The Semiotics of Ethnicity:
The Case of Hurrian Urkesh

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The definition of a phenomenon entails, first, the analysis of its constituent parts whereby one arrives at identifying its "morphology," and second, the identification of the boundaries (the *fines* inscribed etymologically in the term "definition") beyond which there is another, different phenomenon. As found in common usage, ethnicity is a slippery concept, all the more so when used to refer to situations known to us largely from material culture, with only a sprinkling of textual evidence and no living informant. As a result there has dveloped in our field a double-edged trend – to facilely and uncritically accept on the one hand the concept when enshrined within scholarly tradition, and to reject on the other (just as facilely, but with a presumption of greater critical sophistication) the concept when applied to emerging new situations. I would like here to make a case for what I perceive to be adequate methodological standards, and then to apply them to the specific case of Urkesh, which I feel we can justifiably claim to be ethnically definable as Hurrian.

There are no Hurrians today who might validate or invalidate my claim, but presenting these considerations to Gernot Wilhelm is as close as we can come to listening to the response of an ancient native. He combines an unmatched control of the pertinent

data with that instinct for the larger picture that brings meaning to a congeries of facts. As such he has clearly emerged in our time as the pivotal point of reference for all things Hurrian. I offer therefore my considerations to his critical judgment. But I also offer them, for whatever they are worth, to him in the spirit of warm fellowship that colors this occasion and that has characterized our collegial relationship over the many years that we have known each other, if at a regrettable physical distance for most of the time. It is a comfort to know that his critical judgment towards the position I take will be tempered by his friendship, the same friendship with which I, for my part, come to him in the ideal *convivium* represented by this volume.[1]

1   Semiotics and ethnicity

Self-identification is at the root of ethnicity. Individuals recognize themselves as members of a group, and are so recognized by those outside the group. We will pose later the question as to the historical and historiographic dimensions of the phenomenon – how did it actually take shape at given moments in the past, how is it recognizable at such a long remove in time, and how may it be said to apply to a specific archaeological site. For now, I wish to broach the broader methodological issue. Ethnic identification is based on shared recognition of specific signs. There is no identifier that is in and of itself "ethnic," the way a sound may be measured acoustically or a color chromatically. The attributes of an ethnic marker are exquisitely "-emic" in nature, meaning that each acquires its distinctive valence from its opposition to another, the way a phoneme is a sound (-etically) charged with a specific valence because of its opposition to another. Just like any sound may emerge as a phoneme in a given contrastive system (a language), so an "ethneme," as it were, is any cultural trait that assumes contrastive valence as a group identifier. Accordingly, no single sign is ethnic, nor is one more ethnic than the other. Any sign may become ethnic to the extent that, precisely, it signifies symbolically something not immediately coterminous with its typological contours.

        Such identifiers do not occur alone, nor in a vacuum. They are systemic components of an organic whole. There has to be, in other words, a cluster of ethnic traits (a system of signifiers or "ethnemes") that is interwoven and that is opposed as a system to others. These traits reinforce each other in their symbolic valence precisely because they are not seen in isolation. The linguistic analogy is once again enlightening – for no single phoneme can define the expressive system of a language, but only a system with a subtle and organic web of interrelationships. It is the system as such that proclaims an opposition, a meaningful contrast with what is outside the system. The more complex the system, and the more far-reaching is the contrast, the more defining is the opposition.

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[1] Limitations of space prevent me from providing illustrations of the examples and from taking into account the literature on ethnicity and on the Hurrians. For references and full online version of publications relating to our excavations and to my earlier discussion of Hurrian ethnicity at Urkesh, see www.urkesh.org.

It is also important that such systems of signs should last for periods of time spanning generations and centuries, in fact even millennia. This historical depth is a test of the coherence of the system itself. There is no founding text that spells out what the signs are and what they signify. The coherence emerges as a human group progressively acquires and maintains awareness of its own cohesiveness. The bonds that guarantee that a particular body social retains its self-identity; which the group members recognize as they acknowledge their own interdependence; which serve as a yardstick to measure the distinctiveness of the group to the outside – all these bonds are not posited institutionally, for someone to confront and either accept or reject. They are rather inscribed in the unreflecting personal growth of each individual member. The bonds, and the markers that signal their validity, the "signs," are part and parcel of the general upbringing, from the moment any given individual is born into the group. Hence it is that time depth, and the ascription factor, are essential constitutive elements of ethnicity.

