

Urkesh 2008

The archaeology of  
experience

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# The archaeology of experience

We celebrated experience in many a novel way this 2008 season at Tell Mozan.

We did celebrate it in one aspect that has become a hallmark of our project – *site presentation*. Making ours a deep-seated Syrian sentiment, we want to extend a warm and rich hospitality to our visitors – the intellectual hospitality that offers understanding. An innovative system of panels develops a story line that holds the attention because it develops in an almost dramatic way as the visitor progresses from one station to the next. More than 200 pages are already in place, but in a subtle and unobtrusive way, so the visitor can either skim the surface or delve into the substance. This, then, is the modern experience of archaeology as a process and as the finds it brings back to light.

It was our good fortune to inaugurate an early version of the display on the occasion of a most memorable visit – that of *the First Lady, Dr. Asmaa al-Assad*. The honor deriving from her representing the highest authority in the land was only matched by the delight of interacting with the keenest expression of personal interest as she followed the “story line” laid out in the ground. It was a sunny moment on a very sunny day. It radiated from her presence in ways that well explain how she has come to embody a bright ideal for vast segments of the population, such as young women and the disabled, both well represented in Mozan, and all newly energized by her visit among us and the caring attitude she displayed to all.

We did celebrate experience in *identifying closely with a crisis situation that had affected our workmen*. The winter had brought no rain, and, when we arrived, the fields were parched as never before. The wheat stalks seemed like drooping dry grass, without ears, without a single grain. The toll was severe, and as a result we had hundreds of applicants for work – where we had intended to hire around fifty. In response to the emergency, we revised our strategy, and made room in our work plans for additional men. But we needed extra funds. So we send out an SOS to some of our supporters, who answered with great generosity, allowing us to implement the new goals.

It had always been our intent to open a wide space so as to gain *the distance the ancients had from which to view the imposing architecture* at the end of the open Plaza. With the new workforce we would now be able to remove tons of dirt even with the limited staff available because these were massive inert accumulations, predictably without any structures, hence without the need for slow excavation. We completed the first phase, and the results are most gratifying.

We did celebrate experience, finally, as we came closer than ever to understanding the way in which an *unfailing sense of sacrality* safeguarded this vast complex over a span of two millennia, to be re-organized only in the last century before its abandonment, and then in ways that still protected the integrity of the original structure. We have, in fact, growing evidence that the complex had already taken shape by about 3500 B.C.; we have more details about its structural make-up in the third millennium; and we see the final re-organization of space when the urban community that served the temple breathed its last.

Having been abandoned for over three thousand years, it seems at time that we only excavate a dead city. But we are in fact ever in search of the life that gave these stones, this clay, a meaning we want to recapture and make ours. In 2008, we have come closer than ever to this goal.



## The First Lady of Syria

Not since the time of Naram-Sin is the wife of a head of state known to have been in Urkesh. On August 18, 2008, Urkesh was once more so visited, four millennia later.

Dr. Asmaa al-Assad came from Damascus early in the morning, and remained with us for almost three hours, returning then directly to the capital.

She left our site with a memento from Urkesh (a box of books), and from Mozan (the flowers).

We were left with the indelible memory of a presence that proclaims what is most vibrant about modern Syria. We felt greatly honored. But almost beyond the honor, we felt the privilege of witnessing the symbol of a Syria that is “modern” in a more profound sense than just temporal.

# Part One

## The visit of the First Lady

# Brightness on a bright day



The bright sun of the Syrian horizon is our faithful companion all summer long.

In this summer starkness, the First Lady was all the more noticeable as she strode along our gravel paths and descended unruffled in the dust of the excavation trenches.



# In the trenches

*Urkesb Folio 2008 - 4*



Far from skimming the surface, she delved right into the substance of things, with a keenness even visiting colleagues do not often display.

In looking back at her visit, we felt as if her being in such a high position of prestige was ... our misfortune, because we would otherwise have cherished having her on our excavation staff...





