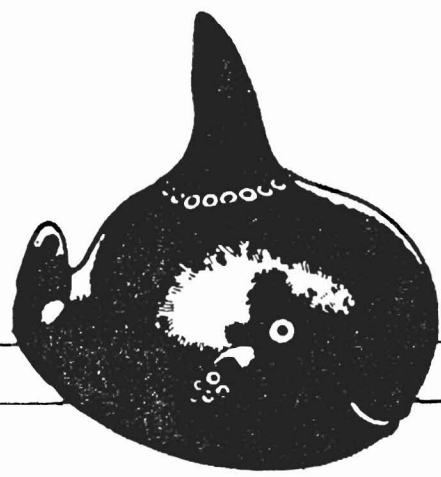


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THE SCRIBES OF TERQA

by

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Out of the literate world of ancient Syria, Terqa is beginning to emerge as a site with a special distinction: for one thing, we are finding tablets in virtually every corner of second millennium occupation, and for another, we are finding tablets from most types known in the cuneiform repertory. There are by now more than 100 texts, divided as follows:

- School texts Exercises
- Textbooks
- Library texts
- Administrative Contracts
- Disposition of commodities
- Other lists
- Letters Private
- Chancery (?)
- Foundation inscriptions

There is one addition this year which is of great significance indeed - **library texts**. We have one large fragment, some 3 by 4 inches, of what must have been a large, multi-column tablet, about the size and thickness of a telephone book. From a preliminary examination, it appears to be of the scientific literature type. The significance of this addition to the Terqa repertory of cuneiform texts lies in the simple fact that library texts presuppose ... a library. Over the years, we have been finding tantalizing clues in this direction.

(1) There have been several round tablets. "So what?" - you may well ask if you have never stopped to think of what it meant

to write on clay. The standard cuneiform tablet is rectangular (or sometimes squarish), about the size of a matchbox or a pack of cigarettes. It takes some doing to mold clay in that shape and to end up with smooth edges and faces on all sides. If all you want is scrap paper, or rather - scrap clay, you don't really want to go through the trouble of shaping a rectangular tablet: a round lump of clay, flattened on two sides, is the easiest shape to produce. Hence the significance of the round tablets (for some reason, Assyriologists like to use the German term "Rundtafeln"): they are the scrap material used by scribes, typically the young apprentice scribes who are learning how to hold the stylus and how to write individual cuneiform signs. We have found round tablets in the past, and again this year. One in particular has some fine calligraphy on it, better than any we have had previously -- perhaps the bluebook of a scribe who had made it at holding the stylus!

(2) There have been blank tablets. Here again the significance becomes apparent if you think of scribes getting ready to write, squatting down to mold the clay in the proper shape, picking up the stylus ... and being called off if not to the telephone then to some other nuisance of the type which has always existed to bother us intellectuals. You come back to find your tablet all dried up, so you toss it away with some appropriate commendation (... which still eludes us!).

(3) There have been erasers. It was Tim Seymour who first called our attention to this,

from some earlier parallels in Ebla. They have the appearance of small axe heads, but they have no means of hafting, and they are too small to have a plausible function as axe heads; plus, they exhibit no wear pattern of the type one would expect. As erasers, they would be used on the narrow side (this would be the hafting side) to push in on the clay and blot out one character, and on the broad side to strike over one entire line. This year we found one more such "eraser," and also a tablet which shows quite well the presumed use of the eraser: it is almost entirely blotted out, and not written over. It obviously came from the waste-basket of the ancient scribes.

These three clues -- round tablets, blank tablets, erasers -- lead us to presuppose the existence of a school nearby. But the library texts are indicative of more. We are not just looking for a grammar school, but rather for an advanced institution with its regular library. We have not found the library, but we are hovering in the general area where there once was one. In the architectural complex where we are excavating this year (in Area F, near the Municipal Park of modern Ashara) we have already found more than 50 tablets, most of them from the period when Terqa was a province of Mari. One contract found this year bears a year name of king Zimri-Lim of Mari, and there is a letter addressed to Kibri-Dagan. Several of the tablets exhibit a beautiful calligraphy, of a type more archaic than the one from the Khana period, and very well in keeping with the Mari calligraphy. Even though the overall exposure is by now considerable (almost 30 x 30 meters) we still do not have enough of the architectural complex to be able to identify it positively. It may be the service quarter of a larger public building, possibly a temple, the main part of which is still under ground.

Whatever the exact nature of the complex, it seems certain that it housed some scribes. We have in fact something which we understand as a **scribal installation**, i. e. the spot for a scribe to sit down and write a tablet. No fancy desk, no fancy filing cabinets, no fancy stationery supplies -- but, yes, a simple desk, two simple filing cabinets, and a simple container for supplies. We have given below a schematic plan of Scribal Office N. 1 at Terqa, which translates as follows:

baked brick platform	= desk and chair
jar containing tablets	= desk drawer
bin	= filing cabinet
jar for clay	= stationery suppl ^s
basket	= briefcase (?)

