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MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI

## CONTINUITY AND INNOVATION AT URKESH IN THE ED III PERIOD

### 1. *Introduction*

Influencing civilizational trajectories toward the development of cities in ancient Syro-Mesopotamia were a large number of factors of which the local environment and local political exigencies were important components. Historically, the impact of the Uruk phenomenon was different across the Khabur region ranging from a massive cultural influence at Brak to a limited influence in Urkesh. In the specific case of Urkesh, in addition to its past cultural history, its geographical position close to the nearby foothills of the Tur-Abdin and the trade route through the Mardin Pass toward the resource-rich Taurus with its supply of wood, stones and metals including copper, influenced the choices that led to the creation of a high terrace. This terrace existed well before the Late Chalcolithic 3 (LC3) period when it already stands to a height of about 22 m above the plain level. The evidence for this high terrace and administrative activities connected with it in the form of cylinder seal impressions on container sealings have already been discussed<sup>1</sup>. Recent excavations near the top of the terrace have revealed a niched building, in all likelihood a temple, connected with ceramics dating to the same LC3 period<sup>2</sup>.

Following this early beginning of urban institutions, the fact that these were a success depended on the large number of opportunities that could be taken advantage of in individual situations. For example, we may think of the centrality of religious ideas and the local peoples' willingness to act on them by constructing such a large terrace within their living and working space. Concomitant with these new opportunities was the large number of individual compromises needed to adapt to a new socio-economic environment. Successful elite strategies entailed adoption of ideas generated in the local situation on the one hand and the co-option of ideas produced in other political, economic and social environments on the other. New ideas, wherever they were generated, became known quickly over a wide geographical area. New ideas additionally set up a pressure toward 'modernization' in those situations where local conditions permitted the fruition of changed conceptions. Obviously not all new understandings of local realities were perceived as acceptable or even beneficial in a

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 2014, pp. 448-461.

given situation, but in my view they nonetheless provided pressure toward ‘modernization’ of some type no matter what new patterns were considered. The range of new ideas was broader than those applicable in any given setting but it is just this richness that enabled permutations to be adapted to the local situation. Some strategies were successful, others not, or only partially so. However the ferment of ideas, the climate of openness to change, the ever widening societal options kept the urban model alive and thriving in many parts of Syro-Mesopotamia.

In highlighting the interaction between continuity and innovation at Urkesh in the ED III period we blend history and archaeology in ways that have been particularly close to the interests of Clelia Mora. It is in this vein that I am delighted to be able to contribute to this volume in her honor: her sensitivity for archaeology is matched by her mastery of the philological sources and the historical reconstruction they make possible. I trust that she will see here a reflection of these shared interests, especially given the overlaps we have enjoyed in our research over the years, whether it be the work at Terqa or the interest in Hurrian civilization.

These pressures toward adapting innovations existed alongside the stabilizing influence of tradition. Tradition was viewed as a strength within the society, not a constricting force. We can see this in Urkesh through the know-how exhibited in such skills as working stones for architectural purposes. These were quarried in the mountains nearby and in all probability floated during the rainy season to Urkesh to be used in the construction of monumental architecture<sup>3</sup>. These skills could only have been developed locally because of the availability of the stone and the need for a method to transport them to the construction site in Urkesh. With this example we can see that looking at cultural traditions within local conditions needs to take into account the local environment<sup>4</sup>. This includes, in the case of Urkesh, the large quantity of rainfall, the availability of large amounts of suitable stone for the construction of monumental architecture, the closeness of the Tur-Abdin mountains with their mineral resources as well as the availability of animals and plants not found in the flat lands of the Khabur region and the closely connected Euphrates region. If we look again at the example of stone monumental architecture it is clear that the heavy rainfall in the region made mudbrick architecture impractical, primarily for wall foundations. Even in LC3 a stone revetment wall was constructed at the base of the temple terrace indicating that knowledge of monumental stone construction was developed early<sup>5</sup>.

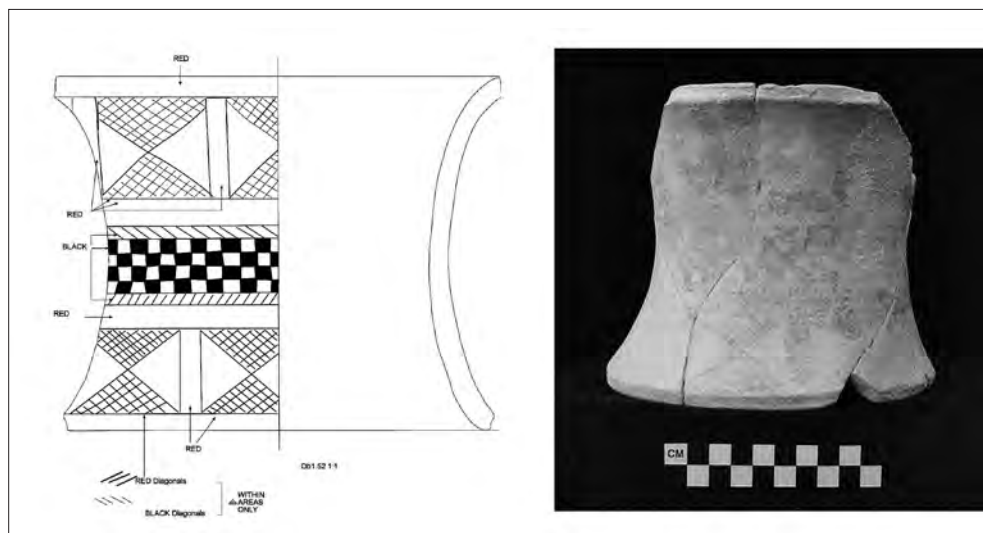
At times innovations found in southern Mesopotamia are transformed to fit the local situation. This is the case for Scarlet Ware ceramics from the south where it is made in a variety of vessel shapes and painted designs. In the Khabur region

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<sup>3</sup> Buccellati, F. 2016, pp. 86-94.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of local traditions in the development of technology is emphasized by various authors in Stockhammer - Maran 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 2014, pp. 448-450.



