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URL:
https://dal.ucla.edu/backdirt/2025/reflections/urkesh_global_record/

Citation (Chicago):
Buccellati, Giorgio, and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. “On Archaeological Publishing: The Urkesh Global Record.” In *Backdirt 2025: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Annual Review*. Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2026. https://dal.ucla.edu/backdirt/2025/reflections/urkesh_global_record/.

Citation (MLA):
Buccellati, Giorgio, and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. “On Archaeological Publishing: The Urkesh Global Record.” *Backdirt 2025: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Annual Review*, The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2026, https://dal.ucla.edu/backdirt/2025/reflections/urkesh_global_record/.

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On Archaeological Publishing: The Urkesh Global Record

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CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL PUBLISHING STRATEGIES

The publication of the results of an archaeological excavation is a more complex issue than it may seem at first. A major conceptual factor conditions the very nature of the publication process: the excavation exposes portions of an ever larger whole, something that remains generally hidden in its wholeness until further excavations bring it to light. And yet the driving interest is in understanding this whole: a large building, a cluster of smaller structures such as burials, an assemblage of different ceramic types, and so on. And as excavations progress from season to season, they expose only fragments, which are expected eventually to cohere into this anticipated meaningful whole. One wants to publish the whole, but this very wholeness escapes us season after season.

This is the underlying cause of two problems that are intrinsic to the very nature of archaeological publishing. The first is what typically emerges as a chronic delay in the final publication: one waits for the whole to emerge in its fullness so as to do justice to the fragments, but, in the process, the fragments remain essentially unpublished. The second problem derives from the first. As the search for the whole progresses, one is inevitably led to be more and more selective in the identification of which fragments deserve full publication: they are those that most lend themselves to explaining the nature of the whole as it is eventually understood, while other fragments are progressively jettisoned and may end up being physically discarded as well.

An additional factor is the broader public interest that excavations often generate. One is then induced to cut even further in order to offer a meaningful and appealing larger picture of the site as a whole.

We may distinguish six moments in the standard process of archaeo-logical "publishing:"

1. *Preliminary reports*. These present a summary of the work done during a given season. They cover all operations and give details on what are perceived to be the major findings, whether movable objects or stationary structures.

2. *Final reports*. For major excavations, these reports cover a fully exposed building, such as a temple, or a complete assemblage of objects, such as ceramic vessels.

3. *Databases*. An important result of the digital turn has been the introduction of extensive databases, which typically include objects with full typological analysis.

4. *Legacy studies*. A recent development has focused on the publication of original field notes. These were not in fact intended to be published, but given that the author did not make full use of them, they are now made available for review.

5. *Overviews*. These consist of general documents for the wider public, including pamphlets, brochures, and visitor guides. Exhibits with descriptive panels and websites dedicated to a given site typically fall in this category.

6. *Displays*. This category includes the physical presentation of material from excavations, whether at the site itself (in which case conservation may be seen as a form of publication, the basis for the accompanying signage) or in museums, where explanatory notes accompany the objects that are exposed.

A WEBSITE APPROACH

The website model allows us to effectively combine the types of publication listed above into a single system. In this perspective, the website is conceived as a new epistemic system—that is, one that articulates and conveys knowledge in a uniquely designed digital format, allowing the totality of the fragments to be given in their distinctive identities while showing at the same time how they cohere into parallel and equally distinctive wholes. We will briefly describe the methodological aspects of a browser-based publication, which is well suited for such an epistemic system, and will then show how this approach applies to archaeological data.

METHODOLOGY

The epochal innovation that a browser makes possible, in comparison with printed media or even digital analogs such as texts in PDF format, is the potential to have multiple planes interact with each other. This may be defined as interplanarity. The use of hyperlinks has become second nature for all of us. They are generally used as pointers to details, much like looking up a word in a dictionary: we are not interested in the dictionary as such, or in any large portion of it, but only in the single item we are looking for. It is the same approach we have in a supermarket, where we look for a specific commodity and are not interested in the group of commodities found on a shelf next to the one of interest.

By way of contrast, an interplanar hyperlink points, as the term implies, to a plane—that is, to a larger section within which the single detail is embedded and makes sense. This is a process analogous to what happens with critical thinking: when reading a printed text linearly, we develop parallel planes in our mind. These planes may consist of either facts or arguments, but they are all concurrent to the main argument laid out in the text we are reading. What the website format makes possible is to have this interaction among planes built into the system itself. There are practically no limits to the amount and nature of planes that are so interconnected. Each one depends on the others, and together they form a seamless, if very complex, epistemic whole, unlike any other we have been used to so far.

