

# The pride of heritage

Archaeology for social development  
at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, in Syria

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Truly, the Urkesh project brings out the richness of the past to nourish the present.

## Urkesh, 2019 A.D.

### *Community archaeology at the test of war*

During the eight years of war in Syria, we have carried out an intense program of activities at the archaeological site of ancient Urkesh, modern Tell Mozan – in all but excavations. One of the oldest cities in history, dating back to five millennia ago, speaks with a whole new vibrancy to the communities that call this land their home. We report here on these activities.

Archaeology remains at the core of what we do. Our special effort is to show the wider claim the past can have on us and on the communities that host this past, enshrined in their territory. So we do not report here about Urkesh B.C. It is the new face of Urkesh A.D. we are highlighting: all the pictures you see here are from these eight years of war (all but a few clearly indicated). They document our continued presence at the site, even as we could not be present there physically.

Our effort started long ago, in times of peace. The war has come, unwittingly, as a stimulus for growth. A site and a civilization that predated all the communities now living there has become a beacon of identity and of unity for these very communities. Amid the violence, Urkesh has become a beacon of peace.

Here you will find an overview of what went into making this possible. We remain, we want to stress it, archaeologists – but we found that research is not an abstraction. It can enkindle profound human responses, serving a need that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge.

We summarize under thirteen headings the extraordinary range of activities we have promoted during these eight years of war:

1. The stones a millennial stage for today
2. The bricks caring for fragility
3. The site as a book the urge to be understood
4. The villages culture as a continuum
5. Children the past through the eyes of the future
6. Schools the enthusiasm of sharing
7. College training our future colleagues
8. War tourism the value of ideals
9. Exhibits a stage for the world
10. Music the common language
11. The websites a virtual stage
12. Research the substance of archaeology
13. Craftsmanship commitment to sustainability
- Conclusion Urkesh, Mozan and beyond

# 1. The archaeological site – the stones

## *A millennial stage for today*

The staircase featured on the cover dates back to four and half millennia ago. It is a fitting stage for the young people visiting the site today, and for the young people performing on it, as we will see a little later.

The iconic value of the image lies in this wedding of the ancient and the modern. What we offer, as archaeologists, is the past. A past discovered and understood. Just as importantly, a past conserved.

Even the stones suffer. The grand staircase would be no longer there were it not for our caring. The rain, the snow, the extreme summer heat would otherwise soon dislodge the individual components of each step, and we would end up with a heap of disjointed pieces.

At the heart of our approach is the reliance on simple local resources. How do we keep the staircase as clean as shown in this picture?

We keep the stone staircase clean by removing by hand the shrubs (they defeat herbicides) and placing new mud as mortar. Maintenance is simple, and wholly based on local resources. Sustainability at its best, even during the war.

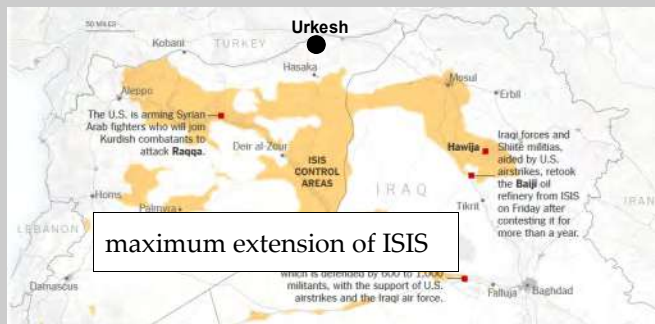




One detail struck us. This February, the house of one of the assistants we see in these pictures collapsed. But the news came to us almost by chance, in the margin of a detailed report on the damage to the monuments!



Covering the underground gate to the Netherworld with a metal cupola...



On the same day the New York Times published this map (Oct. 26, 2017), our staff was working assiduously on the staircase – young men and women, uncaring for the imminent danger...



## 2. The archaeological site – the bricks

### *Caring for fragility*

The wall shown in the image below is a little miracle. It may sound like an exaggeration, just by looking at it: a simple mud brick wall, resting on a stone sub-structure, without any decorations. What is so miraculous about it?

