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ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES OF THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BC FROM TELL ARBID PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Abstract: The collection of 2nd millennium BC anthropomorphic figurines from Tell Arbid, a site in the Khabur river basin in northern Mesopotamia, comprises just eight specimens, but it introduces some new types of representations that have not been attested so far in the region. A comparison with figurines of the 3rd millennium BC illustrates changes in the anthropomorphic minor arts of the time. Finally, some of the figurines seem to attest to the presence of motifs deriving from outside of Mesopotamia, from the Levant and Anatolia, in the iconography of the region.

Keywords: terracotta anthropomorphic figurines, Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, Khabur Ware period, Mitanni period, Syria, North Mesopotamia

Tell Arbid is located in northeastern Syria, in a region known as the Jazirah. Excavations of the site by a Polish–Syrian archaeological expedition between 1996 and 2010 revealed settlement remains dating from the first half of the 3rd millennium BC through the Hellenistic period. Terracotta figurines are one of the most common groups of artifacts in the archaeological material, especially in strata

from the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC, with zoomorphic representations constituting an overwhelming majority. Among the more than 50 anthropomorphic figurines¹ found to date less than a dozen was made probably in the 2nd millennium BC. Almost all of them should be dated to the Khabur Ware period (Middle Bronze Age) and just one to Mitannian times (Late Bronze Age).

ASSEMBLAGE

Most of the figurines were preserved in extremely fragmentary condition. It was possible, however, to reconstruct their original height at about 10 cm or more.

Khabur Ware period specimens usually present a hard, well-fired clay with observable white grains of mineral temper. Two of the figurines have a brown surface

¹ Originating from the University of Warsaw excavations alone without including specimens from the Adam Mickiewicz University project, which was conducted in Sector P in 2008–2010.

and dark grey, almost black core [Fig. 1]. One of these [see Fig. 1:1] is decorated with dark red paint, typical of Khabur Ware pottery. Figurines with dark red or orange-red surface are most numerous in the collection [Fig. 2], but some of them could be dated to the end of the 3rd millennium BC (post-Akkadian period). Only one Khabur Ware-period figurine is of unbaked clay [Fig. 3]. The one Mitanni-period terracotta is made of hard, baked, pale brown clay [Fig. 4].

Most of the figurines were found in secondary context (in room fill, refuse pits and disturbed or eroded layers), and a few are stray finds. An almost complete Khabur Ware-period figurine constitutes an exception [Fig. 3]; it was found together with over 30 unbaked clay objects, including furniture models and miniature vessels (Bieliński 2000: 281, Figs 5–6). Regardless of how this unique assemblage is interpreted (a set of toys, for instance, see Bieliński 2000: 281), the exceptional form of this figurine and the fact that it is the only unbaked specimen among the 2nd millennium BC anthropomorphic representations, should caution against reconstructing the meaning and function of the remaining figurines on the grounds of this particular specimen.

The diversity of the 2nd millennium BC anthropomorphic figurines and the small number of such finds, not only from Tell Arbid, but also from other sites in the region (for example, Tell Brak, Tell Mozan: McDonald 1997; Wissing 2009: 13–17), precludes their classification. The representations are quite schematic, but not overstylized. Some of them are characterized by a fairly naturalistic modeling and careful rendering of details. This was particularly evident in the case of the two large figurines

[see Fig. 1], dated with considerable probability to a later phase of the Khabur Ware period.

One is the head of a figurine, probably female, with a low headdress broadening upwards [Fig. 1, top]. The cap rises high over the forehead, but slants sharply to the rear. Its discoidal top is flat and decorated with two painted lines crossing at a right angle in the middle. The circumference is also decorated with a painted band. The face features are rendered plastically: protruding nose, eyes marked by small appliqué pellets, eyebrows and mouth indicated by incised lines, nostrils and strands of hair falling on the forehead and framing the face represented by punctures. Small, rounded cavities on both sides of the neck could have represented ears, while a painted stripe at the bottom of the neck may have been the hem of a garment or, more probably, a necklace.

