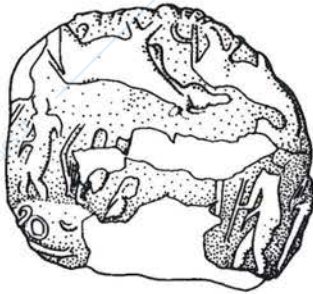
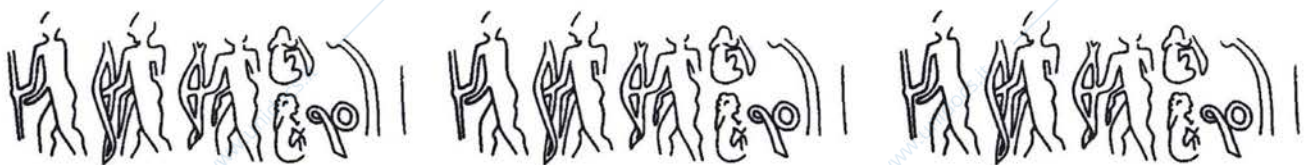


ARTEFACTS OF COMPLEXITY

Tracking the Uruk in the Near East



British School of Archaeology in Iraq



IRAQ ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORTS - 5

ARTEFACTS OF COMPLEXITY: TRACKING THE URUK IN THE NEAR EAST

Edited by J.N. Postgate

BRITISH SCHOOL OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRAQ

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Table of Contents

Preface	v
Contributors	vi
Uruk: key site of the period and key site of the problem <i>Hans J. Nissen</i>	1
The significance of the Uruk sequence at Nineveh <i>Renate V. Gut</i>	17
Tepe Gawra: chronology and socio-economic change in the foothills of Northern Iraq in the era of state formation <i>Mitchell S. Rothman</i>	49
A chronology of Uruk artifacts from Godin Tepe in central Western Iran and implications for the interrelationships between the local and foreign cultures <i>Virginia R. Badler</i>	79
Tell Brak: the 4th Millennium sequence and its implications <i>Joan Oates</i>	111
'Non-Uruk' developments and Uruk-linked features on the Northern borders of Greater Mesopotamia <i>Marcella Frangipane</i>	123
The Uruk expansion in Anatolia: a Mesopotamian colony and its indigenous host community at Hacinebi, Turkey <i>Gil Stein</i>	149
Scientific analyses of Uruk ceramics from Jerablus Tahtani and other Middle-Upper Euphrates sites <i>Fiona M.K. Stephen and Edgar Peltenburg</i>	173
Jebel Aruda: variations on a Late Uruk domestic theme <i>Govert van Driel</i>	191
Contacts between the 'Uruk' world and the Levant during the Fourth Millennium BC: evidence and interpretation <i>Graham Philip</i>	207
Uruk into Egypt: imports and imitations <i>Toby A.H. Wilkinson</i>	237
Indices	
Sites and geographical names	249
Pottery styles, wares, etc.	251
Time spans	254
Persons	254
General	255

Preface

The papers in this volume all derive from the authors' contributions to a conference with the same title held in Manchester in November 1998. In addition to the 11 papers whose written version is included here we heard contributions from Johannes Boese on Tell Sheikh Hassan, Robyn Stocks and Jane Moon on Bahrain, and Holly Pittman on Uruk glyptic, and the proceedings were introduced and summed up in stimulating fashion by Andrew Sherratt standing in at short notice as our external moderator.

* * * *

The late 4th Millennium in South Mesopotamia is universally known as the "Uruk Period" because it is at Uruk that the German excavations have exposed the most remarkable manifestations of this complex society, in the shape of architecture and artefacts, and of the social order expressed most tellingly in the invention and development of cuneiform script. Although it is evident that many other south Mesopotamian settlements shared in this culture, at the major urban centres the Uruk Period levels tend to be buried under metres of later occupation, so that the best known contemporary site is the small town at Tell Uqair, and even at Uruk itself our knowledge of the period is largely confined to the exceptional agglomeration of public architecture. Within Iraq, therefore, many aspects of the Uruk Period remain poorly known and understood.

In recent decades, however, artefacts and indeed entire settlements which look as though they have been transported on a magic carpet from South Mesopotamia have been uncovered in places as far apart as the Mahi Dasht in Iran and the Euphrates in South-eastern Turkey. Some of these settlements seem to be entire new foundations, which it is hard not to attribute to traders or colonists from the south. Others have sectors within them which suggest that there was an "Uruk enclave" within a pre-existing local settlement, while further afield the Uruk presence may be reflected solely in certain characteristic artefacts. The conference at Manchester brought together a combination of presentations on some of the most significant individual sites with regional surveys of the Levant and Egypt, placing emphasis on the artefactual evidence and its interpretation. Several of our contributors had also recently participated in a School of American Research Advanced Seminar on the Uruk period organized by Mitchell Rothman in Santa Fe, which focussed rather on more abstract issues. We are very grateful to them for agreeing to revisit the period from a different angle, and hope that the present volume will form a useful contrasting approach to the Uruk. The proceedings of the Santa Fe conference are due to appear in November 2001 under the title *Uruk Mesopotamia and its Neighbors: Cross-cultural interactions in the era of state formation*, edited by Mitchell Rothman (Santa Fe: SAR Press).

* * * *

The conference was co-sponsored by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq and the University of Manchester, and we are very grateful to the British Academy for their subvention towards the cost of bringing speakers from abroad. For the smooth running of the conference and accommodation we are very grateful to our colleagues in Manchester, in particular Stuart Campbell, joint organizer of the conference, to the staff and students of the Department of Art History and Archaeology, to Elizabeth Healey and the staff of Ashburne Hall, and to Honor Giles who administered the conference with gentle efficiency. This volume was initially typeset by Anna Lethbridge, and the illustrations scanned and edited by Gary Reynolds Typesetting.

* * * *

Two final remarks to the user of the volume. Maps of Uruk sites will be found in the articles of Rothman (p. 53), Stein (p. 156), and Philip (p. 207). In the Index of sites references to these maps are listed first in italics. The indices are intended to be comprehensive for proper names. It is hoped that the lists of ceramic, chronological and general terms will be found helpful, but completeness and consistency is not achievable. Note in particular that site names may feature not only in the index of sites but also in the sections on pottery and/or time spans.

Nicholas Postgate

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URUK INTO EGYPT: IMPORTS AND IMITATIONS

Toby A.H. Wilkinson

Egypt's relations with Mesopotamia have a long and complex history. The inspiration that early Egyptian royal art derived from Mesopotamian iconography is well known, and is a subject that has been discussed over the years by many scholars. This paper focuses instead on the artefactual evidence for contact between Uruk Mesopotamia and Predynastic Egypt, and on the underlying factors behind such exchange. To understand the dynamics of this contact, the chronological and social context within which it took place must first be appreciated.

CHRONOLOGY

The Uruk period in Mesopotamia is broadly contemporary with the Predynastic period in Egypt: more specifically, the three phases of the Upper Egyptian Predynastic sequence termed Naqada I, Naqada II and Naqada III. These phases are named after the site of Naqada, located some 30 km north-north-east of the modern tourist town of Luxor. Together with the towns of This (near modern Girga) and Hierakonpolis (15 km north of Edfu), Naqada emerges as a leading centre of Predynastic Egypt. Here, Flinders Petrie excavated extensive cemeteries dating to the Predynastic period (Petrie and Quibell 1896). The material from these cemeteries, especially the pottery, enabled Petrie (1901) and subsequent generations of Egyptologists to establish a relative chronology for the Predynastic period.

Naqada I is dated very broadly between c. 4000 and c. 3600 BC; Naqada II spans the period from c. 3600 to c. 3200 BC. Naqada III, although strictly speaking a period defined by a cultural assemblage, is generally used to refer to the span of time separating the end of Naqada II (defined in cultural terms) and the formation of the Egyptian state (a political event), in other words c. 3200 to c. 3050 BC (cf. Wilkinson 1996: 9-15). While the transmission of iconographic motifs - and perhaps also the distinctive style of niched, mudbrick architecture termed by Egyptologists 'palace-façade' - seems to have occurred most intensively during the late Uruk period or Naqada III, the artefactual evidence for contacts between Egypt and Mesopotamia is concentrated in the Naqada II period. Since Petrie's pioneering excavations, studies of cemetery material have enabled scholars to subdivide the principal periods of the Upper Egyptian Predynastic

sequence (Kaiser 1957; Hendrickx 1996; Wilkinson 1996). Hence, Naqada II is now split into four shorter phases, termed IIB, IIC, IID1 and IID2 (following Hendrickx 1996; phase IIa, as identified by Kaiser, is now generally recognised as belonging at the end of the preceding Naqada I period). In absolute terms, these phases may be dated very approximately as follows.

- Naqada IIB 3600-3500 BC
- Naqada IIC 3500-3300 BC
- Naqada IID1 3300-3250 BC
- Naqada IID2 3250-3200 BC

In Mesopotamia, the third quarter of the fourth millennium BC seems to be characterised by the first expansion of the Uruk heartland (presumed to be the southern alluvium) into its northern periphery (Rothman, this volume), as attested at Tell Sheikh Hassan on the Upper Euphrates (Boese 1995), Tell Brak (Oates, this volume) and Hacinebi Tepe (Stein, this volume).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: UPPER EGYPT IN NAQADA II

The third quarter of the fourth millennium BC was a period of significant socio-political and economic development in Upper Egypt, just as it was in Mesopotamia. Recent archaeological discoveries make it clear that, by the end of the Naqada I period (about 3600 BC), the ideology and institution of kingship were already emerging at a few key centres in Upper Egypt. To judge from the mortuary record, This (its necropolis was situated at nearby Abydos), Naqada and Hierakonpolis led the way in such developments. By Naqada IIC, all three centres had probably become the capitals of larger, regional polities (Kemp 1989: fig. 8). At each site, the local rulers were buried in high-status, mudbrick-lined tombs. At Naqada (Kemp 1973: 38-42) and Hierakonpolis (Adams 1996), these were situated in elite cemeteries, separated from the burial-grounds serving the general population. In one famous instance, the burial of a local ruler was made yet more distinctive, in a unique fashion: the interior walls of the mudbrick-lined tomb were plastered and decorated with ritual scenes. This is the Painted Tomb (T100) at Hierakonpolis, believed to have been the tomb of a ruler of the Hierakonpolis region (Quibell and Green 1902: 20-3, 54; Case and Payne 1962; Payne 1973). It is dated to Naqada IIC (c. 3400 BC). The Hierakonpolis Painted



Fig. 1. Sherd from
Badari Cemetery 3800
(Spur 16).
Petrie Museum of
Egyptian Archaeology,
London (UC 9796).

