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FROM THE TREASURES OF SYRIA

ESSAYS ON ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN HONOUR OF STEFANIA MAZZONI

edited by

Paola Ciafardoni and Deborah Giannessi

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ON NAKED WOMEN: A CASE STUDY

Candida Felli

Abstract

This article tackles the question of representations of naked women in Near Eastern Art, a favourite topic of Stefania Mazzoni, by approaching a specific iconographic type within the group of nude females occurring in a number of different media in Mesopotamia. Aim of this work is to provide new insights in the much debated question over the range of meanings applied to similar images in the visual language of that part of the ancient world.

Stefania Mazzoni has long dwelt upon artistic matters over her career: among them, the representation of women has been the subject of particular interest.[1] Her article on the ivory figurines found in the Treasure of Ur from Mari (Fig. 1) has given me impulse to offer here some thoughts on the theme of the nude female in Mesopotamian art and, in particular, on a specific iconography: the frontal figure with her hands clasped at the waist and hair in a curl on either side of the neck, which is certainly the most common type attested, appearing in seal imagery for about 80 years (1829-1750 BC) from the reign of Apil-sin to the end of Hammurabi's reign, but also found under the form of figurines and clay plaques for a longer period (Fig. 2),[2] of which the Mari pieces, dating to the third millennium, may well represent antecedents.[3]

In approaching this subject, I am aware to stand on giants' shoulders: the naked woman has been variously interpreted through time by a number of authorities and the literature on the topic is too extensive to be fully commented upon here;[4] nonetheless, the

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[1] Mazzoni 1975; 2002a; 2002b.

[2] Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 152; it would correspond to *Typ* II in Uehlinger's typology: Uehlinger 2001, 53, 58 and 59. To explain her sudden appearance in seal repertoire Collon 1986, 132, suggests that the king Apil-Sin could have set a statue of her which would have somehow conditioned the seal iconography. For a detailed and precise description of the characteristic hair-do see Blocher 1987, 45: "Allen gemeinsam ist das in der Mitte gescheitelte Haar, das nach beiden Seiten hin zum Teil in vier Zöpfe geflochten wird, die dann im Nacken zusammlaufen und dort ein großes Haargewebe bilden".

[3] Braun-Holzinger 1984, 19; 1999, 150; for Akkadian clay figurines as forerunners of the type under discussion see Auerbach 1992, 309, 310. On the similar ivory figurines found in the Ishtar temple at Assur see last Wicke 2010, 72-80, esp. Pl. 2.P.1-3. Indeed naked female representations are found in sculpture in the Near East as early as prehistoric times: Moorey 2004, 13-41.

[4] For a review of the literature up to the 80's see Blocher 1987, 54-76; on most recent works see Bahrani 2001; Moorey 2004; Assante 2006.

Fig. 1: Ivory figurine, Treasure of Ur from Mari: Aruz, J., 2003. *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus,* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 83)

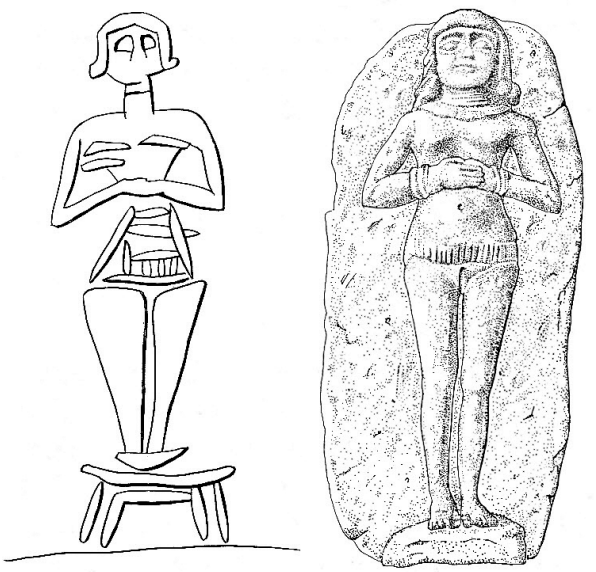

Fig. 2: The nude female type: Black, J. and Green, A. 1992. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary,* British Museum Press, London, Fig. 118.

matter is still far from being resolved and I would like to present some thoughts which I hope can make a contribution to the debate over the meaning of this figure.[5]

SETTING THE SCENE

In 1986 Frans Wiggermann, surpassing earlier views which had gathered substantially around two main ideas, that the nude female was a goddess or a woman, mainly a sacred prostitute, linked to the goddess Ishtar,[6] tentatively identified the nude female with a protective spirit, a personification of *baštu*, a term translated "dignity", but conveying also the idea of personal happiness and fortune, essentially on the basis of a wider and

[5] I agree with Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 151 that "different types of nude female figures may have had different functions" and wish here to investigate one specific type only. In order to maintain the study at a circumstantial level, I also leave out her Syrian and Levantine counterparts for which see *inter alia* Winter 1983; Otto 2000, 206-208; Uehlinger 2001.

[6] Bahrani 2001, 48-51. The scholar has tapped the topic within a larger discussion over the value of the female body in Mesopotamian art "as a sign and index of sexuality": Ibidem, 94.

articulated reasoning over the significance of two further figures occurring in glyptic scenes with the former, i.e. the king with the mace and the deity with raised forearms, respectively identified as the vizier udug/*šēdu* and the introductory goddess lamma, with whom *baštu* is often mentioned in texts.[7] According to the scholar, this idea would also find support in the retrieval of a bronze object in the temple of Ishtar in Assur, interpreted as a representation of a vulva, which bears a dedicatory inscription to that goddess mentioning TÉŠ/*baštu* and would thus stand as an abbreviated version of the naked figure.[8]

