

CHAPTER EIGHT  
IRON AGE IIA CULTIC ARTIFACTS  
FROM THE OPHEL

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Among the wealth of finds from Iron Age IIA contexts discovered in the Ophel 2009–2013 excavations, only a few small fragments may possibly represent remnants of cultic objects. Unfortunately, the small number of these fragments does not leave much room for significant insights. A clear resemblance exists, however, between these fragments and cultic objects from other Iron Age IIA sites.

ARTIFACTS

1. A Serpent(?) Clay Fragment (B11013, L12-191) (Fig. III.8.1)



Description — a small broken clay artifact, most likely zoomorphic in nature, was discovered in Locus 12-191. It is curved and resembles the body of a serpent. Made of gray-red clay, it has a gray core. One side of the artifact, probably the visible side, is punctured with holes, which were most likely decorative in nature; the bottom side is smooth. The side with the puncture holes is gray, while the smooth side shows a shade of brown.

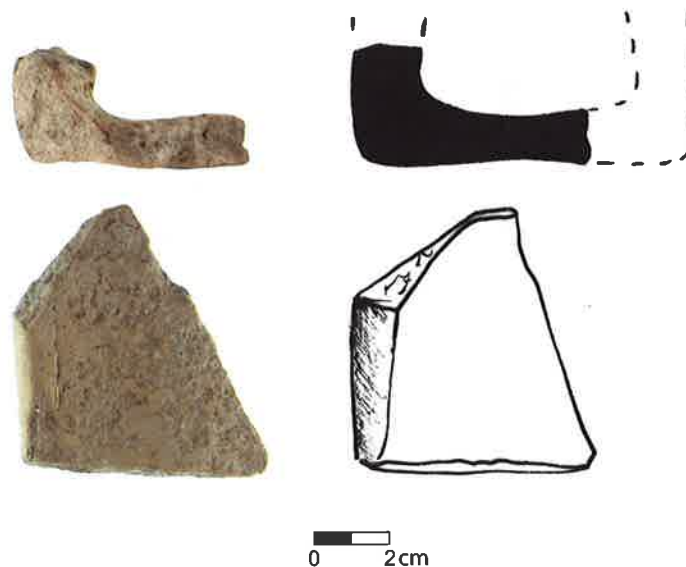
Identity and Parallels — it is likely that this artifact is a zoomorphic serpent decoration that was attached to a cult stand. A cult stand with similar serpents was discovered in Bet She'an's Southern Temple, Lower Stratum V (11th–10th centuries BCE) (Rowe 1940:23, 26, Pls. XIV:1, 3, LVIIA:3–4); the serpents attached to the stand were similarly decorated with puncture holes and share a strong resemblance to our serpent-shaped artifact. In addition to the serpents cult stand, several further examples of a similar decoration were found attached to shrine houses and sacred “boxes” from Iron Age IIA contexts in Bet She'an (*ibid.*, Pls. XVI:1–2, 8–9, XVII:3, XIX:8 and XX:2).

**2. A Palmette Volute Decoration on a Clay Fragment (B20127, L13-081) (Fig. III.8.2)**



Description — a broken part of a clay artifact with curved decorations was discovered in Locus 13-081. It is made of red clay with a dark gray core. On the left side of the artifact is a curved palmette volute motive with a hole punched in its center. To the right of the volute are seen four engraved slightly rounded, horizontal, parallel incisions. Below these is a plant-like curved decoration. No parallels were found.

**3. A Clay Stand Fragment (B20157, L13-097) (Fig. III.8.3)**



Description — this fragment of a clay stand was discovered in Locus 13-097. The fragment is the corner of a square and hollowed-out stand, with incurved edges at its corners and a flat base. It is made of peach clay with a gray core; remnants of white slip are visible on the outside.

Parallels — similar stands, in the form of models of shrines, incense stands, and cult stands, have been found at many Iron Age IIA sites including Yavneh (Kletter et al. 2010:196, Pls. 12, 19 among many others), Khirbet Qeiyafa (Garfinkel et al. 2012:105, Pls. 58–60), and Ta'anakh (Keel and Uehlinger 1998:154–160).

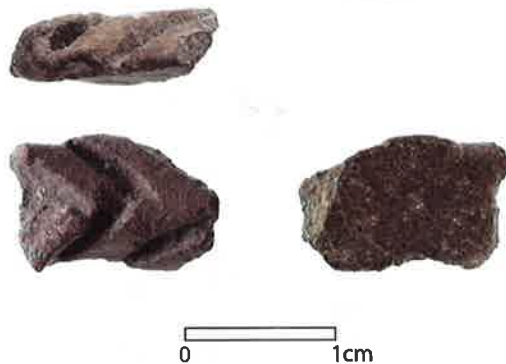
#### 4. A Small Clay Fragment with Plant(?) Decoration (B30132, L13-349) (Fig. III.8.4)



Description — a small clay fragment with an incised plant(?) decoration was discovered in Locus 13-349. One side of the sherd was engraved with a v-shaped decoration that may represent the leaves of a plant. The clay color on the engraved side is peach, while the other side is more reddish in hue and has holes punched in it. The core of the fragment is beige. The fragment was most likely attached to a cult stand, like number 1 above.

