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Having and Showing: Women's Possessions in the Afterlife in Iron Age Syria and Mesopotamia

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In the archaeology of death, goods retrieved from burials are usually believed to offer material documentation of the personal belongings of the deceased, accompanying the body and soul to the underworld. Whether these goods were intended for the rites of ceremonial mourning during the funerals and internment or for feeding the deceased or protecting and facilitating his trip in the afterlife, or as gifts to the netherworld divinities, is still a topic of debate (Campbell 1995: 29; Scurlock 1995; Winter 1999). However, once they had been buried in the funerary context of the grave, they were the belongings of the dead, and acted to confirm his nature as deceased and grant beneficial conditions to his last rite of passage.

The funerary belongings and grave goods are more often investigated in terms of social hierarchy, the rank and wealth of the deceased being indicated by the their quantity and quality. A gender investigation is more difficult to assess because of the ambiguous nature of the data (Parker Pearson 1999: 95-96). The archaeological funerary evidence which can be assigned on a sound basis to women is very limited; most of our documents derive from old excavations, in which the anthropological data was analyzed incorrectly or not at all. Moreover, we can only ascribe sex to skeletons in a good state of recovery and preservation. These limitations inherent in the data and the fact that most burials cannot be clearly attributed to women or men, often render gender investigation unsatisfactory. However, the available evidence from Mesopotamia and especially Syria consists of both archaeological and visual documents which can supply information on a variety of components and features relating to funerary goods, gender differentiation and ideological values. An investigation of these provides a fairly coherent and univocal picture of funerary practices and their social significance.

1. Women's Artifacts and Death: Personal Property and its Value

When we rely upon the materials from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Mesopotamia, specifically from the graves of Ashur, Babylon, and Uruk (Haller 1955, Boehmer, Pedde, Salje 1995), which have recently been the subject of a Tübingen University dissertation (Nasrabadi 1999), no marked indication of genre distinction can be safely recognized among the variety of objects deposited in the 992 tombs analyzed (582 in Ashur, 99 in Babylon, 311 in Uruk). These objects consist mainly of ornaments and jewels (rings, earrings, armbands, bracelets, beads) and vases (**Fig. 1**). Fibulae apparently are quite rare (Nasrabadi 1999: 237), being more widespread only in later times, and especially in the Persian period; amulets, seals, scarabs, and figurines are also rare. Pins, which were the standard female funerary attribute of the Bronze Age, are few, while they maintain a gender role in western Iran

(Marcus 1994). Among the many types listed, only weapons (daggers, spears) can be associated with male graves and spindle whorls with female graves, being attributes of gender characterization, but these are not so frequent. Moreover, occasional documentation is provided of spearheads, commonly considered adult male artifacts, and combs, reputedly adult female artifacts, in child burials (Nasrabadi 1999: 675). Other gender associations cannot be made with certainty. A supposed distribution in the graves between vases and rings seems to support gender division between men (vases) and women (rings); but this gender association has been challenged (Nasrabadi 1999: 140, 236). Also, a supposed connection between the position of the body and the presence of certain goods (namely, deposition towards left and rings, and deposition to right and vases) has been hypothetically considered as a gender marker but has also been considered insufficiently well documented. In the case of the Neo-Babylonian graves, when gender has been clearly identified, there seems to be a prevailing connection of gold, silver, and bronze ornaments with women more than with men. Beads were contained in around 50 percent of female graves and less than 5 percent of male ones (Baker 1995: 219-20), which were, instead, furnished with metal vessels or with iron. There was a trend to furnish more women than men with such items, but this was not a matter of gender exclusion, as men could also exhibit jewels; it was, instead, a distinction of rank.

A high percentage of graves, varying from a half to a quarter, contained no goods (Baker 1995: 236, Tab. 30): in Uruk 212 graves (51,5%) (217, Tab. 197), in Ashur 29 single interments (133, Tab. 87: 153 single interments were equipped with one or more funerary goods), in Babylon 21 (182, Tab. 143: 69 contained one or more items). This result can actually be interpreted in a context of social and economic differentiation rather than one of gender. These graves belonged to persons of low rank and the lack of resources balanced genders. There was a general uniformity among the three sites concerning the corpus of materials and their assemblages; differences were apparently restricted to the economic level. So, metals are less frequently documented in Uruk, which also had a higher percentage of graves without goods, possibly mirroring a lower level of wealth among its population in comparison to Babylon and Ashur.

