Equids as Luxury Gifts at the Centre of Interregional Economic Dynamics in the Archaic Urban Cultures of the Ancient Near East

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Résumé – Quelques textes du IIIe millénaire provenant de Syrie (Ebla, Nagar, Nabada) renseignent sur le rôle des équidés dans les échanges commerciaux entre les principaux royaumes de la région, notamment sur une espèce que les textes ont longtemps suggéré d’interpréter comme une race hybride. Cette donnée philologique a été confirmée par des analyses archéozoologiques récentes et on a ainsi établi de façon définitive la nature hybride du « kunga », fréquent dans les documents de l’Archive royal d’Ebla proto-syrienne et utilisé pour les chariots des souverains et des élites. La documentation archéologique et les représentations d’autres sites syriens, en particulier de Nagar et Urkesh, où l’image du kunga sur des sceaux royaux en souligne la valeur royale et symbolique, sont aussi présentées ici. La nécropole des équidés de Marra-Tuba et la présence de chars dans les sépultures des élites d’Ebla, mentionnées dans les textes, suggèrent que ces équidés constituent une marque de prestige pour leurs propriétaires encore après leur mort ; les kunga, en raison de leur dimension symbolique, ont probablement circulé aussi en Mésopotamie à l’époque protodynastique, et l’on propose de les reconnaître dans les ossements animaux de la nécropole Y de Kish et dans l’équidé reposant sur l’anneau de rène d’un tombeau du cimetière royal d’Ur.

Mots-clés – Equidés, Kunga, Echanges commerciaux de biens de prestige, IIIe millénaire, Proche-Orient ancien

Abstract – The 3rd millennium BC texts from some major sites in Syria (Ebla, Nagar, Nabada) indicate the importance of equids in the trade between the region’s greatest kingdoms and especially of one species, long considered a hybrid on philological grounds. Recent archaeozoological studies of the equids from the Umm el-Marra necropolis have clarified the hybrid nature of the buried animals; these may be specimens of the most valuable species, the kunga, recurrent in the documents from the Royal Archive of Classic Early Syrian Ebla. This article considers further data from Ebla texts on the rich equipment of chariots and equids for the royal court and its notables, men and women, and for allied kingdoms, and presents archaeological and figurative evidence from various sites, especially Nagar and Urkesh, for the high economic and symbolic value of kunga, identified on royal seals. These equids were a status symbol for their owners, even after death, as shown by the necropolis of Marra-Tuba and the burials of chariots among the funerary equipment of the Eblaite elites recorded in the texts. Finally, kunga may have circulated in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia and may be present among the animal remains of the Y necropolis at Kish and in the equid lying on the rein-ring from a tomb in the Royal Cemetery at Ur.

Keywords – Equids, Kunga, Trade of luxury goods, 3rd millennium BC, Ancient Near East

ستراتيجamente presentiamo un intervento settentrionale sul l’insediamento di Sennacherib a Dur-Sharrukin, il quale è stato recentemente di nuovo messo in luce e interpretato in modo innovativo grazie all’ausilio di metodi geologici avanzati. L’analisi geologica delle strutture architettoniche mostra come le fondazioni siano state eseguite con cura, utilizzando materiali locali ma di qualità elevata, e come le costruzioni abbiano subito interventi di restauro e manutenzione durante il loro utilizzo. Questi dati mostrano come la città sia stata adattata alle esigenze del tempo, con un approccio che si riflette anche negli aspetti materiali.

Keywords – Equids, Kunga, Trade of luxury goods, 3rd millennium BC, Ancient Near East

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My ongoing study of the wooden carvings from Royal Palace G of Classic Early Syrian Ebla has raised a series of issues concerning the equipment of draught animals and its recipients: both human, in other words the elites of the Syrian and Mesopotamian kingdoms of the Early Syrian and ED Periods, and animal, especially bovids and above all equids. This paper considers a type of equid, whose precise breed has not yet been determined, which appears frequently in the textual documentation of the Near East and which is of enormous economic value and prestige among the social elites of the period’s largest towns.

The textual data, mainly from the Ebla Archives and to a lesser extent from other sites, alongside new archaeological and figurative evidence, encouraged me to pursue this gradually emerging line of inquiry. At present, wide-ranging connections in the form of “commercial exchanges” and the display of luxury are appearing; these are among the most important in the cultures of the Ancient Near East already from the 3rd millennium BC (EB IV) and cover an extensive geographical area.

This essay presents an overview of the data and issues relating to this topic, starting from the documentation from Ebla where the written sources already appear fairly exhaustive although archaeological sources proper are still lacking. I will also survey some evidence which has emerged over recent years from other sites in Syria, of varying importance, or which has been known for some time from some major cities of Mesopotamia.

1. This paper does not go into detail on the objective evidence concerning the biological and zoological nature of the equids determining their species and subspecies, and on the only crosses between species considered possible and hitherto documented in nature, according to the study in particular by Driesch & Raulwing 2004. The only exception is a documented instance which refutes this theory, following on from the very recent discoveries and analyses at Umm el-Marra (Syria), and is therefore not covered in the aforementioned study and frequently recalled in this paper. My paper aims to shed light on a specific type of commodity, an equid species which takes on particular importance already in the 3rd millennium and whose precise nature is of enormous economic value and prestige among the social elites of the period’s largest towns.

