

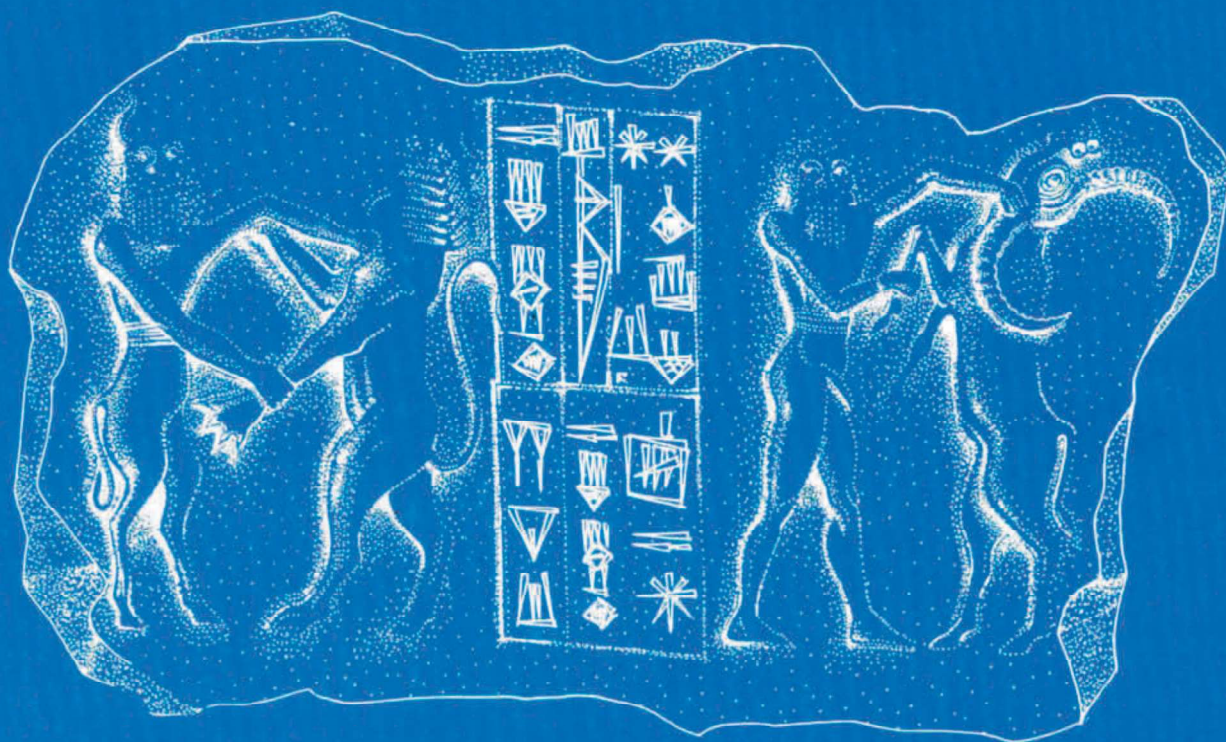


SANEM 3- STUDIES ON THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE HIGHLANDS

*STUDIES IN HONOR OF
GIORGIO BUCCELLATI & MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI*

Stefano Valentini - Guido Guarducci
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THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ANCIENTS. THE PERCEPTION OF BEAUTY IN 3RD MILLENNIUM SYRIA

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Abstract

The archaeological record is a channel that leads to the understanding of ancient life and the evolution of thought, in this case through the corpus of human representations from the cities of Ebla, Mari and Urkesh. We take a look through their eyes, and see what they deemed as beautiful.

It is a great privilege to write this article in honor of Giorgio and Marilyn Buccellati, my teachers, my mentors and my extended family, with whom I have been working for over 10 years and from whom I learned a great deal.

I chose this topic because I wanted to investigate an issue of interest to all of us: the representative art and the philosophy behind it. I hope it conveys the incredible effect our collaboration had on me as a person and as a student.

1. INTRODUCTION

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But our eyes are influenced by social and aesthetic considerations imposed on us by years of traditions, or by new trends pushed forward by fashion industry and advertisement companies, to the point of altering and manipulating our perspective, and clouding our judgement regarding what we consider as beautiful.

