

Assyrian Clay Hands from Nimrud in the Australian Institute of Archaeology

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Abstract: The AIA is home to three artefacts known in Assyriology and Near Eastern archaeology as ‘clay hands.’ These clay hands were included in Grant Frame’s 1991 catalogue of clay hands from Assyria, but their description is general and at the time of publication their whereabouts was unknown. To bring these artefacts to light, this article provides a general overview of their nature and a descriptive catalogue.

In 1951 the Australian Institute of Archaeology (the Institute) became a financial supporter of Sir Max Mallowan’s excavation at the site of Nimrud. Consequently, Mallowan acknowledged the Institute in later publications (Mallowan 1953: 1) and arranged for the Institute to share in the division of objects (AIA Docs 5202, 5403). Amongst the objects allocated to the Institute were three uninscribed clay hands – or as Mallowan referred to them ‘Hands of Ishtar’. The clay hands bear the excavation numbers ND 1959, ND 1961 and ND 1962 and are now registered with the Institute numbers IA5.022, IA5.023 and IA5.076, respectively. While these artefacts were included in Grant Frame’s exhaustive catalogue of Assyrian clay hands, Frame was unaware of their location in Melbourne and hence he could provide only a very general description of them in his catalogue (Frame 1991a: 371, nos. 87–98 and 101–102). This article brings to light these clay hands by providing a general overview of their nature and a descriptive catalogue.

Assyrian Clay Hands

According to Grant Frame, over 170 clay hands have been recovered from the excavations of Assyrian cities including Nimrud (Calah), Aššur, Khorsabad (Dūr-Šarrukīn) and Nineveh (1991a: 335). The sculpted hands are kiln-fired and consist of two parts: the ‘hand,’ comprising a clinched, squared human fist with five uniformly stylised digits arranged in the same direction and a rectangular ‘arm’ which joins the hand at what would be a wrist joint. The hand could be decorated either by a coat of blue or yellow glaze or bear a royal label inscription and could have fingernails inscribed, sometimes with a bitumen coat. Approximately one third of the 148 catalogued clay hands are inscribed and all but one of these bears an inscription of Ashurnasirpal II (Frame 1991a: 338).

The exact context and function of the clay hands is still poorly understood. The vast majority of clay hands have been found in the ruins of Assyrian buildings and thus do not indicate their exact context (Frame 1991a: 355; Curtis and Reade 1995: 104). Indeed, scholars are undecided on whether the clay hands served a structural function or were merely decorative. There is a number of surveys

of the different scholarly interpretations (Frame 1991a: 356–359; Curtis and Reade 1995: 104; Guralnick 2008: 241–242; Neumann 2014: 72–73, n. 344).

The shape and appearance of the clay hands suggests that the arm was inserted into the wall and only the hand was visible. The few clay hands that have been found in the ruins of walls confirm this theory. However, it is not uncommon to find the arm section broken off and this suggests that the clay hands were not strong enough to function as a part of the structure. On the basis of the available evidence, Julian Reade’s idea that the clay hand functions as a type of corbel seems most reasonable (Curtis and Reade 1995: 104). Some scholars have referred to the clay hands as ‘hands of Ištar’ but there is little evidence to link the sculpting of hands to the cult of that deity nor is there a clear connect between these hands and other decorative hands, such as the *hamsa*, produced by other societies of the Ancient Near East, modern Middle East and Africa (Frame 1991a: 340–341, 356–359, Curtis and Reade 1995: 104; Neumann 2014: 72, n. 341).

Descriptive Catalogue

The three clay hands in the Australian Institute of Archaeology’s collection are in excellent condition and all are complete. They were discovered in Ashurnasirpal II’s palace, the so-called ‘North West Palace’, at Nimrud during two excavation seasons. The Institute’s records show that IA5.076 (ND 1962) was allotted to the Melbourne collection from the 1951 dig in 1952 and IA.022 and IA5.023 came from the 1954 excavation (AIA Docs 5202, 5403). Unfortunately, they were not located in their original context but in one of Austen Henry Layard’s ‘dumps’ in the northwest corner of the palace that Mallowan re-excavated a century later (Frame 1991a: 371). However, their presence in the North West Palace indicates that they date from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II.

As a set, they are rather typical in style with other clay hands from Nimrud. They are made from brown clay but there are traces of a pale white paint on two of the three clay hands. In Frame’s catalogue he noted that expedition records indicated that some of the clay hands ‘were



Figure 1: IA5.022 (ND 1959) View of the top side.

covered with a light glaze' and this certainly seems to be the case with IA5.023 and IA5.076.¹ What is particularly pleasing about these exemplars is the survival of the arms, which can often be missing.² Like other clay hands, there is a noticeable difference in the smoother texture of the fists from the rougher surfaces of the arms.

