

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE DELL'ANTICHITÀ

SCIENZE DELL'ANTICHITÀ

17 *2011*

EDIZIONI QUASAR

MARCO RAMAZZOTTI

AESTHETIC AND COGNITIVE REPORT ON ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CLAY
FIGURINES, BASED ON SOME EARLY SYRIAN AND OLD SYRIAN RECORDS
DISCOVERED AT EBLA - TELL MARDIKH (SYRIA)

1. INTRODUCTION

In the ancient myths of the Near East, clay is the matter, matrix and at the same time body of the shape, as we say, figure and substance of Nature¹. Clay gives the possibility replicating the one in many, the copy and the similar, the unique and the diverse. Nevertheless, when we pass from this metaphor, at home in mythopoeic thought,² and survey the daily life of ancient ‘peoples’³ to consider the physical properties of clay, our attention is captured by its plastic

¹ The College de France (55 *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* 2009) and British Museum (6th *International Conference on the Archaeology of Ancient Near East* 2010) workshops on the ‘Manufacture and Analysis of Cuneiform Tablets’ provided me with the occasion to prepare this synthesis on Early and Middle Bronze Clay figurines from Ebla, bringing together different ideas, concepts and materials that I began to collect since the interdisciplinary congress “Argilla. Storie di Terra Cruda” organized by me and by Giovanni Greco in Rome (25-26 may 2007) edited by Ramazzotti - Greco 2011 (Artemide, Roma) (RAMAZZOTTI - GRECO 2011). For this reason, I would like to thank Paolo Matthiae, Director of the Ebla Archaeological Mission, for giving me the opportunity of studying these unpublished objects coming from the Ebla archaeological excavations and for his valuable participation in our congress held in the *Museo della Centrale Montemartini* (Ostiense, Rome) and in the *Sala Pietro da Cortona* (Campidoglio, Rome); Maria Giovann Biga for her participation in the congress “Argilla”, for her continuous and professional contribution to the exploration of the Near Eastern clay tablet world and for inviting me to the Paris and London workshops, where I had the opportunity for to compare, refine and verify cognitive interpretation of the Mesopotamian clay as

‘matter of creation’ and - of course - Gabriella Scandone Matthiae for her scientific and personal support of our common and ancient interest on the Ebla Clay Figurines as ‘popular idols’.

² On the literary, aesthetic and cognitive concept of mythopoeic thoughts, see FRANKFORT 1948; FRANKFORT 1950; GROENEWEGEN - FRANKFORT 1951; JACOBSEN 1970; FRANKFORT 1992a, pp. 3-21; FRANKFORT 1992b, pp. 47-69; FRANKFORT *et al.* 1946; 1949; MATTHIAE 1984; MATTHIAE 2003a, pp. 3-14; SELZ 2011, pp. 49-70. On the religious, cosmological and literary texts related to themythopoeic thoughts in ancient Mesopotamia, see KRAMER 1964, pp. 149-142; PETTINATO 1971; KRAMER 1972; JACOBSEN 1976; LAMBERT 1975, pp. 42-65; BOTTÉRO - KRAMER 1992; FOSTER 1993; LAMBERT 1995, pp. 1825-1835; BLACK *et al.* 2004.

³ The historical reconstruction of the so-called popular thought from ancient Near Eastern archaeological documents is of course both a political and technical problem. I’m convinced that the clay figurines will constitute an important set of information to build up a “common sense” interpretation of the data and to limit an historical reconstruction exclusively linked to the rhetoric of ancient kingships. Here the use of “people” as an ambitious and complex heuristic category is intended to pay homage to Samuel Noah Kramer (KRAMER 1964) and Peter Roger

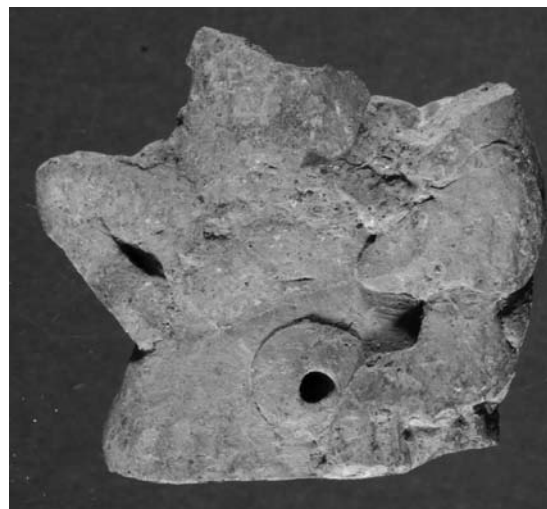


Fig. 1b – TM92P290 Fragmentary Clay Figurine from Ebla, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum, Syria).

Fig. 1a – Snake-headed Human Figurine, Ubaid Period (Baghdad Museum, Iraq).

essence and we see the infinite forms that every lump of earth can take as if the clod of earth gave the hands the capacities of creation, alteration and replication.

In this ancient repetition of manual creation, and in their organization, some art historians have seen «*La Vie des formes*» and, on the other hand, since cultures have always been considered the more material the more they are tied to the Earth and the more they are able to touch and model the earth. Material, in any case, is an ambiguous word, difficult to understand outside its human historiography⁴. Some people who are more sensitive (or simply lucky) see the material as the opposite of the ideal, others regard material as the first stage in the evolution of techniques, and still others view the moulded clay as an expression of techniques which can transform anything into meaningful expression⁵.

Stuart Moorey (MOOREY 2003) philologically and archaeologically pioneering works that tried to explore the natural limit of the textual, material and figurative data.

⁴ On the anthropomorphic interpretations of the so-called 'material culture' concept in modern and

contemporary archaeological thought, see RAMAZZOTTI 2010a, pp. 50-87.

⁵ For an historiography of ancient Near Eastern clay, and for an interdisciplinary overview of the world of clay in the modern and ancient cultures see RAMAZZOTTI - GRECO 2011.

2. THE ARCHAIC MYTHS OF CLAY: CREATION AND «CLAY-ACTION»⁶

In the world of Sumer and Akkad, clay always appears as the material and the ideal of every creation process. It is, in other words, a unique coexistence of values, ethics and technologies that compose allusive and metaphorical images, historical and meta-historical subjects. Clay is indeed a plastic material. However, both in Sumerian (*im*) and Akkadian (*Tittu*), clay is not linguistically distinguished from mud. Regarding the Sumerian tradition of the poem *Enki and Ninmakh*, Nammu, the mother of all the gods, pulls out clay from the Apsû (The Primeval Ocean)⁷ in order to put it in the matrix of the first man; this matrix, elaborated by Enki *Nu.dím.mud*⁸, the artificer, will be used to make man a replicable «automaton» assigned to serve the gods, to obtain food for them and to placate their wrath⁹. In this myth, the animation of the automaton through the life-giving breath of Ninmakh seems to create a solution for Enki's laziness¹⁰. This laziness is apparently incompatible with his well-known official status Enki 'the wise'; but perhaps it is evident here that in the mythogenesis every contradiction – in a vein that seems to us quite ironical – should be resolved: wisdom and guile are universal values of the intellect, but they are also able to invent human slavery¹¹. Later, in the *Curse of Akkad*¹², one of the most potent invectives against those whose sacrilege dared to injure the Ekur of Nippur (the Temple of Enlil founded at the beginning of creation) is: «May your clay return to its Apsû; may it be clay cursed by Enki! ». Afterwards, in the *Atrambasis*¹³, the Akkadian poem, the birth goddess *Belet-ili* is given instructions by Ea to mix the flesh and blood of a god with clay to produce mankind; and so the clay itself will be kneaded with the flesh and the blood of a sacrificed god, as if to emphasize a sort of «sacrifice for life». Finally, the element of the Apsû-Clay is eliminated in the *Enuma Elish*¹⁴ epic and mankind will be created with the blood of Kingu's corpse, the sacrificed rebel god; it seems

⁶ This neologism intends to translate an Italian word (*Cretazione*), invented by a child who was observed and analysed while working with clay by different psychotherapists, and has been adopted for the title of an important essay written by the psychologist Gabriella Trani (TRANI 2002).

