

A Proto-Elamite Silver Figurine in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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SINCE OUR KNOWLEDGE of the history of art in the ancient Near East is still in a rudimentary stage, it is frequently the case that a newly found single object without provenance and from an unknown archaeological context can help to enlarge our ideas of a given period. Such is the case with a remarkable silver sculpture of a bovine animal said to have come from north-west Iran and recently acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹

Being such a successful blend of part human and part animal characteristics, the piece is difficult to describe with ease. The animal is shown in a human attitude with legs tucked up beneath the body and with outstretched arms or forelegs holding a tall, spouted vessel (Figure 1). Large horns springing forward and upward from the poll encircle the cranium of the finely modeled head. The lozenge-shaped eyes, which may once have been inlaid, are placed near the projecting ears and are deeply inset in the inside corner. They are, perhaps, more human than animal and are surmounted high on the cranium by curved brows formed by incised lines. The depressions for the nostrils are sharp and deep and are joined by a deep groove running across the muzzle, which is well formed with a suggestion of fullness to the lips.

1. Acc. no. 66.173. I should like to express my gratitude to Dr. Vaughn E. Crawford, Curator of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, for allowing me to publish this figurine.

The head is set into a relatively large and powerful curved neck, narrow in the front and broad in the back. Massive shoulders are suggested on the back of the figurine, and from the rear these also appear more human than animal (Figure 2). On each side a depression divides the shoulder into two muscles. When the shoulders and legs of the animal are viewed as "arms" holding the vessel, the shoulder of the bovine figure becomes the upper arm in human terms, and the forearm is formed by the animal's upper and twisted lower leg. In relation to the upper leg, the lower leg is greatly shortened and the hoof is enlarged. The hooves are thin in section, flattened to suggest "hands." Their internal spurs are emphasized and serve as thumbs for the "hands," which hold the lower part of the vessel.

The shoulders and chest with a sharply defined brisket remain uncovered while the lower part of the body is wrapped in a long garment. An edge of the garment passes diagonally across the front of the figure from the animal's left to the lower right, where it is decorated with a tassel on the side of the knee (Figure 3). All upper edges of the garment have finely tooled parallel lines, although they are no longer visible on the upper back beneath the shoulders. The garment is decorated with alternating plain and patterned stripes.

The legs, which are also covered by the garment, are folded up beneath the figure. They receive little emphasis in relation to the large knees and buttocks, and the predominant impression is of a fully kneeling figure.



FIGURE 1
Three-quarter view of a silver animal figurine.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase,
Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 66.173



FIGURE 2
Rear view of the Metropolitan Museum's silver animal figurine



FIGURE 3
Side view of the figurine

The rear hooves, though somewhat flattened, are curved on their tops so that the figure is unstable and could never have stood on a hard surface without some type of support.

The tall silver vessel with a very long spout has two incised lines at the base and three lines beneath the rim.

When acquired, the kneeling animal was covered with a layer of corrosion products, which obscured many of the fine details. Preserved in the incrustation were traces of fabric, indicating that the figure had been wrapped in cloth.² Before the figure was cleaned, it was thought that the vessel, which hides the face when the animal is viewed from the front, would drop down to a lower position once the incrustation had been removed. This turned out to be a false assumption; the present position of the vessel is the one origi-

nally intended. Compositionally the front view is the least successful. The figure is most effective when seen in a three-quarter or a side view. The fact that the figurine was not conceived as a frontal image is strange and rare in ancient Near Eastern art, where frontality in sculpture in the round was normally the rule.

Both artistically and technically the kneeling animal is a superior example of ancient Near Eastern art. It is a surprising work that was most probably made in Elam and must date from as early as the Proto-Elamite period, equivalent to the Jamdat Nasr period of Mesopotamia, roughly 3000 B.C. in terms of an absolute

2. See below the section on the technical examination by Kate C. Lefferts.



FIGURE 4
Kneeling female worshiper, from Susa. Musée du Louvre, SB 69



FIGURE 5
Kneeling female worshiper, from Susa. Musée du Louvre, SB 70 (3032)

chronology.³ This date and provenance for the silver animal can be determined by comparisons with a group of small stone figurines and clay seal impressions of Elamite origin.

