

# Urkesh, a dead city and yet alive

From clay to silicon: the pride of a lost heritage and a digital innovation

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Urkesh is the name of one of the first cities in history: it started around 4000 B.C. and it "died out" around 1200 B.C. How does a city "die"? When it is completely abandoned, in which case, in an environment like that of today's northeastern Syria, it turns into a hillock, a "tell" as is known in Arabic. In 1984 Urkesh was just that, a tell, Tell Mozan, as is known in the local Kurdish dialect.

1984 was the year we started our excavations. We had proposed that the site might be that of ancient Urkesh, and we were able to prove it some ten years later, on the basis of written evidence from the excavations. In twenty-five years of work at the site, we brought back to light a major Temple, a royal Palace, a very unique necromantic shaft. And, with it, the earliest known evidence of an elusive population of ancient Syro-Mesopotamia, the Hurrians.

Then came the war, and in 2011 we could no longer continue the excavations. But – we had all along worked with the local communities to make them aware of their lost heritage. Lost, because it had been buried for some three thousand years. And yet a real "heritage," because they shared the same territory with the ancients. With the war, we took the bold decision of not abandoning the site, of not letting Urkesh die another death. We developed new ways of enhancing the awareness of the local communities for the meaning of the past. It was a cultural enterprise in direct contrast with the explicit policy of ISIS which, at the same time, wanted to eradicate all sense of such an early heritage. And the enterprise, supported by a grant from the Kaplan Fund, brought unexpected and inspiring successes.

At the same time, we have engaged in a vast and innovative digital publication effort of the Urkesh record that has been widely recognized for its impact even beyond archaeology, most recently with the attribution of the Balzan prize. Based on an explicit theoretical model, the *Cybernetica Mesopotamica* project shows how a website can be used as full-fledged epistemic system that integrates argument and data in a seamless web of interlacing planes, written concurrently in function of each other. Archaeological data are uniquely suited to serve this purpose, as we will show with some examples from the Urkesh Global record.