

Grisly theory for Holy Land mystery

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RUJM AL-HIRI, Golan Heights (AP) — A newly proposed solution to an ancient enigma is reviving debate about the nature of a mysterious prehistoric site that some call the Holy Land's answer to Stonehenge.

Some scholars believe the structure of concentric stone circles known as Rujm al-Hiri was an astrological temple or observatory, others a burial complex. The new theory proposed by archaeologist Rami Arav of the University of Nebraska links the structure to an ancient method of disposing of the dead.

The site's name means "stone heap of the wild cats" in Arabic. In Hebrew it is known as Galgal Refaim, or the "wheel of ghosts." It was first noticed by scholars in 1968, a year after Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria, and despite its intriguing nature it has attracted few visitors. Unmarked, it lies an hour's hike from the nearest road, near old minefields, an abandoned military bunker and a few grazing cattle.

Rujm al-Hiri's unremarkable appearance from the ground belies its striking form when seen from the air: It consists of four circles — the outermost more than 500 feet across — made up of an estimated 42,000 tons of basalt stone, the remains of massive walls that experts believe once rose as much as high as 30 feet. It is an enormous feat of construction carried out 6000 years ago by a society about which little is known.

It seems likely that Rujm al-Hiri served residents of excavated villages nearby that were part of the same agrarian civilization that existed in the Holy Land in the Chalcolithic period,



This undated aerial photo shows Rujm al-Hiri, an ancient structure of stone circles, in the Golan Heights. A newly proposed solution to an ancient enigma is reviving debate about the nature of a mysterious prehistoric site that some consider the Holy Land's answer to Stonehenge. Some scholars believe the structure of concentric stone circles known as Rujm al-Hiri was an astrological temple, others a burial site for an important figure. The new theory proposed by archaeologist Rami Arav of the University of Nebraska links the circular structure to an ancient method of disposing of the dead.

(AP Photo/Albatross)

between 4500 and 3500 B.C. This predates the arrival of the Israelites as described in the Bible by three millennia.

But nothing is known about why they went to such great lengths to construct something that was not a village or fortress, whose location was not strategic and whose practical purpose is entirely unclear.

Most scholars have identified Rujm al-Hiri as some kind of ritual center, with some believing it connected to astronomical calculations. Archaeologist Yonathan Mizrahi, one of the first to excavate there, found that to someone standing in the very center of the circles on the morning of the summer solstice in 3000 B.C., "the first gleam of sunrise would appear at the center of the northeast entryway in the outer wall."

Just like England's Stonehenge — thought to date to around 3000 B.C. at the earliest — Rujm al-Hiri has also provided fodder for ideas of a less scientific sort. One posits the site is the tomb of the Biblical giant known as Og, king of the Bashan. There is indeed a tomb in the center of the site, but scholars tend to agree it was added a millennia or two after the circles were erected.

A self-proclaimed expert in supernatural energy fields visited the site in 2007 and claimed it had high levels of energy and vibration, which he suggested was the reason the ancients chose the location. A psychic consulted afterward by the same expert declared that Rujm al-Hiri had been a healing center built with knowledge that came from "ancient Babel" and was "man-

aged by a priestess named Nogia Nogia.”

The theory proposed by Arav, who has led the excavation of another ancient site nearby since the late 1980s, is based on a broader look at the local Chalcolithic civilization and on similarities he noticed with more distant cultures. Arav published his idea in the current issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, a U.S. periodical.

“I tried to look at the whole culture of that time,” said Arav.

The Chalcolithic people of the Holy Land buried their dead in ossuaries, small boxes used to house bones. Use of ossuaries requires that the flesh first be removed, which can be achieved by burying bodies for an initial period in temporary tombs until only the bones remain. But archaeologists have not found evidence of such preliminary graves from Chalcolithic times, Arav said, suggesting a different method for disposing of the flesh.

Arav found a clue in a trove of Chalcolithic artifacts discovered to the south, near the Dead Sea: a small copper cylinder with a square opening like a miniature gate and, crucially, figures of birds perched on the edge.

He also noticed a similarity to round, high-walled structures used by Zoroastrians in Iran and India, known as dokhmas or towers of silence. These are buildings used for a process known as excarnation or sky burial — the removal of flesh from corpses by vultures and other birds. The winged scavengers perch on the high circular walls, swoop in when the pallbearers depart and can pick a skeleton clean in a matter of hours.

Rujm al-Hiri, Arav believes, was an excarnation facility.

The cylindrical object found near the Dead Sea, he believes, is a ceremonial miniature of such excarnation sites. He cites evidence — including a mural showing vultures and headless human corpses — that excarnation was practiced several millennia earlier in southern Turkey, where the local Chalcolithic residents are thought to have originated.

Arav’s theory is the first such claim that excarnation was practiced in the Holy Land in that era.

Archaeologist Mike Freikman of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who has led digs at the site for the past five years, said Arav’s theory was based

only on “very distant parallels” rather than on hard evidence, but that it could not be ruled out.

“We know so little about this site that the answer could be yes or no,” he said.

Freikman’s excavations have yielded almost no material remains of the kind that are common at most archaeological sites, he said. That is significant, however, as it confirms that the site was never lived in and was thus not a defensive position or a residential quarter but most likely a ritual center of some kind — possibly, he said, one indeed linked to a cult of the dead.

If Arav’s theory is correct, the biblical narrative written millennia later might offer hints that sky burial remained in the memory of the local population. No longer practiced, it was instead considered an appalling fate wished on one’s worst enemies.

In one example, from the Book of Samuel, the shepherd David tells the Philistine warrior Goliath that he would soon cut off his head. Then David says: “I will give the carcasses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.”