Most of the stone figurines were found in two hoards or deposits on the acropolis of Susa and have been assigned to Susa C c (Jamdat Nasr period) by L. Le Breton in his reconstruction of the early excavations of Susa.⁴ Kneeling and crouching figures of humans and of animals in human attitudes seem to have been very popular in Elam during this period, but not in Mesopotamia.⁵ The human figures include several kneeling, worshipping females with their hands clasped before them (Figures 4, 5).⁶ Only the head is carved in some detail. The lower part of the body is suggested by a simple rounded form with no indication of legs, although in one case a small foot is visible (Figure 5). A similar treatment is seen in the lower part of the silver animal. A male (?) figure of a worshiper, also conceived in highly simplified forms, is shown seated with knees drawn up close to the body (Figure 6).⁷ Like the silver animal, he holds a vessel in his outstretched arms. The hoards also included several animals, monkeys, and perhaps a bear,

3. For convenience and so as not to make the issue overly complex, the Jamdat Nasr period is equated with the Proto-Elamite period. It may well be, however, that the Proto-Elamite period lasted longer and was partially contemporary with Early Dynastic I. On the chronology of Mesopotamia and Iran for this period see: R. H. Dyson, "Problems in the Relative Chronology of Iran, 6000–2000 B.C.," in *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology*, ed. R. W. Ehrich (Chicago, 1965) pp. 224 ff.; and in the same volume, E. Porada, "The Relative Chronology of Mesopotamia, Part I, Seals and Trade (6000–1600 B.C.)," pp. 156 ff. The Proto-Elamite period is termed *Paleo-Elamite* by P. Amiet in *Elam* (Auvers-sur-Oise, 1966), hereafter abbreviated as Amiet, *Elam*.

4. L. Le Breton, "The Early Periods at Susa," *Iraq* 19 (1957) pp. 109, 111, fig. 32, hereafter abbreviated as Le Breton, "Susa." For the bibliography on each of the figurines see Amiet, *Elam*, pp. 109 ff.

5. In Mesopotamia only the so-called "Pig-tail" ladies were generally shown seated or kneeling on the seals of the Uruk and Jamdat Nasr periods: P. Amiet, *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961) pls. 19 ff., hereafter abbreviated as Amiet, *Glyptique*. There are other occasional kneeling or crouching humans and animals from the Uruk and Jamdat Nasr periods, e.g., Amiet, *Glyptique*, pl. 47: 667, 669; pl. 48: 679; the Blau monuments, pl. 48 bis, C, D; or several amulets and seals from Brak, M. E. L. Mallowan, "Excavations at Brak and Chagar Bazar," *Iraq* 9 (1947) pl. VII: 6–8; pl. XI: 1, 2. In Iran the kneeling figure was introduced early on stamp seals from Susa, Susa B, Uruk period, Amiet, *Glyptique*, pl. 6: 119 B, 122, and was used frequently in later Iranian art, e.g., in



FIGURE 6
Worshiper holding a vessel, from Susa. Musée du Louvre, SB 71



FIGURE 7
Drinking bear, from Susa. Musée du Louvre, SB 2984

seated in the fashion of the male figurine. One of the animals holds his hands to his face as if drinking in a human fashion (Figure 7).⁸ Although none of these stone figures is stylistically very similar to our silver animal, viewed as a group they suggest a date and general provenance for the newly acquired figurine.

One other interesting aspect of the Susa deposits

needs to be mentioned. The closest parallel for the tall vessel with the incised lines beneath the rim held by the silver animal is a stone vessel from the first of the two deposits; however, it lacks the grooving on the base and also the long spout of the silver vase.⁹

Although there are only general similarities between the silver figurine and the stone objects of the Susa

the Early Dynastic period on seal impressions from Susa, E. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran* (New York, 1965) p. 38, fig. 13, hereafter abbreviated as Porada, *Iran*; or on a steatite vase in The British Museum, probably Elamite, E. Strommenger, *Fünf Jahrtausende Mesopotamien* (Munich, 1962) pl. 38, hereafter abbreviated as Strommenger, *Mesopotamien*.

6. Le Breton, "Susa," p. 111, fig. 32: 11, 24, 25; Amiet, *Elam*, p. 128, fig. 91; p. 129, fig. 92; Strommenger, *Mesopotamien*, pl. 36.

