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TEMPLES AND FIGURINES.  
THE COROPLASTIC FROM AREA HH  
AT EBLA (SYRIA)  
DURING THE EB IVB PERIOD

LUCA PEYRONEL<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT

*More than two hundreds clay figurines have been found in levels dating from Early Bronze IVB (c. 2300-2000 BC) in Area HH at Tell Mardikh-Ebla. The presence of several architectural phases of superimposed sacred buildings in this area and the chronotypology of the EB IVB pottery built up at the site allow to recognize the development of the Eblaic coroplastic after the destruction of the Early Syrian town at the end of the 24<sup>th</sup> century BC. In comparison with the figurines of the previous period (EB IVA, c. 2400-2300 BC), the EB IVB coroplastic is less standardized, with several clay fabrics and decorations, and with a wider range of types. The human and animals figurines show in most cases features of continuity with the previous EB IVA figurines, but types strongly influenced by the productions of the Euphrates region are quite common and some imports are also attested. New types can be singled out at the end of the period, testifying new trends which reached a full definition only at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.*

A series of super-imposed sacred buildings dating from EB IVA to the end of MB II has been excavated in Area HH at Tell Mardikh-Ebla during the 2004-2007 archaeological campaigns (Matthiae 2006: 458-492; 2007; 2008; 2009a; 2009b: 752-762; 2010: 106-111, 387-391). The peripheral location in the south-eastern part of the lower town, at a short distance from the foot of the rampart and near the urban city-gate, the continuity of the sacred function through times with the EB and MB temples maintaining the entrance eastward, the building of the first temple directly on an elevation of the bedrock in connection with a natural cavity, all strongly indicate that this area had a very peculiar religious meaning for the Eblaic people, possibly related to the mythic foundation of the town, as recently suggested by Paolo Matthiae (2009a: 693-705).

The earliest temple, HH1, the so-called Temple of the Rock, is a massive building 28 m long with a breitraum cella and a vestibule of the same dimensions. The building was destroyed at the end of the 24<sup>th</sup> century BC, and shortly after, during the first half of the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, the temple was ritually cleaned, the cella sealed with mudbricks and filled with a 3 m thick layer of crushed limestone, and the vestibule closed with a

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transversal wall. Moreover, several complete vessels were thrown and buried inside two of the three wells, which were dug into an ellipsoidal depression of the bedrock located in the middle of the cella, certainly as ritual offerings related to the purification of the sacred building after its violent destruction (Sala 2012; Romano *in this volume*).

A second EB IVB phase (roughly dated 2250-2100 BC) is represented by building activities which concentrated around and on top of the ruins of the EB IVA temple (Fig. 1). Private dwellings have been brought to light to the N and W, characterized by thin mudbrick walls and beaten floors (Matthiae 2007: 494-495, figs. 11-13; 2009a: 692, 706-707). The area on the top of the earlier temple was leveled and two new temples (HH4 and HH5) flanking each other were built in the eastern part, over the sector of the vestibule of the Temple of the Rock (Matthiae 2007: 495-507; 2009a: 705-714; 2010: 390-391).<sup>2</sup> Temple HH4 is an *in antis* temple, composed by a langraum cella and a slightly braitraum vestibule.<sup>3</sup> A smaller temple, or more correctly a subsidiary shrine (HH5), flanks Temple HH4 to the E, separated by a narrow space.<sup>4</sup>

The last EB IVB phase is documented by minor architectural interventions and circular pits filled with ash, earth, sherds and animal bones, as a result of refuse discharging activities. The pottery seems to date the pits to a very late EB IVB period, possibly the last century of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium.

A large number of small finds, including some precious objects of ritual or ideological meaning, such as eye's inlays, an agate duck-shaped weight, a long-barrel cylindrical carnelian bead manufactured in the Indus Valley and imported from Mesopotamia, comes from the levels associated to the EB IVB phases and structures (Ascalone and Peyronel 2011; Matthiae 2007: 506-507, figs. 21-22; 2009a: 714).

