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SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET: ARCHIVAL RESEARCH ON THE MEGIDDO COLLECTION AT THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Introduction

My dissertation project, “Transformations in Death: Funerary Practices and Personhood in the Bronze Age Levant”, utilizes a suite of archaeological evidence to reconstruct funerary rituals performed in 2nd millennium B.C.E. Syria-Palestine. A variety of burial types were used contemporaneously, including simple and stone-lined pits, ceramic storage jars, rock-cut chambers, and masonry-constructed chambers (Figure 1). My main case-study site is Tel Megiddo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in northern Israel (Figure 2). My dataset includes recently excavated burials uncovered during the 2010-2016 seasons of the Megiddo Expedition, as well as evidence from the legacy collection of excavation material currently housed at the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago (OIM). This material was collected from 1925-1939.

The 2016 Stahl Grant supported travel to the University of Chicago to consult unpublished field diaries and photographs at the OIM archives in May 2016. Although the OIM maintains an active digitization program and has made many photographs freely available online, most of the hardcopy written records are only available to consult in person at the OIM.

Methods

My dissertation uses primary excavation data to reconstruct the natural and anthropogenic processes of burial, a method known as burial taphonomy (Bello & Andrews 2006). Recognizing how the archaeological record can affect the conditions of burial is key to accurately interpreting the sequence of funerary activities. I utilize data such as burial type and dimensions; context, location, and stratigraphy; assemblages of grave goods; minimum number of individuals; age and sex of individuals; body disposal methods (primary, secondary, or compound inhumations); and evidence of post-burial activities at the grave site such as grave marking. I gather this evidence from first-hand excavation, published reports, and unpublished archives.

The main goal of my Stahl-funded archival research was to minimize the gap in the quality of data between the recently excavated burials and those uncovered at Megiddo in the 1920s and 1930s. The renewed excavation, conducted under the auspices of Tel Aviv University, involves slow exposure of burials and high-resolution documentation techniques including digital illustration, georeferenced orthophotography, and frequent 3D modeling (Prins 2016). In contrast, as revealed in the field diaries, the old excavation used large “gangs” of workers given incentives to find artifacts, which resulted in

efficient, if not high-resolution, digging. For burials, such methods could be disastrous. The fast pace of excavation resulted in poor recording of most burial contexts save the most elite burials that contained the richest assemblages. As a result, hundreds of burials excavated by the University of Chicago team were published with little contextual information. The burials appear in two volumes: *Megiddo Tombs* (Guy & Engberg 1938) and *Megiddo II* (Loud 1948). Such problems are hardly unique to the University of Chicago excavation at Megiddo, which in many ways was impressive for its time. The large-scale excavations put Megiddo on the map as an important type site of the Bronze and Iron Ages, a legacy that continues to be relevant today.

Using published or unpublished archaeological material without firsthand knowledge of the excavation is always challenging. These difficulties are compounded when dealing with records from the early stages of modern archaeology. Yet, issues of inconsistent quality of data are not insurmountable. I accessed a variety of archival documents and photographic records including: field diaries, 1935-1939; locus registers, 1927-1939; field negatives, 1935-1939; and nonmetric skeletal records. I transcribed original notes and lists, and I created spreadsheets to record registration information and photograph numbers (Figure 3). For observations on burials using the field photographs, I followed my own standardized recording method to note burial type, dimensions, and context as well as the number, age, and disposal methods of individuals (Figure 4).

Results

I cross-referenced the archival evidence with my existing database of burials, which was based on the published reports. In some cases, only partial information was available, and in other cases I was able to add new entries to my database. My results were as follows:

- (1) I added records for **115** burials for which I previously had only sparse data, such as registration information. In most cases, I was able to add or confirm burial type and dimensions as well as basic information about the human skeletal remains.
- (2) The archives contained records for an additional **13** unpublished burials.
- (3) I cross-referenced a total of **331** burials, including all of the previously known burials that appear in my database. I checked for consistency between all the documents.
- (4) In total, the archives produced **128** new usable records. Before my visit to the OIM archives, my database contained 153 burials with sufficient quality of data. After consulting the excavation records, the total increased to 281 burials. Fifty burials remain outstanding with incomplete or unconfirmed data.

