

Hai Ashkenazi and Raphael Greenberg

## Shattered Maceheads at Early Bronze Age Tel Bet Yerah: Symbolic Power and Destruction, but Whose?

### Introduction

The mace, often viewed as the first weapon intended solely for human combat, appeared in western Asia during the Neolithic period (in the seventh millennium BCE) and reached its widest distribution during the fourth and third millennia BCE.<sup>1</sup> Maces and maceheads appear to have acquired a largely symbolic role from an early stage in their history, as suggested by the widespread use of precious metal (arsenical copper) and exotic stone for macehead manufacture in the late fifth millennium BCE (the south Levantine Chalcolithic period): these artefacts, which in some cases were never hafted, were clearly not used in battle. In the Early Bronze Age, spheroid, barrel-shaped and piriform maceheads were made of hard and heavy limestone or, rarely, calcite, with bores that could accommodate only thin shafts, rendering the maces virtually useless in combat; this suggests that Early Bronze Age maces, too, were largely symbols of power and of formally sanctioned violence.<sup>2</sup>

The Early Bronze (EB) Age of the southern Levant, ca. 3700–2500/2450 BCE, is usually subdivided into three subperiods.<sup>3</sup> EB I is characterised by small and large villages practicing a Mediterranean economy; fortifications first appeared at the end of the period (ca. 3400–3100/3000 BCE). In EB II (ca. 3100–2850 BCE), a major restructuring of the political economy led to the emergence of a broad network of fortified towns and villages exhibiting a high degree of cultural uniformity and little evidence of administration or social stratification in the form of staple or wealth finance, prestige items, craft specialisation, or large private buildings. During the EB III (ca. 2850–2500/2450 BCE), prestige items became more common and palatial structures or

mansions were built in several fortified centers. At the same time, large parts of the countryside – including many fortified settlements of the EB II – were depopulated. It is at the transition to EB III that we first see evidence for the arrival of a distinct, non-local material cultural assemblage at sites of the northern Jordan Valley, which has been termed ‘Khirbet Kerak’ after the type-site of Khirbet el-Kerak (Tel Bet Yerah) where it was first identified. This material culture consists of highly burnished black and red pottery (Khirbet Kerak Ware), clay andirons, a distinct lithic technology, symbolic objects and non-local ground-stone artefacts. Building technology includes wattle and daub (unlike the local dried mudbrick construction) and polished and fired clay furnishings. This material culture is attributed to migrant settlers, identified as mobile, non-urban groups associated with the Kura-Araxes/Early Transcaucasian Culture of South-Eastern Anatolia.<sup>4</sup>

Khirbet el-Kerak/Tel Bet Yerah, a large mound located on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (**Fig. 1**), was settled throughout the Early Bronze Age. Excavations at the site, conducted since the 1930s, uncovered a large fourth millennium village succeeded by a fortified town that went through several phases of construction and decline in its six centuries of existence. The urbanizing phase of the EB II, radiocarbon-dated to ca. 3100–2900 BCE, is marked by the emergence of orthogonal street-grids in parts of the site and collective construction efforts, suggesting that some sort of political organization existed, perhaps composed of heads of families or of larger kinship groups. Alongside the evidence for shared concepts of order, the material culture of this phase shows considerable uniformity – as in other sites of the period. The EB II–III transition – like that of other sites – sees greater elite articulation through material markers as well as a reduction in collective activities, e.g., a shift from a central

<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg 2010; Sebbane 2009; Yadin 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Miroschedji 2014; Regev *et al.* 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg/Shimelmitz/Iserlis 2014.

