

Research Portfolio on Halaf Neolithic Figurine from Chagar Bazar, Syria

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Figure 1: Clay Figurine from Halaf, Syria. Dated 6000-5000BC. Currently in the British Museum, London.

The art object that will be examined here is a Halaf Neolithic clay figurine from Chagar Bazar, Syria that has been dated to 6000BC-5000BC and is currently in the British Museum, London.¹ ‘Halaf’ refers to the culture that spread across areas of northern Iraq, Syria and southern Turkey, characterised by their intricately decorated pottery and rounded buildings which were mistakenly dubbed ‘*tholoi*’ due to their resemblance to the rounded tombs of Greece.² At a time where strict, hierarchical chiefdoms were becoming the norm, communication between different settlements grew necessary and the exchange of goods was practiced.³ The importance of this when considering the figurine shall be returned to later in this work. Additionally, other objects such as cylinder seals and other clay figurine types were also commonly found in Halaf sites, including the figurine this portfolio focuses on.⁴ Through this portfolio, I shall argue that this particular Halaf figurine has agency, both from the person who created her and her own agency, that interacts with the viewer and elicits response, drawing on Campbell’s theory of the ‘captivating’ agency of art.⁵ She engages the viewer, drawing them to her, and communicates to the observer an understanding of the female form and sexuality that she represents.

The figurine (Figure 1) depicts a seated woman in the nude, holding her arms under her breasts. Her arms and legs are thick and rounded and she has been decorated with black paint. Sadly, she is missing her head and left hand which we assume were broken during her lifetime as no fragmented limbs are recorded in the excavation notes.⁶ There is also little anatomical detail in the way of fingers or feet, the creator instead choosing to leave them globular. Bailey argues that

¹ British Museum number: 125381

² Campbell (1992) 182.

³ Akkermans (2000) 43.

⁴ Campbell (1992) 182.

⁵ Campbell (2001) 118.

⁶ Mallowan (1936) 19.

miniature figurines are not trying to be an accurate representation of a body but rather are the result of humans experimenting with material and concepts of the body, which may provide a reason for this lack of detail.⁷ This figurine follows this pattern, something that shall be explored later in this portfolio.

The figurine, excavated by Mallowan in the 1930s, was found among other female figurines, figurines depicting animals (a horse and vulture are named), flints, beads, and various metal and bone objects, all seemingly deposited randomly and carelessly.⁸ Mallowan immediately brands these female figurines ‘Mother Goddesses’, which implies a religious use or meaning, a theory which is both reductive and simplistic.⁹ Whilst the gender bias here is unsurprising considering the time when Mallowan was writing, it diminishes female sexuality and agency by assuming it must be connected with fertility.¹⁰ The other objects found alongside the figurine appear largely secular by nature and no mention is made by Mallowan of a shrine or altar at the site of excavation. So why is it assumed that this woman must be a goddess? The agency of the figurine comes from her naked body, an untempered representation of female sexuality and the female form. This is what the object communicates to the viewer, engaging them with the figurine and creating social interaction between the two. Figurines were a way for prehistoric individuals to conceptualise themselves and their body - by making themselves in clay, they had a physical, tactile way of engaging with the body on their own terms.¹¹ As Bailey argues, figurines are representations *for* the people they were

⁷ Bailey (2005) 29.

⁸ Mallowan (1935) 19-28.

⁹ Mallowan (1935) 19-20.

¹⁰ Belcher (2016) 922; Bailey (1994) 321-322.

¹¹ Bailey (2012) 245.

made by and not *of*, which allows for their agency to be communicated.¹² It is unlikely, therefore, that they were a representation of a worshipped deity. The figurine itself is passive, with the intention placed upon it by the artist lending it agency until it is witnessed by us, the viewers.¹³ We are drawn in by the object, fascinated (or, to draw from Gell, *enchanted*) by her pose and her markings and begin to make inferences.¹⁴ This inherently social connection allows the figurine to “communicate that which is not communicable in any other way”, with this specific figurine a way for us to witness the exploration of the body and female form by a prehistoric group.¹⁵ This does not mean that this interpretation was homogeneous across different settlements or time periods - definitions of sexuality and gender may have changed frequently and we should view this figurine as only one type of depiction.¹⁶

With this in mind, the condition in which the figurine was found should also be considered. Her broken head and hand, as well as the worn condition of the paint, suggests she was handled often and without much care or thought, continuously being picked up, carried around and touched.¹⁷ The paint is especially worn on the breasts and her feet, implying these were the parts that were rubbed the most. The breasts are the part of her that are quintessentially female, deliberately chosen to be included when the figurine was made. It is their inclusion that makes them all the more important. Choosing to craft them required conscious thought about the female form and what represented it, before transferring that into a physical medium. That their painted surface

¹² Bailey (2012) 245.

¹³ Campbell (2001) 118.

¹⁴ Gell (1992) 46; Campbell (2001) 123.

¹⁵ Campbell (2001) 122.

¹⁶ Bailey (2012) 247-248.

¹⁷ Bailey (2005) 27.

is worn indicates a habitual handling of that area of her body, a continuous return to a specific part of her. By viewing this figurine as a representation of female sexuality and power and as an attempt to understand and create the female form as it was understood by the people of Chagar Bazar, the continuous handling of her breasts is understandable. It suggests a connection with a familiar and distinct part of the lady. Though her deified nature is uncertain, she does conjure feelings of safety in a matriarchal way, with habit forcing those handling her to return to a part of her that nurtures. The ancient interaction with this object becomes entangled with the modern interaction of viewing it, exemplifying the agency of the figurine as a social connection is created.