Tomb provides a good starting point for this discussion of 'Uruk into Egypt', because one of the elements in the decorative scheme is the well-known motif of dominance termed 'the master of the beasts'. Although present in an Egyptian tomb, this motif is clearly derived from Mesopotamian iconography (Smith 1992: 235-8). In fact, some of the closest parallels come from Susa (Amiet 1980: pl. 14.239). It is not intended to repeat discussion of such iconographic borrowings here. What is interesting, for the purposes of the present paper, is the social context in which such borrowings took place. This context has implications for the artefactual evidence as well.

The regional élites of Naqada II Upper Egypt were engaged in a concerted programme of status demarcation and status display. Iconography served to display status through the medium of art (Wilkinson 1999: 31-4); the conspicuous consumption of prestige commodities, especially imported goods, achieved just the same. One of the most distinctive types of pottery indicative of a Naqada IIC date is the wavy-handled jar (Bourriau 1981: 132-3). Vessels of this form were made by Egyptian potters, but were, in origin, imitations of imported Palestinian vessels. Only a few certain Palestinian imports have been excavated, for example at Naqada (Payne 1993: 130-1). Yet the impact that such imports had on the status- and fashion-conscious Upper Egyptian élites can be gauged by the fact that imitations of the Palestinian jars gave rise to a whole new class of Egyptian pottery.

IMPORTS AND IMITATIONS: POTTERY VESSELS

Imports from Mesopotamia reaching Upper Egypt may have resulted in a similar phenomenon. In the Naqada II period, pottery was clearly more than a utilitarian product. It could also serve to display or reinforce status, when placed in the grave of a deceased person. In particular, this seems to have been the case with more elaborate types of pottery. Piriform jars of marl clay, decorated in red ochre with complex natural or ritual scenes, and provided with triangular lug-handles for suspension, may have been produced in a few specialist workshops, for an élite market. Spouted jars of red-polished, Nile clay have likewise been found in a limited number of graves and may represent another type to which access was restricted. In both cases, the Egyptian potters seem to have been copying foreign imports (contra Hendrickx and Bavay, forthcoming), not in these cases from Palestine, but from Mesopotamia.

Four-lugged jars

The impact that imported four-lugged jars must have made on the tastes of the Upper Egyptian élites can be seen clearly in the archaeological record. Although by no means common, decorated vessels with triangular lug-handles are nevertheless one of the diagnostic types for a late Naqada II (IID1-IID2) date in Upper Egypt (cf. Kaiser 1957: pl. 23, centre). As in the case of the

Palestinian wavy-handled jars which were subsequently copied by Egyptian potters, we have very few examples of the imported Mesopotamian four-lugged jars that may have provided the inspiration for Egyptian decorated ware vessels. To date, only two such imports have been positively identified.

Both examples were found in the Badari region of Middle Egypt. The first instance of a Mesopotamian import was found in the Predynastic Cemetery 3800, situated on Spur 16 of the low desert near the village of Badari itself (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: pl. XL). The sherd was collected from the surface debris, so had probably been thrown out from a nearby, plundered grave. The other graves in the cemetery suggest a date of mid-Naqada II, probably IIC. The sherd is now in the collection of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London (UC 9796). It is one of the clearest examples of an Uruk artefact found in Egypt (Fig. 1). The fabric is dense and hard, with mineral inclusions. The colour of the break is pale grey-buff, changing to pinkish-buff at the edges. The vessel is coated with a red slip, quite different from the micaceous haematite slip so common on indigenous Egyptian Predynastic pottery. The slip on the Badari sherd is duller, and more of a pinkish-red. It has been polished with uneven strokes, giving a rather crude finish. An incised cord pattern runs around the neck of the jar; once again, this has been rather hastily executed. Small relief studs have been applied in a line beneath this pattern. Both the incised decoration and the line of applied studs are interrupted by triangular lug-handles. Close parallels for the Badari sherd are known from a number of Mesopotamian sites. A vessel from Choga Mish (III-477), dated to the 'Protoliterate' or late Uruk period, shows a similar red wash and smoothed surface (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, II: pl. 120.C); while a red-slipped four-lugged jar with incised hatched band and appliqué studs from the Ninevite IV level at Nineveh (Gut, this volume, p. 39, Fig. 17:9) provides perhaps the closest parallel for the Badari sherd. Other vessels of the same type have been found at Susa level 18 (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, I: table 8) and Tello (Mark 1998: fig. 15.B, after Genouillac 1934: pl. 25.2), among other sites.

The second imported four-lugged jar was excavated a short distance to the north of Badari, in the Predynastic Cemetery 1600-1800 at Mostagedda. Grave 1837 contained just one vessel, a small jar with four lug-handles and a line of incised notches below the neck (Fig. 2; Brunton 1937: pl. 32.2). It is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Journal d'Entrée 52848). The excavator described the ware as 'brown with a thick cream slip' (Brunton 1937: pl. 35.24). Because the grave contained just this one artefact, it is impossible to date the context precisely. However, the burials in the vicinity suggest a date of mid-Naqada II (perhaps IIC or IID1). The site of Choga Mish provides close parallels for this vessel as well, including a jar (III-401) with traces of cream slip (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, II: pl. 114.C). Perhaps more



Fig. 2. Four-lugged jar from Mostagedda grave 1837. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JdE 52848) (after Brunton 1937: pl. 35.24)

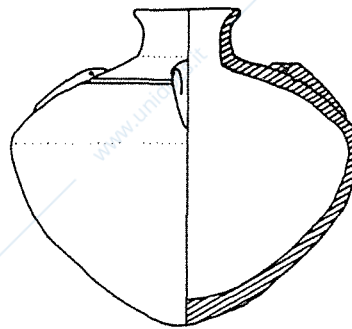


Fig. 3. Four-lugged jar from Habuba Kabira (after Mark 1998: fig. 15.A, itself after Sørensen 1977: pl. 18.124)

significant for the question of Egyptian-Mesopotamian contacts is a parallel for the Mostagedda vessel found at Habuba Kabira, the Uruk 'colony site' on the Upper Euphrates (Fig. 3; Mark 1998: 29, fig. 15.A, after Sørensen 1977: pl. 18.124). Once again, the Mesopotamian parallels are dated to the 'Protoliterate' or late Uruk period.

In discussions of foreign imports from Predynastic Egypt, a third four-lugged jar is often cited (e.g. Kantor 1992: 15), namely a vessel from grave 5112 at Matmar, a Predynastic site which lies a few kilometres to the north of Mostagedda. The vessel is now in the British Museum (EA 63689). Despite its un-Egyptian appearance (Brunton 1948: pl. 12), first-hand study indicates that it is a locally-made imitation of a Mesopotamian form. It is hand-made from a very rough, brown ware of alluvial clay, heavily chaff-tempered. The fabric is soft and very friable, and the manufacture is crude: the mouth of the vessel is far from circular, the body colour varies widely (indicating uneven firing conditions), while the base shows some large cracks where the clay has contracted during drying or firing. Contrary to the excavator's comments (Brunton 1948: pl. 12; followed by Kantor 1992: 15), the simple, hole-mouth vessel never had a neck: the upper part shows no signs of breakage. It seems highly unlikely that such a vessel would - or could - have been transported over a long distance. Nevertheless, it indicates the appeal that Mesopotamian ceramic forms had in Predynastic Egypt. A vessel from Choga Mish (III-226) provides a good parallel for the shape (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, II: pl. 120.D), as does an example from level VI of the Eanna sequence at Uruk (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, I: table 8). Ironically, the Matmar vessel



Fig. 4. Spouted jar from Mostagedda Cemetery 1600-1800. British Museum, London (EA 63003).

comes a securely-dated archaeological context (unlike the genuine imports found at Badari and Mostagedda). Grave 5112 at Matmar is dated to Naqada IIC-D1 (Hendrickx 1993; Wilkinson 1996), and belonged to a child. Other artefacts found in the burial included a cowrie shell, galena and malachite (Brunton 1948: pl. X). Inherited status was clearly a feature of Predynastic society in the mid-Naqada II period, even in a place like Matmar, comparatively remote from the centres of developing political and economic power.

The four-lugged vessels from Badari and Mostagedda prove that genuine imports from Mesopotamia were reaching Middle Egypt during the middle of the fourth millennium BC. The locally-made imitation from Matmar suggests that, if genuine imports were unavailable or beyond one's limited means, a poorly-made copy was the next best thing.

Spouted jars

Spouted jars are a comparatively rare, but distinctive form of Upper Egyptian Predynastic pottery, found in graves dated to Naqada II and early Naqada III. Although, until the present study, none of the examples from Egypt had been positively identified as a Mesopotamian import, the likelihood that the form derived from Uruk antecedents was clear to scholars (but

note Hendrickx and Bavay, forthcoming, for an alternative view). As one leading scholar commented, 'it seems unlikely that such a specific form would have been invented independently in Egypt' (Kantor 1992: 14) when it is a well-known element of the late Uruk ceramic repertoire. Now, the 'missing link' between the Uruk antecedents and the Egyptian imitations may have come to light. First-hand inspection of a spouted jar in the British Museum (EA 63003) suggests that it is a true import (Fig. 4). Like the other vessels of confirmed Mesopotamian origin, it comes from the Badari region of Middle Egypt. It was found on the surface next to a plundered grave in Cemetery 1600-1800 at Mostagedda. Although the original context is lost, the general date of the burials in the cemetery spans the Naqada II period.