⁷ The Apsû is usually means as the 'Primeval Ocean' (GREEN 1978, pp. 127-167; SJÖBERG 1994, p. 202; HOROWITZ 1998, p. 335) sustaining the earthly and royal order (RAMAZZOTTI 2009b, pp. 54-59), although the etymology of the word is still uncertain (LAMBERT 1997, pp. 75-77).

⁸ The clay of the Apsû is plastic since the primeval ocean waters give the earth plasticity and so different images and shapes can be moulded. In this specific character of the Apsû we should understand the epithet *Nu.dím.mud* (image fashioner, god of shaping) and this attribute made Enki the protection of artisans and craftsmen. See JACOBSEN 1976, p. 111; CAVIGNEAUX - KREBERNIK 1998-2001, p. 607.

⁹ Anyway, as suggested by Kramer we can't ex-

clude a particular version of the myth centred on the spontaneous birth of the man from the Earth, in a second moment Enlil: «broke through the cast of the earth with his newly created pickaxe so that the first man developed below could "sprout forth"». KRAMER 1974, p. 5.

¹⁰ See KRAMER 1970, pp. 103-110; KRAMER - MAIER 1989, pp. 3-10; COOPER 1989, pp. 87-89; BLACK - GREEN 1992, pp. 75-76; FARBER - FLÜGGE 1995, pp. 287-292; HALLO 1996, pp. 231-234; ESPAK 2006.

¹¹ Enki's first effort at human creation produces a visibly defective human his creatures are imperfect; but the god will decree a specific destiny for his creatures (ME) and these ME will be existential archetypes of the human being. See CASTELLINO 1959, pp. 25-32; OBERHUBER 1963, pp. 3-16; FARBER - FLÜGGE 1973; MATTHIAE 1984, pp. 7-37.

¹² COOPER 1983.

¹³ LAMBERT - MILLARD 1999; WILCKE 1999, pp. 63-112.

¹⁴ MAUL 2000, pp. 23-34.

here that clay, «matter of creation»¹⁵, has been transfigured into the «vital essence» of humanity, acquiring a function and a role that are easily understandable if analyzed from the point of view of «original sin» as the foundation of human life.

Modeling clay was used for the first Neolithic moulded skull: the skull was removed from the head of the dead and replaced by a plaster mask that reproduced the image and attributes, modifying and embellishing some details (Jericho, Palestine)¹⁶. The sun-dried clay statues of Ayn Ghazal in Jordan are exceptional discoveries of coroplastic that is already statuary, a coroplastic that does not have miniature proportions, but was discovered in contexts where there were miniature handmade human and animal figurines¹⁷. The clay mask that transfigures the face of the dead and the clay reproductions of the family are archetypes, which with plastic manipulation imitated the dead with features from life, therefore the passage between the two; and the *mask*¹⁸ and *copy* should be considered two of the most important nodes in the later consecration rites of divine statues¹⁹. In any case, the link between these theoretical, literary and aesthetic notions can be identified in the Samarra figurines from Niniveh and Choga Mami, in the so-called Neolithic «Pillar Figurines» from Tell Bouqras, in the Yarim Tepe II anthropomorphic vessels and later on in the southern Mesopotamian *Figurines Ophidiennes* dated to the end of the Ubaid period and coming from Uruk, Oueili, Uqair, Ubayd, Ur and Eridu.

Indeed, these are a homogenous group of 20 hybrid figurines discovered out of their original contexts, except for the Ur and Eridu copies that were found in inhumations. The long heads, the almond-shaped eyes, the large shoulders and the long legs are formal indexes of the transformation of a human's natural proportions; these elements make the body a model for a metamorphic change that in this case has been associated with a primeval aspect of Ninkhizida, the snake-lord of the Earth and the Netherworld²⁰. But the metamorphism of these figurines, their human and animal morphology, should not be recognized *a posteriori*; indeed, these shapes reveal something more than a vague exaggeration of deities' attributes or, if you prefer, too much divine exaggeration of human attributes: «the driving emotion in the making of these images was fear of bodily harm and an effort to find protection through the representation of the relevant superhuman figure»²¹. The metamorphism of these subjects depends on controlled manipulation of some details that could have had ideographic values (the faces, the eyes, the shoulders, the legs and the arms); and this kind of alteration can be preserved through millennia as technique capable of making the metamorphic clay figurines a sort of prosthesis of ostensible reality²².

¹⁵ For the clay as «matter of creation» in the ancient Mesopotamia thought see RAMAZZOTTI in press d.

¹⁶ STROUHAL 1973; FEREMBACH 1977, pp. 179-181; BIENERT 1991, pp. 9-23; RAMAZZOTTI 2003, pp. 444-448.

¹⁷ ROLLEFSON 1986, pp. 45-52.

¹⁸ Statues were also objects of a recurrent renewal rites, like the annual replacement of the silver mask that covered the statue of Kura at Ebla during the Early Syrian period. See ARCHI 2005, pp. 81-100;

ARCHI 2010, pp. 3-17.

¹⁹ For a general introduction to the aesthetic of the mask and copy in the ancient Mesopotamian communicative systems, related to the composite statues see RAMAZZOTTI 2010b, pp. 309-326.

²⁰ BRENIQUET 2001, pp. 45-55.

²¹ PORADA 1995a, p. 10.

²² Interpretation of the ancient Near East clay figurines is strictly related to the very different 'anthro-

3. NEAR EASTERN COROPLASTIC SHAPES: MODELING AND IDEOGRAPHY

Beginning with the Samarra, Halaf and Ubaid Periods, the additional elements, moulded, painted, impressed and incised on the clay surfaces, are the center of the figure; they are kinds of ideogramas adapted to a model that seems standardized. These applications, impressions and incisions are so typical of Sumerian image perception and cognition that, observing one single part both of the miniature composite statues and clay figurines of the Uruk period, it is possible to reconstruct the semantic unity of the subjects (*pars pro toto*): the wheel of a ceremonial wagon, the instrument of a musician, the representative standard, the sex of the man and the woman, the human or deity's headgear and so on.

The use of the «Agricultural Revolution» to fix the times and modes of the clay figurines mass production should not be forgotten or neglected²³, but the «Symbolic Revolution» behind these images seems extended over such a large geographical area that it is inappropriate to suggest a historical and cultural epicenter for human clay reproduction as an aesthetic aptitude²⁴. This aptitude implies organizing shapes by integrating and aggregating elements as signs. At the same time, the high variability of attributions and subjects represented makes questionable the hypothesis that most ancient coroplastic was related to the first administra-



Fig. 2a. – TM83G148: Fragmentary Clay Figurine from Ebla, Early Syrian Period (Idlib Museum).



