

PLATE VII The Oldest Acropolis, uncovered at Tepe Gawra
Above: The Main Court. Center: The Northern Temple. Below: The Oldest Acropolis.

THE OLDEST ACROPOLIS

TEPE Gawra has been recognized, since its discovery ten years ago, as a site of fundamental importance for the cultural history of the most ancient East. The mound contained originally more than twenty strata. And yet, only the first six from the top lay within what is commonly known as the historical age. The rest was plainly archaic. As one got down to lower deposits, one encountered layers of increasing interest, because they supplied information concerning little known or virtually unknown stages of early civilizations. This continuous thread through the darkest periods of early settled life was sufficient to establish the reputation of Gawra. The archaeologist needed no other attraction.

As work progressed, however, it became apparent that the mound had additional contributions to make. After crossing the assumed borderline between history and prehistory, the excavators found in Level VIII an admirably planned township and a group of stately temples which bore eloquent testimony to the taste and ability of the contemporary architects. Here was something unexpected and rare. Only one other place, Sumerian Uruk, the site of the Biblical Erech, carried comparable architectural appeal of equal antiquity. But more was to come up below, quite apart from the constantly receding date of the deposits. Rich tombs with ornaments of gold and electrum, and obsidian vessels ground into lovely and intricate shapes with infinite patience and incredible skill today inevitably compel our admiration. Nor was this all. In Level XI-A was uncovered the Round House, a temple-citadel wholly unique. Not until Level XII had been reached did the excavators find traces of that basic civilization of the Near East, which is typified by a long succession of types of early painted pottery. The so-called Painted Pottery Peoples, whatever their interrelations and the length of their existence, had left their wares strewn over a large portion of the ancient world. Their settlements originated in the Neolithic period, thus carrying back our knowledge of settled, or civilized life into the Stone Age. But their very antiquity made those peoples remote and mysterious. Tepe Gawra was one of the few places where a study of the period promised a measure of success, because of the mound's clear stratification and the presence of an adequate sequence of the occupations in question. A chance to study the development of that pottery was all that could be expected. No further inducement was required.

