

# Four unpublished plaques from ancient Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan, Syria): Analysis of context and function

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*This article is based on the author's doctoral thesis, entitled Anthropomorphic figurines, statuettes and jewelry from Urkesh: an archaeological and historical study (Università degli Studi di Pavia), where these previously unpublished plaques are thoroughly studied*

## Summary

The only four terracotta plaques That were found in Urkesh, dating back to the second millennium BC, offer a style variation of the nude woman motif that was extremely popular in Mesopotamia. The main objective of this article is to present these previously unpublished terracotta plaques from Urkesh. The artifacts in question are dealt with from an archaeological point of view, where the descriptive information and archaeological context related to them is provided, before discussing their proposed function that relies to some extent on their imagery and what it represents. The analysis of these plaques, which conform with the domestic nature of other plaques found all over Mesopotamian sites, and the sexualization of woman's depiction on them and how it relates to some extent to the change in the manufacturing techniques from the freehand molded figurines to the mass production of a mold made plaques, and the interpretation of their function as objects of a domestic nature, are presented in this article in effort to highlight what might be a new proposed function for the plaques of Urkesh, in the light of their archaeological context that might be related to burials.

**Keywords:** Urkesh, terracotta plaques, Hurrians, nude female, Khabur, burials

## Résumé

Les quatre seules plaques en terre cuite qui ont été trouvées à Urkesh, datant du deuxième millénaire avant JC, offrent une variation de style du motif de la femme nue qui était extrêmement populaire en Mésopotamie. L'objectif principal de cet article est de présenter ces plaques en terre cuite inédites d'Urkesh où l'artefact en question est traité d'un point de vue archéologique, où les informations descriptives et le contexte archéologique qui s'y rapportent sont fournis, avant de discuter de leur fonction proposée qui repose dans une certaine mesure sur leur imagerie et ce qu'elle représente. L'analyse de ces plaques, qui conformes au caractère domestique d'autres plaques retrouvées un peu partout dans les sites mésopotamiens, et la sexualisation de la représentation de la femme sur elles et comment cela se rapporte dans une certaine mesure au changement des techniques de fabrication des figurines moulées à main levée vers les la production en série d'un moule fait de plaques, et l'interprétation de leur fonction en tant qu'objets de nature domestique, sont présentées dans cet article dans le but de mettre en évidence ce qui pourrait être une nouvelle fonction proposée pour les plaques d'Urkesh, à la lumière de leur contexte archéologique, que pourrait être lié aux enterrements.

**Mots clés :** Urkesh, plaques en terre cuite, Hurriens, femme nue, Khabur, tombs

## ملخص

تقدم اللوحات الفخارية الأربعة الوحيدة التي تم العثور عليها في أوركيش، والتي يعود تاريخها إلى الألفية الثانية قبل الميلاد، تنوعاً في نمط شكل المرأة العارية الذي كان شائعاً للغاية في بلاد ما بين النهرين. الهدف الرئيسي من هذه المقالة هو تقديم هذه اللوحات الفخارية غير المنشورة سابقاً والتي عثر عليها في أوركيش. تم التعامل مع القطع الأثرية المعنية من وجهة نظر أثرية، حيث يتم توفير المعلومات الوصفية والسياق الأثري المتعلق بها، قبل مناقشة وظيفتها المقترحة التي تعتمد إلى حد ما على الصورة التي تحملها وما تمثله هذه الصورة. تتضمن هذه المقالة تحليلاً لهذه اللوحات، والذي يتوافق مع الطبيعة المنزلية للوحات الأخرى الموجودة في جميع أنحاء مواقع بلاد ما بين النهرين، كما تتضمن نقاشاً حول إضفاء الطابع الجنسي على تصوير المرأة وكيف يرتبط إلى حد ما بالتغيير في تقنيات التصنيع من اللوحات المصنوعة يدوياً إلى اللوحات المصنوعة باستخدام القالب، بالإضافة إلى تفسير وظيفتها كقطع ذات طبيعة منزلية، في محاولة لتسليط الضوء على ما يمكن أن يكون وظيفة جديدة للوحات أوركيش، بناءً على سياقها الأثري والذي قد يكون مرتبطاً بالمدافن

**كلمات مفتاحية:** أوركيش، لوحات فخارية، الحوريون، انثى عارية، الخابور، المدافن

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Clay plaques, a type of objects that was introduced in the beginning of the second millennium. Many functions were attributed to them, and many interpretations were offered regarding the images represented on them, and yet, no one was able to pinpoint their exact purpose. According to Bailey, 'every act of representation is an interpretation of a reality or, more likely, every act is one element within many constructions of one of many realities. Every act of representation is a statement (intentional or casual, conscious or subconscious) that interprets a reality though the dimensions of a particular medium' (Bailey 2013: 245).

