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## Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East

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**FIGURING OUT THE FIGURINES  
OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

Edited by Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper

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## PREFACE

The series *Occasional Papers in Coroplastic Studies* came to fruition in order to promote the study of sculptural objects made in clay from the ancient Mediterranean and to facilitate their publication. An initiative of the Association for Coroplastic Studies (ACoST), formerly the Coroplastic Studies Interest Group (CSIG) of the Archaeological Institute of America, *Occasional Papers in Coroplastic Studies* is the first peer-reviewed publication venture of ACoST. This initial volume comprises 4 papers that were delivered at one of the three sessions of the Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) either in 2009, 2010, or 2011 that were entitled “Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East.” I would like to thank Stephanie Langin-Hooper, who had organized these sessions, for also accepting the role of editor for this volume, which involved considerable time and energy on her part. I also would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of the papers that were submitted for this volume. Their valuable insights and direction were very much appreciated by the authors. Finally, I would like to thank the authors themselves for being so steadfast in their devotion to this project.

Jaimee P. Uhlenbrock  
President, Association for Coroplastic Studies  
February, 2014



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## INTRODUCTION

### FIGURING OUT THE FIGURINES OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AT ASOR 2009-2011

Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper

Of all the objects produced by the cultures of the ancient Near East, figurines (particularly, although not exclusively, terracotta figurines) are among the most pervasive. For instance, over eleven-thousand figurine fragments were excavated from the Babylonian site of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris<sup>1</sup>—and such ubiquity is by no means unique to that city. Although when evaluated by modern aesthetic standards, figurines rarely rise to the artistic level of “great” monuments or statuary, they nevertheless seem to have had their own particular appeal, as well as a wide audience, in the ancient world. The use of inexpensive material and relative ease of manufacture meant that terracotta figurines were available to most ancient Near Eastern people. Terracotta figurines thus have the potential to be particularly informative about everyday life in these societies.

Yet, the study of terracotta figurines is also beset with obstacles to interpretation. At the most basic level, there is an often-unexpressed disagreement about how best to regard terracotta figurines: are they artworks or archaeological artifacts? A case can be made in either direction. On the side of art is the fact that, although not always the case, some terracotta figurines (such as the famous Tanagra figurines of the Hellenistic Greek world) seem designed with aesthetics as a major, if not primary, consideration. Even terracotta figurines that are not especially visually appealing are still capable of evoking an art-like response in their viewers. Because of their representational properties as miniature versions of life-size things (usually human beings or animals), terracotta figurines would seem to have the non-utilitarian, visually-engaging properties of an artwork. This effect is especially heightened when a terracotta figurine is seen, and studied, in isolation. As a single object, a figurine’s representative capacity to mimetically link to the outside world, yet also present that world through the shifted perspective of miniaturization,<sup>2</sup> comes to the fore. Selective representation, altered mimesis—these are (some of) the properties of art.

However, figurines are rarely excavated or studied as single objects. Terracotta figurines are usually seen by the hundreds (if not the thousands), and such over-

whelming numbers suggest modes of scholarly analysis that are more similar to those used for potsherds than marble statuary. In addition to their prevalence, terracotta figurines are also generally viewed by scholars as being relatively mundane, due to the inexpensive nature of the ceramic material, their mass-produced or homemade manufacture by and for the non-elite, and the evaluation that many terracotta figurines were made with no special attention to artistic quality. The combination of these factors is often seen to situate terracotta figurines more within the domain of archaeologists than art historians. Archaeological approaches to terracotta figurines have often focused on extensive cataloguing and discussions of figurines (usually by “type”) in general statements that apply to object groups. Such methodologies assist archaeologists in dealing with large numbers of terracotta figurines in a practical, manageable way. Assessing terracotta figurines as groups, rather than as individual objects, can also yield information, such as patterns of use and change across time, in ways more effective than individual artistic analysis would be. Yet, such methodological approaches also invite generalizations that gloss over variation—a particular problem at sites and in periods with marked figurine diversity—and often fail to consider the visual features of figurines as anything more than typological markers.

Terracotta figurines can thus be somewhat intractable and enigmatic. Positioned on the divide between the disciplines of art history and archaeology, they remain alluring, yet out of the full interpretive sweep of either discipline. As a result, many approaches to the voluminous numbers of figurines recovered from excavations in the ancient Near East regard them simply as objects to be categorized based on motif (such as “standing female”) and then left with little more that is said about them. Analysis is often sweepingly broad, and assessments of function (such as “temple votive”) rarely delve into the complexities of the human behaviors and social structures that would coincide with such figurine use.

