



## Syria's Royal Tombs uncovered

In 2002 the most fabulous royal tombs were discovered, concealed below the Bronze Age palace at Qatna, in Syria. These were remarkable not so much for their gold and jewellery - though there were many splendid objects - but because the tombs had been completely untouched since the day of their abandonment following the destruction of the palace - probably by the Hittites - in 1340 BC. As a result, a complete burial ritual can be worked out, and it is possible to see how the living celebrated the lives of their kings and commemorated their deaths. **Peter Pfälzner**, of the University of Tübingen writes:

**I**n the Middle Bronze Age, Qatna was one of the most important centres on the coastlands of the east Mediterranean. It lay on a tributary to the river Orontes, 90km from the Mediterranean, and thus on an important crossroads: east to west from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, and south to north - from Egypt, into Palestine and up to Anatolia (modern Turkey) home of the Hittites. It reached its height in the middle Bronze Age, in the 18th to 17th centuries BC, when Qatna, together with Aleppo, were the two most important kingdoms in Western Syria. From the 16th -14th centuries it was a vassal of the Mitanni Empire, and it was

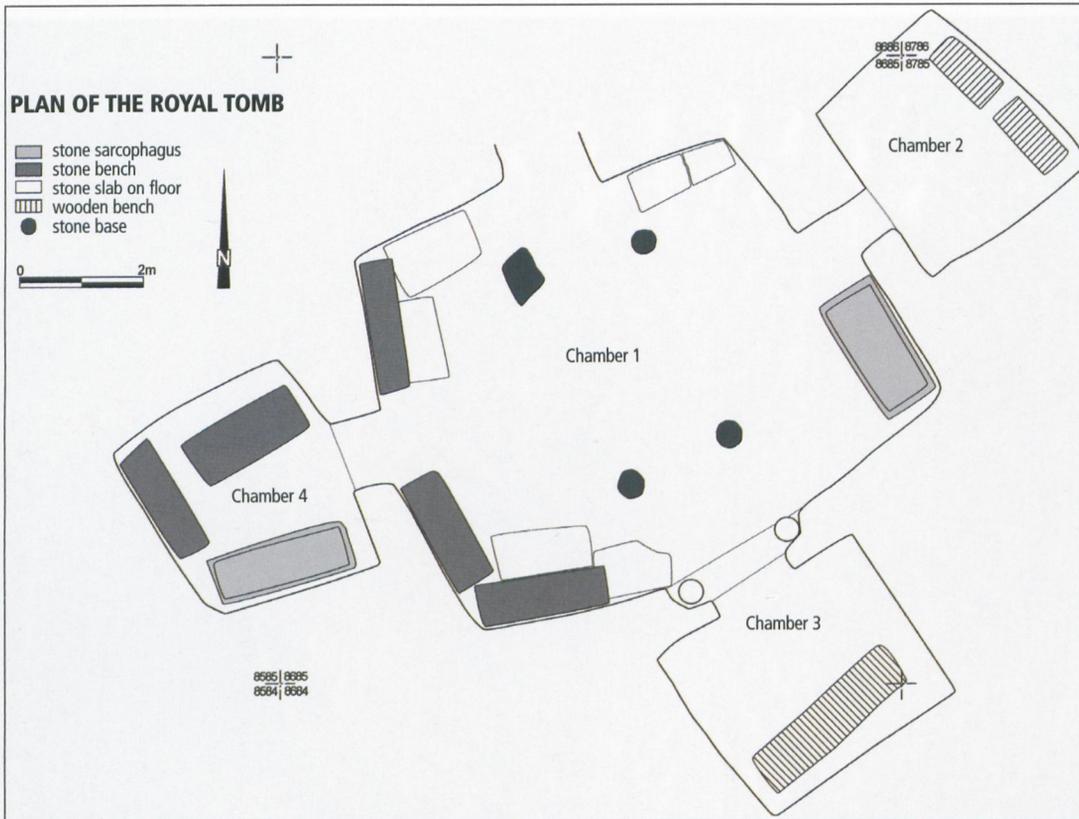
destroyed - most probably - by the Hittites in 1340. There was also an extensive later Iron Age occupation on top. Today, it lies 20 km NE of the modern town of Homs, and is being excavated by three teams, a Syrian team from Damascus led by Michel Maqdissi, an Italian team from Udine led by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, and a German team from Tübingen led by Peter Pfälzner.

