Yale

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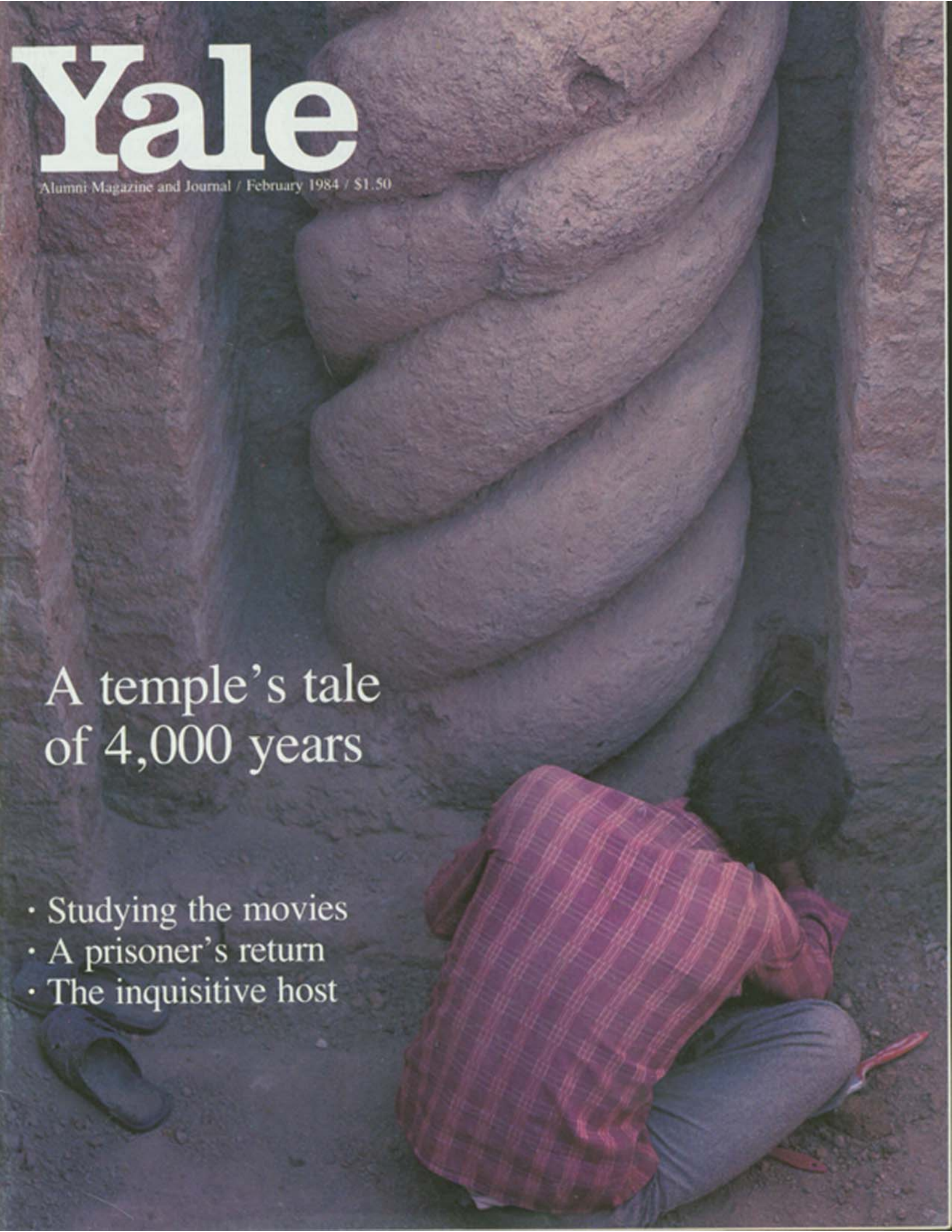

