



Pearls of the Past

Studies on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology
in Honour of Frances Pinnock

Edited by Marta D'Andrea,
Maria Gabriella Micale, Davide Nadali,
Sara Pizzimenti and Agnese Vacca

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Studien zur Vorderasiatischen Archäologie
Studies in Near and Middle Eastern Archaeology

Band 8

Herausgegeben von
Reinhard Dittmann,
Ellen Rehm und
Dirk Wicke

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Münster
2019

Illustration auf dem Einband: Tell Mardikh 1964, Day 1
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Printed in Germany
Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN 978-3-96327-058-1

ISSN 2569-5851



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Ritual Drinking in Syria: New Insights from the Decorated Terracotta Basin from Tall Bazi and the Funerary Talisman from Ebla

Adelheid Otto

Thanks to the numerous excavations in Syria, which were carried out there for 50 years until they had to be abruptly stopped in 2010,¹ the originality of Syrian culture, the country's traditions and also its imagery and iconography are being increasingly understood. In this short note, dedicated to Frances Pinnock as a token of friendship, I will outline one of the typical motives on the basis of two selected objects with figural decorations from Tall Bazi and Ebla: drinking by means of drinking tubes.

1. The Decorated Basin from the Temple at Tall Bazi

A large temple *in antis* rises on the peak of the citadel of Tall Bazi.² It was erected in the Middle Bronze Age (MBA), but only the former vestibule, transformed into a room, was used as sacred area during its last phase in Late Bronze Age I (LBA).³ In the middle of the 14th century it fell victim to a violent destruction. The temple seems to have been looted first and then all that had been left was hacked into as little pieces as possible and finally set fire to. In the debris we found remains of the inventory, amongst which were dozens of fragments of a rectangular terracotta basin with figural decorations (Fig. 1). We could easily distinguish the fragments of the basin from the thousands of potsherds we recovered from the temple and had restored by our helpers from the village of Banat, since they did not show any curvature, were handmade and were strikingly thick (approx. 2–2.5 cm). The condition of the fragments of this thick-walled basin, which basically should have been very stable, proves that the basin was purposefully destroyed, as

¹ We express our gratitude to the staff of the Syrian Antiquities Board and the German Research Society (DFG) for their support of the excavations at Tall Bazi. I further thank Ursula Seidl, Michael Roaf and Berthold Einwag for comments on this paper.

² For Tall Bazi see Einwag / Otto 2010; Sallaberger / Einwag / Otto 2006.

³ For the building history, use and equipment of the temple see Otto / Einwag 2007; Einwag / Otto 2012; Otto 2013. For Middle Bronze Age residential houses in Tall Bazi see Szelag 2012.

well as many other objects in the temple. Due to their scattering in the debris, the fragments have taken on different colours (Fig. 2). Parts of the basin were found scattered on an area of approx. 4 × 5 m (Fig. 3). Some of the pieces are entirely missing because several pits from the Roman period dug down to below the floor of the temple destroyed parts of the LBA deposits.

During our last campaign in Tall Bazi in September 2010 we succeeded in reconstructing the basin partially. It was 28 cm broad and 20 cm high. Its length cannot be definitely reconstructed for want of exactly joining parts, but on account of the slight curvature of the walls and the incised and attached decorations (Figs 4–7) we presume it to have been 55 cm long. Its bottom is flat and the four walls are almost vertical, but flare outwards at the corners towards the top.⁴ Only the basin's front side was decorated, and not its side and rear walls (Figs 4, 6). Close to the right hand and left hand edges, two identical moulded female figurines were attached.⁵ The women are represented frontally, they are nude, support their breasts with both hands and wear caps that are adorned with medallions in the middle. Furthermore, they wear jewellery at their ears, necks and wrists: two necklaces, triple ear rings and triple bracelets.

To the left of the woman on the right hand side there is a coarse decorative appliqué made from various thin sausage-shaped rolls of clay. From a vertical stem five curved lengths of clay bend to the left. On the right hand side, three such curved pieces are preserved; on account of symmetry, we assume that originally there were five on this side too. This object seems to represent a tree or other plant.⁶ To the left of the tree are the remains of another curving roll of clay. Like all the appliques on the vessel, including the female figurines, it was obviously applied once the clay of the basin had already dried out: this is why it has partly come off. It probably continued on another fragment on which there is a further curving piece and three incised lines. The coil is probably continued on another fragment on which there is a further curving piece and three incised lines. Since two similar incised lines can be found on part of the upper rim on the front side, we can reconstruct here an incised decoration that might have had the form of a star. The curved appliqué probably represents a snake—a quite frequent motif on

⁴ The edges had been applied separately. The left edge, which can be seen in Fig. 2, had already come off again at the time the photography of Fig. 4 was taken.

