Offprint From:

Tradition and Innovation in the Ancient Near East

Proceedings of the 57th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale
at Rome
4–8 July 2011

edited by

Alfonso Archi

in collaboration with Armando Bramanti

Early Byzantine mosaic from the Hama Museum

Winona Lake, Indiana
Eisenbrauns
2015

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Printed in the United States of America

www.eisenbrauns.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rencontre assyriologique internationale (57th : 2011 : Rome, Italy)
Tradition and innovation in the ancient Near East : proceedings of the 57th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Rome 4–8 July 2011 / edited by Alfonso Archi in collaboration with Armando Bremanti.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-57506-313-3 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Middle East Civilization—To 622—Congresses. 2. Middle East—History—To 622—Congresses. 3. Assyriology—Congresses. I. Archi, Alfonso. II. Bremanti, Armando. III. Title. IV. Title: Proceedings of the 57th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Rome 4–8 July 2011.
DS56.R46 2011
935—dc23

2014033751

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984.♾™

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Archi ed., *Tradition and Innovation in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 57th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Rome, 4–8 July 2011*
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Reading Figurines from Ancient Urkeš (2450 B.C.E.)

A New Way of Measuring Archaeological Artifacts, with Implications for Historical Linguistics

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I have recently come to see my own view of material culture as limited. This essay, here somewhat revised from my paper (RAI 57) on which it is based, invites consideration of the archaeological artifact as embodied object, a cultural presence rather than an inert and compromised fragment of past lifeways.[1]

This paper is preliminary to an extended essay on the ways classification in archaeology might contribute to the study of ". . . particular historical phenomena, specifically, the domestication of animal species, the migration of human populations, and trans-regional relationships linking culture to culture." (von Dassow, personal communication, 23 june, 2011)

David Anthony, who has co-authored seminal essays on the domestication of early equids, characterizes the void between the two disciplines—archaeology and linguistics—as a chasm most Western archaeologists feel cannot be crossed.

> Many would say that language and material culture are completely unrelated, or are related in such changeable and complicated ways that it is impossible to use material culture to identify language groups or boundaries. . . . We cannot expect any correlation with material culture. (Anthony 2007: 101)

As it turns out, my work on the figurine corpus from Royal Building AK—a storehouse—at Urkeš was caught up in this discussion almost three decades ago.

I did not at that time realize the implications of my own work. I return to the subject in this essay.

The Site

First, the setting (fig. 1). Urkeš (Urkesh, Tell Mozan) is an archaeological site in northern Syria, what remains today of a thriving urban complex that was at its apex in the middle-to-late third millennium B.C.E.. Halafian artifacts have been recovered in the earliest levels, thus extending the life of the settlement over a millennium into the past. Urkeš continued to thrive, although transformed, in Mitanni

1. I wish to keep my paper within the realm of archaeology but to remain mindful of how the discipline is informed by linguistic considerations. Chapman's work on the shattered artifact (2007) is a first consideration, something of a metaphor, in the revaluation I here undertake. The part implies the whole. So do linguistic borrowings in ancient languages echo some larger presence.

Fig. 1. Urkeš, the archaeological site in the 21st century C.E.

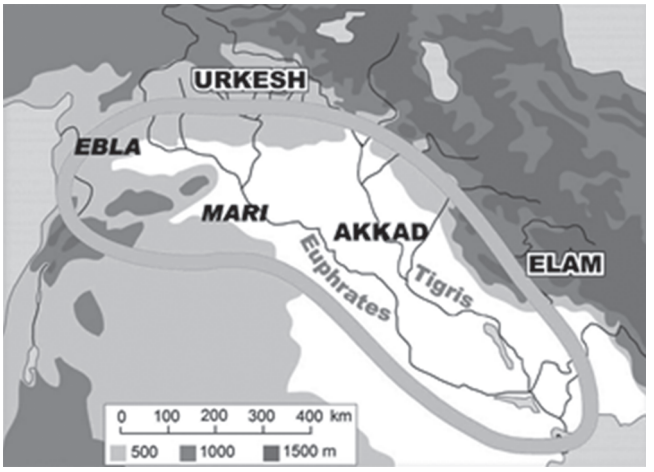

Fig. 2. Urkeš, a regional presence in the third millennium B.C.E.

times. Later, more than a millennium after its heyday, this urban center, mythological and administrative capital of the Hurrian culture, declined and was eclipsed forever.

Piotr Steinkeller has said that "the importance of the discovery of Urkeš . . . can hardly be overstated . . . It marks a new phase in our study of Hurrian civilization." (Steinkeller 1998: 75; see fig. 2, which situates Urkeš among other municipalities and states of the ancient Near East).

Although as a senior staff member, I was intimately involved in the plans and projects of the Urkeš expedition, I understood little of the larger context, for my own knowledge of history and cultural movement was limited. It was far and away enough for me to focus on the day-to-day problems of excavation of the units I supervised; and to try and puzzle out possible function, to say nothing of mere identification, of the terra-cotta objects that were daily coming to light.

