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C. Lippolis, R. Menegazzi

CHILDREN AND MAGIC. A GLIMPSE OF SOME TERRACOTTA FIGURINES FROM SELEUCIA ON THE TIGRIS

Большое разнообразие терракот из Селевкии, изображающих детей, свидетельствует о глубоком воздействии греческой культуры, поскольку этот сюжет чрезвычайно редок в до-эллинистической Месопотамии. Некоторые данные наводят на мысль об особом смысле и (или) назначении, по крайней мере, некоторых из детских статуэток. Более того, небольшая группа их демонстрирует интересную деталь: полый открытый рот, вырезанный миниатюрным инструментом после извлечения статуэтки от формы.

Ключевые слова: эллинистическая Месопотамия, Селевкия на Тигре, терракотовые статуэтки, изображения детей

The terracotta figurines from Seleucia on the Tigris include hundreds of children's representations. Their number testify to the profound impact of Greek culture in the formation of the Seleucian iconographic repertoire, as the subject is extremely rare in pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia.

The terminology used for children in the textual evidence is vague and does not even distinguish small from older children; sometimes — for example in the Ur III ration lists — they are not distinguished by gender as well. Minors — young people were considered adults after the age of 13 — are often defined with terms derived from the root of the verb *ṣeḫēru* that means to be “small, insignificant”: this proves their marginality in the Mesopotamian society.

Looking at the visual evidence, the stele of Šara'ušumgal and two Ur-Nanše plaques, dating to the Early Dynastic period, show the sons/daughters — actually youths rather than children — of the main character. Moreover, remains of the lower legs indicate the presence of a small scale figure — possibly a child? — flanking the statue of a standing woman from the Abu temple of Tell Asmar/Ešnunak. It is now assumed that an “adult” (a goddess?) and not a child (Šulgi?) sits on the knees of a god on the Ur-Namma stela¹, even though the image of adults dandling children on their knees (*birku*) is a well-known literary topos. Children are occasionally seen between the prisoners led into captivity in the scenes of deportation on the Assyrian reliefs, where they are accompanied by mothers and fathers shown kissing them, or carrying them in their arms or on shoulders or giving them something to drink: a dramatic culmination of the complex visual narrative that usually depicts the siege and fall of an enemy city. In the coroplastic production of pre-Hellenistic times, the child do not appears as an autonomous subject: infants are held in the arms of nursing women, a very ancient Mesopotamian theme,

Lippolis Carlo — assistant professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art And Archaeology at the University of Torino, president of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi of Torino, director of the Italian Archaeological Expedition in Parthian Nisa (Turkmenistan) and of the Italian Archaeological Expedition in Tulul al Baqarat (Iraq). E-mail: carlo.lippolis@unito.it

Menegazzi Roberta — PhD in Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Torino, Member of the Technical Staff of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi of Torino. E-mail: robertamenegazzi@yahoo.it

¹ Canby 2001, 13.

which is attested from the 'Ubaid period on and enjoys great popularity in the production of the first half of the first millennium BC². In addition, some scholars interpret as stillborn or premature babies the slender sitting figures that, on some Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, appear next to a divine figure probably representing Nintu, the goddess of birth³.

The brief survey illustrated above contributes to better elucidate the pervasiveness of the Greek influence, as the terracottas from Seleucia portray nude, semi-nude and draped children in a great variety of poses and with various attributes: standing, sitting or in motion, holding a diptych or a bunch of grapes, playing a musical instrument, riding, lying on a bird's back, playing with a bird. Such a variety mirrors a direct and profound knowledge of the Western iconographies; yet, it is counterbalanced by the special popularity enjoyed by only some iconographical types, such as the ones portraying sitting or squatting children.

