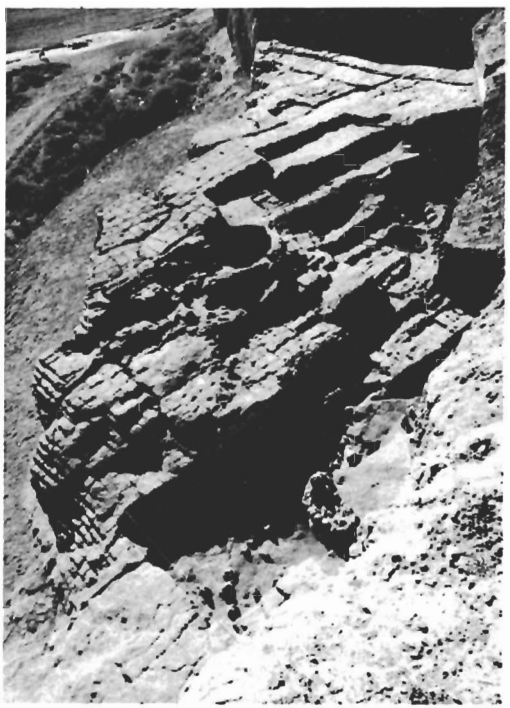
NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL HARVESTS FROM SYRIA



by Giorgio Buccellati
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COVER: *(left, front cover) A monumental brick structure of the third millennium: note a small room in the foreground, a well and a drain in the center. Almost 5000 years in age, this structure was resting immediately below the modern refuse dump of the city, of which one can see the edge on the right. (Right, front cover) A large bowl of the second millennium, used as an urn for an infant burial. It was covered by a somewhat warped platter, which was sufficient, however, to preserve the skeleton to this day.*

Reaping as we do the "harvest of time" out of the ground, the sowing season for us archaeologists comes long before the period we actually spend in the field. In our case it goes back to more than ten years ago.

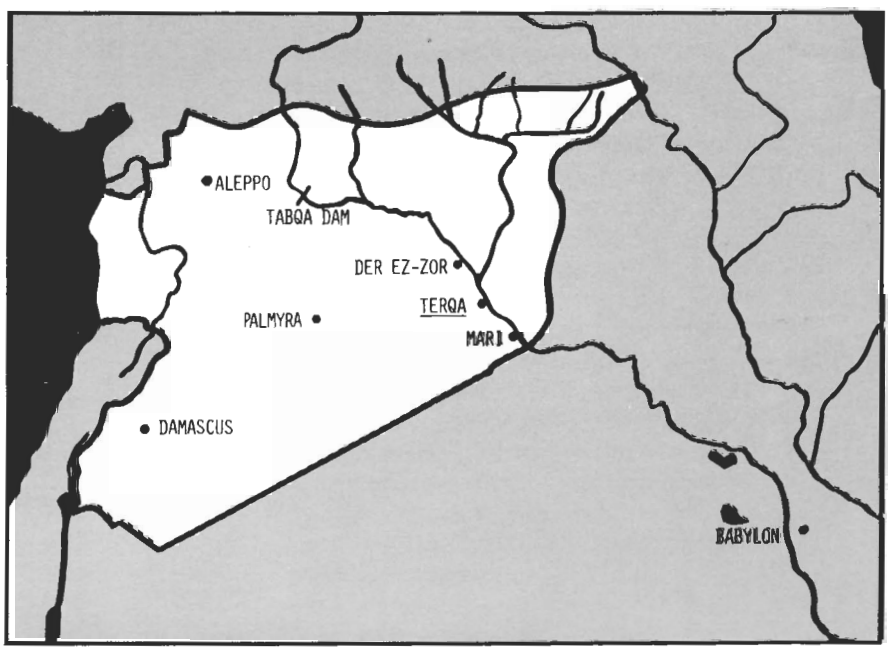
It was the summer of 1966 when we first set foot in Syria to undertake a reconnaissance trip of the area where the desert merges into the steppe, around that caravan station of all times, Palmyra. We both had been studying the available evidence from Syria and Mesopotamia concerning the movements of early nomads—or semi-nomads, as one calls the sheepherders/pastoralists who rode on donkeys rather than camels. Our general time frame was around 2,000 B.C. Our goal: to see if evidence of human occupation for that time period could be found—artifacts, for instance, such as pottery, or burials, or ideally, settlements. We found none that we could identify for that period, although we did find much that could be dated earlier, back to the Paleolithic, and later, down to the Byzantine period. Yet, we knew the area was the homeland of a group of people, the Amorites, who about that time were threatening the security of the last Sumerian Dynasty in Lower Mesopotamia; we, knew, in other words, that it was inhabited. Our failure to uncover any traces of their presence was probably due, in part at least, to what seems to have been a characteristic of the Amorites, namely the lack of large, urban settlements of their own.

