

# The First Gilgamesh Conjectures About the Earliest Epic

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Abstract: Out of the elements of the Sumerian cycle about Gilgamesh, a complex new epic was fashioned at the high point of the Akkadian period. The paper argues in favor of such a high date for the first composition of the epic as a literary whole, and situates it in the context of the Akkadian imperial experiment.

Keywords: Gilgamesh, Bilgamesh, epic literature, Old Akkadian, Hurrians, Urkesh, Ebla

## The argument

Gilgamesh is the best known character of Mesopotamian literature, and the eleven tablet composition that narrates its adventures is universally recognized as a masterpiece of world literature. This is the Gilgamesh of the late version, which was most likely redacted at the end of the second millennium BC, and is available primarily through the scribal version of the library of Assurbanipal, several centuries later. An earlier version, in tablets dating to the early second millennium, has been known for a long time: not preserved in a single scribal context, it presents segments of a story that is close enough to the later version to suggest that the segments were already part of a single whole. Because of the date when these early tablets were copied, the text is considered to be an original Old Babylonian composition.

In this paper I suggest that the first redaction of the Gilgamesh story as a single epic<sup>1</sup> composition should in fact be dated much earlier than the Old Babylonian period, in the Old Akkadian period.<sup>2</sup> It is a philological matter. But it is also an important question of literary analysis, for it implies that that was the time when the first proper epic could in effect come into existence, crowning a literary development that had been set in motion with the beginning of urban life.

My argument rests on archaeological and philological evidence, and on a broader analysis of the historical context. It remains admittedly conjectural, but there is enough substance to deserve consideration. And it is a pleasure to submit it, for such consideration, to the attention of the dear friend whom we are celebrating in this volume. Mirjo Salvini has been among the first to recognize the importance of our work at Urkesh, and part of my argument is drawn from an important archaeological find at this site. It thus seems appropriate that he should be the first to critically assess the argument I am advancing, with the profound ἀκριβεία, the 'acribia' for which the English 'scrupulousness' seems like a poor translation, and of which Mirjo has been such a wonderful champion and model throughout his scholarly life.

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'epic' as a noun referring to a larger, multi-episode compositional whole (in our case, the Akkadian Gilgamesh), and the term 'epic song' to refer to self-contained single episode (in our case, the Sumerian texts about Bilgames). See further below, section 5.

<sup>2</sup> For suggestions about an early date see Foster 2016: 208-209 and 224, with reference to earlier literature. See also Ornan 2010: 254-255, for some archaeological evidence.

## The Urkesh plaque: the reconfiguring of Enkidu

The Urkesh plaque A7.36 (Figure 1) has been convincingly interpreted as representing the encounter of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.<sup>3</sup> Two aspects of the analysis offered by Kelly-Buccellati are particularly relevant for our present concern: the date and the iconography.

The date. The fragment was found in a private house from to the end of the third millennium, which offers a significant *terminus ante quem* – significant because it is in any case earlier than Old Babylonian. Broken and of a quality that is not consonant with the appurtenances of a private house, the plaque did not belong originally to the stratum of the houses (Ur III), but must have gotten there, very likely, as a result of the excavations for storage pits that took place from the level of the private houses and reached down to the floor of the palace and even below. Stylistically, the fragment can confidently be dated to the beginning of the Akkadian period.<sup>4</sup>

The iconography<sup>5</sup> of the two figures evinces traits that are emphasized in the text (specifically the Yale tablet<sup>6</sup>): Enkidu's hairy appearance and strength, Gilgamesh's beauty, elegance and youth. These traits can be seen to refer to the events that take place in the early part of the story, the '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.'<sup>7</sup> After their initial fight, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends, which is signaled by the embrace in the plaque (the text says: *ittasqū-ma ipušū ru'ūtam* 'they kissed each other and made friendship' Tablet Y 19). As a result, Gilgamesh proposes the adventure against Huwawa, and to get ready they are given, among other things, 'bow and quiver' (*qaštum u išpatum* Y 238), which are clearly in evidence in the plaque.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2006: 403-414.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2006: 409.