The stratified sequence divided into three main architectural phases allowed for building up a pottery typology in which the development of the main classes can be followed during the last three centuries of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, from the earliest materials ritually deposited into the *favissae* of the cella to those collected in the houses and temples HH4 and 5, or related to the last occupation, characterized by the appearance of unpainted plain or comb-decorated goblets (Matthiae 2007: 509-512, figs. 25-27; Sala 2012).<sup>5</sup>

2 Similar sacred buildings roughly contemporary to the Eblaic ones have been brought to light at Rawda: Castel 2010.

3 It is composed of a langraum cella with two possible column bases (L.9483, 8.10 m x 6.50 m) and a slightly braitraum vestibule (L.9474, 5.20 m x 6.50 m), with the entrance eastward (Matthiae 2009a: 709-710, figs. 21-23).

4 It has a small longitudinal cella equipped with a podium (L.9469, 4.40/4.60 m x 3.25 m) and an anomalous square vestibule with a facade wall (3.25 m x 3.10 m; Matthiae 2009a: 710-713, figs. 21, 23-24).

5 The earliest materials are those ritually deposited into the *favissae* of the cella (more than 200 vessels): they show a fine fabric of high quality in simple and simple painted ware, and the main types are conical painted goblets with bell-shaped bases, bowls with moulded rims, painted bowls with horizontal painted bands, small and medium ovoid jars with double everted or flaring rims, painted trefoil-mouth jugs. Corrugated (less marked than previously) cylindrical goblets belonging to EB IVA tradition are still attested. In the following phases, we can observe the appearance of new types and especially the bowl with vertical ribbed or grooved rim, together with an increased percentage of smeared wash ware and goblets of different sizes, fabrics and black, brown or reddish paintings. Finally, the last EB IVB occupation is

Beside pottery, clay figurines are the finds most attested with more than two hundred specimens (214), coming from levels related to the whole EB IVB sequence, with some pieces collected as residual in MB levels.<sup>6</sup>

EB IVA layers were found only in very limited portions of Temple HH1, and they contain just a few pottery sherds and no figurines.<sup>7</sup> Most of the specimens have been found in levels dated to the construction and use of the houses and the two temples HH4 and HH5. Several figurines retrieved in the fillings of refuse pits can be related to the final EB IVB occupation. That means the distribution of the materials lacks indicative concentration, and at the same time the presence of clay figurines is certainly related both to primary and secondary contexts. No complete figurines have been found and most of the pieces are very fragmentary. The large number of figurines from the cultic area is certainly indicative of a general ritual meaning, but it must be considered that several finds have also been found in the domestic units around the sacred buildings, and that other EB IVB figurines come from houses located in the western Lower Town, and from the fortification and urban gates.<sup>8</sup>

Two main broad classes of EB IVB figurines are attested in a large number of specimens in Area HH (Fig. 2): anthropomorphic figurines (both female and male) – with 109 finds, and quadrupeds (mostly schematic sheep/goat and equids) – with 97 finds. Only a few figurines attest wild animals – lions, birds, monkeys, hedgehogs, and wagon/chariot models or chariot wheels. Thus the evidence shows a quantitative equivalence between anthropomorphic and animal figurines, and the almost complete lack of chariot models, which are quite rare also during EB IVA.<sup>9</sup>

All the figurines are hand-made, freely modeled with a few applied elements, simple or combed incisions and paintings. Several pastes are used, ranging from whitish or pale green-grayish to a variety of pinkish-brown color clays, characterized by mineral temper (Peyronel 2008: 790, 795-796).<sup>10</sup>

The most striking innovations of the end of the EB IVB period is represented by anthropomorphic and animal figurines decorated with black or dark red painted lines.

Most of the anthropomorphic and animal figurines witness the continuity of the classic EB IVA tradition but with a wider range of combinations of hairstyles, decorations, applied elements (*cf.* Peyronel 2008; 2013). However, new types were intro-

characterized by the appearance of unpainted goblets with a peculiar whitish fabric with or without combed incisions and by a high percentage of bowls with vertical grooved rims.

6 The whole corpus of EB IVA-B terracotta figurines from Ebla will be published by the Author in a forthcoming volume of the series *Materiali e Studi Archeologici di Ebla* (MSAE).

7 Several anthropomorphic and animal figurines found in the EB IVB levels look like those found in the Royal Palace G, and from a typological point of view they could be dated to the end of EB IVA, but it is more probable that they testify to a strong continuity of the EB IV classic coroplastic tradition during the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC: *cf.* Peyronel 2013.

8 For a discussion of the EB IVB period at Ebla, see Dolce 2001; 2007; Pinnock 2009.

9 Chariot models are instead quite frequent in the Early Jazirah coroplastic (*cf.* Liebowitz 1988; Oates 2001), and also at Ebla during the MB period (Marchetti 2001: 122-130).

