

More scientists and engineers are reported to be among recent emigrant groups than have formerly been permitted to leave.

An increasing number of dissidents is coming to the West as a result of the selective policy of exile that Soviet authorities have applied since the early 1970's. Émigré communities have therefore become a rich source of information about the Soviet system. Inevitably, in such communities divisions develop and there is, for example, no unanimity on how American scientists can be most effective in influencing Soviet actions.

In the Soviet Union, treatment of dissidents and refuseniks continues to be harsh. The punitive actions available to Soviet authorities range from deprivation of employment and use of highly developed harassment techniques to arrest, trial, imprisonment, psychiatric con-

finement, and the old Russian custom of internal exile. Compared to the post-Stalin era when scientific cultural exchanges were initiated, the perils of nonconformity are less severe. Emigration and exile are preferable to unrestrained Stalinist terror and the Gulag. In the society at large there are some signs of liberalization. Jamming of foreign broadcasts was stopped and the censorship has eased in some other ways. American scholars say that work in the social sciences is now possible, with access to materials being provided, some field work tolerated, and collaboration with Soviet social scientists countenanced.

The Soviet Union is still not an open society. And American scientists applying Western liberal expectations to Soviet behavior are being highly optimistic. Most American scientists active in the human rights and scientific freedom

cause know this. They also know that there are many imponderables surrounding such things as the outcome of the SALT II debate and the Brezhnev succession. But their working assumption is that scientific cooperation is valuable to the Soviets, both for reasons of prestige and as a practical way to keep up in science and technology. The Soviets are also granted some sensitivity to world opinion. And there is some reassurance taken in the fact that the exchanges have been institutionalized, have become part of the bureaucratic landscape on both sides. American scientists also concede that they could carry the protests to the point where the Soviets could decide to scuttle collaboration. With due restraint, then, these scientists see cooperation as a way to carry on long-term negotiations with the Soviets on human rights and scientific freedom.—JOHN WALSH

Syria Said to Suppress Archeological Data

Hebrew names in an ancient archive reportedly anger the Syrians, but scholars say the whole story is a hoax

On 17 April 1979 the *New York Times* ran a story in its science section that began: "A leading archeology journal has charged that Syrian authorities are trying to suppress the findings of scholars who are deciphering the huge cache of inscribed tablets discovered amid the ruins of the 4500-year-old kingdom of Ebla." It went on to say that preliminary reports from Italian archeologists at the site told of many links between the words on the cuneiform tablets and the world of the Biblical Hebrews. "Speculation," said the *Times*, "has even gone so far as to suggest that the ancient Eblaïtes may have been early Hebrews. . . ." The Syrians were enraged by this, it continued, and the Italian scholars were now pulling back on their earlier interpretations. The Syrian suppression might well succeed, moreover, because "not one of the 15,000 or more tablets has been made available, even in a readable photograph, to the scholarly community."

What gave the story bite was recent history. Some Israeli politicians had justified Israel's claims to new territory, such as the Golan Heights taken from

Syria during the war of 1973, on the basis of Biblical writings. That the Syrians would try to suppress information that they feared might lead to further Israeli inroads seemed more than plausible.

It was a hot story, and it quickly spread. On 24 April the *Los Angeles Times* ran an editorial entitled "Toying with history" that urged "the prompt publication of some of the key tablets, to permit interpretation and debate free of political restraint." Not long afterwards, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Giovanni Pettinato, the epigraphist at Ebla who translated many of the tablets and who discovered the key to the language in which many were written, had been kicked out of Syria by its government. Things came to a head in June when the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* said that an "Arab terrorist hitman" tried to influence the translation of the Ebla tablets by intimidating Giorgio Buccellati, an archeologist at the University of California at Los Angeles who is the only U.S. member of a nine-person international committee of scholars in charge of the Ebla tablets. The terrorist did this, according to the paper, by

murdering the wife and child of one of Buccellati's friends.

Are the Syrians so unnerved by the Biblical implications of the Ebla tablets that they quash documents and terrorize scholars? It makes a good read, but the story seems to require some major revisions. Pettinato, when called in Rome, told *Science* that he can still go to Syria, and that "the Syrians want us to publish the tablets very quickly." It turns out, moreover, that at least 50 of the tablets have already been published. Buccellati, when called at UCLA and asked about the terrorist murders, broke out laughing. "The police never called me. I never even talked to the newsman who wrote the story."

