

SINGULAR DEPOSITS IN GIRD LASHKIR (ERBIL, IRAQI KURDISTAN) AT THE BEGINNING OF THE EARLY BRONZE AGE

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Abstract

This paper will address the study of two sets of unique objects (a set of clay figurines and paleometallurgical objects) discovered in habitat stratigraphic contexts in the excavations of Gird Lashkir (Erbil, Iraqí Kurdistan). The analysis of the material assemblage, and their stratigraphic location in closed contexts, often called "closed deposits", allows us to research their origin, formation, and social function. A set of singular materials were recovered from floors and pits which had been intentionally refilled. The presence of these materials in domestic areas, courtyards and negative structures appeared together with pottery, grinding stones, faunal remains and other domestic debris.

To address this topic, this contribution will cover the presence of utilitarian and figurative objects across the stratigraphic sequence at sector 3, which corresponds with an open-air area with artisanal and domestic uses inhabited at the dawn of the first empires. To this end, singular artefacts recovered from the Ninevite V horizon will be fully characterized. Specifically, a mould associated with paleometallurgic activities and a significant set of quadruped figurines (bovid, caprines) were found together. Moreover, a vehicle model and a horse figurine were buried in the same architectonic phase. The characteristics and archaeological contexts of symbolic artefacts from other sites in the region that developed the Ninevite V horizon have been used to better understand the assemblage found in Gird Lashkir.

These singular deposits will help improve the available knowledge about the Early Bronze Age in the Upper Mesopotamia.

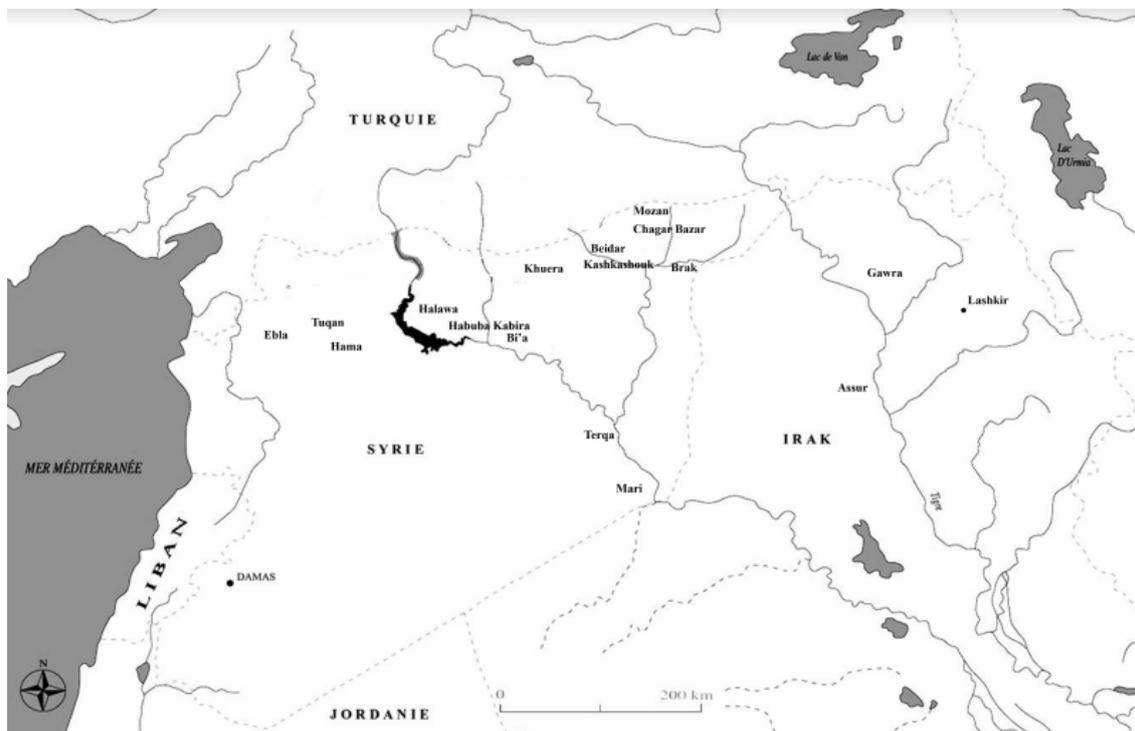
Keywords: Northern Mesopotamia, Gird Lashkir, Ninevite 5, clay figurines, paleometallurgy.

