

The Equids of Urkesh: What the Figurines Say

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*To the Memory
of Sándor Bökönyi*

In the royal “storeroom” and contiguous rooms belonging to the same stratum in Building AK at Tell Mozan/Urkesh, several hundred figurines and figurine fragments have been found within the earliest floor accumulations, dated to about 2200 B.C.¹ A preliminary typology has been established for animal and for humanoid clay figurines found in this Early Bronze deposition at Urkesh. Body shape and manufacture of the artifacts are diagnostic. Six body types have been established for animal figurines, according to genus: *Bos*, *Ovis*, *Canis*, *Felis* and other carnivores, *Capra* and *Equus*. As might be expected, signs of domestication are readily apparent for dogs and sheep. There are clear signs of domestication among the equids, as well.

¹ For a description of the stratigraphic setting, see Buccellati, 1997, pp. 77-96. For preliminary references to the corpus of Urkesh figurines, see my own contribution in the same article, Hauser 1997, p. 87 and Buccellati et al 1997. I have in preparation a comprehensive volume on all the figurines from the AK building, which will appear within the official reports of the Mozan/Urkesh Archæological Project. In this volume, I also discuss in detail the criteria for the attribution of zoomorphic specificity to the formal categories of the figurine corpus.

Background

There are more equids represented amongst the Urkesh figurines than any other *genus*.² The figurines are at once realistic and abstract; they may be anatomically accurate in detail and bear complex surface decoration or be summary (not at all to say “careless”) in execution. A good number of the figurines must have been made with a living equid model in mind and all of them exhibit shared characteristics of an idealized typological model. The artisans who crafted these figurines “knew their animal” and took care to differentiate equids from other animals represented in the corpus.

Some exemplary material had already been recorded in the very first excavation season at Tell Mozan. M1.209 is a notable example.³ The figurine is of burnt clay and it was found in the destruction layer in K1, feature 16, dating to the mid-third millennium, about two centuries before the assemblage from the Royal Building AK.

That there might be a physical and a gestural reality linked to the form of the figurines from the storeroom and throughout Urkesh became clearer in talks with Sándor Bökönyi during the 1993 excavation season (MZ8). This season would prove to be extraordinary with respect to the number of seal impressions that were found in the floor accumulation (labeled A1f113) in Sector B. As we were working exclusively in third millennium strata, the figurines that were excavated were of special significance for questions of domestication and specifically the taming of equids.

Bökönyi had written a classic reference work on domestication and how animals change when they are taken from the wild to live with man. He later observed that in the absence of a full skeletal record or written texts, “artistic representations” could help complete the archæological record. Together, Bökönyi and I reviewed a

² As of the end of the ninth season of excavation (1996), 73 “equids” had been entered in the catalog, including 10 figurines tentatively identified as equids and 1 example from Khabur levels (from unit A8). Some 270 figurines and figurine fragments had been entered in the typology, including humanoid figures. Finds not entered include miscellaneous objects (such as miniature domestic items), wheeled vehicles and wheels/geometric objects and those not identified. MZ10 increased the corpus by half again as many artifacts; these new finds will be entered in the catalog in study season MZ10A.

³ Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati, 1988, p. 81 and Ill. 1; see also Kelly-Buccellati, 1990, p. 124 and Plate 73. Another fifteen fragments of animal figurines, collected on the surface of the Outer City, are referenced on page 54, including M1.207, “a small horse with male genitals and faint incised lines on its mane.” These figurines are not represented in the present typology; but will be studied in future seasons.

number of figurines recovered at Mozan, testing preliminary classification against our own observation. Clearly, there were differences in body shape that might represent different animals. In some cases, there were signs of domestication such as halters and tether-rings.

Although “not everyone was a great artist,” as Bökönyi remarked lightly, there were similarities amongst the little figures that were found repeatedly. He never assumed that body-shape was accidental nor questioned that the artisans who made the figurines did not mean to model a given animal type. It was a fortunate circumstance that I was able to develop my overall animal typology with the benefit of a close daily contact with Bökönyi. He was particularly interested in the category of equids discussed in the present article. He looked forward to “some new kind of evaluation of the figurines because they are undoubtedly of key importance in early horse history in Southwest Asia.” In the report of his season’s work he wrote:

In Tell Mozan,...horse bones...were found....(Only) a small number could be measured, nevertheless even the dimensions of the unmeasurable ones reveal the species identification in most cases (Bökönyi 1994b);

Whereas the figurines are stratified and firmly dated, horse bones taken by Bökönyi from among the faunal remains are few (0.26%) and up until the eighth season of excavation (1992), neither “found in a precisely datable layer (n) or in a closed-find assemblage.” One also could not speculate as to whether or not these faunal remains were of domesticated horses.

