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ZAGROS STUDIES

Proceedings of the NINO Jubilee Conference and Other Research on the Zagros Region

edited by

J. Eidem



NEDERLANDS INSTITUUT VOOR HET NABIJE OOSTEN
LEIDEN

PEETERS
LEUVEN

2020

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A LION-THRONED TOWER FROM TELL BASMUSIAN

DLshad A. Marf and Jesper Eidem¹

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an unpublished terracotta tower discovered at Tell Basmusian during the late 1950's excavation by an Iraqi team, which was supervised by A. al-Tikrity. Two sitting figures on lion-thrones attached to the front top of the tower represent a rare iconography, which makes this tower unique among the several terracotta towers discovered at Tell Basmusian and the adjacent Tell Shemshara on the Rania plain.

INTRODUCTION

In 1956-1958 Iraqi teams conducted three seasons of archaeological salvage excavations at Tell Basmusian on the Rania plain in Iraqi Kurdistan (Fig. 1).² The excavations showed that the site had been inhabited from the sixth millennium until the late second millennium BC, and inhabited again during the Islamic/Medieval periods (see Table 1).



Fig. 1. A view of the excavation, the first season (1956) at Basmusian (after: Abu al-Soof 1970: Pl. VIII 1).

THE TERRACOTTA TOWER FROM BASMUSIAN

In the Cultural Museum of Erbil a number of terracotta towers and censers are exhibited in a collection from the Dukan Lake project, from the sites of Shemshara and Basmusian.³ Among them are five complete and incom-

¹ D. Marf (Archaeology Department, College of Humanities, Sulaimani University) identified, studied, and recorded the object studied here, and authored a first draft of the paper. Subsequent discussions with J. Eidem (Netherlands Institute for the Near East) led to this joint presentation, which must still be considered preliminary. Clearly all the "tower stands" from this period and region should be considered in a broad and comprehensive context, but the unusual nature of this particular piece merits prompt reporting. Eidem joins Marf in thanking Mr. Ahmad Jawdat, director of the Cultural Museum of Erbil, and the former director of the museum, Mr. Sangar Abdullah, for permission to study the terracotta tower presented here and other objects in the museum, and the Office of the Relations at the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (Baghdad) for additional information on the object and for permission to publish it.

² The report of the first season was published more than a decade after the excavation (see Abu al-Soof 1970); unfortunately, the reports of the second and third seasons, after more than a half century, remain, for unknown reasons, unpublished!

³ Tell Basmusian is located in the Rania plain near Tell Shemshara, and is considered the biggest tell among the 40 archaeological sites in the plain (Al-Aseel 1956: 142; cf. Eidem, this vol.), its highest point was 23 m, and the diameter of its base was more than 1500 m before the excavations. On the northwestern slope was a small settlement older than the high tell of Basmusian (Abu al-Soof 1970: 7). The salvage excavations at Basmusian had been started when the Dukan dam was constructed in the southeastern edge of the Rania plain on the Lower Zab River in 1954. The first season of excavation at Basmusian proceeded from 10th July to 11th October 1956. In this season four levels of archaeological remains were revealed (Abu al-Soof 1970: 65ff). Below the upper Level I of Medieval date was a Level II, possibly of Middle Assyrian date (Læssøe 1959; cf. Eidem 2011). Level III featured the Old Babylonian "Temple I", and Level IV an earlier version, "Temple II". A sounding below this level reached an even earlier version. In 1957-8 the second and third seasons, directed by A. al-Tikrity, reached down to a Level XVI, and according to the excavators these levels represent the Samarra, Halaf, Ubaid, Uruk periods, and the entire 3rd millennium BC (Abu al-Soof 1970). For the upper levels it is of interest that Abu al-Soof wrote: "the upper western slope of the site in the first two levels was

