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An Old Syrian Seal from Tell Afis (NW Syria)

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Abstract. The paper focuses on an Old Syrian Linear Style seal found in the area of the Middle Bronze Age Acropolis fortifications at Tell Afis in 1999. The in-depth treatment of the piece in relation to its finding context and iconography provides the opportunity for a reappraisal of the discussion on this class of seals in relation to questions such as chronology and manufacture.

Keywords. Seal, Old Syrian, Linear Style, chronology.

1. In 1999 excavations in area E3 at Tell Afis continued the investigation of the Middle Bronze occupation levels already started in 1991.¹ In square CqV3 a small portion of a street, rising from the centre of the acropolis and running east-west, was exposed. The street, tapering from 4 to 3 metres in width towards the western limit of the trench, had been irregularly paved with small cobbles, stones and sherds (Fig. 1.a, b). It was presumably already opened by the beginning of MB II, which is the date of most of the pottery coming from the overlying deposit (see below). A series of rooms to the south, possibly part of one and the same building, running parallel to the edge of the acropolis settlement, was connected with the street through a door opening in the northernmost wall: to overcome the difference in level between the street and the interior of the room, where the floor was higher, the door was provided with a step made of a large plastered stone (Felli 2000: 13, figs 7, 8.2).

Right next to that door - and close to the eastern limit of the trench - a cylinder seal (Fig. 2.a, b) was found lying in the trample deposit (SU 2262)

¹ Squares CqV1-5: Felli 2000; see also Gabarrini 1995; Giannessi 1998. The final report on the excavation of this area of the site from 1994 to 2010 is currently under preparation. My sincere thanks to prof. Stefania Mazzoni for granting me permission to publish this seal and for her generous support and useful suggestions; my gratitude goes also to prof. Paolo Matthiae, who gave his expertise on this seal in Mardikh at the very time of its discovery.

over the street paving (SU 2261).² Obviously the seal, as it is often the case with this type of finds, can hardly be considered *in situ*: nonetheless, a comparative analysis of the object along with considerations over the material found along with it do seem to suggest an attribution to the same time frame as its archaeological context.

2. THE SEAL

The small sized seal³ is made of a soft, green-coloured stone. The field design is divided up into two horizontal registers by a rope-like motif enclosed by two lines (fig. 2.a, b). The figures are placed in each register as if upside down thus creating an overall *tête-bêche* effect. Although the scenes in both registers are composed of three figures, their respective beginning and end are not coincident as if the two friezes were conceived independently one from the other. On what we take as the upper (main?) register, starting from the right, it is found an apparently naked man lying on his left side, with profile head and folded legs, and two animals seen in profile, the second one at least clearly a lion. In the lower frieze, instead, we find just animals: a large quadruped facing left, a crouching smaller animal (caprid?) facing opposite and a lion with wide-open mouth, again facing left.

The style of engraving is linear and rather sketchy, so that many details (e.g. the eyes) are lacking. The object appears complete apart from a small chip, which affects the top area of what we have considered the lower frieze, especially the head of the larger animal, and some abrasion on the man's shoulder.

2.1 *Comparanda*

The seal belongs to a class of Old Syrian Linear style glyptic known already in the literature as flourishing at the time of the Cappadocian trade (Collon 1987: 44). More specifically, we can ascribe it to what Adelheid Otto, in her study on Old Syrian seals, terms the “Schnurband-Gruppe” because of the type of dividing line, i.e. the first of the four subgroupings within her *Siegelgruppe I* spread in the first half of the second millennium between northern Syria and Anatolia (Otto 2000: 111, 112). According to that scholar, a common feature in this group, apart from the dividing line and subdivision into registers, is the small, almost miniaturistic, scale of the figures. These are mostly animals, but humans are also found, sometimes under the form of detached heads. In accordance with most specimens in the group, the Afis seal is uninscribed:⁴ this detail, along with its small size and coarse style, would seem to indicate that we are dealing with a type of non-official seal, i.e. not the product of a palace workshop, as apparently most of the ‘common’ glyptic styles attested in Syro-Anatolia not only in the first half of the 2nd millennium but also already in the second half of the 3rd.⁵

If, from the point of view of iconography, the Afis seal fits well in the long-standing figurative tradition of predation scenes, at least as to the lower frieze described above, some observations are to be made on the specific imagery of the upper register, which appears less common. Here, as seen above, a man occurs apparently naked and

² TA.99.E.180.