1. - Bi-color stand from ED II grave (Ob1.52).

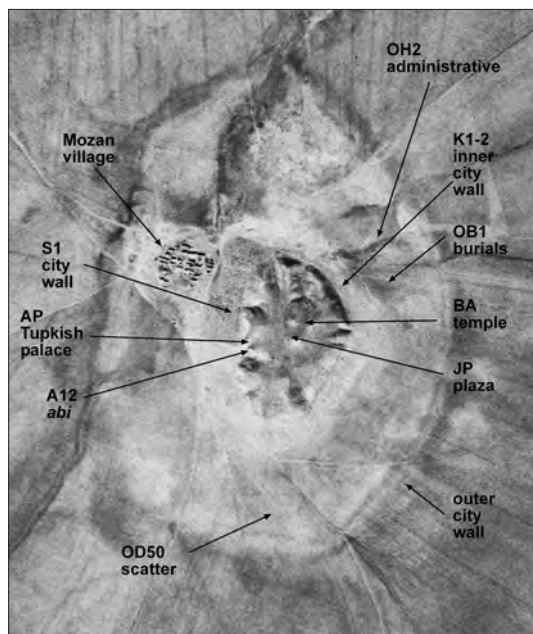
geometric designs in the same colors using fugitive paint are only found on pot stands (fig. 1).

Examples of compatible strategy toward modernization can be seen in many of the ceramics produced in Phase 4 (ca 2100 B.C.). One example is a variation of the very popular third millennium Simple Ware with cups being made in a high fired, green, and radially burnished variation of this ware<sup>6</sup>. In this Phase there were numerous examples of different types of imitations<sup>7</sup>. Most of these imitations do not aim to reproduce the paste, inclusions and firing but concentrate on the surface appearance and decoration. The radially burnished vessels imitate the color of early Simple Ware but in this case also the paste and firing. Here then we have a different type of variation as we see in this example a tradition and ‘modernization’ compatibly interacting in the craft tradition of Phase 4. We see potters open to both past technologies, in this case the long tradition of expertise in firing techniques, and a conscious effort at renewal through a new surface decoration (radial burnishing).

Other strategies can be seen as non-compatible with the contemporary cultural and possibly political necessities and sensitivities; here we can view a prominent example of this non-compatibility: the abandonment of the inner city wall in ED III. The inner city wall and the water channel outside (moat) were abandoned as clearly demon-

<sup>6</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati, 2001 pp. 84, 86, Abb. 18:7,8.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2012.



2. - Tell Mozan/Urkesh in the Early Dynastic period.

strated in the intentional filling up of the channel against the city wall as shown in our excavations in the K1 area (fig. 2)<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. *Urkesh in the Late Chalcolithic 3 and Early Dynastic periods*

Excavations at Urkesh have allowed us to extend our idea of the occupational distribution and architectural expansion of the site back to the fourth millennium. In the Late Chalcolithic 3 period (Early-Middle Uruk in southern terms) a monumental terrace already existed with a niched mud brick building situated on top of this terrace, located at what became the south-eastern portion of the terrace as enclosed by the ED III stone revetment wall<sup>9</sup>. Late

Chalcolithic 3 ceramics were found in excavation unit J1 below the ED III revetment wall and connected to what we have interpreted as the earliest revetment wall (fig. 3). In unit J3 these ceramics came from just behind the revetment wall and ceramics and seal impressions were discovered just below the surface<sup>10</sup>.

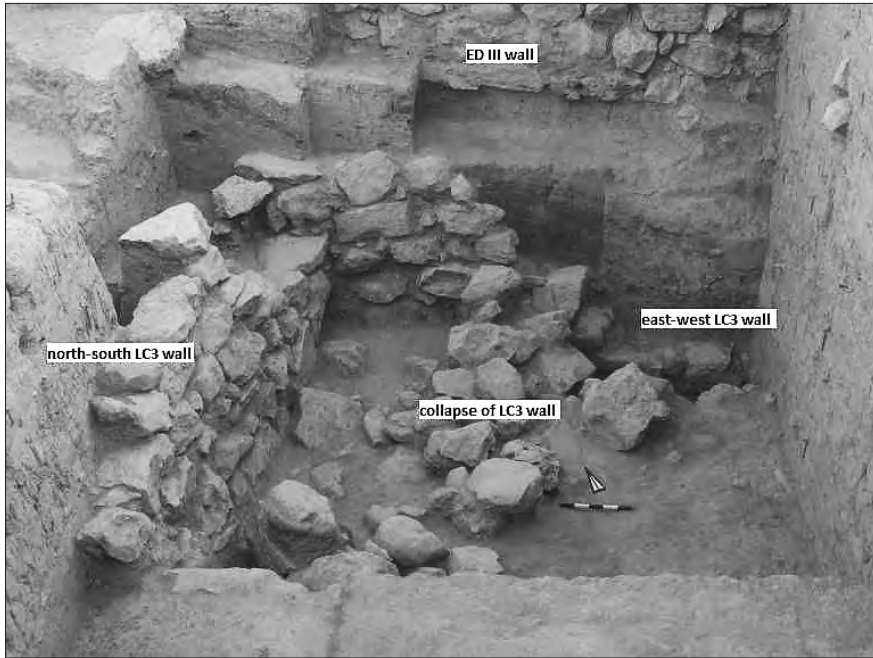
While we know aspects of the site in the ED II period we have not as yet as much data as we have for the ED III period<sup>11</sup>. Our excavations (relating to ED II) near the revetment wall and the monumental staircase leading from the plaza to the temple terrace unearthed early Ninevite deposits stratified below later Ninevite V strata. However the most abundant material from this area comes from ED III, a time when the city was flourishing and the monumental footprint of its high temple complex was expanding with the construction of the ED III temple and the building of the ED III revetment wall (fig. 4). As a result of further excavations a clearer picture of the occupation of various parts of the site in the Early Dynastic period has emerged. Our

<sup>8</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988, pp. 61-80. I wish to thank Rasha Elendari for the Corona image used for this figure.

