

## Assessment 2

### Abstract

Upon considering the emerging and evolving archaeological picture in the UAE and as an aspect of the wider Ancient Near East, it is of interest and importance to consider the locations of the archaeological sites that are providing the material evidence for analysis of the pre-Islamic civilisation that populated the northern coastal region of the modern UAE, the internal sites that formed a trade network from the Persian Gulf towards the Gulf of Oman as well as the cultural transmission that originates from wider ANE culture. As stated by Belushi in consideration of the acceleration of construction in the region, *“the relationship between development and the preservation of cultural heritage is considered one of the most controversial issues facing decision-makers, developers, and heritage managers.”*<sup>1</sup> In the setting of the ever-expanding metropolises of the seven emirates this cultural heritage is already known to an extent, yet provides opportunities for further investigations focused on Iron Age II culture and beyond this into the Hellenistic era and Parthian. It is my intention in this paper to assess the role of symbolic communication in the artforms of some of the discovered archaeological sites of the emirates with a scope from IA II into the Hellenistic era and explore the links with the Parthian regions. Establishing the role of art in this changing culture amidst stylistic transmission from further afield could be a significant aspect of the experience of figurines and numismatic iconography, from localised cultic practice centred around animal husbandry at the sites of Muweilah and Mleiha through to an established religious identity as emerges at ed-Dur.

### Introduction

This paper is intended as a continuation of the work began by Assessment 1 and seeks to interrogate the artistic theory of symbolic representation and investigate its wider application in the UAE region through an exploration of other figurines as well as numismatic iconography with a particular focus on those from the site of ed-Dur and the transregional connections that can be inferred. The figurines under discussion in the first instance are not representations of mythical creatures or gods yet rather those associated with pastoral life, however over the course of societal dispersal, ANE influences, and subsequent re-development this evolves towards a ritualised culture displayed in numismatic iconography as a gesture towards religious dedication. It is therefore apt and necessary in this investigation to attempt a mindset that removes us from our modern and specialised interpretation of art and “relate ourselves to a different view of life.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Belushi, 2015, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Naumberg, 1955, 437.

### **Tell en-Nasbeh Vs. Muweilah.**

The Judaeen site of Tell en-Nasbeh can perhaps offer an IA II contemporaneous location to draw upon the figurine assemblage that has been excavated. In terms of symbolic communication, the pillar figurine shown in Figure 1 is a significant distance from the camel figurines of IA II in Muweilah, Sharjah yet not without some similarity to human figurines found at ed-Dur. This is both in terms of form and of function with a range of possibilities being considered such as deities or supernatural beings, teaching figures, toys, deceased persons or most likely and of interest here is their interpretation as figurines intended to produce, prevent or reverse a specific situation.<sup>3</sup> This assorted categorisation from Voigt (1983: 168-203) is situated within the context of Judaea and the religious ideas of this space and time. Brody cross-examines Voigt's categorisation by taking the view of the wider region and Near East by exploring the stance of figurines as messengers and utilises the 'cupping of the breasts' imagery from across the Levant from Neolithic to the Roman Era in a variety of media as being a key factor in understanding the ritual function of pillar figures from Tell en-Nasbeh.

Such Pillar Figurines are not an aspect of the identity of IA II sites at Muweilah, Maleiha and Tell Abraq, yet one could wonder why such symbolic representation of the human form is not a feature when it has been identified as a significant cross-cultural aspect of the ANE, particularly in the Levant? This can be further considered by examining the issues surrounding the domestication of the camel, it is believed that this took place in the northern Arabian fringes of the Levantine region in IA II around 1000 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The alternative to this view is that domesticated camel emerged from a more southerly region of Arabia and thus we have the emergence of figurines linked with this that are independent of the belief systems and representations of sites such as that at Tell en-Nasbeh. It is with this in mind that we must consider the view of the symbolic communication of figurines in IA II as offering a *modus operandi* that is much removed from those that would later emerge as a result of the uptick in transregional trade caravans brought about by this significant shift in the ability to traverse the peninsula and interact in the more established regions of the ANE.

