

ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM BC FROM TELL ARBID PRELIMINARY REPORT

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The settlement remains discovered by a Polish-Syrian team on the site of Tell Arbid are dated from the first half of the 3rd through the end of the 1st millennium BC. More importantly, an uninterrupted stratigraphic sequence for a larger part of the 3rd millennium, from the time of Ninivite 5 culture through Early Dynastic

III (Early Jazirah III) and Akkadian (Early Jazirah IV) to Post-Akkadian (Early Jazirah V – end of the 3rd millennium), was traced in a number of trenches. The present article is a preliminary report on studies of anthropomorphic figurines,¹ considered one of the characteristic categories of the material culture of the period.

THE COLLECTION

Most of the nearly 40 figurines from Tell Arbid dated to the 3rd millennium BC were made summarily and sloppily with little attention to details. These are mainly small figurines, made of poorly fired dark gray or graphite clay with mineral and vegetal temper. It is entirely possible that they were fired accidentally, by contact with hot ashes, for instance, as the better fired pieces are characterized by a brown or gray color of the clay. The bigger figurines appear to be better made and more precise in the rendering, the clay being well-tempered (usually with mineral particles) and well fired to a greenish or red-brick

color as a rule. Most of these bigger and better figurines originated from layers dated to the second half or the end of the 3rd millennium BC. The only other material used for making the figurines beside clay is stone (one example).

None of the figurines were ever found in a context that could be presumed to be the place where the piece had originally functioned. The objects come from room fill, refuse pits, street deposits and disturbed or eroded layers. This does not help in the reconstruction of the meaning and function of these figurines and it frequently burdens the dating.

1 The collection could be studied thanks to a grant from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University.

TYPOLOGY

The Tell Arbid figurines can be subdivided into a few key types based on their morphology. The typology largely corresponds to divisions established for figurines coming from other sites in north-eastern Syria.

TYPE 1

Figurines with separated legs have been assigned to Type 1. A number of groups can

be distinguished within the type. The most numerous group are flat figurines with arms usually depicted as short stub arms. The legs in this type are shaped either as separate elements or separated by an engraved line [Fig. 1, top]. None of these figurines is complete and in none of the cases has the head survived. Nothing but the genitals was ever marked on the body surface. One of the figurines (illustrated) has a small hole

