

THE EARLY DYNASTIC ‘MAISON DES FRUITS’ AT TELL K IN TELLO (ĠIRSU)

Abstract

Taking as a point of departure a foundation figurine of the Lagashite ruler Ur-Nanše, housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, Greece, this article presents a revised understanding of the ‘Maison des Fruits’ and the Tell K at Tello/Ġirsu. It centers on the objects and their inscriptions unearthed in and associated with the ‘Maison’, includes relevant parallel structures and objects, and concludes with a discussion of the function of the ‘Maison’. It is suggested that this was a sacred building closely related to water and fish, and leaves the discussion open regarding whom this structure was dedicated to.

A MESOPOTAMIAN FOUNDATION FIGURINE AT THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, GREECE

Objects of Mesopotamian origin rarely make it to Greece. This is especially true for objects circulating in the early 20th century antiquities market. Nonetheless, there is an exception: a foundation figurine of Ur-Nanše found its way to Greece after a certain D. Godonis donated it to the National Navy in May 16, 1916. Godonis had himself bought it for 40 drachmas, equivalent to 7.73 USD in 1910 and modern-day 206 USD. In 1900, the ‘Fund of the National Fleet’ was established in Greece, and many Greeks became its donors and benefactors, allowing the Fund to purchase the famous battleship Averof and a large number of torpedo boats. The first years of the 20th century were

characterized by an elevated patriotism among Greeks, and Godonis' donation of this figurine could have been part of this movement.

The dealer who sold this figurine to Godonis likely said that he found it in Epirus, a region in north-western Greece (Papaspiridi 1927: 185, no. 34). However, this is unlikely, for the figurine is certainly part of a set deposited at the circumference of the structure called 'Maison des Fruits' (or 'Ur-Nanše's construction') at Tell K in Ġirsu (modern Tello) in Iraq, together with at least six other identical foundation deposits. It measures 16.5 cm high and weighs 260.5 grams, and is probably made of copper alloy. Its back possibly bears a six-line inscription, which although mostly illegible (Figure 1 & 2), based on the other similar figurines by Ur-Nanše (discussed in more detail in p. 7 and Table 2), can be reconstructed:

1. ur-^dnanše, 2. lugal, 3. lagaš, 4. dumu gu-ni-DU 5. eš₃ gir₂-su 6. mu-du₃

(translation: Ur-Nanše, the ruler of Lagash, the son of Gunidu, built the eš₃ of Ġirsu)

< **HERE FIGURE 1** >

From the photographs in Figure 2, we may discern a few signs of the inscription, especially if corroborated with the similar foundation figurine MRAH.023, housed at the Royal Museum of Art and History, MRAH-KMKG, Brussels (Figure 2c; Table 2), where the whole inscription is legible.

< **HERE FIGURE 2** >

The figurine has been correctly cited previously as belonging to Ur-Nanše (Van Buren 1931: 7; Ellis 1968: 51, no. 31), although in most publications its origin is given as 'found in Epirus' (e.g., Frayne 2008). The reasons for ascribing its provenance to Epirus are unclear. However, if Godonis donated it to the Greek National Navy in 1916, it is possible that he had acquired it before; and as Epirus was not part of the Greek State before 1913 but still under Ottoman control (Clogg 2002: 102), a find from

there would not raise the alarm for the illegal antiquities trade¹. Moreover, 1902 would have been a perfect time for the figurine to leave Tello: it was one year after de Sarzec's death and another incident of illegal excavations took place there, with the result that thousands more objects flooded the antiquities market (Parrot 1948: 22).

The figurine published here gives us the opportunity to reconsider the other foundation deposits and additional objects related to Ur-Nanše found at Tello, as well as the so-called Ur-Nanše structures on Tell K. Such a re-examination suggests that all foundation figurines were found *in situ* delineating an external wall that could have existed enclosing the 'Maison des Fruits' structure. Further contemporaneous objects unearthed at Tell K will also be scrutinized to elucidate their relation to the structures and their function. Parallels of foundation deposits of this kind will also be discussed, mostly those from Nippur, Adab and Mari, while parallels for the building known as the 'Maison des Fruits' will also be presented.

THE FOUNDATION DEPOSITS OF UR-NANŠE AT THE MAISON DES FRUITS ON TELL K AT ĠIRSU (TELLO)

Ġirsu (modern Tello) became the capital of the state of Lagash around the second half of the 3rd millennium B.C. The site measures 4x3 km and is located about 260 km southeast of Baghdad, as the crow flies, near the Shatt al-Hai (the Gharaff), a tributary of the Tigris river. Ġirsu was first excavated in 1877, with twenty further seasons between 1877 and 1933 led by Ernest de Sarzec, Gaston Cros, Henri de Genouillac and André Parrot. The excavations of Tell K, led by de Sarzec, began in 1898; his eleventh and last season on Tell K began in late February 1900, when he tried to dig deeper and

¹ The state of Greece already had antiquities laws protecting its archaeological heritage; the second antiquities law, in force 1899–1932, made the illegal trafficking of antiquities a criminal offence for the first time (Voudouri 2010).

reached groundwater². After de Sarzec's death in 1901, Captain Gaston Cros was appointed the new excavator at Tello in 1903 and continued excavations at Tell K in 1904 and 1905. During de Sarzec's long intervals away from the site, clandestine diggings had taken place and an estimated 35.000-40.000 tablets flooded the antiquities markets (Budge 1925: 200–202; Caubet 2009).

All foundation deposits, which are the focus of this article, were unearthed during de Sarzec's excavations. After each excavation campaign, the finds – including these figurines – were divided between the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul and the Louvre Museum in Paris (Caubet 2009). Unfortunately, the exact archaeological context for some of these foundation deposits is elusive due to the insufficient recording practices.

<HERE FIGURE 3>

The first known Mesopotamian inscribed foundation deposits were commissioned under the ruler Ur-Nanše (Tsouparopoulou 2014). In the area around the 'Maison des Fruits' on Tell K, several sets of foundation offerings were deposited, seemingly circling the structure (de Sarzec 1884–1912: pl. 5 ter; Parrot 1948: 63). They seem to have been found dispersed in the terrace of the *Maison* during different excavation seasons (Heuzey 1900: 27). The figurines were embedded in mudbrick and were found *in situ*. Most of them were just below the then-modern surface of the Tell, at -0,30m (Heuzey 1900: 28). They consisted of a copper peg figurine about 15cm high and a flat disc-shaped piece of copper pierced with a round hole, resembling a fish. The fish-shaped plate was laid flat on the mudbrick and the peg of the figurine was thrust down through the hole, into the earth. Both the figurine and the fish-shaped plate were inscribed with six lines concerning Ur-Nanše's construction of the 'eš₃ (AB) Ĝirsu'.

In five of these deposits, an inscribed gray stone tablet shaped like a plano-convex brick was

² For a thorough description of Tell K and its structures see Huh 2008: 83–131. See also Rey 2016: 25–31.

added, laid flat over the head of the figure (Heuzey 1900: 27). The pegs and the fish-shaped plates display a similar text (Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.7), whereas the stone tablets display different, longer texts documenting the construction of several temples, the construction of waterworks and the manufacture of statues (see Tables 1 and 2; Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.9–18). The exact findspot of those five deposits found with an accompanying tablet are described by de Sarzec and Heuzey, although only four are acknowledged in de Sarzec's plan (Figure 4: a-d). Deposit *a* was found at approximately 18m to the southwest of the *Maison*. Deposits *c* and *b* were found to the northwest of the *Maison*, after the pavement (F) associated with the short face of the northwest wall of the *Maison*. Deposit *d* was found to the southeast of the *Maison*, beyond the two basins I and K, at approximately 24m from the eastern corner of the *Maison*, at 1,7m below the construction's foundation. Its depth is possibly due to the sloping surface at that side or even the presence of a different, lower terrace on the Tell, and is the only one whose accompanying tablet (AO 3180) mentions the abzu³. The fifth deposit (*e*), not included in the original plan, was found 20m from the southern corner of the *Maison*, but unfortunately without more precise findspot information. However, see Figure 4: e for an approximate localization.

