

A Bowl of Bulls

Early Bronze Age I Bovine Symbolism at Tel Megiddo East

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The discovery of a unique Early Bronze Age I large shallow bowl with figurative bull imagery at Tel Megiddo East adds new dimensions to the cult at the Great Temple of Megiddo and in the EB cultures of the Galilee.

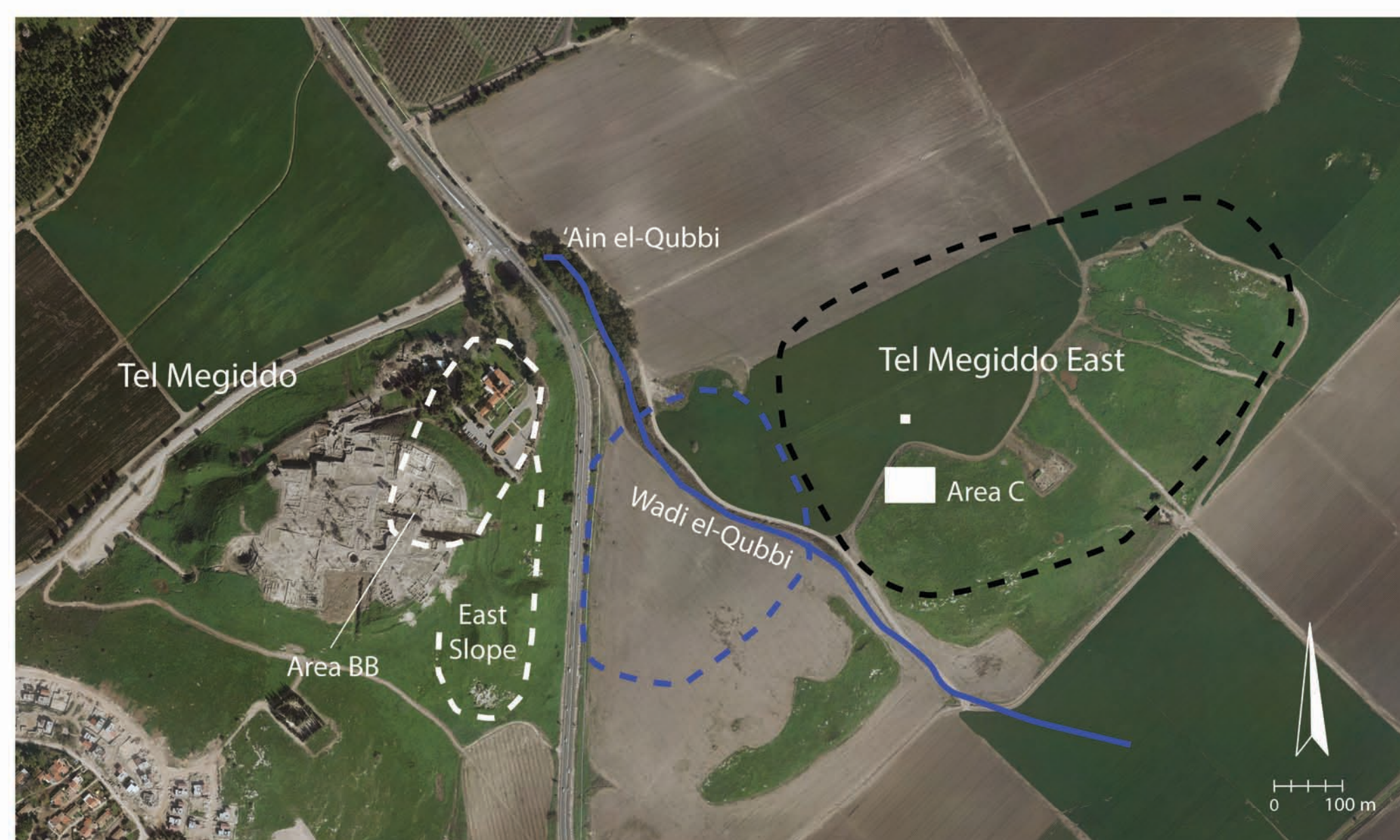


Figure 1. Location of Tel Megiddo East.

