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The House of Urtenu

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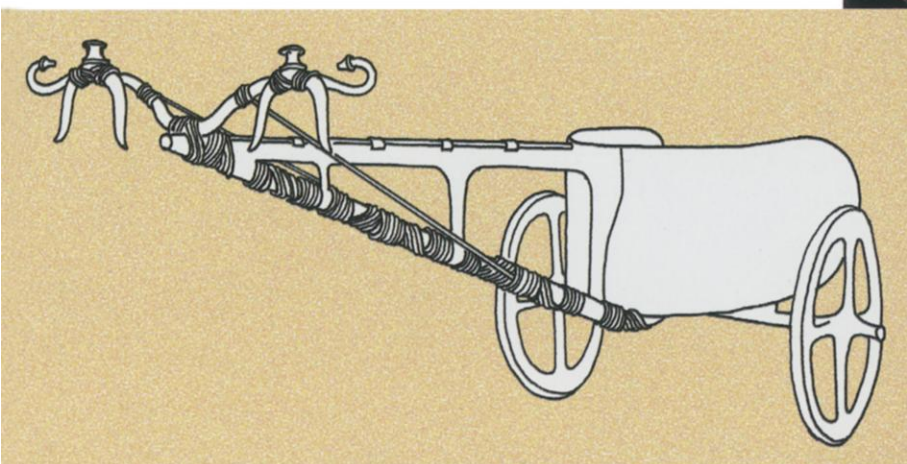
The private residences occupied by prominent citizens at Ugarit at the end of the Bronze Age have left an essential archaeological testimony to the way of life and the housing conditions in the capital of a prosperous and industrious state. Some have provided important epigraphic documentation as well. In the course of recent excavation, the house referred to as that of Urtenu, situated in the southern sector of the ancient city, is a representative case of these great residences.

The construction on the tell of a military structure at the beginning of the 1970s damaged the remains of this house considerably and thoroughly scattered the archaeological material that it contained, most notably numerous cuneiform tablets. The excavations of the house, begun in 1986, have brought to light the ruins of this building, continually unearthing new archaeological finds that testify to the wealth of the house's occupants. Parts of chariots, imported pottery (e.g., Mycenaean craters, and Cypriot vases), metal objects, alabaster jars, and several hundred tablets were among the many treasures found. Also found was a cylinder-seal representing a *maryannu*. The house was large, measuring more than 200 square meters. The architectural technique does not deviate from the features (cut stone, quarry stone, wooden roof timbers) characteristic of other large houses already excavated in the city. The ground floor is organized around a paved courtyard onto which opens a porch, perhaps with two columns. Rooms meant for passage and as storerooms containing storage jars and grinding equipment, occupied the ground floor. At least one stairway led to the living quarters on the second floor. A chamber tomb extends under the ground floor of the house. It is entirely constructed of hewn stone. The dromos of the entrance leads through a door with a lintel carved into a semi-circular arch, to a paved, vaulted and corbelled funerary chamber equipped with niches on the walls. This tomb was used several times but it was also robbed in antiquity. The robbers entered the funerary chamber through a hole bored into the

slabs of the roof. They left behind only some broken ceramics and fragments of stone dishes. But the quality of the material that survived (e.g., alabaster and serpentine vases, and Mycenaean ceramics) attests to the importance and to the wealth of the persons who had been buried there. To the east of the room that covered the tomb a door, whose posts have been preserved, led to a small room where several hundred whole or fragmentary tablets were discovered in 1994. Some tablets were mixed with the rubble from the collapse of the second story. Others were found either directly on the ground, or in the simple niches built into the south wall of the room, or along the wall. The tablets in this room do not appear to have been discarded. They could have tumbled from collapsed wooden shelves, which had fallen in against the wall, or perhaps they had been placed in containers made of perishable material stored on the floor, such as baskets, sacks or wooden boxes. Other tablets were found between 1986 and 1992 in those rooms of the house situated to the north of the tomb.

