In press: in G.J. Selz and K. Wagensonner (eds.),
"Orientalische Kunstgeschichte(n)": Festschrift für Erika Bleibtreu
(=Wiener Offene Orientalistik 13), 1-21.

On women made of clay.

Enquiries on the meaning of an Ancient Near Eastern non-elite (?) production.

Introduction

Terracotta figurines, especially the ones representing women[1], have stimulated a plethora of studies, first dealing with their classification along art historical parameters and subsequently evaluating aspects pertaining to gender and meaning in more recent decades (Dales 1960, Barrelet 1968, Moorey 2003, 2004, Klengel-Brandt – Cholidis 2006, Assante 2006 and Budin 2011 all with previous literature).

Since, however, I would agree that "terracottas do not have inherent meanings independent from their historically specific contexts of production and use"(Moorey 2004: 3), I would like to look more closely, in this contribution, at a single phenomenon, i.e., the sharp increase (Moorey 2004: 71-77) of mould-made terracotta plaques, predominantly representing nude females witnessed at the turning to the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia[2] as well as their decrease thereafter.

The overabundance of evidence, with terracottas counting in the several thousands and probably being surpassed numerically only by pottery sherds in the typology of finds from excavation (and in museums!), in the chosen time frame is typical of mould-made figurines and has even been cited as one of the grounds for the lack for many decades of all-encompassing studies (Caubet 2009: 51).

The site of Diqddiqah/Ur

I will choose here to look at one specific case – a bit atypical, in context – and yet, I believe, possibly representative of the situation in Central and Southern Mesopotamia. These are the terracotta findings from Diqdiqqah, at the outskirts of Ur.

The name of the site, extending in a rough triangle to the NNE of the Ur temenos proper, Arabic *diqdiqqah* refers to a ca. 90 ha large area, a "scrap-heap" thickly "strewn with fragments of pottery and broken brick" (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 81-82). The story of its excavation is well known: after accepting that the workmen passing through the site on their way to work for the first field campaign in the central site of Ur in 1922-23 "constantly brought with them small objects, generally terracottas, which they had picked" by irregular excavations (ibid.: 82), the archaeologists thought it worthwhile to

[1] A detailed scrutiny of all stylistic and iconographic details of these artefacts as well as any possible correlate extracted from the cuneiform written evidence exceeds the scope of this contribution and will not be undertaken here.

[2] Often labelled „Old Babylonian terracotta plaques" they are actually attested starting from the Ur III period. Already Woolley underlined this phenomenon and recognised they would – in Ur – have been in use until the Larsa period, Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 171. For a critical reassessment of the archaeological and historical periodisations between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd mill. BC based on glyptic evidence, see Di Paolo 2010.

conduct regular investigations on Diqddiqah. Apparently the architectural remains were so badly preserved – though wall foundations and even graves below the floor level of buildings were recognised – that a rapid calculation of the cost/benefit ratio (i.e., the additional scientific knowledge beyond the stray finds themselves to be gained by excavation) pushed Mallowan and Woolley to abandon controlled excavation and allow the workmen to search for objects in the previous fashion. A number of inscribed objects of the Early Dynastic period were uncovered, as well as several inscriptions by different kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ur-Nammu, Šulgi and Amar-Suen. Most relevant for the interpretation of the site of Diqdiqqah is the written evidence pointing to the presence of the "meeting-place of waterways constructed or restored by Ur-Nammu as part of the irrigation and transport system (for the e.g., "the ships of Magan") of his capital" (ibid.: 83) and of the "Watch-tower of Ur". Apparently this function of the suburb of Diqdiqqah continued in the Larsa period, as the so-called Treasury of Sin-iddinam[3], excavated in the local NW mound, may be interpreted as a "store-house or custom-house connected with the oversea traffic coming to Ur by way of the canals" (ibid.: 84). Surprising was that the site of Diqdiqqah "yielded several times as many terracottas as the whole of the rest of Ur produced in the course of twelve years' work". A variety of subjects is represented in the Old Babylonian Period corpus (humans, gods and goddesses, genre scenes, demons, chariots and furniture models, animals) but "the most common of all are figures of nude women or girls, *which are clearly of votive character*" (my emphasis) (ibid.: 85).

The Corpus

Though the terracottas published in the Ur Old Babylonian Period volume are but a sample representing slightly over 10% of the total of uncovered figurines[4], their better state of preservation makes them representative of the non-fragmentary class and suitable for our evaluation.

Divided in groups according to their context of provenance, the categories of anthropomorphic (both humans and deities), demons and chariots and furniture are constantly stemming for 20% of the published data from controlled excavation. The overwhelmingly large majority of the specimens, however, come from Diqdiqqah. Only in the case of animal figurines is the percentage of specimens recovered from excavated contexts double (40%) the one attested for other categories. One aspect is peculiar: all published genre scenes (musicians, wrestlers in combat, erotic plaques, etc.) stem from excavated contexts in Ur, never from Diqdiqqah. It, therefore, seems that terracotta production in Diqdiqqah was selective in that it privileged the anthropomorphic and to a minor extent the animals subsets and did not foresee the production of 'secondary' (see below) motifs, such as those represented on genre scenes.

[3] Although the fact that Sin-iddinam may have ordered the erection of the building was put in question, Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 87.

[4] Woolley and Mallowan 1976. 2600 is the total number of the uncovered pieces (complete and fragments) and 258 appear in the final publication. We can presume that the 10% chosen for publication in the volume (and to a minor extent in the Obeid and Kassite volumes) are the best preserved and most representative of the entire assemblage.

The large majority of the motifs of the corpus (70%) is made by anthropomorphic figurines, with humans and deities being attested in even terms. Within the human representations, however, the ratio female/male is 61% to 39% and almost two thirds of the female ones are of the type of the 'nude female'[5]. A similar situation seems to have prevailed in numerous sites (e.g., Nippur, Legrain 1930: 37 or recently Shishin on the Iraqi Middle Euphrates, Rumaiydh 2010 and Rumaiydh and Abdel-Razzaq 1999-2000) and has been commented upon before (Auerbach 1994: 207 and Assante 2002a:7).

