

PERFUME, WOMEN AND THE UNDERWORLD IN URKESH
EXPLORING FEMALE ROLES THROUGH AROMATIC SUBSTANCES
IN THE BRONZE AGE NEAR EAST

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In northeastern Syria lies the site of Tell Mozan, the ancient Hurrian capital known as Urkesh. The site had a royal palace, a temple with a large temple terrace, and an extensive outer city. The remains go back at least to the Late Chalcolithic, but the focus here is on the fourth quarter of the third millennium BC, starting around the time when King Tupkish ruled and his consort Uqnitum at Urkesh. The purpose of this paper is to examine possible evidence for aromatic substances (perfume in the form of oil and ointments), especially in ritual contexts - and in the process of doing so, delve into certain associations with women and female aspects of the data. I begin with an intriguing object of a rare type for the ancient Near East - a small anthropomorphic vessel.

The lady of the Urkesh ābi

In an open area outside the Palace of Tupkish (but established before the palace), a large subterranean stone-lined structure has been discovered (fig. 1), its main period of use being from c.

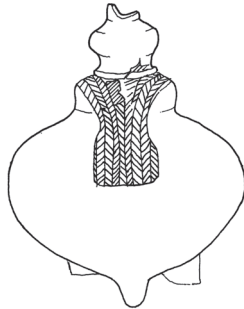
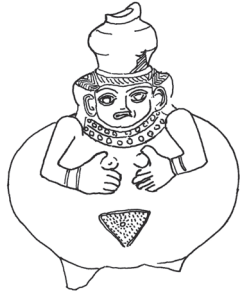
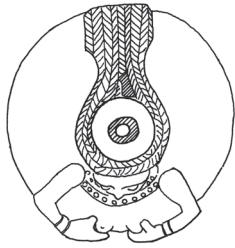


Figure.1 The ābi at Urkesh, with narrow access steps in the foreground.
Photo courtesy of IIMAS

2300 to 2100 BC. The structure is interpreted as an 'ābi' (Kelly-Buccellati 2002, see also Collins 2004) - that is, a place where sacrifices and other rituals took place in order to contact the deities of the underworld. It consists of a lower, circular structure, about 4m in diameter at the top, and a higher, rectangular structure; the whole structure is over 7.5m long. Inside were the remains of slaughtered animals (mostly piglets and puppies, but also sheep, goats, cattle and donkeys - di Martino 2005), along with animal figurines, ceramics, metal objects and flint blades. They were deposited over a long period of time, not in a single, but rather a series of events. The size, placement, construction and finds all support the interpretation of a highly symbolically charged space.

Among the finds from the ābi was also a small ceramic anthropomorphic vessel, about 9cm high and 7cm at the broadest point of the body (figs. 2-4). Its female forms are accentuated with a pubic triangle (with a small dot marking the belly-button

or genitals in the centre of the triangle), breasts and long braids of hair, and the voluptuousness of the female body is emphasised by the round shape of the vessel. The vessel has three feet, but only two are visible from the front, making them look like human legs. Jewellery and/or garments are marked with two lines around the wrists and two rows of lines and dots around the neck.



◀ Figure 2. Drawing of anthropomorphic vessel from the ābi (A12.108). Drawing by Claudia Wettstein

▼ Figure 3. Photo of anthropomorphic vessel from the ābi (A12.108). Photo courtesy of IIMAS



Figure 4. Detail of anthropomorphic vessel from the ābi (A12.108). Photo courtesy of IIMAS

The jewellery and long, carefully pleated hair conveys a special status of the female depicted. Apart from the large belly, other exaggerated physical features are the large hands supporting the breasts, the slightly large ears and the twisted mouth. The shape of the vessel is iconographically reinforced by a small jar being placed on top of the head, acting also as the small opening to the whole vessel.