<HERE FIGURE 4>

FOUNDATION STONE TABLETS OF UR-NANŠE

Ten foundation stone tablets commissioned by Ur-Nanše have been found on Tell K, whereas only seven figurine sets have been located (only five are documented by de Sarzec). Parrot (1948: 61) writes that five of the figurines had a foundation tablet placed on top of their head⁴. Although Parrot (1948) and de Sarzec (1884–1912) locate only five stone foundation tablets, Heuzey (1900: 27–29) mentions that there were ten, and Frayne (2008: E1.9.1.9–18) supports that number; seven of those are housed in the Louvre, Paris and three in the Museum of the Ancient Orient (Eski Şark Eserleri

³ For a discussion of the different abzu-related constructions, see pp. 30–31.

⁴ Ellis (1968: 76) dismisses the possibility that the tablet was placed on top of the figurines' head.

Müzesi) in Istanbul (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Most of the foundation tablets commemorate the building of several temples, shrines and other structures, the digging of canals as well as the manufacture of statues. Not one single structure is mentioned in all of the tablets, although there is a prevalence of documenting the building of the eš₃ Ġirsu (8/10) and the temple of the goddess Nanše (8/10). Other buildings mentioned often are: the Ibgal, the ‘Great Oval’ (AO 3867; AO 3179; AO 253; etc.), possibly referring to the partially excavated temple of Inana in Area A at Lagash/al-Hiba; the temple of Gatumdug, known as the ‘mother of Lagash’ (Hansen 1992: 207), e.g. in AO 3867; the Tiraš, which has been located at modern Šatraḥ⁵; the Bagara, e.g. the temple precinct of the god Ninġirsu, which was partly excavated by Hansen in Area C at Lagash/al-Hiba (Hansen 1970; 1992); and the different Abzu-temples (i.e. the abzu-e and the abzu).

Looking closer at the ordering of the text on those inscriptions mentioning both the formation of statues and the building of temples (AO 3177; AO 3179; EŠ 429), the statues are mentioned just after the building they were meant to reside in; for example, the formation of the statue of Gatumdug is listed just after reference to the building of her temple (AO 3179), the same with Nanše’s statue. If we follow this logic, it appears that the eš₃ Ġirsu could have been the house of Šulšaga (AO 3177; AO 3179), but also that of Gušudu and Kindazi (AO 3177). Seminara (2014) reached a similar conclusion: that the statues of Šulšaga, Gušudu and Kindazi were brought in to reside in the eš₃ Ġirsu. Further, based on Ur-Nanše 9, Seminara acknowledged that also the statue of the god Lamma’u’e was brought in to reside in the temple of Nin-MAR.KI (Seminara 2014: 26). He added that the most striking aspect of the associations between gods and temples/buildings in some – but not all – of Ur-Nanše’s inscriptions is that the main deities to whom the temples/buildings are dedicated are not mentioned, but only the secondary ones. It remains unclear whether these were indeed secondary deities mentioned in some of the inscriptions of Ur-Nanše, or whether they could have been the main

⁵ Frayne 2008: 112. See also Falkenstein 1966: 169; Suter 2000: 87; Selz 1995; and Notizia and di Ludovico 2012 for the Ur III period.

deities residing in those sacred buildings. If the former, we do not know the reasons for such an association. If the latter there always remains the possibility that the eš₃ Ĝirsu could have been the residence of Šulšaga, offspring of Ninĝirsu and Bau (Selz 1995: 46, 251, 277), but for the other two deities mentioned no certain inference can be made about their ancestry or relation to Ninĝirsu and Bau, although they do appear to belong to the Lagaš pantheon (Selz 1995: 139, 156–57).

<HERE TABLE 1>

FOUNDATION FIGURINES AND FISH-SHAPED PLATES OF UR-NANŠE

As mentioned above, seven nail pegs (or else sets consisting of a foundation figurine and a fish-shaped plate) were discovered at the *Maison* and have now been dispersed in Brussels (Royal Museum of Art and History, MRAH-KMKG), Paris (the Louvre), Istanbul (Museum of the Ancient Orient - Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi), London (British Museum) and Athens (National Archaeological Museum) (Rashid 1966; 1983). Ellis (1968: 51, fn. 31) mentions that there is one set in Istanbul, alongside an extra fish-shaped plate. Possibly, the stray plate from Istanbul and the stray figurine in Athens belong together; therefore, they are presented together here.

All foundation figurines and their plates bear an inscription of Ur-Nanše, commemorating the building of the AB (eš₃) of Ĝirsu. Frayne gives a six-line inscription for all of them, and Parrot mentions that the figurine bore the name of Ur-Nanše, while the plate had the clause mentioning the building of the AB (eš₃) Ĝirsu. Parrot's suggestion is incorrect, as both the figurine and the plate seem to have borne the complete six-line inscription, as we can see in the Brussels exemplar (Ellis 1968: 52; Speleers 1925: Pl. I, no. 2; Sollberger 1956: Urn. 3. See here Table 2a). While the inscriptions on the plates are relatively straightforward to read, those on the figurines are not, with only a few signs easily discernible. One can observe minor differences in the rendering and the order of the signs on lines for the plates and figurines. Following Frayne (2008: 81) and based on the orthography and paleography of the plates' and the figurines' text, they do not seem to belong to Ur-Nanše's early

regnal years; all signs and cases of the inscriptions are neatly arranged and there is no discrepancy or signs overlapping, signifying that they must belong to Ur-Nanše's later inscriptions.

<HERE TABLE 2>

For three of the sets (BM 96565, AO 314 and AO 2351), copper alloy analysis has been performed and shows a high concentration of lead in both figurines and plates. The high percentage of lead added into copper –ranging from 5 to 20%– would facilitate casting, though such alloying was not often encountered during the EDIIIb period (Moorey 1999: 257). It is thus possible that these figurines date to the late EDIIIa period instead, pushing Ur-Nanše's reign further back to the EDIIIa, as was initially suggested⁶.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE 'MAISON DES FRUITS' / THE 'CONSTRUCTION D'URNANŠE'

The 'Maison des Fruits' (or 'Construction d'Urnāše') was built above the well-sealed off earlier building, known as the 'Construction Inférieure' or 'Construction anonyme' (Crawford 1987: 74). According to Forest (1999), two phases of the building of the *Maison* can be reconstructed, both attributed to Ur-Nanše (Forest's IV and III phase), and most of the objects recovered there should be attributed to phase III. Forest states that building IV remained in use until Enannatum I, a son of Akurgal and contemporary to Ur-Lumma of Umma⁷. Associated with the *Maison*, but outside the main building, were a series of peripheral constructions, including two large basins (I and K), eight

⁶ For the Early Dynastic rulers, see Marchesi 2015 and Sallaberger and Schrakamp 2015: 67–84.

⁷ The complete stratigraphic sequence of Tell K is beyond the remit of this article, but six main phases within the Early Dynastic period have been proposed for the area around and encompassing the *Maison*. See Rey and Lecompte 2020; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 38–44; Crawford 1987: 71–76; Forest 1999: 5–31; Huh 2008: 83–153.

symmetrically arranged pillar bases (H), and two projecting brick platforms (D and E) for whose function Heuzey (1900: 9) could find no reasonable explanation.

<HERE FIGURE 5>

The *Maison* is a rectangular structure 10,50/10,60x7,30m (de Sarzec and Heuzey 1912; Forest 1999: 7) with no openings identified. The external walls were 0,60m thick and survived no more than 1m in height (Forest 1999: 7). Two rooms were found within it, again with no doors or openings, but with clearly defined passages 0,80m wide (C in Figure 4) and internal walls of 0,30m. All floors inside the *Maison*, including the passages and rooms, were coated with bitumen.

