Abstract: The spectacle idol from Polish excavations in northeastern Syria belongs to the class of artifacts that are known from different regions of the Ancient Near East – Syria, Mesopotamia and Elam – and that have been dated to the Uruk period (broadly speaking, the fourth millennium BC). The name derives from a characteristic shape that resembles the eye idols from Tell Brak. Indeed, the largest assemblage of spectacle idols was discovered at Tell Brak, in an older cultural level within the Eye Temple sector, leading a number of scholars to the conclusion that eye idols evolved from their spectacle predecessors. The ritual function of the eye idols has never been put into doubt, unlike that of spectacle idols, which has been heavily debated. The spectacle idol from Tell Abu Hafur affords the opportunity to discuss the different ideas put forward regarding the function of the objects and to return to the original interpretation of these as associated with worship based on an analysis of the iconography of contemporary glyptic art and a comparative review of finds from diverse archaeological sites.

Keywords: eye idols, spectacle idols, Tell Brak, Uruk period, Northern Mesopotamia

An inconspicuous clay artifact was recorded in 1989 from the site of Tell Abu Hafur in northeastern Syria, where a second season of salvage excavations was then being carried out by a University of Warsaw PCMA expedition. The object came from a layer at the bottom of a step trench located on the northern slope in sector B of the site. The shape of the artifact immediately called to mind the eye idols from Tell Brak, ancient urban centre situated approximately 40km to the northeast of Abu Hafur.

The object (inv. no. TAH/89/847/1874) (Fig. 1) was found in a layer formed by erosion runoff at the foot of the tell, already outside the limits of the town from the third millennium BC, which however could be dated by a fairly uniform collection of fragmented ceramics with two diagnostic sherds, placing the collection in a late phase of the Uruk period/Late...
Chalcolithic 4–5 (second half of the fourth millennium BC). Poorly preserved architectural remains from this period were discovered at Tell Hafur, mainly in the above-mentioned step trench on the northern slope. This hand-formed and fired clay artifact measures 15.3cm in height. Attached to the top of the bell-shaped lower part are two rings, each 2.4cm in outer diameter, one missing part of the circumference. The base is roughly 10cm in diameter and contains a semicircular concavity.

The association with eye idols was evident as the artifact belongs to a class of finds that is prolific on Near Eastern archaeological sites from Syro-Palestine through Mesopotamia to Elam. The characteristic loops at the top have earned the category the name of spectacle idols (Fig. 2a-b). The first to use the name was Max Mallowan, who discovered Tell Brak and who excavated there in the 1930’s — recording ‘thousands’ of both eye and spectacle idols. The latter group was found in layers underlying the platform of the so-called Eye Temple from the end of the fourth millennium BC, below the level in which the eye idols were proliferate, thus leading the discoverer to consider the spectacle idols as a prototype of the eye idols. The stratigraphic positioning, however, has come under doubt.3

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2 Mallowan 1947.
Despite the dubiety of Mallowan’s stratigraphy and interpretations, and the questioning of the sacred nature of the building itself, it was the finding of the two assemblages generally in layers underlying the Eye Temple that led Mallowan to assume a common interpretation of function of the two sets of idols from approximately the same location as objects associated with the cult. Indeed, the widespread use of the term ‘idol’ as a name for the class, by Mallowan as well as by his critics, is tantamount to acknowledging ties with the sacred.

Before undertaking a discussion of the controversial function of the so-called spectacle idol, let us look at the territorial and chronological range of similar finds. All the known examples of spectacle idols come from excavations at sites roughly contemporaneous with the Uruk period, e.g. Hama, Sheikh Hassan, Arslantepe, Hacinebi, Tell Brak, Tell Feres al-Sharqi, Hamoukar, Tepe Gawra, Qalinj Agha, Khafaje, Ur, Uruk, Susa, Chogha Mish. The territorial distribution of spectacle idols is much wider than in the case of the ordinary eye idols. Larger assemblages of spectacle idols occur practically at only one site apart
from Tell Brak, namely at Tepe Gawra in northern Mesopotamia. In this context and taking into consideration that the idols are objects from the Uruk/Late Chalcolithic period, one would like to know whether they were the product of Southern Mesopotamian workshops or whether they should rather be connected with settlements in the Upper Mesopotamia. Precise dating of spectacle idols found in southern Mesopotamia would have ascertained whether they were earlier or only contemporary with the idols from the north, but the documentation standards in the first half of the twentieth century – when layers from the relevant early periods were excavated on most of the archaeological sites in southern Mesopotamia – were not up to par. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to determine the exact find contexts for these objects. In consequence, spectacle idols cannot be connected with southern Mesopotamia and Uruk expansion to the north, but there can be no doubt that the examples from southern Mesopotamia occur mainly in Late and Terminal Uruk contexts. Taking into account the proliferation of the type, one should think that northern Mesopotamia, and especially its western part, were the origin of spectacle idols. However, this assumption must be made with the reservation that Uruk-related sites in the Tigris valley and to the east of it have been by far less extensively investigated than those in regions lying further to the west. Neither should one put out of mind the fact that this class of artifacts was never recorded from any of the earlier Ubaid sites in southern Mesopotamia or the Halaf period sites in northern Mesopotamia, and that they do not occur in contexts later than the Uruk period. The relevance of this observation is that spectacle idols were a specific product of the Uruk period, that for whatever reason disappeared from cultural circulation with the decline of this civilization.

