A FIGURINE FROM URKESH: A “DARLING” FROM TROY TO MESOPOTAMIA

By JEANNY VORYS CANBY

It was a pleasure to accept the Buccellatis’ invitation to publish the upper half of a flat, lead figure of a woman found at Urkesh and return to an old interest of mine. Once surmised that such objects were used by merchants in the metals trade as “cash” when travelling from Mesopotamia to Anatolia.

The Urkesh piece is defectively cast, and the ridge above the eyeballs and the edge of the chin give the face a misleading, cheerful expression. From other examples we know that the ridge would probably have surrounded the eyes and that, above the remnant of a protruding chin, the mouth would have been straight. The long thin nose is still preserved. Curls over the forehead are represented by round knobs, as are the tresses falling on either side of the face. The woman is nude except for four ridges of a high collar necklace. The breasts, represented as small knobs, are placed very high on the chest and the fingers of the upraised hands are spread as if supporting them. A prominent knob, surrounded by a wide ridge, emphasizes the navel.

The Urkesh piece is very welcome as an excavated example of a familiar but rare type of lead figurine. The first example was found in third-millennium levels at Troy on the west coast of Turkey in the nineteenth century. Four moulds for casting such a figurine are also known. These are peculiar in having so many dies tightly crowded onto a single surface. They are for amulets.
jewellery and stamp seals, as well as the figurines, and each object has its own pour hole for casting it separately.

Not all the moulds came from an excavation. One came "from" Akkhar, about 100 km northeast of Izmir, and one from Izmir itself. These, plus the Troy figure, suggested the figure type was western Anatolian in spite of the awkward fact that the ancient city of Sippar (Abu Habbah), on the Euphrates below Baghdad, was the source given for the same type of mould in the British Museum.8

Fortunately, recent excavations have produced contexts for both the type of figurine and the mould. In the 1990s a figurine was found in Tell Brak, south of Urkesh, on the headwaters of the Khabur, c. 1400 km from Troy.9 In 1999, a multi-die mould for a similar figurine was found at Tiyirt in eastern Turkey, c. 1036 km from Troy. 

It was face down on the floor of a late Early Bronze III building, reconfirming the date for the type as the last quarter of the third millennium BC,10 and lending credence to the provenance of the Sippar mould.11 We now know that the figurines, and probably also the moulds, occurred in very different cultures and regions within western Anatolia to northern Mesopotamia at that date. The distinctly regional character of some trickmolds did imply that the clientele for the lead items lived in widely dispersed regions.12 It was not the objects that travelled, however, lead had too little value and would have been heavy to carry. It must have been the moulds, designed to make individual trinkets and figurines, that were carried by people going to these far-apart places. A person with such a mould, wherever he happened to be on his journey, could produce a locally popular item almost instantly. All he needed was an open fire and a pinch of lead, perhaps even some lead the villagers kept for mending pots. A figurine, seal or trickmold could then be traded for food, water, shelter, labour, or whatever small thing he needed. The locations of the sites where the figurines have been found, Urkesh, Brak and Troy, make it likely that the travellers were involved in trade between metal-rich Anatolia and metal-poor Mesopotamia.13

The far-flung occurrence of the Urkesh figure type leaves the question of its native popularity...
The figurine from Troy may have lost its Anatolian homeland, but it now assumes greater importance as proof that caravans from far east in Syria travelled as far west as the Aegean coast of Turkey. The Anatolian character of the Urkesh figurine type was also assumed because of links to the numerous early second-millennium lead figurines and moulds from the Assyrian colonies in Anatolia that have been considered of local manufacture. This attribution may also be questioned. The figurines have indeed been found at Anatolian sites, but they were found only in the houses of Assyrian merchants, and not in later periods. Moreover, most look foreign when compared to the full-bodied, sculptural quality of contemporary Anatolian arts. A planop and curvaceous lead figurine from Karahiyuk is also a mould allegedly from Kultepe illustrate the kind of lead figurines the local artists produced.

Like the "Anatolian Style" cylinder seals used by earlier merchants, the flat lead pieces with linear details resemble contemporary sculpture on the basins at Ebla in North Syria. The flat lead figures are also not exclusively found in Anatolia. They have turned up in widely different areas: at Judeideh in the Amurian, at Ebla in western Syria, and just south of Uruk, and at Tell al-Raqeh c. 150 km still further southeast in Iraq. The moulds to make flat lead figurines with linear details are again, I think, objects belonging to the travelling merchants of this period.

For some good examples, see K. Bittel, Der Chaldeische Kreis - Ein Empire Retrospect, New York, 1981, Pls. between pp. 192-3; W. Orthmann, Der altes Orient (Propyläen Kunstgeschichte 14), Berlin, 1975, Figs. 412-14.

Like the "Anatolian Style" cylinder seals used by earlier merchant, the flat lead pieces with linear details resemble contemporary sculpture on the basins at Ebla in North Syria. The flat lead figures are also not exclusively found in Anatolia. They have turned up in widely different areas: at Judeideh in the Amurian, at Ebla in western Syria, and just south of Uruk, and at Tell al-Raqeh c. 150 km still further southeast in Iraq. The moulds to make flat lead figurines with linear details are again, I think, objects belonging to the travelling merchants of this period.