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## A Near Eastern Megalithic Monument in Context

Megalithic; Rujm el Hiri; Israel; Chalcolithic; landscape.

The structure of Rujm el Hiri (Fig. 1) is one of the largest structures in the Ancient Near East. It consists of a central cairn covering a possible burial chamber surrounded by five concentric walls. The diameter of the outer wall reaches 156m. Two gates were installed in the north-eastern and south-eastern segments of the outer walls. Nowadays, the concentric walls stand to the height of 1.5-2m while the central cairn rises up to 5m. Originally, the walls were at least twice as high and the whole structure was visible from afar.

The complex of Rujm el Hiri was discovered in 1968 in the course of an archaeological survey of the Golan.<sup>1</sup> Later, it was also surveyed by Hartal in the course of the 'Golan Survey' in the 1990s, which considerably enriched our knowledge of the area. Shards dated to different periods from Chalcolithic to Modern were discovered at the site. One object discovered in 1980 should be especially mentioned: while visiting the site, Epstein, escorted by Moshe Lufan and Elaine Nissen, discovered a basalt pillar figure.<sup>2</sup> This figure is one of the clearest landmarks of the Chalcolithic Culture in the Golan area.

Rujm el Hiri was excavated by Mizrachi in the years 1988–1991.<sup>3</sup> He excavated in five different areas: the central chamber, areas in the eastern, western and southern segments of the monument, and the north-eastern gate. Mizrachi reported shards dating to the Chalcolithic, Early Bronze II, Late Bronze and later periods. While only a few shards were found in most areas, clear evidence for a Late Bronze I burial was found in the central chamber. This included pottery, weapons and jewelry. Evidence for usage of the site for domestic purposes during the Late Bronze period was found only in the limited area west of the cairn. Our survey, which was followed by extensive excavations on behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has been conducted since 2006. A total area of more than 400m<sup>2</sup> has been excavated in three different areas since 2007. Two areas are located in the eastern and northern segments of the complex and one more is located in the open field west of the complex.

Three main theories regarding the date of the site were proposed:

- Mizrachi himself dated the concentric walls to the EBII period based on the few shards found in the excavated gate and the central cairn was dated to the LB period.
- Kochavi dated the whole complex to the Early Bronze period. He defined the LB burial as secondary use.<sup>4</sup>

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Fig. 1.

1 Epstein and Gutman 1972, 277–278.

2 Nissen 2012.

3 Mizrachi 1992.

4 Kokhavi 1993, 72.



Fig. 1 | The aerial view of Rujm el Hiri (Photo: Abraham Graicer).

- Hartal dated the whole complex to the Late Bronze period, mainly based on similarities with burials or ritual structures dated to this period.<sup>5</sup>

Such a wide range of opinions regarding the date of the site after four years of extensive excavations clearly shows that data collected at the site is not sufficient to accomplish this task. For example, dating of this immense complex to the EBII period is based on a single indicative shard<sup>6</sup> collected in the most disturbed area of the site, namely the gate.

When regular tools, such as stratigraphy and analysis of the pottery collected at the site, are not sufficient to establish the chronology of the site, different means are necessary.

The overall mass of stones used for building Rujm Hiri is more than 40.000 tons. The transportation and building of the above mentioned would have required more than 25.000 working days. People who conducted the construction works had to be fed and provided with tools and accommodation. In other words, such a monument could be erected only by having a very strong rear base in the area nearby. It is theoretically possible that the monument could be erected over the course of a number of generations, similar to architectural activities at the Mississippian sites like Cahokia.<sup>7</sup> However, it is hard to believe that the relatively complicated design of Rujm el Hiri could be transferred from generation to generation by people without literacy and solid social stratification. Moreover, it is logical to presume that such a monument was central in the life of these people after it was erected, and we would expect activities around it after the erection was accomplished. Thus, the answers to our questions should lie outside the complex. It is vital to understand the change in patterns of settlement network in this area in order to understand the logic of Rujm el Hiri. The following analysis is based on the surveys conducted in this area, and especially on the ‘Golan Survey.’ The precision of this survey

5 Hartal 2006, 7.

6 Mizrachi 1992 Fig. 24.1.

7 Pauketat 2009.

is high, and even if new sites will be discovered in the future, they will not change the main picture considerably. Settlement patterns of the relevant periods (Chalcolithic to Late Bronze) were analyzed in the area of 10×10km around the site of Rujm el Hiri.

