

# To See or Not to See. The Issue of Visuality in Ancient Near Eastern Art

## Images of Queens, High Priestesses, and Other Elite Women in the Third Millennium BC

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**Abstract** The presence of veil usually characterises and defines women in ancient Near Eastern societies: indeed, the use of veil has been usually interpreted as to define both gender and role of the represented characters. But can the veil be so exclusively targeted? The analysis of the presence or even the absence of the veil needs to be contextualised: this contribution offers a short consideration on the use of the veil by women in ancient Mesopotamian and Syrian societies, trying to single out moments and circumstances, showing how images of women with veil are not so clearly identifiable and detectable as pointing to only one category, an exclusive role and a special position.

**Keywords** Syria. Mesopotamia. Iconography. Women. Ebla. Mari. Assyria.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Evidence of the Use of the Veil. – 3 Matter of Methods. – 4 Ebla and Mari in the Third Millennium BC. – 5 The Evidence of the 1st Millennium BC. – 6 Conclusions.

### 1 Introduction

The question of visuality encompasses different aspects of the studies of visual culture, mostly the accessibility of images, specifically in ancient societies: central points of the research in the field of images, in fact, refer to the



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reconstruction of the place where pictures were originally displayed (if they were)<sup>1</sup> and, as a consequence, the understanding of the type of addressees who were supposed to see the pictures, interact with them and, eventually, to be affected by their presence in the space. However, in this contribution, the question of visuality is mostly centred on the analysis of images themselves and the characters they portray, focusing on the use and presence of veils and shawls that had the function of covering, i.e. hiding, parts of the bodies of the figures, thus creating a kind of separation and a diaphragm that worked as a signal (a social marker and indication of the role) and an element of respect. The veil is thus a screen that projects specific meanings and onto which several implications are projected, mostly by the analysts when they try to interpret the office and position of the figures who wear a veil on the head. In this respect, the visuality is here intended as the visibility of the veil and, as a consequence, the partial invisibility of the body of the portrayed figure.

## 2 The Evidence of the Use of the Veil

In an investigation on the use and function of the veil in the Ancient Near East, which news and information can be collected from art? Provocatively, one could simply state: Nothing. On the other hand, images show the use of veils in different contexts, mainly associated with female figures. This particular attitude and occurrence seem actually to corroborate that the use of the veil is mainly, if not exclusively, a female matter with the too-easy and sometimes simplistic comparison with modern and contemporary societies in the Near East. But is it exactly like that? This automatic mechanism of comparison, specifically when it is limited to religious milieu, might in fact minimise the specificities of the ancient Near Eastern contexts and, at the same time, create superfetation with the addition of superfluous considerations that pretend to be true and correct because they are based on the analogy and contiguity of places.

Indeed, male figures of kings, officials, priests, and deities are not represented with their head covered with a shawl, but they are either bare-headed or wear headgear; statues of kings, in particular, usually are bare-headed, while bas-reliefs and representations on cylinder seals normally show kings with headgear (tiara, head-

<sup>1</sup> This aspect, for example, can be questioned in the analysis of the ancient foundation deposits that, beyond cuneiform tablets and documents, also included clay or bronze figurines: because of their nature and function, those images were not supposed to be seen, at least physically: of course, those images were instead, metaphorically, seen by the gods (particularly in the case of foundation deposits of temples) and the future kings who, as the inscriptions often report, were in fact the addressees (Winter 2000).

bands etc.). Can we therefore suppose that statues of kings and deities were adorned with cloth tiaras that were purposely made and put on the heads? The perishable nature of the materials did not survive in archaeological records, but ancient texts document the clothing of ancient statues on the occasion of special events and ceremonies and because of this use and tradition, clothes of statues needed to be periodically renewed.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking of the use of veils in the Ancient Near East starting from and based on the iconographic evidence can therefore be problematic: on the one hand, one has to take into consideration that this might be an *argumentum e silentio*, that is images are few and mostly belonging to a specific category (i.e. the representation of women), but that this corpus of evidence might not exactly correspond to the reality of facts and events; on the other, I think that one of the most problematic issues of the study of the use of the veil in Ancient Near Eastern societies actually pertains to the methodology of our disciplines, our formulation of the question, and, finally, to the conclusion we can reach from so limited a number of images that are even inconsistent.

