

The Urkesh Temple Terrace

Function and Perception

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Some of the typological similarities between Tell Chuera and Tell Mozan invite, on the one hand, a close comparison between the two sites, even suggesting that they may have shared cultural traditions linking them to the northern highlands and possibly to a common Hurrian identity. On the other, we do not have indications that they were in close contact, politically or otherwise – the opposite may in fact be true, if Chuera (*qua* Abarsal) belonged to the Ebla, and Mozan (*qua* Urkesh) to the Akkad sphere of influence. And yet in turn, the opposite is happily true of the relationship that has developed in our own time between the teams working at the two sites. Thus it is that dedicating this article to the director of the Chuera Expedition gives me not only great personal pleasure, but also the opportunity to thank him for his unfailing professional support. The reciprocal visits to our two sites, that have been a constant event of the last several years, have given us an ever greater insight into our respective excavations and contributed to the development of a warm and productive collegiality, that has grown into a genuine friendship for our honoree, Jan-Waalke Meyer. In this article I wish to present to him two aspects that we have often discussed in the field. On the one hand, the remarkable stratigraphic situation that has come to light at Mozan especially in the last season of excavations (2008), and on the other the effort at presenting the site in a way that seeks to match the ancient with the modern perception.

1 The Plaza: a unifying perspective

1.1 Questions of strategy

The nature of the vast urban and architectural spaces of ancient Urkesh that are coming back to light has had an impact on our “philosophy” of excavation. The starting point is the remarkable coherence with which the built environment was planned and organized, as well as its excellent state of preservation, dating back well into the third millennium. The sacral area, in particular, suffered hardly any damage for over a millennium, and only in

the last century of its existence did it undergo a rather thorough-going reorganization, but one that still respected the essential traits of its previous life. The Royal Palace of Tupkish, built around 2300 B.C.,¹ lasted for only two or three generations, but even during this brief span of time it was integrated into the larger urban landscape that pivoted around the Temple Terrace.

This situation has affected our approach to the excavations on three levels. (1) We were prompted to change our overall strategy from an approach that favored vertical excavations down to the levels of the Palace to a different approach that favored instead extensive horizontal exposures. This is in order to reveal as much as possible the configuration of the immediate surroundings of the Temple Terrace at various points in time. (2) In the wake of an intense interest in developing a digital record that might reflect stratigraphy at its best and lead to a truly global record, I have come to subsume more and more explicitly the logic of the excavation to that of publication. Digital publication offers us the possibility, as never before, to construe the record in function of a real time publication, which has to be planned accordingly. (3) Conservation and site presentation affect just as deeply the initial strategy, especially if we view them, as I believe we should, not as an extrinsic appendage but as an integral component of the overall decisional process. Conservation and site presentation are two forms of publication intrinsically linked to the moment of excavation, and just as rich in documentary value as the translation into a narrative of the type we normally associate with the concept of publication.

These various concerns increased my awareness of certain criteria that had already deeply informed my work at Tell Mozan, of which I will mention here two in particular. (1) *Perceptual analysis* is an important presupposition for a fuller understanding of function. Such analysis consists in identifying, on the ground, volumes and spaces that cohere into integral wholes. It is stratigraphy that will tell us how such cohesion is arguable as an objective reality. And once the connectedness is established as a fact, we can then identify the points of view from which a unifying perceptual outlook is possible. Such perception is an objective fact that can be attributed to the ancients as well.

(2) *Distributional analysis* is the concurrent procedure that contributes in an essential way to the objectivity of the results. Underlying this is the availability of the full inventory of all data ever observed in the process of

1 The dates given here are according to the Middle Chronology, even though mounting evidence from our own excavations suggests that the Low Chronology is more likely to be correct. For the sake of convenience, I will use primarily absolute dates instead of descriptive terms to refer to the various chronological periods.

the excavation – something which is at the basis of our digital publication in the form of the Urkesh Global Record. By having all of the data accessible in an articulate way, it is possible to establish distributional arrays that validate the conclusions proposed about a perceptual fruition of the built environment. The details of how this works in practice are beyond the scope of the present article, but it is important to make the point in order to highlight the difference between an impressionistic and a distributional approach to the perceptual issue.

1.2 Excavation strategy

As I have been stressing, all of these aspects are inscribed in the excavation strategy from the very beginning: this means, in a very concrete way, that decisions about where to excavate are conditioned not only by overriding archaeological and historical concerns, but also by the particular needs I just mentioned (see also below, 0). In other words, we choose where and how to excavate in function not only of answering specific *intellectual questions*, but also of – an immediate and comprehensive *publication* of the stratigraphic data; a *conservation* approach to architecture that takes place in parallel with the excavation; and a *site presentation* that is planned in concert with the definition of the primary goals.

Even perceptual and distributional analyses, which are obviously based on a review of observed data and can properly be carried out only after the fact, benefit from a strategy that takes them into consideration from the outset. The question, in this case, will be: how best can we expose the expected architectural volumes and urban spaces in such a way that their perceptual fruition may be enhanced as a result of the excavation? What is the most promising vantage point from which the built environment, once exposed, may best be understood in its intrinsic coherence?

In the practice of our work as carried out in the 2008 season,² we chose

2 The 2008 season lasted from July 13 to September 27. Besides the writers, the staff included the following senior staff members: Beatrice Angeli, Hans Barnard, Federico Buccellati, Patrizia Camatta, Rasha Endari, Maurizio Forte, Claudia Liuzza, William Orrange, Laura Ramos, Hans-Peter Uerpmann, Margarethe Uerpmann, Carmen Valdes Pereiro, James L. Walker. And the following junior staff members: Hiba Assar, Caitlin Chaves, Lorenzo Crescioli, Ani Eblighatian, Stefania Ermidoro, Eduardo Escobar, Lojain Hatahet, Dominic Hosner, Daniele Lampasona, Yasmine Mahmoud, Massimo Maiocchi, Mustapha Ode, Lubna Omar, Silvia Privitera, Lilyann Williams.

The representatives of the DGAM were Elias Abd el-Nur, Elias Kacho, Ahmad Tarakji.

the Plaza as providing such unifying perspective for our various operations (Figs. 1–3). From an ideal point at the center of the Plaza, we envisaged our operations as contributing towards a unified vision of the Temple Terrace as seen from the ground level of the third millennium Plaza floor, in its relationship to the Palace and other built-up areas.

Looking directly *north*, the goal was to reach the level contemporary with the moment of construction of the revetment wall and its first escarpment (J1, see below, 0, 3.1, 0).

Looking to the *northwest*, we intended to clarify what shape the closure of the Plaza would take. Our assumption was that already in the third millennium the Plaza would slope up towards higher ground in the north (J5, see below, 4.3, 5.4) – while to the immediate west we know it would be at about the same level as the formal wing of Royal Palace (AP, elevation 485.00). In unit A20 (see below, 4.4) we were planning to resume the excavations that would eventually bring us down to that level, beginning for this season with the Mittani strata that would link A28 with A19.

Looking to the *northeast*, we intended to clarify (in J6, see below, 0, 0) the eastern edge of the monumental staircase and the link to the built-up area in the east that mirrors the one in the west (A20).

As a result of special factors that emerged during the season, we decided to open a new unit (J7, see below, 5.3). This turned out to be our most ambitious effort yet in terms of obtaining a unified Plaza perspective, because it opened a large vista and from the same distance as in the original Plaza, i. e., *from its extreme southeastern corner*.

Fig. 4 is a wide overhead that includes the entire Monumental Complex.

