



A Lapis Lazuli Female Statuette “La Déesse-mère” from the Jiroft Civilization, South-East Iran (3rd millennium BCE)

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Abstract

South-East Iran is a region of great archaeological significance, with diverse physical landscapes and a rich urban phase in the third millennium BCE. Recent archaeological discoveries in the Halil Rud Valley (Kerman province, Iran) brought to light a hitherto unknown civilization, the so-called “Jiroft or Halil Rud Civilization” which generally dates to the third millennium BCE. As a result of the early 2000s’s widespread looting in this region, numerous sites were plundered and severely damaged and thousands of the burial goods ended up on the black market. Although illegal digs in the region have been halted, there are still countless ancient objects in the hands of local people far more than those confiscated. The present paper deals with one of these finds from the Jiroft civilization. It presents a small Bronze Age object; a semi-precious stone statuette at present in the property of a villager living in the surroundings of Jiroft. The statuette comes from illegal excavations in the Halil Rud Valley (Southern Kerman, Iran) and represents a standing female personage. Although the discovery lot of the statuette is unclear, but it probably comes from the plundered cemetery of Mahtotabad (second half of the third millennium BCE), pertaining to the urban center of Konar Sandal. It is made of lapis lazuli, a rock notoriously imported from Afghanistan, but the evidence indicates that it was manufactured in the Jiroft area. This early Bronze Age statuette is discussed with synoptic reviews of other female sculptures in coeval ancient Mesopotamia, Elam and Egypt. Presenting the uncommon iconography of a breastfeeding female, or mother goddess, the statuette hints to an important religious identity, possibly materializing the symbolic role of breast feeding in the adoption of deified kings by goddesses.

Keywords: Southeast Iran, Jiroft Civilization, Bronze Age, Lapis Lazuli, Mother Goddess.

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Introduction

In early 2000s, a massive looting occurred in the valley of Halil Rud in the Kerman province, South-East Iran (Fig 1). Notice and pictures of thousands of confiscated burial goods, especially elaborated carved chlorite vessels, from a dozen of looted necropolises of the Halil Rud valley hit the media. The discoveries led to bringing to light a lost civilization, so-called “Jiroft or Halil Rud Civilization” which generally is dated back to the third millennium BCE. A wider recognition followed through books illustrating the types and the impressive iconography of hundreds of objects recovered from grave looters,¹ all soon bouncing in popular archaeology magazines. Scientific reports dealing with the ancient settlements and ecological conditions of the valley and the first results of the scientific excavations by Y. Madjidzadeh at Konar Sandal, appeared in the following years (Madjidzadeh and Pittman 2008). It seems likely that the Jiroft area should be considered the core of the production and probably of the distribution of large numbers of chlorite artefacts of the previously labeled “intercultural style”.² These carved soft stone vessels with a quite distinct iconography have been widely discussed (among others, de Miroschedj 1973; Kohl 2001, Pittman 2018). In the same years Steinkeller attributed the ancient toponym and ethnonym of Marḥaši to Jiroft (Steinkeller 1982; 2006).

In 2003, Youssef Madjidzadeh started archaeological excavations at the Konar Sandal archaeological complex in the Jiroft plain. Excavations at Konar Sandal South have revealed an Early Bronze Age large mud-brick citadel which was surrounded by a massive defensive wall, built in the



◀ Fig. 1: Map showing the location of Konar Sandal Archaeological Sites in Iran (Authors, 2022).

centre of a large lower town. Although there is still much to learn about this center, the results are a clear testimony to the power, wealth and social stratification of this major urban and political center during the early Bronze Age (Perrot 2003, Madjidzadeh 2003, Eskandari et al. 2019). This paper deals with one of the exceptional artifacts of the Jiroft civilization that opens new windows into the religion and conceptual beliefs of the early urban world of Halil Rud Valley. It is a lapis lazuli statuette of a female character, perhaps a goddess, breastfeeding a baby.

Description

The statuette is 14 cm high and 5 cm wide at the shoulders and 7 cm at the skirt (Figs 2-5). It is an elaborate small sculpture: the female is standing and nurses a baby. Her lower body is dressed while the upper body is naked. She has a long skirt decorated by dotted diamond designs surrounded by deep folds, and the feet are not shown. She wears a crown that appears to include six denticulations.

