How an archaeological site in Syria has come to stand as a symbol of pride in the past and of hope for the future
....now that we are at the last foot of earth’s boundaries....
my companion asked me, crying:
do you think we will ever come back?
I said to her:
let us cross now, not as migrants do,
but like the sparrows who do believe they will return

the poems of the Syrian poet Adel Mahmoud
will accompany us through the exhibit

his refusal to admit defeat and exile
reflects the inspiration behind our effort at Mozan:
it is the effort to keep the faith,
the faith in a past we share,
a past that warrants our future

the millennia are for today,
and for tomorrow
the birds we see today are those the ancients saw in their sky

our exhibit tells the story of ancient Urkesh, today the site of Mozan in northeastern Syria.

Urkesh has become a rallying point for a broad collaborative effort where the discovery of the past gives new meaning to peace in a modern context of war

PROVOCATIONS
THE DIGNITY OF THE FINDS
A SITE ALIVE
THE VIGOR OF THE WOMEN
OF SHERDS AND MEN
THE POWER OF THE IDEAL
REFLECTIONS
ARCHEOLOGY FOR A YOUNG FUTURE

An exhibit at the American University of Beirut

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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...
the past provokes us

the past provokes us by simply being there: who were the people living then where we are today?

four and a half millennia old, this monument provokes us into asking: why they built it and how?

the weather provokes us: are we to let it all disintegrate through rain and snow?
the war provokes us

the violence and the intentional destruction aim right at the heart of a group’s identity

without a past, we are no longer provoked by our roots

but the war also provokes us because it wants to stop us from being present at the site: we have in fact not been there now for six full years

but we fought back: in these six years, we met the challenge physically absent, we have been actively working with our men on the ground

this exhibit tells you the story of this remarkable partnership
the millennia are for us!

at Urkesh, archaeology fulfills its larger cultural goal, by uniting people from different ethnicities

our Hurrian city is proudly Syrian and the Hurrians are proudly our Syrian ancestors.
a parallel war

during the six long years of the war,
we have been present to fight our war against the elements
and even simply the war against fatigue

we were present in 2011

and in 2012

in 2013

and then again in 2014

in 2015

all the way through 2016 and today
the appropriation of the past

objects have an immediate appeal – and yet, it takes an effort to make them ours

all the more so for the excavated site

and it takes an even greater effort to care for it, preserve it, and insert back in our living tradition

courtesy Ken Garrett
National Geographic
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
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
our watchful eye

the Hurrian inhabitants of Urkesh saw this as the ascent to their supreme god, Kumarbi, who lived in the mountains

but the care of his manmade mountain is now entrusted to us

we have not betrayed the trust, year after year
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
just like the ancient Hurrians, we are guided by the wisdom of our ancestors

facing the challenge of keeping the Abî 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 descent to the Netherworld

at the base
of the temple terrace,
there is a deep shaft

our Hurrians
called it abi

it connected
the world of the living
with the world of the dead
through a medium

placed as a counterpart of the
great staircase,
it reminds us of Dante’s journey,
from the Inferno to Paradise
against all odds

the trajectory of the abi during war time speaks volumes

half way through this period, the dome shaped cover had lost all its protective tarp

we opted for a major intervention
a commitment for the long run

we did not want to just repair: we wanted to improve showing that our commitment is for the long run through an intense two-way communication, we designed a whole new dome with overlapping metal sheets for all its simplicity, this was an important step in showing how we could collaborate long distance in our shared concern for our wounded four millennia old abi

during this was in 2013 the next year, it turned out that the square entrance to the abi also needed repairs and we opted for the same solution, strong of the experience we had gained in communicating and acting accordingly
our little epic story

looking at these pictures from a distance, they evoke a muted response: is it really all so special? why bother to even care for its appearance, covering the metal with cloth and paint so as to avoid the sheen of the metal?

