

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Naked Elamite Figurine: A Talisman to Facilitate Difficult Labor

Abstract

During the Elamite Middle Ages (around the mid-second millennium BC) in the city of Susa in Iran, the remnants of a naked young female figurine with a wide pelvic cavity which has kept its breasts with two hands have long left scholars to think about its identity and functions. The naked figurines which were scattered on the grounds in the alleys and streets were known as The Urban Figurines. The lab research proved that they were broken intentionally. Despite a lot of research done on their identity and functions, they have remained a mystery. This article, which is field research, by doing library studies, has attempted to study the function(s) of figurines assumed in archeology, religion, and medicine. The vertical line on the abdomen of the figurines without any abdomen protrusion can symbolize a mother in labor. This feature differentiates these figurines from other naked ones. Furthermore, the presence of this figurine along with Sin god, or the god of moon, which symbolizes giving a hand to women in difficult labor, which was also observed on the seals impression discovered in Susa Zone, leads us to the hypothesis that these Naked Elamite figurines could be a talisman to facilitate the delivery. The figurines were broken by exorcists during the rituals held to repel evil forces which caused the delay in labor. Some parts of the broken figurine were buried in the walls of the public places and some other parts were offered to the temples of the indigenous goddesses, such as Pinengir and Kiririsha.

Key words: Religion and Medicine, Archaeology, Faith Healing, Witchcraft, Complementary Therapies

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Introduction

The Naked *Elamite*¹ figurine is the oldest excavated object in *Susa*, the capital of the *Elamite* era in the mid 2nd millennium BC. These figurines which have had a long history in Mesopotamia have been a constant feature of *Elamite* civilization observed in all the archaeological excavations and is considered to be a ritual figurine because of her legs² (Figure 1) (Majidzadeh, 1991, p. 54). Observing the sheer number of shattered small sculptures found in the public passages³ of a rather small neighborhood in ancient *Susa* allows one to conclude that most of these figurines are deliberately broken and thrown to the public passageways (Ghirshman, 1996, pp. 35-36). Therefore, these figurines are called the urban figurines⁴.



Figure 1. Remnant of legs of figurin, By Hossein Mozaffarii, 2021, Kept in Persian Gulf Museum, Bndar Abbas, Iran

Interestingly, the remnants of the figurines, such as *Pinengir* and *Kiririsha*, have been found in temples of indigenous goddesses.⁵ But the important point is that none of them is complete and some parts of them are missing. This shows that fragments and parts of these figurines have been removed from that site for some reason (Borujani, 2003, p. 260).

What the function of these figures is and to which goddess they belong have remained a mystery for many years. More importantly, despite the fact that none of the prominent *Elamite* archaeological researchers have attributed these figurines to *Ishtar*, they have been referred to as the goddess of *Ishtar*. (Ghirshman, 1996, pp. 35-36)

Based on the authors' academic experiences in archeology,

1- The only proven historical evidence which existed in Iran before the *Achaemenid* and the *Made* dynasty dates back to the *Elamite* period.

2- In some specimens, some layers are observed under the legs which probably represent the figuring's legs. Of course, the number of layers differs in each figurine.

3- The researchers of *Elamite* culture and civilizations believe that the molded clay *Elamite* figurines have a close connection with people and their arts due to the features such as affluence, content and subject, the basic material of the mud, and their small size. Therefore, those figurines have been famous as folk figurines.

4- The absence of the written evidence of the figurines in *Elamite* texts and books despite their multiplicity and consistency in production for several centuries could show their folk nature unless the opposite is proved by finding new texts and/or more evidence.

5- It seems that these figurines were taken to the temples or shrines for specific reasons and they were offered to the shrine or temples and some parts were broken and left there and some other parts were taken back.



religions, and midwifery, this paper attempts to develop a more comprehensive approach to the study of these figurines, relying on some reliable information in the fields of medicine, history, archeology, religions, and anthropology.

Elamite Naked Female Figurines

The presence of countless clay figurines, known as the naked figurine, holding their breasts with their two hands⁶, has a long history in *Mesopotamia* (Figure 2). These bare figurines come in small sizes (about 20cm) and, based on their appearance, are of three types: slim, medium, wide.



