

ERETZ-ISRAEL

Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies

VOLUME THIRTY



Published by
THE ISRAEL EXPLORATION SOCIETY

in cooperation with
THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM 2011



PUBLICATION OF THIS VOLUME WAS MADE POSSIBLE
THROUGH GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

THE JOSEPH ROSEN FOUNDATION
THE BERNARD SELZ FOUNDATION
THE LEON LEVY FOUNDATION
THE REUBEN AND EDITH HECHT TRUST

ISBN 978-965-221-084-5

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Layout: A. Pladot

Typesetting: Marzel A.S.—Jerusalem

Printed by: Old City Press, Jerusalem

AMNON BEN-TOR

VOLUME

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EVIDENCE FOR LEVANTINE RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN THE LATE BRONZE AGE SANCTUARY OF PHYLAKOPI ON MELOS?

JOSEPH MARAN

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Amnon Ben-Tor has made an outstanding contribution to the archaeology of the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. In addition to his long-term commitment to the Hazor excavations, which has been instrumental for gaining invaluable insights into second millennium BCE religious architecture and practices in the southern Levant, his approach to archaeology is distinguished by seeing the Bronze Age cultures of Israel in the wider context of the Near East and the Mediterranean world. It thus seemed appropriate to contribute an article combining questions of religious practice with ones concerning the interaction between Aegean and Levantine societies in the latter part of the second millennium BCE.¹

Recently, Marian H. Feldman (2006) has dealt with the remarkable group of luxury objects appearing in different parts of the eastern Mediterranean between 1400–1200 BCE, which are often designated as belonging to an “international style” and are distinguished by their lack of cultural affiliation to a specific region. Feldman convincingly argues that the cultural ambiguity of the objects was deliberately chosen in order to make them suitable for use as gifts in inter-dynastic networks of gift giving among rulers. The phenomenon studied by Feldman is a particularly striking example for the transformative capacity arising from peoples in distant areas coming into contact and adjusting part of their material culture to the new situation created by the influx of novel goods and ideas. Studies on the cultural repercussions of modern globalization have underlined that the potential for transformation arises above all from the re-contextualization of foreign cultural forms into the

particular patterns of social practice and discourses of another society (Thomas 1991, 27–30, 83–124; Miller 1994: 291–322; Spittler 2002; Hahn 2004). Without textual sources informing us about such issues, archaeology is not in a position to grasp ancient discourses surrounding the use of specific foreign objects. However, by carefully studying find associations in micro-contexts as well as by observing indications for the manipulation of objects, it can in some cases contribute to clarifying how such objects may have been appropriated and used in different realms (Voskos and Knapp 2008: 661–679). In order to assess such questions, it is necessary to go beyond treating the objects as “foreign” and instead to investigate whether their usage in the new cultural environment conforms with or differs from that in their context of origin.

In focusing on micro-contexts of the appearance of wall brackets and a single bronze armor scale, two types of objects of Near Eastern derivation, in thirteenth and twelfth century BCE Tiryns, it was demonstrated that not only the objects as such, but also aspects of their usage seem to follow patterns of practice typical for Cyprus and the Levant (Maran 2004). The find circumstances of the single bronze armor scale were interpreted as signifying the first evidence for a Near Eastern custom of using such items as a foundation offering in mainland Greece, while the careful contextual analysis of Lorenz Rahmstorf (2008: 110) suggests a highly restricted distribution of wall brackets within the Lower Citadel of Tiryns and a linkage to metallurgical workshops, which is also one of their contexts of occurrence in Cyprus. Based on one of these find assemblages with wall brackets in a workshop

dating to the very end of the palatial period (Late Helladic [LH] IIIB Final), Maria Kostoula and this author have recently inferred the presence of foreign artisans working for the palace, who were responsible for embellishing head-shaped faience vessels of Near Eastern type with inlays and gold applications (Kostoula and Maran *in press*; Maran 2008: 50–53).

