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L.A. Archeologists Digging in Syria Find City of Myth : Science: Clay pieces establish that Urkesh indeed existed. The artifacts show imprints of the Hurrians, a superpower in the Middle East 4,000 years ago.

November 20, 1995 | KENNETH CHANG | TIMES STAFF WRITER

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A myth of an ancient people known as the Hurrians tells of a boy, Silver, who thought himself fatherless. Then one day his mother tells him that his father is Kumarbi, the father of all gods, and tells him to go search for him in the city of Urkesh.

Little is known about the Hurrians, whose history spanned perhaps more than a millennium, but their writings often spoke of the central god Kumarbi and Urkesh, the city where he supposedly lived. "It was a very sacred place, but it was mythical as far as we knew," said Giorgio Buccellati, founding director of UCLA's Institute of Archeology.

In a discovery somewhat akin to finding the lost world of Atlantis, archeologists led by a Los Angeles husband-and-wife team have transformed the myth of Urkesh to reality. This past summer, amid ruins in northeast Syria, the archeologists found clay seal imprints that declared simply, "Tupkish, King of Urkesh."

Other seal imprints said, "Uqnitum, wife of Tupkish." Both royal figures were previously unknown, even in myth.

The discovery of Urkesh is "analogous to knowing Rome is in central Italy and then finding Rome," Buccellati said, and establishes Urkesh, a city with an estimated population of 10,000 to 20,000, as the hub of a civilization that flourished more than 4,000 years ago.

"It's not just finding Santa Barbara," said his wife and collaborator, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. "It's finding Los Angeles."

Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati, an art history professor at Cal State L.A., will present their findings today in Philadelphia at the annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

The Hurrians of the third millennium B.C.--their contemporaries included the Sumerians to the south, the Semites to the west, and the pharaohs of Egypt--lived in a Rhode Island-size swath of desert across what is now southeast Turkey and northeast Syria.

Although the Hurrians spread south toward the center of modern-day Syria and west into Turkey, most of what is known about them comes secondhand 1,000 years later from people in central Turkey who adopted much of the Hurrian culture and religion.

Harry Hoffner, a University of Chicago professor who studies these later Turkish people known as the Hittites, described the Urkesh discovery as "very important."

"What we know of the Hurrians through the Hittites is intriguing, but it's only the surface," he said. "They were among the major superpowers of that era. I would like to penetrate to the origins of their civilization. [Urkesh] gives us the possibility of doing that."

Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati and their colleagues have been excavating the site, which lies near the present-day Syrian village of Tell Mozan, since 1983. They found shards of pottery, parts of the outer defense wall and a temple 30 feet wide. But they did not find any documents that named the city.

This summer, the archeologists' work focused on what appears to have been a storehouse near one of the city's gates. On the floor, about 600 broken pieces of clay lay strewn about.

The Hurrians, like other societies of that time, used personal stone seals as identification. Rolling the seals--cylinders about the size of Tootsie rolls with art and words carved into the sides--in moist clay left imprints that served the same purpose as signatures today. Important documents such as contracts were then baked in ovens, less important ones dried in the sun.

Most of the seal impressions in the storehouse belonged to Queen Uqnitum and her staff, indicating that the room housed offerings to her from outlying areas, Kelly-Buccellati said. (The actual containers--baskets and wooden boxes--have long since decayed.)

The cook's seal, for instance, shows an attendant stirring a jar, a butcher preparing to slay livestock and cuts of meat hanging overhead. The nurse's seal shows her holding onto the son. The queen appears in several pieces, identified by a hair spindle.

"This spindle is connected to her and has something to do with her royal status," Kelly-Buccellati said.

On his seal, King Tupkish is depicted sitting on a throne over a lion--the symbol of Urkesh--while the crown prince stands on the lion's head touching his father's knee. Radiocarbon dating and comparison with other writings from the region place the date of the seals and other artifacts at 2300 to 2200 B.C., Buccellati said.

The boy Silver in the myth never found Kumarbi--who apparently was out of town in the mountains of Turkey to the north--but archeologists believe they now know where Silver was looking. (The tale, Buccellati said, symbolized the mining of metals in the mountains and their journey to the markets in Urkesh.)

The Buccellatis will return to Urkesh this summer and probably several more times after that to dig up more clues about the Hurrians, and how they differ from the neighboring Sumerians and Semites.

"We are really at the frontiers of knowledge," Buccellati said. "It's like a window onto Hurrian civilization"

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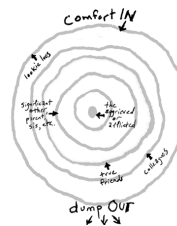
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