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

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BRITISH SCHOOL OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRAQ

ISBN 0-85668-736-7

Printed and published in England for the
British School of Archaeology in Iraq by
Aris and Phillips Ltd.
Teddington House, Warminster
Wiltshire, England

Table of Contents

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).

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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.

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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 élite 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)

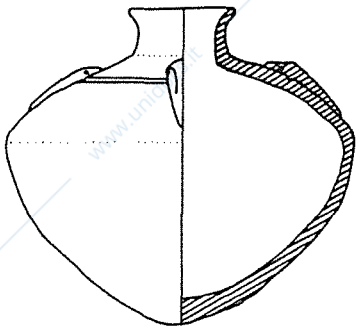

Fig. 3. Four-lugged jar from Habuba Kabira (after Mark 1998: fig. 15.A, itself after Sürenhagen 1977: pl. 18.124)

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 Sürenhagen 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

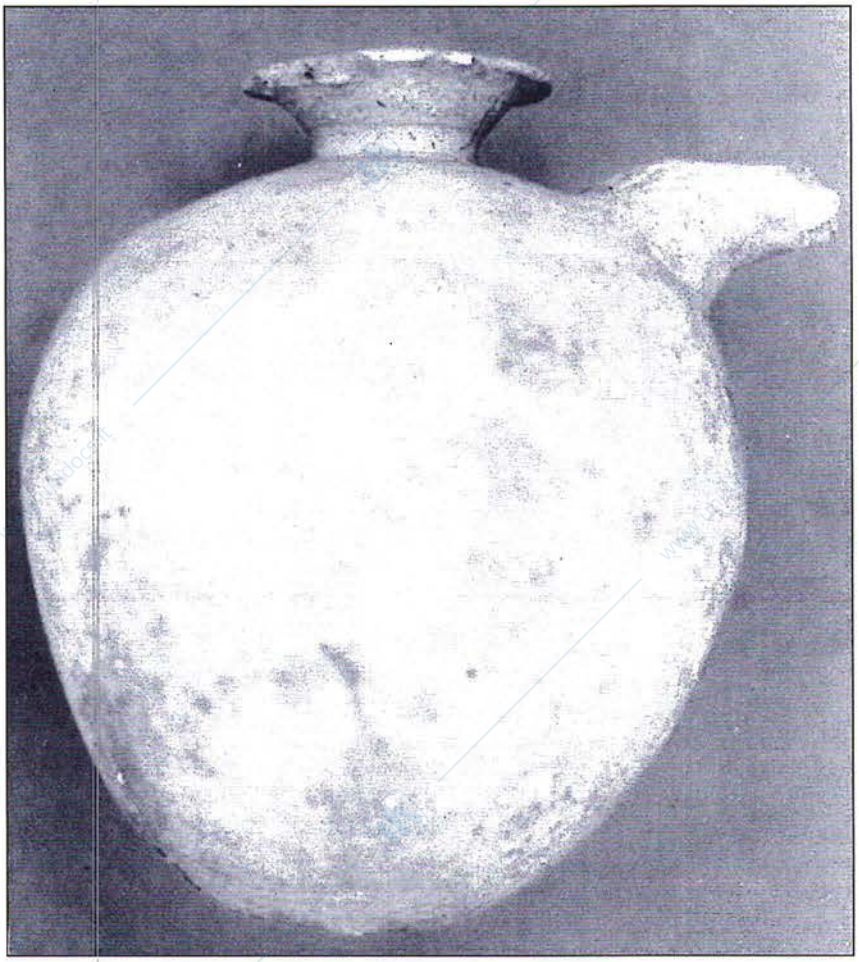

Fig. 4. Spouted jar from Mostagedda Cemetery 1600-1800. British Museum, London (EA 63003).

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

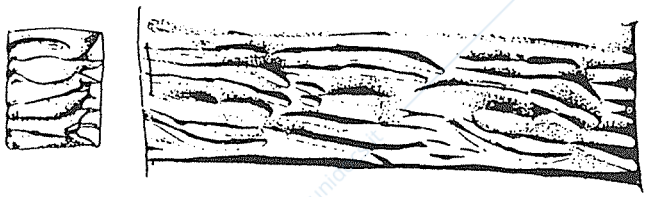

Fig. 5. Cylinder seal from Naqada grave 1863. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London (UC 5374) (after Boehmer 1974: Abb. 1).