Introduction

The rich and dynamic development of archaeological research projects in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq places this area as one of the regions with the greatest archaeological novelties in the Near East. This fact contributes to the formation of new data obtained by the studies in the different archaeological sites as well as the elaboration of new analyses, which open up new perspectives for the knowledge of the ancient societies of the Near East, in particular about Northern Mesopotamia (Kopaniás, McGinnis, 2016, p. xvii). Following the contribution made in the congress *IInd International Scientific Conference. Archaeology and Heritage of Hawler-Erbil* of 2018 (Gómez et al. 2018, pp. 331-345), the objective of this communication is to present the analysis of two sets of singular objects discovered in one of the sectors of Gird Lashkir, specifically sector 3, ascribed to the Ninevite 5 horizon. A detailed analysis of different

fillings will be carried out as both documented pits and open areas contained significant singular objects, mainly animal figurines and artisanal objects related to metallurgy. The study focuses on the detailed analysis of the recovered objects and its stratigraphic context (negative structures and fillings) where they were documented, probably located in a courtyard and related to an artisanal area. The presentation of this data and analysis aims to contribute to a better knowledge of the Ninevite 5 period, that is, the early Bronze Age of Upper Mesopotamia, thanks to its comprehensive analysis comparing it with similar archaeological contexts and documented parallels of the recent research developed in Syria and southeast Turkey.

The study of symbolic elements ascribed to the Ninevite 5 period discovered in the recent fieldworks developed at Gird Lashkir (Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan) such as mobile elements (zoomorphic figurines and a model vehicle) will be highlighted in these analyses. The region of Upper Mesopotamia and, specifically, the Erbil's plain, constitutes a geographic area where, traditionally, the remains of the early third millennium are well known. Therefore, a new cultural horizon could be defined through the study of the pottery, characterized by its morphology and decoration patterns and other elements inside a wide socio-economic and cultural framework. (Fig. 1).



Figur1. Map showing the location of the site. (SAPPO-UAB).

It must be remembered that, geographically, the Ninevite 5 period was defined by pioneer researchers and, initially, it was located in northern Iraq and Syria (Mallowan, 1933, pp.127-171). Recent work, mainly in eastern Syria, has reinforced the idea of a homogeneous Ninevite 5 horizon in which several successive temporal phases are recognized based on the definition of variations in the systems and motifs of pottery decoration (Schwartz 1987, p.53. Rova 1988, 2003, Roaf 2000, pp. 434–439). These studies contributed to the definition of a somewhat stable relative chronology framework in the first half of the 3rd millennium (c 3000-2500 Cal BC), in which

shorter and more specific sub-phases were characterized by the pottery analysis (Rova, 2013, p. 107-118 and Grossman 2014.p.83).

Ninevite 5 archaeological remains at Gird Lashkir

Gird Lashkir was a non-excavated archaeological site which was incorporated in 1976 into the Iraqi Atlas of archaeological sites and is currently protected and managed by the General Directorate of Antiquities of Kurdistan. The ongoing excavation and study began in 2015 and is yielding important results¹. Among them, we must emphasize the definition of a long sequence of chronological occupations and the good conservation of the architectonic remains that help define successive occupation levels. It should also be noted that a large number of archaeological remains consisting of mainly pottery (pots, jugs, jars and large jars), metal, lithic objects, animal bones and botanical remains have been recovered. Studies and in-depth analyses are currently underway.