### **Iron Age II Vs. Ed Dur**

Considering the material culture from IA II representations in the sites at Muweilah, Malieha and Tell Abraq provides somewhat of a paradigm shift in the function of figurines that becomes furthered by a move towards a cultic religious ideology. The movement from animal figurines centred around the representation of dromedary camels towards a mixture of both human and animal is highlighted by the excavations at ed-Dur where eight out of eighteen fragments recovered were human representations. Animals remain a prominent aspect of the assemblage, yet a wider array of representations mostly identified in the form of birds is a feature of four fragments with six fragments remaining difficult to identify. Unlike larger parts of the ANE there

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<sup>3</sup> Brody, 2018, 216.

<sup>4</sup> Fedele, 286-287.

are no representations of more traditional animals such as lions or bulls, perhaps reflecting the local desert/mangrove environment.<sup>5</sup> The range of species now represented clearly points towards a wider connection to the ANE by the time the site of ed-Dur emerges in the Hellenistic era (although IA origins are feasible) comparisons can be drawn with figurines from Babylon, Thaj and the wider Aegean. Perhaps of most interest in relation to this evolution in the representations found at ed-Dur is how do the changes link with theories on symbolic communication and its development from an anthropological and cultural stance?

Daems suggests that we should view the figurines as being in conjunction with other established centres of the ANE and that it is more apt to draw comparisons with similar and identical examples from such sites as those mentioned above. This is furthered by the suggestion that the figurines should not be viewed as revealing use, functionality, or religious/ritual belief.<sup>6</sup> A significant aspect of note is that the ed-Dur figurines are original and hand crafted, can we therefore assume that the representations are not decontextualised and distorted as a reproduction might be? According to Costache “Reproductions modify the identity of originals, but they can also add valuable information.”<sup>7</sup> The figurines that exist in the ed-Dur era are hand crafted and similar to further ANE examples, yet they are not crafted via mould like other contemporary examples from sites such as Uruk, the only example of such a mould made figurine can be seen in Figure 4. Therefore, considering the theorising of Daems that the figurines from ed-Dur should not be viewed as a local manifestation of symbolic meaning is fraught with contradiction in relation to the understanding of art at a local level in the ed-Dur era but also neglects to truly reflect on the development from the other regional IA II sites and artefacts. Daems has somewhat isolated the figurines of ed-Dur without considering the developmental sequence of representation and without application of sound theory in relation to their symbolic communication.

Drawing on further examples from ed-Dur one could consider the role of Figure 3/4 in the cultural landscape from IA II to Pre-Hellenistic/Hellenistic. Although, unfortunately, fragmentary in the context of its find here we can surely see a maintenance of cultural legacy from the introduction of the domesticated camel in IA II. The form of the artwork has changed to include further detail on the hair and facial features of the camel, yet the form remains similar with the elongated, almost ‘S’ shaped neck. This then would sit well with Costache’s view of the modification of originals with added value, the figurine would even fit with an IA II context, perhaps then we could have a legacy item from the inland sites, transported to ed-Dur, or is it that same symbology of the camel as being integral to sustaining life in the desert remains the constant in the minds of the population? The consistent use of the camel as a symbol for the community of this region signifies this sustained importance and somewhat aligns with art as a form of religious identity that is intimately linked with its surroundings in the North-eastern Arabian Peninsula and in the wider trade network.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Daems, 2004, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Daems, 2004, 229.

<sup>7</sup> Costache, 2012, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Costache, 2012, 107.

Figures 3/4/5 excavation location within the wider site could also add weight to the symbolism of the camel even with the onset of a religious identity brought about by the flourishing of ed-Dur. The IA II examples of camel figurines possibly don't have as much of a contextual basis as that shown in Figure 3/4/5. A majority of the fragmentary figurines were surface finds at the site, yet of note when considering this figurine example is its location at the western wall facing the altar of the temple to the solar deity Shamash. The significance of this temple certainly is beyond this art analysis here, yet it remains the only example of a pre-Islamic temple in the entire region. The burial of this figurine at the western wall fits with a contextual methodology for analysing the function of the figurine with consideration to an already pre-established history and symbolism yet now associated with a wider cult of Shamash. Upon linking the location of the find with symbolic meaning then one could consider associations with the sun which of course has a most prominent role in desert life. Beyond this the temple itself as being identified with the solar deity Shamash (Sumerian Utu) via an inscription inside could add weight to the role of the camel figurine as having a symbolic role in the cult. Methodologically it is useful to consider deconstructivism in our approach to Figures 3/4/5 as providing a potential insight towards exposing the diverse and changing meanings of the artform. This would then allow an understanding as to what extent the ideas of IA II have cross-pollinated into the Early Hellenistic and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

