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## Men, Animals and Pots. A few Thoughts about a Narrative Motive on Syrian Bronze Age Vessels

Juliette Mas

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Mesopotamian Bronze Age decorated pottery is unusual. Beyond very specific decorated styles, such as Scarlet Ware, Ninevite 5, Smearred Washed Ware and Khabur Ware, examples of decorated pots are very few. Furthermore, decorated pots usually present a very standardized decorative repertoire of geometrical patterns. Nevertheless, there are a few examples of complex and figurative motives. Attention will be focused here on four Bronze Age pots coming from three different Upper Mesopotamian sites. These pots present narrative scenes combining vegetal, animal, and human figures.

The first pot is a stemmed dish, which was discovered at Terqa in a Phase III grave dated to the Early Bronze Age III period (Rouault and al-Showan 2015: 385-388; Poli 2015: 401-402). The so-called stemmed dishes are quite common types of Central Mesopotamian assemblages dating to the mid-3rd millennium BC (Moon 1982). The stemmed dishes are notably attested at Abu Salabikh, Kish, Uruk and Khafajah.<sup>1</sup> The typical Central Mesopotamian variant is also well attested further north at Mari and Terqa.<sup>2</sup> As we can see with TQ27 3170 (Figure 1), the stemmed dishes are usually in Standard Ware, and are mineral-tempered with a smoothed external surface. These dishes are often fenestrated and present nail and geometrical incised patterns. TQ27 3170 presents two rectangular fenestrations facing each other on the median part of the pedestal, and four smaller circular ones on the lowest part of the base. The dish is decorated with three rows of nail incisions and two rows of incised triangles. Additionally, TQ27 3170 offers a narrative scene with a human figure, vegetal motives and animals among which we can distinguish ostriches and several species of *caprinae*.<sup>3</sup> This decorative scene makes this stemmed dish unique. In fact, the stemmed dishes belonging to the Central Mesopotamian variant, dated to the mid-3rd millennium, exclusively present geometrical patterns, with the exception of an example from an Abu Salabikh grave, where an animal is also represented (Moon 1987: 53).

<sup>1</sup> Compare Moon 1987: 46-56; Mackay 1925: Pl. XII; Finkbeiner 1985: Abb. 15; Delougaz 1952: Pl. 81, 88 and 174.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of stemmed dishes from Mari, see Lebeau 1985: Pl. IX and VI; Jean Marie 1999: Pl. 25-26, 142 and 223; Mathot 2015: Pl. III. The final publication regarding the 3rd millennium pottery from Terqa is currently in preparation.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the animals represented, see Rouault and al-Showan 2015: 385-388; Poli 2015: 401-402; Masetti-Rouault and Rouault 2016: 270-274.

The second pot is a small jar coming from Tell Beydar. It was found on a Phase III floor dating to the Early Bronze Age III period (EJZ 3b) in Area M (Gavagnin and Mas, *forthcoming*). This pot (Bey 06 M 13312-C-65, Figure 2) belongs to a lime tempered Standard Ware fabric. Its complete shape is unknown, as the rim is not preserved. This jar is decorated with a row of incised triangles and a narrative scene on its shoulder. This scene represents *caprinae* eating from a tree, and also a human figure. Unfortunately, the state of preservation of the jar does not allow us to fully reconstruct the scene represented.

The third pot is a small jar, also coming from Tell Beydar, but from a Phase IV floor in Area M. This jar (Bey 08 M 13315-C-16, Figure 3) is later than the two pots previously mentioned. It is dated to the Early Bronze Age IVa period (EJZ 4a; Gavagnin and Mas, *forthcoming*). This small Standard Ware jar is mineral tempered, and its shape is basic and typical of the Akkadian pottery assemblages of the Jezirah.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this jar presents a composite decoration, which is, unlike its shape, fairly unusual. The upper part of the body is decorated with applied snakes with dots, which is a well-known pattern found on pottery of the second part of the 3rd millennium BC, and especially during the Akkadian period (see Valentini 2013). On this jar, the applied snakes are associated with a row of incised motives showing some animals, a tree and a human figure. Even though not all of the animals are easily recognizable, we are able to distinguish among them two birds (ostriches?), a scorpion and a gazelle (?), which is being hunted or driven with a kind of lasso by the man represented.