7. Le Breton, "Susa," p. 111, fig. 32: 26; Amiet, *Elam*, p. 131, fig. 94.

8. Le Breton, "Susa," p. 111, fig. 32: 7, 21, 22, 27. The drinking

bear of Figure 7, though not from one of the deposits, certainly belongs with this group. Amiet, *Elam*, p. 114, fig. 72; p. 115, fig. 73; p. 116, fig. 74.

9. Le Breton, "Susa," fig. 32: 1. Long-spouted vessels of other shapes are known from the Uruk and Jamdat Nasr periods. Le Breton, "Susa," p. 109, fig. 27: 3; p. 110, fig. 28: 9. R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles de Sialk, I* (Paris, 1938) pl. xxvi, figs. 2, 3 (Sialk IV). There is an interesting long-spouted vase in silver from a hoard at Warka: E. Heinrich, *Kleinfunde aus den archaischen Tempelschichten in Uruk; Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft in Uruk-Warka, I* (Leipzig, 1936) pl. 29, W 15260.



FIGURE 8
Proto-Elamite cylinder-seal impression. Berlin Museum, VA 10347. After P. Amiet, *Elam* (Auvers-sur-Oise, 1966) p. 100, fig. 54

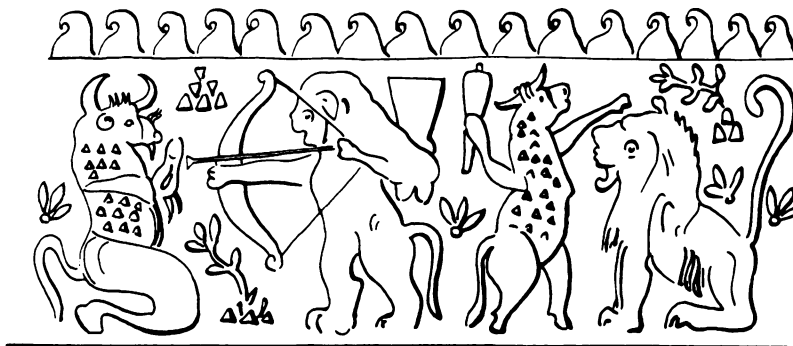


FIGURE 9
Proto-Elamite seal impression, from Susa. After P. Amiet, *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961) pl. 38: 591

deposits, the designs of the Proto-Elamite cylinder seals show many animals in human attitudes.¹⁰ On a seal in Berlin, for example, three animals, including a bull, or perhaps in this case a buffalo, are depicted kneeling (Figure 8). A goat holds a bow and arrows while an ass and the bull are perhaps collecting arrows. The field is filled with objects and structures of daily life. The large curved neck and the outline of the lower part of the body of the bull are quite similar to the neck and body of the silver animal. It is not clear whether the curving lines on the animals' lower bodies were meant to suggest that the humanized animals are clothed,¹¹ for there is a definite trend in the Proto-Elamite glyptic

style to segment the animals' bodies and to fill the areas with a variety of patterns.¹² This may account for the triangles on the kneeling and standing bulls in an amusing scene depicted on a sealing from Susa where a kneeling bull is attacked by a standing lion armed with a bow and arrow (Figure 9). On the right side of the

10. On the date of the Proto-Elamite seals see Amiet, *Glyptique*, pp. 40 ff.; and Le Breton, "Susa," p. 108, where it is suggested that the animals with human postures belong to a late stage of development.

11. Amiet, *Glyptique*, pl. 36: 559; pl. 38 bis, D.

12. Amiet, *Glyptique*, pl. 32; pl. 34: 534, 539.

impression a seated lion seems to receive his just due from an attacking bull, brandishing a club. Coupled with the Susa deposits, these few sealings should be sufficient to date the silver bovine figure to the Proto-Elamite period.

