In tune with the past

Urkesh,
the discovery of a new ancient Syrian civilization

A poster exhibit for the American Cultural Center in Damascus and for various Syrian Cultural Centers

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Arabic rendering by Rasha Elendari

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Foreword

The idea of a poster exhibit arose in the Spring of 2008 following a request made to us by the then Chargé d’affaires of the US embassy in Damascus, Mr. Michael Corbin. He was interested in showing an aspect of the American contributions to Syrian culture, a theme that resonated very vividly with us. For a number of years, in fact, we have been striving to develop a coherent site presentation program that might allow the full fruition on the part of the broader public of the results of our scholarly work at Tell Mozan, the site of ancient Urkesh.

We suggested a poster exhibit that would illustrate the more important substantive insights into the Hurrian culture with which our site is identified, and at the same time develop the theme of how archaeology aims at recovering the live experience of civilizations that have long since disappeared from the continuum of human history.

We also suggested that the exhibit travel outside Damascus to a dozen or so Syrian cultural centers, especially in the more distant regions – our own of Hassaka, and those of Der ez-Zor and Sueda. At each venue, two Syrian members of our team would give a slide presentation to the general public and to teachers who may then bring their students for a guided visit.

Our proposal was received with enthusiasm, and with the same enthusiasm we set to work. A special overall design was conceived, one that would, on the one hand, highlight the central theme of each poster with a single large photograph unencumbered of writing and, on the other, provide interested visitors with ample information in the shape of side panels. A different design would be applied to each panel, and the text would aim to appeal to the general public by using a rather poetic style.

Both the central posters and the side panels are given here in book format. The overall impact that is intended for the full exhibit display is missing, but one will be able to appraise the central message and the style we have chosen.

Just as the exhibit is meant to attract people to visit the excavations, so we hope that the same material, offered here in book format, will induce the reader to come to Tell Mozan. Our innovative site presentation, not found at other archaeological sites in Syria, will come as a surprise: you will find yourself reading the site as you would a book!

Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati
Giorgio Buccellati
Directors, Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project
A note on format.

Visuals and text are designed for a full size display: the impact of these visuals is lost in the book format in which the exhibit is presented here.

Also, the exhibit includes an audio background which cannot be duplicated here. The audio includes a reading of the inscription by Tish-adal, king of Urkesh, and a rendering of the musical score of a Hurrian hymn found at Ugarit.

In spite of these limitations, we hope that the material presented here may be of interest for its content. It should also be noted that, as of now, this is a pre-print version, still susceptible of corrections and changes.

To help visualize the organization of the pages as given in book format, one may refer to the table below. The main poster (here in orange) is a single image, with no text, except for the title; it is 98 x 63 cms in size, and is framed in plexiglas. The accompanying descriptive material consists of laminated A4 pages, glued to boards covered with burlap of different colors. The topmost page (in larger type, here in yellow) gives a general description of the poster content. The next four pages develop the central theme of the poster, generally with additional graphics. The final page (here in green, in a different type and set lower than the bottom of the main poster) is aimed at children. The material that is actually meant for the exhibit is printed here on beige stock, the remainder on white.
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In tune with the past
بالتناغم مع الماضي

أوركيش:
حضارة سورية قديمة جديدة

Urkesh:
A new ancient Syrian civilization
A lion.

It requires no explanation.

Or does it?

For there is a much deeper meaning than the aesthetic appeal.

The lion tells us about an ancient Syrian kingdom: Urkesh, in the northeast.

And that does require explaining.

This Exhibit will tell you how archaeology, and archaeology alone, can give you this explanation.
In tune with the past

Does the past really matter?
Should we really bother
to dig up the fossils of lost civilizations?
Is the memory of distant facts
of any relevance to our life today?

Yes, it matters.
Yes, we should bother.
Yes, we should be
in tune with the past.

We know this
each time we feel the pride of knowing who we are.
Because in large measure we are what we were.
We are the sprouts
of roots sunk in the humus of a rich history.
We are the children and the heirs of our past.

The Syrian past reaches so very far in distant times
that it can teach the world the deeper meaning
of a millennial history.
And the Syrian present offers us a share
in its glorious heritage.