Fig. 2b – TM84G94: Fragmentary Clay Figurine from Ebla, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum).

pomorphic' methods used for their classification: VAN BUREN 1931; UCKO 1962, pp. 38-54; ELLIS 1967, pp. 51-61; KLENGEL-BRANDT 1967, pp. 19-28; BARRELET 1968; VAN BUREN 1969; HROUDA - BRAUN-HOLZINGER 1981, pp. 61-67; GREEN 1983, pp. 87-96; PINCH 1983, pp. 405-414; REINER 1988; GIMBUTAS 1989; WIGGERMAN 1986; 1992; SYCKET 1992b, pp. 183-196; BRENTIJES 1994, pp. 15-18; KLENGEL-BRANDT 1995, pp. 114-118; UCKO 1996, pp. 300-304; TRINGHAM - CONKEY 1998; BRAUN- HOLZINGER 1999, pp. 149-172; PRUSS 2000, pp. 51-63; PRUSS - NOVÁK 2000, pp. 84-195; MALUL 2001, pp. 353-367; ASSANTE

2002, pp. 1-29; NIGRO 2002a, pp. 1-11; KING-UNDERHILL 2002, pp. 707-714; READE 2002, pp. 174-164; MARCHETTI 2003, pp. 247-283; NAKAMURA 2004, pp. 11-25; MOOREY 2005; KUIJT - CHESSON 2005, pp. 152-174; MEYER 2008, pp. 349-363; ABUSCH 2008, pp. 373-385; MARCHETTI 2009, pp. 279-296; PARADISO - COLANTONI 2010, pp. 323-330; RAMAZZOTTI 2012, pp. 53-72; RAMAZZOTTI 2011d.

²³ CAUVIN 1994, CAUVIN 2000.

²⁴ For the specific character of this 'aesthetic aptitude' in the Southeastern Europe Neolithic see BAILEY 2005.

tive processes²⁵ or dedicated to the mother-god, to the fecundity of nature and inspired by the nuclear family, intended as a microcosm of the entire society²⁶.

If so, why the high frequency of clay figurines in the pre-urban archeological contexts and in the seminomadic, nomads and other scattered modern ethnographic groups? Why also the clay imitation of games, furnishings, hybrids (Pl. VI: 1-2), omens and – more generally – many subjects and objects that frequently fall outside the control of our classificatory categories (Pl. IV: 1-2)? In these reproductions an inner geometry is continuously translated but in different shapes; the clothes are diversified but not exclusively; the roles are alluded but not the hierarchy; sexual attributes are almost always emphasized but not sexuality²⁷. This fact connotes a *status quo* that exemplifies the infinite diversities of *being-there / there-being (dasein)*; moreover, agglutination and incision of signs on standard clay models was the most useful, technical and cognitive way to select from the collective memory and to transfer to a living communication system the people's action, the people's desire for deeper consolidated images of authorities and institutions²⁸. Starting from the clay replica of humankind, the silent or non-verbal miniature *replica* of physical and metaphysical beings, it will be possible also to distinguish a figurative world from a non-figurative world, to reduce the world to a hand scale, and to make the hand's action on the clay an extension of human capabilities on the present, on the past and on the future, bypassing any written 'dramatic' distinction between peoples and authorities.

In fact, in the ancient Near East we can identify historically what we call "image" in our western culture many centuries later²⁹, probably since the Old Akkadian period when the word *salmu* translated the Sumerian term ALAM which denote indifferently representations of gods, kings and human beings, as well as demons³⁰.

²⁵ See in particular SCHMANDT-BESSERAT 1992, 1996.

²⁶ See in particular GIMBUTAS 1982, 1989, 1991. For a different model and quite an opposing view see UCKO 1968, where the cultic role of the mother-goddess has been strongly criticised.

²⁷ On a more specific 'gender approach' on the Near East clay figurines see ASSANTE 2006, p. 183; PRUSS 2002, pp. 537-545; McCAFFREY 2002, pp. 379-391; GARCIA-VENTURA - LÓPEZ-BERTRAN 2010, pp. 739-749.

²⁸ On the specifically cognitive character of the ancient Mesopotamian figurative system see RAMAZZOTTI 2010b, pp. 309-326; RAMAZZOTTI 2012, pp. 53-72.

²⁹ On the ancient visual communication systems in Babylonian cultures see JACOBSEN 1987, pp. 1-11; COOPER 1990, pp. 109-116; MICHALOWSKI 1990, pp. 53-

69; WINTER 1995, pp. 2569-2580; POSTGATE 1994, pp. 176-184; FRANKFORT 1992b, pp. 47-69; PORADA 1995b, pp. 2695-2714; AMIET 1997, pp. 321-337; WALKER-DICK 1999, pp. 55-122; WINTER 2002, pp. 3-28; BAHRANI 2002, pp. 15-22; WINTER 2003, pp. 403-421; BAHRANI 2003; RAMAZZOTTI 2005, pp. 511-565; WINTER 2007, pp. 117-142; MATTHIAE 2007, pp. 270-311; RAMAZZOTTI 2007, pp. 7-20; BAHRANI 2008, pp. 155-170; RAMAZZOTTI 2011a, pp. 19-37.

³⁰ And will be the only definition both for the statues and for the stelae (sum. NA-RŪ-A; Akk. from Sumerian loan: narû). For the *stelae* concept in the Ebla documents see ARCHI 1998, pp. 15-24. For the association of this linguistic concept with the conclusion of a Semitization process and the birth of a more allusive, symbolic, affective and quite metaphysical syncretic vision of humans, of the kingships and of the gods see RAMAZZOTTI in press a.

4. THE EARLY SYRIAN AND OLD SYRIAN COROPLASTIC FUNCTIONS:

Miniatures, Fractures and Cuts

The miniature, or the idea of reproducing every subject of the imagination on a miniature scale, seems ahistorical character of perception³¹, which in the Near Eastern visual cultures (and it would be better to say not only in the Near Eastern visual cultures) becomes a tactile experience. In this specific sense the Ebla clay figurines represent an extraordinary and unique *corpus* among many other Near Eastern and Egyptian catalogues (collections and repertoires)³² of original and contextual documents strictly related both chronologically and geographically to the Mesopotamia *milieu* (Fig. 1b; Pl. I: 2-3; Pl. II: 1-5)³³. The Early Syrian³⁴ handmade clay figurines of Ebla form a highly complex network of diversified baked and unbaked clay figurines comparable to many similar images from Northern Syrian urban centers³⁵; but, in observing these materials, it is also possible to select some subjects that could be considered 'figurative archetypes' of the first Mesopotamian state societies³⁶ adapted to the contextual economic conditions of secondary state formation (Fig. 1b; Pl. I: 2)³⁷. Since in the Sumerian world the modeling of clay was a technique to mould the earth that pre-exists the reproduction of copies, in the second half of the third millennium we find in Ebla a local translation of the Sumerian tradition of miniature reproductions of human beings and the appearance of very different shapes and styles, contemporaneous to the Early Dynastic symbolic tradition, which

³¹ For the logic of perception see DAMEROW 1996; DAMEROW 1998, pp. 247-269.