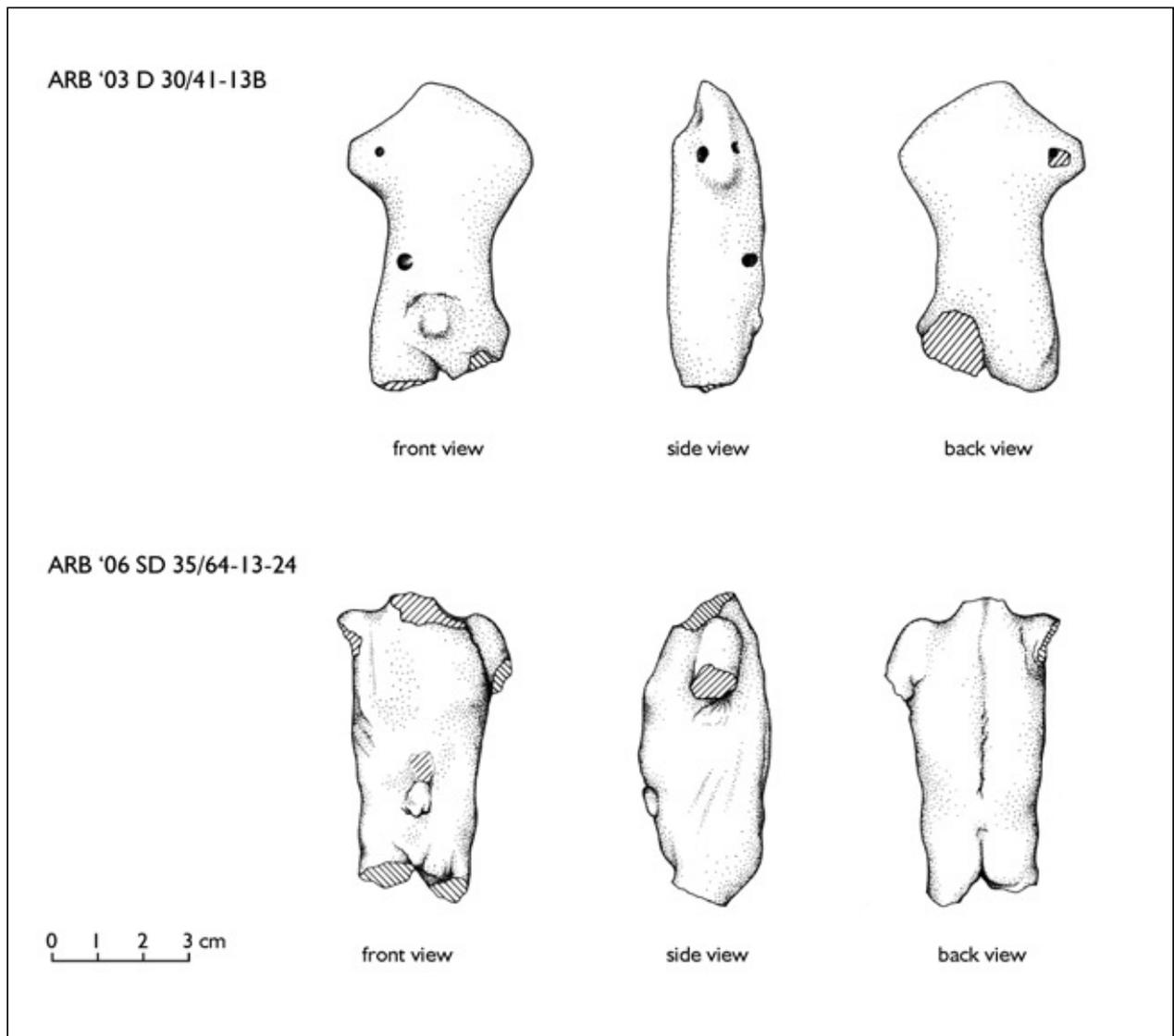


Fig. 1. Anthropomorphic figurines of Type 1: from late Ninivite 5 (top) and from late Early Dynastic III (Drawing M. Momot)

pierced through the right stub arm. Another figurine has a deep slot in the damaged underside, presumably intended for mounting purposes (cf. below, Type 3, *Fig. 3, top*). All of the figurines discovered to date can be identified most probably as male representations. Only one is dated with precision, coming from layers attributed to a late phase of Ninivite 5 culture, which translates into the end of the first half of the 3rd millennium in absolute terms. The remaining examples of this type come from disturbed assemblages encompassing the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC.

Schematic standing figurines with stub arms and separated legs have been recorded at a number of sites in the Jazirah region (northeastern Syria).² They differ from the Tell Arbid examples by a greater fastidiousness of execution and longer stub arms. More frequently they have female gender traits and jewelry either incised, impressed or applied. The heads are usually worked in detail, the eyes characteristically resembling coffee beans, the hairdo and jewelry done as appliqués on the top and sides. Figurines of this type are dated to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC: the Early Dynastic III, Akkadian and Post-Akkadian periods. Only fragments of such figurines have been recorded on Tell Arbid.

The type is also present in southern Mesopotamia, where its appearance has been assigned to the beginnings of the Early

Dynastic, that is, the beginning of the 3rd millennium. One of the earliest is a female figurine with stub arms and some have pierced holes through the stub arms, making them a parallel for the above described group of figurines from Tell Arbid.³

Other Tell Arbid figurines, representing a different group of Type 1, are characterized by a plastic, even naturalistic modeling of the body and limbs [*Fig. 1, bottom*]. Like the previous group, they, too, have only male genitals marked. These figurines come from a context dated to a late phase of Early Dynastic III. Male figurines with similarly naturalistic body modeling and marked genitals are known from Tell Brak and Mari.⁴

TYPE 2

Figurines assigned to this type are characterized by far-going stylization. Their form is generally referred to as violin-shaped, terminating in a triangular, pointed base. They present broad hips and disproportionately short legs separated by an incision. The pubic triangle is incised and filled with either incised dashes or dots [*Fig. 2*]. The context, in which figurines of this type were discovered, are not well dated; the illustrated one was found in a disturbed late Early Dynastic III context.

Female figurines with parallel traits made an appearance in Mesopotamian

- 2 *Tell Beydar*: M. Debruyne, G. Jans, V. van der Stede, "Small Finds from the Acropolis (F Field)", in: M. Lebeau, A. Suleiman (eds), *Tell Beydar. The 1995-1999 Seasons of Excavations. A preliminary report, Subartu X* (Brepolis 2003), 203, 208, Pls I, XI, nos 6343-M-1, 6902-M-1, 32374-M-1; L. Milano, E. Rova, "Tell Beydar – Field I: Preliminary Report of the 1999 Season", in: *Subartu X*, 376-377, Fig. 22, no. 9189-M; *Tell Brak*: H. McDonald, "Third-millennium clay object", in: D. Oates et al., *Excavations at Tell Brak*, vol. 1 (London 1997), 269-270, Figs 286-287, Type I, nos 5, 4, 7.
- 3 H. Frankfort, *Progress of the work of the Oriental Institute in Iraq 1934/35. Fifth Preliminary Report of the Iraq Expedition* (Chicago, Illinois 1936), 73, Fig. 57 a,e.
- 4 L. Badre, *Les figurines anthropomorphes en terre cuite à l'Âge du Bronze en Syrie* (Paris 1980), 284, Pl. XXX/1; J.-Cl. Margueron, *Mari. Métropole de l'Euphrate au IIIe et au début du IIe milénaire av. J.-C.* (Paris 2004), Fig. 413/5.