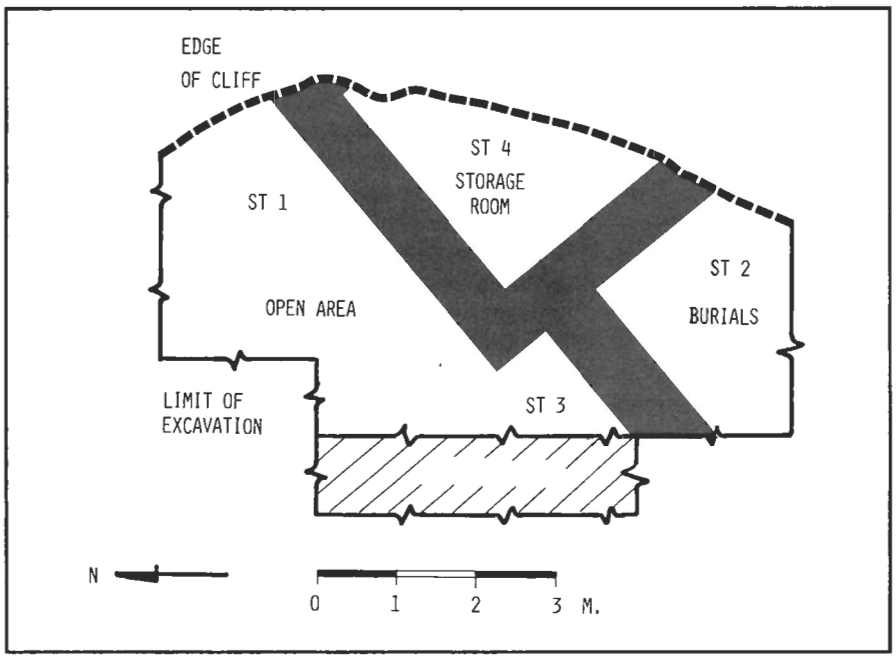
Returning to Syria 10 years later, we are approaching the same problem from a different perspective. This time we have gone to a known ancient city—Terqa (modern Ashara), on the Euphrates, in Syria some 60 kilometers north of the Iraqi border. To the south, the ancient city of Mari is well known from many seasons of excavations conducted by the French. About 1750 B.C. Mari fell to the army of the famous Babylonian King Hammurapi, never to come back to life again. In the ruins of the royal palace, the Babylonians left behind, among other things, a large archive of cuneiform tablets from which we gain a great deal of information about the Amorites. And, of course, about Terqa—which at that time was a province of Mari. The King of Mari had a palace there, under the jurisdiction of a resident queen who would welcome him on his periodic visits and would write affectionate letters to him from Terqa.

Also the governor of Terqa would write to the King in Mari about, besides other matters, the "nomads": "The Suteans have settled to the north of Terqa, and they come and go, back and forth, to meet with me; no incident has occurred. But, in anticipation of the campaign of the King, my lord, the Yaminites have revolted like a single man, as they make their way in the Upper Country to and from their settlements" (*ARM* 3 13: 10-12). In some ways, Terqa seems in fact closer to these nomads than the capital—and that was the expectation we had before us as we came to start excavations there.

When we began our work in October, 1976, we were following illustrious precedents. The site had been identified in 1911 when a German archaeologist, Ernst Herzfeld, came to it quite by accident: he happened to be travelling on the

MAP OF SYRIA *with emphasis on regions where desert and steppe merge.*





AREA OF EXCAVATION *of Residential Unit (SG4, level 15) overlooking the Euphrates. See map of Terqa on page 8 for location on the site.*

main highway which skirted the site a few miles to the west when, during a stop, his horses got lost. While they were being retrieved by his attendants, he wandered about the countryside and stumbled upon our site. The villagers presented him with several artifacts, and he himself found more on the surface—one of these giving the ancient name of the city. Twelve years later, two eminent French philologists, F. Thureau-Dangin and E. Dhorme, undertook a brief five-day season (with a group of French legionnaires as workmen) and were able to establish two important facts. First, there was a major settlement which dated back to the third and second millennium, B.C. Second, the second millennium was overlaid immediately by Islamic remains. On this basis, the site appeared to be most promising for excavations. Yet, regular work there was not undertaken until 50 years later.

