

## POWER AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ANCIENT URKESH

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*It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to Stefania Mazzoni whose constant enthusiasm for life and scholarship has been a pleasure to share over many years of collegial and personal friendship.*

### **Abstract**

*The unique combination of the Urkesh archaeological record and the monumental architecture excavated at the site in addition to the iconographic and textual evidence provides a rare vantage point for research on expressions of power and the construction of personal and social identity in this early city. Two aspects of identity construction are explored: urban identity formation in Urkesh and personal construction of elite identity; the impact of both on the urban society as well as the wider metropolitan area is discussed. The beginning of a focus on urban identity in Urkesh can be found in the fourth millennium with the construction of a high terrace with, in all likelihood, a temple on top; this terrace was a locus of ritual activity until late Mittani times. The article analyzes the personal identity construction of king Tupkish, queen Uqnitum and court servants connected with her through both iconography and seal inscriptions.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of identity has been of primary interest to scholars in the last several decades. Some in particular have paid attention to the nature of ancient identity construction, such as expressed in various historical contexts; these studies provide a framework for thinking about personal and social identity construction factors operative even in the remote past.<sup>1</sup> The question is how effective were certain patterns of behavior in helping to create personal and social identity within any early city, the villages in its hinterland and beyond. This depends to a large extent on social and political purposes, because the negotiation of identity and power are intertwined at a fundamental level. Since identity is

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<sup>1</sup> For relevant works on identity and further bibliography see Abdela et al. 2006; Carter and Philip 2010; Diaz-Andreu et al. 2005; Domingo Sanz et al. 2008; Kuijt 2002; Leve 2011; Macginnis 2012; Mattingly 2011; Revell 2009; Shennan 1994; Steadman and Ross 2010; Varien and Potter, 2008; Wendrich 2012; Cuzzo and Guidi 2013, and the by now classic Jones, 1997. For a different view cf. Remotti 2010.

both relational and contextual, and thus in a study of ancient identity it is important to look at the personal goals of individuals and members of the group, how these goals were formulated and to what extent they were achieved. The unique archaeological, iconographic and textual record discovered in ancient Urkesh provides a rare vantage point for this type of research because of the richness of detail and the coherence of the visual vocabulary displayed. With the extensive excavations of Mozan/ancient Urkesh we have, in fact, well stratified contexts associated with public architecture and a number of seal impressions used to seal doors and containers of a wide variety of types. Seal impressions were found dating to most periods of the site and start in the fourth millennium temple terrace context (Kelly-Buccellati 2010). While many of these excavated contexts are connected with use areas allowing us to gain insights into the socio-economic environment of their employment and discard, here I will focus on two lines of evidence: the fourth millennium religious monumental architecture recently excavated at the site and the Akkadian period secular seal impressions stratified in the royal palace at Urkesh (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996, 1998, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. This article continues my research regarding the messages of these seals and how they were communicated in the seals of Uqnitum and Taram-Agade and administrators connected with them (Kelly-Buccellati 2009).

Based on their secure contexts and iconographic complexity shown in an innovative visual vocabulary, various lines of evidence can be invoked in the analysis of the Urkesh seals. We have already discussed the purposes (agenda) of the Urkesh court and how these aims and goals were carried out and advanced through pictorial imagery connected with textually specific messages (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996, 1998). We have stressed in the past that the designs have social, political and ideological value, that they reflect the subjective narratives of identity, especially Uqnitum and the servants connected with her in various ways (Kelly-Buccellati 2009; emphasis on individual identity is stressed by Knapp in Steadman and Ross 2010, 193-200). Previously, I have suggested that the figure on Uqnitum's seals is indeed her portrait and therefore connected intimately with her and her message. In this respect I stressed that the message was personal and political, aimed at conveying and indeed solidifying her position within the court of her husband Tupkish (Kelly-Buccellati 2009). The political aspect of her message was multi-generational in that it aimed at assuring the succession of her son to the throne. This multi-generational message is clearest in what we have called the "family scene" which shows her seated across from Tupkish with a small figure, presumably her son, touching the lap of the king (Fig. 1). While the political intent of her iconography is undisputable, there is another level that can be approached through this iconography, that is the construction of her personal identity, her wider social intent and its influence within the palace setting and in the surrounding area. In other words: who is Uqnitum? What could be her self-definition, her mental model of herself?

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of our publications on Urkesh can be found at [www.Urkesh.org](http://www.Urkesh.org). Additionally many are found at [www.mkb-cv.net](http://www.mkb-cv.net), [www.gb-cv.net](http://www.gb-cv.net), [fab-cv.net](http://fab-cv.net) as well as some on [academia.edu](http://academia.edu).