The Proto-Elamite sealings have also provided the attribution of a small sculpture of a leonine figure in the Guennol Collection to the same period (Figures 10, 11).¹³ The figure stands erect with paws clenched at the breast and the head turned to the side. There is a tremendous sense of power suggested by the massive shoulders, the clenched paws, the heavy abdomen, and the strong haunches. In spite of its small size, the figure is truly monumental. Edith Porada was able to date and place the figurine by comparisons with depictions of leonine figures in a similar attitude on the same group of Proto-Elamite sealings.¹⁴ She also pointed to a relationship between the figure and a contemporary stone sculpture of a bull from Warka that has a similar general sculptural treatment.¹⁵ The bull has legs of silver, and the leonine figure was undoubtedly provided with legs of a precious metal or of copper. Interestingly enough, this figure is also nonfrontal. Certainly the seal impressions link our silver bovine figure and the stone

13. E. Porada, "A Leonine Figure of the Protoliterate Period of Mesopotamia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 70 (1950) pp. 223 ff., hereafter abbreviated as Porada, "Leonine Figure"; Porada, *Iran*, pp. 35 ff.

14. Porada, "Leonine Figure," fig. 6 (opposite p. 225) A, F, G.

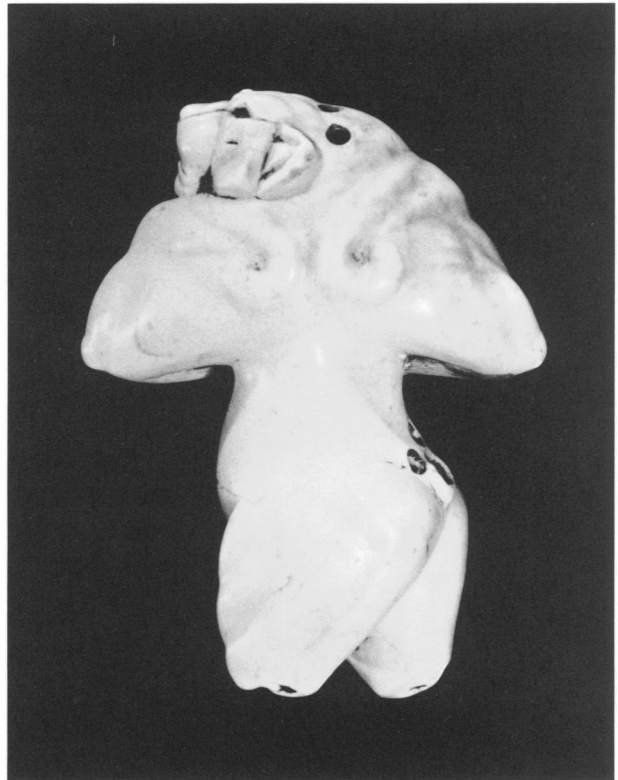
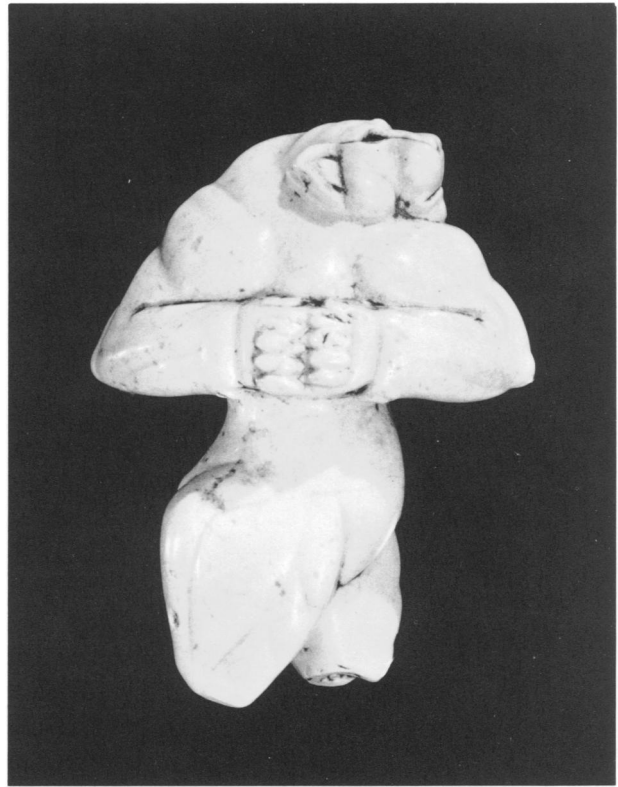
15. The bull is published in *Vorläufiger Bericht über die von der Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft in Uruk-Warka unternommenen Ausgrabungen* 7 (1935) pl. 24, b.

