

# Uncovering 5,000 Years of History

**S**OME of the most significant contributions to knowledge are being made today through archaeology.

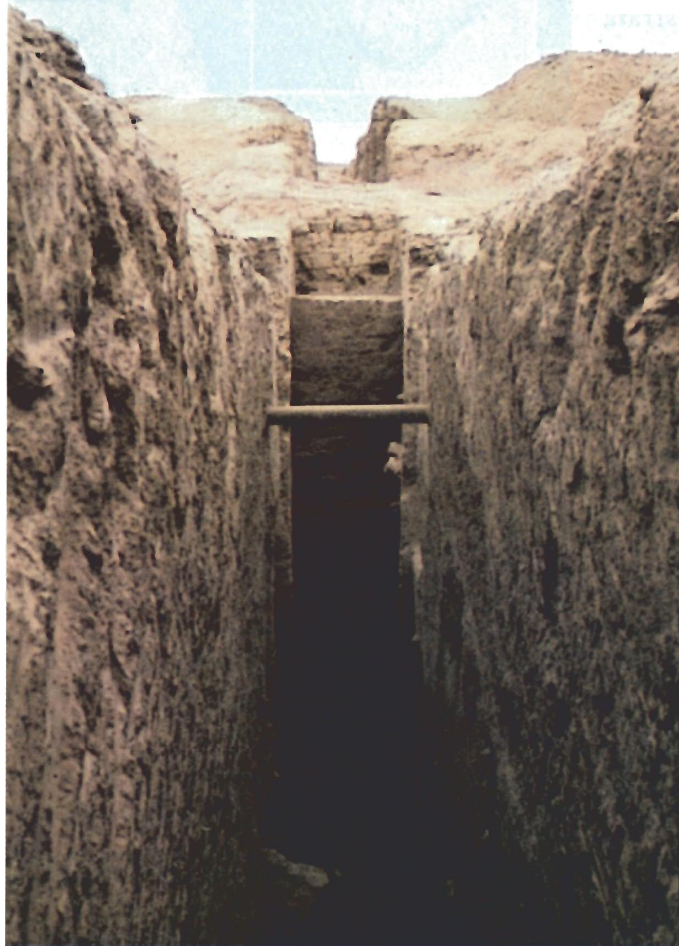
And the most spectacular new frontier in archaeology lies in modern Syria.

We take our readers in this eye-opening report to the middle Euphrates valley. Here, in a region once bypassed by the Industrial Revolution, new paved highways are linking inner Syria's major cities, electricity is brightening village homes, and utility trenches cut through 5,000 years of buried history!

Little wonder the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic is concerned about uncovering and preserving this treasure trove of new discoveries.

In so vast a region, we can focus in-depth only on one excavation site. We have chosen one of the most beautiful settings along the whole of the Euphrates.

Here, only a few kilometers south of a point where the Khabur River enters the Euphrates, the modern town of Ashara lies on and around the heaps of an ancient city.



Salvage archaeology plays an important role in recovering Syria's past. At the site of modern Ashara, ancient Terqa, utility trenches, cut deep into the tell, were kept open by town officials until archaeologists could investigate the exposed ancient city wall and stratigraphy.

Archaeology has revealed it to be the capital of a kingdom that lay on a trade route linking civilizations from the Arabian or Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and the Nile.

The city, anciently, was called Terqa (pronounce the *q* as *k*)—a fact revealed on a cuneiform tablet

picked up at the site in 1910 by the German scholar Hertzfeld. To take our readers on a journey into the past at this intriguing site, we have asked the Director of the Joint Expedition to Terqa, Professor Giorgio Buccellati of the University of California at Los Angeles, to continue this report:

THERE are no prehistoric remains in evidence anywhere at Terqa; we begin with a full-blown city. There is, however, a site in the vicinity of Terqa that preserves the evidence of the immediate prolog, which must necessarily have preceded the establishment of the city. Qraya is the first mound you encounter north of Terqa, some 5 kilometers upstream the Euphrates and right on the river banks, like Terqa.

