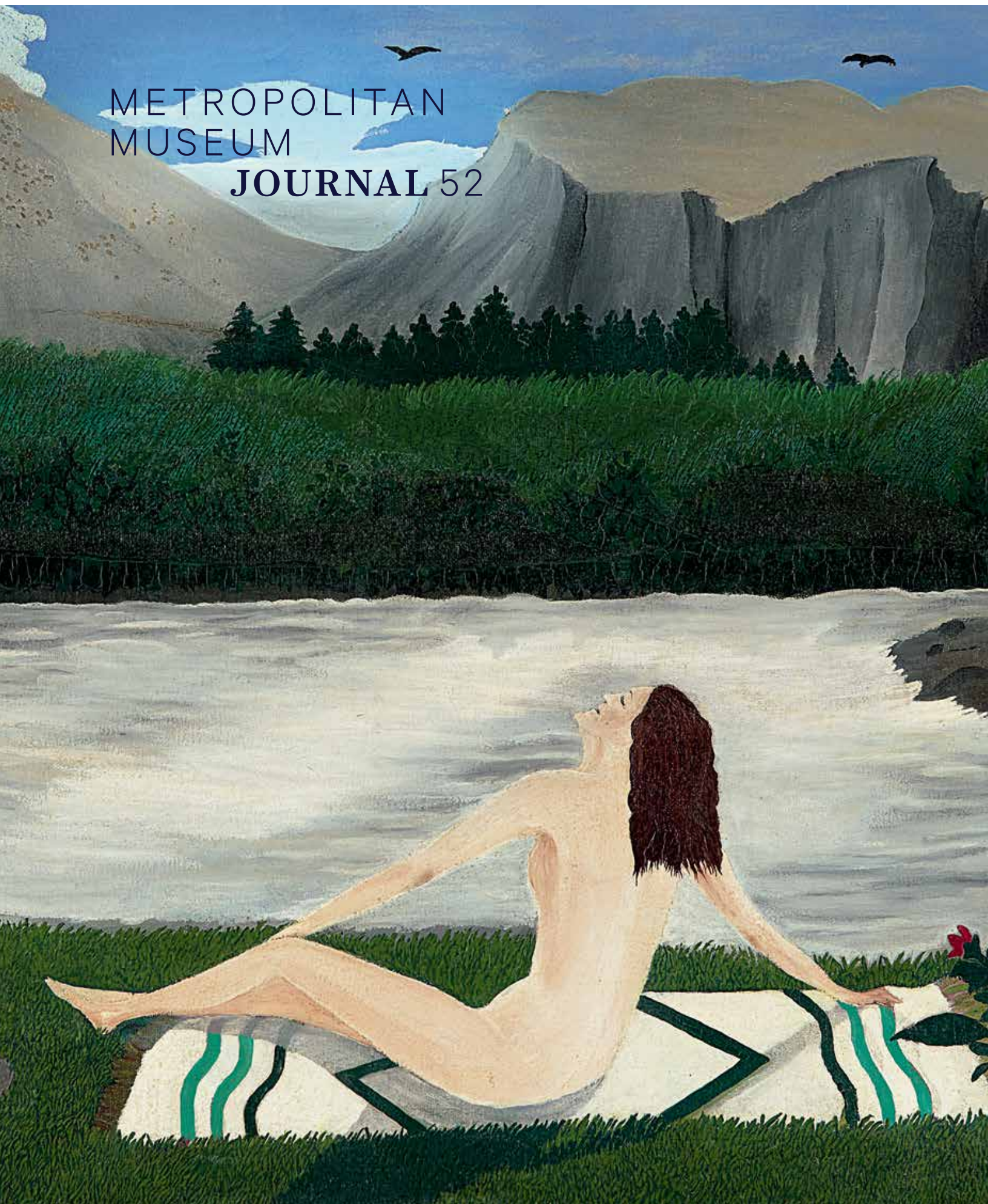


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Illustration on p. 2: Paolo Veronese (Italian, 1528–1588). Detail of *Alessandro Vittoria*, ca. 1575. See fig. 1, p. 116.

# Contents

## ARTICLES

### “Assyrian Clay Hands” in the Architecture of the Ancient Near East

SEBASTIANO SOLDI, 8

### A Possible Cypriot Origin for an Assyrian Stone Mixing Bowl in the Cesnola Collection

LUCA BOMBARDIERI, 24

### Andrea del Sarto’s *Borgherini Holy Family* and *Charity*: Two Intertwined Late Works

ANDREA BAYER AND MICHAEL GALLAGHER WITH SILVIA A. CENTENO, JOHN DELANEY, AND EVAN READ, 34

### Benjamin Franklin, Ambassador to France: Portraits by Joseph Siffred Duplessis

KATHARINE BAETJER WITH MARJORIE SHELLEY, CHARLOTTE HALE, AND CYNTHIA MOYER, 56

### The Sacred and the Modern: The History, Conservation, and Science of the Madina *Sitara*

KAREN M. KERN, Yael ROSENFELD, FEDERICO CARÒ, AND NOBUKO SHIBAYAMA, 72

### “Working My Thought More Perfectly”: Horace Pippin’s *The Lady of the Lake*

ANNE MONAHAN, ISABELLE DUVERNOIS, AND SILVIA A. CENTENO, 94

## RESEARCH NOTES

### An Examination of Paolo Veronese’s *Alessandro Vittoria*

ANDREA BAYER, DOROTHY MAHON, AND SILVIA A. CENTENO, 116

### The Roman *Maniera*: Newly Identified Drawings

FURIO RINALDI, 128

### *The Madonna and Child with Saints Francis and Dominic and Angels* by Giulio Cesare Procaccini: A Masterpiece from the Archinto Collection

MARTINA COLOMBI, 142

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### ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin  
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

*Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.*

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## “Assyrian Clay Hands” in the Architecture of the Ancient Near East

The function of glazed clay hands in the architecture of Iron Age Mesopotamia (9th–8th century B.C.) and the Northern Levant has proven somewhat elusive even more than one hundred years after the first discovery of such objects in the Neo-Assyrian royal palaces of Nimrud, Khorsabad, Nineveh, and Ashur in northern Iraq and in the Aramaean kingdom of Zincirli (ancient Sam'al) in southern Turkey. Evidence in museum collections and from recent field excavations in northern Syria and southern Anatolia, however, allows an opportunity to reconstruct the placement of the hands in their original settlements and to suggest possible meanings of their shape (fig. 1). Through a brief review of their morphology, excavation contexts, and comparisons to other objects, this article aims to connect the so-called Assyrian clay hands with a long architectural tradition in Mesopotamia. In that tradition, temples and palace facades were



