

The Euphrates Valley Expedition

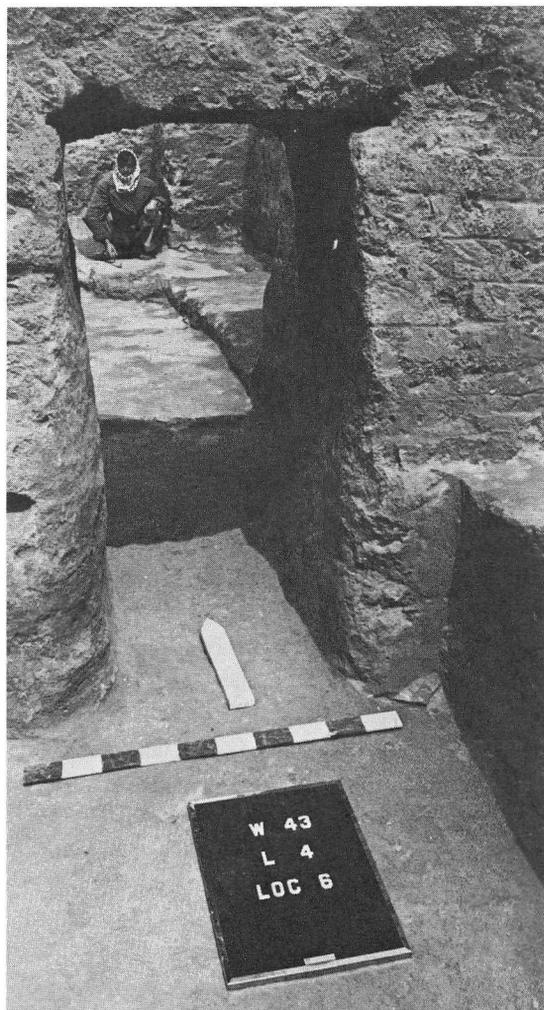
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Since 1965 archeologists and natural scientists have been joining forces under the aegis of the Oriental Institute to tap the sources of information still available along the middle and upper reaches of the Euphrates, but soon to be flooded by dams under construction in Syria and Turkey.

The expedition's first objective was a village of about 10,000 years ago, the remains of which form a mound, Tell Mureybit, covering 6 acres at the point where the river changes from a southerly to an easterly course, 55 miles east of Aleppo, Syria. As only one per cent of the mound has been excavated, the results are necessarily tentative. Due to the abundance of organic remains—charcoal, animal bones and charred seeds—we are nevertheless able to present the first documented picture of a stage in human development only guessed at before: that of village communities living entirely on wild food.

At least twelve superimposed layers of collapsed houses, with additional layers of accumulated refuse in between, accounted for the total height of 22 feet. The earliest layer was devoid of architecture but contained hearths and numerous flint artifacts. A charcoal sample taken from one of these hearths was subjected to a radiocarbon test at the University of Pennsylvania and yielded a starting date around 8500 B.C. for the occupation of the site, which seems to have offered unusual opportunities for catching wild cattle, onagers and gazelles.

After a century or two permanent housing was established in the form of oval stone-paved floors surrounded by low walls of red clay on stone foundations. The inhabitants' diet was enriched by wild wheat, harvested with flint sickles on the south Turkish hills in summer time, roasted (to facilitate grinding) and ground at Mureybit during the winter. Eventually, repeated warfare laid waste Mureybit and its sister settlements about 7800 B.C.



View from side room into portico entrance of large, possibly administrative building at Tell Selenkahiye, Syria. Worker is squatting in waterproofed washing area. At right is ten-foot wide threshold. This floor, second in history of building, was occupied until destruction about 2000 B.C.

Another exceptional interlude of prosperity took place in this semiarid part of the valley during the last phase of Syrian prehistory (about 2400–1900 B.C.). In what had always seemed an oversimplified view, the new features then appearing in the material culture (sophisticated bronze weapons and ornaments, etc.) have generally been attributed to nomads from the Syrian steppe.

Pottery and clay figures of women in a praying attitude, characteristic of this period, littered the surface of a fortified 37-acre site,

Tell Selenkaḫiye, on the right bank of the river opposite Mureybiṭ.

The Euphrates Valley Expedition returned to Syria in the spring of 1967 to investigate Selenkaḫiye, where the complete record of the settlement from its foundation about 2400 B.C. to its destruction and ultimate abandonment after 2000 B.C. could be read near the southern tip to the mound, where a bulldozer had cut a new irrigation channel through 15 feet of pottery-laden debris, representing the successive phases of its existence.

