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URKESH: THE MORPHOLOGY AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE HURRIAN SACRED

ABSTRACT. – Hurrian religious concepts differed notably from Mesopotamian ones. In the ancient city of Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan) we have found, through our excavations, evidence for the awareness and ritual adoption of both Hurrian and Mesopotamian religious practices. Most notable for Hurrian religion is the monumental *abi* constructed as an underground shaft lined with stones and containing a series of stratified magic circles. The *abi* rituals, known from Hurrian texts found in later Hittite archives, focus on calling up deities of the Netherworld. Mesopotamian religious practices are exemplified by an Akkadian period seal with a scene of the enactment of a sacrifice and by *altanni* vessels of which we have excavated one complete and a number of incomplete examples. The 4th millennium temple terrace had already constructed on it a niched building on a low platform, presumably a temple of a type known in the south. Temple BA and a stone revetment wall were built in Early Dynastic III. Serious efforts were made to protect the base of this wall. The Temple Plaza has a unique stratigraphy in that it was kept clean for over a thousand years. The explanation for this enigma connects Urkesh with the Kura-Araxes culture to the north.

Keywords: Urkesh, necromantic structure (*abi*), magic circles, *altanni* ritual vessels, Kura-Araxes culture

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, has yielded a coherent ensemble of religious monuments that is closely interlaced with the Mesopotamian traditions of the south, but at the same time shows deep roots in those of the northern plateau that extends as far northeast as the Caucasus. These widespread connections stem from the geographical location of the city, situated

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as it is in the northeastern corner of Syria, in the Khabur plains very close to the Taurus foothills, and the pass of Mardin (Fig. 1) which was even in antiquity a major route leading eventually to the Caucasus in the east, and to central Anatolia in the west. Climatically Urkesh is situated in an area with heavy rainfall even today and certainly also when the city was occupied between ca 3500 and 1200 BC.

The cultural landscape of Urkesh is shaped by the ethnic affiliations of its people⁽¹⁾. Information on these affiliations comes from a variety of sources, including place names and especially personal names. Evidence for place names is scarce however. From two administrative tablets excavated in Area F1, four place names are attested although two are broken and cannot be read. The other two, Arzakum and Dah, are unfortunately of unknown linguistic origin (Milano 1991, especially pp. 23-24). For the name Urkesh there is a suggestion by Alex Martin that it derives from Hurrian *urka*(?) meaning “saddle or seat”⁽²⁾. In this case Urkesh would be a place name derived from a prominent geographical reference point, the Mardin Pass, which is the dominant topographical feature in the whole area.

Personal names are an important part of our evidence pointing to the ethnic composition of the city and its surroundings. Tupkish, the king, Zamena, the wet-nurse, Tuli, the chief cook all have Hurrian names. Ewrim-Atal, presumably a courtier connected with the daughter of Naram-Sin, Tar’am-Agade, also has a Hurrian name. On the other hand, Uqnitum, the wife of Tupkish has an Akkadian name. If we look in the non-elite contexts found in the administrative texts from excavation area F1, then among the twenty personal names found three are clearly Hurrian, three more are possibly Hurrian, nine are Akkadian and three more are possibly Akkadian (Milano 1991, 23-25). Three personal names are of unknown origin. Therefore based on the names in these two administrative texts we see that the villages in the hinterland near Urkesh are of mixed ethnic origin with Akkadian names predominating. Given the geographical location of the city and its ethnic diversity it is not surprising that we find this diversity also operating in the religious practices in the city.

1.2 Evidence of Mesopotamian cultic practices

In Urkesh we do have evidence that rituals practiced in Mesopotamia were known in the city. Here I will discuss two: animal sacrifice and divination. These Mesopotamian religious practices employed in Urkesh were

⁽¹⁾ For a comprehensive review of Hurrian studies see de Martino *et al.* 2000; a full analysis of the Hurrian evidence at Urkesh is given in Buccellati 2010; 2013 and this volume.

