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Volume Twenty-Eight

Urkesh/Mozan Studies 5

Reading Figurines

Animal Representations in Terra Cotta
from Royal Building AK

Rick Hauser

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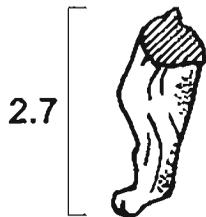
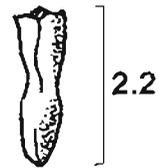
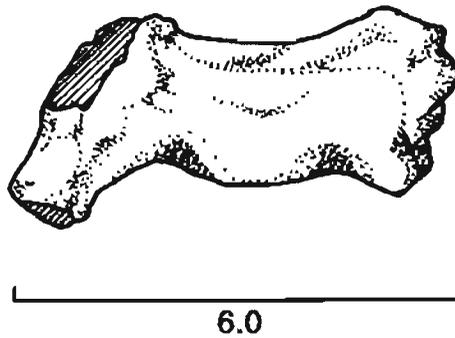
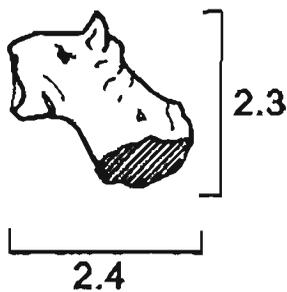
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RICK HAUSER / Renderings by Claudia Wettstein

***READING FIGURINES: ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS
IN TERRA COTTA FROM ROYAL BUILDING AK
AT URKESH (TELL MOZAN)***

READING FIGURINES

ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS
IN TERRA COTTA
FROM ROYAL BUILDING AK
AT URKESH (TELL MOZAN)



TPOLOGY
RICK HAUSER

RENDERINGS
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PREFACE
GIORGIO BUCCELLATI

UNDENA PUBLICATIONS
MALIBU 2007

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge with thanks help from the following people, institutions, and research institutions:

GRANTS and A GIFT

One simple event can change your life, as we were recently reminded. The day I walked into Dr. Giorgio Buccellati's office at the Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, with my wife, Nancy, and our two-year-old daughter, Hannah, in tow, changed my life and the lives of my family as well. Since that day in 1983, the Hauser family has been graced by the friendship of the Buccellati family — Giorgio and Marilyn and Iko — and my professional and personal life has been given added luster through my fieldwork at Mozan and my films and studies of the artifacts recovered there and at Terqa. Giorgio suggested I “take on a specialty” many years ago. I must have just stumbled (literally) across A5.30, a stunning equid figurine from AK. So figurines it was. This volume attests to that interest, kindled now some time ago by friends and colleagues.

The first draft of this work was supported in part by funding from the Minnesota Humanities Commission in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Minnesota State Legislature. Of course, what you read here about the analysis of third-millennium figurines may or may not represent ideas shared by the MHC and its funders.

Herewith I echo the thanks of the Director of the Expedition, Dr. Giorgio Buccellati. This work would not have been possible without the assistance and support of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, in particular Director General, Dr. Abd el-Razzaq Moaz, the new Director of Excavations, Dr. Michel Maqdissi, and the Director of the Office in Hassaka, Mr. Abd el-Mesiah Bakdou.

LIBRARIES and MUSEUMS

The Archaeological Library of the Brooklyn Museum, and Diane Bergman, Librarian, Wilbour Library of Egyptology, for access to their collections;

The Art Library, Minneapolis Institute of Arts;

The British Museum for copyrighted material provided, namely *Ovis* on a terra-cotta “trough,” of which I reproduce a detail of the pelt;

The Cleveland Museum of Art for permission to reproduce an image of “*The Median Lion Strangler*”;

The Metropolitan Museum of Art for permission to reproduce a photograph of one of the lion foundation pegs from Urkesh;

Presses Universitaires de France and Mme. Marion Colas for information regarding the ownership of images of Susa figurines;

Universität Zurich, Archäologisches Institut, for permission to reproduce an image from the Leo Mildenberg Collection in their custodial care;

The Library of the School of Veterinary Science, University of Minnesota;

Vorderasiatischen Museum, Berlin, and the present director, Professor Dr. Beate Salje, for permission to reproduce images of the Assur terra cottas owned by the museum;

Wilson Library, University of Minnesota Library, for numerous searches and directives from the Reference Desk;

University of Pennsylvania Press for access to Speiser's field reports and information about the original publication, as well as for images from Woolley's field reports at Ur;

 VETERINARY SCIENCES

Dr. Robert H. Dunlap, Professor, Department of Clinical and Population Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Minnesota;

Dr. Cynthia Gillett, D.V.M., Director, Research Animal Resources, University of Minnesota, for referrals;

Dr. Mark Goodell, D.V.M., for practical information about the domestication of the dog and ancient veterinary practices;

Livestock Breeders, Minnesota State Fair;

Dr. Robert E. Sloan, Professor, Department of Paleontology, University of Minnesota, for discussions about body types and preliminary typology.

