

# BACKDIRT

2011

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA



**THE WORLD'S  
OLDEST:  
DISCOVERIES IN  
ARMENIA**

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Cover Photo: Mouths of the cave galleries,  
Areni-1 Cave Complex, Armenia  
Photo: Gregory E. Areshian

# OPINIONS AND LETTERS TO BACKDIRT

## The Public Impact

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI<sup>1</sup>

**T**IMES OF TURMOIL ENCOURAGE an intense reflection on the ultimate validity of our fieldwork in foreign lands. Identified as we become with the people, committed as we are to recover their territorial past, engaged as we still remain in the more esoteric dimensions of our research, the question of relevance emerges with urgency.

Such is the case, today, with regard to our fieldwork in Syria. We are identified, we are committed, we are engaged—we definitely have come to feel foreign no more, because of our attitude, because of their openness. Our heart is very much in Mozan while our mind dwells on Urkesh. Our heart is in the streets of Syria today, even while our mind seeks to define something as seemingly remote as Late Chalcolithic 3 pottery.

“Seemingly” remote? How could such abstractions not be remote when people are dying in the streets? But they do, strongly, matter, because the whole effort ultimately evokes and nurtures the sense of dignity that sustains us humans when everything else collapses around us.

As archaeologists, we serve as purveyors of a past in which the present sinks roots that are all the deeper when the sense of identity is under attack. We come to feel that in some

unexpected way, the Syrians of today can also lean on the Syrians of yesteryear whom we help bring back to light.

We have, unwittingly, prepared for this. We have prepared as we have been striving to conserve the fragile mud-brick walls of four and more millennia ago, as we have been endowing this remote past with faces and names, as we have been showing how the delicate disentangling of ruins from the grip of the earth is laden with meaning.

We have prepared because, in doing this, the people affected—we who dig, and they who live the results—have become jointly empowered with the richness of memory. And this memory is *the* treasure to be defended.

Thus it is that we feel confident that, having become the guardians of memory, the Syrians of Mozan will protect the Syrians of Urkesh. Thus it is that the Syrians of yesteryear can in turn lean on the Syrians of today.

Communication is the start of preservation. Alongside conservation, alongside interpretation. Communication conceived as education. An education that educates *us* as much as “them,” as we all learn, together, that to attribute meaning is to affirm relevance. ■

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