Room A of the *Maison* is 4 m square and Room B on its south-east side is cut by a recess in space C. The door sockets (1, 2 in Figure 4, museum nos. AO 252 and AO 31136; here Figure 6) on both corners of the south-eastern wall of Room A with about 3m difference between them according to the plan, were not thought to have been found *in situ* (Heuzey 1900; Parrot 1948: 66); however, Crawford (1987: 74) raised the possibility that these were indeed *in situ*, indicating the presence of a door on this south-eastern wall in Room A. Both door sockets bore an inscription of Ur-Nanše. Door socket AO 31136 could be used further to identify the building of the *Maison* as the eš₃ Ĝirsu, since it documents:

“For the god Ningirsu, Ur-Nanše, king of Lagash, son of Gu-NI.DU, when he built the eš₃ Ĝirsu, he dedicated (this door socket). He built the temple of the goddess Nanše, built the great Ibgal (“Great Oval”), built Ki-NIR, built Bagara, built the E-dam, built the temple of the goddess Gatumdug, and built Tiraš” (Translation from Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.21).

The other door socket found within Room A (AO 252) documents the construction of several temples and timber brought as tribute from Dilmun:

“... he built the temple of the god Ningirsu, built the temple of the goddess Nanše, built the temple of the goddess Gatumdug, built the E-dam, (and) built the temple of Nin-

MAR.KI. He had ships of Dilmun submit timber as tribute from the foreign lands (to Lagash).
He built the Ibgal, built the Ki-NIR, (and) built the E-PA” (translation from Frayne 2008:
E1.9.1.22).

<HERE FIGURE 6>

Parrot (1948: 61) mentions a third door socket found 8,5m east of Room A within the *Maison*, which mentions the construction of the temples of Ninĝirsu and of Nanše, the Šešgar, the Abzu-banda, the Bagara and the fetching of timber as tribute from Dilmun, similarly to door socket AO 252. This third door socket could be EŠ 1299 (as identified by Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.23), but again its location cannot be associated with any door opening (no 3 in Figure 4).

Room B was almost completely empty, apart from a set of copper knife blades with rivets; although some of these appear to have been inscribed, they are illegible (Gimbel 2002: 200; Crawford 1987: 74). Two additional constructions were seemingly abutting the southwest and northeast external walls of the *Maison* (projecting brick platforms E, D in Figure 4). Next to the northwest wall of the structure, which must have been the façade, was a pavement (F in Figure 4); it extends for 10m⁸ from the *Maison* to the northwest and is made of square bricks of two sizes, 0,30m and 0,25m (Forest 1999: 8).

<HERE FIGURE 7>

A bronze standard (Figure 7) with a D-shaped loop, found on pavement F almost parallel to the north-western external wall of the *Maison*, is possibly a doorpost 3,27m long. It is reminiscent of

⁸ 9 m according to the plan; see Forest 1999: 8.

similar doorposts depicted on seals dated from the Early Dynastic I⁹ through the Akkadian period, when they are shown held by bull-men¹⁰ (e.g., Figure 8). It is the only Sumerian temple standard/doorpost ever discovered intact and of such a large size – compare the metal ringed pole fittings from the ‘Steinstifttempel’ (Marchesi/Marchetti 2015: 221, n. 15; Boehmer 1990: pls 1–6) – but was unfortunately lost during transportation (Parrot 1948: 106). This standard/doorpost found on the pavement was very probably *in situ*, having fallen from the door when this was burned down and then levelled and filled. It has been proposed that it was set near the doorway to Ningîrsu’s temple (Parrot 1948: 106; Gimbel 2002: 263). Its shape corresponds to a so-called ‘buckled shaft’ (Woolley 1934: 347), a ‘buckled post’ (Steinkeller 1998: 88), or a simple ring-standard (‘die einfache Ringstandarte’) (Braun-Holzinger 2007: 21). It also corresponds to the written graph URI₃ (as in Szarzyńska 1996: table 2), which does not appear to be linked to any specific deity during the Early Dynastic period (Gimbel 2002: 263–65). The same appears to be the situation with the iconography of the standard during the Early Dynastic period (see footnote 9).

<HERE FIGURE 8>

Possible mention of this standard/doorpost comes from a diorite plaque/stele (AO 3866; Figure 9), which is inscribed with an incantation and a royal inscription for the construction of the eš₃ Ĝirsu (Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.32; Steible 1982: FAOS 5/II, 148). It measures 20,5x18cm and is broken on three sides. Its findspot is unclear, but it has been suggested that it came from a specific building in the area west of the *Maison*’s platform (Frayne 2008: 117). It reads:

“O shining reed! O reed of the canebrake of the fresh water source! O reed, you whose
branches grow luxuriantly. After the god Enki set your roots in the (post) hole, your

⁹ Woolley and Legrain 1936: Table 20, 385; also, see van Dijk 2016: 112–158, for an extensive collection of all Early Dynastic iconographic representations of this type of standard on different media, showing that no single deity can be identified as being closely associated with this symbol in the Early Dynastic period.

¹⁰ Boehmer 1965: Pls. 6, 10 and 11, Nos. 58, 110, 113, and 124.

branches greet the day (or the sun god). Your “beard” (is made of) lapis-lazuli. O reed that comes forth (from) the shining mountain, O reed, may the Earth lords and the Earth princes bow down (before you). May the god Enki pronounce a (favorable) omen (for your construction). Its shining renowned standard(?) the god Enki cast it (with?) his (magic) loop. Praise (be to) Ningîrsu! Šul-MUŠXPA, the personal god of the king, carried the shining work basket. Ur-Nanše, king of Lagash, son of Gu-NI.DU, (Gu-NI.DU was) ‘son’ of Gursar, built the ‘Shrine-Ĝîrsu’”. (Translation from Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.32)

The abovementioned text, as translated by Frayne, could refer to the standard with the loop given by Enki and placed at the entrance of the *Maison*. It has been proposed that because this so-called ‘plaque’ bears no picture, it could have been a draft of a royal inscription (Cooper 1980: 104). However, this is highly unlikely for three reasons: 1) no ‘drafts’ are known on stone from the ED III; 2) the inscription is neatly written; 3) there are no known diorite plaques from the EDIIIa-b. While diorite was used during this period for some royal statues and door sockets¹¹, it was very seldom if ever used for plaques¹². Consequently, this artifact need not be a plaque, but a fragment of a stele or possibly a stand. This would also explain the absence of an image to accompany the inscription; the emphasis here was on the text and its message.

<HERE FIGURE 9>

We could imagine this fragment to have been part of a construction similar to the Bassetki statue (al-Fouadi 1976; Frayne 1993: RIME 2/1.4.10)¹³, and the standard mentioned in the text having been placed similarly to the standard presumably held by the Bassetki statue (Figure 10). The standard-

¹¹ Evans 2012: 126, and fig. 41. Diorite was used especially for statuary of private individuals coming from the Lagash city-state; see Evans 2012: 127 and note 112.

¹² Boese 1971 does not include any EDIIIa-b diorite plaques.

¹³ The stand in the Bassetki statue was cast in bronze, and dates later; thus, this suggestion is highly hypothetical.

doorpost, thus, could have been supported by a statue, rather than driven into the ground or a door socket, such as the cone-shaped one found in room A as tentatively suggested by Crawford (1987: 75).

<HERE FIGURE 10>

If this was the case, it might have been one of a pair placed at either side of the temple doorway, corroborated by the available contemporary visual evidence, for example the inlay fragment in Figure 11 (de Sarzec and Heuzey 1884–1912: 271–72, fig. A; Gimbel 2002: 264).

<HERE FIGURE 11>

As mentioned above, eight pillar bases were found in the circumference of the *Maison*, consisting of four, square baked bricks, laid flat on top of a bitumen layer. The bases are arranged in pairs in parallel to each of the sides of the building, approximately 4m away, and delineating a large quadrangle c. 16m to 19m (Forest 1999: 8). The (possibly) wooden pillars denoted as H in Figure 4 are all in complete alignment with the *Maison* and could make a rectangle enclosing it. Whether the area around the *Maison* included within the pillars was a terrace is difficult to say. The pillars possibly enclosed or delineated a portico to the main building (de Sarzec 1884-1912; Forest 1999; Huh 2008). The idea of a portico was criticized by Marchetti (Marchesi/Marchetti 2011: 40), who suggested that the pillars must belong to the older Phase 5 of the structure (Figure 12b). Since there exist only columns running parallel to the corners of the *Maison*, this could indicate some kind of a structure with four separate wooden porticoes¹⁴; or a different plan such as that proposed by Huh (2008: fig.