Fig. 1: Uqnitum seal showing the “family”.

The new visual vocabulary seen in the seals connected with Uqnitum and Tupkish also extended to a number of Uqnitum’s seals not overtly connected with the king. In our excavated corpus we have few seals of king Tupkish, all fragmentary. Our evidence is more substantial for Uqnitum and the administrators surrounding her, nonetheless we see from the designs of Tupkish that his iconography too employs new visual elements, not thus far found elsewhere (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996). While we cannot reconstruct his visual message precisely, what we can know of his program is discussed below (3.2). In both the seals of Tupkish and Uqnitum we clearly recognize a harmonious combination of new artistic elements. In the scenes of both dynasts there is a clear emphasis on narrative elements with the nuanced telling of a story so that a deeper message is carried to the viewers. To give an example, we see both in the family scene (Fig. 1) and in one seal of Tupkish (Fig. 10) the knee touching gesture of the small figure we assume is the designated crown prince. At a surface level these two seals express desires of dynastic continuity. Looking at them at a deeper level they connect Uqnitum intimately with this desire and moreover they show that she is equivalent to the king in this endeavor. The star always associated with the small figure indicates his association with and protection by the divine world; a symbol also of divine approval of the message.

Another startling characteristic of the Urkesh palace corpus, is that some officials did not seal in their own name or with their own seal but rather they were important enough to be authorized to use a seal belonging to the queen, Uqnitum, as attested in the seal inscriptions. This was not limited to her direct seals but also included, seals utilized by administrators, especially with her wet-nurse Zamena (Buccellati-Kelly-Buccellati 1998, 197-200). The large number of seals with only minor variations in the iconography and the same inscription can only be attributed to a system whereby the seal owner is the queen or another official of very high status (Innin-shadū, see below 3.4) who did not use the



Fig. 2: Niched building, presumably a temple on the Urkesh temple terrace.

seal but rather delegated its use to an individual (or even perhaps a section of the administration) for administrative purposes. The iconography and inscriptions of all these seals are intertwined with a view toward communication that could be perceived by different social segments with an ever increasing clarity.

There are two aspects of identity construction that will be explored here: civic as seen in the Urkesh urban context and the shaping of personal identity by Urkesh elites. Initially the urban context of Urkesh, the creation of its identity as a major religious center, will be discussed. In this section the focus will be on the city itself as a unique entity and locus for the formation of both religious and political power.

## 2. THE URBAN IMAGE

Concerning the urban development of the city, our evidence indicates that this came about for the first time in the fourth millennium (Kelly-Buccellati 2013, Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2014). The evidence we have dates to the Late Chalcolithic 3 period (ca. 3500 BC) when already in this early period the temple terrace had been constructed so





Fig. 3: Early stone staircase, Urkesh.

that it was raised to twenty-two meters above the plain level and contained a monumental niched building, in all likelihood a temple (Fig. 2). It is possible that the terrace and niched building had been constructed already in the Late Chalcolithic 2 period as the excavations have not yet reached the floor level of the building on the interior or the construction level on the exterior. In addition there were some LC 2 gray ware sherds within the predominantly LC 3 ceramic inventory connected with the building, possibly pointing to a date of early LC 3 for its construction. At this point the access to the top of the terrace in the LC 3 period is not clear but it is more than likely that can be found below the present Early Dynastic III stone staircase. We have, in fact, partially uncovered an earlier stone staircase stratified under the ED III one (Fig. 3); the few ceramics that are connected with this earlier stone staircase date to ED II. Given the length of the period within the Early Dynastic period of a stone staircase as the entrance way to the temple terrace it is at least plausible that the LC 3 entrance was in this area of the temple terrace as well.

The reason we can speak about urban identity in this early period in Urkesh is that the very height of the temple terrace made it a beacon within the surrounding landscape. Its height made it visible not only from the surrounding plains, but also as far away as the Mardin Pass, the major route in this area between the Tur Abdin mountains and the flat



Fig. 4: Landscape of Urkesh and the Mardin Pass.

plains of northeastern Syria. Individuals traveling in any direction would have been able to use it as a point of reference and therefore a guide. This guide can more precisely be appreciated when we realize that in the flat landscape of the plains, a high terrace would have helped travelers calculate how far they were from the Mardin Pass, for those traveling north-south (Fig. 4). The terrace served as an intermediate point to calculate the length in distance and travel in terms of time to or from this major pass. Even those traveling east-west would have benefited from such a point in the plains since the Mardin Pass is so prominent and can be seen along much of this route. In this case the high terrace of Urkesh helped travelers situate themselves in an east-west sense too. The construction of a prominent beacon at this point in the plain was no accident; the new city wanted to be seen as a focal point and obviously made fundamental social and economic efforts to achieve this.

