

Laboratory Life

Distancing: One-on-One Heritage Archaeology across Three Continents

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Distancing is a word we hear today the world over. But archaeologists have been practicing distancing for a long time. And overcoming it. It is a chronological distance. We look into a distant past and make it our own. We break the barrier of time.

The Urkesh project in northeastern Syria has been at the forefront of this effort at bridging the distance. Excavations are of course the first step: that is when the buried past is uncovered and brought back to life. But what is life after the excavations? Here too we have been at the vanguard, in three ways. First, site conservation. The site was alive once and it must be kept from dying once its structures are brought back to light, dying through neglect or worse. Conservation is something we have done consistently throughout the 25 years of excavation, and we kept doing it during the 10 years of war. Thus the site remains in excellent shape today, ready for visitors (Figure 1).

Our second duty is to translate this life into a monument of another sort: a conceptual monument. It is the moment of *publication*. A site dies another death if it is not properly published. When it is, it survives in a different incarnation, one that scholars can visit. We have pioneered a dual publication program, one where the new digital embodiment is as rich or richer than the traditional renderings on paper.

Finally, the site, conserved and published, has to be alive with visitors. Site presentation has been another hallmark of our project through the years, and this, too we have maintained throughout the war. It is because of this that a regular stream of visitors contin-



Figure 1. A visit of youngsters to Urkesh led by Amer Ahmad.

ues coming to the site. Are these images not a moving testimony to how alive the Urkesh of yesteryear still is, with the full life of today? What better evidence of how we can effectively bridge the distance in time? Five millennia are here collapsed into a new symbiotic interaction.

THE PROGRAM

We have now launched a special new program: the Urkesh One-on-One Project. It bridges the distance in space as well as time, with links across the continents. And it does so by relying on the young. Here is how it works.

First, the youngsters go through a formation stage, with the help of tutors. Figure 2 shows them in a session in June 2020. Three Syrian youngsters from Qamishli, a city near Urkesh, discuss their plan with three other Syrians—Hiba Qassar, the program director in Florence, Italy; Amer Ahmad, our resident archaeologist at Urkesh; and Carine Tamamian, a UCLA undergraduate student—who advise them with regard to content and form.

The students then prepare by going through assigned readings and by visiting the site. They are thus ready to interpret it and its history with words and images. At this point, each one presents his or her

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Figure 2. A WhatsApp screenshot of a One-on-One meeting of June 23, 2020. Top left: Amer Ahmad, Urkesh supervisor (Qamishli, Syria); top right: Carine Tamamian, Urkesh supervisor (UCLA); middle left: Judy Fendi, Urkesh youngster (Qamishli); middle right: Hiro al-Ali, Urkesh youngster (Qamishli); bottom left: Lana Hussain, Urkesh youngster (Qamishli); bottom right: Hiba Qassar, program director (Florence, Italy).

discovery, individually, to a youngster who lives in a completely different cultural setting. At the same time, non-Urkesh youngsters go through a similar process and respond with their own presentations about an archaeological monument in their country, also under the supervision of a young archaeologist from their country. Sometimes they choose a cultural icon, even if not properly archaeological in nature.

Figure 3 shows a slide from a presentation given by a young Syrian man from Qamishli to a young Greek woman from Corinth in Greece. The small

The project fosters shared identity.

images in the upper right of Figure 3 show the participants in this session. Figures 4 and 5 show us a similar encounter, with the participants being in Corinth, Rome, and Florence, and of course Urkesh.

Next we encourage participants to continue the initial contact and develop a sustained conversation. We continue to provide supervision, so there remains a substantive dimension to the interaction. They do this on an individual basis, talking with one another across borders with the use of online connectivity, primarily Skype and WhatsApp.

In the summer of 2020 we did a test run, with a total of 18 youngsters involved, eight from Urkesh, eight from Corinth, and two from a small city in northern Italy, Domodossola. They were all middle school age, but their participation was not tied to the school setting: it was all done on a personal basis. We are now expanding the program to include young people from other places, not only in Syria (Sweda) but also in China (Xi'an).