³ H. 1,7 cm, ø 0,9, ø perforation 0,4; Felli 2000: fig. 9; Mazzoni 1998b: 16, fig. 15. The drawing published here is a slightly revised version of the one appeared in the previous publications.

⁴ It is interesting to note, on some seals of these groups, the presence of a sort of rectangular frame design with inner partition (e.g. Louvre A.939, Delaporte 1923: pl. 97.12): to judge from the specimen Buchanan 1981: no. 1178, one could argue that what we have here is a pseudo-legend case, i.e. an imitation of a true legend of an inscribed seal (for a different view see Matthiae 1994: 332-336, according to which the design would represent a building). On the question of pseudo-inscriptions on Old Syrian Linear Style seals see also Porter 2001: 237-239.

⁵ On the matter of official versus private seals see Mazzoni 1998c; in the second millennium, Otto 2000: 173-178. See however the quite recent find of an uninscribed, Linear Style baked clay cylinder seal depicting human figures in a row and of a bulla sealed with it in the so-called “Administrative Building” at Hammam eth-Turkman attesting at least its official use: Meijer 2013: fig. 8. The relation between this distinctive, much more homogeneous, class of schematic seals from the same area (Mazzoni 1975; Porter 2001: 171-181), and our group is a yet unexplored issue.

in a lying position in association with animals. If one considers the artistic repertoire of the Ancient Near East, nude male figures are relatively rare and, whenever depicted lying, usually represent dead or about-to-die people, as in the case of fallen enemies in war scenes.⁶ Figures of this kind associated with animals are indeed found on a very small number of Old Syrian seals (not exclusively belonging to the “Schnurband-Gruppe”) in various combinations, either as main subject of a scene or as subsidiary motif.⁷ Most of the times the animals, usually lions or griffins, are shown in an aggressive attitude towards the human being:⁸ the latter is generally portrayed lying, as said above, but different positions are also found.⁹ On a seal from the Brett collection, now at Yale,¹⁰ two lions seem to “tear to pieces” the man lying between them, as described by Paolo Matthiae in a study related to a group of Old Syrian seals featuring a standard with two heads, interpreted as a symbol of the goddess Ištar: in the same study, the latter scholar suggested that the scene depicted on the seals could refer to a human offering to the lions of Ištar.¹¹ More cautious appears Otto’s interpretation who suggests: “Wahrscheinlich ist hier weniger ein Jagdunfall dargestellt oder Menschen, die Löwen zum Fraß vorgeworfen wurden, als die verschlüsselte Darstellung der siegreichen herrscherlichen Macht” (Otto 2000: 237, 238).

Among those seals there is one, kept in the Bibliothèque National (Delaporte 1910: pl. XXX.444), where the lying body is associated to a lion and a caprid on one side and a vulture on the other in one of the smaller friezes (Fig. 3): the seal appears particularly interesting because it shows the man in a position very close to that on ours but carved in a much more neatly way helping clarifying some details, i.e. one arm is folded up to the breast and the other stretched along the body, thus differing from most of the other cases, in which the arm of the figure is raised bent at the elbow.¹²

On the Afis seal animals are arranged in a row in the frieze: while the second is clearly a lion, the first, i.e. the closest to the man, is smaller in size and could also be a dog, especially considering the tail’s curving shape, although unfortunately the schematic rendering of the figure on the whole makes any definitive identification rather difficult.¹³ If the smaller animal is a dog, it is to take into consideration that these animals, whenever attested passing or running, occur always in hunting scenes.