The impact of a high temple terrace not only was felt by travelers, but also by neighbors. The small towns and villages within the orbit of the city would have benefited in a number of ways from the growing prestige of the city, from increased economic activities connected with the expansion of the city to heightened social status for everyone connected with the city, especially of course the local elites in these towns and villages (Kelly-Buccellati 2013). The impact would have been felt in the wider sphere as well. A new

artificial “mountain” on the horizon put an immediate stress on the city of Urkesh as a point of natural curiosity but more importantly as a focal point for new and increased trade and social interactions. Evidence of the increase in local trade comes in the form of container sealings found in small deposits on top of the fourth millennium terrace near the temple (Kelly-Buccellati 2010). Although the iconography of these seal impressions is predominantly southern, this does not necessarily indicate, in my opinion, a southern presence or even indeed a strong southern influence. Since they were container sealings, I have reconstructed a scenario in which these containers were probably sent from a nearby city like Nagar (Tell Brak) where the southern influence was strong. In Urkesh we have found only large amounts of local ceramics, and very few sherds which might belong to the southern tradition. The niched building on the high terrace appears from its being situated on the terrace to be a temple, in this case following the architectural pattern of temples from the south, although non-religious niched buildings have been excavated at the contemporary site of Hamoukar and elsewhere (Sievertsen 2010: 212-219).

Whatever the impact, the urban pattern of a temple on top of the high terrace was maintained in the city from its beginnings in the fourth millennium until late Mittani times, an impressive continuity for approximately two millennia. No other temple on a high terrace in the area can claim such a historical-functional cohesion and the benefits of the collective identity that would flow from it. Additionally in all likelihood the temple constructed on top of this high terrace was dedicated to the Hurrian god, Kumarbi, at least in the third and second millennia. We know from later Hurrian texts found in Hittite archives that Kumarbi lived in Urkesh. He also is connected with the dispensation of justice in the nearby mountains, that is in the hinterland of his city, Urkesh (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2005). No matter who the deity was, in point of fact these fourth millennium developments must have been initiated and led by local individuals. Unfortunately our evidence does not allow us to recognize these individuals in the archaeological record. But the record of such a high terrace being constructed so early in itself gives us firm evidence that not only the leadership but also those constructing the terrace were identified with this vast project and shared the social, political and economic benefits that accrued from it.

### 3. PERSONAL IDENTITY

If we utilize the definition of identity as a set of self-understandings applied to the social sphere, then it is clear that the court in Urkesh was self-consciously producing their own politically charged and secular images with the explicit intent to communicate identity. The Urkesh secular scenes have a tangible immediacy, scenes rendered in a vivid and realistic manner. And within this secular artistic iconographic world no confusing or ambiguous images were allowed. This was achieved in a number of ways. The harmony of iconographic characteristics of most of these seals is impressive: realism first of all connected with a clear narrative proclaiming the profession of the seal owner is combined with a strict effort at describing details, from the head wear of many of the human figures





Fig. 5: Zamena seal showing hair braiding scene.

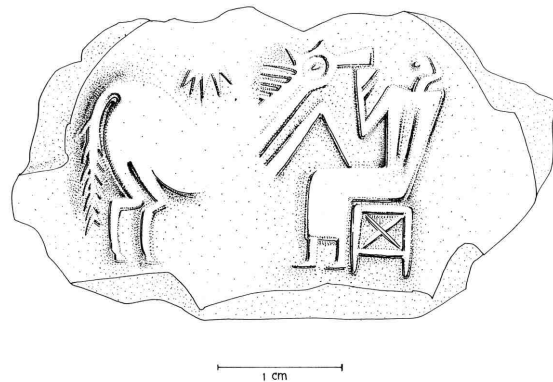


Fig. 6: Seal impression showing an equid before a seated figure.

to the details of a special table found in the Uqnitum seals, prominently displayed also in some unscribed seals. None of these details is seen as an abstracted and patterned reality; rather they are viewed as well as rendered close to the lived visual reality of the artist and patron. When there are non-realistic details, such as the large frontally placed eye in the human figures in all the scenes with Uqnitum, I interpret this as an emphasis on the intimacy of the contact, also expressed by the many instances of touching. The emphasis on intimacy is paramount in the scene of hair braiding found only in the two Zamena seals, discussed below (Fig. 5).

