

## CHAPTER 5

### THE FEMALE PLAQUE FIGURINE

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One small fragment of a female plaque figurine (Fig. 5.1) was found amongst the hundreds of sherds recovered from Yesodot. This significant find came from a surface context (L312). The poor preservation of the figurine and the nature of its context allow us to make only general observations.

#### Description

The figurine fragment is made of clay, using a one-piece open mould. It has an oval shape and is 4.5cm high, 4.1cm wide (max.) and 2.0cm thick (max.). Its reverse side has been smoothed. The fragment bears a high-relief representation of a female figure. Only the head (with shoulder-length hair), a thin neck, and the upper torso have survived, together with the upper parts of a papyrus/lotus stalk decoration, which project outward. The facial features have been weathered away entirely, or were never detailed, but the shoulder-length locks and the papyrus/lotus stalks are clearly depicted and even pronounced. The head is somewhat elongated and it is possible that the figure was wearing some form of head covering. The hairstyle is Egyptian and calls to mind the well-known Hathor locks. The figurine is interpreted as representing a naked female standing in a frontal posture with an Egyptian hairstyle, holding stalks of papyrus or lotus, which were possible divine attributes (see below).

Plaque figurines of naked female figures in high relief form a stylistically defined group widely known as 'Astarte Plaques'. They belong to a class of small anthropomorphic cult objects, made from mould-impressed clay, which become common in Canaan during the mid-2nd millennium BCE (mostly in the Late Bronze Age [LB]) and become common in the third quarter of that millennium (Tadmor 1982b: 140; Ziffer, Bunimovitz and Lederman 2009: 334). The term 'Astarte Plaques'

follows the identification suggested by scholars such as Negbi (1976), Tadmor (1981, 1982a, 1982b), Keel and Uehlinger (1998: 97-108), and Hadley (1989: 188-195), to mention but a few.

These plaque figurines probably have their roots in Mesopotamia and Persia at the end of the third millennium. They have also been found at Syrian sites of the second millennium. From the east they spread to the Levant, Egypt and the Aegean region (Tadmor 1982b: 164-170).

In the Shephelah, female plaque figurines have been found at various LB sites, among them Tel Gezer, Tel Harasim, Tel Batash, Tel Beth Shemesh, Tel Azekah, Tel Lachish (Fosse Temple), Tel Zafit, Tell el Hesi, and Tell Beit Mirsim (Cornelius 2004b:134-142; Cat. Nos. 5.24-5.25, 5.32-5.40, 5.46-5.55, 5.55b-5.57, 5.59).

#### Typology

Tadmor (1982b:161-164) differentiated between two types of plaque figurines. The first are standing figurines with turned-out feet (pointing sideways) and bearing attributes (presumably divine) such as Hathor locks, flower stalks, etc. The second type includes figurines depicted reclining (*ibid.* 140-160). Tadmor argues that the standing figurines represent deities, while those reclining represent mortals which may symbolize or depict concubines of the dead, as in the Egyptian concubine representations of women lying on beds (*ibid.* 145, 157, 161). Tadmor (1982a: 10) saw these figurines in the context of Canaanite-Egyptian funerary practices and related beliefs. According to her typological division the characteristics of the plaque figurine from Yesodot are consistent with the standing figurine type, thus representing a deity.

However, Keel and Uehlinger (1998: 99-100) disagree with Tadmor's typology and consider



Fig. 5.1. The female plaque figurine from Yesodot.

both types to be 'Astarte Plaques' and goddess representations. They point out three main reasons: (1) The shape of the plaques; Tadmor's second type is based on a few rectangular figurines, while most of the plaques have an elongated oval shape, which is different from the rectangular beds depicted in the stone figurines and in Egyptian small sculptures. Thus, they contend, it is improbable that the plaques represent beds. (2) The archaeological context; contrary to Tadmor's interpretation, most of the figurines were found in domestic contexts and only a few in mortuary contexts. (3) Lack of attributes; Keel and Uehlinger maintain that the lack of attributes should not necessarily negate the possibility that a

divine character is represented (which might rule out their link to the 'Astarte Plaques'). Iconographically, the nudity and emphasis on erotic attractiveness are of great importance, drawing attention to the goddess's emanating sexual power—a power bound up with the female biological circle, fertility, and motherhood.

Whatever the case, despite its fragmented condition the Yesodot figurine certainly seems to fit a particular class of high relief nude female depictions—although in a few rare cases a male is shown (Ziffer *et al.* 2009)—boasting Hathor locks. In some examples the figure holds lotus stalks, as in this case (e.g. Tadmor 1982b: Pl. 10). Others have been found standing on animals, or indeed incorporating both of these symbolic motifs (Tadmor 1982b: 140, 161). Examples of this figurine class have been found at various sites in the Shephelah, and none are identical to that from Yesodot; rather, they share similar traits. For example, the outward-pointing papyrus/lotus stalks on the Yesodot piece contrast with the general inward-pointing preference, as exhibited on plaque figurines from Tel Gezer, Tel Lachish (Fosse Temple) and Tel Beit Mirsim (Cornelius 2004b: Cat. Nos. 5.33, 5.55, 5.56).

Its Hathor hairstyle reveals another detail of the Yesodot figurine's distinctiveness. As is typical, the locks curl at the ends, but in this case they finish without internal detailing. To date, among the many such figurines recovered, no parallel for this style of depicting the Hathor hair style has been found.

### Function

The use of open moulds enabled mass-production of these figurines, making them affordable to the general population. Most likely, therefore, these figurines reflect popular iconography, taste, and beliefs (Tadmor 1982a: 10; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 105; Cornelius 2004a: 27). As mentioned above, most plaque figurines are found in domestic contexts. Some are also known to have come from burials (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 100; as mentioned above, Tadmor defined them as burial offerings). This suggests a possible primary use as cult objects, often in family homes, and from time to time as

burial gifts—accompanying the deceased on his/her journey to the after world, just as such an object would have accompanied them through life. Being represented in the inexpensive medium of clay plaques, the figurine is probably the image of a deity who took care of everyday needs and was part of cultic and religious activity in domestic areas within settlements, as well as serving as a burial offering (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 100, 105). Cornelius (2004a: 25) suggests that these figurines were imitations of the goddess's representations in other, more expensive/prestigious media (such as metal and on stelae), which functioned as more official cultic images and high-status votive offerings. In Cornelius' opinion the plaque figurines linked the temple with domestic religious devoutness.

### Summary

The figurine found at Yesodot is an addition to the corpus of female plaque figurines from the southern Levantine LB, sometimes called 'Astarte Plaques'. These popular cultic objects were mass-produced through an inexpensive method and medium. The female figure most likely represented a deity. Although in broad terms it resembles other LB and early Iron Age figurines, this example has several unique characteristics, such as the outward-pointing lotus or papyrus stalks and the simplistically-rendered Hathor locks.

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