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COMPOSITE HUMAN-ANIMAL FIGURES IN EARLY URBAN NORTHERN MESOPOTAMIA: SHAMANS OR IMAGES OF RESISTANCE?

Summary. *Urban growth in northern Mesopotamia in the early fourth millennium BC was accompanied by an increase in clay container sealings, reflecting the intensified movement and management of resources and manufactured items. The diverse imagery impressed into these sealings includes a human-ibex grasping a pair of snakes, a bird-human, and other composite figures. The human-ibex in particular has been identified as a 'shaman', but this is not an appropriate term. The early fourth millennium BC was a period of enormous social and economic upheaval generated by the growth of cities and institutions. Composite figures may have expressed resistance to increasingly structured lived experiences, acknowledging the paradoxes of urban living and affirming the continued presence of the unexplainable.*

INTRODUCTION

Cities developed in northern Mesopotamia, modern north-east Syria and north Iraq, in the first half of the fourth millennium BC, contemporary with cities in southern Mesopotamia, modern south Iraq (Emberling 2003; 2015; Oates *et al*. 2007; Ur *et al*. 2007; McMahon 2020). Large areas of the northern Mesopotamian plains were affected by expanding economic networks associated with widely scattered urban centres. These networks included large agro-pastoral hinterlands around each city and intensified long-distance resource acquisition systems, mainly reaching into the Taurus or Zagros foothills and mountains. Like Uruk, northern Mesopotamian cities such as Tell Brak saw expansion on the physical scale, and presumably the power too, of religious and secular institutions. Some of these institutions engaged in redistribution of food or other staples (Frangipane 2016a).

From the fifth to the fourth millennia BC, the more articulated power hierarchy, combined with elevated demand for resources and manufactured goods generated by large agglomerations of people, became linked to the elaboration and increased diversity of the economy. One result was large numbers of container sealings deposited in many Late Chalcolithic 2–3 (hereafter LC2–3; *c*.4200–3600 BC) contexts, reflecting the need to mark goods' ownership and to record their movement and exchange. This LC2–3 glyptic built on preceding Northern Ubaid Period–LC1

(*c*.5200–4200 BC) traditions in motifs and style but also reflected new ideas and concerns. The sheer numbers of sealings and the variety of their imagery also indicate that an explosion of artistic creativity was associated with the growth of cities. Images on seals comprise the largest assemblage of artwork in the Late Chalcolithic; statues and figurines are rare, and decorated pottery is limited. Therefore, glyptic art offers a unique opportunity to examine Mesopotamian beliefs and concerns in a transitioning world.

SEALS IN MESOPOTAMIAN PREHISTORY

Stamp seals were common across northern Mesopotamia from the seventh–sixth millennia BC (Late Neolithic or Halaf Period). The seals were employed to impress clay lumps that 'locked' movable containers used in exchanges and stationary containers used in storage, as well as for sealing doors of storage facilities. Clay sealings were pressed against strings that either secured textiles over jar rims or were tied around baskets, bags or other containers; they were also pressed against peg-and-string door locks. Each sealing, once removed and discarded, is a record of an economic transaction or a storage management event. The imagery on seals carried information about the identity of the owner (Rothman 1994; Frangipane 2007; 2016b); the user's position within a bureaucratic hierarchy (Nissen 1977; Dittman 1986); important cultural themes (Pittman 1994); the quality and origin of the commodity contained (Wengrow 2008); and/or religious belief (Kielt Costello 2011; 2013). The techniques needed for seal carving, including fitting recognisable scenes into restricted spaces and carving identifiable figures in intaglio, suggest that seals were made by specialized artisans. Distinct carving styles may be linked to different workshops or individual carvers.

Most Halaf Period seals bear geometric motifs, especially cross-hatching. Domuztepe in Turkey and Arpachiyah in Iraq have typical seal assemblages (Mallowan and Rose 1935; von Wickede 1990; Carter 2010). At Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria, among the large assemblage of sealings from late sixth millennium BC levels, motifs include single animals, mainly goats, as well as geometric designs (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1996; 2004). During the subsequent fifth millennium BC Northern Ubaid–Late Chalcolithic 1 period, animal images became more common, and the motif repertoire diversified, incorporating additional animal species, plus occasional human figures (von Wickede 1990; Frangipane 2016b). Tepe Gawra in north Iraq (Tobler 1950; Rothman 2002) and Değirmentepe in Turkey (Esin 1994) provide examples of Ubaid sealings, including the earliest ibex- and bird-headed human images (Pittman 2001).

By LC2, late fifth millennium BC, scenes of human processions and rituals regularly appeared, although the majority of motifs were animals, including lion-animal combats. LC3 northern Mesopotamian glyptic continued LC2 traditions, but southern Mesopotamian cylinder seals and drilled techniques appeared in the region (Pittman 2001). Variety in motifs was not related to site size, with 1.5-hectare Tepe Gawra, 4.5-hectare Arslantepe and 130-hectare Tell Brak all showing significant diversity in motifs (Tobler 1950; Rothman 2002; Frangipane 2016b). The northern Mesopotamian LC2–3 glyptic includes more images of a human or human-ibex grappling with a pair of snakes, a continuation of occasional examples of this figure in Late Ubaid–LC1. In LC2–3, there is also a related group of other composite human figures; the most important among these is a bird-human that shares some elements, especially distinctive upturned shoes, with the human-ibex. The human-ibex (with and without snakes) is represented on seals or sealings from across the 'piedmont zone', from eastern Turkey through the Upper Khabur in Syria and along
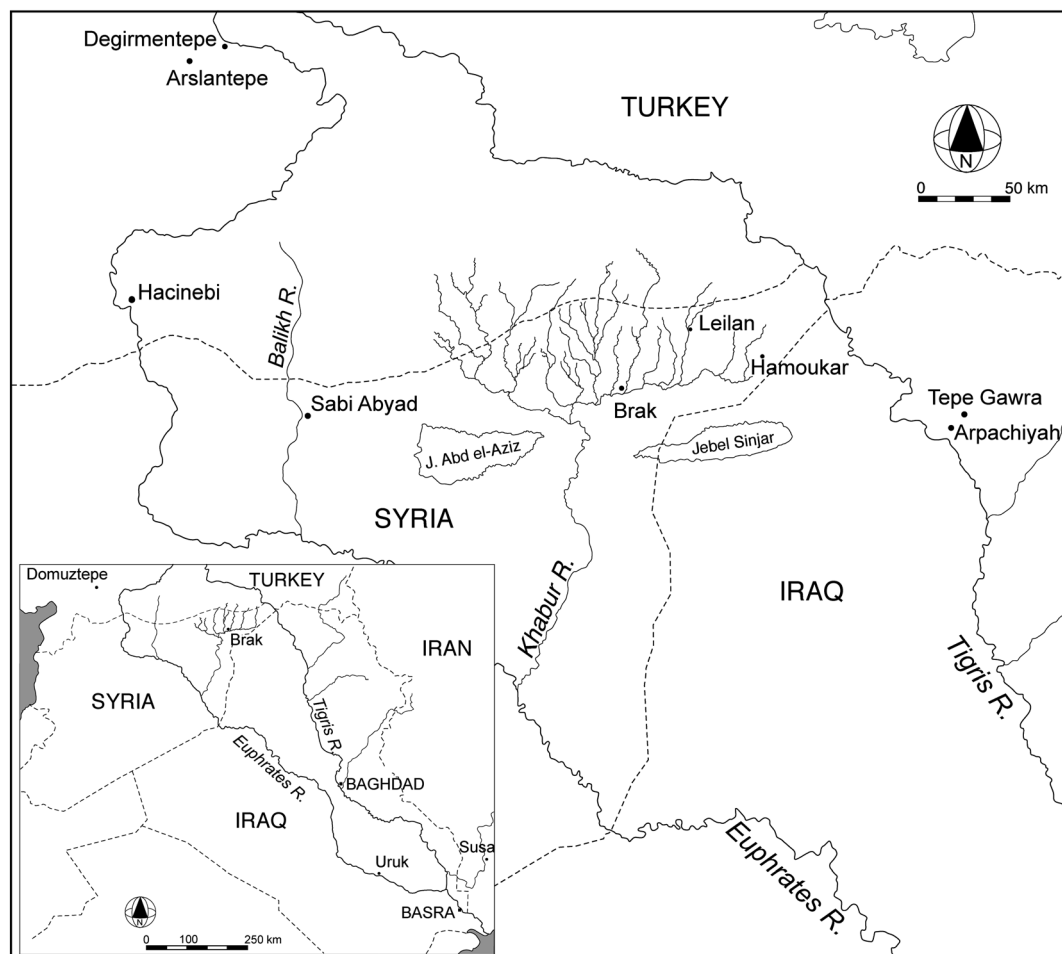
FIGURE 1
Map of Mesopotamia with location of Tell Brak and other relevant sites indicated.