The visual messages were not intended only for a restricted palace audience. We can infer what the impact of this new visual vocabulary would have on a wider audience from a variety of clues: the iconography and seal inscriptions, the excavated contexts, and from the container impressions on the reverse of the sealings. One unusual source is found in the area of seal use as pointed out above: from tiny details in the iconography we know that there were a number of very similar designs employed by a number of different administrators. This indicates that the seals themselves were distributed among the palace administrators, presumably acting in a variety of administrative contexts. They sealed various types of containers which presumably emanated from different points of production within the realms of the administration. The containers included jars, bags, boxes, sacks and baskets. Their variety and large number logically would have come from the Urkesh hinterland since it is unlikely to find such a numerous and varied production within the confines of the city itself. Additionally through iconographic imitations in unscribed seals, we can document the spread of influence to other areas, probably of the administration since these seal impressions are also found in the palace. One striking example of this imitation is the inclusion of the same bird table with a number of different unscribed scenes containing this table, discussed below. Another is the crude imitation of the Ishar-



beli iconography of an equid prancing toward a seated figure (Fig. 6)<sup>3</sup>. Since these are clear iconographic imitations, usually with crudely carved designs, their production and use surely must indicate an acceptance of and identification with the original message. Other incentives are discussed below.

### 3.1 The queen Uqnitum and her servants

Uqnitum proclaimed herself the wife of Tupkish and queen, DAM and NIN in the seal inscriptions connected with her. She was obviously the most important woman in the court of Tupkish as we have no inscribed seals with names of other women except those connected with her. Also we have no other seal iconography that indicates the seal owner as a woman of high prestige in the court of Tupkish. Uqnitum understood the importance of the connection between her personal name and her portrait. Both the combination of her name and her depiction on her seals communicates the uniqueness of her person. In her case, too, her specific context is indicated as located within the palace, shown by providing details of the context of her activities and identifying the specific location of those activities. In all the secular scenes on seals dating to the Akkadian period, she is the only person to show her locus of activity in this detail.

One of the aspects of identity creation is the establishment of markers that separate and help to define. While the importance of markers as boundaries has been stressed in the literature on identity, in Urkesh the markers are fundamental in defining the identity as well; that is, they define the center as well as the periphery. In our case the markers consist in clear signs, such as the high temple terrace or detailed iconographies carved on seals. To be effective the markers must in some way be proclaimed, as in the case of the temple terrace, to a wide public and in the case of the seal designs to a more restricted audience. To be widely effective it is fundamental that the markers are clear and recognizable by a wide segment of the social group. In the seals associated with her, Uqnitum is herself marking and defining her status and that of her son, daughter and administrative retinue, all depicted personally in the seal iconography. Let us now look at some of this in detail. Uqnitum is most often shown seated on the left side of the seal composition. Gestures including touching are prominent in her seal iconography. In the only seal where she is depicted with Tupkish in a formal setting (Fig. 1), she holds a small child on her lap with a second small figure, presumably her son, paying homage to his father by touching his knees. Her status is recognized as she is seated opposite the king, placed on the same level and as large a presence as he is. Also importantly she wears the more prestigious tiered garment while he wears a fringed robe. She sits on a compartmented stool, the same type of stool Tupkish sits on in this scene. Thus her iconography marks her as an equal participant in this recognition scene.

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<sup>3</sup> See G. Buccellati, this volume.



Fig. 7: Uqnitum and her daughter.



Fig. 8: Seal of Zamena, the wet-nurse.

In another seal of Uqnitum (Fig. 7), a somewhat less formal scene, she appears with a small girl, most likely her daughter, touching her lap, in a gesture that mirrors that of the son and his father in the family scene (Fig. 1). In this scene Uqnitum wears the tiered garment but the stool is now one with a patterned seat. Accordingly we see that the scene has slightly shifted but is still formal. In this scene with her daughter both she and her daughter wear their hair in a braid hanging down their back and decorated with a braid ornament. They are the only women with this type of hair arrangement. In a scene filled with identity markers the braid is still a striking one. The other women in the scene surround her: one stands behind her facing her but with her hands clasped. The other stands in front of her, behind her daughter, with a long arm stretched out toward Uqnitum. In the other hand she holds a bag shaped vessel.