The subset

It is therefore interesting to focus on the motif of the 'nude female': a standing woman, shown frontally and nude, except for sometimes a girdle, a high chocker and an elaborate hair style including often additional jewellery (earrings). At times also anklets are present (e.g., Rumaiydh 2010: Pl. 3f). The hands are most often clasped underneath well rounded breasts. Also the pubic triangle is clearly represented, with schematic rendering of the pubic hair (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: Pl. 66, Figs. 19-26 and Pl. 67, Figs. 29-36, Pl. 68, Fig. 37-43, here Fig. 1-3). Though I may definitely speak about a single type for the motif it carries, the figurines are by no means all identical as the shape of the hairdo and the representation of the bodily and facial features vary in detail and style. However, all are produced by the use of the mould.

The motif is only one among the many[6] attested in this phase but I believe it is worthwhile analysing this specific production not only because of its numerical prevalence over the others but also because, stemming as it does from modelled three-dimensional terracotta figurines and starting through the procedure of a one-piece mould already in the Akkadian period (Auerbach 1994: 208 and 258), it constitutes the initial[7] and 'original', i.e., the prototype for which *en masse* moulded production was developed and fully exploited.

Scholarship on the motif of the 'nackte Frau' has a long history (Blocher 1987) and even a review of all relevant contributions would go well beyond the scope of the present contribution. Suffice it to say that all possible meanings from 'mother or fertility goddess'[8], to 'Inanna/Ištar/Astarte' (with nuances Pruss 2002), from 'priestess', 'temple attendant', 'worshipper' to 'seductress' (Bahrani 1996: 8-13) and 'prostitute' have been proposed.

However, both Zainab Bahrani's (2001) and Julia Assante's (2006) critiques of modern and Western biases in previous scholarship have contributed very substantially in advancing a sharper focus on the subject. From this discussion Assante (2006) could derive her interpretation – based on a proposal by Frans Wiggermann (1987: 28-29)

[5] On the statistically low presence of the motif of the "woman and child", either breastfeeding or more generally in the role of *kourotrophos* in Mesopotamia and its meaning see now summarising Budin 2011: esp. 185-214.

[6] Besides the ones listed above from Ur/Diqdiqqah, see Assante 2002a: 7-13 for themes such as: strongman heroes or warriors, horse and rider, musicians, beds with nude women or couples laying on them, human-animal hybrids and even kings (!).

[7] Assante 2002a: 17 "...the most popular and the oldest plaque motifs, namely the nude female, some bull-eared god variety and the Humbaba mask".

[8] For a critical assessment see Bahrani 2001: 48.

concerning the Akkadian term, feminine in grammatical gender, *baštu* – to identify the figurine of the nude female as the icon of the abstract principle/quality of human dignity (For contrary views see Bahrani 2001: 50 and Pruss 2002).

In this instance she reiterates a point made in a previous study (Assante 2002a) that *baštu* like other principles and concepts represented by the "plaque industry" originated in the otherworldly "before or outside of human civilization" (Assante 2006: 202).

I would like to look at the evidence from a different angle, especially in the effort to explain the reason for the mass popularity of the terracotta plaques belonging to the subset of the frontally facing nude female, as mostly found in the region from the Middle Euphrates[9] through the Diyala to Southern Mesopotamia[10].

I will argue that terracotta plaques of the type of the 'nackte Frau' were the prototype (and possibly even the reason) for developing of *en masse* production of plaques with other motifs because, while they may have referred to a basic concept of dignity (*baštu*), they were used to represent real, individual women. These terracottas were used in connection to social events involving large parts of the population, such as e.g., festivities, betrothals and weddings celebrating the 'rite de passage' (van Gennep 1981 [1909]) of achieved maturity (physical and therefore at the same time: sexual, gender and age) that enabled the full participation to the adult world. I would argue that agency in this 'rite de passage' of coming-of-age was performed and controlled mainly by different generations of women (mothers, sisters, daughters, brides-to-be, mother-in-laws, etc.), proving the existence of the powerful role women achieved in society in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennium Mesopotamia. Portrayal of a healthy, young female body that had reached physical maturity, decorated with jewels, other than vilifying, actually enhanced the role of women in the social arena.

Let us check on the basis of a review of the different attributes of these plaques whether the above thesis may be supported.

On manufacture

Realised with the one-piece open mould, the technical innovation used *en masse* during the period, they could be produced in unprecedented high numbers. It is agreed that because of the material – clay – and type of procedure they are to be associated to potters' workshops.

---

[9] The situation in Tell Hariri, ancient Mari, is to a significant extent different from the properly Mesopotamian one: here the studied figurines come from the palace; in the repertory there is a clear dominance of male in lieu of female motifs, their overall number is low; etc. (Margueron 1997). In Mari, too, we find the naked woman, e.g. holding the tambourine. More interesting, however, is the presence here of the 'nude female' iconography, not only on figurines but on terracotta baking moulds (*moules à gateau*, Margueron 2004, 515-516). The naked woman here represented looks different from the ones discussed above because of a turban she wears and because she sits on a bank (Parrot 1959: 37-38, fig. 31 and pl. XIX). For the difference in meaning of standing vs seated posture, though in a different context see Selz 2004.

[10] Already Ruth Opificius (1961: 24 "Je weiter man jedoch nach Norden geht, desto geringer wird die Ausbeute") remarked on the differences with neighbouring areas. For the situation in Assur see Klengel-Brandt 1978. In Syria and the Levant the use of single-piece moulds is introduced much later, in the second part of the 2nd millennium BC. Summarising see Pruss 2002. I would qualify the situation there as basically different from the one obtaining in Mesopotamia.

The finding at Diqdiqqah of "several examples of the clay mould from which the figures were cast" (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 86) as well as hundreds of miniature vessels – both thrown on the potter's wheel and hand-made, is possible indication that we can identify this Ur suburb, extending on the banks of the canals, as the location for one or several potters' workshops for the manufacture of miniature clay vessels and terracotta plaques, mainly of the anthropomorphic and animal subsets.