# The process of excavating

*Urkesb Folio 2008 - 5*

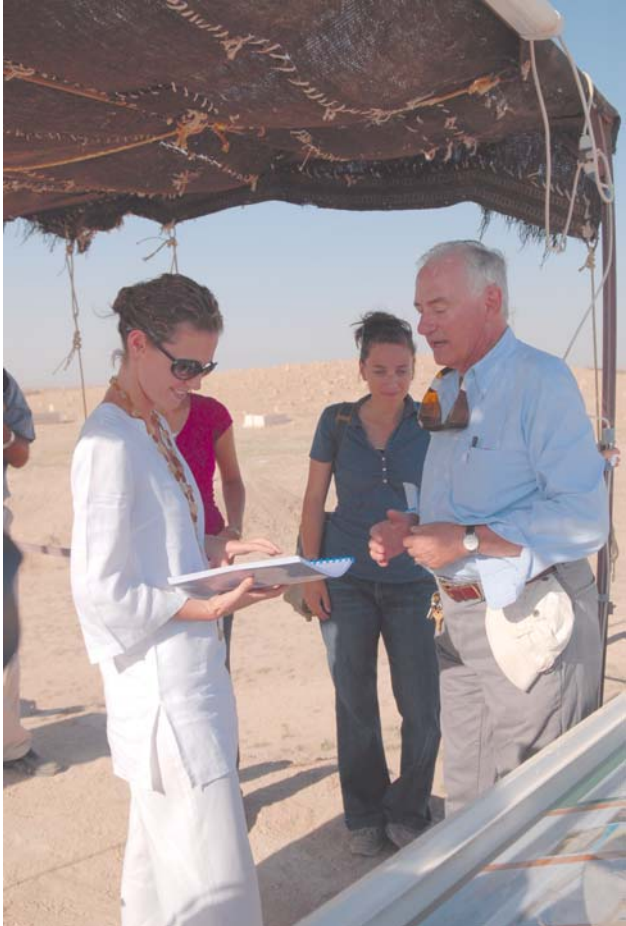




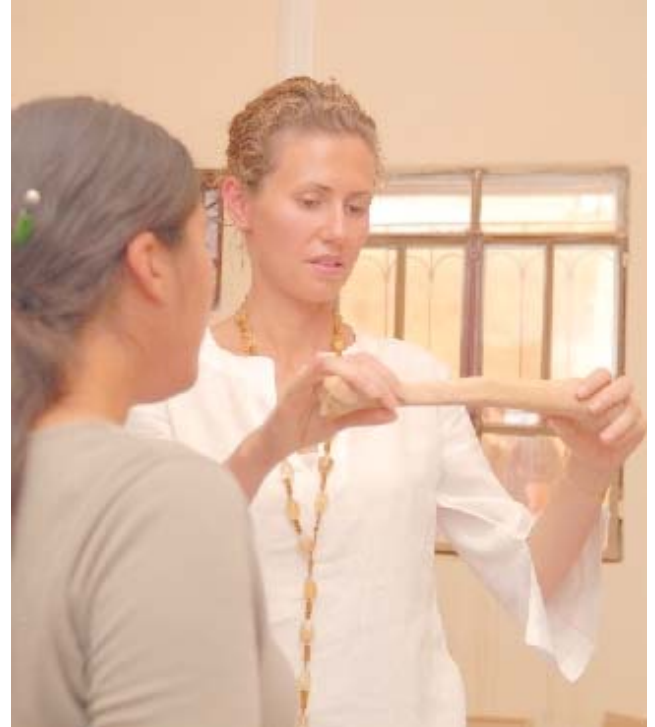












Field work is the more glamorous part of the archaeologist's trade, but to really make sense of all that comes out of the ground we need the hard work of in-depth research – with the computer, with sherds, with bones. The broader Syrian context has allowed us to develop a setting that is unmatched for such research, done directly in the field. It was thus with great pride that we could show the detail of our operation to our special guest, since it is a tribute to her country that we have been able to accomplish so much in an unparalleled atmosphere of support and cooperation.



# The witness of ceramics

*Urkesb Folio 2008 – 10*



Our field house boasts a veritable library of ceramic types, with thousands of sherds arranged by shape, ware, provenience, date.

Because of the quantity of the material and the accuracy of the analysis, the data yield the best insight into historical development and craft specialization. Thus our “library” is an invaluable tool for all visiting scholars.

It is also the starting point for all interested visitors, because it sets the framework within which Urkesb chronology can be understood.



# Part Two

## Facing the centuries



Over two millennia of history are documented in this photograph. Throughout, the organization of the sacred space remained the same. Think of it: for over two thousand years, humans walked in this urban space with only one purpose in mind – worship.

In the next few plates, we will walk through the moments in history that are tied to different “moments” in space. We will, together, face the centuries.