¹⁴ A colleague (personal communication, January 2021) suggested the existence of four separate porticoes: one over the northwest entrance, one each over platforms D and E to the southwest and northeast of the *Maison* (perhaps for outdoor rituals), and then a final portico over the southeast side – over another doorway there as suggested by the door sockets.

35) (Figure 12a), which could designate the perimeter of a wall that de Sarzec has in his plans but which he did not find, and could be delineated by the foundation deposits.

Traces of bitumen-coated wooden pillars have been noted in the Early Dynastic temple at Tell Ubaid: three of them were decorated with mosaics while four others were covered with bronze secured by rivets¹⁵. Charred wood has also been found at Nippur, but this seems to have been used for the roofing, doors and doorposts (Peters 1897). Notwithstanding, foundation tablet EŞ 429 and other texts commissioned by Ur-Nanše¹⁶ mention that Ur-Nanše brought timber from Dilmun as tribute and/or wood from the mountains. The absence of evidence of roofing could indicate that the building was partially or entirely open to the sky, as suggested by Crawford (1987).

<HERE FIGURE 12 >

A further set of inscribed and uninscribed objects were found close to the *Maison*. Seven limestone lion heads were found near the north-western pillar H (no 7 on Figure 4), at the lower level outside of building IV (Forest's second phase of Ur-Nanše's *Maison*). Several of them bear an inscription of Ur-Nanše. Five are currently in Istanbul and two in Paris (AO 233 and AO 231) (Figure 13).

<HERE FIGURE 13>

These lion heads resemble those uncovered at Tell Ubaid (Figure 14; Hall and Woolley 1927: pl. XI 6, 8; Braun-Holzinger 1984: 73, pl. 19)¹⁷, although the latter are considerably larger and cast in bronze. The findspots (no 7 on Figure 4), just next to the northwest pillar and the platform, could

¹⁵ Moorey 1999: 357; Hall and Woolley 1927: 100–103, pl. IV, XXXIV.3, XXXV.6–7.

¹⁶ Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.2, 5, 17, 20, 22, 23, 25.

¹⁷ On the contemporaneity of, and similarities between the Ninhursag temple at Tell Ubaid and the *Maison*, and their associated material and visual evidence, see Marchesi/Marchetti 2011: 66.

indicate that these heads were used as decorative pieces for either the pillar (see parallel in Figure 15) or the building's façade. They could also have been buried intentionally as votive offerings, an argument strengthened by the fact that most were inscribed.

<HERE FIGURE 14>

Analogously to the large lion heads found buried in front of the façade of the sanctuary of Ninhursag's temple at Tell Ubaid (Figure 15), these lions could have acted as guardian figures at the *Maison*'s entrance. Whether they were to be visible or were purposefully buried next to the entrance is not easy to determine, but we should note that guardian figures (commonly images of lions), often protect doorways of monumental buildings (Watanabe 2002: 113; Battini 2009). However, their small size suggests an apotropaic function¹⁸.

<HERE FIGURE 15>

Seven inscribed bricks coated in bitumen were also uncovered, grouped together at the northwest corner of the *Maison* (Figure 16). These, according to the excavators, were probably stacked together at some later date (de Sarzec 1888-1912: 407–408). The inscription on six of them was identical to the text inscribed on the figurines, mentioning the construction of the 'eš₃ Ĝirsu', while one mentioned instead the building of the temple of Ninĝirsu. The fact that they were found in secondary context (Marchesi/Marchetti 2011: 43) makes it difficult to use them for the identification of the *Maison* with the 'temple of Ninĝirsu'. Further, we do not know whether they all originally belonged to the same building.

<HERE FIGURE 16>

¹⁸ There is also a green onyx lion protome with a dedication from Ur-Nanše to Ninĝirsu (AO 3281).

Also, noteworthy are the Ur-Nanše family plaques found close to the lines or corners drawn between the pillars parallel to the western wall of the *Maison* (nos 4, 5, and 6 on Figure 4). These could actually have been found *in situ*, fallen from the walls to which they were attached, delineated by the pillars marked ‘H’ in Figure 4. Four such family plaques are included in Frayne’s publication (2008: E1.9.1.2-5), with three of them presented in photographs and discussed by Parrot¹⁹. According to Parrot’s plan drawing (1948: 62, fig. 15), No 6 seems to have been two plaques, and possibly the other plaque is the one described by Frayne (2008: E1.9.1.5) and bearing the museum number EŞ 1633 (but also 453/4). If the family plaques were found *in situ* in the courtyard or the portico of the *Maison*, then we should re-evaluate their text. One of them (Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.2, Figure 17a) mentions: “Ur-Nanše, king of Lagash, son of Gunidu, built the temple of Ningîrsu; he built the temple of Nanše; he built Apsubanda...”; its significance is discussed further below.

<HERE FIGURE 17>

ARTIFACT PARALLELS

The way the foundation figurines from the *Maison* are fashioned, i.e., the foundation figurine inserted into a plate, is not unique, although the fish-shaped plaque is not found anywhere else (Muscarella 1988: 303). Nonetheless, the use of a plate associated with a figurine or a simple peg is found only

¹⁹ Their current museum numbers and their association with the numbers given to them by Parrot 1948: 62; fig. 15, is: Nr 4: AO 2345, Nr 5: AO 2344, Nr 6: EŞ 401, the latter wrongly attributed by Frayne as being Nr 8 in Parrot’s fig.15. The family plaques of Ur-Nanše have been the focus of many scholarly publications; Huh 2008 discussed them in detail providing a complete bibliography.

during the Early Dynastic period – more specifically EDIIIa and EDIIIb²⁰. Below, parallels to the foundation sets are presented.

Contemporary with Ur-Nanše's foundation deposits and parallel in format is the deposit of the ruler of Adab, E'iginimpa'e, found on Mound V underneath the 'Later Temple' at Adab. The 'Earlier Temple' on Mound V was a baked plano-convex brick structure. After it was filled with mudbrick, it was covered with a course of baked brick and bitumen; upon this bitumen pavement, Banks found several objects, including four items from a foundation deposit of E'iginimpa'e (Banks 1912: 200, 275), consisting of an inscribed adze-shaped copper object with a copper spike inserted into the hole at its end and two tablets, of copper alloy and of white stone (Figure 18) (Wilson 2012: 93–95).

<HERE FIGURE 18>

Another possible contemporary, if not slightly earlier, foundation nail and plate set comes from Level VIIA of the Inana Temple at Nippur (Figure 19; 7N 223, 7N 222; Muscarella 1988: 303–305). The Nippur deposits – three in total and a stray pair of “horns” – are different in shape from those of Ur-Nanše, but are similarly a two-part set: a bronze nail 7–8cm long and a bronze flat object resembling a pair of horns joined at the base (Ellis 1968: 46–47). These were found under the walls at the side of a door from where one could access the free-standing shrine of the temple, which had a straight-axis approach (Hansen and Dales 1962: fig. 2).

<HERE FIGURE 19>

²⁰ See though Gibson 1981; Gibson and McMahon 1995; and Gibson and McMahon 1997 for the suggestion of eliminating the EDIIIb period.

Similar in concept are also the thirteen foundation deposits unearthed at Levels C and A of the Temple of Ištar at Mari, buried in the wall foundations and under the floors of Cella 17 (seven in Level C) and Cella 18 (six in Level A). They consisted of a D-looped copper plate (or ring-bolt) and an aniconic nail peg thrust vertically into it (Ellis 1968: 47, 55, figs. 2, 9; Rashid 1981: pls. II m, figs. 3, 10–16); they were accompanied by small uninscribed lapis lazuli, silver and alabaster tablet-shaped plaques (Figure 20). More such foundation deposits were unearthed in the Temple Area (Chantier G) at Mari, including at the Ninni-zaza temple (Beyer 2014). The tradition of depositing nail pegs at Mari persisted well into the ‘Šakkanakkū’ period (Butterlin 2015).

