

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Papers

Graduate Research

2017

Religious Syncretism in Transjordan During the Iron Age as seen in Tall Jalul and Khirbet Atarutz

Abelardo Santini Rivas
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/papers>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rivas, Abelardo Santini, "Religious Syncretism in Transjordan During the Iron Age as seen in Tall Jalul and Khirbet Atarutz" (2017). *Papers*. 15.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/papers/15>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Religious Syncretism in Transjordan during the Iron Age as seen in Tall Jalul and Khirbet Atarutz

Abelardo Santini Rivas

A constant element in Transjordan religion during the Iron Age is the prevalence of syncretism. The cultural mixture of different foreign and local sources produced different regional religious traditions practiced in Transjordan by different tribal groups. This paper aims to examine such syncretism as reflected in two sites: Tall Jalul, mostly domestic and administrative, and Khirbet Atarutz, mostly cultic. It examines cultic objects present in both sites that reflect different sources of cultic/cultural influence.

Tall Jalul

In the modern Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Tall Jalul is one of the most prominent features on the Madaba Plains. A large mound located next to the modern village of Jalul, about 5 km east of the modern town of Madaba, it is the largest archaeological site on the central Jordanian plateau. It is oblong in shape and about 18 acres in size. On the southwestern quadrant, and underneath a modern extant cemetery, is the unexcavated Acropolis. On the southeast side, a series of depressions seem to suggest the presence of a water (reservoir) system designed, it would seem, to cope with the dryness of the local climate. Excavations in Jalul since 1992 have yielded a number of architectural remains. Among the structures on the tell are paved streets, walls, houses, pillared buildings, a channel, and a water reservoir. A defensive system was built at Jalul consisting of well-built walls around the perimeter of the site. Tall Jalul's height provides an excellent vista of the surrounding plains in all directions; it even permits a view as far as Tall Hisban to the north. Beside the architectural remains, most of them showing the domestic occupation of the site since the acropolis is still unexcavated, a series of figurines indicative of perhaps domestic cultic activities have been found. These, in turn, point to a mixture of different religious influences that may have characterized the local religious practices of the inhabitants of Jalul.

Figurines of Jalul

Some of the several figurines found at Jalul seem to exhibit a mixture of local and Egyptian features or a local interpretation of Egyptian motifs. I have chosen some and divided them into female and male figurines, even though at least one of them seems to represent a primate instead of a human figure.

Female Figurines

While the female figurines may not represent direct Egyptian influences, they do share strong similarities with Egyptian features. In the 94 season in field A, which was classified as a burial place dated to the Late Iron II, a female figurine, J940053, shows several important features (Ray, Younker, Gregor, and Gane 2011: J0053). First, it presents a frontal view, almond-shaped eyes, and a headdress. The headdress seems to go behind the ears and extends to the upper part of the breast. At its extremes, it curves to the inside. While Hathor's headdress seems to curve to the outside, this style of curving the edges in a different direction also occurs in Egyptian art (Lange, and Max 1968:102). Another possible interpretation is that those are not curves but an adornment at the edges of the headdress. In the 2007 season in field D, a female figurine, J0532, almost identical, but better preserved than J940053, was found in a Late Iron II context. Indeed, the previous figurine must have come from the same mold as this one since the characteristics are identical. It has also almond-shaped eyes, frontal view, headdress curving at its ends, but this time, they seem to curve towards the outside (Ray, et al. 2011: J0532). Again, it is not identical to Hathor, but there is a similar artistic element.

Two figurines deserve special attention that were found during the 2009 season. J0730, found in field D during the removal of the North Balk, has unmistakably Egyptian features. The context dates to the Late Iron Age II/Persian period and the figurine has a frontal view, strong detailed emphasis on particular facial features, almond-shaped eyes, and hair going behind the ears and parted at the middle in the same way as figurines found in several Egyptian depictions (Ray et al. 2011: J0730). The lips seem to be wider than common Semite depictions and so does the nose, which more resembles Egyptian features. The contour of the face is well-delineated and the ears seem to be in frontal perspective. The second figurine, J0762, is more eroded, so its features are less distinctive than the previous one (Ray et al. 2011: J0762), yet, one can perceive a frontal view in the design and a headdress or hair that tends to curve in the same manner as the figurines described above.

These figurines show similarities with Egyptian artistic features, yet it would be difficult to assess whether there is direct influence. These similarities between the local portrayal of female features and Egyptian concepts tend to indicate syncretism between local and foreign style.

