

# TERRA

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# The Glory of Ancient Syria

## EBLA TO DAMASCUS, PART II

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As a result of recent excavations, Syria has come to the center of attention as the site of pivotal ancient urban civilizations, contemporaneous with and as significant as those of southern Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Our survey of Syrian antiquity began with the late prehistoric cultures that provide the immediate antecedents of early city life. We then turned our gaze to Ebla, one of the great urban cultures of the third millennium B.C., which was excavated beginning in the 1960s by Italian archaeologist Paolo Matthiae and identified in 1975 as Ebla by tablets found during the excavation. Ebla was a focal point for the urban civilization of Syria and the center of a commercial network that stretched through the Near East and beyond. Particularly significant were the tablets found in the royal archive at Ebla; from these cuneiform writings we learn of the government and the everyday life of the ancient city. The tablets include the first known dictionaries, which recorded equivalents between Sumerian, used as a literary language, and Eblaite.

Mari, a second great urban culture of third millennium Syria, arose near what is now the border between Iraq and Syria. Mari was ruled by an Amorite dynasty that had originated from the pastureland of rural Syria. Opulent and sophisticated, the art and culture of Mari were more closely linked to the Mesopotamian tradition than to that of Ebla. Mari was destroyed around 1700 B.C. by the Babylonian king Hammurabi and never rebuilt. However, this Syro-Mesopotamian region continued to flourish; the citizens of the capital at Terqa had links with the Hittites to the north and the Egyptians to the west; cloves found during an excavation indicate that the Syrians of this era even had trade links with Indonesia and the Moluccas, the only known source of the spice at that time.

**THE GREAT REGIONAL STATES.** Clearly, such broad horizons were not accidental. The domain of urban civilization was expanding, and the political structures that accompanied it were growing apace. Toward the middle of the second millennium B.C. some radical transformations took place in the Near East that marked a sharp break between the two eras. The culture fracture that we witness around 1500 B.C. is, in our opinion, of greater consequence than the one that took place with the introduction of iron some five hundred years later. The introduction of iron is normally considered as significant because with it the "Bronze Age" came to an end; the impact on terminology, however, is perhaps greater than that on history. Let us consider the importance of what happened around 1500 B.C. first politically (with its socioeconomic ramifications) and then in terms of the history of technology.

Politically, the world of the Syro-Mesopotamian territorial states came to an end. In their stead around 1500 B.C. we find large regional states that extend beyond the borders of Syro-Mesopotamia: they have the distinction not only of being larger in size but also more complex in structure and quite different from each other in their internal composition and reciprocal relationships. In Mesopotamia we have for the first time the clear regional break-up into Babylonia in the south and Assyria in the north. Egypt initiates its policy of territorial expansion and military (if not quite administrative) control in southwestern Asia. The Hittites bring Anatolia (Asia Minor) into close contact with Syria, where yet another major regional state completes the configuration of these new major world powers: it is the kingdom of Mitanni, which controls the entire northern region from the Tigris to the Mediterranean.

Unlike the Amorite states of Syro-Mesopotamia, these new regional states were all quite different from each other, beginning with their ethnic and linguistic background. As for Mitanni, the great regional state of northern Syria, it

is centered in the upper Khabur (a bit north of Mari and Terqa), and it is heavily imbued with Hurrian (the third great urban culture of third millennium Syria) and Indo-European elements. Its capital is presumably to be found in the mound of Fekheriya, which has been excavated by German and American teams. (It is unfortunate that none of the major sites excavated by American teams in the recent past is represented in the exhibit Ebla to Damascus; certainly much of the material from these sites, especially Hadidi, Terqa, and Leilan, is at least equal in importance or greater than comparable examples chosen from other sites.)

The kings of Mitanni were on a par with the great powers: their letters have been found in the archive of the Egyptian pharaohs, with whom they intermarried. These letters, as is true of the other documents exchanged among the new regional kingdoms, were written for the most part in Akkadian, which, except for Assyria and Babylonia, was not the language of the parties involved: so foreign were these kingdoms to each other that they had the need for a common lingua franca of diplomacy—the first such case in history.

**TECHNOLOGY FOR A NEW AGE: CONTROL OF NATURE.** We have in our own age grown so accustomed to technological innovations that novelty has almost become a condition of quality. Can we still take enough distance from ourselves to appreciate what the impact of technological change can be when it is not taken for granted? So it has been for most of human history, although there were a few moments when innovations came in such prodigious clusters as to prefigure the technological bounties of our own era.

