The Figural World of Late Iron Age Judah
Some considerations on method

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Beyond Asherah & female figurines

Studies on the figurines of Judah in the late Iron Age have often focused on female figurines, and interpreted them in relation to Asherah, and to religious ritual concerned with fertility or protection (Kletter 1996; Darby 2011). However, this separation of the female figurines from the rest of the figurative repertoire — which includes horse and rider figurines, animals, and other models — is hard to justify, and leads to limited, and possibly vitiated, interpretations.

Fig. 1: Female pillar figurine with moulded head from a tomb near Bethlehem.

A miniature world

A potential route to the interpretation of figurines is to understand them as elements of a world in miniature that can be grasped and manipulated (Bailey 2005).

Key questions emerge. Which elements of the world are miniaturised? What social meanings may they have had? What do the figurines say about gender, and the way gender roles are expressed socially?

Fig. 2: Female pillar figurine with pinched head; horse and rider figurine; model of a couchbed from Tell ed-Duweir / Lachish.

Intra-site distribution and context

Variation in the recovery of figurines from primary contexts across a site can be quantified, and figurines are plotted back onto the site, providing a venue for study of patterns in figurine use and disposal.

At Tell ed-Duweir / Lachish, for example, female figurines seem more closely connected to some domestic areas and the tombs (Fig. 3), but less so to areas of potential defensive interest. In Jerusalem (Fig. 4), too, the concentrations of figurines in certain spaces, and scarcity in others, requires further investigation.

Fig. 3: (left): Distribution of figurine types across different areas of Tell ed-Duweir / Lachish. (right): A correspondence analysis plot of the same distribution helps highlight similar profiles in these assemblages.

Judah in the context of the southern Levant

The intra-site study of the figurines is supplemented by inter-site consideration (Fig. 5) as the figurines of Judah form a clear part of a wider phenomenon in the region.

The commonalities and differences displayed in the figurative repertoire should be seen in the context of the various polities known through historical sources.

Fig. 4: Jerusalem, Silwan / City of David. Excavations directed by Y. Shiloh (1978-85) Area E, Level 12. Distribution of figurines; position markers only indicate locus. (composite plan based on DeGroot & Bernick-Greenberg 2012, plans 11, 32b, 47a, 47b).

Fig. 5: Correspondence analysis plot of figurine manufacture types for a sample from ten sites covering different regions of the southern Levant. Some regional preferences and potential connections can be discerned.

Ancient sources and social meanings

“Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish!”
Micah 1:13

Further research includes looking into ancient sources — both the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern texts — to help focus social meanings which are produced and reproduced through the medium of the figurines.

The reading of the figurines and texts can shift from a search for ritual use and meaning, towards a better understanding of the societies and groups that used them.

Fig. 6: Detail of the Lachish reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh.

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