

Urkesh 1999

The Daughter of
Naram-Sin

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Urkesh 1999

The excavations carried out in the Summer 1999 have yielded exceptional results. We had set out in search of the Royal Palace. We have found both the Palace and, we believe, its Queen.

The *residential wing of the palace* is raised by about five feet above the service area, which we have excavated previously. We were merely searching for the corner of the building we knew already. When we found it, we saw that an even larger building was leaning against it. We had to follow it, and we came upon the much larger building which rose above it— a towering split level construction. Plate 2 gives an imaginary projection of the monumental structure that is still largely lurking in the ground.

The proverbial major discovery on the last day of excavation came with a vengeance, this year. We were merely following clues, again: this time, we wanted to define a cross-wall within the palace. A floor surface had been damaged, and there seemed to be only rubble laying on it. A workman was removing it, with the big pick(!). And he saw a lump of clay. There was little else, it seemed, but lumps of clay. But his sharp eye noticed something different, worth investigating. We agreed, and switched immediately to sifters and dental tools. We had found *a seal impression of the daughter of Naram-Sin* (Plate 3)! Had there been bells in our expedition house, they would have tolled for joy... Naram-Sin was one of the most important kings of the ancient Near East, the conqueror of Ebla, besides all else. If his daughter was having doors sealed in her name at Urkesh, it can only mean that she was ruling there as queen. And that this was her palace. And that Naram-Sin had chosen alliance, instead of war, with Urkesh.

She was named *Tar'am-Agade*, a name with a program, because it means “She-loves-Agade,” the country of which her father was king. With her seal impressions, several others of great historical significance. Here, we are presenting a jewel of miniature art, the seal of *Ishar-beli*: he has an Akkadian name, but the subject of his seal is exquisitely “local” to Urkesh: a horse, consorting with the gods.

Our new queen and her palace almost made us forget all the other major results of the season—our *Mona Lisa* (Plate 1), as we affectionately called her; a remarkable *scribal installation* in the service quarters; a complete *fire altar*, the only one of its kind known south of Anatolia; the *baked brick platform* in the courtyard of the palace; and the major *conservation program* (Plates 5-6) which we put in place this year. The whirlwind of the last few days left us almost giddy—at any rate, charged with the enthusiasm and the determination to bring all of this immediately to publication. Which is what we are working on now.

The “Mona Lisa” of Urkesh



Object A12.30 - Photo V12d5217 G. Gallacci - Findspot: A12f194 - Preserved height of statue: 29 cm

Elusive and mysterious, as if a Mona Lisa before her time, this statue beckons to our taste as it did to the attention of the people of Urkesh more than 4000 years ago. They were also her worshipers, because this female figure was most likely the representation of a goddess.

The aesthetic appeal comes from the blending of two distinct aspects. On the one hand, a sharp realism – as with the earrings, which are a replica of golden jewels found in the Royal Palace of Urkesh. On the other hand, a stark expressionism which accentuates the pointedness of the cheekbones, the linearity of chin and nose, the delicate efflorescence of eyes and lips.



