

The 2005-2006
excavations
at Tell Mozan,
ancient Urkesh:

recovering
a new
civilization

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A vast new panorama through space and time

The architecture of ancient Urkish is so monumental that the excavations have to expand exponentially – if we are to do justice to the scale of the structures we are exposing.

The great Temple Terrace is the most daunting of these monuments, and its significance is exceptional. What makes it so unique is that it is very ancient, specifically Hurrian in character, massive in size, and extremely well preserved

Antiquity. The most extraordinary find of 2006 was the discovery of an earlier phase, lurking just below the one we are excavating, that dates back to about 3500 B.C., some fifteen centuries before the period to which current scholarly opinion pegs the “arrival” of the Hurrians in Syria.

Hurrian identity. The character of this structure is unique, and it gives eloquent evidence of a civilization that had remained so far a mere blank in the known history of Syro-Mesopotamia.

Monumentality. Rivaling the pyramids of Egypt, and contemporary with them, we have in Urkish an alternative use of monumentality – the Temple Terrace is here a ladder to heaven rather than the burial tumulus of a dead king.

Preservation. In contrast with the rest of Syro-Mesopotamia, where the use of mudbrick has caused the upper part of buildings to vanish forever, the Hurrian Temple Terrace of Urkish is fully preserved as first built some forty-five centuries ago.

We have, in these two years 2005 and 2006, made a major inroad into the past. Below is the wide angle view of our recent work, with the excavations in the foreground, the Temple in the background and the Syro-Turkish border in the distance. The night view projects a vista in space that echoes the new vista through time. It is not just the darkness of the sky that our gaze can now begin to pierce. We penetrate as well, ever more deeply, the darkness of time.



Four and half millennia later...



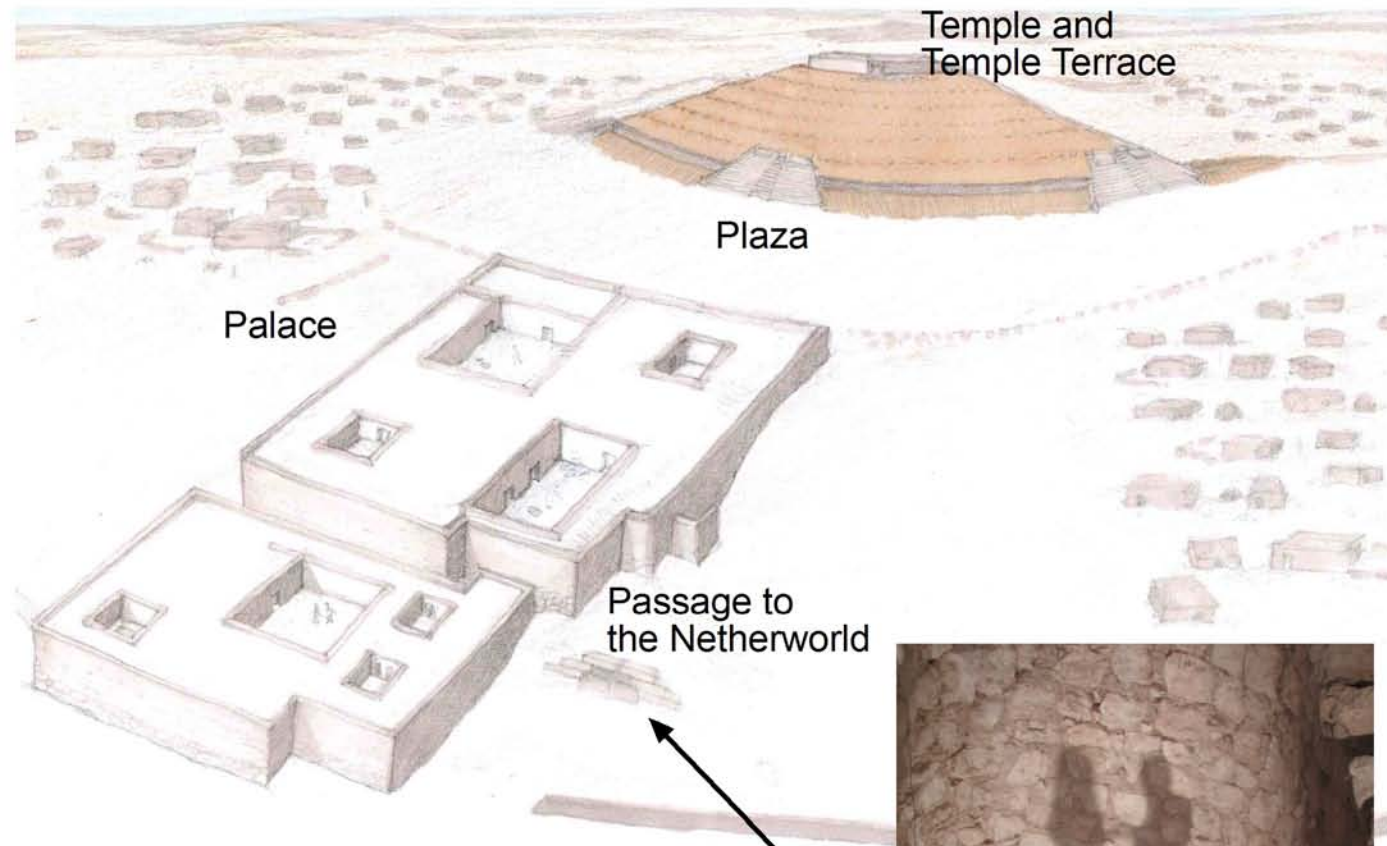
Recovering worlds we did not know existed
is the privilege, and joy, of the archaeologist.