Gender[11] of authorship has been debated – in the stream of interpretations that felt the need to clarify whether the naturalistic and beautified representation of the female body was the women's self as opposed to the men's ideal of feminine beauty. I would like to underline that while the coroplast producing the mould may have been either a man of a woman, as both genders are attested as potters, the final (re-)production of the figurines themselves could for the first time be entrusted even to rather inexperienced workers such as apprentices or even adolescents and children, as has been recently proposed for the double-mould production of Levantine clay figurines in the Hellenistic period (Oggiano 2012). Children could also have been involved in the production of miniature vessels, like those found at Diqdiqqah.

Anyhow, barring envisaging a use systematically restricted to only one among either gender – something we have no extended evidence for so far[12] – as but one item of an entire symbolic communication system, the type must have been accepted as representing a current idea(l) of healthy, adult, womanly body, valid and significant for both men and women. And even more it can be said that, because of the popularity of the motif, and – if the above hypothesis is right – for their potential involvement in the productive process, it must have been a meaningful symbol, an icon even, also for children and youngsters of both genders.

Easiness of production and low cost of the material made terracottas extremely accessible to all classes of society and a very extensive distribution possible.

Beyond the intrinsic cheapness of the material, the small format and the low weight made them extremely easy to be held in the hand, to be transferred from one person to the next and so increased significantly their distribution and as a consequence their visibility.

On circulation

The interest of making replicas has been discussed by Julia Assante as a strategy through which the "plaque industry" (Assante 2002a: 5, 8, *passim*) intentionally used copying as "a means by which an image is empowered and supernatural presences are invoked" (ibid: 19). This seems to be a convincing interpretation for the plaques with explicitly otherworldly or magical themes.

For what pertains to the production of the 'female nude' plaques, however, I would underline that the several idiosyncrasies and variations we register on one site alone e.g., Diqdiqqah/Ur (above Figs. 1-3), let alone in the comparison with other

[11] The existence of more than one gender in ancient as well as in modern societies will not be explored further in the frame of the present discussion.

[12] For a possible exception of terracotta findings in private quarters see below footnote 17.

contemporary ones, seem to contradict the existence of a "plaque industry" portrayed almost as a single entity supervising the production and devising programmatic strategies for diffusing certain motifs, as if it were an overreaching agency, transcending different political and cultural entities[13].

Furthermore, some of Walter Benjamin's comments – though on a completely different time frame, different type of art works and different type of society – may be helpful in clarifying the sort of ideas or concepts embodied by our plaques. Even before 'the age of mechanical reproduction' of art works (Benjamin 1980[1939]), stamping and casting (moulding) allowed copying and producing several replicas. This on one hand did achieve a greater visibility but diminished or actually eliminated the objects' 'aura', by removing its uniqueness. Thus producing replicas detaches the object from the realm of tradition and "in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder...in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced" (ibid.: 477). The widespread circulation throughout the masses is thus not linked to the cultic essence of the artefacts but to their visibility (ibid.: 483-4) and furthermore, to their accessibility and manipulability.

On (find)contexts

The Ur III to Old Babylonian period was "the golden age of terracotta manufacture in Babylonia" and "the present archaeological evidence for this phase in the use of clay figurines and plaques is virtually all from town and, within towns, often public buildings and the areas adjacent to them rather than from suburbs and towns" (Moorey 2004: 72). Besides the well-known exceptions – such as our finds from the suburb of Diqdiqqah – this assessment may be due to the fact that it is mainly towns that were/are being explored by archaeologists and may need to be revised in the future as investigations in Babylonia continue (e.g., Rumaiydh 2010). Old Babylonian period village and rural sites in the e.g., Hamrin, however, do attest the presence of terracotta plaques (e.g., Kheit Genj, Ahmed al-Mughir, etc., see Luciani 2000). In the Diyala, figurines and plaques were found in "nearly all archaeological contexts — secular public, religious, private" (Auerbach 1994: 273). For Babylonia in general has been written, "die meisten Reliefs wurden in Wohnhäusern gefunden, die Zahl die im Tempel ausgegrabenen ist geringer und in Gräbern [ist] so gut wie nie – bis auf eine Ausnahme – ein Stück dieser Art belegt" (Opificius 1961: 24)".

So find contexts do not seem to be specific enough to point to a particular context or class of people using these plaques. Furthermore, the fact that the image's iconic representation of the 'nude female' was found – even if only starting with the Old Babylonian period proper – also on the more elite medium of seals[14] as well as, in the abbreviated form of the pubic triangle[15], in (Ishtar) temple furniture (Assur and

[13] Evidence discussed above in footnote 10 seems, on the contrary, to point to the plaques reflecting local cultural habits.

[14] Collon 1986: 131-138. "Few of the seals with the image of the nude female are inscribed but several of those belong to women" (ibid.: 132).

[15] There is an interesting correspondence in the sign for vulva being associated with the concept of age or better female adulthood and not fertility/fecundity, etc. in Katherine Wright's accent on the fact that in the

Haradum)[16] or in the palace area in Mari (Margueron 1997) together with its widespread distribution may suggest that use was not confined to non-elite population exclusively.

While the terracotta material was surely affordable, I would agree with Susan Sherrat's (1999: 185-186) evaluation of elite status as being contextual, i.e., measurable by degrees rather than by a binary yes or no (Whincop 2010: 1005), so that we may envisage 'non-elite', 'sub-elites' or 'substitute-elites' becoming increasingly engaged in self-representation and gaining visibility in the early part of the 2nd millennium BC. Evidence such as the amplified use of terracotta seals during this period indicates a progressive democratisation and involvement of different population groups (e.g., rural or local sub-elite urbanites) in administrative practice (Luciani 2000: 87).

Roger Moorey pointed out that terracottas were "generally treated like any other household rubbish once they had served their purpose" (Moorey 2003: 2). Traditionally the fact that "throughout they [i.e., the plaques] are recovered by archaeologists from deposits that were contexts of disposal rather than of use" (Moorey 2004: 76) has been felt, especially by scholars with art-historical background, as a "severe restraint on their study" (ibid.).