### **Ed Dur Vs. Ancient Near East**

Continuing to consider the camel figurines, Figure 6 offers somewhat of a different perspective being a surface find and with a context not connected with the Shamash temple. Upon viewing Figure 6 it is apparent that a stark stylistic difference exists compared with the more locally produced examples shown in figures 3/4/5/7/8. The figure is identified as being most comparable to IA Uruk, specifically tied to examples found at the Eanna precinct, yet is also comparable with examples from Susa, Dumat al-Jandal, al-Madam, Rumeilah, Tell Khazneh, Thaj and Ain Jawan. Daems shares the belief that the finds at Uruk are associated with a function as toys, this is based on a large number of finds, yet does not speculate that such a similar function could also be a feature of the ed-Dur culture.<sup>10</sup> It would seem fitting that the figurines produced at a local level would be of more material and cultural value as opposed to imported productions, when this is linked with the stratified find located at the Shamash temple then symbolic significance seems to be a possible connection and a confirmation of the integral role of archaeology and anthropology in the creation of knowledge in proxies of time and place.<sup>11</sup>

Shifting focus towards the human figurines of ed-Dur then the consideration of the symbology of Figure 2 is of prominence in an attempt to establish a wider perspective on the role of figurines in the culture of NE Arabia. What is immediately apparent upon viewing Figure 2 is the stylistic pose with the hands interlocked in what is a common depiction of Sumerian statuettes

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<sup>9</sup> Costache, 2012, 165.

<sup>10</sup> Daems, 2004, 231-232.

<sup>11</sup> Hicks, (2016), 11.

from sites at Tell Asmar and Girsu from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE.<sup>12</sup> Figure 2 is an example of a moulded figure created through *false tongue relief* and is of an origin outside of the locality, such examples are consistent from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, Ur III through to the Seleuco-Parthian and in the Gulf region, a find at Qal'at al Bahrain from a second millennium context and a Hellenistic example from Falaika provide other similar, yet limited examples.<sup>13</sup> Upon considering such a human figurine in this context and tradition then it appears quite out of place at ed-Dur. The inclusion here of such a well-established human form is a clear embodiment of the use of art as symbolic speech in that the use of this visual projection remains in this ANE fringe 2,000 years after first becoming an established traditional form at sites like Tell Asmar, indeed a “recurrent use of universal symbols relating to the creative principle in the cosmos.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not immediately clear as to the gender identity of Figure 2 as the hands are neatly placed in front of the chest, the intent of this provokes some interesting thoughts as when we compare the pose of Figure 1 then it becomes fairly apparent as to the feminine nature of the figurine. Yet with the example from ed-Dur there appears somewhat of a gender fluidity, the circular object held in the hands is also an intriguing aspect of the figurine yet there is little clarity in its identity or purpose outside of suggesting tenuous links with camels. The inclusion of Figure 2 at ed-Dur is quite a conundrum as alongside the figurines discussed a range of other material indicates an occupation of the site prior to the onset of the Hellenistic era, this is especially the case with Figure 2 that could date from between the third millennium BCE to the Seleuco-Parthian era. Daems suggests that Figure 2 could be an example of a repurposed earlier religious tradition thereby providing attribution to a symbolic communicative context at the site linked with Shamash and in line with the suggested use of such a figure in Sumerian contexts as a deity or deity's servant.<sup>15</sup> The function of Figure 2 is difficult to establish due to the contextual constraints as well as it appearing as somewhat of an anomaly amongst the other fragmentary figurines. It is clear in my mind that this example holds weight as an example of cultural transmission that might allude to the crude analogy of ‘*one person's trash is another person's treasure.*’ Figure 2 has a symbolic votive function in its origins and a consistency in production that would fit with its inclusion at ed-Dur as being of symbolic importance to the emerging religious identity of a culture that has garnered influence from further afield via its increasing importance and inclusion in an ANE trading network.

### **Figurative Vs. Numismatic**

The level of ideology that relates to cultic symbology is perhaps best examined in the numismatic iconography that emerges and develops across the region. The site at Mleiha has provided archaeological proof of localised minting in the form of a press which further strengthens the case for the two sites operating in tandem with each other with the inclusion of Muweilah as a part of the route inland. Figure 9 shows the different elements of a scene that is

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<sup>12</sup> Steel, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Daems, 2004, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Naumberg, 1955, 445.

