

Urkesh 2000

The Palace and Beyond

Giorgio Buccellati

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The spread of the Royal Palace provides an eloquent testimony of its ancient splendor. After each year's excavations, we savor the ever-changing vistas that emerge from our own work, and this year we gained the best view from mid-air – through a high oblique picture taken by our trusty kite! (Plate 1).

From this vantage point you can better share the thoughts of the archaeologist when facing ever new complexities. For one thing, the thought of the work ahead of us: we are looking here at no more than one third of what the entire structure will be, when fully excavated!

Next, how do we make sense of this vast congeries of ruins? A major accomplishment of the 2000 season was the bold decision to restore the walls so as to regain the perception of space that the palace offered when inhabited (2).

To put it colloquially, we can have our cake and eat it, too! For, in addition to restoring the architecture, we preserve the monument. The “skin” we place over the walls (3) is, it seems, an innovation, because it has not been used yet in archaeology (though, of course, everyone reminds us of Christo...). And it works. Walls excavated some ten years ago look today just as they did then.

The seal impressions continue to give us new insights into the life of the palace: we have now come to know the mistress of the queen's kitchen (4) and through the discovery of the re-used seal of a certain Unap (5), we can now date firmly the construction of the palace to a time even earlier than we originally assumed.

One of the most remarkable discoveries has been a horseshoe shaped structure, adjacent to the palace, and sunk to a depth of some 5 meters below ground (6). With some hesitation, we interpret it as a space where ritual memory of the royal ancestors was regularly renewed. The structure is unique, hence the difficulty to understand it. And the material found inside helps only to a limited extent. One of the objects is a very distinctive small vessel in the shape of a naked lady (7), whom we have jokingly dubbed the Lady of the underground!

The rebirth of the palace



Photo V13d3024 G. Gallacci

The mound we first confronted a few years ago, is slowly yielding the secret it has tightly guarded for more than 4000 years – the royal palace of ancient Urkish.

We have been finding the bricks of its walls, the objects that were left on its floors.

The view is awesome. But even more so is the expectation. What we see now is probably only about one third of the entire palace complex which awaits its full rebirth. Ever unpredictable, the ancient structure is slowly taking shape again.

What we see now is but a summons – an invitation to enter further into the recesses of power of this once mighty kingdom. Like ancient visitors who were awed by the expectation to meet the king in his throne room, so we, too, are awed by the thought of what lies beneath the mound that rises above the ruins (here to our right).