³² Catalogues of the ancient Near Eastern clay figurines from Syria and Mesopotamia: HEUZÉY 1882; LEGRAIN 1930; VAN BUREN 1930; OPIFICIUS 1961; ZIEGLER 1962; UCKO 1968; VAN BUREN 1969; KLENGEL-BRANDT 1978; LITTAUER - CROWEL 1979; BADRE 1980; WREDE 1990, pp. 215-301; WREDE 1991, pp. 151-177; PRUSS 1996; SPYCKET 1992a; AUERBACH 1994; D'AMORE 1998, pp. 75-98; MARCHETTI 2001; MOOREY 2005; TEETER 2010; PINNOCK 2011.

³³ MATTHIAE 1965, pp. 81-103; BAFFI 1979, pp. 9-18; MARCHETTI 2000a, pp. 839-867; PINNOCK 2000, pp. 127-134; MATTHIAE 2001, pp. 272-281; MARCHETTI 2009, pp. 279-296; LISELLA 2010, pp. 821-836; PARADISO - COLANTONI 2010, pp. 323-330.

³⁴ For the relative chronology of the Early Syrian Period based on historical, cultural and material cultural data see MAZZONI 1985, pp. 3-8; MATTHIAE 1989, pp. 163-169; ASTOUR 1992, pp. 23-39; MAZZONI 2002, pp. 69-96; ARCHI - BIGA 2003, pp. 1-44; MATTHIAE 2009, pp. 165-204.

³⁵ Typologies for Early Syrian clay figurines have been proposed for Hama J 1-6 (FUGMANN 1958; BADRE 1980, p. 180), for the Orontes area (BADRE 1980, pp. 52-54), for Tell Afis (SCANDONE MATTHIAE 1998, pp. 385-414; SCANDONE MATTHIAE 2002, pp. 16-18), for Umm

el Marra (PETTY 2007) for Tell Halawa and Tell Chuera (MEYER 2008, pp. 349-363), for Selenkahiye (LIEBOWITZ 1988), for Tell Mumbaka-Ekalte (CZICHON - WERNER 1998), for Tell es-Sweyhat (HOLLAND 1976, pp. 36-60), for Habuba Kebira (HEINRICH *et al.* 1970, pp. 27-85). The Ebla clay figurines have been only preliminarily analysed by MARCHETTI 2001, pp. 27-32; 62-64; 85-87 and PEYRONEL 2008, pp. 787-806.

³⁶ The aneurystic concept of archetype in the Analytical Psychology and in the History of Religions has been proposed by FRANKFORT 1992b, pp. 47-69.

³⁷ The Secondary State Formation of northern Mesopotamia and Syria is usually considered as based on a more intensive and osmotic contact between nomads, semi-nomads and sedentary groups. See RAMAZZOTTI 2003, pp. 15-71; RAMAZZOTTI 2009a, pp. 193-202. The problem of the imported images identification could partially be solved with the chemical-physical analysis of the figurine's clay provenience. See RAMAZZOTTI 2011c, pp. 16-19. In any case the local imitation of foreigners figurative models must be intended also as a specific aspect of the Ebla aesthetic culture, so deeply related to the lexical and conceptual translation of the Sumerian and Early Dynastic written and visual documents. See RAMAZZOTTI 2010b, pp. 309-326.

we can typologically distinguish as Early Syrian, on the basis of their distinctive iconographic characteristics (*Fig. 2a*; Pl. I: 1, 3; Pl. II: 1, 2, 3)³⁸.

However, during the Old Syrian³⁹ period these differences are reduced to uniform series⁴⁰ not restricted to the female, male or animal clay figurines as such (Pl. II: 5; Pl. III: 1-4; Pl. IV: 3; Pl. V: 1, 4; Pl. VI: 2), but – as we'll see – also to their specific breakages. In some cases, these breakages are linked to post-depositional stratigraphic causes: the semidried, dried or well-baked clay rolls between layers and the more sensitive parts break.

But the evident regularity of some breaks, the very rapid incisions of specific parts and the regular absence of selected parts of the bodies show us that some examples were intentionally broken with a single stroke or a number of rapid strokes⁴¹; and those specific fractures, slashes and cuts could be related to apothropaic rites, probably involving consecration and / or donation (Pl. I: 4; Pl. III: 3, 4; Pl. IV: 4)⁴². In any case, it is too simplistic to ascribe any specific break to a request, offer, or question, applying the *ex voto* classical concept to this dimension so remote from western world's spirituality, just as it is inappropriate to justify every cut, slash and break with the deterministic laws of stratigraphy. Until now any discussion of the original function of clay figurines is highly speculative, even if many archaeologists, philologists and art historians have pointed out that we can't exclude an apotropaic use of the figurine to banish evil⁴³ and/or a religious use strictly related to temple activities⁴⁴ or to divinatory practices⁴⁵.

If so, at the same time, we can't exclude as well a possible 'popular emulation' of the making of images as a sort of an adaptive dynamic system continuously organized around

³⁸ The precious Early Syrian expressive figurines, more conceptually and technologically linked to contemporary composite, miniature statues, are replaced by less varied images of the Old Syrian period, that only in some exceptional cases can be considered fine handmade products. At the same time, the heads, the applications and breaks in the appendages of the Old Syrian coroplastic became a distinctive character of the new mass production. We can suppose for this production not only faster and almost industrial baking that reduced the quality of products, but also a specific role probably related to some pervasive religious cults as the Ishtar cult was at Ebla and Hadad at Alep. See MATTHIAE 2003b, pp. 381-402.

³⁹ For the relative chronology of the Old Syrian Period based on historical, cultural and material cultural data see NIGRO 2002b, pp. 297-328; MATTHIAE 2006c, pp. 39-51; MARCHETTI 2007, pp. 247-253; MATTHIAE 2007, pp. 6-33; PINNOCK 2007, pp. 457-472.

⁴⁰ MARCHETTI 2000a, pp. 839-867; MARCHETTI 2000b, pp. 117-132; MARCHETTI 2001; MARCHETTI 2003, pp. 390-420; MARCHETTI 2007, pp. 247-283; MARCHETTI 2009, pp. 279-296; DI MICHELE 2010, pp. 145-154. In the Old Syrian period we observe a reduction in

the variability of subjects represented, strong formalization of the well known models and impressive growth. We now know that this mass production was established in the Old Syrian city, a city that contains more than five sacred places and royal buildings where there was strong religious and political conformity, ideologically oriented.

⁴¹ For some examples of these intentional breakages in the Ebla Middle Bronze clay figurines see the recent microscope analysis in RAMAZZOTTI 2011c, pp. 16-19.

⁴² Such was the ritual of the fragmentary stone figurines from Keros dated to an Early Cycladic sanctuary and recently discovered and discussed by Renfrew in occasion of the Balzan Prize for Prehistoric Archaeology conference: "*Cognitive Archaeology from Theory to Practice: The Early Cycladic Sanctuary at Keros*" held on 30 November 2011 at the 'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei' (Rome).

⁴³ See MEYER 2008, pp. 349-363.

⁴⁴ See MARCHETTI - NIGRO 1997, pp. 1-44; MARCHETTI - NIGRO 2000, pp. 245-287.