Its sheer existence. Some thirty years after having been excavated, it still stands as when it was first uncovered, three meters high. Had it not been cared for, it would have dissolved in no time at all.

That it is still there, in its pristine conditions, is due to our very special, and very simple, conservation program. This is a piece of some 400 linear meters of mud brick walls in the Palace, of king Tutmose III dating to 1470 B.C. Each wall was covered from the start with an iron trellis and simple burlap panels.

Simplicity has been the key to success – especially during the eight years of the war. The modesty of the tools we use (you see it well in the pictures) are a source of pride. No high technology here. But great results.

The wall, preserved as excavated, is a little miracle.





Here you see the great Palace after seven years of war, preserved as if no war had intervened.

Because the war we had been waging all along was the one against the weather. So we were prepared to continue during the new crisis: and fighting our little war has proven to be a source of strength in fighting the bigger one...

Simplicity and sustainability are the keywords to our effort – and our success. Below are pictures of our local staff taking care of the walls of the Palace, with the simplest of all possible technologies.





### 3. The site as a book

#### *The urge to be understood*

Excavated and preserved, the site has to be explained.

We had set in place a vast signage system, that explained the site in English and Arabic: overall synthesis about the monuments (below) and details about specific aspects (facing page, top left). This system, too, was inspired by simplicity, like the conservation system. It was thus eminently sustainable.

We have thus been able to maintain the system in perfect conditions. Maintenance is our keyword. Precisely because of the many visitors who leave a sign of their presence (see the graffiti on lid of the white stand, photo on facing page), as well as because of the weather, the supports need to be soldered and painted, and the pages to be reprinted and laminated. The pictures to the right show the ongoing tasks that are needed to maintain the signs in their pristine state.





## 4. The villages

### *Culture as a continuum*

Village schools and private homes have become, during wartime, receptive lecture halls for presentations about archaeology. We have organized such presentations in, so far, twenty-seven villages around the site, with a short introductory video clip that brought them our personal well wishes.

Small audiences – but that was precisely our intent. Reaching in a capillary manner young and old, men and women. The goal was to explain not only the archaeology and the history of Urkesh, but the impact that this has on their lives.

First, developing a sense of pride in the past of the ir territory, of which they are the guardians, just as they are the first stakeholders in the riches of its past.

Second, showing how the wider landscape is as important as the site itself. We want in fact to retain it in its pristine beauty, which it has preserved so far.

The rapt attention these photos show is a measure of the success of our enterprise. The pride of heritage is indeed apparent. And we, the archaeologists, act in the spirit of Socrates' maieutics, helping in the process that brings this pride to light. It is this pride, rooted in their territory, that ensures their continued presence there – ready to welcome us when we will be able to return.





## 5. Children *The past through the eyes of the future*

When the excavations were in session, children were always welcome – as an organized school trip

or visiting with family

(here a workman coming on a weekend with his little sister).



What happened to those children now, during the war and our forced absence from the site?

Here is the success story of one of them: on the left, when she was visiting with her father; on the right (left, upper row) as a college student *in archaeology*, in 2017.





So we care today for them as well, supporting story telling for the youngest (above)

and (to the left) musical programs for the "older" ones (see also below, section 10).

Indeed, the future taking roots in the past!

