

Composite Artefacts in the Ancient Near East

Exhibiting an imaginative materiality,
showing a genealogical nature

edited by

Silvana Di Paolo



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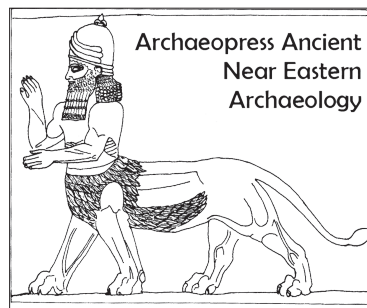
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Introduction.

New Lines of Enquiry for Composite Artefacts?

Silvana Di Paolo

Enrico Prampolini was the principal theoretician of futurist polymateric art. He was experimental in terms of technique and materials, testing a number of different methods and using a combination of materials. In 1915, when establishing the theoretical foundations of what he called 'plastic complexes' he had said that: *'l'arte polimaterica non è una tecnica ma - come la pittura e la scultura - un mezzo di espressione artistica rudimentale, elementare, il cui potere evocativo è affidato all'orchestrazione plastica della materia...Nel polimaterico, infatti, il valore evocativo si manifesta inversamente alla reazione visiva esterna, poiché opera nelle ragioni irrazionali dello spirito. Introspezioni che - nella sfera delle arti plastiche - creano dei sistemi, delle costanti di reazioni interne, le quali producono a loro volta - successivamente e simultaneamente - i fenomeni della meraviglia, della sorpresa, del miracolismo spettacolare. Da questa magia della materia nelle sue apparizioni bioplastiche, nasce il nuovo incantesimo dell'arte polimaterica, del polimaterico'.*

If the macroscopic result of such a definition for the futurist polymateric art is that each component has a role within larger assemblages in physically building the artwork by developing his expressive possibilities and sensuous qualities (three-dimensional, tactile or volumetric effects), then different points of view highlighted how the true aim of this art was not the representation of the exterior and sensory reality of the world, but the creation of 'spiritualising machines'. This term refers to the possibility of building a heterogeneous universe and to inject reality into a work of art, so as to achieve an absolute realism intended as simultaneity of states of consciousness. Thus, the polymateric compositions' power is the power to 'spiritualise' matter by the subject observing it. The matter always stays inert, dead, inexpressive, if it is not led to spiritualise itself. Such artistic experiences, promoted by the futurist's movement exalting psychic energy, permit us to observe reality from a hyperreal point of view, as well as to recreate reality through a new, spiritual mode of artistic creation.

The implications of these approaches to evaluating the creation of 'polymateric plastic' at the beginning of the 20th century and his meaning, from this very different perspective well summarise the opposite points of view giving impetus to the discussion on ancient polymateric artefacts and their qualities in antiquity,

and in particular with reference to the ancient Near East. On the one hand are the objective and natural attributes of materials, possibly exalted from their transformation: a form of fascination immanent in all kind of technical activity which promotes the transition from the ordinary into a different realm, imbuing the object with new meaning. On the other hand is the idea that properties of materials are not fixed attributes of 'matters', but are processual as well as relational: the qualities of artefacts are subjective and included in the worldview of artisans making them, as well as in the mind of who observes or appreciate them.

Taking into account these premises and theoretical tenets, the complex relationship between environment, materials, society and materiality, with particular reference to the composite artefacts in the ancient Near East, is the topic of the eight papers gathered together in this volume. They were first presented as part of an International Workshop organised by myself and held in Vienna at the Austrian Academy of Sciences during the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, 26th April 2016. This inquiry is, obviously, based on whole or incomplete artefacts found during excavations, although they represent just a small percentage of the entire realm of archaeological material, and of myriad combinations possible therein. Some categories of artefacts certain to have been used in antiquity, have completely disappeared or misunderstood in the excavation reports: for instance, metal and/or stone components applied to textiles, or combinations of leather and wood (both completely disintegrated and lost) etc. It is therefore impossible, by physical material remains alone, to accurately know all of the possible combinations of past material culture. Some of these categories of lost artefacts are mentioned or described in cuneiform texts. At Mari, luxurious textiles used to make royal garments were probably richly decorated with pieces of blue stone or metal discs, although these are now archaeologically invisible. This also demonstrates the difficulty in connecting textual evidence and material remains: not only is taphonomic loss an issue, but the variation in shapes and combinations of composite artefacts also make the correlation more complex.