Concerning methodology, the occurrence of veils associated with female figures constrained the analysis to the field of gender studies: What was the role of women with veils? When and why did women wear the veil? The presence of the veil has been usually interpreted as a very special attribute that can finally help identifying the function and role of the women: however, as the images themselves show, the conclusion that has been reached so far is not necessarily erroneous, but I think it is at the same time far from being the only interpretation we can advance.

For that reason, I think that a different approach is needed: first of all, images must be seen in their original contexts, that is the images of women with shawls cannot be decontextualised and used in a general catalogue of occurrences as if one wishes to compile a comprehensive list of all women with veils. This last approach however is not, in principle, an incorrect operation, but one runs the risk of simply presenting the cases without a discussion, putting them at the same level and thus proposing comparisons that are misleading and, as already mentioned, inconsistent with the nature and type of the visual documents at our disposal.

Based on the use of the veil in other ancient societies and looking at modern and contemporary societies in the Near East, it has also been assumed that the presence of the veil mostly concerns religion and is strictly related to religious tradition and cults. Even in this case, is it exactly like that? Can we conclude that all women wearing the veil are somehow linked to religious affairs or have a position in cults and rites?

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the evidence at Ebla (Biga 2021) and in Assyria (Villard 2013).

### 3 Matter of Methods

The question of the veil is in fact more complex and I think that the visual evidence at our disposal is not sufficient to present clear or unique interpretations and conclusions: therefore, many questions are still open and need an answer that could never be found – at least not unanimously for all questions and evidence. Giving (sure and valid) answers is a difficult task that goes beyond the scope of this short reflection, but I would like to point out the problems of the interpretation of an apparently simple issue that in the end unveils many different aspects. In this respect, I am in fact convinced that the study of the use of the veil in Ancient Near Eastern societies needs to be contextualised on one hand, and decolonised on the other: contextualisation is the only process that can in fact explain the use of the veil starting from the place where images were displayed and used; decolonisation marks the turning point in the analysis because it frees the question of the veil from the categories of our modern and contemporary world that are not necessarily valid for ancient societies and that, on the contrary, create a fictitious relationship and an unbalanced comparison, projecting the present onto the past and, conversely, using the past to understand and judge the present.

The study of the question of veiling needs a multi- and cross-disciplinary system of reference, because the exclusive choice of either the gender or religious approach might lead to a partial comprehension of the phenomenon: choosing between the two is not necessarily a wrong approach, but it surely offers a limited vision of the complexity of the reality and we therefore run the risk of making ancient images say what we wish them to convey and express, instead of making images themselves speak on their own. This possible (always latent) risk causes mistaken interpretations and evaluations of the data that are categorised according to our canons and taxonomies: therefore, the study of the use of the veil must be founded on a solid cultural background that encompasses gender studies, ancient religion, anthropology, sociology, and political studies to get a more comprehensive and exhaustive picture that does not point to a selected and too limited detailed aspect: when dealing with images, this is precisely the method of making history of art where images are not just illustrations of history, but they contribute to writing history in all its aspects, thus presenting an inclusive overview that does not pretend to be absolutely true, but at least considers all possible implications in the domain of sociological, religious, gender, and political studies.

To exemplify what I intend, by showing what I called the inconsistency of images, the selection and presentation of some pictures, taken from different contexts, point to the similarities (as if one follows a decontextualised approach), on the one hand, and the differences (applying the contextualised approach that discloses the specificities of each case), on the other.

#### 4 Ebla and Mari in the Third Millennium BC

The two female figures from Ebla and Mari are very typical of what corresponds to the so-called type of ‘woman with veil’ [figs 1-2]: what do they represent? Surely, two seated women. What does the presence of the veil add to the interpretation? Commonly, because of the presence of the veil, the two characters are interpreted as priestesses, thus the veil connotes a religious milieu. Based on this commonly accepted interpretation, we could therefore conclude that all female figures with a veil on their head are priestesses, connoting the images not only within a religious sphere, but actually precisely pointing to a specific duty and role in the administration of the religion.

