

GEDENKSCHRIFT

LLOYD COTSEN

Celebrating Life in Mesopotamia

Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati

Celebrations in ancient Mesopotamia were occasions to affirm connections among the people, their gods, and their city. The evidence for these celebrations comes from architectural remains, iconography, and cuneiform texts. Causes for celebrations are primarily events connected with deities, installations of important public and religious figures, weddings, funerary rituals, and prominent military victories. What we do see in the sources is weighted toward state and religious occasions. But luckily, some more personal celebrations are documented, and here I want to focus on the iconographic and written evidence from three sites in Syria—Urkesh, Ebla, and Mari—with particular emphasis on the role of women.

We know that in Mesopotamia, the majority of women usually worked within the household setting, raising children, providing and preparing food, maintaining the house, and the like. For these women, we have scarce evidence. We see from the texts, however, that some women bought and sold property, while some worked outside the nuclear family setting, as midwives, wet nurses, tavern keepers, workers in large weaving establishments, and even

Beer drinking in Mesopotamia was a sign of civilization.

managers of these large organizations. For instance, in the southern Mesopotamian city of Adaba, a textile workshop was supervised by a woman, Mama-ummi, who was responsible for 170 weaving women (Foster 2016:125).

Celebrations can be connected with taverns, and we know from the texts that some women were tavern keepers. Beer made from barley was the main alcoholic drink in these establishments. The tavern keeper made her own beer or bought beer made by others. Beer drinking in third-millennium BCE Mesopotamia was a sign of civilization, as emphasized in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹ Enkidu, an uncivilized creature, was given bread and ale to drink for the first time (Figure 1):

Enkidu drank the ale, seven jugs (full). His mood became free, he was singing, his heart became merry and his face shone bright. The barber treated his body so hairy, he anointed himself with oil and became a man.

1. Texts from Gilgamesh used here are translations from the original by G. Buccellati.



Figure 1. Gilgamesh (right) gives a friendly greeting to the hairy Enkidu.

One female Mesopotamian tavern keeper is especially famous. We hear of her, also in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, because she advises Gilgamesh to enjoy life. We will hear her advice in her own words below.

THE ROYAL FAMILY OF URKESH: LIFE WITHIN A FORMAL COURT SETTING

The visual corpus from the Urkesh excavations stems mainly from the large number of seal impressions found broken on the floors of several rooms and a courtyard of the administrative portion of the Akkadian-period palace, around 2250 BCE. The seal designs have a unique mix of cultural expressions, which is both authentic and authoritative. The secular scenes belonging to the queen, Uqnitum, and the king, Tupkish, have a tangible immediacy, with scenes rendered in a vivid and realistic manner, and just as importantly they are specific to these monarchs. In the Urkesh corpus of seal impressions, the inscribed seals show women observed in the palace context and clearly not in a religious context. Instead of recording military victories, the rulers of Urkesh are interested in representing the royal family, within a dynastic program that aims at showing a stable succession of power and, in the case of the seals of Uqnitum, her preeminent role in the palace.

Looked at on a deeper level, this iconography intimately connects Uqnitum with this desire. Moreover, it shows that she is equal to the king in this endeavor. The formal setting in which this message



Figure 2. Seal of King Tupkish, with the crown prince touching his knee.

is proclaimed can be interpreted as a celebratory occasion, because the object of the message is that it would be proclaimed widely. This message, and the way it is proclaimed, is found in no other Mesopotamian court. Therefore the message of both Uqnitum and her husband, Tupkish, is multigenerational in that it was aimed at assuring the succession of their son to the throne.

