

Urkish 2004

Urkish @20

Giorgio Buccellati

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**T**he Fall of 2004 marks the twentieth year since the inception of our work at Tell Mozan, in northeastern Syria. We have been privileged, in this time period, to bring back to light the ancient city of Urkesh that lay buried within the *tell*. The journey of discovery has been rich and rewarding, and we would like to celebrate it by offering this retrospective to those who have helped us along the way. We share together in the celebration as we have shared in the adventure that has brought us here.

The name of Urkesh was filled with awe for the ancients. It was the seat of the ancestral god of the Pantheon, Kumarbi, to whom we have reason to believe was dedicated the main temple found at Mozan. The terrace on which this temple rested is in fact so monumental, that we can rightfully say the city grew around it. Urkesh was first and foremost a sanctuary, and as such it must date back to the primordial epoch of city building, around the beginning of the third millennium.

Just as the temple reached to the sky, predating the great ziggurats of the Mesopotamian south, so did the *ābi* reach to the Netherworld. The word alone evoked a sense of dread, and was taken over by other languages to refer to the specifically Hurrian claim they could summon the spirits of the Netherworld and communicate with them. The *ābi* is a monumental frame for a preferred spot in the ground out of which spirits would rise to speak of events to come.

As it grew into a vast metropolis, Urkesh acquired political importance as well. It is so far the only excavated site of the third millennium known to have been the center of a properly Hurrian polity. As such, it was ruled by Hurrians even at the time of the maximum expansion of the first great world power, the empire of Akkad. The great Palace of Tupkish is yielding the impressive evidence of the seat of this Hurrian dynasty.

Thus, beyond the walls and the objects, we are recovering an unexpected new face of ancient Syria. We often refer to Syria as a crossroad, but it was in fact a pivot of civilization. In no case can we see this better than with the Hurrians of Urkesh. They did not *walk through* this great land we know as Syria. Rather, they *irradiated from it* a significantly new understanding of human culture: a religion that saw divine reality as the live source of unpredictable communication, a political organization that rested on ethnic bonds more than on bureaucratic complexities, an artistic vision that pushed accepted canons beyond the known limits of expression. Urkesh is Syrian in the very specific sense that Syria was at the core of the new urban experiment developing in that remote third millennium out of which the civilizational awareness of our own third millennium is still profoundly, and indelibly, shaped.

# The Syrian landscape of Urkesh



Photo G. Buccellati



Photo G. Buccellati



Photo I. Musa

The landscape of modern Syria  
is our link with the Syria of Urkesh  
five thousand years ago –  
the mountains,  
the animals,  
the seasons...

We also feel the continuity  
with the people who once lived here.

And thus we bend to the soil  
looking for the traces of our forbears  
under the modern hill.

What the ancients built,  
we, the archaeologists,  
are now unveiling:  
we turn the hill of Tell Mozan  
back to the glory it was  
when once known as Urkesh.

the arts

# The lion of Tish-atal



Photos A. J. Fulco, from cast of original

Donatello-like, this bronze lion pivots along its vertical axis with the same vehemence of a live animal... It is a great stylistic innovation – the realism of the details being matched by the skill with which the artist rendered the effect of movement.

Foundation deposit for a temple built by Tish-atal king of Urkesh. Bought on the antiquities market before our excavations and currently at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Presumed to come from Temple BA, dating to about 2400 B.C.





Photos L. Mount Williams



Unfinished, this two sided stela from the Temple tells us in eloquent terms of the central concerns of the ancient agrarian civilization of Urkesh – not unlike Greek poetry when it celebrates *the works and the days* and not unlike the medieval representations of the seasonal activities.

Stylistically, it shows a remarkable naturalism.

The plowing scene renders, in ways unknown to contemporary Sumerian sculpture, the thrust of the farmer down into the furrow, and the effort of the draft animal as it pushes forward.

“Neither arrest nor movement...”



Photo L. Mount Williams

The other side of the Temple stela shows a herd in motion.

It is not only the realism of the movement that strikes us, but the circularity of the herd's ambling poise – as if this ancient artist were familiar with T. S. Eliot:

*at the still point, there the dance is,  
but neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.*

Drawing M. Sinclair



We see the same stylistic trait in a seal that renders a herd of wild animals milling in a circle.

There is a clear sense of perspective and intriguing ways of showing diversity in the posture of legs and heads.



## The Mesopotamian tradition



Photo F. A. Buccellati

A most Hurrian of cities, Urkesh was also a cosmopolitan center wide open to Mesopotamian influence.

Thus it served as a conduit of southern traditions for the Hurrian world and beyond.

One of these was the epic of Gilgamesh.

This stone plaque depicts the moment in the epic when Gilgamesh (right) befriends Enkidu (left)

after the two have met in a bitter, but sport-like, contest.

They are now ready to undertake great adventures together – some of which may have been represented in the missing portion of the plaque.



# Faces of Urkesh



Are they looking at each other?  
Or at us, across the centuries?

# The Urkish bestiary



In whatever material, animal representations are rich and varied:  
an ivory puppy dog from near the *abi* (where puppy dogs were sacrificed...),  
the mother-of-pearl inlay of a rabbit from the Temple,  
equids and buffaloes on seals,  
the bronze lion of Tish-atal,  
and humble but artfully done clay figurines –  
everywhere we witness an unsuppressable wealth of imagination.



## Through a tablet brightly...



Photo Louvre Museum

Like light reflected through a crystal, writing provides us with unimagined details.

Whether on stone or on clay, cuneiform magically preserves for us the sounds and meanings of Hurrian as spoken at Urkish some 4300 years ago.

Kings relate their exploits, eager to preserve their name and fame. On stone, Tish-atal says he built a temple in Urkish. On clay, Ishar-*napshum* attests his *endanship* over Urkish.

They were seeking to break through the barrier of time to reach posterity.

As well they did.



Photo G. Gallacci



# The uses of writing



Photo L. Mount-Williams

The homework of an Urkish schoolboy learning a Sumerian word list.



Photo G. Gallacci

An invoice for goods sent to "the governor".

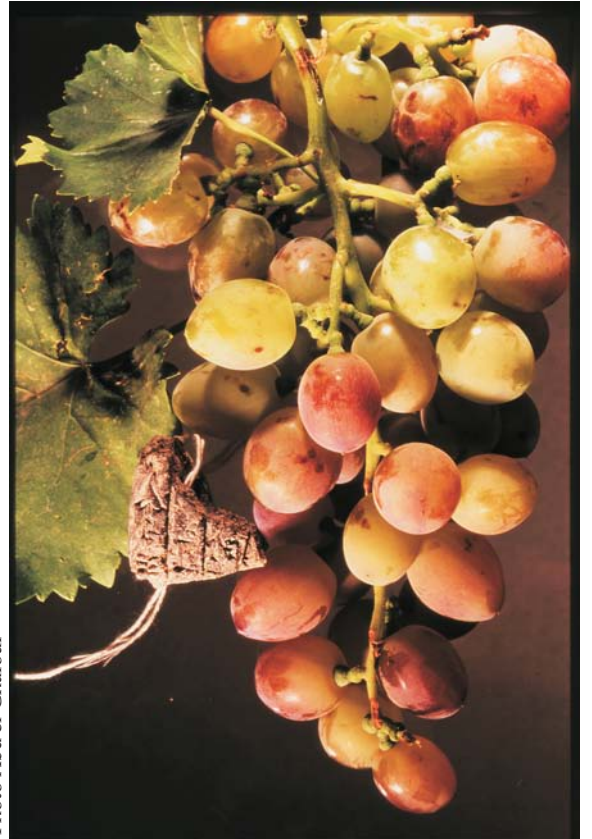


Photo Abd el-Chafour

A bill of lading for the shipment of grapes.

