

AN ARCHITECTURAL “LOGOGRAM” AT URKESH?

G. Buccellati

The Temple Terrace at Urkesh is one of the best preserved third millennium monumental complexes from Syro-Mesopotamia (Fig. 1).

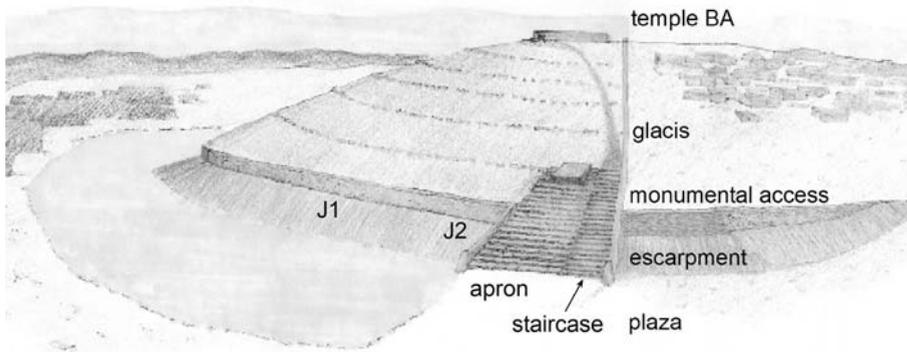


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of Urkesh Temple Terrace (Paola Pesaresi). J1 and J2 refer to the portion of the revetment wall discussed in this article

There are now indications that it originated in the fourth millennium, and it continued undisturbed until the end of the Mittani period. Thus it is also one of the longest lived monuments. The Temple was built on a glacis which was encircled at its base by a three meter high revetment wall, in front of which an escarpment sloped down by another two meters to a wide Plaza. The Temple stood at some 10 meters above the Plaza, and in turn the Plaza at some 12 meters above the plain level. There is one unusual detail in the make-up of the revetment wall which I would like to present here. It was first noted by Federico Buc-

cellati in excavation unit J1, with the remark that it strangely looked like the blocking of a postern gate. As more details became apparent, the thought went to some of the talks I had with Claudio about architecture, modern as well and ancient. It is thus with the special personal pleasure of memories shared over a long friendship that I offer him these almost light-hearted remarks on our curious feature.

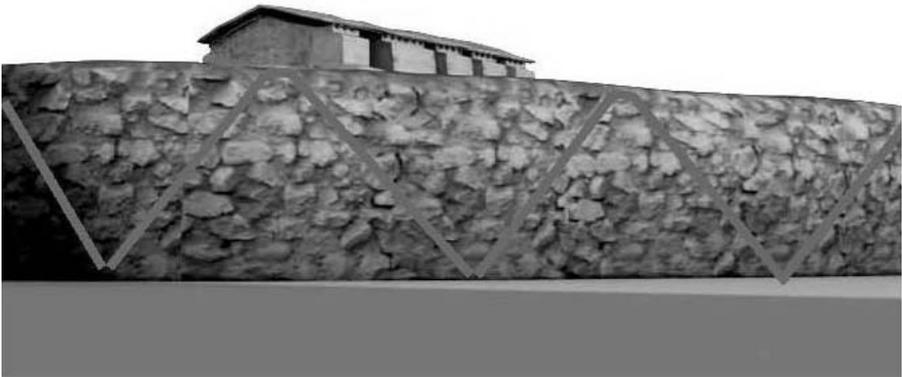


Fig. 2. 3-D reconstruction highlighting the pattern.

The revetment wall is built entirely of large, roughly hewn stones. It stands, as mentioned, to a height of some 3 meters, and it is a little over 1 meter thick. It has no foundations: its base is simply sunk some 30 centimetres below the top of the escarpment. It is obviously not a retaining wall built to withstand the pressure of the glacis behind it. For this reason I have called it a revetment wall, designed to serve almost as an ornamental crown around a preexisting slope (most likely, the fourth millennium antecedent of the third millennium glacis).

It is interrupted by the large monumental staircase (Fig. 3), which is flanked by a trapezoidal “apron” consisting of steps twice as wide as the steps of the staircase itself (with an effect similar to that of an ancient theatre). Revetment wall, apron and staircase, all date to the early ED III period.

The revetment wall shows a triangular pattern with the acute angle at the top. The pattern is visible wherever the wall has been ex-

posed, i. e., in excavation units J1 and J2. There is little doubt that the pattern would continue in the unexcavated part between the two units (see the reconstruction in Fig. 2).

In J2 (Fig. 3 and 4) there are two such triangles showing. The one to the right (east), is partly covered by a stone wall that flanks the apron of the staircase. This wall is only slightly later than the revetment wall itself.



Fig. 3. View of the monumental third millennium staircase in J2.

In J1 (Fig. 5 and 6) one triangular pattern is fully visible. Those to the left (west) are partly covered by the upper escarpment which is slightly later in date, but still within ED III.

We cannot think of any particular structural reason for this particular pattern, which is in fact quite rare in the ancient Near East (the main parallel that comes to mind is in Tell Chuera, a site that is for other reasons as well comparable with Urkesh). Nor does it seem that the wall, being almost decorative in function, would require a special construction technique to achieve greater stability.