<sup>9</sup> Buccellati, G. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2010. For the C14 dates we have from the LC3 contexts see Kelly-Buccellati 2013, p. 166 Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> For one C14 date for the ED III strata see Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 1995, p. 391. For the Outer City see Chaves Yates, 2014 and 2019.

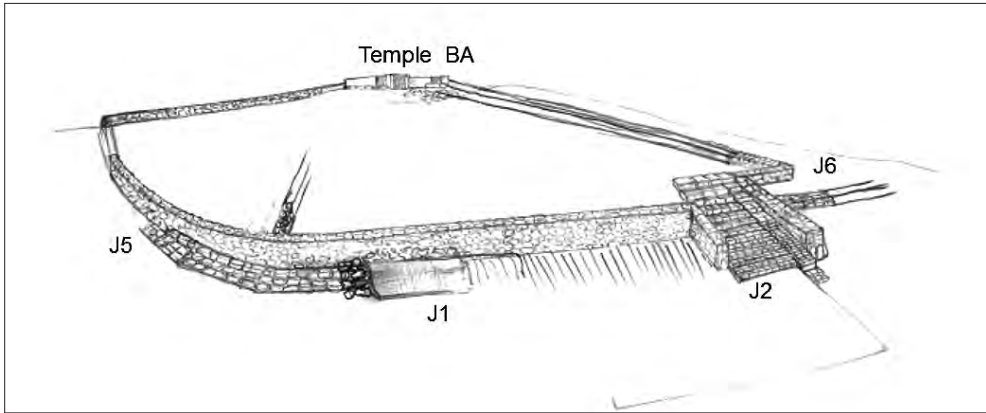


3. - Late Chalcolithic 3 collapsed revetment wall in J1.



4. - Air view of ED III contexts including the revetment wall with the escarpments in J1 and J5, the monumental staircase, and Temple BA.





5. - Sketch of ED III architecture connected with the Temple terrace.

earlier excavations led to the discovery that the northern and eastern part of the Outer City contained early third millennium cemeteries (OB1, OA4, both dating to the late Ninevite V period, see fig. 2). During the ED III period other monumental building projects were carried out, principally construction of the city wall around the high mound as evidenced in our excavations in K1 and K2; this city wall was used only for a short period of time<sup>12</sup>. In K1 the corpus of early ED III ceramics comes from the discarded material from a destroyed building probably constructed nearby; the discard was found next to the exterior base of the inner city wall making it clear that the wall was no longer in use. Additionally two other large buildings were erected: the ED III Temple BA with its very well preserved thick white gypsum floor<sup>13</sup> and an administrative building in the Outer City (OH2). All these areas produced an important corpus of ED IIIa ceramics. These three areas were homogeneous, specialized contexts that gave us a substantial view of the ED III material culture in Urkesh. The ceramics from all three of these areas can now be connected to the new stratigraphic sequence found on the exterior of the revetment wall thus forming a picture of the internal chronology of the ED III occupation and building activities within the city.

The excavations on the exterior of the revetment wall connected with the Temple BA terrace (fig. 5) have yielded a large quantity of stratified ceramics dating to the ED III period. These came mainly from excavation units J1 and J5<sup>14</sup>. Antecedent to the earliest escarpment we found a thin stratum at the base of the exterior of the revetment wall. After this a monumental stone escarpment was constructed at the base

<sup>12</sup> Guy Bunnens and Arlette Roobaert in Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 1988, pp. 61-64.

<sup>13</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 1988, pp. 57-61.

<sup>14</sup> Some comparable data came also from J2 and J6. All excavated ceramics connected with the revetment wall were analyzed and can be found in the Urkesh Global Record ([www.urkesh.com](http://www.urkesh.com)).



6. - Stone escarpment at base of the revetment wall.

a gray Ware that is unevenly burnished, both characteristics unusual for the period (fig. 7:2). Double mouth jars are also produced throughout the period in a buff ware that is medium fired and most often has both mineral and a small amount of chaff temper (fig. 7:1). Both of these types, while distinctive morphologically, were produced in such few examples that they are not useful indicators of chronological changes in most ED III contexts. Their function, while specific, did not necessitate many examples being produced. This is also true for flat bases with an external extension formed on a rough flat platform and cut with a sharp instrument that left striation marks on the exterior diameter of the base (fig. 7:4). Included also in this category although represented in somewhat larger numbers in K1 are large storage jars and vats in a very coarse ware (Rough Ware) with an interior plastered surface to aid in the retention of liquids. They were produced during the entire period and are best attested in the form of vats in