# Hurrian music

Drawings C. Hilsdale



The queen and her daughter, with two attendants, are entertained by a lyre player and a singer. All six figures are women!

Music played an important role in Hurrian society. From a later date and a different site (Ugarit on the Syrian coast) we have the earliest known musical score that records the notes that accompanied on the lyre the tune of a Hurrian religious hymn.





# Ceramics

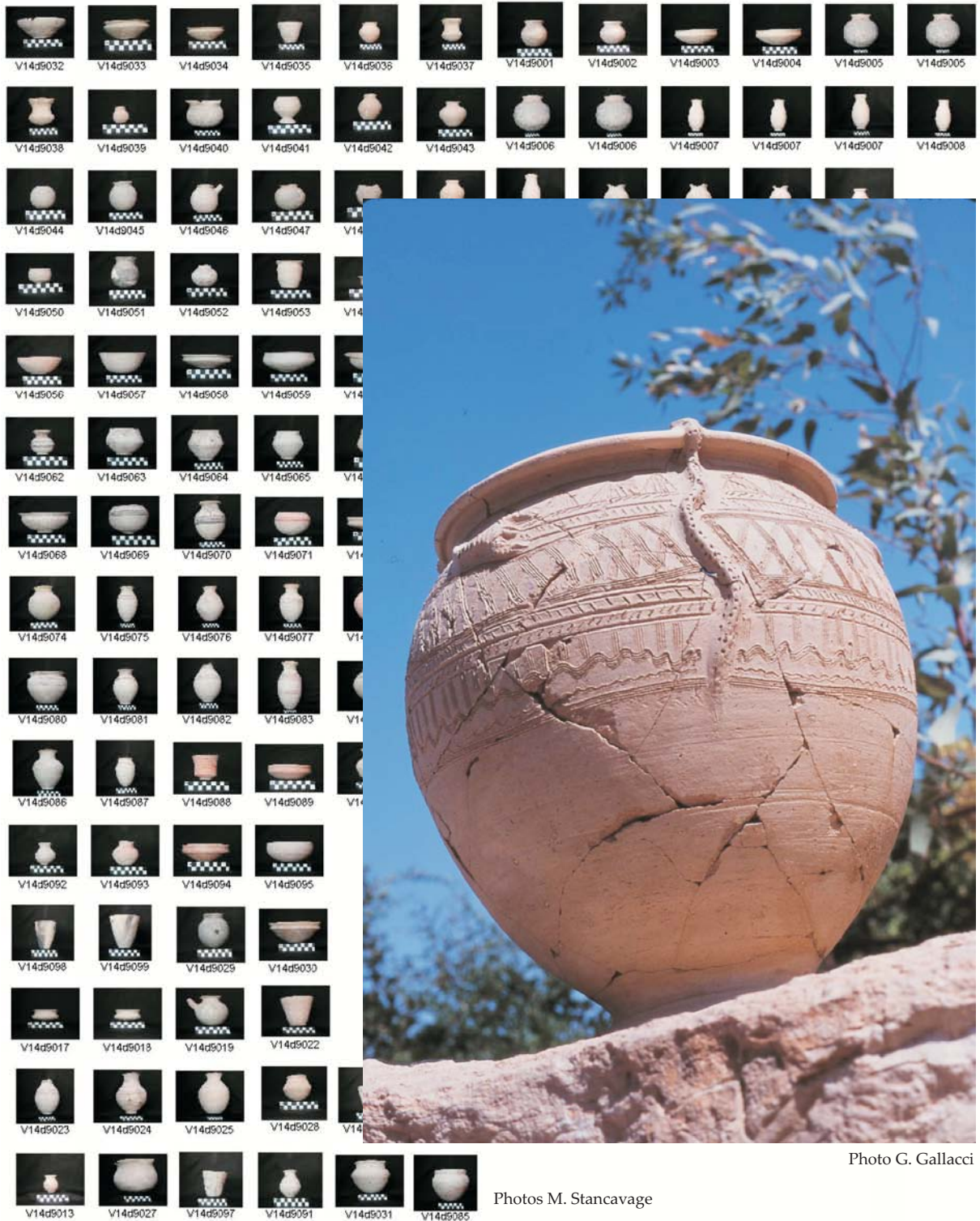


Photo G. Gallacci

Photos M. Stancavage

Because of their quantity,  
ceramic vessels are the best indicators of changes in style,  
and of corresponding time sequences.

Often we can link them to very specific functions.  
The large one decorated with snakes and scorpions may be the Hurrian *altanni*,  
used in divinatory rites in which the movement of snakes  
was observed when immersed in water.