the Zagros mountains to Susa in south-west Iran (Fig. 1; Stein *et al.* 1998, 171; Pittman 2001). Relevant sites include Hacinebi in south-east Turkey (Pittman 1999; Stein 2012) and Tepe Gawra (Tobler 1950; Hole 2010), with a particularly large number from Tell Brak in north-east Syria.

TELL BRAK IN THE EARLY FOURTH MILLENNIUM BC

Tell Brak is one of northern Mesopotamia's most important early cities. The site is located near the Wadi Jaghjagh within the Upper Khabur region, central to northern Mesopotamia (Fig. 1). This was a region of rainfall agriculture, in proximity to the rich resources of the Taurus mountains and the Anatolian plateau. In its complexity and size, Brak rivals Uruk in south Iraq; it is one of a small group of sites in north-east Syria and north Iraq that can be considered urban in the

early-mid fourth millennium BC, including Tell Hamoukar and possibly Tell Leilan in Syria and Tell al-Hawa, Grai Resh and Nineveh in Iraq (Schwartz 1988; Ball *et al.* 1989; Ur 2002; Kepinski 2011; McMahon 2020).

Brak grew from a substantial town of *c.*50−55 hectares in the late fifth millennium BC, LC2, to a city of *c.*130 hectares by the mid-fourth millennium BC, LC3 (Oates *et al.* 2007; Ur *et al.* 2007; 2011). At its maximum, the city comprised three zones: a densely occupied central core, a lightly occupied Outer Town surrounding the central core, and a 'corona' of small sub-mounds at the edge of the Outer Town (Fig. 2). Excavations of LC2−3 occupation comprise trenches in two of the sub-mounds, Majnuna and T2, and larger exposures at the northern and southern sides of the central mound, in Areas HS, TW, CH and the Eye Temple (Mallowan 1947; Matthews 2004; Oates 2005; McMahon and Oates 2007). From these excavations, we know that the LC2−3 city had at least two powerful institutions. The Eye Temple at the south of the central mound was a large formal building raised on a platform; thousands of small stone 'eye idol' votives suggest its wide sphere of influence. A massive secular administrative building at the north side of the central
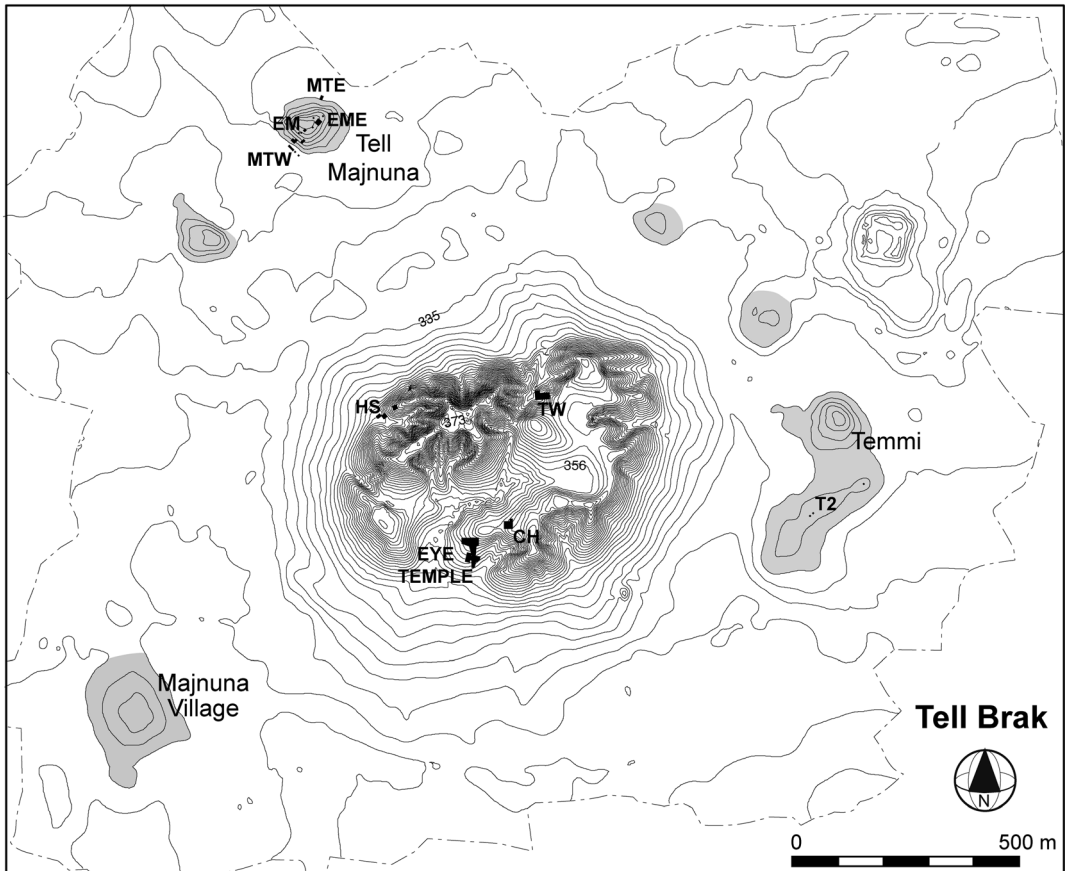

FIGURE 2
Topographic plan of Tell Brak with LC 2−3 excavations indicated.

mound, in Area TW, was adjacent to an industrial area; the building's users may have managed resources and the manufacture of basic and luxury goods (Oates *et al.* 2007).

The LC2–3 material culture at Brak – mainly ceramics and glyptic – reflects northern Mesopotamian traditions common from south-east Turkey to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. There is some regionalization of specific ceramic forms or seal motifs within this wide geographic area, but there are also significant shared practices, motifs and types. The sites with the closest comparisons for the glyptic imagery discussed here are Hacinebi Tepe and Arslantepe on the Turkish Euphrates and Tepe Gawra near the upper Tigris in northern Iraq. However, these are simply the best-known points within an extended interconnected community of imagery and practices.

Between 2007 and 2011, the Tell Brak project excavated at two sub-mounds at the city edge. These sub-mounds date mainly to the late LC2–3 Periods and contained significant deposits of rubbish, including material discarded from administrative contexts (McMahon and Oates 2007; McMahon 2009; McMahon *et al.* 2011). Over 1000 clay container sealings were recovered from these rubbish layers, mainly from the northern sub-mound of Tell Majnuna, with a smaller group from the eastern sub-mound of T2. These assemblages supplement a smaller number of LC2–3 sealings from rubbish deposits in the industrial area in TW, at the northern edge of the central mound. A few additional sealings come from a step trench, Area HS, at the site's northern edge (Matthews 2004). Most of the sealings were originally placed on containers (jars and baskets), and they are a useful proxy for the flow of resources into the settlement as it expanded from town to city. Most of these resources were probably agricultural and pastoral products from the immediate hinterland, but the possibility exists that some sealings were attached to containers of raw materials such as copper or obsidian, from more distant regions to the north.

