

Proceedings  
of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Congress  
on the Archaeology  
of the Ancient Near East  
May, 5<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> 2008, “Sapienza” - Università di Roma

Volume 1  
Near Eastern Archaeology in the Past,  
Present and Future. Heritage and Identity

Ethnoarchaeological and Interdisciplinary Approach,  
Results and Perspectives

Visual Expression and Craft Production in the Definition  
of Social Relations and Status

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with the collaboration of Licia Romano

2010  
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

## EMBODYING SOME TELL ASMAR FIGURINES

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on some figurines from Tell Asmar (ancient Ešnunna). Our study is divided into two parts: first, a description of the images, in which we focus on the physical features of the terracottas themselves and on their decoration. Second, some proposals for their interpretation, concentrating on two main topics: the sensory perspective, and the sex identities and gender roles of the figurines.*

### INTRODUCTION

Tell Asmar is located in the Diyala Region and was excavated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a team from the University of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> The figurines we analyze were found in several locations in the temple of Gimilsin, in the halls, corridors, and private rooms of the palace of ancient Ešnunna, and in some areas just outside the palace.<sup>2</sup>

Clay figurines are powerful objects, since they are considered to be direct representations of a given reality. They show how people perceived both themselves and others. But the methods available to us for their interpretation vary widely. Though the commonest approach is to study the functionality of terracottas, this strategy establishes single explanations, and rules out the many other possible interpretations of their existence.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding terracottas as visual and material culture will help us to bear in mind that they affected the way people perceived and understood realities. Indeed, we should look at them not so much as images ‘in order to’, but as images ‘for’; in other words, we are not interested in decoding what they represent, but in achieving a

1 In 1932 the report of the first season’s work was published and until 1936 these reports were published yearly (Frankfort *et al.* 1932 = OIC 13, Frankfort 1933 = OIC 16, 1934 = OIC 17, 1935 = OIC 19 and 1936 = OIC 20). Unfortunately, no complete catalogue of materials and analyses of the work seasons has been published. We hope that these materials will become available in the future. Specifically on the subject of figurines, E. Auerbach’s PhD thesis was completed at the University of Chicago in 1994, but is unpublished.

2 Chronologically speaking, we are especially interested in the period of the Ur III Dynasty. However, as it is difficult to impose stylistic distinctions between Ur III and subsequent periods, here we will deal with the figurines considered together as Ur III and Isin-Larsa figurines in M.Th. Barrelet’s 1968 study.

3 As Ucko (1962: 47) stated: “many different reasons lay behind their manufacture and their usage”.

holistic understanding of them.<sup>4</sup> From this standpoint, figurines are not passive objects but can be seen as material culture in motion. Terracottas not only model people or divinities praying or dancing, but also provoke movements and embody practices among the people who observe, touch, or interact with them.<sup>5</sup> In brief, terracottas are embodied material culture since they show us how bodies are constructed and which parts of these bodies are essential to a given culture through the representation or omission of particular organs. This is the starting-point for our analysis of the Tell Asmar figurines.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURINES

##### *Positions*

We classify figurines into three groups according to their positions. The first group comprises flat figurines which cannot stand without support (Fig. 1). Their lower part is triangular, suggesting that they may have been embedded in the floor.

The second group includes cylindrical forms (Fig. 2) with a round base to allow them to stand. No legs are represented: the figures would have been dressed in a tunic; the shape of the body, apart from the head, arms and hands, is considered unimportant.

The third group comprises the bow-legged figurines (Fig. 3) (As 31: 329, As 30: 80).<sup>6</sup> Their legs are clearly formed and separate; their design suggests that they were intended to be placed on another object.

##### *Physical Features*

Traditional descriptions and analyses of the figurines classify them primarily as female or male. Although we will partially reconsider these assumptions, the identification of most of them as female or male is practical: by grouping them by sex it is obvious that they share certain characteristics.

