

The Rainbow in Ancient West Asian Iconography

The rainbow is a natural phenomenon that one would expect to encounter on the monuments of Western Asia, but that has remained elusive so far. Recently I published an article about the Rain Goddess (van Loon 1990) and in the course of writing it I have come up with some hypotheses that I would like to submit to the public.

In the article just mentioned I argue that the figurines of women supporting their breasts to give milk, which appeared from time immemorial in ancient Western Asia, represent the consort of the thunder god, who brings the indispensable rain after the thunder storm. In the rainfall agriculture zone of Western Asia practically every rainstorm is accompanied by thunder. Jacques Cauvin has drawn attention to the fact that two dominant symbols, the Woman and the Bull, appear on either side of the Taurus as early as the 8th millennium B.C. (Cauvin 1985). A clay figurine of a woman supporting her breasts comes from Cauvin's own excavations at Mureybit in Syria (*ibid.*: 171, here **fig.1**). Bull skulls were found incorporated into the architecture at the same site and for the 6th millennium Cauvin quotes wall-paintings and relief figures of bulls and women at Çatal Hüyük as examples (*ibid.*: 172).

In this paper I will do what I have often criticised in colleagues. I will skip thousands of years and miles from one site to the next. I believe this is justified by the fact that the nature symbolism I discuss here has often been passed on from one culture to the next.

In the Halaf culture which flourished in the rainfall agriculture zone of North Syria and North Mesopotamia in the 5th millennium B.C. symbols connected with thunder and rain occur frequently both

on painted pottery and on three-dimensional figurines. The bull, symbolizing the thunder in later periods, is usually shown surrounded by dots which may depict rain (Mallowan 1935, figs. 74-76; von Oppenheim 1943, pls. 56, 59, 62; Hijara et al. 1980, fig. 10, here **fig. 2**). A naked woman clad only in a string of beads slung in an X-shape across her body can be compared to later images of the rain goddess (Merpert et al. 1981, figs. 10-11, here **fig. 3**).

Skipping two and a half millennia we find scenes explicitly picturing thunder and rain on Mesopotamian seals of the Akkad period. The rain goddess that accompanies the thunder god is shown either naked holding vertical waves of water (Porada 1948, no. 220, here **fig. 4**) or spreading her cloak which is assimilated to the vertical wavy pattern of the rain (Frankfort 1939, pl. 22e, here **fig. 5**). In the latter scene we also see the bull of heaven symbolizing drought (ibid.: 126-7) being killed by a kneeling god. Another series of seals shows a bull which probably also symbolizes drought carrying a winged gate which is secured with ropes by one or two kneeling gods (Amiet 1972, no. 1584, here **fig. 6**; Delaporte 1923, no. A.150, here **fig. 7**). This scene sometimes takes place in front of a seated goddess (Frankfort 1939, pl. 22g, here **fig. 8**).

Three hundred years later the seal impressions from Kanesh (modern Kültepe) throw additional light on the imagery of thunder and rain. The thunder god usually appears emerging from the winged gate, which is seen in side view and carried by a bull. In front of the thunder god we see streaks of rain (Özgüç 1965, pl. 10:29, here **fig. 9**; pl. 13:39, here **fig. 10**). In the latter case the rain is seen to fall onto a rectangular field. A stamp seal from Achemhüyük shows the same elements, but in addition the rain is shown falling from an arc which can hardly be anything else but the rainbow (Özgüç 1980, fig. 3-24, here **fig. 11**). In another seal impression from Kanesh the thunder god, emerging from the winged gate on his bull, confronts the naked goddess that holds her garment in a

circle around her. Between the two, diagonal strokes of rain fall onto a rectangular field. (Özgüç 1965, pl. 24:71, here **fig. 12**).

The Syrian seals of the Middle and Late Bronze Age also form a rich source of graphic information on thunder and rain mythology. An early second-millennium seal in the Arndt collection in Munich shows the thunder god with his lightning whip on the lion-eagle that symbolizes the thunder cloud (Strommenger 1962, fig. 179c, here **fig. 13**). In a subsidiary scene we see the naked goddess floating in an arched position above the bull that is flanked by a kneeling god with bow and arrow on the left, and by a half-clad goddess (undoubtedly the goddess of love and the evening star) on the right. Here it would seem that the naked goddess herself stands for the rainbow. In other instances the naked consort of the thunder god lets her garment hang down behind her as if it were a skipping rope (Porada 1948 no. 967E, here **fig. 14**).