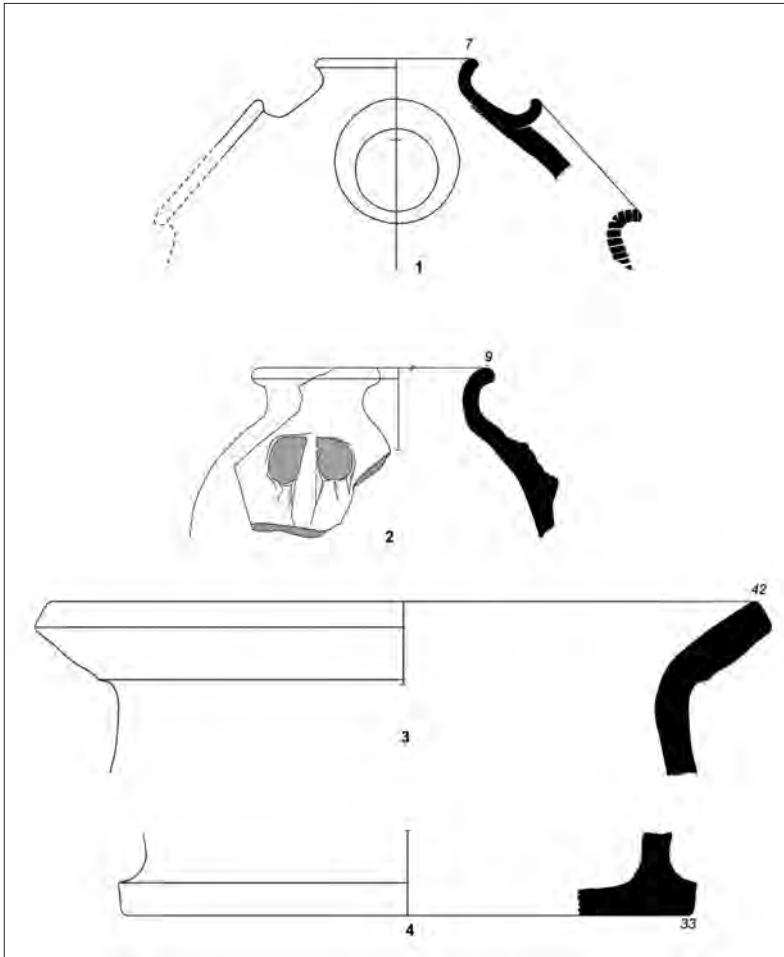
of the wall in J1 (escarpment 1) to protect it from flooding (fig. 6). Above this first escarpment in stone and its use phase, we excavated a second escarpment, made of clay, (escarpment 2) found both in J5 and in J1<sup>15</sup>. The latest ED III period at the base of the wall is connected with the use and erosion of this second escarpment.

### 3. Characteristics of the ED III ceramics

If we look at both early and late ED III then we see that some vessel shapes were produced throughout the entire period in Mozan (fig. 7)<sup>16</sup>. Included in this category are small globular pots with double pierced lug handles placed on the upper body near the rim; they are made in

<sup>15</sup> Buccellati, G. 2012 pp. 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> The horizontal mark on the vertical equals is a 5 cm scale in all the sherd drawings.



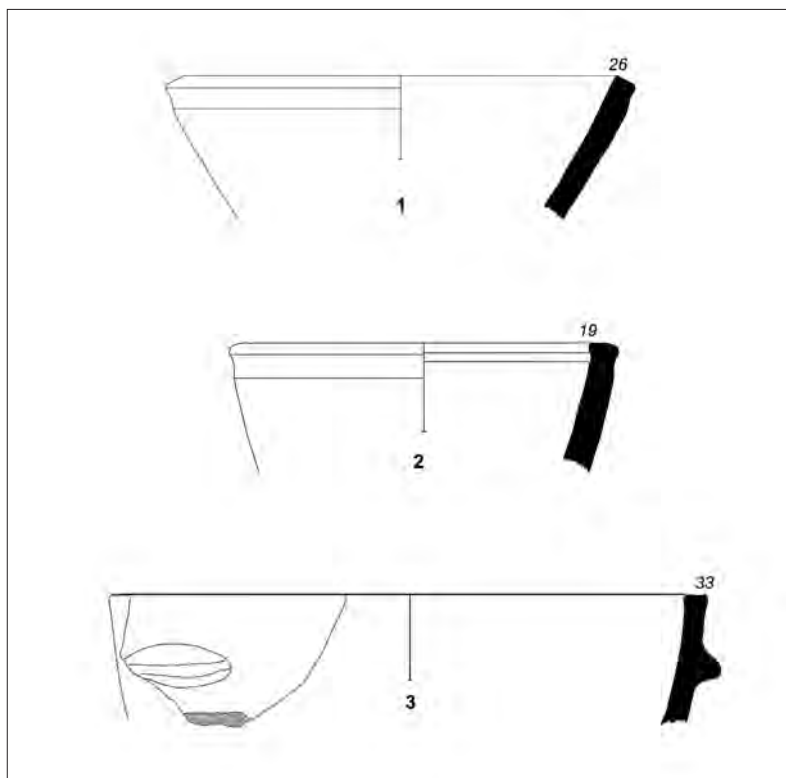
7. - Vessel types made throughout ED III in Urkesh/Mozan. 1. OH2q18.3, 2. J1q1297-p7, 3. J1q1313-p6, 4. J1q1312-p8.

K1f16<sup>17</sup>. A few of these jars are also represented in our data from near the revetment wall but in a less coarse ware (fig. 7:3).

Some types produced throughout the period were in a different category as they were made in large numbers (fig. 8). These include a wide deep bowl with squared rim, sometimes with an oval handle on the exterior near the rim, made in a medium-coarse chaff tempered ware (fig. 8:1,3). While the earlier examples have a wide opening, in late ED III both examples with a wide rim diameter and a narrower type with a

<sup>17</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 1988, pp. 66-67.