<sup>15</sup> Daems, 2004, 96, 99.

repeated across various coin series from the region, this stylistically develops with chronological progression as shown by Figure 10. The main question to be asked of the numismatic iconography, is what links can we make with the other material evidence to enhance our view of a culture centred around symbology? The elements within the coin scene that are repeated and developed could hold some significance in this consideration.

The symbology of the coins from ed-Dur and Mleiha provide consistency in their iconography, there are several elements to consider in terms of drawing and denotation styles: The palm tree motif, the equid and the seated figure. Potts has suggested in his extensive analyses of the spectrum of coins that the palm tree could link with Mleiha, this assumption being made due to the paucity of inscriptions.<sup>16</sup> This symbol could also link with Muweilah, an area noted for date palm cultivation, but certainly inland connotations can be concluded from the motif communicating the importance of the links between the sites. Considering the equid symbol is a significant shift in thinking away from the central role of the domestic dromedary and can be considered as an influence of the wider ANE where the use of horses is widespread thus highlighting the prominent role NE Arabia held within the wider network. The equid symbology also fits with possible interpretations of other fragmentary figurine surface finds at ed-Dur where a possible equid identity has been suggested by Daems.<sup>17</sup> This can be considered further in fragmented so-called “rider figurines” where human interaction with either a camel, horse or mule has been suggested.<sup>18</sup> Potts identifies that the ed-Dur site was originally occupied in IA II yet was less prominent for a period being “apparently unoccupied” before being reoccupied in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.<sup>19</sup> This reduction in cultural assemblage at the coastal site provides an interesting opportunity to consider a window of cultural shift from symbology linked with domestic animals towards the cultic focus inherent in the Hellenistic era.

The seated figure is undoubtedly aligned with the solar deity Shamash as is identified by the Aramaic inscriptions on the coins, yet there is also a consistent connection to a local ruler ‘Abi’el’ that holds significance across the numismatic evidence, another missing link in the picture is the detail of this famous ruler. The drawing style of the numismatic evidence varies in line with cultural change, yet the denotation remains somewhat of an unknown to a modern viewer and thus open to some theorising on communicative meaning and “dependent on the way the human visual system operates.”<sup>20</sup> The prominence placed upon Shamash is in line with the symbolic identities of the region, yet this symbolism would be interpreted differently if removed and placed in other connected regions such as Parthia in the Hellenistic era where connotations towards Zeus Aetophorus rather than Shamash would be drawn.<sup>21</sup> We can therefore consider that ideas around symbology in figurative and numismatic artforms in the NE Arabian region are inextricably linked with those of the wider ANE with a particular identity

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<sup>16</sup> Potts, 1998, 288.

<sup>17</sup> Daems, 2004, 233-234.

<sup>18</sup> Daems, 2004, 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> Potts, 1998, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Smith & Wilde, 2002, 412-413.

<sup>21</sup> Delrue, 2007, 80-81.

devolved from the head of the Persian Gulf region, southern Persia itself and through the establishment of caravans routes towards Thaj.

### **Conclusion**

Upon gaining an insight into the development of the use of artistic forms to evoke symbology at local, regional, and transregional level in NE Arabia then it reigns true that “Art as symbolic speech has played a major role in both the conscious and unconscious cultural expression.”<sup>22</sup> The periodic isolation of settlements in the desert environment provokes the idea that when a settlement is in a more solitary setting, then a focus on domestic life becomes the key reflection in artistic form. Indeed, in line with Gell’s affirmation via cognitive psychology that worship of inanimate objects intersects with the worship of biological fauna and human interactions.<sup>23</sup> The change and adaptation of a settlement into a part of a wider and more significant enterprise brings with it the influences that one would expect brought about through the transmission of ideas and new symbolic iconography, indeed in line with the temporality of landscape and requiring thought through the changes by archaeologist, anthropologist and artistic lenses.<sup>24</sup> The contrast from the IA II figurines through to the representations of the Hellenistic and beyond can be seen as being rooted in the environment yet developed through wider regional interaction. Perhaps the most intriguing of all discoveries that can illuminate symbolic communication at ed-Dur is displayed in Figure 11, a bowl of Levantine influence that originally emerged out of Nimrud during the same era as the function of the site at Muweilah in IA II (destruction of Nimrud in 612 BCE provides a *terminus ante quem*).<sup>25</sup> The existence of the ed-Dur bowl containing iconographic reference to its origins in the Levant yet also depicting local unique iconography is significant. The local parallels from Oman display no other such similar iconography to the ed-Dur bowl and neither of the finds provide significant links to the original 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century Levantine productions. Figure 11 provides us with a cynosure towards the transmissibility of symbolic iconography, ideas and manifestations centred around the significance of the communities that developed in NE Arabia in the first millennium BCE and evoking the age-old traditions of human experiences in the region.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Naumberg, 1955, 435.