These formal scenes are in some ways in contrast to the slightly more informal scene showing Uqnitum and Zamena (Fig. 8). Here the close relationship between servant and queen is accentuated by the placement of the small child on the lap of Uqnitum and the fact that Zamena is touching the child. Budin has recently discussed both human and divine women in her comprehensive study of ancient *kourotrophoi* (Budin 2011: 184-191). Although rare, a human woman seated holding a small child is known in the south. Interestingly, as in the Urkesh scene, when a woman holding a child is depicted in the south, all the other figures in the scene are women.<sup>4</sup>

In the seals of Zamena, Uqnitum imparts to the viewer unique, intimate knowledge of her daily life. This comes through a detailed rendering of the activity of the servant standing behind Uqnitum. This servant is not standing tranquilly in attendance, but rather she is involved in very actively braiding the hair of the queen (Fig. 5). The braid as a personal identity marker combined with the intimacy of the creation of this element impacts us as well as the ancient society in Urkesh as a bold and clear affirmation of her identity and status.

<sup>4</sup> An unusual seal from Susa shows a bearded man kneeling before Shamash (Boehmer 1965: 483); the kneeling figure is presenting a small child to the deity, partly reminiscent of the Song of Kumarbi where Kumarbi is presented with his son, Ullikummi, by a number of goddesses, Hoffner 1991: 57-8.

Beneath the seal inscription containing both the name of Uqnitum and that of Zamena a human faced bison is placed (Hansen 2001). This figure is usually connected with the sun god Shamash. The reclining position with one leg raised of this figure with head turned toward the viewer is quite similar to the sculpture from Brak dated on stylistic grounds to the ED IIIB/Early Akkadian period. That Zamena has in her seal imagery not only her intimate connection with the queen and her child but also imagery associating her with a major deity identifies her as one of the most important individuals in the court, a position confirmed by the large number of container sealings with her seal impressions.

We can contrast the more intimate scene of Zamena with the iconography of the chief cook, Tuli (Fig. 9). Tuli's scenes do not show her patron, Uqnitum as we know from Tuli's seal inscription, but do show two of her servants (servants of Tuli therefore servants also of Uqnitum). The scene indicates a man and a woman working, with an emphasis on food preparation. Tuli's seals show us that not only women, but also men, are servants of Tuli and therefore Uqnitum.



Fig. 9: Seal of Tuli, the chief cook.

Uqnitum's aim through this extensive and detailed iconography can have been to establish her identity to a wide audience. That is she wanted to transmit knowledge of her person, her status and her specific surroundings within the court to a large number of different levels of her contemporary social groups: in the palace, in the city, and in the countryside. The details of her iconography and inscriptions create a widespread perception of knowledge about her in the minds of individuals not close to her firsthand, due to economic, social or geographic distances. The effect is that individuals and groups who have never seen her personally and have little chance of coming otherwise in direct contact with her, feel on some level psychologically connected with her. She is identifiable and identified, even without reading knowledge of the cuneiform legend. She became part of the mental map of their own environment so that this mental map had a known frame, both environmentally and socially, a frame with known persons at its apex: the king Tupkish and queen Uqnitum whose "portraits" they had seen or heard about. Additionally this "mental map" could extend throughout the society because of the interconnectedness of individuals within the city and the countryside. A person "knew" her because they were connected through detailed knowledge of her, even if that knowledge traveled to them over many intermediary links in the knowledge chain. In this extension to a wider social context we see a new approach to social communication with a new social and political impact.



Fig. 10: Seal of Tupkish showing the lap-touching scene.

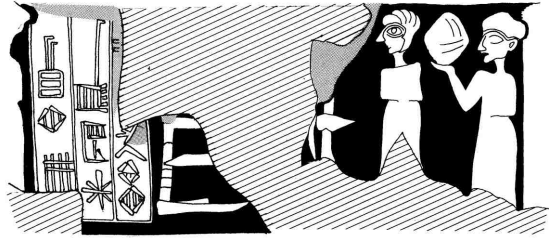


Fig. 11: Tupkish scene with presentation of thread.

### 3.2 King Tupkish

Although we know much less about the iconography or the narrative aims of the seals of Tupkish, the evidence we have comes especially from the two most complete scenes. Both tell a story through the use of specific details. Both are as innovative as the scenes of Uqnitum. One (k2, Fig. 10), as already mentioned, pictures the crown prince touching his knees in a similar scene to that of Uqnitum and her daughter (Fig. 7). The second (k1, Fig. 11) involves the carrying by a servant of what appears to be a ball of thread, discussed below. The first figure in this scene wears a head covering known from other non-inscribed seals, most prominently the priest in the sacrifice scene (Fig. 15). This brings us to look at non-inscribed seals in the Urkesh Akkadian corpus.

