

THE SHELLS FROM THE CHALCOLITHIC CEMETERY AT PALMAḤİM (NORTH)

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During the excavation of the Chalcolithic cemetery north of Kibbutz Palmaḥım (see Gorzalczy, this volume), an extensive area of 1200 sq m was exposed; however, only four shells were retrieved.¹ All of them, three gastropods and one bivalve, originated in the Mediterranean Sea and were in an excellent state of preservation. This short report attempts to place them in their context and analyze their significance to the Chalcolithic people.

One small, broken shell of the species *Stramonita haemastoma* (Linnaeus, 1767) was found in Structure 101 (B2145), one of a pair of large circular burial chambers. A fragment of the species *Tonna galea* (Linnaeus, 1758) was retrieved from Structure 126 (B2130), the second of the pair of chambers.

A worn specimen of the species *Glycymeris nummaria* (Linnaeus, 1758) was found in an accumulation under the floor of Structure 100 (L118, B1005), a rectangular burial chamber. It has a large hole in the umbo and was probably used as a pendent or bead.

A complete specimen of *Bolinus brandaris* (Linnaeus, 1758) was found in Structure 223 (B2131), the largest of the rectangular burial chambers. As it was very worn, it was apparently picked up as an empty shell from the seashore.

Discussion

All four shells were retrieved from the larger and more impressive burial structures at the site, which could perhaps be indicative of their relative importance as funerary offerings. They were clearly placed there intentionally, although their exact ritual significance is unknown. The symbolic meaning attributed to

a shell can be based on its color, form, texture or even the behavior of the animal: “As the snail comes out of its shell, so man comes out of his mother’s womb”, which connects it to birth (Safer and Gill 1982:155), or to rebirth in the context of graves. Mollusks such as the cowries, oysters, scallops and pearls² are known to be symbols of rebirth in various cultures around the world (Eliade 1991:132–133, 136).

These four species are not directly connected to any specific symbolism known today, although Biggs (1963) has suggested that *Glycymeris* shells symbolize the moon (round and smooth bivalves). Shell symbolism connected to the moon is often associated with feminine fertility as well (Eliade 1991:127). However, as none of the human remains could be identified as to sex (see Nagar, this volume), such a significance could not be attributed to the shells found here. *Bolinus brandaris* and *Stramonita haemastoma* are usually associated with the production of purple dye, but not before the second millennium BCE (Reese 1987). During the Roman and Byzantine periods, *Bolinus brandaris* was a luxury food (Ktalav 2015; 2016). In the Chalcolithic period, these shells were probably used as ornaments or had an intrinsic value.

At other Chalcolithic burial sites, such as Peqi‘in Cave, Giv‘at Ha-Oranim, Naḥal Qana, Kissufim Road (Bar-Yosef 2002a; 2002b), Mezad Aluf (Levy and Alon 1982) and Ḥorbat Qarqar (Fabian, Scheftelowitz and Gilead 2015), beautiful trapezoidal pendants made from bivalves were offered as grave goods. These bivalves were imported either from the Nile or the Red Sea. In comparison, the

four shells found at Palmaḥim (North) were collected from the shore near the site and were

not imported from afar, which corresponds well with the overall humble nature of the site.

NOTES

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² Pearls are produced within the mantle of living pearl-oysters.

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