

Marcin Z. Paszke

<https://doi.org/10.26485/AAL/2023/69/11>

**THE IMPERCEPTIBLE SCORPION: A SHORT STUDY ON THE VISUAL
AND SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF AN EROTIC STAMP SEAL IMPRESSION
FOUND AT TEPE GAWRA**

ABSTRACT This paper examines a group of erotic stamp seal impressions found at Tepe Gawra, chiefly in the context of ancient Mesopotamian glyptic art. The aim of the work is to reinterpret those curious objects found with a representation of a mating couple on a seal, labelled by Tobler as no. 86 with the image of a scorpion. The article focuses on the motif of a scorpion, its morphology, its iconography, its cultural and symbolic meaning. The symbol of a scorpion, deeply immersed in the sphere of fertility and magic, seems to play a key role for the proper understanding of the visual language of the erotic scenes found at Tepe Gawra.

Key words: Tepe Gawra, Tepe Giyan, scorpion, snake, ritual sex, sexual intercourse, Chalcolithic

ABSTRAKT Niniejszy artykuł analizuje odciski pieczęci stemplowych ze scenami erotycznymi ze stanowiska Tepe Gawra. Zabytki z Tepe Gawra zostały porównane z paralelnymi przykładami gliptyki mezopotamskiej. Celem prezentowanej analizy jest reinterpretacja niezwykle ciekawego obiektu występującego, wespół z przedstawieniem spółkującej pary, na pieczęci nr 86 opublikowanej przez Toblera. Analiza zgromadzonego materiału sugeruje, że w istocie owym zagadkowym obiektem może być skorpion. Optyka artykułu skupia się głównie na skorpionie – jego morfologii, ikonografii oraz znaczeniu symboliczno-kulturowym. Prawdopodobnie symbol skorpiona był głęboko zakorzeniony w sferze płodności i magii, które to odgrywają kluczową rolę w zrozumieniu wizualnego języka ikonografii pieczęci odkrytych w Tepe Gawra.

Among the examples of the Tepe Gawra glyptic art, as published by Tobler, one extraordinary seal impression under the catalogue number of 86¹ (Fig. 1) is worthy of special attention. It shows an erotic scene which is accompanied, alongside other designs, by an enigmatic object identified by Tobler² as a mammal's head. The present investigation tries to challenge this interpretation since this recognition seems to be far from its true visual and symbolic meaning. Two further seals (Figs. 2, 3) published by Speiser³ and Tobler⁴ play a significant role in the understanding of the topic, thus they will be discussed here in a detail as well. The remaining material analysed in this paper places the erotic scenes mentioned above inside a Mesopotamian cultural context. It is important to emphasize that the present research is focused

mainly on scorpions, despite the fact that the figure of the snake plays an important role in this topic. Snakes in northern Mesopotamian art should be the subject of further detailed investigation. However, discussion of this interesting phenomenon will be reduced here to the essential minimum.

The meaning of snake symbolism in the Early Uruk period is challenging, but it can be compared to a later Mesopotamian cultural tradition. Pientka-Hintz⁵ demonstrated that snakes were obviously seen as venomous and dangerous creatures, but they also held clear healing and apotropaic traits used in magic. Most importantly, they often come together in this context with scorpions and share chthonic and fertility features⁶ with them. Pientka-Hintz⁷ points out that the snake cult observed in ancient Mesopotamia seems to be of foreign

¹ Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 86 and Pl. LXXXIXc.

² Tobler 1950: 183.

³ Speiser 1935: Pl. LV b and LVIII, no. 41.

⁴ Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 87.

⁵ Pientka Hintz 2009-2011: 212-216.

⁶ Pizzimenti, Polcaro 2021: 313-317; Van Buren 1937-1939: 12.

⁷ Pientka Hintz 2009-2011: 214-215.

origin. This cult was probably adopted from ancient Iran and it is usually associated with Elamite and Subartian cultural backgrounds, not to mention the ophidian-like seated gods in eastern Mesopotamia, mainly at Ešnunna, Dēr and Susa. The snake's affinity with fertility is clearly expressed in Tepe Gawra glyptic art by the existence of two seals (see discussion below) bearing the representation of a snake symbol beside a mating couple, whereas the snake's further magical characteristics may be expressed by another seal impression⁸ showing a humanoid figure surrounded by entwined snakes.

Seals and seals impressions in Tepe Gawra's stratigraphy

Tepe Gawra is located in the piedmont area, approx. 20 km north from the modern city of Mosul. It is one of the most important archaeological sites in northern Mesopotamia. Extensive excavations campaigns carried out in Tepe Gawra by Speiser⁹ and Bache¹⁰ in the 1920s and 1930s uncovered an impressive collection of artifacts and remains of monumental architecture as well as examples of local mortuary practices¹¹ from the Late Chalcolithic period. Tepe Gawra's importance derives from its extraordinary material, including objects made of gold, electrum, lapis-lazuli, turquoise, obsidian and carnelian.¹² Gawra XIII-XIIA witnessed the emergence of a local temple household at the end of the Ubaid period, whereas level XII, usually labelled as a transitional phase to the Early Uruk period (LC1), revealed the existence of a small town-centre with craft production and trading based on exchange. Gawra XII collapsed violently, which is marked by the burnt residues and the skeletons of dead bodies found in the streets, some of them sprawled on their faces or half-turned on their backs with arms stretched out, or with stones on their backs. Levels XIA/B-XI/Xa which designate the Early Uruk (LC2) period clearly show that the settlement had risen from the rubble. Thus, the so-called Round House, used as a storage and defensive citadel, the surrounding

domestic buildings and the temple are vivid examples of the site's rebirth. Tepe Gawra of levels X-IX with its well-developed temple as the central institution, dating back in all probability to the end of the Early Uruk period (LC2), retains its leading urban character on level VIII, which from a chronological point of view sets the beginning of the Early Middle Uruk period (LC3).¹³

Stamp seals and clay sealings with human or humanoid figures begin to appear at Tepe Gawra in levels XIII-XIA. Since they are not existent in the material preceding level XIII, it seems that this phenomenon is clearly connected to the emergence of a local temple administration. The seal impressions with erotic scenes come exclusively from levels XIA, XI and VIII. From a technical standpoint Tepe Gawra's stamp seals are crudely carved, thus the humanoid figures they bear are characterized by simplified bodily features. A vivid example of this phenomenon is observed in the objects from level XII where human bodies are represented with an inverted triangle for the torso, flimsy strokes forming their limbs, and an oblique stroke for the head.¹⁴ The erotic scenes bear some of these features, especially when it comes to the image of the head. For this reason, the human figures from the scenes under discussion are called anthropoids with pointed heads¹⁵ or bird-headed humans¹⁶ by some authors.

Seal impressions with erotic scenes

The clearest example¹⁷ of an erotic scene comes from Gawra XIA (Fig. 1), and shows two human beings in a close contact. The smaller, skinny figure on the left is identified as the male due to the erect penis between his legs, holding the other person by the hips. His much bigger companion who seems to be a woman is backward-facing and bent forward. Her arms are stretched out sideways.¹⁸ However, unlike in the case of the man

⁸ See Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXX, no. 179 and LXXXVIII b.