# the palace

# The Palace of Tupkish



Photo J.J. Jarmakani

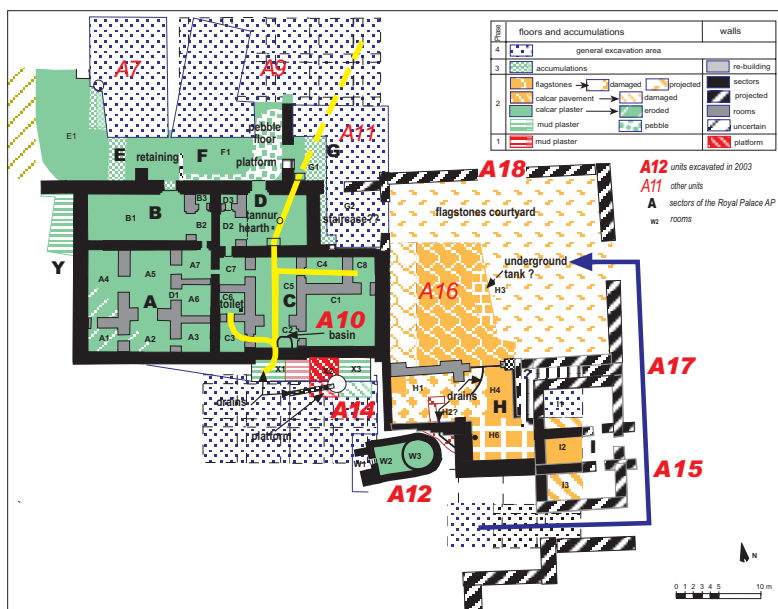


Photo and general plan of the Royal Palace AP. Excavations as of August 2003

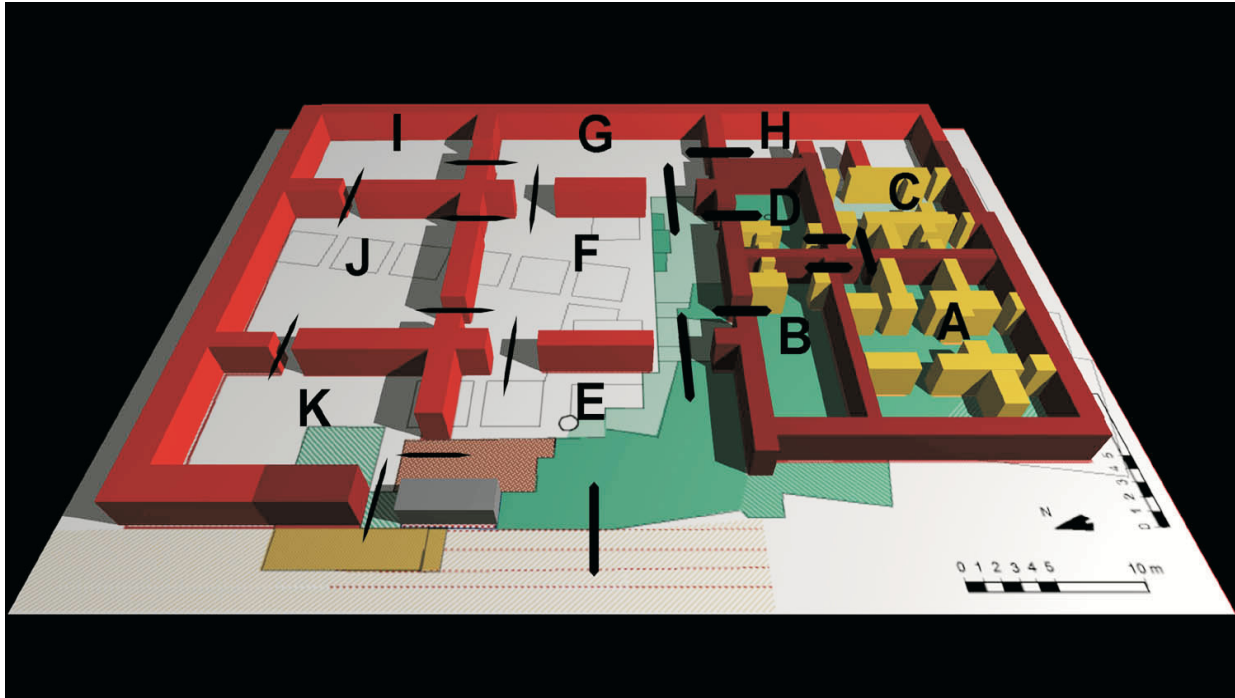
Michelangelo spoke as an archaeologist when he said he was but freeing his figures from the grip of the marble.

We, too, are freeing a whole city from the grip of the earth.

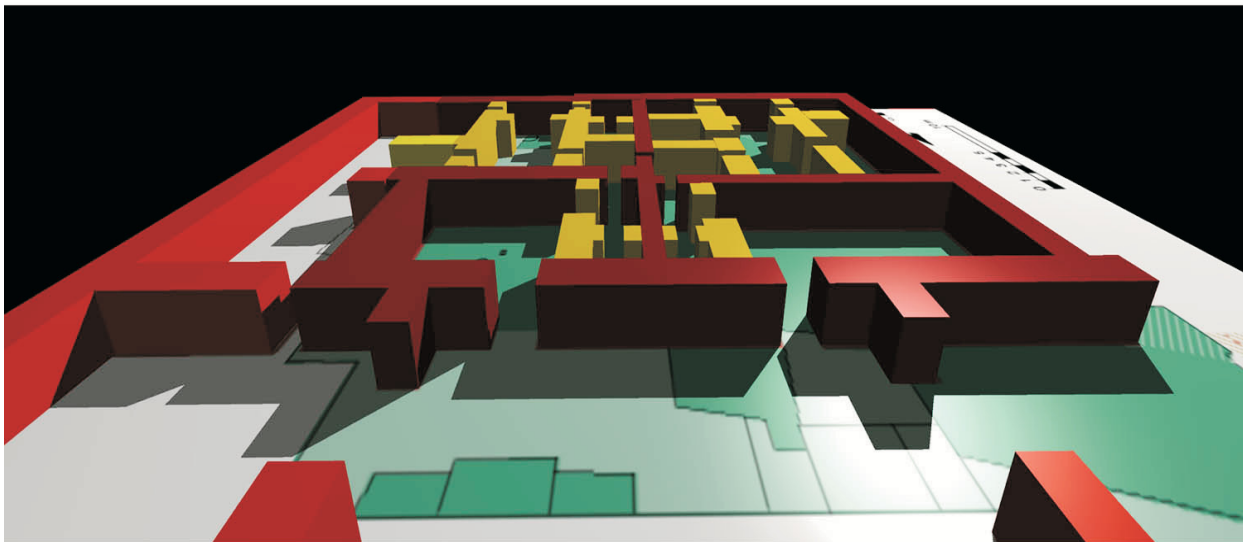
Here is the great Palace built by king Tupkish around 2250 B.C.

Its walls continue under the cover of the later settlements, where we will pursue them till we have revealed the full plan of the building.

# The archaeologist as architect



3-D renderings by F. A. Buccellati



The archaeologist and the architect work in a converse sort of way: the architect has a commission from a client, and must design a building, while the archaeologist has the building and must find out what the client wanted.

Computer graphics plays an important role in our field work: 3-D renderings like these are updated as the excavations progresses.

They help us visualize space as it was experienced  
when walls were fully standing,  
circulation patterns real,  
room functions perfectly understood.

Such a perceptual analysis of architectural space is fundamental for our effort to anticipate what we may find in the ground: they condition our strategy on a day to day basis.



# The heritage preserved



Photos G. Gallacci



Archaeology brings back to light the remnants of life once lived. In so doing, it raises two questions, seemingly in conflict with each other.

First, the remnants emerge as ruins, the only document bequeathed to us by the tell that rose to envelop the debris of its own collapse.

But, second, the ruins speak to the reality from which they sprang – and which we must recapture.

Conservation has a mandate to save the ruin, and restoration a mandate to show it again as meaningful.

At Mozan, we have achieved a balance between the two mandates, and the result is stunning, for here we have as if two sites in one.



# The architecture recaptured



Architecture speaks volumes, but only if volumes are present.

At Mozan, we have developed a system of protection of the ancient walls that conveys the intended volumes without altering in the slightest the ruins as originally discovered.



The system has evolved over the years, but throughout the process the main goal of saving the original has been achieved.





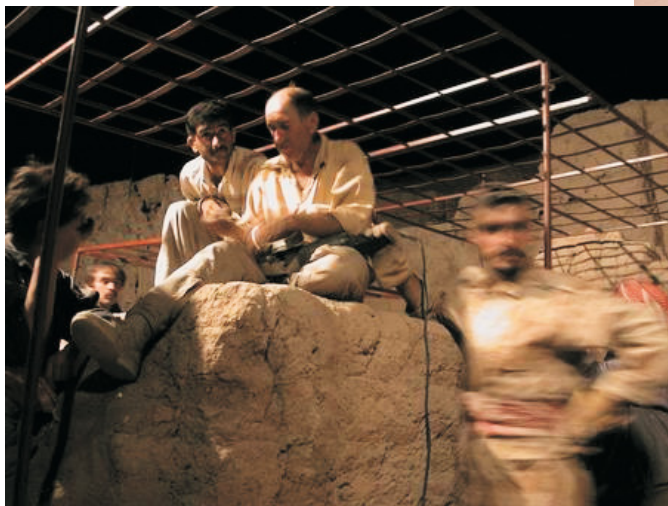
# The iron trellis



Reversibility is the ideal of all conservation projects. Our system is such that it can be removed entirely without leaving a trace. The iron trellis is modular to allow us to achieve this goal.



Photos J. J. Jarmakani



While it requires considerable skill and dedication, we can rely on wonderful local help, as with our master craftsman Sabah Kassem, shown here working into the night. In 2003, it took him and some twenty workmen two full days to remove some 400 meters of wall.



## Ways and means



The protective shelter is here in place over a wall.

In the foreground, metal scaffolding are ready for the other walls.



Partial opening of the canvas cover allows quick inspection.



Full exposure of the wall can be obtained in minutes.

Note the gap on the left resulting from a second millennium grave that had cut into the Palace structure.



Detail of stones and bricks in 2002 (12 years after excavation)

# Monitoring the record



1990

Fourteen years have passed since we first started the excavations in what turned out to be the Royal Palace of Tupkish.



While a great deal has changed in our understanding of this structure, nothing has changed in the preservation of the walls!