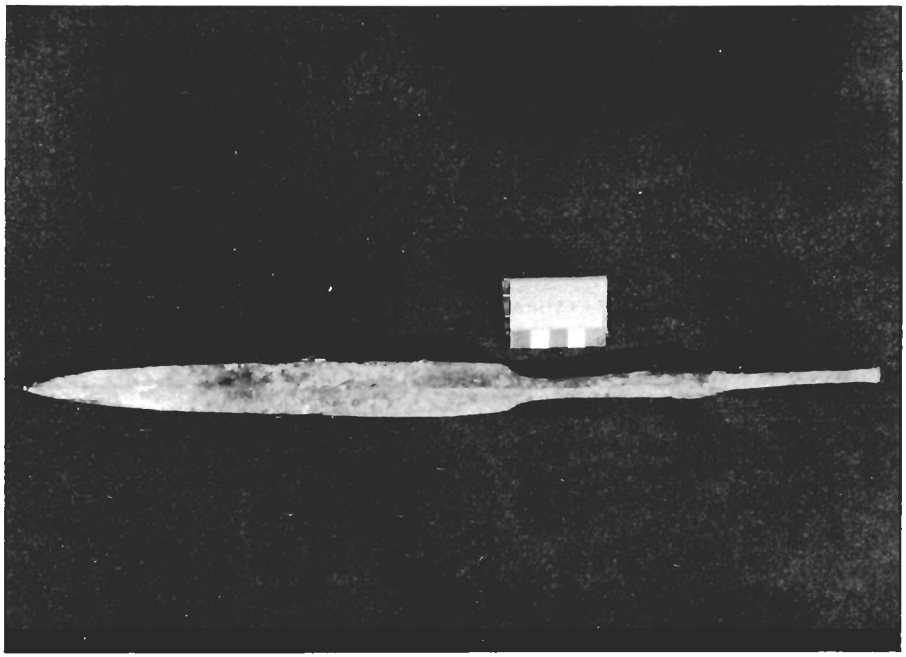
In the spring of 1975, a new American Expedition by Johns Hopkins University, under the direction of Delbert Hillers, began its work at the site. In two operations at the southern end of the site, he was able to confirm the presence of second millennium material just below the surface, with interesting pottery types like the one shown here. The following year, in the fall of 1976, operations were resumed with an enlarged scope which included UCLA and California State University at Los Angeles, besides Johns Hopkins, in a newly named Joint American Expedition to Ashara, under the direction of the present writers. That is, then, when we came back to Syria to resume the search we had started ten years earlier. Rather than from the core area of the nomads, this time we wanted to start from the fringes of the urban area toward which they were attracted in their wanderings thousands of years ago. From here, we will slowly work our way toward the desert, with a new survey which, since it will be done with more time and planning, might hopefully yield those results we had missed in 1966.

We were also brought to Syria by another new development of recent years. The all important discoveries at Ebla had shed a whole new light on the role of Syria in the process of growth of early Near Eastern civilization. It had become clear that Syria, far from being an appendix to the urban civilization of the Southern Mesopotamian alluvium, was an integral part of a unified cultural development, and a major autonomous force within it. Thus, our interest in Terqa was hopefully to lead to important archaeological harvests in this direction too. Since the Euphrates was the major axis of this new dimension of Mesopotamian civilization, Terqa, at midpoint on the Euphrates between Ebla and Akkad, is likely to shed much light on the contacts between the two, and on the intrinsic dynamics of that cultural process which saw urbanism and literacy spread to the great river valley of the Fertile Crescent. With all these thoughts in mind, we were impatient to come to reap the fruits which so much preparatory work promised would be very abundant and rewarding. And so they were.

Let us begin our description with finds from the earliest periods. We know now, after our season of 1976, that Terqa was an important city as far back as the time of the earliest cities, the time of Ebla and

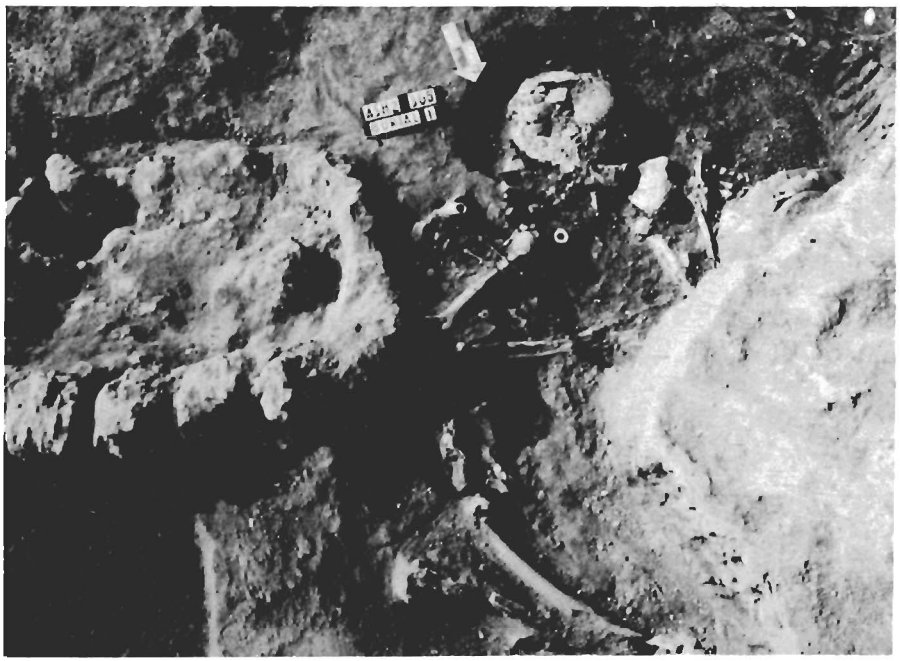
of Sumer. Not that we found the city as such—in just six weeks of excavations this could hardly be the case. But we have sufficient clues to make that conclusion inescapable. The major one is that we have come across a monumental building of such a size that nothing less than a fully developed urban economy can be assumed to have made it possible. While the limited exposure resulting from our excavations does not allow yet a thorough understanding of its structure, its monumentality stands out in full, even just from the sketch shown on page 2. The area shown in gray is all a mass of mudbrick, which must at one point have served as the outer wall of an imposing public building, possibly a palace or a temple. We were able to find an inside room of small dimensions: two rock cairns were standing at two corners, flanking the only entrance to the room, through a narrow passageway. The floor of the room was sloping sharply inward, and it was interesting, as a result of careful excavations, to be able to reconstruct how some of the rocks had tumbled down following the natural slope of the floor toward the lower edge of the room. From these early periods we have also objects of war, such as a spearhead identical in shape to those found in the royal tomb at Ur, and, in contrast, toy animals of clay.

