

Sha'ar Hagolan 3: Symbolic Dimensions of the Yarmukian Culture; Canonization in Neolithic Art

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This book summarizes more than 20 years of research on the Neolithic art assemblage of Sha'ar Hagolan, dated ca. 6400-6000 BCE. The work started in 1989 as part of a PhD thesis by Y. Garfinkel, in which all known artifacts were documented by technical drawings and photographs. Since then, during 11 excavation seasons in the years 1989-90 and 1996-2004, hundreds of additional objects have been uncovered, including complete figurines and previously unknown types. Sha'ar Hagolan presents the largest known assemblage of prehistoric art in Israel and one of the largest in the Near East. The quantity and quality of the items allow a detailed understanding of the art assemblage of the site, the Yarmukian culture to which it belongs, and the Neolithic period in general.

Beyond its enormous contribution to better understanding of the art and cult of the Neolithic period, the Sha'ar Hagolan art assemblage includes the earliest representation of a standardized surrealistic human figure. This personage was shaped in accordance with clear conventions that dictated a specific final product. A single type of anthropomorphic figurine dominates the assemblage. This is an unparalleled phenomenon in early village communities, but is characteristic of subsequent urban societies in the Near East and beyond. Canonization occurs here for the first time in the history of art. This reflects a transition from personal imagination to social imagination, and indicates the existence of a formalized establishment that creates and controls religious beliefs. The Sha'ar Hagolan figurines are the first clear evidence for the creation of gods in the ancient Near East. In addition to the physical characteristics of urban concepts such as size, density, streets and courtyard structures, which were discussed in the second volume of the Sha'ar Hagolan publications, we see that art and cult also underwent changes that characterized the much later urban societies of the Near East.

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