



Where the Living Feasted with the Dead: The Royal Tombs of Qatna, Syria

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Qatna was one of the most powerful and splendid kingdoms of ancient Syria – between 1900 and 1350 BC it was a dominant political, economic and cultural centre of the eastern Mediterranean. Yet it was virtually forgotten until an international archaeological team, of which I was part, rediscovered the tombs of the kings of Qatna beneath the royal palace. Remarkable not just for their gold and jewelry – though there were many objects of great splendour – the tombs were even more exciting because they had been completely untouched since the day they were abandoned.

The ancient city lies in the fertile plains of Syria, about 200 km (125 miles) north of Damascus on a strategic crossroads from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, and from Egypt through Palestine into Anatolia. Qatna was first explored in the 1920s, but it was not until 1994 that Michel Maqdissi of the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities and Museums began a new, long-term excavation. Since 1999, three international teams have worked here: one from Syria directed by Maqdissi, an Italian group directed by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi and a German one led by myself. We have concentrated on the Royal Palace in the centre of Qatna. Built around 1700 BC, it was the royal residence and a symbol of the kingdom's power for more than 350 years.

The Royal Palace

The palace complex measures some 150 m (490 ft) from east to west and stands on a 15-m (50-ft) high natural cliff, dominating the site. The interior must originally have been decorated with fabulous wall-paintings – one room alone has yielded over 4,000 fragments of paintings, which proved to resemble closely Minoan frescoes from Crete. The largest room, the audience hall, was once covered by a wooden roof supported by four massive wooden columns and is the largest known covered room in the Near Eastern Bronze Age. Beyond, reached through a monumental gateway, were two further spacious halls: the throne room, where the king held his receptions, and another one devoted to cult and ceremonial. Only the foundations of the spectacular palace survived, but in 2002 we made a discovery that surprised us all: north of the huge ceremonial hall was a long, mysterious corridor leading down beneath the palace.

The corridor was entered from a staircase, at the foot of which was a secure doorway – it could thus be firmly blocked off. We found numerous cuneiform tablets that had fallen into the corridor during the destruction of the palace. These yielded

important historical information about Qatna in the 14th century BC, at the time when Akhenaten ruled Egypt, and included letters from other Syrian kings and from the Hittites to King Idanda of Qatna.

We followed the corridor down, finding traces of a second and a third door. Where would it lead? The passage stopped before it reached the outer wall of the palace. Could it be the entrance to a tomb? It soon became clear that this was the case. At the end of the 40-m (130-ft) long passage, we discovered an entry to the right, which opened into a 5-m (16-ft) deep shaft, accessible only by ladder. At the bottom of the shaft, 12 m (nearly 40 ft) below the surface, was a doorway in a side wall, cut into the bedrock. Two identical basalt statues stood one on each side, probably idealized representations of kingship. Offering bowls and animal bones lay beside them and we believe that the kings of Qatna would have stood here to address the ancestors and supply them with food offerings.

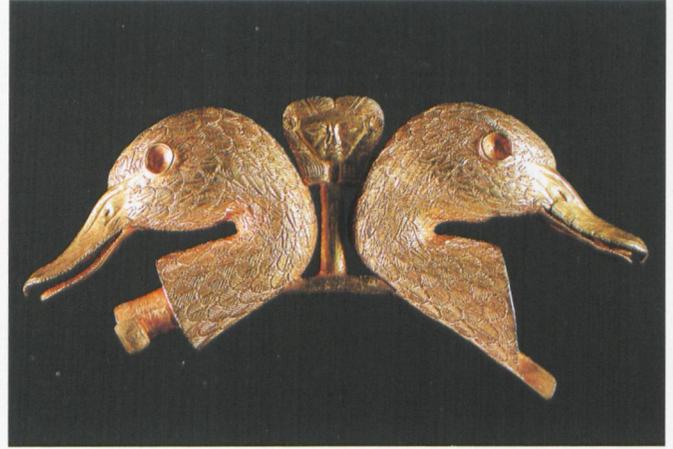
The entrance to the tomb was not solidly blocked but was filled with debris and we could peer inside – was it safe to enter? Remembering rumours of the 'mummy's curse' after Tutankhamun's tomb had been opened, we first arranged for a fungal analysis of the interior, which showed no dangerous concentrations. What would we find within? The suspense was almost unbearable. We were stunned to find it completely undisturbed, just as it had been left when the palace was finally captured and abandoned. We had to work extremely carefully, lying on planks above the floor, since many of the objects, including fragile bones, were scattered around. We recorded over 2,000 objects in their original positions before anything was removed.