It is this anthropomorphic vessel that Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati has suggested contained perfumed oil used during rituals taking place in the *ābi* in her publication of the structure (2002: 141). Hittite texts from the last quarter of the second millennium describe a ritual where pits are dug in order to communicate with the deities of the underworld (Hoffner 1967); in an event of the ‘relocation of the black goddess’, a small amount of perfumed oil is offered in several stages of the ritual. For example, the first day starts:

Wenn aber frühmorgens am 2. Tag die Sonne (noch nicht) (am Himmel) steht, dann nehmen sie aus dem Hause des besagten Opferherrn folgendes: 1 Bündel rote Wolle, 1 Bündel blaue Wolle, 1 *kišri* (aus Wolle), 1 Sekel Silber, 1 *gazzar-nul* (-Gewebe), *ein wenig Feinöl*, 3 flache Brote (und) 1 Kanne Wein. Dann schreiben sie zu den Wassern der Entsühnung, um (davon) zu schöpfen, und der Entsühnung Wasser schöpfen sie. Und in den (alten) Tempel der Schwarzen Göttin bringen sie aus dem Tempel der Schwarzen Göttin, der für die Zukunft gebaut (ist), davon der Schwarzen Göttin und stellen es auf das Dach und es bleibt unter den Sternen.

Und an dem Tage, an welchem sie der Entsühnung Wasser nehmen, (ziehen sie) das alte Götterbild mit roter Wolle und *Feinöl* auf 7 Wegen (und) 7 Seitenwegen aus dem Gebirge, von dem Flüsse, vom der Wiese, vom Himmel und von/aus der Erde.

An jenem Tage findet das ‘Ziehen’ statt: sie ziehen es (das Götterbild) in dem Tempel der alten Gottheit hinein und binden den *ulihi* an das Götterbild.

Die Leute der Gottheit nehmen (dazu) aber folgendes:

1 Bündel rote Wolle, 1 Bündel blaue Wolle, 1 *kišri* (aus Wolle), 1 weiße Frauenkopfbedeckung, 1 Schmuckstein, 1 Porphyry (?), 1 Sekel Silber, *ein wenig Feinöl*, 5 flache Brote, 2 *mulati*-Brote von 1/2 Handvoll, 1 kleinen Käse, (und) 1 Kanne Wein, dies (also) nehmen sie für das Opfer des ‘Emporziehens’. -

1 Bündel rote Wolle, 1 Bündel blaue Wolle, 1 Schlinge (? aus) weißer Wolle, 2 *mulati*-Brote von 1/2 Handvoll, 5 flache Brote (und) ein wenig Feinöl; dies aber nehmen sie für das Opfer des *dupšahi*.

(translation by Kronasser 1963: §9-10, with emphasis by the author).

Perfumed oil (‘fine oil’) is here listed as part of other offerings and as playing a role in drawing out the deity.¹ Elsewhere in the text, fine oil is poured out of a specific type of vessel called *tallai* before the deity is addressed (Kronasser 1963: §21.24-31), and the oil is used for purificatory purposes and in the anointing of the wall of the new temple (Kronasser 1963: §30). The small amount required is nearly always emphasised, indicating the use of a small container for the liquid. In one place, the amount is specified as ‘one cattle-horn of fine oil’ (Kronasser 1963: §5.26). Six small ox horns of perfumed oil, belonging to the king and queen, are mentioned in another Hittite text (Hoffner 1995: 110). These references are particularly interesting in light of the fact that

1 The mention of ‘Tree-oil’ (Kronasser 1963: §11.7, §11.11, §25.53, §27.2) is also of interest and may be another type of aromatic oil, considering some of the most common aromatic ingredients appear to have been various types of wood. It is measured in the small amount of half a handful.

the horns of animals were sometimes anointed with perfumed oil (Güterbock 1952: 17 for bulls anointed before battle in a Hittite epic of Hurrian origin, Hoffner 1995: 111-112, for sacrificial goats and rams, Joannès 1993: 264 for oil dispersed for anointment of sheep), and the horned sacrificial animals (sheep, goats and cattle) found in the ābi at Urkesh.

The use of perfumed oil in ritual contexts is also recorded in Old Babylonian times, for example from Zimri-Lim's palace at Mari. It was distributed to the royal family - including for religious ceremonies, to the women of the harem, for burials, for offerings to the deities, used in the temple for anointing statues and part of the temple itself; for festivals, related to the deceased and sent as part of diplomatic gifts as far afield as Dilmun (Joannès 1993: 263-264, Middeke-Conlin 2014: 23-24). In other Hittite texts, we see perfumed oil for the deity, to summon the deity, for the king to anoint himself, and once again an association with funerary rituals (Hoffner 1995: 110-112, Otten 1958: 66-69).