Before examining the differences according to sex, let us describe the facial features common to all the figurines. The noses and eyes are clearly emphasized, due to their size and shape. The eyes are always represented fairly large and open, and are modeled with round pieces of clay; the noses are also large and made simply, by pinching the clay. Ears and mouths are not represented, perhaps due to the presence of beards or necklaces. Indeed, the heads are richly decorated with bushy beards, hats, necklaces, and hairstyles.

##### *Female Figurines*

The figurines considered as female are almost flat. Let us look at the figurines from top

<sup>4</sup> Bailey 2005: 17-24.

<sup>5</sup> Bailey 2005: 20.

<sup>6</sup> OIC 43: Fig. 113 a and b.

to bottom. The head is richly decorated with some kind of coiffure. Around the face, all present what seems to be hair and some overlays. Moving to the body, the breasts, belly and vulva are usually represented. Interestingly, only feminine terracottas present belly buttons, made of round pieces of clay.<sup>7</sup>

In certain cases, some of the decoration overlaps. All the figures have well-represented arms and legs. The position is always the same: arms and legs upright. The feet are modeled, but not in detail.

### *Male Figurines*

In the male terracottas, the heads are also one of the more elaborately made parts and present a great variety of decoration. Almost all the male figures have beards, either long or short. The beards are all represented using the same technique of applying pieces of clay decorated with incisions.

The trunks bear less decoration than the heads. However, some features of the trunk are of interest. First, some of them bear round pieces of clay representing breasts (As 30: 60).<sup>8</sup> The arms of the male figurines are bent, appearing to hold something, in most cases animals. The hands are particularly interesting because they are represented in a non-naturalistic way with additional fingers. Finally, most specimens lack legs, due to their cylindrical form; only the bow-legged figurines have clearly represented legs.

### DECORATION

Decoration is an essential part of the body. It creates (and maintains) identity and social differences between those who wear adornments and those who do not, and indeed between different types of adornment. The most richly decorated parts of the figurines are the heads, regardless of the sex. The head and the face are essential parts of the body because they express personal identification and because it is here that the sense organs are located.<sup>9</sup>

The heads of the female figurines are richly decorated, especially in terms of hairstyles. The heads seem to be covered with a kind of veil (As 31: 329,<sup>10</sup> As 30: 41a,<sup>11</sup> As 30: 1a),<sup>12</sup> with holes in which jewelry could be attached,<sup>13</sup> or a kind of hair-

7 Belly buttons have a symbolic value, as they are related to fertility and fecundity; indeed, in many ancient societies, the belly button was a metaphor to represent sexual organs. It is considered the centre of the body and a liminal area linking two worlds: the inner and the outer (dead/alive, or humans/gods).

8 OIC 43: Fig. 117 e.

9 Meskell, Joyce 2003: 31; Joyce 2005: 146.

10 OIC 43: Fig. 113 a.

11 OIC 43: Fig. 111 a.

12 OIC 43: Fig. 111 f.

13 Masvidal and Picazo (2005: 53) suggest other possible uses for these holes: for example a system to hang figurines as necklaces or as home decoration, or to attach them into the ground.

band with pendants (Fig. 4) (As 30: 41a, As 31: 360, As 31: 495a<sup>14</sup>).<sup>15</sup>

Male figurines have two kinds of hats: triangular (As 30: 57a,<sup>16</sup> As 30: 93,<sup>17</sup> As 30: 90)<sup>18</sup> or flat<sup>19</sup> (As 31: 569,<sup>20</sup> As 30: 88)<sup>21</sup>. Both types may or may not bear ornamentation. The ornaments present are made of round pieces of overlapping clay.

It is also interesting to note how decoration creates sexual differences. Beards are male symbols not only here, but in Mesopotamia in general,<sup>22</sup> as in the reliefs of Neo-Assyrian palaces. What is more, the kinds of beards we have mentioned above probably denote some kind of hierarchical difference between men (for instance, status, or age). The same can be said of the possible decorations of the hands with gloves, which are found in only a few figurines. In the two figurines shown here (As 31: 557,<sup>23</sup> As 31: 920),<sup>24</sup> the first is wearing a sash and the second not only has a unique beard but also a kind of extension of the hands/gloves.