Some more recently excavated graves from northern Syria, in the town of ancient Burmarina (Tell Shiyuk Fawqani) dating to the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, support the connection of bronze, iron, and silver finger rings, bronze fibulae, bronze bowls, scaraboids, and pottery with women (Luciani 2000: 806-808). As these consist of simple pit burials and lack prestige imports they are interpreted as not belonging to the elite segment of the population. By analogy, the Iron Age I-III extra-mural cremation cemeteries of Yunus and Merj Khamis in the area of Karkemish, the main centre for this Euphratean region, and its West Gate cemetery (Woolley 1939), whose materials derive from old excavations, may well document a similar gender association. Here, the variety of types of burials and grave goods indicates a certain degree of economic and social differentiation among the population. The only grave where the burnt bones of a female adult were observed also contained three steatite spindle-whorls (Woolley 1939: 33, YC 62), a type of artifact frequently found in these graves. A rich assemblage of ornaments and toiletry accessories was also contained in the cremation cemetery of Deve Hüyük I, near Karkemish, and the inhumation cemetery of Deve Hüyük II, dating respectively to Iron II-III and the Achaemenid period (Moorey 1980); because of the presence of a large number of weapons and metal objects, the cemetery of Deve Hüyük II was attributed to Persian troops (Moorey 1980: 8-10). This social and gender association was apparently supported by comparison with the Kāmid el-Lōz Achaemenid female burials, with predominantly personal ornaments and toiletry accessories and very few weapons (Poppa 1978: 43-47). In this cemetery too, however, few distinctions can be made between female

and male funerary goods: apparently, bronze bowls predominate in the male graves and ornaments in the female ones; fibulae are equally shared, but the combination of a fibula and a stamp seal or a scarab characterizes more the female than the male burials. Moreover, individual instances of different combinations contradict the impression of a standardized rule in the gender relation of these funerary goods.

A few conclusions can be certainly drawn from this analysis, which constitutes a satisfactory sample of the situation in densely populated cities with different social classes. If we limit our consideration to the present topic of discussion, the fact that very few gender markers can be recognized in the graves substantiates a conclusion of considerable similarity between men and women in funerary practices and possessions in the afterlife. Apart from a very few cases of gendered goods, such as weapons and spindle whorls, the complex of personal belongings mirrored the status or wealth of the deceased and definitely not his/her gender. Death, with its rites and funerary equipment for the afterlife, apparently resulted in a greater emphasis on wealth than on gender separation.

A further question arises from the data: were these goods, varying in value according to the status, worn, carried, and then exhibited as personal possessions in life or after death? Were they owned by the deceased in life and the afterlife or were they funerary gifts or symbols? Archaeological evidence gives no certain answers to these questions or valid clues to an interpretation. When considering the Mesopotamian evidence discussed above, we find two views: (a) that of B. Hrouda (1954: 183-84; 1957-1971: 605-6), who distinguished between personal belongings used in life and those destined for internment, and (b) that of scholars who deny this functional separation or simply are more skeptical about the probative value of the data in this regard (Nasrabadi 1999: 96-97). The fact that many objects had magic and prophylactic functions does not contradict their use in both life and afterlife; the magical properties of certain stones, materials, colors, or symbols do not indicate an exclusive funerary destination; this is also the case with seals found in the graves that often show special subjects possibly intended to protect the deceased (Salje 1995: 601-13; Bonatz 2000c: 91-95) but also useful for the living. This is certainly clear when we found older seals deposited in the burials.

This same issue remains unclear also in the case of a few special graves of high status, which contained luxury goods, such as the royal tombs of Nimrud. Royal funerary inscriptions cite funerary gifts or personal ornaments to be worn on the occasion of the internment, as a part of the funerary rite, such as the tablet K.14241 referring to the internment of an Assyrian king (Nasrabadi 1999: 25-31). In a further Neo-Assyrian tablet, K. 7856, relating to a royal funeral, goods are apparently divided between those for the deceased, owned and loved by him during his lifetime (transl. “the *regalia* that he used to love”), and those for the Anunnaki (chthonic gods) and the spirits of the underworld (McGinnis 1987: 9-10), and include beds, vessels, and garments.