Looking up for iconographic sources of the motif of the fallen man, it is interesting to note that one of the earliest attestations is found in Syria, under the form of a seal impression from Tell Hammam eth-Turkman, in the Balikh valley, probably to be dated at the beginning of the third millennium (Fig. 4): here the human body is

⁶ The number of attestations is high: within the glyptic realm, one could quote the example of the seal from tomb PG/1236 in the Ur cemetery (Woolley 1934: 340, pl. 196.54). Fallen enemies are also found represented as lying bodies on some Old Syrian seals, but usually within a different and more complex imagery than in our seal (e.g. Eisenberg 1998: fig. 10). On the matter of nakedness symbolism, specifically in relation to men, see Bahrani 2001: 55-65; Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 146-150.

⁷ Otto 2000: 237, 238. For a curious case see the seal impression from room 2 of the Sarikaya Palace at Acmhöyük, with a fallen man portrayed above a table in front of a seated deity: Özgüç 2015: 104, fig. 73.

⁸ To the list compiled by Otto (2000: 237), I would add Teissier 1984: pl. 231.451, lower part of the terminal; Parayre 1997: 125; Özgüç 2015: 146, fig. 111 (upper register), from Acmhöyük, maybe also fig. 112. The most abbreviated version of the scene is given possibly on a seal in the Yale Babylonian collection, where a human head, *pars pro toto*, is placed between two confronted, semi-recumbent lions (Collon 1985: fig. 2.16).

⁹ E.g. seated (?): Teissier 1984: pl. 279.561; falling forward: pl. 231.451. See also Otto 2000: 254.

¹⁰ von der Osten 1936: 14, n. 92; see also Buchanan 1981: n. 1178. In a seal impression on a tablet from Kültepe II, a human figure is found in a position interpreted as “bowing ... in the pose of adoration”, but in fact maybe analogous to that of the man on our seal, though placed obliquely: Özgüç 2001: 143, E, pl. H.5.

¹¹ Matthiae 1994: 333 and 337; see also Matthiae 1993: 659. On the same line of thought Lorenzo Nigro, who proposes to interpret the association of a crouching caprid or sheep with a slayed man found not only on some Old Syrian seals, but also on the Ištar’s stele from Ebla, within the realm of sacrifices to that goddess, of which a possible archaeological evidence could be a burial containing both human and sheep skulls discovered at the site, in the area sacred to Ištar: Nigro 1998b. See also Pinnock 2000: 1403. On the standard see now Matthiae 2014.

¹² See for example the Brett seal mentioned above or a seal in the Damascus Museum, where the naked man is depicted in a vertical frieze together with a lion, which is however curiously turned opposite: Otto 2000: pl. 5.64.

¹³ See Haussperger 1994. We cannot rule out completely the possibility to have here a hare or a caprid, both types usually encountered on seals of the same group.

represented as actually floating in the upper part of what seems to be a predation scene where a number of animals are involved, including two lions and a supine quadruped.¹⁴ Probably still from Syria comes a seal in the Pierpont Morgan Library collection of which the lower register has a lying man along with a stag and a lion (?) in a reverse position (Fig. 5): although unprovenanced and placed by Edith Porada under the heading ‘miscellaneous cylinders’, i.e. those which ‘do not fit precisely into any of the established regional groups’, it is nonetheless acknowledged, on the basis of comparisons, as ‘an example of the crude derivative seal designs produced in Syria in the third millennium, before an individual Syrian style developed’.¹⁵ It is difficult to tell whether experimentation in composition - especially playing with the disposition of figures - within the subject matter of predation scenes in third millennium seals, maybe in combination with the occurrence of detached heads, could have given rise to the development of different meanings for the scenes and ultimately of new scenes altogether in the passage to the second millennium; or whether, instead, both roles, i.e. active (protector of herds) and passive (victim), of the human figure in association with animals were already attested in Early Bronze Age glyptic scenes.¹⁶

