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on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

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Plenary Sessions,
Township and Villages,
High and Low
– The Minor Arts for the Elite and for the Populace

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Cover illustration: Impression of a third millennium BC cylinder seal from Tell Arbid in Syria combined with the depiction of a mermaid – a motif from Warsaw's coat of arms. Designed by Łukasz Rutkowski.

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DIACHRONIC DEVELOPMENTS AT THE CENTRAL MONUMENTAL COMPLEX OF ANCIENT URKESH (TELL MOZAN)

FEDERICO BUCCELLATI¹

ABSTRACT

What evidence can the structures within the monumental complex at Urkesh tell us about the relationship between the urban and the rural in the 4th and 3rd millennia? The construction of the AP Palace shows that a choice was made to see and be seen by a part of the extra-urban environment, while the raised Temple Terrace became a landmark for the region. Additionally, the seal impressions found within the AP Palace give us evidence of the administrative ties between the Palace and the extra-urban resources it controlled.

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of this session is the relationship between urban centers and the townships and villages which make up their hinterland. The twenty-five years of excavations at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, have laid the foundation for research on the study of the relationship of the urban center and its hinterland through extensive excavations on the High Mound and the Outer City. To date, no excavations have been carried out at nearby tells where one would expect to find the towns and villages which would have been associated with ancient Urkesh, although several of these have been identified and plans (now, unfortunately, on hold) to explore this hinterland are in the works.² Thus one might ask: what can be said about the relationship between urban and rural through only the evidence present from the urban context?

Actually, quite a bit. The data from Tell Mozan allows us to suggest three avenues (by no means the only ones, however) of research pursuant to the question of the city's relationship to its rural hinterland. First, the visual tie, which can be seen in the architectural choices made in building the AP Palace; second, the placement of the Temple Terrace; and, finally, the evidence of the seal impressions, in particular the impressions made from a series of (nearly!) identical seals of the queen, Uqnitum. All of this evidence we have from the urban side of the equation, from excavations within the city walls of ancient Urkesh, but these elements also clearly linked the urban and the rural during the lifetime of the city.

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2 The lower town of Urkesh and the immediate region are the focus of a dissertation by Caitlin Chaves Yates.

II. CHRONOLOGY

The occupational history of the site extends from the Halaf period, which is present only in the ceramic evidence, up to the Middle Assyrian period, when Urkesh was abandoned. The evidence considered in this paper will focus on the Late Calcolithic 3 period – in the case of the temple terrace, and on the Akkadian period – for the palace of King Tupkish and Queen Uqnitum.

III. GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONS AND HINTERLAND

Tell Mozan lies in the Khabur triangle, near the Waadi Dara, and is situated close to the modern town of Amuda in the Hassake region of north-eastern Syria. The region is rich in agriculture, and Mozan lies above the 400 isohyet.

In the case of Mozan, the urban area covers approximately 120 hectares, including the upper and lower towns. The wider rural region would have been different in various periods, but at the height of the city's extension it would have covered at least an area of approximately 50 square kilometers around the site. This area reflects the planned area of the Urkesh Eco-Archaeological Park, which aims to preserve the landscape around the site and explore the settlements in the immediate vicinity of Tell Mozan. There are no large tells in this area, the highest mound visible as such from Mozan being Haji Nasr to the SE; the park area covers 22 modern villages, however, and many of these are founded on ancient settlements. The dating of these sites remains a question to be explored, but it seems clear that a city like Urkesh would have had an extensive distribution of smaller settlements in the immediate area.

The hinterland would have been primarily in the mountainous region to the north, within the Tur-Abdin Mountains (see Fig. 1). The Pass of Mardin is a natural formation which had a direct effect on the perception of the environment, since it allowed for access to the regions north of the mountains, specifically the upper Tigris region (Tilley 1994; Kelly-Buccellati *in press*). This constant visual reminder of the link to the north is rather unique, since this pass is one of very few routes linking the Khabur plains to the resource-rich Anatolian highlands.

IV. CITY WALLS & THE AP PALACE

Now we turn to the first example from Mozan: the AP Palace and the city walls as indicators for spatial links. Let us look first at the city walls. On the Corona image of the site (see Fig. 2), one can see the high mound as well as the wall surrounding the lower town. The inner city wall was explored in excavations in area K (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988), while the outer city wall has been identified through satellite imagery and geomagnetics, as well as an early sounding which was inconclusive.

