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# Der Königspalast von Qatna. Teil II: Architektur, Stratigraphie, Keramik und Funde des westlichen Zentralbereiches

Eva Geith, Tulip Abd-el Hay, Jochen Schmid, *Der Königspalast von Qatna. Teil II: Architektur, Stratigraphie, Keramik und Funde des westlichen Zentralbereiches. Qatna-Studien. Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen*, 6. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2019. Pp. 510. ISBN 9783447110235

### Review by

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The book is a monograph in the series “Qatna Studien” (QS) which is dedicated to the publication of the archaeological investigations carried out since 1999 at the site of ancient Qatna (modern Mishrifeh, in Western Syria). In particular, this text is one of the final excavation reports that describe in detail the results achieved by the Syrian-German team under the direction of P. Pfälzner and M. Al Maqdissi in the central sector of Operation G, a large excavation area corresponding to the central and western zone of the famous Royal Palace of Qatna (the eastern portion was excavated by a Syrian-Italian mission directed by D. Morandi Bonacossi and M. Al Maqdissi). Originally discovered by the French mission directed by R. du Mesnil du Buisson during the 1920s (Du Mesnil du Buisson, 1935), the Royal Palace of Qatna is one of the largest second-millennium buildings discovered in modern Syria and is fundamental for understanding the development of the architecture of Near Eastern and Levantine public buildings (Akkermans and Schwartz, 2003; Margueron, 2019; Pfälzner, 2019b) during the Middle and Late Bronze Age, roughly 2000–1200 BCE. This is the second book dedicated to this building; the first (*Der Königspalast von Qatna Teil 1*) was published in the same year (2019) as the fifth volume of the series. A third is planned to complete the publication of the excavations carried out in Operation G. With this monumental publication effort, the German mission is providing a systematic and detailed account of the work conducted during twelve excavation seasons: the achievement of this goal is certainly a great success for the director Peter Pfälzner and his team, since it is rarely possible to have rapid access to excavation results of this complexity.

The book is divided into 10 chapters, including the introduction (chapter 1), which opens the monograph. A summary of the contents in German and English precedes chapter 1 and gives a broad overview of the issues covered in each chapter. For reasons of space and relevance this review will concentrate on those chapters that deal with the second millennium phases (Middle and Late Bronze Age), given their connection with the construction, use and abandonment/destruction of the famous Royal Palace.

Chapter 2 discusses the pottery assemblages and explains the methods used to classify the ceramics excavated in the central sector of Operation G, dividing them into main form and fabric types and subtypes. This is based on the most comprehensive classification of all the Operation G pottery assemblages as described in chapter 3 of QS5. In this sense Q6 is a further part of a single report which has been split into different books (and the titles are explicit about this, since they always remind the reader of the section of the report, i.e., *Teil 1*, *2* etc.). From a methodological point of view, the backbone of this system was originally developed for the ceramics of Tell Mozan (p. 9; Schmidt, 2013), and provides the basis for the

report under review here, as well as for other pottery studies that have appeared in the same series (cf. Döpfer's monograph in QS 7). Via a formal classification of 1282 pieces (out of 2917 excavated potsherds), this chapter furnishes the hallmarks of the ceramic culture and in particular it provides a chronological outline of the form types, which, as will be explained below, constitute one of the main pillars for the definition of the different building phases identified in the Royal Palace sequence. The definition of the chronology is based on a series of comparisons with types from a number of key sequences from western and eastern (Euphrates area) Syria, as well as from Lebanon and Jordan. It is a praiseworthy operation which might have been more successful and reliable if the references had been more up to date, e.g., Ebla, Alalakh and Arqa lack the most recent results (such as Nigro, 2009; Colantoni, 2010; Yener, 2010; Thalmann, 2016).

Chapters 3-10 discuss the finds from the EBA (levels G11 and G12) to the Iron Age (levels G5-6). Chapter 5 is the first on the Middle Bronze Age, since it presents the early second millennium level (G10, corresponding in the authors' view to the MB I) that precedes the beginning of the construction of the palace. The most relevant find of this phase was the discovery of a pit whose fills have been 14C determined to the late 21<sup>st</sup>-late 20<sup>th</sup> century BC (pp. 165-168), thus providing a first *terminus post quem* for the beginning of the palace's construction.

