NABADA:
The Buried City
Excavations in northern Syria reveal the metropolis of Nabada, founded 4,500 years ago. Its elaborate administration and culture rivaled those of the fabled cities of southern Mesopotamia.

by Joachim Bretschneider

The “tell,” or mound, at Nabada

Aerial view of ruins

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The Cities of Northern Mesopotamia

The steppe of northern Mesopotamia near the Khabur River in present-day Syria are home to the ruins of numerous ancient cities, including Nabada. Nabada reached its peak of prosperity in the third millennium B.C., when political and economic power in the region were being concentrated in a few large centers: Kish, Lagash, Umma, Ur and Uruk in modern Iraq; and Chuera, Ebla, Mari, Nagar, Nabada and Tuttul in northern Syria. Nabada and nearby cities probably served as relay stations for caravans traveling the ancient routes (red lines) between Anatolia (present-day Turkey) and Babylonia or between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Archaeologists have uncovered a variety of artifacts at Nabada that reflect the city’s role as a cultural and trade center (photographs at right).

—J.B.
region, Englishman Max E. L. Mallowan, excavated at Tell Brak, a mountain now known to hide the city of Nagar, and at Tell Chagar Bazar, a much smaller site. In 1958 a small team led by Anton Moortgat of the Free University of Berlin began a systematic study of Tell Chuera, a circular tell with a diameter of almost a kilometer. Later excavations at Tell Chuera revealed an urban complex dating to the first half of the third millennium. Although Chuera is made of sun-dried mud brick, as was common in the metropolises of southern Mesopotamia, its temples were constructed on monumental stone terraces.

Who built Tell Chuera or where these people came from remains a mystery. Curiously, Tell Beydar, the only other circular tell to be systematically investigated, is turning out to be quite different.

In Tell Beydar we discerned three main phases of occupation. Researchers date these phases by a combination of techniques: comparing trends in pottery design; measuring the occurrence of radioactive carbon in ashes and other debris of organic origin; and relating names occurring on tablets with those known from other sources. In my view, the dates are uncertain by only about 50 to 100 years, although other scholars differ.

Wreath City

The first and most significant phase began with the founding of Nabada around 2800 B.C. Apparently following a set plan, the builders constructed a circular settlement with a diameter of 600 meters. They protected it by a wall five meters thick, built on a raised embankment. Four gates, now seen as gaps in the buried outer ring, penetrated this wall. Peasants’ dwellings and artisans’ quarters clung to its inner side as in Europe’s medieval cities. About 20 tombs have so far been excavated near the wall, whose elevated base apparently served as a cemetery.

The tombs, some of which also lie beneath the houses, provide a clue to the people’s religious beliefs. In one case, a shaft led to the burial chamber, constructed of mud brick and sealed. The dead man, apparently an important official, lay in a fetal position surrounded by weapons, jewelry and pottery to ease his passage to the afterlife. Another grave was supplied with a bronze ax, ceramic jars filled with wheat and many other objects. Whereas soldiers were buried with their weapons, artisans were interred with their work tools; social stratification is evident in the varying richness of the burial gifts.

Some later Babylonian sources de-

scribe a tomb as an entrance to the underworld, a place of damnation from which there is no return. The offerings of food and drink by the relatives appeased the spirits of the dead in this dark and gloomy realm. Evidently the citizens of Nabada adhered to a similar belief.

An inner wall 300 meters in diameter protected the heart of the settlement. It is very likely that traders were allowed to spend the night between the two walls, safe from highway robbers but not themselves posing a danger to the sleeping citizens of Nabada. The double wall may also have let peasants from surrounding regions take refuge in the city in times of trouble. From the gates, radiating streets led to the central mound, on which rose a palace. Lining the city’s streets were blocks of houses, filling the space between the palace and the inner city wall. Drainage systems evacuated water from houses and courtyards into channels underlying the paved streets and alleys.

In the eastern section of the city stood a remarkable 27-meter-long building whose walls still rise up to three meters. Wide, arched doorways connected the structure’s four rooms, a sign of advanced architecture. Low sockets in the walls show that the rooms were fitted with elevated wooden floors for storing grain or wool; the supplies stayed dry thanks to the ventilation underneath them. Storehouses of such size suggest a complex economy.

For its size, the city inside Tell Beydar had surprisingly few houses: most of it consisted of a palace, rising like a fortress on the central, 20-meter-high acropolis. (That is, at least 20 meters of cultural levels and the ruins of several palaces, all from the early Bronze Age, underlie the present excavation.) The royal complex covered about 50 by 60 meters, comprising almost 50 rooms on the ground floor alone. Many of the mud-brick walls are excellently preserved, being up to four meters high and having intact doorways frequently spanned by a vault. A number of rooms boast a fine, white lime plaster on their walls.