⁹ Speiser 1927-1928; Speiser 1932; Speiser 1935; Speiser 1937a; Speiser 1937b.

¹⁰ Bache 1933; Bache 1935a; Bache 1935b; Bache 1936.

¹¹ Muller, Bache 1934; Tobler 1950.

¹² Tobler 1950: 82, 88, 90-92; Rothman, Peasnell 1999: 111; Algaze 2005: 72.

¹³ Rothman, Peasnell 1999: 106-109; Rothman 2001: 386-399; Rothman 2002: 54-60, in his opinion chronologically some part of Gawra IX should be assigned to the Early Middle Uruk period; Frangipane 2009; Tobler 1950: 25-26; Porada, Hansen, Dunham, Babcock 1992: 93-95.

¹⁴ Tobler 1950: 182-184.

¹⁵ Schmandt-Besserat 2006: 186-189.

¹⁶ Tobler 1950: 183-184.

¹⁷ Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 86 and Pl. LXXXIXc.

¹⁸ Tobler 1950: 183.

her primary sexual features are not indicated, yet it is almost clear that it is the image of a heterosexual intercourse since the *coitus a tergo* motif is well-defined in the third and second millennium Mesopotamian tradition.¹⁹ The background of the discussed seal impression is filled with several highly enigmatic objects of which only one, to the left of the man will be the subject of a further detailed investigation. This object is composed of an oval elongated core with two growths sticking out at the top, and one at the bottom. Tobler²⁰ considers it as an animal's head with long ears, likely that of a fox or of a donkey. He also believes that another object visible in front of the bent woman may be interpreted as another animal's head, but this time in profile.

In a second example²¹ of an erotic scene discovered in Gawra VIII (Fig. 2) the main design is composed of two figures in *coitus a tergo*. The person to the left is apparently the man, bending forward clinging a woman facing backwards who also bends forward. It seems that the man is holding his partner at the hips or sides, though Speiser²² believes that the female's right arm seems to be holding a man in front. It is also hard to judge whether the man's penis has been shown here at all. Some unclear objects are to be seen to the right of the woman in the background of the seal impression, but their nature remains obscure. However, just over the man's back, there stands a fragmentarily preserved animal image, which takes the shape of a narrow semicircular object with a triangular head. This image is quite popular²³ in prehistoric Near Eastern art and should be identified with a serpent.²⁴ The type of serpent shown in Fig. 2 (and in Fig. 3), on account of the triangular shape of the head, is specifically to be identified with the species *Echis carinatus* or *Echis coloratus*, a saw-scaled viper with highly toxic venom, found across North Africa and the Near East.²⁵

Another seal (Fig. 4) with an erotic motif was found at Tepe Giyan, located in the Lorestān province of modern Iran, southeast of Tepe Gawra.

This object may display a related erotic motif since, as has been demonstrated by Caldwell²⁶ and others²⁷ the glyptic art at Tepe Gawra, at least that of levels XIA-XI, bears many similarities with that of Tepe Giyan. This seal, originally published by Herzfeld,²⁸ shows a couple performing a *coitus a tergo*. The central motif shows a man in an upright position, with his arms stretched out sideways, engaging a woman bent forward who is holding the man's penis with her right hand held to her back, while wielding an unidentified object in her left hand. The background of the design is blank, free of any symbols.

Tepe Giyan yielded at least two more objects that could be further examples of the erotic motif under discussion, but they are difficult to classify due to their unconventional, enigmatic iconography. One seal published by Caldwell²⁹ (Fig. 5) shows a couple in *coitus a tergo*. But since their faces have some animal features, and their hands apparently rest on the ground (?) this sexual act may belong to a quite different local genre. A second seal from Tepe Giyan published by Buchanan³⁰ (Fig. 6) shows two human beings standing close to each other in somewhat bent position. Their silhouettes are reduced to some simple carved strokes, so the image is highly generalized. However, one may speculate that it is a depiction of the well-known *coitus a tergo* motif with certain modification, since the individual to the left (probably the woman) is holding a thin and long object identified by Buchanan³¹ as a snake.

A further example³² of erotic glyptic art (Fig. 3) comes from Gawra XIA and bears a somewhat different image because the central mating couple has been portrayed in a sitting position. Here we encounter two human beings, whose sexual organs have not been indicated. They are seated on a rectangular object perhaps a stand or a couch, or a stool as suggested by Tobler.³³ The couple is facing each other and the criss-crossed layout of their hips and legs leads us to believe that sitting sexual entry is being depicted, when the one of the individuals sits above the other in a half-embrace. The background of the seal is again covered with small unidentified objects, of which only one

¹⁹ See Assante 2002: 29, Fig. 1-3; Legrain 1936: Pl. 18, nos. 368-369, Pl. 19, np. 370.

²⁰ Tobler 1950: 183.

²¹ Speiser 1935: Pl. LV b and LVIII, no. 41.

²² Speiser 1935: 124.

²³ See Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 142 c, e, Pl. 156 c; Denham 2018: 90, TG. 2505; Carter, Hole, Bahrani, Spycket, Aruz 1992: 35, Fig. 3; Frankfort 1935: 29, Fig. 30; Caldwell 1976: 243, no. 125, Giyan 2352.

²⁴ Speiser 1935: 124.

²⁵ Carter, Hole, Bahrani, Spycket, Aruz:1992: 34.

²⁶ Caldwell 1976: 234-235.

²⁷ Matthews, Fazeli Nashli 2022: 137.

²⁸ Herzfeld 1933: 87-88, Abb. 14, no. 2362.

²⁹ Caldwell 1976: 235, 247, no. 95.

³⁰ Buchanan 1967: 275-276, no. 11.

³¹ Buchanan 1967: 275.

³² Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 87.

³³ Tobler 1950: 183.

located to the right of the sitting individual may be clearly identified with a snake, similar to the one depicted on the seal impression discussed above (Fig. 2). Gawra XI yielded a comparable example³⁴ (Fig. 7) of a seal impression with two individuals in the same erotic attitude. Nevertheless, this time the lovemaking couple is sitting on the ground and an arm of at least one of the individuals is raised.³⁵ Definitely no snake image has been detected in its poor background.

The last piece of glyptic art with an image of a mating couple has been noted by Speiser.³⁶ This object found in Gawra VIII is quite problematic due to its unclear iconography. According to Speiser³⁷ it is composed of the following elements: the male and female figures with their legs crossed in an erotic attitude (perhaps the couple is sitting on a fragmentarily preserved bedstead located just under them), and two smaller figures on the sides and a crouched quadruped. Despite Speiser's description it must be pointed out that the central lovemaking couple is the most confusing element of the scene. The confusion stems from the fact that the individual sitting to the right is clearly emphasized, whereas his partner, located to the left, was faintly carved or feebly impressed, with the exception of his bent leg, which supports the argument that the central motif shows a sexual sitting embrace.

