

# Lost Capital of a Fabled Kingdom Found in Syria

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Correction Appended

ONE of the vanished cities of antiquity, Urkesh in its heyday more than 4,000 years ago was an opulent oasis of commerce straddling a major trade route in what is now northeastern Syria, near the Turkish border. It was reputed to be the capital of a fabled kingdom and the most sacred religious center of the Hurrians, an obscure people who were contemporaries of the Sumerians in the south and the Semites of Ebla in the west.

But history had long ago misplaced Urkesh and was left with but a dim memory of the Hurrian civilization. The Hurrians, or Horites, are mentioned briefly in the Old Testament and on a clay tablet belonging to Pharaoh Amenemhet IV, Egypt's ruler in 2000 B.C. The rest is mainly legend. Some historians had even doubted that the city ever really existed.

After eight years of excavations, an international team of archeologists is convinced that the long-lost Urkesh has been found. They have uncovered clay tablets and seal impressions, metal tools and detailed drawings revealing that Urkesh was a real city and that its ruins lie buried beneath the modern Syrian town of Tell Mozan, 400 miles northeast of Damascus.

The archeologists said their discoveries established that the ancient Hurrian city was more important and at least three centuries older than once thought. They were also surprised to find evidence that some women in the society appeared to own land and storehouses and to have considerable influence. Many of the seals belonged to a previously unknown queen of Urkesh named Uqnitum.

"To have succeeded in identifying it with the actual archeological site of Tell Mozan means that Urkesh has now a geographical as well as mythical location," said Dr. Giorgio Buccellati, a professor emeritus of Near Eastern languages and cultures at the University of California at Los Angeles, who is the director of the Urkesh excavations.

Dr. Buccellati announced the discovery yesterday in Philadelphia at the joint annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Society for Biblical Literature. Other members of the team included his wife, Dr. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, California State University in Los Angeles, and archeologists from Austria, Italy and Switzerland.

Other scholars of ancient Syrian cultures said the discovery was exciting and extremely important. It should lead to the first real understanding of Hurrian history and language, they said, and also enrich the comparative studies of art, language and cultures of other ancient Syrian societies in the period that saw the beginnings of writing, urban living, labor specialization and political empires. Hurrians seemed to occupy an upper middle-class position in many societies throughout the ancient Middle East.

Dr. Rudy Bornaman, director of the American Schools of Oriental Research and a specialist in Syrian archeology, called the find "a tremendous step forward."

Dr. Buccellati said that excavations at the hillside town of Tell Mozan would continue for many years. "A full assessment of early Hurrian civilization is one of the tasks which lies ahead," he said.

The archeologists have just begun to explore the site. They have uncovered ruins of a large temple and a room described as a royal storeroom. But this represents no more than 1 percent of the 300-acre site. From 10,000 to 20,000 people once inhabited the city, archeologists estimated. It probably flourished for several centuries in the late third

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millennium B.C. and then declined and faded from sight, perhaps as a result of falling water tables in an arid land.

Two bronze lions smuggled out of Syria and acquired by the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York gave Dr. Buccellati the most crucial clue in his search. Inscribed on the base of the statuettes was writing in a strange language. Scholars deciphered the letters spelling out "Urkesh" and the name of a king who had built a temple in the city.

As Dr. Buccellati recalled, this was the exciting moment when he realized that here was evidence of a specific historical ruler, that Urkesh actually existed and that it must be buried in the vicinity of Tell Mozan. In 1987, he began excavations on the slope of the hill, where farmers buried their dead and in doing so often turned up artifacts, including the two bronze lions.

Acting on a hunch decades ago, the mystery novelist Agatha Christie and her husband, Sir Max Mallowan, a British archeologist, had dug in the same area in search of Urkesh. But they gave up after two days, leaving the mystery unsolved.

The current expedition was more persistent. Its most telling discoveries were more than 600 written and drawn figures on clay seals that were found scattered on the floor of a room the archeologists described as a royal storehouse. The seals were affixed to containers that stored goods belonging to Queen Uqnitum and some of her retainers, including her sons' nurse Zamena and her cook.

In a report summarizing the findings, the archeologists noted that most of the seals were the queen's, not the king's, indicating that she occupied a central position in the society. "She appears as a property owner in her own right, as distinct from the king," they wrote, "and she could exercise direct control at least over that part of the storehouse where her goods were being kept."

Moreover, the name Uqnitum for the queen is Akkadian, meaning "the lapis-lazuli girl," or one who is cherished like a precious stone. The king's name, Tupkish, is from the Hurrian language. The archeologists said this may well imply royal intermarriage between different ethnic groups.

Other drawings on clay depict events like banquets, family gatherings and a woman preparing food. One shows the king sitting on a throne with a lion crouching at his feet. Some appear to be extremely fine portraitlike representations of the queen and the prince.

Describing the discovery to other archeologists, Dr. Buccellati exclaimed: "The Hurrians now have names, faces. We know what they looked like -- we know that they lived! The crown prince has a very distinctive face, and it's not very attractive, either."

A date of 2300 to 2200 B.C. has been estimated for these artifacts, based in part on radiocarbon tests. This is two or three centuries earlier than scholars had any knowledge for Hurrian culture. But the presence of a clay tablet containing a dictionary listing names of professions seemed to confirm the age of the city. The tablet is similar to ones found at other late third millennium sites in Syria, especially Ebla, one of the most impressive ancient Syrian cities excavated in this century.

The archeologists said the existence of the tablet, plus the fragments of some 40 administrative texts on clay, and the architectural layout of the building suggested that this had been a place where scribes worked.

If the excavations have indeed revealed the site of the lost Urkesh -- and no one yet is disputing the claim -- the discovery is expected to enable scholars to separate the ancient city of fact with the one of mythology. Kumarbi, the principal god of the Hurrian pantheon, was already known as the "father of the city Urkesh" and described as residing in Urkesh, "where he resolves with justice the lawsuits of all the lands." In mythology, Urkesh is the only known Syrian city to be mentioned as the seat of a primordial god.

Photos: Clay male figure, left, from Urkesh, about 4,300 years old; above, fragment of seal impression of Queen Uqnitum; right, part of schoolchild's exercise tablet, listing professions. (pg. C1); Drawing of seal impression of Queen Uqnitum, left, and photograph of seal impression of King Tupkish, below, found in lost city of Urkesh. (Giorgio Buccellati/U.C.L.A.) (pg. C5) Map of Syria highlighting Urkesh. (pg. C5)

**Correction:** January 10, 1996, Wednesday An article in Science Times on Nov. 21 about the lost city of Urkesh in what is now Syria referred imprecisely to the time and means of the Metropolitan Museum's acquisition of an ancient bronze lion from that site. The lion was bought by the museum in 1948, from a dealer in New York. Dr. Giorgio Buccellati, an archeologist who conducted excavations at the site in the 1980's, uncovered artifacts near the place where the lion was originally found. It was not he who excavated the lion. This correction was delayed by the need to reach Dr. Buccellati.

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