Three factors point to a likely foreign origin: fabric, technology and shape. The fabric looks decidedly un-Egyptian. It is hard, dense and non-porous; both the surface and the break show small fragments of limestone and a few particles of mica. The break is salmon pink in colour, while the exterior surface ranges from grey-buff on the spout to salmon pink on the base. In contrast to vessels of hard pink ware made in Egypt, the spouted jar from Mostagedda shows a high degree of chaff temper. Chaff marks are very noticeable on the surface and are also visible in the break. In terms of technology, the ves-

sel shows distinct signs of turning in the area of the junction between the main body and the neck. The neck was formed separately and was clearly turned. The spout is hand-made, and was shaped by scraping with a knife, as was the main body of the vessel. The surface has been very well smoothed, and there are traces of a red slip. The burnishing strokes are horizontal above the waist, more vertical or diagonal on the lower part of the vessel. The shape seems to have been designed to keep the contents cool and prevent excess evaporation. Hence the vessel walls are thick, and the spout has only a narrow channel for pouring. The neck is very narrow and the rim flares outwards. This shape contrasts with clear Egyptian examples of spouted jars where the neck is usually wider and the walls much thinner. Mesopotamian parallels for the Mostagedda spouted jar have been found at Choga Mish (III-692, Delougaz and Kantor 1996, I: fig. 12) and, perhaps more significantly, at Habuba Kabira (Strommenger 1975: 163, fig. 6); both contexts are dated to the late Uruk period.

The shape of imported spouted jars — or, perhaps, the status associations of the commodity they contained — clearly inspired Egyptian potters to produce imitations. The copies are usually of standard Upper Egyptian polished red ware, made from Nile clay (which is rather porous) and coated with a micaceous haematite slip. The distribution of Egyptian-made spouted jars is telling. Of the fifteen examples with known provenance, five come from graves in the Badari region, three from graves in the Abydos region, and seven from the single site of Naqada (see Appendix 1). Significant is the concentration of examples in two of the leading centres of Predynastic Upper Egypt: both the Abydos region and Naqada were at the forefront of socio-political and economic developments in Naqada II.

IMPORTS AND IMITATIONS: ARTEFACTS OF COMPLEXITY

During the course of the Predynastic period, the process of political and economic centralisation gathered pace in Upper Egypt. The archaeological evidence suggests that, at the beginning of the process in late Naqada I, the three regional centres of This, Naqada and Hierakonpolis were fairly evenly balanced in terms of importance and influence, with Hierakonpolis perhaps enjoying a small advantage. At the end of the process, marked by the formation of the Egyptian state, the Abydos region emerged supreme, and the rulers of This became the first kings of Egypt. However, between these two points, in Naqada IIB-IIC, there is at least some evidence that the site of Naqada and its rulers were temporarily in the ascendant (Wilkinson, forthcoming). The reason for this probably lies in the fact that the town of Naqada controlled access to the gold reserves in the eastern desert (Trigger et al. 1983: 39; Wilkinson 1999: 37). Indeed, the ancient Egyptian name for Naqada was Nubt ('the golden'). Exploitation of these gold reserves must have made the

rulers of Naqada prosperous and powerful, especially when Egypt was drawn into the system of high-value international exchange. The international exchange network which had existed in the Near East from at least Neolithic times (Sherratt 1998) must have been stimulated by the first Uruk expansion into northern Mesopotamia and south-eastern Anatolia, itself a phenomenon which seems to have been driven by a desire to gain access to sources of precious commodities. It is telling that the rise of Naqada, as attested by the earliest burials in the élite Cemetery T, coincides with the first Uruk expansion; moreover, in both cases, the key seems to have been access to metals. Within this context of socio-economic development, it should come as little surprise that the cemeteries of Naqada provide the most abundant evidence for foreign influences during this period. Hence, it is at Naqada that we see the earliest imported Palestinian wavy-handled jar, the most numerous Mesopotamian-inspired spouted jars, and the earliest examples of imported artefacts of complexity: cylinder seals.

Cylinder seals

Cylinder seals are rare in Predynastic Egypt, with only 17 examples known. Of these, only four are certain imports; the rest are probably locally-made Egyptian imitations. Two of the imported cylinder seals come from secure archaeological contexts at Naqada; a third is probably from Naqada too, although it was bought on the Luxor antiquities market a couple of years after Petrie had excavated at Naqada. The remaining import was excavated at Matmar.

The cylinder seal from Naqada grave 1863, dated by its pottery to Naqada IIB-IIC, is now in the Petrie Museum at University College London (UC 5374). The seal is carved from brown limestone, and the incised decoration consists of lentoid shapes with curved lines above and below (Fig. 5; Boehmer 1974: Abb. 1). One of the lentoid shapes has two small projections at the back, which resemble a fish-tail. The other lentoid shape could also be interpreted as a fish. Hence, the design as a whole seems to suggest fish swimming in water. Parallel designs are known from a number of Mesopotamian sites, including Susa, Tello, Tepe Gawra, Ur and Tell Brak.

The second cylinder seal from Naqada was found in



Fig. 5. Cylinder seal from Naqada grave 1863. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London (UC 5374) (after Boehmer 1974: Abb. 1).

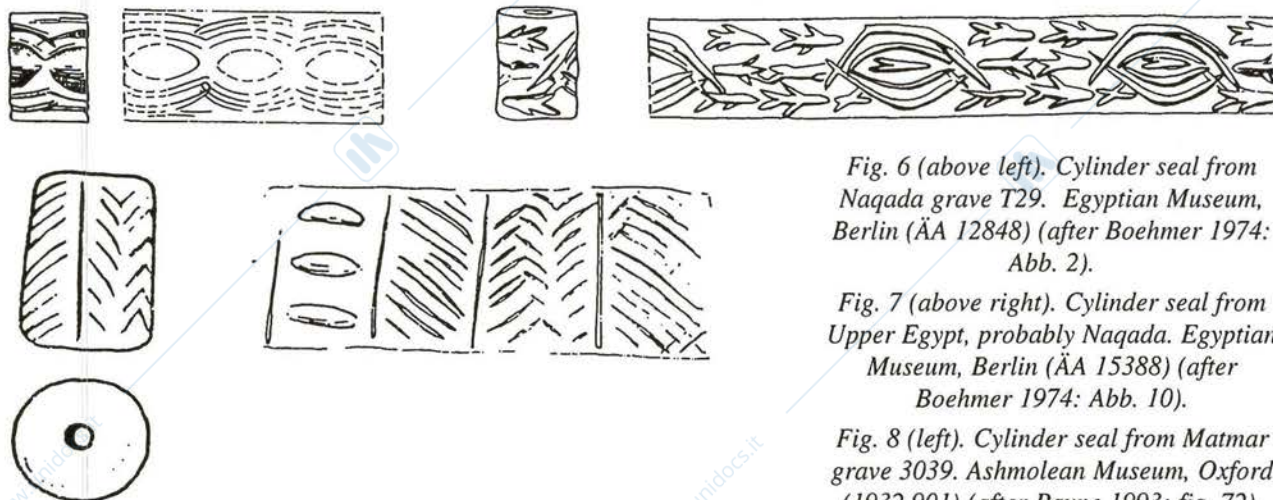


Fig. 6 (above left). Cylinder seal from Naqada grave T29. Egyptian Museum, Berlin (ÄA 12848) (after Boehmer 1974: Abb. 2).

Fig. 7 (above right). Cylinder seal from Upper Egypt, probably Naqada. Egyptian Museum, Berlin (ÄA 15388) (after Boehmer 1974: Abb. 10).

Fig. 8 (left). Cylinder seal from Matmar grave 3039. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1932.901) (after Payne 1993: fig. 72).

grave T29, dated to Naqada IIC. The seal is also of limestone, and its decoration is very similar to that of the seal from Naqada grave 1863 (Fig. 6; Boehmer 1974: Abb. 2). Unfortunately, the present location of the cylinder seal from Naqada grave T29 is not known. It was formerly in Berlin (ÄA 12848), but is now lost. The context in which it was found is highly significant when considering the circumstances in which artefacts of complexity were imported from Mesopotamia into Egypt during the middle of the fourth millennium BC. As stated above, Cemetery T at Naqada was an élite cemetery, reserved for the interments of the local rulers. The establishment of separate élite cemeteries marks a crucial stage in the development of political structures in Upper Egypt. Grave T29 is one of the earliest burials in Cemetery T. Its owner not only expressed his status by the location of his tomb, but also by its contents. The cylinder seal found in T29 identifies the tomb owner as an administrator, someone with access to the mechanisms and artefacts of rule.

A third cylinder seal imported from Mesopotamia is unprovenanced but most probably came from Naqada, too. It is now in Berlin (ÄA 15388). Carved from light grey limestone, the seal bears an incised design of lentoid shapes with curved lines above and below, alternating with groups of fish (Fig. 7; Boehmer 1974: Abb. 10). Close parallels have been found at Susa, dated to the late Uruk period.

A cylinder seal of cream limestone was among the artefacts found in grave 3039 at Matmar (Brunton 1948: 18), dated to Naqada IIC-D1. The seal, now in the Ashmolean Museum (1932.901) measures 2.3 cm in height and 1.7 cm in diameter. The incised design is arranged in four vertical panels: two are cross-hatched, one is filled with a herring-bone pattern, and the fourth with three lentoid shapes (Fig. 8; Brunton 1948: pl. XV.5; Boehmer 1974: Abb. 4; Payne 1993: fig. 72). There has been some dispute about the provenance of the seal. Boehmer (1974: 513) found no specific Mesopotamian parallels for the design and identified the seal as an

Egyptian imitation, but Payne (1993: 203) was clear in identifying it as a genuine import. The material of the seal - limestone - certainly points to a foreign origin, since most early Egyptian cylinder seals were carved from steatite, ivory or ebony.

A cylinder seal of blue-green glazed composition (Boehmer 1974: Abb. 15), acquired on the antiquities market by Borchardt in 1911 and now in Berlin (ÄA 20099) has been cited as an import (most recently by Pittman 1998). However, given the material and the execution of the design - three rows of recumbent lions - the seal is almost certainly an Egyptian imitation (Boehmer 1974: 505-6).

