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Fascination with the tiny: social negotiation through miniatures in Hellenistic Babylonia

Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper

Abstract

The tremendous diversity and variety of miniature objects in Hellenistic Babylonia reflects a social environment of intensive cross-cultural interaction and widespread change. Considering the aspect of miniaturization itself reveals how tiny things participated in this social transformation. Through their appealing and non-threatening materiality, miniatures established an intimate connection with their users that encouraged identity sharing and illusions of power over the outside world. Miniatures of performing bodies, such as musicians and theatrical masks, induced users to experiment with new enactments of Greek cultural identities. Soldiers, deities and other powerful bodies in miniature enabled fantasies of control over the wars and political upheavals endemic to Hellenistic Babylonia. Display-oriented figurines depicting interpersonal relationships encouraged self-identification and shaped new ideals of social behaviour. The miniature objects of Hellenistic Babylonia were more than just witnesses to social change; they were also participants in the processes of negotiating new identity norms for this multicultural society.

Keywords

Terracotta figurines; miniaturization theory; Hellenistic Babylonia; cross-cultural interaction; hybridity.

Introduction

Miniature objects, especially terracotta figurines, are among the most common forms of material culture found in the Hellenistic Babylonian archaeological record. Scholarship on similar cases of proliferation and diversification of miniatures in the ancient world suggests that the phenomenon reflects societies in transition and social identities in flux. I argue that archaeological theories of miniaturization can assist in revealing the means by which miniature objects contributed to social negotiation processes. Three case studies of miniature objects from Hellenistic Babylonia explore the multiple pathways by which miniatures co-participated with

people as active agents in the reshaping of social norms. When used in concert with archaeological and textual evidence, this miniaturization approach reveals that Hellenistic Babylonian society accepted a wide range of social identities, deployed in ways that facilitated mutual comprehension and experimentation across cultural lines.

Cross-cultural interaction and Hellenistic Babylonian miniatures

Hellenistic Babylonia, comprised of the Greek-influenced cultures of the Seleucid period (c. 330–140 BCE) and Parthian period (c. 140 BCE–200 CE) in southern Mesopotamia, was home to a complex, multicultural society. Its population came from a variety of cultural backgrounds: Greeks and Macedonians (often referred to together as ‘Greeks’) and Babylonians were the largest cultural groups, but Persians, West Semitic peoples and, eventually, Parthians also participated in these communities (Cohen 2013). Both material culture and textual records from Hellenistic Babylonia reveal a society defined and pervaded by cross-cultural interaction. Babylonian temples were rebuilt, while Greek structures, such as gymnasia and theatres, were also erected (Downey 1988; Hannestad and Potts 1990; Van der Spek 1987). The activities and performances that took place in those architectural spaces were often culturally hybrid (Ristvet 2014). Economic transactions recorded on cuneiform tablets document marriages of Greek-named individuals into elite Babylonian families (Doty 1978, 1988) and the subsequent births of multi-cultural descendants whose names reflect their complex cultural heritage (Langin-Hooper and Pearce 2014). Ceramic vessels indicate the blending of Greek and Babylonian foodways and the creation of hybrid cuisines (Petrie 2002; Valtz 1991; Westh-Hansen 2011). Stamp seals and signet rings feature a wide variety of Greek, Babylonian and hybrid forms and motifs (Wallenfels 1994; Westh-Hansen 2011).

Yet, among the vast evidence for cross-cultural interaction in Hellenistic Babylonia, the miniature objects are particularly noteworthy. Hybrid forms, motifs and styles are common throughout the Hellenistic Babylonian figurine corpus, indicating, as I have argued previously, sustained information exchange among craftsmen, as well as consumer demand for multicultural imagery (Langin-Hooper 2007, 2013; also Menegazzi 2012; Westh-Hansen 2011). Miniatures (primarily anthropomorphic figurines, but also including small-scale replicas of animals, buildings and other objects) are also among the most abundant forms of material culture surviving from Hellenistic Babylonia. When compared with previous Babylonian eras, the quantity and variety of miniature objects in the Hellenistic period is almost unparalleled.