In the early phase, houses spread over a mile along the previously uninhabited western bank, where the Euphrates comes within 100 miles of the Mediterranean. In contemporary shaft graves the ladies wore bronze toggle pins with bent heads, well known from Sumerian cemeteries at Ur and elsewhere. This phase of considerable prosperity and safety might be interpreted as due to Mesopotamian economic or political expansion under the Early Dynastic III kingdom of Mari, or, if one assumes a certain cultural lag, under the early rulers of the Akkad empire.

In the middle phase the defense system was altered and at the southern tip of the mound a large building with portico entrance, perhaps serving administrative purposes, was built on top of the remains of the city walls. In this building, which still stands to a height of ten feet, three superimposed floors were found. The earliest floor was littered with jar sealings, on one of which a Mesopotamian cylinder seal of the late Akkad period (toward 2150 B.C.) had been rolled. Shaft graves containing the elegant goblets characteristic of this level also yielded miniature images of animals and human beings to be strung on necklaces. In the portico building, a second floor was laid two feet above the first, and on this floor the remains of a violent destruction were found, in which a number of inhabitants had perished; barley and poplar beams had charred and bitumen melted. The burned level contained pottery considered characteristic of the Ur III empire in Mesopotamia (21st century B.C.).



Limestone cylinder seal, 2 inches high, found on threshold shown in preceding photograph, with its impression.

The barley was two-rowed barley, grown locally on the marginal dry-farming fields. This is surprising as these fields are more suitable for the wheat that is sown there now. Does this preference for barley mean that the inhabitants originated from a region where six-rowed barley was grown on irrigated fields lower down along the Euphrates? The summer level of the middle Euphrates is ten feet below the winter flood plain and irrigation was not practiced here until Roman times, when artificial branches were led off the river several miles upstream from the fields to be irrigated. The extensive use of poplar wood, now unavailable in the area, hints at the ancient vegetation of the flood plain.

In the late phase the burned debris inside the portico building was roughly leveled at a height of three feet over the burned floor, the doorways were blocked and the individual rooms turned into one-family dwellings equipped with ovens and quantities of domestic pottery. In this level, close to the surface, clay figurines were particularly numerous. Some figurines represent men and horses, the latter either wearing a harness or carrying a side-saddle rider. The long mane seems to exclude confusion with a donkey. An equid which Dr. Ducos thinks may be a horse is well represented among the animal bones from Selenkaḫiye, all dating 2400–2000 B.C. If confirmed, these would be among the very earliest horse remains from the Near East (the first horse mentioned in Near Eastern texts belonged to King Shulgi of the Ur III dynasty, about 2050 B.C.).

The evidence from Selenkaḥiye suggests that the first impulses for cultural change about 2400 B.C. came not from the Syrian steppe but from the civilized centers of Mesopotamia. Only after the breakdown of centralized government about 2000 B.C. and the rise of warring city states in Mesopotamia do we see repeated destruction, decline in prosperity and abandonment of exposed sites in Syria. Conceivably this reflects a parallel rise of militarism here.

New insights into Early Village life were gained from the expedition's soundings in the underlying deposits at Tell Korom near Palmyra. The bottom 50 feet were devoid of pottery but contained quantities of flint, animal bones (including large cattle), well-preserved house remains with extremely hard white plaster on floors and walls, and rectangular, oval or round vessels cast in the same hard material on matting or coiled basketwork. These remains of the seventh millennium B.C. were capped by a level containing red burnished, knob-decorated or painted pottery of the sixth millennium B.C. The sounding thus showed that another rich Early Village deposit is available in an area hitherto not considered as a likely scene of early animal and plant domestication.

All three Syrian sites would warrant several more seasons of work, but an even more urgent need for archeological salvage has arisen upstream, in the Turkish Euphrates drainage, where another dam is scheduled for completion in 1970. Among the threatened sites are mounds of city, town and village size dating to the Early Bronze Age. This is the center from which a whole cultural complex, undoubtedly to be connected with population movements, spread to the Caucasus in the north and Palestine in the south about 2600–2400 B.C. Several suggestions—militarism, pastoralism, adaptation to deforested woodlands—have been made concerning the economic basis of this extraordinary prehistoric population explosion. To elucidate its nature and origin the Euphrates Valley Expedition is planning a season of work near Elazig, Turkey, for the summer of 1968.