

URBANISM, MATERIAL CULTURE AND SOIL OCCUPATION DURING THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE IN THE MIDDLE EUPHRATES VALLEY

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Introduction

The Euphrates valley played a key role in the history of Mesopotamia as the axis of communication between distant lands with variation of natural recourses, and linked Mesopotamia, the land with dearth of stone and wood, to Anatolia in the north and to the Mediterranean in the west and along the history, from the Paleolithic to practically today. The importation of the raw material and the development of the trade system were some of the reasons behind the rise of the transformation of the Near East settlements from villages to organized urban centers [Margueron 2014: 9], pastoralism also had a crucial role in formation the settlements in Ancient Near East, the topic is deeply discussed in Porter 2012 [Porter 2012].

The task of this paper is emphasize the geographical, political and social aspects of the settlement phenomena along the Euphrates valley in the Syrian territory, shedding light on the archaeological works along the river's course between the mouth of the Balikh to the Khabour, as well as the area of Mount Bishri, located to the south of the Euphrates course during the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 BC). The region witnessed a significant cultural and scientific development characterized by the emergence of new states and the interaction between various ethnicities and cultures; visible both in texts and material culture, and had a remarkable impact on the historical scene of the region.

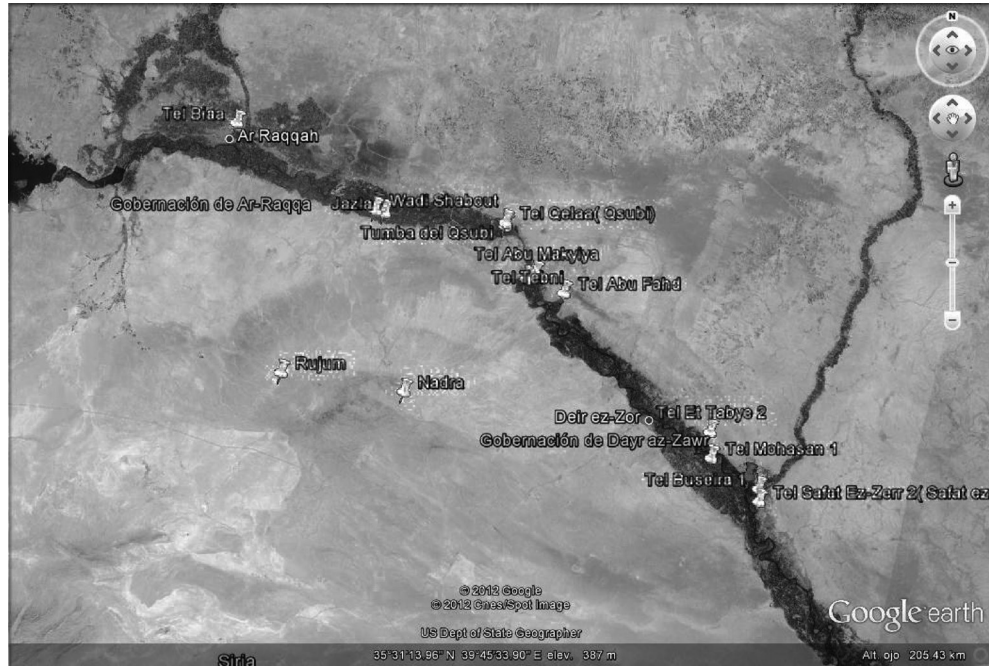
The Middle Bronze Age sites in the investigated area

In the last decade, the Euphrates valley was targeted by various archaeological missions; Japanese, German, Spanish, Finnish, north American, French and Syrian missions, including surveys and excavation seasons. The result of this prodigious archaeological labor helps us to reconstruct the history of the Middle Euphrates during the Middle Bronze Age. In the region between the two tributaries of the Euphrates and the Mount Bishri a totality of 16 archaeological sites were identified, located in both banks of the valley and both sides of the Mount Bishri. These sites follow this distribution from north to south: Tell Bi'a, Rijum (Mounds, cairns) of North-Western Bishri, Necropolis of Wadi Shabout, Tell Ghanem al-Ali, Necropolis of Wadi Jazla, Tell Qsubi (Tell Qalaa), Tomb of Qsubi, Tell Tibni, Tell Abu Makiya, Tell Abu Fahd, Nadra, Tell Et-Tabie II, Tell Mohasan I, Tell Es-Salu V, Tell Buseire I and Tell Safat Ez-Zerr II [Al Khabour 2013: 166–168] (Map. 1).