what we felt was “epic” about our little story was that during the dark night of the war we had been able to produce something strong and durable something that would keep the abi in 2017 and forward in the same condition in which we had found it fifteen years earlier
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, could 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
when excavations started,
we had no inkling that here there would be
a very large building, with a monumental stone courtyard (below)

the size alone told us we were dealing with a major building,
then we found written texts that gave us the name
of the king who built it, around 2250 B.C.

we knew then we were within the Palace of Tukishsh,
the king of Urkesh
one score and seven years ago...

excavations of the palace started in 1990, 27 years ago
the mudbrick walls are still in perfect state today,
thanks to our protective system
which we see above as it was in 2003
sleeping walls

our *arte povera* of conservation aims at achieving the maximum protection with a minimum of technology: the test of these six long years has validated our approach.

april 2016
maintenance and monitoring

six years is a long time

if the approach has been so successful, it is because we made maintenance our first priority

our highest level of technology is just the Internet: through it, we receive a full monitoring of the activities in all their minutest details

during these six years of physical absence, we have received more than 12,000 digital photos
A SITE ALIVE

no, we will not be cut off

true, the remnants of the ancient monuments are mute and still

but understanding what they meant is what brings them back to life

that is our ongoing task, even as war would seem to want to clamp on us a final silence

Urkesh will not be silenced
the “high” of an ancient view

we want to take you “on a high”

from the rise above temple and palace
you gain a panorama view from a distance in space that matches the even greater distance in time

the two “panoramas” speak on our behalf during our absence

that is why it is so important to keep them in a good condition and fully capable of telling visitors the larger story
they are everywhere

yes, they are everywhere, like footnotes to a text that is the site itself – unobtrusive, rich and spread out along a leading path

they are some 200 pages of information about the substance of each individual view

but the weather wages its own war our panels break in front of the mighty wind, loose their color in the sun and the informational content is sometimes blown in the wind or swept away in the heavy rain
our approach to facing weather damage is simple and effective: it relies on periodic monitoring and direct maintenance, so as to intervene at the right time.

earlier in 2017, all the damaged panels were fixed and welded the metal frames were cleaned and repainted and all the information was printed again, laminated and glued back

it is the window through which Mozan lets us look at ancient Urkesh
parasols in a time of war

April 2015

visitors from Qamishli cultural affairs and from Hassaka Department of Antiquities

even a journalist

In December 2016, we issued a 60 page booklet that offers a guide to the site in English, Arabic and Kurdish. It aims for an even broader outreach and it is the first of its kind.
THE VIGOR OF THE WOMEN

faces, hands...

the women of Mozan and neighboring villages are at work

they are producing dolls and clothes that keep alive an old craft

sustainability is not a mere word for them...
the Eco-archaeological Park

in 2009, we launched the idea of a Park that would protect the pristine landscape and develop an economically sustainable project around the site: an area of 54 square kilometers with 22 villages

in 2011-12 a delegation from the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums went to Mozan to make plans for the implementation of the Park
the Urkesh atelier – phase 1

the one component of the Park that became a reality was the handicraft project of the women

"we never betrayed our schedules and we met regularly for two years.... then the tension became too high and we were no longer able to meet in our atelier"

jewelry

clothing

Syrian smiles!
nicely packed, a logo proudly says: "Urkesh atelier of handicrafts"
the Urkesh atelier – phase 2

with the passing of time,
the young members of the group
left the villages because of
marriage or other family events

in October 2016,
we proposed to start a regular school

the teacher was Amira, of the original group:
by December 2016,
a whole new inventory was available...