The Great Temple and Tel Megiddo East

The extraordinary discovery of the massive Great Temple of the Early Bronze Age I (ca. 3300-3100 BCE) at Tel Megiddo has revolutionized our understanding of the beginnings of complex society in the Southern Levant (Figs. 1, 2). At 1100m², it is three times larger than any other EB temple. Equally impressive are the precision of the craftsmanship, the scale of the labor involved, and the underlying organization of the society responsible for it.

In order to contextualize this unexpected monument, the Jezreel Valley Regional Project (JVRP) conducted four seasons of excavation at the site of Tel Megiddo East (Fig. 3), approximately 400m east of the Temple. Several of the buildings were outstanding, and included what may be a large hypostyle hall and another well-constructed rectangular building with a basalt table at its center. Both were laid out according to the same metrological standards as the Great Temple.

The vessel discussed here was discovered on the floor of a third building which featured two rectilinear rooms side by side (Fig. 3). The floor and walls of the larger room were coated with a white chalk paste, a feature otherwise known only from the Great Temple itself.

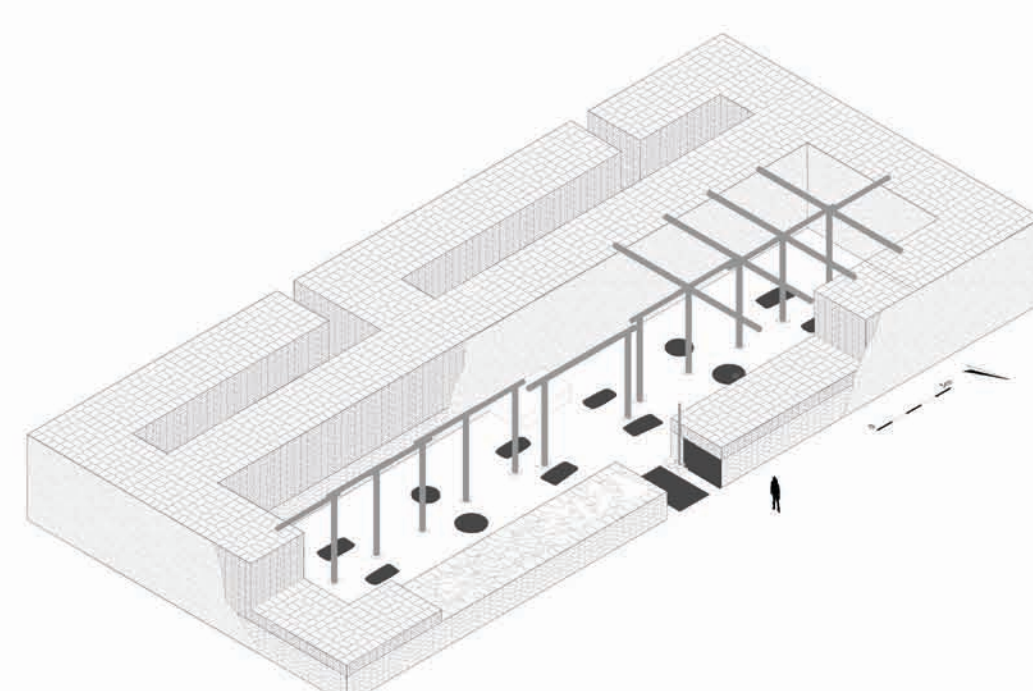


Figure 2. Reconstruction of EB I temple at Tel Megiddo.

