THE COROPLASTICS OF TRANSJORDAN
FORMING TECHNIQUES AND ICONOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS IN THE IRON AGE
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ABSTRACT
During the past twenty years, excavations in Transjordan have produced a large corpus of anthropomorphic figurines and statues, as well as figures attached to architectural models. For the most part, these figures originate in central Jordan and date to the Iron Age. Although they were found in tombs and at a limited number of sites, the figurines and statues in this study represent a variety of ethnic and cultural traditions, many previously unknown. While it is clear in certain instances that Egyptian iconography had an influence on Ammonite and Moabite iconographic traditions, in other cases the imagery, especially of the ceramic statues, is distinctive and/or unique. This paper will present a discussion of the various forming techniques employed to produce these figures and begin to explore their place in the iconographic traditions of the region. Included in this study will be a review of figurines found previously and identified with confidence by early explorers and excavators as Ammonite, Moabite, or Edomite on the basis of the ceramic tradition represented in a given region. In view of the much larger corpus which is now available, considerable diversity in the assemblage is evident and a reassessment is warranted.

AREA UNDER STUDY
The central Jordanian plateau in the Iron Age included a number of small polities, some more centralized than others. Best known is Ammon, whose capital at Rabbath-Ammon (’Amman) retains vestiges of a royal citadel with impressive architecture and works of art. On Ammon’s southwestern perimeter were the Land of Madaba and the plains of Moab, which supported organized tribal groups during Iron Age I–early Iron II. On the plateau to the south, two distinct polities known as Moab and Edom developed during Iron Age II (900–600 BCE). Several major trade routes linking Arabia with Damascus passed through these regions, providing for the exchange of raw materials and cultural traditions.

Specific sites of interest on the plateau that have yielded a significant number of Iron Age figurines include ’Amman, Tall al-’Umayri, Tall Jawa, Khirbat al-Mudayna ath-Thamad, WT-13, Balu’a, and Busayra, with smaller numbers from Maqablayn, Sa’ab, Hesban, Jalul, Madaba, Mount Nebo, Dibon, and Tawilan. One hundred ninety-four figurines and 29 ceramic statues from published reports and from excavations in Moab under my direction are included in this study; figurines with suspect provenience are not discussed in detail.

The anthropomorphic figures from central Jordan consist primarily of terracotta figurines and ceramic statues, with stone figures playing a minor role. Terracotta figurines represent females and males as free-standing fully modeled figures, either mold-made or hand-made, and pillar figurines with mold-made heads. The smaller corpus of ceramic statues is, for the most part, pillar-shaped in style, with few details of the anatomy shown below the waist. Only...
a handful of limestone statuettes have been recovered and these, along with the large stone statues from the `Amman area, are beyond the scope of this study.' So too are the large collections of zoomorphic figurines that deserve separate investigation.⁸

**Basic Figurine Types**

Free-standing, mold-made figures:

Solid mold-made ceramic figurines were formed either in the round (bivalve mold) or, more often, were molded on the front (univalve) and trimmed on the back, either with the potter’s finger or a tool. The result of trimming with one’s finger is evident in the gently rounded back of those figurines which retain additional clay behind the body (WT 21-2/521, Fig. 2.1), whereas tool-trimmed figurines have a flattened back which in some cases truncated the arms and legs (WT 35-2/535, Fig. 2.2; WT 286-4/514; WT 77-2/577). Although solid figurines have a vertical stance, they cannot stand up alone since the feet are often positioned at an angle in order to fully depict the feet (WT 86-2/586, Fig. 2.3). Although these figurines were designed to be carried or to lean against another object,⁹ in some instances there is a small flat support for the feet (WT 95-2/595, Fig. 2.4). All of these figurines are distinct from so-called ‘plaque
figurines’ which typically have a molded form impressed on a larger slab/plaque of clay that frames the figure on all sides. This Late Bronze–Iron I style is rare in central Jordan; for example, one figurine from late Iron Age II Tall Jawa in Ammon consists of the lower body of a female pressed against a thicker clay backing (TJ 1712, Fig. 2:5). Even in this example, the backing is rounded, closer to the hand-finished style seen on figurines from WT-13 than to the flat slab or plaque of earlier figurines. Plaque figurines are found in Late Bronze Age II contexts at various sites, such as Tell Beit Mirsim, Megiddo, Tel es-Safi/Gath and, in smaller numbers, at Tall al-‘Umayri and Lahav.