This year, the world we touched was laden with meaning,
and – it remains intact,
four and half millennia after it was first built.

It is the monumental staircase
leading to the Temple of the Hurrian father of the gods,
Kumarbi,
whom we identify with the power of the magma within a volcano.

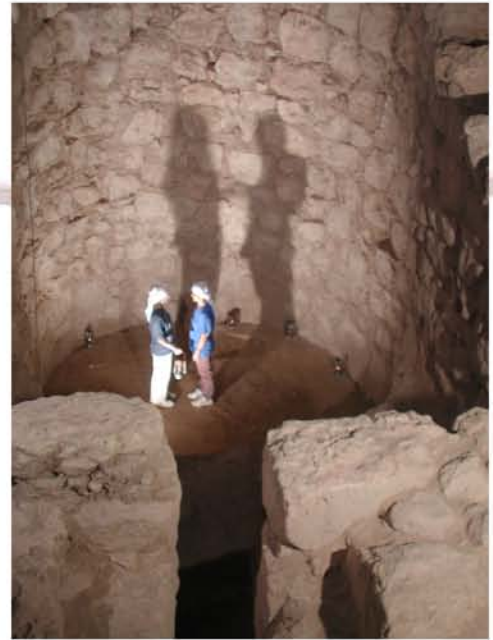
We are standing here, at night,
to consider details and reflect on the larger picture –
the electric lighting a metaphor
of the light we bring from our present
to theirs.

Between Heaven and Hell



The royal Palace of Tupkish is framed between two sacral poles that defined the religious universe of the Hurrians.

Hidden below ground is the passage to the Netherworld (*abi* as it was called in Hurrian, to the right). There, the spirits were summoned to bespeak the future to king and queen. This we have excavated in previous years.



At the other end, looming large above the roofline of the Palace, the Temple atop the Terrace which we are uncovering now. With its bold architectural layout, and its even more ambitious ideological statement, the Terrace beckons to the heavens where the same divine world is venerated.

This constitutes an urban monumental complex that is quite unique in ancient Syro-Mesopotamia. It is "monumental" in a physical sense, because it spans some 15 meters in height. And it is "monumental" in a spiritual sense because it joins together the sacral and the political spheres within the unparalleled urban landscape of ancient Urkish.