However, if one looks at representations of priestesses in the Mesopotamian art of the third millennium BC, it is immediately clear that the figures are bare-headed with their hair loose: on the contrary, when hair is tied up, these figures can be interpreted as members of the ruling class, queens or princesses, and they are represented standing (statues in the round) or seated (in cylinder seals in scenes with other women or in the common scenes of banquet).<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, the most common Mesopotamian priestess, Enkheduanna, Sargon’s daughter, is represented bare-headed with her hair loose.<sup>4</sup>

We are therefore facing two opposite situations and interpretations: the two veiled figures from Ebla and Mari have been interpreted as priestesses, while priestesses in a Mesopotamian context are usually identified as bare-headed figures with loose hair. Therefore, it seems that the veil has no typical religious connotation or, at least not always: it depends on the context in which the images were used and displayed and, probably, the situation they wanted to convey and signify. In particular, this difference actually reflects a geographical distinction with two realities, Syria and Mesopotamia, in comparison: in this respect, it seems that Mari, usually associated with and closer to the Mesopotamian cultural tradition, is here referring to a more properly Syrian practice and again it is quite interesting that this happens in the context of the role and representation of women in the art of the third millennium BC.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, exactly as the reasoning at the beginning about statues in the round, can we in fact exclude that statues of priestesses with hair loose were covered with cloth veils once they were placed, for example, within the

<sup>3</sup> For a categorisation and distinction of the roles, based upon the iconographic evidence of ancient Mesopotamia in the third and second millennium BC see the analysis by Suter 2007; 2016; 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Winter 1987; Suter 2017, 345, 355.

<sup>5</sup> On the political role of women in Syria, see Nadali 2014. On the cultural iconographic tradition of Mari, see Pinnock 2014. See also Suter 2018 on the role and participation of women in social events, such as feasting.



Figure 1 Statuette of seated priestess from Ebla. © Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria



Figure 2 Statue of seated priestess from Mari (after Parrot 1967, pl. L)



**Figure 3**  
Votive plaque from Ebla. © Missione  
Archeologica Italiana in Siria

temple and facing the statue of the deity, or on the occasion of special ceremonies and rites?

Conversely, some images do show women with a veil and these can be interpreted as queens or members of the ruling class: are those women just wearing the veil because of a question of fashion or because they at the same time fulfil a religious duty, maybe in front of the deity or on the occasion of a religious festival or ceremony? A sculpted plaque shows a female seated figure with a veil in front of a deity: thanks to the inscription, she might be identified as Nidupae's wife, whose name appears next to her. According to Claudia Suter,<sup>6</sup> she might alternatively be the daughter of Šaratigubisin, in her role as a high priestess. In this case, a member of the ruling class – exactly as it happened with Enkheduanna, Sargon's daughter – also performs the role of high priestess that is specifically singled out by the use of the veil while seated in front of the deity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Suter 2017, 347-8, fig. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Even if few, the pictures of Enkheduanna show that, even when performing cultic actions and offerings, the high priestess of Nanna at Ur is always bare-headed, and she



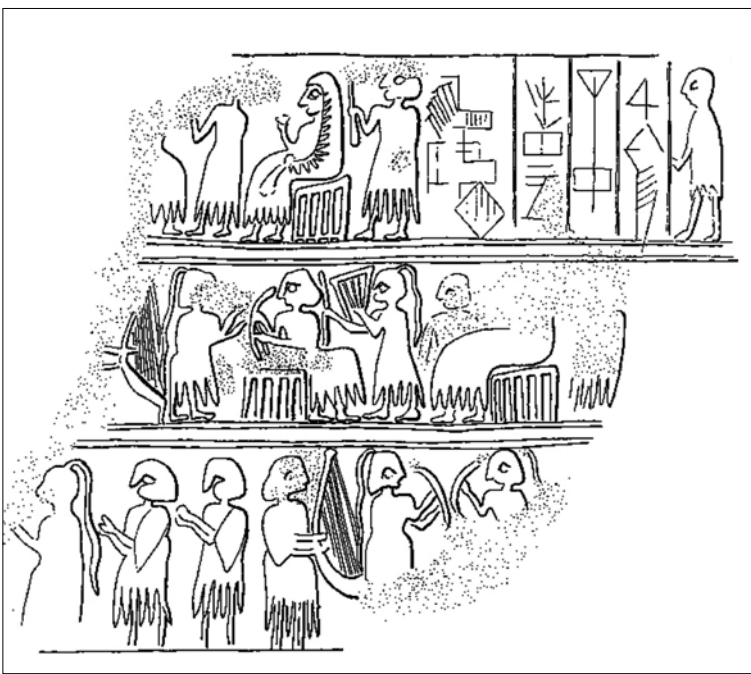


Figure 4 Seal impression from Mari (after Beyer 2007, fig. 4c)

