

## The Monumental Temple Terrace at Urkesh and its Setting

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*“The artist is he who fixes and renders accessible to the more ‘human’ of men the spectacle in which they are actors without realizing it” – Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The Temple terrace at Tell Mozan<sup>3</sup> is one of the most impressive structures discovered to date in third millennium Syria. It is a high terrace, consisting of a sloped ramp rising from the central plaza of the city, encircled by a three meter high stone revetment wall, from the top of which rises another sloping surface leading to a temple at the summit of the complex (Fig. 1). The stone staircase gives access directly from the plaza, cutting the revetment wall. From the plaza to the floor level of the temple there is a difference of 13 meters in elevation.

This article will give the context of the Temple Complex within the city of Urkesh as well as the chronological span of the use period of the Com-

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1 Merleau-Ponty 1962,37. Translation mine.

2 It is with great pleasure that I contribute this article to a volume dedicated to Jan-Waalke Meyer, who lead me to discover Arnheim. As so often, Arnheim came up in a discussion we had about architecture, where he brought in many disparate approaches. He offered, as is typical of his teaching, a range of interesting paths, letting the student follow any of these avenues. Additionally he has always shown a great sensitivity and interest in perception which I have appreciated, in particular when he is guiding visitors around his excavations at Chuera. For his enthusiasm, support and generosity I am most grateful. – I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the directors of the Mozan Archaeological Project for the chance to present the material from the excavations in Tell Mozan, as well as the staff and workmen who have contributed to this project over the years.

3 This article focuses only on the temple terrace and its urban context, for more detailed publications the excavations please see the Library portion of the project website: [www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org) → “Urkesh Public Website” → “Urkesh Electronic Library” See also the article of Giorgio Buccellati in this volume.

plex, before going on to architectural aspects with regard to space and meaning.

### **Excavations in the Temple Terrace**

The Temple BA was excavated in the first years of work at Tell Mozan, and revealed an impressive bent-axis temple and several objects associated with the use-floors of the Temple<sup>4</sup>. In 1999 a team from the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft lead by Prof. P. Pfälzner began work in this area while investigating urban development in the upper Jezireh. A trench dug by the DOG team to stratigraphically connect the temple with buildings to the south revealed the beginnings of a monumental staircase leading up to the temple.

After the DOG project was completed in 2003, work began to link the Palace AP with the temple terrace to the east. Several excavation units have focused on exploring the link between temple terrace, palace and the extensive plaza which connects the two (Fig. 2).

Work will continue in 2009 and following years on expanding our understanding of the development of the temple terrace to the east and west of the portions already excavated, as well as the Late Chalcolithic levels which lie below.

### **The Chronological Sequence of the Temple Complex**

The stratigraphy of the Temple Terrace area indicates a very long period of use. The earliest floor surfaces linked to the staircase found in area B6 and further explored in areas J2 and J6 contain pottery which date the earliest use of the temple terrace to the ED II and Early Akkadian/ED III period. In addition, the material found in the Temple BA itself dates to the Early Akkadian/ED III period. Material from the Early Jeziera II period were also linked to the Temple Terrace by the DOG team, giving further evidence for the early construction and use of this structure<sup>5</sup>.

Earlier material has been found within the terrace, where Late Chalcolithic pottery and cylinder seal impressions have been uncovered in several areas both behind the top and base of the terrace wall.<sup>6</sup> This is all the more impressive when we consider the elevation of the material found, which is between 10–12 meters above the ancient level of virgin soil as discovered in nearby soundings. This material has yet to be tied to the actual construction of this or a previous version of the temple complex, and thus cannot as yet

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4 Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 1995.

5 Pfälzner 2008.

6 See Kelly-Buccellati this volume.

date the beginning of the use of the area in a religious context.

Stratigraphically following the Early Akkadian/ED III material one finds a large Mittani deposit. This begs the question: where are the late Akkadian to Khabur levels? They are present in other, nearby areas of the site in a continuous sequence, so the present stratigraphic sequence to be a hiatus in the settlement pattern. Three elements help explain the depositional sequence: the sloped escarpment at the base of the revetment wall, the stone used to construct the wall and staircase, and the layout of buildings around the plaza. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into these elements in depth, but in brief the reasoning is that the bowl-like shape of the plaza, combined with the hard packed surface of the slope leading up to the revetment wall caused the earliest deposits to be found at the base of the slope towards the center of the plaza, with later accumulations rising up the slope of the glacis until they begin to rest against the revetment wall. This then explains the fact that the material found against the revetment wall is some of the latest to be 'deposited' into the 'bowl' of the plaza, and rests on the construction phase which is well over a millennium earlier.