The Study

Eventually I brought some order to my work. Through careful documentation, an innovative—I dare say—strategy for measuring the objects, and rigorous evaluation standards for secondary characteristics, I eventually worked out methodology and typology in tandem. In this enterprise, I was immeasurably helped by consultation with Sándor Bökönyi, the late noted paleozoologist; and the sensitive renderings and observations of graphic artist, Claudia Wettstein.[2]

2. Support for my study of the figurine corpus at Urkeš and my participation in the ongoing excavations is due to the unfailing generosity of the Expedition Co-Directors, Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn

Fig. 3. 6 genera, 3 equid species, fired in clay.

This work became the basis for my book, *Reading Figurines* (Hauser 2008). The study is pertinent here for it is solidly founded on a system of classification of excavated objects. In much the same manner do philologists mine tantalizing bits of the tissue of language of past times in order to determine the descent and/or declension of phonemic elements.

I was made vividly aware of the passionate debate surrounding the search for linguistic clues to the Indo-European homeland a decade after I began studying the figurines recovered in the Royal Storehouse at Urkeš, when Giorgio Buccellati, the expedition co-director, brought Vyacheslav Ivanov to see me.

> [Hauser's work provides] a figurative counterpart to Ivanov's. . . . The identification of clear distributional patterns in the proportions of body types, and the potential correlation to known animal morphologies . . . sets the whole question of identification on the basis of a clearly articulated formal analysis. (Buccellati 1998: 3)

It turned out that Ivanov had followed with great interest the various discoveries of animal representations at Urkeš, particularly the equids.

Reading Figurines at Urkeš

Now, a remarkable number of figurines were recovered from the first floors of the Royal Storehouse and from two layers immediately atop them.

There were numerous animal representations—one in ivory—but most in clay. These are the objects I study. They comprise a corpus that eventually numbered 335 examples, since substantially augmented by subsequent excavation (see fig. 3, a composite figure of the Urkeš figurine corpus).

It was superficially clear, even without measurement and study, to what genus many of these animal representations belonged. Each genus told its own story–and sometimes, they documented the morphological change that comes with domestication.

Kelly-Buccellati. Nothing in my various studies of the material culture at Urkeš would have come to print, had it not been for their dedication to my professional growth.

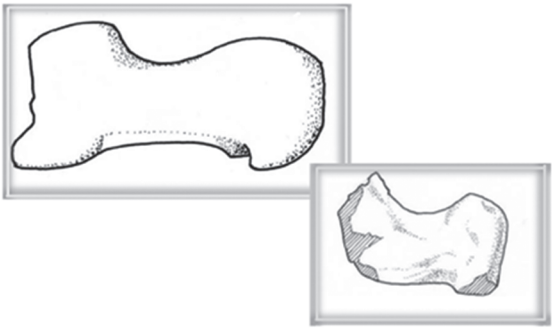

Fig. 4. 2 figurines, 2 different genera, absent identifying secondary characteristics, most appendages missing or broken.

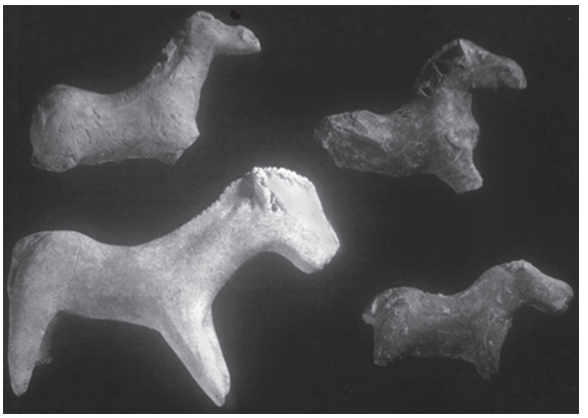

Fig. 5. *Equus*, as variously represented at Urkeš.

But sometimes, these fragmentary objects (fig. 4) were little more than a nondescript cylinder—"dog-bones"!—as some of my less-generous colleagues observed. Yet they, too, seemed to be different one from the other. Those who crafted them must have intended to represent more than just one animal type and they did so repeatedly; the same shapes recurred, although it was not clear at first to what species they belonged.

How to identify what type was represented by which shape? There had to be a key that would allow us to "read" these sometimes nondescript yet various terra-cotta objects.

Animals Observed

Contemplate for a moment, if you will, some of the equid examplars found at Urkeš (fig. 5).

This image does indeed document differences amongst *Equus* species-*E. asinus-E. hemionus* (absent in fig. 5, but illustrated in fig. 3, second from bottom, on right) and *E. caballus.*

Yet without the consistent system of measurement and classification of secondary characteristics that I have developed, this image provides only an *impression* of difference.

Equally important was the relation of such representations to the whole matter of animal domestication at Urkeš.

See, for instance, fig. 6, a seal impression that comments metaphorically on the actual domestication of equids at the site.

The Impossible Bargain of the Išar-Beli Sealing

It is indeed rare to encounter an animal that presents itself to a god.[3]

3. Juris Zarins, the noted commentator on equid domestication, has recently proposed that this figure represents a royal personage, not a god. Based on the historical context of another sealing linked to Naram-Sin's daughter, Tarʾam-Agade, Zarins ventures that this figure is Šar kalli-šarri himself (personal communications July, October 2013).