Other pictures enter into the same category of women with a veil, who, starting from the above-mentioned sculpted plaque, might be interpreted as either queens or members of the ruling class in the duty of priestess or, more probably, while attending a religious ceremony. A plaque from the Royal Palace G of Ebla depicts a seated female figure [fig. 3],<sup>8</sup> her head covered with a shawl: found in the palace, the figure can more probably be identified as the queen of Ebla while acting - apparently banqueting because she holds a cup in her hand - on a special occasion, maybe a festival or a ritual, such as the Ritual of Kingship that was regularly performed by the royal couple within the city in the temple of Kura, and outside the city in the mausoleum in the city of Nenaš, which belonged to the ancient kingdom of Ebla in the third millennium BC.<sup>9</sup> A very similar image is preserved

only wears a band on the forehead.

<sup>8</sup> See Romano 2015.

<sup>9</sup> In this respect, it is interesting to point out that, during the ceremony of the ritual, the queen has to dress up and, more specifically, to cover her head with a veil (Romano 2015, 36-7; Pinnock 2016, 103-4; for the text of the ritual see Fronzaroli 1993).



**Figure 5** Seated statuette of the queen Dusigu from Ebla. © Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria



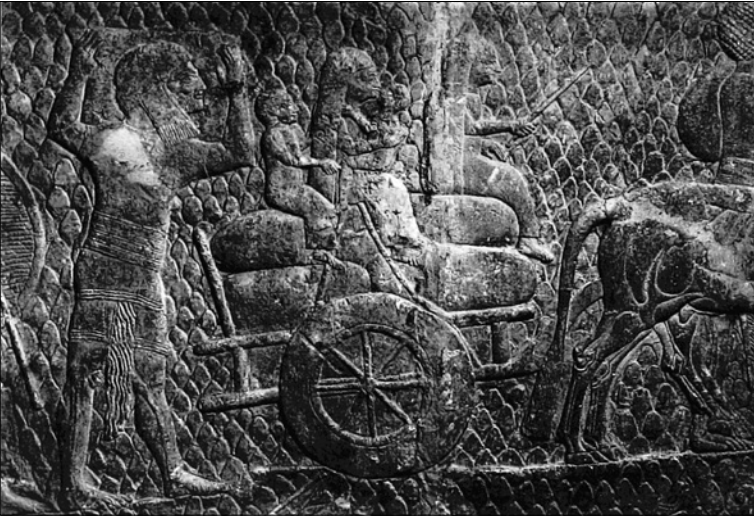
**Figure 6** Standing statuette of the princess Tabur-Damu from Ebla.  
© Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria



**Figure 7** Statue of seated female woman with polos from Mari (after Parrot 1956: pl. XXXVII)



**Figure 8** Arab woman, prisoner of the Assyrians (after Barnett, Falkner 1962, pl. XXVI)



**Figure 9** Detail of slabs 9 and 10, room XXXVI of the South-West Palace of Sennacherib (after Barnett, Bleibtreu, Turner 1998, pl. 333)



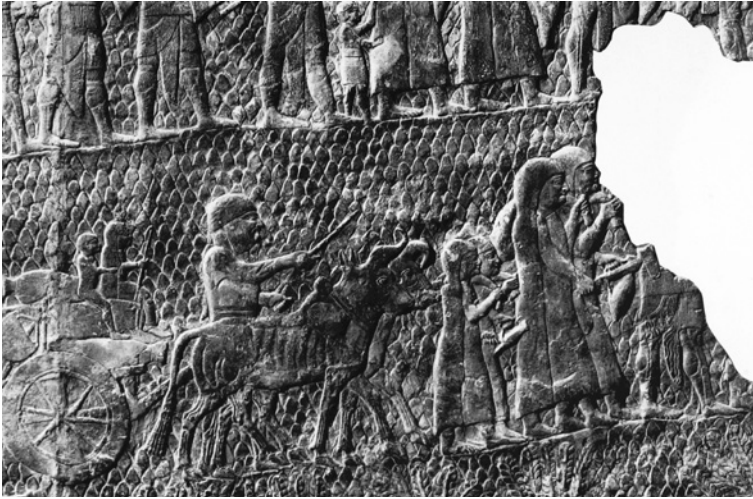


Figure 10 Detail of slab 9, room F of the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (after Barnett 1976, pl. XIX)

