

## WAS “ISRAELITE” SACRIFICE PRACTICED AT TEL DAN?

*Positing any cult other than an Israelite cult at Dan seems less likely when the evidence provided above is considered in light of other factors suggestive of Yahwistic worship.*

**See Also:** *Dinner at Dan* (Brill, 2013)

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The city of Dan is identified in biblical tradition as one of two locations where the infamous Jeroboam I built a shrine to rival Jerusalem and installed a golden calf (see 1 Kgs 12). The excavations at Tel Dan (Tell el-Qadi) in Area T (Figs. 1a and 1b) by the late Avraham Biran from 1968-93 seemed to confirm Iron II cultic activity at the site with the discovery of a large sacred precinct boasting the remains of what was likely a monumental four-horned altar (Biran 1994a), several small altars (Biran 1982; 1986), metal implements associated with animal sacrifice (Biran 1986; Greer 2010), painted stands (Pakman 2003), and massive amounts of unpublished animal bones and ceramic material. Yet questions remain about the nature of the cult practiced at Tel Dan and the relationship of its reconstructed rituals to the traditions preserved in the Hebrew Bible. Is the archaeological evidence congruent with Israelite sacrificial practice as the Bible suggests?

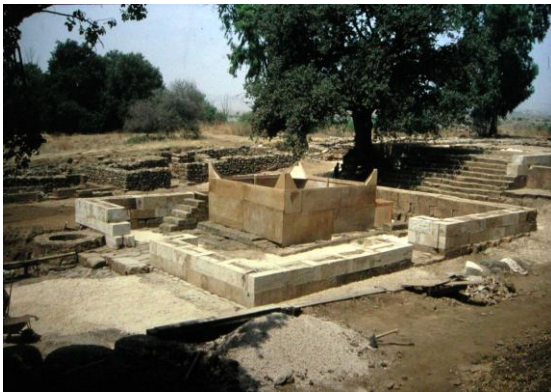


Fig. 1a. Photo of Area T Tel Dan with reconstructed altar (courtesy of Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion).

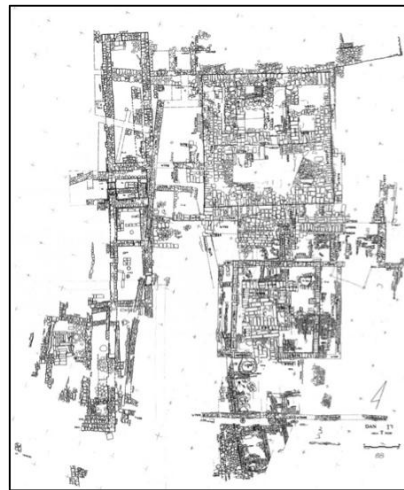


Fig. 1b. Plan of Area T Tel Dan (courtesy of Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion).

This paper, in part, presents a summary of a recent analysis of some of the previously unpublished animal bone and ceramic remains from Area T (Greer 2013) and provides some of the evidence for sacrificial eating events carried out within the precinct during the Iron II period. Correspondences between certain patterns of nonrandom distribution among the remains and prescriptions for sacrificial meals in the Hebrew Bible are highlighted, suggesting that these feasts may indeed be viewed as consistent with Israelite practice.

### A SUMMARY OF THE METHODS & RESULTS OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The published study (Greer 2013) first required a careful analysis of unpublished field diaries, locus cards, reports, photos, and drawings from the Tel Dan excavations in cooperation with David Ilan, the current director of the renewed Hebrew Union College excavations, and Ross Vos, one of the longtime Area T supervisors, in order to isolate potential feasting deposits from relatively secure contexts. Six of these deposits with remains dating primarily to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. (with Biran 1994a; *contra* Arie 2008) were identified in two spaces within Area T, the first centered around the monumental altar structure and the second confined to the western chamber complex (see, Fig. 2; on these two spheres of activity, see also Davis 2013): Southern Deposit 1 (SD1; L.2390) and 2 (SD2; L.2395 and L.2709); South-East Deposit 1 (SED1; L.2321; for SED2 and why it is excluded from the main discussion here, see Greer 2013); Northeastern Deposit (NED; L.2155); Western Deposit 1 (WD1; L.2844) and 2 (WD2; L.2881). The faunal and ceramic remains from the deposits were then analyzed yielding both similarities and differences among them, in many cases demonstrating a statistically significant (evaluated by  $\chi^2$  test) contrast between the deposits of the western chambers, on the one hand, and those of the courtyard, on the other.

