SEEING DOUBLE
VIEWING AND RE-VIEWING JUDEAN PILLAR FIGURINES THROUGH MODERN EYES
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Fig. 1. Pinched head and molded head Judean pillar figurines from the Israel Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

ABSTRACT
Although figurines are usually treated as coherent symbols rather than compilations of separate elements, when it comes to Judean pillar figurines from southern Israel, this approach has failed to generate a scholarly consensus about the figurines’ identity and function. Rather than focus on the identity of the figurine, it is time to explore a different methodology by investigating the various individual parts that constitute figurine iconography, including iconographic content, stylistic criteria, and technological characteristics. Because these figurines represent a new combination of elements taken from a variety of earlier artistic tropes and media, this approach takes seriously the process whereby artisan tradition selected separate elements and recombined them into a new whole. In order to demonstrate this methodology, the following paper investigates the pillar bases of the figurines from Jerusalem, evaluating each element according to two design principles—permanence and detail. As a result, these criteria reveal an internal hierarchy that governs the way elements work together to create figurine form and function. Only after this relative hierarchy is observed is it possible to understand whether a figurine was merely a hyper-redundant combination of individual symbols, or whether its elements coalesced to form a unique, holistic image.

INTRODUCTION
Although visual experience is often overlooked as a straight-forward process, the acts of seeing and interpreting are some of the most complicated functions performed by the human mind. In actuality, images are constituted by a myriad of separate elements, and the means by which an audience perceives these individual elements as a whole is thus negotiable, dependent upon time, space, and culture. Therefore, a modern audience and an ancient audience would not necessarily share the same view.

As one type of image, figurines are composed of many individual properties, both aesthetic and physical. In particular, Judean pillar figurines from the Iron IIB-C in southern Israel are composed of pillar bodies, arms and breasts, and two different styles of heads, as well as clay, whiteness, and paint (see Figs. 1–4). The relative hierarchy of these elements and their meaning for figurine function should not be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, modern interpreters of the Judean corpus often think of various figurine elements as a coherent whole rather than a combination of individual parts. This, in turn, leads interpreters to connect the figurines with goddess worship, as they attempt to
identify the one figure that the image is meant to represent. Yet, throughout this interpretive process, certain elements of figurine iconography become the focus of analysis, such as the pillar bases. Often seen as one of the clues that unlock the figurines’ identity, pillar bases are used as load-bearing supports to prop up scholarly reconstructions, despite the fact that the relative importance of the bases within the overall figurine iconography is far from certain. Moreover, because Judean pillar figurines are the most common “religious” artifacts from southern Israel in this period, these interpretations strongly influence both scholarly and popular reconstructions of Israelite religion in the Iron Age.\footnote{In order to evaluate the manner in which Judean pillar figurines are perceived and interpreted, this paper assesses several figurine elements based on two design principles—permanence and detail. Focusing on the way stylistic and technological features are combined to form the pillar base of the figurines from Jerusalem, the paper suggests that modern interpretations of such elements are often wanting. In contrast, when the figurine bases are considered in light of iconographic form, technological style, and related coroplastic objects, it becomes clear that the base of the figurine may be unrelated to the “identity” of the object, or it may indicate a protective function.}

**Methodology**

A Judean pillar figurine is constituted by many separate parts that create its subject matter and style. Unfortunately, the process by which these separate parts are combined is largely overlooked. For example, in the field of biblical studies, the iconographic school has been responsible for the resurging interest in ancient Near Eastern art and the Bible; but these interpreters focus on the “meaning” behind visual symbols rather than the manner of their creation.\footnote{While the investigation of iconographic content is certainly significant, elements may be included in a representation for a number of reasons; and the most stereotyped aspects of an image are often the most difficult to translate. Focusing on common iconographic elements of figurine design, to the exclusion of other figurine components, such as style, inadvertently creates the impression of a continuous function and meaning that glosses over the particularities of a trope’s adaptation in various cultures and time periods.}

An alternative to this approach is to include elements of style in the discussion—the particular ways figurine elements were created and incorporated.\footnote{An alternative to this approach is to include elements of style in the discussion—the particular ways figurine elements were created and incorporated. This would include the often overlooked category of “technological style,” which considers the production of images and the effect of production steps on the final product.}
Although various aspects of technological style could be explained via a functionalist approach, i.e., economic necessity or resource availability, certain materials and production processes were chosen for ideological reasons as well.8

