

Kneeling bull holding a spouted vessel (Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York)

A small sculpture with dimensions only 16,3 cm in height and 6,3 in width is an interesting example of Proto-Elamite culture (Fig. 1). Purchased in 1966, the sculpture was attributed to present-day southwestern Iran during 3100 B.C. – 2900 B.C¹. Despite the influence of neighbour Mesopotamia, Proto-Elamites seem to be the inventors of writing that accompanied commodity transactions in their own language, a question that has not been entirely resolved yet². The objects they produced and used are today considered as masterpieces.

The figure is made of separated silver pieces that were hammered into shape, fitted with other pieces and put together with silver solder and inside of the sculpture are small pebbles³. It looks like a bovine animal, a bull, in a human posture with some elements of human body as well⁴. The bull kneels and holds a small container, a vessel which can spout liquid. The figure has a bull head with large spiral horns. The cranium is connected by neck to shoulders that seem a bit more human than cow as well as the upper part of the arms⁵. On the contrary, the lower parts of the forelegs are bovine, slightly shortened and ended by hooves that hold the container⁶. The lower part of the body is clothed in a long garment with quite simple repeating ornament ordered in lines. The shape of the body is human, even better said, feminine. The rear legs that the figurine is kneeling on are not flat. That means that the modelled figure has never been able to stand without any kind of support⁷.

¹ Hansen, D. P., *Art of the Early City States*, in *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millenium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, J. Aruz ed., New York, 2003., pp: 43.

² Pittman, H., *The Proto-Elamite Period*, in *The Royal City of Susa. Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre*, P. O. Harper, J. Aruz, F. Tallon eds., New York, 1992, pp: 68.; Hessari, M., Saeedi, S., *New Perspectives from the Proto-Elamite Horizon in the Center of the Iranian Plateau*, «International Journal of Humanities», vol 24(4), (2017), pp. 33.

³ Benzel, K., et al., *Art of the Ancient Near East. A Resource of Educators*, New York, 2010, pp: 56.; The same technique of hammered silver was used for a figure of antelope from the same era (image 1).

⁴ Hansen, D. P., *A Proto-Elamite Silver Figurine in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, «Metropolitan Museum Journal», vol 3/1970, pp. 5-14.

⁵ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 5-14.

⁶ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 5-14.

⁷ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 7.

There are many uncertain aspects of the object that the scholars focus on. One of them is the sex of the figure and whether it is truly a bull. The features are without any doubt bovine. However, I would like to point out, that the human lower part of the figure is apparently feminine. As argued by Edith Porada, the curly features might be connected to depiction of females⁸. She believes that a little sculpture of a lion (from the same period as the kneeling bull) is female because of spiral curves on its back. If that was right, could the large horns of our silver „bull“, that are curved almost to a circle be a sign of a female⁹, of a cow in this case? On the other hand, the shoulders of the figure look quite masculine¹⁰. And as it is written below, the bovine that are very commonly depicted in Proto-Elamite era might be a symbol of strength and force – cosmic or natural¹¹. Such signs are usually connected to bulls. However, we don't know really much about their mythology, therefore in my point of view it might still be open to deeper discussion, because if it was a cow and not a bull, it may change the whole narrative of the Proto-Elamites' visual language.

Another important question to ask is about the function. Vessels in ancient world were very often objects used for the act of libation¹². Pouring water, wine, oil or another liquid onto an altar or another sacred object in order to gift and communicate with worshiped divinity. But the little stones inside of the silver sculpture offer another explanation. Thanks to the hidden but free-to-move pebbles inside, the figure might have been used as a noisemaker¹³. Because of the unstable shape of the bull it is very probable that this object was meant for active use in ritual performances while holding in hands¹⁴. Is it possible that both hypotheses were right, and the noise was part of the libation ritual in a form of music or creating of sound to help communicate with the deity?

⁸ Porada, E., *A Leonine Figure of the Protoliterate Period of Mesopotamia*, «Journal of the American Oriental Society», vol 70/4 (1950), pp. 224.

⁹ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 8.

¹⁰ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 12.

¹¹ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 12-13; Benzel, K., 2010, pp. 14.

