

Unknown Qatna

Amazing Ruins & Royal Tomb Discoveries

Part I





Introduction

You possibly have not heard of this intriguing archeological site. Reason being that Qatna lies in war torn Syria. Most of you might have read about famous Palmyra and Bosra or seen a report of it on TV. Few might even have had the chance to visit those impressive ruins before the war in Syria started like I was fortunate to do so.

Unfortunately, Qatna was never open for visits and was not listed in any tourist information. Despite various excavation campaigns no reconstructions were undertaken at all. Nevertheless, it is one of the most interesting unknown treasures in the Near East to explore for times to come. Qatna really is different from legendary Palmyra and Bosra in many aspects.

First its square layout with massive mud walls has really no comparison in pre-historic Syria. Secondly it was very much destroyed and over time the modern town of Al Mushrefa expanded more and more into the archeological site.

Unfortunately, it was also used to source building materials for the growing

modern town like it was the case in Bosra. Also different to Bosra when excavations begun all modern buildings erected on the archeological site were removed and its inhabitants resettled.

It really was an archeological sensation when in 2002 and again in 2009 two untouched royal tombs with rich funeral furnishings were discovered during excavations by German archeologists beneath the main palace building. Now let's look a bit in more detail at this fascinating prehistoric site.

Qatna History

About 4,000 years ago Qatna was established as trade center between Halab/Aleppo in the north and port city of Ugarit in the south. From the start an Amurrite dynasty ruled Qatna for five centuries. They arose from independent nomadic tribes called in historic sources amurru or apiru. Experts established that Qatna was an important city state and not a kingdom with large territories.



The modern Tell el-Mischrife or Al Mush-

arefa village is situated about 18 kms northeast of Homs. The ancient city was built at the confluence of two rivers. New land of 25 ha for agricultural production was created to sustain its urban development. This was managed by a well-organized production process with sizable over production allowing a growing trade to flourish with exports.

Around Qatna 17 satellite towns on two hierarchy levels focused on well-organized agricultural production. Various springs secured permanent water supply as main basis for the growing city and agriculture expansion. Annual rain fall reached only 500 millimeters on average.

The first use of the name Qatna or QTN as no vocals existed in old alphabets was based on a dam built close to the city. We know that at some stage the following ancient cities belonged to Qatna: Qadesh, Homs, Palmyra, Dur Ischchi-Addu, Nazala/ Qaryalein and Arattum. So far only ten percent of Qatna could be excavated.

City Developments

Let us now look at the first developments from a small regional town to an important regional trading center with long distance trade connections. Qatna had a common city layout with citadel enforced by a stone wall at its foot. All vital buildings lay within the citadel. The lower city area consisted of living quarters. The city was protected by a mas-

sive earth wall with outer moat and reached an extension of over hundred hectares. This was rather huge at the time and is described in more detail further on in this article.

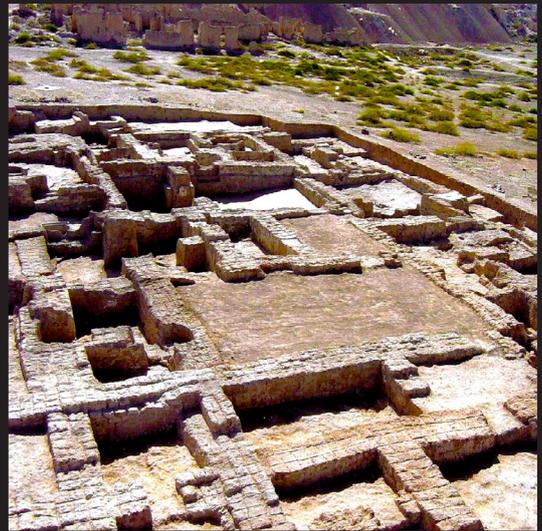
First Phase

Around 2700 BC in the Early Bronze Age a settlement existed at the site of the later upper city. It had a round layout of an astonishing 30 ha at the time. The houses on the plateau were rather large with various rooms and outside shaft silos for food storage.

In total over 100 storage pits found, plus two grain storage rooms. Around 2500 BC warehouses and silos were erected on destroyed and flattened houses on the plateau. These silos were used for long time storage of agricultural products including barley, wheat, grapes, olives and pulses.

Second Phase

About 2000 BC a mayor settlement extension was done by Amurritic tribes who moved in from the mid





Euphrates region. Qatna received a square layout including an upper and lower city. Its building layout was similar to the Mesopotamian city of Mari and Ebla in the Fertile Crescent.

And Qatna was now enforced by most impressive and solid city walls. The earth wall was 20 meters high with a base of 70 meters, plus a five meters high brick wall on top. This structure was unique in the region and various attacks were successfully fought off by it.

