

# BACKDIRT

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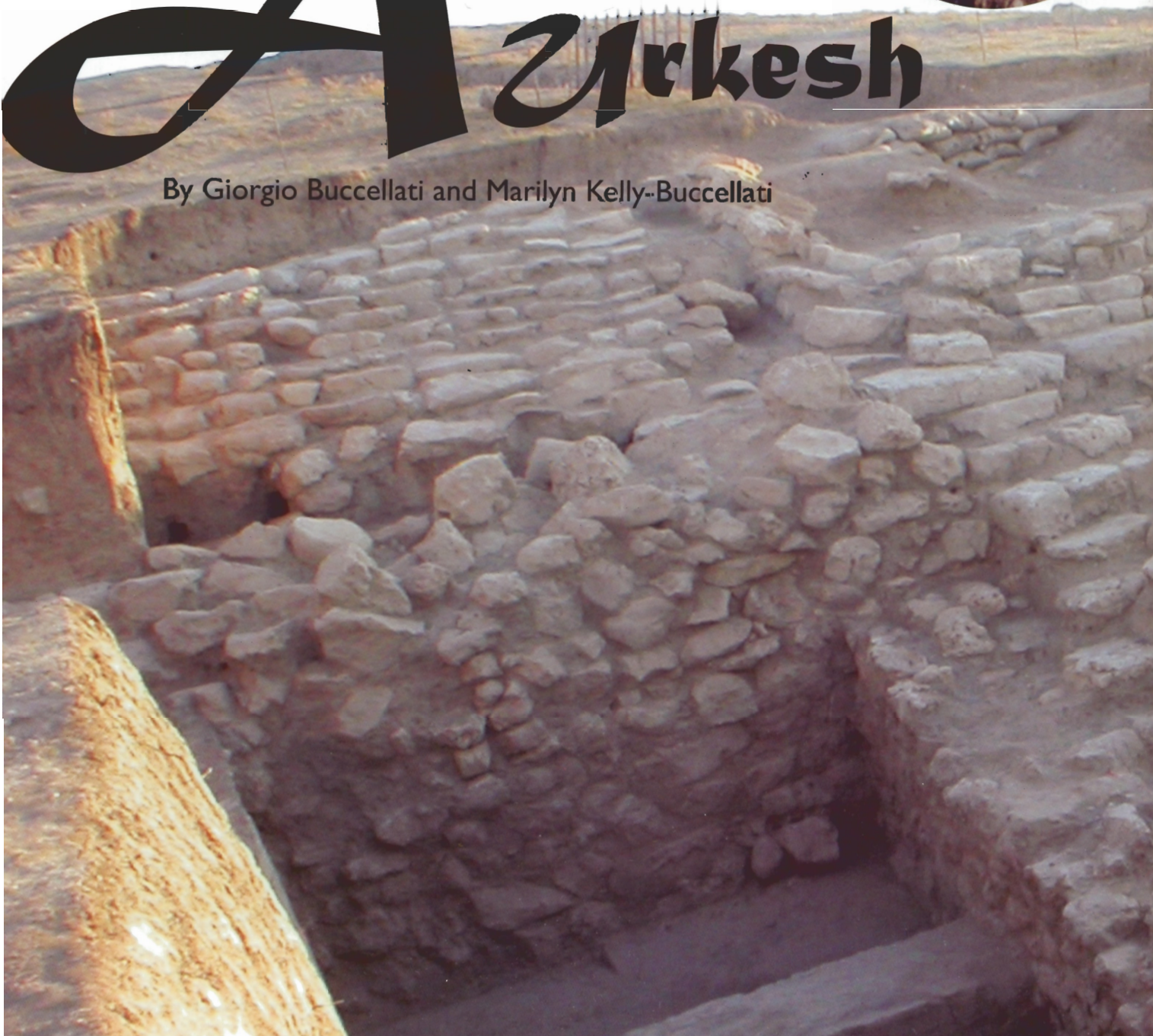
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**Between Heaven  
and Hell in**



**Ancient  
Zirkesh**

By Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati



**It** had not occurred to us that a “*son et lumière*”  
approach to our excavations might help us  
see better what we had been staring at, daily, under  
the glare of the sun. *And yet...*



The 2005 season had uncovered such a monumental structure as to warrant a visit of the Minister of Culture all the way from Damascus, a good nine-hour drive. He was due by late afternoon, but anticipating the inevitable delays of such official visits, we were concerned that he might arrive too late to actually see the main object of his trip. Not quite knowing what to expect, we decided to set up a few halogen lights. At dusk, the electrician's work finished, the bright beam of the reflectors began to shed a play of light and shadows that grew more dramatic as the sky darkened. And it was not just a matter of aesthetic impact. Structural details stood out more sharply than we had ever noticed before, as if we were re-discovering what we had seen, described and measured inch by inch in the full daylight.

have lit up the sky for some of the Hurrian rituals described in the texts as being performed at night time.

