

RELIGION, ART, SOCIETY IN THE HALAFIAN PAINTED SHRINE-BOWL FROM ARPACHIYAH

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Our knowledge of past, illiterate civilizations is often entrusted to exceptional findings, such as the halafian painted bowl from Arpachiyah, a line piece of prehistoric art, which is able to enlighten the religious attitudes of halafian society (pl. 1). It was found inside the grave G2, which had been dug from lev. VII, phase 2, close to the tholos of lev. 8: Hijara pointed out that the tholoi area was located in this phase in a special precinct surrounded by an enclosure wall, the fill consisted of clean reddish clay, and the grave was as well exceptional, since it contained four skulls inside three bowls and a jar plus six more pots and one stone bowl, a hint to fractional burial and to skull cult. The vessel bears a complex decoration, on the exterior, inside methopes, on the interior in a continuous frieze, and on the base, with a bold, sweeping line and several "scenes" are depicted men, women, whole and shortened animals, abstract symbols and possibly, an architectural representation which aim in some way at communicating us some code-message. The trouble is that while offering us at least six different themes, with clear and most intriguing religious implications, the bowl escapes a ultimate interpretation because of its uniqueness. Indeed, apart from a few sherds, bearing fragmentary scenes, the only other relatively complete halafian vessel, which shows freely painted scenes with men, animals and abstract symbols is a comparatively poor and enigmatic specimen from Tell Halaf. Therefore it seems that the only possible approach for a better understanding is to make use of any comparison, however separated in space and time it may be, since religious imageries show a tendency to remain deeply rooted in human minds and traditions and we have clear evidences of the drifting of important symbols from one area to the other, often with severe chronological shifiting, and sometimes with variations in the original meaning. In such a process of acculturation, ethnicity may have played some role, but that is not to be considered as a rule. I was already concerned with the Arpachiyah bowl: basing on its methope decoration, on the themes represented, and on a long series of intriguing analogies, I suggested that it could be the representation of some kind of tholos, which could have been either painted or enriched with some kind of kilims hanging from the walls, and I considered the bowl as a first occurrence in the tradition of portable shrines. Of course my suggestion is not so much linked to the possibility that one day we may find a painted Halafian tholos, and I do not imply that any tholos, either painted or not could have been a shrine, as well as not all model houses are to be consider as "shrines".

Of course an easy critic for any shrine-interpretation is that only with a wealth of evidences can we surmise such daring opinions, the problem is to decide how many evidences do we need.

There is always some liminality in essential human values such as shrine house: we still say in Italy: "my house is a shrine", to mean the sacrality we ascribe to our home. However, if we consider the rich witnesses of Çatal Hüyük shrines, with realistic wall paintings and relieves, which are variously involving human beings, hybrids, animals, abstract symbols, maps and kilim patterns, with obvious religious and mythical meanings, and ascertained that traces, although poorer, of the same attitude to wall painting are to be found at other prehistoric Near Eastern and European sites, the future possibility of finding wall paintings in halafian houses, either round or rectangular cannot be excluded.

One point in favor of the model-shrine interpretation is certainly the deposition of the vessel in a rich, special grave, buried in a special context. Although we guess it was not prepared purposely, since it had been repaired with gypsum in antiquity, we should not dismiss its location as one of the elements we have to evaluate it; it has been emphasized that there is

some parallelism among the worlds of the living and of the dead, accordingly the type of burial and ritual connected to the deposition, may enlighten the life of ancient societies.

Anyhow, I do not intend to discuss the model shrine interpretation at long: instead, I am here concerned with the "Fringed Square" motif. Indeed I was much intrigued by a recent paper concerned with an analogous motif found in a faraway culture. Stefania Casini, while studying the motif of the "fringed rectangle", which is considered an important numen, possibly symbolizing a male personage, of Valcamonica rock engravings, connected it, inter alia, with the motif of the fringed rectangle, which is held by two ladies on the Arpachiyah bowl.

The possibility of such a remote comparison, and the search for any intermediate link we may find is quite charming, insofar as if it is presumable that trade, art, religion and some kind of orally handed down "literature" connected distant people since the beginning of civilization. Also many evidences point to a closer relation of Halaf religious symbolism with Anatolia, and therefore with Europe: inter alia, the bucranium, the double axe, the Maltese cross and square, the cruciform and labyrinthic patterns on seals and architecture, the anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and foot shaped vessels, "bowl shrines" or model houses which seem to echo with their decorations lost architectonic originals with kilim patterns, the suggested depiction of landscapes or "maps", the skull cult.

Another reason for coming back to the subject is that only recently I received by Ismail Hijara, whose liberality and open mindedness I thank so much, a copy of the original photographs of the vessel. These allow a better interpretation since, due to the limitation of available room on the relatively narrow walls, deformation may be remarkable according to different points of view, and then, as usual, any drawing, may appear in some way an interpretation, possibly deceiving and subjective. I would also point out that, due to the tendency of halafian painting to flake off, only with a careful examination of possible traces and discolourations left on the surface we can attempt a better analysis. (Pls. 1.2)

As already stated, I choose to attain myself here mainly to the interpretation of the fringed rectangle motif, approaching the subject from an orientalist point of view, and making use of Casini's suggestions.