A Hurrian Jacob's ladder

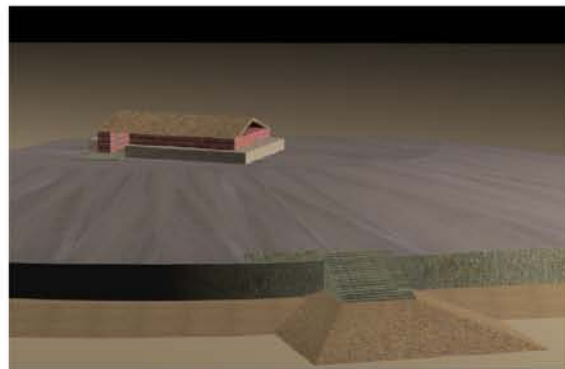


Twenty-four steps
are a short distance for a climb to heaven.
But the ideology behind it
bridges a much wider gap –
that between man and God.

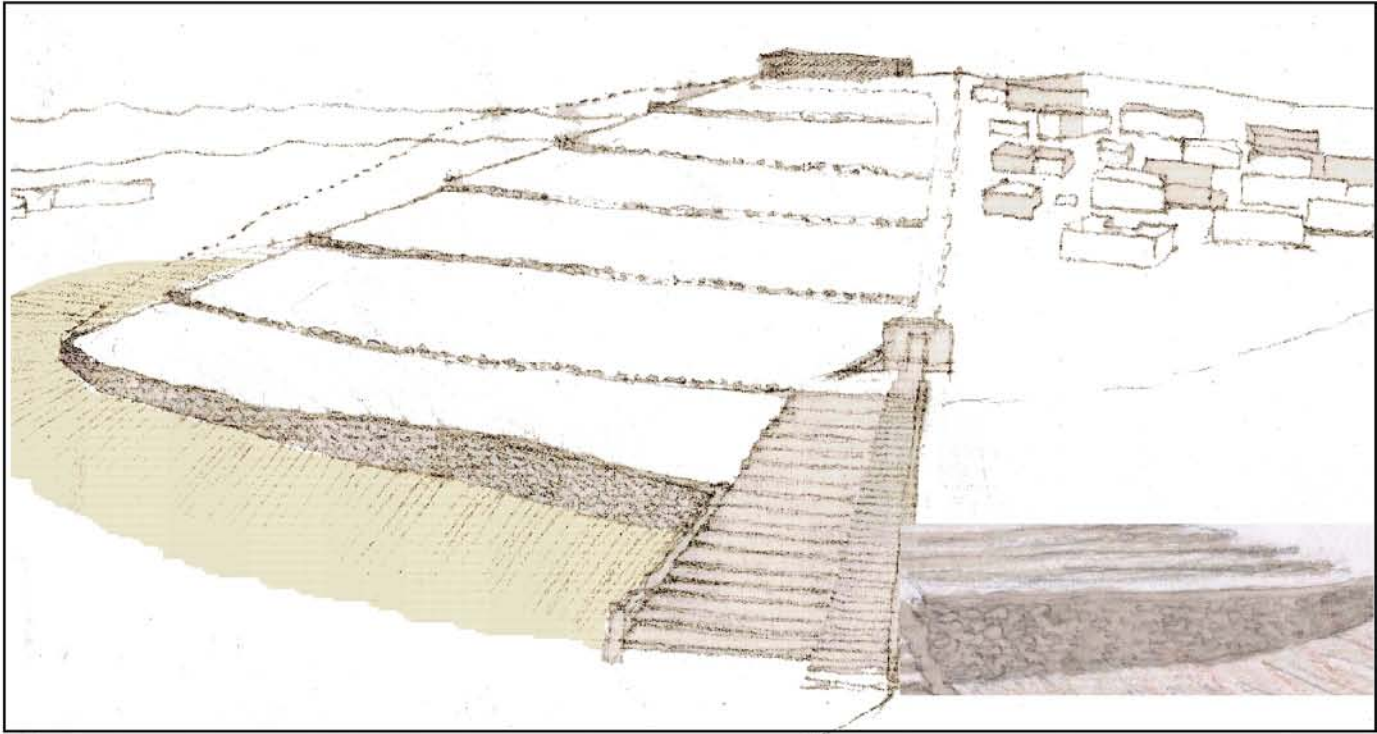
The staircase we see dates to about 2500 B.C.
Some earlier steps can be seen below
the bottom of the staircase,
dating back to 3500 B.C.