## 6. Schools

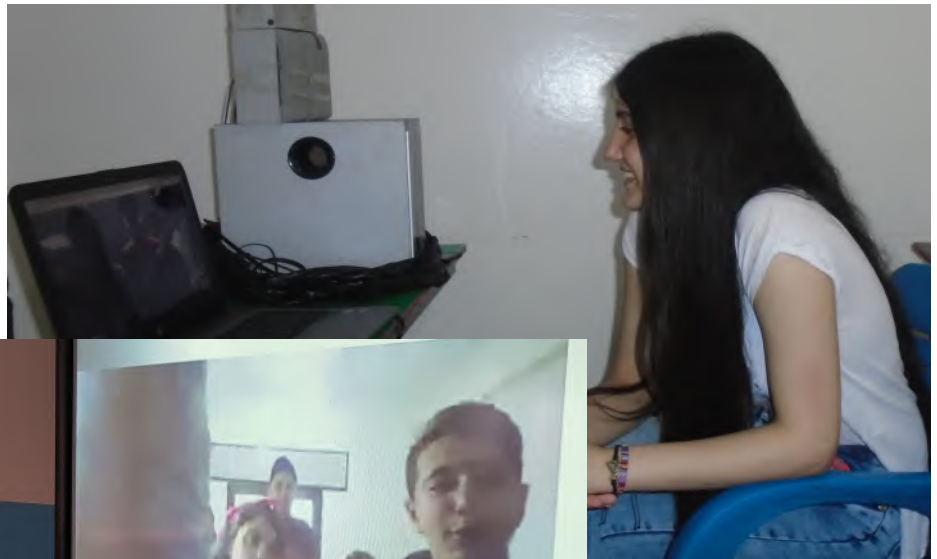
### *The enthusiasm of sharing*

In 2018, we started a unique program: a twinning between a middle school in the Syrian city near the excavations, Qamishli, and one in the Italian city of Domodossola, which is similar in some respects to Qamishli.

The project was rooted in three basic assumptions. (1) The ability of young people to communicate to each other overcoming national and linguistic barriers. (2) The challenge to deeply reflect on important themes, breaking away from the modern obsession for the instantaneous, especially the visual. (3) A sense of loyalty towards the territory in which one lives and towards its history, in order to generate a sense of belonging and identity.

With the help of their teachers, we placed total trust in the children (aged 11 to 13), with extraordinary success. We first gave lectures to the students over Skype and asked the students to write essays. These, they exchanged – a total of 83 essays, in Arabic and Italian (we provided them with a translation in both direc

Finally, we organized Skype sessions so they could talk to each other, about the content of their essays and about their goals and ambitions for the future.



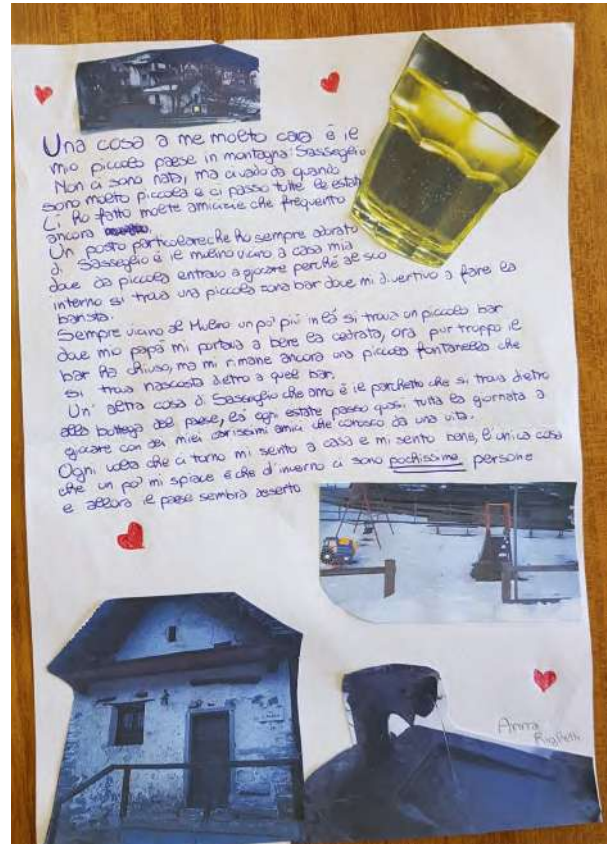
Qamishli



Domodossola



Middle school students in Qamishli listening to a lecture via Skype  
and  
two sample essays in Arabic and in Italian





## 7. College

### *Training our future colleagues*

An unexpected turn of events has given us the opportunity to support college level work at Mozan even while excavations have stopped during our absence.

Given its excellent state of preservation, Urkesh is the major site in the region where it is still possible to have direct contact with the practice of fieldwork. We have therefore teamed up with the local al-Furat University and helped organize ceramic workshops on the university campus and topographic practical courses directly at the site.

In May 2019, a seminar dedicated to the archaeology and history of Urkesh ended with a presentation of the results of the class directly in the site. The photo below shows the students with their posters *about* Urkesh *at* Urkesh. (The staircase has vegetation growing because the event was before the spring cleaning...)

