

Archaeology for a Young Future

A UNESCO event in Beirut

Giorgio Buccellati, November 20, 2017

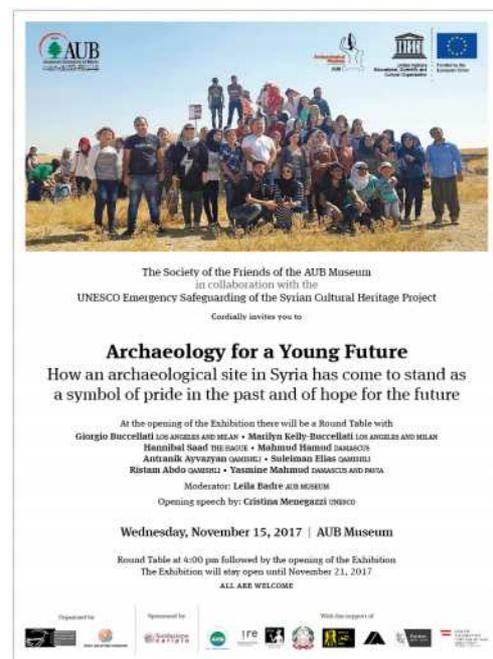
In collaboration with UNESCO, we were able to organize an important event in Beirut intended to present our work on the Urkesh Extended Project.

On November 15, 2017, we opened an exhibit at the American University of Beirut devoted to our site during the six years of war. The exhibit itself is significant because it brings to light the inner dynamics of an archaeological project in fostering a unique sense of purpose and determination. This goes well beyond the bounds of archaeology as an academic discipline in the traditional sense. Tempered by the harshness of war, the Urkesh experiment points the way to the wider social implications of dealing with the past.

Beyond the exhibit, it was extremely significant to be able to exchange in person our views and concerns: the support of UNESCO made this all the more promising. We renewed a commitment to working together with various communities, and saw how all of it is indeed possible.

It is, as the title says, a "young future." It is young because it relies on young Syrian men and women who are placing their enthusiasm and inventiveness in the service of their country. And the future is young because it proposes new ways of finding commonalities in the shared past.

All of this is possible because of the support of persons and institutions that are really partners in an enterprise in which we share a common ideal. Sure enough, there are logos that identify them in our posters and catalogs. But the sharing goes well beyond the acknowledgment. It rests on the joy of doing something worthwhile together.



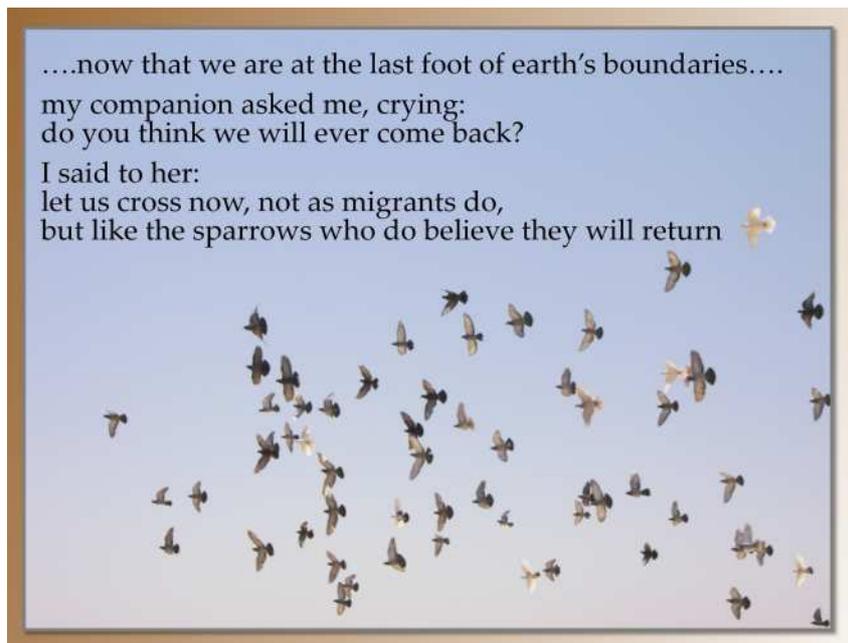


The American University of Beirut hosted us in its beautifully renovated museum. It held a special personal meaning for Marilyn and for me, because of the plaque, nearby, honoring Malcolm Kerr. He was the Dean of the Division of Social Sciences at UCLA when I had just started the Institute of Archaeology, housed in his Division: how often did we talk as to whether archaeology could have social relevance, and how pleased he would be to hear the answer, loud and clear, that we gave with our event at AUB. which turned out to be, alas, his last academic home...