Furthermore, her seated position allows her to have a flat base and so she could be placed upon a surface - a table or a shelf - where she was continuously interacted with and considered a durable object within the household. That she was found among multiple random items alongside other female figurines of varying conditions demonstrates a casualness to the ancient reception of these figurines. They were discarded together in what we may view as a 'rubbish bin'. After their long life, in which they may have been accidentally broken through overuse, they were simply discarded, and a new one would be created. A revered 'Mother Goddess' statue would surely not be treated with such indifference and the context this figurine was found in argues rather convincingly against Mallowan's fertility goddess theory, as it implies a more mundane use. The agency of the creator, or rather their intended purpose, is seen in the treatment and handling of these figurines. These actions are witnessed in the archaeological record, and in turn provide the figurine with a captivating aura that draws us as viewers in.

Additionally, the figurine bears painted decoration that can be seen in the faded darker patches on her body. These wrap around her ankles, her breasts, and her hips. The paint is worn and so the exact design is difficult to determine but we know that generally it consisted of curves and



Figure 2: Decoration on a bowl/pot sherd from Tell Halaf, Syria. Now in the British Museum, London.

geometric shapes.¹⁸ For example, her ankles feature decoration in the form of thick stripes, whilst on her breasts wavy lines work their way up to her collarbones. Geometric decoration like this is characteristic of the time as much of the pottery discovered in Halaf sites feature the same thing.¹⁹ The pot shown in Figure 2 shows black paint being used in the same way to create straight and

¹⁸ Bailey (2005) 26.

¹⁹ Becker (2017) 59.



Figure 3: Map showing the geographical spread of Halaf culture in the ancient near east. Chagar Bazar and Tell Halaf have been underlined.

wavy lines around the bowl.²⁰ It is contemporary to the figurine in date but they were found at different sites; the bowl sherd was found at Tell Halaf which is not far from Chagar Bazar, where the figurine was discovered (see Figure 3). That the wares of two different sites should yield the same painted motif suggests interactions between these settlements were common and perhaps encouraged, leading to the geographical expansion of Halaf culture.²¹ These kinds of geometric shapes were evidently a popular way to decorate objects but we should consider why. Pottery of this

²⁰ British Museum number: 1920,1211.13

²¹ Campbell (1992) 184; Akkermans (2000) 43, 51.

time also featured animals, usually bucrania or sheep, though creatures such as snakes and leopards were included too.²² At a time where hunting animals for food was an integral part of life, and a rather crucial concept, it makes sense that the objects that this food would be cooked in, stored in, or eaten from should feature them.²³ Human figures were only depicted holding bows and hunting - it was clearly more popular for humans to be made three-dimensional in clay, a much more tactile way of viewing the body.²⁴

The geometric shapes may have no utilitarian purpose or they may be representing something bigger. As similar markings are found on figurines, representations of the body for these people, we must question their significance. Mallowan makes the suggestion that the markings upon the figurines are representing dress or perhaps even tattoos.²⁵ Considering this, Joyce argues that dress or decoration of the body should be seen as non-verbal communication from the wearer, conveying messages that are understood by the viewer.²⁶ With the figurine embodying a way of understanding the female form, choosing to paint on clothing may have been a deliberate choice by the maker to communicate certain messages, pushing their agency into the passive figurine. However, none of the female figurines appear to be more elaborately decorated than another, implying they are a representation of an everyday woman, in everyday clothes, *for* these everyday women and thus the 'social communication' of her decoration may not be so complex.²⁷ This is also seen in their similar treatment and deposition, suggesting that the figurines present women of equal standing and further disproving the 'Mother Goddess' theory pushed by Mallowan. The addition of clothing could be a

²² Erdalkiran (2017) 152.

²³ Erdalkiran (2017) 159.

²⁴ Erdalkiran (2017) 159.

²⁵ Mallowan (1936) 19.

²⁶ Joyce (2005) 142.

²⁷ Belcher (2016) 933-935 for examples of other figures found at Chagar Bazar; Mallowan (1936) 19-20.

way of adding to her femininity or an aid in comprehending the female form and the body as a central point in the world. It may even be considered an attempt to grant modesty to the figurine. The tattoos follow accordingly, though they are a much more permanent way of communicating identity and social standing, and may simply be a contribution to the understanding of the human body.²⁸ They are an integral part of the body, as clothes are, and as such are included on a figurine that works to understand the bodily concept. We, as modern day viewers, find ourselves intrigued by these decorations just as Mallowan was, and are captivated by the agency exuded from the figurines. As Joyce comments, the body is a “site of lived experience” and this is represented upon the figurine in its painted decoration.²⁹

The lived in body is being explored, alongside the power of female sexuality, a notion which is communicated to us through the deliberate inclusions of large breasts and elaborate decoration. As mentioned before, the worn surface of these areas suggest their importance as they were points on the body that were returned to and handled repetitively. The figurines are a physical record of how these communities saw themselves as anthropomorphic beings and they turned to clay as a way of experimenting with this concept to figure out themselves and their place in the anthropomorphic world.³⁰

²⁸ Joyce (2005) 145.

²⁹ Joyce (2005) 151.

³⁰ Belcher (2016) 943-944.

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Accessed on: February 15th 2023.

Figure 2: Picture showing decoration on a bowl/pot sherd from Tell Halaf, Syria. Now in the British Museum, London. From: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1920-1211-13 Accessed on: March 2nd 2023.

Figure 3: A map showing the geographical spread of Halaf culture in the ancient near east. (Belcher (2016) fig. 1).