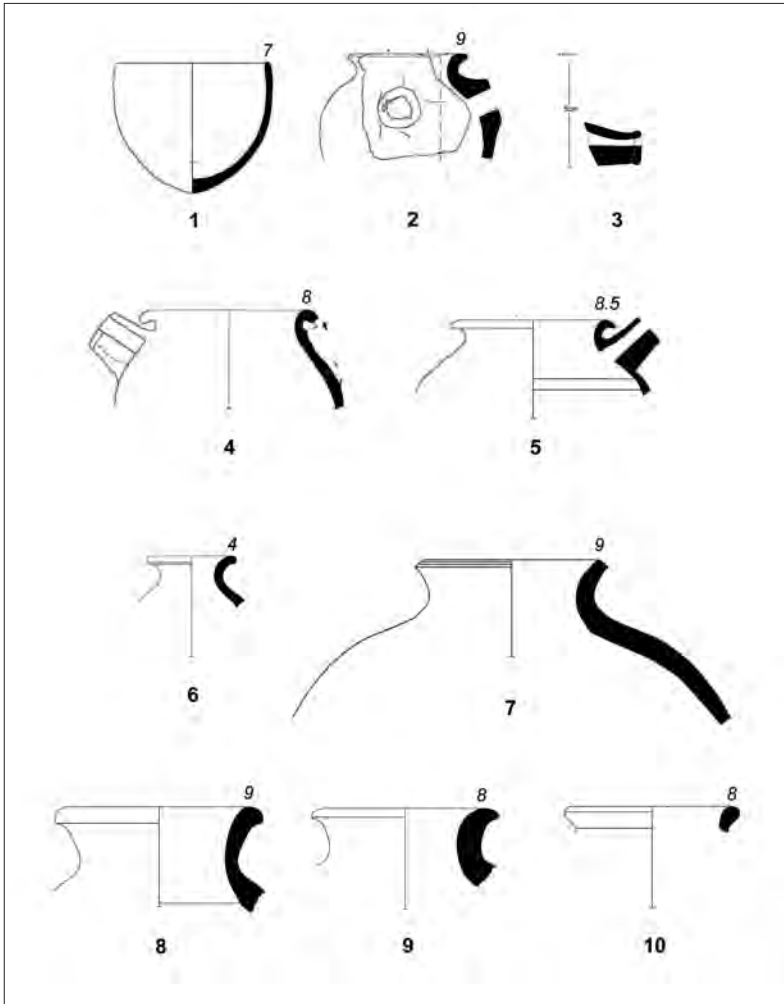


8. - Ceramic types made in large numbers during ED III. 1. J1q1287-p23, 2. J5q413-p3, 3. OH2q9-p5.

small lip on the interior of the rim are found (fig. 8:2). Jars with a folded rim and interior groove are common in the entire period however they vary in details and especially in the specific articulation of the rim, as discussed below.

### 3.1. *ED IIIa ceramic shapes continued from the Late Ninevite V period*

The earliest stratified ED IIIa ceramics near the revetment wall came from just below the earliest escarpment and have some similarities to the latest Ninevite V ceramics (fig. 9). Small bowls/cups with a pointed base are found in Ninevite V strata as well as near the revetment wall (fig. 9:1). Other examples include short necked jars, usually globular in shape with a narrow straight or slightly flaring rim either plain or with a small channel down the center of the top of the rim (fig. 9:6-10). This type of jar shape although carried over from the Ninevite V period is produced during ED III in a ware that is generally buff in color, medium fired with more inclusions and therefore coarser in texture than the medium fired but yellow-buff Ninevite V jars. Another example comes from the category of small spouted pots (fig. 9:2-3,5).



9. - Shape types continued from the late Ninevite V period. 1. F2.10 (latest Ninevite V), 2. B5q182-p2, 3. J1q1278-p7, 4. OB1q143-p69, 5. K1q9997-p1, 6. J1q1297-p3, 7. OH2q16-p1, 8. J1q1313-p5, 9. J1q1306-p1, 10. J1q1303-p9.

These pots have a short spout containing a narrow flange at the end. They appeared in ED III for the first time on the exterior of the revetment wall in the J1 stratum of use and erosion of escarpment 1. This type was present in early ED III in Temple BA, OH2 and in K1. It was already being produced in the latest Ninevite V period (fig. 9:4). All these vessel shapes help to connect and demonstrate the continuation of the potting traditions of these two periods. This potting tradition is important since production of ceramic vessels is fundamental to the economy of this urban area and the efficiency of all levels of the society.

### 3.2. Early ED III ceramic shapes

In addition to the continued production of short necked jars the earliest ED III ceramics near the revetment wall are characterized by a large number of medium jars with three body types: globular, cylindrical and ovoid. These jars both in number and proportion are significantly connected with both escarpments as consistently they represent about half of all jars

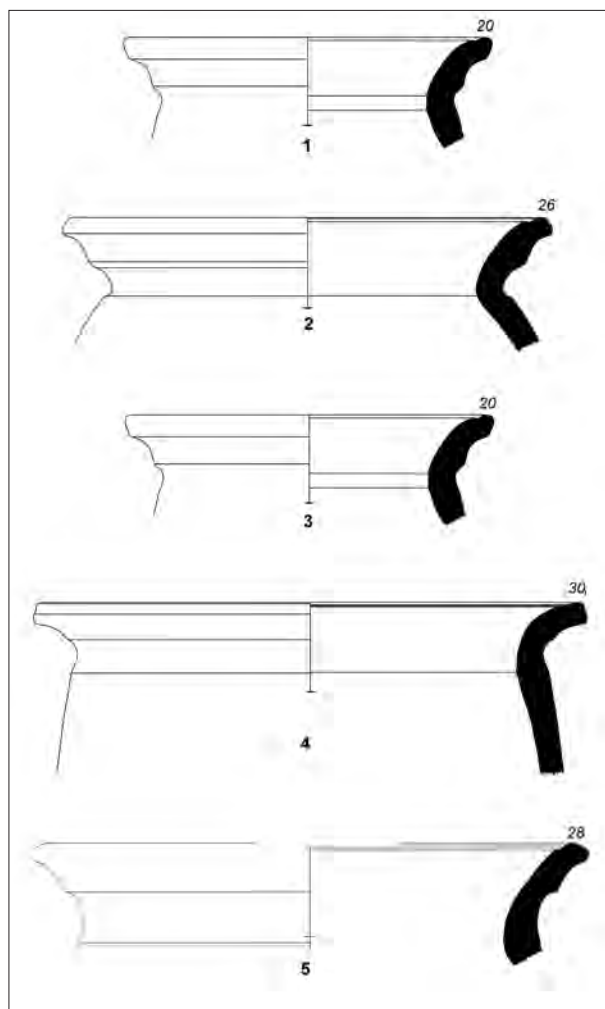
in these strata (fig. 12a)<sup>18</sup>.

