

Prof. Scott B. Noegel
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization
University of Washington

“Partying ‘Canaanite Style.’”

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Partying "Canaanite Style"

by Scott Noegel*

"A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully, but as a drunken sleeper. "
-(1603) Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, iv. ii. 149.

"Being sharpened by his death. To drink from the wine-breath. While our gross palates
drink from the whole wine. "
-(1922) W. B. Yeats, *Seven Poems*, 1.

Today the word "party" possesses a wide variety of meanings and is applied to a host of public and private events usually associated with some celebratory occasion, e.g., birthdays, graduations, weddings, homecomings, and Mardi Gras, etc. It also can mean simply "to have a good time" or "to entertain." The original force behind the word, however, was one that distinguished the public and private sectors, hence the word "party" in reference to a "part of the whole," as in "a number of persons united in maintaining a cause, policy, or opinion in opposition to others who maintain a different one."¹ Curiously, these two applications of the word "party" are intrinsically bound in the ancient Near East, where parties served very different functions.

Since there are so many references to parties in the ancient Near East, I will focus on one particular type of ancient party, the Canaanite *marzeah*, for it is of seminal importance for understanding later Greek cultic celebrations specifically, and the history of parties generally.

However, before I invite you to the *marzeah* and break out the potables and victuals, the obscure nature of the subject dictates that I provide some background. Canaan is the land roughly corresponding with modern day Israel and part of Syria. In antiquity, Canaan was marked by a city-state system in which each city had its own king, who also served as high priest of the city's religious institution. Thus, when we speak of Canaan, in some ways it is misleading, since Canaan never achieved unification in the same way as the two superpowers on its southern and eastern borders, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Canaan was what we today would call a "third world nation."

Our information regarding the *marzeah* party comes from one Canaanite city, a seaport known in antiquity as Ugarit (modern day Ras Shamra). Ugarit, which accidentally yielded its texts to a peasant farmer in 1929, was a thriving international cosmopolitan center in the 15th century BCE, made wealthy through mercantilism and

* Scott Noegel is Assistant Professor of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Rice University in Houston, TX.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary.

contact with the Aegean, Egypt, Hatti, and Mesopotamia, as well as other smaller city-states in its political purview. Ugarit's geographical placement and international contacts created of Ugarit a cultural conduit; it became both a receptacle of foreign influence and an exporter of native culture. The discovery and subsequent translation of the Ugaritic tablets had a profound impact on biblical and Near Eastern studies, since the texts not only mirror stylistically and thematically much of what one finds in the Hebrew Bible, but because perhaps more importantly, we have for the first time, the Canaanite's own mythologies and views on religion, that is, the flipside to the bad press the Canaanites receive in the Bible.

Enough background, it's time to get ready for the *marzeah*. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the *marzeah* is its guestlist which included the powerful noble and warrior classes as well as the king. However, this was not a party in the king's honor, though it certainly was a fancy diversion laden with protocol and one for which a lavish feast was arrayed. The invitees drank flagon after flagon of wine; quantities which would stagger even the later Romans. In fact the texts describe the occasion as highly Bacchanal (if you'll excuse the anachronism), and it is clear that the event was an "all-nighter." Had we this information alone, we might conclude that the *marzeah* was not too different than an exceptionally wild party at the White House. But there is one major difference that defies the analogy: at the top of the *marzeah*'s guestlist were the dead, specifically the deceased kings and nobles of Ugarit's illustrious past, whom the texts call the "Rephaim." The discovery of the *marzeah* party tablet with its repeated mention of the Rephaim has had important repercussions in biblical studies, since the Rephaim appear rather frequently in the Bible both as the shades of the underworld and as giants.²

At the *marzeah*, the invited deceased had become celestials upon death; they had become gods, and their arrival at the party was marked by a mysterious ghostly rapping beneath the feast table. Today, we might be inclined to view this event more like a seance with cocktails and dinner, but I should stress that the event was not viewed as creepy or frightening in any way, for the people of Ugarit, like most peoples of the ancient Near East, honored and worshipped their dead. In fact, the care and feeding of one's dead ancestors played a prominent role in Ugaritic life, so much so that family burial vaults were hewn beneath residential homes and were equipped with installations through which the deceased's sons slipped bread and wine. They lived with their dead.

² As "shades," see, e.g., Isa 14:9, 26:14, Job 26:5, Prov 2:18, 9:18, 21:16. For references to the Rephaim as "giants," see, e.g., Gen 15:20, Josh 17:15, 2 Sam 5:18.