The photos on the facing pages show various scenes from two other seminars and workshops.

Research has thus emerged as a powerful new way of serving the needs of the new generations of Syrian archaeologists in Syria. Through our site, we are extending a virtual handshake to these our future colleagues...





Seminar on  
Urkish ceramics  
at al-Furat Univer-  
sity, taught by our  
ceramicist Ham-  
made Hamza

and (below)  
a workshop in to-  
pography and ce-  
ramic analysis  
at the site of  
Urkish



## 8. War tourism

### *The power of ideals*

War destroys what is in its path. But it touches deeply even beyond. It is the anxiety of feeling subjected to events greater than oneself, over which one has no longer control.

What we are experiencing more and more, in our commitment to Syria, is that culture is capable of healing. In our case, it is a matter of archaeology. We propose an ideal, that of a remote past that becomes very present because of the bond that it offers to those who live in this area today. The extraordinary images of tourism in Urkesh, in today's Syria, bear witness with simple but great eloquence to the strength of an ideal which is interpreted and presented, so that it can be lived.

There has been, in our effort, a natural progression of events. First came the commitment to ensure the conservation of the site and with it to provide a signage that would translate the monuments into a meaningful narrative. Then the presentations to the villages and the schools. The results have been impressive.

As the pictures show, we have had a constant influx of visitors. We did organize trips for the school children and for the people in the villages. But, beyond that, we had families coming on week-ends and even a certain number of foreign visitors, surprised at seeing the care with which the site is being maintained.



2011



2012



2013



2017



2018



2019



## 9. Exhibits

### *A stage for the world*

The great 2018 exhibit of the Rimini Meeting, *I millenni per l'oggi* (Millennia for today), went to Damascus in 2018 and most recently to Aleppo in October 2019 (photo right). This was on the occasion of the reopening of the National Museums in each city, an event of great

symbolic significance. It was intended to show the desire to resume a normal life on all levels, including the cultural one. And the choice of Urkesh as the only educational exhibit in the new Museum is highly significant. Even though we come from outside Syria, we acted as spokespeople for a new hope for the Syrians.

From Italy to Syria and the United States: three continents! The English version of the exhibit came to the University of California, Los Angeles also in 2019, on the occasion of the celebrations of the first centenary of the university's life.

It has been a long series of exhibits, started in 2010 with an exhibit commissioned by the US Embassy in Damascus, subsequently brought to the National Museum in Damascus just a few days before the crisis began in 2011. Several other venues include especially our own village in Mozan and several cities in its region, plus Beirut and other cities in Europe.



2019 Aleppo



the catalog of the last exhibit



2010 US Embassy Damascus



2011 National Museum Damascus



2012 Mozan village



2014 Qamishli



2014 Rimini



2014 Domodossola



2017 Beirut



2017 Qamishli



2018 Leiden



2018 Rimini



2018 Damascus

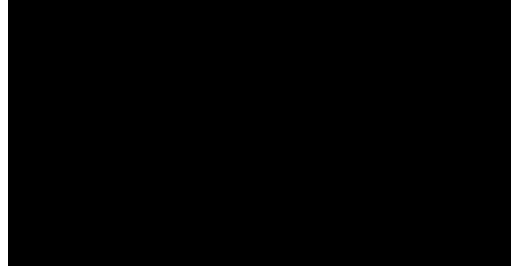


2019 Los Angeles

## 10. Music

### *The common language*

The grand conclusion of our last exhibit was going to be in the dark.



We asked the students in an Italian musical middle school to compose a piece that would explain the content of the exhibit to the blind. It was a way to ask them to reflect deeply on the content of the exhibit and all that we wanted to communicate with it. It worked beautifully – you can listen to it at [avasa.it/music](http://avasa.it/music).

By now, the Italian children had been talking to their Syrian counterparts, and it emerged that there was music at that end as well. So the young, and very young (!), Syrian players went to the monumental staircase of our Temple, and performed for us a concert the like of which Urkesh had never seen. The video (also on [avasa.it/music](http://avasa.it/music)) is one of the most moving events you can imagine.

In the exhibit, the music in the dark and the music in the video followed each other and invariably brought tears to the eyes of all visitors.