2. From Tell Beydar/Nabada: Sallaberger 1999, p. 393-394, 401 ff.; Van Lerberghe 1996, p. 112-117; Milano 2004, p. 111-112, document no. 200; for a text-based analysis of the role of Nabada, both compared to Nagar and the territory of which the latter was the regional capital, and Ebla itself see Sallaberger & Ur 2004, p. 51 and ff., 65 and ff.; from Tell Brak/Nagar: Eidem et al. 2001, p. 104, fig. 138b, 118-119, fig. p. 118, (FS area) with inscriptions on bullae nos 77-78, on the issue in question.
What do we know from Ebla

The Eblaite texts have told us much about the trade in equids with some of the period’s important kingdoms, indicating the centrality of these animals in the culture and societies of the mid-3rd millennium BC. These animals were necessary for transport, but some species were also, and perhaps especially, elevated to the status of prestige animals. Here I will cite only a few examples. Ebla purchased large numbers of “Kunga” equids at Nagar (present-day Tell Brak). Ebla sent 10 substantial deliveries of silver to the king of Nagar and his subject cities, destined in part for the purchase of BAR.AN. A large purchase of equids, including some BAR.AN, was made by Ebla at Nagar for the high price of 200 jars of olive oil, perhaps on the occasion of diplomatic alliances (or marriages?). There was a flourishing trade with Nagar in the prized and expensive “BAR.AN-Kunga”, possibly a hybrid breed with a particularly high commercial value, as we know from the texts. The “high superintendents of the charioteers” and those responsible for animal husbandry at Ebla also appear to have travelled frequently to Nagar in relation to this trade, which now seems to be central to the economy of Ebla and elsewhere.

We learn that BAR.AN may also have been used for the exhibitions of dancers or acrobats from Nagar, during festivals held at the Palace of Ebla, proof of their luxury nature, and employed even for entertainments. A large number of equids (both BAR.AN and IGI.NITA) and other animals are given as a dowry to the daughter of the last en of Ebla on her marriage to the heir to the throne of Kish, proof of the intrinsic value of this species and its function as a status symbol.

Finally, it should be noted that in Classic Early Syrian Ebla the bones of onagers and asses are documented by archaeozoological analyses.

Virtually no archaeological evidence in the form of artefacts relating to the use of equids survives for Early Syrian Ebla. One possible exception is a bronze artefact found on the floor of room L.9583 of Royal Palace G and consisting of a ring with a central shaft. I have recently advanced the hypothesis that this was a rein-ring, typologically similar to a specimen found in the Y necropolis at Kish, a single ring divided in two by the shaft belonging to the harnessing of the equid buried with the deceased.

By contrast, thanks to the work of philologists, the Archive sources provide a large amount of data on the production, circulation and desired possession by the notables of the kingdom, royal and otherwise, of valuable artefacts (in terms of materials and craftsmanship) for the harnessing and equipment of equids and the decorations of chariots. Both in life and after death, these are a lasting indication of the luxury nature of these commodities, an expression of the power acquired by their owner.

3. TM.75.G.2428; ARCH 1998, p. 8-9; OATES & OATES 2006, p. 402 espec. The kunga equid is considered a hybrid by some scholars: see n. 1, 4.
5. The Eblaite texts often mention two types of equids, IGI-NITA, and BAR.AN (corresponding to asses), both used to draw carts; the BAR.AN is often used to draw carts in pairs; oxen are also used to draw carts. The price in silver of an IGI-NITA is much lower than that of a BAR.AN; as such: the BAR.AN is considered of absolute prestige.
6. ARCH 1998, p. 11-12; BIGA 2009, p. 46-47. The BAR.AN type can be considered the same animal known as ANŠE.BAR.AN in Mesopotamia and for which N. Postgate proposed the reading KUNGA some time ago. This animal is neither an ass nor a horse but maybe a hybrid, considered a donkey-onager cross by Postgate 1986, p. 194-197. For up-to-date data on this issue see n. 47.
9. BIGA 2009, p. 46; with ref. to the date provided by De Grossi Mazzorin & Menniti 2000.
10. Dolce in press: on artefact TM.06.G.906; WAELEN & LANGDON 1934, p. 33, Pl. XXV, XXV, 3 in particular. The artefact has been reconstructed by P. Matthiae as a composite work interpreted as the top of a standard: Matthiae 2008, p. 53, 56, Pl. 30; Matthiae 2009, p. 277, n. 49, p. 281, fig. 8.
Possession during Life

A representative instance is that of the minister and valiant general Ibbi-Zikir, victor over Mari in the last battle won by Ebla over its powerful rival before its destruction, who was rewarded for this triumph with a set of reins and a chariot with wheels decorated in gold, among other valuable gifts. One of the texts recording some of the gifts for the powerful Ibbi-Zikir is found on a small tablet from the lot of documents mainly containing recordings of artefacts for harnessing and chariots. The tablet was discovered in room L.2586, adjacent to L.2601 where the wooden carvings from the decorations of furniture lay, and facing room L.9583 where the aforementioned bronze artefact and other valuable objects were found (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Ebla, the Royal Palace G. Detail of the North-West Wing © MAIS.

The generous gift of this specific type of objects ordered by the king himself seems to become popular, what we would describe as a ‘must have’ at the time of Ishar-Damu when Ebla reached the height of its power and expansion, before the kingdom’s collapse. During this phase, the king himself gave not just clothing and daggers, but also the decorative parts of bits for equids and of the wheels of ceremonial chariots to high-ranking males; significantly, he also frequently gave similar gifts to foreign queens and princesses and to the great ladies of the Ebla court. Parts of the harnessing for the animals that drew ceremonial chariots were also often destined for the most important Eblaitic women; in my opinion, these ladies expressed their prestige inside and outside the court through possessions and moveable goods of this type, a measure of their influence over the affairs of the kingdom.

