

# The Discovery of Urkesh and the Question of Meaning in Archaeology

## Abstract

What does it mean to “discover” an ancient city? “Our” city was in fact well-known already, and yet unrecognized. Well-known were three aspects of a single puzzle:

- a city of myth, called Urkesh in antiquity, home of the ancestral Hurrian god, Kumarbi;
- the capital of the only known Hurrian kingdom of the third millennium, also called Urkesh;
- and a large hill, which goes under the modern name of Tell Mozan.

The peculiar chemistry of our discovery was that we linked the three elements, and were able, through our excavations, to prove that the gods of myth, the kings of history, the buried remnants in the ground all matched! Urkesh, a city founded some 5000 years, and then buried under its own collapse some 3500 years ago, could rise and speak to us today in its own name. We are the interpreters.

The “we” of the story is the staff of the expedition. They, too, lend me their voices as I, today, unravel for you the process and the results of our discoveries. Above all, my colleague Marilyn, who for my good fortune is also my wife, played an absolutely central role in the “discovery” I will narrate.

Next to the “what,” the “why and how.” How do we bring meaning to broken traditions – i.e., traditions that are no longer embedded in the continuous stream of living cultures? The peculiar fascination that archaeology holds for so many derives from this confrontation. We meet the *unknown*, buried and remote. Yet we *know* we know it, alive and near. Scholarly discipline teaches us to channel our instinct, and to retrace with method the steps of the argument.

### The city

At its peak, Urkesh was about the size of the UCLA campus, very large for a city dating back five millennia. Size being, in this case, correlative with importance, the sheer bulk of the *tell* encouraged us to consider Tell Mozan for possible excavation. We had some clues that it might be ancient Urkesh, and started excavations in 1984, to look for an answer. Eleven years later, we could finally read, on some minute scraps of clay, the words that confirmed our hypothesis.

Is it just a curiosity to be able to say that this particular archaeological site is ancient Urkesh? No: and the answer leads us to explore the role of inference in archaeology. At the higher level of meaning, I will highlight some of the conclusions

that can be drawn from the identification. Take myth, for instance. While we cannot expect to find the footsteps of Kumarbi, the ancestral father of the Hurrian gods who resided in Urkesh, we can project the birth of his myth back into an archaic time when Urkesh was already an important city. The earliest archaeological strata in Mozan become evidence of Hurrian urban presence in Syria some 1500 years earlier than it was generally assumed.

### The court

The city we are slowly bringing to light is a splendid example of early Syro-Mesopotamian experimentation with urban modes of life. The most important body of data pertains to the royal court, as we know it for a brief slice of time around 2200 B.C. There was a complex, yet transparent, symbolism that translated into vivid images the dynastic concerns of the ruling family, especially of one of the king’s wives.

Pursuing our quest for meaning, I will show how a typological analysis of the seal impressions from the royal court strengthens the case for identifying Mozan with Urkesh. We have a coherent assemblage that could not have included by accident the mention of the ancient name. The last remaining doubt is whether this assemblage could have been brought to Mozan from another site, which would then mean that our site was not Urkesh, but only traded with it. The answer to this last question helps us understand what lies at the very core of archaeological reasoning.

### The palace

The seal impressions were found in a quite specific stratigraphic context: the floor accumulation of a large building. A look at this context will show how the final proof in our argument derives from a proper understanding of how things are found in the ground. The process of discovery is ultimately as important as the result of the discovery.

One thing archaeologists do that no one else does is the stratigraphic analysis of cultural remains, and it is also here that the primary source of meaning resides. While this principle is universally accepted in practice, little attention is in fact being paid to the theoretical dimension of stratigraphy. The establishment of a grammar of the stratigraphic record is one of the goals of our project and of my personal research, in an effort to show how the importance of method must override our easy fascination with tools and techniques. For technique without method is like a mirror that entices birds only to break their flight.