

1. Introduction

by

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1.1 History of the Excavations at Qraya

In 1977 the Joint Expedition to Terqa initiated a program of regional survey of the Middle Euphrates floodplain in the vicinity of Tell 'Ashara, ancient Terqa. Wachtang Djobadze and Olivier Rouault conducted a reconnaissance survey of the easily observable mounds along the river basin from the mouth of the Khabur river to the Syrian-Iraqi border.

This survey was followed in 1978 by an intensive foot survey from 'Ashara westward to the Syrian desert escarpment, for a total of 19 km², and in 1979 by an intensive car survey within a 600 km² quadrant centered on Tell 'Ashara. The intensive survey of 1978 and 1979 was conducted by Kay Simpson, who presented the results of her research in her 1983 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Arizona in Tucson (Simpson 1983); a revised version of this work will be published as part of the Terqa Final Reports.

During their initial survey of 1977, Djobadze and Rouault called to our attention the impending danger that was facing the nearby site of Qraya. Upon closer inspection, it was immediately realized that there was an important component of Uruk period material at the site. While the tell had been noticed before (e.g., Kupper 1950:112), its specific archaeological significance had not been fully realized.

The presence of a Protoliterate settlement in the immediate vicinity of Terqa was of particular interest to us because, from all indications we had at the time (and still have today), occupation at Terqa did not precede the early third millennium B.C. It appeared therefore that the Qraya settlement, because of its immediate proximity to Terqa, might represent a direct antecedent to the later urban development at Terqa itself. This consideration, plus the realization that no other sites of that period were known for the Middle Euphrates (Ramadi, a Protoliterate tell near Mari about which see below, 2.1, was discovered later), induced us to ask the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums for a special permit to conduct excavations there. Given the imminent danger of destruction by the local villagers (much of the upper levels, of the Old Babylonian or Khana period had already been bulldozed away), we stressed the need for immediate, urgent action at the site. With the customary efficiency and spirit of cooperation, the permit was received within a matter of days, and we diverted some of our resources from the Terqa excavations to undertake a small sounding at Qraya, under the direction of William R. Shelby. Similar soundings were continued in the following two years, under the direction of Kay Simpson: it is on these first three seasons of soundings that she reports in this publication. To her we wish to express here our warm appreciation for the skill and determination with which she pursued both the excavations and the preparation of the material for publication, even at a time when she was otherwise heavily involved with her primary work, the Khana regional survey.

These preliminary soundings had proven that the significance of Qraya was considerably greater than just in terms of providing the earliest stage of occupation in the “greater Terqa” region. The thick deposit of Protoliterate material, the nature of the artifactual finds, the strategic location in terms of the diffusion of Uruk period sites in the North (the results from Habuba Kabira, Kannas and Malatya have been published in the meantime)—all of this indicated that continued excavations at Qraya were very much needed.

A first major step in this direction was taken in 1981. In the Fall of that year Daniel Shimabuki undertook a six-week excavation at the site, which was followed by a protracted study period at the Terqa headquarters lasting until the Spring of 1984. The excavations were sponsored by IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies, with the additional support of resources made available by Shimabuku through a Fulbright Research Fellowship which he was holding at the time. He brought to Qraya a special familiarity with Uruk period material due to his previous experience at a major contemporary site in Khuzestan, Chogha Mish (see Shimabuku 1978). A brief preliminary report of his work at Qraya is in press for the *Annales Archeologiques Arabes de Syrie*, while a fuller report is in preparation for a forthcoming issue of the *Qraya Modular Reports*.

The major new insight which resulted from his expanded work at the site was a clearer delineation of specific architectural phases, the recovery of seal impressions on “bullae” and jar sealings, and the realization through a series of test soundings that the ancient settlement extended much beyond the present limits of the mound, in areas which are today under cultivation. We are greatly indebted to Shimabuku for the painstaking laboratory work which he carried out on the Qraya material during a long year spent in the Syrian countryside, and which will prove to be of extreme interest when published.

In 1984 work at the site continued under the direction of Steven Reimer, who had already worked with Shimabuku in 1981. Reimer proposed a long term project for excavations at Qraya, aimed at extending the horizontal exposure of the Protoliterate strata. His first results are briefly summarized below, and they promise much for the future. We are grateful to him for the spirit of initiative which he has demonstrated in assuming the responsibility of field director for the project, in securing additional funding, and in coordinating a small but very capable staff. The Ph.D. dissertation on which he is currently working will present in systematic fashion the materials and conclusions from his current excavations.