## The fourth millennium peering through the third...

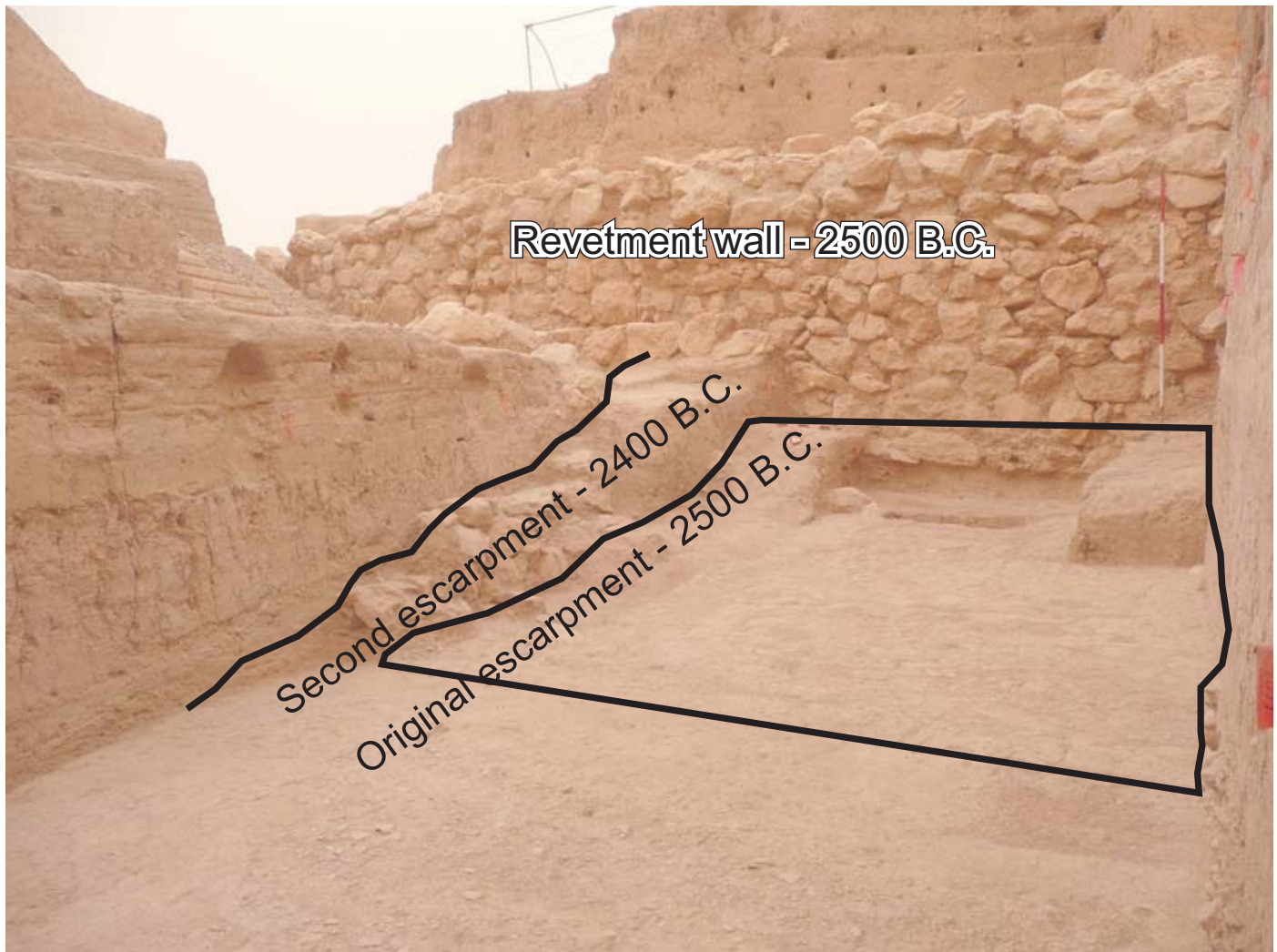


The small rectangular sounding in the center opened an unexpected window onto the past. The stones appearing immediately below the surface belong to a structure which is most likely an antecedent of the great revetment wall of the third millennium, which rises less than a meter away.

This earlier wall dates to about 3500 B.C., because of the pottery associated with it. And the general alignment (parallel to the later wall) and quality of the stones strongly suggest that the wall served the same purpose as the later one.

If so, we have a jump in time of about 1000 years. The earlier wall was progressively covered by the accumulations on the Plaza, so that a new wall had to be built (around 2500 B.C.). For the earlier wall, we can imagine a view much like this one, only a few meters lower in elevation.

You can well imagine where we will excavate next year: we will widen the sounding! And you can also imagine how the new photos will show, if our pre-diction is right, a step-like effect from one wall to the other.



You recognize (from the previous plate) the rectangular sounding where the earlier wall (3500 B.C.) lurks in the depths.

Over a period of a thousand years the deposits in the Plaza accumulated to a point where this earlier wall became obliterated (which is, of course, why we had to dig deeper to find it...)

So, around 2500 B.C., it became necessary to .. rise to new heights! A new revetment was built (3 meter high), with an escarpment that protected the base of the wall as it sloped down to the level of the Plaza.

This version of the wall remained visible for another 1000 years! (We will see later what happened during the last century of Urkesb' history.)

It is a complex historical scenario, but one about which we can be quite certain. The sequence of strata is perfectly clear, and the evidence of the ceramics unequivocal.





The archaeology of experience...

You feel the full impact of this season's motto in considering these two parallel ways to recapture the perception of the ancients.

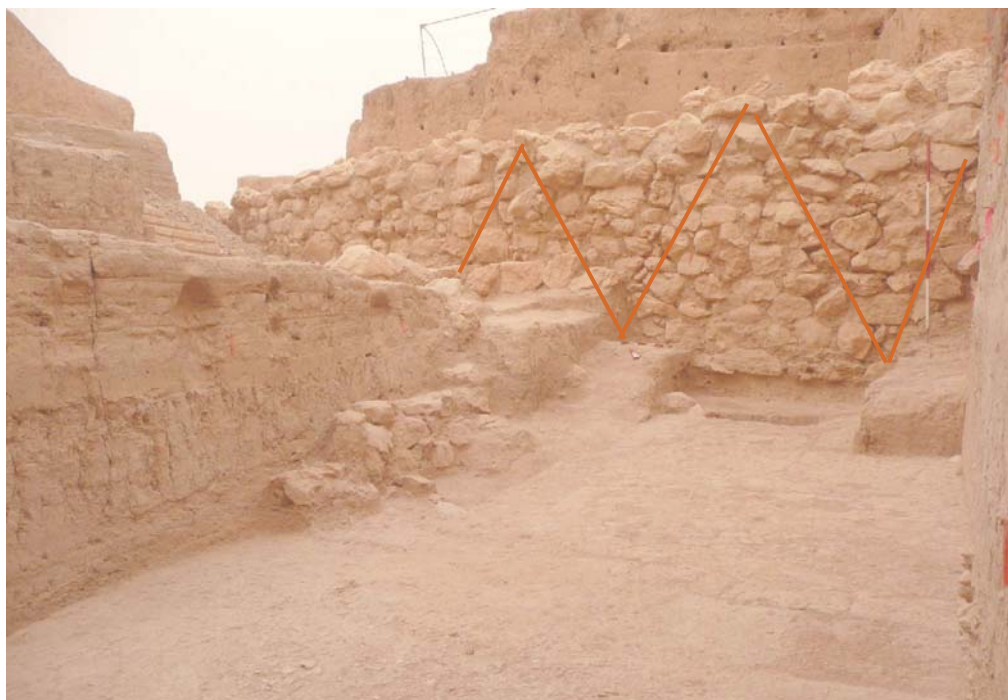
On the one hand, you face the great wall, and you feel it as an impassable barrier, which emphasises the distance between the level of your humanity and the higher level of the gods.

Or you climb, on the other hand, the staircase that leads you skywards, to that other level where the gods reside, in the temple.

