CHAPTER 9

Urkesh Community Archaeology Project

A Sustainable Model from Syria

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the community archaeology approach in Urkesh, which has been instrumental in turning the site into a source of pride and common identity for a mosaic of communities living next to it. It discusses the sustainability of the Urkesh community project, showing how these communities became more engaged in site activities despite the physical absence of the archaeological team. The concept of inheritance as tied to living inheritors is illustrated with examples from the interaction between archaeologists and the local communities. Finally, the chapter illustrates the resilience of the project in adapting to a situation of crisis, highlighting one particular programme designed

to empower local young people amid the global pandemic and the impact of Syrian conflict on their lives.

Keywords: Syria, resilient community archaeology, Syrian identity, empowering young people, inheritors

Introduction

Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, located in the north east of Syria, is one of the earliest cities in history (4000–1200 BCE[2]). Excavations started in 1984 and continued every year until 2010, when the Syrian upheaval started. Since the first seasons of excavation, local communities have been engaged continually as part of the project in terms of research and work. As a result of this policy, local communities became the active force in protecting the site during the conflict and conducting various community archaeology projects under the (remote) supervision of the archaeological team.

This chapter discusses the community archaeology approach in Urkesh that has been instrumental in turning the site into a source of pride and common identity for a mosaic of different communities living next to it. It then discusses the sustainability of the Urkesh community project, showing how these communities became more engaged in site activities despite the physical absence of the archaeological team. Finally, it discusses the resilience of the project, adapting to a situation of crisis, by highlighting one particular programme that was designed to empower local young people amid the global pandemic and the impact that the conflict had on their lives.

Archaeology and Local Communities in the Syrian Jezirah (HQ)

The area in which Tell Mozan is located comprises part of the Syrian Jezirah, which extends from the Euphrates in the west to the political border in the north with Turkey and in the east with Iraq. Until the beginning of the twentieth century the region was inhabited and reserved as grazing land for Arabic and Kurdish

tribes (Montagne 1932). The current population of the region was formed from different communities: Armenians and Assyrians who survived the 1915 genocide in Turkey (Altug 2011, 18), the Kurds, who escaped from Turkey after the 1925 revolt (Bruinessen 1984, 281), and Assyrian groups from Iraq escaping after 1933 (Al-Kate'e 2015). In addition, the region hosts nomadic Arab tribes who settled in the early 1950s, and Kurdish Yazidi. As a result of this history, the Syrian Jezirah is the most diverse area in Syria, linguistically, religiously and ethnically (Altug 2011, 19).

The region has received a considerable amount of archaeological attention since the early 1930s. However, the number of archaeological missions (national and international) increased from 1946 – the year of Syrian independence – until a boom was witnessed in the 1990s. The relationship between archaeological missions, the Syrian state and society is regulated by the Syrian Antiquities Law (SAL) adopted in 1963, which laid down the rights and duties of archaeological missions, giving all rights over antiquities to the Syrian people. This law states that all artefacts should be given to the Syrian authorities, and that archaeological missions should protect and maintain the sites that they are excavating, cooperate with and accept the presence of a representative of the Directorate General of Antiquities, and finally, pay the salaries of site guards. A new law, which came into effect in 1999 (Syrian Parliament 1999), included modifications with regard to the penalties for trading in archaeological materials, exporting such materials and exchanging with other cultural institutions. The SAL did not consider the relationship between archaeologists and the surrounding communities in terms of site presentation or outreach programmes. Therefore, communities living next to sites were not aware of the history or the value of these sites, and in most cases were indifferent to their protection (Qassar 2021). This situation showed its worst consequences in the Jezirah area, since most of the ancient architecture is made of mudbrick, which is challenging to preserve and to interpret in such a way as to be understood by non-specialists. As a result, most of the excavated sites in the region are reduced to just a 'place' where archaeologists

extract information for academic research, without the location becoming a living educational centre for locals.

In the early 2000s, the Syrian government started a series of initiatives to engage local communities with cultural heritage in Syria (Qassar 2021). One of these initiatives called on the international archaeological missions to preserve and present the sites they were excavating. However, the results were not as impressive in the Jezirah region, since the preservation of mudbrick architecture and its subsequent interpretation cannot be built on momentary decisions but must be based on a long process, starting from deciding the excavation strategy, and making the goal of presenting the site a priority. Through the last ten years of the Syrian conflict, many sites in the region have been destroyed due to destruction, whether direct (looting, bombing) or indirect (neglect and lack of preservation; Lababidi and Qassar 2016), utterly depriving locals of their benefits.