The most palpable manner of identifying the contents of an ancient vessel would be through organic residue analysis. Unfortunately, these methods have so far not received a widespread application in Near Eastern projects.² In Syria, promising research is being carried out on material from the 14th century BC Royal Tomb at Qatna, which has identified the presence of degraded plant wax and resin components in some of the vessels (Evershed et al. 2011), which could come from aromatic oils, but may equally indicate other substances containing such lipid components. Further afield, frankincense has been identified at sites in Egypt (Evershed et al. 1997, Stern et al. 2003), and therebinth resin, a possible ingredient in perfumes, was found in the cargo of the 1300 BC Uluburun shipwreck (Haldane 1993: 352-354). To date, the best results come from Cyprus and Crete. In Middle Minoan IA Crete, several vessels have been found to contain oil of iris, interpreted as an aromatic oil (Tzedakis and Martlew 1999: 44, 50). One vessel also contained components of olive oil, pine resin and possibly carnation and anise (Tzedakis and Martlew 1999: 50, no.12); this vessel has several pierced holes in the bottom, larger but comparable to those on the vessels discussed below from Tuttul. At the site of Pyrgos Mavroraki on Cyprus, a workshop area was destroyed by an earthquake around 1850 BC. The workshop included a 'perfumery', and vessels were found to contain traces of possible aromatic and medicinal ingredients like turpentine, conifer resin, bergamot, myrtle, myrrh, lavender and chamomile, among others (Belgiorno 2006: 93-94, 127-152; Lentini and Scala 2006). It is perhaps no coincidence that the vessels found included one with anthropomorphic handles and one zoomorphic, porcine-shaped (Belgiorno 2006: nos. 29 and 47). Short of being able to detect the content, our best clues to identifying vessels that held aromatic substances are a combination of vessel type and context, texts and iconography.

Perfume in ancient texts

Near Eastern texts provide a surprising level of information concerning the production of perfume, including related vocabulary (for elaborate discussions of the vocabulary associated with perfume and perfume production, see e.g. Hoffner 1995, Middeke-Conlin 2014, and CAD entry 'igulū'). Some of the earliest tablets dealing with the topic are Sumerian Ur III tablets from Umma. These record 'fine oil of grand trees' and 'fine oil of small aromas' (should perhaps read 'of small trees' - Limet 1978: 148). The production is of a relatively small final amount of 13 litres, and the ingredients include cedar, cypress, juniper and myrtle (these four only found in the first type of fine oil). Many other ingredients are as yet untranslated, but some may be suggested: calamus,

² It is also not always possible to get good results due to preservation; so far, analyses on material that could be exported from Mozan has not yielded useful data (Barnard et al. 2011).

apricot, conifer, a kind of spurge, and various unidentified resins. The method of manufacture was by grinding, pressing, macerating (soaking the ingredients in the oil), and finally filtering. Heating, but not boiling may have been used to aid the process (Limet 1978: 153-157).

In the Old Babylonian period at Mari, we find Akkadian transactions of a perfume workshop recorded on tablets in the palace; the workshop itself may well also have been located in the palace (Gates 1988). Here we see again a prominence of cedar, cypress, juniper and myrtle as ingredients, but also calamus and carob tree, various unidentified resins, and possibly also myrrh and styrax (Joannès 1993). The perfume was produced by maceration, leaving the wood/bark (possibly at times powdered versions) to dissolve in the cold oil, and then filtered. The finished product would be distributed in small units. Finally, tablets from 13th century Assur record ingredients which are largely unidentified, but include sesame oil, flowers, myrrh, calamus, cedar and cypress (Ebeling 1950). We here get a very lengthy manufacture of soaking, heating, stirring and filtering (sometimes using cloth rather than a sieve) repeatedly over a number of days, altogether a 'tedious, time-consuming and costly procedure' (Levey 1956: 384). The high value of perfume is also noted by Hoffner in Hittite texts (1995), and by Middeke-Conlin for Old Babylonian texts, although in these less high quality - and therefore less expensive - varieties occur that would have made aromatic products more broadly available (Middeke-Conlin 2014: 23).

Cult vessels and perfume

Anthropomorphic vessels, with either male or female features, are not very common in the Near East during the Bronze Age, and the example from the Urkesh ābi is quite rare. The most directly comparable piece is an unprovenanced juglet published by Badre (1980: 398, no. 45), which has a round body and anthropomorphic head, but no explicit markings of gender, although Badre attributes it to a female group of figurines. From Urkesh, there is a fragment of a vessel which provide further tantalising hints (fig. 5). It was discovered on a pebble floor outside the palace, dated to the time of Taram Agade (late third millennium BC). It consists of the lower half of an anthropomorphic vessel, about 6cm broad and preserved to a height of about 3cm; like the other vessel from Urkesh, it has three feet, which look like two human legs seen from the front, and an incised pubic triangle decorated with dots. At the very bottom of the triangle is a small hole, around 0.2-0.3cm, which would only let a very small stream of liquid pour out.

