in Canaan.
Fig. 5: Mesopotamian domestic (1) and temple (2) architecture. There is a clear resemblance between the layout of the house and temple, with a series of rooms constructed around a central, internal courtyard.

If a house signifies familiarity, comfort, ownership and control and responsibility over private matters, perhaps a temple constructed along a similar plan would elicit these very emotions upon entering. Anyone from that cultural group who entered the temple would recognize it was modeled on domestic space. What then does it mean if a temple does not resemble a house?

During the Early Bronze Age, temples – like contemporary houses – had broad-room layouts. In this sense, temples did architecturally seem to mirror domestic space. But in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, temples no longer have any resemblance to the domestic sphere. This is evident in their layouts and in the placement of courtyards, the most communal spaces.
Temple architecture can be categorized into three main types: a standardized monumental migdal plan (Fig. 2: 1,2), irregular layouts (Fig. 2: 3,5,6), or open-air precincts lacking architecture altogether. These temples were free standing, either facing or surrounded by the courtyard (Fig. 6). No examples are based on the plan of the typical Canaanite courtyard houses that had a series of rooms situated around the courtyard. The courtyards were integral internal units within houses themselves, not surrounding the exterior edifices as in temples.

What does this mean for worship? How does architecture, and a shift away from recognizable “domestic” forms, affect the religious experience? First, it is likely that the large urban, elite-controlled temples were mainly off limits for the majority of the populace. That said, these spaces did not elicit a “domestic” feeling upon entering. The large towering migdal temples, even from a distance, marked themselves as awe-inspiring, reaching up to the heavens, vastly different than courtyard houses (Fig. 7).
In fact, Canaanite palaces were more in line architecturally with houses; even for ruling elites who controlled and built large urban temples, these spaces did not reflect their own notions of the “domestic”. Rather, public cultic spaces were constructed in such a way as to signal themselves as different, the (w)holy other.

For Canaanites in the southern Levant, the houses of the gods were diametrically opposed to the houses of humans. Perhaps what Canaanites experienced when entering sacred space – whether built up and monumental or completely open air – was a space that signaled itself as different from all other types. It was not recognizable as a home in the human sphere, but was different, set apart, and unlike all other types of spaces in the landscape.

These temples would have immediately been recognized as sacred; upon entering such a space, one exited the human realm and entered that of the divine. The sense of familiarity and comfort of the home was lost, and was contrasted with unfamiliar and unique activities performed within Canaanite cultic spaces. And the deities that dwelled in these alien spaces had to be approached in an equally unfamiliar way.

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