<sup>5</sup> Steymans (2010: 8) makes short shrift of Kelly-Buccellati's analysis, which is particularly surprising as her analysis takes up seriously the question of iconography, that is central to Steymans essay. But clearly Steymans' reading of Kelly-Buccellati's argument remained rather on the surface, as he refers to Urkesh as the Mittani capital... – In the same volume edited by Steymans, Tallay Ornan (2010: 230), equally dismisses Kelly-Buccellati's and other 'efforts to link visual depictions to specific events mentioned in the various versions of the written narrative,' but without any argument, even though the rest of his article proceeds to offer just the same kind of correlation for the figure of Humbaba.

<sup>6</sup> George 2003: 192-216.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2006: 408.

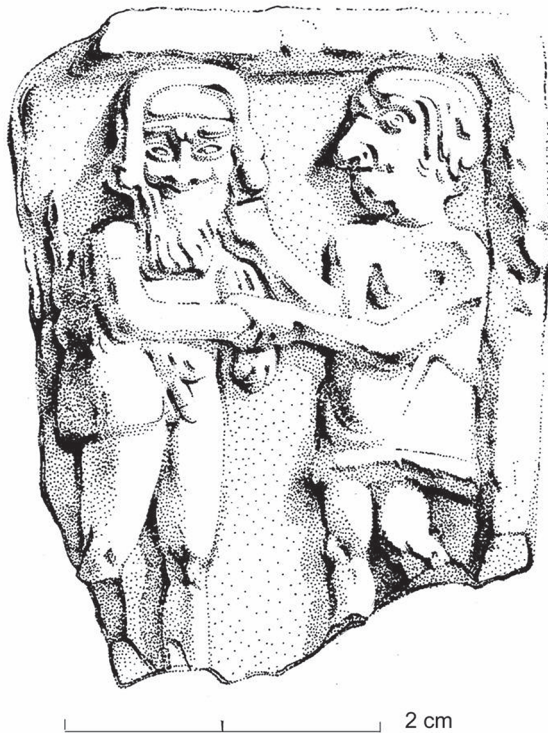


Figure 1. The Urkesh Gilgamesh plaque (A7.36).

The iconography of the Urkesh plaque presupposes the story we know from the version of the epic available to us in the Old Babylonian manuscript tradition, indicating therefore that these later tablets reflect a much older composition, a composition so well known in Old Akkadian times that its themes could be reflected in the iconography of a plaque carved in the Hurrian context of Urkesh. An important consideration is that, since the fragment with its self-contained scene appears in the upper right corner of the plaque, the original version of the plaque must have contained at least three additional scenes, which Kelly-Buccellati reconstructs as follows: 'upper left = struggle, upper right = friendship (our fragment), lower left = fight with Huwawa, lower right = death of Enkidu.'<sup>8</sup> The sequence may be rendered graphically as in Figure 2.

This is significant because, however one may wish to reconstruct the rest of the plaque, it is certain that it consisted of a series of connected episodes – our scene being, in the proposed reconstruction, the second in a four episode sequence represented on the plaque. The fact that other scenes must have accompanied the scene we have on this fragment, suggests therefore that the artist had in mind the larger compositional whole of which the plaque renders only a single specific event. Such a representation fits better with the notion of the epic as a single compositional whole than with the notion of a cycle (see below, section 4).

The tone of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as described in the text and shown in the plaque, is very different from the tone we see in the Sumerian episodes.

<sup>8</sup>Kelly-Buccellati 2006: 406.