### 3.3 Non-inscribed seals

It is clear that the message is proclaimed on many different levels and this was a very effective promulgation. Elite status in most societies is not unitarian but rather has numerous subtle sub-categories/divisions often depending on family or ethnic connections, personal or familial economic power, either inherited or acquired social status (Abdelal et al 2006). Therefore foregrounding their similarities with those of a higher elite status through emulation of iconographic motifs could be employed as a mechanism to generate social and economic benefits for some middle-range elites (Bell 2002:253-4, 291-2 a perceptive study of emulation and its results over several generations for what she calls “middling” elites). And by highlighting their similarities with elites, other individuals of a lower elite status could generate social benefits for themselves and those connected with them. This pattern of emulation of elite practices and its results for “lesser” elites has been extensively investigated, especially in regard to so-called Romanization (Revell 2009: 5-15, Mattingly 2011: 203-236 his concept of *discrepant identity* encompasses many levels of elite and non-elite responses).



The range of new visual vocabulary was not restricted to monarchs and servants closely associated with them but also can be seen in non-inscribed seals whose owners were in some way connected with the royal administration. Therefore even if the seal contained no inscription, the status and to some extent the identity of the seal owner was proclaimed, as it was even in the inscribed ones for those who could not read. In other words this new visual vocabulary developed its influence even beyond the innermost elite circle in Urkesh through complex iconographic and stylistic links.

We can here cite one example. The bird legged table, so prominent in one of the seals of Uqnitum (Fig. 7), is also found in a number of non-inscribed seals. One seal with this table has food placed on the top, presumably bread (Fig. 12). It is not a surprise that a table is so important in identity construction because we know that furniture, as shown in the later Gudea stele and Assyrian inscriptions and reliefs, was highly prized.<sup>5</sup> This scene of Uqnitum with the table also shows the presence of a singer and lyre player adding more specificity to her identity: her status was important enough to have two musicians connected with her part of the court and shows her connection with contemporary musical culture.

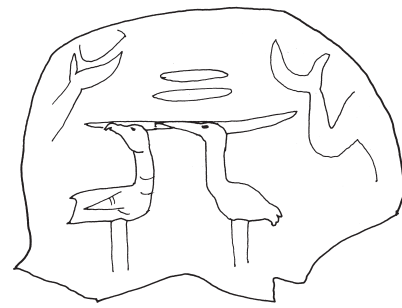


Fig. 12: Uninscribed seal with the bird table.

### 3.4 The seals of Innin-shadū

The case of the seals of an official in the court of Uqnitum and Tupkish, Innin-shadū, is interesting in that it helps us to understand how identity and power could be negotiated in a variety of ways in ancient Urkesh (Fig. 13). The basic iconography of his scene is one popular in that it is a contest scene with two groups of three figures: human, lion, horned animal, then human, horned animal, lion (Rakic 2003, pp. 98-105, 243-251). Connected with the second group described here is a rampant human faced bull holding the tail of the lion; he is followed by the name of Innin-shadū (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1998, 201-201). Innin-shadū's iconography shows that revival or the persistence of older imagery and older themes continued or was revived from the Early Dynastic III period into the early part of the reign of Naram-Sin, when we date the Tupkish and Uqnitum seal impressions. The emulation of earlier themes indicates a certain respect for Early Dynastic III and earlier Akkadian visual imagery. This persistence must have been continued through the local craft workshops as we have excavated in Akkadian contexts other, unscripted, contest scenes similar to earlier contest motifs (Kelly-Buccellati 2012).

<sup>5</sup> One example can be seen in room XXXVIII of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace in Nineveh where scribes are shown inventorying booty, including furniture in which tables and chairs are present (Barnett et al. 1998: Pls. 410-11, 413, nos. 524-525).



Fig. 13: Seal of Innin-shadū.

Innin-shadū is an important figure in Uqnitum's administration visible from a number of lines of evidence. The context of his large number of seal impressions on containers in the storeroom along with seal impressions of other members of her administration points to his being heavily involved in the administration of Uqnitum. His seal inscription only contains his name a pattern we have later for the seals of Ishar-beli and Ewrim-atal. While his seal is inscribed only with his name and not his relationship to any dynast, he, too, had more than one seal showing an almost exact duplicate of the other. His seals are carved at a high level of artistic craftsmanship with the even proportions of the figures, regular arrangement of the figures in the composition and the harmonious positioning of each figure in relationship to the others. Additionally both the outlines of the figures and the details of each, especially the head of the human faced bull and the two lion manes are carefully carved, even though the style and carving are not the high quality we find in the Ishar-beli or Ewrim-atal seals, not to mention the seal of Tar'am-Agade.