I argue that this marked diversity of figurines can be understood both as a reflection of, and a means to perform, the substantial social changes of the Hellenistic period. By considering the aspect of miniaturization itself, I propose that these tiny objects had a particularly powerful role in the negotiation of personal identity within an environment of cross-cultural interaction and social transformation.

Diversity of miniature objects and social change

The correlation of a diversity of miniature objects with widespread social change, especially at the level of identity negotiation, has recently become a focus of archaeological inquiry. Gosden (2005, 203–5) attributes the diversity of small-scale objects in Roman Britain (first century BCE

through first century CE, in particular) to a fluidity and renegotiation of social relationships resulting from cultural interaction. Gosden (2011) proposes that this is in sharp contrast with periods of more fixed social roles, which show a corresponding rigidity in miniature object types. Similarly, Assante (2002, 19–20) correlated the rapid expansion of Old Babylonian terracotta plaque types with the social changes, such as community strife and the distancing of people from access to their gods, that resulted from the fall of the Ur III state and the migrations of the Amorites, beginning *c.* 2000 BCE.

In contrast, times when social identities were coalescing around rigid ideals, usually in order to form stable homogeneous communities in opposition to external forces, are marked by a similar homogeneity in the miniature objects. Wilson (2012) has recently argued that Judaeen pillar figurines of the eighth–seventh centuries BCE helped solidify a singular Judaeen identity in opposition to the impending threat of the Neo-Assyrians. I would argue that similar pressures towards unified group identity in the Neo-Babylonian heartland (*c.* sixth century BCE) were also expressed (and reinforced) through the standardization of the terracotta figurine tradition. Neo-Babylonian figurines, such as FM 228732¹ from Kish (Fig. 1) and BM B82-3-23-5179 from Borsippa (Fig. 2), are often so lacking in variety that they have nearly identical measurements and proportions, even when made using different moulds or in different cities (see also Klengel-Brandt and Cholidis 2006, 95–100; Ziegler 1962, No. 508; Legrain 1930, Nos. 38–43; Van Buren 1930, Nos. 223, 226).

Fitting the Hellenistic Babylonian miniatures into this model of identity formation suggests that their diversity of form is indicative of a time and place where identities were in flux. But it is necessary to explore why miniature objects respond to social change in order to establish the particulars of what kinds of identities were being renegotiated and with what result.

Fascination with the tiny

Tiny objects have an almost universal appeal. Their small size and delicacy draw in the viewer, encouraging inspection of intricate details. The tiniest of miniatures inspire wonder and amazement that anything could have been made so very small (Stewart 1984). Slightly larger miniatures, such as the figurines discussed in this article (which range in height from 6cm to 15.5cm), endearingly conform in size to the human hand's ability to grasp easily—provoking intrigued awe, as well as comforting familiarity, at the notion that a small-scale world could exist literally at one's fingertips. This alluring property of miniatures is a kind of 'enchantment' (Gell 1992, 47), a phenomenon that gives spectators of the miniature 'a sense of being drawn into another world' (Bailey 2005, 34). Indeed, miniatures are enchanting primarily because they play with scale in order to present an alternative version of reality. In this daydream of a life within a life (Bachelard [1958] 1994), real-looking things are small, so the human user feels that his or her body has been enlarged and empowered by comparison (Bailey 2005, 33). This potentially disorienting feeling of bodily dysmorphia is resolved through most miniature objects' invitation to touch and requirement of close visual inspection – both of which compel the user to bring the miniature into his or her personal space and allow the human hand to bridge the perceptual distance between real-life and small-scale worlds.