10 The mineral temper has an absolute predominance of calcite and quartz, although a fabric with the presence of silicatic minerals indicates the use of a clay not attested in the previous period.

duced at the end of the period, attesting the beginning of a change in the representation of the anthropomorphic figure with the introduction of female figures with expanded limbs and pubes indicated by dots, which fully developed during MB I.<sup>11</sup> During EB IVB, specimens are also attested linked to the Euphrates region, where an autonomous coroplastic tradition covers the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, characterized by pillar-shaped standing anthropomorphic figurines with large shoulder and arms bent to the chest (Cooper 2006: 117-121; Peyronel 2013).

#### ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES

EB IVB anthropomorphic figurines are pillar-shaped with splaying bases. Since all the specimens are broken and the same type of torso can be associated with different types of heads or arms, a classification of the different parts of the body (head and neck – torso and arms – legs and base) has been elaborated. A successive step considers the attested correlations, trying to reconstruct the complete types when possible.

Figurine heads display some common visual traits, such as the face with prominent nose, the dotted pastilles for the eyes, the absence of mouths and chins, the applied strips, incisions or dots on the neck as schematic indication of necklaces. A conical head is the prevalent one, usually associated with long lateral curls, but rounded or flattened heads are also attested. Peculiar head gears in the form of a ‘crown’ or ‘diadem’, very frequent in the figurines of the Euphrates and Balikh sites, are not attested at Ebla (*cf.* e.g. Meyer 2007: 349, type AIII, fig. 3).

Several main head types can be recognized (Fig. 3).

The head with plain or incised conical top and marked curls or pigtales at the sides of the face occurs in several specimens (Fig. 4). The hairstyle can be completed by a central girdle or band on the forehead, usually decorated by short vertical incisions or dots, or by a pastille. In some cases, the curls can be folded up and fixed by the frontal band. This type is probably a female head and it is already attested in the EB IVA, as testified by several specimens from Royal Palace G and Hama J 8-6, and it is characterized during the EB IVB by a more cursory style and by a higher variation of the visual traits (Peyronel 2008: 792, fig. 1:1-2, 2:1).

Other kinds of conical head are those without lateral curls or with three lateral applied elements on each side of the face (Fig. 5, TM.07.HH.658). Also these types appeared during the previous period and are documented in Inner Syria and in the Euphrates Valley.<sup>12</sup>

11 N. Marchetti has classified a group of female figurines showing these features in transitional EB IV/MB I group, although specifying that the pieces can be probably dated to the very end of EB IVB. The stratified materials from Area HH now clearly confirm this chronological attribution, although it is probable that these types continued to be manufactured at Ebla and Hama also at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Marchetti 2001: 27-32, 228).

12 For EB IVA Ebla, see Peyronel 2008: 792, fig. 2.2.

Five specimens attest a type of head with an elaborate hairstyle with two large rounded expansions, always decorated by incisions or dots, and a third high vertical and slightly curved element starting at the nape (Fig. 5, TM.07.HH.510). The high vertical curved element can be present also without the lateral expansion. This type is peculiar of the EB IVA coroplastic and its presence in the EB IVB corpus is strong evidence of the continuity of the classic Early Syrian tradition, whereas it is not attested in the Euphrates region (Peyronel 2008: 792, fig. 2: 3-5; 2013: 77-78, fig. 4.1: 2, pl.7: 2).

Heads with a rounded top have usually lateral long curls (Fig. 5, TM.06.HH.105), and heads with a flattened top show a central line dividing the hairs indicated by short incisions, or short curls at the back (Fig. 5, TM.06.HH.232). Necks can be decorated by herring-bone motifs which could be considered a beard or, alternatively, an ornament. This type can be associated with a chest without decoration and with arms frontally raised.

The most attested type of torso shows a lateral rounded expansion and a chest decoration which consists of two symmetric crossing lines without breasts and arms indicated. It is therefore possible to consider this type as related to an image of a dressed personage, although it is difficult to define the sex in absence of an indication coming from the head. Several sub-types are attested (Fig. 6): with slightly asymmetric double-crossing lines, with fringed crossing lines or with double-crossing lines with inner fringed motif.

