

Images of Work in Urkesh

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1. Introduction

Urkesh glyptics is distinctive because of its high degree of realism at the time of king Tupkish, shortly before Naram-Sin. There is an elite iconography that functions as part of their identity creation, but next to it there is also a rich iconography that celebrates lower level types of work they held in respect and esteem, especially crafts and services, that contributed to their lives and to the palace community.

As early as the beginning of the Akkadian period in Urkesh, iconographic themes emphasized work and daily life. The double-sided round top stele found in the early years of the excavations of the Temple BA had carved on one side a herd of moving animals and on the other a farmer in the act of plowing his field (Figs. 1, 2).¹ The amount of realistic detail on both sides and the emphasis on movement in both scenes characterizes this stele. The animal herd in movement is not unique in Urkesh as we have from the palace area a seal impression of another animal herd in movement (Fig. 3). Work outdoors in the fields is not a common motif in the iconography of Urkesh but this may be due to the contexts excavated. This stele came from very near the temple northern exterior wall. It may have been set up inside the building as we know from stele found in southern Mesopotamia in temples. On the other hand it has no motifs connected with the temple or its deities. Furthermore it is unfinished and thus may be from a workshop placed near the temple. In this case however it is difficult to know where the stele would have been placed ultimately.

While there are a vast number of seals with the iconography of animals in various contexts from other sites, the most significant for our purposes here is the seal of the scribe Mu-ri-ish excavated in Tell Brak with two deities “fee-

* It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to Frances who has been a very good friend throughout the years of the excavations of Ebla and Mozan.

¹ Kelly-Buccellati 1990.

ding” two rampant animals.² This motif is in harmony with the Urkesh seal impressions of Ishar-beli as well as the earlier stele from the area of Temple BA.³

The context of the royal palace of Tupkish is the most important source for the iconography of work in Urkesh. Since many of the seal impressions found there were owned by the Urkesh elite, the emphasis in the iconography is on what may be called their work in the sense that they are shown in positions of authority which easily identifies them.⁴ This is also emphasized in the seal inscriptions which identify the various seal owners, for instance the wet nurse Zamena (Fig. 4).⁵

However these scenes of the rulers of Urkesh and elite members of the court are also vehicles for the display of work of more common people.⁶ Non-elite palace workers are found in the elite seals depicted both under the seal inscriptions as well as alongside but also extending partly under the seal inscriptions. Additionally many non-inscribed seals illustrate the performance of daily tasks as well. It is these non-elite workers and their work that are the focus of this study.

Scenes showing non-elite workers can be divided into two categories: services (cooks, butchers, a singer, lyre player) and those involved in craft production (production of ceramics, baskets, and cloth).⁷ These activities are carried out by both men and women connected with the palace but for the most part they appear to be women connected with queen Uqnitum's part of the palace administration. The fact that they are present on elite seals demonstrates an attention to the individuals and the work that they perform not found in other Syro-Mesopotamian cities in this time period or later. While we do have so-called scenes from daily life in southern Mesopotamia they mostly center on fishing and hunting, activities carried out by men and away from the urban centers.⁸

2. Craft Production

The most important craft exhibited in the Urkesh seal iconography is the production of ceramics (Fig. 5). Remarkably, one of the Urkesh seals contains a detailed scene of a potter in her workshop. This potter is actively constructing a

² Matthews 1997, pl. XXVIII:346.

³ Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 2002.

⁴ The “professions” of the Urkesh royalty and their household has been the focus of a number of articles, see especially Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1996; 1998; 2002; Kelly-Buccellati 2009; 2015.

⁵ Kelly-Buccellati 2015. For the mother and child motif so prominent in the “family scene” and those of Zamena see Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1998, 199; Pinnock 2008, 21–23; Budin 2011, 186–188; Nadali 2014.

⁶ For the importance of this display aspect of the seal impressions see Kelly-Buccellati 2009, 192.

⁷ These latter two activities are inferred from the iconographic evidence.

⁸ Amiet 1961, pl. 86: 1129–1135; Boehmer 1965, pl. LXI:718–724.

large necked jar placed on a stand. Above, is a shelf with two necked jars, one larger and about the size of the jar being produced below, and the other a smaller necked jar. Both these jars are also sitting on a stand. Since this scene is positioned behind a seated figure it occupies the space of secondary scenes usually found below the inscription; in this case the scene takes up the whole height of the seal, emphasizing it as an active part of the total iconography.

Representation of ceramics plays a major role in Urkesh glyptics in general, both from the palace and elsewhere. Ceramic vessels not only play a role in scenes related to food preparation, see below, but can be carried on the head of a servant (Fig. 6), placed on tables containing food, in this case especially conical cups (Fig. 7) which are also held as status symbols by both Tupkish and Uqnitum and in uninscribed seals such as this example. The vessel shapes are varied, so for instance a bag shaped vessel shown in some of Uqnitum's seals (Fig. 8), as well as in some uninscribed seals (Fig. 9).