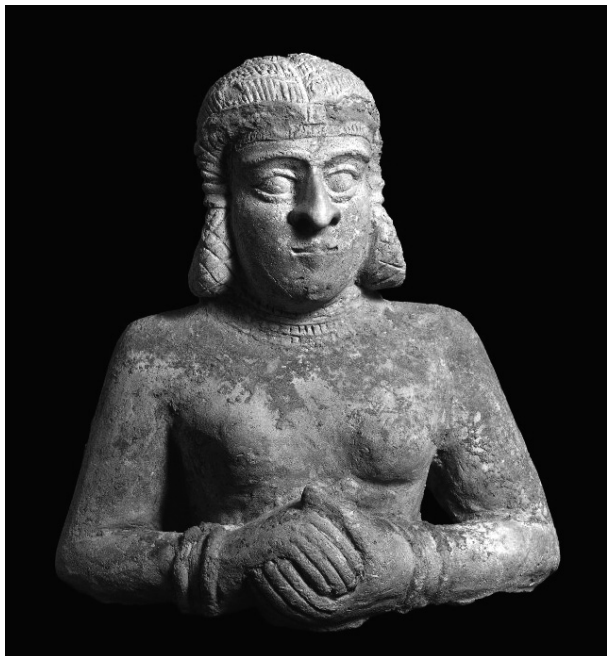

Fig. 3: Clay bust of a female figure, British Museum: Reade, J., 1991. *Mesopotamia,* British Museum Press, London, Fig. 79.

Around the same years another scholar, Felix Blocher, in a long study on the representation of the *nackte Frau*, suggested instead to identify this figure with a woman mentioned in the texts with the title *kezertum*, who, on the basis of a translation of that term ("the curly one"), would be characterized by a specific hair-do as much as the nude female figures attested in terracottas and glyptic. In this reconstruction, the figure would be portrayed as symbol of the deity to which this priestess is known to be connected, i.e. Ishtar, as much as other symbols stand for the relative gods; its connection with that deity would also be indicated by its frequent association with musicians and monkeys, which too are known to be linked to Ishtar.[9] To support an identification with a real figure, the scholar drew also attention to a small group of life-size terracotta statues or, more precisely, heads and busts, coming mostly from illicit excavations and acquired by museums, which include the iconographic type under discussion (Fig. 3).[10]

While Blocher's hypothesis encountered much criticism, especially in relation to the identification of the figure on the basis of the hair-style, and did not have many follow-

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[7] Wiggermann 1987, 28, 29; 2001. On this question see now Steinert 2012, 405-509, mainly 437-443.

[8] Wiggermann 2001, 46.

[9] Blocher 1987, esp. 225-233. On the term *kezertum* see also below.

[10] Blocher 1987, 215, 216, figs 1-8. Some of the latter were quite likely from Isin, as revealed by later, regular excavations which found further fragments apparently in association with the staircase of the temple of Gula: see last Moorey 2004, 117, 118.

ers,[11] Wiggermann's one, though criticized by some scholars, has been accepted by most and certainly has been much more influential in this realm of research:[12] nonetheless, both studies do represent focal points in the discussion over this figure with which most scholars have then had to come to terms. Among the most recent reappraisals of the question, Roger Moorey would place the nude female, because of her frontal position, often on a pedestal, in "a special category, yet amongst the mortals rather than the immortals as if she was a mediating figure or beneficent spirit that was betwixt and between";[13] Julia Asher-Greve, convinced that the nude form represents the 'essence' of human beings, has instead suggested that the "nude female may represent the counterpart to the nude hero, with whom is associated on a number of seals", being a symbol of femininity in opposition to ideal masculinity.[14]

SOME QUESTIONS

Considering the above mentioned hypotheses, there are a number of points which need to be discussed. First of all, I would like to observe that, in ancient Mesopotamian imagery, figures are rarely meant to refer to abstract concepts, at least in their first meaning:[15] just to make an example, the representation of the goddess lamma mentioned above conveys the idea of protection but is primarily a goddess as indicated by her horned headdress; by the time we are discussing, in fact, Mesopotamians carefully depict horns on deities' caps in order to distinguish them from mortal figures and therefore this would

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[11] *Inter alia* Assante 2006, 196, 197; Auerbach 1992; Moorey 2004, 118. In fact, although all dictionaries put in relation the word *kezertum* with a curl of hair, it remains to be demostrated that the term refers to the iconographic type under study, although I do not find cogent Moorey's argument that "comparable hair-styles are found on stone sculpture of women with none of the social implications proposed by him" (Moorey 2004, 118). See also Collon 1999, 21: "It has been suggested that figures of naked women might be priestesses but there is no supporting evidence and it is more likely that they are associated with fertility."

[12] The idea is accepted by Braun-Holzinger 1996, 252; 1999, 150; Assante 2006, 201, 202; see instead *contra* Pruß 2002, 541 and note 28; Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 153. Cfr. also Porada 1993, 573: "her meaning may have varied according to the accompanying figures". It is to mention Bahrani 2001, 50, which has rightly criticized the interpretation of the bronze votive find which Wiggermann uses to support his idea: in general, feet or other parts of the body when found represented as votive objects in temple contexts are never interpreted as abbreviated versions of humans but as depictions of what they are, i.e. body parts, most likely healed or in need to be healed (for votive representations of body parts see Postgate 1994, 177).

[13] Moorey 2003, 31: a somewhat similar idea was already given as possible by Opificius 1961, 205. See also Pruß 2002, 538 suggesting that the figures portrayed in clay figurines represent different demons or supernatural beings evoked during rituals.

[14] Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 153 and 162.

[15] On the complex question of objectification and polysemic value of symbols in ancient Mesopotamia see Selz 2004.

Fig. 4: Cylinder seal, Yale Babylonian Collection: Buchanan, B., 1981. *Early Near Eastern Seals in the Yale Babylonian Collection*, New Haven/ London, Yale University Press, no. 878.

Fig. 5: Cylinder seal, British Museum: Collon, D., 1986. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals III. Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian Periods*, British Museum Publications, London, no. 272.

suggest that the nude female, once without the horned headdress,[16] is in the first place the representation of a woman. This basic fact appears also demonstrated by other elements: if it is true that the nude female is generally represented frontally and that, as noticed by Roger Moorey, even within a seal scene, "her image is almost defiantly isolated or self-contained",[17] there are instances, though admittedly rarer, in which the figure is not rendered full frontal but in profile (or, at least, her head) and, at times, even raising one hand, thus establishing some sort of relation with the scene in which is set as if a real character and not simply an icon (Fig. 4).[18] Even the idea that the figure, on many seals found in a diminutive form within the scene (Fig. 5), would have a function much alike that of the other symbols filling Old Babylonian seal scenes, as for example the ball-staff and the vase with which is often attested, appears disputable:[19] diminutive human figures other than the nude female are often encountered in glyptic and never interpreted as filling

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[16] See e.g. Klengel-Brandt 1989, 326, no. 84, Pl. XVI.4; Porada 1948, no. 502. For an identification of this figure with the goddess Shala see Winter 1983, 162; Wiggermann 1997, 232; Collon 1999, 21.