In sum, the archival research that I conducted at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago significantly increased the quality and quantity of usable data for my project. My dataset has nearly doubled and better reflects the statistical realities of burial practices in the 2nd millennium B.C.E. The gap between the recent and legacy mortuary corpora has been narrowed.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1. Masonry-constructed chamber tomb excavated by the University of Chicago that is still visible on the surface of Tel Megiddo. Photograph by Adam Prins.



Figure 2. Aerial view of Tel Megiddo in August 2014. Facing east. Courtesy Megiddo Expedition.

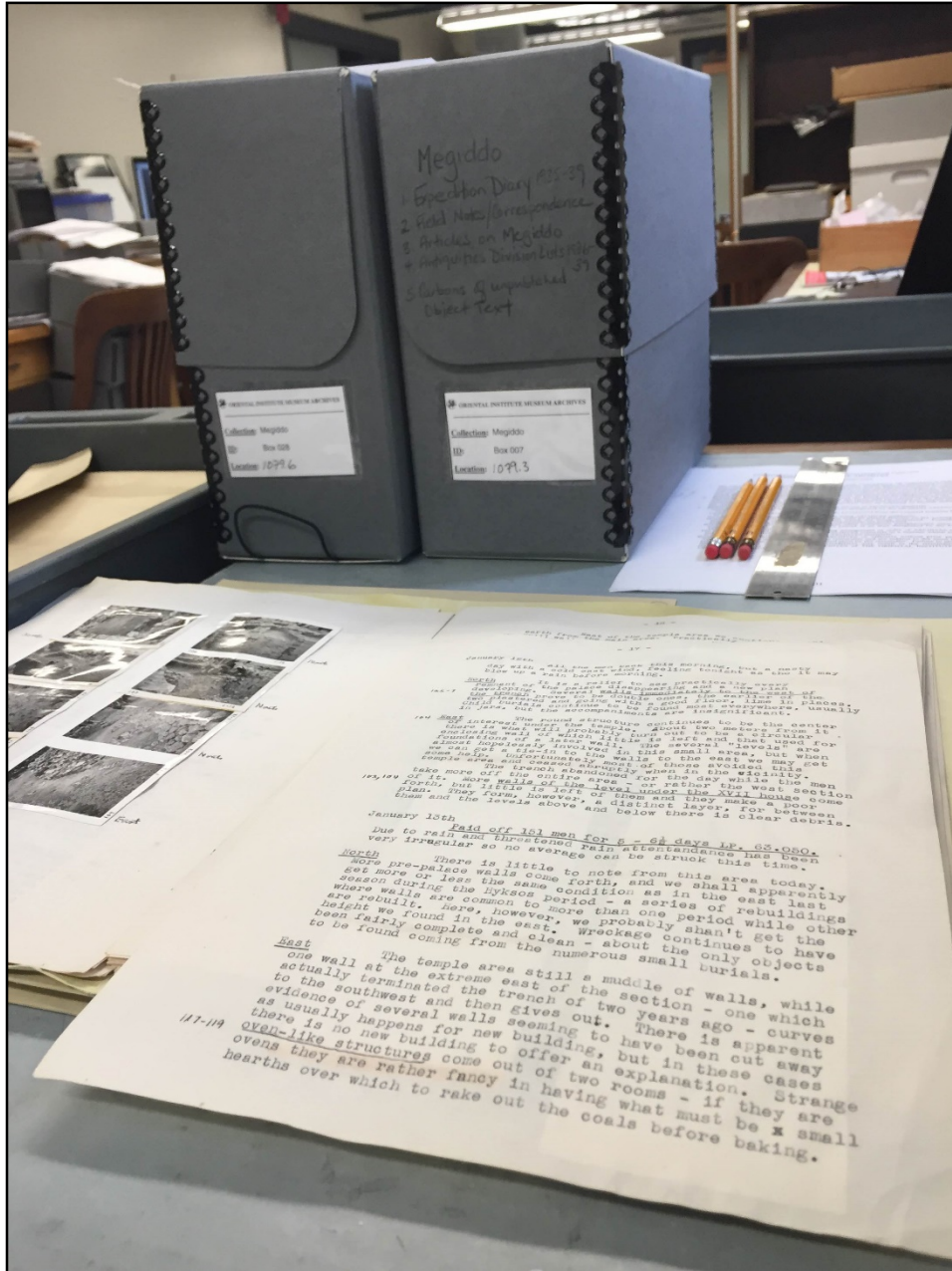


Figure 3. Field diary from January 12th-13th, 1938 from the Megiddo archives of the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago. Strips of field negatives were occasionally pasted to the back of the field diary page with brief captions.