Searching for an iconographic formula – the scorpion

The recent discussion prompts us to the conclusion that Tepe Gawra's erotic scenes may be initially divided into three interrelated groups: the first presents an image of sexual intercourse accompanied by the figure of a snake, the second is composed of an image of sexual intercourse image accompanied by an enigmatic mammal-like head, and the third consists of an isolated sexual intercourse image without any recognizable animal figure. Of these groups the second one requires significant further attention. Let us reflect that in Tobler's opinion the object located to the right of

the mating couple on one of the seal impressions³⁸ (Fig. 1) found at Tepe Gawra should be identified as the head of a fox or donkey. It seems that this belief rests on the assumption that the three protuberances growing out of this enigmatic object reflect ears and a muzzle. But if one looks the images of foxes and donkeys in Tobler's publication, it becomes clear that this interpretation is based on seal impressions bearing images of quadrupeds carved in profile³⁹ (Fig. 8, 9, 10). The depiction of the object in Fig. 1 has more similarities in shape with those shown in another piece of glyptic art from Tepe Gawra⁴⁰ (Fig. 11). There the image of a huge standing human figure is shown surrounded V-shaped objects, Tobler's putative animal heads. This means that the identification proposed by Tobler is inconclusive.

I propose a new interpretation based on glyptic and ceramic evidence. I will argue that the shape of this enigmatic object is better interpreted as the image of a scorpion, rather than the head of a quadruped, following Tobler.

For the purposes of this article lack of space dictates that I am constrained to make some generalizations. A scorpion's body architecture is segmented. It is composed of a head (prosoma), an abdomen (mesosoma) and a tail (metasoma). The cephalothorax holds the chelicerae, two pincer-like appendages which point forward, as well as massive pedipalps. Scorpions have eight legs arranged in four sets on each side of the body used for locomotion, and finally a characteristic telson with a poison gland at the apex of its tail.⁴¹

A comparison of Tepe Gawra's scorpion images with other depictions of scorpions shown in Mesopotamian art mostly dating to the third millennium BC. shows that scorpion body parts may have been depicted in diverse ways. The style was undoubtedly dependent on the prevailing artistic or cultural trends, personal carving skills, the size of the artifact and finally some technical issues like the qualities of the stone and the tools used. A basic analysis of the scorpion images in Mesopotamian glyptic art highlights the existence of some less or more defined stylistic patterns which can be tentatively summarized as follows:

³⁸ Tobler 1950: 183, Pl. CLXIII, no. 86 and Pl. LXXXIXc.

³⁹ Cf. Tobler 1950: 178, 188, 189, Pl. CLXVIII, nos. 148, 154, Pl. CLXIX, no. 167 for foxes.

⁴⁰ Cf. Tobler 1950: 182, Pl. CLXII, no. 78 for a fox or a donkey.

⁴¹ Bergeron, Bingham 2012: 1083-1084, Fig. 1; Vachon 1956: 128-129.

³⁴ Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 88.

³⁵ Tobler 1950: 184.

³⁶ Speiser 1935: PL. LVIII, no. 40. The redrawing of this seal impression is not included in the present study due to its illegible iconography.

³⁷ Speiser 1935: 124.

First group (Tab. 1: A1-A11): prosoma fused with mesosoma, chelicerae displayed in three ways – as one or two outgrowths, as a small ball between pedipalps, or as not displayed at all, pedipalps with or without fixed and movable fingers, mesosoma usually plain, different number of legs on each side of the body, metasoma more or less bent, telson with or without an accentuated sting.

Second group (Tab. 1: B1-B10): prosoma fused with mesosoma, chelicerae displayed in three ways – as one or two outgrowths, as a small ball between pedipalps, or not displayed at all, pedipalps usually with fixed and movable fingers, mesosoma predominantly covered with herringbone strokes probably reflecting tergites or being the reminiscence of non-existent legs, metasoma bent, telson with or without an accentuated sting.

Third group (Tab. 1: C1-C6): prosoma fused with mesosoma, chelicerae displayed in two ways – as a rounded outgrowth, as a small ball between pedipalps, or not displayed at all, pedipalps without fixed and movable fingers, mesosoma plain, legs not indicated at all, metasoma bent or almost straight, telson with an accentuated sting.

The principal trait of the first group is the presence of movable legs in the images, whereas in the images from the second group the legs are not shown but replaced by herringbone or other patterns. In the third group the images are not only deprived of legs or herringbone strokes covering the mesosoma, but they almost always lack fixed and movable fingers in pedipalps too.

These scorpion images from glyptic art can be cross-referenced against further examples known from pottery and stone vessels. The visual scheme of the first group corresponds with a beautifully carved scorpion (Fig. 12) found on a fragmentarily preserved limestone vase-stand, probably from the times of Gudea of Lagash⁴² and even with the scorpion image present on an imported chlorite vase discovered at Khafajah,⁴³ though the body of the latter is covered with multiple lines. The representatives of the second group are present on a painted Archaic Susiana pottery shred (Tab. 1, B8) from Chogha Mish,⁴⁴ as well as on a painted vessel (Tab. 1, B4) found at Jemdet Nasr.⁴⁵ However, the last specimen is quite unusual since almost its whole outline is covered with multiple externally protruding lines. Highly interesting appliqué

scorpions (Fig. 13) were discovered at Tell Brak⁴⁶ on fragmentarily preserved pottery vessels, probably Akkadian in date, yet assigning them to any of the three groups outlined above is challenging, because they are covered with multiple hasty incisions, so it is hard to judge if they have any legs at all. Nevertheless, it is clear that we can recognize here the following scorpion body parts: fused prosoma and mesosoma, chelicerae in the shape of a single outgrowth, pedipalps with or without fixed and movable fingers, metasoma straight, telson with non-existent sting, the legs are lacking or at least disputable. Gawra VII and IV yielded an appliqué scorpion image (Fig. 14)⁴⁷ found on the outer face of a piece of pottery. The scorpion fits into the third group, therefore its prosoma and mesosoma are fused, chelicerae non-existent, pedipalps going sideways are crescent shaped, metasoma is short and bent or does not exist at all, since it may be seen as a telson with a sting. As far as the third group is concerned, we should recall the example found on a stone vessel (Fig. 12)⁴⁸ which has already been mentioned above. It has been already stated that it bears a beautiful representation of a scorpion in a shape which that matches the first group. However, it must be emphasized that just below this scorpion there exists another (Tab.1, C6), an object which should be regarded as a child of the scorpion shown above, displaying all the morphological features characteristic of the third group, with the exception of chelicerae which is displayed as a small ball between pedipalps.

The examples of the images of scorpions discussed above demonstrate that their shape to some degree drifts towards an iconographical simplicity when compared with the scorpion's biological morphology, though its core parts expressed as the outlines of pedipalps, metasoma and fused prosoma and mesosoma remain usually intact. From the structural point of view the object located behind the mating man on Tobler's seal impression no. 86 may be regarded as a simplified scorpion image. Thus, the two protuberances pointing upwards and sideways would correspond to the pedipalps, whereas its oval elongated body core would relate to the fused prosoma and mesosoma. From this perspective the slightly bent lower portion would harmonize with the metasoma without the telson.

⁴² Hall 1928: 30, Pl. VII, no. 3-4.

⁴³ Aruz 2003: 330-332, Fig. 85, no. 227.

⁴⁴ Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 211 S.

⁴⁵ Mackey 1931: Pl. LXXX, no. 1.

⁴⁶ Oates 2001: 167-168, 431, Fig. 407, no. 362, 365.