What distinguishes this category of jar is the presence of a folded rim with an interior groove (fig. 10). This type is functionally connected by the use of lids in preserving their contents. Rims with interior grooves are found throughout the ED III period in Mozan and continued later,

even as late as the late Akkadian period as evidenced by the pottery from the reuse of the palace building in the late Naram-Sin period dated by the seal impressions of Tar'am-Agade<sup>19</sup>.

However the early ED III type has a deeper and wider groove (fig. 10:1,2,5). Later ED III examples tend to be cylindrical in body shape, still retain a folded rim but now a narrow and shallow groove is prevalent, even if the deeper groove still exists (fig. 10:3);

in some examples the groove can be reduced to simply an incised line (fig. 10:4). In Temple BA there are a number of these



10. - Folded rim jars with interior groove. 1. J1q1312-p2, 2. J1q1298-p1, 3. J5q913-p23, 4. J1q1155-p16, 5. B5q268-p1.

<sup>18</sup> I wish to thank Laerke Recht for creating these charts from the data in the cumulative sherd analysis in the Urkesh Global Record, [www.urkesh.com](http://www.urkesh.com).

<sup>19</sup> Buccellati - Kelly-Buccellati 2002.

jars but not with deep interior grooves; this may be an indication that the thick white floor in Temple BA can be dated as transitional between early and middle ED III. While the white floor in Temple BA still contains ceramics from the earliest portion of ED III, predominant ceramic types date to the middle of the period.

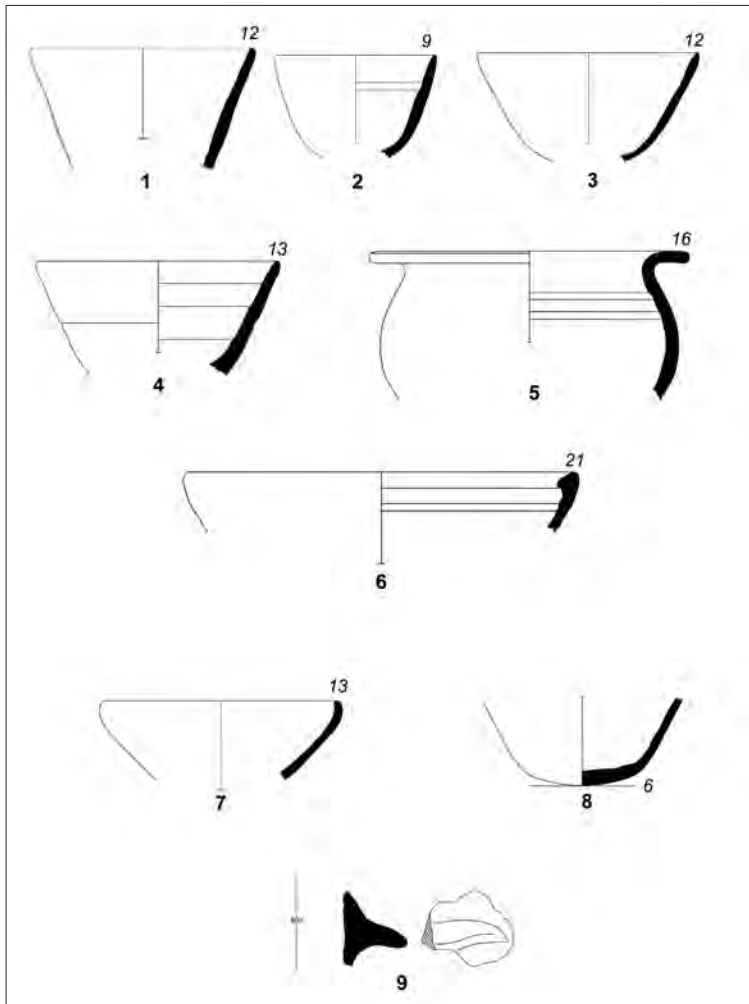
If we look at the numbers and percentages of conical cups found associated with the two escarpments at the base of the revetment wall in both J1 and J5, it is clear that starting with the construction of the stone escarpment (escarpment 1) conical cups were the largest percentage of cups of all types excavated in these strata (fig. 12b).

### 3.3. *Middle ED III ceramics*

Evidence from the middle of the ED III period comes from the J1 phase associated with the use and erosion of the earliest escarpment. At this point some high quality fine wares are being produced in the form of Simple Ware vessels in a thin walled, high fired pottery with little or no inclusions (fig. 11:1,2). These very fine ceramics, related to Simple Ware, are also found in large numbers in cups and small bowl shapes connected with the white floor in Temple BA. Given that these ceramics are most abundantly attested in this ritual context, we can conclude that the best quality of pottery was produced for cultic purposes and was in use both within the temple and in the plaza outside the revetment wall. It is interesting that the shapes of this fine ware are similar to the earlier coarser examples. Also connected with the middle ED III period jar shape types found in both excavation units (J1 and Temple BA) include the continuation of both globular and cylindrical jars with a folded rim. Now however the grooves appear to be diminishing in both depth and thickness.