...and Possession in Death

Significantly, the written sources note the widespread occurrence of the decorative elements of chariots and the equipment of equids in the tombs of members of the Eblaitic elite.


Here we will mention only the most striking instances, such as the funerary gifts for Minister Ibrium, in silver and gold, belonging to a two-wheeled chariot with decorated wheels and reins for the equids which drew it; or for Queen Dusigu, mother of the last reigning en, Ishar-Damu, who took with her to the afterlife luxurious funerary equipment including a chariot decorated in silver and gold and equipment for the two equids which drew it.\(^\text{13}\)

Furthermore, the terms for various types of artefacts for harnessing and chariot parts are widely documented in the Archive texts, recorded in detail in the administrative accounts; it can be deduced that Ebla manufactured large quantities of high quality goods of this type, made of precious materials ranging from metals to fabrics, often with figurative decorations.\(^\text{14}\)

**Equids and Ebla’s International Relations**

Finally, it should be noted that deliveries of precious parts of chariots, equipment and so forth destined for members of the Eblaite royal family and that of other kingdoms, and for the local and foreign elite, generally occur in relation to important events —religious or otherwise— or as gifts to high-ranking individuals.\(^\text{15}\) We are thus dealing with parade chariots and the luxury equipment of draught animals, used to display the prestige of their patrons and recipients.

It is highly likely that in the context of this widespread circulation of animals, equipment and chariots in the form of “gifts”, seen here from the observation point of Ebla, the intense trade between Ebla and Nagar in equids, especially BAR.AN, paved the way for closer relations, as noted by J. Oates and for the most important marriage of the period, between a princess, daughter of the last reigning en of Ebla (Ishar-Damu) and the son-heir of the king of Nagar.\(^\text{17}\)

Another significant episode in Ebla’s international relations where the trade in “good Baran” appears to represent an opportunity to establish an alliance well to the north of its sphere of control concerns the failed overtures to the king of Hamazi, a major town whose location is still unknown but which is generally thought to have lain east of the Tigris.\(^\text{18}\) Ebla’s purpose appears obvious from the final passage of the letter evoking a “brotherhood” between Irkab-Damu of Ebla and Zizi of Hamazi.\(^\text{19}\) The episode described in the Archives “only” succeeded in activating the commercial exchange of BAR.AN equids, of which Hamazi appears to have been a major supplier, for prized artefacts in boxwood for parts of chariots such as wheels made by the Eblaite workshops; these, as I have already proposed, were certainly renowned in this field.

In my opinion, it is interesting that Hamazi has for some time been proposed as the capital of the original region known as Subartu (Subir) in the Pre-Sargonic period before the extensive official use of Ebla.

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14. *Arch* 1985, p. 31 already identified the terms for studs and pendants of bits and reins for equids among the objects made of precious metals completing the delivery of textiles. *Fronzaroli* 1996, p. 61-63, analyzes a term (ne-ni-zi-mu) which is fairly polyvalent and may indicate a metal-working technique for fine hammered sheets, also used for parts of carts and their equipment, such as the reins. For various terms identified as parts of carts see *Conti* 1997, p. 27, 35-39, espec.


18. Its location was east of Kirkuk, according to *Arch* 1998, p. 10; *Biga* 2009, p. 48; *Steinkeller* 1998, p. 79 and related ref. in n. 16.

19. In agreement with the interpretation of *Steinkeller* 1998, p. 81-82.


of this name on the part of Naram-Sin of Akkad: this may be a large area north of the Diyala Basin, stretching from the Tigris up to the Zagros mountain range 22.

It can be deduced that luxury goods, in the form of some species of equids indispensable at the courts of the time, played more than a purely economic role and became in part an instrument of international relations, including interdynastic marriages, at Ebla and elsewhere 23.

**WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM OTHER SITES IN SYRIA?**

In contrast to Ebla, the picture emerging from other sites in Syria provides some archaeological evidence of help in the preliminary reconstruction of the organizational and economic dynamics relating to these commodities on a local/regional and interregional scale, even when cuneiform data from individual cities are scarce or absent, though such data are sometimes indirectly available from the Ebla archives themselves 24.

The city that appears to play a leading role in the Land in equid breeding and trade is Nagar. As mentioned above, Ebla sourced “hybrids” and equids in general from this town. According to the archaeologists, the evidence from the site has definitely confirmed the presence of structures for the housing and rearing of equids in the Complex Building in the FS area near the city’s North Gate 25, as well as the find of “dockets”, attested up to the Akkadian period 26. Additionally, numerous remains of equid bones have been found at Nagar, although it is not certain whether these belong to the BAR.AN species or to donkeys 27.

22. According to **STEINKELLER 1998**, p. 76-77 and previous ref. See also **CHARPIN 2004**, p. 166, n. 56. On the geographical and linguistic identity of Subartu from the textual sources and its recurrence in over three millennia of the geo-political history of Mesopotamia and Syria see **MICHEL 2012**.

