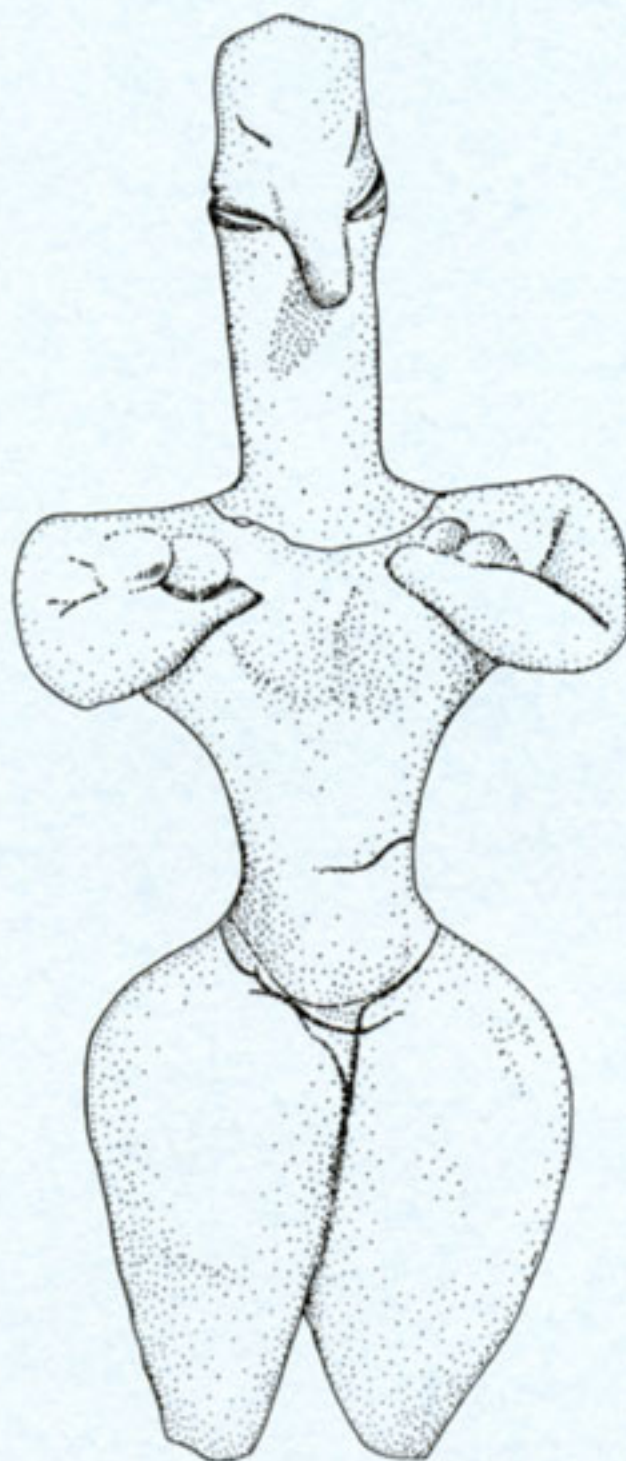


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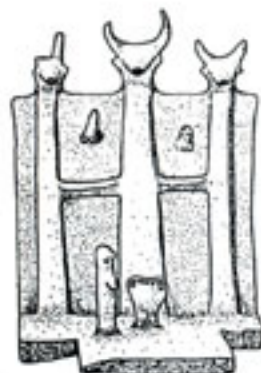
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Terracotta Model from Kotchati (or Marki), Cyprus. Early or Middle Bronze Age, c.1900 B.C.
Cyprus Museum, Nicosia. See P. Åström, "A Cypriote Cult Scene", *JPR* 2: 5-11.
Early Neolithic Figurine from Nea Nicomedia. Museum at Veroia. From D. Theocharis (ed.),
Neolithic Greece.



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A HUMAN SACRIFICE ASSOCIATED WITH A SHEEP SLAUGHTER IN THE SACRED AREA OF ISHTAR AT MB I EBLA?

Lorenzo Nigro

Recent excavations at Tell Mardikh / ancient Ebla have revealed two major phases of use of the Sacred Area of Ishtar (Matthiae 1990a; 1990b; 1993a; 1993c; 1994a; 1994c), an open courtyard including the impressive high-terrace called Monument P3 and Temple P2 (fig. 1). The square comprised between these two massive buildings was devoted to cultic activities, being used as votive burial area during the entire Middle Bronze Age. Various finds testify to this peculiar function, such as dismissed temple vessels, food offerings, sacred and votive objects, and also remains of sacrificed animals, of which several skeletons were discovered buried under the floor of the square or scattered on it (fig. 2). The ritual employment is further demonstrated by three *favissae* (F.5238, F.5327 and P.5231) a series of *bothroi* excavated in 1992-1997 (Marchetti and Nigro in press a; in press b). Two 11 m-deep cisterns (fig. 3) contained more than 850 complete ceramic vessels, hundreds of precious beads, silver and bronze snakes, clay figurines, other personal ornaments and votive offerings consecrated to Ishtar (fig. 4). Among this manifold evidence, an intriguing find of the 1995 campaign gives us an opportunity to examine some peculiar aspects of Old-Syrian cult and rite.