“I like to make
handicraft objects
because I see’
my character and soul
through the objects I did.
It is something
I elaborate and
hold in my arms
for a long time therefore
it gives me satisfaction
when I see
my kids wearing it “
OF SHERDS AND MEN

who
would ever
suggest
that sherds
be seen as weapons?
they are not, of course
and yet...
in the six years of war,
the 65,000 sherds
that have been
analyzed and added
to our database
are a symbol
of a rare
commitment
the commitment
to research
is after all a weapon
against the lure of violence
a human time machine

we present to you Hammade, our Mozan assistant and pottery expert
during the six years of war, he has analyzed some 65,000 sherds
sending us for each piece the full details to be included in our growing database

the process starts by sorting the sherd bags according to excavation units

then Hammade analyzes each item by shape and fabric and every other detail according to a full set of standards

he writes this down by hand onto a detailed log that is then entered in the computer and sent to us via the internet for inclusion in our database
for the record

part of the process
is a full photographic
documentation

we give pride of place
to this sherd because
the theme of the bird
is the poetic leitmotiv
of our exhibit

seeing it
among the photos
that have just reached us
from Mozan
struck a chord
in our heart:

a beautiful symbol
of the bond we have
with our site
and people
even across
the gulf of war

next to
the photographs,
the drawings
thousands of
hand drawn objects
have been scanned
during these
six years,
and as many have
been digitized
in vector format

Kamiran Beg
has lent all his skill
to this exacting task –
an immense
contribution
to the Urkesh project
passing the torch

from his sherd laboratory in Mozan Hammade went on to teach a regular workshop to the archaeology students in Qamishli

a truly hands-on experience that took place in October 2016

it is with pride that we see the new generation come thus in touch with the material from Urkesh through the continuity that our project has made possible over the years

the graduating class included Hamrin Omo (leftmost in the upper row)

the daughter of our guard, Muhammad Omo, she grew up with the expedition

we hope to work with her when inshallah we, too, will be back in Mozan!
field school 2017

September 2017: a field school for the archaeology students of al-Furat University

with our support, it was held at Mozan, because our site still has well preserved architecture and available ceramic collections
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
in 2014, we organized a major exhibit on Urkesh at one of the largest cultural festivals, the “Meeting” of Rimini: it had some 22,000 visitors in one week. The directors of the antiquities departments from the regions of Idlib, Aleppo and Qamishli came to Rimini. The director from Qamishli, Dr. Suleiman Elias (to the right), suggested that we mount a similar exhibit in Qamishli itself and its region. So we did: it opened in December 2014 and toured the region in early 2015.
the ripple effect of great ideas

Qamishli and Amuda:
December 2014 and February 2015:
two towns at the heart of the Syrian northeast,
with the so-called Islamic state at a distance of some 60 kms

we have learnt the real meaning of the term “outreach”
as we have seen the ripple effect of great ideas:
the past, explained, becomes a motor for growth
we read in the juxtaposition of these images what values really are, how deeply they truly affect the inner fabric of society against the iconic images of the destruction wreaked by the so-called Islamic state, we want to turn into iconic images those of the young men and women of our region as they transport and mount the panels of the Qamishli/Amuda Urkesh exhibit
ancient monuments seem mute and still
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?"

looking at yourself in an imaginary mirror, would you see a trace of Urkesh in your own image?
the main story archaeology tells us is continuity:
the continuity of the space in which we live,
the continuity of the time enshrined in memory.

children are at the core of storytelling:
the past orients them towards the future

so a story-teller came to Mozan,
to tell them about Urkesh.

and here
they are,
hailing to
their past
and their future.
“From Damascus, I went to Mozan in 2012 to build a cultural pilot project. Moving in between yellow landscapes of the most fertile area in Syria was a touching experience. A sense of connection was very loud...

As a woman from the capital I thought I had it all to figured out, and that my identity would be so different from my fellow women from a rural area. Again, I was completely mistaken. Going to the “periphery” made me understand what it means to belong to the center!”

“...vibrant eyes were looking straight in our faces... how do we dare advise them? all we needed to do was to listen!”

Yara Moualla
if Mozan birds had mirrors, they would recognize themselves in the birds of yore...

Oh stranger... How long have you been in this street, Looking for addresses you knew once upon a time?

The face of the city changed in your long absence. Prepare for yourself a seat in the garden of the past.

And sit, as if but waiting for the ones you love... Be careful not to get into the oriental boredom.

They will come, for sure, they will come. The bird does not forget the window of the house, the branches on which he lived an old spring.

Adel Mahmoud