

In Pursuit of Visibility

Essays in Archaeology, Ethnography, and Text
in Honor of Beth Alpert Nakhai

edited by
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Plaque figurine of a mother holding a child found in a Late Bronze Age context at Tel el-Wawiyat. Drawing by Lilah Rogel after Nakhai, Dessel, and Wisthoff 1993.

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What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This? Contextualizing an Iron Age IIA Female-Drummer Figurine from Tel Abel Beth Maacah

Nava Panitz-Cohen and Daphna Tsoran

Introduction

Tel Abel Beth Maacah (ABM) is the northernmost Iron Age site currently being excavated in Israel, located 5 km south of the town of Metulla on the Lebanese border, in the so-called 'finger of the Galilee.' While the modern border between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon is well demarcated, the question may be asked whether such a border—politically, culturally, and economically—was viable in the early first millennium BCE between the main powers in the region at that time: the northern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Aram-Damascus, and the Phoenician polities. No clear answer can be offered to this question, as the complexity of such relationships is obscured by the ambiguity of the existing texts, particularly the biblical one, and the vagaries of the archaeological record. What can be attempted is to contextualize elements of material culture in order to gain insight into the broader processes and events that define such geo-political relationships. Such an item is a clay torso of a female holding a disk, commonly known as a 'drummer figurine,' which was found in the excavations at ABM. In this article, we look at the context, iconography, style, and technical tradition, with the goal of shedding light on the figurine's cultural role, both on the site and regional levels.

The engendering of archaeology greatly enriches the cultural and historical discourse and adds a critical dimension to our understanding of ancient life. Undoubtedly, Beth Alpert Nakhai is at the forefront of this endeavor and plays a pivotal role not only in formulating the framework of academic archaeological gender studies, but also in the efforts of female archaeologists to gain equal personal and professional status in what has traditionally been a man's world. We dedicate this short study to Beth as a tribute to her leadership, integrity, and dedication to us as archaeologists, scholars, and women.

Tel Abel Beth Maacah—The Site and the Excavations

Tel Abel Beth Maacah is a large (100 dunam) site located in northern Israel, on the modern-day border with Lebanon, 6.5 km west of Tel Dan, 35 km north of Hazor, and 35 km east of Tyre and Sidon on the Lebanese coast (Figure 1). The identification of this tell with the biblical city is based on its Arabic name, Abil el-Qameh, which preserves the ancient name Abel, and on the order of cities conquered by the Arameans in the ninth century and the Assyrians in the eighth century, respectively, as related in 1 Kings 15:20 and 2 Kings 15:29. A third biblical reference includes the story of Sheba ben Bichri who rebelled against King David and fled to Abel Beth Maacah, only to be beheaded by a local Wise Woman in order to save the city from the revenge of David's army (2 Samuel 14) (Panitz-Cohen and Yahalom-Mack 2019).