SEALINGS WITH COMPOSITE FIGURES

Tell Brak Composite Figures

The LC2–3 stamp seals are usually circular, lozenge or square/rectangular; the size is normally between two and eight cm in the maximum dimension. Like Halaf and Ubaid Period seals, LC2–3 seals often have holes for suspension through their body (which may be hemispherical, rectangular or gabled in section) and were worn as amulets or identity symbols, as well as used in the administration of goods.

The most common motif among the *c.*1150 LC2–3 sealings from all areas at Brak is a lion attacking a wild goat or ibex (over 600 examples, e.g. Fig. 3). However, there are significant numbers of snakes (50 examples) and human-animal composites (71). The sealings with snake and composite imagery were found sporadically in the same type of rubbish contexts as other sealings and, like them, were discarded immediately after removal from their container. Those 71 composite images include 41 human composites holding a snake or pair of snakes, of which composites 40 are ibex-headed (Fig. 4) and one is bird-headed. The human-ibex has a human body, arms and legs, a wild goat or ibex head and horns, and upturned shoes. The human-animal composites also include 17 images with a human head, arms and legs, combined with the body, wings and tail feathers of a bird of prey, probably a vulture; most of these carry a mace and many retain the bird's head, below the human head (Fig. 5). They wear upturned shoes like the human-ibex.

There are smaller numbers of composites that are more varied and challenging to group into types. Two examples have the same human head, wings and/or bird body, and mace as the
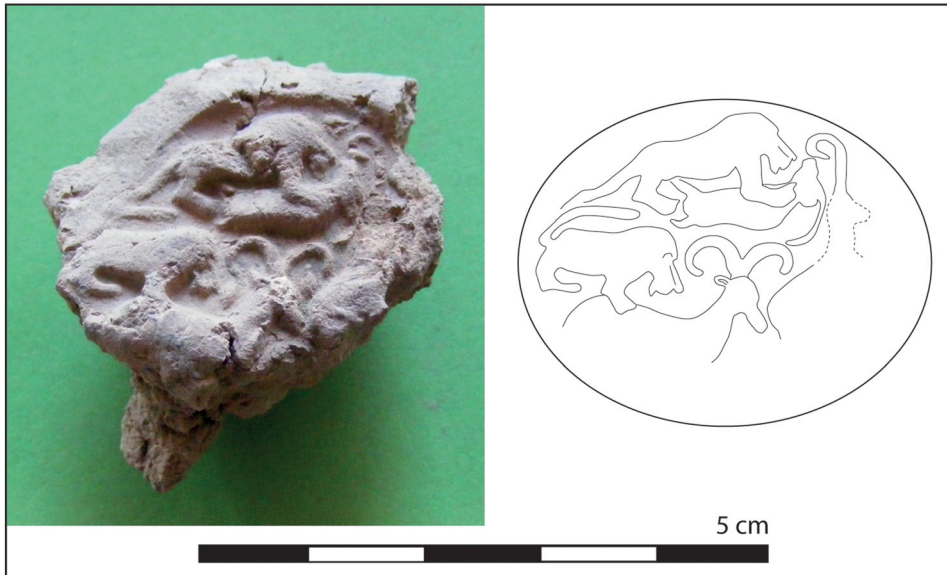
FIGURE 3
Example of sealing with lion-ibex combats.

bird-humans, but with lion legs (Fig. 6). Four images combine humans and lions in diverse ways: one with a human body and legs and a lion head, two having lion bodies with human heads, and one with lion body, human head, bird feet and wings, and a lion head facing the opposite direction on the back (Fig. 7). The similarity of the latter to the Greek *chimaera* is notable but coincidental. Seven images combine bird wings, ibex heads and lion legs with minimal human elements, mainly arms (Fig. 8). There are also five images of composite figures that do not include human elements: three bird-lions (Fig. 9) and two bird-ibex (Fig. 10). An additional 16 sealings preserve elements of human composites (e.g. upturned shoes, hand with mace) but were too fragmentary for unequivocal identification.

Most of these composite figures follow the principle that the elements should be unambiguous, accurate, of an appropriate scale, and in their proper anatomical position, e.g. legs below the figure, head above arms, in order to deliver maximum intelligibility (Descola 2010; Wengrow 2014). However, a small but significant number partly contradict this principle, with an extra bird head in front or an extra animal head facing the wrong direction (Figs. 5, 7, 10). This intelligibility principle is also not followed in composites with limited human elements, which have multiple arms or legs attached at impossible angles (Fig. 8). In the majority of images, the human form dominates, shown with erect two-legged poses; they are presented as a human base turned into a composite. However, the mixed animal composites are different; while upper and lower body parts are distinguished appropriately, these figures do not have a primary core figure but are formed by merging many elements of equal weight.

The styles range from naturalistic and detailed (Fig. 4, left; Fig. 8) to flat and sharp-edged (Fig. 4, right; Fig. 10). Some are clear single images, while others are densely surrounded by filling motifs. In every case, the image is relatively clear and easy to 'read', with the hindrances to their
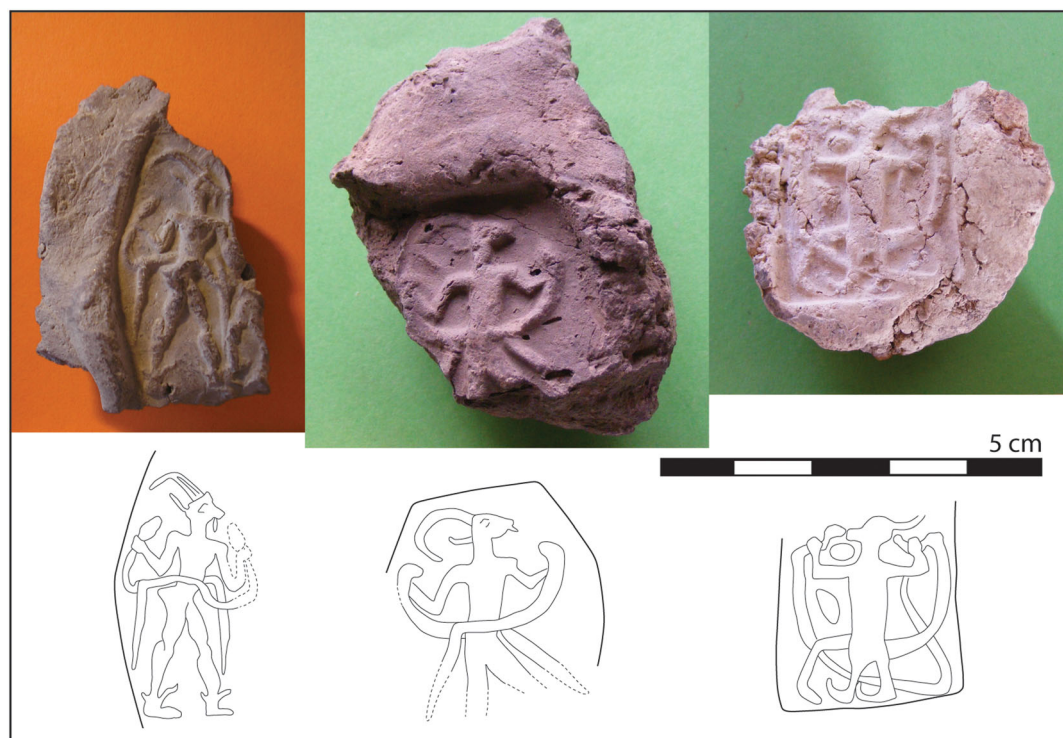
FIGURE 4
Sealings with ibex-headed human composites.

legibility being the small scale and, potentially, the placement of a sealing on an inaccessible part of the container. The variation in styles, as well as in details of figures or scene, suggest that many different artisans were involved in the images' production and that composites were embraced by a significant number of individuals or groups in the city and hinterland.

