INTRODUCTION

This book investigates the role of anthropomorphic figurines as agents of cross-cultural identity production and social negotiation in Hellenistic Babylonia. Babylonia, in the southern region of the modern-day country of Iraq (see Map), was conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE. This event began the so-called Hellenistic period, a time marked by widespread migrations of Macedonian and Greek peoples (often referred to together as “Greeks”) into the already ancient and culturally diverse cities of the Ancient Near Eastern region. Babylonians, other Mesopotamians, Persians, West Semitic peoples, and, eventually, Parthians also participated in these communities. Both material culture and textual records from Hellenistic Babylonia reveal a complex society defined and pervaded by cross-cultural interaction. The end date of the Hellenistic period is less fixed. The earliest date could be given as the Parthian conquest of the Seleucid kingdom in 141 BCE; yet most of the material culture, particularly the figurines, offers little evidence of a cultural or social dividing line at this date. Rather, the figurine tradition, including figurine forms and motifs (even those of Greek origin), forms an unbroken continuum well into the Parthian period. For this reason, most scholars study the Babylonian figurines of the Seleucid and Parthian periods together as one corpus, and I follow this choice. Thus, I will use the term “Hellenistic” throughout this volume to include both the Seleucid (c. 330–141 BCE) and Parthian periods (c. 141 BCE–224 CE).
Map: Sites mentioned in the text, with particular focus on Babylonia. Cartographer: Svetlana Matskevich.

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Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper
Excerpt

More Information
Among the vast evidence for cross-cultural interaction in Hellenistic Babylonia, the figurines are particularly noteworthy. Miniature objects – primarily anthropomorphic figurines, as well as small-scale replicas of animals, buildings, and other “full-size” objects (such as ceramic vessels) – are among the most common forms of visual culture surviving in the archaeological record of Hellenistic Babylonia. Four major centers of figurine production and use are known archaeologically from Hellenistic Babylonia: Babylon, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, Uruk, and Nippur, with significantly smaller corpora known from Borsippa, Kish, and Sippar. Each of these cities had its own distinctive social environment and material culture during this era, and substantial local variation in its use of figurine motifs, styles, and forms.

When comparing the major Hellenistic Babylonian sites strictly based on the number of figurines found, it appears that the traditions at Babylon and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris were the most robust. However, comparing the size of the assemblages is not entirely valid. The overall corpus of Hellenistic Babylonian figurines is enormous in size, with nearly 11,000 figurines excavated at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris alone. The precise number of figurines surviving in museum collections or catalogue publications can vary greatly with the duration of the excavation project at the site, the excavators’ interest in figurines (or in the later periods of ancient Mesopotamian history generally), or other modern circumstances of discovery, preservation, and curation. These modern conditions impact the degree to which quantitative data about the Hellenistic Babylonian figurine corpus can be assembled or trusted; thus, throughout this volume, I am fairly tentative in giving concrete numbers of figurines that were made in a particular motif, style, and so forth. From those figurines that are recorded, we can nevertheless make some distinctions between the major Hellenistic Babylonian cities.