Central to any theory of signs is the concept of opposition and meaningful contrast. A sign de-fines not only because it flags something as belonging to a given whole, but also because it flags it as different from another. So we may ask, to what is the ethnicity of a human group "opposed"? There is a double answer. First, ethnic identity in general contrasts with other aggregative mechanisms, in particular those that have a specific organizational structure, like the city or the state. There are no sets of formal institutional prerequisites entailed by membership, such as registration or taxation. It is for this reason that the symbolic value of the identifiers, the signs and what they signify, acquire such a preponderant significance in connection with ethnicity. The shared recognition of symbols is the thread that holds the individuals together, symbols that are not chosen but rather sink their roots in a common past.

The second part of the answer pertains to the specific meaningful contrast between one ethnic group and another. Ethnicity speaks to difference as much as to inner consistency: the power of a system of symbols is enhanced by the meaningful opposition to another system. Language is perhaps the most powerful identifier because it can pose a barrier to communication, and thus it cloaks the identity of the speakers who understand each other but are not understood by outsiders. What is understood is only that communication takes place within the system as seen from the outside, and that breaching the barrier requires a special effort (translations, interpreters, dictionaries, etc.). A similar transposition of values hidden behind the signs takes place with all cultural markers, even if that may require a lesser effort, as with clothing fashions, daily life routines, or even religion. But what always remains a closed book is why and how these diverse traits evoke each other into a coherent system, so that the presence of one elicits, almost mysteriously, all the others.

In this context, a sign does not elicit an automatic response. It is rather conditioned by a specific receptivity, and the response is shaped by an inner disposition, absorbed through a tradition, educated by the sensitivity of a community. The role of perception and awareness is thus a central component of any semiotic analysis of

ethnicity. We must assume a perception, by all members of the group, of a set of external mechanisms (the signs), correlative to an awareness of their intrinsic meaning (the signified). Where language serves as such a sign, the awareness is heightened by the fact that native competence in that linguistic system is, indeed, native, i. e., it cannot be acquired by outsiders except through an intense activity of study which may often never equate true and full competence. In varying degrees, other signs require an analogous "competence," i.e. the ability to be instinctively in syntony with the deeper meaning not only of single signs, but of the full semiotic system. In other words, perception and awareness elicit an instinctive response, even on an emotional level, which is reserved to members of the group.

2   A definition

These considerations form the basis for the following definition of ethnicity which seems to me best to describe the phenomenon and to which I have already called attention in earlier publications. An ethnic group is
(1)   sufficiently large to preclude the possibility of face-to-face association among its members,
(2)   sufficiently consistent through time to span several generations while retaining its internal aggregation. It has
(3)   a marked sense of identity, as expressed especially through a proper name referring to the group. The members share
(4)   a system of cultural traits, ranging from material culture to ideology and religion, from customs and life ways to language. These traits are
(5)   ascribed because they are acquired at birth, or through a birth-like process of assimilation;
(6)   symbolic in that the signified to which the sign points heightens the sense of cohesion that derives from, and supports, the sense of group self-identity; and
(7)   non-organizational since they do not, in and of themselves, motivate the group into a special kind of coordinate action. In particular,
(8)   there is no institutional leadership that assumes responsibility vis-à-vis the group, not even addressing core issues of identity or regulating what is acceptable in the symbolic sphere.