Even though, as archaeologists, we are at a remove from *their* religious experience, it behooves us to attempt to share their perception of the spaces they had created. Identifying with their experience leads us ultimately to better understand the monuments in their wholeness – not as dead fossils, but as the springboard of life they once were.



# An architectural “logogram” ?



We had all been looking at the revetment wall for months on end, and finally it dawned on us: there is a very subtle, but clear, triangular motif that extends along the entire face of the wall.

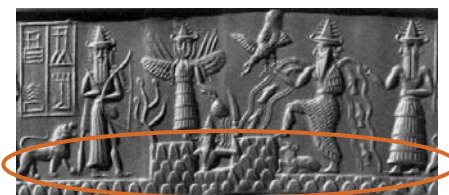
Why?

We could not think of structural reasons, or of building techniques that would require this curious arrangement.

So the idea came that it may be an ideological motif. In other words, the triangles refer as symbols to something else. And just such a symbol is indeed well known as an early pictograph (with the meaning “mountain”), a sign that remains throughout the cuneiform tradition:



The same motif is used to represent the mountains in the seals of the same time period as our wall:



Could it be, then, that the motif on the wall is an echo of the same iconographic tradition?

We would like to think so. It could be understood as a way to connect symbolically the city mountain erected by humans to the real mountains within easy view of Urkesh. The mountains on which the god Kumarbi used to walk, as the myths tell us and as it is rendered in the seal on the left.





# Pointers to the ascent



At the base of the staircase, two oblong stones seem to point in the direction of the ascent. They date to the same period as the main wall and the staircase, around 2500 B.C.

They were not left there accidentally. They are supported in their oblique position by mudbricks, and the top of the one on the right is intentionally embedded in the wall.

Such upright oblong stones are found in other contexts, though never in the Mesopotamia of Sumer and Akkad – which is interesting for us, given the importance we attribute to the Hurrian ethnic element in the shaping of Urkesb culture.

In every case, they are linked to a cultic setting. So, what was their function? In our case, given the placement at the beginning of the staircase, we may surmise that they were meant to invite the worshippers to climb the stairs, as if pointers to the ascent towards the temple.

But – why two? And why is one rough, and the other polished? We may find the answer looking at the broader context, to which we turn next.



Look at the difference between the wall on the left and the staircase on the right. It echoes the difference between the two oblong stones. The rough and the hewn are side by side.

Remember also that, in our interpretation, the architectural “logogram,” inscribed in the wall, suggests that the wall represents a mountain.

We would like to think that it is all intentional. The rough (the wall on the left and the shorter oblong stone) represents nature in its original state. The hewn (the staircase and the longer oblong stone, with the small wall in which it is embedded) represents instead the world of man.

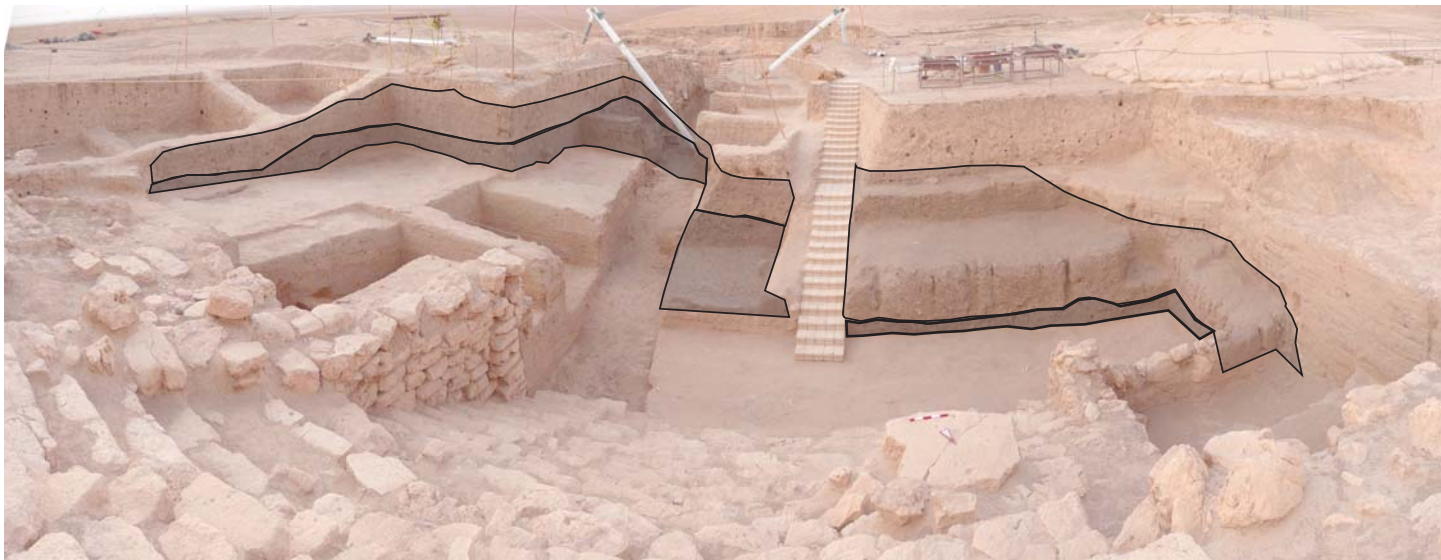
Admittedly, the argument is tenuous. But consider the larger picture. The Hurrians are at home in the mountains, and the Terrace on which the Temple stands is clearly an imitation of the mountains that dominate the northern horizon of the city. As Urkesb developed into one of the few large cities of the Hurrians, it stands to reason that they have wanted to retain, in the rough, the memory of their origins.



