

ASOR 2020

Panel: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Collapse, Resilience, and Resistance in the Ancient Near East

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Title: Between the Cosmopolitan and the Vernacular: Private Literature in the Post-Iron Age Southeastern Mediterranean

Abstract:

Despite losing political control at the end of the Iron Age, the Southeastern Mediterranean saw a blossoming of indigenous literature during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods, notable since the old institutional and ideological underpinnings of literary production vanished with the local court. I will argue in this paper that this cultural resilience is a new social form, that of private literature, emerging for the first time in this region in the wake of Iron Age collapse. It is most conspicuous in the genre of prose narrative fiction, uniquely shared by Egypt and Judea. Such works were produced by religious professionals, but not for consumption in such settings, and often satirized cherished religious institutions of the Iron Age and before. A kind of historical fiction, narratives were set in the past but were not historiographical, instead telling sometimes wildly unrealistic stories with a patina of historicity. Having both cosmopolitan and vernacular features, but not reducible to either, Egyptian and Judean private literature of this era resists easy categorization. Consequently, I will articulate its social form in historical and sociological terms by exploring the niche negotiated by the Egyptian and Judean literary class under hegemonic rule, affording different kinds of engagement with the pre-collapse past now seen as a kind of golden age. Finally, following the work of Altaweel and Squitieri (*Revolutionizing a World*, 2018), I will consider how the arrival of universalism under the world empires contributed to the development of this literature.