Recent archaeological studies confirm that Gird Lashkir was a small site with a long sequence of human occupation. The oldest occupations documented correspond to the Middle Uruk Period, probably dated to the fourth millennium BC. They have been documented in one sector located in the lower part of the tell and at a very high depth in relation to the current surface, which will prevent extensive search in the future. After this phase, we find a large occupation corresponding to the third millennium, whose best known part is that of sector 3, located in the southern part of the site (Fig. 2). In this sector, consisting of a total area of 134 m², a series of archaeological levels dating from the first part of the third millennium and ascribed to the Ninevite 5 horizon were identified. Specifically, we can highlight a large domestic building, of which the best-preserved part is a patio, probably without a roof, which could correspond to an artisan zone. It is surrounded by small rooms constructed by well-preserved brick walls.



Figure 2. Map of Gird Lashkir with the location of each sector. (SAPPO-UAB).

Finally, in the upper part of the tell and located in different areas of excavation, different levels of occupation are emerging from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

In sector 3, which is the case for this study, the levels are defined by architectonic remains associated with occupation layers providing a good set of archaeological

¹ Molist *et al.* 2018, Gómez *et al.* 2018.pp. 331-345.

remains (ceramics, bone remains, etc.). In more detail, the sequence of this part of the tell delivers a succession of construction floors, well defined in their composition, with limits formed by brick walls, small rooms or dwellings, although these are less well preserved (Figure 3).



Figure 3. General view from sector 3 with the Ninevite 5 sequence (SAPPO-UAB).

These are constructed floors elaborated with a basement of small pebbles around 10 cm thick, and an upper layer of soil that defines the floor itself properly. Domestic structures can be associated with these floors due to the presence of post holes, jars placed directly on the ground and combustion structures. Recent excavations have evidenced the superposition of these built floors and the different domestic structures associated. Amongst these domestic structures, we must emphasize the combustion structures, which can be defined as built flat fireplaces. They are very conspicuous with many traces of rubefaction and combustion indicators (ashes, charcoal, etc.), or flat, arranged in the form of a thin layer or lens, or by filling small depressions or pits. Finally, the pits are also structures associated with these soils. They are dug on the ground and most of them do not present any particular development or further construction. Their shape is variable, usually irregular and the refilling can be characterized by layers of variable sediment nature.

Recovery context

The nature of the recovery contexts falls into two types of principal deposits. Those that came from the refurbishment of negative structures, mainly pits, and those that came from levels of pavement and floor preparation.

In all cases, singular objects are accompanied by other materials (pottery sherds, faunal remains and few lithic remains). Two architectonic levels where these materials are concentrated have been isolated. At the upper level, a pit (str. 2016/4) with two refilling levels has been recovered. The upper one contained a mold, grinding stones, pottery and

one zoomorphic figurine, and a second one (Locus 29.5) contained 4 zoomorphic figurines with an unequal preservation status. This last one has been interpreted as a courtyard related to a domestic space but with an important activity area related to artisanal practices. (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Upper architectonic phase with singular objects str. 2016/4 (SAPPO-UAB).

The lower level has yielded a second architectonic phase related to an open space formed by a pavement with a pebble preparation, in which one zoomorphic figurine was recovered, and a refilled pit containing a layer with three more pieces of figurines (62.4). In this case, the stratigraphic context has been interpreted as an open space where various activities of an artisan type might have taken place. This is emphasized by a room unit presenting of two well preserved kilns. (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Lower architectonic phase with singular objects str. 2018/34 (SAPPO-UAB).

The proximity of the location between both pits can be considered “singular” in spite of the stratigraphic gap between them. The relevance of detecting this type of structures in a socialized open area should also be noted.

Objects, figurines and description.

The presences of symbolic objects, particularly figurines which are very often naturalistic representations or are inspired by everyday life, are well known in the Middle East. They have a large presence as they are documented since the beginning of the Neolithic, the Chalcolithic period and their number increases significantly during the beginning of the Bronze Age. The assemblage on which we focus our attention here is, in the first place, a set of 11 ceramic figurines located together but in an unordered and not well arranged position.