Figurines with elaborate headdress or hairdo are known from the Khabur Ware period from other sites in the region (Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 2002: 123–124, Figs 8–9, Nos A.14.7, A.15.226; see also Kelly-Buccellati 1998: 40, Fig. 6). Some of them were also painted, but none featured a headdress analogous to the abovedescribed one. Similar, although not identical caps were worn by some male figures in Mesopotamian iconography (Boehmer 1983: 204–205, Nos 4–7, 14–18, 26), although these appear to have been characteristic of the 3rd millennium BC and had virtually disappeared in the 2nd millennium BC. The closest analogy for the headdress of the figurine from Tell Arbid, if its formal features are considered, can be found outside Mesopotamia. It is one of the variants of a cap characteristic of female figures in the iconography of central

Anatolia (Bittel 1984: 102–105, especially variant C). In this region such caps are attested already in the 3rd millennium BC (Makowski 2005: 14, 21, Fig. 6:3), but did not gain popularity until the 2nd millennium BC. In Anatolia of the Middle Bronze Age, which was roughly contemporary with the Khabur Ware period, female figures wearing headdresses of identical form were depicted in glyptic art,

among others (for example, Özgüç 1979: Figs 1:Ac.g.136, Ac.K.42, Ac.i.725; 3:An.Gr.71, Ac.k.54; 5:Ac.I.1132, 7:Ac.i.751).

The second figurine belonging to the group of large and naturalistic representations is also fragmentarily preserved. It has a flat corpus with plastically rendered arms bent at the elbows [Fig. 1, bottom]. Both hands are broken off, but originally they must have been drawn to the chest,

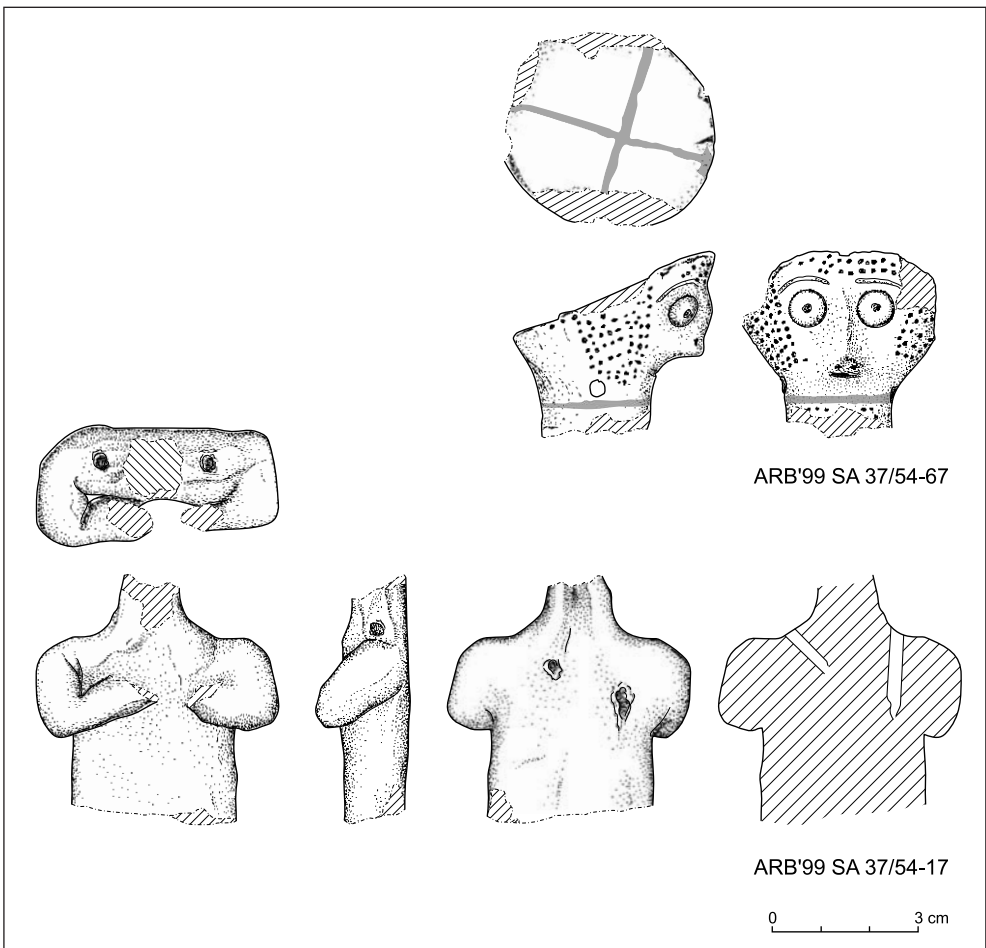


Fig. 1. Figurine head (top) and corpus (bottom), of clay with brown surface and almost black core, Khabur Ware period (Drawing M. Momot, M. Wagner)

possibly holding an object of some kind. An exceptional feature of this figurine are two holes pierced slantwise through its back. Each of them has two openings — one on the shoulder and the other approximately in the middle of the back. There is no evidence as to the purpose of these holes. Perhaps a cord had been threaded through them in order to fix the figurine, for example, to the back of a throne. Alternately, some kind of attributes could have been stuck in the holes, just as in the case of 3rd millennium BC warrior figurines (Makowski 2007: 475–476, Fig. 3; McDonald 2001: 270, Fig. 486:11; see also Wissing 2009: Pl. 4:14). No parallels for this figurine have been found so far.