She has long hair and wears two necklaces, the lower one made of large rounded beads or pendants. Her hairstyle includes four braids that fall down the back and end in a curl at the height of the waist. The woman has a belt around the waist. She holds an infant: the left hand supports the legs of the baby, while the right one rests on the latter's belly. The right hand supports its head as the newborn suckles. The baby's right hand rests below the right breast. The statuette has marked facial features: a strong triangular nose, bulging almond-like eyes deeply carved below the eyebrows, and smiles with lips protruding above a rounded chin. Figurines in various materials of similar subjects were found in religious-related contexts in Elam and Mesopotamia. Local villagers claim that it was found in the plundered cemetery of Mahtoutabad, about 800 m east of Konar Sandal. If the information is true, it would indicate that the image had been originally offered in a burial context related to Early Bronze Age.3

Materiality and the Exotic Good

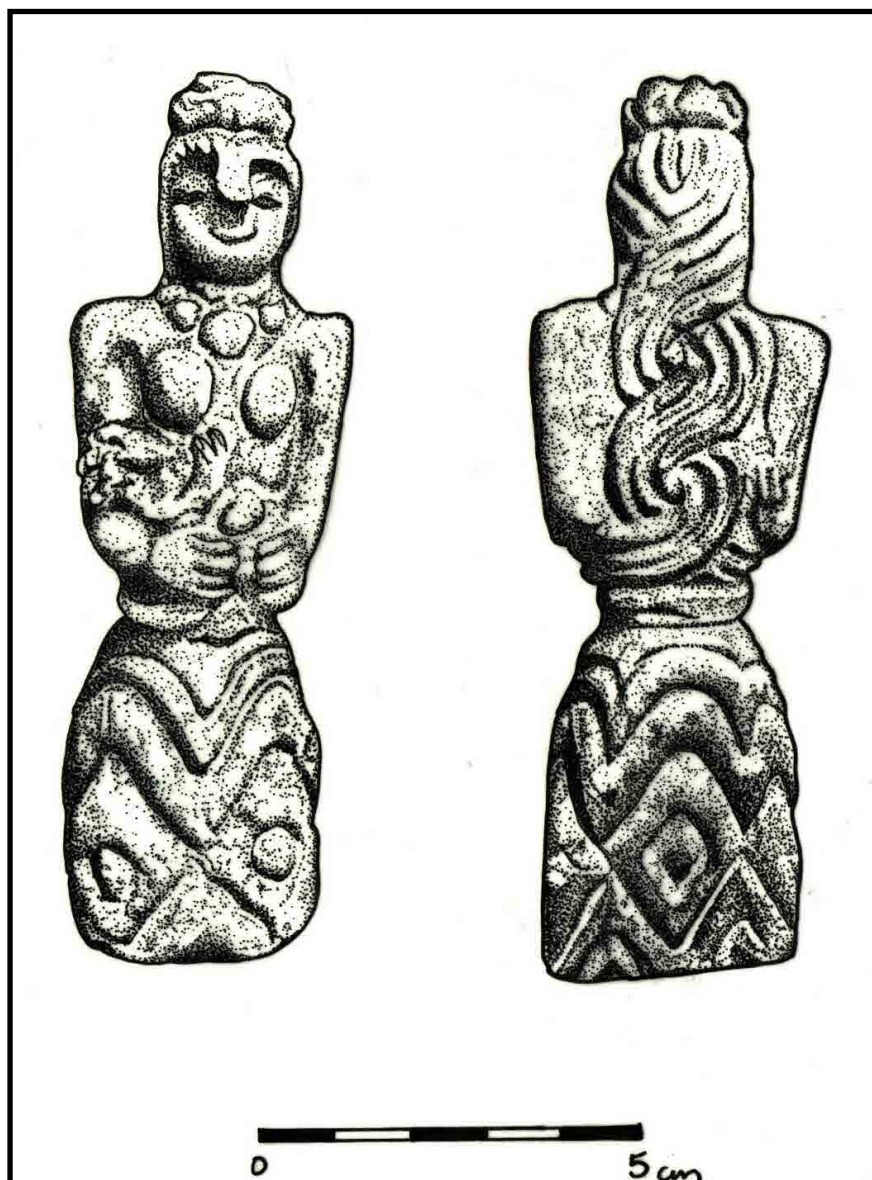
As the Iranian Plateau is devoid of lapis lazuli, it is evident that the material for manufacturing this statuette had been imported. In Near Eastern archaeology, Badakhshan in Afghanistan is considered as the only point of origin of the lapis lazuli trade (Tosi 1974; Casanova 2013; Vidale and Lazzari 2016). Although there are other lapis lazuli objects discovered in the Halil Rud area, datable to the 3rd millennium BCE, this female statuette is the largest one (See; Madjidzadeh 2003). A number of lapis



▲ Fig. 2: View of the Jiroft statuette discussed in the article (Authors, 2022).



