

School project: Syria and USA

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We had the first meeting in which the Syrian students presented their work about Tell Mozan by the end of July 2021. This meeting was followed by another one on the 14th of August in which the American students presented their heritage to the Syrian students.

The meetings were held on collective basis at the beginning, then the interested ones will proceed into the one-on-one meetings.

Both meetings were most impressive in terms of students' preparation and participation, and here I will explain in details starting with the preparation of the Syrian group.

The Syrian group (Bright Kids Centre, Qamishli)

Phase 0

This phase started by gathering a group of youngsters from Qamishli, aged between 13-16 years old. The meetings of the Syrian group were led by dr. Hiba Qassar, based in Florence and Amer Ahmad, based in Qamishli. (pic.1) Through the first meeting, Dr. Qassar, explained the various phases of the program, what to expect from the program and the total hours that the project will require.

The focus of this phase was to get to know the participants, their interests and hobbies and if they are interested in history in any way. The results were surprising since none of the participants expressed any interest in history, and some of them expressed that they detest studying it and they consider it

completely irrelevant to them. Therefore, we went through a reflection on what cultural identity is (in general) and what is their cultural identity? what has been inherited from the ancestors and what has been lost? what history, the history of their families, means to them to move then to talk about the history of the territory that they are living on, means to them.

It was hard at the beginning to get them to express themselves and to get them to start thinking of who they are-culturally as a group and how did they become who they are 'culturally', to finally discuss what is history, archaeology and heritage, and what can be relevant or useful to their present(pic.2).

Discussing ethnic and religious diversity in the history of Urkesh was challenging since all the participants belong to the same ethnicity, and were looking to find a clear indication to their ethnicity among the history of the territory. At this phase of the project, we didn't correct or oppose them because we were aiming to acquire their confidence so they can feel free to discuss what they really believed in and how do they perceive the history in relation. However, we asked them to prepare 3-4 questions each to tell us what they would like to know about the history of Urkesh and its ancient population, religion, etc. Their questions shed a light on how history and archaeology can become interesting to them, which led us to phase 1(pic.3).

Here are some of these questions: how did the kings imposed the rules? were they popular? Were they fair? Who founded the city? did they have an army? Was it strong? Did they have enemies?

Other questions were about the people living in the kingdom: how did they make living? Did they all share the same religion? Was it the same religion as the kings?

Phase 1: the formation

This phase is a tailored formation that responds to the cultural curiosities of the participants. It started by answering the questions the students posed in the previous phase then we worked together on elaborating these questions to uncover a full 'image' of the history of Urkesh.

Going through this phase was exciting and challenging for many reasons. First, it was the first time for the participants to be in touch with an archaeological site. Therefore, telling them about an ancient history, like the history of Urkesh, was hard for them to conceptualize. They seemed extremely interested in the explanation, but they weren't able to locate in their minds an ancient history (even understanding the dates Before Christ were difficult for them to comprehend). Therefore, I tried several methods of story-telling, trying as much as possible, to be close to the way they used to receive their information. At the end, I asked the ones who were able to understand better, to tell the history to their peers in their own way (using words that they are more familiar with) so they can all be able to reach the same level of knowing the history of the site.

As planned, the second part of the formation is the site visit (pic. 4-5-6-7). After the visit, Amer Ahmad (our local assistant who accompany the participants and explain the site through the visit), recognized that they weren't able to recognize the monuments well and that they were a bit lost. When I wanted to know the feedback of the students about the visit, they asked to visit the site again with Amer, in order 'understand' better the monuments and be able to connect them with the history in their minds. Therefore, students

had other two visits to the site. Through the visits, Amer mentioned that they were trying with real effort to understand the history, memorize the names of the main characters we mentioned (like the queen or the king), recognize each monument in the site and its function.

Another difficult aspect to explain was the discovery and its relation to writing history. So, how archaeologists excavate and how this excavation leads to uncover 'new' history. They were very much interested in knowing how come the archaeologists chose this site to excavate in, and what if they weren't able to find any written document, then how would this change the history of the city. The fact that the site is not totally excavated nourished their curiosity and scepticism about the history in general and the history of the site in particular.

