

Buchbesprechung

Evelyn Klengel-Brandt und **Hans-Ulrich Onasch**: Die Terrakotten aus Assur im Vorderasiatischen Museum Berlin. Von der frühdynastischen bis zur parthischen Zeit. (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 156). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020. 620 S. 24 × 34,5 cm, 340 Taf. ISBN: 978-3-447-11394-6. Preis: € 158,00.

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Many scientific works on figurative terracotta objects – and the publication under review makes no exception here – start with a disclaimer. Such disclaimers aim to justify the limited insights retrieved from the study of these objects. Terracotta studies regularly point out their aesthetic deficiencies of and thus limited art-historical value, their lack of iconographic originality with the nude women motif being so natural that it hardly merits further explanation, their status as ‘mass-products’ or ‘cheap’ substitutes for more valuable objects, inherent vagaries of stylistic dating, missing contextual information, and the typically fragmentary states of preservation. Another concern regards an observed incongruence between the motifs depicted as miniatures in clay with the information available from contemporaneous textual sources and thus the impossibility for the researcher to reconstruct their true ‘meaning’ or ‘function’ in ancient societies. All of this moves terracotta figurines and plaques down the ladder of scientifically valuable objects and towards the qualitative end of visual production in ancient Western Asia. Accordingly, Ruth Mayer-Opificius’ review of Evelyn Klengel-Brandt’s 1978 catalogue on terracotta figurines from Assur (see below) started with the comment that terracotta studies require arduous work with little scientific merit and are (therefore) almost exclusively carried out by women.¹ This observation holds until today. However, the reviewer suggests that there is more to be gained from this object group, especially when categorically defined typologies and catalogue formats are left behind or amended by more fluid, question-driven investigations, as suggested by Stephanie Langin-Hooper (2019) and others.

The publication under review (from now on WVDOG 156) strictly coheres to the traditional path of research. It marks the end of Klengel-Brandt’s lifelong occupation with

the terracotta corpus from Assur. In 1964, she completed a PhD on anthropomorphic figurines from Assur at Humboldt University Berlin (Klengel-Brandt 1967). Her work continued with publications on the unbaked clay figurines (‘Apotropäische Tonfigurinen’, 1968), chariot models (‘Wagenmodelle’, 1970), and a first volume called ‘Die Terrakotten aus Assur im Vorderasiatischen Museum Berlin’ (1978). The latter included only 783 terracotta objects due to publication constraints. The most important and characteristic pieces were pictured in excellent black-and-white photographs accompanying the catalogue.

WVDOG 156, the volume under review, purports to complete this work. It makes available detailed information on 1892 figurative terracotta objects from Assur dated from the third to the first millennium BCE and housed today at the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin (VAM). This includes all entries from Klengel-Brandt’s 1978 publication but only about half of the 3825 figurative terracotta objects registered during the German excavations between 1903 and 1914 (Vorwort der Herausgeber). Unfortunately, more than a hundred years after the end of Walter Andrae’s archaeological fieldwork at Assur, it was not possible to consider the Berlin corpus in conjunction with its complement at the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, or at least with the information, photographs or sketches of Andrae and his team on these objects which are available in the field registers (Fundjournale) or earlier publications; future research would have profited from such information and be it in an abbreviated tabular and/or – ideally – digital form only.²

According to the authors’ preface, Hans-Ulrich Onasch reworked the catalogue based on Klengel-Brandt’s old catalogue cards and re-photographed all objects. Both authors admit that due to other obligations only a limited number

¹ Mayer-Opificius (1983, 456) wrote: “Es ist ein merkwürdiges Schicksal, das die Terrakotten des Alten Orients heutzutage erfahren haben: fast alle wichtigen Publikationen dieser Denkmälergattung stammen aus der Feder weiblicher Gelehrter. [...] Vielfach ist es eine entsagungsvolle Arbeit, sich mit Gegenständen dieser reinen Volkskunst zu befassen, deren Aussagekraft zunächst gering erscheint und deren ästhetische Aussage gewiß häufig gleich Null ist.”