Finally, the fourth pot was discovered in a Middle Bronze Age II grave at Chagar Bazar (Tunca and Mas *in press*). This Khabur Ware pot (CB 5014, Figure 4) belongs to the so-called 'grain measures' category. The grain measures are very standardized open pots, which were discovered in large quantities in Upper Mesopotamian Middle Bronze Age II and Late Bronze Age levels, notably at Chagar Bazar (McMahon and Frane 2009: 185, Pl. 47; Tunca and Mas *in press*), Tell Brak (Oates, Oates and McDonald 2011: Fig. 191), Tell Barri (Pecorella 1998: Fig. 35) and Tell al-Rimah (Postgate, Oates and Oates 1997: Pl. 77-78). These pots usually belong to the decorated Khabur Ware and often present geometrical painted decorations. We can also observe a few examples of painted birds on some grain measures coming from Tell Brak. Nevertheless, the narrative scene painted on the Chagar Bazar pot is unique. It represents several animals: a fox (?), birds (ostriches?) and gazelles (?). We can see that one of the *caprinae* is suckling its offspring. The other two are feeding themselves from a tree, while a man with an assegai is hunting one of them.

The motive of the four pots cited above reveals an important number of common points in the figures represented. We can notably observe the omnipresence of the *caprinae* – probably gazelles, according to the shape of their horns. Nevertheless, we can also observe some important differences in the scenes represented. Indeed,

<sup>4</sup>However this shape seems to be more largely attested during the EJZ 3b period (Rova 2011: 73, type 64).

although the *caprinae* are feeding themselves from a tree on three of the pots (Figures nos. 1, 2 and 4; probably the same specie of tree as the trees are represented in the same way on the four pots), they are facing each other on only two of the three: the EB III jar from Tell Beydar and the Middle Bronze Age grain measure from Chagar Bazar (Figures nos. 2 and 4). Moreover, although the probable gazelles, ostriches and humans are always represented, the other figures vary according to the pots. Finally, the human figure is depicted as hunting the *caprinae* on only two of the four vessels.<sup>5</sup>

Two of the pots (TQ27 3170, Figure 1 and CB 5014, Figure 4) come from a funerary context. The stemmed dishes are usually discovered in graves,<sup>6</sup> but that is not the case for the grain measures.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we know that the pottery found in tombs as offering goods generally represent shapes also discovered in other kinds of context, and that they were not specifically made to furnish burials. The two other pots cited (Bey 06 M 13312-C-65, Figure 2 and Bey 08 M 13315-C-16, Figure 3) were found on floors. In fact, it does not seem that the narrative scene discussed here is related to a specific practice. The fact that almost the same scene is represented on pots dating from the EB III period to the MB II, suggests that this decoration was applied on pots not linked to a specific activity. Furthermore, this scene has been found to decorate very distinct types of pottery, and it is thus probably related to different kinds of use. Nevertheless, these pots were obviously not vessels of daily use, but rather were probably linked to a form of private worship. As pointed out by Masetti-Rouault and Rouault concerning stemmed dish TQ 27 3170 (Masetti-Rouault and Rouault 2016), these scenes may refer to classical mythological Mesopotamian hymns. Whether or not this was the case, these pots clearly reveal the desire of the artists and/or potters who made them to represent their environment and men activities in as much detail as possible. The persistence of this narrative motive exposes the existence of long lasting iconographic traditions, not only in 'major art', such as sculpture or glyptic, but also on Standard Ware pottery vessels.

<sup>5</sup> A narrative hunting scene also decorates a jar from the Euphrates, which dates to the Early Bronze Age. Nevertheless, the exact provenience of that jar is unknown and its iconography differs somewhat from the four examples mentioned. It is for these reasons that we decided not to include the jar in the discussion. For more details on this jar, see Böhme 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this was the case for stemmed dishes discovered at Kish, Khafajah and Abu Salabikh (Moon 1987; Mackay 1925; Delougaz 1952).