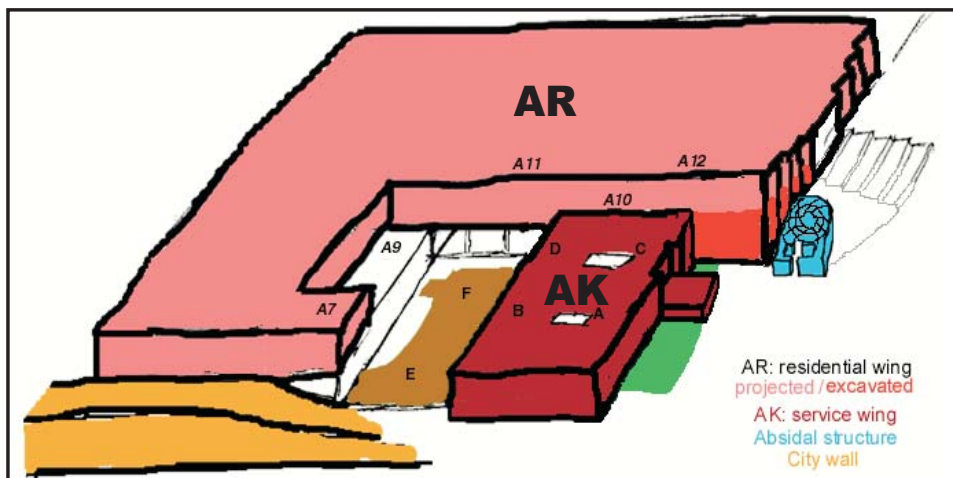
A10.221 - Photo V12d5956 R. Hauser

The statue had been thrown in a pit that cut through the walls of the palace shortly after the palace itself was abandoned, hence it is likely to date near the time period of the palace, around 2250 B.C. Being so distinctive stylistically, it emerges as a significant piece of evidence in the debated question as to whether a proper Hurrian art ever existed.

The royal palace



Photo: V12d2035 O.K.Khalsa



In 1990, we chanced upon a building that we could identify as “royal” because of the seal impressions of the king of Urkesh.

But, was it a *palace*? Only in 1999 were we able to answer this positively. Here is our reasoning.

Two large buildings adjoin and communicate with each other. The floor level of one is lower than the other by about two meters. (The sketch gives an impressionistic rendering of the entire complex.)

The lower building (AK) is a service area. The higher building (AR) is more monumental in nature, but uses the same walls as AK and is linked with it through doorways.

New royal sealings (of Tar’am-Agade) were found in the higher building AR. The two buildings are part of the same complex, clearly a palace, the residence of the dynasty and the nerve center of the kingdom.

What remains to be excavated is daunting. The photo shows the tents we use during work, which cover the extent of the current excavation.

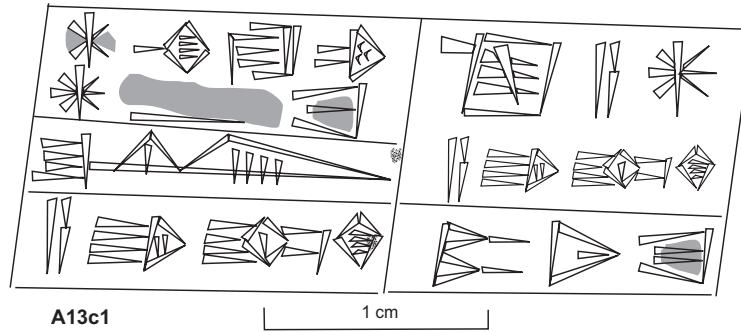
The line gives an approximate boundary of the entire building as we project it.

The mound rises where we still have to excavate. This is because private houses were built above the area of the palace after it had been abandoned (around 2000 BC.). This will make excavations longer, but even more rewarding.

The daughter of Naram-Sin

DINGIR-Na-ra-am-
DINGIR-EN.ZU
LUGAL
A-ga-de3.KI

Tar-am3-
A-ga-de3.KI
DUMU.SAL-su



Of the divine
Naram-Sin
king of
Akkad

Tar'am-Agade
his daughter



A13.9 V12d5626 R.Hauser



A13.28 V12d9710 F. A. Buccellati

Like a thunderbolt, we saw appear one day, sign after sign and fragment after fragment, the name of Naram-Sin. It was an awesome feeling for it would be, in modern terms, like piecing together, a few letters at a time, the name of Napoleon.

How tiny were these fragments is shown on the left. And the sealings showed ancient finger prints, which gave an eerie sense of commonality between us, the modern scholars, and the ancient inhabitants of the palace.

