

BACKDIRT

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Mozan

Tales from a Hurrian (?) Storehouse, 2300 BC

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WE ARE KEEPING AN APPOINTMENT, WHICH IS NOT ALWAYS easy in archaeology. But, if everything is predictable, where is the adventure?

Let us begin at the beginning. In last year's *Backdirt* we gave a brief report on an excavation at Tell Mozan which had yielded sealings and tablets from the Old Akkadian period. In case you've forgotten, two things stood out. First, the date and the place: this was the northernmost evidence ever found of cuneiform writing for the third millennium. Second, the promise: we had identified the nature of the building and could expect on the basis of our analysis to find more, possibly much more of the same, in the following season. So we gave you an appointment to come back and read about it in the next issue of *Backdirt*. That's where the gamble was. Could we indeed be so confident as to announce what we would be finding? Well, the gamble paid off. And here we are.

But before we tell you about it, we'd like to set part of the record straight. Let us pit *Backdirt* against the *New York Times*: which would you rather read? When it comes to archaeology—definitely *Backdirt*. Two *New York Times* articles from this past year dealt prominently with materials from our part of Syria. One in June described as brand new a theory concerning possible volcanic activities in that area, which would have had a major impact on historical events. Well, it wasn't brand new. We had written about similar phenomena and conclusions in our 1989 *Backdirt* article "Of lions, sun flares and volcanoes: Excavations at Mozan and Ziyada in Eastern Syria, spring 1988." (We have since published our views in a



proper scholarly venue, but the whole thing was nonchalantly ignored by the *New York Times* sources.) The second *New York Times* article appeared in the fall and described recent epigraphic finds from a site near Mozan as the first of their kind. Wrong again. They did not read the last issue of *Backdirt* (nor listen to reports we gave at two national scholarly meetings). The moral: stick with *Backdirt*....