⁽²⁾ Personal communication.

communicated through realism in rendering ritual scenes and a new combination of design elements, also observed in the secular scenes. Thus, in a remarkable Akkadian Period cylinder seal excavated in the royal palace AK we have a number of realistic details in a scene of sacrifice in which a small bull has just been beheaded (Fig. 2) (Kelly-Buccellati 2005; 2013, Recht 2014). The two priests on either side of the reversed bull have a specific headdress and one holds the sacrificial knife. The iconography of this cylinder seal is unique with the detailed head of the bull placed at the base of a palm shaped column with a jar placed on top. All the participants in the ritual are human and actively involved in the ritual even if we do not understand the role of the seated figure, probably a woman, who holds an implement in the shape of an animal leg, mixing with it something inside a jar. The two vessels in the sacrifice seal play a prominent role in the drama: one vessel holds something being stirred by the seated figure and the other is placed on top of the palm column, which has the head of the sacrificed bull at its base⁽³⁾.

Divination was the most typical of Mesopotamian rituals: as is well known, it offered insight and control through the use of known patterns seen to be recurrent in various natural phenomena, such as movements of celestial bodies, the motions of the liver of a slaughtered animal, or the observation of the movements of liquids in a container. In Urkesh we have possible evidence of this latter type of activity (lecanomancy), in the form of a vessel decorated on the exterior with applied and incised designs. The applied motifs are prominent snake and scorpion figures with the snakes positioned so that they appear to be looking inside the vessel. We have interpreted this as an *altanni* vessel used in divination: the three snakes looking over the rim into the jar would then mark the position from which the priest viewed the patterns inside the jar (Fig. 3)⁽⁴⁾.

2. THE *ABI*

Next to such limited evidence for cultic practices that hail from Mesopotamia there are other practices and installations that can instead be linked very specifically with a Hurrian cultural dimension. Here we will look in particular at the necromantic structure or *abi*, and at the monumental temple terrace.

In looking at the sacred architecture of the city of Urkesh, the construction that is most closely linked with Hurrian religion is the monumental un-

⁽³⁾ The theme of a vessel placed on a pole is discussed by Budin 2011.

⁽⁴⁾ Buccellati 2004, 212, *altanni*; for a comprehensive overview of Hurrian religion see Marie-Claude Tremouille 2000 and Biga *et al.* 2008.

derground structure identified in the later Hurrian texts as a place for calling up the deities of the Netherworld. The term in Hurrian for this structure is *abi*. Kumarbi himself was one of the Hurrian deities of the Netherworld, although the Song of Silver also has him in a mountainous setting. In the Hurrian world view the ritual technicians (that is priests and mediums) were able to communicate directly with the various deities, and in the case of Urkesh the locus for this communication with the Netherworld was through rituals in the *abi* (Kelly-Buccellati 2003).

2.1. Architecture

The *abi* as excavated in Urkesh is a stone lined underground structure consisting of a circular portion that is about 4 m in diameter (Fig. 4). The later addition is square in shape, resulting in a keyhole configuration which includes a steep, narrow stairway; the total structure is 7.5 m long. The circular part was initially built of smaller stones placed at some distance apart. In the second stage the stones were larger and placed closer together. It is not certain when the *abi* was initially constructed because our excavations stopped at a 7 meter depth due to safety considerations but cracks near the stone walls indicate that they continued down for at least another meter. The earliest ceramics found in the *abi* excavation so far date to ca 2600 BC. In the earlier and later periods the *abi* was not roofed, but in the time of the palace the placement of the stones show that the circular portion of the structure was covered with a corbelled vault. There can be little question that the square portion was also roofed.

After the *abi* had been used for a long period the royal palace was built next to it by Tupkish around 2250 BC. (F. Buccellati, forthcoming). It has a slightly different orientation than the *abi* and was constructed with its southern wall stepped back to accommodate the earlier structure. The placement of the palace in the urban texture of Urkesh must have been to some extent conditioned by the presence of such an important and monumental religious structure. Texts link the royal couple to the rituals taking place inside the ritual pit.

«The diviner says these words, and when they draw him/her/it with thick bread, they fill a *kukubu*-vessel with water besides. Then in that place they open up pits and the diviner with ear-shaped loaves (alternatively with four loaves) draws the deity up from thence seven times, and says: “If anyone – king, queen or princess – has done something and has buried it, I am now drawing it forth from the ground”. Then he proceeds to speak other words of similar import, and they perform this action just so in that place»⁽⁵⁾.

⁽⁵⁾ From Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh KBo II 9 iv 9-16.

