

Gilgamesh at Urkesh?

Literary motifs and iconographic identifications

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Identification of the subjects of Syro-Mesopotamian art is often difficult due to the general lack of the appropriate iconographic specificity needed to be certain of the connection between scenes and texts.¹ A great deal has been written on this topic especially as it relates to the identification of mythological figures in texts for which we have only later sources.² While some scholars feel strongly that it is impossible to make this type of connection, others, with a great deal of caution, think that it may be potentially useful in some instances to attempt a connection between literary figures or even entire scenes with visual evidence.³ An alternative line of approach centers on the correlation of iconography and historical events – as for example, with the recent critical study of a stone mold interpreted to refer to the campaigns of Naram-Sin in the eastern mountain regions.⁴ In this article I am attempting to establish an association between the iconography of a plaque from the Urkesh excavations dating to the second half of the third millennium with themes known from the epic of Gilgamesh because I consider that there is sufficient narrative and visual clarity to link the two. My methodological premise is that we should not be looking for literal illustrations of specific episodes, as if the artist had been commissioned to accompany words with pictures. Rather, I think we can assume broad thematic correlations, whereby the artist would be, yes, inspired by a story, but would simply re-elaborate its motifs according to his own visual vocabulary.

1. Criteria

In an attempt to determine a correlation between texts and images two basic criteria can be applied. On the one hand, there can be single iconographic elements that are sufficiently descriptive to allow a univocal correlation between a given figurative element and a known literary motif. However only few figures provide an immediate visual and mythological association, i.e., those that have special physical characteristics in their descriptions (such as Huwawa or the Scorpion-man⁵), and then with considerable difficulty. The most striking rendering of the Scorpion-man is found in the ED IIIa representation from Ur. On the front panel of the so-called Great Lyre the lowest register contains a depiction of such a creature. The Scorpion man is portrayed with a human head, arms, lower legs and feet. His body appears in segments as patterned lozenges with a long segmented tail characteristically upturned.⁶

Alternatively, the identification may rest not on a single figure, but on a clustering of figures which, together, seem to represent a specific event described in the texts. Thus the role of the Scorpion-man and his wife have been interpreted in the epic of Gilgamesh as the guardians of the road of the sun. This association continued later in the third millennium as shown by an Akkadian seal depicting a Scorpion-man with rays extending from his body in a scene also portraying the Sun God.⁷ But the Scorpion-man from the front of the Ur lyre cannot be specifically linked with the figure in the epic of Gilgamesh. The context is a scene related to drinking and to a banquet, that may be tied to the burial containing the lyre. In light of these considerations, it is not at this point possible to link these early images of the Scorpion-man with his role in the Gilgamesh epic. On the other hand, we have an ED II design already connecting a Scorpion-man with the god in a boat who may be here understood as the Sun god.⁸

¹ Amiet 1980, p. 35-53. Stressing mythological themes, Amiet has given us an overview of the state of the question as of that date. For other studies on the relationship of texts and images focusing on history, religion and literary genres see Winter 1985 and Cooper 1990. In the case of the Gilgamesh epic see the discussion of W. Lambert 1997.

² A review of the literature on this topic can be found in Matthiae 1992; in this same volume P. Steinkeller has discussed this topic and suggested a new avenue of approach, Steinkeller 1992.

³ This is especially clear in the article by Steinkeller quoted above. Douglas R. Frayne, has recently (Frayne 1999) added his arguments for connecting texts dated to the ED III period with the birth of Gilgamesh and iconographic representations of this event in Akkadian cylinder seals.

⁴ Hansen 2002. Of course there are no uncertainties when the text is inscribed directly on the monument, see for instance the reconstruction of an Akkadian stele by G. Buccellati, Buccellati 1993.

⁵ For an early image of the Scorpion-man, see Amiet 1961, No 1245.

⁶ Hansen 1999. A. Green examined the apotropaic nature of the later depictions of the Scorpion-man (Green 1985).

⁷ Amiet 1980, fig. II-20.

⁸ Frankfort 1939, pl. XV:j. Wiggermann 1992) discussed the association of the Scorpion-man and the Sun god, p. 180-1.

A model of this type of clustering of figures to represent an event is the drama surrounding the slaying of Huwawa. Texts and images of this scene have been studied by Lambert. In them, two men are attacking a third monstrous looking creature.⁹ Lambert's earliest examples are an Old Babylonian clay plaque and a sealing on a Nuzi tablet. In both of these examples a younger looking, beardless figure wearing a kilt is flanked in the killing of a centrally placed monster by a bearded figure who appears to be nude.¹⁰ His later examples represent both figures as bearded. While this is important in the analysis of the Urkesh plaque fragment (see presently), the visual elements that are relevant for the connection of images and texts (in addition to the representation of Huwawa) can be found in the fact that the texts specify both as acting in the event. Therefore the examples are relevant because they not only indicate the monster being killed but both heroes acting in the deed. The narrative and visual clarity combine, in this example, to provide a dynamically interwoven theme the interpretation of which is so striking as to be entirely convincing.

