

**Identity and alterity**  
**Hurrian Urkesh facing the Akkadian imperial expansion**

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## 1 Introduction

In the case of a broken tradition, ethnic identity can be recognized on the basis of clusters of tangible attributes in material culture on the one hand and linguistic evidence on the other; it can then be studied in its interaction with surrounding ethnicities, whether in conflict or in amity. In the case of Urkesh there are significant pieces of evidence in both regards, convincingly showing that the city was a Hurrian foundation from the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium and lasted as such until its end around 1200 B.C. The markers are so apparent and continuous that they imply a real awareness on the part of the people. This is all the more remarkable if one considers the strong cultural encroachment from southern Mesopotamia, first with the Sumerians and then with the Akkadians. But in fact the sense of alterity in confronting this encroachment only served to strengthen the sense of identity on the part of the local Hurrian population.

We have discussed this Hurrianness of the population in a number of publications where we gave evidence from the various periods in the history of Urkesh.<sup>1</sup> By "identity" I mean the self-perception they would have of their "Hurrianness," and by "alterity" the perception of the distinctiveness vi-à-vis other ethnic groups. Here I will deal especially with one of the apical moments of this confrontation, namely the moment when the Akkadian empire is reaching its outer limits. Urkesh is precisely at the edge of this outer limit and it managed to retain its identity while squarely facing not only the military, but also the cultural might of Akkad.

## 2 Monumental Architecture

The concepts connected with this identity can be seen in a variety of cultural characteristics. One is a distinctive type of monumental architecture, a necromantic pit without parallels outside of Urkesh (Fig. 1a) . *Abi* is the Hurrian word for this unique structure which served to encase the Urkesh

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1 Buccellati, 2010, 2019; Kelly-Buccellati 2012, 2020

necromantic shaft through which the spirits of the Netherworld were summoned. The concept is uniquely Hurrian, as is shown by the ritual that was taking place in it, well known through later Hurrian texts. The great distinctiveness of this feature was deeply felt by the Akkadians in Urkesh, especially the queens. We attribute to them the decision, which stratigraphically can be dated precisely to the Akkadian period, of giving a very steep access to the shaft itself (Fig. 1b), covering it with a roof (now lost, but with remnants still extant near the shaft itself), and of placing a large stone at the top of the steps (Fig. 1c), as a strong door, to block the possible unwanted exit of the spirits of the Netherworld from the shaft. For the Akkadians this was very important because they conceived these spirits as bringing sickness and bad dreams among other things.

Our second example of monumentality in Urkesh can be seen in the temple mound. We look first, by way of contrast, to a southern ziggurat, the iconic one of Ur (Fig. 2a)<sup>2</sup>. It stands high in the southern plains, clearly visible from all the surrounding area, and it is very symmetrical in its plan and its access (Fig. 2b). A view of our Temple Mound at Urkesh, in contrast with the ziggurat model, shows a triumph of asymmetry (Fig. 2c):

- the staircase is placed to the side of the plaza that fronts the Temple terrace and the steps are askew in relationship to the direction of the staircase itself;
- a high revetment wall in the south contrasts with a low temenos wall on the other three sides, and the overall outline of the temenos is quite irregular;
- the upsloping rise of the glacis leads to the broad upper side of the temenos,
- but the temple itself is offset to the extreme right corner of the temenos itself;
- at the top, the temple does not stand in isolation, but is flanked to the north and the east by the service quarters, which are at the same elevation as the temple.

All told, the major difference from the Southern ziggurat model is that the Urkesh temple mound is perceived as a "proscenium," i. e., as an invitation to the mountains in the background (Fig. 3b). These are the mountains on which the Hurrian myths say that the god Kumarbi is walking, as shown on one of our seal impressions (Fig. 3a). We know from later Hurrian texts that Kumarbi lived in Urkesh and is very much connected with these mountains: "He (Kumarbi) had gone to roam the land(s). He wanders about up(?) in the mountains."<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Realism in Urkesh

The next concept I want to emphasize in the Urkesh context is one of figurative realism.<sup>4</sup> The Urkesh artistic tradition is characterized by a very strong sense of realism. Interestingly this emphasis on realism occurs both in sculpture as well as glyptic in Urkesh. This style was already visible in the lions of Tishatal found long before our excavations<sup>5</sup> and it is, especially the exemplar in the Metropolitan Museum of Art that displays a surprising sense of movement, the image pivoting around the vertical axis (Fig. 4a)<sup>6</sup>. Further, we may look at a stone relief from our excavations of the Akkadian period, where the scene on one side shows a plowman pushing with great effort the plow into the ground and on the reverse a herd of animals in a dynamic circular movement (Fig. 4b). Another stone relief shows what I have interpreted as Gilgamesh and Enkidu in a warm gesture of friendship (Fig.