Historical context

The flourishing political and economic systems of the Early Bronze Age experienced a dramatic collapse at the end of the 3rd millennium; Cooper 2006 depicted this situation and the reasons behind the decline [Cooper 2006: 257–277]. The transition from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age produced three types of reaction on the level of settlements antecedently occupied during the EBA; in some cases, these settlements were abandoned, specially but not only the case of Jerablus Tahtani [Peltenburg 1999: 103] and Tell Banat [Cooper 1999: 322] in the Upper Euphrates in Syria, and in Tell Hamadin in the targeted area of this study [Al Khabour 2013: 168], although in some occasions, sites were abandoned and inhabited again in later periods like the case of Tell Leilan [Weise 2013: 109]. While in other cases, the reaction against the transmission was the limitation of the spatial

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Map 1. Distribution of the archaeological sites from MBA in the investigated area [map elaborated by the author]

control of the site, to occupy almost only the main Tell with a notable loss of the neighboring lands [Porter 2007: 71] such as the example of Tell Swehat [Cooper 1999: 323]. The last kind of reaction was the continuity of occupying the site from the EBA to the MBA like the example of Tell Munbaqa in the edifice of *Steinbau I* and the evidence from the pottery repertoire of the site [Czichon and Werner 2008: 381–384], in Tell Amarna: (*par la suite, toute la zone a été occupée par des maisons du Bronze moyen dont seuls les soubassements en pierres ont pu être retrouvés*) [Tunca 1999: 131], Tell Shiyukh Tahtani period III witnessed the arrival of newcomers who built their own houses right above the remains of the previous period [Falsone 1999: 138–139], the material culture in the site reflects the existence of new groups in different other sites where the Middle Bronze Age structures appeared directly above the EBA rests, an example for this continuity can be given also from the site of Tell Halawa [Meyer 1996: 132–170], as well as various settlements in the area of Carchemish [Algaze 1999: 554].



Fig. 1: A pit grave from Tell Ghanem al-Ali, Square 6 represents the MBA [after Hasegawa 2010:32]

In the area between the Balikh and Khabour this continuity was confirmed through the archaeological record from the sites of Tell Bi'a (Tuttul) [Kohlmeyer and Strommenger 1995: 50] and Tell Ghanem al-Ali, where the architecture of both sites and the pottery products confirmed this continuity [Ohnuma and Al Khabour: 2008a, 2008b]. The pottery in Tell Ghanem al-Ali show similarity of the pottery of Phase 3–4 of Porter's Chronology, and the potsherds collected from the surface of the Tell dated to the Middle Bronze Age (Fig. 1) [Hasegawa 2010: 33; Porter 2007: 3–21], and Tell

Bi'a demonstrated accordance with the textual evidence from Mari archive. The same can be said about the southern part of the Euphrates in the cities of Mari, Larsa and Babylon [Kuhrt 1995: 74].

Pottery comparison also confirmed that various kinds of bowls and jars which first appeared at the beginning of EBA IV continued to exist in high quantities during the transition period (Fig. 2) [Cooper 1999: 327].

During the Middle Bronze Age, the diplomatic and commercial influence of Mari kingdom in

