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From Urkesh to Mozan. The itinerary of a project in wartime

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Abstract
Building on a long experience with community engagement in prewar times, the Urkesh Extended Project has faced the problems caused by the current war in Syria by expanding the range of its activities and involving on many different levels the local communities. Here I touch first on a theoretical consideration: the notion of territorial legacy as linking the modern with the ancient inhabitants of the area of ancient Urkesh. I then illustrate two particular aspects of our work, namely, conservation and site presentation: both continued unabated during the war, and were even expanded. The response of the local people has been a major measure of success, with large numbers of visitors still coming to the site for a surprising form of war tourism.

1. Boundaries

The distance between Tell Mozan and Tell Arbid is not great, some 45 km as the crow flies, and exchanging visits was a regular and delightful opportunity for our two teams when we were in the field. This volume, in honor of our friend Piotr Bieliński offers us an opportunity to ideally meet again, as if in the field. We would exchange then what had just come to light in the excavations of our two sites, and we would especially raise the questions that this new material would pose: it was the excitement of collegiality at its best. We meet now on the pages of a book, which gives us the opportunity to tell Piotr how this way of sharing our research with him is at the same time a way to tell him our appreciation for the collegiality we shared when we could meet on Syrian soil. When in the field, we were especially interested in Urkesh; the long confrontation with the war, and the resilience of the work we were doing, which is now called community archaeology, has shifted the focus to what the site is today. The title "From Urkesh to Mozan" intends to stress precisely this aspect, which I know to be as much of interest to Piotr as the insights we were sharing about the ancient world.

Thinking of the short distance between our two sites, and how easily we traveled from one to the other, highlights a fact that has come starkly to mind in these recent years, when looking at the maps of war-torn Syria. There are no geographical boundaries between the northern and the southern portions of the Jezirah. And yet the maps have been constantly showing a boundary: the one of the so-called Islamic state in its surge northward. And this boundary hovered in the area just south of Arbid, with terrible moments like the one when Tell Tamer was taken. Somehow, this image of a Jezirah split latitudinally along a line that has no counterpart in physical geography seemed to echo a similar split in the period when Mozan was Urkesh. The southern part did on the whole remain more Mesopotamian than the northern part, where the connections with the highlands were direct and of great consequence in defining group identity. And in this, too, we felt particularly close to Tell Arbid.

It was because this boundary held fast throughout the current war, that we have been able to remain active at Tell Mozan for the long duration of the war. Marilyn and I were still able to visit the site in December 2011, some eight months after the start of the unrest. After that, we have remained in constant contact with our people at the site not just in the sense of learning about each other, but in a very concrete and operative mode. The presence of the "boundary" made it possible logistically, but what made it possible operationally was the fact that over the years when we were excavating we had set in place a complex *modus operandi*

that, put to the test by the war, proved to be resilient. We talked about this often, with Piotr and his team, when they would come for a visit. And I would like now to continue those conversations, sharing with Piotr the concerns we have faced, the work we have done and the results we have seen.

I will cover only the most recent period of what we now call the *Urkesh Extended Project*.[1] It is impressive to look at the dates of the photos I am including in this article, all taken in 2017. The purpose of my article is in fact to document how current the project remains, in the midst of all the terrible news we have about archaeology in Syria. The care for the detail, the total lack of fatigue, the strong sense of purpose bear a remarkable witness to a project that sees us involved with a commitment not so much to a site we hold dear, but to a past that gives us all, Mozanians in Mozan and Mozanians abroad, vigor for the present and hope for the future.

The Mozanians in Mozan currently active in the project are Muhammad Omo who, as one of the two official guards, oversees all the work at the site; Ibrahim Khello who manages the record; Muhammad Hamza who continues analyzing the ceramics from past excavations and works on the signage; Ibrahim Musa who maintains the internet connection; Amer Ahmad who processes data from the old archives and maintains local contacts .

The Mozanians outside Mozan are a major force behind our whole project. Here I will mention in particular Yasmine Mahmoud in Damascus: she maintains the contact with the people on the ground, monitors closely their work and keeps a complete record of the very large number of communications we have with them. I have relied fully on her help in preparing the material for this article, and for this I am most grateful to her.