Following Bailey (2005, 2014) and Stewart (1984), I suggest that a particular intimacy is created by this close physical proximity to the human body, and that the miniature's role in



Figure 1 FM 228732. Mother and child figurine, terracotta, Neo-Babylonian, Kish. Height: 9.6cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the Field Museum, Chicago.

requiring that intimacy is foundational to its ability to function as a powerful tool for personal identity negotiation. The term ‘fascination’ used in this article expresses the mutual intimacy of miniature and user, in which each is attracted towards, and exercises power over, the other in a mutually entangled interaction (for use of the term ‘entanglement’ to express relationships between persons and things, see Hodder 2012; Thomas 1991; Gosden 2011; Renfrew 2001). Once intimacy is established, miniatures link to the social world through various means, three of which are explored in this article as they pertain to Hellenistic Babylonia: by their theatricality (first case study), by allowing their users the illusion of control over more powerful forces (second case study) and by acting as substitutes for the self (third case study). As I propose that



Figure 2 BM B82-3-23-5179. Mother and child figurine, terracotta, Neo-Babylonian, Borsippa. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the British Museum, London.

cross-cultural identity negotiations were the impetus behind the diversity and popularity of miniature objects in Hellenistic Babylonia, particular attention will be paid to the cultural identities expressed in each case study.

This miniaturization approach adds depth to the traditional ways in which miniatures are studied, rather than replacing or operating in mutual exclusion to such methodologies. Figurine function as deduced from archaeological context and formal analysis (i.e. votive dedication or child's toy) still provides valuable information about ancient social practices. Where I perceive the benefit of investigating miniaturism to lie is in the opportunity for close interrogation of the seemingly obvious (i.e. *why* are tiny human bodies appealing playthings, decorations and offerings?) in order to reveal the mechanisms by which miniature objects bore meaning in

ancient societies, thereby functioning successfully and convincingly in the contexts where they were used.

Practical concerns, born from constraints of manufacturing technology, material and display space, were undoubtedly influential. Yet, I suggest that such concerns should not be assumed to be the *only* reasons why miniatures were made. Other solutions to problems of limited resources were frequently found – such as local production of exotic imports or manufacture in cheaper materials – when the desired object affect could not be achieved on a miniature scale. Conversely, ancient miniatures could be used in elite contexts, such as palaces and temples, or side-by-side with larger representations – indicating that limiting financial expense was not a miniature’s only purpose. Indeed, miniaturization ‘does’ something more than just save space and resources: it creates intimate interactions and physical closeness (with the feelings of pleasure and power that accompany such proximities) in ways that life-size or larger objects simply cannot. It is the interrogation of this value-added aspect of miniaturization that I pursue here.

Performing in miniature

Interaction between a miniature object and its user is rarely at a distance; the object’s small details demand close visual and tactile inspection (Stewart 1984). Grootenboer (2012, 180) describes this as the ‘looking-touching of treasuring a miniature’ – a performative gesture and secretive gaze that creates intensified physical intimacy. This intimacy can be deeply private, and yet, paradoxically, it is also theatrical – and thus social. To imagine one’s body entering the small-scale world of the miniature is an act of dramatic play, to which the outside world is a constant referent (for, without the real-scale world, the efficacy of the miniature disappears) and audience (Stewart 1984). The more frequently and enthusiastically one touches a miniature, and the closer one keeps the miniature to one’s person, the greater the possibility that, at some point, one will be observed ‘in the act’ by others – granting social implications to this private drama.