A large central courtyard provided easy access to the palace’s many rooms. Friezes with clay rosettes decorated the walls of the main rooms, and stairways led up to a throne room (where the king met his subjects) and ceremonial chambers at a higher level. These rooms, which archaeologists recognize by their altars and other characteristic features, had annexes supplied with terracotta.
shafts up to 20 meters deep. The small rooms may well have been used for ritual washing and purification, with the shafts providing drainage.

From this large courtyard a smaller one toward the southeast could be reached. From here other staircases led to a higher level, where the living quarters of the ruler may have been situated. All around the perimeter of the palace are storage rooms, still filled with huge ceramic jars that once brimmed with goods. The southern part of the palace featured elaborate wall niches and altar platforms. The ruler may even have been interred here beneath the floor, following an old Syrian practice.

Last year excavators uncovered an intriguing set of terraces. These suggest that this year we are likely to find giant stairways leading up to the palace from the southern gate of the outer wall. They would have formed a steep ramp or stepped pyramid, lined with temples, the whole probably creating a monumental entrance for visiting dignitaries and the elaborate processions accompanying them.

Accounts of Nabada

In 1993 and 1994 excavators made a surprising discovery: a collection of clay tablets with a meticulous record of the palace’s daily accounts. Since then, we have found 170 tablets inscribed with a cuneiform script familiar from southern Mesopotamia. Most of the tablets were part of the floor of a house; they had evidently been discarded and reused as building material. Recently we have come across a heap of trash thrown over the palace wall, including many tablets. These written documents date to 2350 B.C., their age making them an important key to the culture.

The tablets are curious in one aspect: the script is Sumerian, but the language is Semitic. Philologists assume that Semites migrated into Mesopotamia around the end of the fourth millennium B.C., intermingling with Sumerians and finally dominating Mesopotamian civilization. They adopted the Sumerian script—the only one available—to express their own language. The tablets of Tell Beydar represent the largest collection of Old Semitic texts found in the Khālībur area.

The Semitic royal cities of Mari and Ebla had yielded archives of this period. Mari, discovered in the 1930s, lay halfway between southern and northern Mesopotamia and formed a link between the two cultures. Around 2400 B.C. it ruled much of the region to its north. Ebla, in western Syria, was discovered in 1968 by an Italian team led by Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome “La Sapienza.” Here the archaeologists found an extensive archive of cuneiform tablets, which describe trade relations with Nagar and Mari. Nagar was said to lie on an international trade route between the mountains, which were rich in ores, and southern Mesopotamia, with its major center at Kish.

Some of the tablets, deciphered by Walther Sallaberger of the University of Munich, speak of neighboring hamlets administered by Nabada. One group of texts informs us of the care taken of travelers, recording precisely the rations for people and animals. At one time, 11 teams of 44 onagers—a subspecies of the wild ass now found mainly in the north of Iran—had to be taken care of for four days, costing the city a considerable amount of grain. From other texts, Sallaberger concluded that onagers of high quality were bred in the region of Nabada and traded over hundreds
of kilometers—as far as the city of Ebla. Another text mentions the king of Nagar, who apparently ruled Nabada around 2350 B.C. This king visited the “province”—that is, Nabada—on occasions such as council meetings and ritual celebrations. A recently unearthed tablet lists delicacies provided to a woman named Paba, possibly the queen of Mari and spouse of King Iblul-il. Her visit illustrates the city’s far-reaching political connections.

Daily activity in this ancient city is also revealed in the impressions made by seals. High officials in the palace possessed finely carved stone cylinders that they rolled over gobs of clay to seal doors, containers and documents [see illustration on next page]. We found many such seal impressions in Tell Beydar, on pots and doors of storage rooms and also at the entrances of the throne room and the temple. These rooms may have been opened only on special occasions. Many of the sealings are miniature masterpieces depicting celebrations, lively traffic on trade routes, war and diplomatic activity. Historians now know that during the first half of the third millennium B.C., political and economic power in Mesopotamia were being concentrated in a few large centers. Thus, cities such as Kish, Lagash, Umma, Ur and Uruk in present-day Iraq and Chuera, Ebla, Mari, Nagar, Urkesh, Nabada and Tuttul in northern Syria came into being. (The earliest levels of Troy in northwestern Asia Minor and the early occupation of Byblos on the Lebanese coast also belong to this era.) Each of these cities contained fortification walls, palaces, storage areas and temple complexes.

The economic and political structure of southern Mesopotamia is relatively well understood. Burgeoning agricultural production allowed livestock to be raised communally. The surplus of food enabled specialized artisanal and administrative skills to flower, and a flourishing trade in raw materials such as copper spurred the evolution of centralized authority and power—as well as warfare. Perhaps the most far-reaching innovation was the craft of writing.

