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Problematizing Typology and Discarding the Colonialist Legacy: Approaches to Hybridity in the Terracotta Figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia

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Edited by W. Paul van Pelt

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Problematizing Typology and Discarding the Colonialist Legacy: Approaches to Hybridity in the Terracotta Figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia

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Introduction

Scholarly reconstructions of cross-cultural interaction between ancient Greeks and Babylonians have traditionally been influenced by more recent histories of colonial tensions between East and West, particularly by the empire building practices of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century European nations (Alcock 1993; van Dommelen 1997; Gosden 2004: 18–22; Sherwin-White 1987; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993: 141–142). In the past few decades, postcolonial theories have been influential in reshaping such understandings of cross-cultural interaction (Langin-Hooper 2007; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993). However, removing the colonialist biases of earlier scholars has in many cases resulted in an interpretive void in which reconstructions of Hellenistic Babylonian society are difficult to formulate. Terms like 'hybrid' and 'cross-cultural'

are frequently used, but often in imprecise ways and without addressing whether they are the most appropriate ways to think about this complex social milieu. I propose that one reason why progress on this front has been so difficult is that, in spite of the changes wrought by postcolonial advances, the fundamental tools, such as typology, used to study ancient cultures continue to bear a legacy of colonialist thinking.

Although typologies have often been regarded as scientific tools, the categorization process necessary to create a typology is not devoid of interpretive bias. Particularly problematic for archaeological typologies is that they generally operate under an unspoken principle of universality, in which ancient categories are assumed to overlap with modern ones. Such assumptions became ingrained into the typological process—as will be seen for the Hellenistic Babylonian figurines—because scholarly typologies were created in the modern colonialist era, when essentialized categories for grouping people (and objects) according to easily identifiable differences were a part of the dominant western world view. In this article, the underlying assumptions implicit in typologies are problematized as a way to move beyond the colonialist past of the discipline and create a new understanding of hybridity in Hellenistic Babylonian terracotta figurines. The methodology outlined eschews typologies and the essentialized, hierarchical categories that they impose upon objects in order to provide a more flexible analysis of the multiple associations (such as similarities in shape, motif, size, material, and manufacture) that exist between individual figurines.

Two case studies are presented as illustration. In both cases, a methodological approach based on entanglements reveals the need to nuance our understanding of hybridity. These figurines were more than just hybrid; they were hybrid with a purpose, carefully crafted to cross ethnic divides. Such examples of inclusive hybridity within the figurines from Hellenistic Babylonia indicate that ethnically based categories of 'Greek' and 'Babylonian' were not exclusionary social divisions. Rather, terracotta figurines were co-creators of a social reality in which ethnic and

cultural difference was smoothed over and made into a less operational part of daily life.

Hybridity in Hellenistic Babylonia

The Hellenistic period in Babylonia (c. 330 BC–51 AD)¹ began with the conquests of Alexander the Great and the subsequent influx of Greeks into the ancient Near East (Green 1990: 319; Sherwin-White 1987: 9; Walbank 1981: 46). Shifting power bases, changing governmental systems and population migrations were not new to this region: during the preceding five hundred years, Babylonia had been ruled by Neo-Assyrians and Achaemenid Persians as well as by native Babylonian dynasties. During the course of these political transitions, Babylonians had incorporated into their society populations from around the ancient Near East as well as small groups of migrant Greeks (Haerinck 1997: 27; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993: 159). By the time of Alexander the Great's arrival, Babylon and its surrounding cities were therefore already highly multicultural.