The 50 images with snakes, and 92 composites (71 human, 5 non-human, and 16 probable) make up small but significant percentages of the total LC2–3 sealing assemblage: 4.3% and 8%, respectively. However, sealings with composite figures and with snakes were concentrated in TW, T2 and the western trenches at Tell Majnuna (MTW and EM), which date to late LC2 to early LC3. There are fewer in the slightly later contexts represented by the eastern trench at Majnuna (MTE), which dates to late LC3. Similarly, there are no composite figures yet reported from Tell Hamoukar, where an assemblage of late LC3 sealings has been recovered (Reichel 2002). Thus, these composite figures are contemporary with the growth from town to city, tapering off in popularity as the city stabilized in size.

Composite Figures: Comparanda

Comparisons for composite humans come from the piedmont area stretching from south-east Anatolia to south-west Iran, and from the fifth through fourth millennia BC. The
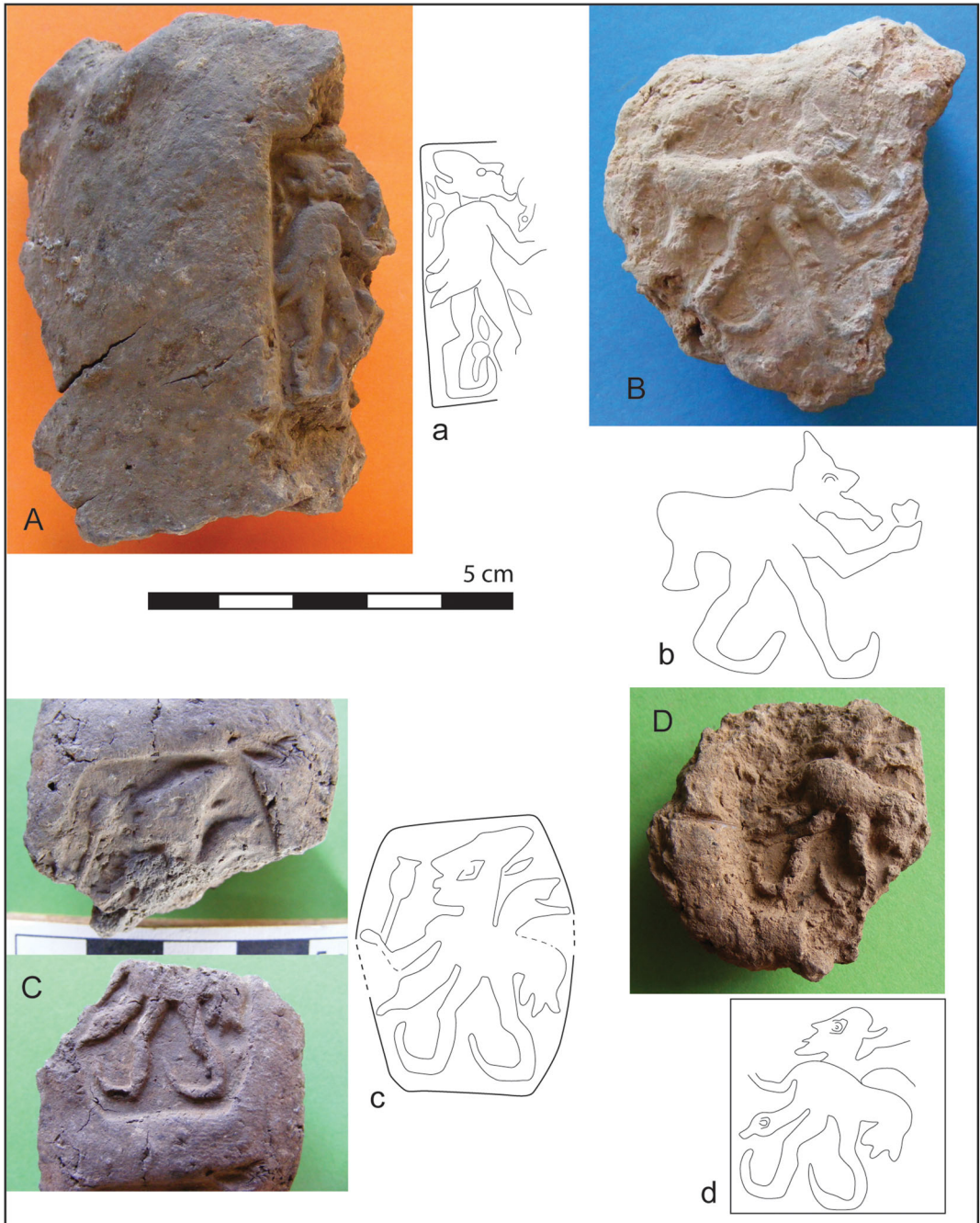
FIGURE 5
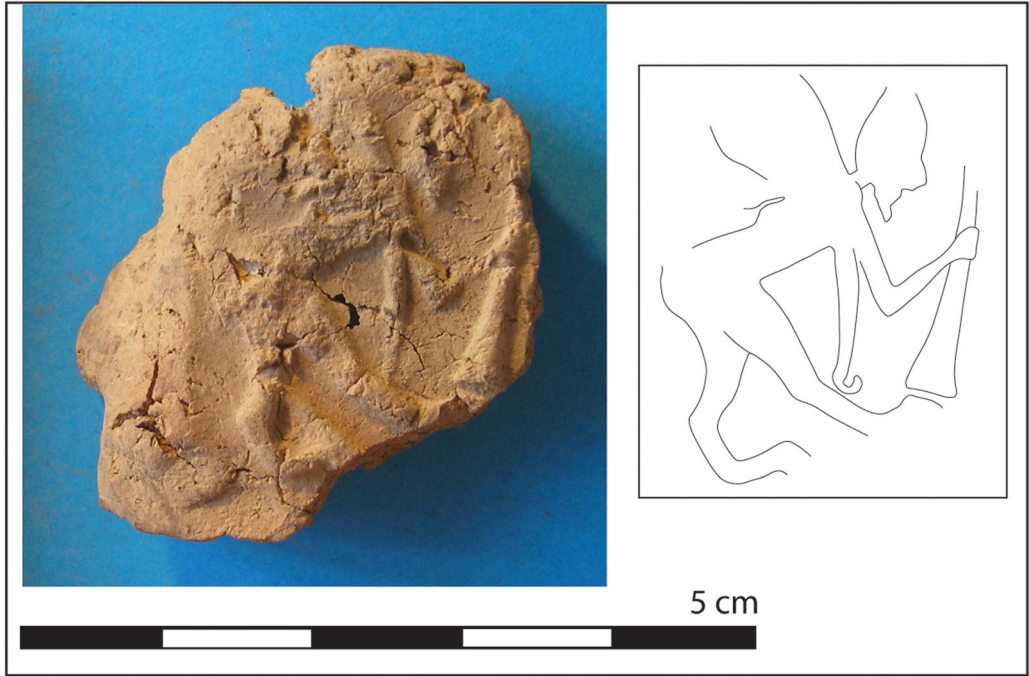Sealings with bird-human composites.