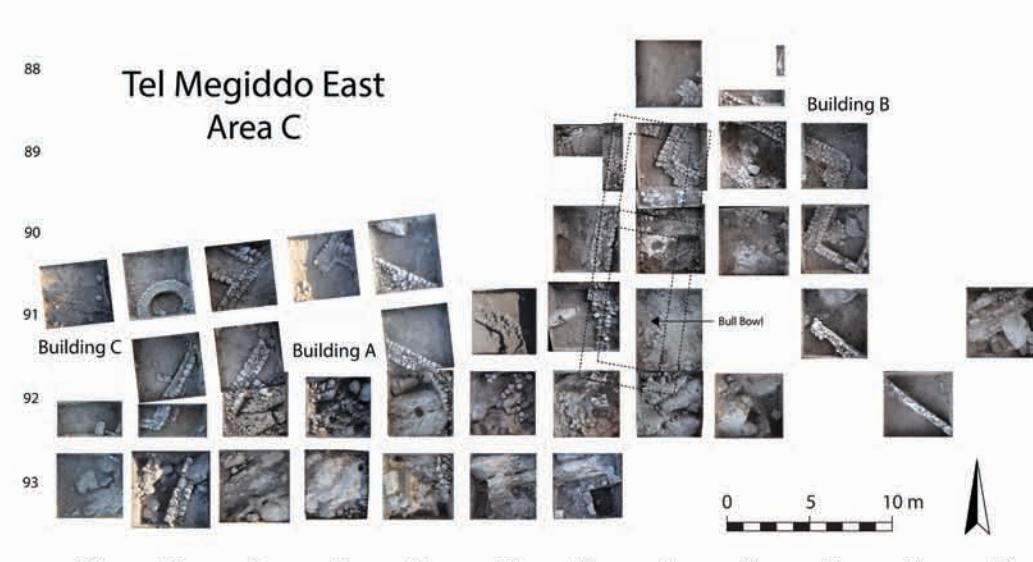


Figure 3. Aerial view of part of the TME site during excavation, showing the find context of the bull bowl.