¹² Pittman, H., 1992, pp. 21

¹³ Hansen, D. P., 2003, pp. 43

¹⁴ Benzel, K., 2010, pp. 56

That leads me to the last part, depiction. Even though it used to be probably part of rituals for people to dress in animal skin, this shall not be the case.¹⁵ However, it was very common to picture animals in human postures, in fact as we can say thanks to another sculptures and tablets that have been found¹⁶, the focus of Proto-Elamite art is more on animals, such as bulls/cows, lions, caprids and sheep than on people. It is possible that it represents some deity by their own attribute (as the Sumerian storm god Adad was represented by a bull¹⁷). Another hypothesis says that bovine animals were used as a symbol of nature powers. It is very often depicted with lion, usually in a combat. Both of the animals are connected to strength and fertility, meaning different nature forces fighting together¹⁸. Analogous meaning describes these fights as symbols of cosmic forces¹⁹. The last potential solution is depiction of members of society²⁰ – as long as Proto-Elamites didn't picture humans much, but gave animals human postures, it is also possible, that the animals could be a representation of certain people.

¹⁵ Hansen, D. P., 1970, pp. 14.

¹⁶ Yeganeh, S. J., 2021, pp. 171-187.

¹⁷ Hansen, D. P., 2003.

¹⁸ Hansen, D. P., 2003.

¹⁹ Amiet, P., *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, Paris, 1961, pp. 19, in Hansen, D. P., *A Proto-Elamite Silver Figurine in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, «Metropolitan Museum Journal», vol 3/1970, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ Yeganeh, S. J., *Correlation of Sealings and Content on Proto-Elamite Tablets: Four Unpublished Sealings in the National Museum of Iran*, «Iranica Antiqua », vol LVI (2021), pp. 176

Images

Image 1: Kneeling bull with a spouted vessel, Iran, Proto-Elamite Period, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, from Hansen, D. P., *Art of the Early City States*, in *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millenium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, J. Aruz ed., New York, 2003, pp. 43

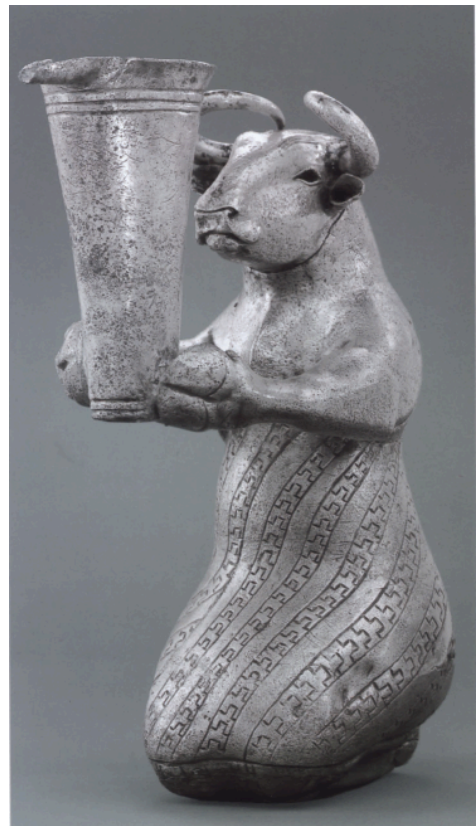
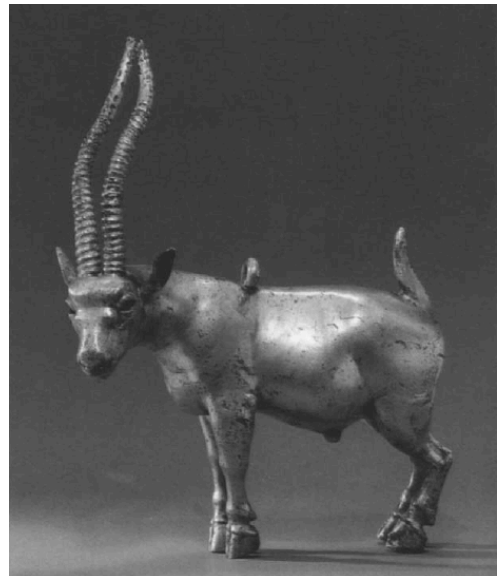


Image 2: Antelope, Iran, Proto-Elamite Period, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, from Pittman, H., *The Proto-Elamite Period*, in *The Royal City of Susa. Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre*, P. O. Harper, J. Aruz, F. Tallon eds., New York, 1992, pp. 68



Resources:

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