

The Archaeology of Tell Ras Shamra

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In the spring of 1928 a Syrian farmer by the name of Mahmoud Mella Az-Zîr was plowing his field near the natural harbor of Minet el-Beida when he stumbled upon a tomb, later to be identified as belonging to the Late Bronze Age¹ (ca. 1600-1200 BCE)². The site was dubbed a royal necropolis and samples of Mycenaean and Cypriot pottery dating to the thirteenth century BCE, as well as part of the funerary vault, were sent to the Louvre for examination. René Dussaud, in charge of oriental antiquities at the Louvre, noted similarities between the Minet el-Beida vault and those of Cretan tombs and suggested that the cemetery may belong to an important city nearby. The French, therefore, turned their attention 800 meters east to Ras Shamra (“fennel headland”) where the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* began excavations in 1929 under the direction of Claude Schaeffer.³ Schaeffer excavated and published at Tell Ras Shamra for nearly 50 years before Marguerite Yon took over the dig in 1978 and served as its director until 1999.⁴

What Schaeffer, and later Yon, uncovered was occupation from as early as the Neolithic Period (ca. 7500 BCE) culminating in a vast urban metropolis in the last two centuries of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400-1190/85 BCE). The most notable artifacts the excavators dug up were the numerous tablets inscribed with a variety of texts. Within a month of the start of excavations at Tell Ras Shamra, Schaeffer and his team discovered texts written in Akkadian,

¹ Curtis, Adrian. *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, (1985), 18.

² Yon, Marguerite. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, (2006), 24.

³ Curtis. *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. (1985), 18-19.

⁴ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 5.

Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Cypro-Minoan⁵ as well as a multitude of inscriptions written in what was, at the time, an unknown language. The local language, now known as Ugaritic, was an alphabetic language using cuneiform signs. The relatively low variety of signs suggested an alphabetic system and the short word lengths led language experts to assume that Ugaritic was semitic. Scholars were therefore able to decipher the language quickly.⁶

The many archives of texts allowed the archaeologists to identify the site as ancient Ugarit, a kingdom mentioned first in the Ebla archives (ca. 2400 BCE) and later in the texts of Mari in Mesopotamia (18th century BCE) and El-Amarna in Egypt (14th century BCE).⁷ The abundance of written material at the site also allowed archaeologists to come up with a history of Ugarit as it related to its most powerful neighbors, the Egyptians and Hittites, during the end of the Late Bronze Age.⁸

With the nearby harbor of Minet el-Beida, Ugarit's principle role in the Late Bronze Age was as an economic powerhouse, particularly in the area of maritime trade.⁹ Thus, while Ugarit maintained its hegemony, it was often at the mercy of the militarily superior Egyptians and Hittites and had little military strength itself.¹⁰ By the late 15th century BCE, textual evidence begins to suggest that Ugarit had fallen under the rule of Egypt. Ugarit is first mentioned in Egyptian records around this time and a letter in Ugaritic mentions "Nimmuriya, the eternal king," the throne name of Amenhotep III who was ruling in Egypt at the time. An Amarna letter originating in Ugarit by King Ammistamru, who reigned ca. 1390 BCE, claims that the "fathers"

⁵ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006).

⁶ Curtis. *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. (1985), 25.

⁷ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 15.

⁸ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 18.

⁹ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 21

¹⁰ Yon (2006) references a number of texts suggesting that Ugarit preferred to give its allies economic rather than military support in times of war.

of the author were also vassals of Egypt, meaning that at this time Ugarit must have been under Egyptian rule for a generation or two already.¹¹

Subsequently, it appears that Ugarit remained under Egyptian rule until the “First Syrian War,” ca. 1366 BCE, in which Suppiluliumas, ruler of the Hittites, invaded from the north. A letter from Suppiluliumas to Niqmaddu, Ammistamru’s successor, reads, “As previously thy ancestors were friends and not foes of Hatti, now thou, Niqmandu, be in the same way a foe of my foes and a friend of my friends!”¹² It seems that Suppiluliumas was writing in response to a proposition from Egypt’s other territories to Ugarit requesting that it join forces with them. Niqmaddu apparently decided to cast in his lots with the Hittites, for Suppiluliumas came in from the north to rescue Ugarit from the hands of its former allies and established Hatti over it.¹³ Ugarit remained under Hittite control until its collapse in the early 12th century, perhaps at the hands of the “sea peoples” also considered responsible for the fall of Egypt and Hatti.¹⁴

