A FIGURINE FROM URKESH: A “DARLING” FROM TROY TO MESOPOTAMIA

By JEANNY VORYS CANBY

It was a pleasure to accept the Buccellatis’ invitation to publish the upper half of a flat, lead figure of a woman found at Urkesh and return to an old interest of mine. Once surmised that such objects were used by merchants in the metals trade as “cash” when travelling from Mesopotamia to Anatolia.

The Urkesh piece is defectively cast, and the ridge above the eyeballs and the edge of the chin give the face a misleading, cheerful expression. From other examples we know that the ridge would probably have surrounded the eyes and that, above the remnant of a protruding chin, the mouth would have been straight. The long thin nose is still preserved. Curls over the forehead are represented by round knobs, as are the tresses falling on either side of the face. The woman is nude except for four ridges of a high collar necklace. The breasts, represented as small knobs, are placed very high on the chest and the fingers of the upraised hands are spread as if supporting them. A prominent knob, surrounded by a wide ridge, emphasizes the navel.

The Urkesh piece is very welcome as an excavated example of a familiar but rare type of lead figurine. The first example was found in third-millennium levels at Troy on the west coast of Turkey in the nineteenth century. Four moulds for casting such a figurine are also known. These are peculiar in having so many dies tightly crowded onto a single surface. They are for amulets.

1. A9.86; ht 0.07 m.
4. A. Güzz (in W. Dörpfeld, Troy and its Bosom, Athens, 1902, pp. 36-37) describes it as that of a toothless woman (see also Canby, Pl. Xc; Emre, No. 32, Pl. 1). It was taken to Berlin by the excavator and disappeared for many years, along with the precious objects from “Priam’s Treasure.” It had been taken to Russia at the end of World War II. In 1996, it was displayed at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, and republished in a catalogue raisonné: V. Tolstikov, M. Treister, The Gold of Troy (Pushkin Museum), Abrams, 1996, No. 258, pp. 194, 217.

Fig. 1 Lead figurine from Urkesh (A9.86; height 7.0 cm).
jewellery and stamp seals, as well as the figurines, and each object has its own pour hole for casting it separately.

Now that the moulds came from an excavation, one came "from" Akhisar, about 100 km northeast of Izmir, and one from Izmir itself. These, plus the Troy figurine, suggested the figurine type was western Anatolian in spite of the awkward fact that the ancient city of Sippar (Abu Hallab), on the Euphrates below Baghdad, was the source given for the same type of mould in the British Museum. 

Fortunately, recent excavations have produced contexts for both the type of figurine and the mould. In the 1990s a figurine was found in Tell Brak, south of Urkesh, on the headwaters of the Khabur, c. 1400 km from Troy. In 1995, a multi-die mould for a similar figurine was found at Tîrîk in eastern Turkey c. 1036 km from Troy. It was face down on the floor of a late Early Bronze III building, reconfirming the date for the type as the last quarter of the third millennium BC, and lending credence to the provenance of the Sippar mould. We now know that the figurines, and probably also the moulds, can occur in widely different cultures from western Anatolia to northern Mesopotamia at that date. The distinctly regional character of some of the figurines implied that the clientèle for the lead items lived in widely dispersed regions. 

It was not the objects that travelled, however, lead had too little value and would have been heavy to carry. It must have been the moulds, designed to make individual trinkets and figurines, that were carried by people going to these far-apart places. A person with such a mould, wherever he happened to be on his journey, could produce a locally popular item almost instantly. All he needed was an open fire and a pinch of lead, perhaps even some lead the villagers kept for mending pots. A figurine, seal or trinket could then be traded for food, water, shelter, labour, or whatever small thing he needed. The locations of the sites where the figurines have been found, Urkesh, Brak and Troy, make it likely that the travellers were involved in trade between metal-rich Anatolia and metal-poor Mesopotamia. 

The far-flung occurrence of the Urkesh figurine type leaves the question of its native popularity the Babylonian and Assyro-Akkadian (2nd ed.), London, Orbis, p. 117. No. 1071; Emre, No. 39, p. 111, PI. 10.1; 3. From Izmir (present location unknown, see n. 7; Emre, No. 37, p. 112, PI. G; Canby, PI. Dc-a). & In the Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem (Emre, No. 38, p. 112, PI. 12). The Akhisar and Abu Hallab moulds have both been known since the beginning of the twentieth century. The cross-hatching, the little face on the pendant spring and other aspects of the Venice and British Museum moulds are strange (Emre, PI. 114-5).


6 The Izmir mould could see Canby, PI. Dc-a. The owner of the Izmir piece was not a collector but the wife of an American soldier stationed in Turkey, who bought it as a paperweight. The sum, as I remember it, was five American dollars, a small amount even then. This suggests to me that the seller purchased it locally, and it could, therefore, have been a west Anatolian find. Unfortunately, the last I heard about the piece was in the early 1980s when the owner, at my urging, sent it to the Metropolitan Museum so he looked at, but she refused to sell it for the price she offered her. 