Four city gates east, west, south and north were guarded by 500 soldiers delegated from various towns. The city gates were similar to the typical Syrian city gates with three bottlenecks and two chambers to control access.

The new city wall changed the shape of the lake, now running along three sides of the wall with a small pond inside the wall. The enormous earth wall structure proved very effective against various forms of ancient attacks with archers, ramming devices, mobile towers and tunnel digging.

The first palace in Qatna was built in the period around 1800 BC with a central courtyard and

surrounding official rooms, plus a smaller yard with smaller private rooms. A temple with a holy cella, columned ante portico and a basin in front was also erected during that time. A necropolis with 50 simple burials in pits or large pottery vessels with rich funerary gifts was established as well.

Third Phase

During this phase a large residential area was added. This included the small South Palace as part of a group of public buildings and other small palaces in the upper city.

A long rectangular temple was also erected similar to that in Ugarit a Phoenician

port on the Mediterranean coast and Alalakh the Murkish capital on the Orontes river west of Halab/Aleppo.

This temple of goddess NIN.É.GAL or belet-ekallim housed an important inventory of cuneiform tablets with hundreds of text lines listing cult objects, their sponsors and even Qatna rulers allowing to record a full chronology of rulers. The so-called gods of lands temple plus a temple with separate cult buildings and rectangular cella formed the holy area.

The lower city consisted of several residential areas with varying architecture and some residences included workshops. All crucial buildings were then located in the upper city and residential areas at the lower city area. West of Loth Hill a rich living area was established with complex houses. During that period important pottery mass production took place imitating the beautiful ceramic ware from Mycenae.

Qatna's First Attack

The establishment of long-distance trade resulted in wealth and various city states





aspects regarding their enormous size, elaborate structure and skillful wall paintings. But from an archeological point of view the most incredible discovery were two untouched royal tombs found during excavations of the main place.

This was a real sensation when the news spread of the first royal tomb in 2002 and then again in 2009 for another surprise discovery of the second royal

Main Palace

Qatna had the largest palace in Syria and Palestine with over 100 rooms measuring 150 x 120 meters with a total space of 18,000 square meters. This enormous size made it larger than the famous Mari palace. It is suggested to have been built from 1800 BC onwards during the rule of Ischchi-Addu and Amut-pi'el.

But another opinion dates the palace at 1650 BC based on pottery shreds excavated in its foundation fillings. Two building phases closely followed each other. And it took less than 50 years to built, which was fast at the time.

The architectural focus was on large representation and

ceremonial halls. The layout with hall A to C is of Mesopotamian origin, same as in the Zimri-lim palace in Mari, the palace in Eshnunna and the palace of King Nuradad in Larsa or the palace in Tell Bi'a. This layout type could also be called Amurritic and was used already from 2300 BC onwards in the Dijala area.

The Qatna palace had no space for administration activities, these were housed in separate buildings. It was built on an eight meters high plateau with five meters high foundations resulting in the palace floor being fourteen meters above the surrounding city level. This gave it an impressive sight.

Its builders must have had advanced architectural knowledge because they installed a complex drainage system to prevent any water damage. They also had the ability to build wide unsupported flat roofs.

The four arched doorways in line were the only one's found so far in Syria. The palace building had three floors with a total height of eight meters which made it again unique in the whole of Syria.

Two floor high walls with six meters are still in situ today. The palace facade shows regular niches and the outer walls were painted white.

The cedar wood roof beams with a length of 12 meters came from the Lebanese mountains 50 kms away. And the basalt column bases were transported from its quarry over 30 kms to Qatna.

Huge Palace Halls

How come that in Qatna everything was built bigger than in other important cities in Mesopotamia? Was it a demonstration of overwhelming trading wealth?

Certainly it was not a demonstration of political or military power. Because Qatna was not a kingdom and never started any military campaign to conquer and plunder other cities.

The audience hall measured 36 meters square and was the biggest covered hall in the region. It was larger than the main hall at the famous Hittite capital Hattusa, which had 25 columns to support its roof.



Another interesting feature was a central basalt pool or fire place in the floor. In a corner a shrine was erected for the most important Ninegal goddess adorned with a beautiful marble sphinx for worshipping.

The rectangular throne hall with six meters wide door way was nearly as large measuring 45 x 16 meters. It was three times bigger than the Mari throne hall.

The ceremonial hall was similar in size and used for banquets as well as cult rituals. A huge well with circular basalt stairs two meters wide and five flights in the northwest corner of the palace was the biggest well in the region measuring ten meters square with a depth of 20 meters. A door lead from the audience hall via a long corridor and stair case to the first untouched royal tomb 14 meters below ground with four burial chambers.

Painted Walls

One of the most amaz-

ing features are the richly painted walls. They were painted with Minion motives by artisans from Crete.

