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# **Reading Figurines**

**Animal Representations in Terra Cotta  
from Royal Building AK**

**Rick Hauser**

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R esearch  
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S tudies

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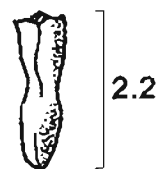
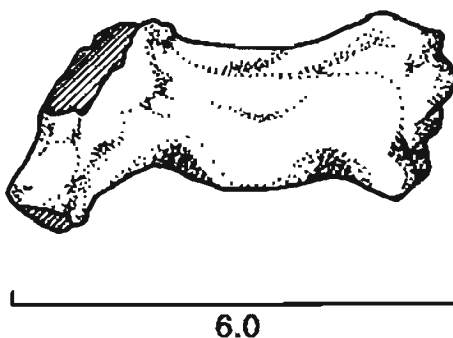
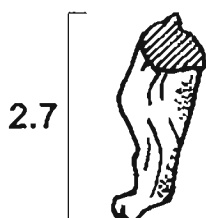
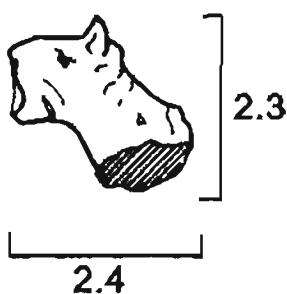
**RICK HAUSER / Renderings by Claudia Wettstein**

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***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  
CLAUDIA WETTSTEIN

PREFACE  
GIORGIO BUCCELLATI

UNDENA PUBLICATIONS  
MALIBU 2007

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*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 Tuzkash. 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,<sup>1</sup> 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).