The tomb chambers

The tomb consisted of a central chamber and three side rooms, jointly explored by the German and Syrian teams at the end of 2002. The central chamber contained a basalt sarcophagus with no lid. Inside were the remains of three individuals, none complete. Their bones had been laid elsewhere first and then redeposited here. Other burials lay on four wooden biers – the wood had rotted away but they were outlined on the floor. The bodies had originally been covered in purple cloth, as shown by

opposite

The two statues of basalt are among the most outstanding examples of ancient Syrian sculpture. They served to receive offerings to the ancestors in the antechamber of the Royal Tombs.



above left and right

A golden hand (left) was mounted on a wooden stick and was perhaps used as an arm-like instrument for presenting offerings. These two golden ducks (right) are a brilliant example of the high standard of Syrian craftsmanship in the 2nd millennium BC.

below

A gold disc decorated with griffins in repoussé technique. It was once sewn on to a piece of textile or leather.

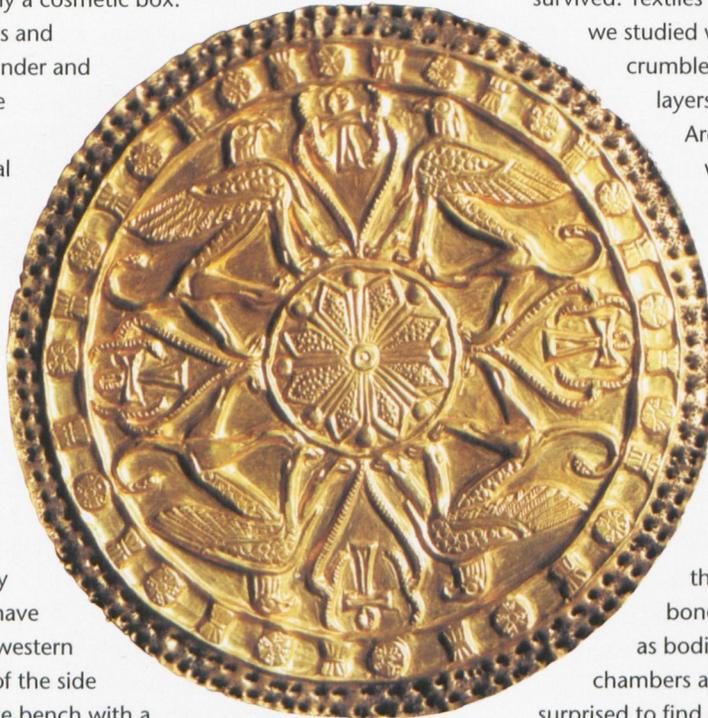
opposite

The main chamber of the Royal Tombs of Qatna, with benches for feasting and storage jars for food offerings.

chemical analysis. Hundreds of gold and stone beads lay on the biers, as well as spearheads, a golden hand and a lion head made of Baltic amber, presumably a cosmetic box.

Stone benches lined two walls and numerous jars and bowls stood under and on them, with an Egyptian calcite vessel dating to the early 18th Dynasty (16th century BC). Animal bones lay beneath the benches. We are convinced that these are the remains of communal meals of the living and the dead – ritual feasts known from ancient literature as *kispu*-offerings.

No human bones were found in the southern chamber. Vessels had been deposited at the foot of a wooden bench, together with symbolic food offerings, probably for the dead king, and this may have been his banqueting room. The western chamber was the most exciting of the side rooms. On the right stood a stone bench with a complete skeleton – the only one in the whole tomb in its proper anatomical arrangement. Presumably this was the most recent burial, and still in its original resting place. What is most remarkable – although not yet finally proven – is that the body had probably been heated to around 200–250° C (392–482° F) for at least an hour. Was this for preservation, sterilization or to



reduce odours? The skeleton had then been placed in a wooden box, of which only the bronze clamps at the four corners

survived. Textiles had been placed over it, which we studied with a microscope before they crumbled away, identifying different layers dyed in various colours.

Around the waist of the body was a girdle of gold, carnelian, amethyst and amber beads strung on gold thread. On the left side of this chamber stood a second basalt sarcophagus containing the remains of two bodies, several pottery and stone vessels and a gold bowl.

The fourth, eastern chamber was clearly the ossuary, for in it we found a thick layer of animal and human bones, deposited over a long period as bodies were cleared from the other chambers and brought here. We were surprised to find numerous offering bowls, as if these older human ancestors were still supplied with food offerings.

Our discoveries of these undisturbed kingly burials are providing fascinating insights into both the royal burial practices and rituals of ancient Syria, and a major cultural and artistic centre of the ancient world.

