

## URKESH INSIGHTS INTO KURA-ARAXES SOCIAL INTERACTION

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### ABSTRACT

The core values of the Kura-Araxes culture are seen as a fundamental driver for the long continuity of the culture and allowed them to successfully negotiate their interactions with new cultural environments and social groups. New data from the Mozan/ancient Urkesh excavations in the Khabur plains is interpreted as resulting from the presence in the city of Kura-Araxes groups. Their integration into the Urkesh urban culture is contrasted with their negative experience in Arslantepe. It is suggested that the contrast is due to the Kura-Araxes social and cultural affinities with the urbanised Hurrians in Urkesh. The Kura-Araxes long association with mountainous environments and emphasis on fire rituals show a strong identification with the volcanic nature of these mountains. The Kura-Araxes primordial memory of volcanic eruptions are reflected in the Hurrian myths of Kumarbi and his son Ullikummi.

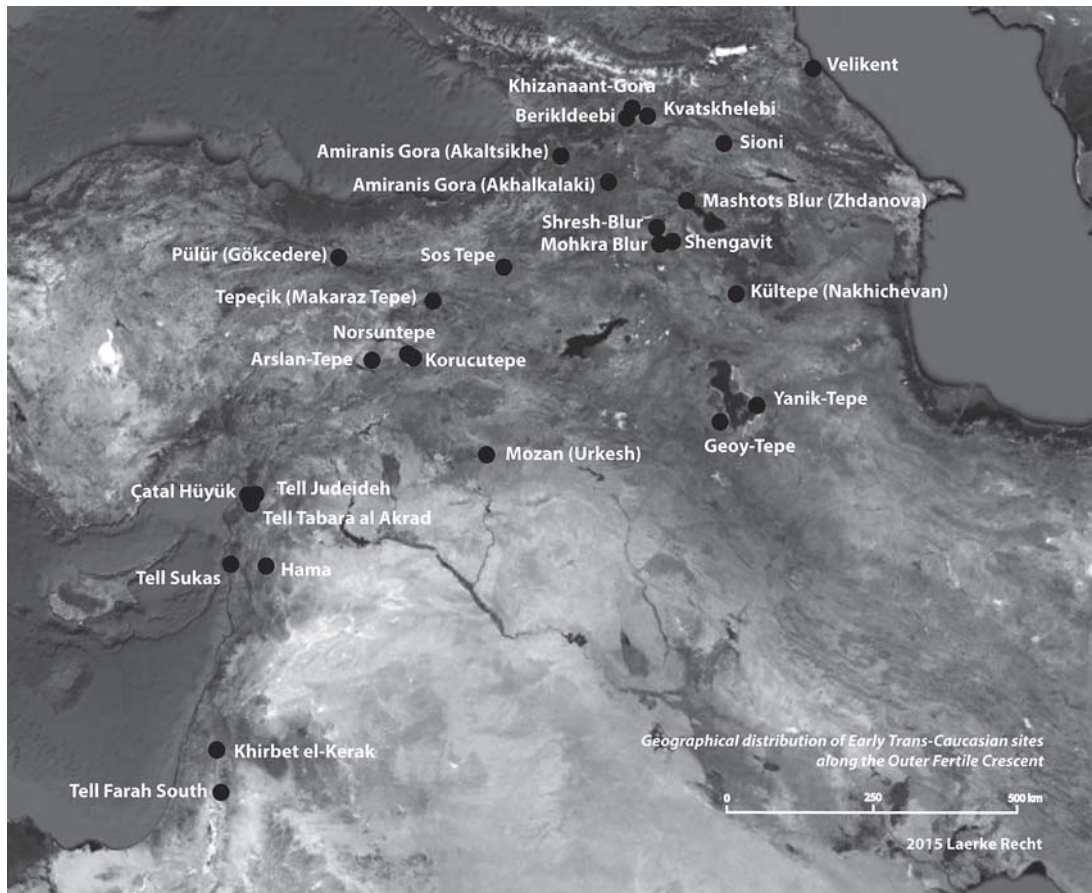
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### INTRODUCTION

While discussions of the beginning, ending and internal chronology of the Kura-Araxes culture are ongoing, new stratigraphic sequences and radiocarbon dates are gradually clarifying the overall situation.<sup>1</sup> Realisation has come slowly as to the importance of the fifth millennium, even while there is more widespread evidence for the fourth millennium in the development of this culture. This is also true for the recognition of the importance of agriculture along with pastoralism in the various stages of Kura-Araxes economic development. With the excavation of more sites both substantially Kura-Araxes in nature and those with varying degrees of Kura-Araxes influence, geographic areas are expanding and new environmental zones are coming to light (**Fig. 1**). One of the more dramatic sites, recently being excavated by Tony Sagona, is at Chobareti in southwest Georgia.<sup>2</sup> The most characteristic features of the Kura-Araxes culture include the handmade red-black ceramics, varying at times and in some places with only one of these colours. Both permanent and portable hearths are also characteristic of the culture, many of them decorated. The permanent examples are usually found in the central room of domestic spaces; they are considered by most

<sup>1</sup> For important overviews of recent research, see Rova 2014 for the Shida Kartli area; Sagona 2011, 2014; Palumbi 2011 with relevant bibliographies. Generally, the Kura-Araxes chronology spans from *c.* 3800–2000 with the Urkesh andiron evidence dating to *c.* 1800 BC. The Uruk chronology spans the period from *c.* 3900–3000 BC. It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to Tony Sagona whose work has been continuously seminal in the field. He has both excavated major Kura-Araxes sites and greatly advanced through his insightful analysis our understanding of this culture in its broader archaeological setting.

<sup>2</sup> Kakhiani *et al.* 2013.