There were in fact 6 tablets inside the tablet jar, and one tablet in the bin. In addition there were 9 tablets (including the library text mentioned above!) in the immediate proximity as well as two cylinder seals. Three more tablets were found in a similar bin in a different room nearby. There was in fact some clay in the jar next to the platform, although there was also some refuse. Its position is very suggestive: it is set deeply in the ground, with the rim rising a bit above the surface of the brick pavement, so that a scribe squatting on the pavement could have reached easily down for clay, kept moist inside the jar. Since there is no evidence of burning or water circulation, we can exclude the possibility that the platform may have been used as either a cooking or a hygienic installation, whereas the interpretation as a scribal installation would account well for all observed facts.

This scribal installation was in use for some length of time: as the floor around it rose, the little platform came to be sunk in the ground, so that it was rebuilt. We have found three such levels superimposed one upon the other, with a thickness of less than a foot between them. Two other interesting items can be mentioned in connection with the scribal installation. First, next to the doorway of the area where the installation was found there was a basket. It was carbonized but very well preserved: a flat rectangular base, about a foot on its long side, with the sides sloping inward, though unfortunately without a rim. Nothing was found inside, but one of its possible uses was as a container to move tablets about - a briefcase, we would say. Second, in the bin there was a small clay box. The inside area of the box corresponds approximately to the size of a standard cuneiform tablet. Could it be that it was not really a box, but instead a mold for preparing rectangular tablets on which to write?

One of the indications of the importance of the building was the presence of a large and well built **drainage system**. There is a deep vertical drain, and two lateral channels feeding into it. The vertical drain is about two and a half feet in diameter. As for depth, we followed it to a depth of 15 feet, and then desisted as it was getting difficult and dangerous; if it descends all the way to the water table, it would be to a depth of some 15 additional feet. It is made of pottery cylinders, each about 2 feet in height. The lateral channels consist of ceramic pipes, made in sections about 2 feet long and slightly less than a foot in diameter. Both elements (vertical drain and lateral pipes)

are not uncommon, but two features in our system are of special interest. First, one of the lateral channels begins with a small collector basin which has a filter raised above the bottom; it was set on the floor of a small open area, and was clearly intended to collect rain water, and filter it of impurities as the sediments would collect at the bottom of the small basin (this "basin" is in fact probably just a spouted jar with a filter behind the spout). Second, the vertical drain begins with an opening which looks very much like that of a large jar, i. e. tapering shoulders and a thick rim. The rim is peculiar in that it is square rather than circular, and it was covered with a square baked brick. Clearly the opening was meant to give access to the drain: its size indicates that it was meant not to let a person through for cleaning, but only to allow a container, such as a water skin or small jar, to be dropped down to raise water. Hence the system may be understood as a combination for the disposal of rain water and for water reserve at the same time. The complexity and the size of the system further indicates that we are not in any small private house, but in a more substantial building.

We mentioned that some seals were found in the "scribal office." One of them in particular is important because it is of a Syrian style which we had not yet found in Terqa. Its fine manufacture make it perhaps the best seal we have found so far at the site.

In addition to the drain described above, we uncovered one additional drain of a completely different nature. It is a lateral channel, which is embedded in the city wall of the **third millennium**. We have found it preserved for a length of some 10 feet, going in the direction of the moat. The inlet area is unfortunately disturbed, and so is its exact relationship to the city wall. But this was an important feature of a new excavation area which we have just begun this year in the area which we suspect may be that of a city gate. Our work there was hampered by the presence of massive recent deposits, mostly in the form of contemporary garbage, but also with loose pockets of medieval Islamic fill.

One more note on the third millennium. We opened yet another new area of excavation at the northern end of the tell, where the surface of the mound is rather low, and where we suspected we might find easy access to third millennium levels. And so we did. Below some 2 to 6 feet of modern loose fills, we came immediately upon good third millennium walls and floors. It was not possible this year to carry

our excavations beyond the size of a small sounding. But within a limited area, about 6 by 6 feet large and some 2 feet deep, we found six well preserved bronze spearheads, three bronze double-pronged objects with limestone fittings (of unknown use), one silver ring, and a representative sample of third millennium ceramics.

From one of these fills comes the most important single discovery of Islamic material yet made at the site: a small glazed jar containing **76 silver coins** dated to two different rulers of the Ayyubid period (about 1200 A.D.). It is regrettable indeed that no context is available for this find, but it clearly corroborates the remaining evidence we have, however slight, for an Ayyubid presence at Ashara - if this was already the name of the site at that time.