Male Figurines

The first group can be represented by figures J0455 and J0566 (Ray et al. 2011). Both figures wear a crown, which seems to resemble in form and detail the Tell Jawa male figure wearing a similar Atef crown representation (Daviau, and Paul 1994: 153–67). One major difference between the two figurines is the absence of ostrich feathers, perhaps broken off, in figure J0566. However, both crowns have the same conical form, also similar to the Tel Jawa's figurine, and have incised radiating lines from a central axis. Both figurines were made in a mold and have a frontal view. The facial features do not seem to resemble Egyptian influences except, perhaps, in the design of the lips and nose. These tend to have a more Egyptian aspect than local. The dating of both figures seems to be Late Iron II (Ray et al. 2011). These figures seem to have a modified version of Egyptian features and the incorporation of local artistic conventions.

The second type of figurine is represented by J0717 and J940036. While the dating of J0717 does not seem clear, it is most likely based upon the occupational faces of the site, an Iron Age dating. J940036 was found on top soil and the context suggested a LB/Iron II dating, a broad spectrum of time, but again, the figure most likely dates to somewhere in the Iron Age. Among the common characteristics are almond-shaped eyes with inlaid pupils. They were both also made in a mold and show a frontal view. However, the most distinctive feature, from an Egyptian perspective and from a common depiction, is the wearing of an Atef crown. In contrast with the previous type, they are more reminiscent of the Egyptian style and parallel the representation of the Atef crown found in the statue of the Amman Citadel (Bienkowski 1991: 41). The crown seems to be shorter than the typical Egyptian Atef crown. On the sides, the ostrich feathers are represented in both figurines. On the other hand, the emphasis in the eyebrows and an apparent depiction of a beard without a mustache seems to be more Semitic and definitely un-Egyptian.

The third type is represented only by one figurine uncovered during the 1996 season on field A and dated to the Iron II period, J0150. This figurine is unique because the Egyptian features represented in it are not common in Transjordan. The face has a frontal design. The eyes are almond-shaped with emphasis on the eyebrows with a "raised" type of carving. The borders of the mouth are much delineated and it seems to indicate some type of beard. The chin is over-emphasized with what seems to be a replica of a typical Egyptian beard at the chin, long and square at the bottom. The ears are in frontal view and are also disproportionately bigger in relation to other facial features. Based upon the right ear, three "rings" earrings seem to be depicted as attached to the ear. The left ear still seems to also have a similar depiction, although it is eroded and less certain. The figurine seems to have a crown or headdress. Such seems to be an attempt to depict a nemes headdress. At the top, a ribbon or lower border of the headdress is depicted in an Egyptian fashion (Lange, and Hirmer 1968: 47). It is also square and wide, which is also similar to Egyptian depictions (Lange, and Hirmer 1968: 16). At the top of the "crown," a depiction of what appears to be an

uraeus snake is shown (Wilkinson 1994: 109). A small red dot on the right side (perhaps representing an eye) and a small incision in the front (perhaps a nose) make it also seem a plausible interpretation. However, it is eroded and a precise identification is difficult. The chest is flat and small in proportion as compared to the arms and the shoulders. No trace of clothing remains. It seems as if the chest is portrayed bare. The nose is quite wide, which seems to resemble certain Egyptian conventions (Lange, and Hirmer 1968: 107).

Hardly any features of this figurine seem to be un-Egyptian. The headdress, the uraeus, the width of the shoulders, the bare chest, the facial features, the square long beard at the chin, and the frontal perspective are all Egyptian artistic depictions. Perhaps the only aspect in this figurine that could be considered un-Egyptian is the end of the headdress, which does not fall on the frontal part of the chest. Similarly, the three-earring depiction in the ears may be a local feature.

A final type is also represented by one figurine excavated during the 2011 season on Field G, Square 12. Even though it is, as I will argue, a zoomorphic depiction, it is still included in the male representations because all the possible associations indicate a male Egyptian depiction (Wilkinson, 1994: 73).

J11.0879 is a zoomorphic figurine depicting perhaps a primate or more specifically a baboon. Its length is 6 cm. The width at its neck is 3.3 cm and at its headdresses, 2 cm. It seems to have been made using a mold to be seen from a frontal perspective. Its mouth is completely eroded, but it is portrayed longer as a snout, seemingly imitating a primate. On the sides, strident marks resemble similar attempts to portray facial hair, particularly that of a baboon. Its eyes are almond-shaped with exaggerated eyebrows. The ears are eroded or perhaps broken off at the top. It is wearing a headdress with perpendicular lines and a flat top. The nostrils are wide and significantly larger than normal depictions of humans. The nose is also very wide, which seems to correlate more with a depiction of a primate's nose. From a side view, the area from the nostrils to the mouth is brought forward more than the rest of the face, again resembling a primate. A parallel figurine of a primate carrying a sheep is in the Amman citadel which also dates to the Iron Age (Bienkowski 1991, 38).