1997

At most other Syro-Mesopotamian sites, pervasive erosion has obliterated what remnants of walls had been excavated, and wholesale reconstruction takes the place of conservation,



2000

Urkesh remains instead as it had been left 4000 years ago – for us to uncover under the slopes of Tell Mozan.



2003

Photos  
G. Buccellati,  
F. A. Buccellati  
and  
G. Gallacci



## Refining the system



In 2004 we have undertaken a systemic change in the configuration of the shelters.

Two problems had emerged with the existing system. (1) The tightly tailored covers were more prone to being torn by winds because they created an undesirable sail effect. (2) Lifting the tarps to show the walls was time consuming.

The new experimental system uses material that lets air through; the tarps are not tailored as a single whole; each segment is pulled sideways like a normal curtain, and it is held in place by springs that can easily be unhooked.



the court

# The lion of Tupkish

Photo A. Abd el-Ghafour



Drawing P. Pozzi



The palace was built around 2300 B.C. by a king named Turkish. On this seal, Turkish acknowledges his son by queen Uqnitum as the crown prince.

The young prince is standing on the head of a live lion – so indicated by the fact that his feet are shown as embedded in the lion's mane.

And the lion is yawning – a posture that shows he is well sated after his meal..

Our drawings are composites of many small fragments, and thus they reconstitute, from their multiple impressions, the design of the original seal.



# Matching the fragments



Photos G. Buccellati



The fragments from which we assemble our composites are extremely small – difficult to find, and even more difficult to match!

Considering that the original was carved in the negative and on stone, one can but wonder at the skills (and eyesight!) of the ancient Urkish seal-cutters...

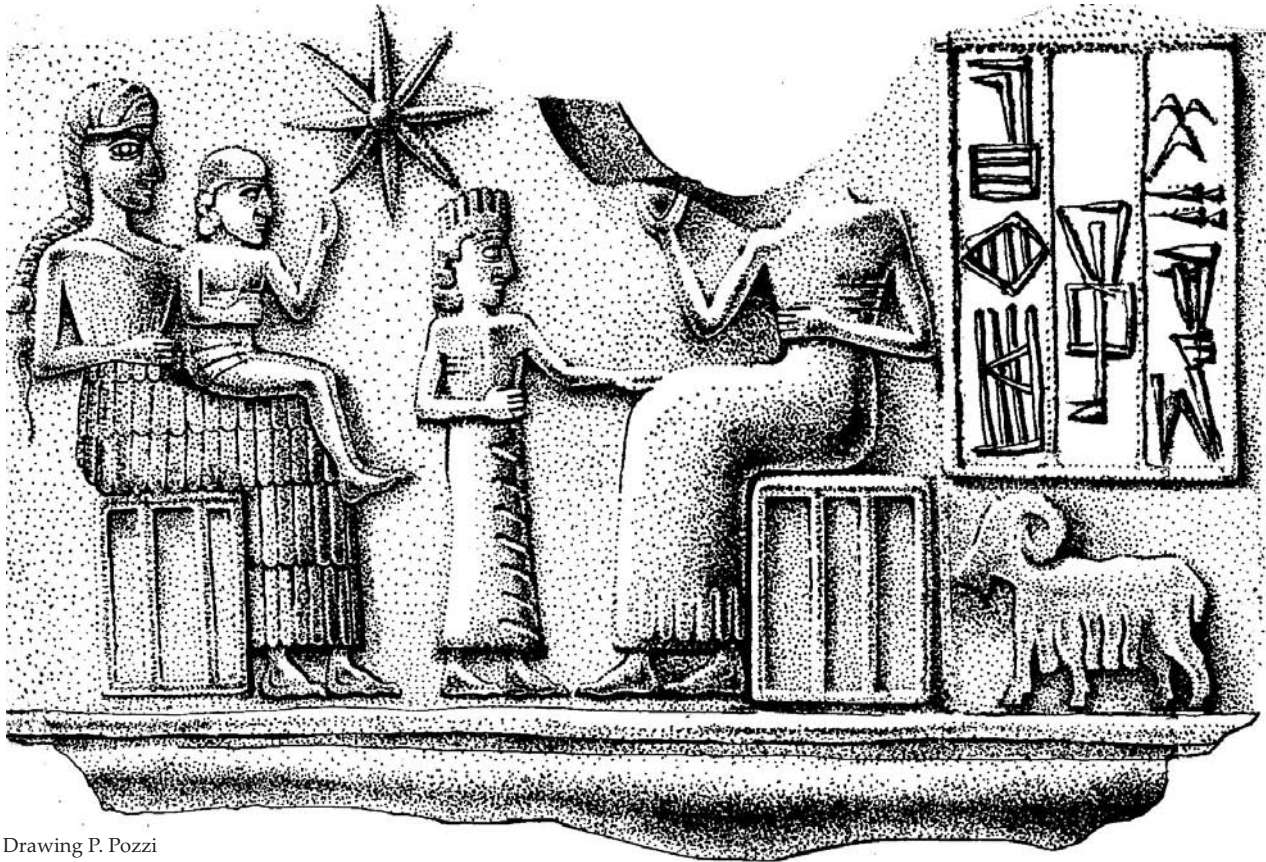


Drawing P. Pozzi

The physiognomic details are remarkable. Here the fine profile of the figure pouring some liquid for the lion is in marked contrast with the less than attractive face of the crown prince...



## Family and politics



Drawing P. Pozzi

The royal family of Urkesh is shown here in what appears to be an intimate scene.

In fact, it is a political manifesto.



Photo A. Abd el-Ghafour

The cuneiform inscription tells us that this is the seal of the queen, Uqnitum.

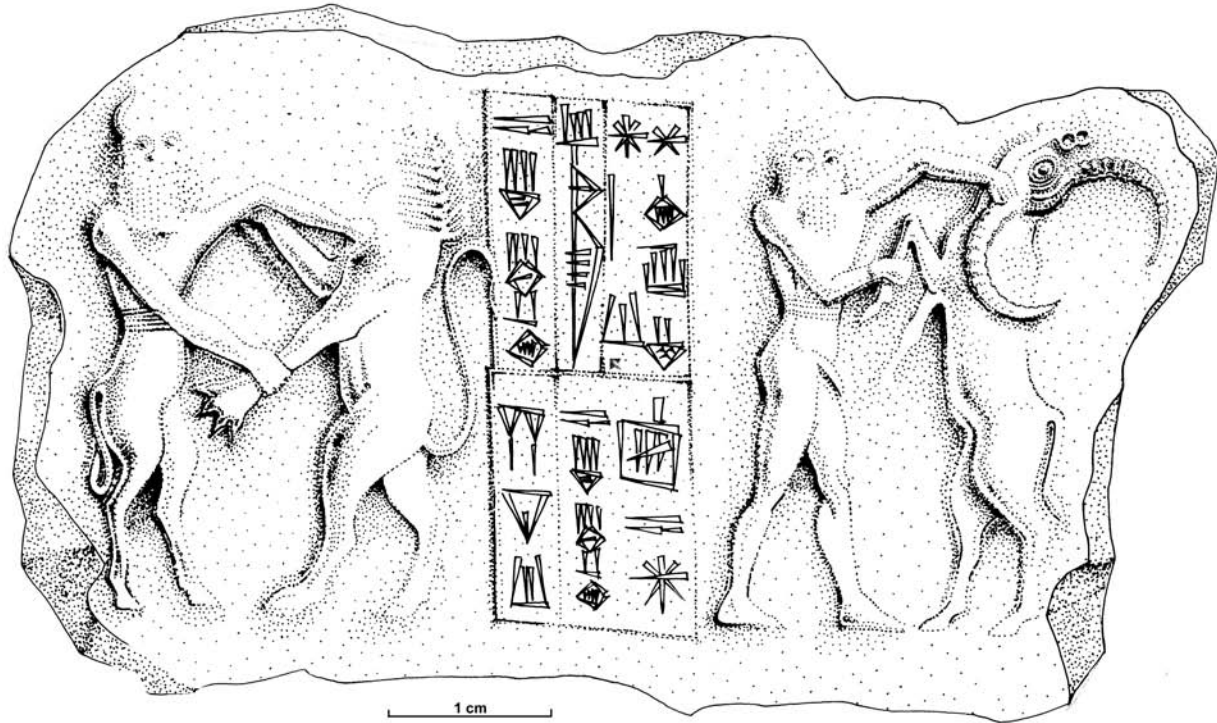
And she wants it known that she is the king's primary wife (in point of fact, no other wife has left us in the Palace impressions of her seal).