2 Woolley 1939 Pl. 84.

3 Hoffner 1990, p. 49.

4 Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1996, Kelly-Buccellati 2015

5 Buccellati 2013

6 Buccellati 2013

4c)<sup>7</sup>.

The same realistic style can clearly be seen in a number of cylinder seal impressions found in our excavations. They are very minute and broken pieces of clay from which however I could reconstruct a series of composite scenes which are remarkable for their quality. For example, in the Urkesh seal iconography, lions only appear on the seals of the king while the queen's seals emphasize her role in the family and her running of the household as shown in the seal of her cook Tuli (Fig. 5e). Thus, in a seal of Tupkish (Fig. 5b) a lion reminds us of the bronze lion statue connected with Tish-atal; this lion appears to represent a live “pet” crouched under the stool of the king with the crown prince's feet sinking into the mane of the lion and an attendant pouring liquid in front of the lion who is well sated and yawning. Also very realistic is the gesture of the crown prince who touches the lap of the king. The same scene of the crown prince touching the lap of the king appears on a seal of the queen (Fig. 5a), a woman from the south with an Akkadian name, Uqnitum, but here the scene is that of a family gathering, without the lion. Another seal belongs to a woman with a Hurrian name, Zamena (Fig. 5d): she is in charge of the royal children and is shown here as she is holding the hand of the prince sitting on his mother's lap while a hairdresser braids the hair of the queen. Zamena's seal inscription states that she is a servant of Uqnitum. A different seal belonging to king Tupkish shows a tributary bringing a skein of wool to the king (Fig. 5c). Wool was an important commodity both within third millennium cities and in their trading relations.<sup>8</sup> One seal impression gave us the filler motif only, but it presents a view of a workshop with a potter making a ceramic vessel; a collection of finished items are on a shelf in the workshop (Fig. 5f). One of the most important scenes of realism portrays an elaborate religious sacrifice in the most minute detail (Fig. 5h). It is one of the few cylinder seals (as distinct from seal impressions) we found in our excavations at Urkesh<sup>9</sup>

Affirming instead the Akkadian ascendancy of another Urkesh queen, Tar'am-Agade, is her seal iconography which exhibits a classical hieratic style from the south (Fig. 5i)<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, the seal of a servant of king Tupkish who has a Hurrian name (Unap) but the seal iconography is in the hieratic style of the south (Fig. 5j). The case of Unap-[] is interesting because of the discrepancy between the personal name, which is Hurrian, and the iconography, which is Akkadian. The reverse is true with the seal of Ishar-bēlī, an official who has an Akkadian name but an iconography in line with the realism of the Urkesh style (Fig. 5g).

## 4 Personal Names and Language

Another concept relates to personal names used in Urkesh. The onomastics of Urkesh includes Hurrian and Akkadian names, side by side. But what is of special importance is the distribution of the names of kings and queens and their officials and attendants. Here is a simplified distributional chart (Fig. 6a) of the personal names of some of these individuals. The queens come from the south and retain their Akkadian name, but their attendants have Hurrian names, including the most sensitive one, the woman in charge of the upbringing of the queen's children, Zamena. We have here a window onto what alterity really meant. One can try to imagine an Akkadian young woman, finding herself, undoubtedly at a very young age, in a setting that is not only so different in customs (if one remembers the *abi*!) but also so alien linguistically. And on top of it, having to entrust her children to a local woman who probably knew little or no Akkadian!

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7 Kelly-Buccellati 2006.