The most important point here is that the Temple Terrace has a continuous pattern of use from at least the ED II period through to the end of Mittani. The fact that the stones were not removed from the revetment wall and reused as is the case in other areas of the site is one indication of the importance of the structure for some 14 centuries.

### **An Analysis of Architecture through Psychological Effect**

What I now propose is a look at the architecture of the Temple Terrace from a special direction. Let us pose the question: "what information can architecture contribute to the goal of better understanding ancient peoples?" There are many avenues open to this line of inquiry, be it the technologies employed in construction, typological aspects or room function, to name a few. What I would like to explore here is the effect of architecture on a visitor, to attempt to understand the architecture by means of a psychological study.

Does such a study have merit? There are three approaches linked to these questions. First, an empirical approach would deny the claim that there is a shared or repeatable experience in architecture; that the idea of a common ground (psychology) shared with the ancients is impossible, and that our own culture builds the filters through which we experience the world around us. Thus a description of the experience that architecture has on a viewer is limited to the person who describes it, and there can be no assumptions made as to the experience another might have. This approach is very narrow and limiting, and such it greatly weakens most of the tools we use as archaeologists: are typological studies only a reflection of the archaeologist who makes them, and do not necessarily have something to say of ancient culture?

The relevance of archaeology is thus also put into question: if there is no *a-priori* commonality, then what role can archaeology play in modern society?

The second major approach can be best called 'neo-platonist'. Here the claim is that qualities such as beauty are inherent in the objects of study, and thus it should be buildings which are the object of our study, divorced from psychological effects on people. Such an approach has always met with stiff opposition on a philosophical level, and also seems less than relevant as a tool for archaeology because the abstraction inherent in this approach alienates us from the subject of our research. On a fundamental level, archaeology is the study of peoples of the past through material culture; by focusing on how archaeology and architecture 'participate' in abstract concepts such as beauty we would be turning the spotlight of our work towards these abstracts rather than illuminating the ancients who are behind the material culture we investigate.

The third perspective on the question of what architecture can contribute to archaeology can be called the rationalist perspective. Here the psychological effects of architecture are seen as a valid indicator of ancient reactions, and to study them is both valid and productive in that it leads to an understanding of the ancients. It is equally important to clearly state the assumptions behind such studies, so the reader is clearly aware of both the point of departure as well as the results of the argument.

### Space and Meaning

We can also analyze the monumental temple terrace and its place in the ancient city of Urkesh by asking what effect the architecture might have had on the ancient viewer. This 'psychological' approach assumes that the ancients' reaction to space can be studied through a modern analysis. If we accept this postulate, it seems that the conclusions reached are plausible and rewarding; as Rudolf Arnheim put it:

"We can hope, however, to isolate – *in vitro*, as it were – some of the object's qualities most likely to survive the changing tastes of the ages, the timeless values of an Egyptian temple, a Chinese pagoda, or a Rococo hunting lodge, long after the particular connotations of its style cease to be an integral part of the experience. We perceive a unique configuration of readable qualities, which serve to enrich our notion of the many ways in which man can translate his view of life and world into stone and wood."<sup>7</sup>

There is a twofold danger in this approach of which we should be aware – on the one hand, by removing the social context of the actor one may rarefy the concepts explored to such an extent that they become gross generalities,

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7 Arnheim 1977, 5.

while on the other hand the desire to understand the ancient mind may drive us to apply such a method in many particulars and in depth, where then the potential to 'fill in the gaps' increases, thus increasing the danger of inserting more and more of ourselves into the result rather than what should be the 'other' of the ancient mind.

What makes such an approach worthwhile, to my mind, is the concept that there is a "self-sufficient completeness" to certain perceptual phenomena which allows us to posit the idea that certain reactions are universally human. Some examples of this might be rising vs. falling, openness vs. closedness, or circular vs. parabolic.<sup>8</sup> There is also the suggestion that some elements of perception and the psychology of experience can be seen to have roots in our very biology, and as such to be universally applicable.<sup>9</sup>

In using the word "visitor" here when speaking of the phenomenon of experiencing the archaeological and architectural monuments, we have set as a postulate the fact that the base psychological effects of perception are universal. Were it particular to a specific group of individuals then the value of the argument and the hypotheses built upon it would be greatly diminished. To stand before a monument and to experience as "visitor" means also to respond to the experience of being confronted by specific architectural elements in the same way as anyone else, regardless of culture or time period. Here then is the power of the approach, and this article represents an attempt to reflect the experience by examining each thread and thus quantify and perhaps enhance in some way that experience.