"How can you possibly date such a structure?", might well be any reader's question who looks at the cover photo of the brick structure. That was our question as we were digging day after day and were uncovering more and more bricks without any objects which might serve as a specific point of reference for chronology. Until—



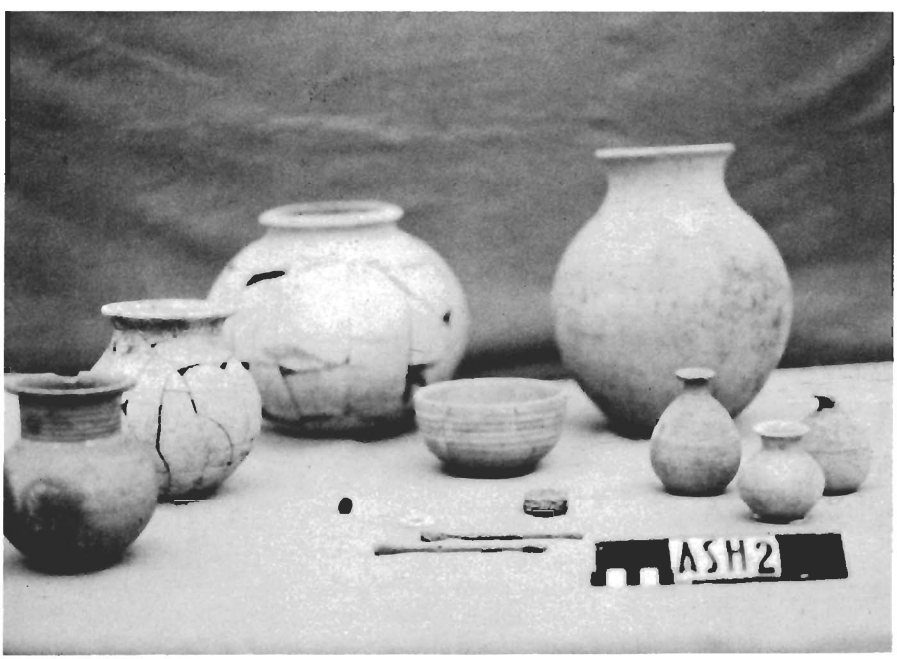
A BRONZE SPEARHEAD *of the third millennium, identical in shape to those found in the famous Ur graves in Southern Mesopotamia.*

A QUADRUPED *(an ox?) made of clay, possibly used as a toy; from the second millennium B.C.*



THE SKELETON *of a woman found inside the wall of the monumental building. The bronze pins on her humerus were used to fasten her garment around her shoulder.*

THE MIDDLE THIRD MILLENNIUM *artifacts recovered just below the heaps of contemporary refuse.*



until, tucked away in the corner at the very edge of our excavations, we came upon the burial of a woman, which was going to serve as the explicit label we had been searching for. She had been buried with a garment wrapped around her body and fastened by two pins at the shoulder from which apparently a small ring and a black stone bead were hanging: these were found where you'd expect them, right on or near the humerus, and their use is documented representationally by a shell inlay from the nearby city of Mari. The pins are of a chronologically distinctive type, and had thus put us on the alert. And we were fully repaid when we cleared away the pottery vessels on which the hand of the woman was still resting. Several complete vessels were found, all of them quite distinctive of the middle of the third millennium or slightly later, as they are found in Northern Syria and as far afield as Eastern Turkey. These were obviously luxury items, some gracefully painted, and all of a very graceful line (see photo opposite). Since the burial had been cut into the wall, this meant that the wall was even earlier than the burial itself—although its exact date remains for future seasons to elucidate.