8 Sallaberger 2014.

9 Recht 2015.

10 Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati 2002

The personal names give us an insight into the languages spoken at Urkesh, and we have seen that Hurrian and Akkadian are dominant. But we have a number of tablets that give us an equally variegated history. A school tablet (Fig. 6b), found in three pieces on the floor of the Palace of Tupkish is a good indication that there was a scribal school, possibly located in the service wing of the Tupkish Palace itself. The tablet contains an excerpt from a well known Sumerian lexical series, the LU E series and what is particularly interesting is that the copies of the same six lines were found, with minor orthographic variations, in tablets from sites as far away as Abu Salabikh in the southernmost part of Syro-Mesopotamia, and Ebla, in its westernmost part. A sort of "world wide web" ante litteram... The reverse shows how the young student, having finished his assignment (which was to copy six lines of the text) started doodling with his stylus, practicing the writing of individual wedges.

But the most important texts are those written entirely in Hurrian, the most famous being of course the two lions of Tish-atal, found before our excavations but coming most likely from the Temple we saw earlier. Less spectacular, but in some ways even more significant is a small clay tablet (Fig. 6c).<sup>11</sup> It shows that Hurrian had penetrated even the administrative and thus the school system, in a way similar to what happened at about the same time in the south, where Akkadian was introduced over a very short period of time in the scribal system of the schools. This tablet from Urkesh is a document that records the taxation of three parcels of land and, as Massimo Maiocchi has shown, it uses Hurrian morphemes, proving that the tablet was written and read by Hurrian speaking scribes.

## 5 Daily life

If we look at the objects used in daily life in Urkesh, the situation is different. The vast majority of our ceramic vessels (and we now have about a million between sherds and whole vessels) does not have any characteristic that associates it specifically with the Hurrians. They are for the most part traditional shapes (jars, bowls, cups etc.) made predominantly in local clay tempered with chaff.<sup>12</sup>

The major exceptions are a few very distinctive vessels linked to the rituals in the *abi* (Fig. 7a), and in this case the difference is primarily based on function rather than on style – such as an anthropomorphic vessel found in the *abi* that would most likely serve to hold perfumes used in the necromantic ceremonies. Only some aspects of choroplastics may show stylistic peculiarities as well, as with some distinct figurines where the bitumen is used to highlight important features.<sup>13</sup> But the most distinctive items are the andirons, portable hearths, in horseshoe form, which are very typical of the north, and have typical patterned decorations on the front. We excavated both large and small examples (Fig. 7B,c).<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to note the difference vis-à-vis the situation at the end of Urkesh' history. At that point in time, material culture becomes a telltale sign for political and, indirectly, for ethnic alterity. This is what happens when the Assyrian empire begins to develop in our area, and there are very distinctive differences in contrast with the situation in the previous Mittani control of the area: material culture becomes then a distinctive marker<sup>15</sup>. In our interpretation, the Hurrian identity of Urkesh was still strong enough to make it difficult for the Assyrians to undertake to absorb it within its cultural universe, and yet the sense of alterity was *not* just as strong in maintaining its own identity. And thus it is that Urkesh faded away and completely disappeared from the scene.

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11 Maiocchi 2011.

12 Kelly-Buccellati 2019.

13 Discussed in a forthcoming publication by Yasmine Mahmoud.

14 Kelly-Buccellati 2018.

15 F Buccellati <https://www.mit-ma.net/>

## 6 Conclusions

Urkesh remains to date the only urban site of the fourth to the second millennium that can be considered Hurrian. But clearly some of the features I have pointed out can be found at other sites where the epigraphic evidence is lacking. Foremost among these is Tell Chuera, and here I show only the comparison of a very significant architectural structure, the Temple Mound (Fig. 8a). In Chuera, too, we have a very asymmetrical organization of space (Fig. 8b), with elements, like the staircase, and the irregular temenos, that are wholly consonant with the Urkesh Temple terrace.

The distinctiveness of Urkesh was its connection with the mountains. There, they were settled, if in smaller settlements, rather than in urban centers. Urkesh is so far the only known third millennium city that is demonstrably Hurrian, most probably going back already to the fourth. So in our case the clash is not between sedentary and non-sedentary populations, but between, we may say, different landscapes, the mountains and the plains. It is a contrast that emerges when we consider the themes that appear in the Sumerian ideological landscape and compare them with those prevalent in the Hurrian ideological landscape, in which Urkesh certainly figured prominently. It is a clash, one can clearly see, that is deeply conditioned by the landscape, and there is a double valence to this.

