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Slab-lined Feline Representations: New Finding at ʻAwja 1, a Late Neolithic Open-air Sanctuary in Southernmost Jordan

Our recent excavations at ʻAwja 1, a small-scale open-air sanctuary in southernmost Jordan, revealed several slab-lined features representing feline animals. Similar representations are known in the Negev and Sinai, suggesting close cultural contact between the two areas. This paper discusses their date, function, and archaeological implications in a broader context.

1. Introduction

The site of ʻAwja 1 is located near the Jordan/Saudi border, in the middle of a sandstone desert that extends from the escarpment fringing at the southern edge of the Transjordanian Plateau toward the at-Tubayq Highlands in the northwestern part of Saudi Arabia (**fig. 1**). It is among five archaeological sites (i.e. ʻAwja 1–5) that we have investigated in the area. The excavations, which have taken place in 2011 and 2012, revealed that the site contained an elongated open sanctuary probably dated to the Late Neolithic, and that the sanctuary was associated with several slab-lined features representing feline animals (Fujii/Adachi et al. n. d.; Fujii/Yamafuji et al. n. d.). As mentioned below, similar combinations are known in the contemporary Negev Highlands and Sinai Peninsula, suggesting that there was close cultural contact between the two areas under the initial process of pastoral nomadization. This paper briefly reviews the investigation results at the desert site and discusses the date, function, and archaeological implications of the unique features.

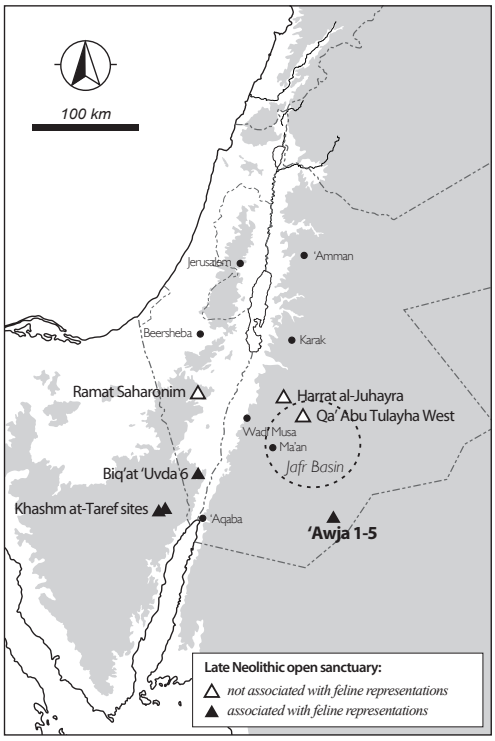

Fig. 1. Late Neolithic open sanctuaries in the southern Levant.

2. The Site

'Awja 1 is situated in a flat fluvial plain *c*. 5 km northeast of Tell 'Awja, a landmark of the area. The annual average rainfall in this area is less than 50 mm, and no perennial natural water source is available around the site. Understandably, no settlements exist; even pastoral nomads are rarely encountered. Being located in such a harsh natural environment, the site is both small in scale (*c*. 0.1–0.2 ha) and thin in artificial deposit (less than a few cm). Thus it is defined as a typical desert site.

Aside from several small stone concentrations dotted in its northern half, the site consists of the following two structural entities: Complex I in the northeast and Complex II in the southwest. The construction method of the two complexes is very simple. Elongated sandstone slabs *c*. 10–30 cm long are merely put down on the then ground surface in an upright position with their longer sides facing up and down. The walls are two-rows or *c*. 15–20 cm wide and a single course or *c*. 5–10 cm high. Thus it follows that the complexes consist only of the foundation course. No clear evidence for clay mortar or foundation banks is recognized, although it is possible that it weathered away over a long period of time. Alluvial and/

Fig. 2. ‘Awja 1: general view of Complex I (looking N).

or aeolian sandy deposits of Layer 3 are used as a natural floor without any special treatment. This unique construction method (i.e. the two-rowed upright slab wall technique) is ubiquitous in the Neolithic Badia, and many examples have been found in the Negev and Sinai (e.g. Bar-Yosef 1982: 11) as well as southern Jordan (e.g. Fujii 2013: figs. 17, 19, 20). Of interest is the existence of corner stones, which marked the four corners (and, in some cases, the middle point of two long sides) of a rectangular unit constituting the complexes. This fact demonstrates that the complexes were constructed under a systematic architectural design.