Like the four-lugged jars and spouted jars, cylinder seals imported from Mesopotamia were copied by Egyptian craftsmen. The Egyptians adapted the original designs to suit their own tastes, and eventually produced seals with entirely Egyptian designs. Like the style of niched mudbrick architecture borrowed from Mesopotamia, cylinder seals eventually became a standard component of Early Dynastic Egyptian élite culture. Why were cylinder seals adopted and adapted, whereas most of the Mesopotamian motifs found in early Egyptian iconography were abandoned after they had served their purpose? The answer must lie in the administrative practice that cylinder seals represented. As we have seen, Upper Egypt in Naqada II was undergoing a process of rapid socio-political and economic change. Political and economic power were becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few élites. They displayed and reinforced their status, inter alia, by means of prestige artefacts, often imported. But the maintenance of political and economic power also requires administrative mechanisms: controlling peoples' lives means controlling their livelihoods. To put it simply, economic control requires documentation. In the sphere of documentation, especially accounting, Mesopotamia had an early lead over Egypt. Throughout its long history, Egyptian culture was adept at borrowing ideas from abroad if they

were useful, and adapting them to its own needs. This is particularly true of cylinder seals, and the concepts of ownership and economic control which they embodied. As an artefact of administration, the cylinder seal was exceptionally effective. With the emerging Egyptian élites intent upon securing their own power, the whole-hearted adoption and survival of the cylinder seal was guaranteed.

Stamp seal

The cylinder seals deposited in graves at Naqada and elsewhere were not the earliest artefacts of complexity to find their way from Mesopotamia to Egypt. A stamp seal from grave 7501 at Naga ed-Deir (Lythgoe and Dunham 1965: 318-19, fig. 142.e; Podzorski 1988: 262-3, fig. 3; Mark 1998: fig. 25), now in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at the University of California (UCLMA 6-3919), may be seen as an early fore-runner. The cemetery of Naga ed-Deir lies on the opposite bank of the Nile from Abydos. It seems to have alternated with Abydos as the cemetery serving the Predynastic town of This (Wilkinson 1999: 354-5). Grave 7501 at Naga ed-Deir can be dated by its pottery to Naqada IIB or IIC, roughly contemporary with grave 1863 at Naqada which yielded an imported cylinder seal. Grave 7501 was the burial of a mature woman, unremarkable except for one artefact, a hemi-spheroid stamp seal of hard, shiny white limestone.

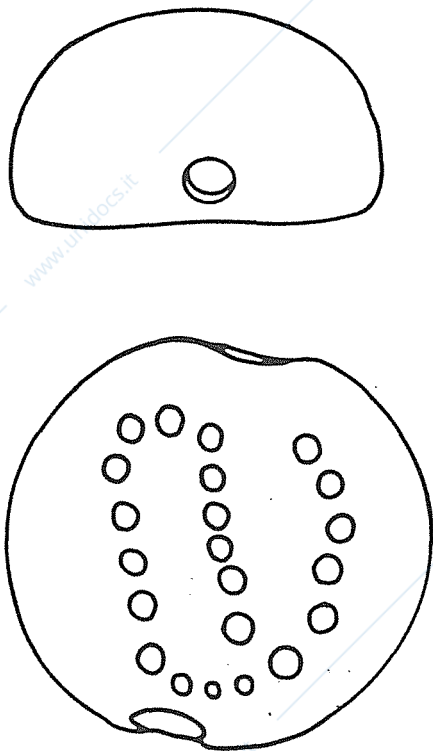


Fig. 9. Stamp seal from Naga ed-Deir grave 7501. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California (UCLMA 6-3919) (after Mark 1998: fig. 25.A, itself after Podzorski 1988: fig. 3).

It is pierced through, and the underside bears an abstract design of 22 small circular pits, in the shape of the letter 'e' (Fig. 9). The pits were produced by drilling. There can be no doubt that this seal was imported from Mesopotamia, and probably from eastern Mesopotamia (cf. Podzorski 1988: 263). Close parallels, both in shape and decoration, have been found at Tepe Gawra, Tepe Giyan, Nuzi (Fig. 10), and Choga Mish (Delougaz and Kantor 1996, II: pl. 41.J). The examples from Nuzi (Homès-Fredericq 1970: nos 416-18, 421) were previously dated to the Jemdet Nasr period, but Pittman (1998) has pointed out that this dating should now be revised to the late middle Uruk, contemporary with Naqada IIB in Upper Egypt. The appearance of drilled seals in the late middle Uruk period may mark the introduction of a new drilling technology (Pittman 1998).

To date, the Naga ed-Deir artefact is the only example of a Mesopotamian stamp seal found in Egypt. Its presence at Naga ed-Deir is not entirely surprising, since the Abydos region was one of the three main centres of socio-political developments in the Predynastic period. Other aspects of the find, however, are more puzzling. The inclusion of an artefact of administration in an otherwise unremarkable burial of a mature woman raises important questions. By the time it was buried, the seal may perhaps have become a treasured family possession, disassociated from its original function; or it may never

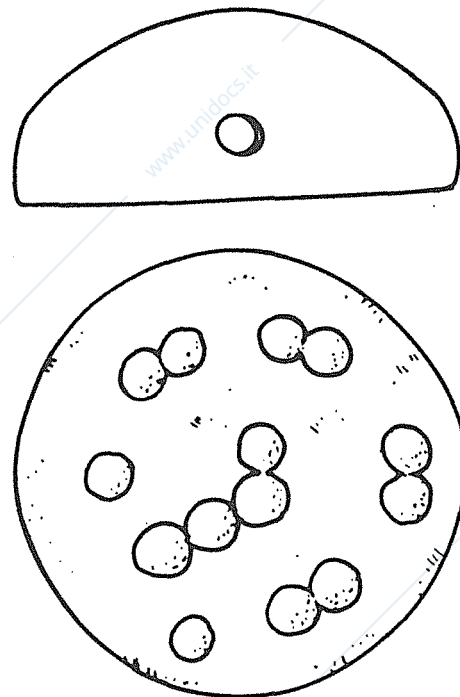


Fig. 10. Stamp seal from Nuzi (after Mark 1998: fig. 25.B, itself after Starr 1937: pl. 40A).

have served as an administrative artefact within Egypt. It may simply have been viewed as a curio, an exotic object to be valued for its rarity.

Tokens?

The Mesopotamian cylinder seals found in Egypt represent not just the importation of exotic baubles for conspicuous display, but the adoption of a complex administrative system. Clay tokens constituted another important mechanism of economic administration and accounting used in Mesopotamia in the Uruk period. Tokens have been recovered from the Uruk 'colony sites' at Tell Brak, Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda, and in the Amuq Plain (Schmandt-Besserat 1992: 39). It is not entirely implausible that such tokens may have reached Egypt in the Naqada II-III periods, together with other artefacts of complexity and influences from Mesopotamia. Indeed, excavations of Predynastic mortuary and settlement contexts in Egypt have occasionally unearthed small, cone-shaped objects of fired clay, some examples with traces of red pigment (e.g. three cones from Abadiya tomb B101, Ashmolean E.942-4, Payne 1993: cat. nos 1948, 1949, 1950). Such objects have usually been identified as gaming pieces (Payne 1993: 235); this was also the case in early site reports of Mesopotamian excavations, where 'authors who risked an interpretation identified the tokens as amulets or game pieces' (Schmandt-Besserat 1992: 8). It is possible that the same mis-identification may have plagued Egyptologists as well. It is also probable that, as in the Mesopotamian case before tokens were recognised, similar objects from Egyptian excavations may have been 'mostly ignored' (Schmandt-Besserat 1992: 195). There are good Mesopotamian parallels for the enigmatic objects found in Egyptian contexts. A cone-shaped token covered in red pigment, like the examples from Abadiya, is known from Arpachiyah; and tokens are attested as grave goods both here and at Tepe Gawra (Schmandt-Besserat 1992: 106-7).

There is good reason to suppose that the practice of economic administration represented by cylinder seals spread from Mesopotamia to Egypt. It is certainly possible that a mechanism of accounting followed the same route.

ROUTE OF TRANSMISSION

There has been considerable debate about the route Mesopotamian imports and influences followed to reach Egypt. Some scholars (e.g. Rice 1990; Smith 1992) have favoured a southern route around the Arabian peninsula, up the Red Sea and along the Wadi Hammamat to Upper Egypt. Others (Moorey 1990) have argued for a northern route via the Uruk outposts in Syria, and thence by land or sea to the Nile Delta. There is no question that the latter, northern route is the shorter by far. Moreover, the Uruk colony sites in northern Mesopotamia and southern Anatolia provide staging posts for a route linking Khuzistan and southern Mesopotamia to Egypt. By con-

trast, the southern, round-Arabia route has very little archaeological evidence to support it. Two main points have been advanced in support of a southern route. First, rock-cut pictures in the Wadi Hammamat itself show high-prowed boats of supposedly 'Mesopotamian' form. However, the identification of these boat glyphs as Mesopotamian craft is by no means universally accepted. Second, the frequency of Mesopotamian imports and influences in Upper Egypt, particularly at the site of Naqada (which seems to have commanded access to the Wadi Hammamat), is highlighted.

There are powerful answers to this latter point. First, We should expect to find most evidence of Mesopotamian influence in Upper Egypt, since that is where the concentration of political and economic power associated with the rise of social complexity was most advanced. An iconography of power, employing some motifs borrowed from Mesopotamia, was being developed by the rulers of Predynastic Upper Egypt, not by their Lower Egyptian counterparts, if such figures even existed. We should also assume that the rulers of the Abydos and Naqada regional polities were the intended recipients of most of the artefacts of complexity imported from Mesopotamia. Upper Egyptian rulers needed administrative mechanisms to maintain their authority. Hence, it should come as no surprise to find an imported stamp seal in the Abydos region, and the earliest cylinder seals at Naqada.