The scenes are set in important contexts that reflect both formal and informal occasions. These two



Figure 3. Seal of Queen Uqnitum, shown holding a small child and with Tupkish and the crown prince.

dimensions blend in unexpected ways, and it is in this sense that we can speak of celebrations of life. Take, for example, the scene in Figure 2. On the one hand, the occasion is most formal: the crown prince has a crown-like headdress; the eight-pointed star over the son's head may also offer a significant recognition of his special status as the crown prince; the king holds a scepter that clearly points to royal status; the filler motif is a bull, which may have a particular symbolic valence in a political sense. On the other hand, the prince is shown standing on the mane of what appears to be a live lion. His feet seem to be embedded in the mane of the animal. The attendant figure pours liquid in a vessel in front of the lion, which is yawning, suggesting that he has just been fed and is fully sated. Also, the animal's hind quarters make a bend from behind the legs of the seated king and emerge under the king's seat, thus giving again the appearance of a live animal rather than a statue serving as the base of the throne. The dimension of life is projected by this blending of a real and very concrete situation (a live lion) and the formal moment of the crown prince's recognition by the ruler. (With regard to the touching of the knee, we are reminded of the gesture in Genesis 24:2, 24:9, and 47:29, where placing the hand under

Life seems to protrude out of a scene intended to show the prowess of the crown prince.

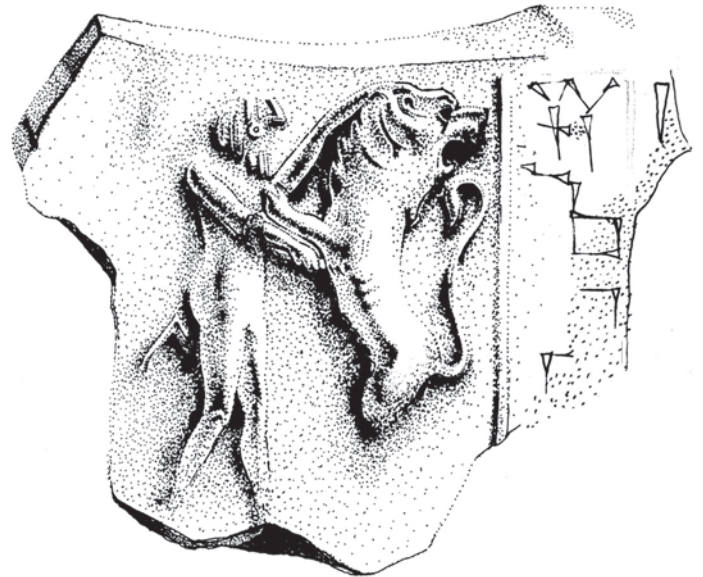


Figure 4. Seal of the son of the king, shown in combat with a lion.

the thigh serves as a symbol that accompanies an oath, here too combining a familial gesture with a formal occasion.)

Or take the family scene in Figure 3. On the one hand, the seal conveys a political message: the queen is proclaiming that she is the most important female in the court (we assume she may be related to the royal house of Akkad, like her successor, Tar'am-Agade) and that her son should become the next king of Urkesh. This is clearly evinced from a series of visual details that signify the concurrence of King Tupkish with the queen's intent: he accepts the special greeting of his son, who touches his knee, and returns it by lifting the cup; the young boy wears the same crown-like headdress as in Figure 2, but this time we see that the king also wears the same type of head covering; and again the eight-pointed star appears as a possible attri-

bute of the crown prince. It is therefore a seal about dynastic continuity. On the other hand, the queen holds on her knee a small child (possibly her daughter, given her braid, which echoes that of her mother). The detail indicates that this is indeed a family scene, where the king appears now as a father who appreciates the simple joy of being together. The portrait-like nature of the faces of the participants (in particular the two adults) also gives a special tone of familiarity to the scene. Finally, the ram as the filler motif under the legend does not seem to stand out as a particularly official symbol. Altogether then, it seems as though the emphasis on the family dimension brings out a special aspect of life, imbuing the official aspect (the dynastic concern) with a different kind of energy.

A fragment of a seal impression that the legend attributes to the crown prince (Figure 4) shows a human figure engaged in combat with a lion standing on its hind paws. Unlike other representations of such combat, which tend to be very heraldic and stylized in nature, we have in this impression a very lifelike animal, which appears to echo that of Figure 2. Again, here life protrudes out of a scene that presumably was intended to show the prowess of the crown prince in a very realistic fashion.