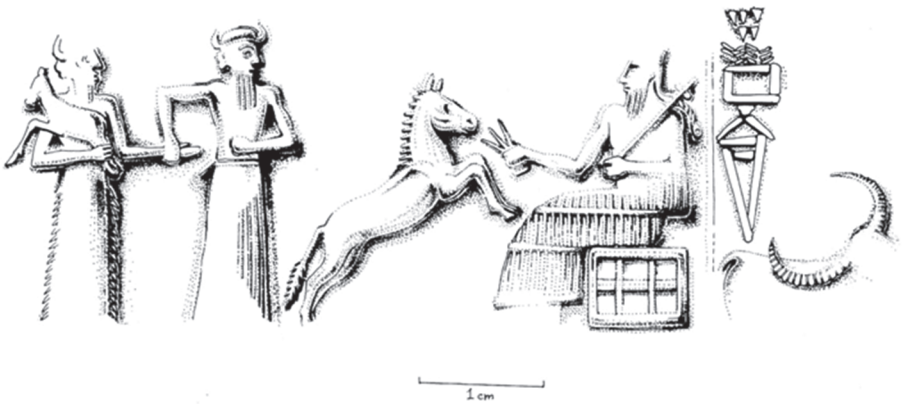

Fig. 6. An onager, a foal, servitors, and a deity (king?), pieced together from shattered fragments of impressions in clay.

This equid is not a horse, in spite of the short, pert ears and a lean torso, but rather an onager, the "donkey of the steppe." Strong and wily, untamable by all accounts. This attitude of spirited obeisance before a god's throne is remarkable, then, as if the animal were offering itself, in an impossible bargain of domestic servitude.

Such things can happen in heaven, of course, where the gods live.

For all the ambiguities in the Išar-beli scene—he was the seal-owner, possibly steward to the queen (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002: 25)—I embrace it. The figurines from ancient Urkeš recovered at Tell Mozan are part of the same story as the Išar-beli equid. They are caught up in the sweeping story of animal domestication and human domination of animal stock over 4,000 years ago in Northern Syria.

> "These numerous figurines belonging to . . . the last quarter of the third millennium [B.C.E.] make it clear that the horse was extremely important for the life of the society. Particularly interesting seem horse figurines showing the harness and thus documenting the use of horses and transportation. . . . The Hurrian data found by the Mozan/Urkeš excavations are quite exceptional from this point of view." (Ivanov 1998: 145)

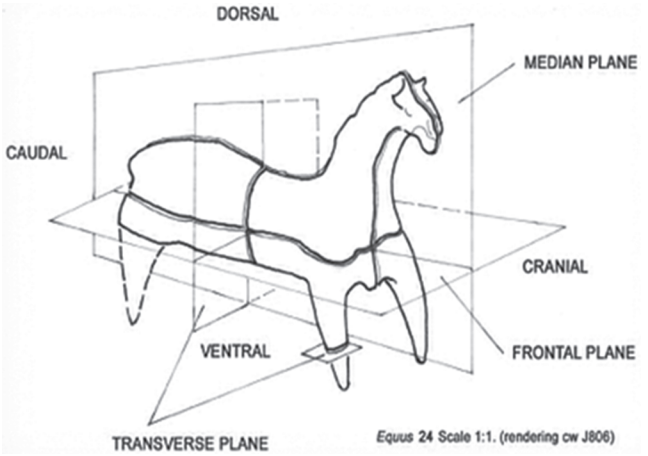

Fig. 7. Normal standing quadruped; sections taken as might a veterinarian researcher.

The Template[4]

Over the next several years, as we recovered more examples of different animal types, it became apparent to me and to my associate, Claudia Wettstein, that there was in fact an *underlying pattern* that could be documented by consistent measurement and by documentation of variables.

A template (fig. 7) was developed for taking artifact measurements, between and among which different ratios and proportions obtain. Some seventeen different correlations are diagnostic, as taken on a quadruped in normal standing position.

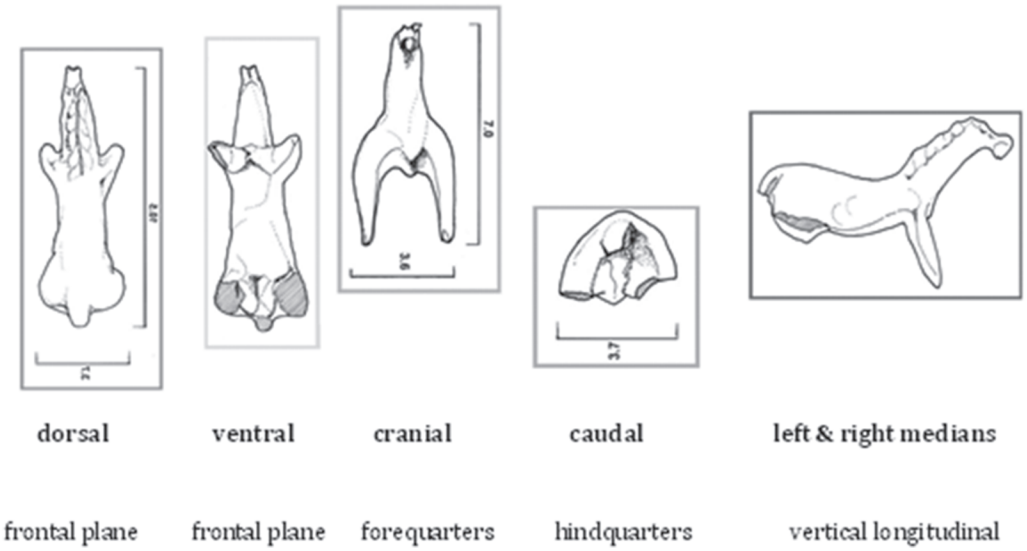

Fig. 8. 6 planes/views are recorded as possible for each genus.