1 The exhibit

The exhibit consists of 46 panels, arranged around the lecture hall of the AUB Museum.

It begins with a poem by a Syrian poet that sets the tone and accompanies the visitor till the end.



There are then eight sections that follow a logical path, beginning with an introduction that is meant to "provoke" the visitor into thinking about why archaeology may have a role in life greater than that of academic knowledge. It is a theme that is picked up again at the end when the visitor is asked to reflect on his or her own experience.

THE DIGNITY OF THE PAST

April 2016



to discover is not enough
we must protect
what we bring back to light

each find has a dignity of its own:
this, too, we must respect
and thus share
in the pride of the ancients

our approach to Urkesh
was what we call the
"arte povera" of conservation
it has served us well
in the ensuing time of war

PROVOCATIONS

what do you do
when you are facing a hill
you know to have been
an ancient city?




it is not enough
to let yourself be guided
by a rainbow...



you must let yourself
be provoked to aim
for something bigger
than yourself...

There follows a section that claims a special dignity for the past and the traces it has left in the soil. The word "dignity" wants to convey the sense that, inert though these material remains are, they call for special attention: if the archaeologists recognize this dignity from the start, excavating with a view to conserve, then this sense of dignity is organically transmitted to even the most casual visitor.

the ascent to the heavens

the past
provokes us ...
how often,
while working
on this
staircase,
have we
wondered...



built more than four and half
millennia ago,
it saw many a generation climb it
why were they climbing it?
it led to a temple at the top,
so climbing it was like ascending
to the heavens
in the beauty we can thus read
a spiritual experience
and make it ours
it is a monument that must be preserved
for all to experience it as we did



the necromantic shaft



just like the ancient Hurrians,
we are guided
by the wisdom of our ancestors

facing the challenge
of keeping the *Abri* alive
is our own way
of keeping the spirits
and the wisdom of the ancients
alive

the protective structure
mirrors our commitment
to protect souls and stones

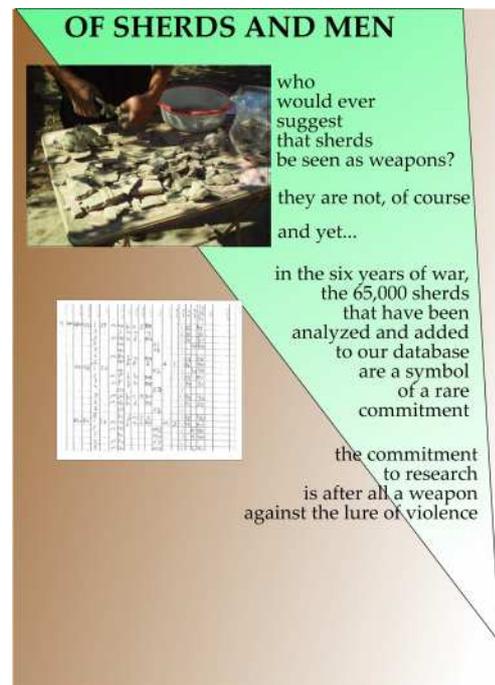
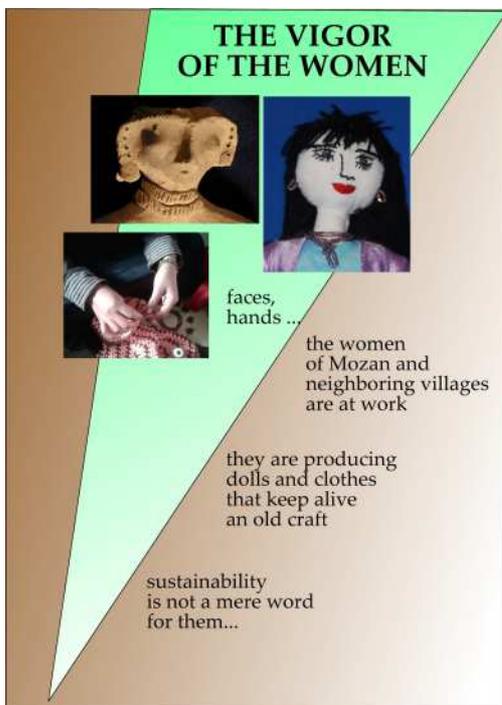
the royal palace of Tupkish