On the contrary, I believe a new look at their final deposition in rubbish contexts may help shed light on their meaning. It should be put into relation with how they were perceived and with their actual use: deprive of the 'holiness' and 'aura' other representation were loaded with, they were meaningful on single events, or on a single occasion, of e.g., a feast, a performance or 'rite de passage' (at any event 'discrete episodes of activities') and could thereafter be thrown away "as any other household rubbish" (Moorey 2003:2). If they are so often found within refuse deposits, it is because they were *meant* to be discarded after use.

For the plaques representing the nude female the interpretation as fixed furniture inside, e.g., a house does not seem to be confirmed by excavation data.

On themes, motifs and style

"Fragmentation is characteristic of assemblages of prehistoric anthropomorphic (and other) terracottas recovered through excavation. Such practices may suggest that terracottas were only rarely, if ever, at this stage 'dedicatory offerings' or images of deities when made in human form" this seems to point to their "almost exclusive involvement in rituals dedicated to the living, used briefly and then discarded, in prehistory" (Moorey 2004: 47).

---

archaic Uruk and slightly later texts "adult women are described in term of the nude sexual organs" (SAL/MUNUS/MÍ), except for mothers (!) and children (daughters) (Wright 2007: 217). This representation through the writing signs, however, is not directly mirrored in terracotta figurines during the Uruk period (ibid. 224). One Late Bronze Age specimen of mould of the nude female type from Syria (Tell Munbaqa) carries on the back the sign MUNUS/MÍ 'woman' (Kühne 1980: 215 and fig. 13).

[16] For the often cited evidence from the Old Assyrian level of the Ishtar temple in Assur see Jakob-Rost and Freydank 1981. For further votive artefacts (sculptures and metal plaques see Bär 2003: 125 [SK 88], 127 [SK 96] and 159 [VP 2]). For Khirbet ed-Dininyeh, ancient Haradum see Kepinski-Leconte 1992, 350-351, fig. 141, Nos. 2 (from the Ishtar temple Bâtiment 1) and 7 (from the building adjoining the temple, Bâtiment 3).

We have proposed above that the type of the 'nackte Frau' plaque descended directly from three-dimensional, modelled terracotta figurine and probably served as prototype for the production of all other plaques. It is interesting to underline that the other themes, the representation of deities (and even the king) in small format and in clay are an innovation of this period (Ur III) and this class of production after a millennia-long tradition of production of only human beings and animals. From the conceptual point of view, therefore, within the production of plaques, the motif of the 'nude female' is primary[17], all the others are secondary.

Consequently, I would like to argue that otherworldly, supernatural meanings (Assante 2002b) – well fitting for the majority of the motifs of contemporary but secondary plaques – just as interpretations of later, sometimes inscribed, terracottas as magical figures (Moorey 2004: 87) should not be imposed on the 'nude female'. In its primary essence, it is more likely to have simply been the representation of (an) "adult woman(hood)"[18], involved in ordinary and festive activities of women and men in the society[19].

What is new is a decidedly more naturalistic representation of women than in previous times. This aspect, combined with the degree of variation in details and non achieved standardisation may have to be ascribed to the greater role played by the identit(ies) and the wishes of individual[20] commissioners in respect to the producers.

If we understand terracottas as "embodied material culture since they show us how bodies are constructed and which parts of these bodies are essential to a given culture through the representation or omission of particular organs" (García-Ventura and López-Bertran 2010: 740) then this emphasis must be relevant to the way figurines were used. A look at the nude female (Figs. 1-3), allows us to recognise three main characterising features: the naturalistic type of representation, the nudity, the frontal posture[21]. As a rich and increasingly pertinent discussion of these aspects has developed in scholarly discourse I will not repeat it here (Assante 2006 with previous references). I would like to just put the accent on some elements more neglected so far.

While the representation of the nude female seems definitely to be an "engendered female" (Budin 2011: 334) image, differently from representations on e.g., beds or erotic scenes, the woman is not really naked.

---

[17] "The fact that Akkadian plaques, all of type I [i.e., frontally facing nude female], were restricted to private contexts in the Akkadian period, may support the contention, that the type I plaques were manufactured to meet the specific social needs of female consumers who used those objects – just relief versions of female figurines – in their private quarters" (Auerbach 1994: 318).

[18] As the, e.g., inscription on the mould from Tell Munbaqa clearly states: MUNUS/MÍ, see above footnote 15.

[19] For their nudity, relation to the world of the living – as opposed to funerary and divine representation – and indication of – in this case young – age, we may recognise some structural parallels with the Egyptian bronze mirrors handles with representations of nude girls, see Quack 2003.

[20] On the human (as opposed to animal) figurines as effigies of specific individuals see Postgate 1994.

[21] I am not sure the frontal posture with straight, closed legs should be read (with García-Ventura and López-Bertran 2010: 740) as faithfully mirroring a static and demure attitude and a non-participation to movement (e.g., dancing) during the festivities. It may be due to iconicity the motif had attained otherwise.

"The body, dress, and artistic representation of the body are seen as most crucial arenas of enculturation of an individual in definitions of gender" (Wright 2007: 202 with references) – and I would add – of age "and in social rules of appropriate appearance" (ibid.).

Beside common elements with other categories representing females, I see two aspects as characteristic of the 'nude female': the emphasis on the representation of the pubic triangle haired (found also in the representation of the nude female icon on seals[22]) and the presence of heavy jewellery.

I would like to read the emphasis on the representation of developed secondary sexual traits, such as pubic hair – and breast too – as a signifier for achieved physical maturity: i.e., the representation of a young healthy body, ready to enter the adult world.

However, the presence of jewellery clearly indicates that these young adults were not meant to be represented naked: pendants on the ears, heavy chocker and necklaces from the neck to the cleavage, at times a girdle and/or anklets on their legs: all evocative of dressing up for a highly festive occasion[23]. "Anthropological and social theories relating to personal adornment, social identity and 'rites of passage' highlight the importance of body ornaments in marking life stages and expressing gender- and age-specific roles throughout life into death" (Green 2007: 283).