The sanctuary of Phylakopi on Melos has played an important role in discussions about the profoundness of intercultural contacts between Late Bronze Age societies of the Levant and the Aegean. Ever since the excavations under the direction of Colin Renfrew led to the discovery of two bronze figurines of the “smiting god” type² as well as a building, the so-called East Shrine, exhibiting a so-called irregular plan and a bent-axis approach,³ it was intensely debated whether this might be regarded as sufficient proof for the performance of rituals of Near Eastern derivation at that site (Renfrew 1985: 71–84, 303–310). In contributing to a debate about the relation of late second millennium BCE religious architecture in the Aegean and the Levant, which began roughly two decades earlier,⁴ Ora Negbi (1988) confirmed the significance of the resemblance of the ground-plan and installations of Aegean cult buildings like the Phylakopi East Shrine to religious architecture of the Southern Levant, as previously noted by Mazar (1980: 66). In her opinion, such similarities must signify the transfer of this particular type of building from the southern Levant to the West, and she concluded that the cult of a foreign, Semitic god in smiting pose must have been practiced in the East Shrine at Phylakopi (Negbi 1988: 355–356). To bolster her argument, Negbi relied upon, in addition to the similarity in ground-plan and the appearance of the two bronze figurines, a small head of sheet gold (Fig. 1) found in the Late Helladic IIC-context of Phase 3c in the East Shrine (Negbi 1988: 356). According to her, the head had been originally attached to a “smiting god” bronze figurine worshipped in this building, but she did not elaborate on how she conceived it to have become detached from that figurine.

Inasmuch as Negbi founded her conclusions mainly on moveable and immovable forms of material culture and not on the culturally specific

practices in which these forms were integrated, it was perhaps foreseeable that her argument would be susceptible to criticism. This may explain why her ideas were unanimously met with skepticism by specialists on Aegean religious architecture and cult practice. Gabriele Albers (1996: 660–661) found comparisons based on isolated architectural features generally unpersuasive, and proposed that figurines of Levantine type may have been dedicated as rare and prestigious foreign objects without any knowledge of their original religious significance (Albers 1994: 100, 144). On the other hand, Albers (2004b: 136 with footnote 85) acknowledged the extraordinary concentration of foreign objects in the sanctuary of Phylakopi and ascribed this to the presence of peoples who either had access to regions far distant from the island of Melos or who were able to acquire foreign items with a high material and/or ideological value. Clear similarities between the Aegean and Near Eastern sanctuaries were conceded by Garth Gilmour (1993), who nevertheless opted for interpreting them as merely coincidental. He explained the appearance of the two Levantine bronze figurines as thank-offerings placed in local shrines by Canaanite seamen, but refused to see any evidence for Canaanite cultic influence at Phylakopi in particular or in the Aegean Late Bronze Age in general (Gilmour 1993: 132–134). Helène Whittaker (1997: 66–79) was also reluctant to accept the architectural comparisons between the Phylakopi shrines and religious architecture of the southern Levant and doubted any involvement of Canaanite traders in the construction of cult buildings of the Aegean Late Bronze Age. As regards the bronze figurines from Phylakopi, she did not want to rule out the possibility of Canaanite involvement in that sanctuary, but saw no evidence for a permanent presence of Near Eastern foreigners. Moreover, she independently reached a similar conclusion to Albers’ by arguing that the original religious meaning of the bronze figurines in their area of origin may have been lost in the course of transmission to the Aegean, and that the figurines may have been deposited by locals as votives of exotic character (Whittaker 1997: 82).