As such, it is *her* son (shown here touching the knee of the king his father) who will be the next ruling king.



# The queen as ruler

Drawing P. Pozzi



Drawings C. Hilsdale



One of the most important finds from Urkesh has been the collection of sealings that include the impressions of the seal of Tar'am-Agade.

She was the daughter of Naram-Sin, one of the great Mesopotamian kings, and her seal (above) bears witness to the importance of her filiation: the theme of a heraldic animal contest is one cherished by members of the dynasty. She presents herself as endowed with inherited power.

Her predecessor Uqnitum (left) chose a different theme: she stresses her role as the primary wife of the ruling king and the mother of the crown prince.

Her personal power as a ruler is symbolically emphasized (left) by placing the inscription that gives her title as "queen" on *the shoulders* of her servants.

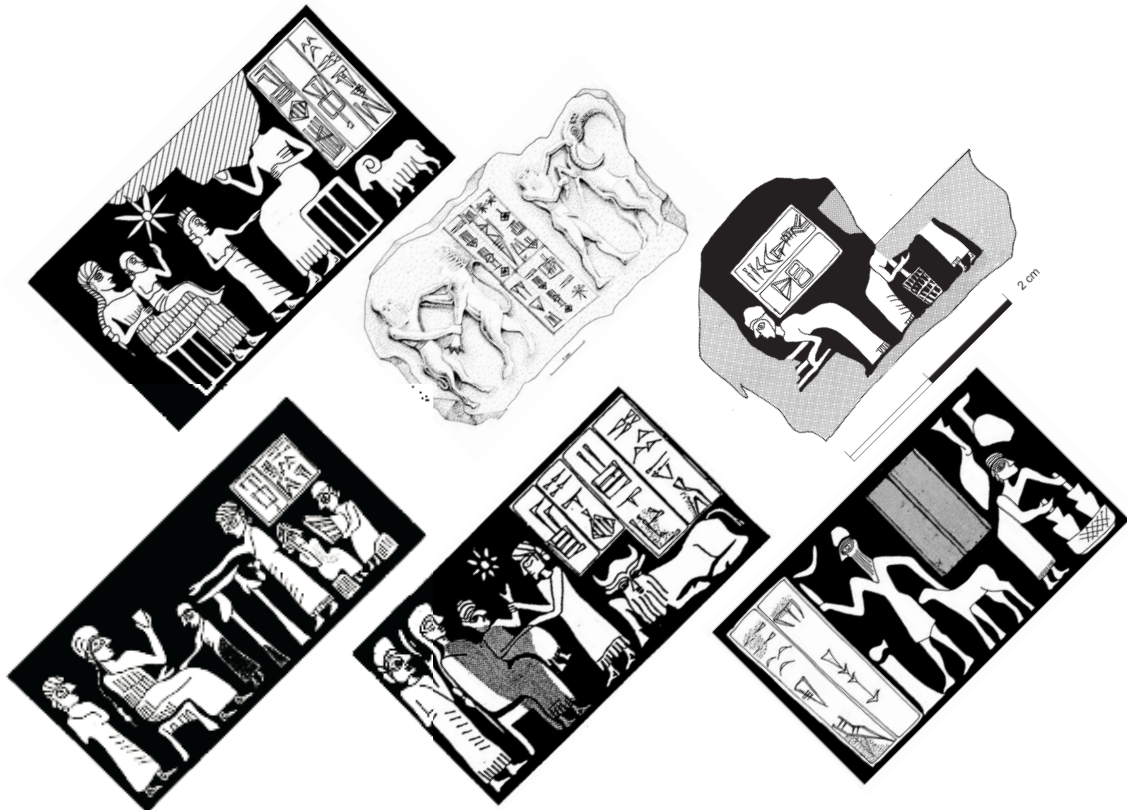
# The women of Urkesk

Drawings C. Hilsdale



Another seal of queen Uqnitum shows her with a piglet as a filler motif below the inscription that bears her name. We can only conjecture what may have been in the damaged part: given the importance of the piglets in the ceremonies of the *abi*, could this seal have represented the queen's connection with the woman who was performing the Hurrian necromantic rituals?

What is certain is that the seals present us with a variety of functions in which women are active, from their highest role as queens and princesses down through the ranks as nurse, cook, lady-in-waiting, and humble servant.





# The prince enthroned



Seals were rolled three times on lumps of clay affixed to containers or doors.

Here we have a door sealing with the impression of the seal of the newest king of Urkesh, Ishar-napshum.

The scene is similar to that found on the Tupakan seal with the live lion. Here, however, the two lions are clearly the sculptural podium on which the statue of a god rests.

In front of, and facing away from, the god, stands a young human figure.

It is probably another rendering of the dynastic succession theme, except that here the crown prince is absorbed within the divine sphere.

