

## *From the Seabed, Figures of an Ancient Cult*

A trove of Phoenician artifacts was long ascribed to a single shipwreck. More likely they were tossed overboard, and over centuries, a new study suggests.

By Joshua Rapp Learn

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In 1972, in one of the early finds of marine archaeology, researchers discovered a trove of clay figurines on the seabed off the coast of Israel. The figurines — hundreds of them, accompanied by ceramic jars — were assumed to be the remains of a Phoenician shipwreck that had rested under the Mediterranean for 2,500 years.

The artifacts were never fully analyzed in a scientific study, and were filed away and mostly forgotten for decades. But a new analysis by Meir Edrey, an archaeologist at the Leon Recanati Institute for Maritime Studies at the University of Haifa in Israel, and his colleagues indicates that the items were not deposited all at once in a wreck. Rather, they accumulated over roughly 400 years, between the 7th and 3rd centuries B.C., in a series of votive offerings, as part of a cult devoted to seafaring and fertility.

“These figurines, the majority of them, display attributes related to fertility, to childbearing and to pregnancy,” Dr. Edrey said.

The ancient Phoenicians were a seafaring merchant culture that stretched across the Mediterranean. Their first city states arose nearly 5,000 years ago, and the culture reached its height during the millennium before Carthage was defeated by Rome in 146 B.C.

In the 1970s, a number of the Phoenician figurines began turning up on the illicit antiquities market. Researchers at the time tracked down the vendor and persuaded him to reveal the source; the details led to the discovery of hundreds of figurines and amphorae, or clay jars, at a site called Shavei Zion, off the coast of western Galilee.

The items were ascribed to a shipwreck dating to the 6th century B.C.

But Dr. Edrey’s team examined thousands of pottery shards and found they were quite different in style. Such variation typically indicates that pots come from different time periods, suggesting the site was not the result of a single event.

“I’m completely convinced that their understanding of this site is correct,” said Helen Dixon, a historian at the East Carolina University who was not involved in the recent study but did some work on the early findings at Shavei Zion as part of her doctoral research. “They’re being cautious and scientific, but I’m sold.”



She noted that the loose jumble of amphorae at Shavei Zion contrasted with that of shipwrecks found off the Maltese coast, which have similar-looking pots laid out in an orderly fashion.

Dr. Edrey and his team also looked at more than 300 figurines, which fit within several themes. Many of the figurines carried symbols associated with Tanit, a goddess of the Phoenician pantheon — and the main goddess of Carthage by the 5th century B.C. Others bore dolphin symbols, also associated with Tanit, while some of the figures showed a pregnant woman carrying a child.

“Tanit was the mother goddess for the pantheon,” said Aaron Brody, director of the Badè Museum at the Pacific School of Religion; he has published work on Phoenician religion but was not involved with the new study. “She quite literally was the mom of the family of deities.”

Dr. Edrey speculated that practitioners of a fertility cult came to this area periodically to cast offerings into the water. The figurines might represent common people, and casting them into the sea could represent a type of sacrifice that substituted for the real thing, he said.

In some figurines the right hand is upright, and the left sits below the mouth. This could indicate some sort of vow in exchange for a divine favor, such as safe passage on a voyage, Dr. Edrey said, which would have been particularly important for the seafaring Phoenicians.

“The figurines are in some ways kind of a bridge between the earthly world and the divine,” Dr. Brody said.

Knowledge of Tanit and of Phoenician religion is limited, as most of the papyrus from that period has not survived. Still, Dr. Dixon said, the Shavei Zion figurines add to what researchers have learned from similar figurines found in tombs.

“In the same way that figurines might be part of ritual going on into a dangerous part of the sea, they might be part of a burial, preparing for a journey to the afterlife,” she said.

“Every day sailors are leaving a record over time, not because they were told to by the king. It’s sort of just romantic and beautiful in that way — a touchstone from everyday people in the past.”