I derive these correlations from any one of six views (fig. 8).

This manner of representation is *not typical* of figurine studies. In most studies, only the length and height, sometimes the width of the object, are given.

Think how you measure a pot.

By contrast, I have chosen to use classical topographic anatomical terms of veterinary science in order to emphasize that the figurines represent *observed, living animals*, not arbitrary creations by inexperienced artisans or non-professionals or children.

Equids at Urkeš

If domestication is the story told by the figurines of ancient Urkeš, the equids are its avatar. They are numerous, they embody different species, they are idiosyncratic and particular in the manner of their representation.

4. As researchers, we are called to more rigorous standards of *visual literacy*. Absent measurement as described briefly in this section, observation is reduced to impressionism–"Well, it *looks* like a horse, so it must be. . . ."

Now, all members of genus *Equus* share a body type that approaches 5 : 4 : 6 in proportional conformation-forequarters, torso and hindquarters. Species of equid are further distinguished by striking secondary characteristics. Asinid types have been recovered roughly 3 times—and hemiones 4 times—more frequently than *E. caballus*.

The true horse is rarely found at Urkeš.

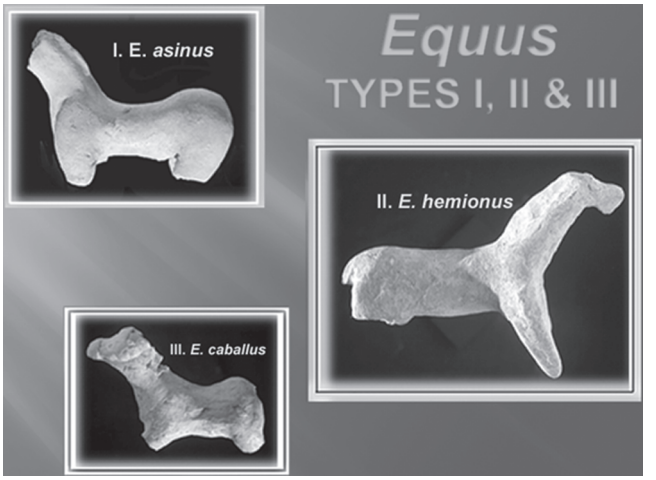

Fig. 9. Equid representations found at Urkeš.

Equus Type III Caballine

All examples of *Equus* TYPE III—the caballines—have long manes, including one that Bökönyi imagined to be "flowing in the wind" (fig. 9, lower left). At least one of these has a forelock that falls over (fig. 10), indicated by cross-hatching that overlays a "halter."

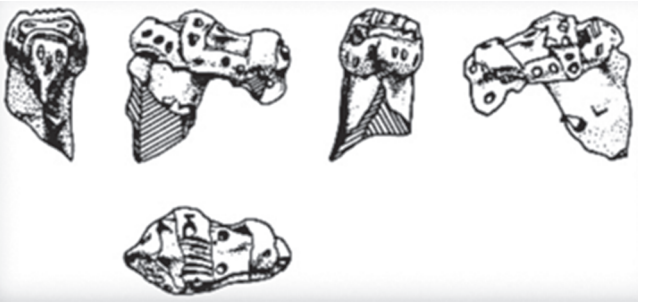

Fig. 10. Domesticated equid, with forelock.

Of course, harness and/or halter point to domestication or demonstrate at the very least a wish to control—tame—an animal (fig. 11).

Signs of human intervention exhibited by the equid representations at Urkeš are universal and varied—as, a striking example of nostril-slitting in a rendering by Renaissance master Pisanello (fig. 12). The practice continues to this day, and is considered by some to be an aid to breathing; the slit nostrils of *Equus 204* from the Urkeš corpus

Fig. 11. Halter/tether.

Fig. 12. Nostril-slitting.

are marked (fig. 3) and are visible, although less obviously, in fig. 5 (both exemplars, lower left).

To all appearances, the program of domestication was successful, for it was vigorously pursued for over several hundred years, as recent discoveries tell us. It cannot have been easy, as Clutton-Brock tells us (1992: 22); and must have required at the outset considerable courage and knowledge of animal behavior.

The herdsmen of Urkeš possessed these skills. The figurine corpus tells us this.

The Spread of Proto-Indo-European[5]

Now let us return to the matter of language and culture as they might be traced in the archaeological record.

Renfrew, in somewhat avuncular vein, describes the rather cozy mythological world of historical linguistics–a golden land of proto-Indo-European society and belief which is rooted neither in time or space.