Photo G. Gallacci

Drawing F. Portales



1cm

the temple



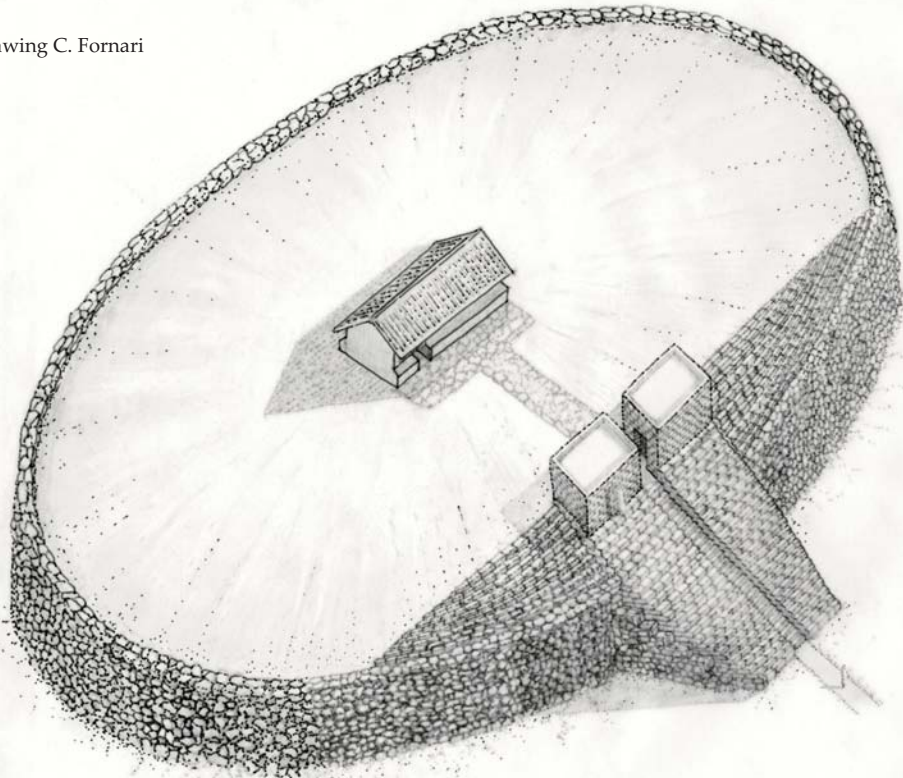
# Aiming for the sky



Photo G. Gallacci

Photo F. A. Buccellati

Drawing C. Fornari

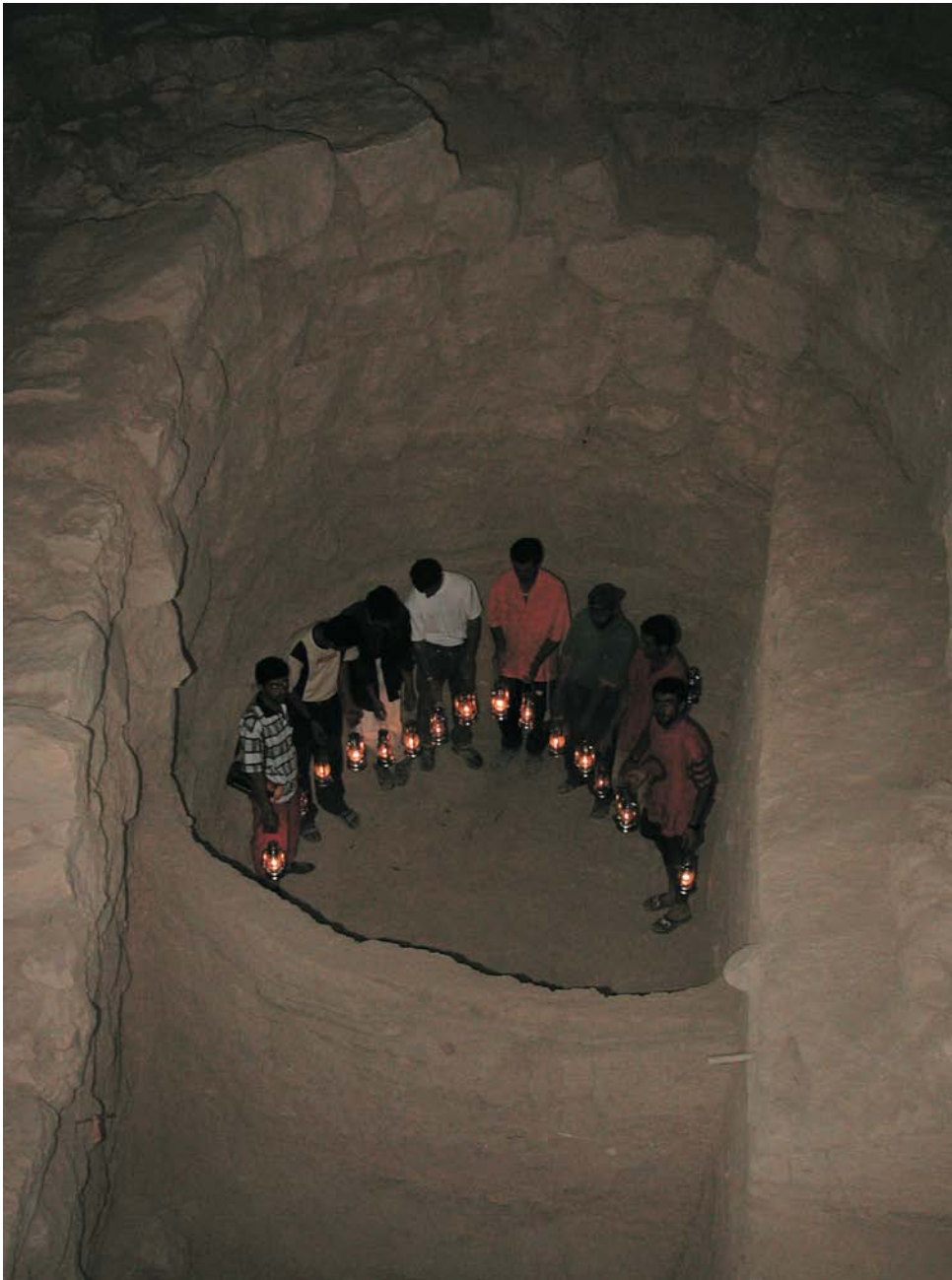


The Temple Terrace is the most monumental third millennium construction in all of Syro-Mesopotamia.

It was probably erected at the beginning of the third millennium, and remained in use throughout the history of ancient Urkesh.

The architectural reconstruction is a reliable projection based on the areas excavated so far. In the coming years we will expose the Terrace in its entirety, and show its relationship to the Tupkish Palace.

# Reaching for the Netherworld

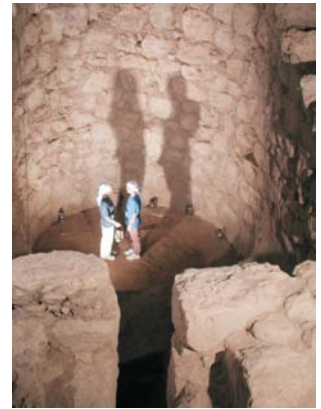


Photos G. Gallacci and F. A. Buccellati

The *abi* was one of the most sacred, and most Hurrian, places of ritual in ancient Urkish.

An underground structure, used seldom and then at night, it served as a conduit between our world and the land of the dead – the “undiscovered country” of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

But the Hurrians claimed they *could* discover it: through the help of mediums who would interpret the responses given by the spirits of the Netherworld.





## The Lady of the Netherworld



Photo G. Gallacci

This remarkable little jar comes from the great underground shaft that served as the *abi*, the Hurrian passage to the Netherworld.

It presumably contained perfumed oil used in the *abi* rituals.

The distortion of the mouth may emphasize the fact that the spirits of the Netherworld (as embodied in our anthropomorphic jar) did not speak clearly but, as the ritual texts say, uttered a speech similar to the chirping of birds.

# The gaze from the “undiscovered country”

Urkish @20 – Plate 29



Photos G. Gallacci



The intense gaze of this female figure seems to beckon from a remoteness – the remoteness of time, but also the remoteness of perceptions that are no longer ours.

Through careful study, we seek to re-embed these perceptions in our own experience.

We attune our eyes to the heightened expressionistic rendering of the human figure.

And we attune our sensibility to the religious response she most likely did once elicit:

a sense of the beyond arising from the Hurrian rituals aimed at discovering the “undiscovered country”...



# Action, cult and myth



Photos G. Gallacci



When we find the original seal (rather than its impression on a clay lump) the scene that can be rolled is sharp and clear.

Above, a unique representation of a ritual being performed.

The seated woman is stirring some liquid in a vat — the blood of the slain animal?

The two attendants, or priests, have just cut off the head of the young bull.

The one on the left still holds the knife in his hand,

the one on the right holds up the animal by his hind legs.

The head of the bull is neatly placed at the base of palm-like column, with a jar on top.

Below a mythological scene with otherworldly beings.



the toil



# They also lived



Photos G. Buccellati



Bending on their forebears,  
and as if locking eyes with each other,  
our workmen seem to want  
to bring these bones back to life –  
to the life, at least,  
of cultural understanding.

Their remnants are placed  
where they were first buried –  
with simple offerings  
that signify the reverence  
humans have always felt  
for death.

Through their bones,  
and through what they have left behind  
of a culture that once breathed,  
we do recover the imprint  
of the life they lived.

