The 2005 season had uncovered such a monumental structure as to warrant a visit of the Minister of Culture all the way from Damascus, a good nine-hour drive. He was due by late afternoon, but anticipating the inevitable delays of such official visits, we were concerned that he might arrive too late to actually see the main object of his trip. Not quite knowing what to expect, we decided to set up a few halogen lights. At dusk, the electrician’s work finished, the bright beam of the reflectors began to shed a play of light and shadows that grew more dramatic as the sky darkened. And it was not just a matter of aesthetic impact. Structural details stood out more sharply than we had ever noticed before, as if we were re-discovering what we had seen, described and measured inch by inch in the full daylight.

Could it be that the lighting was, at the same time, pointing to possible new functional interpretations of the monumental structure? There is, clearly, a stairway leading to a temple at the top of a huge terrace. There is what we called an apron flanking it – one larger row of stones for every step of the central staircase. Could it be, then, that this “apron” served to accommodate an audience that might witness the early phase of a ritual, starting in the plaza in front of the staircase and then leading up to the temple above? The thought had occurred to us, but the dramatic artificial light seemed to bolster our suspicion, suggesting that ancient torches might have lit up the sky for some of the Hurrian rituals described in the texts as being performed at night time.

Not that seen in the daylight the structure was less spectacular. The full staircase numbers 24 steps, and the trapezoidal shape of the “apron” gives the whole complex an even more imposing appearance. The viewer’s attention is directed vertically towards the higher plane where the Temple stands, as if to enhance the awareness of a presence beckoning from above. And the punctuated horizontal rows, with the double effect of wider and narrower vertical risers, emphasize visually the gradual ascent. Also, the broad stone revetment wall that flanks the staircase and apron, serves as a boundary between the two worlds, as if a barrier that can be crossed only at the marked threshold of the staircase.

As exposed so far, the monumental staircase is most likely to be only half of the full structure, which we see reconstructed in the drawing by our architect. It is accessed from a wide plaza and is flanked by a stone wall that frames an artificial hill, leading up to the Temple. The wall itself is some three meters high, and it stands atop an escarpment that rises above the plaza below. The difference in elevation between the level of the Plaza and the floor of the Temple is of some twelve meters – a man-made terrace that rivals the mountains of what is today the Turkish plateau, a suggestive backdrop to the urban landscape of Urkesh today as it undoubtedly was in antiquity.
We could set the date of construction of the wall and of
the staircase to the middle of the third millennium. And we
could show that the wall remained intact for more than 1,000
years, until the city itself was abandoned with the coming of
the Assyrians, about 1350 BC. The remarkable longevity of
this complex may be attributed to its great sacrality, which kept
it from being damaged throughout its very long history. In fact,
the third millennium, the material deposited on top of it
is almost 1,000 years later. The thick
and regular accumulations that abut
the revetment wall can be explained
with reference to the overall depositional
history of the site, which we begin to understand
in ever greater detail. By the end of the third millennium, urban
development stopped in the lower portions of the mound (the
Outer City), and the city as a whole retrenched atop the High
Mound.

Here, only the southwestern portion of the Temple
Terrace and central portion of the Plaza remained free of
buildings. The buildup at the southern edge of the Plaza had
a considerable impact on the overall process of site formation.

There is no doubt that the beginnings of this sacrality go back to
late prehistoric times. This is shown by the sheer height above
the original plain level (some 27 meters to the level of the
Temple floor), by the evidence of earlier construction phases
lurking beneath the staircase, and by the very early ceramics
(Late Chalcolithic) found in the fill below the top surface of
the terrace. This is clearly one of the best preserved and most
monumental sacral complexes of its kind anywhere in third
millennium Syro-Mesopotamia.

The stratigraphic situation is particularly interesting. While the base of the wall can be dated to the middle of
By blocking the natural drainage from the Temple Terrace to
the plain level, a bowl was created that would trap the material
being washed down. Obviously, the lower levels of the Plaza
were the first to be filled in. This is the material of the early
second millennium, which we have not yet reached. Slowly,
the sedimentation within the bowl grew to where it was even
with the top of the revetment wall. These are the top 2 – 3 m
that we have excavated so far, and which can be dated to the
middle part of the second millennium. What is remarkable is
that, even at this stage, when the templar structure was much
less imposing than in earlier centuries, the revetment wall, now
reduced to a progressively smaller lip, was never touched. The sacrality remained even as the architectural dimension became ever less spectacular.