Another case in point is the myth of Etana, for which there are close correspondences in the figurative scenes of early glyptic.¹¹ It is a very unusual occurrence in early Mesopotamian art to find an elaborate scene with a detailed set of iconographic motifs all of which can be connected with a single identifiable tale.¹² Texts describing the myth give a detailed narrative of a unique incident: an eagle carries Etana, a king of Kish, higher and higher into the heavens. To achieve this goal, the eagle instructs Etana explicitly how to place himself around the bird to be carried upward. "Put [your chest] against my chest, Put [your hands] against my winged feathers, Put [your arms] against my sides." The text explains why this position was necessary: "Great indeed was the burden upon him."¹³ The scenes that have been identified with the Etana story have as their main characteristic the human figure sitting so that his torso and head are at the height of the breast and head of the eagle.¹⁴ The unification of the image of a man and eagle in flight, where the proportions have been harmonized and the eagle's outstretched wings and prominent tail are emphasized so as to present a tenable image, is such a unique picture in Mesopotamian art that even a small portion of the scene can be identified with the Etana tale. While some of the specific details of these scenes are not found in the textual tradition as we now have it¹⁵, they can nevertheless be logically fitted into the atmosphere of the encounter. Thus for instance, many of these scenes on Akkadian period seals and seal impressions include one or two dogs looking upward in amazement at the figure of Etana and the eagle rising toward the heavens.

At Urkesh a portion of one of these scenes (Field Number A5q680.1) was stratified with seal impressions dated through their inscriptions to the reign of king Tupkish and his wife Uqnitum (Fig. 1).¹⁶ The piece of the scene preserved depicts a human facing right with an arm stretched toward the other figures in the scene, three sheep face a dog who is looking upward with his mouth open in surprise toward the eagle represented in the preserved part of this sealing only by a portion of the tail and one wing of the rising bird. Below this bird we can identify a piece of the wing of a second bird although his relation to the higher bird is unclear. A second bird is carved on some Akkadian Etana seals. The variants of this type are discussed by Steinkeller who believes that the Sargonic plot of the story was different from the later Old Babylonian version.¹⁷ That the story was known in this Hurrian city can probably be concluded from the widespread popularity of the scenes in the Akkadian period. From the large body of seal impressions dating to the Akkadian period found at Urkesh it is clear that Urkesh shared in much of the dominant Akkadian iconographic traditions and was part of the cultural sphere within which these stories and their iconography circulated.¹⁸ Even if the original of our Etana sealing was carved somewhere in the south I believe that it is more than likely that urban Hurrians did know and appreciate such a dramatic tale.

⁹ Lambert 1997, p. 50-62. See recently the discussion of Salje in Aruz 2003, p. 479-484.

¹⁰ Lambert 1997, fig. 1-2.

¹¹ For a recent edition of this epic see Novotny 2001. See also Bernbeck 1996. For a review of arguments against this correspondence see Haul 2000, p. 40-44. See also Michalowski in Aruz 2003, p. 477. D. Frayne (1999) points out that a story by the Greek historian Aelian recounts an episode in the early life of Gilgamesh where he is thrown out of a window of a citadel where his mother is held captive. He is rescued in mid-air by an eagle and carried safely to earth.

¹² Steinkeller 1992, p. 248-255. For a second bird see an example in Boehmer 1965, Pl. LVIII:701.

¹³ Foster 1993, Tablet IV/B 18-20, 24. The physical position of the eagle and Etana and the adjusted proportions of the eagle and Etana in the Akkadian seals are meant to illustrate this situation.

¹⁴ Boehmer 1965, No. 693-701. For the history of the Etana texts see Alster 1989.

¹⁵ Lambert 1997, p. 58-9, fn. 1.

¹⁶ Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati 1995-96, fig. 9f.

¹⁷ Steinkeller 1992, p. 252-255. For a second bird see an example in Boehmer 1965, Pl. LVIII, p. 701.

¹⁸ This internationalism of the Urkesh culture in the Akkadian period can also be demonstrated from the evidence attesting to a standard Sumerian school curriculum, see Buccellati, 2004, p. 45-48.

But the main focus of this article is the publication of a stone plaque fragment from our excavations at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh¹⁹, which I interpret as representing Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This identification is wholly new and correspondingly more problematic, but for that very reason all the more interesting in its implications. It is a pleasure to offer the publication of this important document of Urkesh artistic production to Jean-Claude Margueron, whose research has contributed so widely and so insightfully to our deeper understanding of “the Mesopotamians” and to the explicitness of method when proposing new interpretations.