### 3.4. *Late ED III ceramics*

Our data for the late ED III period in the area of the revetment wall is more extensive than the evidence related to the early or middle part of the period. It includes the construction of escarpment 2 for which there is rich ceramic evidence both from J1 and J5 containing over 1000 rim and base sherds. The escarpment was constructed by bringing material from elsewhere on the site but the homogeneity of the ceramics within it indicates that it was taken from a context dated to a single time period. A type of flaring rim jar (fig. 11:5) appears with a plain rim and made in the fine ware, that is high fired with a very smooth textured surface; this ware is so prominent in middle ED III but rare in late ED III. In the jars category the most common jar is the folded rim jar discussed above but now mostly made with a cylindrical body. The globular jar with a short straight neck (fig. 9:6-10) is still being made but now often with a larger rim diameter than previously. The open bowl with straight sides and a squared rim is the most common large and medium bowl in late ED III. Thin walled small cooking pots can have a long tab handle (fig. 11:9). Cups and straight sided bowls are often now made in Simple Ware or a Fine Chaff Ware that is highly fired

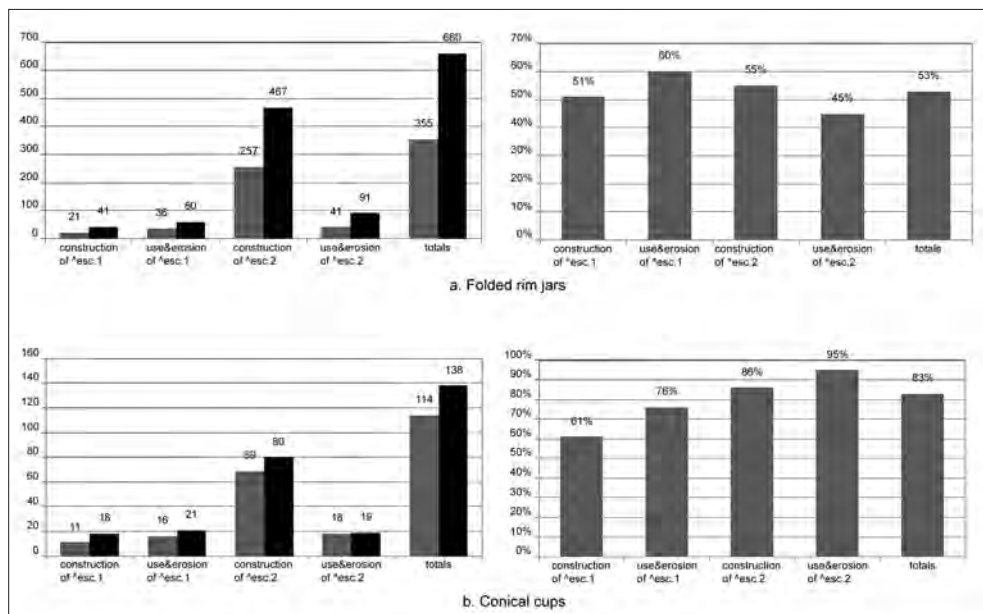


11. - Shapes from middle (1. B4q155-p69, 2. J1q1266-p1 used as a lamp) and late ED III, 3. J1q1137-p5, 4. J1q1156-p2,16, 5. J1q1167-p5, 6. J5q901-p6, 7. J5q901-p5, 8. J5q420-p5, 9. J1q1241-p22.

and light to medium green in color (fig. 11:1-3). Alongside the finer vessels, cups and small bowls can also be made in this phase in a slightly coarser ware and have wheel marks on the interior (fig. 11:4); these bowls have convex bases (fig. 11:8).

One interesting aspect of the production of ceramics in Mozan in the late ED III period has to do with the production of jars, indicating for the most part cylindrical folded rim jars since they are by far the most common jar type found in J1 and J5 during this period. These jars have the appearance of a mass produced product. They are uniform in shape, firing temperature, surface color and texture. We do not see





12a. - Folded rim jars, the number shown in gray on the left with the totals of all the jars shown in black. The percentages on the right show the gradual increase proportionately of these jars which are 53% of all the jars in these strata. - 12b. - Cups, conical cups in gray and all cups in black. The percentages on the right indicate the importance of the conical cups as they consist in 83% of the total in these four strata.

such a standardization in the production of bowls or cups. These jars may have been produced in a single workshop which developed the type induced by a market need to have a standardized product in terms of capacity or weight. This type of standardization only comes in the next period, the Akkadian period.

In the latest Early Dynastic phase on the exterior of the revetment wall (use of escarpment 2) we have few ceramics but we do see the beginning of a different ceramic tradition exemplified in this stratum by cups with string cut bases, small bowls with a flat rim with a slight interior lip (fig. 11:6) and small bowls with a slight angle in the body wall just under the rim (fig. 11:7); all continue into the Akkadian period.

#### 4. Conclusions: Pressures for 'modernization'

ED III building activities at the site are extensive. A major stratum of Temple BA was important in this period, the revetment wall and one of the monumental staircases that accessed the temple can also be connected with this period. The ED III occupation and use in the Outer City is widespread. While there are late ED II tombs on the northeast indicating a cemetery in that area (OB1 and OA4), the administrative building in OH2 helps to build up a picture of occupation and use on the northeast in ED III. To the south in the Outer City we have a large quantity of

ED III pottery on the surface, especially in an area to the south (OD50) where we collected a large quantity of later Metallic Ware pottery connected topographically with the Outer City wall.

The expansion of the Urkesh urban complex came as a result of a rethinking of the LC3 monumental footprint in the light of new understandings, and a more nuanced awareness of the power of monumentality. The internal pressures toward ‘modernization’ culminating in a revision of the earlier secular and religious structures within the built-up area of the city were present side-by-side with an appreciation of the place within the social and economic context that the previous structures and their generating institutions held.