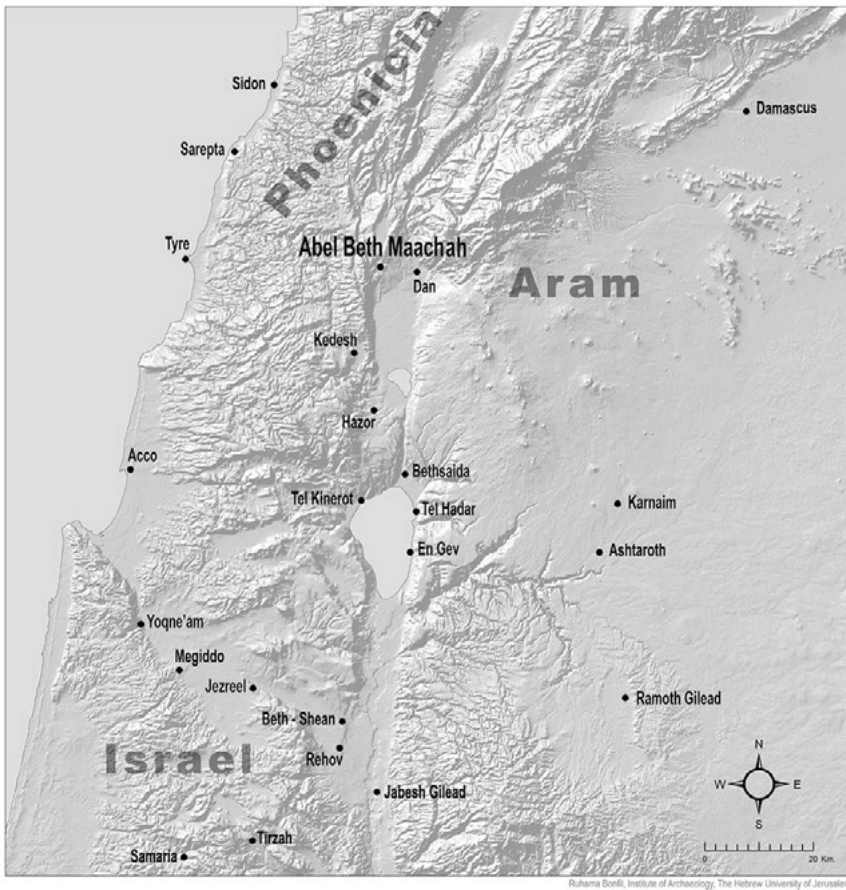


Figure 1: Tel Abel Beth Maachah: view of the tell looking east and location map (photograph by Robert Mullins, courtesy of the Abel Beth Maachah Excavations; map by Ruhama Bonfil, Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

Eight seasons of excavation since 2013¹ have revealed rich occupation remains from the second and first millennia BCE, with a particularly robust Iron Age stratigraphic sequence covering the twelfth to ninth centuries BCE. Notably, despite the reference in 2 Kings 15 to an Assyrian conquest, to date no clear occupation layer or destruction can be assigned to this period or event. More sporadic remains have been uncovered from the Persian to the Mameluke periods. A small Arab village (Abil el-Qameh) occupied part of the tell from the Ottoman period until 1948.²

Find Context

The figurine torso was found in Area B, located on the eastern slope of the tell's summit (Figure 2). A large building complex dated to the Iron Age IIA is the main element in this excavation area, comprising a massive casemate structure and related structures and courtyards to its north and south (Figure 3). The casemate structure had at least two phases and is dated to the late tenth and ninth centuries BCE.³ Among the finds in the complex are red-slipped and hand burnished pottery, as well as fine Samaria/Achziv ware, an elaborately painted



Figure 2: View of the tell looking west, with Area B, where the figurine was found, marked (photograph courtesy of Mikraot Gedolot Haketer Project, www.mgketer.org).

¹ The excavations are co-directed by Naama Yahalom-Mack and Nava Panitz-Cohen under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, together with Robert Mullins under the auspices of Azusa Pacific University of Los Angeles. The excavations and research are supported by an Israel Science Foundation grant (2017–2020, grant no. 859/17) and by generous private donors. Licenses are granted by the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

² For preliminary reports and articles on selected finds, see Panitz-Cohen, Mullins, and Bonfil 2013; 2015; David, Mullins, and Panitz-Cohen 2016; Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2016a; Panitz-Cohen et al. 2018; Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen, and Mullins 2018a; b; Yahalom-Mack et al. 2018; David 2019; Yahalom-Mack et al. 2019; Panitz-Cohen 2021; Yahalom-Mack et al. 2021. Annual field reports are posted on www.abel-beth-maacah.org.

³ The date is based on a series of radiocarbon dates obtained from short-lived organic samples found in several contexts and phases measured in the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at the University of Oxford, and on the ceramic sequence.



Figure 3: Area B, with Iron Age IIA citadel complex; star marks the findspot of the figurine (photograph by Alexander Wiegmann and Yakov Shmidov, courtesy of the Abel Beth Maacah Excavations).

Phoenician Bichrome storage jar (Panitz-Cohen 2022), a pendant stamped with a Phoenician ship motif (Brandl and Yahalom-Mack 2022), a sherd of a Greek *skyphos*, and a spoon-shaped stone nozzle. A special find in the eastern casemate room was a faience head of a bearded elite figure (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen, and Mullins 2018: 154; Yahalom-Mack et al. 2018: 30).

