

# Discovery of an Ancient City In Syria Called 'Sensational'

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ROME, Oct. 24—Italian archeologists, who have been working at a site in northern Syria for more than ten years, are now convinced that they have made a "sensational discovery" of an ancient kingdom that flourished as an important cultural and commercial center more than 4,300 years ago.

Their work was carried out at Ebla, just south of the modern city of Aleppo. Their breakthrough came last fall when they found 15,000 tablets in the archives chamber of the royal palace of the old kingdom and then began to decipher the cuneiform script that they said had not previously been seen.

"There were many skeptics at first," said Paolo Matthiae, the 36-year-old leader of the team and Professor of Near East Archeology of the University of Rome. "Now I think the discoveries are being generally accepted for what they are—evidence of the existence of a new world, one that rivaled the ancient kingdoms of Egypt and Mesopotamia."

Mr. Matthiae and a colleague, Giovanni Pettinato, a 42-year-old Professor of Assyriology and a language expert, are now preparing documents and packing pictures for a trip to the United States this week to lecture on their discoveries. They will be addressing archeologists and historians at meetings in St. Louis and later at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and the Universities of Michigan and Chicago.

## Most Ancient Semitic Language

Interviewed in their office in Rome, the professors said that the tablets revealed the most ancient Semitic language yet found and added a wealth of knowledge about the third millennium. The tablets, which showed that the city of Ebla had a population of 260,000, covered the 150 years from 2400 to 2500 B.C.

They said the findings were also of biblical significance. For example, the tablets contain accounts of the creation and the flood, which the Italian experts said were similar to those found in the Old Testament and Babylonian literature.

"The tablets bring to light a civilization that preceded the arrival of the Hebrews in Palestine," said Mr. Matthiae. "We have found the civilization that was the background of the people of the Old Testament, to verify what is written in the Bible. But the tablets reflect the kind of life the Hebrews found when they arrived later in Palestine."

"In the Bible, for example, we have some tales and traditions and ideologies that were innovations of the Hebrews, such as monotheism. But we also have cultural and other aspects that appear to have been borrowed from the ancient civilizations of Syria and Palestine. We have found the background to some of these."

## Old Testament Ceremony Recalled

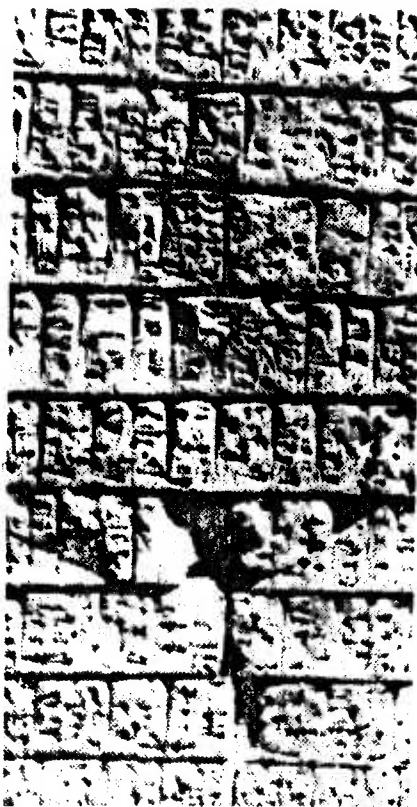
For example, the professor said, one of the exciting revelations was a line on one of the tablets saying: "The kings came anointed with oil." He said this recalled the Old Testament ceremony when Hebrew kings such as Saul and David were anointed with oil at their coronation.

Moreover, the tablets mentioned the names of citizens that translated into David, Abraham, Israel, Esau and Saul. The reference to "David" was described as the oldest mention of the name found to date in ancient script.

The cuneiform, which Mr. Pettinato is deciphering from photographs of the tablets, also refer to a place called Urusalima. He said that this could well be Ebla's name for Jerusalem, thus predating other ancient references to the holy city by perhaps hundreds of years.

One of the dynasties of Ebla was that of King Irium. And, Mr. Pettinato explained, this could be the root of the word "Hebrew," but he added that there was no firm evidence.

In reading the script, Mr. Pettinato has been helped substantially by the discovery of vocabularies in the palace's archives. He said that the Semitic people of Ebla had decided to invent a new language, different from that of the non-Semitic Sumerians of Mesopotamia



Section of a tablet said to contain the most ancient Semitic language.

languages at school, Sumerian and the new language, which we are calling Eblaite," Mr. Pettinato said. "We found vocabularies, one word in Sumerian and the equivalent in Eblaite. For example, the Sumerian word for king, nam-en, had beside it the word, na malik."

The Sumerians lived in southern Mesopotamia about 3,000 B.C. and were credited with developing the cuneiform style of script. The "new" language of Eblaite was believed by the Italian professors to be similar to the biblical Hebrew spoken hundreds of years later.

Because of the work already completed by scholars on Sumerian, some of Mr. Pettinato's translations came relatively quickly. "Many of the tablets are still easier to read than to understand," he added.

The Italians have read details of business transactions in bread, wine, gold, silver, bronze and copper. The professors said that it appeared that Ebla imported metals, processed them and then exported them to other parts of the Middle East.

## Wedding Gift of Cities

One tablet carried the details of a treaty between the King of Ebla and the King of Emar in the Euphrates Valley. It seems the King of Emar married the daughter of the Eblan king, who then promptly provided a wedding gift of a number of cities.

A proverb appears on another tablet: "The gift is all, the gift is life."

Still another provides a full military report on a campaign against the King of Mari in the Euphrates Valley. The general from Ebla gave a full account of the battles and the journey of his troops and listed the cities he had conquered.

"In our minds, the tablets represent a sensational discovery," said Mr. Matthiae. "Before, this area was dismissed as merely peripheral between the big centers of Mesopotamia and Egypt."

"People wrote that it was a land of roads, without culture and commerce. Now we know differently. It was a large center of urban life, not dependent on Mesopotamia. Ebla had been mentioned in previous ancient tablets, but only as having been conquered by Akkad kings."

According to the newly-discovered tablets, however, the kings of Akkad, which was the great Mesopotamia state, and the kings of Ebla were in constant struggle. King Naram-Sin of Akkad led the destruction of the palace in which the tablets were found.

"All this is new in terms of what we knew before about the whole area," Mr. Matthiae continued. "It is nothing less than a new and important chapter in the history of the world."

The excavations, which mark the biggest success for Italian archeologists outside their own country, will resume next summer. The professors said they still had many acres and many years to go.