Complex I, our main concern, contains a total of four rectangular units *c*. 4–4.5 m wide and *c*. 2–2.5 m deep, which are divided into the following two parts (**figs. 2–3**). One is a laterally connected body of the northerly three units (i.e. Units A–C). This continuum stretches in the NEN-SWS direction, measuring *c.* 13 m in total length. The other is the freestanding Unit D, which is *c*. 1 m separated from the neighboring Unit C and, at the same time, slightly differs in general orientation from the continuum. This minor structural discontinuity possibly indicates a small temporal gap between the two. Every unit is rectangular in general plan and equally incorporates several rectangular or round features into its left sidewall. In addition, a round feature *c*. 1 m in diameter is added to the frontal space of every unit. It appears that both components were paired to form a composite unit or a *pseudo-house burial cairn*

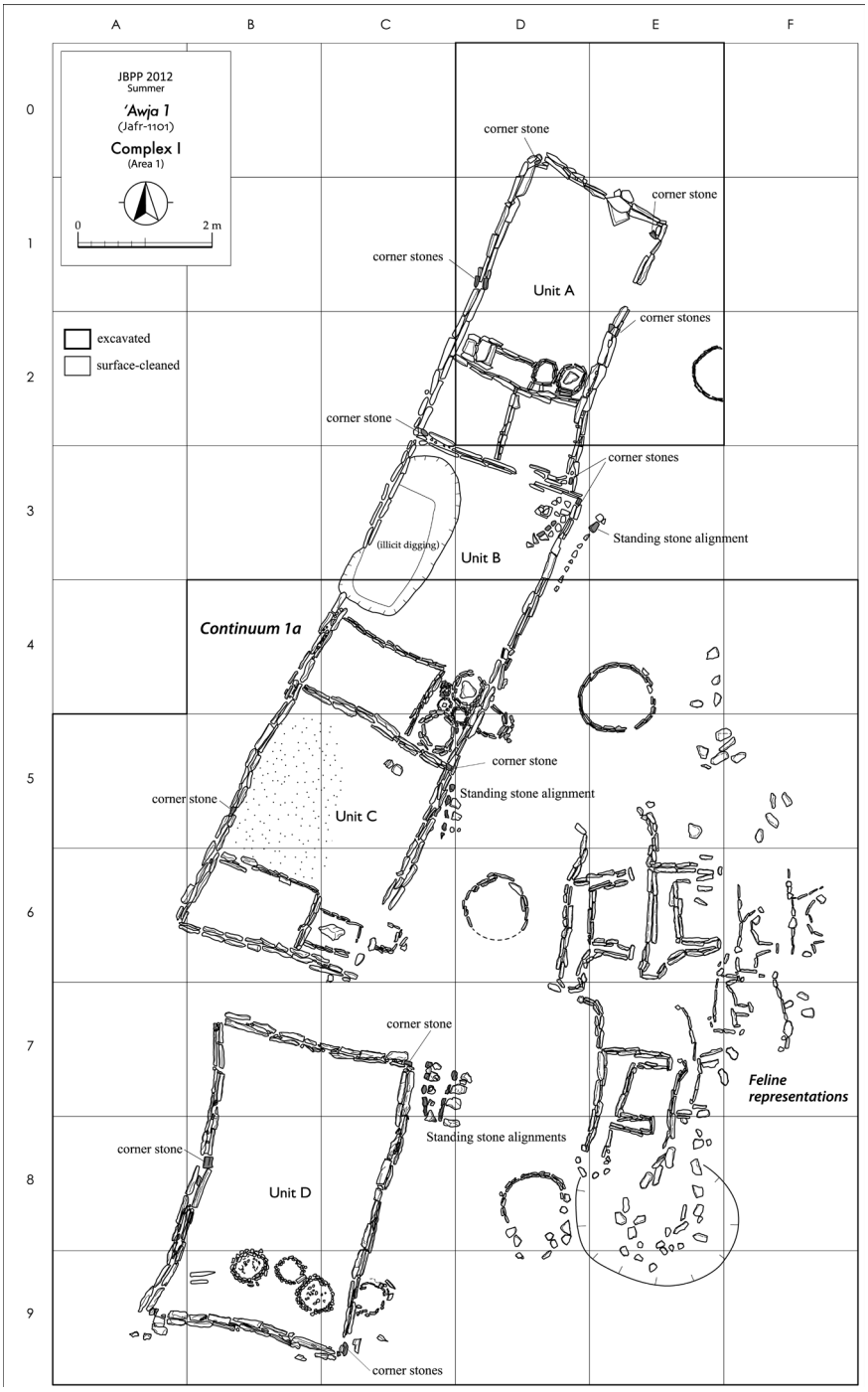

Fig. 3. 'Awja 1: Plan of Complex I.

Fig. 4. ‘Awja 1: close-up view of feline representations (looking W).

characteristic of the Late Neolithic open sanctuaries in the neighboring Jafr Basin (Fujii 2002; 2013: 70–78, 96–98). The wall-sharing relationship between any two adjacent units suggests that the elongated complex gradually developed southwestward, namely, from Unit A toward Unit D. Given this, it would follow that the indoor layout of each unit was gradually simplified in the course of the lateral development. As mentioned below, this perspective provides a key to approaching the chronological seriation of the five ‘Awja sites.

Neither human skeletal remains nor faunal/floral remains, to say nothing of artifacts, were found at the complex. Even hearths and ashy deposits were not confirmed. The series of unique traits – the location in the middle of the hyper-arid land, the adoption of the two-rowed upright slab wall technique, the combination of an empty rectangular unit and an again empty circle, the lateral development of such homogeneous components and consequent formation of a continuum facing southwest, and the absence of traces of real life – are common to Late Neolithic open sanctuaries in the neighboring Jafr Basin (Fujii 2014b: 107–114), suggesting that Complex I shares a similar character and date to them.