This dualism of intimacy and theatricality can be explored especially through an examination of Hellenistic Babylonian figurines that evoke ideas of performance, through both their visual forms and their interactive qualities that particularly invite human touch. I take as a first example the puppet-like terracotta figurine KM 15632 (Fig. 3) that depicts a male performer, holding a musical instrument and dancing, which might have been a child’s toy or ritual object (Van Ingen 1939, 32). The style and form of the figure are culturally hybrid; the pointed beard derives from Mesopotamian tradition and the wreath worn on the head is Greek, while the non-specific costume and schematized lute instrument are (perhaps intentionally) vague in cultural origin (Van Ingen 1939, 25, 170). The interactivity of this ‘dancing’ figurine consists of suspended legs that can be moved by pulling on a string that loops down through the head and around a second string that holds the legs in place. This complicated internal rigging requires both of the user’s hands for successful operation of the puppet-like features: only by holding the body of the figurine with one hand and pulling the first string with the other hand can the user give controlled movement to the figurine’s legs. The necessity of two-handed manipulation recruits the user into collaborating with the figure’s ‘performance’. It is human touch – that gives life – perhaps the most intimate of all acts to the figurine’s legs, and enables their theatricality.



Figure 3 KM 15632. Puppet-like figurine, terracotta, Hellenistic, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height: 8.2cm. Photograph courtesy of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper.

Other Hellenistic Babylonian miniatures that recruit their users into supplying performances include miniatures with cut open mouths, which ‘interact’ by implying the production of sound. Miniature terracotta versions of theatrical masks, such as TM 1930.146 ([Fig. 4](#)), often have mouths that were delicately cut open after the clay was moulded; considerable care was



Figure 4 TM 1930.146. Miniature theatrical mask, terracotta, Hellenistic, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height: 9.8cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

expended to create a realistic appearance of sound-making capacity. The large protruding eyes and contorted facial features of TM 1930.146 would also have been attention-grabbing, and associate this miniature with Greek tragic theatre masks (Ristvet 2014, 6; Karvonen-Kannas 1995; for extended discussion of Greek and Mesopotamian miniature terracotta masks, see Carter 1987). Although such miniatures are not large enough to cover the human face completely, their form nevertheless evokes that bodily proximity – perhaps encouraging the user to ‘try on’ the mask, however unsuccessfully, or speak in response to the open, though voiceless, lips. Such performances of intimacy are simultaneously personal and theatrical.

A close consideration of the effects of miniaturization in these theatrical objects can inform upon their role in cross-cultural interaction and identity production in Hellenistic Babylonia. Their motifs would suggest a display of Greek identity, as theatrical and musical performances for entertainment were a largely Greek cultural phenomenon (although possibly with ritual associations in Hellenistic Babylonia; see Ristvet 2014). Figurines like KM 15632 and TM 1930.146 almost certainly imitated real-life Hellenistic entertainers, such as travelling musicians and ‘troupes of professional actors’ (Fox 1986, 395; also Arnott 1988, 1485–7). Yet the interactive and theatrical nature of these figurines indicates that they were more than just reflections of Greek traditions. As such miniatures invited their user to participate in a performance, I argue that they also encouraged their user to try on, and experiment with performing, Greek identity.

The archaeological context of these two figurines supports my assertion of their experimental, performative role in a landscape of cultural negotiation. Although terracotta figurines (including miniature performers and masks) were generally used within domestic spaces in Hellenistic Babylonia, both KM 15632 and TM 1930.146 were found in the area of Room 19 of a monumental building that was probably a Seleucid Heroon, dedicated to the Seleucid kings at

Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (Van Ingen 1939, 171, 306; Hopkins 1972). Room 19 adjoins at least one (Room 4), and possibly a second (Room 18), room with exterior doorways into the temple (Manasseh 1931, 11); additionally, much of Room 4 was paved with baked brick, indicating some level of public access (Downey 1988, 57). Because of the overtly political as well as religious associations of the Seleucid Heroon, this quasi-public space was likely not only to have shared the Hellenistic Babylonian ‘focus on visibility, spectacle and assembly’ in cultic practice (Ristvet 2014, 5), but also to have been an especially dynamic arena for cultural negotiation. KM 15632 and TM 1930.146 might have functioned in both. KM 15632 was found beneath Level IV of the Heroon; as Level IV dates to *c.* 290–143 BCE, this places KM 15632 in the earliest years of the city. This miniature mask, displayed and used in a public space (although possibly one that dates prior to the Heroon construction), invited ‘performances’, perhaps of the Seleucid royal ‘hero’ commemorated in the Heroon or a character from Greek tragedy. Yet, in taking on such roles, a more general performance of Greek cultural identity new to the region was also enacted and thus familiarized.