 SPECIALISTS

Nicholas Brandt, for allowing me to reproduce here and for permission granted to the Expedition to publish on the Urkesh website his spectacular photograph of a bounding lion;

Bill Cooke, Director of the Kentucky Horse Park, for information about equid domestication;

Jutta Crowder, for verification of my analysis of some German texts;

Dr. Vyacheslav Vs. Ivanov, for information about the origins and etymology of certain words relating to equids;

Dr. Denise Schmandt-Besserat, Professor of Near Eastern Culture, University of Texas, Austin, for analysis and sustained interest in this publication;

Mrs. Sybil Sewell, breeder and judge, for documentation, guidance, and discussion regarding the conformation of donkeys;

Mlle. Agnès Spycket, author, scholar, curator, humanist, for spirited discussions about figurines and the difficulties of establishing a coherent typology;

Biblical Archaeology Society for permission to download on the Internet an article about Urkesh and figurines;

DK Publishing, Inc., for permission to reprint a table documenting pony types from its *Eye-witness Handbooks* series;

The Hamlyn Publishing Group, Inc., for permission to reprint a photograph of a honey badger in the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Animal Life*;

The Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, Publications Section, and Dr. Itzhak Beit Arie, editor, for permission to reproduce renderings of *Capra* and *Canis* from their volume on Horvat Quitmit;

Librairie Paul Geuthner for permission to republish drawings and photographs involving its publications on Tello and Mari; with especial gratitude to Mme. Myra Prince for her patience and support in obtaining these permissions;

The Natural History Museum, London, for permission to reproduce an image of a twisted *Capra* horn from Dr. Juliet Clutton-Brock's work, *Domesticated Animals from Early Times*;

OKAPIA, for permission to reproduce an image of a honey badger from the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Animal Life*;

Oriental Institute Publications and John Larson, Museum Archivist, for help with the reproduction of images from Jarmo and the original Braidwood field reports;

PRIMEDIA Enthusiast Publications, Inc., for permission to reproduce a bitted equid;

Réunion des Musées Nationaux Agence Photographique for a photograph of a bear drinking from a vessel;

W. B. Saunders Company for permission to adapt a schematic drawing of a quadruped, along

with topographic terms of position and direction; in *Sisson and Grossman's The Anatomy of the Domestic Animals*, Vol. 1, 5th Ed. (1975), editorial coordinator Robert Getty, D.V.M., Ph.D., and others;

Michael Yonkers and Lizbeth Voelker, shepherdess of Moonshadow Farms, for information about the present-day body-shape of sheep and goats from the breeder's perspective.

ARTISTS and ILLUSTRATORS

Warren MacKenzie, potter;

Fr. Pietro Pozzi, for his meticulous renderings included here;

Mlle. Emmanuelle Besson for discussion regarding figurine style; and for several renderings included here;

Ms. Aaron Strozinsky, designer, for the format and design of the tables that document ratios, proportions, and secondary characteristics of each genus;

Mme. Claudia Wettstein, whose drawings grace almost every page of this publication. Her intelligence and careful rendering make her a worthy successor to the masters of archaeological design whose work characterizes the finds of classic sites and excavations of times past.

INVESTIGATORS and EXCAVATORS

Miss Helen MacDonald, The Tell Brak Project, MacDonald Institute for Archaeology, for access to unpublished field documents and materials relating to third-millennium figurines from Tell Brak;

Dr. Paolo Matthiae for permission to reproduce his photograph of an artifact from Ebla;

Dr. Rudi Meyr for information regarding early equids and for revised rendering of the *Abakalla* sealing;

Dr. Joan Oates for gracious permission to reproduce a photograph of an Akkadian human-headed bull found at Tell Brak;

Dr. David I. Owen for a rendering of the *Abakalla* sealing by Josh Owen;

Dr. Peter Pfälzner, Altorientalischen Seminar der Universität in Tübingen, for typological criticism and conversation about function;

Despite my best efforts over some years to contact the excavators of Tall Munbaqa, I have never received a response to my multiple queries; I thank these scholars nonetheless, because my work here and in the field has been influenced and is made the better for their efforts; thanks then to

Dr. Rainer M. Czichon

Dr. Peter Werner.