3   Factuality, history, historiography

Before checking the Urkesh data against these presuppositions, we must review another important methodological distinction, that between the historical and the historiographic dimension, a distinction that has significant implications for our argument. Upstream of both is factuality. Things and events have a legitimate claim to be factual if they belong to a sphere of referentiality that conditions everything else to which they, precisely, refer. An imagined phenomenon cannot be held to such a coherent set of implications

about everything else it touches. It remains a metaphor, which is a fragment of a story, parallel, but only in a minimal way, to another story. A child is like quicksilver because of the unpredictable agility displayed, but that is where the parallel story ends (there is no implication that the child is a mineral). A fact, on the other hand, must be held to such overriding coherence: referentiality is total.

History brings us to the documentary level. A fact may be considered historical when there is evidence for its existence, i. e., when it is documented. Such evidence may be direct or inferential. Thus the birth of a child is documented directly through a specific observation, which may be explicitly recorded. The causes, the moment or the modality of conception, on the other hand, cannot be observed, nor, as a result, documented directly. The inference as to factuality can however be drawn with certainty with regard to at least one causal factor (the mother) and, with a lesser degree of certainty, with regard to the other causal factor (the father), the modality (the specific setting), and the moment (the precise point in time when conception occurred).

Historiography is the moment of reflection about historicity. At a remove from the facts, we reflect on the nature of the record and on how it all impacts our intellectual consciousness and our human experience. We may summarize synoptically these considerations using an example drawn from the archaeological domain:

	nature of argument	*archaeological example: a house*
factuality (reality of a given fact even if unrecordable)	inferential	an existing house was indeed built, whether or not an actual record is available to document its construction – i. e., the moment of its construction is factual even if the details are unknown
historicity (documented factuality)	inferential	comparative material found in foundations
	direct	foundation deposit with inscribed tablet
historiography (awareness of, and reflection on, historicity)	active	the occupants (the first ones and those at a time subsequent to the construction) are aware of who the builder was
	passive	an observer removed from any use is aware of the documentary ecidence (social scientist, archaeologist, historian)
	reactivated	an observer removed from its original use identifies with the sensibility of the original occupant (humanist)

If we now apply this scheme to the question of ethnicity, we may pose the question in the following terms, for each of the three moments I have just articulated. (1) Was ethnicity (as defined above) an operative factor in social consciousness at the time and place in which we are interested? (2) If so, what trace did it leave in the record? And, finally, (3) was there a self-reflection about the significance of such an ethnic bond, if present? To have circumscribed the problem in the terms I have stated above helps us because it tells us what we should be looking for in the record. Somewhat like a linguist does not simply tell an informant to speak, but asks pointed questions that target potential distributional realities, so we cannot simply ask the historical record to speak to the issue at hand, but we must rather ask pointed questions that aim to discover the pertinent distributional realities.

The core question, in the case of ethnicity, is whether or not there was a level of social integration that can best be attributed to ethnicity understood as the distinctive cluster of attributes which I have listed in the definition given above. We recognize distinct human groups that cohered into effective wholes: what were the foundational bonds of solidarity, the social mechanisms that made this bonding possible? Thus in the territorial state the identity of the group depends on physical contiguity within a settlement, with political institutions (summed up in kingship) providing the focal point of solidarity. A city wall circumscribes this physical reality, a temple terrace at the center is like a spoke that radiates presence to the surrounding hinterland – these are emblems of the congruence of the social group defined territorially. Conversely, deportation is the most effective means of breaking down solidarity and the consequent ability to withstand a new order imposed from outside.

If it is an ethnic bond that provides social integration, then we would look for a non-organizational, ascribed sharing of cultural traits. Instead of territorial contiguity, or in addition to it, genetic relation plays a major role. Parenting provides, as it were, a vertical contiguity that serves as effectively as horizontal territorial contiguity to bring about the social integration that holds the group together. The emblems may be more intangible, but if we have the external evidence of a cluster of signs, then we may validly postulate the inner value of what is signified. To do so in the case of Urkesh, we will pursue two avenues. First, I will seek to identify the morphology of the traits that form a potentially ethnic cluster, or "distributional array," and to see if and how this cluster may have been perceived, semiotically, in opposition to other operative factors of social integration within Urkesh society (section 4). Second, I will look at the possible (semiotic) opposition between this Urkesh cluster assumed to be Hurrian and other parallel clusters outside Urkesh assumed to be non-Hurrian (section 5).