Some two millennia later
is when the book of Genesis
places a dream that has become
a hallmark for all dreams to come:
Jacob's nightly vision of a ladder
along which human aspirations
and divine blessings
climb and descend.

How many other aspirations and blessings
did in the remote Hurrian past
negotiate the steps we now see once again
in the full light of day?



The ruse of symmetry



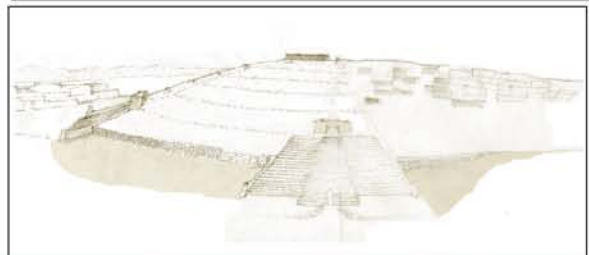
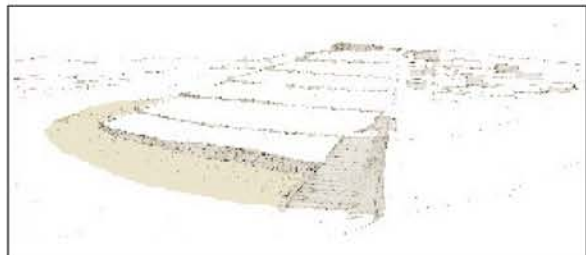
What would you have imagined
in 2005
after the excavations exposed
a staircase that clearly seemed to be
half of a larger whole (*drawing right*)?

Most likely,
you would have imagined
a symmetrical other half...
So did we,
as the architectural reconstruction shows.
We even projected a complete staircase
photographically,
by flipping the one half we actually have.

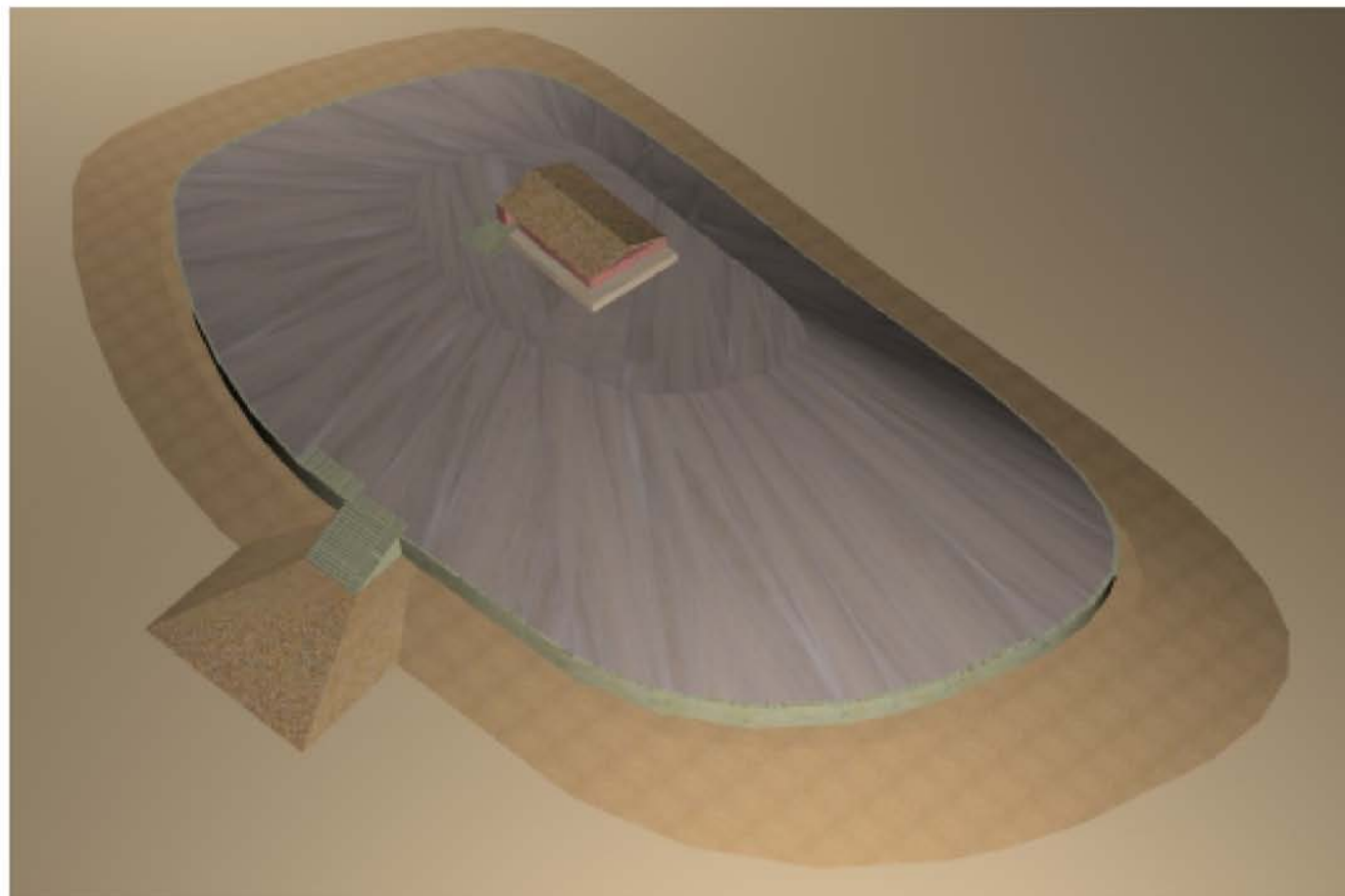
But, no!
The Hurrians seem to have delighted
in asymmetry,
and the 2006 excavations
found no trace
of the mirrored half to the right...