2.2 Dating and manufacture

The so-called “Schnurband-Gruppe”, in which our seal can be included, is dated by Otto in the time span from the end of the so-called “level II period” of *kārum* Kaniš to the time of the kings Šamši-Adad and Sumu-epuh, i.e. roughly from the late 19th to the early 18th century BC according to the Middle Chronology.¹⁷ In archaeological terms, this period corresponds in Syria to the end of the Middle Bronze I or the very beginning of Middle Bronze II. The only dated examples of the group are one seal impression from the Tell Bi‘a palace (1790-1776 BC)¹⁸ and two others from Acemhöyük (before 1776 BC),¹⁹ while the dating of most of the others, unfortunately unprovenanced, remains uncertain. None of the dated examples is much similar to the Afis seal in order to support a dating to the beginning of the eighteenth century, although they all show the same type of partition. From a stylistic point of view, lack of any plasticism of the figures appears an early trait within the development of Old Syrian glyptic, even when considering the low quality of execution of the piece. The way of rendering the lion’s mane along with that of the muzzle plus its crouched position are elements encountered on sealings found in the level II at Kaniš, thus indicating a placing more towards the upper than the lower limit of attestation of the group.²⁰ A lion much similar is however found on a seal from the Western Fort at Ebla – on the whole quite different from our seal – which is dated to MB II, probably at the end of 19th or beginning of 18th century, thus indicating a lengthy attestation of the type.²¹ Indeed, the number of elements ascribable to the Early Bronze Age tradition on the Afis seal would suggest in fact quite an early dating within the Middle Bronze period. The four-legged, large quadruped

¹⁴ van Loon 1988: 661, 662 and 665, fig. 200.3, suggesting a dating at the end of the fourth millennium; see also Matthews 1997: 90, 91.

¹⁵ Porada 1948: 152, 153, pl. CLXIV.1079. I thank Stefania Mazzoni for bringing this seal to my attention.

¹⁶ On an Old Assyrian seal impression still from Kültepe level II (Özgüç 1989: 380, pl. 82.5), a naked figure, lying, is repeated three times at the bottom of the scene, under a crouching lion of a very similar type to the Afis seal; the presence of detached heads is also worth noticing. According to the scholar both are ‘rare motifs’ at the site.

¹⁷ Otto 2000: 112; see also Otto 1999: 350. Or, from the beginning of the 18th to the beginning of the 17th century, if one accepts the still controversial proposal of an Ultra-Low absolute chronology: see Gasche *et al.* 1998: 4; Veenhof 2000: 149; van Soldt 2000: 113; in relation to Old Syrian seals see Beyer 2013: 434.

¹⁸ Otto 1999: fig. 18; Otto 2004: 90, pls 12.10; 90.1.a-c.

¹⁹ Özgüç 1980: 83, figs III.19, 20; on the Old Syrian style impressions from that site see now Özgüç 2015: 133-148. In Beyer’s recent synthesis (2013: 435, fig. 242.4), the impressions of this type of seals from Acemhöyük are placed within its *phase paléo-syrienne classique A*.

²⁰ E.g. Teissier 1993: figs 3, 9 (in the first of the two, the lion is however depicted standing).

²¹ Pinnock 2000: 1400, fig. 3b; Peyronel 2000: 1354. It is to notice that the piece seems to be a stray find, its context being generically indicated as “on the west walls”: Pinnock 2000:1400. It is important also to recall the presence of a similar lion in the relief decoration of the limestone basin from temple D on the acropolis initially dated between 2000-1900 BC (Matthiae 1966: 113-129, esp. page 123, pls XLIII-LI: esp. pl. L.1), now slightly postdated to MB I/II (Matthiae 2013: 383).

in the lower register, which is very similar to the one on another seal of the “Schnurband-gruppe” (Otto 2000: pl. 2.16), finds also comparisons in a small number of EB IV, presumably Syrian, seals.²² The tradition of double register seals itself goes back to the third millennium, when the rope-like dividing motif is found on seals, especially from Syria.²³ On those examples this partition device is often attested along with detached heads, an element also found on some seals of the second millennium “Schnurband-Gruppe” group,²⁴ though not on the Afis seal.