Moving down, the neck is always covered by decoration. In some cases, it is hidden by the beard. Others are covered by what we identify as necklaces: female figurines wear thick ones.<sup>25</sup> One male figure is wearing what we also identify as a necklace beneath his beard, (As 30: 54)<sup>26</sup> and other figures (As 30: 57a, As 30: 9)<sup>27</sup> bear what could be a beard or a necklace.

Some male figurines present trunk decoration. One of them has a sash (As 31: 557)<sup>28</sup> and a single bow-legged figurine has a kind of belt around the waist. Moreover the female figurines wear belts with pendants, and one figurine (As 31: 495b)<sup>29</sup> presents what seems to be a veil decorated with pendants and jewelry.

There are also differences in dress: male figurines are mainly dressed, whereas feminine ones are clearly naked.

In conclusion, decoration not only expresses different identities, but also creates them. This means that bodies are not decorated, but are “decorated bodies”: bearing

14 OIC 43: Fig. 111 a, c and k respectively.

15 This plaited hair with ornaments recalls the traditional decoration of Iberian Ladies found in the Iberian Peninsula during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (7<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC).

16 OIC 43: Fig. 116 a.

17 OIC 43: Fig. 117 c.

18 OIC 43: Fig. 117 d.

19 Those wearing flat hats may have been used as incense burners. We cannot confirm this hypothesis because, as far as we know, the remains have not been analysed.

20 OIC 43: Fig. 116 g.

21 OIC 43: Fig. 117 b.

22 It was the topic of the communication of C. Suter at the XLVII<sup>e</sup> RAI held in Helsinki in 2001: “Beards of lapis lazuli: the representation of men in early Mesopotamia” (not published). Asher-Greve 1997: 438

23 OIC 43: Fig. 114 b.

24 OIC 43: Fig. 118 b.

25 This kind of decoration recalls in a way the necklaces of the Paduang women or giraffe women of the “Karen Hilltribe” located in the province of Northern Thailand.

26 OIC 43: Fig. 118 d.

27 OIC 43: Fig. 116 a and d, respectively.

28 OIC 43: Fig. 114 b.

29 OIC 43: Fig. 112.

a special hairstyle, beard or jewelry is an intentional act, which creates status and personal histories and demonstrates them to others.

### *Terracottas in Motion*

As we have already mentioned, figurines are not only passive objects. They are in motion because they represent people performing physical activity, and they also have bodily consequences for the people who are using them.

Here again, the sexes perform distinct activities. Male figurines are dynamic as, in most cases, they are carrying or holding an offering. The female terracottas appear to be less active. However, if we assume that they represent real women and real decorations, we have to imagine that having this overdecorated hairstyle and body would have consequences for their movements: walking, dancing or simply making gestures would have been difficult and they would also have been quite noisy due to the large amount of pendants and jewelry.<sup>30</sup> In brief, considering terracottas in movement has corporeal consequences.

### TERRACOTTAS AND THE SENSES

As we stated above, figurines are embodied material culture; that is, they show us a specific way of constructing the body as a dynamic element in cultural and social processes. Bodies are not passive entities receiving orders from minds; rather, through bodies, social identities and meanings related to gender, status or age are created and represented. An embodied approach has to be accompanied by a study of the senses because it is through the senses that we perceive and create corporealities and gestures.

This approach defines the senses as culturally constructed, not as natural, biological and psychological elements. The senses have specific meanings and are carefully hierarchized to represent the social order.<sup>31</sup> Looking at how the senses are represented through the appearance of mouth, ears, eyes, hands and noses in Tell Asmar figurines will provide a basis for our discussion of this issue.

The first point to be mentioned is the lack of differences between female and male figurines. Both are represented with the same sense organs: large eyes and large noses, and significantly, no ears or mouths. This is interesting not only from the point of view of the senses, but also from the point of view of gender.

On the one hand, Tell Asmar figurines show a specific organization of the senses. Sight and smell appear to have been more significant to their consumers and users than hearing and taste. Moreover, as both sexes share the same hierarchy, it appears that men and women perceived senses in the same way.

