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Evidence of the early religion of the Hurrians in ancient Urkesh : summary

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SUMMARY

Evidence of the Early Religion of the Hurrians in Ancient Urkesh

Discoveries from Tell Mozan in north-eastern Syria and their place in the overall historical and cultural context of the ancient Near East make an important contribution towards understanding religiosity and culture in general, not only in this city, but also in a wider regional context. Without a doubt, Urkesh offers many answers and is currently the most comprehensive source of knowledge about the earliest history and religion of the Hurrians. The intention of the present publication is to map the material culture and written sources associated with this location according to the findings made so far, expound on current hypotheses and conclusions, and posit new ones that, with all due modesty, seek to contribute to the reconstruction of the religious image of the city. The answers that will emerge will be derived from two key research questions:

- What features of the material culture from Tell Mozan can be used to identify religiosity?
- Which elements of this religiosity, also considering written sources, can be classified as Hurrian according to current knowledge?

The first section of the first chapter, “Theoretical and Methodological Starting Points”, provides a theoretical framework based on the work of Colin Renfrew and Ian Hodder. Renfrew, a proponent of cognitive-processual archaeology, presented 16 archaeological indicators of ritual as a tool for identifying religion in material culture. Ian Hodder, conversely, represents post-processual archaeology and places emphasis on a context-based and interpretive approach.

The second part of the introductory chapter includes the theoretical and methodological procedure for examining the Urkesh glyptic from a religious and

mythological perspective. Emphasis is placed on the contextual perspective of iconographic elements and the meanings of symbolic representations in a cultural context. Texts or images on Akkadian seals are used to analyse and interpret the glyptic, with analogues expected in specific mythological compositions.

The second chapter, “Remarks on the Beginnings of the Hurrians in the Ancient Near East”, is focused on the origins of the Hurrians, with most scholars promoting the Transcaucasus region in this respect, which appears to be the most appropriate explanation. However, it is important to note that dissenting opinions do exist. Another important objective of the chapter is the presentation of arguments in favour of the earlier arrival of the Hurrian population in the ancient Near East prior to the Old Akkadian period. Discoveries from Tell Mozan are evidence of this.

The third chapter, “Framework Reconstruction of the History of Urkesh”, maps the history of this Hurrian city on the basis of available written sources and the chronological order of documented rulers and other persons from the royal court. The sources attest that Urkesh held a prominent position in the Khabur region in the last quarter of the third millennium B.C. and an alliance, sealed by a dynastic marriage, likely existed between Urkesh and Akkad during the reign of the Old Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin. Urkesh began progressively to decline on many fronts beginning from the start of the second millennium B.C.

The fourth chapter, “Temple of the Hurrian God [of Kumarbi?]”, describes a temple from the mid-third millennium B.C., with origins dating back to an earlier period. Renfrew’s indicators of ritual are used to demonstrate the religious function of this structure. The so-called Lion text is closely related to the temple and provides the oldest continuous written source in Hurrian, dated to the 21st century B.C. This text is focused on the dedication of a temple structure in Urkesh to the god Nergal and also mentions other deities. Five arguments are made, ending with the hypothesis that in this text the scribes wrote the name of the Hurrian god Kumarbi with the logogram for Nergal. Such a scribal practice in the ancient Near East is commonly referred to as *interpretatio Akkadika*. Common chthonic/underworld traits are the primary reason for the assumed identification of Nergal and Kumarbi. In addition, Kumarbi certainly had a residence in Urkesh, which the mythology testifies.

Another text related to Urkesh is further examined, the so-called Samarra tablet, written in Akkadian, which also refers to the construction of a temple to Nergal. Other deities are also identified here. The site was likely the place referred to as Hawalum and in this case as well, Nergal could represent Kumarbi.

The objective of the fifth chapter, “Chthonic Characteristics of Kumarbi in Hurrian Mythology”, is to investigate Kumarbi’s specific chthonic/underworld traits and his familial line as presented by the Hurrian Kumarbi Cycle. The conclusions reached by Harry A. Hoffner represent the basis for this section, accord-

ing to which the gods Kumarbi and his arch-enemy Teshub are from opposite cosmological spheres, specifically chthonic and uranic. Even the gods and goddesses who appear in the cycle belong to one camp or the other, creating a kind of uranic-chthonic antagonism among the members of the pantheon. The cycle consisting of five mythological compositions is characteristic in that the individual descendants of Kumarbi try to take control of Kumarbi's genealogical line in each of the compositions. The storm god Teshub always wins in the end.

