



## 26. Tell Mozan/Urkesk (Hassake)

Front matter

at the end

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Every excavation in Syria discloses great new riches that complement what we know already about its ancient past. Bringing to light ancient Urkesk, has added the surprise of opening a new window onto unsuspected evidence for a different civilization, that of the ancient Hurrians. They were known already from later periods, when the Hurrian kingdom of Mittani was at its peak. But this was in the mid 2nd millennium. Urkesk has now emerged as the only Hurrian kingdom of the 3rd millennium, and there are good reasons for assuming that it was so already by the middle of the 4th millennium.

By the mid 3rd millennium, the site had expanded to cover an area of some 130ha, enclosed by a city wall, with a central high mound of some 25ha (Fig. 1). One of the largest cities in Syro-Mesopotamia, it was dominated by a monumental Temple terrace, most likely dedicated to Kumarbi, the main god of the archaic Hurrian pantheon. He was described in the myths as residing in

Urkesk, from where he dispensed justice in the mountain hinterland. This myth, preserved in the later scribal schools, reflects a much earlier tradition, which very likely goes back to proto-historic periods, of which the archaeological record gives us an inkling.

Stunning evidence to this effect has in fact emerged during our last season of excavations, in 2010. Just below the surface, near the top of the tell, the corner of a niched building appeared (Fig. 2) that is almost certainly the 4th-millennium precursor of the later temple complex. We only have the external corner of the structure, which echoes the architectural template of southern Mesopotamia, such as the temple in Eridu. The date is certain because of both the glyptic and ceramic evidence, and because of <sup>14</sup>C determinations; the stratigraphic seal just above the structure is extremely well defined (it was the solid glacis of the later temple terrace), and it seems most likely that the rest of the building is fully preserved.



FIG. 1 THE 'HIGH MOUND', SITUATED IN THE FERTILE PLAINS OF NORTH-EASTERN SYRIA, WITH THE MOUNTAINS OF THE TUR-ABDIN IN THE BACKGROUND.

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FIG. 2 THE CORNER OF A NICHED STRUCTURE OF THE MID 4TH MILLENNIUM, JUST BELOW THE 3RD MILLENNIUM GLACIS. A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE 3RD MILLENNIUM TEMPLE IS IN THE BACKGROUND.



FIG. 3 THE MONUMENTAL TEMPLE TERRACE OF THE 3RD MILLENNIUM.

In 2010, we did not reach the level of the original floor, which we had hoped to excavate in 2011, a project which has unfortunately remained in abeyance ever since. But there is also good evidence that this structure rested on top of what was already a very high temple terrace, about 22m above the plain level, implying the existence of a large city that could support the presence of such a monumental structure.

This suggests an early urban development of a type different from the classical one known from the Sumerian south. Urkesh is located just at the foot of the Taurus range, the first city coming down from the mountains towards the fertile Syrian plain. Here the bond of solidarity that held people together transcended the immediacy of the territory, as was instead the case in the south. In Urkesh, the people in the mountain valleys were linked together by an ethnic bond that tied mountain people with the city. Since this is one of the earliest cities known, this assumption suggests an alternative type of urban revolution.

The temple terrace is well known in the shape it took by about 2400 BC (Fig. 3). It was a massive structure, with a monumental stone staircase bridging the space between a very large plaza and a glacis that sloped up towards the top where the temple proper was located. The temple stood some 27m above the plain level, and some 7m above the plaza. The terrace was bounded to the south by a stone revetment wall which posited a sharp boundary to the sacred area at the top. The very wide and monumental staircase, with 27 steps, was flanked by a much wider parallel row of higher steps, which may have served either as an impressive frame for the staircase proper, or perhaps even to provide seating. Indications are that the famous bronze lions of Tish-atal were part of a foundation deposit for just this temple.

Just as the temple terrace projects the image of an ascent to the heavens, another astounding structure seems to thrust you downward in the direction of the netherworld. It is a deep, stone lined shaft, with a very steep and

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FIG. 4 THE NECROMANTIC SHAFT (*abi*); THE WALLS ON THE LEFT ARE THOSE OF THE PALACE. IN THIS SHAPE, IT DATES TO THE TIME OF THE PALACE, ABOUT 2250 BC.

narrow staircase (Fig. 4). It dates to at least the same time as the temple terrace, but it is likely to go back in time to the earliest occupation of the city, in the 4th millennium. From a careful comparison with later Hurrian texts, it is

clear that its purpose was for a medium to connect with the spirits of the Netherworld, which were summoned according to specifically Hurrian rituals. We even know the Hurrian name for this structure, *abi*.

Even more explicit is the evidence regarding the Hurrian character of Urkesh by shortly after the mid 3rd millennium. It comes from the royal palace of Tupkish (Fig. 5). It was built around 2250 BC, shortly before the reign of Naram-Sin of Akkad. The excavations have exposed the service sector and part of the formal wing. It is a large structure, built in a single phase according to a careful and well-documented architectural planning. It was used during the reign of Tupkish and his wife Uqnitum: we know their names from the legends on numerous seals that belong to the king, the queen and members of their court, where we also find the name of the city, Urkesh. After Tupkish and Uqnitum, the palace was used for another generation as a storehouse by their immediate successors, the queen being now Tar'am-Agade, daughter of Naram-Sin.