Fig. 4. Detail of the revetment wall in J2.



Fig. 5. Detail of revetment wall in J1



Fig. 6. Revetment wall in J1.



Fig. 7. The Tur-Abdin range in the background of Tell Mozan

I would therefore suggest that the triangular pattern has a subtle ideological nuance, namely, that it recalls the mountains which are ever present in the background landscape of the city (Fig. 7), and of which the Temple Terrace itself is like an echo. The pattern is well known as a motif in cylinder seals of the same time period, including one from Urkesh (Fig. 8) that we have interpreted as representing the god Kumerbi “walking in the mountains,” as the myths say.



Fig. 8. The mountain pattern on an Urkesh seal

It is a recurrent iconographic motif in Mesopotamian art, all the way down to the Assyrian reliefs. In our case, it is, however, a very nuanced motif at best, because, even though convincingly identifiable

in the texture of the wall, it is not overly marked. Also, it must be noted that both the side wall of the staircase (in J2) and the upper escarpment (in J1) were set in place in a way that suggests the triangular pattern no longer retained the original importance soon after the construction of the wall, since it was partly obliterated by the new additions. It would appear, therefore, that the pattern did not have such an overriding ideological importance to secure its continued visibility.

The triangular motif is, of course, the pattern found in the early pictogram for “mountain,” Sumerian KUR, which is continued in the later cuneiform sign for the same value (Fig. 9).

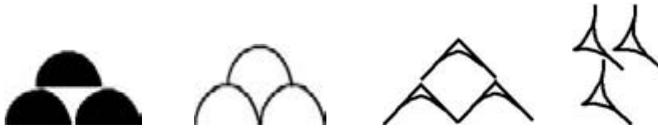


Fig. 9. The pictograph and cuneiform sign for KUR “mountain”

It is for this reason that I refer to this formal detail as an “architectural logogram.” Perhaps with a sense of irony, this visual pun proposes, in full view of the real mountains, a counterpoint to the Nippur *é.kur*, the “house mountain” where the echo of the reality was limited to the mere word.

Dallo Stirone al Tigri, dal Tevere all'Eufrate

Studi in onore di Claudio Saporetti

A cura di Paola Negri Scafa e Salvatore
Viaggio



AIO
477

Copyright © MMIX
ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-2411-9

*I diritti di traduzione, di memorizzazione elettronica,
di riproduzione e di adattamento anche parziale,
con qualsiasi mezzo, sono riservati per tutti i Paesi.*

*Non sono assolutamente consentite le fotocopie
senza il permesso scritto dell'Editore.*

I edizione: aprile 2009

INDICE

Premessa	i
Biografia	iii
Bibliografia	v
F. ANGELELLI - G. BOCCALARO, Il professore Claudio Saporetto e l'Associazione Geo-Archeologica Italiana	1

M. G. BIGA, Dovecotes in the Kingdom of Ebla, Syria, XXIV Cent. B.C.	11	
E. BRESCIANI, L'amministrazione satrapiale in Egitto. Il caso di Ptahhotep	17	
G. BUCCELLATI, An Architectural "Logogram" at Urkesh?		23
M. CECCARELLI, Einige Bemerkungen zum Synkretismus BaU/Ninisina	31	
T. CRISCI, Il cuoco, il ladro, sua moglie e l'amante. Scambi di coppie, prestiti e parentele nella trattatistica gastronomica tra antichità e Medioevo	55	
N. DANELON, Atlante virtuale del mondo antico: idee per un progetto	83	
G. F. DEL MONTE, «Quando il nemico venne a sapere che...». Uno stilema nelle opere storiografiche di Mursili II	97	
O. DILIBERTO, La palingenesi della Legge delle XII Tavole e le codificazioni "a domino"	119	
H. FREYDANK, Bemerkungen zu dem Brief T 02-32 aus Tell Sabi Abyad	149	
F. ISRAEL, Miscellanea Idumea III. L'onomastica di Qos: gli ostraca dall'Idumea e un aggiornamento della lista	157	
P. MANDER - P. NOTIZIA, Testi relativi all'agricoltura e a lavori di manutenzione fluviale dallo Harvard Semitic Museum	233	
G. MATINI - C. AMBOS, «Sono solo un bue...». Riflessioni sulle preghiere di lamento e di espiazione nel Vicino Oriente antico	253	
R. MAZZUCCHI, Lunghe mura per difendere un impero ...	265	
G. MINIACI, Storia di una bandiera	277	
G. MINUNNO, Da Urkeš a Emar. Nota sull'abi	283	
P. NEGRI SCAFA, La menzione dei metalli nei testi del Palazzo di Nuzi	295	
R. SCIANDRA, Distruggere il Passato. Antiche biblioclastie e progetti di alterazione del tempo tra Babilonia e Cina	319	
D. SOCCI, Una questione di carattere	337	
G. TABITA, I beni culturali della Palestina occupata	345	
S. TICCA, I primi passi verso il Progetto "Duplicazione e Rinascita"	359	
S. VIAGGIO, Old Babylonian Texts (Diyala Region) from the Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley	377	
B. VIRGILIO, Aspetti e prospettive della corrispondenza reale ellenistica	391	