# The sun also shines



Photos J. Forde

The summer sun  
is blinding  
and hot.

Raised high  
above the excavations,  
and repositioned as needed,  
light but strong enough  
to withstand the wind,  
our tents direct the shade  
just where we want it.

Most of what we find  
is one version or another  
of clay and dust...  
Without shade,  
we could hardly  
have even seen  
those small clay objects  
that hold such secrets  
about our ancient city.



# The work of our hands



Nothing but teamwork



can bring to a successful issue



our confrontation

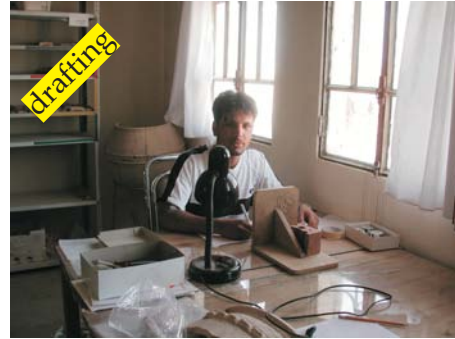
with the millennial soil...



# A future for the past



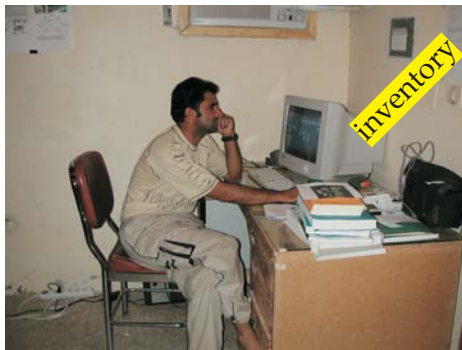
Intent as we are in recovering the past, we cannot forget the present and the future.



It is especially the young Syrians working with us who are the guarantee of a safe future for the shreds of history we see buried under the soil they tread today.



We have trained a large cadre of local assistants to work on the tasks that require more and more of their skills.



The talent they bring to the project is matched only by their enthusiasm – and ours, working alongside them.





# The tools of the craft



Removal of the loose dirt after excavation is the single activity that takes the most time and effort. The enclosed conveyor belt provides the best solution: it was designed by Sarkis Balian and brings the dirt to a large sifter or directly to a truck.



Over long distances we use the “bucket rail,” a monorail designed by Sabah Kassem that discharges the dirt at great speed, avoiding the need to walk across previously excavated areas.

# A view from the top



Simple and elegant, the kite keeps an unbiased eye open to view the progress of work on the ground.



The camera, hanging some 30 meters below the kite, is activated by a remote control ...stolen from a toy car!



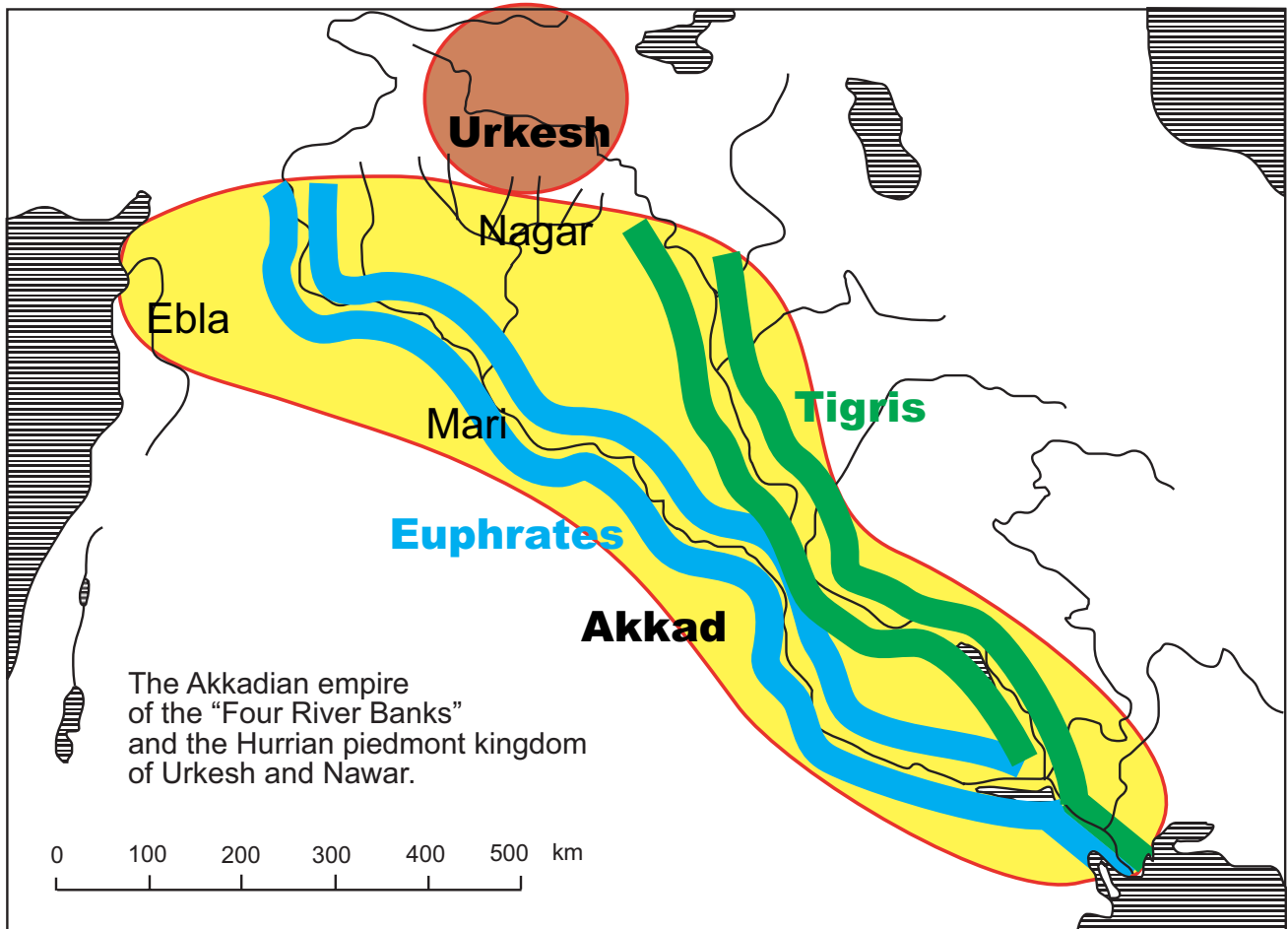


# A mound of data...



The Expedition house was conceived and built  
as a research center.  
It offers ample space and sophisticated equipment  
for advanced research directly at the site,  
where we remain in residence for up to four months in the summer  
(extending it sometimes even in the winter).  
Our facilities include a first rate computer network,  
fully equipped conservation and natural science laboratories,  
ample space for pottery analysis,  
an oversize well-organized storeroom with all non-museographic objects.  
(This folio, too, was produced in the expedition house)  
The house and its computer network  
serve as a metaphor for our approach to method:  
even the most minute piece of information derived from our excavations  
is promptly and fully integrated into a single harmonious whole.  
It is here that the mound of dirt  
gets transformed into a mound of data –  
on which in turn rests our broader cultural understanding.

# The backdrop of empires



## Syro-Mesopotamian chronology

5000	<i>Halaf period</i>
2900	<i>Sumerian influence in the north</i>
2700	<i>Early Dynastic II</i>
2500	<i>Early Dynastic III</i>
2300	<i>Akkadian empire</i>
2000	<i>Post-Akkadian/Ur III</i>
1800	<i>Old Babylonian ("Khabur" pottery)</i>
1500-1400	<i>Mitanni ("Nuzi" pottery)</i>

The spiral of power was set in motion from the very start of history.

