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Sun., February 22, 2004 Shvat 30, 5764

Israel Time: 00:33 (GMT+2)

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In the wildcat's pile of stones

By [David Rapp](#)

Rujm al-Hiri in the Golan Heights is not a burial ground around which a monumental site was erected, but rather a monumental site in which there is a burial ground

Even though they perhaps chose a moonlit night, everything was dark underground, and when the oil lamps fell from their hands, they remained in the darkness. Finally they succeeded in finding a way out, carrying golden jewelry, bronze arrowheads, colored beads, ceramic statuettes and whittled flints. In their escape some of the pieces of jewelry fell on the floor of the burial site, but they did not bother to look for them in the dark.

The antiquities robbers entered the burial site in the Golan Heights in the fourth century C.E. to steal objects that had been put there about 1,600 years earlier. The jewelry that they lost as they fled, along with their oil lamps, remained at the site for approximately 1,600 years more.

One summer afternoon in 1990, one of the members of the work crew at the dig (headed by Dr. Yoni Mizrachi) felt cold air coming up from the cairn in the tel [large, flat-topped mound of accumulated archaeological remains] of stones in the center of Rujm al-Hiri. When he looked down, he saw the opening to the burial site that the crew had been looking for during that entire excavation season.

Rujm al-Hiri is one of the most mysterious archaeological sites in the country. The site, that in old Syrian military maps was called in Arabic, "the wildcat's pile of stones," is called Gilgal Refaim in Hebrew. It is located in the Golan Heights, not far from Gamla, about 16 kilometers east of the Sea of Galilee at an altitude of about 500 meters above sea level.

The structure of the site can best be understood from the air. It is a megalith - a huge complex of stones - in which there are more than 42,000 basalt stones that were brought there in the third century B.C.E. and arranged in circles. Some of the stones weigh more than five tons.

Approximately at the center of the site stands a huge monument of stones, which is about 20 meters in diameter and nearly five meters high. Although this is the most striking part of the ruins, it is doubtful that it is the most interesting. Around the monument stand stone walls. The circumference of the outermost wall is nearly half a kilometer and its diameter is more than 150 meters. Within the area it surrounds, other walls were built, some of them elliptical, some of them round and some of them open - without creating a closed circle. The walls are connected by many additional stone walls.



An aerial view of Rujm al-Hiri: More than 42,000 basalt stones were brought there in the third century B.C.E. and arranged in circles. (Dubi Tal and Moni Ha)

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'Just because you know two languages, that doesn't mean you can translate.'

By [Daphna Berman](#)**One of the chosen**

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By [Aharon Amir](#)

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Mizrachi, who wrote his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University about Rujm al-Hiri, had help in 1990 from two specialists in gas and oil drilling who came from abroad with radar and sonar equipment. They passed the heavy equipment over the monument, and in photographs an especially dark area could be seen - and that is where the crew dug from that day on, and that is where the ancient burial site was found.

The jewelry, from the end of second millennium B.C.E., did not belong to the generation that had built the burial site. Someone had used an already existing structure for that. At the center of Rujm al-Hiri site - which apparently had already been built by the end of the third millennium B.C.E. and was used for cult purposes - a burial area was added during the second millennium B.C.E. This was a means perhaps to honor the prestige of the person buried there as the heir of a glorious culture, a culture that erected an impressive ritual site that served the inhabitants of the area during a period when they had not yet developed a written language.

From hand to hand

Rujm al-Hiri was "revealed" to the world immediately after the Six-Day War. The summary of the archaeological survey of the years 1967-1968 shows evidence of relatively recent anthropological phenomena: "In the context of the special survey in the territories held by Israel, the Golan Heights were also surveyed," wrote Shmarya Guttman and Adam Drucks in 1969 modestly, many years before the annexation of the Golan and the declaration that "Gamla will not fall again."

In his 1992 dissertation, Mizrachi explains - perhaps for the benefit of his colleagues at the anthropology department at Harvard - that the Golan has always been the dividing line between the fertile lands to the west of the Jordan River and the deserts of Syria to the east. He notes that it emerges from the Bible that even the permanent residents of the Golan were considered outsiders. Episodes of permanent settlement there, he says, were relatively brief and suddenly truncated. The Golan has passed from hand to hand throughout history.

