

## OPINION

As archaeologists attempting to engage with the past, we often find ourselves confronted with realities of the present that are not always academic in nature. The Backdirt editorial committee wanted to find a way to provide scholars with a conduit to communicate these kinds of experiences and is therefore pleased to initiate a new section to our Annual Review — **Opinion**. The assertions or opinions expressed below are not necessarily those of the editorial committee or Institute.

# Courage among the Ruins: A Sustainable Conservation Program in Time of War

*Giorgio Buccellati*<sup>1</sup>

### A MORAL PRESENCE

An archaeological project explores the past. But it lives in the present. It is not only that history, extracted from the ground, unravels their experiences, of the humans of yesteryear, it is also that our collective identities rest on the vertical sense of self that only our past can give us. We are our past. And caring for it is the responsibility we share, whether archaeologists or not.

It is, then, with tender care that we must nurture a project like ours—aimed at a remote Syrian past, and yet so full of meaning for the troubled Syrian present. We had to design wholly new ways of showing how much life there is in the remoteness of a buried past. *It is a moral presence*. But not in the rhetorical and sentimental sense that we only *speak* about it. Rather, in the very concrete and real sense that we are transforming culture into a social glue.

We were ready, though we had clearly not been

expecting war. And yet it was as if we had. With the clearest sense of purpose. It was the attention we gave, over the years, to a central concern: the need to raise local awareness for the subtle richness of a long since hidden culture.

Training in conservation and education at all levels were the mechanisms to meet these concerns. And we were enabled to live up to our readiness through grants, among others, from the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology and from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor of Research at UCLA. Through their support, our moral presence has become ever more real on the ground where ancient Urkesh stood millennia ago and where today's inhabitants are keeping guard, with our help, protecting the silent witness of their ancient territorial forebears.

The results are far-reaching. From politics to economics, from social awareness to, certainly, the *scholarly* dimension as well, our project has set new standards and has become a model for other such projects. Putting together all the strands that derive

---

1. Professor Emeritus of History and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.



Figure 1. Presentations on Syrian archaeology at Rimini “Meeting,” with about 5,000 people in attendance.

from it reveals the richness of its message and defines the uniqueness of its scope.

#### THE ABIDING RELEVANCE

During a recent major event in Rimini, Italy, we highlighted our current work in Syria to a vast public. The occasion was a cultural festival that is quite unique and certainly the largest of its kind anywhere: during a single week, over half a million people attend a vast array of exhibits, lectures, and art events. Admission is free, and the public is drawn from the widest imaginable segments of society, from artists, intellectuals, and politicians, to families, students, and children.

This year, we were able to present a series of events on our project and Syria in general. My wife, Marilyn, curated an exhibit for which our son Federico and I were the co-curators. The format of the Rimini exhibits is very participatory: it requires the presence of a guide who explains the contents of each room to individual groups, and a large number of videos, audios, and special graphic devices explain

the central concept in detail. This year there were five large exhibits and a dozen smaller ones. The one we proposed was one of the larger ones, alongside one on space exploration, another on social work in developing countries, two on Peguy and Tolstoy, and two on recent events in the Ukraine and in Egypt.

Our exhibit, entitled *From the Depth of Time: Communication and Community in Ancient Syria* (Figures 1–3), dealt with the past, but the last room addressed the significance of archaeology for today, especially this Syrian “today” so tragically immersed in war and bloodshed. The exhibit remained open each day during the week from 9 A.M. until midnight, with groups averaging 60 people starting on a tour every 15 minutes. By the end, some twenty thousand people had visited the exhibit. We also organized three conferences (Figure 1): the first two, addressing, respectively, the contents of the exhibit and the situation in Syria today (*Archaeology for Peace* was the title), were attended by several thousand people, while the third was restricted to a limited technical audience.