² A database or at least digital scans of the field documentation must have been created in the framework of the Assur project carried out between 1997 and 2010. Not all the terracotta finds already published were included in WVDOG 156, only those housed at the VAM. Documentation and publication of finds from the Babylon and Assur excavations held in Istanbul are now underway through a project carried out by Andreas Schachner (DAI Istanbul).

of recent publications, especially the important comparable terracotta finds excavated at Syrian and Northern Mesopotamian sites during the last decades, could be taken into consideration or referenced in the volume (Vorwort der Autoren). They decided to reproduce Klengel-Brandt's (1978) catalogue order, subdividing the material into six uneven sections: I Anthropomorphic figurines (Nr. 1–995), II Animals (Nr. 996–1642), III Vessels with applications (Nr. 1643–1647), IV Furniture (Nr. 1648–1690), V Chariots (Nr. 1691–1877), VI Varia (Nr. 1878–1892). As in 1978, the anthropomorphic figurines are dealt with in approximate chronological groupings (see discussion below), but the other typological groups are not. As already remarked by Mayer-Opificius (1983, 458) regarding Klengel-Brandt's 1978 publication, it is difficult to understand why the unbaked clay figurines from Neo-Assyrian contexts in Assur were excluded. The authors justify this exclusion by stating that baked and unbaked clay figurines occupied completely different realms of iconography and function, with the unbaked figurines being closer to Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and statues than to their baked siblings in clay (pp. 5–6). This is an interesting point but for the sake of comprehensiveness, which is ostensibly the primary objective of the volume, a few more catalogue entries and plates with photographs of the unbaked, often ritually inscribed terracotta figurines, would have been useful, the more so since both Rittig (1977) and Klengel-Brandt (1968) depicted only selections of them.

WVDOG 156 contains only ten pages of synthetic discussion with two pages devoted to interpretative questions (pp. 1–10 with 7–9 "Bedeutung und Verwendungszweck"). The remainder consists of 238 pages of catalogue information for each piece ordered typologically with brief overarching discussions at the beginning of each new type section (pp. 11–249), 24 pages of indices that link excavation numbers, museum numbers, and excavation squares (pp. 251–275), and 340 plates of black-and-white photographs which depict each object from at least two sides in 1:1 scale. The consistency of the photographic record is admirable. However, a few colour plates for glazed and painted pieces (e. g. Nr. 495) and some visual documentation of breakage points and surface treatment could have been included. In some cases, the visibility of details would have benefitted from increased contrast/lighting.³ The overall effort to provide full visual documentation remains laud-

³ Details, for example of terracotta plaque Nr. 490 (VA 8055), are clearer in Klengel-Brandt's 1967 (cf. Taf. 9.13) and 1978 publications. Compare also VA 8076 in WVDOG 156 (Taf. 117.848) with the same object in Klengel-Brandt 1967, Taf. 11.2. Overall, the photographic quality is better in the earlier publications.

able while the scientific benefit of two-sided depictions of simple objects like chariot wheels and cylindrical animal torsos in a 1:1 scale remains to be determined.

Turning to the text, the overlap between Klengel-Brandt 1978 and the volume under review is striking. Most passages and catalogue descriptions are identical in wording.⁴ Other passages are only slightly revised versions of Klengel-Brandt's even earlier publications.⁵ Besides the catalogue entries which were added to this volume and occasional references to literature published after 1978, there is barely any original passage in WVDOG 156. This includes the introduction and thus the only synthetic part of the volume.⁶ The functional interpretation of the corpus (Bedeutung und Verwendungszweck, pp. 7–9) rests upon conventional opinions about "fertility", nude females as sexually active Ishtar in temples and domestic cult, men with curved sticks as Assur or Amurru, substitute votive offerings or dedicatory objects (for the poor), and apotropaic function in domestic settings. The use of figurines as toys is categorically refuted (p. 9). The authors attribute functions related to "magical practice" rather to the unfired clay figurines not included in the volume.

The typological assessment likewise remains unchanged from 1978. For the largest group, the anthropomorphic figurines (I.), chronology supersedes typology, dividing the chapter into four parts: I.1 Second half of the third millennium; I.2 First half of the second millennium; I.3 Second half of the second millennium until first half of the first millennium; I.4 Mid-second century BCE until mid-third century AD (see discussion below). Within these parts, the authors suggest a not strictly hierarchically sorted typology based on the following features: 1) Posture (seated/standing), 2) sex/gender (female/male/"figure"), 3) attire (naked/bell-shaped skirt "Glockenrock"), 4) gesture (holding breasts,

⁴ For identical passages, compare for instance WVDOG 156, p. 27–28 (chapters "I.1.6.1 Stehende Frauen im Glockenrock" and "I.1.6.2 Stehende Frauen im Glockenrock"; note that both sub-chapters (groups) carry the same title as the overall chapter "I.1.6 Stehende Frau im Glockenrock", i. e. typological differences are not indicated in the title, as already in 1978) with Klengel-Brandt 1978, 33; or WVDOG 156 p. 42 ("I.1.6.4 Stehende Männer im Glockenrock mit Krummholz") with Klengel-Brandt 1978, 33–34, and 38 among many others. For the latter chapter even the catalogue entries were reprinted in almost identical form including sequence; the same is true for chapter III ("Gefäßsteile und aufgesetzte Verzierungen"), pp. 220–221, cf. already Klengel-Brandt 1978, 110–111 respectively.