The work of the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project is an exception to this state of affairs, and has come to represent a model for how an archaeological project can interact with local communities. Through the chapter we will highlight the nature of this project by reflecting on the living communities in Syria in relation to archaeology, and by the engagement of diverse local social groups in a variety of community archaeology initiatives.

Living Communities and Their Archaeologies (GB)

I would like to share a personal reflection that bears on the two core issues of this book: *living communities* on the one hand, and *their archaeologies* on the other, with an accent on the pronoun 'their'. My personal experience has been in two different settings: the urban setting of Ashara, a small town on the Syrian Euphrates which is the site of ancient Terqa; and the rural setting of Mozan, a small village in the Syrian Jezirah which sits atop the outer city of the site of Urkesh and next to the imposing tell that covers the central portion of the ancient city. I will not go into a detailed

description here of the archaeology of these two important sites. Briefly, Terqa was a provincial city during the third and early second millennium BCE, and then the capital of the small kingdom of Khana in the latter part of the second millennium. Urkesh was one of the first cities in history, dating back to the early fourth millennium, and was the capital of a Hurrian kingdom in the third millennium and then a provincial city in the second.[3] Our heritage work has centred primarily on the second site, Urkesh, modern Tell Mozan, and most of this chapter deals with the various experiments we have carried out there.

Our 'expedition' appeared suddenly in both places as a novel foreign body. The very term 'expedition' conveys a sense of external appearance, of intrusion, even more so than the French term 'mission' or Italian term 'missione', which refer to a body of individuals sent as diplomats or experts to a foreign country to represent the interests of the home country. At any rate, all of these terms evoke a colonial attitude.

How does an expedition or a mission relate to the '*living* communities' it encounters? What degree of recognition is there for *their* archaeologies? In retrospect, I can say that we felt the impact of these questions even though we never asked them explicitly. We, the directors and the core staff (coming from the USA, Europe, China and India), were foreigners in the double sense that we came from abroad and that we were uncovering a past of which these communities had no awareness. At both sites, we were welcomed with a sense of curiosity: why would these foreigners be interested in what seemed so trivial and unimportant? And what developed was a sort of reciprocal maieutics. Yes, the archaeology was 'theirs', because this was their territory in a deeper sense than simply a locational one (meaning where their homes were) – they had an innate relationship to the territory which they shared with their territorial ancestors, which we could never even approximate. This applies also to the newcomers who were resettled there in recent times: the identification with the territory had more recent roots, but by virtue of their settling there permanently they did begin a new relationship with the territory. And yet it was

also 'our' archaeology – we brought a specific competence, which came to blend more and more with their 'competence'. It was a reciprocal maieutics because we each brought out the best in the other.

From this perspective, to interpret the title of this book in a way that adds a nuance that may not have been envisioned by our editors, the archaeologists are also a living community, and one of the 'archaeologies' is *our* archaeology. A lesson I have learned is that it is important to maintain one's own identity if one wants to truly respect the other's identity: to pretend to be more local than the locals may emerge as a subtle form of colonialism. We should acknowledge 'our' respective archaeologies so that they may become each other's archaeology. A concrete way in which I found myself expressing this was by repeating often, to the living communities we were encountering, a special word of thanks – when they would routinely say: 'our house is your house', I would express the feeling that they were also telling us: 'our history is your history'. It was, as well it should be, a wondrous reciprocal enrichment. This issue was addressed in part in Oras (2015). The literature addresses this topic from the point of view of the academic context ('preferences in research areas'), and the question of data (archaeologists 'create data') and social context ('influence of nationalism, contemporary politics and ideology'). My perspective is that we should transparently articulate our archaeological research goals in such a way that the communities affected by our work may, just as transparently, understand and confront them with their own concerns.

Community Archaeology in Mozan

Archaeology as Heritage in Mozan (GB)

The term 'community' in community archaeology may be understood either as an object or as a subject of the phrase's deep structure. As an object it implies that the community is the target: archaeology is addressed to the living communities who live in

the territory where a given site or archaeological area is located. As a subject, on the other hand, the word 'community' implies that the people are involved in doing archaeology: they contribute both to the process of discovery of a local past and to its interpretation. (The term 'public archaeology' is analogous in that it refers to either the intent to reach a wider public than an academic audience, or the participation of the public in the archaeological process itself.) In recent decades there has been increased interest in engaging locals within archaeological activities, with a corresponding increase in the academic literature discussing the very definition of the term 'public archaeology' (Corbishley 2011; Jones 2015; McDavid 2013; Mickel, Filipowicz and Bennison-Chapman 2020, in press; Moshenska 2017b; Moshenska and Dhanjal 2012; Moualla and McPherson 2019; Nadali 2020; Sakellariadi 2010; Thomas 2010, 2017; Vitelli and Pyburn 1997; Wendrich 2018, and more generally, Kohl 1998; Kohl, Kozelsky and Ben-Yehuda 2007; Scarre and Coningham 2013).