**Fig. 1.** Important Kura-Araxes sites.

scholars to have ritual connotations and in level C1 in Kvatskhelebi, one excavated house showed evidence of a ritual being enacted at the time the building was burnt.<sup>3</sup>

New data also confirm the economic importance of metallurgy, pastoralism and small-scale agriculture, while at the same time raising the possibility of additionally exploring other economic avenues, such as viticulture.<sup>4</sup> The migration model for transhumance has been accepted by most scholars concerned with the Kura-Araxes culture, especially after breakthrough studies of contemporary migration patterns and D. Arnold's work on archaeological evidence for migration.<sup>5</sup> What is of concern here, and a topic to which the stratigraphic evidence from Urkesh has something to contribute, are the various modes of the migrants' integration, or non-integration, into fully urbanised societies. The unique evidence from Urkesh has, indeed, something to contribute to the essential questions, first, of what identity factors were paramount in the Kura-Araxes society and, then, of what societal structures enabled it to continue spreading over such a wide area while still retaining its socio-cultural integrity over such a long period of time. In other words, what gave the Kura-Araxes groups such confidence in their core cultural values that it was certain that their society would continue to be principally controlled by these values, even with a reconfiguration of

<sup>3</sup> Djavakishvili and Glonti 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Batiuk 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony 1990, 1997; Rothman 2005.

their social environment due to their transfer into new areas? In spite of a changing landscape and environment, and in addition to the changing social context of their migration, they held to their core values, belief system and social ideals. The basic question is, in the archaeological record, what habitual practices can we identify that can lead us in turn to identify these core beliefs?

In this article, I will study two cases where the confrontation with an established urban culture on the part of migrating Kura-Araxes groups took place along diametrically opposed lines, and will propose a common reason for this difference. The two sites are Arslantepe in southwest Anatolia and Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan), and the reason I suggest is that at Arslantepe the Kura-Araxes groups met with a completely alien population, one that did not share any of their core values, while at Urkesh they met with a Hurrian population with which, we have reason to believe, the Kura-Araxes culture had many ties of affinity. I will first review briefly the main evidence from Urkesh.

## URKESH BETWEEN THE HIGHLANDS AND THE SYRO-MESOPOTAMIAN PLAINS

Urkesh, on the periphery of the Kura-Araxes world, situated as it is in the northern part of the Syro-Mesopotamian plains,<sup>6</sup> gives us an insight into what was most fundamental to the Kura-Araxes culture, in that patterns observed in the archaeological record of the third millennium city are starker and more visible in a context that has only some part of the Kura-Araxes cultural array. The Urkesh evidence of both permanent and portable hearths decorated in a Kura-Araxes style, as well as the unusual stratigraphy of the plaza, contributes to an evaluation of the number of variations the Kura-Araxes culture exhibited in a long trajectory that at times had difficult and sometimes violent relations with urban socio-economic environments. The subject of the Urkesh plaza stratigraphy is at the heart of the new evidence I am presenting here.

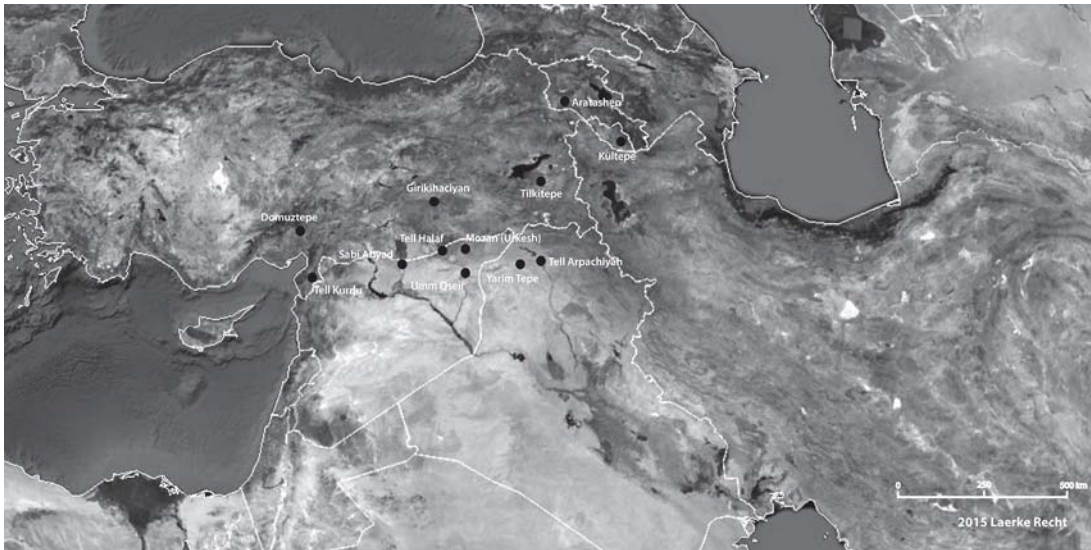
The earliest excavated evidence at Urkesh comes from a small deep sounding (S2) in which we discovered Halaf sherds just above virgin soil. Besides this excavated evidence, on both the High Mound and in the southwestern part of the Outer City, Halaf sherds were collected on the surface.<sup>7</sup> In the various excavation units near the base of the third millennium revetment wall, a few Halaf painted sherds were mixed in with later deposits. This is not surprising, since in this part of the Jazira, in the Wadi Hanzir area especially, there are a large number of Halaf sites. Of these, Hajji Nasr just to the southeast of the Urkesh Outer City perimeter is one of the largest. This evidence from Mozan, ancient Urkesh, and the Wadi Hanzir in the Halaf period connects this area with the wider distribution of Halaf ceramics and other evidence for this culture (**Fig. 2**). What is important to note here is the distribution of Halaf ceramics along an arc that includes southeastern Anatolia, northern Syro-Mesopotamia and the area of the southern Caucasus, an arc of early contacts that is reflected later in what I have called the 'Outer Fertile Crescent'.<sup>8</sup>

From the middle of the fourth millennium, the distributional patterns of various types of related chaff-tempered pottery, even if regionally distinct, again links all this area. By the Late Chalcolithic 3 period in Urkesh (*c.* 3500 BC), a high terrace had been constructed,

<sup>6</sup> The ancient names of the city and its Hurrian rulers are discussed in Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996. Most publications on the Urkesh excavations can be found in digital format on [www.Urkesh.com](http://www.Urkesh.com), under E-Library. Statistics on all ceramics from the plaza area are included in that website.

<sup>7</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Özbal 2010; Kelly-Buccellati 1979.