On Syrian seals the winged gate has an arched shape which makes its assimilation to the rainbow more plausible than the rectangular shape seen in Mesopotamia (Wiseman 1959:47, here **fig. 15**). Some seals combine the hanging garment with the winged gate and in that case we seem to have two motifs standing simultaneously for the rainbow (Von der Osten 1936, pl. 9:90, here **fig. 16**). That the winged gate consists of water and thus undoubtedly represents the rainbow is evident from the fact that it is sometimes shaped as a guilloche (Porada 1948, no. 944E, here **fig. 17**).

A Middle Hittite seal in the Louvre shows the rain goddess disrobing while single streams of water issue from her shoulders (Parrot 1951, pl. 13:1, here **fig. 18**). Next to her the thunder god cracks his whip over his bulls. The thongs of his whip are entwined like a guilloche ending in two goblets. On the Old Hittite 'Tyszkiewicz' seal in Boston the rain goddess is also shown disrobing in close proximity to the smiting god of thunder and lightning (Terrace 1962 no. 12, here **fig. 19**). Below her are both

a lion and a bull. She is shown spreading her garment behind her back, very much in the same way as she is pictured about 750 years later on the gold bowl from Hasanlu (Dyson 1960:124-125, here fig. 20). On this rich source of iconographic material the thunder and lightning god is shown twice on her left, once riding on his chariot pulled by his bulls that spit out drops of rain and streams of water, and once fighting a monster that is part human, part mountain and part three-headed snake. Drops of rain fill the space between this monster and the disrobing goddess. The garment that she spreads behind her consists of a number of vertical strips with diagonal stippling in alternate directions. This time she is mounted on two rams. It is the last instance in which the rain goddess is shown spreading out her garment. The parallel strips of which it consists may well, in my opinion, represent the varicolored spectrum of the rainbow.

The interconnected symbols of the Bull and the Woman remained deeply influential in the mountainous periphery of Western Asia which depends on thunder and rain for its sustenance. As one example among many I cite the 13th century B.C. temple of Adad and Shala at Choga Zanbil (ancient Dur-Untash), which yielded many frit figurines of humped bulls and clay figurines of breast-cupping women, naked except for an X-shaped string of beads (Ghirshman 1968:23, fig. 6, pls. 75-78.¹ Could the string of beads, possibly thought of as multicolored stones, be another symbol for the rainbow? In that case we may have to count with three possible ways of representing this natural phenomenon:

I. as the winged gate, at home in southern Mesopotamia since the Early Dynastic Period;

¹ A problem that cannot be dealt with here is the existence of the goddess Manzat (meaning 'rainbow'), also called Belet-ali (meaning 'lady of the city'), who is paired with Shimut, god of the Netherworld. At Choga Zanbil they had a temple adjacent to that of Adad and Shala (Ghirshman 1968:16-19).

II. as the garment of the disrobing goddess, seen in Syria, Anatolia and Iran and possibly earlier on an Akkad seal (fig. 5);

III. as the jewels of the naked goddess, worn crosswise over the body.

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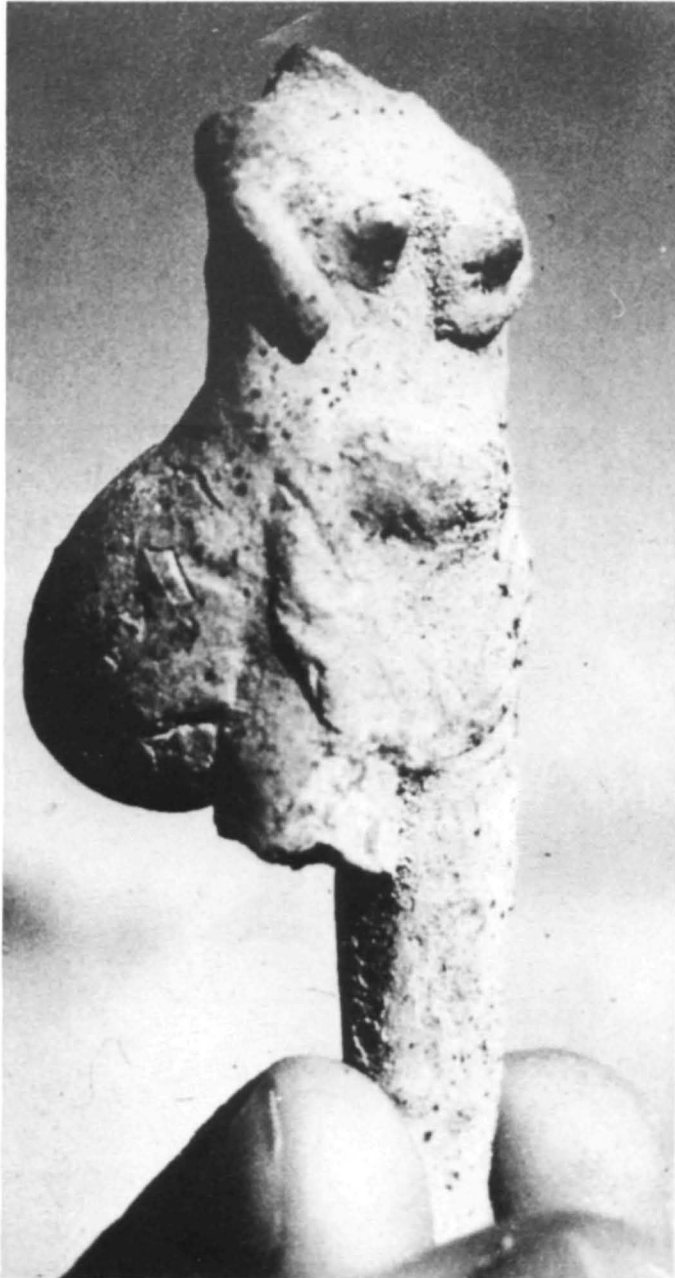