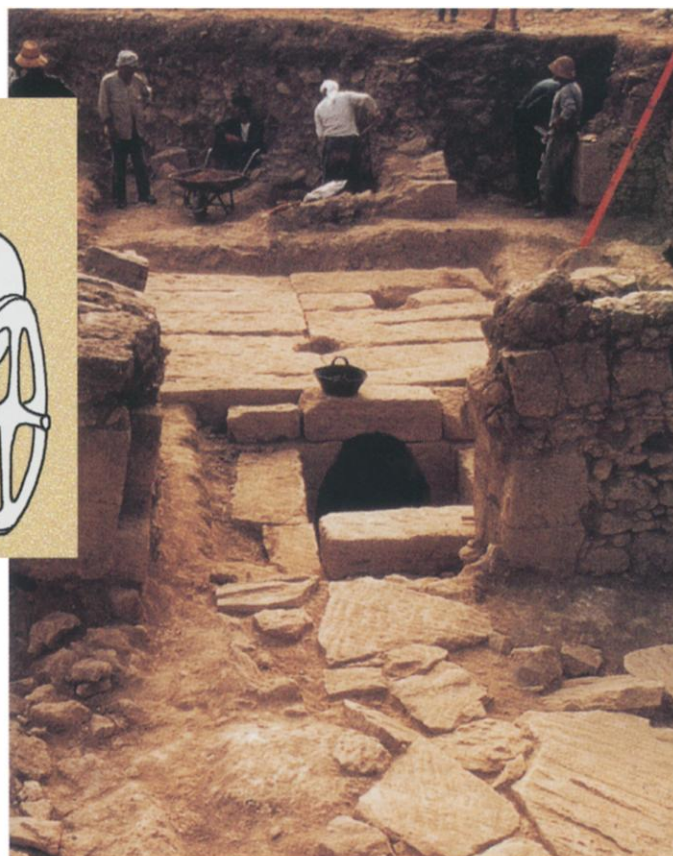
What Do These Archives Say?

Several languages are represented in the archives. Approximately eighty percent of these tablets are written in syllabic cuneiform (Akkadian) and many of these are letters. The alphabetic cuneiform that transcribes the local language, Ugaritic, is represented by a series of letters and economic texts, and also by an unusual abecedary, which has important implications for the history of the alphabet (p. 197). A sealing



△ *Reconstruction of a chariot based on pieces found in the house of Urtenu. The chariot shows similarities to Egyptian chariots found in the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun. The presence of such a chariot in his house is evidence of Urtenu's high status. After M. Yon, *La cité d'Ougarit*. Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1997.*

▷ *The house of Urtenu at the southern end of the tell, showing the funerary vault. At the top right is the small room where many tablets were recently found. Le monde de la Bible 120 (1999) 61.*



("label") bearing Cypro-Minoan characters (p. 192) and a trilingual lexicographic document in which the Hurrian language appears were also among the important epigraphic finds (p. 198).

To date, religious and literary texts are not numerous in this house. The few that have been found there doubtless reflect the personal taste of the owner, and suggest that the owner was not a religious official. A comparison with the proportion of religious and literary texts (rituals and prayers) found in some houses of the upper city or of the center of the city is indicative in this respect. We should, however, note the presence of a tablet in the house bearing an extract from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Some texts relate to international commerce: business letters addressed to the king of Ugarit or to a governor coming from foreign authorities, correspondence from the great Egyptian, Hittite and Babylonian empires. To give some examples, there are numerous orders concerning wine, beer, barley and especially oil. Goods for dyeing are also the objects of foreign purchase. An order for wood is addressed to Hatti. A man originally from Ugarit, who resides on Cyprus, buys pieces of furniture from the king of Ugarit. Reciprocal shipments (imports and exports) concern wool, linen and garments. Some texts mention a round-trip journey of manufactured garments made in Hatti that were sent to Ugarit to be dyed and then sent back to their place of production. A letter indicates the number and the weight of copper ingots imported from Cyprus in exchange for horses. Even if the nature of these documents is not unique to Ugaritic documentation, they help to clarify the economic life of the kingdom. Allusions to difficulties linked to these commercial activities are frequent, such as problems of payment (by exchange), late deliveries, and

the detention of foreign nationals. Most of the letters concern orders and exchanges, organized in a very hierarchical way by the great businessmen of Ugarit. Their social and economic importance sometimes leads them to address the king of Hatti directly for their transactions.

The Man Named Urtenu

The mention of the name of Urtenu on several tablets in Ugaritic found between 1973 and 1996 in this area has led to the attribution of the archives of this house to this person. But the documentation in Akkadian does not reveal anything to make one suppose this is the case. We must keep in mind, then, the conventional character of this appellation. This Urtenu, who was perhaps at one time the owner of the premises and of at least part of the archives, was not an ordinary person. The written documents found in this house show that he was not only a great merchant, but also a politically important man with ties to the royal family. His archives contain a "private library," but also a repository for elements of the archives of the kingdom. The period of his commercial and political activity is probably some time in the reigns of the last kings of Ugarit: Niqmaddu III (1210–1200 BCE)—seventeen letters are sent to him—and Ammurapi (1200–1185 BCE), the last king, attested by four letters. The dimensions of his house, the quality of its tomb, the wealth of its contents (despite the pillage), and the presence of chariots and harness fittings reveal the preeminence of this person. A person of great distinction such as Urtenu is not unique at Ugarit, as evidenced by the houses of Rapanu and of Yabninu. Those of other dignitaries, known only by name and activity, still remain to be discovered.

Aerial view of the northwest section of the tell of Ras Shamra-Ugarit, 1993. Photo by Franck Lechenet.