2.2. *Rituals connected with the abi*

From the Hurrian texts in the later Hittite archives it appears that the rituals take place at sunset or at night (KAR 234, line 13; CT 23:15-18, line 17) and that the action proper is carried out in a magic circle, in our case inside the underground structure. The pertinent texts indicate that among the implements used in digging the pits are a hoe, a shovel but also a dagger and a knife, which would be more appropriate for tracing a magic circle on the ground than for digging a real pit. None of the textual descriptions seem to suggest that the digging of the pits lasted for any length of time so we can only conclude that these pits must be shallow and ephemeral, just as our archaeological evidence indicates. In our excavations we found a series of small and shallow pits drawn in the floors (Fig. 5). Some of these had either a small ceramic plate or a series of small stones connected with them.

«When at night on the second day a star leaps, the offerer comes to the temple and bows to the deity. Two daggers which were made along with the (statue of) the new deity they take (with them) dig a pit for the deity in front of the table. They offer one sheep to the deity [...] and slaughter it down in the pit»⁽⁶⁾.

In the texts, the fact that the offerings are slaughtered inside the pit is stressed as in the above text.

«The queen comes forth, the diviner opens up a pit before the storm god of *marapshi*. The diviner offers one sheep to the storm god of *marapshi*, and down inside the pit the diviner slaughters it»⁽⁷⁾.

In fact, the evidence we discovered inside the *abi* shows that the preferred animals were small pigs and puppy dogs, slaughtered inside the *abi* where the bones of the entire animal remained (Di Martino 2005; Kelly-Buccellati 2005b). One of the ritual objects found inside the *abi* is a *rhyton* in the shape of a pig (Fig. 6). A second ceremonial vessel is a small nude woman with an opening shaped as a smaller jar placed on the top of her head (Fig. 7). The texts specify that among the items to be offered in these rituals is a small amount of perfumed oil; the capacity of our jar seems to parallel this⁽⁸⁾. Her large ears and distorted mouth may reflect passages in the texts concerned with the need to hear and the fact that the speech of the dead is distorted.

⁽⁶⁾ From Relocation of the Black Goddess, KUB 29.4 rev iv 31-36, for a translation see Hoffner 1967, 389; Collins 2002, 228.

⁽⁷⁾ From Winter Festival for Ishtar of Nineveh KUB 10 63 obv. 1 17-28.

⁽⁸⁾ From Relocation of the Black Goddess KUB 29 4ii 19-21.

While the Hurrian-Hittite texts do not speak of calling up dead ancestors, such rituals are known in Syria in Ebla, Qatna and Ugarit as well as the prominent example of the so-called Witch of Endor in the Old Testament. We cannot determine the exact focus of the rituals conducted in the Urkesh *abi*, however it is well known that the Hurrian chthonic god Kumarbi lived in Urkesh. Additionally, Nergal is connected with Urkesh in the Tish-atal inscription (Wilhelm 1998; Buccellati 2004, 212). One of the main temples in Urkesh is dedicated to him. Our evidence of a ritual underground structure connected with the Hurrian *abi* is another indication of the strong Hurrian religious presence in Urkesh, a presence that is not felt in other contemporary cities in the Khabur region.

3. FOURTH-MILLENNIUM BEGINNINGS OF THE SACRED IN URKESH

In the immediate area of Urkesh, shown in Fig. 8, a few sites exhibit occupation from the mid- 4th millennium. While we knew from our initial surface survey of the site that some 4th millennium evidence existed there (Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 1988) it was only in 2010 that monumental 4th millennium architecture was discovered in Urkesh. We excavated in that year near the top of the temple terrace, about 22 m above the surrounding plain level, the niched corner of a mud brick building set on a low platform and connected with local mid- 4th millennium pottery (Fig. 9). The building is near the present surface of the mound and, it is important to note, that it is stratigraphically sealed by the Early Dynastic III glacis covering it. We do not have presently the date of its construction as neither the exterior nor the interior floor levels were reached. But it is clear that this structure was built on an already extant high terrace and dominated the entire surrounding plains. The ¹⁴C dates coincide with the mid-4th millennium date of the ceramics (Kelly-Buccellati 2013, 166).