⁵ Compare for instance WVDOG 156 74–75, with Klengel-Brandt 1967, 24–25.

⁶ See WVDOG 156 pp. 3–9, and Klengel-Brandt 1978, 12–19, respectively. Few post-1978 references were added to the otherwise identical footnotes.

holding curved stick etc.). The seven resulting groups in I.1 could have been subdivided further or critically assessed according to additional, cross-cutting criteria like hairdo, jewellery, body decoration, painted features, and so on.

The separation of anthropomorphic figurines from their heads (pp. 63–68; pp. 129–135) remains an awkward decision in cases where the typological connection is overtly clear and indicated by the authors themselves in the discussion (see pp. 53; or the female heads Nr. 945–949 belonging to Parthian mould-made figurines Nr. 860–868; the description of the latter as seated does not seem obvious to the reviewer). However, the suggested typology is as good as any, given that it serves the purpose of the publication. This purpose lies ultimately, according to the authors and at least for the anthropomorphic figurines, in establishing a chronological sequence – although they shy away from precise attributions to conventional periods or even a transparent relative order (see below).⁷

Over the last two decades, publications within the framework of the Assur project (1997–2010) critically revised building histories and find catalogues (see the synthesis on pp. 1–3). However, these efforts could not add much to a better understanding of the terracotta finds. According to the authors and despite Andrae's meticulous documentation of architectural features, barely any terracotta object from Assur can be stratigraphically dated and no insight could be gained from their distribution.⁸ We have

⁷ See p. 11: "Bei der Anordnung der Terrakotten innerhalb der 2. Hälfte des 3. Jts. ist versucht worden, die zeitliche Aufeinanderfolge der einzelnen Typen zu berücksichtigen, auch wenn eine feste Zuordnung zu einer historischen Epoche nicht ausdrücklich angezeigt wird." Klengel-Brandt wrote in her 1978 publication (p. 11) that she purposefully refrained from the attribution of the evidence to historical (Early Dynastic, Akkadian, Ur-III etc.) periods due to issues with terminology. Instead, she stresses the greater relevance of the relative sequence of types attested at Assur – without offering such a sequence based on either sound stratigraphic, typological, or comparative arguments. Klengel-Brandt (1978, 12; identically 2020, 3) writes: "Die Figuren der zweiten Hälfte des 3. Jts. sind bemerkenswert vielgestaltig. [...] Wahrscheinlich sind die einzelnen Typen auch nicht immer gleichzeitig, sondern nacheinander benutzt worden, ohne dass es jetzt noch möglich wäre, diese Abfolge nachzuweisen. Wenn man davon ausgeht, dass die früheren Figuren gewöhnlich auch sorgfältiger und besser gearbeitet sind, dann müssen die Frauenterrakotten der Gruppe I.1.1, deren Körper wohlproportioniert und durch Aufkleben geschmückt sind, besonders hervorgehoben werden." There is no argument given here or in later chapters that would substantiate the claim that higher quality and greater elaboration of figurines indicates an older date. Andrae's stylistic-stratigraphic assessment of figurines from the Archaic Ishtar Temples is quickly refuted by Klengel-Brandt (1978, 11–12) but not referred to in the publication under review.

⁸ See p. 3: "Die archäologischen Publikationen der Grabungen in Assur haben [...] gezeigt, dass die Fundgattung der Terrakotten sich einer

to trust the authors on this since the volume provides no distribution maps, quantitative assessments or synthetic tables based on iconographic types, chronological periods, archaeological contexts, or other criteria. Although brief contextual comments are scattered throughout the chapters and the archaeological square and locus (eD6IV, eA5II, hE5II etc.) are noted for each object in the catalogue, often including additional findspot details such as "nördliche Grabungsgrenze, ca. 3,00 m unter Hügeloberfläche", "über Libbn", "an der Libbnkante", "Halde(??)" etc., the reader, who does not have a personal GIS of Assur at hand or a lot of time to immerse themselves into Andrae's recording system, is left without an idea about where and in what frequency terracotta objects were discovered in Assur and from what kind of contexts. The highlighting of the few stratified figurines from the corpus in the catalogue (e. g. through an asterisk as Wrede 2003) would have helped the reader assess the validity of the argument. The large assemblage of terracotta figurines, plaques and chariots associated with the Archaic (third and early second millennium) and Younger Ishtar Temples (Tukulti-Ninurta I, 1233–1197, and later) would have deserved further discussion and not dispersal throughout various typological groupings. Their detailed investigation was explicitly left out by Bär (2003) and Schmitt (2012, 123–124) with reference to Klengel-Brandt/Onasch's forthcoming volume. The earliest stratigraphically dated figurine (Nr. 1), discovered in Level G of the Archaic Ishtar Temple (early Akkadian) is highly exceptional and would have merited further discussion.