2 The emergence of the Protoliterate³

During the 2006 and 2007 seasons of excavation a few seal impressions and a considerable amount of ceramic material were found, all dating to the

Funding for the 2008 seasons of excavations came from the Catholic Biblical Association, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Carlos foundation, the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies, and from a number of individuals, especially interested in providing student scholarships and in developing the educational opportunities for the local workmen.

Funding for preparation of the publication of the Global Record came from the Committee on Research of the Academic Senate, UCLA, and especially from a substantial grant from the Mellon Foundation.

3 Even though the term Protoliterate has gone into disuse, it seems useful because it bridges conceptually the various areas of greater Syro-Mesopotamia.

fourth millennium.⁴ In 2008 we found, for the first time, evidence of a structure that is associated to this same material and thus can be dated to the same period (locus k123, feature f288, Figs. 5–6). We interpret it as part of a *stone wall* that served as an antecedent of the great third millennium revetment wall. This interpretation, which if true has momentous implications, must still be regarded as hypothetical, but it seems plausible to us on the basis of the following considerations.

Even though the sounding is extremely limited in size, and even though we have not yet exposed either face of the wall, this much is clear, that the stones have an alignment that is parallel to that of the third millennium wall, and that they are of the same general quality and size. This strongly suggests, first of all, that they are indeed a wall and not an amorphous mass; and that because of the general location and the specific position relative to the third millennium wall, they served a similar purpose.

I assume that, instead of a normal high wall, this was only a “curtain wall,” i.e., a low barrier like the ones we have in later periods (see below, 6.3). In this case, it would have acted primarily as a hinge to mark the separation between the relatively flat area of the Plaza and the steep slope of the glacis. In this respect, it would have served a function similar to that of the “memory stones” that we find at the very end of the Terrace’s history (*ibid.*).

It is in principle conceivable that the fourth millennium wall was, instead of a low curtain wall, a high wall like its third millennium equivalent, in which case two hypotheses are possible. If what we have is the base of that wall, the difficulty is that much of the wall would have had to be torn down to make room for its third millennium counterpart. If on the other hand what we have is the top of such a wall, this would not explain why the glacis behind it is so much higher than its top. Hence my preference for the interpretation as a “curtain” wall.

We should be able to resolve these uncertainties one way or another as further excavations expose the wall to lower levels.

What seems almost certain in any case is that the glacis as we have it now consists essentially of a third millennium veneer laying on top of a *solid fourth millennium core*. There are two good reasons for this assumption. First, in J3 there is fourth millennium material immediately below the present surface of the glacis. Second, the third millennium revetment wall is too thin and too poorly founded to have served a retaining function against the thrust that a recently built glacis would have exercised against the wall; it makes sense instead as a revetment wall, essentially with a decorative function.

4 See the article by M. Kelly-Buccellati in this volume.

3 The mid third millennium consolidation

If indeed, as I have just suggested, the present form consists essentially of a thin veneer resting on a millennium antecedent that had very similar contours, then the fresh in the archaic period is of staggering proportions. This has to wait for further clarifications resulting from the In the meantime, the structural set-up as we have it is gaining more and more definition, both chronologi

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3.1 Chronology: the “longue durée”

Excavations in J1 have brought into sharper focus the developmental history of the revetment wall (Fig. 8, 11–12). It is clear now that the first escarpment, placed at the base of the wall and sloping south towards the Plaza level, dates to the early Ninevite V period, thus between 2800 and 2700 B.C. Our original dating placed it two centuries later, and the reason for our revision is due to the material which we now find embedded in the front (southern) part of the glacis itself and in the accumulations immediately before it. Before this, we only had a limited amount of material that had come from the back portions of the glacis, excavated in a very narrow trench along the face of the wall itself, which did not allow for a sufficiently clear discrimination of the strata.⁵

The second escarpment is now dated to the ED III period, around 2400 B.C., on the basis of the same considerations. We assume that the reasons for the addition of the second escarpment have to do with a rise in the level of the Plaza, which had reduced the prominence of the first escarpment. The function of the escarpment being, in our estimation, to create a buffer zone (see below, 6.3), a new one had to be set in place once the earlier one had become obliterated by the rise of the Plaza. The higher level of the second escarpment would also have served to deflect the water flow that would have been streaming down from the upslope (in J5), a purpose that was also served by several, small barrier walls erected along the slope itself.

The factors which had conditioned this rise between 2800 B.C. and 2400 B.C. (which we presume to have been structures erected at the southern end of the Plaza, which would have trapped the flow down slope towards the plain) were no longer operative after 2400 B.C. (in other words, no new structures were erected to the south) This explains why there are no accumulations dating to the intervening centuries, until late Khabur and early

5 See also H. Dohmann-Pfälzner and P. Pfälzner, “Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft in der zentralen Oberstadt von Tall Mozan/Urkeš. Bericht über die Vorkampagne 1998,” *MDOG* 131 (1999) p. 39.

Mittani, when the Plaza level begins to rise again. The revetment wall, then, was exposed and visible from 2800 B.C. until 1400 B.C., a staggering period of fourteen centuries – the only change being the construction of the second escarpment, which hid only the lower courses of the wall.

3.2 Structural aspects: the flank wall and the monoliths

The asymmetry of the monumental third millennium staircase is a marked characteristic of the monumental complex, and it has come into even bolder relief as a result of the 2008 excavations in J6. Three aspects must be noted in particular.

(1) The staircase is flanked on the eastern side by a wall (f129, Fig. 9) that is bonded with the steps of the staircase, hence it is contemporary with it. The tops of this wall is at the same level as the top of the revetment wall, and the base is at the same level as lowermost step. When this flank wall first came to light, we assumed that it was in some ways linked to something on the other side of the staircase, either a matching eastern staircase or a southern extension of the glacis. But it is neither. It is a free standing wall, that serves as a railing towards an open space to the east (the right as one climbs the stairs).

(2) Two longitudinal stone monoliths or “pillars” (f100, f177, Figs. 9–10, 27) emphasize the forward projection of the wall to the south. Their base is at the same level as the lowermost step, they are leaning against the narrow southern face of the flank wall, they are supported by mud bricks and are partly engaged in the stone work of the flank wall itself. It is clear, therefore, that they belong to the time of construction of the revetment wall, about 2800 B.C.

(3) The staircase is at a marked oblique angle to the revetment wall, not perpendicular to it. It points in a direction that veers away from the entrance of the Temple BA. The Temple as we have it dates to the late ED III period, so about 2400 B.C., at which time the staircase was still fully in use (like the revetment wall, it remained visible and in use until the mid Mittani period, about 1400 B.C.). Thus for a period of many centuries the staircase pointed away from the Temple itself, and there must have been a path of some sort that curved west as it ascended the glacis. Whether or not this Temple goes back to 2800 B.C., whether or not there was an earlier Temple, and if so whether or not this was at the same place as its successor – we cannot tell.

3.3 An architectural ideogram

Wherever it is fully exposed (in J1 and J2), the third millennium revetment wall exhibits a curious triangular pattern that is not overtly marked, but is

clear once observed (Figs. 11–12). We cannot think of any structural reasons for it: it does not seem to provide any greater stability to the wall, which, in any case, is primarily symbolic and decorative in function, being too narrow and too poorly founded to adequately serve as a retaining wall.