> It is rather like the Dream Time of the Australian aborigines, or the Camelot of Arthurian fable: so much so, indeed that it seems almost churlish to ask such prosaic questions as 'when?' or 'where?' (Renfrew 1992: 286)

But "when?" and "where?" are precisely the questions which archaeologists in their prosaic way like to ask, and are equipped to answer.

Renfrew will go on to say that it is the inception of farming some thousands of years earlier than when Urkeš flourished that is the key to the entire Indo-European question—his so-called "wave" theory of migration and transformation of indigenous populations. And indeed, the language of domestication does permeate Proto-Indo-European.

For their part, V. V. Ivanov and Tamaz Gamkrelidze have, over decades, sought to establish the location of an Indo-European homeland. Their reconstruction of the classic paradigm, "Proto-Indo-European," has been achieved through a comparative study of modern Indo-European languages. Their observations synchronize rather nicely with those of Renfrew, whose reconstruction, even though it antedates the Urkeš material by several millennia, sets the stage for the Urkeš domestication program (Anthony 2007: 97).

Their proposed setting for the Indo-European homeland (fig. 13) is very different from that proposed by Marija Gimbutas who, with Childe, set the Indo-European heartland in the Russian steppes of the Don and the Volga Basin. The dialects comprising "Proto-Indo-European" that emanate from this territory contain on the one hand, a majority of words relating to agrarian activities (both tools and species), and on the other hand, words that denote plants and landscapes in mountainous country.

This is where my work intersects that of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov.

5. The location of the P.I.E. homeland is raised here for a single purpose: to serve as backdrop to my considerations of how material culture—specifically, equid figurines recovered in the Royal Storehouse at Urkeš and wear facets on undamaged portions of horse teeth at Botai—might relate to language (a sometimes eloquent if unwieldy manifestation of culture) in the Early-Middle Bronze Age of the Ancient Near East. I did not ever anticipate that this discussion would settle the question of the location of the Proto-Indo-European homeland; nor did I presume, with less than a lifetime of study, to master the intricacies of how the various *languages before languages* (as one might say) intertwined. This is the province of expert linguists. Archaeologists have their own conundrums to debate–informed, if we are lucky, by the interdisciplinary insights of colleagues.

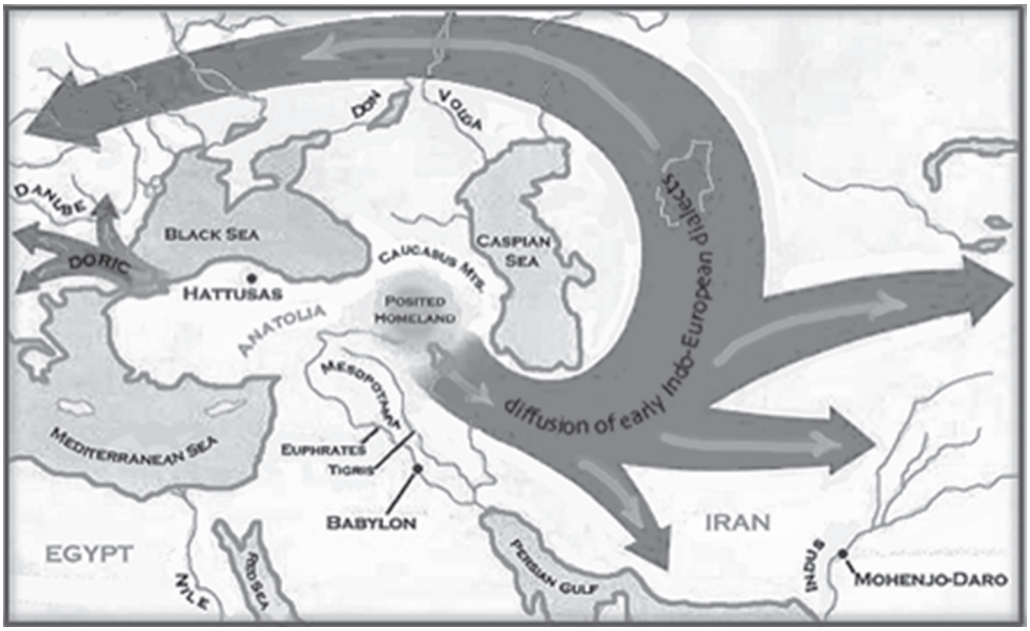

Fig. 13. Proto-Indo-European homeland in Anatolia (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov proposal).

The Equids of Urkeš and the Indo-European Presence

Fundamental to Ivanov's understanding of language diffusion is his conviction that animal husbandry was a tangible marker of the Indo-European presence.[6]

> The Hurrian name of horse is of utmost importance . . . for Indo-European origins and migrations insofar as it is related to the domestication and use of horse. (ibid. 148)[7]

The controversy attendant on Ivanov's thesis evolved in a sphere apart from my work-space at Urkeš, yet his contention was given physical substance by the methodology which I used to determine that a substantial number of the terra-cotta representations we found at Urkeš *were* equids in the first place.