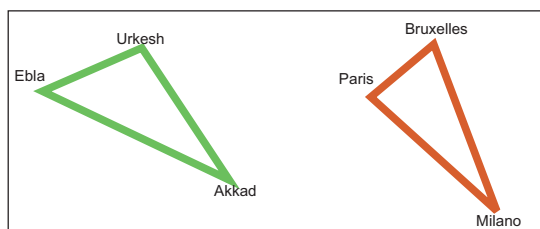
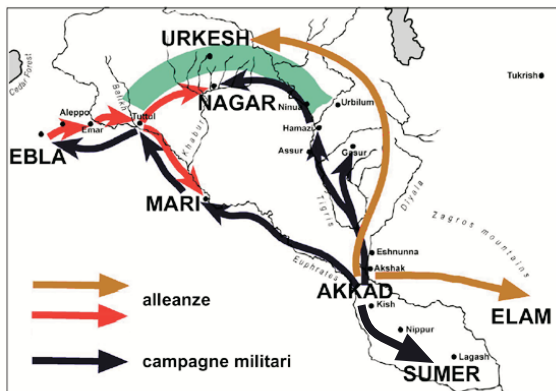
Truly, the value of the message is infinitely greater than that of the medium. The small cuneiform signs on the right opened up a whole new vista on Mesopotamian history.



A13q106.1 V12d5761



A13q97.8 V12d5628 R.Hauser



As we read more fragments, they revealed that it was actually the *daughter* of Naram-Sin who had been in Urkesh – most likely as one of our queens.

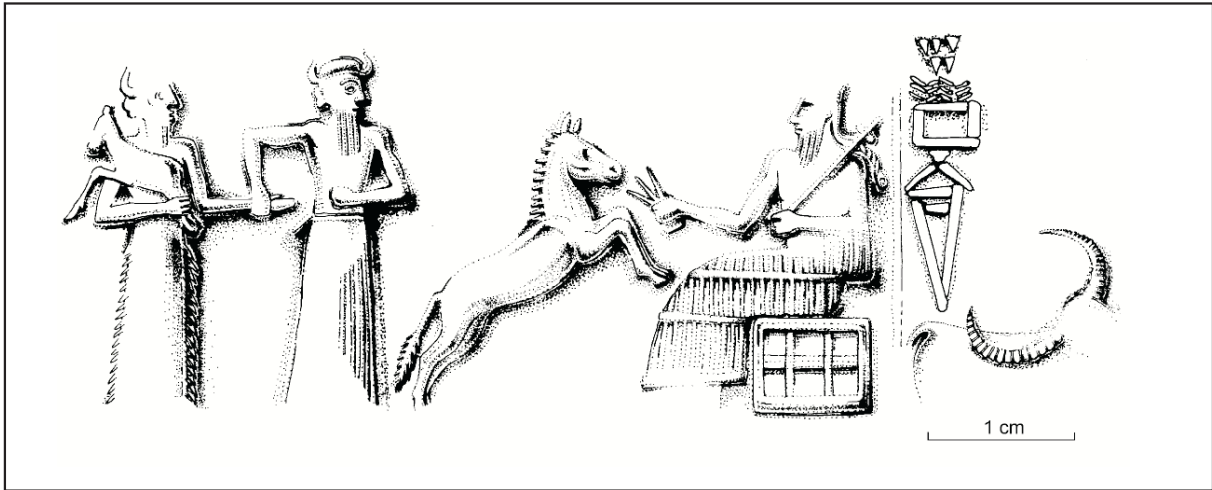
And so, from such minute splinters of clay, a new picture of the interplay among ancient world powers began to emerge.

Naram-Sin of Akkad had continued the expansionistic policy of his dynasty, bringing his conquests to the north and the west (the purple arrows on the left). He boasts of conquests there, and archaeology confirms his control of cities like Nagar and his destruction of Ebla.

Just north of Nagar, was Urkesh. Instead of conquest, he chose an alliance through a dynastic marriage. What greater sign of the central importance of Urkesh?

The stage on which the play was unfolding was of a vastness one might not suspect for the 23rd century B.C., spanning distances comparable to those among major European cities.