The figurine torso was found in the space to the south of the eastern casemate room, in a layer of stone and earth debris revealed below topsoil (Locus 7747). This layer runs along the southern end of an Iron IIA white plaster surface (Locus 7736). Although the findspot of the figurine torso was eroded due to the downslope of the area to the south and east, its context may be assigned to the Iron IIA, as it adjoins the stratified remains of this period. In fact, no later Iron Age remains were noted in this part of the excavation area and the abandonment of the casemate structure, dated to the late ninth century BCE, marks the end of occupation in this period.

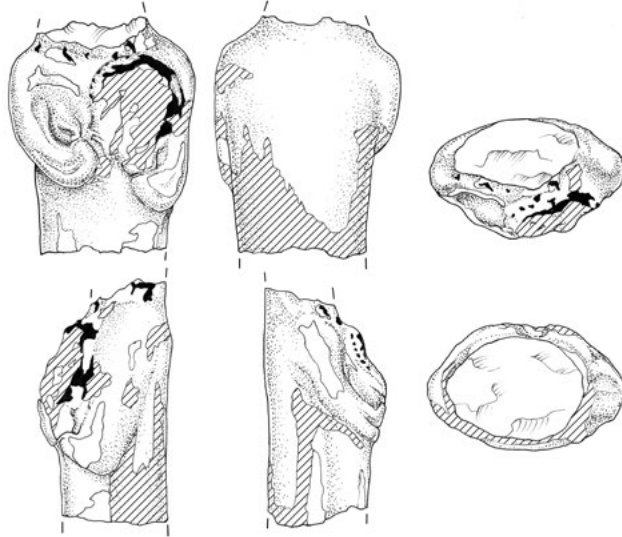
Description

The extant fragment (Figure 4) extends from the bottom of the neck/top of the shoulders down to just below the waist (6 cm high). The body is hand-formed as a solid oval with a slight tapering towards the bottom (oval near waist: 3.3 cm by 2.5 cm). It seems that the features were added separately to the front: the arms, the exposed breast, and the disk (see further discussion below concerning the formation technique).

WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS



Figure 4a: Photograph of the figurine (photograph by Tal Rogovski).



L.7747 B.77186

0 2 CM

Figure 4b: Drawing of the figurine (drawing by Yulia Rudman).

The arms descend from broad, rounded shoulders. The arms, bent under the breast line and adjoining the body, hold a round object/disk (2.2 cm diameter) pressed against and hiding the left breast.⁴ The upper part of the right arm is rounded and protrudes from the side of the torso, while the left arm hardly does (see back view); the right arm is slightly thinner than the left. The right hand is placed on the disk, while the left hand is not visible and appears to be depicted as reaching the very bottom of the disk, positioned lower than the right hand. The right wrist clearly has two bracelets, and it appears that the left one does too; these are depicted as shallow incisions. The fingers of the right hand are spread and can be discerned, although not all five. The right arm encircles the visible breast, which has a shallow short gash at its edge, although it is not clear if this is intentional.

The figurine is painted in three colors: red, black, and white. Short, vertical, uneven black hatches surround the lower neck, just above the line of the shoulders, possibly depicting a necklace; a few small patches of white color can be seen around and under these black lines. From just below the right shoulder, a narrow white strip runs above the right breast and terminates at the disk. Faint traces of white and black paint are visible on the upper right and most of the left arm; faint traces of white paint can also be discerned on the front below the arms. The disk is covered with red paint, with a black line around its perimeter; this line is not visible where the two hands reach the disk. The layer of red and black paint is thick and peeling in some spots. The fingers of the right hand and the entire left hand (hardly visible) are also partially painted red, continuing the paint applied to the disc. A splash of red paint can be seen in the middle of the left upper arm, although this might be a spillover from the paint on the disc. Traces of a lighter red paint (or slip) are visible on the back of the torso, especially on its middle and lower parts.⁵

Formation Technique and Provenance

The body appears to have been hand formed as a solid oval shape, 3.3 cm wide and 2.5 cm thick. Traces of finger pressing and vertical and diagonal smoothing and deep scraping lines are visible on the back and sides (see Figure 4). It seems likely that the missing head was a separate appendage, although no clear traces of its attachment mode are seen (i.e., there is no peg).⁶ As noted above in the description, the arms, breast, and disk were attached separately and it can be seen, particularly in the back of the upper arms, how clay was smeared to form the attachment (Figure 5).⁷

⁴The terms 'left' and 'right' refer to the figurine's perspective, not that of the viewer.