[17] Moorey 2003, 32; see also Wiggermann 1997, 232; Bahrani 2001, 69-71; Assante 2006, 196.

[18] According to Blocher 1987, 217, most of these seals are later attestations. E.g. Buchanan 1981, no. 877; Collon 1986, no. 301; Porada 1948, nos. 378, 482, 488, 502, 503, 505, 506; Klengel-Brandt 1989, nos. 41c, 69 and 89; Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004, no. 124; von der Osten 1934, n. 243. It can also be added a small OB tablet maybe from Nippur in the Ashmolean recording a loan of grain (?) concerning a servant girl of Tappiya, *nadītum* of the god Ninurta, which bears impressions of a seal with the image of a nude female with the head in profile: Buchanan 1966, 87, no. 475; Dalley and Yoffee 1991, 2, 13, no. 95. According to Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004, 111, following Porada 1948, 56, in the instances in which the figure raises her arm would be object of veneration; see *contra* Wiggermann 2001, 46, 48 and 49, suggesting to identify it with praying nude figures as the one described in an inscription of king Ammiditana.

[19] See Collon 1986, 131; Nijhowne 1999, 47. For an example see the seal impression on a tablet from the archive of Tell Sifr, next to Larsa, Colbow 1995, 25, no. 1.1. According to Blocher 1987, 218 the nude female as a filling motif would be a peculiarity of Larsa, Sippar and maybe Nippur: I will come back to this point below. On the ball staff see Porter 2001: the question of the association of 'filling motifs' of this kind with the naked woman would deserve further study.

motifs; in some cases, they can even be portrayals of seal owners.[20] It is worth mentioning one seal of the British Museum collection in which the small figurine of a naked woman is inserted in the space itself of the inscription (Fig. 6):[21] if, as it seems, people often bought already made seals to which apt inscriptions were then added along with what are labelled as "filling motifs",[22] the latter evidently bore some importance for the seal purchaser as much as the legend.

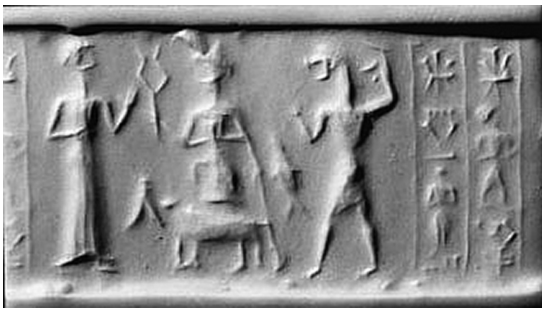

Fig. 6: Cylinder seal, British Museum: Collon, D., 1986. Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals III. Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian Periods, British Museum Publications, London, no. 461.

I would thus take the part of those who think that the lady is an actual woman:[23] by saying so, I am not meaning that we are in the presence of portraits of individuals, but of a representation of a specific type of figure, distinguished by her hair-do and ornaments and connected with a specific type of office or profession requiring nakedness, at least on certain occasions.[24] In doing this, I follow Blocher's line of enquiry though revising some points in the light of further elements, both on the archaeological and philological side. This does not rule out the possibility that the image may have taken on a secondary, positive meaning, especially in later

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[20] See Frankfort 1939, 150, in relation to the seal illustrated on Pl. XXIXa: "the interceding goddess and the worshipper (a nude woman) are reduced to small scale figures filling open spaces between decorative groups". For other examples see Collon 1986, nos 252-254, interestingly showing the same association with the king with the mace and the goddess lamma. For an Akkadian example of a small scale seal owner see the seal of UR.UR nar, the singer: Collon 1982, no. 199.

[21] Collon 1986, 132, no. 461: the figure is actually placed between the divine determinative and the name of the goddess Shala but the author excludes an identification with that deity since the male individual similarly placed next to the name of the god Adad does not show the iconography typical of that deity.

[22] Christopher Walker apud Collon 1986, 21.

[23] Apart from Blocher 1987, see also Auerbach 1994, 45; Black and Green 1992, 144; Henshaw 1994, 281; Van Buren 1930, 1 ("worshippers"). There are also a number who prefer leaving the question open: Buchanan 1981, 278: "nude female"; Collon 1986, 131, 132, "nude goddess", though acknowledging a possible interpretation as worshipper; Opificius 1961, 37, "Göttinnen oder Frauen", but then using the heading "Nackte Ishtar" (Ibidem, 204 and 205).

[24] The term "naked" and "nude" are used here invariably and in a simply descriptive manner, referring to absence of clothes, without implying any interpretation. See instead Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 133: "'naked' refers to unclothed bodies depicted in circumstances where nakedness reflects actual practice and is not intended as a 'trascendent' form; 'nude' refers to those depictions which are intended as symbolic 'trascendent forms'". On the question of portraiture in Near Eastern Art see Winter 1984, 107 and 108. See also Claudia Suter's observations on terracottas in a recent survey of high priestesses images: "terracotta objects were not considered because the figures they depict remain anonymous and represent more types than concrete individuals" (Suter 2007, 317 note 1); on a similar line of thought already Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 162.

Fig. 7: Cylinder seal, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève: Vollenweider, M.-L., 1967. *Catalogue raisonné des sceaux cylindres et intailles vol. I, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève,* Genève, no. 42, Pl. 23.8.