The ideological motivations for production strategies are further supported by the scale and nature of the figurines as miniatures.9 A miniature is not the same as a replica. While a replica, or a model, attempts to reproduce even the smallest details of a larger image, a miniature is selective, often reproducing only those elements that communicate the most important aspects of the image. Miniatures imply choice on the part of the artisan community, including which visual representations to use, the degree of detail, or energy, invested in any given aspect of the image, and the resources dedicated to the durability of these various parts. Furthermore, miniatures depicting the human body are especially indicative of artistic choice, including which elements are depicted, how they are portrayed, and which elements remain ambiguous.10

The technological style of Judean pillar figurines

Judean pillar figurines are composed of fired clay, white wash, and paint. Rated on a continuum of permanence or durability, clay is certainly less durable than stone or metal, and this suggests the figurines were not created for extensive, long-term use. At the same time, artisans did dedicate the time and resources to fire the images, indicating that they were intended for some durability. Firing the figurines also implies they may have been manipulated by hand, displayed, and exposed to the air, since unfired clay would disintegrate quickly when handled.11 Furthermore, those elements made of clay may also have been intended to endure for some time and must have been important to the function and meaning of the image.12 This would include the heads, particularly the molded faces, the hand-modeled arms and breasts, and the hand-modeled pillar bodies.

The significance of clay as a production material is also indicated by a number of ancient Near Eastern textual witnesses. In addition to clay or earth in creation accounts,13 clay was an important material in rituals of protection and transference. For example, a number of Mesopotamian ritual texts mention clay and its protective and healing functions. Tablet 9 of the Utukkū Lemnūtu incantations prays, “may Nunurra, the great potter of Anu, drive (the demon) away from the house in a pot fired in a pure kiln from a pure place.”14 From the same corpus, Tablet 12 describes “liquid extract of dark clay” used to cover the outside gate of the temple to protect against demonic attack.15 Further, raw clay is used in one sky omen NAM.BUR.BI, a ritual used to ward off evil predicted by omens.16 Additionally, a ritual to ensure healthy delivery requires the woman to recite prayers inside a potter’s kiln.17

From the Ugaritic corpus, the Kirtu Epic describes the god El forming a divine female from clay and commanding her to heal King Kirtu.18 There also seems to be a connection between potters and healing rituals in Egyptian magico-medical literature,19 and it has been suggested that this connection should be applied to Egyptian clay female figurines as well.20 So, too, the Hebrew Bible indicates that clay had unique properties that might be used in rituals transmitting purity and impurity.21 Nor is this association between clay and ritual properties entirely unique to the ancient Near East.22 In sum, these various witnesses undergird the conclusions made on stylistic grounds, especially the hypothesis that figurine elements formed in clay would have been important for the figurines’ ritual function.

The clay properties can be compared with whitewash and painted decoration. While there is overwhelming evidence that the figurines contained whitewash and paint, these particular elements are poorly preserved on almost all extant exemplars. Whitewash may have served two purposes. It hides imperfections resulting from poorly levigated clay or firing mishaps. Indeed, even badly malformed fragments were covered and used. The whitewash also prepares the surface for painted decoration. Furthermore, other cultic items, such as zoomorphic figurines, cult stands, and shrine boxes, were regularly whitewashed and painted, suggesting some common techniques for the preparation of cultic objects.23

Perhaps the best explanation is that whitewash was an appropriate solution for the aesthetic irregularities that accompany clay formation and also provided an appropriate surface for painting.24 Because clay was necessary for the figurines’ function, whitewash was the easiest way to improve their appearance. That having been said, ethnographic analogy suggests that whitewash and paint quickly fade from
figurines, particularly when exposed to the elements.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, while the whitewash and paint must have been important in the initial design and function, they were not the most durable components of the image, which may suggest design elements depicted in paint were only necessary in the initial phase of a figurine ritual. At the same time, those figurine elements that were formed from clay as well as painted, suggesting both durability and detail, would probably be the most important elements within the hierarchy of the image.

