

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

“I’m again not doing well . . .”

Giorgio Buccellati¹ and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati²

We knew Gregory Areshian’s strength of character, and we knew as well his abiding commitment to scholarship. It was all encased in a very gentle manner, without any display. But it was deep and enduring. This strength, and this gentleness, came to life for us during what turned out to be the final correspondence we had with him.³ As we look back, it is as if we were able to see him, in his hospital bed. The email messages from this bed became progressively more poignant, and in retrospect we read in them the darkening that was gathering around him. Until the last one: “I’m again not doing well...” He was not well indeed. For that was his last email message to us.

Gregory was completing his work on the publication of the figurines from Terqa, Syria. We had excavated the site in the 1970s and 1980s, and the small finds were awaiting publication. Knowing of his interest in probing the deeper layers of meaning even in the most minute of artifacts, we had asked him if he would like to publish them. He took up the challenge immediately, and he worked on them assiduously. During a visit he paid to us at our new excavations in Tell

Mozaan, also in Syria, we arranged for him to go the museum in Der ez-Zor where the figurines were kept. After that, he continued with his research on and off, and when we had to close the volume, he committed himself to this task. It turned out to be a more tragic end than any of us ever suspected.

By June 2020 he had finished everything. He only needed to sort for the typesetter the individual files, the drawings he had produced and gathered on collective pages. This he started doing right away, and then came the first email message from the hospital:

July 16

It seems that there is some kind of force preventing me from meeting the deadlines nowadays. I contracted Covid-19 and started having acute symptoms (including high fever and incipient signs of pneumonia) since last Thursday evening. Now I’m hospitalized for the third day, and, unfortunately, have a very poor wi-fi connection. So, I must apologize for the inconvenience that my situation is causing, but with this email I start sending my work on Terqa done in the last 10 days in relatively small portions, determined by the capability of my wi-fi connection. Please see attachments.

Stay safe,

Three more messages on the same day brought us three additional batches of drawings. They were perfect, and though we were concerned about the ominous term *Covid-19*, we did not become too alarmed. We were, without knowing it, being comforted by his strength and gentleness.

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3. See also the obituary of Gregory Areshian elsewhere in this issue.



Figure 1. Gregory Areshian in Terqa, Syria.

July 17

I'm so sorry, I had a very hard day with fever up to 103°F. Otherwise, I would have sent you more batches. Please find attached Batch 5.

Again, this message was followed by one additional batch. It was a struggle, we could tell, but it was all so professional that we attributed the slowness to the Wi-Fi, as he was telling us. We insisted, in our return message, that he should not worry, that we could send the finished drawings to the typesetter after he got better, that he should keep his strength.

July 21

I'm again not doing well, still on oxygen and ridiculous doses of intravenous medications. I really can't work in bed on the computer for more than 20 minutes per day, because I'm very weak and losing concentration. But I want to send you everything ASAP because it's all completed. Please find attached Batch 7.

On the same day, two more batches followed. The task was practically all complete. He had indeed kept his strength. But not for himself. This was to be his very last email.

* * *

On the occasion of his visit to the museum in Der ez-Zor, where he had gone to see the figurines from Terqa, he took a side trip to Ashara, the site of ancient Terqa. Both moments were typical of him: to study an item autoptically and to become familiar with its original environment. When corresponding a few weeks before he was taken to the hospital, in an email message dated May 28, 2020, he attached photographs of his visit to the site. Here is the message that accompanied them:

As a sweet memory, I'm also attaching the photo of the tell of Terqa taken when, thanks to you, I had the chance of visiting Terqa.

It was his gentleness coming through once again. We share the image, and all it stands for, with you.

BACKDIRT

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA
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Archaeology and Pandemics



BACKDIRT

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FRONT COVER: Empty corridors of the Cotsen Institute with directions for one-way traffic and a hand sanitizer dispenser in place. (Photograph by Vanessa Muros)

BACK COVER: Symbols of life in 2020: face masks and meetings through Zoom. (Screenshot by Matei Tichindelean)

ABOVE: Sonia Zarrillo, postdoctoral fellow at the Cotsen Institute, presents a lecture for the Andean Working Group: “New Approaches to Tracing Cacao’s Dispersal from the Amazon Basin,” January 23, 2020.

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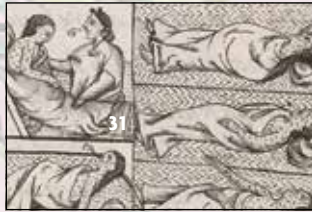
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