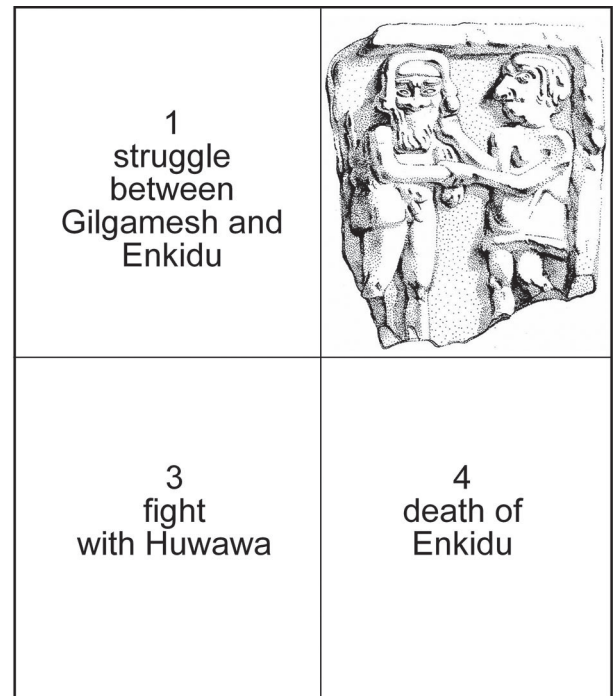


Figure 2. Reconstruction of Gilgamesh plaque.

Here Enkidu is the servant of Bilgames,<sup>9</sup> a trusted and friendly servant, to be sure, but still a servant. The Old Akkadian plaque, and the text it presupposes, reconfigure Enkidu into a very different person: he is different in origin and by his very nature, because he does not come from the known entourage of the royal household as other servants do, but from a totally different background. And he becomes a close friend through a sequence of actions that test his nature as well as that of Gilgamesh and that offer a psychological setting for what amounts to a wholly extraordinary type of friendship.

#### **Šunū ithū ana māṭ Ebla: the western horizon**

A text known from another Old Babylonian tablet, published recently, tells us that Gilgamesh and Enkidu, 'together,<sup>10</sup> drew near to the land of Ebla' (*Šunū ithū ana māṭ Ebla*, written with crasis *ma-ti-ib-la*).<sup>11</sup> It is the adventure against Huwawa: Gilgamesh has had a dream which Enkidu interprets as describing the god Shamash who intervenes to help him. Strengthened by this good omen, Gilgamesh happily resumes his journey in the direction of the western mountains, where Huwawa lives. It is the direction of the 'land of Ebla.'

<sup>9</sup>See George 2003: 71–90 for the arguments in favor of this spelling for the Sumerian version of the name.

<sup>10</sup>This is an example of what I call a semio-syntactic translation. Syntactically, the pronoun *šunū* is not needed. It refers back to the two subjects, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who are mentioned in the previous narrative, but one after the other, not side by side. Thus the pronoun signals, semiotically, that it is the same two, 'together,' who undertake the action of going further in the trip. A simple translation of *šunū* as 'they' does not render the full force of the independent pronoun, since in English the pronoun is syntactically required. It is of course true that there is in Akkadian the adverb *ahāmeš* that properly means 'together'; one could render the independent pronoun as 'the two of them,' or in some other way, but the point is that the simple 'they' is insufficient.

<sup>11</sup>OB Schøyen, 26, in George 2003: 234–235.

The mention of Ebla would be anachronistic in Old Babylonian times, but would of course be expected in the beginning of the Old Akkadian period. It was at that time the major city in the west, and one that was the major aim of the kings of Akkad in their military campaigns. Sargon and Naram-Sin, in fact, refer to it prominently in their inscriptions.<sup>12</sup>

The term used by Sargon and Naram-Sin in their inscriptions is *Eb-la*<sup>KI</sup> that refers to the city, not the land or country (which would be *KUR Eb-la*<sup>KI</sup>, the equivalent of *māt Ebla* in the Old Babylonian text). But this stands to reason, because Gilgamesh and Enkidu are in fact not going to the city itself, but to the mountains in the region under the control of Ebla (the 'land' of Ebla).