23. Marriages between Eblaite princesses or the daughters of ministers of the kingdom and the heirs to other kingdoms is an identifiable form of international relations, as evidenced by the data from the Ebla texts: see formerly **BIGA 1987**, p. 45-47; **BIGA 1998**, p. 17 and ff.; **ARCHI 2002b**, p. 6; **TONIETTI 2005**, p. 247-248; **ARCHI & BIGA 2003**, p. 26-28, 32. This type of trade and its implications for international relations also seems to have been important in Old Syrian Ebla, as indicated by the text of a tablet in the Hirayama Collection where over 40 horses from the Land of Lullu, probably located in the area of the Zagros mountains, are destined for the flourishing Old Syrian kingdom: **TSUKIMOTO 1997**.

24. **ARCHI 1998**, for the inscriptions of the 3rd millennium BC from Tell Brak/Nagar see n. 2.

25. **OATES & OATES 2001a**, p. 41 and ff. illustrating the structure of some rooms (nos 2, 13) in level 5 dated to the Akkadian Period and thought to have been used for animals, and related features such as herbivore dung and stakes and the discovery of skeletons of donkeys both near the entrance to room 13, in the courtyard in front 6/5, and in the southwest courtyard and in room 10: **CLUTTON-BROCKET 2001a**, p. 334 ff., fig. 343, 344. Another highly significant fact concerns the inscriptions on two bullae with glyptic impressions, definitively read as anše-BAR.AN, considered by Oates to be the hybrid species of equid in great demand: **OATES & OATES 2001a**, p. 45, 47; see also n. 2. The existence of a caravanserai in the area of temple complex FS thus seems to be confirmed. The presence of skeletons and human remains in the same area, sometimes dismembered and associated with those of equids, is in my opinion an open question, currently interpreted by the excavators as part of a ritual for equids and humans, connected to the closure and abandonment of the building (**OATES & OATES 2001a**, p. 50). Cf. for the donkey skeletons and their use also **CLUTTON-BROCKET 2001a**, p. 329-338; **WEBER 2001**, p. 345, 348 noting that the relevant data are in line with the first results on the ritual animal burials already proposed during the excavations by M. Mallowan, and recording the specificities of the species from the bones found at Brak. Finally, of particular importance are the mention of donkeys in Sumerian and Akkadian textual sources and their recurrent presence as deliberate depositions in burials, sometimes associated with the human dead, in numerous archaeological contexts in Near Eastern regions in the 3rd mill. BC, including Mesopotamia and Syria; this is where the documentation currently appears to be most ancient, dating to the EB IV. As well as from the data from cities examined in this article we also have documentation from other sites, including Halawa, Tell Banat, Tell Bi’ia, Tell Madhur, Tell Razuk and Abu Salabikh. On this see recently **WAY 2011**, p. 105-106, 133-158, which in some cases, firstly for Umm el-Marra (and generally for the specimens found in Mesopotamia), notes the hybrid species of the buried equids: “All the equids(at Marra) have been identified by Jill Weber […] as male kunga hybrids—that is crosses between donkey and onager” (**WAY 2011**, p. 134, n. 200). Regarding Mesopotamian deposition of equids as possibly hybrids, and humans in burials of the 3rd mill. BC, the author quotes **ZARINS 1986: WAY 2011**, p. 141-142, 145.


At Tell Beydar (ancient Nabada), the site of a city subject to Nagar, the presence of equids is also documented, managed by functionaries as at Ebla; according to the texts on the tablets found at the site the city also had a way station (or caravanserai) for these animals, and dockets as at Nagar. The king of Nagar himself travelled here on a chariot drawn, perhaps, by special equids, for cult ceremonies and other events.

Whether or not the role of Beydar in the rearing and care of equids was wholly subordinate to the regional capital Nagar remains in my opinion an open question. The recurrence of vehicles drawn by equids in the images on the local glyptics, as at Nagar, suggests the importance of this activity for the economy of Beydar itself and the people involved, members of the elite class (fig. 2). Tell Beydar/Nabada is also a centre for the production of chariots, a valuable commodity.

Figure 2. 2a, b: Seal impressions from Tell Beydar, Palace area; 2c, d: Seal impressions from Nagar, SS area (2a, b: after JANS & BRETSCHNEIDER 1998, Bey. 1, Bey. 2, Pl. I; 2c, d: MATTHEWS 1997, 200, 201, Pl. XIX).

It has rightly been observed that the use and dissemination of “chariot-scenes” in glyptics are typical of the territory of the kingdom of Nagar, although we should also consider the albeit sporadic evidence from elsewhere — the specimen on a seal from Urkesh dated to the E.D Period and the material from Mari (fig. 3).

28. VAN LERBERGHE 1996, p. 112 ff.; the remains of equids (here generally anše) come both from domestic areas and the vicinity of the monumental buildings on the Acropolis; the equids used at Beydar also belong to the prized species of anše-BAR.AN, maybe the hybrid type suggested some time ago by POSTGATE 1986, p. 189, 194 and ff.

29. On Beydar/Nabada see SALLABERGER 1996, p. 103-106; OATES & OATES 2006, p. 403-404, 405, n. 8; OATES & OATES 2001b, p. 387 for similar structures at Nagar and Nabada; additionally, the Beydar texts also suggest the relationship with Nagar as concerns the trade in equids; SALLABERGER 1999.


31. JANS & BRETSCHNEIDER 1998, p. 155, 158 and ff., 179-180, fig. 11-15, Pl. I; SALLABERGER 1998, p. 175 espec. These are seal impressions of the late ED Period from the palatine area of Beydar, followed by a broad repertoire of glyptics with “chariot scenes” from contemporary late early dynastic Mesopotamia and from Syria. More recently JANS & BRETSCHNEIDER 2011, p. 15, 75-82, 90-91, 319. On the probability deducible from seal images that anše-BAR.AN, considered hybrids also by Van Lerberghe, were used to pull royal and divine chariots cf. VAN LERBERGHE 1996, p. 114, n. 29.