> Although it is not clear to what extent the Hurrian cultural influence could be found at this early stage in Asia Minor, in the next period the horse training in the Hittite Empire was apparently at least in part influenced by the Hurrian-Aryan tradition of Mitanni . . . In the light of the Mozan/Urkeš discoveries it seems possible that this Mitannian tradition was not determined only by the Aryan influence, but might be to some extent continuing the older Hurrian customs, as the Urkeš period precedes this Hurrian-Aryan symbiosis of the second millennium [B.C.E.]. (ibid. 147–148)

6. "Knowing that we are looking for a society with a specific list of material culture items (to say nothing of *transmission of technology*, as von Dassow might say [2008: 68]) . . . is a great help in locating the Proto-European homeland." (Anthony 2007: 99)

7. Ivanov's recent work on the matter (2007: 128–129, n. 8) features an exhaustive compendium of North Caucasian words for *horse*, some never before attested.

For his part, Ivanov noted that the Urkeš figurine corpus documented

> . . . for the first time the use of . . . horses in a palace economy and everyday life
> . . . for the last part of the third millennium [B.C.E.]. (Ivanov 1998: 147)

As I have noted, figurines recovered at Urkeš represented different equid genera, some wild, some domesticated working horses. They also documented the morphological change that accompanies domestication. These artifacts were recovered from strata above the first floors in the Royal Storehouse. Of a sudden, Ivanov found himself tantalizingly close to the elusive Indo-European presence he sought. In effect, our equid representations were so many "words" that embodied in the physical world a presence Ivanov had documented only linguistically.

If artisans had crafted the image, so must there have been a physical entity that was its original; and since the morphological changes that accompany domestication were amply documented in the figurines, then so, too, must have the process existed.

Some 15 years earlier, lack of knowledge about the Early Bronze Age

> did not permit us to elucidate more completely the nature of the historical ties between . . . regions or to reconstruct [an important] missing archaeological link between . . . cultures. (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1985: 75)

If that link were to be found, its reconstruction would make it possible to envision a continuous line of migration of Indo-European culture from the Near East across Central Asia to the historical regions of Eastern Europe, the new homeland of the Indo-Europeans. (ibid.)

In the equid representations of Urkeš, Ivanov saw that missing link.

> [w]e may say now that the chronology of the domestication of horses (starting with the fourth millennium BC), [and] the spread of early Indo-European dialects . . . makes it possible to seek for important synchronic intersection of these events around the border of the fourth and third millenniums [B.C.E.]. (Ivanov 1998: 156–57)

Gamkriledze and Ivanov situated *their* homeland in "the South-East part of Anatolia, close to North-East Syria and North area of Mesopotamia" (Ivanov 2007: 128, after Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1990: 114). Thus, for Ivanov and Gamkrelidze, Anatolia is the source of the linguistic diffusion we collectively designate as "Proto-Indo-European."(Cauvin 2000: 138).

That is to say, right next to Urkeš. Migrations and cultural diffusion carried the Indo-European protolanguage from the homeland throughout the region and beyond (fig. 13).

Anthony does not discard outright all of the linguistic markers Gamkrelidze and Ivanov use to help pinpoint their geography, even though he has reason to challenge the authors' location of the Indo-European homeland.

It turns out instead that Anthony has compelling archaeological evidence for the possible domestication of the horse in the Pontic-Caspian steppes (fig. 15; see also fig. 16 for superimposition of the region; after Anthony 2007: 84, fig. 5.1).

And when did this occur? Sometime after 4800 B.C.E., an ample 2000 years before *Equus caballus* appears at Urkeš (Anthony 2007: 200). Most likely, the hapless creatures provided a cheap source of winter meat.

The event is also marked by unusual mortuary practices involving the joining of horse heads and/or lower legs with those of cattle and sheep in human funeral rituals. Bone carvings of horses appear as well (ibid. 201).

Later (3700–3000 B.C.E.), in the Botai settlement of northern Kazakhstan, horses were used to hunt horses (Anthony 2007: 216), still antedating the panoply of domestication activity at Urkeš by half a millennium and more. Bit wear—significant wear faceting, "like a horse ridden with a 'soft' bit of rope or leather"—is the index of such activity (see fig. 15; from Anthony 2007: 218, fig. 10.11)

Fig. 14. Proto-Indo-European homeland in Pontic-Caspian region (Anthony proposal).

According to Anthony, "archaeology of the steppe region between the Caucasus and the Urals, north of the Black and Caspian Seas—the Pontic-Caspian region—. . . reveals a set of cultures that fits all the requirements of the reconstructed [PIE] vocabulary." Also, "archaeological evidence for migration from this region into neighboring regions, both to the east and to the west, is well-established (ibid. 99–100).

In the two possible versions I have presented here, it is archaeological evidence that "pegs" the location of the Proto-Indo-European homeland.

A recent paper on the origin and spread of "horse domestication" in the Eurasian steppe (Warmuth et al. 2012) tends to corroborate Anthony's version, establishing the antiquity of the husbanding practice–"a scenario . . . [that] suggests that horse domestication originated in the western part of the Eurasian steppe and that domestic herds were repeatedly restocked with local wild horses as they spread out of this area." This proposal "unites evidence from archaeology, mitochondrial DNA, and Y-chromosomal DNA" (ibid.).