In contrast with the better quality of the staircase, the revetment wall is rather coarse, and the triangular motif is not as immediately evident (we had only briefly noticed it in earlier seasons). My interpretation is that it served a symbolic function, serving as an ideogram analogous to the iconographic motif for “mountain” in glyptics and sculpture, and analogous as well to the logogram in cuneiform writing for the corresponding word in Sumerian and Akkadian. Both the coarseness of the construction and the subtle iconographic hint serve, I would suggest, as pointers to the mountain hinterland of the Anatolian plateau which, on the one hand, is visible as the real background to the Temple Terrace and, on the other, carries the strong emotive overtones of a mythology that stresses, as for Kumarbi, the close links with those very mountains.⁶

In our current chronological understanding (3.1), the wall construction dates to about 2800 B.C., and the second escarpment to about 2400 B.C. Now, this second escarpment covers the lower part of the wall, and thus it obliterates the base of the triangular motif. Similarly, in J2, the western side wall of the staircase, constructed at the same time as the second escarpment, obliterates an entire segment of this motif. This means that some four centuries after the construction of the wall the motif had seemingly lost its current relevance.

4 The Mittani contraction and the re-organization of the sacral space

About half way through the Mittani period, so around 1400 B.C., three major events were set in motion that changed radically the organization of the space around the Temple Terrace, even though its sacral character remained undisturbed until the end. First, there was a major collapse of buildings overlooking the Plaza on the eastern side: they were not rebuilt, and the area to the southeast of the Temple Terrace was abandoned. Second, the Plaza had become a depression, which filled in rapidly, within a century, to where the revetment wall was no longer visible. Third, a new staircase was built on the western side of the Terrace, to accommodate the shift of the sacral focus from east to west. – This is, at least, our reconstruction. I will now give the major details that can be adduced in its support.

6 For details see now G. Buccellati, “An Architectural ‘Logogram’ at Urkesh?,” in P. Negri Scafa and S. Viaggio, *Dallo Stirone al Tigri, dal Tevere all’Eufrate. Studi in onore di Claudio Saporetti*, Roma: Aracne, 2009, pp. 23–30.

4.1 The great eastern collapse

Excavations in J6, J7 and J2 show a massive brickfall (Fig. 13) which evidently came from the east and rolled down onto the floor of the Plaza, becoming progressively thinner toward the western portion of J2. There is no trace of it in J1. At present, we have no trace of the buildings themselves in J6: they would have been therefore further to the east and possibly to the south as well. As a result we do not know for certain what may have been the cause of the collapse, nor what the nature of these buildings may have been.

We may, however, conclude that they were in use in the early Mittani period because the brickfall itself overlays Mittani strata in J6. The floor of the Plaza on which the debris fell was still the original third millennium floor, on which no later accumulations had taken place. In this the situation is the same as in J1. While there was no brickfall in J1, as noted, it can be deduced that the thick accumulations in J1 belong to the same time as the brickfall, i.e., the latter part of the Mittani period. This is based primarily on stratigraphic considerations, namely, the sequence of events as I have just briefly outlined.

It is clear that after the collapse no attempt was made to clear up the Plaza or to rebuild the structures that had fallen. It is true that we have not excavated the area where the original buildings were, but in J6 the accumulations that overlay the brickfall (and which would have been at the same level as the original buildings to the south) indicate that the area was abandoned.

In this light, we can propose a new understanding of what I had called the “secondary apron.” The term was in reference to the staircase: the main apron was the one that immediately flanked the staircase, and the secondary apron was the one to the west of it. We knew already that this “secondary apron” was late in the Mittani period, but I still assumed that it had been built in function of an active staircase, in however poor a state of repair. It appears now that at the very end of its history (roughly from 1400 to 1300 B.C.) the staircase was no longer in use, and was replaced instead by a new one to the west (see below, 4.3). The “secondary apron,” then, is not an apron flanking the staircase (as the main apron had been) but rather a frame that marks the eastern end of the sacred space – the Temple Terrace, at a time when the Terrace was no longer marked by the revetment wall which had come to be obliterated by the rapid infilling of the Plaza.

4.2 The rapid infilling of the Plaza

After having been in full view for some fourteen centuries (from 2800 to 1400 B.C.), only partly covered at its base by the second escarpment, the

revetment wall disappeared altogether within the span of a century or less. The late Mittani strata sit immediately upon Plaza floor accumulations that date to the earliest date (2800 B.C.). Had we been digging here at the exclusion of other areas on the tell, we would have concluded that Urkesh was uninhabited throughout the EDIII, Akkadian, Ur III and Old Babylonian periods – a time period when we obviously know only too well that the city was flourishing.

That this could happen did in no way diminish the sacral nature of the space. There is no trace of dumping, of occasional build-up (tannurs, bins), or of intrusive activities (burials, pits) – as one normally sees in wide open areas. The accumulations are very even, relatively clean, and with occasional layers that are as hard as cement. The only evidence of a forceful disruption is the massive brickfall that was, however, a single event at the very beginning of the infilling process.

We interpret this as the result of deposits that were either windblown or caused by the natural flow from the buildings that surrounded the Plaza on all sides. As a result of some blockage to the south (of which we have only partial evidence, but which is clear from the morphology of the tell), these deposits were trapped and could not be washed away.

4.3 The new western staircase

At the western end of the Temple Terrace (in unit J5) a new staircase was built at about the same time that the Plaza began to be infilled. The date is based on material found at the base of the lowermost step and in a small sounding behind the topmost step. Even though far less monumental than the eastern staircase, this smaller staircase (Figs. 14–15) is nevertheless indicative of the fact that the Temple complex remained active until the very end, i.e., until the site was abandoned with the coming the Assyrians. It is in fact, well built, and set within a frame that required careful planning. This frame was the continuation of the great revetment wall of the third millennium, which, by the time of the construction of the small staircase, was completely obliterated by the infilling of the Plaza, except for its very top and the “memory stones” that marked its perimeter where no longer visible.

The change of venue for the staircase was, as we have seen, in function of the overall reorganization of space, which resulted from the abandonment of the service quarters on the eastern side, the infilling of the Plaza, and, as we shall see (4.4), the development of new service quarters in the western side (unit A20). This may have perhaps entailed a slight rearrangement of the Temple itself, something we will never be able to find out for certain because all later strata of the Temple have disappeared. On the other hand, it will be possible to explore other details, in particular the relationship to the

earlier structures, the northern flank of the staircase, the continuation to the east in the direction of the Temple.

An important aspect that will also be possible to investigate further is the way in which the third millennium Plaza came to a closure at the location where the staircase was built in Mittani times. We have a good chance to find an answer because there seems to be a continuous link to the early Plaza in J1. Our assumption is that the Plaza sloped up towards a level not too much below the staircase, and that the Temple Terrace was not open to the north the way it is to the south. We base this on the fact that there is evidence of structures to the north and northwest of the Temple (B3), as well as to the east (B4), in contrast with the areas to the south, which were clearly not built-up and constituted instead a proper glacis.

One final area that remains to be investigated more closely is in the western portions of J5, where we have found two rows of stone, that do not appear to be walls in the full sense of the term, but may represent some sort of a boundary to the sacred area. One of them at least can be dated to the Middle Assyrian period, and so it represents the very end of the occupation of the site and of the sacral use of the monumental complex.

4.4 The western service quarters

Excavations in the west aim at reaching, in due time, the level of the Palace, which is, however, some 7 meters below the surface. It will take a good number of years to reach this goal, because our current strategy is to obtain a full horizontal exposure for each horizon, and we are currently still within Mittani strata. Work in unit A20 provides the link between A19 to the east and A18, A17 and A16 to the west.

Preliminary results (Fig. 16) give evidence of structures and open areas that, though still modest in scope, reflect something more complex than a simple village. The structures do not fit the blueprint of normal houses; the many stone pavements suggest a care that goes beyond the vernacular; the finds, in particular the many bronze objects, go beyond the scope of village house inventory. And along the northern baulk there is a wall that is long and large enough to possibly intimate the presence of a public building.