A rather early dating would appear confirmed also by considerations over the material assemblage coming from the same context as the seal and the deposits immediately above it. The pottery found in the trampled deposit over the street paving from which the seal originates can be dated, at the very latest, to the very beginning of MB II on the basis of the Ebla sequence and further comparisons (Fig. 6.a-b).²⁵ In the same deposit are also found two clay fragmentary figurines, one female and one male, which should be dated to a rather limited period between the end of MB I and MB II according to Ebla stratigraphy (Fig. 7.a, b).²⁶ This is also in accordance with the dating of the pottery found in the accumulated deposit sealing the context (Fig. 6.d-p), late MB I/early MB II,²⁷ and confirmed by the retrieval, in a deposit higher up in the square (SU 2239), of two more fragments of figurines representing an equid with a rider: this type of hand-made figurine, which makes its first appearance in Syria at the end of the Early Bronze Age (Moorey 2001: 346) but becomes more popular by the Middle Bronze II, finds good parallels in some pieces from Ebla dating to MB IIA (Fig. 7.c, d).²⁸

Summing up, the materials found with the seal and that covering it are altogether not later than the end of the 19th century, thus confirming the placing of the seal quite at the beginning of the series based on the stylistic and iconographic analysis.

Finally, the difficult question of manufacture: although the limited number of provenanced seals in the “Schnurband-Gruppe” prevents any firm conclusion, I would not underestimate the fact that at least five of them are told to come from ‘Aleppo’, which means basically the area of the capital city of Yamkhad.²⁹ The use of registers (also reversed) seems to represent a well established regional tradition, as shown by some seals which Dominique Collon has ascribed to one single workshop, possibly located in the area of Aleppo.³⁰ Further indication is also given by some stylistic details, as for example the rendering of the head of the human figure which is the same as that on a seal from Alalakh, level V, though presumably unstratified, now in the Hatay Museum (Collon 1982: 65 fig. 35).

²² Mazzoni 1992: 246, 247, pl. 45.2-4, 7. On this production of seals see also Mazzoni 1998c.

²³ See also Otto 2000: 169.

²⁴ E.g. Matthews 1997: figs 188, 217, 218, 224, 233, 235, 236, 253, 261, 262. On this matter see already Amiet 1963: 76, 77.

²⁵ For fig. 6.a and b see respectively Ascalone 2011, fig. 41.4 and 12, Tuqan, Area N, Phase 5, MB IB; as to fig. 6.c see Marchetti and Nigro 2000: fig. 4.5, Ebla, *favissa* F. 5238, MB IB.

²⁶ The female figurine is close to examples ascribed by Marchetti to MB IB and MB IIA, especially for the arm position: see e.g. Marchetti 2001: 51-53, 59-61, fig. 28 and pl. XX.292, 293. The three-tiered necklace is found on a female figurine from F.5238 (though lacking of braces), where also a seated male figure is attested, which should be dated at the latest to the MB IIA: Marchetti and Nigro 2000: fig. 9, TM.94.P.526 and TM.92.P.768. As to the latter, see also Marchetti 2001: 94, 95, pl. XLIV.869, 870, although our specimen has no necklace. A detailed study of the anthropomorphic figurines from EB and MB levels in area E3 at Afis by Ilaria Falzone will appear in the forthcoming final report of the excavations.

²⁷ See for example the jar rim fig. 7.m, which is also attested in the *favissa* F.5327 at Ebla, dated to MB IB (Marchetti and Nigro 1997: fig. 6.53), and the bowl rims fig. 7.f and 7.h of similar dating, for which see respectively Baffi Guardata 1988: fig. 1.12, Ebla grave D1, and Nigro 2002: 113, pl. XLVI.11, from the Archaic Palace. Some of these types continue at Ebla down to MB II: for the pottery of this phase see Pinnock 2005.

²⁸ Marchetti 2001: 107, 131, 136, 137, esp. type Q21TA2b, pls LXIX.1485, LXX. 1481, CLXXXII.1479, 1485. The former finds a close parallel in a specimen from grave 1 at Hama, which should be dated to MB IB on the basis of its pottery equipment: Nigro 2002: 99. The fact that only heads are preserved hampers to check further details considered diagnostic in that study, e.g. the rear part of the body of the animals.

²⁹ Otto 2000: 111; see also 62 on the question of seals from the antiquities market.