anthropomorphic art at the end of the 3rd millennium BC, contemporary with the Post-Akkadian period.⁵ A flat female figurine of similar form, a parallel for the Tell Arbid finds, was discovered in the whereabouts of Tell Chagar Bazar.⁶

TYPE 3

Figurines of this type are characterized by a conical or cylindrical body and flat or slightly concave bottom. No details on the surface are the rule. Most of the small-size figurines of the type are dated to Ninivite 5 times. They can be pierced through one of the stub arms and have a deep slot (one case) presumably for the purpose of mounting [*Fig. 3, top*]. The larger figurines [*Fig. 3, second from top and two below*], made of a somewhat better fired clay, originated from contexts of late Early Dynastic III, Akkadian and Post-Akkadian. They are also more painstakingly worked. The heads

have conical tops and faces modeled by pulling the clay out to the front [*cf. Fig. 3, third from top*] and often adding features like noses and ears. Hands are often plastic as well, although stub arms are just as common. Occasionally, the legs are also rendered schematically. Gender traits were not represented in all but one case, in which male genitals were shown. Some had dress indicated with incisions [*cf. Fig. 3, bottom*]. Many exhibited various combinations of slots. In one case, there was a hole from the left shoulder front slanting into the body and another one sunk from the right shoulder down [*cf. Fig. 3, second from top*]. In another case, a hole was pierced through the right forearm which was stretched forward and a second one was pierced horizontally through the left shoulder [*cf. Fig. 3, third from top*]. A third figurine had a hole pierced vertically through the broken right arm.

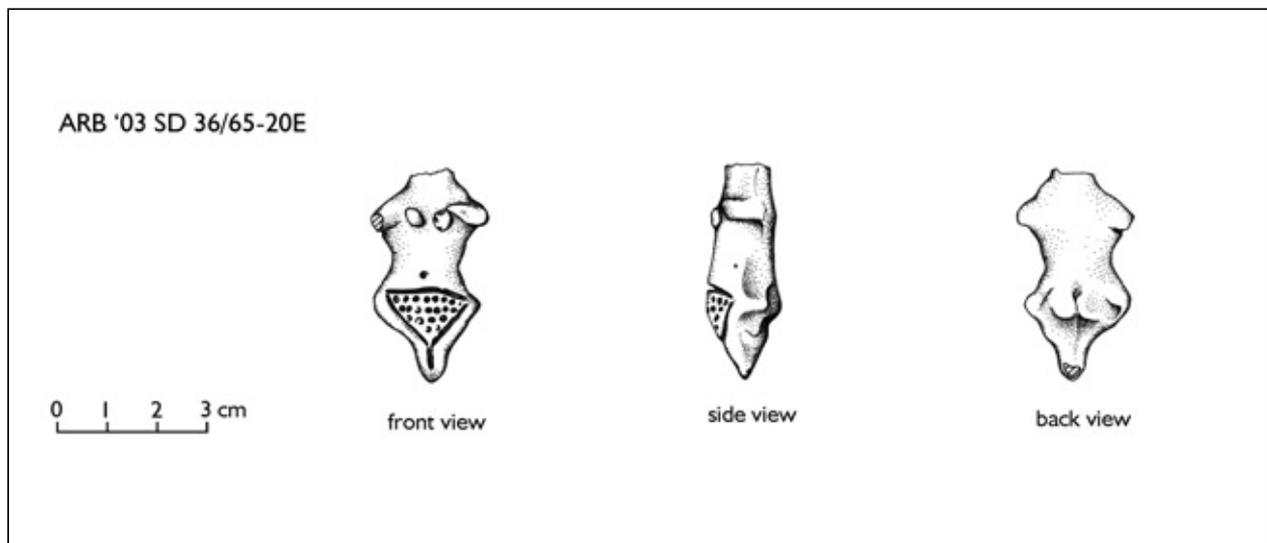


Fig. 2. *Anthropomorphic figurine of Type 2, of late Early Dynastic III date*
(Drawing M. Momot)

5 M.-T. Barrelet, *Figurines et reliefs en terre cuite de la Mésopotamie antique*, vol. I (Paris 1968), 73-74; see, e.g., figurine from Ashur: E. Klengel-Brandt, *Die Terrakotten aus Assur im Vorderasiatischen Museum Berlin* (Berlin 1978), 28-29, Group 5.