We are now projecting the wall
as shown in the drawing at the top.

But you never know...
2007 may bring us
yet another ruse of the reality underground.



The virtual view



Without a backhoe,
it is impossible
to expose the
Temple Terrace
to its full extent.
But such
mechanical tools
are not allowed.

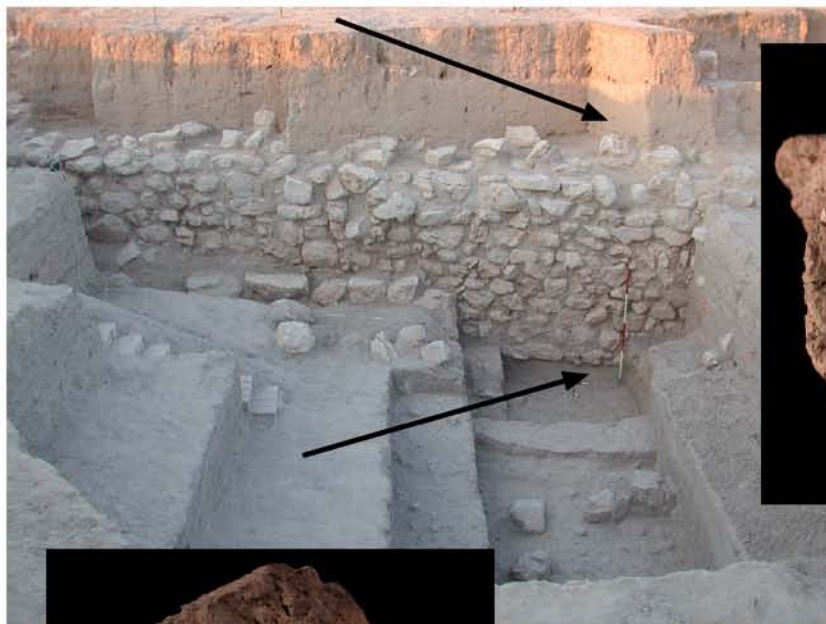
So, unless
an exception is made
in the future,
it will only be through
a virtual visualization
that we will be able
to gain a full view of this exceptional monument.



Here are two preliminary three-dimensional reconstructions –
of the entire complex from the air (by Federico Buccellati)
and of the staircase from the ground up
as the ancients would have seen it (by Niccolò dell'Unto).