One of the remarkable aspects here is the diachronic sequence: the inner city wall was built in the latter part of the ED period, and was closely followed by the construction of the outer wall late in the ED period or the very beginning of the Akkadian period.

In terms of elevation, the floor of the formal wing of the Palace lies at 485 meters above sea level, while the ancient plain level (as determined through several soundings in the area) was ten meters lower (475 m.a.s.l.), which would have allowed visibility over the outer city wall, given an estimated height of 6 to 8 meters.

What is surprising is the fact that with the outer city wall as a defensive structure, the integrity of the inner wall is breached to make room for the AP Palace. This means that the ancients did not feel the need for a defensive structure to protect the inner areas of the urban environment, relying solely on the outer city wall. This can be further seen in area K, where the glacis in front of the inner city wall was filled in with burnt material containing seal impressions, allowing us to date the material to the latter part of the ED period.

We can now ask the question as to why the decision was made to place the Palace in this location and remove a portion of the inner city wall, and a part of the answer, I am suggesting, is that seeing and being seen by the extra-mural areas was important to the architect and the 'patron', that is the person or persons who commissioned the construction. The viewshed is more limited in the case of the Palace, extending only to the areas to the west of the upper town, but the position of the Palace within the urban environment was probably primarily influenced by the desire to front onto the central plaza, and the presence of several important antecedent structures, such as the *abi*.

V. TEMPLE TERRACE

The second point I will make in regard to spatial links focuses on the temple terrace.³ In a normal stratigraphic situation, the latest cultural material is found above earlier cultural evidence. At Mozan, we have the peculiar situation of the earliest architectural finds located close to the top of the highest mound at the site.

The elevations for the temple terrace indicate an early and rapid build-up in this area of the site: the floor of the ED Temple at the top of mound B is 497 meters a.s.l. The top of the revetment wall, along with the floors of the LC Architecture, is 490 meters a.s.l. The top of the ED glacis is 487 meters a.s.l., while the plaza is at 485 meters a.s.l. It is worth noting that the elevation of this plaza and the stone courtyard of the AP Palace are nearly identical, which is one of the reasons that the AP Palace fronted onto the plaza on its western side. As I mentioned before, the ancient plain level is at 475 meters a.s.l., and we have no indication in any of the soundings that there was a natural hill on which the settlement was founded. This means that even in the Late Chalcolithic period we have architecture at 15 meters above the ancient plain – indicating,

³ For further information regarding the temple terrace at Tell Mozan, please see the contribution of P. Camatta in these proceedings.

of course, 15 meters of cultural deposits, of which we unfortunately have no data for now. We cannot exclude the possibility that the LC architecture rests on material deposited secondarily – meaning that the LC builders brought in material to build up the terrace. However, this seems quite unlikely, since the revetment wall does not have the structural stability to hold back the soft matrix which would be the case with a secondary deposit, but is rather the façade to a compact matrix which would be typical of a primary deposit.

The unexpected height of the LC architecture and the later structures situated on the top of the temple terrace would have had a commanding view of the area, probably an unimpeded 360 degree view (Bradley 1998). The view we still have today from the area on top of the temple terrace must reflect what the ancients saw: a view encompassing the Tur-Abdin, the Mardin Pass, the Jebel Sinjar and the Kawkab Volcano. This visual link goes beyond the wider rural region into the area we previously defined as the hinterland. As with the Royal Palace, the fact of being seen from the urban and extra-urban environments was probably just as important as the visibility from the top of the terrace (Buccellati 2010). This visual link is perceived very differently by different people at different times. One can imagine that certain rituals, especially if held at night, outside, with fire, would have been clearly seen, and the viewers became participants on some level, an audience outside looking in (Bradley 1998). For travelers it would have been a clear geographic marker, seen from quite some distance, while for city dwellers it would have been a place from which one could be connected to the hinterland without leaving the city itself (Buccellati 2010).

This Late Chalcolithic evidence is the most recently excavated material from the site, since it is, in part, a development from the last season at Mozan, 2010. Previous to the 2010 season, we had found LC material both at the top and at the bottom of the revetment wall, leading us to the conclusion that the revetment wall contained some of the earliest material found at the site to date. But we had still no architectural evidence from the period; in the 2010 season we explored the LC material at the top, and discovered part of a structure whose construction dated to the LC period. What was uncovered was the corner of a building, with niches inserted in the wall face (see Fig. 3). The presence of niches suggests that the building might have been a temple, but only further investigation and an appropriate inventory will give conclusive evidence. In the illustration, one can see the red bricks of the structure, as well as the niches.