Therefore I think it is possible to interpret the prominent representation of jewellery on the (not-really-fully-)'nude female' as the material correlate of a ritual performance, e.g., the celebration of coming-of-age, the first time a young woman was finally allowed to dress up[24] and wear jewellery 'like an adult'[25].

Furthermore, since jewels were indicators of social status, the differences in representation of the different bodily ornaments displayed during these ceremonies may have played a role in reproducing, reinforcing or even questioning the status of the participants.

Conclusions

If at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC the representation of men sometimes in close association with models of wheeled vehicles and traction animals reflects "the emergence in the real world of new male *élites* in the pristine city-states of the region" (Moorey 2003: 20-21 and idem 2004: 53) and their numerical predominance – for the first time since we have attestations (Wright 2007: 211) – has been associated with the formation of the state, marginalizing female roles, why should the increased number of

[22] I fail to see why this very iconic symbol should suddenly carry "bikini briefs" in some of the seals (Collon 1986: 131). It seems much more likely that the stripes visible on the seals must still be seen as a very schematic representation of pubic hair.

[23] Also the association of the the 'nude female' in seal iconography and other plaques with dancers, musicians and entertainers may support this interpretation.

[24] In some present Islamic societies the young girl starts veiling around the time of the menarche and is thereafter perceived as adult. However, on the non-direct correlation between veiling and subjugation of women in patriarchal societies in the ancient Near East see Reade 2002: 559-561.

[25] Is the Old Babylonian letter AbB IX, 61 (Stol 1981: 43) really evidence of a mother "quarrelling with her teenage daughter over jewellery"? (Westenholz in Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999: 71 fn. 331).

images of women at the turn of the 3rd millennium BC not reflect the emergence of *women's* role in society?

For a long time, women made of clay have been interpreted as goddesses. However, "interpreting female images of all types as deities does not elevate the status of women but rather expunges them from the annals of human history" (Assante 2006: 203).

Ernst Gombrich (1993: 75-77) has written of "the ecology of the image", underlining that "an image may evolve but its ecology, the social context, in its turn reacts back on why images are made, how they are made....So you may find this very interesting interaction always between the strength of tradition and the social *milieu* which allows something to continue".

I am not advocating the existence of a "plaque industry", through which (women-) potters programmatically mass-produced their own image, in order to disavow male dominance in the social arena. I do, however, argue that the very conspicuous phenomenon of multiplication of an icon of female dignity, the youthful yet physically mature, nude female with elaborate hairdo and heavy jewellery, shown full-frontal in low relief terracotta plaques, a phenomenon rather restricted in time (the very end of the 3rd and first part of the 2nd mill. BC), while being inscribed in a long tradition and developing along traditional canons, represents a clear and visible innovation – in style (moulded and stronger naturalistic), number and circulation.

From the explanatory point of view, there is no reason to confine all interpretations exclusively in the realm of magic, divinity or the supernatural when dealing with female images as opposed to rank and society when interpreting male representations. Therefore we should be ready to allow for the unprecedented increase of the number of plaques of the subset of the 'nude female' with prominent jewellery and fancy headdresses to signify an increase of the visibility and importance of the active social role of women in this age.

These plaques may have been the material correlate[26] of the 'rite de passage' connected with reaching adulthood, coming-of-age[27] or other celebrations of rites of passage (e.g., betrothal or entering marriage). These were events probably the young woman (and also the young man?) shared and experienced first and foremost within the women's world, and where the mother[28] was likely to have played a more significant role than the father, even where the latter was the signatory of the marriage contract[29].

Furthermore, since rites of passage, betrothals and weddings were very likely to have implied festivities, frequent, repeated but single-event celebrations, it seems likely that thereafter, these figurines having served their function, they were simply discarded or

[26] For the performative role of the image see Selz 2004:37 and Asher-Greve 2006: 43.
[27] Possible modern comparable events could be considered the Latin American *Quinceañera* or even in some respects the *Bat Mitzvah.*
[28] It is not uncommon, even in present traditional and patriarchal societies, that it is the young man's mother's prerogative to choose the bride for the son.
[29] A lot is known of the legal practices connected with marriage contracts in different periods and area of the ancient Near East (for an overview see Stol 1995: 488-490 and Greengus 1995: 479-481). However, very little is known of e.g., the actual performance during celebrations of wedding festivities or other 'rites de passage' not reported upon in the texts.

re-used for different purposes. As feasting "allows the constant negotiation and manipulation of social relations as well as a reconfirmation of power structures" (Helwing 2003:63) the study of these materials correlates to ritual celebrations enables us to better define the human agencies active in society. The context of banqueting during such celebrations seems a fitting explanation also for the cake moulds in the shape of naked women uncovered in the kitchen rooms of the early 2nd millennium BC palace in Mari[30]. Such moulded pies may have been served and consumed during festive celebrations of the 'coming-of-age'.

Julia Assante (1998) has shown that until the Old Babylonian period professional and ecclesiastical independent women (see also Asher-Greve 2006) were active and recognisable in the written record. As category they do not seem to survive beyond the mid of the 2nd millennium BC.

The capillary distribution of these images implies a far greater presence of women in society than in any previous period – including the so-called 'golden age' of women (Asher-Greve 2006: 45) – also *because* of the intrinsic unsurpassed visibility of these cheap replicas, far higher than any elite representation.

Whether this raise in importance of the role of women mirrored by their representation *en masse* - so specific of the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium BC - was linked to (1) an increase in their status due to the new accent on kinship structures (as opposed to a class-based society) brought about by the new Amorrite rule or (2) was simply made possible by the opportunities that the highly stratified regional kingdoms offered or even (3) a combination of the two factors, needs further investigation, especially of the data stemming from cuneiform records.

