

Diggers Find Imperial City Of Assyrians

By WALTER SULLIVAN

It was in 1964 that a scholar at Yale, while cataloguing thousands of cuneiform tablets, came across a crucial clue: an itinerary of an ancient journey from the southern part of Mesopotamia up the Tigris River to northern Syria.

That itinerary, plotted on a modern map, has now led archeologists to the discovery of a site in Syria they believe to be the long-sought capital of a great Assyrian empire, which 39 centuries ago may have stretched from the Mediterranean to southwest Iran.

"By the end of the 1979 field season," wrote Dr. Harvey Weiss of Yale in a report just published, "we had managed to expose portions of two large temples, each magnificently decorated with facades of mud-brick columns, and in one case columns intricately braided in a manner known from few previously excavated sites."

Walls 60 Feet Thick

Beneath these ruins lay the remains of a city enclosed in more than two miles of mud-brick walls 50 feet high and at least 60 feet thick, walls so huge that an army of workers must have been needed to build them. Excavations to even greater depths have revealed layer on layer of remains of human occupation dating back 7,000 years.

Careful excavation is expected to fill in one of the largest gaps in the ancient history of the region. It should show changes in settlement patterns and daily life over 3,000 years. The findings

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should be "a powerful tool for understanding the origins of a civilization in northern Mesopotamia," according to Dr. Weiss, who headed the group.

The Assyrian empire whose capital was apparently built above this ancient city was ruled by a Semite named Shamshi-Adad. Archeologists, however, have suspected for some time that an earlier nation of uncertain ethnic roots dominated northern Mesopotamia, rivaling the kingdom of Sumer in the south.

The suspicion grew out of analysis of inscriptions on thousands of tablets from such ancient cities as Babylon and Ur. Names were found that are neither Sumerian nor Semitic. The region of origin is referred to as Subir or Subartu. It is suspected that the city of huge walls beneath the temples of Shamshi-Adad was the capital of that land.

Excavation Before World War II

The first clues to Shamshi-Adad's imperial capital began to emerge on the eve of World War II, when French archaeologists excavated Mari, an ancient city on the Euphrates near what is now the border of Syria and Iraq. In a palace of more than 260 rooms they found 20,000 cuneiform tablets.

Deciphering the tablets has provided a picture of the diplomatic, social and economic life of the period, including conflicts of the Mari kings with Hammurabi, famous for his "eye-for-an-eye" code of laws, who ruled Babylon from 1792 to 1750 B.C.

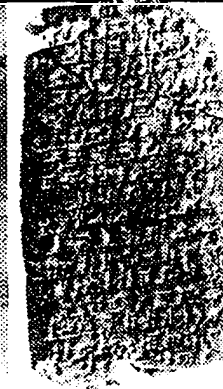
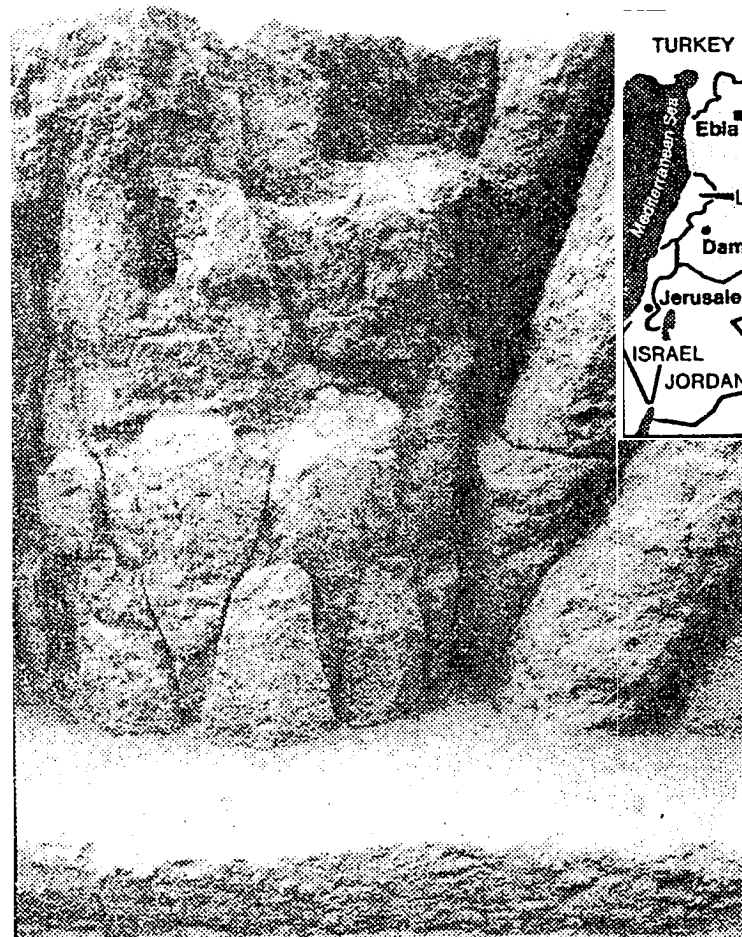
The tablets revealed that 20 years before Hammurabi ascended the throne, Shamshi-Adad seized control of northern Mesopotamia, establishing his capital in a place he called Shubat Enlil. He conquered Mari, leaving his son as ruler there. The Mari tablets include letters from Shamshi-Adad to his son.