4   The Urkesh cluster

Since admittedly no single sign has ethnic valence in and of itself, how is it possible to establish any inventory of just such signs? The procedure is not unlike the one used in

establishing a phonemic inventory: no phone has any phonemic valence in and of itself until (a) it is seen in opposition to others, and (b) it coheres with other elements of the same type to form a system – the phonemic inventory. Our question, then, is: which cultural traits may be placed in opposition with others and, at the same time, share common aspects with others within a system that meets the criteria indicated in our definition given above?

4.1   Language: the sign as cipher

In our specific case, the existence of a distinctive *language* is the first of these emic elements, or "ethnemes." As we saw earlier (in section 1), language is a closed system, one that establishes a boundary within which the cipher is instinctively (natively) known, and beyond which unintelligibility reigns. It is the sharpness of the boundary that makes language a most explicit identifier. For all signs are ciphers, but language is the most impervious to, precisely, decipherment.

It is of critical importance to stress how greatly the *distribution* of the evidence matters. This means that the discrete phenomena (in our case, Hurrian words or names) must be contextualized and seen in relation to each other and to the world onto which they open a window. At Urkesh, they fall into three categories.

First, the *connected texts.* The inscriptions[2] on the lions of Tish-atal are the longest connected Hurrian text of the third millennium, although some of the seal legends may also be viewed as short Hurrian texts. What is significant, contextually, is that they are all political texts, because they stem from the court and demonstrate an explicit will to affirm a distinctiveness at the highest level of leadership.

Second, the *royal titulature.* The fact that the Hurrian title *endan* is used regularly for the Urkesh rulers (Tupkish, Tish-atal, Ishar-kinum) is significant because it signals the same proud affirmation at the very time when Akkadian military power looms very large on the political horizon of Urkesh.

Third, the *onomastics.* More important than the presence of Hurrian personal names are the pertinent prosopographic considerations. All of the third millennium kings (except Ishar-kinum) have Hurrian names, and so does the majority of the courtiers – including, very significantly, the nurse and the cook of Uqnitum, a queen with an Akkadian name (and most probably Akkadian origin).

It is then the constellation of factors that lends particular significance to the linguistic evidence from Urkesh. The individual factors are held together by the linguistic properties they share: the phonological, morphological, syntactical attributes are so complex and so diversified as to make the link with the more abundant later evidence of the same language unmistakable. And the social distribution of the evidence, i. e., the way in which it appears concretely in the archaeological and historical record, exhibits a coherence that can be all but accidental.

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[2] In the plural, because the text appears not only on the stone tablet of the Louvre lion, but also on the bronze flange of both exemplars.

4.2   Religion: signs as pointers to a shared intangible

A similar situation obtains with evidence relating to the religious sphere. There are three elements of material culture that are very distinctive in terms of their typology and which exhibit the same kind of distribution and overlap as we have observed for the linguistic evidence. In this case, the distribution pertains to the centrality that these elements enjoy in the Urkesh built environment, and the overlap pertains to the links we can establish with evidence that is in turn explicitly linked to a Hurrian identity.

The first is a highly distinctive structure, namely *a large and elaborate stone lined pit*, in which events were taking place at regular intervals, as evidenced by a very homogenous horizontal stratification. These events were characterized by shallow round depressions; by a singular disproportion of piglets and puppy dogs in the faunal assemblage; and by a couple of distinctive objects – all of which coincides with written evidence known from later Hurrian texts in the Hittite record. The Urkesh "pit" can safely be identified as the monumental frame for a Hurrian ritual that aimed to establish a link with the Netherworld, in ways that were largely unknown and mostly repugnant in the rest of Syro-Mesopotamia. What is remarkable and unique about the nature of the Urkesh evidence is that the monumental frame underscores the long continuity in time (at least twelve centuries) of the ritual in the very same spot, to which we can attribute the name *ābi*, as known from the later Hurrian texts.