We have some major work under way along these lines,
in collaboration with Maurizio Forte of the
Istituto per le Tecnologie Applicate ai Beni Culturali
of the Italian Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche.

When time lurks underneath



Just below
the foundations,
and just below
the top
of the Terrace wall
(*arrows*),
a big surprise
awaited us.

These clay lumps
bear the impression
of cylinder seals
that unmistakably belong
to the mid Uruk period,
about 3500 B.C.

A recumbent quadruped,
an upright standard
set next to a table,
coiled snakes,
are the telltale sign
of this archaic time.



This very early dating
is supported
by the ceramic inventory
associated with the sealings.

In and of themselves,
these are modest artifacts.

But the consequence we can draw
from their findspot (top photo)
is momentous.

For they give a firm date
for the antecedent of
the monumental Temple Terrace.
What lurks below is clearly
an earlier version of the same Terrace.

The continuity of such impressive
cultic architecture implies
that the earlier construction phase, too,
is due to the Hurrians –
the earliest evidence by far
of their first appearance in history.

Their loss, our gain...

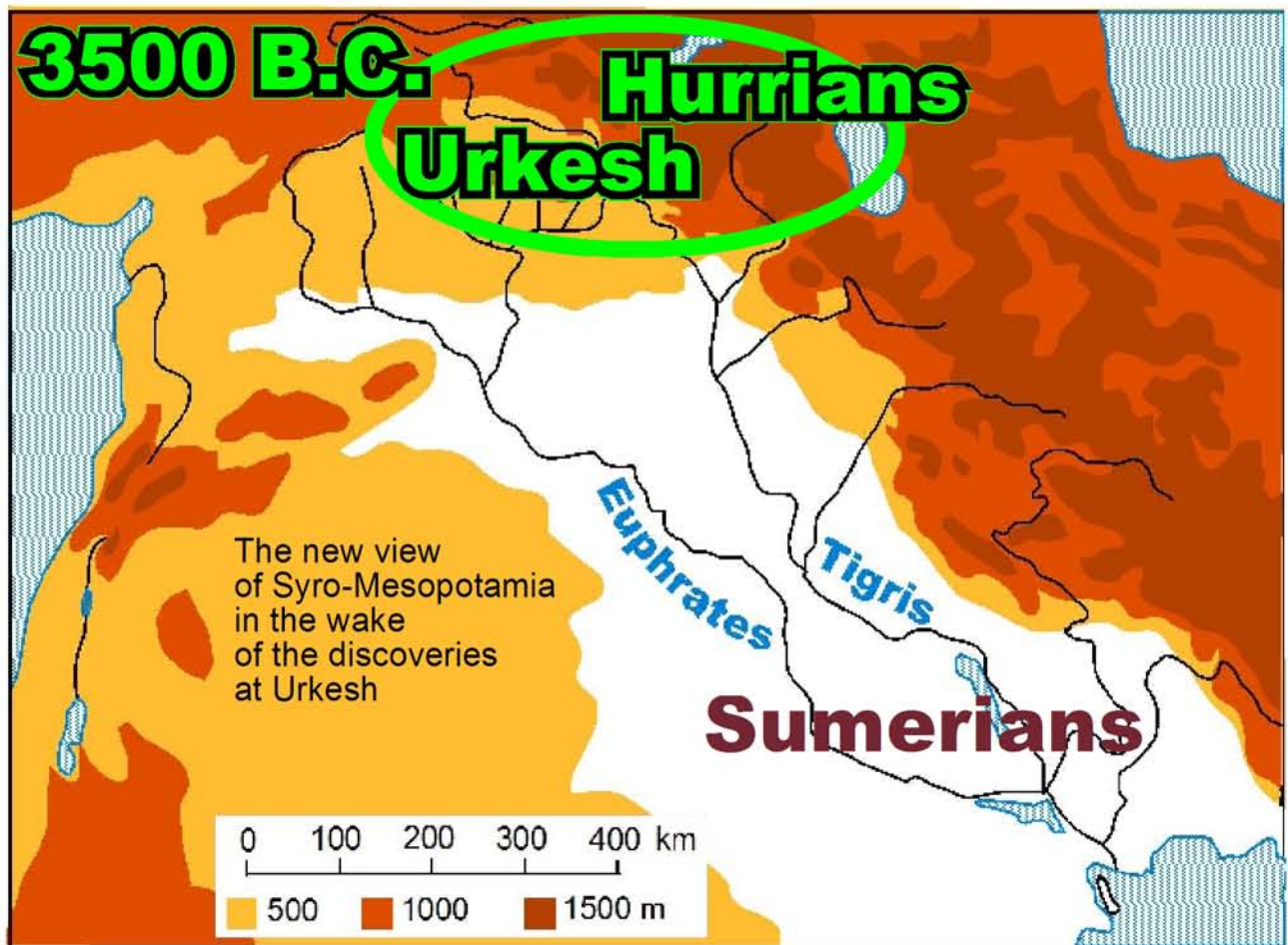