1.2 Significance

Started as a salvage project of what was perceived to be an early historical appendage of greater urban Terqa, the excavations at Qraya have proven to be of considerably more importance than just in terms of a local perspective. The main reason for this lies in the unique constellation of factors present in the evidence recovered there: these have led us to suggest the possibility of a new understanding not only of early Syrian urban history, but of the larger perspective of Sumerian civilization. This new interpretation has a direct bearing on the age-long discussion concerning the function of one of the most ubiquitous types of vessels ever, the beveled rim bowl. But beyond that, it sheds light on some fundamental aspects of early trade, on subsistence patterns and on the nature of early Sumerian expansion to the North.

The main arguments in favor of this interpretation are to be published elsewhere (Buccellati *forthc.*; they were first hinted at in Buccellati 1977:32). Briefly summarized, the results as proposed in that article are as follows.

Qraya represents a seeming detour in an Uruk period diffusion of settlements which went otherwise north along the Tigris (see Abu al-Soof 1985) and then went across the upper Khabur plains, from Hamukar to Brak and Habuba in modern day Syria (there are in fact no Uruk period sites along the Euphrates south of Qraya and Ramadi until the southernmost Iraqi sites). The detour south along the Khabur to Qraya (and Ramadi) would not seem to have been suggested by agricultural reasons, since the northern Khabur plains provide much better opportunities for farming. Nor was Qraya (or Ramadi, for that matter) a station on a route leading elsewhere, since a more direct route to the big bend of the Euphrates is available from the upper Khabur triangle. Now, if we look for local resources which may have been a target for the detour, one seems to emerge which has been completely ignored so far in the literature, and yet must have been of primary importance for the newly developing urban communities—salt. This commodity was greatly needed in the newly expanding urban setting not only as an indispensable dietary supplement but also as a preservative agent. The large salt playas of Bouara immediately to the east of Qraya (and somewhat to the northeast of Ramadi) offered a significant source of salt, of industrial proportions. It is to be noted that while the Uruk sites in the South had easier access to salt in the marsh areas, such was not the case in the Northern plains where the urban diffusion was taking place. The large settlements at Habuba and Kannas may also have been conditioned, at least in part, by the availability of salt in the nearby Jabbul playas.

Such a suggestion offers itself not only on the basis of geographical considerations, but also and especially as a result of a new assessment of a distinctive Qraya (and more generally Protoliterate) archaeological assemblage. The most typical vessel of this assemblage is the beveled rim bowl. What is most distinctive typologically about these vessels (regular shape, were including a high degree of porosity, distributional pattern of large amounts found together in thick deposits) happens to be identical to the “briquettage” which in late prehistoric sites in Europe has come to be demonstrably linked with salt production (Hopkinson 1975). The association, at Qraya (and other Protoliterate sites as well) of beveled rim bowls with small ovens/kilns, with large high rim platters (or “trays”), and with ceramic ladles corresponds well with what is known of the manufacturing techniques required for the refinement and consolidation of salt cakes: salt would be first evaporated in the large platters which were resting on the grills inside the ovens, then scooped out into the smaller (beveled rim) bowls and left to dry completely on the edges of the grill. Complete desiccation was necessary because of the high hygroscopic nature of salt. Once so desiccated in the bowls, the salt cakes were probably shipped in the bowls themselves: in spite of the extra weight, the bowls would have insured the better preservation of the salt against moisture; but it is also possible that the salt cakes were placed in lighter containers for shipment. The standardization of the beveled rim bowls, which has been shown to be only approximate (Shimabuku 1976; Beale 1978), would then correspond to the need to have cakes of some generally uniform shape and size for shipment, rather than to the need of exact measurement such as for the distribution of rations.

Whatever the ultimate merit of the “salt hypothesis” for an explanation of the use of the beveled rim bowls, the fact remains that the position of Qraya is so unique as to require some

very distinctive interpretive hypothesis. Unlike other Protoliterate sites, Qraya (together with Ramadi) are relatively small *and isolated* settlements, whose nature can hardly be described in terms of either major agricultural centers or way stations on a major overland route. Such a uniqueness of their location, coupled with the presence there of a standard protoliterate assemblage, make for a very intriguing cultural problem which the continuation of our excavations there will hopefully contribute to elucidate.