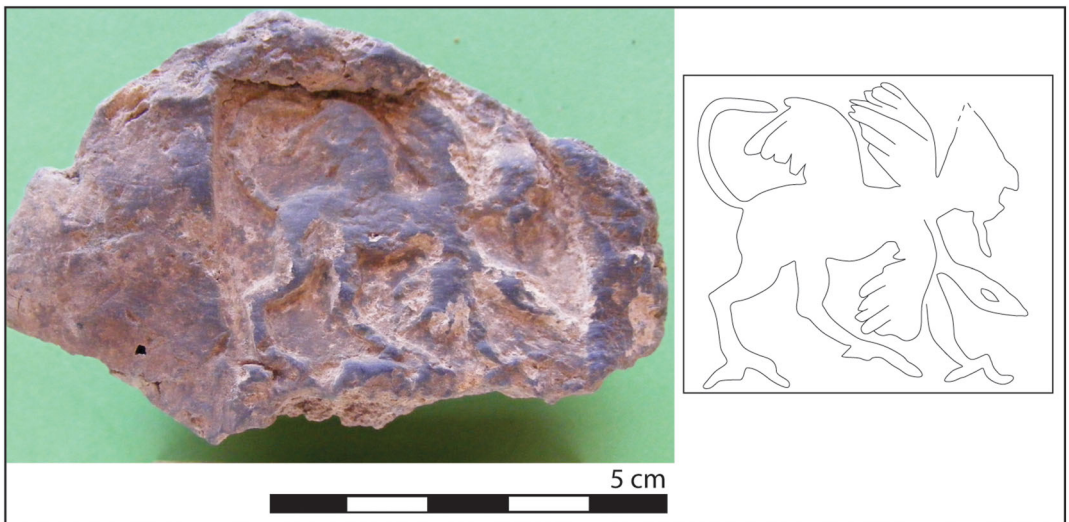FIGURE 6
Sealing with human-bird-lion composite.

FIGURE 7
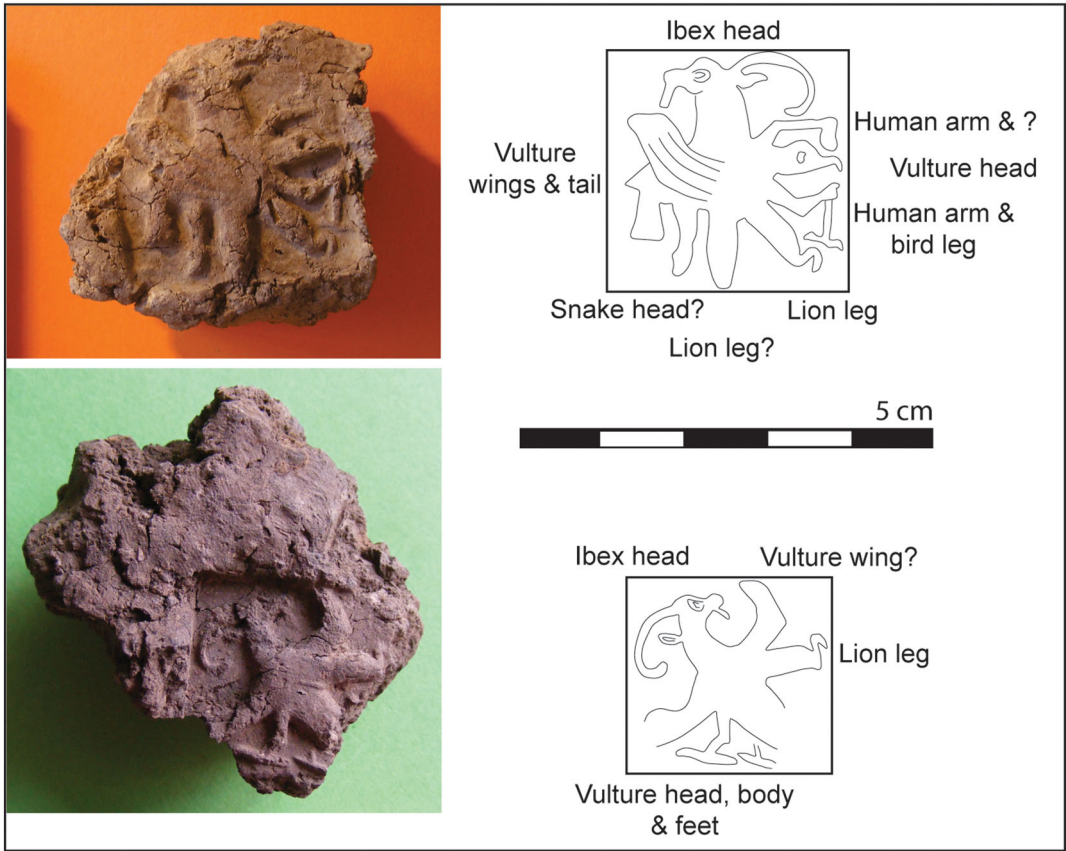Sealing with lion-bird-human composite.

FIGURE 8
Sealings with bird-lion-ibex composites.

comparanda resemble the human-ibex or bird-headed human; Brak's bird-bodied, human-headed figure, and the other mixed composites are not yet known from other sites. The bird- and ibex-headed humans are similar in all respects other than the head, suggesting overlapping mental categories. Sealings from Ubaid Period Değirmentepe have the earliest bird-headed humans (Esin 1994, figs. 14, 15). Late Ubaid–LC2 levels at Tepe Gawra (XIV–IX: Tobler 1950; Hole 2010, fig. 15.7) contain scattered examples of bird-headed humans, some holding schematic snakes (Tobler 1950, pls. CLXII.76–77, 79–80, CLXIII.83, 84, 90). A seal from Hacinebi LC2 has a human figure (either bird- or ibex-headed) with a mace and upturned shoes, in a scene with a caprid and vulture (Pittman 1999, fig. 1.2; 2001, fig. 117f; Stein 2012, fig. 6a). Ibex-headed figures, some with snakes, also appear at LC1–2 Tepe Gawra (Tobler 1950, pls. CLXII.78, CLXIII.81, CLXIV.94–6).

Images of the human-ibex with a pair of snakes also come from Tepe Giyan in north-west Iran (Cool Root 1997–2000, figs. 4g, 5, 6; Pittman 2001, fig. 11.5b; Hole 2010, fig. 15.8b–d). Their context is unclear but may be Late Ubaid in date, similar to the bird-headed humans from Değirmentepe. More complex examples of the human-ibex, with elaborately detailed clothing and pairs of snakes or wild animals, come from Susa, in south-west Iran, in late fifth–late fourth millennia BC contexts (Barnett 1966; Amiet 1972, no. 220; von Wickede 1990, 459–65; Harper
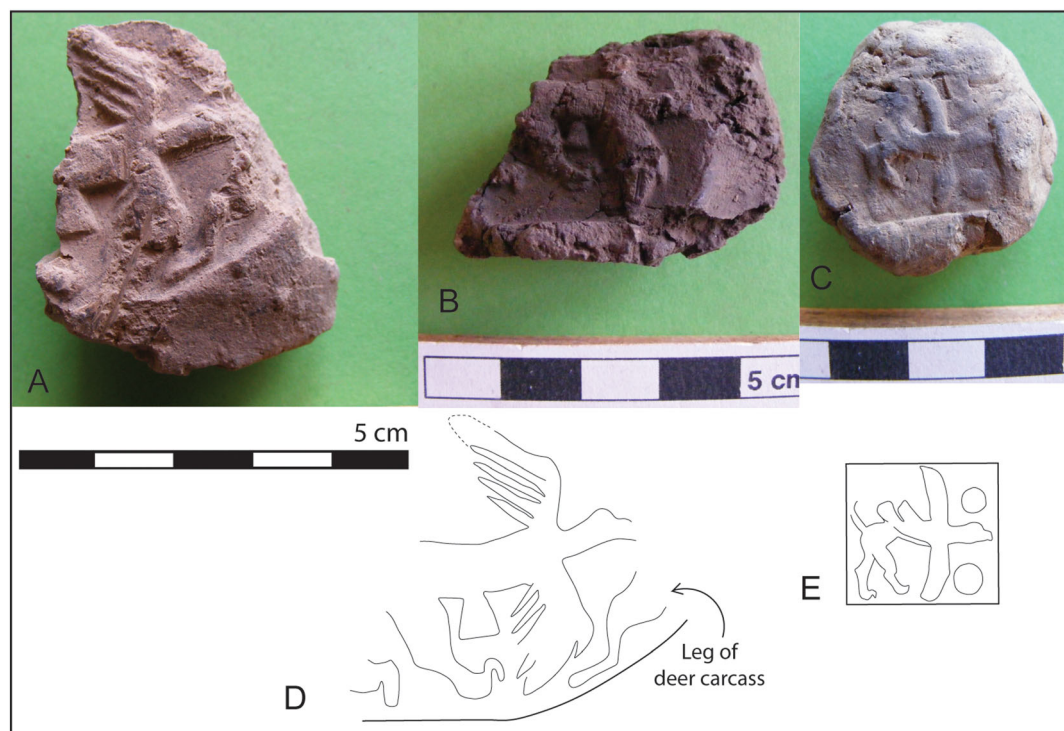
FIGURE 9
Sealings with vulture-lion composites; A–C photos, D reconstruction combining A and B; E drawing of C.

et al. 1992, 45, no. 18; Pittman 2001, fig. 11.4; 2013, 295, fig. 16.1; Hole 2010, fig. 15.8e–l). This figure continues into the Late Uruk, late fourth millennium BC, as the entirely human 'Master of Animals' holding goats or lions, on cylinder seals from Uruk and Choga Mish (Boehmer 1999, pls. 41.13A–W, 42.14A–D; Pittman 2001, fig. 11.15).