A temple's tale of 4,000 years

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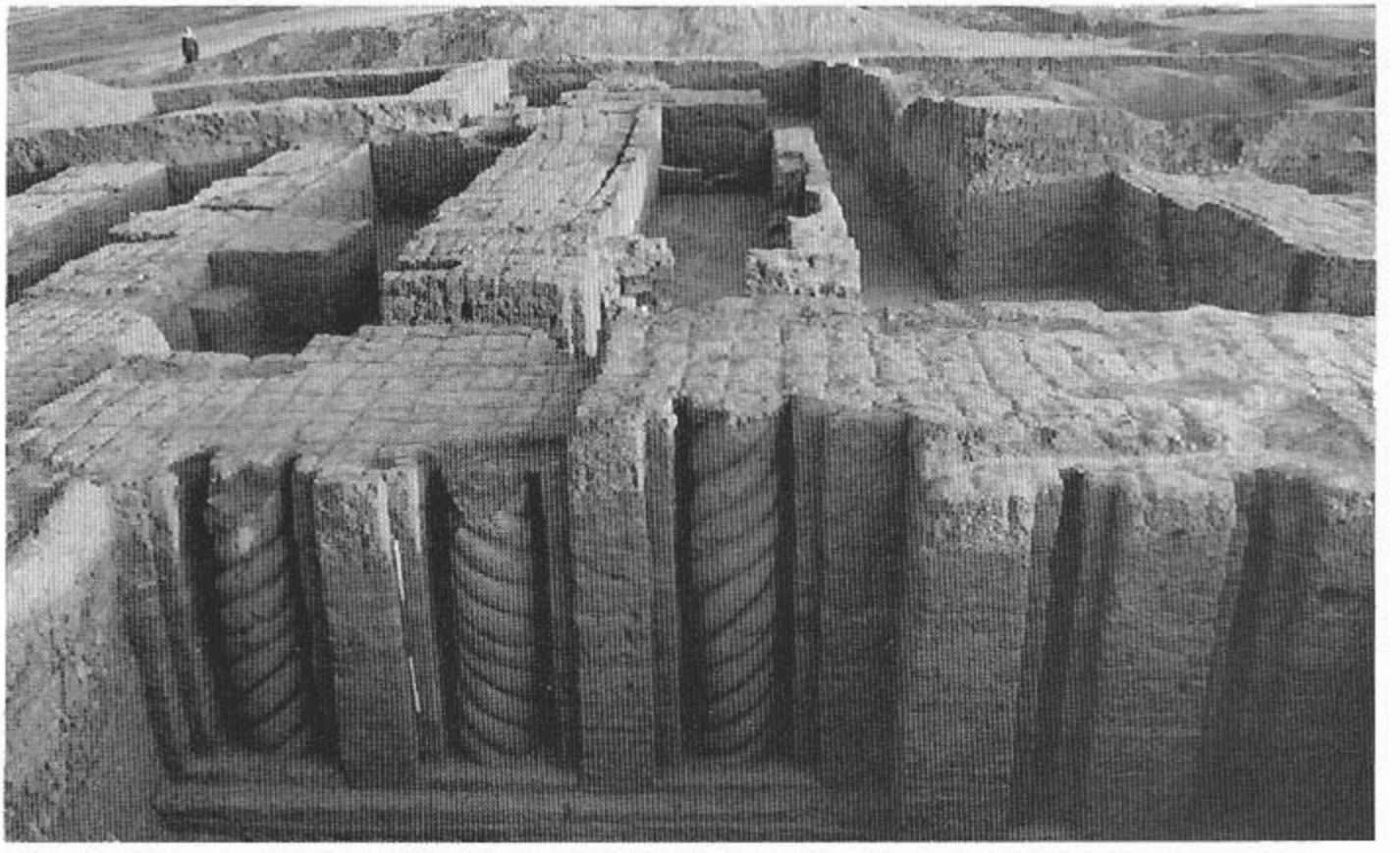
urban base of this northern empire, and the historical problem of its rise and collapse?

In 1979 and 1980 we had already excavated portions of a monumental, public building on the northeastern quadrant of the Leilan Acropolis. We were fortunate to have discovered that this building of the late 19th century B.C. was representative of the site's last occupation prior to the construction of a small village in the late 19th century A.D. This village is still occupied. At Tell Leilan only centimeters of topsoil separate us from walls built 4000 years ago.

Our Acropolis northeast building seemed to be a temple with an elaborate southern facade, decorated with rabetted niches and a mud-brick column which had been plastered, and then sculpted to resemble the trunk of a palm tree. Within this building we had retrieved several cuneiform documents, syntactically and paleographically similar to letters of Shamshi-Adad retrieved at other sites. Since Shubat Enlil passed into oblivion with the fall of Shamshi-Adad's empire, the evidence of Leilan's terminal occupation along with its size and location suggested that it might indeed have been the capital city of the northern empire. But we still had no textual evidence to indicate that Leilan was Shubat Enlil. The best we could muster was a small lump of unbaked clay, retrieved on a temple doorway floor, which bore the fragmentary seal impression of a "servant of Shamshi-. . . ."

In a field as hotly competitive as Near Eastern archaeology, scholars jump all over each other for the presumption of announcing "discoveries" when little supporting evidence is on hand. Who would claim that Leilan was Shubat-Enlil because we had found a lump of



A view of the northern facade of the temple and interior rooms at the close of excavations in August 1982.

The map at right indicates the location of Tell Leilan and other important sites in Northeastern Syria.