▲ Fig. 3: View of the Jiroft statuette discussed in the article (Authors, 2022).



▲ Fig. 4: Photograph of the statuette in profile (Authors, 2022).

◀ Fig. 5: The drawing of the Lapis Lazuli Statuette (Authors, 2022).



lazuli beads were found while sieving the dumps of illegal excavations at Mahtoutabad (Massimo Vidale, personal communication). Second for size comes a confiscated pin-like object in Jiroft museum, almost 60 cm long and possibly interpreted as a distaff, which ends in a large finial or fastener made of a high quality, indigo-like high quality blue lapis lazuli carved in form of a “temple” or “hut” door (Desset et al. 2020).

Representation of the “Mother Goddess” in the Early Civilizations

Representations of women with a child at their breast are often seen in the regions of the Ancient Near East in nearly all historical periods. The nature

of these images has long been debated: whether they depict goddesses feeding a child, usually identified with a young king, or more generally women as mothers nourishing their child. On the one hand, the identification of the women as goddesses and the child as a young king clearly has strong religious and cultural implications on the role and meaning of kingship (Nadali 2014). The office of kingship is strictly and explicitly linked to the sphere of the divine; the king is adopted by a goddess and he is even nourished by her. Inscriptions of Mesopotamian kings usually emphasize this divine affiliation.⁴ On the other hand, the interpretation of the women as human nourishing a child has more than one possible meaning, generally associated with the idea of motherhood and fertility. In this case, it would appear that we are dealing with non-divine women, and one can speak either of amulets created for the protection of women and children, or of idols as an expression of popular cults related to the positive outcome of a birth (Kuhne 1978: 510). Historically, in 1800 BCE, the Babylonian King Hammurabi issued laws formalizing the relationship between the wet nurse and the employer. According to Babylonian scriptures, breastfeeding used to last for 2-3 years (Gruber 1989).

In this research, the representations of breastfeeding females in the religion of the early civilizations of southwestern Asia are taken into consideration implying the divine character of the Jiroft Statuette.

Mesopotamia: Ninhursag, also spelled Ninhursaga (Sumerian), and Belit-ili (Akkadian), in Mesopotamian religion is the mother goddess. The mother goddess under her name Ninhursag was related to the royal ideology of several states in Mesopotamia.⁵ It was common for kings of the Sumerian city-states to claim a superior relation to her, she appeared to be the king's wet-nurse and mother in the royal inscriptions.⁶ A newly published text from Woolley's excavation at Ur held by the British Museum is dealing with fashioning and decoration of a copper statue breastfeeding a suckling baby (dumu-ga) (Verderame 2021). In Sumer, each city had a goddess as its owner and ruler. These city goddesses are further assumed to have ruled every aspect of human life (Steinkeller 1999: 113). This goddess is also seen in the literary texts of ancient Mesopotamia, "Enki and Ninhursag" and "Enki and Ninmah" are the relevant myths in the Sumerian literature which refer to the role of this goddess as the mother and wet-nurse of kings (For a detail discussion, see; Rodin 2014). A clay plaque from Telloh (ancient Girsu) presenting a female breastfeeding a baby dated to the second half of 3rd millennium BCE (Fig 6).

Egypt: in ancient Egypt, from an early time the wet-nurse of the king



◀ Fig. 6: Clay plaque from Telloh (After: AO 12570, Musée du Louvre)

and queen played an important part at the court. She was called “the great wet-nurse, who nourished the god, with sweet breast, mighty with respect to nursing, the great wet-nurse of the lord of two lands, who beautified the Horus.” Hence, at the court of Akhenaton (1363-1347 BCE) the great wet-nurse of the queen, who suckled the goddess [i.e., the queen, who was considered a goddess] was often a very influential personality (Gruber 1989).