# OPINION

We brought to Rimini three regional directors of antiquities from Aleppo, Idlib (the province of Ebla), and Qamishli (the province of Urkesh); in addition, we also had four Syrian students. The Director General was unable to come but sent a video in which he addressed the central concerns of the meeting. The entire program made a great impact, because it gave a sense of the immense vitality and profound relevance of archaeology.

## THE NATIONAL SYRIAN RESPONSE

In Rimini, we wanted to highlight the positive—the “*courage among the ruins*”—in two ways: on a larger scale, the work being strenuously done by the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM); on a smaller scale, our own work at the site of ancient Urkesh.

With great energy, the DGAM has been conducting a successful battle for the preservation of the national cultural heritage and the motivation of the people to defend it. Given the circumstances, and the long duration of the hostilities, one would expect the functionaries to withdraw into a sort of intellectual and procedural limbo. But the opposite is true, and within the tragedy, the DGAM is living a moment of hidden but real glory. It was always in the vanguard of all the systems in the Near East—rigorously professional, in the service of archaeology first and foremost, whether done by Syrians or foreigners. And in the current crisis, this tradition emerges in a new light, because of the courage with which the functionaries remain faithful to their task at the very moment when personal interest might suggest an escape into despair. There is a strong will to maintain the national values and even to innovate. In so doing, they are indeed offering a model to the world of how to cope with tragedy, a model from which the world may well learn, especially in comparison with



Figure 2. Entrance to the Exhibit on Urkesh at Rimini “Meeting.”



Figure 3. Exhibit on Urkesh at Rimini “Meeting”: about 2 0,000 people visited the exhibit during the one week it was open.

what has happened in other countries under similar circumstances.

In a statement of June 2013 the Director General, Dr. Maamoun Abdulkarim, writes:

Within the framework of the campaign of the Ministry of Culture “Syria—my homeland,” the DGAM has launched a national campaign targeting 23 million Syrians to engage them all in protecting ancient Syrian antiquities and cultural heritage, which they take pride in, against



theft, vandalism and distortion as it is everyone's responsibility, and they should work together to protect those antiquities.

The national campaign started its activities on 15-10-2012 by means of putting up road advertisements in all Syrian cities and governorates and showing films on national televisions encouraging Syrians to defend their Syrian cultural identity.

As for interaction with the local community, workers in all directorates of antiquities are collaborating on protecting Syrian antiquities with volunteers, interested people, opinion leaders, and intellectual, cultural, and religious elites in order to create a feeling in every Syrian that damaging antiquities is an assault against their civilization, national identity, and history.

The key issue for the DGAM is to play its role in *protecting the Syrian cultural heritage and all its components, seeing that it belongs to all Syrians regardless of their political views, which do not concern the DGAM at all since the battle is about safeguarding the history and heritage of a nation.*

Thus, the DGAM has been seeking to *unify the visions of all Syrians concerning the antiquities so as to defend and protect them, given that they represent the thing which has always brought our people together.* Thanks to that, the DGAM's performance has been professional, scientific and effective, and its cadres have remained united in all governorates.

The measures taken reflect a wide range of initiatives, in five different directions: (1) Ensuring the *cohesiveness of the staff* is a strong priority, because their solidarity is essential to a capillary effectiveness of the program. While often personally at risk in their work, the staff, all the way to down to the guards at the sites, can be in touch directly and at any time with the Director General; to this end, a variety of new items has been provided, from portable telephones to computers. Also, members of the staff at all levels have taken part in international meetings, whether or not the Director General could attend alongside them. (2) To maintain a high level of *professionalism* is difficult, given the isolation in which the DGAM has found itself. But this they have done, continuing excavations and the publication program within the severe limits imposed by the events. What should not be forgotten is that the DGAM is safeguarding the sites for which foreign missions (more than 60!) hold a permit of excavation. (3) *Damage prevention and control* is, of course, the most direct means to be present in the territory, wherever access is possible. A great number