A major flaw of the book lies in the fact that not even the broad chronological groupings suggested by the authors stand scientific scrutiny. Discounting stratigraphy (see above), the authors would love to rely on comparative evidence. Such comparative evidence, however, is not offered to a sufficient degree. Neither the old and mostly well-stratified Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago excavations in the Diyala region,⁹ nor the numerous and in many ways closely related terracotta figurines discovered during the surveys and excavations carried out in northern Mesopotamia over the last decades, especially in the Eastern Tigris region,¹⁰ the Jezirah and the Middle

genauerer Datierung entzieht. [...] Der größte Teil der Terrakotten stammt aus unspezifischen Fundorten oder aus Schutt von Umbauten und Zerstörungen. Sie waren über die ganze Stadt verteilt und wurden sowohl in Wohnvierteln als auch in den Bereichen der Tempel und Paläste gefunden."

⁹ A full record of all registered finds including sketches in the field registers has been available open access as *Diyala Archaeological Database* for more than twenty years.

¹⁰ See Mühl 2013 for further literature.

Euphrates region,¹¹ are adequately cited by the authors to substantiate their vague and ultimately intuitive chronological attributions. The most often cited reference throughout Chap. I.1 is an unpublished and outdated PhD thesis on nude clay figurines from Mesopotamia to India (Dales 1960). The outstanding specificity of the handmade Assur terracotta corpus, as stressed repeatedly by the authors (p. 9),¹² results more from a lack of consideration of comparative evidence than archaeological reality. If Assur's material culture was seen in the context of contemporary northern Mesopotamian and Syrian sites and not contrasted with that of Southern Mesopotamia, it would be hardly surprising that hand-made figurines took centre-stage in its terracotta production.¹³

Klengel-Brandt draws a chronological divide between the second half of the third millennium and the first half of the second millennium BCE. While the first group contains almost 500 pieces and thus half of the anthropomorphic figurines' total (Nr. 1–466), the second consists of less than 30 pieces (Nr. 467–494). Thus, in the traditional historical terminology of southern Mesopotamia, the catalogue formally combines terracotta figurines contemporary with the diverging visual cultures of the Early Dynastic, Akkadian and Ur III periods into one group, and those contemporary with the Old Babylonian period, which adhered closely to Ur III artistic conventions in its initial stages, into another. The artistic continuities and particularities between late third and early second-millennium cylinder seals and reliefs were often observed and discussed for southern, central but also northern Mesopotamia during the emergence of the Old Assyrian kingdom (see recently e. g., the works of C. Suter, A. Lassen, or M. Eppiheimer). The seemingly arbitrary chronological break suggested by WVDOG 156 for the turn of the second millennium in view of the terracotta production would have necessitated at least some reflection and explanation. The chosen divide evades discussion of when and why the terracotta figurine (and for central and southern Mesopotamia the quickly evolving terracotta *plaque* production, cf. Roßberger 2018) increased so significantly during the second half of the third and the beginning of the second millennium. The reasons why an Assur terracotta figurine type is either placed into the third-

or the second-millennium chapter are not explicitly spelled out.

Among the few terracotta *plaques* discovered at Assur, only one motif occurred more than once: Two dancing combatants holding curved sticks (“Kampftanz”, cf. Opificius 1961, 156–159) on four plaques, three of them from the same mould, (Nr. 489–491; one local version with lion and offering table, reminiscent of Kültepe seal iconography, Nr. 494).¹⁴ The motif is known, in variations, from central (Ishchali, Khafajeh, Shaduppum) and southern Mesopotamian sites (Larsa, Kish, Isin, Ur). Given the predominance of male figurines from Assur holding one or two curved sticks in front of their chests (Nr. 232–273), it does not seem as a coincidence that this among the many plaque motifs known from southern Iraq was present at Assur. The function of the figurines and plaques must have depended on these instruments, creating a (magical?) potency only available to male actors.

Readers unfamiliar with the vast chronological differences between the terracotta figurines combined in the animal chapter (II) arranged according to animal class (horses, cattle, sheep, goats, dogs, birds, etc.) will find it difficult to use since it combines Early Dynastic to Hellenistic and Parthian figurines in sequence. Many important stratigraphic and comparative observations that would have allowed for reasonable chronological subdivisions are hidden in the type discussions and footnotes.