Ceramics also can be shown in ritual scenes, as in the Akkadian seal of animal sacrifice where the content of a tall cylindrical jar is being stirred and in the same scene a necked jar is placed on top of a palm shaped column (Fig. 10).⁹

In the Urkesh seals we have examples of baskets being used, in the earlier seal of Tuli discussed below (Fig. 11) and in the seal of Uqnitum with bending figures supporting her inscription (Fig. 12). In this case the two figures, probably women, are both working but at different activities; one with what appears to be long straight tools and the other with something placed in a tall basket. The importance of their work is emphasized by the fact that these two bending figures carry on their backs the seal inscription of Uqnitum, placed horizontally rather than vertically; no other seal impression of the queen has her inscription so prominently displayed personally by her servants. The presence of baskets as part of the work being done in the seals of these two important Urkesh women is another indication of the realism displayed in all these activity scenes.

While we do not have explicit scenes of weaving, one of the seals of Tupkish has a servant carrying a large biconical shaped object which we have identified with a ball of thread (Fig. 13).¹⁰ In what may be a scene exemplifying both weaving and basketry two figures are separated by a palm tree; on one side is a figure with a raised hand next to a rectangle which has a decorated upper and lower border (Fig. 14). I would suggest that this may be identified as a woven cloth. On the opposite side of the palm tree is a figure with both hands extended toward a large conical shape with a pattern similar to the baskets in other seal impressions from Urkesh. In other fourth and 3rd millennium seals more than one craft can be depicted, for example weaving and ceramic production.¹¹

One seal impression shows very clearly a seated figure on a high stool with a

⁹ Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 36–40; Recht 2015.

¹⁰ Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1996.

¹¹ Amiet 1961, pl. 16:265 and probably also from Brak Matthews 1997, pl. IX:41.

hooked tool working on something being held in the other hand (Fig. 15). While it is not clear what activity the figure is working on, or the entire iconographic context of this work, again we have here an image of working which could be identified by contemporaries because of the realistic details in the imagery.

3. Services

3.1 *Cooks*

Tuli was the chief cook of queen Uqnitum and as such she was the main administrator of the queen's kitchen. In this role she more than likely had the administration of the acquisition and storage of food, based on the fact that she is the only palace administrator whose seal was badly worn, so much so that her name became unreadable through continuous use of the seal (Fig. 11). Interestingly, because of this she had another seal cut with a similar scene, but not an exact replica. Importantly she had her seal inscription identifying her as the cook of Uqnitum placed on the back of the female servant and on the spine of the animal to be slaughtered, similarly to the seal inscription of Uqnitum carried by two servants (Fig. 12). In the earliest seal of Tuli a servant, probably female, is pounding with a long handled tool something in two jars. More than likely she is making butter. The two jars are placed in a low basket. In her later seal Tuli again shows a butcher, but now the woman on the other side of the inscription holds in one hand a small rounded lump and in the other an unclear tool (Fig. 16). More than likely she is about to make bread in a *tannur*-type bread oven: if so, the tool could be interpreted as a type of hook used to remove the cooked flat bread from the side of the oven. What is important here is the detail of the rendering of the activities of the kitchen in food preparation. An uninscribed seal with again a detailed scene of food preparation shows two figures preparing something in a tall vat while a figure stirs a bowl placed on the lap (Fig. 17).¹² Other instances of food preparation occur but in a limited iconographic context (Fig. 18). In this example a figure seated on a low stool appears to be preparing something, possibly food, in a wide bowl that has been placed on an oval shaped support.

The importance of the scene is emphasized by the presence of a star and the bird-legged table that characterizes scenes of Uqnitum but also appears in uninscribed seals.¹³

3.2 *Butchers*

A butcher is shown clearly on the seals of the chief cook of Uqnitum, Tuli (Fig. 11). He is distinctly identified as male with a long prominent beard. He is also

¹² Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1997, 82.

¹³ Kelly-Buccellati 2009, 197; 2015, 123.

shown with his butcher knife, the same shape of knife as shown in the sacrifice seal where the head of a small bull has just been severed with the knife (Fig. 10).¹⁴ A small necked jar is positioned atop a low stand, probably to be used in catching the blood of the slaughtered animal. This figure is repeated in the second seal carved for Tuli (Fig. 16). To be noted here is that even in this new image where the food preparation scene has changed, the image of the butcher has not. This to my mind indicates that the status of the butcher and the importance of this activity had not changed, but was rather emphasized by its repetition.