Continuing gratitude is due my colleagues at Tell Mozan. I am touched and gratified by their concern for the proper excavation of figurines, by the care they take to preserve the context of each find, and by the interest they bring to the study of these small terra cotta objects;

I am grateful also for the insight, dedication, and good humor of the Syrian excavators in the Royal Storehouse, good and loyal friends with whom I have worked side-by-side for many years;

PUBLISHERS

Gebr. Mann Verlag for permission to reproduce a photograph from Charlotte Ziegler's study of the figurines of Warka;

Saarbrücker Druckerai und Verlag for permission to reproduce a figure and a photograph from the Tall Munbaqa volume.

Simon & Schuster, for information regarding the copyright of Thompson-Seton's *Animal Anatomy*, and its interest in the publication.

ART Resource/SCALA, for permission to reproduce an image of an equid from the Collections du Louvre, courtesy Musées Nationaux;

Weldon Owen Publishing for permission to reproduce an image of a modern spitz.

Rick Hauser

FOREWORD

Giorgio Buccellati

Referentiality and structure

In presenting the corpus of figurines from the Royal Palace of Urkesh, Rick Hauser has developed a method that aims at providing explicit standards of identification. There is a basic assumption that conditioned his whole effort, and a methodological consistency that ultimately lends it, in my view, true credibility.

The basic assumption is that the animal figurines of our corpus (and presumably those of the same genre in the rest of Syro-Mesopotamia) answer a specific need for referentiality. There was, he suggests, a univocal correlation between any given figurine and a living type of animal. The accent here is on “univocal.” For it is certainly common for all archaeologists to label one figurine a sheep and another a horse. But what is original with Hauser is that, he claims, *every single* figurine unequivocally referred to a very specific genus. And if such referentiality did obtain in the past, it must obtain in the present as well. If the individuals working in the Royal Palace of Urkesh understood the reference, there must be discernible formal traits that we can read into the exemplars that are left for us.

This is all the more remarkable in that a cursory inspection of the data would rather lead us to subsume a good many of these exemplars under such generic categories as “quadrupeds,” without any further attempt at specificity. In this respect, the stratigraphic element bears some weight (and so it did with me as I was hearing the first formulations of Hauser’s principles). Why would there be in the storehouse of the Royal Palace such a wealth of undistinguishable objects? A concrete function, whatever that might be, would more likely be associated with actual, rather than potential, referentiality. Not that one should necessarily attribute precise meaning to everything we find. Yet, given the very concrete context from which they all stem, one would like to explore the possibility that we have here more than just some sort of three-dimensional doodling. At least, this was sufficient to encourage Hauser in his pursuit for meaning.

And he has come up with an answer. What is it, then, that makes this answer plausible? What are the standards for the referentiality he proposes? He points to structure. There are, he shows, recurrent correlations in the general proportions that match, regularly, two important attributes: external diagnostic traits and physiological characteristics. The external diagnostic traits are the ones we all recognize: the mane of a horse, the fleece of a sheep. The physiological characteristics are the more subtle features that a zoologist associates with animal morphology.

And in this respect Hauser was fortunate to be able to spend long hours with Sándor Bököny, then serving as our paleo-zöologist, and insightful enough to know how to avail himself of his expertise. Building on his protracted association with a scholar who related instinctively with the animals being portrayed, Hauser thought he could decode, as it were, the criteria that underlie, precisely, the portraiture. Those recurrent correlations to which I referred are, in effect, distributional classes that he has painstakingly documented and from which he has abstracted repetitive patterns.

It is the high degree of correlation, and fairly sizable scope of the inventory, that lend plausibility to his effort. It also supports his implicit contention that these correlations are neither casual nor random.

The specific results will of course be subjected to criticism by the experts. But one thing at least stands out clearly. And that is that Hauser's identifications are not casual approximations, but formal definitions. Like a linguist studying a language, he points to formally definable distributional classes. He then arranges his data concretely within these precise formal arrays. He goes further and attributes meaning to these arrays by postulating referentiality. Again, like a philologist reading a text, he identifies exemplars that may be considered "cursive," as it were, i.e., a less accurate rendering of the standard template, but what remains in any case, so he claims, is the precise conceptual construct that made the template possible in the first case.

Hence, his use of the Latin terminology for the specific types of animal should be seen not as pretentious, but as the expression of a carefully thought out categorization. Where, looking at a figurine, I may say "sheep" without much concern for pattern recognition, he would say "sheep" as specifically distinct from a goat or an ox — and this he wishes to convey by saying "Ovis." The presupposition remains, as I have stressed, that the ancients were precisely sensitive to such pattern recognition, or else there would not be such a high incidence of correlations.