Asher-Greve and Sweeney (2006: 162) hold that "the human body is an ontological form....as a consequence...nude form can be considered the 'essence' of human beings". And even if this is a difficult area to investigate without severely distorting biases (Bahrani 1996, Assante 2006) a contextualised evaluation of nudity[31] on our plaques has shown no evidence for them to signify a "subordinate status and/or an 'ungoverned' persona, outside social controls of urban society" (Wright 2007: 211) as is clearly the case in many instances of elite artistic and literary accounts in the 3rd millennium BC. Nor is there compelling evidence for these terracottas to refer explicitly and simply to divinity and/or fertility. On the contrary, it seems to "present female generically as a neutral zone, an average, yet also undamaged body" (Assante 2006: 195).

Chronological anteriority, genetic link with three-dimensional representations and numerical superiority in respect to other themes and motifs represented in the

[30] See above fn. 9. It should furthermore not be excluded that also jars with applied figurines of the naked woman – e.g. those found in the *favissae* in Ebla (Pinnock 1995a, 1995b and 2011) or their miniaturised versions – also originated from table and serving sets used (symbolically or realistically) during these kinds of festivities and then discarded. The connection in Ebla (Marchetti – Nigro 1997), Assur or Haradum (see above fn. 16) with Ishtar and her temples seems perfectly suitable because of the aspects pertaining to attaining also sexual maturity implied in reaching adulthood.

[31] On the difference between of the concepts of nudity and nakedness in ancient art, see Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 129-30 and further "It is not clear how far nakedness was associated with shame in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, as there are very few references to this issue" (ibid.: 127).

terracotta plaques production characterise the subset of the 'nude female' as something specific. Interpretation of the meaning, function and use (e.g., divine status, magical tools) as developed for the other plaques should not be imposed on them, also in view of the selectivity in the production of different motifs (anthropomorphic + animal vs genre scenes) detected in e.g., Diqdiqqah and Ur.

Once absolved their function of material correlate of a 'rite de passage' in the one discrete episode of activity, they could be refunctionalised in different ways (e.g., magical figurines, toys, etc.), exchanged with different persons and disposed in different contexts – including in the rare event, the funerary one.

Sources of the illustrations:

Fig. 1: Woolley and Mallowan 1976: Pl. 66.

Fig. 2: Woolley and Mallowan 1976: Pl. 67.

Fig. 3: Woolley and Mallowan 1976: Pl. 68.

Cited references

Asher-Greve, Julia M., 2006: "'Golden Age' of Women? Status and Gender in Third Millennium Sumerian and Akkadian Art". In: Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art, ed. Silvia Schroer, OBO 20, Fribourg, 41-81.

Asher-Greve, Julia M., and Sweeney, Deborah, 2006: "On Nakedness, Nudity and Gender in Egyptian and Mesopotamian Art". In: Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art, ed. Silvia Schroer, OBO 20, Fribourg, 125-176.

Assante, Julia, 1998: "The kar.kid / *ḫarimtu*, Prostitute or Single Woman? A Reconsideration of the Evidence", Ugarit-Forschungen 30, 5-96.

Assante, J., 2002a: "Style and Replication in 'Old Babylonian' Terracotta Plaques: Strategies for Entrapping the Power of Images". In: Ex Mesopotamia et Syria Lux. Festschrift für Manfred Dietrtich zu seinem 65. Geburtstag, eds. Oswald Loretz, Kai A. Metzler and Hanspeter Schaudig, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 281, 1-29.

Assante, J., 2002b: "Sex, Magic and the Liminal Body in the Erotic Art and Texts of the Old Babylonian Period". In: Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the XLVII[e] Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki. Part II, eds. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 27-52.

Assante, J., 2006: "Undressing the Nude: Problems in Analyzing Nudity in Ancient Art, with an Old Babylonian Case". In: Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art, ed. Silvia Schroer, OBO 20, Fribourg, 177-207.

Auerbach, Elise, 1992: "Review of Blocher, Felix, 1987: Untersuchungen zum Motiv der nackten Frau in der altbabylonischen Zeit". Journal of Near Eastern Studies 51, 308-310.

Auerbach, Elise, 1994: Terra Cotta Plaques from the Diyala and their Archaeological and Cultural Contexts. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Bär, Jürgen, 2003: Die älteren Ischtar-Tempel in Assur. Stratigraphie, Architektur und Funde eines altorientalischen Heiligtums von der zweiten Hälfte des 3. Jahrtausends bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 105. Saarbrücken: Saarbrücker Druckerei Verlag.

Bahrani, Zainab, 1996: "The Hellenization of Ishtar: Nudity, Fetishism and the Production of Cultural Differentiation in Ancient Art". Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 19, No.2, 3-16.

Bahrani, Zainab, 2001: Women of Babylon. Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia. London and New York: Routledge.

Barrelet, Marie-Thérèse, 1968: Figurines et reliefs en terre cuite de la Mésopotamie antique. I. Potier, termes de metier, procédés de fabrication et production. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

Benjamin, Walter, 1980 (1939): "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Dritte Fassung), 1939". In: Walter Benjamin – Gesammelte Schriften Band I, Teil 2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, , S. 471–508.

Blocher, Felix, 1987: Untersuchungen zum Motiv der nackten Frau in der altbabylonischen Zeit, Münchener Vorderasiatische Studien, Band IV, München: Profil Verlag.

Budin, Stepanie L., 2011: Images of Woman and Child from the Bronze Age. Reconsidering Fertility, Maternity, and Gender in the Ancient World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Caubet, Annie, 2009: "Figurines en terre cuite", *Perspective* 2009-1, 43-56, accessed at: http://www.coroplasticstudies.org/images/Caubet.pdf.

Collon, Dominique, 1986: Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals III. Isin-larsa and Old Babylonian Periods. London: British Museum Publications Limited.

Dales, George Franklin Jr., 1960, Mesopotamian and Related Female Figurines: Their Chronology, Diffusion, and Cultural Functions, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Di Paolo, Silvana, 2010: "Continuità e discontinuità tra Ur III e Paleobabilonese iniziale: un contributo sulla cronologia dallo studio delle Udienze Reali sui sigilli dei 'servi del re'". In: Quale Oriente? Omaggio a un maestro. Studi di arte e archeologia del Vicino Oriente in memoria di Anton Moortgat a 30 anni dalla sua scomparsa, ed. Rita Dolce, Palermo: Flaccovio Editore, 263-290.