⁵ There is evidence of similar female figurines, which were formed from a mould and attached to terracotta objects, from other places in the Euphrates valley and beyond. In Emar, Ekalte and Hammam et-Turkman they mainly decorate so-called house or tower models and jars (Muller 2002, figs 47, 54, 64, 94; Czichon / Werner 1998, nos 24, 25, 4083–4084, 4086).

⁶ Comparable stylized and incised plants or trees can be found on contemporary house models or tower models, e.g. from nearby Tall Sweyhat and Emar (Muller 2002, figs 55, 126). Trees consisting of applied coils are found on a jar from a Late Bronze age house at Tall Munbaqa: Czichon / Werner 2008, no. 7832.

contemporary house models and terracotta basins.⁷

Some enigmatic remains of a decoration are found approximately in the middle of the front side of the basin (Fig. 5). Several traces of clay appliquéés were difficult to understand until the surface of the basin was carefully studied. Reddish and whitish discolorations show exactly where appliquéés of clay had been attached. The lower two pieces, set at right angles to each other, seem to have been a leg and a horizontal bar of a seat. The upper pieces consist of an S-shaped element with two grooves which is placed on top of a straight element. This is clearly a raised arm with a hand holding a stick-like object. The discolorations can be reconstructed as the original position of an ovoid head and the torso of a person sitting on a stool. A separate appliqué, which has the same thickness as the raised arm and consists of a similar roll of clay, we also assign to this figure and interpret it as the left arm resting on the figure's lap (Fig. 6). Since the object which is held in front of the figure's head ends near its mouth, it seems likely that this is a drinking tube, with the help of which the sitting figure is drinking. But is there any evidence for this from the period of this basin, i.e. the Late Bronze Age, presumably the 15th or 14th century BC?

Ritual drinking using drinking tubes from a vessel placed in a stand is frequently depicted in the Early Dynastic and Akkadian Periods all over Mesopotamia, mainly on seals, but also on votive plaques and other media.⁸ Afterwards, it disappears from the repertoire of motives in Southern Mesopotamia, but not in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria, as has already been pointed out by F. Pinnock.⁹ There is evidence of this motive on Syrian and Mittanian seals from the early 2nd millennium until the end of the LBA. It is very common on cylinder seals of the Old Syrian Popular Style, on which usually a single sitting figure is depicted drinking from a vessel with a long drinking tube.¹⁰ Frequently, other persons, animals or hybrid creatures are associated. Often an altar with curved bull's legs, with horizontal objects piled on it, which are interpreted as loaves of bread, is placed next to the vessel (Fig. 8a). On the seals in Syrian Colony Style and on

⁷ E.g. a contemporary house model from Tall Hadidi (Muller 2002, fig. 91) and a terracotta basin from Tall Munbaqa: Czichon / Werner 2008, no. 8685. Snakes as appliquéés on objects, which were apparently used during rituals in temples, are already frequent during the 3rd millennium, on basins, house models and stands from Assur, the Diyala region, Tall Chuera and other sites (von der Osten-Sacken 2009).

⁸ Seidl 2009–11; for depictions on seals e.g. Selz 1983, figs 9–12, 113–136, 489–521; for a votive plaque from Nippur: Boese 1971, N3.

⁹ Pinnock 1994. It seems that not only the motif but also the habit of drinking through tubes continued mainly in North Mesopotamia and Syria, as is attested by the regional distribution of bronze filter tips in the 2nd millennium.

¹⁰ Porter 2001, nos 1–19, 24, 29, 30, 35–40, 49, 52, 55–56, 58–61, 72, 74, 80, 82–91, 93–105, 112–115, 117–121. Provenience cylinder seals come from Tall Judaidah, Çatal Höyük, Alalakh, Ras Shamra, Byblos, Gezer and Tell Baghouz.