The most important clue to the site of Shubat Enlil was found in 1964 while William W. Hallo, professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature at Yale, was cataloguing cuneiform tablets in the university library. One of them spelled out an itinerary from southern Mesopotamia up the Tigris to northern Syria, giving distances between known, and unknown, communities, including Shubat Enlil. This information, plotted on a modern map, placed that capital near the present Tell Leilan, site of a massive mound in northeast Syria.

Syrian Digs Began in 1978

In 1978, after approval by the Directorate General of Antiquities in Damascus, the Yale group began a systematic survey of the site, collecting 98,920 potsherds, many of which seemed to date from the Shamshi-Adad period.

The next summer, with workers from other institutions, the group began excavating the central mound, or acropolis, and found what they believe to be the remains of Shamshi-Adad's temple. Twelve tablets and tablet fragments as well as four cylinder-seal impressions



A mudbrick column decorating the facade of a temple exhibited the intricately braided pattern shown at far left, a pattern "known from few previously excavated sites," according to archeologists. Shown under the map is a clay tablet, a letter dealing with the disposition of royal lands. Tell Leilan is believed near site of Assyrian capital

on clay were collected. None referred to Shubat Enlil, but one indicated it was written during the reign of Shamshi-Adad. This, combined with the fact that the location conformed to the ancient itinerary, was taken as confirmation that this was Shamshi-Adad's capital.

So far, excavation of the deeper layers has been only exploratory. It is hoped that full excavation will produce a harvest of artifacts and cuneiform records.

Below the level attributed to Shamshi-Adad is one of pottery in a previously unknown style. It is called Leilan ware for the present name of the site. It seems to have appeared in about 2400 B.C., when the walled city was built.

Back to Fabled Nineveh

Further below is a layer of pottery associated with an early stage at the fabled city of Nineveh (known as Ninevite V) whose chronological position, until now, had been uncertain. Artifacts from the so-called Uruk Period of 3500 B.C. have been identified as well as those, deeper, from the Ubaid Period of 5000 B.C. The earliest known cuneiform writing dates from 3000 B.C.

Dr. Weiss notes that succeeding levels can be distinguished "in much the same way that frequencies of certain soda bottle types might allow us to distinguish 1930's city dumps from 1980 city dumps."

Unlike southern Mesopotamia, where highly productive agriculture based on irrigation enabled Babylon to flourish, the northern region had to depend on rainfall to water its crops and, according to the records, also supported nomadic populations that herded livestock. It is hoped that future excavations will help explain the relationship between such a rural economy and the

emphasis on city life exemplified by the newly discovered city.

In the October issue of the Yale Alumni Magazine, Dr. Weiss, an associate professor of Near Eastern archeology, notes that the Syrian government has allowed his group to bring back large numbers of potsherds for study. He hopes to resume excavations next summer.