Level	Objects, architecture	Period
Levels I-II	An Ilkhanid arched tomb A great wall made with baked brick surrounded the western upper slope of Levels I-II Ceramics	– The Ilkhanid period (13-14 th century AD) – Abbasid period, from 8 th -9 th century AD
Levels II-III	Ceramics Temple I All the towers were discovered in level III, on the floor of Temple I	– Early to late 2 nd millennium BC
Level IV	Some fragments of Middle Assyrian tablets in a pit south of the Temple II Habur Ware	– Probably in pit cut by the inhabitants of levels II-III – Second half of the 2 nd millennium BC – First half of the 2 nd millennium BC
Level V	Buildings	– Early 2 nd millennium BC
Levels VI-XVI	Ceramics, architecture	– 3 rd millennium BC, Uruk Period, Halaf/Samarra Periods

Table 1. Stratigraphy of Tell Basmusian (table by the author based on the report in Abu al-Soof 1970).

plete terracotta towers, three of them are fragmentary, one is complete and the last one, which we discuss in this article, was discovered in fragments at Tell Basmusian in the so-called “district of the temples”, but fortunately it has been restored. It is not much different from the other towers from Shemshara and Basmusian, but has specific details which is not attested in the other towers. The Cultural Museum of Erbil holds no records with details about the object and its discovery, but some information has kindly been supplied by the Directorate-General in Baghdad.⁴

surrounded with a great wall made with baked bricks similar to the supporting wall which surrounds the citadel of Erbil.” (A. al-Soof 1970: 8). On the now heavily eroded high part of Basmusian are multiple remains of “walls” and “features” of baked bricks, and on the “beaches” of the site are thousands of baked bricks/fragments (cf. Eidem, this vol.). Only further investigations may reveal the true nature and date of the original system(s) for these features, but they must represent monumental reshaping(s) of the mound.

⁴ During the unrest of the Gulf Wars, most of the records and the data in some of the museums of Iraq had been damaged when these museums were looted, and the Erbil museum was also among the museums which were partly looted. Fortunately some objects still bear Iraq Museum numbers (this both in Erbil and other Iraqi museums, because the Iraq Museum later transferred objects to the new museums. Thus the tower presented here bears the IM number (IM.61034), and the code of the excavation (88-2 BSN in Arabic letters), which refers to the BaSmusiaN excavations, probably to the 2nd season, object number 88. The original object card, kindly supplied by the Directorate in Baghdad, confirms this, and adds information on the context: “in fill layer ca. 25 cm below the surface of level IV in square E”. Unfortunately a “square E” cannot be located with the information presently available.

The tower was found in fragments, the left horn and three ribs of the terracotta animal were missing, but it has been restored in the Iraq museum lab, except a small part on the top roof of the tower, and the heads of two human figures, unfortunately lost in antiquity. The tower was made in reddish well-baked clay, similar to the other stands from the Rania plain (Shemshara and Basmusian) (see Fig. 2-7).⁵

The object is shaped like a tower, placed on the back of an animal, presumably a wild goat⁶ with rather short legs. Its length is 45 cm, its height 35 cm, its width from 10 to 15 cm, and its thickness 2 cm. The goat has a tall and thick neck, also its horns are tall and thick, bending up backwards to touch the tower, and bent down shortly in front of the corners of the tower. The horn has more than six notches.⁷ The tower has two main rectangular windows, and more than 30 small circular holes from the left, right and the back sides of the tower. On the left side of the tower a bird with its nest is attached at a point close to the roof where the left horn of the goat touches the tower beside it, the base of another nest can be seen on the same side and on the opposite side (see Fig. 2). The top roof of

⁵ For details about the other towers see Eidem 2011; Abu al-Soof 1970: 65ff, Pl. XIII a-b.

⁶ These types of goats still live wild in the mountains surrounding the Rania plain.

⁷ Notches may refer to the age of the animal, each notch representing a year, so that it is six years old or more.

the tower is missing, but forms the base of a tube, like those present in other Rania Plain towers.

The front part of the roof is partly preserved, and above the point where the animal horns touch the tower two seated human figures have been attached, their heads are missing, but their arms are grasping their knees without separating the arms from their bodies (see Fig. 3-6). The figures are sitting on some kind of seat supported by animals, the animal on the left side is broken, so that we cannot identify it, but the one on the right is partly preserved, and here we see the lower part of the front claws and paws probably of a lion. The lion was one of the known figures in the art of Basmusian, for instance the archaeological excavation during the first season revealed two broken fragments; each one shows a lion claw with its paw.⁸ This evidence shows that there were real terracotta statues of lions in Basmusian (see Fig. 4).

