

Urkesh 2001-3

Widening horizons

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Urkesh 2001-3

The years 2001-3 were marred by external difficulties (the preparation for the war in Iraq and then the war itself). There were uncertainties, delays and some curtailing of our field activities, but in the end, Syrian hospitality prevailed, and we were able to continue our work unabashedly.

Sometimes we feel that the excavation itself is like a war... Our adversary is the ground, that tightly holds in its grip what we most care to see revealed. We have been winning the individual battles that we call seasons, but we are awed by the prospect that the ultimate victory in the "war" itself may elude us as it recedes further and further into the future. The soil is hiding a Palace larger than we ever anticipated. This means of course that the final conquest will be all the richer, and we are determined to get there...

At one point we felt as though an ancient colleague was reaching out to help in this war against the soil. We labor daily on our floor plans – and here was an ancient plan of a portion of the very building we are excavating! What more can you ask...

And then it was as if we had found some ancient photographs as well. Seals and seal impressions continue to provide us with real snapshots of the life they lived and small statuettes emerge as real portraits. Their naturalism and attention to detail that brings us truly face to face with the ancient, reminding of the common bond of humanness we feel across the millennia.

As do the burials. In the second millennium town, that came to be built above the forgotten remnants of the third millennium Palace, we have a variety of grave structures set among the private houses. No amount of routine experience at digging can free us from sensing kinship with a human being, however ancient.

The widening horizons of the Palace



Photo J. Jarmakani

We have been viewing our task as “a summons – an invitation to enter further into the recesses of power of this once mighty kingdom” (from the 2000 Folio). The recesses are growing ever deeper, as the Royal Palace is getting larger.

Here you see the situation as of the end of 2003 season. We still have only one corner of the building, in the lower left. The service wing (with protective covers in green) is now completely excavated. But the formal wing (in gold) continues – and it must be some distance to the right before we reach the other corner.

The mound rises sharply to the right. That is because in later times private houses came to be built on top of the ruins of the Palace. Their remains are visible in the center right. In future years we will have to first excavate down to the level of these houses before we can “descend” to the Palace. So it may be a while before we can fully uncover the all too massive outline of this monumental third millennium building – before we can enter its innermost recesses...

That thoughtful ancient architect...

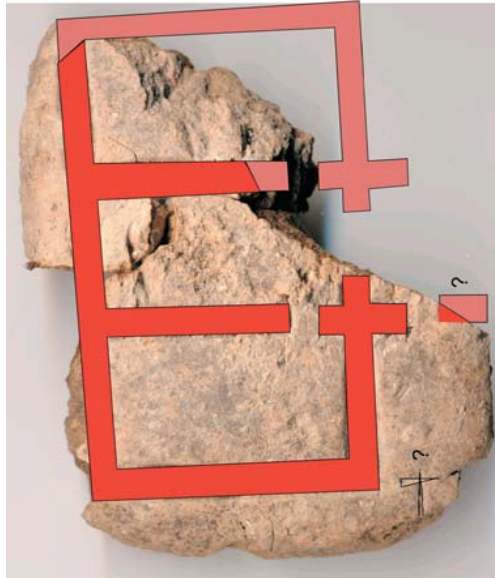


Photo G. Gallacci

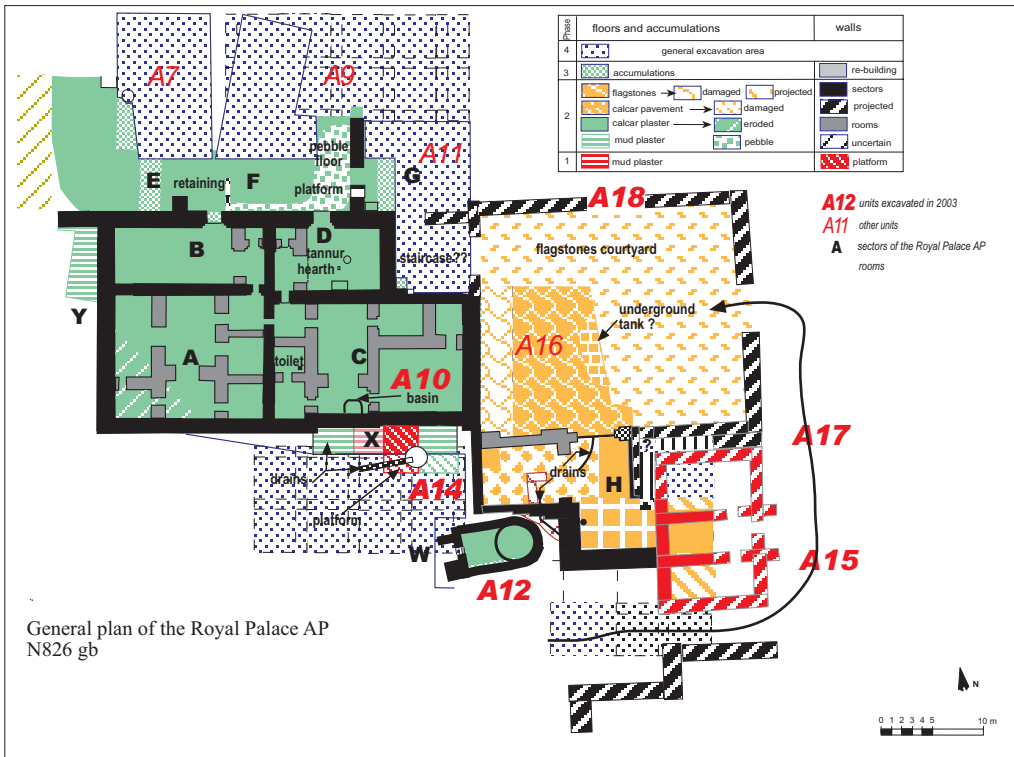
Greater size means greater planning. The question always intrigued us: how did they manage to build such a monumental structure all at once and without, seemingly, false starts?

