

## A STUDY OF FROG-SHAPED ARTEFACTS IN MESOPOTAMIA

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### Introduction

In the ancient Near East, animals are characteristically depicted in reliefs and on pottery. Among them, vultures, foxes and other animal figures were carved in relief on stone columns at Göbekli Tepe in South-East Anatolia from the Neolithic period, while the wall paintings at Çatal Höyük in South Anatolia depicted giant bulls, lions and other animals [Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2014]. Then, in the Uruk period, lion and bull designs were used as symbols of power [ibid.]. Furthermore, animals were sacrificed and often depicted on temple implements. In particular, during the Hittite period, earthenware and metal vessels began to be made with rhytons in the shape of animals and animal heads, which are believed to have been used in temple rituals [ibid.].

Similarly, many artefacts in the form of small animals such as frogs have been found. Frog-shaped artefacts have been found at the 'Usiyeh in the second millennium BC.<sup>1)</sup> However, their use has not yet been determined, as they were either 'weights' or 'amulets'. Examples of frog-shaped artefacts have also been found from Kültepe in Central Anatolia [Kulakoğlu 2017: p. 348]. Thus, frog motifs are frequently used, particularly in Mesopotamia, but why was it necessary for them to be in the shape of a frog? This study therefore considers the meaning of the frog motif and its uses.

### Meaning of Frogs

To begin with, frogs were a symbol of life and fertility in the early dynasties of Egypt around 3000 BC, when the flooding of the Nile produced millions of frogs [Cowie 2018]. As a result, in Egyptian mythology, the goddess 'Heket' and the male god 'Kuku' were depicted as frogs [ibid.]. The goddess Heket, who is also the goddess of water and the symbol of the midwife responsible for conception and childbirth, is represented by a frog head [Wanner 1999]. For this reason, Egyptian women often wore metal amulets in the shape of frogs to favor her [Wanner 1999; Page 2018].

In addition, the flooding of the Nile was an important event for agriculture, which supplied water to the fields, and was considered a symbol of abundance, along with the subsequent appearance of frogs in large numbers [Wanner 1999]. Furthermore, the frog became a symbol for the number 'hefnu', meaning '100,000' or 'huge number' [ibid.]. In this regard, Wanner [1999] notes that the amazing fertility of frogs and their association with water, which is so important to human life, may have led humans to view frogs as a powerful and positive symbol.

In ancient Mesopotamia, settlement sites can also be found around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where the people living there established a centralised society [Page 2018]. And the people of that time also attached great importance to the rivers here, treating the frogs there as symbols of fertility and life [ibid.]. In the Sumerian poem Inanna and Enki, the first creature that the goddess Inanna tricked the water god Enki into giving the gods an order to send some water creatures for Enki to retrieve it was a frog [Cowie 2018]. Therefore it seems that frogs came to be depicted in reliefs, sculptures and objects as a symbol of life-giving water [Page 2018]. Furthermore,

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1) Similar motifs often unearthed include ducks rarely lion and boar heads in Mesopotamia [Melein 2018: p. 32].

focusing on the life cycle of frogs, they are known to take on a completely different shape when they transform from juvenile to adult. Ancient peoples revered their shape as a symbol of rebirth [Cowie 2018].

However, the frog has not always been interpreted in a positive light as a symbol of fertility. For example, the second plague of Egypt described in Exodus 8:6 was the work of frogs, and in the New Testament, frogs are associated with unclean spirits in Revelation 16:13 [ibid.]. Thus, the social and symbolic importance of frogs has been preserved in many documents since antiquity [Page 2018], and it is clear that frogs were also familiar in ancient Mesopotamia.

### **Frog-shaped Artefacts**

Examples of frog-shaped artefacts from the Mesopotamian region are given from museum sources. One of the examples, the British Museum has a collection of frog-shaped artefacts made of lapis lazuli. Among them are a frog-shaped artefact from Larsa, measuring  $2.2 \times 1.2$  cm [The British Museum: Museum No. 122106], and a frog-shaped artefact from Ur, measuring  $1.67 \times 1.87$  cm [The British Museum: Museum No. 120650]. Furthermore, a reddish-brown frog-shaped artefact from Mesopotamia, dating back to the third millennium BC, measures 2.06 cm in length [The Walters Art Museum: Access No. 42.1462]. In the 2nd millennium BC, a hematite frog-shaped artefact ( $0.7 \times 0.9 \times 1.3$  cm) has been excavated from ‘Usiyeh [Oguchi and Tsuneki 2022: No. 19, List of figs. 1, 2 and 3 on p. 43]. These all have in common that they are made of stone and are 1–2 cm in size.

Other examples may have been used as weights. One frog-shaped artefact in the British Museum, made of striped agate with a hole in the centre to allow it to be threaded onto a cord, dates from the Akkadian, ca 2400 BC to 2200 BC, measuring  $2 \times 2.7$  cm and weighing 8.761 g [The British Museum: Museum No. 123555]. As one shekel, a unit of weight at the time, is approximately 8.3 g [Dercksen 1996: p. 251], the museum representative is of the opinion that if the artefact had been used as a weight, it would have been used as a unit of one shekel [The British Museum: Museum No. 123555]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art also has a collection of diorite or andesite frog-shaped weights from the Old Babylonian period, dating from around 2000 BC to 1600 BC [The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Accession No. 1988.301]. It measures  $12.3 \times 21.8$  cm, and on the frog’s throat is an Akkadian inscription that reads “a frog [weighing] 10 minas, a legitimate weight of the god Shamash, belonging to Iddin-Nergal, son of Arkat-ili- damqa.” [ibid.]. The inscription suggests that the frog weighs about 5 kg, considering that one mina weighs about 500 g [Dercksen 1996: p. 251]. These two examples also correspond to the standards of weight at the time, and it is very likely that they served as weights.

### **Conclusions**

This section discusses the meaning of frogs and their uses. In general, frogs have long been strongly associated with rivers. This is partly because frogs lived in the water as juveniles during their development, and because it was essential for them to live around bodies of water even after they had reached adulthood. Moreover, because frogs were prolific, they were treated as a symbol of fertility and life, and are often mentioned in mythology. The use of relics in the shape of frogs seems to have varied according to the size of the relic. For example, small relics with a diameter of 1–2 cm were used as amulets to be worn. In addition, artefacts excavated from Mesopotamia indicate that some objects larger than 2 cm were evidently used as weights. Thus, it is clear that frogs were a familiar part of people’s lives and were closely related to them.

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