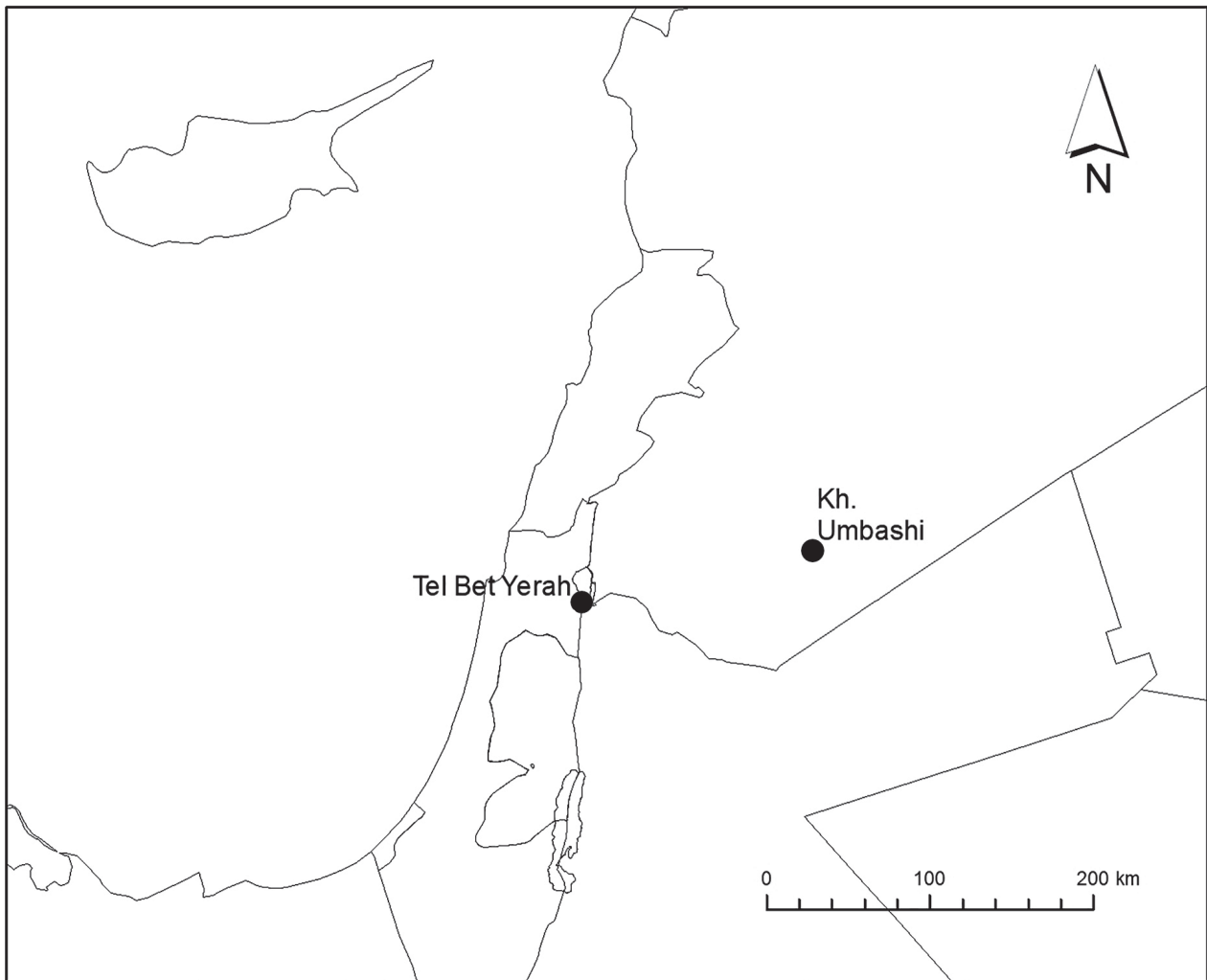


Fig. 1 Location of sites discussed (map by H. Ashkenazi)

grain processing and pastoral production during the EB II to a more dispersed mode of production during the EB III.<sup>5</sup> A unique marker of this transition is the monumental – but functionally enigmatic – Circles Building constructed near the highest point of the mound (described below). It appears to have been intended to regulate the collection and redistribution of grain, perhaps by the EB II governing council, but was abandoned before completion precisely at the same time as the entry of makers and users of Khirbet Kerak Ware (henceforth, Khirbet Kerak Ware people) into the site.

