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Laden Animal Figurines from the Chalcolithic Period in Palestine

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Animal figures laden with receptacles of several types have been found in Chalcolithic Palestine. Executed in various materials (basalt, pottery, and on a wall painting), animals and containers alike are closely connected with the two main branches of the contemporary economy, namely, sheep/goat rearing and agriculture. The figures are essentially cultic in character, implying a use in rites to promote increase and prosperity, probably in an everyday domestic context. While most of the figures discussed have long been known, this is the first time that they have been considered as a group: all are seen to have been fashioned to the same end: the guarantee of basic subsistence needs essential to man's existence.

Long before the discovery of pottery man was fashioning primitive schematic clay female and animal figurines, which he probably believed were imbued with special powers and which he used to promote fertility on the one hand and success in hunting on the other. Figurines of this kind are known from Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites throughout the Near East. The female figures are portrayed in a variety of ways, with emphasis usually on sexual characteristics, many clearly pregnant and some actually in the process of giving birth (Albright 1940: 98; Mallon 1956: 14; Mellaart 1967: fig. 52, from a grain bin). The animal figures are represented as both hunted and herded species, some of the quarry having been intentionally maimed, broken, or "stabbed" in some sort of magical hunting rite (Braidwood *et al.* 1961; Singh 1974: fig. 64; Mellaart 1967: 78 and pl. 66; 1975: 88). Zoomorphic vessels are also found, pointing to a cultic use (Mellaart 1970: pls. 61:2, 62:7, a boar; and 1975: fig. 64, a deer). Over time there was increased emphasis on the representation of herded animals, especially sheep and goats.

Later, effigy vases occur at several more or less contemporary sites, some modeled in the form of a seated goddess, but all bearing her likeness in

the form of a painted face, often with eyes inlaid with obsidian or cowrie shells, and many having tattoo marks on the cheeks (Lloyd and Safar 1945: fig. 1:2, pl. 17:2-3; Abu Al-Soof 1968: pl. 13; Oates 1968: pl. 20; Mellaart 1975: fig. 69). The inference is that such vessels were used in rites to promote fertility, or that the effigy of the goddess was regarded as having apotropaic powers—probably a combination of the two. Certainly the vase shape points to libations or votive offerings. In this connection contemporary, ovoid churn-shaped vessels should be noted in Anatolia, similar to the later pottery churns of the Chalcolithic period in Palestine and possibly similarly used. On a vessel of this type the neck, which is treated in the same manner as on the goddess vases, is painted to represent a face with inset eyes of obsidian (Parrot 1969: fig. 4; fig. 1 here), doubtless in the belief that the very association of the goddess with a vessel connected with the milk-giving flocks was a means to ensure fertility and increase.

It thus appears that long before the fourth millennium B.C. it was widely believed that man's basic subsistence needs could be assured by invoking the beneficent powers of tutelary deities, which, while differing in name and aspect, ultimately represented the essential concept of a life-giving



Fig. 1. Churn-shaped goddess vase, from Anatolia. Height 26 cm; width: 2602 cm.

force governing both man and the world in which he lived. Although relatively little is known of early cult practices, much can be deduced from the paraphernalia and objects that have come to light at site after site, nearly always associated with a series of recognized symbols. Summing up the ^cUbaid period, B. L. Goff writes (1963: 88):

People were preoccupied with hopes for fertility, the increase of their flocks and herds, growing fruits and grain, human well-being and productivity. . . . The continuity in human hopes and fears produced a basic similarity in symbolic motifs.

This similarity is seen not so much in the form that the symbol takes as in the underlying concept for which it stands, expressed in each region in a different way.

In Chalcolithic Palestine the indications are that there were certain accepted symbols whose latent potency, it was believed, could be transferred to objects with which they were associated. The use of such symbols was prompted by the desire to promote fertility within the family unit and the wider tribal group, as well as among the flocks and herds, and likewise to ensure prosperity and abundance in the fields and cultivated areas. Although we do not always entirely understand them, their import can hardly be in doubt in view of the growing body of evidence from sites

throughout the country pointing to the use of the same symbols on ossuary frontons, on temple equipment from ^cEn-gedi (found in the Cave of the Treasure), on vessels and on basalt pillar-form figures in the Golan, on both human and animal figurines in the Negev, and painted on the walls of the houses at Ghassul (Epstein 1978a, 1982).