**Fig. 2.** Halaf site distribution.

which stood 22 m above the level of the plain. On what appears to be the top of this terrace a niched building, most likely a temple, was constructed. Previously we had found in this area a large number of local Late Chalcolithic 3 chaff-tempered ceramics and some Middle Uruk-style seal impressions that can be linked to the contemporary evidence from the nearby site of Tell Brak.<sup>9</sup> While the niched building and the Uruk-style seal impressions connect the site to southern cultural elements, I do not think that there was any direct Uruk influence in Mozan, given the fact that only very few sherds in a large corpus of local Late Chalcolithic 3 ceramics could be linked with the south. The cultural environment within Mozan in the mid fourth millennium appears to be one of an urban space where local elites were able to construct a high terrace for display to all the surrounding countryside of the power of that place.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, some residents were knowledgeable about the architectural developments in the south, so much so that a southern type of niched building was constructed and some containers were sealed with designs characteristic of the Middle Uruk iconography in use in the south. But, in my opinion, this “south” was relatively close at hand in the case of Mozan; that is, the architectural knowledge and the sealed containers in Mozan more than likely came through contacts with the major Middle Uruk-period centre in the area at Brak where the Eye Temple and the number of Middle Uruk seals would have had an influence. In other words, Urkesh in that period did not participate in the so-called Uruk Expansion with its access to a communication and trade system far beyond the local Khabur sites and their mountainous hinterland; it was not, therefore, an Uruk-type site, but a culturally autonomous urban centre that was in active contact with the an Uruk-type site like Brak.

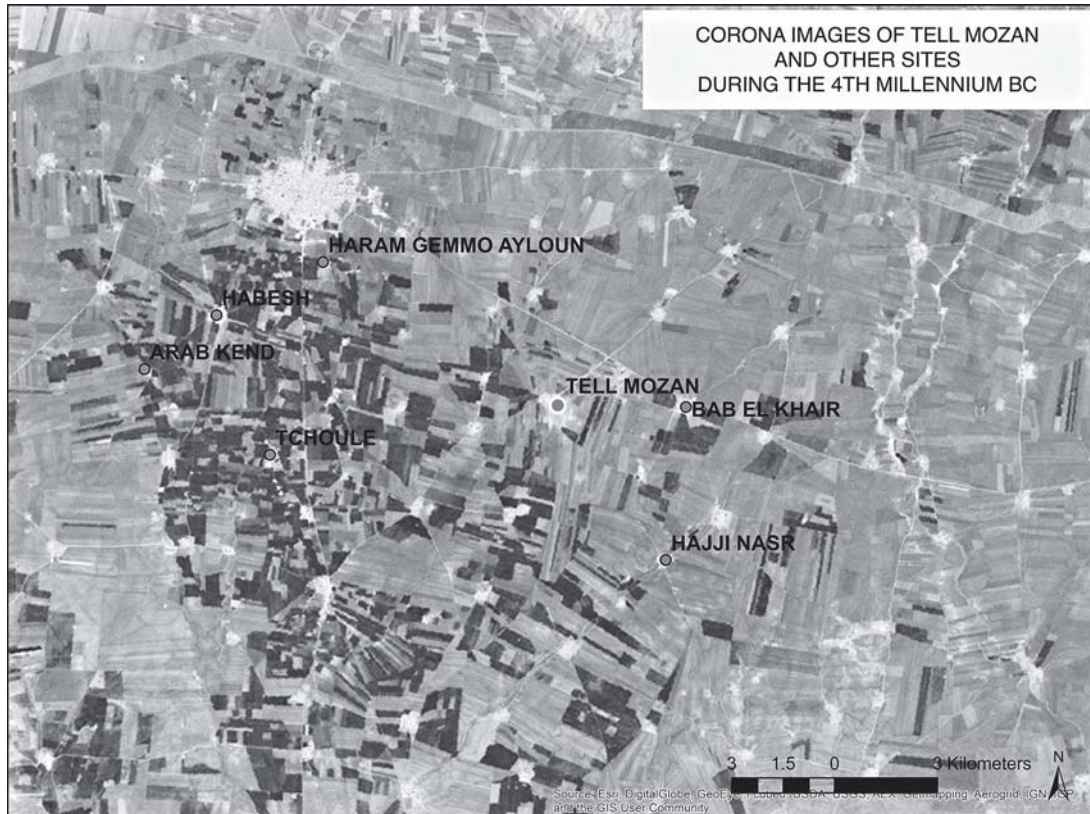
At the same time, there were contacts between Urkesh and the north in the mid fourth millennium. Knowledge of the cultural environment to the north can be seen in the large number of local Late Chalcolithic 3 ceramics found in our excavations on top of the temple terrace and in front of the revetment wall near the later monumental staircase.<sup>11</sup> Also in the area immediately surrounding the city there are a number of small sites with evidence on the

<sup>9</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2010. I would like to thank Rasha el-Endari for the map in Fig. 3.





**Fig. 3.** Fourth millennium sites near Mozan.

surface of local Late Chalcolithic 3 ceramics (**Fig. 3**). This handmade, chaff-tempered pottery has a wide distribution to the north, with simple ceramic forms such as casseroles and the so-called hammer rim bowls. Many of the vessels, in Urkesh and elsewhere, are identified by a potter's mark.<sup>12</sup> The nature of the Kura-Araxes spread kept them focused on a restricted range of climatic and landscape environments; during these early periods they did not venture into the very different cultural world of Syro-Mesopotamia to the south. Even though we see the continuous evidence of connections with the north, there is no evidence this early of Kura-Araxes presence in the plains to the south of the Tur-Abdin—with the possible exception of Urkesh alone, as I will argue below.

#### THE KURA-ARAXES OPPOSITION TO URBANISM: THE CASE OF ARSLANTEPE

When Kura-Araxes agro-pastoral groups migrated to rural areas, they seem to have had the ability to peacefully co-exist with the groups already there as they interacted with them in various ways.<sup>13</sup> But their experience with urban environments was quite different. One of the few places where we can see the interaction between the Kura-Araxes culture and an urban socio-economic context is in the stratigraphy of Arslantepe.<sup>14</sup> In the earliest periods of

<sup>12</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2010; Marro 2008, pp. 11–15.

<sup>13</sup> Marro 2005, pp. 27–29; see also Greenberg 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Frangipane 2012b, pp. 235–260 with references to previous publications of this complex stratigraphy.

this interaction, period VII (3900–3400 BC), Frangipane interprets Arslantepe as a centralised society with elite residences on the higher part of the mound and a large temple located nearby.<sup>15</sup> Connections with Mesopotamia in this period are seen in the architecture of Temple C, a tripartite structure, and the number of seal impressions. In the following period (VIA, 3400–3000 BC), the architecture is characterised by elite residences, a ‘palatial complex’ and two new but smaller temples, Temples A and B. The presence of a small amount of Kura-Araxes ceramics in these strata certainly indicates contact with this culture: the Kura-Araxes agro-pastoralists would have experienced a centralised type of society in Arslantepe, with its emphasis on large-scale religious, economic and residential buildings. They would have seen the effects of elite power and, to some extent at least, elite control over local economic resources. They would have experienced the interactions of a larger population group living within the city and its interconnections with smaller settlements in the surrounding area.