After the figurine was removed from the mold, additional attention to detail was completed, such as incised lines representing strands of hair (WT 68; WT 86-2/568, Fig. 2:6; WT 518) or the addition of pellets to represent curls (WT 21-2/521, Fig. 2:1; WT 466-6/505, Fig. 3:7), a feature that applies to both female and male figurines. Paint was used on occasion to highlight features such as hair and eyebrows (MT 565-4/21, Fig. 2:7); in other instances, it is apparent that paint covered
the entire figurine although in their current condition, the paint is only preserved in grooves and depressions in the surface. Necklaces, bracelets, arm bands (WT 42-2/542; Fig. 2.8) and anklets (WT 95-2/595; Fig. 2.4) are also shown, although it is not clear in all cases whether these details were added by hand or were already present in the mold itself. Along with their jewelry, the line of the girdle on the abdomen and details of the anatomy (MT 566-4/22; WT 286-4/514, Fig. 2.9) are sometimes shown and/or enhanced on naked female figures. Facial features such as eyes, nose and mouth were partially designed in the mold and later enhanced by hand; in a few instances, a small pellet was added to enlarge the eye and the pupil was either painted (MT 565-4/21, Fig. 2.7) or punctated (for example, Jalul, WT 282-4/510, 466-6/505, Fig. 3.5-7).

Free-standing figurines could also be attached to another object, such as an architectural model or ceramic stand. This can be done in a number of ways; the figure may be pressed onto another object or attached with the addition of clay packed around all sides to seal it to the object (WT 88-2/588; WT 89-2/588, Fig. 2.10, 11) or, thirdly, the figure could be attached only along one side (WT 86-2/586, Fig. 2.3). Figures that were attached on all sides were clearly made as free-standing figurines before a coil of clay was added as a seal. A small number of hand-made attached figurines represent a different technique; these were formed as integrated components of an architectural model (WT 80-2/580, WT 179-2/679) and protrude from one side or edge of the miniature structure.

Pillar Figurines:

Pillar figurines have a conical base, a mold-made head, and attached arms and breasts. The pillar was formed either by hand with a concave base or made on the wheel, a practice evident from the rills on the interior of the lower body (WT 72-2/572, Fig. 3.1). The cone was then cut from the hump and inverted and a depression was made in the top of the pillar to receive the tenon extending from the neck. The mold-made head and neck ends in a peg-shaped tenon that was inserted into the top of the pillar. Extra clay was then added to secure the head to the pillar and form the shoulders. This extra clay was often poorly molded with the result that the shoulders sloped down onto the body (WT 190-4/501; WT 479-6/526, Fig. 3:2). In contrast to the standardization of the mold-made pillar figurine heads found in Judah and represented at Tel ‘Aroer, the facial features of pillar figurines from Transjordan are considerably more varied, with some figurines having pronounced eyebrows, large eyes, chins and ears, while others have delicate features (WT 315-5/505) and an elaborate hair style, such as the drum player from Tomb 84 at Mount Nebo. Hand-made additions to the pillar figurine may include small coils of clay to fashion the arms, pellets for breasts, mittens for hands and a clay disc to represent a frame drum (WT 53-2/553, Fig. 3:3). In one case, a Judean-style molded head found at Khirbat al-Mudayna ath-Thamad was enhanced by the addition of small coils of clay framing her face to form curls in the style of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. A second style, seen at Barta’ and at WT-13, is the veiled female figure that appears either as a pillar figurine or as an attached figure. Due to poor preservation, many figurines are represented only by their head. While it is apparent that molds were used to form many of these heads, there is great variety in facial features. The lack of repetition makes it difficult to assign an exact identification or function for many of the female figures. The differences in hair style and the presence of veiled female figures in cultic and domestic contexts in both northern and central Moab add to this uncertainty.