The excavations in Tell Mozan/ ancient Urkesh, a Hurrian city in northeast Syria dating back to the fourth millennium BC<sup>1</sup> (Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2009: 55),<sup>2</sup> have yielded only four clay plaques thus far with a representation of a nude woman on them. The presentations of these plaques from Urkesh and the analysis of their imagery and context, could make a small contribution that would help us step a little closer towards understanding these objects and their function. This article aims at presenting these previously unpublished four plaques from an iconographical, and functional point of view, in addition to presenting and discussing their archaeological context and the possible implications of this context on their interpretation.

## 2. THE PLAQUES<sup>3</sup>

The four plaques bear a similar motif in terms of subject (nude female) but vary in style and iconographical elements.

**A7.356** (Fig. 1), dating to the Khabur period/OJ2/ MB<sup>4</sup> and measuring 5.8 cm in height,

3.5 cm in width and 1.7 cm in thickness, is a portion of the bottom part of a plaque with a female depicted on it, which was determined based on the incised lines forming the bottom half of the pubic triangle. The legs were not separated, but since the pubic triangle is represented, we can assume that the figure was nude, while omitting to accurately portray the anatomical features.

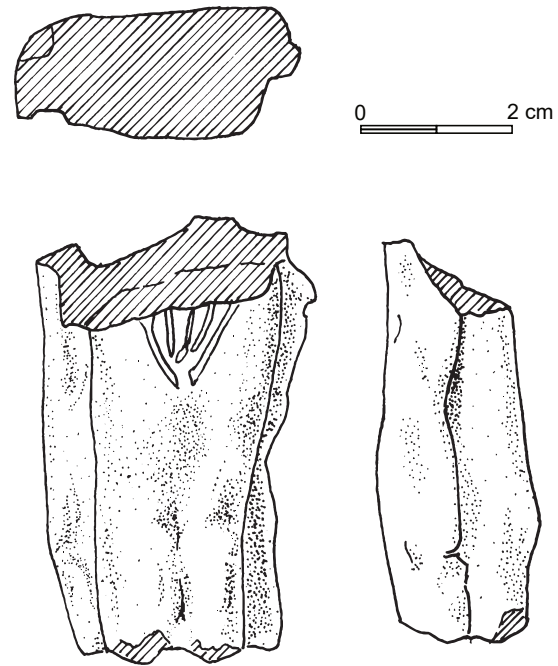


Fig. 1 – Plaque A7.356 (5.8x3.5x1.7/ Image source: <http://urkesh.org/main/main5.htm>)

**A15.228** (Fig. 2), dating to the Khabur period/OJ2/ MB and measuring 13.2 cm in height, 4.8 cm in width and 3 cm in thickness is a clay plaque with a female anthropomorphic figure represented on it. The top part of the plaque is oval with half an oval opening at the top. The woman on the plaque was depicted with a long neck and a lean body. Arms are broken. It has two small round applied breasts. The hips are represented wider than the waist, giving it a feminine shape. The pubic triangle is depicted, and it extends almost to the knees.

The figure appears to be wearing a head dress like a hat, with prominent edges. The

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information, refer to Kelly-Buccellati 2010, Mozan in the late chalcolithic.

<sup>2</sup> The city continued to exist until the end of Mittani period, where the site was abandoned with the arrival of the Assyrians (Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2009: 55).

<sup>3</sup> All data presented here regarding the plaques is available on [www.urkesh.org/record](http://www.urkesh.org/record).

<sup>4</sup> This plaque is dated to the Khabur period based on comparative analysis where a similarity of techniques used to render the pubic hair on figurine A12q19.1 from Urkesh was found, and the fact that the mold technique was introduced in Urkesh during the second millennium and

not prior to that (The other three plaques from Urkesh are from the second millennium, two of which date back to the Khabur period (A16q6383.3 and A15.228)). The dating to the Isin-Larsa period is considered a possibility as well.



Fig. 2 – Plaque A15.228 (13.2x4.8x2.8/ Image source: <http://urkesh.org/MZ/A/A15/UGR/-frame.htm>)

face seems to be an extension of the neck. The only facial feature that was depicted is the nose which is long and well defined. On the top part of the nose, there is a piece of clay perpendicular to the nose and runs across it. The two edges of this piece of clay end where the eyes should be, appearing to be the eyes. The edges of the plaque are smooth and round.

