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Coroplastic Studies and the History of Religion: Figurines in Yehud and the Interdisciplinary Nature of the Study of Terracottas

Izaak J. de Hulster

- 1 Readers of this new journal are familiar with coroplastic studies and most of them will have a sense of religious studies, as — in the core areas and periods covered by this journal — figurines are usually assumed to have a religious meaning. The presence of figurines in the archaeological record leads to various kinds of research in coroplastic studies and cognate fields of study (focused on a variety of, *e.g.*, technical and social aspects). The project that I am introducing with this *carnet* note is based on the *questioned presence of figurines* in the Achaemenid province of Yehud, known as ‘Judah’ in reference to earlier periods, the area around Jerusalem. The figurine report of Shiloh’s excavations in Jerusalem’s ‘City of David’¹ attributed all the figurine finds, except for a few earlier ones,² independent of their stratigraphic contexts, to Iron Age II. This practice concurs with the tendency to abnegate figurines in Achaemenid Jerusalem and its surroundings.³ As such, I have introduced a rather archaeological debate but not one that is lacking historical, and in particular religious historical, consequences; various areas of interest within the interdisciplinary field of coroplastic studies shed light on these issues. Therefore, with this contribution to *Les Carnets de l’ACoSt* I also hope to stimulate thoughts about the interdisciplinary nature of coroplastic studies.
- 2 The Achaemenid period is usually regarded as the turning point (period) towards a religiously-fueled, programmatic aniconism in Yehud. Although Yehud may not provide an avalanche of pictorial sources, there were indeed images in Yehud. Centered on the iconography of Yehud, one part of my present project addresses, contrary to the present scholarly consensus, the presence of figurines similar to those figurines in Figure 1 in Jerusalem and its surroundings. Given the religious interpretation of figurines, the issue of either presence or absence is one of historical religious importance, and through the

reception of the Hebrew Bible, not only for this period, but also for the history of Judaism and Christianity.

Fig. 1. Figurine compilation : bird pillar figurine ; lamp, Judean Pillar Figurine, bed model ; horse-and-rider. Source : combination of three figures from Keel and Uehlinger 2012 : respectively figures 320, 329, and 333b.



- 3 I have argued the case that despite the common assumption of an absence of figurines in the province Yehud, archaeological evidence supports the probability of the use of terracotta figurines even in Achaemenid period Jerusalem, the center of Yehud.⁴ Usually, it is assumed that such figurines were only used in Judah under the Assyrian hegemony. Since most scholars associate figurines with religious functions, they conclude that an absence of figurines in Yehud indicates the establishment of monotheism. My results thus far, however, have demonstrated that such a theory is, in fact, a ‘myth of the reborn nation.’⁵ This research, therefore, warns against viewing an ancient society as monolithic and shows the need to distinguish groups within a society and thus focuses on groups of actors, including possible minorities. Nevertheless, more detailed analysis is needed. In particular, besides specific contextual elements (whether demographical, technical, cultural, etc.), it would be important to know more about the “rise and decline” of certain figurine types and figurines in general.
- 4 Interestingly, even one of the most outspoken advocates of the absence of figurines in Yehud, Ephraim Stern, has excavated two figurines in the Achaemenid stratum at En Gedi (part of Yehud).⁶ Stern interprets these figurines as objects of transcultural exchange, commenting: “These two figurines presumably belonged to a non-Jew since pagan figurines were not ordinarily found at Persian period sites in the territories of Judah and Samaria”.⁷ Such a case needs to be scrutinized within a broader context of transcultural exchange of objects, groups of objects, and their material characteristics, typologies, iconographies, etc. and investigated for the change it might indicate, especially if Stern’s ‘migrant actor’ is to be dismissed as an explanation—which would be possible with a less arbitrary reconstruction. The evidence from other excavations in Yehud might cast doubt on Stern’s thesis, or at least require a more structural interpretation of the coroplastic evidence.
- 5 Like other pictorial material, figurines form an important topic from the perspective of exchange. Not only do general questions of comparison and influence still require academic answers, but figurines in Judah/Yehud are in urgent need of further analysis. First of all, figurines show similarities with amulets; in the Israel Museum they are even grouped together,⁸ functionally. But whereas amulets are commonly studied within a paradigm of exchange stemming from Egypt,⁹ research has primarily studied Judean figurines in relation to Assyria.¹⁰