All of this leads us to interpret this area as the service sector of the Temple in the very last century of its existence, after the collapse of the eastern buildings, the infilling of the Plaza and the construction of the small western staircase. The staircase itself is the single structural element that can be identified for certain as an element of this last configuration of the sacral complex. But the very fact that one should have undertaken its construction means that the religious dimension of Urkesh was still of some significance, and that its cultic functioning would have to be secured by an adequate sup-

port system, such as the one we think may be found in the structures to the west.

5 Regaining the ancient perception

5.1 Goals

The effort at conservation and site presentation depends on more than just sensitivity for a commitment to provide social fruition of the finds we make. It goes to the heart of the archaeological process itself and it should be undertaken because our final understanding of the cultural remains is thereby enhanced. In other words, it is archaeology that gains from conservation and site presentation, not just the public.

One important reason why that is so, lies in the fact that our effort at favoring the modern perception of the ancient built environment must in the first place rely on what we think the ancient perception was. The process is not impressionistic. It is rather based on specific parameters that are derived from the correlation of concrete elements in the ground: it is possible to focus on the configuration of spaces and volumes in such a way that a certain unifying perspective emerges. And if it does so emerge, it is fair to assume that the perception of the ancients would have aimed for the same end view.

In Mozan, I have sought all along to integrate conservation and site presentation in the process of excavation, in such a way that the goals of the former are inscribed in the strategy of the latter (see also above, 0). In practice, this means that certain considerations are raised that may limit possible excavation options – for instance, by suggesting that a wall should not be fully excavated if conservation is not possible at a particular point in time, or that the opening of given loci may be selected in function of the eventual perspective they open onto a given structure under excavation. I will illustrate this with two specific examples, in sections 5.2 and 5.3.

Ever since the beginning of the Mozan project we had flyers and pamphlets for visitors, and at one point we also had an audio tape that could be played while walking along. In 2008 I introduced a radical change: the site itself would be the book. I gave more attention to the itinerary, which now unfolds following an almost dramatic story line. It is narrated through short panels at each of the fourteen stops, which provide a rapid tour for visitors who cannot spare more time. But they also provide the general frame for engaging our modern perception in a committed effort at recapturing its ancient counterpart. This is developed through two mechanisms, the panoramic overviews (5.4) and the detailed panels, which I have dubbed “footnotes” (5.5).

5.2 Facing the wall and the sections

In J1, we had, in previous years, opened an area in front of the revetment wall that would be large enough to allow a view not foreshortened by too narrow a distance from the face of the wall. Given the considerable depth below the surface of the tell (some 7 meters to the base of the wall), we also decided to have a series of slopes and intermediate steps that would render the section more stable and secure. This meant opening a much wider area at the top. In the end, the open space at the level of the Plaza floor is now no more than 9 x 4 meters, to which one descends through a series of three cement block staircases comprising some 36 steps. When one reaches the Plaza level, one enjoys a reasonable perspective of the wall (Fig. 5), even though the view is still limited to the wall itself, without being able to see the glacis that rose above it and led to the Temple.

The discovery of the fourth millennium "wall" (see above, 0) raises more daunting questions in this respect. It is clear that we need to probe deeper and laterally, in order to identify the face(s) of the wall and to determine the full extent of the wall. But it will be impossible to provide the same distance and correlative depth of view that we have for the third millennium wall.

This forces us, in the present circumstances, to abandon the goal of regaining the ancient perception for this particular fourth millennium wall. However, the relative sounding adds another important dimension, that of presenting in a convincing way the nature of the archeological reasoning on which we base our inferences. To achieve this goal, we had already shielded the great eastern section with curtains (Fig. 17, cf. Fig. 7) that protect it against weathering, while at the same time allowing for inspection when opened. The section shows very clearly the use we make of it for stratigraphic analysis in reconstructing the chronological sequences. Excavations of the fourth millennium wall, will now enable us to see the sounding in the same light – as a probe that opens a window onto even earlier stages of development, which can properly be assessed only in virtue of the stratigraphic connections that these two classic examples of archaeological work (section and sounding) make possible.

5.3 Facing the staircase

At the beginning of our 2008 season we were faced with a dire human situation: as a result of a great winter drought, there was a very high number of men who were desperately looking for work. We were able to obtain additional funding, and thus could hire some sixty more workmen than we had originally anticipated. But we could not increase our supervisory staff, and so we were facing the problem of how to employ the new workforce. Our solution was to open unit J7, a vast area to the southwest of J6. Being

completely within the perimeter of the Plaza, we expected it to be devoid of any structure or installation, and thus easier to excavate with limited supervision. This turned out to be the case.

The reason for our choice was to open a triangular swath (Figs. 18–19) that would allow a full view of the large staircase and of the exposed portion of the revetment wall from the southern end of the Plaza and at the same elevation as the floor of the Plaza. With the reconstruction of the Temple walls at the top of the Temple Terrace, this would afford us a perspective view such as could not be gained if foreshortened as it currently is in J1 by the limits of our present excavations. And such a perspective would closely replicate the perception of the sacral space that obtained in antiquity.

By the end of the season we had been able to remove only a little less than half of the earth volume needed to achieve our goal, leaving the rest for another season. But even so, it was already clear that the results were well worth the effort. There is no amount of descriptive or graphic effort that can match the physical confrontation with the wide open spaces of the Plaza as it is being recovered in its full dimension, with the imposing background of the mountains to which the Temple Terrace points.

5.4 The panoramic overviews

At critical junctures along the itinerary, we have placed high vista points from which one can gain a synthetic overview of large areas that come into view as a coherent architectural ensemble. In this case we do not aim to recover the ancient perception, but rather to offer a bird's eye view of the ancient built environment, a perspective that was clearly not that of the ancients. The purpose is to provide a panorama that combines multiple points of view, and brings together not only the physical evidence of what has been excavated, but also the reconstruction of what we think is missing and the historical interpretation of the times to which we assign the strata we have identified. If it carries a mild negative connotation, because it feels a bit like looking at animals in a zoo, this approach is amply compensated by other advantages. From a distance we can see, for example, stratigraphic correlations that are obscured by a myopic closeness; we can reflect on historical connections that span different time periods; we can appreciate the juxtaposition of architectural elements in ways that are not visible from the ground.

Two such vista points had been set in place in 2007, one overlooking the Palace (Fig. 25) and the other the Temple area. In 2008 we started work on a new panoramic vista point (Fig. 20). Located in J5, it looks in both directions, towards the Temple to the east, and towards the Palace to the west. We finished the platform, and in 2009 we plan to complete the panels.

5.5 The “footnotes”

In addition to the panoramic panels, there are smaller panels that present specific details. I have dubbed them “footnotes” because they deal with a variety of different items, some technical in nature, which can be read or passed by, much as one would with footnotes in a book.

A practical problem which we had to resolve had to do with the means of display. The papers with texts and graphics have to be protected from sun, rain, snow and wind, which means that we need something weatherproof and yet inexpensive and lightweight. In 2008 I introduced a model that seems to meet all these requirements: a support that looks like a music stand (Fig. 21), with a beveled lid that covers a plate (Fig. 22) on which two plasticized sheets of paper can be glued. On the back of the lid there is room for two more such sheets, so that, when open, a total of four sheets is displayed (Fig. 23) – altogether, a considerable amount of information. Two other important criteria are met by these panels: the ability to (1) replace the individual sheets easily and practically at no cost, and (2) let the stands be placed right next to the feature they illustrate and yet remain unobtrusive.

Critical to our overall approach is the need to allow visitors unimpeded access to privileged viewing points from which full fruition may be gained of the monuments. This means in some cases descending long flights of stairs that we have arranged so that the viewer may be on the same floor level as the ancients, in other cases walking through series of rooms where the walls (reconstituted in their ancient volumes through our draping system) delimit the spaces and make clear what the ancient circulation patterns were. The “footnotes” are placed at various junctures in the proximity of those elements of the architecture or the stratigraphy that most arouse attention.