Primates are not part of the natural fauna of Jordan. Thus, the idea must have come from foreign concepts. Obviously, Egypt is the most logical option. However, we must be careful not to associate every primate representation as a depiction of Thoth (Robins 1997: 190). Although a representation of Thoth would be the most logical choice, since it is largely depicted in Egyptian iconography, other possibilities cannot be discarded easily (Wilkinson 1994: 73). Yet, regardless of which deity is being depicted, the motif is without any doubt Egyptian. Not only is it Egyptian, but also seems to lack any local features.

Khirbet Atarutz

Khirbet Atarutz, located 3 km east of the Herodian fort Machaerus and 10 km west from Khirbet Libb, has been excavated during the last 12 years under the direction of Chang-Ho Ji (Chang 2012: 203). The site has yielded several cultic

installations such as high places, temple installations, water cisterns, altars, and objects that speak of the cultic nature of the site. It continued to be occupied until the Islamic age, but its most prominent period was during the Iron Age II and the temple functioned until the Late Iron Age when it suffered a period of abandonment (Chang-Ho Ji 2012: 6-10). Later, the cultic role of the site was never to become as prominent. I have participated in the last two years of excavations, as well as in the study of the objects found in these cultic areas. It is important to mention that the site is not merely cultic and that several domestic areas remain unexcavated, some of which started to be uncovered during the last season. Naturally a series of cultic objects have been unearthed in Atarutz and these again reflect a combination of foreign and domestic religious/cultural influence during the Iron Age. For the purpose of our study, I am including those that precisely reflect the idea of religious syncretism and foreign influence.

Objects of Atarutz

Most of the cultic objects in this paper were uncovered during the 2001 season in Field A (Chang-Ho Ji defined the entire acropolis or cultic area as Field A). Field A constitutes the entire Acropolis of the Khirbet. A multi-chamber temple/sanctuary has been excavated in this field. Chang-Ho dated this structure to what he defined as the temple phase II to the early mid-ninth century B.C.E. or the early Iron Age II. The artifacts themselves suggest the cultic nature of the building and the building's structure also suggests the cultic use of the objects. It seems that each object reflects local and foreign cultic parallels suggesting Hittite, Philistine, Canaanite, and partial Egyptian influence in the religion of Atarutz.

Kernoi

Three different hollow-ring libation vessels commonly known as kernos have been discovered at Atarutz. One of them is horizontal, while the other two are vertical. The horizontal kernos was also found during the 2001 season in Square 5, Locus 7. The pottery was also dated by the excavation team between the early to mid-ninth century B.C.E., early Iron Age II. The kernos was found over the offering table in the main court of the multi-room temple complex scattered in pieces. It is a circular-shaped ring. The ring area is hollow to keep the liquid used in the libation or ritualistic function of the vessel inside. Because of its openness and its width, it seems as if the front spout serves as the place where the liquid would be poured in and the smaller or side spout would serve as the place from where the liquid would be poured out. The two vertical kernoi were also found also during the 2001 season in Field A, Square 5. The first one was the whole form and was in Locus 7, while the second one was half-broken and was located in Locus 6. They seem to have very similar physical characteristics. They are 18 cm wide and 21 cm long from the spout to the bottom. The spout's diameter is 4.5 cm. At the mouth of the spout, there is a 1 cm inclination to pour out the liquid. The half-broken kernos has a round spout.