Fig. 8: Cylinder seal, British Museum: Collon, D., 1986. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals III. Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian Periods*, British Museum Publications, London, no. 615.

times, like the one postulated by Wiggermann, but I claim that her frequent depiction on different media in the second millennium is justified by her role within society which I wish here to investigate more thoroughly.[25]

INSCRIPTIONS ON SEALS

First of all, it has to be underlined that most of the seals with the nude female are uninscribed;[26] of the rest, many, as most of the seals of the earlier part of the second millennium, bear a simple inscription with the name of a deity, or of a pair of deities, while the others belong to persons who declare themselves to be servants of a goddess or, less frequently, of a god, apparently a more developed version of the earlier formula.[27] A significant part of the latter are women (Figs. 7 and 8).[28] It is still a matter of debate whether legends of this kind should indicate special devotion on the part of the seal owner or imply that the latter is part of the cultic personnel of a temple: if, as it seems, the second option is more likely,[29] it could be an indication of a special favour towards this imagery within

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[25] One may object that the hairy male figure identified by Wiggermann in 1982 with the god *laḫmu* mentioned in the texts is portrayed invariably without a divine headdress but, in that case, the origin of the iconographic type goes back to the third millennium (see Wiggermann 1992, xiii, note 3), a time in which the presence of horned headdresses for deities was yet not compulsory.

[26] It is to recall that an increase in legends on seals took place in the time period between Sumulael and Hammurabi: Blocher 1992, 144.

[27] Blocher 1987, 186-188, according to which, the most frequently attested deity in the inscriptions is Adad, followed by Shamash and Aya; see also Braun-Holzinger 1996, 252, 253, note 71; Collon 1986, 19. On female sealing practices in OB Mesopotamia see Colbow 2002.

[28] Buchanan 1981, nos. 813, 876; Colbow 1995, 80, no. 30.1; Collon 1986, nos. 282, 291, 613-615; Legrain 1925, no. 380; Porada 1948, no. 568; Vollenweider 1967, nos. 42, 51; von der Osten 1934, n. 247.

[29] For examples in the Akkadian period see Felli 2006, 42.

this segment of the population but more should be known on the actual roles played by the seal owners before getting to any conclusion.[30] Nonetheless, the observation seems valid at least as far as *nadītu*-priestesses are concerned, as shown by some seal impressions preserved on tablets from Sippar showing a design which includes the nude female.[31] Excluding the possibility that the figure represents the actual owner of the seal, at least in all those cases in which the legend tells us that the latter is a man, it remains to justify its presence in the seal imagery, a question which needs to be addressed more precisely.

MEANINGFUL ASSOCIATIONS

Unlike figurines, glyptic and, to a lesser extent, clay plaques provide some context to the figure under study. As already recognized by Blocher,[32] no exclusive association can be detected between the nude female and the goddess Ishtar with which is traditionally put into relation: other, and not only female, deities as well (Amurru, Gula, Adad, Shamash among others) are found on seals featuring that figure and her position in relation to them seems to vary.

More significant appear other types of associations: apart from the one, already mentioned above, with the figure with the mace and the deity lamma, often in the middle between them, and for which I cannot offer any meaningful speculation,[33] it is to notice that on some seals, the nude female occurs together with a man with a pail and a frond/sprinkler or cup, usually placed behind a deity and interpreted as a priest, most likely with a purifying function, although not identified with any specific one (Fig.

Fig. 9: Cylinder seal, Louvre Museum: Delaporte, L., 1923. *Catalogue des cylindres orientaux, cachets et pierres gravées du Musée du Louvre II.* - Acquisitions, Hachette, Paris, no. A. 412.

[30] Gelb 1977, 113 and 114 with reference to earlier literature. See however Charpin 1990, 74: "il est désormais clair que le mentions ìr + nom de divinité temoignent d'une dévotione familiale". According to Blocher 2001, 144, what is clear is that "belonging to the personnel of a temple did not obligate one to depict that temple's deity on the seal". On the limited occurrence of professional terms in second millennium legends see Walker apud Collon 1986, 22.

[31] Teissier 1998, no. 27 (Erišti-Aja), 28 (Iapḫatum). For depictions of women-*nadītum* on seals from Sippar see al-Gailani Werr 1988, 43, pls XXV.5, XXXIII.5 and 6: "hair tied in a bun hold by a headband, plain garment with short fringed shawl and one hand brought forward". On *nadītu* seals see also Teissier 1998, 117.

[32] Blocher 1987, 232.

[33] See last Assante 2006, 199-202. For a large sample of seals of this type see Collon 1986, Pl. XXII. See however Moorey 2004, 98, on the speculative character of the udug proposal forwarded by Wiggermann and mentioned above.

Fig. 10: Cylinder seal, Ashmolean Museum: Buchanan, B., 1966. *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum I.* Cylinder Seals, Clarendon, Oxford, no. 480.

Fig. 11: Drawing of cylinder seal, Oriental Institute Museum: Frankfort, H., 1939. *Cylinder Seals. A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, Macmillan, London, Fig. 40.

9):[34] it would be tempting to see in him the gudu$_4$-priest/*pāšišu*, of which the role of purifier is well attested in the texts along with the care of divine statues, but other options could also be possible.[35] The latter too is often represented in smaller proportions, thus constituting an interesting parallel to our case and maybe a hint that the nude female could play an analogous role in kind.[36] It is probably not out of place to recall here that the two figures are among the few who are portrayed at times in the glyptic on top of a small pedestal:[37] if that has been interpreted as a possibile indication of a divine status of the figures (see Fig. 2), especially the nude female which is depicted in this way also in other media, it is to be taken into account that "dancers, musicians, and others sometimes performed atop a platform or table".[38] Frontality, in the case of the nude female, could then be explained with the need to establish a direct relationship with the viewer as needed in performances: it appears then no chance that the only other figures, apart from some deities, who are represented frontally in glyptic and clay plaques, are some musicians.[39] Indeed, as noticed already by Blocher and others, the naked woman is often associated with music and dance as appears clearly not only on seals (Figs. 10 and 11) but also on

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[34] Collon 1986, 33-35; 1999, 21, 22; see e.g. Collon 1986, nos. 104, 145, 290, 315, 352 and 449; Blocher 1992, 86, no. 256.

[35] For an attempt at an identification of the gudu$_4$ on the disk of Enḫeduanna see Winter 1987, 192, note 21. It seems that this figure performed also music next to the gala, the lamentation priest, in the third millennium, but little evidence on this question is found in second millennium material: Shehata 2009, 14.

[36] Collon 1986, 530; see also Braun-Holzinger 1996, 253, 354, who however leaves open the possibility that the male figure could represent a protective spirit.