2. Territorial legacy

Let me first refer to a concept that can help place the project in a wider perspective. Community archaeology as a term has come of age recently, but, if at times in a limited way, it has often guided archaeological expeditions

[1] A special section on Community Archaeology is devoted to this aspect of the project on the website www.urkesh.org. For reports on the earlier stages of the project see my articles (online at the Urkesh website, in the section eLibrary): Buccellati 2014; 2015; 2018. The project has received much attention in the media: a selection will be found on the website www.giorgiobuccellati.net in section III.

throughout the years. At Mozan, the issues that are at the core of the approach to community or public archaeology were uppermost in my mind since the beginning of the project in 1984.[2] The aspect I want to stress here is the concept of "territorial legacy." There is more to the territory than meets the eye. We tread on soil that has a resonance all its own for those who are born *in* it. To be "native" means precisely to have absorbed, from birth, the environment in ways that no newcomer can. The notion of "mother tongue" is analogous, and more easily acceptable than "fatherland", tinged as this is with nationalistic overtones. What is conveyed is the idea that there is as if a genetic link between an impersonal element (the tongue, the land) and the individual.

It is to this link that the idea of "legacy" refers. The territory is not an inert entity, for two reasons. On the surface it is the landscape that comes to be imprinted in people's lives. In the subsoil, it is the archaeology that connects these people with an ancestry that was in turn connected with the same landscape. The territory is a legacy in that it holds in itself the testimony of lives past that were just as deeply associated with the environment as the current inhabitants are. They were stakeholders because they had a stake in the territory, just as the current stakeholders have a stake in what was bequeathed to them.

Nowhere else, perhaps, is this legacy felt as strong as when burials are involved.[3] Ancient burials are not set in a sterile ground; it is the ground where people live today – the same ground where the contemporary dead are laid to rest. We had, on Tell Mozan, three modern cemeteries, belonging to three different villages. After the start of the excavations, this use of the tell as a cemetery had to be stopped, and at one point we had to start removing modern burials that overlaid areas where we were excavating. It was an important moment, for two reasons.

The first is that the transfer to a new burial ground was done with no friction at all, and in fact with a moving ceremony that involved the expedition staff along with the local families. The background is significant. During the excavations, we had exposed a large number of ancient burials: in all cases, I insisted that we should remove the human remains not only with the necessary skills that would provide a good record, but also with a sense of reverence that went beyond the technical dimension. Thus, even a few bones were placed in a wooden case, not in the plastic bags in which we would carry and store objects

[2] For a discussion of the theoretical aspects of the question see Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2017.

[3] See my introductory remarks to a recent article by Arwa Kharobi (Kharobi and Buccellati 2017).

and specimens. I attribute to this sense of reverence for the humans of ancient Urkesh the development of a sense of reciprocal trust between the local families and us. The modern burials were never perceived as a nuisance to be gotten out of the way: the reburial was a considered act in the importance of which we could all share.

The second reason that made the transfer meaningful was that it stressed the commonality of human experience in front of death. This may at first seem irrelevant within the context of a scholarly enterprise, which is expected to command the detachment of a surgeon when operating on a living body. But in fact it was the shared sense of reverence for the phenomenon of interment that helped develop a sense of respect for the very soil in which the burials had taken place. In a context where all links with the past are broken, except for the territory one shares with the ancients, the link to the territory becomes a challenge to the sense of responsibility towards the past. That this is far from irrelevant is amply shown by the way in which any kind of looting or vandalism has become inconceivable at Mozan. The first guardians of the territory are the people who in this territory live today.

3. The dignity of the finds

The dignity of the finds extends beyond human burials. It is the task of the archaeologists to recognize this dignity during excavation – which in practice means not only to accord each find their full attention, whether or not a specific element fits within the parameters of the initial research strategy; it also means to encase every such element in a proper referential record and to make it as much as possible a part of the preserved physical record.[4] In the case of the architecture at Tell Mozan, I experimented with a conservation system that was grounded in simplicity and depended wholly on local resources and skills.