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Mozan

Tales from a Hurrian (?) Storehouse

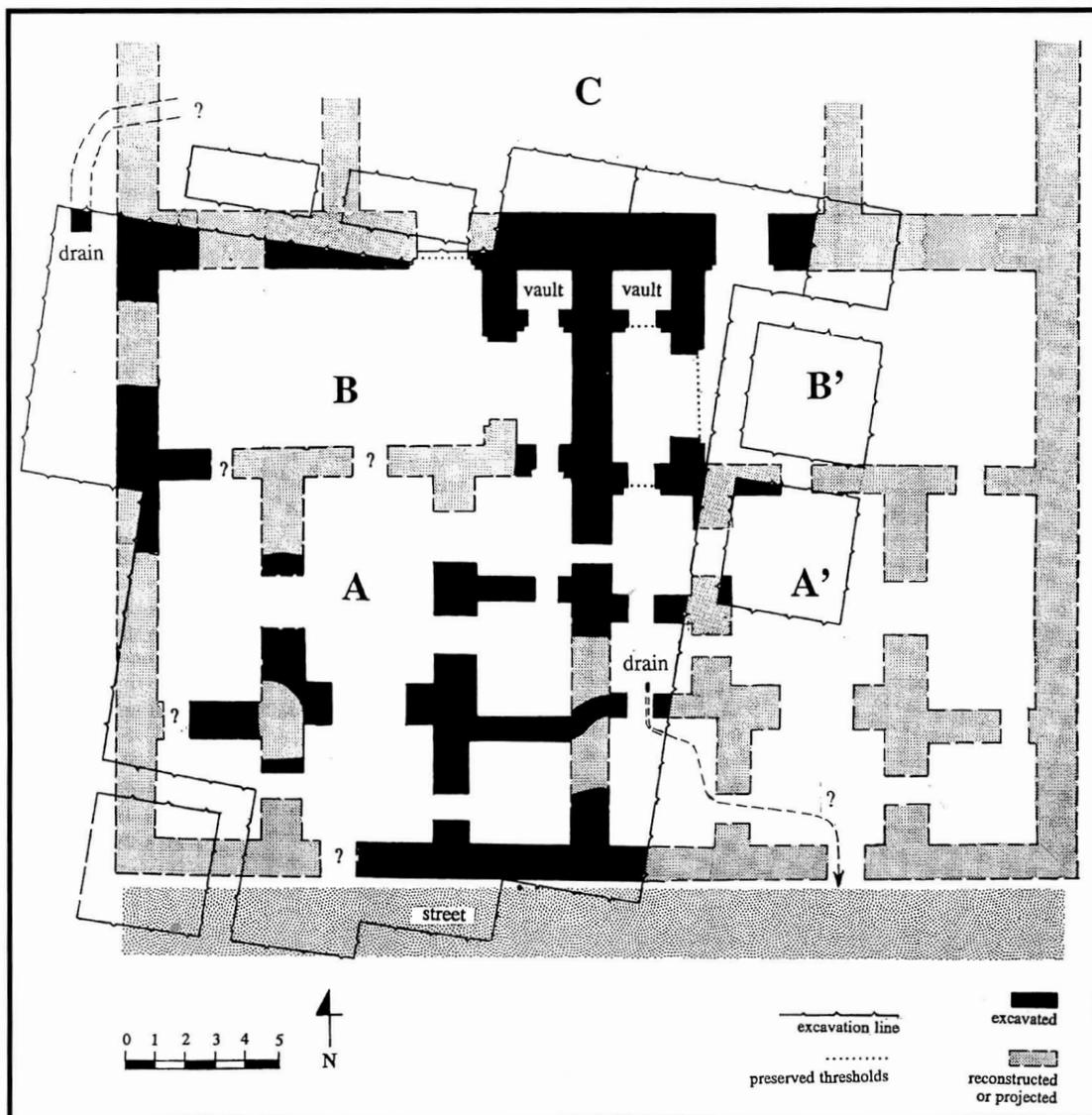
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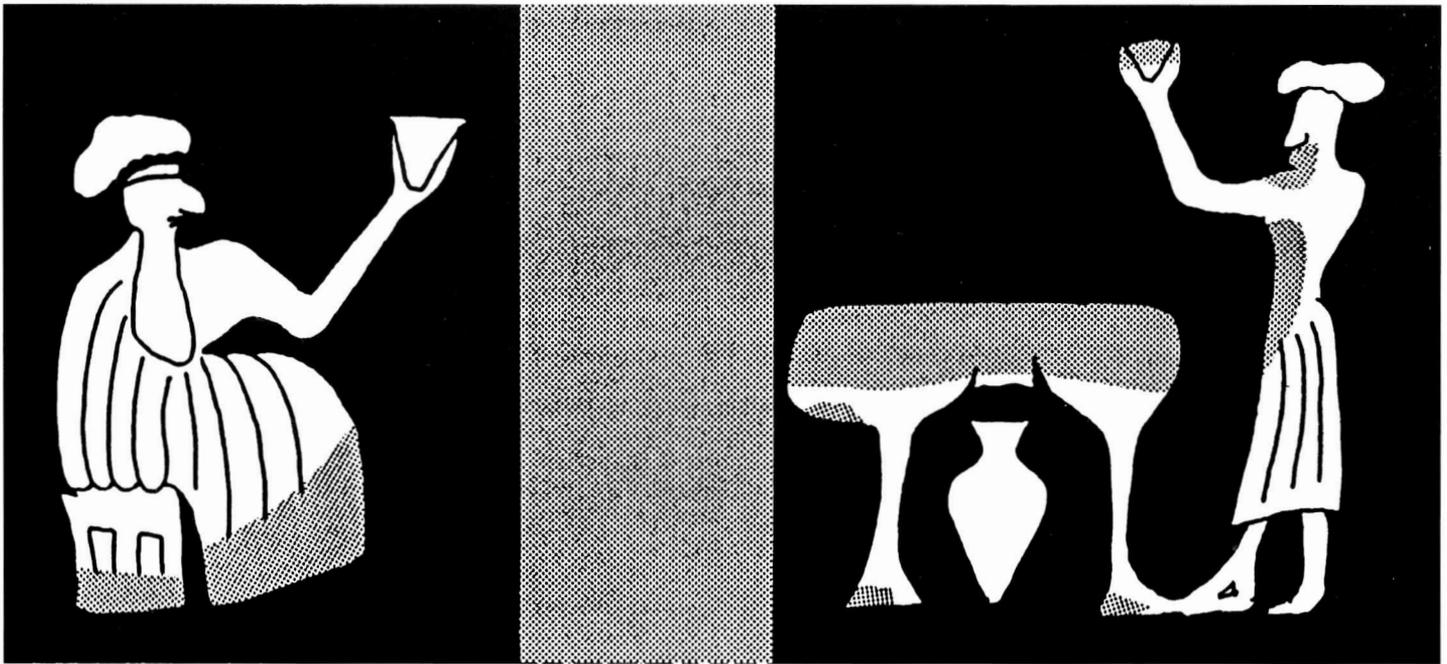
Now, back to the real thing. We have exposed extensive portions of a large storehouse. Because of the symmetry in the layout, we extrapolate the rest of the building as shown in the plan (*below*): two mirror image sectors (A-B and A'-B'), leading to a courtyard in the back with a number of rooms around it (C). For now we have only uncovered sector A-B, and a small part of A'-B'. We assume that A and A' were reception suites where incoming goods were registered and that B and B' were primary storage areas, each with a vault in one corner. The Sumerian term E₂. KISHIB, literally "house of the seal," may refer to just such a vault, a place where objects were stored inside sealed containers. The vault itself may have been locked rather than sealed, because hardly any of the sealings would have fit a door; most of them came from boxes and a few from ceramic vessels.