This piece leads us to two fascinating examples from Tell Bia - ancient Tuttul, tentatively dated to the latest phase of the Early Bronze Age (figs. 6-7, Strommenger et al. 1989: 61-63, Miglus and Strommenger 2002: 99, pls. 119-120, Strommenger and Miglus 2010: 49-50, pl. 45.7-8). They are handmade terracotta vessels in a shape similar to the Urkesh vessel, 9-9.5cm high, and with a very small opening of 0.3cm. They have anthropomorphic features in the shape of a human head and shoulders;

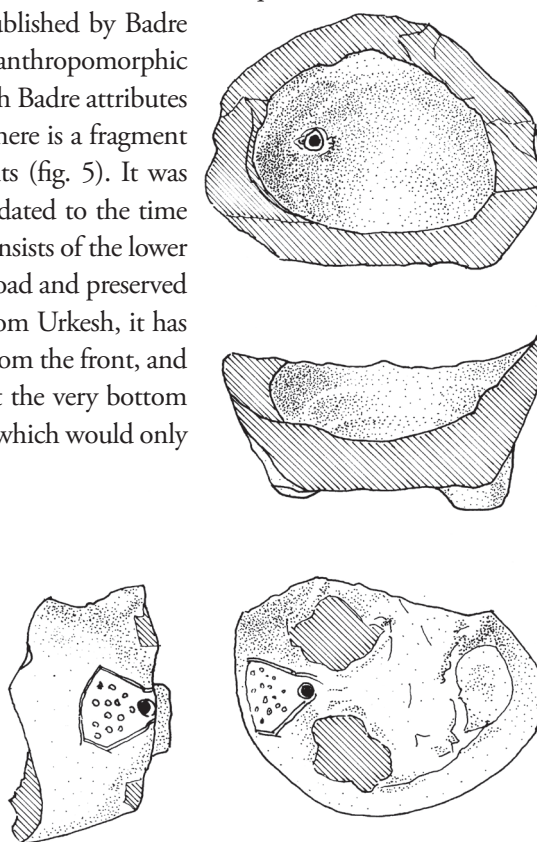


Figure 5. Lower part of an anthropomorphic vessel from Urkesh (A9.91).
Drawing by Claudia Wettstein

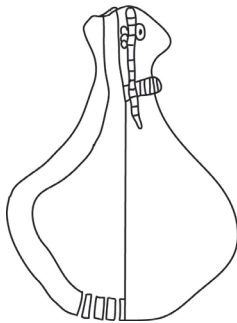


Figure 6. Anthropomorphic vessel from Tuttul (U.295.1).
Drawing by Laerke Recht, after Miglus and Strommenger 2002: pls. 118-119

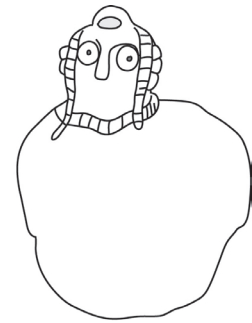
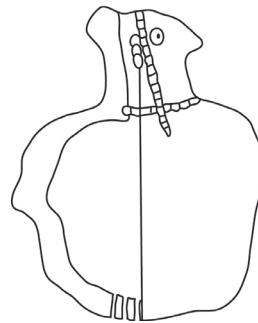
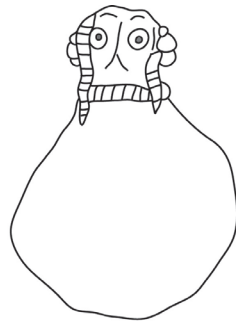


