

female deity plaques,³¹ female deity appliqués from shrine models and cult stands, and Phoenician and Israelite pillar-based figurines, their function appears to have been influenced by “magico-medical, apotropaic, and exorcistic figurine rituals” to which Judahites were exposed by their Assyrian vassalage (Darby 2014, 393).³²

Darby's analysis includes some intriguing overlap with the discussion so far of communicable agency. She argues that clay seems to have been perceived as an effective conduit for purity/holiness as well as impurity.³³ For example, rituals in Lev 14 and Num 5 prescribe the use of earthen vessels to facilitate the transmission of impurities to/away from individuals in need of cursing/healing. Prescriptions from Lev 11 show that an earthen vessel coming in contact with unclean animals renders unclean any food or water it touches, and therefore must be shattered. The idea here seems to be that the clay vessel was charged with or stored impurity which could only be dispelled through the shattering of the vessel.³⁴ This could easily extend to removing other contaminants thought to operate on the level of communicable agency. As with stone, fired clay did not naturally deteriorate, and that permanence may have subtly influenced its suitability as a host for divine agency. Its fragility, however, allowed for the deliberate breaking of clay objects to take on significance of its own. Not only could it dispel impurity, but execration rituals meant to curse a specific target could involve the deliberate breaking of clay. The ability to conduct/transmit purity and impurity could have served a wide array of domestic functions related to exorcism, apotropaism, as well as execration, which would account for their presence in domestic contexts.³⁵ Whatever the precise nature of the agency they

³¹ Two figurines discovered at Tel Rehov may represent a transitional phase between the plaques and the JPFs. According to Amihai Mazar (2015, 39), they “comprise a strange combination of a mold-made plaque figurine and a standing ‘pillar figuring;’ each has a broad base, enabling it to stand on its own.”

³² Darby goes on to discuss the possible role of the figurines in developing national identity or resisting Assyrian hegemony.

³³ Another way of understanding the function of fired clay was that whatever quality it had absorbed could be transmitted, but could not be removed. Thus, pottery that becomes impure must be destroyed, as it could never be purified (Faust 2019, 186–90). Faust notes that many Iron Age four-room homes that have been excavated contained rooms devoid of pottery, which he interprets as an indication people needed a location free from pottery for the process of purification. (His paper argues for a preexilic context for the composition of the majority of P.)

³⁴ Darby 2014, 277–83. Ritual and contamination have been important frameworks within the cognitive science of religion. See, for instance, McCauley 2011, 177–82.

³⁵ Darby (2014, 394) concludes, “it is tantalizing to hypothesize that the preference for pillar figurines might relate to their ability to stand guard unaided in open and liminal areas, such as windows and doorway, much as pillar-based females do on the Yavneh fenestrated stands. Additionally, free-standing figurines could be configured in any number of ways,