*Late Bronze.* The discussed area was virtually empty of settlements. The only one settlement is located inside the Rujm el Hiri itself. However, it was very small and could not contain more than a single family. Moreover, it was built between the walls of the already existing structure, and thus cannot be related to the building stage.

*Middle Bronze.* Only three small sites dated to different stages of the Middle Bronze period were found in the discussed area. As the central cairn of Rujm Hiri is actually a huge dolmen structure, this fact is even more significant, for the dolmens in this area are usually dated to the MBI period.

*Early Bronze.* Five large sites are located in the discussed area. Some of them are fortified,<sup>8</sup> and altogether their population probably numbered several hundred people. However, most of the large sites are located at a distance of more than 5km, which is more than two hours walk from the monument, except for Sha'abaniyeh, which is located only 2km from the complex. The closest site was too far away to be the basecamp for the builders of the complex, the location of Rujm el Hiri is far from being central in the Early Bronze settlement pattern, which would be logical for such a monument.

*Chalcolithic.* The picture is very different during this period. 47 sites of different sizes were discovered in the discussed area alone. This number is especially striking compared to the total amount of 25 Chalcolithic sites across the whole Golan area known prior to the 'Golan Survey'.<sup>9</sup> The size of the sites varies from a single discovered house to the huge sites containing dozens of large houses. The picture is even more striking in the immediate vicinity of Rujm el Hiri. Even Epstein's earlier surveys showed an unusual concentration of sites in Rujm el Hiri's area.<sup>10</sup> The Golan survey shows that three large sites are located in the immediate vicinity of the complex at a distance of no more than 300m. In fact, these three sites constitute a single huge settlement in the form of a rough horseshoe with Rujm el Hiri located in its center. Interestingly, the area inside this circle is totally empty of Chalcolithic data, as if it was some kind of 'taboo' zone.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The map clearly shows that only in the course of the Chalcolithic period two main terms exist:

1) Settlement network around the spot of Rujm el Hiri could give enough manpower for the erection of this immense structure and provide enough resources to accomplish this task.

2) The location of the site is central enough in the context of this settlement pattern to assume the special importance of the spot before the erection of this monument. Indeed, later excavations in area C outside the complex revealed another similar circular structure which was dismantled prior to the building of Rujm el Hiri, clearly pointing to the long tradition of the sanctity of this place long before Rujm el Hiri was erected.

The immediate surroundings of Rujm el Hiri show that different elements of the landscape were related to each other. Domestic buildings and the burial chambers of their inhabitants acted as different organs of the same organism, at the heart of which was

8 Paz 2003.

9 Epstein 1998.

10 Epstein 1998, Fig. 1.

11 Kokhavi 1993.

located the ritual complex of Rujm el Hiri. The landscape theory was lately strengthened by OSL analysis of the soil probes collected inside the central chamber of Rujm el Hiri. The earliest of them (which provides the TPQ to the latest possible date of erection) is 5580 BP  $\pm$ 280, which perfectly fits to the last phase of the Chalcolithic period.

Thus, all these elements are logically connected and are well embedded in the local landscape as parts of the same pattern. In fact they *are* the landscape with Rujm being its central and most important element. However, the complex of Rujm Hiri did not lose its importance during later periods. It was known to people and used by them from the Early Bronze age until historical periods as a ritual site. It is not clear whether the ritual significance of this site was dictated by cultural continuity or by the monumentality of the architecture itself. In any case, the complex was probably embedded into the local ritual paradigm by newcomers according to their needs and beliefs. The task of understanding these paradigms is much more complicated than dating the initial phase of the monument and (if possible at all) still waits to be done.

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