Thus the text extant in the Old Babylonian tablet points in direction of an Old Akkadian date for its first composition. And we know of course that Old Babylonian scribes copied extensively from Old Akkadian texts.<sup>13</sup>

### *Šūtur elī šarrī*: an epic beyond a cycle

There is an important consideration that concerns the literary dimension of the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic: it goes beyond the format of a cycle<sup>14</sup> as is found with the Sumerian Bilgames compositions. We may point to three aspects that distinguish the literary construct of a cycle from that of the epic as a unitary composition. In the Sumerian cycle: (1) the unfolding of the narrative as found in one composition does not condition that of another; (2) there is no character development that carries over from one composition to another; (3) there is no anticipation of events that would happen beyond the limits of a given composition. The reverse happens in the epic. This is a major innovation: the breadth of the composition introduces a tensional factor that encompasses much wider horizons, maintaining a firm coherence of the whole while developing, at the same time, the finer details of the single episodes. It is, in fact, the notion of the 'episode' as the part of a larger integrated whole that now emerges. While in a cycle the episodes are self-contained, in the epic they explicitly point to each other, both forwards and backwards.

It is true that, other than for the first two tablets, we do not have philological evidence in support of a multi-tablet unitary composition as is the case for the later eleven tablet version. But the coherence of the fragments as we have them speaks in favor of such an integrated whole. In addition to the clues we have already seen, this, too, speaks in favor of a date in the time of the dynasty of Akkad for the unified single epic. The creativity we see in the representational art of the dynasty of Akkad reflects a cultural milieu that is perfectly suited for the innovation that the epic brings to literary development. The wider framework of the narrative as a whole recalls the complexity of the statuary and the reliefs.<sup>15</sup> The care with which the characters are defined, and contrasted with each

other, recalls the realism not only of sculpture but also of glyptics.<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand there is the heroic ideal of the kings of Akkad that the epic wants to portray.<sup>17</sup> The figure of Gilgamesh, set in bold relief, projects the sense of adventure and of invincible prowess that the exploits of a Sargon or a Naram-Sin would have generated. The *incipit* of the work, which gave it its ancient title, is paradigmatic: *šūtur elī šarrī* 'he is the one who excels above kings.' It reflects the imperial claim in all its nuances, and seems to be echoed in the name of the last major king of Akkad, *šar-kalī-šarrī* 'the king of all kings.' Both the epithet of the *incipit* and the name of the king reflect an explicit imperial ideology, which the epic develops fully.

On the other hand, the epic projects not only the ideology of empire, but also its substantive achievements. The central theme of the Sumerian epic cycle was the nature of civilization: as such it resonates with the sense of awe and wonder at the establishment of the city and all that that meant in its profound impact on the human psyche.<sup>18</sup> The widening of the narrative in the epic goes well beyond. There are two major themes in this regard.

The first is that the Akkadian Gilgamesh transforms the opposition between the *pre*-urban and the urban dimension in one between *non*-urban and urban, where the former is assimilated into the latter. It is in this sense that the theme is imperial. Enkidu becomes civilized because he loses his identity and becomes assimilated into the one and only possible political reality. The central figure that makes this possible is that of the glorious king who acts in his full role as the leader who personally submits the forces potentially antagonistic to his rule.

The second is the inclusion of the far horizons of conquest. Journeying to the west in the initial portion of the epic and to the south in the last, reflects the effective range of conquest of the kings of Akkad. Somewhat like the Iliad and the Odyssey, which can be seen as the ideological projection of the Greek expansion to the east and the west respectively, so the Gilgamesh 'epic' idealizes the landscape and protagonists of the mountains to the west and of the sea to the south. That is where the kings of Akkad went following the *urhum reqētum* (Meissner Tablet IV 16), the 'distant road' that brought them to the limit of where their imperial claim could reach.