³⁰ Collon 1981: 34, figs 2.24, 25 and 27; see also Buchanan 1966: n. 849.

I would thus suggest the seal to be local but in a large sense, i.e. not specifically from Afis but from its area, which may mean Ebla or even Aleppo itself. As indicated by the main characteristics of the seals of our group, especially the variability in style and quality of execution, this production was possibly the work of not one single workshop, but, more likely, of smaller ones scattered over the area of distribution if not of itinerant seal-cutters (Porter 2001: 601-604). Unfortunately our yet limited knowledge of seal manufacturing in the Yamkhad area at this stage hampers to elucidate this matter in further detail.

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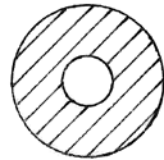
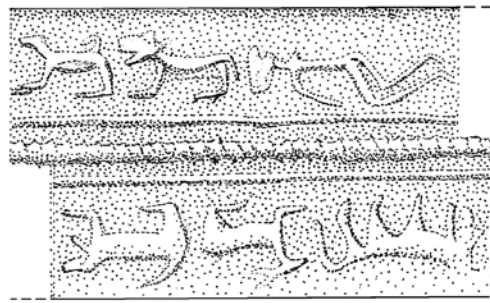
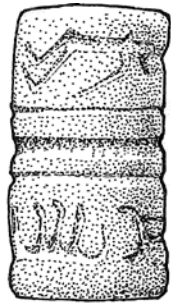
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Fig. 1: a: Tell Afis, area E3, the fortifications (foundations level) from NE; b: the street from E.



a



b

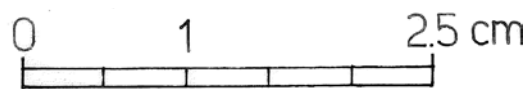


Fig. 2: Photo by M. Necci (a) and drawing by S. Martelli (b) of seal TA.99.E.180 and its impression.



Fig. 3: Impression of the cylinder seal Delaporte 1910: pl. XXX.444 (not on scale).

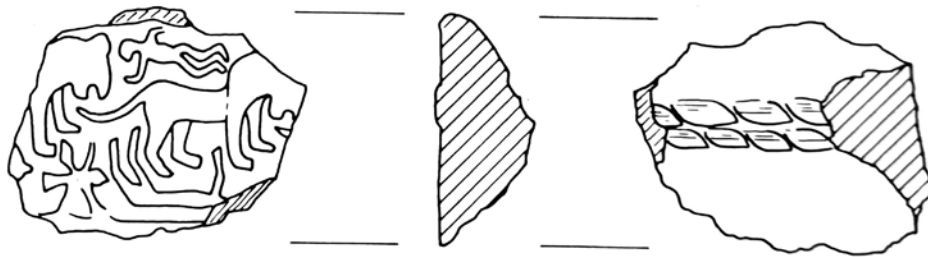


Fig. 4: Drawing of the sealing from Hammam eth-Turkman, van Loon 1988: fig. 200.3 (not on scale).



Fig. 5: Impression of the cylinder seal Porada 1948: pl. CLXIV.1079 (not on scale).