In the centre of the square, not far from the eastern front of Monument P3, a mudbrick and stone-lined pit (D.6274,

in DiVI7i-vi) was discovered, sealed by several stones, emerging on the floor of the square, and filled with brownish virgin soil (fig. 5). It had a roughly rectangular shape in plan and contained remains of two skeletons; namely a human and sheep cranium, the latter only partially preserved (the upper part of the cranium and a mandible were visible), and two sheep leg-bones (fig. 6). No other human bones were found except for the cranium. Unfortunately, the pit had partly undergone an inner subsiding, probably due to an underground ravine caused by an earthquake during the Middle Bronze Age, and was raised on the top by the paving of the square, so that the bones were partly discarded from their original spots, being accumulated in the south-western corner (fig. 7). However, evidence from a similar burial found further south (see below, D.5314), suggests that a regular placement of selected bones was commonly observed. This may be confidently connected with the practice of slaying and cutting sacrificed animals, since different destinations were scheduled for different parts of the victims.

An offering deposit consisting of three ceramic vessels was found next to the pit, filled with the same brownish virgin soil. This suggests it should be associated with the mixed burial. It comprised a cooking pot, an ovoid jar with short neck and high pedestal, and a

small bowl with high carination and everted rim (TM.95.P.271/1-3). The jar with trumpet pedestal is especially noteworthy (fig. 8), since its shape is unknown at Ebla, while many comparisons permit to identify it with a distinguished MB I type of the Euphratian horizon (Orthmann 1981: pl. 49:1-2). Also clay and manufacture point to a non Eblaite origin for this vessel.

The mixed burial has a clear stratigraphic position. It was cut in the EB IVB filling of the collapsed structures of Building P4 (Marchetti and Nigro 1995-96), and was raised and overlaid by the latest floor of the Square of the Cisterns, dating from MB IIB. A dating during MB I seems thus quite reasonable, as the associated ceramics also confirm. As far as this phase of utilisation of the sacred square is concerned, further evidence for animal sacrifices is available. A cult installation, including a 2 m large cistern (P.5223), occupied the middle of the square during Middle Bronze IA (2000-1900 B.C.). It consisted of a small precinct, north-east/south-west oriented (like Monument P3), which was surrounded by votive pits. To the south, two dog burials have been discovered (see below), while to the east and to the west there were two *bothroi* storing votive objects and food offerings. One of these is a circular pit (F.5242), 2.00 m large and 0.60 m deep, filled with dark brown virgin soil. Six slightly carinated bowls were buried in it, disposed along the borders (Marchetti and Nigro in press a: fig. 18:2). The surrounding area also contained scattered bovine bones, hinting at ritual activities held in the central precinct. In front of the eastern façade of

Monument P3, next to the mixed burial, there were a human deposition, a *bothros* and a disarticulated burial of a sheep (D.5314 in D1VI5iv). A determined pattern of displacement is shown: leg-bones form a square in the middle of which the head is deposited (fig. 9). Around this burial other fragmented bones of sheep were scattered.

Dog burials are of particular interest. Two greyhounds were buried together (D.5340), lying side by side, covered by large sherds, while a third, a few metres away, was very badly preserved. The head of one of the two dogs was reversed and was touching the other one, while the bodies were parallel (fig. 10). Such a position possibly indicates that the animals were strangled by twisting their neck, in order to avoid a blood-stained sacrifice. This feature might be tentatively ascribed to the domestic and noble character of such animals, or, more practically, to the fact that they were not destined for consumption. The recent discovery, in the courtyard in front of a Middle Bronze *in antis*-temple at Tell Abu Hureyra, in the Wadi Ghazza, of burial pits with donkeys and puppy dogs killed by twisting and breaking the neck (p.c. E.D. Oren), offers a striking comparison and testifies to the diffusion of this rite in Syria-Palestine. Nevertheless, burials of greyhounds are also known in Northern Syria from a MB I level at Tell Abu Danne (Tefnin 1977: 195-196, fig. 20) and from Akkadian levels at Tell Brak, in the ritual filling of the sacred quarter of Area FS (Clutton-Brock 1989: 219-220, pl. XXX).