From the subsequent history of the site, it is clear that these small Kura-Araxes groups did not adapt themselves or their culture in this urban direction, either from the point of view of site occupation, construction of monumental architecture, use of administrative mechanisms, or ceramic production by means of the potter’s wheel. After the destruction and collapse of period VIA, the following period, VIB1 (3000–2900 BC), saw the reoccupation of the site, with the Kura-Araxes red-black handmade ceramics being the only pottery in use there.<sup>16</sup> Even though this constituted a sharp break with the past, the Kura-Araxes settlement in Arslantepe was constructed on the ruins of the previous buildings, indicating that there was not a long period of time between the two events, the destruction and the construction of the new architecture. This new settlement was quite different from the previous centralised settlement, as shown through the construction of simple wooden architecture characteristic of the Kura-Araxes culture.<sup>17</sup> The complicated developments within the VIB period, as reconstructed by the excavators, shows a continuation of Kura-Araxes simple wooden architecture and handmade red-black ceramics.<sup>18</sup> Most important is that even knowing about the previous centralised society and economic structure, and some people perhaps having directly or indirectly participated in it, there was no crossover imitating this experience. Rather, we see a continuation of Kura-Araxes socio-economic core ideas and practices, ignoring the supposed benefits of urban-type centralisation. My point is that this urban experience was never imitated or translated into the Kura-Araxes culture, in whatever environmental niche they were inhabiting.

#### KURA-ARAXES ACCEPTANCE OF URBANISM: THE CASE OF URKESH

From our excavations we see a complex but quite different experience in Urkesh. Urkesh is a gateway city between the north and south and, as such, needed contacts with the north for the transfer of knowledge and trade, especially connected to northern metal resources and metallurgical know-how.<sup>19</sup> We have evidence from our excavations of the Kura-Araxes cultural presence in Urkesh from the mid third millennium into the Old Babylonian period, around 1800 BC. The history of the city during this timespan showed one moment of an

<sup>15</sup> Frangipane 2012a, pp. 19–36.

<sup>16</sup> Frangipane 2012a, 2012b.

<sup>17</sup> Frangipane 2012b, pp. 242–244.

<sup>18</sup> Frangipane 2012b, pp. 237–260; Palumbi 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 1979.

intense fire, in the temple area, at the end of Early Dynastic III or the very beginning of the Akkadian period (c. 2250 BC). The fire destroyed the temple; additionally, in Area K1 the remains of a burnt structure and its contents were discarded outside the inner city wall.<sup>20</sup> In neither case do we have evidence for warfare or even social unrest. Our evidence for a Kura-Araxes cultural presence in Urkesh includes a small amount of ceramics—a few Kura-Araxes sherds were found both on the surface of the site and from our excavations.<sup>21</sup> The earliest Kura-Araxes sherds from stratified contexts come from the Temple BA excavations and are dated to the Early Dynastic III period in the mid third millennium. At that point, Urkesh was an important city with a monumental temple complex at its centre, the continuation of the monumental fourth millennium temple terrace, now with a new temple on its summit. In this period, the temple was accessed by a monumental staircase flanked by a large stone apron. This constituted the elevated central part of an impressive city that both the inhabitants and travellers on the nearby plains would have viewed and interacted with (Fig. 4).<sup>22</sup> In the temple area and in graves in the Outer City we found a large number of metal objects dating to the Early Dynastic II and III periods (2700–2400 BC).<sup>23</sup> In addition to the metal objects, the presence of a small amount of Kura-Araxes ceramics in one of the most important parts of the city, the Early Dynastic III temple area, shows that contacts with the north were varied, even if we do not understand their extent and mechanisms.

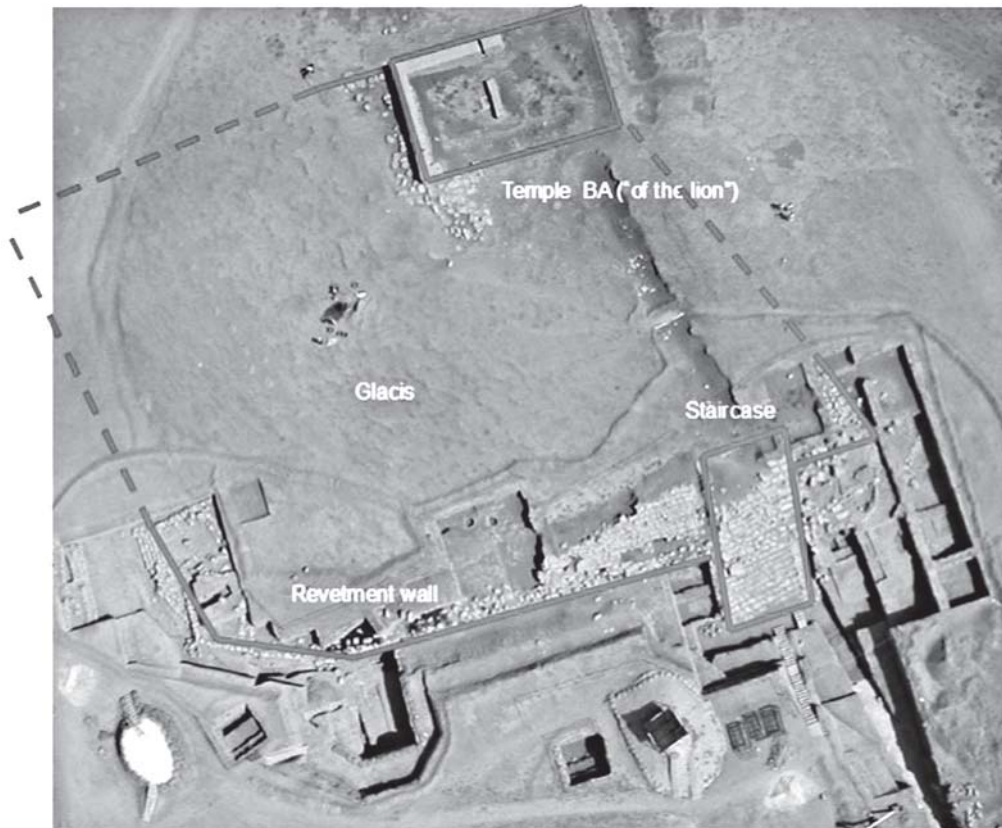


Fig. 4. Mozan, temple terrace in the mid-third millennium.

