

# RELIVING THE LEGEND: THE EXPEDITION TO ALALAKH, 2003

*K. ASLIHAN YENER (EXPEDITION DIRECTOR)*

*J. DAVID SCHLOEN (ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR)*

*AMIR SUMAKA'I FINK (SENIOR FIELD SUPERVISOR)*

Many archaeologists secretly aspire to find the oldest, the largest, or the most spectacular ancient site. Alalakh (modern Tell Atchana) in the Amuq Valley of southern Turkey is none of these. During the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (ca. 2000–1200 BC) it was the capital of a kingdom called Mukish that encompassed the valley. But Mukish was a minor power, a vassal state within larger empires, and its capital at Alalakh was by no means the largest or most impressive city of the period. Yet Alalakh and the Amuq region as a whole have proved to be uniquely informative about a number of important cultural developments over the long span of history from the Neolithic to the medieval period. This site and its hinterland have yielded a host of clues concerning innovations in agriculture, trade, metallurgy, and political organization in what was for millennia a prime zone of settlement and a crucial corridor of communication between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea.

The first archaeological survey of the Amuq Valley — the Plain of Antioch in classical times — was conducted by Robert Braidwood in the

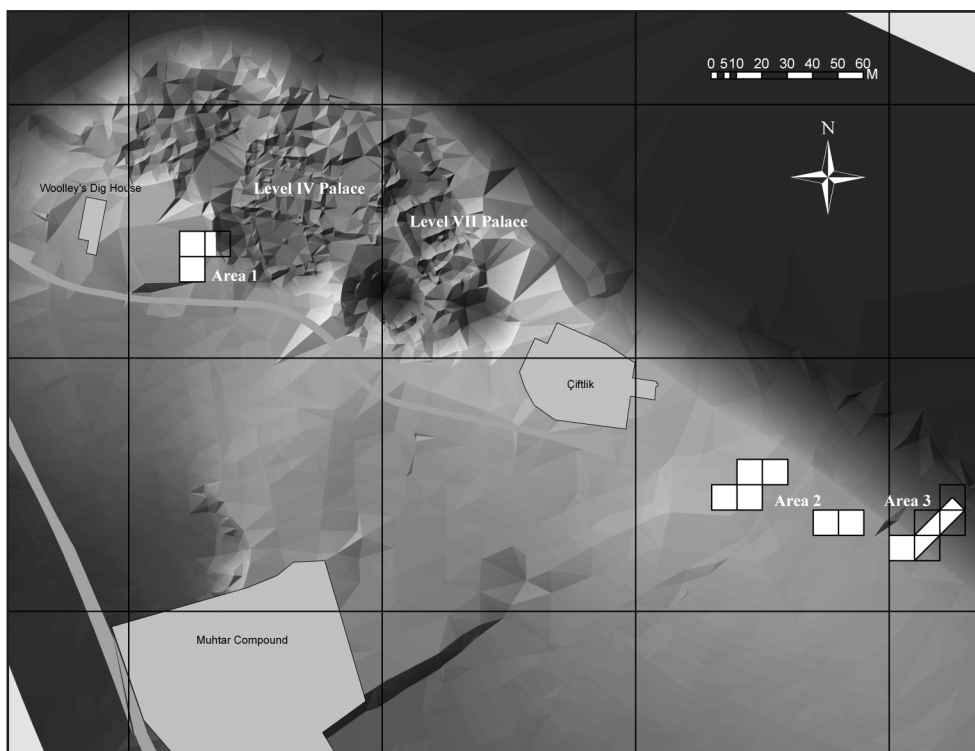
1930s on behalf of the Oriental Institute. Braidwood's site number 136 was Tell Atchana, which was subsequently excavated by the noted British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley, who identified it as ancient Alalakh. Woolley dug large areas of the site between 1936 and 1949, with a five-year hiatus during the Second World War. On the north end of the mound he found a stunning sequence of temples and palaces complete with Akkadian cuneiform ar-

chives, Minoan-style frescoes, Egyptian artifacts, Hittite reliefs, and Syro-Mesopotamian sculptures. The eclectic nature of these cultural remains and their intrinsic historical and artistic value have marked Alalakh as a place of special interest. But Woolley failed to record or publish many details of interest to archaeologists and historians, and archaeological methods have improved enormously in the past fifty years. For this reason a team led by Professor Aslihan Yener returned to Braidwood's site 136 in the summer of 2000 to investigate Alalakh as part of the Amuq Valley Regional Projects.