This is rendered graphically in Figure 3. In the early (Sumerian) periods, the epic compositions are mono-thematic songs, which are at best linked in pairs of two, but without a structural integration. The full epic version, which I place in the Akkadian period, develops instead the full narrative of the type I have briefly described here.

### The first epic

The 'first Gilgamesh' is thus substantially different both from the Sumerian 'songs' about Bilgames and from the 'second Gilgamesh', which becomes a channel for the expression of themes dear to the wisdom tradition.<sup>19</sup> I have suggested that the court of the kings of Akkad is the ideal setting for its first conception and initial consignment to a written form – of

<sup>12</sup> Frayne 1993: 28-30, 132-134, 136, 167.

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of the copies from texts on statues see Buccellati 1993: 58-71. The Old Babylonian copies of royal inscriptions are close, if not identical, to the original Old Akkadian (but see Hasselbach 2005: especially p. 11), whereas the Old Babylonian texts of Gilgamesh render in an Old Babylonian linguistic form what I presume to be the original Old Akkadian version.

<sup>14</sup> On the notion of cycle see Gadotti 2014: 51-53, 80-82.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent overview of Akkadian art see Foster 2016: 188-215. For the complex narrative in Akkadian statuary see Buccellati 1993.

<sup>16</sup> For some considerations about realism in glyptics see Buccellati 2015: 289-298.

<sup>17</sup> See the remarks by Foster 2016: 209.

<sup>18</sup> I develop this more fully in Buccellati, forthcoming, Part Two.

<sup>19</sup> See Buccellati 1972: 1-36, and Buccellati, forthcoming, Part Four.

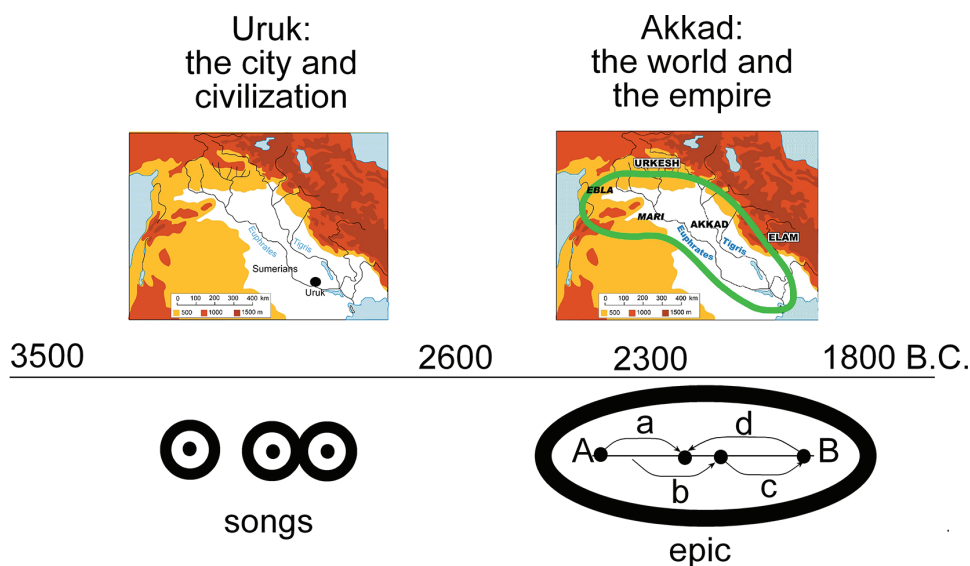


Figure 3. Correlation between socio-political events and the development of Mesopotamian epic.

which we have only the later version in as extant in the Old Babylonian tablets. This scenario underscores all the better the very unique literary dimension of the work: it is truly an epic, in a twofold sense.