- 6 Moreover, seeing Judah/Yehud as part of the southern Levantine 'Sacred Bridge,' exchange with a number of regions as occasion for change needs to be scrutinized. As Rainey and Notley¹¹ describes the Levant as "the land bridge between Asia and Africa, between Greco-Roman culture and the coasts of Arabia" and gave their study the title *The Sacred Bridge*, this project with its case studies follows in their tradition, with its emphasis on iconography and comparative study, as 'Images of the Sacred Bridge.'
- 7 The importance of the presence or absence of figurines shows the significance of figurines. Questions about the nature of figurines cannot be left unaddressed here. Therefore, I also discuss the definition of figurines (rather to the more restrictive end),¹² their materiality, and their possible meanings (incl. multi-functionality and multiple contexts of use), representations, interpretations, and functions. I also deal with these fundamental issues in a volume about Iron Age terracotta figurines in the Levant (edited together with Erin Darby),¹³ a volume that also engages in the comparative analysis as mentioned above.
- 8 Given the fundamental archaeological issue of my research on figurines, one important approach is through the materiality of figurines, as this brings in aspects of the tangibility of the object, technology, decoration,¹⁴ miniaturization, human agency, etc. Through human agency aspects of meaning also lead to discussions within the history of religion. Also related to the materiality is the shape of the figurine ; usually discussed separately as iconography, one of the emphases of my research is to avoid the 'gynemorphic fallacy' (an over-emphasis on figurines shaped as a woman) by the inclusion of other anthropomorphic and theriomorphic figurines. Moreover, study of figurines in Israel-Palestine also includes furniture models.¹⁵ This 'broader' view leads to a reconsideration of aspects of meaning.
- 9 Speaking about coroplastic studies and its cognate fields of study, the interdisciplinary nature of coroplastic studies sometimes makes it hard to maintain distinctions. Which fields belong to what extent within coroplastic studies? The history of religion might be one example here, not in the least place, when the figurines studied are not unequivocally retrieved from a religious context and the religious nature of the finds is not obvious. For the project that I have introduced here, there is the more specific question of the relation between figurines and early Jewish monotheism(s).
- 10 In other words, putting the above in a more general theoretical framework: what do we see as the core of coroplastic studies? The most obvious discipline to be mentioned might be archaeology. The focus, however, is (terracotta) figurines—or more in general, based on the name: coroplastic productions.¹⁶ The various approaches, methods, methodologies, and further science-theoretical underpinnings of coroplastic studies as a cross-disciplinary-boundary field of study already provide a large number of 'intra-disciplinary' tools to address terracottas.¹⁷ Among its cognate fields are archaeology and anthropology ; the former might include technical aspects (studies with help of natural sciences), the latter philosophical ones. A more classical take on coroplastics is through art history (including iconography). For this reason I have referred to coroplastic studies as an 'interdisciplinary field' in my first paragraph. As such coroplastic studies could be compared with 'comparative literature' or theology, fields combining a number of methods initially developed in other disciplines. An awareness of the various academic influences may provide a more transparent practice in coroplastic studies. First, depending on the definition of figurine the core of coroplastic studies could be defined. To its proper could also belong the relations to figurines made from other materials than

terracotta, as well as relations between terracotta figurines and other terracotta items. Second, the research question can point to the most important methods (respectively disciplines) in the research (intra-disciplinarily) and lead to the disciplines that need to be taken into account as well (multi-disciplinarily or pluri-disciplinarily).¹⁸ I hope that coroplastic studies will contribute to the cross-fertilization of cross-disciplinary work in adjacent and further off academic fields, and likewise broaden the perspectives of disciplines related to non-metaphorically geographical entities, such as classics or Levantine archaeology. This would grant the possibility for larger scale comparisons¹⁹—for instance in regard to the meaning of figurines, an attempt of which might be exemplified by Lesure’s study on gynemorphic figurines especially from Meso-America and the Near East—and if not a ‘phenomenological uprooting of our thinking patterns’²⁰ at least a much better calibration of our hypotheses.

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NOTES

1. GILBERT-PERETZ 1996.

2. Most of these figurines are described as 'forerunners'; GILBERT-PERETZ 1996, 39.

3. Elaboration of this simple but important thesis in light of other iconographic material from Yehud would fill a void left even by seminal works such as KEEL and UEHLINGER 2012 and SCHROER 1987 mainly focusing on the archaeological record of Iron Age I and II under the title: *In Israel gab es Bilder*.
4. See: DE HULSTER 2012.
5. Cf. DE HULSTER 2014. In line with the theses of 'the myth of the empty land' and 'the myth of the mass return;' two claims putting into perspective common — presumably historical-archaeological — assumptions (especially in theological discourse), the former pointing out that Judah was not uninhabited after the mass deportations in the first quarter of the sixth century B.C.E. (BARSTAD 1996), the latter denying a mass repopulation of Judah/Yehud by former deportees (as coined by my PhD supervisor, BECKING 2006); cf. DE HULSTER forthcoming a.
6. Even according to the minimal borders in LIPSCHITS 2005, 183.
7. STERN 2007, 262.
8. DAYAGI-MENDELS and ARIE ³2013, 77.
9. STAUBLI & HERRMANN 2010, 168.
10. Recently, *e.g.*, WILSON 2012 and DARBY 2014, 61–97, 367–382.
11. RAINEY and NOTLEY 2006, backcover.
12. Cf. PRESS 2012: 5 in comparison with, *e.g.*, KNOX 2012, 62–65.
13. See: DE HULSTER forthcoming b.
14. Cf. DE HULSTER 2013.
15. Cf., *e.g.*, ALBERTZ and SCHMITT 2012, 57–72.
16. Cf. footnote 12 above in relation to restrictiveness or fluidity in defining 'figurine'.
17. My perception of the terms 'intra-disciplinary' and 'inter-disciplinary' draws on TÖTÖSY DE ZEPETNEK 1998, 17–18, 80–81 (adapting THOMPSON KLEIN 1990). He speaks about 'intra-disciplinarity' as working within one discipline, such as comparative literature which can borrow from other related disciplines and is therefore inter-disciplinary. He also distinguishes as 'inter-disciplinary' both 'multi-disciplinarity' (one scholar engaging in more distant disciplines to resolve a problem) and 'pluri-disciplinarity' (team-work across disciplines).
18. Cf. the preceding footnote. Building on Tötösy de Zepetnek's work, MOORE 2013, 4, attempts to demonstrate the general relation of other disciplines to literature with a graph with literature (in tandem with history) at the center and other disciplines in concentric circles around it. For coroplastic studies this implies that the core or center discipline is not fixed and that other disciplines are arranged around it depending on the kind of research at stake.
19. Cf., *e.g.*, ICKERODT 2010.
20. See §6 of de Hulster forthcoming b.

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