There have always been exceptions to this trend. Within the field of ancient Near Eastern terracotta figurine

studies, notably innovative analyses have been conducted by Julia Asher-Greve (1998), Julia Assante (2002), and Zainab Bahrani (2000), in particular; and even some earlier scholars, such as Wilhelmina Van Ingen (1939), went beyond the simple catalogue in their publications of terracotta figurines. Yet despite this notable precedent, it has been only very recently that ancient Near Eastern figurine studies has experienced a turn of the tide in terms of both the prevalence of research specifically engaged with terracotta figurines, as well as an expansion of the methodologies used to study these elusive objects. Many of these new studies attempt to overhaul, or even to reinvent, how figurines are analyzed. In my own observation, two trends in these new methodological approaches seem to be emerging: scientific and quantitative studies that analyze figurine manufacture, use-life, and deposition; and object agency and materiality-based studies that focus on the human engagement (usually visual and tactile) with figurines as objects. Although the adherents of either approach are not restricted by a single methodology, it is nevertheless useful to provide a general overview of each analytical development.

Scientific and quantitative studies of ancient Near Eastern terracotta figurines have particularly prospered in the last decades because of technological advancements that allow for such investigations as the geological sourcing of clay, detecting of micro-fractures that can indicate deliberate breakage, computer models of figurine distribution on both localized and regional levels, and reconstructions of object circulation within social networks. The search for scientific facts that can be quantified, graphed, and otherwise inputted as “real” data has been seen by many as preferable to what are often regarded today as the more impressionistic analyses of figurines that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even when studying figurines as archaeological artifacts, early cataloguing efforts that attempted to categorize often-illusory figurine motifs into clear sets of defined differences were based on a certain amount of connoisseurship. Analyses of figurine use were similarly rife with intuitive assumptions, often resulting in speculation about the role of figurines in society (usually as deities or votives) superseding, and even displacing, archaeological evidence for the figurines’ use context. New quantitative approaches usually begin with the archaeology, rather than the object itself, and reconstruct figurine use and meaning based on detailed studies of contextual data. Studies

of figurines as objects focus on quantifiable attributes, such as the texture of the clay or the length of the figurine’s arms, rather than on the more nebulous aspects of figurine appearance, such as motifs, iconography, and style. Such approaches are often described as an attempt to introduce methodological rigor, which is already well-established in other archaeological studies (particularly of ceramics), into a field that has been the more traditional domain of qualitative analysis.

The other approach to terracotta figurine analysis that has been gaining traction within recent years is based on anthropological investigations of object agency and materiality. As with the quantitative analyses, studies of human-object engagement with terracotta figurines generally exhibit a macro-level interest in the role of terracotta figurines within a society and community. But rather than utilize standard archaeological explanations for figurine use (as votives or toys) and appearance (representations of deities or offerings), the object agency approach to figurine use asks why figurines, as miniature representations of large-scale living beings, objects, or structures, are appealing and have meaning within ancient societies. Douglass Bailey (2005) has been the pioneer of this avenue of terracotta figurine research. His work has revealed that figurines as miniature versions of life-size objects, particularly those of humans or animals, have an intimate and powerful quality. As Griselda Pollock has put it: “why do we like looking at images of other human beings? ... An image of another or even ourselves might have no meaning or actually threaten us. There must be a reason for and a mechanism by which we delight in images, especially those that are ‘like’ us, human images.”<sup>3</sup> This power to enchant and engage—a power that all human images share—is intensified in figurines because of their miniature size. Miniature human images can be not only viewed, but they can also be possessed, in a complete physical sense. Such intimate relationships enable reciprocal identity sharing and transfer between person and figurine.<sup>4</sup> As I have argued in my own research, this particular power of figurines to display, as well as reshape, human identity means that they are an especially useful tool for archaeologists interested in accessing social roles, traditions, and interactions in the ancient world.<sup>5</sup> Object agency and materiality approaches to the study of terracotta figurines are endeavoring to pursue such social analysis, while also maintaining a focus on the individual figurine as a locus for meaningful interaction.