The beginning of civilization had been such a moment: large-scale architecture, the first industrial-type use of metal, complex sociopolitical structures, and, above all, perhaps, the introduction of writing in the service of a new capillary system of public administration. All these elements are well documented in





*This standing deity (1400–1300 B.C.) from Ugarit cannot be securely identified, but it may be the storm god Adad, in which case the statue would have held a thunderbolt in its right hand. Photograph courtesy of SITES.*



the first part of the Ebla to Damascus exhibit: in those areas Syria was a concurrent partner with the other major foci of civilization in the Near East.

Around 1500 B.C. a whole series of new technological advances took place that are more specifically identified with Syria. These changes have not yet been properly assessed in terms of general cultural history: even though they are well known in and of themselves, they have not been appreciated for what they mean when taken together.

On the Mediterranean littoral of Syria and in the fertile northeastern Khabur triangle we find the first documentation ever of some far-reaching new "inventions" that were to affect human history on all levels. The two innovations that took place in the northeast affected the relationship of man to nature in a primary way.

The best known is the domestication of the horse: what is remarkable is that this process entailed not just the taming of the animal (as it had been with earlier species such as dogs or cattle) but its training to respond to specific commands and perform specific tasks in close collaboration with the charioteer. That the uses of such technology should have been reserved for the military goes without saying! But what is even more remarkable about this event is that the whole process was described in a how-to manual, one of the first such manuals ever. And while in its extant version it comes from the Hittite archives outside of Syria, we know that both the cultural and linguistic origin of the manual, and of the "invention" itself, was the kingdom of Mitanni in northeast Syria.

The same is true of the second great technological innovation, which reflects a greater human control of the forces of nature. The first manufacturing of a new chemical substance, a completely man-made product—glass—originated at about the same time, in about the same area. Just as for the domestication of the horse, here too we have a technical instruction manual that describes the process of manufacturing. And here too actual manuals are found in later versions coming from outside the area (Assyria, in this case), but the early focus and the starting point of the process is northeast Syria, and the many excavations currently under way there may contribute the proper background for this phenomenon.

**TECHNOLOGY FOR A NEW AGE: COMMUNICATIONS.** The other two major technological innovations of the period are already well documented from Syrian evidence. They do not affect the natural world but rather the world of culture or, as we would say today, the world of information. The first is the introduction of a system of musical notation—yes, a mu-

sical score! The earliest known example of such a notational device comes from Ugarit, a city that is well represented in the exhibit Ebla to Damascus. The clay tablet on which the musical score was inscribed was originally thought to be a mathematical text, but the numbers turned out to be references to the strings of a musical instrument, hence "notes," written in conjunction with a lyric, most likely religious in content: song and music!

Presumably, the people of Ugarit came to write this down because the song originated from an earlier linguistic tradition of Syria (Hurrian) that was no longer well understood. They wanted text and music to be retained in their pure form, and for this a plain oral tradition was no longer deemed sufficient. Modern decoding of the score is still tentative, and a couple of interpretations (and corresponding musical renderings) of the text have been produced by scholars: but even if we cannot claim full accuracy, it is a very moving experience to tune our ears to this sound that is trying to break out of its clay embodiment to bring us the same musical experience our Syrian forebears had some thirty-five hundred years ago.

The last innovation is the best known of all. What the microchip did for the computer industry, the alphabet did for writing—and its introduction and first general use is attested from the ancient Syrian city of Ugarit. So closely is it identified with the city, in fact, that the first full-fledged alphabetic script is called "Ugaritic." Some of the Ugaritic tablets shown in the Ebla to Damascus exhibit are written in this script: they are shown side by side with tablets in "syllabic" cuneiform, also written in Ugarit, and used for the purposes of international correspondence with foreigners who had not yet made the jump to the new Syrian technology. (Tradition has such a strong momentum that it is hard to shed even when new technology can prove it an unnecessary burden—witness today the absurdity of the English spelling system, with which, however, we have all chosen to live.)

Here too, as with the other "inventions" of this period, we have a technical document of the first order: a tablet that records, with the utter majesty of simplicity, nothing but the alphabet itself. It is a tablet of such supreme cultural import that it was not considered safe enough to export it for use in the exhibit; it is well worth a trip to the museum in Damascus just for its own sake.