Figure 7. Anthropomorphic vessel from Tuttul (U.295.2).
Drawing by Laerke Recht, after Miglus and Strommenger 2002: pls. 118-119

although they lack the obvious female designations of breasts and the pubic triangle (the body of both vessels is quite eroded), they are associated with a specific type of figurine which is always female and 'breast-holding' (Tuttul type K 2b, Strommenger et al. 1989: 61, Strommenger and Miglus 2010: 15, 49). Unfortunately, the context of these two vessels is not very informative, having been discovered fairly close to the surface - but not far from a kind of basin installation. At the bottom, they both have over a dozen very small holes, 0.1-0.2cm in diameter. Another Syrian example in the British Museum, published by Tubb (1982), is a small juglet with an 'applied' female figure, with two rows of necklaces and hands over the breasts. It also has small holes in the bottom, and a 'primary' opening of only 0.4cm diameter. Tubb dates it to the late Early Bronze Age (c. 2400-2000 BC), but unfortunately, the example is unprovenanced.³ The Urkesh ābi further contained a large fragment of a zoomorphic vessel - the front part of a pig, with a small hole in the mouth where liquid could flow out (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2004: 36-39). The porcine shape of the vessel is consistent with the large amount of sacrificial bones from piglets found in the structure.

In fact, these vessels could be categorised as Type I rhyta (Koehl 2006: 13-22),⁴ with a 'primary', larger, opening placed at the top, and 'secondary' opening(s)⁵ smaller, and in these cases placed at the bottom and in the snout. The small size of both 'primary' opening (not preserved in the Urkesh examples, but can be postulated with some certainty) and the holes at the bottom, makes them inefficient filters for industrial use, and along with the small content that the vessels would be able to contain,⁶ as with the Urkesh example, the liquid they held must certainly have been of great value. Very likely the anthropomorphic vessels discussed here were filled the way suggested by Tubb (1982: 176), and by Koehl for certain types of Aegean rhyta (2006: Type I and II), by immersing the vessel's bottom in a larger holder of the liquid, and when the desired level had been reached, a thumb would be placed on the 'primary' opening at the head of the vessel. The liquid will thus be contained in the vessel until the thumb is removed; this allows careful control of the stream exiting the vessel, for example as part of libations. The immersion has the added effect of slightly filtering - or purifying -

3 Vessels expressing a similar iconographic concept are found in third millennium BC Crete. The style is very different, but they also use the body of the vessel to represent the female body, and have female features such as modelled breasts and pubic triangles (Fowden 1990). Some also carry an extra jug (Fowden 1990: figs. 1 and 4), displaying iconographic reinforcement in line with the Urkesh vessel.

4 For the Near East, Koehl instead suggests using the Akkadian *bibru*, but he argues that this refers to vessels with the secondary opening(s) placed in a higher location, and mainly used for drinking through straws (2013); this would not seem to apply to our much smaller vessels where the secondary opening(s) are at the bottom.

5 Koehl excludes examples from the Aegean with several holes in the bottom from the category of rhyta (2006: 9); the number of holes in themselves do not seem to have a bearing on function, but the small difference in location of the holes in the Tuttul examples (in the actual bottom of the vessel) and the Urkesh one (at the bottom, but in the body of the vessel) would mean a slight difference in the angle of the flow of the liquid or the angle at which the vessel was held.

6 Tubb calculates about 210cc for the BM juglet (1982: 176); the anthropomorphic vessel from Urkesh would have been able to hold a similar amount.



Figure 8. Composite drawing of seal impressions from Urkesh (A14.239, A14c1). Drawing by Kamiran Albek



Figure 9. Detail of seal impression showing libation (A14.239). Photo courtesy of IIMAS

the liquid going into the vessel, something which may have been useful in the case of perfume, where the mixture had to be repeatedly filtered to obtain the highest quality product. Given their closed shape, these vessels focus on a pouring or possibly sprinkling action, i.e. libation, as part of the ritual. We saw that this was mentioned in the Hittite text as one of the ways in which the oil was used, as part of anointing the temple wall for the deity to enter.⁷ Perfumed oil would thus be a very good candidate for the contents of these types of small, closed and highly specialised vessels.

⁷ Libations also occurred using open shapes, as can be seen on seal impressions from Urkesh, where king Ishar-kīnum pours a libation from a small vessel in front of a seated deity (figs. 8-9 - Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2005: 39-40, 43-44), and on one of King Tupkish's own seals from a cup (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995-1996: fig. 4a).