Function

The implications are significant. If even the simplest "quadruped" could be "read" univocally by a functionary in the Royal Palace as a sheep and thus distinguished from an ox, then the figurines were part of a precise system of meaning in the service of specific administrative mechanisms. I have already referred to the importance of the fact that the bulk of the figurines presented here were found in the accumulations on the floors of the Royal Palace of Tuzkush. In other words, the figurines are found in a context that presupposes regular activities by functionaries and bureaucrats handling goods for various members of the royal family and their high officials. It seems logical to at least consider the possibility that the figurines may have been a mechanism used for the practical operations of this administrative system. All the more so if they carried, as Hauser claims, a univocal referential meaning.

As an additional alternative to the suggestions advanced below (Introduction, p. 43 f.), we may consider the possibility that the figurines may have served as place markers. Sector B of the Royal Palace of Urkesh (Figure F1) is a large storage area where, in our understanding,¹ goods were brought from outlying supply centers (farms producing food staples, ateliers producing finished products like textiles, etc.). These goods were shipped on behalf of the king, the queen, and high officials, and bore sealings that testified to their destination (possibly also their origin). The seal of the king was placed on goods belonging to the king, the seal of the queen on goods belonging to her, and so on. This explains why so many different seals belonging to one and the same individual were used, as evidenced by the impressions found together in the Palace. Once in the Palace, the goods were stored until need for their use arose, at which time the sealing was broken (the small pieces that fell on the floor are the ones we have found).

¹ I relate here the understanding of a complex administrative procedure, which results from a research carried out in common with Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. Our conclusions are published in "The Royal Storehouse of Urkesh: The Glyptic Evidence from the Southwestern Wing," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 42/43 (1995-96), 132.

There was therefore a period during which goods belonging to the various members of the court were stored together in the large room B1 and elsewhere. If these goods were grouped according to the persons to whom they belonged, one might reasonably expect that each area where any given group was stored be labeled accordingly. Given the fact that storekeepers were certainly illiterate, it would make sense to have symbolic place markers that could be “read” as labels. It is such a function that I am suggesting the figurines may have served.

In support of this hypothesis one may consider the following. In our reconstruction, the seals were used to identify at the point of origin the goods being shipped to the Palace as belonging to distinct members of the court. Many of these seals bear an inscription and, in close proximity to, generally immediately below, the inscription itself, they show a filler motif, which is unrelated to the rest of the scene. In several, though not all, the cases the filler motif is an animal of the type found in the figurines (see Figure 2, Object 1). In my interpretation, the sheep would have been used analogously to mark the place where the goods of the queen were stored. In this particular case, the similarity may seem too generic to be particularly meaningful. But consider the other examples.

In Object 2, the reclining human-headed bull has a much higher degree of specificity. The seal belongs to the nurse of the queen, as the inscription says. But obviously she is the nurse *in the service* of the queen, and her real charge is the crown prince, shown in the seal sitting on the lap of his mother. Hence the bull might be the symbol for the crown prince, and only by extension of his nurse as well.

In Object 3, the lion on the seal is not a filler motif, but an integral part of the scene: I show it in this context because the animal’s position at the feet of the king suggests a possible correlation between the animal (whether living or a statue) and the king, in line with the symbolic valence which I am proposing we may attribute to the figurines. In other words, the lion figurines would be place markers for goods belonging to the king.

Finally, Object 4 shows a highly specific detail as a filler motif: a hanging cut of meat. Since the case with the inscription (at least half of it) is too long to allow a filler motif below it, the cut of meat may be viewed as serving both the purposes of a filler motif and as a representational detail, illustrating the actual situation in a kitchen. This place marker would be not a clay figurine, but a bronze pendant (a ring at the top is still preserved) that can unmistakably be identified as exactly the same cut of meat shown in the seal.² The subject seems unlikely for a piece of jewelry, and if so we can at least consider the possibility that the pendant hung from something like a shelf where the goods belonging to the mistress of the kitchen, a woman named Tuli, were kept.

Such a proposed function for the figurines found in the Palace would account for the two features identified in Hauser’s typology. Referentiality was important because the symbols stood for actual animals, as shown on the seals, and the structural correlations were important in order to allow a sure recognition of each type as distinctive. What I have called earlier the “cursive” aspect of many of the figurines would also fit in well. Even the simpler exemplars are not really sloppy. Rather, they always show a sure mastery of the plastic results intended. (Hauser brings this out with much sensitivity in his analysis.) The only explanation must be that they were professionally made, even if at times “cursively,” knowing that they were ephemeral by intent. And such professionalism must in fact be recognized, regardless of what one might think of the specific functional hypothesis I am proposing here.