⁴⁷ Speiser 1935: 46, 68, Pl. LXXXVI, no. 11.

⁴⁸ Hall 1928: 30, Pl. VII, no. 3-4.

Scorpions – cultural justification

The belief that the mating couple encountered on the seal impression no. 86 (Fig. 1) are accompanied by a scorpion image is broadly consistent with the canons of Sumerian glyptic erotic art. The Ur excavations have yielded interesting examples of seal impressions which exemplify several sexual positions. The first one (Fig. 15)⁴⁹ shows the couple in a sitting face to face sexual position with a free standing scorpion image to the right. The second one (Fig. 16)⁵⁰ is a representation of an enigmatic ritual, maybe a bedding ceremony as suggested by the image of a drinking set (a vessel with protruding drinking tubes)⁵¹ and a human figure, perhaps a paranymp⁵² to the left of the lovemaking couple. The possible newlyweds are taking the face to face (?) horizontal entry position lying on their bed. There is a scorpion image under the bed, one which should be assigned to the third group (Tab. 1, C3), as discussed above.

In three further examples of Sumerian glyptic art from Ur (Figs. 17, 18, 19)⁵³ the depiction of the *coitus a tergo* sexual position is more developed than it is at Tepe Gawra, though in these cases the motif is, however, not accompanied by the scorpion image. There is no doubt about their ritualistic character. The nature of these scenes is undoubtedly heterosexual, and the primary sexual characteristics of the key participants are clearly emphasized.

The repertoire of seals from Ur also contained an unusual erotic motif of a squatting woman which should be discussed here separately since it does not show any sexual intercourse *per se* (Figs. 20, 21, 22).⁵⁴ This image depicts of a naked woman with her legs spread out sideways which makes her vagina frontally exposed. Her arms go up sideways, whereas her long hair is apparently flowing. It must be pointed out that the woman is usually accompanied by a scorpion image or images. Mazzoni⁵⁵ based on earlier research⁵⁶ has demonstrated that this motif is in general linked to the sphere of eroticism and fertility, and that the unusual squatting posture should be regarded as an invitation to sexual intercourse. For example, the

squatting, frontal pose could have played a vital role helping a childless woman ensure her fertility. The image of a naked squatting woman is indeed somehow related to sexual intercourse, as is supported by the evidence of another seal impression from Ur (Fig. 19)⁵⁷ showing a woman with her legs apart in the vicinity of a lovemaking couple in a *coitus a tergo* position. However, our understanding of this iconographic device is far from reaching the final conclusion, as has been demonstrated by Battini⁵⁸ who stipulates that the isolated image of a squatting woman, usually accompanied by scorpions, snakes and lizards (Figs. 20, 21, 22) may in reality depict childbirth scenes. Tepe Gawra material produced only one example of such a seal (Fig. 23)⁵⁹ showing a squatting individual or individuals. Unfortunately, its interpretation is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the two squatting human figures have been carved here vertically, the lower figure reversed, with a substantial empty space between them. Secondly their primary sexual attributes are not shown. Thus, it is impossible to assess whether it is a bizarre example of seated, face to face sexual intercourse or maybe, as suggested by Battini,⁶⁰ a scene of childbirth.

It is really difficult to discover the true nature of the scorpion image in Late Chalcolithic Tepe Gawra, but due to the clear similarities between the erotic scenes found at Tepe Gawra, and later Mesopotamian glyptic art, we may be almost certain that it belongs to the sphere of fertility, lovemaking and childbirth. It is known that the scorpion was a symbol of fertility in ancient Mesopotamia,⁶¹ but it was also seen as a popular therapeutic agent used in medicine and everyday magic.⁶² In late erotic magical incantation, selected body parts of a scorpion (the tail), mixed with other magical components, enhance a man's sexual drive towards a woman.⁶³

Scorpions – biological justification

The relationship between scorpions and human sexual intercourse seems to be bizarre at

⁴⁹ Legrain 1936: Pl. 18, no. 366.

⁵⁰ Frankfort 1955: Pl. 53, no. 559.

⁵¹ Frankfort 1955: 38.

⁵² Malul 1989: 241-278.

⁵³ Legrain 1936: Pl. 18, nos. 368, 369, Pl. 19, no. 370.

⁵⁴ Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, nos. 268, 269, 270.

⁵⁵ Mazzoni 2002: 367-377.

⁵⁶ Cf. Asher-Greve 1985; Cooper 1972-1975.

⁵⁷ Legrain 1936: Pl. 19, no. 370.

⁵⁸ Battini 2006: 7-13., Fig. 7-11, 14-16.

⁵⁹ Speiser 1935: 121-122, PL. LVI, no. 3.

⁶⁰ Battini 2006: 11-12, Fig. 16, cf. similar motif with an image of two snakes on Fig. 15.

⁶¹ Pientka-Hinz 2009-2011: 579; Zernecke 2008: 109, 112; Battini 2006: 8; Van Buren 1937-1939: 12.

⁶² Pientka-Hinz 2009-2011: 578-579.

⁶³ Biggs 1967: 22, text no. 5.

first glance, however it reflects the biology of the scorpion. The female scorpion is known for its extraordinary maternal care and fertility. It has been observed that the female carries the immature scorpions on her back. This period may last between a week and approx. a month from birth.⁶⁴ The brood number can be remarkable. The litter size is variable, oscillating between 3 to 100 young per brood.⁶⁵ Furthermore, scorpions show ritualized and complex courtship behaviour which results in mating and reproduction. The one of the most intricate parts of mating is called the *promenade à deux*, when the male grabs the female's pedipalp chelae with his own to perform a type of ritualized dance.⁶⁶ In fact, an image of this peculiar behaviour is present in Mesopotamian glyptic art.⁶⁷

However, there may exist another reason why the scorpion is associated with erotic scenes. Stings from all species of scorpions from the Buthidae family, except the Hemiscorpion, may cause priapism particularly in young men. Priapism is a very interesting phenomenon characterized by an involuntary, painful and persistent erection, which is triggered by parasympathetic stimulation following envenomation by a scorpion or spider.⁶⁸ We shall never know whether knowledge about the stimulant properties of scorpion venom was current in fourth millennium Tepe Gawra, but if it were the case it would be another powerful aspect of the scorpion's symbolic fertility in Mesopotamian culture.

Conclusions

It seems that the Late Chalcolithic glyptic art found at Tepe Gawra used a well-defined symbolic language reflecting ritualistic behaviour involving sexual intercourse. This custom was expressed by the heterosexual *coitus a tergo* intercourse in a crouching position. The sexual act might have had a magical significance being connected to a widely defined fertility which is put into evidence by its coexistence with the image of the scorpion or

the snake. Since the scorpion retained its fertility value in the later Mesopotamian tradition, we may speculate that the erotic motif encountered at Tepe Gawra on Tobler's seal no 86 could exemplify a ritual procedure whereby its participants were enabled not only to improve their effective sexual drive, but in the case of an emergency triggered by some sexual disorders, to overcome these problems with the help of the forces of fertility, embodied in these wild species. The proposed identification of the mysterious object found on erotic seal no. 86 as a scorpion image, harmonizes with the ancient Mesopotamian tradition concerning the visual language of ritual sex.