We come, strangers no more,
to share in turn what we have been privileged
to discover in the rich Syrian soil.
بالتناغم مع الماضي

هل الماضي حقاً مهم؟
هل واجب علينا عناة حفر مواقع الحضارات المفقودة؟
هل ذاكرة الحقائق البعيدة لها أهمية في حياتنا اليوم؟
نعم، الماضي مهم
نعم، يستحق العناء
نعم، ينبغي أن نكون في تناغم مع الماضي.
نحن نعرف ذلك في كل مرة نشعر بالفخر لمعرفة من نحن لأنّه إلى حد كبير نحن هم الذين كانوا في الماضي، نحن البراعم لجذور غرت في دبال من ماضي غني.
نحن الأبناء والورثة لماضينا.

الماضي السورى يصل حتى الآن إلى أزمنة بعيدة مكنته من تعليم العالم المعنى العميق لألفيات التاريخ.
والحاضر السورى يسمح لنا بمشاركته تراثه الغني.
نحن لم نعد نأتي كغرباء بعد الآن لتشارك بدورنا ما قد حظينا به لاكتشاف التراب السورى الغني.
Urkesh:
A new ancient Syrian civilization

New and ancient? – Yes!

We go back in time
to the beginning of civilization –
five and a half millennia ago.
That is as ancient
as the Sumerians.

But it is not Sumerian.
The distinctiveness of Urkesh
is that it hails from an altogether
different Wellspring:
the Hurrians.
A new urban civilization.

That is the great role
that Syria has played in history:
to imagine and
bring into existence
new formulas of social living
and political organization.

Urkesh, and our exhibit,
bring back to light
one glorious moment
of the long unfolding
of Syrian history.
This bronze lion was sculpted by a Hurrian craftsman more than four thousand years ago.

It was made at the behest of a king of Urkesh named Tish-atal.

The voice you hear is a modern reading of the ancient text.

That we may read the text that we may hear the voice – isn’t this the most eloquent proclamation of the value of archaeology, this amazing bridge across the gulf of time?

The photograph, like others in the Exhibit, is the work of Ken Garrett, a master photographer of the National Geographic Magazine.
Look at this courageous young man, standing on the mane of a live lion!

He was a prince, who lived 4000 years ago in Urkesh, an ancient Syrian city we want you to get to know.

And don’t you think the bronze lion looks alive as well?
The archaeology of experience
The archaeology of experience

How can we recapture experience once the lifeline of a continuous tradition has been cut by centuries of abandonment, once the witness of its monuments has been buried under the weight of its own collapse?

That is the archaeologists’ challenge.
The fascination of archaeology is that it brings us face to face with a distant past that is still vibrant with life.

A wall like this one is a simple wall no more when you learn that it was built almost fifty centuries ago, it remained in use for some fourteen hundred years, it served as a barrier in front of the higher world of the gods.

As archaeologists we expose the ruins, but behind them we seek the human experience which gave them meaning in the past and can give them meaning again for us today.
المتعة في الآثار
أنها تجلبنا
وجهًا لوجه مع ماضٍ بعيد
مازال مفعماً بالحياة.

جدارٍ كهذا
هو عبارة عن جدار بسيط لا غير
لكن أهميته تأتي عندما تعلم بأنه:
- بني تقريباً
منذ خمسين قرناً
- بقي يستخدم
قرابة ألف وأربعمئة عام
- وكان عبارة عن
 حاجز أمام عالم الآلهة الأعلى.

وكعلماء آثار
نكشف الآثار،
لكن وراء هذه الآثار نحن نسعى
إلى التجربة الإنسانية
والتي أعطتها معنى في الماضي
والتي تُعطيها معنى مرة أخرى
لنا اليوم.
The discovery of Urkesh is a prime example.

We did not even know the city had once existed.

We did not know that the bearers of its culture, the Hurrians, had Syria as their home at such a great remove in time.

With the images and texts that follow we want to introduce you to the story of this discovery.

We want to show you how we come to know that a wall like this one is a simple wall no more.