The evidence illustrated above demonstrates that various animal sacrifices

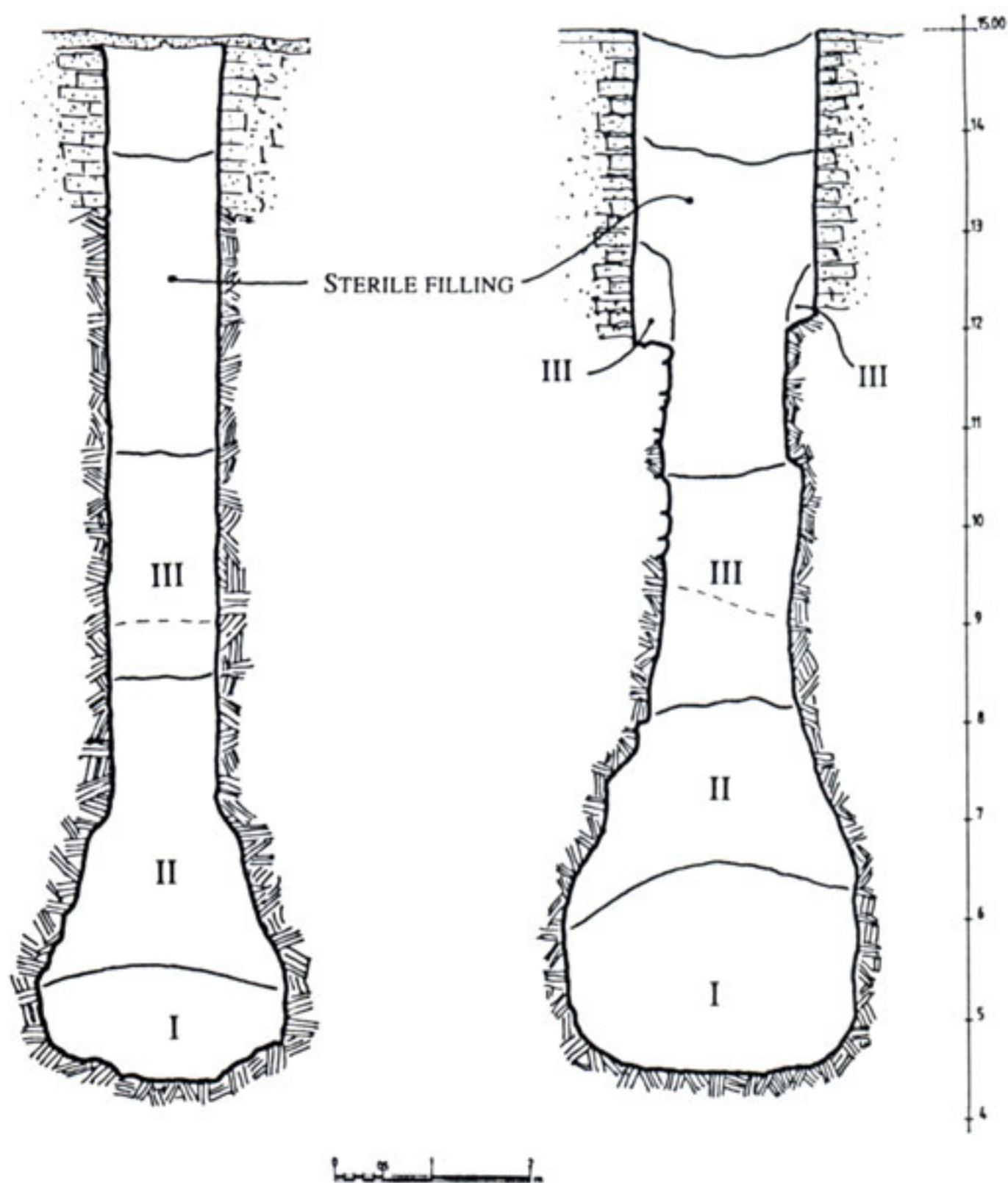


Fig. 3. Sections of the two cisterns F.5238 (left) and F.5327 (right) hewn into the rock and filled with votive offerings (MB IB-IIA, c. 1850-1775 B.C.).



Fig. 4. Votive objects and vessels retrieved in Favissa F.5238.

were performed during MB I in the Sacred Area and that the victims were then buried under the floor of the square. The concomitant presence of several *bothroi* containing food offerings and ceramic vessels ascribable to table services points to sacrifices connected with communal consumptions. Different rites are perhaps revealed by intentional burials of dogs and sheep, although - as far as ovine meat is concerned - one cannot rule out the possibility that parts of sacrificed animals not to be eaten were consecrated to the Goddess by burying them according to ritual precepts. Moreover, the diversity of rites held in the area is shown by the retrieving of a basalt torso of a bearded man (TM.95.P.469; Matthiae 1996: 201-204, figs. 7-8) presumably annexed to a human deposition, which hints at the cult of a worshipped ancestor (fig. 11).

Co-ordinating these manifold data with the evidence from the two *favissae* F.5238 and F.5327 (Marchetti and Nigro in press a; in press b), one may conclude that communal rites took place in the square (Nigro 1996: 222-224), including consumption of sheep and goats. (Sheep and goat bones for almost 50 kilos were found in the cistern P.5213, sealed by a distinguished basalt altar, largely known from Old-Syrian glyptic, see Matthiae 1994b: 166-177).

Since meat should normally be object of sacrifice before consumption, one may consequently surmise that sheep burials found in the area derived from cruel sacrifices related to collective banquets (Milano 1988: 62-67). The performance of such rites was in fact usual in open cult areas, as it is indicated by comparable finds in Ugarit, Byblos, Me-

