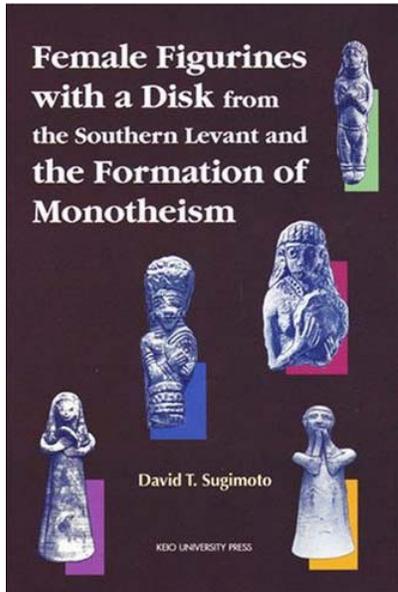


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Sugimoto, David T.

Female Figurines with a Disk from the Southern Levant and the Formation of Monotheism

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One of the most interesting aspects of the material remains of ancient cultures are those finds that can be suggested to be related to ritual and cult. Time and again, placing things within the “realm of religion” provides a fascination for both archaeologist, historian, and layperson. This is all the more evident in the discussion of the material remains of the Iron Age, the time of Israelite/Judean kingdoms, and the possible connection of objects of apparent ritual/cultic connotations and the Hebrew Bible.

Since the very beginning of modern research, the various types of figurines that were found in Bronze and Iron Age contexts in the Land of Israel and surrounding regions have been avidly discussed, with many attempt to ascertain, inter alia, (1) whether these objects were for cultic/ritual use; (2) if cultic/ritual, who or what is depicted; (3) if a deity, what its identity is; (4) what can extrapolated from this on understanding early Israelite religion. Needless to say, the literature on this is immense.

The volume under review attempts to tackle the study of a very specific type of figurine, the “female figurine with a disk.” These figurines, which first appear in the Late Bronze Age but are mainly evident in the Iron Age I–II, represent a small but unique and quite clearly defined group of figurines known from various regions in the Southern Levant.

The volume is divided into six chapters, in addition to a very detailed catalogue of the relevant objects, along with representative illustrations of the figurines from various sites.

In chapter 1 (“History and Methodology of Research,” 1–15), the author introduces the topic under study, reviewing previous research on Canaanite and Israelite goddesses, previous research in general on female figurines, previous research on the female figurines with a disk, methodological issues, and finally, the methodology of the present study.

In chapter 2 (“Typology of Female Figurines with a Disk,” 17–35), the author presents a detailed typology of the known examples of this type of figurine, dividing it into two main types, “plaque figurines” and “pillar figurines.” He believes that all the examples of both types ultimately derive from the same basic category and that all the various examples represent the theme of a “female frame-drum player.”

In chapter 3 (“Female Figurines with a Disk and Similar Figurines with Unique Features,” 37–50), Sugimoto reviews figurines with similar motifs, in particular figurines with fertility symbols and musical figurines. While he notes that the disk may symbolize fertility-related issues, he is somewhat hesitant in this regard. On the other hand, he believes that one should differentiate between the musician figurines from other cultures (such as Cyprus and Phoenicia) and the figurines with a disk from Israel/Judah, since the latter always appear alone, while the former most often appear with other types of musicians.

Chapter 4 (“Archaeological Contexts of Female Figurines with Disk,” 51–65), one of the most important parts of this book, provides a nice summary of the archaeological contexts in which these figurines were found. Several points are of interest. (1) From the Late Bronze Age until the tenth century B.C.E., the figurines appear most often in Israel, but from the ninth century B.C.E. and onward they are common in Phoenicia. (2) In Transjordan, figurines that are quite similar to the Phoenician types are abundant. (3) Approximately half of the figurines from clear archaeological contexts derive from cult-related areas; while this is so throughout the Iron Age in Phoenician and Transjordan, in Israel this is so until the ninth century B.C.E., while from the eighth century B.C.E. and onward most appear in noncultic contexts. (4) Primarily from the eighth century B.C.E. and onward, some of the figurines are found in burials contexts, but only in Phoenicia and Transjordan. As the author points out, these conclusions clearly illustrate the need for a fine-tuned differentiation, both temporally and spatially, in any discussion of the meaning and/or function of these and other figurines.

In chapter 5 (“Identification and Function of Female Figurines with a Disk,” 67–87), Sugimoto discusses the possible identity of the goddess depicted and the function of the figurines. He believes that, although one cannot be absolutely sure, if one suggests that these figurines do depict a goddess, the most likely identification is to Astarte. This is argued from the iconography and the geographical and chronological dispersion of these figurines. Clearly, as the author stresses, this is a very tentative suggestion.

Chapter 6 (“Female Figurines with a Disk and Monotheism during the Israelite Kingdom,” 89–112) ties together all the evidence and analysis presented in the previous chapters and attempts to extrapolate from this on Israelite religious practices during the Iron Age and, as the very title of the book implies, on the formation of monotheism in Israel. The author believes that the figurines’ popularity in Israel during the earlier stages of the Iron Age and its decline from the ninth century B.C.E. and onward can be connected to the formation of monotheism in ancient Israel. In his opinion, while in the early stages of Israelite religion Canaanite attributes were incorporated in Israelite religion, from the ninth century B.C.E. and onward, these foreign attributes were abolished. While he believes that the cult of Astarte flourished in other areas in the late Iron Age, in Israel this pattern was changed. Sugimoto believes that the decline of this figurine type in Israel is a clear sign of the gradual appearance and acceptance of monotheism in ancient Israel.

On the whole, this is a very meticulously and generally quite judiciously researched book, with in-depth coverage of the relevant materials and research. While the final conclusions on the reasons and underlying mechanisms for the appearance of monotheism (or rather “monolatry”) will undoubtedly be debated (note that the author missed some relevant studies, including the very important recent discussion by T. Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* [Fribourg: Academic, 2005]), the volume will without doubt serve as a first-rate tool for further research on this and related topics and will join the by now overloaded shelves of research on the origins and meaning of early Israelite religion.