Figure 4. Large poster exhibited in Damascus and other Syrian cities to motivate people to defend their cultural heritage.

of projects have been undertaken in this regard, with a major effort at documentation: this seems often to be underestimated at a time when several other projects are being started from the outside to do just what the DGAM has bravely been carrying out on a daily basis. (4) Far from accepting isolation, the DGAM has aggressively pursued a policy of very active collaboration with a large number of *international organizations*, from the UNESCO, ICOM, and ICCROM, to NGOs like the World Monuments Fund and various universities. (5) Last, but certainly not least, a strong campaign intended to *raising national awareness* has been waged, with a number of activities, from the display of enormous posters in all major cities (Figures 4 and 5), to training conferences for the staff, public meetings involving local communities, and conducting a policy of supplying information to local authorities, as well as strengthening cooperation with them.

In Rimini we witnessed all of this first hand. We received the directors of three of the most vulnerable areas, and while far from being Pollyannaish about



Figure 5. Large poster exhibited in various Syrian cities.

it, they displayed the full measure of plain and simple courage that the media seem to have come to disregard in their coverage of Syrian affairs. Some of us at the meeting had been talking about courage and even heroism. When I asked for comments from Yasmine Mahmoud, one of the Syrian students on our staff who had just arrived from Damascus on opening day, she only said: “I hear words such as heroism, but in truth we all feel, in Syria, that we are doing with simplicity what is needed and is important.” She blew a kiss to the audience, and she sat down.

#### THE “ARTE POVERA” OF CONSERVATION AT MOZAN

Deliberately, the system of conservation I had set up in Mozan had used the simplest approach, devoid of technological sophistication, but rich on training for maintenance at the local level and totally dependent on local resources. The localized shelter approach to mud brick walls is our trademark (Figure 6): a system of iron trellises (Figures 7 and 8) that support a roof of either metal or mud, flanked on the sides by burlap panels (Figures 9 and 10). These panels may be drawn like curtains, in which case they show the walls as



Figure 6. The system of localized shelters used to protect the mud brick walls of Urkesh.



# OPINION



Figure 7. Detail of trellis, showing link among components.



Figure 8. Detail of trellis, showing modularity of system.



Figure 9. Trellis above mud brick wall (with stone substructure).



Figure 10. Tarps being draped above trellis.



Figure 11. An “arte povera” approach to wall conservation: individual panels replacement.



Figure 12. Patching of holes in panels.



Figure 13. Patches on panels.

they were when first excavated. With the curtains in place, one gains a sense of the architectural volume. When they are drawn, one has a perfect view of the monument in its full documentary sense. More than twenty years since they were excavated, the walls remain essentially undamaged.

Our long absence (it is now four years since our last excavation) has proved the full validity of this approach. Panels deteriorate and need replacing. My choice was to opt for local patching (Figures 11–14), which had the advantage of giving work to our local assistants, if at the cost of aesthetics. But the very humility of this “arte povera” approach speaks well in support of the system: the sense of involvement and responsibility is increased even more.

In one case, I opted instead for a more drastic solution. The burlap on the cupola-like cover of the necromantic shaft, one of the most remarkable structures in third millennium Syro-Mesopotamia, had disintegrated. Instead of replacing it, I supervised (via a complex communication network that relied on e-mail, telephone, Skype, and Viber) the covering of the cupola with metal sheeting (Figures 15–17). It was a better solution in terms of long-term goals. But especially I wanted to send a signal that our commitment to the site was serious and for the long duration. And it worked that way, with a renewed sense of identification with our goals on the part of the local stakeholders.

We have six individuals working on the project in Mozan, and we are in touch on a regular basis with them. We receive detailed reports and a great quantity of photographs over the internet so that, for sure, the site of ancient Urkesh is by far the best documented during this period of crisis.

### THE AWAKENING OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Mozan, as a hill, has always been there, for over three millennia. It has become Urkesh again thanks only to archaeology. The evidence is so fine and fractured that no one but an archaeologist would have been able to recognize the reality deeply hidden in the ground.

