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Urkesh

Sifting Through the Tell

Tell Mozan, Syria

BURIED AND LOST FOR CENTURIES, THE ANCIENT CITY OF URKESH WAS FINALLY UNEARTHED BY archaeologists in the past 2 decades. Built of adobe, the walls and buildings of Urkesh are now vulnerable to wind and rain and must be protected if they are to be preserved.

For years, the legendary city of Urkesh taunted archaeologists like a cruel mirage. Agatha Christie and her husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan, searched for it in the 1920s and 1930s, but they ruled out the Tell Mozan area. When a UCLA team began their dig here in 1984, they had no guarantee that this 150-hectare (370-acre) mound in the middle of a stark flat plain in northeast Syria held anything at all.

As they began to dig, they found the remains of mud-brick city walls and several houses, along with what seemed a royal palace, a monumental temple terrace, and an enigmatic underground pit, buildings that dated from the right period—5000 to 1500 B.C. But not until 1995, when they unearthed several seal impressions in the palace, could they definitively say that, yes, they had finally solved the mystery of Urkesh. For archaeologists, the thrill of discovering a whole new culture would be like an astronomer discovering a new planet.

Around 3000 B.C., the writings of Mesopotamian peoples like the Hittites and Akkadians frequently mentioned Urkesh as the great holy city of the Hurrians, a nation with its own unique language and mythology, and with great wealth based on copper mining in the Anatolian mountains to the north. Still, no trace of the Hurrians themselves existed anywhere—a baffling riddle for archaeologists. This mound didn't look too promising at first, for it had been plowed extensively and quarried for building stone. Generations had built their houses on top of the collapsed ruins of earlier houses, building up the mound century by century, so there was a lot of debris to plumb.

Today, the excavated ruins at Tell Mozan seem sharply gouged out of the flat, wind-swept top of the tawny mound, which rises 28m (92 ft.) above the surrounding plain. Excavators have reconstructed the foundations of the temple—now known to be a temple to Kumarbi, the Hurrians' chief god.

Despite recent political upheaval in the country, work continues on the royal palace, slowly and meticulously. Cagelike scaffolding covered with weatherproof fabric is used to protect the mud-brick structures once they're uncovered. (The scaffolding also helps visitors imagine what the buildings might have looked like.) It's a fascinating opportunity to watch state-of-the-art excavation in progress.

But adobe is such a vulnerable material, more needs to be done to strengthen the walls now that they are exposed to the

elements. There is so much left to do at Tell Mozan—can they peel back all the layers of the past before the present catches up with them?

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