Here is part of the secret.

Next to a collapsed wall, we found a clay tablet with the plan of three rooms that match, as far as we can tell at the moment, a suite in the access sector of the Palace.

Our assumption is that this was the work assignment for the crew charged with building those three rooms. Once the outline of the walls was in place, they dropped the plan in the wall, from which it spilled out for us to find.

But we felt as though this ancient architect was reaching out to help us reconstruct his building...



Stories from the Palace



Photo J. Jarmakani

The seal cutters of Urkesh took great delight in rendering the details of daily life in very naturalistic scenes.

This faint impression of a seal adds an amusing detail to a scene we know well from earlier scenes (below, right).

The attendant of the queen is here shown as not just standing in attendance behind the seated queen,, but actually combing her hair! The strands of hair are clearly kept separate, as she runs a comb through them while holding the lower part of the braid with the other hand.

Zamena, the nurse of the queen whose seal this was, wants to make a statement: she is sufficiently intimate with the queen to be present during her toilet...



Drawing F. Portales



Drawing C. Hilsdale

Stories from the Temple



Photos J. Jarmakani

The naturalistic style that is so characteristic of Urkesh glyptics reaches new heights in this detailed representation of an animal sacrifice.

Note how every figure shown is involved in some action, and how even the static details tell a story.

The seated woman is stirring some liquid in a vat – the blood of the slain animal?

The two attendants, or priests, have just cut off the head of the young bull. The one on the left still holds the knife in his hand, the one on the right holds up the animal by his hind legs.

And the head of the bull is neatly placed at the base of palm-like column, on top of which rests a jar.

The Great Descent continues...



Just as the Palace is getting larger, so the *Abi* is getting deeper.

The great Passage to the Netherworld is indeed ... getting closer to the Netherworld! We are now 7 meters down, and we can see stones for another meter – about the height of a three-story house!

This remains one of the most imposing and monumental cultic buildings of third mil. Syro-Mesopotamia, and the only one that can uniquely be associated with the Hurrians.

The gazer



Photo G. Buccellati

From a pottery workshop of the second millennium, above the Palace (which by then had been covered and forgotten) comes this small painted statuette in clay.

Even if not meant perhaps as a great work of art, it elicits a response from us as it certainly did from the ancients.

We like to think of him as gazing at us as we bend over the remains of the world he lived in.

They also lived



Photo G. Buccellati

One of the Mozan villagers bending over the remains of one of his forebears, laid to rest some 4000 years ago.

It takes one to two days of patient work to bring back to light, if not to life, a regular size burial.

Links across time



Photo G. Buccellati

Sheep and shepherds are a constant in our landscape. But this scene has a special story.

I was circling the tell from a distance, to take pictures with the Tur-Abdin mountains, which you see here in the background behind Tell Mozan.

I stopped to talk to the shepherd. And I noticed that as he made a certain noise, certain sheep would come to him away from the herd – as you can see in the picture. Curious, I inquired. Well, he said, it is something all shepherds do. Occasionally, when a new lamb is born, they take it away from the mother and imprint it with a special sound which these lambs alone will recognize. They will then be always close to the shepherd, and respond instantly whenever they hear his voice. Thus when they are out at night, for instance, and the shepherd goes to sleep, he can rest assured that these sheep will stay next to him – and the other sheep will in turn not stray away.

Well, said I, all shepherds know this, but I certainly did not. One thing, however, I knew and this particular shepherd did not: the biblical image of the good shepherd, whose sheep hear his voice...