Even a simple task cannot be taken for granted. Let us consider, for example the removal of vegetation: it is done twice a year, in March and May. ***Fig. 1*** illustrates the situation in the monumental Temple staircase, in the spring 2017: here, after the shrubs are pulled, each individual joint is refreshed with a piece of burlap (that distinguished the old from the new) and fresh mud plaster [***Fig. 2***]. The fresh mud is only added in the fall, before the rain starts: for this reason the illustration given dates back to 2016.

[4] I have discussed the theoretical import of this approach in Buccellati 2017, especially Part III.

There is no high technology here. But there is a great deal of patience and commitment, especially when you think that this is now the seventh year that the process takes place, without us being present. Just as significant is the fact that we have an ongoing photographic documentation of the process, year by year (fully reported in the Urkesh website). It is what I call a deep *loyalty* to the site and its

Fig. 1. *Monumental staircase in Unit J2: top, after the first cleaning (March 27, 2017). It is interesting to note that the damaged portion of the staircase (in the black frame) is the result not of modern weathering, but of the disuse of the staircase in Mittani times, when the entire lower part of the staircase was covered by rapid accumulations. It is today the way it was first excavated in the 1990s; bottom left, the staircase during the second cleaning (May 5, 2017) and right, after second cleaning (May 7, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

monuments: it is the running theme of this article. I only refer here to actions taken in the field in the early months of 2017 to underscore precisely the point just made: that the whole project makes sense only if it can be sustained for a long duration, with a humble but constant care. And "long duration" in our case means precisely the entire duration of the war, which has now sadly reached its sixth year. Ours is thus a diary of simple actions, but actions that are professional because of the seriousness with which they are carried out and especially because of the extremely positive results that they deliver. It is at the same time, one must remember, a diary of war. It is true that the war did not come to Mozan with the devastating fury of the arms. But other sites, which were equally spared the force of war, were not equipped to face the almost equally devastating effect of weather and vandalism.

On a slightly more complex scale, the same "loyalty" governs the process of protection of the walls. The system of protection consisted of a metal trellis with a metal and mud cover, and with burlap curtains on the sides that can be drawn open to show the original state of the walls. At the simplest level, the maintenance entailed patching the burlap when it was damaged only in spots [***Fig. 3***].

When the damage was too extensive to be patched, then new curtains were designed and produced [***Fig. 4***]. We had purchased before the outbreak of the war a special sewing machine so that the curtains could be produced in-house by piecing together several pieces of burlap. In the end, the appearance of the walls shows the difference between old and new curtains [***Fig. 5***], but clearly the effect is that the walls remain protected and are to this day in a perfect state of conservation.

The notion of a "perfect state" of conservation needs to be qualified. We did in fact suffer the loss of two wall faces over the seven years of our absence from the site, the second having taken place in the winter of 2016–2017 [***Fig. 6***].

Fig. 2. *Gaps between stones filled in with new mud, laid on top of a piece of burlap to keep it separate from the old mud (October 29, 2016) This process takes place in the fall, hence it was not done yet in 2017 (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 3. *Patching a curtain (January 7, 2017) (IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 4. *New curtains being made: top left, taking measurements of a torn curtain to be replaced (January 12, 2017); top right, designing a new curtain (January 14, 2017); bottom left, sewing a new curtain (January 18, 2017); bottom right, a completed curtain before installation (February 2, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 5. *Damage to doorway C5–C7 (January 3, 2017). This is one of two major losses suffered over the seven years of war (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 6. *Overall view of a sector of the Palace AP with old and new curtains (January 18, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

But, considering that we have about 400 linear meters of mud brick walls, the loss is indeed acceptable. It is contained, and well documented. The excellent condition of the other walls is just as precisely documented in a very extensive section of the Urkesh website (Record > AP Palace > Conservation). This monitoring of the AP palace (which includes a thorough photographic coverage and a daily record of temperature and humidity), started in 2001 at the suggestion of Neville Agnew and Martha Demas of the Getty Conservation Institute and provides the most comprehensive reporting anywhere of a mud brick conservation project – and seven years of this during wartime!