These scenes are in contrast with a large and complete door sealing of a later king of Urkesh, Ishar-kinum (Figure 5), which shows instead a ritual celebration, still centered on highlighting the power of the dynasty. In it a small figure—a child or the king?—is standing on two lion figures, which appear in this case to be statues, not real lions. Also on the lions is a seated god. A figure pouring liquid in front of the lions completes the scene. The reason for thinking that this is a cult celebration of the power of the dynasty is its close iconographic connection with the earlier seal of Tupkish (Figure 2), although here, both the occasion and the style are quite different.

THE URKESH COURTIERS: THE LIFE OF THE DAILY TASKS

The seals I review here are all inscribed, and we know that possessing an inscribed seal naming the owner was important for the personal identity of elite men and women in Mesopotamia. In one of the letters found in Mari, dated after the Urkesh seal impressions, the royal princess Shimiatum writes to her father, Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, asking him for a lapis lazuli cylinder seal with her name written on it. She says, “When I write, I will not be mocked by others



Figure 5. Seal of Ishar-kinum, showing images similar to those in the seal of Tupkish in Figure 2.



Figure 6. Seal of Zamena, the wet nurse of the seated Uqnitum.

who say ‘Her seal has no imprinted legend’” (Sasson 2015:113). Seal inscriptions give us another significant register to “read,” since many identify the seal owner by name and title; this is certainly the case for elite seals found in Urkesh and the mention of Urkesh in the title of the king was of course fundamental in allowing us to identify the ancient name of the site. For our topic, the legends of the seals are of particular importance, because they show a close connection between the functions of the individuals as given by their titles and the images on the seals. We look at three in particular.

In the seals of the wet nurse Zamena (Figure 6), we see her as a smaller figure standing before Uqnitum, who is holding a young child on her lap. Zamena



Figure 7. Seal of Tuli, the cook of Queen Uqnitum.

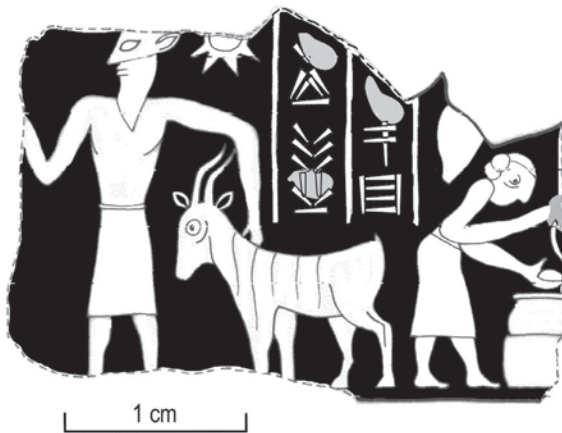


Figure 8. A later seal of Tuli, showing her name.

is intimately connected with these two figures, as she is touching the baby with both hands. The intimacy of the whole scene is powerfully indicated by the servant behind the queen, who is in the act of braiding her hair. In this instance we are not viewing a festive occasion but one of probably an everyday occurrence. From texts elsewhere, we know that the wet nurse often stays with the family and in some way becomes part of the family. The message in Urkesh stresses the power of Zamena in the court through her very close connection with Uqnitum. Proof of this power can be seen from the large number of containers sent to the palace under her seal. In the Mari letters, we hear of

a princess from Qatna, Beltum, who is bringing her nanny with her to Mari when she is married. The comment from the Mari point of view is that this nanny knows nothing about the palace operations, with the implication that she will not be a good administrator. Based on evidence from the number of containers sealed in her name, Zamena must have been an efficient administrator in Urkesh.