On the one hand, there is the strong perception of physical boundaries. The mountains bordering the urban plain constitute a constant and firm reminder of a distant yet present hinterland. But the valleys in this hinterland are sharply defined by the mountain ridges that give strong identity within, and an equally strong alterity without. While in the south social cohesion was predicated on the close proximity and physical visibility of the city center (the ziggurat) from all parts of the countryside, in the Urkesh area this cohesion rested on a bond that transcended the mountain ridges – a bond that was only reinforced by the physical separatedness.

On the other hand, we can see how ideology would be deeply influenced by the geographical dimension – how, in fact, it would give a new face to it. The image of Kumarbi walking in the mountains (Fig. 3a...) is emblematic. The identity of the Urkesh social group is rooted in this, and so is the alterity of these highlanders vis-à-vis the southern "plainlanders" from Sumer and Akkad. When excavations resume, as we hope they will, these contours of Hurrian Urkesh will certainly come even more clearly into focus.

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## Captions

Fig 1. The necromantic shaft

- a. Overview
- b. Narrow and steep staircase
- c. Entrance blocked with a stone

Fig. 2. Architectural symmetry and asymmetry

- a. Symmetry of the Ur ziggurat
- b. Landscape of the Ur ziggurat
- c. Asymmetry of the Urkesh temple mound

Fig. 3. Urkesh landscape and its importance for Hurrians

- a. Seal impression from Urkesh showing Kumarbi walking in the mountains (AkC21)
- b. View of Tell Mozan with the Taurus mountains in the background

Fig 4. Realism in Urkesh sculpture:

- a. Dynamic motion in the lion of Tish-atal at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- b. Stone plaque showing dynamic action of a plowman and a herd in movement (B1.19)
- c. Plaque in stone with the encounter of Gilgamesh and Enkidu (A7.36)

Fig. 5. Realism in Urkesh glyptics

- a. Uqnitum and Tupkish with family (AKq2)
- b. Tupkish seal with a lion (AKk2)
- c. Tupkish seal showing gift of a skein of wool (AKk1)
- d. Zamena seal depicting her with Uqnitum and a child (AKh2)
- e. Tuli seal illustrating a butcher with an animal and a servant churning butter (AKh3)
- f. Seal impression showing a potter at work (A1.364)
- g. Ishar-bēlī with a prancing equid ((AFc3)
- h. Urkesh seal portraying a sacrifice (A15.270)
- i. Akkadian iconography in Tar'am-Agade's seal (AFc1)
- j. Akkadian iconography in Unap-[] seal before and after recutting (A1.144 and A13.70)

Fig. 6. Linguistic evidence

- a. Onomastic distribution
- b. Sumerian school tablet (A1j1)
- c. Hurrian administrative tablet (A7.341)

Fig. 7. Ceramic evidence:

- a. Small anthropomorphic vase in the shape of a nude female from the abi (A12.108)
- b. Portion of a small andiron (A18q312.2)
- c. Large andiron (A11.34)

Fig. 8. Architectural asymmetry

- a. Urkesh
- b. Tell Chuera.





