



## Tell Mozan / Urkesh Archaeological Project

Project supported by the  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and  
International Cooperation of the  
Italian Republic

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What role can the ruins of an ancient city, located in the most remote region of Syria, still inaccessible to those who are not local after nine years of conflict,

play today? The role of ancient Urkesh, nine years after the beginning of the conflict and the isolation of the site from the international scientific community, is surprisingly a place of dissemination and encounter, where local visitors come to learn about their past despite the difficulties of the present; Urkesh is, therefore, an example of how **culture, and archaeology in particular, can act as a reason for hope** in a context of conflict such as today's Syria.

**The past is visibly present in the territory**, the archaeological monuments emerge from the ground as evidence of a tradition which is buried in the earth (they are not mere fossils) causing a reaction in all those who feel tied to the same territory (the so-called "stakeholders"), those to whom not so much (or not only) the monuments – but the very sense of appropriation of the values embedded in the monuments themselves "belong". The archaeological monument becomes a witness of that past, and its discovery links it to the community. In Mozan this reaction occurred continuously during the years when the archaeological mission was present with its excavation campaigns, but it also happens today thanks to the link between the local community and that place of the past, which the Project contributed to create in the years before the war. The importance of this link is what ISIS had well understood and therefore decided to destroy: to deprive a society of its memory means to deeply hurt the sense of a shared identity.

The Project has always ensured that the **pride and sense of belonging** that arise from the experience of the ancient monuments are positively transformed into care for the territory itself. And the pride that is rooted in a life lived in a shared place has the effect of uniting communities who might otherwise not only be divided, but even in conflict. This is the basis of the new experience made by the Project from 2011 to today. The people who have visited the site in recent years belong to the communities of the Mozan region and are, by religion, culture and ethnicity, very different groups. However, the site is a shared element, and therefore a link. A recurring theme in the essays that the Project asks local school children to write after their visit to the site, as well as in the comments left in the guestbook by adult visitors, is the sense of wonder that comes from the fact that the people of ancient Urkesh, who created the monuments they visit, were ancient Syrians – ancient inhabitants of the same country where they live today. There is a simple truth in this awareness: it is the common land, which we call Syria today, that unites those who live and used to live in it.

The Tell Mozan/Urkesh site is therefore a **cultural stage**, due to the attention and care that the Project has maintained on the site and its relationship with the local communities not only during the years of the yearly excavation missions, but also from 2011 to the present day – in the firm belief that spreading

the sense of the past as a shared asset would naturally have involved the protection of the monuments by the communities themselves. Through constant (remote) contacts with the communities living around Tell Mozan, the Project has ensured an effective protection of the site, the continuity of the maintenance of the archaeological areas and of its accessibility, the work of a small group of local employees, the support to the initiatives of schools and local cultural associations related to the ancient history of the region, the support to women and artisans involved in the creation of objects capable of representing the cultural relationship between the present and the past in Mozan.

The activities planned for 2020 will take place both in Syria and in Italy, continuing and expanding the work which has been done so far. For 2020 in particular, the project will focus on the didactic and informative dimension of the archaeological excavations carried out at Tell Mozan. We plan two main initiatives.

The first initiative, which will take place in Syria, is aimed at the development and expansion of educational materials on the site, as well as of those distributed in schools in the area. The **explanatory panels** on the site (in English, Arabic and Kurdish) need revision and updating based on the results of research made in recent years. Thus, visitors to the site will also be able to see the ongoing research work on Tell Mozan data, conducted by international students and scholars. In addition, from a material point of view, these materials need to be reprinted, while the metal stands on which they are placed need to be repaired and repainted. The explanatory brochures that are distributed on the site and at conferences and local exhibitions also need updating. The work of updating will be done by the Scientific Director of the Project, while the field work will be coordinated by the collaborators living in Syria (Yasmine Mahmoud and Amer Ahmed). In parallel to this work of arrangements for visitors, the Syrian collaborators will make contact with the schools in Amouda and Qamishli (the two cities closest to the Tell Mozan site), to continue the twinning program between Syrian and Italian schools successfully launched by the Project in the past years, which is at the heart of the second initiative.

This will take place in Italy and aims to **disseminate the work of the Project** and of past archaeological activities, i.e. the main scientific results and their relevance for the communities involved (local communities, but also communities of scholars, students and interested people in Italy and all over the world). In particular, the project will expand the twinning programme between schools of various degrees in Syria and Italy. Classes that are planning to study Ancient Mesopotamia will be selected and, within the educational program of each school and with the support of the teachers, preparatory lessons will be offered to explain the historical and cultural role of ancient Urkesh and Mesopotamia in general. The lessons will also address the importance of culture as a founding element of a community's identity. This will be followed by Skype meetings between students from Syrian and Italian schools during which they will compare the fruits of meetings with archaeologists and preparatory lessons, their knowledge of the past, antiquities and shared identity. The problem of languages will be overcome thanks to the ability of the members of the project to speak all the languages in the field. Following the meetings, students will prepare written papers on the topics discussed, which will then be translated, exchanged between schools and made public through the appropriate channels.

It is precisely these types of human and cultural exchanges that add value to archaeology and support the sense of identity and belonging at the basis of each community's life. Although it is not possible for all members of the Mozan Project to physically travel to Syria and start an excavation campaign there, the Project is present with the research and all its other initiatives, which have been remotely implemented with the valuable collaboration of local staff.