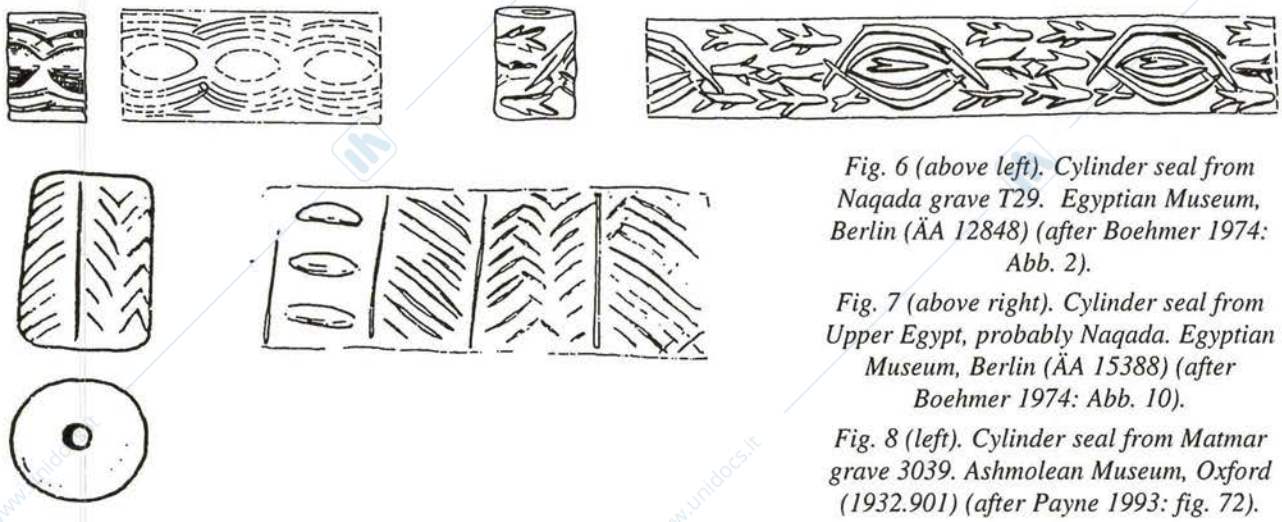

Fig. 6 (above left). Cylinder seal from Naqada grave T29. Egyptian Museum, Berlin (ÄA 12848) (after Boehmer 1974: Abb. 2).

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 wholehearted 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. 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

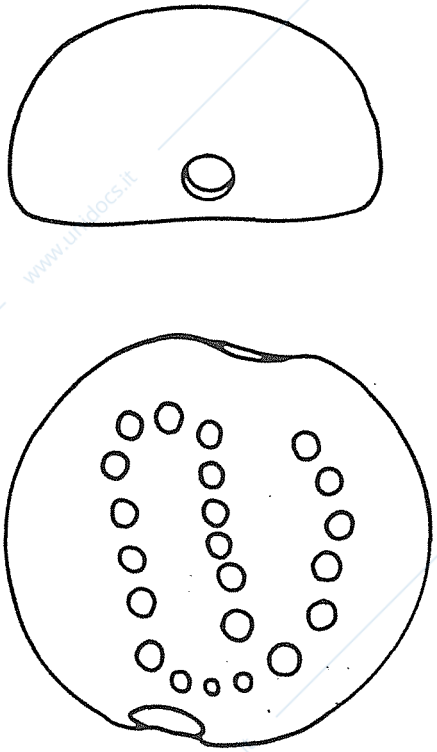

Fig. 9. Stamp seal from Naga ed-Deir grave 7501. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California (UCLMA 6-3919) (after Mark 1998: fig. 25.A, itself after Podzorski 1988: fig. 3).

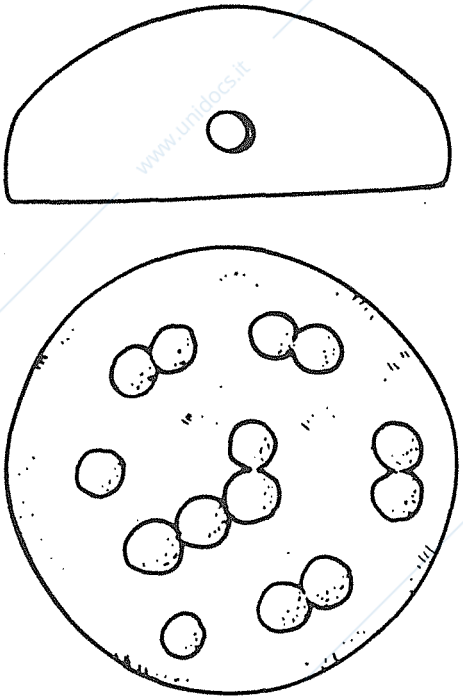

Fig. 10. Stamp seal from Nuzi (after Mark 1998: fig. 25.B, itself after Starr 1937: pl. 40A).

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 contrast, 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

First, I should like to thank Nicholas Postgate and Stuart Campbell for inviting me to speak at the conference 'Artefacts of complexity: tracking the Uruk in the Near East'. Thanks are also due to the British School of Archaeology in Iraq for generously paying the speakers' expenses. The paper, as presented here, has benefited from discussions and correspondence with a number of colleagues, including Mitchell Rothman, Holly Pittman and Alexander Joffe. The suggestion that some of the small clay cone-shaped objects from Egyptian excavations may represent tokens was first made by Baruch Brandl at an international conference held in Jerusalem in April 1998. The sherd in Fig. 1 is illustrated here by kind permission of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London. The pot in Fig. 4 is illustrated by kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum. My research at the University of Durham was supported by the Leverhulme Trust through a Special Research Fellowship.

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-IIIA1	Ayrton and Loat 1911: pl. XXXVIII	?
Mahasna	grave H131A	IID2	Ayrton and Loat 1911: pl. XXXVIII	?
Hu	grave U 187A	IIIA1	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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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.

2. Pottery styles, wares, etc.

3. Time spans

4. Persons

5. General

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ISBN 0-85668-736-7

9 780856 687365