A NOTE ON A HEAD OF JUDEAN PILLAR FIGURINE FROM RAMAT RAHEL IN THE MUSEUM OF NEAR EAST EGYPT AND MEDITERRANEAN

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On the occasion of the exhibition "Astarte. La dea dei mille volti"[1] held at the Museum of Near East Egypt and Mediterranean of Sapienza University of Rome, a head of female figurine from Ramat Rahel gained a renewed interest. The head belongs to a Judean Pillar Figurine, a kind of artifacts made in the Southern Levant during the 1st millennium, often associated with a female deity, sometimes Astarte or Asherah, and connected with fertility and domestic cults. This paper is the occasion to reflect in the light of new discoveries on the function and meaning of these statuettes and on the value of archaeological heritage preserved in the Museum.

Keywords: Judean Pillar Figurine; Iron Age; Ramat Rahel; Asherah; domestic cults

1. INTRODUCTION

Judean Pillar Figurines, henceforward JPFs, are clay female figurines holding their breasts with hands. They are attested in the Southern Levant[2] during the Iron Age II (9th-6th centuries BC) and became very common in the 8th-7th centuries BC.[3]

The iconography of naked woman is one of the most popular of Ancient Near East and female statuettes of this type are often described as "Astarte figurines".[4] Based on the iconographical analysis it's very difficult to argue for sure if a female figurine represents a human or a goddess and in this case which one. Particular features, as prominent breasts held by hands, help to identify who these figurines would represent.

The head of JPF from Ramat Rahel gives the opportunity to reflect another time on these figurines, their iconography and use during specific rituals.

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[1]   Montanari 2022.

[2]   These figurines have been found not only in Judah, where a flourishing production developed in the 8th-7th century BC, hence the definition of Judean Pillar Figurines, but also in Philistia, at sites as Ashdod (Dothan 1971, figs. 64.11, 65.11), Ashkelon (Press 2012, cat. nos. 39-59, type 1), Gezer (Bloch-Smith 2014, 16, fig. 8) and Tell el-'Areini (Ciasca 1963, 48-49, pl. XX; Kletter 2001, 185-188), in Transjordanian area (Hunziker-Rodewald 2022) and in Northern Israel (Kletter 1996, 45-46; Press 2012, 206, note 41). The discovery of this figurines outside Judah testifies that they are not necessarily expression of an ethnic identity but due their high presence in that area they took the name of Judean.

[3]   Few earliest specimens date back to the 10th century BC and the most recent to the beginning of the Persian period (Kletter 2001, 183, 185, fig. 12).

[4]   Orsingher 2021, 86. Three main iconographies are labelled as "Astarte-types": the pregnant woman (Culican 1969; Bisi 1988, 331; Montanari 2021, 185-186), the lady at the window, very common in Phoenician ivories, (Hermann 1992, pls. 18-19; pl. 20, ns. 110-112; pl. 97, 467-470; Winter 1975; Washbourne 1999; Affanni 2012, figs. 2, 3, 8; Fontan - Affanni 2018, 102, cat. 32) and the female figure with hands to breasts (Bisi 1988, 328, 330, 339; Peters 2004, 181, n. 115; Bondì 2009, 315, fig. 1).

2. JUDEAN PILLAR FIGURINES: TYPOLOGY AND MANUFACTURING TECHNIQUES

JPFs are made up of two separated parts: the body and the head. The body is a hand-made, conical, pillar base characterized only by the presence of prominent breasts held or supported with hands. There are no other sex or anatomic attributes. The head is hand-made or mould made.

In the first type the body and the head are shaped by a single lump of clay and the anatomical details, the eyes and the nose, were pinched by the artisans, hence the definition of "pinched" JPFs.[5]

In the second type the body and the head are formed separately, and the mould-made head is attached to upper body through a small depression.[6] Despite the existence of different molds, the heads share many features, as large eyes with arched lids, a protruding nose and a smiling mouth. The hairdress, made of several rows of curls, frames the face, and usually covers the ears.