In the case of Urkeš, archaeological evidence shows that equids were present; morphological change as represented in terra-cotta representations of *Equus* documenting domestication occurred—and the program that brought this change about persisted long after Tupkish, *endan* of Urkeš, and his household were little more than shadows in memory.

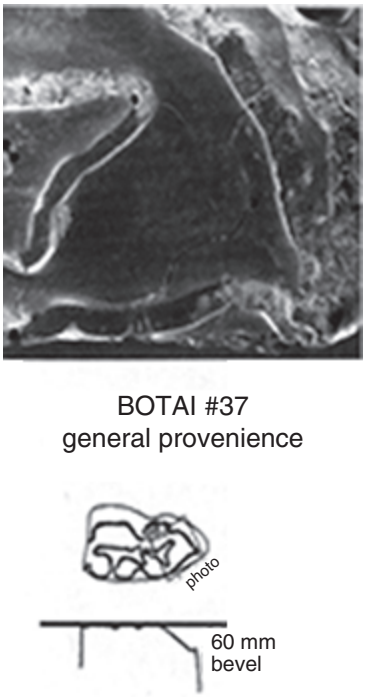

Fig. 15. "Bit-wear"—significant wear faceting: evidence that these equids were ridden.

Ivanov took this evidence as one element in the vindication of his theory of language dispersal. Indeed, he recently observed that the domestication program of the Urkeš equid corpus

> . . .[foretells] the future Mesopotamian-Aryan and Hurrian excellent training of horses in Mitanni. (Ivanov 2007: 133)

The celebrated linguist qualifies his most recent observation somewhat with the locution "as if" (ibid. 133); constructing a metaphorical possibility in place of certainty, seemingly to forfend the objections that continue to be visited upon his theory.

Anthony, while acknowledging that debate about the location of the Indo-European homeland will continue, nonetheless senses "a chord . . . emerging from the different notes" (ibid. 459)

Language and People

It must be said that the real fabric of language itself is elusive. Without speech or present speakers, reconstruction is speculative at best. Thus it is perilous to track migrations and displacement of peoples though using such ephemeral evidence.

Now, "[a] language is not a people," von Dassow (2008: 68) observes. Languages are not biologically inherited entities but are rather acquired "cultural traits . . . utilized and transmitted by population groups", just as are any number of other cultural traits. Given this perplex of influences difficult to untangle, linguistic criteria, she concludes, are at best "imprecise tools for identifying ethnic groups . . . and their movements." (ibid.)

> The use of these tools may reveal [rather] patterns of acculturation, features of sociopolitical organization, or transmission of technology and associated goods and services." (ibid.)

We might think that these modest determinations are reward enough for our research, for such documentation of the minutiae of culture may be clues aplenty to permit reasonable speculation about the make-up of culture.

What cannot with any measure of certainty be determined is the physical displacement of populations along prescribed routes–migration. For one thing, our speculations would certainly benefit from texts in determinable context; and we would expect such witness repeatedly. Archaeology must additionally tell us how language relates to everyday lifeways across a cultural spectrum.

This is the promise that the figurines of Urkeš held.

And that explains V. V. Ivanov's sustained excitement about the diminutive *Equus* representations from Tupkish's Royal Storehouse.

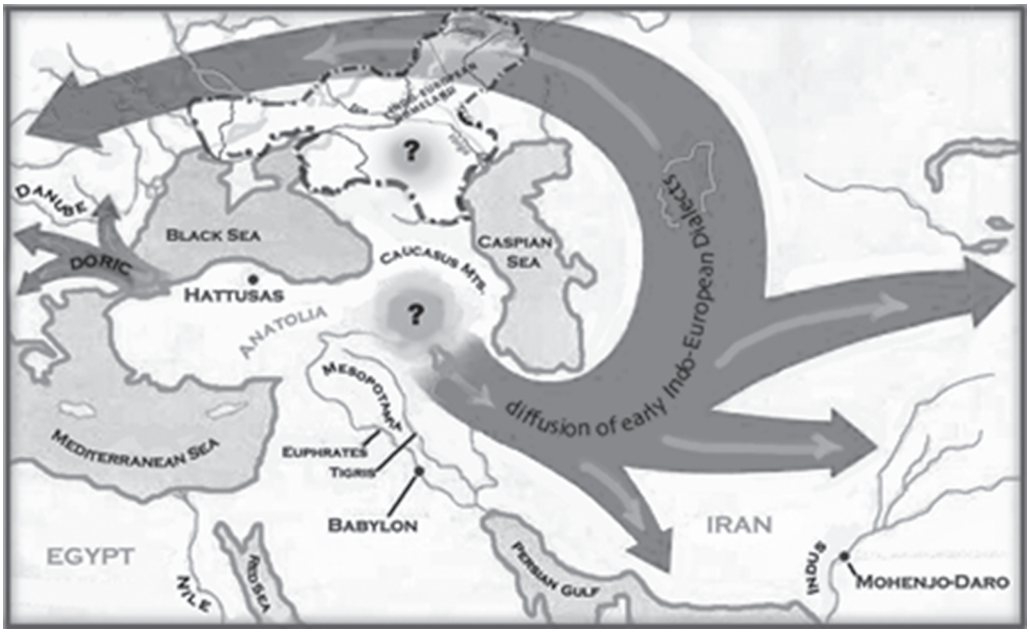

Fig. 16. Archaeological finds relating to possible horse domestication "peg" two locations for the Proto-Indo-European homeland.