Babylon, the historic seat of power in the region and the first capital city of the Seleucid kingdom, was home to both an established local community as well as an influx of Greek immigrants. Traditional structures were repaired or rebuilt, sometimes with slight modifications, but in other cases preserving the original architecture and functions of buildings such as the major Babylonian temples. Many Greek institutions were not introduced overnight, but rather built gradually. For instance, the earliest textual evidence for a gymnasion at Babylon dates to 109 BCE, decades after the Parthian conquest, and physical evidence for a building that might have served as a gymnasion is even later in date. The building of Greek structures and the practice of Greek traditions could be blended with local Babylonian traditions, and be changed over time, as is seen in the connection between the Greek theater and local temple cult at Babylon, where the activities and performances that took place in those architectural spaces were often culturally hybrid.
Seleucia-on-the-Tigris replaced Babylon as the Seleucid capital at its founding in 312 BCE, and subsequently became home to a substantial immigrant population from the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. Initially presumed to have been built on a Greek plan, further excavation revealed the incorporation of Assyrian and Babylonian principles of city design. Many expected institutions of a major Greco-Macedonian metropolis have yet to be discovered archaeologically, and may never have existed or may have been built later or in a different form than anticipated by archaeologists. For instance, the evidence for the gymnasion at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris is comprised of a stamp of unbaked clay referencing the civic office of gymnasiarch, which dates to 72/1 BCE – and, thus, is later than the already late evidence for the Babylon gymnasion. Instead of robust evidence for the mainstay institutions of Greek civic life, a level of ambiguity and cultural fluidity can be found. For instance, when Tell 'Umar, a mound now believed to be the Greek theater, was first excavated, its physical mass and structure was interpreted as a Seleucid-era ziggurat – demonstrating an ambiguity between the architecture and purposes of Babylonian and Greek performance and ritual spaces, which might have been cultivated and intentional on the part of the Seleucid builders and their desires to appeal to a diverse populace.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the new Greek foundation of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris seems to have hosted the greatest variety of figurine motifs, including many connected with the Greek world (such as the athletes discussed in Chapter 4) that are not found in other cities. Figurines from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris also demonstrate the most consistent use of the double-mold technique, a technology of Greek origin. Babylon follows Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in terms of figurine variety and use of the double mold; again, a perhaps not unsurprising situation given the attention paid to Babylon early in the Hellenistic period, including by Alexander the Great (who died there), and the Greek buildings constructed in the city. However, the figurine corpora of both Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and Babylon also demonstrate ample use of Babylonian figurine techniques, such as the single mold, and Babylonian motifs. Indeed, many of the figurines from both sites were insistently hybrid, showing blendings between figurine forms, motifs, styles, and techniques to create unique variants that can be assigned to no singular cultural origin; see, for instance, the female figurines discussed in Chapter 2. Babylon’s figurine corpus also differs from that of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris – not only in its less extensive use of uncommon Greek motifs, but also for its increased use of other motifs, including those that were culturally hybrid, such as the female figurines with finished-off arms discussed in Chapter 2.
Uruk was also the site of substantial occupation as well as massive, predominantly Babylonian-focused, building programs in the Hellenistic period. Four Hellenistic period temple complexes built for the practice of Babylonian religious activity (the Bit Resh, Irigal, E-anna, and Bit Akitu) have been found, as well as two ziggurats (for the god Anu at the Bit Resh and for the goddess Ishtar at the E-anna). While some of these structures have pre-Hellenistic precursors, some were new and all of them experienced significant building activity during the Hellenistic period. The figurine corpus at Uruk reveals similar interests in Babylonian motifs and beliefs operating at miniature scale. However, a substantial number of Greek motifs were also present in the Uruk figurines—an appearance which is not, in fact, at odds with most of the other surviving evidence about the city. The new Babylonian temples were built with the support and financial assistance of the Seleucid kings, and numerous textual records also attest the existence of a palace, although whether this was a royal palace or for use by the local governors is unknown. Two burial mounds of elite local rulers, possibly two of Uruk's powerful governors, were discovered in the Frehat En-Nufegi Tumuli outside of Uruk; these tumuli were made of the same mudbrick as the Bit Resh but contained culturally diverse grave goods, including two gold wreaths, furniture legs, amphora, and iron strigils.

Uruk is additionally known for its substantial archive of cuneiform tablets recording economic transactions. From these documents are attested the continued survival of Babylonian customs of monetary exchange, inheritance, ownership, as well as the already-ancient and largely outmoded form of documentation itself (writing in Akkadian cuneiform on clay tablets). However, this archive also preserves evidence of Greek-named individuals marrying into elite Babylonian families, and the subsequent births of multicultural descendants whose names reflected their complex heritage. Stamp seals and signet rings, most often preserved as impressions on those tablets, feature a wide variety of Greek, Babylonian, and hybrid forms and motifs; this multiculturalism is also seen in the seals impressed on the ring bullae used to encircle parchment or papyrus documents at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. Ceramic vessels known from Uruk, as well as Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and Babylon, indicate the blending of Greek and Babylonian foodways and the creation of hybrid cuisines.