Fig. 7. *The "panorama" panels: top from left, removing broken glass (February 2017), cleaning and replacing printed sheets (February 2017), carrying a new glass (February 2017); bottom, the new panorama panel (August 12, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 8. *A damaged "footnote" panel (April 23, 2012). This photo was taken in 2012. At that point I decided to give precedence to the needs of conservation, and we did not repair the signage. The metal stands were taken off the site and stored. Reconstituting the panel stands (February 2017): bottom left, when starting to repair the signage in 2017, the first step was to weld the pieces together: this was done in the neighboring town of Amuda; top right, cleaning and repainting panels (February 2017); bottom right, a laminated page: we had bought a simple laminator that gives strength and durability to the printed pages (February 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 9. *Top left, preparing the newly printed pages for insertion in the panels (March 2017); top right, gluing the laminated pages onto a stand (March 2017); bottom, the assembled stands ready to be brought to the site (April 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 10. *A stand placed in its proper position at the site (May 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 11. *An access staircase for visitors in its damaged state and after being repaired and cleaned (February 16, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

Fig. 12. Families visiting Tell Mozan (August 30, 2017), top, and bottom, a group of students from Al-Furat University at Tell Mozan for a workshop sponsored by the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project (September 5, 2017) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)

4. The wider reach

If conservation focuses on the materiality of the finds, site presentation focuses on their fruition. It has been my goal since the beginning of the project to have the site be transparent and relevant for visitors. I had in mind the full range of interests, from those of colleagues to occasional guests, adults and children.

Fig. 13. Two facing pages of the multilingual guide book published in December 2016 (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)

To this end I had developed a comprehensive signage system, which is fully published on the Urkesh website (Education > Site Presentation; it includes about 200 pages). In the first years of the war, we had to give precedence to the conservation effort, and only in 2017 did we go back to this project, and in a few months it was restored to its original shape. I report on it here for two main reasons.

The first is of a technical nature. Just like conservation, the signage, too, was conceived as something that could rely on the simplest of local resources: metal stands and printed pages. One particular reason was to allow for constant updates, in the measure in which the excavation proceeded. Simplicity turned out to be also the main factor of durability: restoring the signage to its pristine state was feasible because it could all be done locally, if with our guidance and support.

On the conceptual side, my effort was to provide a very substantive interpretation of the site and of the archaeological process, and at the same time to nurture the local interest. This would start minimally with a sense of curiosity, and would develop and become well founded in the measure in which the substance of the excavation, and even of the archaeological process, could be absorbed and thus appreciated.

Fig. 14. *The Urkesh Exhibit in Amuda, organized by the Subartu association of Qamishli (February 24, 2015) (Courtesy IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies)*

There are two main types of signs, which have come to be known as the "panorama" and the "footnote" panels. The first type gives a synthetic overview from an elevated point which does not correspond to one that the ancients would have had. The second gives detailed information about specific elements that are in front of the visitor at the same level as that of the ancients: viewing eye to eye a detail of the excavation, so to speak, allows one to establish a more direct correlation with the perceptual conditions of the ancients.

I will not describe here the system, for which I refer again to the Urkesh website. I will only show how the process of restoration of the signage took place in the first half of 2017. As you look at the images that document the care and the skill with which the signs were brought back to life, remember the conditions under which this happened: after seven years of absence on our part and with contacts only through the internet. Each photograph tells us very eloquently of a sense of pride and of commitment to values. There are no breeding grounds for fundamentalism here.

The first section [***Fig. 7***] shows the work on the "panorama" panels: the glass broke again shortly after being installed, so the final photo is from a few months after the initial work was completed. This, too, indicates, the importance and effectiveness of ongoing maintenance.

The second section [***Figs 8–10***] shows the work on the "footnote" panels. There are thirty-nine metal stands, and as many panels, of different sizes (some have only on page, others up to six pages). The photographs shown here give an abbreviated, but revealing, record of the process involved in restoring all panels to their pristine appearance.

We also restored the paths and the access ways to the portions of the excavations that are accessible to visitors, such as the modern staircase that leads to the base of the revetment wall of the Temple Terrace [***Fig. 11***]. For, in fact, we still have visitors, family groups and students [***Fig. 12***], taking part in a class on surveying and ceramic analysis: the students come from the Al-Furat University, and the workshop was sponsored by our project. Both images are remarkable in showing the continued vitality at the site. As a supplement to the on site signage, we published, in December 2016, a multilingual guide book to the site, in English, Arabic and Kurdish [***Fig. 13***], which gave us an opportunity to update the signs on the ground.