<HERE FIGURE 20A + 20B>

The practice of depositing nail-pegged plates was apparently mostly restricted to the EDIII. All artifact parallels described above are roughly contemporaneous to Ur-Nanše’s reign, though the Tello and Adab exemplars are the only inscribed ones. While it becomes clear that the technique of thrusting a nail into a plate was relatively common and could have served to monumentalize the building practice, the shape of the Ur-Nanše nail pegs is unique.

ARCHITECTURAL PARALLELS

If we identify the *Maison* with a straight-axis cella temple, as interpreted by Forest (1999), parallels are seen in the sacred area of Ninhursag on Tell IV at Adab, in the Inana VIIA temple at Nippur and the Ninhursag temple at Mari, though the latter are attested together with bent-axis shrines (Marchesi/Marchetti 2011: 220; Marchetti 2013: 284, n. 4; Hansen and Dales 1962: fig 2).

Interestingly, both the contemporaneous Ninhursag temple at Mari and the Inana VIIA temple at Nippur share the bipartite foundation offering set idea, with a nail and a plate, just like the Ur-Nanše set.

Parallels to the *Maison*’s structure can be seen mainly in the Eanna district at Uruk (Moorey

1999: 339; Heinrich 1982: 67–68, 134–36). The ‘Steinstifttempel’ (or ‘Stone Cone Building’) was a T-shaped limestone structure measuring 28x19m, sitting on a butted earth platform, and waterproofed throughout with bitumen (Figure 21). It was constructed in the Late Uruk period (Uruk VI-IVa). The excavators designated an L-shaped sunken room measuring 4x2,4m in the south-east of the temple as a pool (an abzu-pond) because of the use of bitumen (Lenzen 1959: 15). The whole building foundations have been set in bitumen, thus leading to interpretations regarding the building’s function. Boehmer (1990; 1991) suggested that bitumen was used to make the building watertight and was possibly associated with an early water cult. Further, copper overlays and wire fittings for monumental ringed poles have been identified there (Boehmer 1990: pls 1–6). Since the ‘Steinstifttempel’ is an enigmatic building, especially for the construction of its mosaic stone walls, and is dated much earlier than the *Maison*, one should be cautious when making comparisons between the two (Eichmann 2007; 2013; Hageneuer and Levenson 2018).

<HERE FIGURE 21>

Harriet Crawford (1987: 74–75) attempted to find parallels with the ‘Riemchengebäude’ in the Eanna precinct at Uruk, which was sunk into a section of the ‘Steinstifttempel’ (Heinrich 1982: 72; Eichmann 2007), and which the excavators understood as a place for the ritual deposition of objects after the ‘Steinstifttempel’ ceased to be used (Figure 22). It measures 20x18m and was a subterranean construction, possibly accessible through the roof by ladder (Figure 23).

<HERE FIGURE 22>

Although the *Maison* and the ‘Riemchengebäude’ share many similarities – including being rectangular with rooms nesting inside the enclosure wall, burnt and carefully filled in, and associated with rich finds – the ‘Riemchengebäude’ is much larger and earlier (Van Ess 2015b; Vogel 2017; 2019). Their function also does not seem comparable, thus Crawford (1987: 74–75) concluded that

the similarities between these two structures should be disregarded. There are no other comparable buildings to the *Maison*.

<HERE FIGURE 23>

THE FUNCTION OF THE *MAISON*

The *Maison*'s function has been discussed extensively. Ernst Heinrich did not identify any of the structures on Tell K as temples (1982: 110). Tate Paulette (2016: 90) presents it as a possible grain storehouse, due to its bitumen-lined rooms, while Marchetti and Marchesi (2011: 41) believed that it acted as a foundation for another structure that does not survive. That the *Maison* and the older structure on the mound (the 'Construction Inférieure') had religious significance is however undeniable, proven by its orientation, its placement on the mound and crucially its related finds (Crawford 1987; Ławecka 2014).

Many scholars identify the *Maison* with the Early Dynastic E-ninnu, the temple of Ningîrsu; some appear certain about this (e.g., André-Salvini 2003: 69). David Gimbel (2002) identifies both the previous edifice (the 'Construction Inférieure'/'Construction Anonyme') and the 'Construction d'Urnashe' (or 'Maison des Fruits') as different levels of the E-ninnu. Following Forest (1999), Rey (2016) did the same. Both Forest and Rey suggest that if one considers all objects unearthed at Tell K mentioning the god Ningîrsu and spanning the reigns of the Early Dynastic rulers of Gîrsu, there is enough evidence to prove that the *Maison* is Ningîrsu's inner sanctum²¹.

²¹ The objects include: 1. copper dagger (P513625; now apparently lost) inscribed ^dnin-ĝîr-su(NIN:SU:ĜÎR:AN), ĜÎŠ.NI saĝa, a [mu]-ru, a stray find from Tell K, not associated with any structure (de Sarzec and Heuzey 1884–1912: 414–15); 2. bull-head AO 2676 (P513630) found 16m to the south-east of the *Maison*, which according to Marchesi and Marchetti (2011: 46) could have been brought together with Mesilim's macehead because it mentions Uruk and therefore the dedicant is a foreigner; 3. Dudu's

This however presents some issues of interpretation: most of these objects belong to different periods than the *Maison*. We do not know if they were found *in situ*, and in fact some were not (such as the ‘Figure aux Plumes’; Parrot 1948: 56) and/or were found in secondary contexts; besides, many were found related to other buildings on Tell K (e.g. the so-called ‘brewery of Ninĝirsu’ or ‘the coach-house’). Based on our (limited) understanding of how dedicatory objects were set up in Early Dynastic temples, we cannot be certain that their current placement conforms to their original placement. Most of these objects are arbitrarily placed on Tell K, and the French excavations of the 19th and early 20th centuries appear haphazard, not allowing us to identify any structure, yet alone the *Maison*, with Ninĝirsu’s inner sanctum. The only objects that can reliably aid us in identifying the *Maison*’s function are the bricks and the foundation deposits. Furthermore, objects such as the clay nail (EŞ 1716) found on Tell K recording Enmetena’s building of Nanše’s E-engur temple, or the onyx cup (EŞ 427), dedicated to Bau by Ur-Nanše, that was found 8m from the *Maison* on Tell K (Frayne 2008: E1.9.1.27; see also Braun-Holzinger 1991: 115, G1), generate more difficulties for the evaluation of the unearthed objects versus their connection to Tell K structures.

The existence of objects on Tell K mentioning Ninĝirsu comes as no surprise, nor does it prove that the *Maison* was Ninĝirsu’s E-ninnu, just as the nail mentioned above does not prove that the E-engur of Nanše was on Tell K. To group all objects together, which clearly belong to the reigns of different rulers and have been associated with different structures on Tell K, is not helpful in

plaque AO 2354 found near the ‘Massif d’ Enmetena’s’ southern corner (Huh 2008: 382; Marchesi/Marchetti 2011: 38, fn 81); 4. Eannatum’s victory stele’s pieces, found scattered; 5. mortar EŞ 384 found south of the *Maison*, without further contextual information; 6. objects related to Enmetena and the ‘Massif’ wall situated in the south-west, about 15m west of the *Maison*, and the foundation objects (mainly bricks) of Enmetena, related to the ‘brewery of Ninĝirsu’, located in the ‘Esplanade’ area; 7. silver vase of Enmetena (AO 2674), excavated by de Sarzec from a trench that ran from the area of the *Maison* west to the area of the ‘Massif’; 8. Enmetena’s foundation figurines, found in the ‘Esplanade’; 9. four door-sockets of Enanatum II (MNB 1417, AO 249, EŞ 390, EŞ 1551), mentioning the restoration of the brewery of Ninĝirsu, without clear findspot.

identifying Ur-Nanše's *Maison* with Ningîrsu's inner sanctum, even if it shows that Tell K had a special religious significance and an undeniable connection to Ningîrsu.