Moreover, the funerary inscriptions of the “palace women” Mullissu-mukannishat-Ninua and Jabâ found in the graves in the south-east corner of the North-West Palace at Nimrud, probably the harem, do not cite personal funerary belongings (Nasrabadi 1999: 16-20), which were, nonetheless, numerous in situ (Harrak 1990). Among the many jewels found there, some special objects might have had a funerary association and a magic function. This, at least, seems to be the case for the fibulae, for which an apotropaic function has been proposed (Muscarella 1967). Noteworthy is the gold fibula with a Pazuzu head surmounting the bust of a woman, on the left side of the bow, and a bird on the right side acting through its beak as the clasp for the pin. This was found among many other precious jewels in a pottery sarcophagus in the subterranean chamber beneath the floor of room MM, near the tomb of Jabâ under

Room 49 and that of Mullissu-mukannishat-Ninua under room 57 (Curtis 1994: 52, Pls. 4-5). This fibula, which was attached to a chain of gold plaited wire also holding a red stone stamp seal, can be compared with a class of Assyrian fibulae sharing the same motifs (Curtis 1994) to be dated from the late eighth (Nimrud) to the seventh century BC. Since Pazuzu could counteract Lamashtu, hostile to pregnant women, and was thus a demon protecting women during childbirth, a prophylactic function has been argued for such fibulae, possibly intended to be worn by women (Curtis 1994: 54; Farber 1995: 1897). A similar conclusion might be extended to the famous “Nimrud Jewel” (**Fig. 2**), consisting also of a stamp seal attached to a gold chain linked to a fibula (Mallowan 1966: 114-15; Curtis and Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 102-105, Pls. XXXe-f, XXXIIa-b). This jewel was, in fact, found in a female grave buried in a clay coffin sealed by three reused foundation slabs of Ashur-nasirpal II dug under the floor of the north-east corner of room DD of the domestic quarter of the palace. However, we can also cite the rich Grave 30 from Ashur, containing also a fibula and, among the other finds, the bronze bowl of Ashshur-taklāk, overseer of Ashur (Sürenhagen und Renger 1982: 124-28; Fig. 17) to be dated to the late eighth century (Muscarella 1984; Boehmer 1984). A gold fibula and a carnelian stamp seal inscribed with the (male) name Adoni-Nur were also part of the funerary equipment of a burial in a terracotta coffin in Amman, probably of the seventh century (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 261-62). The seal shows a Lamashtu and the goddess Gula with her dog, documenting the magic function of the jewel in the funerary context.

The materials from the tombs of the Aramaean town of Guzana in the Bit Bakhiani, today Tell Halaf, illustrate the funerary nature and function of these goods. A rich grave belonging to a local lord (“Ältere Gruft”) was located in the compound of the “Tempel Palast”, to the north-west of its façade (Oppenheim 1950: 100-103). The other graves, instead, belonged to women and were surmounted by the funerary statues of the deceased (A1-2) (Moortgat 1955, Pls. 1-9, nos. A1-2 = Bonatz 2000: 15, B5-B4); they consisted of two shaft tombs concealed in a massive platform of bricks to the south-east of the Southern Gate of the “Temple Palast” compound; the chambers, at the bottom of the stone-plated shafts, contained the urn with the ashes and the funerary goods (Oppenheim 1950: 159-67, Figs. 80-82) (**Figs. 3-4**). Like the tombs in the royal palace at Nimrud, they were originally included in the area of the earlier palace, which was built or rebuilt by king Kapara in the middle of the eighth century BC. They can be dated to the so-called pre-Kapara period, probably the late ninth century, to which are attributed the “small orthostats” decorating the side and back of the palace but originally belonging to a temple of the Weather god. A higher date of the Kapara friezes in the mid-ninth century has also been suggested (Winter 1989: 323-26) on the basis of an evaluation of their pre-Assyrian character and comparison with the Assyrianized statue of Tell Fakhariyeh inscribed in Assyrian and Aramaic by HDYS’Y, king (Aramaic version) or governor (Assyrian version) of Guzana.

