

A Channel to the Underworld in Syria

Those times when the evidence of archaeology and text conspire harmoniously to inform us about a single event or phenomenon of antiquity are rare as hen's teeth. However, one such occasion is currently unfolding at Tel Mozan, recently identified as ancient Urkesh, a third millennium Hurrian city situated in northeastern Syria (see BA 60/2 [1997]).

Excavations began at the site in 1984 and after eight seasons of work, the excavators, Giorgio Buccellati of the University of California, Los Angeles and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati of California State University, Los Angeles, were able to identify the site as a major Hurrian center. Despite much progress in our understanding of northern Mesopotamia in antiquity, the Hurrians remain one of the great puzzles—their culture being preserved primarily in the extraordinary influence they wielded on their contemporaries in the region.

During the 1999 campaign at Tell Mozan, the Buccellati's began digging in the area of the exterior southern wall of the palace looking for its principal entrance. Instead, they found a monumental structure that defied interpretation—at least at first. It consists of a circular chamber with a square antechamber that was added later. Access to the four-by-four-meter antechamber is by a narrow staircase on its western wall, while a ladder would have been the only means to access the circular pit. This stone-lined structure existed before the palace was built and underwent three building phases in the course of its existence, but its main phase dates to about 2300 BCE. For at least part of its history, the circular pit had a vaulted ceiling, none of which has survived, but which is evident from the way the stone blocks lining the pit were laid out. The pit measures five meters in diameter and to date has been dug down six meters with possibly another meter to go.

The structure consists of a circular chamber with a square antechamber. Excavations have cleared the pit down to six meters with no end in sight. *All photos courtesy of the Tell Mozan Excavations.*

The excavators ran through the various possibilities—was it an elaborate cist burial? A well? A place for making offerings (*kispum* in Akkadian) to the dead? The structure was impressive enough by itself, but the contents of the pit were astonishing. Within it half a dozen shallow depressions about ten centimeters in diameter had been dug out. These were filled with ash, pebbles and seeds.



This anthropomorphic vessel in the shape of a naked woman with a distorted mouth suggested to the excavators a ritual use, perhaps for pouring libations of oil. Are her large ears designed for listening to the dead? The latter were said to chirp like birds: Is her deformed mouth designed for conversing with the dead in a chirping voice?



A spouted vessel in the shape of a pig's head was among the objects excavated from the pit, which also contained numerous piglet bones. The Hurro-Hittite rituals from Hattusha describe piglet offerings to the deities of the Underworld.

In addition, there were the remains of dozens of animals, including sixty piglets and twenty puppies. The remains of some sixty sheep or goats and twenty donkeys were also found. The animals, with the exception of the puppies, had been carefully butchered. Parts of one adult dog and a dog figurine were also found and a spouted vessel shaped like a pig's head, an anthropomorphic vessel, a handful of copper/bronze pins and silver or lead rings, and clay animal figurines complete the list of finds.

The remains filled the circular pit in a regular build-up of layers with minimal compaction, suggesting few people had access to it. All strata contained similar faunal evidence, although some had more than others, indicating that its use remained consistent over the years.

In the Late Bronze Age, a thousand years after the Urkesh structure went out of use, scribes based at Hattusha, the capital of the Hittite Empire, in consultation with ritual practitioners, were recording ritual recipes for the royal archives. Among these were Hurrian rituals designed to communicate with the gods of the Underworld. It was to these texts that the excavators turned for a possible answer to the function of the Urkesh structure.

In these rituals, pits¹ were dug using various implements—e.g., knives, hoes, spades or axes—and offerings of various grains and liquids, including wine, beer and oil, were lowered into them. Models in precious metal were also placed in the pits, including in one case a model ear, which invited the infernal powers to listen to the petitioner's prayer, and a ladder, which invited the powers of the lower world to ascend into the upper, much like the ladder that accessed the circular pit. Animal sacrifices were also made into the pits, with the blood of the victim either smeared around the lip of the pit or directed to flow into it.

The sacrifices included adult sheep, which were offered up and then eaten by the humans in a ritual meal that they shared with the gods, while lambs and birds were given entirely to the pits as food offerings for the underworld deities. Hurrian myth tells us that when the Storm God drove the Anunnaki (the gods of the Underworld) into the Underworld, he established birds as offerings for them, so it is notable that no bird remains were found in the deposits at Urkesh.