2. A stone plaque fragment from Urkesh

In 1997 a portion of a plaque (Field Number A7.36) carved in white limestone portraying two figures in relief was excavated at Urkesh (Mozan) near the floor of a private house but just under the modern surface. This house, in excavation unit A7, belonged to settlements of the late third millennium situated more than 5 meters above the service courtyard of the Royal Palace AP.²⁰ Since the ceramics associated with the plaque fragment are mixed, the context does not necessarily reflect its date. Our fragment is small in size measuring 3.4 cm at its widest and 4.3 cm in height.

The plaque is flat on the reverse and on the preserved top and right edges; it is broken on the other two sides (Figs. 3-4). The relief carved on the front indicates that it is the uppermost right corner of a plaque which has a raised border along the top and the right side. This border closely frames a relief of two figures with both their heads touching the upper border and the body of the right figure touching the right border at some points. These figures are preserved in what is most likely part of an upper register of a plaque composed of two or more registers (see the next section for a possible reconstruction of these other registers).

On the right side stands a beardless male, with his head shown in profile facing left. Both the figures on the plaque have heads represented disproportionately large. The facial features of the figure on the right are characterized by a prominent forehead, large nose, a large rounded eye depicted in front view, a small mouth and receding chin. Short closely cut hair with thicker strands shown near his left ear does not appear to end in tight curls. His upper body exhibits a short neck and wide shoulders, neither of which are well executed. There is a slight modeling of the right breast; his left breast is covered by his left arm crossing the torso. While his torso is nude, he is wearing a short kilt that has a diagonal line extending from the thickened belt to the bulky lower border. This kilt is mid-thigh in length so that the figure's well articulated knees are clearly delineated. The calf of the right leg indicates a slight swelling of the musculature. The left leg is slightly bent below the knee giving his position a relaxed feeling. His kilt is one of the typical male garments of the Akkadian period and is represented in Akkadian art either with a straight lower hem, as in our plaque, or more frequently with a diagonal hem. Our type of kilt is found worn by heroes in the early contest scenes, but can be depicted in presentation scenes, and is worn by subsidiary figures in the Etana seals.²¹ Both arms are characterized by a pointed elbow with a thicker upper arm and a narrower lower arm. He holds the wrist and appears to be touching the hair of his bearded companion.

The bearded figure on the left is portrayed as the same height as the figure on the right but his head is shown in front view. This allows a clear depiction of his thick hair worn straight and extending just below his ears. At the height of his ears his hair is further thickened into what appear to be curls. Covering most of his forehead is a flatter extension of his hair, in the manner of bangs. The total impression is one of a small face framed by a heavy but orderly hair style. This idea is heightened by his thick, bushy eyebrows, and narrow oval eyes that are slightly slanted downward toward his nose. His tapered beard comes from the fact long and extends down onto his bare chest with indications of thickened tufts of curls on the lowest half of the tapered beard. This beard ends in a straight line across the upper portion of his chest. His cheeks are clearly modeled as is his wide nose but the striking impression given by the face is that his mouth has a slight smile. This figure is nude, but he wears a quiver hanging from the back of his right shoulder and a rectangular pouch hanging from his waist at the right thigh. It is this rotated pose that allows us to see both part of the quiver behind his right shoulder and his entire pouch. His right shoulder is clearly represented

¹⁹ We are grateful to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic for their continuous support of our work at Urkesh. The excavations are funded through grants from the National Geographic Society, the Catholic Biblical Association, the S.H. Kress Foundation, the L.J. and M.L. Skaggs Foundation, the Ahmanson Foundation, the Syria Shell Petroleum Development B.V., and the Urkesh Founders.

²⁰ For a preliminary presentation of the architectural and stratigraphic situation see Buccellati 1998, p. 22, p. 29.

²¹ Boehmer 1965 eg. Nos 112, 636, 650, and Etana seals 693, 695, 698-699. While the corpus of Etana seals is small, the occurrence of this type of garment in them indicates that the straight-hemmed kilt was a common working garment in the early Akkadian period. It is worn also by the plowman from the Urkesh stele found near Temple BA (Kelly-Buccellati 1990 and Kelly-Buccellati 1998). See also Porada 1948, No. 132.

in this view but the opposite shoulder is awkward and slanted downward. We only see his right arm with a broad shoulder, pointed elbow and thinner lower arm. His right hand, with the indication of three short and wide fingers, hangs downward as his wrist is being held by the figure on the right. The figure is represented in a rotated view so that the lower part of his stomach and his genitals are shown as are both his strong thighs. His knees are articulated and he has indications of muscular swelling of the lower leg. Neither figure has preserved feet. His overall appearance, especially from his legs, is that he has a heavier and more muscular body than the beardless, younger figure on the right. The rendering of his head frontally with his all encompassing hair contrasts sharply with the profile head of the beardless figure.

3. Identification of the figures

While we have no early iconographic examples of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to compare with the Urkesh plaque fragment, I am suggesting that our two figures can be identified precisely as Gilgamesh and Enkidu portrayed at the moment, near the beginning of the story, when the two have entered into a new friendship, following their first struggle²², setting the stage for their joint adventures.