Second, recent excavations at Buto in the north-western Delta have provided definitive evidence for contacts between Egypt and northern Syria at the end of Naqada II, in the form of a few sherds of spiral reserved slip pottery (Köhler 1998: pl. 68, photographic pl. 11). Such pottery is characteristic of the ceramic repertoire of the Amuq Plain, itself a region in close contact with the Uruk sites on the Upper Euphrates. The discovery of these sherds at Buto indicates that a northern, possibly maritime, trade route was in existence during the third quarter of the fourth millennium BC. As we have seen, all the examples of Uruk imports found in Egypt come from funerary contexts. Prestige, exotic objects were highly valued, and were interred in graves to express the status of the deceased. To date, no burials dating to the period of either Uruk expansion have been located at Buto; excavations here have uncovered only settlement remains. The fourth millennium BC graves at Buto, if they exist, may well contain further evidence of Egyptian-Mesopotamian contacts.

Third, the discovery of Mesopotamian imports - one seal and three pots - in Middle Egypt more-or-less proves a northern route of transmission. It shows that objects were travelling upstream towards the courts of Predynastic Upper Egypt. It also argues strongly against a southern, round-Arabia route. If trade was following the Red Sea route, we would not expect to find Mesopotamian vessels in Middle Egypt.

The Badari region

The peculiar concentration of imports in this politically insignificant region of Egypt is noteworthy. Although never a leading region for socio-economic or political developments, the Badari region seems nevertheless to have prospered throughout the Predynastic period. Communities like Matmar and Mostagedda survived the vicissitudes of political and economic change, leaving a continuous sequence of burials over a period of some two millennia. A key factor favouring this region may have been its geographic location.

As well as commanding a wide expanse of alluvial floodplain, Matmar is situated at a point where the cliffs of the eastern desert approach close to the river, in other words a natural constriction in the course of the Nile. This may have given it a strategic advantage in controlling riverine trade. Goods travelling from sites in the Delta (like Buto) southwards to the courts of Predynastic Upper Egypt had to travel by river, and they had to pass through the Badari region. This seems the best explanation for the unexpected concentration of Mesopotamian imports in this part of Egypt.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, artefacts imported from Mesopotamia and their imitations fall into two categories, pots and seals. The distribution of these two categories is highly significant. All three imported vessels come from the Badari region of Middle Egypt, comparatively remote from the process of state formation; while three out of four imported seals of known provenance and most of the Mesopotamian-inspired pottery (whether decorated, four-lugged jars or spouted jars) come from important Upper Egyptian sites at the heart of this process.

The first Uruk expansion happened to coincide with the rise of complex society in the Nile valley. The exploitation of gold reserves in Egypt's eastern desert

drew the polities of Naqada II Upper Egypt into the wider, international trade in low-weight, high-value commodities (Sherratt 1998). Participation in this exchange network brought imports and ideas from an advanced civilisation (Uruk Mesopotamia) to Egypt at a time when Egypt's own rulers were particularly receptive to such influences. A re-appraisal of the evidence for contacts between Egypt and Mesopotamia suggests that the Near East in the fourth millennium BC was a dynamic melting pot of ideas, characterised by significant cross-cultural exchange. Importation, imitation, emulation: these were the hallmarks of early Egypt's relations with other advanced cultures of the Near East. The artefacts of the Uruk found in Egypt represent merely the archaeologically visible tip of the iceberg, the surviving material manifestations of a much broader phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX 1: EGYPTIAN-MADE PREDYNASTIC SPOUTED JARS OF KNOWN PROVENANCE

site	context	probable date	publication	present location
Matmar	grave 3110	IID2	Brunton 1948: pl. XII.9	Cairo JdE 57428
Matmar	grave 3128	IIC-D1	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Cairo JdE 57435?
Qau	Cemetery 200	?	Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: pl. XXXVIII	?
Badari	Cemetery 3800	?	Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928:pl. XXXVIII	?
Badari	Cemetery 4600	?	Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928:pl. XXXVIII	?
Mahasna	grave H123	IID2-III A1	Ayrton and Loat 1911: pl. XXXVIII	?
Mahasna	grave H131A	IID2	Ayrton and Loat 1911: pl. XXXVIII	?
Hu	grave U 187A	III A1	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Petrie UC 10849
Naqada	grave 145	?	-	Ashmolean 95.397
Naqada	grave 421	IIC	Payne 1993: cat. no. 1043	Ashmolean 95.396
Naqada	grave 1069	?	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Petrie UC 5742
Naqada	grave 1108	?	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Chicago OIC 858
Naqada	grave 1211	IIC	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Petrie UC 5741
Naqada	grave 1619	?	Petrie 1921: pl. XVIII	Petrie
Naqada	grave 1886	IIC-D1	Payne 1993: cat. 704	Ashmolean 95.768

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Toby A.H. Wilkinson

URUK INTO EGYPT: IMPORTS AND IMITATIONS

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Indices

1. Index of sites & geographical names

NB map references are given first in italics; principal discussion of a site is marked in bold. Very frequently recurring names like Syria or Tigris are not taken up.

- Abada/e, Tell 11, 59
 Abadiya 244
 Abr, Tell 174
 Abu Dhahir 53; 43
 Abu Hamid, Tell 207; 220
 Abu Salabikh 156; 5, 7
 Abydos 227, 237, 241, 243-4
 Afghanistan 51
 Afis, Tell 207; 210, 213-4, 217-8
 Afridar 207; 220
 'Ain el-Assawir 207; 225
 Alaca Höyük 125, 129
 Alawiyeh, Tell 174
 Aleppo 208
 Alişar 125, 129
 Altinova 22
 Amarna, Tell 175
 'Amuq (sites) 207; 212, 215, 217, 223, 226, 244
 Anatolia, northern 57
 Arabia 215, 244
 Arad 207; 224
 Arpachiyah 53; 42-3, 60, 244
 Arslantepe 156; 207; 50-1, 53, 55-6, 58, 60, 68-71, **123-148**, 150, 158, 176, 210, 214-5, 219-20, 222, 224, 226
 Assur 3
 Assyria 87
 Atatürk Dam 158
 Azzo, Tell 43
 Babylon 3
 Badari 238-40, 245
 Badia 222
 Birecik 174
 Brak, Tell 156; 17, 22, 23, 42-3, 50-3, 55-7, 66-7, 70-1, 74-7, 81, 84, **111-22**, 123, 126, 150, 152, 224, 237, 241, 244
 Buto see Fara'in
 Byblos 207; 215-8, 220, 224-6
 Carchemish 156; 173-4, 176
 Çatal Höyük 212
 Caucasus 129
 Çayönü 111
 Chioukh see Shioukh
 Chogha Mish 5, 9, 14, 83-4, 86, 89, 239, 241, 243
 Cilicia Stein, 215, 218
 Cizre 53
 Cyprus 208
 Degirmentepe 55, 64-5, 121, 127, 150
 Deh Luran 152
 Deir ez-Zor 121
 Ebla 208
 Edfu 237
 Egypt 208, 215-6, 219, 221, 223, 225, **237-48**
 Elam 129
 El-Kowm (Caracol) 207; 43, 210-2, 221, 223, 225
 Erbil 53; 17
 Ergani 156; 150
 Eski Mosul 53; 17, 20, 21, 58
 Europe 208
 Fara'in, Tell el-, Buto 207; 216, 221, 227, 244-5
 Farukhabad, Tepe 156; 79, 81, 84-5, 112
 Faynan 207; 219
 Gawra, Tepe 53, 156; 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 31, 32-3, 35, 41-3, **49-77**, 121, 126, 176, 241, 243-4
 Gawra VI 57
 Gawra VII 57
 Gawra VIII/VI 76-7
 Gawra VIII 20, 22, 53, 57, 59, 74-7
 Gawra VIII-XIII 36
 Gawra IX 19, 20, 21, 72-5
 Gawra X 72-3
 Gawra XA 20, 51, 66-71
 Gawra XA-IX 40
 Gawra X-IX 22, 56, 59
 Gawra XI 50-1, 66-71
 Gawra XI-IX 19, 20, 21
 Gawra XIA 20, 51, 66-9
 Gawra XIAB 59, 66-9
 Gawra XIA-IX 53, 56, 111
 Gawra XIA-X 112-4, 116, 119
 Gawra XIB 66-7
 Gawra XII 19, 21, 22, 51, 54, 59, 66-7, 111
 Gawra XIIA 51, 54
 Gawra XIII 19, 21, 59
 Geoy Tepe 50, 70-1
 Gerdi Resh 43
 Girga 237
 Giyan, Tepe 243
 Godin Tepe 156; 53, **79-109**, 153
 Grai Resh 53; 17, 18, 20, 22, 41-3, 56, 59, 72-7
 Gumria 53
 Gurdi, Tell 43
 Habuba Kabira 156; 207; 5, 18, 23, 43, 50, 52-3, 56-7, 84, 86-7, 111, 114-5, 126, 151-3, 158, 173, 175-9, 189-91, 209, 218-9, 221-2, 226, 239, 241, 244
 Hacinebi (Tepe) 156; 207; 50-1, 57, 84, 119, 121, 123, 126, **149-169**, 173, 175-9, 210, 214-5, 218, 220, 222, 237
 Hajj, Tell el- 43
 Hajji Firuz Tepe 50
 Hama 207; 210, 214-8, 220, 222-3, 225