² In fact, just such a figurine fragment has been recovered — *Capra* 32 A7.301, the right (?) foreleg and hoof of a goat. See *Capra* CATALOG, page 342, this volume (author’s note).

The question may remain open as to why some of the figurines were produced in such a cursive manner while others were not, if they were all meant to serve the same purpose. In fact, in a case such as *Bos 7 A6q569.1* the quality of the manufacturing, the miniature size, and the nature of the iconography (not a real animal, but a human headed bull) are so different from other figurines that one wonders if we are justified in subsuming it under the same category. And are we justified in assuming a similarity of functions for the bronze pendant? For, while the iconography seems to make our hypothesis plausible, everything else puts this object apart from the figurines proper.

In line with these observations, two additional questions arise. The first pertains to what the difference might be between figurines and other types of plastic art. To simply rely on the material used (statues are in stone or bronze, figurines are in clay) seems insufficient. For some of the clay representational objects show a sensitivity for detail very similar to stone and metal “statues.”

Perhaps we may consider as a criterion the (presumed) intent to render generic qualities in the figurines as distinct from that of rendering individual traits in statues or “statuettes.” This will remain a subjective valuation, but by and large the quality of individual modeling does stand out.

The second is the obvious fact that we need not assume a single functional explanation for all figurines. The interpretation proposed here is largely based on the provenance of the exemplars collected in this volume — the storage area of the service wing AK within the Royal Palace. With Hauser, it seems reasonable to assume that these specific figurines were professionally made and served a specific, professional purpose, even when cursively produced. But in other contexts, the figurines may indeed be not the cursive variation of professional production, but rather a parallel, vernacular version, possibly even at the hand of children.

The Urkesh Typological Record

This volume inaugurates a series of reports in which we intend to publish data from our excavations at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, sorted in typological order rather than according to their stratigraphic provenience. Of course, such provenience is not ignored, and in fact appropriate indications are given in Hauser’s catalog for each item. In addition, the overall provenience is homogeneous, since the majority of the figurines come from the main accumulations of the Tupper strata of the service wing AK of the Royal Palace. However, the main focus remains a discussion of the corpus as a typological whole. A full presentation of the AK stratigraphy is left for another volume, which will appear in the series *Urkesh Stratigraphic Record*, and a full analysis of the stratigraphic distribution of this class of object, together with other classes, will also follow.

All primary data will also appear in digital format in the *Urkesh Global Record*. This is a comprehensive database that includes the entire information available for any given excavation unit, with regard to both stratigraphy and typology. The precise articulation of the system, and the way in which the data presented in this volume fit in it, will be presented in detail in the first set of CDs that is due to appear at about the same time as this volume.

Acknowledgments

Together with the Director of the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, I have the pleasant task to acknowledge the assistance of all the individuals and institutions that make our project possible.

As always, we are very grateful for the assistance and support of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, in particular the Director General, Dr. Abd el-Razzaq Moaz, the new Director of Excavations, Dr. Michel Maqdissi, and the Director of the Office in Hassaka, Mr. Abd el-Mesiah Bakdou.