**A16q625.3** (Fig. 3), dating to Isin- Larsa/ OJ1/ MB and measuring 5.1 cm in height, 4.2 cm in width and 1.8 cm in thickness, is a portion of the bottom half of a plaque bearing a female representation on it. The preserved portion shows the thighs which are depicted separated and

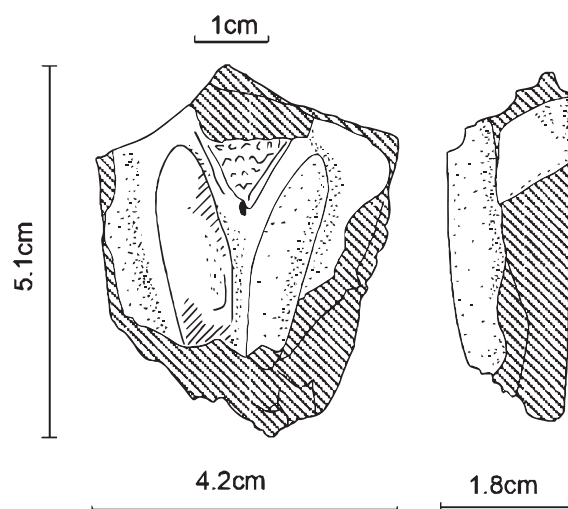


Fig. 3 – Plaque A16q625.3 (5.1x4.2x1.8/ Image source: <http://urkesh.org/MZ/A/A16/ugr/-frame.htm>)

formed to make the hip area in the shape of an hour glass. The pubic triangle is depicted as an incised triangle with small incised lines inside it, to schematically represent the pubic hair.

**A16q638.3** (Fig. 4), dating to the Khabur period/ OJ2/ MB and measuring 6.7 cm in height, 4.4 cm in width and 2.2 cm in thickness, is the bottom portion of a plaque bearing a female figure.



Fig. 4 – Plaque A16q638.3 (6.7x4.4x2.2/ Image source: <http://urkesh.org/MZ/A/A16/ugr/-frame.htm>)

The hips are accentuated giving a silhouette of an hour glass. There is a gap between the thighs. The figurine is decorated with reddish pink paint on the waist with one horizontal line and four vertical lines dripping from it like tassels<sup>5</sup>. The feet are flat and project forward by 1.5 cm, and they are painted as well. One of the preserved sides of the plaque is decorated with horizontal lines of the same paint. The pubis is depicted by a vertical slit, with thin painted vertical stripes on each side, giving the shape of a vagina.

### 2.1. Historical overview and the archaeological context<sup>6</sup>

Tell Mozan/ ancient Urkesh is an important site in the Jazirah region, where a Hurrian civilization thrived four millennia ago. The excavations at the site began in 1984 and yielded a royal palace built around 2300 BC by king Tupkish (Buccellati 1998, Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2000, Buccellati 2016: 14), a temple on the highest point on the mound constructed by king Tish-Atal probably for the worship of the god Kumarbi in 2700 BC (Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2005: 29, 36), and a necromantic shaft, called Abi in the Hurrian language (Kelly-Buccellati 2016: 102).

The excavations revealed a rich chronological sequence in Urkesh, beginning from EDI, all the way to the Middle Assyrian period. The second

millennium period in the site is extremely important and rich in finds, among which, the four plaques in question.

The archaeological context of the four plaques, pertaining to three different excavation units, shares similarities as they all seem to pertain to a domestic sphere, whether it is a residential area or a burial area (Fig. 5)<sup>7</sup>.

Unit A7 constitute the northwest part of the service wing of the Royal Palace, including a part of the northern service courtyard. This unit mainly consists of houses and graves dating to the phase of post palace abandonment in the first half of the second millennium.

Unit A15 is characterized by the settlement and residential area that formed following the abandonment of the royal palace. It is also characterized by the Khabur level burials and the kiln area dating to the Khabur period<sup>8</sup>. The plaque A15.228 was found in an ash layer of a kiln pertaining to the Khabur period.

Unit A16 is the area that includes the southwestern portion of the paved courtyard of the formal wing of the Royal Palace, and a substantial number of later accumulations corresponding to the settlements of the late third and early second millennium. A16's significance comes from the fact that it provided an in-depth insight to the graves setting in the Khabur period, where the mortuary structures appear like a city of dead and each grave resembles a small house.

This unit was excavated to descend to the level of the stone paved courtyard of the palace

5 The markings on the body can be interpreted as symbolic conveyer of a message in addition to attracting the eye to that area of the body. The interpretation of these markings as a tattoo is also a possibility. According to Woolley, some figurines from the Ubaid level in Ur have tattoo markings on them (Woolley 1955: 12). However, I do not believe that any of these markings are in fact a tattoo. They are, most probably, non-permanent paint markings. A tattoo practice (just as it is in our modern days in some old traditions such as the Japanese and Hawaiian traditions) is considered very symbolic, almost sacred. One would imagine a similar view for it in the Ancient Near East, yet no depiction of such a symbolic, and probably important practice have been found thus far to my knowledge, which make the whole argument about the markings being a tattoo not very solid, yet it remains a possibility.

6 All the data regarding the archaeological context presented in this paragraph, is collected from the data base found on the Urkesh website, [www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org), in the record section where the data pertaining to each excavation unit is available.

7 Nearly a third of the Umm el-Marra Bronze Age corpus (including plaques) derive from domestic layers such as wall foundations, floors, or domestic trash and/or debris. And much of the material culture recovered in association can be linked with domestic activities (Petty 2006: 65).