**Pillar Bases in Scholarly Opinion and Stylistic Analysis**

Turning to the pillar figurines, most examples from Jerusalem include hand-made, solid pillar bases, though some wheel-made\textsuperscript{26} or hollow\textsuperscript{27} fragments have also been found. The pillar bases have presented certain complications for the study of pillar figurines. Some interpreters have assumed that the pillar represents a tree trunk, which they connect with Asherah and sacred tree imagery.\textsuperscript{28} This opinion remains fairly popular, despite the fact that the definition of the biblical terminology purportedly related to the goddess is still debated,\textsuperscript{29} and the connection between the goddess Asherah and trees has been complicated.\textsuperscript{30}

Other interpreters have argued that the plain bases should be contrasted with the figurines’ Canaanite forerunners—the naked female plaque figurines. Such scholars claim that the pillar base is evidence for a distinction between Canaanite “fertility” figurines and Judean “nurturing” figurines, which emphasize a nursing mother rather than a “courtesan of the gods.”\textsuperscript{31} In this view, either the figurines are wearing a dress, or the schematic nature of the lower body was meant to censor elements from Canaanite religion, such as the pudenda.

The first and most practical objection to either of these approaches is that pillar bases are common on a number of figurines all over the world as a means to support a standing image,\textsuperscript{32} suggesting that a more functional rationale cannot be dismissed. Further, pillar bases are component parts of a number of figurines both in the Middle Bronze Age in the ancient Near East, as well as in contemporaneous figurine traditions from Philistia,\textsuperscript{33} Ammon,\textsuperscript{34} Moab,\textsuperscript{35} Northern Israel,\textsuperscript{36} Cyprus,\textsuperscript{37} and Phoenicia.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, there is considerable precedent for adopting a simple and schematic pillar base from the iconographic traditions of the Levant and Cyprus, which does not suggest a unique connection between Judean pillar figurines and sacred tree iconography assumed to be central to Asherah worship as depicted in the Bible.

Going beyond these practical considerations, stylistic features present problems for these common interpretations. First, the pillar bases generally lack molded decoration or any modeling that indicates the pillar was intended to represent either a tree or a garment. Second, in many examples only whitewash remains; where paint is preserved it consists of broad stripes in red and yellow.\textsuperscript{39} In short, the paint may simply depict geometric designs, as is the case on some Philistine hand-made figurines.\textsuperscript{40} This lack of paint on the pillars should be contrasted with the faces and chests
of Judean pillar figurines, where the remains of red, black, and yellow paint have been found with some regularity.\textsuperscript{41} Finally, were the pillar meant to represent a clothed female body, this artistic convention would differ considerably from that in neighboring Egypt, where clothing on females is most frequently depicted adhering closely to the body, so much so that the breasts, waist, thighs, buttocks, and even pubic triangle remain visible.\textsuperscript{42} Given the fact that Egyptian convention largely governs the art of the Levant from this period, the schematic nature of the pillar base is even more striking.

Nor does the technological style of the pillars suggest that the pillar was one of the most essential aspects of the figurines. As part of the overall design, pillars are made of poorly-levigated clay, with consistent grey-oring that indicates they may not have been properly fired or were used as filler in kilns. Even when the pillar base is bent or disfigured the figurine is not discarded, but is whitewashed and used regardless.\textsuperscript{43} Clearly the condition of the pillar was not so significant as to interfere with the object’s function.

In sum, the fact that pillars were formed and fired as a part of the entire figurine suggests that they may have functioned either as a stand for the image or that the image could be held in the hand without breaking or disintegrating immediately. In other words, they do reflect a certain permanence or durability. However, when the technological characteristics are considered in combination with the lack of detail in molding, modeling, or painting, the pillars are certainly less important than other aspects of the image. As such, the pillar base is an unlikely place to look for the key that identifies the figurines’ identity.

Comparanda

Comparing the pillar bases to related coroplastic objects also helps to clarify their relative importance and function. In addition to the pillar-based figurines outside of Judah, a number of pillar-style figurines, including those with hands on their breasts, were attached to the cult stands in the Yavneh corpus, found along the Mediterranean coast of Philistia.\textsuperscript{44} These stands were dated to the end of the 9th through the beginning of the 8th centuries B.C.\textsuperscript{45} and thus bridge the gap between the plaque figurines of the Late Bronze Age and the pillar figurines of the Iron IIIB-C (Fig. 5).

As to the pillar-based females on the Yavneh cult stands, Irit Ziffer has explained the pillar base as a skirt, suggesting a partially dressed female.\textsuperscript{46} This is problematic for several reasons. While it is true that females holding their breasts are more frequently depicted with fully-formed lower bodies on these cult stands,\textsuperscript{47} these frontally molded or modeled females appear in the same areas of the cult stands (in rectangular or rounded openings) and with the same gestures as the females with pillar bases, suggesting a similar function.