If we consider that these figurines are related to ritual or religious practices, the

30 García-Ventura, López-Bertran 2009.

31 Howes 2005: 3.

importance attributed to sight and smell is highly significant. The eyes would be essential not only to see the performances carried out in rituals involving figurines, but also to have a symbolic vision and a relationship with divinities or other fantastic beings. Equally, smell was considered an essential sense in Ancient times as it was related to hygienic practices and the search of pleasant odors through the burning of perfumes or oils.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, smoke would have been regarded as the connection between the figurines, the participants, and the gods.<sup>33</sup>

But where does the sense of touch fit into this scheme? Here we see clear differences between male and female terracottas. The female figurines do not have hands. Of course, a large number of arms have been lost and these may have borne hands; however, many male figurines have also lost their arms but their hands are preserved. This suggests that the hands of male figurines might have been better represented than the female ones (if we assume that all figures indeed had them).

The hands are modelled in a simple way, merely by making incisions at the end of arms to create fingers. However, not all the cases appear to represent real fingers because most of the figurines have more than five. There are two examples (Figs 5 and 6) of this feature. In both cases, the hands seem to be covered by a kind of glove, and especially in the second one they stretch around the trunk.

The existence of hands is significant as it shows the important role attributed to touch, especially in the figurines defined as offering-bearers. Touching offerings allows bearers to have direct, intimate encounters with the gods because people give them animals or food that have been in contact with the offerings; perhaps the animals were their property, or perhaps the food was prepared at their houses. Giving something to gods is like giving a part of the self, and this close relation is embodied through the careful representation of hands.

#### MULTIPLIED FIGURINES: SEX IDENTITIES AND GENDER ROLES

As we pointed out in the last section, the initial division of these and other collections of figurines was classically by sex. Traditional studies distinguish only between men and women,<sup>34</sup> and this initial division is made on the basis of the explicit representation of the genitals and the assumption of certain attributes understood as related only to one sex, such as beards for men.

The many figurines represented naked with breasts and an evident vulva are considered women (Fig. 7). The others are automatically considered men, though the genitals are not usually represented (only two of them have genitals modelled: As 30: 80 and As 30: 82).<sup>35</sup> Some of them are classified as men because of their beards (Fig.

32 Classen 1993: 7.

33 Meskell, Joyce 2003.

34 See Barrelet 1968; Frankfort *et al.* 1940.

35 OIC 43: Fig. 113 b and c, respectively.

8) (As 33: 72,<sup>36</sup> As 30: 5,<sup>37</sup> As 31: 716).<sup>38</sup> However, some figurines are fragmentary and no head is remaining (As 30: 60, As 31: 717, As 31: 75a, As 31: 36)<sup>39</sup> or there is no clear beard (As 31: 646,<sup>40</sup> As 30: 55).<sup>41</sup> In these cases, sex is assigned according to the shape of the body; they are considered to be men in spite of the absence of clear marks.

In general terms this division is useful, but for these last figurines we propose a third new group, an asexual group. In our view, the presence of sex marks is as significant as their absence. For this reason, some figures without explicit representations of genitals or beards could be considered asexual or at least as sexually ambiguous (Fig. 9).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the fact that their sex is unimportant is significant in itself. For the Tell Asmar figurines, we propose a tripartite social and sexual structure, including female, male, and asexual.<sup>43</sup>

Following Judith Butler's principles, we consider gender as a performance for these figurines. Though some attributes are considered typically female or male, all of them, including the asexual ones, assume a role in which gender is like fancy dress, denying an intrinsic and internal sex identity.<sup>44</sup>

If we agree that all societies construct sexual identities and gender roles, we think it is important to take into account certain aspects when examining ancient figurines like the ones from Tell Asmar. Firstly, in most traditional studies, ancient figurines are implicitly considered to be produced by men, and to be used and observed by men, like examples of modern advertising.<sup>45</sup> Women's authorship has only rarely been suggested.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, there are no clues as to who the creators of these figurines were; so it is important to assume that they could have been made by anyone.