⁵It is difficult to determine if the paint depicts dress or jewelry, and if the figurine was nude or partially dressed; the latter, however, seems to be the case. Mold-made figurines with incisions and reliefs are thought to be nude or partially dressed, while the painted, hollow, wheel-made figurines with outstretched arms are thought to be completely dressed (Tadmor 2006: 328).

⁶It is possible that the missing head was mold-made, based on figurines whose extant head appears to have been so made and then attached to a hand-made body, e.g., the figurine from site WT-13 in Transjordan cited later in the text.

⁷The figurine was examined by Dr. Naama Yahalom-Mack, the director of the Laboratory for Archaeological Materials and Ancient Technologies at the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under an optical microscope (Stemi 508, Zeiss with Axiocam 105). Microscopic comparison to a Late Bronze Age plaque figurine from the Collections of the Institute of Archaeology showed that it lacked these striations on its back, as well as the smears joining the arms to the sides and torso.

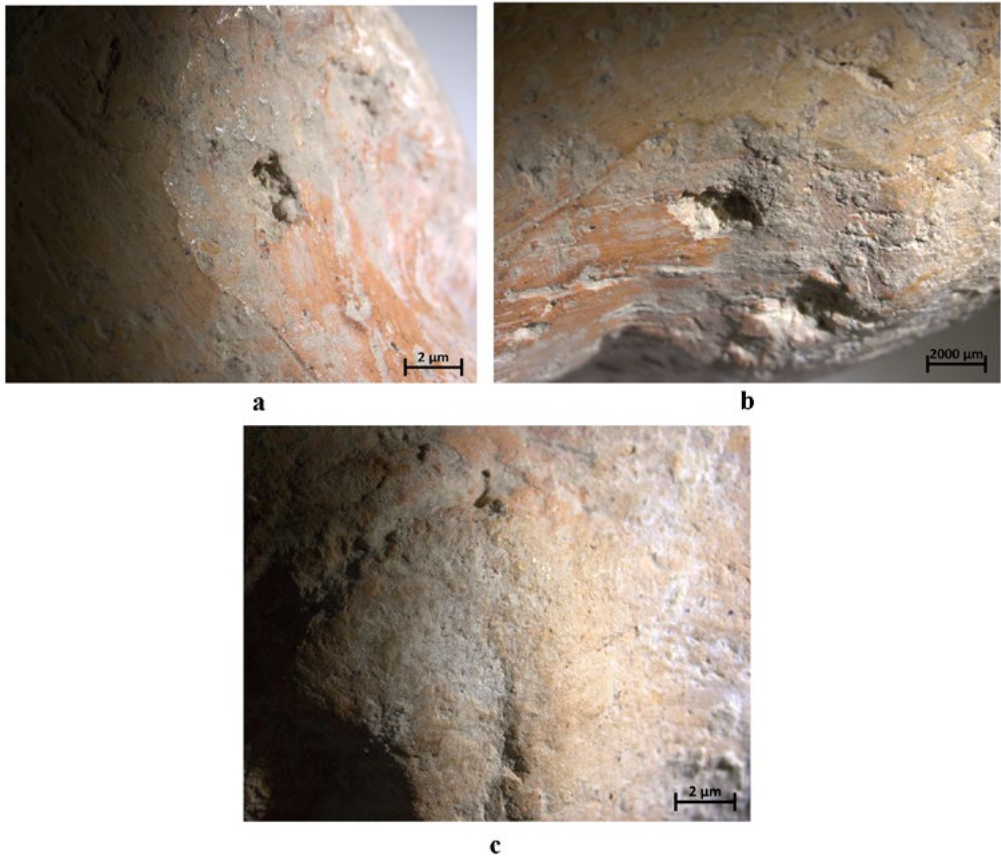


Figure 5a: View of back attachment of the right arm; b: View of back attachment of the left arm; c: Smear of clay between body and back of the left arm (photographs by Naama Yahalom-Mack, courtesy of the Laboratory for Archaeological Materials and Ancient Technologies at the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

From a visual examination and preliminary petrographic analysis, the clay is most likely local, being similar to that used to make contemporary vessels.⁸ The color is light brownish-pink with a few small black and white inclusions. A dark gray core with organic voids and fissures possibly caused by relatively low temperature during firing is visible.