Unlike the other three major figurine-producing cities, Nippur hosted few building projects, and indeed had relatively little occupation, during the Seleucid period. It rose to prominence again during the Parthian period. Occupation during that period is attested primarily through temple architecture, the construction of a large military fortress, as well as immense numbers of graves, which were dug down into the earlier stratigraphic levels of the site. These Parthian funerary deposits usually included coffins, some of which could
be quite elaborate and feature figural decoration. However, relatively few grave goods were deposited and, in general, less is known about the material culture of Hellenistic Nippur than the other three sites. Noteworthy for the purposes of this volume, however, is how the surviving figurines from Nippur often attest to the continued popularity and engagement with Hellenistic figurine motifs, forms, and ideas well into the mid- to late-Parthian period. Overall, this evidence from the four major figurine-producing centers of Hellenistic Babylonia demonstrates the individualized local character and trajectory of each community, as well as a general trend of shifting, complex engagement between Babylonian (and, generally, Near Eastern) cultural norms and long-established practices with the newly introduced ideas arriving from the wider Hellenistic world.

Indeed, despite their local flavor, the figurine traditions in all of these cities can be characterized by their use of both Babylonian (or, more broadly, Mesopotamian) and Hellenistic koine (largely inspired by Greek tradition) figurine forms, motifs, styles, and technologies of production. The communities of Hellenistic Babylonia expressed their connection to the rest of the Hellenistic world in part through their adoption and use of Hellenistic koine figurine motifs and styles. True imports of figurines were exceptionally rare; the vast majority of the figurines found in Hellenistic Babylonia were made in the region and, in the case of terracotta figurines, from local clays. Molds used in the manufacture of terracotta figurines might have traveled more widely and may explain how specific figurine motifs were shared over long distances.

Prior to the Hellenistic period, Babylonian figurines had generally been made in the single mold, a technique in which moist clay was pressed into a one-sided mold (usually made of baked clay or plaster), resulting in a solid figurine that was modeled only on the front side. This technique, combined with Mesopotamian artistic conventions, produced figurines characterized by their frontality and direct engagement with the viewer. The Greek invention of the double mold, a technique which produced two-sided hollow figurines that were modeled in the round, was adopted in Babylonia in the Hellenistic period, expanding the possibilities for figurine production.

In addition to these different techniques of manufacture, Babylonian and Hellenistic ideas about figurines also offered diverse – and not always compatible – options for figurine motifs. When the motifs and styles of the Hellenistic koine arrived in Babylonia, their acceptance and adoption was not assured. As was also the case elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, the individual communities of Hellenistic Babylonia did not adopt the koine figurine repertoire wholesale, but selectively engaged with those forms and motifs that they found appealing – and, in so doing, often adapted them to further reflect local ideas and preferences. Negotiation also centered around the identities of depicted figures (including not just different gods but also different ideas for
what kinds of mortal bodies should be shown), the acceptability of different bodily poses, clothing styles and the appropriateness of nudity, and so forth. These varying possibilities, and how the people of Hellenistic Babylonia negotiated this plethora of options in the creation and use of their figurines, will be explored throughout this book.

What unites the figurine corpora of Hellenistic Babylonia is that the rich cultural heritage of Babylonia and the Hellenistic world was utilized as a vast resource, from which could be drawn the raw material and inspiration for new forms and ideas. With extremely rare exceptions, neither the Hellenistic nor Babylonian figurine traditions were kept as culturally isolated practices, but rather were blended together in a variety of ways. Hybrid forms, motifs, and styles are common throughout the Hellenistic Babylonian figurine corpus; indicating, as I have argued previously, sustained information exchange between craftspeople, as well as consumer demand for multicultural imagery.  

The communities of Hellenistic Babylonia thus became home to an immense quantity and variety of miniature objects – indeed, extreme diversity of figurine form, motif, and technique is especially characteristic of Hellenistic Babylonia, a fact that other scholars have also remarked upon. This nearly unparalleled depth and variation of the Hellenistic Babylonian figurines make this corpus a particularly productive subject through which to study the substantial social changes of the Hellenistic period.