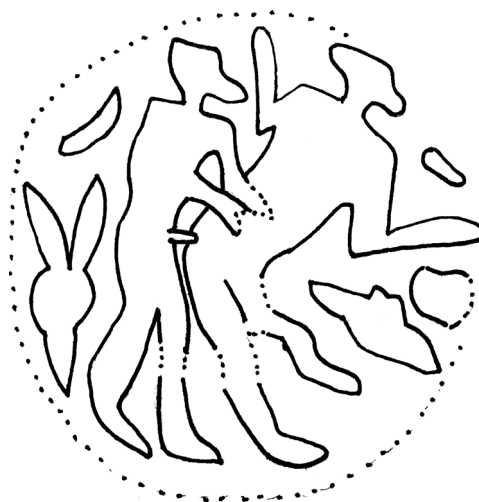


Fig. 1. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, Tepe Gawra (drawn and modified by M. Paszke after Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 86 and Pl. LXXXIXc)

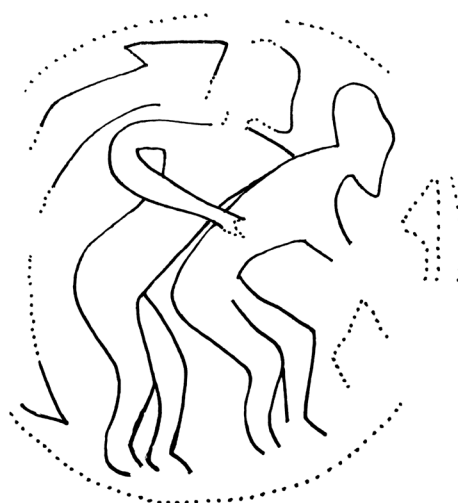


Fig. 2. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, Tepe Gawra (drawn and modified by M. Paszke after Speiser 1935: Pl. LV b and LVIII, no. 41)

⁶⁴ Benton 1991: 20-21; Lourenço, Ythier, Cloudsley-Thompson 2008: 898; Lourenço 2018: 9, Fig. 12; Shaffer, Formanowicz Jr 1996: 1018.

⁶⁵ Lourenço 2018: 5.

⁶⁶ Polis, Farley 1979: 38-41; Olguín-Pérez, Francke, Carbajal-Saucedo 2021: 99-100, Fig. 1c.

⁶⁷ See Frankfort 1955: Pl. 47, no. 497; Toscanne 1917: 190-192.

⁶⁸ Nunes, Torres, Borges, Matavel, Pimenta, De Lima 2013: 153.



Fig. 3. Mating couple, sitting intercourse, Tepe Gawra
(drawn by M. Paszke after Tobler
1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 87)



Fig. 6. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo* (?), Tepe Giyan
(drawn by M. Paszke after
Buchanan 1967: 276, no. 11)



Fig. 4. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, Tepe Giyan
(drawn by M. Paszke after Herzfeld
1933: 87, Abb. 14, no. 2362)



Fig. 7. Mating couple, sitting intercourse, Tepe Gawra
(drawn by M. Paszke after Tobler
1950: Pl. CLXIII, no. 88).



Fig. 5. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, Tepe Giyan
(drawn by M. Paszke after
Caldwell 1976: 247, no. 95)

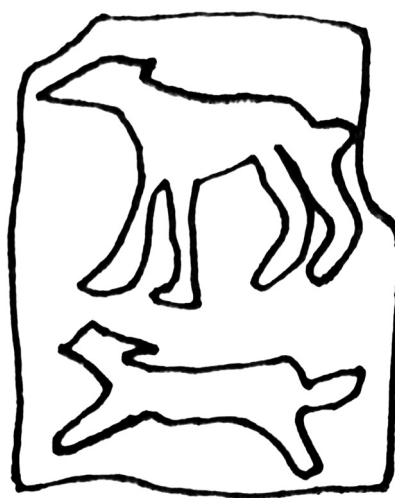


Fig. 8. Animal design (drawn by M. Paszke
after Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXVIII, no. 148)

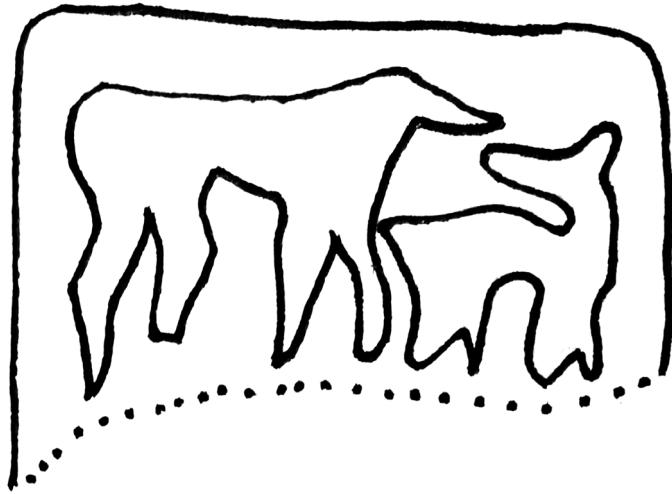


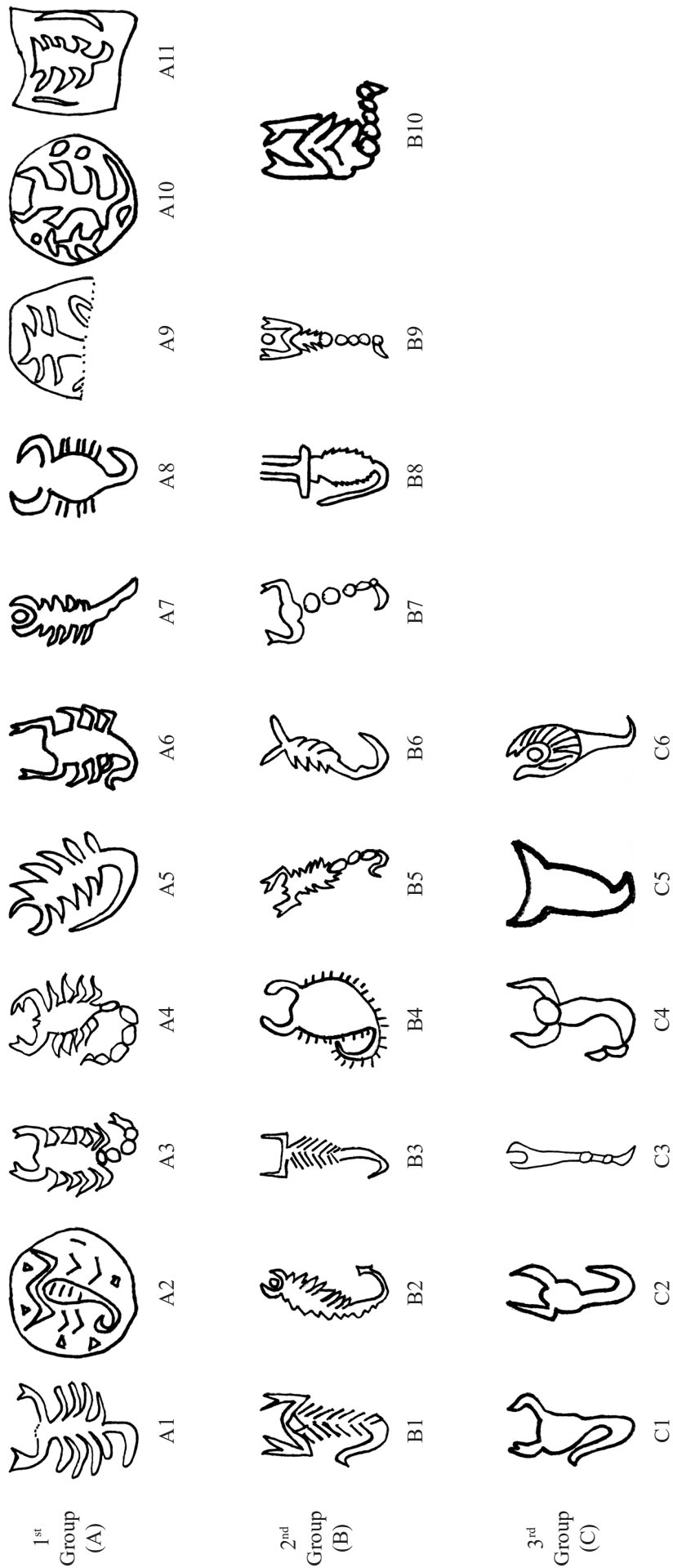
Fig. 9. Animal design (drawn by M. Paszke after Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXVIII, no. 154)