As an interesting side-line of our work on this major structure, and as an indication of what awaits us as we are preparing to continue reaping our archaeological harvest at Terqa, we would like to say something about the unique contrast of old and new which we found at Ashara. The third millennium wall, and the burial embedded in it, were lying immediately below the modern dump of the town. It almost seemed unbelievable to see such a juxtapo-

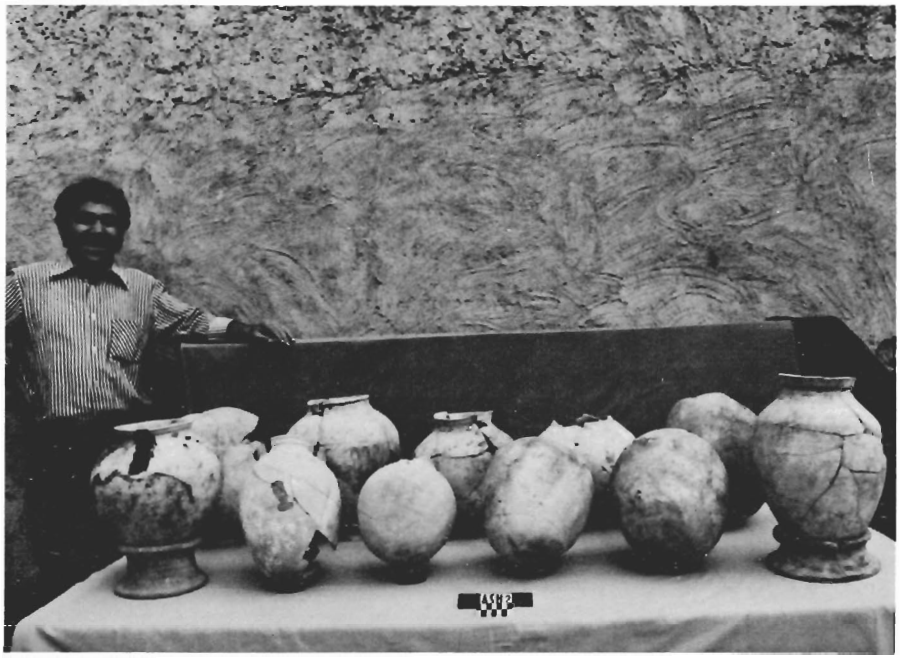
sition of some of the oldest urban remnants anywhere with the living present of its remote successor city—modern Ashara.

Ashara spreads in part over the ancient tell which rises high over the banks of the river some 18 meters high. The skyline of the city may, from a distance, be not too unlike what it might have been in antiquity. And the organic interaction of the present inhabitants with their subsoil repeats a process which has taken place continuously over the centuries and has shaped the stratigraphic sequence of the tell. It is a process which disturbs, inevitably, the archaeological record, especially when it takes on the large-scale proportions of a municipal sewer project, which has inflicted long and deep wounds by means of the blind mechanical power of a modern bulldozer (see page 8, map of the site). The only benefit we derive as archaeologists are the individual objects, which can be salvaged, even though we miss the all important stratigraphic context. But the constant presence of alert eyes on the site can also spot important objects on the surface without disturbing the subsoil: the most important find of this type is a cuneiform tablet (right) which was given us by a local resident. It is the administrative record of three workmen who were sick, and it is important because of its early date (shortly after 2,000 B.C.) and because of its connection with a group of tablets of exactly the same type from Mari.

But there is more to archaeology proper. At a different spot in the mound we came across the remains of an important residential quarter (see page 8, map of the site). What was actually uncovered by us in a period of about four weeks was small in area: only a few square meters, with the corner of an open area (possibly a courtyard, and portions of two rooms). The reasons for its importance are to be found especially in the remnants of the small room to the east right along the steep escarpment of the tell facing the river. It was full of objects, crammed on its small floor; part had fallen from above, perhaps from shelves along the walls, but most had been resting on the floor where we found them just as they had been left. Notice for instance the interesting round base jar sitting on a stand or the cluster of small goblets still nestled together to serve tea or some other drink (see photos on page 6). The parallel with a modern drinking set is suggested not only by the similarity of proportions between ancient and modern, but also by the discovery, in one of the jars of the room, of a cluster of seeds which appear to be spices, the exact nature of which remains to be determined by further analysis.