Pascal Butterlin (2016) states that "Les textes nous rapportent que le nom de ce sanctuaire était Eninnu «Demeure du Cinquante», ce nombre étant associé à Ningîrsu, dieu présidant à l'orage et à la guerre". However, there is no relevant inscriptional material from the time of Ur-Nanše identifying this structure with the E-ninnu. Additionally, Butterlin assumes (2016: label of figure 8) that there was *possibly* an oval enclosure on Tell K, thus introducing a caveat about a confident reconstruction of the oval enclosure wall²². Therefore, the interpretation that the so-called *Maison* or 'Construction of Ur-Nanše' corresponded to the E-ninnu, and more specifically to the inner sanctum of the Temple of Ningîrsu, could be queried.

It is now certain that the later E-ninnu, re-built by Gudea of the Lagash II Dynasty, together with Bau's temple, is to be found on the 'Tell du Palais' on Tell A. This was confirmed by renewed excavations on Tell A in 2016 and 2017, when the central part of the sanctuary of Ningîrsu's temple was discovered²³. The current excavators at Ġirsu, together with other scholars, believe that the older E-ninnu, the one built by Ur-Nanše, should be located on Tell K (Rey 2016)²⁴ and that it was moved from Tell K to Tell A during the Lagash II Dynasty. Nonetheless, the argument that the E-ninnu was moved by Gudea from its original place on Tell K to Tell A is not proven beyond any reasonable doubt but is rather based on the reading of the Gudea Cylinders at face value. As Suter writes, the mention of Ningîrsu dwelling/living in the ancient house (é ul é libir) (CB 2:11 and in prayer CA 17:29-18:2) and the mention of the new house (é gibil) in CB 19:16 is not but two terms 'consciously chosen to give the illusion that Gudea built an entire temple' and that 'it is unlikely that Gudea

²² See Butterlin 2019 for his reconstruction of Tell K and the environs of the *Maison*.

²³ <https://archaeopress.wordpress.com/2018/05/02/the-tello-ancient-girsu-project-iraq-scheme-the-british-museum/>; last accessed 26.11.2019.

²⁴ See however above and Frayne 2008 who opines that Tell A housed both the Early Dynastic and Gudea's E-ninnu.

actually rebuilt the entire temple' (Suter 2000: 115).

Digging deeper below the E-ninnu of Gudea on Tell A, the excavators found two superimposed monumental cultic platforms (see Figure 24), signifying that on Tell A there were cultic structures dating to the Early Dynastic period and even earlier (MacGinnis and Rey 2018). These platforms unearthed beneath Gudea's E-ninnu appear more elaborate and monumental than the constructions on Tell K, but this could be due to the excavation practices²⁵.

Sébastien Rey (2021) suggests that the monumental platform found below Gudea's E-ninnu on Tell A belonged to an Early Dynastic temple of Bau. However, Sallaberger (2018/2020: esp. fn. 4), based on documentary evidence, demonstrates that there is no indication that Bau was venerated in a separate distinct temple building of her own during the Early Dynastic, but rather the pertinent evidence signals that she had a separate wing within the Ningirsu temple. The monumentality of the platform unearthed under Gudea's E-ninnu, and the fact that Bau could have been venerated in Ningirsu's temple during the Early Dynastic period as well, as was also the case for the later Lagash II Dynasty²⁶, could in conjunction potentially prove that the Early Dynastic temple of Ningirsu is on Tell A. Notwithstanding, even if the *Maison* was not the temple of Ningirsu, it was still within the sacred precinct of the tutelary deity of Ĝirsu.

As discussed above, references to the building of the eš₃ Ĝirsu are plentiful in the inscribed objects found within and around the *Maison*, and especially on the foundation figurines and fish-shaped plates, where the only building mentioned is the eš₃ Ĝirsu. This led Heuzey (1900) to suggest that the eš₃ Ĝirsu was the contemporary name for the *Maison*.

²⁵ That the excavators at Girsu unearthed monumental structures belonging to a so-called Temple Kitchen dated to the ED III in the vicinity of Tell A (Rey 2021) could further be used to indicate that these kitchens belonged to Ningirsu's and Bau's temple.

²⁶ Votive objects dedicated to Bau dated to the second Dynasty of Lagash, such as AO 58 (P234639), have been unearthed on Tell A.

<HERE FIGURE 24>

What therefore is the $e\check{s}_3$ (AB)? AB, with the reading $e\check{s}_3$, is translated as precinct, shrine, or sanctuary. Already in the Uruk period, AB with a reading $e\check{s}_3$ corresponded to ‘temple’ (Selz 1997: 187, fn. 26) and Englund (1998: 81) noted that in Jemdet Nasr texts, AB corresponds to a ‘temple household’. Gonzalo Rubio (2017: 292) assigns a general meaning of ‘dwelling’, especially of deities in archaic texts from the Uruk period, and argues that $e\check{s}_3$ was used for ‘temple’ in EDIIIa/EDIIIb texts from Fara and Abu Salabikh. Crawford however translates it as ‘store-room’ (1987: 75), which is echoed by Paulette (2016). However, there does not appear to be reasonable justification for the translation/interpretation of $e\check{s}_3$ (AB) as ‘store-room’.

THE VENERATED DEITY IN THE *MAISON*

If we assume that the $e\check{s}_3$ Ĝirsu is to be identified with the *Maison* and understand it as the ‘shrine of Ĝirsu’, it would be noteworthy to attempt to identify the worshipped deity/ies. As discussed above, many scholars identify the occupant with the god Ningirsu. However, there are reasons to question such an identification, stemming most importantly from Sallaberger’s suggestion that Bau would have shared her temple with Ningirsu, rather than occupy a religious building independently (2018/2020). This is significant, as renewed excavations at the site have unearthed monumental structures under the later E-ninnu, which the excavators are identifying with Bau’s temple (Rey 2021). If Bau did not occupy a religious structure on her own but shared it with Ningirsu during the Early Dynastic period as well, it is highly possible that what lies underneath Gudea’s E-ninnu is the Early Dynastic temple of Ningirsu on Tell A. Therefore, if the Early Dynastic Temple of Ningirsu is indeed on Tell A, it is not inconceivable to question the identity of the venerated deity on Tell K or indeed its function.

Based on material, visual, and textual evidence, I tentatively propose that this building was closely related to water and fish, and secondly that it could have been associated with either of the

Early Dynastic water deities: Nanše or her father Enki²⁷. My argument here is preliminary and speculative but builds upon various pieces of evidence, with three key attributes for the association of the *Maison* with either Enki or Nanše; these will be interwoven with reference to these deities in pertinent texts, both later literary compositions and contemporaneous building and/or royal inscriptions ascribed to the Lagashite ruler Ur-Nanše. The three main pieces of evidence used here to aid in the identification of the venerated deity in the *Maison* are: 1) The standard/doorpost; 2) the symbolic and physical presence of fish; and 3) the close association of the structure and the surrounding area with water.

1. The physical standard/doorpost which was found associated with the *Maison* (Figure 7).

Although the shape of the standard/doorpost (the ring-pole) does not seem to be particular to one specific deity, on many cylinder seals from the Akkadian period onwards it seems to have been associated mostly with Enki/Ea (see pp. 10–11 and Figure 8)²⁸. Its location shows that the *Maison* had sacred significance, and while a direct association with Enki is not feasible at least for the Early Dynastic period, the existence of fittings for ringed poles at the ‘Steinstifttempel’, a building with a suggested water-pool, would reinforce the argument about the water-related aspect of the *Maison* (see below p. 29).

2. The presence of fish both as physical remains and in the visual evidence found in and around the *Maison*.

Notably, the plate from the foundation set discussed here is shaped like a fish. The practice of

²⁷ Note also the reference to the formation of the statue of Šulšaga, a son of Ningirsu and Bau, immediately after the listing of the building of the eš₃ Ĝirsu on the foundation tablets AO 3177 and AO 3179; see discussion in p. 6–7.