The roster of project tutors is impressive. The director of the project, Hiba Qassar, hails from Qamishli and is on the staff of the Urkesh archaeology project; she now lives in Florence. The tutor in Greece is Eleni Gizas, the Steinmetz Family Foundation Museum Fellow of the Corinth Excavations. Laura Sartor is in Domodossola; Arwa Kharobi in Bournemouth in the United Kingdom; and Samer Abdelghafour is in Rome. We also have several UCLA graduate and undergraduate students: Carine Tamamian, Arpine Lilinyan, and Ronida Cheko are Syrian; Amr Shahat and Maryan Ragheb are Egyptian. Our new tutors are Murhaf Karmoushi in Sweda and Qin Yu in Xi'an.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The cyberspace is thus being populated by figures from ancient Urkesh, brought to life by their young compatriots of today. You might enjoy reading some of their comments as they reflect on their experiences (we provide them here as we received them):

Hiro: When I visited Urkesh I felt like visiting a different world. Strange and a beautiful one. I felt the contrast between the present we are living in

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and the past. It helped me to imagine *how can life be in a different Syrian reality*. Urkesh taught me a lot of things: It taught me that my city contains very wonderful things and we overlooked them, and I didn't know their importance and greatness. *I'm very proud that these monuments were built in the same region I was born in*, and when I look at it, *I feel that I'm in a war between the past and the present*. Urkesh introduced me to the most beautiful people, and they taught me a lot about the beauty of life, as if they are giving me a box of knowledge, as I realized, even if there are millions of kilometers between us, we still feel and understand each other. *I feel that one of the goals of these ruins is to connect the world from different . . . nationalities*. Thank you all for this opportunity to tell everyone that *there is someone who loves you in Syria*.

Judy: Learning about the Abi was interesting but visiting it was an amazing experience. *I thought of all the ancients who were surrounded by the same walls we are surrounded by. I invite you to visit it as soon as the war is over. It's worth it.*

Akkash: It was very important for me to learn about ancient Urkesh because it adds a lot to my culture, and I could understand the history of something I am not familiar with, which inspired me to write a story about it.

Steve: I have learned that *these ruins are Syrian ruins which made me proud*, since there is no similar site in any other place on earth.

Layan: *My self-confidence increased* when speaking in other languages, as well as exploring new archaeological sites.

And here are some comments from their Italian counterparts:

Lucrezia: Imagine that *you can see your best dreams with open eyes*. It touches me deeply and makes me believe more in myself.

Giulia: I studied about this civilization in school books, but Hiro's voice and her presentation made these topics more alive and real. It gave me a lot of pride to *introduce other guys like me to the Italian*

culture. I learned to relate to a foreign girl, share aspects of her life as a girl, and to be interested in a very different culture than mine. *I learned to proudly tell others about my country*.

Two of our tutors also shared their feelings about the project within the context of their report on the work done. We can give only brief excerpts here. The first is from Samer Abdelghafour, a long-standing member of the Urkesh staff, who has worked at length on various UNESCO projects and took on this project as a personal challenge:

As someone who lived in Syria before the conflict, I had a hard time imagining how our Iraqi neighbours would live through the long years of war. *Imagining war is never equivalent to living it. . . .* The unknown becomes a companion to one's everyday thoughts, and the certainty disappears with one exception—that war is relentless.

As the project aims precisely at young middle school students, it deals with *a generation moved from crawling to walking* to find itself living the daily life of war or its consequences.

This pride is a feeling that is generated within them, as a result of their interaction with the site spatially and temporally, and it is sometimes difficult to describe. Through the program they interpret the site and its history for youngsters in Greece.

In light of the isolation that surrounds the country, this project comes to form a unique platform without any competitor, that takes upon itself the role of an incubator for these young people. *It places them at the beginning of the intellectual bridge that leads to the other side of the world, which is Greece in this case.*

The project comes at *a difficult time for a country that has been torn apart, to teach this new generation the meaning of partnership and coexistence*. It opens their eyes to see that *there are many things that can be shared with others without owning them*.