⁸ Petrographic analysis was done by Anat Cohen-Weinberger of the Israel Antiquities Authority, but the results were inconclusive as the sample was too small to unequivocally determine provenance (this due to caution in taking the sample so as not to harm the figurine). However, based on the information that could be gleaned from the thin section, as well as Cohen-Weinberger's familiarity with the local fabrics of Abel Beth Maacah, it is most likely that the figurine is a local product.

Contextualizing the Figurine

Iconography

Female figurines holding disks are well-known in numerous contexts, particularly in northern Israel, although they are also found in Transjordan; all date to the Iron Age II. They have been widely studied and discussed (e.g., Holland 1975; Tadmor 2006). There are two basic categories based on formation techniques and style: one where the figure is holding the disk close and parallel to her chest (mainly on one breast and, rarely, between the two breasts), and the other where the arms are outstretched (or not flush against the body) and the hands clutch the disk which is held perpendicular to the line of the body. In the former, the figurine is invariably mold-made, with the disk being part of the mold, while in the latter the figurine is depicted in the round and its body is mostly hollow, either hand or wheel made, while the arms and disk comprise a separate attachment.⁹ There are also variations within these two main categories, such as the disk held at an angle just in front of the body or a hollow body with the disk flush against the chest.¹⁰ Notably, in both categories as well as in the variations, the figure almost always holds the disk in the left hand while the right one overlaps it and the disk (Sugimoto 2008: 31).

Various suggestions on the identification of the disk have been offered, among them a plate or bowl, a solar disk, a cake or loaf of bread, and a drum; the first two have already been ruled out, while the last two remain the most viable possibilities (Paz 2007: 52, 60; Sugimoto 2008: 6–10). Meyers (1987: 120; 2017: 125–126) identified the pressed disk as a cake or loaf of bread in the role of a sacrificial offering, and only the type with the outstretched disk as a musical instrument (a drum). Other scholars viewed the disk as a drum, with the difference between the two categories not necessarily reflecting different meanings but rather expressing technological variations, with those who hold the disk against the body being mold made and those who hold it away from the body being hand or wheel made (or both) (Kletter 1996: 36; Sugimoto 2008: 35; Tadmor 2006: 326).

It has been debated whether or not the female figurine should be identified as a deity or as a mortal (a question pertinent to other types of female figurines as well). If a deity—which? If mortal—what is the role of such a figure? For both suggestions, there is the question of the portent of grasping a drum or bread. Sugimoto (2008: 75–82) viewed all the female figures holding disks as deities, specifically Ashtoret; for later Judean figures holding disks, Kletter and Saarelainen (2011: 24–25) claimed the identity as Asherah. Other scholars viewed the figures as mortal females who accompanied ritual activities by dancing and strumming musical instruments. This conclusion was based on examination of various scenes in other media, such as ivories and metal plates, where women holding disks are seen as participants in processions, feasts, and ritual activities (e.g., Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 166–167; Meyers 2017: 127–128; Paz 2007: 80). Related to the identity of the figure itself, its role in the lives of ancient women, whether ritual or apotropaic (or both), has also been a topic of discussion by these scholars.¹¹

⁹ Mold-made figurines are often termed ‘plaque figurines’ and those that are wheel-made are called ‘pillar figurines’ (e.g., Meyers 2017: 117).

¹⁰ These are termed ‘hybrid’ by Paz (2007: 45).

¹¹ A recent suggestion (Hunziker-Rodewald 2020) to view the drum as a direct association with the phases of a

Regional and Cultural Context

Although iconographically conforming to the basic ‘grammar’ of the disk-holding female figurines, the ABM figurine has several unique features. The mode of manufacture, which we surmise was made by hand, does not align with the conventional technical definition of the category of disks held pressed against the body, namely, that they are mold made. Moreover, these mold-made figurines routinely have decorative designs showing jewelry or details of dress that are incised or punctured, as well as in relief, which are an integral part of the mold (cf., two molds from Iron Age IIA Tel Rehov, Kletter and Saarelainen 2020: 27; Mazar 2020: 9). In the ABM figurine, the decorative elements, whether jewelry or clothing, are painted on.