This paper explores some of these ideas applying them to the architecture of ancient Urkesh as perceived in the ruins of modern Mozan, and see what results may be obtained. I would like to highlight four dualities embedded in this social space: access, verticality, material, and empty spaces.

### Space and Meaning: Access

The first duality is that of access; the layout between the city plaza and the temple terrace is such that there is a sharp boundary between the 'urban' plaza and the 'sacred' temple area. Here the visitor is confronted with the need to get from one place to another. The simplest path between any two destinations is a straight line which neither rises nor falls<sup>10</sup>. In applying this to the case of Mozan, we have the plaza, which, by definition, is a nexus of paths of travel, and so we imagine the visitor in the plaza with the temple as the target. How then does the access from the plaza to the temple deviate

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8 *Ibid.*, 5.

9 Mithen 2001 also Donald 1991.

10 Arnheim 1977, 11.

from the simplest path described above? And, when considering such deviations, which can be ascribed to necessity and which to expression?

On the one hand there is the monumental revetment wall (Fig. 3). This serves as a sharp boundary between the plaza and the temple terrace behind and above, both in access and visual perception. The wall is three meters high, and is an impediment to a straight path of access from most points in the plaza. However, this is not a 'normal' wall in that the ground on either side is of similar height, but rather it is a boundary wall with the plaza at the base of the wall on one side and a surface which slopes up away from the top of the wall on the other side. This wall as impediment means that to reach the temple the visitor<sup>11</sup> must go towards a breach in the wall which acts as a bottleneck for foot traffic. In addition, because of the angles of vision, the closer one is physically to the temple by approaching it on the plaza level, the less one sees of it, until it vanishes from view because of the revetment wall which blocks the line-of-sight. The effect is similar to a building one approaches from afar: from far away the roof is visible, but the closer one gets the less one sees of the roof, until at a certain point only the façade is visible and the roof completely out of one's line-of-sight<sup>12</sup>. All visitors would see the temple only from afar, and would never be 'near' the temple unless they were going to it by surpassing the revetment wall. These two aspects distance<sup>13</sup> the temple from the urban activity in which it is geographically so central.

In direct opposition to this boundary one finds the monumental staircase (Fig. 4). This functions as the breach or bottleneck in the revetment wall, providing access to the temple complex. In doing so it emphasizes the importance of the temple area by funneling visitors through a single point which surmounts the barrier of the revetment wall. In this way the staircase emphasizes the transition between the temple and the rest of the city.

In contrast to the sharp division that is created by the architecture of access here described, it is worth noting that the staircase is wide and inviting. The widest portion of the staircase is at the bottom, and it becomes somewhat narrower at the top. This construction makes the sloped surface on which the temple sits seem almost higher and farther away in reality it is, enhancing the distance created by the perspective of the viewer at the base. From this low vantage point the top of the staircase is perceived as narrower and farther. The measured narrowness and the perspective increase the force

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11 By using 'visitor' here I mean to include both ancient and modern visitors.

12 Arnheim 1977, 79.

13 It is perhaps worth underlining how the linguistic expression and the architectural expression also overlap here: the distances used as a barrier in architecture are reflected in the verb "to distance" which I here mean in the metaphorical sense.

of the total architectural impact vis-à-vis access. In addition, it means that it would be difficult to limit access to the temple area: further, there are no signs of doors or other means of closing the staircase, and thus no way to 'complete' the barrier of the revetment wall and deny access to the temple. Thus the temple area, while defined and separate, is none the less open and accessible.

### Space and Meaning: Verticality

The second duality, a corollary to the first in a way, is the sense of vertical access to the temple. We have spoken of pedestrian movement being controlled by the barrier of the wall and the access afforded by the staircase, and in doing so we think mostly in terms of motion in a two dimensional plane. However the visibility of the temple from the plaza and the staircase are also heavily influenced by the difference in elevation. It is important to recall at this point that the temple BA was the highest point at the site even in modern times, when excavations began in 1984.<sup>14</sup> Thus we may assume that it was the pinnacle of the settlement from the moment of its construction through to the abandonment of the site, and that no other buildings were as high.

