The populations of the Near East and nearby regions: evolution of diet and health status from the Neolithization to the Early Bronze Age

Janine Major – Wadi Hammeh 27, Jordan Valley. Natufian Art items, a Contextual Analysis

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The is rather a hefty book, ca. 400 pages, of a big format, each page measuring 29.5 × 21 cm. It comprises 9 chapters and a detailed catalogue (68 pages), part of chapter 5, of art items (=69) from Wadi Hammeh 27 providing all data imaginable per each item: dimensions, preservation, categorization by raw material, artifact type, decorative motif, location, indexing, provenance, detailed description and manufacture techniques as well as several illustrations (drawings and photographs) of every artefact. The bibliography list is substantial (15 pages). There are 301 figures, on top of those in the aforementioned catalogue, and 71 tables, some of which are spread over more than 10 pages.

It is actually an adaptation of the author’s PhD thesis (2012), and accordingly it puts emphasis on the site of Wadi Hammeh 27, with three chapters dealing in particular with this site. Chapter 3 provides an account of the site, the material remains therein, its chronology, site formation processes, architecture, etc. Chapter 5 is a detailed description of “The Art items from Wadi Hammeh 27” comprising the comprehensive catalogue mentioned earlier, followed by chapter 6 which summarized “The Wadi Hammeh 27 Art Assemblage” presenting a quantitative analysis of motifs, raw materials, manufacture techniques, spatial and chronological distribution of the art items as well as “Evidence for Re-use of Art Items” on site. The other chapters of the book are attuned to the phenomena of Natufian art overall: chapter 1 being an
introduction to “Natufian Art”, chapter 2 describing “The Natufian”, chapter 4 “Classifying Natufian Art”, chapter 7 providing “A Temporal, Spatial and Technological Analysis of Natufian Art”, chapter 8 is “interpreting Natufian Art Objects” and chapter 9 presents the “Conclusion”.

In the preface of the book the author claims that her research “established a new classification system” and offers “the first quantitative and systematic analysis of this genre of art”. Regrettably, while this may be true, one cannot relate to this very informative compilation of Natufian Art data as providing a break-through in our understanding of this unique phenomenon.

The author states that her objective was to search for encoded meaning through an investigation of patterns in relationships between media, artefact type, manufacture, context and distribution—in the process providing long tables enumerating each Natufian “artistic” item ever published up to 2016 or so. Still, the main contribution of this work is the very compilation of the data and the illustrative material as most of those patterns were observed and published previously, even if the data sample was smaller.

Moreover, what this work portrays is a classic archaeological attitude towards what is considered as “art” or “artistic manifestations”, just as it was done in the earlier stages of other art corpora (e.g. the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic Art). Great efforts were invested in assigning the artistic items unto their “categorical” slot or slots, depending on whether the categorization entails the artistic motifs (being the basic unit of analysis), the artefact type or the manufacturing process (and see chapter 4: ‘Classifying Natufian Art’ for the detailed accounts of the 13 motif categories and 12 artefact categories). Indeed, the author should be complimented on her thorough sifting of the Natufian findings, referring to each item she considers as an artistic manifestation—ca. 300 items (table 7.1) that were published or available for her inspection while conducting her PhD research. Saying this one cannot but wonder how to relate to the complex statistical calculation presented and discussed in the book, taking into consideration both—the categorization of items as artistic manifestations and the fact of the on-going nature of the Natufian research. Thus the consideration of “waisted stones” (figs. 5.14-17)—a stone with a circumscribing groove—as “art” items is not self-evident. The groove can be considered fully functional, of artisan rather than artistic purposes, e.g. as in fishing or spindle weights. The same can be said concerning the longitudinally grooved stones, named in the literature as “shaft straighteners” (figs. 5.22, 5.29). And what about the natural items which were collected by the Natufians? (e.g. fig. 5.7). Why should one consider a natural fossil as a “pendant” and incorporate it as an “art” item (fig. 7.150) while ignoring all manufactured bone pendants found in great numbers at some Natufian base-camps (e.g. Eynan [Ain Mallaha], el-Wad, Hayonim), both in the living quarters and in Early Natufian burials? The author does state that “only items of personal adornment bearing geometric marks or figurative form are included” (p. 30) which seems rather arbitrary. Thus a single “bone pendant (?)” (fig. 5.27) is included among the artistic manifestations of Wadi Hammeh 27 because it has a circumscribing groove at its proximal terminal. And as a final aside, why count broken fragments which can be parts of the same item (e.g. figs. 5.58-60—engraved slabs) as two separate specimens and thus enlarge the “artistic” inventory per site?
How can one speculate about the meaning of artistic manifestations per excavation extent (table 7.4) and the implications drawn from these data as regards the Natufian art and its distribution in general and the place of the various geographic regions-cum-specific sites in particular? Suffice is to bring the example of the site Nahal Ein Gev II and compare the relevant data in the book, based on the publication by Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 2000 to that available currently after the renewal of the excavations at the site in 2010 (Grosman et al. 2016, 2017, Grosman and Shaham 2019). The same can be said concerning the renewed excavations of the el-Wad terrace, not to mention other publications with information on Natufian artistic manifestations such as Shaham and Belfer-Cohen 2013, Richter et al. 2016 or Yeshurun et al. 2016 published in-between 2012 and 2018. Clearly, one simply cannot be cognizant of each and every publication pertaining to a particular research, thus detailed calculations such as “Volumetric density of art items at Natufian and contemporaneous sites with open area excavations” (fig. 7.6), or “Frequency of phallic items from individual sites by zone” (fig. 7.36) should be treated, at the most, as indicative of what is known at the time—never mind the problematics of what should/could be considered “phallic representations”, and be evaluated cautiously.

Accordingly, I find the conclusions drawn by the author from such calculations rather disturbing in their finality, e.g. “However, prior to this examination of Natufian art, the dominance of male symbolism amongst the figurative corpus was not appreciated” (ch. 9: Conclusions, p. 356). Regrettably, the author did not consider treating the Natufian Art phenomena differently. She does summarize the discussion of what was published in the literature concerning the rise and intensity of Natufian artistic activity, but while showing the pitfalls of the various explanatory scenarios, the main one their being essentially universalist (and see chapter 1) she ignores that there could be several explanatory levels, from a universal one relevant to the overall phenomena to particular explanations of local occurrences, a regional or even a single site within their specific context. On p. 4 (chapter 1) it is stated that “this work celebrates the diversity of Natufian art, and rather than searching for a global meaning, it offers a range of interpretations that are developed through investigations of particular objects or groups of objects themselves”—unfortunately, it does not materialize at the end of the day. The results presented through cross-referencing between numbers of items, extent of excavations, geographic location, etc., presented in the numerous tables and figures in the book, are valid only to the moment of the writing-up. Moreover, the absence of discussion concerning the particular environmental circumstances of each region, and little if at all reference to the difference between the nature of the sites, whether those are caves or open-air occupations, with or without burial grounds, detracts much of the conclusions validity.

Lamentably, this detailed research does not provide us with new insights on or exploration venues for the Natufian artistic phenomena. Yet it is a well-researched compilation and gazetteer comprising the majority of currently known Natufian artistic manifestations, the first and so far only of its kind and the author should be lauded for her impressive endeavours to carry out this study.


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