

A ZOOMORPHIC CLAY FIGURINE FROM 'EN ḤAKHLIL, MIGDAL 'HA-EMEQ

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INTRODUCTION

A nearly complete clay zoomorphic figurine was uncovered in the Early Bronze Age I–II burial cave at 'En Ḥakhlil (L151, B1069; Fig. 1; see Shalev, this volume: Fig. 14:7). The burials in this cave were disturbed. However, they appear to be predominantly associated with EB IB ceramics.

THE FIGURINE

This diminutive figurine (length 40 mm, width 16 mm, height 21 mm, weight 10 g) is almost intact, except for the tail and a small chip from the tip of the right hind leg, which are missing. A faint indentation on the back of the same leg possibly indicates that the tail was originally impressed against it and has since broken off. The clay is of a pale pinkish terracotta color, with many fine- to medium-sized dark gritty mineral inclusions that lie close to the surface, creating a slightly rough texture. No slip or paint were applied. The animal has a standing stance, in which the posture of the head is almost level with the back, creating a near-horizontal profile.



Fig. 1. Zoomorphic figurine.

The figurine seems to have been made in haste as the face appears abstract and abbreviated, showing visible marks of the shaping and pinching gestures that created a short, pointed muzzle with a drooping aspect. Slight traces of what appears to be either ears or horns indicate the ad hoc manufacture of the object. It is likely that fairly soft damp clay was used for the production of this figurine, as indicated by the presence of fine, unfinished flanges or creases of clay around the neck and muzzle area, and the cursory appearance of the ears or horns as though they were unintentionally flattened against the head during handling. The unusually wide extremities of the legs may have resulted from the placing of the soft figurine firmly on a flat surface immediately upon completion. The use of such highly malleable clay would have facilitated the rapid creation of such a small animal figurine.

DISCUSSION

The diminutive size of the animal figurine from 'En Ḥakhlil and its ad hoc manufacture are atypical of the small inventory of such figurines from Bronze Age burial contexts. Zoomorphic figurines of the Early Bronze Age have been found throughout the Southern Levant, although they occur in rather low numbers in comparison to later periods, especially the Iron Age. Small-scale excavations, such as at Tel Dalit (Gophna 1996:146–149) and Qiryat Ata (Golani 2003:207–209) have each yielded a handful of figurines, while as many as 45 such items have been published from the numerous excavation campaigns at Tel Bet Yerah (Getzov 2006:94–96; Paz 2014:239–298).

Research on Bronze Age zoomorphic figurines, especially their identification, is difficult as they have mostly been found in a damaged and broken condition, and are therefore typically attributed to the generic category of 'quadrupeds.' In cases where the animal species can be determined, the figurines primarily depict familiar farmyard domesticates, namely cattle or bulls, equids, sheep/goat and occasionally, birds. Donkey figurines are often portrayed with distinctive upright ears and most commonly, with saddlebags/panniers on their backs (Amiran et al. 1978:54, Fig. 6, Pl. 117:1–5; Epstein 1985:53–62; Ovadia 1992:19–28; Grigson 1995:245–268; 2012:185–201; Greenberg 1996:139, 142, Fig. 3.38:2–4, 6–8; Golani 2003:207–209; Milevski 2009:1–18; 2011:178–179; Milevski and Horwitz 2019:108–111); rare exceptions without saddlebags were published by Kenyon (1960: Fig. 40:1) and Hizmi (2004:309–324). In cases where these projecting features are damaged, their former presence can be identified from the negative scars. Cattle figurines tend to exhibit distinctive horns and are thickset at the sloping neck and shoulder regions (Paz 2014:239–249). The tails on the figurines of both donkeys and cattle are generally exaggerated and disproportionate, appearing un-naturalistic. Sheep/goat figurines may be recognised by the presence of horns and/or textured rendering of the coat. The animal species that is represented by the 'En Ḥakhlil figurine is not readily identifiable, as the shape of the ears/horns is unclear and the tail is missing. However, it is noteworthy that this example lacks the characteristic posture and other attributes of sheep/goat figurines and therefore, it may represent a donkey or a bull.

Early Bronze Age animal figurines have been found in a variety of domestic and public contexts, including houses, pits, courtyards and streets or alleyways. From about EB IB, donkey figurines became especially prominent in tombs and burials (Kenyon 1960: Fig. 40:1; Amiran 1985:190–192; Epstein 1985:53–62; Ovadia 1992:19–28; Grigson 1995:245–268; Milevski 2011:184–188) and therefore, the small figurine from 'En Ḥakhlil may also represent a donkey. Equid skeletal remains have been discovered in contexts of human habitation from the late Chalcolithic period, although the precise identification of the equid species involved is still uncertain (Milevski 2011; Grigson 2012; Milevski and Horwitz 2019).

The majority of Bronze Age animal figurines are not found with as clear-cut an association as in the burial at 'En Ḥakhlil, where the figurine was conceivably intended as an offering for the deceased, imbued with some symbolic meaning and value. There have been many suggestions regarding the function of zoomorphic figurines from the prehistoric, protohistoric and historic periods, for example, that they served as ritual or ceremonial artifacts, toys, teaching aids, good luck charms or talismans and exchange tokens (Bailey 2005:1–25). That being said, their continued manufacture throughout the region for such an extended time span would appear to indicate that they represent a widespread and sustained cultural tradition.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering that the incidence of zoomorphic figurines in Bronze Age tombs or burials is low, the discovery of the present example in the EB I–II burial cave at 'En Ḥakhlil is exceptional. Furthermore, the diminutive size of the figurine and the indications that it was produced in haste as an ad hoc artifact add to the unique character of this animal figurine.

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