

The Discovery of a New Urban Civilization: Urkesh and the Hurrians

A lecture by

Giorgio Buccellati

Director, Mesopotamian Lab, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA
Director, IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies
Co-director, Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project

1 The Hurrians and the earliest history of Syria

We know how, at the dawn of history, urbanization was the major phenomenon that transformed human social existence. This is generally associated with the model of the Sumerian city states in the southern regions. But in the north, in the Syrian part of the Syro-Mesopotamian area, different models were operative at the same time, that have not been sufficiently appreciated. The Hurrian model is based on the principle of ethnic solidarity that transcends the principle of territorial contiguity (central to Sumerian urbanization). This made it possible for Hurrian cities to control a vast mountain hinterland that was not susceptible to the type of administrative controls developed in the south. Urkesh is the best known example of such an early model of urbanism.

2 The High Temple and the Necromantic Structure

Our excavations have revealed a large monumental complex, which is the focus of the lecture. Two major sacral structures bracket this complex. At its lowest end, there is a deep shaft where the spirits of the Netherworld were summoned with rituals known from Hurrian texts preserved in later archives. The ritual is very alien to Mesopotamian religion, hence very specifically Hurrian, and the Urkesh example is the only one preserved in an archaeological context, and is very monumental. Even more monumental is the high Temple Terrace, which we believe to have been dedicated to the main god of the Hurrian pantheon, Kumarbi. The extensive use of stone has made it possible for this terrace to be preserved in a way that is quite unique in Mesopotamia. Both structures were first built in the early part of the third millennium.

3 The Royal Palace

The Royal Palace was built by king Tupkish about 2300 B.C. It was placed between the underground Necromantic Structure and the High Temple, and in par-

ticular it was linked with the Temple Terrace through as a large Plaza. Excavations have exposed the entire service quarter, and we are now in the process of exposing the formal wing of the Palace. The architectural layout is imposing, and our conservation efforts have succeeded in protecting, with simple but imaginative new techniques, the mudbrick walls as first excavated. Major finds include especially the rich glyptic inventory, with a total of more than 200 inscribed seals that have given us details about the names of the ancient city and its rulers.

The Urkesh Global Record: Theory and Practice

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Director, Mesopotamian Lab, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA

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Co-director, Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project

4 Theory

Archaeological theory has developed into a field of its own in recent decades. It is actually a series of different theories. What they have in common is that they all are theories of inference: they deal with what can be extracted from the data. But there has been practically no theory at all about the procurement of the data. In other words, no theory of excavation. This is what I have been developing, and I call it a *Grammar of the Archaeological Record*. This *Grammar* rests on a fully articulated set of principles, and it yields substantial results which affect deeply the very concept of archaeological publishing. The first part of the presentation will give a concise presentation of these new theoretical principles.

5 Browser edition

The main result is a new type of archaeological publication, the *Global Record*, which replaces the very notion of a Final Report. This is an interactive record that makes accessible the totality of the information ever recorded for any given excavation unit. It utilizes the browser format which is by now second nature to everyone. The second part of the presentation will illustrate in some detail how this

works, by showing on the computer the publication in progress of some of the excavation units from Tell Mozan.

6 Field operations

A major aspect of the browser edition is that it is updated on a daily basis in the field, so that the establishment of the Global Record is contemporary in real time with the progress of the excavation. This is of paramount importance for the formulation of the ongoing excavation strategy, and for the goal of obtaining an immediate publication of the excavation results. The third part of the presentation will show on the computer how the data are structured and how they are processed by our in-house programs that make this possible.