Perfume and healing

Perfume was made not only as a liquid, but also as an ointment or paste (Limet 1978: 151-153, RAI 'Parfüm(rezepte)').⁸ Like the oil version, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the finished mixtures may not simply have had pleasing aromatic effects, but also medicinal properties - in fact, the distinction between perfumery and pharmacy may have been a blurred one (Joannés 1993: 265, Limet 1978: 157. For the word 'aromatics' covering substances used in perfume, medicine, ritual and as a condiment, see Middeke-Conlin 2014). Cypress and juniper are mentioned as part of medical-ritual texts (Ur III: van Dijk and Geller 2003: 21-22, Hittite: Hoffner 1995, Burde 1974: 42-43), and cedar as part of a purification ritual (van Dijk and Geller 2003: 36-38).⁹

In modern scientific studies, the possible properties of myrtle are listed as antiseptic, astringent, expectorant, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antibacterial and antifungal (Charles 2012: 411); of juniper as anti-inflammatory, diuretic, antioxidant, fungicidal, anticholinesterase, antimicrobial, antibacterial (note, however, that this is for the berries and leaves; Charles 2012: 359); of cypress as expectorant, antimicrobial and antioxidant (Teke et al. 2013, Asgary et al. 2013); of cedar as antibacterial, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, antitumor, immunomodulatory, cytotoxic, neuroleptic and antioxidant (Başer and Demirçakmak 1995, Gupta et al. 2011); of calamus as antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, insecticidal and neuroleptic, to name a few (Paithankar et al. 2011); and of sesame as demulcent, emollient, diuretic and laxative (Kapoor 1989: 302). All of these properties may not have been known in ancient times, but the presence of these ingredients in medical texts tells us that at least some were known and mixed into ointments and oils.

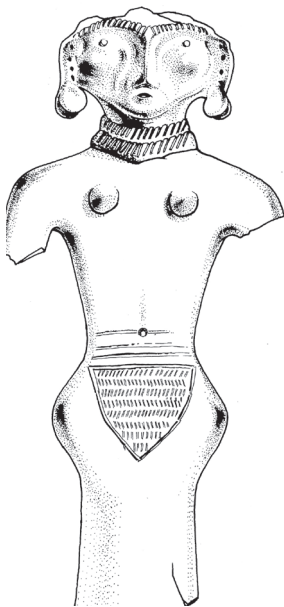


Figure 10. Drawing of female figurine from Urkesh (A12.30). Drawing by Pietro Pozzi

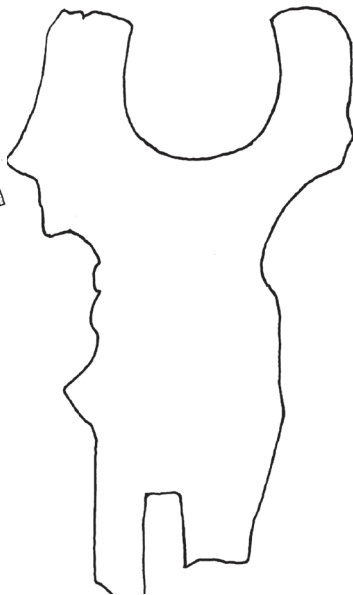


Figure 11. Profile of upper part of female figurine, showing depression in the head (A12.30). Drawing by Claudia Wettstein

One object from Urkesh of a possible cultic nature which may have held a small amount of a very valuable material such as an ointment is a terracotta figurine (figs. 10-13). It came from a pit cut through an outer wall of the service wing of the palace, dated to the last quarter of the third millennium BC. The pit was interpreted as having certain aspects in common with a favissa, where ritual items would be disposed of (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2000: 156). The figurine is preserved to a height of 29cm (larger than usual, found in two pieces - the feet and lower legs are broken off), and has female features in the form of applied breasts and a pubic triangle with an incised pattern. The hips and buttocks have been given extra emphasis, and around the neck are two rows of decoration indicating

⁸ A distinction between oil and 'unguent' is equally recorded in Linear B records (Bushnell 2012: 201-202).

⁹ Myrtle, juniper, cedar and cypress are also mentioned as part of medicinal mixtures in Neo-Babylonian tablets from Sippar, often made into a paste (Heeßel and Farouk 2003).