The friendly atmosphere of the encounter on the Urkesh plaque is clear.²³ Neither figure is portrayed with an aggressive posture; the figure on the right is rendered in a relaxed position as indicated by his bent left leg. Both have a pleasant, even perhaps a smiling look on their face. The nude figure is being held by the wrist but his hand is limp, indicating that he is not struggling to gain freedom from the grip. The differences between the two figures are clearly emphasized by the artist. The one is portrayed beardless, clothed, without weapons and appears to be younger with a slighter build. The other is hairier, nude, more heavily built and carries hunting weapons. Their facial types are quite different. Both appear to indicate specific and identifiable figures since their physical attributes and accessories are well defined. And both are emphatically represented with enough visual description to make their identification apparent to the ancient audience.

An important limiting factor in this interpretation is of course that we do not have the rest of the object. Since these two figures are placed in the upper right corner of the plaque, there were originally other elements to the left and in the lower register(s). They may have formed a standard ascending visual sequence, this scene being one of the culminating elements at the top.²⁴ On the other hand, it may make more sense to go from top to bottom in the following sequence: upper left = struggle, upper right = friendship (our fragment), lower left = fight with Huwawa, lower right = death of Enkidu. This reading follows the sequence Foster has reconstructed for the stele of Rimuš.²⁵ Whether or not there were other scenes connected with these two figures, however they are to be identified, is impossible to determine on the basis of our present evidence.

We can now review in detail the individual correspondences between iconography and texts.²⁶

1 *Enkidu's hairy appearance* – Enkidu is described at the beginning of the story as hairy: “His whole body was shaggy with hair, he had a full head of hair like a woman, his locks billow in profusion like Ashnan.”²⁷ The significance of this particular feature of his appearance remains in evidence even after he

²² From the iconographic record of the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods we do have wrestling figures on plaques perhaps representing this struggle. However these scenes are not sufficiently specific to identify the participants. One ED IIIa plaque from the Nintu Temple at Khafajah shows two pairs of wrestlers in the lowest register. Some attempt at specificity can be seen in the fact that one figure has long hair and is bearded while the other either has short hair or is bald, but in any case does not have a beard, (cf. Frankfort 1943, pl. 62, N^o. 313). However two nude, beardless figures from Susa who are possibly wrestling are not differentiated iconographically, see Boese 1971, Taf. XXIV:S9, and neither are those on Taf. IX: 2 and XL: 3.

²³ Comparable quietness of atmosphere signifying great profundity can also be seen in the face-to-face encounter with the divine in the presentation scenes that begin later in the Akkadian period.

²⁴ A visual and temporal progression from the bottom register to the top is the usual one in this type of art. However other sequences are known such as the seated divinity at the bottom left corner of a plaque from level VII of the Nintu Temple at Khafajah, Frankfort 1943, pl. 64, No. 315.

²⁵ Foster 1985, especially p. 22-23. See the cautionary note by Nigro 1998, p. 97, fn. 34.

²⁶ Translations from the Standard Babylonian are cited by tablet and line numbers, and are given in the translation of M. Gallery Kovacs (Gallery Kovacs 1989). Translations from the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets with the Old Babylonian version are cited with a prefix P and Y respectively, and they are given in the translation of G. Buccellati (personal communication). – I combine in a single presentation the evidence from the Old and Standard Babylonian versions, and in one instance a Sumerian episode as well, for reasons that are outlined briefly in my conclusions below.

²⁷ Tablet I, lines 86-8. In line I 90, Enkidu is described as wearing “a garment like Sumukan.” This is interpreted as meaning that he is dressed in animal skins (Gallery Kovacs 1989, p. 6, fn. 6), but it appears to me that this line can be interpreted as describing Enkidu as nude like animals that do not put on clothing. Note that lack of hair in the pertinent figure has been adduced as an argument against the interpretation of the hero and bullman combat scene as representing Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Calmeyer 1968, p. 373).

has been groomed into a civilized man: “A [bar]ber groomed his hairy body.”²⁸ This aspect is clearly accentuated in the left figure on our plaque; he is not only bearded with his face prominently framed by long, orderly and thick hair but also has his bushy eyebrows emphasized. It is further highlighted by the kilted figure touching his long hair!

2 *Enkidu's strength* – Another analogy between the plaque and the texts is the way in which the musculature of the figure on the left corresponds to the allusions to Enkidu's strength in the texts. Enkidu is described in a dream of Gilgamesh as “the mightiest in the land, he is strongest.”²⁹ The shepherds say of Enkidu when the harlot brings him to their camp “How the youth resembles Gilgamesh, tall in stature, towering up to the battlements over the wall. Surely he was born in the mountains; his strength is as mighty as the meteorite (?) of Anu.”³⁰

3 *Gilgamesh' beauty and elegance* – Stress is also placed in the texts on the physical appearance of Gilgamesh who is portrayed at the beginning of the story as “a handsome youth”³¹ who lives in Uruk “where the people show off in skirted finery.”³² Throughout the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh is pictured as both physically attractive and mighty.