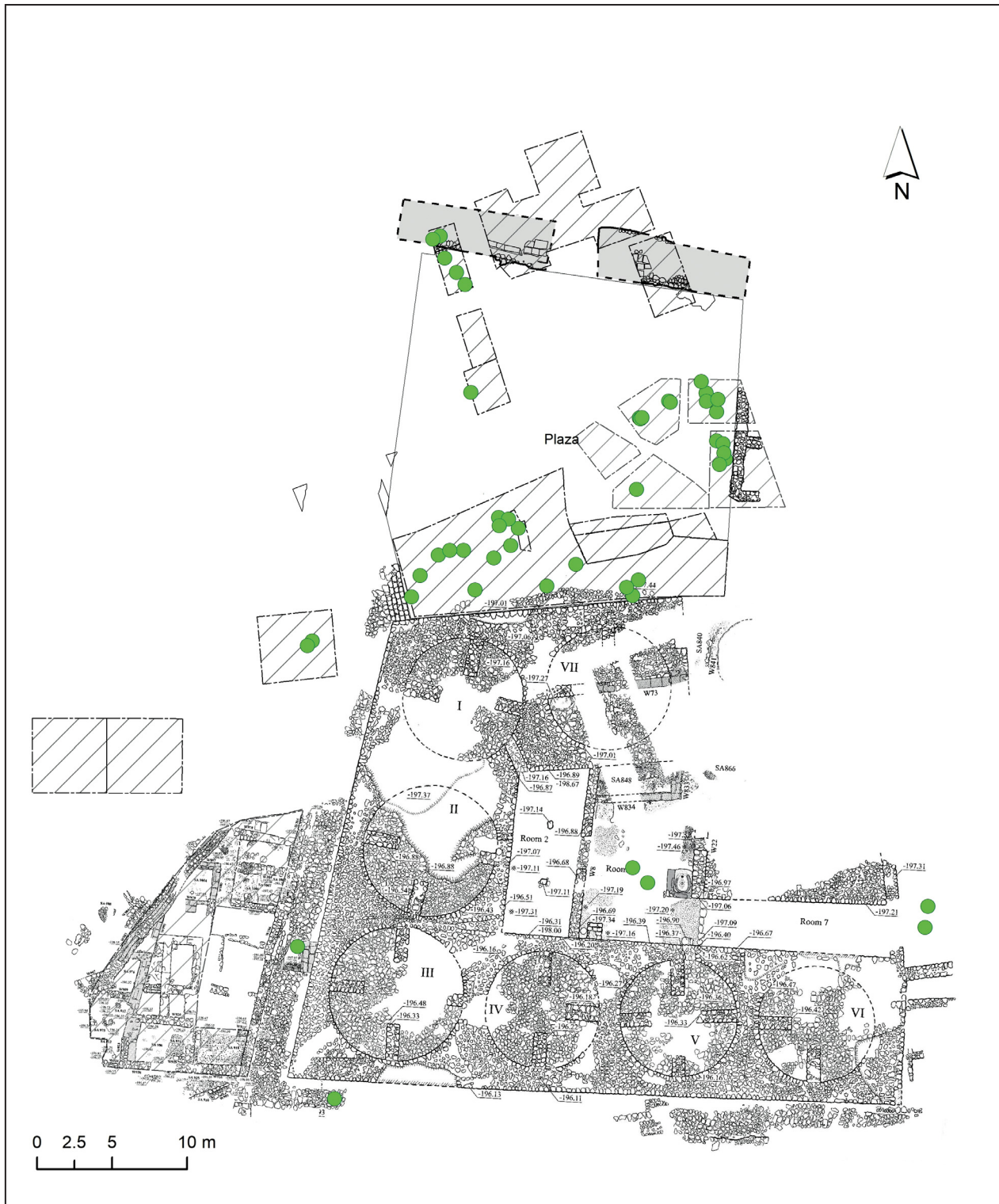
Scores of polished stone maceheads and macehead fragments were recovered over the years at Tel Bet Yerah, the great majority of them in a large court or plaza located north of the Circles Building. The large quantities found at this location, more than at any other Early Bronze Age site in the Levant, raise questions regarding the typical

manufacture and use-history of Early Bronze Age maces and the reasons for their concentration in this specific place. In the following pages we suggest the different possibilities for the activities leading to this concentration.

### The maceheads in context

As noted above, the greatest concentration of maceheads was found near the Circles Building, the only public building excavated to date at Bet Yerah. The building, 41 × 33 m in size, consists of a massive U-shaped stone platform with 7 sunken circles on it, an enclosed room and a paved courtyard (Fig. 2). The building, which replaced an agglomeration of EB II houses found beneath it, was apparently intended to serve as a collective granary, the circles marking the foundations of domed silos. The construction process, possibly begun in late EB II, came to a halt after the completion of the stone founda-

<sup>5</sup> Berger 2013; 2018.



