

Tell Halaf

Reconnaissance excavation 1899

A report of a Bedouin guide drew Max von Oppenheim's attention to a mound in the Khabur spring region that the locals called Tell Halaf. On the 19th of November 1899 he started a reconnaissance excavation at the site during which four different loci were investigated yielding sculptures right beneath the surface. Lacking a digging license however von Oppenheim quit his activities after only three days and re-filled all his test trenches carefully with dirt knowing that he had turn to the authorities in Constantinople in order to arrange the legal requirements for further excavations.

Site map

Despite the auspicious prospects von Oppenheim tried to pursue a career in the diplomatic corps in the following 12 years, a career that was always limited to a certain extent as his Jewish roots were held against him. In 1910 he handed in his letter of resignation dedicating from then on all his time and energy to the preparations of his excavation, thus returning to Tell Halaf in the summer of 1911. In the course of the next two years the focus of the digging activities lay mainly on the citadel. Under the direction of his chief architect Felix Langenegger the Western and the North-Eastern Palaces were cleared, as well as substantial parts of the inner and outer city wall, two gate complexes, several tomb vaults and the so-called 'cult-room'. The standard inscriptions name the Aramaean ruler Kapara of the house of Bachiani ('Bit Bachiani') as the builder, giving at the same time the designation of the settlement as given by the Assyrian neighbours in antiquity – Guzana.

At the end of the second millennium B.C. Aramaean tribes coming from the west and crossing the Euphrates had moved into northern Syria. They had founded small independent kingdoms and thus filled up the vacuum left by the fall of the Hittite empire around 1200 B.C. Bachianu, establisher of the Bit Bachiani dynasty chose what would later be called Tell Halaf as his place of residence. After years of autonomy the kingdom eventually fell under Assyrian supremacy. As an Assyrian province Guzana lost more and more of its importance. The last scarce settlements on the site date back to Hellenistic and Islamic times.

Sculptures

Tell Halaf became famous mainly for the unique building decoration of the Western Palace. Constructed in an architectural lay-out commonly named *bit hilani*, its entrance façade was characterized by columns shaped as deities and their sacred animals: in the middle the weather god, standing on his bull with his son and his divine spouse at his sides, both on lions. Mighty mythical creatures flanked the gateway and the entry to the adjacent room. Big orthostats and small relief slabs initially counting more than 200 covered the base of the outer walls. Up to this day the Western Palace with its monumental décor remains unequalled in the North Syrian region. Not less remarkable are two sculptures depicting seated women that were found on top of tomb vaults.

Painted pottery

The princes of Guzana were not the first inhabitants of the site. In the sixth and fifth millennium B.C. a population with a mostly agrarian lifestyle settled there producing a hand-made, painted pottery of finest quality. Although excavations at other sites have since unearthed quantities of the same pottery it is still called 'Tell Halaf-ware' after the first finding spot. In spite of a settlement hiatus of 3000 years between the major phases of occupation the cultural layers were in direct succession leading von Oppenheim to the erroneous assumption that some of the sculptures dating back in fact to the Iron Age were created contemporarily to the painted pottery.

Scorpion-Gate 2006 - New Excavations

After a break of 77 years the excavations at the Tell Halaf started again in the summer of 2006 by a joint mission of the State Museums of Berlin and the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées de Damas in co-operation with the Universities of Tübingen and Halle. The main goals of the project supported by the German Research Foundation are investigations of the settlement chronology, of the settlement structure and of the role of the site in the historical development of the ancient Near East.

Further reading:

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Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, Tell Halaf I: Die prähistorischen Funde, bearbeitet von H. Schmidt, Berlin 1943

Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, Tell Halaf II: Die Bauwerke, von F. Langenegger, K. Müller, R. Naumann, bearbeitet und ergänzt von R. Naumann, Berlin 1950

Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, Tell Halaf III: Die Bildwerke, bearbeitet von A. Moortgat, Berlin 1955

Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, Tell Halaf IV: Die Kleinfunde aus historischer Zeit, bearbeitet von B. Hrouda, Berlin 1962

W. Orthmann, Die aramäisch-assyrische Stadt Guzana. Ein Rückblick auf die Ausgrabungen Max von Oppenheims in Tell Halaf, Schriften der Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung Heft 15, Saarbrücken 2002

F. Fless (Hrsg.), Die Antiken der Sammlung Max Freiherr von Oppenheim im Archäologischen Institut der Universität zu Köln, Kölner Jahrbuch 30 (1997) 21-143.