Mallowan divided discovered idols into ‘spectacle’ and ‘eye’ types, and observed a certain set of rules governing the production of the former. First of all, he noticed that an absolute majority of the spectacle idols were made of clay, while most of the stone examples are rather diminutive in size. With regard to the eye idols, they were made mostly of limestone and to some extent of clay, but also shell and mother-of-pearl. Taking into account raw material criteria, as well as size, C. Breniquet in her study of the idols divided the spectacle ones into two types: large idols from 7 to 27cm high, made of clay, and small ones, seldom higher than 7cm, made of stone. The clay spectacle idols were handmade and they stood on a massive base, occasionally constricted and flat on the underside (Fig. 2c-d) and sometimes concave – as in the case of the example from Tell Abu Hafur – to ensure greater stability (Fig. 2e-f). Among the stone idols Breniquet distinguished examples with a massive flat base, as well as others – featuring an irregularly worked and often rounded

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5 Spectacle idols found during recent excavations at Tell Feres, Hamoukar and Hacinebi and their dating seem to confirm this hypothesis (Forest, Vallet, Baldi 2012: 37; Gibson et al. 2002: 20, Fig. 14; Quntar, Khalidi, Ur 2011: Fig. 3; Stein et al. 1997: 120, Figs 4/A, C, D, E; 12).
6 Tell Brak actually was an exception, the excavations uncovering a continuous chronological record from the prehistoric period (Halaf, Ubaid) to the Akkadian period (second half of the third millennium BC).
7 Mallowan 1947: 150–159, Pls XXV–XXVI.
bottom, that made it difficult to stand them upright on any surface. The French scholar believed the stone and terracotta spectacle idols to be purely utilitarian, despite the fact that none have ever been found in a context determining their function unequivocally.\(^9\) She thus rejected Mallowan’s religious interpretation of these artifacts, linking them with the worship of the Eye Deity from Tell Brak. A proposition to this end was put forward by W. Andrae, who observed the similarities between the spectacle idols and ‘hut symbols’, known from Uruk period and Early Dynastic glyptic art from Mesopotamia,\(^10\) and interpreted as houses of the god, that is – temples. For the sake of completeness, one should recall some more prosaic, if far-fetched ideas, e.g. H. Frankfort’s comparison of the objects with vessel lids or another theory suggesting their use as andirons.\(^11\)

Breniquet’s theory presented above should be taken seriously.\(^12\) In searching for a non-sacral function for the artifacts, she points out the annular form of the top and the worn inner surfaces of these rings (although no evidence of wear of this kind was observed on the find from Tell Abu Hafur). Breniquet suggests that these artifacts would have been used for the production of woolen or linen thread. The larger clay objects would have been set up on the ground, making work easier for the spinner sitting slightly above the object, while the smaller spectacle idols of stone with narrow rings could have acted as a specific form of loom weight, ensuring that the thread was not snarled when pulled.\(^13\) Balls of yarn for spinning would have been placed in separate baskets. Breniquet referred primarily to Egyptian spinning bowls with their loops inside the vessel for distributing linen or woolen yarn.\(^14\) Similar vessels were in use in the Aegean as well.\(^15\) Breniquet also reviewed scenes of everyday life in early Mesopotamian glyptic art in search of confirmation for her theory and turned to ethnographic parallels.\(^16\) Without going into a detailed critique of her idea, the author believes that she has not considered the differences in the use of fibrous plants between Egypt and Mesopotamia.\(^17\) Moreover, the Mesopotamian pottery tradition knows no vessels even remotely resembling spinning bowls, which were also in use in neighboring Palestine.\(^18\) Finally, as said already, no spectacle idols were ever recorded in evidently utilitarian contexts.

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\(^9\) Two out of the c. thirty idols from Tepe Gawra were found in a grave (Tobler 1950: Pl. LII/b), whereas at Qalij Agha the idols were found together with figurines, obsidian points, loom weights and seals (Soof 1969: Pl. XI/1–3).

\(^10\) The interpretation of spectacle idols was discussed extensively by M. Mallowan (Mallowan 1947: 202–205). The term ‘hut symbols’ was coined in later literature on the subject (Soof 1969: 3–42; Rothman 2002: 65–66; Delougaz, Kantor 1996: 113–114).


\(^12\) Breniquet 1996: 31–53.

\(^13\) For example, Chogha Mish excavations have yielded such stone spectacle idols, or ‘hut symbols’ as the discoverers would have it, a few centimeters high and with a very small perforation (from 1 to 2mm), capable of acting as an amulet and referred to here as such (Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 31/AA, BB, CC, GG).


\(^15\) Barber 1991: 70–77.