Figure 2. The Broken Remnants of Elamite Female Statues, By Hadi Mirvali, 2017, Kept in Sosh Museum, Sosh, Iran

There are various types of them but, in this study, only the medium and the wide ones are examined. The very first presence and the sign of the human-like figurines, in particular the female ones in Iran, goes back to the *Neolithic* age (i.e., the 8th millennium- middle of the 6th millennium BC).

6- The figurines holding breasts show the thumbs in one side and other fingers in the middle of the breasts adjacent to each other.



(Borujani, 2003, p. 49)

Over a century ago, hundreds of specimens were discovered in the archaeological excavations of the *Susa* and *Haft Tappeh*⁷. The multiplicity and the abundance of fragmented broken figurines have also led researchers and excavators of *Elamite* sites to agree that they were deliberately broken. (Negahban, 1993, p. 175)

Almost all the figurines in *Haft Tappeh* Museum are broken, and defective, with some cracks on them. Since the studied figurines have a human-like appearance and shapes, in some parts, such as the neck and legs, they are thinner and more vulnerable. So it is normally expected that they would be fractured in thinner sections, while this is not the case. The examination of the broken parts of the figurines shows that fractures did not happen in the hollow structure, lack of consistency, clay paste clogging, or inadequate baking. In general, the vulnerable areas in the texture showed no significant advantages over other parts lacking these defects⁸. (Borujani, 2003, p. 247) One-sided molds were used to make the figurines.^{9, 10}

Studying Decorative Figures

These figurines come in two types which are holding their breasts with their hands. They have the same decorations, such as naked ones standing with their legs attached, and a tilted strap or crossed straps passing through the breasts. The straps can be adjusted by a slippery circle exactly in the middle of the breasts¹¹. Although the toes are generally displayed, beneath the legs of some figurines, there are several rows of layers that may represent the stands on which the figurines are placed and the number of these layers varies in different figurines. There is a decorative belt, made of prominent dotted lines or small straight or crossed parallel lines, around the waist of some figurines. The necklaces decorated the figurines are of different types: some with large pendants and some with different strands. Some figurines have decorative bracelets on their hands, while others have anklets. The head of the figurines generally has hair ornaments of various styles (Figure 3). The most common style of ornamentation is that the hair is stacked above the head and in the back and a headdress is seen on the forehead. In one specimen, the hair is parted off to the sides of the face, with some curls and waves on the ends (Borujani, 2003, p. 260). All of them wear something big on their hands like a turban or Arabian

7- In February 1852, William Kont Leftos opened eight trenches at *Ville Royal* where in K trenches in west south of it, he discovered a collection of 200 clay sculptures named naked goddess.

8- There are different speculations on this. For example, the figurine might have been hit strongly to a solid object or probably a solid object was hit to the figurine, or in some cases the figurine was held tight in hands and then it was thrown away. Then, first, the head was hit to the ground or a solid object and broken at the neck.

9- It should be taken into accounts that despite the flaws in the details of the molds, they could not be thrown away. It is supposed that the producers were not allowed to take actions freely in mold making and there was some close monitoring at work. Apparently, they were made of precious metals, such as gold, silver, and bronze which were not available to everyone and they were kept in sacred places, like temples and shrines due to the sacred essence of the mold. So, the clay molds, smaller than the genuine ones, were made and given to the artists who made the figurines and sometimes were given to the people working in the temples. They were also under strict supervision. Thus, the clay molds were considered sacred which passed from generation to generation.

10- The discovery of fifty one-sided molds in Susa, far greater in number, compared to other ancient places in the Near East, shows that the city was involved in the mass-production of molds. On the other hand, there was no sign of the molds in ancient excavated *Elamite* areas, such as *Haft Tappeh* and *Choghazanbil*.