Tuli was the “cook of Uqnitum,” as per the legend on her seals (Figures 7 and 8). Two points about this title need to be stressed. The first is that she was no ordinary cook but the manager of all the cooking needs. Second, these were the needs of the queen, as distinct from the king. Her two seals do not show her (as distinct from the seals of Zamena) but rather the events and personnel for whom she was responsible: a male butcher and a female who is churning butter (in one seal; in the other she may be stirring, and possibly cooking, something else in a large vat). Both points are interesting for our topic. By connecting her exclusively with the queen, the cuneiform legend proclaims, as it were, the singularity of her position and of the queen’s administrative apparatus as well. It is quite a statement to make, underlining as it does such a special distribution of functions and “offices” within the royal palace. And the life of this office is shown in the details of its most minute operations, in its two main aspects of food procurement (the butcher) and food preparation (churning and cooking).

Ishar-beli was presumably a courtier of Tar’am-Agade, the daughter of Naram-Sin, who succeeds Uqnitum as queen by probably one generation. His seal (Figure 9) may be interpreted as a scene celebrating the birth of a foal, where the mother is prancing in front of a seated deity while one of the standing deities holds the little foal in his arms. There is a great sense of dynamism (Buccellati 2015) in the scene, with the mother raised to receive a gift (possibly some special food) and the little one locking eyes with the buffalo; the filler motif being adroitly and unexpectedly integrated in the main scene. The great realism and the strong dynamics of the scene underscore the intent to celebrate an event (the birth of a young animal), placing it in a mythological context (the deities) while at the same time anchoring it in the reality of everyday life. Whether Ishar-beli was specifically in charge of animal husbandry we do not know, but it is likely, also in view of what we have seen in relationship to Tuli and her tasks in the “kitchen” of the queen.

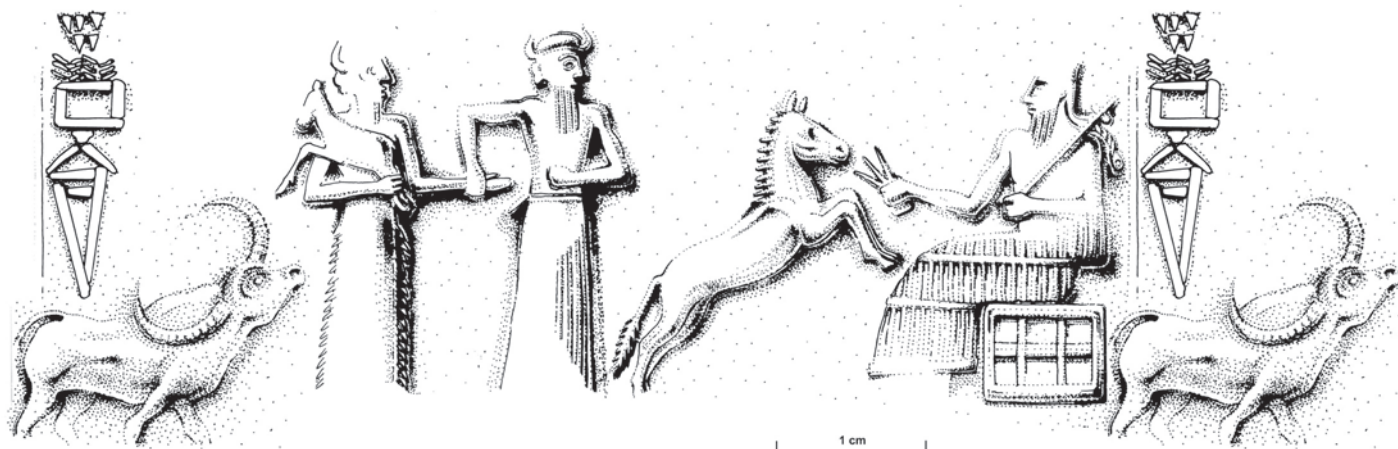


Figure 9. Seal of Ishar-beli, with a horse prancing before a bearded deity.

