

Preliminary Thoughts on the Tall Nimrin Krater

The 1990 season of excavations at Tall Nimrin, under the direction of James Flanagan, David McCreery and Khair Yassine, continued the excavation of a series of plots on the east side of the *tall* near its center. A late Iron I through Persian period sequence was exposed but excavations stopped just at the top of the Late Bronze through Early Bronze Age IV sequence excavated at the road cut in the 1989 season (Flanagan and McCreery 1990).

The single most important object from the 1990 season was a krater that was reconstructed from many fragments that were found on and above the floor of an Iron II building (FIG. 1). The krater, measuring 33 cm high and 34 cm in diameter, is unique with its fascinating, 8 cm high decorative frieze providing a rich addition to the corpus of artistic materials from Transjordan (FIG. 2).

General Description

The profile of the handleless krater is unusual but fits in a general eighth-sixth century BC context with exterior wheel burnishing of a cream to pink-cream surface. The decorative frieze includes representations of animals, naked men, palm trees and an incense altar. The figures were probably applied to the vessel in the leather hard



2. Sherds of krater smashed on floor of room.

stage before it was fired (FIG. 3). They were formed by applying small individual molds over patches of clay that had been applied to the surface of the vessel. This created greater relief in the figures and made fuller impressions from the molds. Many of the figures are repeated impressions from the same mold. There are 20 separate impressions in the frieze.

