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A Ceramic Zoomorphic Figurine from Tel Bet Yeraḥ

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A zoomorphic figurine (L146, B1139) was recovered from a domestic context in EB IB Stratum V in Area AG in the southern part of Tel Bet Yeraḥ (see Golani, this volume).[1]

This ceramic animal figurine is well-made, comprising a complete torso, neck and head (6.4 cm long, 2.7 cm wide, and 4.3 cm high; Fig. 1). The four legs are broken at different lengths. The tail is absent, although its presence is indicated by a scar and a slip-free area on the animal's rump, suggestsing that the original tail was fairly robust and un-naturalistic. The once-upright ears are also damaged and the remaining vestiges indicate that they were oval in section and positioned parallel to one another on the top of the head. The clay used to produce the figurine is buff-colored, containing a high percentage of medium-sized to fine dark gray inclusions. The surface is well-smoothed, although the inclusions are visible and faintly palpable on the surface. A uniform coat of orangey-red slip was applied to the figurine and it was subsequently well-fired. This stylised object was modelled with simple clean lines, an elongated head and a rounded muzzle, lacking any additional facial features. The neck is relatively short, and the torso is sturdy with a curved back and a flattened belly. All the physical characteristics of this zoomorphic figurine suggest that it was intended to represent an equid and perhaps, more specifically, a donkey.

Discussion

The incidence of animal figurines in the Southern Levant remains consistent throughout the Early Bronze Age, albeit the numbers remain low in comparison to the previous and subsequent periods. That being said, the number of zoomorphic figurines at Tel Bet Yeraḥ is, to date, the highest in the region, amounting to 55 published specimens (Getzov 2006:94–96; Novacek 2007:164–66, Pl. 2.15:6; Paz 2014:239–249; Knudsen and Greenberg 2019).

The zoomorphic figurines from Tel Bet Yeraḥ, as at the other Early Bronze Age sites, represent the familiar domesticates of the period, namely cattle or bulls, sheep/goat, equids/

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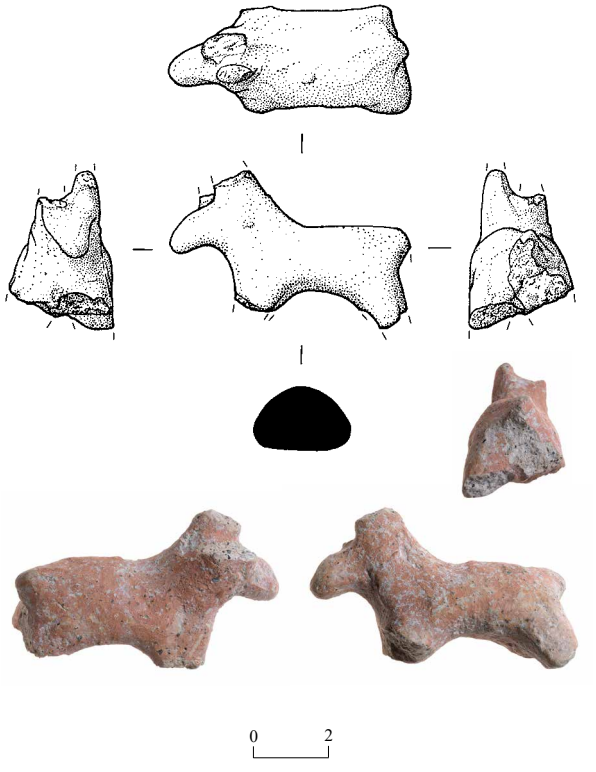

Fig. 1. Zoomorphic ceramic figurine.

donkeys and occasionally birds. The vast majority of animal figurines are broken with a very small percentage found intact.

This particular figurine stands out among the zoomorphic figurines from Tel Bet Yeraḥ, as well as those from the Southern Levant in general. Donkey figurines from this region are typically depicted with distinctive panniers or saddlebags on their backs (Amiran 1978:54, Pl. 117:6; 1985:190–192; Epstein 1985:53–62; Ovadia 1992:19–28; Greenberg 1996:139, 142, Fig. 3.38:5; Golani 2003:207–209, Fig. 7.4:1; Hizmi 2004:309–324; Milevski 2011:177–197; Paz 2014:242–247). However, in this case, there are no vestiges of any burden or load. The suggestion that this figurine is a depiction of a donkey is based in part on the shape of the face and the indication of the former presence of a robust un-naturalistic tail. The absence of horns or horn scars on the side of the head and the slender forequarters also suggest that this is not a representation of cattle which tend to feature horns and bulkier shoulders (Amiran 1978:54, Fig. 6, Pl. 117:1–3; Greenberg 1996:139, 142, Fig. 3.38:2–4, 6–11, 19–28; Golani 2003:207–209, Fig. 7.4:3, 4; Paz 2014:239–245). It is also unlikely that this figurine represented an equid other than a donkey, as there is no definitive faunal evidence for the presence of any other domesticated equid species in the Southern Levant during the Early Bronze Age (Ovadia 1992:19–28; Grigson 1995:258–259; 2012:185–201; Milevski 2009:1–18; 2011:178–179).

The archaeological contexts of animal figurines, including those of donkeys, are varied, and include both public and domestic areas: open courtyards, rooms in houses, pits, streets and alleyways (Getzov 2006:94–96; Paz 2014:239–249). Donkey figurines have occasionally been found in tombs and in association with burials (Kenyon 1960: Fig. 40:1; Amiran 1985:190–192; Epstein 1985:53–62; Ovadia 1992:20–24; Milevski 2011:184–188).

The figurine from this excavation was found in a domestic area amongst the debris on a compact earthen surface adjacent to a wall (W212), and in association with pottery sherds diagnostic of the northern variant of EB IB ceramic industry (see Golani, this volume). Although the exact date for the initial domestication of donkeys and the production of their figurine counterparts is still debated (Grigson 1995:245–268; 2012:185–201; Milevski 2009:1–18; 2011:178–179), the date assigned to the archaeological context of this particular artifact correlates well with their established presence within Early Bronze Age communities.

The purpose of zoomorphic figurines remains obscure, although multiple suggestions have been offered, including their use as toys, talismans or good luck charms, teaching aids, exchange tokens, or for ritual or ceremonial functions (Bailey 2005:1–25). Nevertheless, the consistent appearance of domesticated animal species in figurative form attests to their integrated and enduring cultural value throughout the Early Bronze Age.

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