Figure 12. Photo of female figurine (A12.30).
Photo courtesy of IIMAS

Figure 13. Detail of female figurine showing depression in the head (A12.30).
Photo courtesy of IIMAS

necklaces. The arms have been broken off, but there is no trace of the hands on the body, so they were likely extended out from the body. The mouth is slightly open, and the ears and hair around the front of the head are marked by extended lobes and several small piercings, perhaps for attached jewellery of a different material; an ear ornament is preserved at the bottom of the right ear. Along the back is a counter-weight for the necklaces. In the head is an indentation which creates a hollow from the top, like a miniature bowl, almost with a small lip going all the way around. This hollow would have been able to contain a very small amount of a particularly valuable kind of substance.¹⁰

Female figurines with a hollow or indentation in the head of a similar date have been found at Tuttul (Strommenger and Miglus 2010: e.g. pl. 4.9-12) and Tell Halawa A (Meyer and Pruß 1994: nos. 89, 117, 118), but none of them have the same regularised deep depression as the Urkesh example, and Meyer and Pruß's interpretation of crowns or diadems in these instances (1994: 26) would seem more fitting, but does not explain the Urkesh figurine, since the hollow is much deeper than would be necessary, and extends into the actual head. Although the figurine could be tipped to pour, its shape is more conducive to an action that involves 'scooping out' its content, for example by simply dipping a finger in a paste and applying it where relevant, either on the image of a deity or on an area requiring medicinal treatment. The shape and context of the Urkesh figurine suggests use as part of a ritual akin to the examples described in medical-ritual texts.

10 Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati mention the possibility that the hollow was used as a hold for a head-ornament or wig of a different material (2000: 159). The regularity and depth of the hollow would suggest more than the simple use for an attachment.

Expressions of female: social status, ritual and healers

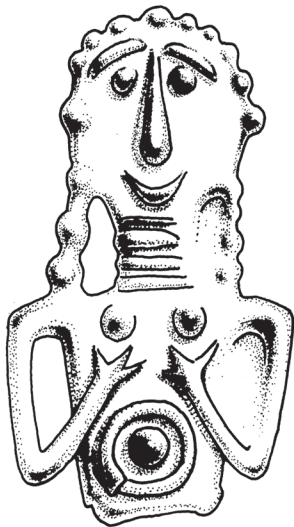


Figure 14. Female figurine from Urkesh (A9.86).
Drawing by Pietro Pozzi

One of the most striking aspects of the objects discussed is their strongly emphasised female features. Iconographically, they most closely resemble a commonly found type of female figurine with hands holding the breasts, wearing various kinds of jewellery and usually a marking of the genitals with a pubic triangle (for examples from Urkesh, see Figures 14-16). The meaning of these female and similar images has been a matter of great dispute, and may or may not link back to some of the first human artefacts known, spanning a wide geographical area across Europe and Asia (Delporte 1979). The suggestions include toys, votive items, use in rituals of magic, and there is much discussion about whether they represent humans, deities or other supernatural beings (Strommenger and Miglus 2010: 6-7; see also Meskell 1995 for a discussion of how these ancient figurines have been used to support modern feminist ideologies). Certainly, a universal meaning does not apply to all these figurines, as can be seen from the varied contexts in which they are found. What we do know is that some were highly valued - a tablet from the Ur III period describes an actual ritual for the making of a figurine (van Dijk and Geller 2003: 65-66), and we see

in the Hittite text quoted at the beginning that several figurines were made of perishable material for the explicit purposes of that ritual. Another type of vessel from the late third millennium with female features is found in the form of larger jars, where anthropomorphic elements of eyes, nose, breasts and sometimes the mouth and a pubic triangle are applied or incised on the handle (from Abu Salabikh: Moon 1981, 1982; from Kish: Barrelet 1968: 65, figs. 29a-b). These are perhaps too large for perfumed oil, but likely contained another liquid.