We want to have you share the awe the ancients sensed as they stood before it then, the awe we can still sense as we stand before it today.
اكتشاف أوركيش
هو مثال مهم.
لم نكن نعلم
حتى أن المدينة كانت قد وُجدت يوما.
لم نكن نعلم حتى
من هم حاملين هذه الثقافة،
الحوريين،
اختاروا سوريا كبلد لهم
لفترة طويلة من الوقت.
من خلال الصور والنصوص القادمة
نريد أن نقدم لكم
قصة هذا الاكتشاف.
نريد أن نُريكم
كيف توصلنا لمعرفة
أن جداراً كهذا
هو جدار بسيط لا أكثر.
نريد مشاركتكم الرهبة
الذي أحسمه القدماء
عندما وقفوا أمامها يومها
والرهبة التي مانزل نحن نشعر بها
عندما نقف أمامها الآن.
The prince you just met in the previous poster was standing on a lion, in front of his father.

Here is another prince, sitting on his mother’s lap, his nurse holding him by the hand. The star and the human headed bull are his symbols.

Where would you rather be – on a lion or with your mother?
The great ascent
الارتفاع العظيم

The great ascent

يقود هذا الدرج العظيم إلى قمة الهضبة العالية حيث يتواجد المعبد، والذي مُهدى لأب الآلهة الحورى- كوماربي.

A monumental staircase leads to the top of a high terrace where a Temple stood, dedicated to the Hurrian father of the gods – Kumarbi.

تسلق الدرجات لم يكن تجوال عادي، بل ارتفاع نحو القوة السامية للعالم الإلهي.

Walking up the steps was not a casual stroll, but an ascent towards the transcendent power of the divine world.
The vertical face of the wall seems like an impassable barrier: it blocks the view and the access to the Temple on top.

Thus it is all the more impressive to be able to climb the great staircase which bridges that very barrier.

Built around 2600 B.C., the staircase remained in constant use for 11 centuries!

It gave the Urkesh worshippers the feeling they could rise above the level of everyday life, and climb towards the divine world.
Almost five millennia since it was first built, the staircase looks as inviting to us as it did to the ancients.

The perception of spaces and volumes has not changed.

If you come to the site and actually climb these steps you are immersed in the same physical ambiance that once elicited the awed response of ancient Hurrians.

They also climbed – aiming to interact with the gods at the end of the great ascent.
The gods they worshipped represented the forces of nature experienced in the mountains.

The temple at the top was the house of Kumarbi, the god of the magma that erupts from the volcanoes.

The myths assign to him as his sons the god of the flowing lava and of the darting lightning – visible in ancient times as the lightnings are today.
Did you ever climb a staircase so steep and high that it seemed to discourage you from even trying?

You would have this feeling here. The best is to try for yourself!

Come and visit us in Mozan!
The mystery of the depths
One day in the excavations we came upon a large circular wall and our fist thought was – it is a well.

But as we continued downwards, it looked more and more like a place where people would come to do something.

It eventually became clear what this “something” was: the summoning of the spirits of the Netherworld.

The shaft was meant as a direct passage to the mystery of the depths.
Here is one of the most mysterious places of Urkesh, and of Hurrian religion.

“Mysterious” because it sought to bring humans face to face with the divinity. It is, however, a “mystery” we have deciphered!

In this dark and deep shaft, called abi in Hurrian, a medium would summon the spirits of the Netherworld. The dark shaft is thus like a passage that placed humans in direct contact with the divinity.

Such belief in a face-to-face confrontation with the gods is distinctive of Hurrian religion, and is in contrast with that of the Sumerians and the Akkadians. For them, the gods spoke through predictable patterns (such as the movements of the celestial bodies), but could never be encountered in the depths of a shaft like this one.
هنا المكان الأكثر غموضاً في أوركيش وفي الذين الحوري.  

- غامضٍ - لأنه يسعى إلى جلب الناس وجهًا لوجه مع ألوهيتهم.

إذا فهو – الغموض- الذي استطعنا حلًّ ألغازه.