[37] E.g. Moortgat 1940, Pl. 44.345; for the male priest, see e.g. Collon 1986, no. 415. For an identification of this pedestal with the ki-gal/*kigallu* of the texts see Wiggermann 2001, 47.

[38] Kilmer 1995a, 2610: see e.g. Spycket 1972, Fig. 32. It has to be noticed however that the male priest appears usually engaged in actions which do not conform with music and are never depicted frontally.

[39] See e.g. Auerbach 1994, Pl. 21. For an alternative view of the frontality of the figure see Bahrani 2001, 67, 68.

clay plaques: according to Dominique Collon, the appearance of this iconographic type in glyptic could be in some relation to the diffusion of itinerant musicians which are depicted on a number of media at the beginning of the second millennium, especially seals (e.g. the bow-legged dwarfs, with or without monkeys), with whom is often associated, maybe performing fertility rites.[40]

Fig. 12: Clay disk, Baghdad Museum: Orthmann, W., 1985. *Der Alte Orient*, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte 18, Propyläen, Berlin, Fig. 186b.

At this point, it can be instructive to recall, as it has already been done by others, a clay disk kept in the Baghdad Museum (Fig. 12): here two female figures are represented standing, one on top of the other, with their head in profile, next to two bow-legged dwarfs playing the lute, two crouching and one standing (maybe dancing) monkeys or, as it has been suggested by Subhi Anwar Rashid, humans masked as if they were monkeys.[41] The rather small piece (15 cm in diameter) has a sort of handle on the verso of unknown purpose.[42] Most of the scholars commenting upon the imagery of the plaque have interpreted the female figures

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[40] Collon 1986, 132; see also 32, 33 and 46 and Blocher 1992a. Seals with bow-legged dwarfs and/or monkeys are Blocher 1992b, 67, no. 186; Buchanan 1966, Pl. 34.480 (Shamash); 1981, nos. 878, 879; Collon 1986, nos 289, 290, 438 (with the presence of Adad) and 459; Delaporte 1923, Pl. 82.9 (Shamash); Legrain 1925, Pl. XXII.378 e 379; Porada 1948, nos. 480, 486, 488, 491 (Nergal), 493, 496, 502-504, 517 (Amurru). For a symbolic function of the bow-legged figure see Wiggermann 1997, 232. Monkeys have been often misinterpreted as mongoose: Dunham 1985, 246.

[41] For the first option see Dunham 1985, 245; Collon 1986, 13. On monkeys in Mesopotamian art see Dunham 1985; Spycket 1998. Figurines of monkeys playing flute are also attested, e.g. at Ur, Larsa, Warka (Dunham 1985, 247) and Kish (Moorey 2004, 96).

[42] Blocher 1987, 85 follows Anton Moortgat apud Bohl 1942 who suggests that the object could be the positive to make stamps for making bread or cakes like those found at Mari. It may derive from this the attribution of an origin from that city given to the piece both in Orthmann 1985, 303 and Blocher 1987, 85, which does not find any confirmation in the original publication of the piece where it is indicated as unprovenanced: see Böhl 1942. Its shape is however somehow reminiscent of that of a tamburine, as the one depicted in the hands of naked female figures on Ur III clay plaques and identified with the Sumerian instrument ub, akkadian *uppu*: Spycket 1972, 180, 181, Fig. 31. See Shehata 2009, 43 for a tentative identification of the figures so depicted with the drum players *tigiātum*: these female musicians are attested in Larsa only in association with the goddesses Inanna, Nanaja and Ninegala (Goodnick Westenholz and Westenholz 2006, 33; see also below).

as dancers.[43] One aspect which appears worth considering is the arms position of the figures: the gesture of arms folded is, as already recognized, characteristic of figures in front of the gods,[44] but is found also on figures who have been interpreted as singers and therefore one might ask whether singing is involved in the representation.[45] Be that as it may, it is true that music performers are often associated with nakedness, as recognized by a number of scholars.[46] The reason why some are usually depicted naked is a question that goes beyond the scope of this article: maybe nakedness is required by liminal roles they may play under certain ritual circumstances.[47] It is highly probable that nakedness represents a temporary state, to be interpreted as ritual nudity required in certain occasions as it is in the case of male priests.[48] Nakedness per se is not an indication of a sexual connotation of one figure's role, which is in fact explicit only when the figures are depicted in sexual activities as in some terracotta plaques on which however women with different hair-dos are also found.[49] Finally, it is to underline that in all representations the nude female, when details are discernible (especially on the terracottas), appears provided not only with jewellery (quite often, the counterweight necklace),[50] but also with hip-belts or girdles and, less frequently, cross bands, which appears an attire particularly suitable to dancers.[51]

Going back to glyptic, at times, all the elements described above, the nude female, the priest, the musicians (especially the bow-legged dwarfs) and the monkey, occur altogether and it remains unclear whether the instances in which the woman (as well as any

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[43] Böhl 1942, 725; see also Opificius 1961, 204; Collon 1997, 489.

[44] Magen 1986, 42; see also Collon 1986, 132.

[45] Kilmer 1995b, 468; Cheng 2009, 168-170, which includes also a peculiar stance of arms crossed at the wrists.

[46] Kilmer 1995a, 2604, 2605; Seidl 2001, 68.

[47] According to Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006, 165, there may lie behind practical or functional reasons, without discounting possible sexual implications. The question of nakedness has been the subject of focused studies by a number of scholars: Bahrani 1993; 2001; Seidl 2001; Reade 2002; Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006. On the notion of liminality in specific relation with the so-called erotic plaques see Assante 2002.

[48] Seidl 2001, 67; Reade 2002, 555. For example the *išippum*, represented naked in an Ur III seal from Girsu: Renger 1969, 125.

[49] In erotic plaques women are usually portrayed with loosen long hair, with hair tied in a bun or hold by a headband: Assante 2000, 82. Although difficult to judge since these depictions are usually in profile while the figure under discussion is normally frontal, there are few specimens in which the hair-do looks exactly like hers: see e.g. Barrelet 1968, Pl. L.527, from Tello. On the meaning of erotic plaques see also Assante 2002.

[50] The earliest attestations of this type of ornaments are dated to the Old Akkadian period: Dales 1960, 43, 121 and 122.

