Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

11 | 2014

Varia

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/444>

DOI: 10.4000/acost.444

ISSN: 2431-8574

Publisher

ACoSt

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 June 2014

Electronic reference

Nadia Knudsen, « Zoomorphic Figurines and Images from the Southern Levant », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 11 | 2014, Online since 13 July 2015, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/444> ; DOI : 10.4000/acost.444

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

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Zoomorphic Figurines and Images from the Southern Levant

Nadia Knudsen

- ¹ In broad terms, my area of interest is figurative imagery of the Bronze Age in the Middle East. However, for the final dissertation of my Masters degree from University College London (UCL), the study focus was directed towards a small collection of Early Bronze Age zoomorphic iconographic material in terracotta from the from Tel Bet Yerah in the Southern Levant.

Early Bronze Age III decorative ram's head applique.

- 2 Tel Bet Yerah is a large 30-35 hectares Early Bronze Age mound on the shores of Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) in northern Israel. It is noted as the type-site for the striking Khirbet Kerak Ware and has attracted much scholarly attention regarding inter-regional links, migrations and diaspora, ceramic technology, and the co-habitation of culturally disparate groups.¹ Archaeological excavation commenced here tentatively in the 1920's and has continued without any notable hiatus until the present. During this time, the mound has yielded a number of figurines, some of which I was fortunate enough to have been given access to.

Ceramic re-creation of ram's head and archaeological illustration of original artefact. See Fig 1.

- 3 The purpose of the study was to examine selected facets of the life-history of this group of figurines in the light of the *chaîne opératoire* method of analysis where the process and meaning of object creation is emphasised as a way of looking beyond the mere descriptive.² In discussing the full lifespan of the figurines, my aim was to include, but also progress beyond, the initial phases of idea and intention, material procurement and artefact production, and to explore the relationship between producer, owner and the artefact in the hope of creating a narrative of their subsequent lives.
- 4 In exploring the possible lives of the figurines, one could not only consider the life within the context of their creation, that is to say life during the Bronze Age, but also the 'death' or moment of deposition and removal from the environment of its 'birth.' The opportunity of rediscovery during archaeological excavation could result in a possible 'rebirth' and subsequent 'afterlife' in the hands of any number of archaeological specialists. This may result in a renewed active life as a well-documented artefact which is available for research and appreciation by the general public and interested scholars. However, it may be subjected to eventual 'reburial' into a dark and silent storeroom. Other possible fates include loss through theft, breakage, destruction (through accident or intention) and material decay.
- 5 The aspects of figurine life which were selected rest at either end of this spectrum. The ceramic fabric of the dataset was examined non-invasively, and a macroscopic examination and description was undertaken. This study was then compared with the fabric of the associated pottery assemblage from the site to ascertain if there were any parallel relationships. The particularly distinctive dual pottery tradition, which prevailed during this period at Tel Bet Yerah, makes this a particularly interesting point of study.³ A physical description of the artefacts themselves was also made and the details of

context and associated material culture were considered as far as the archaeological record permitted. Early excavation reports are a little limited as regards these details.

- 6 Having worked as an archaeological illustrator, it was self-evident for me to consider this phase of the figurines' life histories. A chapter in the post-excavation afterlife. The role of the illustrator is to depict, represent and sometimes recreate the artefact through this type of non-verbal communication. This is one of several visual media which make artefacts available to the archaeological community and the broader public in general.
- 7 As a natural extension to the practical exercise of archaeological illustration, I felt that there was something to be gained by the experience of making figurines myself and so followed the advice of Pierre Lemonnier, who wrote : "one can hardly talk of techniques without sticking a finger in the dough, or at least, without attempting, with our representations, to comprehend what it is that passes through the head and the hands of the actor."⁴ This process was enlightening and gave me insight into the fine manual dexterity, detailed anatomical knowledge and time expenditure required in the production of these artefacts. As noted by Morris and Peatfield, there are the questions of how the manner in which an object is represented impacts upon the wider audience and subsequent academic research.⁵ Similarly, the mode with which one engages with artefacts on a re-creative and post-excavation level imparts a certain appreciation of the original process of figurine production and subsequent life history.
- 8 The results of my research are not without its flaws and limitations, some of which were beyond my expertise and control. However, the overall preliminary discourse has convinced me that there is much to be gleaned from a holistic approach to figurine studies. The combination of knowledge and research derived from a number of archaeological specialities, both theoretical and scientific, is enhanced by the nuances and the innate character of these diminutive artefacts, which is achieved through an informed hands-on experimental approach.
- 9 I wish to thank the staff of the Tel Bet Yerah Research and Excavation Project, namely Professor Rafi Greenberg, Dr Sarit Paz and Mark Iserlis, for their support and generosity in provision of all manner of data and expertise. Much appreciation also goes to Professor David Wengrow at UCL for advice and encouragement at the critical stage of my dissertation. The photograph of the original ram's head appliqué was kindly provided by the site directors and the photograph of the post-excavation representations is my own.

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NOTES

1. GREENBERG 2011; GREENBERG et al 2006, 2012; PHILLIP 1999.
2. DOBRES 2000; SCHLANGER 1990, 1994; LEMONNIER 1986, 1993.
3. GREENBERG 2007, ISERLIS 2006.
4. LEMONNIER 1990, p. 33.
5. MORRIS, PEATFIELD 2013.

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Keywords: zoomorphic figurine, artefact

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