Classical Syrian seals, this scene is less frequently depicted (Fig. 8b).¹¹ Syrian and Mittanian seals from the 17th to the 14th century continue to show the motive of a seated figure, drinking with a long drinking tube. Good examples are attested from Emar (Fig. 8c), Ugarit (Figs 8d–e) and the art market (Figs 8f–h). In some depictions, a nude woman is shown standing opposite the drinking person (Figs 8f–g). Also seals of an extremely schematic style, manufactured only with a drill and a cutting wheel, show this motive. Of special interest is seal BM 103237, which is made of goethite (Fig. 8h). It belongs to a group of seals that were probably manufactured in the region around Tall Bazi, Karkemish and Emar, where goethite can be found in the mountain range bordering the Euphrates valley.¹² The seals of this group are the best proof that the motive of ritual drinking with a drinking tube was a common pictorial motive also in the region of Tall Bazi in the Late Bronze Age. Beyond that, this motive was not only a traditional pictorial topos, but the depiction refers to the actual custom of consuming beer with drinking tubes at Tall Bazi on special occasions.¹³ This is attested by filter tips from perforated bronze metal sheets. Five such filter tips were found in Room A of the temple. Since in the domestic area of Tall Bazi usually not more than one filter tip was found in each house, we argued that drinking through tubes was correlated with ritual feasting, while everyday drinking was out of beakers or bowls.¹⁴ How the nude woman, the treelike object, the snake and the star were related to this ritual feasting, however, still eludes our understanding.

2. The Decorated Talisman from the Tomb of the “Lord of the Goats” at Ebla

Two rich tombs from the 18th/17th century BC were found in Ebla in Area Q. In the so-called Hypogeum Q.78.C, the “Tomb of the Lord of the Goats,” two unique objects from hippopotamus ivory were found in 1978. P. Matthiae calls the more intact one, TM.78.Q.455, the bone funerary talisman of king Immeya and dates it to around 1750–1700 BC.¹⁵ Being only 5.5 cm high, the central scene between the upper and lower framing border is not much larger than a cylinder seal impression, and this may explain the rather careless execution of many details. More than twelve human figures and several animals and hybrid creatures had been

¹¹ For some impressions of Syrian Colony Style seals on Karum Kanish II tablets see Teissier 1994, nos 517–520. A Classical Syrian seal (Moortgat 1940, no. 526) exhibits a sitting person in a flounced garment, who drinks from a vessel with a drinking tube together with a standing person. Some Classical Syrian seals feature sitting persons holding a small vessel from which a drinking tube leads into a big vessel: Otto 2000, nos 158 (from Tell Ahmar/Til Barsip), 162–163.

¹² Otto 2008.

¹³ Zarnkow et al. 2006.

¹⁴ Otto 2012.

¹⁵ Matthiae 1977, 182–183; 2013, pls 172–173; *Archi / Matthiae* 1978. A new extensive treatment of the talisman was done by Polcaro 2015.

attached to the flat surface on either side of the object by means of bronze nails. The main protagonist of the complex scene is the male figure on the far left, to judge from his sitting position and from the direction of the four upright men approaching him. The man is wearing a fur-cloak and is holding a crook in his right hand. He raises his left hand, makes a fist, but does not hold anything in it. In front of him there is an elaborate table with bull's legs, on which three disc-shaped objects are piled.

Not all figures and objects, which had been originally attached, have been preserved, but they must have been fixed where bronze nails are protruding. Therefore it is necessary to reconstruct an object in front of the sitting person. Comparable scenes on cylinder seals of Old Syrian Popular Style (cf. note 10) depict only a large jar and sometimes the ball-staff between the sitting person and the table. The position of the figure's left hand is also strange. Usually, a raised left hand holds something—greeting or adoration is done with the right hand—either a weapon or a vessel or a drinking tube. It cannot be a weapon, since the figure is holding one already in its right hand. Neither can it be a vessel, for in that case the palm would be depicted open with fingers and thumb. In our opinion the only possible reconstruction is a vessel from which the sitting person is drinking with a drinking tube held in his left hand (Fig. 9).¹⁶ This reconstruction of the scene resembles those on numerous seals from the same region and period (e.g. Figs 8a–b). Also many of these seals, e.g. those impressed on the Kültepe tablets, show the position of the drinking tube floating above the hand and not being held by it.