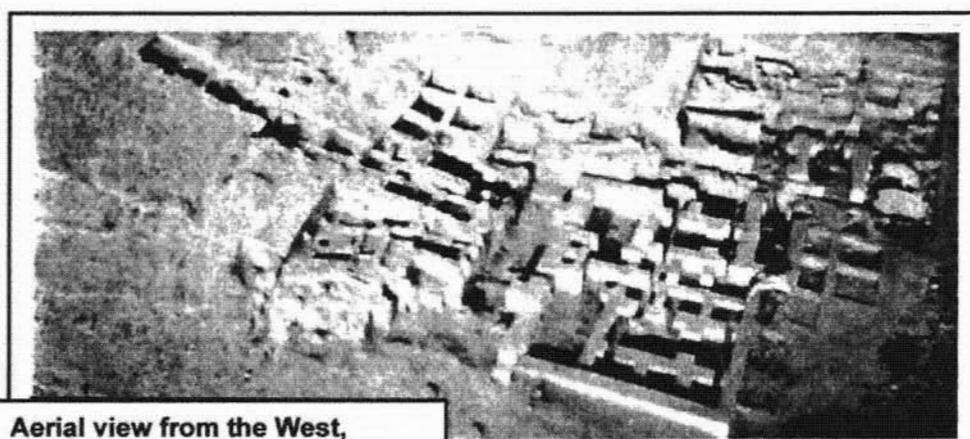
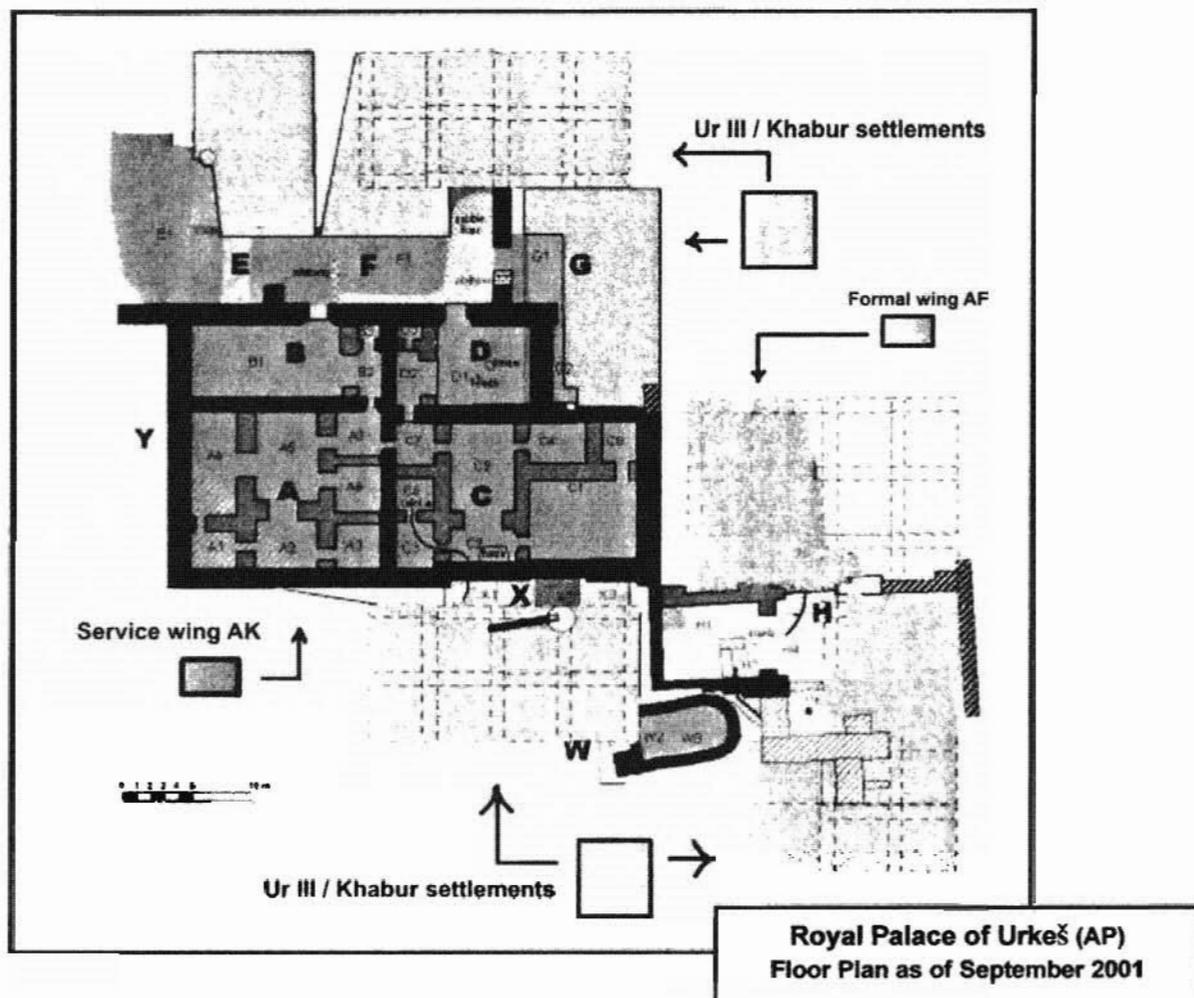