<sup>23</sup> Gell, 1998, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Hicks, 2016, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Overlaet & Yule, 2018, 174-182.

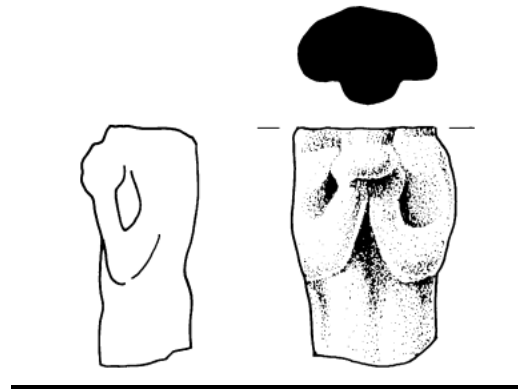
<sup>26</sup> Naumberg, 1955, 438.

**Figure 1**



Pillar Figurine, Room 369, Bade Museum at Pacific School of Religion.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 2**

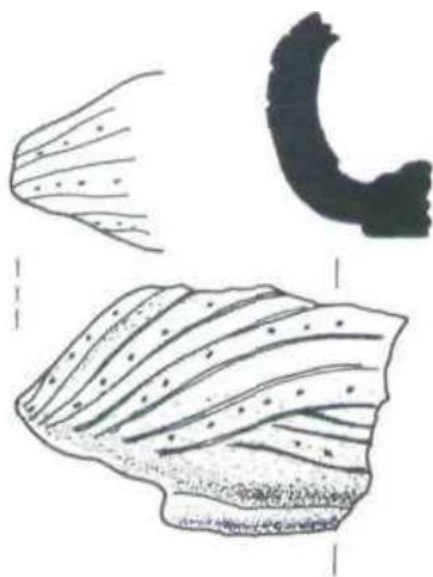


Mould-made human figurine was found loose within the excavated area (27), Ed Dur.<sup>28</sup>

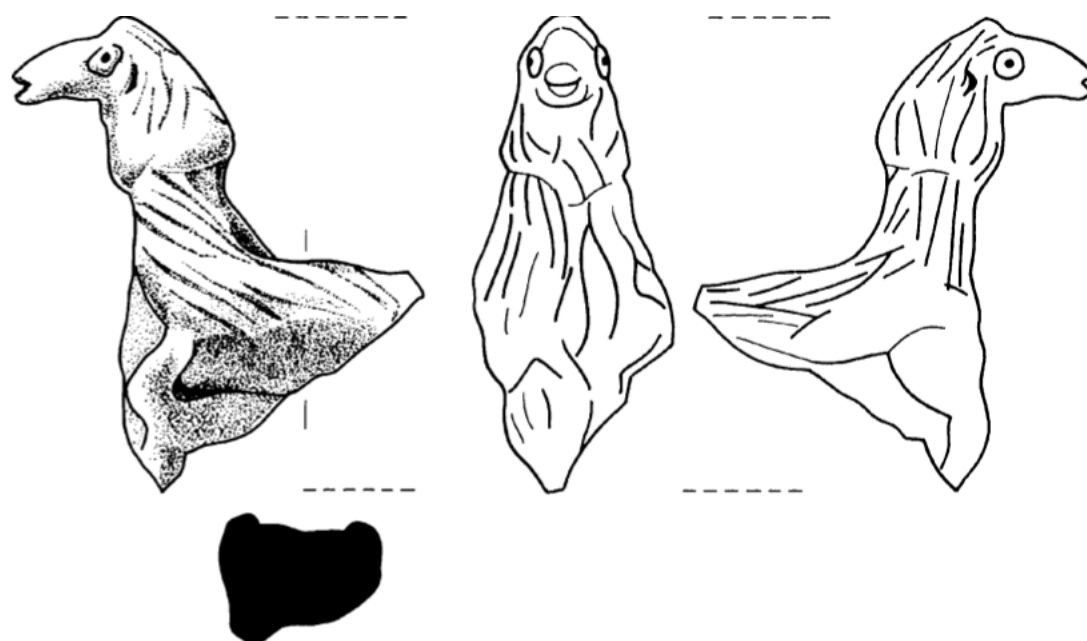
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<sup>27</sup> Brody, 2018, 216.