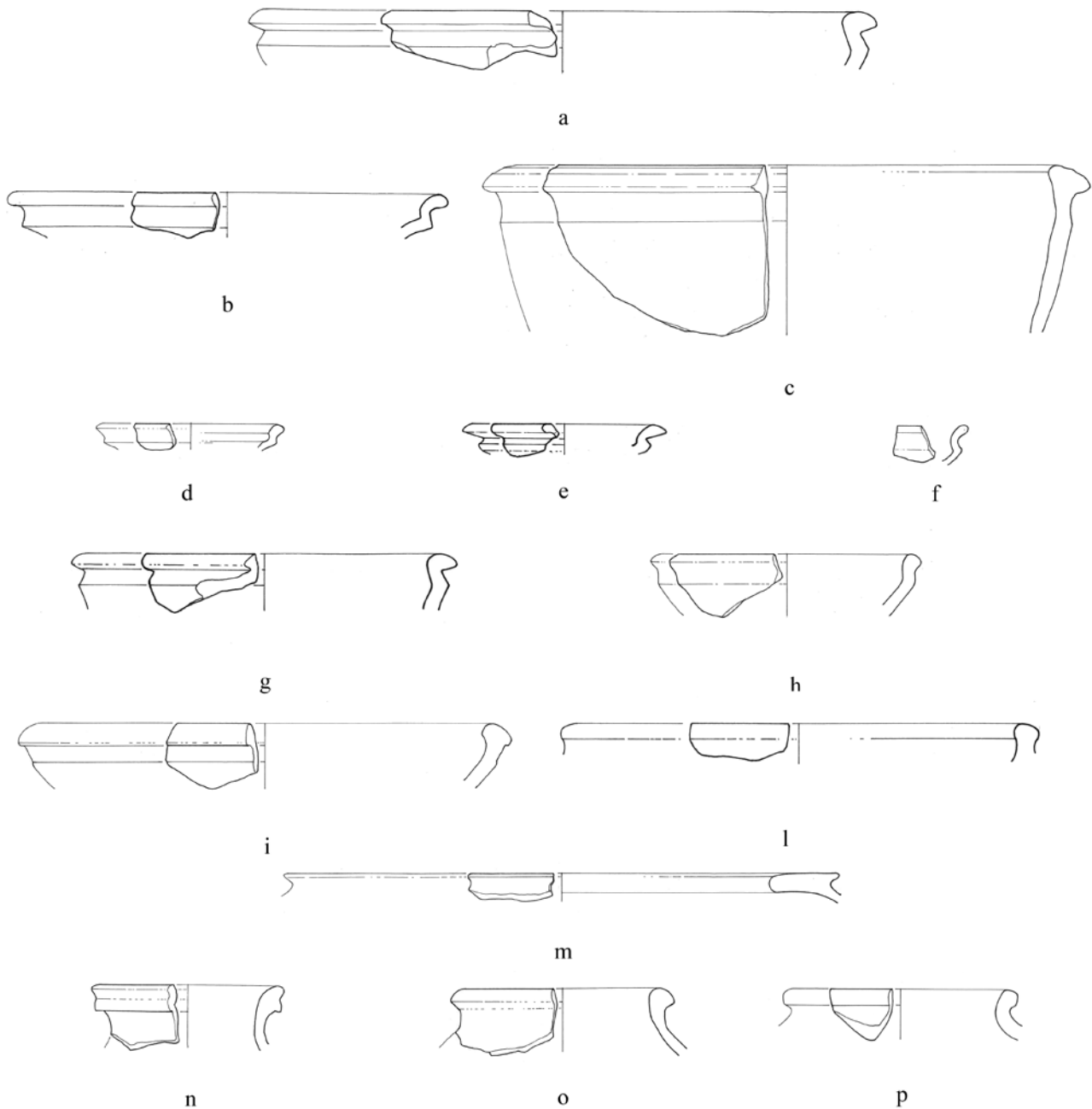


Fig. 6: Pottery from the street paving (SU 2261: a-b) and the trample deposit (SU 2262: d-p) above it: a. TA.99.E.377/1, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; b. TA.99.E.377/4, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; c. TA.99.E.377/3, Simple Ware, deep bowl; d. TA.99.E.350/1, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; e. TA.99.E.350/3, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; f. TA.99.E.350/6, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; g. TA.99.E.350/7, Simple Ware, bowl; h. TA.99.E.350/5, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; i. TA.99.E.350/24, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; l. TA.99.E.350/27, Simple Ware, carinated bowl; m. TA.99.E.350/21, Simple Ware, jar; n. TA.99.E.350/8, Simple Ware, jar; o. TA.99.E.350/10a, Simple Ware, jar; p. TA.99.E.350/22, Simple Ware, jar (scale 1:10).