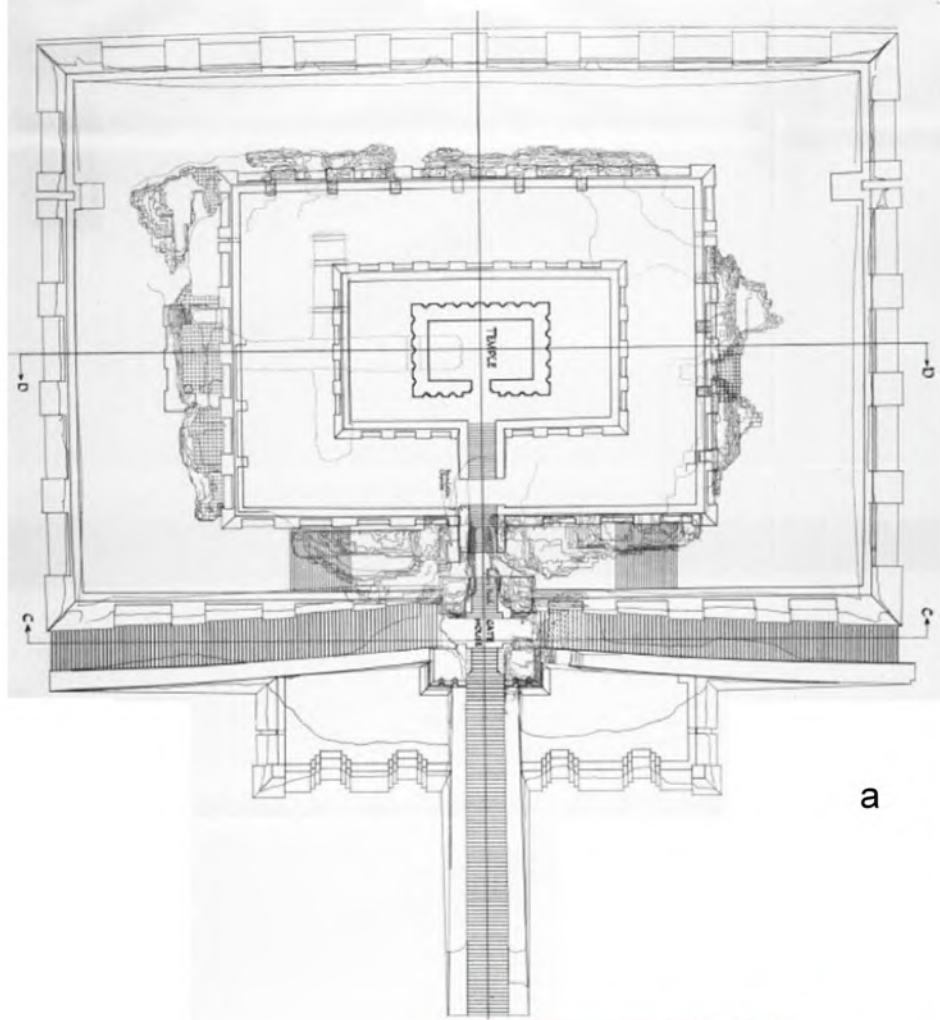
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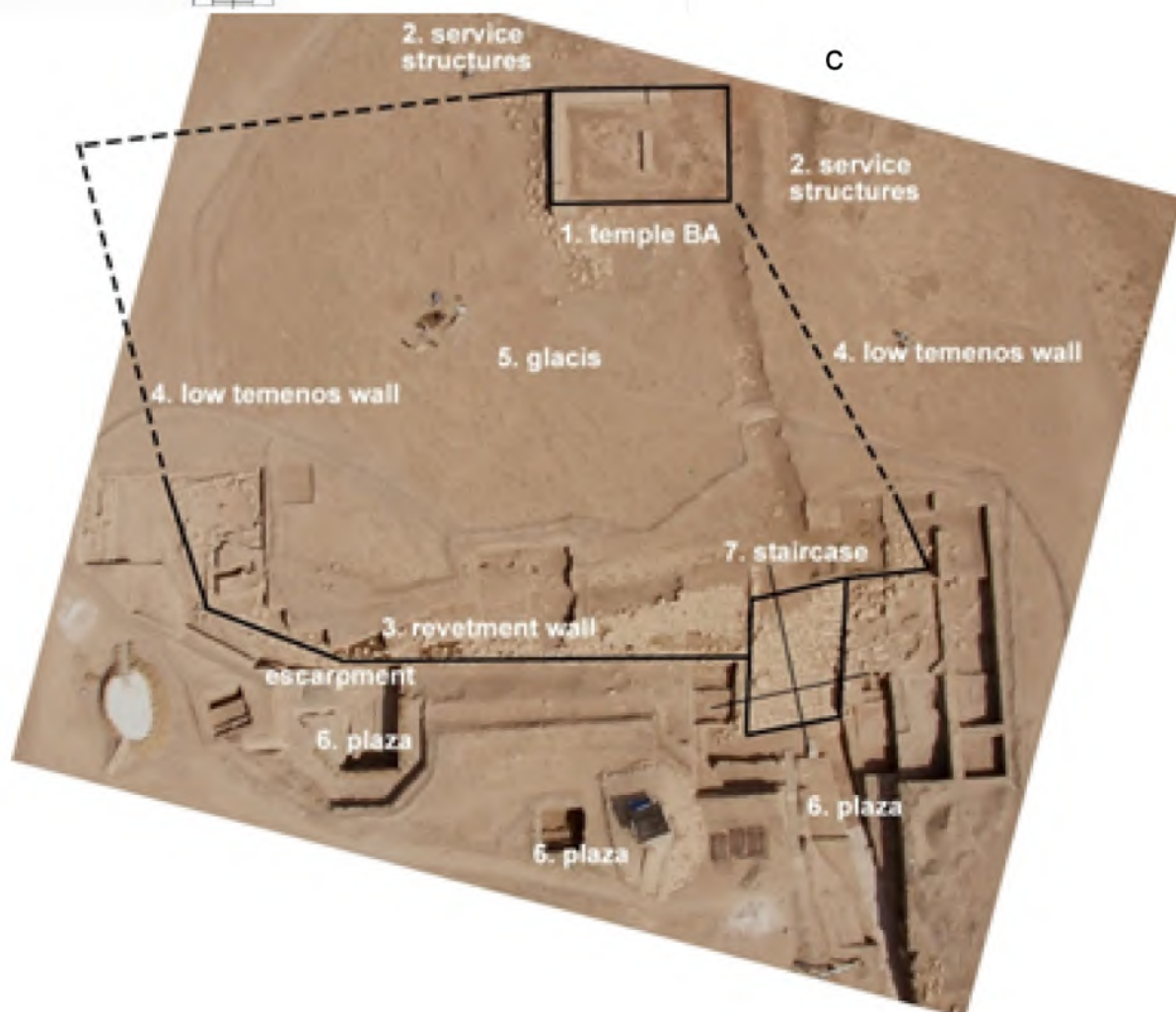