Let me go into the dating for a moment; the LC3 material lies directly under the EDIII material, but what makes the dating secure is that the LC material is completely sealed by the ED glacia, which gives us a hard seal above the material below. I stress this point because we have taken seeds from the LC layers, which we submitted for C14-dating, and the result was that the LC material lies with a 78% probability between 3590 and 3525 BC, which is another firm tie between the material culture found in this context – and what we will find in the future – and absolute chronology. These finds are tantalizing not only because they might lead us to a better understanding of the Chalcolithic in our area, but might also shed light, with more evidence from the area, on the developmental stages from the LC3 to the ED III.

VI. SEAL IMPRESSIONS

My third point focuses on the variation of seals in the court of Tupkish, and as an example I will focus on the seals of Queen Uqnitum. What is surprising in this corpus is that there are actually many seals of Uqnitum: at least 8 different versions (see Fig. 4). What we have are only the impressions, but it is clear that there are at least 8 physical seals which made these impressions. The fact that there are many seals belonging to the Queen is not a unique phenomenon within the corpus of seals found in the Royal Palace – it is also true of the seals we have from other members of her court, e.g. the wet-nurse, Zamena, and the cook, Tuli. The backs of the sealings were also studied, and indicate that the sealings were made on a variety of containers, primarily jars and baskets; only 3 door sealings were found (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996a).

Thus, the question is: why so many different seals for Queen Uqnitum? It has already been suggested that the seals might have been used for the portion of the administration of the court of Tupkish which was linked to goods coming from outside the city. These seals would probably have been given to certain officials, and they would have sent goods back to the Palace (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996b).

There are, thus, two ‘sets’ of administrators whose seal impressions have been found in the Royal Palace. On the one hand we have impressions from the seals of a series of named functionaries, such as the cook, Tuli, and the nurse, Zamena. On the other hand, we have a set of nearly identical seals which all ‘belong’ to the Queen, as she is the person indicated on the inscription. I am suggesting that this second set of administrators were not named in the seal inscriptions because they were acting ‘in lieu of’ the Queen outside of the urban sphere. Thus, these seals, and the impressions made by them, are a semiotic message in two ways – the ‘standard’ interpretation of seal impressions, that of being a guarantor of the integrity of the sealed container, but also as a kind of badge of office for the person using it. The person sealing is acting in lieu of the queen in the extended territory of the city, and is procuring something for her use within the Royal Palace in doing so.

This fact gives us a fascinating look into the relationships between the seals and the seal owners, for these nearly identical seals no longer represent either the person actually using them, nor do they represent, directly, the office of the person using them. They are the seals of the Queen: as such, the person using the seals is acting not as a functionary with a specific task, but rather in the place of a person of power who is not there at the moment. I think that this distinction can be further tied to the urban/rural dichotomy – the functionaries within the city, acting directly in the palace, had distinct tasks and areas of control, and as such had seals which marked their name and area of responsibility. The administrators who were acting outside of the city, on the other hand, were acting on behalf of the functionaries in the Royal Palace, and as such they were not there in their own names but rather were acting in lieu of someone else holding a specific office. Further research in similar contexts and excavations in settlements in Urkesh’s rural region will show if this model reflects the ancient relationships,

but the evidence we have now at least points to a rich and complex entanglement of seals, people and places (Hodder 2012).

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the relationship between urban and rural environments helps us understand both sides of the equation better, and investigate questions relating to economy, social hierarchies, and settlement patterns. While it is true that the best evidence we can hope for would come from the archaeological exploration of both environments, it is also true that some evidence about the relationship between urban and rural can be interpolated with evidence from just one area.

In the examples above, we have seen how the Palace of King Tupkish was designed so that a visual link between the Palace and the immediate rural environment was established – even to the point of removing part of an older defensive structure. Furthermore, the Temple Terrace of Mozan remained the highest point on the site for most of its history – beginning already in the LC period. Not only was it the highest point on the site for so long, but it was also the highest point in the plains area south of the Mardin Pass, and as such would have represented a landmark.