32. As recently noted by W. Sallaberger during the seminars held at the University “La Sapienza”, in Rome in March 2012.


34. DORFMANN-PFÄLZNER & PFÄLZNER 2000, p. 226-227, fig. 29; the seal impression recurs several times on the fragment of a vase; BEYER 2007, p. 249 and ff., fig. 17-18, 20.
It has also been correctly noticed that hitherto nothing of this kind has been found in the figurative documentation from contemporary Ebla, including the palace glyptics. The latter focus on the celebration of kingship and its mythical roots. In my opinion this represents a distinction in the visual choices for the legitimation of power at Ebla, compared to those made in other towns discussed in this paper.

Alongside these observations, we can broaden the field to further archaeological and visual data from other Syrian sites indicating the close connection between kingship/the power of leaders and the ostentatious display of valuable equids. Clear evidence of this can be found in the palace glyptics of the late Akkadian period from Urkesh, the capital of a Hurrian kingdom in northern Mesopotamia whose cultural horizon differs from that of inner Syria and the rest of the Khabur. Selected specimens of equids (perhaps hybrids) are shown next to the throne, facing a god in the act of feeding them, and as a valuable gift in homage by other deities in the form of a baby equid (fig. 4a).

36. BUCELLATI & KELLY-BUCELLATI 2000, p. 7-9, fig. 3; 2002, p. 22-25, fig. 5. The owner of the seal is Ishar-beli, according to the inscription, a high functionary in the retinue of the daughter of Naram-Sin who settled in the capital, perhaps as queen. The images showing the foal and the adult animal and the feeding of the second animal seem to recapitulate the cycle of birth, reproduction and husbandry of this prized species. The hypothesis of BUCELLATI & KELLY-BUCELLATI 2002, p. 24, that this was an adult female which had given birth to a foal fits well with my interpretation of one of the meanings of the image.
This is a clear indication of the great significance of equids, beyond their intrinsic economic value, in the representation of kingship and its prestige in the kingdom of Urkesh, exclusive to the elite and a visible mark of the solidity of their power. This immediately suggests a reflection on another famous seal of the Akkadian period from a royal palace context in Nagar itself, of which numerous impressions from the monumental building SS survive, again belonging to a high functionary, a scribe, perhaps Murish according to the inscription 37 (fig. 4b).

![Figure 4. 4a: Ishar-beli seal impression from Urkesh; 4b: Scriba’s seal impression from Nagar, 4a: after Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2002, fig. 5; 4b: after Felli 2001, fig. 181.](image)

A few remarks are in order: on both seals, from Urkesh and Nagar, gods appear as protagonists. In both, equids play a central role in the figural representation. In both there is an obvious relationship between the illustrious seated figures, gods or humans, to whose identity we will return shortly, and the equids or other animals which they take care of. Again, in both, this connection, essential to the visual message, is expressed through the same compositional scheme: a seated figure towards whom the equid stretches. Finally, it seems that the species of equid represented in both images is the prized hybrid 38.

However, there are some distinctions. The first noteworthy difference is that whereas all the individuals on the Urkesh seal are interpreted as gods, on the Nagar seal one of the two figures seated on a throne has been considered, rightly in my opinion, to be a human 39, and likely a king, who displays his

37. Felli 2001, p. 144 and ff., fig. 181; Oates 2001a, p. 137 and ff. The addition of the inscription after the seal was cut, or perhaps re-cut in his name, and the eminence of the scribe, already the owner of another seal, remain aspects worthy of further investigation.


39. Felli 2001, p. 148 espec.; Oates 2001a, p. 138 is of the same opinion. As concerns the identification of the king represented here, the proposal by C. Felli, with Manishtusu, differs from that of J. Oates, with Naram-Sin. Further different chronological attributions of the seal to within the Akkadian Period by other scholars are reported by Felli 2001, p. 149. For the identification of the seated figure on the Urkesh seal as a god see Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2000, p. 8; 2002, p. 22.
close relationship with the seated deity facing him. I would add that the posture of god and “king” and
the gestures reserved for the two young animals mirror one another; next to the god is an equid.\textsuperscript{40}

A peculiarity of the composition of the Nagar seal is the association of two different themes (though
this may be due simply to our way of looking at the issue): one traditionally Akkadian, the struggle
between gods, the other celebrating a valuable commodity, the object of special care in the kingdom’s
language: animals and in particular equids. Once again, we can conclude that equids played a fundamental
role not only in the economy but also in the ideological context of that regional state and elsewhere.
Support for this theory comes from the fact that in both seals equids explicitly belong to the divine
world, as noted by Buccellati\textsuperscript{41}; this is important for the dynamics underlying the economy, politics and
the legitimation of power in part of Syria at least in the last quarter of the 3rd millennium.

The results of the archaeozoological analysis of equid remains, though controversial\textsuperscript{42}, also draw
attention to the site of Tell Chuera for the EB Period occupation phase, the most extensive, and covering
a broad chronological period (2600-2200 BC)\textsuperscript{43}. Equid remains have been found in different contexts
in the archaic settlement from the Steinbau (II, I) to the area of the Late EB Period Palace\textsuperscript{44}, according to
the archaeologists\textsuperscript{45}, the domestic area and the Lower Town. These animals are thought by the
archaeozoologists to be partially hybrids, if not yet horses, raising the vexata quaestio of the presence
and domestication of the horse as early as the late 3rd millennium BC rather than the 2nd\textsuperscript{46}, a topic which
obviously falls outside the scope of this paper and which has numerous implications for the fields of
science, history and geography.