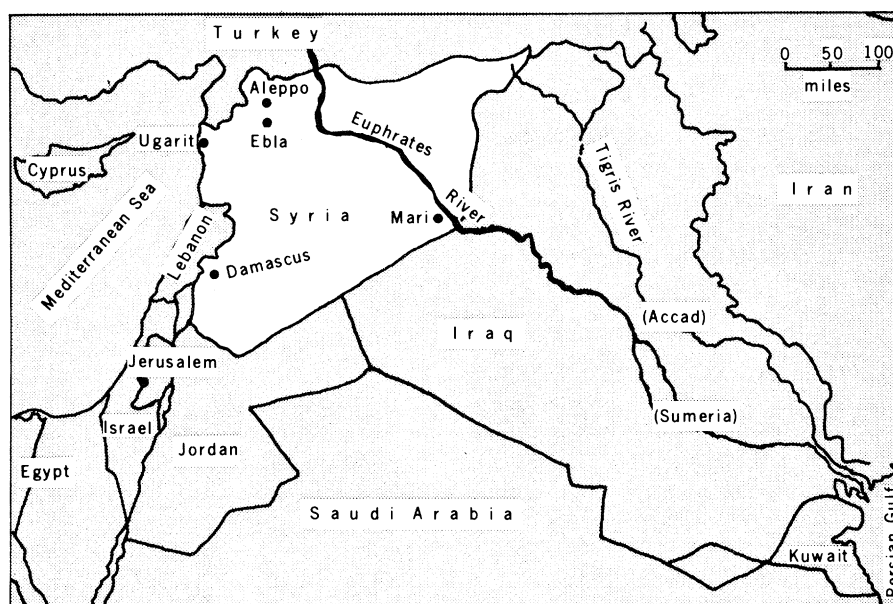
Academic observers see quite different sources of conflict. Some suggest that Pettinato was a trifle too eager to establish Biblical connections. Others note that it is a bitter feud between Pettinato and the archeologist who uncovered the tablets, not orders from Damascus, that has kept Pettinato out of Syria. Buccellati has charged the archeology journal cited in the *New York Times* story with shoddy scholarship. And many of the ar-

cheologists contacted by *Science*, some of whom have digs in Syria through the grace of the government, regard charges of a coverup as absurd.

This tangled scene suggests that the real controversy over Ebla has less to do with nationalist rivalries and simmering Near Eastern politics than with the partiality of the press to a seemingly hot political story—even when large parts of it prove ambiguous at best.

The Ebla story starts back in 1964, when archeologists from the University of Rome began to dig into Tell Mardikh, a large mound in northwestern Syria that covers some 140 acres. At first they had little luck. The mound obviously held the ruins of an ancient city, but the site seemed no different from a dozen others in the area. Then, in 1975, they hit an archeological jackpot. Amid the ruins of a palace destroyed by fire in the 23rd century B.C., they came upon more than 15,000 cuneiform tablets that had been hardened by the flames, preserving the texts for posterity. It was the largest third-millennium archive ever unearthed, and it quickly drew worldwide attention. Most intriguing were references in some of the tablets to cities and names of Biblical significance. Sodom and Gomorrah stood out, as well as names like Mi-ka-ia, Da-u-dum, and Ar-ra-um, which could correspond to Micah, David, and Abraham.

When scholars and laymen in the U.S. press soon afterwards called Ebla the cradle of Hebrew culture, the reaction by Syria, the bitter enemy of Israel, was intense. In September 1977, an official newspaper of the Syrian government, *Tishrin*, carried a long article in which Afif Bahnasi, director general of antiquities and museums, accused U.S. newspapers of reporting that the Ebla tablets had confirmed the existence of the Jewish patriarchs, and said that "Zionists wanted to exploit this misinterpretation" in order to "establish their existence through historical confirmation." To set the record straight, Bahnasi printed a declaration by Pettinato. "Even if it were true," it read in part, "that the study of proper names at Ebla left room for the possible comparisons with the proper names in the Old Testament, at times subsequent to those of Ebla, there is no justification for regarding the Ebla-ites as ancestors of Israel. That the Northwest Semitic proper names of Ebla should bear inherent characteristics which render them comparable to the proper names of all other Northwest Semitic civilizations is too obvious to occasion any surprise or wonder." Petti-



nato's declaration was reprinted in a Damascus magazine, *Flash*, in February 1978, the headline noting that it "refutes all Zionist allegations aimed at defacing Syrian Arab history, and emphasizes the antiquity of the Syrian civilization and its wide frame."