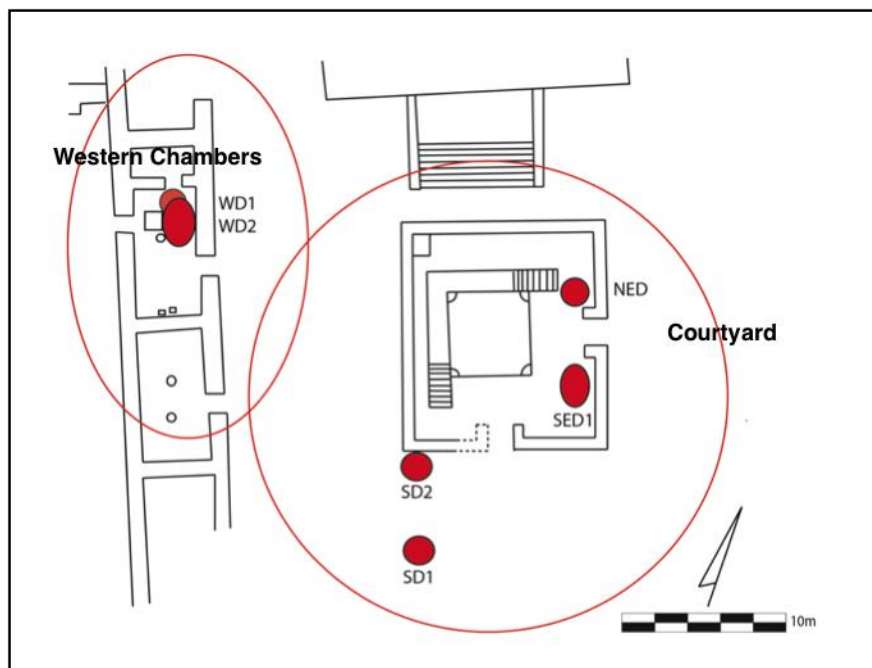


Fig. 2. The Location of the Deposits in Area T (drawn by the author after site plans provided courtesy of Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion).

Consistent with previous faunal analyses from Tel Dan (Wapnish and Hesse 1991; Greer, Hesse, Wapnish 2009; Hesse, Wapnish, and Greer 2011), the feasting deposits analyzed for this study contained the remains of almost entirely sheep and goats and cattle—the three main domesticates most prevalent at other Iron II Levantine sites (cf. Raban-Gerstel et al. 2008: 46-47)—with very few remains of other taxa (gazelle, deer, donkey, and bird; no pig remains were found among the deposits). The bones were relatively well-preserved and did not show signs of

being gnawed by predators or rodents, though many of the bones from the deposits and from the larger sample bore cut marks associated with slaughter, processing, and consumption activities of human agents (see examples in Figs. 3 and 4; cf. Binford 1978; 1981; Grantham 1995; 2000; Klenck 1995).



Fig. 3. Cut Marks on a Sheep Humerus (photo with cm scale by the author).



Fig. 4. Chop Marks on a Medium Mammal Long Bone Fragment (photo with cm scale the author).

Flint and metal blades and larger tools were also found among the remains that may have been used in these activities, as well as the remains of ceramic vessels associated with preparation and dining such as cooking pots, bowls, and jugs (see Fig. 5 for examples and Fig. 6 for proportions by deposit).

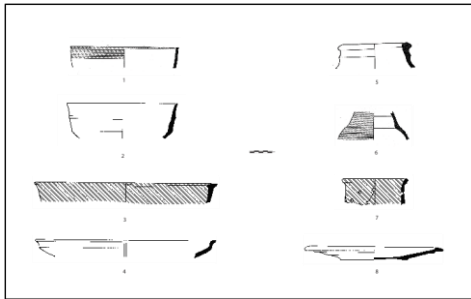


Fig. 5. Typical Deposit Assemblage, This One From SED1: 1.-2. Deep Bowls; 3.-4. Shallow Bowls; 5. Storage Jar Rim; 6. Jug Neck; 7. Strainer Cup; 8. Platter (graphic adapted by the author from plate drawings provided courtesy of Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion).