⁴⁵ MARCHETTI 2009, pp. 279-296.

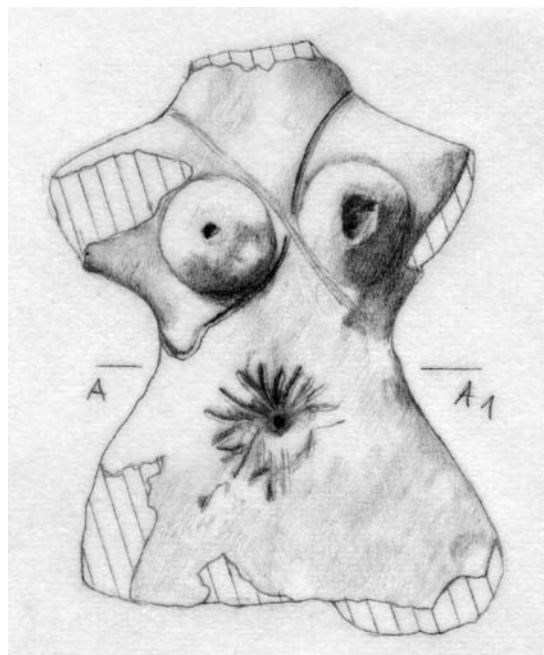
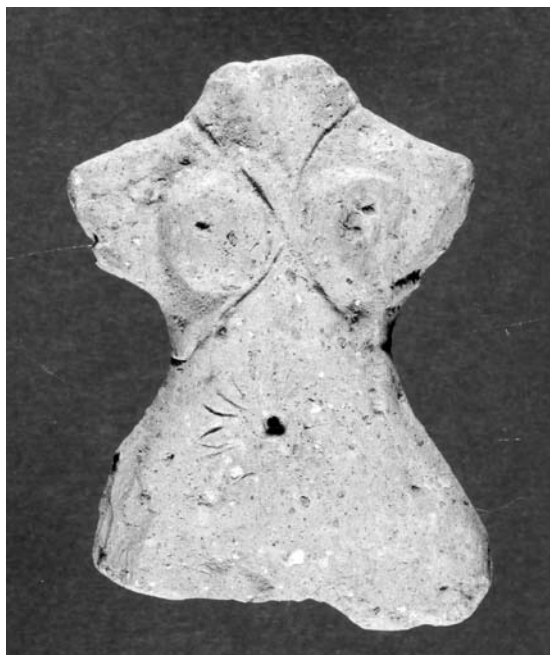


Fig. 3a-b – TM95P584: fractures and cuts on a fragmentary clay figurine from Ebla, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum).

the rhetoric of the government authorities, or their spirit (*Geist*)⁴⁶. However, at Ebla during the Early Syrian period, the spatial distribution of the clay figurines can't be associated with specific cult monuments, and their diffusion in the Royal Palace G of Ebla⁴⁷ – since the rare Early Bronze clay figurines discovered in the enormous Temple of the Rock⁴⁸ seem not to be accidental – demonstrates a sort of affinity of this miniature world with kingship more than with the world of the people⁴⁹.

On the contrary, the spatial distribution of clay figurines during the Old Syrian Period is widely diffused, although it has been possible to underline a specific and symbolic proximity among some clay figurines and many cultic places. These new spatial organizations could reveal a new aspect of the political characters of the city⁵⁰ in which the figurines became “clay idols of

⁴⁶ Many inductions of the cult images and “many rituals of constitution and installation” are attested in Mesopotamia since the end of the third Millennium, and later on the “mouth-washing” and “mouth-opening” ritual were created in order to transform the humanly manufactured icon into a living deity; moreover a special verb meaning ‘to give birth’ (sum. tud; akk. waladu) was used for the creation of the statue, rather than the verb ‘to make’ (dim₂). See WALKER - DICK 1999, pp. 55-122; WINTER 2000a, pp. 129-162.

⁴⁷ PEYRONEL 2008, pp. 787-806.

⁴⁸ MATTHIAE 2006b, pp. 447-493.

⁴⁹ If we have to hypothesize for which occasions the Early Syrian clay figurines were realized we can consider the documented existence of some institutional rituals as official occasions as well to realize clay reproductions, such as the monkey sacrifice at Mari and the equids sacrifice at Umm al-Marra. On the particular importance of equids in Syria during the Early Bronze Age Period see BIGA 2007, pp. 125-151; for the supposed equids ritual dated to the Early Bronze Age period see SCHWARTZ 2006, pp. 603-641; SCHWARTZ 2007, pp. 39-68.

⁵⁰ One future project for the Ebla clay figurine corpus is the findspot localization on a Geographic

people”, diffused everywhere as ‘*Volksgeister*’ media of an inner communication inspired and sustained by popular belief, sometimes intimate without explicit ideological constraints of the authorities, other times quite instinctive reproduction of the real world as mysterious requests or questions for the venerated deities⁵¹.

5. THE AESTHETICS OF EARLY SYRIAN AND OLD SYRIAN COROPLASTIC: REPRODUCTIONS, AUTOMATIONS AND PREVISION

Since the theistic world view of the ancient Orient did not allow for chance or hazard, this meant that everything was an expression of the divine, creative will which manifested itself in the world again and again. This form of thinking made it possible to draw conclusions about the divine plans for the future on the basis of exact observations of the ever changing material world.
MAUL 2007, p. 362.

During the Early Dynastic and the Early Syrian period (with the Second Urban Revolution⁵²) in Mesopotamia and in Syria the quantity and variability of the clay figurines grew, while the hybridism recognized during the Halaf and Ubaid period⁵³ disappears and the more naturalistic representations of the Uruk – Jemdet Nasr period decrease⁵⁴. At Ebla in the Old Syrian period, however, the figurines are highly structured; the moulded categories are related to the divided spheres of hybrid humans and animals and are elaborated on shared a model with standard proportions and dimensions⁵⁵. In other words, the technique of the agglutinated, composite, moulded signs on the wide variety of Early Syrian subjects is followed by closer imitations of the real and/or metaphysical world during the Old Syrian period. This transformation starts with a rapid change, probably with the collapse of the Early Syrian centralized political power, at the beginning of the Akkadian period, when the aggressive expansion of the Sargonic royal household at the expense of many local institutions

Information System map in order to classify spatially the distributions of the main clay figurine types and fractures, since could be a semantic relation among the clay figurines, their identity and their breakages. See RAMAZZOTTI in press b.

⁵¹ For the archaeological context and the interpretation of the unbaked clay figurines discovered in the *Favissa* P. 9301 of the Middle Bronze Age Temple HH2 see LISELLA 2010, pp. 821-836.

⁵² On the political and economical character of the ‘Second Urban Revolution’ settlement system in northern Mesopotamia see RAMAZZOTTI 2002, pp. 651-752; RAMAZZOTTI 2003, pp. 15-71; RAMAZZOTTI 2009a, pp. 193-202.

⁵³ For the hybrid clay figurines dated to the Ha-

laf and Ubaid period see BRENIQUET 2001, pp. 45-55.

⁵⁴ For the naturalistic clay representation in miniature scale of the Uruk period from Warka see ZIEGLER 1962; WREDE 1990, pp. 215-301; WREDE 1991; WREDE 2003.