This book is a material culture study, with strong roots in both anthropology (particularly theories of miniaturization and human engagement, as well as the reconstruction of embodied subjectivities) and art history (with focus on iconography, formal properties, and visual engagement). Evidence of archaeological context, beyond the broad contextual information of city/site of discovery, is not taken heavily into account. The reason for this is, simply, that contextual information for these figurines is often problematic. Many were unearthed in the early twentieth century, when archaeological context was not well documented. Small finds from the late periods of Mesopotamian history, a category that includes Hellenistic-era figurines, were not particularly valued or well recorded. Due to their presence in some of the last levels of occupation prior to site abandonment, many were surface finds. Even when meticulous archaeological investigation took place, as in the recent Italian excavations at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, difficulties with determining context or precise chronology were still common. Primary among those difficulties is that most figurines seem not to have been considered particularly valuable or sacred by their ancient users, and so could be disposed of in domestic refuse or reused (often as temper material inside of mudbricks; as an example, see Figure 4.18) – thus the final deposition context of a figurine is often not where it was originally used as a figural object. Other scholars have made valiant attempts to grapple with these archaeological issues; for instance, Roberta Menegazzi’s 2014 catalogue
of the Seleucia-on-the-Tigris figurines deftly explores these complexities and offers many valuable interpretations. Rather than repeat her work, or attempt to reconstruct archaeological context at other cities where the evidence is partial or lacking, I have taken a different approach in this volume. Archaeological context, and the information on figurine “function” (e.g., grave offering, votive, and toy) which that context is presumed to provide, undoubtedly has the potential to offer much in the way of understanding ancient figurines. But, I contend, the objects themselves can also be used directly as informants on their social worlds. The visual, formal, and tactile properties of figurines are not simply facts to be catalogued, but are, in themselves, a kind of evidence for how the figurines operated on and within the communities that used them. I access and interpret that evidence through the lens of “miniaturization theory,” an object-centered, affect-based approach particularly utilized in the field of anthropology.

Overlying a study of miniaturization and object affect onto an already stated aim of exploring cultural interaction and hybridity might seem, at first glance, like an excess of analytical implements, an overflowing toolbox. And, indeed, these two intersecting frameworks of the book do both shape the narrative. But rather than creating a tension by pulling in separate directions, I find it to be a productive union. Understanding hybridity and issues of cross-cultural interaction – particularly how Hellenistic Babylonian people interacted with one another and shaped their society – is the goal of the volume. Miniaturization theory is the tool used to get at hybridity, to reveal those cross-cultural interactions in ways more complex than iconographic study alone can provide.

These dual lenses work particularly well in concert because the issues with which they are concerned – cross-cultural interaction and the use of tiny things – were intrinsically linked. Intensive use of miniature objects, especially when accompanied by significant variety and diversity within a particular figurine corpus, has been correlated with widespread social change and the identity negotiations that would result. Chris Gosden attributes the diversity of small-scale objects in Roman Britain (first century BCE through first century CE, in particular) with a fluidity and renegotiation of social relationships resulting from cultural interaction. Similarly, Julia Assante correlated the rapid expansion of Old Babylonian terracotta plaque types with the social changes, such as community strife and the distancing of people from access to their gods, that resulted from the fall of the Ur III state and the migrations of the Amorites, beginning c. 2000 BCE. In contrast, times when social identities were coalescing around rigid ideals, usually in order to form stable homogeneous communities in opposition to external forces, are marked by a similar homogeneity in the miniature objects. Ian Wilson argues that Judean Pillar Figurines of the eighth to seventh centuries BCE helped solidify a singular Judean identity in opposition to the impending threat of the Neo-Assyrians.
Similar pressures toward unified group identity in the Neo-Babylonian heartland (c. sixth century BCE) may also have been expressed (and reinforced) through the standardization of the terracotta figurine tradition. I have previously argued, and will continue to argue in this volume, that the remarkable diversity of figurines in Hellenistic Babylonia indicates a society in flux, where identities were being renegotiated under the pressure of shifting community norms. Such miniatures functioned both as “models of and models for” reality, “by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.”