Nonetheless, the large-scale migration of Greeks and Macedonians into Babylonia during the Hellenistic period is traditionally seen as a very different (and more significant) process than the population shifts of the preceding eras. While cross-cultural interaction is only one of many avenues of inquiry into Babylonian society during the Neo-Assyrian or Achaemenid Persian periods, it is the primary interest of many scholars who study Hellenistic Babylonia (for a recent review of such trends in scholarship, see Rossi 2011). There is a rich supply of evidence to support such inquiries: the presence of Greek peoples in Babylon and the surrounding cities is attested archaeologically by new buildings, such as theatres and gymnasiums, as well as small-scale finds such as statues, pottery and coins (Hopkins 1972; Invernizzi 2007). Babylonian communities were also still in existence; traditional Babylonian temples were rebuilt and documents continued to be written in Akkadian on clay

¹ The dates for the Hellenistic period are not entirely fixed. Here I have included not only the Seleucid era but also the early Parthian period, during which time cultural forms derived from Greek tradition continued to be in use throughout Babylonian society.

tablets (Colledge 1987; Downey 1988: 7–63; van der Spek 1987). Evidence for the sustained existence of both Greek and Babylonian cultural groups gave rise, in earlier scholarship, to theories of colonization and resistance between these communities (see Green 1990: 316–317; Rostovtzeff 1941: 499–504; Tarn 1951).

However, recent decades have brought the introduction of postcolonial approaches to the study of Hellenistic Babylonia. Kuhrt and Sherwin-White (1987, 1993) have been most influential in pointing out deficiencies in earlier models of cultural interaction for the Hellenistic East and in calling for more nuanced analyses of those processes. In doing so, they and others have stressed the importance of "avoid[ing] the reductionist tendencies inherent in the traditional overarching definitions of 'Hellenism' and 'Hellenisation'" (Petrie 2002: 86). In addition to dismantling previous assumptions about enforced cultural adoption and other colonialist ideas, postcolonial theorists and archaeologists working within this conceptual framework have also increased recognition of the existence of hybrid and cross-cultural objects in the material record (Rossi 2011; Westh-Hansen 2011).

Terracotta figurines, one of the most popular forms of art used in Hellenistic Babylonia, are among the object corpora to include hybrid pieces. Greek and Babylonian coroplastic traditions were often combined, reshaped and altered into new forms in the creation of a vast diversity of uniquely Hellenistic Babylonian objects. As has previously been argued, by both myself (Langin-Hooper 2007) and Westh-Hansen (2011), the intense proliferation of hybrid figurine forms in Hellenistic Babylonia suggests that a sustained environment of cross-cultural interaction existed across broad swathes of society. The recognition of colonialist approaches in earlier scholarship on Hellenistic Babylonia and the subsequent process of divesting the field of this bias have opened up avenues for new approaches to the objects of this period.

However, I propose that the limits of this process have, in some ways, been reached, beyond which it is difficult to proceed without a

renewed introspection of scholarly practices and modes of analysis. Specifically, I no longer think it is enough to merely observe that many Hellenistic Babylonian figurines are hybridized. 'Hybrid' has been a useful label to apply to mixed, multicultural objects as it gives such objects and the people who used them a recognized place in archaeological discourse. Yet it is also rife with reductive assumptions. A cross-cultural hybrid implies the existence of two or more 'pure' cultures, as "essentially distinct entities, each of which is internally homogenous and externally bounded" (van Dommelen 1997: 308; also Feldman 2006: 59–63), from which the hybrid is created. The juxtaposition of hybrid against non-hybrid has resulted in the term "becoming essentializing in exactly the way in which its proponents sought to overcome" (Feldman 2006: 63; also Thomas 2000).

In its reductive meaning, hybrid was applied to Hellenistic Babylonian terracottas even by the early twentieth-century scholars who first studied them. Legrain (1930: 11) divided the figurines of Hellenistic Nippur into "pure Greek figures" and more hybrid pieces with elements of "Greek style". For the figurines of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, van Ingen (1939: 8) similarly documented separate Greek and Babylonian figurine categories, as well as "a merging of Greek and Oriental [into] a more hybrid style". Studies on Hellenistic Babylonian figurines conducted since the advent of postcolonial theory have made greater use of the term hybridity and have been more willing to recognize cross-cultural combinations. However, in practical application, little has changed: 'hybrid' is often simply incorporated as another category of objects within a typology of figurines that also includes Greek and Babylonian types (examples include Invernizzi 1985; Karvonen-Kannas 1995). In these studies, what constitutes hybridity is rarely articulated—an especially pressing point, as few Greek-like figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia have direct parallels with objects from Hellenistic Greece (and so most Greek figurines could also potentially be described as hybrids). Assessment of a figurine's hybridity varies from scholar to scholar and is often based on modern judgments of aesthetics and degrees of 'naturalism' in the object (for a discussion, see Root forthcoming).