Fig. 10. Animal design (drawn by M. Paszke after Tobler 1950: Pl. Pl. CLXIX, no. 167)



Fig. 11. Human figure with V-shaped objects (drawn by M. Paszke after Tobler 1950: 182, Pl. CLXII, no. 78)



Tab. 1. Scorpion images in ancient Mesopotamian art

(drawn by M. Paszke after: A1 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 24, no. 244, A2 – Herzfeld 1933: 92, Abb. 18 (2353), A3 – Delaporte 1910: Pl. VI, no. 51, A4 – Legrain 1936: Pl. 538, no. 31, A5 – Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, no. 268, A6 – Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 146E, A7 – Legrain 1936: Pl. 13, no. 258, A8 – Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 135K, A9 – Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXX, no. 182, A10 – Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXX, no. 183, A11 – Tobler 1950: Pl. CLXX, no. 184, B1 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 33, no. 332, B2 – Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, no. 273, B3 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 52, no. 553, B4 – Mackay 1931: Pl. LXXX, no. 1, B5 – Legrain 1936: Pl. 30, no. 517, B6 – Woolley 1934: Pl. 197, no. 58 (U7992), B7 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 47, no. 499, B8 – Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 211S, B9 – Steele, McDonald, Matthews, Black 2003: 265, Fig. 6.71 (HP 10), B10 – Matthews 1997: Pl. XXI, no. 241, C1 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 47, no. 497, C2 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 69, no. 757, C3 – Frankfort 1955: Pl. 53, no. 559, C4 – Wiseman 1962: Pl. 5e (102416), C5 – Speiser 1935: Pl. LXXXVI, no. 11, C6 – Hall 1928: Pl. VII, no. 3-4

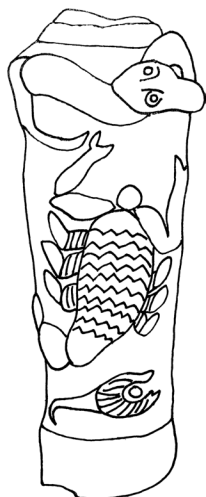


Fig. 12. Limestone vase-stand (?) with animals in relief (drawn by M. Paszke after Hall 1928: Pl. VII, no. 3-4)



Fig. 13. Appliqué scorpions, Tell Brak (drawn by M. Paszke after Oates 2001: 431, Fig. 407, nos. 362, 365)

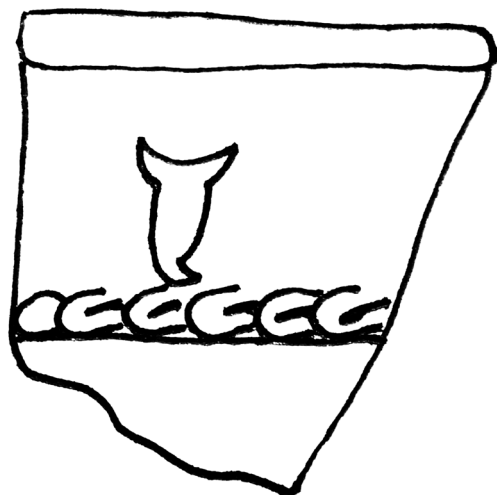


Fig. 14. An appliqué scorpion on a pottery shred, Tepe Gawra (drawn by M. Paszke after Speiser 1935: Pl. LXXVI, no. 11)

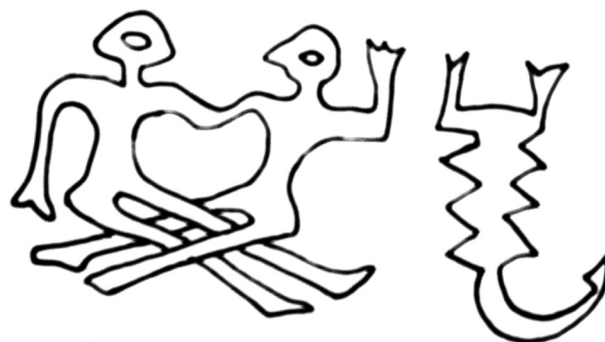


Fig. 15. Mating couple, sitting intercourse, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 18, no. 366)

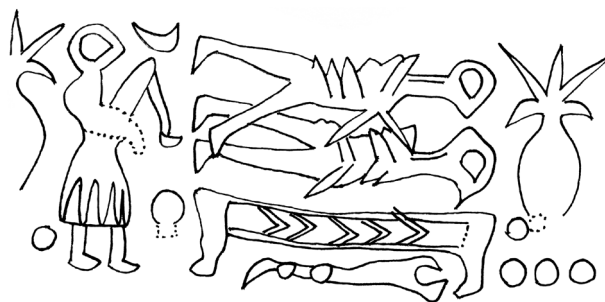


Fig. 16. Mating couple, lying intercourse (?), Tell Asmar (drawn and modified by M. Paszke after Frankfort 1955: Pl. 53, no. 559)

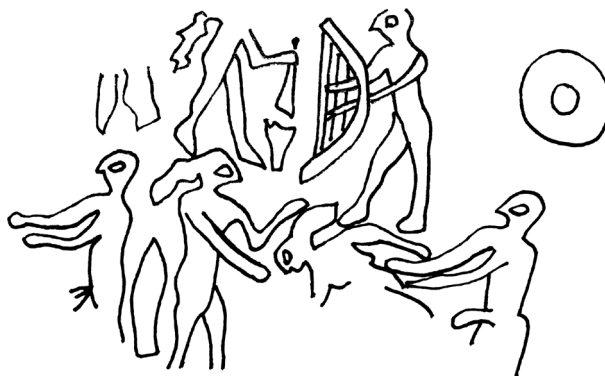


Fig. 17. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, ritual scene, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 18, no. 369)