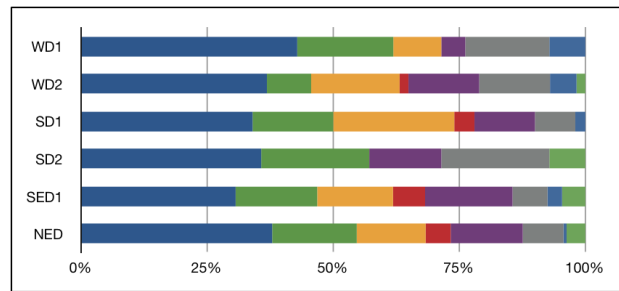


Fig. 6. Percentages of Pottery Types by Deposit, from Left to Right: Bowls (Blue); Cooking Pots (Green); Jugs (Yellow); Platters (Red); Jar (Purple); Kraters (Grey); Lamps (Light Blue); Other (Light Green).

Most important for this study is the significant contrast that was observed between the faunal and ceramic remains of the western chamber deposits and the main deposits of the courtyard. Contrast was observed in four categories (see further Greer 2013):

1. **Right-sided and left-sided limb bone fragments** (Fig. 7): the western chamber deposit WD2 (the sample size in WD1 was too small for analysis) contained 67% right-sided and

33% left-sided remains from sideable meaty limb bone sheep and goat remains (cf. Fig. 8 for location of bones) in contrast to the combined courtyard deposits containing 37% right-sided and 63% left-sided remains.

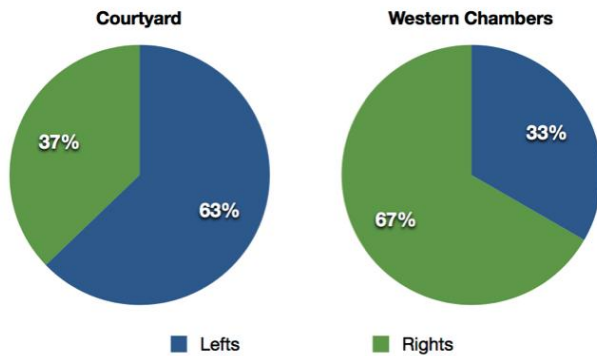


Fig. 7. Percentages of Right (Green) and Left (Blue) Forelimb and Hindlimb Portions from the Combined Totals of the Deposits of the Western Chambers (Right) and the Deposits of the Courtyard (Left).

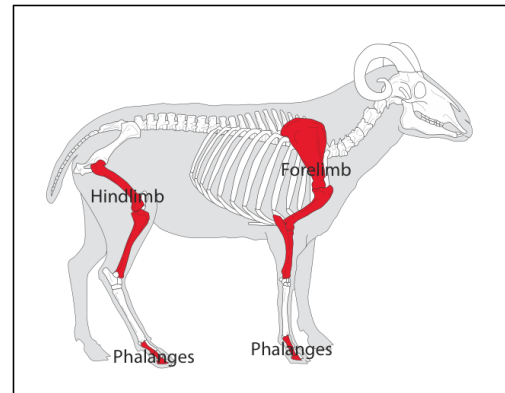


Fig. 8. Anatomical Location of Forelimb and Hindlimb Portions and Phalanges on a Sheep (adapted from illustration by M. Coutureau after Barone 1976, made available for public use at [www.archezoo.org/en-article134.html](http://www.archezoo.org/en-article134.html)).

2. **Meaty limb bone and “toe bone” fragments** (Fig. 9): in the western chamber deposits, “toe bones” (phalanges—see Fig. 8) ranged from 26% to 63% of the bone assemblages compared to meaty limb bone fragments in contrast to the courtyard deposits in which “toe bones” comprised 4-17% of the samples.