Upstream of what this terminology entails, and closer to the central goals of our book, is a consideration of what is at stake for the communities: why do we speak of 'their' archaeology? In other words, how does archaeology become appropriated so that it might emerge as a value capable of empowering the people involved? The twin notions of inheritance and heritage are helpful in this regard.

Inheritance is a 'thing': the monuments and the objects seen statically in themselves and dynamically for what they mean. A cuneiform tablet is such a thing, and it requires competence for it to be interpreted. But even items such as a building or a statue, clear as they are at first appearance (a place where people moved about, the representation of a human being), require a set of competences to be understood at a deeper level (the building as a palace or a temple, the statue as a divine being or a king).

Heritage, on the other hand, is a thing inherited. This happens when the value behind the thing is appropriated by the living communities that today share the same territory occupied by the ancients who originally conceived the things – the tablet, the

building, the image. Heritage, in other words, entails awareness and sharing of values, values that are not only those behind the initial moment of creation of the thing but also those that resonate with modern awareness (for the meaning of heritage and its use, see, e.g., Apaydin 2017; Clark 2006; De Cesari 2010; Jokilehto 2020; Smith 2006; Sonkoly and Vahtikari 2018; Stein et al. 2017).

I would like to offer an example, drawn again from my personal experience. But first I need to explain a certain set of circumstances. The excavations in which I took part in Iraq, Turkey and especially Syria rely on local workmen, mostly farmers and only very few students, sometimes adding up to fairly large numbers (up to a couple of hundred in some seasons). It became my practice to involve them regularly in our ongoing effort to interpret the data we were discovering: this took the form of weekly lectures, during work hours, at different sectors of the excavations, occasional lectures in the expedition house on select groups of objects, and ongoing discussions during the excavations about the finds. It was the first of several other efforts at outreach directed at the community: the workmen were the first priority stakeholders. Apart from a simple sense of commitment on our part to them as our collaborators, with the resulting effect of greater commitment on their part to our work, there was the basic fact that they were de facto our daily interlocutors: theirs were the questions that other people in the communities around the site would at some point ask us. It was as if it were a day-to-day rehearsal of what we would eventually present to those communities (on this, see especially the work by Allison Mickel, most recently Mickel 2021; Mickel and Byrd 2022; and Mickel, Filipowicz and Bennison-Chapman 2020, in press). Our presentations gave them a sense of what we valued, and motivated them to search on their own for what meaning their work could have for them. The greatest validation of this effort was when the workmen would come back to the site on their day off with their families to show them and explain what they were doing *with* us.

Against this backdrop, the example I have in mind seems particularly eloquent. At one point we were excavating a temple that

dates back to the mid-third millennium BCE. We had reached the cella, with the altar, and one of our lectures took place there. The intense question that came up was about the very nature of the ancients' worship, of what 'god' meant to them. For the most part, our workmen were practising Muslims, so the question resonated in a very special way with them. It resonated just as intensely with me, a practising Catholic. And thus I came to share with them the deeper sense of relating, jointly among us *and* with the ancients, to an absolute who in some ways was a common point of reference for all of us, jointly and severally, and across the gulf of several millennia.

It should be noted that this conversation was taking place in Arabic, and that the word for God was *Allah*. But there was no fear of being disrespectful. Rather, there developed a profound syntony, one that did not lessen the differences (either between our Muslim and Christian sensitivities or the difference inherent in the polytheistic nature of the ancient worship that would have taken place right there at the spot where we were all sitting on the ground), but rather helped us to see, in these differences, our commonalities. We had, we may say, inherited the temple. In different ways, it had truly become our heritage – without surrendering in the slightest either our competence as archaeologists or our sensitivity as people of faith.

The reader may well imagine how strongly this came to mind as, in recent years, we faced the wholly opposite stance assumed by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). And that, too, helps to highlight the central aspect of our question. The fanatical iconoclasm of ISIS was a form of anti-hermeneutics: they denied the past, they wanted to obliterate heritage (see, e.g., Curry 2015; Jones 2018; Matthiae 2015). In a more subtle but equally pernicious way, this had been the very goal of colonialism, for it, too, is expressly anti-hermeneutical: it wants to impose values, instead of sharing them as the result of a common search (for colonialism and being anti-hermeneutical, see Bahrani 1998; Byrne 1991; Meskell 1998; and my entry in critique-of-AR.net/colonialism). Instead of discovering an authentic heritage, both ISIS and colonialism wilfully

impose one that is extrinsic and foreign, and they do so by eradicating a pre-existing tradition.