But the Ebla to Damascus exhibit gives superb evidence of the overall cultural background that made the flourishing of such inventiveness and imagination possible. The style exhibited by the art of Ugarit is as impressive as the wealth that it displays: gold and precious stones are

(Continued on page 28)



*A religious text (an incantation against snakebite; 1300–1200 B.C.) written in a cuneiform script peculiar to Ugarit: it is the first alphabetic script, where each sign stands for a sound and is hence much easier to learn than the earlier syllabic cuneiform used at Ebla and Mari. Photograph courtesy of SITES. The text translates as follows: "The mother of the stallion, the mare, the daughter of the source, daughter of the stone, daughter of heaven, daughter of the underworld invokes (the sun goddess) Shapash, her mother: Shapash, mother, bring my word to (the chief god) El at the source of the two rivers, at the place where the two depths flow together! (This is) the incantation against the snake bite, the poison of the scaly snake: destroy it and remove the poison. But see he lifts up the snake, feeds the scaly snake, places a chair and sits down.... Recite the incantation around the houses, around the locked houses, around the bronze locks. Open up the house for the incantation, open up the house so that I (the god), Horon, can enter. Open up the palace so that I can enter. As dowry, give me snakes: give me lizards as my wedding gift, snake babies as my present. Now I'll give you snakes as your dowry, baby snakes as your present." Translation by Wolfgang Röllig.*



The ancient Syrians crafted elaborate wooden furniture inlaid with carved ivories, which were sometimes given as presents to ruling princes. This ivory carving (850–800 B.C.) shows a cow licking her newborn calf. The motif appears in an Ugaritic text: “Like the heart of a cow longs for her calf, like the heart of a sheep longs for her lamb, so does the heart of Anat long for Baal.” Photograph courtesy of SITES.



This necklace from Mari (crafted around 1200 B.C.) is an artifact left by a small population that lived at the city after it had been destroyed by the Babylonian king Hammu-rapi. Quadrupled rolled gold spirals are combined with beads of agate, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, which form a strikingly colorful arrangement. Photograph courtesy of SITES.



This relief, showing two Assyrian court officials, was painted at a time (around 750 B.C.) when the Assyrians had conquered much of Syria. The heavy emphasis on the eyes and the patterning of the beards are typical of Assyrian wall painting. Few of these paintings still exist. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Museum of Natural History.

This ivory (850–800 B.C.) carved in an open technique showing two sphinxes facing a central stylized tree was also part of an inlaid furniture piece. These sphinxes have ram heads and wings. Photograph courtesy of SITES.







*Clockwise from top, left: A bearded man shooting a bow and arrow is carved here on a small basalt block (900–850 B.C.). He is part of a more complex scheme that had been set up along the outer wall of a temple-palace in northern Syria. Photograph courtesy of SITES.*

*A mountain god flanked by two bull-men combines both Anatolian and Mesopotamian artistic traditions (1000–900 B.C.). Photograph courtesy of SITES.*

*Vessels shaped in animal or human form are a very old tradition in Syrian art. This vessel, which probably contained incense or spices, is in the form of a Nubian boy. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Museum of Natural History.*

#### **Syria and Surrounding Empires**







In the city of Palmyra the meeting of the Roman West and the Syrian East was reflected in its art. This idealized funerary monument (A.D. 150–200) shows a woman identified in an inscription as Aqmat. Photograph courtesy of SITES.

This Koran (1689) is written in black ink on paper and illuminated in many colors. The binding is particularly rich—it is made of leather and stamped with two tones of gold. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Museum of Natural History.



## EBLA TO DAMASCUS

*Ebla to Damascus: Art and Archaeology of Ancient Syria*, on display at the Natural History Museum from March 15 to June 1, 1986, is an unprecedented exhibition of nearly 300 archaeological and artistic treasures from the National Museums of Syria representing 10,000 years of cultural developments. *Ebla to Damascus* tells a tale of this unique culture symbolized by ancient Ebla at one end of the chronological spectrum and modern Damascus at the other. This exhibit is cosponsored by Occidental Petroleum Corporation and the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum Foundation.

## TICKETS

Each museum membership receives 2 free tickets to *Ebla to Damascus*. Additional tickets are \$4 for adults and \$1 for children (5–12) and senior citizens. Tickets purchased at the museum's Membership Office have no handling charge; there is a \$1 handling fee for each ticket order processed through the mail and a \$1 service charge for each purchased ticket. Tickets may also be obtained through Ticketmaster outlets at the May Company or Music Plus or charged by phone. Tickets entitle holders to visit all museum exhibits. Special exhibit hours are 10 to 5 Tuesday through Thursday, 10 to 8 on Friday, and 10 to 6 on Saturday and Sunday. The museum is closed on Mondays. Entrance to the exhibit will be through the East (Rose Garden) doors.