Elam/Hatamti:

Southwest Iran has accommodated one of the early civilizations which has its own evolutionary pathway, from first villages to empires. It came to reside in a vast area from lowlands in Khuzestan and Bushehr provinces to the highlands from central to southern Zagros (Fars) regions.⁷ Thanks to the written cuneiform texts, we are familiar with the religious beliefs of the Elamite world and their gods and goddesses (See; Potts 1999, 2016). Some figurines, mostly made of terracotta, were found in southwest Iran which depict breastfeeding females (Fig 7). One of these mold-cast figurines from Susa dates back to the Sikkalmah period (Fig 7, a) and is interpreted in

term of the symbolic role of breast feeding in the adoption of deified kings by goddesses (Álvarez-Mon 2020, 277). Wet-nursing female figurines were also found in the Susiana plain related to the Middle Elamite period (second half of 2nd millennium BCE) (Fig 7, b-d). Women are shown with naked infants of a range of ages. Unlike the nursing goddesses of the Sukkalmah period, they appear to be human—whether mothers or wet-nurses employed by the urban upper class (Álvarez-Mon 2020, 380). In view of high infant mortality, they could have been prophylactic images intended to prevent demons from killing “snatching” babies or causing suckling problems (For Mesopotamia, see; Scurlock 1991 and for Elam see; Álvarez-Mon 2020).

This kind of figurines _mother goddesses or wet-nurses_ are the less common ones in the Elamite world. They have been found at Susa and at Choga Zanbil in the temple of the goddess Pinikir. The figurines of Choga Zanbil were interpreted as depictions of the goddess Pinikir nursing a baby (Ghirshman 1968: 13). The breastfeeding females have been found in both religious (mostly) and domestic contexts (Ghirshman 1966, 1968).⁸



Fig. 7: Terracotta wet-nursing females from Elam; a: from the Sukkalmah period, b-d: related to the Middle Elamite period (After: Álvarez-Mon 2020). ►

Eastern Civilizations:

Interestingly, this female personage is absent in the eastern civilizations of southwestern Asia like Harappa and Oxus. Based on the present information, Jiroft area is the eastern-most region in the ancient world which is presenting this goddess.

Concluding Remarks

The Jiroft statuette is an elaborate artefact made of a semi-precious exotic material which indicates the noble status of breastfeeding character in Jiroft, other parallel examples from Iranian plateau are mostly made of

terracotta. It seems that Jiroft Civilization went underway in the early third millennium BCE and collapsed at the end of the millennium (See Madjidzadeh and Pittman 2008 for absolute dates for Konar Sandal sites). Konar Sandal area where probably the statuette was found is the center of the Jiroft early urban landscape. Broadly, we believe this statuette can be assigned to the urban phase of Halil Rud cultural sequence.

Human and animals with supernatural powers are depicted on the chlorite vessels and seals of Halil Rud region⁹ which all represent male divinity while the presence of this mother goddess in the Halil Rud valley underlines the significant role of women in Jiroft civilization.

Based on the comparative studies, we interpret this lapis lazuli breastfeeding female as the “La Déesse-mère” rather than being a wet-nurse that was paid to care for a child from an upper class’s family. Hence, existence of female divinity could convey a duality of male and female deities in the pantheon of the Halil Rud world. Still, we know very little about the religion of the early civilizations of eastern Iran due to the lack of written texts, we may have to wait for further fieldwork investigations to know much more about the gods and goddess of the Jiroft civilization; an example is a life-size clay statue in a holy painted shrine discovered from Konar Sandal South royal citadel.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the villager who permitted us to publish this statuette from the Jiroft civilization. We are also thankful to Prof. M. Vidale and F. Juercke for their comments on the draft of this paper and K. Jahangiri for drawing the statuette.

Endnote

1. For more details see: Madjidzadeh 2003, Jiroft: The Earliest Oriental Civilization; Piran and Hesari, Cultural around Halil Roud and Jiroft; Piran and Madjidzadeh, Objects from the Jiroft treasury; Perrot and Madjidzadeh, “L’Iconographie des Vases et Objects en Chlorite de Jiroft”, Perrot J. and Madjidzadeh Y., (eds.) 2003, “Jiroft, Fabuleuse Découverte en Iran” and “A travers l’ornementation des vases et objets en chlorite de Jiroft”.

2. Apart from the published chlorite vessels, many vessels remained unpublished and still await study in the storerooms of the museums of Jiroft and Kerman. In January 2020, a team, headed by N. Eskandari documented around one thousand artefacts including many objects in chlorite confiscated by the Police forces in the surroundings of Jiroft (Eskandari et.al. in preparation).