The hermeneutic approach lies at the opposite end of the spectrum because it is essentially symmetrical (for a development with regard to children, see Buccellati 2018). This approach is at the core of education in general, which should be understood as the discovery of existing values that can be shared once they are found. It is a reciprocal maieutics, one where we help each other in extracting a meaning that is jointly discovered, from different and concurrent points of view. The archaeological competence emerges in the process as essential: it is what we, the archaeological community, contribute – something that is specific to us. The reading of a cuneiform text cannot be improvised: but what a sense of shared enthusiasm when the reading of one such text, even to the least educated farmer in the audience, brings to them the sound of an ancient name that can be pronounced today as it was over four millennia ago, as when we can tell them with no hesitation that 'Tar'am-Agade' was the name of a queen who ruled at 'our' site when she came in marriage to 'our' king, Tupkish, from a land in the distant south, not far from where Baghdad is today. It was a triumph, a truly symmetrical triumph, as we, the archaeological community, were able to bring back to them 'their' queen, a queen who had lived in their very territory 4,250 years ago. Dating is always a matter of great curiosity: how do we know that this thing, or this layer, is 42 centuries old? This is where the issue of stratigraphy becomes intelligible, as well as the whole methodology of a controlled excavation. It is by far the surest antidote to potential looting and vandalism.

Local Site Visitors (HQ)

When local visitors reached Tell Mozan during the excavation season, they were accompanied by an archaeologist to show them ancient Urkesh. For almost four years, I had the chance to guide local visitors around the site and had ample opportunities to notice, personally, the impact of a 30-minute tour. A sense of

involvement on many levels was developed in such a short time. This was clear from the visitors' concerns about the future excavations; what we expected to discover; what the plan was to conserve and maintain the site. In some cases, they even suggested ideas to protect the site and maintain it for the future.

During the visit, locals tried to find similarities with their present, similarities with their daily life, comparing the seal impressions of ancient manufacturers with similar contemporary ones in the nearby village. Moreover, questions about identity and diversity were always present, in their wondering if ancient inhabitants of Urkesh were one homogeneous people or many groups living together, and if they were related to present-day societies living in the same area.

At the end of the visit, visitors were invited to leave their feedback in the visitors' book. Here are some of their comments as they reflect on their experience (we give it here translated from Arabic but otherwise exactly as we received it):

> Antiquities teach us how ancients lived so we could learn from them and avoid their mistakes. (Dr. D., 1988)

> It was one of the most inspiring days I and my daughters have ever had, it was a unique educational experience which will be a hand work for the future. (W.A., July 1997)

> To be born in history and to be able to live and breathe through it is an amazing thing and hard to be described. It's a feeling that only the sons of history will understand. VIVA Syria. (A.S., 2002)

> It's a beautiful thing to be surrounded by history and even more beautiful to be able to feel and touch the passing millennia. (A.H., 2009)

Sustainability

Awareness, Identity and the Test of War (GB)

There are two concomitant and fundamental side effects of seeing archaeology as live heritage: awareness and identity.

Awareness goes beyond knowledge: one does not only know that Urkesh, in our case, was the name of the ancient city of which we see the remains today; one also senses its importance because of all the ramifications that this has with regard to the territory where other communities live today.

And *identity* grows from this awareness. To understand how this worked with Urkesh we should stress two particular aspects of our situation: the first is that there are five distinct communities in the area – Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Yazidis; the second is that Urkesh precedes all of them chronologically, that its people belong to yet another ethnic group (the Hurrians), and that both the city and the Hurrians disappeared some three millennia ago. For our communities, then, identity grew out of the awareness of a reality attested only through the material ruins of a dead city, but a reality in which all the living communities of today could find a common point of reference.

What this meant concretely was that archaeology led to the creation of what we may call a higher community, one that embraced diversity and offered a constructive path to interaction. I will once more relate a specific example. The Kurdish community had been hosting a new year's festival at the site of Urkesh for a number of years before our arrival on the scene. Once excavations started, it became dangerous to have so many people at the site (several thousand normally took part), so the festival could no longer be held at the site and had to be moved. This in itself did not create a problem; the problem was instead that the feeling had grown that Urkesh was Kurdish, and that therefore what we were uncovering was an ancient Kurdish city. It was not. And what ensued was an articulate discussion with the 'archaeological' community that brought out the sense of belonging to that higher community I have mentioned. This 'belonging' was not due to a presumed

Kurdish dimension of ancient Urkesh (a misconception which had to be recognised as such) but rather because of the territorial bond that was common to all modern communities as well as to the ancient 'Hurrian' community.