A beautiful pendant,
lost on the floor of the Plaza facing the Temple Terrace.
By the time the owner missed it, it had disappeared,
embedded in the dirt of the Plaza,
for us to retrieve some 34 centuries later.

It is made of a vitreous paste, not uncommon by 1400 B.C.
It rivaled precious stones, which it intentionally imitated.
In a letter from this period to the king of the coastal city of Ugarit,
his ambassador at the Hittite court warns him
of the displeasure of his overlord, the Hittite king,
because he had received in tribute glass (not unlike our piece)
instead of lapislazuli!

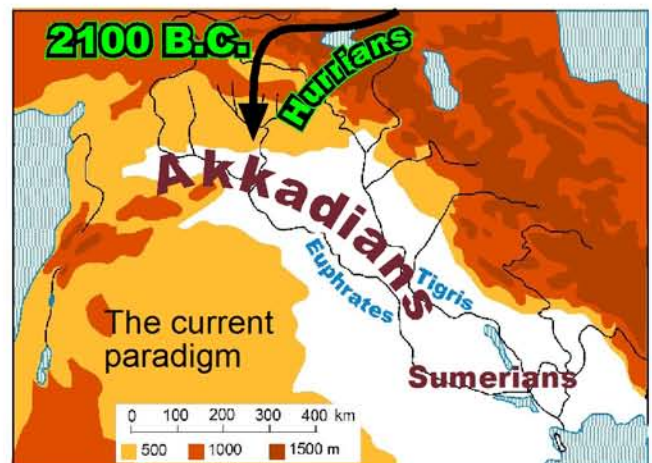
*What is the matter that you should keep writing to the Great King:
"Here is my shipment of lapislazuli?"
The Great King became utterly enraged in his heart, and roughed me up saying:
"What does this man [the vassal king of Ugarit!] think he is doing?
He picks up a piece of glass and sends it to me
pretending he is sending lapislazuli?"*

Calibrating history



Open any current book on the history of the ancient Near East, and you will read that the Hurrians came into Mesopotamia late – at the turn of the third millennium B.C., following the demise of the Akkadian empire.