7 [The trinket dies for Schnabelkannen on the new moulds join the riverside creatures: frogs and turtles, as well as fish, popular on Mesopotamian moulds at Brak (Oates, Quaest. 2, Book 2, see below n. 12), North Mesopotamia (Wartke, No. 4, p. 228, Fig. 6, see p. 248).] The trinket dies for Schnabelkannen on the new moulds are distinctly regional. The objects with serpentine on the Izmir and Lippehorz mould (Emre, PI. 3.1-2) are probably some kind of insect, like the flies on a mould from Nuzi (R. F. S. Starr, Nuzu — Report of the Excavation at Forgan Type, Cambridge, Mass., 1937, PI. 24-5; II, PI. 96g), and join the riverside creatures: frogs and turtles, as well as fish, popular on Mesopotamian moulds at Brak (Oates, Quaest. 2, Book 2, see above n. 9). Nineveh (D. Opitz, Ästhetische Gussformen, AO Die Weltkunde der Altertümer, 1. Berlin, 1973, PI. V3), and Assur (Wartke, pp. 237, Fig. 4, p. 234, No. 1). The striding lion facing the viewer certainly belongs in that area, see the Assur, Nineveh, Brak and Nuzi moulds just cited, plus one from Selimkaleh (M. van Loon. The prehistorical results of 1974-1975 excavations at Selimkaleh near Mazkane, AASOR 46-47 (1979)., Fig. 13; M. van Loon (ed.), Selimkaleh: Final Report on the University of Chicago and Consorzio di Amici Excavations in the Tepko Region, Northern Syria, 1967-1975. Istanbul, 2001, PI. 9.6; c-1d). 

8 The Akhisar mould. In the 1990s a figurine was found in Tell Brak, south of Urkesh, on the headwaters of the Khabur, c. 1400 km from Troy. In 1995, a multi-die mould for a similar figurine was found at Tîrîk in eastern Turkey c. 1036 km from Troy. It was face down on the floor of a late Early Bronze III building, reconfirming the date for the type as the last quarter of the third millennium BC, and lending credence to the provenance of the Sippar mould. We now know that the figurines, and probably also the moulds, can occur in widely different cultures from western Anatolia to northern Mesopotamia at that date. The distinctly regional character of some of the figurines implied that the clientèle for the lead items lived in widely dispersed regions. 

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open. It certainly was not at home at Troy or in central Anatolia, and while similarities of individual details may be found elsewhere and in other media, no exact parallel has yet been found. The best, it seems to me, is still at Mari. The home of the figurine type could be somewhere outside Anatolia, perhaps in northern Syria or Iraq where moulds were common and lead figures continued to be produced. The figurine from Troy may have lost its Anatolian homeland, but it now assumes greater importance as proof that caravans from far east in Syria travelled as far west as the Aegean coast of Turkey. The Anatolian character of the Urkesh figurine type was also assumed because of links to the numerous early second-millennium lead figurines and moulds from the Assyrian colonies in Anatolia that have been considered of local manufacture. This attribution may also be questioned. The figurines have indeed been found at Anatolian sites, but they were found only in the houses of Assyrian merchants, and not in later periods. Moreover, most look foreign when compared to the full-bodied, sculptural quality of contemporary Anatolian arts. A planop and curvaceous lead figurine from Karahiyuk is a mould allegedly from Kültepe illustrate the kind of lead figurines the local artists produced. Like the “Anatolian Style” cylinder seals used by earlier merchants, the flat lead pieces with linear details resemble contemporary sculpture on the basins at Ebla in North Syria. The flat lead figures are also not exclusively found in Anatolia. They have turned up in widely different areas: at Judeideh in the Amurraq, at Ebla in western Syria, and to the east at Chagar Bazar, just south of Urkesh, and at Tell al Rumayeh c. 150 km still further southeast in Iraq. The moulds to make flat lead figurines with linear details are again, I think, objects belonging to the travelling merchants of this period.


15 See n. 12 and Warke for some of these moulds.

16 Emre, pp. 139-50, Pls. V:2 to XI:3: also Bittel, op. cit. (n. 8), pp. 95 ff., Figs. 83-4, 87, 90. Moulds for lead figurines from the later colonies in level 1 of Kültepe and at Aligar are smaller and usually have dates for only a god plus a female who sometimes holds a baby and, between the adults, sometimes an antelope or stag, and a winged god. A figurine from Achemhiyuk is thought to be a transitional piece (see Emre, Pl. XII:1-2, fig. 1; Bittel, op. cit. (n. 8), p. 99, Fig. 89, with an identical pair in the Louvre and to be from Karahiyuk. The full-bodied, sculptural quality of contemporary Karahiyuk (where there could well have been Assyrian colonists) seems to be related to the group of stick figures just south of Urkesh, and at Tell el Rimah c. 150 km still further southeast in Iraq. The moulds may have been made under local influences.

17 Earlier Anatolian lead idols are known. One, that copied an alabaster disc idol type characteristic of the late Early Bronze levels on the city mound at Kültepe, was found in northeastern Turkey near Zile (E. Uzunoglu, Ein Ankoiurium, Impressionen des Bronzes, Berlin, 1937). Another was found in the temple-palace area of Kültepe (M. E. L. Mallowan, The excavations at Tall Chagar Bazar, 1993-4, p. 90).

18 For some good examples, see K. Bittel, op. cit. (n. 8), pp. 69-91, with figures.

19 Ibid., p. 101, Fig. 91; S. Alp, “Über das Karahiyuk, MÖgliche Manier (Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınlarınoede VII-60), Ankara, 1976, pp. 710-7.

20 Emre, No. 51, Pl. X:1-4b. Some of the curvaceous, flat lead figures from Kültepe lower level II and Alarum (Emre, Pls. V:1 and X:1), may have been made under local influences.

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