Equus in the Figurine Typology

Three body types belonging to *equus* in the figurine corpus at Tell Mozan/Urkesh may be distinguished. In Fig. 1, the heavy outline corresponds to an idealized form which we⁴ use to make a provisional identification of the figurine upon excavation. This outline is superposed on the sketch of an actual, representative figurine from the corpus (in this case, TYPE I, Z1.279 and TYPE II, A5.30.).

Measurements of body parts (labeled as w1/w2/w3 for forequarters/torso/hindquarters and lg for length) bear an internal consistency, each to the others; and

⁴ The line drawings accompanying this article are the work of my collaborator, graphic artist Claudia Wettstein, who also inked BH.383-2. A1q836-f and A5q815-f were drawn by Emmanuelle Besson, A1q960.8, A5q63-f and K3.16 were drawn and inked by Pietro Pozzi.

while not every ratio has been explored, a number of relationships have been observed to be constant.

Equus (genus)

$w1 < w3$	The forequarters are less wide than the hind-quarters.
$w2 < w1 < w3$	The torso is less wide than either the forequarters or the hindquarters.
$w1/w2/w3 \sim / = 5:4:6$	If the hindquarters are taken to be 6, then the forequarters will be about 5, the torso 4.
$lg \geq 2w3$	Body-length is greater than or equal to twice the width of the hindquarters.
$neck \geq lg/2$	The length of the body is a little less than twice as long as the neck. ⁵

These ratios and proportions, somewhat idealized, serve to distinguish the equid body-type from other animal representations in the figurine corpus at Mozan. Some carnivores have a very similar body-type, but forequarters and hindquarters approach or can be equal to each other in width, and the torso is scarcely less wide than the forequarters (the constant is $w2 \leq 4/5w1$).

It is important, too, to recognize that these ratios may or may not reflect observable relationships within the body structure of the actual animal (modern domesticated horses, for example, exhibit a range of body-types and characteristics⁶

⁵ The length of the neck does not prove to be a differentiating factor in other animals in the figurine corpus (but see, in the limestone seal, A9.24, two horned animals with long necks and lean bodies). It is so, however, in the case of the equids, as the head and neck are usually long and thrust forward, out from the body. Obviously neck-length and appropriate ratios can only be determined if forequarters, neck and head of the equid are intact. The width of the equid neck is a little wider than half the width of the forequarters and somewhat smaller than the torso.

⁶ Piggott is particularly amusing on the subject of horse-fanciers, who, he avers, create new horse families almost at the drop of a riding-crop.

and draft animals in particular may exhibit heavier hindquarters.⁷ In this place and time, however, and in this corpus, we have chosen to identify animals with these characteristics as “equids.”

In addition to the body ratios noted above, equids in the figurine corpus at Mozan may exhibit some and not infrequently all of the following characteristics:

1. Forequarters are solidly founded
2. Muzzle is rectangular in section, snout is frequently pinched and triangular in section
3. Angle of foreleg/body join is 120°
4. Neck is long and forward from body
5. Torso is lean
6. Buttocks are fused and sometimes recessed
7. Sexual parts are expressed

Other animals in the corpus may exhibit some of these characteristics, but not all and not all taken together.

In addition to *genus*, we are able to observe certain characteristics of domestication, changes in bodily structure resulting from morphological change brought about by isolation from the animal stock in the wild and selective breeding. We do not mean to say that such a change occurs over the short term of decades; rather, domesticated and non-domesticated species lived side-by-side and did exhibit different body-types. Following are signs of domestication in equid TYPES II and III:

1. Breast ridge is pronounced and does not continue into belly

The domesticated horse (equid TYPE III) also exhibits the following characteristics, observable as a third equid body-type in the figurine corpus:

2. Muzzle is narrow, eyes are widely-spaced and deeply recessed, ears are short
3. Mane is long

⁷ That equids in the Urkesh figurine corpus have, as a general rule, heavier hindquarters may indicate the usage to which the domesticated animal was put. This remains to be investigated.