في هذا البناء الدائري المظلم والعريق، والذي يُدعى الآبي في اللغة الحورية، كانت تتم عملية استدعاء أرواح العالم الآخر.

فهذا البناء المظلم هو الممر الذي يضع الناس في احتكاك مباشر مع ألوهيتهم.

ومعتقد كمعتقد الواجهة وجهًا لوجه مع الآلهة هو شيء مميز جداً في الدين الحوري، وكان ذلك على خلاف السومريون والأكاديين.

إذ بالنسبة لهم، كانت الآلهة تتكلم من خلال رموز للتنبؤ (كحركات الأجسام الفلكية)،

لكن كان من غير الممكن أن يتواجهوا معها في عمق كعمق هذا البناء.
The shaft is next to the Royal Palace (its walls are visible in the upper left).

It reaches deep below the surface (8 meters at present).

The stone lining gives it a cavernous appearance, clearly meant to evoke the Netherworld itself.
Access to the shaft was through a steep and narrow portal – a symbolic blockage against unwanted excursion from the depths.
If you are afraid of ghosts, you should not enter this building when you come to visit us in Mozan...

But if you do, we guarantee you will be impressed.

It is like entering a cave, but one that was built thousands of years ago — just to provide an opening for the ghosts to come and speak to us...
The seat of power
The seat of power

The king lived here, and from here he ruled.
The people identified with him as with the one who made their communal living manageable and efficient.
Politics is the exercise of power at the top, but also a force that holds the community together.
Father and mother, with their two children. A happy domestic scene? Not really! It is a political manifesto.

The queen is one of many wives if the king, and she wants to affirm that it is her son who will succeed his father on the throne.

This is proclaimed in her seal which depicts a daily scene from the Palace. Like a poster today, it would have been seen by all in the Palace service.

الأم والأب، مع أطفالهم. مشهد عائلي سعيد، ولكن ليس بالضرورة! إذ يبدو أنه يُلمِّح إلى بلاغ سياسي. فإن الملكة واحدة من الزوجات الكثيرات لدى الملك، وهي تريد أن تؤكد أن ابنها هو الذي سوف يخلف أباه على العرش. وصرحت هذا على ختمها الذي يُصوِّر المشاهد اليومية من القصر. مثل الملصق اليوم، كان سيراه جميع الناس الذين يخدمون في القصر.
Tupkish –
this is the name of the king
who built the palace.

His name is on the seal
of his wife, reconstructed
from many small fragments
on the page to the left.
There we could not find
a perfect fit for his head.

But we think we found it
in this other fragment.
It is a beautiful portrait
of the man
to whom we owe
this great architectural
accomplishment,
undertaken about 2250 B.C.
The Palace was built around 2250 B.C. following a sophisticated architectural plan.

The service wing was completely excavated. It consists of several sectors, for some of which we can identify the original function.

Curiously, it was used as the royal residence of king Tupkish for only one generation!
Since the start, we protected the mudbrick walls with shelters designed to fit individually each wall.

After almost twenty years, the walls are preserved in perfect shape, in spite of rain and wind - and even snow!
Remember the young man standing on the mane of a lion?

Well, he was the son of the king who built the Palace.

He had his own seal (above, right).

Here, too, there is a lion, fighting with a hero.
Life in the Palace

الحياة في القصر
Life in the Palace

The naturalism that is typical of Urkesh art produced a vast repertoire of vignettes from everyday life – the king and the queen toasting each other, a kitchen maid churning butter, a singer accompanying a lyre player, a baby lamb suckling, a woman making pots.

The ruins are suddenly populated as they were in ancient times.
In the seal on the left, queen Uqnitum is shown with a piglet as a filler motif below the inscription. (Given the role of the piglets in the ceremonies of the abi, could this seal refer to the Hurrian necromantic rituals?)

The other seal is that of Tar’am-Agade, the daughter of the great king of Akkad, Naram-Sin. It has the heraldic motif typical of the royal house of Akkad. In Urkesh, she used her seal to lock the doors of the important rooms of the Palace.

We see from such evidence what a major role women played in Urkesh.
Cups for a royal toast!