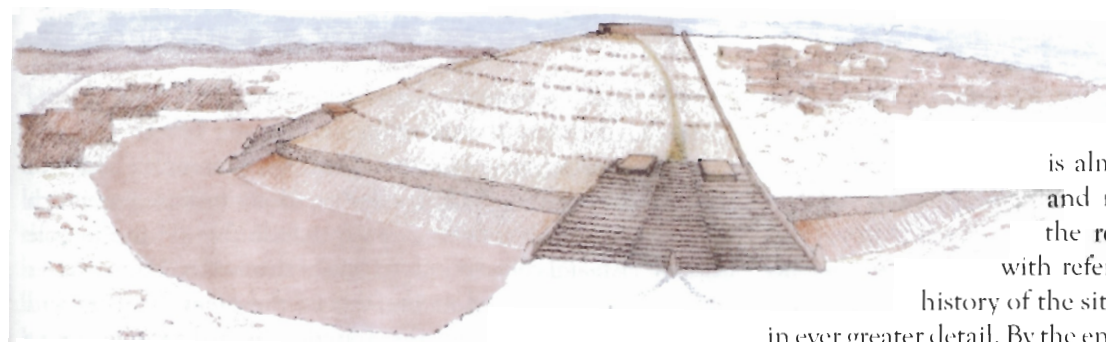
Not that seen in the daylight the structure was less spectacular. The full staircase numbers 24 steps, and the trapezoidal shape of the "apron" gives the whole complex an even more imposing appearance. The viewer's attention is directed vertically towards the higher plane where the Temple stands, as if to enhance the awareness of a presence beckoning from above. And the punctuated horizontal rows, with the double effect of wider and narrower vertical risers, emphasize visually the gradual ascent. Also, the broad stone revetment wall that flanks the staircase and apron, serves as a boundary between the two worlds, as if a barrier that can be crossed only at the marked threshold of the staircase.



*Frontal view of revetment wall, with sounding showing the base of the wall. On the right, in the section, regular accumulations of the last two centuries of use of the Temple Terrace. Previous page: Side view of the monumental staircase (looking NE), with the revetment wall on the left.*

Could it be that the lighting was, at the same time, pointing to possible new functional interpretations of the monumental structure? There is, clearly, a stairway leading to a temple at the top of a huge terrace. There is what we called an apron flanking it – one larger row of stones for every step of the central staircase. Could it be, then, that this "apron" served to accommodate an audience that might witness the early phase of a ritual, starting in the plaza in front of the staircase and then leading up to the temple above? The thought had occurred to us, but the dramatic artificial light seemed to bolster our suspicion, suggesting that ancient torches might

As exposed so far, the monumental staircase is most likely to be only half of the full structure, which we see reconstructed in the drawing by our architect. It is accessed from a wide plaza and is flanked by a stone wall that frames an artificial hill, leading up to the Temple. The wall itself is some three meters high, and it stands atop an escarpment that rises above the plaza below. The difference in elevation between the level of the Plaza and the floor of the Temple is of some twelve meters – a man-made terrace that rivals the mountains of what is today the Turkish plateau, a suggestive backdrop to the urban landscape of Urkesh today as it undoubtedly was in antiquity.



the third millennium, the material deposited on top of it is almost 1,000 years later. The thick and regular accumulations that abut the **revetment wall** can be explained with reference to the overall **depositional** history of the site, which we begin to **understand**

We could set the date of construction of the wall and of the staircase to the middle of the third millennium. And we could show that the wall remained **intact** for more than 1,000 years, until the city itself was abandoned with the coming of the Assyrians, about 1350 BC. The **remarkable longevity** of this complex may be attributed to its great sacrality, which **kept** it from being damaged throughout its very long history. In fact,

in ever greater detail. By the end of the third millennium, urban **development stopped in the lower** portions of the mound (the Outer City), and the city as a whole retrenched atop the **High Mound**.

Here, only the southwestern portion of the **Temple Terrace** and central portion of the Plaza remained free of **buildings**. The buildup at the southern edge of the Plaza had a considerable impact on the overall process of site formation.



*A night view of the monumental staircase, looking towards the Temple. Top of page: reconstruction of the plaza, revetment wall, staircase and temple (drawing Paola Pesaresi).*

there is no doubt that the beginnings of this sacrality go back to late prehistoric times. This is shown by the sheer height above the original plain level (some 27 meters to the level of the Temple floor), by the evidence of earlier construction phases lurking beneath the staircase, and by the very early ceramics (Late Chalcolithic) found in the fill below the top surface of the terrace. This is clearly one of the best preserved and most monumental sacral complexes of its kind anywhere in third millennium Syro-Mesopotamia.

The stratigraphic situation is particularly interesting. While the base of the wall can be dated to the middle of

By blocking the natural drainage from the Temple Terrace to the plain level, a bowl was created that would trap the material being washed down. Obviously, the lower levels of the Plaza were the first to be filled in. This is the material of the early second millennium, which we have not yet reached. Slowly, the sedimentation within the bowl grew to where it was even with the top of the revetment wall. These are the top 2 - 3 m that we have excavated so far, and which can be dated to the middle part of the second millennium. What is remarkable is that, even at this stage, when the templar structure was much less imposing than in earlier centuries, the revetment wall, now

reduced to a progressively smaller lip, was never touched. The sacrality remained even as the architectural dimension became ever less spectacular.