# Part Three

## Reshaping the urban landscape

# The great collapse



The story we have told so far covers a two thousand year period, from 3500 to 1400 B.C. During these two millennia, the basic organization of the sacral space remained intact: the Terrace with a Temple on top, the revetment wall with a staircase, and the Plaza in front.

Around 1400 B.C., when the last century of Urkesh' history begins, the settlement shrinks and moves to the west. The structures in the east are abandoned, and they soon fall on top of the Plaza, filling it.

The evidence of this collapse is clear, in the form of a massive brickfall, more than two meters thick. The photos tell the tale. In the lower stratum you can still see the bricks, clearly outlined. Progressively, the demarcation between individual bricks becomes blurred: we call this upper part a “brickmelt.”

They did not bother to clear the debris, nor did they rebuild on top of it. As a result, the staircase became obliterated. At about the same time, in fact, they had built another staircase to the west, where the settlement now was. This we will see next.

For now, we want to call your attention to the details of the stratigraphy, which is the basis for all our reconstruction. The photos show in progressive detail the nature of the collapse. And the ceramics found in it provides the unmistakable chronological reference.





After the collapse in the east, the Plaza quickly filled up to a point where the third millennium wall was no longer visible. At this point, a new staircase was built in the west, with only six steps. It retained the memory of the earlier complex, only on a reduced scale and a different orientation. But even in this last century of its existence, Urkesb retained essentially the same organization of the sacral space, and protected it from all intrusions.



# Hurrian tracks in urban Urkesh

*Urkesh Folio 2008 – 22*



But for some changes in the organization of space, the Temple, with its Terrace and the Plaza in front of it, retained essentially the same structural make-up for over 2000 years.

Such a massive cultic complex required an urban infrastructure capable not only of erecting the Temple complex in the first place, but of maintaining it as well.

For the second half of its existence (from 2500 to 1300 B.C.), the complex was unequivocally Hurrian. Given the structural similarity between the fourth and third millennium phases, it seems inescapable that the earliest evidence (that of the fourth millennium) is tied to the Hurrians as well.

To get an answer we have only to dig further – which we will of course do in the coming years. But the hypothesis is likely enough that we may formulate it with confidence.

If so, the staggering implication is that this elusive population we have been pursuing for the last two decades is beginning to emerge more and more convincingly as responsible for one of the earliest experiments in urban living, in civilization.

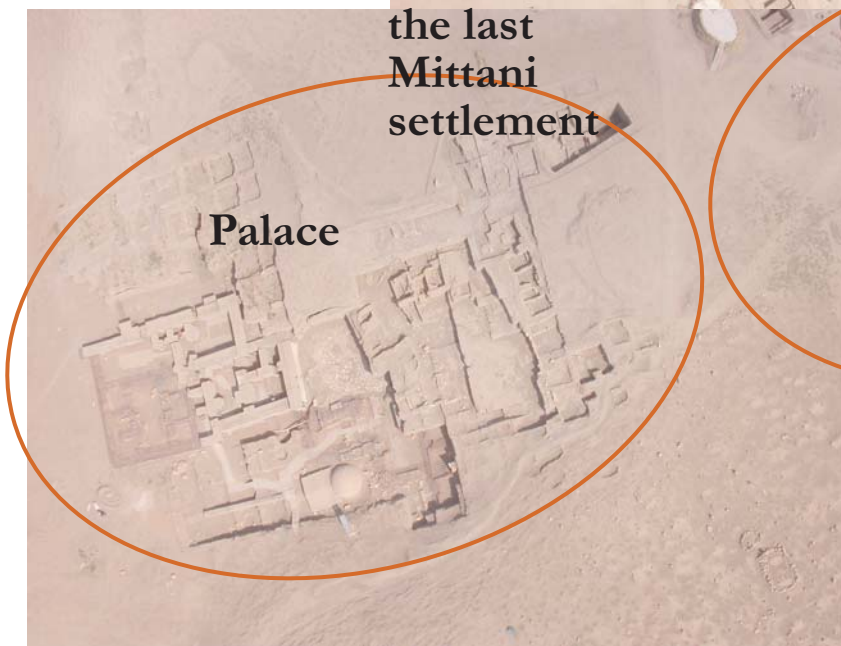
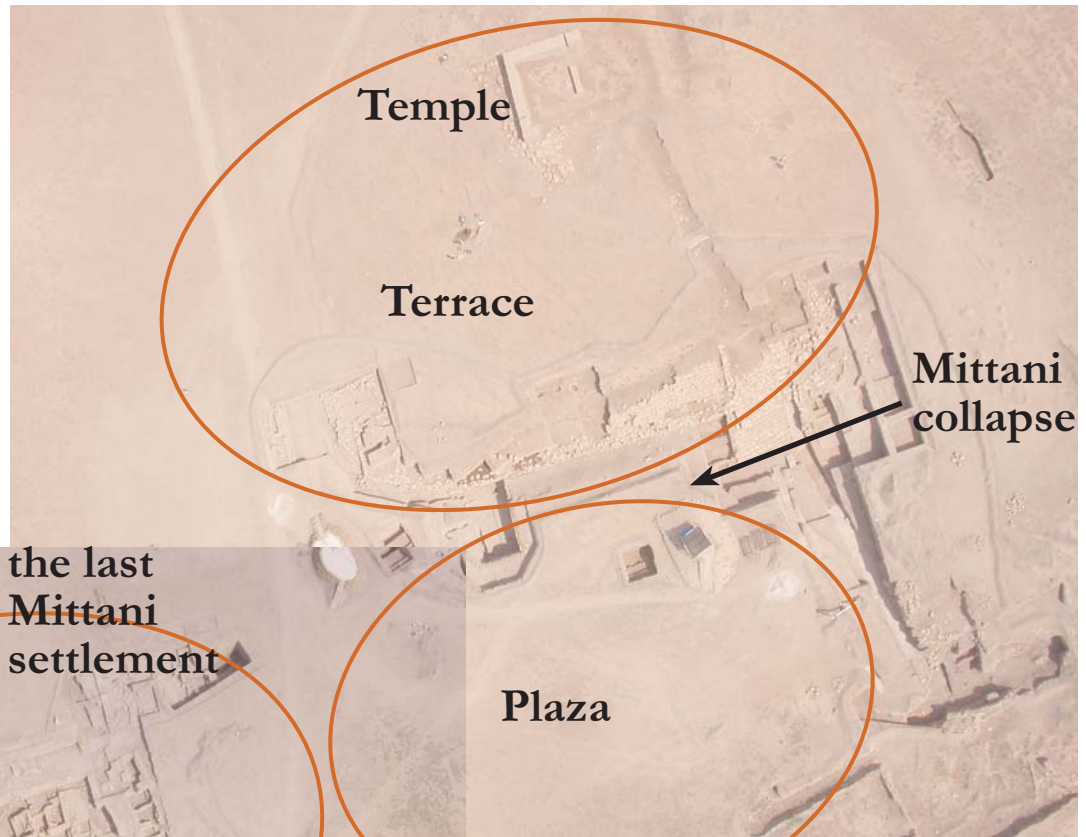
Next to the Sumerians, and at the same time, they put their own imprint on the larger picture of human development – leaving it for us to disentangle from the ground and to reconstruct as a meaningful component of our civilizational past.