As highlighted in a previous paper⁴, the selective approach to the Western models marks a peculiar trait of the coroplastic production from Seleucia, and is most likely connected with the identity of the represented character and/or with the value ascribed to the figurines representing it. In this perspective, figurines of sitting and squatting children are of particular interest. From an iconographic point of view, they are clearly influenced by Eastern Mediterranean models, as the seated or squatting position exactly recalls the so-called temple-boys, stone and terracotta statuettes spanning from the 4th to the 1st century BC. At Seleucia, one of the most widespread iconographical schemes — reproduced both in large and in small scale — depicts a child sitting on a base, with frontal head and torso, lowered right leg and flexed left leg. Large-scale specimens — produced in several moulds and sometimes completed with elements made of stucco⁵ — are also attested in the repertoires from Babylon and Borsippa⁶, marking a peculiar feature of late coroplastic production from Central Mesopotamia. If compared to the average terracotta production, they stand out for their size and for the special care in the manufacturing process, and already in the 1930s they had drawn the attention of M. Rostovtzeff, who called them “squatting gods”⁷.

None of the known specimens actually bears attributes or accessories that can support a divine interpretation; yet, the finding context of one of the exemplars from the Italian excavations at Seleucia may offer an argument in this sense, as a large statuette depicting a semi-nude child, together with its separate moulded cylindrical seat (fig. 1)⁸, was found in the Tell 'Umar area, in a filling layer of the temple leaning against the western front of the theatre. Due to its original templar pertinence, the statuette might have represented either an *ex voto* or the cultic statuette of a child deity whose identity is

² See Klengel-Brandt, Cholidis 2006, 93-103, n. 259-371, taf. 19-21 (from Babylon); Ziegler 1962, 77-81, n. 499-533, abb. 260-273 (from Uruk); Legrain 1930, 14-15, n. 38-42 (from Nippur); Barrelet 1968, 320, n. 592-594, pl. LVI (from Larsa), 321, n. 595, pl. LVI, 412-413, n. 820-822, pl. LXXXII (from unknown provenance).

³ Harris 2000, 9. For these terracotta plaques see Opificius 1961, 76, n. 224-226, tf. 4.

⁴ On the topic, see Menegazzi 2012.

⁵ See Menegazzi 2014, n. 11.G314, tav. 346, with short dress modelled in stucco.

⁶ See Karvonen Kannas 1995, 148-150, n. 242-252, pl. 42-44; Klengel-Brandt, Cholidis 2006, 369-372, n. 2297-2303, taf. 115-116.

⁷ Rostovtzeff 1937.

⁸ Menegazzi 2014, 381, n. 11.G309, tav. 344.

completely unknown to us. Within the Near Eastern context, the ostensible lack of divine attributes is not an obstacle to the divine interpretation of a subject⁹; on the other hand, the reading as votive offering appears to be consistent with the function of the Eastern Mediterranean temple-boys, which were dedicated in the temples for the birth or protection of children.

Whatever its specific function may be, the exemplar in question is probably ascribable to a sacral sphere connected with fertility and protection of children; reference to the fertility is manifest in the case of a large seated boy probably from Babylon that holds a pomegranate in his left hand¹⁰. To the same sphere could possibly be related also the small-size seated and squatting terracottas: it is probably not by chance that in the area of the temple also small figurines of seated or squatting boys were found¹¹.

Further evidence seem to suggest a special meaning and/or function for at least some of the children's figurines. A small group of them share an interesting detail: the open mouth is hollow, having been cut-out with a tiny tool after the extraction of the statuette from the mould, when the clay was still soft. The hollow, cut-out mouth is a common feature among the theatrical masks, well attested in the coroplastic repertoire from Seleucia; on the contrary, it does not appear on any of the double-moulded male or female figurines. Moreover, in the case of the masks the open mouth is foreseen in the mould, whilst in the children figurines the opening is often irregular and cuts away the moulded lips.

The only complete specimens come from a terracotta deposit located on the southern side of the Archives square, linked to the activity of a large terracotta workshop and formed between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. They are referable to two iconographic types. The first one depicts a semi-nude standing boy with advanced left leg and extended right arm¹². The head, slightly turned toward right, is crowned by a floral wreath; the features are delicate, and the small mouth is opened with a tiny incision (fig. 2). The second one portrays a nude squatting boy