To recapitulate, the scholars criticizing Negbi’s ideas all made the point that the evidence from

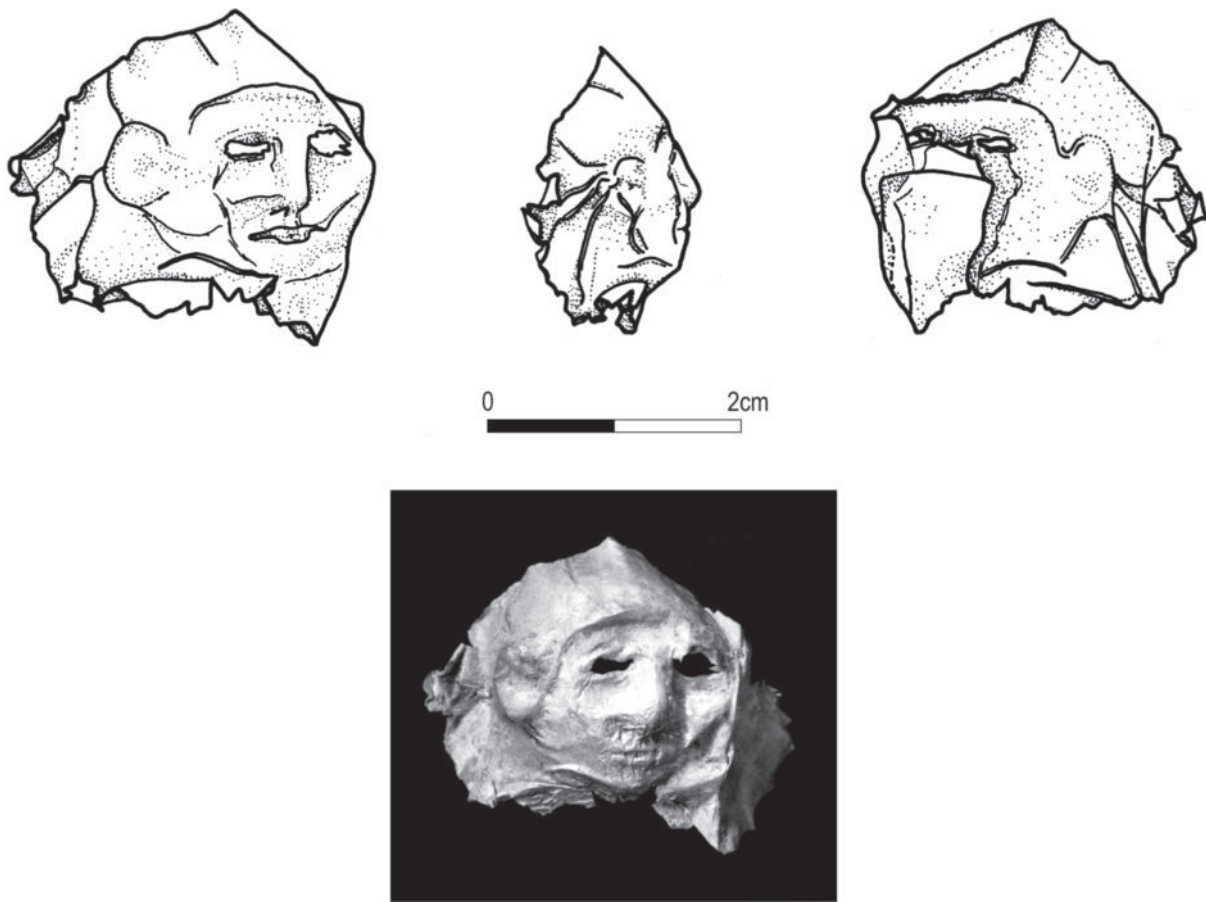


Fig. 1. Phylakopi (Melos). Head of sheet gold from the East Shrine (after Renfrew 1985: fig. 8.2, pl. 59:1. Reproduced with permission of the British School at Athens)