*(In the summer of 2008, the cover story of Archaeology Magazine was devoted to Urkesh, and it proposed more strongly than we would have been willing to affirm yet, the antiquity of Hurrian presence at our site, and its importance for the history of the ancient Near East. The finds we were making just as the article appeared in print tend to support this view.)*

# Linking temple and palace

*Urkesb Folio 2008 – 23*

An exceptional series of kite photographs taken in 2008 (by Federico Buccellati) gives a full view of all the excavations in the area of the Palace and the Temple.



“Mittani” is the name of the last Hurrian empire, lasting from about 1500 to 1300 B.C. It had two capitals: Urkesb was still a functioning religious center, and was located between the two cities.

Though important as a shrine, Urkesb was greatly diminished in size. In the last century of its existence, after the collapse of the eastern structures, it retrenched to the west, where the new Mittani staircase was built.

In the third millennium, the monumental complex of Temple, Palace and Plaza was much larger.

A remarkable aspect of this is that the state of preservation is excellent, so that the urban layout emerges with a coherence hardly ever found in third millennium Syro-Mesopotamia.

Such coherence of the urban landscape is one reason why we have become heavily involved in the whole process of site presentation – to which we turn now our attention.



# Part Four

## Function and perception

# The view from the Plaza

A full understanding of the *function* of ancient architecture depends in part of the *perception* of spaces and volumes. Which means that we must recapture as much as possible this perception by recreating the setting within which the ancients viewed their monuments.

We must also provide access to viewers so that their feet touch ground at the same level as the ancients.



In our excavations at Mozan, it is our goal to inscribe an understanding of perception in the very strategy of excavation. We want to plan from the beginning in such a way that the outcome contribute to a visual perception we have reason to assume was that of the ancients.

In the case illustrated here, the excavations of the eastern side of the Plaza aim at recreating a view of the staircase and of the revetment wall from the extreme southern end of the Plaza itself, at the same level as when it was first constructed.

In 2008 we completed the first phase of this project, which is to be continued in 2009. The photos on the right show how the staircase comes progressively more in view as one walks through the “funnel” opened from the extreme southeastern corner of the Plaza. In each photo, the two red arrows show the widening angle from which one can gain a full perception of the monument.

When you visit the site, individual panels explain these concerns, so that viewers can more easily train their sensitivity to be in tune with the perception as we think it was originally intended.





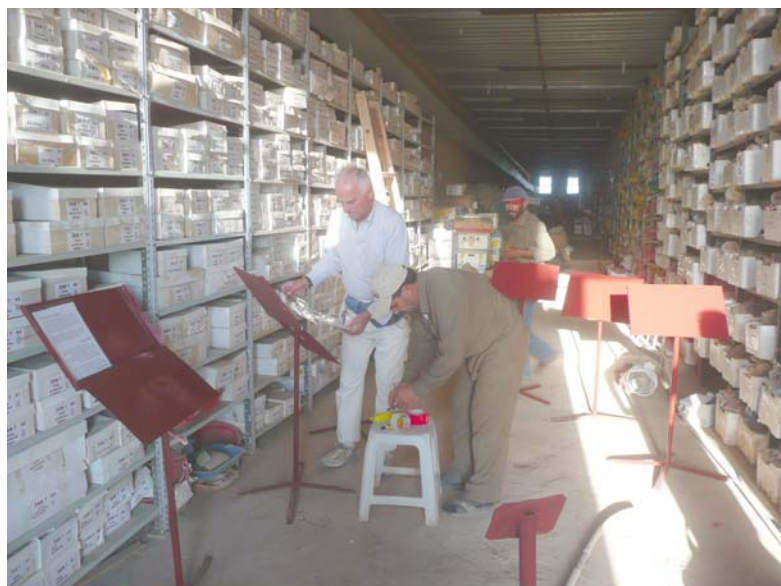
# “Footnotes”



We had introduced the concept last year: detailed information keyed to very specific points along the itinerary, which may be read or skipped, just like footnotes in a book.

