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A LEAD AMULET OF NEFERTEM FOUND AT TEL MICHAL ON THE COASTAL PLAIN OF ISRAEL

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Abstract: A lead amulet of Nefertem belonging to the Persian Period was found at Tel Michal on the central coastal plain of Israel. The figure is wearing a lotus flower crown, the most typical attribute of this Egyptian deity of fertility and rebirth. It adds to the twelve previously discovered Nefertem amulets in Israel and is further proof of the activity of foreign merchants who used the mooring facilities at Tel Michal.

Keywords: Nefertem-Egypt-Tel Michal-trade

Palabras clave: Nefertem-Egipto-Tel Michal-comercio

A lead amulet representing the Egyptian god Nefertem was found at Tel Michal, on the central coastal plain of Israel, in area C, locus 709, very close to the edge of the northern Hill during the Israel Antiquities Authority 1996 excavation season¹. The locus consisted of a fill over what seems to be a small circular Persian Period shrine. The figurine (Reg. N° B7029), cast in poor quality lead, measures 4.5 cm high, and weighs 12.8 gr. This figurine

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depicts the god in his most typical human form with the divine braided beard, commonly found as a votive statuette. He stands with his left leg forward, but the right leg is broken off at the thigh. He wears a long kilt, and has a lotus flower as a crown with an uraeus. This figurine has a loop at the back, which indicates that it was worn as an amulet.

Nefertem is an ancient divinity of creation, fertility and rebirth in Lower Egypt, who is represented by a blue lotus (*Nymphaea Caerulea*), which was particularly fragrant. Nefertem is well-attested in the Pyramid Texts, the royal funerary texts of the Old Kingdom². There he is depicted as the God of the Primeval Lotus and is called «*The lotus blossom which is at the nose of Ra*», probably an allusion to the display of this scented flower by banquet guests. Another epithet, also associated with the lotus, is «*Lord of the Perfumes*»; since the lotus was the symbol of rebirth³. The epithet «*Unique*» is attested as an independent appellation of a god in the Early Dynastic Period, and in the Pyramid Texts the god Nefertem is «*Without equal*»⁴, like the goddesses Maat, Sekhmet, and Mut⁵.

According to Egyptian mythology, Nefertem was born from the lotus flower on an island raised from the primeval sea, Nun. Thus, his main attribute was the lotus flower, which links him to perfumes, pleasant fragrances, precious unguents and rebirth. Ra too was often depicted holding a lotus flower to his nose, since both Ra and Nefertem sprang from the sacred lotus floating upon the waters of Nun⁶. He was called «*Perfect in beauty*», «*Good is Atum*», «*Watcher at the nostrils of Ra*», and «*The one who is perfect in being or not being*»⁷. In the Memphite Triad, Nefertem was regarded as the son of Ptah and his consort, the lioness-goddess Sekhmet, and is called «*Atum*» or «*Ra, the younger*»⁸.

Iconographically, Nefertem appears in several ways: as a human standing alone; standing on a lion (in a XXVI Dynasty Saite context)⁹; as a human holding a lotus flower¹⁰, and as a human wearing a lotus flower as a crown

² Sethe 1908: §266.

³ Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 199.

⁴ Sethe 1908: § 483 b-c.

⁵ Hornung 1971: 185, 280–282.

⁶ Ions 1982: 102 ff.

⁷ Schlögl 1982: 378–380.

⁸ Shabaka Stone, in Lichtheim 1973: 54.

⁹ Setton-Williams 1965: 14.

¹⁰ Petrie 1914: 38, Pl. XXX: 175 a–f.

with two plumes and two necklaces counterpoises (symbols of fertility). Another, less common version (not found in amulet form), depicts him as a lion-headed human wearing a headdress composed of a lotus flower, two plumes and two menats (virility symbols).

In Israel, twelve Nefertem amulets have been found. The earliest three date to Iron Age IIA, and come from Tel Fara South¹¹, Beit Shean¹², and Lachish¹³. Six from Iron Age II B contexts were found at Lachish¹⁴, Achziv¹⁵, Beit Shemesh¹⁶, Gezer¹⁷ and two at Megiddo¹⁸. Merely two were found in the Persian Period strata at Ashkelon and Tel Gemme¹⁹. These were carved in several sorts of glazed material. Nefertem amulets now in the Turin, Cairo and St. Petersburg collections are made of gold, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli, as well as violet, blue, green and yellow faience²⁰.

The presence of a figurine representing an Egyptian divinity dating to the Persian period could be further evidence that foreign merchants were active at Tel Michal. Trade relations with Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Persia are well documented in previous excavations²¹. These merchants presumably used anchorage facilities available at Tel Michal or its surroundings²². Since no seaport has been discovered at the site, it is quite possible that during the Persian period some kind of coastal transport system (vessel to shore, probably using rowboats) existed at Tel Michal, or nearby in the estuary of the Gelilot River²³.

¹¹ Petrie 1930: Pl. XLIII: 505.

¹² Herrmann 1994: 241.

¹³ Tufnell 1953: Pl. 35: 38.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, Pl. 35: 39.

¹⁵ Herrmann 1994: 245.

¹⁶ Mackenzie 1912–13: Pl. XXVIII: 3; Herrmann 1994: 242.

¹⁷ Macallister 1912: 332; Pl. CCX: 79.

¹⁸ Lamon and Shipton 1939: 120, Pl. 76: 3; Herrmann 1994: 244–245.

¹⁹ Herrmann 1994: 245–246. The amulet from Tel Fara South, was found in a XXII Dynasty context (Petrie 1930: Pl. XLIII: 505). The one at Beit Shemesh (Mackenzie 1912–13: Pl. XXVIII: 3), at Gezer (Macallister 1912: 332, Pl. CCX: 79), and two at Lachish (Tufnell 1953: Pl. 35, 38, 39) have good parallels to others found in Italy (Hölbl 1986: Taf. 8: 1a–5b, 9: 1a–b). One more broken amulet identified as Nefertem was retrieved at Beer Sheva, in a late Iron Age - Persian Period context (Singer-Avitz 1999: Fig. 13:8).

²⁰ Herrmann 1994: 243–246.

²¹ Herzog 1989:113.

²² Grossman 1990: 46.

²³ For a survey on seamanship and port installations along the coastline of Israel during the different historical periods see: Galili and Sharvit 1994; Galili, Dahari and Sharvit 1993.

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