[51] On figurines: Dales 1960, 128-132, 211 and 212, suggesting an identification of the girdles with the Akkadian word *dīdū* mentioned in the texts; 1963. For a clear case of girdles on a seal, Blocher 1987, Fig. 22. As to the crossed breast bands see however Opificius 1961, 205, who connects them to those of Ishtar and places them in relation to her martial character.

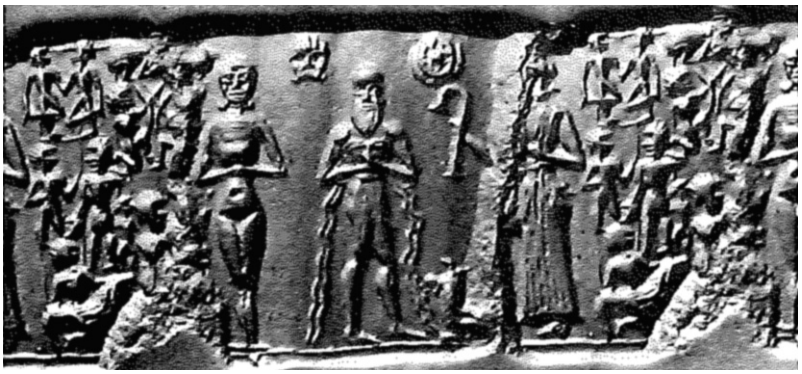

Fig. 13: Cylinder seal, Pierpont Morgan Library: Porada, E., 1948. *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections: Volume I – The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library*, Bollingen Serie XIV, Pantheon Books, Washington, no. 517.

other elements) is depicted alone may represent in fact abridged versions of just described groups or refer to solo ritual performances.[52] Be that as it may, we know from texts that various types of performers were certainly engaged in official cult ceremonies, and not only in association with Ishtar as stated by Blocher:[53] at Larsa, for example, a ritual text informs that the god Shamash, as well as the goddesses Inanna, Nanaja and Ninegala, were celebrated with music, while dances are performed by the ḫúb-bi.meš, sort of acrobats.[54] Performers as acrobats and maybe wrestlers are attested also in the course of the ritual of Ishtar at Mari, which seems to describe a ceremony including the god Shamash as well.[55] One thus wonders whether these glyptic scenes could actually be in relation to ceremonies of the same kind as the ones described in the texts of Larsa and Mari (e.g. Fig. 6), a visual rendering of what was a main aspect of the cult and which was more often simply alluded to with adoration scenes[56]: a seal in the Pierpont Morgan collection is particularly intriguing from this point of view since it shows to the left of the naked figure a series of superimposed smaller size scenes including a bow-legged dwarf, male dancers, wrestlers and

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[52] See already Dunham 1985, 246: "the bow-legged man, the monkey and the nude female were "performers" on special occasions in Old Babylonian times". For texts mentioning monkeys in association with the chief musician gala see Dunham 1985, 244, 245 (see also 244-248, 26 on their general association with music).

[53] Blocher 1987, 231.

[54] Goodnick Westenholz and Westenholz 2006, 33: the ceremony involved also the presence of estatics (lú-gub-ba). On the ḫúb in the third millennium see Catagnoti 1997.

[55] Durand and Guichard 1997, 51 and 58, ll. 23-25; see also Ziegler 2007, 55-64 and the informative sketch published on page 56 which gives a vivid idea of how this type of ceremony should look like.

[56] According to Reade 2002, 554, the performers depicted on terracotta plaques could have been engaged in the New Year's festival among other celebrations. Plaques are also found with depictions of men in ritual dances or combats and horse riders: Moorey 2004, 104, 113.

horse riders (Fig. 13).[57] Of course, this cannot be anything more than a suggestion and needs more evidence to be proved, but considering that religious ceremonies have been the subject of seal imagery since the very beginning of attestation of cylinder seals,[58] the possibility appears not too remote; looking in this way at the seal imagery of Old Babylonian glyptic would give some reason for the grouping of, at times, apparently unrelated figures, which could instead play some role in the context of ritual ceremonies taking place at regular times in honour of deities.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

Unfortunately most of the seals on which the nude female occurs have no finding context known, as usual for this type of object; more informative appear instead the seal impressions on tablets, which are mostly attested in texts from archives of Kish, Sippar, Larsa and Nippur, where significantly records concerning activities of women linked in different ways to a cultic environment are also found (see below). As to the other artefacts, although many of the extant clay figurines and plaques are unprovenanced, if we consider those provenanced, it appears that they are quite widespread all over Mesopotamia and in all sorts of contexts, especially temple and house areas and mostly from fills.[59] It is however to notice that any distinction between living and sacred spaces is risky since it can be a fictitious one and not reflect the ancient reality:[60] just to mention one case, it is impossible to say whether the presence of a number of terracottas in the house of the lamentation priest Ur-Utu at Tell ed-Der, ancient Sippar Ammanum, which was also the site of cultic activities, is somehow affected by the latter's role or not.[61] It is to mention that in the case of the large scale representations of heads and busts mentioned above, at least those from Isin found within the area of the temple of Gula were certainly associated with a religious context.[62] On a whole, however, the lack of a clear pattern in the distri-

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[57] Porada 1948, no. 517.

[58] Collon 1987, 172-177, with several examples of different periods.

[59] The better stratified evidence comes from Nippur, where figurines have been found mostly from domestic contexts: Dales 1960, 210, nos. 125-131; the same applies to terracotta plaques: Assante 2000, 118. The terracottas from Ur have mostly been found in the suburb of Ur, at the site of Diqdiqqeh: it is interesting the retrieval of one specimen from a grave (LG 117) in the city itself: Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 205, Pl. 68.39 (on the rare occurrence of figurines in graves see Felli forthcoming). In the North, at Assur, instead, the majority gathers in the area of the Ishtar temple: Auerbach 1994, 215. It appears relevant that, according to Auerbach 1994, 323, most of the plaques found in the Ishtar Kititum temple at Ishchali are of the type with the nude female (type I). On differences in interpreting contexts between archaeologists see Assante 2006, 193, note 17.

[60] On this matter see also Auerbach 1994, 317.