The kernoï seem to be associated with foreign cultures (Mazar 1980: 111), particularly those originating around the Aegean (Dever 2001: 119) and the Mediterranean (Dothan 1958: 22) seas. Two main cultures seem to be associated with the use of kernoï, predating the Late Bronze and Iron Age. In Palestine, they seem to be associated with the Philistines. “Most of the kernoï found in Palestine come from three contexts in the Iron Age: (1) twelfth-eleventh centuries B.C. levels of Philistine sites along the coast, especially Tell Qasile; (2) from later ‘Neo-Philistine’ sites of the ninth-seventh centuries B.C., such as Ashdod; and now (3) from a few tenth-seventh centuries B.C. sites in Israel and Judah” (Dever 2001: 119). William Dever argued that the kernoï tradition was reintroduced in Canaan by the Sea People from Cyprus (Dever 2001: 125). Indeed, the horizontal kernoï seems to resemble the rim of the “Philistine krater bearing cups,” (Dever 2001: 248) namely, the kernoï as a hollow vessel. However, kernoï also bear local Canaanite features. In regards to a group of kernoï found at Tel Miqne-Ekron, it has been argued that these “zoomorphic libation vessels (and kernoï) which, on the basis of their shape and decoration, do not display Philistine characteristics, but rather relate to local Canaanite traditions” (Ben-Shlomo 2008: 34). Besides Philistine and Canaanite parallels sustaining the argument of foreign influence, kernoï can be traced to Hittite culture with what scholars define as ring vase vessels (Kulakoglu 1998: 199). At Kutelpe, three of these ring-shaped vessels were found in what has been classified as a private domestic complex. While most of these were vertical, their description does closely resemble the one found at the Atarutz cultic structure. “They have ring shaped bodies with squat necks, simple rims and round orifices. A single handle connects the rim to the neck. Buff colored clay is levigated and fired. Over the micaceous pinkish cream slip, the outer part of the pipe is decorated with reddish brown colored lines forming irregular cross hatches” (Kulakoglu 1998: 200). The munsell chart of both horizontal kernoï found at Atarutz and the kernoï of Kutelpe reads 7.5YR/3 or 4. While the Kutelpe ring vessels are vertical, in contrast to most of the Philistine and Canaanite kernoï which are horizontal just like the one at Atarutz, the hollow form, the ring shape, the use of two spouts, the ware, the ritualistic function, and the lack of zoomorphic depictions along with a more simplistic model do resemble the Kutelpe ring vessels, or kernoï as they are known in Palestine.

The ritualistic function of these vessels is not only attested to by the direct context where they were found, but also by the inadequacy of its form for daily use and its parallels with similar vessels at other sites. The vertical ring vessels show a closer similarity with the Hittite ring vase libation vessels. A helpful classification of these vessels based upon ware and decoration has been proposed as follows:

Type one: round spout, footless, and plain ware or undecorated.

Type two: round spout, footless, and painted or relief decoration.

Type three: round spout, high pedestal base, and plain surface.

Type four: beak spout, high pedestal base, and plain surface (Kulakoglu 1998: 202).

While some variation or combination of these features can also occur, as indeed does happen with one of the kernoï from Atarutz, the proposer of the

classification was able to identify vertical keroi in several important Hittite sites in Anatolia, as well as along the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean sea coast, in sites like Byblos, Ugarit, Cyprus, and others (Kulakoglu 1998: 202). Therefore, it seems as if the origin of this type of ring-shaped vessels named kernos in Cisjordan and Transjordan archaeology can be traced back to Anatolia, which gained preeminence during the Hittite domination of the land (Bryce 2005: 48) and always fulfilled a cultic function, containing perhaps wine as a libation offering—a practice well attested to in the Ancient Near East (Pardee, and Theodore 2002: 216).

Standing Statue

A standing human statue carved out of limestone was uncovered on Square 5, Locus 6, Field A in the main sanctuary area during the 2001 season. The statue is broken at the torso or knees, which is unclear because the garment is not apparent. It seems to be in a walking position since the left foot is further towards the front than the right foot. It stands on a square vase 13 by 12 cm and its width is 3.5 cm. It is 11 cm tall from the base to the knees (assuming that such are the knees in comparison with the rest of the missing body). The garment covers the figure down to the ankle at the front and down to the ground at the back. A staff or part of the garment is over the left foot covering two toes. Furthermore, all the toes, as well as the lower part of the garment are carved in great detail. A carved design seems to be on both sides of the statue's square base and it appears to resemble palm branches. This statue was found as support for the large vase which included the bull motif typical of Atarutz. As stated above, the spatial context suggests a ritualistic purpose for the statue. It is difficult to determine if it represents a priest or a worshiper because all of the upper part is broken.

What is significant for this study of this statue is how it reflects a typical Egyptian building technique employed to avoid breaking it. It could be defined as standing/advancing.

Statues were normally made of stone, wood or metal. Stone statues were worked from single rectangular blocks of material and retained the compactness of the original shape. The stone between the arms and the body, and between the legs in standing figures or the legs and the seat in seated ones, was not normally cut away. From a practical aspect this protected the figures against breakage, and psychologically gives the images a sense of strength and power, usually enhanced by a supporting back pillar (Gay 1997: 119).

These standing/advancing statues, whether of wood or stone, seem to have the arms straight down or one down and the other up in an attempt to depict motion. A similar technique seems to be used with several standing statues found in the Amman citadel in the design of the feet, the intent of depicting forward motion, and the length of the garment seems to suggest a strong parallel. This seems to indicate foreign influence, whether Ammonite or indirect Egyptian influence.