6 M.E.L. Mallowan, "The excavation at Tell Chagar Bazar and an archaeological survey of the Habur Region 1934-5", *Iraq* III (1936), 21, Fig. 5/13.

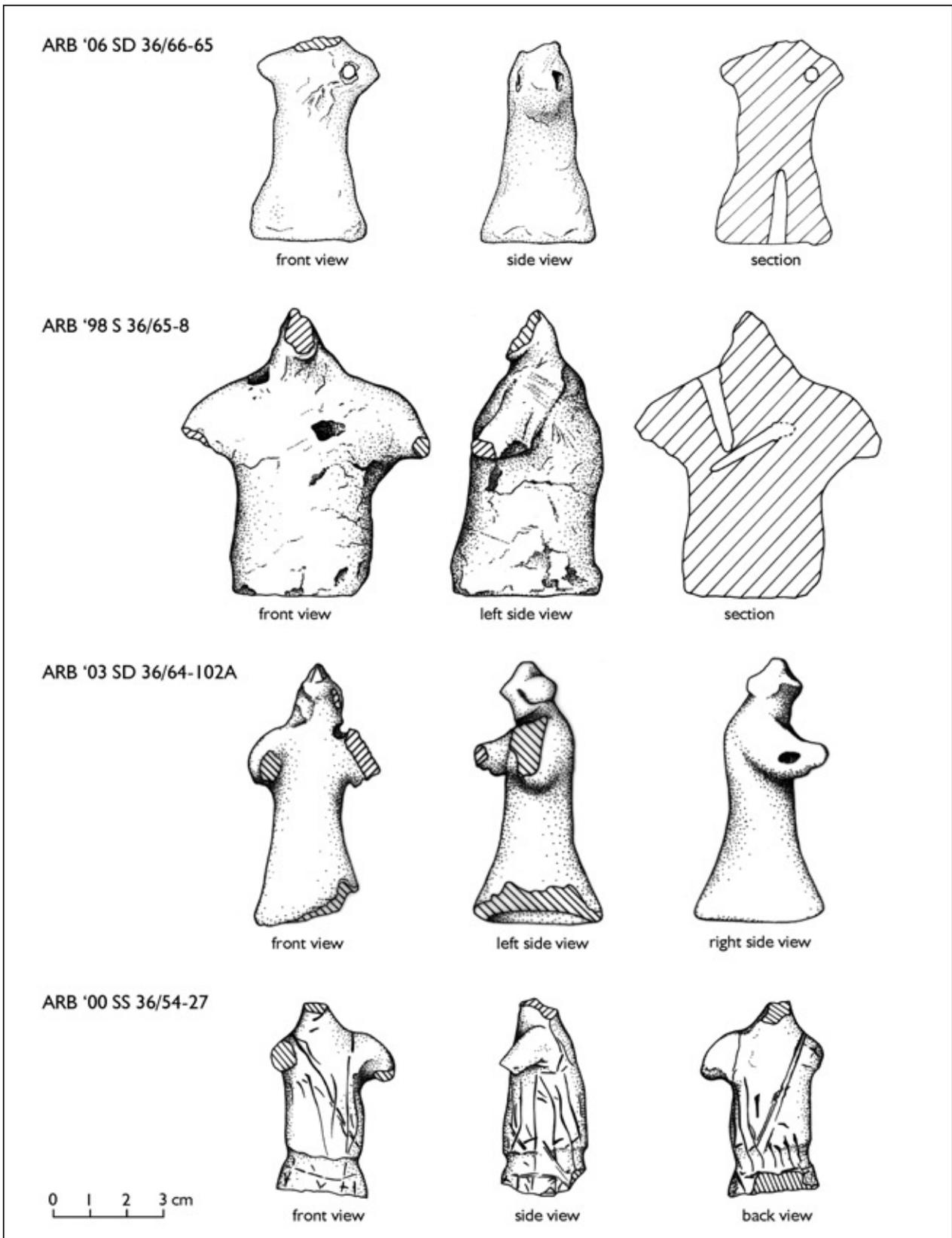


Fig. 3. Anthropomorphic figurines of Type 3: dated to Ninivite 5 (top), Early Dynastic III (second from top), Akkadian or Post-Akkadian (third from top) and late Akkadian or Post-Akkadian (bottom) (Drawing M. Momot)

While there is no certain evidence as to the function of these holes, in one case it was determined that an elongated object was placed in one of them. In this particular example, there is a groove executed all along the stub arm, corresponding to the opening of the hole slanting into the body. It suggests that the end of some object must have rested against or rather in the body, while the other end reached to the end of the left arm, if not further. It is likely that this attribute was a spear.⁷ An analogous attribute could have been placed in a hole pierced horizontally through an outstretched arm.