His different choice of iconography, and the independence of this choice, indicate that variations in imagery and style could be an option for high administrators in this time period and context; important administrators could have independent iconography and did not need to cite the dynast in their inscriptions. The choice made by Innin-shadū clearly connected him to the past with all the connotations of this as a mechanism through which he sought recognition for his social and political power. Negotiations of power then could take on a variety of forms in the Urkesh power sphere and the reification of the past was one important one; we will see this later in another sphere in the discussion of the importance of the craft tradition below.

It is possible in this case that his opportunity to create this identity was conditioned by positive situational factors; that is, Innin-shadū may have been acting within a different sphere of the palace circle allowing him to have greater freedom in his choice of iconography. We cannot be certain of this of course since clearly Zamena and Tuli, were connected at a high level within the administration of Uqnitum. He also differs from either of

these two women in that his seal iconography does not represent his profession. Neither is he personally depicted, as Zamena on her seals. As noted above elite status has many different nuances and is not a monolithic entity as often portrayed. This may be a glimpse into one of these nuances.

In the well contextualized seal of Innin-shadū we see a prominent example of the continuity of relationships of past to present, of the continuity of culture as embodied in seal designs and their meaning in the past and present contexts. His seal, just as the seals of the other administrators of Uqnitum, reflects his personal identity, both through the inscription and the choice of iconography. Can we go so far as to say that it reflects his values, especially his value of the connection with the past and therefore to some extent at least, the values of the past? A similar case has been made by Mark Garrison for a much later period when more evidence is available. Garrison's studies bring out the use and meaning of antique seals in the Achaemenid Period through the seals rolled on the Persepolis Fortification tablets (2011, 2012); earlier he had investigated the use of archaizing imagery and styles in this same corpus (1991: 8-10). Within this larger data set it is clear that archaizing imagery was a choice rendered possible by the continuity of the craft tradition.

### 3.5 Importance of Crafts and Craft Traditions in Urkesh

One aspect of the new visual vocabulary in Urkesh is the number of scenes closely connected with interest in crafts and craft production. The investigation of crafts within the city and its hinterland directly bears on social and economic aspects of the life of the city and its surroundings (Mazzoni 2003). In the Urkesh seals the importance of crafts is shown in detail, such as using ceramics in a context, and showing pertinent details of that context. One significant example comes to us on an uninscribed seal impression (Fig. 14). Here a craft is prominently referenced. Behind a seated figure a potter is shown at work, kneeling in the midst of creating a jar in realistic detail including the jar placed on a support as it is being worked on. Additionally there are two other jars placed on a shelf. Here the imagery is close to Akkadian seals from the south showing deities, usually goddess, holding a child (Boehmer 1965: 555, 557, 558). One such seal (*ibid.* 555) not only has the potter kneeling making a vessel placed in a stand but above is a shelf with three bag-shaped jars very similar in form to the jar held by a servant of Uqnitum (Fig. 7). Again here we see reference to a craft, as in the seal belonging to Tupkish where a different craft is indicated (Fig. 11). In this Tupkish scene



Fig. 14: Seal showing pottery workshop.



Fig. 15: Urkish cylinder seal with scene of sacrifice.

two large figures are facing left, in what appears to be a presentation scene. The first one wears a hat also worn by the priests in the Urkish sacrifice seal (Fig. 15). A second figure holds something in the palm of the hand. The hand is outstretched and purposefully flat so as to emphasize the large oval object being held. This object we have interpreted as a ball of thread, with reference then to crafts connected with spinning and weaving. The importance of crafts, and of this craft in particular, is highlighted by the fact that this figure appears to be presenting this thread to a seated figure on the left of the composition; we only have a small part of the seat in the preserved seal design. But given the fact that it is a scene on a Turkish seal the likelihood is that either he is the person on the left or an unknown deity.

Another aspect of the respect for craft in the city can be seen through imitations of older ceramic styles in later periods. There was a strong tendency in the Urkish craft tradition toward imitations connecting the Urkish potters with the previous potters (Kelly-Buccellati 2012). In this they imitate especially the decorative styles of previous potters, for which we have a number of examples. Emulation of earlier craft traditions is an indication of a strong social glue, that the Urkish society was aware of its past and considered its past as a source of inspiration for its present values and present modes of action (*ibid.*, 221).