A monumental underground structure discovered in Urkesh is the subject of the sixth chapter, "The Underground Structure". It was constructed before the palace, in the immediate vicinity of its wall. A platform with stone drainage and an inlet is located near the wall. The skeletal remains of several animal species and various artefacts were discovered in the individual stratigraphic layers of the underground structure, which led scholars to believe that the structure represented a ritual site known as *āpi*. Records of rituals held there are from much later Hurro-Hittite texts. Their function was to initiate communication with the deities of the underworld to guarantee purification, protection, fertility, reassurance, reconciliation, or health. The indicators of ritual were applied in this case to determine the religious or ritual function of the underground structure.

After their presentation, these Hurro-Hittite rituals are related to the archaeological discoveries from the structure. Several concrete and specific common traits are identified in both types of sources, which permits the formulation of the hypothesis that the structure was used for *āpi*-rituals. On the basis of references in ritual texts, findings from the structure, and its location near the palace, it appears that the structure was a feature of the practices of the official (likely purification) cult in Urkesh, which involved the rulers or the local ruling dynasty.

The final portion of the chapter briefly directs attention to the close relationship between the underground structure, the platform (probably used for chthonic rituals), and the palace, complemented by the more distant temple; all the structures are connected by a ritual pathway. It is a chthonic sacral complex, which became a prominent feature in Urkesh. It could have included Kumarbi if one accepts the hypothesis that the temple was dedicated to Kumarbi, and some indications exist of Kumarbi's involvement in the later Hurro-Hittite rituals.

The seventh chapter, "The Sacral Aspect of the Ruling Dynasty", focuses on the Hurrian royal title of *endan* and its etymology. The term itself could be partially derived from the Hurrian word *eni* "god". Four seal impressions from Urkesh, belonging to two rulers and a person who likely held an official position, are analysed and interpreted in terms of iconography. The contents of the royal impressions testify to the sacral dimension of the royal office. They express the legitimacy of the office, including the rulers and princes, and the symbol of a lion connected to the local dynasty plays an important role here. On the basis of the discovery of the lion idol inside the temple, the Urkesh Lion text written upon

the two lion statues, and the lion symbol on the mentioned seals, the lion could hypothetically represent Kumarbi.

When considering the comparison of all four seal impressions, the etymology of the title of *endan*, and the existence of the tradition of deified rulers in Mesopotamia in the last quarter of the third millennium B.C., it remains an open question whether the rulers of Urkesh were similarly deified. However, on the basis of available evidence, it seems unlikely.

The eighth chapter, “Glyptic Religious Motifs with Akkadian Influences”, focuses on the glyptic discovered at Tell Mozan. Thematic and stylistic criteria are considered in its examination. The glyptic demonstrates elements of the local northern Syrian tradition and significant Akkadian influences. The depictions capture religious-mythological and political-ideological themes, from which multiple conclusions may be drawn.

The final, ninth chapter, “Concept of Hurrianization and its Application on Urkesh”, seeks to provide the framework of an explanation for the establishment and preservation of Hurrian cultural elements and Hurrian consciousness in the city. In this case, Fredrik Barth’s model based on ethnic boundaries and Eva von Dassow’s model involving the Hurrianization of Alalakh are applied to the situation in Urkesh. According to the proposed hypothesis, the Hurrian population was present in Urkesh prior to the Old Akkadian period, which is supported by the fact that the Khabur region was one of the oldest areas of Hurrian settlement. The spread and endurance of Hurrian elements in Urkesh was then the result of Hurrianization, which was supported by the ruling dynasty. There are indications that Urkesh could have contributed to the expansion of Hurrian traditions, which were preserved until later historical periods.

The final section contains a conclusion with a summary and a suggestion for the direction of future research. (1) To better understand the characteristics of ancient Urkesh, it would be appropriate to define a place for this important city in the overall cultural and geographical context of the Khabur region, i.e., the cities with which Urkesh was or could have been in contact. This involves centres such as Tell Leilan, Tell Brak, Tell Chuera, Tell Beydar, and others. A more thorough comparison of these cities with Urkesh at multiple levels could contribute to a better understanding of the broader context. (2) Hurrian consciousness and traditions were present in Urkesh in the third millennium B.C. and, therefore, it would be beneficial to determine how these elements from northern areas spread over time and space into other regions of the ancient Near East and what role Urkesh could have played in this scenario.