Partially preserved figurines:

Identification and determination of function is also difficult for the male heads and crudely-made heads of figures with indeterminate gender. Complete male figures are rare but a wide variety of head styles make their appearance. Best known are mold-made heads wearing an atef crown or conical cap, a style that continues into the Persian period in the Levant. These are typically slipped or painted to show the beard and/or mustache, such as a complete figurine from a tomb at Maqbalayn and a head from the ‘Amman citadel, while the paint on a male head from Tall Jawa is faded (TJ 100, Fig. 3:4). A double flute player with atef crown from Jalul also appears mold-made (Fig. 3:5). This figurine has depressed pupils which may have been added by hand (Fig. 3.2), as was the case for two male heads from WT-13—these males are shown either bald (WT 282-4/510, Fig. 3:6) or with curls (WT 466-6/505, Fig. 3:7). The most elaborate head has long locks of hair held in place with a headband. Male heads with a conical headress are found at ‘Amman and Tall al-‘Umayri. In contrast to these carefully formed heads, hand-made male heads that are stylized
appear with only the nose and cap clearly formed (WT 521/6/520, Fig. 3:8). One body fragment from WT 13 suggests that some male figures were shown nude (WT 3235/5/508, Fig. 3:9), as is a limestone statue from Khirbat al-Mudayna ath-Thamad (MT 2974) and a small, silt stone figure from Tall Jawa.39

Unique Figurine Types:
A small number of hand-made torso fragments are unique, such as the small figure seated on a throne or architectural model fragment (WT 472-6/506) and a second seated figure, somewhat larger in size and missing its head and limbs (WT 439-6/501).30 Most distinctive among the hand-made figurines are a pair of legs, each made separately and then pressed together (WT 13a+b-1/513). The position of these feet is similar to certain mold-made figurines in that they are not flat on the bottom, although a single foot and lower leg (WT 110-2/610) and the feet and legs of a naked female (WT 95-2/595) are flat enough to stand on their own.

A naked female molded onto the side of a hand-made pillar31 is distinct from other pillar figurines mentioned above. So too is a mold-made female figure, also from Tall Jawa, that appears to be seated on a winged chair; this figure has as its best parallels figurines from Aegean sites such as Tanagra, Locri, and Corinth.32

with nearly equal representation from Tall Jawa and Tall al-Umayri.34 Smaller numbers come from excavations at Hesban, Bala‘a, Madaba, Mount Nebo, Karak, Dibon and Tasilan,35 with isolated examples from Jalul and Maqabalayn.36

The second important class of ceramic figures consists of statues. Fragments and body sherds of statues are often not recognized as such or are classified as figurines, while hollow heads are identified as, or confused with, masks. I have classified small hollow figures as statues based on their similarity to the 20 statues of various sizes recovered at WT-13 and known from sites in Israel.37 The statues were made on the wheel with the base fashioned in the same manner as the rim and neck of a jug or storejar (WT 37-2/537, Fig. 3:10). Clear evidence of ribs and tool marks on the interior indicate this process, while the locs of hair, ears and other features were hand-made. The breasts were either formed separately and attached or were formed by pushing out the wall of the body. The heads were probably formed separately and then attached, since many statues are broken at the point of attachment (WT 11-1/511, Fig. 3:11). Two of the statues from Busayra have lamps on their head and one holds a disc parallel to the body38 in the same position as many of the WT-13 figurines.

The arms of these statues were made from a clay coil, like a loop handle, and were pressed against the torso for support. The largest statue (WT 11-2/511) was painted with horizontal bands—only in a few places is there evidence for faded vertical stripes, while other statues retain a horizontal band of color on the lower body (Fig. 3:10). One figure holds several small loaves, each made separately and then pressed together (WT 166-2/666, Fig. 3:12). This same figure has attached locks of hair with a clear part in the middle and a hair band around his head which is knotted in the back. This hair style appears on several other statue heads, one of which supports a lamp attached above a headband which is decorated with pellets (WT 98-2/598). Other hand-made features include pellets for eyes, ears with holes for earrings, and noses, both simple and elegant in form. Quantification of statues (Chart 2, Statue Totals) yields only two concentrations, WT-13 and the Busayra area, with isolated examples from Tall Jawa, Tall Madaba,39 Tall Damay in the Jordan Valley40 and Sabkha in northern Jordan,41 reflecting the small number of Iron Age sites excavated and published to date.