Identity and Parallels — an exact parallel was found in the City of David Stratum 12, dating to the Iron Age IIB. The sherd from the City of David is more complete and shows engravings in both horizontal and vertical directions. It was identified as part of a stand and was found among other cultic(?) stand sherds (De Groot and Bernick-Greenberg 2012:331, 339, Fig. 9:4–8).

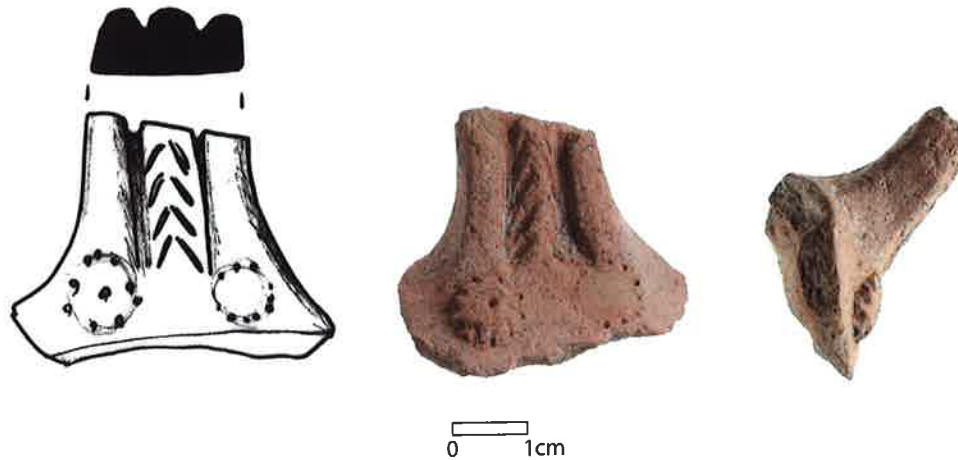
#### 5. A Small Clay Fragment with Plant(?) Decoration (B30131, L13-349) (Fig. III.8.5)



Description — a very small clay fragment with a v-shaped engraved decoration (similar to no. 4 above) was found in Iron Age IIA Locus 13-349 and was most likely part of a stand. The clay is brownish in hue with a gray core. Although similar to number 4 above, this fragment is engraved in a more crude fashion. Its smooth backside makes it hard to tell whether or not it was attached to a stand. However, the fact it was found in the same locus as fragment number 4 increases the likelihood that it was indeed part of a stand.

Identity and Parallels — this decoration can be found on Iron Age IIA cult stands at Yavneh. Many of those stands have palm trees whose trunks were depicted as v-shaped incisions (for examples, see Kletter et al. 2010, Pls. 78:2, 128:4).

**6. Decorated Jug(?) Handle (B13-3211, L13-349) (Fig. III.8.6)**



Description — a broken ridged handle of a jug(?) was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 13-349. It is made of reddish clay with a gray core. The handle is decorated in the center with an incised branch(?) motif and two flower-like circles attached to both sides of its base. One of the circles had fallen-off, but little punched holes form a ring that shows its attachment spot. The attached circle that still remains has an incised dot at its center.

Identification — the flower-like circles may represent schematic rosette designs. The design resembles the rosettes seen on handles of Iron Age IIB Rosette Stamped Storage Jars, which also have a dot in the rosette's center (Cahill 1995:231).

**7. Engraved Clay Fragment (B30149, L13-349) (Fig. III.8.7)**

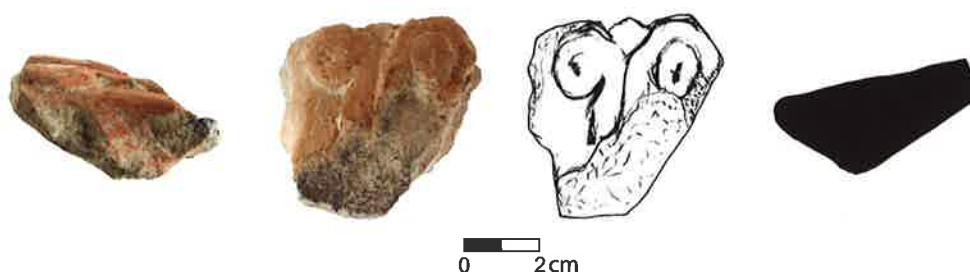


Description — a broken circular clay fragment was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 13-349, made of peach clay with a gray core. Three complete lines were engraved in the center with an additional line or two engraved on both broken sides.

Identity and Parallels — it is difficult to identify a broken sherd such as this. However, based on parallels, there are three possibilities:

1. The fragment is the end part of a beam from a model of a shrine house. Although they had fewer lines incised than the Ophel fragment, similar engraved beam-ends were discovered on Iron Age IIA shrine house models at Khirbet Qeiyafa (Garfinkel et al. 2012:152, Pl. 60) and Yavneh (Kletter et al. 2010, Pls. 94:3, 95:2-3).
2. The fragment is part of an animal figurine's paw, such as a lion. Examples of zoomorphic figurines with similar paws were found attached to Iron Age IIA shrine models from Yavneh (*ibid.*, Pl. 101:1, 5).
3. The sherd is part of a snake's head decorating a cult stand. An Iron Age IIA cylindrical cult stand found in Bet She'an was decorated with a row of similar projections, identified by Rowe as snake heads (Rowe 1940:60, Pl. XIV:1).