This reconstruction is even more probable in the light of a recently published fragment of a basalt stele, very probably from Ebla, which shows a seated male drinking from a large jar with a tube, in front of a similar altar loaded with bread.¹⁷

3. Conclusions

Ritual feasting was an important pictorial motif in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia not only in the Early Bronze Age but also throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Drinking beer with the help of a drinking tube was often depicted as part of these events. The reconstruction of the deliberately smashed basin from the temple at Tall Bazi contributes another example of this scene within Syrian and North Mesopotamian art. Drinking beer with a tube is here also reconstruct-

¹⁶ The raised fist is unfortunately never described in detail. It would be interesting to know whether it was pierced. If not, the drinking tube might have been fixed above or behind the hand. The representation of a drinking tube floating above a hand is a frequent motive on seals, e.g. figs 8b, 8e. We reconstructed the vessel on the talisman analogically to the big vessel beside the nude woman.

¹⁷ Matthiae 2011, 770–771, fig. 29. I am very grateful to Paolo Matthiae, who pointed this important piece out to me, when I had already finished this note and sent it to him for publication. It is highly probable that this fragment, which was brought to the museum of Idlib, originated from Ebla.

ed for the central figure of the talisman of Ebla. Interestingly, nude women and snakes accompany the drinking scene in both instances, without their interpretation being self-evident. The contexts, however, clearly show that an important act of ritual drinking is depicted in each case: the decorated terracotta basin from Tall Bazi must originally have been placed near the main altar of the temple and the talisman was a piece of grave furniture for a member of the royal family. Whether the depictions of drinking with the help of a cup, an alabastron-like bottle or a tube represent different personalities or different rituals or were just a caprice of the craftsman, remains to be thoroughly examined.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Frances Pinnock (1994, 22; 2006, 500) considered the different drinking vessels as marking the living and the deified dead king respectively.

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Fig. 1. One of the appliqués of the female figurines of the basin in the debris on the temple floor in Tall Bazi.



Fig. 2. The fragments of the thick-walled terracotta basin, which had been deliberately smashed.

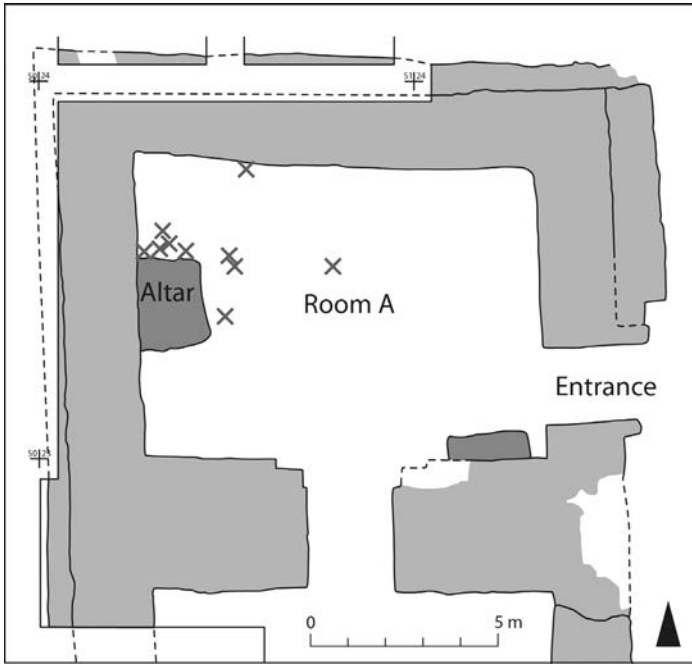


Fig. 3. Schematic plan of Room A of the temple in Tall Bazi with the find spots of the fragments of the terracotta basin near the altar.



Fig. 4. The fragments of the decorated front side of the terracotta basin.



Fig. 5. Detail of the central sitting person.

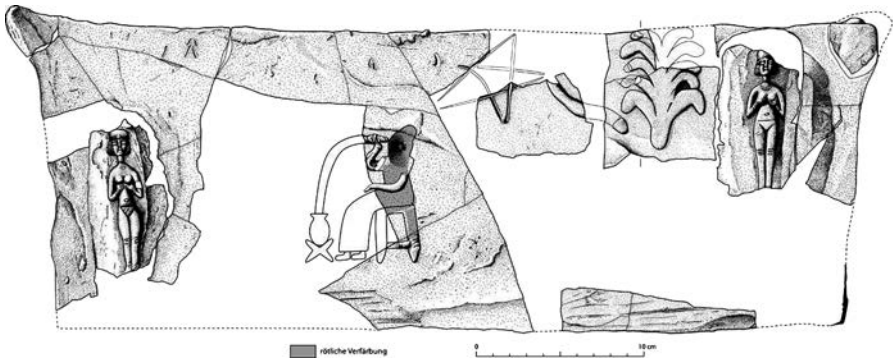


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the terracotta basin according to Adelheid Otto (drawing M. Lerchl).