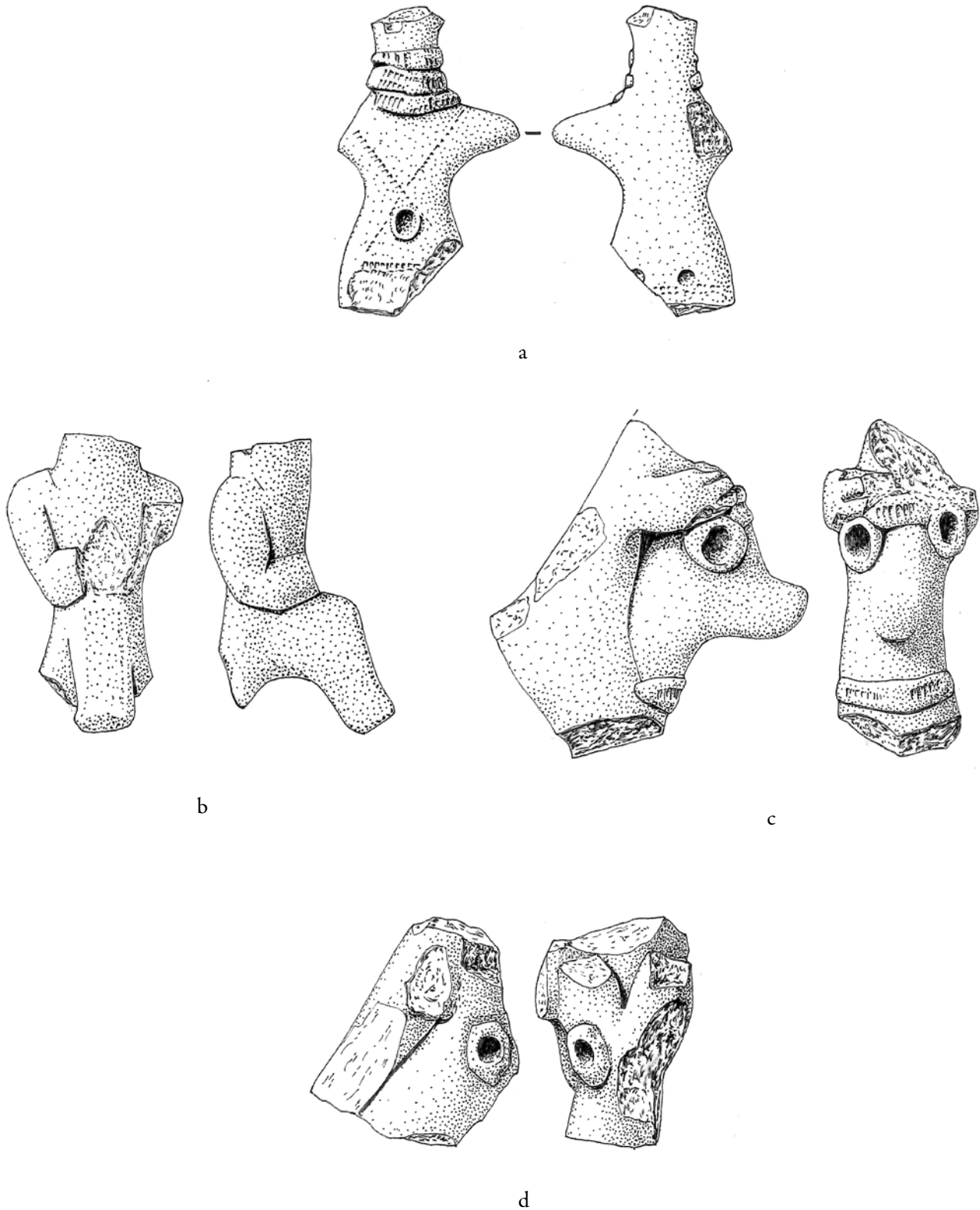


Fig. 7: Clay figurines from the trample deposit over the street paving (SU 2262: a, b) and from the deposit above it (SU 2239: c, d): a. TA.99.E.167, fragmentary female figurine; b. TA.99.E.172, fragmentary male figurine; c. TA.99.E.176, fragmentary horse rider figurine; d. TA.99.E.178, fragmentary horse rider figurine (scale 1:5).