Bronze Belt

In the area of the main sanctuary, a “belt” (Chang 2012: 197) was found having undeniable Egyptian origin. Ji described it as a “bronze belt-like plate decorated with serpents” (Chang 2012: 197) No chemical analysis has been performed on it and the material could also be copper. It is a two-part metal belt (it may not be a belt; it could also be a standard or some other type of cultic ornament) with back and front matching perfectly with each other. Ten cobras are represented in this belt. They are distributed in pairs or as twins (Wilkinson 1994: 109). Six of them are depicted as a reared-up cobra without any extra symbol. The other four are depicted as also reared up, but with the solar disk over their heads. All the ones depicted with the solar disk over their heads are in an upward position. Cobras paired with the solar disk are depicted in various Egyptian monuments and even in Egyptian crowns (Lange, and Hirmer 1968: pl. 51). Indeed, in some royal adornments such as pectorals, both depictions, with and without the solar disk, appear together (Lange, and Hirmer 1968: pl. 43). The artifact seems to be a direct import from Egypt since apparently no local features are present. If it is an import, then it demonstrates direct contact through trading with Egypt and the importance locals placed on Egyptian cultic material (Wilkinson 1994: 109).

Religious Syncretism

As seen in the description and analysis of the objects in these two sites, a series of local and foreign influences played a significant role in their fabrication and use. While the figurines at Jalul show a mixture of local and Egyptian features, there may be influence from other sources since the objects from Atarutz show Hittite, Egyptian, Canaanite, and even Philistine influence. More important, even though the influence of areas such as Mesopotamia is to be expected because of the political/historical context during the Iron Age, Egyptian or even Hittite influence is not expected. Most likely, such comes by the venues of trade or by older adopted traditions that remained in spite of the changes in the political climate of the time. In any case, the religious practices in these sites may have followed a similar path reflected in these objects, which included a mixture of local traditions, foreign influence, and local interpretation of older or recent foreign tradition through the eyes of local expressions.

References

- Ben-Shlomo, David.
2008 “Zoomorphic Vessels from Tel Miqne-Ekron and the Different Styles of Philistine Pottery.” *Israel Exploration Journal* 58, no. 1: 24–47.
- Bryce, Trevor.
2005 *The Kingdom of the Hittites*. New ed. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bienkowski, Piotr.
1991 *Treasures from an Ancient Land : The Art of Jordan*. Stroud: Alan Sutton.
- Daviau, P. M. Michèle, and Paul-Eugène Dion.
2002 *Excavations at Tall Jawa, Jordan*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Culture and History of the Ancient near East. Leiden: Brill.
- Daviau, P. M. Michèle, and Paul-Eugène Dion.
2002 *Excavations at Tall Jawa, Jordan*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Culture and History of the Ancient near East. Leiden: Brill.
- Daviau, P. M. Michele, and Paul E. Dion.
1994 “El. The God of the Ammonites? The Atef-Crowned Head from *Tell Jawa*, Jordan.” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 110, no. 2: 158–167.
- Dever, William G.
2001 “Iron Age Kerno and the Israelite Cult.” In *Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and Neighboring Lands in Memory of Douglas L. Esse*, edited by Douglas L. Esse and Samuel Richard Wolff, 119–133. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Dothan, Trude.
1958 “Philistine Civilization in Light of Archaeological Finds in Palestine and Egypt.” *Eretz Israel* 5.
- Ji, Chang-Ho.
2012 “The Early Iron II Temple at Hirbet Atarutz and Its Architecture and Selected Cultic Objects.” *Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina - Vereins* 41: 203–222.
- Ji, Chang-Ho.
2012 “Khirbat ‘Ataruz: An Interim Overview of the 10 Years of Archaeological Architectural Findings.” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*.

Kulakoglu, F. K. R.

1998 "Ring-Shaped Vases Discovered at Kultepe." *Essays on Ancient Anatolia in the Second Millennium BC* 10: 199.

Lange, Kurt, and Max Hirmer.

1968 *Egypt: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting in Three Thousand Years*. 4th revised and enlarged; ed. London, New York: Phaidon.

Mazar, Amihay.

1980 *Excavations at Tell Qasile : Part I. The Philistine Sanctuary: Architecture and Cult Objects* Qedem; 12. Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

2002 Pardee, Dennis and Theodore J. Lewis.

Ritual and Cult at Ugarit. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Yunker, Randall, Paul Ray, Paul Gregor, Connie Gane, and others.

2011 "Madaba Plains Project-Jalul." Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press.

Robins, Gay.

1997 *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Wilkinson, Richard H.

1994 *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*. Thames & Hudson.