## 11. The websites

### *A virtual stage*

We have developed a network of websites to suit different needs. They are linked together in a single home page: [www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org).



[www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org): a set of websites devoted to our project

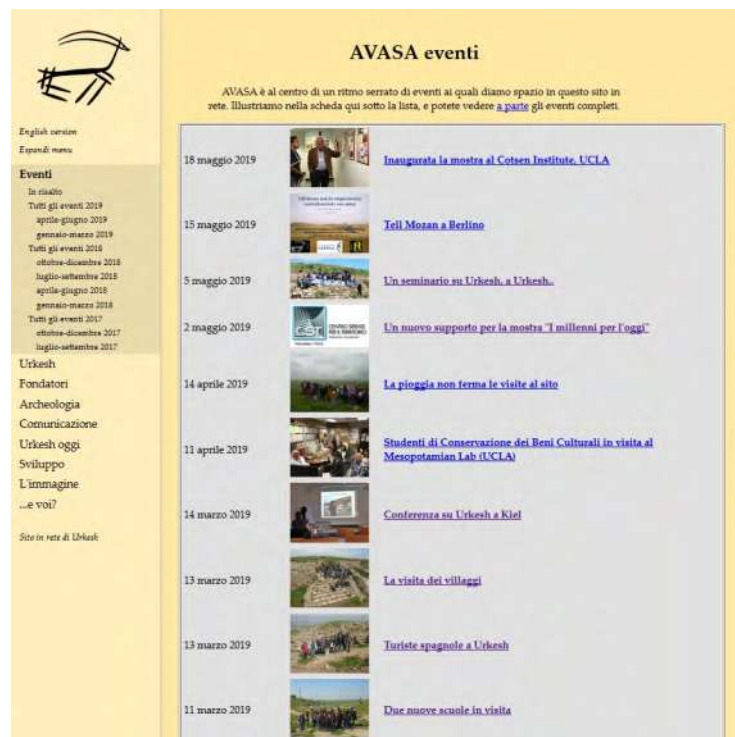
At the scholarly level, we have a number of subordinate websites that present in a comprehensive way all the results of our work during the excavations, and its interpretation. Together, they represent a new departure in the publication of the archaeological record, with a concern for the totality of the data ever observed (which we call the Urkesh Global Record) and for the theoretical underpinnings of the excavation and of the attendant record. We are actively developing this network of websites, incorporating all the available material from our archives, both in Mozan itself and in Los Angeles.



three samples of comprehensive scholarly websites within [www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org):

- the stratigraphic record of a single excavation unit,
- the full ceramic corpus from all excavation units,
- the theory behind the excavation methods

At the educational level, the site [www.avasa.it](http://www.avasa.it) presents (in Italian and English) all the material related to our activities in this period of crisis. The image on the right shows the events of the last three months: it is a 360-degree system of activity, which involves in a truly proactive way the local populations and many collaborators, especially in Italy, but also abroad – in particular, several young Syrians in Rome, Florence and Berlin as well as Damascus and, of course, Mozan and Qamishli.