The frieze progresses in two directions around the

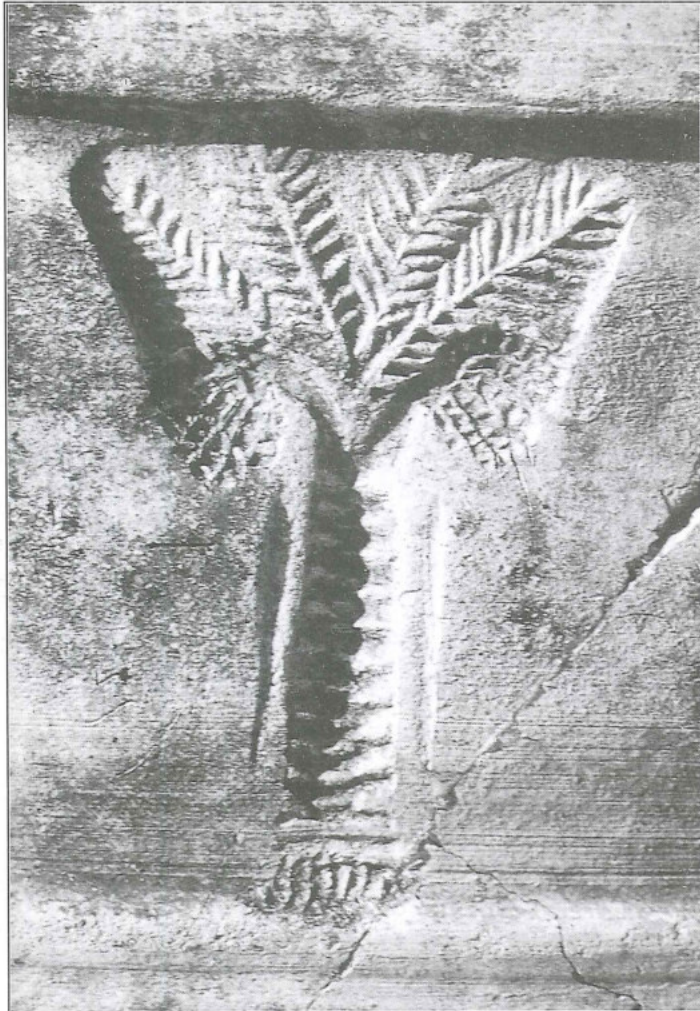


1. General view of the Tall Nimrin Krater.

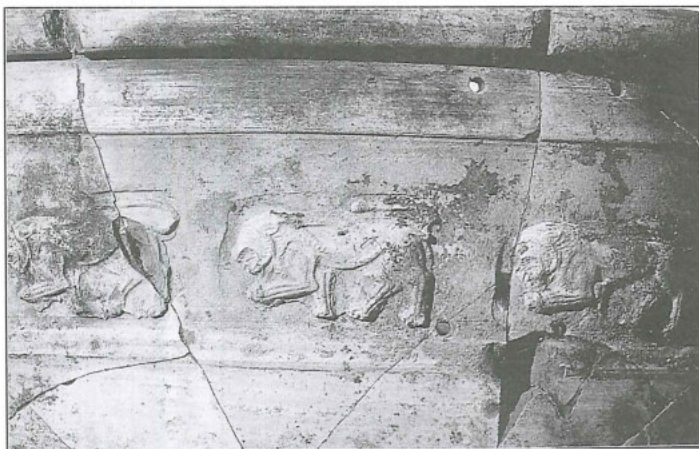


3. Interior view of krater.

vessel. A palm tree (FIG. 4), repeated four times, is used as a divider between the five groups of figures. Three lions (FIGS. 5 and 6) in profile, stride to the left and are separated by a palm tree from three stags (FIGS. 7 and 8), also in profile, striding in the same direction. Another palm tree separates the stags from a third group, a row of



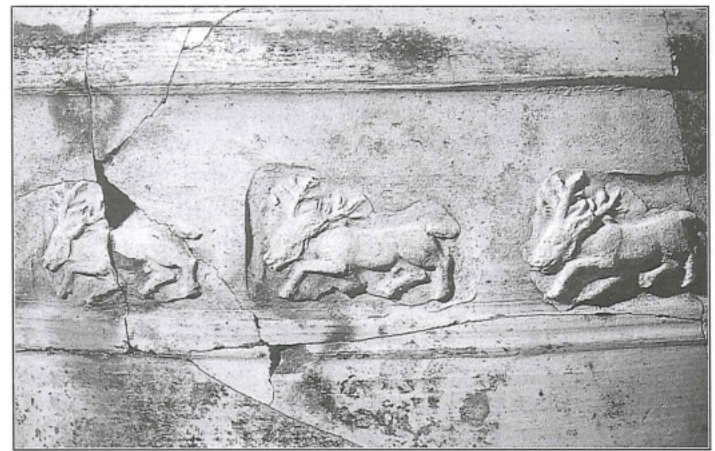
4. Palm tree impression.



5. Impression of lions.



6. Impression of lion.

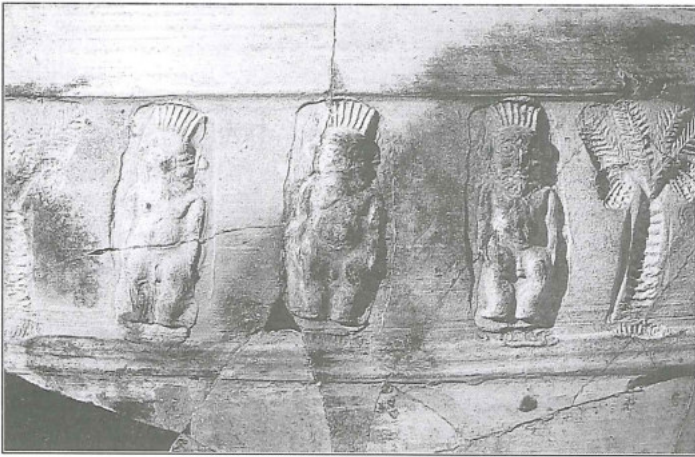


7. Impression of stags.

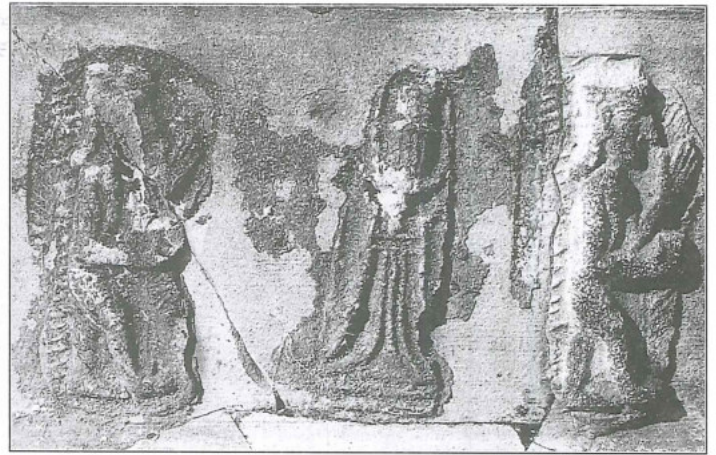


8. Impression of stag.

three naked Bes figures represented frontally (FIGS. 9 and 10). Another palm tree separates the remaining figures which proceed in the opposite direction. This sequence starts back to back with the lions but without a palm tree divider. The fourth group is two naked men, in profile, proceeding to the right, separated by an incense altar (FIGS. 11 and 12). A palm tree separates this group