Other Khabur Ware period figurines were more schematic. At least three of

them were fragments of standing figurines. Their legs are shaped either as separate elements or are solid, with an engraved line marking the divide. Two of them are undoubtedly female, as evidenced by pubic triangles marked by incised or punctured decoration. On the better preserved figurine [Fig. 2, left], the breasts, navel and necklace were also rendered. The third figurine, with broken off legs and arms and few details marked, most probably represented a male. A few figurines of similar date and shape with clearly marked pubic triangle are known from other sites in the Jezirah (Mallowan 1936: 22, Fig. 5:21; see also: Pecorella 2003: 39).

The only sitting figurine in the discussed collection is very schematic and block-shaped [Fig. 2, right]. The arms are sche-

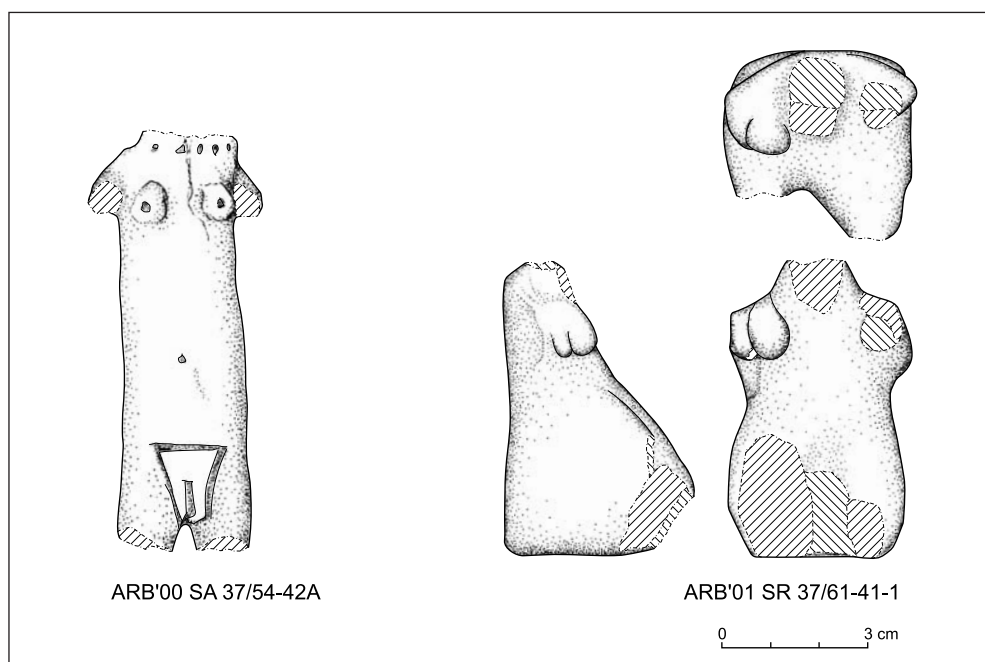


Fig. 2. Figurines of clay with dark red or orange-red surface, Khabur Ware period: standing (left) and sitting (right) (Drawing M. Momot, M. Wagner)

matically rendered and the legs are hardly divided. A massive, cubic base enabled placing the figurine in an upright position. Most probably the piece should be dated to the Khabur Ware period, although a late 3rd millennium BC date (post-Akkadian) cannot be ruled out.

The schematic and blocky shape of this figurine resembles the form of figurines made of stone (Howard-Carter 1998: 113–115; McDonald 1997: 106, Figs 136, 228) rather than any seated terracotta specimens known from the Jezirah (for example, Wissing 2009: 16, Pl. 6:42). However, the majority of the aforementioned stone figurines is dated as late as the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, possibly with the exception of a specimen from Tell Brak (McDonald 1997: 106, No. 95, Figs 136, 228) and a somewhat similar find from Tell Barri (Pecorella 1997: 8–9).