The three graves contained a full range of precious ornaments and objects of both specialized funerary destination and daily use; however, it is also possible that these latter items, objects of daily use, consisting of pottery, metal vases and jewels, were destined for the interment of the three important personages of Guzana. Undoubtedly only of funerary use were the golden mouth coverings in the “Ältere Gruft” (Hrouda 1962: 19, Pl. 1.8) and the A1 statue’s grave (Hrouda 1962: 19, Pl. 2.9) (**Figs. 5-6**). The bronze coverings and parts of a face found in a grave to the north-west of the Steinbau II of Tell Khuera, which date to Chuera IE (2200-2100 BC), if not composite elements of a cult-statue (Krasnik, Meyer 2001: 386-390, Figs. 9-13), might represent an occasional forerunner of the practice of funerary masks emerging in the middle of the second millennium; gold coverings and full masks are documented in graves from Uruk, Babylon, Nineveh and especially Phoenicia in later times

(Curtis 1995). Consistent with these data is the mention in the funerary inscription on the sarcophagus of Beten‘m, mother of king ‘Azba‘l of Byblos, of the golden mouth covering, following the custom for the internment of royal personages (Magnanini 1973: 31, no.8).

The man of the “Early Grave” also had other golden sheets decorated with bulls and goats trampling over palmettes and trees, possibly for covering the head and chest (Hrouda 1962: 19, Pl. 1.1-7). The three deceased were furnished with personal jewels, consisting of one large earring and one pair for the man (Ibid.: 44, Pl. 33.61-63) (Fig. 7) and two pairs of earrings for the woman of A1 (Ibid.: 45, Pl. 33.64-67) (Fig. 8). The single earring can be linked with the single earrings of the Mesopotamian graves, which sometimes are defined as nose rings. The women had finger rings in gold, onyx and silver (Ibid.: 44, Pl. 33.50-51). The man, on the other hand, had five golden pearls (Ibid. 43, Pl. 30.20-24) and golden bands (Ibid.: 45, Pl. 34.70-85), probably appliqué ornaments to be woven on his garments (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 254-60). There are no significant gender differences among their personal belongings, which they might also have possessed during their lives. Earrings, which the Mesopotamian funerary epigraphic sources attribute mainly to women (Nasrabadi: 61), were worn by at least two deceased – the man and one of the women.

There were apparently no significant differences among the other items contained in the three graves, except in terms of the quantity of metal vases. The number and quality of the silver and bronze vases, bowls, goblets found in the “Ältere Gruft” are, in fact, notable (Hrouda 1962: 69, Pls. 48.1-6, 49:11) (**Fig. 9**), while in the other two tombs pottery containers predominate (Ibid.: 92, Pl. 56.8, 57.5-6, 63.7 and probably 56.10), only two bronze bowls being found (Ibid.: 69, Pl. 49. 12-13) in the grave under A1 and two bronze goblets in the grave under A2 (Ibid.: 69, Pl. 49. 14-15) (**Fig. 10**). The male funerary equipment also included an ivory pyxis with applications in gold and frit inlays of a rosette in the middle of the lid, an inner circle of guilloche and an outer with a twisted braid, which also decorates the outer body of the base of the bowl (Ibid.: 55, Pl. 43, 50. 271) (**Fig. 11**). Moreover, the female graves contained other notable objects. The most frequently cited are without doubt the ivories of the A2 statue grave, which were contained with the ashes in a jar (Ibid.: 93, Pl. 57. 11). They consist of three female heads, one inlaid with golden ornaments (**Fig. 12**), and 10 fragments of animals (Ibid.: 21, Pl. 9. 46-58), whose importance has been stressed for the vexed question of both the dating and the identification of the regional centers of manufacture of Syrian ivories (Winter 1989: 329-30). The other artifact contained in the A1 grave was a limestone tripod whose outer face is decorated with a relief representing a sphinx, two scenes of hunting of a winged bull and an ostrich and two other animals (Ibid. 8, fig.1, 21, Pls. 6-7) (**Fig. 13**).