*fig. 1* Glazed hand. Neo-Assyrian, Nimrud (Ancient Kalhu), probably Northwest Palace, ca. 883–859 B.C. Terracotta, glaze,  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$  in. (21 × 9.5 × 6 cm). British Museum, London (BM 92095)

*fig. 2* Reconstructed clay cone-mosaic columns decorating a staircase in the E-anna Precinct, Uruk. Late Uruk, ca. 3300–3000 B.C. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum

decorated with various architectural elements that had multiple functions, combining symbolic and decorative purposes with structural needs.<sup>1</sup>

The utilization of multifunctional elements had been in place since the beginning of monumental architecture in southern Mesopotamia, where the imposing buildings in the E-anna sacred area of Uruk, dated to the end of the fourth millennium B.C., had peculiar facade decorations. The niches and projecting pilasters along the walls of major town buildings were decorated with multicolored stone and clay cones systematically inserted into the plaster. The flat bottoms of the cones were arranged in a geometric, mosaic motif on the surface of the building (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Beside the cones, other clay or stone figurative objects were displayed on the surface, fixed into the walls through a stem, in a format that

continued from the late Uruk period (ca. 3200–3000 B.C.) until the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2350 B.C.). The practice is observed across a large geographic area and a long time span, as attested in the Eye Temple in Tell Brak, in northern Syria, where the cones and a composite gold and limestone frieze were excavated together with a series of stone rosettes once fixed to the walls of the sanctuary.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the Ninursag temple in Tell al ‘Ubaid, near Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, spectacular copper-alloy with limestone and shell-inlay friezes were found along with stone and clay rosettes similar in shape and function to those at Tell Brak (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup>

In later periods the tendency to integrate decorative solutions within architecture became more articulated, culminating with the introduction of molded bricks during the Middle and Late Bronze Age in the second millennium B.C. In Tell Leilan and Tell al Rimah, respectively in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, archaeologists have revealed imposing temple facades characterized by mud-brick half-columns in the shape of palm-tree trunks and spiral columns, obtained by juxtaposing molded bricks cut in the required forms to obtain the complex pattern.<sup>5</sup> In Uruk, during the reign of Kara-indash, king of the Kassite dynasty ruling over Babylon at the end of the fifteenth century B.C., a small shrine dedicated to the goddess Inanna was erected. The exterior walls of the small temples were decorated with repeated images of lifesize deities inserted in the niches and framed by circular elements.<sup>6</sup> A similar system of adornment with mythological figures represented in the molded bricks is attested in Susa during the Middle Elamite period (twelfth century B.C.), in the temple erected by King Shilhak-Inshushinak and dedicated to the great Iranian god Inshushinak, patron god of Susa and of the dynasty of the Shutrukides.<sup>7</sup> These instances testify to how architecture and figurative decoration in a variety of materials have a long reciprocal history in the Near East. Assyrian palaces and temples appear along the line of this tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Assyrian clay hands were first discovered in the mid-nineteenth century by British and French archaeologists among the remains of palaces and temples of major Assyrian cities in northern Iraq. As these were the first excavations carried out in the Near East, archaeological methods were at their very beginning, and excavators were mainly focused on major finds such as sculpted reliefs and gigantic statues of winged gatekeeper figures. Many of the latter would form the core of the first Mesopotamian galleries in European and American museums.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, many small



finds were collected and sometimes recorded in field notes, so that a certain number of clay hands found in the debris of the royal buildings were catalogued and shipped to museums.

In 1991, Grant Frame, who analyzed most of the known examples, recorded 171 clay hands, a number he warned was partially incomplete because some items mentioned by early explorers in Iraq were not accessioned and were left at the site.<sup>10</sup> About thirty more hands must be added to the total after recent excavations, mainly from northern Syria and southern Turkey. Sites where clay hands have been identified so far are the historical Assyrian capitals of Nimrud, Khorsabad, Nineveh, Ashur, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, and a few other smaller settlements in the Mosul area.<sup>11</sup> Westward, a few hands have been found at two sites in the Khabur region of northeastern Syria, and, far from the Assyrian heartland, in Zincirli, capital of the ancient Aramaean kingdom of Sam'al, located in the Karasu river valley, in the Amanus region of the northeastern Mediterranean (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has in its collection two Assyrian clay hands, found in the Northwest Palace at the site of Nimrud (figs. 5, 6).<sup>13</sup> With the exception of the Zincirli pieces, which present some peculiarities typical of items from that site, all other clay hands are closely related in shape, surface treatment, and chronology. The objects are generally composed of an "arm" segment, rectangular in shape and left in an unfinished and unpolished state, and a "hand" part in

the shape of a clenched or cupped fist; the fingers are individually marked, and the thumb is always represented as a fifth finger without distinction from the other four (figs. 7, 8). The hand usually has a section that is wider and higher than the arm:<sup>14</sup> this characteristic, together with the rough finishing of the arm part in contrast with the definition of the fingers in the hand, suggests that the arm would have been inserted into the mortar among the brickwork with the function of a tenon (fig. 9), leaving the fist as the only visible part of the object.<sup>15</sup> Some works have a clear indication of fingernails, which do not continue in the direction of the arm but seem to turn toward the wrist (figs. 1, 6, 8). Frame observes that "it remains uncertain whether these objects were intended to represent cupped hands, fists, or simply hands with fingers outstretched."<sup>16</sup> Finally, some hands exhibit a surface treatment, such as a blue or greenish glaze covering, in most cases (figs. 1, 11), or a bitumen coating. The treatment is associated only with the fingers and fist, leaving the rest of the object blank and rough.