9. Impressions of Bes figures.



11. Impression of two naked men and incense altar in ritual scene.



10. Impression of Bes figure.

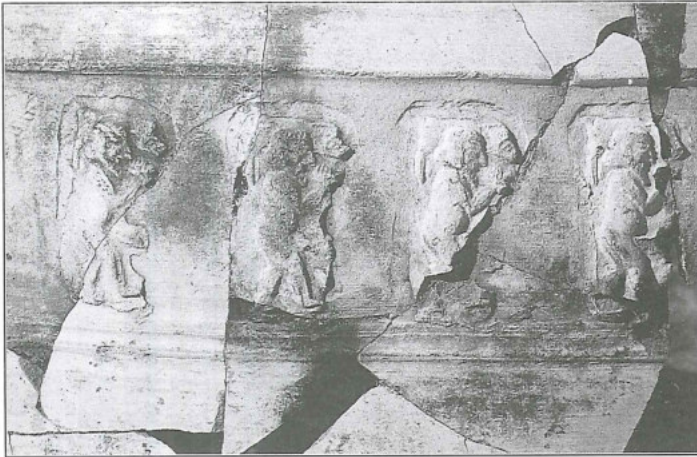


12. Impression of one of the naked men in the ritual scene.

from the last group of four naked men in profile (FIGS. 13 and 14), striding to the right, quite clearly sexually aroused and carrying boards on their shoulders.

Each of these representations provides tantalizing details that help link its art style with well known pieces

from elsewhere. The examination of each figure reveals many general parallels in a broad Near Eastern context, but the combination of features has no exact parallels. The style is uniform with well modeled, realistic representations developed by a school of art belonging to the



13. Impression of naked men carrying boars.



14. Impression of naked man carrying boar.

late Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian periods but not conforming precisely in details to well known Assyrian, Syrian, Phoenician or Egyptian representations of the time. Of course, the figures are reduced to small scale for the molds and this adaptation may have influenced the style

somewhat. The pottery found in association with the krater is primarily large, reconstructible storage jars and a small number of other types of vessels. Though the stratigraphic sequence in this area of excavation at Nimrīn covers at least the tenth through fourth centuries BC, our study of the ceramic sequence has just begun and the repertoire of forms is quite restricted. At this time it is premature for us to be more precise than the date range we have proposed — the eighth through the sixth century BC.

The use of mold-made figurines for decorative purposes is known from many periods. Roughly contemporary molds were found near the Roman theater in downtown 'Ammān, in the excavation of an Iron Age tomb (Dornemann 1983: 132-142). The stylistic details again do not conform precisely to Phoenician, Syrian, Assyrian or Egyptian models though they are clearly heavily dependent on all in detail and choice of motifs. It is not yet possible, in our opinion, to subdivide Transjordan into Ammonite, Moabite or Edomite styles until specific features characterizing these designations can be separated from a broad common tradition. The only known use of small molds like those from 'Ammān has been to produce terra cotta plaques or to provide facial detail on human figurines hand-molded in clay. Only the excavation at Buṣayra have provided precise parallels with the Nimrīn treatment of molded decoration on a pottery vessel. At Buṣayra a sherd of a fine ware bowl (Bennett 1975: FIG. 8.9, 10) was decorated with a mold impressed stag that is almost identical to the one on the Nimrīn krater.

The art style employed for the decoration of the Nimrīn krater is a combination of normal, expected conventions in Near Eastern art and some unique or very unusual features. The presentation of files of animals and humans can be traced back to proto-dynastic art work in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Frankfort 1970: 26-29, 81, 212, etc.; Barnett 1982: PL. 3). The lion is extremely common throughout the Near East and parallels can be illustrated for the position of the tail, the folded-over ear, the menacing snarl bearing the teeth and tongue, and the ruff of the mane framing the face. The molding of the muscles of the legs, body and paws are somewhat patterned but not excessively. The treatment of the mane is unusual as it tapers to two points on the back. The bodies of the stags, similarly, are not rendered by a stylized treatment of the muscles or hooves, but are realistically treated. The head and horns dominate the body. The horns are elaborate and in good proportion to the head but the head seems oversized in comparison to the body. The greatest amount of detail is concentrated on the head and the rack of horns. This, however, may be deceptive and a result of the lack of uniformity in the impressions with some true to the rendering of the mold and others inaccurate, where

the full detail was not impressed or was obscured.