3.3 Musicians

In four of the seals belonging to queen Uqnitum (q4,6,7,8) she has placed under the seal inscription a scene of two musicians seated on low stools.¹⁵ One of these is playing a lyre and the other is singing (Fig. 19). Musicians are a status symbol in Mesopotamian courts and as such these musicians play a role in the establishment of the influence of Uqnitum within the Urkesh court as well as themselves having a significant place in the palace social order.

4. Conclusions

While we do not have a clear indication as to who the seal owners might have been for the uninscribed seals, it seems plausible that they should have been somehow connected with the administration, since most of them come from the royal palace of Tupkish. In this case, the themes may have been linked to specific tasks associated with the general area of competence of a particular administrator (as we know to have been the case for the cook and the nurse of the queen). Be that as it may, it remains a significant fact that these motifs are not just symbols, but very realistic renderings of actual situations, of work being carried out in a very concrete daily practice.

This attention to realism, which is so characteristic of the Urkesh artistic tradition,¹⁶ corroborates the view¹⁷ that glyptics was used, in Urkesh, to communicate specific messages, easily understood by even the lower level echelons of the administration, thanks precisely to their transparent representation of true to life situations. Thus we can see an interesting overlap of two trends concurring in defining this special glyptic style. On the one hand, there was a delight, on the part of the artists, to achieve new representational canons, at all levels of society.

¹⁴ It is obvious that this scene is quite different from the ritual bull killings, e.g. Boehmer 1965, pl. XXX:356–361.

¹⁵ Kelly-Buccellati 2015.

¹⁶ For the strong coherence that characterizes the Urkesh craft tradition over the span of generations, see Kelly-Buccellati 2012.

¹⁷ Kelly-Buccellati 1998.

On the other, there was the desire, on the part of the users, to capitalize on the transparency of the medium and thus convey a very specific message, tied to the concreteness of situations and events. Thus the representation of even the simplest of crafts and services, as we have seen, emerges as an important tessera in the complex mosaic of social institutions and artistic experimentation in this earliest of Hurrian cities.

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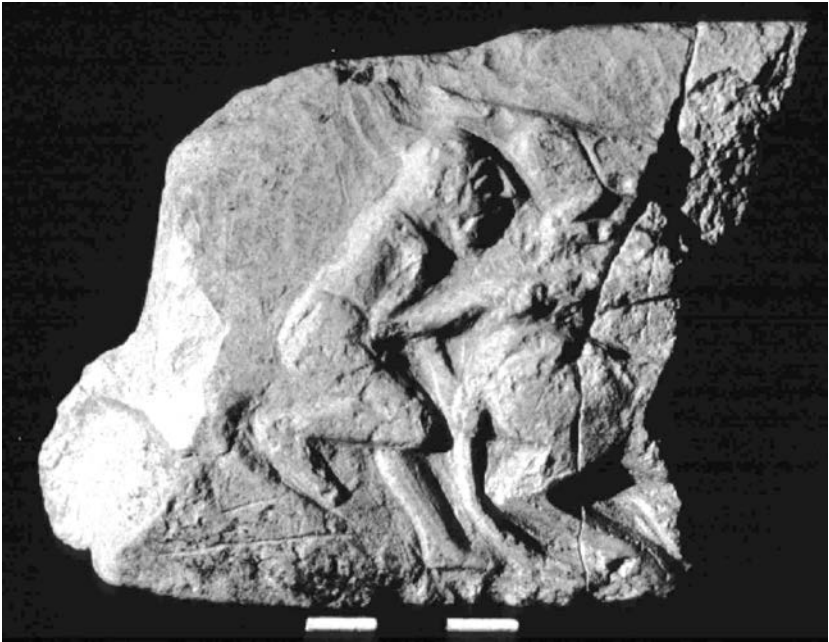


Fig. 1. Stela, plowing side (B1.19).



Fig. 2. Stela, animal herd side (B1.19).

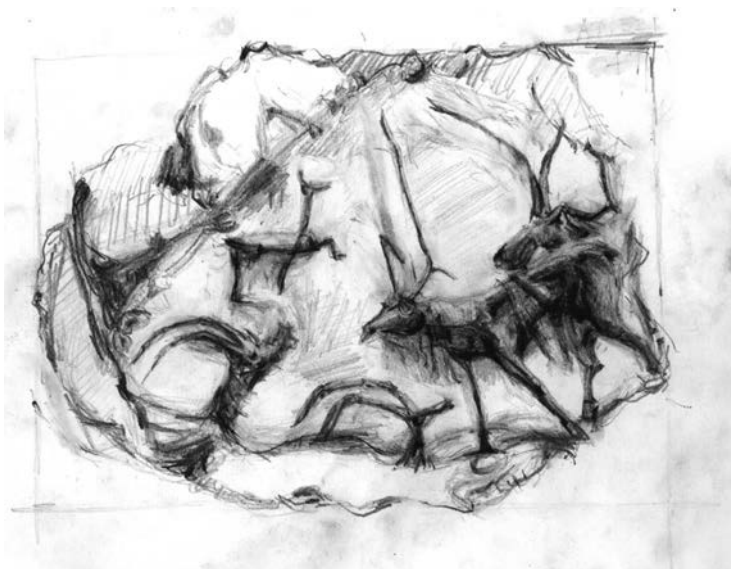


Fig. 3. Animal herd in motion (A7.321).

