

Naming Names: the 2004 Season of Excavations at Ancient Urkesh

By **GIORGIO BUCCELLATI AND MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI**

It is a privilege of Syro-Mesopotamian archaeology that our sites should speak infinitely more directly than in the metaphorical sense in which we say that monuments and objects “speak.” Last summer, the voice came across with almost shocking clarity.

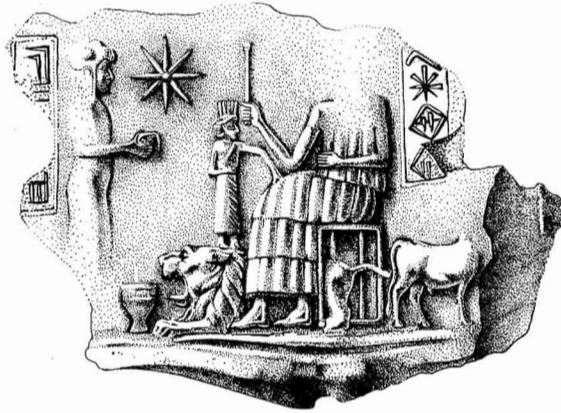
The last hour of the last day of excavations we are removing the last little bit of a baulk. One of our best workmen is wielding the pick. Thank goodness he is one of our best workmen. One trained to sense what may be hiding in the dirt, like a fisherman who intuitively would sense a catch. In spite of the fatigue of the day – in fact, the fatigue of the whole long season – he does not let the pick intrude more than it should in the dirt as it crumbles away. And so he can reach for an intact clay sealing, impressed, clearly, not only with a scene but – with writing.

Unlike most other seal impressions, this was well preserved, the scene and the writing standing out with a sharp outline. And – it was complete! In fact, there were three complete impressions rolled on the one sealing. It was a rare moment when both the iconography and the text could be read right there, hot from the ground.

It was the name of a new king of Urkesh, and it was immediately clear that the figure standing on the two lions was that of the king himself. Here we were, just outside the walls, in a sacral area and a period that we knew matched one of the known phases of the Palace. So we knew the date – about 2200 BC, almost four and a quarter millennia ago.

There is emotion

even for a jaded archaeologist when you feel drawn into a presence. Here, we could



FOUND IN EARLIER SEASONS, THIS SEAL BELONGED TO THE KING WHO BUILT THE ROYAL PALACE OF URKESH.

call out by name one of the protagonists of the story we were trying to piece together: *I-shar-kinum en-da-an Ur-kesb!* We felt almost hesitant in calling out his name as if *he* were still around, *his* city were still standing, *his* people still alive, *his* ears still open to hear the sound of his name and his title called out aloud. (If truth be told, the second half of his name was not quite as clear at first, and we misread it. But if he heard us, he knew whom we meant...)

It was also the first time that we could see the full name of Urkesh written out

completely – all the other instances we had so far from the excavations were broken lines on fragmentary seal impressions. Though there was never a doubt about the reading of the ancient name of our site, there was a certain thrill in seeing it spelled out all at once, in clear cuneiform characters, in front of you.

The scene was just as startling. It echoes one we had found in earlier years from another room of the Palace (we reproduce it here as a small inset). It belonged to another king of Urkesh (you may recognize the name of the city in the cuneiform legend, and notice that the first sign is missing). His name was Tupkish. He was the builder of the