With the expansion of stock-raising and the resultant need to process part of the milk yield, and with the diversification of cultivated crops (including fruits), pottery figurines of animals laden with receptacles commonly used for milk or produce appear for the first time in the Chalcolithic period. These occur side by side with simpler animal figurines, including domesticated dogs (Macdonald *et al.* 1932: pl. 27:D1, 83, 84; Mallon *et al.* 1934: figs. 35:1, 3, 4, 36:1, 11; Hennessy 1969: fig. 11:4; Bar-Adon 1980: 143, Ill. 11). These naturalistic figurines not only reflect the current economy, but their small size and their container-offering vessels lead to the assumption that they were used in rites to promote increase and fertility much as were the circular basalt figures from the Golan, all of which terminate above in an offering bowl (Epstein 1975).

Support for an interpretation of this kind is provided by a closely-allied basalt figure of a ram, found on the surface at Tell Turmus (fig. 2a,b), which, unlike the stylized pillar figures, is a naturalistic representation, only the forepart of which is extant.¹ The animal is sculpted with curling horns, a prominent muzzle (or nose), low ear-knobs on either side (similar to those on the pillar figures), and stumpy front legs (now broken off); on its back is an offering bowl with thickened rounded rim. A second surface find from the same site is a circular basalt figure with offering bowl on top and ear-knobs on either side, but no other facial features.² The two belong to the same cultural background, and the ram—like the horned pillar-figures found in contemporary house contexts (Epstein 1977: 59, 60; 1979: pl. 26:D; 1982: 64 and figs. 33, 34)—was almost certainly connected with a domestic cult to promote increase among the flocks and herds. While the shallowness of the bowl on its back precluded the pouring of milk libations, it was clearly intended to receive an appropriate offering.

The basalt ram belongs to the same general class as two well-known pottery figurines of a ram, one from the ^cEn-gedi sanctuary, bearing on its back two hollow churns³ (fig. 3a,b), the other

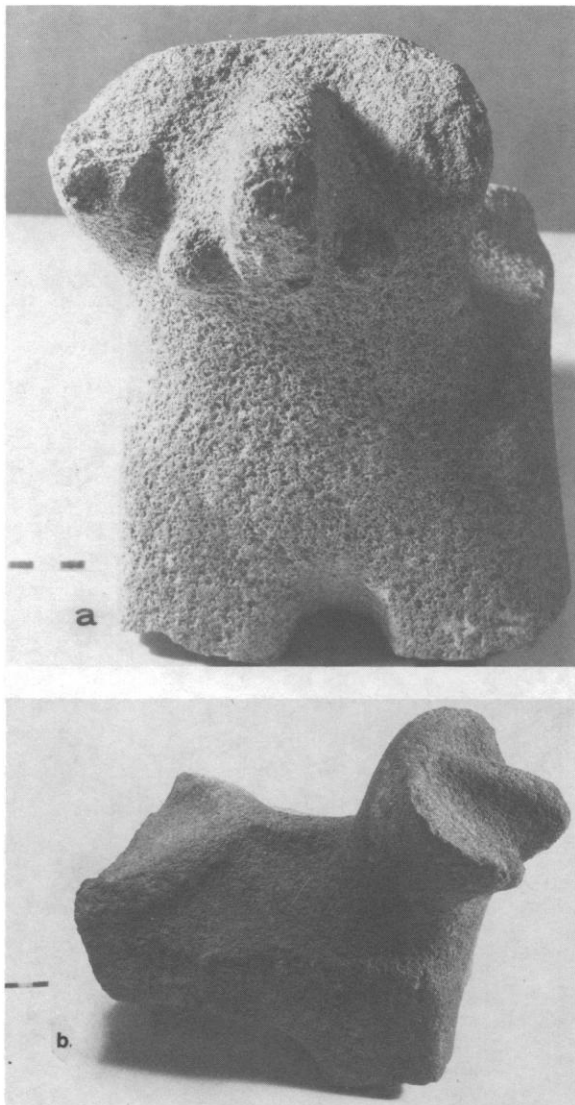


Fig. 2a, b. Basalt figure of ram with bowl on the back (incomplete), from Tell Turmus. Height: 21 cm; extant length: 25 cm.