Striving for beauty has been a quest from the dawn of history. It is in our nature as humans to create beautiful things and to try and become beautiful and aesthetically more appealing. But did the ancients experience what we are experiencing now? In every culture, in all parts of the world, there are desirable features considered as a standard for beauty, like the long neck in some African tribes, the small feet in China, and the overweight women in Mauritania. And these desirable features shifted and changed with time periods. In our modern days, the change is very quick. But in antiquity, the change must have been slower because they did not possess the communication means that we have today, but this did not stop the influence from traveling.

Since the perception of beauty is very different in every culture and in every period, can we see what was the perception of beauty in 3rd millennium Syria through the artifacts that were found during excavations?

What actually constitutes beauty in any given era is very complex. Today's world, modifies the images of men and women in ads and art works to fit what we consider as beautiful. But did the ancients do the same thing? Is what we see on seal impressions, reliefs and sculpture, actually a modified image to fit their perception of beauty? Is it possible that all people had large noses like we see them depicted on seal impressions from Urkesh for example? Or where they depicted this way because these were considered aesthetic traits desirable by all? This issue is surely affecting individuality in our modern days, where diversity is being celebrated less and we are molded in to a standard measure of beauty. It would be most interesting from an anthropological point of view, if we can discuss this issue in antiquity as well.

In this article, we will look at the body of anthropomorphic figurines and statues, the depiction of humans on seal impressions and reliefs, to try and determine whether we can see the desirable aesthetic features, and the beauty trends of that time.

It is impossible to consider all the 3rd millennium sites in this paper, so I chose three different sites: Ebla, Mari, and Urkesh.¹

2. TRENDING IN THE 3RD MILLENNIUM

It is fairly easy to know what was desirable esthetically from the point of view of Romans and Greeks. There are written testimonies, such as what Plato wrote about the structure of the human body and face

¹ The reason behind choosing these sites specifically is 1) these are major cities who had reciprocal influences with other neighboring cities and 2) they cover different geographical areas of Syria which will highlight my point in a good way and 3) Urkesh in particular represents a strong ideological identity. It would be very interesting to follow the progress of the human representation across a wider area and a longer time period, but this would be beyond the scope of this paper which aims at offering an insight to a very specific period, and opening a discussion on this subject.

as a system of triads. For Greek mathematicians, the number 3 had a special significance. The perfect face was divided into three sections: from hairline to eyes, from eyes to upper lip, and from upper lip to chin. The ideal face was two thirds as wide as it was high.²

We can also see it in their sculptures that represent the human body as sleek, fit and hairless, the face with pointed nose, and subtle features. It is however more difficult when dealing with previous periods, as there are no written sources which describe their philosophy regarding beauty, and the body of material culture is very diverse in style.

Looking at the representation of human figure in ritualistic context from the Neolithic period all the way to the 3rd millennium, we see a shift in style. The mother goddess representation shifted from a large woman with huge breasts and very wide hips, to a more sleek body with small breasts and only a slight accentuation of the hips.³ It appears that even the statuettes used in rituals were preferred thinner. In the 3rd millennium, the mother goddess with the large breast seems to have disappeared. A tendency towards thinner women seems to be the trend, and this assumption is based on the fact that usually, the ritualistic figures are represented baring desirable traits.

2.1. Mari

The art of Mari (Tell Hariri) offers a great insight into the beauty standard of the city. The female statuette from Mari, from the pre Sargonic palace, room 27, which dates back to around 2500 B.C is probably a representation of Ishtar.⁴ In this statuette we can see a tendency towards a slim body and small breast, even though it was interpreted as the goddess of fertility and love. There is a slight accentuation on the hips, but it is not exaggerated.