(Continued from page 24)

once more in full evidence, as at Ebla or Mari in earlier periods, and they are fused together with ivory and stone with very secure craftsmanship and with a masterful sense of elegance.

The second half of the second millennium B.C. represents one of the major turning points in world history, with Syria playing a pivotal role in the development. Whether through the great regional state of Mitanni, or through the wealthy and sophisticated harbor cities of the Mediterranean coast, Syria proposed at this time some major new formulas of civilized life and well-being. What is perhaps most remarkable, intellectually, is not only the openness to innovation and change, but especially the determination to provide a crystallized embodiment for the new experience. The "manuals" we have just referred to and above all the alphabet tablet of Ugarit, with all its noble simplicity, represent some of the supreme cultural formulas of all times.

#### **INFRASTRUCTURE OF EMPIRE: THE**

**ARAMEANS.** The political structures that followed the great cosmopolitan age of the late second millennium were on a scale much larger than anything known previously. We call it "empire," and it was truly so, a universal state that imposed uniform administrative structures over people of different background and culture. In its early form the empire was dominated by the Assyrians, at home in northeastern Mesopotamia and thus outside Syria. What Syria contributed to the empire was, we might say, its ethnic infrastructure. The Arameans were at home in the Syrian steppe, which had already served as the pastureland of the Amorites in the early periods: here and in the adjacent river valleys they gave rise to a series of territorial states with their own characteristic art, of which the sculpture is especially well represented in the exhibit. Their works have a unique quality, a freshness that seems to mark a new beginning on the seemingly unbroken trajectory of formal expression that had characterized the course of early Syrian art.

As their states came to be subsumed more and more under the ever-encroaching political arm of Assyria, the Arameans spread as a people beyond their original enclave. Their language came to be used beyond the limits of Syria, to the point that they achieved for the first millennium what the Amorites had not succeeded in doing for the second: Aramaic came to be the common language of the empire, the language that was most universally spoken, perhaps already under the Assyrians, and then even more so under the Persians in the sixth century B.C. The lingua franca now

*This elaborate gold bracelet (1000–1100), made from gold foil, is inscribed with a prayer for blessings and happiness for the owner: "Lasting power/permanent happiness/eternal success/true, pious blessing/complete grace, prosperity/lasting, eternal power/perseverance, kindness/constant happiness/to the owner." Gold or silver bracelets were worn in pairs on the wrist or upper arm. Photograph courtesy of SITES.*





The Romans built this road of limestone blocks west of Aleppo 1,800 years ago. Photograph by James L. Stanfield, © National Geographic Society.



Palmyra, long a prosperous resting station for caravans, under Roman rule became the most important trading center in the Orient. In the third century A.D. The Palmyrene queen Zenobia conquered Roman provinces from Egypt to Asia Minor before the Emperor Aurelian ended her revolt. Photograph by James L. Stanfield, © National Geographic Society.



was no longer that of the ruling chancery at the top but that of an originally rural people at the base.

**THE HISTORICAL CENTRALITY OF SYRIA.** Beyond the ancient world, the exhibit Ebla to Damascus covers a second major portion of Syrian history, which we cannot cover here. Whether it is the Seleucid dynasty (the dynasty that arose in the wake of Alexander the Great) in Hellenistic times or the caravan cities of Palmyra and Dura-Europos in the so-called late Antique period (Roman and Parthian, a Persian empire), or especially the splendor of the early Islamic period—Syria retained a central role in the development of Western history. The magnificent works of art of these periods, documented by the exhibit, will leave an indelible mark on even the most casual visitor.

The reflection with which we may close our brief review of the significance of this splendid civilization has to do precisely with such centrality. In the average historical perception, Syria had been viewed as central only in its role of a bridge to adjoining civilizations that were presumed to hold the key to the major unfolding of history. The wealth of new data that has come from excavations has begun to impose a new historical paradigm: Syria was central not as a threshold to something else but as a major crucible in which the mold of civilization was itself being shaped.

Ebla to Damascus is indeed an apposite title not only for the exhibit but for this entirely new paradigm. Ebla on the one hand stands for the earliest urban civilizations that found a very specific mold in their Syrian variety vis-à-vis those of Egypt and southern Mesopotamia. Damascus, on the other hand, stands for that major component of Western civilization, Islam, which only too often we view through the window of a Euro-centric historical paradigm. To the extent that it can help us rid ourselves of a parochial perspective of history, this exhibit will have performed a greater task than that of identifying the greatness of the Syrian cultural tradition—it will have enlarged and refined our Western awareness for the fuller significance of our most ancient civilizational past.

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