Furthermore, females are not the only figures attached to the Yavneh cult stands by means of a pillar or peg. Zoomorphic fragments are also depicted by their heads or heads and pegs, attached vertically in the openings.\textsuperscript{48} Moreover, in many of the same openings, the space is filled by pillar columns.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, it makes the most sense to read the pillar bases on the females in the same way one reads the pillar bases on zoomorphic images and columns—namely, as architectural features (Fig. 6).

Nor is the Yavneh corpus alone in combining female figurines with architectural features. Other cult stands also use frontally molded females or sphinxes with molded heads as a substitute for columns; the heads may be associated with capitols and volutes.\textsuperscript{50} In fact, frontally-molded, naked females commonly flank doorways and stand in for architectural elements on cult shrines and stands from the Middle Bronze through the Iron Age, a fact already noted by Silvia Schröer.\textsuperscript{51}

Although Schröer is aware of the potential connection between Judean pillar bases and columns, she interprets the base of the figurine as the trunk of a tree, assuming the figurines are associated with the goddess Asherah, who she connects with tree iconography. At the same time, however, she argues that frontally-molded, naked female bodies on cult stands and shrine boxes often represent architectural elements; and, in those cases, she argues that the females served as guardian figurines, similar to the protective lamassu and šēdu.\textsuperscript{52} Given the fact that frontally-molded and pillar-based females seem to have been used interchangeably on the Yavneh cult stands, it makes more sense to argue that both the pillar-based females on the Yavneh stands and the Judean pillar figurines are alternative versions of the same protective female figures.

As to the function of the Yavneh cult items in particular, although Raz Kletter identifies these cult stands as
votive objects left in a temple (as yet undiscovered) and used for a number of purposes, he also notes that they depict architectural elements used in the construction of sacred spaces. Unfortunately, Kletter then claims the females on the cult stands may represent the consort of the god worshipped in the temple space, depicted because “the god prefers nice, erotic images of his consort, rather than of himself, on his gifts.”

In contrast, many of the images on the cult stands, such as sphinxes, lions, bulls, caprids, and trees, are known in larger media from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, particularly temple and palace architecture, where they may function as images of protection and blessing. Because the females, with or without pillar bases, were adopted on the cult stands along with other protective characters, the best explanation might be that they serve an apotropaic function, as divine guardian figures. This would be in keeping with Schroer’s interpretation of other cultic items in which frontally molded females stand in for architectural features as protective guardians.

Finally, whether the pillar bases are meant to recall actual pillars or merely represent a schematization of a relatively unimportant lower body, ancient Near Eastern artistic style presents some precedent for excerpting symbols from their original settings, such as torsos with hands holding the breasts, and recombining them in new ways, like adding this trope to a pillar base. For example, Egyptian depictions of Hathor frequently borrowed only the head or the head and bust of the image in a type of synecdoche to indicate the meaning of the total image. Similarly, ancestor statues at Deir el-Medina consisted of busts alone; clearly the bottom section of the image was simply unnecessary. Furthermore, this abbreviated form of the female image combined with other elements, like wings or a sun disc, is also known from Syrian and Phoenician art of the Iron II. In Egyptian iconography the extraction of particular symbols of gods and their recombination into fantastical forms may even have increased the effectiveness of an image. Moreover, Andrzej Niwiński argues that the media of miniatures (here specifically scarabs and coffins of the 21st Dynasty) requires that images be abbreviated, what he calls the pars pro toto rule.

This method also occurs in large-scale art. Female images combined with actual columns are known from Hathor columns in Egypt and at Timnah, as well as the basalt female standing on the back of a lion from the ninth century palace entrance at Tell Halaf. Caryatids, believed to have been influenced by Ionic temples in Anatolia, may be a later continuation of these Syrian and Anatolian traditions.