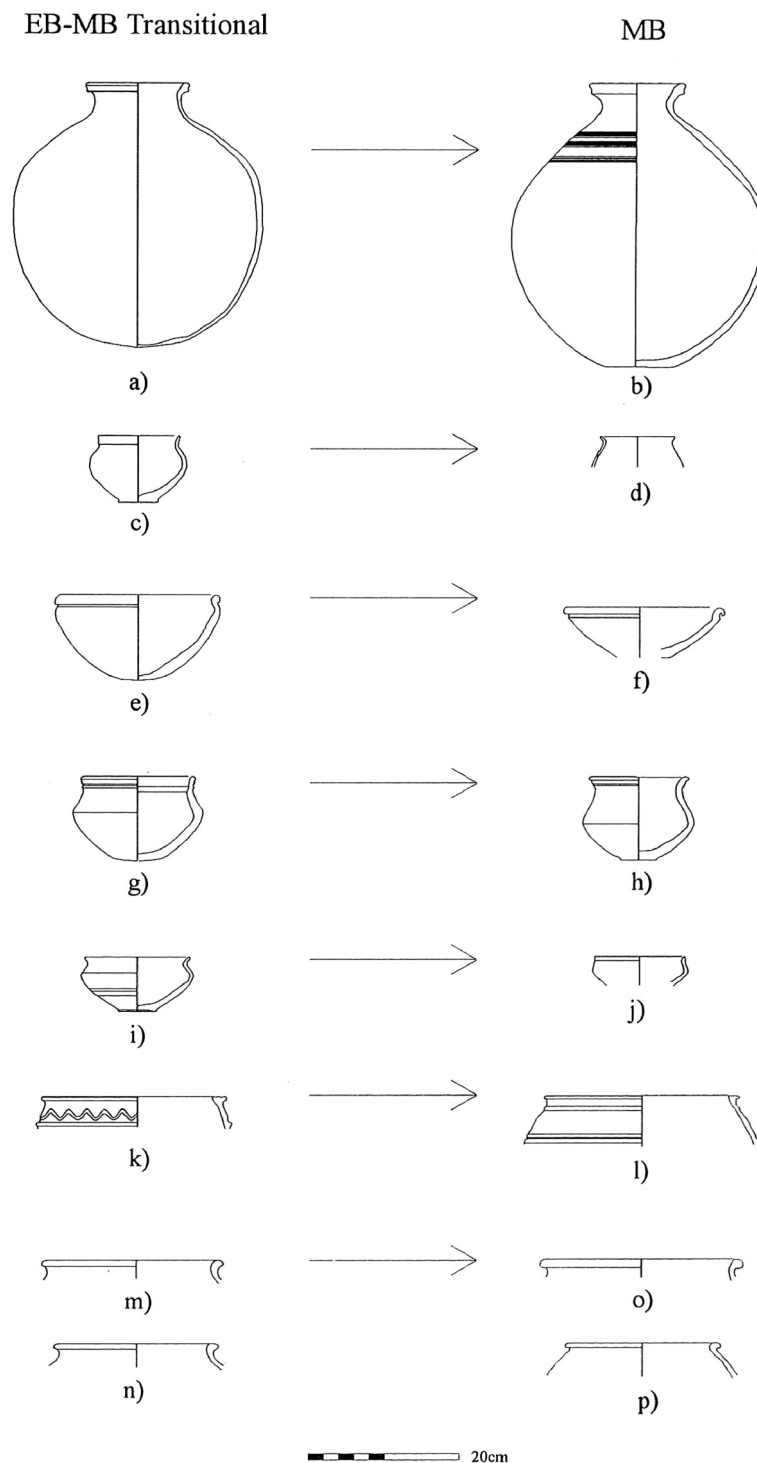


Fig. 2: Ceramic analogies between EBA and MBA [after Cooper 1999: 327]

the Euphrates Valley arrived to the rest of the western Syria towards the Mediterranean. Another factors influenced the political and ethnical scene in the region were the emergence of the Amorites in Central Syria, and the tense activities of the Assyrians who dominated the Western territory by means of many trade centers “*Karum*” along the trade roads through Northern Syria and Anatolia [Sasson 1966: 164]. Thus, the area became from the dawn of the Middle Bronze Age a sphere of active trade [Veenhof 2008: 185–190; Oliva 2008:80]. As a result of this density of human occupation by different ethnic groups and states, was the prevalence of the “Amorite cultural *koine*” [Burke 2008:160], studies correlate material culture representations with these ethnical groups, ascribing visible changes to ethnic movements [Killebrew 2014: 142].

Between 1800–1600 B.C profound changes were produced towards more consolidated political structures; the Amorites established a powerful and developed state in Babylon since the 18th century [Porter 2007: 71], and they maintained a close relation with the kingdoms of Mari and Aleppo as an opposed policy and exchange network against the Assyrians during the reign of the Assyrian monarch Shamshi-Adad I. Thus the Euphrates continued playing a crucial role as the principal via of communication and political control.

The Middle Euphrates became under the authority of the dominant kingdom of Mari after numerous military campagnas by the monarch Yahdun-Lim [Oliva 2008: 8], and the kingdom of Mari had to construct various settlements along the river to ensure both trade routes and the source of raw materials [Margueron 2004: 435–442]. The investigated sites in this paper are dated to this period of expansion of the kingdom of Mari.