Assuming that these figurines did indeed represent armed figurines with spears in their hands, an analysis of known warrior images of the 3rd millennium BC suggests that the other holes and slots were also used for placing spears. The spear could have been held vertically, point upward, resting against the shoulder (figurines with a vertical slot in the shoulder), in a raised hand (figurines with horizontal slot in the shoulder) or vertically in a stretched out hand (figurines with hole pierced through the stretched out arm). Naturally, other objects could have been placed in these

slots, for instance other kinds of weapons or a shield.

Figurines with similarly shaped bodies are known from a few sites in the Jazirah. The shoulders are usually represented as short stub arms, more seldom rendered in plastic form and stretched forward.⁸ The head is usually more than schematic, the legs occasionally separated. Some have additional details marked, like male genitals, breasts or dress. A few have holes pierced in the stub arms, in similarity to the figurines from Tell Arbid. Figurines of this type are dated to the Early Dynastic III and the Akkadian and Post-Akkadian periods.

Figurines referring to the said type are known also from southern and central Mesopotamia. A rich collection originates from Abu Salabikh, where the context in which they were discovered was dated to the Early Dynastic III.⁹ Not only is the overall shape similar to the figurines from Tell Arbid, but so is the general lack of any details (including female gender traits). Like the Tell Arbid examples, these figurines sometimes have slots sunk into one of the shoulders, incised elements of dress and separated legs.¹⁰

7 See the male figurines of metal from Tell el-Judaidah with holes in the arms for spears and maces, R.J. Braidwood, L.S. Braidwood, *Excavations in the Plain of Antioch I*, O.I.P. 61 (Chicago 1960), 300-315, Figs 240-242. Also figurines from Tell Brak with holes in the arms have been interpreted as representations of warriors originally armed with spears in their hands, McDonald, *op. cit.*, 270, Fig. 289, no. 11, Type 3.

8 *Tell Beydar*: Ch. Buard, I. Poinot, P. Quenet, "Un quartier d'occupation d'époque dynastique archaïque (chantier B)", in: M. Lebeau, A. Suleiman (eds), *Tell Beydar, Three Seasons of Excavations (1992-1994)*, *Subartu* III (Turnhout 1997), 50, Pl. I/b; Debruyne, Jans, van der Stede, *op. cit.*, 208, Pl. X, no. 6236-M-1; *Tell Melebiya*: M. Lebeau, *Tell Melebiya. Cinq campagnes de recherches sur le Moyen-Khabour (1984-1988)*, vol. I-II (Leuven 1993), Pl. 188/2-3, XLIII/4-5, nos 1756-M-2, 1340-M-5; *Tell Brak*: Badre, *op. cit.*, Pl. XXX/2; McDonald, *op. cit.*, 270, Fig. 289, 307, no. 10, 11; *Tell Mozan*: G. Buccellati (ed.), *Mozan 1. The Soundings of the First Two Seasons (Malibu 1988)*, 81, Fig. 46, no. M1 208; see also figurine with conical base from *Tell Khazne*: R.M. Munčev, N.Ja. Merpert, "Da Hassuna a Accad. Scavi della Missione Nella Regione di Hassake, Siria di Nord-Est, 1988-1992", *Mesopotamia* 29 (1994), 43, Fig. 30/2.

9 E. McAdam, "Clay figurines", in: A. Green (ed.), *Abu Salabikh Excavations*, vol. 4. *The 6G Ash-Tip and its contents: cultic and administrative discard from temple*, vols 1-2 (Melksham Wiltshire 1993), 83-85, 92-97, Figs 3.2-3.7; see especially nos 263-264, 274-276, 278, 281-284, 287, 288, 291, 294; A. Green, "The excavations: details and overview", in: Green (ed.), *op. cit.*, 10.

10 See previous note; figurines with slots in the shoulder: nos 275, 287; see also no. 283; marked dress: nos 262-269; separated legs: especially no. 290.