Craft production, then, held a high status in the Turkish court and was proclaimed in their imagery. The empirical evidence from the ceramics found in the Turkish palace building shows a close connection to the previous ceramic production in the ED III and early Akkadian periods, even though the very high standard of quality of the Simple and Wet Smooth wares, especially the very fine Simple ware from the temple BA, could not be maintained. In the Turkish/Uqitum seal iconography there are a number of scenes where ceramic vessels were being actively employed in food preparation. In the uninscribed cylinder seal with the sacrifice scene (Fig. 15) one vessel is passively employed, but symbolically important, as it is placed high on a column, a second one is being actively





Fig. 16: Seal of Ishtar-kinum.

engaged because it holds something being stirred. In the Tupkish and Uqnitum seals all vessels are being actively employed (for a discussion of the sacrificial importance of this scene cf. Recht, forthcoming).

Craft appreciation, sustained and encouraged at the highest social level, can only be part of a larger educational purpose in which technological knowledge allows a society to integrate moral and social values as part of building cultural identity. In doing this the Urkesh artists succeeded in representing everyday events without trivializing them. Part of this is because each scene is unique in iconography, and each scene is iconographically connected to a whole and consistent range of communication themes. Each scene contains multiple registers of information which can be “read” in various ways by different groups. The “unpacking” of the information in the various “registers” in the Urkesh seal designs allows us to view not only the value held by elites for these aspects of the local culture, but also the use made by these local socio-political groups to communicate their interconnected identity.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The city of Urkesh, at an early stage in the city’s development achieved an identity status as a major religious focal point in the region, the only one for which we know the ancient name of the worshipped deity. The fact that the city continued to maintain and use such an impressive temple terrace is a strong indication of the felt importance of this religious identity within the city itself and its surrounding hinterland. The identity communication to a wider social audience was important to the city itself and dependant villages.

The political ambition and the constructed identity of Uqnitum was proclaimed within the city of Urkesh, and probably also its surroundings, through the large number of seals in use by the administration. Because of this her “person” was known as well as her power within and beyond the court of Tupkish. We do not see the earlier stages of her identity construction, but it seems likely that Uqnitum’s identity was reshaped to reflect her evolving self-image within the boundaries of her acquisition of power in the Tupkish court, a power that also was evolving with its acquisition. How her consequent power within the court was negotiated can only be imagined. The evidence we have shows us her relationships at the stage of what was presumably her greatest success. Exactly how she achieved this or what her subsequent status and ambitions were are not known. But one hint of her eventual success can be gleaned from the iconography of a later endan (king) of Urkesh, Ishar-kinum (Fig.16). His seal shows a reinterpretation of the scene of Tupkish with again a small figure standing on a lion, but in this case not a real lion but a part of the extension of the throne base of a bearded deity (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2005). It is possible that Ishar-kinum, clearly connected iconographically with the small figure in the Tupkish seal (Fig. 10) and the “family seal” (Fig. 1) could have indeed been the son of Uqnitum and Tupkish.

Because of the number and quality of the Tupkish/Uqnitum secular scenes it appears that the world of the artist, patron and contemporary society is less polarized and more dynamically integrated than elsewhere. In other words the emphasis in the city of Urkesh was on factors that included the creation of an integrated social unit. Evidence for this comes from iconographic examples of local culture extending from craft production to the representation of the importance of music, as well as details of everyday life of servants and elite courtiers. In my opinion this was a direct consequence of their identity creation goals and therefore the outcome of the methods they used to communicate their identities. This identity was personal and social and as such had a direct effect on contemporary society within the city and its hinterland. If this is indeed the case, then the powerful voice of the “elders of Urkesh” in the Mari letters concerning Urkesh<sup>6</sup> would be a later reflection of a socio-political structure that was more integrated among elite, crafts-people and the wider society in Urkesh, than we have evidence for elsewhere.

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<sup>6</sup> Kupper 1998: letters 44-46, 48, 69, 98, 100, 105, 107, 140; see also a discussion of the importance of these letters by G. Buccellati <http://128.97.6.202/abstracts/913Kuppe.htm>.

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# FROM THE TREASURES OF SYRIA

## ESSAYS ON ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN HONOUR OF STEFANIA MAZZONI

*edited by*

Paola Ciafardoni and Deborah Giannessi



NEDERLANDS INSTITUUT VOOR HET NABIJE OOSTEN

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