About one-third of the preserved hands bear an inscription on the fingers or on one side of the hand (see figs. 5, 6, 8).<sup>17</sup> The inscriptions, except for a single case related to the reign of Shalmaneser III, are connected to Ashurnasirpal II, who reigned between 883 and 859 B.C. There are a few standardized types, repeating a common series of elements, such as the king's royal titles and genealogy denoted in different ways. A few objects bear indications that they belong to the palace

*fig. 3* Rosettes. Sumerian (Early Dynastic III), ca. 2400–2250 B.C. Ninursag temple, Tell al 'Ubaid. Terracotta, stone, and bitumen, each 7½ × 4¾ in. (20 × 12.3 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia (B15795; B15796; B15888)





fig. 4 Map of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean in the second and first millennia B.C.



of the king or to the temple of Ishtar in Nimrud, signaling that the objects were designed for specific places. The two works in the Metropolitan Museum, both from Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), have similar inscriptions, in one case displayed on the three central fingers, and in the other, subdivided along all five fingers of the cupped fist:

MMA 54.117.30 (fig. 5):

Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, king of the world, king of Assyria,  
son of Tukulti-Ninurta II, king of the world, king of Assyria,  
son of Adad-Narari II, (who was) also king of the world  
(and) king of Assyria.<sup>18</sup>

MMA 57.27.30 (fig. 6):

Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, great king,  
mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria,

son of Tukulti-Ninurta II, king of the world, king of Assyria,  
son of Adad-Narari II, (who was) also king of the world  
(and) king of Assyria.

Property of the city of Kalhu.<sup>19</sup>

Without entering here into a specific analysis of these inscriptions and others in the catalogue of known clay hands, which has been so well carried out by other scholars, we turn now to observations addressing the possible origin and function of the clay hands, relying on the few iconographic sources and archaeological data. A few clay hands have been found in situ, but in most cases, the exact location of origin is not clear, leading scholars to speculate on how they were used. The most complete documentation is provided by the Old Palace excavation in Ashur, where the German expedition directed by Walter Andrae in 1903–14



*fig. 5* Glazed and inscribed hand. Neo-Assyrian, Mesopotamia, Nimrud (Ancient Kalhu), Northwest Palace, ca. 883–859 B.C. Terracotta, glaze,  $3\frac{3}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{3}{8}$  in. (9.8 × 22.2 × 5.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1954 (54.117.30)

*fig. 6* Inscribed hand. Neo-Assyrian, Nimrud (Ancient Kalhu), Northwest Palace, ca. 883–859 B.C. Terracotta, bitumen,  $2\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$  in. (5.75 × 14.2 × 9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1957 (57.27.30)

recorded a collapsed wall with a row of clay hands set at a regular distance from one another in a vertical orientation (fig. 10).<sup>20</sup> Conrad Preusser notes that mud-bricks in “Raum 2” of the Old Palace, where clay hands were found in situ, measured  $47 \times 47 \times 7$  centimeters, and bore the stamped inscription of King Ashurnasirpal II.<sup>21</sup> Recently, Friedhelm Pedde and Steven Lundström reviewed the documentation of the excavations of the Old Palace and proposed that the distance between the hands was 25 centimeters.<sup>22</sup> The thickness of the clay hands, which are on average between 4 centimeters in height in the arm part and 7 centimeters in the hand segment, is compatible with the height of the bricks (7 centimeters, according to Preusser).<sup>23</sup> The average dimensions of the hands and the bricks would thus allow the clay hands to be inserted as corbels in the horizontal rows of the brickwork. The vertical position in which the hands were found in the Old Palace is

explained by the frontal collapse of the wall and the ceiling.

In Nimrud and Khorsabad too, British and French archaeologists respectively discovered clay hands inserted into the wall plaster. George Smith recorded finding them in a vertical position, “planted upright in the wall, embedded in mortar between the bricks,” noting at the same time that the wall itself was ruined and in very bad condition.<sup>24</sup> Although a reuse of such artifacts cannot be excluded, it is more likely that the hands were found in a vertical position only because of the building structure’s collapse, as was the case in Ashur. In addition, French archaeologists at Khorsabad observed the hands protruding horizontally out of the walls.<sup>25</sup> Considering both the excavation contexts and the manner in which the clay hands are left rough and without surface treatment along the arm part, we can confidently state that their original position was

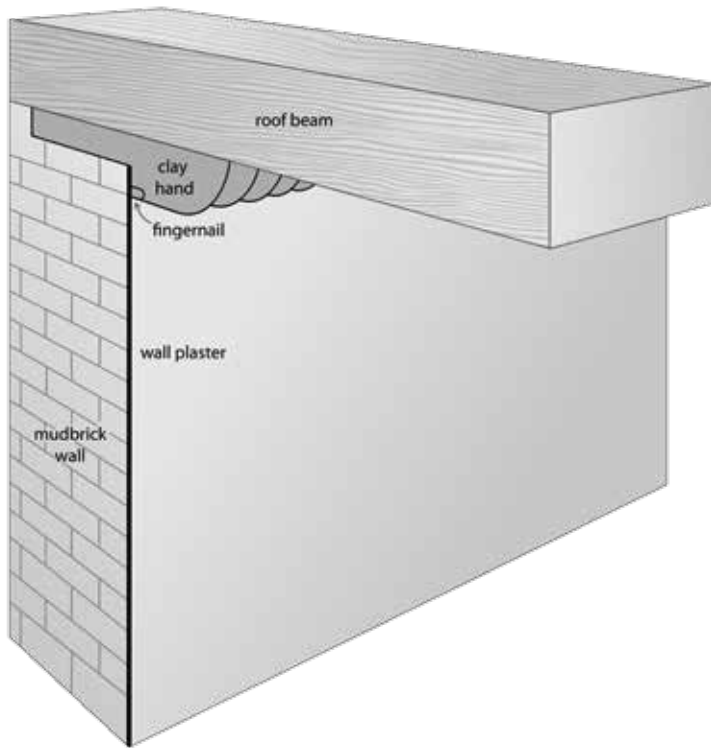
*fig. 7* Multiple views of a fragment of a clay hand. Neo-Assyrian, Nimrud (Ancient Kalhu), ca. 883–859 B.C. Terracotta,  $4\frac{5}{8} \times 3\frac{3}{8} \times 2$  in. (11.7 × 9.7 × 5.2 cm). British Museum, London (BM 1994.1105.8)



*fig. 8* Multiple views of a fragment of a clay hand. Neo-Assyrian, Nimrud (Ancient Kalhu), ca. 883–859 B.C. Terracotta,  $5\frac{1}{8} \times 3\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$  in. (13 × 8.5 × 5.3 cm). British Museum, London (BM 90976)