5.6 The visit of the First Lady

On August 18, 2008 we had the great pleasure to receive the visit of the First Lady of Syria, Dr. Asmaa al-Assad. She arrived at 7:30 in the morning directly from Damascus, and stayed for three hours at the site, after which she returned directly to Damascus. Her visit was a great honor. But almost greater was the privilege to talk with her about the substance of our work, and to have her test, as it were, the site presentation effort which was at that point still in the making (Figs. 24–25).

Which is why, more than a memorable moment in the chronicle of our project, her visit stands out as a significant contribution to our endeavors in making the site meaningful and accessible. That Urkesh as revealed in Mozan should be of real and live interest to both her, representing the highest authority in the land, and, at the other end of the scale, the least prepared of the local villagers, was a real, and fortunately successful, test of

our overall commitment. Her contribution was in the shape of probing questions that validated our attempt at making the archeology of Urkesh and the Hurrians relevant in ways that elicit the interest of even the most demanding of visitors.

6 From perception to function

6.1 Principles

As I briefly mentioned at the outset (0), perceptual analysis rests on criteria that are clearly arguable and concretely definable. It may be compared to the identification of the vanishing point where lines converge in a perspective drawing. In a similar vein, identifying the points of view from which the built environment acquires coherence and unity is of great consequence for the final fruition of the monument, and must be taken into account during the excavation process. Obviously, these perceptual points of view are not known before the excavation; but as the excavation progresses and structures are disengaged from the matrix that envelops them, one should be ever mindful of the need to look for these vantage points as much as one looks for the individual components (the structures or their fragments). Given the concreteness of the supporting data, and assuming a sufficiently wide exposure, our projection of a perceptual point of view seems to be as plausible and valid for the ancients as it is for us today.

It is in this sense that perceptual analysis is a good gauge for functional analysis, for it is more readily anchored in the concrete clustering of recognizable factors. If volumes and spaces are configured in ways that bring out a coherence of planning, and especially if the underlying configuration remains operative over time, even with modifications that affect the basic design without radically changing it, then it stands to reason that function might safely be inferred. We may compare perception to the -etic, and function to the -emic dimension, or again perception to the lexical/semantic and function to the semiotic types of analysis.

In what follows, I will consider three instances in the larger complex of the Temple Terrace and the Plaza where we may propose a functional inference based on the recognition of given perceptual factors.

6.2 Barrier and ascent

The revetment wall is placed half way between the level of the Plaza and that of the Temple. Below it, there is an escarpment that separates the base of the wall from the floor level of the Plaza. Above it, there is the slope of the glacis that rises to the level of the Temple itself. Thus the wall appears as a vertical line that interrupts a double oblique line. In contrast, the monu-

mental staircase offers a double oblique line, one ascensional and the other lateral. The first oblique line marks a continuous upward slope linking Plaza and glacis. The second oblique line frames laterally one side of the staircase funneling the view from left to right as one looks up along the ascensional line (Fig. 26).

The vertical line of the wall provides a visual hinge between the two planes, of the Plaza and of the Temple. Because of the escarpment it is as if suspended in mid air: its base is at eye level for someone standing in the Plaza. The triangular motif (0) and the rough configuration of the masonry provide an additional symbolic dimension: the vertical line is a visual echo of the mountain wall that blocks the horizon in the background. From all indications, the temple terrace was not free-standing in the third millennium; in other words, it was not an isolated cone with a steep slope on all sides. If so, the wall would not have been encircling the base all around, but would rather have served only as a frontal barrier for those approaching the Temple Terrace from the south.

In this perspective, we can better appreciate the double oblique line of the staircase. The ascensional line breaks the barrier-like visual impact of the wall – all the more so as its masonry is relatively polished and the stones well hewn. The lateral oblique line offers a striking asymmetry, which we had not anticipated, so much so that our earlier projections had posited a specular lateral oblique line on the east. It appears now, instead, that the staircase is bounded, on the east, by a lateral straight line, strongly marked by a side wall (3.2, Fig. 9). The contrast between the two lateral lines (oblique in the west, and straight in the east, left and right on Fig. 26) would create a distinct perception of spaces when viewed from the Plaza: our attention is turned away from the barrier of the rough vertical wall, away also from the smooth glacis that rises behind the wall; and it is directed instead towards the structures that rise, in the east, at a level not much lower than that of the Temple. The two monoliths at the base of the flank wall (3.2) reinforce the same perception: they punctuate the lateral straight line, and (inclined as they are) they point to the top of the ascensional line (Fig. 27).

The fact that this situation lasted, unaltered, for fourteen centuries (from 2800 to 1400 B.C.) is a good indication of the regard in which it was held, and thus, inescapably, of its significance. Which leads us from perceptual to a functional analysis that elaborates the ideological dimension. It is obvious that the staircase is for climbing and descending. It is also obvious that, the Temple being the target of the climb, there was a dimension of awe and privilege in being allowed to negotiate the ascent. Beyond that, reflecting about perception contributes a better appreciation of the intended visual impact of all the various elements and through that it offers new tools for an assessment of the intended significance. That this is more interpretive it goes without saying. But the marked nature of the visual references makes the

nature of the inference explicit and arguable.

It might then be suggested that the wall as a vertical element, “ideo-graphically” identified as a mountain and further characterized as such by the roughness of the stonework, serves as a barrier that cannot be crossed over physically and which sets apart visually the glacis’ rise to the Temple. It represents, in this respect, the boundary that nature sets to accessing the supernatural world of the gods.

On the other hand, the double oblique line of the staircase (an ascensional passage that becomes progressively narrower), as well as the polished nature of the stonework and the emblematic valence of the monoliths, provide an altogether different tonality: the ascent across the barrier takes place at the extreme edge of the Plaza, flanked to the east by the build-up of what we presume to have been the service area for the Temple. It represents the bridge that culture and religion offer across the barrier in a successful effort to reach for the divine world.

6.3 Buffer zones

As was just noted, the visual effect of the escarpment was to visually distance the wall from the Plaza in terms of elevation, because the base of the wall was at eye level, i.e., it was raised above the floor of the Plaza.⁷ In addition, the escarpment was protruding onto the Plaza itself, thus creating another element of distance, because the pronounced slope would keep people from walking along the incline and would as a result establish a buffer zone in front of the wall. As we saw earlier (3.1), a second escarpment was built about two centuries after the first, i.e., around 2400 B.C., and the situation then remained intact for a full millennium.

It was only in the last century (about 1400 to 1300 B.C.) that the floor of the Plaza rose quickly and dramatically, until it entirely covered the wall. It is of great interest to see the changes that this imposed on the perception of space, in ways that would guarantee a functional continuity. There were two stages (see a schematic rendering of this process in Fig. 8).

At first the escarpment came to be covered but part at least of the wall

⁷ The Akkadian term is *kisū*, and its Sumerian equivalent is *ki.sá* (possibly a loanword from Akkadian), which may be understood functionally as a “damp course,” meant to protect the base of the wall from erosion. This functional use of the escarpment is especially applicable in the stretch that slopes up from J1 to J5, see above, 3.1. Note the use of the term to refer to a Temple Terrace, e.g. “I surrounded the Enamtila temple to its full extent with a *kisū* made of baked bricks” (OB Malgium i 14 – this is the earliest reference). It is also used for Palaces. In a less monumental setting, it may have referred to the ledge against the base of mudbrick walls.

was still visible. The physical and psychological distance from the wall was then assured by what I have called curtain walls, i. e., low screens consisting of about two rows of stones, placed at a couple of meters from the base of wall. Ideologically, the curtain wall serves as the hinge between the horizontal plain of the Plaza and the oblique plane of the escarpment. Functionally, it would have screened the wall itself from easy access from the (rising) Plaza floor. Fig. 28 shows the earliest curtain wall (J1f260), which was excavated in 2005.