Starting with material remains, we can investigate some aspects correlated to specific characteristics

of the artefacts. Firstly, the method to describe, organise or standardise them is strictly linked to the adopted terminology. In modern language, as well as in contributions gathered in this volume different terms are used to indicate these types of objects (composite, multi-component, polymateric etc.) but not all are unambiguous. This was one of the first issues that I faced when organising this workshop.

The adjective 'composite', for instance, introduces a first point for discussion. The Collins Dictionary defines 'composite' as 'composed of separate parts', while the Oxford Dictionary listed two different definitions: 1) 'made up of several parts or elements'; and 2) (of a constructional material) made up of recognisable constituents'. Certain materials, like bronze or glass, are composite: constituent elements with different physical and chemical properties which, when combined, produce a new material, with characteristics different from the individual components that remain separate and distinct within the finished structure. In such cases, the new composite material is preferred for many reasons: because it is stronger, or more sophisticated and, sometimes, less expensive when compared to traditional materials. Ceramics, for instance, may be considered the first manufactured composite material. The production process involves several stages, changing the appearance and properties of the raw materials: natural clay is, in fact, a mixture of clay minerals and 'accessory' minerals, derived from sediments or rocks, adding other substances. Otherwise, our field of study concerns the composite objects produced or shaped by human craft, the result of a combination of elements of distinct material and colour, but which preserves, their physical and chemical properties. They are a sum of their parts or fragments: each element possesses a specific material nature and unique origin.

But the evidence is more complicated.

The silver cup inlaid with bucrania from Late Bronze II Enkomi (Cyprus) has been discussed, for a long time, as containing niello (a composite metal alloy fused onto base metal for decorative effect), as do some bronze daggers found in the Shaft Graves at Mycenae. However, analyses carried out on these artefacts reopened the question, because the dark material visible on the surface is, without any doubt, blackened bronze: the darkness derives from a thin surface patina created after immersion in a chemical bath. In this case, the metal technology is tailored to particular needs. On the one hand, there is a composite material, that is the blackened bronze, formed by the combination of more chemical elements and then modified through a deposition of a thin patina. On the other hand, as composite artefacts, these daggers are characterised by a black-inlaid bronze. It is inserted

in a conventional bronze frame and becomes, in turn, the dark support for exalting colour and silhouettes of a series of gold and silver inlays in which figurative subjects predominate.

Thus, the craftsmanship is oriented to the achievement of sophisticated products through assemblage techniques and the blending of contrasting properties and qualities of materials. Here, the term 'composite' is a combination of the power of technology and the ability to form new images: the strict relationship between creativity, technology and manufacture produces novel interactions and solutions. Therefore, scientific analyses have become fundamental tools to explore the adopted technological solutions; from the nature and origin of materials to their workmanship, assembling techniques and fixing procedures. This dataset would allow us to establish, where possible, an appropriate terminology and an easier descriptive system.

Composite artefacts can be considered the result of a special connection between human brain/body and environment. At least, since the Upper Palaeolithic, they form a point of interaction. On the one hand, the material sphere (the external world) where materials, exist in nature and modified by humans, are adapted, transformed, and assembled to produce a finished object. On the other hand, there is the cognitive-cultural sphere, which is engaged in performing constructive actions. Understanding the fundamental architecture of human cognitive processing, especially how it interacts with cultural contexts and manifests in the production of composite artefacts, requires significant further research. In fact, in the present volume, all authors just preliminarily approach this aspect (especially in the contributions by myself and A. Di Ludovico).

Materials and their natural properties, including colours (modified and enhanced through manufacturing processes) are used for promoting and extolling virtues and qualities. Artisans amplify the composite nature of the artefact by assembling garments, body parts, and landscape in a uniquely imaginary world: contrasts of colours and the interplay of transparency or opacity illuminate the materials around them, exemplify the value of polychromy. However, 'polychrome' is a separate colour concept: in the ancient Mesopotamian texts, this term, focus on the ideas of 'variegation' and 'patterning' (for instance, it is applied to embroidered textiles), and brings together all of the meanings of colours, emphasising the congruity of parts to their whole, as well as an higher value for the multiplicity.

A primary concern of this volume is to provide specific case studies in which theoretical assumptions and hypotheses can be applied to the ancient evidence.