The potentials for conflict were of course aggravated by the war that has traumatised Syria for the last ten years as of this writing. A new dangerous element emerged on the horizon of our 'community archaeology', namely the arrival of foreign forces, which, we may say, represented yet more 'communities', all of them foreign not only to the territory and tradition of 'our' communities but also to 'their' archaeology. ISIS was the most nefarious, and it came within 60 kilometres of Urkesh. But all of this only strengthened the awareness of the archaeological dimension and the sense of identity it had engendered.

All of this speaks to the issue of sustainability. It also speaks to the very important fact that it practically eliminates the danger of looting (as mentioned above). We may think of it in terms of practical considerations, and I will mention a few in the next section. But upstream of mechanisms, sustainability rests on habits and attitudes – on awareness and identity. It is really only when these sink their roots deeply into the consciousness of the living communities that heritage comes truly to life and gains a strength able to withstand external disintegrating forces. It is the awareness of values with which one can identify that ensures continuity. Values are indeed stronger than mechanisms. But mechanisms are important too, and to them we should now briefly turn our attention.

Mechanisms (GB)

I referred above to the practice we developed of having regular 'lectures' to the workmen, and that was the starting point of a broader effort at interpreting the site for the local communities. It was a programme we had started during the time when excavations were possible, a programme we maintained and in fact expanded very much further during the war period.

Basic to the whole effort was the commitment to physically conserve the excavated portions of the site and to present them to the visitors. Both *conservation* and *site presentation* were based on very simple techniques that made use only of local resources, and could thus be kept up to date even in the worst periods of the war (Agnew and Demas 2019; Buccellati 2002, 2006a, b, 2019; Buccellati and Bonetti 2003; Buccellati, Ermidoro and Mahmoud 2019).

This made it possible for *visits* to the site to continue unabated. There were four major categories of visitors: (1) families who would come especially on weekends, sometimes on their own, sometimes through tours organised through our local archaeologist, Amer Ahmad; (2) students from the local universities, ours being the only site in the region that was easily available for academic research; (3) high and middle school students, who were brought as classes studying ancient history, and in particular students involved in long-distance correspondence with their counterparts in Italy and Greece (see below); (4) a very small number of foreign visitors, coming from the border with Iraq. Throughout, there was a constant stream that was interrupted only because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but will certainly resume in full force as soon as that danger is over (AVASA n.d.-d).

We also organised three different *exhibits* in the cities near the site. These were didactic in nature, with panels in Arabic and Kurdish and ample illustrative information. The first exhibit was about our excavations, the second about excavations by a Syrian team at Tell She`ir, the third about the more recent community archaeology projects (AVASA n.d.-c; Buccellati, Ermidoro and Mahmoud 2019).

In addition to visits to the site, we organised *lectures in the local villages*, with the intent not only of interpreting the past but also explaining about the importance of maintaining the landscape in as pristine a condition as possible. These lectures were given mostly in private homes, sometimes in the village school, always with a limited, but highly interested, number of participants. With this programme we reached 24 villages (AVASA n.d.-b).

A message that was brought to the villages, particularly with regard to the landscape, was that we have serious plans to establish an *eco-archaeological park* that would bring significant financial returns to the villages (the literature on eco-parks and -museums is vast; see, e.g., Maggi 2001, 2009, because of its interest with regard to both data presentation and a reflection about underlying principles; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). Plans for the park were quite advanced when war broke out, but it remains very much in the foreground for the future. It covers an area of some 54 square kilometres, inclusive of 24 villages (the ones we reached with our lecture programme). Each village is expected to become like a hall in a museum, being devoted to an aspect of ancient life with its counterpart in modern life (e.g., pottery, textiles, agriculture) (Urkesh Park n.d.). It is in the expectation of this future park that we developed the Urkesh Gate project.

Urkesh Gate: Empowering Local Women (HQ)

Local women in the Middle East are not usually included in archaeological fieldwork. The eco-archaeological park was one of the first initiatives to shed light on the power of this 'unknown soldier' in the region. The expedition first tried to enlist women in the excavations, but this turned out not to be acceptable to local social mores.