The second stage came when the wall was no longer visible. At this point, a single row of stones marked the line where the wall, now buried, had once stood. I have called these “memory stones,” because they retain but the memory of the barrier, now no longer such in visual terms, but still effective symbolically as a hinge between the level plane of the Plaza and the slope of the glacis.

6.4 The “apron” as a seating area?

In the terminology I have adopted in earlier descriptions of the structure, the staircase proper consists of the normal steps that are along the flank wall, while “apron” refers to the larger steps west of the staircase (Fig. 26 and 29). The steps of the apron are twice the size of those of the staircase, so that there is one apron step for every staircase step.

As one looks at the configuration of staircase and apron in relationship to the revetment wall and the Plaza (Fig. 29), a curious pattern emerges, with three conflicting orientations. The western revetment wall (the only one exposed so far, n. 1 in Fig. 29) is almost perpendicular, but not quite, to the sides of the staircase/apron complex as a whole (n. 2). In turn, the steps of both the staircase (2b) and the apron (2a) are at a sharp angle to both the western revetment wall (1) and the side walls (2c and 2d). They are, however, parallel to the presumed eastern revetment wall, if this is to be found below the back side of the later bin (3).

Three additional considerations are potentially very interesting, but they need to be validated with additional exposure. First, the sharp line in the east (4), which was already exposed by the B6 excavations (by the DOG team) is at a specular orientation vis-à-vis the apron/staircase complex, in such a way as to suggest that they are both part of the initial design. Second, the earlier staircase (5), while at the same orientation as the steps of the later one, may not be framed by apron and walls at the sharp angle that obtains the later complex. Third, both the steps (2a) and the presumed eastern wall (3) are parallel to the wall that marks the southern end of the Plaza (5 in Fig. 30).

It is precisely because the evidence as currently available is fragmentary but promising in view of future excavations that the role of perceptual analysis emerges as particularly useful. With the clues currently available,

how can we best project the organization of space and its assumed perceptual fruition, and, accordingly, how can we best plan our excavations in such a way as to test the proposed perceptual points of view? In other words, which are the alternative points of view which we propose may have served to provide a unifying perceptual perspective? Only if such a proposal is advanced can we then develop an excavation strategy that aims at testing the possible hypotheses. One intriguing such hypothesis is to pay attention to the perception not only from the bottom up, but also from the top down (Fig. 13). From the perspective of the apron steps (Fig. 30, n. 2a), one would look south along the eastern edge of the Plaza towards the southern edge, marked by the wall that is parallel to the apron (Fig. 30, n. 6). It would have been (presumably) along this line that one would have gained access to the staircase and the Temple coming from the southern access of the Plaza. It is then conceivable that the “apron” may have served to provide seating for people looking down towards this sector of the Plaza, in a seating arrangement that has a parallel (structural and presumably functional) in the (later) Minoan palaces, as an embryonic antecedent of the later theaters. Considerations such as these guide our strategy in a very practical sense, for instance by suggesting that there may be traces, however ephemeral, of Plaza installations that would have made sense when viewed from the top of the apron looking down, rather than just as markers along a possible processional way leading across the Plaza to the staircase and the Temple.