## 12. Research

### *The substance of archaeology*

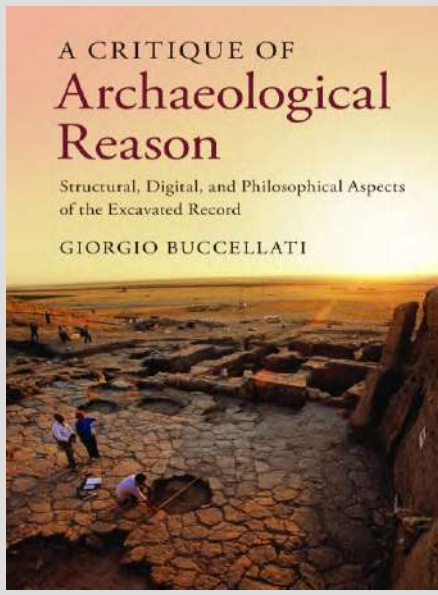
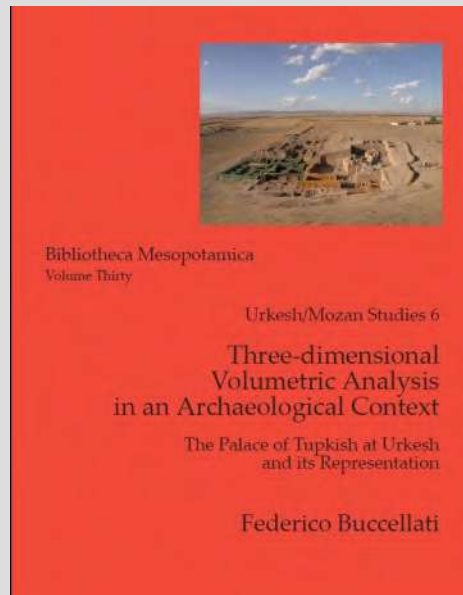
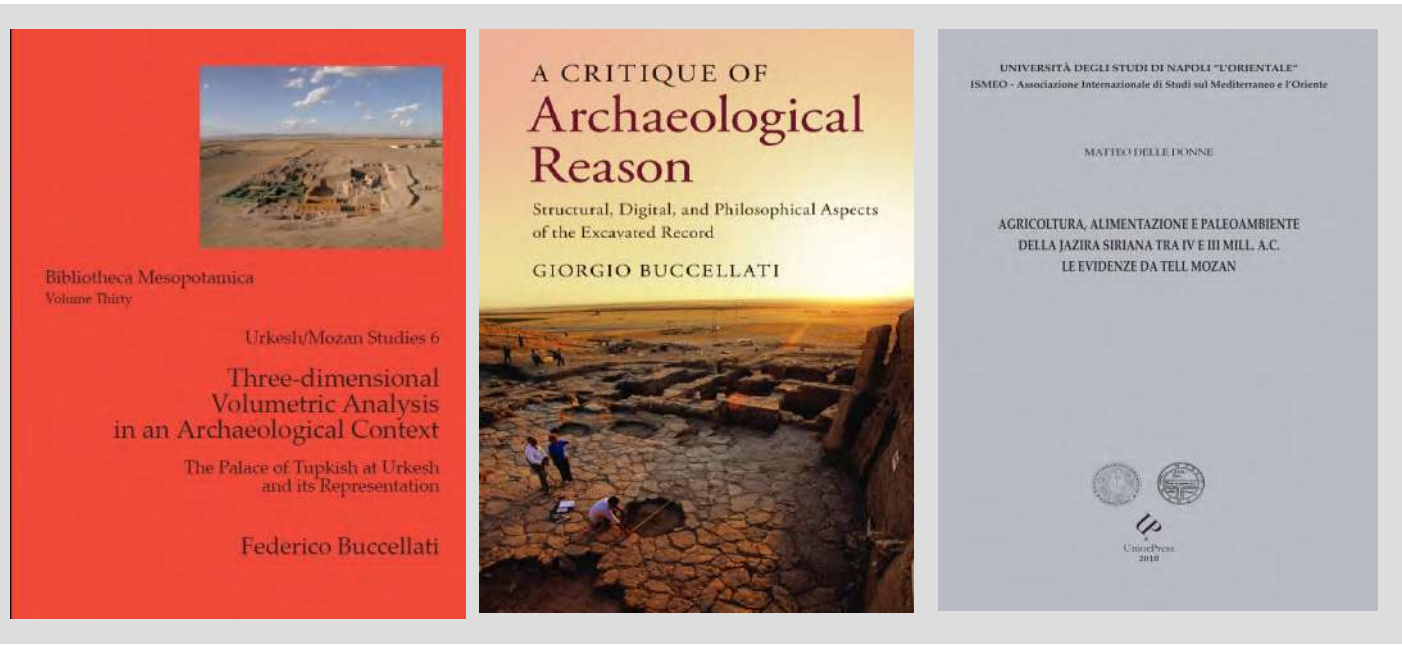
Research is at the core of what we do as archaeologists. Besides the intense work on the websites (see the previous section), our research has continued unabated during this period of forced absence from the site, with innumerable articles in scholarly journals, papers at conferences around the world and volumes on data and theory (the latest three are shown on the next page).

Here we highlight the contributions by the young Syrian members of our staff.