This is the typical chest of the EB IVA anthropomorphic figurines of North Inner Syria, attested at Ebla and Hama (Peyronel 2008: 791, figs. 1:1,2,5, 2:1, 3:7; Badre 1980: 179-180, nos. 79-85, pl. 4). The figurines from Area HH prove that it continued to be very common also during the late Early Syrian period, confirming the evidence from Hama J 5-1. To the east, it is documented by some figurines found in EB IVB level at Tell Tuqan, but not in the Jabbul plain, where the coroplastic of Umm el-Marra is strongly related to the Euphrates tradition (Peyronel 2013: 74-75).

A type of torso with painted decorations of crossing lines, in one specimen associated with applied pastilles to indicate the breast, can be dated to the last EB IVB phase (Fig. 7).

Undecorated chests are also present on several pieces. Although this type makes its first appearance during the previous period at Ebla and Hama, it seems that it became more common during EB IVB.

Another type of torso is marked by pronounced shoulders and freely modeled arms at the breast, sometimes indicated by dots or applied pastilles (Fig. 8; Peyronel 2008: 791-792, fig. 3:3-5). Even if we only have fragments of the chests, the shape is surely linked to the types of human figurines dominating the Jabbul, Euphrates and Balikh coroplastic. In these regions, the type reaches its peak during the last three centuries of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, and therefore the Eblaic EB IVB examples from Area HH might be imports or more probably local copies of the Euphrates figurines. If we look at the documentation from other Inner Syrian sites, the hypothesis seems to be confirmed, since the only dated figurines of this type come from EB IVB levels.<sup>13</sup>

13 Cf. Badre 1980: 79, type MAI 3b, 177-178 nos. 74-78, pl. IV (Hama); Nishiyama 2009: fig. 8.33:3-4 (Tell Mastuma); Dornemann 2003: 95, 193, figs. 174-175, 193 (Tell Qarqur); Scandone Matthiae 1998: 386, 392-393, fig. 406: nos. 1-3; 2002: 16-17, fig. 8:1, 4-5 (Tell Afis).

This type cannot be confused with the chest characterized by forearms and hands applied on the body and folded to the breast which is known from a few specimens during the EB IVA period and only from one example from Area HH, and which might be related to a class of anthropomorphic figurines peculiar to the Hama region, where it is frequent during the whole phase J sequence (Peyronel 2008: 791, fig. 3:1-2; Peyronel 2013: 74, 78, fig. 4.1: 5, pl. 7: 6). Another type which appears at the end of the period is the chest showing lateral expansion and indication of breasts, representing a female figurine.

It seems therefore that the typical EB IVA chest with crossed lines is still dominant during the central EB IVB and that in the later phase the type can also be decorated with painted lines. At the same time, figurines with modeled folded arms to the chest suggest an increasing influence of the Euphrates coroplastic tradition during this period.

The lower part of the body is strongly schematic, pillar-shaped without distinction of the legs, ending in a self-standing concave base, with an elliptical or circular section. However, at the end of the period, we can recognize the beginning of a change in the concept behind the clay figurines, with some examples showing expanded limbs, vertical dots marking the division of the legs, and dots indicating the pubic region. These new elements still do not appear to have been standardized, and these figurines attest the first step in the elaboration of female figurines, which develops according to a codified body appearance only at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, during MB IA (Marchetti 2001: 32-44).

#### ANIMAL FIGURINES

Animals are represented quite exclusively by schematic quadrupeds. A large group is characterized by animals (equids?) with a short body, long neck with a simple muzzle sometimes horizontally pierced, with pointed or rounded ears, and slightly curved pointed legs (Fig. 9, top). The tail is short and usually bent downwards.

Another type is characterized by an incised decoration of the body, probably a schematic representation of the hair (Fig. 9, bottom). On the back of some examples, we can observe a high vertical element, not easily understandable, or the beginning of a vessel.