Urkesh Gate is the name of the women's enterprise which started in 2012, under the supervision of a team from Damascus in coordination with Urkesh project directors, to include a group of 30 women from the nearby villages. Urkesh Gate aimed at improving the economic situation of local women by teaching them some craft skills and connecting these crafts to women's activities in ancient Urkesh.

The path of this project was not simple because of the conflict in the years following 2012. Therefore, the team from Damascus was not able to get back to Tell Mozan, which was also true of the archaeological mission. Nevertheless, the women showed extraordinary will to collaborate autonomously and to start producing

the first objects of the Urkesh Gate enterprise. In 2014, on the occasion of an exhibition organised in Italy by the site directors, the women sent some of their products and a video in which they talked about the economic benefits they were realising thanks to Urkesh Gate and also the difficulties facing their project due to the conflict (such as the lack of basic materials, the migration of skilled women, lack of security).

One of the ways to sustain the local women was by buying their products. However, this was not enough any more, since most of the skilled women had left their villages. This led us to initiate the 'Urkesh Gate school' in one of the nearby villages. The school started in 2016 to include a group of 15 women between 19 and 35 years of age, who gathered every day under the supervision of Amira, one of the skilled women from the original group. We offered them the basic materials, a place to gather and the teacher. In less than six weeks the women had started to produce beautiful products which they could sell in the local market.

Since 2020, the Urkesh Gate project has been going through another formation phase, in which we have helped the women to improve their skills and their products. We are extending the training programme to other villages in the area, and we are adding the production of rugs to that of clothing.

Resilience

One-on-One Project: Description (HQ)

In 2018–2019, the Urkesh for a Young Future project was started, aiming to bring together students from Qamishli, a city some 25 kilometres east of Urkesh, and students from Italy and Greece. The project aimed to reflect on the value of the past and heritage for youngsters coming from completely different backgrounds and cultures. Through this project, students met on a collective basis, under the supervision of their educators. The project showed interesting results in terms of connecting young people to local heritage and developing their sensibilities in relation to the topic.

The new emergency provoked by COVID-19 led to school closure in many countries around the world and demanded physical distancing. This meant that the school project in its original form could not proceed. Young people, especially in the USA and Europe, shifted to online learning. This shift was not possible for poor or under-resourced countries. Students in Syria, for example, were left without remote learning, due to the lack of resources in terms of modern technology in schools. Therefore, our concerns increased regarding young generations living next to the site, who have grown up in isolation due to the war, the sanctions and now the global pandemic.

We looked for a way to adapt the project to the new emergency safety measures and to be able to deeply engage the Syrian youngsters in the Urkesh enterprise. The original school project was developed to achieve a more personal approach in which participants, i.e., the young people, could be the protagonists as individuals involved in the project. We were looking to see ancient Urkesh through their eyes and to listen to the history of the site from their perspective. At the same time, we were keen to consolidate their hard and soft skills through the various phases of the project. To respond to these challenges, the One-on-One project was born in the summer of 2020, to include a group of school students, between 12 and 14 years old, from Syria, Italy and Greece. The participants were eager to discover themselves through their heritage and to share this heritage with their peers around the world using their own perspective and talents.

Differently from the original school project, students met on an individual basis, which gave them a better opportunity to satisfy their personal cultural curiosities about their own heritage and that of their peers.

The project was articulated through four main phases to achieve its goals. Each phase was designed to be dynamic, to adapt to the cultural particularity of each country. What follows is a brief description of each phase,

Phase 0 was dedicated to introducing the young people to the project and to constructing a relationship between the project's

supervisors and the participants. The main goal of this phase was to help the youngsters feel comfortable enough to tell us about themselves, their interests, talents and future hopes, and how heritage can be part of these things. We then proceeded by exploring the perceptions of the young participants of heritage and its role in their lives. We asked them how their own heritage could serve them to improve themselves and their skills. To what extend did they consider it relevant for their own generation? If they did not, how could we work on its presentation to make it relevant to them? These questions led to interesting discussions among the participants and prepared the ground for the next step, phase 1, which was designed to respond to the interests of the participants that had been collected in phase 0.

Phase 1, the formation, introduced participants to aspects of the cultural heritage in their vicinity. Each group showed different interests regarding heritage and how it related to their modern lives.

Phase 2 aimed to improve the hard and soft skills of the participants individually. Counting on a group of tutors (post-doctoral, graduate and undergraduate students coming from different parts of the world), each participant received personal mentoring to consolidate their English, computer and communication skills in order to be ready for phase 3.