The burials lay within the palace at Qatna, and the palace formed part of the large Bronze Age town of Qatna. The town, unlike many ancient settlements of this part of the world, was not covered by substantial later settlements, and

**Above** The vast area of the ancient city of Qatna surrounded by high ramparts. In the centre is the terrace with the Royal Palace excavation.

Golden Disk with representation of griffins, found on one of the wooden biers in the Main Chamber.





is surrounded by ramparts still surviving 15-20m high that enclose some 100 hectares. At the centre is a palace that stands on a plateau that is mostly natural, though the top 5m are artificial. The palace was partially hacked out in 1924-1929 by the French explorer the Comte du Mesnil du Buisson. The excavators therefore began by re-excavating the old excavations. They could hardly have expected better luck: the spoil of the earlier excavators covered the very area where the tombs were found. This meant the real boon of the site had been saved for us, the current archaeologists. Here, we tell the story of their discovery.

### The palace

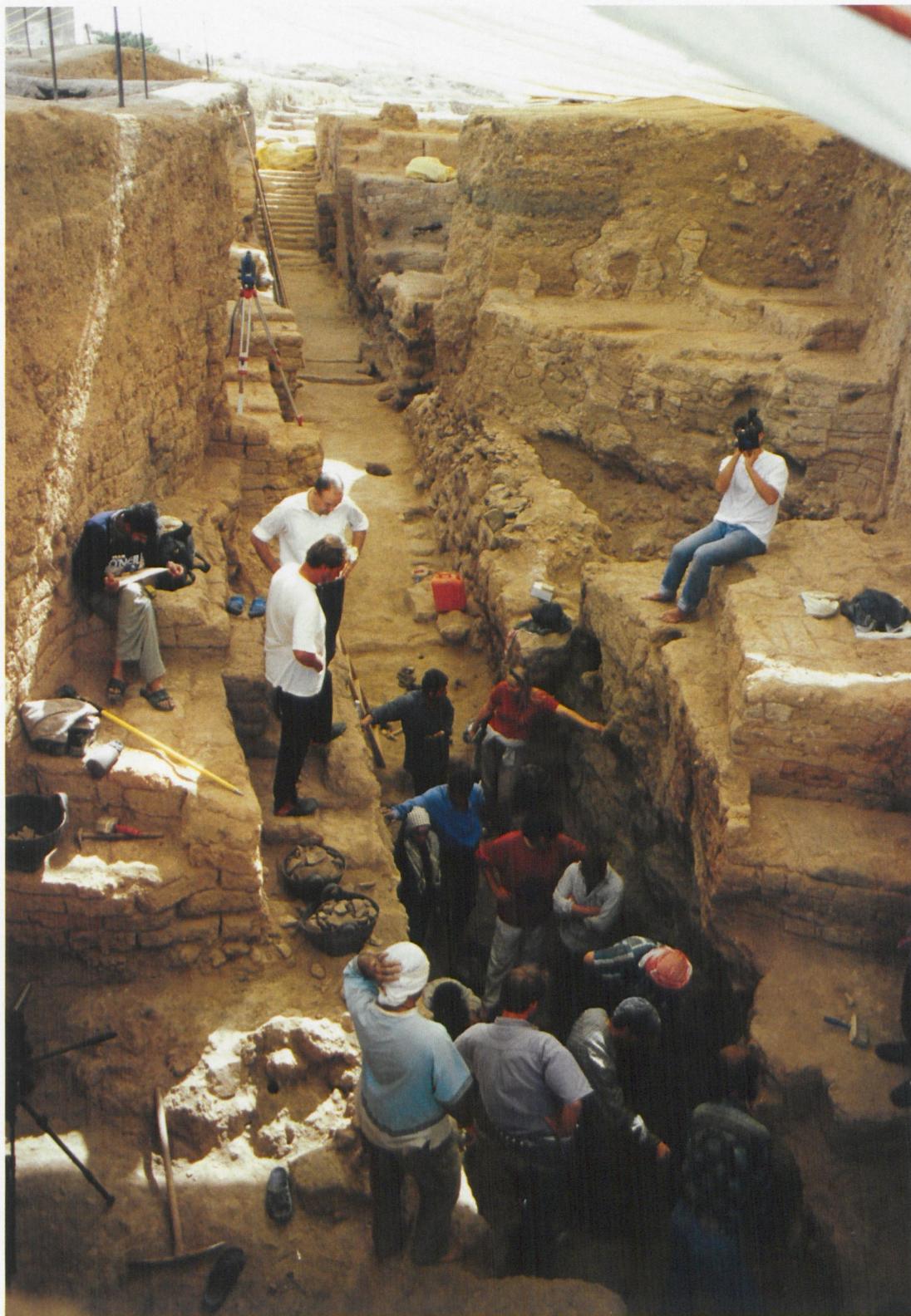
The palace dominates the surface of the site, measuring some 120m from east to west. It was entered from the west, from whence one went into the largest room: the Audience Hall. This then led through into two halls, the first of which was the Throne Room where the King held his receptions, while the second was devoted to cult and ceremonial. However, there was one very anomalous feature, a long corridor which led north from the ceremonial hall right through the centre of the palace towards the northern walls. It led down a series of mud-brick steps that had been covered by wooden beams. At the bottom of the steps, half way along the