Together, these two new schools of terracotta figurine studies seem poised to remake scholarship's traditional understanding of terracotta figurines in the ancient Near East, and their connection to the societies who made and used them. Theoretical advancements in other fields, such as Mesoamerican and Neolithic European figurine studies, as well as technological developments in broader archaeological practice, have fueled the development of both approaches. But their application to ancient Near Eastern corpora, and the further expansion of these theories to suit the distinctive features of the ancient Near Eastern past, have been recent developments. It therefore seemed timely to introduce a session specifically tailored to figurine studies at the Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

This session, begun in 2009 and entitled "Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East," aimed to bring together scholars researching terracotta figurines across all regions, sites and time periods in the ancient Near East, Egypt, and eastern Mediterranean. Prior to this session, papers on the topic of terracotta figurines were often presented at ASOR; however, they were always distributed across the conference, as they were slotted into sessions about regional specialties, such as the archaeology of Cyprus, or topics such as religion. This distribution of figurine papers across multiple sessions often did not allow for group discussion between figurine scholars. The "Figuring Out the Figurines" session aimed to provide a forum for idea presentation and discussion among a group of scholars who specialize in researching terracotta figurines. When the session was initially proposed, it was hoped that several benefits would result: encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons of figurines; facilitating theoretical discussion about figurine interpretation; and fostering a sense of community among ancient Near East figurine scholars.

The response to the session was overwhelming. So many scholars submitted abstracts the first year that the session had to be given two time slots. The following two years also saw full slates of speakers, with deserving abstracts being turned away in the selection process. The audience response was equally enthusiastic. All three years saw audiences of 75-100 people, substantial crowds that far exceeded the average attendance at an ASOR session. Lively, informed discussion was frequent, both during the question-and-answer

sessions and after the session concluded.

Based on these responses of both presenters and audiences, I judge the three-year run of "Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East" to have been a success. Through this effort, the visibility of ancient Near Eastern figurine studies has been raised, and a community of scholars working in the field has become further interconnected. Although this incarnation of the "Figuring Out the Figurines" session has run its course at the ASOR Annual Meetings, it is my hope that figurine studies continue to be featured prominently at the conference, and that a revival of the session (at ASOR or another conference) might take place at some point in the future. As figurine studies continue to advance through new archaeological discoveries, new theoretical breakthroughs, and innovative approaches to figurine interpretation, the need for an ancient Near East figurine conference forum will continue. It is crucial that all scholars concerned with the study of these intriguing objects remain connected in productive collaboration and mutual idea-sharing, to further the efforts of our unique discipline.

#### **ASOR CONFERENCE PROGRAMS OF THE "FIGURING OUT THE FIGURINES SESSIONS," 2009-2011**

Before proceeding to the introduction of the papers in this volume, I would first like to acknowledge the ASOR staff and organizing committee for their strong support of this project. Additionally, all of the scholars who participated in the three years of "Figuring Out the Figurines"—as speakers, facilitators, audience members, or supporters—have my sincere thanks. The session chairs, speakers, and paper titles are listed here:

#### **ASOR 2009 (New Orleans), Session 1**

STEPHANIE M. LANGIN-HOOPER (University of California, Berkeley), Presiding

ADI ERLICH (University of Haifa), "Double Faces, Multiple Meanings: the Hellenistic Pillar Figurines from Maresha, Israel"

ERIN WALCEK AVERETT (Creighton University), "The Ritual Contexts of Archaic Cypriot Figurines"

JAIMEE P. UHLENBROCK (SUNY New Paltz), "A Near Easterner at Cyrene: Cross-Cultural Implications at a Greek City in Libya"

ERIN D. DARBY (Duke University) and DAVID BEN-SHLOMO (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), "Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice: Terracotta Pillar Figurines

and Jerusalemite Pottery Production in Iron II Judea”  
SUSAN DOWNEY (University of California, Los Angeles), “Images of Divinities in Terracotta and Stucco Plaques from the Hellenistic-Roman Period at Dura-Europos, Syria”

#### **ASOR 2009 (New Orleans), Session 2**

ANDREA CREEL (University of California, Berkeley), Presiding

CHRISTOPHER TUTTLE (American Center of Oriental Research, Jordan), “The Nabataean Coroplastic Arts: A Synthetic Methodology for Addressing a Diverse Corpus”

ELIZABETH WARAKSA (University of California, Los Angeles), “Female Figurines from the Mut Precinct, Karnak: Evidence of Ritual Use”

ELIZABETH BLOCH-SMITH (St. Joseph’s University), “Nudity is Divine: Southern Levantine Female Figurines”

#### **ASOR 2010 (Atlanta)**

STEPHANIE M. LANGIN-HOOPER (University of California, Berkeley), Presiding

RÜDIGER SCHMITT (University of Muenster), “Animal Figurines as Ritual Media in Ancient Israel”