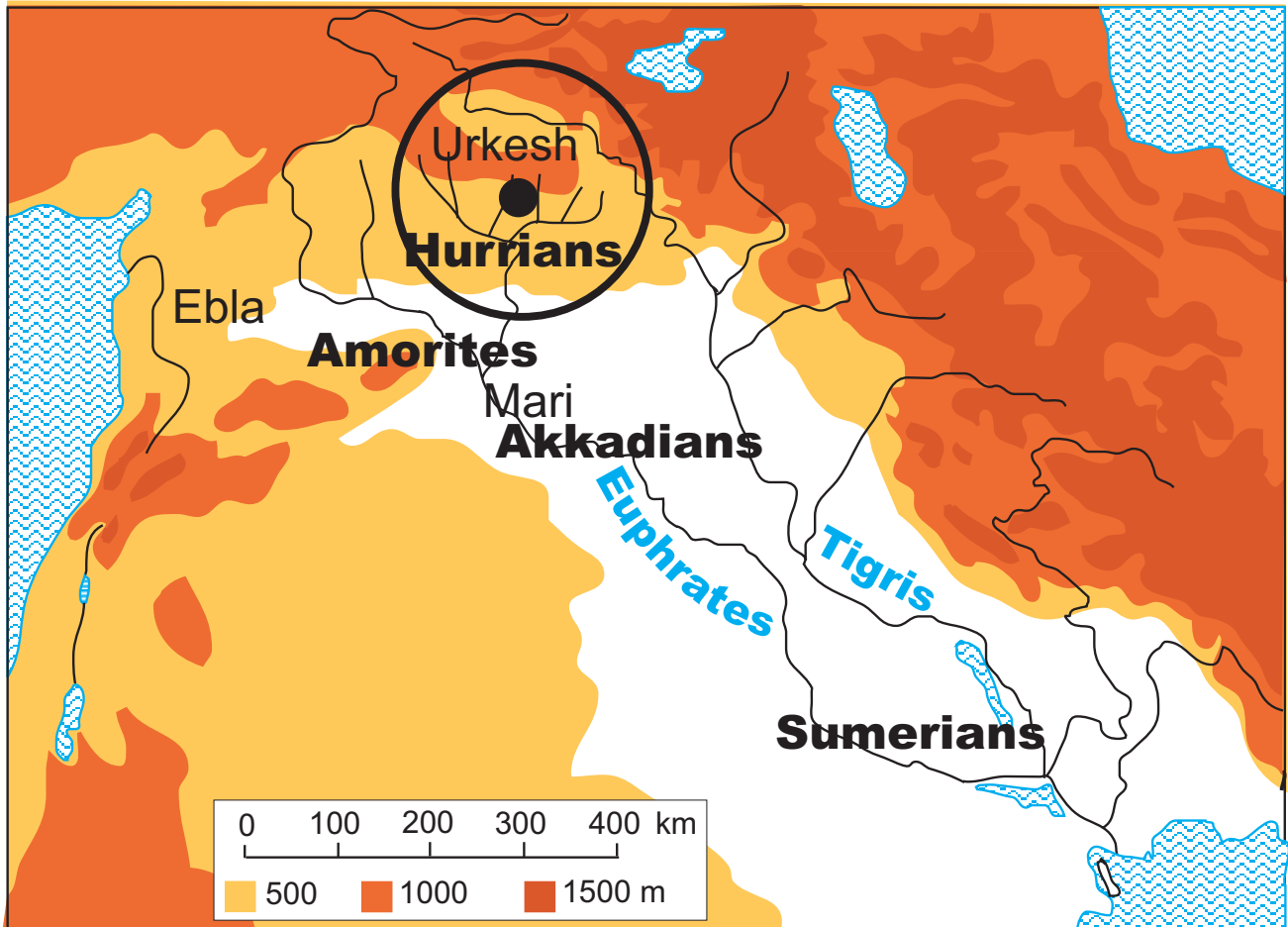
By the middle of the third millennium a large empire was established by a Semitic speaking population, the Akkadians.

The only major city in Syria that did not come under their sway was Urkesh, whose kings remained allied by marriage to the ruling dynasty of Akkad.

Counterbalancing the expansionist mode of Akkad, Urkesh, as we know it from our excavations, continued to assert its independence and unique mode of life.



# Birth of a civilization



We do not bring back to light  
just buildings and objects.  
From the ground of Urkish we recover history.

Civilization,  
understood as the beginning of organized social living,  
began in the Near East about 5000 years ago.

Syria  
is at the core of the lands  
where this momentous development took place.  
In the dynamics of the history of civilization,  
Syria, more than any other region,  
provided alternative civilizational models.

Urkesh  
is for now the only city of the third millennium  
that can for certain be considered Hurrian.

The Hurrians of Urkish  
wrought a major change in history some 5000 years ago.  
It was the birth of a new Syrian civilization then,  
and we are privileged to bring about its rebirth  
in the Syria of today.

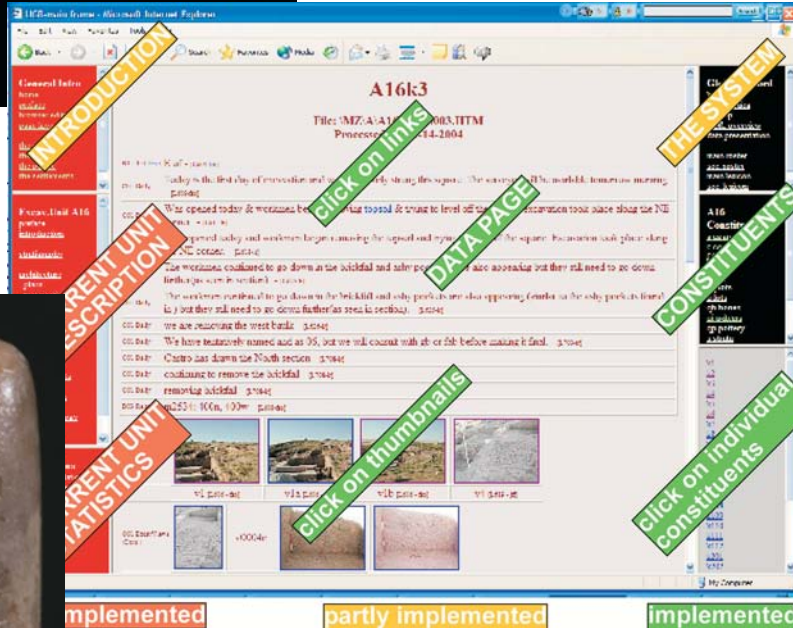
The Hurrians died out as people,  
but their role as a link in the chain of human history  
and their impact as a formative force in culture  
is emerging ever so clearly from the ground of Tell Mozan.

# The reassembled vision



[www.urfesh.org](http://www.urfesh.org)

Whereto  
all the toil?



As with the six characters  
in search of an author,  
a myriad pieces of evidence  
come to us out of the ground  
to ask that we recompose them  
into the whole they once were,  
to ask that we re-infuse meaning  
into their fragmented state.

Thereto goes our toil.

We, the archaeologists, bring back together  
what time has shattered and scattered.  
For Urkesh, we provide the *Global Record*,  
a unique digital presentation, in browser format, of all the evidence  
along with our interpretation of it.  
It is the reassembled vision our searching characters have been asking for.

We trust it will remain through time.

Ephemeral though the electronic medium is,  
the substance, we trust, will match the bronze of Tish-atal's lion and its inscription.  
We hand it down so that it may be, in the words of Horace,  
"a monument more lasting than even bronze."