TM 1930.146 dates to another critical cultural moment: Level II, which in the Seleucid Heroon probably dates to the period after the revolt of 39–43 CE, when the people of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris waged (and lost) a ‘bitter struggle’ with the Parthians for autonomous status, on the basis of their Greek descent (Hopkins 1972, 13). Use and repair of the Heroon continued during the Parthian period. In the aftermath of Greek-Parthian tensions, the continued use of (at least partially) Greek material culture in a newly Parthian space speaks to both conflict and mediated engagement. In particular, the presence of a culturally hybrid figurine that could move, and which imitated a performer – the style and form of which bore evidence of prior, successful social negotiations between Greeks and Babylonians – may have invited Parthians to join the ‘performance’ of Seleucian identity, albeit on Greco-Babylonian terms.

Of all the terracotta figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia, theatre masks and dancing performers are among the most strongly connected with Greek culture. It seems telling that, rather than enforce cultural boundaries, these Greek-related miniatures allowed – and, indeed, almost compelled – the user to perform aspects of Greek identity in an experimental way that was both intimate and theatrical. Such miniatures provided avenues for the people of Hellenistic Babylonia, including those with no Greek heritage, to try out these cultural traditions and potentially integrate Greek practices into their own social norms.

Power over the miniature

Although miniatures can elicit intimate interactions and bodily performances from their users, they remain unassuming and non-threatening. Their diminutive scale suggests that they can be completely overwhelmed and dominated by their user, whose body feels enlarged and empowered in comparison (Bailey 2005, 67–8). While authority over tiny objects is seductive regardless of the subject matter depicted, it is particularly alluring when miniatures represent animal, human or supernatural beings that are usually more powerful – physically, cosmically, politically or socially – than the human user. Such miniatures make the stressful realities of life in the full-size real world more manageable by shrinking intimidating forces to tiny, controllable proportions.



Figure 5 KM 14496. Cavalry (armed horse-rider) figurine, terracotta, Hellenistic, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height: 6cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Horse-riders, who are often depicted as soldiers, were among the most popular terracotta figurines in Hellenistic Babylonia, and are an informative example of power dynamics with miniature objects (Van Ingen 1939, 27). KM 14496 (Fig. 5) depicts a terracotta horse-rider; he wears a skirted tunic and chlamys (Greek horseman's garment: Bonfante and Jaunzems 1988, 1390), grips a round shield and holds his right fist close to his thigh. This figurine elicits user



Figure 6 KM 14017 (rider) and TM 1929.98 (horse). Horse and rider figurines, posed as if in use, terracotta, Hellenistic, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height of KM 14017: 7.3cm. Height of TM 1929.98: 8.5cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

interaction in multiple ways: a pierced hole through the right fist allows for the insertion of a weapon (now missing) and the widely spread legs (now broken, but which would look out of proportion when the figurine was viewed alone; see Fig. 6) encourage the placement of the figurine on the back of a terracotta horse (for examples, see Van Ingen 1939, 315–19). Both tactile engagements would have invited the user to participate in the intimate drama of ‘riding’ a miniature horse into a miniature battle. Through this interaction, the user could pretend to be a soldier – or perhaps, empowered by his or her authoritatively large scale, the user could pretend to be the general who directs soldiers on the battlefield. Children might have used such figurines in militaristic play; for adults, such figurines could symbolize personal service in the military or apotropaic protection.