During the three field seasons from 2000 to 2002, our expedition prepared for renewed excavation of the site. We conducted an intensive surface survey, produced detailed topographic maps, and inventoried the finds from previous excavations stored in the Hatay Archaeological Museum. In 2003 we conducted our first full season of excavation, digging from September 1st to October 17th with an international staff of thirty-nine archaeologists and stu-

dents and seventy-two hired workers from the local villages (see the list of acknowledgments below). Our dig headquarters, long on the drawing board, are now successfully established in the village of Tayfur Sökmen, two miles from the site. Three large, colorful (red and yellow) prefabricated buildings — a dormi-

*(continued on page 3)*



**Figure 1. The northern part of Tell Atchana (ancient Alalakh). This plan shows the three areas excavated during the 2003 season. Plan by Aaron Burke**

tory, dining hall/laboratory, and office — were erected over the summer thanks to the extraordinary efforts of senior field supervisor Amir Sumaka'i Fink and his co-workers. Remarkably, the dig house compound, started in mid-July, was completed by the end of August with running water, electricity, and all necessary furnishings, ready for the arriving team. We rented two additional houses in the village of Tayfur Sökmen and another in the nearby city of Antakya (ancient Antioch) to serve as extra dormitories and storage depots. Three other projects — the University of Toronto's Tell Tayinat project, directed by Professor Timothy Harrison (University of Chicago, Ph.D. 1995); the Tell Kurdu Project; and the Amuq Valley Survey — are partners with us in this new "archaeological village." We are now open for serious archaeological business!

Alalakh is located near the Orontes (Asi) River, about 12 miles east of Antakya (Antioch). The site measures 750 × 325 meters, with a total area of about 22 hectares (54 acres). After clearing the weeds and brush, we laid out fourteen 10 × 10 meter excavation squares in three areas unexcavated by Woolley (fig. 1). In our excavations we are not depending on Woolley's analysis but are developing our own fine-grained stratigraphy, which we can later compare to Woolley's strata. In our first season we have already identified several phases of architecture (named Local Phase 1, 2, etc.). These are tentatively dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age. The latest phase may even belong to the early Iron Age, although we need to do further analyses of the pottery and stratigraphy and obtain dates for our radiocarbon samples before we can be sure.

Gabrielle Novacek, the supervisor of Area 1, oversaw three of the 10 × 10 squares. Eudora Bernsen and Adam Miglio served as square supervisors in this area (all three are graduate students at the University of Chicago). Area 1 is in the palace-temple zone on the north end of the site, in a spot where Woolley had left several hundred square meters of earth unexcavated next to his dig house. We suspected that we might find here the southwest wing of the "Hittite fortress" that



**Figure 2. The excavation squares of Area 1 are at the bottom left. The Level VII gate and Level IV palace, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1930s and 1940s, are at the top right. Photograph by Nita Lee Roberts**