[61] For a similar caveat but concerning temple findings see Assante 2000, 115, 116. For skepticism in relation to the low percentage of plaques ascribed to temples by the latter scholar see Silver 2006, 651.

[62] Moorey 2004, 118, asks himself how this can relate to healing practices attested by other types of ex-votos at the site.

bution of the artefacts in relation to actual phases of use of a building hampers any conclusive reconstruction.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

If we turn to the textual evidence of the period, we find no mention of nakedness as a specific requisite for any of the categories of women known in relation to cultic occasions.[63] Among the groups of women mentioned in the texts with relationship with music, there are attested mainly the *ḫarimtum* and the *kezertum*, already mentioned above:[64] some progress has been done towards a better understanding of the roles played by these two categories, especially within cult, although the debate over their possible activity as prostitutes is far from settled and still dominates the discussion.[65]

As far as what is of interest here, it appears relevant to say that the two terms are associated in the lexical lists, although in neither cases it is clear whether they represent legal, professional or descriptive categories.[66] *Ḫarimtu* women are attested together with the lamentation priest (gala) of the Shamash temple at Sippar, maybe with a role as singers.[67] In the OB texts of the archive of the chief lamentation priest (gala-maḫ) Ur-Utu in Sippar Ammanum, modern Tell ed-Der, a series of *parṣu*-rites are recorded, performed both by men and married or unmarried women and all connected to the goddess Annunitum, a local form of Ishtar, among which is found one named *ḫarimūtum*.[68]

As shown by some texts of an archive of late OB documents from Kish, *kezertu* women are involved too in the performance of, not better specified, *parṣu*-rites, assigned

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[63] The same applies to male categories too: Biggs 2001.

[64] Shehata 2009, 101-103: less clear appears the link with music of other groups, such as the *nadītum* and *kulmašītum* (Ibidem, 99, 100).

[65] Both *CAD* Ḫ 101 and *AHw* have *ḫarīmtu* as a prostitute; the same *CAD* K 314, 315 and *AHw* 468b for *kezretu(m)*. See Cooper 2006; Lambert 1992; Silver 2006; *contra* Assante 1998. I prefer to leave out the question since I am unable to contribute in any significant way to a discussion which is mostly textually based.

[66] In Sumerian respectively kar.kid and sal.suḫur.lá: Henshaw 1994, 197, 198; as we learn from OB Proto-Lu A, there is also a male version of the latter, the lú.suḫur.lá = *kezrum*. While most scholars see in this association of the two categories evidence for both being a prostitute, Assante 1998, 38, 39 suggests the alternative explanation of the common unmarried status.

[67] Assante 1998, 63; Shehata 2009, 91, 92.

[68] Apparently the rite lacks any clear indication of a sexual nature: Tanret and van Lerberghe 1993, esp. 441, with reference to earlier literature; for a different view see Silver 2006, 646, 647, 655 and 656. It is clear from these texts that these rites entail the use of some commodities (i.e. beer, bread, flour, etc.) for which a payment is due by the performer to the gala-priest and an additional tax is also included for the actual performance (Tanret and van Lerberghe 1993, 446). On the analogies between these texts and those from Kish, although in the former no explicit mention of *kezertum* is made, see Gallery 1980, 333; Tanret and van Lerberghe 1993, 447 note 19.

in the form of prebends by an overseer of *kezertu* of the temple of Ishtar, some of which taking place out of town, in stretches of land along the river and for which elite women came on purpose from the area around Kish.[69] Marten Stol has tentatively suggested a role of the *kezertu* as midwife, which could be compatible with what known from these texts.[70] The long-standing assumption that *kezertu* women were originally only found in Uruk and later in Kish, once the temple personnel of Uruk left the town to move there, has to be revised in the light of increasing evidence on them in relation to other places as well.[71] It is significant in this context to say that *kezertum* occur in the so-called ritual of Larsa mentioned above: the text gives account of the disbursements for a series of ceremonies in honour of different deities and in col. V, l. 7 *kezertum* are mentioned receiving oil rations along with the gudu$_4$/*pāšišu* priests, which are issued only after the offering to Inanna (and maybe Nanaja, but the text is there broken), thus attesting their functioning in a cultic occasion for which needed to be anointed, although their actual role remains unclear.[72] The association of the *kezertum* with the *pāšišu* appears of some interest if we think at the possibility mentioned above that the man portrayed with a pail and a sprinkler or frond on the seals, always next to a deity, could be identified with that official.[73] As already stated above, the latter was also in charge of the care of divine statues and it is maybe not out of place to mention here that the *kezertum*, along with ištaritu women, are specifically associated with the transportation of divine statues from Jamutbal to Babylon in two OB letters.[74] A possible connection of the *kezertum* with cleansing and embellishment activities is in fact acknowledged by some scholars.[75]

Literary evidence links this figure with music activities: in a text, behaving like a *kezertum* equals playing a certain type of instrument, maybe a sort of maraca, singing

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[69] Yoffee 1998. See also George 2003, 453: "the word *kezertum* could refer to a woman under an obligation to perform for a goddess cultic duties (*parṣu*) that may or may not have included some of *ḫarimūtūm*, 'prostitution'". On the term in Neo-Assyrian times see Radner 1997, 218, 219. On the system of prebends in Mesopotamian temples see Postgate 1992, 126: "both cultic offices (what we would call broadly 'priests') and domestic jobs (like 'doorkeeper') could be treated as prebends.[...] prebendary offices which could be passed from one hand to another every few days should be viewed in a different light from those where the identity and experience of the individual was critical".

[70] Stol 2000, 172. According to Assante 1998, 62, a type of profession to be associated with the *ḫarimtu* as well was probably midwifery.

[71] Charpin 2007, 164.

[72] Kingsbury 1963; Goodnick Westenholz and Westenholz 2006, 32, 33; 78; Charpin 2007. See also Shehata 2009, 141-146. According to Henshaw 1994, 199 "the cultic aspect is shown by the *kezretu*'s being associated with the *šangû* of a goddess"; see Shehata 2009, 71 for a connection with the gala-priest.

[73] It seems that this figure performed also music next to the gala in the third millennium, but little evidence on it there is in second millennium material: Shehata 2009, 14.

[74] Shehata 2009, 102 and 145.