- Hamadan 89
 Hammam et-Turkman, Tell 20, 43, 50, 54-5, 57, 64-5, 74-7
 Hamoukar 53, 156; 113, 119
 Hassek (Höyük) 156; 207; 50, 111, 121, 126, 128-9, 151, 158, 174, 212, 220, 222
 Hasseke, Tell 43
 Hatara see Khirbet
 Hawa, Tell al- 53, 156; 17, 20, 21, 22, 42-3, 60, 66-9, 150
 Hierakonpolis 237, 241
 Hit 152
 Homs 215
 Hu 246
 Jawa 207; 221-2
 Jazira, Jezira, Jezireh 51, 58-9, 120, 126, 150, 193, 222
 Jebel Aruda 156; 207; 5, 43, 50, 53, 56-7, 87, 114, 126, 151-2, 158, 173-9, 188-9, **191-205**, 209, 218, 244
 Jebel Maqlub 50
 Jemdet Nasr (Ġemdet Naşr) 3, 114, 173, 176-9
 Jerablus Tahtani 156; **173-190**
 Jordan (Valley) 215, 219-21, 224
 Judeideh, Tell al- 212-3, 216-8
 Kangavar 79
 Kannas see Qannas
 Karababa 174
 Karatut Mevkii 156; 158
 Karrana, Tell 53; 21, 42-3, 111
 Kazane Höyük 156
 Khab(o)ur 53; 22, 51, 53, 119, 121, 126
 Khatuniya 120
 Khazir Su 53
 Khirbet Baiar 53
 Khirbet Hatara 53; 20, 23, 43
 Khirbet Kerak 216, 218
 Khirbet Yosef 53
 Khosr River 53
 Khurruk 53
 Khuzistan 244
 Korucutepe 156;
 Kudish Saghir 42-3
 Kültepe 87, 173
 Kum Ocağı 84
 Kura-Araxes 125
 Kurban Höyük 156; 51, 150, 158, 175
 Lagash 14
 Lebanon 210
 Leilan, Tell 156; 42, 50-1, 55, 150, 158
 Levant **207-235**
 Luxor 237, 241
 Madhhur, Tell 59
 Mahasna 246
 Majnuna 113, 118
 Malatya 125, 128, 130
 Building XXIX 124, 127, 134-7
 Mardikh, Tell 207; 213, 217-8, 223
 Mashnaqa, Tell 43
 Mashrafa see Musharifa
 Matmar 239-42, 245
 Mediterranean 150, 208, 215, 219, 221, 225
 Mishrife s. Musharifa
 Mohammed Arab, Tell 18, 21, 22, 40, 50, 57, 76-7
 Mostagedda 239-41, 245
 Mosul 53; 17
 Mulla Matar 43
 Mureybit 174
 Musharifa, Mishrife, Mashrafa, Tell 53; 20, 35, 42, 55, 66-71, 74-5
 Naga ed-Deir 243
 Naqada 241-2, 244
 Nebi Mend, Tell 207; 213-4, 216-7, 220, 222-3, 225
 Negev 220-1
 Nile Delta 219, 221, 223, 227, 244-5
 Nile (Valley) 215, 225, 243, 245
 Nineveh 53, 156; **17-48**, 50-1, 56-7, 60, 70-3, 76-7, 84, 126, 239
 Deep Sounding 18-20, 25, 27-9, 34, 40, 44-6, 57
 Kuyunjik 17
 Nebi Yunus 17
 North Palace 17, 25
 palace of Ashurnasirpal 17, 25
 South-West Palace 17
 temple of Ishtar 17
 temple of Nabû 17, 25
 trench H 20, 34
 Vaulted Tombs 17, 21, 25
 Nippur 5, 79, 81, 83-6, 89, 114
 Norşun Tepe 156; 22, 51, 55-7, 60, 64-73, 127
 Nuzi 59, 243
 Orontes Valley 214-6, 219, 221, 223, 225
 Oylum Höyük 130
 Palestine 215-6, 219-21, 224-5
 Palmyra 211
 piedmont 51, 53, 58-9
 Qal'at ar-Rus 207; 216-7
 Qalinj Agha 53; 17, 18, 19, 20, 34, 41-2, 59
 Qannas (Kannas), Tell 5, 43, 57
 Qau 246
 Qraya 156; 43, 50, 52, 111, 115, 120
 Rafaan, Rifan, Tell 53; 20, 35, 42
 Ras Shamra 207; 210, 214, 216-8, 225-6
 Red Sea 244
 Rubeidheh 156
 Sabi Abyad, Tell 119, 123
 Samsat 156; 60, 84
 Şanlıurfa 153
 Santa Fe 51, 57, 112, 175
 Seh Gabi 80
 Sheikh Hassan, Tell 156; 207; 43, 50, 52, 57, 60, 74-7, 111, 114, 117, 120-1, 123, 126, 151-2, 158, 173, 175-9, 191, 210-2, 221, 237
 Shelgiy(y)a 53; 43, 64-5

Shioukh Fouqani 174
 Shuna, Tell esh- 207; 219-20, 227
 Sinjar 53
 Si(y)alk 82, 84-5
 Sukas, Tell 207; 214, 217
 Susa 156; 5, 14, 18, 57-9, 82, 84-6, 89, 114, 129,
 151-2, 238-9, 241-2
 Susiana 7, 10, 129
 Syrian steppe 211-2, 221
 Sweyhat, Tell 174
 Ta'as 191
 Tabqa Dam 158, 173-4, 176, 208
 Taurus 126, 129
 Taurus piedmont 149
 Tehran 81
 Tell 'Afar 53
 Tello 89, 151, 239, 241
 Temmi 113, 118
 Tepecik 156; 22, 70-1, 128-9
 Thalathat, (Telul eth-) 53; 20, 42, 55, 68-71
 This 237, 241, 243
 Thuwajj 53
 Tishreen 174-5
 Titriş Höyük 89
 Transcaucasia 82, 89, 125, 129-30
 Tripoli 215
 Tülintepe 22
 Um Hammad, Tell 207; 221
 Umm Qseir 23, 43, 52, 55, 64-5, 68-9, 76-7
 Ur 156; 84, 173, 176-9
 Urmia 50
 Uruk(/Warka) 156; 1-16, 18, 20, 51, 57-8, 84-5, 89,
 114, 116
 Anu 8
 Archaische Siedlung 12
 Bit Resh 8
 Deep Sounding 21
 Eanna 1, 8, 12
 VI 239
 X-VII 20
 XII 20
 XII-IX 22
 K/L XII 9, 11
 Kullaba 8
 Limestone Temple 5
 OXI-XII 11
 Riemchengebäude 60
 Stampflehmgebäude 1
 White Temple 8
 Warka Survey 6
 Wadi Ajij 207; 212
 Wadi Beersheba 207; 220
 Wadi Hammamat 244
 Yarım Höyük 174
 Yiftah'el 207; 226-7
 Yorgan Tepe 42-3
 Zab River, Upper 53

Zagan, Tell 43
 Zagros Mts 14
 Ziyade 43

2. Pottery styles, wares, etc.

'Amuq (E-H) 210, 214
 applied pellet 81
 appliqué 119, 151, 211
 appliqué stud 239
 base
 disk 81, 88
 flat 80-1, 124
 flint-scraped 124
 pedestal 80-1, 88, 226
 ring 81, 88, 114, 222
 string-cut 82, 86-7, 105, 108, 124-5, 127, 220
 beaker 21, 56
 carinated 52, 125, 141
 chaff-faced 141
 mass-produced 140
 red-burnished 52
 with paint 52
 with string-cut base 138
 blob paint 52, 56
 bottle 52, 82, 205
 spouted 128, 145, 152, 195
 with everted rim 226
 bow tie, painted 52, 56
 bowl 136, 216
 angular rim 21
 beaked 128
 bevel(l)ed edge rim 82
 bevel(l)ed rim bowl 5, 8-10, 18-21, 23, 52, 55-7,
 59, 79, 81-2, 84, 86-8, 114, 120, 126, 128, 150-1,
 165, 175-7, 185, 188, 212-3, 215, 217, 223, 225
 bevelled rim conical 114
 carinated 21, 52, 57, 82, 211, 216, 226
 chaff-tempered 19, 21, 55
 club headed 20
 Coba 19, 52, 55, 60, 127, 212-4
 conical 21, 84, 125, 127-8, 138, 151, 211-2
 conical flat-bottomed 127
 conical with pouring lip 23, 115, 211
 conical with string-cut base 220
 cut rim conical 114
 fenestrated 226
 fine-ware 220
 flaring 82-3, 87
 flat based 19, 33, 218
 flint-scraped 52, 55, 125, 127, 138, 150, 220
 grit tempered 89
 hammerhead 57, 150, 175
 hemispherical 212, 216, 226
 high-stemmed 128
 hole mouth 52

- incurved 52
 in-turned rim 81, 83, 88, 217
 inwardly bevelled rim 19, 20, 46
 ledge rim 81
 mass-produced 123-5, 126-8, 137, 140, 143, 220
 open 118
 plain flaring 81, 87-8
 red-slipped 216
 ring base 19
 rounded 56
 shallow 175, 214
 sinuous-sided 226
 small 80, 84
 spouted 128
 straight-sided 218
 v-shaped 219-221
 wheel-made 220
 with bead rim 57, 88, 128
 with channel rim 52
 with corrugated rim 57
 with corrugated surface 57
 with in-flaring rim 57
 with inner ledge 57
 with interior decoration 83
 with in-turned rim 57, 214
 with pedestal foot 226
 with recessed rim 226
 with reserved slip 216-7, 221
 with rolled rim 87-8
 with thickened rim 211
 with spout 52, 56, 211
 with vertical rim 217
- brazier 55
 burial urn 20, 226
 calcite 177, 183, 195
 cannon spout 52, 56
 casserole 21, 39, 47, 57, 115, 117-8, 125, 150, 225
 chaff temper 240; see under ware
 chalice, painted 114
 Chalcolithic, local (Late) 111, 115-6, 120, 126, 152, 160, 224
 channel rim 56
 churn 226
 coil built 221
 cooking pots 80, 89, 115, 128, 151, 166, 195, 214
 corrugation 221
 cup 46
 carinated 56-7
 conical 21, 52, 81-2, 87, 165, 176, 178, 186
 handled 128
 pointed 56
 ribbed 114
 with lip spout 52, 175
 with ribbed rim 20
 with strap handle 5
 with string-cut base 21
 decoration 86
 band, cross-hatched 239
 band, red-painted 218
 burnishing 241
 comb(-incised) 151, 217
 cross-hatching 21, 151, 239
 cut-out 128
 fenestration 226
 fish 241-2
 herring-bone 128
 horizontal notching 86
 incised 86, 130, 151, 211, 239
 incised notches 239
 lion 242
 line painting 175
 mountain goat 83, 108
 ram's horns 83
 red ochre 238
 red pigment 244
 reserved slip see slip
 rope 84, 86
 snake 83
 spiral 212
 spiral reserved slip 244
 vertical burnish 214
 see also appliqué, pattern, slip, stamped
 diagonal scraping 87
 diatom 195
 diopside 177, 184
 double rim (med vessels) 20, 56
 drain pipe 109, 176
 droop spout 52, 83, 212
 finger-nail impression 151
 flask 195
 flower pot 114, 127
 footed vessel 114
 four-lugged vessel 21, 47, 240; see also jar
 funnel 56, 83
 Gawra impressed ware 20
 globular vessel 195
 goblet 195, 205, 211
 grit see under ware
 grog 89
 Hajji Muhammad 119
 Halaf 18
 hammer rim 52
 handle 224
 ledge 214
 strap 87, 151, 195, 214
 twisted 87
 Hassuna 18
 hedgehog 195
 incense burner 56
 inner ledge rim 52
 Jamdat Nasr polychrome 114
 jar 83, 226
 'Abydos' 227
 angle neck(ed) 52, 56

