The purpose of this paper is to work toward an approach for the problem of identifying domestic cult. In order to do this, I will first survey the problem of identifying cultic contexts more generally, and specifically the identification of large-scale cultic buildings such as temples. There are two reasons for this approach. First, most of the attention given to the problem of cult identification has focused on the latter issue. Second, while the problems of identifying temples and domestic cult contexts are ultimately distinct, they involve some of the same basic issues. Thus, the general problem of identifying cultic contexts provides an appropriate starting point.

The Problem

The difficult nature of identifying loci of cult in the archaeological record has long been acknowledged. As Rast (1994: 355) points out, there is a deep tradition in the archaeological literature of the southern Levant of stating this difficulty, going back at least to H. G. May (1935: 1). It is therefore surprising to observe the frequency with which publications of cultic sites have provided no justification for their identification. A survey of the literature shows that publications of such well-known cultic contexts as the Lachish Fosse Temples (Tufnell et al. 1940), the Arad temple (Aharoni 1968; Herzog et al. 1984), and the Qasile temples (Mazar 1980) include no discussion of how...
these buildings are to be recognized as temples. On the other hand, discussions of the problems of identification can be found in the presentation of more controversial cultic loci (e.g., the Lachish “Solar Shrine” [Tufnell 1953: 141–145] and Aharoni’s reconstructed cult place at Beersheba [Aharoni 1972: 123–127; 1973: 13–18]). It appears, therefore, that in the previous examples the cultic nature of the buildings was seen as self-evident.

To my knowledge, the first systematic critique of cultic identifications was made by Chester McCown (1950). McCown not only reviewed specific cases of cultic identifications (for instance, the interpretation of the entire city of Megiddo Stratum V as a sacred area by the excavators), but the more general tendency to identify any unusual or unexplained artifacts or buildings as “cultic” in nature. For McCown, most artifacts could not safely be identified as “cult objects,” with the exception of the limestone horned “incense altar” (1950: 210). He concluded that most other objects usually judged to be cultic, such as pottery “model shrines,” censers, ceramic and bronze stands, chalices, and cup-and-saucer combinations, could just as easily have served secular functions, and were perhaps luxury objects. Bronze and clay figurines, meanwhile, were determined to have “religio-magical significance” (1950: 214), but as part of “domestic rites” (1950: 215). McCown even made some positive suggestions for identifying cultic structures, specifically based on a combination of their plan, “cult remains” (special artifacts and animal bones), and continuity of unique buildings in the area (1950: 208).

Questioning of cultic identifications increased in the 1970s and 1980s. These critiques tended to be particularist, focusing on individual sites. S. Yeivin (1973), for instance, reevaluated the identification of temples and cultic buildings at Ta’anach, ‘Ai, Arad, and Lachish. Ottosson, in his survey of cult places (1980), reanalyzed Jerusalem Cave 1 and even the Lachish Fosse Temples as secular contexts; he also

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1 I do not necessarily mean to question the identification of any of these buildings as temples; I am merely remarking on a basic problem of methodology in these publications.

2 It should be noted that the studies referred to above predated important theoretical work by Processualist archaeologists, particularly Renfrew’s influential publication of the Phylakopi sanctuary (1985). The impact of such work is evident in the archaeology of cult in the southern Levant, as over the past two decades, publications of cult places have more consistently addressed the identification problem, even if only in a cursory manner (see below).