[75] Blocher 1987, 229; Shehata 2009, 102; Goodnick Westenholz and Westenholz 2006, 32.

sweet songs and playing games.[76] It is also not out of place to recall that *kezertu* take part with *ḫarīmtu* and *šamḫatu* in a mourning rite of Inanna over the Bull of Heaven in the Gilgamesh Epic.[77] Leaving Mesopotamia proper, the *kezertum* is attested also at Mari, where is in fact primarily a musician, as shown by the study of Ziegler on music and musicians in that centre, attested in large numbers in the harem of the palace where receive rations, with no clear association with prostitution.[78]

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, on the basis of the archaeological evidence summarized above, the iconographic type seems to refer to a real figure, playing a cultic role which may involve music and/or dancing and entail nudity and having enough importance in daily life to justify its frequent representation on different media with different functions, such as seals, figurines and plaques.[79] The representation of naked women on them is probably equal to that of musicians or other categories, such as carpenters, maybe part of the temple personnel: they are carrying out their duty, an activity of which a representation was deemed necessary, for whatever purpose plaques and other media may have.[80] To judge from the frontality

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[76] Roth 1983, esp. 278: "*kezertu* here clearly involving entertainment and not necessarily sexual favors"; Ziegler 1999, 87, note 552. For a possible identification of the instrument GIŠ.DI.TAR with a maraca see Civil 1987. It appears also relevant that in the lexical list Proto-Lu_2 on line 646 is found nar igi suḫur - lá "nar-musicians before the *kezertum*": Shehata 2009, 16 and 17, which seems to opt for an interpretation in favour of a qualification within music execution ("Anleiter oder Vorsänger") than an indication of rank.

[77] George 2003, 629.

[78] Ziegler 1999, 87, 88; 2007, 50: 44 *kezertum* are under the control of the *nargallum*, "chef de musique" at the time of the king Zimri-Lim; see also Charpin 2007, 166. One might wonder whether the large presence of this type of personnel in the palace is due to the presence of the Ishtar sanctuary within it, although this would seem to conflict with the fact that they are part of the royal harem. The reading of the title *kezertum* on the copy of the dedication of a statue to Ishtar by Izamu, one of wives of Yasmaḫ-Addu, mentioned by Blocher 1987, 226, 227, has been recently corrected in NAR "singer": Charpin 2006, 148. It is also interesting to notice that the nude female motif is present at Mari on seals of royal officials (e.g. the seals of Yasim-Sumu: Beyer and Charpin 1990) .

[79] Moorey 2004, 86. On the question of use of terracotta plaques, which were certainly often placed on walls both of temples and houses, as suggested by the presence of holes, see Asher-Greve and Goodnick Westenholz 2013, 238, 239; Assante 2000, 112, 113; Auerbach 1994, 330-357; Opificius 1961, 245. According to Wiggermann 2010, 343, "terracotta plaques afforded protection beyond the specific representation, especially when they had become permanent fixtures of the house". As far as the difficult question of the use of figurines in magic rituals and in general of their function see Reiner 1987; Postgate 1994; Wrede 2003, 21-23; Moorey 2004, 6, 7.

[80] For examples of musicians see the Louvre plaques in Spycket 1972, Figs. 33-35; for the carpenter plaques see Barrelet 1968, Pl. LXXVI.778, 779; see also Dunham 1985, 241, for clay plaques depicting a man with monkeys interpreted as a "monkey handler". On this respect it appears also important to recall the proposal by Nele Ziegler to identify the acrobats *huppûm* in the "danseurs aux claquoirs" depicted on terracotta plaques: Ziegler 1999, 263, 264, illustrating Barrelet 1968, Table LXXXIII.829.

of the nude female figures, I suspect that the ultimate result of their performances, whatever they were, was an apotropaic effect: they ward off evil. The profiles emerging from the texts in relation to these two categories of women would appear consistent with what can be said on the figure on the basis of the visual attestations, although no conclusive argument can be offered here in support of one identification or the other, as suggested by Blocher, and other options remain open too.[81] The mere attestation of a number of different categories of women gravitating around temples for, as far as it can be presumed, different ritual duties, which certainly could be performed also outside the temple precints (e.g. midwifery), provides flesh for otherwise reckoned unmaterial beings: I am convinced that had we had a better match between artefacts and provenance we would be able to appreciate significant correspondences between the place of attestations of these figures in archives and that of the archaeological material on which the nude female is found depicted.[82] Without excluding a possible sexual connotation of the role of the latter, which seems attested by her presence in some of the erotic plaques (but this does not necessarily make her a prostitute), I suggest that a more complex role should be envisaged for this figure in which the ritual dimension appears prevailing.[83]

In this view, the finding in third millennium contexts, both at Mari and Assur, of nude female ivory figurines, purposely designed to stand on small pedestals, does not appear any longer isolated but on the contrary seems to attest the existence of a long standing practice of materialization in artistic media of female personnel performing ritual activities in relation with, though not exclusively, female deities, of which the exact nature/s, "between fertility and eroticism", has still to be clearly ascertained.[84]

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[81] The *kezertum* would seem to me the most apt option, but for reasons which are independent from her presumed hair-style. For a proposal of identification with a *kezertum* of the long-haired woman holding a tamburine and engaged in a unique coitus a tergo with a man playing the lute on a terracotta plaque from Larsa see Ziegler 2007, 50 note 202; for the illustration, Rashid 1984, Fig. 58. It is a pity that the no illustration is known of a seal owned by a person whose name is significantly *Kezertum* mentioned by Stol 2001, 149 (see also Stol apud Yoffee 1998) since its imagery would have been maybe telling.

[82] It is maybe not accidental that the nude female almost disappears from the glyptic at the end of the Old Babylonian period, when most of the Mesopotamian cities, and their temple institutions, experienced a period of crisis and abandonment: for a historical sketch of this period see Yoffee 1998, 334.

[83] See also the observations in relation to the *kezertum* in Yoffee 1998, 336: "their sexual roles as part of their larger ritual persona need to be recognized".

[84] The Mari pieces were found buried in a jar in the palace area, which however housed also a temple of Ishtar: Parrot 1968. For an interpretation of the third millennium naked figurines as cultic personnel see Asher-Greve 1985, 131.

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