Of interest here is the widespread occurrence in Syria during the second half of the 3rd millennium BC
of equids that were likely domesticated: at Tell Selenkahiye, at Mumbaqa, at Tell Sweyhat, as well as,
and above all, at Umm el-Marra, as we will see below\textsuperscript{47}.

\textsuperscript{40} Perhaps Shamagan lord of the steppe animals: Felli 2001, p. 146; Oates & Oates 2001b, p. 387-388.
\textsuperscript{41} Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 2002, p. 24; Weber 2012, p. 161 states that the kunga of Marra buried in the Burial
Complex were related to royalty and gods and that they “[...] may have been sacrificed to open a line of communication with
the gods”.

\textsuperscript{42} Vila 2010, p. 607-611.

\textsuperscript{43} Vila 2010, p. 607 and ref.; Pruss 2000, p. 1431-1435, fig. 1, 2; Meyer 2006. For the various proposed identifications
of the ancient site cf. Orthmann 1997, p. 492 as the ancient Harbe in the middle-Assyrian texts from Dur-Katlimmu; Archi,

\textsuperscript{44} During the phase of its reuse as a pottery workshop; Vila 2010, p. 607-608.

\textsuperscript{45} Orthmann et al. 1995, p. 17-93, 121-172; cf. n. 43.

\textsuperscript{46} Vila 2010, p. 610-611 espec.; according to the author, the exact definition of the remains of equids from the site is also
complicated by the scarcity of bone samples (only two) subjected to radiocarbon analysis (as of 2010) among those found in
texts archaeologically ascribed to the mid-3rd mill. BC; the outcome of this analysis may indicate a date in the 2nd mill. BC,
involving the sequence of archaeological layers and post-depositional phenomena ("intrusions"). E. Vila nonetheless believes that the evidence for equid remains from many other sites in Syria, from the Euphrates valley to Umm el-Marra, also requires
further scientific analysis. On the other hand, various pieces of evidence agree in suggesting that the horse (Equus caballus) was
likely present in Mesopotamia already in the last quarter of the 3th mill. BC, both from the written sources and from visual
documentation: cf. already Moorey 1970, p. 36, 48-50; Owen 1991, p. 259-263, Pl. I, fig. 1 for the image on a seal impression
of a scribe on a tablet of the period of the III\textsuperscript{rd} Dynasty of Ur. For an examination of the état présent on the issue of the unlikely
appearance and use of the horse in Anatolia and Syria from the preceding millennium see Rauwing 2000, p. 33-35. Recent
discoveries made in 2009 in Kazakhstan at settlements of the Botai culture dating to the mid-4th mill. BC of remains of equid
bones already considered to belong to domesticated horses. Other related archaeological evidence may also document this
transition about a millennium earlier than hitherto believed.

\textsuperscript{47} Cf. Vila 2010, p. 611 and ref., who nonetheless expressed reservations regarding their date. Numerous other finds of
equid bones, espec. of onagers, are reported in Van Lerberghe 1996, p. 114 in the Northern Khabur Basin, between the 5th
and 3rd mill. BC, and in Tell Leilan contemporary with Beydar/Nabada of the late ED Period. Regarding Mesopotamia, as can
deduced, for example, from the early-dynastic texts from Lagash and Fara, where the most frequently recurring species of
equids are Anše.DUN.GI and Anše.BARXAN, considered by Maekawa to be two different kinds of equids: Maekawa 1979,
p. 35-36. A large number of finds at archaeological sites of bone remains of the 3rd mill. BC of two species of equids, donkey
and onager, from North Mesopotamia to the Diyala basin to the domain of Sumer, and perhaps already with finds in proto-
archaeological Uruk, was reported in Strommenger & Bollweg 1996, p. 351 and ff. Documentation and issues linked to the presence
of “donkeys” and similar species in some lands of the Ancient Near East, from Egypt to Mesopotamia, are discussed most
recently by Way 2011.
Also important is the figural documentation on equids and their equipment during the same period on clay figurines, plaquettes and glyptic from Syria and Mesopotamia, for example at Tell Chuera, Tell Sweeney, Tell Brak/Nagar itself 48, and even Kish and Ur 49.

**The extraordinary documentation from the necropolis of Umm el-Marra**

In this context we must consider the broader archaeological and archaeozoological documentation hitherto known on equids, and very probably also hybrids, found in western Syria in the most recent excavations at Umm el-Marra, probably the ancient Dub/Tuba 50.

Here I will survey only the most telling evidence, which may suggest new lines of research and reconstruction regarding the interactions between cultural identities —specific and regional— and different cultures 51. Although G. Schwartz considers the ancient site a mere secondary regional centre, subservient for over a millennium to other larger cities, initially Ebla and later perhaps Alep 52, he rightly sees it as a sort of “Cult Centre” on raised ground, fully visible from the surrounding plains, with a peculiar configuration (fig. 5).