⁵⁵ These tendencies show us an aesthetic program of society and while the constraints imposed on the variability of the pre-existent classes are perceptible, during the Old Syrian period the human subjects are fashioned on standard schemes emphasizing their dimensions, proportions and sometimes their social roles. MATTHIAE 1965, pp. 81-103; BAFFI 1979, pp. 9-18; MARCHETTI 2000a, pp. 839-867; MARCHETTI 2000b, pp. 117-132; MARCHETTI 2001; MARCHETTI 2007, pp. 247-283.

is attested⁵⁶. In this period – after the «Fall»⁵⁷ – we have some rare and particular painted clay figurines that cannot be automatically assigned to the previous tradition (Pl- II: 4)⁵⁸.

In any case, with the beginning of the Old Syrian period the human, animal and divine figures proliferate, but in the *habitus* of this baked mass production coexists on one hand the tendency to formalize more ancient schemes of representation and, on the other, the tendency to maintain archaic ideographic codes to make subjects and individuals recognizable⁵⁹. These ideographic codes, the use of clay details of the image and the image prossemic as socially recognizable signs of the institutional, political and religious roles were probably inspired by a popular imitation and translation of some contemporary Old Syrian ‘surpassing works’, such the ‘Face of Ishtar’, that were impressive images of the most archaic Eblaite kingship and religious power⁶⁰.

Moreover, during the Late Old Syrian period we witness the multiplication of some figurines that are not properly ‘imitations and/or representations’ but follow an autonomous

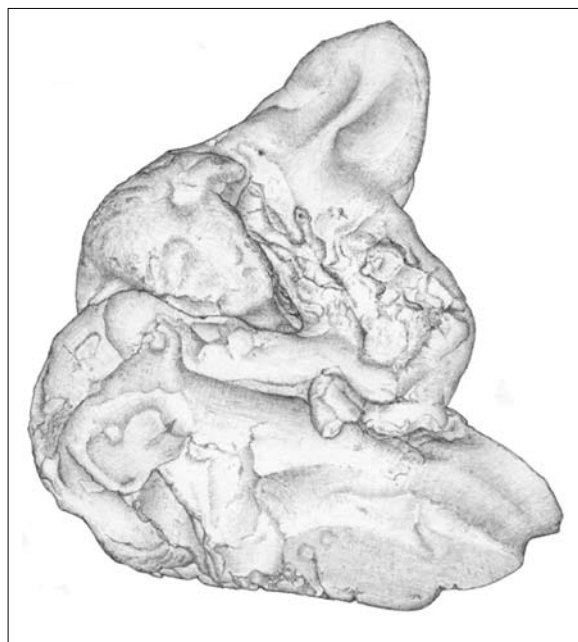


Fig. 4a-b – TM05HH9308: Unbaked Clay Figurine from Ebla, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum).

⁵⁶ RAMAZZOTTI 2009b, pp. 54-65; RAMAZZOTTI 2011b, pp. 341-375.

⁵⁷ DOLCE 1999, pp. 293-304; DOLCE 2001, pp. 11-28; ARCHI - BIGA 2003, pp. 1-44.

⁵⁸ Some figurines dated to the Early Bronze IVB period were discovered in Area T (MATTHIAE 1993) and in the so called Phase I of the Archaic Palace (MATTHIAE 2006a); recently some painted animal and human clay figurines were found in Area HH, the location of the ‘Temple of the Rock’ (MATTHIAE 2006b,

pp. 447-493). For some chronological aspects related to the EBIVB – MB transition at Ebla see DOLCE 2008, pp. 171-194; MATTHIAE 2008, pp. 5-32.

⁵⁹ Such as the so-called «undressed goddess», the «nude goddess with hands on her breasts» or the «doves of the goddess», closely related to the popular, rather than official Old Babylonian and Old Syrian religious tradition. PINNOCK 2000, pp. 127-134.

⁶⁰ MATTHIAE 2001, pp. 272-281.

composite project: theriomorphic vases, war wagons, ceremonial chariots and incense burners (Pl. VI: 3-5). These projects show that clay as the «matter of creation» for humans and animal and «matter of tactile mimesis» for humankind has become a professional technique to display a «potential automation» of the real world⁶¹, and we could hypothesize that the role of these infinite reproductions was that of collective copies created in order to have some function during important rites or in order to stay as memory signs, games and /or allusion in the daily life⁶².

Our preliminary report on this mostly unpublished documentation⁶³ plastered, impressed and marked in the Ebla figurines has focused on the Sumerian concepts of clay as «matter of creation» and as «moulding technology»⁶⁴. These categories are subjective or collective interpretations of official, sacred or imaginative reality, but are also the unmistakable symbols of a popular codification of the *Geist* of these official, sacred or imaginative reality. In some cases we can suppose that this codification was realized more or less without political and ideological influences, or as an individual's perception of his own reality. Therefore, the plastic mould of the «matter of creation» began to copy the observed reality that the producer, free from the constraints and suggestions of customers, imagined in the clay⁶⁵.

⁶¹ The case of the Early Dynastic, Early Syrian and then Old Babylonian, Old Syrian and Middle Elamite wagons is typical; they are mobile, multi-sensory miniatures with tactile, visual and sometimes olfactory functions. Each mechanism is activated by humans and is built as a harmonic integration of single parts (wheels, hubs, bodies, ropes). The parts are decorated with specific attributes (incised, applied and integrated), which exhibit the complexity of a unitary project, of its copy or its simulation. A project that was probably planned in order to emulate, to memorialize or to reproduce – on a different scale and in a different space-time dimension – ceremonial processions, like the ceremony attested in the L. 2769 Archive at Ebla, where the couple of divine formally dressed statues of Kura and Barama were certainly borne on a chariot drawn by oxen during the royal ritual. MATTHIAE 2007, pp. 270-311.

⁶² Like the second millennium Ishtar rite of Mari, where the hierarchical positions of the precious statues of deities were probably fixed in order to be seen. Following an Early Dynastic tradition, since the Early Syrian period many cult objects were transported inside chapels (dag_x) according to Biga (BIGA 2006, pp. 19-39) or sacred niches, as the Ishkara image that we recently supposed was originally located in the painted niche of the Building FF2 (RAMAZZOTTI - DI LUDOVICO 2011, pp. 66-80); otherwise, in contemporary Mesopotamian tradition these images of gods were set “upon” a seat in a temple and their surfaces can reflect (more than absorb) the light render the

physical emanation of the Sumerian (me-lam₂) and Akkadian (*melammu*), as a sort of ‘aura’, according to WINTER 1994, pp. 123-132.

⁶³ Two MSAE (*Materiali e Studi di Archeologia Eblaita*) Volumes related to 4.500 ca. fragments of Early Syrian and Old Syrian clay figurines discovered at Ebla since 1981-2001 (a *corpus* that follow the Marchetti's publication on the clay figurines discovered at Ebla since 1964 to 1980) is in preparation by the author (RAMAZZOTTI in press b).

⁶⁴ I hope these two peculiar concepts, aesthetic and technological, will contribute to our understanding of the Early and Old Syrian coroplastic tradition. Many quantitative and qualitative differences are perceptible between the productions of the two periods, but the incisions, the applications and the additions seem to maintain, in both periods, the same ancient ideographic value.