The second excerpt comes from Amr Shahat, an Egyptian graduate student in Archaeology at UCLA:

[The project] fosters . . . shared identity, especially among youngsters who face a lot of psychological and mental problems as they say "we do not know who we are." The sense of shared identity as

One result of the project is finding points of relevance.

learned from this project *transcends the different stereotypes that have been used by different forces nowadays under the war to split the communities in Syria and fuel more wars.*

While working with the student to translate his knowledge from Arabic into English, I realized that we need to work on more activities to encourage the student [to] share their personal connections; it is already there. We just have to make it salient and expressive in the other language. One interesting result of the project is *finding points of relevance of the history of the site to modern times, which is something important for identity perception and presentation.*

The students are not only the long-term sustainable power to preserve the site, but also the *cultural ambassadors who bring this knowledge to the international community* by attempting to present their knowledge and personal connection of the site with other students in other parts of the world. One of the most significant results of the community archaeology efforts in Tell Mozan is the *protection of the site from ISIS, war activities and looting.* While *reflecting on what happened to Egypt due to the lack of similar projects targeting school young students following the revolution,* the local communities have attacked the museum and destroyed the monuments at the city of El Menya as a stance against the government. If we do not maintain *educational programs to maintain and nourish the multi-faceted relevance of the site with its community,* both the community and the site may fall victims to the current politics and war in the region.

The benefits of the educational program go from regional to international benefit, by educating students on cases of climate change, and food and water sustainability. I shared with him [Steve, an Urkesh youngster] what is *my focus in archaeology in paleoethnobotany* and what this means in simple Arabic terms. He reflected *back to me by mentioning that the archaeological site in Tell Mozan yielded the discovery of kitchen areas which ignited important discussion with the student on the environmental history of the site,* the drought and lack of water that led to the abandonment of the site around 1300 BCE, and the relevance to modern-



Figure 3. A Skype screenshot of a One-on-One meeting of September 9, 2020, showing a slide about Urkesh made by Akkash Joseph.



Figure 4. A Skype screenshot of a One-on-One meeting of September 16, 2020. Top left: Hiba Qassar, program director (Florence, Italy); top right: Sotiris Mantas, Corinth youngster (Corinth, Greece); bottom left: Judy Fendi, Urkesh youngster (Qamishli, Syria); bottom right: Eleni Gizas, Corinth supervisor.

day issues of climate change as related to agriculture, food and water sustainability. . . . Discussing the kitchen and bathroom area of the palace from a food and water systems sustainability [standpoint] makes the preservation of the archaeological sites and community engagement *a powerful tool to preserve this deep-time knowledge and create points of inspiration for next generations to tackle large-scale problems in this region and beyond.*

The focus on children and youngsters in the Urkesh archaeology program is of particular significance as *the forces of war involve children in looting all over the regions in the Middle East.* Youngsters are [an] important focus of this program. Considering that looting activities mostly victimize children, *the program enriches and is enriched by children as the future stakeholders of*

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the sites and the transmitter of its knowledge. . . . In other words, this time of war has made the lives of the community and the lives of the archaeological sites deeply interlinked. . . . This sustainable community archaeology program as practiced by the Urkesh project makes a paradigm shift in archaeology tailored and suitable to Syria and the larger region in the Middle East rooted in the past and relevant to the present. *It is more than a case study, it is a paradigm shift to the archaeology of the ancient near East transferrable to other regions facing similar crises in site preservation, looting as we see in Egypt, Iraq and other regions where either revolution or wars have dismantled the archaeological sites and the local communities as well.*

To finish, we give in full the most touching witness as to the impact of the project, that of Amer Ahmad, our staff archaeologist, who has been our lifeline to the site. He tells us how Urkesh has become a lifeline for him:

When I finished high school and I was on the verge of entering the university, aside from my desire to study archeology I was always trying to move away from any field that could make me teach students in the future. For two years I have been working on a project that depends on young students, and contact with them was the basis of my work in the project. In the beginning, I was afraid that I could not communicate ideas to young people because I did not like teaching at all. From the second meeting with them, *I began to feel that my mind was changing towards the innocence of childhood.* I saw the enthusiasm they have. Though young children do not have any idea about the heritage and antiquities, they are trying as much as possible to prove themselves. Some of them were not very proficient in English. They were struggling to show all their English words they had mastered. I saw in them seriousness and interest and things that I did not expect to discover in children of their age. What surprised me most was that girl who was speaking about Urkesh in three languages without hesitation or confusion. All this made me

Imagining war is never equivalent to living it.