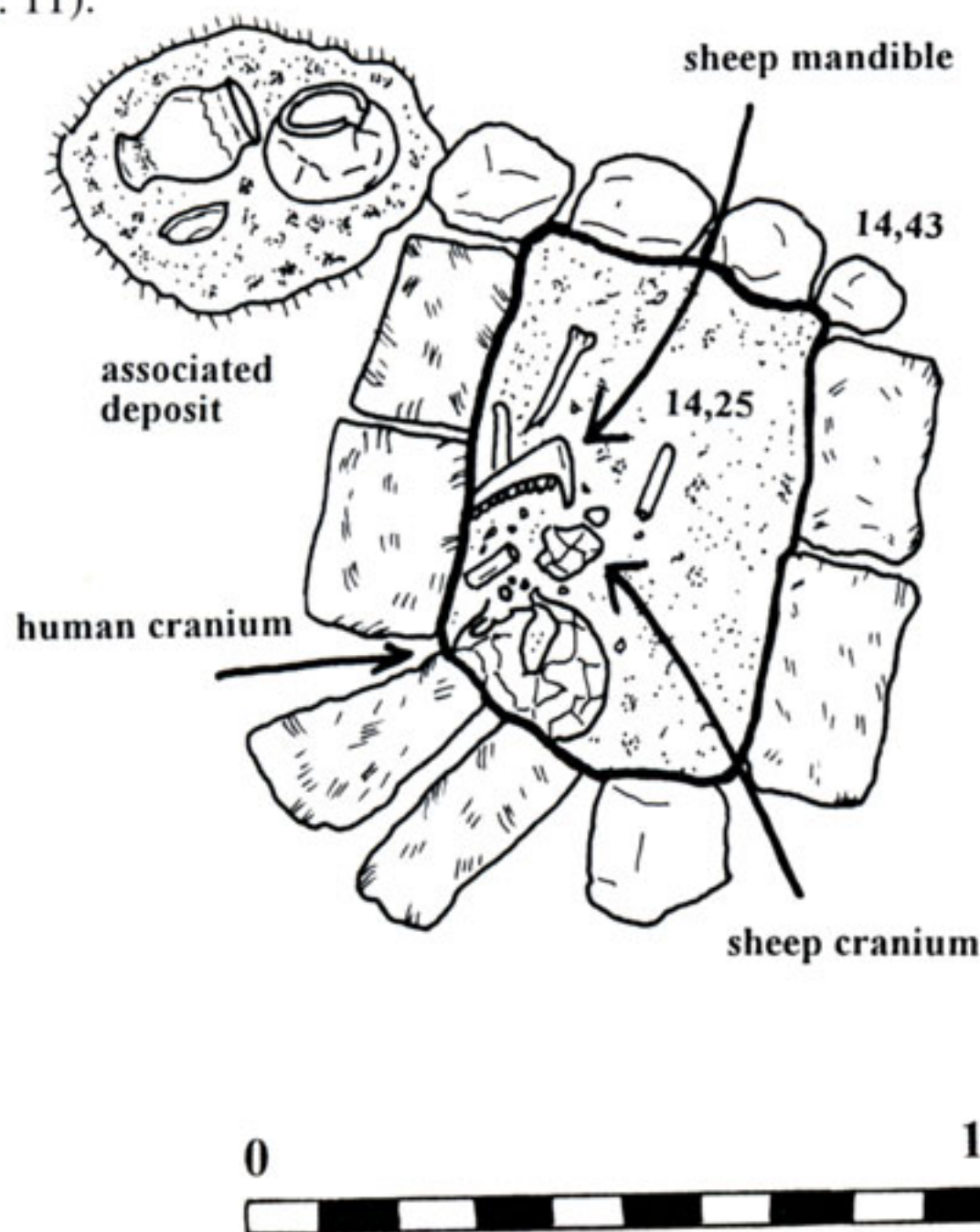


Fig. 5. Detailed plan of burial D.6274 in DiVI7i (MB IA, 2000-1900 B.C.).



Fig. 6. View of the burial D.6274 from north-east.