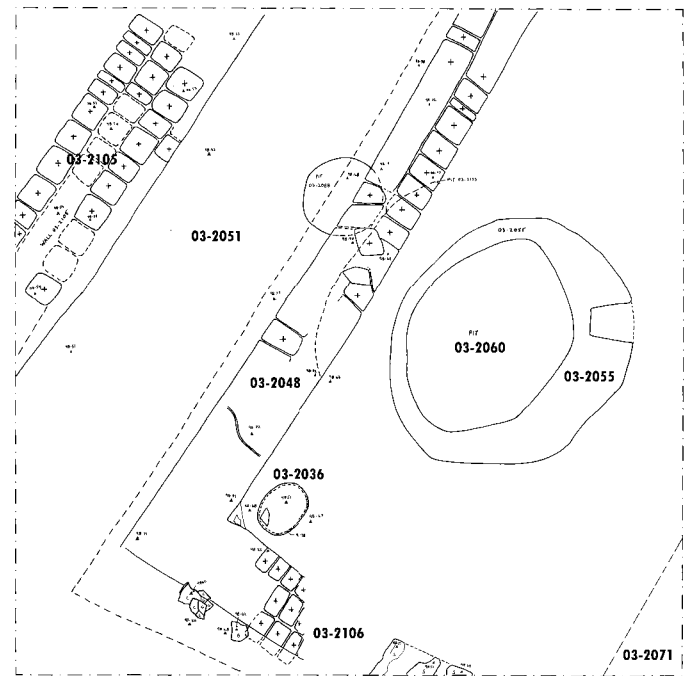
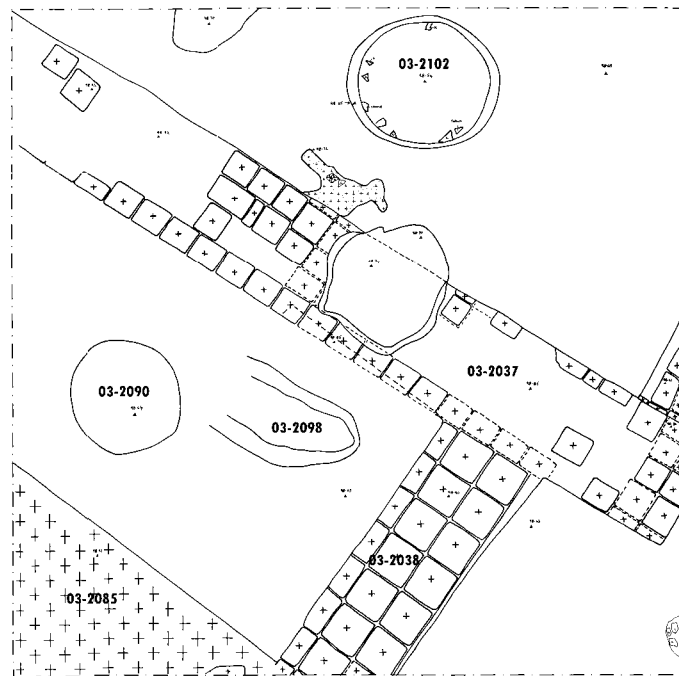
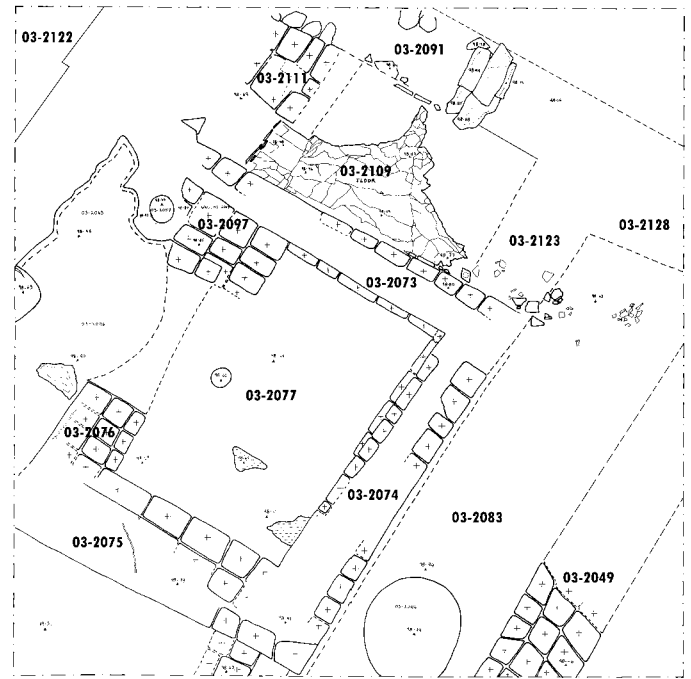
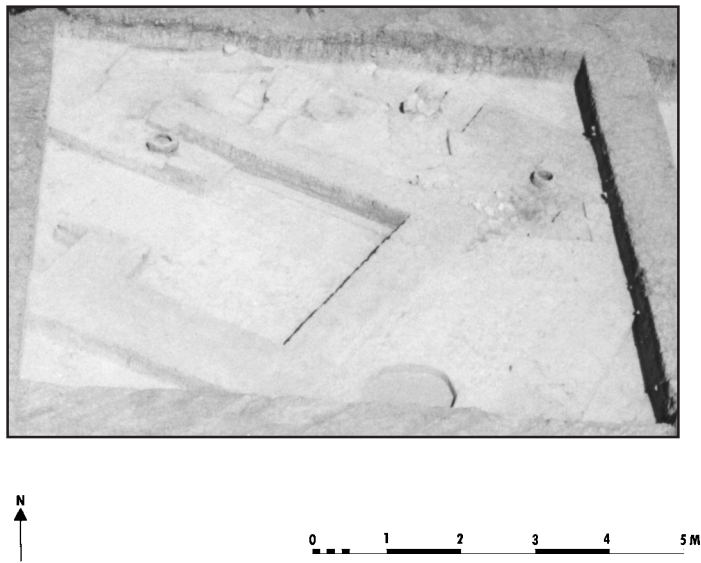
Woolley assigned to his Level II/III period (fourteenth century BC), and we were not disappointed. After several weeks of digging, we finally exposed the eroded tops of thick mudbrick walls encasing rectangular chambers that we will excavate in the future (fig. 2). These walls and chambers line up with Woolley's plan of the Level II/III fortress, whose massive walls are reminiscent of Hittite monumental architecture, reflecting Hittite suzerainty over Alalakh during the last two centuries of its existence.