Phylakopi can neither be used to support the transmission of certain forms of Near Eastern religious architecture to the West nor to demonstrate the introduction of Near Eastern rituals in the Aegean. According to these scholars the evidence was thought to support, at most, occasional visits by Levantine foreigners, but not actual ritual practices of Near Eastern derivation by a group of people residing at Phylakopi. Indeed, Albers' and Whittaker's argument that the bronze figurines may have undergone a shift in meaning upon transfer to the Aegean must be taken very seriously in light of what is known from ethnographically documented cases of the appropriation and re-contextualization of foreign goods in a new cultural environment.⁵ The decisive question, thus, is whether there is actual evidence supporting the notion that the Phylakopi figurines were employed in a way

corresponding to what can be inferred about the usage of such figurines in the Levant. While the critical assessment of Negbi's hypothesis by the scholars mentioned revolved around the issues of the ground plan of the East Shrine and the possible meaning of the appearance of the "smiting god" figurines at Phylakopi, in my opinion the significance of the head of sheet gold has not yet received the attention it deserves. It is here argued that this object may prove to be crucial for understanding the nature of some of the rituals practiced at Phylakopi. In the framework of my line of argument, the importance of the head of sheet gold derives not only from the possibility of clearly attributing it to the East Shrine, indicating that, in contrast to the two bronze figurines, its linkage to cult practice in this building is unequivocal. Rather, what I regard as the central and hitherto insufficiently

understood question concerns the interpretation of the object.

As was observed by Colin Renfrew and John F. Cherry, the small human head of sheet gold (Fig. 1), 2.8 cm high and 3.0 cm wide, originally covered the head of a standing human figurine (C. Renfrew and J.F. Cherry in: Renfrew 1985: 302). Renfrew (1985: 373, 381) thought it likely that it had served as a cult figurine rather than a votive, and raised the possibility that it may have originated from an earlier phase of the sanctuary. In pointing to the gold embellishments of Near Eastern bronze figurines and the possible precious-metal cover of the head-dress of one of the bronze figurines from Phylakopi, Renfrew and Cherry (in: Renfrew 1985: 305) spoke out in favor of attributing the head of sheet gold to a figurine of the "smiting god" type. Indeed, the conclusion that it must derive from a figurine of Near Eastern type can be regarded as virtually certain in light of the fact that the gold object clearly shows the lowest part of the high conical head-dress typically worn by figurines of the "smiting god" type, but also encountered on contemporary male enthroned figurines (Negbi 1976: 29–53). Given that two figurines of the "smiting god" type were found in the sanctuary of Phylakopi, there is indeed a strong likelihood that the gold head belonged to a figurine of this particular type. In such a case, however, we would be dealing with a third and now lost example, since the head is slightly too large to fit on one of the two preserved bronze figurines (C. Renfrew and J.F. Cherry in: Renfrew 1985: 302). As for the material of which this figurine was made, Renfrew and Cherry were hesitant to identify it as bronze, and entertained the idea that it may have been of wood (C. Renfrew and J.F. Cherry in: Renfrew 1985: 302). The possibility of a wooden figurine with gold covered head was accepted by some scholars (cf. Rutkowski 1986: 185, 198 [figurine of wood]; Albers 1994: 89 [figurine of wood or bronze]), while Negbi (1988: 356) and Klaus Kilian (1990: 92–93) evidently regarded it with certainty as a bronze figurine.

Undoubtedly, the hypothesis that the head of sheet gold may have been attached to a wooden figurine arose because it was not found in association with a bronze figurine and it was deemed

unlikely that the object had simply fallen off such a figurine and was left lying in the East Shrine. Accordingly, it was concluded that the core, around which the sheet gold was folded, must have consisted of a perishable material that had disintegrated. Whether this line of reasoning is conclusive depends on the reason for the addition of sheet gold or silver to Levantine bronze figurines. As far as I know, neither this question nor the issue of the functions of bronze figurines of the "smiting god" type have been adequately examined. Most interpretations oscillate between regarding such figurines as votives or as cult statues (Seeden 1980: 154; Negbi 1976: 141–142; 1989: 353–355), but it is not known how such figurines were integrated into ritual practice. As for the precious metal embellishments, the implied assumption is that they were applied only once, at the time of manufacture, to decorate the figurines before using them in cult practice. I would like to propose an alternate interpretation for the gold head from Phylakopi which draws upon the role of imagery in societies of the ancient Near East and links the act of adorning the sculptures to ritual practice.