4. Mane rises onto head between ears
5. Tail is wide at the base

With non-domesticated equids (equid TYPE I), by contrast, we note that:

1. Forequarters are narrow
2. Muzzle is blunt or short
3. Mane is erect
4. Tail is tufted

This list of details has been assembled from two sources: 1) signs of animal domestication as documented in paleozoology and 2) the way Third Millennium observers represented the animal in clay at Tell Mozan/Urkes. No one detail taken in isolation is diagnostic; and final identification is open to interpretation. In the main, however, these details are *indicators* that provide a basis for approaching the figurines and for seeing in them a key to one aspect of third millennium life.

This typology will be refined as more examples are excavated and as archæozoologists test the parameters given above as accurate indicators of four of the five species of the genus *equus*⁸ and as archæologists relate the form of the small figures to life-ways of the past.

The Figurines

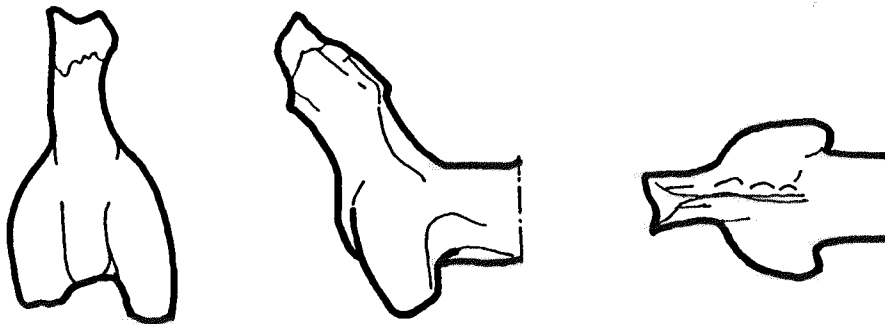
Some representative examples of the corpus have been assembled here to indicate both the range of material and some of the issues we have considered in cataloguing the equids. The complete catalog is under revision and will be published soon. Most of these examples are from the Royal Building AK.

A1q836-f, equid, fragment: head (see Ill. 8)

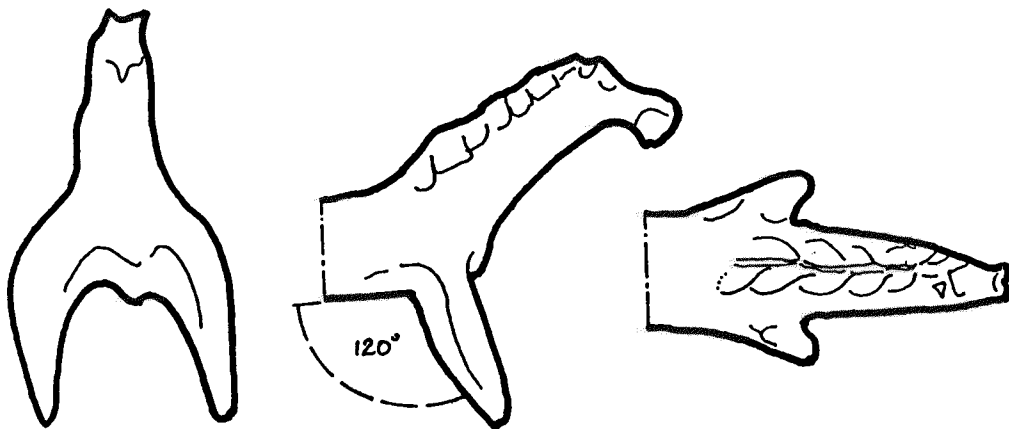
This is one of several equid heads so simplified that I have identified them as

⁸ The zebra did not live on the Syrian steppe. A possible relative, the "Otranto ass" (*Equus hydruntinus*), once did (Davis 1987, p. 33). The other species in the *genus* are the wild ass and onager (non-domesticated and domesticated hybrid) and the donkey (domesticated) and the horse (non-domesticated and domesticated).