At the end of the 1992 season we had exposed the vault itself and most of the wall perimeter around sector B, and we had found

some eighty sealings in front of the vault. We anticipated that more would be found on the rest of the floor. But we were also ready for the opposite alternative: the farther we moved from the vault, the lesser the concentration of sealings might be. This would have been quite possible if the sealings belonged to containers stored in the vault only and not in the rest of the hall. However, we wanted to have the time to excavate the floor without any pressure, and we figured that a whole season would do it.

In 1993 we were ready for either alternative—many sealings or none. What was beyond doubt was that we would not have the proverbial unexpected find of the last day because the entire season was planned as if it were the last day of the previous season. We lucked out. By the end of the season, our total count of seal impressions had reached almost five hundred, eighty of which were inscribed, plus two small cuneiform tablets and fragments of some additional thirty tablets. The tablets are all administrative in nature, except for the school tablet whose photo





appeared here last year. They are written in Sumerian. The inscriptions on the seal impressions are more tantalizing, because there is a possibility that they may be Hurrian. This would be fascinating since it would place an ethnic stamp on what already appears to be a very distinctive material assemblage. Admittedly, the question mark in our title above looms very large. But distinctive our assemblage certainly is in terms of style and iconography, even if there are still doubts on the ethnic and linguistic label.

Finding the seal impressions was only part of the task. Our UCLA students Jamal Omar and Lynn Swartz worked on the excavation with Rick Hauser (formerly from Los Angeles, now in Minneapolis), and with the assistance of our own Barbara Pritzkat as surveyor. (Others you would know from UCLA were William Shelby and Helene Cooper, who worked on the ceramics.) Since the sealings are very small and fragile, they had to be carefully cleaned. Excitement grew as we brushed each one and saw this new corpus of ancient art literally appearing before our eyes! Then the fragments had to be drawn and photographed so that the original seal designs could be reconstructed. The drawings were done by Cecily Hillsdale, using a black and white technique that is distinctive of our seal publications from Terqa and Mozan.

It became immediately clear that many of the original seals were carved at Mozan. New or rare motifs were incorporated by the Mozan seal carvers; some design elements were reused and recombined. For example, at first we were impressed with what appeared to be a rather unique design of a figure holding a child on her lap. We now have at least two different scenes showing a

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child. The one (shown on page 1) points to a different pattern of interaction with the deity (or royal figure?): the small figure on the right touches the lap of the seated figure, a much more intimate, physical contact than found on other seals from this period.

Another reconstructed design (above) depicts a seated man in front of a table (?) with a vessel beneath; his servant stands beyond. Both are gesturing with raised drinking cups. The carving style of this seal is unusual in that emphasis is placed on the patterned edges of the relief. This period (ca. 2300 BC) is considered one of the highpoints of Mesopotamian art, and Mozan is adding a large and well stratified corpus for its renewed study.

We are beginning to reconstruct the ancient cityscape at Mozan: the city wall defining the perimeter of the central city, monumental public buildings that were already in elevated position by the middle of the third millennium (we have found an important temple of that period some 25 m above plain level), and a series of important storage facilities along the edge of the city. Since our new seal impressions were for the most part carved in Mozan, this city is beginning to take on a human fabric with its own particular artistic tastes, reflections of ceremonies, and records of administrative and intellectual life. Our ancient past looms ever clearer at Mozan.

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