Figure F1 The Royal Palace of Urkeš

SEAL IMPRESSION

MOTIF ON SEAL

THREE
DIMENSIONAL
OBJECT

1



Ovis 13
A7.501

•
Ovis 26
A5q135.1/A5.199

•
Ovis 53
A7.308

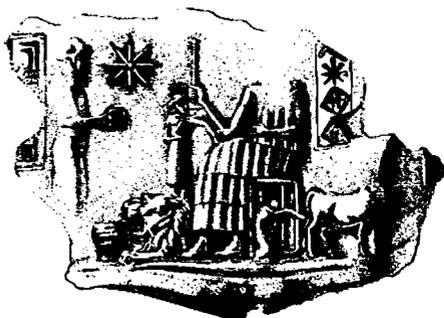
•
Ovis 202
A10.18

2



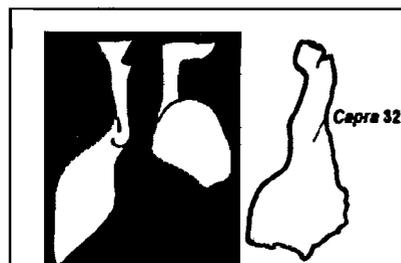
Bos 7
A6q569.1

3



Felis 8
A5.25.1

4



Capra 32

Capra 32
A7.301

Figure F2 Possible correlations: figurines and artifacts with seal motif

The material presented here was excavated during the sixth through eleventh seasons (1990–1998). Work in that period was made possible through grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Catholic Biblical Association, the S. H. Kress Foundation, the L. J. and M. L. Skaggs Foundation, the Ahmanson Foundation, Syria Shell Petroleum Development B.V., the Urkesh Founders, and various donors.

When I suggested to Rick Hauser that he take on the publication of the figurines from the Royal Palace, I did not suspect that so much would come of it. But I should have known better. His commitment to this task, as to any other he has undertaken on behalf of our Expedition, grew in the measure in which the intellectual scope was widening. Such a development was directly proportional to his great sensitivity for a class of objects, which he came to regard more and more as a witness to a life once lived. There was courage in his endeavor — the courage of seeking complexity in spite of a superficial simplicity, of seeking meaning where the obvious seemed apparent, if trite. I, for one, feel that such complexity, such meaning, is not of his making, but is in fact what the data tell us. Beyond the specific results he proposes, I trust that his effort will be appreciated for what it contributes with regard to the articulation of verifiable formal correlations. Certainly, the “philological” basis of his “reading,” i.e., his publication of the primary data as such, is as thorough and accurate as it could possibly have been. Such documentation was after all the primary aim of the task when he first undertook it, and for this we are indeed in his debt.

In his overall effort, Hauser could avail himself of the precious collaboration of Claudia Wettstein. She was not only the person who drew practically all the figurines included in this publication; she also contributed in a substantive way to the definition of the typology in its finer points. And that is because the technical expertise with which she was able to render the figurines was never a mere mechanical exercise, but was rather the natural rendering of a deeper perception. Every single drawing is not only a carefully measured projection; it is, in its own way, a reading.

A GUIDE FOR THE READER

Narrative and Style

This volume has as subject the animal figurines recovered from Royal Storehouse AK at Urkesh (Tell Mozan). To the extent that the CATALOGS accurately represent the genera in this corpus, it is a reference tool and a baseline. Moreover, this work presents a typology, a way of classifying terra-cotta animal figurines in a systematic way. The method cannot be taken whole and superimposed on any other body of data. It was nonetheless our thought from the beginning that others might find ways to adapt this work and to apply it in different circumstances not necessarily contemporaneous with Mozan nor even within the same geographic, temporal or cultural provenience. In this, I share M. E. L. Mallowan's sentiment:

It will be seen that the catalogue makes very lengthy reading, and it is hoped that it may prove of some use as a work of general reference, since it has aimed at referring as widely as possible to similar or analogous material discovered on other ancient sites. (Mallowan 1948)

As for the tone and written style, I have kept in mind field reports that I have found particularly *readable*, namely, Mallowan's work on Arpachiya, Chagar Bazar, and Brak (Mallowan 1936, 1937); Parrot's prose, including his summaries of Mesopotamian archeology (Parrot 1946 I, 1953 II); the Braidwood volumes on the Zagros flank (Braidwood 1983), including the frank and practical evaluations provided by Morales on the figurines from Sarab and Çayönü (for a more complete survey, see Morales 1990). Each of these studies is characterized by expansiveness and by a willingness to share information about context and process as well as artifact; the text moves effortlessly among these three aspects of archaeological documentation without straining credulity or compromising the analysis. To the contrary.

Some of these narratives are downright lively. I have wanted this text to be the same, so that the general reader might also find the subject and the treatment inviting.

This narrative rather frequently speaks in the first person (singular and plural). This seemed natural and appropriate. I have felt that the personal process of discovery and the way a certain line of reasoning developed would be useful to others engaged in the analysis of artifacts, perhaps the more so as classification procedures are reevaluated.

Here is a synopsis of the organization of this volume.

- Each genus is represented by a section in the book.
- Each section is comprised of an INTRODUCTION and a CATALOG.
- In some cases, families are represented by a separate section; as, the order Carnivora is represented by sections on the family Canidae (the dogs have their own CATALOG) and (taken together in another CATALOG) the families Felidae • Ursidae • Mustelidae.