Roßberger makes a statement about the domestic context of the plaques from Iščali where the number of plaques with a nude female representation is relatively low inside the Kititum-temple but increases in the immediate surroundings. Moreover, no plaques were found inside the Gate-Temple, while several were found in the adjoining rooms which might have had a domestic nature (Roßberger 2017: 179).

Liebowitz mentioned the archaeological context of the figurines and plaques in domestic areas, buried under houses, without any divinatory indicators (Liebowitz 1988: 26-32).

8 Refer to Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2002.



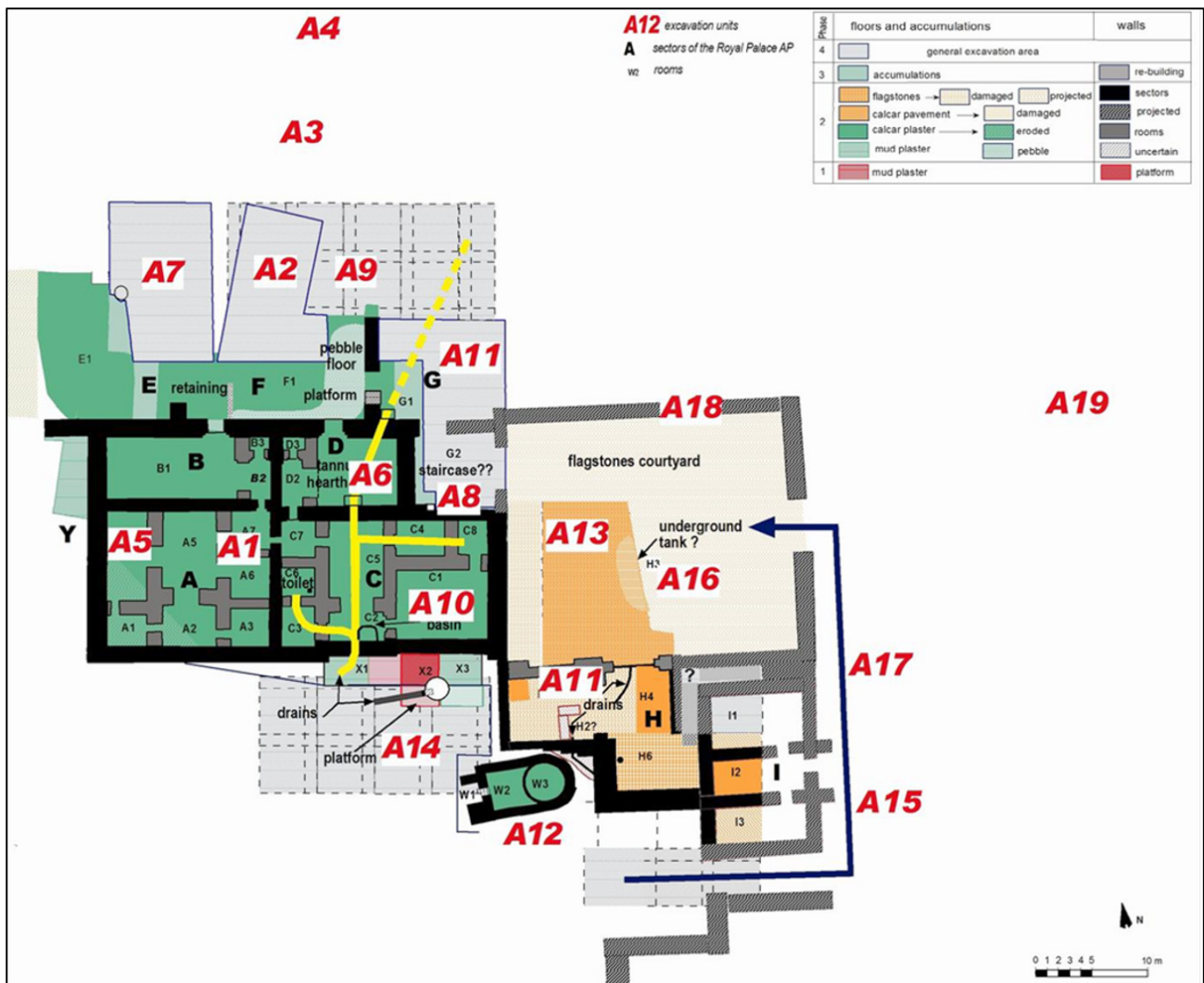


Fig. 5 – Map of the AP palace showing the various excavation units, including A7, A15 and A16 to which the plaques pertain (image source: <http://urkesh.org/mz/a/AP/ugr/-frame.htm>)

discovered in A13, which was accomplished. A16 contains the largest exposure of the courtyard, which is presumed to cover the entire unit, but was not fully exposed due to the important finds in the Khabur level.