The productivity of such an approach is limited. To assign new labels to figurines—calling some of them hybrid instead of just Greek or Babylonian—does not contribute much towards interpreting how figurines were participants in ancient social worlds. Nor does it provide much insight into Hellenistic Babylonian society, beyond simply acknowledging that cross-cultural interactions took place. In order to develop beyond the constraints of hybridity, I propose that a deeper look should be taken at the underlying analytical structures into which notions of hybridity are built.

Problematizing Typology and Utilizing 'Entanglement'

I suggest that the limitation of hybridity concepts derives, at least in part, from the typological structure with which Hellenistic Babylonian terracotta figurines are usually ordered and from which hybridity is deduced. The creation of ever more finely divided and precisely described typologies has often been viewed as a scientific endeavour. However, much about this categorization process is inherently subjective. A typology is built on a series of nested assumptions: everyday categories are natural and self-evident; the best way for scholars to study ancient objects is to systematize these natural, everyday categories through the naming of types and the creation of a typology; and these typological schemas can be projected back into the past as if they were ahistorical and therefore universal.²

Each of these assumptions can be unpacked and shown to be problematic. As described by Keane (2005: 188), all objects have innumerable qualities (such as colour, shape, texture, flammability, hardness, etc.) that are bundled together to compose the complete materiality of the object. When a person groups objects into types, (s)he privileges certain features of the object (which are considered instrumental in deciding its type) and ignores (or considers irrelevant) other features of the object. However, the non-type-determining features

² A fuller discussion of the assumptions inherent in the typological process can be found in Langin-Hooper (2011: 40–59).

remain bundled with the other attributes as part of the complete material presence of the object. At another time, place or by another person, the ignored qualities could be selected as relevant in defining a new purpose, name and function for the same object. There are thus many overlapping and competing ways of organizing 'things' into 'types' (Bowker and Star 1999: 2–3; Dupré 1993; Meskell 2004: 42).

Typologies make it difficult to conceptualize this multiplicity of inter-object associations because, in order for a typology to be created, scholars must choose to consistently privilege some object similarities over others. Often this happens along lines familiar to the person creating the typology, resulting in the application of current categories to ancient objects. When we use categories such as 'standing nude female'—categories that we may feel comfortable with in our own lives—and apply these to ancient figurines, we unwittingly retroject categories onto the past as if they were universal. Typologies further reify current culturally specific categories by encouraging binary divisions (i.e. clothed *or* naked, male *or* female) rather than allowing for flexibility and subtle degrees of variation. Then, through the structural division of typologies into categories and sub-categories, these assessments about figurine features are cemented into a hierarchical ranking of more—and less—important similarities.

The structure of typological organization fits well into analytical approaches developed out of colonialist mindsets. Colonialism itself relied on essentializing modes of thought, in which complex variability was reduced to key lines of difference by which individuals, objects or landscapes could be recognized and opposed between 'colonizer' or 'colonized' (Gosden 2001: 242–243, 257–258). Through the power of terminology and naming, the colonialist nations of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'West' not only kept their colonies under control, but actually created the 'East' as a cohesive unit to be dominated (Said 1978: 2–4, 6). In addition to dichotomies based on ethnicity, the colonialist mindset particularly found expression in oppositional approaches to gender identity (Conkey and Gero 1997; Nochlin 1988). Colonialism was, in

large part, the practice of enforcing essentialized divisions that ignored social complexity.

Scholarship has since shed colonialist thinking at the higher conceptual level through postcolonial approaches and other theoretical advances. For instance, it is now commonly acknowledged that even seemingly universal categories, such as gender, are culturally constructed and continually renegotiated (Conkey and Gero 1997: 418; Pollock 1988: 18). Nevertheless essentialized categories live on in typological schema. The utilization of seemingly universal classifications, insistence on binary divisions and hierarchical ranking of similarities and differences—all of these are intrinsic to the structure of typologies. They all also present ways in which typologies maintain the legacy of both the culture-based and gender-based separations that were hallmarks of colonialist thought. Thus the core organizing principles underlying typology hinder our understanding of the diverse and unessentialized associations between ancient objects and people.