THE COURTS OF EBLA AND MARI: MARRIAGE CELEBRATIONS

Celebratory occasions in Mesopotamian lives are often alluded to in the texts. For instance, from the Ebla texts we understand something about the processions and ceremonies connected with the wedding of Tabur-damu to her cousin Ishar-damu, the king of Ebla at that time. Events begin the night before the wedding, when she sleeps outside the city walls of Ebla. Her transformation from a young girl into the queen of Ebla (*maliktum*) begins in the morning, with a ritual anointing with oil, followed by a purification ritual and then her entry into the city. After her entry, she is clothed in new royal garments and proceeds directly to the Kura temple to sacrifice to the gods of Ebla. During this ceremony, she presents offerings of jewelry and precious vessels to the two important city deities, Kura and Barama, both especially connected to Ebla royalty. The marriage celebrations include a procession of Tabur-Damu through the city, so that city dwellers have a chance to view and cheer their new queen. The wedding is celebrated by the entire court and entails the giving of precious gifts of metal and splendid fabrics to the courtiers, their distinguished guests, and invited allies (Fronzaroli 1998; Matthiae 2010:109-10).

In the Ebla texts connected with this marriage, we again see the position of the wet nurse. In Ebla court documents, we recognize the intimate relationship between the queen of Ebla and her old wet nurse. When Tabur-damu marries Ishar-damu and becomes queen of Ebla, Agašadu, her nurse, is also present at court. She does not work as the nurse of the children of the queen, but she bears the title “nurse of the queen”—that is, the nurse who nourished the queen

We see that the nurse of a girl given in marriage goes with her to her new home.

when she was a child (Biga 1997). Here we see that the nurse of a young girl given in marriage goes with her, as her friend, to her new home. It must have been the same relationship that Zamena had to Queen Uqnitum in Urkesh.

In the Mari letters, we hear that when Princess Shiptu of Yamhad was to marry Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, he sent two trusted members of his court to bring his bride to Mari: his chief musician and his diviner. The chief musician probably also was in charge of the harem in Zimri-Lim’s court. We know from other texts that in conjunction with the marriage ceremonies there were wedding processions, and music was a very popular entertainment on many occasions.

“THE LITTLE ONE HOLDING YOUR HAND”

We have not looked at formal celebrations of life but rather at the way in which life emerges with all

They are the simplest of gestures.

its vigor in a variety of contexts. The formality surrounding the king, the queen, and the crown prince is pierced through, as it were, by the concreteness of moments that proclaim the value of family ties. The courtiers choose to place on their seals moments of the life that characterize their tasks, in ways that in their simplicity succeed in portraying the life that these tasks are meant to serve. The marriage texts give us a glimpse into aspects that affect the daily life as well as the events involved in a wedding ceremony.

By way of conclusion, we may read a passage from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* that seems to echo, in a very poetic tone, the scene with which we opened our considerations. The seals illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 show us the crown prince touching the knee of the king. It is a formal sign, but one that at the same time involves a great familiarity. And this reminds us of good advice the tavern keeper Siduri gives to Gilgamesh. She says in the text:

Gilgamesh, wherefore do you wander?
The eternal life you are seeking you shall not find.
.....
As for you, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full.
Always be happy, night and day.
Make every day a delight.
Night and day play and dance.
.....
Look proudly on the little one holding your hand.
Let your mate be always blissful in your loins.
This, then, is the work of mankind.