FIGURE 10

Front view of a leonine figure. The Guennol Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair Bradley Martin (Photo: The Brooklyn Museum)

FIGURE 11

Rear view of the object in Figure 10 (Photo: The Brooklyn Museum)



leonine figure. The naturalistic treatment of the head of the silver animal may compare well with the head of the Warka bull, but the published photographs of the Warka piece are views from one direction and are not clear enough for a precise comparison.

There is some question as to the sex of the leonine figure. Porada has considered it to be a lioness since there is no indication of sex and the forms of the lower part of the body are feminine.¹⁶ The same problems exist for the silver figurine. It is not possible to decide whether the animal is a bull or a cow. When the figurine is viewed in human terms from the back, the outline of the lower part of the body is extremely feminine in spite of the massive shoulders. On the Proto-Elamite seal impressions where bulls are depicted, the sex is frequently shown (Figure 12),¹⁷ but on those impressions where the animals assume human attitudes, there is rarely a suggestion of the sex.

On the leonine figure two curls emerge from the shoulders and fall down the back in the form of a double spiral thought by some to have been a female symbol in the ancient Near East. Porada points out that here the curls may suggest woman's hair and notes the

rendering of such curls on a bovine figure with encircling horns depicted on a Susa sealing (Figure 13).¹⁸ It is difficult to know whether the curls are meant to indicate that this kneeling bovine is female. The bovine animal on the right side of the impression does not have such curls, yet the horns extend outward and are precisely the same type as those shown on cows in a kneeling frontal position, giving birth, on other impressions.¹⁹ The significance of the various representations is decidedly complex.

As has been pointed out by Porada, the bulls and lions on one Susa impression must represent a kind of "balance of power" or an equalization of forces (Figure 14).²⁰ Both Porada and P. Amiet have studied the problem, and the latter suggests that the animals rep-

16. Porada, "Leonine Figure," p. 223, note 1.

17. Amiet, *Glyptique*, pl. 32: 514-517.

18. Porada, "Leonine Figure," p. 224.

19. Amiet, *Glyptique*, p. 108, pl. 38: 581, 582. The head of 581 is reconstructed on the basis of 582.

20. Porada, "Leonine Figure," p. 225.



FIGURE 12
Proto-Elamite cylinder-seal impression. Musée du Louvre, SB 1484

FIGURE 13
Proto-Elamite seal impression, from Susa. After P. Amiet, *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961) pl. 38: 587

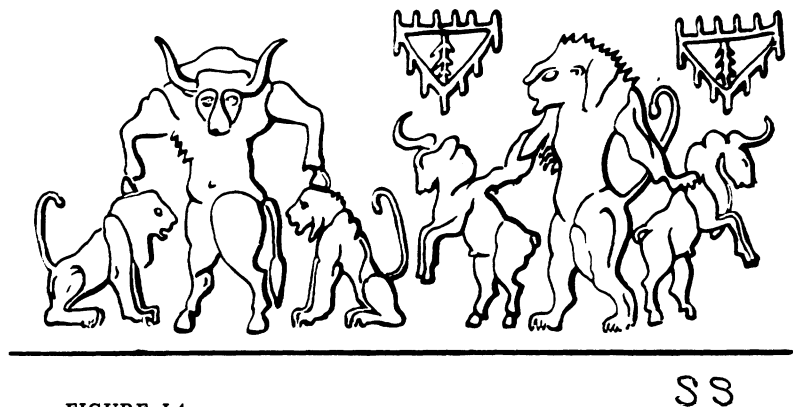


FIGURE 14
Proto-Elamite seal impression, from Susa. After P. Amiet, *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961) p. 38: 585

resent the personification of cosmic forces.²¹ Undoubtedly there is some cyclical concept behind the composition, but we shall probably never know the true significance.

The meaning of our silver animal is not to be found among the special group of lion-bull seal impressions, but more probably in those impressions that show, sometimes humorously, animals either in scenes of daily life, playing games, or hunting. Ancient literature offers little help in trying to understand these scenes. The question has often been posed as to whether we

are dealing with early myths or animal fables, the most likely assumption. These scenes, so popular in the Proto-Elamite period, appear only occasionally in later Near Eastern art, as, for example, on the lyre front from the Royal Cemetery of Ur and on an orthostat from Tell Halaf, but were never as common as they were in Egypt.²² The artist of the silver figurine may well have drawn on some kind of fable in creating the object, but it is entirely possible that this offering figure was simply the personification of a deity.