This reconstruction of both childhood and adult uses for such figurines is consistent with their archaeological contexts. Although sometimes discussed as toys (as in Hopkins 1972, 37), soldier and horsemen figurines were found in votive and domestic contexts, as well as occasionally in the graves of both adults and children (Van Ingen 1939, 27; Van Buren 1930, 165–6). KM 14496, in particular, was found between two graves buried beneath the floor of a residential space at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (Room 97, Section B, Block G6); each grave housed the remains of a male adolescent or young man. The skeleton in Grave No. 202 is described as a ‘youth’ based on the lack of wisdom teeth; however, the considerable length of the femur (43cm) would indicate full adult height. The skeleton in Grave No. 203 was estimated to be 15 years old, and measures 30cm at the femur (Yeivin 1930–6). In this funerary association with young adults it seems unlikely that KM 14496 functioned exclusively as a toy. Indeed, the diversity of archaeological contexts for horse-rider figurines across Hellenistic Babylonia suggests a shared need for such miniatures throughout a broad segment of the population.

In seeking an explanation for this widespread appeal of horse-rider figurines, I return to the power that miniatures grant people, by virtue of our larger scale, to be masters over their tiny worlds. The user of the horse-rider figurine can choose whether to put the miniature soldier on the horse (and thus send him into battle), or to leave the horse in his stable – power usually possessed only by kings and generals. Taking physical control over a miniature soldier and his horse also miniaturizes the battle – as well as any dangerous enemies – making such conflicts and threats seem smaller and more understandable. By bringing the battle ‘to life’ in the intimate tactile immediacy of the miniature horse-rider, the historical reality of any particular battle is erased; instead, the potential is opened for new narratives to be played out within the ‘presentness’ of miniature scale (Stewart 1984, 60). This illusion of power over the wars that commonly afflicted Hellenistic Babylonia might have been especially seductive, and could explain these figurines’ popularity.

Yet, in spite of the political and militaristic tensions which these figurines expose, such miniature horse-riders do not provide evidence of strain between cultural groups. KM 14496 appears culturally hybrid, with a round shield and tunic derived from Near Eastern tradition, but wearing a Greek chlamys. It was also made using Greek double-mould manufacturing techniques and detailed modelling style (Uhlenbrock 1990). Other mixtures of military garments, armaments and styles were common throughout the Hellenistic Babylonian horse-rider figurine corpus, and these combinations are not strongly correlated with any particular cultural group (as noted by Van Ingen 1939, 27). Instead of the performance of culture (and perhaps cross-cultural outreach) explored in the first case study, KM 14496 and other horse-rider figurines seem to

have encouraged feelings of empowerment that had little, if any, connection with cultural identities.

The self in miniature

The case studies presented thus far have focused on figurine engagements facilitated primarily by touch and enlivened through real movement. Yet ‘dancing’ or ‘horse riding’ in miniature is distinctly different from reality; unlike their figurine counterparts, horse-riders do not mount their horses by flying in from above and theatrical performers are not animated by means of a string. The apparatus needed to make such figurines functional also distances the miniature from the real action depicted, imperilling (or at least making more oblique) the user’s self-identification with the object. Users are inspired to see themselves as performing *with* the miniature dancer or *controlling* the horse-rider, not necessarily *being* either one. In contrast, the ‘fascination with the tiny’ experience could be markedly different with Hellenistic Babylonian miniatures designed to stand alone, without needing to be held in the hand. Their solid, well-supported bases and vertical stability suggests that exhibition and display, to either the user or others (or both), was their principal focus. Rather than creating an interaction that existed primarily in the fantasy world of the miniature, such figurines could serve as iconic referents to real interactions and identities being performed in the large-scale social world.