One-on-one meetings took place in phase 3. The meetings occurred under our supervision and were designed as a journey that started by talking about the past and heritage, before moving on to the present and sometimes the future. Each participant presented their heritage and showed how it was relevant to their modern life. Based on the participants' level of interest in knowing about each other's life, each one-on-one meeting took a unique personal shape and led to a variety of outcomes. After the planned meetings under supervision, participants were encouraged to keep in touch with each other in order to learn more about the lives and the general cultural landscape of other countries.

The Impact of the Project on Syrian and International Youth (HQ)

One major goal of the project was to create a dialogue between nations through heritage. Participants coming from completely different realities were urged to discuss not only the past, through heritage, but also different topics in the present and the future. Exchanging thoughts at such a young age helped them to develop their capacities in dialogue and to discover new perspectives from which they could see the 'other'. This was reflected through the participants' feedback:

> I learned to relate to a foreign girl, share aspects of her life as a girl, and to be interested in a very different culture than mine. (Giulia, 12 years old, Italy)

> For me it was quite meaningful to talk to children my age because I had conversations about important topics and learned important things about a country that I knew almost nothing about. (Sotiris, 13 years old, Greece)

Specific to Syria was the encouragement to 'imagine' an inclusive Syrian identity. As mentioned earlier, the geographical region which the Syrian participants came from is rich in a variety of ethnicities and religions, and the participants themselves reflected this diversity. Aged between 12 and 14 years, these young people had started their lives by opening their eyes on a war in which the existence of the other is not welcome. Any different reality than the war for them is simply a 'tale' that they might hear from elders in society.

During phases 0 and 1, the Syrian youngsters' questions showed a real exigency to discover themselves and their identity through ancient Urkesh. They asked about the religion of the ancients, whether their language was similar to Arabic or to other languages in the region, and how the modern ethnicities in the region were related to the Hurrians. In addition, many questions relating to daily life, such as the ancient diet, economy, agriculture methods, etc., were raised.

The parallels participants found with their modern lives were common to all of them, as they share many cultural traits despite their diversity. The parallels with ancient Urkesh were the same for Christians and Muslim participants, just as they were the same for Armenians and Kurdish participants. Through discovering ancient Urkesh, they were able to find an inclusive identity that gathers them all together, and that predates modern identities in Syria. It allows them to belong to each other by belonging to ancient Urkesh.

> When I visited Urkesh I felt like visiting a different world, a strange and a beautiful one. I felt the contrast between the present we are living in and the past. It helped me to imagine how can life be in a different Syrian reality. (Hiro, 14 years old, Qamishli)

Assessment

Recognition and Evaluations (HQ)

One measure by which we can assess the results of the project is in the form of awards coming from outside the project. The Urkesh project has received four such awards (AVASA, n.d.-a). In 2006 the World Monument Fund added Mozan to its list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites, underscoring the project's 'well-established strategy for long-term stewardship' (World Monument Fund n.d.). In 2011 the Archaeological Institute of America awarded the project its first ever Best Practices in Site Preservation Award, citing the 'exceptional work at Tell Mozan' and the 'innovative and efficient approach to protecting the delicate material' after excavation (Archaeological Institute of America 2011). In 2017 the Shanghai Archaeological Forum (2017) gave the project a research award gold medal for 'The new Syrian life of the ancient City of Urkesh'. In 2020 the EU gave the project the very first ILU-CIDARE[4] Special Prize for Heritage-Led International Relations, calling it a 'a strong example of how heritage can lead to people-to-people dialogue' (Europa Nostra 2020). In 2022 the project

was awarded the European Archaeological Heritage Prize for its impact on engaging young people in the archaeological heritage in their vicinity. And in 2022 the project also received the Balzan Prize 2021 for art and archaeology of the ancient Near East.

Then there are evaluations from colleagues outside the project. As the result of two invited lectures in 2020, where various members of the team presented their work, the organisers expressed in some detail their view of the project overall, while in a published article two leading conservators of the Getty Conservation Institute provided a critical review of the work done at the site (Agnew and Demas 2019).