- bulbous 81
 burial 150, 226
 burnished 20
 chaff-faced 139
 club-headed 20
 collar necked 84
 combed 38
 double-mouthed 52, 56
 elongated 128
 everted rim 81
 flat-based 52, 57
 four-lugged 21, 38, 52, 79, 82-4, 86, 128, 238-9, 242
 funnel spouted 81
 globular 52, 56-7, 211, 214
 hand-made 81
 hole-mouth(ed) 20, 56, 214, 239
 incised 21, 38, 86
 large 84, 87, 128
 lugged 176
 metallic ware 216
 necked 128, 143
 neckless 82
 ovoid 211, 214
 piriform 238
 red-slipped 21, 86, 100, 128, 139, 146
 ring-base(d) 52, 55-6
 rope decorated 83
 small fine 128
 small-necked 128, 222
 spouted 38, 89, 151, 238, 240-2
 storage 80, 87, 151-2, 166-7, 193, 224
 tab-lugged 114
 tall 82
 three mouth(ed) 56
 trough spouted 82
 wavy-handled 238-9, 241
 white-slipped 221
 wine 83
 with band rim 151
 with beaded rim 214
 with corrugated rim 52
 with double strap handle 84
 with drooping spout 21
 with tubular spout 211
 with everted rim 175, 211, 222
 with flaring neck 56, 214
 with grooved rim 222
 with handle 211
 with indented shoulder 221-2
 with inner ledge rim 211
 with inwardly bevelled rim 33
 with nose lugs 176, 211
 with raised rib 21
 with rolled rim 86, 214
 with short neck 52, 214
 with thickened rim 86
 with two opposed lugs 21
 jug, high-necked 214, 217
 red-black 146
 with everted rim 226
 knob 128
 ladle 89, 151
 lid 83
 local see Chalcolithic
 lug (handle) 86, 222, 238-9
 mica 178
 mineral temper see under jar, ware
 miniature vessel 21
 Nile clay 238, 241
 Ninevite 5 17, 52, 111, 114
 nose lug 151
 'Palestinian' 227, 238-9, 241
 panel pattern 52
 pattern burnishing 175, 222
 pattern combing 214
 pictograph 117
 pithos 83, 88, 128, 217
 platter 52, 57, 117, 167, 214, 216
 platter-bowl 217
 'Proto-Ninevite 5' 19, 34, 114
 quartz 177-8, 184
 Red Rim Pithoi 217
 reserved slip 244; see also under jar
 rim, thickened 125
 'rolly-bin' 195, 202
 rope decoration 81
 rosettes 56
 Samarra 18
 scraper, ceramic ring 84, 109, 176
 scraping 195
 shell temper 81, 178
 slip 128
 brown 175
 cream 83, 86-7, 239
 micaceous haematite 241
 pseudo-reserved 21
 red 81, 86-7, 125, 151, 175-6, 211, 222, 226; 239, 241; see red-slipped under jar, ware
 removal of 215
 reserved 52, 128, 212-3, 216-7, 244
 white, whitish 195, 211, 221
 spouted vessel 20, 47, 89
 spout
 bent 225
 droop 176, 240
 false 87
 rim 87
 sprig motif 56
 stamped 119
 stand 52, 55, 211
 Stone Ware 217
 straw temper 84, 128
 stud 239

surface griffée 216
 'tea pot' 194
 temper see calcite, chaff, grit, grog, mineral, quartz,
 shell, straw
 torpedo-shaped vessel 194-5, 201
 Transcaucasian (type) 79, 82-3, 89, 107
 trays 80-3, 87, 89, 115, 167
 chaff-tempered 151
 with ledge handle 83
 triangles 56
 cross-hatched 55-6, 151
 trimming 86-7
 tumblers 52, 56
 Ubaid pottery 9, 46, 205, 212
 Late Ubaid painted 213
 Ubaid-related 210, 214, 216, 225
 U-shaped pots 19, 20, 52, 55
 volcanic material 178
 wares
 appliqué 52, 56
 bubble(d), bubbly 56, 114, 119, 195
 Buff-slipped 88
 burnished 217, 219
 burnished grey 20, 37, 47
 chaff-faced 52, 55, 57, 175, 195, 203-4, 210, 212,
 215-6
 chaff-tempered 52, 116, 125, 150, 208, 210, 212,
 214-6, 220, 222, 225-6, 239
 combed 21, 47, 56
 'common ware' 81
 cream slipped 81
 egg-shell 53
 fine light-coloured 125, 128
 fine painted 80
 Fine White-slipped 88
 flint-scraped 52, 55
 green gray 52, 56, 66, 70-6
 grey 20, 47, 57, 81
 grit-tempered 52, 81, 83, 87, 128, 150, 212
 Khirbet Kerak 216, 218, 225
 impressed 47, 52, 56
 incised 21, 47, 52, 176, 187, 190
 kitchen 128
 Late Reserved Slip 226
 mass-produced 212
 metallic 216-7
 mineral 52
 mineral-tempered 116, 151, 212, 215-6, 222, 239
 natural burnished 216
 painted 210, 225-6
 Painted Simple 214
 pink (buff) 81
 red-black burnished (RBBW) 125, 128-9, 146, 208,
 210, 213, 215, 226
 red-polished 238, 241
 red-slipped 21, 88-9, 100, 178, 187, 189, 195, 214,
 217, 219, 239

reserved slip 213, 226
 (sealing) wax 52, 56, 111, 114
 slab made 56
 sprig 19-20, 52, 55, 111, 114
 stamped 52
 Stone 217
 straw-tempered 128
 white slipped 81
 wash, red 239
 waster 152, 178, 190
 wheel-made 52-3, 56, 114, 150-1, 176, 214, 220
 wide flower pots 52, 55-7, 59
 x-cross triangles 52

3. Time spans

Achaemenid/Hellenistic 149
 Akkadian 13, 41, 57, 120
 Amuq E 212, 225
 Amuq F 126, 150, 158, 212, 216-8, 222
 Amuq G 158, 216-8, 222, 226
 Amuq H 218
 Byzantine 175
 Chalcolithic 209, 218-9, 221, 223, 226
 Late Chalcolithic 1-5, 22, 49, 51-2, 55, 125, 212-3,
 218-9
 LC 1-2 212
 LC 2-3 209
 LC 3 209, 212
 LC 4 175, 209
 LC 5 209, 213, 223
 Local (Late) Chalcolithic 127, 149-51, 169, 174-5,
 208-9
 Early Bronze Age 51, 60, 125, 149, 175-6, 209,
 212-4, 216, 218-21, 224-6
 Early Dynastic 49, 114
 Early Dynastic Egypt 224
 Enéolithique 218-9, 224, 226
 Gawra 18, 27, 32, 34-5, 43
 Gawra A 22, 35, 36, 41-2, 50-2, 56
 Gawra B 22, 35, 36, 40-2, 46, 50-2, 56
 Ghassulian 209, 222, 226
 Hajji Muhammad 111
 Halaf 18, 19, 27, 40, 111, 129
 Hassuna 17, 29, 40
 Islamic 175, 191
 Jemdet Nasr 81, 111, 114, 243
 Middle Bronze Age 175
 Naqada 221, 237-40, 242-4
 Neo-Assyrian 17
 Neolithic 50, 123, 214
 Ninevite 1-5 27, 40
 Ninevite 1 18
 Ninevite 2 18
 Ninevite 3 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 32, 33, 35, 37,
 38, 39, 46-7, 52

- Ninevite 4 18, 21, 23, 39, 47, 50, 53, 239
 Ninevite 5 18, 21, 23, 27, 41, 51, 57, 60, 111, 130
 Proto-Ninevite 5 130
 Transitional Ninevite 5 40, 41
 Old Babylonian 114
 Pisdeli 50
 PPNB 111
 Predynastic Egypt 219, 224, 237-46
 Proto-Elamite 49, 129
 Protoliterate 239
 Proto-Urban 226
 Roman 149, 175
 Samarra(n) 27, 119
 Seleucid 8
 Ubaid 11, 14, 18, 22, 27, 49, 57, 59, 114, 123, 127
 129-30, 223, 225-6
 End Ubaid 50
 Late Ubaid 19, 21, 36, 40-2, 54-5, 111
 northern Ubaid 121
 Post Ubaid 50, 111, 113, 123
 Terminal Ubaid 31, 36, 40-2, 46, 52, 54-5, 111
 Ubaid-Uruk transition 22
 Uruk
 Early Uruk 14, 18, 20, 22, 50, 53-4 56, 119, 125
 Late Uruk 1, 5-8, 12, 14, 17-19, 21, 22-3, 39, 41,
 43, 51, 56-7, 79, 81-2, 111, 114-5, 120-1, 123,
 126, 128, 144-6, 152-3, 158, 175, 194, 208, 239,
 241-2
 'Late Uruk' 21-22, 40, 191
 Middle Uruk 7, 20, 22-3, 50-1, 56-7, 79, 81-2, 111,
 115, 125, 152-3, 158, 175, 208, 210-2, 215, 217,
 221-3, 225, 243
 Northern Uruk 22, 23, 37, 38, 40-1, 43, 46-7,
 Northern Early Uruk 111-2, 119
 Northern Late Uruk 126, 129
 Northern Middle Uruk 111-4, 116-9
 Post-Uruk 111, 209, 226
 Terminal Uruk 22, 23, 39, 40-1, 43, 57
 Uruk A 36, 56-7
 Würm 174
 1st Dynasty (Egypt) 218, 225
 2nd Dynasty 225
- 4. Persons**
- Adams 120
 Algaze 50, 57-8, 88, 174, 212
 Alizadeh 88
 Amiet 218, 226
 Angell 179
 Bache 51, 54, 59
 Badler 205
 Baird 226
 Benoit 88
 Bigelow 152
 Blackman 60, 152
 Blanton et al. 58
 Blocher 88
 Boehmer 11, 88, 242
 Boese 179
 Borchardt 242
 Borgmeyer 205
 Brandes 11
 Brandl 245
 Bucak 153
 Caubet 88
 Childe 49
 Christaller 7
 Christie 18
 Collas 150
 Collon 88
 de Contenson 175, 216, 218
 Copeland 175
 Courty 220
 D'Altroy 50
 Dunand 218-9, 226
 Dyson 88
 Edens 152
 Eichmann 1
 Emberling 112
 Esin 130
 Falkenstein 4
 Forest 51, 56
 Frangipane 50, 88, 175, 223, 226
 Gordon 60
 Gut 51-3, 55-6, 58-9
 Hansen 88
 Harrison 226
 Hauptmann 88
 Helms 222
 Helwing 151
 Henrickson, E. 88
 Henrickson, R. 89
 Herrmann 51
 James 179
 Jansma 205
 Joffe 245
 Johnson 14
 Kaiser 237
 Kalsbeek 84
 Kenyon 226
 Lamberg-Karlovsky 88
 Layard 17
 Lenzen 4, 11
 Lupton 174
 Mackay 89
 Mallowan 18-23, 27, 33-34, 40, 51, 54, 60
 Mathias 214
 Matthews 218
 Mazzoni 210, 213-4, 216-9, 224
 Misr 153
 Moore 175
 Moorey 179