García-Ventura, Agnès and López-Bertran, Mireia, 2010: "Embodying some Tell Asmar Figurines". In: Proceedings of the 6th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, ed. Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, Lorenzo Nigro and Nicoló Marchetti with the collaboration of Licia Romano, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 739-749.

Gombrich, Ernst H., 1993: A Lifelong Interest. Conversations in Art and Science with Didier Eribon, London: Thames and Hudson.

Green, John D.M., 2007: "Anklets and the social construction of gender and age in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age Southern Levant". In: Women and Archaeology. Ancient

& Modern Issues, eds. Susan Hamilton, Ruth D. Whitehouse, Katherine I. Wright, Walnut Creek, Ca.: Publications of the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London, 283-309.

Greengus, Samuel, 1995: "Legal and Social Institutions of Ancient Mesopotamia". In: Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, eds. Jack M. Sasson, John Baines, Gary Beckman, Karen S. Rubinson, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 469-484.

Helwing, Barbara, 2003: "Feasts as a social dynamic in Prehistoric Western Asia – Three Case Studies from Syria and Anatolia". Paléorient 29,/2, 63-86.

Jakob-Rost, Liane and Freydank, Helmut, 1981: "Eine altassyrische Votivinschrift". Altorientalische Forschungen VIII, 325-327.

Kepinski-Lecomte, Christine, 1992: Haradum I. Une ville nouvelle sur le Moyen Euphrate (XVIII^{e}-XVII^{e} siècles av. J.-C.), Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

Klengel-Brandt, Evelyn, 1978: Die Terrakotten aus Assur im Vorderasiatischen Museum Berlin. Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften.

Klengel-Brandt, Evelyn and Cholidis, Nadja, 2006: Die Terrakotten von Babylon im Vorderasiatischen Museum in Berlin / Teil 1. Die anthropomorphen Figuren, Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 115, Saarwellingen.

Kühne, Hartmut (in Zusammenarbeit mit Hans Steuerwald), 1980: "Das Nordost-Tor von Tell Mumbāqat". In: Le Moyen Euphrate. Zone de contactes et d'échanches. Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 10-12 Mars 1977. Travaux du Centre de Recherché sur le Proche-Orient et la Grèce Antiques, ed. Jean-Claude Margueron, Strasbourg, 203-215.

Legrain, Leon, 1930: Terra-cottas from Nippur. The University Museum, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Luciani, Marta, 2000: "Il bacino dello Hamrin nel II millennio a.C.". In: Patavina Orientalia Selecta, ed. Elena Rova. History of the Ancient Near East / Monographs IV, Padova, 71-102.

Marchetti, Nicoló – Nigro, Lorenzo, 1997: Cultic activities in the sacred area of Ishtar at Ebla during the Old Syrian period : the favissae F.5327 and F.5238, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 49, 1-44.

Margueron, Jean-Claude, 1997: "Palais de Mari: figurines et religion populaire", M.A.R.I. 8, 731-753.

Margueron, Jean-Claude, 2004: *Mari. Métropole de l'Euphrate au III^{e} et au début du II^{e} millénaire av. J.-C.* Picard/erc. Paris.

Moorey, Peter Roger S., 2003: Idols of the people: miniature images of clay in the ancient Near East, Oxford - New York.

Moorey, Peter Roger S., 2004, Ancient Near Eastern Terracottas with a catalogue of the collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, accessed at: http://www.ashmolean.org/ash/amocats/anet/.

Oggiano, Ida, 2012: "Images of women and children in the hinterland of Tyre between Persian and Hellenistic periods. The rural shrine of Kharayeb". In: Paper presented at the 8th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, April 30 – May 4, 2012, University of Warsaw, Abstracts, 73.

Opificius, Ruth, 1961: Das altbabylonische Terrakottarelief. Untersuchungen zu Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Band 2. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Parrot, André (avec des contributions de M.-Th. Barrelet-Clementel, G. Dossin, P. Ducos, J. Bouchud), 1959: Le Palais. Documents et Monuments. Mission Archéologique de Mari, vol. II/3, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

Pinnock, Frances, 1995a: Vasetto con decorazione applicata. In*: Ebla. Alle origini della civiltà urbana*, P. Matthiae – F. Pinnock – G. Scandone-Matthiae (eds.), Electa, Milano, 417.

Pinnock, Frances, 1995a: Giarette con decorazione applicata, In*: Ebla. Alle origini della civiltà urbana*, P. Matthiae – F. Pinnock – G. Scandone-Matthiae (eds.), Electa, Milano, 455.

Pinnock, Frances, 2011: *Le giarette con decorazione applicata del Bronzo Medio II*, Materiali e studi archeologici di Ebla 9, Roma.

Postgate, John Nicolas, 1994: "Text and figure in ancient Mesopotamia: match and mismatch". In: The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology, ed. Colin Renfrew and Ezra B.W. Zubrow, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 176-184.

Quack, Joachim Friedrich, 2003: "Das nackte Mädchen im Griff halten. Zur Deutung der ägyptischen Karyatidenspiegel". Welt des Orients 33, 44-64.

Pruß, Alexander, 2002: "The Use of Nude Female Figurines". In: Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the XLVII^{e} Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki. Part II, eds. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 537-548.

Reade, Julian, 2002: "Sexism and Homotheism in Ancient Iraq". In: Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the XLVII^{e} Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki. Part II, eds. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 551-568.

Rumaiydh, Salah S., 2010: "Shishin – a Fortress controlling the Euphrates". Zeitschrift für Orient-Archäologie 3, 26-43.

Rumaiydh, Salah S. And Abdel-Razzaq, Riyab M., 1999-2000: "Pottery Plaques from Shesheen" Sumer 50, 88-97.