Many other examples from Mari highlight some desirable features of the mid-3rd millennium, or at least they show a trend, if we can say so. The bold headed males with long pointed beard seemed as a desirable look, as evident from the statue of Shibum, from the temple of Nini-Zaza dating back to 2500-2400 B.C.⁵ The man is depicted with a large nose, abnormally large eyes, and a very defined mono brow, which also seem to be fashionable at that period, and it shows in other representations from Mari, such as the female statue from the temple of Ishtar, cella 17, priest's chamber, where the figure has a dispro-

portionately large nose and eyes, and a well-defined mono brow.⁶ Another example is the seated female statue also from the temple of Ishtar, with large eyes and a mono brow, all dating back to 2550-2400 B.C.⁷ Even the mask that was found in massif rouge temple dating back to 2500-2400 B.C presents the same features, in an even more exaggerated manner.⁸

An interesting example also from Mari, from the temple of Nini-Zaza, is the statuette of Ur-Nansheh.⁹ The statuette is dedicated to the goddess Nini-Zaza, which means that it had to be perfect. One would ideally offer the gods the best gift, and in the case of a statue, the best looking one. This would therefore, represent a strong indication of how desirable the large eyes and noses were considered to be, and how appealing the mono brow was.

Someone could say that such desirable features were represented on purpose, because the statuettes described above mostly consisted in offerings for temples, and they were found in sacred spaces, but the male head found at the temple of Nini-Zaza (2660 B.C), seem to confirm the same standard of beauty. This person has been identified as a member of the court, and yet, its image shows all the typical characteristics that we see in the other statues: the extremely large nose, very big eyes and a mono brow.¹⁰

2.2. Ebla

The same type of mono brow can also be found in a specimen from the city of Ebla (Tell Mardikh), from the royal palace G, the administrative quarter (2400-2300 B.C). It is a miniature representation of a male's head (fig. 1), probably of a royal figure.¹¹

An interesting example also from Ebla, is the standard of Maliktum, which represents a standing female figure, and the statue of a seated lady. Both were found in palace G and were all represented in a naturalistic way. Matthiae argues that the two figures and the incense burner that were found at a close proximity from one another, are a part of the same miniature representation, and they were probably fixed together on a bronze base (fig. 2). The standing woman is made with wood and covered with silver foil lining, while the seated lady is dressed with a fleeced cloak covered with gold. This, and the difference in size between the two representations, points to an explicit and deliberate indication of the fact that the two figures were not homogeneous: the standing

²For more on this subject, refer to Plato 1961.

³See the mother goddess representations from Tell Kashkashuk from the Halaf period, and from Tell Aswad.

⁴Parrot 1968, 15-18, fig. 7, pls. IV-VI; Moortgat and Moortgat-Correns 1974, 155; LB no.57; PBA n.10

⁵Parrot 1953, P.208, pls. XXI-XXII; Parrot 1967, 37-39, pls. XII-XIII.

⁶Parrot 1935, 27-28, pl. X 1.

⁷Parrot 1953, 212, plates XXVI 3; Spyket 1981, 110; LB no. 64; PBA no. 98.

⁸Parrot 1952, 196, figs. 2-3, pl. XX.

⁹Parrot 1967, 89-93, pls. XLV-XLVI; Sollberger 1969, 95.

¹⁰Margueron 2008, 51, fig. 23.

¹¹Matthiae 1978, 227, fig. 18.

figure represented a real woman, while the sitting figure represented a precious statue. In fact, the use of gold for the cloak and stool of this figure reproduces, on the one hand, possibly in a realistic way, the extreme preciousness of a votive or cult image of a very peculiar female character, and, on the other hand, stresses the patent difference, in nature itself, from the standing figure, where all the materials employed are different, except for the hairdo, which in both cases is made of steatite.¹²

In this case, both women were represented baring similar facial features, despite the difference in status. Both women had disproportioned large nose, and a mono brow.

The inlay depicting the scene of soldiers leading and executing prisoners found also at the palace G in Ebla (2400-2350 B.C), is a good example of the artistic trend that was very widespread at the time.¹³ Although the scene does not depict royal subjects or a deity, the artist followed the same style. All the figures were represented with a large nose, large eyes and very well defined eyebrows, which could be an indication of how aesthetic trends, becomes the norm with time.

What gives the most solid evidence of the desirable features, are the representations of high ranking members of the society and the representation of deities, because no one would represent these figure as what is perceived as hideous or undesirable features. The same could be said about regular people's representation to some extent, but in this case, the inference cannot be so well-founded.