Formally, it suggests that there was, already at that time, a large coherent whole, with a complex formal structure: the episodes are not juxtaposed, but linked within an overarching compositional scheme. In terms of the content, the epic presents the idealization of a recent past, that of the imperial program: the policy that guided the political, military and administrative expansion found its literary underpinnings in this ambitious text that embodied the spirit of the bold new course. I am the first to underscore the conjectural nature of this proposal, in terms of both its formal and its substantive aspects. But the clues are substantial, and the whole text makes better sense within the larger context of the period.<sup>20</sup>

What we know about the court of Urkesh may help us to better understand this setting. The impression of a seal of queen Uqnitum<sup>21</sup> (Figure 4) shows a court scene in which the queen receives the greeting of another woman, while her daughter is touching her lap and attendant stands by her at the back. The table with bird legs is typical of the palace furniture (there is a second seal with the same scene except for the table). The filler motif under the cuneiform legend (that gives the name of the queen, identified only as DAM 'wife', i.e., the primary wife of the king), shows a parallel scene with a woman playing a lyre and another woman singing with her hands capped by her ears. The filler motif illustrates well the situation to which the texts refer when they speak of a singer accompanied by a lyre player.<sup>22</sup>

The queen has an Akkadian name, and most likely came to Urkesh through a dynastic marriage linking the royal families of Akkad and of Urkesh, much as Tar'am-Agade a generation later.<sup>23</sup> Chronologically, Uqnitum belongs to the generation of Manishtushu or Naram-Sin, and Tar'am-Agade to that of Šar-kali-šarri.

The interpretation of the name of Tar'am-Agade ('she loves Agade') is relevant for our argument. I do not believe that the subject of the verb in the name is the name bearer, but an unnamed deity. In other words, it is not of Tar'am-Agade that one proclaims the love for Agade, but, very possibly, of Ishtar, the patron deity of the dynasty: her full name would have been Ištar-tar'am-Agade, or the like.<sup>24</sup> For the importance of Ishtar, one may think of the *Exaltation of Inanna* by Enheduanna, who would have been a great-aunt of Tar'am-Agade.<sup>25</sup> As mentioned, Tar'am-Agade was of the generation of Šar-kali-šarri, and both names project an idealized ('epical') view of the political situation – whichever may have been the deity whose love for Agade is proclaimed in the name.

The seal of Uqnitum shown here can then be seen as representing a court scene of the type that would have provided a setting for the transmission of a text like the first Gilgamesh, by queens coming from the court of Akkad to the Hurrian court of Urkesh.<sup>26</sup> All the figures in the scene are women, and the mention of Enheduanna is significant in this regard as well: we may safely presume literary creativity and awareness in the world of Mesopotamian women. Thus the singer in our seal impression scene may be not only singing for the sake of light entertainment, but also be involved in a more wide-ranging set of performances.

<sup>20</sup> These considerations are developed at length in the book cited in note 18, Part Two.

<sup>21</sup> Published in Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996: 65-100, Plates I-VII. See also Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 186-187, 197; 2015: 120; 2016.

<sup>22</sup> 'Myths and epics were probably recited by rhapsodes (*nar*) to the accompaniment of a lyre, *zag-mi*, the name of which became a term for 'praise', Jacobsen 1987: xiii.

<sup>23</sup> See Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002: 11-31; Kelly-Buccellati 2010.

<sup>24</sup> I have suggested this in my review of Markus Hilgert (Buccellati 2004: 107), with reference to the alternation between the two names *Iḫib-sināt* and *Šū-Suen-iḫib-sināti* 'He/Su-Suen became well disposed towards them,' in Hilgert 2002: 375-376.

<sup>25</sup> See also Hansen 2002.

<sup>26</sup> On bilingualism at the court of Akkad see Foster 2016: 213-214.