The second piece of evidence in the religious sphere is a *monumental Temple Terrace* which only superficially reminds us of the Mesopotamian ziggurat. Both are built up structures which proclaim at the same time the sharpness of the boundary between the human and the divine (the walls as vertical element) and the ability to transcend the boundary (the staircase as oblique means of ascent). But while the ziggurat tapers to a high point where there is room for only the house of the deity, in the Urkesh Temple Terrace the summit is shared by the Temple and by the service installations. The difference in perceptual impact is noteworthy, for the Urkesh Terrace echoes more closely the feeling of the highlands very visible on the near horizon, whence most likely the Hurrians of Urkesh originally came, and which still represented their natural hinterland, and with which they still had the most active and regular interchange.

Third, the outward sign at the level of the household is *the andiron*, a simple portable hearth, which we find, sometimes decorated with emblems that evoke the divine sphere, in a funerary context that is the miniature of a normal house. This is linked with traditions of the northern highlands, albeit not specifically Hurrian.

The coherence of these elements lies in the fact that they point to a shared world of intangible religious values. They are all the more significant precisely because the signified is intangible, hence beyond empirical verification – and yet it is agreed upon as having overriding validity and as commanding assent.

4.3   *Style and customs: signs as pointers to social identity*

The markers of ethnic identity that define the Urkesh cluster display different degrees of explicitness and of declaratory power. The more subtle the symbolic referent, the stronger the integrative pull of the marker. Language as a shared cipher, and religion as a system of shared intangibles, are the most powerful markers precisely because their semiotic valence is not immediately perceptible outside the social group wherein the sharing occurs. They require interpreters, translators, if they are to be understood at all. And even then, such understanding may barely scratch the surface: the recipient of a translation may well understand the outward contours of the message, the information, but be unable to respond to it with the immediacy and the depth of feeling that a "native" carrier brings to it.

Next to language as cipher, and to religion as a system of shared intangibles, there are markers that are easily perceived by outsiders in their outward quality *as signs*, and easily understood *as signifiers* endowed with associative power. Examples from Urkesh include a special type of headdress, in the shape of a beret, and distinctive stylistic traits in the figurative arts, such as movement and circularity in the compositional layout of a scene, descriptiveness and realism in iconographic choices, expressionism and double frontality in the rendering of the individual figure. Thus the beret, for instance, is clearly perceived in its specific morphology by everyone outside the group (it needs no translation as the linguistic cipher or the religious intangible do). This clear perception of the item in its morphological specificity makes it easy, for those outside the group, to see how *it* (rather than another garment of a different style) will elicit an associative response in members of the pertinent group. In other words, while in the case of the linguistic cipher the sign itself is simply not understood, and the signified even less so; and while in the case of the religious intangible the sign may be hidden, and the signified even more so; by contrast, with style and customs the sign is perfectly visible and understandable (the beret is transparently recognized as such by everyone), and its symbolic valence (as a pointer to a specific social group) is assumed by virtue of its uniqueness.

Precisely because of the greater immediacy and transparency of their quality as signs, markers based on style and customs are not as self-declaratory as language and religion. While a Hurrian text is unmistakably "Hurrian," and so is a religious ritual linked to the *ābi*, a similar attribution of a beret is by necessity tentative, in the absence of declaratory statements as one would find in a living tradition. All the more so when different ethnic groups co-exist in the same area: how can we consider a beret as ethnically distinctive in the first place, and even more specifically as distinctive of the Hurrians rather than of another group present in Urkesh? It is reasonable, I suggest, to propose an inference, based on the nature and overlap of distributional classes. In our specific case, the beret (just like the other stylistic traits noted above) co-occur with features that are specifically Hurrian. They are in fact characteristic of the glyptic style that is associated with the ruler and his court, the ruler himself being identified by the Hurrian term *endan*, and the courtiers (with the exception of the queen) having Hurrian names.

