

A female clay figurine from Tell Agrab (Iraq)
in the Vatican Museums

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A FEMALE CLAY FIGURINE
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BY
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Among many artifacts of the Pontifical Biblical Institute deposited in the Vatican Museums (Dept. of Near Eastern Antiquities), a Mesopotamian female clay figurine (inv. D738) deserves a special mention, due to its formal quality, and because it exemplifies an early 2nd millennium BC type, relatively rare in published records.

The figurine is told to have been found at Tell Agrab (Iraq) on the surface of the tell.¹ The naked lady is shown as usual in frontal view, with open arms, broken at their ends (figs. 1-3). The lower part of the body is lost below the exaggerated vulva, and also the breasts and the left part of a necklace are broken. The uppermost of the right couple of earrings and the second button from the left of the five composing the topping of the headdress have fallen down too.

The figurine is very well executed in pure pinkish clay (Munsell 10YR8/4, Very Pale Brown). The face of the lady (fig. 4) is framed by the long hairdo – bound on the back by means of a diadem which is enriched on the front with five buttons (possibly imitating precious stones or golden flowers or leaves) –, by two couples of crescentic earrings, carefully decorated with crossing incised lines, and four necklaces made of small vertical incised strokes. The hairstyle is noteworthy (fig. 5), since it is a well known arrangement of the Isin-Larsa Period, descending from a fashion already attested to during the Ur III Period,² with two plaits folded behind

¹ It is reported to have been retrieved by Father R. North, s.j., during a trip in the '50ies. No other information is available.

² F. PINNOCK, *The Iconography of the entu-Priestesses in the Period of the Ur III Dynasty*, in J. PROSECKY ED., *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East. Papers Presented at the 43^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale. Prague, July 1-5 1996*, Prague 1999, pp. 339-346.

