

# AN ARCHITECTURAL “LOGOGRAM” AT URKESH?

*G. Buccellati*

The Temple Terrace at Urkesh is one of the best preserved third millennium monumental complexes from Syro-Mesopotamia (Fig. 1).

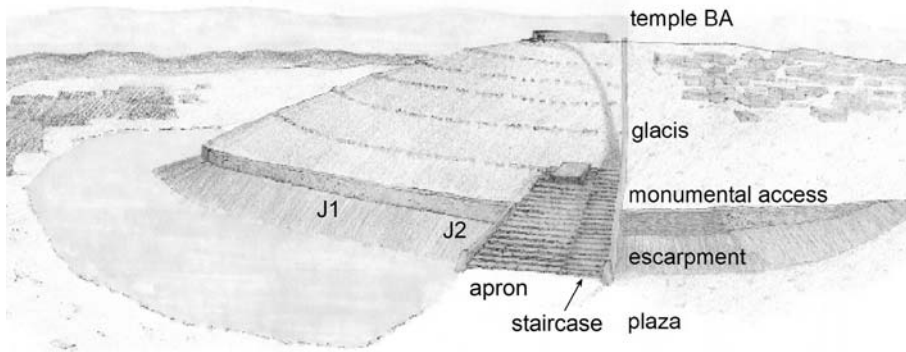


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of Urkesh Temple Terrace (Paola Pesaresi). J1 and J2 refer to the portion of the revetment wall discussed in this article

There are now indications that it originated in the fourth millennium, and it continued undisturbed until the end of the Mittani period. Thus it is also one of the longest lived monuments. The Temple was built on a glacis which was encircled at its base by a three meter high revetment wall, in front of which an escarpment sloped down by another two meters to a wide Plaza. The Temple stood at some 10 meters above the Plaza, and in turn the Plaza at some 12 meters above the plain level. There is one unusual detail in the make-up of the revetment wall which I would like to present here. It was first noted by Federico Buc-

cellati in excavation unit J1, with the remark that it strangely looked like the blocking of a postern gate. As more details became apparent, the thought went to some of the talks I had with Claudio about architecture, modern as well and ancient. It is thus with the special personal pleasure of memories shared over a long friendship that I offer him these almost light-hearted remarks on our curious feature.



Fig. 2. 3-D reconstruction highlighting the pattern.

The revetment wall is built entirely of large, roughly hewn stones. It stands, as mentioned, to a height of some 3 meters, and it is a little over 1 meter thick. It has no foundations: its base is simply sunk some 30 centimetres below the top of the escarpment. It is obviously not a retaining wall built to withstand the pressure of the glacis behind it. For this reason I have called it a revetment wall, designed to serve almost as an ornamental crown around a preexisting slope (most likely, the fourth millennium antecedent of the third millennium glacis).

It is interrupted by the large monumental staircase (Fig. 3), which is flanked by a trapezoidal “apron” consisting of steps twice as wide as the steps of the staircase itself (with an effect similar to that of an ancient theatre). Revetment wall, apron and staircase, all date to the early ED III period.

The revetment wall shows a triangular pattern with the acute angle at the top. The pattern is visible wherever the wall has been ex-

posed, i. e., in excavation units J1 and J2. There is little doubt that the pattern would continue in the unexcavated part between the two units (see the reconstruction in Fig. 2).

In J2 (Fig. 3 and 4) there are two such triangles showing. The one to the right (east), is partly covered by a stone wall that flanks the apron of the staircase. This wall is only slightly later than the revetment wall itself.



Fig. 3. View of the monumental third millennium staircase in J2.

In J1 (Fig. 5 and 6) one triangular pattern is fully visible. Those to the left (west) are partly covered by the upper escarpment which is slightly later in date, but still within ED III.

We cannot think of any particular structural reason for this particular pattern, which is in fact quite rare in the ancient Near East (the main parallel that comes to mind is in Tell Chuera, a site that is for other reasons as well comparable with Urkesh). Nor does it seem that the wall, being almost decorative in function, would require a special construction technique to achieve greater stability.



Fig. 4. Detail of the revetment wall in J2.



Fig. 5. Detail of revetment wall in J1



Fig. 6. Revetment wall in J1.



Fig. 7. The Tur-Abdin range in the background of Tell Mozan

I would therefore suggest that the triangular pattern has a subtle ideological nuance, namely, that it recalls the mountains which are ever present in the background landscape of the city (Fig. 7), and of which the Temple Terrace itself is like an echo. The pattern is well known as a motif in cylinder seals of the same time period, including one from Urkesh (Fig. 8) that we have interpreted as representing the god Kumerbi “walking in the mountains,” as the myths say.



Fig. 8. The mountain pattern on an Urkesh seal

It is a recurrent iconographic motif in Mesopotamian art, all the way down to the Assyrian reliefs. In our case, it is, however, a very nuanced motif at best, because, even though convincingly identifiable

in the texture of the wall, it is not overly marked. Also, it must be noted that both the side wall of the staircase (in J2) and the upper escarpment (in J1) were set in place in a way that suggests the triangular pattern no longer retained the original importance soon after the construction of the wall, since it was partly obliterated by the new additions. It would appear, therefore, that the pattern did not have such an overriding ideological importance to secure its continued visibility.

The triangular motif is, of course, the pattern found in the early pictogram for “mountain,” Sumerian KUR, which is continued in the later cuneiform sign for the same value (Fig. 9).

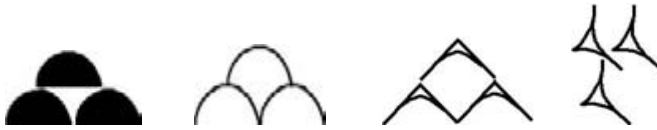


Fig. 9. The pictograph and cuneiform sign for KUR “mountain”

It is for this reason that I refer to this formal detail as an “architectural logogram.” Perhaps with a sense of irony, this visual pun proposes, in full view of the real mountains, a counterpoint to the Nippur *é.kur*, the “house mountain” where the echo of the reality was limited to the mere word.





# Dallo Stirone al Tigri, dal Tevere all'Eufrate

Studi in onore di Claudio Saporetti

A cura di Paola Negri Scafa e Salvatore  
Viaggio



AIO  
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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it  
info@aracneeditrice.it

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B  
00173 Roma  
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-2411-9

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I edizione: aprile 2009

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