

THE JOINT AMERICAN EXPEDITION TO TERQA

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Dear Friends:

It is the end of a week for us today, Thanksgiving Day, as we get ready for the Islamic day of rest which falls as usual on Friday. And it is the end of a season. We are still working on the tell this morning, before we sit down for our turkey dinner in the afternoon; but we are closing up our operations and putting our tools to rest for the season. They have served us well -- the picks, the trowels, the brooms: the millennia of deposition we now contemplate have suffered graciously the gentle violence of one more, and last, intrusion. It is as if the structures we have articulated out of the ground, the objects, the samples, might also wish to join us for Thanksgiving dinner to celebrate their newly recovered identity as signposts of history. And surely you will want to join us, too, as this is the time to muse over the accomplishments of such a rich and full season.

The goals we had set ourselves, ambitious as they were, have been materializing so well that we may be accused of having planted our results. In our published reports of last year we had theorized that the earliest second millennium period of occupation excavated so far dated to the second quarter of that millennium, about 1700-1650 B.C., known as the Khana period. This was based exclusively on a careful analysis of the vast ceramic inventory we had recovered. But mark the following. There is no other comparable body of ceramics from Mesopotamia since the Khana period is hardly documented at other sites. Hence our conclusion was based on a painstaking typological seriation, which showed how our ceramics overlapped in part with ceramics from other sites immediately before the Khana period, and in part with ceramics from sites immediately after. Our ceramic inventory was thus dated only inasmuch as it was framed on either side of its own typological boundaries by known quantities along the established chronological sequence. This was naturally the reason for its importance, in that it filled in what is otherwise a blank in the sequence. But it also gave us some reason to worry, since we had by necessity to trust our judgment in making a variety of logical and typological jumps. This year we were seeking a confirmation which went beyond typology. And we have found it.

Near the highest point of the mound we had uncovered last year the remains of a burnt house. We have been able to clear portions of two rooms and one open area -- three relatively small triangles, which had yielded, however, most of the Khana period pottery: it was extremely well stratified, since the roof debris had preserved everything on the floor. This year we opened up six squares adjacent to that house, in order to determine if, as we expected, more of the same structure was preserved in the same conditions. And there it was -- in fact, not just a house, but a residential quarter, with a street running through it. Given the size of the exposure, we have not reached the burnt floor everywhere. We have, however, two main results. On the one hand we have a fuller context, since we have substantial architectural structures, in excellent state of preservation. And on the other, we have been able to find the fixed point of reference in time which we had been looking for: we have now from this area seven tablets or fragments of tablets which date conclusively the houses, with their floors and all their rich ceramic inventory, to the period we had proposed on the basis of the pottery alone. The tablets are varied in content: there are contracts, with their envelopes; there are school tablets, both of an elementary type (a young apprentice learning to hold the stylus) and of a refined type, a beautiful calligraphic copy of a known foundation tablet of Zimri-Lim of Mari. There are also beautiful seal impressions, on the tablets themselves and on a clay tag. All of this indicates that this is no accidental epigraphic find. We have only skimmed the top of the burnt layer, and as we go down next season through its entire thickness and in all the rooms, we may reasonably expect to find at least some more components of what appears to be a family archive.

The remains of the house are so well preserved and the entire residential quarter so attractive that we have decided to make this the first display area of a Terqa Archaeological Park. We have placed a wooden balustrade around the edge of the excavation, prepared a three-dimensional model and various visual aids, and erected several posters (in English and in Arabic) explaining the history of the site, the nature of the finds, the methods of excavation. This will remain open year-round, and the guard will have additional leaflets to hand out to visitors, both Syrian and foreign, who have begun to find their way to the site. In fact, we expect tomorrow the visit of U.S. Ambassador Richard Murphy and his wife, who will help us to inaugurate our Park.