Because of its placement so high on an artificial terrace, the niched building and the low platform on which it is resting, we have suggested an identification of this building as a 4th millennium temple of a type found in the south (Kelly-Buccellati 2013). Mid- 4th millennium (Late Chalcolithic 3, ca 3500 BC) local ceramics were found both in connection with the niched building as well as the 4th millennium wall, near the base of the temple terrace and immediately below the glacis covering the Early Dynastic III terrace. The ceramics found in both of these areas were of a well-known local type with hammer rim bowls and thick plates predominating (Kelly-Buccellati 2010)⁽⁹⁾. Besides ceramics, a number of Late Chalcolithic 3 seal

⁽⁹⁾ See <http://www.urkesh.org/mz/a/CERAMICS/ugr/-frame2.htm>.

impressions were excavated in small deposits dug into the top of the temple terrace, close to the niched building. While the general nature of the early Urkesh sealing iconography is known from the south and not obviously connected with religious motifs, one specific complex scene is unique and more than likely shows part of a ritual including carrying of standards toward a temple (not preserved in our sealings; Kelly-Buccellati 2010; here Fig. 10). These container sealings, I have concluded, were imported from somewhere to the south, perhaps even from Tell Brak, a major Uruk period city about 50 km south of Mozan (Kelly-Buccellati 2010).

At the time the niched building was constructed, the temple terrace was already 22 m above the plain level. Based on this evidence and the fact that the same type of LC 3 pottery was found in other areas on the surface of the site, it seems clear that by the mid- 4th millennium this was already the site of a large and religiously important early city.

4. THE MONUMENTAL EFFLORESCENCE IN THE MID-THIRD MILLENNIUM

4.1 Structural elements of Temple BA and the temple terrace, ca 2600 BC

Temple BA, on the summit of the temple terrace, is a stone founded mud brick building that had a large single room with a bent-axis entryway accessed from a stone ramp (Fig. 11). The temple terrace revetment wall was built of rough stones in Early Dynastic III ca 2600 BC. A monumental staircase with a retaining wall to the east of it allowed access to the immediate temple area (G. Buccellati 2010; Camatta, forthcoming). Next to the staircase, a stone apron was built, perhaps for performing or viewing ritual events (F. Buccellati 2010). Two undecorated orthostats were placed at the lower end of a retaining wall that separated the monumental stairway from the heavily used service area immediately to the east. Below this Early Dynastic III staircase there was at least one earlier stone staircase (Fig. 12).

4.2 Water problems in the 4th and mid- 3rd millennium

As early as the mid- 4th millennium severe flooding problems affected the temple terrace, with an intensity that must not have been dissimilar to the one we have witnessed on the site in recent times (Buccellati 2012). The height of the slope in antiquity caused the rainfall water to acquire a great velocity, and this, coupled with its sheer quantity, clearly turned it into a powerful and destructive force. The great concern for the protection of the base of the revetment wall is evidenced by two important events that characterize the reconstruction in Early Dynastic III times. The first particularly

successful aspect of the wall protection came on the inside of the wall where an insulation layer of a local material still in use today called *baqaya*, acted as a filter, spreading through capillary action, the water coming off the temple terrace so that no underground channels could build up behind and against the wall interior.

At the base of the revetment wall on the exterior two different escarpments were constructed. The earliest one, made of stone, was built along with the wall (Fig. 13). The later one, created not long after the first, was made of a thick mud packing. All the ceramics connected with both escarpments can be dated to Early Dynastic III.

4.3. Reasons for concern

Protecting the base of the revetment wall was the first motivation. But the deeper motivation came from the fact that the plaza and particularly the area closest to the temple terrace was considered a sacred space, intimately connected with the terrace and the temple on top (Buccellati 2012). The plaza itself covered a very large area, as we know from a number of soundings – one of which (J7) exposed the eastern edge of the Plaza, for a length of some 50 m, to its southernmost edge.

5. THE ENIGMA OF THE TEMPLE PLAZA

5.1. Defining the enigma

Our excavations within the Plaza uncovered an unexpected stratigraphic situation. Surprisingly, the nature of the deposit shows unmistakably that the Plaza floor was kept absolutely clean from the end of the Early Dynastic period until the beginning of the Mittani period: there are no use floors, no evidence of dumping, no hollows, no pits, no hearths, no burials, so none of the usual traces of use one would expect for a normal open air urban space. This is all the more remarkable as the surface of the Plaza was not paved. And yet it was kept clean for over a millennium, from ca 2600 until ca 1400 BC.