²⁸ However, it is not unproblematic to equate the Akkadian period’s glyptic and symbolism to the preceding Early Dynastic’s.

thrusting a foundation figurine into a plate was only seen during the Early Dynastic period (as discussed above), but the shape of the plate in our case is unique and reminiscent of a fish (or at least a fish-tail). For comparanda in the visual evidence for the representation and iconicity of fish on a variety of media in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, see here Figures 25, 26 and 29. That only fish-shaped plates appear as foundation deposits at the *Maison* could be understood as symbolizing the occupant and/or function of the building, since what we see is a distinctive localization of a wider phenomenon that must be attributed to the specific cultic affordances of this sacred building.

Furthermore, many fish remains were found in three deposits, some of which were fully preserved fish skeletons with skins and scales still attached (Englund 1998: 130). The earliest deposit, found at a depth of 3.35m dates to the Jemdet Nasr period, the subsequent deposit at a depth of 2.3m, dates to Early Dynastic I or II, and the latest deposit, at a depth of 1.1m, seems to have been contemporaneous with Ur-Nanše's reign and thus the *Maison* (Van Buren 1948: 103–5). Since the *Maison* was possibly constructed on a high platform (Butterlin 2019), the difference in elevation of the fish remains could well be explained. As discussed briefly above, there could have been a sloping side on the mound, or even a lower terrace where foundation deposit *d* was found at a depth of 1.7m from the foundations of the *Maison*. The other foundation deposits were found instead at a depth of 0.3m or 0.5m, and these could have been buried below an upper terrace level close to the *Maison*. Gaston Cros (1910: 81–83) suggested that there must have been at least two rooms in which dried fish were stored at the *Maison* and noted that the stacked fish could have been cuttlefish and a tuna variety endemic in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Van Buren (1948: 103–5) notes that slightly west of the fish deposits, layers of slabs were found at three levels, one below the other, at identical depths to the fish deposits. Could these slabs have been offering tables for open-air rituals relating to the fish? Unfortunately, we cannot say more about the relation of the slabs with the fish remains at this point, but if these were meant as offerings, a tradition of the veneration of a deity linked to fish could be discerned. This high presence of fish would nonetheless suggest that the *Maison* had a special relation with fish, either as a storage space for fish to be consumed later or as a deposition of fish offerings (Potts 2012: 234), although the latter

suggestion seems less probable given the amount of fish found on the mound (Crawford 1973: 235). Bitumen lined basins/vases and large tanks were also unearthed at the ‘Region des Bassins’ to the *Maison*’s northeast (Cros 1910: 100), and Crawford (1973: 234) suggests that these could have been fish-tanks, and/or fish houses as storage places for salted/smoked fish ready for consumption, since in the surrounding area many fish skeletons, some of which stacked, were also found.

This close relation of Tell K with fish is further supported by a fragment of an alabaster plaque depicting a man with fish (Figure 25) found 1,5m from the double staircase leading to the ‘Region des Bassins’ (Boese 1971: 202, T13, Pl. 31.4), indicating once more the close relationship of Tell K and the *Maison* with fishermen, fish and possibly fish offerings²⁹.

<HERE FIGURE 25>

While substantial quantities of fish remains have been associated with a variety of temples, and it is well-known that fishes were part of the offerings to the deities of the Sumerian pantheon, this close association with the aquatic world seems to be especially prevalent with Enki’s and Nanše’s temples, even if some of such temples are distanced in time from the *Maison*. Temples with substantial quantities of fish remains are the Eridu temple of Enki (Lloyd and Safar 1947: 94, 104; Safar et al. 1981: 107–110; also van Buren 1948) and the Barbar temples in Bahrain, where in the latter fish remains were found in a single locus in an area outside the oval platforms (Jensen 2003: 12–14; Crawford 1973). At Eridu, in separate rooms within Temple VI, and later within a non-secular building in Square 5H, evidence of fish offerings has been found. At Tell Zurghul/Niġin, in the

²⁹ Obviously, representations of people carrying fish are not unique at Tello. However, at least on plaques, the motif of an individual carrying fish appears in more complex scenes and is not attested alone on a plaque. See, e.g., Boese 1971: Pl. VI.1, for an Early Dynastic plaque from the Oval Temple at Khafajeh depicting among other scenes a man carrying fish. For other media, see MET 59.41.51, and here Figure 26, a shell inlay from ED III Nippur depicting a skirt-clad figure carrying fish, or the SIS sealing UE III: 302.

building unearthed in Area B, dated to the late Ubaid period, fish bones were also found, prompting the excavators to associate it with the goddess Nanše (Nadali and Polcaro 2016: 92–93; Nadali 2020). By the Uruk period, it appears that fish offering ceremonies had moved outside (Van Buren 1948), much as we see in the later Barbar temples.

<HERE FIGURE 26>

Enki's close association with fish is indisputable: apart from the fact that the majority of fish remains have been found in sacred spaces associated with him, e.g. Eridu, this relation is especially evident in the glyptic from at least the Akkadian period onwards. The most famous representation of the god with fish is the cylinder seal of the scribe Adda, which depicts Enki with a flowing stream full of fish (Figure 27a). An earlier cylinder seal dating to the EDIII-Akkadian transitional period (Figure 27b) could also depict Enki/Ea resting his feet on fish (Braun-Holzinger 2013: 156, 178).

<HERE FIGURE 27A AND 27B>

Enki's daughter, Nanše, similarly appears to be closely associated with fish – on an Early Dynastic plaque from Nippur, for example, Nanše is represented holding a fish in her right hand (Braun-Holzinger 2013: 40, 173; Boese 1971: 185, N 11; here Figure 28). Yet this connection is especially prevalent in Old Babylonian literary compositions. The key source is 'A Balbale to Nanše (Nanše B)' iii 51-iv 2 and 6, where Nanše is presented surrounded by fish:

"She wears a fish as a crown on her head as her emblem. She holds a fish as a staff in her hand as her emblem. She binds fishes as sandals on her feet as her emblem. She has fish as a garment wrapped around her body." (translation after Veldhuis 2004: 144).

In another Sumerian literary composition, known as 'The home of the fish', Nanše is presented as the "mother of the fish" and "queen of the fishermen", who made a house for the fish to live in (Civil 1961; Thomsen 1975). In artistic representations of the Akkadian, Ur III and Old Babylonian periods,

Nanše is associated with flowing water, birds and fish (Maxwell-Hyslop 1992)³⁰.

<HERE FIGURE 28>

It appears therefore that both Enki and his daughter Nanše were closely related with fish in iconographic representations from the Akkadian period and possibly also the Early Dynastic period, although the latter is more difficult to prove from the available visual evidence. Archaeological evidence points to a much closer relation between fish and Enki and Nanše already from the Ubaid period. While fish were a very important and common component in the population's diet, they seem to have been linked particularly to Enki and Nanše (Nadali and Polcaro 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2015). Remarkably, by the Early Dynastic period, fish seem to have lost the 'elite' status they presumably held during the Ubaid period, for now they were mostly associated with economic and administrative activities, as observed at Lagash (Mudar 1982: 31; Pournelle 2003: 211). That fish were still found deposited in the sacred area of Tell K is noteworthy and potentially ties them to some kind of water cult and/or deities associated with water.

3. Water: its importance and relation with the *Maison*

Water was undoubtedly a common and important physical trait in the city-state of Lagash already from the Ubaid period (Wilkinson 2013). The sea coast was close, and we have evidence for extensive hydraulic work on the site of Tello (Rey and Lecompte 2020). The bitumen-coated walls of the *Maison*, together with the absence of any evident openings, is also suggestive of the rooms' use as water basins or an artificial water pond – much like in the Uruk VI-IVa 'Steinstifttempel' or the ablution room D17:5 at the Square Temple at Tell Asmar (Frankfort 1935: 9–10, fig. 9), both identified with types of water-'pools', or at least filled with water, because of their bitumen lining. While bitumen was widely used as a mortar building agent, what is significant here is that all of the *Maison's* walls were coated, possibly pointing to its use as a waterproofing agent. See also for

³⁰ For a different identification of the goddess see Battini 2006.

example the bathroom (Room 158) in Zimri-Lim's palace at Mari (Gates 1988: fn. 51), or chamber 25 in the plano-convex building at Kish (Moorey 1964: 86–87). Further support for the existence of a potential type of water-pool in the *Maison* comes again from comparison with the 'Steinstifttempel' and the presence therein of fittings for monumental ringed poles.