CHRISTOPHER TUTTLE (American Center of Oriental Research, Jordan), “Nabataean Camels & Horses in Daily Life: The Coroplastic Evidence”

ERIN DARBY (Duke University), “Seeing Double: Viewing and Re-viewing Judean Pillar Figurines through Modern Eyes”

ADI ERLICH (University of Haifa), “The Emergence of Enthroned Females in Hellenistic Terracottas from Israel: Cyprus, Asia Minor, and Canaanite Connections”

P. M. MICHÈLE DAVIAU (Wilfrid Laurier University), “The Coroplastic Traditions of Transjordan”

RICK HAUSER (International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies), “Reading Figurines: Animal Representations in Terra Cotta from Urkesh, the first Hurrian Capital (2450 BCE)”

#### **ASOR 2011 (San Francisco)**

STEPHANIE M. LANGIN-HOOPER (Bowling Green State University), Presiding

RÜDIGER SCHMITT (University of Muenster), “Apotropaic Animal Figurines”

MARCO RAMAZZOTTI (La Sapienza University of Rome), “The Mimesis of a World: The Early Bronze and Middle

Bronze Clay Figurines from Ebla-Tell Mardikh (Syria)”  
DOUG BAILEY (San Francisco State University), “Uncertainty and Precarious Partiality: New Thinking on Figurines”

CHRISTOPHER TUTTLE (American Center of Oriental Research, Jordan), “Miniature Nabataean Coroplastic Vessels”

ERIN DARBY (University of Tennessee) and MICHAEL PRESS (University of Arkansas), “Composite Figurines in the Iron II Levant: A Comparative Approach”

ANDREA CREEL (University of California, Berkeley), “Manipulating the Divine and Late Bronze/Iron Age ‘Astarte’ Plaques in the Southern Levant”

#### **DISCUSSION OF PAPERS INCLUDED IN THIS VOLUME**

All participants from the three-year run of the “Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East” session at the 2009-2011 ASOR Annual Meetings were given the opportunity to submit articles for publication. The four peer-reviewed articles included in this issue are the result of that process. Fortunately, they represent the breadth and diversity—both in temporal and geographical scope, as well as in theoretical approaches—that was exhibited over the three years of the ASOR session. Each can stand alone as a contribution to its respective field; however, together they represent the progress being made in figurine studies throughout ancient Near Eastern scholarship.

P. M. Michèle Daviau’s contribution, “The Coroplastics of Transjordan: Forming Techniques and Iconographic Traditions in the Iron Age,” is immediately notable in its treatment of the diversity of figurine forms found in Transjordan. Although difficult to classify, the unique or uncommon figurines in the corpus are nevertheless given equal treatment in this article with the more popular and easily categorized forms. Daviau powerfully demonstrates how classification of figurines can still be a useful tool without resorting to the over-generalizations and disregard for uncommon figurine forms that are so common to figurine typologies. In the analysis of her material, Daviau utilizes an object-experience methodology to address issues of use. Her assessment that many of the Transjordan figurines cannot stand alone, but must be held in the hand or propped up, is an excellent example of how object materiality can yield useful information about the function and experience of terracotta figurines. Daviau’s detailed study of figu-

rine manufacture and iconography, along with quantitative analysis of figurine distribution across several ancient sites, is also representative of the recent trend in figurine scholarship towards more scientific studies. Daviau thus combines both of the new approaches to figurine analysis in order to shed important light on the expression of ethnic identity in the terracotta figurines of Transjordan.

Erin Darby's contribution, "Seeing Double: Viewing and Re-viewing Judean Pillar Figurines through Modern Eyes," is strongly positioned within the quantitative approach to ancient Near Eastern figurines. Yet, uncharacteristically for a quantitative study, Darby's article investigates iconography and motifs traditionally seen as the domain of art historians. Darby catalogues individual elements of the figurines in her corpus in order to determine how artisans drew upon a broad repertoire of available symbols and recombined them to create specific visual forms and functions in the figurines. An important critique of the tradition of impressionistic studies of figurines in scholarship is made; particularly enlightening is the critique that viewing and looking at objects is culturally-situated and conditioned, so any correlation between modern and ancient ways of seeing must be demonstrated, not assumed. Darby's article is uncommon in that its discussion of terracotta figurine iconography is presented with few accompanying images, none of which illustrate the specific figurines presented in her article. This is a compelling, and innovative, way to oblige the reader to think about figurines from ancient perspectives, rather than jumping immediately to visual assessment based on modern cultural norms. The article's comparison of the terracotta figurines with other artifacts from the Judean culture to discover iconographical similarities outside the figurine corpus is also a significant step forward for the field, as archaeologists often focus on figurines as a special class of objects, obscuring their functional, display, and visual similarities to other forms of material culture.