The next question was how to preserve this fragile gift of time. Preserve it physically, so that it is not destroyed by rain and snow. But preserve it morally as well, so that it is not destroyed by war.

The answer is that the site has to be embedded in the consciousness of the people who are now the immediate heirs to this remote richness. We had been nurturing this consciousness, with a very explicit and concrete program long before the troubles started in



# OPINION



Figure 14. Patches on panels.



Figure 15. The disintegrated tarp above the necromantic pit (abi) in summer 2013.



Figure 16. The new metal cover for the abi in the fall of 2013.



Figure 17. The abi shelter in winter 2013–2014.





Figure 18. A doll produced by the women of Mozan.

It may seem either epic or surrealistic, depending on the point of view. . . . And it is instead the result of a most admirable sense of commitment to a job well done, the sense of pride in their effort, *“in order to see the hill Mozan of the most beautiful and the best archaeological sites in the world,”* as our photographer, Diadin, writes in one of his reports.

Motivation is one of the main ingredients of this whole enterprise. We had nurtured it while we could work together; we are nurturing it now from a distance with our intense correspondence. But it is ultimately nurtured by the sense of accomplishment that comes from seeing the results. There is a marked tone of victory in these pictures, with which they show us, and really show to themselves in the first place, how the site can continue to be managed and maintained in spite of all odds.

At the Rimini Meeting, I presented a small but meaningful accomplishment: a guidebook to the site written in English, Arabic, and Kurdish. Our signage at the site, which adds up to more than 200 pages, had been in English and Arabic from the beginning.

We would, however, give presentations in Kurdish to the children and had started working on a translation of the written texts as well when the troubles started. I decided that now it was important to complete this task, and with the help of a number of people from Syria, Europe, and Canada, it was possible to finish this guidebook in time for the meeting. It will be printed in Syria and distributed widely. Another sign of our commitment to our values.

#### GRASSROOTS EMPOWERED

In our Mozan experiment, terms like “stakeholders,” “sustainability,” “grassroots,” and “bottom-up” come across with a whole new forcefulness. No theory, here. Or rather, theory is vindicated by the natural impulse that life brings to the fore. Reality precedes the words.

One of the goals had been to encourage local activities that could eventually develop into a venue

2011. This meant eliciting a sense of importance for a seemingly evanescent, and certainly very remote, past. It also meant training. For a patterned maintenance system is the indispensable human ingredient for the success of any such project.

Our local collaborators, Kurds and Arabs, are working together with the sense of a common goal. What is extraordinary is the complete lack of a feeling of fatigue and disaffection.

It is four years now since there have been excavations at the site. A civil war has been raging in the country. And we get picture upon picture of damages to the mud brick; of plastic that shrivels and needs to be replaced; of tarp covers that slowly disintegrate. All of this is carefully documented on a floor plan or with marks on a photograph to highlight the nature of the problem. More than ten thousand pictures have been received by the middle of 2014.

# OPINION

of interest to visitors. We suggested that the Mozan women might be able to produce their artifacts so they would be available for tourists as we developed the site for tourism. Our plans could not proceed beyond the concept, but colleagues from the Directorate General of Antiquities in Damascus went to Mozan in our absence, further strengthening the resolve of the local women. Through their own initiative, they set things up as a well-organized system. We are now interfacing directly with them so as to maximize the potential of their work. By all standards, this is a remarkable accomplishment.

The group numbers some 30 women, working on a variety of items, and their pride shows not only in the actual products, but also in statements like the following one from a video in which Amena speaks of their work:

Earlier we used to work but it was normal things. We used to make normal pieces for my neighbor, my sister, but it was not of good quality. Then a group of people came from Damascus and told us: we have micro projects! We applied for the grant. It was a little, but it helped us materially and morally.