The most frequent motif on the seals is a toast, and the most frequent ceramic vessel is the conical cup used in those toasts.

It is almost like seeing a video clip that uses the very vessels we find in the excavations!
When thinking of life in a Palace you may perhaps imagine gold treasures and armed guards.

We did not find much evidence for either at Urkesh – certainly not because her kings were poor and unprotected, but because the Palace was not destroyed!

The golden hair buckles, the fork and the spearhead are among the few pieces that must have been dropped by accident and then forgotten.
Hurrian texts tell us that snakes were used in divinatory rites to predict events from their movements in water.

This vessel may have been used in the Palace for just such purpose. And if so, we can call it by its Hurrian name: *altanni*. 
In the Palace we have found many animal figurines.

Were they toys for the royal children?

The sheep has holes for wheel axles, and a hole in front from which it could be pulled.

Would you enjoy playing with it?
كيف نستطيع أن نعلم

How can we tell
How can we tell

We bend down carefully to retrieve history from the soil.

In isolation, even statues and gold cannot tell the story.

For that, you need to see how each piece, however small, fits together with everything else.

This is what archaeology is all about.
The overhead shades shelter us from the heat but even more from the glare of the sun. That is how we can find even the smallest of clay sealings!
Patience is the name of the game.

With fragments no bigger than a thumbnail, and no different than the dirt in which they are embedded, you must work the way a dentist would work on your teeth.

It is not by chance we use his tools...
What we leave in the ground is as important as what we take away.

This is a cut we made in front of the monumental Temple Terrace. The section reads like a book – when you study the ceramics.

A long series of floors came to rest against the face of the wall, all in one century. Just below, the floors are a millennium earlier!
We have designed special tools to help us on the excavations.

Here you see an encased conveyor belt to evacuate the dirt, and a daring ladder for taking pictures…
Do you see the box hanging in mid air? It is a camera attached to a kite, with which we take pictures from the sky...

هل ترى العلبة المعلقة في منتصف الهواء؟ هي عبارة عن كاميرا مُتصلة ببطائرة، والتي من خلالها نأخذ صور من السماء...
Syria, pivot of civilizations
Syria, pivot of civilizations

Syria is often referred to as a crossroads of civilizations. But it was much more than that. It was a pivot around which civilization turned.

How? Because of the innumerable innovation in culture and in social living which deeply impacted the people around her.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3500 B.C.</td>
<td>By about this time, Urkesh is already a large religious center, with a Temple Terrace that rose like a hill, some twenty meters above the level of the plain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500 B.C.</td>
<td>The huge Temple Terrace of Urkesh we see nowadays is built at this time above the earlier one. A large city wall encircles a city of about 130 hectares.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2250 B.C.</td>
<td>King Tupkish builds the large Royal Palace. His dynasty is allied with Akkad, and his successor marries the daughter of Naram-Sin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800 B.C.</td>
<td>During this period, the settlement shrinks, but Urkesh retains a sense of independence vis-à-vis the regional power of Zimri-Lim of Mari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400 B.C.</td>
<td>Urkesh is by now a small sanctuary, still exclusively Hurrian in nature. Between 1300 and 1200, it is abandoned at the same time that the Hurrians disappear from history.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Tell Brak, ancient Nagar, is another important center in this period.
- Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, reaches the peak of power.
- The kings of Akkad conquer most of Syria, but not Urkesh.
- Tell Hariri, ancient Mari, controls most of the Jezirah.
- The kingdom of Mittani extends from the Jezirah to the Mediterranean sea.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>سنة ق.م.</th>
<th>تفصيل</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3500</td>
<td>تل براك، ناغار القديمة، هو مركز آخر مهم في هذه الفترة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500</td>
<td>تل مرديخ، إيبلا القديمة، وصلت إلى أوج القوة. استولى ملوك آكاد على معظم سوريا، ما عدا أوركيش. سيطرة تل الحرير، ماري، على معظم منطقة الجزيرة.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2250</td>
<td>كانت أوركيش مركز ديني كبير، مع مصطبة المعبد المرتفعة كهضبة، تقريباً 20 متر فوق مستوى السهل.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>مصطبة المعبد الكبير في أوركيش التي نراها اليوم كانت قد بنى فوق واحدة أقدم. جدار المدينة الضخم يطوق المدينة على طول 130 هكتار.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>الملك توبكيش يبني القصر الملكي الضخم. سلالته الحاكمة متحالفة مع آكاد، وزواج خليفته من ابنة نارام-سين.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