As expected, many of our initial finds in this area came from thick deposits of highly disturbed topsoil that covered the monumental building and thus have no contextual provenance. Of particular interest are the abundant copper-based metallurgical residues and indications of iron-working. After some initial puzzlement we deduced that Woolley had used this area as a sherd yard where his pottery was sorted, which explains the striking concentrations of diagnostic potsherds we unearthed in the topsoil of Area 1, having in effect sifted through Woolley's trash. Unfortunately this pottery had long since been removed from its original context and thus is of little value archaeologically.

Found in this area out of its original context, a beautiful cylinder seal was analyzed by Dr. Dominique Collon of the British Museum, who is a member of our expedition. The seal is made of glass, a precious material at the time, and is in a quite deteriorated condition. The top scene shows a bearded sphinx with a horned cap and the lower scene presents two kilted and bearded men with Mittanni caps facing one another, clutching the Tree of Life. It is likely that the partial cuneiform inscription gave the name of the seal's owner.

Excavations in Area 2, in the east-central part of the site, were supervised by Amir Sumaka'i Fink. Six 10 × 10 squares were laid out in this area just south of a cluster of "private houses" exposed by Woolley in the 1930s and 1940s, not far from the northeastern slope of the mound. The square supervi-

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**Figure 3. Plan shows two buildings in Area 2 separated by a street. The buildings belong to Local Phase 2. The northernmost excavation square is also shown in the inset photograph (not to scale). Plan by Brenda Craddock and Can Ercan. Photograph by Nita Lee Roberts**

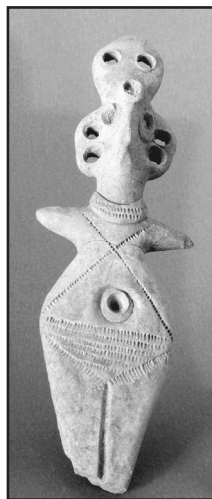
sors in Area 2 were Katherine Strange Burke, Glenn (Joey) Corbett, Leann Pace, and Bike Yazıcıoğlu (all graduate students at the University of Chicago), as well as Murat Akar (a graduate student at Middle East Technical University in Ankara) and Sarah Miglio (a graduate student at Wheaton College).

We detected two phases of settlement in Area 2 very close to the modern surface. The lower, earlier phase was probably inhabited at the close of the Late Bronze Age (Woolley's Level I), just before the great political and economic collapse that put

an end to both the Hittite empire and the city of Alalakh. In this phase we exposed two large, multi-roomed mudbrick houses separated by a street (fig. 3). In one of the houses we came across a plastered bathroom, a luxury that was enjoyed by many households in Late Bronze Age Alalakh, as Woolley's excavations showed.

Cautiously comparing our architectural phases to Woolley's, we can say that our finds in the upper, later phase in Area 2 shed light on Woolley's topmost and ephemeral "Level

0.” This was understood by him to represent a brief period of occupation during the twelfth century BC, after the collapse of the ruling dynasty; however, Woolley found no architecture to go with this phase, only burials. Using a slower and more controlled excavation method than he employed we were able to detect a badly preserved, but nonetheless coherent architectural phase just below the modern surface. The buildings in this phase are quite different from the phase before it and may well belong to the post-collapse period, that is, the early Iron Age. One of the most interesting discoveries in this final phase is a multichambered pottery kiln. We are now in the process of analyzing the ceramic assemblage and other materials in Area 2 in order to elucidate this last, post-Hittite settlement of Alalakh, of which very little was known before.