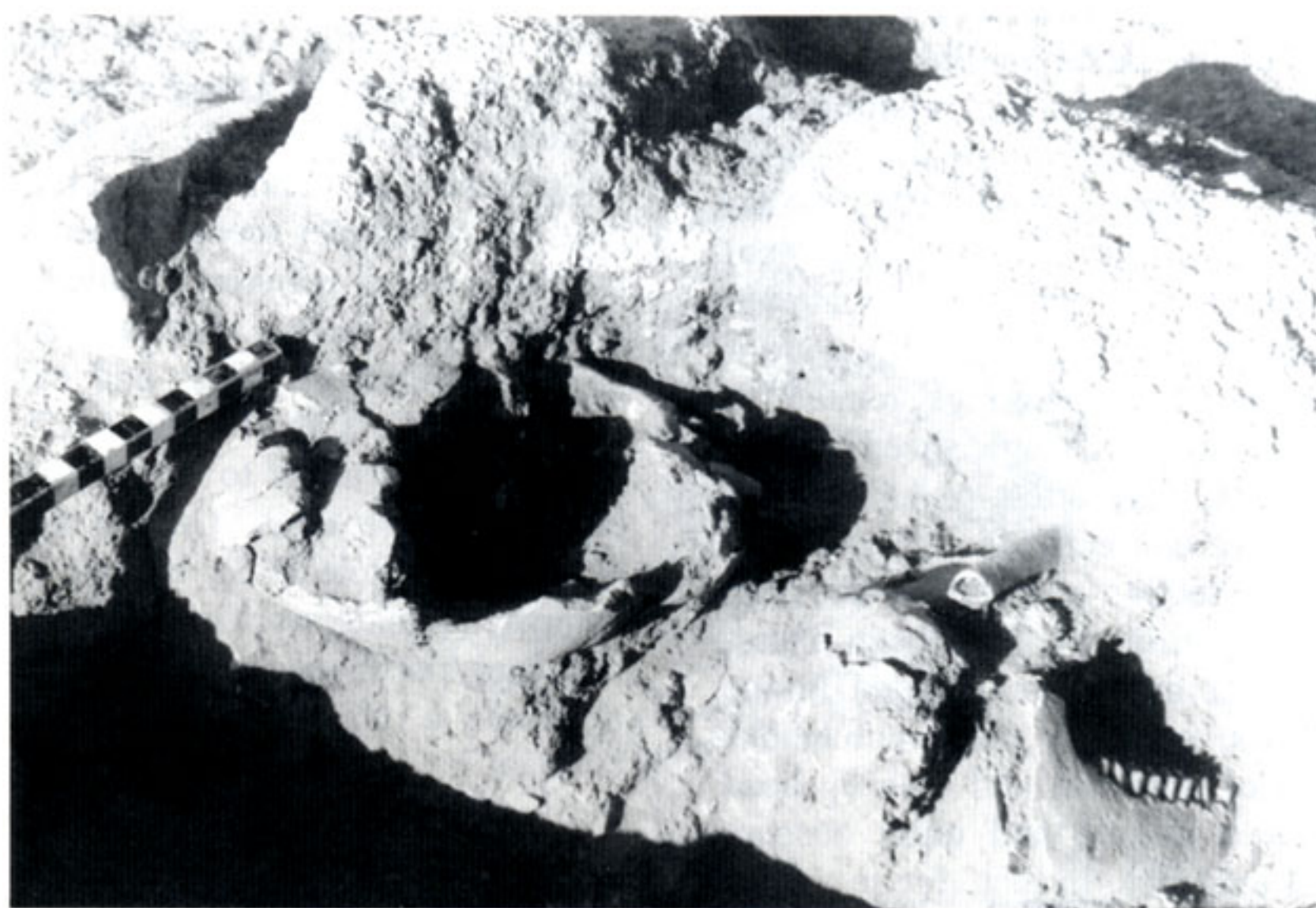


Fig. 7. The human cranium, the sheep cranium (in front of the central leg-bone) and the sheep mandible in D.6274 from north-east.

giddo, Nahariyah and Giv'at Sharett near 'Ain Shems (Nigro 1996: 226). They usually took place on or near a high-terrace, as stated in 1 Sam. 9, 11-14, where a sacrificial banquet on the *bamah* is described on the occasion of Saul's royal designation (Grottanelli 1988: 138-140). The interpretation of the Eblaite high-terrace with a monumental Syrian ancestor of what biblical sources will call *bamah* (Vaughan 1974: 29-36), proposed by P. Matthiae (1993a: 651, n. 90; in press), seems thus to be corroborated by sacrificial evidence from the Square of the Cisterns.

The coexistence of two different kinds of animal sacrifices, those ascribable to food consumption rites (where goat and sheep were favourite victims), and those referable to consecration by killing (dogs), may possibly be explained with the variegated aspects of the cult of the Ishtar of Ebla and with the diversity of people visiting the sanctuary (dog burials seem a special nomadic custom). Nevertheless, while the large quantities of sheep and goat bones found in the cisterns or scattered in the area has been explained as a proof of sacrifices and offerings related to collective banquets, single sheep burials, like D.5314, may attest to animal immolation or consecration consisting of slaying, dissecting and ritually burying. The mixed burial we have been examining so far might be included in the latter class, although the simultaneous presence of a human and a sheep head makes it a unique and quite obscure piece of evidence. In fact, due to the association with the disarticulated sheep head, presumably resulting from a cruel slaying, one cannot definitely rule out

the probability that also the human head derived from a sacrifice, or in a less dramatic hypothesis, that a human cranium, possibly belonged to a qualified person, was deliberately annexed to the remains of a sacrificed sheep. (The dissection and ritual burying of the human body according to the rules of animal sacrifice is known from a famous biblical account: Judges 19; Milano 1988: 59).

No comparable evidence is available for the interpretation of this exceptional find and written sources are too far to be used with plausible reliability. Therefore, one may only rely on visual evidence. A deep insight into Old-Syrian rite and cult is provided by the Stele of Ishtar (Matthiae 1987; 1989; Matthiae et al. (eds.) 1995: 390-391, n. 236), a basalt monument found near Sanctuary G3 on the Acropolis, which is illustrated with mythic, cult and divine subjects aimed to celebrate Ishtar's support to Eblaite kingship (fig. 12). As far as ritual practices are concerned, on the front side (A) a banquet scene is represented on two central registers, while on the narrow flanks various rites are depicted, such as animal sacrifices and carrying offerings (B2, C4). In frieze C3, two priestesses are about to slay a goat represented above them. On the opposite side of the Stele (B3), behind a worshipper, animals sacrificed to the Goddess are portrayed, namely a hare, a dove and a ram. Bones of such sacred animals have been copiously found in the two cisterns discovered in front of Temple P2, thus confirming that they were actually objects of food offerings and victims of sacrifices. It is not yet clear whether the bones were thrown in