The Syrians were obviously upset. But were they tampering with the tablets or intimidating scholars? Here enters the *Biblical Archeological Review* (*BAR*), the "leading archeology journal" of the *New York Times* story. *BAR*'s editor, Hershel Shanks, charged in an article in the March-April 1979 issue that Pettinato's "declaration" had been made under pressure. To back up his charge, Shanks pointed to early statements by Pettinato that showed stronger Biblical references than he was now making. A key example, said Shanks, was Pettinato's reading of tablet TM-75-1860. Pettinato, he said, was reported to have said back in 1976 that this tablet contained the names of the five cities of the plain mentioned in Genesis 14, and that they occurred in the same order as in the Bible—Sodom, Gomorrah, Admad, Zeboim, and Bela. But then came alleged pressure from the Syrian government. "Pettinato now says that although the cities of the plain do appear in the Ebla tablets, they do not appear in the same tablet." Moreover, said Shanks, "there have been rumors that tablet 1860 has disappeared." To clear up the situation, Shanks called for the Italian archeologists and the Syrian authorities to publish the tablet promptly. "The pages of *BAR*," he said, "are available for this purpose."

Not everyone was impressed. Neither Syrians nor Italians responded—some

say with good reason. In an unpublished letter to the *New York Times*, Harvey Weiss, an archeologist at Yale, said that *BAR* was the last place to print a transcript of the tablet. *BAR*, he said, is a "slick new magazine featuring popular, nonscholarly articles, some of them written by the magazine's editor, who has no known academic credentials as an archeologist."

In fact, *BAR* does seem aimed at a popular audience. In an article on how to pick a dig, a headline notes that "You may learn as much about yourself as about the ancient culture you dig up." The back pages of the magazine tell of *BAR* Tours, where "discriminating *BAR* readers" can find "the romance and adventure of visiting the sights of Biblical renown, plus the exotic ports of the Mediterranean. . . ." And then, of course, there are the ads for *BAR* tote bags and T-shirts. Buccellati, an archeologist who also teaches cuneiform, says that a copy of TM-75-1860 would not mean anything to Shanks because he could not read it. Shanks, who works as an attorney in a Washington, D.C., law firm when not editing *BAR*, was not visibly shaken by this remark. "I am an expert in relevance," he recently told *Science* during a visit to his law offices. "You don't have to be a scholar to look at the evidence and see that Syria is trying to influence what people do."

Buccellati does not agree. A large part of the charge of Syrian suppression, he says, boils down to Shanks' misusing second- and third-hand information. Pettinato's remarks about the five Biblical cities of the plain were made during a visit to the United States in 1976. It was another scholar, David N. Freedman,

editor of *Biblical Archeologist*, who claimed that the names were all on one tablet. Freedman apparently got this information from Pettinato over breakfast. "Years later," says Buccellati, "Shanks comes out with a major article based on Freedman's word-of-mouth data, without in the meantime checking back with Pettinato or other scholars who have access to the tablets."

Though Shanks did not ask for confirmation of what was written on the tablet, Freedman eventually did. In *Biblical Archeologist*, he recently printed a letter from the Reverend Mitchell Dahood. Dean of the Pontifical Biblical Institute's Oriental Faculty in Rome, Dahood is an authority on the languages of the ancient Near East and is working with Pettinato on the Ebla tablets. Dahood said that the names Sodom and Gomorrah do occur in the tablets, but that the other cities on the Genesis list were in doubt because of "improvement in the reading of the signs, improvement that could only come with greater experience in reading the tablets. In any case, the cities three and four of the Genesis list do not occur



Hershel Shanks

in the same tablet . . . as for tablet 1860, it deals with the alloys of metals, quite a long text but without these city names on it."

The Syrians say they are not put off by the fact that the tablets contain references to Sodom and Gomorrah. "If it is science and if it is history," says Toufic Abouchaer of the Syrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., "then we cannot change it and we do not want to change it."