having worked at this site
for so long,
we feel that we are a part of it --
past, present and future
just as king Tupkish,
ould have defended
his kingdom and his palace,
so we, too, feel the obligation
to defend it
we clearly face
a different kind of danger,
but face it we do,
and with
the same determination

Our special concern for the visitor is highlighted in the next section, which deals with how to present the site to the public. This we had done by means of an extensive and simple signage system, which has remained in full force at the site during the six years of the war, and continues to this day to attract visitors. This educational effort reaches deep, and we credit it with the total lack of vandalism at Tell Mozan: the local communities are fully aware of the significance of the past embodied in the soil and are the first and most dedicated guardians of the territory.

The next two sections deal with the work of women and men of the neighboring villages. The "atelier" of the women maintains alive the folk traditions of handicrafts: we have established a small "school" that ensures that the process continues as some of the first recruits get married and move to other areas. On the other hand, the men we had trained to analyze pottery, to keep a photographic record, to digitize old records, they all continue to work on our project with surprising results.



It is, truly, the power of the ideal that is at work. Just as it can be destructive when placed in the service of perverse ends, it becomes instead a source of inspiration for constructive progress and social cohesiveness. Thus the exhibit talks about exhibits! We have in fact done a number of these in these six years, and they have come to serve a major purpose in raising the awareness of the local communities for what they hold in common. They are also a vehicle of self-expression especially for the young men and women who volunteer their time and talents in designing and installing them – in small towns as well as in bigger cities.

THE POWER OF THE IDEAL



“the Center for the Revival of Civil Society”

Amuda,
a small town in northeastern Syria,
offers a strong bulwark
against the perverse ideals
of fanaticism

even the remote past,
even Urkesh,
can provide society
with a common purpose:
to find a greater unity
against the forces
of disaggregation



Reflections

looking at yourself in an imaginary mirror, would you see a trace of Urkesh in your own image?

ancient monuments seem mute and still but they speak loudly, if we can only listen

all the more so when war wants to clamp on us a final silence

how can *we*, looking at the past, learn for our own “young future”?

The last section invites visitors to a reflection through which they may thoughtfully confront themselves with the message that the exhibit was meant to convey – a sort of mirror in which we can see ourselves by reflecting on the shared past.

back to a sandy shade

grass and shrubs grow all over the site, especially in spring time



left unattended, they would affect the integrity of the monument

removing the vegetation is thus the first order of business



simple enough, but necessary: from verdant green to its original sandy shade



we must then each spring re-fill the joints between the stones with mud: this keeps the stones from becoming loose and the staircase from falling apart

The individual panels within each section are composed with a view to blend image and text in a way that is at the same time informative and poetic – as in this one (to the right) written by the catalog co-author and main associate of the exhibit, Yasmine Mahmoud.

All the panels of the exhibit will soon be available online at www.uep.urkesh.org.