Specifically, there are 5 figures that are preserved almost in their entirety and 4 in which only the torso or the front or back extremities are conserved. In the first excavation campaign, a torso fragment (TL 2015 S3 Sup-1) from the surface levels of sector 3 which had the appearance of a four-legged animal could be identified. Then, in the 2016 campaign, a total of 6 figurines were recovered. One of them (TL 2016 S3 L.29.1-1), preserved in its entirety, was located on the surface of a constructed floor (L. 29.1) and was identified as a bovid. On the other hand, the 5 remaining figurines that appeared throughout the 2016 campaign in filling contexts (L. 29.3 and L. 29.5) of a single negative structure, str. 2016/4, which has been described previously. Regarding figurine TL 2016 S3 L.29.3-1, it preserves the entire torso, part of the extremities and the neck, thus making it difficult to assign it to the specific type of animal, although these needs to be a quadruped. Two of the four remaining figures ascribed to level L.29.5 conserved more than 75% of its body while the two others were only partially preserved. During the 2018 campaign and at lower levels, although always in Sector 3 and in a similar position to the 2016/4 structure, it was possible to recover a total of 4 more figurines, 3 of them in the filling levels (L. 62.4) of structure 2018/34. These belonged to a torso (TL 2018 S3 62.4-3) and limbs (TL 2018 S3 62.4-2) of quadrupeds as well as a well preserved rectangular shaped vehicle (TL 2018 S3 62.4-1). The last one appeared related to a constructed floor (2017/24) which has been identified as a horse (TL 2018 S3 2017 / 24-1). Therefore, a total set of 11 figurines has been recovered, all of them related to foundational contexts of buildings.

Regarding the raw material used, these would be fired clay containing a small mineral temper. The outer surface is polished and, in one of the cases, traces of digital imprints belonging to the last stages of manufacture could be appreciated.

Among all these figurines, three of them (TL 2016-S.3 L.29.1-1, TL 2016-S.3 L.29.5 coord.2505-1, TL 2016-S .3 L.29.5-3) exhibited an almost complete state of preservation (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Zoomorphic figurines recovered at Sector 3. (SAPPO-UAB).

In all three cases their clearly representation of bovids, heads with horns, left no doubt about their animal filiation. In all three cases, the body was elongated, usually, rounded and well-proportioned regarding the head and the legs. These were more refined towards the lower part. In general, the elaboration is dominated by schematism and there is almost no anatomical detail. It may be emphasized, however, that the presence of small details may be indicative of certain anatomical parts. These include two small buttons on the face of the figurine that constitute the eyes. They are well arranged and especially well-proportioned in relation to the shape of the face, which allows a very balanced frontal vision. In the same figure but in the posterior part, we find a small protuberance which clearly represents the tail in a position slightly inclined to the left. Incomplete or less well preserved figures due to erosion or the absence of a part, normally the legs and the head have morphological and aesthetic characteristics very close to the ones described which make it possible to group them in the same type of objects and in the same set of productions.

The finding of the figure (TL 2018 S3 2017/24) which kept the head and body while the legs are not preserved is worth highlighting. The head, in its frontal part, has an elongated shape, which represents a snout, and in the upper part, two small extensions that can be interpreted as the ears. In the upper part of the head and overflowing on the upper part of the body, we find the indication of a mane, represented by a long strip of clay, very simple, which covers almost the entire part of the body. The sum of all these elements allows us to propose that it is a representation of a horse (TL 2018 S3-2017 / 24-1) (Figure 7). In addition, a double perforation, one in the nostril and the other on the neck should be noted. These would be related to possible supplements made of perishable materials (ropes, etc.).



Figure 7. Horse figurine in the preparation of a pebble floor str. 2017/24 (SAPPO-UAB).

The model vehicle (TL 2018 S3-2018 / 34-1) is also very clear because the essential components are well marked, and they are well preserved (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Model vehicle recovered in the refilling of pit str.2018/34. (SAPPO-UAB).

