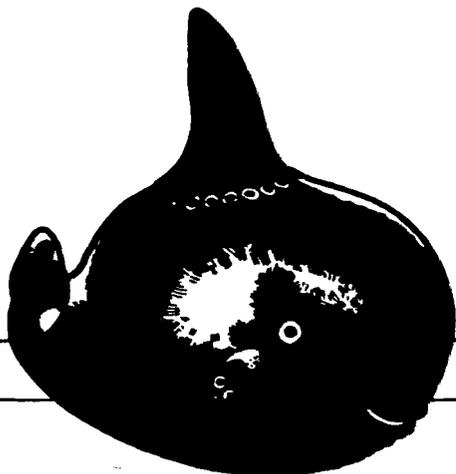


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THE JEWELS OF NINKARRAK

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If a season of excavations were to have a title, this would have to be the one for Terqa 5: The Jewels of Ninkarrak. It is proverbial that one comes upon the best find of the season on the last day of excavation--and so it was with the jewels. Proverbial, yet predictable. It was as if we had worked all season with a preordained goal: everything led to a place where a bag had been laid down in a corner, next to the altar, almost 4000 years ago. Here is how things went.

It started out with a lunar landscape. That particular area of the mound had been riddled, in medieval and recent times, with dozens and dozens of pits, used for storage. After we had cleared them, they all looked like craters on the surface of the moon. But, in between the craters, we could begin to read an older story, older by more than three millennia. There were faint lines, discoloration patterns, subtle changes in texture: together they spelled out, before we had even cleared a wall or found a tablet, the story of--a temple. We knew it from the layout of the rooms which could be traced between the pits, we knew it from the shape of the doorways which had a pattern of recessed door jambs characteristic of Mesopotamian temples, we knew it from the detail of shallow engaged columns befitting the style of public architecture. We knew it, but when we showed it to visitors at that stage of the game they gave us an incredulous and puzzled look: what they saw was like Swiss cheese, with lines between the holes which might as well have been drawn by us onto the dirt.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and so it was for our Temple. We were now digging away in between craters, and the faint clues we had perceived on top gave way to a three-dimensional, concrete reality. We had now plaster on the walls, floors inside the rooms, features on the floors, and objects right where you would expect them. By the end, we had not one, but four temples, on top of and intersecting each other.

They looked a bit like Russian wooden dolls, because one temple would encase the other: this was the result of deliberate architectural planning, aimed at preserving as much as possible of the earlier building by sinking the new foundations very neatly around the walls of the old temple, rather than directly on top of them. Three of these phases we have excavated almost completely, while the fourth one is lurking beneath, once again in the shape of faint lines and discolorations. We know we have about 10 more meters of cultural deposition below us: we may find as many more phases in the building history of the temple, going back to the Third Millennium. If so, we would have a major stratigraphic sequence in a single building for the Khana period and earlier. The Khana period, between about 1750 and 1500, is otherwise practically unknown, and its clarification has been a major goal of our excavations since the beginning.

We had the building, we had the altar, we had some ceremonial items, but we did not have the patron deity of it all. One suggestion came one day as we found a beautiful miniature dog in bronze right at the base of the altar: the dog is the symbol of Gula, the Mesopotamian goddess of good health, and its presence here could have been more than a coincidence; but there were no other notable...canine finds. (A remarkable faunal remain from the annex of the temple proper was a big elephant rib bone, almost three feet long!) Then came three epigraphic finds which suggested rather convincingly, if not conclusively, that this was the temple of Ninkarrak. A list of offerings gave her name in the first position, and two impressions of the same cylinder seal also gave her name. All three inscriptions were associated with the same king, Kashtiliash, already known as one of the Khana kings. And since Ninkarrak is the Sumerian counterpart of Gula, the little bronze dog found by the altar could in fact be associated with the goddess, as her symbol. The goddess is one of the important deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and in her Akkadian identification she was the tutelary deity of Isin, a major city in Southern Mesopotamia, and had, for instance, three temples dedicated to her in Babylon.

We thought we had finished our season. We were busily clearing the floor for the final overhead shots, a task of some magnitude because this year we were going to have--a helicopter. The entire site needed a good brushing, and we were all scurrying right and left. We were done in time: the helicopter landed in a cloud of dust--and people: everybody in town had gathered to witness the event. Since it was a large aircraft, the entire staff climbed on board and we all had a euphoric ride, while the photographers were leaning out over the side, shooting one picture after another. It was, we thought, a fitting end to the season.

But it wasn't. There were still the beads. A few had begun to appear before the helicopter ride. Right afterwards, we went back to check on the spot which we had temporarily covered with dirt, and it became apparent that there were going to be quite a few beads, perhaps in the hundreds. We set up a tent around the corner of the room so that we

could dig quietly, even after dark. To understand how they had gotten there in the first place, we had to dig slowly, in spite of the rush of the last days. It turned out that they had been placed chockful inside a bag and laid down by the altar. There was no trace of a bag left, but from the shape of the compact mass it was clear that they had been lumped together inside some soft container. They were not strung together, and were not in association with any cultic item, but given their location next to the altar they could indeed be regarded as the jewels of Ninkarrak.

As we started cleaning them, they seemed to multiply in number: from the first estimates of a few hundreds, we went up to a couple of thousands, but we were still counting. Strung together by shape types and by materials, they began to extend for meters on end, as one necklace after the other was laid down on our trays. The final count was--6737! Their weight--more than 10 pounds. Small beads and large beads, spherical, romboid, cylindrical, discoid beads, and fluted beads, and beads in the form of animals; carnelian beads, and of lapis lazuli, and rock crystal and hematite and gypsum and shell and frit and other stones. The most impressive were the little animals--ducks and frogs and quadrupeds (perhaps dogs). The most important were eight scarabs, presumably of Egyptian manufacture, but in any case indicative of early Egyptian influence this far east along the Euphrates.

This is, admittedly, only the title of Terqa 5. The rest of the story is just as interesting--the tablets, the Khana palace, the Aramean settlement, a sally port in the Early Dynastic city wall, the Proto-literate levels at Qraya, the Early Dynastic tombs (or cemetery) at Kishma, the new Kassite site of Mishteli. But we leave all this for a later follow-up, when we'll have gained some more distance from the dust and from the glitter. We have, now, indeed finished our season, and are ready to return. The soil, too, must have its rest.