11- There have been signs of two straps crossing the center of the breast towards the back since the *Arpachiyah* period.



headgear.¹²

Figurines' Function

According to Ghirshman, hundreds of figurines in *Susa* are naked and broken. Except for a few graves, these small figurines were not found in graves. They were rarely seen inside houses. Stacks of these figurines found in the streets and alleys¹³ would indicate that they were thrown there. 'What can be drawn from these observations?' (Ghirshman, 1996, pp. 35-36) Ghirshman believes that these figurines are *Manzat* fertility goddess and women kept them during pregnancy to protect their fetus. Because of the numerous fractures found on the streets, Ghirshman speculates that the figurines were no longer useful after the baby was born and hence they were discarded to streets and alleys.



Figure 3. Naked Broken Statues with Elaborated Haircut, By Hadi Mirvali, 2017, Kept in Sosh Museum, Sosh, Iran

Azarpey states: 'In general, these figurines are also known as fertile figurines associated with the daily family worship ritual. Although the exact function of these figurines remains a mystery, the remain of multiple fragments of broken figurines may reflect the magical and protective powers invoked in certain ceremonies and may be related to a transitional phase in the life of a young woman.' (Azarpey, and Borujani, 2002, p. 24).

Mircea Eliade links prehistoric figurines to various phenomena, such as fertility, growth, mating, burial, acquaintance, birth, and lactation, and believes that these figurines have undoubtedly been prominent elements in life and ritual beliefs of the people at that time. Images and figurines were used for magic and magic disposal. (Mortazavi, and Solaim-

12- According to Atram-Hasis legend, the midwife has a special headgear on her head. One of the Mother-goddess's names is *Nin-me na*, meaning 'the lady of the head-gear' which is associated with childbirth. (Stol, and Wiggermann, 2000, XIV, p. 75)

13- It has been noted that street shrines were often associated with goddesses (especially *Istar*) and that they may have been frequented by women in particular. (Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 546)



ani, 2011, pp. 269–98)

Professor Vard posits that the naked woman displayed on the seals is *Zirpanit*, the wife of god *Marduk*, which is generally come along with other gods, namely *Raman*, *Shamash*, and *Adad*. (Negahban, E., 1993, p. 281)

According to the observations of Dr. Negahban, the head of the excavation team in 1965, these figurines are known as fertility goddesses brought to the temple and sacrificed at that time, based on religious beliefs. They broke a part of it and then left it there and took the rest with them. They didn't get even one intact figurine during their excavations where no broken pieces found to fit the broken parts of the figurines, and hence could not fix the figurines. (Borhani Ahang, 2004)

Women's Condition in the Postpartum Period

Exaggeration of the pelvic in these figurines is a depiction of a woman who has experienced at least one pregnancy. Physiologically speaking, joints and ligaments in the hip part are affected by relaxing hormone, *symphysis pubis* on the front, and *Sacroiliac* on the sides which increase the size of the pelvic space and the outlet. Hence, women experience an increase in their pelvic part during at least one pregnancy which facilitates the fetus exit from the birth canal.

Depicting nipples can be attributed to hormonal changes during pregnancy because the breast size increases after the second month of pregnancy and subtle veins appear just below the skin. The nipples are dramatically enlarged and have a sharp increase in pigmentation and are more erectile. The crescent in the abdomen can be attributed to the existence of pregnancy striae. At least one physiological cutaneous change has been reported in 87% of women. Slightly reddened lines are often seen on the abdominal skin and sometimes on the skin of the breasts and thighs from mid-pregnancy onwards. These lines are called pregnancy strains or stretch marks. Pregnancy strains occur in 48% of cases on the abdomen, 25% on the breast, and 25% on the thighs. (Ghaze Jahani, and Ghotbi, 2018, p. 49)

On the other hand, these crescents on the abdominal surface can also be attributed to the sudden evacuation of the abdomen whose skin has extensively stretched for months (Figure 4). As a result, ruptured elastic fibers remain in the skin and prolonged dilatation caused by the uterine lining of the abdominal wall relaxes the shell. It takes several weeks for these structures to return to normal. The abdominal wall usually regains its pre-pregnancy appearance except for pregnancy striae (Ghaze Jahani, and Ghotbi, 2018, p. 439). A vertical cleft on the abdomen (Figure 5), which is one of the hallmarks of pregnancy (in the naked figurine holding up her breasts and reported in a facial examination by Mr. Borujani), is a line called *Linea Nigra* which occurs in about 90% of pregnant women due to Hyperpigmentation and is usually more pronounced in women with darker skin. The skin of the midline of the anterior abdominal wall (white line) develops a dark brown to black pigmentation and forms a black line. In Post-partum, these pigmentation changes usually disappear or recede significantly. This will take at least six weeks because the hormone levels of the pregnant women will return to normal pre-pregnancy levels after some weeks which is called postpartum. (Ghaze Jahani, and Ghotbi, 2018, p. 49)