*fig. 9* Diagram showing possible usage of clay hands underneath roof beams



horizontal, inserted in the brickwork and extending out of the walls. As noted above in the case of Ashur, dimensions of the mud bricks used during the Neo-Assyrian period are compatible with those of the hands and the arm section with the function of tenon. During the Iron Age, bricks tended to become thicker than in previous periods, with an average height between 7 and 12–13 centimeters.<sup>26</sup>

The clay hands were certainly used inside the rooms of palaces and temples, as attested by the Old

Palace in Ashur and by field notes relating the objects to the vicinity of the throne room in Nimrud, but due to the dearth of archaeological records from the find sites we cannot state if the interior use was exclusive or if they were also used as exterior decoration.<sup>27</sup> The exact use of the objects is debated among scholars, who alternately favor a general apotropaic purpose, use as supports for roof beams, use as window ledges, or a purely decorative function.<sup>28</sup> The apotropaic possibility derives from uses of the hand as symbolic representation against the evil eye in many Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures. The presence of the hands along the perimeter of sacred palaces and temples could have protected an area and purified it from evil spirits.<sup>29</sup> The blue glazed coating has been interpreted in this manner because of its historical connections with amulets and magical objects made of glass, faience, or Egyptian blue, but the explanation must be contested, because, as mentioned above, some hands do not have any surface treatment, or are covered by black bitumen.

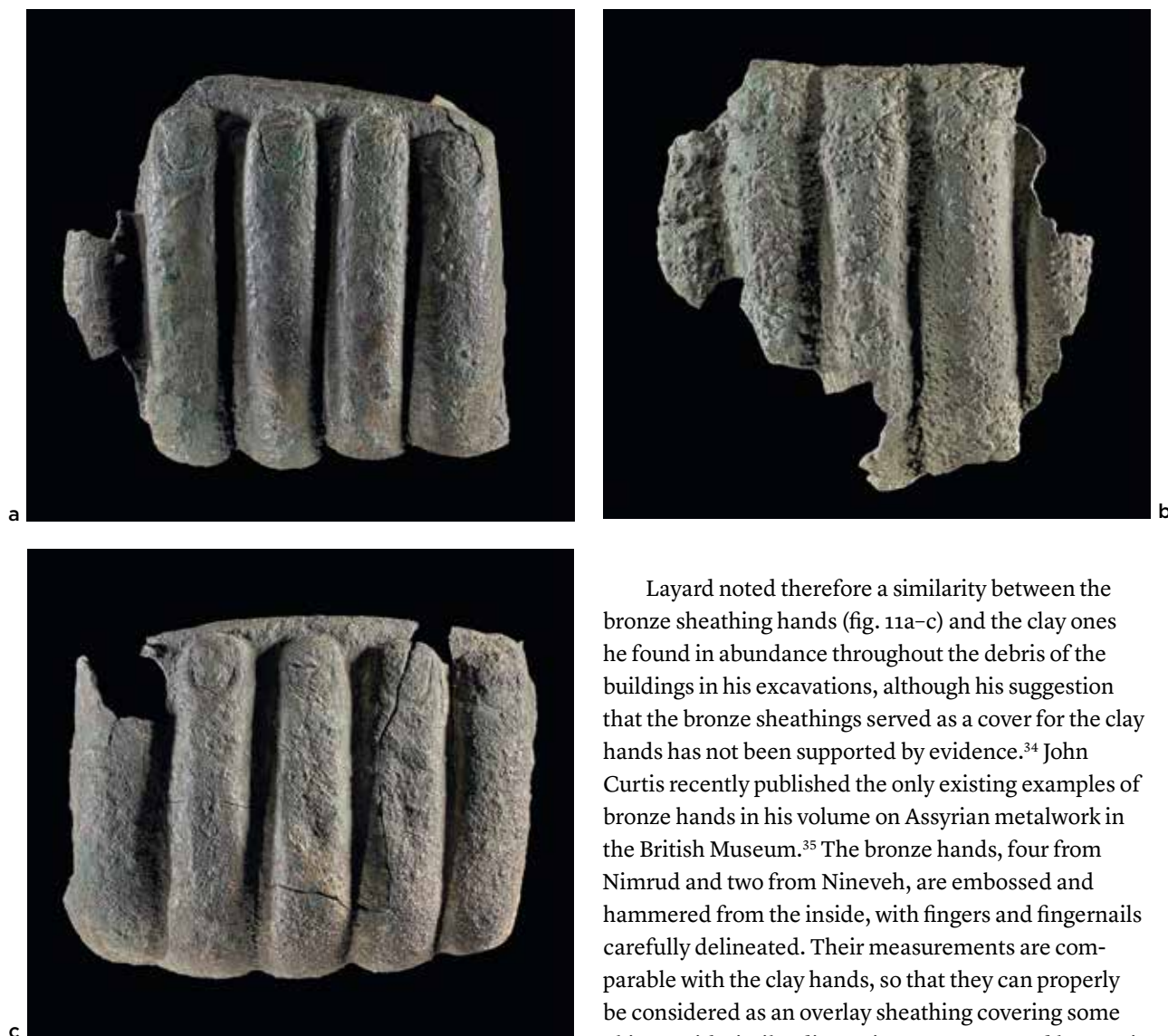
Other scholars regard the hands along the wall as a means to support the roof, or roof beams, or as window-ledge fixtures.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, the hands may have framed tapestries or other textiles on the walls, a hypothesis that cannot be proven because textiles from ancient Mesopotamia were rarely preserved.<sup>31</sup> Given the state of current research, it is best to consider the objects as decorative elements or as supports for light weights, rather than structural elements in the architecture, since the baked clay would easily break in the junction between arm and hand due to the static stress

*fig. 10* Neo-Assyrian, Old Palace, Qalat Sherqat (Ancient Ashur), reign of King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.). Collapsed wall in "Raum 2" as found by the German expedition between 1903 and 1914. Clay hands were found in situ, inserted at a regular distance into the brickwork, originally in a horizontal orientation, but seen here vertically in the collapsed wall structure. Note the fallen clay hand to the left of the seated workman.