Finally, the evidence from the seal impressions shows how a multiplicity of (nearly) identical seals is likely an indicator of a rural net of supply, controlled by officials who would have been directly responsible for sending material back to the Palace, where the containers were then opened and the impressions discarded.

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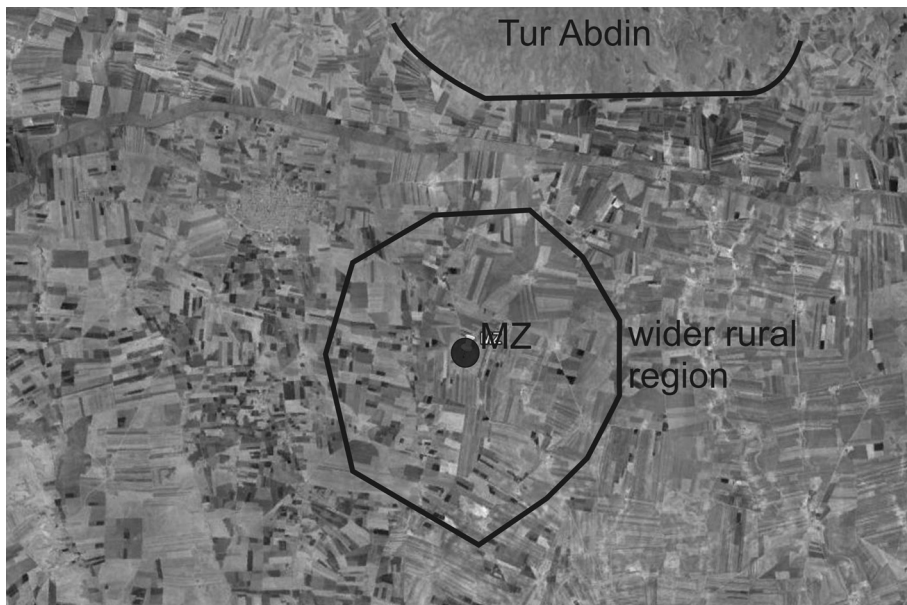


Fig. 1: Tell Mozan (MZ) with the wider rural region indicated, as well as the Tur Abdin Mountains.

(Image courtesy of Google Earth)

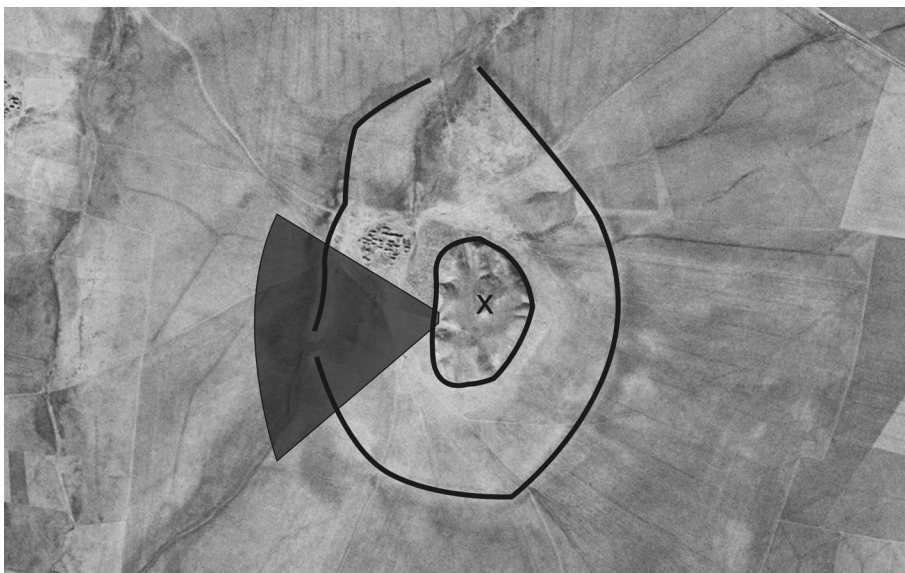


Fig. 2: Tell Mozan with the inner and outer city walls indicated, as well as the Temple Terrace (X) and the view from the Palace AP to the lower city and outside the city. (Corona 1968).