Both types were white-washed in order to improve the aspect of the surface and after they were painted in red or yellow.[7]

2.1. *Interpretation and meanings*

There are many assumptions about the interpretation and the meaning of these figurines, and many questions remain to be clarified. Who do these figurines represent? Do they identify a goddess or a human? What was their function? Different interpretations have been supplied over the centuries.

The iconography of female figure with hands to breasts led many scholars to identify JPFs as a goddess. In a first time they claimed that these statuettes would refer to specific cults of fertility and prosperity related to Astarte.[8] In a second time JPFs were identified as Asherah, the main goddess in Judah during the 1st millennium BC.[9] Two reasons are the base of this interpretation. Breasts recall fertility cults, an aspect also of Asherah's worship, as testified by Ugarit's texts, where the goddess is described as "wet nurse of gods" or "creatress of gods".[10] In the second instance the pillar body would represent the pole or the tree, a cultic object standing close to the altar.[11]

The identification of a precise goddess remains a hard task especially when several deities share the same iconographic features. The iconography of woman with hands to breasts is typical of some goddess, as the Phoenician Astarte, but only this feature doesn't allow to identify these figurines with the deity. At the same time the dominant position of Asherah, the prominent breasts and the association of the pillar shape with the pole or tree is not enough to connect JPFs with Asherah's worship. For these reasons JPFs are often interpreted as

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[5]   Kletter 1996, 87, fig. 5; Yezerski - Geva 2003, 80, pl. 3.3; Petersson-Solimany - Kletter 2009, 116, fig. 4.1, n. 2.

[6]   Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6; Yezerski - Geva 2003, 78-79, pls. 31, 3.2; Petersson-Solimany - Kletter 2009, 116, fig. 4.1, n. 1; Ben-Shlomo - McCormick 2021, 31, fig. 5.

[7]   Tushingham 1985, 361.

[8]   Aharoni 1971, 113-114; Kletter 1996, 75-76; Darby 2014, 35-36.

[9]   Kletter 1996, 76-77; Dever 2005, 176; Darby 2014, 37-43.

[10] Hadley 2000, 4; Engle 1979, 106.

[11] Ex. 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:13. Ackerman 2003, 395. On the other hand pillar bases are not necessarily a symbol. This technological device gives more stability to hand-made standing figurines.

naked goddess, nurturing goddess or suckling goddess.[12] This explanation appears very simplistic. Their iconography recalls fertility and prosperity cults, but it would look very forced to associate these statuettes with a *dea nutrix* or a mother goddess.

It's more realistic that JPFs were cultic objects used, probably from women, to invoke the protection of a goddess in specific house-cults. [13]

3. A HEAD OF JPF FROM RAMAT RAHEL (INV. M265, 110)

The head of JPF[14] preserved in the Museum of Near East Egypt and Mediterranean is mould-made head type (fig. 1). It measures 4.8 × 6.7 cm. The face is rounded, the eyes are almond shaped ant the lids are arched. The nose, the mouth and the curls on the side of face were abraded. The right ear is not preserved. Upon the forehead the hairdress is arranged in more rows of curls.

On the basis of iconographic analysis, the head can be compared with some other specimens in many sites of Judah. The anatomical details of the face and the hairdress are typical of JPFs made in Judah during the 8th-7th century BC[15] and discovered in sites as Jerusalem[16] (figs. 2:1, 3: 1-3), Tell Beit Mirsim[17] (fig. 2:2), Lachish[18] (figs. 2:3, 3:4), Tell Moza[19] (fig. 2:4), Tell en-Nasḅeh [20] (fig. 2:5), Tell Beer Sheba[21], Bet Shemesh (fig. 3:5)[22], Bethlem[23] (fig. 3:6) and Ramat Rahel[24].

The head could be dated to the end of the 8th-7th centuries BC in according to the chronology of the context.