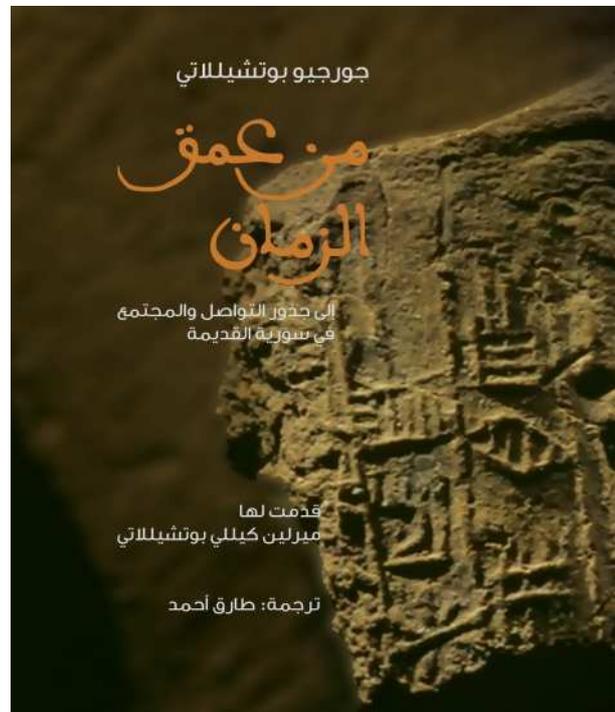
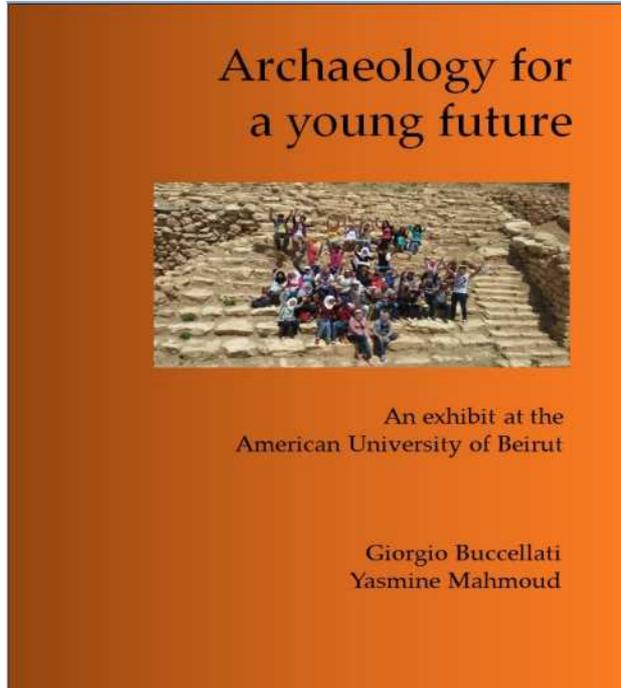
We currently have plans to bring the exhibit to Qamishli and to Hassaka, where it will be provided with a translation into Arabic and Kurdish.

2 The catalogs

We prepared not one but two catalogs. One was written specifically for the exhibit and describes in detail the content of the panels. It is published by the "Urkesh Press," and this, too, is part of the young future of which the small book speaks. The "Urkesh Press" is meant to serve as the publishing arm of the Urkesh Extended Project. Within the framework of a projected Urkesh Eco-archaeological Park, it is planned that the village of Mozan will have a printing and binding establishment, alongside a permanent exhibit about ancient writing, particularly regarding the scribal schools of ancient Urkesh.

The second catalog is the Arabic translation of the catalog we prepared for the exhibit on Syria at the Meeting in Rimini in 2014. Richly illustrated, it offers a good compendium of the historical and archaeological significance of ancient Urkesh, thus providing the background for the understanding the effort at making the site a point of reference for the local communities, which is central to the Beirut event.

Just like the panels, so, too, the two catalogs will soon be available online at www.uep.urkesh.org.



3 The Round Table

For the opening of the exhibit, we held a Round Table aimed at setting the Exhibit in its proper perspective.

Chaired by Dr. Leila Badre of AUB, it was introduced by Dr. Cristina Menegazzi of UNESCO, who explained how rich in symbolism our project is, inasmuch as it highlights the value of accepting diversity.

Dr. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati (Los Angeles) gave an overview of the site of ancient Urkesh, to highlight its significance within the context of Syrian history, and Dr. Giorgio Buccellati (Los Angeles) described the Urkesh Extended Project. It is through this project that we have kept the site of Tell Mozan fully active in all but the excavations throughout the war period.