First of all it seems important to state whether the fringed squarish rectangle held by the two ladies on our bowl is to be considered as some kind of tissue or not.

Hijara's suggestion, that the fringed square is representing a rug, has been criticized by Breniquet, who prefers to consider the pattern as the representation of a sacred enclosure, her explanation, which is not really contradicting my idea of the fringed rectangle as the door to a sacred building guarded by two female personages, does not give account of the fact that the two ladies are actually shown as "holding" the tissue with their arms, so it is impossible considering the ladies position, the fringes direction and the later analogies, including the Valcamonica occurrences, not to think of the fringed rectangle as a tissue of some kind.

Instead I suggested that, by analogy with later representations of shrines and of model shrines, the rug held by the ladies could be considered as the "door" of the shrine itself. I would incidentally point out the liminality of symbols as "door" and "veil", and we should not forget their importance in covering, or hiding, discovering and symbolizing gods and deified kings.

More difficult is to decide which kind of tissue is represented: Casini points out that the fringes on three sides hint to a sheet or mantle representation since carpets usually have fringes on two opposite sides only her interpretation is that we have here an act of worship: the mantle is an idol, a divine attribute, echoed by the later camunian representations.

Certainly we have very early evidences of weaving in the Near East, the possibility that some Çatal Hüyük's paintings can be considered as precursor of Anatolian kilims has been much debated, many geometrical patterns painted on Samarran and Halafian potteries may echo twining or weaving, and many female figurines bear painted dresses, however we lack the actual representation of pieces of cloth, comparable with the Arpachiyah fringed square. The only comparison I could suggest is with a fringed apron which is painted on a Hacilar clay

statuette, also we could consider the pattern painted on the relief birth-giving goddess as the representation of a light tissue held by her raised arms and veiling the goddess, what could strengthen Casini's suggestion, still our evidence remains elusive. Painted chequer panels on Halafian or early Iranian pottery are inconclusive, as possible parallels I would just mention the "comb" pattern painted on a Jaflarabad bowl and the hyperstylized human figures alternating with hatched rectangles of Tall-i-Bakum.

Further searching for analogies, apart from the comparisons established by Casini with human figures stylized in squares, which are incised on potteries from neolithic Ozieri and from middle late bronze Polish lusatian site. I would quote the undated figures of the Pacentro cave, bearing hatched, somehow rectangular mantles, and the rectangular chequer panel painted in the Magoura cave, in Albania, which is topped by "horns".

If we accept the mantle interpretation, a different type of object to be taken in comparison could be that of stylized human figures with painted "mantles", such as the clay "models" from Sesklo or the flattened squarish or rectangular incised models from Vinča level at Vadastra, south-west Romania, and from Karanovo VI Ruse.

Our survey may be extended to the chequet painted inside the middle chalcolithic ritually deposited vessel from Cyprus, where a clear "door" is represented, and to the apparently doubt-fringed, rug-door of a late Minoan clay model of temple from Crete. Also we may quote the rectangular skirts, with chequer or hatching, of late Minoan and early Greek, Cretan hyperstylized human figures, or with the textile ornament, actually a fringed square, painted on a Villanovan ossuary from Veil.

If we turn to early writing, a very close pattern may be considered a rectangle hatched with horizontal parallel lines and topped by a vertical line, found in Harappan script.

Summing up, notwithstanding the chronological and geographical dispersal of our evidences, I think we are allowed to consider the fringed square of the Arpachiyah bowl as a textile of some kind: the comparison with later religious imageries in the same area favours the hypothesis that it could represent the cloth door of a shrine or symbolize the shrine itself, but the evidence of the fringed apron painted on the Hacilat lady seems to enhance Casini's suggestion of a mantle, symbolizing some deity. Again I would point out the intermingling of symbols: the two hypothesis do not really exclude each other, essentially the deity is meant through its symbol, be it a shrine, a mantle or an animal.

Eventually it should be emphasized that, while spinning and weaving (as well as pottery making), are commonly related to the woman, as life-giver (whwn spinning), or death giver (whwn cutting the thread), the Valcamonica personage symbolized by the fringed rectangle apparently is a male god: in this case we should have evidence of a complete change of meaning of the same graphic symbol from female to male, the pattern remains, however, a kind of guide-fossil, with a value analogous to those literary topoi, or linguistic persistencies, which allow us to connect faraway cultures.