*fig. 11* Hand sheathings. Neo-Assyrian, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) and Kouyunjik (ancient Ninua/Nineveh), 9th–8th century B.C. Bronze,  $4\frac{7}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$  in. (12.3 × 5.9 × 9.4 cm). British Museum, London (BM 55-12-5; BM 48-11-4; BM 313-4)



of the ceiling timbers' weight.<sup>32</sup> This observation leads to the analysis of a related class of materials: bronze casings in the shape of embossed hands.

When excavating the debris of entrance D to the throne room B of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud in 1846, Sir Austen Henry Layard observed the following:

In clearing the earth from this entrance, and from behind the fallen lion, many ornaments in copper, two small ducks in baked clay, and tablets of alabaster inscribed on both sides were discovered. Amongst the copper mouldings were the head of a ram or a bull, several hands (the fingers closed and slightly bent), and a few flowers. The hands may have served as a casing to similar objects in baked clay, frequently found amongst the ruins, and having an inscription, containing the names, titles, and genealogy of the King, graved upon the fingers.<sup>33</sup>

Layard noted therefore a similarity between the bronze sheathing hands (fig. 11a–c) and the clay ones he found in abundance throughout the debris of the buildings in his excavations, although his suggestion that the bronze sheathings served as a cover for the clay hands has not been supported by evidence.<sup>34</sup> John Curtis recently published the only existing examples of bronze hands in his volume on Assyrian metalwork in the British Museum.<sup>35</sup> The bronze hands, four from Nimrud and two from Nineveh, are embossed and hammered from the inside, with fingers and fingernails carefully delineated. Their measurements are comparable with the clay hands, so that they can properly be considered as an overlay sheathing covering some objects with similar dimensions. As suggested by Curtis, who notes the presence of a nail to fix them to an underlying material, it is unlikely that they were used to cover the actual clay hands, which never bear a nail-hole. They might, however, have covered a wooden structure, such as the ends of roof beams protruding from the exterior walls, which could have been carved in the shape of the hand. Even though Layard recalls “several” bronze hands, their number does not compare with the clay hands, two hundred of which remain. Bronze was often melted and reused in antiquity and metals would have been among the objects most likely pillaged from the royal palaces after the fall of the Assyrian empire;<sup>36</sup> moreover, wood is rarely found in Mesopotamian archaeology because of conservation issues related to the moisture levels of the soil.

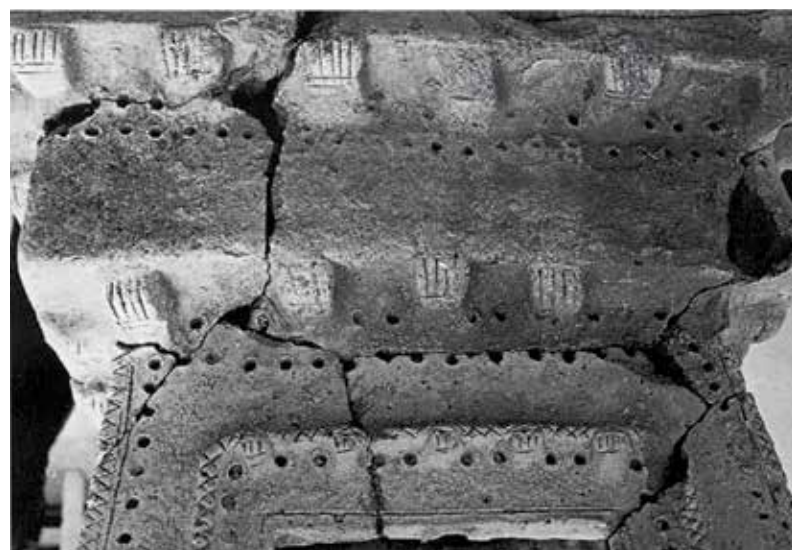
If the hypothesis of the bronze hands as overlaid sheathing repoussé is correct, we may suggest that the bronze hands may have covered the protruding end of wooden beams employed in Assyrian buildings to



*fig. 12a* Architectural model with ridged elements. Meskene (ancient Emar), Syria, Tour A, 14th–13th century B.C. Terracotta,  $46\frac{1}{8} \times 30\frac{3}{4} \times 30\frac{3}{4}$  in. ( $117 \times 78 \times 78$  cm). National Museum, Aleppo, Syria

*fig. 12b* Detail of architectural model in fig. 12a showing ridged protuberances encircling the window of Emar Tour A

*fig. 12c* Detail of architectural model in fig. 12a showing ridged protuberances underneath the rooftop of Emar Tour A



support the roof, whereas the clay hands were displayed with a purely decorative function as a sort of skeuomorphic replica of those bearing a static function.<sup>37</sup> Further objects support this proposal. The first group is composed of Late Bronze Age architectural models (fourteenth to thirteenth century B.C.) from the Syrian mid-Euphrates area representing towers, houses, and temples, with particular attention to those from Emar and Tell Mumbaqa. These *maquettes architecturales* have been collected in a vast corpus by Béatrice Muller, who discusses in detail the evolution and typologies of such works from the Eastern Mediterranean to Iran.<sup>38</sup> With regard to the architectural models from the mid-second millennium B.C. from Emar and Tell Mumbaqa, Muller suggests that a few elements, such as the ridged

protuberances encircling the window and underneath the rooftop (figs. 12a–c), might relate to the Assyrian clay hands.<sup>39</sup> Olivier Callot, who studied the use of wood in the architecture of Syria and the Levant, focuses on the ridged elements represented in the architectural models, identifying them as the roof-supporting beams protruding from the buildings' facades, a treatment that is still used in traditional mud-brick architecture in Syria and Iraq.<sup>40</sup> As Béatrice Muller and Jean-Claude Margueron point out, the architectural models were not necessarily intended to be exact representations of ancient buildings.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless they display distinct features that help us to reconstruct details of the original, lost buildings, especially when the information matches that from excavations. One such feature is the

*fig. 13* Clay hand. Tell al-Hamidiya (ancient Ta'idu), Syria, 15th century B.C. Terracotta, 21 × 6¾ × 3⅞ in. (53.5 × 17 × 8 cm). Museum, Deir ez-Zor, Syria (TH 41/42-38)



ridges that appear at junctures between wall and roof or wall and window on some architectural models. We can therefore begin to establish a parallel between the bronze casings that Layard excavated in Nimrud and Nineveh, probably meant to cover a wooden core, and these ridged elements.