Plaque A16q625.3 was found in an accumulation layer that contains a mixture of layers with chunks of light brown clay mixed with a soft ashy matrix. Plaque A16q625.3 dates to the Isin-Larsa/ OJ1/ MB, a phase characterized by the formation of thin outdoor accumulations, but most of all by several pits and burials dug in the open area. While plaque A16q638.3 was found in a fill inside the square tomb, belonging to Khabur /OJ2/ MB period, a phase characterized by the large brick fall that covered all the A16 area.

## 2.2. Notes on iconography

The perception of the body image stems from a psychological conditioning that exceeds the physical aspect into a conceptual dimension. We tend to view the body the way we were conditioned to view it by society, traditions, religion and customs. And we add to this mix a set of rules and concepts that are the result of our upbringing and our own experiences in life. This psychological conditioning leads us to view the body not only as a physical form, but as a concept and a construct. According to Bahrani, the body in art should be viewed as a representational sign (Bahrani 2001: 40). And when the represented body is nude (especially if the nude body is that of a female), the sexual component becomes a focal point in the

discussion. Budin speaks of a tendency to interpret all Mesopotamian female representations as sexual, meaning that all nude representations were meant to be sexually attractive and seductive (Budin 2016).

Since the sexuality of the body is largely based on being represented nude, it is very important to stress the difference between nudity and nakedness. Berger argues that 'To be naked is to be oneself,' and 'to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself' (Berger 1972: 54). This is to say that nakedness is a state of being undressed, and nudity is somewhat a state of display, and all the sexuality and eroticism related to it (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 115).

The representation of nude females in Urkesh is strongly present in the three-dimensional art (anthropomorphic figurines and plaques), varying in terms of sexual appeal, and having many different layers which creates multiple attitudes when viewing the representation of sexuality in Urkesh.

The plaques could be viewed as the most sexualized form of representation. The reason it is the most sexualized image is because a) the plaque's function probably relied on the imagery of the woman represented on it, and the way she was represented. The visual aspect was probably of a great significance for the plaque to perform its role. And since the plaques with the motif of a women represents the women nude, and seductive to some degree, we might assume that this depiction of a temptress woman was for display to some degree, not just function<sup>9</sup>, and b) the frontality of the representation places further emphasis on the whole nude body to be viewed and perhaps admired. This frontality meant that no body parts, like the arms, and no position can block the view of the nude body, hence enhancing the sexual nature of the representation.

There appears to be two types of nude female representation on plaques in the late third millennium and early second millennium Mesopotamia. The first represents the female with a curvy body, elaborate hair style and ornaments with some emphasis on the pubic triangle. Hands holding breasts or folded below

it. These representations have a stylistic variation in detail, but the theme is unified.

The second type has less variations to the identical representations, where the nude female is represented like a barbie doll, with slim hips small ornaments, very little emphasis on sexual attributes and feet on a platform to stress its static position (Roßberger 2018: 527).

The examples from Urkesh represent different levels of sexual appeal that include the two afore mentioned types. The nude woman on plaque A15.228 is represented with small breasts with a very generic body silhouette, while the representation of nude females on plaques A16q625.3 and A16q638.3 are more highly sexualized. The pubic triangle is clearly represented on A16q625.3 with pubic hair and feminine silhouette for the hips. As for A16q638.3 only the bottom part is preserved where the hips are very feminine, the waist is slim, and there is decorative reddish pink paint on the waist that seems to be designated to draw even more attention to its feminine shape. What is interesting is that here we do not have a representation of the pubic triangle, but we have two strokes of paint on the vagina with a slit in the middle, which is a very forward sexualized representation.

The shift in production techniques that introduced the plaques might have been a major contributing factor in this highly sexualized image of nude women that resemble pin up girls. The introduction of plaque technique could have created a shift in conceptualization specifically since it relies on mass production, a less personal method of producing 'art' that is not meant for handling as much as it is meant for display. This method of production and use that involves less touching of the object can establish a form of distance that would make the sexualization of the representation more forward in nature<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Some plaques might have been hanged on the wall. One of the plaques from Urkesh A15.228, has an opening that might have been for hanging purposes.

<sup>10</sup> This transition was a cultural transition into a more materialized industry and a more materialized view of the human body. The shaping of the human figurine by hand is an artistic self-expression, whether it is driven from reality or imagination, because even if an artist is shaping the figurine based on a set of instructions and specifications, there is no denying that a glimpse of the artist's soul and vision will transmit into the piece. But molded plaques are standardized and less personal, and they certainly followed a pre-set outline that almost everyone adhered to.

According to Roßberger, this transition from figurines to plaques that took place in the late third and early second millennium BC, was part of a profound, culturally embedded re-conceptualization of figurative artworks in general and visualizations of the human body (Roßberger 2018: 521)<sup>11</sup>.

Why was there a need to mass produce replicas of the same representation? According to Barrelet, there was an increasing demand (Barrelet 1968: 86-94). This shift could be understood as a testament to a shift in taste as well as ideology, by moving from more of a personified representation with the anthropomorphic representations into a symbolic yet generic form of representations that comes with the mass production of replicas, which are less personal and were probably related to a specific function that required certain specifications that can only be achieved through a mold production. This ideological shift could be related to a newfound domestic cult, which required this type of artifacts, hence the growing popularity.