Fig. 18. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo*, ritual scene, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 18. No. 368)



Fig. 19. Mating couple, *coitus a tergo* (left) and a squatting woman (right), ritual scene, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936, Pl. 19, no. 370)

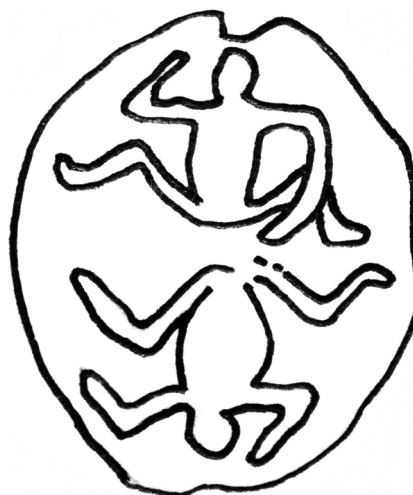


Fig. 23. Two squatting figures, Tepe Gawra (drawn by M. Paszke after Speiser 1935: PL. LVI, no. 3)



Fig. 20. Squatting woman, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, no. 268)

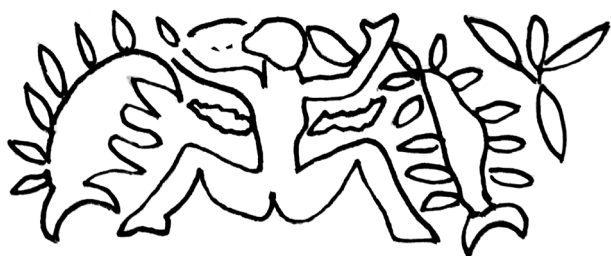


Fig. 21. Squatting woman, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, no. 269)

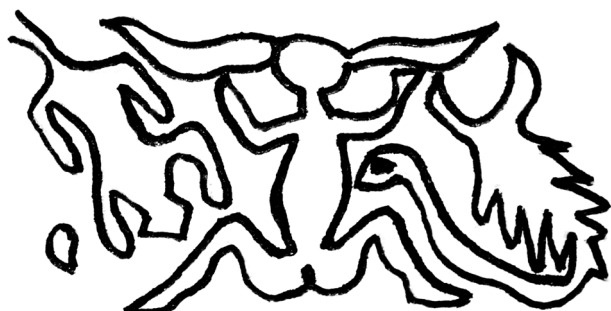


Fig. 22. Squatting woman, Ur (drawn by M. Paszke after Legrain 1936: Pl. 14, no. 270)

Abbreviations

- AfO Archiv für Orientforschung (Berlin, Wien, 1926ff.)
- AJA American Journal of Archaeology (Boston 1897 ff.)
- ASOR The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research (New Haven 1924 ff.)
- BAlI Bulletin of American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology (New York 1937/1938)
- BAR British Archaeological Reports (Oxford 1974 ff.)
- JAOS Journal of American Oriental Society (New Haven 1843 ff.)
- OIP Oriental Institute Publications (Chicago 1924 ff.)
- RA Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale (Paris 1884 ff.)
- RIA Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie (Berlin 1932 ff.)
- ZDPV Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins (Wiesbaden 1878ff.)

Bibliography

- Algaze G. 2005. *The Uruk World System. The Dynamics of Expansion of Early Mesopotamian Civilization*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Aruz J. 2003. "Intercultural Style" Carved Chlorite Objects. In *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*. J. Aruz, R. Wallenfels (eds.),

- 325-346, New York, New Haven, London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press.
- Asher-Greve J.M. 1985. *Frauen in altsumerischer Zeit*. Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 18, Malibu: Undena Publications.
- Assante J. 2002. *Sex, Magic and the Liminal Body in the Erotic Art and Texts of the Old Babylonian Period*. In *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East, vol. I*. Proceedings of the 47th RAI, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001, S. Parpola, R.M. Whiting (eds.), 27-52, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Bache Ch. 1933. *From Mr. Bache's First Report on the Joint Excavations at Tepe Gawra and Tell Billa 1932-3*. ASOR 49, 8-14.
- Bache Ch. 1935a. *A Report from Mr. Bache on the Tepe Gawra Expedition*. ASOR 57, 12-18.
- Bache Ch. 1935b. *Tepe Gawra 1934-1935*. AJA 39/2, 185-188.
- Bache Ch. 1936. *Report on the Joint Excavation of the Tepe Gawra in Assyria*. ASOR 61, 5-10.
- Battini L. 2006. *Les images de la naissance en Mésopotamie*. In *L. Médecine et médecins au Proche-Orient ancien*. Actes du Colloque International organisé à Lyon les 8 et 9 novembre 2002, Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, L. Battini, P. Villard (eds.), BAR International Series 1528: 1-37. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Benton T.G. 1991. *Reproduction and Paternal Care in the Scorpion Euscorpius Flavicaudis*, Behaviour 117, no. 1/2, 20-28.
- Bergeron Z.L., Bingham J-P. 2012. *Scorpions Toxins Specific for Potassium (K⁺) Channels: A Historical Overview of Peptide Bioengineering*. Toxins 4, 1082-1119.
- Biggs R. 1967. *ŠA.ZI.GA Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations*. Texts from Cuneiform Sources II, Locust Valley, New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher.
- Buchanan B. 1967. *The Prehistoric Stamp Seal. A reconsideration of Some Old Excavations*. JAOS 87/3, 265-279.
- Caldwell D.H. 1976. *The Early Glyptic of Gawra, Giyan and Susa, and the Development of Long Distance Trade*. Orientalia Nova Series 45, 227-250.
- Carter E., Hole F., Bahrani Z., Spycket A., Aruz J. 1992. *Prehistoric Susa Circa 4000 B.C.* In *The Royal City of Susa. Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre*, Harper P.O., Aruz J., Tallon F. (eds.), 25-46, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Cooper J.S. 1972-1975. *Heilige Hochzeit. B. Archäologisch*, RIA 4, 259-269.
- Delaporte L. 1910. *Catalogue des cylindres orientaux et des cachets assyro-babyloniens, perses et syro-cappadociens de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, Éditeur.
- Denham S. 2018. *Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic Glyphs and Stamp Seals in the British Museum*. Research Publication 208. The Trustees of the British Museum.
- Deolougaz P., Kantor H.J. 1996. *Chogha Mish, vol. I. The First Five Seasons of Excavations 1961-1971*. Part 2, Plates, A. Alizadeh (ed.). OIP 101, Chicago, Illinois: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Frangipane M. 2009. *Non-urban Hierarchical Patterns of Territorial and Political Organization in Northern Regions of Greater Mesopotamia: Tepe Gawra and Arslantepe*. In *A propos de Tepe Gawra le monde proto-urbain de Mésopotamie*, P. Butterlin (ed.), 135-148, Subartu 23, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.
- Frankfort H. 1935. *Oriental Institute Discoveries in Iraq, 1933/34. Fourth Preliminary Report of the Iraq Expedition*, OIP 19, Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Frankfort H. 1955. *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region*. OIP 72, Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hall H.R. 1928. *Babylonian and Assyrian Sculpture in the British Museum*. Paris, Brussels: Les Éditions G. Van Oest.
- Herzfeld E. 1933. *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, Band 5. Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer.
- Legrain L. 1936. *Ur Excavations vol. III. Archaic Seal Impressions*. Oxford University Press.
- Lourenço W.R. 2018. *Scorpions and life-history strategies: from evolutionary dynamics toward the scorpionism problem*. Journal of Venomous Animals and Toxins including Tropical Diseases 24, no. 19, 1-12.
- Lourenço W.R., Ythier E., Cloudsley-Thompson J. L. 2008. *Observations on the life history of Chaerilus philippinus Lourenço & Ythier, 2008 (Scorpionidae, Chaerilidae) from the Philippines*. Comptes Rendus Biologies 331, no. 11, 896-900.
- Mackay E. 1931. *Report on Excavations at Jemdet Nasr Iraq*. Field Museum of Natural History. Anthropology Memoirs, vol. I, no. 3, 219-303.
- Malul M. 1989. *Susapinnu: The Mesopotamian Paranymp and His Role*, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, vol. 32, no. 3, 241-278.