from Gilat (fig. 4), carrying three tall vessels (Alon 1976: pls. 33, 34; 1977: 65). In addition, a small pottery fragment showing the hindquarters of an animal—probably a ram or goat—was found in the 1960 Ghassul excavations (North 1961: No. 8728, from Level 8 D2, fig. 15 and pl. 10; fig. 5a–c here). The curve of what remains of the two vessels on its back (which are interconnected within) makes it almost certain that these were churns—possibly some kind of “bird vase”—while the broken tail recalls that of the Gilat ram.⁴ On the analogy of the offering bowl on the back of the

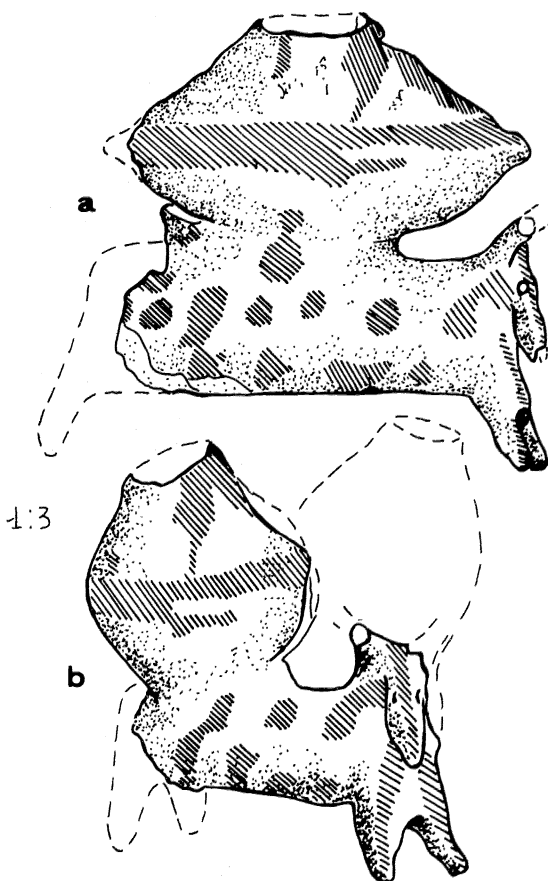


Fig. 3a,b. Pottery figurine of ram (?) bearing churns, from ^cEn-gedi.

Tell Turmus ram, it can be plausibly suggested that the vessels carried by its pottery counterparts likewise served as receptacles in which offerings (probably milk libations) were placed, and that all were used in rites to promote fertility and success in the pastoral component of the economy. The sanctuary context of the ^cEn-gedi animal, coupled with the fact that it is carrying churns, strengthens such an interpretation, while the cultic significance of the Gilat ram has been stressed from the outset.⁵ The churn itself, a vessel in everyday use and essential for the preparation of milk products, has been found at many Chalcolithic sites. It is not surprising, then, to find miniature churns (clearly cultic in character; fig. 6) that were also probably used in rites to ensure a good milk yield (Sukenik 1948: pl. 1:1; Mallon *et al.* 1934: pls. 50:A, 102; de Contenson 1956: 227 and fig. 9:9; Dothan 1959: fig. 10:3; Perrot 1961: fig. 39:1, 3 and pl. 9:11, 14; the churn on the head of the



Fig. 4. Pottery figurine of ram bearing cornets, from Gilat. Height (excluding cornets): 12 cm; length: 27.5 cm.



Fig. 6. Miniature pottery churn, from Azor. Height: 17.5 cm; width: 23 cm.

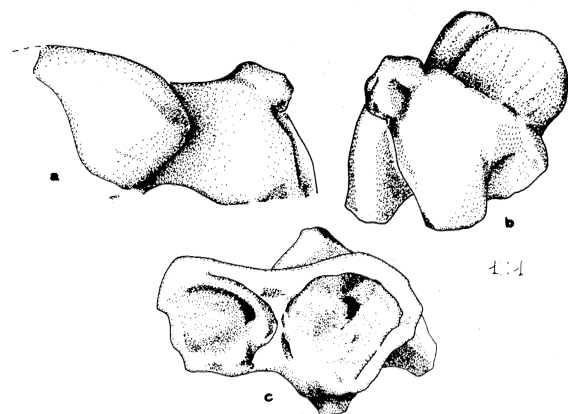


Fig. 5a-c. Fragments of pottery figurine of animal bearing churns, from Ghassul. (Drawings by Ms. T. Mazziola.)