خلال هذه الفترة، المقاطعة تقلصت، لكن بقيت أوركيش إلى حد ما مستقلة في وجه سلطة زيمري ليم ملك ماري الإقليمية. كانت أوركيش بهذا الوقت عبارة عن حرم، وكانت ما تزال تتمتع بطبيعتها الحورية. أما بين 1300 و 1200، فقد هجرت وهذا كان الوقت نفسه الذي اختفى فيه الحواريين من التاريخ.
The Hurrians were an elusive but influential population of ancient Syria.

Why elusive? They were few in number and we know little about them.

It is only at Urkesh that we have discovered a Hurrian city back at the very dawn of history.

The city controlled the mountain hinterland to the north from where the copper ore came.

Urkesh held sway in those mountains because of its ethnic ties with the populations there more than any administrative mechanism.

This was a new pattern of political organization, one of many innovative experiments that distinguished Syria throughout its history.

كان الحوريون غامضين مع أنهم شعب ذي سلطة وتأثير في سوريا القديمة.

لماذا هم بعيدو المنال؟ لأنهم كانوا قللة بالعدد ولأنا نعلم القليل عنهم.

إنه فقط بأوركيش حيث اكتشفنا مدينة حورية تعود إلى فجر التاريخ.

سيطرت المدينة على جبال الموارد الطبيعية إلى الشمال من حيث أتى معدن النحاس.

احتفظت أوركيش بنفوذ لها في الجبال وذلك بسبب الصلات العرقية التي تربطها مع السكان هناك، أكثر من أن تكون آليات إدارية.

كان هذا نمط جديد من التنظيم السياسي، واحدة من التجارب العديدة المبتكرة التي ميّزت سوريا عبر تاريخها.
An astounding aspect of the archaeology of ancient Urkesh is the extraordinary cultural continuity of its religious structures.

Both the Temple Terrace and the Passage to the Netherworld remained in use, with hardly a change, for more than a thousand years.

As for the Temple Terrace, it is likely that it lasted for at least 22 centuries! What is even more astonishing, is that this was a vast open area, never disturbed with even the smallest of intrusive structures.

Given the conservative tendency of religious traditions, we conclude that both the Temple and the Passage reflect an urban Hurrian presence at Urkesh since the very beginning of history.
When a king of Akkad named Naram-Sin unified this large territory under his control, he claimed the title of “King of the Four River Banks.” And, as you know, a very long portion of the Euphrates is in Syria.

But Urkesh retained her autonomy. Why? Because the mother of the prince you met earlier was from the conqueror’s family!
The power of the word
The power of the word

Writing opens the door to ancient consciousness.

It allows us to meet face to face, as it were, those who lived thousands of years ago.

The cuneiform texts on these sealings make it possible for us to say, once again, the forgotten name of our site – Urkesh.
"Sound of silence" is the title of a famous American song by Simon and Garfunkel.

"Hello darkness, my old friend" is how it begins.

The archaeologist’s old friend is the darkness of the remote past.

We pierce this darkness by deciphering its code, including the music.

The music in background is a Hurrian song whose tune was written down in another great Syrian city, Ugarit, at the time of the end of Urkesh.

The score is rendered with numbers that correspond to a string on a lyre. Each set of numbers defines a scale, and the lyrics match in turn these sets of numbers.

It is the first known musical score.

Musical interpretation by Marcelle Duschesne-Guillemin
The other “sound of silence” you hear is from the tablet in which king Tish-atal of Urkesh relates the building of our great temple. (It was found long before our excavations, and is now in the Louvre.)

The voice you hear is that of Gernot Wilhelm, one of the foremost experts of Hurrian, who lends his voice to our Urkesh king.