- Some genera are further specified by TYPE, a classification that may point to species differentiation or morphological change brought about by domestication. *Ovis*, *Felis*, and *Equus* are so divided.

- In the first instance, graphic artist-illustrator Claudia Wettstein and I took as model the exemplary drawings of Mr. L. Osman, architect-illustrator for Mallowan's second campaign to the Habur Region (Mallowan 1937). Later, we assigned specific meaning to certain types of graphic conventions of our devising (see page 50, this volume).

The artifacts are identified as follows:

- Within each genus, artifacts are listed in order of discovery, with associated field number. An approximation of stratigraphic sequence can thus be read without reference to more complete depositional information (see the FOREWORD to this volume by the excavation co-director, Dr. Giorgio Buccellati).

- Artifacts are grouped with others found in similar circumstances:

STRATIFIED FINDS (1–99)

STRATIFIED FINDS TENTATIVE IDENTIFICATION (100–199)

RELATED STRATIFIED FINDS (200–299)

RELATED UNSTRATIFIED FINDS (300–399)

OTHER GENERA (400–499)

The findspot of unstratified artifacts cannot be determined with certainty. Some are surface finds. Typological considerations can help to position these artifacts within an appropriate context.

Measuring

Some general observations about the Urkesh figurines and the manner in which they are classified are in order.

Figurines — and certainly many other types of artifacts — may be described in detail in field reports. In the case of an intricately elaborated animal figurine, this description may suffice to distinguish the representation from other examples of the animal form depicted.

If the excavator provides complete description, then medium, color, texture, type of surface decoration, stylistic considerations, and so on — what we could call *secondary characteristics* — may contribute to understanding and may be noted.

Seldom, however, does measurement, except in terms of gross size, play a part in definition of the type of object or its description. As a rule, length and height are the only measurements taken. Occasionally width is specified. Where exactly these measurements are taken, from what point to what point, is seldom made clear. This might be important, for example, if an equid were at rest or in action or if standing, the legs were extended. Where in fact does the body of the animal representation begin and end? If an object is broken and missing appendages, could measurement ever be diagnostic?

These and similar questions began to be important to Claudia Wettstein, my artist-illustrator colleague, and me as we were faced with an ever-mounting assortment of what appeared to be animal representations, all very similar. The difficulty in differentiating amongst them was further complicated by breakage. Deposition in the ground had taken its toll; the figures often were missing an appendage, two appendages — *all* appendages, including the tail. Almost never were we lucky enough to find an animal with its head on.

Even within a class of readily identifiable artifacts, say, horse and rider from the second millennium and later, what *does* distinguish one object from another? Secondary characteristics, assuredly — this example may have a bridle, the rider a beard or cap. And usually the height and length of the object are dutifully noted.

Might there be other information that would be useful in establishing a typology of similar objects from a given period?

In the case of animal figurines, at least, I believe that we have ignored one of the most useful and obvious diagnostic tools — measurement of body parts and, further, ratio and proportion of the given body part to other parts of the animal anatomy. These measurements have become for me, *primary* characteristics, rather than obligatory notations without any particular meaning other than classification by size — a “large horse,” a “larger horse,” the “largest of the lot,” etc.

When we render or photograph the Urkesh animal figurines at Tell Mozan, if time permits we represent six views, taken on a quadruped in normal standing position:

dorsal (frontal plane, from above)
 ventral (frontal plane, from below)
 cranial (forequarters, transverse segmental vertical section)
 caudal (hindquarters, transverse segmental vertical section)
 left median (vertical longitudinal section)
 right median (vertical longitudinal section)

By examining the artifact in each of these views, taken separately at first, we are able to isolate certain characteristics and see, after a time, similarities of body structure.

Where does this terminology come from? We have borrowed our approach to anatomical analysis from veterinarians, scientists whose very specialty is the adequate and accurate description of anatomical normalcy and variants from this norm in order to heal or nurture animals. Our end is different, of course. We aim to describe and define different types of animals as represented in the Urkesh corpus. A *typology* hopefully is the end result of such exhaustive collection of data.

Measurements are taken in the various planes and views described above and the point at which the measurement is taken is usually at the point where the plane intersects the anatomical detail at its greatest extension. It is not unusual for us to take as many as seventeen different measurements of body parts, in order to determine the animal’s genus or species by comparison with other examples from the sample.

Other attributes — secondary characteristics — can also be telling. Some are definitive. Measurement, however, is the underpinning of the typology I have established.

How else might one accurately give meaning to the shattered clay remnants of what Urkish artisans must have meant to represent a living animal?

We comment in some detail on these matters in the pages that follow.