These objects furnish reliable evidence of the funerary nature of the goods associated with the depositions. The pyxis was a special container for cosmetics, usually made of ivory and green stone carved with scenes of different subjects; ivory pyxides have their own style and a selection of images and figurative conventions, being produced in workshops specialized in ivory carving. Stone pyxides, on the other hand, share style and iconography with the architectural friezes, being occasional products of the same workshops (Winter 1983, Mazzoni 2001, 2002). They were luxury and ritual objects, certainly destined for specific occasions, possibly institutional or ritual. The presence of the subject of the banqueting couple in the Mahmudiyah pyxis, so similar to the images of the many Syro-Hittite funerary stelae, might support a funerary destination in this case (Mazzoni 2001); a similar function is documented for the many cosmetic containers, both spoons and pyxides, from the Rasm et-Tanjara hoard (Athanassiou 1977, Mazzoni 2003). These containers might have been used in the funerary rites for anointing the deceased and are, in fact, documented in funerary contexts.

For the purposes of comparison I would adduce a limestone cosmetic bowl decorated inside with a rosette found in a tomb from Ur of the Persian Period (Woolley 1962: 119, Pl. 34, Grave P.132, no. US 16214), as well as the many cosmetic containers from the Deve Hüyük graves (Moorey 1980: 44-47). The presence of cosmetic containers among the funerary goods derives from an earlier tradition documented, only to quote the most relevant cases, in tomb 45 of Aššur (Benzel 1995: 87-88, no. 49; Wartke 1995: 108-109, no. 72), in a tomb of the XVIIIth Dynasty at Medinet el-Ghorab (Barnett 1957) and in tombs at Ugarit (Gachet 1987: 250-53, 263, no. 9, Pl. 1, Tombe 1068) and Minet el-Beida (Ibid. no. 41, Pl. 5, Tomb 3).

A similar case is represented by the tripod bowl: its outer relief presents the subject of the heroic hunt, often shown in pyxides (Karkemish, Nineveh, Tell Rifa'at) and in the friezes decorating the gates of the Luwian capitals, possibly celebrating ritual hunts or alluding to some symbolic meanings (Mazzoni 1997: 310-315). The rosettes carved on the legs share the decoration prevailing in the small cosmetic containers. The tripod showed traces of burning (Hrouda 1962: 7-8) and was most probably used for the funerary rite. Basalt tripods are frequently found in the cremation burials of the area of Karkemish, as the one with a rosette carved on its base from the West Gate Cemetery (Woolley 1939: 20, Pl. XVIIa). A stone bowl from room S, possibly related to the tombs of room T, from the Schatzhaus at ancient Kumidi (Kāmid el-Lōz), was carved with a banquet scene certainly intended for funerary purposes (Salje 1996).

The ivories from the third grave might have decorated some piece of furniture, a footstool, a table, a box; although neither the original object nor its function can be firmly interpreted and, consequently, any hypothesis regarding its everyday or funerary purpose should be treated with caution. We know from the written sources and the funerary stelae (Bonatz 2000: 92-96) that tables and stools were essential instruments of the ceremony for feeding the deceased; the stool and the table of the deceased are cited in the tablet of Mullissu-mukannishat-Ninua (Nasrabadi 1999:17). Items of furniture were, therefore, not out of place in rich graves; they were not personal belongings in life but in the afterlife and were used in the funerary rituals.

To conclude, the archaeological documentation points to a prevailing funerary use of most of the goods found in the graves. It is, however, difficult to ascertain and open to debate if ornaments, valuable objects, and common objects of daily use were personal belongings of the deceased, already used in their lifetime, or rather gifts intended for their protection or used on the occasion of the interment. Consequently, they might have had the dual value of status symbol and prophylactic and magic appeal. There were apparently no major differences in the funerary goods between women and men; instead, it was the rank of the deceased which represented a consistent marker affecting the quality and quantity of his or her funerary goods.

2. Women's Images and Death: the Portraiture of a Social Status

In the Syro-Hittite period, funerary monuments became one of the most significant genres of art; numerous statues and stelae carved with the images of the deceased and their relatives sitting at the funerary repast illustrate the attitude towards death and the belief in afterlife of Luwian (Hawkins 1980, 1989) and Aramaean society (Dion 1997: 265-70; Lipinski 2000: 636-40) in the first millennium BC. D. Bonatz in his book (2000a) and further articles (2000b, 2001a, 2001b) has explored the many characteristics of the funerary images, their ideological and social meaning, their origin and background, and their cultural and artistic links. According to his thesis, funerary monuments and the associated rituals were aimed at linking the deceased and the living in order to establish their individual and collective identity and ensure religious consensus (Bonatz 2000: 158-66). Private commemoration became a social

performance in which the participants achieved their social status as belonging to the community. The pivotal institution granting continuity and social identity was the family, on both the private and institutional level; the family of the lord secured the unity of the state, and the cult of the ancestors extended over several generations to legitimize the descendants.