As one way forward, I propose to access inter-object associations through a concept of object entanglement. The term entanglement can be used to express the varying connections between figurines: some figurines share stylistic similarities;³ others share similar size, weight or fragility; others, similar motifs. None of these inter-object associations need be privileged over others as any of them might have been significant to a particular ancient user at a particular moment of human-object interaction. This analytical process assists in drawing out the parallels between objects and allowing new connections to be made beyond those most obviously apparent. These inter-object associations have always existed in the figurines, but can be easily overlooked by a

³ Note that entanglement is a concept that is currently used in the anthropological and archaeological literature, most significantly by Hodder (2011, 2012), but also by scholars such as Gosden (2011) and, less explicitly (through material engagement theory), Renfrew (2001). In these usages, entanglement usually refers to the mutual entrapment between the human and object worlds, which come into being, shape and even depend upon each other. 'Entangled' is also used, such as by Stockhammer (2012, this volume), as a substitute for hybrid in describing specifically cross-cultural objects. In my approach, I utilize the term entanglement to talk about the specific associations between objects, highlighting interconnection and similarity, as opposed to interdependence and functionality.

modern, Western scholar, who has been culturally conditioned to engage with objects in ways that are specific to our own time and place. Using a concept of entanglements allows a variety of associations between objects to be made, some along traditional typological lines and some which differ considerably from the traditional approaches to these objects.

A concept of entanglements provides a deliberately subtle and flexible approach that is not intended to be all-encompassing, complete comprehensiveness being impossible. It cannot lead to an account of all associations between objects, nor does it approximate every way in which an ancient viewer or user might approach and interact with a figurine. It remains open, so that the approaches and ideas of future researchers who consider the material—as well as new evidence, for example Hellenistic Babylonian figurines discovered in future excavations—can be incorporated. This deliberate flexibility allows for multivocal interpretations, which through their multitude have the potential to approach ancient social realities.

Case Study of Multiple or Ambiguous Gender(s)

Two Hellenistic figurines from the Babylonian city of Uruk, BM51-1-1-107 (fig. 1) and BM51-1-1-108 (fig. 2), display bodies with both a penis and breasts. While such figurines are uncommon, their existence suggests that there were alternative ways of thinking about gender in Hellenistic Babylonia besides the male/female binary dichotomy that is consistently reified in academia's typologies of these objects (from van Buren 1930 through to Karvonen-Kannas 1995). Several features of BM51-1-1-107 and BM51-1-1-108 suggest female gender: the breasts, the elaborate headdresses of vertically ridged curls, the jewellery, the position of the arms to support the breasts, the narrow waist and the wide hips. All of these features closely entangle these two figurines with the visual appearances common to many female figurines. However, the presence of shared features only connects these two objects with female figurines—it does not make them female. Substantive visual entanglements also link these two objects to figurines



Fig. 1 (left). BM51-1-1-107. Terracotta figurine from Uruk. Height: 17.7cm, width: 6.5cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 2 (right). BM51-1-1-108. Terracotta figurine from Uruk. Height: 17.5cm, width: 6.5cm. © Trustees of the British Museum.

portraying male bodies. The depiction of a penis is the most obvious link; indeed, the prominence given to the male genitalia suggests that an actively male sex/gender is being asserted for these figurines. The roundedness of the arms and the position of the hands on the breast can also be visually linked to depictions of male children (see e.g. van Ingen 1939: nos 691a, 800a; Karvonen-Kannas 1995: nos 214, 200; Ziegler 1962: fig.

339). Thus BM51-1-1-107 and BM51-1-1-108 can be seen to be entangled in multiple ways along multi-gendered lines.