Figurines that represent common interpersonal relationships, such as that between a mother and her child, can assist in an exploration of the social potency of self-identification with figurines. BM 91800 (Fig. 7), a terracotta figurine from Babylon, depicts a seated adult woman cradling an infant child. Her left arm supports the child’s reclining body, while her right hand offers her breast for the child to nurse. Yet, in spite of this tender interaction, the woman is situated in a strongly frontal posture and her face looks directly out to meet the viewer’s gaze, rather than that of her child. The woman sits on a backless chair or stool, and her feet rest on a raised platform (which could, but need not necessarily, indicate divine status: Karvonen-Kannas 1995, 54–9); together, these furniture elements were made into a broad base, which easily supports the figurine in an upright display position. The back of the figurine is rounded (adding to the vertical stability of the object) but lacks modelling (Fig. 8). Frontally focused visual consideration (as opposed to tactile interaction) by the user is implied throughout these features, which present a relationship between two people (mother and child) as something designed primarily to be observed from the outside, rather than enacted or experienced from within. Indeed, the mother’s bodily posture and gaze seem to offer a greater connection with the user than with her own infant. The user is invited to participate in this intimate drama not by exploring it with his or her hands, but rather by identifying with the tiny mother figure in the way that one identifies with the gaze returned by one’s own mirrored reflection.

A similar mode of visual consumption can be deduced for PM 9450 (Fig. 9), a terracotta figurine from Nippur, which depicts an embrace between heterosexual lovers, possibly a married couple. As with BM 91800, PM 9450 portrays an intimate relationship in a surprisingly frontal and open manner. Posed as if sharing a kiss, the lips of the two figures do not quite seem to touch; rather, the viewer is allowed to see almost the entire face of each. Although the bodies should be facing one another, the figures stand in parallel formation, opening each of their torsos to visual inspection. The awkwardness of this pose is apparent in the unnatural lengthening of



Figure 7 Front view of BM 91800. Mother and child figurine, terracotta, Hellenistic, Babylon. Height: 15.5cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the British Museum, London.

each figure's arms from the elbow to the wrist, which enables each figure's outside arm to reach across both bodies to clasp the other figure's shoulder. Openness to external vision is thus privileged even over internal coherency, and intimacy with the viewer is privileged over intimacy within the lovers' miniature world.

The focal points for this visual consumption, in both BM 91800 and PM 9450, are the social identities represented, which the miniature has made available for materialized viewing by separating them from the messy lived reality of complete personhood and complex interpersonal relationships (Bailey 2005, 146). In each figurine, the presence of the second figure (the infant or



Figure 8 Back view of BM 91800. Mother and child figurine, terracotta, Hellenistic, Babylon. Height: 15.5cm. Photograph by author; courtesy of the British Museum, London.

the intimate partner) serves as a prop to identify, as well as simplify, the social role depicted – to make the portrayal of ‘mother’ or ‘spouse’ clearly recognizable and, as such, essentialized. The visual similarities that each of these figurines shares with depictions of deities – Isis/Harpokrates or Kybele/Attis for BM 91800 (although this figurine lacks a crown or other unambiguous goddess attributes: Tran 1973, 33; Karvonen-Kannas 1995, 58) and Eros and Psyche for PM 9450 (although this figurine lacks their characteristic wings and tight embrace, as seen in other figurines, Karvonen-Kannas 1995, No. 257, Van Ingen 1939, No. 844 and statuary: Pollitt 1986, 128) – further contributed to this effect. Although similar to divine groupings, each figurine also bears sufficient differences from unambiguous representations of gods that it is only the



Figure 9 PM 9450. Embracing couple figurine, terracotta, Hellenistic, Nippur. Height: 9.3cm. Photograph by author; edited by Jerry Langin-Hooper; courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

relationship *between* the figures, rather than the identities *of* the figures, that can be conclusively ascertained. By association with divine paradigms, these terracotta relationships were modelled as ideal (Stewart 1996, 143; Stansbury-O'Donnell 2006, 67–88; Winter 1996, 19–23, 2000). Such idealized yet relatable manifestations of social personas could be easily taken up (if one shared sufficient personal characteristics, such as motherhood, with the figurine), experimented with and presented to the outside world, using the figurine itself, with its display-oriented materiality, as mediator.