<sup>7</sup> Even though, the grain measures often occur in burials, they are also often discovered in other kinds of context (Tunca and Mas, *in press*).

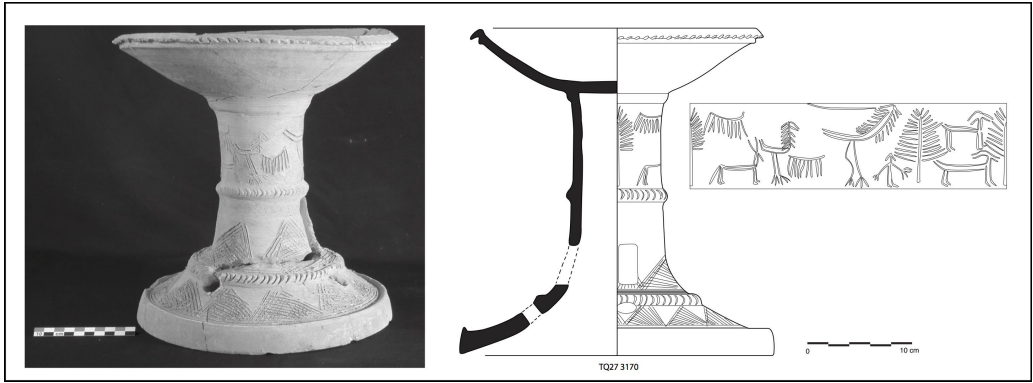


Figure 1: Stemmed dish TQ27 3170 from Terqa, © Terqa Archaeological Mission

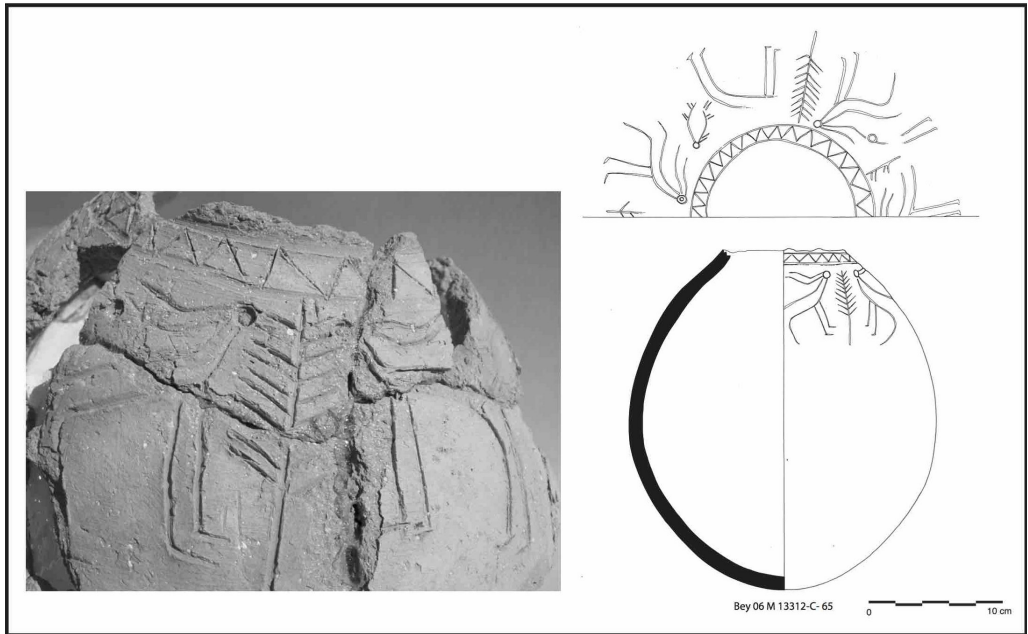


Figure 2: Small jar Bey 06 M 13312-C-65 from Tell Beydar, after Gavagnin and Mas, *forthcoming*.