Fig. 1 Overall view of Monumental Complex

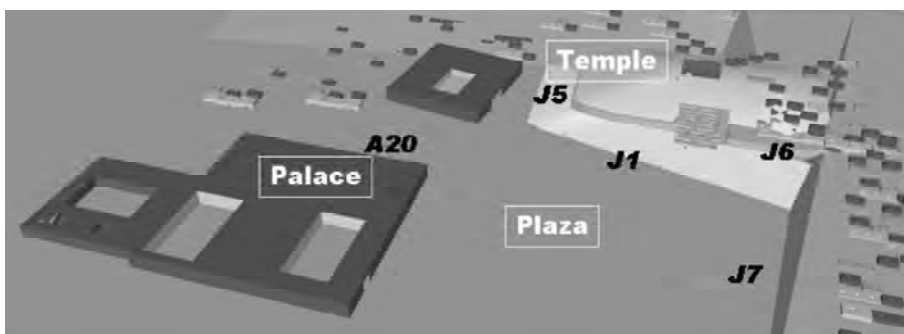


Fig. 2 Sketch reconstruction of Monumental Complex

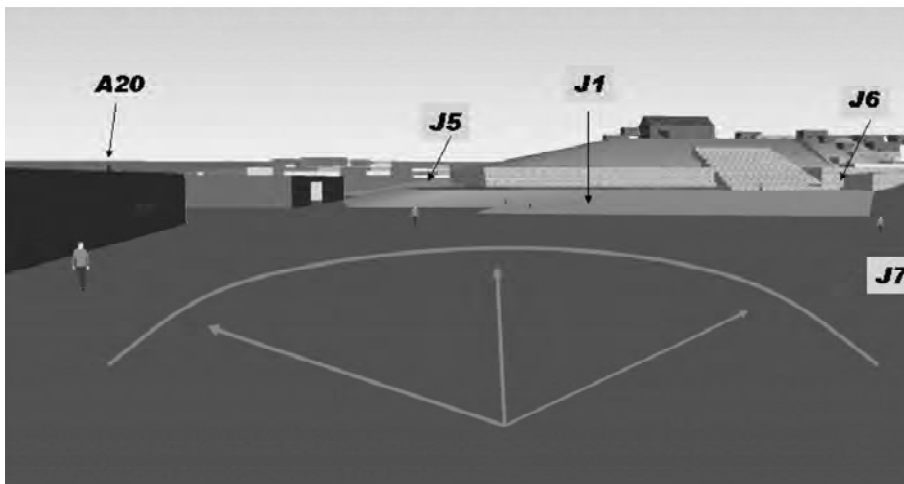


Fig. 3 Sketch view of unifying perspective from Plaza

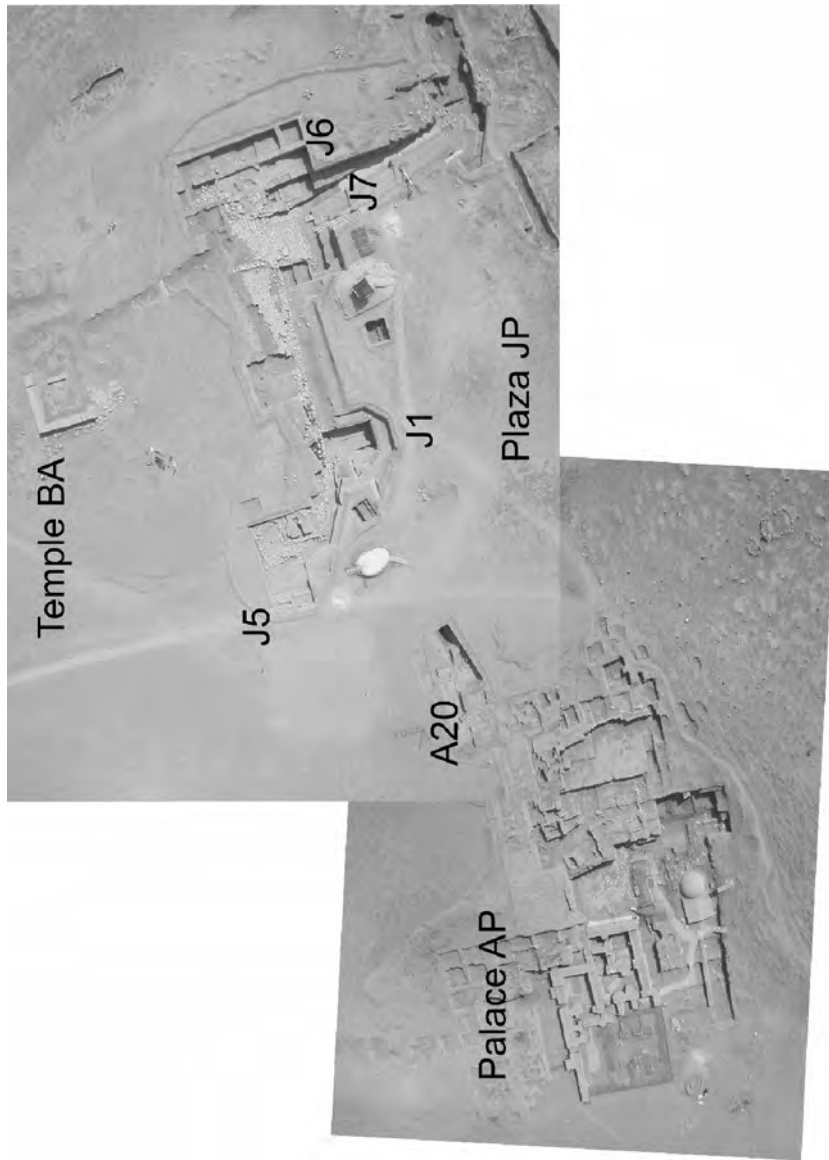


Fig. 4 General Overhead of Monumental Complex
(Photo F. A. Buccellati)



Fig. 5 J1. General view from the south

(Photo D. Mustafa)

- 1 – The 4th millennium sounding; 2 – The early escarpment (2800 B.C.);
3 – The later escarpment (2400 B.C.)



Fig. 6 J1. Overhead view of structure f288 in sounding k123
(Photo F. A. Buccellati)

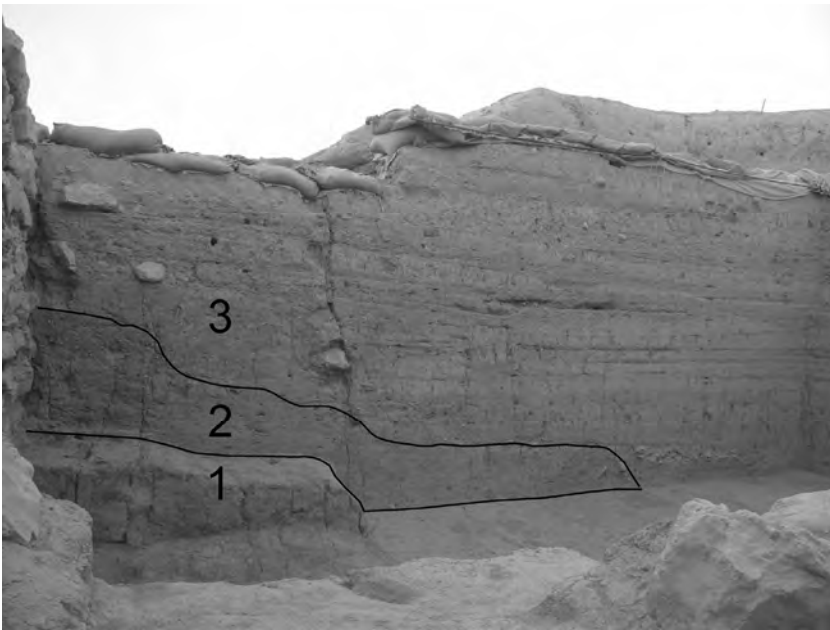


Fig. 7 J1. View of eastern section
(Photo D. Mustafa)

1 – The early escarpment (2800 B.C.); 2 – The later escarpment (2400 B.C.);
3 – The Mittani accumulations (1500–1300 B.C.)

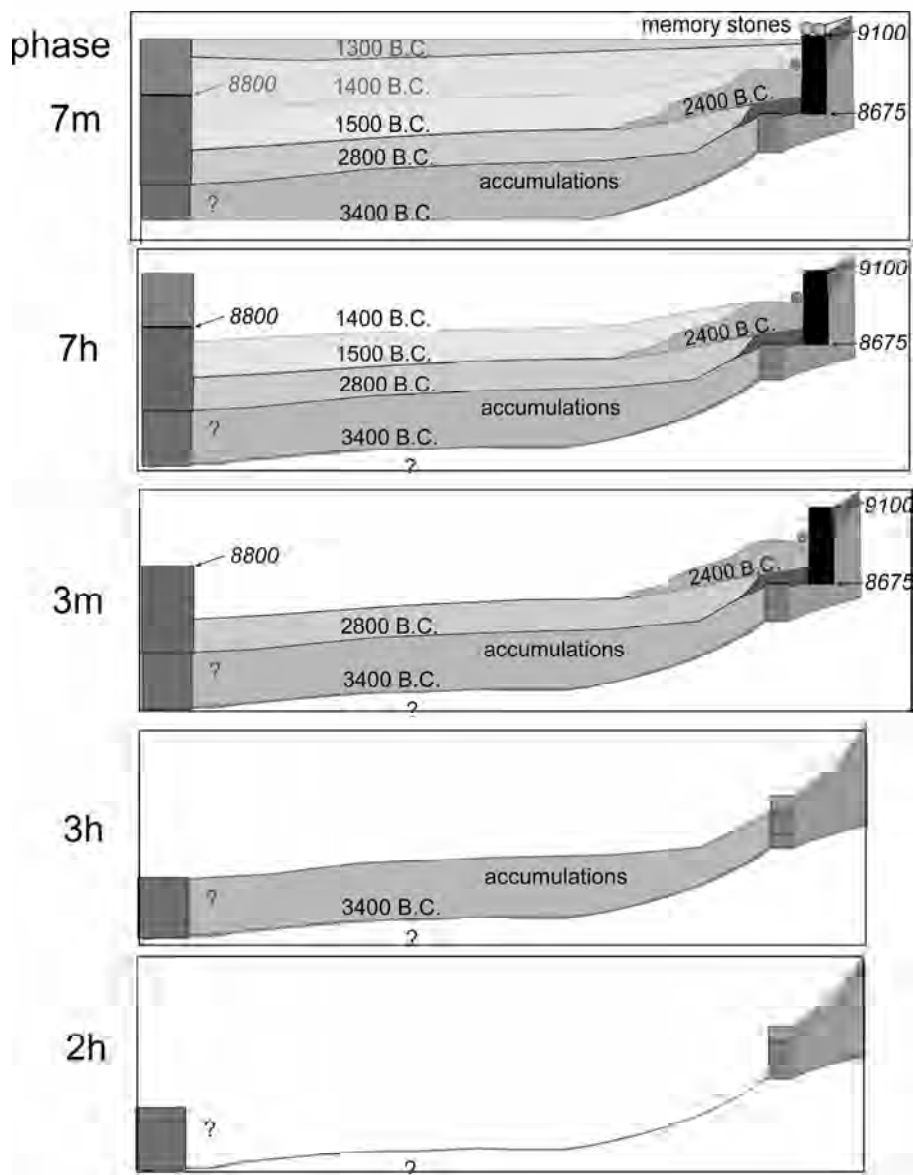


Fig. 8 Sketch of Plaza depositional history as seen in J1



Fig. 9 J6. View of staircase with flanking wall (f129) and two monoliths (f100, f177) (Photo D.Mustafa)



