SHORTER NOTES

AKKADIAN STEPPED ALTARS

It might be thought that the last word concerning the altar as represented in ancient Mesopotamian art had been said by Kurt Galling in his invaluable and comprehensive work on the subject 1). Since his book was written, however, much fresh material has been discovered or made available by publication, and therefore it may be useful to reconsider what can be learnt from representations of at least one type of altar in early glyptic art. Altars were often rendered in summary fashion with little regard to proportions or details, for an altar was not itself an object of veneration but was merely an item of the temple furnishings. Galling stresses the peasant character of the culture prevailing in Mesopotamia in the Third Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods to explain why the utensils employed in religious rites were all derived from objects in use in daily life. In this he is perfectly right, for the purpose of the earliest “sacrifices” was to promote the fertility of crops, flocks, and herds.

As the long series of sacred edifices at Eridu have proved, the earliest temples almost always contained a “table of offerings”, not at first in the cella itself, but in an adjoining room 2). The table of offerings was a solidly built, immovable structure. In the Early Dynastic period a tall, cylindrical vessel was often placed in front of a divinity, either male or female, and into it libations were poured 3); they must always have been of pure water because sprays of foliage frequently rise from the vase, and a cluster of fruit hangs over the edge on each side. It is a misconception to classify these particular vases as altars 4). Even to speak of the libation as a drink-offering is a misnomer, for the rite

1) Kurt Galling, Der Altar in den Kulturen des alten Orients (Berlin, 1925).
3) Heuzey, Découvertes en Chaldée, Pls. 4ter, 4bis, Fragments F, G reverse, Fig. p. 209; B.M. 23580, King, CT VII, Pl. I, b; AJ VI (1926), p. 376, Pl. LIII, a; B.N. No. 15; Porada, The Morgan Library Coll. (Corpus of ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Museums I) (= Corpus I), Pl. XX, No. 125; Ur Excav. II, Pl. 192, No. 13; III, Pl. 21, No. 533.
4) Galling, Der Altar, pp. 23-9, 33-4, Figs. 9-23, 27-33, 53, termed “Vasenaltar”.
performed seems to have been a mimetic rain-making ceremony to promote fertility; the water was poured out upon the ground or, more realistically, upon the verdure and clusters of fruit in the vase to symbolize what it was hoped to obtain from the fertilizing showers of rain which the ceremony mimed and solicited. The rite was, strictly speaking, neither a sacrifice nor a drink-offering to the divinity, but a function performed in his presence as a reminder of what he was besought to concede.

An innovation of the Akkadian period seems to have been the portable clay altars of various types suitable for different kinds of offerings. They superseded the tall, cylindrical vessels which became merely supernumerary utensils. It is possible that certain types of altars were considered especially appropriate to particular categories of divinities; for instance, before the Snake-god a low, thick, hour-glass-shaped altar was usually placed 5).

One type of portable altar may for the sake of convenience be termed a "stepped" altar 6). It is best known from the specimens of it discovered in the sanctuaries of phases G and H of the archaic temple of Ishtar in Ashur. Reimpell was the first to explain these clay objects as altars 7), but they have been described as houses, thrones 8), or even as dovecotes 9). The best description of them is given by their discoverer, Professor Walter Andrae, who explains them as models of houses, or more precisely as images of houses used as altars 10). These clay objects were hollow, and the outer walls were modelled to imitate house-fronts. The ground-plan was quadrangular, but the depth exceeded the breadth. The lower floor was divided into

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5) Mus. Guimet No. 30; B.N. No. 78; De Clercq Pl. XVI, No. 141; Moort- gat, Vorderasiatische Rollseigel (= VARS), No. 236; Frankfort, Cyl. Seals, Pl. XXI, b, f; Delaporte, Cat. cyl. or. ... Musée du Louvre (= CCO), A 151, Pl. 72, fig. 6; IB.SA: 16, AnOr. 21, Pl. II, No. 13.

6) Gallie, Der Altar, pp. 20-3, 32-3, Figs. 1-8, 52; he terms an altar of this type "Absatzaltar".

7) Reimpell, ZA 30, pp. 75-6; Weber, Orientalische Studien II (1918), pp. 79-80; Gallie, Der Altar, p. 22, Fig. 7; Unger, Altar: RLV I, p. 111; Van Buren, Clay Figurines, pp. 246-7, No. 1212, with bibliography.

8) Weber, Hommel Festschrift II (1916), pp. 370-92; Meissner, OLZ 26/1923, Col. 168; Contenau, Manuel I (1927), p. 337, Fig. 158.


10) Andrae, Die archaischen Ischtar-Tempel in Assur (WVDOD 39), pp. 34-8, Figs. 7, 8, 12, 13, Pls. 14-17; Das wiederersandete Assur, pp. 75-6, Figs. 34-5.