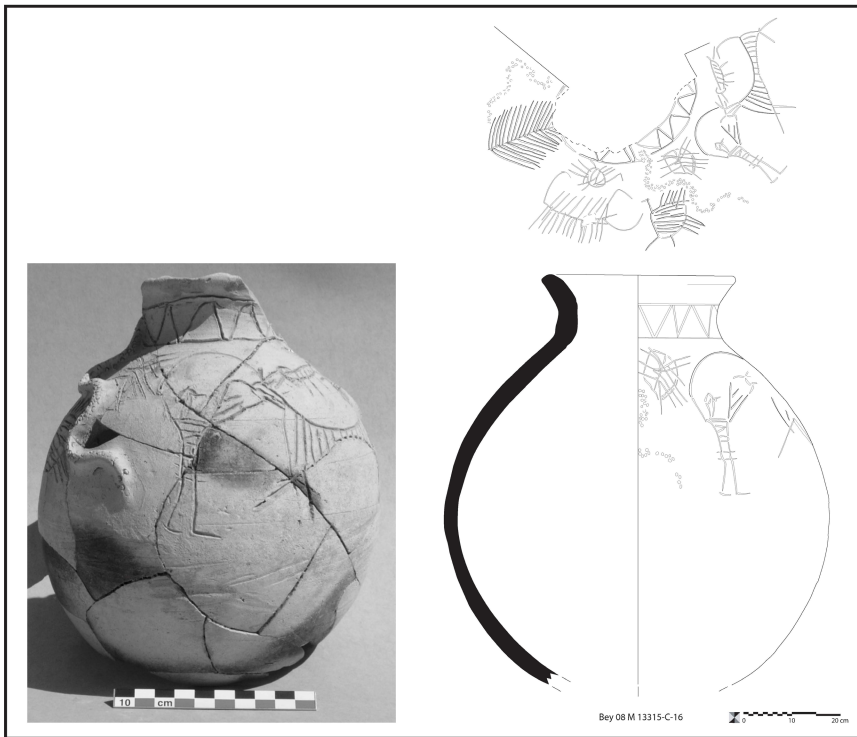


Figure 3: Small jar Bey 08 M 13315-C-16 from Tell Beydar, after Gavagnin and Mas, forthcoming.

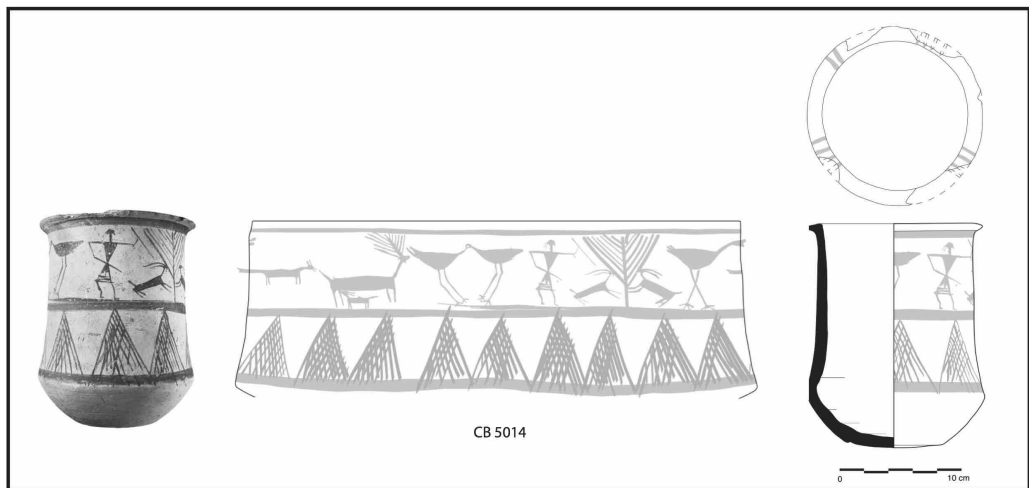


Figure 4: Grain measure CB 5140 from Chagar Bazar, after Tunca and Mas, *in press*.

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