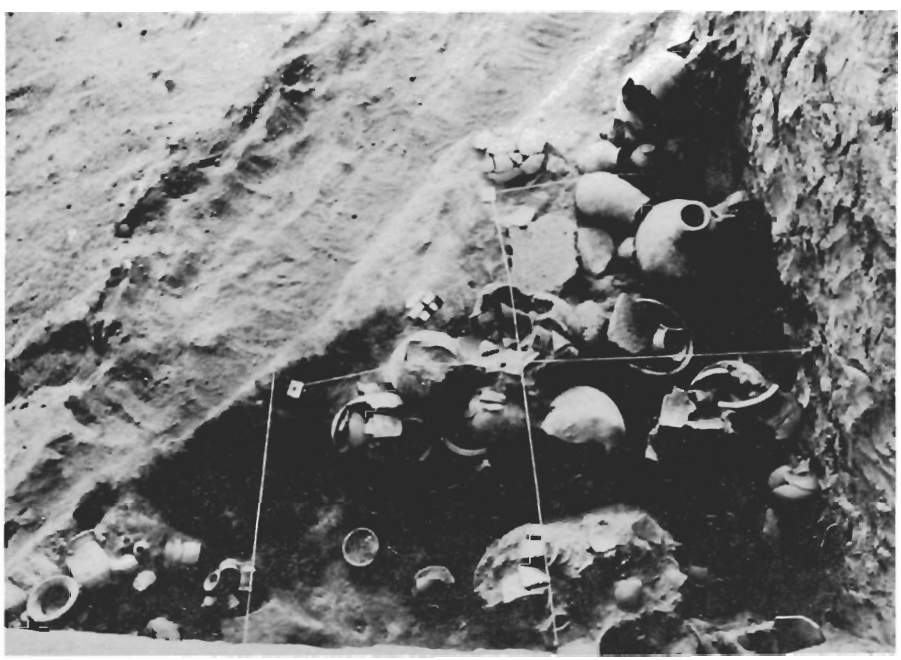
The house was burnt by a severe fire, which caused the collapse of the roof and left the walls standing almost to their original height. In the wake of the fire, and after the house had been abandoned, several burials were placed between the walls. The majority were children's burials, which were placed in large bowls covered by a platter serving as a lid. An interesting detail: some of the vessels were apparently kiln rejects, and could not have been used for utilitarian purposes. Yet, their being used as burial urns does not imply disrespect (much as our cemetery plots being away from

***A CUNEIFORM TABLET** of the twentieth century B.C., telling us that three Terqa workmen were on sick leave from their job on the 21st day of a given summer month.*



LARGE STORAGE JARS *with round base, suitable for soft, dirt floors or for pottery ring stands.*

THE FLOOR *of a storage room, as it was found by us some 3500 years after the ancient householder was forced out by fire.*



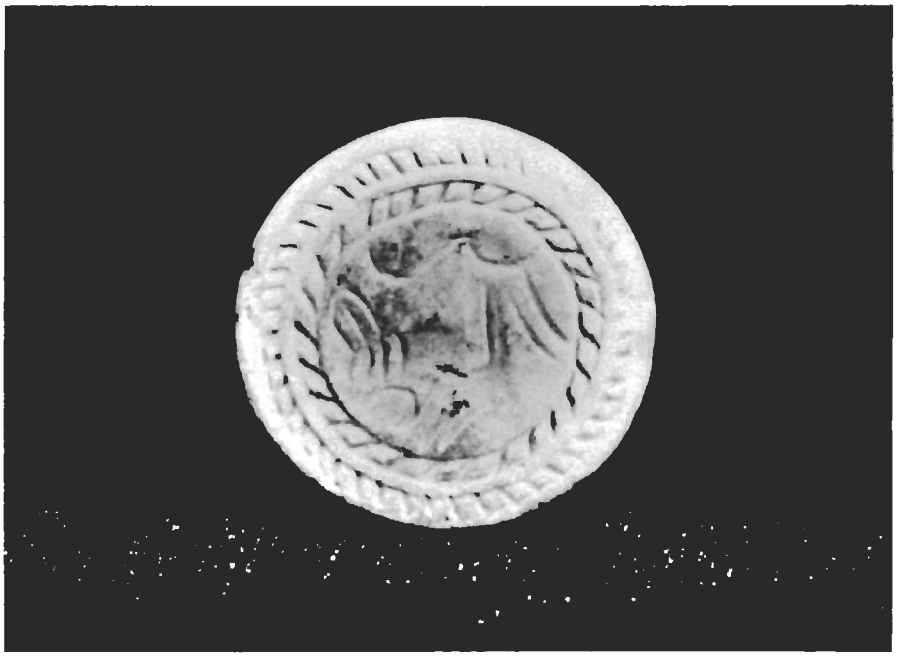
prime real estate areas do not imply disrespect). The burials were accompanied by offerings: some are simple goblets which may have contained perhaps some liquid; others were more precious, such as a stamp seal (page 7, upper photo) which has on its face the representation of a quadruped in a rampant position, similar in many respects to the representations of a hare which is commonly found on stamp seals of the same type from Anatolia in the Old Hittite period. This parallelism serves an important function in helping us to date the burial levels within the abandoned house. As is also confirmed by typological parallels with several of the vessels, the house belongs to about 1700 B.C., i.e. precisely the period of the Amorites, the discovery of which was one of our goals when coming to the site.