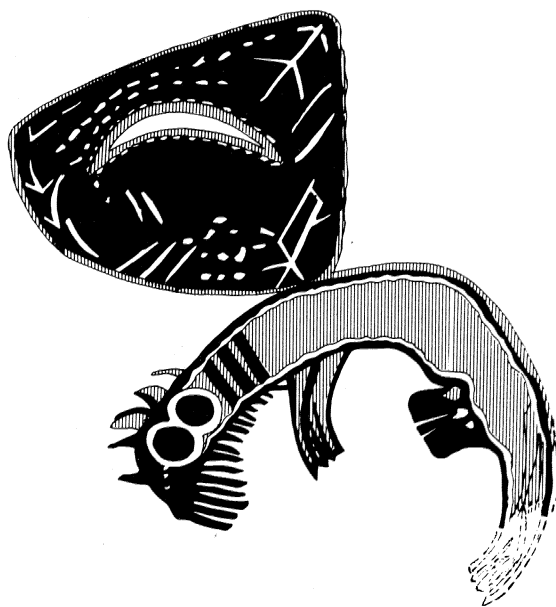


Fig. 7. Suggested restoration of animal from wall painting at Ghassul.

Gilat goddess, Alon 1977: pl. 36; Epstein 1982: 78 and fig. 53).⁶

In the light of all this it can be assumed that to insure fertility and increase among the flocks it was common practice to place appropriate small offerings in vessels borne by realistically portrayed animals that were closely identified with this branch of the economy. If this be so, it is likely that another animal figure can be included in this group, although not made of pottery or sculpted in stone. This is the so-called “dragon” figure in the Ghassul mural, discovered some 50 years ago (Mallon *et al.* 1934: 179 and Frontispiece; fig. 7 here). While much is enigmatic regarding the overall meaning of the superimposed layers of the fresco, the excavators were of the opinion that the

two masks, the “dragon,” and the central star belonged together (Koepfel *et al.* 1940: 17 and pl. 7). It is not within the scope of this article to attempt to interpret the significance of the various elements in the Ghassul frescoes, which by general consent are considered to be cultic in inspiration. In the present context it is to the animal figure shown between the two upper left-hand rays of the star that attention is directed. Zoologist F. S. Bodenheimer concluded that this red-colored figure was intended as a carnivore, possibly a fox (Bodenheimer 1960: 155; 1972: Frontispiece). Since in addition to the ears the animal has two horns,



Fig. 8. Pithos from house at Rasm Ḥarbush, Golan. Height: 39 cm; width (excluding handles): 35 cm.



Fig. 9. Pottery figurine of donkey laden with baskets, from Givʿatayim. Height: 7.4 cm; extant length: 8 cm.

it is unlikely that a fox was intended, especially as this is an animal completely alien to the iconography of the period. Mallon suggested that this was a winged monster with open jaws and darting fang (the latter perhaps intended as a snake and belonging to a different layer of the painting). With the laden ram figures in mind, we suggest that the one-dimensional fresco animal was also intended as a ram and that it is similar in approach to the pottery figurines.

Thus what Mallon saw as the lower jaw is in fact a depiction of the animal's forelegs, and what he interpreted as the front teeth is a careful depiction of the shaggy hair on the dewlap, likewise shown on the Gilat ram. Three lines across the upper part of the body no doubt indicate the base of the head, recalling the ridge at the base of the head on a number of pillar figures (Epstein 1975: 201 and fig. 3:9), while the head itself is disproportionately large on account of the pair of large white eyes shown frontally. On the underside of



Fig. 10. Pottery figurine of donkey laden with bins, from Azor. Height: 7 cm; length: 9.5 cm.