passage was a secure doorway with a double framework anchored firmly into the wall; so the corridor could be firmly blocked off.

On the floor of the passage, we made the first big discovery: the floor above had collapsed, and 73 cuneiform tablets had fallen through from above (see box feature on page 20). The fairly narrow corridor (at 2m wide) sloped downwards: it had begun at a depth of 4m, but had now increased to 7m. We wondered where this would lead.

Following the discovery of the tablets, we asked for an extension of the campaign to explore the rest of the corridor. A second door was discovered, with the traces of the wooden framework still preserved, and then the outline of a third door. The passage was continuously sloping down and had cut through the earlier mud-brick layers into the natural terrace below. Would, we wondered, the passage lead to the outer wall and provide a secret entrance into the city, or possibly a way out for the royal family if the palace was attacked? In fact, the passage stopped at the outer terrace wall of the palace so it was not an exit, but led to something inside the palace: could it be the entrance to a tomb? Very soon, it became clear that it was. As a result, the German-Syrian team had to extend the campaign for a further period. Excavations were continued until December 22nd 2002. At the end of the 40m long passage, we discovered a

Excavation of the corridor leading to the Royal Tomb, October 2002.



way off to the right, which opened into a deep shaft, 5 metres down: there was no sign of any staircase leading down into it, so it must have been entered by a ladder. It was very fortunate for us that it lay 12m under the surface, and had been preserved from earlier excavators under the deep dump of their spoil.

### Exploring the underground shaft

To one side of the shaft was a wall cut into the bedrock with a blocked entrance in the middle of it. On either side of the door were two identical statues, both in their original positions: one to the right and one to the left.