Pegs: Linking Material Culture and Language

The evolution of language across cultures needs such "pegs". Without the reality of material culture—context—script is self-referential, an actor's soliloquy gone begging for public performance.

One thing is for sure, as Anthony tells us,

> The more places a narrative is pegged to the facts, and the more different kinds of facts from different sources are employed as pegs, the less likely it is that the narrative is false. (ibid. 465)

Anthony's quite brilliant reconstruction, with Brown, of equid domestication in the Pontic-Caspian region is one such archaeological "peg".

So, too, is my methodology for identifying genera of animal representations a "peg" permitting speculation about the domestication of species. The animal figurines from Urkeš figure amongst "a vast array of archaeological facts" (ibid.) to which we as archaeologists and linguists have access today, and may be seen as so many tools that eventually will permit analysis of quite complex issues of language dispersal, form and other acculturated phenomena.

It is in that spirit and with a more canny knowledge of this very complex issue that I have persisted in the elaboration of my remarks at RAI57.

My future studies in material culture will attempt to make palpable a larger context embodied in the humble artifacts I have studied for so long. Public archaeology and conservation will certainly figure in this research.

I hope to undertake this project in partnership with colleagues in curatorial institutions in the Middle East and Francophone Africa. Together, I believe we may find a way to catalog and to link linguistic pattern, material culture and cultural memory.[8] Our aim will be to craft a model for future research, an alternative to the arid compendia that those of us who catalog objects all too often offer as substantive contributions to scholarship.

How linguistic variability may inform this research and how this variability may be reflected in the migrations of peoples is—and has been—a matter for specialists to debate.

I marvel that my research—so parochial, in its way—may have a disputed part to play in this unfurling panoply of knowledge.

8. As epitomized in the work of Merlin Donald (see, for example, Donald 2005 [1998]).

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to IIMAS—The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies for permission to reprint images from my work on the figurines of Urkeš, a map and a photograph of the excavations at Tell Mozan from the Urkeš website;

to Giorgi Bedianashvili of the Georgian National Museum and the American Research Institute of the South Caucasus (ARISC) for a complete copy of Ivanov's synthesis of work on proto-Indo-European in the Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences (2007, vol. 175, no. 3, Map 1, 128);

to John Soderberg, University of Minnesota Department of Anthropology, for suggestions regarding clarification of my intent in this essay;

to Princeton University Press for permission to reprint a map showing the Proto-Indo-European homeland (Fig. 5.1, 84 in Anthony 2007) and of Botoi bit-wear (Anthony 2007: 218, Fig. 10.11).

to Thomas C. Moore, illustrator, for permission to reproduce and to adapt a map showing the path of presumed migrations of the Indo-European protolanguage from the homeland (as seen in the Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences [Ivanov 2007, vol. 175, no. 3, Map 1, 128], after Scientific American Magazine, March, 1990: 112 "Migrations and Cultural Diffusion"); current contact information for Mr. Moore is not available.

The work of Vyacheslav Ivanov was first brought to my attention, as noted, by Dr. Giorgio Buccellati, a prescient mentor. Only recently have I come back to the matter and become aware of the controversies that swirl about the topic, thanks to interdisciplinary studies in linguistic anthropology. The considerations I entertain here are my own and may not necessarily be those of my colleagues at Mozan.

My work at Urkeš 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 (then) new Director of Excavations, Dr. Michel Maqdissi, and the Director of the Office in Hassaka, Mr. Abd el-Mesiah Bakdou. My heartfelt gratitude is also extended to friends from the surrounding region who taught me how to dig.

The excavations at Tell Mozan (ancient Urkeš) began in 1984 through a concession of The Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, The Ministry of Culture, The

Syrian Arab Republic and are under the direction of Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati. Their caring vision kindles my admiration and guides my work today.

The major supporters between 1984 and 2010 were The Ahmanson Foundation, The Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, The American Cultural Center (Damascus), The Catholic Biblical Association, The Cotsen Family Foundation, The Council of Research, Academic Senate (UCLA), The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, The Mellon Foundation, The National Geographic Society, The National Endowment for the Humanities, The Neutrogena Corporation, Rotary Club Conegliano, The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, The San Carlos Foundation, The L. J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, The Steinmetz Family Foundation, Syria Shell Petroleum Development (B.V.), The Urkeš Founders, Vartanian Oilfield Services, The World Monuments Fund—with the institutional participation of The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology (UCLA), The Getty Conservation Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, L'Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Firenze, Università degli Studi e Centro Scavi (Torino)

Beginning in 2010, major support for the Mozan/Urkeš Archaeological Project has been provided by the Gulfsands Urkeš Exploration Fund.

A project of IIMAS-The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies and IIMAS-Italia Istituto Internazionale per la Mesopotamia e l'Alta Siria.

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