The total projected difference between the level of the plaza and the floor of the temple is thirteen meters. The height is surmounted in three stages: the escarpment sloping away from the base of the revetment wall towards the center of the plaza, the staircase breaching the barrier posed by the revetment wall, and finally the 'glacis' sloping up from the top of the revetment wall towards the temple itself. The vertical movement from the 'urban' nature of the plaza<sup>15</sup> to the 'sacred' templar heights is as much of a boundary as the horizontal barriers one would have faced. Here the elements discussed previously of the width of the staircase and the visibility of the temple only from afar emphasize the vertical discrepancy as well as access. It is also important to consider movement and the vertical element, in addition to perceiving the temple as above one must actually climb to get to it (Fig. 5). The act of climbing is an effort greater than walking along a flat surface, and this also contributes to the perceived boundary between the urban plaza and

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14 One aspect of the height of the temple, not discussed here but important nonetheless, is its organizing role (both psychologically and physically) with regard to the entire surrounding landscape from which it was visible or inferred.

15 There may certainly have been sacred functions taking place in the plaza, but it was not sacred as such, because of the presumed foot traffic towards other destinations, the ease of access and, presumably, the lack of meaning-oriented structural features (altars, offering areas, etc).

the sacred temple complex.<sup>16</sup> Of course, leaving the temple complex also entails descending, returning to the urban 'level', which 'reverses' the effect of climbing.

It is also important to note that once the top of the staircase has been reached, the climb is not yet finished: there is still the 'glacis' which continues to slope up to the temple. In this way the inclination of the surface on which the visitor walks forces the temple to be the center of the empty area which is the glacis, as well as the goal in walking upon it. Here we have a contrast to the idea of a plaza or courtyard, which seldom has a focal point in the middle. While in Mozan we have not excavated the central point of the plaza, the geophysical survey, topography, surface finds and select soundings all point to the absence of any kind of structure in or near the central portion of Plaza J.

In Urkesh there is an interesting parallel to the use of access and elevation as separators. The *abi*, the necromantic structure of Urkesh, which was located near the Palace AP also has a sharp contrast in elevation. To access the *abi* it was necessary to pass through a narrow entrance, down a steep staircase to the floor of the structure several meters below.<sup>17</sup> Here, too, the means of access and the vertical dimension are used to differentiate the 'urban' and 'sacred' realms; yet with the *abi*, by using a narrow, difficult access and by going down into a deep, dark place the effect is the reverse. For while access to the *abi* is possible through a *narrow* staircase leading *down* into a dark covered area, access to the Temple atop the terrace was possible through a *wide, inviting* staircase leading *up* to an area with a remarkable panorama. We can then ask the question whether the contrasts between *abi*, plaza and temple complex, which are heightened by their architecture, reflects three conceptual planes of reference, the spirits of the netherworld, the living and the gods, or whether the architectural emphasis is meant to create boundaries and uses space as one element. This question goes beyond the effect of architecture on the visitor and into the realm of interpretation, which may be a fruitful discussion but lies outside the scope of this paper.

### **Space and Meaning: Material**

The third duality is that of the material used in construction, and how this choice affects what is perceived by the visitor. At Mozan we find structures which are made in part or wholly with a white calcareous stone which presumably comes from the nearby Tur-Abdin Mountains. There are modern

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16 Arnheim 1977, 33.

17 Kelly-Buccellati 2003.



quarries extracting a similar stone in what is now Turkey which can be seen in the distance from the top of the Tell.

Several structures in various chronological phases use the stone as part of the construction, most notably the palace AP, which has a stone sub-structure for most of the walls and a large courtyard which is entirely paved with these stones. In addition the *abi*, or necromantic shaft just south of the palace, is entirely lined with such stone, and there is also the hypothesis that there was a corbelled roof also consisting of these stones.

But when one considers the buildings around the plaza, we presume that they were made of mudbrick, with, at most, the lower part of the walls in stone. In contrast to this, the revetment wall of the temple terrace is constructed entirely of this stone, to a height of three meters at its highest point. The contrast in color and material between the white stone wall of the terrace and the predominantly brown of the mud brick structures must have been quite striking; the stone revetment wall must have been seen as a band of color separating the soil-colored escarpment below and the soil-colored 'glacis' above.

The choice of stone might also have been an attempt to recall the mountains of the Tur-Abdin to the north of Mozan, bringing to mind perhaps Kumarbi and his link to the mountains to the north. The stone revetment wall with the stone staircase recreated perhaps the ascent of a mountain from the plain below, and the sacred space above. In fact, we can further hypothesize that the temple is dedicated to Kumarbi, whom one would imagine as being the deity associated with the most imposing temple of the city<sup>18</sup>.