Fig. 1. Clay figurine inv. D738: front view

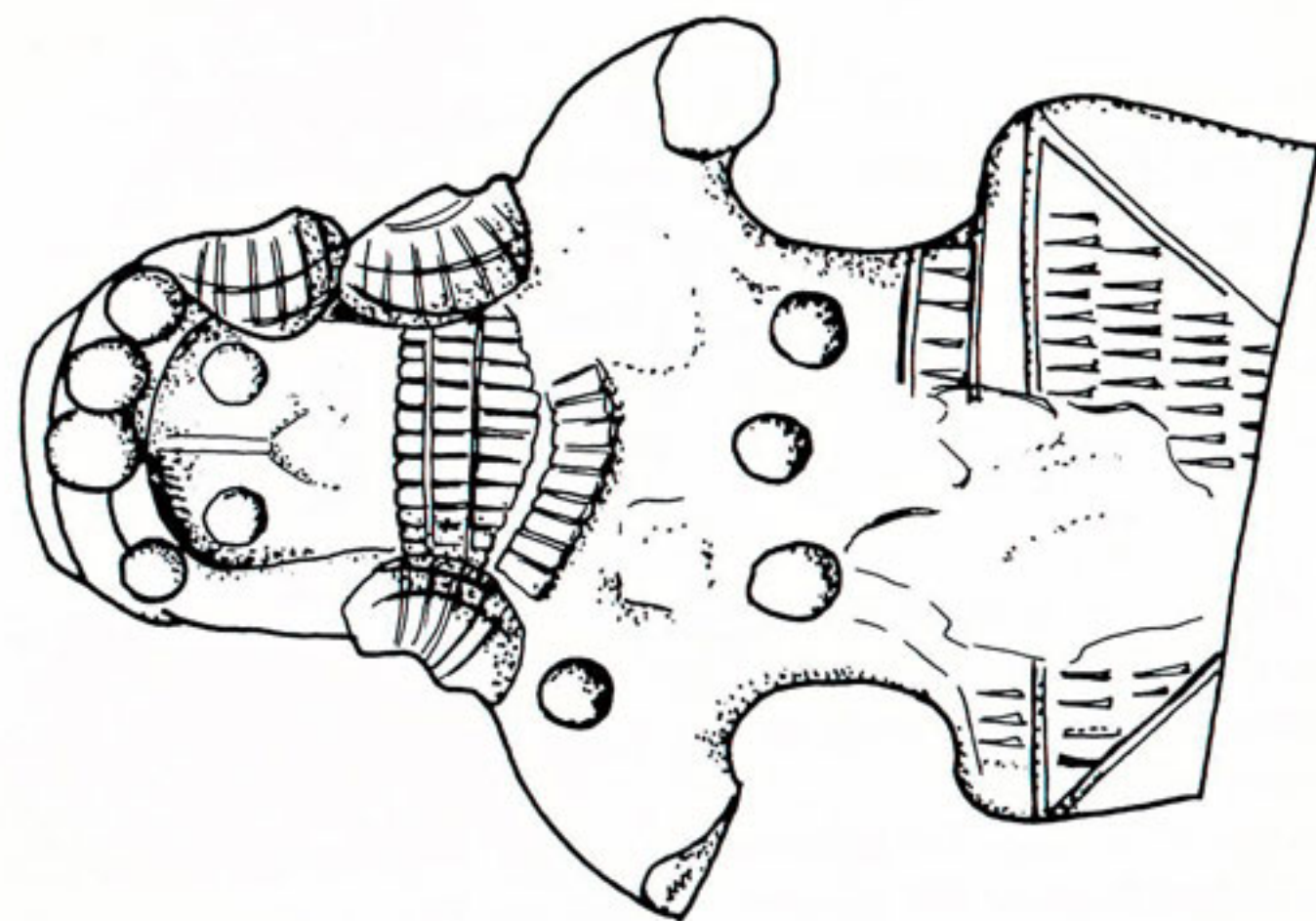
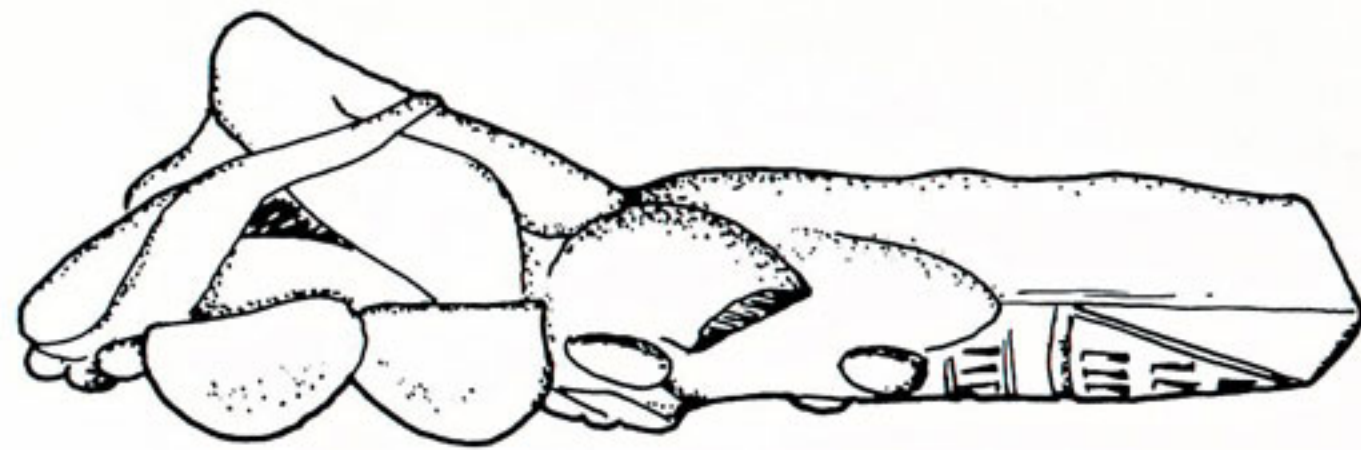
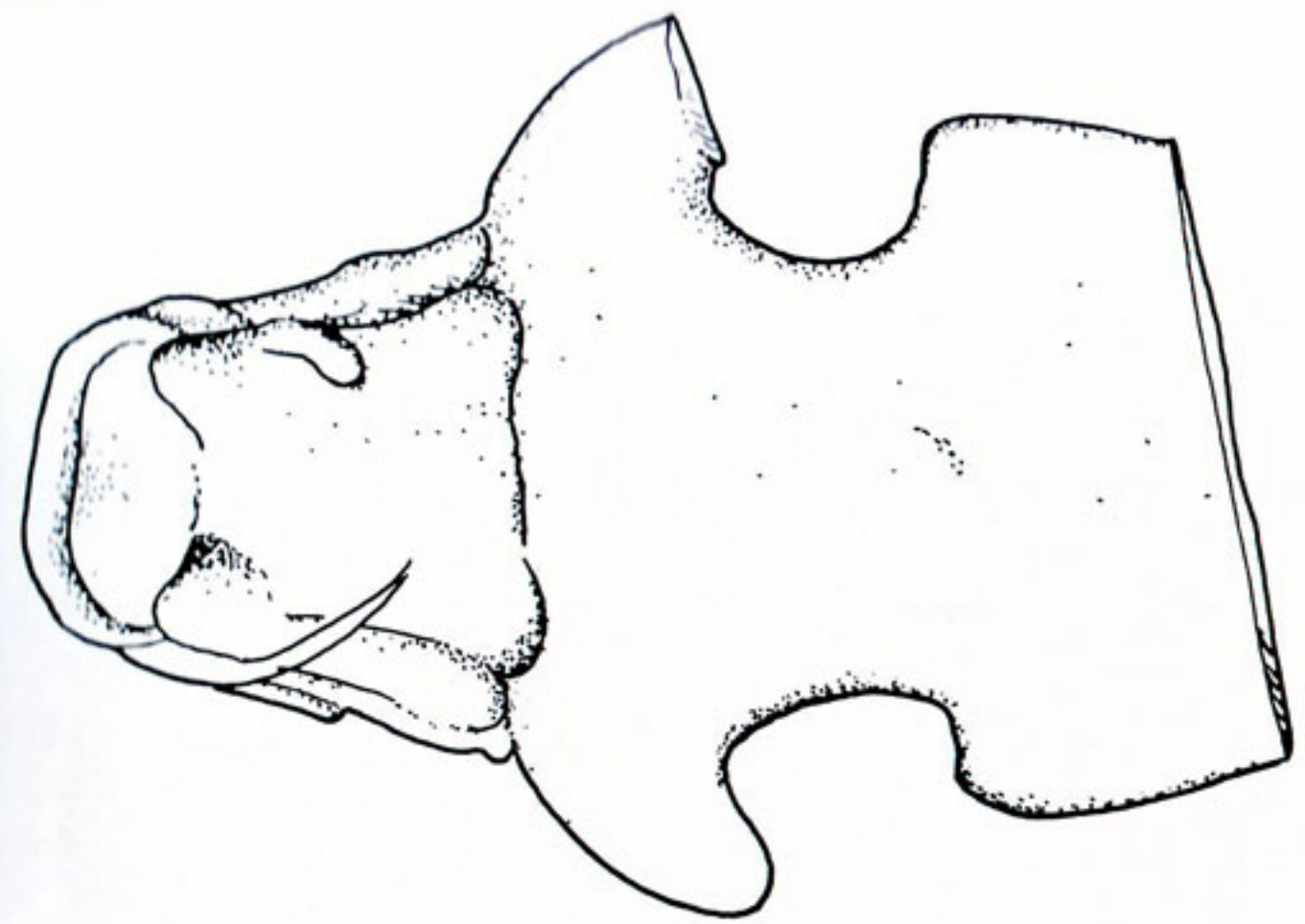
Fig. 2 Clay figurine inv. D738:
rear view