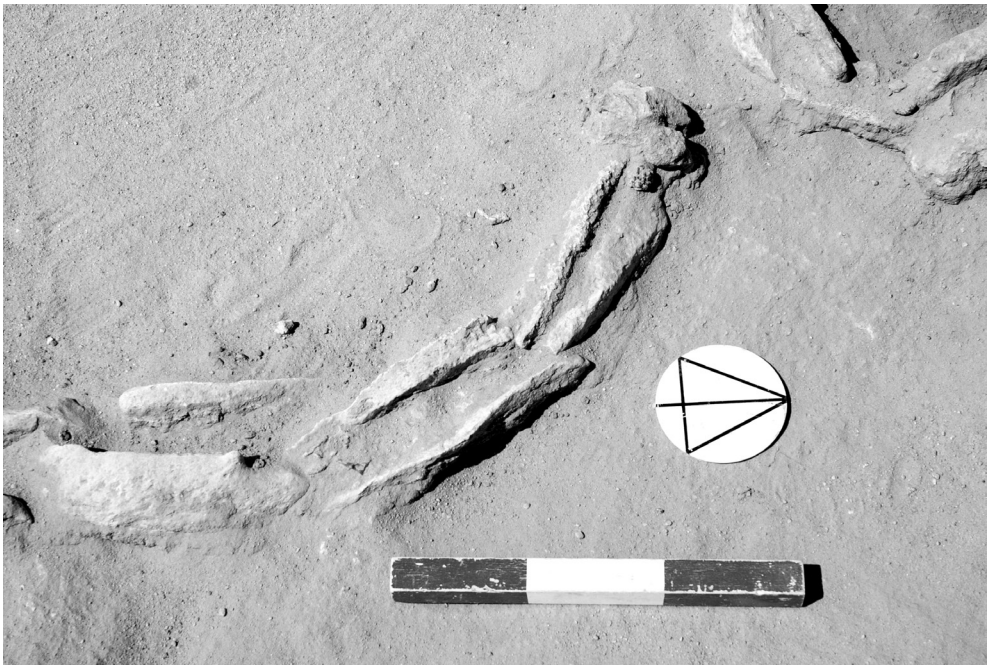

Fig. 5. ‘Awja 1: close-up view of the tail tip of a feline representation (looking W).

3. Slab-lined Feline Representations

Complex I was associated with a total of eight slab-lined features representing quadrupeds **(fig. 4)**. They were produced using the same building material and technique as the adjacent four rectangular units. Every feature was filled with sandy soil including abraded flint pebbles *c.* 5–10 cm long, which might possibly represent black spots on the body surface of the quadrupeds. A similar representation is known in the Negev Highlands (e.g. Avner 2002: 114, figs. 5.153, 5.155).

The eight features occupied the frontal space of Units C and D, being laid out in two rows and four tiers. The upper (i.e. westerly) two tiers comprised four large quadrupeds, which measured *c.* 1.5–2 m in trunk length, *c.* 1 m in trunk height, and *c.* 1 m in tail length, respectively. They probably represent adult individuals. The lower two tiers, on the other hand, contained four smaller quadrupeds measuring *c.* 1 m in trunk length, *c.* 0.5–0.6 m in trunk height, and *c.* 0.5 m in tail length. Unlike the upper four features, they used the single-row upright slab wall technique, which is probably attributable to their small size. It appears that they represent cubs of the adults arranged in the upper two tiers. (Such a regular layout differentiates ‘Awja 1 from the Negev and Sinai sites referred to below.) In terms of

iconography, all of the eight quadrupeds were represented in a side view with their small head being equally oriented southward and their long tail stretching northward. A few of them curled their tail tip upward, suggesting that they belong to feline animals. Furthermore, one of them took the trouble to use small pebbles to depict a rounded tail tip, another remarkable trait of the feline (**fig. 5**).

It is evident that the unique features were combined with the adjacent units to form a unified complex, because both of them share the same site stratigraphy, construction material, and construction method. The question is which of the four units the features belonged to. The nearest two units, Units C and D, would be likely candidates, but further narrowing-down is difficult. A hint, if any, would be that extremely elongated sandstone slabs over 60 cm long are shared between one of the features and Unit D only. This fact seems to suggest that the features were attached to the final component of Complex I. As discussed below, this perspective becomes important in dating the features.

4. Discussion

The following discussion deals with, first, the family identification of the quadrupeds and, then, their date, function, and archaeological implications in a broader context. The first issue requires no further argument. The series of remarkable traits – the slender trunk, relatively small and rounded head without horns, and the long tail curling only its rounded tip upward – allows us to regard them as representations of feline animals (i.e. *Felidae*). Especially important is the last item, which clearly distinguishes feline animals from the other quadrupeds. Although subfamily- or genus-level identification is not easy, cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus*) or leopards (*Panthera pardus*) seem likely in view of the slender trunk, long tail, and probable representation of black spots.

The second issue (i.e. the date of the features) is difficult to approach due to the absence of direct evidence such as C-14 data and diagnostic artifacts. However, the following two clues are available. One is the local chronologies of open sanctuaries in the neighboring areas, which would provide a general framework for seriating the five ʻAwja sites including ʻAwja 1. The other is the typological sequence of the ʻAwja open sanctuaries themselves (Fujii et al. op. cit.). It is our present perspective that the ʻAwja open sanctuary started with the freestanding unit at ʻAwja 2, developed to its connected body at ʻAwja 5 and, through the typological simplification at ʻAwja 1, ended with bipartite complexes at ʻAwja 4 (**fig. 6**). (According to the typological sequence in the Jafr Basin, the unique complex at ʻAwja 3 is thought to have followed the series of rectangular units.) Both clues enable us to tentatively date the feline representations to the Late Neolithic, especially its latter half.