One substantial problem posed by comparing the Assyrian hands with the architectural models lies in the chronological and geographic gap between the sets of objects. The bronze and clay hands are attested in Assyria between the ninth and eighth century B.C., whereas the architectural models are found in the Syrian area of the middle Euphrates between the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. Unfortunately, there is a lack of archaeological evidence in that area in the middle of the second millennium B.C., but recently published excavations in eastern Syria provide new information. In Tell al-Hamidiya, in the Khabur region, the Swiss archaeological expedition identified between 1988 and 2001 some twenty-eight examples of clay hands, unglazed and unpainted, in a secondary-use context in the palace attributed to the Mittanian period, which should be dated to the fifteenth century B.C. (fig. 13).<sup>42</sup> Although of slightly different shape—the definition of the single fingers is flatter and rougher than those in the Assyrian models—the Hamidiya hands must now be considered the most ancient artifacts of this class of materials.

A date in the thirteenth century B.C. had already been tentatively proposed for some hands found in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, one of the first Assyrian capitals in northwestern Iraq, but the uncertain stratigraphic position of the objects led archaeologists to reconsider the attribution to the later Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>43</sup> Another single clay hand is recorded from the plowed surface in

Tell Brak, where an imposing Mittanian and Middle-Assyrian occupation is also attested, but the British archaeologists working at the site hypothesized that this single object must have belonged to a disappeared Neo-Assyrian level (about the ninth to eighth century B.C.), rather than attributing it to the Mittanian or Middle-Assyrian buildings.<sup>44</sup>

David and Joan Oates and Helen McDonald considered the recent findings from nearby Tell al-Hamidiya, but they excluded a chronological relationship between the two, since the Brak example appears more similar to types from the Neo-Assyrian period than to the flat and long-armed pieces from Hamidiya. Importantly, however, archaeologists report that in Brak no occupation levels or materials belonging to the Neo-Assyrian period are attested within the site itself. As we have seen, the presence of Assyrian clay hands is always related, except in a few cases from an Ashur grave, to official buildings such as palaces and temples, which in this case would not have left a trace on the ground, not even with other eroded materials and pottery shards below the slope of the tell. Also, the height of the small hand fragment from Brak is reported to be nine centimeters, a measurement comparable with the findings at Hamidiya. These factors lead us to retain the possibility that the clay hand from Brak might have belonged to one of the official buildings dated to the Mittanian or Middle-Assyrian periods on the top of the tell and could be roughly contemporaneous with the items at Hamidiya. If this hypothesis is correct, we could state the following: hand-shaped devices were first in use in eastern Syria, then in Assyria, as early as the fifteenth to thirteenth century B.C., as attested by the iconography of clay architectural models and by recent finds in archaeological excavations.





*fig. 14* Glazed pair of cupped hands (external and internal views). Syro-Hittite, Zincirli (ancient Sam'al), Turkey, 8th century B.C. Terracotta, glaze,  $7\frac{1}{2} \times 5 \times 4$  in. ( $19 \times 14.5 \times 10$  cm). Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (S 2302)

*fig. 15* Altar or funerary stele. Syro-Hittite, Karamanmaraş (ancient Gurgum), Turkey, late 8th–early 7th century B.C. Basalt,  $29\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{2}$  in. ( $76 \times 56.5 \times 31.5$  cm). Archaeological Museum, Antakya, Turkey (17915)



Another group of clay hands must be brought into the discussion: the only site in the Northern Levant where glazed hands have been found is Zincirli, in the Karasu river valley in the Amanus mountains.<sup>45</sup> Here the German expedition directed by Felix von Luschan at the end of the nineteenth century and recently the joint expedition of the Universities of Chicago and Tübingen directed by David Schloen have revealed several glazed hands in the ruins of the palaces of the ancient capital of the Aramaean kingdom of Sam'al (about the ninth to eighth century B.C.), which was conquered by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. The Zincirli hands, labeled "Handkonsolen" by the German archaeologists, present one main difference from those from the Assyrian region: they are represented as pairs of joined hands, with eight fingers and the two thumbs clearly represented in the correct position and not as an indistinct fifth finger (fig. 14), as in the Assyrian examples. No fingernails are represented, but a cupped hole, sometimes interpreted as an indentation, is present in the middle of the hands on the upper side, in some

cases connecting with a hole passing through thumb and forefinger.<sup>46</sup> New fragments of Zincirli hands have been excavated by the Chicago-Tübingen expedition and are currently under study by the present author. It is difficult to place the Zincirli hands in relation to those from Assyria, or to understand their possible function, given that few indications of their stratigraphic provenance were recorded.<sup>47</sup> For the moment we can state that hands with a generic architectural function and a thick glaze coating were used in the far western province on the border between Syria and Anatolia, probably introduced by the new Assyrian rulers and locally readapted in shape and function as a regional variation.<sup>48</sup>

The same area of Zincirli presents another striking piece of evidence for the clay hands in their original setting: a funerary stele, or more probably an altar, from the city of Marash (ancient Gurgum), dated to the late eighth–early seventh century B.C., with a frontal depiction of a woman wearing a finely decorated dress and seated on a bed (fig. 15).<sup>49</sup> The stele is represented as an architectural frame, and underneath the stepped crenellations,<sup>50</sup> which have also been found in glazed ware in Zincirli,<sup>51</sup> are four protruding hands just below the ceiling, with all four fingers and thumb clearly defined.<sup>52</sup> The work provides a clear representation of the hands within their original architectural framework, recalling the visual suggestion provided by the Late Bronze Age Syrian architectural models.