Chapter 6 discusses the first phase pertaining to the Royal Palace, i.e., the so-called Original Plan (sub-phase 9B) which refers to an initial palace phase abandoned during its construction for a new conception of the palace central sector. This led to the creation of the new monumental Hall C, that lasted without significant variation until the destruction of the Royal Palace during the LB II (as it was found by the French mission during the 1920s). The proposed Original Plan, which is largely reconstructed on the basis of fragmentary evidence, due to the presence of superimposed levels and the incompleteness of its rooms, thus involves a different spatial organization with a smaller central open court (p. 169) surrounded by narrow rectangular rooms. The dating of this structure is the MB IIA, a chronology that seems justified especially by the presence of many bowls with characteristic in-turned rims, although this reviewer wonders whether a few types with upright rims may indicate perhaps a lower dating.

Chapter 7 discusses the abandonment of this initial plan (sub-phase 9a) and the preparation of the area for the construction of the new plan, which was thereafter the main structure in use until the LB II. The area underwent infilling, and walls that were no longer needed were dismantled; the site of the new Hall C was levelled with clay layers, and pits were dug for the foundations of the monumental pillars characterising the central sector of Hall C. The new plan eventually resulted in the construction of the monumental reception suite (Hall C-Room B and Room A/"Throne Room") that constitutes one of the most remarkable aspects of the Royal Palace of Qatna, due to its similarity with other reception suites of Mesopotamian Palaces, in particular the famous sequence of Mari, Court 106, Rooms 64 and 65 (Margueron, 1982, 2019; Pfälzner, 2019a, 2019b).

The identification of this phase is thus of fundamental importance for the definition of the building's construction sequence and, in particular, for the origin/foundation of the palace itself, which has been subject of debate (Novák, 2004; Morandi Bonacossi, 2007). The construction technique, a fine example of the expertise of Qatna's ancient architects, as well as the skill of the builders, is explained in detail and shows the complex foundation system that supported the massive walls of the Royal Palace. The chronology of this phase is here maintained as the MB IIA (i.e., basically identical to the previous 9B sub phase), given the sudden, rapid (and rather peculiar) change that occurred during the building's construction.

The dating is again based on a discussion of the pottery which offers a *terminus post quem* for the proposed chronology; the analysis is, however, rather approximate and accompanied by a discussion which, in the light of the importance of these two phases, should perhaps have

been more detailed. By way of example, a few types, e.g., plates with short upright rim or with internally thickened rim (Taf. 64, K667 and K672; Taf. 74, K 790-791), or Brownish Red Slip bowls, seem likely to pertain to a later period spanning from the MB IIB to the LB I (Nigro, 2002, p. 112; pl. LIV: 83-85; Iamoni, 2012, pp. 175–176, 2017), whereas other types (Taf. 73, K779 and Taf. 108, K1202) are suspected Iron Age intrusions (Besana, Da Ros and Iamoni, 2008, pp. 143–145). This leaves open the question of the dating of the assemblages that only a more detailed study could resolve. The chapter is then completed by studies of the stone and terracotta finds and the archaeobotanical analyses of samples collected during the excavations.

Chapter 8 discusses the first phase of use of the Royal Palace. Due to the absence of standing walls this phase is to a great extent a reconstruction based on an integration of data from the French excavation with the remains still present when excavations restarted in 1999. The monumental lime mortar floor (of concrete-like hardness) that covers the surface of Hall C is thus the best evidence of this phase. The new excavations have added a few interesting details regarding the room's new shape, such as the position of the square posts in front of the passage from Hall C to the so-called *Porte Royale* that led to the Throne Room, or a floor repair located in the eastern sector of the hall. These modifications were performed subsequently, and thus provide evidence of the hall's continuous use. A small assemblage of pottery found during these operations has also been dated to the MB II.

These excavations also yielded a number of sealing fragments, some of which belong to King Ishhi-Addu, a monarch who was in touch with Mari during the Middle Bronze Age—roughly during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Klengel, 1992; Van Koppen, 2015; Ziegler, 2015). Other fragments of these sealings had been found in the foundation trenches of the Royal Palace eastern sector (Morandi Bonacossi and Eidem, 2006) as well as in the Royal Hypogeum (Pfälzner and Dohmann-Pfälzner, 2011). Their presence in secondary contexts, namely the foundation trenches, has been taken as a major proof in support of a lower chronology for the Royal Palace (Morandi Bonacossi, 2007). On the basis of a different reading of the text preserved in the sealings, the authors of this volume suggest a different interpretation of them as dynastic seals (whose duration might thus have been much longer than previously thought, pp. 396–397). In this way the precise chronology of these finds is of less importance. This is an issue best studied by philologists; from an archaeological perspective it may be noted that all the sealing fragments bearing the name of Ishhi Addu came from the Royal Palace, but none were found in a primary context. This may suggest in theory that the area of the Royal Palace might correspond to that of the original building of Ishhi Addu, but, at the same time, that the excavated structures may not entirely belong to this latter construction.