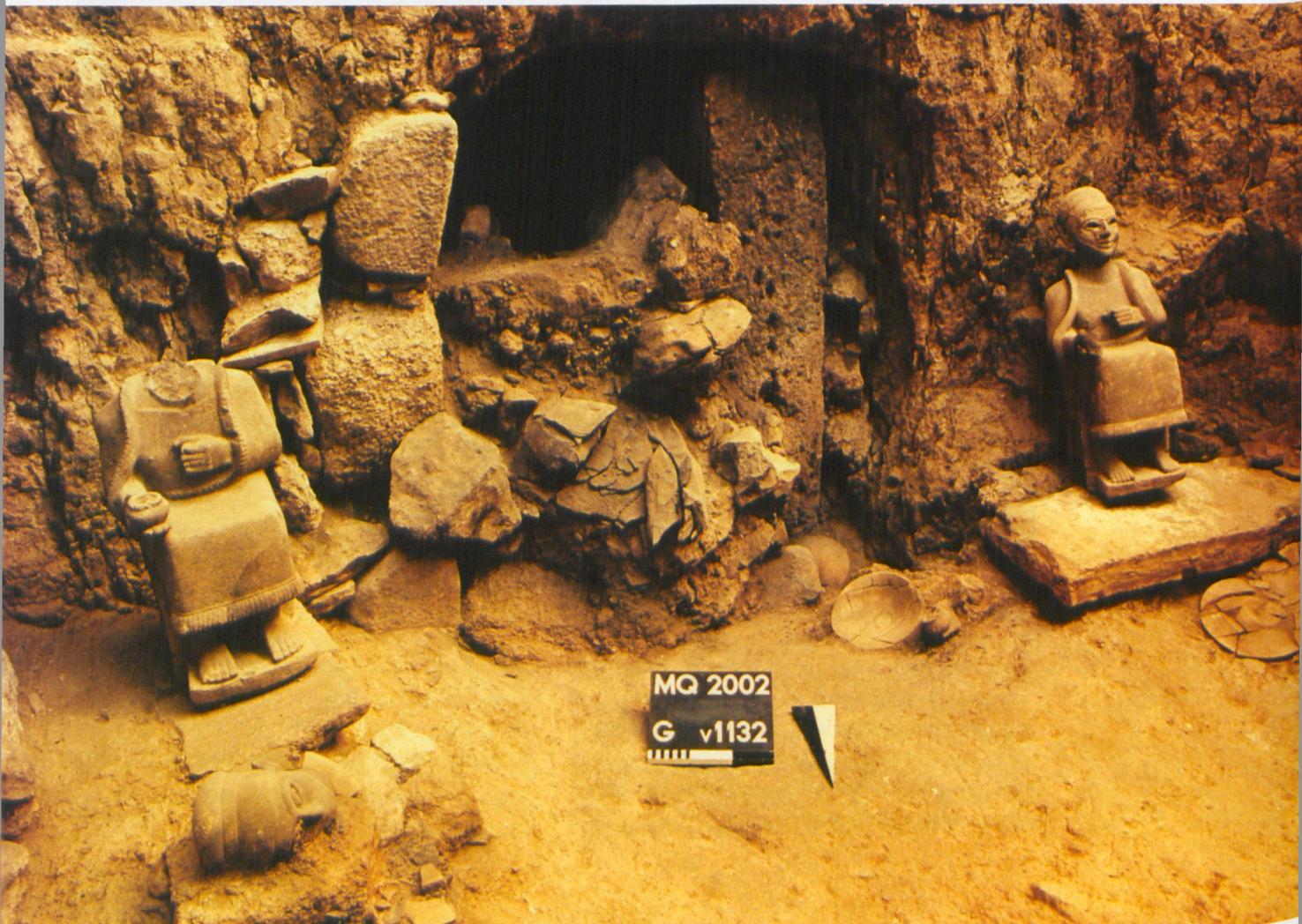
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## The find of one's life!

**Left** One of the specially trained Syrian excavators unearthing the first of the two ancestor statues found in the antechamber of the Royal Tomb.

**Below** The antechamber of the tombs with the two royal statues *in situ*.

**Right** The two ancestor statues from the antechamber of the Royal Tomb after cleaning and restoration. They are perfectly intact. On one of them even the inlaid eyes are preserved.







They were both made of basalt and though the head of one was broken, both were in otherwise excellent condition. They were seated statues in the old Syrian style of the Middle Bronze Age, the heads carefully carved, the eyes inlaid with limestone. There was a binding round the hair so that the hair appeared as two braids, one below, one above the binding, a very typical headdress for the period of the 18th or the 17th centuries - compare the similar headdress of the so-called head of Yarim-Lim, found at Tell Atchana/Alalakh.