As was emphasized by Zainab Bahrani (2003: 121–184), visual representation in Babylonia and Assyria was not meant to be mimetic, but aspired to create a substitute for what was being depicted, which was then thought to belong to the realm of the real. From this metaphysical system followed the belief that cult statues of the gods could be animated through magical rites and had to be treated as living beings expecting to be fed, dressed and adorned (2003: 171–184). In fact there is rich textual evidence attesting that statues of Mesopotamian deities were dressed on ceremonial occasions with garments specially made for such a ritual purpose (Zawadzki 2006: 153–207). While perishable items like textiles can usually not be archaeologically ascertained, the question must be raised whether other aspects of ritual action might be grasped by carefully analyzing images and their find contexts.

Although the immediate scope of Bahrani did not extend beyond Assyria and Babylonia, the constant flow of ideas between Mesopotamian societies and those of the surrounding regions makes it likely that her conclusions may also prove to be

useful for re-assessing the religious imagery of the Levant and the manner in which figurines of the “smiting god” type were used in rituals. In particular, Bahrani’s study should serve as a reminder that such figurines were not necessarily meant to “represent” something, either a votive or a deity, but in the eyes of the cult community were rather thought to be alive and capable of interacting, just like human beings.

The study by Helga Seeden of bronze figurines in the Levant provides ample evidence for such objects having been provided with deep grooves, for instance on the back of the head-dress, along the arms and/or the legs (Fig. 2).⁶ As Seeden (1980:

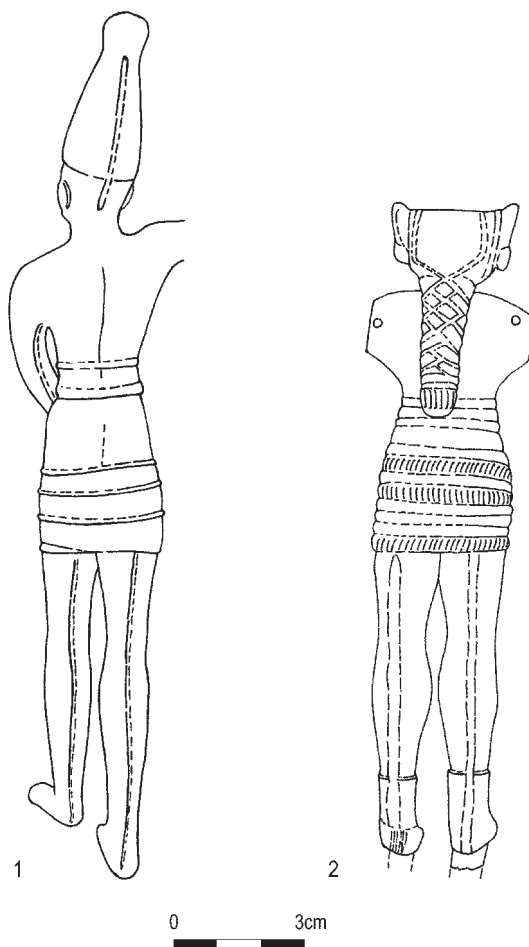


Fig. 2. Back sides of Near Eastern bronze figurines with deep grooves for attaching gold foil. 1 Unknown provenance; 2 “North Syria” (after Seeden 1980: pl. 101:1717, 105:1739. Reproduced with permission of A. Jockenhövel [Prähistorische Bronzefunde])