Throughout the volume, the authors refrain from committing themselves to positions regarding chronology, attribution, and interpretation based on transparent criteria. This makes it difficult for non-specialist readers to appreciate this fascinating but varied corpus from a well-excavated site, and to situate its findings within the wider picture of three millennia of visual, material culture, and historic developments. Given the increased availability of comparative archaeological data, it is no longer necessary to understand the corpus only on its own merits. Relevant works from other places have been acknowledged to some extent, but hardly play a role in the actual argument.

The volume is probably one of the last of its kind. It stands at the end of a long series of collection and site catalogues with broadly conceived motifs as the primary distinguishing feature between figurine types, making it difficult to analyze all figurines by time period or archaeological context, and resulting in the impression that little changed in thousands of years of figurine making in ancient Meso-

11 For convenient syntheses with much further literature see Pruß 2011, Sakal 2015; 2018, and Peyronel/Pruß 2018.

12 See p. 6 (“Die Terrakottafigurinen aus Assur behaupten innerhalb der mesopotamischen Entwicklung eine eigene Stellung.”) und p. 10.

13 A special status of Assur's terracotta production due to its continuous hand-made figurine tradition in contrast to other “Mesopotamian” sites is repeatedly emphasized by the authors (e. g. p. 3).

14 The catalogue contains only two further plaque fragments with the remains of what was probably a sexual intercourse scene (Nr. 492 and 493).

potamia, especially from the late third to the first millennium BCE.¹⁵ Fundamental as these catalogues continue to be for the establishment of a firm body of data upon which scientific arguments can be built, their structural peculiarities have obliterated promising avenues of research. These peculiarities include: The illusion of “completeness” when the published corpus is actually highly restricted by typological and administrative factors (e. g., only baked clay figurines from Assur which ended up in Berlin); the preeminence of catalogue entries structured by a rigid system with little or no connections between entries; and, the grouping of the material into seemingly intuitive (“natural”) categories, such as male/female, human/divine, clothed/unclothed, even if this kind of categorization leads to “one groups” or “miscellanea” grab bags including unrelated items which fit nowhere else.¹⁶ Nobody dealing with large quantities of similar objects can deny the usefulness of typological groupings. However, problems do arise when typologies lose their status as mere heuristic tools and become an end in themselves, an ultimate goal of scholarly activity leading to the codification of a certain set of material culture over decades, an ossification into artificial, modern categories not justified by the archaeological record, the fluidity of social interactions with material/visual culture, and the dynamics of socio-cultural history in ancient Western Asia (similarly, Langin-Hooper 2011, 54–59; 2019).

Two minor changes – one methodological, the other organizational – have the potential to unlock more explorative and question-driven investigations into this promising but also highly specialised field of visual culture studies. Instead of imposing one fixed scheme of mutually exclusive typological groupings that largely ignore temporal differences and contextual associations, overlapping patterns of visual and material properties should be named through a coherent vocabulary, structured by chronological and con-

¹⁵ See Langin-Hopper (2011, 9–29) for a recent overview on ancient Western Asian terracotta scholarship with a focus on the Hellenistic period and critical discussion, e. g. on Klengel-Brandt/Cholidis 2006.

¹⁶ For an insightful critique with many similar points on how terracotta figurine “typologies both create the mess and then try to hide it”, see Langin-Hooper (2011, 49–54). She states further: “It is an unfortunately solution, for in relying on the tidiness that typologies create we actually limit or remove from discussion many potentially rewarding avenues of inquiry about the degrees of similarity and differences in figurines, and the ways in which these relationships between objects were thought about in the ancient world.” (Langin-Hooper 2011, 54). As alternative, Langin-Hooper (2011, 57–66. 137) suggests to arrange and continuously re-arrange figurines according to flexible “bundled” features and “fluid associations”. Her features include visual, but also technological, contextual, and human-figurine-interaction related properties.

textual information whenever possible and then arranged and rearranged according to a transparent research agenda. The observed patterns are more likely to be relatable to ancient categorizations, cultural concepts, and social practices, in particular when compared in chronological and interregional perspective and in view of contemporaneous artistic media and textual sources. Secondly, beyond printed catalogues, an accompanying digital publication strategy, at least for basic object and context data, but ideally with searchable technological, iconographic, and stylistic features included, would provide a fruitful starting point for future investigations, statistic evaluation, and transfer of knowledge about this fascinating category of objects to a wider international, and more interdisciplinary audience. The thorough work carried out by E. Klengel-Brandt on these objects will provide a reliable foundation for such an endeavor.

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