Images that combine elements from multiple animals are rare at other sites. However, indirect comparanda come from Arslantepe, where a small group of seals each bears a large central animal with horns, bodies and feet from different species (Group 16; Frangipane *et al.* 2007, 264–5). For example, A206-52 combines horns from gazelle and deer, plus lion feet and legs (Frangipane *et al.* 2007, 200). This figure also uses both side and top viewpoints. Mixtures of animals also appear on Late Uruk cylinder seals from south-west Iran, including bird-feline composites: feline body, bird head and wings (Pittman 2013, 317, fig. 16.21).

SNAKE IMAGERY

In addition to being grappled by composite figures, snakes appear singly or in clusters on 50 sealings from LC2–3 Brak. Occasionally these are single snakes in a multi-figure scene, but the most common image is a snake or group of snakes in an elaborate braid (Fig. 11), presumably a representation of snakes copulating.
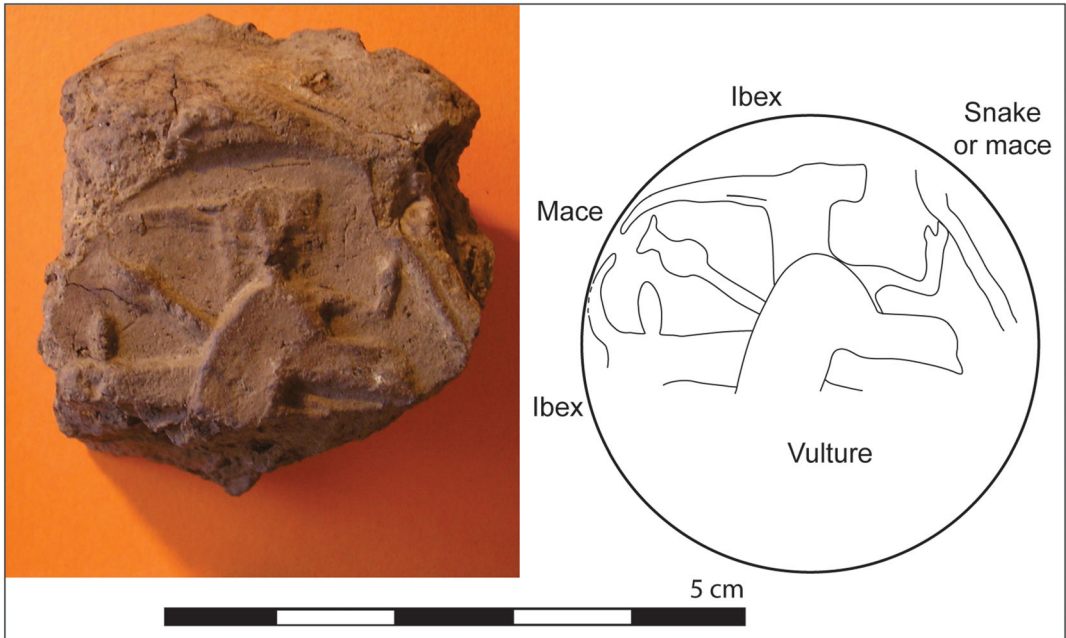
FIGURE 10
Sealing with vulture-ibex composite.

Snake imagery is not new in LC2–3 northern Mesopotamia. At Pre-Pottery Neolithic Gobekli Tepe, the most common motif on T-shaped pillars in Enclosure A is the snake (Peters and Schmidt 2004). Snakes, with vultures and animals, appear on PPN palettes from sites on the Syrian Euphrates (Kielt Costello 2011). From the Ubaid and early LC, snakes appear on Değirmentepe seals and sealings (Esin 1994, fig. 6.4). LC2 Hacinebi has two stamp seals and one sealing with snakes (Pittman 1999, fig. 1.1). Most of these examples are a single snake within a scene, while the snake braid is rarer. But Tepe Gawra has three seal impressions with braided snakes in LC1–2 (XII–X; Tobler 1950, pl. CLXX.178–80). Snakes surround a female human figure on sealings from Arslantepe VII (LC3–4; Pittman 2012, fig. 3a), and another sealing from this level has a braided snake (Pittman 2012, fig. 6a). Single extended snakes persist on cylinder seals of the late fourth millennium BC (LC5) at Arslantepe VIA (Frangipane *et al.* 2007, 184–5, A206-006, -008, -009; 202, -056, -057, -058), as well as on stamp seals, with goats, gazelles or felines (Frangipane *et al.* 2007, 186, A206-012; 195, -036 and 197, -042; with numerous other examples). Coiled or knotted snakes are rarer but also present in these later levels (Frangipane *et al.* 2007, 198, A206-045, -059, -060, with numerous other examples).

COMPOSITE HUMAN-ANIMAL AS 'SHAMAN'

The ibex- and bird-headed humans have been identified as 'shamans' (Porada 1995, 31–3; Pittman 2001, 412; Rothman 2009, 17). But this term is not culturally appropriate, and, more importantly, the roles and practices of such figures in LC2–3 Mesopotamia may not be shamanistic.

FIGURE 11
Sealings with snake braids.

The origin of the term shaman in central Siberia, the definition of shamanism, and its wide – but not uncontroversial – application to other belief systems have been extensively discussed (e.g. Eliade 1964; Lewis 1971; Vitebsky 1995; Harvey 2003; Jones 2006; Price 2010; Pharo 2011; Kielt Costello 2013; Winkelman 2013; Tully and Crooks 2015). Shamans are spiritual mediators; they perform public rituals, aided by hallucinogens, repetitive sound or motion, fasting, or other ways of achieving ecstatic or trance states (altered consciousness). The aim of these trance states or spiritual journeys may be communication with the supernatural or requests on behalf of the community or individuals, such as hunting success, good weather or healing. Shamans usually have an association with a specific animal and transform into or are possessed by that animal. Shamans often wear costumes and carry distinctive objects during ritual performance. Shamanism may also

involve belief in a tiered world with connections between layers – via a pillar, tree or other physical connector – that could only be accessed by shamans (Eliade 1964; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1996; 2007; Price 2010; Lewis-Williams 2012; Winkelman 2013).

Late Chalcolithic Mesopotamian composite figures have some characteristics that match these defining attributes of shamans. Their animal elements and (for some) mastery of snakes suggest supernatural powers and the capacity to operate in more than one world. Although it is risky to use analogy from later periods, Mesopotamian religious belief of the third millennium BC and later allowed for some movement between worlds of the living and the dead by heroic human (Enkidu) and divine (Inanna) figures. It is possible that this built on an earlier similar belief. Evidence for sensory deprivation and use of hallucinogens (e.g. hemp) is ambiguous for prehistoric Mesopotamia, although Stein (2017) argues for their use in historic periods. None of the northern Mesopotamian images includes a musical instrument, such as the drums often associated with shamans, but a trance-inducing dance or other motions cannot be ruled out, since care is taken to show both legs in a striding pose. In addition to their animal attributes, many composite figures wear distinctive shoes or carry maces that may symbolize their powers.