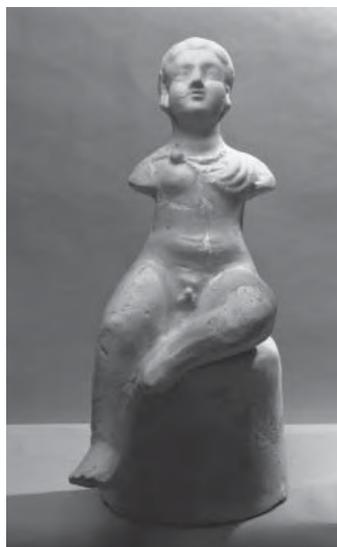


Fig. 1. Seleucia on the Tigris, large seated child. Terracotta. (31,1x12,4 cm; Menegazzi 2014: 11.G309)



Fig. 2. Seleucia on the Tigris, semi-nude standing child. Terracotta. (16,7x6,5 cm; Menegazzi 2014: 11.S14)

⁹ The terracotta child riders from Jebel Khalid, a Seleucid settlement on the Euphrates, are interpreted as representations of gods in spite of their lack of divine attributes. See Jackson 2006, 222.

¹⁰ Karvonen Kannas 1995, 148-149, n. 243, pl. 43.

¹¹ See Menegazzi, Messina 2011, 135-136; Menegazzi 2014, 71.

¹² Menegazzi 2014, 383, n. 11.S14-S19, tav. 349-350.



Fig. 3. Seleucia on the Tigris, nude squatting child and standing draped figure. Terracotta. (13,8x7,4 cm; Menegazzi 2014: 11.S152)



Fig. 4. Seleucia on the Tigris. Torso of a child. Terracotta. (7,1x4,8x3 cm; Menegazzi 2014: 11.G119)

with left leg bent on the floor and right knee drawn up. The head, turned toward right, is crowned by a floral wreath. The hair are shoulder-length; the forehead is frown, and the hollow mouth is large. On his left side stands a draped figure of smaller size, with frontal head and torso, left arm on the side and right arm folded to the chest, holding an attribute in the right hand¹³ (fig. 3). Its interpretation is uncertain: the round face, the full cheeks and the hairstyle — with the hair gathered in a low ponytail — are compatible with the representation of a child. On the other hand, the hairstyle is also typical of dwarfs, and the open knees — visible under the drapery of the mantle — are consistent with this reading¹⁴. The semi-nude standing boy finds a precise correspondence in the coroplastic repertoire from Myrina¹⁵; conversely, for the latter iconographic type we were not able to find a parallel — either in the Mesopotamian or in the Mediterranean terracotta production — that could shed some light on the identity of the standing figure and the meaning of the group.

Other than the above quoted exemplars from the deposit on the southern side of the Archives square, the detail of the hollow, cut-out mouth appear on some fragmentary specimens — a torso, most likely belonging to a squatting figure¹⁶ (fig. 4), and some detached head of various size, both without headgear¹⁷ and with wreathed head¹⁸ (fig. 5). In the case of the heads without headgear, quite large in size, the mouth is little and just half-open. On the contrary, some of the wreathed heads, which include both small-sized and larger than average specimens, have large, wide-open mouths. Almost all of the

¹³ Menegazzi 2014, 390, n. 11.S152-S156, tav. 358.

¹⁴ Bow-legged dwarfs are quite a popular subject in the coroplastic production of Seleucia. On the topic, see Menegazzi 2014, 398-412.

¹⁵ Mollard-Besques 1963, 131, pl. 157f.

¹⁶ Menegazzi 2014, 368, n. 11.G119, tav. 327.

¹⁷ Menegazzi 2014, 492-493, 495, 509-510, n. 15.G15-G17, 15.G58, 15.G261, 15.G265, tav. 436, 438, 450.

¹⁸ Menegazzi 2014, 500-504, 511, 514, n. 15.G133-G135, 15.G154, 15.G173-178, 15.G184, 15.S11, 15.P15, tav. 442, 444-446, 451, 453.

fragmentary exemplars come from housing areas¹⁹, and the majority of them were found in levels dating from the second half/end of the 2nd century BC to the beginning of the 1st century AD.