The intervening winter having caused much damage to last year's panels, a new design was needed. We have entrusted our new version to metal panels, with a beveled cover that protects four laminated sheets.

With more than 200 such sheets already in place, our site can be “read” truly like a book - produced at minimal cost.



# The unfolding narrative

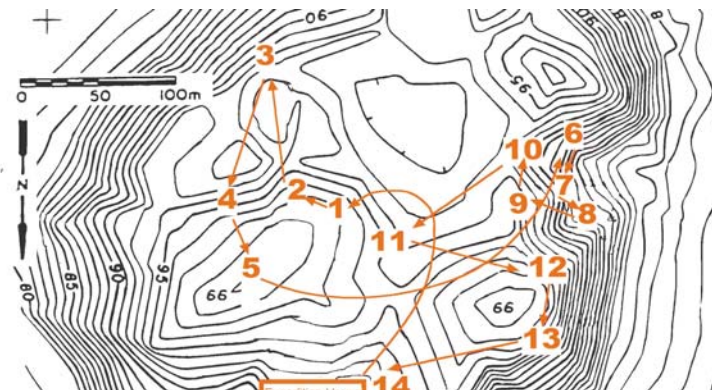
The itinerary has been richly improved from previous years, and it provides the visitor with a basic guideline, so that even the most hurried can gain a good, if quick, overview of what the site has to offer. (The “footnotes” offer greater details for those who have the time and the inclination...)

The 14 stops are programmed as an almost dramatic narrative, one that involves the visitor with regard to the historical development of the ancient city on the one hand, and, on the other, the archaeological process of discovery. (The “footnotes” are integrated in the same narrative concept, one panel referring to the other as one anticipates or looks back.)

A brief introduction explains how the itinerary unfolds, and provides the tour map (below). The English portion of the first four panels is given here as an example.

Every single one of our panels is given in English and Arabic. The panels of the main narrative will be in the future translated in other languages as well.

Thus conceived, site presentation at Mozan is sufficiently flexible and inexpensive to allow regular expansions and updates. We have dispensed with the printed visitor’s guide, which did not have this flexibility. The site itself is now its own book (and all panels can be found on line, for anyone who wishes to print them on paper.)



# 1

## The clash of centuries

The wall in front of you was built around 2600 B.C. It encased the terrace that sloped up to the temple you see in the distance. It remained in use for over 1000 years. In the last centuries of Urkesb (1500 to 1200 B.C.) the plaza was filled in, and the effect was lost - much as it is lost today. In order to recapture the original perception of this vast sacred space, you are invited to walk down the steps on your left to the level of the ancient plaza.

# 2

## A bird's eye view

From this panoramic vista point you can gain a comprehensive view of the great Terrace wall and of the staircase - both built around 2600 B.C. It is not how the ancients saw it (the next stop will take you down to their level ...). But the view from up here, aided by the descriptive panels in front of you, offer you a good synthetic survey of the visual and the historical dimensions of this great monument.

# 3

## Facing the transcendence

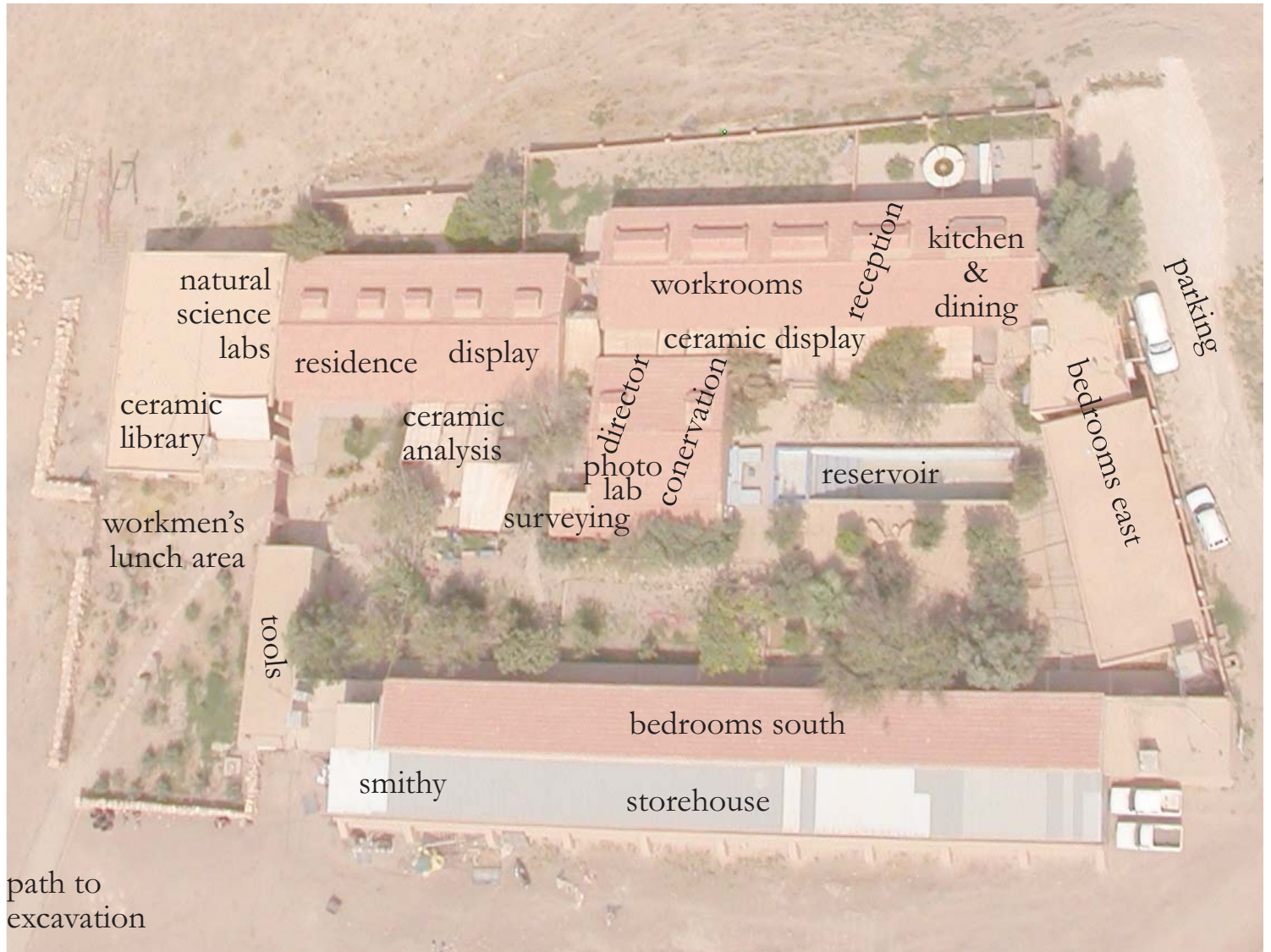
From the high vista point behind us we looked down at the staircase as a bird would. Now we descend to the level where humans stood - and still stand. We have excavated a large portion of the Plaza specifically in order to make it possible for you to walk on the ground the ancients trod. As you approach the staircase, be mindful of the rich meaning it held for those who approached it thousands of years ago.

