

Neolithic Figurine Could Lead to Reassessment of Prehistoric Israel

Recent discovery has implications for understanding Yarmukian culture

Robin Ngo • 05/13/2015



This clay figurine discovered near Beit Hilkia takes the shape of a full-figured woman, according to archaeologists, and is identified with the Neolithic Yarmukian culture that flourished in prehistoric Israel 8,000 years ago. *Photo: Israel Antiquities Authority/Yitzhak Mermelstein.*

A small Neolithic figurine that may have been used for cultic purposes has been unearthed near Beit Hilkia in south-central Israel, [Haaretzreports](#). Despite its size, the figurine's presence in the region could have archaeologists rethinking the nature of the cultures living in [prehistoric Israel](#) some 8,000 years ago.

Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologists Edwin van den Brink and Yitzhak Mermelstein were conducting a salvage excavation ahead of the installation of a new pipeline when the Neolithic figurine was discovered. The clay figurine takes the shape of a full-figured woman, according to [Haaretz](#), and is similar to Neolithic figurines found in northern Israel, mostly around the site of [Sha'ar Hagolan](#) ("the Gate to the Golan"). These figurines are attributed to the Yarmukian culture that flourished in northern Israel around 8,000 years ago, during the Pottery Neolithic period (6400–5800 B.C.E.). The Yarmukian culture was the first in this region to produce pottery.



Found at Sha'ar Hagolan, this 5-inch-high, red-painted figurine depicts a seated woman with cowrie-shell eyes and exaggerated hips, buttocks and thighs. *Photo: David Harris.*

Archaeologists Yosef Garfinkel and Michele Miller describe the human figurines discovered at the Neolithic settlement of Sha'ar Hagolan [in an *Archaeology Odyssey* article](#):

The most common—and engaging—human figurines are seated clay figurines with cowrie-like eyes. We have five complete, or nearly complete, examples, along with 70 fragments of various body parts. Each body part was made separately—head, torso, right leg, left leg. The components were assembled to create the basic figurine. Then small details were added: Eyes, ears and nose were put on the head; a veil was placed over the nape of the neck; arms, breasts and clothing were added to the body; fingers and fat folds were created by using different incision techniques; and the navel was depicted by a puncture mark. Remaining patches of paint on the figurines indicate that sometimes the entire figurine was painted red, while at other times only specific parts of the body were painted with red lines. The use of the color red—which is often associated with blood, and thus with life and fecundity—on these figures is intriguing. With one exception, all the anthropomorphic figurines represent women.

[...]

How were these figurines used? Probably for some cultic function. Were they fertility talismans, made to assure the fruitfulness of flocks and fields? Did they represent some sort of deity to be worshiped, perhaps a mother goddess? Or were they representations of beloved ancestors, used in an ancestor cult? No one knows. What we can say is that they appeal to our modern aesthetic sense.

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Photo: Google Earth

Many scholars believe that there was another distinct culture living in south-central Israel during the time that the Yarmukian culture flourished in northern Israel. The ceramic repertoire of this culture based in south-central Israel is identified with that found in Stratum IX at the site of Jericho; the culture is therefore referred to as “Jericho IX culture” or “Lodian culture.”

What makes the figurine found near Beit Hilкия remarkable is that it is attributed to the Yarmukian culture, but was excavated in the region where the Jericho IX culture flourished.

“I think that in the end this is one culture with differences in the way pottery is made,” excavation codirector Edwin van den Brink told *Haaretz*. “It seems they had a single system of beliefs.”

“The question is whether the figurines represent a single ritual world in which there is an image with a bountiful chest, wide hips and maybe pregnancy,” explained excavation codirector Yitzhak Marmelstein. “The most important question is whether the figures were made in the south or brought from the north.”

According to *Haaretz*, the archaeologists plan to test the composition of the figurine’s clay to determine whether it came from the north or south region of prehistoric Israel.