The other type of assessment comes from within the project itself. We have put in place a monitoring system whereby the various members of the project provide regular evaluations, not only in objective terms but also with regard to their own personal interaction. Some of these comments are helpful in seeing what the full impact of the project can be:

> All this made me think more seriously, as everything I mentioned played a role in changing my viewpoint towards teaching, as long as I have students who possess all these qualities also they have affected even on my family life. I started thinking, for example, why won't my young son not have these qualities in the future? I started giving him more attention in order to give him this determination. After my first and second experience in this project, I now finally feel as if I have lost something that I may never get a second time because I will probably not meet these students who were in constant contact with me and who are ready to give their best. They have become interested in heritage despite their young age. (Amer Ahmad, archaeologist and collaborator in Qamishli)

> While working with the student to translate his knowledge from Arabic into English, I realized that we need to work on more activities to encourage the student share their personal connections, it is already there. We just have to make it salient and expressive in the other language. One interesting result of the project is finding points of relevance of the history of the site to modern times,

which is something important for identity perception and presentation. (Amr Shahat, project tutor, UCLA)

The project comes at a difficult time for a country that has been torn apart, to teach this new generation the meaning of partnership and coexistence. It opens their eyes to see that there are many things that can be shared with others without owning them. As for the Syrian professional mentors/tutors involved in the project, who currently live abroad, in Europe and in the United States, this gives them an opportunity to improve their capabilities to stay in contact with the local communities. (Samer Abdelghafour, Project tutor, IIMAS)

The Inheritors (GB)

A final assessment of the success of the project can best be made with the stakeholders themselves.who are the direct beneficiaries of the project. By stressing the notion of heritage, we have pointed to an important dimension of our approach to studying the archaeologies of living communities. Precisely because heritage is not a thing but an inheritance that has been appropriated, the emphasis is shifted to those who inherit. It goes without saying, then, that the inheritors should be the primary evaluators of any programme aimed at raising such awareness. Theirs should not so much be an assessment that comes after everything is done, but rather it should be undertaken concurrently with the work being done from the beginning.

What helped in our case was that we had not set out with a pre-ordained research design focusing on heritage or fixed ideas about to apply it to the reality where we were working. Rather, our engagement at Urkesh has been the result of an organic development that has grown slowly as needs arose. The war was the external factor that had the greatest impact on this development (it could never have been part of a prior research design!), and on top of this came the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the goals we had come to articulate were, in the process, sharpened in their

focus and strengthened in their applicability. It was the resolute bottom-up approach we had followed from the beginning that made it possible to develop and expand our activities precisely at a time when a physical presence was no longer possible.

In fact, what has characterised our Urkesh experiment has been, from the very beginning, a determinedly inclusive effort. The term 'inclusive', current though it is today, may lend itself to the wrong interpretation, because it may suggest a hidden superiority on the part of the subject who allows inclusion. Inclusivity should not be seen as a one-way street, whereby one party includes the other into a predefined precinct. It should rather be reciprocal. From this perspective, as I have stressed already, the archaeological community cannot abdicate its responsibility. We must present our interpretation of the archaeology with all of the necessary competence that we can bring to the issue. And this should reflect total openness, without resulting in a flattening of the substance or a glossing over of difficulties.

It will be apparent, from this perspective, that the inheritors are the first evaluators of the project. We might in fact say that it is their very existence that makes the project successful. For it is only if there indeed are inheritors that, as I have argued, there can be any heritage at all. Only when there are inheritors who are aware of 'their' archaeology can we say that archaeology as a thing has morphed into archaeology as live heritage. It is then that, to muse on the title of the book, communities can truly lay a claim to 'their' archaeologies.

Notes

1 The sections of the chapter were authored individually by one or the other author. Each section bears the initials of its respective author.

2 Please see the discussion in Chapter 1 on the editorial decision to use this siglum despite it disregarding non-Christian calendars.

3 For full information and bibliographical references please visit www.terqa.org and www.urkesh.org.

4 The ILUCIDARE Special Prizes, selected within the European Heritage Awards/Europa Nostra Awards, put a spotlight on European change-makers in heritage-led innovation and international relations: https://ilucidare.eu/news/ilucidare-special-prizes-2020-archaeology-young-future-italysyria-and-estonian-print-and-paper.

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How is 'community' defined and reflected in community archaeology? Which archaeology does community archaeology employ? How are its successes and failures measured?

Living Communities and Their Archaeologies in the Middle East presents theoretical ideas, case studies, and reflective insights on community archaeology. Written by scholars working in and from Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria, the chapters discuss the realities of challenges and opportunities presented by opening up archaeological experiences to wider publics in different social and political settings. Further, the contributions reflect different historical trajectories and cultures that enable us to find similarities and differences in the theory and practice of community archaeology.

The Middle East has a long, fascinating, but also complicated history of archaeological investigation, deeply entrenched in colonization, and more recently in the decolonization process. The involvement and social values of the associated communities have often been overlooked in academic discussions. This book aims to redress that imbalance and present original research that reflects on the work of current scholars and practitioners and draws similarities and differences from diverse cultures.

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