Both types find precise parallels in the coroplastic of the previous period, witnessing a strong continuity of the mature Early Syrian tradition (Peyronel 2008: 793-794, fig. 4; 2013: 78-79, fig. 4.1: 7, pl. 8: 3).<sup>14</sup> Also the peculiar manufacture technique re-

<sup>14</sup> The identification of the animal depicted in the exemplars with a long neck, short body and schematic muzzle is quite problematic, since the figurines combine features that cannot easily be related to an animal genus. It could be possible that they were intended to reproduce equids in a local manner, but the short muzzle is against this identification and no comparisons can be traced outside North Inner Syria. The specimens with incisions on the body, with miniature vessels or projections on the back were probably caprids, although only bodies without heads have been found, preventing a precise attribution. In his study on animal coroplastic from Tell Mozan, R. Hauser proposed a precise typology referring each piece to animal genera and species, through measures and relative proportions of the body parts borrowed to anatomical analysis by veterinarians (Hauser 2007). His study is one of the few devoted to Bronze Age animal figurines in Syria.

vealed by a sort of slipped envelope of a few mm in thickness which covers the core of the figurines was still widely used by the EB IVB coroplastic workshops.

However, some innovations are introduced at the end of the period: in particular a few quadrupeds have dotted pastilles indicating the animal's eyes, which became the rule during the following MB I period, and a painted decoration consisting in crossed lines over the bodies of a few examples indicate the diffusion of the new painted tradition (Fig. 10).

We also have figurines representing other animals, attesting the existence of special productions, probably linked with a specific ideological meaning. In particular, a fragmentary terracotta figurine of a lion with open jaws, small ears, applied dotted eyes and mane covered by incisions has been found immediately outside temple HH 4 (Fig. 11, Matthiae 2007: fig. 24). Another specimen retrieved at a short distance away shows a trapezoidal head and open jaws, and it could also be considered a rough figure of a lion.

Lion figurines are not attested in the EB IVA coroplastic, although among the composite statuettes found in Royal Palace G, a lion with a limestone head and the mane in jasper is one of the best examples of artistic and technical skills reached by the Eblaic palatial workshop (Matthiae 2004: fig. 11; *cf.* Dolce 2000). Lions are quite rare also in the MB coroplastic, with manes decorated by combings, the tongue protruding from the mouth, and the tail bent over the back (Marchetti 2001: 101, 108, fig. 48-49, tav. 68-69, 75, 181, 189).

From the cella of Temple HH 4 comes a well preserved figurine of a seated monkey or possibly of a cynocephalus, with forelegs to the chest (Fig. 12). It is a *unicum* in the EB coroplastic, whereas during the following MB I and II periods seated monkeys are documented by some specimens, usually having one arm to the mouth (Marchetti 2001: 118-120, fig. 57, tav. 80-81, 208-209).

The presence of these rare figurines in the sacred area of the twin temples HH 4 and HH 5 could be related to specific religious or cultic meanings conveyed by the images of the lion and the monkey.

From a chronological perspective, the Eblaic EB IVB figurines collected in the sacred area HH show, first of all, that an uninterrupted local tradition of anthropomorphic and animal clay figurines is attested at Ebla, from the half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC until the end of late Early Syrian period. This tradition seems to be diffused in Central and North Inner Syria and it is characterized by homogeneous and long-lasting types of figurines, well distinct from those attested in the Eastern region of the Euphrates and Khabur Valleys. Ebla was without a doubt the main center of production of this coroplastic province, which includes the Orontes Valley to the West and South-West – and reaches the 'Amuq plain to the N-W, where it is present also as a local coastal tradition, which cannot be precisely defined on the basis of the few exemplars published (Peyronel 2013: 75-76). It is certain that already during EB IVA the Jabbul plain cannot be included into this area, since all the Umm el-Marra figurines might be ascribed to the Euphrates production (Petty 2006). It seems therefore that the EB IV coroplastic and

ceramic provinces are not coincident, with a wider geographical diffusion of the caliciform pottery tradition (Mazzoni 1985; 2002; 2013; Sala 2012).