Women played an important role in extending their protection to their descendants, as the inscriptions claim. They were more often ladies from the royal entourage, like the so-called princess of the Barrakib reign at Zincirli (Orthmann 1971: 65, 549, Zincirli K/2, Pl. 66d; Bonatz 2000a: 21, C49, Pl. XVII) (**Fig. 14**), or women of high status like the one on the *kliné* on the front of an altar from Marash (Schachner 1996: 204-205, Fig. 1-2, Pl. 1; Bonatz 2000a: 22, no. C59, Pl. XX) (**Fig. 15**), or the one in an embrace with her husband in a high-relief from Marash (Orthmann 1971: 89, 524, Marash A/1, Tav. 43:h; Bonatz 2000a: 19, C29, Pl. XIII) (**Fig. 16**). They show objects which signal their social and female status but may also allude to aspects of regeneration (Bonatz 2000a: 107, Table II): the distaff and spindle (**Fig. 17**), the mirror, attribute of Kubaba and probably connected with the sun, the pomegranate or the spindle and the basket of wool (Melchert 1999: 128-30). In a stele from Marash, the woman embracing her daughter shows a lyre (Orthmann 1971, Pl. 46d) (**Fig. 18**), which is known from the texts as the “Ishtar instrument” (Bonatz 2000a: 100). The ladies portrayed in the stelae and statues wear bracelets, necklaces and earrings; fibulae fasten their dresses (Muscarella 1967; Bonatz 2000a: 19, 21, nos. C29, C46, Pls. XIII, XVII). Furniture consists of footstools and tables; a *kliné* seems to be a unique case. The statues over the graves at Tell Halaf have bracelets and necklaces and decorated dresses (Bonatz 2000a: 15, nos. B4-B5, Pl. 5). The *polos*, the mantel of the women of this period, can also be decorated with friezes of rosettes, probably representing garments embroidered with precious stones. The majority, however, of both men and women do not display ornaments, nor do the very rough statues from the area of Tell Halaf (Schachner, Schachner, Karabulut 2002).

The tables are often shown bearing food consisting of bread, ducks, birds, and fish. Ducks and birds were usual funerary food but they could also symbolize regeneration, and fish fertility (Bonatz 2000a: 94-95). Goblets also appear but they are usually held by men, together with the grapes alluding to wine. In the scenery, there is a clearer gender specialization of the attributes, which, however, are more often instruments signaling the social rank of the deceased: the belt with a tassel, the stick, the *stola*, the bow carried on the shoulder, the balance, the writing board. On the table food and vessels predominate, while small boxes or other objects are quite rare.

Among the many objects shown, the distaff, the spindle and the basket of wool might have signaled at the same time symbolic and social values. They were certainly not new attributes of the role of women in family society, but it was undoubtedly only in the Syro-Hittite period that they began to play a role in female imagery and in monumental art. It seems significant that in the very same period and area specialized textile manufacture emerged with the adoption of the warp-weighted vertical draw loom, which made it possible to weave larger products. Moreover, artifacts for weaving, such as spindle whorls, distaff, spatulae, loom weights, and reels become ubiquitous in the domestic contexts of this period throughout the entire Levant (Cecchini 1992, 2000), attesting to a general increase in the production of textiles not only in industrial enterprises, such as the celebrated Phoenician ones, but also in households. As a consistent force of production in the household and in the community, women might have benefited from this process, eventually rising in rank and social status.

In the images portrayed in the funerary monuments, social roles and protecting functions were, in fact, equally shared by men and women; they could embrace their children and their spouses as well, who apparently embodied their most precious belongings. Individual values

became important features to be recorded for posterity as the inscriptions often claim; the rites of feeding the ancestors and parents ensured them an honorable afterlife, earning benefits for their descendants and legitimacy for their social status. Possession of personal goods was limited to a few objects that marked social rank; the position in the family and links with the relatives were the significant traits, which were apparently consistent with a transformation of Iron Age Levantine society.

