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Press Release

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Second Rock Tomb Discovered under the Royal Palace of Qatna (Syria)

Burial cellar containing spectacular artefacts found by Syrian-Tübingen excavation team

The archaeological excavations at the royal palace in the ancient city of Qatna, north east of the Syrian city of Homs, have once again unfolded a remarkable archaeological discovery. The summer excavations, due to end on the 25th September 2009, located a rock tomb-cellar underneath the palace containing hundreds of artefacts as well as human bones from the period 1600-1400 BC.

In the year 2002, excavations at this site found a tomb with accessibility from the central palace rooms. The present excavation, led by the German-Syrian team of Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations at the Directorate General of Antiquities in Damascus, and Professor Dr. Peter Pfälzner from the University of Tübingen, brings to light the existence of an unexpected second underground tomb-cellar. Heike Dohmann-Pfälzner is the excavation coordinator on site. The Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (IANES) in Tübingen spearheads the excavations which have been in existence for the last eleven years in cooperation with the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities.

The archaeologists made their discovery during excavations of the north-west wing of the palace. They located a “slope basement” below ground floor level, its walls almost completely intact. A chamber bearing a collapsed timber roof, acting as an antechamber to the tomb-cellar, exists beneath the basement. A stone rock-cut leads from here into the spacious cellar itself. It is 4.90 by 6.30 metres large and is divided into two chambers by a wall hollowed out of the rock. The cellar is accessible from the palace and is integrated architecturally into its whole structure. Its use can be verified back to the later period of the palace in 1400 BC.

A huge number of clearly visible human bones has been found in the tomb-cellar. The discovery of 30 skulls suggests at least the same amount of burials. The fact that the bones are stacked in groups rather than lying in anatomical formation is significant here. Particles of wood found suggest that at least some of them were placed in wooden crates or coffins indicating a secondary burial. The amount of bones found is immense and significantly surpasses the findings of 2002. Their condition is good under the circumstances. The anthropologists Dr. Carsten Witzel and Dr. Stefan Flohr from the University of Hildesheim are carrying out an intricate examination of these human remains on site.

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Wir bitten um Zusendung von Belegexemplaren!

Numerous vessels of ceramic and granite have been found. The latter are Egyptian imports whose production in the Old Egyptian Kingdom dates to a period 1000 years prior to the existence of the tomb. Furthermore, the archaeologists discovered alabaster vessels which might also stem from Egypt. In one of these a collection of gold jewellery was found consisting of rings, rosettes and gold foils. In other parts of the tomb, chased gold foils possibly used for textile or furniture decorative purposes have been uncovered. Notable among the bronze artefacts is a heavy spearhead and a dress pin. A further finely crafted dress pin made from gold, a cylinder seal made from lapis lazuli as well as a seal in the shape of a scarab complement the inventory of artefacts found. Of particular interest due to its fine craftsmanship and beauty is a stone sculpture of a monkey holding a vessel used to hold facial paint. Of great interest from the perspective of art history is the discovery of an ivory human statuette with a very finely carved face.

The identification of those buried in the tomb-cellar is now the task facing researchers, but the lack of inscriptions makes this difficult. Most probably the remains stem from members of the royal family or royal household of Qatna. However it is also possible that the remains originate from earlier royal burials placed in the cellar at a later point of time.

Qatna was one of the most important kingships during Syria's middle and late Bronze Age. It reached the height of its prosperity between 1800 and 1600 BC and was among one of the most powerful states in the Orient. The royal dynasty continued until its destruction by the Hittites in 1340 BC. The recent excavations give us a wealth of new information about the death cult of the kingship of Qatna, its artistic excellence and its relationships to other Old Orient powers 3500 years ago.

Germany will host an exhibition entitled "Treasures of Ancient Syria – The Discovery of the Kingdom of Qatna" from 17th October 2009 until 14th March 2010 in the Landesmuseum (State Museum) Württemberg in Stuttgart, Germany.

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