\(^17\) Climate in northern Mesopotamia did not favor the cultivation of flax.

\(^18\) Vessels from sites on the Diyala river, resembling in shape Egyptian spinning bowls, are not only much later in time, but also in some cases were not suitable for the purpose (Delougaz 1952: Pl. 168.C.011.201a,b).
Standing contrary to the ‘textile’ argument is also the relative scarcity of these finds. Had they indeed been used for the very mundane activity of spinning, then considering the role of textile production in Mesopotamia, also in the Uruk period, the preponderance of these artifacts should be more like that of spindle whorls. And why would they have gone out of use so suddenly, while remaining an important part of the spinning equipment elsewhere in the ancient world? We know of no revolutionary change that could explain why these objects functioned during the Uruk period and then after at once disappeared at all. Moreover, the ‘tool’ set of the Ancient Near East does not offer any kind of artifact of even remotely similar shape, possibly made of a different material, that could have served in this role.

The glyptic art representations cited so often by Breniquet also fail to answer questions considering the functional interpretation of spectacle idols. Many cylinder seals present apparently secular scenes that can be interpreted as showing women at work (identified as such on a basis of their hairstyle) (Fig. 3a). The woman are depicted sitting on mats or benches, but also kneeling, and close to them are artifacts resembling spectacle idols.19 Some of these scenes can be linked to loom weaving and spinning in general, especially when they are accompanied by symbols traditionally associated with weaving, such as a spider.20 However, the schematic character of these images has to be kept in mind and its nature replete with symbolism that is inscribed in the typical Mesopotamian glyptic art convention. Motifs recalling spectacle idols can be observed, however, on a group of seals discovered in contexts of no apparent connection with ‘textiles’. In these scenes, a hugely schematic idol accompanies representations of animals (Fig. 3b). This is to the author’s mind an assurance of the magical and apotropaic function of the idols.21

The ‘classic’ eye-idol plaques, which are known essentially only from Tell Brak and Tepe Gawra, can be and are considered as ex-voto or an early form of orant. Arguing in favor is the schematic rendering of single, double and even triple figural images with heads marked only as a pair of eyes. The spectacle idols are just as schematic, although perhaps more attractive, and they are extremely widespread. They could well have been symbols of the same deity that the eye idols were dedicated to, but their function was in my opinion

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19 Breniquet 1996: Fig. 6/B, D, E, G; Buchanan 1966: Pls 2.14a-d, 2.15. Female representations (so-called figures with a braid) on some cylindrical seals, depicted with objects resembling spectacle idols, may have actually held the idols in their hands. If so, then these scenes of work would be showing women at work on the making of these clay idols (Amiet 1961: Pl. 20,335). The same scenes, however, can equally well be interpreted as scenes of adoration or prayer (Buchanan 1981: Figs 144–145).

20 Amiet 1961: Pl. 21,338.

21 A similar scene can be seen on a seal from Tepe Gawra, depicting a dog (or, judging by the head’s outline, possibly a lioness) surrounded by objects with annular volutes similar to the spectacle idols – although their interpretation as handled vessels cannot be precluded (Rothman 2002: 66, Pl. 52/2023). A completely different context for images of spectacle idols (in no way related to weaving or work scenes of any kind) appears in the glyptic art from Chogha Mish, being at the same time one of just a few such explicit depictions of spectacle idols in Ancient Near Eastern glyptic (Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 155/C). A cylindrical seal impression from this site shows the idol with a crescent and kidney-shaped symbols above it and two vessels at its sides. In this context it is noteworthy that elements visible on another impression from Chogha Mish can also be interpreted as schematically rendered spectacle idols (Delougaz, Kantor 1996: Pl. 155/B).
entirely magical and apotropaic. These idols may have been some kind of guardian deity and the two groups may have been contemporaneous. The diversity of shape and material with regard to spectacle idols would reflect the cult range and the existence of local variants. Among the spectacle idols one can find stone products with decorated bases, referring perhaps to schematic representations of altars or other elements of sanctuaries. They can be assumed to represent an informal ‘domestic’ cult, a symbol of a guardian deity charged with protection of the household. The find contexts of spectacle idols are to a much greater extent domestic in nature, or funerary as was the case in Tepe Gawra in a few instances, thus arguing in favor of the proposed idea. Moreover, the disappearance of eye idols and spectacle idols at more or less the same time as the Urukean Eye Temple in Tell Brak was disused bolsters the proposed idea, as it is difficult to accept that the fading of any specific cult could have affected in any way utensils used in everyday circumstances.

Spectacle idols should in the author’s opinion be then associated with the *sacrum* rather than the *profanum* sphere. In this sense, Mallowan’s original interpretation was better motivated. The find from Tell Abu Hafur sits well in this perspective and may initiate further discussion of the function of these artifacts, which is not immediately evident. The issue of spectacle idols cannot ultimately be resolved without new finds from the field, but questions like the ones covered in this article should be reviewed closely from time to time, broadening our view of the ‘spiritual’ life of proto-historic communities in Upper Mesopotamia.

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