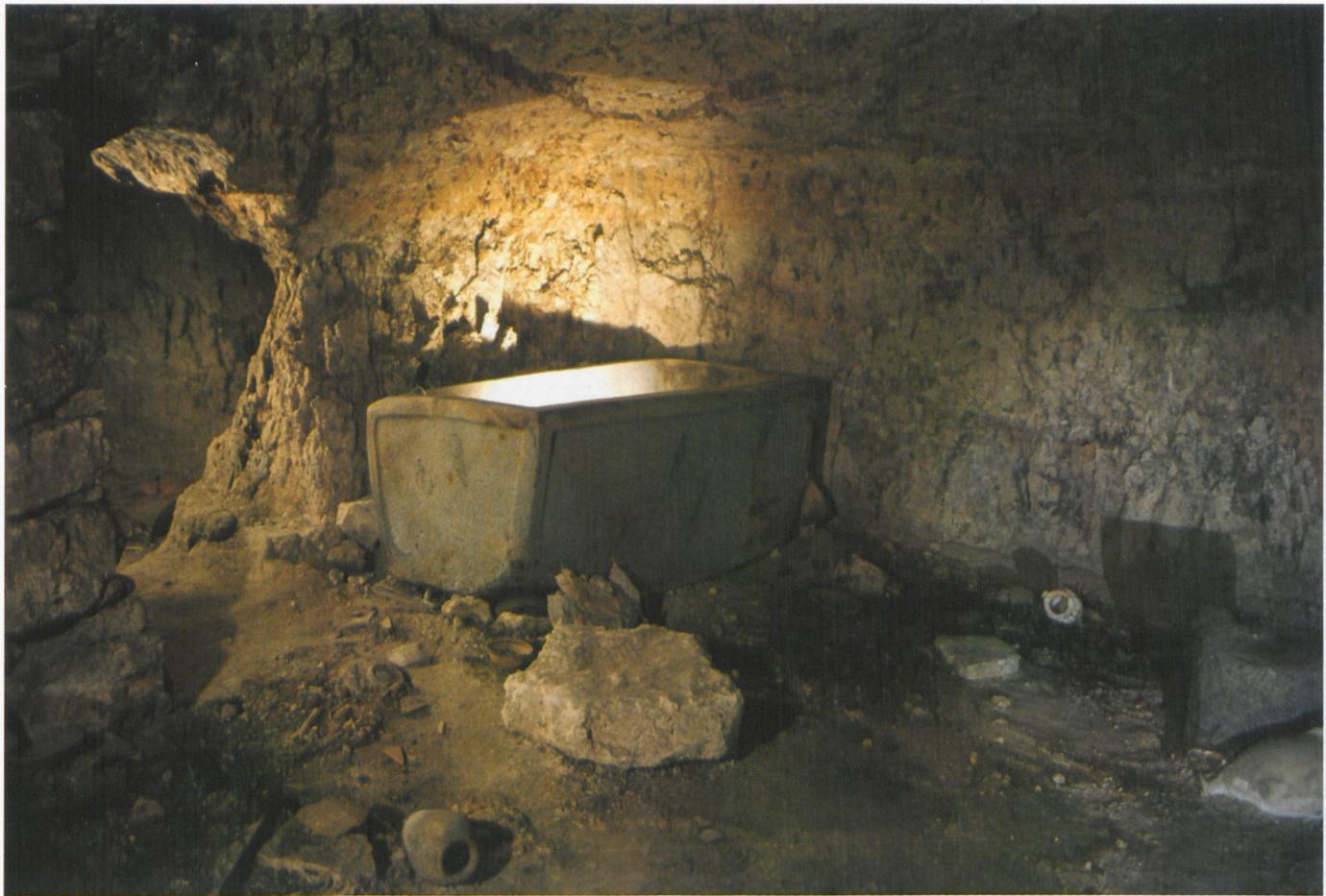
There were no inscriptions on them, so they were presumably ideal representations of kingship. Moreover, they were probably ancestral statues, for this was clearly an ancestral cult room. There were offering bowls beside the statues, plus animal bones; we think that the king would have stood here to address the ancestors and supply them with the preliminary food offerings.

Between the statues, we discovered the entrance to the grave. It had not been formally

**Working in the Royal Tombs: all objects were kept *in situ* within the chambers until everything was drawn and documented.**

blocked, but was filled with debris. Nevertheless, it was possible to peer inside. But was it safe to enter? Remembering the problems encountered with Tutankhamen's tomb, we first did a fungi analysis of the air. This showed that there was no high fungi count, but nevertheless, before we entered we called in the local fire brigade to pump out the air to encourage air circulation. What would we find within? The suspense was immense.

When the time eventually came for us to enter the tomb, we found it to be unlooted, just as it had been left when the palace was finally captured and abandoned. We set to work investigating the forgotten tomb as a joint Syrian-German team, directed by Michel Maqdissi and myself. We had to work extremely carefully: since many of the objects, including fragile bones, were scattered on the floor, work was done from wooden planks. Over 2000 objects were eventually recovered, and nothing was removed until everything was drawn.