After that they sent experts to teach us, among them was Ms. Reem who taught us a lot. We were 30 girls. Some learned how to make accessories, others dolls [Figure 18], clothes, and embroidery.

Earlier, we could not send our products because its quality was poor. After this training we became able to improve the quality. . . . We have so many good things!

The thrust comes from the base, with a strong sense of commitment and purpose. The women of Urkesh—Urkesh is the ancient name, but we use it for the larger enterprise that subsumes the villages around the archaeological site. So, it is the women of “Urkesh” who have picked up with vigor when no more guidance could be provided from the outside.

It is a model of an initiative at the grass root level. *We* can now be partners in *their* initiative. And we have found a way. We have “ordered” a number of items produced by them and have received our first shipment. It was with great emotion that we opened this modest little package. They had placed products inside a typical black garbage bag and sent them to Damascus, from where they were in turn sent abroad.

The quality of these products is no less astonishing than the simple fact that they were produced and



Figure 19. The packaging of another doll produced by the women of Mozan.

shipped under the circumstances we all know so well. We are now preparing ways to make them available to our common friends and to place an order for more. The photos speak for themselves.

But there is another small and yet significant detail. The packaging and the logo (Figures 19 and 20)! Some of the items are carefully wrapped in a bag with a burlap backing and a cellophane cover. In the corner, there is a beautiful logo, which uniquely identifies the project and gives in beautiful handwriting the name of the “Urkesh Atelier of Handicrafts” and their telephone number!

## CONCLUSION: UNPLANNED PLANNING

The developments that have taken place at Mozan in the wake of the tragic Syrian upheaval have been remarkable. We had planted a seed. And a consciousness took root that validated our efforts. We had of course never anticipated the disaster that would ensue. But the commitment to the goal was so profound, that there was no question about the results. Our planning was unplanned as to words. But it could not have been more clearly planned as to the intent.

This was possible because there was, in the first



# OPINION

place, a dimension of trust. We had laid out concrete mechanisms for maintaining contact with our local collaborators, whom we expected to carry out various activities while we were there. But we could not anticipate all details, nor could we micro-manage the situation from afar, once it became impossible for us to return regularly. What made up for it was the reciprocal trust, which helped us, on both sides of the great chasm, to interpret the essence of what was needed, even when explanations could not be forthcoming.

The heart-warming and comforting result was the realization that out of the worst can come the best. The dynamics of human situations are like a spiral, and the initial direction of the movement is perhaps the defining moment. If it spirals downward, one is sucked into a progressively more negative trend. It is therefore important to lay the groundwork so that the thrust is upward from the beginning. That is what happily happened in our case.

I will close with two e-mails dated November 2013, from Ibrahim and Kameran of our Mozan staff.



Figure 20. The logo on the packaging.

They shed more light onto the attitude with which they see the joint commitment we share for the site.

Excavations good, but always lacking materials and most of the time I do I bought on my account such as threads, needles and oil and other materials.

Ibrahim

Hello Dear Samer

We the workers we bought materials, such as nylon and other materials debt, from when our friends [they bought plastic sheets with their own money] in order to cover the walls And Abe before the rains, to come Mr. Sabah and covering Abe well

We've temporarily covered with nylon and also some of the walls [they wanted to cover the underground structure in anticipation of heavy rains expected before Sabah, the smith, could complete his new cover for this structure].

After we finished the coverage was really there was a heavy rain, but we got back up In a timely manner and there was no damage to the site.

Thank you,

Kameran



**UCLA**

COTSEN INSTITUTE OF  
ARCHAEOLOGY

Cotsen Institute of Archaeology  
University of California, Los Angeles  
405 Hilgard Avenue  
Box 951510,  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510

[www.ioa.ucla.edu](http://www.ioa.ucla.edu)

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
UCLA

BACKDIRT 2014

COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA

# BACKDIRT

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA

DECEMBER 2014



Learning from the past,  
preparing for the future