4.4   Distributional cohesiveness

The notion of overlap is important methodologically in bracketing elements with different relevance and transparency as to ethnicity. Fundamental to a semiotic evaluation is the notion of a cluster of elements that displays a profound distributional cohesiveness. To just be a native speaker of a language not understood by others is not constitutive of ethnicity. It *is* so constitutive when it overlaps with other markers, which, taken together, constitute a demonstrable distributional array. This is the *cluster.* As for *cohesiveness,* it depends on how tight the overlap is, for instance in terms of geographical and chronological distribution. The *depth,* finally, is a function of the difficulty in appropriating the full semiotic valence of the marker: it is easier to develop a perceptual response to a style of clothing than to appropriate the full resonance of a language or of a religious system. Such a deeply cohesive cluster goes well beyond single traits (such as isolated personal names or seemingly distinctive stylistic features) which remain essentially anecdotal.

A "dead" culture is one for which there have not been for a long time any living carriers. All the more so when the evidence that embodies its past life is a broken tradition i. e., one that is not borne by a living social group as memory enshrined in a continuous documentary thread (say, the Bible), but is rather recovered from the fragments of its own collapse (say, the archaeology of Urkesh). But any culture that is dead today was obviously alive in its own time. The extent to which ethnicity had a semiotic reality for those living carriers of the past is reflected in the distributional reality of the evidence, i.e., in the overlap of concrete elements which we do find in the seemingly dumb and inert matrix of the soil. It is the qualitative assessment of these overlaps, of these distributional arrays, that allows us to reconstruct a demonstrable cluster of traits for Urkesh and thus to argue − plausibly, I feel − for the specific ethnic identity of a distinct social group within this ancient polity.

5   Hurrians and non-Hurrians

I have argued for the validity of identifying a social group within Urkesh as ethnic on the basis of a specific and demonstrable cluster of elements. To go further, and label this group as Hurrian is not based on direct evidence from the city, but rather on inferences drawn from later evidence, which can in turn be bracketed with the one we have just considered.[3] The two major elements in this respect are language and religion, for which we have clear and specific overlaps between Urkesh and later documentation.

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[3] Vyacheslav Ivanov suggests that there may in fact be evidence for an earlier use of the term. I am grateful to him for the following comment in which he summarizes his observations. "The Hattic designation wa_a-a-ḫur-la- might go back to earlier times because later Hattic was a dead sacred language of the Hittite Empire. Since the form means 'Hurrians' (O. Soysal, "Hattischer Wortschatz in hethitischer Textüberlieferung." Handbuch der Orientalistik.1 Abteilung Nahe und der Mittlere Osten, Bd.74. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 320, 880), I understand it as a typical ancient Northern Caucasian nominal form with a class prefix wa_a- of the masculine plural. Hittite, which did not have prefixes, borrowed this designation of Hurrians as "ḫurla-" in Old Hittite (as in ḫur-la-aš-ša "to Hurrians", H. A. Hoffner, "Hurrian Civilization from a Hittite Per-

But if we broaden the scope from Urkesh to Hurrian ethnicity, we must then consider the pertinent implications in terms of the wider setting of ethnic relationships in third millennium Syro-Mesopotamia. In this article there is room for only a few remarks.

There is, for the third millennium, no other similar cluster. But, clearly, this cannot be taken to mean that Hurrian ethnic identity was limited only to Urkesh. Rather, a double case can be made. First, there may have been relatively few urban centers like Urkesh, i. e., cities where a specific Hurrian identity was central to their ethnic composition. These cities would have been along the piedmont zone of the Anatolian plateau, and might be represented at sites like Tell Chuera, Tell Leilan, Nineveh. It is what I have called the Hurrian urban ledge, and presumably the only area where a Hurrian scribal tradition might have been in place, as we know it for now only from Urkesh. The second relevant point is that the wider hinterland of these urban centers would have been in the mountain plateau to the north: thus, while the Hurrian urban population may have been limited in size, its rural counterpart to the north may instead have been much larger and spread over a very wide area. As a result, while markers of specific Hurrian identity recorded by written sources (at home in a scribal urban setting) would have been few in antiquity and would not be easily retrievable today, the actual demographic pool would have been much more sizeable.