Adi Erlich's contribution, "Double Face, Multiple Meanings: The Hellenistic Pillar Figurines from Maresha," utilizes both of the new approaches to terracotta figurine analysis. The article begins with quantitative assessment of figurine types and distribution across the landscape and sites near Maresha. From this scientific analysis, Erlich progresses to a detailed consideration of the human interaction with, and meanings created

through the materiality of, terracotta figurines with two faces. Her article takes a theoretically-informed perspective on the fluidity of "meaning" as a product of the encounter between the person and the object, with the conclusion that terracotta figurines were interpreted differently, and took on different identities, based on the cultural background and particular interests of their viewer. In Erlich's view, the interaction between human and figurine was dynamic, and only partially determined by the physical appearance of the object. The relationship of figurine forms to broader social issues of cross-cultural interaction and ethnic difference are discussed in the conclusion of the article, in which it is suggested that the "double face" figurines were accessible to most members of the Maresha community during otherwise tumultuous times. Erlich's line of argumentation seems to suggest that these figurines participated in broader social processes in which ethnic and culture differences were minimized—a powerful example of the role and agency of terracotta figurines within the communities who made and used them.

Marco Ramazzotti's contribution, "The Mimesis of a World: The Early and Middle Bronze Clay Figurines from Ebla-Tell Mardikh," is the most at home in the new branch of figurine theory that deals with anthropological approaches to materiality and investigates the intimate encounters between person and object that figurines encourage. Nevertheless, Ramazzotti also utilizes quantitative studies of figurine context and use at Ebla, as well as chemical and physical analysis of figurine breakage patterns, to support his argument. He thus demonstrates that both approaches to figurine analysis can be used together productively, especially to focus on the material presence and properties of a figurine, which have both a quantitative and a qualitative (human experience) component. The tactile element of human experience with figurines is especially highlighted in the article and used to explore how miniature clay versions of beings can substitute for (and allow experimentation with) the life-size, real social world. Ramazzotti's conclusion that the spatial distribution of figurines at Ebla, as well as the tactile experience of these diverse figurine forms, indicates that broader social issues beyond the sacred kingship were being addressed through terracotta figurines, is a striking example of the interpretive possibilities offered by both current approaches to figurine analysis. His discussion of creation versus mimesis, and the linkages of both concepts with Mesopotamian literary sources, is

a valuable addition to theoretical discussions of Mesopotamian figurines.

#### CONCLUSION

The four articles presented in this volume provide an excellent cross-section, as well as some of the most compelling examples, of the approaches to terracotta figurines presented in the three years of the “Figuring Out the Figurines of the Ancient Near East” sessions at the American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meetings. All four articles fit within at least one of the two current trends in figurine scholarship, and many of them suggest that these two approaches can be productively combined. I would suggest that this combination of rigorous quantitative studies of figurines-as-artifacts focusing on contextual and physical data, with the more theoretical approaches to figurine agency, materiality, and human-object interaction, will be the future of our field. It is my hope that future conference sessions, at ASOR and elsewhere, will provide the valuable forums necessary for those of us engaged in terracotta figurine studies to continue to share our research and to enrich our community with further innovations and methodological developments.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This volume is based on research that was originally presented at the American Schools of Oriental Research Annual Meetings. I would like to thank ASOR for sponsoring the original conference sessions, and believing in my vision that “Figurine Studies” had a place in the annual meeting. Many thanks go to all of the presenters who gave insightful and innovative papers during the three years of the session, as well as to the audience members who came to hear the speakers and participate in the lively and informed discussion.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Menegazzi 2012: 157

<sup>2</sup> The most immediate way in which figurines present a shifted perspective on the world is by their miniaturization. However, other changes to the life-size human/animal body, clothing, etc. are often made to terracotta figurines; such changes have the potential to further alter the way in which the figurine’s viewer encounters the object, and the way in which the object can alter the viewer’s perception of the world. Bailey 2005 is the ideal reference for further reading on the ways in which terracotta figurines and other miniature objects present alternate perspectives on, and experiences of, reality.

<sup>3</sup> Pollock 2003: 182

<sup>4</sup> Bailey 2005: 38

<sup>5</sup> Langin-Hooper 2013

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