Not so, says Shanks, who in his *BAR* article lists several sweeping statements made by Pettinato in 1976, before the

Syrian "pressure" hit. A *New York Times* article with a Rome dateline, for example, quotes Pettinato as saying the tablets "shed light on the history of the Jewish people." According to another *Times* report, Pettinato said that the tablets "seem to show that many Hebrew ideas and words came from Ebla."

It seems, in fact, that on some matters Pettinato has indeed backed down. In a recently published book, *Ebla* by Chaim Bermant and Michael Weitzman, the authors note that in 1977 Pettinato wrote of Eblaite's "very close relationship with Ugaritic and Phoenecian" but failed to mention its ties with Hebrew. Syrian pressure? The *Ebla* authors say it is a "disquieting" possibility, and Shanks is sure of it.

Apparently not considered by those who see a Syrian conspiracy, however, is another probable influence on Pettinato—the opinion of his peers. When photographic copies of the Ebla tablets and transcriptions of them started circulating in 1976, not a few scholars took issue with some of Pettinato's translations and asides. For instance, Ignace J. Gelb, professor emeritus of Near Eastern languages at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, said in a March 1977 article that of four ancient Semitic languages (Akkadian, Amorite, Ugaritic, and Hebrew), Eblaite was least closely related to Hebrew, showing similarities to it in only 5 of 26 linguistic features.

Pettinato also caught flack from scholars on the word Ya, a contraction of Yahweh, the biblical god of the Hebrews. Pettinato said it was spread throughout the tablets, and based his claim on the presence of a particular character at the end of several names. But translators of cuneiform are hindered by an ambiguity of the signs called polyphony, which means that many characters can be translated in a number of ways, and many scholars disagreed with Pettinato's reading. And even if Pettinato's reading was correct, the sign still need not refer to a divine name. The ending was often used in Akkadian, Amorite, and other Semitic languages to form pet names, just as -y is often added to English proper names, as in *Billy*. Scholars raised these objections more and more often, and some of Pettinato's initial bold suggestions fell by the wayside. Of late he makes little mention of the god Ya.

It is also worth noting that Pettinato's pullback started before the Syrian "pressure." When the authors of the book, *Ebla*, say that Pettinato overlooked Eblaite's ties to Hebrew, they cite an article

in an Italian journal, *Rivista Biblica*, as proof. What they fail to mention is that the issue in question came out in July 1977—some 2 months before the first "threatening" article appeared in the Syrian press.

To many, Pettinato's Sicilian temperament has much to do with the extravagance of some of his early statements. "He is very excitable," says Robert D. Biggs, an archeologist at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. "Pettinato gets easily carried away and tends to jump to conclusions." This is in marked contrast to Paolo Matthiae, the Italian archeologist who discovered Ebla. Matthiae is a retiring person of German origin, given to what one observer called "few words and long silences." On Ebla, Matthiae is conservative. "In my opinion," he is quoted as saying in a December 1978 *National Geographic* article, "the claimed Biblical associations are not based on real evidence."

Shanks says that Matthiae too has backed down. He claims Matthiae is now terrified of being booted out of Syria, but that in 1976 he often spoke of Biblical connections. "But how can you have a discussion without the tablets themselves," Shanks asks. "I think the Syrians could capture a public relations coup if they said, 'Here, we've got some of the most exciting tablets in the world. Here they are.'"

Buccellati is miffed by this. "That's exactly what the Syrians are doing," he says. The publication of the tablets has been organized by a nine-member international committee headed by Matthiae, and composed of scholars from Italy, Britain, West Germany, East Germany, France, Belgium, Iraq, and the United States. An international congress on Ebla has been scheduled for April 1980. Ten volumes of critical editions of texts are being prepared, funded by the University of Rome. Studies about lexicon, morphology, paleography, and onomastics of Ebla are already in print. An Italian journal, *Annali di Ebla*, wholly dedicated to Eblatic studies, is now in print. Some tablets have already been published and photographs of other tablets are available in a volume published in 1977 by Matthiae, *Ebla: Un impero ritrovato*. In a few weeks it will be published in English. All this is no mean feat, considering that delay in scholarly productions is the rule rather than the exception. It has been more than 30 years since the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, yet major segments of them still have not been published.