The issue of the relationship of the Qraya material to the Uruk period material from other sites, and its bearing on chronological distribution, is taken up only briefly in this report, which remains primarily descriptive; it will be discussed more at length in forthcoming, fuller publications of the Qraya material currently planned by Shimabuku and Reimer. As for terminology, we use the term "Protoliterate" to refer to the period as a whole in its historical dimension, and "Uruk (period)" to refer to a particular type of artifact assemblage.

1.3 Publication Program

The series of Qraya reports will follow closely the pattern established by the Joint Expedition to Terqa reports. This includes three major subseries.

The first set consists of *modular* preliminary reports. They deal with relatively narrow segments of the evidence, often conditioned by extrinsic, temporary conditions (typically the duration span of one season of excavations), they reflect a preliminary stage in the evaluation of the evidence and provide a more limited amount of elaboration and documentation. We will use the term "modular" instead of "preliminary" in the series title, because some of the topics covered in these reports will not necessarily be resumed in later reports—as might otherwise be implied by the term "preliminary."

Final reports, on the other hand, include larger groups of data which may be regarded as self-contained from a stratigraphic point of view and comprehensive in terms of data presentation. The main difference from modular reports, then, is that with the final reports (a) no additional information bearing directly on the stratigraphic aspect of the data can be expected from further excavations, while at the same time (b) the scope of the data constitutes a major body of material, presented with full documentary evidence.

The third category of regular publications consists of the *global record*, sorted by period of excavation. This is a computer data base which includes all the data excavated, encoded according to a full categorization system developed especially to take into account the requirements of stratigraphy, and to some extent of typology as well. Encoded in the field directly on the computer, it will provide the most complete and objective record of the data as excavated; this, however, will be possible only for material from future seasons, because for the past ones the encoding was non-digital and not yet fully developed in terms of the current categorization system. (A first sample of this new type of record, together with a revised *Encoding Manual*, is in preparation for the first IIMAS seasons at Mozan.)

The specific titles currently in preparation include the following: Daniel Shimabuku, Report on the 1981 season of excavations; Steven Reimer, Report on the 1984-85 seasons of excavations; Guy Bunnens and Arlette Roobaert-Bunnens, Protoliterate seal impressions. We also have to refer to these publications for a photographic documentation of excavations and finds.

1.4 Acknowledgments

We are pleased to present the first systematic publication of the results of our work at Qraya to the Director General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, Dr. Afif Behnassi, and to the other officials of the Directorate who have so promptly and generously supported our special endeavors at this site—especially Dr. Adnan Bunni, Director of Excavations, Mr. Kassem Touer, Director of Research, and Mr. As'ad Mahmud, Director of the Museum of Der ez-Zor. Recognizing the urgent need for the safeguard of Qraya, they made it possible for us to undertake our work there as an extension of the main work at Terqa/Ashara, of which Qraya is in fact a satellite settlement.

The representatives of the Directorate helped us at all times to deal with the sometimes delicate situation arising from the presence of local inhabitants on part of the tell. Over the years, our representatives at Qraya included Messrs. Muhammad Muslim, Khalil Hassani, and Hamido Hammadi: to them goes our sincere appreciation for their role in making our progress there possible.

The local authorities were also very instrumental in helping us to carry out our work and to protect the antiquities of Qraya. We wish to mention here in particular the governors of the province of Der ez-Zor under whose administration the work described in this report took place—Messrs. Abd el-Salam Bitar and Hamid Abu-Hassan. Also, the Chief of Police of Der ez-Zor, Major Muhammad Heikal, has always extended his support in matters pertaining to the protection of the site, as well as the Chiefs of Police of the Mantaqa of Meyadin and the Nahia of Ashara (in whose jurisdiction Qraya lies).

IIMAS — The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies, has been directly responsible for the excavations at Qraya. Funding was made generously available throughout all the seasons by the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation; for the 1983 season Daniel Shimabuku was able to use the research support made available to him by the Fulbright Commission; and in the 1984 and 1985 seasons Steven Reimer obtained partial support from the Institute for Old Testament Related Studies. To these individuals and institutions goes our sincere appreciation for making the Qraya excavations a reality.

Started and carried out under salvage project conditions, the work at Qraya is now yielding evidence of considerable significance for the understanding of the earliest period of human civilization in Syria and the Near East. We trust that our continued cooperative work at the site will yield ever more abundant fruits in the future.