It is a rectangular shaped vehicle with an upper frontal part in the front, in which there is a double X-shaped incision. In the lower part, perforations are found where the axis of the wheels would be fixed. The body is rectangular and presents a slightly hollow inner part which would suggest the location of the "load". No other details or aesthetic element are indicated. Moreover, there is no evidence of the wheels in these level or sector of the excavation. This model vehicle can be included in the typological group of "Four-wheeled box body" in Mattia Raccidi studies about the representations discovered at Tell Arbid (Syria). The decoration is thus similar, with X-shaped incised lines and a central perforation (Raccidi 2012, p. 609-610, Raccidi, 2013, p. 183, Pruß 2018, p. 183). This would be a very common type in the Early Dynastic III period.

Discussion

The presence and distribution of animal figurines has been considered in numerous publications and monographs of archaeological sites in the third millennium, although its spatial distribution and the specificities of its deposit are not always underlined. The presence of animal figurines is normally indicated and described in the "small finds" category, as they are anthropomorphic figures and vehicles (chariot), especially during the third millennium. In this period, the major concentration of published figures comes from the Middle Euphrates: Ebla, Mozan, as well as Tuqan, Halawa, Mari, Chuera, Chagar Bazar, Barri, among others, and closer to Lashkir, the site of Tepe Gawra (Speiser, 1935). It is a phenomenon considered contemporary with the development of figurative representations and written sources.

Regarding the context, the similarity with the structure *A2004* of Tell Brak, ascribed to Ninevite 5 horizon, must be emphasized. There, a set of symbolic and administrative items such as figurines or seals were recovered. The association of this kind of artefacts appears in other Early Bronze Age sites in Mesopotamia like Abu Salabikh, Jemdet Nasr (4C88) or Tell Fara (Id/Ie).

As recently reported by Peyronel and Pruß (Peyronel, Pruß, 2018, pp.85-94), this type of material appears, often fragmented and in a secondary position, refilling pits, on streets and in the open air areas, with the exception of the level of destruction at the Royal Palace G of Ebla (Peyronel, 2008, p.800). In addition, they highlight the great variability documented in equine representations or more generally in animal representations. However, equines are often more carefully elaborated to indicate the attribution to its species or the main attributes.

Final remarks and contributions.

The parallels on zoomorphic figurines and model vehicle are abundant but scattered in the Upper Mesopotamia since the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC, as already noted by Childe in 1954 (Childe, 1954, pp.1-17). The most recognized objects are the quadruped figurines standardly produced: either bovids, cattle, horses. It should be noted that horse representations appear a little later, documented c.2500 cal BC, and become more numerous around 2000 cal BC.

Highlighting the characteristics of the taxonomically represented species appears as a trait that becomes widespread. A common debate is the representation of domesticated animals versus wild animals, as well as the presence of figurines with harnesses, wheeled animals, animals with packages, robust and muscular animals, etc.

Another aspect is the high homogeneity of the techniques and production traits regarding animal and chariot figurines. This is the case of Lashkir, where the vehicle model looks like other frequent models in Khabur, Gawra and Assur, and the X-shaped decoration as well, which appears too in tell Brak (Oates, 2001, p.282). Whether a specialized workshop existed or the standardization of the traits represented can be evaluated is a subject to be discussed after the acquisition of further data such as petrographic studies, shaping techniques, etc. Right now we can assume that there is a strong uniformity by type and by well identified ornaments in Upper Mesopotamia.

The figurative objects of Gird Lashkir appear as a new example of the singularity of the deposits of symbolic material in the pseudo-peripheral regions and in the satellite sites.

This fact stands out from the domestic and religious sphere to move into the sphere of craftsmanship, as well as reinforces the presence of other singular elements such as moulds to produce metallic tools, usually absent in this type of context.

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Figures captation

Figure 1. Map showing the location of the site. (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 2. Map of Gird Lashkir with the location of each sector. (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 3. General view from sector 3 with the Ninevite 5 sequence (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 4. Upper architectonic phase with singular objects str. 2016/4 (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 5. Lower architectonic phase with singular objects str. 2018/34 (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 6. Zoomorphic figurines recovered at Sector 3. (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 7. Horse figurine in the preparation of a pebble floor str. 2017/24 (SAPPO-UAB).

Figure 8. Model vehicle recovered in the refilling of pit str.2018/34. (SAPPO-UAB).