2.3. *Urkesh*

Urkesh (Tell Mozan), the Hurrian city dating back to the 4th millennium B.C., offers a great insight through its seal impressions, where we can find many representations of the royal family and courtiers.¹⁴

If we look at the scene from seal impression q2, depicting the royal consort (fig. 3), we can see the king, the queen and their children.¹⁵ The queen is represented with a large nose. In fact, all the characters represented on the seal have a large nose. There could be three interpretations as to why the queen was depicted with a large nose: The first has to do with realism in Urkesh. The artist at the seal workshop did not lack the skills to make a representation with more refined features, so the queen might have had a large nose, but she did not request the artist to make it

smaller or to change her appearance. She is celebrating her appearance, that in our modern day is considered unattractive, but in 3rd millennium Urkesh, it could have been quite appealing. The second interpretation is actually the opposite of this opinion. The queen might have had a small nose, but she intentionally requested the artist to depict it in this manner, because the big nose was considered a desirable aesthetic trait, which she did not possess, and if this interpretation is plausible, then Urkesh was influenced by Akkadian or foreign trends more than it is thought so. The third interpretation is that the artist did this on purpose, but not based on the queen's request, but rather as a sign of appreciation and respect, by depicting her in an attractive manner.

The same emphasis on the big nose can be found in seal impression q3, the boar scene, and q4, the Lyre scene.¹⁶ And building on this, the most plausible interpretation would be that the queen probably had a big nose, and requested the artist to depict it as it is, and celebrate her appearance.¹⁷

The large nose is still very characteristic in the region of Jezirah and lower Anatolia to this day, and this could be an indication of the realistic representation of characters on seal impression. The only difference now, is what we consider as beautiful in our days, which is extremely different from the antiquity.

From the seal impressions of Urkesh, we can see that the female courtiers wore their hair in a bun, while the queen and the princess had either long hair tied with an ornament at the end, or a braid.¹⁸ It is safe to assume that it was a matter of distinguishing the working people from the royal household members, but it could also indicate a preferred hairdo in the eyes of the ancients, giving the fact that important people set the trends in all societies.

As for human statuettes of Urkesh with ritualistic nature, there are two examples available to us: the first one is a statuette of a female (A12.30) that was probably used for medicinal purposes, hence a healing practice.¹⁹ The female was represented with emphasis on the hips and the pubic triangle but with a very thin torso and small breast (fig. 4). The other example comes from an anthropomorphic vessel representing a female, found in the Abi (A12.108), and was probably used in the Abi rituals as medium to communicate with the spirits of the ancestors.²⁰ This

¹² Matthiae 2009, 282-283, fig 9-11. The argument presented here regarding the tow representations is discussed at length in Matthiae's article which is referenced here.

¹³ Matthiae 1989c, 32-39, fig. 2, pl. IV.

¹⁴ Kelly-Buccellati 2010b.

¹⁵ Buccellati, Kelly- Buccellati 1995.

¹⁶ Buccellati, Kelly- Buccellati 1995.

¹⁷ Queen Uqnitum asserted her power as the primary wife and the mother of the crowned prince through her seal images, which depict her in this manner. This was most probably done on her request. For more on this, refer to Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1996; and Kelly-Buccellati 2010a.

¹⁸ Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1998.

¹⁹ Recht 2014.

²⁰ For the analysis of the function of the Abi and its finds, refer to

statuette is very round, because it served as a container for a liquid (oily aromatic substance most probably), and it has very small breasts, unproportioned to the rest of the round body, which implies a tendency towards small breasts even for representations of ritualistic nature.

Another aspect that could shed light on the ancient's perception of beauty, is the representation of garments. The ruffled garments with geometric triangular patterns, executed in a parallel and even way, suggests a tendency towards structured shapes which are pleasant to look at. This tendency towards geometric patterns can be seen not only in clothing styles from the three cities, but in architecture and material culture as well. Striving to achieve geometrical equilibrium was obviously a goal, which implies a very refined sense of visual aesthetics. One example that could serve this case very well, is the mirrored sector in the royal place of Urkesh. The service wing of the royal palace, sectors A, B, C and D are built as a mirrored plan, with minor exceptions in sectors D and C.²¹

3. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BEAUTY

Freud explains bodily beauty as originating from the sexual drive: through a transformation, sexual attraction is moved away from the primary sexual characteristics (reproductive organs) and instead to the secondary sexual characteristics.²²

As I mentioned before, the mother goddess representation had all the sexual characteristic very exaggerated,²³ but the face is blank and emotionless. And as the human experience evolved and matured, more concentration was placed on other attributes, the ones that could reflect an inner beauty as well as exterior beauty, which is a major leap in the evolution of human thought.²⁴ And the women in particular are no longer represented as mere sexual objects.