#### 8. A Clay Fragment with a Palmette Volute Decoration (B30110, L13-328) (Fig. III.8.8)



Description — a clay fragment with two palmette volute decorations was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 13-328. It is made of orange-peach clay with a gray core and is burnished on the outside.

Identity and Parallels — volutes and stylized palm trees in various configurations are commonly found on incense stands and shrine models from the Iron Age, and it is likely that this fragment broke off from such a stand or shrine. On shrine models, a pair of volutes often appears on pillars that flank the entrance to the shrine (Keel and Uehlinger 1998:154-155). One such parallel was found on a shrine model supposedly discovered in Transjordan: a clay shrine model with two pillars and volute capitals (Weinberg 1978:38-40). Another similar shrine model with volute capitals was discovered in an Iron Age IIA context in Tell el-Far'a North (Weinberg 1978:40). Additional Iron Age IIA examples of similar volute decorations were also found in Megiddo (May 1935:13-17) and Ta'anakh (Keel and Uehlinger 1998:154-160).

#### 9. A Clay Fragment with Snake(?) Decoration (B2392, L09-241) (Fig. III.8.9)



Description — a clay fragment with a snake(?) decoration was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 09-241. It is made of yellow clay with a gray core.

**Identity and Parallels** — this fragment bears a remarkable resemblance in thickness, shape, and size to a snake decoration on a krater found in a Middle Bronze Age II B–C context at Nahal Rephaim (Wallajeh) (Ein Mor 2011:73). Another very similar decoration, attached to the exterior of a bowl, was found in a Late Bronze Age I context at Bet She’an (Rowe 1940, Pl. LXXA). This snake decoration may also have belonged to a cultic stand, similar to the Iron Age I stand from Bet She’an (ibid., Pl. LIXA).

**10. A Clay Fragment with Incised Decoration (B2150, L09-226) (Fig. III.8.10)**



**Description** — a clay fragment made of red ware with a beige core was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 09-226. The sherd was red slipped and shows incised decorations on the outside. On its upper left hand corner is a cut-out area that may indicate that the sherd is a broken piece of a window from a chalice or cult stand.

**Identity** — it is possible that this sherd was part of a cult stand or a chalice. No parallels were found.

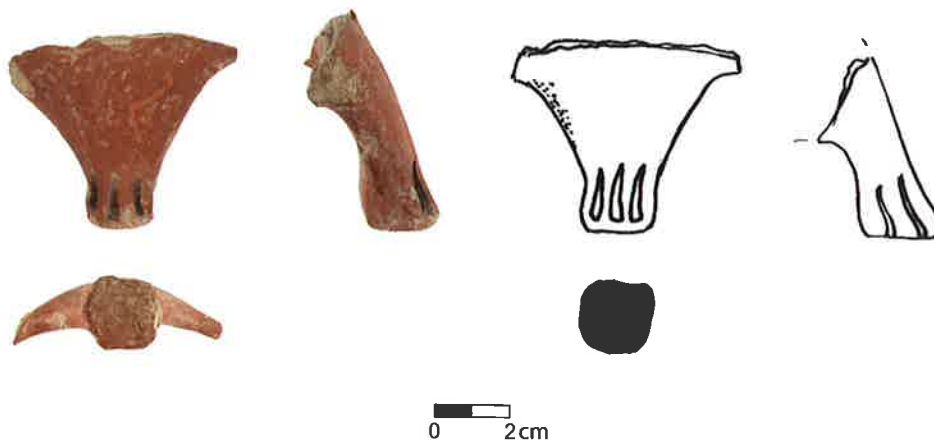
**11. A Clay Fragment Decorated with Puncture Holes (B20020, L13-014) (Fig. III.8.11)**



**Description** — a broken, oval-shaped clay fragment was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 13-014. It is made of brownish-red ware and core, and its surface was decorated with puncture holes. The remnants of white chalk can be seen in several of the holes.

**Parallels and Identity** — the clay fragment is most likely part of a snake decoration, similar to the clay snake fragment found in Locus 12-191, also decorated with puncture holes. It is also similar to other clay snakes attached to various cult stands, shrine models, and sacred “boxes” found in Iron Age IIA contexts in Bet She’an (Rowe 1940, Pls. LVIIA:3–4; XVII:3; XIX:8; XX:2 and XVI:1–2, 8–9).

12. A Clay Zoomorphic Fragment of a Leg (B3178, L12-240) (Fig. III.8.12)



Description — a clay zoomorphic leg fragment made of reddish ware with a dark gray core was discovered in Iron Age IIA Locus 12-240. The fragment was burnished and red slipped. It is most likely part of an elegantly designed zoomorphic vessel. At the bottom of the leg are three incised lines that were carved to look like the paw of an animal. The base below the paw is flat. No parallels were found.

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