- Mueller 54
 Müller-Karpe 88
 Nicola 152
 Nissen 50, 84, 89
 Oates 52, 88
 Oldenburg 217
 Özbal 150
 Özgüç, N. 88
 Payne 242
 Perkins 22
 Petrie 237, 241
 Pittman 50, 150, 245
 Pollock 50
 Prag 219
 Reade 117
 Rothman 50, 174-5, 245
 Roux 220
 Rova 52, 57-8
 Saghieh 218, 226
 Schwartz 50, 52, 152
 Speiser 54, 56, 60
 Stein 50, 88, 152, 175, 179
 Strommenger 179
 Sürenhagen 5, 88
 Tadmor 212
 Thompson, R.Campbell 17-19, 26-7
 Tobler 54, 60
 Tomita 56, 58
 Trentin 221, 226
 Trufelli 51-3
 Urnammu 8
 van Driel 88, 179
 van Driel-Murray 88
 van Gijn 205
 Watson 179, 210
 Weiss 83
 Wickede, von 56
 Wilkinson 221, 226
 Wilson 88
 Woolley 174
 Wright 49, 50, 88
 Yener 216
 Young, Cuyler 83, 88-9
- 5. General**
- administrative artefacts, practices 150, 152, 212, 218, 224, 243-4
 adze 193
 agriculture 174
 altar 127
 animal bone 152
 antimony 129
 anvil, stone 194
 arsenic 129, 219
 Ashmolean Museum 18, 179, 242, 246
- axe 115
 barley 120
 bead 82-3, 89, 116, 176
 beef 152
 beer 84, 195
 Berlin Museum 5, 21
 Birmingham City Art Museum 179
 bitumen 82, 152, 175-6
 Boğaziçi 150
 bowl, stone 83, 106, 176, 194, 215
 bread 9
 brewing 205
 brick 176, 191-2, 205
 brick sizes 84-5
 British Museum 17, 245
 bulla 7, 12, 116, 151, 225
 burial 59-60, 119, 150, 176, 224, 226, 241, 245
 cattle 120
 cemetery 241-2, 246
 Chicago 246
 chieftdom 151
 chipped stone 216, 218
 chisel 83, 150
 cloth 59, 89
 collapse, (post-)Uruk 60, 176
 colony 57, 121, 123, 130, 149, 151, 153
 column 131
 copper 115, 129, 149-50, 193-4, 219
 core 83, 115, 152
 cowrie 240
 craft(smen) 59, 84, 128-30, 150, 193, 220, 242
 cross-hatched band 176, 239
 crucible 150
 cylinder seal 10, 11, 22, 52, 57, 86, 115, 151, 217-8, 224-5, 241-3
 disk, stone 83
 docket 117
 drain 192
 drill(ing) 243
 drill hand guard, stone 194
 ebony 242
 Edinburgh University 179
 Egyptian Museum, Berlin 242
 Egyptian Museum, Cairo 239, 246
 electrum 60
 élite 58, 121, 123-4, 127, 150, 209, 221, 223-6, 237-8, 241-3
 enclave 209, 212 see also trading enclave
 envelope 12
 ethnicity 173-4
 exchange see trade
 eye idol 22, 116, 176, 211, 215
 fast wheel 21, 214, 220
 figurine 151, 219
 flint 80, 151, 194
 blade(let) 152
 Canaanean 115, 120, 194, 216, 218, 220, 226

- cortical flake 142
 fan-scraper 194
 prismatic blade 220
 tabular flake 194, 198
 tabular scraper 212, 221
 see also core
- flooding 176
 galena 240
 gaming piece 244
 gender 87
 goat 120, 152
 gold 59-60, 116, 129, 219, 241, 245
 glyptic 217-9
 grave 55, 60, 124, 238-41, 243-4, 246; see burial, tomb
 grave goods 244
 habitus 173-4, 176
 ḥarra 221
 hearth 84, 89, 115, 117, 120, 124, 127, 192
 herding 212
 hut symbols 22, 56
 inhumation see burial
 irrigation 174
 ivory 116, 242
 jar, atone 176
 kiln 89, 121, 150
 knife 193
 lexical text(s) 13
 linseed 120
 loom 89, 194
 loom support 120
 loom weight 89, 152
 Lowie Museum 243
 macehead 82
 malachite 240
 mass production 223, 225
 merchants 57-8
 metal 120, 193, 241, 223
 see also copper, electrum, galena, gold, malachite, nickel, silver
 metal(working) 10, 53, 58, 81-2, 120, 129, 150, 194
 mica 240
 migration 173
 model 129
 mould 150
 neutron activation 60, 152
 niche 116, 124, 127
 niched building 121, 150, 162, 237, 242
 nickel 129, 219
 numerical tablet 12, 18, 116
 ochre 125
 oil 193
 oven 120, 175, 191-2, 205
 palette, stone 194
 pastoralism 174
 Petrie Museum 238-9, 245-6
 petrographic analysis 178
 pierced sherd 152
 pig 120
 pin 150-1, 193
 pit 192-5
 plaster 191-2, 237
 podium 192, 205
 polisher, stone 194
 pork 152
 potter's marks 56, 117, 125, 128
 potter's wheel 8, 220, 225
 fast wheel 9, 21, 214
 pottery production 125, 130, 212
 pounder 194
 principal component analysis 177, 185-7
 public architecture 224-5
 pulses 120
 radiocarbon dating 82, 89, 117, 123, 125, 149, 159, 209-13, 217, 223
 ring 150
 rods, Çayönü 111
 roof beam 193
 rosettes, appliqué 56
 saddle quern 194, 197
 salt 120
 seal 56-7, 59-60, 88, 115, 123, 127, 153, 173, 226, 244
 gable-shaped 218
 impressed on jars 218
 see also cylinder seal, glyptic
 sealing(s) 12, 57, 59, 79, 82-3, 88, 115, 124, 127, 129, 152-3, 176, 182, 220
 seal impression 18, 115, 153, 169, 222
 semi-column 116
 sheep 120, 152
 shell 150, 240
 sickle, clay 57, 151-2, 168
 sickle, flint 152, 168
 silica gloss 152
 silver 129, 150, 219-20, 224
 slag 150
 slingballs 83
 smoother, stone 194
 spindle whorl 82-3, 87, 89, 109, 115, 120, 153, 176, 193-4, 196
 spinning 87, 193-4, 215
 spiral 176
 stair 193
 stamp seal(s) 11, 12, 22, 57, 150-1, 169, 224, 243
 stone 58-9, 82, 89
 alabaster 60, 176, 194
 basalt 194, 197, 215, 221
 chert 194
 chipped 152, 216, 218
 chlorite 59, 150
 flint see under flint
 lapis lazuli 59-60, 194
 limestone 240-3

- marble 60
 obsidian 59-60, 111, 114-5, 125, 223
 oolite 60
 sandstone 194
 semi-precious 149
 soapstone 194, 196
 steatite 194, 242
 see also anvil, bead, bowl, core, disk, drill, figurine,
 flint, jar, palette, polisher, pounder, saddle quern,
 smoother, vessel, weight
 stopper, for jar 83, 151, 176, 225
 storage, store(room) 125, 127-9, 150, 152-3, 163,
 176, 193, 195, 224
 tablet 11, 52, 79, 82-3, 151-2, 173, 193
 temple 59-60, 124, 127-8, 133-4, 191-2, 194, 205
 textiles 120, 153, 193
 timber 219
 titles and professions 13
 token 12, 79, 81, 88, 99, 115, 117, 151, 244-5
 tomb 225, 237, 242; see also burial, grave
 tournette 55-56, 222
 trade (routes) 57-9, 81, 89, 129, 150, 176, 219, 241,
 245
 trader 152
 trading enclave, post 57, 87, 153, 176; see enclave
 tuyère 150
 urbanization 225, 227
 'Uruk contact' 121
 'Uruk expansion' 56-9, 124, 149, 152-3, 173, 245
 vessel, stone 193-4
 wall cone 151, 168, 176, 221
 wall painting 127-8
 weaving 59
 weight, stone 151, 168, 194
 wheat 120
 wine 83
 wood 59, 149; see also ebony, roof beam, timber
 wood-working 194
 wool 120
 writing 11, 12
 X-ray diffraction 177, 183-4
 X-ray fluorescence 177

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