![Figurine Totals](chart1.png)

**Chart 1. Distribution of Figurines in Central and Southern Jordan**

**Distribution and Quantification**

When we quantify the figurines from sites in central Jordan (Chart 1, Figurine Totals), the largest concentrations known to this writer come from Amman, Khirbat al-Mudayna ath-Thamad, WT-13 and Busayra31
ORIGIN OF THE CERAMIC FIGURES

The diversity of styles among the figures in this study and the recognition of various clay matrices with few links with figures from neighboring sites lead to the supposition that the figurines and statues at WT-13 were not all local products. In order to test this hypothesis, 10 samples from WT-13 and one from Mudayna at Th-amad were submitted for NAA analysis to Jan Gunnneweg and Marta Balla at Budapest for comparison with similar statues from Horvat Qitmit and ‘En Haševa. By comparison of their results with databases that include Judah and Edom, it was clear that only one sample from WT-13 and one from Mudayna Thamad were similar to a lamp from ‘En Haševa, while another sample had parallels at Busayra and ‘En Haševa. The remaining Moabite samples fell into two groups, neither of which has parallels known at this time. Figurines from Amman have not yet been tested by NAA.

MOTIFS

Due to the fragmentary nature of many of the figures from Transjordan, the iconographic details are often lacking. As a result, the understanding of the iconographic traditions of Transjordan is in its infancy. Nevertheless, there are three motifs that appear dominant: figurines and small statues holding a disc at the waist, female figurines playing a drum, and females holding their breasts. Other musical instruments are also attested: a male flute player from Jalil and a lyre player from Amman. Only 4 figures obviously have their arms at their sides, while several statues have their hands on their abdomen or hold a bowl, a lamp, a stack of bread loaves, or an animal in their arms, positions that suggest that these ceramic figures were votive representations of worshippers. The same is probably the case for those statues with a lamp on their head. Recognizable deity figures are few and are better known among stone statues from Rabbath-Ammon and among the small aterf-crowned male heads. The precise function of naked female figures that hold their breasts or cover them with their hands, comparable in style to figurines from Megiddo and Cyprus, remains unclear, although they may represent Astarte or Anat. These are, however, very different in style from the Judean pillar figurines with larger breasts most probably related to the goddess Asherah and which may be symbolic of lactation. Female heads with ornate earrings and necklaces from Tall Jawa and in a mold from Amman have parallels to the ‘woman at the window’ depicted on Phoenician ivory inlays, whose precise meaning is in doubt.

Apart from the male figures with an aterf crown or conical headdress, each male figurine is unique and its association with a specific iconographic tradition cannot be determined at present. The same is true of the small seated figures. However, the statues, both male and female, are part of a much larger tradition. They have their best parallels at Horvat Qitmit and ‘En Haševa and in the extensive repertoire from Phoenician sites across the Mediterranean, especially at Byblos.