**How the tomb worked**

The main form of the tomb was one familiar to students of the British Neolithic - which took place some 2,000 years earlier - namely, that of a chambered tomb with a central chamber and three side chambers. Here, however, it was possible to work out the differing function of each of the chambers. The main chamber was the most important: this is where most of the burials were made, and this is where the main ceremonies were performed, and where above all, the feasting took place. To one side was a basalt sarcophagus with no lid. It contained the remains of three individuals, none of them complete, whose bones had all been taken from a primary resting place and redeposited here. Four other burials, perhaps the most recent, were represented by traces of four wooden biers. The wood had all rotted away but they were still outlined on the floor. Bones still remained on the biers but they were partially disarticulated. The bodies had clearly been put in fully dressed, for there were hundreds of gold and glass beads. We also found spear heads, a golden hand, and a lion head made of resin that had presumably served as a toilet box.



But the main function of the room was feasting. Around the south and western walls there were stone benches. Under and on these were numerous pots, both storage jars and bowls: the food was presumably brought down into the chamber to be stored in the jars, and then eaten from the bowls. Other benches were free from objects and may have been used specifically as seats. Beneath these benches were animal bones, as if the feasters, having enjoyed

**Top** The south-eastern corner of the Central Chamber with the basalt sarcophagus without lid.

**Above** A golden hand, probably from a libation arm, found in the central chamber of the tomb.

their feast, then stuffed the bones under the seat. Were these the remains of the common meals of the living and the dead? Such memorial feasts, called *kispum*, are known from literature. There were also some Egyptian objects including a calcite vessel with an inscription of the 18th dynasty (1550 - 1295).

The chambers to each side of the main chamber performed different functions. The largest chamber was the southern one, lying directly opposite the entrance. It had a wooden floor and a wooden bench on the far side - it had collapsed long ago but is visible as a darker coloured trace upon the ground. Within this chamber no human bones were found, suggesting that it was not a burial room. But there were offering bowls at the foot of the bench and symbolic food offerings - probably meant to be presented to the dead king. We think this chamber may well have been regarded as the banqueting room of the dead king. It contained two serpentine vessels made in Egypt in the 12th dynasty, at around 1900-1800 BC, which were thus clearly heirlooms, 500 years old at the time of burial. Had they perhaps been carried forward from the time of the first use of the tombs or were they brought to Qatna at a much later date?