It is not only Late Chalcolithic Mesopotamian composite figures that have been identified as 'shamans'; Palaeolithic and Neolithic hybrid figures in the Near East are also occasionally designated as such. Human-animal composite images have been presented as evidence for shamanistic aspects of Neolithic religious beliefs in northern Mesopotamia and Central Anatolia, e.g. Göbekli Tepe (Peters and Schmidt 2004), Çatal Höyük (Hodder and Meskell 2010), Körtik Tepe and Hasankeyf Höyük (Benz and Bauer 2015). In a similar vein, Kielt Costello (2011; 2013) has argued that the 'shaman', in scenes with snakes, animals and birds of prey, reflects formalization of late Neolithic religious beliefs into cosmological tiers.

However, Hole (2010) points out that the Mesopotamian composite figures do not have healing associations, which are strongly linked to shamans in other cultures; he prefers the inverted term 'namash' and emphasizes their generic leadership role. The Late Chalcolithic composite images' placement on seals means they are not linked to the location of ritual practices, as are many shaman images in other cultures. In rock art, a shaman or composite image on a natural surface may mark a porous boundary via a cave or crack, beyond which is the alternate world into which shamans are able to travel (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990; Rozwadowski 2017). Any possible animating effect of composite images on the efficacy of seals or sealings seems negated by the prosaic imagery on other sealings, such as hedgehogs or rosettes. The scaling down of the composite figure to something as small, personal, and portable as a seal also stands in strong contrast to the large-scale fixed position of shaman images in other cultures.

Further, the animal composites without human elements on Late Chalcolithic sealings challenge interpretation of the human-ibexes as 'shamans' and suggest a more complex ideation for the whole group of composites. But it is useful to note here that some San rock-art non-human composites have been identified as the outcome of several sequential shamanistic transformations (Jolly 2002, 99). The occasional appearance on LC seals of separate body elements (e.g. human or ibex heads) suggests that the process of composite creation may also have taken several conceptual steps: initial separation and subsequent recombination.

There is little discussion of whether composite figures on LC sealings represent hypothetical supernatural figures or ritual practitioners in masks or costumes (e.g. Porada 1950, n. 20). The small scale of the sealings makes such distinction difficult. Two related and larger (*c*.17.5 cm high) copper statuettes of human-ibex wear a knapsack shaped like the wings and tail of a vulture (Barnett 1966, pls. XIX, XX, XXI); the sharp delineation across the chest implies that

the bird element was a costume, not integrated with the human body. The ibex ears and horns also are attached to a headdress, not integral to the head. Unfortunately, these statuettes were acquired from the art market and their date and provenance is uncertain, although late fourth millennium BC Iran is proposed. Ultimately, our identification of these and other composite figures as shamanistic is shaky, as it is based only on some similarities in their representations. Our limited knowledge of these figures' actions, their training, or their audience and practices, means that such an identification remains speculative.

COMPOSITE FIGURES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Uncritical application of the 'shaman' term can mean that composite images are associated with universal mystical beliefs and that their social or political context is ignored (Klein *et al*. 2002). The increase in popularity of these images at LC 2–3 Brak must be contextualized within their context of urban growth and social change. Elsewhere, composite figures have been argued to assist in managing shifting relations between humans and the environment or other socio-economic changes, such as population aggregation from the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic (Winkelman 2002) or the Neolithic transition to agriculture (Benz and Bauer 2015). Composite figures have been connected to the process of Neolithization and new relationships among humans, animals, and the landscape (Verhoeven 2002) or to the breakdown of categories and the boundaries of the human body (Miracle and Borić 2008). Hole (2010) proposed that fifth millennium BC (Ubaid Period) climate change affected rainfall and flooding, generating agricultural uncertainty that was instrumental in development of Mesopotamian beliefs about the supernatural. He traces the initial elaboration of scenes with composite figures to this climate change, which affected the growth in scale and power of religious institutions.

By the fourth millennium BC in northern Mesopotamia, however, farming was millennia old and the environment was reasonably stable. If shamans and composite images help people manage change, the relevant changes at the time the composite figure imagery grew in popularity were those incurred during urban growth: increased intensity and frequency of interactions between people and subtle shifts in relations among people, animals and the natural world. Wengrow (2014), citing Rostovzeff, notes the increased number of imaginary composites at the beginning of urbanization (see also Porada 1987), but his focus is on their origins, cognitive classification and cultural transmission into the late fourth millennium BC and subsequent Bronze Age. At the same time, the expanding Eye Temple at Brak reflects increasingly formalized religion developing towards the anthropomorphic pantheon of the third millennium BC, which conflicts with the human-animal connectivity that the composites express. Rothman points to the shift from folk religion to temple-based formal religion during the development of urbanization, together with a shift from shamans to priests as the main religious practitioners (Rothman 2009). But the number and complexity of composite figure images at Brak grew during the urban transition, rather than shrinking, suggesting resistance to this trend.

LIONS, IBEX, VULTURES AND SNAKES

The growth in popularity of composite images in LC2–3 may also be assessed in light of the animals combined with humans: lions, ibex, and vultures; the frequent presence of snakes has additional complex meanings. These animals must have been chosen because their attributes or

behaviours were meaningful and useful. Each of these animals generates ambiguous reactions – both positive and negative – with significance for urbanizing society.

Lions were frightening and awesome, deemed the equal and rival to human leaders for much of Mesopotamian history; images of kings hunting and killing lions symbolized and legitimized rulers from the fourth millennium BC Uruk Period Lion Stele to first millennium BC Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and Achaemenid stamp seals. Brak LC2–3 sealings include imagery of lions in cages or in combat with humans (McMahon 2009), which are the earliest known examples of this symbol. Lions in LC glyptic thus may symbolize new concepts of leadership and strength, and the prevalence of lion imagery during urbanization is therefore unsurprising. But the merging of humans and lions is exceptional. The relatively small number of lion-human composites, and their typological variability, suggests that this combination was not particularly successful or widely accepted, despite the lion's usefulness as a symbol. Human-lion rivalry, rather than merging, perhaps carried a clearer message. The first millennium BC human-headed lion *lamassu* or lion-headed human *ugallu* in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and foundation deposits are an independent reinvention of this image, with unrelated apotropaic attributes.

The goat merged with the human figures is the wild ibex, as suggested by the tall curving horns. Ibex, like lions, are powerful and physically fearless. They occupy rugged landscapes of mountains or steppe within the piedmont zone. In glyptic art, they are potentially a reminder of wilderness, distinct from familiar urbanized or farmed landscapes, and the source of metals, stone and timber that were increasingly valued and vital for urban life. Ibex attacked by lions are the most common motif in LC2–3 glyptic, where their vulnerability contrasts awkwardly with their strength when depicted as elements of composites.

The bird of the bird-human figures is the vulture, with the same tail and wings shown on clear images of vultures crouched over animal carcasses on contemporary sealings (McMahon 2016). The vulture's distinctive head and curved neck are retained (albeit hanging below the human head) in many examples. Vultures may have strong negative connotations, as ungainly and noisy carrion eaters. But they are also the largest and most powerful birds that the inhabitants of Brak would have been able to observe closely; other local large birds of prey, such as eagles, rarely come near human settlements. Vultures would be attracted by rubbish and thus provide a valuable service to urban residents through reduction of animal carcasses and offal frequently dumped at the edges of cities.