We may never completely understand the significance for the people of the ancient Near East of such hands in different shapes and materials created from Assyria to western Syria in a span of time between the second half of the second millennium B.C. and the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Probably all the abovementioned hypotheses are partially true, beginning with a structural function coexisting with a symbolic and religious meaning. The hand always played an important role in Mesopotamian representations, as seen in the hand gestures on numerous Assyrian reliefs.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the hands bear the name of King Ashurnasirpal II, and mention his palace or one of the temples in Nimrud, could be a reference, at least in Assyria, to the role of the king as builder of palaces and temples, a topos that characterizes Mesopotamian kings from the earliest Dynastic periods onward. In this case the hand would be a symbol for the embodiment of the *roi bâtisseur* within the palace that he erected with his own hands, putting in place or transporting the mud bricks for construction, as represented in art contemporary with and even much earlier than the clay and bronze hands. For example, during the Neo-Assyrian period



fig. 16 Stele of Shamash-shum-ukin, king of Babylon, represented as builder. Neo-Assyrian, Temple of Nabu (Borsippa), 668–655 B.C. Stone, 12 × 6 in. (30.5 × 15.2 cm). British Museum, London (BM 90866)

King Ashurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shum-ukin, formerly king of Babylon before Ashurbanipal unified the crown of Assyria and Babylon, left three steles of their restoration works in the Esagila temple in Babylon, representing themselves carrying a basket of earth upon their heads (figs. 16, 17).<sup>54</sup>

Another possible explanation for the use of hands protruding out of the walls could be connected to the act of supporting the roof, the hand being a sort of *pars pro toto* for a figure of an Atlas or Telamon upholding the highest part of the building. Representations of mythological figures supporting the heavenly vault or the winged sun disk are common in the ancient Near East, especially on stone reliefs from Syro-Hittite citadels and on Assyrian and Babylonian seals. In these cases the anthropomorphic deities support the sky by holding it with their hands (fig. 18).<sup>55</sup>

This article has reviewed most of the archaeological and visual documentation related to the Assyrian glazed hands and has identified their employment as far back as the Late Bronze Age in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. Although the visual sources helpful to





*fig. 17* Stele of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, represented as builder. Neo-Assyrian, Esagila Temple (Babylon), 668–655 B.C. Marble, H. 14 ½ in. (36.8 cm), W. 8 ¾ in. (22.2 cm). British Museum, London (ME 90864)



*fig. 18* Cylinder seal belonging to the priest of Adad, Nabu-shar-usur, with a figure of Atlas holding a winged sun disk. Neo-Assyrian, ca. late 9th century–8th century B.C. Chalcedony, 1 ½ × ¾ in. (3.6 × 1.5 cm). British Museum, London (BM 89082)

reconstruct their use are sparse, the monument from Marash, though outside of the Assyrian heartland, provides striking evidence that they were placed in an architectural setting consistent with that suggested by the excavated hands still embedded in the fallen wall of Room 2 in the Old Palace at Ashur. Furthermore, the Late Bronze Age Syrian architectural models offer a means by which to interpret the function of the hands in the second millennium B.C., as they can now be paired with archaeological remains of clay hands in a building presumably dated to the Mittanian period. The wide usage of these objects in the Assyrian palaces therefore seems to continue a long tradition in the architecture of the Near East, probably beginning in the last centuries of the second millennium B.C. in the region between the Syrian middle Euphrates and northern Mesopotamia. The origin of the hand-shaped objects in this area and their subsequent spread throughout Assyria in the early first millennium B.C.,



and most likely extending to the western provinces of the Northern Levant, could explain the variations in shape and surface treatment between the extant works, revealing once more the persistence of cultural interconnections between these regions already in place during the Late Bronze Age.