My desire to utilize miniaturization theory as a methodology to better access and understand cross-cultural hybridity also emerges, at least in part, from my frustration with the label of “hybridity” itself. Certainly it is preferable to scholarship’s now-outdated concept of “Hellenization,” the belief that Greek traditions spread over the world in the wake of Alexander’s conquests, and penetrated local customs to a greater or lesser degree depending on the force of the conquerors, the receptiveness (or power) of the conquered, and the centrality (versus peripherality) of the locale to Greco-Macedonian imperial ambitions. In the past few decades, many scholars have endeavored to dismantle such simplistic models of human interaction, using post-colonial theory as one of their primary tools. “Hybrid” and “hybridity” are now the terminologies most en vogue in discussions of cultural encounter in the Hellenistic world, and such terms are used throughout this volume. However, many valid critiques of the notion of hybridity have also been raised: it implies uniformity, it is too reductive, it reinforces the perceived naturalness of typological categories; it reifies cultural groups into isolated and bounded entities that are imagined to interact in a simplistic, recipe-like fashion, as if Greeks and Babylonians (or their figurines) were added to a bowl and stirred. Perhaps most problematic is that “hybridity” is regularly applied as a descriptive label that too often ends the discussion rather than beginning it.

I am not so bold, or so naïve, as to claim that I have completely avoided all of these traps in this book. Yet, although I use the term “hybrid” throughout the volume, I also endeavor to point out the contingent and negotiated nature of hybridity as it emerged in the figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia. There is more that can be said than simply labeling a figurine, or an entire figurine corpus, as “hybrid” and then moving on. How that hybridity was created can also be probed, investigating what particular elements of previous cultural traditions were drawn upon and how they were selectively combined in creating an individual figurine, or a group of figurines engaged with one motif, or a group of figurines from a particular community. I believe that those individual choices about how to create hybridity, and what that hybridity looked like, have the potential to be deeply revealing of the social negotiations and identity constructions that underlay the ancient users’ desire to own and use these
objects. In other words, I wish to probe beyond the “what” and the “how” to get to the “why.”

To that end, I also consider what these figurines don’t look like – what elements of previous cultural traditions were abandoned or minimized – as a reflection of individual agency and community motivations. Looks alone can also be deceiving: something that might appear to belong to one culture could also have expressed core values or ideals of another. For instance, although the Greek double mold was widely used in Hellenistic Babylonia, it frequently was not deployed to take advantage of the plastic, three-dimensional possibilities of double molding thus the resulting double-molded figurines often reflected Babylonian conceptions of the body rather than Hellenistic ones. All of these things are hybrid.

On the other hand, I find “hybridity” less useful in describing whole cities and communities, and their object traditions, when it is applied in terms that look for greater or lesser numbers of, or intensities of, “the hybrid.” “Hybridity” was not a blanket that spread, more or less, over the Hellenistic world, covering cities like Babylon more thickly than it covered Uruk. Rather, “hybridity,” for me, describes the willingness of the members of these communities to engage in a process of cross-cultural negotiation and the material expressions of that process, however complex and varied. Whether or not those objects look obviously hybrid to us at first glance – i.e. clearly show visual evidence of the blending of two or more cultural traditions of style, motif, and form – should not be the sole, or even the primary, criteria for determining how the objects participated in or reflected cultural interaction. How hybridity manifested in physical form as a figurine depended on a great many variables, from the concerns of that specific community to the particular motif of that individual figurine.

Discussion of how this process worked in the Hellenistic Babylonian figurines will unfold over the following five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the complexities of miniaturization theory and my intervention within that anthropological and art historical discourse. Fundamental to this intervention is the notion that, although Hellenistic Babylonian figurines were objects of simultaneous visual and tactile consumption, they nevertheless did not allow their users to completely see or touch. User desire for sensory engagements necessitated spatial proximity with the object; yet, rather than invite the user completely into a private miniature world, figurines made continual reference to the real-scale world through tangible marks of manufacture, the placement of clothing and pose to restrict human touch to socially acceptable limits, and other similar strategies. I dub this paradox of access an “intimacy illusion” and argue that this previously unrecognized concept is what allowed figurines to function so effectively. The “intimacy” enabled people to trust and engage with