That the effort at preserving and presenting the site of ancient Urkesh is not a mere academic exercise is shown by the live interest of these visitors and the respect that the project has gained. One telling case is the fact that a colleague in Qamishli, Dr. Elias Suleiman, organized an exhibit on the archaeology of Urkesh that opened in Qamishli in December 31, 2015, and then traveled to other towns

in the area, including Amuda [***Fig. 14***]. Well attended everywhere, the exhibit bears witness to the lasting impact that archaeology can have (for a full listing of events since 2017, see now www.avasa.it/en). All the more so as, put to the test in the time of war, it serves to inspire young and old alike in the struggle to maintain a clear sense of values, which are the base of their identity.

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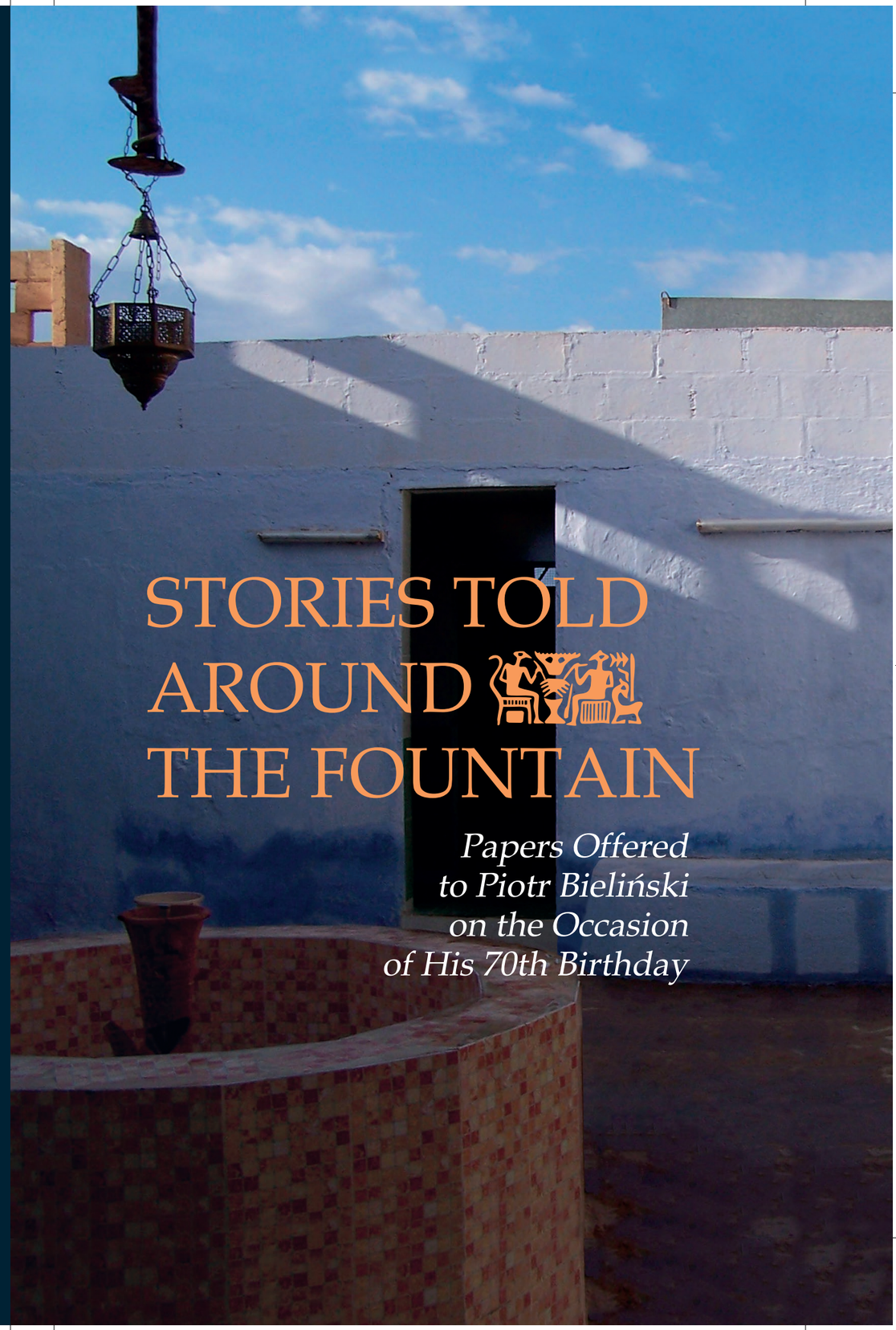