Parallels to solid figurines with round or oval body sections and appendages (arms, breast, and disk) that were added separately are not common, and in fact are usually categorized in the literature as having been mold-made, despite those features that we suggest point to hand formation. Examples come mainly from Transjordan and include: a neck-to-waist fragment from a tomb at Irbid (Dajani 1966: 90, pl. XXXIII:16; also in Holland 1975: 196, A.10.G.3; Kletter 1996: 136, 5.E.1.1; Paz 2007: 33, A55) and a head-to-vulva fragment from Deir ‘Alla (Amar 1980: 62, No. 33, pl. 9:1; also in Holland 1975: C.6.A.7; Kletter 1996: 138, 5.E.1.40; Paz 2007: 33, A52; for a photograph, see Hunziker-Rodewald 2020: 259, Figure 5). A head-to-waist fragment found at site WT-13 in the Transjordanian plateau (Daviau 2014: 4, pl. 3.3) is described as a solid pillar with arms, breast added, like the ABM figure. The drum in this figure is not flush against the breast but rather is somewhat angled away.¹² A figurine torso from shoulders to below the waist that is similar to ours in many respects was found at Tell Abu al-Kharaz and assigned to early Iron IIB (the beginning of the eighth century BCE; Phase XIII). This fragment was described as being handmade, with arms, breasts, and drum attached separately (Bürge 2013: 517–521).¹³ To these we may add a few figurines that appear similar to ours found at northern sites in Israel, e.g., Megiddo (surface find) (Peri 2013: 1024, Figure 20.1:4) and possibly Tell el-Far‘ah North (Chambon 1984: pl. 63:1, Stratum VIIB), with the drum held near the chest at an angle, clearly an added feature. These two figurines have incised decoration that appears to have been added when the figure was leather hard and not as part of a mold, further supporting the suggestion that they were hand formed. Moreover, the incisions depict simple linear motifs, as opposed to the more intricate designs often found on the mold-made items.

Parallels to drummer figurines that are painted are extremely rare and we cite here two of them. One is an example from Transjordan that was a surface find from the Amman Citadel: the hair is painted black and traces of red are preserved on her face (Amar 1980: 86, Figure 82; photo in Dornemann 1983: pl. 89:2; see also Kletter 1996: 4.A.3). Red paint that covers both the disk and the hands gripping it was found on a fragment from an Iron II(A?) context in Samaria of the type with outstretched arms holding the disk perpendicular to the body. Since it is fragmentary, it is difficult to know whether the rest of the figure was painted as

woman’s reproductive life was based on a number of figurines wherein the drum was replaced with the figure of a baby or child (e.g., from Iron Age IIA Tel Rehov, see Kletter and Saarelainen 2020 with discussion and references).

¹² The photograph of this figurine shows that the head had been broken off at the line above the shoulders; the head itself appears to be mold-made.

¹³ Bürge (2013: 520) notes a torso from Beth-Shean Level Lower V that she claims is almost identical to the example from Tell Abu al-Kharaz. From the drawing in the original publication (James 1966: 337, Figure 111:1) it is difficult to determine if indeed this item is handmade as well.

well. The small, preserved part of the body shows that it was hollow, yet handmade, making this a hybrid type (Holland 1975: B.VIII/6; Kletter 1996: 5.IV.6.24; Tsoran 2015: 24). Additional painted figurines were found mainly in Transjordan; although they are not of the drummer type, they show that the painted tradition was known at sites in that region. Examples include a torso fragment that was a surface find from Tell el-Mazar that was painted with black bands on the front (Amar 1980: 88, Figure 85), as well as several heads whose eyes and hair are emphasized by black paint (e.g., Amar 1980: 85, Figure 80, unstratified, from Sahab). It is unknown to which body type these heads might have belonged.

Painted drummer figurines, all of the type with hollow, probably wheel-made bodies and outstretched arms holding the drum, dating to the latter part of Iron Age II (eighth–seventh centuries BCE), come from sites along the southern Phoenician coast (e.g., Paz 2007: 39–40, B.3, Figure 2.4:3 from Achziv), and were also found in Cyprus, most likely under Phoenician influence (Paz 2007: 63).