**Fig. 2** The Circles Building and the plaza (recently excavated areas are hatched; location spots of maceheads are marked with green dots) (courtesy of the Tel Bet Yerah Archaeological Project)

tion in early EB III, and its mudbrick superstructure was never completed. It was later occupied by Khirbet Kerak people, who modified it and seem to have used its spaces for domestic purposes.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg *et al.* 2017.

The building was bordered on the north by a large open space, or plaza, delimited by a massive mudbrick wall built no later than the early EB II, indicating that the plaza was part of the original urban plan. By the beginning of EB III, structures built on the eastern and western sides of the plaza

created a 24 × 23 m trapezoidal court (i.e., about 500 m<sup>2</sup>) that fronted the foundations of the Circles Building. It was at this stage that the plaza was paved with a layer of packed mud-plaster, upon which layer after layer of refuse deposition began to accumulate. Four distinct stages of deposition have been identified, all dated to the EB III and all characterized by numerous artifacts associated with the Khirbet Kerak (Kura-Araxes) material culture assemblage – ceramic vessels, andirons, figurines, and more – alongside a wealth of bio-archaeological remains.<sup>7</sup> Notably, of the 97 maceheads and macehead fragments found in all excavation areas on the mound, 73 were found in the refuse layers associated with the plaza or in later deposits overlying them (that is, in fills associated with Hellenistic and later construction that intruded on the earlier layers) (Figs. 2–3). Since none of the fragments could be refitted, and since only about a quarter of the plaza has been excavated, we assume that the total number of shattered maceheads in the plaza may have been significantly greater. Comparing this find to other sites in the Southern Levant, these figures seem even more impressive; with the exception of Khirbet Umbashi in Syria<sup>8</sup> (see below) no Early Bronze Age site in Israel or the neighbouring regions has yielded more than 36 maceheads, and in most of them only a handful were found.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above, the only similar find of broken maceheads in this period has been described by the excavators of Khirbet Umbashi, southern Syria (Fig. 1), where more than 57 limestone macehead fragments were discovered. Most of them were located in and above a huge deposit of animal bones, associated with a large ceremonial building, dated to the first half of the third millennium BCE. The Umbashi maceheads are usually broken lengthwise, along the axis of the drilled bore.<sup>10</sup> The Bet Yerah maceheads, in contrast, show completely haphazard breakage patterns. The Umbashi finds suggest some connection between public ritual and intentional destruction of maceheads. Unfortunately, they cannot offer a definitive answer to the issues raised at Bet Yerah.

## Preliminary interpretation

A full understanding of the macehead deposit at Bet Yerah requires a consideration of the complete *chaîne opératoire*: the materials used and their origin, the production technique, microwear evidence for their primary – and perhaps secondary – usage, and their discard (including a consideration of how they were collected, how they were broken, and how they ended up in the plaza refuse deposits). Since we are in a preliminary stage of our investigation, we will focus on the latter parts of the sequence, offering several scenarios for their role as complete and as broken objects.

### Some assumptions

We assume that the Early Bronze maceheads were symbolic items: insignia that represented the power, masculinity and high social status of their possessors, and, although shaped as weapons, they were probably not intended for use in battle. Their manufacture from calcite or hard limestone demanded a high degree of craftsmanship, and as such they were relatively rare and valuable. However, the considerable uniformity of the maceheads and the absence of any personalization points in the direction of distributed power (the ascription of similar status to many individuals) or, alternately, to commodification and alienability (the production and accumulation of exchangeable products of recognized value). As insignias, there would be little to be gained in the individual accumulation of maceheads, unless they could be conspicuously displayed (e.g., in a procession) or ceremonially destroyed (e.g., as the spoils of victory). As commodities exchanged between elites, they might have had intrinsic, cumulative value, but only as complete objects and within a broadly shared value system.

We also assume that the fragments in the plaza represent the end of a full *chaîne opératoire*, rather than an aborted one (i.e., breakage during production). This is based on the absence of any blanks or partly drilled objects and on preliminary observations of polish and wear, which suggest that all the objects belonged to finished products, often with well-worn bores, that were subsequently broken.

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg *et al.* 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Échallier/Braemer 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Sebbane 2009, 205–206.