The palace – real and virtual

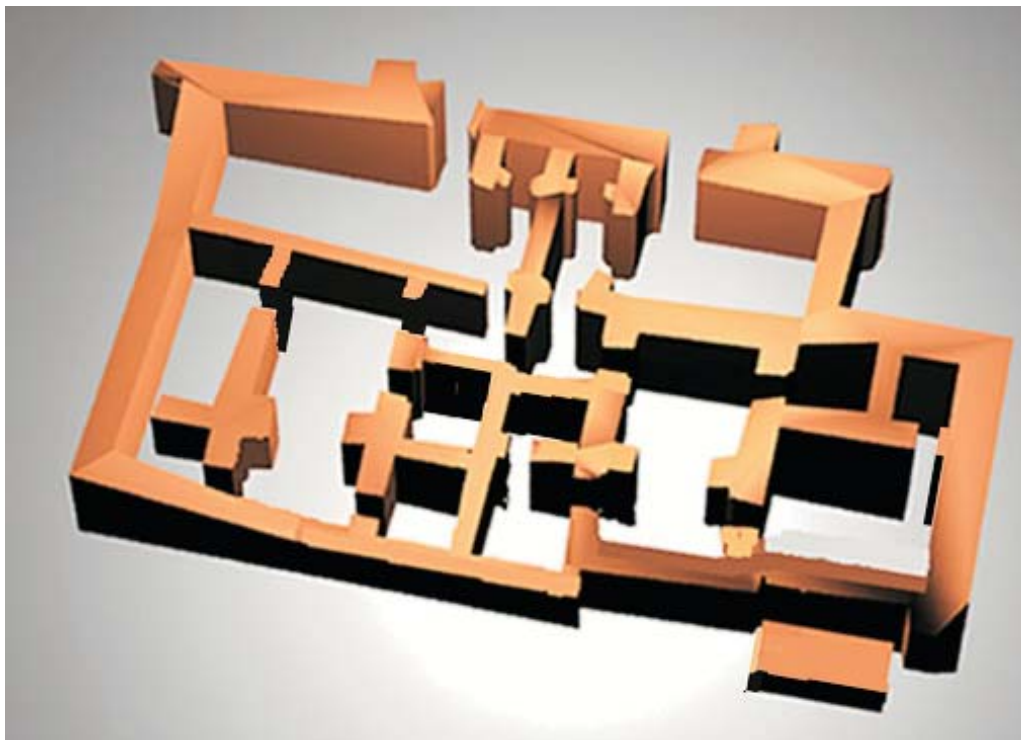
Photo V13d8415 G. Buccellati



Freed from the grip of the earth, we are seeing the architectural space come back to life.

Our primary task as archaeologists is to recover the moment when the past hands over a monument to the future.

3-D rendering by F. Buccellati



That was the moment a building stopped living, and turned into a ruin.

But as historians, we want the ruin to be no longer ruinous. On the ground our conservation efforts restore the walls to their full dimension, producing an effect in real life that matches the virtual reality of the 3-D renderings of our computers.

The palace's new skin



Photo V13d8402 G. Buccellati



Photo V13d8403 G. Buccellati

The dramatic new vistas resulting from our conservation program, give the visitor a veritable jolt. The dimensions are imposing, the articulation of space inviting, the interplay of volumes and light striking.



Photo V13d8561 G. Buccellati

The new skin which we place on these age old walls is the simple secret of our success. The fitted canvas adheres tightly to an iron wire frame that follows closely the contours of the walls.



Photo V13d8567 G. Buccellati

The canvas can be lifted at any point to reveal the "document." In a matter of minutes, the interested visitor can see the original, in its pristine state. And "pristine" is no casual word: the skin we set in place protects for the future the monument as we first saw it at the moment of discovery.

Tuli, the mistress of the queen's kitchen

One of the rooms we have identified is the palace kitchen – a large room, with a big bread oven in the center.

The person in charge was a woman.

We knew her from her seal, of which we had found some 50 impressions scattered on the floors of the kitchen and adjacent rooms.

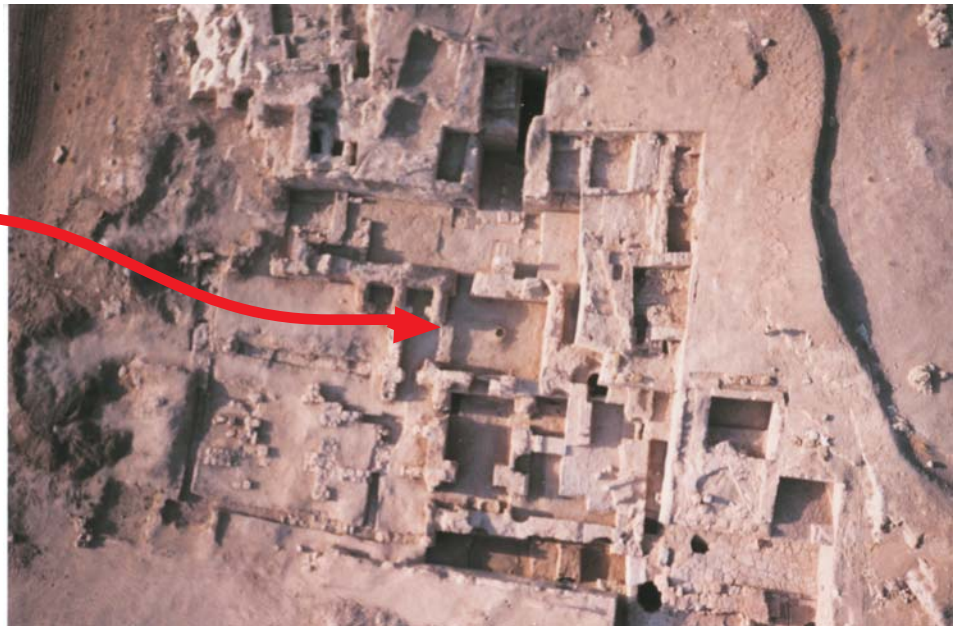
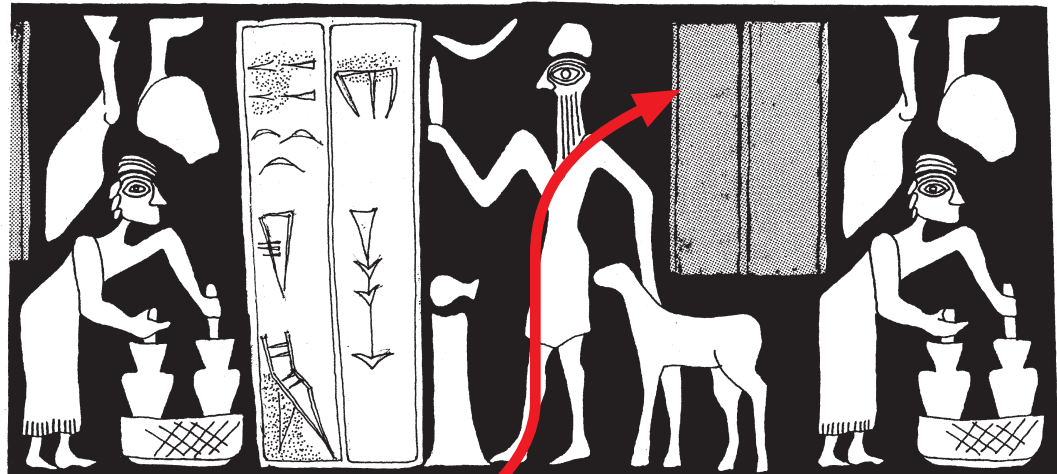