The horse of Ishar-beli



The horse, this most noble of animals and so familiar to us today, was actually one of the last to be domesticated. He entered the landscape of civilization in the region of Urkesh, where proper training techniques were also developed. This splendid seal of which we found several impressions in 1999 is of exceptional importance. It links Akkadian style of the south with a subject (the horse) typical of the Hurrians in the north.

In our seal, the horse is at the center of the scene, and of the attention. It is rendered so naturalistically that the artist must have been very familiar with the figure and even the character of the animal. He is rising to meet, in a fiendly posture, a god, seated on a throne. The god holds out something to the horse: food? a training tool? On the left, two minor gods bring an offering to the seated deity: possibly a newborn colt.



Oggetto: A12q538.1-3 - Foto V12d9404

The cuneiform inscription gives us the name of the owner of the seal, a man with the Akkadian name Ishar-beli. His seal was used at the same time as that of the daughter of Naram-Sin.

The composite drawing above, by our artist don Pietro Pozzi, renders faithfully what we can bring together from many fragments of different impressions of the same seal.



Oggetto: A13.28 rolling C -- Foto V12d9713



Oggetto: A13.28 rolling A -- Foto V12d5638

Walls for a palace



V12d9453
F.A.Buccellati

We inherit the past.
And we want the future to inherit our present.
It is a burning agenda with so many, varied
interests today. And it is becoming more and
more of a burning agenda in archaeology as well

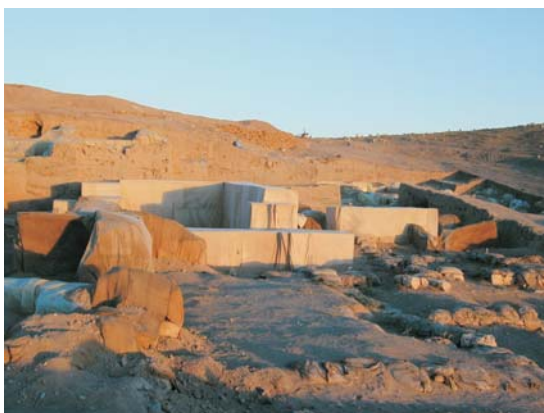
With us, at Urkesk, it has been a live concern
ever since the start of excavations. Each year, we
have preserved the walls by wrapping them with
quilts made from burlap bags used to store wheat.
The proof of time is in our favor. After nine years,
the mud brick of the palace walls remains very
close to its pristine state.

Our quilts were draped on the walls to protect
them as ruins. This year we took a step forward,
with an aim to protect the palace as architecture.
Starting with the two rooms shown here, we built
a frame of metal, which we then covered with
canvas especially fitted. The result conveys quite
a new perception of the original architecture.

On the lower left, a detail of the old and the
new, juxtaposed to each other. On the lower right,
one of many "windows" which can be rolled up to
show the visitor the wall as originally found.



V12d9451 F.A.Buccellati



V12d9458 F.A.Buccellati



V12d2332 O.K.Khalsa

Expressionism at Urkesh



Foto V12d5335 G.Gallacci



Oggetto A7.507

Disegno P. Pozzi

This small head, a fragment of a clay statuette, preserves for us an almost dramatic moment of daily life at Urkesh. We do not know whom it represents, but probably he is a common man, without religious or other overtones. A moment, then, the witness of a state of mind, which almost reminds us of a similar moment in modern art, the *Scream* of Eduard Munch – two faces that share a similar feeling across a gap of some 4000 years.

It is often, in Urkesh art, that we find the stressing of an expressive gesture, of particular physiognomic traits, as in the figure which we have nicknamed “Mona Lisa” in our first plate. Nor is it due to a lack of technical skills. As is amply shown by the single example of the onager of Ishar-beli (our fourth plate) Urkesh artists had an extraordinary ability to render realistically the most minute details. Thus expressionism is to be understood as a free stylistic choice, very close to our modern sensibility.