4 *Gilgamesh' youth* – On the Urkesh plaque, the figure on the right has a youthful appearance, as described above, and this matches well the statement about Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian text: “You are still young, Gilgamesh, your heart can (easily) exalt you; whatever you want to do you don't know (well).”³³ Gilgamesh is also described as a “young lord” (en-TUR) in the Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh and Huwawa.³⁴

5 *Respective heights* – A difference between iconography and description is seen in the fact that the text indicates Enkidu as equal to Gilgamesh physically but slightly shorter in stature (Tablet II v 16). Our figures are equally tall, but Enkidu appears slightly more physically robust.

6 *The friendly encounter* – In a dream, Gilgamesh is anticipating the coming of Enkidu as a friend: “There will come to you a mighty man, a comrade who saves his friend. ... You loved him and embraced him as a wife.”³⁵ This is an important point for the interpretation of the Urkesh plaque since this attitude reflects the amicable relationship depicted between the two.

7 *The scene is self-contained* – Since the interaction between the two friends, as told in the story, is complete in itself, we do not have to look for scenes in the texts which significantly involve other creatures. Also it does not appear likely that a specific physical setting is needed to understand the iconography and none is provided in our fragment.³⁶ The texts of the Gilgamesh Epic do have important scenes, especially at the beginning of the story, where only Gilgamesh and Enkidu are prominent.

8 *Memorialization of a specific moment* – The scene in our fragment apparently refers to a specific moment, or a conflation of moments, in the sequence of events described in the poem. As discussed above, if our fragment were to be understood as a frame in a multi-register plaque, then one would expect more frames describing other moments as well. At their first encounter, Gilgamesh and Enkidu get into a wrestling match, which Gilgamesh wins, and then, “as soon as Gilgamesh regained his composure, Enkidu approached and said to him, to Gilgamesh: Like onto no other your mother bore you!”³⁷ following which they seal their friendship: “They kissed each other and made friendship.”³⁸ Soon afterwards, Gilgamesh proposes to go to the Cedar Forest and slay its guardian, Huwawa, projecting the image of a young and inexperienced man. Reluctantly, the elders agree, relying on Enkidu's supporting role. This new relationship is sealed by the two new friends going to the temple of the divine mother of Gilgamesh: “Taking each other by the hand, Gilgamesh and Enkidu walked to the Egalmah.”³⁹ I take then the scene in our fragment

²⁸ P iii 22-23 (reading [U].I for *gall bum*).

²⁹ Tablet I line 250

³⁰ Tablet II lines 46-9.

³¹ Tablet I line 217.

³² Tablet I line 208.

³³ Y v 10-11.

³⁴ Edzard, 1993, Version B, line 3; Version A, line 167; see also lines 51 and 53.

³⁵ Tablet I 249.

³⁶ This is the case in many of the scenes which must have been apparent to contemporaries but are not specific enough for us to interpret. The numerous banquet scenes in Early Dynastic plaques and cylinder seals or the symbolism of the raised conical cup in Early Dynastic and Akkadian art are good examples of this.

³⁷ P vi 24'-28'

³⁸ Y i 19

³⁹ Tablet III 19 f.

to reflect these three moments of discovered friendship, of reciprocal confidence and of holding each other by the hand, just they are about to embark on their major adventure.

9 There is yet one final, important aspect that is included in the scene represented on our plaque: the person on the left carries a quiver with arrows in it. This I interpret as reflecting the narrative portion that describes the final preparation before Gilgamesh and Enkidu set off on their journey: the elders “place [bow] and quiver in his hands.”⁴⁰ Because the text is broken at this point, we do not know if the recipient is Gilgamesh or Enkidu, but the rest of the episode places a clear emphasis on the role that Enkidu has to play by going ahead of Gilgamesh: “Let Enkidu march before you: he is experienced as to the way to take, he is wont to go on this road, [he knows] the forest’s hidden entrances... Going in front, will Enkidu be able to help his friend; his [eyes] alert, [he will protect your safety].”⁴¹ The accentuated eyes of the figure on the left, and the fact that he carries weapons, seem to intentionally echo this emphasis on the alertness and preparedness of Enkidu as the appointed guardian of the young, impetuous ruler.