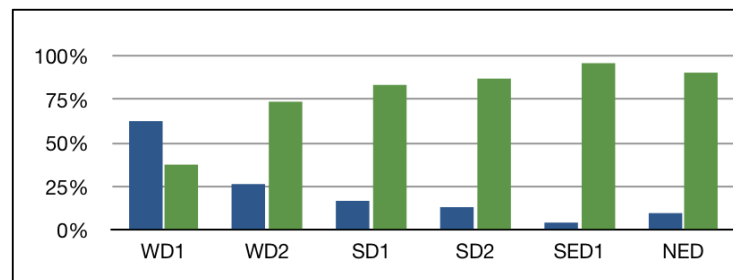


Fig. 9. Percentages of Phalanges (Blue) and Meat-bearing Long Bone Elements (Green) by Deposit.

3. **Sheep/goat concentrations** (Fig. 10): the western chamber deposits contained 80% Sheep and Goat remains compared to 74% in the main courtyard deposits, a statistically significant difference given the sample size.

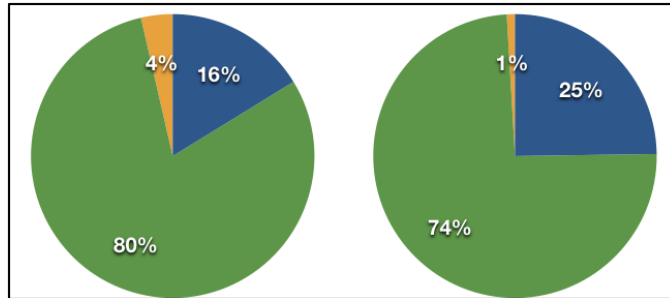


Fig. 10. Percentages of Cattle (Blue), Sheep and Goats (Green) and Other Taxa (Yellow) from the Combined Totals of the Deposits of the Western Chambers (Left) and the Deposits of the Courtyard (Right).

4. **Painted and diagnostic** (Fig. 11): in the deposits,

unpainted ceramic sherds of western chamber fragments of painted wares (for an example, see Fig. 12) comprised 11% to 25% of the assemblages in contrast to the deposits of the courtyard in which fragments of painted wares were completely absent or present as at most 6% of the assemblages.

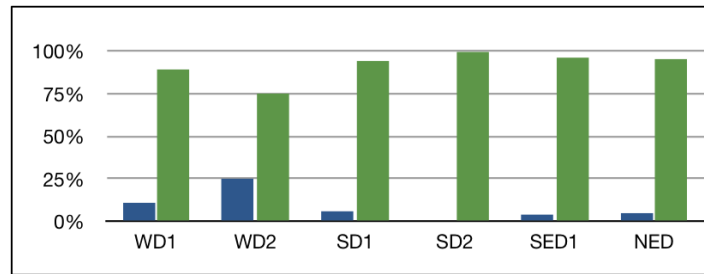


Fig. 11. Percentage of Painted Sherds (Blue) and Unpainted Diagnostic Sherds (Green) by Deposit.