⁶⁵ The manipulation of the clay on a miniature scale to reproduce things observed and thought is an intimate gesture, sometimes collective and open and others individual and secret, but able to animate reality artificially and to offer the same reality to the perceptive and cultural senses of the «common man». In this dimension, variation of details multiplies the general richness of each homogenous production. Sometimes we have just the elementary model of the shape, while the applications, the orientations, the rotations, the incisions, the discrepancies, the asymmetries and the incongruities can reveal an *Habitus* of the producer. In other words, this action that can be

From our contemporary point of view, so deeply immersed in virtual communication, in the landscape of what is potential in nature, and in a world still plastered by the mass ... *media*, this miniature world, a tactile link between reality and imagination, appears far away and pervaded by abstractions and incongruities. However its ideographic character, its metamorphic physical structure and its quite 'genetic' hybridism reveal a tactile (and to us anachronistic) continuity between the similar and different, life and death, present and past.

Marco Ramazzotti
Sapienza Università di Roma
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità
marco.ramazzotti@uniroma1.it

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conditioned, instinctive, planned or intended for divination and / or devotion always using (and abusing) of formal models that with time became a sort of sup-

port for non-verbal writing, for allusive provisional writing (or for writing in dialect still incomprehensible to our modern «context of appreciation»).

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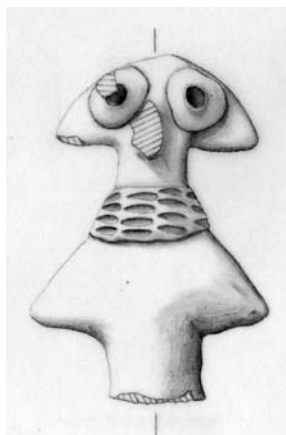
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RIASSUNTO

Questo contributo è una prima analisi iconografica e comparativa di alcune figurine fittili di Ebla databili ai periodi Protosiriano e Palesosiriano, ovvero all'arco di tempo compreso tra la seconda metà del III Millennio a.C. e la prima metà del II Millennio a.C. I risultati preliminari, ottenuti su un campione di documenti selezionato tra gli oltre 4000 esemplari di prossima pubblicazione nella serie MSAE (Materials and Studies Archeologici di Ebla, Sapienza), identificano la pratica della manipolazione dell'argilla come una dimensione cognitiva peculiare del mondo mesopotamico arcaico e la costruzione figurativa dell'esistente come *mimesi* ideografica, miniaturistica e *virtualis* (potenziale) della realtà. Ne consegue un *habitus* estetico eblaita che cambia sensibilmente nell'arco di poche centinaia di anni tra la fine del III Millennio e gli inizi del II Millennio, e un cambiamento che in queste espressioni fisiche e tattili del 'senso comune' rivela una sorprendente originalità dei ruoli, delle posizioni e dei gesti rivolti alle aggressive e dominanti 'retoriche dell'abbondanza'.



1a-b



2a-b



3



4

Plate I – Figs. 1a-b. TM83G248: Fragmentary Male Clay Figurine, Early Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 4.1 x 3.8 x 2.0 cm); figs. 2a-b: TM93P589: Fragmentary Male Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 4.3 x 3.6 x 1.7 cm); fig. 3: TM83G361: Fragmentary Female Clay Figurine, Early Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 5.5 x 5.1 x 1.5 cm); fig. 4: TM84G72: Fragmentary Female Clay Figurine, Early Syrian (EBIVB) - Old Syrian Period (MBI), Idlib Museum 4.3 x 5 x 1.5 cm.

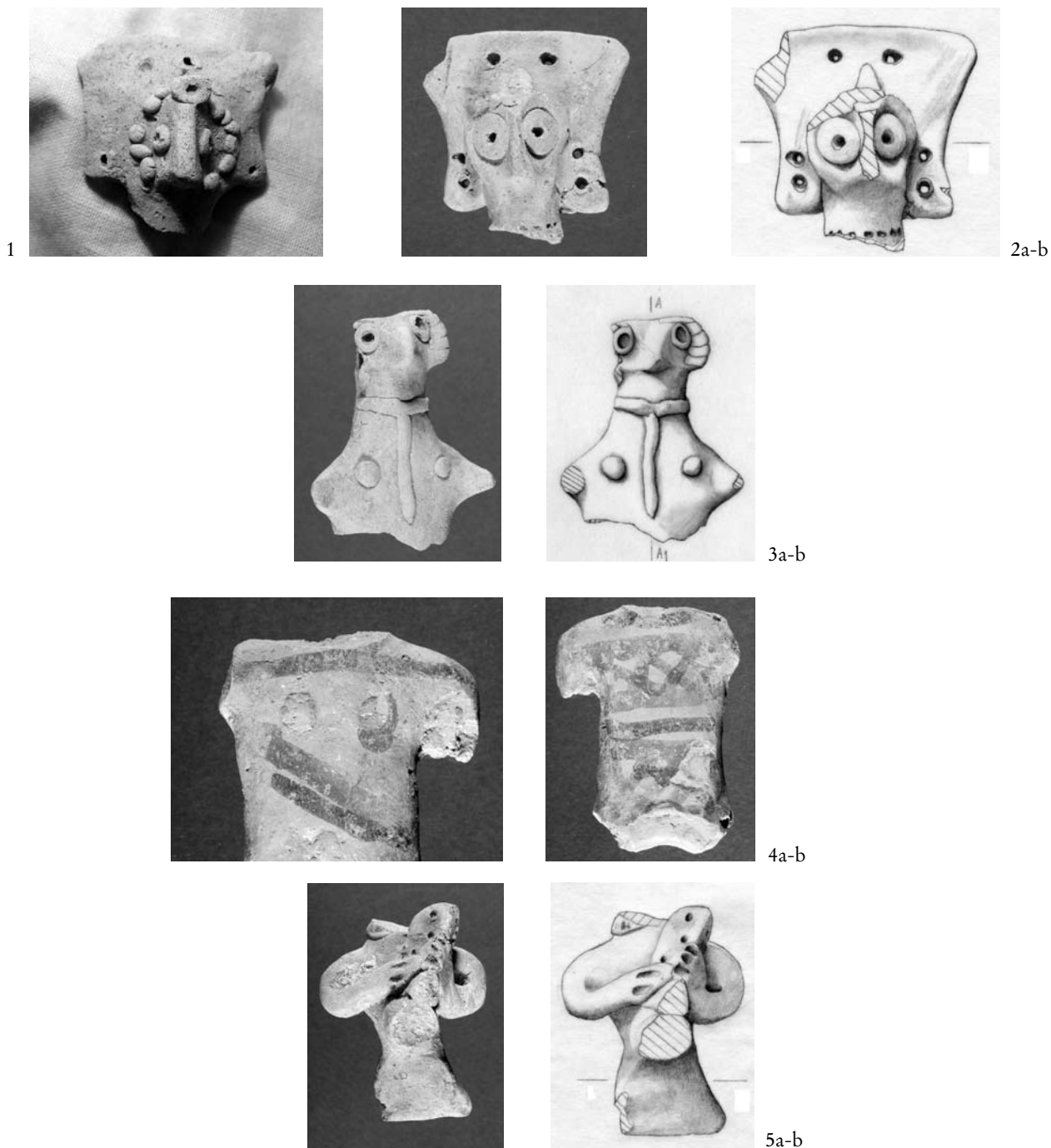
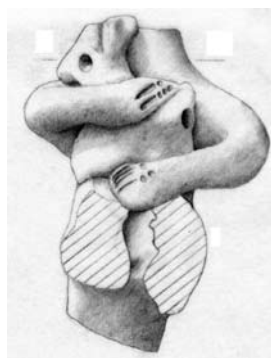