think more seriously, as everything I mentioned played a role in changing my viewpoint towards teaching, *as long as I have students who possess all these qualities also they have affected even on my family life.* I started thinking, for example, why won't my young son not have these qualities in the future? I started giving him more attention in order to give him this determination. After my first and second experience in this project, *I now finally feel as if I have lost something that I may never get a second time because I will probably not meet these students who were in constant contact with me and who are ready to give their best. They have become interested in heritage despite their young age. Some of them were even insisting to their family that they go to Tell Mozan (Urkesh). Urkesh was the only city that tried hard to open up prospects for them to communicate with the world and made them aware of the customs, heritage, and culture of foreign countries.* Perhaps it was the first time for them when they heard about it, and they were in contact with their counterparts from those countries. Perhaps it made them forget the pain of the war years of their lifetime. They were eager for every interview we conducted via Skype, and each of them tried to highlight everything he/she has in a spontaneous way to show the extent of his/her mental abilities and his/her ideas, things that made even their families show all kindness towards this project. In fact, *I can't imagine that one day we will lose projects like this, as it has shown children that they have talents that may not have been discovered in them even by their families.* Some of them are seriously thinking to be involved in the archeology field in the future. All of them have communicated with children of their age from countries that they never expected to communicate with, such as Italy and Greece. They had only heard the names of these countries. I hope that initiatives like [this] will never stop. *Initiatives which gave children confidence that there are people outside the border of their country who support their ideas and care about them and assure them that they are not alone despite everything that happened in their country Syria.*

IMPACT AND ASSESSMENT

The One-on-One Project is a new way to discover heritage. Local heritage is being shared by the young Urkesh inheritors on a global and yet personal basis. We had done this work previously at the level of the classroom.³ The Covid-19 pandemic urged us to change the model to a one-on-one basis, and the fact that we started in summer, when school was out of session, added another incentive. Even vacation time was affected by the novel situation. Thus the project, instead of interfering with other fun events, added a measure of interest. The Italian name for the project is evocative: *a quattr'occhi*: “in a four-eyes mode.” That more intimate four-eyes setting turned out to be a godsend. We crafted it carefully, so it would not be just a pen pal type of arrangement. Worthwhile though that is, our aim was to provide substance to the interaction. The very fact of selecting the topic for the presentation, and then articulating it in an organic way, entails critical judgment. But sharing it with another youngster of the same age, yet coming from a completely different cultural background, provides the greatest incentive for this reflection. If it matters to me, how can I convey this feeling to another? And when I compare my story with theirs, how do I evaluate the relative merits?

We have at our disposal exceptional communication tools, which are broadly available at no additional cost. What matters then is not the technological but the human infrastructure. Technology has its own fascination and can lead us to where it wants, whereas we must harness it with a clear awareness of which defined goals it may serve. In a small way, our project does that. We were very mindful, in designing the project, that we did not want it to be just an opportunity for social contact, in a pen pal mode. We remain solidly anchored to the archaeological dimension because we see a deeper value in archaeology than we were accustomed to. It is an aspect we are developing on the theoretical side of our project.

What is cultural heritage? Going back to the beginning of this article, how do we help the youngsters in Urkesh bridge the millennial distance in time? How do we help them bridge the “million-kilometer”

3. See Giorgio Buccellati, “A Children’s Hermeneutics,” *Backdirt* 2018, pp. 32–37.



Figure 5. A Skype screenshot of a One-on-One meeting of September 16, 2020, showing a slide about Corinth made by Sotiris Mantas.

(as Hiro put it) distance in space when they talk with their counterparts in Italy, Greece, or China? It seemed a daunting task. But it was not. The youngsters resolved it for us. Values emerge of their own accord, through their own inner force. And what we are learning is that cultural heritage is not a thing. It is a value that speaks through things. To paraphrase Samer: we share it because we do not own it in a possessive mode. We have helped the youngsters visualize their past: and this visualization adds immeasurably to our own competence. We invent the past in the etymological sense of the term: we discover it; we do not fictionalize it. And to see how this happens with the young ones has been a great lesson for us: they respond to a reality precisely because it is real. We are learning more and more that to convey meaning in archaeology (as perhaps in everything else) does not mean to water down a complexity but rather to let the complexity emerge in its wholeness and speak with its own immediacy. In the process, this very complexity of a site we knew so well has spoken to us with a new voice. That of its young inheritors.

If you wish to follow the progress of the project and to see in greater detail its various aspects, please visit <https://www.avasa.it/EN/>.

BACKDIRT

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA
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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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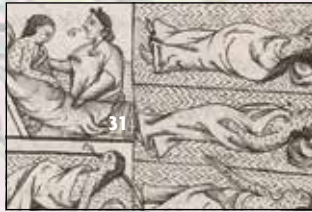
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