Our stratified evidence from ceramics during the ED III period, and the ceramic continuity with earlier and later periods give us significant insight into ED III social and political stability in Urkesh. In the realm of local ceramic craft traditions we see a continuity of ware types as the wares gradually change from wares used in the Ninevite V period to prominence of Simple and Wet Smoothed wares, replaced by Fine Chaff and Chaff tempered (CH) wares. Ware colors also show a consistency that indicates a continuous tradition in the potter’s craft<sup>20</sup>. Shape types confirm the pattern seen in ware types as they follow a similar gradual trajectory, easiest to see in the cups and jars with folded rims and interior grooves. The development in these latter shows that in the majority the interior groove becomes less defined and the shapes of the body are more often cylindrical. Conical cups with string cut bases begin toward the end of the ED III period and continue as a major type in the Akkadian period.

These data have important ramifications for the reconstruction of the history of the city and more broadly for the nature of Hurrian presence in northern Mesopotamia. They show in fact a continuity in craft traditions that belies the notion that the Hurrians in Urkesh during the Akkadian period arrived as a new, incoming population that disrupts the local culture. What we have seen is, rather, that there was a uniform development of material culture at Urkesh that was, we may say, autochthonous, i.e., independent of external influences. In some cases, we can show that elements of this material culture (the *abi* in particular) are closely linked to an exclusively Hurrian cultural horizon. For the rest, this continuity allows us to legitimately extrapolate to the earlier periods the evidence for Hurrian identity as we know it from the Akkadian period (the language, the royal title, the very name of the city). This is a significant conclusion in terms of the larger picture for the earliest periods of Syro-Mesopotamian history, one that we hope to be able to further document when excavations may finally resume at Tell Mozan after the long hiatus of the Syrian war.

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<sup>20</sup> Recht 2014, p. 16.

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65

# CITTÀ E PAROLE ARGILLA E PIETRA

**Studi offerti a Clelia Mora  
da allievi, colleghi e amici**

*a cura di M.E. Balza, P. Cotticelli-Kurras, L. d'Alfonso,  
M. Giorgieri, F. Giusfredi e A. Rizza*

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*E S T R A T T O*

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## SOMMARIO

### *Prefazione*

FEDERICO GIUSFREDI - MARIA ELENA BALZA (a c. di)  
*Bibliografia di Clelia Mora*

THEO VAN DEN HOUT  
*Laus Cleliae, Morae Encomium*

MARIA ANDALORO - PAOLA POGLIANI  
*Il meraviglioso cosmo rovesciato nella Cappadocia rupestre e la chiesa dei Quaranta Martiri a Şahinefendi fra paesaggio e pitture*

SILVIA BALATTI  
*I Cappadoci a Persepoli*

MARIA ELENA BALZA  
*Potere e performance politica. Ancora sui monumenti ittiti a iscrizione geroglifica*

BENEDETTA BELLUCCI - MATTEO VIGO  
*Ancora sulle sigillature multiple del deposito di Nişantepe*

MARIA GIOVANNA BIGA  
*Mr. Ushra-samu/Irra-samu of Ebla and his Seal*

NATALIA BOLATTI GUZZO - MASSIMILIANO MARAZZI  
*The Sign for «Wine» / «Vine» in Anatolian Hieroglyphic: A Formal Analysis*

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI  
*Le origini preistoriche di simbolo e mito*

MARCO CAPARDONI  
*Food Storage Practices, Capacity and Household in Middle Chalcolithic Southern Cappadocia: Some Preliminary Remarks*

PAOLA COTTICELLI-KURRAS - ALFREDO RIZZA  
*The Anthropological Conception of the Hittites*

LORENZO D'ALFONSO  
*Origine e sviluppo dei monumenti rupestri a gradini (Step Monuments) d'Asia Minore: considerazioni sulla base dei monumenti dell'Anatolia centro-meridionale*

FEDERICO DEFENDENTI  
*Assiri danteschi: gli Assiri nella letteratura italiana del '200 e del '300*

STEFANO DE MARTINO

*Qualche osservazione sulla funzione, il riuso e l'obliterazione dei monumenti rupestri ittiti*

MARCO DE PIETRI

*Il sigillo come strumento dell'amministrazione e specchio della società: uno sguardo relativo all'Anatolia ittita*

FREDERICK MARIO FALES

*Saritra and the Others: A Neo-Assyrian View of Papyrus Amherst 63*

MAURO GIORGIERI

*Note filologico-linguistiche sui manoscritti del trattato con Talmi-Šarruma di Aleppo (CTH 75)*

FEDERICO GIUSFREDI

*Questa città dei miei antenati era di Ninuāyu*

SIMONETTA GRAZIANI

*Text and Image. Reading Seals as Written Texts*

MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI

*Continuity and Innovation at Urkesh in the ED III Period*

MARIA TERESA LACHIN - GUIDO ROSADA

*Nel luogo del gossip e delle trame. Le terme romane di Tyana in Cappadocia*

ALESSIO MANTOVAN - LORENZO D'ALFONSO

*Le fortificazioni di Kınık Höyük di Bronzo Tardo: nota relativa agli scavi del settore A-wall*

MARIA GRAZIA MASETTI-ROUAULT - OLIVIER ROUAULT

*Expériences et essais au début du temps: Marduk et le chat de Schrödinger*

ALVISE MATESSI

*Symbols of Power ittiti: considerazioni sul doppio disco solare alato (DDSA)*

PAOLO MATTHIAE

*Quelques réflexions sur l'iconographie paléo-syrienne de Koubaba de Karkémish*

MARTA PALLAVIDINI

*Le metafore della regalità nei testi dei trattati ittiti*

ANNA PASSONI DELL'ACQUA

*Il dilemma delle rose nella Bibbia*

PAOLA POLI

*Per una riconsiderazione del ciondolo sigillo con scena di banchetto rinvenuto a Ashara-Terqa*

MAURIZIO VIANO

*Pratiche archivistiche e proprietà a Emar*