Snakes have a strong affect, both revolting and fascinating. Their scales and sinuous motion offer greater contrasts to humans' skin and walk than do the fur, skin and ambulation of most mammals. Their hissing advertises danger; they hide and are easily overlooked; they lay eggs but do not fly like birds, making them difficult to categorize. Their habits of sunning themselves before moving, dwelling in enclosed spaces, and skin shedding can suggest that snakes can travel between worlds of the living and dead. Although beliefs of the Mesopotamian historic periods do not necessarily reflect those of prehistory, some associations of the snake in the third through first millennia BC are relevant and may be universal. Aspects of multiple lives and movement between worlds are reflected in the snake's stealing of the plant of everlasting life in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Mentions of snakes in Sumerian literature vary from fascination at their movement ('a saĝkal snake that slithers across the meadows and mountains'; ETCSL *Dumuzid and Ĝeštin-ana*: c.1.4.1.1 [Black *et al*. 1998–2006]), through awe at their heightened senses ('alert snakes of the mountains allow no one to pass'; ETCSL *The Cursing of Agade* c.2.1.5 [Black *et al*. 1998–2006]) to fear at their danger ('spit your venom at evil like a snake which drools poison'; ETCSL *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave* c.1.8.2.1 [Black *et al*. 1998–2006]). In the omen list *Šumma alu*, the sight of snakes generally

leads to death, illness, divorce, or abandonment of houses or entire cities (Whiting 1984; Freedman 2006, Tablets 22–26). But paradoxically, killing a snake may incur the gods' anger (Freedman 2006, 15), and snakes could herald the birth of sons or good fortune. This paradox of good and evil is similar to that ascribed to lions, which are dangerous but have strength and courage to which kings aspire. The nature of the snake, living both on and below the earth, has the greatest potential for relevance to shamanistic beliefs: the snake may be the connector between human and supernatural worlds. The human or human-ibex holding snakes thus could express control over contradictory and incomprehensible natural forces.

COMPOSITE FIGURES, URBAN CHALLENGES AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

Imagery of human-ibex snake-handlers first developed in the Late Ubaid-LC1 context of increased agglomeration of people into towns but relatively informal and democratic organizational structures, including small shrines. Increased representations of composite figures during the LC2–3, and their elaboration with more species and more complicated images, coincided with the transition to urbanism and the growth of institutional power, both secular and religious. Expansion of imagery incorporating animals reflective of the paradoxes and challenges of urbanism may reflect ways of humanizing and connecting with new modes of leadership, resource extraction and exploitation, and city life. Social connections within urban settlements may have frayed in the face of expanding networks and intensity of interactions. Greater vertical differentiation and inequalities generated during urbanization may be smoothed over by the notion of shared beliefs and concerns. Further, if the composite imagery reflects actual ritual practices, the perpetuation of rituals with interpersonal interactions and high emotions (including fear and awe of the supernatural), which are traditionally associated with small scale societies (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014), can help maintain social cohesion or 'identity fusion' even during the growth of urbanization and formal temple-based religion. This kinship-like cohesion resists one goal that structured and routinized state religion sought to achieve, namely a more formal and passive group identification (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). This theory of resistance or co-existence is an alternative to Wengrow's (2011) proposal that established ritual was hijacked by urban elites as part of a strategy to control the economy.

The amplification of human and animal iconography, and the sub-division of that iconography and its recombination into composite figures, suggest the LC inhabitants of northern Mesopotamia were grappling with relations between humans and non-humans. These relations, and concerns over them, may have been amplified by the demographic and economic changes associated with city growth. Descola's 'analogism' (2013) is relevant, acknowledging the complex physical and spiritual properties of animals and humans and yet the need for connections to create order. The popularity of snakes and composites in LC Mesopotamian glyptic is a reminder that the regimentation and control implied by urban life, institutions and industrialized production did not eliminate uncertainty. Indeed, in cities, some uncertainty and chaos may have been valued. Composite figures contrast to human figures in contemporary glyptic who are engaged in activities associated with institutions: carrying or drinking communally from jars (Fig. 12 and Tepe Gawra XII, Tobler 1950, pl. CLXIII.91), walking in procession (Tepe Gawra XIA and XIII, Tobler 1950, pl. CLXIII.89, 92), and making offerings at altars (Tepe Gawra XIA, Tobler 1950, pl. CLXIII.82). These images reflect group identification rituals and the growing power of institutions such as Brak's Eye Temple. Shamanism may co-exist with formal state religions and can attract
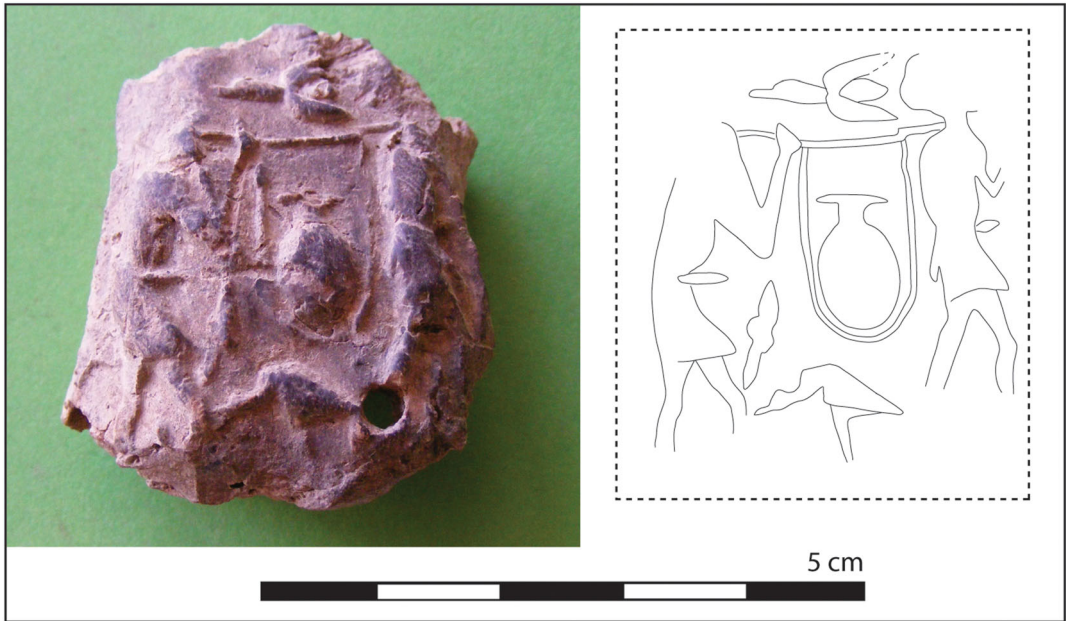
FIGURE 12
Sealing with jar-carrying human procession.

disenfranchised members of society (Lewis 1971; Price 2010; Pharo 2011). Similarly, within the context of urban growth and formalization of religion, the composite figures offer an alternative, celebrating the persistence of wild non-inhabited space and acting to maintain the human-wilderness connection. The existence of multiple beliefs is part of the heterogeneity which defines cities.

CONCLUSION

Seals and sealings in LC2–3 northern Mesopotamia are evidence for administration and economic control, among the most important aspects of urban, socially-complex societies. This administration was layered over, rather than replaced, kinship and other informal modes of socio-economic organization. In the same way, state religion, as expressed in the growth of temples, was layered over but did not replace a strong pre-existing belief system.

The elaboration of human-animal composites during the Late Chalcolithic may be related to thinking through a human-environment relationship that was subtly changing during the expansion of urbanization, including a deepening contrast within the landscape and in inhabitants' mental maps between tamed farmed areas near settlements and distant wild areas. Wilderness may have been increasingly limited, but limits can generate paradoxical emotions: value and fear. Wilderness areas were valuable as sources of timber, metal, obsidian and flint, but the reduced knowledge of such areas as more people became tied to farming may have generated fear of the unknown. Composite figures acknowledged the value and addressed the fear through presenting the persistence of a human-animal connection and the possibility of access to another world or

special natural places. A connection to the unknown and the uncontrollable within an increasingly structured world of crowded cities, taxation, and powerful institutions might have provided a release. An individual who could move between human and animal worlds could offer awe or comfort and symbolize resistance to cities and their restrictions. As such, the LC composites are potential solutions to social problems.

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