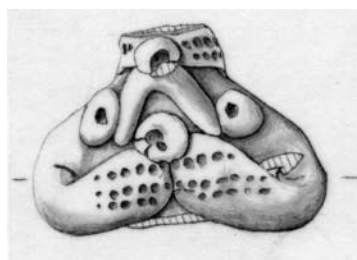
Plate II – Fig. 1: TM84G118: Female Head of an Early Syrian (EBIVB) Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 3-4 x 3.8 x 2.2 cm); fig. 2a-b: TM93P600: Female Head of an EBIVB – MBI Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 4.4 x 4.4 x 1.7 cm); figs. 3a-b: TM95P093: Fragmentary Female Clay Figurine, Early Syrian (EBIVB) - Old Syrian (MBI), Idlib Museum 5.4 x 4.3 x 2.5 cm); figs. 4a-b: TM88R416: Fragmentary Female Painted Clay Figurine (EBIVB - Idlib Museum: 5.8 x 4.3 x 1.9 cm); figs. 5a-b: TM93P075: Fragmentary Old Syrian Musicians Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 3.2 x 4.2 x 5.3 cm).



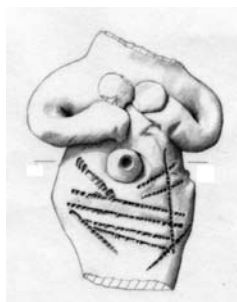
1a-b



2a-b

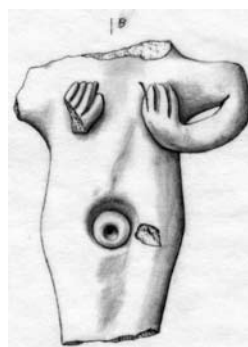


3a-b

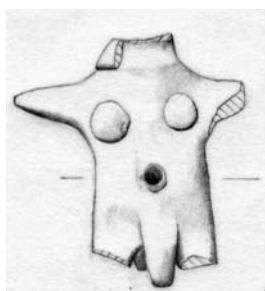


4a-b

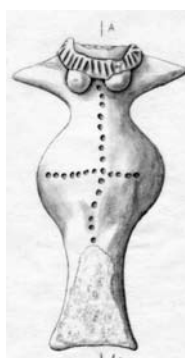
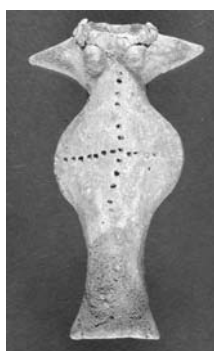
Plate III – Figs. 1a-b: TM83G178: Fragmentary Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 3.3 x 3.3 x 1.4 cm);
 figs. 2a-b: Fragmentary Male Offerer Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 6.5 x 5.1 x 2.9 cm); TM92P596;
 figs. 3a-b: TM85G24: Fragmentary Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 2.8 x 4.1 x 1.5 cm); figs. 4a-b:
 TM92P618: Fragmentary Female Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 6.2 x 4.8 x 1.8 cm).



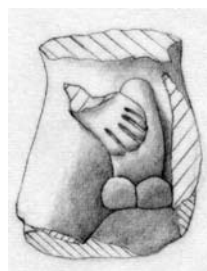
1a-b



2a-b

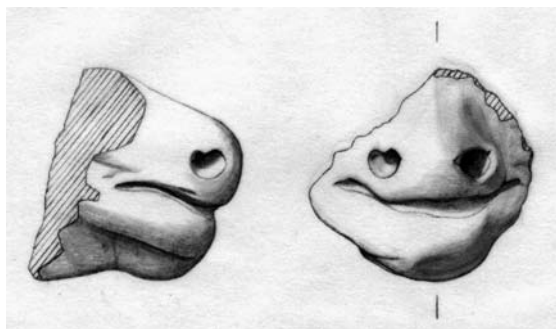


3a-b

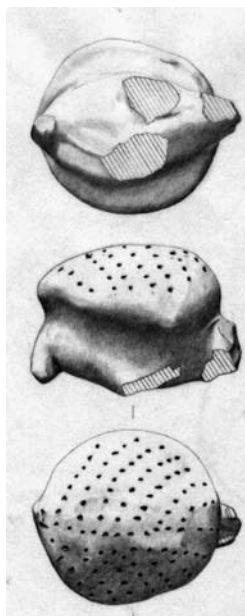


4a-b

Plate IV – Figs. 1a-b: TM93P469: Fragmentary Human Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 5.6 x 4.3 x 1.2 cm); figs. 2a-b: TM88R095: Fragmentary Human Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 3.7 x 3.3 x 0.8 cm); figs. 3a-b: TM94P350: Fragmentary Female Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 9.5 x 5.5 x 1.6 x 2.8 base cfr. Marchetti 2001, fig. 8); figs. 4a-b: TM93P056: Fragmentary Male Clay Figurine, Old Syrian Period (Idlib Museum: 5.6 x 2.6 x 3.8 cm).



1a-b



2a-b



3

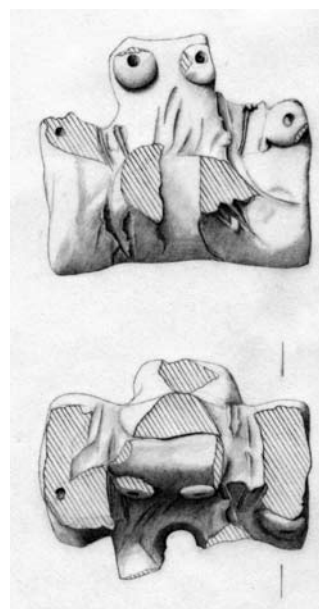


4

Plate V – Figs. 1a-b: TM89G186 Fragmentary Quadruped Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum 3.1 x 4.2 x h. 4.2 cm); figs. 2a-b: TM83G198: Fragmentary Hedgehog Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 4.9 x 4.3 x h. 3.4 cm); fig. 3: TM06HH410: Fragmentary Monkey Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 9.0 x 4.0 x 1.0 cm); fig. 4: TM84G143: Dog Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum: 4.4 x 2.2 x h. 4.2 cm).



1a-b



2a-b-c

Plate VI – Figs. 1a-b: TM95P664: Fragmentary Hybrid Animal Clay Figurine (Idlib Museum 7.2 x 3.7 x 1.6 cm; cfr. MARCHETTI 2001, fig. 46); figs. 2a-b-c: TM93P200: Fragmentary Hybrid Chariot Clay Figurine (Idlib museum: 4.1 x 5.3 cm; cfr. MARCHETTI 2001, fig. 62).

Edizioni Quasar di Severino Tognon s.r.l.
via Ajaccio 41-43 - 00198 Roma
www.edizioniquasar.it

per informazioni e ordini
qn@edizioniquasar.it

ISSN 1123-5713

ISBN 978-88-7140-486-8

Finito di stampare nel mese di ottobre 2012
presso la tipografia La Moderna - Roma