The seals also mention several of the courtiers connected with Uqnitum, especially her cook Tuli and wet-nurse of her children, Zamena: the style is very realistic, showing details of their professions, so that the Tuli iconography contains a butcher and a figure making butter, while Zamena is standing before Uqnitum touching the royal child held on her lap. One of the most significant of these royal sealings belonged to Uqnitum and pictures her seated opposite Tupkish holding a small child on her lap (Fig. 6). Between the two large seated figures is a small figure, interpreted by us as the son of this royal couple. He is touching the lap of Tupkish in a gesture of filiation, indicating that he is to be the next king (*endan* in Hurrian)



FIG. 5 THE PALACE OF TUPKISH, ABOUT 2250 BC. THE MUDBRICK WALLS ARE COVERED WITH A SYSTEM OF TRELLIS AND CLOTH THAT PROTECT THEM FROM WEATHERING.

## A HISTORY OF SYRIA IN ONE HUNDRED SITES

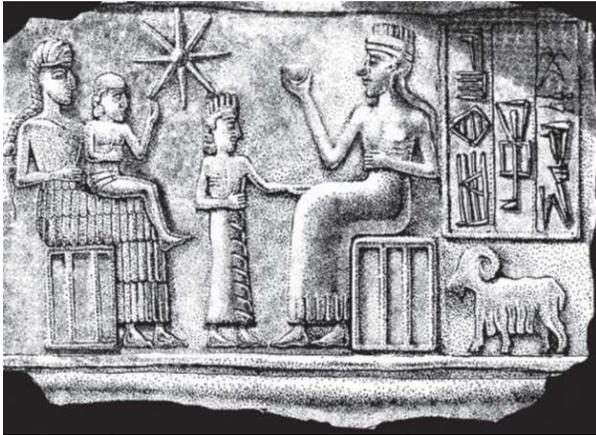


FIG. 6 COMPOSITE OF THE IMPRESSION OF THE SEAL OF UQNITUM SHOWING THE ROYAL FAMILY.



FIG. 7 STONE PLAQUE SHOWING GILGAMESH AND ENKIDU.

after Tupkish. Nowhere else in 3rd millennium Syro-Mesopotamia do we find a portrait of a royal family. In this scene Uqnitum is shown seated opposite Tupkish and of equal height, indicating equal importance. This is the message in all her seals; she identifies herself as the most important wife and the mother of the next king.

A number of free standing and relief sculptures have been excavated in Urkesh. A double-sided round-topped stela, from the area of the Temple, shows a farmer plowing on one side and an animal herd on the other. But the most significant is a stone plaque divided into registers with the preserved upper register depicting Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Fig. 7). Gilgamesh has short hair, no beard, a short garment and is touching in a friendly manner Enkidu, who is shown as having long hair, a long beard, nude and with

a quiver. The identification of these two figures is based on the close correspondence between the iconography and the description in the Gilgamesh narrative, where Gilgamesh is described as young and Enkidu as older, more experienced and hirsute. Here in the Urkesh plaque we have the moment when their friendship is established, before they begin their adventures together. This plaque is dated to the beginning of the Akkadian period, much earlier than the other Mesopotamian scenes identifying these two protagonists.

With the turn of the 2nd millennium, the city shrank to just the high mound, and fell under the political control of Mari first, and of Mittani later, until it was abandoned with the arrival of Assyrians shortly after 1300 BC. It had remained profoundly Hurrian. We surmise this from the continued use of the temple terrace (if with some reorganization of the space), from the equally continued use of the *abi*, from the resistance the city put up against the Mari governor, and even from its final abandonment: its cause may be attributed, in fact, to the strong Hurrian character of its religious institutions, which would have made the city somewhat undesirable for a political system like that of the Assyrians, rigorously intent on assimilation of all minorities.

Before hostilities began in 2011, we had set in place an effective system of conservation and site presentation. It continues to date. In spite of our enforced and protracted physical absence from the site, we have been able to sustain without interruption work at the site, through direct supervision on our part of the work done by two guards and four assistants, and by providing the necessary resources and materials. As a result, the site is in excellent condition, documented by means of a thorough photographic and descriptive record. The conservation of the mudbrick architecture consisted in covering the walls with an iron trellis and tent material: this protects the mudbrick from the weather, and gives a visual sense of the architectural volumes; it is also simple enough that it can be maintained easily even during our protracted absence from the site.

# **A History of Syria in One Hundred Sites**

**edited by**

**Youssef Kanjou and Akira Tsuneki**

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Cover Illustration: View of the excavation at Hummal site  
© The Syro-Swiss mission on the Palaeolithic of the El Kowm Area

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