Butchered sheep and goats, like the ones the Buccellati's found at Urkesh, were commonly used as offerings to deities in the ancient Near East, and the evidence of butchering of the bones may attest to ritual meals similar to those found in the Hurro-Hittite rituals. The puppies and piglets, on the other hand, were not considered typical food offerings, suggesting their sacrifice had an entirely different purpose, one that the rituals indicate may have been purificatory.

In one of these rituals, the Hittite wise woman, Hantitassu, describes her technique for aiding a petitioner in obtaining forgiveness from sin. When night falls, the petitioner digs a hole in the ground and slits the throat of a piglet, letting its blood flow into the pit. Grains and liquids are offered into the pit as well. The doors to the Underworld are symbolically opened and the divine images of the Underworld deities are set around the pit to draw the deities up from the earth. Finally, they are invoked to plead with the Sun Goddess of the Earth, Queen of the Underworld, on behalf of the petitioner so that his offense may be forgiven.

The piglet is thus sacrificed to aid in securing the petitioner's release from sin. This purificatory role fits with the piglet's overall use in Hurro-Hittite ritual. Some believe that its chthonic associations originate in the pig's

penchant for rooting in the ground. But it is young animals rather than adults that are particularly favored as offerings to the gods of the Underworld.

Although there is no mention in the ritual texts of puppies being placed in pits for the Underworld deities, like piglets they were used often as purifying agents. Both animals were considered impure and had the power to heal, a juxtaposition of attributes that on the surface may seem contradictory but in fact is not uncommon. A ritual practitioner might wave either, or both, animals over a patient in order to extract the impurities, or cut them in half so that the patient could pass through the parts and be cured. The inevitable outcome was the destruction of the animal as a way of ensuring that the impurity did not return. In the case of the placement of piglets into pits, the combination of purification and offering does not seem to have bothered the Underworld deities, who were apparently immune to the impurities the animal carried with it.

If the monumental structure at Urkesh was a channel to the Underworld, in which animals were sacrificed either for food or for purification to the chthonic powers, who used it? Who would have had a problem so serious that he would have undertaken an activity as dangerous as raising the inhabitants of the Underworld? The Hurro-Hittite rituals seem to suggest that anyone willing to pay the price had access to the expertise of the ritual practitioner, but there is also no doubt that the petitioner in some of these rituals was the Hittite king himself.² The location of the structure at Urkesh adjacent to the royal palace suggests a similar royal use at this ancient Hurrian capital and the Buccellati's believe that a platform situated between the structure and the palace may have connected them in a kind of ritual complex.

Rituals designed to communicate with the deities who inhabited the world beneath the earth typically took place at night and it is notable that the shaft that formed the entry to the structure at Tel Mozan faced the setting sun. The entry had been blocked by a large boulder, which must have been carefully set in place when the structure was not in use to prevent the Underworld powers from unscheduled visits to the world of the living. There it remained untouched for more than four millennia until archaeologists removed it, liberating the secrets it hid, if not the powers it held at bay, for us to ponder.

For more information on this find read Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati's article "Ein hurritischer Untergang in die Unterwelt," published in *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 134

(2002), visit the Tel Mozan website at www.urkesh.org, or look for the feature soon to appear in *National Geographic* magazine.

Notes

1. Hittite scribes used various words for pits in the texts. The Hurrian term *āpi-* seems to be used in connection with the sacrifice of lambs and birds as offerings to the deities of the Underworld, while Hittite *ḫattešar* seems to be the appropriate term when piglets are sacrificed. For discussions of the term *āpi-* see

Hoffner (1967), Ünal (1996: 68) and Collins (2002).

2. See also Kelly-Buccellati (2002: 142) on the structure's royal use. There is possible archaeological evidence for structures serving a similar use at Hattusha, the Hittite capital. One vaulted chamber located in the area known as the *Südburg* may have been constructed as a channel or path to the Underworld (KASKAL.KUR; Hawkins 1990). At the back of the chamber is a relief of the Sun God,

beneath which is a shallow depression, presumably for offerings. The structure is associated with a large sacred pool, perhaps constructed to take the place of the riverbanks near which so many Hurro-Hittite rituals were conducted. (In Hittite ideology, rivers were channels to the Underworld.) Inside a building near to this structure a two-by-two-meter-square rock-lined pit was excavated (Neve 1993: pl. 142). This too, it has been suggested, must have been a ritual pit, perhaps an *āpi-*. Two miniature bronze axes, models of the implements that would have been used to dig the pit, were found lying nearby. Finally, Ünal points out the "cup holes," found throughout the site (1996: 68), for which no good explanation has been found so far. Could these be Late Bronze Age versions of the shallow pits dug within the large pit at Tell Mozan?

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