The textual evidence discovered at Tell Ras Shamra is not limited to royal correspondence. Numerous economic and religious texts were also discovered all over the *tell*. The presence of such an abundance of textual evidence means a lot for the interpretation of the archeological record. Not only is the practice of historical archaeology made easy, but also numerous artifacts are illuminated because of texts describing the objects and their uses. For example, in her book *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*, Marguerite Yon describes an ivory

¹¹ Astour, Michael C. “Ugarit and the Great Powers.” *Ugarit In Retrospect*. Edited by Gordon D. Young. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, (1981), 15-16.

¹² Astour. “Ugarit and the Great Powers.” (1981), 10.

¹³ Astour. “Ugarit and the Great Powers.” (1981), 20.

¹⁴ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 21-22.

container shaped like a duck as a “cosmetic box.” Her evidence for this use of the box comes from a tablet referencing “20 cosmetic boxes of ivory.”¹⁵

Likewise, the texts allowed for the interpretation of cultic rituals and artifacts. Numerous ivory and terra cotta liver models were excavated at Tell Ras Shamra. The determination that these oddly shaped artifacts were in fact meant to represent sheep’s’ livers was made upon discovering an inscription on one of them that read *kbd*, Ugaritic for “liver.”¹⁶ Descriptions of religious rituals involving livers are attested in Mesopotamia¹⁷ as well as in the “Library of the High Priest” on the acropolis at Ugarit.

In general, the archaeology of Tell Ras Shamra has been of cognitive archaeological or empirical nature. The abundance of textual evidence alone is enough to almost force the hand of anyone studying the *tell* into an empiricist framework; it is far easier to make objective interpretive decisions when they are backed up by ancient texts. Furthermore, at the moment Ugarit is, for all intents and purposes, a single period site lasting little more than 200 years. The limited scope of Ugarit as we know it means that there are few internal cultural comparisons archaeologists can make. In order to draw comparisons archaeologists must create cross-cultural comparisons with Ugarit’s Levantine, Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Egyptian neighbors.

Even Claude Schaeffer, who was excavating well before the introduction of the modern empiricist school, has a proto-empiricist approach to digging. His excavations in the first half of the 20th century are meticulously documented and his drawings are still in use by modern archaeologists today. His style of excavation left something to be desired, though, in that it comprised mostly of wide scale architectural exposure as opposed to careful stratigraphy (as in

¹⁵ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 139.

¹⁶ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 139, 155.

¹⁷ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 155.

the South City),¹⁸ however the early excavations still accounted for complex stratification throughout the site.¹⁹

Marguerite Yon exhibits a solid empiricist theory in her publications. In her 1992 article in which she refutes the New Archaeology based population estimates of Randall Garr,²⁰ Yon's primary concern is the insufficient data available. Furthermore, she often refers to either creating or revising hypotheses, a large tenet of empiricism, with regard to population estimates.²¹

In her book, Yon demonstrates her cognitive archaeological and empirical nature. Yon describes two different statues, one in limestone and one in bronze, found in separate places on the *tell*, both of which appear to be the god El. The limestone statue, however, is missing its arms, whereas the bronze one has its right hand stretched out in benediction while his left fist is clenched, presumably holding something that has been lost. Yon assumes, based on the bronze statue, that the limestone statue's arms would have been constructed similarly.²² This interpretation assumes that the artist had some sort of preconceived image of what the deity's pose ought to have been. This is in stark contrast to how a post-processual archaeologist would have interpreted the statue, since a post-processualist would not believe the individual would have had such an image in mind.

A combination of textual evidence and cross-cultural comparisons makes the excavations at Tell Ras Shamra prime examples of empirical study. Both Claude Schaffer and Marguerite

¹⁸ Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 91.

¹⁹ Curtis. *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. (1985), 26.

²⁰ Garr, Randall. "A Population Estimate of Ancient Ugarit." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. no. 266 (May, 1987): 31-43.

²¹ Yon, Marguerite. "Ugarit: The Urban Habitat the Present State of the Archaeological Picture." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. No. 286. May (1992): 19-34.

²² Yon. *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra*. (2006), 130-33.

Yon after him exhibit those empiricist qualities in their publications, and it helps clarify Ugarit's role in our understanding of the history of the Late Bronze Age.

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