Fig. 3 Drawing of clay figurine D738 (L. Di Blasi); ratio. 1:1



Fig. 4. Clay figurine inv. D738: view of left side

Fig. 5. Clay figurine inv. D738: view of right side

the head and kept by the diadem. An interesting observation was made, as some traces of a black substance were visible on the right side of the head and on its top against the diadem (fig. 6a-b), which proved to be a bituminous coating, applied on the hair.³ This testifies to the custom of coating human figurines, and especially their hair, with bitumen, already noticed by Frankfort.⁴

³ Chemical analyses were conducted by Dr. Fabio Morresi in the Laboratory of Scientific Researches of the Vatican Museums, thanks to the kind cooperation of its Director, Dr. Ulderico Santamaria; they were able to identify this substance with bitumen by means of CGMS chromatography.

⁴ H. FRANKFORT – S. LLOYD – TH. JACOBSEN, *The Gmilsin Temple and the Palace of the Rulers at Tell Asmar* (Oriental Institute Publications 43), Chicago 1940, p. 207.



a

Fig. 6. Clay figurine inv. D738: remains of bitumen over the hair: a) on the right side of the head; b) on the top, behind the diadem



b



Fig. 7. Clay figurine inv. D738: rear view

On both shoulders a button is applied, while a row of three buttons emphasizes the waistline just below the breast (figs. 1, 3). Flanks and vulva are, as usual, deliberately exaggerated with a series of short vertical incisions filling the whole triangle and its upper horizontal band.