3. It should be mentioned that this statuette is kept by the villagers, who just allowed us to document it. We are actively trying to convince them to give it to the local museum.

4. See; for example, the claim of divine motherhood by Eannatum in the third millennium BCE (Frayne 2008: E.1.9.3.1) and Assurbanipal in the first millennium BCE (Hymn to Ishtar of Nineveh and Arbela, Livingstone 1989: 10–13).

5. For the roles of mother goddess in Sumerian Mesopotamia, see Rodin 2014. The author has explored aspects of birth, death and power as expressed by the Sumerian mother goddesses in the context of early state formation of Sumer.

6. For the Early Dynastic IIIb period, see the relevant inscriptions of Eanatum, Enanatum I and Enmetena of Lagaš (Steible and Behrens 1982), and Lugalzagesi of Uruk. See also the Early Dynastic IIIa kings Mesilim of Kiš and Anepada of Ur (Frayne 2008: 71, 397, 435). For the Ur III period, see the royal inscriptions 3 and 4 of Lu-Utu of Umma (Steible 1991), of Gudea of Lagaš, Statue A and B (Steible 1991), as well as Ur-Namma and Šulgi of Ur (Frayne 1997: 74, 125, 138). For a detail discussion, see; Rodin 2014.

7. For Susa, see; the results of (19th and 20th century) excavations by French missions headed by Loftus, De Mecquenem, Ghirshman, Perrot. For Haft Tepe, see Negahban, 1991 and For Chogha Zanbil, see Ghirshman 1966.

8. Although the old investigations at Susa are the poorly controlled excavations, but it seems that they were not found in burials.

9. For mythological interpretations of the iconography of chlorite vessels see Vidale 2015, for seals see Madjidzadeh and Pittman 2008.

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یک مجسسه الهه مادر از جنس سنگ لاجورد، تمدن جیرفت (هزاره سوم پیش از میلاد)

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چکیده

جنوب شرق ایران دارای منظرگاه‌های متنوع طبیعی است و از لحاظ باستان‌شناسی، منظرگاه‌های شهری و تمدن‌های مهمی از هزاره سوم پیش از میلاد را در خود جای داده است. یکی از این مناطق، حوزه فرهنگی هلیل رود یا منطقه جیرفت در جنوب استان کرمان است. کشفیات باستان‌شناسی طی دو دهه گذشته در این منطقه موجب شناسایی و معرفی یک تمدن اولیه شکوفا گردید که تحت عنوان «تمدن جیرفت» شناخته می‌شود. در سال ۱۳۷۹ حفریات گسترده غیرمجاز در سراسر حوزه فرهنگی هلیل رود صورت گرفت و در پی آن، آسیب جدی به محوطه‌های باستانی، عمدتاً گورستان‌ها، وارد آمد. در نتیجه این غارت گسترده، اشیای باستانی فراوانی از بافت اصلی خود خارج شد و وارد بازار سیاه شد. تعدادی از این اشیاء خوشبختانه توسط دستگاه‌های امنیتی کشف شد و داخل موزه‌های کشور جای گرفته‌اند. این مقاله به یک شیء باستانی بسیار خاص و مهم از تمدن جیرفت می‌پردازد که از حفریات غیرمجاز به دست آمده است. این شیء یک مجسسه سنگی از جنس لاجورد است که با هنرمندی، یک مادر در حال شیردادن به یک نوزاد را نشان می‌دهد. اگرچه محل کشف دقیق آن مشخص نیست اما طبق ادعای مردم محلی، این شیء از گورستان محطوط‌آباد جیرفت به دست آمده است. محطوط‌آباد گورستان اصلی شهر عصر مفرغی کنارصندل است که به طور کلی قدمت آن به نیمه دوم هزاره سوم پیش از میلاد بازمی‌گردد. با توجه به این‌که منابع لاجورد تاکنون در منطقه جیرفت شناسایی نشده است، به احتمال زیاد سنگ لاجورد جهت ساخت این مجسمه وارد شده است و اما مجسمه مذکور در دشت جیرفت تولید شده است. در این پژوهش علاوه بر معرفی دقیق این مجسمه، به جایگاه مجسمه‌های مشابه در تمدن‌های اولیه عصر مفرغ از مصر تا بین‌النهرین و عیلام پرداخته شده است.

کلیدواژگان: جنوب شرق ایران، تمدن جیرفت، عصر مفرغ، سنگ لاجورد، الهه مادر.

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