Fig. 10 J6. Detail of two monoliths (note supporting mudbricks) (Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 11 J1. Revetment wall showing triangular pattern in unit J1
(Photo D. Mustafa)

Notice that later escarpment covers the lower portion of the pattern



Fig. 12 Revetment wall showing triangular pattern in J2
(Photo G Gallacci)

Notice that the later wall flanking the staircase covers the
right hand portion of the pattern

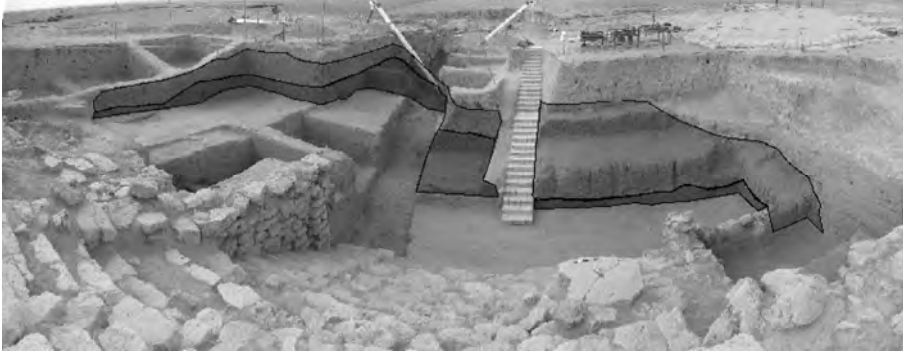


Fig. 13 J2–J7. The great collapse during the Mittani period
(Photo F. A. Buccellati)

The darker shading identifies the brickfall, with brick shapes still clearly recognizable; the lighter shading stands for the brickmelt of the higher elevations



Fig. 14 J5. The western staircase of the Mittani period
(Photo D. Mustafa)

1 – The staircase; 2 – The southeastern frame leaning against the staircase;
3 – Possible evidence of the continuation of the third millennium revetment wall;
4 – Third millennium revetment wall

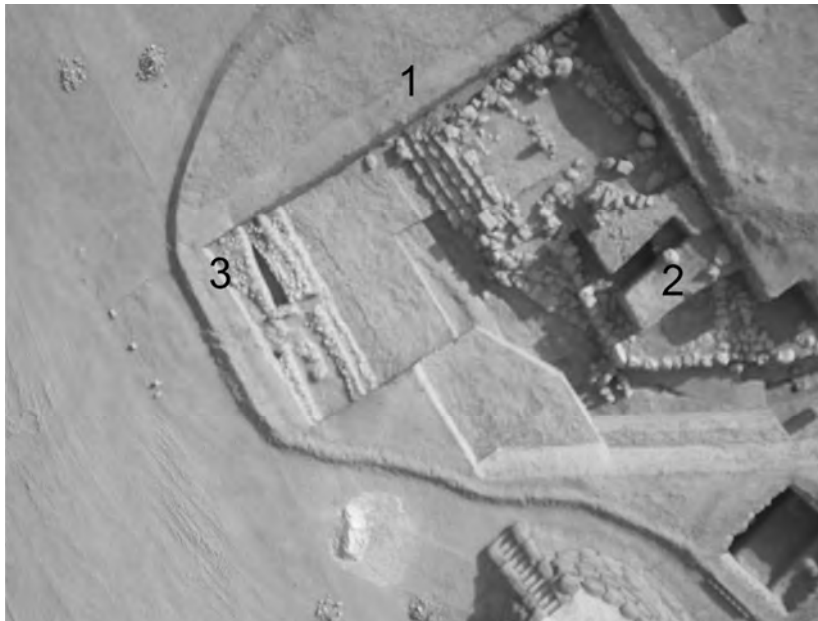


Fig. 15 J5. Overhead view of staircase
(Photo F. A. Buccellati)

1 – The staircase; 2 – The southeastern frame;
3 – Low stone walls, possibly from the Assyrian period



Fig. 16 A20. The western service quarter in the Mittani period
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 17 Curtains for the sections
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 18 J7. Overhead view of viewing swath
(Photo G. Buccellati)
The dotted lines show the projected viewing area



Fig. 19 J7. A view from the southern end of the viewing swath as of 2008
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 20 Overhead of perspectives visible from mid panoramic vista point
(Photo F. Buccellati)

The dotted line shows the perspective towards the Temple Vista Point,
the solid line show the perspective from the Middle Vista Point,
towards the Temple on one side, and the Palace on the other



Fig. 21 Panel stand
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 22 Detail of cover of panel stand
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 23 Panel in situ
(Photo D. Mustafa)



Fig. 24 The First Lady at the beginning of the site itinerary



Fig. 25 The First Lady at the Palace Vista Point



Fig. 26 Monumental staircase and revetment wall: perceptual analysis
(Photo G. Gallacci)
Arrows mark the oblique ascensional direction, double line marks
the vertical barrier



Fig. 27 Monumental staircase from the base, with monoliths
(Photo D. Mustafa)

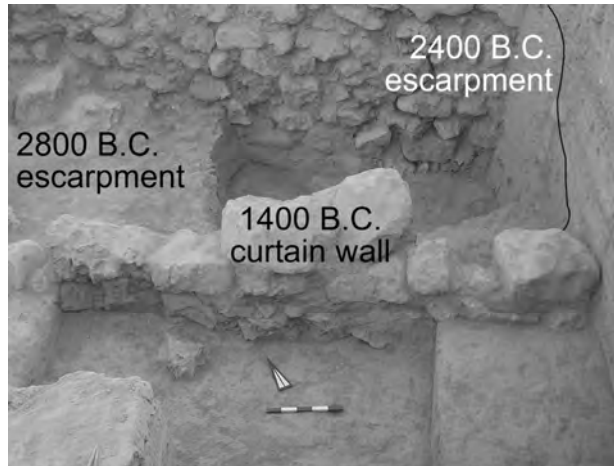


Fig. 28 Curtain wall (J1f 260) and buffer zone
(Photo D. Mustafa)

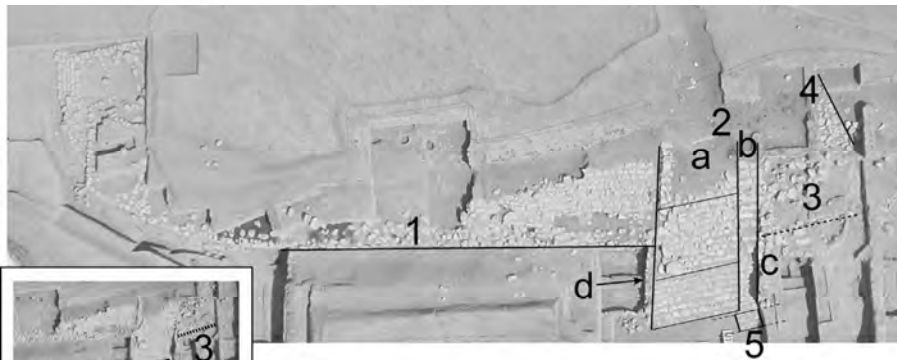


Fig. 29 Overhead view of Temple Terrace and staircase complex (Photo F.A. Buccellati)
1 – The western revetment wall; 2 – The staircase complex (a: apron; b: staircase proper; c: western side wall; d: eastern side wall); 3 – The possible eastern revetment wall;
4 – The eastern edge of the staircase complex (?);
5 – The earlier staircase

Fig. 30

Fig. 30 Overhead of Temple Terrace, Plaza and southern wall
(Photo F.A. Buccellati)
2a and 3 – same as in Fig. 29; 5 – The possible southern wall of the Plaza