The sons' funerary duties were an odd mixture of the trivial and the cultic. I translate in part below an Ugaritic text that describes the filial obligations as they relate to the *marzeah*. It is written in the voice of a dead father to his living son.

One who will erect my ancestral stele,
 In the burial vault, offer incense to me,
 To the underworld, send my spice,
 To the dust, sing toward me...
 Clasp my hand when I am smashed,
 Carry me when I am drunk with wine,
 Eat my piece in the house of Bāal,
 My portion in the home of El...

The mention of inebriation here must be viewed within the context of the *marzeah* party, for even the "piece" and "portion" to be eaten refer not to a sacrifice shared by the living, but to a necro-cannibalistic funerary custom of eating sections of the dead, a practice which persists even today among the Fore tribe of New Guinea who eat their dead and rub themselves in their bodily liquids. Thus, when Aqhat dies, the son of the Ugaritic king Danel, the king invites the Rephaim (also called "gods") to a *marzeah* in his palace. The Rephaim harness their horses, mount their chariots, and speed to Danel's threshing floor for the seven day extravaganza.

The *marzeah*, therefore, was a raucous party that united the living and the dead, and one that demanded excess. The *marzeah* appears also in the Bible where its mood is politely described: ³

They lounge on ivory beds, unrestrained on their divans, devouring lambs from the flock, and calves from the stalls. They stammer medleys to the lute...they guzzle wine straight from the ritual wine basins, and they are anointed with the choicest of oils (Amos 6:4-6).

The *marzeah* was a religiously sanctioned night of decadence where the nobles and gods in attendance, like El, the chief deity of Ugarit's pantheon, partied with abandon. The Ugaritic Rephaim text puts it this way.

El feasted game in his home,
 Venison in the midst of his palace.
 He summoned the gods to feast.
 The gods gorged and guzzled,

³ To be sure, the Bible takes a decidedly negative stance on the *marzeah*, as on all Canaanite practice.

Drank wine until drunk,
 Must until smashed...
 El slumped in his *marzeah*,
 El drank wine until drunk,
 Must until smashed.
 El made his way home,
 Descended to his court...
 There accosted him a creeper,
 With two horns and a tail.
 He (El) floundered in his shit and piss.
 El collapsed, El as those who are descending to the underworld...

The description of the creeper is probably the iconographic origin of devils as we think of them today, though since there was no Hell in the ancient Near Eastern mindset, the figure probably served as an obstacle during El's staggered descent to the underworld. Ugarit's abode of the dead, like the Bible's *She'ol*, was a place of dark and dreary continued existence. A place where one drank muddy water and ate dust, unless of course, invited to a *marzeah*. It was not a pleasant place, but an ultimate one nonetheless.⁴ The Ugaritic passage is reminiscent of two biblical texts: the first describes a tribal religious practice.

These too, with wine they swagger,
 With drink they stagger.
 Priest and prophet swagger with liquor,
 They are gorged with wine, stagger with liquor.
 They swagger in vision,
 Totter in decision,
 Indeed, all the tables are full,
 Puke and shit everywhere (Isa 28:7-9).

The second is a reference to a the *marzeah* party held at Baal Peor in modern day Transjordan which involved ritual defecation and wife swapping (Numbers 25).⁵ According to ancient rabbinic sources the *marzeah* was equated later with a Roman festival called *Mayumas* which was so fetid that even the Romans banned it.

⁴ The Egyptians did not share this concept of death with the Canaanites, Israelites, and Mesopotamians, but rather saw the afterlife as a bright place where food and drink were plentiful (much like their living existence). However, before one could obtain this positive afterlife, one needed to overcome various obstacles including a dangerous river (much like the Styx of Greek mythology) and amalgamated horrifying creatures.

⁵ Sifre Numbers, 131.

Before leaving the *marzeah* it is worthwhile to pause and reflect on the god Ea's role at the party as described in the Rephaim text, for his delirium, defecation, and eventual stupor are more than a mere depiction of his drunkenness. Dignity is apparently of little concern to El, and since the gods and princes alike follow suit, El's quaffing to oblivion must serve a religious function. The *marzeah*, after all, is precisely that, a religious function. The key to understanding the meaning of this Canaanite party lies in the drunkenness itself. It is the very vehicle by which El travels to dwelling of the dead. He has, for all intents and purposes, died himself. He has taken a psycho-spiritual, albeit drunken journey to the underworld. This then, was no ordinary party.