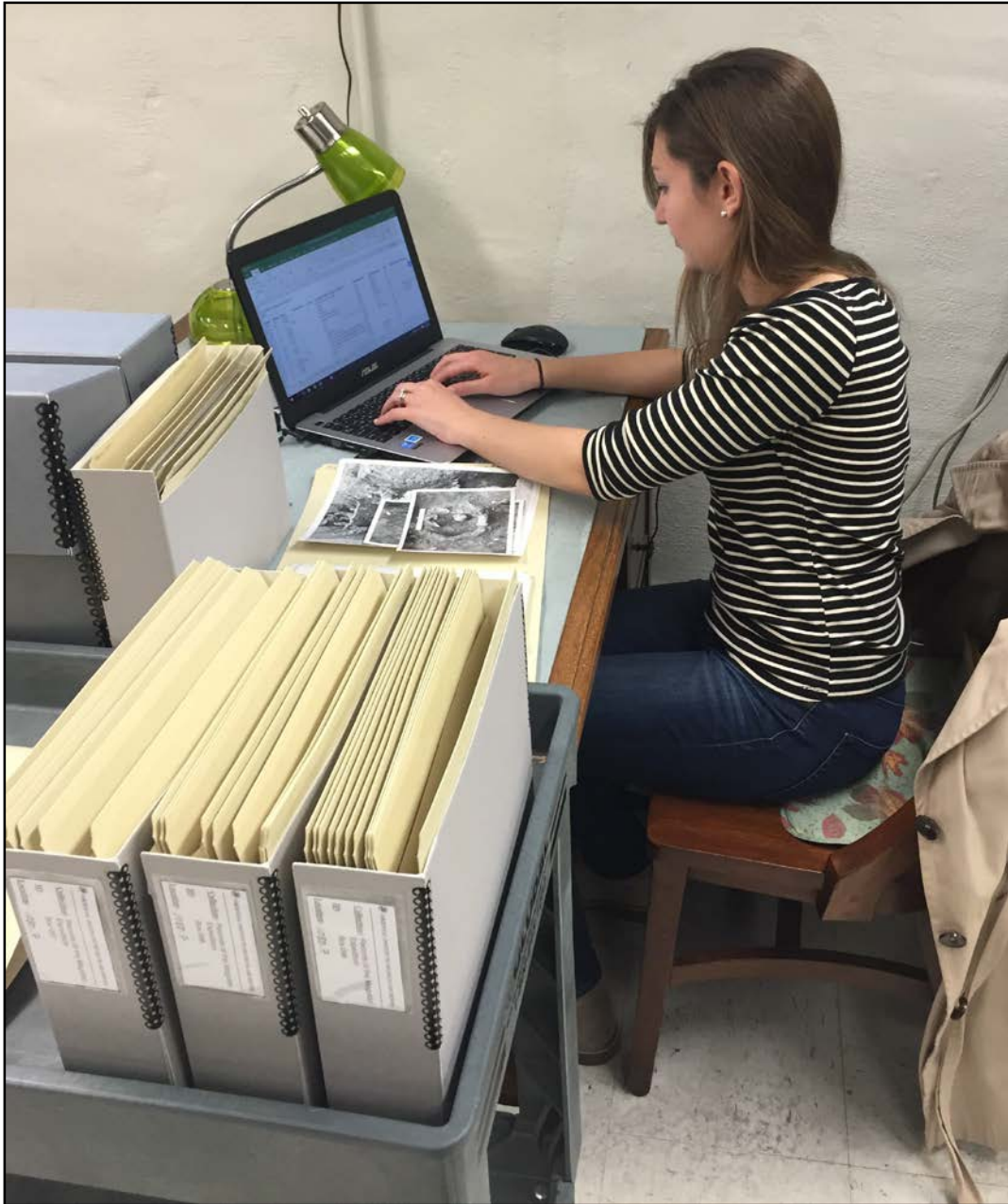


Figure 4. The author recording observations on burials using unpublished field negatives from the Megiddo archives at the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago.

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