Apparently, children figurines with hollow, open mouth are peculiar to the Seleucian repertoire, as they are not attested in the main production centres from central and southern Mesopotamia²⁰. The opening of the mouth, which implies an extra step in the productive process, appears therefore as a specific choice and is in all likelihood to be related with the function and meaning of these exemplars. A meaning that could perhaps be found in specific ritual and devotional contexts. In this sense, we should consider the cultural *milieu* in which these particular figurines had been made. Visually, as pointed out in a recent paper²¹, the detail of the cut-open mouth recalls an ancient Mesopotamian ritual, known from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian textual sources, and still attested in some 2nd century fragments from Uruk²²: the Mouth-Opening and Mouth-Washing ritual. The ritual is related with the making (in fact, a real birth) and dedication of cult images, or with the transfer of properties from the divine/spiritual to the human/material world. Its basic form involves the washing of the mouth, generally indicated as the *mīs pī*, before its opening, also called *pīt pī*: these acts were accompanied by rituals and recitations of prayers and incantations²³. The antiquity of the ritual is uncertain. In Egypt the comparable ritual goes back to the Fourth Dynasty, while in Mesopotamia most of the descriptions date to the first millennium BC, although its origin could probably trace back in time to the third millennium BC²⁴.

The purpose of the mouth-opening was to give life to an image, but sometimes to other objects as well²⁵. It is well-known that in Mesopotamia an image (*šalmu*) was not just a visual medium, but it had “the potential of becoming an entity in its own right, a being rather than a copy of a being”²⁶. The creation and making of a statue is sometimes

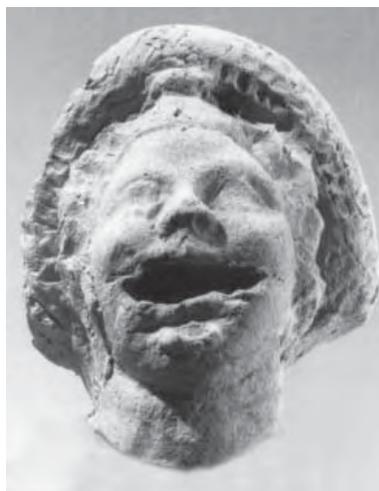


Fig. 5. Seleucia on the Tigris. Head of a child. Terracotta. (5x3,9 cm; Menegazzi 2014: 15.G184)

¹⁹ The majority of them come from the dwelling block G6, investigated in the 1920s-1930s by the archaeologists of the University of Michigan. Some specimens were found by the Italian archaeological mission in the dwelling area that rose in Parthian times on the remains of the Archives building.

²⁰ No specimens with open mouth appear among the published materials from Babylon, Nippur and Uruk.

²¹ The connection between the figurines with cut-open mouth and the *mīs pī* ritual has already been pointed out in a recent paper by S. Langin-Hooper (Langin-Hooper 2013).

²² Walker, Dick 2001, 27-28.

²³ Not a single full text is known about the ritual, which has been reconstructed combining fragments from different texts.

²⁴ Walker, Dick 2001, 18.

²⁵ The opening was symbolic as far as we do not know a single statue with cut-open mouth. The texts inform us that the mouth-opening was performed with syrup, ghee, cedar and cypress.

²⁶ Bahrani 2003, 125. This view remains till later periods, if it is true that in Seleucid era the creation of a cult statue required the approval of the god (Mc Ewan 1981).

reported in the texts with the verb that indicates the birth and the *mīs pī* ritual has been interpreted by some scholars as a symbolic process of birth²⁷.

According to the Mesopotamian texts, the opening of the mouth was performed not only on divine royal images, but also on apotropaic figurines, in order to make them function as a substitute for the person involved in the subsequent rituals²⁸. Within this context, it is maybe worth mentioning that the Greek Magical Papyri of late Greco-Roman Egypt testify to the “miniaturization” of the temple rituals, referring to many small-scale objects employed in simplified and “domestic” versions of ancient official rituals²⁹. Such a creative adaptation of official religious practices is not attested in Mesopotamia where, however, we have an abundant documentation about both miniature objects³⁰ and rituals concerning small substitute figurines, these latter being especially mentioned in exorcisms and magical texts of the first millennium BC. The use of figurines made of clay, wax or other materials is one of the main tools for making a substitution³¹. In these cases, the function of the figurine is to become, albeit only temporarily, the replacement of the physical person and thus to attract to itself any evil eye, misfortune, illness.