![Figure 5. Umm el-Marra, the Mortuary Complex, after SCHWARTZ 2012, fig. 19.](image)

48. **VILA** 2010, p. 613-614; **HOLLAND** 2006, p. 229, Pl. 116 a, b. Espec. at Nagar: **OATES** 2001b, p. 286-292; **OATES, OATES & MCDONALD** 2001, p. 594-595, fig. 489, provides a broad survey of the variants within this animal species, discussing the possibility that the hemionous-type equid appeared from as early as the 7th mill. BC in the Jazira (Umm Dabaghiyah) and the certainty that the Syrian onager inhabited the Khabur area in the same millennium and that it was present at Nagar from the 4th mill. BC. The figurines of equids found at Nagar in EB layers are in part considered representations of the famous hybrids for which this town was internationally renowned: **OATES** 2001b, p. 287; **MOOREY** 2001, p. 344-346 provides an overview of the presence and movements of equids, perhaps including hybrids, in Syria and elsewhere between the late EB and the beginning of the MB periods through clay models and figurines but with examples from the Southern Levant which could suggest that “asses” were domesticated in this region by at least the 4th mill. BC, whilst the representation of equid riding in Syria increases significantly in the last quarter of the 3rd mill. BC. The latter fact is in my opinion in agreement with the other evidence illustrated in this essay.

49. See already **MOOREY** 1970, p. 41, 45-46 and passim. Here we will recall only that the representation of equids in general is also emphatically present in artefacts, valuable in terms of materials and workmanship, from the Diyala area to Nippur to Ur, and recurs in one of the characteristic artefact types of the period of the city-states, the votive plaques. See also n. 47.

50. Cf. recently **SCHWARTZ** 2010, p. 376, n. 3. A similar proposal was advanced by **MATTHAEI** 1979, p. 118. It should be noted that this ancient toponym recurs both in the texts from the Ebla Archives and in sources of the 2nd mill. BC from Mari, Alalakh, and as far afield as Bogazköy and Karnak: **SCHWARTZ** 2009, p. 18.

51. On another occasion I will formulate an analytical consideration of the available data which provides much food for thought: see **SCHWARTZ** 2007, 2009. At this regard see very recently **SCHWARTZ** 2012, p. 15 ff.

52. **SCHWARTZ** 2010, p. 376.
This is an “elite mortuary Complex” on the Acropolis, consisting of at least nine tombs, used on several occasions, often with valuable funerary equipment containing male and female individuals of varying age and another set of nine installations with skeletons, prevalently of equids, sometimes associated with human infant remains dating to a period between ca. 2500 and 2200 BC (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Umm el-Marra, the Mortuary Complex. Installations with equids skeletons, after SCHWARTZ 2012, fig. 10-11, 20.

The pottery evidence from one of the tombs indicates that the Complex was partially contemporary with the final phase of the kingdom of Ebla. It has been suggested that the whole Complex was devoted to ancestor worship on the part of the local elites: this practice is also well known from other Syrian sites, from Tell Banat to Tell Bi’a, from Tell Ahmar to Mari. The associated structures held over 30 complete skeletons of equids, alongside a smaller number of other animals, which according to Schwartz died of different causes and as a result of different practices.

Last but not least: recent archaeozoological research on the equids from Marra indicates that the animals were onager-donkey hybrids, and thus may be evidence for the highly prized and ostentatiously displayed BAR.AN species, in other words the “kunga” known from contemporary texts especially

57. SCHWARTZ 2009, p. 22-27. Some of the equids were killed, others were treated after a natural death, but with a variety of practices. Some were sacrificed (4 young male specimens), in one case buried alongside the remains of a human infant (installation A is of this type, p. 22), divided in half and probably decapitated (according to the location of some skulls, p. 23), or buried whole inside a semi-circular stone enclosure built above the skeleton of a foal. For an analytical documentation of equid installations in the Burial Complex, and interpretation of hybrid kunga as royal symbols, see WEISS 2012, p. 165 ff.
from Ebla 58. To quote Schwartz, these are not animal remains intended as food for the deceased in the afterlife (in accordance with widespread, extremely ancient and consolidated funerary traditions) but as “[...] an equid cemetery found within a grave complex for aristocratic people”! 59.

The cemetery of distinguished people and valuable equids at Umm el-Marra is unique in our current picture of cultural identities in EB IV Syria, but it sheds light on a fundamental issue that connects the various pieces of evidence dealt with here in an ideological, media and economic circle: equid hybrids were a mark of wealth, prestige and thus of political power; a mark of social distinction for elites and sovereigns, but not of gender. Aside from the various explanations hypothetically proposed by the excavators for the presence of hybrids in the Mortuary Complex of Umm el-Marra 60, these animals were a mark of maximum prestige for their owners, in life and after death, to the same and perhaps to a greater extent than other luxury goods which circulated and drove the economy of the Ancient Near East between the EB and MB periods.

A LOOK AT EARLY DYNASTIC MESOPOTAMIA

One question, among the many, raised by the spectacular find at Umm el-Marra concerns the contextual presence of human and equid remains (most of them “kunga”) in some burials, and often their sacrifice. Was this the greatest possible act of generosity towards the deceased —a display of veneration on the part of local society towards their ancestors?

The reference to elite necropolis and the funerary rites of early dynastic Mesopotamia appears obligatory here and raises further issues that will be discussed only briefly. We will restrict ourselves to a reference to necropolis Y at Kish, even recently dated mainly to between the ED I and II 61, where in one of the tombs (no. 494) the bones of the deceased turned out on palaeoanthropological analysis to present features compatible with those of a habitual rider. Judging from the funerary equipment 62, this was an individual of high status, a member of the elites. The “cart burials” from the sounding, again in area Y at Kish (whose date in my opinion remains open within the ED III a-b) 63 contain carts drawn by equids, sacrificed and buried with the deceased 64 (fig. 7).