Laborers and students worked in the early hours of relative coolness. Part of the temple's columned north facade is in foreground.

The plan of the Leilan temple at the end of the 1982 excavations.

mud with "Shamshi-. . . ." stamped on it? And how could we investigate the rise and fall of Shamshi-Adad's empire if we still did not know if Leilan was the missing capital?

There was no flip of a coin, but in the end I decided to reserve "the origins of third millennium cities," for our 1984 excavations. We would focus our 1982 season upon the retrieval of additional information for the terminal, temple construction on the Acropolis.

Although villages and towns in Syria are rapidly building homes, schools, and hospitals of concrete, kiln-fired brick, and cement, traditional architecture persists across the countryside. The villagers of Tell Leilan build their houses with sun-dried brick similar to that used in antiquity. Not only are these materials durable, requiring but an annual or biannual replastering for maintenance, they are also a perduring adaptation to the climatic extremes which characterize the semi-arid Near East. Mud-brick keeps houses cool in summer and warm in winter. During the summer, villagers, reclining on the carpeted, well swept floors of cool, high-ceilinged, mud-brick residences, chuckle over the steam-room atmospheres of cement-block buildings inhabited by townspeople. Our workmen from Tell Leilan village know mud-brick architecture, as only those who live and build with it can. Many Leilani farmers and high school students are now veterans of our 1979 and 1980 excavations. Some have become expert stratigraphic excavators and help teach new students how the process is accomplished. You can't expect, after all, a student who grew up in Detroit to know how to excavate the strata-filled ancient collapse of mud-brick architecture.

With a team of veteran workmen such as this, and a dedicated staff of archaeology students eager to try themselves against the strata below, the second millennium temple on the Acropolis northeast presented few excavation problems. This was, of course, the summer time in the Habur, when most people wisely choose to spend their days indoors. Nevertheless, by rising at 3 a.m., and beginning work at 4 with the sunrise, we were able to spend seven and a half hours on the mound each day, and then take our sweat-drenched bodies back to our mud-brick expedition house for showers, lunch and a well deserved nap. The heat gets a bit rough, and some bodies attuned to the temperate climes of New Haven found the situation a little difficult. Nevertheless, massive brick-collapse was removed expertly, and wall faces of mud-plaster were carefully picked with hand tools so as not to "create" walls, but define them against the matrix of virtually identical mud-brick collapse.

Excavation is not for the faint of heart. There is a daring kind of brinksmanship, a continuous tension, between the need to excavate and remove, and the need to preserve and isolate. Following wall faces down to their floors can be nerve-wracking. There is the ever present danger of missing the floor, following the wall face down to its sub-floor foundations or to an earlier floor, and thereby mixing the stratigraphic deposition which provides the temporal framework for archaeological reconstruction. Delicately tracing with hand picks the "break" between collapse and wall face down to the first centimeter-sized patch of "break," which indicates the tamped, sometimes lightly plastered floor, is an anxiety-filled process. There is no second chance. Unique among research disciplines, archaeology destroys part of its data, the archaeological context, as that data is retrieved and then removed in the excavation of still earlier deposits.

When floors are located, student supervisors and pickmen call out for fine one-millimeter screens. The floor deposits provide the crucial evidence for activities which can be securely dated, as opposed to post-occupation collapse deposits. Sieving assures uniform retrieval, but also that no artifacts, however small, will be passed over as the debris immediately resting upon the floor surfaces is cleared.

Drawing upon experience and dedication, Yale students and Leilan villagers worked as a team, removing, recording, bagging, labeling, and note-taking with all the bizarre and sometimes mundane tools of the archaeologist: dental picks, hand-picks, and trowels, shovels, paintbrushes, graph paper, line-levels and plumb-bobs. Within six weeks of excavation we managed to expand our exposure of the temple from 550 square meters to 1300 square meters.

We have not, to be sure, retrieved all of this structure. It is clear, however, that the building wrapped itself around a massive pre-existent platform of mud-brick, partially excavated on the northwest. The northern facade of the temple, dominating the plains twenty meters below the Acropolis, was decorated

with engaged, mud-brick spiral columns, twisting in alternate directions, and offset by deep rabbeted niches. Although uniquely preserved at Tell Leilan, this kind of architectural decoration is now known from two other contemporary temples in Iraq, from where the convention, perhaps a stylized representation of trimmed palm-trunks, probably emanated.