Date palms, again, are extremely common in Near Eastern art and the depiction of the bark, fronds and date bunches seems less stylized than realistic. The representation of the god Bes is well articulated (Wilson 1976: 88, 100) with feathered crown, a large mask-like face with large eyes, moustache, beard and protruding, perhaps non-human ears. The body is plump with rounded features, short proportions, particularly short legs, and only a slight belly with several folds beneath, and a clearly articulated penis.

Tall, narrow incense altars are depicted in Phoenician, Assyrian and later art work (Forte 1976: FIG. 39; Strommenger 1962: FIG. 260) but again, not conforming to the precise details shown here. The human depiction on the krater is most provocative. The two figures with the altar should, in typical Near Eastern iconography, be represented so that they face the altar, the object of their attention. Apparently it was not considered essential to produce an additional mold for a left-facing individual, so the same mold was used here for both figures flanking the altar. It is difficult to see if the right hand holds an object or simply is positioned with the palm up. The left hand is open and raised in an attitude of salute or prayer. The treatment of the head and face is similar to the depiction of many "Semitic" figures. It has almond-shaped eyes, beard and is somewhat flattened on the top of the head. The impression is indistinct and the figure may be wearing a flat, shallow hat. The shoulder-length hair is common. It is difficult to interpret the function of the herring bone pattern behind the man, whether this is used simply as a decorative space filler or is intended to represent some kind of a tree, like a pine. The nakedness of the figure is unusual in a formal context. Normally worshipping figures are clothed and nakedness is reserved for individuals in disgrace; a common depiction of prisoners of war, as it is in the scene on the 14th century ivory carving found at Megiddo (Loud 1939: no. 295; Strommenger 1962: 214). In our case, the nakedness is clearly intended and is consistent with the representation of the four male figures in the next group.

The repetition of four rather than three figures in the final group must have been intended for emphasis. In contrast to the relatively lean figures at the altar, the bodies of these figures are fuller and more rounded. The musculature of the bodies is not particularly emphasized, though this is difficult to determine because the mold is not fully impressed on all of the figures. The face is represented with almond-shaped eyes, small mouth, large pointed nose, and fairly long pointed beard. The hair style is slightly different and fuller than that shown on the figures of the other group, with fuller shoulder-length hair this time covering rather than pulled behind the ear. This rendering is very similar to that of the figurine head

published by Glueck from the Moabite site of al-Madaiyina (1968: 145). No hat is indicated on the figures of this group but rather the figure is bare-headed. It is possible that a band may have been used to hold the hair, but this cannot be seen in the impressions. The right hand is drawn up to the face and may be intended to help hold the animal on the shoulders but looks more like the hand is holding a shallow cup to the mouth. The erect, apparently circumcised, penis is explicit. The identification of the animal is surprising. The squared back end, short tail, sharp rounded juncture from shoulder to head, small squared-off snout, rounded lower jaw, centrally positioned eye and placement of the ear, conform to representations of boars rather than any other animals, like lambs, goats, calves or deer. A figure carrying a young boar is unique while animal bearers with sheep, calves or stag are documented elsewhere in Near Eastern art (Orthmann 1971: TFL. 30).

Function of the Krater

Given the wealth of detail on the krater, what insight can the choice of figures provide for an understanding of its function? Some figures like the stags, lions and palm trees are such common representations that they can be considered "standard" motifs. The Bes figures would seem to have a more specific meaning in defining the context. The two worshippers are again standard, but provide illustration of a specific ritual act. The final scene, again basically standard as a file of men, has clearly been placed in a very specific context with the depiction of the nakedness — taken to the point of seeming lewdness, and the choice of an unusual animal to be carried, a pig, that would be classed as unclean in many Semitic contexts. The possibility of the figures shown as drinking, brings to mind the consideration of a wine krater for this vessel. It almost seems as if these four figures are intended to present as acceptable what, in many contexts, is usually considered taboo: inclusion of swine in a ritual act, nakedness to the point of lewdness, and drinking. Highlighting some religious purpose with an emphasis on fertility is obvious in this group, but is also emphasized by the choice of the god Bes and the use of the palm tree.