This display of idealized identities thus takes on ramifications beyond the personal; indeed, miniature representations of commonly shared identities and interpersonal relationships could saturate communities with ‘particular image/senses’ of social existence (Bailey 2005, 199). As commoditized, externalized packages of social identities, miniature objects provided visual cues about acceptable and available roles within society – educating the viewer about the social space allowed to him or her (Gosden 2005, 197). Miniatures also participated in reshaping that social space; if people no longer found a particular miniaturized identity to be relevant or compelling, it could be altered or remade in future figurines to more adequately reflect contemporary norms. The new miniature embodiment of social ideals would, in turn, influence the development of new human identities among its users. This recurring process of human and object agency is similar to what Hodder (2012, 88) refers to as ‘chains of entrapment’, in which the cycle of human dependence on objects means that objects can demand certain behaviours and identities from humans, and vice versa.

It is revealing that these embodied essences of everyday social existences in Hellenistic Babylonia seem to have been culturally hybrid. The soft naturalism of BM 91800, as well as the slight contraposto posture (with the figure's left leg drawn back), indicates Greek influence. Yet, the pose of cradling a child in the figure's left arm and holding the infant across the body evokes Neo-Babylonian figurines (such as Figs 1 and 2) and, indeed, the general subject matter of breastfeeding has Babylonian origins, as it was 'taboo in Greek art' prior to the Hellenistic period (Bahrani 2001, 92). The female figure's double-knobbed hairstyle, which was derived from Hellenistic Greek statues of Aphrodite with a topknot or bow of hair (Smith 1991, 80), is enlarged and flattened here in a common Babylonian adaptation. The figurine's manufacture was similarly hybrid, combining the double-mould technique utilized primarily by Greek coroplasts (Higgins 1967) with the frontal posture and unmodelled backside characteristic of Babylonian tradition. PM 9450 is also culturally hybrid yet in a differing combination: each figure wears Greek costuming (especially the wreaths), but the figurine is made in the Babylonian single-mould technique.

Both miniature objects present an ideal of interpersonal relationships that bridge cultural boundaries. Yet, they present this message through material combinations of features that are uniquely specific to the individual object – perhaps implying that individual relationships could also be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, within a broader context of cross-cultural fluidity. Such 'custom-made' multiculturalism is also reflected in the textual evidence for blended families in Hellenistic Babylonia (Doty 1978, 1988). Multicultural children born from marriages between Greeks and Babylonians were given names from a multi-lingual selection, with the cultural affiliations of the names chosen often differing among the siblings or cousins of the same family (Langin-Hooper and Pearce 2014; also Boiy 2005; Sherwin-White 1983). As in the figurines, the development of multiculturalism within these family relationships (as reflected in the naming practices) seems to have been individually negotiated from among a plethora of broadly cross-cultural options.

Conclusion

This article explored how the miniature quality of Hellenistic Babylonian figurines itself contributed to the way these objects operated within social life. Miniatures establish intimate connections with their users, enabling these objects to act as powerful tools in personal identity negotiation. The particular identity issues with which the figurines presented in this article engaged, such as performance, family relationships and military participation, were remarkably diverse. Yet all provided similar evidence of cross-cultural interaction, in which Greek and Babylonian features, traditions and cultural norms were combined and mediated, in order to create objects that were accessible to members of both groups. This active multiculturalism suggests that the numerous and varied Hellenistic Babylonian miniatures were not simply reflections of an environment of social transformation – they were also participants within it. By presenting a miniature version of society in which many identities were possible, but *all* identities bridged or transcended the divide between cultural groups, the figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia helped to shape new, multicultural social norms.

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Note

- 1 Abbreviations used before museum numbers in this article are as follows: BM (British Museum, London), FM (Field Museum, Chicago), KM (Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), PM (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia) and TM (Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio; objects with this designation are currently held in loan-to-transfer agreement by the Kelsey Museum).

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