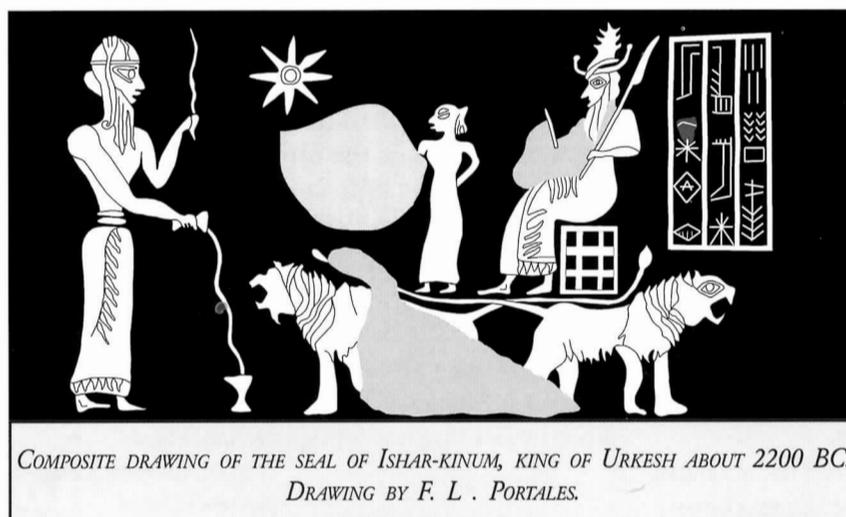
Palace, and he is shown here sitting on the throne, in the position that a god occupies in the seal of I-shar-kinum. The lion of Tupkish seems to be a live animal, whereas the two of I-shar-kinum are clearly statues. And in both, an attendant pours a liquid in a trough place before the lions.

From the stratigraphy, we know that I-shar-kinum comes after the successor of Tupkish, whose wife was Tar'am-Agade, a very important person we had met in earlier excavations. She was the daughter

of Naram-Sin, one of the greatest Mesopotamian kings, whose name would have the resonance that “Napoleon” has in Western history. And it is not unlikely that our newly found member of the royal house of Urkesh, I-shar-kinum, may have been the grandson of both Tupkish on

Urkesh

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COMPOSITE DRAWING OF THE SEAL OF ISHAR-KINUM, KING OF URKESH ABOUT 2200 BC.
DRAWING BY F. L. PORTALES.

Hall

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these images are diverse.

"We don't just scan professional work," said Gordon, noting that many photos they have are from people's vacation shots. The team is also working on recording unpublished rock art articles, and the life collections they own, which includes the work of Robert F. Heizer, C.L. Gebhardt, and others.

While they work to complete their project, Gordon and other Archive affiliates have taken steps to help others set up similar labs around the world.

In Winter 2003, Gordon went to Nairobi, Kenya, with equipment he bought through a grant that was awarded to him, and was reunited with his first work-study student in order to set up a similar database and train them in the new technology.

"I had travel opportunities that I never would have dreamed of," said Gordon, noting that travel is just one of the benefits of working in the Archive—the other being his interaction with the students.

Gordon dedicates himself to his employees, mentoring them as much as possible and giving them access to world travel through his global contacts. His great rapport is evidenced by the amount of former students that he keeps in contact with. In fact, Gordon keeps in touch with every one of his former workers.

"It's kept me young working with the students," said Gordon. "I enjoy mentoring them and giving them new experiences."

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where she hopes to work with Los Angeles' diverse community museums, introducing students to the practice of conservation and opportunities in the field. "I think the West Coast gives (conservators) enormous opportunities ... because it's so culturally diverse," she said.

Urkesh

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his father's side and of Naram-Sin on his mother's. Talk about naming names...

The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology was well represented in our 2004 season. Besides the present writers, we had three special participants – Minna Haapanen, a graduate student in Chinese archaeology who benefited for the second year from a special Director's grant for students to work in areas outside their area of expertise; Gregory Areshian, a Cotsen Institute Research Associate who came to draft a major NSF proposal concerning our paleoenvironment; and William Orrange, a member of the Director's Council who joined us as a veteran of several other expeditions to work on the treatment of our objects. We are looking forward to an ever increasing presence of the Cotsen at Urkesh, in the wake of our eponym himself, who had come for a quick visit exactly 10 years ago, in Winter 1995.

Olmec, Maya, Aztec: Papers in honor of Dr. H.B. "Nick" Nicholson

On November 13, Department of Anthropology Professor Emeritus, Dr. H. B. Nicholson, was honored at a daylong symposium at UCLA.

Nine former students of Nicholson attested briefly to his impact on the profession and then discussed their own research in a variety of related fields for the 200 people attending.

Nicholson was joined by his wife and family for a formal dinner and friendly "roast".

Jill Sifton, Symposium Chair
Event arranged by the FoA, and supported by the Cotsen Institute, the Anthropology and Art History Departments, the Latin American Center, and the Fowler Museum.



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