An additional piece of evidence that demonstrates the sacrality of the area is that the Plaza remained, throughout the centuries, a privileged space. All indications are that no installation ever took place there – no pits, no bread ovens, no graves, not even working areas with any concentration of objects. It is not a sterile accumulation, because there are plenty of sherds. But it is inert, as we call it, meaning that it consists exclusively of naturally washed down accumulations. Within several hundreds of cubic meters excavated, hardly any objects have been found. A rare example is a clay rendering of a pig or boar snout, significant because we know of the important role that these animals played in Hurrian rituals.

We have talked about chronology. We can even talk about onomastics. We feel that we have good reasons to link the construction of an early phase of the Temple to one of the best known Hurrian rulers, Tish-Aral. Calling himself endan of Urkesh (a Hurrian title which translates as “king”), he

recorded, on two beautiful bronze statuettes each representing a lion in a different posture, the building of a Temple to a god whose name is given as Nergal. Through a complex series of inferences, which would be too long to describe here but which we feel are quite compelling, we conclude that (a) the temple built by Tish-atal corresponds to one of the construction phases of the Temple situated at the top of the great Terrace, and that (b) the god to whom the Temple was dedicated was not Nergal, but Kumarbi, the ancestral figure of the Hurrian divine pantheon. This, then, gives a name to both our building and its builder. Conversely, it gives a date to Tish-atal, somewhere in the second half of the third millennium.

Both lions were purchased on the antiquities market long before our excavations began – one by the Louvre and the other by the Metropolitan. We illustrate here the one from the Metropolitan, which exhibits a very ambitious aesthetic program by injecting great dynamism in the animal figure – with its paws positioned frontally and its torso twisted to one side. This is a striking stylistic innovation, which we think may in some way speak to a Hurrian artistic tradition. Within the



Upper left: One of the very few objects found in the accumulations abutting the revetment wall: a clay snout of a pig or boar. Middle left: stone statue of a lion from our excavations in the Temple on top of the monumental Terrace. Upper right: bronze lion with dedication of the king Tish-atal of Urkesh for the construction of a temple to the god NERGAL (probably a logogram for the Hurrian father of the gods, Kumarbi). The lion was sold on the antiquities market long before our excavations, and was purchased by the Metropolitan. Opposite page: Architect's view (Paola Pesaresi) of the monumental urban complex, with the Palace of Tupkish in the foreground, the Plaza and the Temple Terrace.

Temple itself we had found, in earlier excavations and next to the altar, the full image of the stone lion, unfortunately severely damaged and not as stylistically ambitious as the Metropolitan lion. But they both share gusto for a three-dimensional realism that may not be accidental. We assume that the stone lion may have been placed on or near the altar itself, whereas the two bronze lions were part of a foundation deposit, which must have been very near the surface of the Tell and thus within easy reach of local people excavating, in the 1940s, for graves used by local villagers.

Finding a home for the Metropolitan (and the Louvre) lions was particularly meaningful because of the institutional association that we have developed with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has long since been an enlightened policy of the Museum to have members of its personnel join as active members of archaeological expeditions in order to gain firsthand experience of excavation techniques and to learn about the importance of the stratigraphic context for the understanding of any object. For two years now we have had the participation of one of the Assistant Curators in the Department of the Ancient Near East (Jean Evans), and this last year we also benefited from the visit of the Chief Curator, Joan Aruz. One particular contribution that will derive from this collaboration will be their assistance in developing plans for the installations in the newly built Museum in the capital city of our province, Hassaka, where the objects from our excavations will be on display.

While we are currently concentrating on the Temple Terrace, we will soon return to the excavation of the Palace as well, because it is part of a single organic whole that stretches for more than 200 m from west to east. What makes the whole complex even more impressive is the coherence of the ambitious urban planning that links harmoniously the secular

and the religious spheres. The Palace itself is slightly later (2250 BC), and we do not know whether or not an earlier one stood in its place. But what is certain is that another very sacred, and equally earlier, structure brackets the Palace to the southwest. It was called *abi* in the language of Urkesh, Hurrian, and it served as a conduit to the Netherworld, whence the infernal deities were summoned through rituals preserved in later Hurrian texts (preserved in the Hittite archives). The *abi* is a deep pit, lined with large stones, much like the revetment wall of the Temple Terrace. We have excavated it to a depth of 8 m, and it reaches even further, probably to virgin soil (6 m more). The earliest levels excavated belong to the same time period as the Temple, and, like it, it most likely dates back to late prehistoric times.

This double thrust – downwards to the netherworld and upwards to the heavens – defines a very special Hurrian ideological landscape. It is very seldom that we can find such organic monumental wholes in Mesopotamia, so well defined architecturally, so clearly understandable in their function and meaning, so perfectly preserved archaeologically. As we stood looking at the staircase sharply highlighted under the floodlight of the halogen lamps, we could not help but enjoy the subtle metaphor – of us bringing the light of understanding to these mute witnesses of an intensely lived ancient human experience. ▲

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