The stratigraphic section of the Plaza as seen from our excavations in J1, along the outside of the southern portion of the revetment wall, is impressive in its linearity and uniformity (Fig. 14). The section clearly shows that directly on top of the Early Dynastic III strata we have the Early Mittani strata. The Mittani strata indicate that finally, in this last century of its existence, the Plaza was no longer kept clean but gradually filled in, resulting in a thick Mittani deposit that spanned both the Early and Late Mittani periods, that is about one century. This was the result of two concomitant

factors. First, we assume that there was a blocking of the Plaza to the south, with the result that the Plaza turned into a basin that would easily fill in. Second, there was an overall shrinking of the settlement, which resulted in the abandonment of the area to the immediate east of the Plaza. The gradual erosion of the mud brick buildings to the east of the temple stairway covered the stairway and the plaza near the stairs. Because of these factors, the Plaza lost its role as the central element in the urban layout. In Late Mittani times the entrance to the upper portion of the temple terrace was moved to the west, necessitated by this filling in of the plaza and the consequent covering of the eastern stairway (Fig. 15).

The stratigraphic history of the areas immediately to the east and west of the excavations in the Plaza give a quite different picture. To the west in A16 above the stone paved courtyard of the Akkadian palace the continuous stratigraphic sequence dates from late Akkadian to the Mittani Period. The same is true to the east of the monumental staircase. Here again the periods that are seemingly missing in the Plaza are in fact represented.

5.2 *Resolving the enigma*

It is clear from the architecture, stratigraphy and later Hurrian texts, that temple BA is a major Hurrian sanctuary within an important city from at least the middle of the 4th millennium and continuing into the beginning of the 2nd millennium. The city gradually shrank in size and importance first through the attempts of Zimri-Lim to control it and later evolving into a smaller sanctuary in the Mittani Period. The rise of Assyria with a different religious orientation, occasioned the quick disappearance of even this small sanctuary and the service center that supported it – in other words, the abandonment of Urkesh.

This occupational history and the stratigraphic analysis of the Plaza do not take us very far in resolving our enigma of the Plaza. However, there is one other line of evidence we must look at in connection with the enigma of the Plaza. In the Old Babylonian Period, Zimri Lim attempted to control the city of Urkesh. We see the situation of conflict in a letter from an erstwhile governor of Urkesh, Terru, to Zimri-Lim.

«The situation in Urkesh is one of conflict. Let my lord (the overlord, king of Mari) send a royal prefect to Urkesh who may protect the property owners in order that the country may not escape from the control of my lord. [...] The elders of Urkesh must not hear this tablet of mine» (ARM 28, 45).

It is in this period of political uncertainty that we observe the appearance in the archaeological record of permanent hearths (Fig. 16) decorated with iconographic motifs closely connected to the Kura Araxes culture to

the north. Earlier we had excavated some small, portable andirons of the same type as are typical of the Kura-Araxes culture (Kelly-Buccellati 2004)⁽¹⁰⁾. This culture began to appear in the South Caucasus before 3000 B. C. gradually spreading all along the Outer Fertile Crescent lasting until 2200 BC but in a few areas into 1800 BC (Fig. 17). Characteristic of it is its cultural conservatism exhibited by the fact that its principal cultural elements, especially permanent hearths and portable andirons, still defined it geographically all along the arc of the Outer Fertile Crescent and chronologically to the end.

The evidence of the use of these decorated hearths in Urkesh at the end of the 3rd millennium extending into the 2nd millennium is, I think, an indication of the presence of deeply engrained cultural patterns. In my opinion, a dynamic culture that preserves fundamental cultural elements for such a long chronological span, and with such a vast geographical spread, would be capable of maintaining a clean ritual space connected to a major temple in the city of Urkesh.

What comes to mind, when looking at this extraordinary stratigraphic situation, is Derrida's "sous rature", under erasure. The situation is different from what he meant, but, this idea goes to the heart of the matter. What is here erased, in the Urkesh Plaza, is almost a millennium of human activity, not erased because it was first there and then obliterated, or because it defies definition. It is rather that the constant and never interrupted human presence in the Plaza kept erasing itself at the very moment that it was happening. Through a prodigious display of discretion, century upon century of human presence carefully avoided leaving a trace of its passing. And yet the trace is there. Under erasure!