In conclusion, the debated problem of the function of the terracotta figurines during the EBA must be faced taking into account the new data from Area HH. The iconography, context and preservation of the figurines has yielded data which must be considered together, trying to reach a coherent interpretation. J.-W. Meyer recently suggested a general magic use of anthropomorphic figurines as representations of personified evils, used to banish evil through being broken, buried or burnt, according to acts described in incantations and magical texts (Meyer 2007: 359-360). He stresses the lack of precise visual traits identifying the figurines' gender, the predominance of domestic contexts, and the fragmentary condition of most of the items, possibly indicating deliberate breaking as a result of magic practices. Alice Petty starts with an analysis of the Umm el-Marra figurines, reaching a similar conclusion and proposing a more general use as a substitute in a ritual requiring sympathetic, magical manipulation (Petty 2006: 197-198).<sup>15</sup> Many scholars share this view of their function as vehicles of magic, linking it with the act of breaking and tossing away the figurine, which brings about some desired effect, such as the termination of an illness or the expulsion of a malevolent ghost (*cf.* Cooper 2006: 119-120). If this interpretation sounds as if it especially applies to material coming from domestic contexts, which are apparently prevalent in the Euphrates sites (Cooper 2006: 117-118), it must be stressed that the Eblaic evidence shows a widespread distribution also in public buildings during the EB IV period (Royal Palace G, Building P4 and temples of Area HH) (Peyronel 2008, 2013). It seems possible that anthropomorphic and animal figurines, attested in similar percentages, display also generic cultic meanings, as an expression of popular beliefs linked to the symbolic values of the images, representing high-rank human personages and animals conveying specific symbolic meanings in relation to the religious sphere. The apparently new characteristics, which can be recognized during the Middle Bronze Age (predominance of naked female figurines, religious contexts, figurines as part of the funerary assemblages), were certainly the result of a change, introducing new subjects, but not completely 'new' functions.

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15 She also notes the consistent omission of the mouth in the figurines and this feature may indicate that these objects were intended to remain understood by their users as made objects.

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Fig. 1: Tell Mardikh-Ebla – plan of EB IVB Temples HH4 and HH5 and private houses.  
(©MAIS)

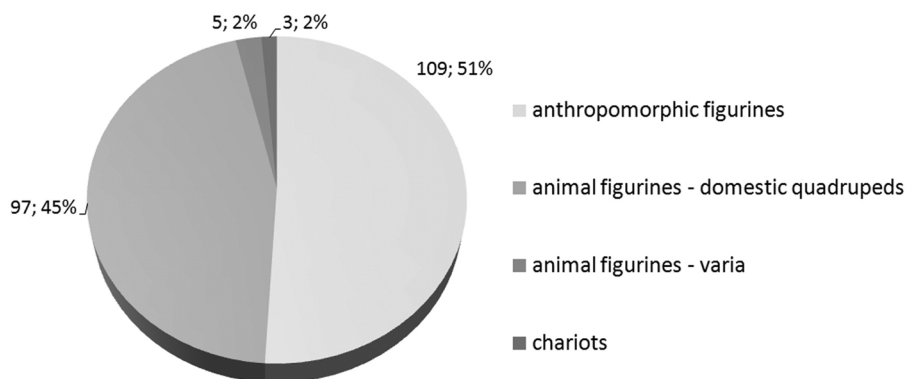


Fig. 2: Quantitative distribution of EB IVB terracotta figurines from Area HH by classes.

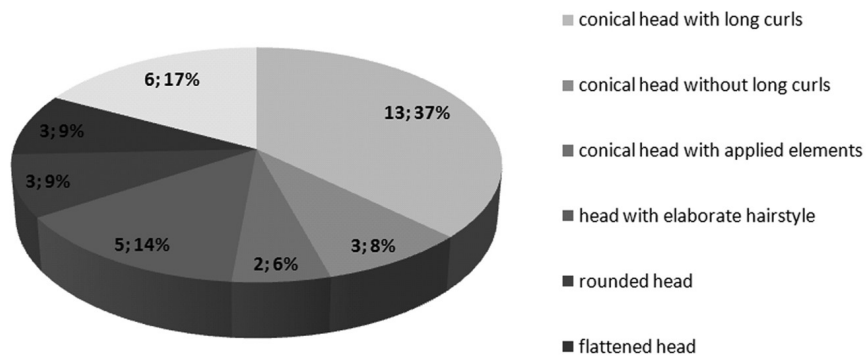


Fig. 3: EB IVB terracotta figurines from Area HH. Heads – quantitative distribution of main types.