Figure 4. Naked Broken Statues with Abdominal Crescents, By Seyed Rasoul Borujani, 2018, Kept in Haft Tappeh Museum, Iran



Figure 5. Elamite Femal Statues with Abdominal Vertical Line, By Seyed Rasoul Borujani, 2018, Kept in Haft Tappeh Museum, Iran

A Talisman to Facilitate the Delivery Process

The Mesopotamians believed that any kind of disease originated from an evil force¹⁴ which appears because of some factors such as¹⁵:

- punishments sent by the gods
- breaking the taboos intentionally or unintentionally
- sorcery
- hand of a ghost¹⁶
- demons

There were some factors and tools which could eliminate the evil forces, talismans, recitations, and medication that were prescribed by Healers¹⁷. Undoubtedly, a lot of talismans

14- In ancient Mesopotamia, demons are one of the main reasons for suffering. (Verderame, L., 2017, p. 67)

15- Deeply rooted in Mesopotamian thought, this was commonly held that illness or any kind of trouble were punishments sent by the gods because of sins committed by the patient.(Biggs, Sasson, and Baines, 1995, pp. 1911-24)

16- The dead—especially dead relatives—might also trouble the living, particularly if the family neglected to pay due respect to their dead by offerings, such as prayer, food, flower, and the like. (Biggs, Sasson, and Baines, 1995, p. 1916)

17- There are two types of healers. The first type, called Conjurer, deals with magic and spell. The second type, called Physicians, did the therapies.



were made to help pregnant women and their parturition because there were a large number of newborns and more needs for emergency treatments. Due to the risk of pregnancy and delivery, people had to invent new methods of effective treatments. Probably the most accurate point for decoding the symbols which were used in the talismans was to pay attention to this Mesopotamian thought 'The body is a house'. (Steinert, 2017, Boston, p. 297)

As a result, a lot of talismans and recitations¹⁸ were used and associated with the images of the houses or the words related to the structure of the house. For example, in some inscriptions, the difficult labor was depicted as a house with closed doors and the severe bleeding was described as a canal or a river with a dam that was broken. Some of the most common symbols which described the difficult labor on seal impressions, inscriptions, and other references are as follow: the image in which 'A woman was riding a boat in a river', the water symbolizes *Amniotic liquid* and the boat symbolizes the uterus. As a result, this pregnant woman introduced herself as a 'full boat' (Hätinen, 2017, pp. 169-86). A cow commonly symbolizes hard labor. There was a myth which talks about the god of *Sin* who helps the cow with her difficult labor and saves her from death (Stol, and Wiggermann, 2000, p. 66). Due to similarities between the cows and humans in difficult labors, the cow symbolizes this process for humans. The similarities in the appearance of the boat and the moon and between the cow's horn and the crescent symbolize the helping role of the god *Sin* in protecting the women in labor¹⁹.

Haft Tappeh Seal and Seal Impression

In some of the cylinder seal impressions,²⁰ we found the god of *Sin* along with the naked *Elamite* figurine. We faced interesting points during our investigations of seal impression in *Haft Tappeh* where the naked figurine was present in praying scenes in a cylinder seal made of black stone, having drilled holes where two gods were standing against each other and one of them had a long beard and was wearing a hat or a crown²¹. He was wearing a long gown that was just above his ankles, with margins placed over one another in the front. His arms were bent at the elbows and his hands were connected in front of him, showing a form of praying. A short naked woman who seems to hold her breasts with her hands is located behind the god. After describing the powerful appearance of the moon god, *Sin*, as well as his azure beards with his powerful appearance was described, tracing