### Space and Meaning: Empty Spaces

The last duality is the visual perception of space. The plaza, while a large space, is bounded by buildings and the city wall, and by being the center of this urban expanse, is entirely enveloped by the built environment. The viewer sees a large empty space, but this space is very sharply enclosed by the urban buildup. There is thus a very definite boundary visible between structure and plaza, even if the plaza is empty of structures<sup>19</sup>. This 'description' of space is just as important as a Cartesian one, for a hill and a depression of the same surface area are still two distinctly different 'spaces'<sup>20</sup>.

In direct contrast to the plaza as urban 'center' is the top of the 'mountain' which is the temple terrace: here a direct optical link is established bet-

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18 There are specific arguments for this which can be found in Buccellati 2006 and Buccellati / Kelly-Buccellati 2009.

19 Arnheim 1977, 69–74.

20 Arnheim 1977, 9–10.

ween the temple and the mountains to the north, and on a clear day the Sinjar mountain and Kaukab volcano to the south are also visible. While the plaza is the heart of the city in part because it is ‘embedded’ in the city’s core, the temple resting on the terrace is intrinsically in the city but is also a bond with that which is beyond the city, visibly.<sup>21</sup> Here the ‘empty space’ is the rural extension which, through the temple atop the terrace, is linked to the city which acts as the hub of a wheel, acting as a real ‘center’. As described in Central Place Theory, outlying agricultural villages, administrative nodes and workshops would all be organized around and in function of the main city, Urkesh. One is then led to ask if this visible link recalls or reinforces the link to conceptual bonds between urban and rural populations as well.

Thus the temple terrace may seek to recall through this link the non-urban regions which are such a part of Hurrian mythology, while still being an intrinsic part of ‘urban’ Urkesh. Arnheim suggests that the exhilaration of being at the top of a mountain is due to the feeling that the viewer “irradiates” the emptiness with personality and meaning<sup>22</sup>. Heidegger, in a similar vein, suggests that a bridge spanning a river alters completely the landscape on a much deeper level than the physical connection or the ease of movement<sup>23</sup>. Such effects could also be ascribed to the temple of Urkesh: a visible sign of religion and urbanity which irradiates into the landscape changing city and landscape inexorably<sup>24</sup>.

### **The Role of Architecture in the Religious Context of Tell Mozan**

“A person’s identity is not a static entity, but is achieved through continual reactivation. As a result, performance as an iterative act is an essential part of the identity-maintenance process. Private identities are reaffirmed and modified by the individual on the basis of new internal and external inputs, and the process of identity maintenance is a dynamic one.”<sup>25</sup>

This quote refers to a private individual, but some of the same points could be made about social mechanisms, such as religion, in a public context. Religion is also reinforced through continual reactivation. The static

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21 The plaza with its surrounding urban architecture is framed by the city wall while the Temple Terrace and the temple are framed by the mountains to the north.

22 Arnheim 1977, 21–22 also 32–33.

23 Heidegger 2000.

24 There is an analogy which can be drawn with Temples in classical archaeology, where a fundamental link between a temple and the landscape in which it is situated is postulated. (Hillman 2006; also Scully 1969; also Steadman 2005).

25 Smith 2007, 416.

nature of the architecture still plays an active role in this reactivation through the psychological aspects of the architecture discussed above. In addition, the very static nature of the architecture would serve as one of the elements in this 'reactivation', in that it would play a specific role as 'place' in the religious tradition passed on from generation to generation. It is interesting here to link the static nature of the architecture which still serves actively in 'reactivation' to the discussions of ritual serving much the same function<sup>26</sup>.

Thus the temple terrace at Tell Mozan can thus be seen as actively reinforcing the religious mechanisms present in the society. Visitors would be affected by the psychological responses called forth by the architecture, and its presence as a sacred place would be taught in word and action from generation to generation<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusion

Studies in iconography are a powerful tool used to examine expression within social contexts, but, apart from decoration, it is difficult to consider architecture through that lens. Here I have suggested that by studying the psychological effects of architecture we can strive towards a similar goal, that of understanding the expression of buildings within social contexts. It is this artistic content to which Merleau-Ponty speaks in the quote at the beginning of this paper, and we as archaeologists seek to analyze the elements which seek to "fix and render accessible" in order to see the spectacle in which they played such an important role.