<sup>10</sup> Braemer/Échallier/Taraqji 2004; Échallier/Braemer 2004; Vila/Vallerin 2004.



Fig. 3a-d Several of the macehead fragments (photos by H. Ashkenazi)

### Who accumulated and destroyed the maces?

There were two communities who may have been implicated in the collection and destruction of the maceheads: the original inhabitants of Bet Yerah (whether elite or commoners) and the incoming 'Khirbet Kerak Ware people'. Let us review the possible scenarios and permutations.

*Khirbet Kerak Ware people accumulated, fragmented and dispersed the maceheads.* The new inhabitants of the Circles Building and plaza might be considered the 'immediate suspects', since (a) the fragments are found in deposits characterized overwhelmingly by Khirbet Kerak pottery (some 90 % of the typologically diagnostic pieces), as well as by andirons, figurines, burnished plaster fragments and lithic techniques, all associated with the Kura-Araxes cultural sphere; (b) they were an alien community, whose entry to the site might have been accompanied by conflict and who might not have been constrained by local concepts of value.

Militating against this scenario is the nature of the plaza's archaeological deposit itself – an accumulation of domestic refuse almost entirely given over to remnants of food preparation and consumption – and the absence of any refittable fragments among the maceheads, which points to a significant amount of curation and transport intervening between the time of breakage and their deposition in the midden. Quantification of the raw pottery sherd material (diagnostic and non-diagnostic) in the plaza by fabric group indicates the presence of a significant number of residual items, brought up from earlier strata, supporting the possibility that the macehead fragments also originate in earlier deposits. Moreover, even if we

were to assume that the maceheads were broken by the people depositing refuse in the plaza, the accumulation of such a large number in the plaza would still require an explanation: the maceheads were precious items and – unless they were simply abandoned in the Circles Building and plaza – collecting large numbers of them required the exercise of considerable powers of persuasion or intimidation. Other areas of Khirbet Kerak occupation on the mound did not produce macehead fragments, nor was the entry of Khirbet Kerak people into the site accompanied by any evidence for violence. Their own material culture includes no weaponry, nor are there any destruction events associated with their arrival. Thus, while Khirbet Kerak Ware people – indifferent to the value of these objects – might conceivably be implicated in the fragmentation of the maceheads, using them for activities like food preparation, cracking large bones for their marrow, or crushing pottery and other hard materials for use as ceramic temper, they are not likely to have been the ones who brought them to the scene. The subsequent dispersal of the fragments, however, may well be associated with their ongoing practices of refuse disposal and redeposition.

*Local leaders or commoners accumulated and fragmented the maceheads.* Under this scenario, the maceheads would have completed their use-life and undergone fragmentation before the arrival of Khirbet Kerak Ware people on the scene. They would therefore (a) have been accumulated by an institution or figure of authority situated in proximity to the plaza – or by someone directly confronting such an institution or authority – during EB II or at the EB II–III transition, and subsequently destroyed there, or (b) have been de-

posited individually, over a long period of time, in the plaza. Under scenario *a*, their fragmentation is likely to have been a singular event, whereas under scenario *b*, a repeated ceremonial practice. The fragments were later mixed with the material remains of the Khirbet Kerak Ware people. This thesis explains the accumulation process, but its explanation of the discard/post-depositional process is less straightforward (or rather, requires a higher evidentiary bar), since the maceheads would have been of high symbolic or economic value to the local community, and their destruction would require extraordinary circumstances.

Such extraordinary circumstances could include the following:

1. *Ritual*. The broken maceheads might have been deposited in the plaza as a part of a repeated ceremonial practice, such as death rites of leading members of the community, in which items belonging to the deceased were ritually “killed”,<sup>11</sup> or in the context of ceremonial or ritual combat conducted in the plaza.<sup>12</sup>
2. *Conspicuous consumption*. Elite actors or institutions may have intentionally destroyed large numbers of maceheads to demonstrate their power or wealth or as an emergency remedy (as part of a broader set of sacrificial gestures) at a time of crisis.
3. *Political conflict or resistance*. The destruction of the symbols of status or power may have occurred in the context of internal political conflict between elites, or in the context of social upheavals, where commoners (local or incoming) demonstrated their resistance to the authority of the ruling hegemony.
4. *Political collapse*. The maceheads could have been abandoned by local elites prior to the abandonment of the town in its entirety, or at least of its political-ceremonial center. Subsequent fragmentation (during the Khirbet Kerak Ware phase) would be the product of indifference to their value, rather than active resistance.