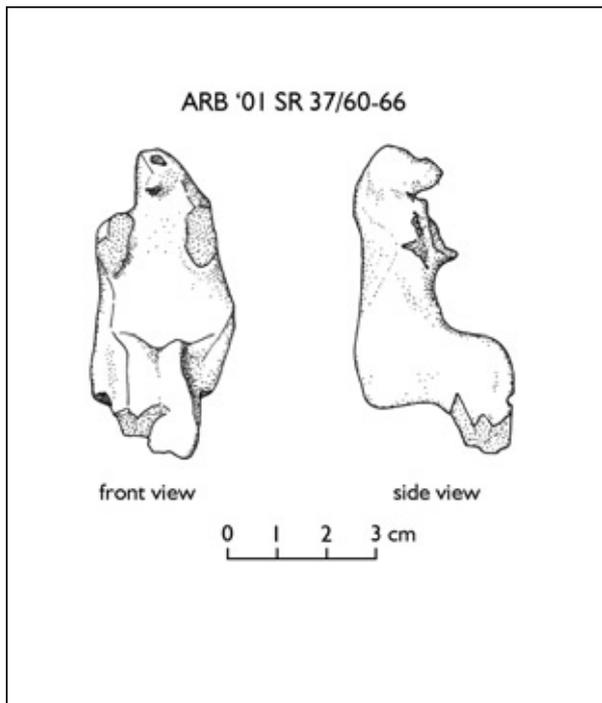


Fig. 4. *Anthropomorphic figurine of Type 4 from a Post-Akkadian context (Inking M. Wagner)*

TYPE 4

Belonging to this type is a single sitting figurine with legs bent at the knees [Fig. 4]. The arms, now broken, must have been stretched forward originally. It came from a Post-Akkadian context.

TYPE 5

A few of the Tell Arbid figurines are characterized by a widening corpus which is flat in lateral section. The arms are in this case represented as short stub arms. The bottoms are concave. No details have been noted on the surface. A deep vertical slot was pierced in the neck of one of the figurines, presumably in order to mount a now missing head [Fig. 5].

Figurines of similar form are known from a number of sites in the Jazirah. Some are entirely plain,¹¹ while others feature various details, including female gender traits.¹²

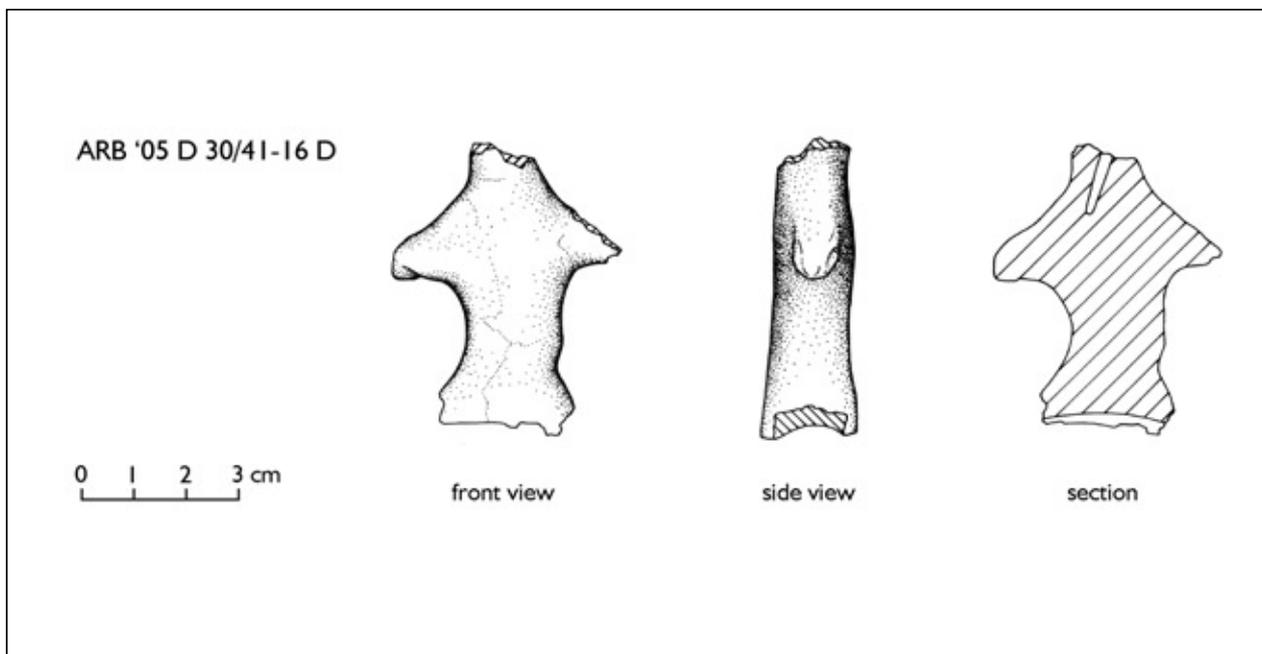


Fig. 5. *Anthropomorphic figurine of Type 5 from a disturbed layer of Ninivite 5 and Akkadian times (Inking M. Momot)*

11 McDonald, *op. cit.*, 270-271, Fig. 289, nos 127-129, types 5-6.

12 *Tell Melebiya*: Lebeau, *op. cit.*, 507, Pl. 188/1, XLIII/3; *Tell Beydar*: Milano, Rova, in: *Subartu* X, 341-342, Fig. 24, no. 9604-M-1.