Below is a picture of Yasmine Mahmoud in the Library of the University of Pavia, together with the chair of her doctoral committee, Prof. Clelia Mora, and the two directors of our project. Yasmine manages from Damascus the Syria side of our project, while writing her dissertation on the interpretation of the human figure in the artifacts from Urkesh.

On the facing page, four other young Syrian scholars associated with our project and studying or working in various parts of Europe.





Hiba Qassar, PhD from Florence here teaching a class on heritage



Yara Moualla, doctoral student at University of West Scotland



Arwa Kharobi, here for her PhD at Bordeaux, now at Bournemouth



Samer Abdelghafour, PhD from Rome and working for UNESCO in Paris

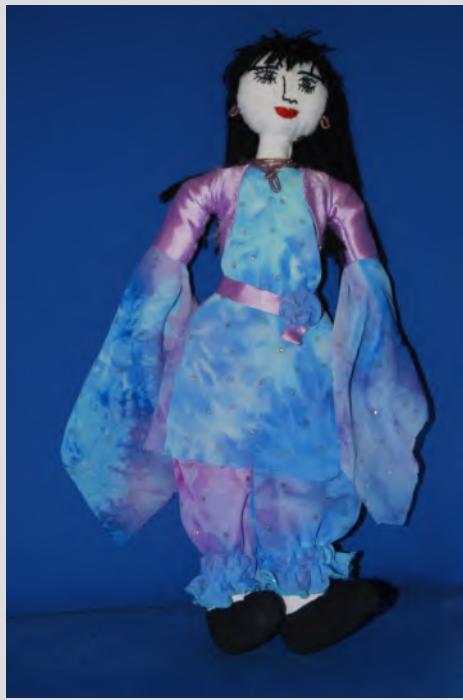
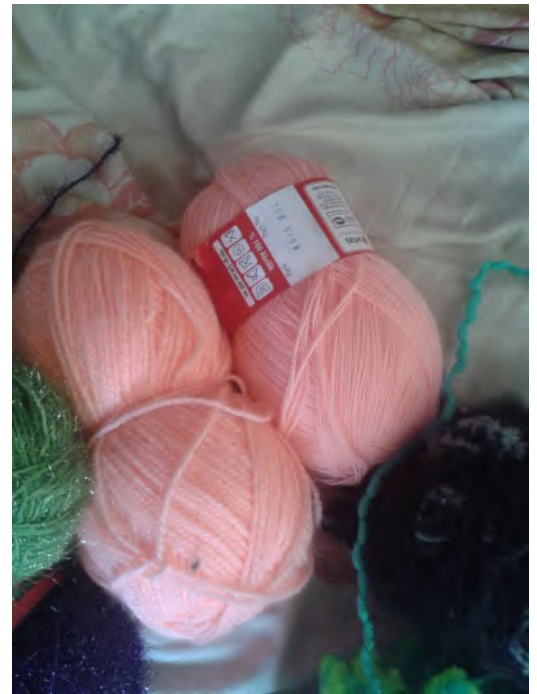
### 13. Craftsmanship

#### *Commitment to sustainability*

Beyond archaeology as a study of the past, there is an archaeology that offers a strong motivation to those who live today on the same territory as the ancients. Whether archaeologists deal with it or not, archaeology has a strong impact on those who live in contact with the excavations: and the need to deal with it is a warning that we have heard very strongly in Mozan.

The village women's workshop is an activity that we started in 2012, and that continues with the new generation. We buy wool for them, and we provide "education courses" where young people learn from the experts of previous years.

The women's "atelier" is a model. The idea is to foster the future development of similar activities , helping to establish a marketing program for these and other activities that we will involve all the villages within the larger frame of a future eco-archaeological Park of Urkesh.





## Conclusion

### *From Urkesh to Mozan – and beyond*

Here are two generations – the children of the grammar school in the village of Mozan, and the young Field Director of our excavations, Federico Buccellati.



This was during the excavations, in 2007.

Where are we, twelve years later?

We are there, still. In so many different ways, as this report has shown.

In these ways, and more, we plan on remaining loyal to the site.

And to the people who make the site alive, today.

As they will, tomorrow.