An additional piece of evidence that demonstrates the sacrality of the area is that the Plaza remained, throughout the centuries, a privileged space. All indications are that no installation ever took place there — no pits, no bread ovens, no graves, not even working areas with any concentration of objects. It is not a sterile accumulation, because there are plenty of sherds. But it is inert, as we call it, meaning that it consists exclusively of naturally washed down accumulations. Within several hundreds of cubic meters excavated, hardly any objects have been found. A rare example is a clay rendering of a pig or boar snout, significant because we know of the important role that these animals played in Hurrian rituals.

We have talked about chronology. We can even talk about onomastics. We feel that we have good reasons to link the construction of an early phase of the Temple to one of the best known Hurrian rulers, Tish-Atal. Calling himself endan of Urkesh (a Hurrian title which translates as “king”), he recorded, on two beautiful bronze statuettes each representing a lion in a different posture, the building of a Temple to a god whose name is given as Nergal. Through a complex series of inferences, which would be too long to describe here but which we feel are quite compelling, we conclude that (a) the temple built by Tish-atal corresponds to one of the construction phases of the Temple situated at the top of the great Terrace, and that (b) the god to whom the Temple was dedicated was not Nergal, but Kumarbi, the ancestral figure of the Hurrian divine pantheon. This, then, gives a name to both our building and its builder. Conversely, it gives a date to Tish-atal, somewhere in the second half of the third millennium.

Both lions were purchased on the antiquities market long before our excavations began — one by the Louvre and the other by the Metropolitan. We illustrate here the one from the Metropolitan, which exhibits a very ambitious aesthetic program by injecting great dynamism in the animal figure — with its paws positioned frontally and its torso twisted to one side. This is a striking stylistic innovation, which we think may in some way speak to a Hurrian artistic tradition. Within the
Temple itself we had found, in earlier excavations and next to the altar, the full image of the stone lion, unfortunately severely damaged and not as stylistically ambitious as the Metropolitan lion. But they both share gusto for a three-dimensional realism that may not be accidental. We assume that the stone lion may have been placed on or near the altar itself, whereas the two bronze lions were part of a foundation deposit, which must have been very near the surface of the Tell and thus within easy reach of local people excavating, in the 1940s, for graves used by local villagers.

Finding a home for the Metropolitan (and the Louvre) lions was particularly meaningful because of the institutional association that we have developed with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has long since been an enlightened policy of the Museum to have members of its personnel join as active members of archaeological expeditions in order to gain firsthand experience of excavation techniques and to learn about the importance of the stratigraphic context for the understanding of any object. For two years now we have had the participation of one of the Assistant Curators in the Department of the Ancient Near East (Jean Evans), and this last year we also benefited from the visit of the Chief Curator, Joan Aruz. One particular contribution that will derive from this collaboration will be their assistance in developing plans for the installations in the newly built Museum in the capital city of our province, Hassaka, where the objects from our excavations will be on display.

While we are currently concentrating on the Temple Terrace, we will soon return to the excavation of the Palace as well, because it is part of a single organic whole that stretches for more than 200 m from west to east. What makes the whole complex even more impressive is the coherence of the ambitious urban planning that links harmoniously the secular and the religious spheres. The Palace itself is slightly later (2250 BC), and we do not know whether or not an earlier one stood in its place. But what is certain is that another very sacral, and equally earlier, structure brackets the Palace to the southwest. It was called abi in the language of Urkesh, Hurrian, and it served as a conduit to the Netherworld, whence the infernal deities were summoned through rituals preserved in later Hurrian texts (preserved in the Hittite archives). The abi is a deep pit, lined with large stones, much like the revetment wall of the Temple Terrace. We have excavated it to a depth of 8 m, and it reaches even further, probably to virgin soil (6 m more). The earliest levels excavated belong to the same time period as the Temple, and, like it, it most likely dates back to late prehistoric times.

This double thrust — downwards to the netherworld and upwards to the heavens — defines a very special Hurrian ideological landscape. It is very seldom that we can find such organic monumental wholes in Mesopotamia, so well defined architecturally, so clearly understandable in their function and meaning, so perfectly preserved archaeologically. As we stood looking at the staircase sharply highlighted under the floodlight of the halogen lamps, we could not help but enjoy the subtle metaphor — of us bringing the light of understanding to these mute witnesses of an intensely lived ancient human experience. ▲

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Between Heaven and Hell in Ancient Urkesh

By Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati
It had not occurred to us that a “son et lumière” approach to our excavations might help us see better what we had been staring at, daily, under the glare of the sun. And yet...