Fig. 1

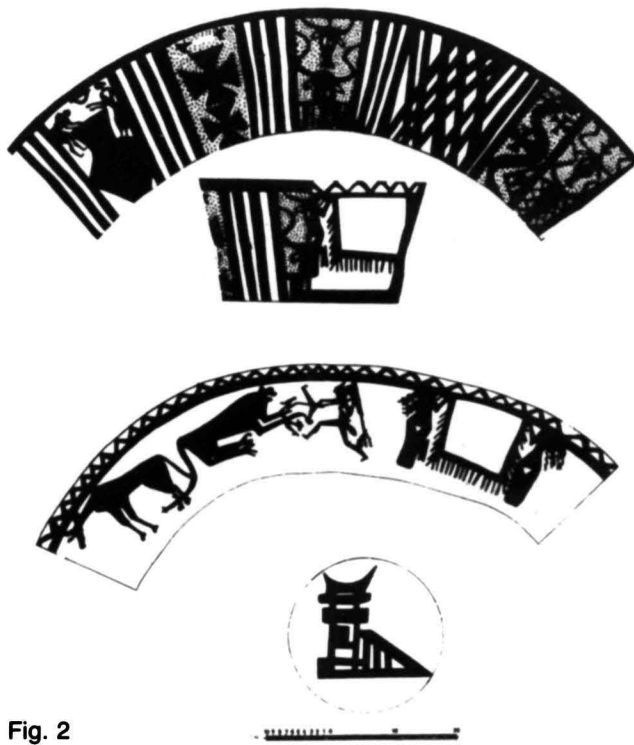


Fig. 2

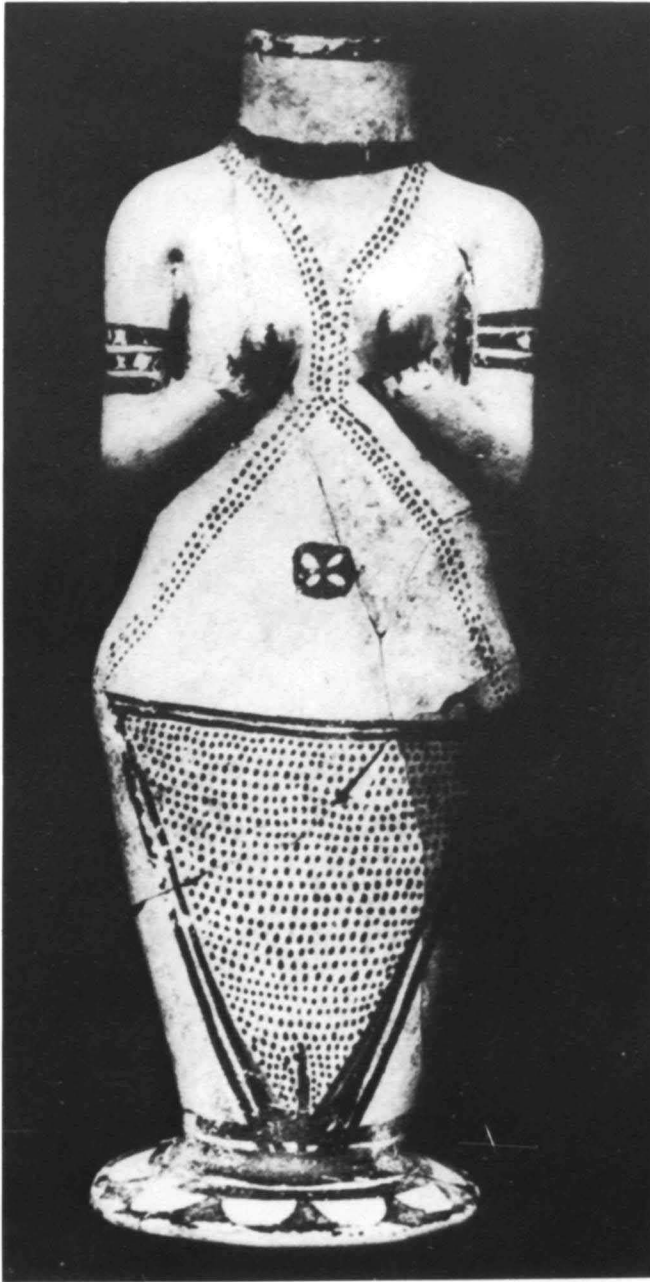


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