The four plaques from Urkesh are not enough to suggest that there was a mass production of plaques in Urkesh, nor does the archaeological evidence support this (no traces of a mass production workshop have been identified in Urkesh, nor the necessary tools and materials for such production)<sup>12</sup>. However, since the excavations in Urkesh are far from over, and many residential quarters are yet to be excavated, these four plaques could in fact be a part of a mass production of plaques that are yet to be discovered or there are many plaques that did not survive due to weather elements. My argument is based on the fact that to produce these plaques, a long and difficult process of carving a mold is in order, a process that would not take place only to produce very few plaques.

<sup>11</sup> The molding techniques was invented in the third millennium in southern Mesopotamia. The technique was introduced in Syria in the second quarter of the second millennium and was used until the Neo-Babylonian period (Badre 1980: 22-23; Barrelet 1968: 86-90).

<sup>12</sup> It is possible that no large workshops were set in Urkesh because it was a religious center. The various workshops might have been situated in few of the smaller cities in Urkesh's hinterlands to the north. For an ample reading on the northern hinterlands of the Hurrian Urkesh, refer to Buccellati 1999.

### 2.3. Notes on function and identity

The nude woman plaques were extremely popular, and despite the unity of the motif's theme in general, several interpretations regarding their function were made by scholars throughout the years. And despite the fact that a specific function might have been the key factor in creating this type of artifacts, they transcended their 'utilitarian' function. Many scholars agreed that this nude woman was a representation of a goddess (Bahrani 2001: 48) or a sacred prostitute linked to Ishtar (Frankfort 1939: 160). Wiggermann went against this interpretation and identified her as a protective spirit 'baštu' or dignity and as guarantor of personal happiness (Wiggermann 1985-86: 28).

Asher-Greve and Sweeney suggested that this representation of nude woman in its ideal feminine rendering might be the counterpart representation of the nude masculine hero and its ideal masculinity (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 139), while Blocher identifies this nude woman as *kezertum* (Blocher 1987), a priestly title connected to sacred prostitution (Brisch 2021: 83)<sup>13</sup>.

Roßberger drew her interpretation of the plaque's function based on distribution which suggests that figurative clay objects did not only have one but several functions, including the protection of sacred space (plaques depicting lions and other gatekeepers), commemoration of festive activities (plaques depicting musicians and performers), and the presenting of specific cult images in rich accoutrements (plaques depicting shrouded god and goddess in a structure) (Roßberger 2017: 180-181).

According to Bahrani, the main purpose of the nude female images appears to be the display of the sexual attributes in a way that seems to say, 'desire me'. This emphasis on the sexual allure gives her the role of a seductive temptress (Bahrani 2001: 83).

Both, anthropomorphic figurines and plaques depicting a human figure can be thought of as a symbolic representation of a deity. According to Van der Toorn, plaques depicting a nude

<sup>13</sup> *Kezertum* in CAD K, p. 314, s.v. *kezertu*, prostitute (lit. woman with curled hair, a hair-do characteristic of a special status).



female are inexpensive accessible replicas of a cult image, and that their wide distribution confirms that they played a role in private worship and the official cult (Van der Toorn 1998: 94-95). But the replica of a cult image is symbolic in the sense that it was intentionally stripped of divine indicators to represent, as Assante argues, a being between high gods and mortals that protects the house and enhances the life of its inhabitants. Some were meant to ward off evil (Assante 2002: 6-7).

There are few aspects that should be considered regarding the plaques and what they represent. According to Assante, in order for the plaque to fulfil its function, it could not bear an original image, and its efficacy largely depends on suppressing human authorship (Assante 2002: 3), meaning it should not bear any personal artistic influences from the artist, and no vision or perception of his should be imposed, nor it should be a creation that bears the soul of the artist. It should be a standard symbol bearing a unified perception of the figure depicted on the plaque that cannot be accredited to a specific artist or maker because it was not meant to personify a person, but rather a concept and a spirit, therefore it did not bear to be interpreted differently by the imaginations of artist. And in turning a high god into a generic god as Assante phrases it, it becomes more of a folk related practice. Perhaps it was forbidden or frowned upon to have high god representations in regular houses, so a re-adaptation of the divine imagery was needed to make them suitable for popular use but still maintain their protective power by the symbolism of the replica<sup>14</sup>. In my opinion, the sheer use of clay, which was easily available and economically convenient, personified the underlying subconscious notion of creation which is in itself a ritual. All the above interpretation of the plaque with nude woman on it are valid for the Urkesh plaques, including the conceptions regarding the plaque images of nude females that were made by Luciani, who believes that the plaques could have been used by females in a rite of passage