Unlike Terqa, however, the site of Qraya (no ancient name is as yet known for it) does not appear to have been as badly eroded by the action of the river. It rests on top of a sizable glaciis of river pebbles congealed into some sort of rock formation, as hard as concrete, clearly visible as you walk along the edge of the water on the northern slope of the tell. The river current, in its constant lapping at the edge of this natural formation, has not suc-

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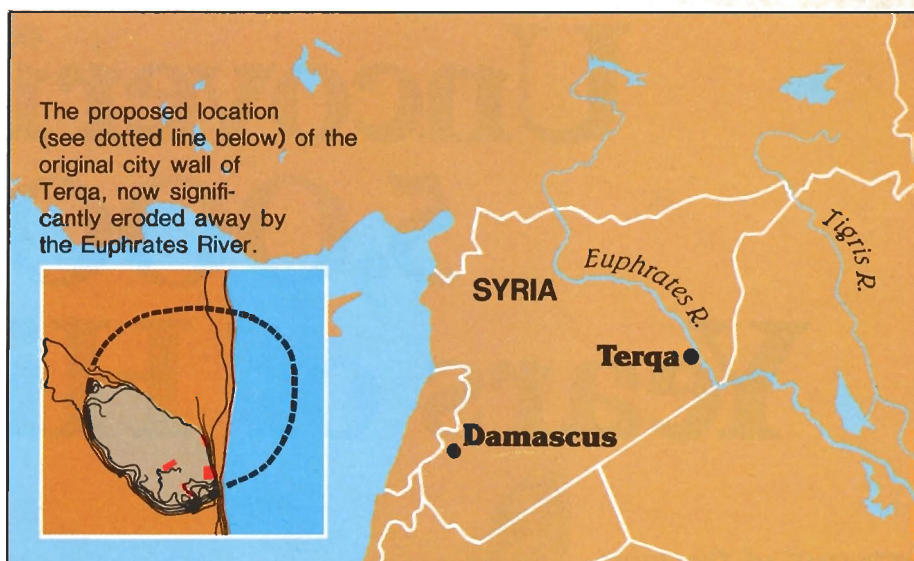


ceeded in eroding it in the same fashion as Terqa.

The site of Terqa exhibits no traces of occupation before 3000 B.C. And then suddenly, around that date, a momentous change takes place: a massive city wall came to be built there, the largest by far known to us for this early period from Syria and Mesopotamia. Was it the people from Qraya who moved south and established the new city? We have no proof for this hypothesis, but it is a tempting one in view of the fact that no third-millennium strata have been found in Qraya.

Much of our knowledge about the city wall came from long and narrow trenches that had been cut by the municipality of Ashara to make room for a new sewer system. These trenches were left open for our inspection for a period of three months in 1978 and have since been back-filled after completion of the sewer system. None is therefore visible today, and our map shows merely the location of the trenches.

It may be appropriate at this juncture to make a few remarks about the interaction between the modern town and archaeology. The sewer system was one of a few major public projects that had been planned by the municipality shortly before our excavations. Since the beginning of these projects coincided more or less with the beginning of our work, and since the importance of ancient Terqa came to be appreciated slowly with the progress of our work, there was an



initial period when archaeology and city projects had to contend with each other. In subsequent years, through the enlightened collaboration of all concerned officials, from the governor of Der ez-Zor to the local mayor and through the understanding of the local inhabitants, and under the guidance of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, it was agreed to put a halt to all improvements on the tell and to prevent all constructions by private parties as well. We hope that the progressive recovery of ancient Terqa will continue to provide adequate compensation for modern Ashara and its people.

#### Provincial Capital and Religious Center

Around 2400 B.C. the city of Mari, some 60 kilometers south of Terqa,

held sway over the Khabur basin. Terqa was certainly under the control of Mari. We may surmise that by the middle of the third millennium Terqa had become a provincial center of its more powerful neighbor downstream. If the construction of the massive defensive system a few centuries earlier is any indication of political independence, it would appear that such independence did not continue. If so, we have no indication as to what events affected the history of Terqa. A possible hypothesis is that there was a progressive dislocation of the center of power downstream, such as we have postulated for the sequence Qraya/Terqa at the beginning of the third millennium.

It is a fact that Terqa remained the cult center of the major god of the region, Dagan, even during the







period of political ascendancy of Mari. Dagan is mentioned prominently and regularly in the Mari texts from the Old Babylonian period as the main god of Terqa. There is also some indication that the Zimri-Lim dynasty of Mari may have originated in Terqa.

At any rate, most of our current information for this period comes from Mari, and then only for the Old Babylonian period, rather than from excavations at Terqa. The royal archives of Mari contain more than 200 letters that had originated in Terqa and were sent to Mari where they were stored in the royal palace. They deal with a number of items of the greatest interest, some of them quite picturesque and intriguing, and provide a lively account of what seems to have been the most important provincial capital and religious

center of the kingdom. During the excavations in 1982, parts of two large buildings were uncovered, framed nicely by a street on one side and a narrower alley between the two of them. They have a tortured architectural history—quite interesting because it shows palpably how these early urbanites coped with the problem of limited space within the confines of the city even at a time when the overall population pressure was much less than it is today. Yet here they were, trying to make the most of narrow spaces, with odd corners, small rooms, tight alleyways.

