

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARCHAEO-ZOOLOGY OF THE *ĀBI*

by Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati

The analysis published in the following article by Silvia Di Martino is based on animal bones excavated from several strata deposited in a large underground structure located just to the south of the palace of Tūpkish. The structure predated the construction of the palace which has its southern wall stepped back to accommodate the preexisting construction¹. (Ill. 1).

This stone lined hypogeum consists of two chambers: the circular one, constructed first, and the square chamber added later to the circular portion by removing a part of the stone wall on the western side of the circle (Ill. 2). The resulting structure has a keyhole shape. Presumably the western perimeter of the circle, which was later removed for the construction of the square, contained the original stair since it is not present in the excavated portion of the circle. The square portion did have a preserved entrance through a very narrow doorway and steep stone steps. The final stage of this monumental pit, including both the circle and the square, is over 7.5 meters in length near the top of the walls as preserved. The width of the circular chamber is about 4 meters in diameter near the top.

Even though the structure has not yet been completely excavated, the ceramics excavated thus far date it from Phase 2 through Phase 4 with its abandonment in Phase 5, indicating that its main period of use was between ca 2300 and ca 2100 B.C.

The stratigraphy throughout the use-life of the structure indicates that the circular portion was the major focus of the activities. The accumulations within the later, square portion were in the nature of a clean fill, especially in the lower strata. Within the circular portion there were smaller, ephemeral pits indicated by circular depressions. The outer limit of these depressions were indicated in various ways: a placement of stones (Ill. 3), a color change from the surrounding stratum, a difference in deposition such as traces of burning or an accumulation of bones either inside or just outside these pits.

The most important clue in the identification of the function of this underground structure came from the animal bone analysis published here, especially the large number of piglet and puppy dog bones. The majority of these bones were excavated in the circular part of the structure. Inside the circular portion there is a clear continuity within the bone deposits from the lowest feature, f351, to the high-

¹ For a discussion of this structure see M. Kelly-Buccellati, "Ein hurritischer Gang in die Unterwelt," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 134 (2003), pp. 131-148. The stratigraphic reconstruction of the development of the structure is discussed in G. Buccellati and M. Kelly-Buccellati, "Der monumentale Palasthof von Tall Mozan/Urkeš und die stratigraphische Geschichte des *ābi*," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 136 (2004), pp. 13-39.



Ill. 2 – View of the *ābi* showing stone work.



Ill. 3 – An ephemeral pit within the circular portion of the *ābi*.

est, f316 (Ill. 4). Between these two features there is a continuous, regular build-up of strata including features 347, 343, 342, 331, and 329. The clear continuity of deposits within the strata can easily be seen in the case of the pig bones, which are more numerous than any other type. Feature 347 was particularly rich in that it contained a large number of both pig and dog bones. Feature 343, along with pig and dog bones, contained an anthropomorphic vessel of a nude woman with long braids². In this feature too were parts of two rare ceramic cups made of a fine Simple ware and decorated with incised geometric designs³. Dog bones were most frequent in features 347, 343 and then in 316, also showing a continuity but not as clearly as the pig bones because in feature 342 there were 3 bones and feature 331 contained only 1 bone. The features that contained a large number of dog and pig bones also had in them a number of donkey bones. Again feature 347 was the most prolific in that it contained 17 donkey bones. Features 343, 331 and 316 included a number of these bones.

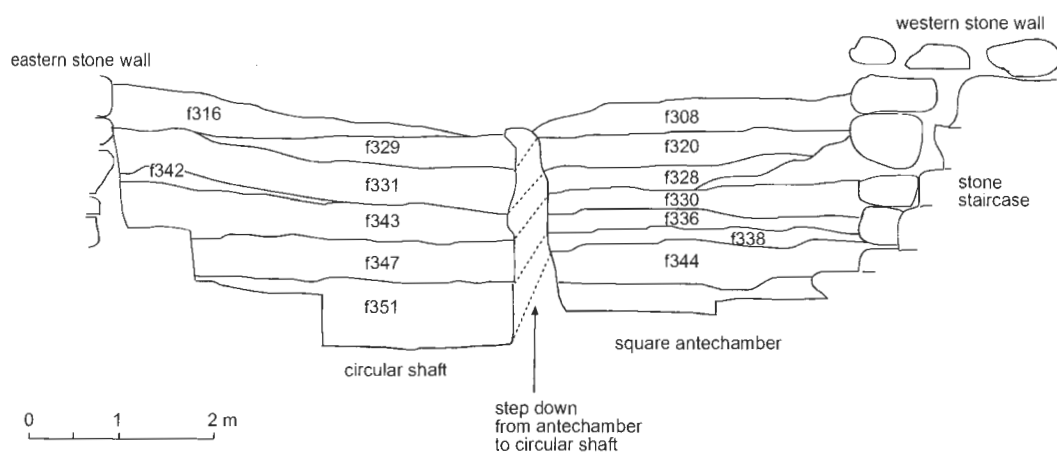
The regular, undisturbed continuity of deposits within this unique monumental architecture, containing animal bones as its major depositional component signaled that very specific activities took place within it, even though the function was not immediately clear at first. It could not have been a monumental tomb because there were no human bones, the artifacts found in the structure were not the type usually found in tombs and the even distribution of the artifacts as well as the regular, continuous build-up of the strata are not characteristics of tomb deposits. The same argument militates against considering it a well or an ice-house, since, once abandoned, these structures would have been filled with an amorphous dump, and not with the regular deposition we found. In the case of a well, the restricted and very steep access to it would have made any attempt to carry water out of it so difficult as to be impossible on a regular basis. Another hypothesis we considered at first was whether the structure might be a *bīt mātim*, that is a structure in which a ritual meal (*kispum*) was celebrated by the king and queen in honor of their ancestors. This hypothesis was also discarded because of the lack of human bones.