These have not been considered burials of kings given the absence of valuable funerary equipment and the similarity of the objects with those from other tombs in the necropolis, with the exception of the carts and equids, but rather of the illustrious dead, of the elites 65.

59. SCHWARTZ 2009, p. 25.
60. These include the display of elite status in the form of a combination of wealth and power; sacrifice to follow one’s leader in death; the honour of burial next to one’s owner for older animals that had died a natural death; connections with the burial of infants: cf. SCHWARTZ 2009, p. 26-27; 2007, p. 51-52.
61. MARCHETTI 2006, p. 100 for most of the 122 tombs.
62. WATELIN & LANGLEY 1934, p. 20-21, 27-28, fig. 4, Pl. XXI (tomb no. 494); cf. MOOREY 2001, p. 346 and ref.
63. MARCHETTI 2006, p. 100-102; for Moorey’s opinion on a date still in the ED IIIa for the “cart burials” cf. MOOREY 1978, p. 104 and ff.
64. Three certain burials with the same funerary equipment of carts, and three dubious ones; only in one (Y237) did the state of preservation of the cart and the equids allow the excavators to analyse it: WATELIN & LANGLEY 1934, p. 30-34, Pl. XXIV,1; cf. MOOREY 2001, p. 346 and ref. For an analytical reexamination of the cart-burials see MOOREY 1978, p. 106-110.
65. MOOREY 1978, p. 105-106: here Moorey still believed that the draught animals were bovids (p. 106), whilst after the subsequent identification of the species he confirmed that they were equids: cf. MOOREY 2001, p. 346.
The Royal Tombs in the Ur Cemetery, chronologically dated to the ED III, and possibly to the ED IIIb\(^ {66} \), in some cases contain carts or vehicles (without wheels) drawn by oxen buried with their high-ranking deceased owners, such as Queen Puabi (PG/800) or maybe Abargi (PG/789), the owner of the seal found inside the tomb\(^ {67} \) (fig. 8).


\(^{67}\) Woolley 1934, p. 78, Pl. 39b, 166 (U.10439), Equipment of the chariot-sledge from the tomb of Queen Puabi (PG/800); 301, Pl. 34b, 167a (U.10551) from the tomb ascribable to Abargi (PG/789). Littauer & Crouwel 1979, p. 25, n. 50, believe those in PG/800 of queen Puabi to be bulls as well; as does Moorey 1977, p. 39, rather than equids, as they were defined by Woolley, and here considered an error. Zettler 1998, p. 34 states that in PG/789 there were two wagons each drawn by three oxen; as in PG/800, which contained a cart and skeletons of oxen.
Alongside the reins of the queen’s chariot, a precious rein-ring survives, decorated by a small equid.

At Lagash (present-day El-Hiba), again in the middle ED Period, we find a tomb where the deceased, an elite man, was buried with his rich funerary equipment above a male equid \(^{68}\) (fig. 9).

\(^{68}\) HANSEN 1973, p. 70, fig. 26 espec.: here the animal is identified as an ass of as yet unknown type; MOOREY 2001, p. 346 considers it a “hemionus onager equid”.

Figure 8. Ur, Royal Cemetery. Equipment of the chariot-sledge from a: tomb of Queen Puabi (PG/800); b: tomb of Abargi (?) (PG/789), after WOOLLEY 1934, Pl. 39b, U.10439, Pl. 34b, U.10551.
It is clear that equids were often included in the trade circuits for luxury goods and in the transregional economy, from Syria to Mesopotamia (fig. 10), even among communities ruled by tribal leaders or chiefdoms; among the numerous issues raised (which require further study) I have limited myself here to the importance of some species, likely hybrids, and perhaps the “kunga” of the Eblaite texts, which may originate outside Mesopotamia before the mid-3rd millennium BC.

Figure 10. Map of sites involving in trade equid circuits, © Arcane Project, re-elaborated by S. Pizzimenti.

69. See above, n. 20, 21. The complex issue of the origin of equids and their domestication and other aspects were dealt with in 2004 in the publication by specialists in different fields such as WESZELI 2004, SEIDL 2004, DRIESCH & RAULWING 2004. Some of them were more sceptical regarding the possibility of identifying hybrid types deriving from the two equid species of onager and donkey: DRIESCH & RAULWING 2004. The more recent archaeozoological data mentioned above concerning specimens of equids from the Syrian site of Marra seem, however, to confirm this hypothesis. For an updated overview of the documentation and many issues on equids see VILA 2010, p. 611 ff. The route or routes by which this luxury item, increasingly indispensable in near-Eastern urban societies, reached the regions under examination still remains an open question although it can to some degree be traced.
However, their success probably resulted from the “exclusive” management of this species in the original Subartu for a certain period of time; this may have had an impact on the socio-economic and political dynamics of this area. The equid covering the rein-ring from the Royal female Grave in Ur Cemetery resembles that depicted on the royal seal from Urkesh, perhaps belonging to a hybrid species, the renowned “kunga” (fig. 11) 70.

Figure 11. a: Ur, Royal Cemetery. The rein-ring of the chariot from the grave PG/800; b: Urkesh. Ishar-beli seal impression, 11a: after WOOLLEY 1934, Pl. 166, U.10439; 11b: BUCCELLA & KELLY-BUCCELLA 2002, fig. 5.

70. According to WEBER 2012, p. 169 who states that “[...] it is unlikely that the donkey, rather than the kunga, is the animal found in these images.”
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