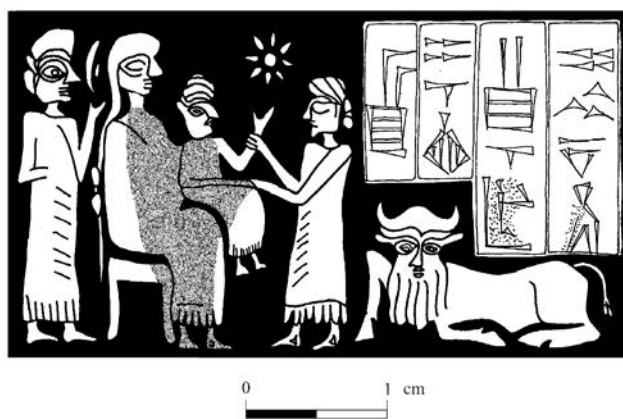


Fig. 4. Seal of Zamena (h1+h2).

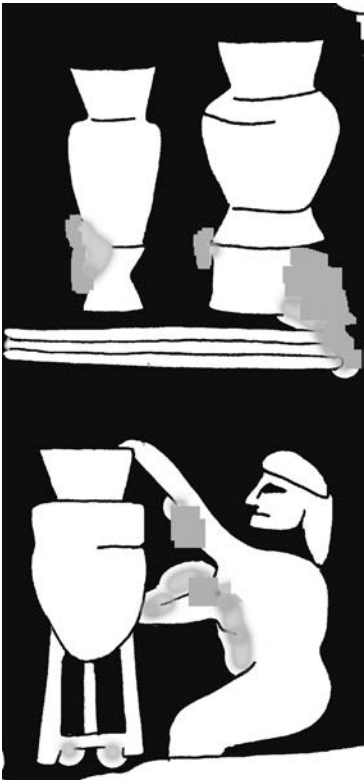


Fig. 5. Pottery workshop (A1.364).



Fig. 6. Pottery workshop (A1.364).



Fig. 7. Procession with a table (A1.241).



Fig. 8. Uqnitum seal with servant carrying a bag-shaped vessel (q4).

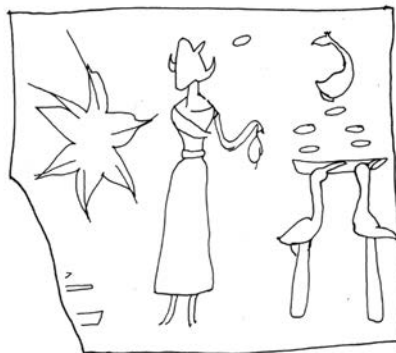


Fig. 9. Bag shaped vessel, uninscribed seal (A10q0249.1).



Fig. 10. Akkadian period sacrifice seal (A15.270).



Fig. 11. Earlier seal of Tuli (h3).



Fig. 12. Bending figures (q1).



Fig. 13. Ball of thread (detail of k1).



Fig. 14. Weaving and basketry work (A8.37).



Fig. 15. Work with a hooked tool (A7.390).

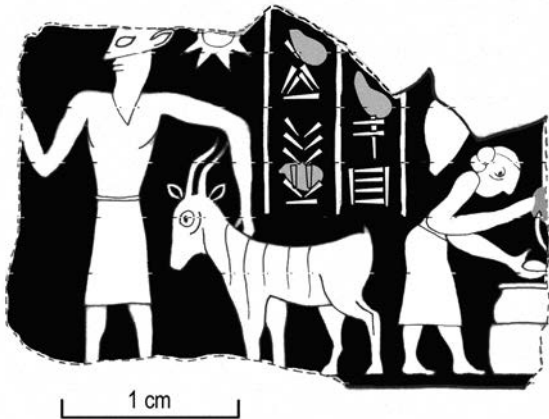


Fig. 16. Later seal of Tuli (h5).



Fig. 17. Food preparation (A6.88).



Fig. 18. Seated Figure Preparing Food (A1.310).



Fig. 19. Musicians (detail q4).



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