Over 3,000 fragments of the elaborate wall paintings found in the well during excavations. Aegean painted wall fragments only found in one room next to well in northwest section of palace. They show an underwater landscape with turtles, fish, crab, dolphin on red gray underground color. As well as mini landscape with blue palm trees and rocks.



Coloring and motives of bend palm trunks suggest the paint work was done by Aegean artists similar to frescos in the Greek islands of Akrotiri, Thera and Routs. The wall socket was done in black with white spots and dark red bands.

The wall underground color was white. Stucco work was done in six layers and up to 20 centimeters thick and show proof of regular repair and over painting. These painted walls had a short life span. Because mud brick walls contracted and extended with regular temperature changes.

Aegean motives with Syrian stucco and drafting techniques were used. It is assumed that technology transfer took place and not import of Aegean artisans, which was done 200 years earlier. As a result we see here a unique mix of Syrian tradition with wonderful Aegean motives.

Lower City Palace

This was built in the period from 1600 BC on an eight meter high terrace for ceremonial and representation use with two entrances, more than 65 rooms, three large court yards, throne hall, storage rooms, various kitchens, beverage store, bathrooms with sanitary installations, some walls were covered with basalt, others were painted.

Here 50 stands for ceramic drink containers were found, plus many ivory in-lay pieces from wooden furniture and many painted pottery items from Mycenae, east Mediterranean area, Mesopotamia, Cyprus and Mittani Nuzi ware.

A remarkable piece found here as well is a beautiful human



mask made of ivory with crystal in-laid eyes dated 1500 BC. In the archives over 50 cuneiform platelets were discovered evidencing grain and beer deliveries and listing animal counts.

East Palace

Was built in the Late Bronze Age period 1800 to 1550 BC. Its mud brick walls were three meters thick and nearly 20 meters long. This palace was built over various terraces with foundations done in stone. A large west court yard with 15 rooms around it including a kitchen, stores and metal workshops. Here clay tokens with seal imprints of King Yarim-Lim of Jamchad and Sumu-Epuh were found. The palace had some stucco walls with white and black painted decor.

South Palace

This was a small palace south of the main palace built during third phase. It was part of a group of public buildings in the upper city area where further small palaces were erected. The smaller palaces might have been the residences of important and wealthy trading clans.

First Royal Tombs

It was a sensation when the first untouched royal tomb was found in 2002. This was an archeologist dream come true for any archeologist. The remarkable fact was that the tomb was untouched and not plundered.

This tomb has four chambers. A central chamber with three side chambers all fully carved out of bed rock deep underneath the

main palace. In total around 20 royal burials were counted including females and children most deceased aged 20 to 60.

Interesting door concept from mythical story of goddess Ishtar to pass seven doors to the underworld. Here two identical fine and undamaged king statues made of basalt with inlaid eyes were discovered. They are seated on a small stool both wearing the typical royal coat and cap and depicted with full partly shaved beard. These statues were guarding the royal tomb entrance door on each side. They show many similarities with royal tombs at Byblos.

The central chamber with over ten burials had four wooden columns with stone bases similar to the audience hall. The monolith basalt sarcophagus without lid housed the remains of three individuals and contained also an ivory scepter as well as various ceramic vessels.

On a stone bench many big and medium sized ceramic storage vessels were placed for food and drink, as well as bottles, plates and broken seals. The bench had an interesting inscription of Egyptian queen Ahmes Nefertari mother of Amenhotep I.

Four wooden stretchers with rests of human bones were also placed in the chamber. Archeologists found various jewelry, gold platelets with relief depictions possibly attached to clothing, bronze arrow heads, seals and other objects.

The south chamber was not used for burials. It is the biggest of the three side chambers, similar to the throne hall

with a wide entrance flanked by wooden columns and seen as the underworld palace of the deceased ruler. This chamber contained rests of an elaborate wooden bed with gold foil coverage including golden double duck heads assumed to be the handle of a cosmetic container lid. And along the wall a row of stone vessels was placed including one with an inscription of Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III.

The east chamber was used for about seven royal burials. Here the bones of previously deceased royals were collected. The floor was covered with a huge amount of human bones and interestingly they were mixed with animal bones of sheep, goat, cattle, gazelle and fish. This might have been the place for secondary burials to make space for new burials. The animal bones might result from burial gifts or being the rests of annual ceremonial meals.

The west chamber contained three royal burials. In the basalt sarcophagus bones of two individuals were found with the only skull found in this tomb. It is assumed that the deceased were beheaded after death and skulls removed.

As burial furnishings many pieces of high value clothing were discovered here, including a unique jewelry hip chain with three strings of over 100 gold pearls and precious stones as well as solid gold and silver bowls.