3. Women's Belongings in Life and Afterlife

Visual documentation and archaeological evidence do apparently coincide in furnishing a picture of funerary contexts signaling more the rank and social status of the deceased than his/her gender. Gender markers are apparently very few or are more often lacking as *realia* in the graves, while the images sometimes reproduce them, but possibly as they might allude to regeneration or fertility, being also religious symbols. A few objects appearing in both graves and funerary representations, items of furniture, containers and goblets, were funerary goods, used during the burial (Winter 1999) and the possibly repeated occasions of the rite of feeding the deceased and evoking his/her spirit from the underworld back to the tomb, hence his/her house (Potts 1997: 221; Bonatz 2000: 105). They might be evocational offerings, which have been suggested for Greece in later periods (Penglase 1995: 194) or offerings to make visible, entertain, and consult spirits but also settle restless ghosts (Scurlock 1995: 1888-92). Personal belongings are, therefore, apparently limited to the jewels and ornaments worn in life and in the afterlife by men and women, without distinction.

Again, were they funerary gifts or personal belongings from their lives? Archaeology and art furnish no definite answers to this question. Textual sources from third millennium Ebla indicate, however, that “the clothes and jewels which these ladies (from the royal family) received on their marriage or their ordination as priestesses were exactly the same as those destined to adorn them on their burial. They were not, however, the objects that they had used when alive” (Archi 2002: 178-79). Personal belongings remained the property of the family, while other objects were listed among the expenditure for the burial. This is what emerges from the fact that the same object could not be cited twice among the lists of expenditure which were drawn up for the many occasions celebrated in the palace. As a consequence, there were funerary goods and gifts intended to be worn and used by the deceased in the afterlife; there is, however, no mention of gifts for the gods of the underworld. In the Ebla texts, gifts for women apparently equaled in value those for men and there were no gender distinctions. The funerary dowry paralleled the marriage dowry in quantity and types of gifts for high status women; life and funerary belongings mirrored the status of the owner, men and women apparently being equal.

To conclude, from archaeological and visual sources of first millennium BC Mesopotamia and the Levant a coherent and common picture emerges of a society that did not mark gender roles by the goods buried in the graves or shown in the funerary images. There was, instead, a clear cultural and regional divide when dealing with the funerary images and the representation of the deceased. A funerary art emerged, in fact, only in the Luwian and Aramaean kingdoms, certainly at the end of a long development, beginning in Syria in the early second millennium BC and culminating in the creation of a genre of art in the twelfth to eighth centuries BC. This process in the visual arts mirrors the nature of the funerary cult as both a family and individual event to strengthen the link between the deceased and the living and eventually ensure continuity to the family. Consequently, belief in the afterlife might have been repeatedly confirmed and eventually exalted through remembrance of the ancestors

and the necessity of appealing to them to obtain individual and social protection and legitimacy of the family rank in the community.

It was in this cultural and social scenario that women were apparently made equal in status, rank, and nature. Their symbols and belongings were then not gender but social and status markers; they signaled the function of the woman as a productive force in the community and a tutelary entity in the family. Women appear, in fact, as a notable part of the imagery, which underlines their social role: royal brides (Long Wall of Sculpture, Royal Buttress, Karkemish; Lion's Gate, Malatya), members of their entourage (Processional Entry, Karkemish), private personages (Marash). They can be celebrated after death (Marash, Meharde) and worshipped as deified ancestors (Wati, Karkemish). The role of the mother giving life and accompanying the deceased to death might also be alluded to in the funerary stelae following a Hittite funerary ritual that portrayed death as the day when the mother takes the deceased by the hand, an image which is an impressive forerunner of the "mater dolorosa" in the Deposition of Christ (Bonatz 2000a: 110).

Women's possessions were not limited to the few belongings appearing in the images and in the graves; the dual process of giving life and protecting, both in life and in the afterlife, becomes an individual and social role to be celebrated by the descendants as part of their family duties. The new emphasis given in the monuments to the funerary *pietas* between and towards women is one of the many factors in a heritage that Syro-Hittite society would ultimately leave to the emergent Western world.

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