The multi-gendered appearance of these figurines is constructed using aspects of both Greek and Babylonian figurine traditions. The frontal pose, holding of hands to the breasts, nudity and use of a single-mould manufacturing technique all derive from Babylonian tradition, while the plastically three-dimensional modelling, elaborate hairstyling and the particularly hermaphroditic combination of sexual features (a primarily female body with male penis) link more consistently to Greek tradition. Thus, these figurines embody aspects of both cultural identities. However, this is not the traditional view of these objects, which are usually classified as exclusively female and Babylonian in identity. The gender issue is particularly striking: even though male genitalia are clearly shown—and in spite of the fact that similar figurines, in this pose and with a penis exist in alabaster (Invernizzi 2008: 265)—the penis is often unremarked upon by figurine scholars. For instance, Karvonen-Kannas (1995: 119) groups BM51-1-1-107 and BM51-1-1-108 typologically as female without comment. The choice to ignore the male genitalia in favour of a more conventional sex determination highlights how the use of traditional typologies means that scholars literally do not see the figurines themselves.

This lack of sight and the subsequent enforcement of either male or female categories onto these figurines is significant. It has obscured the ancient reality in which these relatively rare hermaphroditic figurines existed alongside the more numerous Hellenistic Babylonian figurines without clear gender markers, such as horse riders with amorphous and non-gendered bodies (Langin-Hooper 2011: 86–92). Taken together, these figurines suggest that the categories of gender often employed in constructing typologies do not overlap well with the ancient Hellenistic Babylonian understanding of gender identities. In other words, the legacy of our discipline's colonialist past lives on in the way in which scholars see—or don't see—a penis.

Case Study of 'Heads' and 'Masks'

The second case study confronts the issue of cultural identity, which is of substantial interest for most scholars who research Hellenistic Babylonia. The figurines M14556 (fig. 3) and T7142 (fig. 4) both depict a child-like human head with a round, beardless face, bulging eyes and large facial features. Most strikingly, they also share rectangular-shaped, open-gaping mouths cut through the clay—an uncommon feature in most Hellenistic Babylonian figurines, but one that is present in several heads with child-like appearances. The figurines that share this cut-out mouth, such as M14556 and T7142, are usually separated into different typological categories based on the presence of a back to the figure's head: M14556 is modelled in the round (and so typed with the 'children's heads'), while T7142 has only a face (thus typed with the 'masks'; van Ingen 1939: 300–308). However, using the approach of object entanglements, the feature of the cut-out mouth can be addressed across typological lines. When this feature is examined on its own, it appears that the cut-out mouth appeals to both Greek and Babylonian traditions.

The cut-open mouths shared by M14556 and T7142 were likely meaningful, both because they were rare among the figurine corpus generally and because they involved extra effort to make. Carving a mouth into the clay after moulding adds an additional step to the production process and cut marks still visible on some figurine interiors (such as on the inside of the neck of M14556) provide evidence of the repeated small incisions necessary to precisely cut a rectangular hole. In light of the obvious care given to incising these mouths, there must have been some purpose to the feature—but what? The visual similarity to Greek theatre masks, emphasized in van Ingen's typology, is undeniable. Greek theatre and its accoutrements were popular subjects of art in a variety of media across the Hellenistic world (Pollitt 2006: 4–7). Terracotta masks—some of which had their "eyes and mouth cut out"—were also used as votive offerings at Greek sites from the sixth century BC through the Hellenistic period (Uhlenbrock 1996: 582). Some Hellenistic Babylonian terracotta figurines, such as T7142, show close links with this Greek tradition. However, many other mask-like figurines do not share



Fig. 3 (left). M14556. Terracotta figurine from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height: 8.8cm, width: 5.7cm. Courtesy of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan.

Fig. 4 (right). T7142. Terracotta figurine from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Height: 11cm. Photograph from the collection of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan.

the cut-open mouth. Typologies can therefore not only fail to document some object entanglements, but can also exaggerate the strength of other inter-object associations. Further complicating the exclusive association of cut-open mouths with Greek theatrical tradition are the figurines, such as M14556, which share the cut-open mouth, but which cannot be interpreted as masks due to the moulded back of the head and original attachment to a body. Indeed, such head figurines with cut-open mouths seem to have been more common in Hellenistic Babylonia than their mask counterparts (see van Ingen 1939: 290–302)—indicating that the cut-open mouth requires additional elucidation.

