

# The Discovery of a New Urban Civilization: Urkesk and the Hurrians

A lecture by

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## 1 Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesk in its geographical setting

Situated at the base of the Tur-Abdin, Tell Mozan is one of the largest third millennium sites in Syria, about 150 hectares. It enjoys the greatest amount of rainfall in the Khabur plains, which makes its agricultural landscape very fertile. But even more important for its ancient history is its proximity to the Anatolian highlands: from there came stone, timber and especially copper. All of this made of ancient Urkesk a very prosperous commercial center. The excavations are bringing this to light, and are showing how the uniqueness of the city and of the civilization it portrays can be ultimately linked with a high degree of ethnic specificity – that of the Hurrians.

## 2 The Royal Palace

The Royal Palace was built by king Tupkish about 2300 B.C. Excavations have exposed the entire service quarter, and we are now in the process of exposing the formal wing of the Palace. The architectural layout is imposing, and our conservation efforts have succeeded in protecting, with simple but imaginative new techniques, the mudbrick walls as first excavated. Major finds include especially the rich glyptic inventory, with a total of more than 200 inscribed seals that have given us details about the names of the ancient city and its rulers. From the language and from the material culture we can establish that this ancient city was more specifically Hurrian than any other in third millennium Syro-Mesopotamia.

## 3 The High Temple and the Necromantic Structure

The royal palace was situated between the underground Necromantic Structure and the High Temple, and in particular it was linked with the Temple Terrace through as a large Plaza. Together, they formed a large monumental complex, unique in ancient Syro-Mesopotamia. Two major sacral structures bracket this complex. At its lowest end, there is a deep shaft where the spirits of the Netherworld were summoned with rituals known from Hurrian texts preserved in later archives. The ritual

is very alien to Mesopotamian religion, hence very specifically Hurrian, and the Urkesh example is the only one preserved in an archaeological context, and is very monumental. Even more monumental is the high Temple Terrace, which we believe to have been dedicated to the main god of the Hurrian pantheon, Kumarbi. The extensive use of stone has made it possible for this terrace to be preserved in a way that is quite unique in Mesopotamia. Both structures were first built in the early part of the third millennium.

#### 4 The Hurrians and the earliest history of Syria

We know how, at the dawn of history, urbanization was the major phenomenon that transformed human social existence. This is generally associated with the model of the Sumerian city states in the southern regions. But in the north, in the Syrian part of the Syro-Mesopotamian area, different models were operative at the same time, that have not been sufficiently appreciated. The Hurrian model is based on the principle of ethnic solidarity that transcends the principle of territorial contiguity (central to Sumerian urbanization). This made it possible for Hurrian cities to control a vast mountain hinterland that was not susceptible to the type of administrative controls developed in the south. Urkesh is the best known example of such an early model of urbanism. As such, it is not just a new city that we have discovered, but truly a new civilizational model.