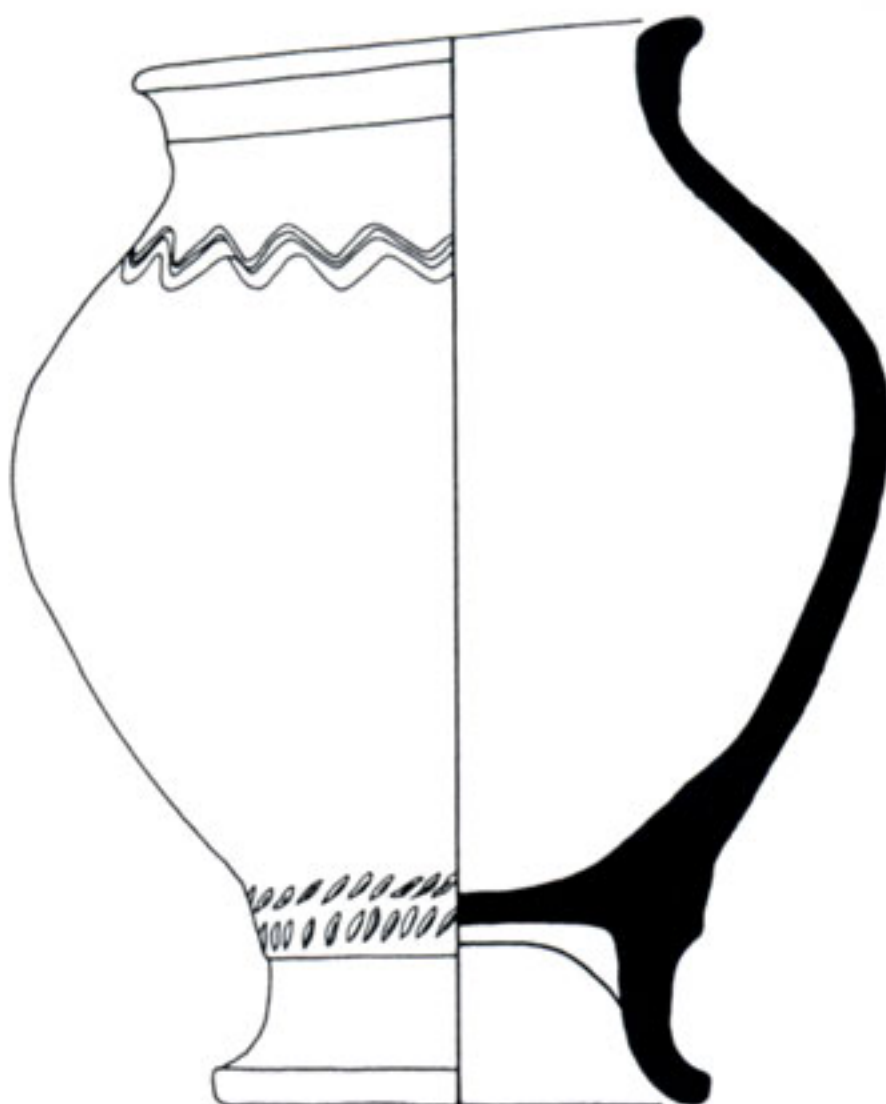


Fig. 8. Pedestal jar from the deposit associated with D.6274 (TM.95.P.271/2).

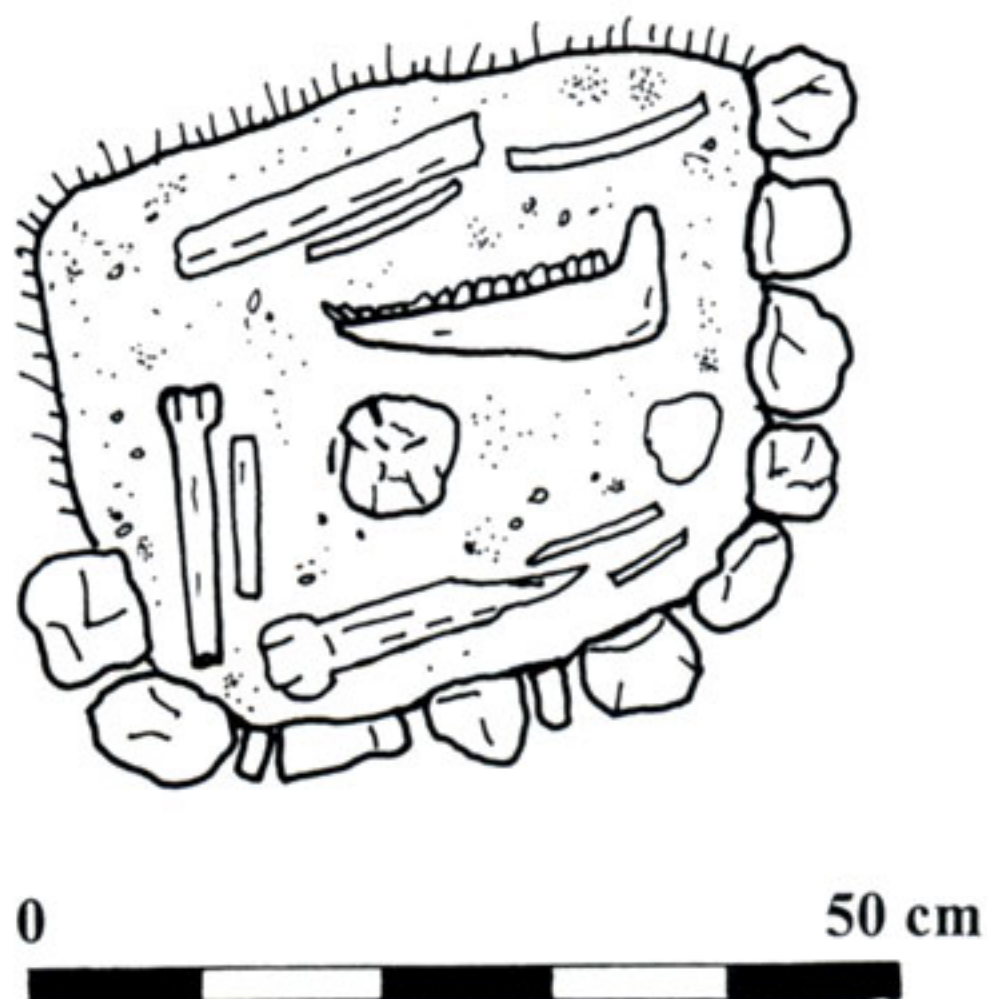


Fig. 9. Plan of the skeletal remains of a sheep (D.5314) ritually buried (MB IA, 2000-1900 B.C.).

the *favissae* after consumption, or whether these animal remains were offered to the Goddess by throwing them in the cisterns after having been burnt. In any case, it seems quite sure that the scenes precisely refer to the actual cult performed at Ebla, for they have received striking confirmations in the archaeological records of the Sacred Area.