# 4

## The great ascent

You are now ready to climb the stairs. There are two important lessons to be learnt. The first is archaeological. The sections will teach us a most important historical lesson, and will enlighten us on the final years of Urkesb' history. The second is perceptual. Was the ascent a casual stroll, that anybody in the city could take, or was it laden with meaning, and reserved only for religious occasions?





The Expedition House serves as the start and ending point point of the self-guided tour (the path shows on the lower left in the photo).

The Expedition House has been conceived as a research center, with ample facilities and sufficient comfort to allow for prolonged and efficient study periods. The exceptional kite photography of 2008 has yielded this beautiful aerial shot, where you can see the organization of the various sectors.

At the moment the House has a reception area that includes a library of all our publications and a small display of the major ceramic types, divided by phases. This serves as an introduction for visitors so as to give them an understanding of the major criteria for dating the various strata that visitors see in the field.

When the Expedition is present, the large ceramic library (with several thousand sherds, subdivided by types, provenience, phase) is also accessible and is of special interest to colleagues. We also have various PowerPoint presentations that introduce the visitor to special aspects of the site before they actually visit the excavations.

In the future, we plan to expand the visitors' facilities even during the absence of the Expedition, including a larger ceramic collection and permanent PowerPoint presentations.

# Part Five

## The hosts as guests





The banquet, the handshake, the toasting are the recurrent messages of goodwill that foster not only human enjoyment, but also enthusiasm for the work we do together. As in few other endeavors perhaps as in archaeology is the result dependent on sharing our ability to work closely together.

These gestures are also emblematic of another profound truth we have learnt in Syria – that we are, together, guests of history.

That is so because the keepers of the Syria of yesteryear are as generous with their past as they are with their present – their food, their handshake, their work. They are our hosts inviting us into their land, into their history in the same way that they invite us into their homes, their friendship. They truly say to us “Our history is your history” as they instinctively say “My home is your home.”

It gives us then a special pride and pleasure to invite them back into this history we reconstruct from the soil we dig up in what is their land. It is *our* understanding of the past that we can offer in return. We, too, can say that “*our* history is indeed yours.” And thus have the hosts as our guests.





The perennial wonder of discovery does not happen unbidden.

But it does almost look like a miracle when so many things converge to make it all possible.

Our staff and our workmen are the doers. It is with this group of men and women that Urkesb, the Hurrians, the Temple or the Palace become realities we can perceive anew, millennia later.

In 2008, a very special contingency took place that is reflected vividly on these faces. A great drought had brought immense misery in our region, and we had hundred of applicants for work. Our budget was planned for some 60 workmen. Our call for help met with a generous answer, and we could hire 50 more. They are the ones shown below. Their gratitude, and ours, extends warmly to our special donors.

It was through this infusion of additional workmen that we were able to open the great swath described on the preceding plate. Our supporters, then, are the enablers, who, upstream of the whole effort, make it all possible.







Regular lectures to our workmen are a distinctive feature of our project. They are given every two weeks to the entire work-force, and as needed for the crews of individual work units. They take place in the field under the sun, and in the house with slide shows.

The questions they elicit are a most gratifying experience. The sense of shared purpose they create energizes all to give the very best in us. And the identification of this our first constituency with their territorial past is the best guarantee for the safeguard and the conservation of the site.



# A stake for the stakeholders



Like Moliere's *bourgeois gentilhomme* discovering that he has been speaking prose all along, archaeologists are discovering that ... people matter!

But at Mozan, our “stakeholders” have been empowered with a stake in their own territorial past ever since the beginning of our work. And they are the first to flock to the site and to absorb the wealth of information that we offer.

Notice in these photos the children, boys and girls, who accompany their parents and eagerly learn about their common past - which in the end it is our pride to share in common.