Discussion and Conclusions

This brief review of female figures holding disks, most probably to be identified as drums, places them in a clear spatial and chronological framework, namely northern Israel in the Iron Age IIA, and somewhat later reaching Transjordan, Phoenicia, and Judah. While there is marked variability in both their style and technology, it is important to emphasize the commonality of the theme itself, showing that what they represented, whether in the realm of the cultic or the apotropaic (or both), was meaningful to a wide range of end users. Despite the technical and stylistic diversity seen both geographically and chronologically, the extensive circulation of these figurines is an expression of the close cultural koine that existed in the region during the tenth to eighth centuries BCE, regardless of the geo-political division into territorial kingdoms, such as Israel, Judah, Ammon, and Moab, as well as the Phoenician cities.

The predominance of the mold-made drummer figurines during Iron Age IIA in northern Israel points to this as being the main technique for the manufacture of such objects, while the variations reflect local technical choices. The mold-made tradition has its roots deep in the Late Bronze Age, when this technology was used to produce mainly female figures who were either deities or played a central role in cultic practices. The continuing use of this technology in the Iron Age can perhaps be understood as an expression of the close cultural relationship between the technical aspect and the ideology behind the product. In Iron IIA we see the existence of several contemporary formation techniques (i.e., hand formation, wheel formation, hybrid, etc.) showing that it became legitimate to create the desired topic in different ways, detaching the technical from the ideological. It is also notable that, by the Iron IIB, the use of a mold to create these figurines declines and is gradually replaced almost exclusively by wheel making and composite formation (wheel made body and mold made head). Do these developments reflect population diversity, external cultural influences, or possibly the way in which the cultural koine of that time played out, so that it became legitimate to manufacture the same ritually meaningful object in different ways?

Our suggestion that the ABM figurine was hand formed as a solid oval with the features attached opens up the possibility that other such items, despite their routine definition as mold-made in the literature, were so manufactured as well. This suggestion should be

tested by close microscopic examination of those figurines that lack the typical mold-made characteristics. One such feature is the incised and relief decoration that depicts details such as dress, coiffure, jewelry, or the frame of the drum, which was an integral part of the mold and thus does not appear on those figurines that were hand made. When defining hand-, wheel- or mold-made techniques, we should also take into account the possibility of a combination. An example of this seems to be a unique figurine from Early Iron IIA Tel Rehov showing a nude female who apparently was made in a mold, yet details of her coiffure and jewelry were perforated and incised by hand, and clay was added to her back and bottom after she was removed from the mold so that she could be free-standing (Saarelainen and Kletter 2020: No. 15). Another possibility is that hand-made figures such as the ABM drummer might have been part of a larger object or vessel, like, for example, a vessel handle from Tel Kinrot (Supinska-Lovset 2014: 69, Fig. 1). Note also two drummer figurines found attached to a cult stand from the Kerak region in Transjordan (Amr 1980: 95, Figure 104; also Paz 2007: A59–A60, Figure 2.3:7), although they appear to be mold made in this case.

The ABM figurine is distinguished by the extremely rare if not unique combination of hand formation and painted decoration. The tri-color scheme that appears on the figure is also rare as most of the painted examples at that time were in red with details emphasized in black. The combination of red, black, and white, unique as far as we know in a figurine decoration, points to the realm of Phoenician Bichrome, where such a color scheme is well-known on mostly closed vessels in the early part of Iron IIA (Gilboa 1999: 5). As ABM was located on the northern border of the Israelite kingdom of the ninth century BCE, in proximity to the major Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, it most likely served as an interface of cultural and economic relations between the Phoenicians and the Israelite kingdom, epitomized by the marriage of Jezebel and Ahab of the Omrides, and expressed in numerous aspects of art and craftsmanship, including architecture, ivories, pottery, and more (Markoe 2000: 38). Close relations between Phoenicia and ABM are evident in the large number of Phoenician items, particularly pottery, found at the site, and it is possible that the tri-color decorative scheme on the figurine was a product of such influence.

The presence of a drummer figurine at ABM in the late tenth–ninth century BCE, albeit of a non-routine combination of technology and decoration, associates the city with the Israelite kingdom, where the majority of such items were found. Yet, on the other hand, this type of figurine is known from other contemporary contexts, so that it serves as a connection to the multi-national cultural koine that flourished in the Iron II in which the northern geo-political powers of that time were involved, including the Kingdom of Israel, the Phoenician coastal cities, the Arameans, and the territorial kingdoms of Transjordan.

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