

# Polydactylism in the Ancient World<sup>1</sup>

By Richard D. Barnett

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In Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* there is a long and rather moving account of the servant Masha, to whom a child is born with six fingers. We are not told which hand was affected. Masha rejects the child in the belief, it seems, that it comes from the Devil. The phenomenon of six fingers or toes (polydactylism) in ancient art has received almost no attention from scholars, although it clearly existed in ancient works of art.

Polydactylism is a not-uncommon, inherited genetic abnormality, especially in closely interbred communities. It is less commonly encountered today, as cosmetic surgery in Western countries frequently eliminates the anomaly at birth.

In the Bible we read that David's nephew Jonathan (not Saul's son Jonathan) slew a "giant" who taunted Israel. The episode resembles the story of David himself with Goliath, except that this giant had six fingers and six toes:

"There was a giant of a man, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in all; he too was descended from the Raphah (plural: Rephaim). When he taunted Israel, Jonathan, the son of David's brother Shimei, killed him" (2 Samuel 21:20–21).

In the Levant, polydactylism—an excess of fingers or toes—was considered to be a mark of the Rephaim, a race of giants. If you were a giant, you apparently needed more fingers or toes. According to Genesis, the Rephaim were one of the peoples who lived in Canaan before the Israelite conquest (see Genesis 15:18–21). In Deuteronomy 3:11, we learn indirectly about the impressive stature of the Rephaim. Og, the last king of the Rephaim, possessed an iron bed "nine cubits long and four cubits wide." A cubit is about 18 inches, so Og's bed measured over 13 feet in length.

Mesopotamian priests and sorcerers were often consulted about the significance of polydactylism. Some of their conclusions appear in the seventh-century Assyrian collection of omen texts called *šumma izbu*:

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<sup>1</sup>Editor, H. S. (2004; 2004). *BAR 16:03 (May/June 1990)*. Biblical Archaeology Society.

“If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six fingers on the right hand—poverty will seize the house of the man.

If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six fingers on the left hand—[the mother] is endowed with prosperity; [the man’s] adversary will die.

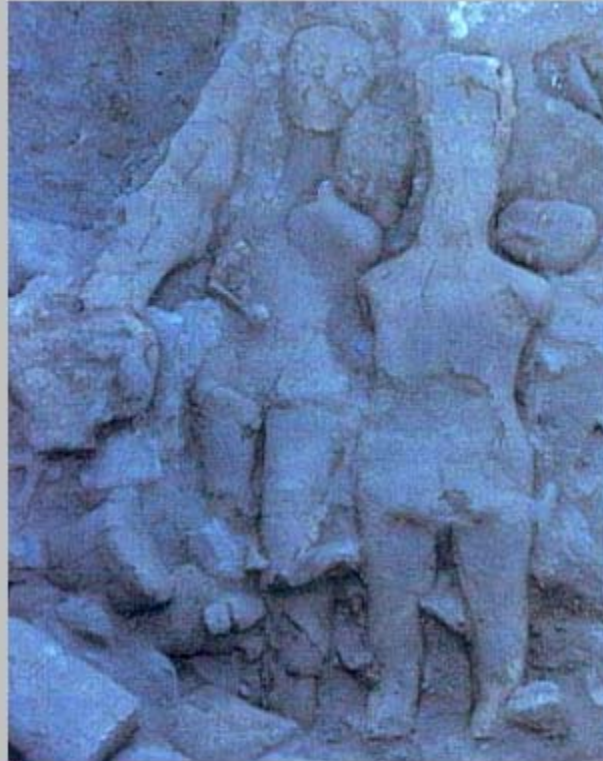
If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six fingers each on its right and left hands—the descendants [of the house] will be poverty-stricken.

If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six toes on its right and left feet—the descendants of that house will be scattered.

If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six toes on its right foot—[the child] is endowed with worrying.

If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six toes on its left foot—[the child] is endowed with [ ... ]. If a woman gives birth, and [the child] has six fingers [and toes] on each of its right and left hands and right and left feet—the land will live undisturbed.”

This contemporaneous record indicates that in Mesopotamia the birth of the six-fingered child was a favorable sign if the extra finger was on the left hand; the omen then promised prosperity and wealth. If, however, it was on the right hand, dire consequences might be expected. The formula seems to be: left hand—good; right hand—evil. Numerous other examples of polydactylism in art and archaeology are known to me. From the Neolithic temple (c. sixth millennium B.C.) at Jericho, we have the six-toed foot of a clay statue. At Ain Ghazal in Jordan, a nearly 3-foot-tall Neolithic statue was discovered that also has six toes.



*Courtesy Gary Rollefson*

Imprisoned in earth, 9,000-year-old plaster statues and busts await release. The foot of one disintegrated statue has six toes (see photograph). Discovered in two caches at the Neolithic site of 'Ain Ghazal in Jordan, the nearly 3-foot-high figures originally had skeletons of reeds and twigs, wrapped with twine, over which the plaster was molded. The skeletons have now decomposed however, leaving the statues hollow. Expressive faces of considerable individuality include eyes made of white chalk, outlined with green and black pigments, and round irises of black pigment. According to archaeologist Gary Rollefson, the figures apparently portrayed deceased individuals and served as cult symbols, possibly involving ancestor worship or veneration.



*Courtesy Gary Rollefson*

Fragment of plaster statue from 'Ain Ghazal, showing a foot with six toes. For full caption, see photograph of statues.