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

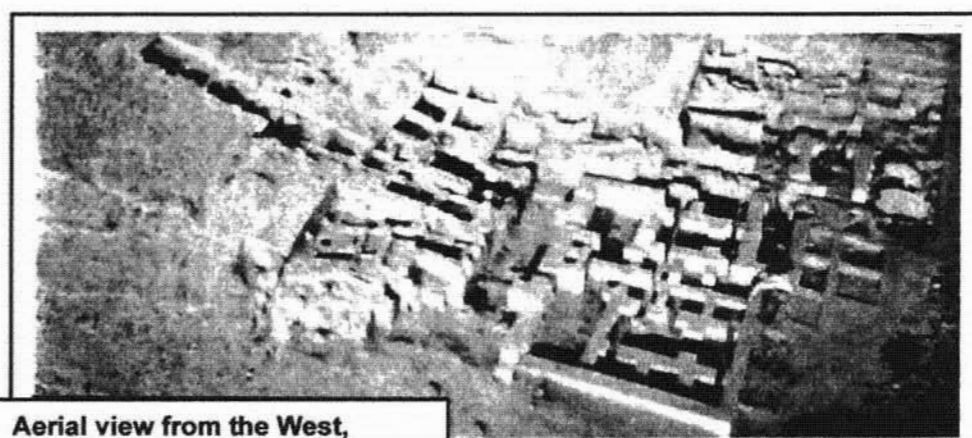
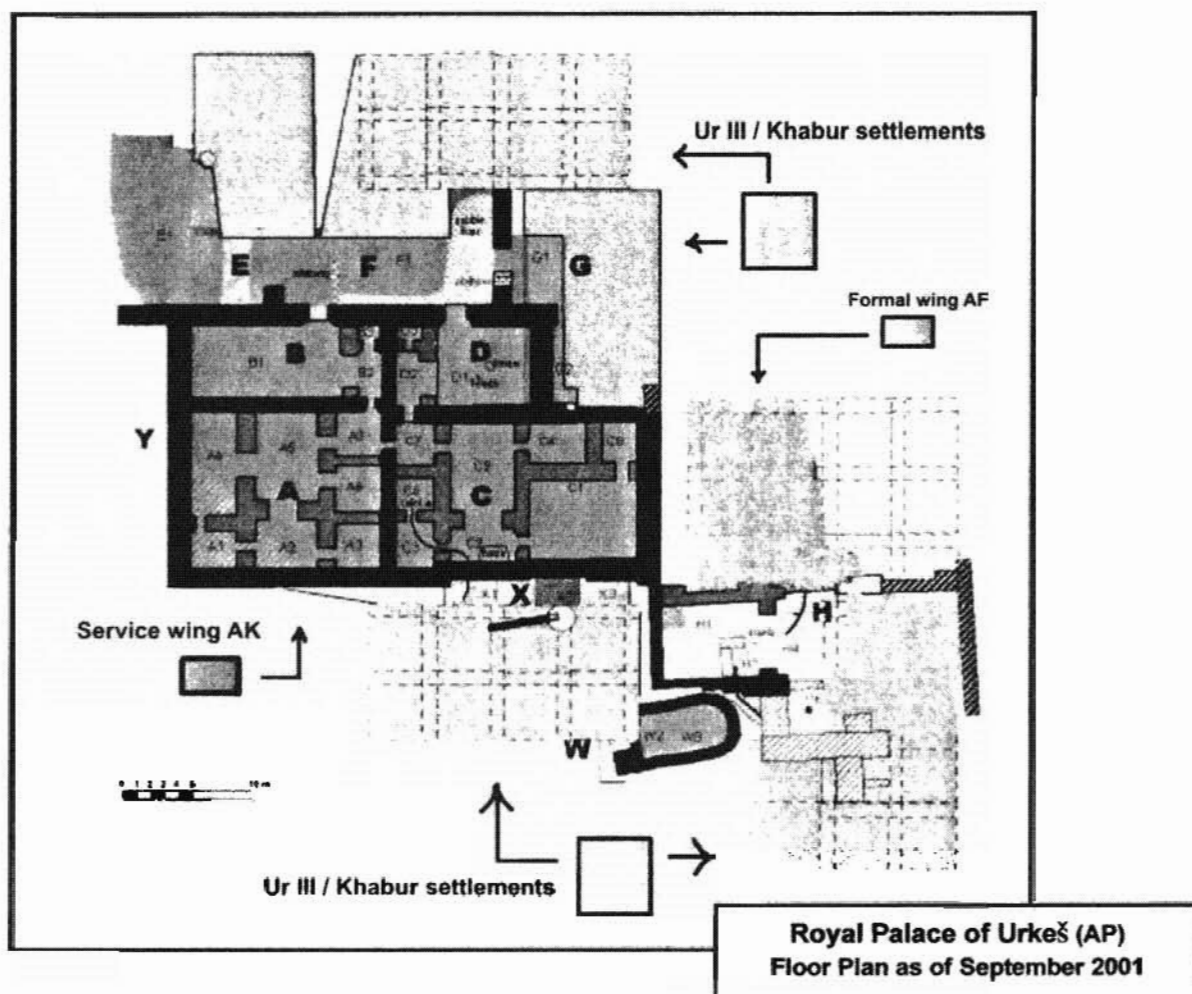
All primary data will also appear in digital format in the *Urkesh Global Record*. This is a comprehensive database that includes the entire information available for any given excavation unit, with regard to both stratigraphy and typology. The precise articulation of the system, and the way in which 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

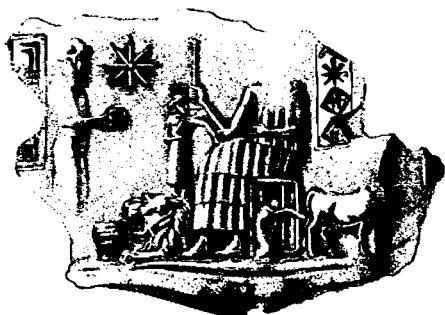
A10.18

2

*Bos* 7

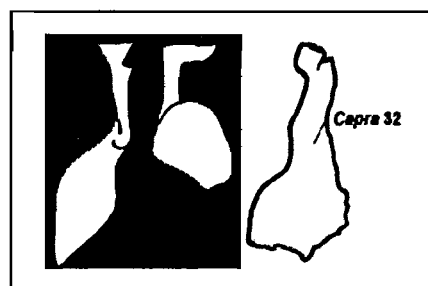
A6q569.1

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.