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## NOTES

- 1 Edgar Peltenburg used the label “Assyrian clay fists” in his article of 1968. Grant Frame redefined them as “Assyrian clay hands” in his article of 1991, the most complete study on these objects. The pieces also became popular in the archaeological literature with the name “Hands of Ishtar,” a definition that is best avoided, as correctly advised by Roger Moorey (1985, p. 180), since no clear reference in cuneiform texts or other visual sources relates the objects to the Mesopotamian goddess of love and war.
- 2 See the detailed study of the motifs and disposition of the cones in Brandes 1968.
- 3 Mallowan 1947, pp. 93–95, pls. 3–5.
- 4 Collins 2003a; Collins 2003b.
- 5 Weiss 1985; Oates 1967.
- 6 Evans 2008, pp. 200–201, fig. 66.
- 7 Harper 1992; Caubet 2003.
- 8 Anastasio 2011, pp. 35–65.
- 9 On the first excavations in the Near East, see Matthiae 1986 and Matthews 2003, pp. 1–19.
- 10 Frame 1991, p. 335n1.
- 11 See Peltenburg 1968 and Frame 1991.
- 12 Luschan and Andrae 1943; Peltenburg 1968.
- 13 MMA 54.117.30 and 57.27.30, excavated by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq in 1952.
- 14 In specific cases the hand and arm have identical widths, as in some examples of clay hands from Ashur (Preusser 1955, pl. 17e–h) or all the specimens from Khorsabad in the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago (Guralnick 2008).
- 15 See the hypothesis of employment in Frame 1991, p. 358, fig. 4.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 See the transliteration and translation in *ibid.*, p. 348 (Inscription F).
- 19 See the transliteration and translation in *ibid.*, p. 350 (Inscription H).
- 20 Preusser 1955, p. 21, pl. 14:B.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 22 Pedde and Lundström 2008, p. 45; see the two images in *ibid.*, figs. 54, 55 (the first one was not published in Preusser 1955), where missing clay hands can be detected within the wall mud bricks.
- 23 Frame 1991, pp. 336–38.
- 24 Smith 1875, pp. 76 and 429.
- 25 Place 1867–70, vol. 2, p. 86.
- 26 See the detailed study by Martin Sauvage (1998, especially pp. 147–50) devoted to the brick and its employment through different periods of the ancient Near East.
- 27 Frame 1991, p. 356; Moorey (1985, p. 180) notes that the glaze or the bituminous covering on some of the examples was not treated in this manner to avoid damages caused by water in an outdoor environment, as the glaze would not be enough to resist the effect of flowing water.
- 28 Frame 1991, pp. 355–59.
- 29 Van Buren 1945, pp. 58–59.
- 30 The explanation of the use as a window ledge is proposed by Edgar Peltenburg (1968, p. 62) on the basis of a parallel with a basalt architectural decoration with lion talons from the citadel of Hama (ancient capital of the Aramaean kingdom of Hamath and Luash, in western Syria, ninth–eighth century B.C.).
- 31 Pedde 2011, p. 43.
- 32 Moorey 1985, p. 180.
- 33 Layard 1849, vol. 1, pp. 115–16.
- 34 In a portrait of Sir Austen Henry Layard by Ludwig Johann Passini (Austrian, 1832–1903), now in the National Portrait Gallery in London (NPG 1797), he is represented at his desk writing notes, with an Assyrian clay hand lying on the table in front of him.
- 35 Curtis 2013, pp. 61–62.
- 36 Frame 1991, p. 339.
- 37 The main objection to this hypothesis is that the dimension of the bronze sheathing hand is smaller than the eventual average diameter of a wooden timber supporting the roof, but we cannot exclude that the terminal part could be carved and adjusted to fit within the casing of the bronze hand.
- 38 Muller 2002.
- 39 Muller 2001, p. 337; Muller 2002, pp. 97–98; this hypothesis would harmonize well with Peltenburg’s suggestion to interpret the hands as window ledges; Peltenburg 1968, p. 62.
- 40 See Callot 2001, especially p. 283, discussion with Peltenburg, who proposes a relationship between the wooden timber beams and the Assyrian clay hands.
- 41 Muller 2001; Margueron 1976; Margueron 2001.
- 42 Wäfler 1993, pp. 195, 464 no. 327; Wäfler 2003.
- 43 Eickhoff 1985; Dittmann et al. 1988, p. 121. See discussion in Hausleiter 1999, p. 277.
- 44 Oates, Oates, and McDonald 1997, pp. 153–54, fig. 178.
- 45 Luschan and Andrae 1943, pp. 60–61, 155, pl. 31:d–e; Pucci 2008, pp. 72–73.
- 46 See especially Luschan and Andrae 1943, p. 61, fig. 72, pl. 31:d–e; Peltenburg 1968, pp. 58–59, fig. 1c.
- 47 According to Felix von Luschan and Walter Andrae, the Zincirli hands were found in a pit south of the Hilani III, with other similar glazed objects (hands and rings); see the discussion of the possible stratigraphic attribution for the pit and related material in Pucci 2008, pp. 72–73.
- 48 An interesting but doubtful case of hands carved in stone from the Syro-Hittite area comes from Karkemish: Leonard Woolley (1921, p. ix, pl. A.16,e) describes two fragments of stone hands with Luwian inscriptions from the Lower Palace as fragments of a bowl. We cannot exclude that such hands were part of a larger statue that was lost or were part of a lost architectonic decoration similar to the Zincirli cupped hands with indentation.
- 49 Schachner and Schachner 1996; Bonatz 2000, p. 22 (C59), pl. XX.
- 50 For the hypothesis of the stele’s use as an altar, see the comparison with another altar from the citadel of Marash in Garbini 1959 with the striking similarity in the stepped crenellation (Schachner and Schachner 1996, pp. 211–12).
- 51 Luschan and Andrae 1943, pp. 61, 155, pl. 31:a–c.
- 52 Schachner and Schachner 1996, p. 212, figs. 1, 9; see also the detailed color images posted by Tayfun Bilgin on the website Hittite Monuments, accessed January 9, 2016, [www.hittitemonuments.com](http://www.hittitemonuments.com).
- 53 See the comprehensive analyses of Assyrian hand gestures in Gruber 1980, Goldman 1990, and Cifarelli 1998.
- 54 Tallis 2014.
- 55 One apparent incongruence to this hypothesis is that the clay hands with represented fingernails have the fingernails leaning on the side of the wall and not to the roof, looking as if a hand would come out from the roof above, and not supporting the roof itself (see Frame 1991, pp. 357, 358, fig. 4). It must be stressed, however, that if the clay hands did belong to an Atlas supporting the roof, fingernails would be represented as they are in a cupped open hand, as in images of Atlantes in stone slabs and seals (see fig. 18), and thus with fingernails leaning on the side of the wall.

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**A Possible Cypriot Origin for an Assyrian Stone Mixing Bowl in the Cesnola Collection:** fig. 3: from Miglus 1996; fig. 4: from Hrouda 1962; fig. 5: from Bikai 1981; fig. 6: photograph by Olaf M. Teßmer

**Andrea del Sarto’s *Borgherini Holy Family and Charity: Two Intertwined Late Works*:** figs. 2, 3, 26: Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington; fig. 4: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY; figs. 5–12, 14, 20, 22: photographs by Michael Gallagher; figs. 13, 19, 24, 25: Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi; fig. 15: © The Cleveland Museum of Art; fig. 16: Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, photographs by Michael Gallagher; fig. 18: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY; fig. 21: Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford; fig. 23: photograph © The State Hermitage Museum, photograph by Vladimir Terebenin

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**An Examination of Paolo Veronese’s *Alessandro Vittoria*:** figs. 3–9: photographs by Evan Read; fig. 10: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY; fig. 11: digital image courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum Open Content Program

**The Roman *Maniera*: Newly Identified Drawings:** fig. 2: Pandolfini Casa d’Aste, Florence, photograph courtesy Pandolfini; fig. 4: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY, photograph by Michel Urtado; fig. 6: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY, photograph by Jean-Gilles Berizzi; fig. 8: Photograph © Vatican Museums

# METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 52

## ARTICLES

"Assyrian Clay Hands" in the  
Architecture of the Ancient Near East  
Sebastiano Soldi

A Possible Cypriot Origin for an  
Assyrian Stone Mixing Bowl in the  
Cesnola Collection  
Luca Bombardieri

Andrea del Sarto's *Borgherini Holy Family*  
and *Charity*: Two Intertwined Late Works  
Andrea Bayer and Michael Gallagher  
with Silvia A. Centeno, John Delaney,  
and Evan Read

Benjamin Franklin, Ambassador  
to France: Portraits by  
Joseph Siffred Duplessis  
Katharine Baetjer with Marjorie Shelley,  
Charlotte Hale, and Cynthia Moyer

The Sacred and the Modern:  
The History, Conservation, and  
Science of the Madina *Sitara*  
Karen M. Kern, Yael Rosenfield,  
Federico Carò, and Nobuko Shibayama

"Working My Thought More Perfectly":  
Horace Pippin's *The Lady of the Lake*  
Anne Monahan, Isabelle Duvernois,  
and Silvia A. Centeno

## RESEARCH NOTES

An Examination of Paolo Veronese's  
*Alessandro Vittoria*  
Andrea Bayer, Dorothy Mahon, and  
Silvia A. Centeno

The Roman *Maniera*:  
Newly Identified Drawings  
Furio Rinaldi

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Francis and Dominic and Angels* by  
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