<sup>20</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988, pp. 44, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2005, pp. 34–36; 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 1990.

In the Akkadian period, Kura-Araxes stratified ceramics come from primary contexts (living floors) of the royal palace. On these floors we had a total of 11,618 sherds, of which only 25 were Kura-Araxes ceramics.<sup>24</sup> These same floors yielded a large number of seal impressions of the Hurrian king (*endan* in Hurrian) of Urkesh, Tupkish, his queen, Uqnitum, and servants connected with her. From their seal inscriptions we know that the city was named Urkesh and that the ruling elite was Hurrian. Evidence from the royal inscriptions, the seal legends and an administrative cuneiform tablet indicate that the language they were using was Hurrian.<sup>25</sup> We have argued elsewhere that the local dynasty, whose kings called themselves *endan*, was connected to the Akkadian rulers to the south in specific ways, one of which was through the previously unknown daughter of Naram-Sin, Tar'am-Agade, who in all likelihood was married to an *endan* of Urkesh. A number of door sealings connected with the palace, sealed with a contest scene naming her as seal owner, attest to the fact that she was present in Urkesh.<sup>26</sup> We have also published our interpretation that the purveyors of the Kura-Araxes culture can be identified as Hurrian.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to ceramics, our earliest evidence for the use of Kura-Araxes-connected andirons in Urkesh comes from the period around 2100 BC, as we excavated one small portable andiron with a Kura-Araxes type decoration in a working courtyard area of the palace (Fig. 5). One of the ends of the object is preserved with two large X-design patterns, each with a circular portion in the centre used for an inlay. This is a very similar decoration to the later example we excavated from the Old Babylonian period,<sup>28</sup> when both portable andirons and permanent hearths were found in Old Babylonian strata.<sup>29</sup> The context of the permanent and portable hearths was in areas of private houses and tombs, where both types were discovered.<sup>30</sup> This use of Kura-Araxes andirons can be interpreted as a re-emergence of evidence of the core beliefs of some part of the Urkesh population in a period of great socio-political upheaval, as shown in the letters from the area preserved in the Mari archives.<sup>31</sup>

New evidence has been excavated in Urkesh which I am interpreting as resulting from the Kura-Araxes presence in the city. We have seen above that the Kura-Araxes culture was inherently a conservative one, in which the retention and active continuity of the core values was fundamental. This formed a basis that enabled the Kura-Araxes culture to survive for such a long period and spread over such a wide geographical area. The new evidence from Urkesh is stratigraphic in nature. The temple terrace founded in the city in the Late Chalcolithic period continued to function as the most elevated part of the city, but more importantly it continued to function as the ritual centre of the city. In the mid third millennium (Early Dynastic III) a stone revetment wall was added at the base of the temple terrace, possibly replacing an earlier Late Chalcolithic wall. Outside this enclosure wall, on the south and southwest, was a large plaza. It is the unique stratigraphy of this plaza that is important here. Our excavations have revealed it was a large open space that was kept clean continually for

<sup>24</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2000, fig. 14a.

<sup>25</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1996, 1998, 2002; Maiocchi 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2004; Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2007. The archaeology of ethnicity has been widely discussed by members of the field and recently Kohl (2007) has taken exception to both the concept and the term. For an alternative view, see G. Buccellati 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2004; Kupper 1998, pp. 52–62, 141–143, 158. To the north, the picture has been reconstructed of a large and evolving Kura-Araxes polity which may have influenced the reappearance of evidence of Kura-Araxes core values in Urkesh as well: Marro 2011, pp. 303–305.