A6.238 - TYPE I



A5i30 - TYPE II



A5q 815.2 - TYPE III

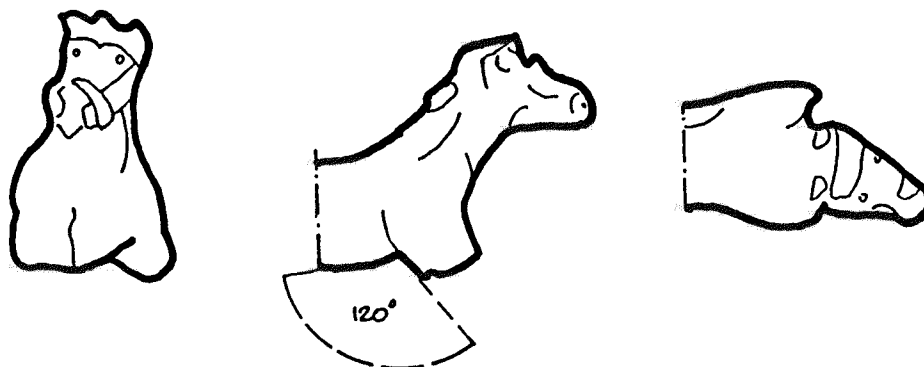


Fig. 1. Equus, Types I-III

“blanks.” Whether they serve as a basic form for further elaboration remains to be substantiated. The musculature of the neck is indicated. The lower join of the head and neck is formed by the side of the finger. The muzzle is blunt. The mane is high between the eye-ridges, which are pushed up as a result of pinching the sides of the muzzle together and lifting the clay toward the back of the head. The head has been modeled as a rectangular block, then pinched from the sides to taper the muzzle (see fold on top of the muzzle). The medium is chaff-tempered.

A10.89 equid TYPE I, intact non-domesticated, onager or wild ass (see *PDS* 2.16)

Intact except for chipped left hind leg and slightly abraded right ear. Were nostrils originally open or has a layer of clay eroded from the top of the muzzle, opening the nostril incision far back into the muzzle? The ears are curved back and sharply pointed and are formed of two narrow pieces of clay, tapered and pulled; the join is incomplete at the top of the ear. There are light incisions along the rim, as a pelt. The muzzle is blunt and rectangular in section. There is no breast-ridge. Forelegs are solidly founded, but are thrust forward. The mane begins low down on the neck and is evenly notched; it is erect and comes up onto the muzzle. The tail is carried high and has been laid in as a separate piece of clay; the tail swells out at first, but then tapers to a point. The rump is flat on top and the hindquarters are solidly founded. Manufacture should be studied further, as some appendages may have been inserted as separate pieces of clay in deep incisions in the torso. There are strikes on the body, on the left flank low on the neck, at the left foreleg and in front of the left hind leg. Depositional damage?

A6.238 equid TYPE I (see Fig. 1; Ill. 1)

Analysis of figurine to be completed in the 1998 study season.

A5.30, equid TYPE II, domesticated, likely a horse (see Fig. 1; Ill. 2, *PDS* 2.17)

The stance of the animal is solidly founded (“four-square” as defined in the typology).⁹ The legs are rectangular in section. There is a pronounced breast-ridge;

⁹ In the interest of brevity, I have not discussed the typology in terms of stance. Also, the angle

the tail is rather thick. The mane falls on both sides of the neck, there are five ridges on the left side, incised with fingernail; the mane is equally pronounced on the right. The muzzle is pinched and triangular in section. The eye-ridges are pronounced; perhaps the right eye is applied. The mane rises onto the head. The belly is slightly convex. The hind-quarters are equal in width, yet heavier in mass than the fore-quarters. The buttocks are fused and recessed. There is an incised line along one side of a raised rounded area from the tail to the sexual parts. Manufacturing techniques include smoothing (torso, hind-quarters and neck) and pinching (mane and head). The detailing of the mane may indicate a horse, rather than a domesticated onager-ass hybrid; the tail also is broad at the base, not thin.