So, here we begin to tread on familiar ground, much as we had hoped when approaching the site. It is with great impatience that we are awaiting now the next season, when we expect to uncover the rest of the house which lies beyond the excavation line, as tantalizing as a secret room behind a closed door.

We are also beginning to gain some insight into the configuration of the ancient city. The house we have just described is at an elevation of about 12 meters over the surrounding plain level—and it is to be dated, as we just said, to about 1700 B.C. Some 200 m. to the southwest we opened two other squares, and here we found material which appears to be later, somewhere around 1500 B.C., and yet is much lower in terms of absolute elevation, about 4 meters over the plain level. The conclusion? The city of Terqa was sitting, already in

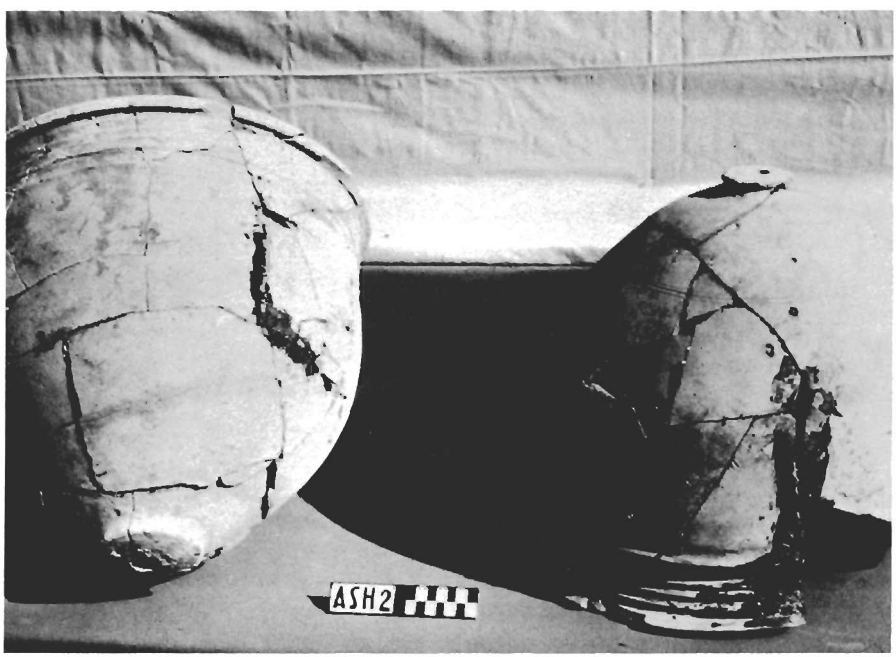
1700 B.C., on an artificial hill, of which the area of the house represents the highest point of what is left today: the present undulation of the surface may well have been the same in ancient times, except for the sharp escarpment on the east which is the result of the more recent erosion force of the river. Another conclusion may be suggested by these observations: since the higher elevation at the center of the mound is not due to a natural hill, but derives entirely from cultural deposition, it is likely that the higher levels of the 18th century sit on larger remains of earlier periods, most likely of the third millennium. We have thus another tantalizing secret in store for us, the urban physiognomy of a city with an unparalleled stratigraphic record of its growth.

The materials of the 15th century to which we just alluded are important in that they seem to confirm our expectations about the possibility of bridging the gap of the 16th century—a chronological problem which was one of the original reasons for the choice of Terqa. What we have at the moment are burial complexes which can be dated to about 1500 B.C. on the basis of typological comparisons especially with Nuzi, a site which is today in Iraq and which was in antiquity the easternmost province of the Kingdom of Mitanni, just as Terqa was probably its southernmost province. These burial complexes are for adults as the large jars were over 5 feet in height, and accompanied by several smaller vessels probably used as associated offerings. Another typical burial jar has a small disc as a base with a hole pierced through it, the example shown here, right, had been broken and mended in antiquity—with bitumen.