You can appreciate this as you first look down at the current excavations and then raise your eyes and look beyond into the wide open spaces of the surrounding desert. Being closely hemmed in by each other, almost living on top of each

other—was this a psycho-urban need of man from the beginning? Certainly, they liked the cloistered feeling of a bustling town, and paid high prices for every square foot of it as seen from the cuneiform tablets found at Terqa.

From the tablets strewn on top of the floors, just below the brick-fall that lay underneath the higher strata, we can now begin to piece together a fair slice of Terqa history during the last phases of its life as a provincial capital. It is no small feat to piece together such sequences from stratigraphic bits and pieces.

#### Capital of the Lower Khabur Basin

The period best documented archaeologically for Terqa corresponds to the century and a half or more that followed the destruction of Mari by Hammurabi of Babylon about 1760 B.C. It is generally assumed that Terqa became the capital of the region at that time. This is the most likely

**Early in the Terqa excavations a remaining part of the massive third-millennium B.C. city wall, far left, was cleared to reveal its structure. In a middle-class house from a store room were tablets about 4,000 years old (center photos show them *in situ* and after removal). Among them is a document recording purchase of about 10 acres of land. When participants in a contract could not write, their signatures were affixed in various ways. One solution, below, was to press the hem of one's garment into the moist clay.**





hypothesis, although there is no certain proof for it. The titulary of the kings omits the name of any city and refers only to Khana, the name of the region. On the other hand, Terqa is the only known site to date to have yielded cuneiform tablets with names of kings of Khana, and its general urban layout is significant enough to qualify as a capital city. Finally, Terqa is at the geographical center of the region of Khana.

We know by now the names of 13 kings of the dynasty of Khana.

Two buildings are primarily associated with this period, the temple of Ninkarrak and the house of Puzurum. The main entrance of the temple was onto a plaza on the south, in an opposite direction from the house of Puzurum. The house had been burned in antiquity: you may still see on the walls clear traces of the fire that must have been intense as the roof collapsed and buried the contents of the house for us to retrieve some 3,700 years later. The fire was, however, contained, because its traces are

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**The second-millennium temple of Ninkarrak, goddess of health, provided a great surprise. Within 2 feet from the altar in the corner of the cella a small bag had been deposited in antiquity, chock-full of beads for priestly use. The bag had disintegrated, below left, but the contents were in pristine shape. The semiprecious stones—all 6,637 of them!—are on display in the Der ez-Zor Museum.**

localized and certainly did not extend to the temple. The layout of the house, still clearly visible in the excavation area very much resembles the layout of a modern village mudbrick house. A central courtyard served as the main living area, where most of the household activities occurred, including cooking. The three rooms on the northern side of the courtyard served primarily as storage.

One of these rooms, the one at the corner with one wall flanking the alleyway, was the most important of all, at least for us. It contained some 100 pieces of written documents, 15 of which were in a good state of preservation. Together, they form an interesting archive of a middle-class person who was buying land and houses in the area of Terqa.

#### **Nomadic Gathering Center**

For a few centuries after the end of the city we have come to know, the site of Terqa underwent a drastic change in its sociopolitical function and hence in its outward appearance. We have found no trace of Assyrian presence in Terqa or elsewhere on the western banks.

If there is no trace of Assyrian occupation at Terqa/Sirqu, is there any trace of Aramaic occupation? Yes, and of quite a varied nature.

From our own excavations comes the evidence of burials. These were found in shafts, normally within jars, with pottery of a distinct type, quite different from that of the earlier periods.

Thus the general picture that emerges, albeit tentatively, is that of a gathering center for a nomadic group that did not reside at Terqa/Sirqu, but used it for ceremonial purposes: the burying of the dead and the acknowledgment of the political suzerainty of the Assyrian king.

The few centuries of nomadic occupation at the site were followed by a long hiatus, during which the site seems to have been totally uninhabited—some 20 centuries, from about 700 B.C. until about A.D. 1200.

The date of the medieval remains is set to A.D. 1200 in the Ayyubid period on the basis of a coin and of ceramic typology. We have no indication of what happened to the village after that, for how long it was occupied and when the modern settlement originated. It is also unknown whether the modern name “Ashara” was already in use in medieval times, or whether it came to be used later.

As excavations continue we will keep our readers updated. □

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*The institutions currently associated with the Joint Expedition to Terqa are*

*IIMAS—International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies*

*The University of California, Los Angeles*

*California State University, Los Angeles*

*Johns Hopkins University*

*The University of Arizona*

*The University of Rome*

*The Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques, Paris.*