Ethnic differences can best be seen in the variation in hair styles and head coverings for both male and female figures. Among the statues, the dominant style shows individual locks held in place with a headband; this style is in contrast to male figurines that appear bald, with curls, or with a crown or hat. At present, the small numbers involved makes it difficult to interpret certain of these styles satisfactorily. Nevertheless, the recovery of an increasing number of ceramic figurines from current excavations and their ongoing publication is rapidly expanding the repertoire from central Jordan. As a result, future research should make it possible to better understand the forming techniques and unique styles of the coroplast traditions of Transjordan.
Notes
1 Director of the Wadi ath-Thamad Project, Jordan; and Professor Emerita, Archaeology and Classical Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5 Canada)
2 van der Steen 2004.
3 Sites in the Jordan Valley that reflect Ammonite ceramic styles and a diversified material culture are not included in this study.
4 Certain sites currently being excavated are not adequately published for a full appreciation of their figurine assemblages.
5 A complete and more in-depth study and illustration of the ceramic figurines and statues from WT-13 is currently in preparation by the author with a comprehensive Jordanian corpus forthcoming by R. Hunziker-Rodewald. Preliminary studies by this author include Daviau 1997, 2001, 2006, 2008; Daviau and Dion 1994, 2002; Daviau and Steiner 2000.
7 Abou Assaf 1980, Dornemann 1983.
8 For an initial study of zoomorphic figurines from Ammonite sites, see 'Amr (1980) and the preliminary reports of excavations at Tall al-‘Umayri (for example, Dabrowski 1997).
9 These same forming techniques are attributed by J. Karageorghis (1999) to figurines of the Cypro-Archaic period on Cyprus.
10 The flute player from Jalul is shown here with permission from the excavator (after, Younker et al 1996, pl. 12).
11 Albright 1939, pl. A.
12 Loud 1948, pl. 242:13, 14.
13 Shai et al 2011, fig. 11. Even in this small corpus, one figurine has a rounded back with the result that the head is bent forward (ibid., fig. 11:1).
15 For the online catalogue of figurines, see DigMaster@www.cobb.msstate.edu. In his report on the Zaraqun survey, Kamlah illustrates two plaques from northern Jordan (1993, fig. 2) and compares them to various types from Cisjordan (1993, pp. 122–125, fig. 8).
16 Dabrowski 2009, p. 64 noted incisions around the eyes of a pillar figurine recovered at Hesban (74.3202).
17 Herr and Clark 2003, figs. 23, 24.
20 Thareani 2011, figs. 3.76–3.80.
21 Glueck 1970, fig. 94.
22 M2001, Saller 1966, fig. 28:2. Heads with pinched faces (Kletter 1996, fig. 4:1, Type A), such as those found at Judean sites (Thareani 2011, figs. 3.81, 3.82), are not represented in Transjordan.
23 Worschech 1995, figs. 2, 4a, b.
24 Harding 1980, pl. 15:12.
25 F33, Koutsoukou and Najjar 1997, fig. 8.
26 Glueck 1934, fig. 6.
27 Koutsoukou and Najjar 1997, fig. 8.
28 Herr and Platt 2002, fig. 16.36:1848.
29 TJ 1877, Daviau 2002, fig. 2.34:1.
30 Although its position suggests a rider, the fact that WT 439 appears to be naked and retains no evidence that it was attached to a horse mitigates this interpretation.
31 TJ 1119, Daviau 2002, fig. 2.31:1.
32 Daviau 2002, pp. 53–58, fig. 2.28:1.
33 Sedman 2002.
34 One ‘figurine’ (U1696) may in fact be a statue fragment although this cannot be confirmed from the illustration (Herr and Platt 2002, fig. 16.36:1696).
36 For a complete bibliography prior to 1999, see Daviau 2001; examples of more recent studies include Mansour 2005 for Amman, Dabrowski 2009 for Tall al-‘Umayri, Sedman 2002 for Busayra and the synthetic study of Sugimoto 2008.
37 Horvat Qitmit; Cohen/Yisraeli 1995 and En Ha’seva; Beck 1995.
38 Glueck 1970, fig. 90.
39 I am grateful to Jonathan Ferguson of the Tell Madaba Project who first brought this statue to my attention.
40 Petit et al 2006, 187; fig. 4.
41 Glueck 1951, fig. 13.
43 Gun neweg and Balla, personal communication.
44 Sugimoto 2008.
45 You nker et al 1996, pl. 12.
46 Koutsoulakou and Najjar 1997, fig. 2.
47 Frevel 2008.
48 Guy 1939, pl. 24; M 4385.
49 Karageorghis 1999, pls. I–XV.
50 If not the goddess herself, these figures may be lesser goddesses associated with the cult of the higher deity. For a different opinion, see Sugimoto 2008, p. 85, who understands the disc-holding females, even those that appear naked, as “human women” who represented the goddess (Astarte).
51 Kletter 1996.
53 Daviau 2002, fig. 2.29:1.
54 Dornemann 1983, 88:3.
56 Pesce 1965.

Bibliography


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