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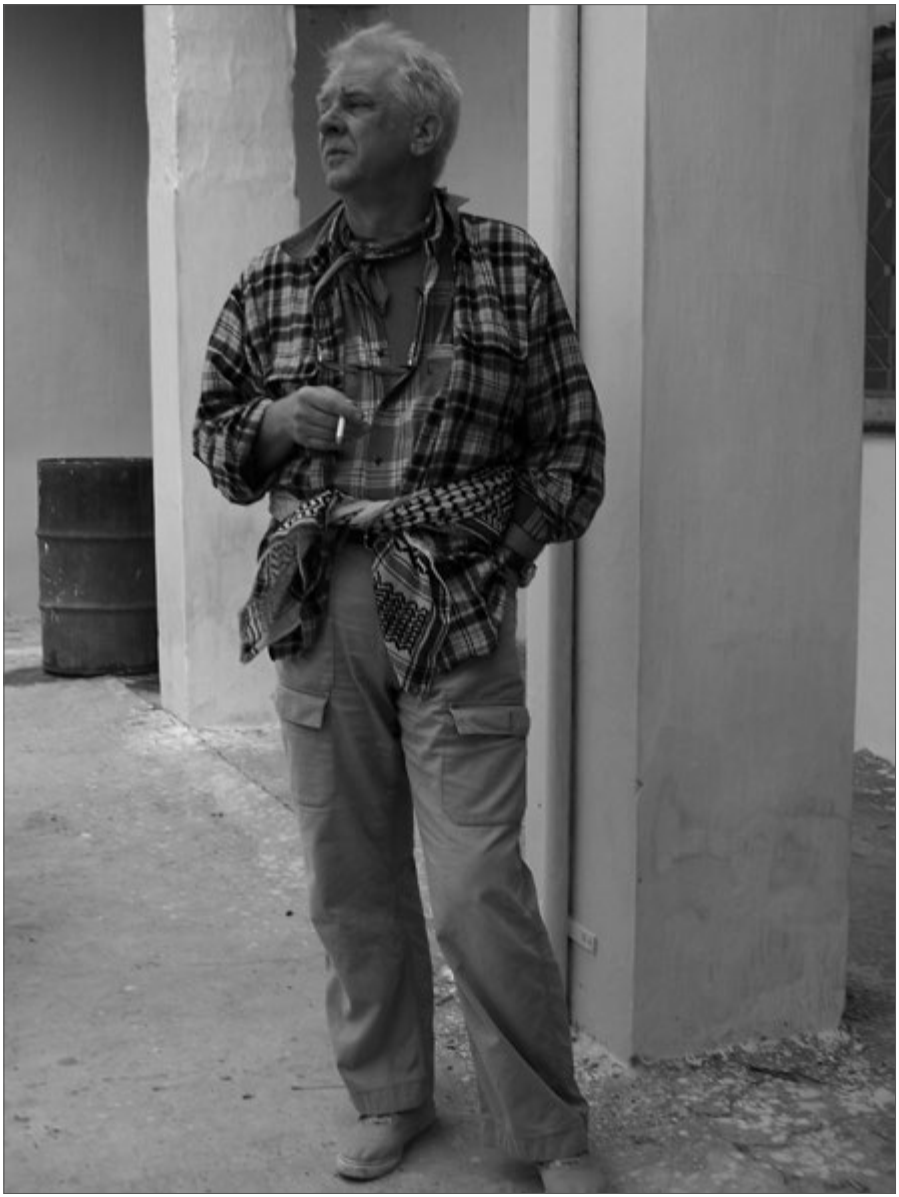

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