It has also been suggested that finding someone attractive has to do with our perception of their fertility. For example, in women, a low waist-to hip ratio, where there are more fat deposits around the hips as compared to the waist, were considered more attractive in many different time periods. These women were seen as healthier and reproductively viable. Interestingly, studies have shown that women with high waist to hip ratios are generally less healthy, with higher incidences of diabetes and infertility.²⁵

Figurines from many sites in Syria, among them Mari, Ebla and Urkesh especially towards the end of the 3rd millennium and the beginning of the 2nd millennium, exhibit these traits. Even the ones that are considered to be abstract representation of the anthropomorphic figure, or not the most realistic in their representation of features and proportions, such as the clay figurines from Ebla,²⁶ where we see an emphasis on the hips, the small breasts, and the pubic triangle. In the representations from Urkesh, we see sexual attributes are almost always emphasized but not sexuality.²⁷

I am in no way suggesting that this emphasis on the hips and low waist was a result of the ancient's knowledge about the link between fertility and these traits. I am simply referring to the fact that this intentional emphasis is connected with the idea of fertility.

This emphasis on sexual attributes rather than sexuality which could be deeply connected with our subconscious survival instincts, is in my opinion one of the earliest steps of thought evolution where the body of women is celebrated instead of being objectified.

In order to better understand how the minds of the ancient perceived beauty, we have to understand the influence of the image in a non-reading society.²⁸

The way we value beauty is an argument deeply connected with our psychology. Our judgment about things is dependent on their setting, and on the context. We are more likely to think that someone is beautiful if we learn that he/she did some heroic act for example, and we are more likely to appreciate music if it is played in an opera house, by a famous musician, on a Stradivarius instrument²⁹. By the same logic, it is more likely that the ancients were led to find beauty in the high ranking officials of the state, the hero's representations in folk stories and the royal family members. It is not surprising that they would have perceived their

Kelly-Buccellati 2005; 2016.

²¹ F. Buccellati 2016.

²² Freud 1953.

²³ See Maqdisi 1995, 176, figs. 26-28.

²⁴ Plato wrote that "Beauty is not just any Form. It bears some close relationship to the good" (Plato, *Symposium*, 296 d), the argument is of interest as it deals with the human's thought on beauty and the link between beauty and morals.

²⁵ Darwish 2009.

²⁶ For further reading on the terra cotta figurines mentioned here, one can refer to publications by Badre 1980; and Ramazzotti 2011.

²⁷ Ramazzotti 2011 mentions the notion of sexual attributes rather than sexuality.

²⁸ This notion is discussed in Pinnock 2014.

²⁹ The *Washington Post* wrote an article about an experiment made by Joshua Bell, one of the best concert violinist in the world who played for free, for 45 minutes, on a violin worth 3.5 million dollars at a subway station. Over a thousand people passed by Bell, only seven stopped to listen, including a 3-year old boy, and only one person recognized him, which could prove how our evaluation of beauty depends on the setting and the presentation. To read more about the experiment, refer to the article by Gene Weingarten entitled *Pearls before breakfast* published in the Washington Post on April 8, 2007, or refer to this link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7175c6f9c9eb

features and their attire as very desirable, hence unconsciously setting a mental template.³⁰

The constituents of beauty are not arbitrary, and people from the same ethnic group or the same cultural sphere agree on a mutual beauty standard, according to Darwin.³¹ This notion could explain, to some extent, the difference in beauty standards between Mari and Ebla on the one hand, and Urkesh on the other.