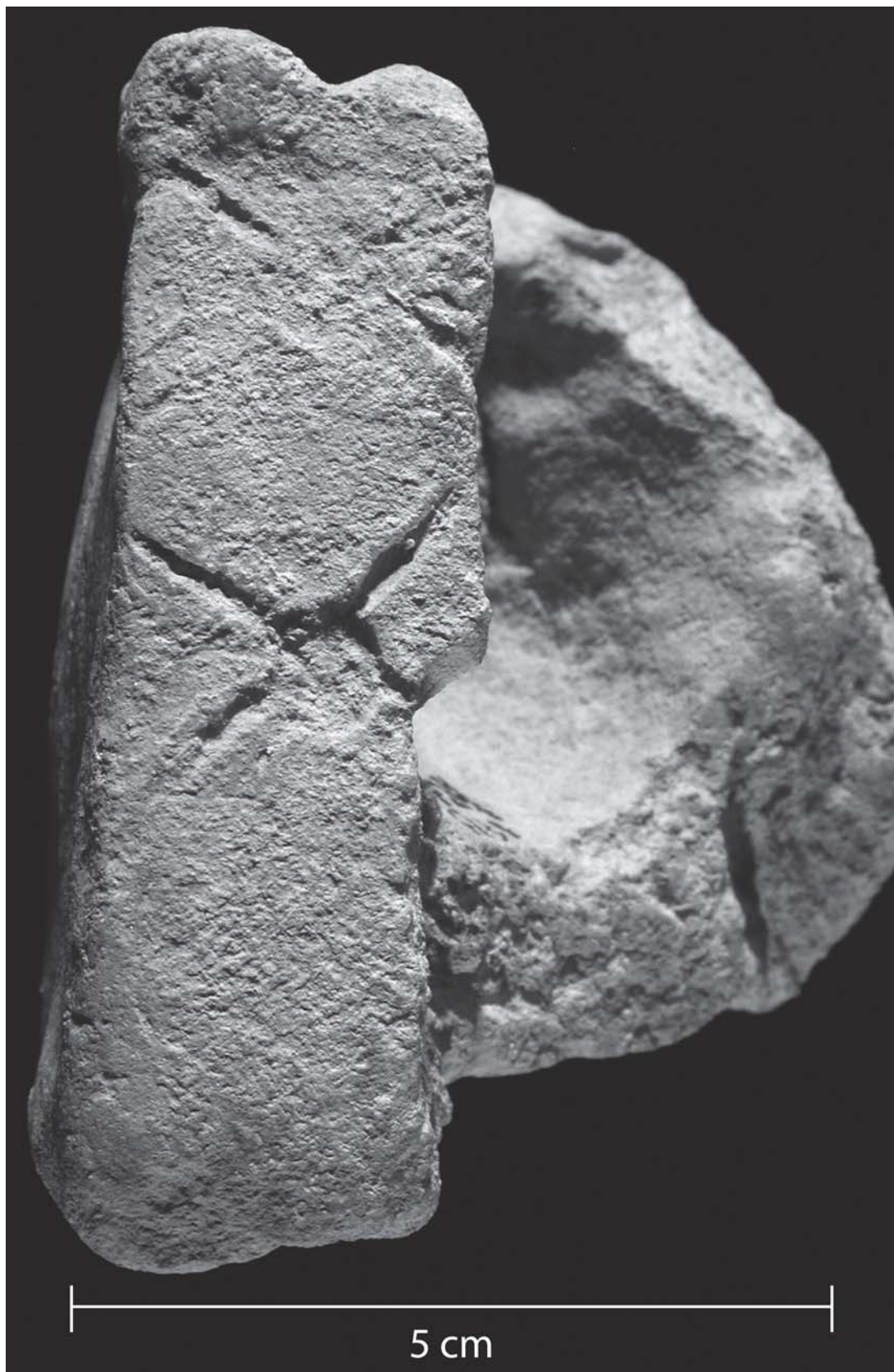
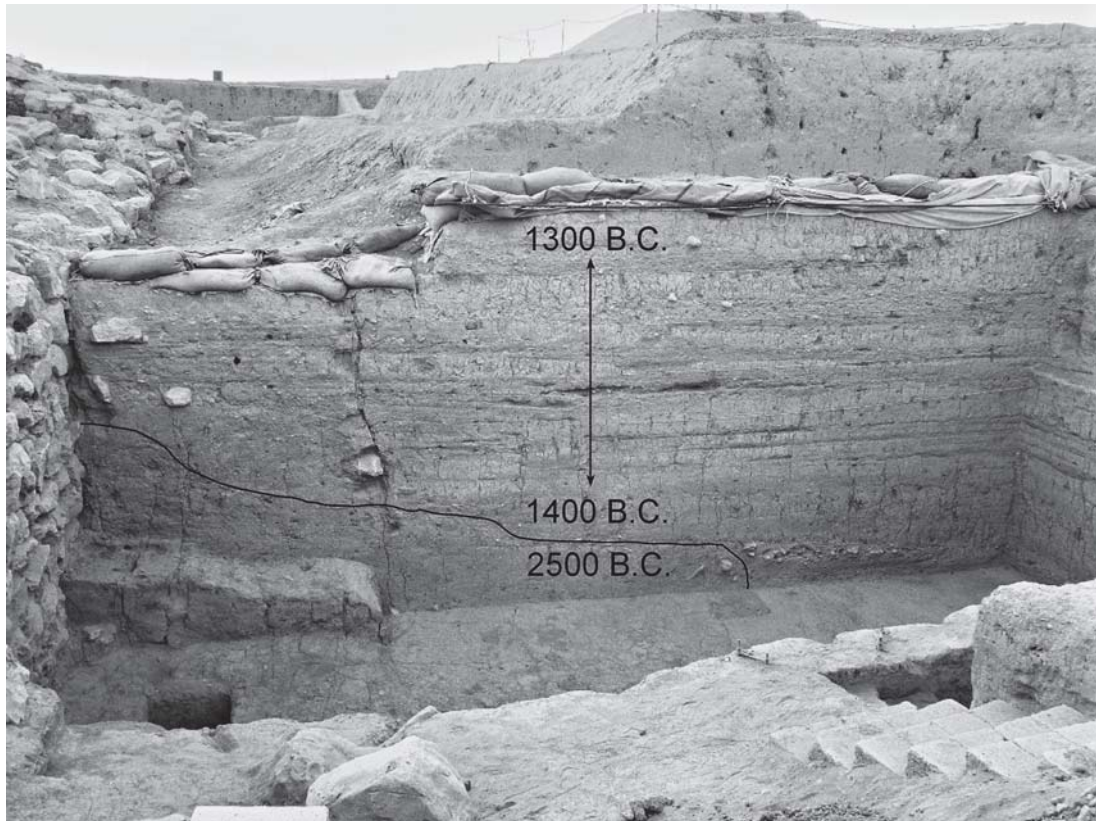


Fig. 5. Portable andiron from Area A9.



**Fig. 6.** J1 plaza in front of the temple terrace.

over a thousand years, even though the surface was an unpaved dirt floor (**Fig. 6**). In this plaza we found relatively flat layers that were clean in the sense that there were no pits, no hollows, no hearths or *tannurs*, no burials and no evidence of refuse being discarded there. In other words, the plaza existed as a clean open space next to the monumental stairway and southern part of the revetment wall for this entire time period, from *c.* 2500 until 1400 BC. In the immediate vicinity (to the east, southeast and west of the temple terrace), we have instead evidence of a continuous occupation, which indicates without any doubt that life in the city continued uninterrupted. Nor is there any evidence of abandonment in the plaza itself (such as weather erosion or eolic deposition). The city was not abandoned during these periods, nor did the ritual focus of the city shift. The plaza was kept clean because the city's inhabitants wanted it clean, and so it remained for an extraordinarily long period of time.

How does this unique 'presence' in the plaza reflect a Kura-Araxes presence in the city? First there is one more archaeological line of evidence to evaluate. In the plaza, west of the monumental stairway and south of the revetment wall we did find a large amount of ceramic evidence in the form of sherds; they, too, reflected the effort to maintain the pristine nature of the plaza, as their deposition was evenly scattered over the area with no evidence of ceramic dumps. The stratified ceramics from the mid third millennium (Early Dynastic III) were all local in type with a southern Mesopotamian influence. They were directly covered by ceramics dating to the Early Mittani period. In other words, there is no ceramic evidence in this area for the time from the Akkadian through the Old Babylonian period (*c.* 2300–1800 BC). We have analysed the entire corpus of ceramics from our plaza excavations and have found that the ceramic patterns of use in this area in Early Dynastic III are also reflected in the