Art Style on the Freeze

Before proceeding with a brief examination of broad parallels and pertinent literary and cultural evidence to help place the artistic representation in its cultural framework, I would like to look in greater detail at parallels for some of the representations. I have already mentioned the lion as a common animal in Near Eastern art. It is difficult to connect the lion specifically with a certain deity, though it is shown in relation to a number of deities. One of its most common functions is as a guardian at the doorways

of temples or other important buildings, or as a guardian at the entry to important rooms in a building complex. The lion hunt is a standard topic for artistic representation, giving the hunter, usually royalty, particular status in overcoming an animal of fierce power. Such scenes are best known from Assyrian palace reliefs and contemporary Neo-Hittite reliefs (Frankfort 1970: FIGS. 185, 210-212; Bittel 1976: FIG. 306).

The representation of a stag is somewhat less common but is found in Assyrian period art, as at Arslan Tash (Barnett 1982: FIG. 47e, f), as an individual motif and as an animal worthy of chase. Again, a powerful animal successfully hunted would provide glory to the hunter. The stag has a long history of representation in Anatolian art from earliest times and is well at home in Neo-Hittite context (Frankfort 1970: FIGS. 210-211; Bittel 1976: FIGS. 224, 280). Whether or not this choice is included on the krater out of a "catalogue of standard motifs," as may be the case with the lions and palm trees, is not certain. Our repertoire of Transjordanian art work is too limited to allow us to determine any favorite animals for the region. The illustration of a boar is clearly uncommon in Near Eastern art, though good examples occur. Again, like the stag, an Anatolian context may be closer to home than elsewhere. A 14th century BC relief from Alaca Höyük includes a boar with a stag in a hunt scene (Bittel 1976: FIG. 225).

The intended allusions to fertility in the choice of motifs is far from clear in each case, and leaves room for considerable speculation. The palm tree, as an independent motif or in a small group scene, can symbolize fertility, whether grouped with human figures in a variety of ways or with a heraldic pair of animals. The illustration of a palm tree and the abstracted use of a tree as a stylized tree of life has a long history in Near Eastern art.

The god Bes was taken up as an outside element in Egypt, apparently by the Middle Kingdom (Ions 1973: 110; Wilson 1976), and occurs in amulets, ivories and sculpture from the second millennium on in Palestine and Syria. The range of functions for Bes in Egypt included the use of his depiction as a "good luck charm" related to fertility and more specific associations as a protective force in childbirth. Precisely what function, association and meaning this god had to the northeast of Egypt is of course speculative and could range from very general symbolism, like the palm tree, or a very specific function like the protective force for child birth, or a local modification of the fertility theme to a distinct but, to us, unknown function. The feathered headdress is typical but not always present in representations of Bes. Bes is often characterized by leonine features but here only the facial features tend in that direction with the scraggly beard, large eyes and protruding ears (unfortunately the

frequently found short stump nose is poorly preserved). No further indication is given: like the frequently found paws and tail of a lion to indicate that a lion's skin is worn by the figure (Moscati 1988: 357-361, 623, 653, 684, 723). The figure is isolated and not further embellished with representations of snakes or monkeys, as is sometimes the case on Neo-Hittite sculptures (Bossert *et al.* 1950: TFLN. XIV:71, XVI:78).

One mold fragment found in Tomb F near the Roman theater in 'Ammān (Dornemann 1983: FIG. 88:5), was found with other molds and pottery maker's tools. It was intended for the production of a simplified figurine of Bes that must have yielded an impression also roughly 8 cm high. The feather head dress is indicated, and the face, which is large in comparison to the body, has a lengthy beard, fat cheeks, large flattened nose, normal-sized eyes and large but indistinct ears. Only one shoulder and arm are preserved and nothing below the waist. The arm does not rest at the side but the hand is brought in toward the belly. The 'Ammān mold could have been used to decorate a vessel, as was done when the Nimrīn krater was produced, or it could have been used to produce small plaques. The date range for the tomb is given as second half of the seventh century to the beginning of the sixth, but there is no precise overlap of details between the 'Ammān and Nimrīn figures to require precise temporal agreement.

If the choice of motifs for the Nimrīn krater is intended to stress a consistent theme, then the nakedness of the male figures may be intended to carry the fertility theme further and accentuate the human fertility aspect in some sort of worship or ritual setting. This seems more likely than an alternative of interpreting the final scene simply as an erotic depiction.