Although there are known cases in later Mesopota-

21. Amiet, *Glyptique*, p. 109.

22. C. L. Woolley, *The Royal Cemetery; Ur Excavations*, II (London, 1934) pl. 105; M. F. von Oppenheim, *Tell Halaf*, III (Berlin, 1955) pl. 100. The Egyptian material has been fully studied in sev-

eral works of E. Brunner-Traut, the latest, *Altägyptische Märchen* (Düsseldorf and Cologne, 1963). See her remarks on Babylonia in "Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel; Gestalt und Strahlkraft," *Saeculum* 10 (1959) pp. 162 ff.

mian art of human figures dressed in animal skins,²³ it is the opinion of the present writer that the kneeling bovine figure as well as the animals on the seal impressions were not intended to be representations of humans dressed as animals participating in some religious ritual.²⁴

The fact that the figurine was wrapped in cloth would suggest that the object was intentionally buried in antiquity. This was frequently the case with foundation figurines,²⁵ although objects not intended for foundation deposits have been found with traces of cloth adhering to the corrosion.²⁶ The figurine may have been used in a fashion similar to the contemporary seated worshiper holding a vessel from the Susa deposit (Figure 6). The Susa deposits were probably not foundation deposits but may well have been groups of votive objects originally placed in a temple and later buried beneath the floor of the building, a practice common in Mesopotamia.²⁷

The silver figurine was said to have come from northwest Iran by the dealer from whom it was acquired. This may or may not be the case. It is currently fashionable to suggest this area as a source for many of the ob-

jects from Iran that appear on today's market. Even if the piece was found in northwest Iran, the suggested attribution of the figure as Elamite is not objectionable. Elamite contacts with the north were certainly prevalent in later periods, and there is no reason not to assume that they existed in the earliest periods.²⁸

The leonine figure and the silver bovine figure were undoubtedly made in Elam. Miss Porada originally suggested that the stone leonine figure was the work of a foreign artist because of the relationship of the figure to the Warka bull.²⁹ The recent discovery of the silver animal also related to the Proto-Elamite seals makes this attribution less likely. However, there is no question but that art produced in Elam during the Proto-Elamite or Jamdat Nasr period was closely related to the classic Sumerian art of southern Mesopotamia proper. Although the silver bovine animal is only a small figurine, its addition to the corpus of relatively few sculptures of high artistic quality preserved for us helps to suggest that the Jamdat Nasr period in Elam and probably also in Mesopotamia was an era of great artistic creativity, a continuation of the achievements of the preceding Uruk period.

23. On a relief of Ashurnasirpal: R. D. Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs* (London, n.d.) pl. 21.

24. G. Offner expressed a similar opinion in *Revue d'Assyriologie* 41 (1947) p. 117. Her view has been questioned by Porada, "Leonine Figure," p. 226, note 29.

25. The foundation figurines from Nippur of Urnammu (Ekur) and Shulgi (Inanna Temple) were wrapped in cloth. R. C. Haines, *Illustrated London News*, August 18, 1956, pp. 266 ff. In the winter of 1968, during the excavations of the Wolfe Expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, seven foundation figurines of Enannatum of Lagash (Early Dynastic III B) were found. Several of these showed traces of having been wrapped in cloth.

26. The ninth-century silver beaker from Hasanlu was apparently wrapped in material. Porada, *Iran*, pp. 113 ff. Miss Porada suggests that in this case the beaker was wrapped with a bundle of loot ready to be taken from the destroyed building.

27. Amiet, *Elam*, p. 92.

28. Elamite stylistic elements are common in many Luristan bronzes, and another acquisition of the Metropolitan Museum (acc. no. 63.74) supposedly from the Savid River region, a bronze helmet decorated with figures of gold and silver foil, is basically Elamite in style and iconography. C. K. Wilkinson, "Art of the Marlik Culture," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 24 (1965-1966) p. 107, fig. 9.

29. Porada, "Leonine Figure," p. 225.