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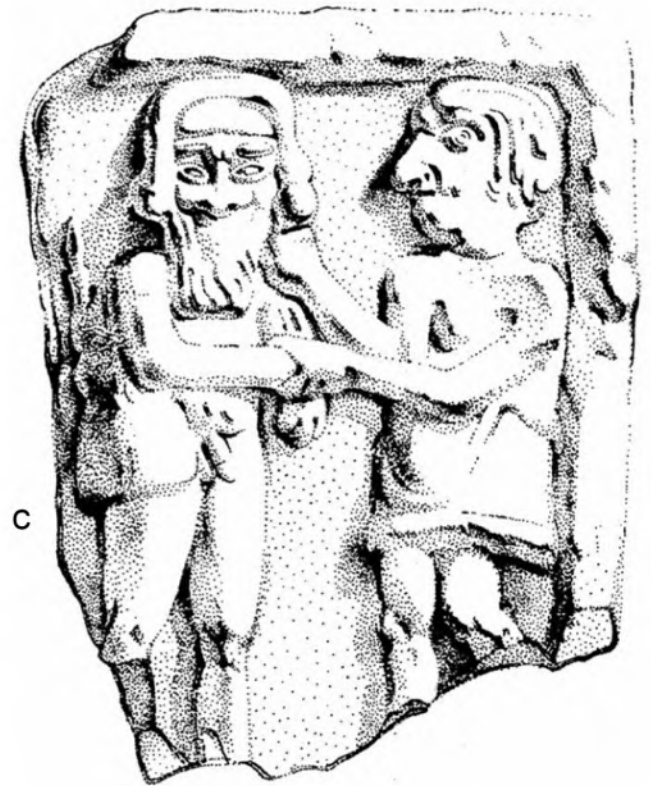