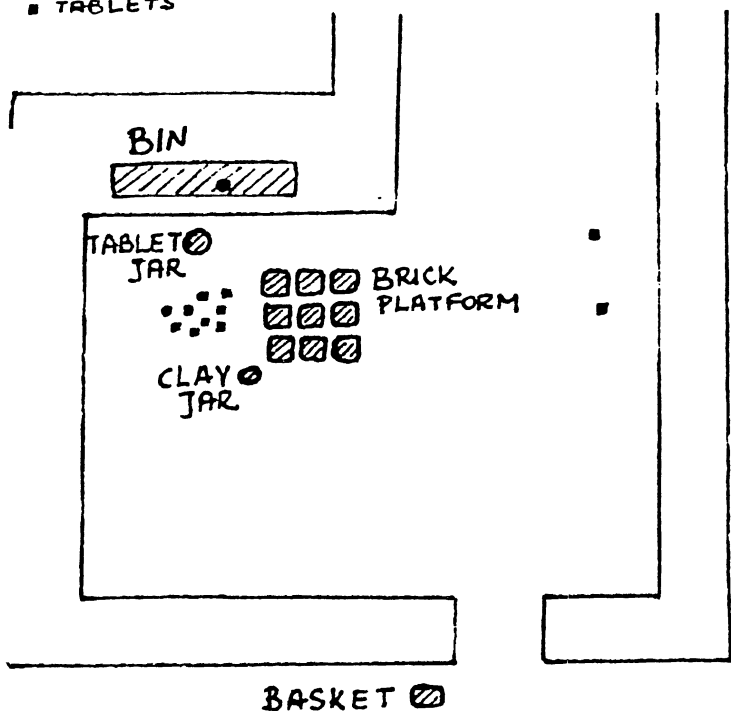
On the **technical side**, too, there was much work this season. We can only refer to it here in the form of footnotes. (1) The computerized stratigraphic recording begun last year continued on a fully operational basis without any major problems (except for occasional power failures). Like last year, this Newsletter is being set in the field on our main computer system. (2) A system for computerized graphic plotting was introduced. Supported by one of the new portable computers (a TRS-80 Model 100), the system worked very well on a preliminary, experimental scale. We will work next on rendering it operational, and we expect to have it in general use by the staff as of next season. (3) Less positive was an experiment with a small model airplane which we intended to use for regular aerial photography. While the plane had worked well in our test flights in California, it did not work here, and we had to resort to friendly local pilots and to our own older monopods. But we fully intend to continue with our experiment next year so as to have regular high range air coverage of our excavations. (4) With the very active participation of Steve Hughey, we have developed not only a new grid for both Terqa and Graya, but also implemented new methods of volumetric recording which allow for much greater precision and ease at the same time. This was the most wide-reaching and effective technical innovation of the season, and we will follow up with more work at home, meant especially to tie these data into our computer work. (5) We had the benefit of a two week visit by Roy Shlemon, a geomorphologist who laid the groundwork for future research in this area in connection with our excavations: even his initial and preliminary work was extremely infor-

mative and contributed greatly to our understanding of the broader context of Terqa.

This was - you will agree - a very full archaeological season. But it was also a very full logistic season. We have started the building of a **new Expedition house**. It is in a choice location, across the river immediately facing the site. We have about three acres, with a long river front section that leads to the new bridge linking the two banks of the Euphrates just at the foot of the tell. The first major building is by now almost complete - it includes the workrooms and laboratories. We will also have the bathrooms and laundry area completed shortly after we leave, while next year we plan to build a separate structure for the kitchen, the dining and living rooms, and the library. Last will come the sleeping quarters. The buildings are simple but very well built and quite attractive. Ismail Hijara has doubled as archaeologist and architect, and has done an incredible job at coordinating our needs and means with the local resources. Our building program has been made possible

through special grants from the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation and the Ahmanson Foundation to whom we are extremely grateful for their generous and prompt support. It was a wonderful surprise to have Dr. Herman Hoeh of AICF come for a field visit at the tail end of our stay here: he still managed to put in a couple of days on the dig in addition to reviewing our plans and projects. The city of Ashara will help us with the landscaping, and soon we will settle in one of the most attractive Expedition houses around! We will finally have adequate space to do justice to our technical support material, which has grown to the size of a regular research facility, and we hope it may be possible to spend more time here in the future than we have been able to do so far, largely in order to work on the data from our site, which are by now quite large. The archaeology, the new quarters, our growing circle of local friends all blend to make this more and more of a home away from home for many of us.

■ TABLETS



The scribal installation
in Area F
(sketch floor plan)

The drainage system
in Area F
(sketch section)