Sallaberger, Walter and Westenholz, Aage, 1999: Mesopotamien. Akkade-Zeit und Ur III-Zeit. Annährungen 3, eds. Pascal Attinger and Markus Wäfler, Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Selz, Gebhard J., 2004: "Feste in Stein. Der frühmesopotamische Kult der Bilder: Identität und Differenz". Archiv für Religionsgeschichte 6, 19-38, pl. 6-10.

Sherratt, Susan, 1999: "*E pur si muove*: pots, markets and values in the second millennium Mediterranean". In: The complex past of pottery: production, circulation and consumption of Mycenaean and Greek pottery (sixteenth to early fifth century BC), Proceedings of the ARCHON international conference, held in Amsterdam, 8-9 November 1996, eds. Jan Paul Crielaard, Vladimir Stissi and Gert Jan van Wijngaarden, Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 163-211.

Stol, Marten, 1981: Letters from Yale. Altbabylonische Briefe, Heft IX, Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Stol, Marten, 1995: "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia". In: Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, eds. Jack M. Sasson, John Baines, Gary Beckman, Karen S. Rubinson, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 485-501.

van Gennep, Arnold, 1981 (1909): Les rites de passage : étude systématique des rites. Paris : Picard.

Whincop, Matthew R., 2010: "Between *High* and *Low*: North Levantine Iron Age Ceramics and the Expression of Sub-elite Identities". In: Proceedings of the 6th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, ed. Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, Lorenzo Nigro and Nicoló Marchetti with the collaboration of Licia Romano, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1003-1013.

Wiggermann, Frans A.M., 1987: "The staff of Ninšubura. Studies in Babylonian Demonology, II". Jaarbericht van het vooraziatisch-egyptysch genootschap Ex Oriente Lux, No. 29, 3-34.

Woolley, Sir Leonard C., and Mallowan, Sir Max E.L., 1976: Ur Excavations. Volume VII. The Old Babylonian Period. Publications of the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia, London: British Museum Publications Limited.

Wright, Katherine I., 2007: "Women and the emergence of urban society in Mesopotamia". In: Women and Archaeology. Ancient & Modern Issues, eds. Su Hamilton, Ruth D. Whitehouse, Katherine I. Wright, Walnut Creek, Ca.: Publications of the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London, 199-245.

Fig. 1: Woolley & Mallowan 1976: Pl. 66.

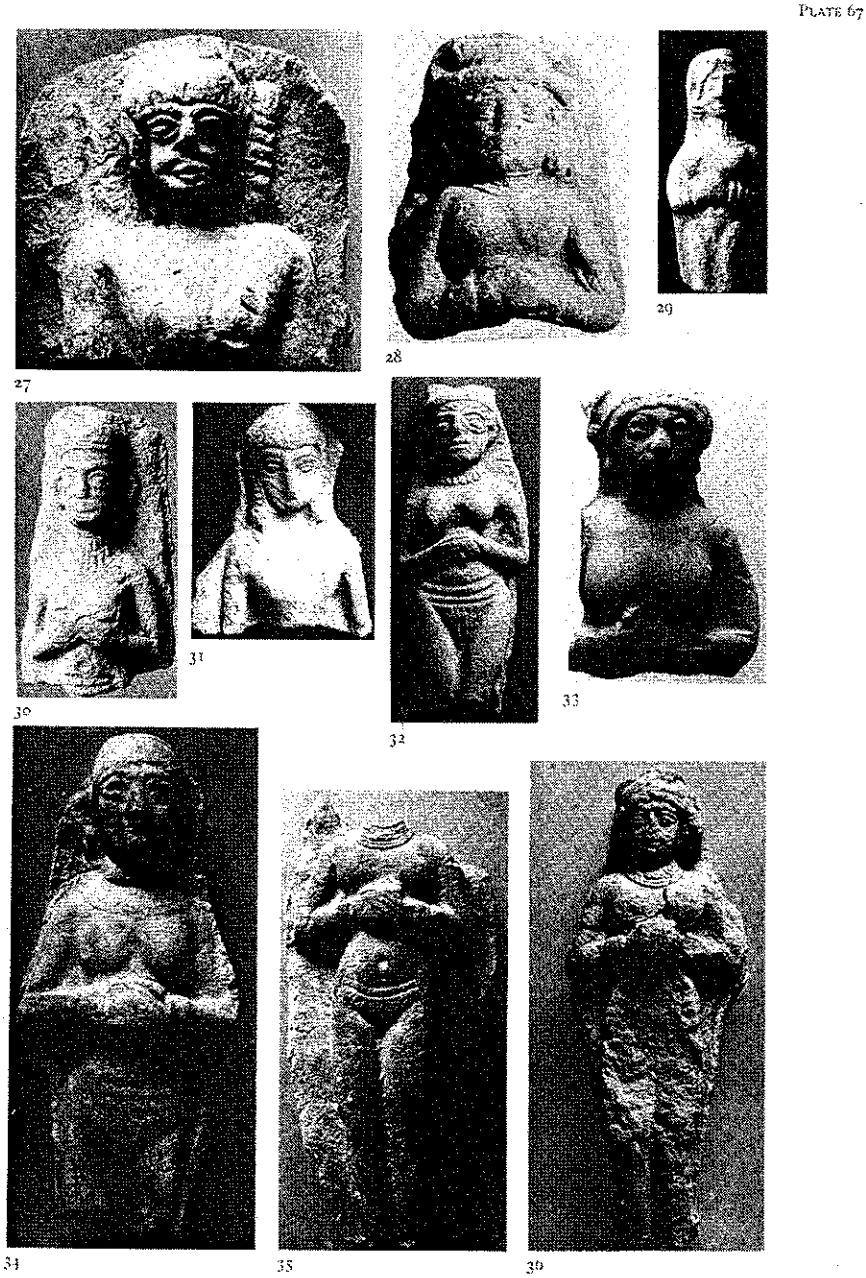

Fig. 2: Woolley & Mallowan 1976: Pl. 67.

Fig. 3: Woolley & Mallowan 1976: Pl. 68.