A major result is that databases are not to be seen just as repositories of data to be mined, because each individual item in them emerges as an "actor;" it is in fact capable of interacting directly with arguments laid out in parallel planes. For example, a single sherd in a database of tens of thousands of items may be linked to a typological discussion of wares and shapes, a discussion about the stratigraphy of a given structure where the sherd was excavated, a discussion about historical develop-ments affecting the site as a whole, and vice versa.

ARCHAEOLOGY

A major difference vis-à-vis current archaeological publishing strategies lies in giving total prominence to the individual excavation unit, with regard to four aspects.

1. *Totality*. Every single observation or measurement ever made by any member of the staff is entered in the official record.

2. *Public status*. No observation is considered private. A fundamental reason is that even the smallest assumption conditions the overall strategy of the excavation and must be made explicit from the start.

3. *Immediacy*. Every observation becomes immediately part of the overall record. In practice, this means that every day during the excavations, the record is available in its final format.

4. *Permanence*. No observation made is ever removed from the record. When a mistake becomes apparent (for example, an error in measur-ing), the original observation is kept and a correction is added. In a sense, we may say that one publishes the "legacy" from the very start.

Each excavation unit has its own independent website, which grows on a daily basis as the record develops. Each website integrates as a matter of course any new argument with the database, which is growing as the excavation progresses. Independently and concurrently, other web-sites are produced, devoted to various synthetic aspects of the record, such as typologically distinct classes: they utilize the data from the exca-vation units and are tightly interlaced with them.

A fundamental presupposition of the whole system is the use of a basic "grammar" that is strictly adhered to by everyone during the excavation and in the subsequent analysis. This is more than an encoding manual in that it defines in a coherent theoretical manner all aspects of the categorization system.

IMPLEMENTATION: THE UGR SYSTEM

We have systematically applied this website approach in our excavations at Tell Mozan in Syria, ancient Urkesh. The system developed over the years, and it is now reaching a closure

thanks to a research project made possible by the Balzan Prize, awarded to us in 2021. We will give here a list of the major components of the system—that is, some of the perti-nent websites that together act in an interplanar mode to provide full publication of the data from the excavations. (The links will lead to the actual website. Some of the pages are still being worked on, so the web-sites are in a beta version; a full public opening is expected late in 2026).

- urkesh.org/UGR: An overall description of the system, with a com-plete list of all websites (including those on which work is still under way).
- urkesh.org/A16: A sample website devoted to a given excavation unit book. Based on the excavation of eight 5 x 5 m squares, it includes a database of some 61,000 ceramic vessels and sherds, and a total of some 64,000 pages.
- urkesh.org/JP: A sample website dedicated to a given sector of the built environment, in this case the large plaza fronting the temple and its wide terrace.
- urkesh.org/TCR: A sample website dedicated to a typological assem-blage, in this case a ceramic inventory of some 350,000 items, with a full description of the categorization system.
- urkesh.org/MCV: A sample website dedicated to an aspect of the activities regarding the site as a whole, in this case conservation activ-ities regarding structures at the site (a multiyear project at Mozan) and objects in the lab.
- urkesh.org/GRM: The grammar that governs the entire system, in both its theoretical and its practical aspects.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DURABILITY

There are two major reasons why websites have not become a regular part of scholarly discourse.

The first is that one does not generally conceive of websites as proper epistemic systems. In current practice, they do not develop an argument, or, if they do, it is in the static format of an analog file of the PDF type. Typically, one does not "write" or "read" a website: one places data into it, as if into a container, and one searches and queries for single items, which are retrieved in isolation one from the other. Terms like *browsing* and *surfing* are indicative of how one conceptualizes websites: one remains on the surface because in effect there is no depth to them. Our approach requires instead an extra effort that allows us to make full use of the rich network of relations that link the various planes with each other. "Writing" such websites has to be done with a vision toward inter-planarity, and "reading" them has to be done with a full awareness of what such multi-tiered arguments entail.

The second reason why websites have not become a regular part of scholarly discourse is that websites are seen as essentially fragile and ephemeral. One step to ensure greater portability is the establishment of mirror sites in different locations. An even greater risk is found in the constant changes in hardware and software, which seem to guarantee that websites in their present form will no longer be available in a very near tomorrow. This is all the truer with complex systems like the UGR, which is intended to serve as a very specific epistemic system, where programming and platforms need to be constantly adjusted, in ways that standard backup systems cannot support. To remedy this, we have established a special permanent fund that will ensure all necessary upgrades as time unfolds, so as to provide the durability that is intrinsic and necessary to scholarly discourse.

We note, by way of conclusion, that archaeological data may be seen as natively digital in the sense that they emerge from the ground disconnected from each other and special effort is required to recompose them into a meaningful unity. The interplanar website approach we have described is ideally suited for this task, and an archaeological inventory, such as the one from Urkesh, constitutes an ideal test case for the implementation of the broader website theory we have briefly sketched here.