<sup>14</sup> Assante elaborates in her 2002 publication on this subject and gives examples of this re-adaptation of the divine image. The figures were deliberately lifted from their official context. 'The figures on the plaques are situated between the realms of the high gods and mortals, whose natural arena was folk magic rather than institutional religion' (Assante 2002: 11-14).

ritual, and that the nude female on the plaque actually represents a 'healthy young female body that had reached physical maturity' (Luciani 2020: 218). However, in the case of Urkesh, further excavations in neighborhoods and residential areas are indispensable because our current evidence consists only of four plaques and Luciani's interpretation relies to some extent on the sheer number of the plaques from Ur. If the plaques were a part of an important ritual, like the rite of passage, their number in Urkesh should be very high, especially considering that some scholars, like Moorey 2003 and Luciani 2020, believe that the terracotta plaques were treated like rubbish once they fulfilled their purpose, meaning that they were not kept and inherited from one generation of women to the next, because they were meaningful for an event, and they can be discarded of when the event is over (Luciani 2020: 220). The low number of plaques recovered from Urkesh thus far, might stand against this interpretation, especially considering that only few private houses were excavated in Urkesh.

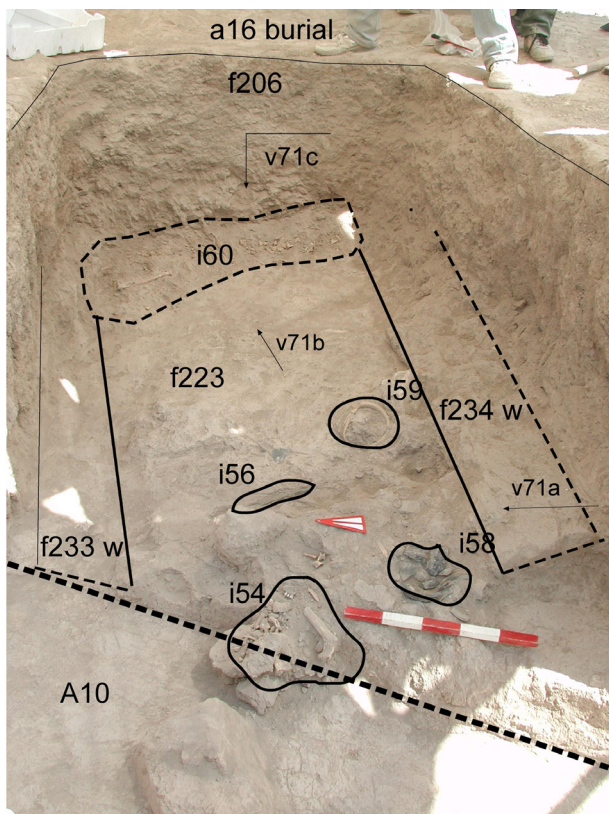
#### 2.4. Plaques in Burial context

It was indispensable to present these various interpretations of the image of the plaque and the proposed function in order to propose another function for these items which is derived and inspired by the archaeological context of the Urkesh plaques, especially plaques A16q625.3 and A16q638.3 that might be associated with a burial context, hence finding a new venue for these objects where they might have had a value.

Plaque A16q625.3 was found in a layer that contained a jar burial<sup>15</sup>. The association of the two finds is not confirmed as they belong to two different sub-layers (plaque belongs to sub-layer 225 which is 7 cm lower than the sub-layer 223 to which the jar burial belongs). The associated material culture consists of ceramic vessel, and two different fragments of animal figurine in the same sub-layer as the plaque (A16q625.1 and A16q625.2). The fact that there are other figurines very close to the burial along with the plaque, could suggest that they were associated somehow with the burial, but it was disturbed in a later stage.

<sup>15</sup> The jar burial number is i51 and i52. For further information refer to the record of the excavation unit on [urkesh.org](http://urkesh.org).





**Fig. 6** – View showing the two burials in A16 and the fill layer that yielded plaque A16q638.3 (image source: <http://urkesh.org/MZ/A/A16/ugr/-frame.htm>)

Plaque A16q638.3 was recovered from a layer that yielded many artifacts and a burial (Fig. 6), but only two of these artifacts (a bead and a stone artifact)<sup>16</sup> are from the same sub-layer as the plaque. The rest of the artifacts are from a different sub-layer along with the human remains<sup>17</sup>. However, in this case, the plaque could be associated with the burial because the entire layer to which all these artifacts belong is a burial fill, even if the plaque was not found with the cluster of the other artifacts<sup>18</sup>.

There is archaeological evidence that this tomb was re-used, where the bones of the original

<sup>16</sup> Bead (A16q638.1), stone artifact (A16q368.2)

<sup>17</sup> human bones (A16.54 and A16.60), bead (A16.55), spear head (A16.56), nail (A16.57), two ceramic bowls (A16.58 and A16.59), three beads (A16.61, A16.65, A16.66), piece of jewelry (A16.64)

<sup>18</sup> This remains an uncertain possibility as the fill of the tomb could consist of earth brought from a nearby place and dumped in the tomb with what it contains of material culture. The other possibility is that the item was intentionally deposited there.

burial (multiple skeletons) were placed in a pile suggesting that someone removed them and piled them to make room for a new burial<sup>19</sup>. Since we are almost sure that the grave was disturbed, the fact that the plaque was not found in direct association with the remains but rather in a layer above but pertaining to the tomb fill, means that it is possible that it was part of the grave goods, however, we do not yet possess a conclusive evidence that could support this possibility.

