

Interview to Prof. Giorgio Buccellati and Prof. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati

“Giorgio Buccellati: ‘Al Daesh, como a los talibanes, hay que combatirlos con las ideas y la arqueología es útil’”

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(English translation reviewed by the authors)

“Giorgio Buccellati:

‘Daesh, like the Taliban, must be fought with ideas, and archaeology is useful’”

The Syrian war forced the renowned Italian archaeologist and his wife to abandon their excavations in the ancient city of Urkesh, but at a distance they have not stopped working for the Mesopotamian heritage.

A grimace of pain appears on the faces of Giorgio Buccellati and his wife Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati at the mention of Khaled Asaad, the Palmyra archaeologist who was beheaded by Daesh fundamentalists for refusing to reveal where the archaeological treasures of this historic city were hidden. “He was a very good friend of ours”, says this couple of archaeologists who were forced to leave Syria when this long war began in 2011. Although the soldiers of the self-proclaimed Islamic State advanced within a few kilometres from Urkesh, fortunately they did not reach this Mesopotamian city discovered by the Buccellati couple in north-eastern Syria.

The heritage unearthed in the ancient capital of the Hurrians was spared from the barbarity of the Islamic radicals and may be safe for years, at least for the next generation, because the Buccellatis have not stopped working on the maintenance and protection of this site, even though they have not been able to excavate there for a decade.

Their investigations of the building on which the Urkesh Temple stood, around 2600 BC, still await their return. **“Do you see this little corner of a building? It dates a thousand years before present – the renowned archaeologist points out to ABC, showing a photograph of the place. This means that, as early as 3500 BC, there was a city there. It was something important and we started excavating it, but we could not continue anymore”.**

In recent years, they have visited Urkesh a couple of times, but it is still impossible to bring a team of colleagues and students there to continue the excavations. The war continues and “it is too dangerous”, they admit. But during their visits, they were able to verify that the Syrian members of their team are taking care of the site and that the initiatives they continue to promote from the United States are still prospering.

“We have developed a program of education and involvement of local people, with tours for local tourists, workshops, and conferences that our collaborators offer in towns and private houses”, explains the Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) on his recent visit to Madrid.

His projects led to two important consequences. “The first is that **there is no vandalism**, because the local population is involved in defending their own territory, and the second, even more important, is that **we offer a real ideological antidote to terrorism**. All these people will never join Daesh because they are so identified with their past that they will never think of betraying their own history”, he says convinced.

For Buccellati, it is difficult for Westerners to understand that Daesh, or the Taliban movement (recently in the news for its takeover of Afghanistan), **“are ideological movements we have to fight with ideas, and archaeology serves that purpose”**. His last book is dedicated precisely to the projects that have been developed in this regard at Urkesh in the last decade. From it, he shows to ABC some photographs of the visit of an Armenian priest, as guest of honour, together with the Kurdish and Arab authorities of the city, or of children from the area of Urkesh who are connected with groups of Italians of their age, and spoke about their culture, or played for them violins and flutes from the steps of the ancient Hurrian city.

The reason leading him to Spain, however, was the publication in Spanish of his work *‘When on High the Heavens...’ Mesopotamian Religion and Spirituality with Reference to the Biblical World* (Routledge, forthcoming) and the course and conference he has taught on this topic this September at the ‘Universidad San Dámaso’, in Madrid. In the office of Professor Ignacio Carbajosa, organizer of the course, Buccellati explains that, in addition to the preserved written texts describing the way of life in Mesopotamia, “there is archaeological material that tells us about its spirituality”.

There are even examples of pre-Mesopotamian materials, the archaeologist continues, mentioning a prehistoric skull discovered in the Caucasus and belonging to a person who lived two or three years without teeth before dying. “From this unwritten evidence, from this skull, we can infer two things that concern ancient spirituality. The first, that the people who lived with this person took care of him for a long period, and the second, that they knew that he was closer to death. Love and fear of death are two universal human factors. It is an example of how unwritten documents can tell us about spirituality”, he explains.

A Necromantic Pit

At Urkesh, there was a religiosity that (even though it was Mesopotamian) slightly differed from that of the Sumerians or Babylonians. In this Hurrian city, they discovered a deep necromantic pit about three metres in diameter.

According to Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, Professor Emerita at the California State University – Los Angeles, it had a very narrow and slanting staircase to descend, which was closed at the top with a stone; inside the pit, they have found different layers with circles, and bones of piglets and puppy dogs offered to the gods of the afterlife.

A similar pit is mentioned in a biblical account telling how king Saul went to the witch of Endor to evoke the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel. “The word for this necromantic pit in Hebrew and Hurrian is the same; the Hebrew took it from the Hurrian”, Buccellati assures.

For the archaeologist, the Urkesh pit “is the monumental and oldest testimony of this biblical passage”.

In the Hurrian city, they have also found another element with a biblical connection. In one of the walls of the great royal palace, they discovered a unique clay tablet, which shows the plan of three rooms that correspond to ones actually excavated. On one edge of the tablet, an incision can be seen that had to be repeated on the other edge, now lost. These traces served to fix the measures with which the workers had to build these rooms.

“In the Bible, **the cornerstone** is mentioned very often. The texts say that it is a malformed stone that cannot be used for construction, “the stone that the architects rejected is now the cornerstone”, recalls Buccellati before pointing out that, although the metaphor is used for Jesus who is seen like the stone on which the entire building depends, “the cornerstone is the stone from which the measurements to build the house are taken”. Another link.

Important Fragments

If Buccellati is asked why he is interested in Mesopotamia, he replies with a simple but forceful: “because **it is important**”. His studies of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew led his steps towards the Mesopotamian world, but the discovery of the city of Urkesh was due to chance.

The Tell Mozan mound **had been explored in the 1930s by Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie’s husband**. However, the detective-story writer stated in an autobiography that Mallowan stopped excavating there, disinterested and believing that they were Roman remains. During a survey of the area, the Buccellatis came over to take a look. “We went to see the remains of Roman pottery from the site and there was nothing Roman there; it was from the third millennium, so we decided to excavate”, Giorgio remembers.

Since they began their investigations in 1984, they were convinced it was the city of Urkesh, because there were documents indicating that it has to be located in that area of north-eastern Syria, but they could not confirm it until a decade later. It was in 1995, when, among thousands of fragments of clay sealings, they managed to find the name of the city, as well as valuable information about the servants of the king or different queens, one of them the daughter of the great king of Mesopotamia. “By analysing these small pieces of pottery, we have come to know very important historical data”, Marilyn emphasizes.

Nobody knows how many more fragments are still underground at Urkesh. “We hope God allows us to return. Hopefully”, they both say. The person in charge of the direction of the future campaigns, however, will be their son Federico, also an archaeologist. “We are **the grandparents of the excavation**”, they comment laughing.