Each of these scenarios and their permutations might be associated with observable patterns in the archaeological record. For example, redundant intentional breakage of the maceheads, observable directly and by means of experimentation, would suggest highly motivated fragmentation

– i.e., not the kind of breakage that is incidental to combat or to secondary use. A long period of deposition during EB II should leave some indication in deposits beneath the plaza floor. Rituals of sacrifice and conspicuous consumption should be accompanied by items other than maceheads. While all these measures require full consideration – keeping in mind that only about a quarter of the plaza was excavated – we can already state that soundings beneath the plaza do not support the scenario of ongoing accumulation in EB II. Moreover, initial microscopic analysis of the assemblage shows signs of repeated breakage on individual fragments and little evidence of use-wear. Thus, the bulk of the evidence at this point in our work suggests a short-term event. Given the assumed connotations of maces in EBA society, such an event would have had political implications, which should be related to the many independent signs of crisis at the EB II–III transition, not least among them – the abandonment of the Circles Building during its construction.

## Summary

The large quantities of broken maceheads found within a strategically located and well-defined public area at Tel Bet Yerah raise many questions regarding the significance of the collection, usage, destruction and discard of these items. After considering several of the more likely scenarios (Fig. 4), we argue that the people most likely to have possessed enough social or economic clout to acquire a large quantity of these relatively rare and valuable items were local elites. The next stage, in which the maceheads were intentionally fragmented, allows for multiple scenarios. The most plausible of them include ritual, conspicuous consumption, the remains of political conflict or resistance, or secondary use after an abandonment due to political collapse. Each of these may be connected with the abandonment of the Circles Building in mid-construction, which is symptomatic of a political crisis that overtook Tel Bet Yerah at the end of the EB II.

The Early Bronze maceheads were not intended for battle. As stylized weapons that had lost much of their effectivity, they served mainly as symbols or insignias of power and male status in the hands of community leaders or elders, evoking their potential to inflict punitive or coercive violence. This

<sup>11</sup> Grinsell 1961.

<sup>12</sup> Arkush/Stanish 2005; Shimelmitz/Rosenberg 2013.