## J1 - the main Plaza

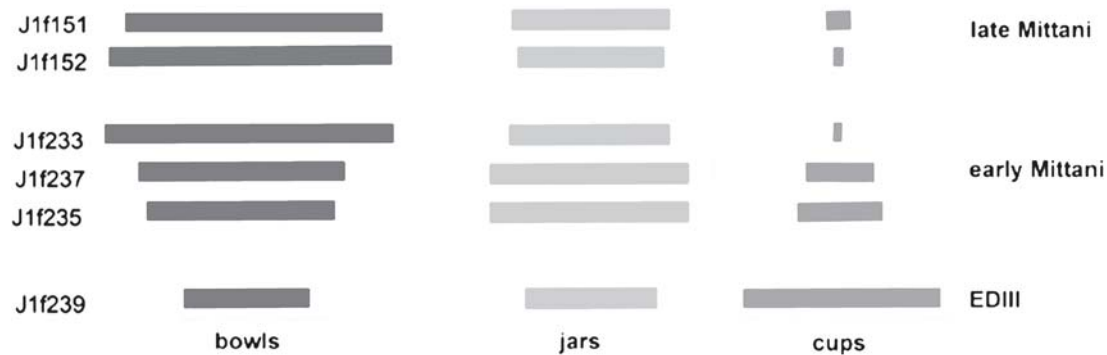


Fig. 7. Ceramic distribution in the J1 plaza.

ceramic distributional patterns of the Early Mittani period (Fig. 7). In other words, there is what we would expect in an uninterrupted stratigraphic sequence, a battleship curve with a gradual development and a gradual decline indicated. So, for instance, we see from our analysis that in the mid third millennium cups were the most important shape numerically (and this is one of the lines of evidence we have used in arguing for the ritual nature of the plaza).<sup>32</sup> In the Early Mittani period, cups continued to be important, with a decline at the end of the period; this decline in the use of cups continued into the Late Mittani period. Looking at the bowl and jar patterns, we can see that their frequencies are very similar in Early Dynastic III. This continues in the Early Mittani period, even while both shape types are more frequent. In Late Mittani, a different pattern for bowls begins to emerge. What is important here is that there are no breaks in the usage patterns of these shapes, indicating, to my mind, a functionally coherent use of this important urban space.

What, then, is the value of this new evidence from Urkesh for research on Kura-Araxes social patterns? If we look at the evidence as shown above, the Kura-Araxes individuals were not successful, probably for a variety of reasons, in integrating themselves into the urban context of Arslantepe to the northwest of Urkesh. My reconstruction of the situation in the urban context of Urkesh, on the other hand, is that they found themselves in a different type of social situation and urban framework. It was a city that was closely connected to the south and dependent to a large extent on local agriculture, but it also functioned as a gateway between the resource-rich north and the urban centres of the south. The model for their social interaction in Urkesh is based on the fact that Urkesh was an important Hurrian cultural centre, one which Hurrian mythology considered the residence of the primordial god Kumarbi. More than likely, in fact, the god 'lived' in the temple on the highest part of the mound surrounded by the revetment wall. We have presented in a number of publications the hypothesis that the Kura-Araxes culture in the southern Caucasus may be seen as having spread out from there as a population of non-urban Hurrians.<sup>33</sup> Based on this interpretation, it is more than likely that the carriers of this culture did not adapt to a non-Hurrian urban environment as they found it in Arslantepe, with the very dramatic results we see from the excavations there. In Urkesh, on the other hand, they would have lived within a culture that

<sup>32</sup> G. Buccellati, 2010; F. Buccellati, 2010; Kelly-Buccellati 2013.

<sup>33</sup> G. Buccellati 2010, 2013; Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2007; Kelly-Buccellati 2004.



shared their core values, even if we see only some evidence of this from the material culture. Throughout a great part of the third millennium and into the early second millennium, their urban experience was only manifested in a dramatic and constant manner in how the plaza was kept clean and probably kept in use ritually in a functionally coherent manner. The continuity seen in the Urkesh material culture would be indicative of the affinities the Kura-Araxes groups had with the urbanites in Urkesh. The cultural force necessary to preserve intact the clean plaza area in my view could have stemmed from the same type of integrated and conservative culture that also enabled that culture to extend over such a wide geographical area over such a long period of time.

We have observed in Mozan four lines of argument that suggest long continuities, on the basis of (1) architecture, (2) use of space, (3) mythological traditions, (4) the cult of the dead. They are as follows:

(1) We have a niched building, dated to the Late Chalcolithic 3 period, sitting on a terrace at an elevation of 22 m above plain level: it is almost certainly a temple and, while architecturally different from its third millennium counterpart, it seems inescapable to assume that there was continuity in the cultic values which the temple served. This theory is also supported by the fact that there are two direct lines of architectural continuity in the rest of the terrace. First, there is a monumental fourth millennium revetment wall at the base of the terrace which is perfectly aligned with a later third millennium wall serving the same function. Second, underneath the third millennium monumental staircase, there is evidence of an earlier staircase that served the same purpose and is very likely to have provided access to the fourth millennium niched building.

(2) As I have shown, there is strong continuity in the plaza fronting the temple terrace. From the third to the second millennium, for over 12 centuries, the plaza remained clean of all encumbrances, even though its paving was only dirt and not stones. This means that there was a very deliberate maintenance and protection system, which implies great concern for continuity.

(3) The Hurrian myths relating to Kumarbi are preserved in Late Bronze Age cuneiform texts, but they clearly reflect a very archaic strand of the tradition, because of the nature of the narrative and of the themes. These are, in other words, primordial myths and not late, learned inventions. In this context, Kumarbi is at home in the mountains, but resides in the city of Urkesh. We have already suggested that these myths may plausibly refer to a very early situation, one that identifies the city of Urkesh as the place of residence for a deity who is really at home in the mountains.

(4) The Urkesh necromantic shaft (*abi* in Hurrian) has been excavated only to the levels of the mid third millennium, but it certainly continues deeper (the current level is some 6 m above virgin soil). It seems most likely that such a unique structure, and the equally unique cult associated with it, would go back to the beginning of the city. If so, we have here one more strand of evidence for a continuity that reaches into the fourth millennium.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: NATURE OF KURA-ARAXES SOCIAL COMPLEXITY

The Kura-Araxes migration patterns we see in the archaeological record focused on small groups moving, for the most part, in the highlands. Core Kura-Araxes values were maintained by these new and continuing local societies, even though they usually consisted in a small number of people separated by long distances from others of the same culture. What was the nature of the Kura-Araxes society that it could retain its core cultural values for such



a long period of time and spread over such a wide geographical expanse? What we see in the pottery, architecture, andirons and metallurgy is a material reflection of those characteristics that would have reinforced these values and beliefs in the minds of the people, even if the exact connotations (for example, of decorations on andirons<sup>34</sup> or ceramics) escape us. While the geographical span is immense for such an early time period in the ancient world, the environmental span is not. The exploitation of highlands with plentiful pastoral lands that seem not to have been strongly contested by other groups and the availability of limited agricultural lands, also not strongly contested based on our present evidence, helped to reduce the uncertainties of coexistence with new societies Kura-Araxes groups were encountering.

