

# Ancient Syria

## Introduction

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What the Rosetta Stone and Egypt were at the turn of the 18th century, the Assyrian reliefs in the middle of the 19th, and the Sumerian question at the beginning of the 20th, the reemergence of ancient Syria seems to be in our own time. The discovery of the royal archives of Ebla has polarized public, as well as scholarly, attention in a way that few other archaeological finds ever have. Even if the sound and fury have often been more disruptive than constructive; even if all the ferment seems to have been stirred in most cases by the wrong reasons; even if the general notions that linger in the public consciousness about Ebla are at best fanciful by any scholarly standards—the fact remains that there ought to have been just such sound and fury, if only better directed; and there ought to have been just such ferment, if somewhat less epidemic; and there ought to remain the firm awareness that the historical picture of the ancient Near East has changed radically.

On balance, one may wonder which of the three major discoveries of Bronze Age Syria has had the most far-reaching impact on our understanding of ancient Near Eastern civilization—Mari, Ugarit, or Ebla. One reason Ebla is so significant is that it has channeled our scholarly perception toward a better appreciation of what is specifically Syrian about Syrian culture (ironically, the public fanfare that exaggerated the biblical connections of Ebla may, in part, have to be thanked for this redirecting of scholarly opinion). In the perception of scholars, Mari, for instance, had been viewed as essentially Mesopotamian, an outpost that just happens to be—accidentally, as it were—within the modern borders of Syria. As for Ebla, it is difficult to speak of it as an outpost of Mesopotamian civilization: for all its commonalities with the Sumerian south, Ebla has a centrality of its own that stands out glaringly. Significantly, the discovery of Ebla came as the result of an explicit research design that posited precisely a unique cultural centrality for Syria in the third millennium. It is remarkable that, by their own

training, inclination, and early publications, some of the principals in the “choice” of Tell Mardikh had posited a set of questions and goals that postulated just such a cultural tradition as what turned out to lurk behind Tell Mardikh—Ebla! I am thinking of the art-historical and archaeological work of Paolo Matthiae, the historical research of Mario Liverani, the linguistic analysis of Pelio Fronzaroli. That we speak of a deliberate scholarly “choice,” articulated within an explicit framework of working hypotheses, shows how much of a genuine “research design” there was behind this momentous “discovery.” (In fact, for the deliberateness it implies, the term “choice” is the real scholarly equivalent of what is otherwise more popularly termed “discovery.”) The essence of such a research design was that there ought to have been a major and independent urban cultural tradition in ancient Syria.

It is such centrality of ancient Syria that Ebla, more than any other discovery, has forcefully vindicated. So genuine and real is this centrality in global historical terms that we were able, in our Chicago symposium,<sup>1</sup> to adhere to it without having a single paper devoted to Ebla. For all the significance attached to Ebla as a site, ancient Syria is indeed much larger than Ebla. In other words, Ebla is not just a glorious but isolated episode, it is a window, if the most transparent one as yet, into a world we can now begin to reinterpret on its own, rather than in derivational terms.

The remarkable pace of archaeological work in Syria is such that more discoveries of the magnitude of Ebla may still be in store within our own lifetime: some of the major third- and second-millennium sites in the Khabur plains clearly hold such a promise, and in fact a new ASOR symposium is being planned on Syrian archaeology. One portion of the Chicago symposium, devoted to the broader issue of the historical presuppositions for such developments, was published recently. The other portion of the Chicago symposium was dedicated to the other regions of ancient Syria. The papers were intended to provide an overview of the

major periods and areas of Syrian archaeology, especially as illustrated by some of the major current excavations. For a number of reasons, only three of the original papers could be published here, while the other article was added subsequently as this issue of *BASOR* was being prepared for publication.

The first three articles, which contain the papers presented at the original symposium, deal with prehistory and with the Bronze Age. Each article views the broad regional and chronological issues from the vantage point of specific sites with which the authors have been involved. Moore's presentation of the prehistoric period is the most comprehensive and systematic, and establishes with clarity and conciseness an up-to-date framework within which late prehistoric developments are best understood. The material from his own site of Abu Hureira illuminates in a paradigmatic fashion the nature of those developments. Analogously, Dornemann's and my own papers deal with the Bronze Age from two different regional perspectives, West and East. Dornemann defines the parameters within which the materials from the Big Bend of the Euphrates may best be understood, especially from the vantage point of Tell Hadidi. My paper deals with the uniqueness of Khana as a geopolitical region from the vantage point of ancient Terqa.

The remaining paper presents a new approach to old materials. Gates provides interesting illustrations of the way in which a careful correlation of second millennium textual and artifactual materials from Syria may yield new insights into the data.

That such ferment of scholarly rethinking about ancient Syria as evidenced by the Chicago symposium and by this publication is at all possible we owe, quite obviously, to the richness of ancient Syrian culture. But we owe it as well to the enlightened policies of the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums. In welcoming the Director General, Dr. Afif Bahnassi, as he inaugurated our Chicago symposium, I had the opportunity to remark that we are consistently made to feel as much at home in today's Syria as we are at home, as scholars, in its history. Our appreciation is borne out of professional as well as human grounds. As foreign archaeologists, we work on sites and materials that are under the specific jurisdiction of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums: as such, we are official guests, enjoying a cooperation unmatched in the efficiency it provides and the freedom it leaves. With true Syrian hospitality, Dr. Bahnassi and his staff have always let us know, in a very concrete and explicit sense, that "their home is our home," as the Arab saying goes—or, even more important for us as scholars—that "their history is our history." The Chicago symposium and the studies contained in this issue of *BASOR* afford us a small opportunity to reciprocate this intellectual hospitality in the way we know best.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>The symposium was held as a special one day plenary session of the national meeting of ASOR in November 1985. While I was not responsible for either the organization of the symposium or the choice of the papers, I was asked to chair the morning session, at which I also had the privilege of introducing Dr. Afif Bahnassi, Director General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, who participated in our proceedings. The

speakers at the morning session were Andrew M. T. Moore, Rudolph Dornemann, Elizabeth Stone and Paul Zimansky, John M. Lundqvist, Oleg Grabar, and me. As will be apparent from the table of contents of this issue, some of those speakers were not able to submit their contribution for publication at this time, while articles by another author (Marie-Henriette Gates) was added subsequently.

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