The distinctiveness of the Hurrians, as we see it first emerge in Urkesh, was striking, and certainly greater than, say, that of the Amorites. The latter were, in my view, distinguished from the Akkadians originally and primarily for social, not ethnic, reasons. It was only in a given geographical area (the middle Euphrates) that they distanced themselves progressively from their urban base and in the process acquired an ever greater sense of self-identity which developed into a proper ethnic consciousness. With the Hurrians we see the converse happening: the core region seems to have been the rural highland of the Tur-Abdin, from where they spilled over only to a very limited extent in the immediate piedmont region to the south, which became their sole urban base in the third, and possibly already in the fourth, millennium – Urkesh being so far the only demonstrable example.

The question of Hurrian ethnicity has been a recurrent topic of interest, and while a review and discussion are beyond the scope of this paper, I will conclude by referring to two old views, Moortgat's and Barrelet's. They may be considered as emblematic because, unwittingly, they strive for the implementation of a semiotic approach but from opposing points of view – Moortgat[4] deals only with the signified, and Barrelet only with the sign. On the one hand, Moortgat seeks to identify the underlying and

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spective," in G. Buccellati and M. Kelly-Buccellati, *Urkesh and Hurrians*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 26, Malibu: Undena, 1998, p. 171, fn. 9; other later examples as *ḫurla-ma-ššan ḫenkan siya[ir]* 'they shot the plague at the Hurrian", J. Puhvel, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary,* volume 3. Words beginning with H. Trends in Linguistics. Documentation. 5. Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991, p. 296). The combination *-rl-* rendering some non-Hittite phoneme combination seems important to me."
[4] Anton Moortgat, *Die Bildende Kunst des Alten Orients und die Bergvölker.* Berlin: Schoetz, 1932.

unifying factor that might explain the epiphenomena, the de facto appearances. His emphasis on the "Bildgedanke" expresses this. A proper translation of the term might be "deep structure," in the sense that it aims at capturing the deeper meaning of tangible forms. On the other hand, the various authors in Barrelet's[5] edited volumes seek to gather all the fragments that have been assigned a Hurrian label, and to extricate a common thread, if any exists. Within a philosophical context, semiotics may be linked to phenomenology and to the mediating role it plays between idealism and positivism. We may give an idealistic reading of Moortgat (*à la* Hegel), which is almost literally echoed in his repeated reference to the "Geist der Kultur," the "geistige Welt," the "geschlossene Gedankenwelt," the "Hurritischer Geist": in this reading, we see the attempt to provide a universal interpretive key which he identifies with the genius of a people. And we might give a positivistic reading of Barrelet (*à la* Comte), which finds it ultimately difficult, as an intellectual exercise, to bracket data into a paradigm, and takes refuge in the safe harbor of a formal analysis that ends up being an end in itself.

It is important to retain what is valid in either approach, by combining the alternative and potentially opposing goals within the framework of a unified, semiotic method. This means, first, that we want to link the sign and the signified. But it means, even more importantly, that this linkage must entail a recognition of systemic oppositions. It is not enough to suggest a meaning for what is perceived as a symbol, in isolation – as Moortgat was doing. Nor is it enough to inventory a vast array of data, as if the very wide range of their co-occurrence could argue against the possibility of an underlying common cause, as in the work of Barrelet's research group. What needs to be done for a semiotic analysis to start, is to show if and how distinctive oppositions can cluster into demonstrable arrays. What makes a phone into a phoneme is not its mere co-occurrence next to a multitude of distinct phones, but the contrastive opposition, within the clustering of minimal pairs, between bracketed phones and other bracketed phones.

It is in this perspective that I have sought to pursue a fuller and more proper semiotic approach, in an effort to first highlight, in theoretical terms, an adequate methodology, and then show how, through it, we can rely on a specific handle, a "clef de lecture," with which to deal, concretely, with the data.

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[5] Marie-Thérèse Barrelet (ed.), *Problèmes concernant les Hurrites: Méthodologie et critique, 1,* Paris: CNRS, 1977; *Problèmes concernant les Hurrites: 2*, Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Mémoire 49, 1984.

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