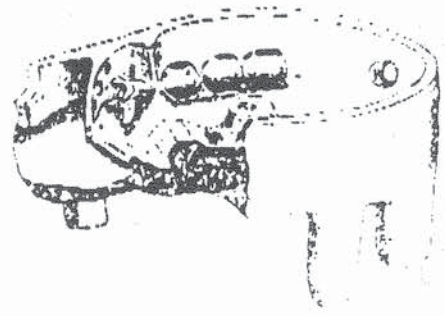
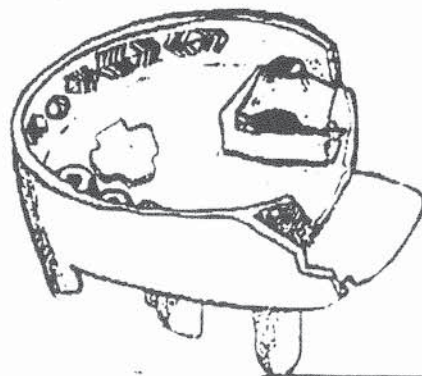
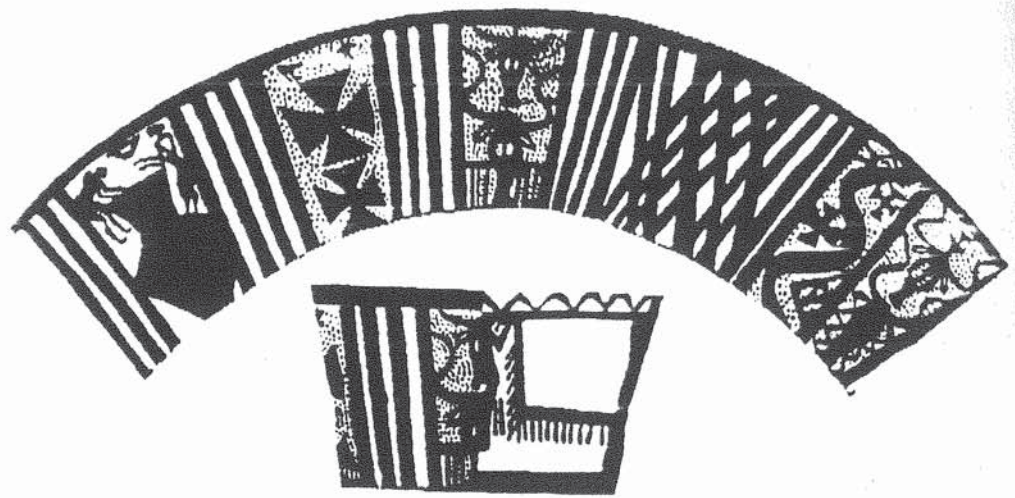


Fig. 66 - Late Cucuteni model-shrine from the Ukrainian site of Popudnia (after GIMBUTAS 1982).

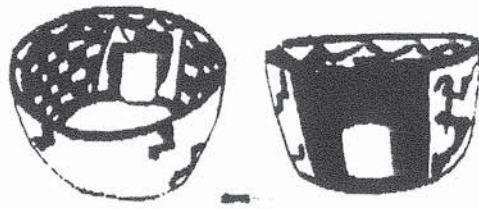


Fig. DD - Middle chalcolithic model-shrine from Cyprus (after PELTENBURG 1988).

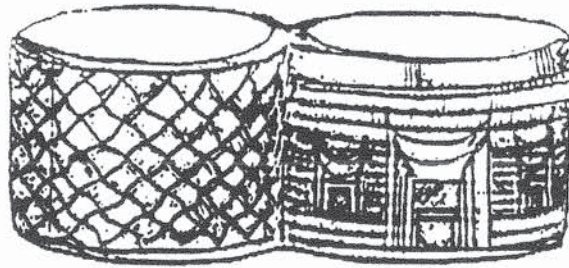


Fig. V - Steatite twin-vessel from Susa (after DELOUGAZ 1960).

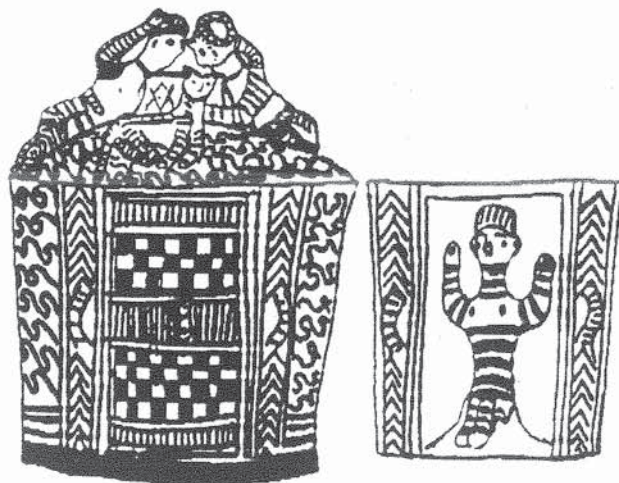


Fig. Z - Model shrine from Subminoan Crete (after MARINATOS-HIRMER 1960).