If my interpretation of the iconography of the Urkesh plaque fragment is correct, it invites us to reflect on the portion of the story that the artist chose to render.⁴² Even though we do not know what was sculpted on other portions of this plaque, the two figures we do have already tell us a great deal. The two are portrayed at a quiet interval in the story. Not in their first dramatic encounter, nor in any of their later adventures with mythological creatures, nor in their encounters with deities, such as Ishtar. Nevertheless the moment does reflect the profound essence of the relationship between the two, one of friendship and youthful companionship. This is prefigured in the text in the dreams of Gilgamesh about Enkidu even before their first meeting. The story of this moment at the beginning of their relationship is told visually in the Urkesh plaque with few and simple iconographic devices. Essentially we derive our impression of their relationship from clear physical gestures calmly exchanged.

4. Date and place of origin

Many fewer plaques have been found dating to the Akkadian period than the Early Dynastic period.⁴³ Our plaque is divided into registers and framed by a raised border in a similar fashion to plaques found in the south but can also be compared to the basic compositional divisions of the larger stele found in Halawa.⁴⁴ Stylistic elements seen in the Urkesh plaque are found in those plaques spanning ED IIIa to the early Akkadian periods. While the short, tapered beard with straight sides and bottom is earlier, the loosely wavy thickening rendered toward the bottom of the beard of our figure is closer to the Akkadian type of separated but thickened strands which have eliminated the tightly wavy pattern of the ED III beards. The rhomboid shaped eyes of the bearded figure can also be seen in late ED seals as is generally the case for the proportions of the heads of both figures.

But the stylistic characteristics that are most telling in our plaque are, the combination of the frontal or profile heads, awkwardly displayed shoulders and a rotated view of the torso, especially seen in the bearded figure but also shown in the kilted figure. As already noted, the farther shoulder of the nude figure, interpreted here as Enkidu, is executed awkwardly but the rotated view is most clearly seen in the lower stomach, legs and genitals.⁴⁵ Because the body is turned in relationship to our plane of view, we see part of the arrows and the side of the quiver he is wearing on his back and almost the entire pouch carried at his waist. It means too that his genitals are carved so that they are framed against his far leg with approximately half the thickness of that leg extending beyond. This characteristic rendering of the genitals and leg is also found in some nude prisoners from the ED IIIa Standard of Ur⁴⁶, on a limestone plaque from Ur in which a cult scene is depicted showing nude figures pouring libations⁴⁷ and an early Akkadian inlay from Ebla.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Y vi 10. For figurative representations assumed to show Gilgamesh and Enkidu with bow and quiver as they slay Huwawa (with axe and sword), see Lambert, 1997, p. 57, figs. 5 and 6.

⁴¹ Y vi 23-28.

⁴² For a discussion of this subject in Greek art see Woodford 2003.

⁴³ Boese 1971, p. 122-133.

⁴⁴ Orthmann 1985. This stele is only partially divided into registers. Other similar but not identical elements include the close cropped hair which in the Halawa figures is curly, the large nose and large eyes of all the figures. The women, but not the men, have a receding chin and one woman has a very awkwardly drawn shoulder, Orthmann 1989, Abb. 44 and 47.

⁴⁵ The rotated view where the genitals are represented against the middle portion of the leg first can be seen in the Uruk period as for instance some nude figures of the Uruk vase. This method of depicting nudes was taken up again in some ED III nude figures as discussed in the text.

⁴⁶ Parrot 1960, fig. 176.

⁴⁷ Boese 1971, Taf. XXI: 4.

⁴⁸ Matthiae *et al.* 1995, p. 321, No. 105. This was excavated in an administrative area of the Palace G in room 2913.

Examples from cylinder seals can be found also, as in a seal connected by its inscription to Lugalanda.⁴⁹ While it is true that we must take into consideration the type and function of the objects decorated with these nude figures in assessing the relevance of the comparisons (here the Urkesh stone plaque, and inlays and cylinder seals from other areas in Syro-Mesopotamia) all these pieces are in a broad sense public art in that they were displayed for the purpose of impressing the viewer with a certain message or attitude.⁵⁰ If we see stylistic details which link them, I think that the comparisons are methodologically valid to the extent of being able to come to chronological conclusions even if the specific purposes, function and audience of these classes of objects vary.⁵¹

These stylistic characteristics of the rotated view, especially as seen in the lower body, are also portrayed alongside nude bodies represented in a profile view with one leg extended forward as if walking but the genitals depicted as framed against the outer edge of the far leg. Both are represented in the nude prisoners on the Standard of Ur and nude prisoner inlays found at Ebla in room 4436 of the central portion of Palace G.⁵²

In addition to the manner in which the genitals are framed (or not) against the far leg, the volume of the lower torso is sometimes emphasized by modeling the contours of the lower stomach. While this characteristic does not appear in the nude figures of the Ur Standard or the Ebla inlays, in the Urkesh plaque the modeling of the lower stomach of the nude figure shows a thickened downward curve, emphasizing the volume of the figure in this area.⁵³ A seal dated to the Lugalanda period exhibits these same stylistic characteristics in the lower bodies of the two nude heroes, that is, the two nude heroes have their genitals framed against their far leg and a modeled lower stomach (Fig. 2).⁵⁴