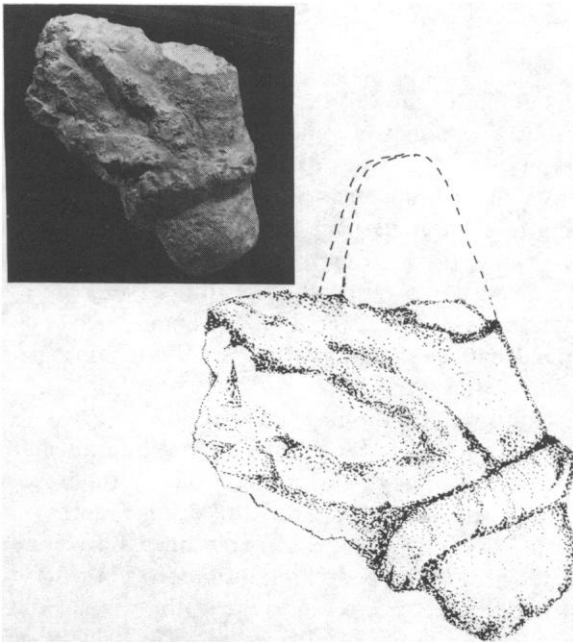


Fig. 11a, b. Pottery head of bridled animal, probably a donkey, from site near the Yarmuk River. Size of fragment: 7.5 × 4.5 cm. (Drawing by Ms. M. Yanai.)

the body the sexual organ is shown, but the figure is incomplete and neither the hind legs nor the tail is extant. As is the case with the Gilat ram, the body itself is unduly elongated, while on its back is not a “butterfly wing” (as suggested by Mallon) but a wide-mouthed jar—possibly one of a pair—carried in exactly the same way as the churns and the cornets on the backs of the pottery figurines. In support of this interpretation it should be noted that this pithos-like vessel is decorated with a series of ornamental motifs, including what may well have been intended as a “rope-pattern” design, common on contemporary wares (fig. 8).⁷ Thus the painted figure falls into place alongside the modeled figures of rams, its very depiction on a house wall emphasizing its cultic significance.

Reviewing the above, we see that at four sites—in the far north, in the Negev, and in the Dead Sea region—the figure of a ram has come to light bearing on its back a receptacle for offerings or libations. To be sure, the ^cEn-gedi figurine was found in a sanctuary; nevertheless it is likely that all originated in house contexts⁸ where they had

been used in simple domestic rites to promote fertility in the pastoral branch of the economy.

Other pottery figurines, closely allied to those discussed and exemplifying an identical approach, are modeled to represent the donkey. They are likewise laden, but with jars and baskets, clearly pointing to a connection with agriculture. The donkey figure apparently fulfilled a function similar to that of the ovids, being used in simple rites to insure good harvests; the vessels borne on their backs likewise must have served as containers for appropriate offerings. As in the case of the churns, these are miniature representations of vessels that were in daily use for bringing in the crops: panniers for olives, pulses and fruit, large pottery bins and jars for grain. Allowing for a certain amount of diversity, this ties in well with what is known of contemporary crop varieties.⁹

Two laden donkey figurines were found in ossuary caves at Giv³atayim (Kaplan 1969: pl. 8; 1976: 452; fig. 9 here) and at Azor (Druks and Tsafiris 1970: 578 and pl. 40:B; fig. 10 here). Both are realistically modeled and in all probability had been made in the first instance for use in a domestic context and only later deposited with other grave goods in a tomb cave. In addition there is a pottery head of a harnessed animal (fig. 11a), which may qualify for inclusion in this group, although there is nothing to identify the complete figure or any indication as to whether or not it bore receptacles of any kind on its back. Made of light buff ware covered with red paint, the reins are plastically rendered in the form of raised bands or a "rope-pattern." The fragment was found on the surface at a site situated on the north bank of the Yarmuk river near its emergence into the Jordan Valley (Epstein and Gut-

man 1972: Site 209; Epstein 1976: 454), and it can be assumed that it originated in a house.¹⁰ Since the ears have broken off, its identification is uncertain; but it is likely that it once formed part of a donkey figurine (cf. fig. 11b, with suggested restoration) and that it was laden, there being few other candidates for domesticated beasts of burden at this time. The continued use of laden donkey figurines in the subsequent Early Bronze Age strengthens this suggestion. For just as the miniature churn from Giv³atayim (Kaplan 1969, 1976) illustrates the continuance for centuries of cult practices relating to pastoralism (Amiran 1981), so the two laden figures—probably intended as donkeys—from an Early Bronze I horizon at Râs el-⁵Ain (Eitan 1969: 51 and fig. 3:1, 2) demonstrate a similar tendency in regard to agriculture.¹¹ Another once-laden figurine of a donkey, which is of even later date, was found in an Early Bronze III tomb at Jericho (Kenyon 1960: 124 and pl. 7:3, from Tomb D 12); as in the case of the donkeys deposited in the ossuary tomb caves, it is likely that it, too, was originally made for domestic use and only later placed in the tomb.