on a door sealing from Mari [fig. 4], depicting a seated veiled woman while banqueting – she also holds a cup in her right hand. The cuneiform cartouche clarifies that the seal belonged to the wife of the EN (king) of Mari. Therefore, if one thinks of the two female statue figures from Ebla and Mari, one could thus suggest that they are two queens or members of the ruling class wearing the veil because they are represented and connoted here as attending to or officiating at a religious moment. In fact, the woman of Mari also wears a *polos* that is usually associated with an official specific role such as a ritual activity and involvement of the female royal members.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the visual documents from Ebla, when the queens are not directly involved in ritual activity, they neither wear a headgear nor do they cover their head with a veil [figs 5-6].<sup>11</sup> At Mari, again, a seated female figure wears the *polos*, but not the veil [fig. 7]: these examples show that the combination is multiple and *polos* and veil are not always associated, but this probably happens on the occasion of special contexts, when the female character is directly involved in official religious and cultic activities.

<sup>10</sup> Pinnock 2014, 677-8.

<sup>11</sup> See the representation of the court ladies, the queen Dusigu, and the princess Tabur-Damu, in the so-called standard of the queen, as interpreted and reconstructed by Matthiae 2009.



**Figure 11** Detail of slabs 8 and 9, room XXXVI of the South-West Palace of Sennacherib (after Barnett, Bleibtreu, Turner 1998, pl. 352)

## 5 The Evidence of the 1st Millennium BC

In a completely different context, women with their head covered with a shawl occur in the Assyrian palace bas-reliefs of Tiglath-Pileser III, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal [figs 8-10].<sup>12</sup> Differently from the examples of the third millennium BC so far analysed, the Assyrian wall palace reliefs represent the aftermath, that is processions of prisoners - among them women - coming out from the cities conquered and sacked by the Assyrian army. With the sole exception of the bas-relief of Tiglath-Pileser III (depicting an Arab queen), the women in the bas-reliefs of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal could in fact be labelled as 'normal' women, that is they are not members of royal families and the ruling class: in this context, the veil does not point to type and function, but it simply denotes a female individual wearing a typical dress, independently of the age and the social position [fig. 11]. In the Assyrian bas-reliefs the veil seems to (exclusively?) operate as a gender marker: Does it also have a geographical function? The women with the veil in Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib bas-reliefs have a Western origin, Arabia and Southern Levant; the scene from Ashurbanipal palace belongs to the series of wall panels dedicated to the depiction of the Elamite wars in the East. However, the Arab women in Ashurbanipal bas-reliefs depicting the Arab

<sup>12</sup> In general, on the illustration of Arabs in the Assyrian visual evidence, see Reade 1998.



Figure 12 Detail of slab 9, room L of the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (after Barnett 1976, pl. XXXIII)

campaign in Room L of the North Palace at Nineveh are represented bare-headed [fig. 12].<sup>13</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

Images of women with veils are not largely documented: with such little evidence at our disposal, it is difficult and even misleading to formulate apodictic conclusions. As reminded at the beginning, the question is still open and I think that open interpretations, rather than fixed and definitive statements, can be advanced only from a contextual approach because images, even within the same culture and period – such as the examples from Ebla and Mari show, are inconsistent and they do not allow for a categorisation by types. The use of images explains the reason for the presence or absence of the veil and even the religious sphere and cultic activity is not a good and perfect common denominator.

Needless to say, the question is still open and research should take into account the poor evidence from visual documents (numbers of examples) on the one hand, and silent data, such as the use of fabric shawls that are no longer visible, on the other. To overcome these evident limits, we need to establish the research upon methods that favour a cross-disciplinary investigation which combines different aspects without making one prevail over another: in particular trying to avoid the preferential interpretative choice of what seems easier or feasible just because it is closer to our feelings, perception, and understanding of the ancient Near Eastern societies as an early mir-

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Arab women in the representations from Room L in the North Palace of Ashurbanipal receive a very violent special treatment that is in fact unusual in the Assyrian visual documentation and this probably depends on the role women had in Arab society (Nadali 2004, 73; Dubovský 2009). One could thus conclude that the veil, in Assyrian documentation, mostly works as a gender marker, without any implication on the role and social characterisation of the female subject.



ror that reflects and recalls social aspects of the modern and contemporary Near Eastern world.

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