For this purpose, most of the papers take not only the general perspective, such as the relationship between materials and humans, but also a defined body of evidence – material, textual, visual, architectural – through which to address the issue.

The volume begins with a section entitled ‘The Planning: Materiality and Imagination’ which provides some remarks on the relationship between imagination and skill: they have to work together with sets of beliefs and myths explaining the origins of the world, as well as the symbolism and ideology of power in the construction of the composite artefacts. I myself examine this issue. With particular reference to the network of associations for the construction of composite ‘bodies’, I emphasise the synthesis between thought and images, between ‘externalised’ reality and ‘internalised’ man. Alessandro Di Ludovico’s article analyses the organisation and meaning of the assemblages of cones used to create wall decorations in the Lower Mesopotamia during the first urban phase. The planning of such mosaics, made by different stones, as well as by clay specimens coloured on their ends or differently baked in order to nuance pieces, addresses the need of a depersonalised coding system aimed to the communication and interpersonal relations between communities.

The second section, ‘Symbols in Action’, consists of three articles investigating the symbolic dimension of composite artefacts. As signs creating associations, they, in some cases, offer a means to enchain relations between peoples, things and places. At the same time, semiotic introduces the social dimension of meaning, as well as the social processes of signification and interpretation. Chikako Watanabe’s study introduces the relationship between texts and images. Focusing on composite animals – the lion-headed eagle and the lion dragon – exhibiting a body structure that consists of multiple body parts taken from different animals from reality, the author examines some aspects from the point of view of the aetiological and symbolic functions, as well as their relation to the materiality through some composite artefact conveying the same values and notions. The next article explores the concept of enchantment. Taking into account the inventories of the tombs discovered under the Royal Palace of Qatna (Syria), Elisa Roßberger emphasises the importance of the visual and semantic qualities of materials and colours for the artistic productions of Syria in the 2nd millennium BC. Composite artefacts are planned with a social function: in this case, enchantment, founded on the exceptional assemblage of materials, produces ‘dramatic’ and profound effects on viewers. Special personal ornaments discovered inside the female burials of Hasanlu (northwestern Iran) are the subject of the study proposed by Megan Cifarelli. They consist of iron armor scales with attached garments pins, stone,

shell and composite beads. The symbolic dimension is particularly evident here: the author suggests that the creation and recycling of these aggregates of objects, which include fragments of masculine armor and emanate evocative sounds, enchain individuals across gendered boundaries.

The last section ‘Sum of Fragments, Sum of Worlds’ presents some case studies exploring the essence of composite artefacts as a sum of fragments but serving for the whole. The articles here included investigate how, although each element possesses a singular material nature, origin and context, aggregates of matters can inviting novel interactions in the material world from the social and religious points of view. Jean M. Evans analyses the process of building up of the body in the Early Dynastic temple sculpture. Although there was a plan for drilling the holes in order to assemble perfectly the different parts and create a body unity, she stresses that the construction of stone human or animal images combining fragments from different materials emphasises the meaning of the single body parts, while the role of the material properties (type, provenance, availability etc.) looks little relevant. As in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, polymaterism is also a diffused practice in Northern Syria. Frances Pinnock examines the remains of composite artefacts coming from different areas of the Palace G (Early Syrian period). The palace furniture, found in scattered pieces, as a consequence of the dramatic fall of the town, includes composite objects made of many different materials (wood of many qualities, stone, gold). In particular, the maliktum’s standard represents an extraordinary synthesis of substances, each of them exalting specific divine and royal attributes. With the last contribution, the focus shifts to the island of Cyprus in a long period between the Late Bronze Age and the Archaic period. Normally, jewellery consists of many decorative items worn for personal adornment and made of different materials (metals, stone, organic materials etc.). Anna Paule investigates the goldsmithing traditions, stressing out how the wide range of materials employed emphasise the specific qualities of single and rare elements through the color combinations and composition patterns.

This volume represents a first attempt to conceptualise the construction and use of composite artefacts: the richness of approaches, the development of new issues depending on specific case studies, and the overturning of widely accepted ideas show the interest towards this category of objects and the opportunity to enlarge this field study in the future.

I would like to thank all the participants for the wonderful and stimulating Workshop. Many thanks also to the Vienna Organising Committee of the 10th ICAANE for allowing us to address this topic.

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