**Figure 4. A clay goddess figurine unearthed in Area 3. Photograph by Nita Lee Roberts**

Area 3, straddling the top of the slope along the eastern edge of the site, was supervised by Aaron Burke, assisted by square supervisors Jacob Lauinger and Edward Stratford (all three are University of Chicago graduate students). Our excavations in this area were designed to expose the sequence of fortifications of the city. A 10 × 10 square was laid out on the crest of the slope but, to our surprise, we found here not a city wall but a large kitchen or workshop with vessels for preparing and serving food lying next to a horseshoe-shaped ceramic hearth. This hearth or oven was extremely well preserved and sat intact upon the floor. Other fragmentary hearths were found in the area, indicating a large scale of production. Preserved on the floor were several clay andirons, four basalt grinding bowls, flint debitage, and twenty-four intact or restorable ceramic vessels. The repeated relining of the intact hearth with successive layers of clay indicates that this workshop continued in use for a substantial length of time.

In excavation squares farther downslope in Area 3 we did find evidence of fortifications in the form of a large mudbrick wall, but this wall is much lower and more deeply buried than we expected and is probably to be dated to the Middle Bronze Age. In the fill above this wall a terra-cotta figurine was found (fig. 4). According to our conservator, Franca Cole, this nude female “Astarte”-type figurine had lead-lined eye sockets that would have given its inlaid glass eyes (now lost) a distinct sparkle.

In Area 3 we did not find Late Bronze Age fortifications from the latest period of occupation at Alalakh, contrary to our expectations. But we did find ten burials and evidence of many more eroded or disturbed burials on the slope, possibly indicating the presence of a cemetery in this area during the last few centuries of the city’s existence. This would have important implications for the size of Alalakh in the Hittite period.

Of the burials in Area 3 one stood out as special: a tomb with multiple individuals and special grave goods. This tomb has a plastered superstructure on a cobblestone foundation. On

the top of the tomb were two columns of baked clay tile headstones stacked four high and a row of cobblestones. Within the plastered superstructure, which may once have encased a wooden coffin, four individuals were laid tête-bêche, each separated from the other by fragments of broken plaster (fig. 5). Individual number 2 was buried with many gold, carnelian, ivory, and amber beads (fig. 6). A number of gold appliqués decorated with raised rosettes were found around individual number 3, probably from a now disintegrated cloth or headdress placed over the head. Some beads and appliqués came from around the torso, which suggests an elaborately beaded and gold garment or headdress. There was a gold ring still on the finger of number 3 and gold sheet earrings or hair rings by the skull. A number of copper-based toggle pins were found as well as a silver one, all used to fasten the burial garments. Some of the pottery came in pairs: two Cypriot base ring jugs, two red lustrous ware spindle flasks, and two trefoil-mouth buff jars. In addition, a leg of cattle and numerous bird bones were found in the tomb. The spindle flasks would have contained beer or wine and the jars would have held other liquids. It seems that these individuals were buried with all the sustenance they needed in the afterlife.

When one thinks of Alalakh one thinks about cuneiform tablets. We found two fragments of a single tablet in Area 2. The first fragment was found in topsoil on the first day of excavation



**Figure 5. Professor Aslihan Yener and members of the Tell Atchana expedition carefully excavate a unique plastered tomb that contained four skeletons. Photograph by Nita Lee Roberts**

and was registered as object number 1 in our catalog of small finds. The second fragment was found two weeks later. Our epigrapher Jacob Lauinger immediately identified this tablet as a lexical text containing a Sumerian bird list. Another tablet found in Area 1 is an economic text. Rounding out our corpus of inscriptions from the first excavation season are two clay envelope fragments and two Hittite hieroglyphic stamp seals.