Thus, most of the comparanda agree with the conclusions based on stylistic criteria and suggest that the lower “body” of the figurine is actually a pillar and a schematization that has largely lost its significance for the function of this image. In comparison, a number of free-standing bird figurines appended to pillars have been discovered throughout Judah, although few scholars would argue that the pillar is anything more than the base of the figurine (Fig. 7). These bird figurines come from the same region, time period, and sites as Judean pillar figurines. If the bases of Judean figurines maintain any significance, perhaps they recall the pillar columns from protective figures on cult stands guarding shrine spaces. Such an interpretation would be consistent with descriptions of clay in ancient Near Eastern texts that indicate its association with protection and healing.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS
This examination of the pillar bases on Judean-style pillar figurines has revealed that the technological characteristics, stylistic criteria, and related coroplastics objects all yield a similar interpretation—namely that the bases of the figurines were not only the least important iconographic elements in the figurine design but that their schematization and ambiguity actually indicate some connection with shrine box and cult stand iconography where female guardian figures typically take the place of architectural elements. In contrast, by attempting to read all figurine elements together as representing a single character, scholars consistently
misread the iconography. The resulting interpretations either insist the pillar bases, as part of a coherent symbol, represent tree trunks whose meaning is unlocked by an assumed relationship between the biblical terminology describing Asherah and a possible connection between the goddess and trees, or insist that the pillar base was incorporated into the holistic image as a garment meant to contrast the Judean figurines with their lascivious counterpart in Canaanite mythology.

The problem with Judean pillar figurines has always been the absence of a direct iconographic antecedent in any material or medium. The advent of these clay figurines appears to represent a new creation taken from individually known elements. Thus, whether this creation intends to suggest one holistic image, for example, that of a recognizable super-natural being, is not readily apparent. The alternative, tracking the individual design components, their stylistic characteristics, and their unique combination, still suggests a tentative but informed function for the image, as one intended to protect and preserve. It may also suggest that the extended search for the figurines’ “identity” is misguided.

Notes
4 Weissenrieder 2009, p. 117; LeMon 2010, pp. 146–147; Winter 2010a, p. 139.
11 Van Buren 1930, pp. 191–192, 211.
14 Geller 2007, p. 228, Tablet 9:47.
20 Waraksa 2009.
23 E.g., Kletter and Ziffer 2010, CAT 80, pl. 116; CAT 82, pl. 5:3; CAT 95, pls. 129–130; CAT112, pl. 143:1.
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34 Amr 1980, pp. 22–35.
35 Daviau 2001, p. 322.
44 Darby 2011, pp. 484–486.
45 Kletter and Ziffer 2010, CAT 37, pls. 11:1, 76–77, 78:1–2; CAT 44, pls. 13:1, 84–85; CAT 49, pls. 2:2, bottom, 14:2, 90:1, 3, 91:1; CAT 59 pls. 33:1, 103:2–3.
47 Ziffer 2010, p. 77.
48 Kletter and Ziffer 2010, CAT 84, pls. 21:1, 43:1, bottom, 119, 120:1; CAT 85, pls. 41:1, 120:2–3; CAT 86, pls. 21:2, 121; CAT 92, pls. 23:2, 125:2–3, 126:1–2; CAT 113, pls. 26:1, 143:2, 144; CAT 123, pl. 150:2, CAT 28, pls. 9:2, 69, 70:1; CAT 29,pls. 47:3, 70:2–3; CAT 57, pls. 7:1, 17:2, 99–100; CAT 59, pls. 1:2–3, 40:1–2, 41, 123:3–4.
49 Kletter and Ziffer 2010, CAT 22, pl. 65; CAT 30, pl. 71; CAT 41, pl. 81; CAT 110, pl. 141:2.
50 Kletter and Ziffer 2010, CAT 17, pl. 62:1; CAT 52, pls. 5:1, 16:1, 93:4, 94; CAT 53, pls. 2:2, center, 16:2, 95; CAT 54, pl. 96:1; CAT 106, pl. 138:2.
51 Zevit 2001, pp. 325–326, fig. 4.10; Meier and Dayagi-Mendels 2007, pp. 111–123, figs. 1, 2.
52 Schroer 2007, pp. 438–439; Rowe 1940, pp. 54–55, pls. 17:1, 57A:1, 35:2, 17:2, 56A: 3; Wooley 1955, pp. 64, 248, pl. 58 a, b; Keel 1998, p. 41, Beck 2002, pp. 185, figs. 1, 2, 3a, 209, fig. 10, 414.
54 Kletter 2010a, pp. 186–188.
55 Kletter 2010b, pp. 42–43.
56 Kletter 2010a, p. 188.
58 Robins 2008, p. 175, fig. 206; Staabli 2009, pp. 93–112; abb. 3.
60 Bisi 1988, figs. 1g, 1d; Gubel 1993, p. 123, figs. 61–63.
62 Niwiński 2000, p. 27.
64 Reithenberg 1972, pp. 130, 151, fig. 78.
65 Oppenheim 1931, p. 121.
67 E.g., Kletter 1996, Appendix 5: 5.II.

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