The primary burials were made in the



### Box feature: The Cuneiform tablets

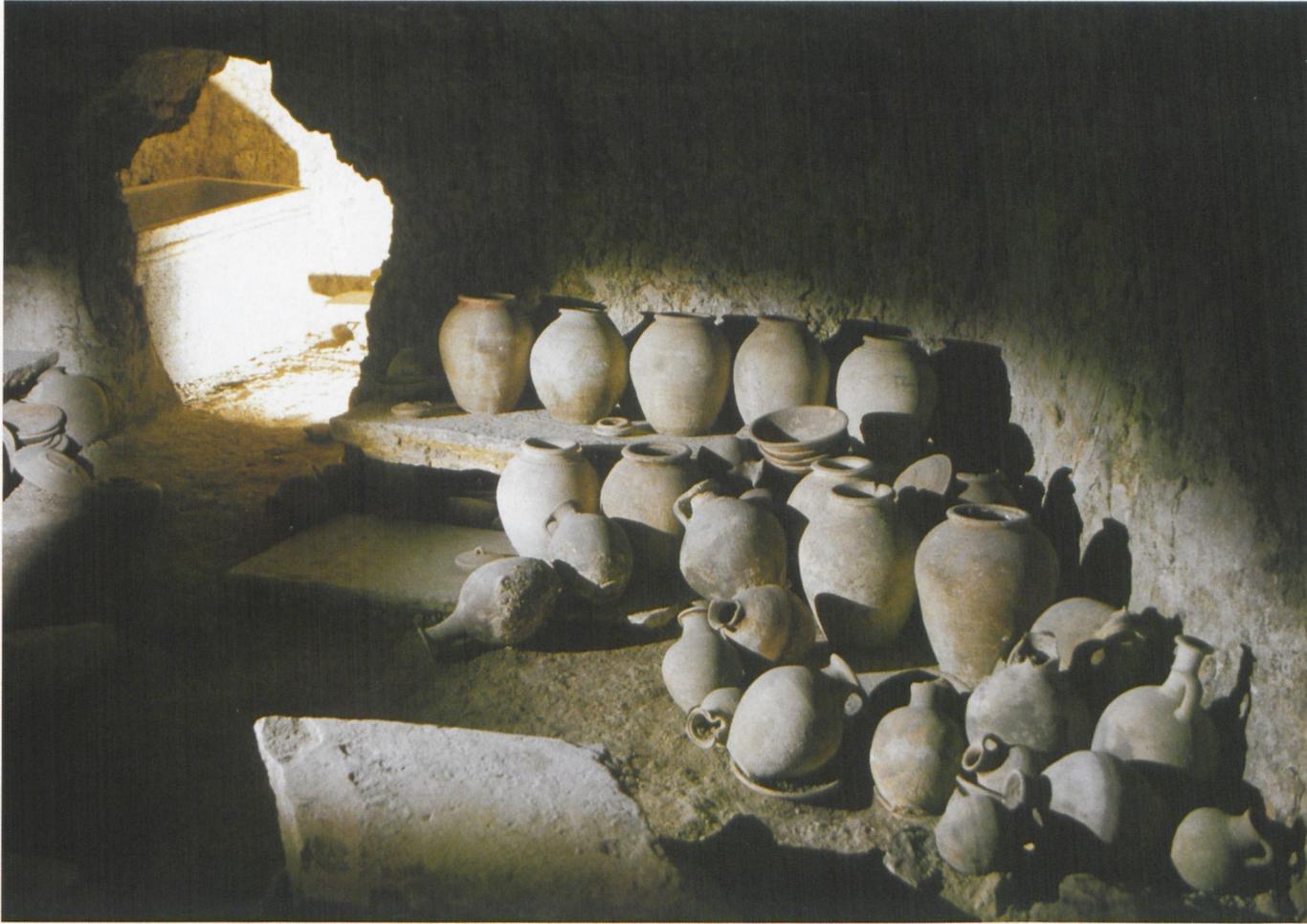
One of the most remarkable finds from Qatna has been an accumulation of 73 cuneiform tablets which had fallen from the room above onto the floor of the passage. These are all perfectly preserved, because not only did they have the primary firing necessary to preserve them but they had also undergone a secondary firing in the destruction, making them even harder. They had been archived in flat bowls, and can be subdivided into four different categories. The letters are the most interesting one.

All the letters mention Idanda, the second-last king of Qatna, and concerned the military situation in Syria. The king of the Hittites is mentioned and the fall of the Mitanni Empire is announced. The tablets must be from the time of Shuppiliumma the First, the founder of the Hittite Empire who probably destroyed Qatna in 1340 BC. They are of considerable importance for the chronology of the destruction.

The second group of tablets are administrative records, the most remarkable of which was an order for 18,600 bronze swords. There were also inventories: one of 200 knives with lapis

lazuli handles and 200 knives of gold; another of a textile workshop where 140 people were employed. Clearly the palace workshops were able to call on very substantial resources. Finally there were legal documents including one recording a trial in a city of Mount Lebanon. Among the debris of the destruction, were a number of wooden beams from which samples have been taken for dendrochronology.





**Facing page, top** Lion head made of resin and probably used as a toilet box.

**Above** The north-western corner of the central chamber replete with pottery vessels used during feasts held in the grave.

western chamber, which proved to be the most astonishing of the side rooms. To the right was a stone bench with a skeleton in anatomically correct form laid out on it, the only complete skeleton in the whole tomb: this was presumably the most recent burial, the only one that had not been moved.

However, what is most remarkable - although not yet definitely proven - is that the bodies had probably been heated to around 200 degrees. Was this done for preservation, for sterilisation, or for smell reduction? The body had subsequently been fully clothed or covered by textiles which remained, though very fragile. A stereo microscope was brought into the tomb so that the remains could be examined *in situ* before they powdered away. It could be seen that there were several different cloths in different layers which had been dyed in different colours. The body had been placed in a wooden box which had all decayed away apart from the bronze clamps at the corners. Round the waist of the body was a

well preserved gold belt where the gold thread on which the beads were strung had still survived unbroken, so that we could see how the beads of gold, carnelian, amethyst and glass had been arranged. There was also a second sarcophagus which, as with the first one, was without a lid. It contained remains of two bodies, numerous pottery vessels and a gold bowl.