Dr. Mahmud Hamud (Damascus) spoke about the role of the DGAM in the protection of the archaeological sites during the crisis, and how the work at Tell Mozan shows the importance of involving the local communities in the appreciation of their past history.

Ristam Abdo (Qamishli) stressed the Syrian dimension of the effort undertaken by the local communities in defending the common heritage, and the synergy with the Urkesh Extended Project, which had led to a meaningful and productive collaboration in the service of all of humanity.

Dr. Suleiman Elias (Qamishli) spoke of the collaboration between the Urkesh Extended Project and local cultural initiatives, in particular with regard to the Subartu cultural association and the Syrian archaeological expedition at Tell She'ir.

Msgr. Antranig Ayvazian, of the Catholic Armenian church in Qamishli, pointed to the tone of family life that distinguished the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project



Dr. Leila Badre (AUB) introduces the speakers



Dr. Cristina Menegazzi (UNESCO) introduces the topic of the Round Table



from left: Ristom Abdo, Hannibal Saad, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, Giorgio Buccellati, Mahmud Hamud, Suleiman Elias, Antranig Ayvazian, Yasmine Mahmoud

during the years when excavations were possible, a tone that helped in creating a strong bond between the expedition and the local communities and to even foster a closer bond among these communities.

Hannibal Saad, of the Music and Beyond Foundation in The Hague, provided the initial inspiration for the Exhibit and the event that accompanied it. He remained indispensable throughout the entire process, and gave untiringly of his time and talent – for which we are extremely grateful. At the Round Table, he spoke eloquently of the value of music within the context of Syrian culture, emphasizing the reciprocal enrichment that derives from the very diverse traditions that are at home in different parts of Syria.

Yasmine Mahmoud (Damascus) represented the hope and vigor of the younger generation as it strives to build a future that is consonant with the rich past of her country: to her, work at Tell Mozan was a source of inspiration for her personal and professional career, something that she feels can be shared and expanded.

4 Meeting at UNESCO

On November 16, we held a two hour meeting at the UNESCO office. In attendance were, besides the participants in the Round Table, Ahmad Deeb and Ahmad Tarakji from Damascus and Khaled Ahmo from Hassaka.

The major topic discussed was the conditions under which one might renew the efforts started in 2009 towards the establishment of a legal entity representing the Urkesh Eco-archaeological Park. All parties present indicated their strong support in principle for the initiative. UNESCO in particular would be behind this initiative as well, because it adheres closely to its goals. It was agreed however that the time is not ripe for a formal procedure aimed at creating the desired legal entity. It will be useful to have a statement that brings the original proposal up to date, and stresses the fundamental reasons behind it. It is particularly important to avoid possible misunderstandings as to the nature of the Park, which is clearly above politics and is in fact intended to stress the truly "Syrian" nature of the archaeological site and of its environment. It was also agreed that this is the best message that both the Urkesh extended Project and the park project can propose to the broad public.

5 Background meetings

During separate meetings we considered some operational aspects relating to the Park project that could be implemented without depending on a formal structure and a legal entity representing it. We focused, in so doing, on the primary goal that was behind the idea of the Park in the first place: the protection of the landscape. To this end, an idea proposed by Ristam Abdo seemed particularly promising: we could aim for a grass roots approach to education, that would motivate the local village communities

to adhere to the basic goals of the Park even without a formal regulatory system being set in place. In particular, we will seek to undertake the following tasks:

- The colleagues who are operative in the region have offered to go to the individual villages to give introductory lectures to the local communities about the history of their territory and its significance. At the same time, they will emphasize the importance of maintaining the landscape, as a way to encourage in the future a special type of tourism. This we will call an awareness campaign.
- We will start small "libraries" in each village, located in the house of the mukhtar or any other person who is willing to serve as a repository for the books. The idea is to build a small point of reference that will give the local inhabitants a chance to learn more about the past. It will also serve as a pointer for future developments, when such libraries will be of interest to visitors.
- We will organize bus trips to Tell Mozan to explain the importance of the city of Urkesh as a live feature of their cultural landscape. We will especially highlight its history as a major urban center of a civilization, that of the Hurrians, which, even though it has completely vanished, was at one point important for the history of Syria.
- Similarly, we will organize for the villages bus trips to the upcoming exhibit in Qamishli: this will be the same as the Beirut exhibit, with the addition of an Arabic and a Kurdish translation of the texts.
- We will make available small grants-in-aid for university students from the villages in our area: the program will be open to students in all fields who have a good academic standing at the local University.