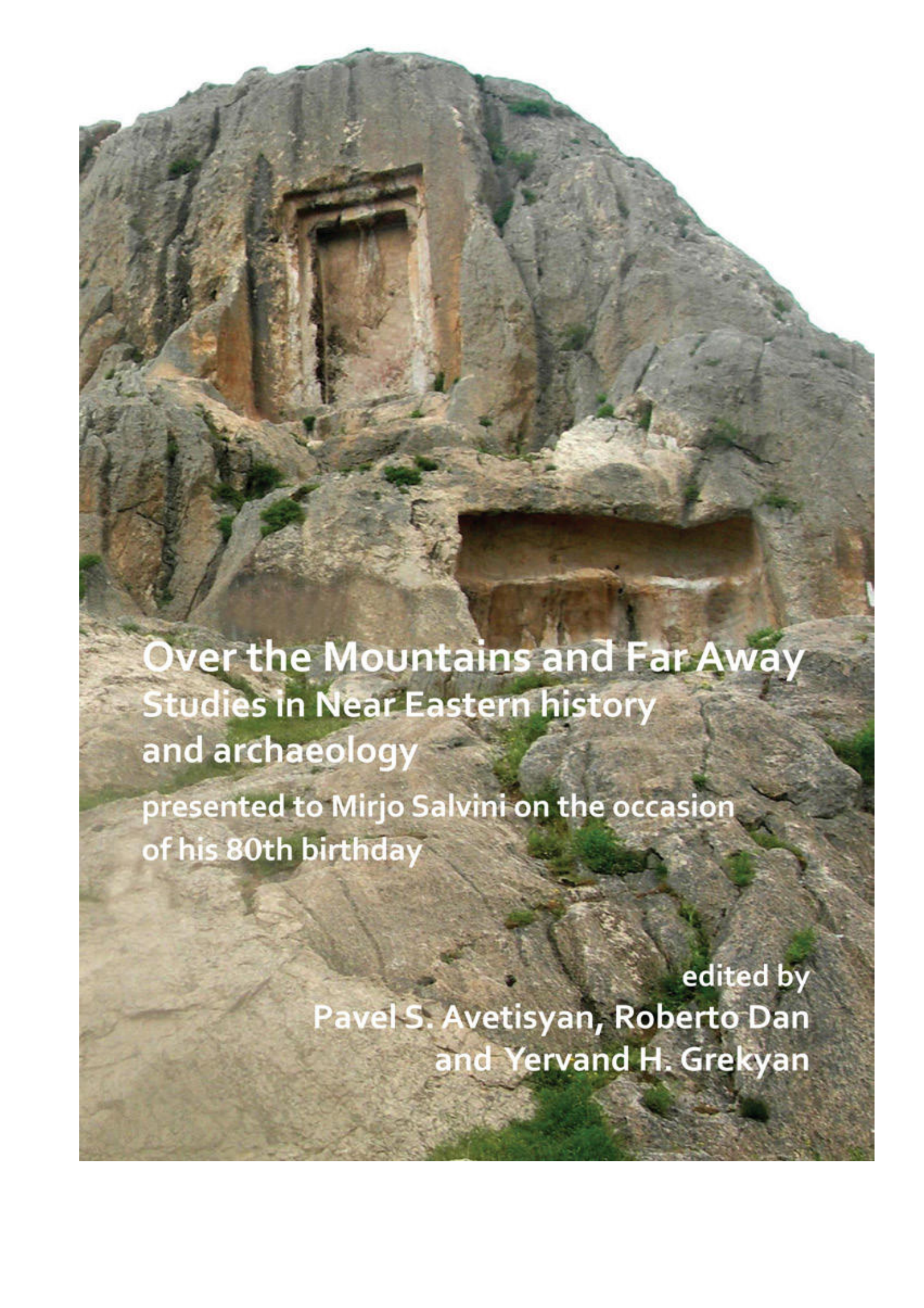


Figure 4. Two seal impressions of queen Uqnitum of Urkesh, with detail of a filler motif (AKq6-7).

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ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD  
Summertown Pavilion  
18-24 Middle Way  
Summertown  
Oxford OX2 7LG  
[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-78491-943-6  
ISBN 978-1-78491-944-3 (e-Pdf)

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