The renewed excavation of Alalakh has generated considerable interest among those aware of the importance of this site and the potential for fascinating new discoveries. In our 2003 season we had busloads of visitors from academic institutions in Israel and Germany. We were also visited by Turkish friends

and colleagues from Istanbul, Ankara, and Antakya, including a group of faculty members from Mustafa Kemal University, the local university of the state of Hatay. The state governor also paid us a visit, together with members of the local press. During the last week of excavations we hosted a documentary film crew from public television station WTTW in Chicago. WTTW is producing a film about the Oriental Institute and chose to visit Alalakh and the Epigraphic Survey (Chicago House) in Egypt. The film crew was guided by Sel Yackley, chairwoman of the Chicago Amuq Committee and a longtime supporter of the Amuq Valley Regional Projects.



**Figure 6. Gold, carnelian, ivory, and amber jewelry was found in Area 3 inside the plastered tomb. Photograph by Nita Lee Roberts**

Our exploration of Alalakh will continue in a second field season from August 15th to October 15th, 2004. We eagerly anticipate a visit by the Oriental Institute tour group that will be led by Gil J. Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute, as well as several other visitors who have told us of their interest in traveling to Alalakh. In the coming season we will complete the analysis of the large quantity of excavated material collected in 2003 and undertake additional excavations to connect Area 2 with Area 3, in order to solve some pressing stratigraphic problems. A project is also in the works to renovate the famous Woolley dig house, which still stands on the site and was recently declared a historical heritage site. Once the dig house is renovated, it will make an ideal visitor's center, complete with restroom facilities, a watchman's residence, an exhibit area, and an on-site depot.

All in all, our first season was a resounding success. Alalakh lived up to its reputation in terms of compelling finds, and we were delighted that we were able to operate on a large scale with a diverse team who lived and worked together very efficiently and with good cheer. Congratulations to all who participated and made this a special excavation!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the authors, the 2003 Tell Atchana/Alalakh staff consisted of the following people: Eudora Bernsen, Aaron Burke, Katherine Strange Burke, Glenn (Joey) Corbett, Jacob Lauinger, Adam Miglio, Gabrielle Novacek, Leann Pace, Samantha Stewart, Edward Stratford, and Bike Yazıcıoğlu (University of Chicago); Hatice Pamir, Tülin Arslanoğlu, Mustafa Baltalı, Sedat Biçer, Can Ercan, Bilge Gürkan, Murat İvecan, Adem Öncü, and Ahmet Ünal (Mustafa Kemal University); Amy Gansell and Stine Rossel (Harvard University); Susan Helft (University of Pennsylvania); Fazıl Açıkgöz (Niğde Museum); Nita Lee Roberts (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University); Murat Akar (Middle East Technical, Ankara); Katrin Hieke (Tübingen University); Joseph Keller; Sarah Miglio (Wheaton College); Dominique Collon (British Museum, London); and Brenda Craddock, Franca Cole, and Phil Andrews (U.K.).

The research was generously supported by grants from the Neubauer Family Foundation, The Institute for Aegean Prehistory, members of the Oriental Institute, and numerous private donors. The research was conducted under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Directorate General of Cultural Monuments and Museums. Special acknowledgment and thanks go to the Hatay Archaeological Museum, its director Hüseyin Dinçer and archaeologists Aslı Tuncer, Faruk Kılınc, Demet Kara, and Ömer Çelik. Special thanks are also due to Metin Gürkanlar, rector of the Mustafa Kemal University; Saadettin Kafadenk, the Hatay Kültür Müdürlüğü; Şükrü Çakır, the governor of the Reyhanlı district; and Abdurrahman Sarı, State-Governor of Hatay, for their help and guidance.

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**K. Aslihan Yener** is Associate Professor of Archaeology and Director of the Oriental Institute Expedition to Alalakh/Tell Atchana Excavations. Dr. Yener specializes in Anatolia (ancient Turkey) and ancient metallurgy. Since 1995 she has directed the Amuq Valley Regional Projects.

**J. David Schloen** is Associate Professor of Syro-Palestinian Archaeology in the Oriental Institute and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Before joining the Tell Atchana project he excavated for twelve years at the site of Ashkelon in Israel. His research focuses on the society and economy of the Bronze Age Levant.

**Amir Sumaka'i Fink** is a Research Project Professional at the Oriental Institute, contributing to the study and publication of the Tell Atchana excavations. Having earned an M.A. in Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Chicago, he is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Tel Aviv University, where he is preparing a dissertation on the Late Bronze Age period at Tell Atchana.

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