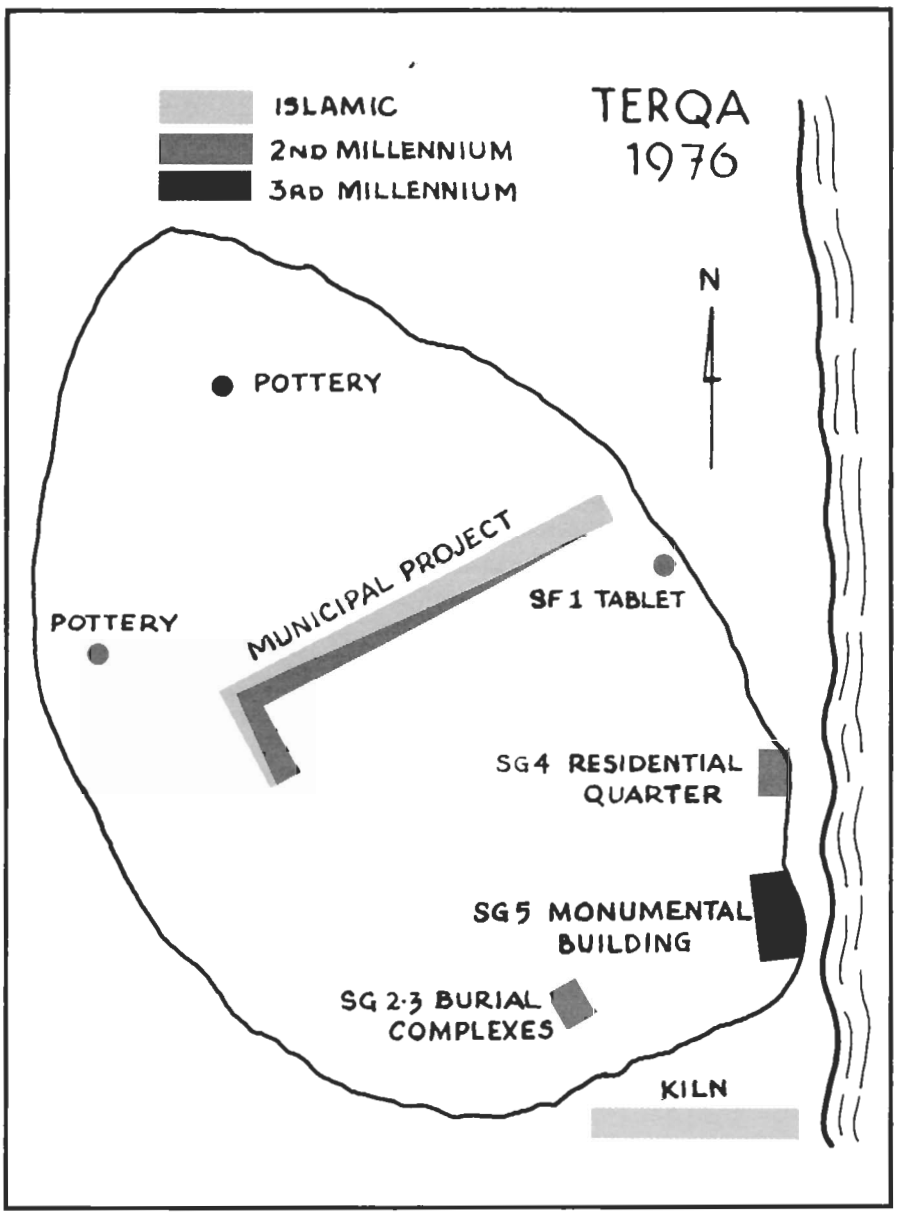


A STAMP SEAL, *used in antiquity to impress the clay of a tablet, of a jar cover, or the like.*

LARGE BURIAL JARS *of the second millennium.*



One reason why the present configuration of the tell may in fact correspond to that of the second millennium is that there does not seem to have been any major occupation of the site after that period. There is a considerable amount of Islamic pottery found on the surface, but, stratigraphically, the Islamic levels seem to be almost like a veneer; especially, we do not seem to have structural remains in the Islamic levels. With one exception—an interesting one, which may shed some light on the apparent paradox of the quantity of artifactual remains unaccompanied by structural remains. The exception is a glazing kiln which was slit open by the bulldozer: still sitting in their original position were small tripods and fire dogs some clearly showing drippings of glaze. Nearby, were two whole vessels, identical in shape, and apparently ready to be placed in the kilns—an indication of the mass production which the kilns apparently served. Terqa, then, may have served as a craft center for the ceramic industry in Islamic times (and for the glass industry: many fragments of colored glass bracelets are found strewn over the surface), hence, the quantity, in spite of the apparent poverty of architectural remains.



To continue with our initial metaphor, our harvest has already produced the seeds which lead to the next harvest. The thoughts which the excavations have engendered in us provide the framework within which to envisage the continuation of our work. Paradoxically, there is a sense in which it is true to say that we as archaeologists "invent" our finds. Not that we produce the data, since those are eminently "given" in the concrete reality of the stratigraphic record. But we do produce the conceptual web of relationships within which alone the actual finds make sense as part of an overall context. That such a conceptual framework is never an end in itself, but part in turn of a forever unfolding history, is the unsettling beauty of our profession. It calls for a dynamic spirit of adaptation through which alone we can harmonize new results with the established picture—going from harvest to harvest much like a farmer does, safe with the knowledge of a good sowing season and yet daring to face every possible twist of the unpredictable.

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