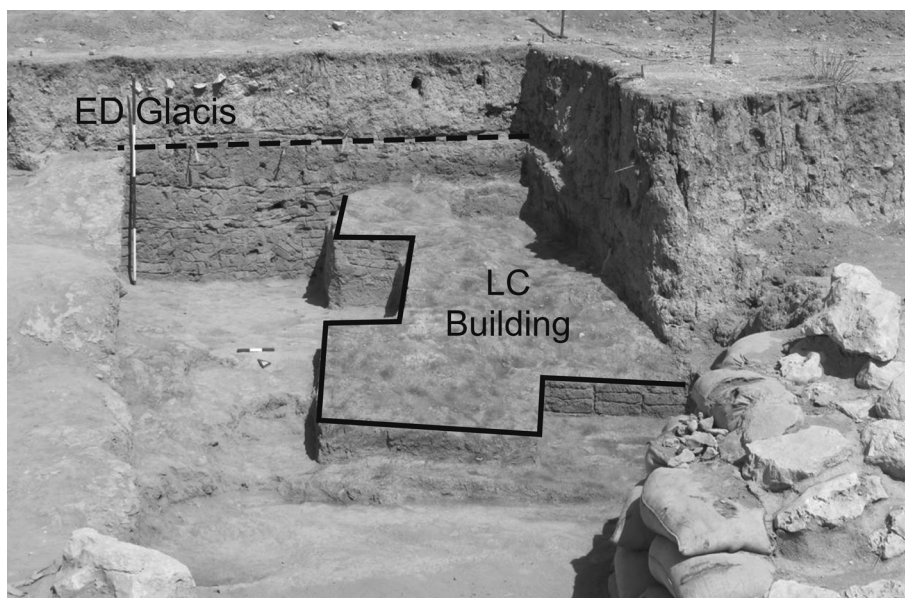


Fig. 3: Niched building underneath the ED Glacis dating to the LC 3 period. (Urkesh Global Record)

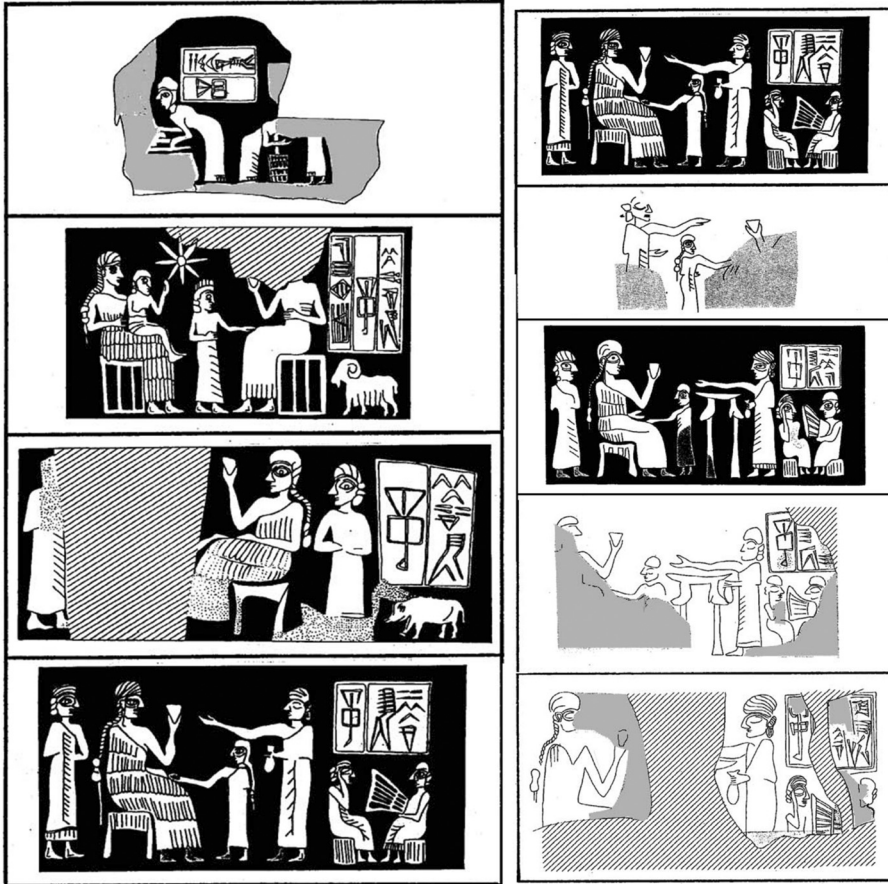


Fig. 4: 8 different impressions of the seal of Queen Uqnitum.
 (See Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996a)