While relatively few plaques are known from the Akkadian period, elements of royal reliefs are useful for dating the Urkesh plaque fragment.⁵⁵ The carving of the hairstyle of the kilted figure appears to be closest to the short, close fitting and striated hair (without clearly defined curls at the end) worn by the dignitaries marching behind Sargon on his diorite stele found in Susa.⁵⁶ The knees of both figures in the Urkesh plaque are similarly carved and can be compared with the knee of a soldier on that same stele.⁵⁷ Here too the lower bodies of some nude captives appear to be represented in the same manner as the Urkesh bearded figure although the far leg extending beyond the depiction of their genitals is not seen as fully.⁵⁸ These captives appear to be wearing a low belt but this may be an ineptly rendered modeling of the stomach. In the next phase of Akkadian art a diorite stele found in Susa no longer portrays the captives in this style since their lower stomachs are indicated only by incised straight lines and their far leg is not seen extending beyond their genitals.⁵⁹ This is also the case of nude prisoners in the Telloh stele and the alabaster stele from Nasiriya in the Baghdad Museum dated to the same phase.⁶⁰ It appears then that the sculpting of this three-quarter view of the body was not considered completely successful by the ancient sculptors and was attempted for only a very short period of time from ED IIIa into the earliest phase of the Akkadian period. Our plaque must date to the later part of this phase, at the beginning of the Akkadian period.

The stratigraphic location of the plaque fragment can only provide a *terminus ante quem* at the end of the third millennium or the beginning of the second. Clearly, this has no bearing on the date of the carving, just as the fact that the fragmentary state of the piece and its find spot in a modest private house suggests

⁴⁹ Amiet 1961, No. 1100.

⁵⁰ Hansen 2002, p. 106 has cited "... an interplay between the artists of different genres and the cross-fertilization of ideas and techniques."

⁵¹ Matthiae 1992 discusses this issue on the basis of the much clearer contextual evidence at Ebla.

⁵² Matthiae 1995, p. 274, Nos. 20-2. This may also be the case in some cylinder seals dating to the period of Lugalanda, Amiet 1961, No. 1100, 1103-1104.

⁵³ The lower abdomen in the Uruk vase nude figures and the ED III examples differ in that they do not have the details of modeling in this area. In early Greek *kouros* figures, there is also an emphasis on the development of the musculature of the lower abdomen.

⁵⁴ A clear photograph is given in Parrot 1960 Fig. 169b. See also Amiet 1961, No. 1108 and Boehmer 1965, Taf II, No. 7. A revised version of this drawing is included here as Fig. 2.

⁵⁵ Amiet 1976.

⁵⁶ Börker-Klähn 1982, No. 18d. Their hair however is worn so that the ear is exposed whereas our figure has his ear covered. Amiet 1976 p. 9 has pointed out that this hair style is characteristic for the early Akkadian period.

⁵⁷ Börker-Klähn 1982 No. 18h although the knees of the kilted figure do have a suggestion of the lozenge-shaped Early Dynastic knee pattern closer to 18g. The ED III type of knee does continue into the early Akkadian stele as shown by the knees of the nude figures and soldiers in the upper register of 18d.

⁵⁸ Börker-Klähn 1982, No. 18d.

⁵⁹ Börker-Klähn 1982, No. 20.

⁶⁰ Börker-Klähn 1982, Nos. 21-22. The emphasis on stomach modeling reappears with greater prominence on numerous examples of the late Akkadian contest scenes, eg. Boehmer 1965, No. 199.

that it was wholly out of place. As a result, the stylistic criteria I have just discussed are the only guide we have in the matter.

The last question that needs to be asked concerns the workshop where the stone plaque was carved. Although we have not made an analysis of the stone, it is quite possible that it came from local sources as they are numerous in the vicinity of the site. One reason to think so stems from the fact that the stone of the plaque is similar to the stone used for the unfinished round-topped stele found near Temple BA.⁶¹ A comparative analysis of the style confirms the closeness of the two objects. They both have a figure represented in profile with a large prominent nose, large eye, close fitting short hair (the plaque) or a tight fitting cap (the stele), and especially an awkwardly rendered shoulder (in the case of the plaque both figures have this characteristic). One figure in the plaque and the plowman on the stele are wearing a short kilt. In addition to the similarities in iconography we can see a certain spirit of freshness both in the plowing scene and in the encounter of friends on the plaque. The naturalism and restraint exhibited by the figures on the two pieces is striking. While the stress on the individual figures is clear, their integration either with each other (on the plaque) or their environment (on the stele) is distinctive for the art of this time period at Urkesh as the seal impressions found outside the city wall exhibit these same characteristics.

The stele from Temple BA is important in connection with the plaque since it was unfinished and therefore strongly suggests that it was produced in an Urkesh workshop, and this can then be assumed for our plaque as well. In combination with the statue of the stone lion from Temple BA,⁶² there is a growing body of evidence that there existed local workshops in Urkesh during the end of ED III and the earliest part of the Akkadian period, workshops carving stone reliefs for local consumption.