Phase 2: tutoring

Through this phase participants received tutoring to improve their English and computer skills in order to be able to communicate with their peers around the world. Two of UCLA students, Zichan Wang and Ronida Cheko, were in charge of this task (pic. 7-8).

The English level of most of the participants were a little bit more than basic i.e., they were able to make few sentences but not able to follow a whole discussion or to express and elaborate a topic in English. Ronida and Zichan, using two different methods, were able to improve the students' English remarkably in order to present their work.

It was the first time for most the students to work on PowerPoint. The hard

part wasn't teaching them how to work on the program itself. But more how to collaborate together in making one PowerPoint in which each participant present one aspect from the site. They were supposed to be creative on one hand and to keep the harmony between each other's work on the other hand. Some of the students weren't able to follow and they withdrew. Most of the group, instead, accepted the challenge and worked together to reach a final presentation that talks about the youngsters through the history of Urkesh.

Phase 3: The meetings

Syria Meets USA

Since most of the participants didn't have a good internet connection at home, they followed the first meeting from the language centre (Bright Kids centre). They were in the same room but each connected from different device so they can present their work and be able to intervene individually. The participants presented first the aspects that impressed them among the history of Urkesh, then presented few aspects of their traditions and connected between the ancient and the modern.

Here are some of the highlights of their presentations:

- **connect and reflect through the ancient history of Urkesh**

The Syrian students started their presentation by provoking questions about why there is a need to understand the history in general, the history of the territory we are living on in particular and how this might be related in the formation of the cultural identity of the youngsters. Then they moved to locate Urkesh considering its distance from their city.

- **History, people, monuments**

The participants then proceeded to talk about the monuments in Urkesh which

they were mostly impressed by and how these monuments are telling the history of the ancient city, the people who were living in it, thousands of years ago, and their habits (pic. 10).

- **History in a critical prospective: the discovery**

As mentioned above, this was the first experience to the Syrian participants with an archaeological site. As a result, it was the first time to think of how history might be written. This experience opened their curiosities on what is still to be discovered, how little do we know from the history and how can the still hidden information change the perception on ourselves.

Through the presentation the participants tried to communicate these ideas to their peers in the USA and to explain how it felt to be in the archaeological site and to think of all the answers under the ground of the archaeological site (pic. 10).

- **Our traditions and Urkesh**

Presenting cultural traits from the modern traditions in a wide lens, in which the ancient is combined with its parallels, was important aspect that Syrian participants wanted to highlight. Therefore, they presented the traditional costumes, the traditional celebration to welcome the Spring and some culinary aspects in relation to the ancient ones (pic.11).

USA meets Syria

In the second meeting the American students gave a rich and inspiring presentation including the following themes (pic.12-13-14-15):

- the perception of the American culture from young perspective (food, fashion, entertainment, etc).

- Geography and the landscape of North America

-important points in the history of the USA in general and the history of the democracy in the USA in particular.

-special focus on the racial equality: from the statue of liberty-the original and the actual one- till 'Black Lives Matter'

-the philosophers that the participants were influenced by

-what made America the country it is today (from the students' perspective)

Opening a window on the culture of the USA from a young perspective filled the Syrian students of curiosity and led to various discussions about politics, history and everyday life.

Two parents asked dr. Cox, the project responsible in USA, if it is possible to host a Syrian student in their house as part of this exchange. However, considering the bureaucratic difficulties to get this happening, we proposed if they can create an imaginary hosting tour- including all the destinations, traditions, etc. that they want their host to know about, which was very exciting for the Syrian students.

Through this imaginary tour the two students showed their peers the museums in their nearby, and explained why they believe these museums are relevant to them. The tour also included some entertainment activities and culinary stops.

After the Meetings

As planned, after the meetings the students are invited to keep in touch and to learn more about each culture. Considering that it was the first time for the participants from USA and Syria to be in touch with each other's cultures, many of the Syrian participants had questions about the information that their American peers presented during the meeting. Therefore, they

communicated together to delve into some of the information provided by their peers during the sessions.