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[12]   Kletter 1996, 74-75.
[13]   It's possible that women turned to the goddess for protection in difficult moments (Oggiano 2012, 233) or for reproductive purposes such as fertility, nourishing or childbirth (Pritchard 1962, 121; Albright 1974, 121; Miller 2000, 38-40; Bloch-Smith 2014, 10; Nakhai 2014, 184-185).
[14]   Ciasca 1960, 23, fig. 10; Aharoni 1962, 42, pl. 24, n. 1; Moscati 1964, 6, pl. XXIV; Lipschits - Gadot - Freud 2016, fig. 34.1, n. 2.
[15]   Outside of Judah a regional production developed, as testified by JPFs discovered in Philistia (Ben-Shlomo 2018, 274, fig. 2, ns. 5, 7-8; Ben-Shlomo 2019, 16, 18, fig. 14, n. 1) and Transjordanian area (Kletter 1996, 92, ns. 1-6; Hunziker-Rodewald 2022, 14, fig. 5). They have specific features as long hair arranged in vertical rows of curls, an oval face and often an unsmiling mouth.
[16]   Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 3; Keel 2007, 480, ill. 333f; Lichtenberger 2017, 199, fig. 15. 18; Schroer 2018, 538-539.
[17]   Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 6.
[18]   Tufnell 1953, pl. 31, 11; Winter 1987, abb. 30; Deutsch 2021, 166, fig. 7.4.
[19]   Petersson-Solimany-Kletter 2009, fig. 4.1, cat. n.1, fig. 4.3, cat. n. 60.
[20]   McCown 1947, fig. 85; Ben-Shlomo - McCormick 2021, 31, fig. 4.
[21]   Aharoni 1973, pl. 27, ns. 4-9; Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 7.
[22]   Mackenzie 1912-1913, pl. 23, Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 1.
[23]   Moorey 2017, 28, fig. 2.
[24]   Aharoni 1964, pl. 35, n. 1; Lipschits - Gadot - Freud 2016, fig. 34.1, n. 1.

4. Finding context

The site of Ramat Rahel was investigated since 1959 up to 1962 by a joint mission between Sapienza University of Rome and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem directed by Prof. Y. Aharoni[25]. The head of JPF was found in the stratum Va[26] in the 1960 season during the investigation of the Iron Age Citadel. A casemate wall surrounded the Citadel on three sides, north, south and east where the main gate gave access to it.[27] The royal palace was the core of the Citadel. It was made by two main structures stood at north and east of the inner courtyard (L. 380) (fig. 4).

The head of JPF was discovered in a long hall (L. 329, squares 18/W-Y) only partially excavated in 1960 season.[28] The room was part of several units used for storage or administrative purposes.[29] The other findings of the hall are represented by pottery, especially Red Slip Ware[30] and wheel-burnished bowls, and some sherds of cooking-pots and jars,[31] such as some specimens of hole-mouth jars.[32] Many clay figurines were also discovered in this room and in the area to the east of it (L. 340). In the report more attention was dedicated to the study of two decorated sherds (fig. 5:1-2) while the head and other statuettes were labelled as Astarte figurines of the "pillar class".[33] From this assemblage the head is the only published specimens of mould-made head type while the others are of pinched JPF (fig. 5:3).[34] Many fragments of animal figurines, especially horses (fig. 5:4), complete the repertoire.[35]

In that room the concentration of findings attributable to a female deity is not accidental but it recalls specific aspects of worship. In addition to figurine there was a clay seal portraying a female head on the face, maybe a schematic version of the woman at the window (fig. 5:5).[36]

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[25]   Aharoni 1962; Aharoni 1964; Ciasca 1960.

[26]   Stratum Va corresponds to Building Phase II, dated between the second half of the 7th century BC and the Persian period, when Ramat Rahel was a royal administrative center under imperial hegemony (Lipschits *et al.* 2011, 9, 11, fig. 10).