Photo V13d3061 G. Gallacci

The seal shows a butcher leading a lamb to the block and a woman churning butter. They were in the service of the “mistress of the queen’s kitchen,” as she is called in the seal inscription.

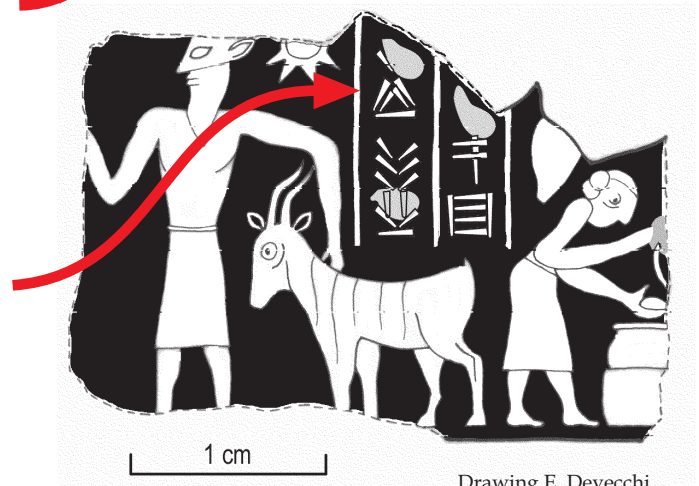


Drawing C. Hilsdale

But the seal had been used so often that, while her title is preserved, her name had disappeared.

This year, we had the pleasant surprise to ... meet her in person! We found the impression of a second seal which says clearly: “the seal of Tuli.” A Hurrian woman working for an Akkadian queen!

The scene is the same as on the other seal, but here the animal looks more like a kid, and the woman is churning in a single large container rather than two.