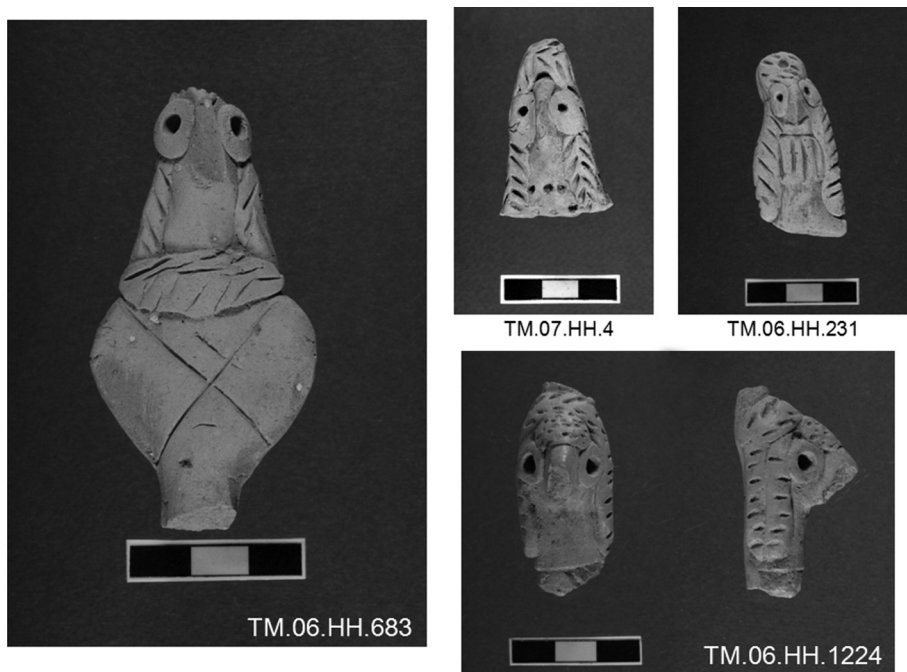


Fig. 4: EB IVB anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Area HH. Heads.  
(©MAIS)



TM.07.HH.658



TM.07.HH.510



TM.06.HH.105



TM.06.HH.232

Fig. 5: EB IVB anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Area HH. Heads.  
(©MAIS)

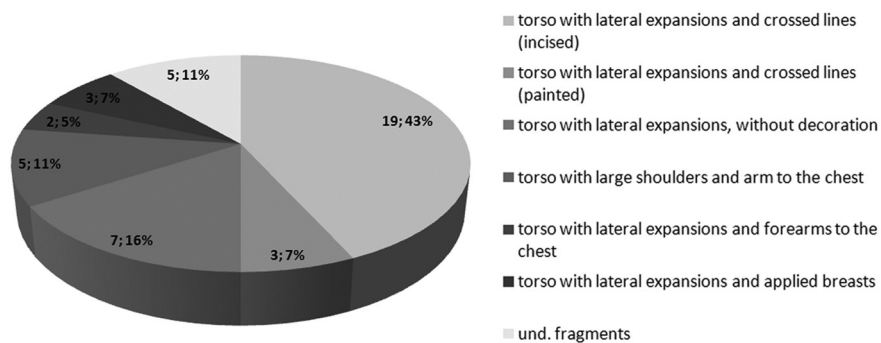
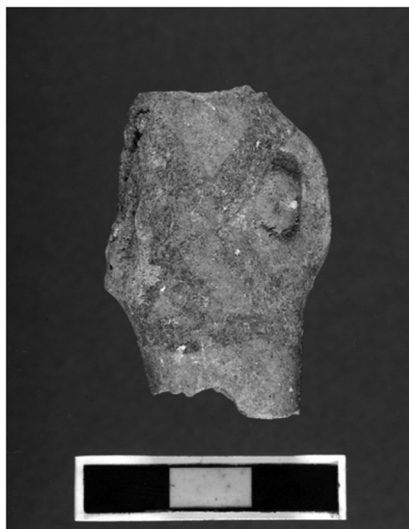


Fig. 6: IVB anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Area HH. Torsos – quantitative distribution of main types.



TM.07.HH.486



TM.07.HH.165

Fig. 7: EB IVB anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Area HH. Painted torsos. (©MAIS)



TM.05.HH.564



TM.05.HH.100



TM.04.HH.985



TM.04.HH.860

Fig. 8: EB IVB anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Area HH. Torsos with expanded shoulder.  
(©MAIS)



TM.05.HH.540



TM.07.HH.3



TM.06.HH.1065



TM.07.HH.282

Fig. 9: EB IVB animal terracotta figurines from Area HH. Quadrupeds. (©MAIS).



Fig. 10: EB IVB animal terracotta figurines from Area HH. Painted quadruped. (©MAIS).



Fig. 11: EB IVB animal terracotta figurines from Area HH. Lion. (©MAIS).



Fig. 12: EB IVB animal terracotta figurines from Area HH. Monkey.  
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