And what of TM-75-1860? "Nobody

has yet asked through normal scholarly channels if they could have a copy of it," Buccellati told *Science*. "But if any scholar who has competence and authority would like to have access, it would certainly be available."

Shanks is not convinced. There is still no proof that really controversial tablets are not being "misplaced," he says. There are, after all, more than 15,000 of them. Moreover, apologists for the Syrians, such as Buccellati, have a vested interest in not rocking the boat. Buccellati has a dig at Terqa, Syria. "And if you want to continue to dig," says Shanks, "then you've got to take certain 'things' into consideration."

Buccellati is anything but shaken by these remarks. Any member of the international committee, he says, can go and inspect the tablets at the National Museum in Aleppo, Syria, at any time they want. There is also a complete photographic archive of the tablets in Rome, and a complete catalog as well. And while acknowledging his Syrian dig, Buccellati notes that only three of the nine scholars on the international commission have done work in Syria. He also notes that for 50 years clay tablets that have Biblical connections have been found at two Syrian archeology sites, Mari and Ugarit. Yet at no time has the Syrian government been anything but cooperative.

How the press coverage concerning "suppression by the Syrian government" became so twisted is a question that baffles almost everyone involved. One press report seemed to feed another until they lost all contact with the original data. Take Pettinato's being kicked out of Syria by the government, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* of 18 June. Pettinato in fact has not gone back to Syria, but it is because of a feud with Matthiae. Ever since Pettinato arrived at Ebla in 1975 after the discovery of the tablets, he has received all the glory—even though it took ten dusty, hot years of work by Matthiae to uncover the archive and its tablets. And the two disagree on the translation of the tablets and on the dating of Ebla by 200 years. The ensuing jealousy and rivalry has taken its toll. Last December Pettinato resigned from the whole Ebla Project, he told *Science*, "because of my conflicts with Matthiae." Pettinato can in fact go back to Syria at any time he likes. He says, however, that he is not going near Matthiae.

And of the terrorist murder story run by the Los Angeles *Herald Tribune*, Buccellati says "it is a totally laugh-



Cuneiform tablets litter the floor of the archive room in the royal palace of Ebla. The tablets were hardened and preserved by a fire that destroyed the palace.

able type of coverage." While the paper spent 48 paragraphs trying to tie the murders to Buccellati, it gave only one for another possible explanation of the deaths. "The day of the shooting," said the paper, "she [one of the victims] happened to be sitting as a juror in the trial of an Iranian student charged in connection with last January's Beverly Hills riot against the now-deposed Shah of Iran."

Though Buccellati and Pettinato have few kind words for the U.S. coverage of the Ebla controversy, there are those who undoubtedly find it pleasing. The play in the press, for instance, has certainly not hurt the sales of *Ebla*, which was released in 1979 by Times Books, a division of the New York Times Book Company.

And with Shanks, mere mention of the press put a smile on his face. "I've been interviewed by the BBC and Canadian Broadcasting," he told *Science*. "The *New York Times* article was picked up by 150 newspapers." He reached for one of the clippings and held it up.

It is ironic, but even though there may be no ultimate proof that the Syrians have not tampered with the tablets, some scholars suggest that a motive for the alleged suppression does not exist. The whole coverup theory rests on the as-

sumption that the Syrians are terrified that the Israelis might assert some historical claim to Syria. In light of the Ebla tablets, this seems unlikely. Even if there were some evidence at Ebla of historical continuity between the two peoples, such evidence could just as well be used to show that the Syrians have a claim on Israel. And, since Eblaite culture was earlier than Jewish, this claim might have more substance. As it is, such cultural continuity is far from clear. Many newspaper readers have been left with the impression that the names in the Ebla tablets such as David and Abraham refer to actual Biblical personages. This could not be so. The Ebla tablets are dated to somewhere between 2500 and 2300 B.C. King David began his reign in about 1000 B.C., and the exodus from Egypt is regarded by most scholars to have occurred around 1230 B.C.

"Yes," says Buccellati, "there are interesting parallels between Ebla and the Bible. But there simply is no evidence of historical continuity between the two—only linguistic affinities of a type which is otherwise well known from plenty of other sources. Let me assure you that there is no induced timidity among scholars in this respect. We simply have not kept pace with the bizarre escalations in the press."—WILLIAM J. BROAD