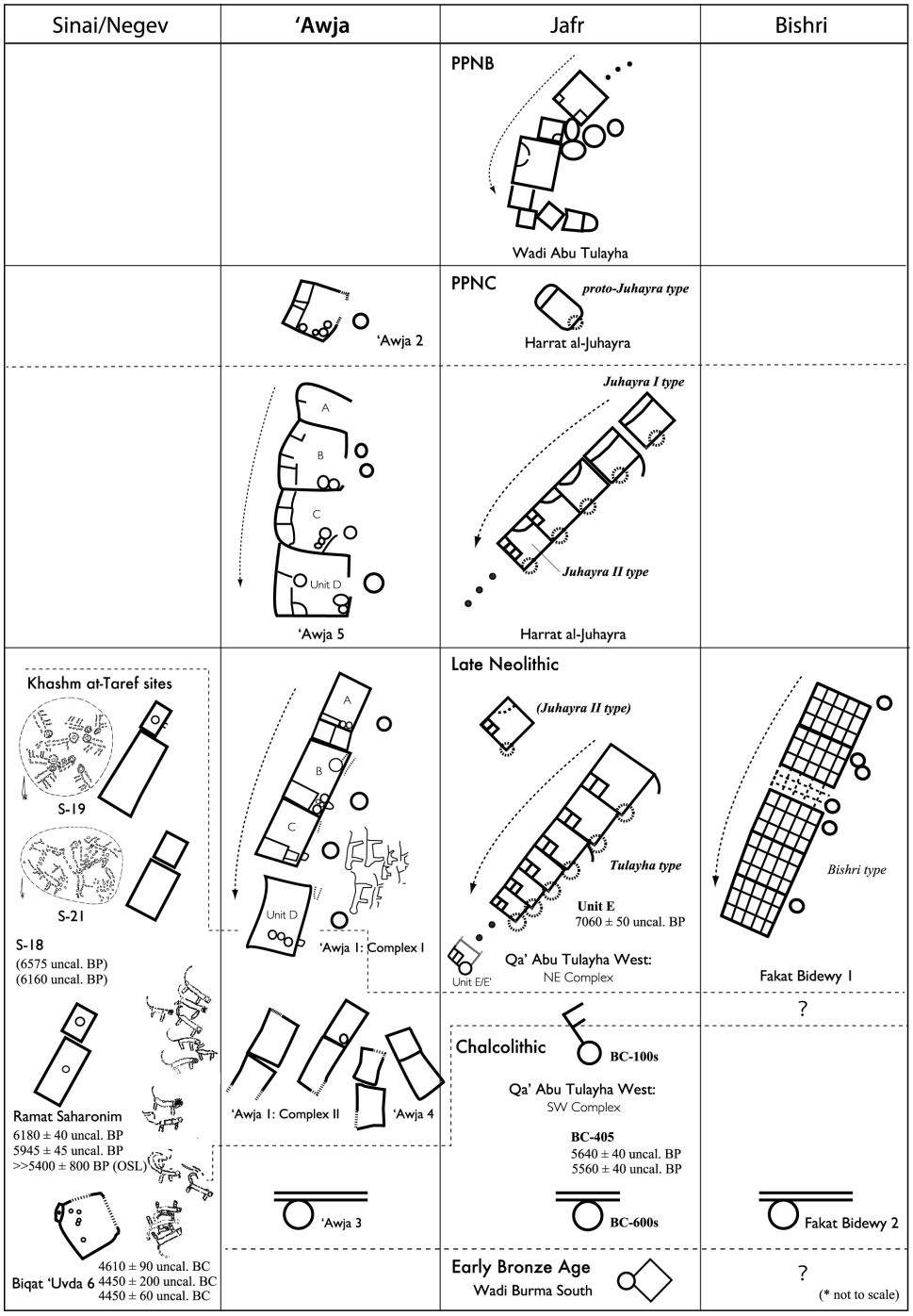

Fig. 6. Tentative chronology of open sanctuaries in the Levantine arid peripheries.

