There is a general consensus today that the earliest traces of Israelite society appear in the transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Ages,\(^1\) and it was only then, in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, that a recognizable entity in the highlands (the Galilean, Samarian, and Judean hills) emerged and eventually evolved into the Israelite people (Halpern 1983; Coogan 1987a; Finkelstein 1988; Callaway 1999; Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999; Bloch-Smith 2003; Killebrew 2005, 21–49).

Israelite society was at first characterized by a loose, at times confederated, tribal system that was absorbing other groups moving into the highlands (Halpern 1983, 187–237; van der Toorn 1996, 183–265). As a result, regional and local alliances such as those clearly attested in the book of Judges were very much in evidence. Several centuries later a monarchy emerged, at first a united one (for most of the tenth century),\(^2\) then one divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (ca. 930–722 BCE), and finally the survival of Judah alone, with its capital in Jerusalem (722–586 BCE).

Our discussion of Israelite artistic remains will be followed by a brief review of the related biblical data and, finally, by a discussion of the historical implications of this evidence.

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\(^1\) An especially enigmatic piece of evidence for this early period is the famous Merneptah inscription from ca. 1208 BCE, in which the Egyptian king reports on having destroyed Israel: “Israel is laid waste and his seed is not.” Since this event would have taken place about the time when the settlement in the highlands was just beginning to coalesce, it remains questionable as to what the entity called Israel refers and what was meant by it being entirely wiped out (Stager 1985; Hayes and Miller 1977, 245–62; Miller and Hayes 2006, 39–42; M.S. Smith 2002, 25–27; Callaway 1999, 77–80).

Archaeological Evidence of Israelite Art

The archaeological remains span the entire 800-year period under examination (thirteenth–sixth centuries BCE) and come from urban and rural Israelite settlements in both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The artistic remains for the pre-monarchic era are extremely sparse. In the course of this period, the amount of artistic material, along with the literary data, increase steadily, and toward the end, even dramatically. By the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, both Israel and Judah exhibited diverse religious beliefs and cultural practices.

Statuette of a Bull

A bronze statuette of a bull was found in a twelfth-century BCE context at a hitherto unknown cultic site in northern Samaria (Fig. 13.1). Measuring 17.5 cm long and up to 12.4 cm high, it is one of the largest of such figurines yet found in ancient Israel (A. Mazar 1982; Ahlström 1990; Zevit 2001, 176–80). The discovery of a bronze bull figurine is unusual in the Levant generally and in Canaan in particular; it is known at four other early sites—Arad (Iron Age I), Hazor and Ashkelon (both from the Middle and Late Bronze Age; A. Mazar 1982), and Ḥorvat Qitmit of the seventh century (Beit-Arieh 1993).

The pottery unearthed at this twelfth-century BCE cultic site points to a settlement with a single occupation. While Amihai Mazar has suggested that the statuette was either a local product made under Canaanite influence or acquired through trade with the local Canaanite population (1982, 32), others have proposed that it may have been manufactured elsewhere and brought to the site by peoples who moved into the region—suggestions regarding the latter alternative range from the Galilee to Syria (Ahlström 1990, 80–81).

Some scholars regard the statuette as a cultic object and not merely a votive offering. A. Mazar and others suggest that it did not represent a symbol of the god, but formed a sort of pedestal or throne for the deity (1982, 32; Mettinger 1995, 137; Hendel 1997, 218). Gösta Ahlström, positing that the statuette was imported from the north by new settlers, concludes that the god was in all likelihood El (1990). Robert Wenning and Erich Zenger suggest that the figure was Baal, while Michael Coogan leaves its identification open, as Baal, El, or Yahweh (Wenning and Zenger 1986, 81–86; Coogan 1987b, 1–2). Finally, Rainer Albertz distinguishes between the original intent and its later popular

4 For a ninth-century ivory statuette found at Tel Reḥov that may depict an enthroned king, presumably the product of a local workshop in the northern kingdom, see A. Mazar 2007.