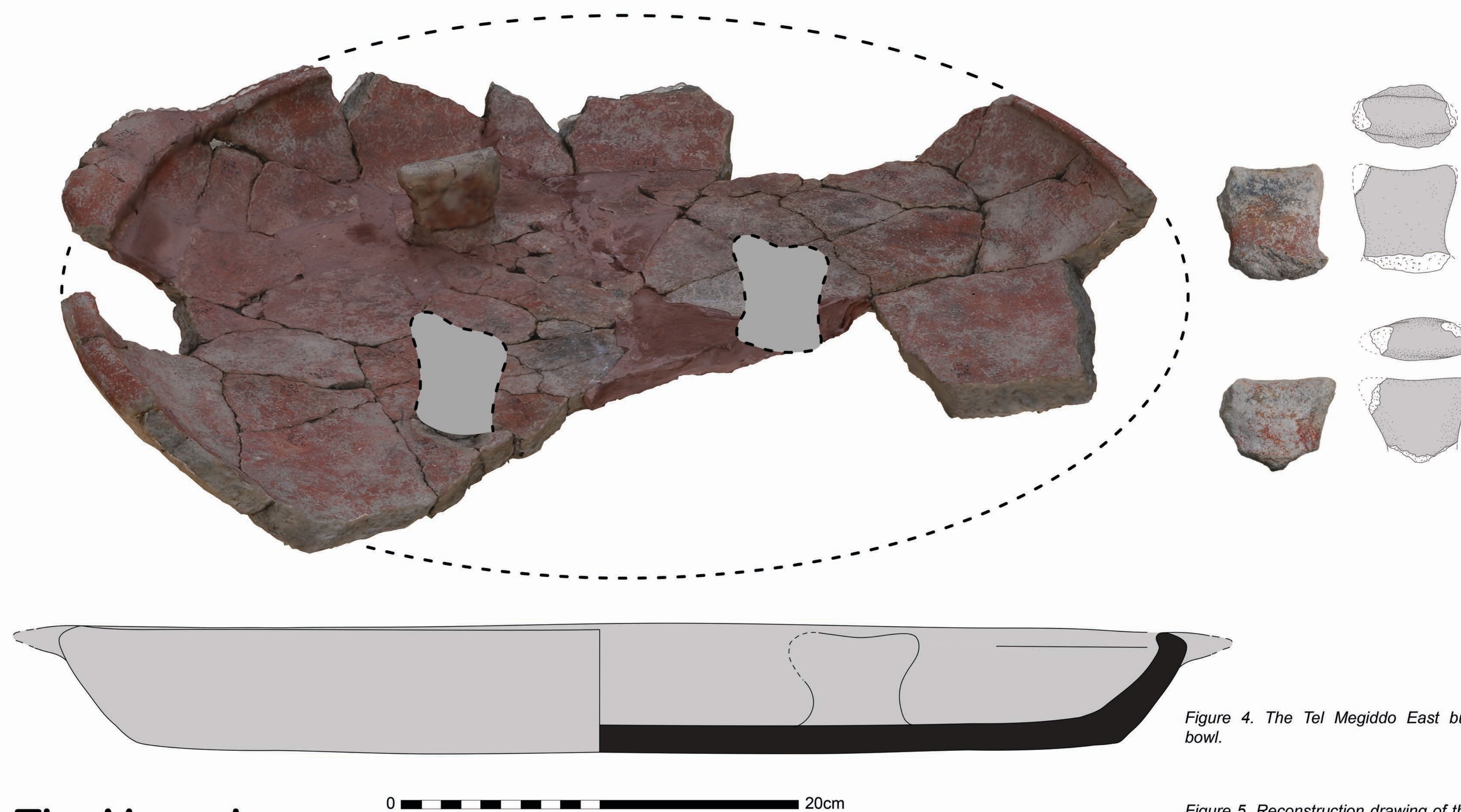


Figure 4. The Tel Megiddo East bull bowl.

Figure 5. Reconstruction drawing of the bowl.

The Vessel

The large shallow bowl (58.50cm diam.) has a flat base. The walls of the vessel extend out about 45° from the base and curve inward slightly, culminating in an inverted rim. One ledge handle is preserved, joined to the rim. At the center of the bowl are three figurative protrusions reminiscent of bovine heads - arranged 'facing' one another. Discoloration between and on them may indicate burning. The interior and exterior sides of the vessel are coated in a red slip. The base is rough and undecorated. The fabric is composed of coarse straw and non-plastic inclusions - typical of coarse wares of the time and region.

Bovine Symbolism in the Ancient World

Bovine imagery and symbolism have been part of the cultic and art repertoire in the Near East and beyond since at least the Neolithic era. By the third millennium BCE, bovine imagery was associated with the key socio-economic role of cattle breeding. From the famed Minoan "horns of consecration" in Crete (Fig. 6), to Cyprus, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant, cattle horns became a quintessential symbol of divinity, power and fertility. Within the general body of cattle symbolism, an emphasis on heads and horns is apparent. It is possible that horns had significance beyond that of complete heads, or were a visual shorthand for complete crania, whole animals, or particular ceremonies.



Figure 6. Composite horns of consecration from Petsopas peak sanctuary, Crete (courtesy of Ministry of Culture, Greece).

EB Southern Levant

Bulls and oxen are depicted in various media throughout the Early Bronze Age in the Southern Levant, reflecting the bull's increasing importance in the agricultural economy. Clay bull figurines, vessels, statues, drawings and paraphernalia are found in temples, tombs and private houses (Figs. 7, 8). Most scholars propose that they were used as ritual or magical objects. These representations are rather schematic, primarily identified by the crescent-shaped horns extending sideways and pointing upwards.

Bull symbolism persisted throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. An established cultic tradition involved burning incense on a four-horned altar, symbolizing a ritual offering to the gods. Ba'al, the storm god, is likewise portrayed with horns or as a bull figure. In the Bible, horns represent strength, royalty and political power.



Figure 7. Cattle figurines in a clay bowl, found at Far'ah (N).

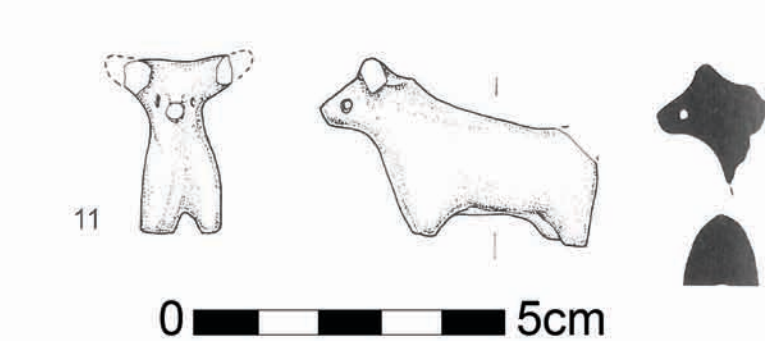


Figure 8. Clay cattle figurine from Tel Bet Yerah.

Interpreting the TME Bowl

In light of this compelling background, we identify the appendages on the interior of the TME bowl as representations of bull horns, and the vessel as a cultic accoutrement drawing on bovine ideological symbolism. The signs of burning in the center of the bowl and its ostentatious size are also compatible with a ritual usage. Secondly, the aforementioned unusual architecture of the building in which the vessel was found may suggest a non-residential and perhaps high-status context for any postulated cult practice. Additional bovine appendages and the rim and base of an identical bowl were recovered at TME (Fig. 9), reinforcing the possibility that this was a site of religious significance.