IA5.022 (ND 1959)

IA5.022 is complete, made of brown clay and measures 235 mm (l), 98 mm (w) and 69 mm (h), and weighs 2040g (Figures 1 & 2). There is no trace of a glaze or any other decoration. The end of the arm bears five dents which could well be the indents left by fingertips in antiquity (Figure 3). This is the only example of such dents I have been able to find on a clay hand but, upon inspection of the artefact, it seems that the finger impressions might have been made when pushing the clay hand by the arm into a kiln for firing, since such impressions would have been impossible after firing and one cannot pick the clay hand up by placing one's fingers in the position of the impression.

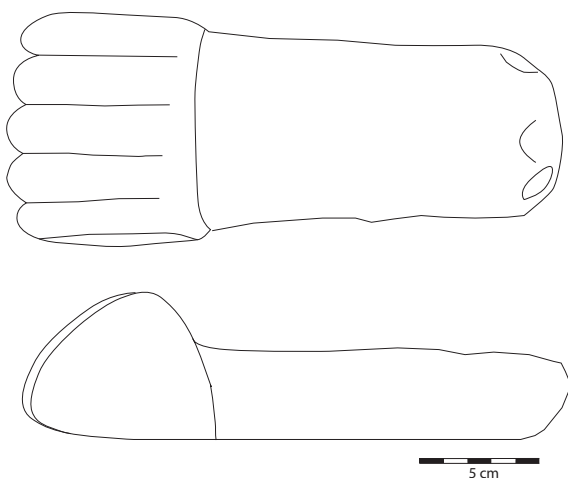


Figure 2: IA5.022 Drawing, top and side elevations



Figure 3: IA5.022 View of the end of the 'handle' showing fingure impressions

IA5.023 (ND 1961)

IA5.023 is complete, made of brown clay and measures 216 mm (l), 95.5 mm (w) and 56 mm (h), and weighs 808g (Figures 4 & 5). The hand is mostly covered in a faint white paint. As mentioned above, Frame noted in his catalogue that the British expedition records state that some of the clay hands excavated from the same find spot as this one were covered in a light glaze. I suspect that this is one such hand.



Figure 4: IA5.023 (ND 1961) View of the top side.

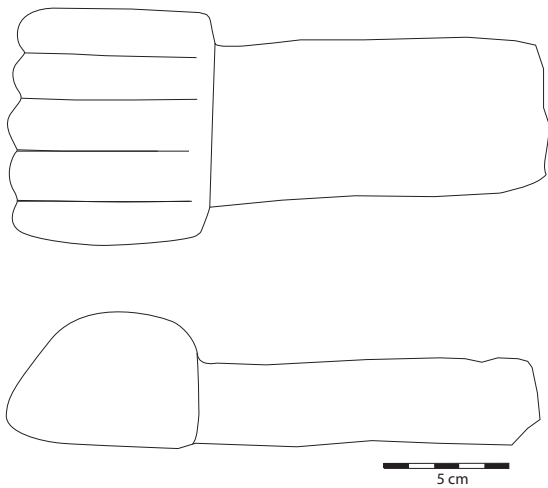


Figure 5: IA5.023 Drawing, top and side elevations

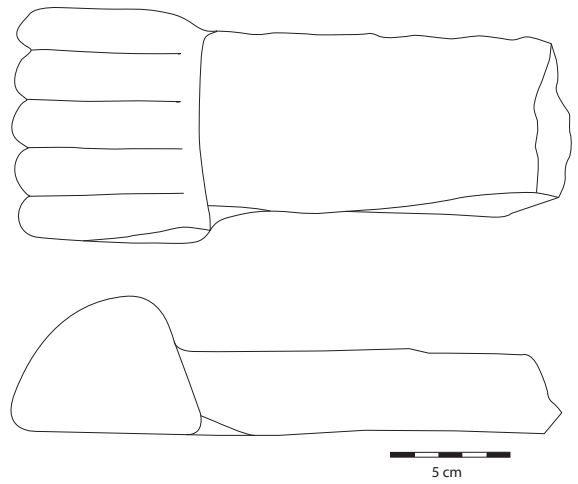


Figure 6: IA5.076 Drawing, top and side elevations.



Figure 7: IA5.076 (ND 1962) View of the top side.

IA5.076 (ND 1962)

IA5.076 is complete, with minor damage to the end of the arm (Figures 6 & 7). The hand is made of brown clay and measures 232 mm (l), 99 mm (w) and 59 mm (h), and weighs 958g. The hand has traces of the same white paint as IA5.023, though it has not survived as consistently across the fingers. It is most likely that this is another example of the ‘lightly glazed’ clay hands in the British expedition records.

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Endnotes

- 1 Frame 1991a: no. 87–98, p. 371. Note that IA5.023 (ND 1961) and IA5.076 (ND 1962) are actually no. 102–103 and the description about the glaze is not listed here. However, given these clay hands were found in the same location as no. 87–98 and the general nature of the records from the British expedition, it is not hard to see that the description of the light glaze may actually refer to IA5.023 and IA5.076 in the Australian Institute of Archaeology’s collection.
- 2 Compare, for instance, those clay hands published here with those in the Oriental Institute at Chicago all of which have lost the arms, see Guralnick 2008.