However the results of the animal bone analysis allowed the connection of our monumental underground structure with Hurrian ritual texts preserved in Hittite archives. The rituals concerned with the calling up of deities of the Netherworld take place in a pit called with the Hurrian name *ābi*. Prominent among the offerings given to these deities are piglets and puppy dogs. Recently in a lower stratum a part of a ceramic vessel in the shape of a pig was excavated (Ill. 5)⁴. It is possible that this vessel was used in just such Hurrian rituals. Through this type of pit the Hurrians summoned the deities of the Netherworld and also used this same type of pit to imprison evil of various kinds down in the underworld. The Hurrian-Hittite rituals indicate that the king plays a role in calling forth these gods; in fact it is significant that the Urkesh palace of Tupkish was constructed alongside the preexisting underground structure. It is also noteworthy that the only example we have of such a monumental underground structure should be found in Urkesh where

² G. Buccellati and M. Kelly-Buccellati, "Überlegungen zur funktionellen und historischen Bestimmung des Königspalastes AP in Urkesh," *MDOG* 133, Berlin 2001, pp. 59-96, especially pp. 66-71, 78-80.

³ *Ibid.* 78-87.

⁴ Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2004, p. 36-39.



Ill. 4 – East-west section through the *ābi* looking south.

A schematic rendering of the section published in *MDOG* 133, p. 67.

The dotted lines show the probable correlation between strata on either side of the step from antechamber to shaft.



Ill. 5 – Ceramic vessel in the form of a pig A12.149
Photo by Giuseppe Gallacci.

the Hurrian god Kumarbi is said in the texts to reside. Kumarbi is sometimes listed among the chthonic divinities although not specifically with rites connected with an *ābi*.

Contemporary evidence from Syria for the use of an *ābi* can be found in three parallel Ebla texts where an *abi* (*a-ba-i*) is mentioned in conjunction with a ritual for the purification of a statue of a goddess named ^d*ga-na-na*. This goddess is characterized by the fact that she is linked with the Netherworld, she is connected with the king and queen on the day of their enthronement, she is related to the mausoleum of dead Ebla kings at a place called NE-na-*áš^{ki}*. Ceremonies associated with the opening of her door appear to signify that through this door spirits of the Netherworld could ascend. While the *ābi* is not described in the Ebla texts, it is assumed to be a hypogeum. Mention is also made in the texts from Emar of an *ābi* associated with the cult of the dead⁵. The summoning of the dead is also attested at Ugarit.

The discovery of the function of the monumental underground structure at Urkesh is one of the few instances in Syro-Mesopotamia where archaeological and textual evidence come together to identify the use of a specific type of building, or in this case a pit. While this does happen with more regularity with palaces, even in the case of temples the name of the deity connected with the temple is difficult to determine. We know from the myths that the god Kumarbi resided in Urkesh and from the same myths it is clear that he is a chthonic deity. King Tish-atal dedicated a temple to Nergal, also a chthonic god, but in fact it seems likely that Nergal is but a logogram for Kumarbi, and that the temple in question is the one we have excavated at the summit of the modern site of Mozan (Temple BA). While no rituals requiring monumental structures are associated with them, necromancy and the calling of chthonic deities, through the use of ritual pits, are characteristically Hurrian ritual practices. The interpretation of the Urkesh monumental shaft as a focal point for such rituals is another indication of the strong Hurrian cultural identity of the city of Urkesh.

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⁵ Jacopo Pasquali/Piergiorgio Mangarotti, "Il rito dell' "ipogeo" ad Ebla," *N.A.B.U.* 2005, No. 1, pp. 21-3.