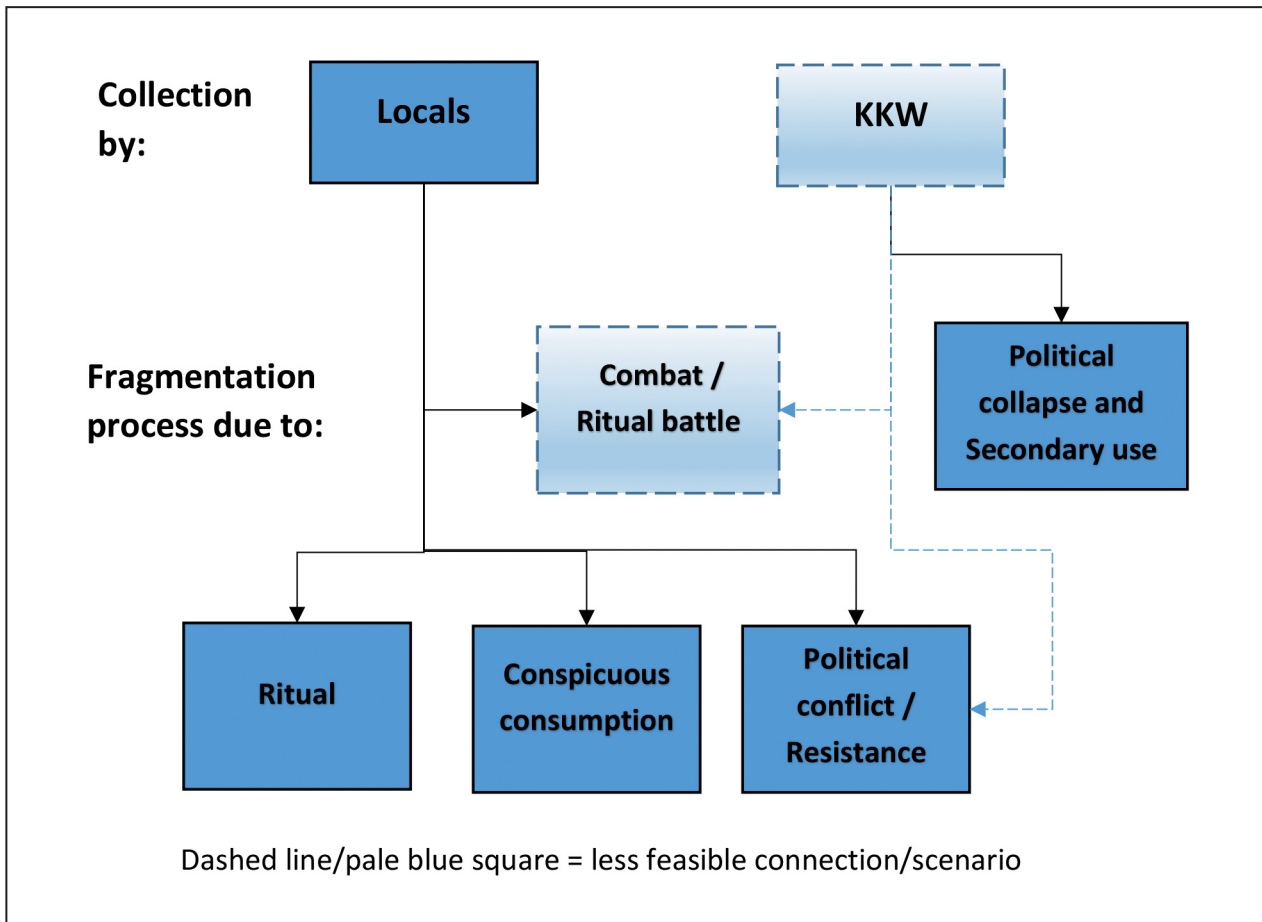


Fig. 4 Flowchart summarizing the various options for the collection and fragmentation processes (graphic by H. Ashkenazi)

phenomenon, of military trappings that function as *indexes* of power, rather than effective *instruments* of that power, is comparable to the imposing, yet tactically inferior, fortification walls of the period.<sup>13</sup> As such, the concentration of intentionally shattered maceheads in the Bet Yerah plaza is therefore most likely the product of either ritual destruction with symbolic intent or of indifference – if not intentional resistance – to the economic and social structures that gave them value.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Rüdiger Krause, Svend Hansen and the LOEWE research group for inviting us to contribute to the Fulda conference. Alon Arad provided us with quantitative details on the Bet Yerah plaza ceramic assemblage. A further investigation into the production techniques and breakage patterns of the plaza maceheads is currently underway in the Haifa University Laboratory for Ground-Stone Tools Research.

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<sup>13</sup> Greenberg/Ashkenazi 2019; Ashkenazi, forthcoming.

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### **Hai Ashkenazi and Raphael Greenberg, Shattered Maceheads at Early Bronze Age Tel Bet Yerah: Symbolic Power and Destruction, but Whose?**

An unusually large number of stone macehead fragments were found in a large open court in the Early Bronze Age site of Tel Bet Yerah, Israel. Maces, which first appear in the Levant in the seventh millennium BCE, are considered the earliest dedicated combat weapons in western Asia; in later periods they take on a symbolic role. We discuss the sequence of events leading to the accumulation of maceheads at Bet Yerah, the people who may have been implicated in it and its possible political significance.

### **Hai Ashkenazi und Raphael Greenberg, Zertrümmerte Keulenköpfe im frühbronzezeitlichen Tel Bet Yerah: symbolische Macht und Zerstörung, aber von wem?**

Eine ungewöhnlich große Anzahl an Fragmenten von steinernen Keulenköpfen wurde in einem großen, offenen Hof an dem frühbronzezeitlichen Fundort Tel Bet Yerah in Israel gefunden. Keulen, die in der Levante im siebten Jahrtausend v. u. Z. aufkommen, werden als die frühesten für den Kampf bestimmten Waffen in Westasien betrachtet; in späteren Perioden haben sie eine symbolische Rolle angenommen. Wir diskutieren die Abfolge von Ereignissen, die zur Akkumulation der Keulenköpfe in Bet Yerah geführt haben, die Leute, die darin möglicherweise verwickelt waren, und ihre mögliche politische Bedeutung.