These figurines are dated to the Early Dynastic III or the Akkadian and Post-Akkadian periods. The objects from Tell Arbid originated from layers containing disturbed Ninevite 5 – Early Dynastic III material and layers of Akkadian and Post-Akkadian date.

OTHER CLAY FIGURINES

One of the fragmentarily preserved female figurines represents a category of Akkadian

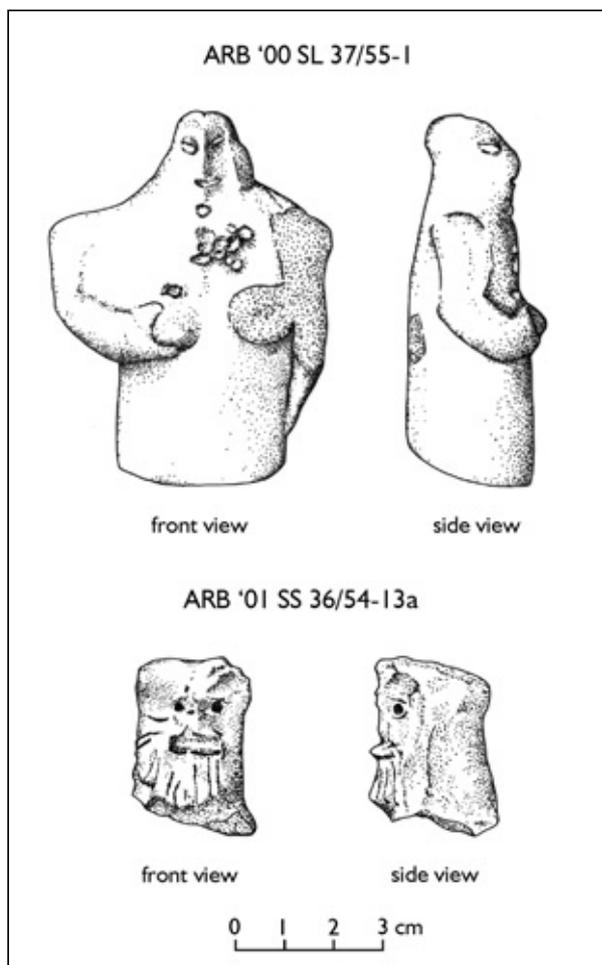


Fig. 6. Unclassified anthropomorphic figurines of Akkadian (top) and Post-Akkadian date (Inking M. Wagner)

figurines in a characteristic pose of one arm laid against the body (at the waist, breast or below the breast) and the other falling loosely along the body [Fig. 6, top]. Figurines of this kind are known across Mesopotamia; they have been recorded at Ashur, Tell Brak and Tell Chagar Bazar among others.¹³ The Tell Arbid figurine had once had an applied hairdo (now broken) and the facial features, breasts and presumably jewelry are marked. The eyes are especially characteristic, taking on a shape that strongly evokes a coffee bean.¹⁴

Coming from a Post-Akkadian layer is a naturalistic male head [cf. Fig. 6, bottom]. It is too fragmentary for comparison with material from other sites; even so, it seems that the nearest parallels are constituted by male figurines with marked facial features known from southern and northern Mesopotamia. Unlike the Tell Arbid

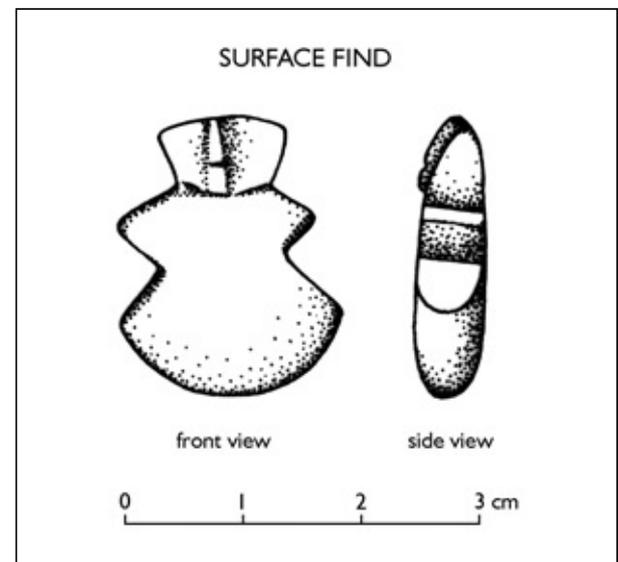


Fig. 7. Schematic figurine cut from a pebble. Unstratified (Drawing M. Momot)

13 Badre, op. cit., 284-285, PL. XXX/1,6; M.E.L. Mallowan, "Excavation at Brak and Chagar Bazar", *Iraq* IX (1947), Pls XXXVIII/1, XLII/6, LIV/ 2, 6, LV/7; Klengel-Brandt, op. cit., 33, Pl. 4, nos 87-88; see also an Akkadian figurine of ivory from Tell Brak, Oates et al., op. cit., Fig. 315.