The second main question we brought to Terqa this year concerned the monumental building of which we had uncovered a portion last year. We knew it had to be dated before 2400 B.C. and that it was very large in size. We wanted to understand its structure and function, and to pinpoint its original date of construction. It was an exciting search -- exciting because of the size of the structure, which seemed to increase with every touch of the pick,

and because t_he date seemed to recede quite far back in time. At the end of our search this season we can say with confidence that what we have is in fact a massive city wall, and that its construction dates back to at least 2700 B.C., a period known as Early Dynastic II in Mesopotamia. The area where we first encountered the wall last year was the southeastern corner of the ancient city. From there the wall went in one direction toward the northeast -- and there it has been obliterated by the river, except perhaps for some boulders which are reported to be embedded in the Euphrates. The remains of the wall to the west and northwest have instead survived in many places down to our day, and coincide in large part with the present perimeter of the tell. In one spot we have opened a trench which has given us a well preserved inner face of the wall, preserved to a height of about 3 meters for the part excavated: it continues down to a deeper level yet, but we could not for this year follow it any longer. The width of the wall at this point is of at least 12 meters, but it may have been considerably larger in antiquity since we do not have here the outer face. On the inside of the wall we have an accumulation of about 2 meters of third millennium floors neatly stacked up against the face of the wall: we hope in future seasons to obtain a large exposure of a third millennium city quarter contiguous to the city wall, thus obtaining un hoped for information about the texture of one of the first major urban settlements. That this is indeed a very early city wall is shown both by a complicated stratigraphic sequence in the area by the river (which implies a long occupation given the disparity of functions which the same area served in succession), and by the type of pottery which we have been finding in the lower floors associated with the city wall. The Early Dynastic II period, about 2700 B.C., is a conservative estimate, and this makes the Terqa city wall one of the oldest (and best preserved) in Syria and the Near East.

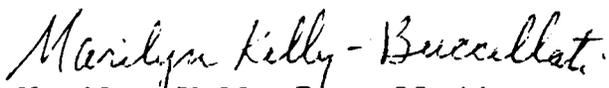
The wall seems also to mark the beginning of the history of Terqa, from what we know so far. But almost by accident we have come across, and begun to excavate, what appears to be t_he immediate antecedent of historical Terqa. This we will call proto-historical Qraya. It is a suburb of Ashara (the modern town which sits on ancient Terqa), about 4 kilometers to the north and also directly on the river bank. The site was endangered by a bulldozer and a building project. From an analysis of the surface pottery it appeared that while the top had a considerable second millennium occupation, the lower layers were clearly very early -- Protoliterate or fourth millennium. There were, especially, several beveled rim bowls which we found scattered in various places, in perfect state of preservation. We decided to apply immediately for a sounding permit, and with its customary readiness and effectiveness, the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities cabled back a positive reply within a few days. Now,

as we close a brief two-week operation at this new site, we can look at significant results, in spite of the limited exposure. The Protoliterate pottery we found on the surface was also found in very high concentration on a series of floors we uncovered within the excavation: these floors are contained by two walls which cross at right angles and continue beyond the perimeter of the square in what promises to be well preserved architecture. Besides beveled rim bowls, the pottery contains other typical Protoliterate vessel forms and decorative patterns, including painted motifs. To the same period belongs a rich variety of lithic tools, such as blades and scrapers, mostly of chert but also obsidian. From our surface collection we also have found Ubaid pottery and are hoping to find in Qraya the stratigraphy which will shed light on the critical transition from the Ubaid to the Protoliterate period. The site is relatively large, and given the nature of the finds we may expect it to be an important representative of the protohistorical period in Syria, for which little information has been recovered so far, and none, in fact, from this region.

From Qraya to Terqa we have now a continuous sequence from the fourth to the second millennium, with the best stratified evidence from anywhere in Mesopotamia for the period of Khana. The dynamism of historical development, which has come to be embedded in the ground over the years, is now reflected and fixed in our record... The cook's bell is ringing now in the courtyard to call us in for dinner. As we sit down to celebrate the bounty to which we are grateful to have fallen heir in America, our thoughts will also wander to those innumerable other pilgrims who have walked the shores of the Euphrates over the millennia, and to whose bounty we are also heirs, gratefully, here in Syria.



Giorgio Buccellati



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