

<http://www.wrmea.org/2016-march-april/preserving-an-archaeological-site-in-northern-syria-threatened-by-war.html>

Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, March/April 2016, pp. 64-65

Special Report

Preserving an Archaeological Site in Northern Syria Threatened by War

By Pat McDonnell Twair



The archaeological site at Urkesh, or Tell Mozan, in northern Syria. (BOLLETTINO DELL'ASSOCIAZIONE ARCHEOLOGICA TICINESE 2015/NUMERO 27)

University of California, Los Angeles Prof. Emeritus Giorgio Buccellati told an audience at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, CA on Jan. 27 that the protection of ancient archaeological sites can present daunting challenges during times of warfare. Buccellati dedicated his talk, “In the Eye of the Storm: Resilience of the Urkesh Project in the Time of War,” to his colleague Khaled Asaad, director of archaeology in Palmyra, who was killed Aug. 18, 2015 by [ISIS](#) (see [October 2015 Washington Report](#), p. 64).



*Dr. Giorgio Buccellati and Dr. Marilyn Buccellati.
(STAFF PHOTO SAMIR TWAIR)*

Buccellati's most vital method of protecting an archaeological site is educating and hiring the people who live there to make them stakeholders in the maintenance and success of the site. Buccellati described his excavation of Tell Mozan (Urkesh) in northern Syria, a third millennium archaeological site consisting mainly of holes with very few monumental structures on the surface.

In order to protect the site, Buccellati continued, the team had to devise protective equipment that was inexpensive and locally available. Even though there has been no dig for the past five years, the Urkesh site has been successfully maintained and protected because the local staff has an intense loyalty to the site and scientists. They keep in touch through a website, Dropbox and e-mails.

Such work is costly, of course, and without a continuing excavation program, raising funds is difficult. "Everyone wants preservation, but it's hard to get funds to do so," said Buccellati. The UCLA Cotsen Institute specifically, along with a number of other

institutes, have been helpful.

The local workers have managed to preserve the site by developing a series of metal frames that are then covered with locally available burlap. They initially used tightly fitted canvas, but that deteriorated quickly and was difficult to remove, especially if a documentary team was trying to film the site.

The team eventually developed a system that uses curtains on the sides, and the tops are protected with mud and straw, much like the roofs of the local homes.

The local Kurdish militia has become involved in protecting the site. Fortunately, [ISIS](#)-controlled territory is 60 kilometers (37 miles) from Urkesh.

Thanks to the training of six local staff and establishing the means to maintain contact, archaeologists have been able to analyze 50,000 sherds during the past five years. Those six have also maintained a rigorous system of checking for and repairing damage to the site and supplying regular, extremely detailed reports to Dr. Buccellati's team.

Another reason for the success of the site has been Buccellati's team's creation of a culture of community archaeology. First, instead of writing a book on the site, the team has facilitated an on-site "book" where specific discoveries are explained in detail in reports that are made available on stands located next to the discovery described. Written in English, Arabic and Kurdish, they even include footnotes. Also, the team has developed a 20-page booklet that includes Kurdish translation.

Dr. Buccellati's dream has been to create an Urkesh Eco-Archaeological Park with the intention of preserving the entire locality as best as possible (such as keeping the land in the hands of farmers rather than turning it over to developers). The park would cover 58 square miles and include 22 villages. Each village would have a local center/museum that would focus on a particular aspect of the archaeological site. One center would focus on ceramics, for instance, another on history and so

on.



Local workers created structures to protect the site. (BOLLETTINO DELL'ASSOCIAZIONE ARCHEOLOGICA TICINESE 2015/NUMERO 27)

Sadly, there was no funding to bring about this dream, but the locals, especially the women, took it upon themselves to create their own centers/museums with posters showing specific parts of the Urkesh site that initially included a workshop for the women to make their own crafts. (They have since created their own stand-alone workshops). Dr. Buccellati admitted it brought tears to his eyes to see their enthusiasm and dedication.

There was a mini-exhibition of the site in Qamishli, Syria that opened on Dec. 31, 2011, and a half-day exhibition at the American Embassy in Damascus a few weeks before the start of the peaceful protests in Deraa became a civil war. A big week-long exhibition of Urkesh that opened in Italy last year drew 25,000 people.

For more information, visit <<http://ucla.academia.edu/GiorgioBuccellati>>. ☐

Pat McDonnell Twair is a free-lance writer based in Los Angeles