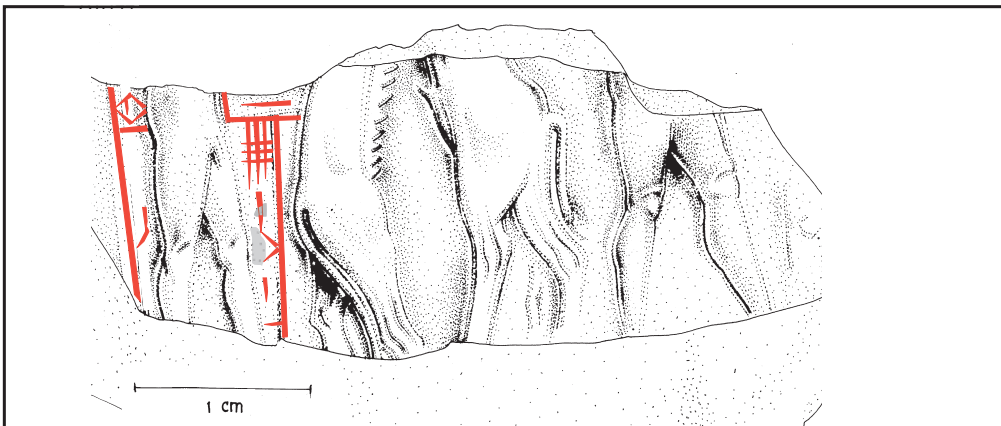


Drawing E. Devecchi

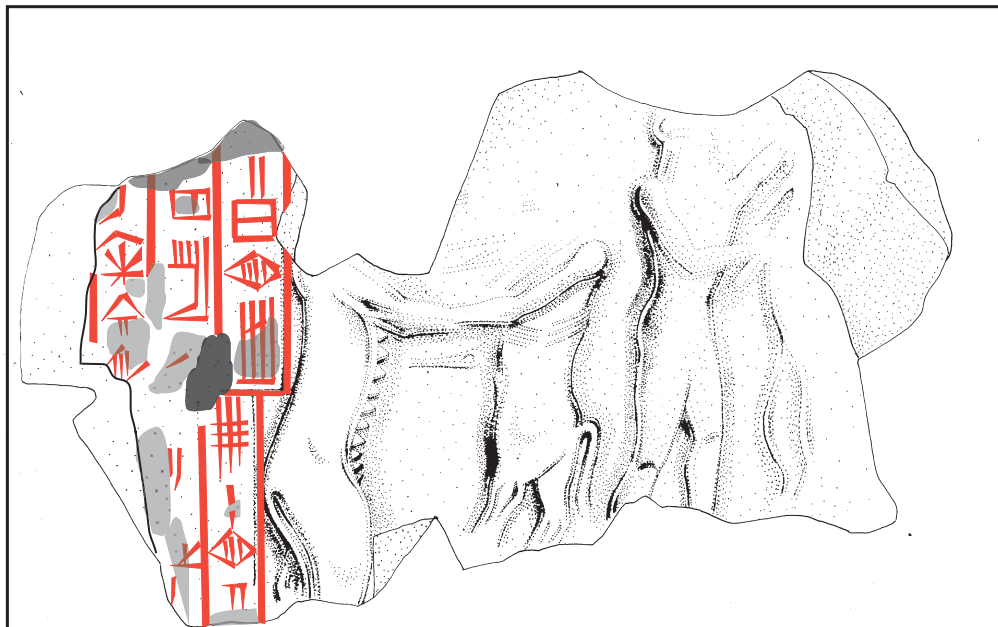
The story of Unap



Photo V13d2643-4 G. Gallacci



Drawings by Pietro Pozzi



1 cm

On this small piece of clay rests a great deal of history.

Unap is the name of a functionary of king Tupkish. We found impressions of his seal together with those of other members of the court of Tupkish (drawing below).

After the death of Unap, his seal was re-used by someone else, who had a new figure carved on top of the inscription (photo and top drawing).

The impressions of this re-cut seal were found together with those of the daughter of Naram-Sin. This definitely dates Tupkish to at least 2250 B.C.

The descent to the Great Below



Photo V13d1327 G. Gallacci and F. Buccellati

A massive structure, dug deeply into the ground.

Adjacent to the Royal Palace.

A steep and narrow stairway leading from the sunlight to the darkest underground.

A square chamber from which one descends even further into a circular one.

Walls built of large stone blocks, gleaming in the dark at the light of torches.

Evidence of regular use over a period of several centuries.

What can you make of all this?

It was, and it remains, a burning question. The best answer is: a ceremonial place for funerary rites in honor of the royal ancestors. We can imagine few members of the royal family descending through the stairway, on special occasions, to consume a meal in what certainly looks like the depths of the earth.

But then, think of the following. If the same place was used over the centuries to honor the roots of kingship, does this mean that the same dynasty remained in control at Urkish over that long a period of time? The historical implications would be enormous. However, they rest for now on speculation.

The Lady of the underground



Photo V13d1632 G. Gallacci

Inside the underground chamber, there was evidence of continuous occupation and use. The most remarkable object was this little jar, in the shape of a naked lady, with a jar on her head! There are interesting parallels for this kind of vessel from Anatolia.