What does one find on the floors of a four-thousand-year-old mud-brick temple in northeastern Syria? To be sure, potsherds, in the thousands. But also animal bones and carbonized grains, the refuse of daily cooking and eating, from which we hope to reconstruct not only the range of comestibles consumed within the temple, but the variety of crops and agricultural practices which characterized the Habur Plains during the second millennium B.C. Did we find "treasure"? Yes, but of a sort not usually understood to be treasure. No library or archive of cuneiform tablets was deposited upon the floors of the excavated rooms, although such probably exists in the palace close-by. The scattered cuneiform tablets found on the temple floors are all "economic" documents, recording the receipt of various commodities important for the temple economy. In fact, the temple floors were rather clean of exotic artifacts—except for the little bits of mud.

"Little pieces of mud impressed by cylinder seals . . . identify the officials . . . who used them."

Cities, by definition, are functional centers serving a dependent hinterland. When cities first emerged in Mesopotamia a means of recording the transactions which maintained this new social and economic system became a necessity. The transactions were complex and involved a multitude of groups, individuals and institutions: cities and villages, classes of administrators and laborers, and officials regulating and recording the transfer of goods and services. Two devices evolved and were then regularly employed to facilitate these exchanges. One was writing, and the second was cylinder sealing. Writing was, of course, used to record the details of transactions; but some means was needed to insure the veracity of the inscription, or in cases where only the goods were to be transported or received, the integrity of the shipment. Ancient Near Eastern officials therefore sealed tablets as well as containers, even storerooms, with cylinders bearing their names and titles, much the way post offices stamp telegrams, or customs officials bind and seal international shipments.

Patient, time-consuming sieving of the Leilan temple floor deposits provided us with the end products of these sealing activities: little pieces of mud, impressed by cylinder seals bearing inscriptions which identify the officials who owned and used them. From the southern part of room 13, one seal impression bore the inscription of a "Suri-Adad, servant of Shamshi-Adad," thereby conclusively proving the occupation and use of this temple during Shamshi-Adad's reign. Ten impressions of another seal of (the same?) "Suri-Adad" were also found on the floor of room 12. But sometime, probably not too long, after the initial use of these floors, the temple underwent some rather significant alterations.

Three rather flimsy and sloppily laid brick walls were set upon the floors of the temple using brick both coarser and whiter than that of the original walls. One of these secondary constructions was the enclosure wall which created room 13. The long central corridor, which probably had a mud-brick altar set squarely in front of its northern wall, would have then ceased to serve as the carefully planned focus of cultic activity. The two other secondary constructions sealed off the doorways of rooms 16–17 and 8–12.

Removing the secondary blockage of the doorway between rooms 8 and 12, three additional clay seal impressions of Suri-Adad were retrieved from the interstices of the brickwork. These seal impressions were probably lying on the floor when a mason swept them up to fill cracks in his sloppy construction of the secondary wall. After the construction of this wall a deposit of ash and trash built up against it upon the floor. Within this organic rubbish 229 additional seal impressions were tossed as jars of commodities were opened. Two of these bore the inscription of a servant of "Apil-ilishu, son of Ali-banishu, servant of Turum-natki." Two hundred and twenty-seven bore the inscription of "Beli-emuqi, servant of Haja-abum, servant of the god Adad." Who was Turum-natki and who was Haja-abum?

In the tumultous days following upon the death of Shamshi-Adad, the princes and kings of the small city-states on the Habur Plains ransacked and pillaged Shubat Enlil, and fought with each other over its spoils, until order was reestablished through the intervention of Zimri-Lim, the king of the great city of Mari to the south on the Euphrates. One of these petty princes was Turum-natki. Another was Haja-abum, apparently the king of the city of Apum, near Shubat Enlil, and a prince selected by Zimri-Lim to serve as his vassal in charge of the now despoiled capital. Have we then a record here of the last days of Shubat Enlil? A temple clean of all but the most humble artifacts, little bits of clay testifying to the activities of bureaucrats first in the employ of Shamshi-Adad, and then, after his death, those in the service of his former vassals? Size, location, and now the succession of bureaucrats, all provide circumstantial evidence which no other site on the Habur Plains can claim on behalf of an identification with the missing capital. Academic prudence requires that we say no more.

I am frequently asked what happens to Tell Leilan, this mountain-like mine of ancient history, when we return to New Haven. What happens to the magnificent architecture, product of so much toil, ancient and modern? Tell Leilan, and other ancient settlements, are carefully protected from any unauthorized excavations by the laws of the Syrian government which express a deep concern for the preservation of the country's cultural heritage. Tell Leilan undergoes no excavation without the permission which the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities provides to us. And the temple itself? Although petroleum scientists have wrestled with this problem for years, none have yet come up with a compound which might enable Near Eastern archaeologists to preserve excavated mud-brick architecture from the destructive powers of wind and rain. Therefore, we back-fill all of our excavations, thereby preserving the ancient walls and floors with that which insured their preservation these four thousand years, their own collapse. □