Chapter 9 discusses phase G7, which corresponds to the last phase of the Royal Palace (subphase G7c), to its destruction (G7b, that took place in about 1340 BCE—Late Bronze IIA) and to an immediate but very brief re-use after the fire that destroyed the building (G7a). Here the analysis of the finds necessarily relies on what was excavated by the French Mission, hence the chapter provides a re-contextualisation of the old data, in particular of various artefacts brought to light during the 1920s, including the collection of tablets that permitted the identification of Qatna with the modern Syrian village of Mishrifeh. The identification of an immediate re-use of the hall after the palace's destruction is of particular interest: this was possible thanks to the discovery of a pit filled with burnt pottery and debris from the palace (pp. 407 and 435–437). However, a more cautious approach might have been preferable to the definition of this phase largely on the basis of a pit, especially in the light of the presence of suspected Iron Age ceramic types (which might suggest a much later re-use of the palace area in line with the new settlements that occurred in Mishrifeh during the first half of the first millennium BCE).

The Iron Age (phase G5/6) is treated in chapter 10, the final of the book. The scant evidence discovered during the excavation has not permitted a finer subdivision into more than a phase, as happened in the adjacent Operation H where two main phases were recognised; to

maintain a general correlation a double phase number has thus been adopted. It was therefore not possible to say much about a period that must have been of some importance in Mishrifeh (the name Qatna seems to have been no longer in use during the Iron Age), as evidence from old and new excavations suggests (Morandi Bonacossi, 2015, 2019).

The book is an exceptional source of information on the archaeology of the Near East, although I have two comments to make in this regard. Firstly, it is not easy to consult the book. As mentioned, it offers highly detailed explanations of the archaeological contexts: for example, Hall C is divided into a number of sectors with very precise descriptions of the structural finds. This complicates one's understanding of the results achieved (which is further increased by the division of the reports into several volumes). Discussion of minor stratigraphic/architectural points in a section at the end of each chapter, similarly to the strategy adopted by Woolley, for example, in his account of the Alalakh excavation (Woolley, 1955), would have allowed the reader to first grasp the most important features and then, if necessary, focus afterwards on more specific aspects. An alternative solution might have been to dedicate the volumes to specific issues (e.g., archaeological contexts, pottery, other finds) as has been done in other archaeological report series (e.g., Kreppner, 2006; Kreppner and Schmid, 2013).

Lastly, a weakness of the volume concerns the discussion of the pottery, which has been presented very concisely and to some extent 'sacrificed' to the pursuit of a rather rigid method that does not leave room for in-depth analyses in the present report. In the light of pottery's importance for the chronology of the Royal Palace a more detailed and accurate seriation should have been presented; it is true that in some cases the number of sherds collected is exiguous, but in general sizeable ceramic assemblages have been excavated (a quick calculation of the diagnostic form types gives: G12: 71; G11: 62; G10: 459; G 9b: 575, G9a: 1375; G8: 64; G7a: 117). There was thus the basis for a more accurate discussion of this "pillar" of the dating of the Royal Palace (Pfälzner, 2019b, p. 236). This might help to explain what seems to be a substantial gap in the Royal Palace's pottery sequence, i.e., the MB III and (especially) the LB I. At present the pottery discussion shifts from a bulk dating of the MB II directly to the LB II, a rather odd procedure for a building that was continuously in use from the late MB IIA to the LB IIA. A more analytical presentation of the pottery by means of the better integration of more recent ceramic studies from Qatna and other sites in Western Syria and the Levant might contribute to resolving this anomaly.

Apart from these two considerations, the book remains a major point of reference for studies concerning Qatna and Syrian/Near Eastern and Levantine archaeology. The results obtained are of exceptional importance and their detailed publication constitutes a valuable example of the prompt and accurate dissemination of scientific data that will doubtless stimulate future studies focussed on the ancient architecture and material culture of one of the most important Syrian capitals of second millennium BCE.

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