A5.10, equid TYPE II, domesticated equid, donkey or half-ass

The gestural reality of this figurine is notable: the animal thrusts its head up and out, as if braying. The signs of domestication are wide eye-ridges, a mane carried high onto the forehead between the eyes. The body is stocky ($w1/w2/w3 = 1:1:1$). A break at the muzzle may be at a perforation. Was this a tethering ring? The left fore- and right hind-quarters have been pinched so as to form a shallow trough down the middle of the leg; they are rectangular in section. The legs are “gracile,” in Bökönyi’s terms. There is a slight breast-ridge at the base of the neck. The buttocks are recessed and fused. There are fingerprints on the underbelly. The piece has been pinched into shape from a single piece of clay, with the exception of the eye-ridges, which have been applied. There is firing bloom on the hind-quarters. The ware is chaff-tempered and there is a straw impression in front of the left hind leg.

A5q815-f equid TYPE III, domesticated horse with harness, intact except for legs and part of harness (see Fig. 1; Ill. 3; *PDS* 2.18)

The harness is intact, save for one missing piece. The figurine has been scraped to model. The head is turned right, and the mane is as if “blowing in the wind” (Sándor Bökönyi’s observation). A lively, realistic rendering. There are clear signs of domestication: there is a harness, the mane is high between the ears; there is a forelock. The breast-ridge is broken. The ears are held high. The taper of the muzzle

at which the forelegs join the torso of the animal has been categorized.

is marked; in section, the muzzle is a rectangle becoming a triangle at the snout. The eyes are lightly incised dots. The nostrils are raised. There is a perforation (broken) at the neck; a hole (0.3 cm) at the tail. The sexual organs are indicated.

A5q63-f equid TYPE III, domesticated horse, fragment: crown of head and neck with mane (see Ill. 7)

At first glance, it appears that this object—an equid—has a mane uniquely modeled by pinching and by the action of the tips of fingers which is left in the clay to indicate the long hairs of the mane. In fact, it appears that the mane of this figure was designed and manufactured in several stages. First the mane was modeled by pinching. Then, the mane was further modeled and given texture by the repeated application of a stick or knife. A final stage was “combing” with a tool uniquely suited to this action.

Contemporary potters still use small combs for decorating pottery; the instrument can be used, as here, on the left side of the mane, in long strokes; or it can be applied and lifted regularly to give a series of “lines” composed of multiple “hatchings,” as on the right side of this figure (the animal’s left and right).

Note the high mane between the ears, coming onto the forehead, and prominent (deep) eye-ridges; eight scalloped ridges on left possibly represent a long mane for rider’s mount. Compare with the other side which is smoothed with repeated impressions of fingers, but not scalloped. The ears are carried back; they are applied to, not modeled from the head. Deep eye-ridges are pushed up and back with fingers from the clay mass of the head. The muzzle is triangular in section.

K3.16, equid TYPE III, domesticated horse, fragment: head, with harness (see Ill. 4)

Incised dots (studs?) decorate the harness. A forelock is indicated; it falls over the harness. The left ear emerges from under the harness. The eyes are incised dots, as are the nostrils, which are not wide-spread. The muzzle is flat. There is a tethering ring (pierced through and entire) under the mouth. The harness is complete except under the muzzle (as with A5q815-f). The muzzle is rectangular in section. At the snout/ring, the section becomes an inverted triangle.

See also M1.209, a TYPE III equid, with wide-set eyes under prominent eye-ridges; the ears appear short, the muzzle relatively narrow. Possibly, there is a

forelock, falling forward high on the crown of the head and between the ears.

BH.383-2 clay artifact, equid trapping; model (?) (see Ill. 5)

This is a long object (6.2 cm) pierced with holes and with a “hook.” There is a firing bloom on the back of the object (“front” taken as the face towards the camera). Sándor Bökönyi suggested that it is a cheek-piece from a horse-harness. The piece does bring to mind various sculptural treatments and horse trappings of later times, but a parallel from the same period as our object has yet to be identified.

A1q960.8, equid, fragment: head (see Ill. 6)

An erect mane comes far forward on the forehead. Contrasting colors of clay emphasize the mane; the contrast has been consciously exploited for this effect. The eyes are far forward on the eye-ridge itself; they are indicated by incised dots made as from a thin reed, with center abraded or removed. Jaw-line clearly indicated. The muzzle is flat underneath to the snout, which is heavily pinched. The muzzle is narrow for an equid and the forward eyes are not typical of the *genus*. The break makes a diagnostic view difficult.

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