Aspects of fertility rituals or worship are associated with the common representations of naked women (van Buren 1930: FIGS. 25-29, 34-50; Dornemann 1979: 113-151) on plaques or seals from the late third millennium on, but the representation of male nudity is extremely rare. The representation of the ithyphallic Min of Koptos in Egypt is of course obviously similar when rendered in profile. Min's worship is clearly related to fertility and he is well known as "Lord of the Eastern Desert, for he was the tutelary deity of the caravan routes to the Red Sea which departed from Koptos passing through dangerous tribal lands. He was called Lord of Foreign Lands and was the protector of nomads and hunters" (Ions 1973: 110). A possible connection in this light between Min and Transjordan is intriguing.

The only other representations which could be related to the naked Nimrīn figures are occasional, mostly Mesopotamian, scenes classed as erotic or as representations of the sacred marriage. It is possible that our representations are related to such fertility ceremonies but a

quick review of relevant artistic representations provides no concrete similarities. Also, a quick review of Near Eastern and Biblical references to fertility ceremonies yield some possibilities, but again nothing concrete. One thinks of the repugnance of King David's wife Michal at his dancing before the Lord when the ark of the covenant was moved to Jerusalem. One wonders about the background of this ceremony and whether David remained clothed with the linen ephod through the ceremony, as 2 Samuel 6:20 has him "disrobing in the sight of slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would." Exactly what the Transjordanian religious practices from Moab, Ammon and Edom were, that were similar to those rebuked by Israelite prophets as practices taken up by the Israelites from their neighbors, are known in only a general way. Can a clue be found in the mention of ceremonies dealing with the drinking of wine or associated with swine? Our preliminary remarks cannot pursue these matters in detail but references to consumption of pork broth brings us into the area of practices dealing with the cult of the dead (Heidir 1985: 389-391) and the possibility of a ritual involving the offering of semen in place of human sacrifice (Heidir 1985: 402) may connect several other vague threads which, upon further study, may lead to some clarification.

Broader Cultural Connections

What cultural thread connects practices in Transjordan with those in the Phoenician homeland and beyond? A quick review, again, provides nothing concrete but indicates that as more information becomes available, the associations of the figures on the Nimrin krater may help to pull together and clarify some of these practices.

The date of the krater coincides with the period of Phoenician expansion in the Mediterranean area. Many of the distinctive features of Phoenician culture can also be found in Transjordan (Homès-Fredericq 1987: 89-96) as for example, a similar repertoire of artistic conventions including the "woman in the window" and naked women wearing polos hats, representation of the god Bes, the use of terra cotta masks, including grotesque masks, as well as many shared features in the form and decoration of pottery vessels and the use of votive sculpture as found in the 'Ammān district and on Cyprus.

Beyond the Phoenician world, the Greek world picked up Near Eastern ideas at this time and incorporated them into their art, rituals and many areas of life and culture (Boardman 1967: 73-108; Amyx 1988: FIGS. 15-17, 19, 20, 23, 24, 52). One of the earliest features of Orientalizing Greek Art on pottery was the use of animal friezes which included the lion, stag and boar. Common representational conventions are evident, as on lions in the patterning of the mane, the representation of the snarl, depiction of the tongue and the positioning of

the tail. Stags with ample racks of horns are included in the repertoire and boars occur frequently (Boardman 1967: FIGS. 40, 55, 83). Even mold-impressed decoration is found on contemporary vessels in Crete, though with little similarity in artistic rendering to our Nimrin krater (Boardman *et al.* 1970: TFLN. 24-37).

The most tantalizing connection of our krater with artistic representations of the Greek world are the scenes showing male nakedness. The Greek artist's delight in depicting the human form is a cornerstone of Greek Art, and the freedom of expression and abandon of the Greek artists finds great delight, rather than shame, in the depiction of cavorting erotic figures (Boardman 1964: FIGS. 90, 91, 150; Berard and Vernant 1984: 175-216). No animal ears or tail can be discerned on the figures of the Nimrin krater, so connections with the god Silenus or with satyrs, cannot be established. The Dionysiac scenes with cavorting satyrs (Boardman 1967: FIGS. 89, 90; 1964: FIG. 78; Berard and Vernant 1984: 175-216), often represented as accompanied by music, with dancing and with wine, take on a haunting similarity if the one group of Nimrin figures are to be understood in dancing postures with cups at their mouths!

It is impossible at this point to accentuate the similarities we have indicated, but clearly we have much to learn before we can securely place the Nimrin krater into a clear and well understood cultural and religious context. On the other hand, the uniqueness of the krater and its depictions will provide a significant reference point for our understanding of the art of Transjordan and its place in a broader cultural context.

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