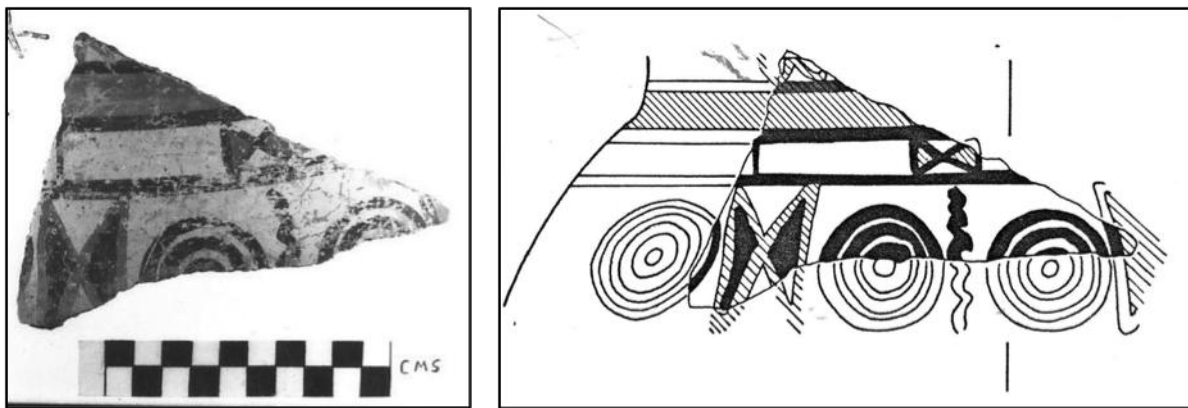


Fig. 12. Cypro-Phoenician Bichrome Style Sherd (left) with Reconstructive Sketch (right) Indicative of Fine Wares among the Deposits, This One from SED1 (photo and sketch provided courtesy of Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion).

CULTIC MEALS IN AREA T AND DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ISRAELITE CULT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE  
 Taking the faunal and ceramic evidence together and considering the cultic context of Area T (Biran 1994a; Greer 2013; Davis 2013), we can be confident that cultic meals took place in this

space during the Iron II period—but what of this evidence can aid in identifying the feasters themselves? Were they Israelites or some other Iron Age people?

Curiously, each of the four categories of statistically significant contrast noted above may be explained as an archaeological reflex of specific priestly prescriptions described in the Hebrew Bible if the area of the western chambers is viewed as the domain of Israelite priests, as Biran first suggested (see, e.g., Biran 1994a), and the courtyard as the domain of worshipers. Each is discussed specifically below according to the categories mentioned above:

1. **Right-sided and Left-sided limb bone fragments.** The most obvious potential connection with priestly prescriptions is the higher percentage of the right-sided bones in the area assigned to the priests. In the biblical texts concerning the “fellowship” offering, the priests are awarded the forelimb (in the LXX) or hindlimb (in the MT) of the animal offered along with other elements and, while there appears to be evidence of different traditions and diachronic development, when the side of the limb portion is specified it is always the right-sided portion that is given to the priest (cf. Exod 29:27-28; Lev 7:32-33). Thus, the higher percentage of right-sided limb bone fragments in the western chambers may be explained as the remains of meals in which the priests consumed their portions of fellowship offerings surrendered by worshipers.
2. **Meaty limb bone and “toe bone” fragments.** The much higher proportions of “toe bones” in the western chambers may also be explained by the priestly texts, but in this case by the “burnt” offering prescriptions. While all of the flesh and innards of the animal victim were entirely burned up in the burnt offering, the priests did receive a share: the skin (Lev 7:8). The only archaeological residue left of skins in the faunal record would be the phalanges that would have been imbedded in the hooves of the victims left attached to the skin (Wapnish and Hesse 1991). Thus, we may conclude from the biblical texts that the percentage of bones associated with skin processing activities—specifically phalanges attached to the skin—would be higher in an area acted in by priests in a sacrificial setting than it would be in an area acted in by worshipers, just as we have in the western chambers compared to the courtyard.
3. **Sheep/goat concentrations.** A less obvious connection with priestly texts may be suggested in the higher percentage of sheep and goat remains in the western chambers, but this requires returning first to the expected outcome of the archaeological reflexes of the fellowship offering discussed above. If fellowship offerings (the main offering consumed by priests and worshipers) were the sole explanation for the faunal remains, one would expect (barring other factors) a roughly even distribution of ovicaprids (sheep and goats) to cattle between the two areas, with elevated percentages of right-sided portions in the area of the priests and an elevated percentage of left-sided portions in the area of the worshipers. This is because both priests and worshipers would have been consuming different parts of the same number of individual animals (be they sheep, goats, or cattle). While the right-left distribution lines up, the statistically significant increase in ovicaprid remains in the western chambers does not—where did the extra sheep and goats for the priests come from? If, however, we note that the victim in certain “sin” offerings (for a ruler, Lev 4:22-35; for a layman, Lev 5:6-10; 6: 18-20) and “guilt” offerings (Lev 7:1-7; for a cleansed leper, Lev 14:12-21) was always a sheep or goat—

never a cow—and that it was surrendered to the priests whole for consumption, explanation may be found. For, in such a scenario, the refuse of meals from additional sin and guilt offerings would cause an increase in the percentage of ovicaprid remains in the western chambers compared to the courtyard.