5. Conclusions

If one accepts the interpretation of the Urkesh plaque that I have proposed in this article, two important inferences can be drawn.

The first is that a significant thematic development that we know from the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh story would already have been so popular in the late third millennium as to have become the subject of a figurative representation and not in this case on cylinder seals but on a stone plaque. This figurative rendering is not in itself surprising, it would be an interesting example of a theme shared by literature and art, but attested for this early period only by the latter. If this is indeed the case, then our evidence, is the earliest, visual documentation of the epic and would antedate even the presently known textual evidence or one of the earliest if one accepts the arguments of D. Frayne for the representation of the birth of Gilgamesh.⁶³ We may assume in general that the visual representations in the figurative arts did not necessarily have a one to one correspondence with the different philological embodiments of the textual tradition.⁶⁴ Nevertheless thematic correspondences are plausible across boundaries of time, genre and even plot – apart of course from the fact that we do not know how much is missing of the earliest strands of a given literary tradition.⁶⁵ Obviously, a figurative rendering would result in a combination of different aspects of plot and character, which are unified in a single compositional whole. It is for these reasons that in my treatment above I felt justified in telescoping narrative aspects from different time periods and literary traditions.⁶⁶

The second inference is about the Hurrian context within which the plaque can be situated. Arguments have been presented elsewhere for the specific ethnic nature of Urkesh as a Hurrian city.⁶⁷ Since it seems likely that our plaque was carved in Urkesh, the presence of a Gilgamesh motif in this city attests to the third millennium Hurrian familiarity with these tales and their participation in the proliferation of these pan-

⁶¹ Kelly-Buccellati 1990, p. 149-154 and 1998, p. 35-50.

⁶² Kelly-Buccellati 1998, p. 39-40, Ill. 1. For the late ED III seal impressions excavated outside the city wall see Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati 1988, p. 65-80.

⁶³ Frayne (1999) has connected three ED III texts with the story of the birth of Gilgamesh; these texts were excavated in Abu Salabikh and Ebla, see Biggs 1974, No. 278 and Edzard 1984, Nos. 5,6. For some newly published early fragments from Northern Mesopotamia, see S. Dalley 2001.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the latter, see W. W. Hallo. For the relationship between texts and figurative themes see Matthiae 1992, Steinkeller 1992. Cooper 1990, p. 50 fn. 29, states that "...the 'textual' repertoire drawn upon by third-millennium artists was not at all the same repertoire circulating in written form in elite and scribal circles."

⁶⁵ Thus for instance while the pertinent texts of Gilgamesh from either the Babylonian or the Sumerian versions date only from the Old Babylonian period, it seems certain that their antecedents were in the same time period as our plaque, see e.g. Edzard, "*Gilgamesh und Huwawa*", cited, p. 59.

⁶⁶ The complex literary development of the themes that cluster around Gilgamesh is studied in detail by Tigay 1982 and Pettinato 1992.

⁶⁷ Kelly-Buccellati 1996; Buccellati 1999.



- Fig. 1: Seal Impression from Urkesh with a part of the Etana story (A5q680.1)
Drawing by Cecily Hillsdale.



- Fig. 2: The Contest Scene from a seal dated to the period of Lugalanda
Adapted from Parrot 1960, Pl. 169B and Amiet 1961, No. 1108.



- Fig. 3: Urkesh Plaque fragment (A7.36) Drawing by Pietro Pozzi.



- Fig. 4: Urkesh plaque showing Gilgamesh and Enkidu (?) Photo V9d2501 (A. Abdel-Ghafour)

Syro-Mesopotamian stories. It has been commonly thought that the Gilgamesh stories were transmitted to the Hittite scribes through the Hurrians. We know that the later Hurrians were familiar with and appreciated the story of Gilgamesh from fragmentary Hurrian texts of the epic. The name Siduri has long been identified as a Hurrian name.⁶⁸ Salvini has noted that there are preserved parts of two cycles in Hurrian literature: one similar to the 12 Akkadian tablets containing the stories connected with Gilgamesh and one focused on the Guardian of the Cedar Forest, Huwawa.⁶⁹ If my interpretation is correct, our plaque provides evidence for a very early reception (some eight centuries before the heyday of Hurrian influence over the Hittites) by the properly Hurrian culture of Urkesh of this great literary tradition, through an episode that links the two cycles – the first encounter of Gilgamesh with Enkidu (as known from the standard cycle) and their setting off for their first joint adventure.

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⁶⁸ Salvini 1988, esp. p. 159 (I wish to thank Stefano De Martino for this reference). See also Haas 1994, p. 131, and Pettinato 1992, p. 387.

⁶⁹ Salvini 1977, especially p. 78-79.

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