Our successful restoration of the TME bowl also allows us to identify similar vessels within the Great Temple at Tel Megiddo (previously published; Fig. 10). This finding at TME also confirms that identical bovine appendages recovered at Qiryat Ata (Fig. 11) and Tel Yaqush (Fig. 12) come from similar bowls.



Figure 9. Bovine appendages from other contexts at Tel Megiddo East.

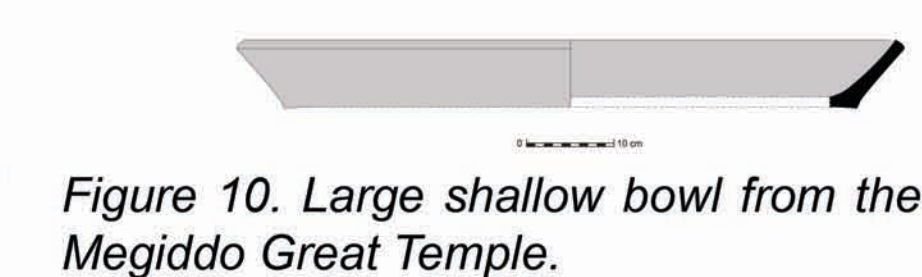


Figure 10. Large shallow bowl from the Megiddo Great Temple.

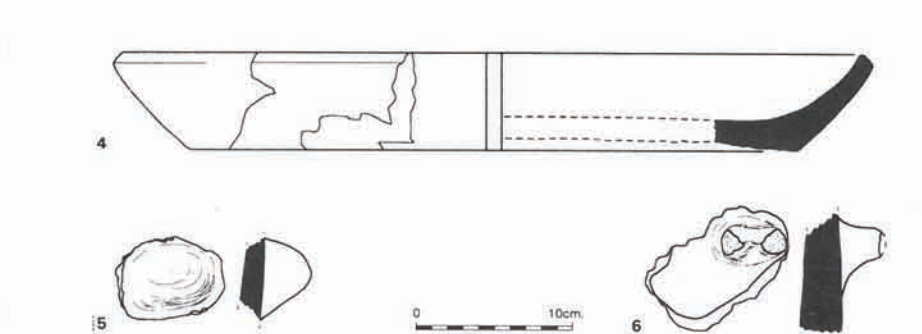


Figure 11. Several large shallow bowls were found together with bovine appendages at Qiryat Ata (Fantalkin 2000).

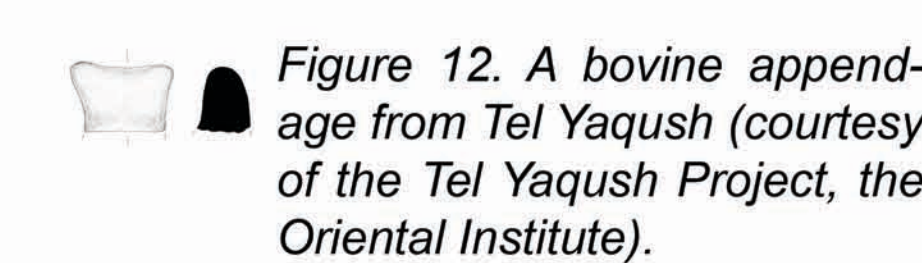


Figure 12. A bovine appendage from Tel Yaqush (courtesy of the Tel Yaqush Project, the Oriental Institute).

Conclusions: the TME Bowl in Context

The sequence of grand EB I temples discovered on Tel Megiddo, adjacent to TME, illuminates the crystallization of city and state during the Early Bronze Age. The ideology justifying the concentration of power in the hands of few individuals depended upon visual symbols and rituals which united the population around the administrative institutions. The use of horned platters was perhaps an attempt to create a connection between the rising status of the rulers and the symbolism of the bull. This cult may also have involved sacrifice of real bulls and belief about fertility and rebirth.

We do not know yet whether the horned platters were manufactured in regional production centers, i.e., for trade, or made locally at the different sites. Nor do we know whether they were fashioned by craft specialists who functioned under the auspices of the temples. In any case, the horned platters are an excellent example of how metaphysical concepts and perceptions of the supernatural may become embodied in solid, symbolically charged objects.

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