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⁽¹⁰⁾ It is quite possible that there may have been a use of such andirons in the earlier 3rd millennium, but in locations of a different nature than the ones we have excavated so far.

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Fig 1 – The site of Tell Mozan/Urkesh with the Mardin Pass in the background.



Fig 2 – Tell Mozan, seal showing the enactment of a sacrifice, Akkadian Period.

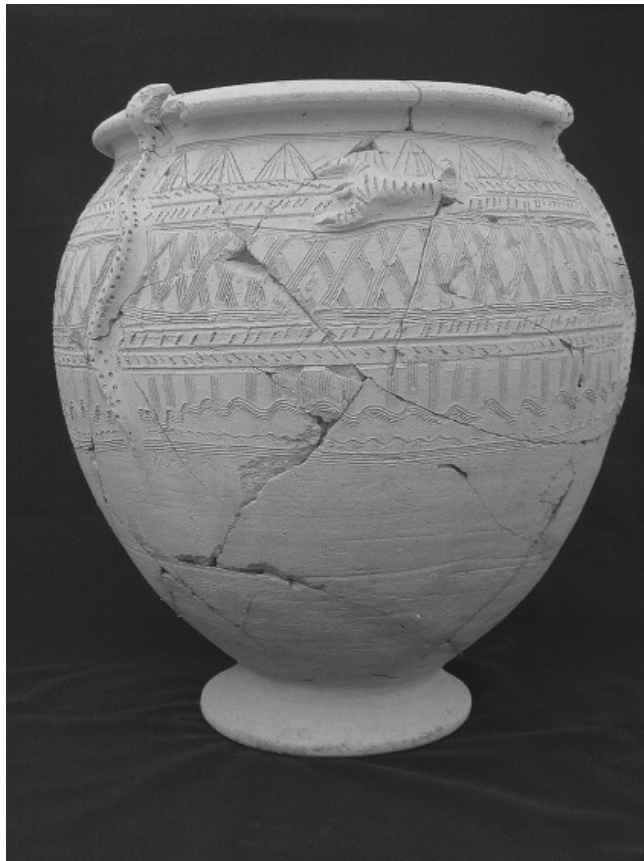


Fig 3 – Tell Mozan, *altanni* vessel with snake and scorpion relief decoration.



Fig. 4 – Tell Mozan, view of the *abi*, a necromantic pit, mid-3rd through mid-2nd millennium BC.



Fig. 5 – Tell Mozan, magic circle inside the *abi*.



Fig. 6 – Tell Mozan, ritual vessel in the shape of a pig, late 3rd millennium BC.



Fig. 7 – Tell Mozan, ritual vessel in the shape of a nude woman, late 3rd millennium BC.



Fig. 8 – 4th millennium BC sites near Mozan.



Fig. 9 – Tell Mozan, corner of niched building on a low platform, Late Chalcolithic 3, ca 3500 BC.

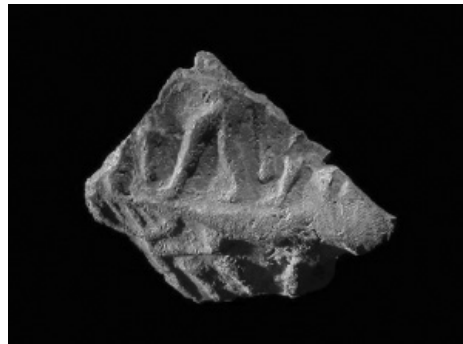


Fig. 10 – Tell Mozan, seal impression with a complex scene, Late Chalcolithic 3, ca 3500 BC.



Fig. 11 – Tell Mozan, Temple BA, revetment wall, monumental staircase, Early Dynastic III.



Fig. 12 – Tell Mozan, earlier stairs and partially excavated orthostats, Early Dynastic II-III.



Fig. 13 – Tell Mozan, stone escarpment along the revetment wall, Early Dynastic III.