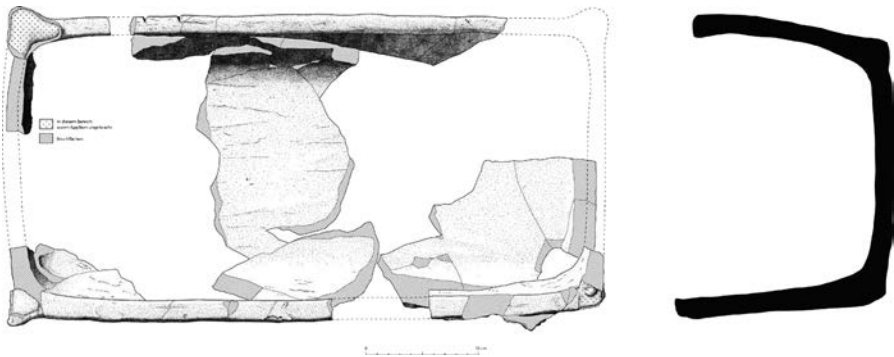


Fig. 7. The rectangular basin seen from above (l: approx. 55 cm; w: 28 cm; h: 20 cm).

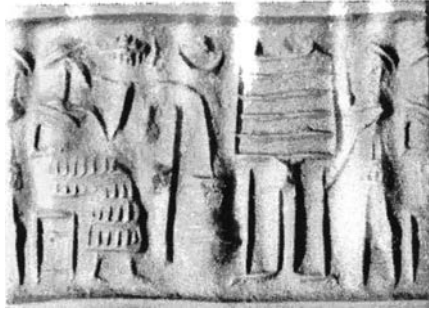


Fig. 8a. Cylinder seal Rosen 1953 (Porter 2001, no. 93).



Fig. 8b. Cylinder seal impression on a tablet from Karum Kanish II (Teissier 1994, no. 517).

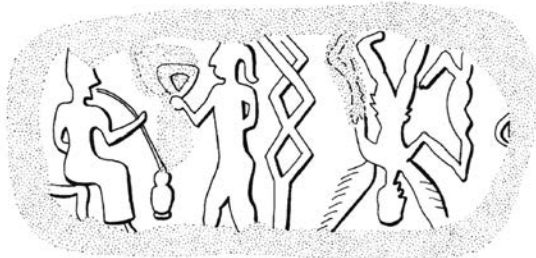


Fig. 8c. Cylinder seal impression E 47 on an Emar tablet of Syro-Hittite type (Beyer 2001, 230).



Fig. 8d. Cylinder seal R.S. 29.116 from Ugarit (Amiet 1992, no. 54).



Fig. 8e. Cylinder seal R.S. 17.024 from Ugarit (Amiet 1992, no. 56).



Fig. 8f. Cylinder seal BM 89855 (Matthews 1990, no. 537).



Fig. 8g. Cylinder seal BM 89819 (Courtesy The Trustees of the British Museum, drawing M. Lerchl).

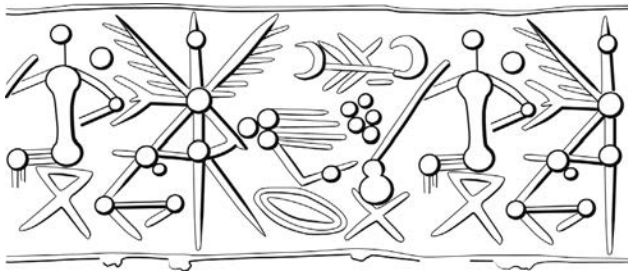


Fig. 8h. Cylinder seal BM 103237 from Goethit (Courtesy The Trustees of the British Museum, drawing M. Lerchl).



Fig. 9. The funerary talisman from the “Tomb of the Lord of the Goats” at Ebla; detail of the far left hand end (combined after Matthiae et al. 1995, 529 and Xella 1984, 52) showing the possible original scene with the addition of a vessel and drinking tube.