108 [no. 1716], 113 [no. 1739]) has conclusively demonstrated, these grooves must have been meant to attach and fasten the precious metal cover of the sculptures. At least in these instances it is certain that the embellishment was not by fire-gilding, but by mechanical gilding, in which pieces of metal foil were applied by pressure to the surface of the figurines. By using this technique, the gold cover did not adhere firmly to the bronze surface and had to be fixed by inserting the edges of the foil into the grooves. This seemingly insufficient arrangement makes sense if we assume that it was intended to remove and reapply the foil cover. It is here argued that such figurines were repeatedly adorned with gold or silver in the context of rituals worshipping the deities associated with the figurines. On certain occasions the precious metal covering the figurines may have been ritually renewed by removing the old foil and replacing it with new.⁷ The possibility that the gold covering of such figurines may have been applied by a worshipper at a later stage of use was raised in passing by Annie Caubet and Ella Dardaillon (2008: 246) in discussing one of the bronze figurines of the “smiting god” type from Ugarit. The frequent handling of such figurines in ritual is suggested by their loose attachment to stone or wooden bases by inserting tangs protruding from under the feet of the statue into holes in the base (Seeden 1980: 95–96; pls. 117:1–16, 133:3). This facilitated removal of figurines for carrying (eg., in processions) and other activities. While, to my knowledge, there is no textual evidence for the hypothesized ritual practice of Late Bronze Age date, a Neo-Assyrian text from the palace of Assurbanipal in Nineveh refers to a building ritual, describing how a wooden statue of the king should be made and dressed. The statue should be covered with a gold wrap and its head should be covered with golden *mammu*-headgear.⁸ Thus, the dressing and adorning of the figurine was regarded as part of a ritual, rather than a process of artistic production.

In conclusion, the head of sheet gold from Phylakopi is here interpreted as an embellishment ritually removed from a figurine. The lack of thorough basic research beyond typological and chronological classification of Levantine bronze figurines precludes consideration of how many such objects may have been used in ritual in the

described manner. It would be important to conduct scientific research on the variability of methods of fastening sheet metal to the surface of such figurines and to clarify whether there are other indications that similar gold covers were intentionally applied so as to facilitate subsequent removal and replacement.⁹ Furthermore, if the same pieces of sheet gold were used more than once to adorn statues, perhaps, like palimpsests, traces of an earlier use may still be ascertainable on some of the gold embellishments of Near Eastern bronze figurines.

If the proposed interpretation is correct, the head of sheet gold, together with its now lost bronze figurine and the single armor scale from Tiryns, would have at least two things in common. First, they would both represent Near Eastern objects, indicating that in addition to mere material forms, ideas about their correct use in ritual practice were transmitted. Admittedly, this would not prove that people from the Levant carried out rituals in the sanctuary of Phylakopi, but it would suggest a much more intimate familiarity with forms of ritual practice of Near Eastern derivation than conceded by those who have flatly rejected Negbi's views. For this reason, it would also lend more credibility to the comparisons used by her and others to make the case for some sort of linkage between the Late Mycenaean Aegean and the Levant in the realm of religion. Second, it seems noteworthy that the ritual use postulated here for the head of sheet gold from Phylakopi and the armor scale from Tiryns

both date to LH IIIC. Moreover, on the basis of the re-dating of the sanctuary of Phylakopi by Albers (1994: 90–92), the construction of the East Shrine and the one datable example of a bronze figurine of the “smiting god” type assigned to Phase 2b by Renfrew (1985: 304) would also date to LH IIIC. All these features would thus belong to a period of the history of the eastern Mediterranean that is generally thought to have been accompanied by instability and human mobility. Since it is likely that the movements of groups in the eastern Mediterranean subsumed under the heading “Sea Peoples” included ones from the Aegean, a certain amount of “reflux” of practices of oriental derivation into the Aegean is to be expected, and not necessarily only due to trade connections. The analysis of historically well-documented migrations shows that groups moving to a foreign land try, at least for a certain time, to stay in touch with their communities of origin (Prien 2005: 318). In this way a continuous flow of foreign knowledge into the areas from which these peoples had originated is ensured. It is important to determine whether the aforementioned cases may have been brought about by such a pattern of social networks that arose due to the particular forms of human mobility in the aftermath of the events that had shaken and transformed the political systems prevailing before 1200 BCE in the zone from the Levant in the east to the Peloponnese in the west.

