



Ugaritic Letters and Ritual Texts

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A new entry in the Annual Report deserves some explaining. Ugarit was the ancient name of a city located on the coast of what is today Syria, just a few miles north of Latakia. The modern *tell* goes by the name of *Ras esh-Shamra*, "Cape Fennel," named after the plant that grows there in profusion during the months of summer and fall. French excavations began there in 1929 and have continued to this day. During the very first season tablets were discovered which bore not only the well-known Akkadian script and language but others as well with a totally new script. Because, as it turned out, the language of these other tablets was Semitic, fairly closely related to Phoenician and to Hebrew, the script was deciphered within a year and the language was identified as the local language of ca. 1400-1200 B.C., the only West Semitic language known to this day to have been written by means of the cuneiform system.

Further excavations and discoveries at Ugarit and elsewhere have shown that the period of the Ugaritic tablets was both the heyday and the last gasp of the Ugaritic city-state, for its civilization, reaching back at least in its material remains to the fifth millennium B.C., was destroyed by the Sea Peoples and the mound henceforth was inhabited only occasionally and by much smaller groups.

My own interest in Ugaritic began before coming to Chicago and was fostered by my professor here, Stanley Gevirtz. A Fulbright-Hayes Senior Lectureship at Aleppo University in 1980-1981 permitted a prolonged period of contact with the Ugaritic tablets themselves, most of which are kept now in the museums of Aleppo and Damascus, with a few still in Paris. The current *Mission de Ras Shamra* as well as the Syrian Department of Antiquities and Museums gave me every facility for access to and study of the tablets.

Having then just completed a study of Hebrew letters from the biblical period, I was especially interested in the Ugaritic epistolary texts and began my study with them. For my own training, I went about studying the tablets as though they were totally new documents, doing detailed hand-copies and taking photographs of each one, though virtually all had previously been published. This turned out to have been a good plan, for as I studied I discovered that the previous editions of many of the tablets had been based, not on examination of

the tablets themselves, but on study of secondary materials, in this case casts and photographs of the tablets. Thus many new readings were emerging. Several weeks into my study I also discovered the benefits to be gained from the use of a low-powered binocular microscope. With magnification of 10x-20x, one can often distinguish what the naked eye (at least mine) could not see in the attempt to distinguish an accidental crack from a true sign. In January of 1981 I ran out of epistolary texts and went to work on a totally new category, that of ritual texts. These are rather arid descriptions of sacrifices to various deities that are very difficult to interpret, and had been widely ignored in Ugaritic scholarship.



Ritual text (RS 34.126) for the burial of Niqmaddu III, king of Ugarit ca. 1210–1200 B.C. The shades of former kings are called up and offerings are made. The following king, Ammurapi, the last king of Ugarit (ca. 1200–1210 B.C.), receives wishes for well-being. (Photo by D. Pardee, courtesy Mission de Ras Shamra)

Once back in Chicago, I began casting about for ways of speeding up the publication of my new readings and decided to apply to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant under their Translations Program. As of April, 1983, a grant was awarded which permits me to hire a research assistant for two years and to have photographs printed of the tablets I studied. In Donna Freilich, who had just passed her Ph.D. qualifying examinations and wished to do her dissertation on the Ugaritic ritual texts, I found an ideally qualified research assistant. Donna, meanwhile, has the opportunity to work up annotated translations of the texts upon which her dissertation will eventually be based. As of this writing, half of the photographs have been printed and we are deep into the epigraphic and philological analysis of the texts themselves.