The figurine belongs to what Henri Frankfort called "Common Larsa Type", a very popular choroplastic iconography,⁵ exemplified by several specimens found at Tell Agrab,⁶ Tell Asmar,⁷ Kish,⁸ Nippur,⁹ and in some other southern Mesopotamian sites,¹⁰ the echoes of which can be traced e.g. also in the surrounding regions at Susa,¹¹ Assur,¹² and Tell Ashara.¹³

The main iconographic characteristic of this type is the richness of the ornaments worn by the lady, which include the buttons topped diadem, a pile (three to five) of superimposed necklaces, two sets of earrings, and buttons applied on shoulders and on the waistline, or bands crossing over the breast. It seems reasonable to identify the lady depicted with the fertility Goddess Ishtar, perhaps reproducing a famous cult statue with her wealthy ornaments (that of Itschali, for example, in the Diyala Region), which was the actual Goddess for the worshipper. The figurine was used as a personal apotropaic

⁵ E. D. VAN BUREN, *Clay Figurines of Babylonia and Assyria* (Yale Oriental Series-Researches 16), New Haven 1930; M.-TH. BARRELET, *Figurines et reliefs en terre cuite de la Mésopotamie antique, I. Potiers, termes de métier, procédés de fabrication et production*, Paris 1968, p. 74, fig. 43.

⁶ C. HOFFMANN, *Glømt af dem Naere Orients Oldtid. Mesopotamisk kunst fra en dansk privat-samling*, Copenhagen 1996, p. 47, n. 34, fig. 22.

⁷ FRANKFORT ET. AL., *The Gimulsin Temple*, quoted in note 5, pp. 207-208, figs. 111 a-c, e-g, j-l (letters d, h, i belong to a slightly different type).

⁸ H. DE GENOUILLAC, *Premières recherches archéologiques à Kish II*, Paris 1925, n. P 17, tav. I 8, 58:1.

⁹ D. E. McCOWN - R. C. HAINES - D. P. HANSEN, *Nippur I. Temple of Enlil, Scribal Quarter, and Soundings. Excavations of the joint Expedition to Nippur of the University Museum of Philadelphia and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Oriental Institute Publications 78), Chicago 1967, n. 2N 834, pl. 126:11; this specimen is, however, mould made (and thus probably later than the one taken into consideration here), even though it shows the same iconography of the Vatican figurine.

¹⁰ See e.g. A. INVERNIZZI, *Dal Tigri all'Eufrate, II. Babilonesi e Assiri*, Torino 1992, pp. 89-90, fig. 147.

¹¹ A SPYCKET, *Le figurines de Suse* (Mémoires de la Delegation Archeologique en Iran, LII; Ville Royale de Suse IV), Paris 1992, p. 41, n. 142, pl. 25.

¹² W. ANDRAE, *Die archaischen Ishtar-Tempel in Assur* (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 39), Leipzig 1922, tav. 51 d; 52 : p, 53 : f.

¹³ M. KELLY-BUCCELLATI, *Figurines and Plaques from Terqa*, in AA.VV., *Histoire de Deir ez-Zôr et ses antiquités, Symposium International, Deir ez-Zôr 2-6 octobre 1983*, Damas 1986, pp. 149-154, n. 1, p. 150, tav. I:1; this figurine shows holes instead of buttons on the diadem.

amulet, or, when necessary, as cult offering or *ex-voto*. Its dating can be estimated, on art-historical and technological comparative grounds, at least within the first century of the 2nd millennium BC (2000-1900 BC), because shortly after these figurines begin to be produced in moulds.¹⁴ It should be, thus, regarded as one of the last distinguished examples of the early hand-made type, finely realized by a skillful artisan.

¹⁴ On this basic transformation of choroplastic techniques see A. SPYCKET, *Transition du modelage au moulage à Suse à la fin du III^e millénaire*, in L. DE MEYER - H. GASCHÉ - F. VALLAT EDS., *Fragmenta Historiae Elamicae Mélanges offerts à M. J. Steve*, Paris 1986, pp. 79-82.