The one anthropomorphic figurine in the collection that was made of unbaked

clay [Fig. 3] is exceptional because of its execution as much as its form. The corpus is flat and stylized, widening downwards. Eyes, marked by small appliqué pellets, are the only feature marked on the face. A diagonal projection at the back of the head, now broken, could have represented a hairdo, just like on some late 3rd millennium BC female figurines (McDonald 2001: 269, Figs 286, 486:5; see also Wissing 2009: Pl. 2:6). This element indicates that the figurine could be female. The arms are broken and the legs were not rendered at all. Due to the shape of the corpus (compare Makowski 2007: 478–479, Fig. 5) and the projection on the back of the head, this find evokes 3rd millennium BC anthropomorphic figurines. However, the find context leaves no doubts as to the dating of the figurine to the Khabur Ware period.

The last figurine, a stray find, is the only one dated to the second half of 2nd millennium BC. It is the upper half of a molded plaque [Fig. 4], the only Bronze Age terracotta from Tell Arbid manu-

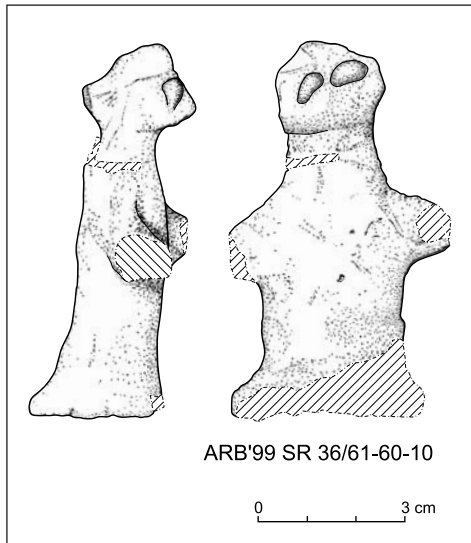


Fig. 3. Figurine of unbaked clay, Khabur Ware period (Drawing M. Momot, M. Wagner)

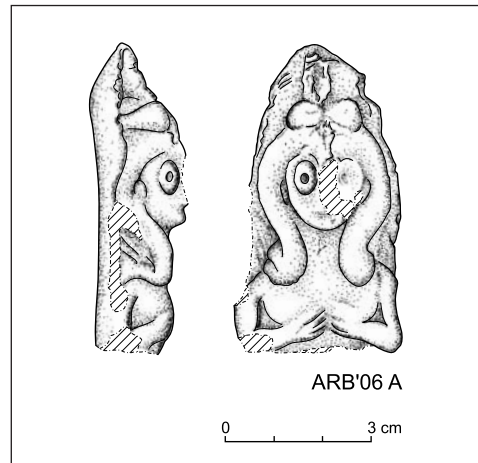


Fig. 4. Molded terracotta plaque, Mitanni period (Drawing M. Momot)

factured in this peculiar technique.² The surface of the figurine is strongly damaged, especially its right side. A nude female was represented with a distinctive Hathor-like hairstyle. She wears low headgear, possibly a *modius*, surmounted by an upright oval. The nose and mouth are marked in relief, while the eyes are pellets applied after the plaque had been mould-pressed.³ The hands were placed on the breasts.

The poor state of preservation of the headgear hampers interpretation. Since it is comparable to the “heads of Hathor” depicted on a Mitanni-period wall painting from Nuzi (northeastern Mesopotamia, Starr 1939: Pl. 128), it may be presumed that it represents a hair band with a central ornament. The ornament on the Nuzi painting evokes three combined feathers.

Among the relatively innumerable terracotta plaques known from the Jezirah, only a few represent nude females with Hathor-like hairstyles. One of them, a piece from Tell Brak, dated to the end of the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, shows a figure with an oval ornament at the top of its hairdo (Mallowan 1947: 189–190, 217, Pls XLII:5, LV:8). Unlike the Tell Arbid plaque, there was no

marked headgear to be observed. Probably the most direct analogy to the discussed figurine from Tell Arbid, in terms of both execution style and headgear, was found at Tell Bazi, a site on the bank of the Euphrates (Otto, Einwag 1996: 469–470, Fig. 24). It allows the Tell Arbid find to be dated to the Mitannian period.

In Mesopotamia, the custom of producing plaques with representations of nude females with Hathor-like hairstyle most probably derived from the Levant. In the Levant, figures of this type, sometimes depicted as wearing various kinds of headgear, hair bands or overstylized attributes of Hathor, are widely attested in the iconography, among others on terracotta plaques (for example, Winter 1983: 96–121; Badre 1980: 100–101, 118–120, Pl. LX:11–27). It can be hypothesized that the details of headgear marked on northern Mesopotamian plaques, or even those rendered on the “heads of Hathor” from the Nuzi wall paintings, were a local adaptation of the attributes (*modius*, for example) typical of the iconography of females with a Hathor-like hairstyle in the eastern Mediterranean littoral.