14 Evidenced in the Jazirah in the Akkadian period: Debruyne, Jans, van der Stede, op. cit., 203-204, Pl. II, nos 6849-M-1, 32403-M-1.

example, these figurines are shown most frequently in all kinds of headdresses.¹⁵ They are dated to the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC.

STONE FIGURINE

Apart from the clay figurines, there is also one stone object, which is unfortunately not stratified. It is a flat, schematic violin-shaped figurine cut from a pebble [*Fig. 7*]. It has a head of trapezoidal shape with distinctly marked nose projecting from the flat face. A deep scratch (possibly accidental damage?) runs horizontally at one third of the height of the nose. The arms are shown as short pointed stub arms. The bottom edge of the body which widens toward the bottom preserves the original shape of the pebble. This piece represents a fairly rare category of flat,

schematic stone figurines occurring in northern Mesopotamia (Niniveh, Tepe Gawra, Nuzi) and on sites in the Diyala river valley (Tell Asmar).¹⁶ Limestone is the usual material of choice for these figurines. The violin shape is characteristic and so is a prominent nose, often as high as the face. The eyes were marked occasionally by drilling. Figurines of this type are dated most often to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC (late Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods). Similar figurines but without the nose have also been recorded at sites on the Euphrates in northern Syria (Serrin) and in southeastern Turkey (Titriş Höyük).¹⁷ They, too, have been dated to the 3rd millennium. The Tell Arbid example extends the geographical tradition of these violin-shaped figurines also to the Jazirah.

RECAPITULATION

An analysis of the collection of figurines from Tell Arbid contributes new information on the anthropomorphic minor arts of the Jazirah in a period that has been weakly investigated so far, that is, the end of the first half and the beginning of the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. It has enabled a study of prototypes of figurines known from other sites and dated to a later phase of the 3rd millennium. The Tell Arbid collection

differs from these other figurines by a rather summary working and few details, as well as no tradition of incised or impressed decoration. Type 3 especially demonstrates a continuity of artistic tradition from the first half of the 3rd millennium through its end. The collection is also illustrative of new types of representations only then taking hold in this part of the Near East (violin-shaped stone figurine).

15 Barrelet, *op. cit.*, 72-73; see, e.g., figurine from Ashur: Klengel-Brandt, *op. cit.*, 38, 45, nos 136, 213-219.

16 Collected by P.R.S. Moorey, "Third-millennium 'Cycladic' stone figurines in Northern Mesopotamia?", in: L. al Gaillani-Werr et al. (eds), *Of Pots and Plans. Papers on the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia and Syria presented to David Oates in Honour of his 75th Birthday* (London 2002), 227-235; for the figurines from Niniveh, cf. R. Gut, J. Reade, R.M. Boehmer, "Ninive - Das späte 3. Jahrtausend V.Chr.", in: J.-W. Meyer, M. Novák, A. Pruß (eds), *Beiträge zur Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Winfried Orthmann gewidmet* (Frankfurt am Main 2001), 81, Fig. 8, Pl. 14/a,d, nos 99-100.

17 G. Algaze et al., "Şanlıurfa Museum/University of California excavations and surveys at Titriş Höyük, 1991: A preliminary report", *Anatolica* 18 (1992), 47, Fig. 17; G. Algaze et al., "Titris Höyük. A small EBA urban centre in SE Anatolia. The 1994 Season", *Anatolica* 21 (1995), 27-28, 39, Fig. 35. For the Serrin figurine, see note 15.

Of the Tell Arbid figurines with gender traits marked, male figurines constitute almost half the number, an observation that holds true also for anthropomorphic figurines from other centers in the immediate vicinity (Tell Brak, for example). It is probable that many of the figurines without marked gender traits also represented males. For instance, figurines of Type 3 were most likely armed with spears or other weapons, normally considered as male attributes. The predominance of male representations among anthropomorphic figurines is especially evident at the close of the first half and beginning of the second half of

the 3rd millennium BC (late Ninivite 5), when female images are virtually non-existent. Most female figurines are dated to the Early Dynastic III, Akkadian and Post-Akkadian periods. Whether the initial prevalence of male figurines in the collection from Tell Arbid, replaced later by female representations, is a matter of chance or a reflection of cultural changes and processes of transformation occurring in 3rd-millennium society cannot be said for now. Further studies on the figurines from Tell Arbid may lead to more specific answers to these and other questions concerned with the anthropomorphic arts of the region.¹⁸

18 A complete catalogue of the anthropomorphic figurines from Tell Arbid is in preparation by the author.