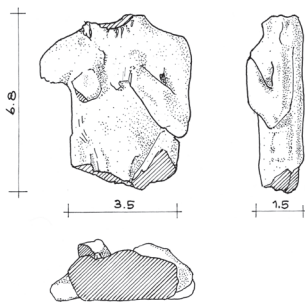


Figure 15. Female figurine from Urkesh (A16.27).
Drawing by Claudia Wettstein

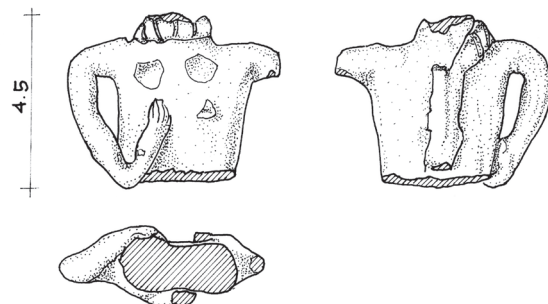


Figure 16. Female figurine from Urkesh (Z1.231).
Drawing by Claudia Wettstein

The female aspect of the vessel from Urkesh is so emphasised that it must have been pivotal for the success of the ritual it was part of. The unusually large ears and twisted mouth may be one clue:¹¹ if the *ābi* was a means of communication with the deities of the underworld, these features may be an expression of this object's ability to facilitate such communication through increased hearing and speaking. Silver model ears are also recorded as placed in the pit in the Hittite ritual, interpreted by Hoffner as the desire to 'hear' the underworld deities (Hoffner 1967: 397). Reviewing the evidence of ritual pits, Hoffner notes that the officiator most commonly was

11 As noted by Smith, in miniature images such as figurines, the diminution of some features, and accentuation of others serve to focus the attention of the viewer or user on specific aspects (2009: 19), which in turn gives clues to the importance and function of the image.

a woman (revealingly, the word 'witch' is used), who may well have lived in the vicinity of the pit and served clients there (Hoffner 1967: 394). In Hittite 'magical' rituals, we often find an 'Old Woman' or a 'Wise woman' as the practitioner, possibly with a strong association with the word for midwife (Gurney 1977: 44-45). The hairstyle with the long braids going down the back of the body is unusual, and like the special hairstyle of Queen Uqnitum (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995/1996: 14), work as an identifier of a specific woman, whoever she might have been.

Given the potential medicinal properties of perfumed oil (if this is indeed what the vessel contained), it is possible that some of the acts performed at the *ābi* had ritual-healing aspects, purifying the client - most likely the royal family - through sacrifice, libation and/or the application of oil. In this sense, it is of interest to note the association in modern and traditional natural medicine of myrtle, cypress, sesame and myrrh as being beneficial against certain female afflictions such as hormonal imbalance of thyroid and ovaries (myrtle - Charles 2012: 411), vaginal infection and to stimulate menstrual flow (cypress - Kane 2006: 67), against menstrual pain, to encourage production of milk in mothers and to cause abortion (sesame - Peter 2012: 478), and against labour pain (myrrh - Iluz et al. 2010). What is more, cedar, cypress, juniper, calamus, sesame are all listed as useful against urinary problems. Urinary problems are of course not limited to women, but this information puts the fragmentary anthropomorphic vessel from Urkesh (fig. 5), in a new light, with its piercing at the bottom of the pubic triangle.

Women are associated with perfume in a number of other ways. In the two tablets from Assur with any indication of the craftsman, the recipes both come from the 'mouth of the perfumeress' (*muraqqātu*) (Ebeling 1950: 5, 15). A woman is the provider of perfume to a man for anointment of himself before or after worship, and a female physician performs a ritual of troops, including anointing the commander and his equipment with perfumed oil before battle (Hoffner 1995: 111). A more seductive aspect is indicated in the dispatches of perfume to the queen and the harem (Joannès 1993: 264, Middeke-Conlin 2014: 23), and in the myth of *Ḫedammu*, the goddess *Ištar* bathes and applies perfume before going to seduce *Ḫedammu* (Siegelová 1971: 55). Finally, perfume is recorded as part of the funerary offerings of women: a text from Ur III Girsu lists 'a pot of perfumed oil' among the offerings given at the funeral of the wife of *Urtarsirsira* (Cohen 2005: 163-164), at Mari a woman receives perfume at her funeral (Joannès 1993: 264), and an Assur tablet lists perfume given to the daughter of the king (Ebeling 1950: 4).

Conclusion

The ancient texts make it clear that aromatic substances existed and were used in a variety of contexts beyond modern cosmetic usage; and that it could be a very costly product, meaning that even small quantities were highly valued. This must also have been the case at ancient Urkesh and the broader region of northeastern Syria. The most likely vessels that may have contained such liquids or ointments come from cult contexts, including the monumental channel to contact the deities of the netherworld. The perfumes may have had not only cosmetic uses, but also have been appreciated for their medicinal properties and therefore part of healing rituals. They further appear to have a strong association with females and representations of females, and through the intermingling of wife, queen, daughter, seducer, craftsperson, healer, practitioner and goddess, represent a microcosmos of some of the roles of women at Urkesh and throughout the ancient Near East.

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