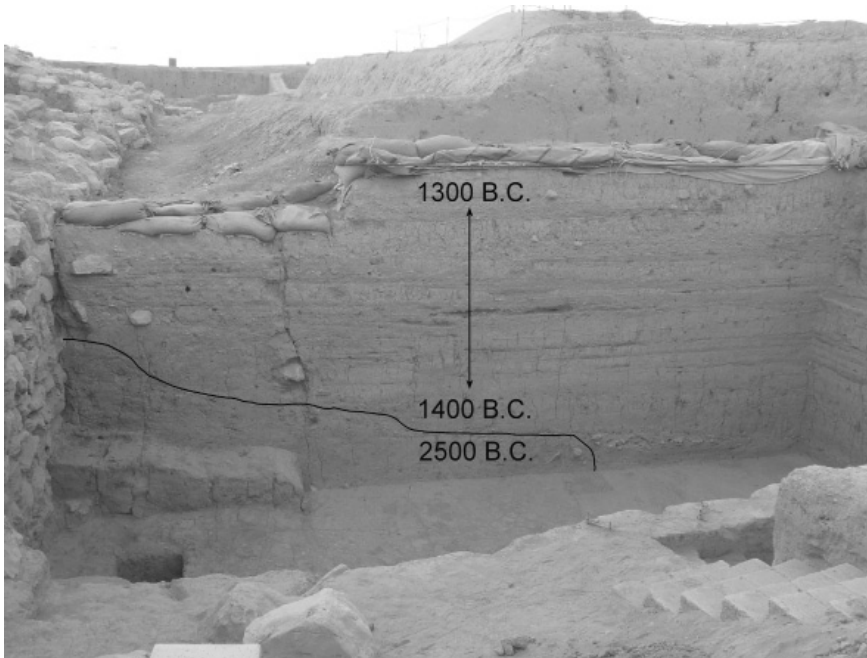


Fig. 14 – Tell Mozan, section of the Plaza in J1, mid-IVth millennium to mid-Mittani Period.



Fig. 15 – Tell Mozan, Mittani Period staircase.



Fig. 16 – Tell Mozan, decorated permanent hearth, Khabur period.

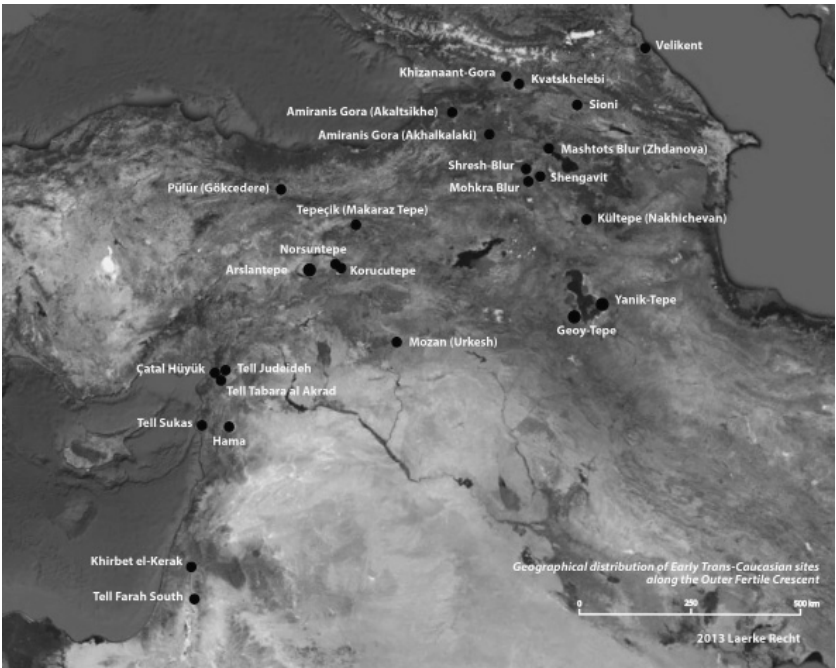


Fig. 17 – Kura-Araxes sites along the Outer Fertile Crescent.

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Giornate di studio

**L'ARCHEOLOGIA DEL SACRO
E L'ARCHEOLOGIA DEL CULTO**

SABRATHA, EBLA, ARDEA, LANUVIO

(Roma, 8-11 ottobre 2013)

- EBLA E LA SIRIA DALL'ETÀ DEL BRONZO ALL'ETÀ DEL FERRO -

a cura di PAOLO MATTHIAE

con la collaborazione di MARTA D'ANDREA



ROMA 2016

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