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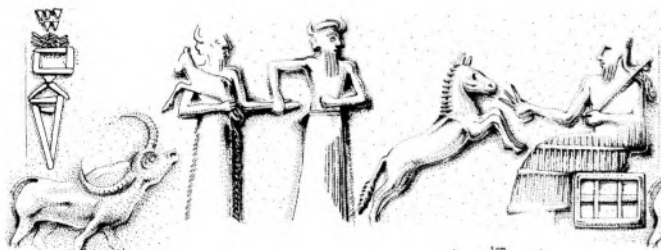
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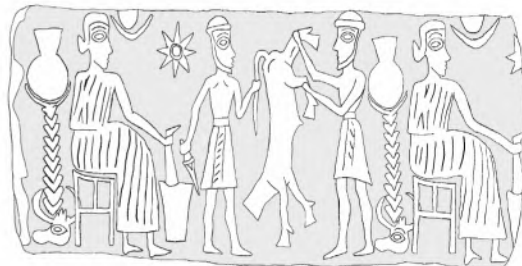
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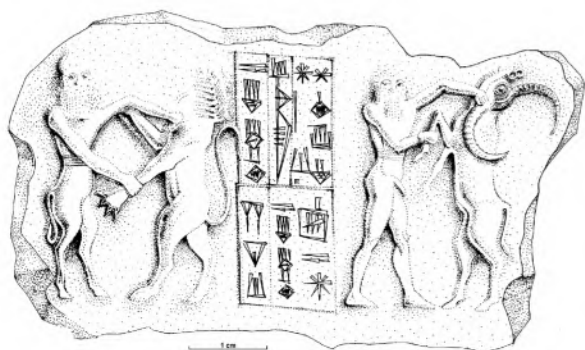
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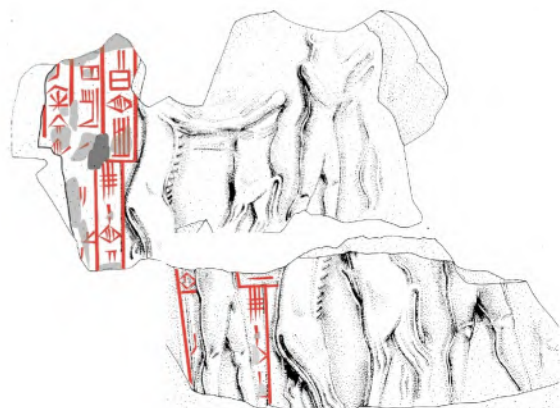
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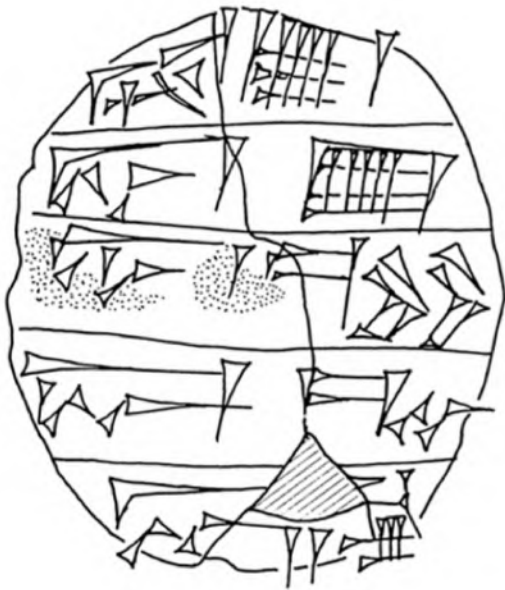


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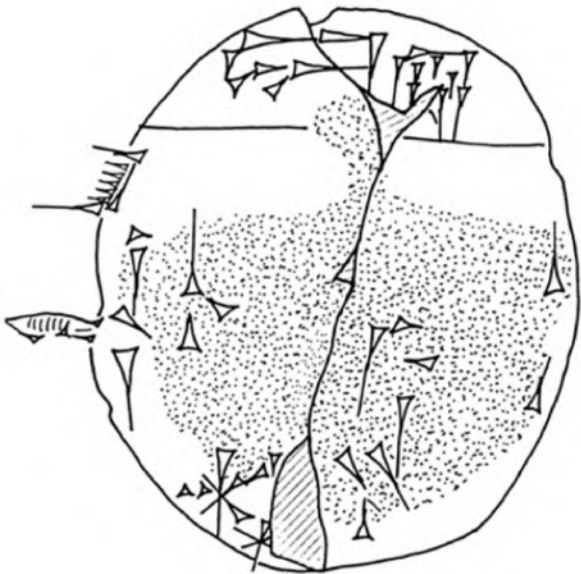
Kings	Officials and attendants		Queens
	of the king	of the queen	
Tiš-atal			
Tupkiš		Zamena	Uqnitum
		Tuli	
	Unap-[]		Tar'am-Agade
	Išar-bēlī		
Išar-kīnum			
Atal-šen			