DETAILS AND PARALLELS

The shape, style and size of the terracotta tower and the animal supporting it are generally similar to the other terracotta towers discovered in both Basmusian and Shemshara.⁹ Those from Shemshara and Basmusian found in the temples may represent towers on public buildings and were perhaps presented by the rulers to the temple, showing the loyalty of the citadel and the rulers of the castle to the gods of these temples, in return for which the deities gave them protection and blessings. From Ashur similar towers from the Late Bronze Age have been discovered, but of simpler design.¹⁰ We note also that in Nuzi simple terracotta towers were made during the Mittani period.¹¹

THE HUMAN FIGURES

The attached human figures on the front roof top of the tower are not paralleled on the other towers discovered in the Rania Plain, and they remain rather enigmatic. Unfortunately the whole top part of the tower is badly fragmented, and a reliable reconstruction not possible. It is unclear whether, for instance, the two seated figures are



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

flanking a central feature, since this portion of the object is damaged and parts perhaps missing. The two figures are apparently naked except a "belt" around the waist, represented by the two incised lines. As such they resemble the typical "hero" wrestlers known from numerous examples of early Mesopotamian iconography. Like attached humanoid figures on other "architectural models" they are probably not specific divine figures.¹²

⁸ Abu al-Soof 1970: 81, Pl. XV-VI.

⁹ For further details about these towers see, see Eidem 2011; Abu al-Soof 1970; Muller 2002; Marf 2016: 333.

¹⁰ Muller 2002, vol. II: figs. 2-13.

¹¹ Starr 1937: pl. 61b; pl. 113 a, b1, 2,3.

¹² Muller 2002, vol. I: 166f.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 7.

THE HOLES AND THE ATTACHED BIRDS

There are some parallels to the holes and the birds' nests on terracotta towers from the Ancient Near East, for instance the architectural models discovered in the Archaic Ishtar Temple, Level G, which dates back to the Akkadian period.¹³ A good parallel to these features of the Basmusian tower is a Late Bronze Age model discovered in Syria, with similar attached birds and holes.¹⁴ Birds nesting on walls of towered buildings with multiple round holes certainly tempt the idea that such models include representation of

ancient dove-cots.¹⁵ In fact the general shape of several terracotta towers with their inner space and funnel tube tops are clearly reminiscent of pre-modern dove-cots in the Middle East, like numerous examples in Iran.¹⁶ It must be admitted, however, that ancient Mesopotamian texts provide little evidence for keeping doves or similar birds.¹⁷ The well-known association of the goddess Ishtar with birds may also be recalled. From Middle Bronze Age Ebla in Syria, for instance, we have a group of cult vessels with applied rows of birds, found in Area P, the "Sacred Area of Ishtar".¹⁸

¹³ Muller 2002: figs. 2-7. On these examples one notes also attached snakes. Pre-modern Iranian pigeon towers often have structural features aimed at blocking entry of snakes.

¹⁴ Muller 2002, vol. II: 173. There is also an example of a terracotta tower topped by lions, their tails being held by two 'heroes', see Muller 2002, vol. II: fig. 174, see also fig. 3. Also, for the holes on a tower from Assur, see Muller 2002, vol. II: fig. 7.

¹⁵ For further details about birds and nests attached to terracotta towers in Mesopotamia and Syria see, Muller 2002, vol. I: 168-170.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Amirkhani, Okhovat, Zamani 2010.

¹⁷ Cf. however the references to feeding doves in Ur III and OB texts, CAD S, 379.

¹⁸ Pinnock 2000.

In the end, however, we must conclude that the still small collection of incense burners in the shape of “towers”, supported by animals, is unique to the Dukan area, and here a rather exotic element in a material culture otherwise predominantly Mesopotamian. No doubt future excavations in northeastern Iraq/northwestern Iran will supply more examples and help us understand this phenomenon in proper perspective.

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