Moreover, in the vicinity of the *Maison*, three rectangular basins (I, K, and possibly G in Figure 4), contemporaneous with the *Maison* and constructed by Ur-Nanše (supported by the identical bricks used) were found. Along one of those basins (K), a gutter (M) began connecting with a brick channel to the northeast, which bent sharply to circumvent the angle of the terrace (N in Figure 4; de Sarzec 1884–1912: 408). The existence of such elaborate and extensive facilities for the flow, circulation and storage of water, including the basins, as we have on Tell K, involving and surrounding the *Maison*, although not unique in Early Dynastic temples – albeit on a smaller scale³¹ – further supports the idea that water played a significant role on Tell K.

The prominence and systematic documentation of Abzu shrines and temples in Ur-Nanše's inscriptions (the abzu-banda, the abzu-e and the abzu) undeniably reflects the prominent position of Enki in the theology of Lagash (Espak 2010: 16; 2015). Ur-Nanše is said to have built the abzu-e (e.g. in a limestone slab from Lagash, RIME1.9.1.6b, and in two stone foundation tablets from the *Maison*), the abzu-banda (in Ur-Nanše's family plaques RIME1.9.1.2, RIME1.9.1.4-5, and in a triangular plate from Ġirsu, RIME1.9.1.20); the abzu (in a foundation tablet from the *Maison*). That such constructions are documented as part of this Lagashite ruler's building projects demonstrates irrefutably that some kind of structure symbolically conveyed the idea of the abzu, be that a small water pool beside a temple or a basin within a shrine.

It is beyond doubt that the Abzu, a subterranean realm surrounded by a large body of sweet

³¹ We note for example altars being equipped with bitumen-lined clay benches and receptacles (usually solid-footed goblets) for receiving liquids/libations; see Evans 2012: 97, 192 for such a liquid installation in Room 173 of the Inana Temple VIIB.

water, was the domain of Enki (Lambert 2000; Espak 2010: 174–184). His main sanctuary was known by two names, often used simultaneously: the E₂-abzu ‘Abzu-House’ and/or the E₂-engur ‘Engur-House’ (George 1993: 65, 82). From documentary evidence, we are further aware that during the Early Dynastic period, abzu-shrines were attested in Nippur, Ur, Murum, Keš, and Lagash (Selz 1992: 195–196). Thus, it would be unsurprising if another shrine, with a small abzu-like pond, were to be located at Tell K in Ĝirsu. Another significant temple that has been associated with both water and Enki is the Barbar temple. It has even been suggested that the pool unearthed there, closely associated with the temple, may have represented the Abzu, Enki’s abode (Andersen 1986: 176; Andersen and Høylund 2003: 330). However, due to the lack of inscriptions, it cannot be ascertained to whom the temple was dedicated (Magee 2014: 161); moreover, the Barbar temples date much later than the *Maison*³².

Water in sacred precincts also raises important discussion points about water cults in Mesopotamia and the occurrence of natural or artificial water ponds associated with the abzu. Nicole Brisch (2016), while discussing the importance of water in Sumerian mythology, urged caution when identifying water pools with the Abzu, as the Abzu was part of the cosmic geography of Mesopotamia and may not have been reflected in the archaeological evidence – nor do we know, Brisch explicates, whether such a place would have even existed. There is no reason however to believe that the abzu was not symbolically constructed in temples and/or shrines in the fashion of artificial pools or ponds. Water-pools seem to exist at Uruk in the ‘Steinstifttempel’ and the Barbar Temples in Bahrain, and it is not implausible that the same could have been the case for the *Maison* in Tell K.

DISCUSSION

It appears certain that the *Maison de Fruits* should be identified with the eš₃ Ĝirsu and had religious

³² It should be noted that the Barbar Temples cannot be compared directly to the Mesopotamian religious landscape, due to the great differences in time, space and traditions.

significance. The question that arises therefore is to whom this shrine was dedicated. Although the suggestion that it was dedicated to Ningîrsu is overall convincing, elements in the evidence presented above give food for thought regarding a reconsideration of this suggestion. One of the most important is Sallaberger's suggestion that Bau, Ningîrsu's spouse, was not venerated in her own distinct temple during the Early Dynastic period, but rather occupied a separate wing within Ningîrsu's temple (2018/2020: fn. 4). If that is correct, we should reassess whether Tell A held Bau's Early Dynastic separate temple, as suggested by Rey (2021), or rather the Early Dynastic E-ninnu, Ningîrsu's temple, where Bau occupied a separate wing. This would not conflict with either the resumed excavations on Tell A nor with the evidence discussed above. It would also tally with Frayne's opinion that the Early Dynastic E-ninnu was on Tell A³³.

Therefore, it is not inconceivable to review the identity of the deity venerated in the *Maison*. Through a thorough reconsideration of the finds associated with the *Maison*, especially the foundation figurines and fish-shaped plates, an examination of the contemporaneous architectural remains on Tell K, the possible existence of an artificial water-pond within the construction of the *Maison*, the parallel findings from Nippur, Uruk, Eridu and the Barbar Temples and a deliberation of all pertinent material, visual and textual sources, I tentatively suggest that the *Maison* could have been dedicated to one of the two water deities of Mesopotamia: Enki or his daughter Nanše.

Ur-Nanše, as his chosen name suggests, appears to have had a special relationship with the goddess Nanše. In the 'Hymn to Nanše (Nanše A)', the goddess appears seating Ur-Nanše on the throne:

"There is perfection in the presence of the lady. Lagash thrives in abundance in the presence of Nanše. She chose the *šennu* in her holy heart and seated Ur-Nanše, the beloved lord of Lagash, on the throne. She gave the lofty sceptre to the shepherd" (ETCSL 4.14.1).

³³ Frayne 2008, regarding the clay cone of Enmetena found at Ur (RIME 1.9.5.6): "This text may possibly refer to the main shrine of the Ningîrsu temple at Ġirsu which almost certainly lay beneath the E-ninnu temple built by Gudea on Mound A".

Similarly, in ‘The rulers of Lagash’, Ur-Nanše appears to have built her temple, the “E-Sirara, her temple of happiness”, as well as “Niĝin, her beloved city” (ETCSL 2.1.2). Niĝin (modern day Zurghul) was first excavated by Robert Koldewey in 1887 and has recently been the focus of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Niĝin, which identified that the Sirara, Nanše’s temple, was located on Mound A, and was (re-)built by Gudea (Nadali et al. 2016; Nadali 2020), as was expected from pertinent textual information (e.g. Selz 1995: 184–85; Heimpel 1998: 152–60). This identification however would not exclude the founding of another shrine for Nanše at Ĝirsu; it is well-known that shrines and temples dedicated to the same deities could be founded in different cities under the same ruler, though each city’s tutelary deity remained one and was venerated in the city’s largest temple³⁴. It is interesting to note the mention of the building of the E₂-engur of Nanše by Ur-Nanše in an inscription found on Tell K and open up the discussion of whether Nanše’s ‘House of the Subterranean waters’ could have been founded on Tell K. Ur-Nanše’s relation to Enki, on the other hand, is less straightforward to assess.

It would nonetheless be thought-provoking, as excavations progress, to explore further whether the ‘Maison des Fruits’ could have functioned as a symbolic representation of a small pool to connect the structure/shrine with the water deities of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, and whether it could indeed have been the abode of a water deity instead of Ningĝirsu.

³⁴ Note the suggestion that the Šešgar temple of Nanše could be identified with a structure on Tell L – see most recently Rey and Lecompte 2020: 222.

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