The representation of the lower register of the rear side of the Stele (D4) might be tentatively related to the complex burial we are dealing with. A direct examination of the monument has permitted to trace a new drawing (fig. 13). Two dressed personages are slaying a naked figure (Matthiae 1987: 460, 475, 489-494, figs. 8, 19). A crouching lamb is represented just above the victim. It has a crescentic pendant attached to the neck, similar to that hanging from the horns of the bulls conducted to sacrifice in the wall-paintings of the Royal Palace of Mari (Parrot 1958: 20, fig. 18, pl. Ba). The two officers may be interpreted as royal figures wearing the short dress appearing under the classic bordered cloak of Old-Syrian kings (this has been convincingly identified with the Old-Syrian royal battle-uniform (Pinnock 1996: 178). Their hats can be also considered close to the oval crown of the Eblaite kings, known at Ebla from a later ivory inlay retrieved in the Northern Palace (Matthiae et al. edd. 1995: 397, no. 246). The king on the left is catching the right forearm of the naked figure with his left hand, and is holding in the right a short dagger with crescent handle, of a well-known Syro-Palestinian typology (Pinnock in press). On the opposite side, the other royal figure is hanging up the victim from the

hairs, and is going to kill him with a fenestrated axe. The symmetric duplication of the royal figure is attested in Old-Syrian glyptic, and probably descends from Egyptian heraldic motives. This is the case of the two kings appearing on both sides of a sacred pillar on three seals of the Pierpont Morgan Library (Porada 1948: pl. CXLIV, ns. 950E, 953E, 954E) or on a cylinder kept in Berlin (Moortgat 1940: pl. 64, no. 535). The victorious king slaying an enemy is a quite rare iconography, albeit it appears in a secondary scene on another seal of the Morgan Library (Porada 1948: 111, pl. CXXXII, no. 877E). As far as the motif with two facing figures killing a naked personage is concerned, few examples are known from Old-Syrian glyptic. Two deities slaying a human figures are depicted on a cylinder now in the Aleppo Museum (Hammade 1987: 46, no. 86). In this case, only the general arrangement of the figures can be taken into account, while other seals provide closer comparisons. Two opposed Old-Syrian kings slaying an enemy appear on a cylinder of the Collection de Clerq (Frankfort 1939: pl. XLII:f). The smitten figure, portrayed at a smaller scale - a quite common rule for enemies -, is overlaid by a bird and a crouching ram. A similar iconography also occurs on a cylinder seal kept in the Aleppo Museum (Hammade 1987: 88, no. 163). Two kings, wearing the classic oval royal crown, are slaying a naked enemy, upon which a small crouching ram is carved (fig. 14). The enemy is kneeling and has the head turned back. The left king is trampling on and smiting him with his mace. The right king is catching him from the hands and has the



Fig. 10. Dog burial D.5340 in course of excavation (MB IA, 2000-1900 B.C.).