The series of laden animal figurines not only provides additional evidence regarding the economy of groups settled up and down the country, but it illustrates the importance attached to and the connection between cult practices and daily life.¹² Whether a ram bearing churns or other vessels used for milk and milk products, or a donkey carrying the produce of the fields, the emphasis is on animal husbandry and agriculture: success and abundance for everything connected with these occupations was widely regarded as depending on the favor of tutelary deities.

NOTES

¹The incomplete figure was found on the surface some years ago by Dr. M. Prausnitz, to whom I am indebted for permission to publish it here. The figure is on permanent exhibit in the Huleh Prehistoric Museum, Ma⁶ayan Barukh. For Tell Turmus, see Dayan 1969; Epstein 1978b: 39–40.

²Unpublished, on exhibit in the Huleh Prehistoric Museum, Ma⁶ayan Barukh. Height: 30 cm; Diameter: 18 cm.

³The animal is described as a bull by the excavators, although there are no clear indications on the fragmentary figurine to support this (Mazar 1963: 105; Ussishkin 1980: 20 and fig. 11. See now Amiran 1981: 49).

⁴I am grateful to the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Jerusalem, for allowing me to examine the fragment and publish new drawings here.

⁵In my opinion the building in which the two Gilat figures were found was neither a temple nor a shrine,

but a house similar in size to contemporary houses in the Golan (many of them measuring 15×6 m). The ram and churn goddess figurines were probably used in domestic cult practices directed towards guaranteeing increase and plenty. This applies equally to the fragmentary Ghassul figure found in a living area.

⁶Another churn from Giv²atayim, published as Chalcolithic (Kaplan 1976: 452), would be a candidate for inclusion in this list; but J. Kaplan (personal communication) is convinced that it belongs to the Early Bronze I phase of the tomb.

⁷This medium-sized pithos is cited since, in addition to the bands of impressed "rope-pattern" decoration, it has on the shoulder a single, nonfunctional "horn-handle," clearly associating it with the milk-giving flocks (Epstein 1982: 77 and fig. 52). When found, only the stumps of the horns remained; these were restored, modeled on plastic horns that had broken off from other vessels.

⁸The context of the fresco figure is not in doubt since it was painted on the wall of a house; the Tell Turmus ram was almost certainly from a house.

⁹Typical crops include emmer wheat, einkorn barley, flax, lentils, pea and vetch, dates, pomegranates and olives, with the addition of gathered wild fruits, nuts, acorns and pistachios. For Ghassul: Lee 1978: 1213; for Beersheba: Perrot 1968: cols. 432, 435; for the Cave of the Treasure: D. V. Zaitschek *apud* Bar-Adon 1980: 223; for the Golan, Lifschitz and Waisel 1977, 1979; Hopf

1982 [emmer wheat].

¹⁰Since this article was written, the allocation of this surface find to the Chalcolithic period has been rendered less certain in view of the results of recent excavations by the writer at the site, since Chalcolithic levels have not yet been reached below the Early Bronze I layers uncovered.

¹¹After this article had been completed the find was reported of a laden donkey figurine in an Early Bronze I context at Tell Kishion (C. Arnon, *Hadashot Archaeologiot* 78-79: 18 (Hebrew)).

¹²In the third millennium there is evidence for the elaboration of this approach (Amiran 1981). It is particularly well illustrated by a unique alabaster plaque dating to the Early Dynastic III period, which was found in secondary usage at Tell Chuëra. On it are shown, in relief, seven female figures identically dressed, representing different aspects of the Mother Goddess, each holding in her lap a child or young animal. Although the plaque considerably postdates the cult figures discussed here, it is inspired by the same fundamental approach—above all, a belief in the transference of the potency inherent in the godhead to promote fertility in humans, flocks, and fields. These are tangibly expressed through the figures of children, sheep, goats, and a donkey, while the lion and bull-calf figures almost certainly symbolize virility. (Moortgat-Correns 1977-78: Abb. 20-21).

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