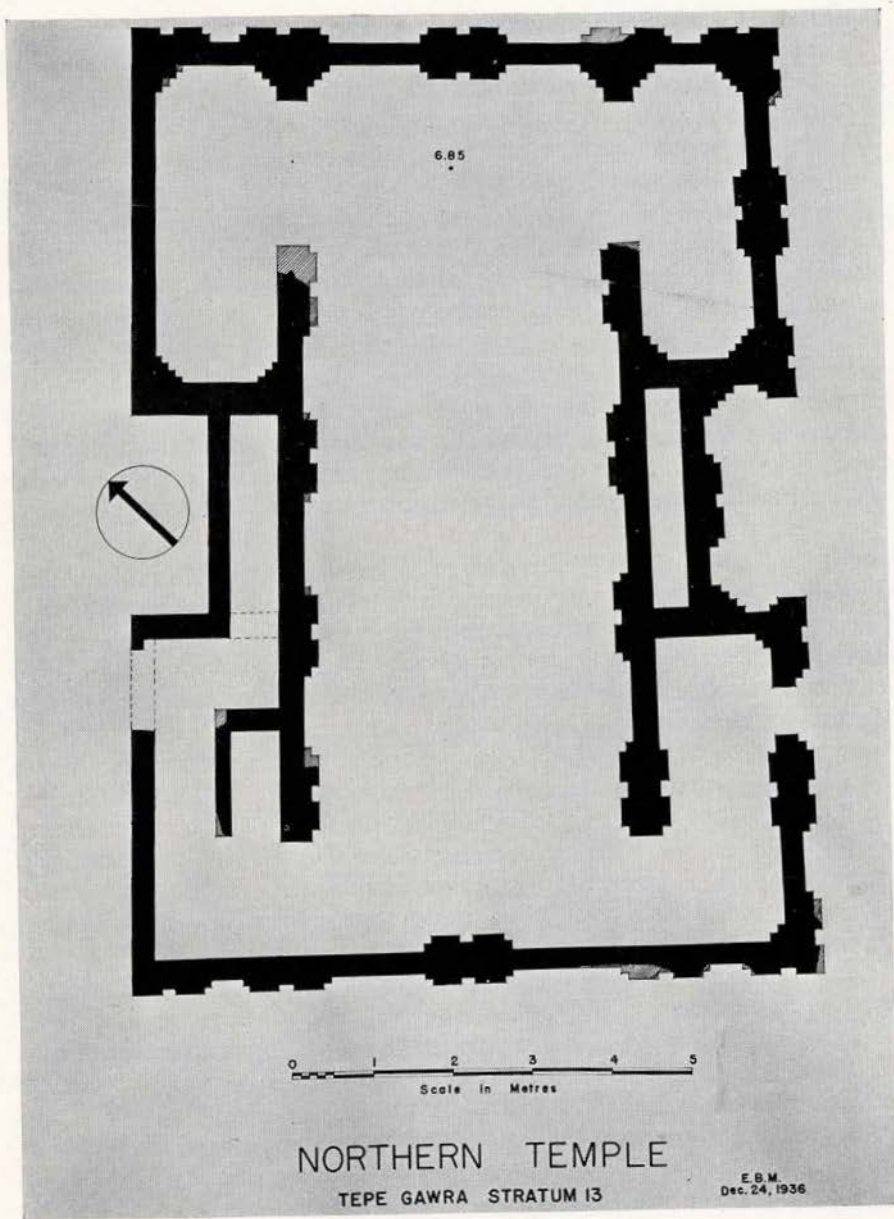


Plate VIII

But we had not taken into account the ever surprising faculty of Gawra to exceed the digger's most optimistic expectations. The material for a comprehensive ceramic study is there in gratifying abundance. With it, however, goes something of considerably greater moment; a picture of contemporary civilization illuminated by its architecture and by its social and religious background, a picture that provides a startling commentary on the life and work of early man. As a result, with Level XIII Gawra ceases to be of interest to a single area or a single science alone. It acquires unusual importance for the architect, the sociologist, and the student of religion, and bids fair to command the attention of all those who recognize the value and the appeal of a knowledge of the early progress of mankind.

These revelations have come with an acropolis that has just been excavated in Level XIII. Gawra XII belongs definitely to the el-Obeid period, a phase in the era of Early Painted Pottery. It will be remembered that within that era lie the oldest civilizations of the Near East. Level XIII is well inside the el-Obeid period. The stratigraphic evidence alone would suffice to establish this date. Pottery joins to corroborate this evidence in a convincing manner. Absolute dates are not available, of course, for prehistoric occupations. It is a safe deduction, however, that Gawra XIII cannot be later than the turn of the fifth millennium B. C.

The acropolis is situated in the northeast section of the site. It covers an area of about thirty metres square and encloses from three sides an open court which measures approximately twenty metres by fifteen. The principal buildings are the Northern Temple, the Eastern Shrine, and the Central Temple connecting the other two along the northeast edge of the mound, the one nearest to and parallel with the foothills of Kurdistan, which are only two miles away. All three buildings open upon the Main Court, which is closed from the southwest by secular houses.

The Northern Temple was built of small reddish-brown, sun-dried bricks. Apart from a plaster of the same material, it had no other applied decoration. This is not the case, however, with the remaining buildings of the acropolis where a greyish brick seems to have invited painted ornamentation.

The Central Temple is contiguous with the east corner of the Northern Temple and is turned from it at an angle of 90 degrees.

All the rooms of this temple had painted ornamentation on the inside.

The color was red purple and it was applied to the walls of the rooms and to the floor of the Cult Chamber. Where the paint has remained the application proves to have been solid. Whether the same was true of the upper parts of the walls, especially below the ceilings, we are in no position to determine. Contemporary painted pottery exhibits several graceful floral motives, and the suggestion is therefore not entirely out of the way that the highly ornamental walls with their piers and pilasters were adorned at the top with painted designs based on foliage patterns. But there can be, of course, no certainty in the matter.

The front wall, which faced the Main Court, was treated with white plaster. The same applies to the Eastern Shrine and its adjoining rooms. The inside walls, however, were decorated in this section with lively vermilion. The main room of this shrine was a long chamber which led to a small room provided with a wooden floor. The front of the shrine was again subdivided with piers decorated with pilasters. The back wall, away from the Main Court, was undecorated, just as in the Northern Temple.

The Main Court was a truly inspiring sight. Paved first with fine gravel and later covered with stamped clay, and all but surrounded by monumental buildings, this court was dominated by the great niche of the Central, or Purple Temple. When the votary faced that niche, he had on his right



the white-plastered façade of the Eastern Shrine, and on his left the warm reddish walls of the Northern Temple. Whether calculated or not, the effect must have been awe-inspiring. To the excavators, who could view the sight at what was but a suggestion of the original surroundings, the experience was, none the less, profoundly moving.

It scarcely needs pointing out that the stratum before us would be interesting architecturally regardless of its age. In a way, it anticipates with gay anachronism some Renaissance features and Renaissance tastes. So modern does the level appear to be in some respects that we have cause to be grateful indeed for the unambiguous stratigraphic evidence. Where, then, is the "classic" prototype of this architecture? In our downward course through the accumulated deposits of Gawra we have passed the period when history was ushered in; when metallurgy was introduced and writing laboriously evolved. We have touched the stage when the wheel was invented and are rapidly approaching the period when the brick was as yet unknown. We have penetrated, in fact, the succession of remains that mark the earliest recognized civilization of the ancient world.

We are now dealing with the legacy of the Painted Pottery People, a group that has hitherto been thought barely capable of producing flimsy mud hovels, for all the excellence of their ceramic products. One problem concerning these peoples has now been cleared up. We are at last in a position to understand how they were able to spread over and dominate a vast portion of the ancient world. Pottery alone does not begin to express the achievements of that age. When we have considered the contemporary accomplishments in architecture, it becomes clear that the civilization of the time, at least in the el-Obeid phase, was astonishingly advanced and balanced. For the acropolis implies great strides in social and religious development as well, as expressed in the contrast between temple and secular architecture, and in the prodigious effort of a large community which the construction of an acropolis presupposes. In short, the term primitive proves to be as inadequate in connection with the el-Obeid age as it has been shown to be when applied to the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods. It should not be forgotten, however, that the bottom of Mesopotamia is still several levels away. Close though we may be to the beginnings of settled life, we are not confronted as yet with man in the inchoate infancy of his civilization.

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