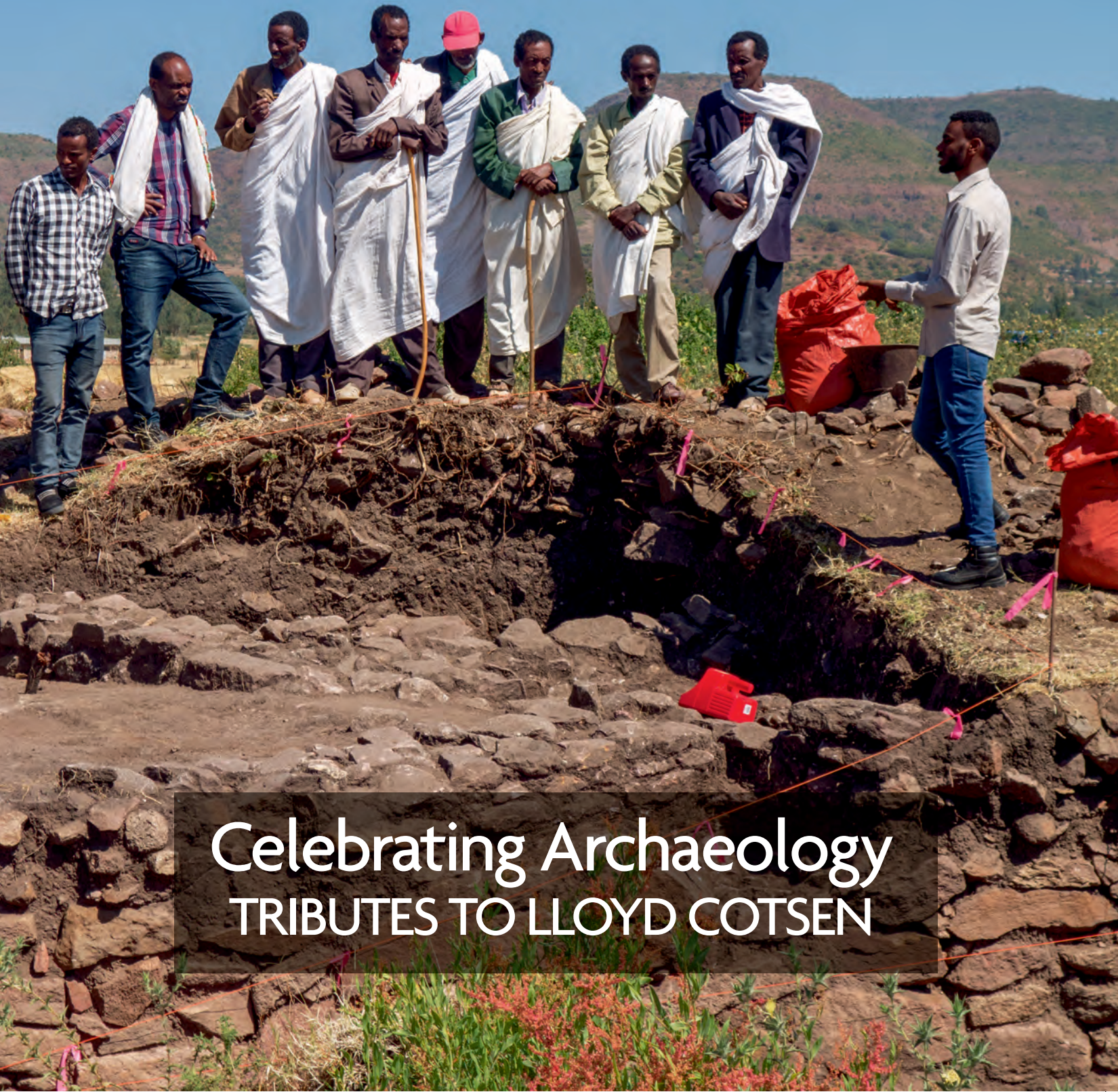
Holding the hand, touching the knee: they are the simplest of gestures, but they emerge as the most eloquent way to celebrate life in all possible settings. I like to think that Lloyd Cotsen would enjoy this way of combining different moments and aspects, and this is because he was so deeply open to the full dimension of life in all its variations, and so sensitive to the human experience we can also read in the ancient documents.

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BACKDIRT

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Celebrating Archaeology
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BACKDIRT

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FRONT COVER: Ethiopian archaeologist Goitom Weldehaweriat (right) explains the site of Mai Adrasha, near Indaselassie (Shire) in northern Ethiopia, to a group of mourners returning from a funeral.

BACK COVER: Northern Arizona University graduate student Whitney Yarbrough studies an ancient Egyptian wooden animal coffin in the collection of Museo Egizio, Turin, during the field school in museology and Egyptian material culture organized by the Cotsen Institute, the Institute for Field Research, and Museo Egizio.

ABOVE: Beverly Godwin, longtime member of the Friends of Archaeology, greets visitors during the open house on May 12, 2018.

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