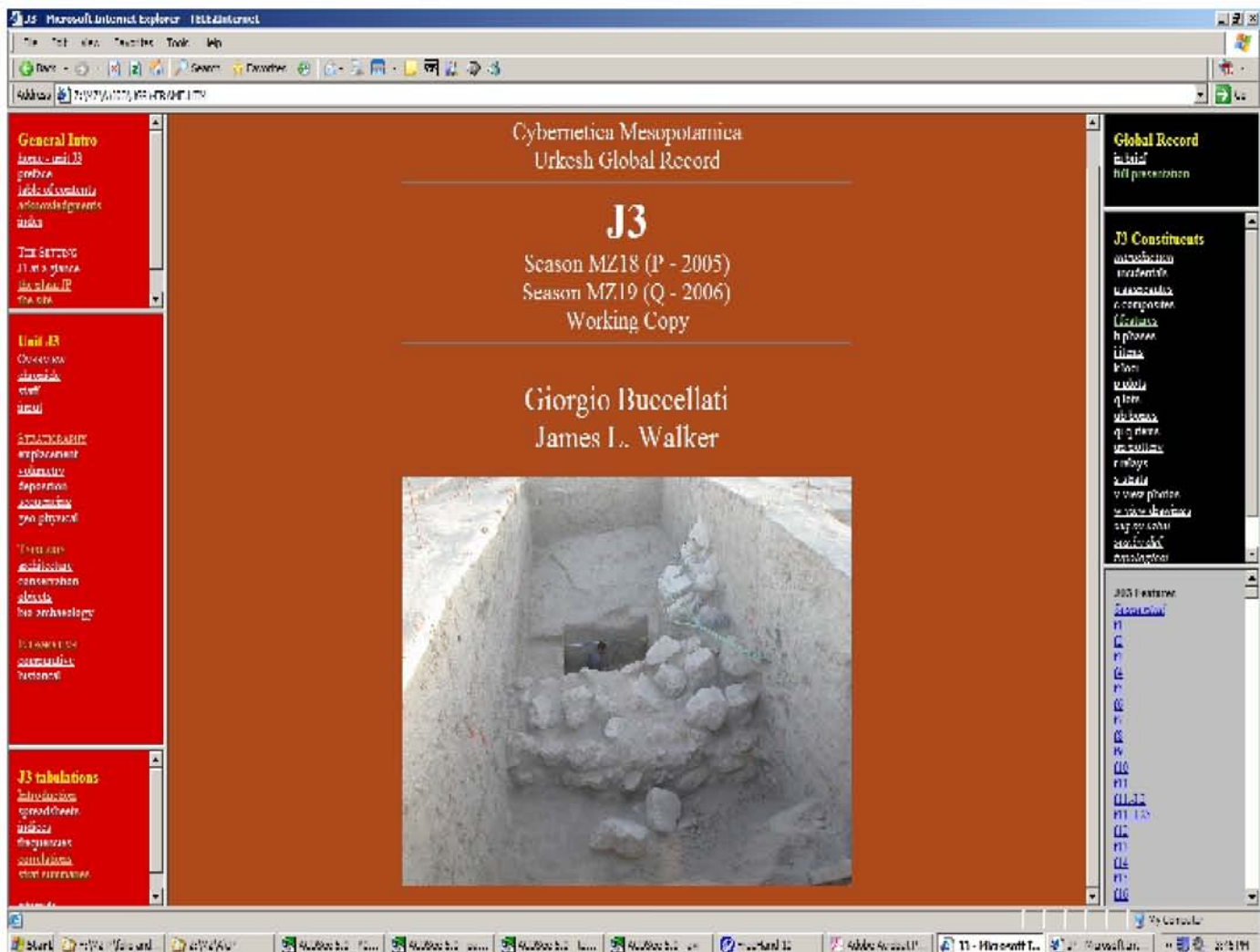
And that Urkesh arose only then as a petty local kingdom.



The discovery of much earlier material in the last two seasons pushes back by one and a half millennium the existence of a major city at the site explicitly known as Urkesh around 2300 B.C..

Given the cultural continuity that we see in the material remains, and given especially the unique religious character of the great Temple Terrace, we can safely see the Hurrians as the autochthonous population in the region from as far back as the late prehistoric periods.

The global reach



In April 2007
we will have the official opening
of the full version of the
Urkesh website (www.urkesh.org).

We think of it as a major innovation in the field of archaeology.
The *conceptual structure* is highly developed,
built on a theoretical understanding of the archaeological record
that breaks new ground with regard to stratigraphy.

This makes it possible to offer the most extensive documentary base
ever obtained for any archaeological project,
which we call precisely the *Urkesh Global Record*.

It is not just a complete and well articulated inventory.
It is, more importantly, an example of *digital thinking*
that proposes the possibility of “studying,” and not just consulting,
a scholarly resource given online.

Finally, it addresses squarely the recurrent problem of delays
in *archaeological publishing*
by giving the full record of the excavation within months of the closure of the season.
The snapshot above reproduces the opening page
of a unit excavated in 2005-6, devoted to a portion of the Temple Terrace.