4. **Painted and unpainted diagnostic ceramic sherds.** The greater percentage of painted wares in the western chambers may also be congruent with priests acting in that space, though there is no clear connection with priestly texts. If, however, we may associate more decorative wares with a priestly class (though this is by no means certain) or even with a specialized (cultic) function of the vessels, we may find some reason to associate this nonrandom distribution with priestly activity in the western chambers.

#### ISRAELITE SACRIFICIAL FEASTS AT TEL DAN?

As intriguing as these correspondences between the archaeological evidence and the priestly texts may be, two major problems remain. First, there is the issue of the dating of the so-called “priestly texts”—can the practices described therein be compared with 9-8<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E. archaeological remains? While it is generally agreed in biblical scholarship that the Pentateuch contains at least three major traditions (P, “non-P,” and D), debate ensues regarding the process of composition (documentary, supplementary, or something else?) and the dating of sources (preexilic or postexilic? see further Greer 2013: 98-100). Though some (this author included) would affirm a preexilic date for P (and H) materials (e.g., Milgrom 1991; Knohl 2007), others would, in fact, date them to the Persian period and view the ritual texts as reflective of the cult of the rebuilt temple or another postexilic Jewish (or Samaritan) shrine, thus rendering a comparison with the Dan material irrelevant. Still, even if such a position is maintained, we must be reminded that cult is by nature conservative and later texts often preserve earlier practices as is affirmed even by those who adhere to later dating schemes (see, e.g., Blum 2009: 31-32, following the classic statement of Wellhausen 1885: 404).

The second major problem centers on the question of uniqueness—even if the priestly texts (whatever the date of the final form) may be cautiously taken as representative of preexilic practice, how particular are these rituals to ancient Israel? Indeed, general and specific parallels have been long noted between rituals described in the Hebrew Bible and those found in texts from Ugarit, Mari, Hatti, and Egypt, to name a few. Elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History itself, an Aramaean conquest of Dan is mentioned (1 Kgs 15:20) and archaeological evidence at the site (e.g., the Tel Dan Stela [Biran 1994a Postscript] and an Aramaic bowl [Avigad 1968]) attests to an Aramaean presence there—might not the cult practiced at Dan have honored Hadad instead of Yahweh as some have proposed (Noll 1998; Athas 2003: 255-57; cf. Arie 2008)?

While such may be hypothetically possible, positing any cult other than an Israelite cult at Dan seems less likely when the evidence provided above is considered in light of other factors suggestive of Yahwistic worship. These factors include particular paraphernalia employed—such as an “altar kit” found in the western chambers containing similar implements as those described for temple and tabernacle rituals in the biblical texts, including a bowl that may have been used in distinctly Israelite blood manipulation rites (Greer 2010; see Fig. 13)—and the space in which the rituals were enacted, the architecture of which displays an intriguing correspondence to the literary descriptions of Solomon’s temple in the Hebrew Bible at some points (Greer 2013: 108-



18). The discovery of seal impressions with names containing Yahwistic theophoric elements (Biran 1994a: 199-201; cf. Biran 1994b: 15), too, would seem to strengthen the case. Finally, returning to the Deuteronomistic account of the northern cult, it would be surprising indeed to think that a cult of foreign god in Israel would have escaped mention—let alone vehement condemnation—by the historians who considered such practices to be the cause of the fall of the north.



Fig. 13. Bronze Cult Bowl from Area T Tel Dan Identified as a Biblical "blood bowl."

Debate will likely continue, as much depends on the historical veracity one attributes to the Deuteronomistic History, but if the basic narrative of the biblical account—namely, that an Israelite king (re)established Yahwistic cult centers in the north when a temple stood in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12)—is granted any degree of historicity, then the convergence of our “monologues” of texts and archaeology (Halpern 1997) would seem to suggest that, at least at some stage, Israelite sacrificial feasts were carried out at Dan during the Iron II period. As such, this study of sacred feasts at Tel Dan may provide a snapshot of the (northern) Israelite royal cult in motion, perhaps one of the best, and track its development, inviting further exploration of these remains as well as a close look at relevant comparanda from other sites and related textual traditions.

**Professional Acknowledgements:**

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