Notes

- 1 Research for this article was conducted within the framework of the Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context.” The author wishes to thank Dipl.-Arch. Maria Kostoula for preparing the illustrations. Special thanks are due to Professor Peter Miglus (Heidelberg) for invaluable advice on Near Eastern ritual practices. Permission to reproduce the images used for illustrations 1–2 was granted by the British School at Athens and the editor of the series “Prähistorische Bronzefunde,” Prof. Dr. A. Jockenhövel, for which I am very grateful.
- 2 C. Renfrew and J.F. Cherry in Renfrew 1985: 304–307; Seeden 1980: 127. For figures of this type in general see Collon 1972; Negbi 1976: 29–41; Seeden 1980: 91–132; Moorey and Fleming 1984, 70–74; Muhly 1980: 153–161; Buchholz 1999: 661–674. For a discussion and analysis of such figures in the Aegean: Gallet de Santerre 1987. To the list of objects of Near Eastern derivation in the sanctuary of Phylakopi should now be added a bifacial rectangular plaque identified by Brandl 2008 (with earlier literature) as a Levantine import.
- 3 For a recent comprehensive analysis of cult buildings with irregular plan and bent-axis approach in Israel and their relation to other kinds of religious architecture see Albers 2004a. The relative chronological position of the building phases of the sanctuary of Phylakopi has been cast into doubt by Albers (1994: 90), who argues that the chronological assignments by the excavators are consistently too early. She concludes that the West

- Shrine cannot have been built earlier than LH IIIB, and the East Shrine not earlier than LH IIIC.
- 4 Yeivin 1968; Mazar 1980: 66–67; 2000: 220–222; Stern 1984: 31–38; Schäfer 1983. Albers 2004a: 25–31 provides an excellent overview over the course of this debate.
 - 5 Spittler 2002; Hahn 2004. For archaeological case studies for such phenomena of “hybridization” see Voskos and Knapp 2008.
 - 6 Here are some of the examples of figurines from the Levant or of Levantine type for which the existence of such grooves to attach the gold foil is mentioned: Seeden 1980: nos. 1687, 1700, 1708–1710, 1714–1717, 1729, 1735, 1739–1740, 1742.
 - 7 In discussing a bronze figurine decorated with gold foil from the Ulu Burun shipwreck, Cemal Pulak (2008: 345) recently noted that the figure may have been dressed up as part of ritual activity, but he seems to suggest that this only concerned the parts of the figurine not covered by gold foil.
 - 8 See Ambos 2004, 120–121 (Text K48+): “...Eine Statue aus Sissoo-Holz, eine Statue des Königs stellst du her. Mit [...] aus Gold wickelst du [um(?)] ihren Kopf. Einen Ring aus Gold legst du an ihre rechte Hand, [einen Ring(?)] aus Silber an ihren linken Oberschenkel. Ein Gewand und eine Kopfbinde legst du auf ihre [Sti]rn(?) wie bei einem König.” (Rs. 59–63). I am indebted to Professor Peter Miglus (Heidelberg) for drawing my attention to this text.
 - 9 What interesting insights can be gained by such an in-depth analysis is shown by the study of Martin 2007: 475 with footnote 3. The technological analysis of a bronze figurine in Berlin has demonstrated that the gold foil was fastened by wedging it into openings created by applying lead strips to the grooves. In another case cited by Seeden (1980: 107 [no. 1715]) the gold foil was fastened by using minute gold nails. Neither author discusses whether this technological procedure could possibly have been reversed and repeated in ritual practice.

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