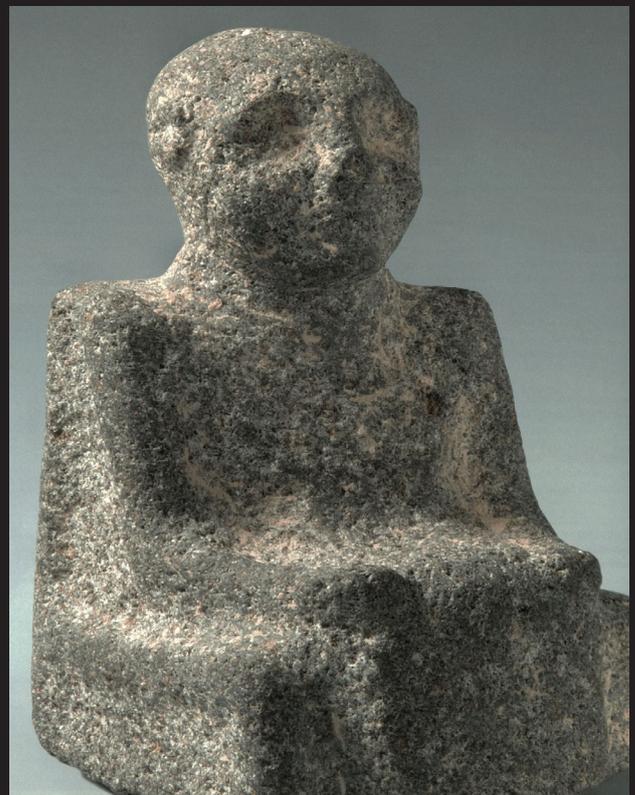
Here banquets with ancestors in the tomb chambers took place. The ceramic plates with rests of meals are proof thereof. The 60 plus stone vessels found here are the biggest find of stone vessels in the region. Most were made of calcite or calcite alabaster.

Others made of serpentinite, carnelian, porphyria, gabbo-anorthosite and granodiorite. In total there are about 20 different forms including so-called alabastona, jugs, bowls, tazza and amphorae.

Second Royal Tomb

The first royal tomb find was already a sensation, but when the second royal tomb was found only seven years later in 2009 the involved archaeologists flipped out. The second tomb was found under the northwest wing of the palace.

Two royal stone statues again guarded the entrance. The door led to an ossarium for secondary burials with more than 50 skulls and bones



als were counted. Also shaft tombs with multiple burials existed. It was common practice that older burials were removed to make space for new burials. So older bones were stacked up in the corner like secondary buri-

als in an ossarium. It is assumed that the deceased with time lost their identity and became part of the ancestral family.

An area in this necropolis had graves for common people with simple single rectangular or semi-circular pits. Graves were always outlined in east west direction. The deceased were buried on their back, arms up, legs to the right, heads west with their faces south looking. Above their heads an eating plate, a flat and deep bowl and small bottles were placed. There was no difference between men and women regarding burial furnishings. Only babies were buried in ceramic pots.

An Italian archeologic team researched 50 skeletons with interesting results. Live expectancy was low with 35 to 45 years. Child mortality was high in the first three years. But there was no proof of epidemics and no traces of hard labor, but traces of repetitive artisan work. The deceased were well feed with proteins and carbon hydrates, but showed differences between royals and common people.

Burial Rituals

Studying burial rituals a lot can be established about religious beliefs and culture. People from Qatna used simple embalming with oil and resin paste rubs. Thereafter corps were heated for an hour at 200 degrees Celsius to dry out and get rid of body fluids. This also minimized bad smells and enable them to perform rituals in the burial chambers.

These rituals included lying in state, crying and praying ceremonies. Burial were done in wooden coffins or on wooden beds covered in valuable textiles and jewelry with a floral branch

on top. Another practice were food sacrifices or kispum regular monthly meals with deceased or gods at new moon.

Different to Egypt it was not necessary for religious beliefs in Qatna to conserve the body, as the ghost of the deceased or etemmu were important in the ancestor cult. No skulls were found in burial chambers. It is possible that deceased were beheaded after death and their skulls got special treatment for example were covered with clay and painted and kept in the house which was an ancient Neolithic ritual found in the region.

Summery

Qatna is a very special place not only because two unplundered royal tombs have been discovered in the last twenty years. But it is also special for its successful survival as important trading center between various powerful empires and still being able to make enormous profits from trading activities with them.

And still the question remains what was Qatna if it was not a kingdom? Was it so successful because it was only a trading center run by trading clans with no object to gain territories via military campaigns?

In history we have another good example close by the Nabataeans. They were so successful because they only focussed on trading and were very active long distance traders.

But there is no proof that Qatna traders were traveling themselves to source their good from far away. It seems they had chosen an easier way to success. Tehy produced everything locally.



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