<sup>28</sup> Daems, 2004, 96.

**Figure 3**

Hand-made chest fragment of a camel.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 4**

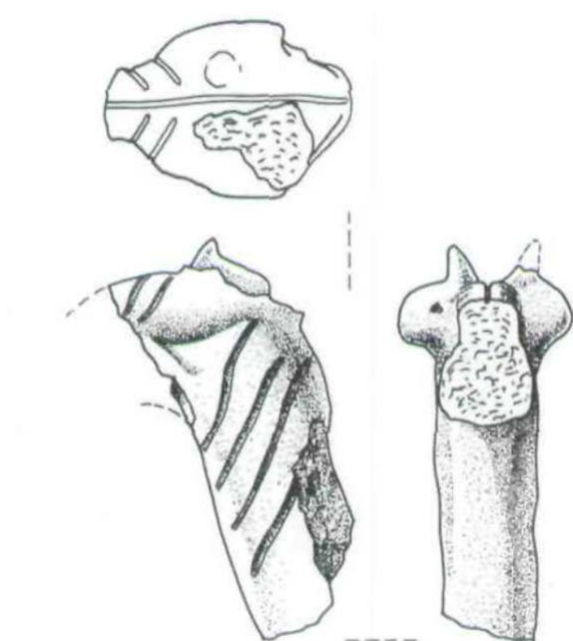
Hand-made neck fragment of a camel figurine.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Daems, 2004, 230-231.

<sup>30</sup> Daems, 2004, 231.

**Figure 5**

Hand-made neck fragment of a camel figurine.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 6**

Hand-made neck and chest fragment of a camel.<sup>32</sup>

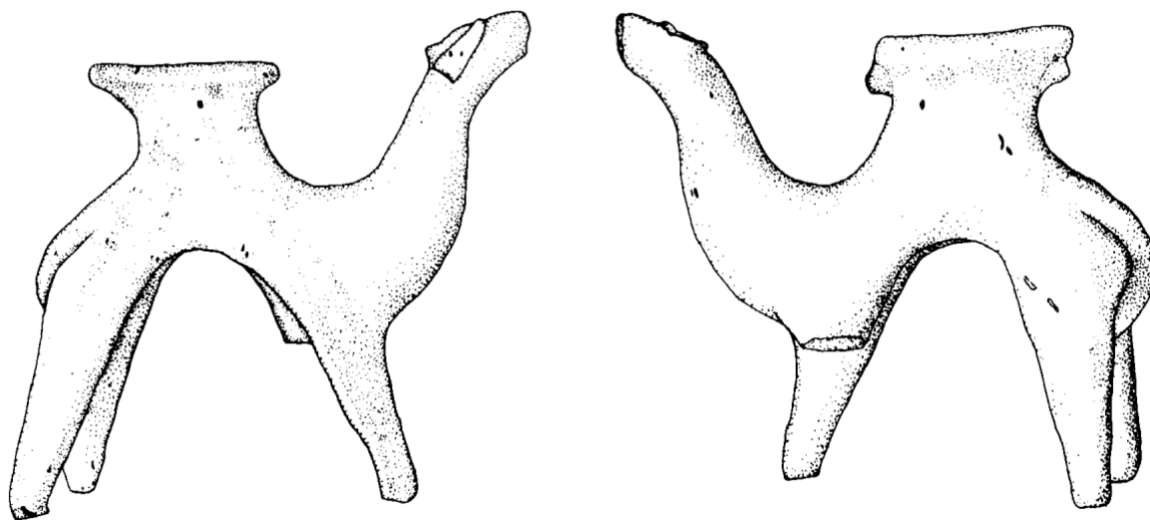
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<sup>31</sup> Daems, 2004, 231.

<sup>32</sup> Daems, 2004, 232.