6 The young future

The Syrian future is young. Those of us who have been privileged to work in Syria for many years, coming from abroad, have always come to feel the embrace of the Syrians of today just as we were seeking to encounter the Syrians of yesterday. And we are now, literally, invigorated by their vigor, especially that of the Syrian youth. There is always a promising future where there is a young future, and this we have Syria today.

We have seen this in the way in which new solutions were being proposed as we faced unexpected problems – for instance in the details of bringing about the Park project. Not giving up is the mark of youth. And this is one more thing we are learning from our Syrian colleagues. We are confident that this dynamics will meet the goals of public archaeology at its best: something we construct from the ground up, with a synergy of intents. The villages in the area of Mozan will thus develop ways of offering, along with the hospitality that is so deeply embedded in their spirit, a *cultur-*

al hospitality, as it were: the hospitality of their history, which they can live afresh with- in the context of the shared rediscovery of a past where we are all guests.

The exhibit portrays this young future not only as a central theme, but also because of the way in which it has come into existence, through several young Syrians who have contributed in an essential way to making it possible.

Yasmine Mahmoud has been in the forefront of the effort, coordinating the realiza- tion of the panels, keeping the organization on track, co-authoring the catalog and su- pervising the publication process.

Hiba Qassar, Yara Moualla and Samer Abdelghafour have contributed some of the panels, and took part in the overall design of the exhibit.

Hannibal Saad shared with us, from the very beginning, his infectious enthusiasm. It is an artist's enthusiasm, capable of illuminating and captivating, claiming not only your mind's but also your heart's attention. It is, as we experienced it, the vigor of mu- sic, a young Syrian music, which blended so well, and unexpectedly, with the archae- ology we were proposing.

7 The enablers

Cristina Menegazzi, Project Officer of the UNESCO Observatory of Syrian Cultural Her- itage, shared from within the goals of the Ex- hibit and of the Round Table associated with it. It was indeed a sharing of basic values and of ways to work together towards them: and then again we shared in the joy of seeing the project come to fruition in ways that seemed exceptional – reminding us once more as to how often Syria has been the place where the exceptional happens with the ordinariness of a daily event.

Leila Badre, Director of the Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut, by hosting us in the beautiful halls of her Mu- seum, with her most efficient staff, gave us not only a place, but truly a home.

Joining with our Syrian colleagues, and hosted by the our friends in Beirut, this was in other respects a thoroughly Italian project. The recognition on the part of the Italian Em-



ARCHAEOLOGY FOR A YOUNG FUTURE

An exhibit at the American University of Beirut

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AUB American University of Beirut
IAA the International Academy of Archaeology
IMAS - the International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies
the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA
Ambasciata d'Italia, Beirut
MUSIC AND BEYOND FOUNDATION
AVSI
Ire

bassy in Beirut and particularly of the Ambassador, Dr. Massimo Marotti, holds a special significance for us.

The support of the Fondazione Cariplo, and in particular of its President, Giuseppe Guzzetti, is emblematic of the synergy that blends together the practical and the ideal sides of a project like ours. It is true that *Archaeology for a Young Future* is a research endeavor, and one that is aimed beyond the confines of Italy. But it is a project that builds on a commitment capable of bringing together young people on both sides in ways that were unimagined until now. The support of the Fondazione Cariplo not only fuels the practical side making the project possible financially, but it also supports the sense of value that animates all those involved in bringing it to reality.

In this light all our supporters are truly "enablers" who take stock, personally, in the work being done. Showing them the results is thus a way to show that these are our *joint* results. They truly support by sharing.