In writing this article I have referred to the architectural elements as if monuments fixed at a specific point in time. This leaves aside the fundamental role of time, which is the domain of archaeology. For these architectural elements 'fit' into the city as a whole which is in large part already present at the moment of construction, and 'replaces' in some way an urban element which occupied this space before it. After the construction it then changes as the city changes, and in the specific case of Mozan we see that the plaza begins to fill and the city dwellers adapt to these conditions in an attempt to preserve some of the integrity of the monument as such. Such effort gives credence to the value of some of the ideas here presented, but an in-depth study of tradition vs. innovation in this monument through the various phases of use<sup>28</sup> is beyond the scope of this paper.

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26 Renfrew 1994.

27 Tomasello 1999, 512.

28 It is clear that the temple terrace existed for 14 centuries (2800–1400 BC) and there are indications that it reflects a pre-existing monument with a similar configuration.

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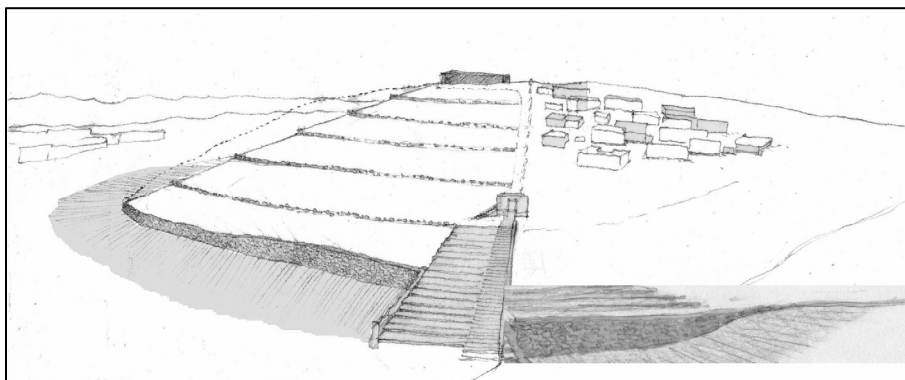


Fig. 1 The revetment wall, monumental staircase, temple atop the temple terrace and plaza (rendering by P. Pesaresi)

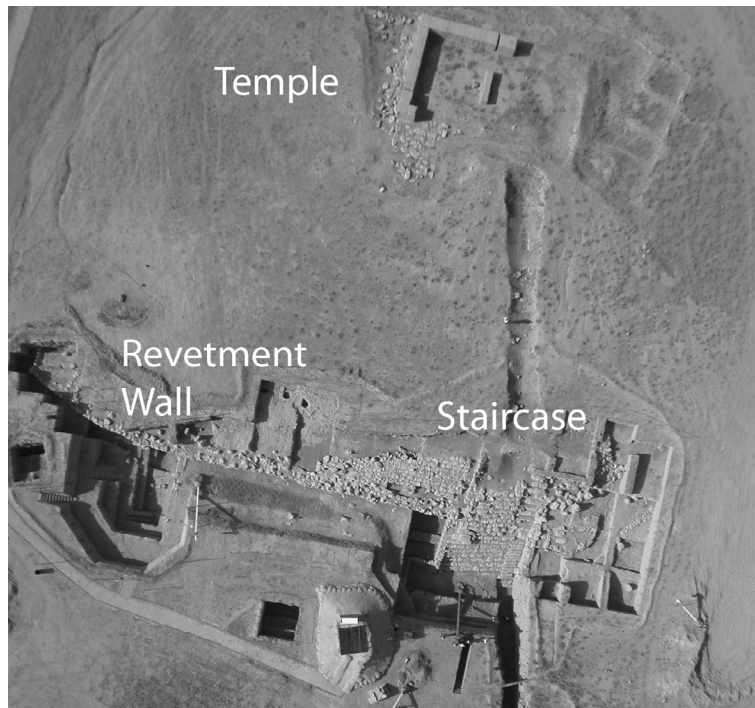


Fig. 2 Kite photo showing the relationship between the Temple BA, the revetment wall and the monumental staircase



Fig. 3 The high revetment wall as a barrier with stadia rod emphasizing verticality



Fig. 4 The monumental staircase in a night shot with three staff members showing ease of access and ‘climbing’ aspect



Fig. 5 The Tell Chuera team “scaling the mountain”: Jan-Waalke Meyer is in the middle of the group, with his trademark kaffiyeh around his shoulders

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