What is important here is that all of the major open sanctuary sites associated with feline representations – ‘Awja 1 in southernmost Jordan, the Khashm at-Taref sites in the northeastern corner of the Sinai Peninsula (Avner op. cit.: 113-115, figs. 5.134–5.141; Eddy/Wendorf 1999: 72–73, 74–75, figs. 3-37, 3-44, 3-45), and Biqat Uvda 6 in the southeastern Negev (Avner 1984; 2002: 105–106, 114, figs. 5.149–5.155; Goring-Morris 1993: 82–83, fig. 12; Yogev 1983: 121) – not only concentrate on a relatively limited range on both sides of the Lower Jordan Valley, but they also consist equally of simple complexes without any substantial indoor space division. (A small circle often incorporated into the center of a rectangular unit might possibly be understood as an indoor version of an outdoor circle recognized at earlier open sanctuaries.) It would follow that the feline representation was a cultural component proper to the southern edge of the Levantine Badia in the latter half of the Late Neolithic. Available evidence seems to suggest that it originated in the context of open sanctuaries in southern Jordan and, then, spread westward together with the bipartite complex. However, the final conclusion must await further investigation.

What, then, were the unique features or Complex I associated with them used for? As for the complex, it is most unlikely that it represents a settlement, workshop, storehouse, or any other structure for practical use. The absence of traces of real life speaks for itself. Thus, it is more reasonable to assume that the complex was used as an open sanctuary of initial pastoral nomads who migrated in the arid peripheries of the southern Levant. The function of the feline representations can also be understood in this context, but their specific use is still obscure. We should note, however, that they are represented in a small group, and that they include cubs in the group. Both traits are shared among most of the sites referred to above, suggesting that the unique features were related to some fertility/prosperity rite (Avner 2002: 114–115). Avner (ibid.) identifies them as leopards and, on this base, claims that they actually represent deities of fertility, a likely interpretation in view of the series of collateral evidence he listed. However, his identification as leopards is still debatable, because the possibility that they represent cheetahs or hunting-cheetahs (i.e. tamed cheetahs for hunting) cannot be ruled out (Fujii 2008, 2010). In this case, the argument might be forced to make a significant turn. Anyhow, further scrutiny is needed to develop the details of the issue.

The new finding at ‘Awja 1 has a twofold archaeological implication. To begin with, it has provided a glimpse at the ideological aspect of initial pastoral nomads already scarce in information. Although its iconographical interpretation is not yet fully determined, it has the potential to enrich our understanding of the LN culture. Second, it has enlarged the distribution range of the unique features eastward to a large extent and, by doing so, bridged a spatial gap between the Late Neolithic Negev/Sinai and the contemporary southern Jordan. As a result, it has enabled us to trace the process of pastoral nomadization in the two adjacent areas within a unified chronological framework. Though not associated with feline representations, a similar open sanctuary is recognized at the northern edge of the Baidat

ash-Sham as well (Fujii et al. 2013; Fujii 2014a: 72–75). This means that the unique open sanctuary culture holds a key to approaching the issue of pastoral nomadization in the whole range of the Levantine arid peripheries. The feline representations must also be understood as an aspect of this far-reaching post-PPNB socio-cultural reorganization.

5. Concluding Remarks

The new discovery at ʻAwja 1 has proved that the slab-lined feline representation is not a local phenomenon in the Negev and Sinai but can be understood as a common cultural index in the arid margins of the Late Neolithic southern Levant. In this sense, it provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of the areas under the initial process of pastoral nomadization. However, much still remains obscure including its ritual meaning. Further investigation is required for a better understanding of the unique features.

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