[27]   Aharoni 1964, 50.

[28]   Only 10 × 12 metres were excavated (Aharoni 1962, 38).

[29]   The presence of many royal stamps could confirm this function (Ciasca 1960, 27).

[30]   The shapes more attested are bowls (Aharoni 1962, 41, fig. 28, ns. 1-2; pl. 23, 7; fig. 28, ns. 13-15, pl. 23, ns. 5-6) and jugs (Aharoni 1962, 41, fig. 28, ns. 44-46; pl. 23.3).

[31]   Ciasca 1960, 25.

[32]   Aharoni 1962, 41, fig. 29, ns. 4-11.

[33]   Aharoni 1962, 41-43.

[34]   Aharoni 1962, 42, pl. 24, n. 1(mould-made type); Aharoni 1962, 42, pl. 24, ns. 2-4; Aharoni 1964, pl. 35, ns. 2-4; pl. 36, ns. 1-3 (pinched type). An intact figurine (inv. VO 55, 130) and an acephalous specimen (inv. VO 104) are preserved in the Museum of Near East Egypt and Mediterranean.

[35]   Aharoni 1962, 42, pl. 25, ns. 1-2. Animal figurines are more attested of the human ones as evidenced by the high number of broken statuettes found in 1961-1962 excavations (Ciasca 1964).

[36]   The figure of the clay seal (4.1 × 4.3 × 1.0 cm) has been identified as Astarte, depicted with some features of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. The overlap between some features of Hathor and Astarte are known from the Late Bronze Age (Aharoni 1962, 42, pl. 25, ns. 3-5).

5. FINAL REMARKS

The majority of JPFs was found in domestic contexts. For this reason, they are interpreted as an expression of a popular religion[37] that is often considered in opposition to statal worship.[38] Public and private religion are not incompatible. As in temples there were big statues of deity made with precious raw materials, expression of statal and official religion, at the same time clay figurines, made with cheap materials, were used in domestic contexts by believers.[39] In this way people can ask their prayers to deity also in not official occasion as religious festivity. So, these statuettes are cultic objects, as household icons or amulets, used during private and domestic rituals, probably connected with female sphere. Furthermore, JPFs are the archaeological record of a non-temple worship practised not only by common people. The head and the other JPFs found in the royal palace of Ramat Rahel testify that these statuettes were used also by the ruling class. They were the proof of the existence of a private religious, not necessarily popular, where figurines played the role of apotropaic tools used to communicate with the goddess.

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[37] Kletter 1996, 77-78; Oggiano 2012, 233, note 49.
[38] Popular cults are often associated with superstition and for this reason interpreted as unofficial or forbidden by the statal religion. In this case JPFs and other cultic objects would be "magical" tools used during domestic and forbidden rites. This argument appears very forced, especially for JPFs. The use of molds, that differ only for few details, testifies that JPFs are a mass production. Their standardized iconography should have been known and accepted by common people and legitimized by ruling class.
[39] Some scholars claim that JPFs are cheap copies of cult statues placed in temples (Engle 1979, 52, Hadley 2000, 205).

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Fig. 1 - A head of JPF from Ramat Rahel preserved in the Museum of Near East Egypt and Mediterranean of Sapienza University of Rome (inv. M265, 110).

Fig. 2 - Heads of JPFs from Jerusalem (n. 1) (Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 3), Tell Beit Mirsim (n. 2) (Kletter 1996, 88, fig. 6, n. 6), Lachish (n. 3) (© The Trustees of the British Museum, inv. 1980, 1214.16711), Tell Moza (n. 4) (Petersson - Solimany 2009, fig. 4.1, cat. n. 1), Tell en-Naṣbeh (n. 5) (Ben-Shlomo - McCormick 2021, 29, fig. 4, n. 15).