18- Magical incantations tended to be elaborate formal recitations involving healing gods, advising effective remedies while medical incantations looked more like folk magic, usually simple doggerel poetry or even mumbo-jumbo spells which were no longer understandable. (Geller, 2010, p. xi, 162)

19- The story of a beautiful cow, who became pregnant in the holy cattle pen, experienced calving difficulties but was eventually rescued by divine agents, functioning as a prototype for any woman in difficult labor: just as this cow suffered and finally gave birth to her calf, so any woman shall give birth successfully to her baby. (Steinert, 2017, Germany, p. 223)

20- The format of the cylinder seal is an ideal tool for a magical inscription against demons or disease, written, as a rule, to be read directly from the object itself. The amulet could be worn comfortably by the person, offering the twin benefits of protection and cure. They were not seals, in other words. The amulet symbolizing the cylinder seal has seldom been discussed in the literature beyond Goff 1963, 195-210, and the topic remains worthy of further investigation. (Negahban, 1993, p. 233)

21- A lot of seals and seal impressions are explained thoroughly in 'Excavation at Haft Tappeh'.



back to the second millennium BC. Notably, the god *Sin* was worshiped in these prayers as the facilitator god who opens the closed doors. (Botero 2008: 46).

The tree was believed to have a soul. Due to his soul, the tree could facilitate the difficult labor. Hence, a tree, because of bearing a soul, in many cases also could fertilize men and women. Since the cosmic influence the trees, they could facilitate the delivery, increase the reproduction capability, and cause fertility and affluence (Mirce, 2020, p. 270)

The seal impression #70 manifests a goddess who is wearing a long gown and is holding a reasonably thick tree, similar to a palm tree in front of herself. The second person in the scene is wearing a long gown and is shown upside down, holding the base of the tree. There is a naked woman in front of the goddess.

The seal impression #287 shows an object, identical to a slightly tilted ladder, placed in an approximately oblique state next to a naked woman which holds her breasts with her hands. Since the object is drawn similar to a ladder, it could demonstrate the transition from one place to another, i.e., the birth of the fetus and entrance to the world of infancy.

Therapeutic ornaments

Ornaments such as necklaces, bracelets, and anklets used by women can be studied from medical perspectives rather than aesthetic ones. There are some prescriptions in Babylonian and Assyrian medical texts²² about the treatment of pregnancy and delivery problems, such as difficult labor, hemorrhage, and abortion. These prescriptions are about how to make, arrange, and use the medical stones (Tzvi, and Schwemer, 2010, p. 50). The appropriate time to use them and their combination with other stones and beads are explained thoroughly. It shows how to string different types of stones, beads, and knots. Late Babylonian medical texts from Uruk (group five) explain how to string beads, stones, and knots. One special stone, called Ittamir, is famous for childbirth and is placed in the center of the string. (Tzvi, and Schwemer, 2010, p. 50) There is a star-like protrusion in the center of the necklace string on the naked *Elamite* figurines.

There is a prescription related to early labor in which the pregnant woman has to wear a ready-made talisman around her neck one hundred days after her last menstruation. This talisman is tightened with some knots. Two knots are opened at the end of each month so that there will be no knots on the labor day; therefore, she will be able to have an easy labor. (Tzvi, and Schwemer, 2010, p. 51)

22- The corpus of Babylonian magical and medical literature can be subdivided into three major categories: Diagnostic texts, Therapeutic texts, Pharmaceutical texts. (Tzvi, and Schwemer, 2010, p. 8)



The figurine which was found in Toorang Tappeh comes with six strings of a necklace with a central pendant prescribed to prevent abortion. It can be concluded that the pregnant woman had to wear a new necklace every month which was longer than the previous ones.²³ A new string was added to the necklace each month instead of making the previous knots loose. This period started from one hundred days after the last menstruation to the day of the delivery.

In the medical texts related to different types of Obstetrics and Gynecology diseases, all the texts related to abortion mention prominently that the pregnant woman has to tie a red woolen string around her ankle. Unlike the other types of figurines, the thin naked *Elamite* figurine which holds her breasts has two anklets. During the treatment, a figurine, similar to the patient, is made according to the medical texts. The thin figurines are made similar to the women in their early pregnancy because there is no sign of pregnancy such as wide pelvic, abdomen protrusion, and gestational line.