One possible explanation for the non-mask associations of cut-open mouths can be found in Babylonian cultural traditions. Rituals of 'mouth-opening' (*pit pi*) and 'mouth-washing' (*mis pi*) were a crucial part of the process of enlivening some statues, such as cult images or other statues associated with deities (Walker and Dick 1999; Winter 1992). Tablets

containing the incantations of the *mīs pî* ritual from second century BC Uruk attest to the continued knowledge and practice of mouth-opening ceremonies in Hellenistic Babylonia (Mayer 1978: 458; Walker and Dick 1999: 67–68). In these rituals of animation, physical actions were taken to open and wash the statue's mouth—actions which might have been procedurally and somatically (if not ritually) similar to the process of cutting open the mouths of figurines such as M14556 and T7142. This is not to say that such rituals were necessarily being performed on terracotta figurines or that these figurines directly represented ritual actions. However, the cut-open mouths of figurines such as M14556 and T7142—regardless of whether there was a back to the head—would visually resonate with the Babylonian cultural interest in such practices and imagery.

Cut-open mouths thus seem to have been a figurine feature which could appeal to both Greek and Babylonian cultural traditions. A cross-cultural connection is made through these figurines, developed through a shared use of the cut-open mouth and adapted to transcend the formal differences of attachment (or lack thereof) to a head and body. What was accomplished through the creation of these figurines was more than just hybridity as a happenstance conglomeration of different cultural features.⁴ Rather, these figurines seem to have been tailored to bridge differences and enhance similarities between Greek and Babylonian traditions. By presenting visual features that could be used and considered meaningful by members of both cultures, such figurines provided a material, embodied example of cross-cultural overlap—which, in turn, aided in opening up space in Hellenistic Babylonian society for further multicultural entanglements to develop.

⁴ Although not approached in postcolonial terms and continuing to use traditional typological structures, Menegazzi (2012) has recently made a similar argument. She, however, frames her discussion with emphasis on the appropriateness or adoptability of Greek traditions into a Babylonian context: "Seleucian coroplasts made specific choices, favouring some Greek subjects which were likely to meet the local taste" (Menegazzi 2012: 157). My work proposes a more reciprocal process, in which there was a selective use of mutually acceptable Greek and Babylonian traditions in creating Hellenistic Babylonian figurines.

Conclusion: Discarding the Colonialist Legacy

In search of a new perspective on hybridity, the essentialized categories that are the continuing legacy of colonial discourse must be re-examined. It is not enough to expand typologies beyond 'Greek' and 'Babylonian' to include a 'hybrid' category in between. Rather, it should be acknowledged that the categories themselves, in their reductive nature, blind us to the rich reality of information in the Hellenistic Babylonian figurine corpus.

The hybrid figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia, when viewed through an entanglement approach, appear to have been more than random combinations of cross-cultural features. Instead, many figurines were hybrid with a purpose—crafted with a particular sensitivity to both Greek and Babylonian cultural concerns and capable of negotiating common ground between both traditions. Through the reciprocal relationships that humans hold with objects—especially anthropomorphic objects, such as terracotta figurines (Bailey 2005: 38; Pollock 2003: 182)—such hybrid figurines had the potential to act with agentive social force as mutual co-creators of multicultural communities. This has broad implications for our understanding of Hellenistic Babylonian society, as it suggests that—contrary to what is assumed in most traditional academic approaches to this era—ethnic or cultural differences were, in some cases, actively deconstructed rather than emphasized. Hellenistic Babylonian society may thus have been organized along lines other than ethnic opposition. Rather, other delineations of social difference, such as age, status, occupation or regional/city affiliation, may have taken precedence. Such possibilities cannot be fully explored here; however, they are the subject of my broader research into this richly multicultural figurine corpus. Although an understanding of hybridity will continue to feature prominently in such work, I suggest—based on the evidence presented in this article—that the term 'hybrid' might best be applied not as a label, but as a starting point for questions of purpose and agency.

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