**Figure 7**

Sharjah Archaeological Museum.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 8**

Camel Figurine from Area C, Muweilah, Scale 1:2.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Sharjah Archaeological Museum

<sup>34</sup> Magee, 1996, 210

**Figure 9**



Locally minted silver tetra drachma from Ed Dur.<sup>35</sup>

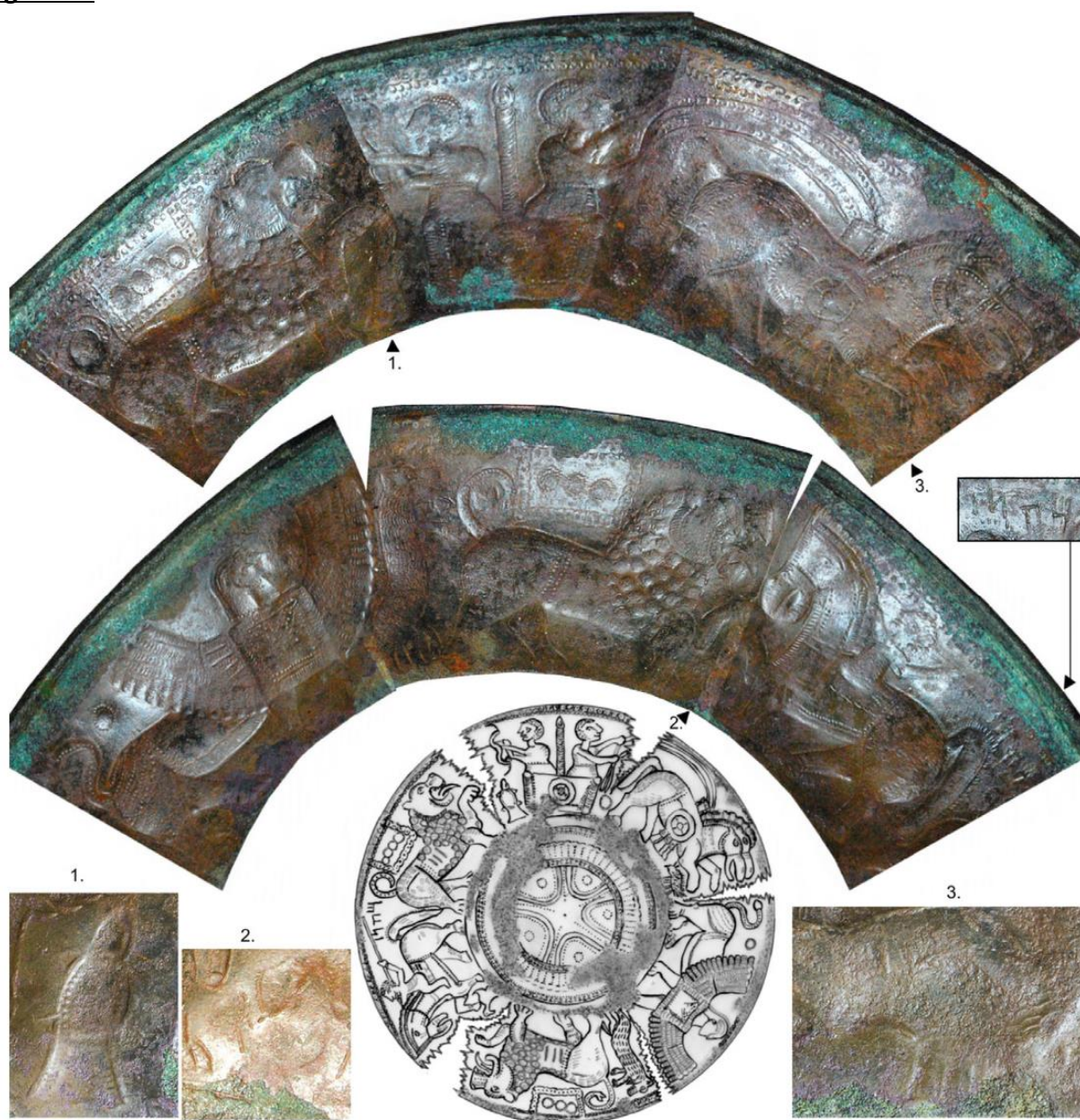
**Figure 10**



Imported/stylistically enhanced and developed Silver Tetra Drachma.

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<sup>35</sup> The National, 2015.

**Figure 11**

Drawing and photo mosaic of the ed-Dur bowl and details of the inscription and the animals inserted between the main figures.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Overlaet & Yule, 2018, 175.

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