Conclusion

Since magic was tremendously popular and accepted in the middle *Elamite* period, exorcists (*āšipūtu*)²⁴ used different kinds of witchcraft, talismans, and rituals to dispel the evil²⁵. *Elamite* naked figurine can be conceived as a talisman to facilitate the delivery at that period. In some magical rituals which were the most common and ancient ways to cure the patient, a piece of mud was used to create a figurine resembling the patient²⁶. This figurine was placed overnight next to the patient and it was meant to be broken at dawn. After that, they were supposed to return home without looking back to counteract the evil forces²⁷.

Our assumptions to prove this claim are based on the comparison of features found on the body of two types of figurines, one with huge and the other with a slender pelvis. The most distinctive and important feature of figurines with huge pelvic is the presence of a vertical line on the abdomen that is not observed in the other naked figurines. The vertical line, known as *Linea Nigra*, is dark that occurs in 90% of pregnant women due to “hyperpigmentation.” This dark line remains distinct on the body for at least six weeks after delivery. Then, it vanishes or considerably fades after the retrieval of hormonal levels of the woman who gave birth to her baby. It gets back to its natural level normally expected prior to the pregnancy. Since no abdominal bump is observed on the appearance of this figurine, one can conclude that the figurine is a symbol of a mother who has already given birth.

23- <https://iranatlas.info/regional%20prehistoric/torang%20teppe/torang.htm>

24- The *āšipū*, ‘exorcist’ or ‘magician’, had sacral functions, interpreted as the symptoms, and sought the cause of afflictions. (Biggs, Sasson, and Baines, 1995, p. 1124)

25- Common to most anti-ghost rituals is the idea that the exorcist puts the ghost under oath not to return; at the end of an anti-witchcraft ritual during which figurines of warlock and witch are sent to the netherworld together with a ghost. (Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 430)

26- The variety of symptomologies corresponds to numerous witchcraft diagnoses, among which one can distinguish two main groups: (a) bewitchment caused by the performance of evil rituals, often involving the manipulation of figurines representing the patient; and (b) bewitchment caused by contact with bewitched substances. (Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 432)

27- Evil ghosts usually received libations; figurines of patients were buried and thereby banished to the netherworld. (Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 430)



It symbolizes a mother who imagines herself going through a difficult labor, asking the deities responsible for childbirth to make her like one of the specific figurines who has just delivered a baby. This is a symbol that probably manifests the pregnant mothers wishing to go through a difficult labor and related hemorrhage safely.

A woolen red string should be tied around the mother's ankles. According to the medical texts, to prevent abortion, a thin naked *Elamite* figurine, which bears two circles on her ankles, shows mothers in their early weeks of pregnancy.

Based on the common beliefs to dispel the force of vicious ghosts which usually caused the disease (i.e., the difficult delivery), special rituals were held by saying special words²⁸ and using a talisman²⁹. On the other hand, the simultaneity of the presence of naked *Elamite* figurine with the god 'Sin' which was a symbol of helping the women who were giving birth found on the seal impression obtained from *Susa* and *Haft Tappeh* is another proof suggesting that the *Elamite* naked figurine with huge pelvic and breasts in her hands was a talisman to facilitate the delivery. Being naked is a part of this ritual to purify the mother for a successful delivery³⁰. This talisman was used in rituals held by Asipu to dispel evil. After deliberately breaking the figurine, according to their traditional customs, some parts were buried inside the walls of the public places and the remnants were offered to the temples of Pinengir and Kiririsha.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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28- When they see these strange words with no meaning they get scared since they do not know the meaning behind them and thus they ward off to another house or person.

(Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 41)

29- The assistance was provided by a midwife –šabsūtu-, probably aided by a female relative. (Biggs, Sasson, and Baines, 1995, p. 1120)

30- Bathing was part of quite an elaborate therapy for the case of a woman who could not give birth. (Radner, and Robson, 2011, p. 731)



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