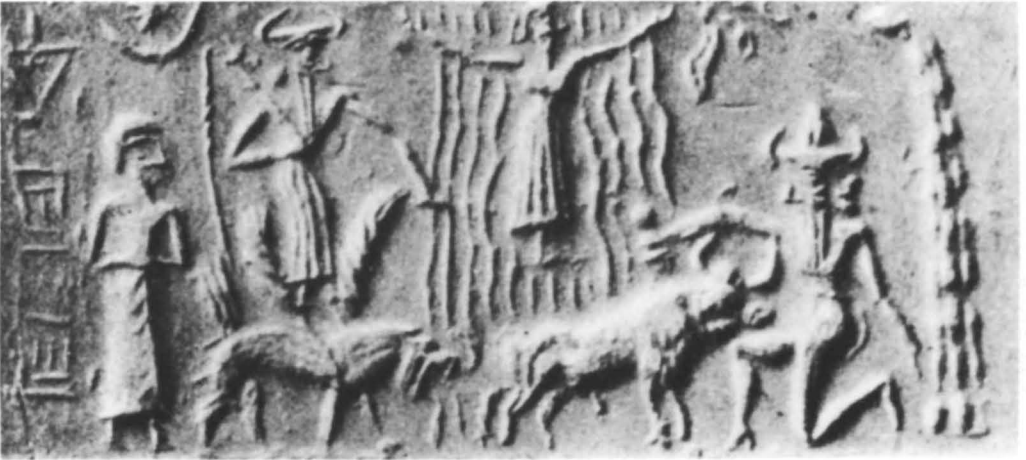


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

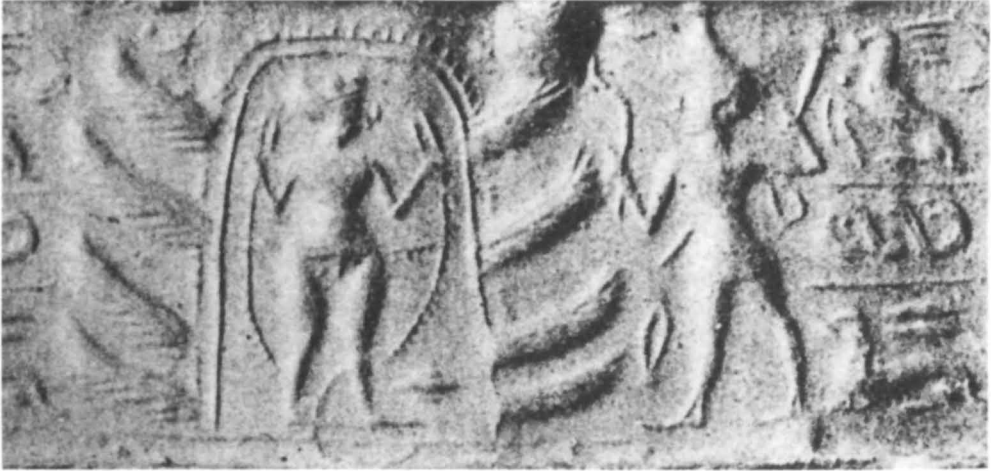


Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20