

Digging into the Past

Interview with Glenn Schwartz, Ph.D.

by Amy Entwisle



Throughout much of his career, Johns Hopkins University Professor Glenn Schwartz has been directing archaeological projects in the Middle East, primarily in Syria—until the civil war put a halt to his studies there. In 2012, he began a new project in a largely unexplored region of Mesopotamia, in what is now northern Iraq. Dr. Schwartz spoke to Imagine about what he and his team discovered and what it can tell us about the people who lived there some 4,000 years ago.

Why is this area important?

Mesopotamia is known as the cradle of civilization. It's the first place that developed

cities, writing, and large-scale hierarchical political organization. A whole host of important developments occurred there.

Most of what we know about this urban revolution comes from southern Mesopotamia. In contrast, northern Mesopotamia has been relatively unexamined. One reason is that much of it is in the Kurdish region, and the Iraqi government under the regime of Saddam Hussein didn't want foreigners operating in the area. After the American invasion of Iraq, Kurdistan became more independent of the central government, and that opened up the region to foreign archaeologists.

How did you learn about the site?

I was tipped off by a colleague at Harvard who does archaeological surveys. He had discovered this very large site called Kurd Qaburstan that he believed was a major city of the Middle Bronze Age—the period from about 2,000 to 1,600 BC. We know from ancient texts that the capital of the Erbil region was called Qabra in the Middle Bronze Age, and we were intrigued by the possibility that Kurd Qaburstan might be Qabra. Whether the site was Qabra or just a big city from the early second millennium, it was a great opportunity to learn about how a city in northern Mesopotamia functioned in the Middle Bronze Age.

What did you find?

The site has two distinct components. There's a high mound, and surrounding that is a vast lower mound. There's also a higher pro-

tuberance surrounding the lower mound, so we know there was a wall around it.

When we dug below the surface on the high mound, we didn't hit the Middle Bronze Age; we hit the Late Bronze Age. Below the surface of the southern part of the high mound, we also found evidence of medieval occupation, from around the 13th century AD. But below the surface on the northern part of the lower mound, we found evidence of Middle Bronze Age occupation.

Did people deliberately build on top of older settlements?

If people settled in a given spot, chances are there was a good reason, whether it was a source of water, good soil for agriculture, or a strategic location near trade routes. In this case, there is a source of water, and the site is on a road that connects to other parts of northern Mesopotamia.

Most of the architecture in this region had been made with sun-dried mud brick. These structures didn't last very long. When they fell apart, people would simply level them and build a new structure on top. Just by virtue of that process, the site starts to get higher. It might be abandoned for a while, and then people come back and build their new houses on this little hill that's the residue of the earlier occupation.

Was excavation your main means of gathering information about the site?

We're actually learning about this site from two different sources. One is excavation. The other is geophysical survey, which involves using instruments to infer what's below the surface of the site without digging.

The geophysical analysis revealed that it was a very densely occupied city with regular streets. You can see patterns, like blocks



Skeleton of an adult from the Late Bronze period, which spanned 1500–1300 BC



Pottery specialist Mette Thuesen, part of the 2014 expedition team, works on Bronze-age pottery sherds.



Tiles in a bath from the Late Bronze period. The bath featured a rather sophisticated drainage system for the times.

of neighborhoods, with houses, and you can see the city wall with towers at regular intervals. In our last season, we determined that a huge building in the eastern part of the site was a temple.

You returned to the site multiple times. Why?

The site is over 250 acres, which for an ancient archeological site is very big. It takes a long time to learn about it.

Archaeological sites tend to have materials on their surface. In a site from the later periods, it's usually pottery. So that gives us an idea of what's below the surface and the periods represented, but you never know for sure. When you're digging, you keep learning more, and you continually have to change your research goals depending on what you find.

The past decade has been a very turbulent period in that area. Did that affect your work?

In 2014, ISIS swept over northern Iraq. We were digging at the time, and we didn't know what was going to happen. I didn't think ISIS would dare to attack the Kurdish region because the Kurdish military has a pretty fierce reputation. And indeed, ISIS didn't attack while we were there, and we finished our season successfully. But two months later, ISIS did attack the Kurdish region. We couldn't go back in 2015 because of the situation, but in 2016, I went back with a small group for a study season. In 2017, we returned for a full-fledged excavation season.

What can we learn from the findings about the people who lived in this region 4,000 years ago?

There's a theory that cities in the Middle Bronze Age were hollow

cities. The rulers wanted to replicate cities of the Early Bronze Age, but they didn't have the population to do it, so they built impressive walled areas that just housed the temples and the rulers' palaces. But we can see that Kurd Qaburstan, at least, was not a hollow city. It was very densely occupied.

We know from the animal bones we excavated that they ate a lot of sheep and goats. They also had pigs and cattle, which is interesting because they require a relatively wet climate, and some people have proposed that the Middle Bronze Age was a dry period in Mesopotamia. But that doesn't seem to be the case if they had all these pigs and cattle.

We know what their houses looked like, how many rooms they had, and the sizes of those rooms. We even found a bath—a big square room with a tiled floor and tiles on the sides—and there was a rather sophisticated drainage system of tiles and baked bricks.

What happens after you finish surveying and excavating?

It takes time to process the huge amount of data we collect and to publish the findings. Beyond that, there's always work to be done. Archaeologists have a very multi-faceted job. We have to raise the money for field work, and when we go into the field, we have to deal with foreign bureaucracies. We have to learn something about the culture and the language and about how to manage a group of people living in a strange place. We have to analyze our data and write it up, and some of us teach. That's one of the things I like about it, though—all these different kinds of skills that you have to master. ■