Since social cohesion and group identity was paramount to Kura-Araxes peoples' control of their place in their world, their retention of commonly held social values, as we see in their rejection of the urban social model, and religious values, attested in the prevalence of hearth and fire rituals, was paramount to successfully negotiating their interaction with new cultural environments and new social groups. Their emphasis on traditions connected with a geographically widespread contemporary culture and a shared past would generate benefits of social cohesion and clarity of ethnic identification. Additionally, the development of rituals revolving around a central hearth associated with houses or spaces where only a few individuals could participate helped to perpetuate within the group their interaction with the 'beyond' at a small-group level. These small-group rituals, probably only held at the household level, were purposely intimate, conveying a deeply felt social relationship. They demonstrated a close, even direct, link with a reality connected with 'the other' through the physical nearness involved and the dynamism of the fire within the context of the hearth, which encased it while at the same time signifying, as it were, the 'reality beyond'. Furthermore, those conducting the rituals would have been well known to the small community, making the experience that much more familiar. This association between the central hearth and the small local community was demonstrated physically in the three nested hearths excavated in Korucutepe. Going from larger to smaller, each was decorated with the schematic representation of a human-like face.<sup>35</sup> Few larger spaces can be interpreted as the locus of religious events; the most notable is at Berikldeebi.<sup>36</sup> Berikldeebi can be interpreted as an important node, the site not only of ritual performances but also a locus for negotiations within the social group, the result being that these negotiations were taking place within a religious context.

In conclusion, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the Kura-Araxes culture as a conservative society, characterised by traditional beliefs and practices aimed at stability and continuity. Their society was obviously a close-knit one, based more than likely on kinship, so to some extent it was closed. It was also based on socio-economic adaptive patterns which were fundamental to successfully confronting new territorial challenges. But the society was not based on a specific, restricted territory but rather on a type of landscape connected with mountains and associated valleys. Additionally, their social group was egalitarian, meaning that its values must be inherent, not imposed by an elite societal component.

What are the group's core values as shown through the archaeological record? A fundamental one is their belief in a divine world in some way connected with fire, since their domestic rituals are organised around a central hearth. Another value must be an appreciation of belonging to this closed group, which functioned efficiently and more than

<sup>34</sup> Smogorzewska 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Van Loon 1978, vol. 2, pp. 20–21; Kelly-Buccellati 2004, pp. 70–72.

<sup>36</sup> Djavakishvili 1998; Rova 2014.

likely for the benefit of most members of the society. Another core value, as I see it, is a pride in the group and its achievements—achievements in migrational success, as they were able to sustain a pattern of widespread small group settlements, or, in other words, to ‘conquer’ (in some way appropriate to their control) a vast territory. This does not mean political control, and may not necessarily be associated with socio-economic adaptation, but may mean a spiritual control over the mountains and valleys by being physically present on the one hand and, on the other hand, present in a psychological sense, thereby acknowledging association with and dependence on the mountains. The appreciation of the mountains must have had a deep spiritual meaning for them. This deep connection to territory must also be connected with the love of ‘seeing’ the territory by travelling in it, leading in their case to an even closer migration pattern whereby they moved into that territory. And this success in the establishment of settlers in a new territory must be related to the fact that they are always within the shadow of the mountains where they now live; in archaeological terms, as we have seen above, they are moving and settling within a very similar environmental niche. Their connection with the mountains also meant, given the geology of the region, that there was a strong identification with the volcanic nature of these mountains. The primordial memory of volcanic eruptions can be seen in the emphasis on fire in the Kura-Araxes rituals, and then in the Hurrian myths of Kumarbi and Ullikummi.<sup>37</sup>

We can point to other factors that were, in my view, at the basis of their society. One is a pride in their technological level. Their ceramics continue to be handmade even though in the societies they come in contact with there are potters using the wheel. In the minds of the Kura-Araxes potters, ceramics are related to metal and therefore connect them with their homeland, which is rich in metal sources. It should be noted that they usually migrate into areas with metal sources or, in the case of Urkesh, into a hub for metals trading. The Kura-Araxes ceramics, in addition to being handmade, are characterised by the high burnish on their surfaces, which is especially time consuming for the potter to achieve. We can safely assume that to continue making such energy-consuming ceramics, the Kura-Araxes potters were proud of their skills and were appreciated throughout the Kura-Araxes society. Lastly, the widespread ceramic decorations, both colours and decorative techniques, would have connected the society over the vast territory.

And this brings us to the last question: how are these migrations connected over a very long period of time to the wider Kura-Araxes group? And, in particular, how can we see their relationship to Urkesh, distant as it was from the Kura-Araxes homeland not only in space, but also in terms of its nature as a fully developed urban centre? In my view, individuals and small groups were going back and forth between their homeland and the new territories, thereby gaining knowledge of and familiarity with other members, even those living far away. The transfer of this knowledge all along the way would have been a natural occurrence. And the travellers would have been accepted and welcomed because of the solidity of the group identity, so that unknown persons were ‘known’ because they were members of the larger group.

Urkesh is the earliest known Hurrian city, with its beginnings clearly in the fourth millennium, at the same time as the great Sumerian cities in the south and the beginning of the Kura-Araxes migrations. The Hurrians, too, came from the northern highlands to the Mesopotamian plains. Their cities were along what we have called the Hurrian urban ledge; that is, that portion of the plains that is immediately to the south of the Tur-Abdin

<sup>37</sup> Hoffner 1998, p. 41; Burkert 1979, pp. 253–261.

and the Anatolian plateau. Thus the Hurrians and the Kura-Araxes people shared the same mountain habitat, and this may have contributed to establishing their ties of affinity. The long cultural continuities that I have highlighted in Urkesh are an important element of this affinity. What I have called the core values of the Kura-Araxes people found a match in those of the Hurrians, and this served as the social glue that made possible adaptation to the starkly different urban environment.

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## CONTEXT AND CONNECTION

Studies on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East  
in Honour of Antonio Sagona

edited by

ATILLA BATMAZ, GIORGI BEDIANASHVILI,  
ALEKSANDRA MICHALEWICZ and ABBY ROBINSON



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