- Matthews D.M., 1997. *The Early Glyptic of Tell Brak: Cylinder Seals of Third Millennium Syria*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 15, Fribourg, Switzerland, Göttingen: University Press, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Matthews R., Fazeli Nashli F. N. 2022. *The Archaeology of Iran from the Palaeolithic to the Achaemenid Empire*. London, New York: Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Mazzoni F. 2002. *The Squatting Woman: Between Fertility and Eroticism*. In *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East, vol. II*. Proceedings of the 47th RAI, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001, S. Parpola, R.M. Whiting (eds.), 367-377, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Muller E.B, Bache Ch. *The Prehistoric Temple of Stratum IX at Tepe Gawra*. ASOR 54, 13-18
- Nunes K.P., Torres F.S., Borges M.H., Matavel A., Pimenta A.M.C., De Lima M.E. 2013. *New insights on arthropod toxins that potentiate erectile function*. Toxicon 69, 152-159.
- Oates J. 2001. *The Third Millennium Pottery*. In *Excavations at Tell Brak. Vol 2. Nagar in the Third Millennium BC*, D. Oates, J. Oates, H. McDonald (eds.), 151-194, London, Cambridge: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge.
- Olguín-Pérez L., Francke O.F., Carbajal-Saucedo A. 2021. *Evidence of piercing and sexual differences in venom composition in a sexual stinging scorpion (Scorpiones: Euscorpidae)*, Journal of Arachnology 49, 98-107.
- Pientka-Hinz R. 2009-2011. *Schlange A. In Mesopotamien*. In RIA 12, S. Ecklin, S. Pfaffinger (eds.), 202-218, Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co.
- Pientka-Hinz R. 2009-2011. *Skorpion*. In S. RIA 12, Ecklin, S. Pfaffinger (eds.), 576-580, Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co.
- Pizzimenti S., Polcaro A. 2021. *From Earth to Heaven. The Symbol of the Scorpion and its Astronomical Association in Mesopotamia*. In Atti del XVII Convegno SIA: Ex Oriente: Mithra and the others: Astronomical contents in the cults of Eastern origin in ancient Italy and Western Mediterranean, A. Antonello (ed.), 311-328, Padova: Padova University Press.
- Polis G.A., Farley R.D. 1979. *Behavior and Ecology of Mating in Cannibalistic Scorpion, Paruroctonus mesaensis Stahnke (Scorpionida: Vaejpvidae)*, The Journal of Arachnology 7, no. 1, 33-46.
- Porada E., Hansen D.P., Dunham S., Babcock S.H. 1992. *The Chronology of Mesopotamia, ca. 7000-1600 B.C*. In *Chronologies in the World Archaeology, vol. I*, R.W. Ehrich (ed.), 77-121, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rothman M.S. 2001. *The Tigris Piedmont, Eastern Jezira, and Highland Western Iran in the Fourth Millennium B.C*. In *Uruk Mesopotamia & Its Neighbors. Cross-Cultural Interactions in the Era of the State Formation*, M. S. Rothman (ed.), 349-401, Santa Fe, Oxford: School of American Research Press, James Currey Ltd.
- Rothman M.S. 2002. *Tepe Gawra. Chronology and Socio-Economic Change in the Foothills of Northern Iraq in the Era of the State Formation*. In *Artefacts of Complexity: Tracking the Uruk in the Near East*, J.N. Postgate (ed.), 49-77, Iraq Archaeological Reports 5, British School of Archaeology in Iraq, Aris & Phillips Ltd.
- Rothman M.S., Peasall B. 1999. *Societal Evolution of Small, Pre-state Centers and Polities: the Example of Tepe Gawra in Northern Mesopotamia*, Paléorient 25/1, 101-114.
- Schmandt-Besserat D. 2006. *The Interface Between Writing and Art: The Seals of the Tepe Gawra*, Syria 83, 183-193.
- Shaffer L.R., Formanowicz Jr D.R. 1996. *A cost of viviparity and parental care in scorpions: reduced sprint speed and behavioural compensation*. Animal Behaviour 51, 1017-1024.
- Speiser A.E. 1927-1928. *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*. ASOR 9, 17-94.
- Speiser A.E. 1932. *The Joint Excavation at Tepe Gawra. January and June Reports*. ASOR 47, 17-23.
- Speiser A.E. 1935. *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, vol. 1. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Speiser E.A. 1937a. *New Discoveries at Tepe Gawra and Khafaje*. AJA 41/2, 190-193.
- Speiser E.A. 1937b. *Excavations at Tepe Gawra During the Season of 1936-37*. BAI 5/1, 2-6.
- Steele C., McDonald H., Matthews R., Black J. 2003. *Later third-millennium investigations: the Late Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods*. In *Excavations at Tell Brak, vol. 4. Exploring an Upper Mesopotamia regional culture, 1994-1996*, R. Matthews (ed.), 193-269, London, Cambridge: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge.
- Tobler A.J. 1950. *Excavations at Tepe Gawra. Joint Expedition of the Baghdad School and the University Museum to Mesopotamia*,

- vol. 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press.
- Toscanne P. 1917. *Sur la figuration et le Symbole du Scorpion*, RA 14, no. 4, 187-203.
- Vachon M. 1956. *The Biology of Scorpions*. The Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society 54, 128-139.
- Van Buren E.D. 1937-1939. *The Scorpion in Mesopotamian Art and Religion*, AfO 12, 1-28.
- Wiseman D.J. 1962. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum I. Cylinder Seals. Uruk – Early Dynastic Periods*. London: The Trustees of the British Museum.
- Woolley C.L. 1934. *Ur Excavations, Vol II. The Royal Cemetery. Plates*, Publications of the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia, New York: Trustees of the two Museums.
- Zernecke A.E. 2008. *Warum sitzt der Skorpion unter dem Bett? Überlegungen zur Deutung eines altorientalischen Fruchtbarkeitssymbols*, ZDPV 124/2, 107-127.

Marcin Z. Paszke
ORCID 0000-001-5815-1467
Department of Mediterranean Archaeology
Institute of Archeology
University of Gdańsk
marcin.paszke@ug.edu.pl