Fig. 3 - JPFs from Jerusalem (ns. 1-3) (Lichtenberger 2017, 199, fig. 15.18; Schroer 2018, 538, ns. 1543-1544), Lachish (n. 4) (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 34.126.53), Bet Shemesh (n. 5) (© Penn Museum, inv. 61-14-1318), Bethlem (n. 6) (© The Trustees of the British Museum, inv. 93091).
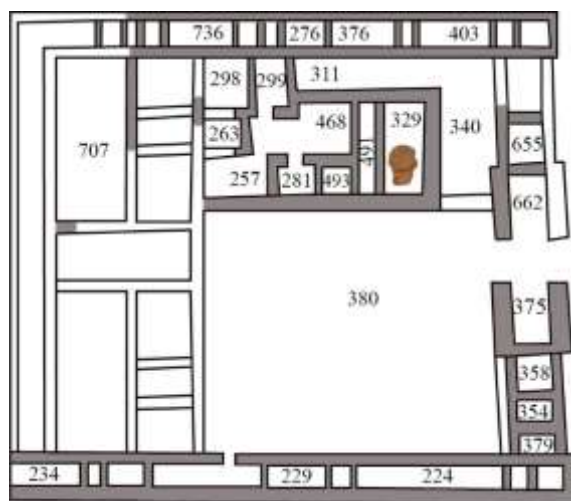
Fig. 4 - The plan of Ramat Rahel Palace in the Iron Age II, the main *loci* excavated by Aharoni in 1960 and the finding context of the head of JPF (after Aharoni 1962, pl. 6).
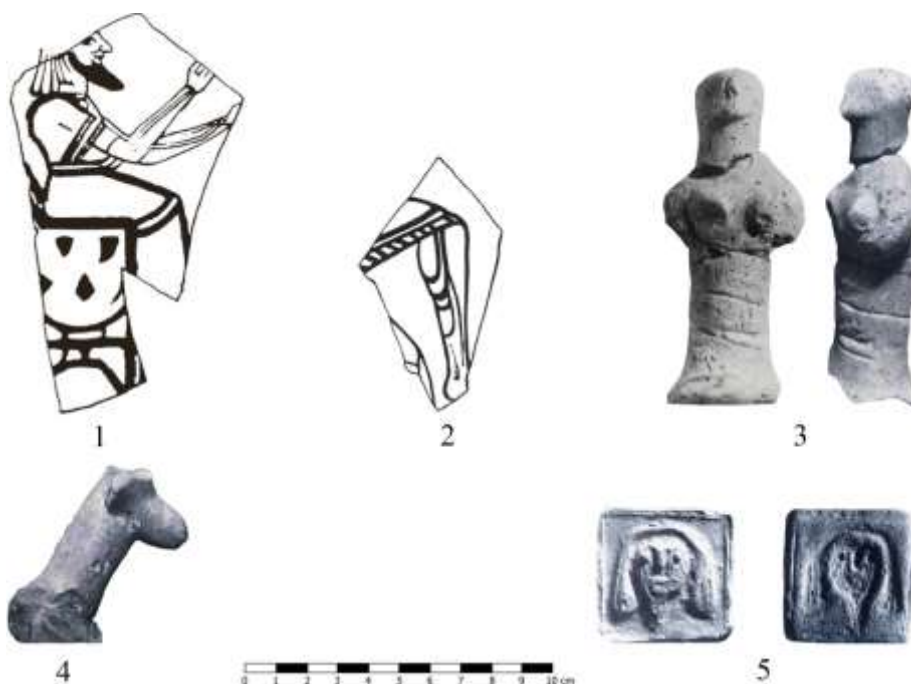

Fig. 5 - Other findings from the 1960 exploration: painted pottery (ns. 1-2) (Aharoni 1962, fig. 30, ns. 1-2), pinched figurine (n. 3) (Aharoni 1962, fig. 24, ns. 3-4), zoomorphic figurine (n. 4) (Aharoni 1962, fig. 25, n. 1), clay seal (n. 5) (Aharoni 1962, fig. 25, ns. 4-5).