In this case, the main question would be why? What was the meaning and value of these plaques that would make them constitute a part of the funerary objects if they ever did? There are many archaeological evidence from many archaeological sites that show how the anthropomorphic figurines were buried with deceased, from Tell Atchana (Yener and G. Bike Yazıcıoğlu 2010: 26), Tell Afis (Angelo di Michele 2010: 146), Tell Halawa (Al Khabur 2018: 175), Terqa (Kelly-Buccellati and Mount-Williams 1977: 3), Hama, Murek and Ebla (Marchetti 2000).

Many interpretations to the existence of an anthropomorphic figurines in burial were offered. Some proposed a gender related theory like Woolley, based on the iron age tombs of Carchemish, that contained feminine figurines in girl's burials and the rider figurines with boys (Woolley 1939: 57).

Others proposed a fertility related use like the hypothesis of H. May mentioned by Badre, where she states that this was a part of a funerary cult associated with that of fertility, where the figurines would be the protector of the deceased. Badre proceeds to say that these figurines acted like the protector images or saint images (Badre 1980: 156)

In northern Syria and south-eastern Turkey, some anthropomorphic sculpture, referred to as 'guardian spirits' by Carter, are believed to have been related to a cult of the dead (Carter 1970). Examples dating back to the Early Bronze age have been found in Tuttul (Hemker 1994) and within a house at Tell Halawa (Meyer and Pruß 1994), and more recent examples from the Middle Bronze age in Oylum Höyük, Mumbaqa, Tell Amarna, Tell Sabi Abiad (Yener

<sup>19</sup> The original burial is i60 and secondary burial is i54. For more information refer to the record section of urkish.org.

2015: 207), and Tell Afis where Mazzoni 1992 described them as having an apotropaic character (Mazzoni 1992: 161).

Many of the graves, where limestone figurines have been found, might be considered to symbolize the 'etemmu' (spirit) of the deceased, as they were placed in grave as part of a ritual related to the ancestor's cult (Van Loon & Meijer 2001: 220-221).

The evidence from Urkesh thus far is not conclusive, nor is the number of the artifact enough to make a thorough assessment of the association of clay plaques with burial. However, the possibility of such hypothesis is drawn from their deposition within the same layer as burials.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Badre's interpretation of the anthropomorphic figurines in burials as the protector images or saint images, sparked this idea, especially that the imagery on the plaque is believed to be a replica of a cult image (Van Der Toorn 1998), which would function perfectly in a burial context as a protector of the deceased in his afterlife journey.

This argument might contradict with my previous statement in this article about the sexualized image of the plaque, and how the visual seductive aspect of the representation was probably, not only important to the function of the plaque, but it might have been related to a display status. However, while the initial idea behind the birth of plaques might have been very specific, I do believe that plaques served various functions, where in one function the display of the image was important and in another, it might have been ignored.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The four plaques from Urkesh with the nude female representation, while varying in the shapes of the representations, adhere to the Mesopotamian domestic cult tradition as it can be concluded from their archaeological context in areas of domestic nature pertaining to the second millennium level of the site.

It is unfortunate that not many conclusions can be drawn with regards to their function and the identity of the female represented on them, because of the fragmentary state in which they were found. But in the light of the evidence at hand, many of the interpretations regarding the plaque imagery and role that were offered by scholars could be applicable to the plaques from Urkesh.

As for my suggestion regarding their possible association with some burials, if further excavations in Urkesh, and other archaeological sites reveal that this type of plaques are in fact related in some cases to burials, then one of the interpretations that can be offered in the light of this context is that they might have been viewed as guardian spirits or symbols of deities related to domestic cult or religion that might have played a role in the afterlife. This in fact would be coherent with an argument I make in my doctoral thesis (Anthropomorphic figurines, statuettes and jewelry from Urkesh: an archaeological and historical study, a doctoral thesis realized at *Università degli Studi di Pavia* in 2021) about the religious restrictions that limited the practices of religion to state governed cult places, which created the right environment for a thriving domestic cult or religion in the society.

This is not to say that domestic deities or guardian spirits was the main function of the plaques in general, but it does propose a new interpretation of the plaque function as a guardian in the afterlife. However, such interpretation needs to be supported with more data (especially data from residential areas) that only future excavations can provide.

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<sup>20</sup> As mentioned in a previous footnote, Liebowitz 1988, states that some cultic figurines were found buried under houses in Selenkahiye, which indicates that the protective power of the cultic image remain effective even when not viewed.

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