The eastern chamber was left to last. This was clearly the ossuary, for it contained a thick layer of animal and human bones marking a long period of deposition and the final resting place of the bodies; when they were cleared out of all the other chambers they were deposited here. We were surprised to see numerous offering bowls even here, indicating that the older bodies also had food offerings with them.

Thus the full procedure can now be worked out. When a king died, his body - according to our preliminary analysis - was first heated. Presumably this took place outside - perhaps as a public ritual. Some may also have died away



**Above** A pair of golden duck heads found on the wooden bench in the southern side chamber.

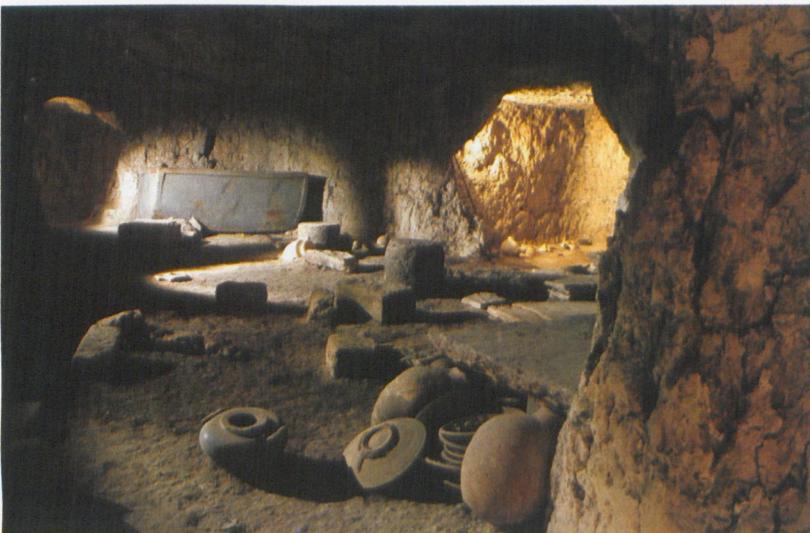


**Above right** A view into the sarcophagus of the western side chamber. Human bones, pottery vessels, a calcite amphora and a golden bowl were among the grave goods.

from home and were heated to protect the body for the journey back to Qatna. The body was then brought into the tomb, and deposited in its primary resting place, for example in the western chamber. In the secondary burial the decayed bodies were transferred to the sarcophagi, where they too could enjoy the offerings and the funeral feasts. Finally, in the tertiary burial, the oldest burials were removed into the ossuary and offerings were presented to them continuously. Many generations were thus brought together in tombs, dining together, with the living sitting on their benches, and the dead lying on their biers and in their sarcophagi.

Digging the Royal graves has been an extraordinary experience. While it may be tempting for us to think that throughout history, the 'norm' has been to bury the body, and that was that, in fact, far more elaborate burial rites were also used. Sometimes they were even spread out over

**Below** The central chamber of the Royal Tombs of Qatna as seen from the doorway leading to the western side chamber. In the background is the door into the southern side chamber.



a generation or more - as is, for example, suggested for the burials which took place in the British Neolithic some five millennia ago. As we have described, in the case of Qatna, our very careful excavations of the exceptionally elaborate and well-preserved 3000 year-old élite tomb has revealed a long sequence in which the dead and the living feasted together for a long time. Then, finally, the dead were laid to rest in an ossuary; and there they stayed until our surprising discovery. ■

Peter Pfälzner is professor for Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Tübingen (Germany). His main research interests are household studies, pottery analysis, urbanism and early urban societies, and studies on interregional exchange and cultural complexity. He has been conducting archaeological field work in Syria since 1980, including own projects at Tell Bderi, Tell Chuera, Tell Mozan / ancient Urkesh, and since 1999 at Tell Mishrife/ ancient Qatna.

Michel Maqdissi, director of the Syrian Archaeological Mission at Tell Mishrife/ Qatna since 1994 and co-director of the Syrian-German excavation of the Royal Tomb at Qatna is teaching Near Eastern Archaeology at the Universities of Damascus and Beirut and is Director of the Section for Archaeological Excavations at the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria at Damascus.

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