It is not clear that the northern cities followed a similar pattern. As in the south, the larger cities probably controlled extensive regions with vital trade routes. Nabada and its neighboring cities seem to have functioned as relay stations for caravans traveling the ancient routes between Anatolia (present-day Turkey) and Babylonia or between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Important families and a council of elders ruled, as in the south, and offered sacrifices to local and regional deities. A growing number of settlements also led to armed disputes over water rights, agricultural and pasture land, and control of trade routes.

Many questions remain. Historians would like to know who founded Nabada and other northern cities, where they came from, what language they spoke, and around what political and moral principles their society was organized. Moreover, Nabada appears to be quite distinct from the other circular tell that was examined, Tell Chuera. (Tell Chuera is, however, older than the levels so far excavated at Tell Beydar, and so a direct comparison cannot be made.) Chuera had monumental stone architecture (not just mud brick as in Nabada), and, more significantly, 15 years of digging have as yet yielded no evidence of writing. Nabada was probably more allied with southern Mesopotamia than with Tell Chuera, which had closer links with the civilization in Turkey.

After 500 years of prosperity, Nabada
was abandoned around 2350 B.C. Why, we do not know; the other known cities of northern Mesopotamia declined at the same time. Perhaps the kings of Akkad, who conquered many of the city-states of Mesopotamia, burned Nabada as they did Ebla. At Nabada, however, no indications of fire or other destruction have been found.

Some architectural changes may provide a clue to this mystery. Shortly before deserting the palace at Nabada, its inhabitants added a sanctuary and renovated several of the ritual rooms. Could this religiously motivated activity have been prompted by some natural event, such as a drought? Or do the deep fissures and cracks in the palace walls suggest a phase of intense earthquakes?

Hartmut Kühne of the Free University of Berlin has suggested that a large increase in population caused the natural resources of the region to be overexploited, forcing a migration. It may simply be that a reduction in the number of caravans traveling the trade routes made the northern cities uneconomical.

Tell Beydar was briefly reoccupied a few hundred years later. Around 2250 B.C., however, it suffered from plundering, decline and erosion. In the next millennium the Hurrians, a people who originated in the mountains of East Anatolia, arrived in the region, founding new royal cities such as Urkesh (excavated by Giorgio and Marilyn Buccellati at Tell Mozan). Around 1600 B.C. a Hurrian empire called the kingdom of Mitanni developed in the Khābūr area. At its apex, around 1400 B.C., it extended all the way from the Mediterranean coast to the Zagros Mountains. The Hurrians settled amid the ruins of Nabada, 1,000 years after the fall of the early Bronze Age metropolis.

In the lower town surrounding the abandoned palace of Nabada, outside and to the west of the fortification wall, some preliminary excavations have located remains of the Mitanni period. We came across a ceremonial vase decorated with rams’ heads and a collection of ivory reliefs depicting lions and bulls that were probably once used as inlays for furniture. The Hurrians did not, however, build a palace, and overall Tell Beydar was far less important at

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A picture of what life was like in Nabada can be found in the impressions made by seals. To produce a seal, palace officials rolled a finely carved stone cylinder over wet clay; when the clay dried, it sealed shut pots, documents, even doors. Many of the seals depict celebrations, lively traffic on trade routes, war or diplomatic activity. The photograph at the right shows a seal illustrating the use of wagons in both religious ceremonies and in war.

— J.B.
A New Language

The writings found at Nabada are unusual: the script is Sumerian, but the language is Semitic. The tablets of Tell Beydar (an example is shown below) represent the largest collection of Old Semitic texts found in the Khābūr area. Language experts have translated the symbols; a sample dictionary is shown below.

— J.B.

The empire of Mitanni perished in its turn, and in the eighth century B.C. As-syrians conquered the Khābūr region. From Assur, their capital city to the northwest of Babylon, these warlike people increased in influence after 1100 B.C. For a brief period, they even advanced as far as Egypt. The Assyrians were feared by their enemies: they are said to have deported entire populations and slaughtered opponents without respect to sex or age.

The invaders settled on top of the earlier Hurrian occupation in the lower regions of Tell Beydar. Their stay was brief; Babylonians and Medes (from what was then Persia) combined their forces and attacked them. “All who hear the news of you clap their hands at your downfall,” wrote the prophet Nahum in the Old Testament when Nineveh, the last and greatest capital of the Assyrian Empire, was reduced to ashes in 612 B.C.

With the fall of the Assyrian empire, Tell Beydar once again returned to dust and silence.

Further Information


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