The terracottas from Seleucia are the result of the encounter and exchange between Greek and Mesopotamian culture, and mirror the complex cultural context from which they come from. As highlighted above, the presence of children representations is directly linked with the spread of Greek iconographies; yet, their popularity probably reflects specific needs of the local population. Mesopotamian texts from the 1st millennium BC record an increase in remedies, incantations and prophylactics counteracting the dangers and illnesses that could afflict babies³², and testify to the licit anxiety of the adults of a society where the infant mortality was inevitably high. It is therefore licit to suggest, for at least some of the children figurines, a function as apotropaic object or *ex voto* related to the sphere of child protection, as the specimens found within the templar area of Tell ‘Umar seem to suggest. Within this context, figurines with cut-open mouth could have played a special role. In the light of what said before, they might have been used in rituals of Mesopotamian origin, related to a private sphere and connected with the protection of infants. It is maybe worth mentioning that all the specimens coming from domestic areas were found broken, with only the head — or, in just one case, the head and the upper torso — preserved³³.

²⁷ See Jacobsen 1987. The emphasis in the birthing aspects of the ritual is questioned by other scholars. On the topic, see Berlejung 1998, Walker, Dick 2001.

²⁸ Walker, Dick 2001, 13.

²⁹ See Smith 1995. See also Moyer, Dieleman 2003 for the interpretation of the Greek “*Ouphōr*” invocation — to be performed on a ring’s gemstone — supposed to correspond in name and function to the Egyptian “opening of the mouth” ritual.

³⁰ The coroplastic repertoire from Seleucia include scale models of fruits, plates and tables for offerings, beds, ships and altars. See Menegazzi 2014, 695-719.

³¹ Verderame 2013, 304. Figurines as substitute for a person, not physically present, are widespread in Mesopotamian rituals especially in anti-witchcraft — *Maqlū*.

³² As Geller has stressed Babylonian medicine considered disease “the result of the attack of demons or external factors” (Geller 2004). Magic and exorcisms were performed alongside medical remedies: this, from a Mesopotamian perspective, is “entirely rational” (Geller 2010, 56).

³³ According to M.T. Barrelet, “le bris d’un objet en terre cuite fabriqué par le potier est, dans les textes incantatoires ou magiques néo-assyriens, symbole de la destruction d’un ennemi, ou de l’élimination du péché et du mauvais sort” (Barrelet 1968, 17).

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CHILDREN AND MAGIC. A GLIMPSE OF SOME TERRACOTTA FIGURINES FROM SELEUCIA ON THE TIGRIS

C. Lippolis, R. Menegazzi

The great variety of terracotta depicting children from Seleucia testifies to the profound impact of Greek culture, as the subject is extremely rare in pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia. Some evidence suggests the special meaning and (or) function for at least some of the children's figurines. Moreover, a small group of them share an interesting detail: a hollow open mouth, cut-out with a tiny tool after the extraction of the statuette from the mould.

Key words: Hellenistic Mesopotamia, Seleucia on the Tigris, terracotta figurines, images of children

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В. Н. Пилипко

АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ЛАНДШАФТ ДАШЛИНСКОГО ОАЗИСА И ЕГО ИСТОРИЧЕСКАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ

Дашлинский оазис — уникальный историко-культурный объект. Его освоение началось во второй половине II тыс. до н.э. и продолжалось до III в. н.э. После этого данная местность никогда не осваивалась земледельцами. Сохранившийся микрорельеф позволяет проследить основные закономерности его развития на протяжении столь длительного времени.

Ключевые слова: Средняя Азия, Туркменистан, историческая география, эпоха раннего железа, античность

Примерно в 100 км восточнее Ашхабада, столицы современного независимого Туркменистана, в пределах «слепой» дельты реки Козган¹, находится мест-

Пилипко Виктор Николаевич — доктор исторических наук, ведущий научный сотрудник Отдела классической археологии ИА РАН. E-mail: pilipko2002@mail.ru

¹ Ныне в пределах подгорной равнины Копетдага она полностью высохла.