SUPRA-REGIONAL CULTURAL CONTACTS IN THE LIGHT OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC MINOR ARTS

The plaque testifies to the presence of motifs deriving from outside Mesopotamia in the Late Bronze Age anthropomorphic minor arts of Tell Arbid. At that time the site was located in the heartland of the Mitanni kingdom, stretching, at the peak of its power, from northeastern Mesopotamia

to the Mediterranean coast. The presence, in various parts of Mesopotamia, of representations of females with a Hathor-like hairstyle and a distinctive headgear suggests a certain uniformity in the whole region as to the iconographic motifs, of which some originated from the Levant.

² The only other terracotta plaque found at Tell Arbid was dated to the Hellenistic period (Bieliński 1998: 213, Fig. 1a).

³ The same two-stage technique of terracotta manufacture was attested also at Tell Brak (McDonald 1997: 132).

During the Middle Bronze Age Tell Arbid could have belonged to a supra-regional system that was not political — the Old Assyrian trade network. At that time the Jezirah was frequented by trade caravans moving from the north Mesopotamian city of Assur to Central Anatolia.⁴ Along this route Assyrian merchants established a network of trade stations, one of which was located according to textual sources in Tell Leilan (ancient Šehnā/Šubat-Enlil), some 60 km from Tell Arbid (Eidem 2008). Tell Arbid is the only other site in the Jezirah to have yielded, from a secondary context (Bieliński 2000: 276, Fig. 2), a cuneiform document — a fragment of an envelope — written in the script and language of the merchants from Assur (Eidem 2008: 40, *addendum*). Its presence at the site allows the assumption that it must have been in some way connected with the Old Assyrian trade system.

In the light of these data, the similarity between the headgear of the Khabur Ware period figurine from Tell Arbid [see Fig. 1, top] and the cap used in contemporary Central Anatolian iconography seems to be more than a coincidence. The Assyrian merchants crossing the Jezirah on their way from Assur to Anatolia undoubtedly acted as mediators in the transfer of cultural patterns between distant regions. Such connections between central Anatolia and north Mesopotamia are reflected, among others, in the anthropomorphic minor arts: lead and terracotta plaques from sites in present-day Turkey, Iraq and Syria (Emre 1971; Mallowan 1947: 100, 152–153, Pl. XVII:A–B; Howard-Carter 1998: Fig. 3; Klengel-Brandt 1978: 53–54, No. 271, Pl. 8). The figurine from Tell Arbid may be seen as further evidence of this process, but more finds of similar nature are necessary in order to confirm this hypothesis.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2ND AND 3RD MILLENNIUM BC FIGURINES

There are some important differences between the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC figurines from Tell Arbid (Makowski 2007). The Middle and Late Bronze Age figurines are quite large in comparison to the earlier specimens. Almost all are well fired, most probably in pottery kilns. It could suggest that they represented craftwork. On the contrary, the 3rd millennium BC figurines, made chiefly of poorly baked clay, may have been manufactured largely in domestic settings. Further differences concern the form of the figurines. Khabur Ware and Mitanni period specimens are not as strongly stylized as the earlier ones

on the whole. Body structure was rendered as a rule, even if only schematically. By contrast, many of the 3rd millennium BC figurines were characterized by blocky, geometrical bodies, arms shaped as stubs and often no attempt to mark the legs (Makowski 2007: Types 2, 3, 5). Moreover, the 2nd millennium BC figurines feature much greater detail. Female traits were frequently marked. Of the eight Middle and Late Bronze Age figurines from Tell Arbid, at least five were likely female representations, one was undoubtedly male and the gender of the remaining two could not be identified. In this respect, the Middle

⁴ For a general introduction to the subject, see Veenhof, Eidem 2008.

and Late Bronze Age specimens seem to continue an earlier tradition. Already in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC, a gradual increase in the number of female representations could be observed (Makowski 2007: 481), although they still seem not to have prevailed over male figurines. Therefore, the 2nd millennium figurines represent a subsequent stage of the process. Finally, some of the older figure types, like the warrior figure which had been very popular in the previous periods and had developed continuously throughout the 3rd millennium BC (Makowski 2007: 475–477, 480, Type 3), apparently disappeared at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC.

These changes related to the formal features of the figurines (dimensions, degree

of firing), as well as to the character of the represented figures (growing number of female representations, absence of warrior figures) most probably reflected some shift in their function and meaning at the turn of the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC. Considered in a broader perspective, they could have mirrored the cultural transformation which was evidently taking place at Tell Arbid during this time.

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