The Rujm al-Hiri site was not fully excavated until the end of the 1980s, but the similarity of its form to Stonehenge and scores of similar sites in England and France immediately led to a wave of speculations about its dating and functions. It was argued that Rujm al-Hiri served as a ritual center or a military area; there were those who saw it as a site for storing harvested crops or a corral for animals; and others thought that it was a large burial site. There was even someone who hastened to declare that this was the burial site of Og, King of the Bashan, who is mentioned in the Bible.

Dr. Mattanyah Zohar of Hebrew University of Jerusalem investigated the site from the beginning of the 1980s and drew up its ground plan, including the

locations of the thousands of stones it contained. He suggested that Rujm al-Hiri functioned as a monumental ceremonial center, built around a megalithic burial site. Zohar believed it served as a site for annual gatherings by a population with nomadic traditions. The digs that Mizrachi supervised there during the years 1988 to 1991 - as part of an archaeological delegation to the land of Geshur, headed by Prof. Moshe Kochavi and Prof. Pirhyia Beck of Tel Aviv University - yielded new findings and illuminated others that had been discovered in the first survey in the 1960s.

In the external walls of the complex two large gates were found, one in the northeast and one in the southeast. The hypothesis is that special rituals were held at Rujm al-Hiri on the longest day and the shortest day of the year. According to calculations by Mizrachi and his colleagues, apparently around the year 3000 B.C.E., the first rays of the sun on the longest day of the year shone through the opening in the northwestern gate, which is about 20 x 29 meters wide, although not at a perfect angle. The light then passed through openings in the inner walls to the geometric center of the complex.

The theory is that this was a ritual of the gods Ishtar and Tammuz, the Mesopotamian couple whose love life signified the cycle of fertility in nature - as a blessing to man and animals and the flourishing of the crops. In the second millennium B.C.E., when the burial site was built at Rujm al-Hiri, the passage of the light was impeded.

The southeastern gate was a disappointment to the Stonehenge fans. The sun did not come in through it on the shortest day of the year, in December 3000 B.C.E., or even 1,000 years earlier.

Sense of proportion

The research at Rujm al-Hiri is defined as a dig in "the Levant," but there is some difficulty in assuming that any of the researchers pondered the possibility that careless contractors got it wrong and missed the sun's rays by a few degrees. The regime during the ancient Bronze Age did not tolerate such construction errors, and apparently the southern gate was not intended to mark a specific day. Perhaps it faced a historical site that was important to the local population.

The ancients could determine the equinoxes at the Rujm al-Hiri site with the help of two stones, two meters high and five meters wide, that were placed at the eastern end of the area. On the basis of the autumnal equinox and the vernal equinox, the inhabitants could estimate, accordingly, the first rains, after which came the sowing season, and the searing east winds of the summer.

Mizrachi and the astronomer, Prof. Anthony Aveni, made precise calculations at the site. They succeeded in calculating the proportions according to which the entire complex was constructed - a measure that was used in Mesopotamia and Egypt that is based on the proportion of the human body.

Mizrachi also tried to figure out the meaning of the walls that link the five central circles of stones at the site. These walls have no important architectonic significance, and he conjectures that they constitute an architectural system that relates to a celestial system of stars that were seen at the time of the construction of the site. In some of the structures, he sees a relationship to prominent geographical sites in the area of Rujm al-Hiri- among them Mount Hermon and Mount Tabor, which were considered sacred in ancient times.

Apparently, the Rujm al-Hiri site had religious, mythological and cosmological significance for the inhabitants of the region. It served them for astronomical observations and for the planning of the agricultural calendar. Rujm al-Hiri is not a burial site around which a monumental site was erected, but rather a monumental site within which a tomb was erected. The latter was built only at the end of the second millennium B.C.E., in the form in which it has been preserved to our times. During this period there were no permanent settlements in the Golan Heights, but mostly nomads and herders.

There were researchers who argued that the entire complex was erected during a single period, and that it was a burial site that became a sacred site where rituals were conducted. Over the years Rujm al-Hiri ceased to serve as a ritual site or a place for burial. Then perhaps it became a corral for animals or a place to store harvested crops, or perhaps even a military stronghold.

The site has over the years lost some of its splendor and most of the stones of its walls have collapsed. The occupation of the Golan Heights led to its re-exposure and to the unraveling of some of its secrets. There are those who will not want to relate to the bleak testimony the site provides - testimony of a flourishing culture, which even though it relied on the planetary system and tried to impose order on the world of nature, did not survive in the Golan.

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