Aside from the influence of the cultural sphere, the mental templates that are formed in an area, are very susceptible to other elements. Landscape, being one of these elements, can have a major influence on our taste and perceptions. A mountainous landscape, in the case of the Hurrians in Urkesh, had an effect on many aspects of their life, such as architecture for instance.³² And in this light, it might have had a big effect on their thoughts regarding beauty. Another element that could have a strong effect on the mental templates is of an ideological nature. The fact that Urkesh was a major Hurrian religious center,³³ strongly established the ideological identity of the city and made it less susceptible to influences from outside. Whereas in the case of Mari and Ebla, both major metropolitan cities, we see more interactions and exchange of cultural influences, which is why we see many similarities in the desirable aesthetic traits, and faster change in these beauty standards with the arrival of the 2nd millennium.³⁴

Urkesh was probably not excluded from these influence, especially because we know that the daughter of Naram-Sin, the king of Mari, was married to the king of Urkesh, and that there was an alliance between the two cities through dynastic marriage. This is evident from the seal impressions found at Urkesh bearing her name and the names of her courtier, and from the shift in sealing style into an Akkadian style.³⁵ Yet the body of art work dating to this period that we have from this city retained its Hurrian identity.³⁶ Further excavations at Urkesh could change this scenario, as there is still the formal wing of the royal palace to be excavated, which holds a great potential, especially from the cultural material aspect, and we might learn that the Akkadian influence had a much greater effect of the Hurrian ideology.³⁷

³⁰ Kant 1914.

³¹ Darwin 1871.

³² For the effect of the mountainous landscape on Hurrian architecture, refer to Buccellati 2016; 2009.

³³ Buccellati, Kelly- Buccellati, 2001.

³⁴ We know of the relations between Mari and Ebla from the many literature that was written in this regard: see for example Catagnoli 2012; Pinnock 2014.

³⁵ Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 2002.

³⁶ It is unfortunate that I am not able to discuss this issue further because the material involved are yet to be published.

³⁷ For more on the Hurrian Ideology, refer to Buccellati, Kelly-

4. CONCLUSION

Even though the body of material culture from the three cities discussed here is very diverse in nature, it still offers an insight into the minds of the ancients.

Tracing the perception of beauty from the ancient time, to our modern days, sheds light on one of the aspects of the evolution of human thinking.

Knowing the desirable features and preferred appearance in the eyes of the ancients, might not hold a great deal of importance when looking at it from a narrow and direct angle. But if we widen our view on this subject and interpret these finds, we discover a new window into the progress and the maturity of the human mind on the one hand, and on how the psychological effect of power figures was dominant even in these early periods on the other hand. And on that notion, I would like to think that the first transformation from a sexually driven representation of women into a fertility driven one, was done by a woman artist, hence giving us the oldest record of a feminist movement! A beautiful notion, if only could be proven!

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Fig. 1. Miniature head found at the royal palace G at Ebla, TM.77.G.220. Matthiae 1978, 227, fig. 18.

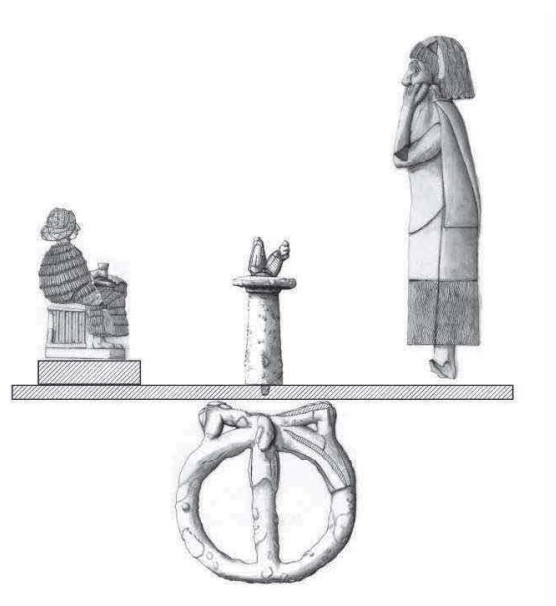


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the two figures TM.07.G.230, and TM.07.G.231 from royal palace G at Ebla, together with the incense burner.



Fig. 3. Seal q2 the royal consort, from Urkesh. Buccellati 1996, 10, fig. 4. Rendering by Pietro Pozzi.



Fig. 4. Female statuette from Urkesh (A12.30). Photo courtesy of IIMAS