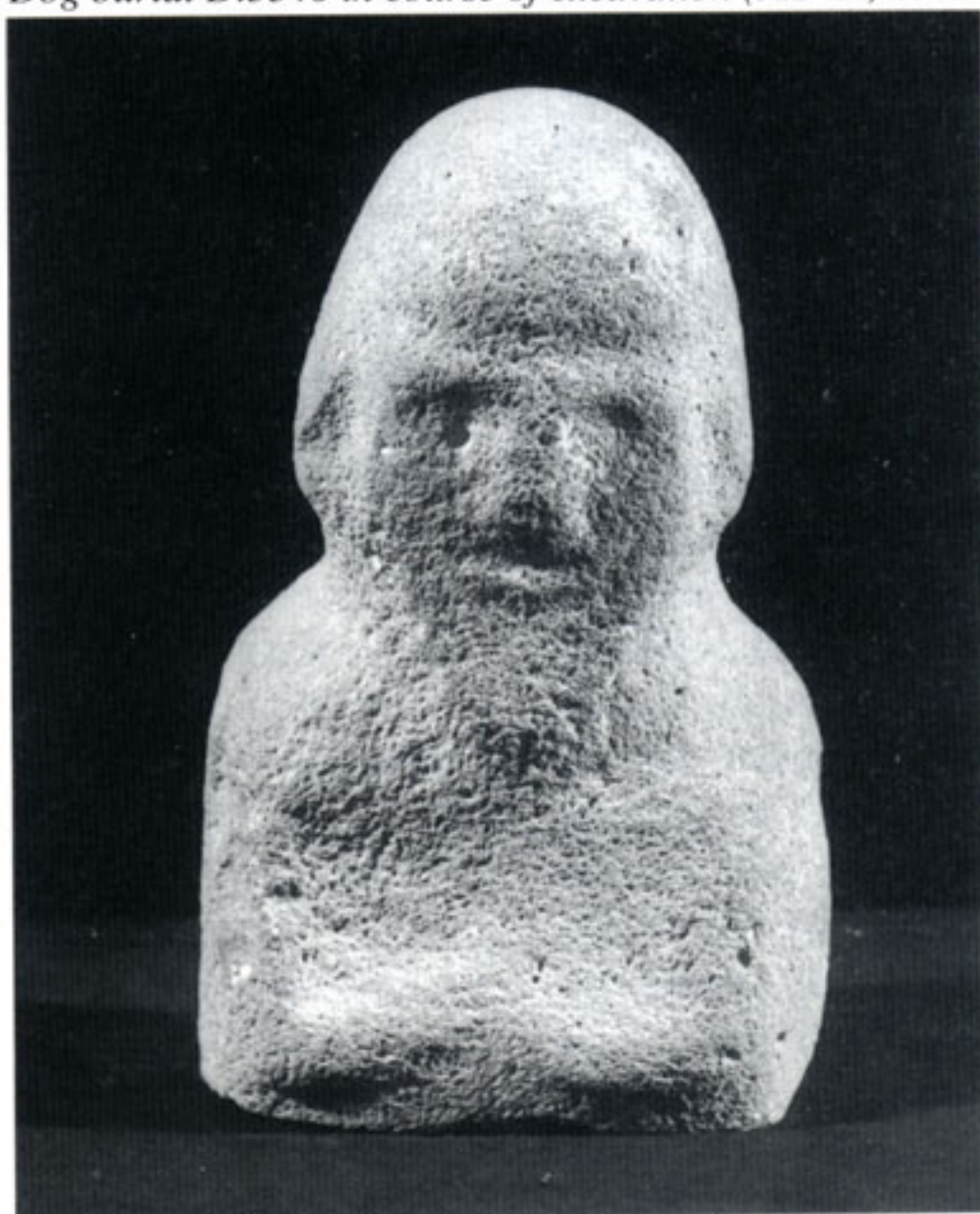


Fig. 11. Basalt torso of a bearded man (TM.95.P.469) found in front of Monument P3 near a human deposition (MB I, c. 1850 B.C.).



Fig. 12. The Stele of Ishtar from Sanctuary G3 (c. 1800 B.C.).

left arm raised up. Two armed figures are approaching the main scene; one is carrying a bird, a detail hinting at the ritual character of the scene. A fourth cogent comparison is provided by a seal of the Yale Babylonian Collection (Buchanan 1981: 416-417, no. 1196). Two warriors (possibly kings), with a helmet similar to that appearing on the Stele of Ishtar, are shooting a kneeling enemy (fig. 15). Here the sheep is represented at full-size behind the left king, on top of an accessory figure. The clothes of the slaying personages are exactly the same portrayed on the Stele of Ishtar, with a short skirt, a V-shaped protective covering on the chest, and a helmet similar to an up-side-down funnel.

The representation of cut off human heads is quite frequent in Old-Syrian glyptic, but it cannot be surely related to rites implying exhibition or burying of heads. Nevertheless, a connection between the cult performed in the Sacred Area of Ishtar and a rite involving truncated human heads is testified by a seal of the Marcopoli Collection (Teissier 1984: 418-419, no. 422), where the adoration of Ishtar's sacred standard, to which a female and a male head were hung (Matthiae in press), is accompanied by two crossing male figures, each holding a human head.

Summing up these pictorial references, what strikes the attention is the recurrent presence of the crouching sheep (a lamb or a ram) over or near the dying enemy. In spite of being employed as a mere filling motif, the latter figure seems an indispensable iconographic element for conveying the significance of the representation. The

scene on the Stele of Ishtar might thus be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the victory, with the tragic slaughter of an enemy, a subject which should be ascribed to the large inventory of representations celebrating the king's power, like other visible on registers B4 and C2 of the same monument. However, this would not explain the presence of the crouching ram in the seals of Aleppo and Yale, and in the Stele of Ishtar itself. In the latter cases, one may identify a sort of visual comparison set up between the victim and the superimposed animal, which suggests the figures shared some aspects or referential functions (this is particularly evident in the Stele of Ishtar, where the lamb presents a pendant on the neck, known as ornament for sacrificial victims). Such a visual association recalls the factual association of the two crania in the mixed burial found in the Square of the Cisterns. If this comparison could be verified, one might suggest that a human being and a sheep would have shared their destiny of victims, offered as symbolic prize for the king's power. However, since no evidence is available to confirm such a hypothesis, it should be confined to the realm of mere speculation. Different origins could be detected for the quite rare royal iconography appearing on the lower register of the rear side of the Stele of Ishtar, but many other explanations may be forwarded for the mixed burial. The addition of a human cranium to a sheep burial might be, for instance, comprehended within the sphere of sacrifice for substitution connected to the cult of ancestors. This interpretation would be supported by the small ceramic assemblage associated

with the burial and the human deposition with annexed statue found nearby. Both data in fact seem to indicate veneration of defuncts. On the other hand, the presence of an imported vessel in the ceramic equipment found next to the burial would fit well the hypothesis of a sacrificed prisoner, buried with his personal items for ritual reasons. The slaying of an enemy by the king could have been a ritual way to propitiate his military power (for instance, just before a military campaign or at his ascent to the throne), and the performance of such a sacrificial practice might be adequately

understood in the Sacred Area of Ishtar, the dynastic Goddess whose warrior aspect is well-known. Whether this rite is really testified at Ebla by the mixed burial, as well as by the representation on the Stele of Ishtar, we shall never know. However, burial D.6274 undoubtedly represents a quite exceptional piece of evidence on Old-Syrian rite and cult, which demonstrates, like many other finds from the Sacred Area, the variety and complexity of the Syro-Palestinian religion during the Middle Bronze Age (Matthiae 1993b).



Fig. 13. Drawing of register D4 of the Stele of Ishtar (c. 1800 B.C.).



Fig. 14. Cylinder seal impression in the Aleppo Museum M.6359 (after Hammade 1987: no. 163).



Fig. 15. Cylinder seal impression in the Yale Babylonian Collection no. 1196 (after Buchanan 1981: no. 1196).

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