Is it not a marvel that archaeology can so pierce the darkness and recapture, literally, the ancients’ hidden voice?
Like a diamond refracting light, the smallest written line can explode our knowledge.

The first sealing reads:  
*Uqnitum / wife of / Tupkish*

And the second:  
*Of Urkesh / the king, / Tupkish.*

We can read the cuneiform.

But just as important, we can read the setting in which the texts were encased.  
It is because we found them on the Palace floor that the Palace itself suddenly comes to life.

Wrested from its context, orphan of archaeology, even the most eloquent text is half as mute.
The majority of cuneiform texts is not about literature, music or politics. It is about everyday life, especially the economic concerns.

Do you see the little docket on the left? It has a hole for a string, and it records a shipment of grapes. We have now rejoined it to an analogous shipment...

The tablet on the right records the shipment of copper, which would have been used to produce a weapon or an artifact like the one shown.
At the time of Urkesh, children were already going to school.

One of them had been studying Sumerian. He was memorizing a list of words, learning at the same time to write cuneiform (do you see how he practiced on the back of the tablet?)

On the way home, the tablet broke in three pieces, and he left them there for us to find 42 centuries later...
The shape of fantasy
The shape of fantasy

The artists of Urkesh experimented with a variety of styles, and in so doing they gave expression to new perceptions of reality.

As we retrace their steps, we can identify with their successful effort at projecting their vision, their fantasy.
The bearded head
(in a masterly photograph, right, by Ken Garrett)
is one of the few examples of sculpture in the round from Urkesh.

The stone stele above
(front and back are shown) was being carved at a local workshop in Urkesh when it broke and was left unfinished.

It is a daring experiment in rendering movement.
The plowman pushes his tool in a downward thrust, the animals amble around in a circle.
The lion of Tish-atal in the Metropolitan, which serves as our logo, embodies a remarkable combination of realism and movement.

The sharp twist in his upper body is altogether different from its twin in the Louvre. This exhibits a static and single frontal axis, in contrast with the dynamic double frontality of the Met lion.
The highlighting of certain somatic traits leads to highly stylized renderings of the human and animal figures, with interesting expressionistic effects.
The seal of Tar’am-Agade uses the standard motif of the royal house of Akkad: a rampant buffalo being subdued by a hero.

Even though framing an heraldic pose, the seal reproduces realistically the scene where a buffalo is seen in actual combat.
Urkesh artists were keen observers of nature, and they rendered what they saw with great accuracy.

You have seen in an earlier panel a lion in just this pose (remember the prince standing on the mane?)

Now you understand. The lion was not roaring and threatening. He was rather yawning after having eaten! That is why the prince could safely treat him as a pet...
Encounters
Encounters

We meet across the centuries.
And we meet across distant lands.

From their resting place
beneath the ground,
the ancients rise to meet us,
queens and commoners,
their faces cast in clay and stone.

The vibrant Syria of today
meets us as well,
from its First Lady
to our local friends, the workmen.
The great American actor Martin Sheen is, truly, a member of our team.

Enamored of archaeology and of Syria, we are planning a film on Urkesh.

The theme is that of this exhibit: how to appropriate and make ours the experience of our ancient Syrian forebears.
We come from Syria and from distant lands to jointly work on a common goal. We seek, together, new clues to a past we share.

"Our home is your home" is the standard Syrian greeting.

And we feel embolden to hear its echo: "Our history is your history."
When you first see human faces come out of the ground, your eyes instinctively lock with their eyes. They seem at times as astonished at seeing us as we are at seeing them – savoring this unexpected, renewed human contact!
An extensive program of site presentation offers an in depth look at ancient Urkesh, second to none in Syria.

The site reads like a book and we have many readers!

Our primary audience are the local inhabitants who come eagerly to learn about those ancient Syrians who inhabited the territory of which they are the guardians today.
In Mozan, you can meet the First Lady of this great country of yours, the Syria of today, and another First Lady from Syrian Urkesh...

They are as if looking at each other, across a gap of thousands of years.

You, too, can look across the barrier of time and learn to feel at home even in the Syria of yesteryear!