Hurrian name

Akkadian name



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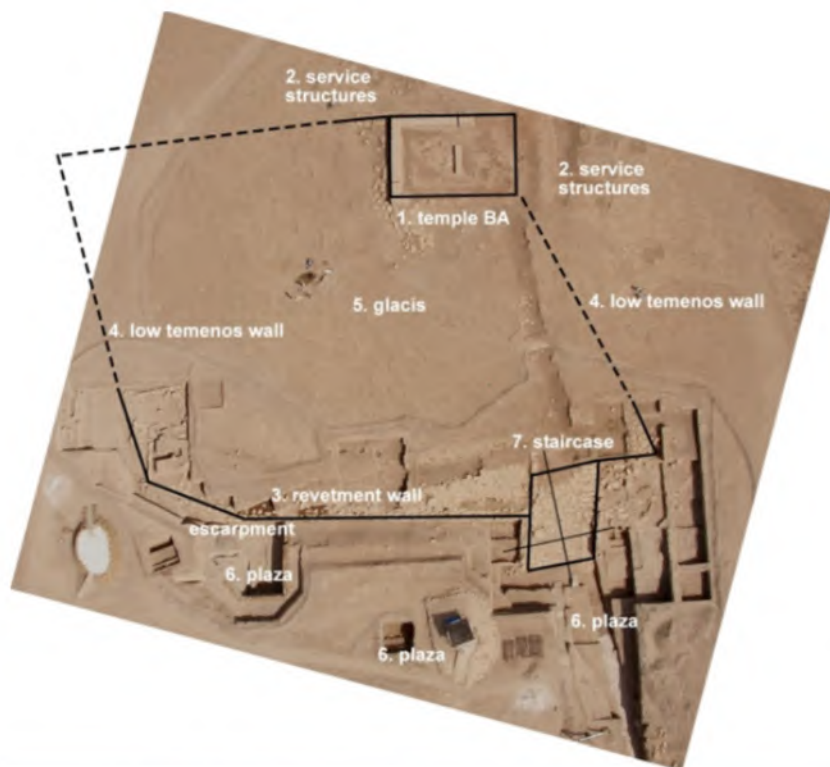


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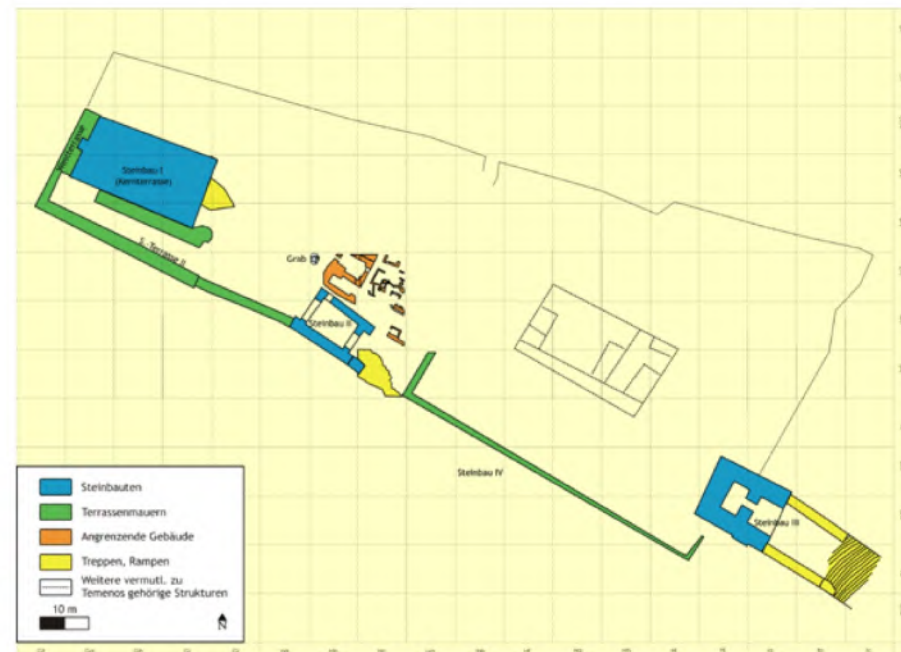
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