The hands of bronze, winged “siren figures” occasionally exhibit six fingers. These figures are usually in the form of girls, but we sometimes find male examples and even two-headed ones. With outstretched arms, and the wings, body and tail of a bird, the bronze figures were fixed in pairs or fours to the rims of bronze cauldrons, probably manufactured in Eastern Anatolia or North Syria—or, less likely, Urartu (in modern, eastern Turkey)—in the ninth or eighth centuries B.C. Over 70 such winged “siren figures” are known, recovered from ancient sites as far distant as Etruria in the west (in modern Italy) and as Soviet Armenia in the east. Many have also been found in Greece, particularly at Olympia, and the type was eagerly imitated by early Greek bronze-smiths at other sites. Of the 70 or 50 eastern examples, at least two have six fingers on the right hand, as do two of the Greek imitations. One example sports six fingers on the right, and seven on the left! Strangely, none of the publications describing these figures comments on these digital peculiarities. The learned authors probably never noticed them. I suggest that the figures represent Rephaim, giants, in some ritual in which they are invited to drink from the cauldron.



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A “siren figure” from Olympia, Greece, displays six fingers on its right hand and six or seven fingers on its left hand in this rear view. Such part-human, part-bird figurines served as decorations around the outside of the brim on widely distributed, bronze cauldrons, a style that probably originated in eastern Anatolia or North Syria in the eighth or ninth century B.C. A ring passed through the loop on each figurine’s back, the protuberance at the center of the photo, providing handles by which the cauldron could be lifted. Seven of the 81 known figurines have six fingers, always on their right hand, although one also has seven fingers on its left hand. The author has suggested that they represent Rephaim, giants—the divinized ancestors of the celebrants of a funeral feast—who are invited to drink from the cauldron.

Two examples of polydactylism from the 13th century B.C. appear on clay sarcophagi in quasi-Egyptian style found at Deir el-Balah (DEAR-ell-BAH-lah), near Gaza. One, formerly in the collections of Moshe Dayan and now acquired by the Israel Museum, shows a man with six fingers on his left hand. Another, excavated by Trude Dothan, is indistinct in details, but was clearly meant to be polydactylous.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Editor, H. S. (2004; 2004). *BAR 16:03 (May/June 1990)*. Biblical Archaeology Society.



*Courtesy Itzhaq Beit-Arieh*

Anthropoid coffin lid. Excavated from a cemetery at Deir el-Balah, near Gaza, this fired-clay coffin bears human features that were modeled separately and then applied to the lid. The six fingers on the right hand, here crossed over the left hand in a conventional manner, may indicate that the buried individual was polydactylous. Dated to the 13th century B.C., the coffins in this cemetery exhibit a quasi-Egyptian style that reflects the Egyptian domination of the area at the time. The coffins probably held the bodies of high-ranking Egyptian officers or officials serving in Canaan, or of Canaanite rulers and dignitaries.

A still earlier example, a fragmentary portrait statue of an Egyptian of the XIIIth dynasty (c. 1783–1640 B.C.), found by chance near Akko in Israel, displays unmistakable traces of six fingers on his right hand.

I have found other ancient examples from Alexandria, Egypt; Greece; Malta; Iran; and Etruria, in Italy.

After the ancient world of art was conquered by the Greek ideal of the perfect human body, the motif of polydactylism seems to have disappeared save in the far west. The legend of Cuchullain (koo-KUL-lin), the Irish hero of the Ulster cycle who is supposed to have lived in the first century A.D., claims that he had seven toes on each foot and seven fingers on each hand, plus seven pupils to each eye.

The motif of six fingers, however, re-emerges into the full light of canonical Western art in the late Middle Ages. At the pilgrim center of Maria-Laach in Austria, there is a painting, done in about 1440 and much venerated by cripples, that is known as “*die Maria mit den sechs Fingern*” (The Mary with Six Fingers). Here Mary has six fingers on her right hand. A Spanish statue in wood, dated 1609 and displayed in the church of St. John in Oud Valkenburg, Holland, shows John the Baptist with six fingers on the right hand. A fine painting, attributed to Maerten van Heemskerck of Alkmaar (or to Jan van Scorel) and now in the Marquis of Salisbury’s collections at Hatfield House in Britain,

depicts Adam and Eve seated before the Tree of Knowledge, in which lurks the serpent. Adam raises his left hand, which has six fingers, and points his index finger.



*Courtesy Hatfield House, England*

Detail of "Adam and Eve," showing Adam's polydactylic left hand.

Ann Boleyn, Henry VIII's unhappy Queen whom he beheaded on charges of high treason and adultery, is described by an admittedly hostile witness (Nicholas Sanders) as having had six fingers on her right hand. Without explicitly saying she was a witch, he certainly implies she was an evil influence.

In St. Paul's Church in Malta, a now unfortunately headless limestone statue of St. Paul, from the 16th century, has six toes on the left foot. The motif occurs again in an 18th-century fresco now in the refectory of the Catholic Seminary in St. Chalcedonius Square, Floriana, where, in illustration of the visit of Nebuchadnezzar's steward to Daniel and his companions (Daniel 1:1–12), Daniel is pointing with his left hand to the food and drink that they reject. Six fingers can be clearly seen on his hand, no doubt indicating his supernatural powers, since we have his interpretation of the king's dream in the next chapter.

No overall pattern is observable. Early examples seem to indicate that polydactylism was a characteristic of giants, or of people with super powers or extra strength. In this connection, we find some depictions with even more than six fingers or toes. On the other hand, certain Mesopotamian omens indicate that polydactylism, especially of the right extremities, was a bad omen. Otherwise, however, there seems little support for the right-equals-bad, left-equals-good equation. In the medieval period and later, we see portrayals of Mary, John the Baptist and St. Paul with extra fingers or toes. This surely suggests that polydactylism was thought to be a sign of special powers. Yet, in other depictions, we find six fingers on Adam, Ann Boleyn and, as late as the 19th century, the child of a servant in a Dostoevsky novel. In short, it seems impossible to impose any order on all these examples.