Secondly, the abundance of figurines with female attributes is usually explained in symbolic terms, since they always represent divinities or priestesses. In this regard, the denomination of paleolithic figurines as "Venus" (in 19<sup>th</sup> century studies) is revealing.<sup>47</sup> We should avoid the automatic identification of female figurines with deities because the evidence to support this is insufficient: the images could just as well be goddesses as real women.<sup>48</sup>

36 OIC 43: Fig. 116 e.

37 OIC 43: Fig. 118 a.

38 OIC 43: Fig. 114 e.

39 OIC 43: Fig. 118 e, f, g and h, respectively.

40 OIC 43: Fig. 114 d.

41 OIC 43: Fig. 118 c.

42 Assante 2006: 183; McCaffrey 2002: 386; Picazo 2000: 33.

43 Bailey 1994: 321.

44 Butler 1996; Sanahuja 2002: 56.

45 Masvidal, Picazo 2005: 38.

46 Assante 2006: 180; Masvidal, Picazo 2005: 10. Some scholars, like M.D. McDermott, raise the possibility of women's authorship of certain representations, which would then be considered as self-portraits. However, the resemblance of some of them calls into question this hypothesis.

47 With different objectives, this is also the thought underlying the research of M. Gimbutas and her followers in the "Goddess movement" (Masvidal, Picazo 2005: 29).

48 Picazo 2000: 29.

In contrast to the standard interpretations of female figurines, the ones identified as male are normally related to “earthly” and political power, considered as powerful men, and not as deities. This difference between the reading for figurines identified as men or women reflects a preconception that explains why many historians used to identify men sitting on thrones as princes and women in the same position as goddesses, denying real and earthly power to ancient women.<sup>49</sup>

Thirdly, even though we avoid these preconceptions, there is another danger in applying our own sexual and gender roles to the analyses of the materials. This tendency is probably inevitable, but it is important to bear it in mind. Today, figurines are often considered as objects of leisure activities<sup>50</sup> or of use in certain sexual practices (e.g. female figurines considered as pornographic objects for men)<sup>51</sup> typical of our Western and European context.<sup>52</sup> Indeed these are some possible uses of the figurines that are really thought-provoking, but it is important not to restrict our readings to these possibilities.

Finally, the importance of the study of the figurines from the point of view of sexuality is undisputed.<sup>53</sup> However, reading them from this point of view alone may prove as simplistic as reading them only from the perspective of fertility: it is essential to consider the body in Antiquity as polysemic, as it is today.<sup>54</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

Figurines would have been touched by people regardless of their function and location as offerings in rituals, in the decoration of furniture in royal palaces, private houses, and as toys for children. Their size and their three-dimensionality would have made direct contact with people easy. They are easy to handle, and are suited to activities such as play or some kind of performance art or theater.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it is like a drama without an audience, where there are only active participants, and figurines are the images of all these actors and actresses. In other words, figurines are embodied: they have life.

49 Dobres 2000: 46; Assante 2006: 185-188.

50 E.g. toys, Bailey 2005: 66-88.

51 Nude women figurines and statues would have been interpreted in relation to sexual and erotic issues, especially since most of these figurines were located in private places (some even inside the royal palaces) and were contemplated erotically by men (Asher-Greve 1997: 446-447). Dobres 2000: 43-44; Bahrani 2001: 86.

52 McCaffrey 2002: 379; Masvidal, Picazo 2005: 64.

53 Bahrani 2001: 70-96.

54 Dobres 2000: 43-45; Sanahuja 2002: 118-134; Assante 2006: 178.

55 Sanmartín 2001: 35.

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Fig. 1: Flat and triangular figurine (As. 30:45a).



Fig. 2: Cylindrical figurine (As. 33: 72).



Fig. 3: Bow-legged figurine (As.30: 82).



Fig. 4: Figurine with decorated head (As. 31: 329).



Fig. 5: Figurine with decorated hands (As. 30: 5).



Fig. 6: Figurine with a possible extension of the decorated hands (As. 31: 920).



Fig. 7: Feminine figurine (As. 33: 598).



Fig. 8: Masculine figurine (As. 30: 61).



Fig. 9: Asexual figurine (As. 30: 57a).