The Mount Bishri

The Middle Bronze Age communities and soil occupation were documented in both Western and Eastern foots of Bishri Mount during the Middle Bronze Age, although the material culture of these groups was hard to identify through the archaeological record, it have been confirmed in form of funerary areas (tumulus tombs) without any recording of stable settlements in the region (Fig. 3) [Fujii *et al.* 2010: 73].

Perhaps we can relate the mentioned funerary areas to the presence of the nomadic groups mentioned in the texts from Mari [Charpin 2004: 83–94], these texts refer to the Amorite identity, as their self-perception and how they were by the “others” perceived. As for the research related to the Amorite presence in the region of Bishri Mount, there are many studies dedicated to this topic [Buccellati 1966; Kopper: 1957; Anbar 1991; Durand: 2004, and other more]. The Mount Bishri was mentioned in the epigraphic Sumerian and Akkadian texts as a homeland of the Amorites [Porter



Fig. 3: Cairn at Wadi Hedaja [after Fujii *et al.* 2010: 66]

2007: 71] and named as the Amorite Mount by Gudea, from where he brought building material [Sallaberger 2007: 445], Naram-Sin mentioned his victory at Bašar also. Various Mesopotamian kings and rulers claimed Amorite affiliation such as Zabala (Larsa) and the famous Babylonian monarch Hammurabi, the affiliation as Amorite ancestry was important both for individuals and for states in order to advocate their legitimation such as the kingdom of Mari [Nichols and Weber 2006: 42; Wossink 2009: 120]. The Amortite’s impact was strong in the region that we can ascribe

them the destruction of Ebla around 2000 B.C, not as a violent act but as an infiltration and gradual introduction new religious elements and new material culture styles in Ebla [Mazzoni and Felli 2007: 209].

During the Middle Bronze Age, the texts from the archive of Mari considered the studied area as the land of the tribes of Beni-Simal (sons of the left), referring to their territory situated on the left bank of the Euphrates [Charpin and Durand 1986: 141–183; Porter 2009: 203]. Also, Mari's texts refer to the Beni-Yamina (sons of the right) [Streck 2002: 175], that's those related to the city of Tuttul; the architecture in Tell Bi'a has revealed a palace from the Middle Bronze Age showing likeness to the Amorite palace in both cities Qatna on the Orontes and Mari, also the Amorite personal names were attested through the inhabitants names in Tell Bi'a [Wossink 2009: 125; Bösze 2009: 7–10].

The obtained data from the excavation and surveys of the Syrian-Japanese mission in the Bishri Mount provided a block to the larger puzzle of visualization the nomadic tribal societies in the region, the archaeological evidence consisted in graves and necropolis as well as wide funerary areas embodied by tumulus tombs [Fujii 2009: 139–142], the analysis of the C14 samples dated these carin/tumulus tombs from 1950–1600 B.CE [Nakamura 2010: 128]. However, support the hypothesis that the prominence of the Amorites from the Bishri Mount as a unique homeland is a subject on which debate still open.

Concluding remark

The distribution map of the 16 sites identified in this paper provided a clearer image of the Middle Bronze Age settlements on the middle Euphrates valley between Balikh and Khabour. These sites spread on both sides of the Euphrates Valley, indicating the facility of crossing the river and establishing the settlements on both banks, occupying a key location to control the river and its two confluences. The trade route and the geographical location of each settlement were a decisive condition because the topography and the limited the size of these settlements as well as their activities in the domains of agriculture, hunting, pasture and commercial networks of their communities, as well as the relationship to the rest of the other urban centers, this distribution conveys indications to the entire population and their activities during the Middle Bronze Age.

The dispersion of these settlements must be related to dominating the land and the political horizon criteria; the first zone is Tell Bi'a; where the confluence of the Balikh in the Euphrates, forming a key place for the connection to the Balikh valley and the northern part of Syrian and southern of Anatolia. The second zone is the key location of the gorge of Halabiya between Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor; there they were documented the sites of: Tell Qsubi, Tell Tibni, Tell Abu Makiya and Tell Abou Fahad [Montero 2009: 123–145], key settlements to control this important point of the Euphrates course. The third zone is the confluence of Khabour in the Euphrates, and its flood plain, there were documented five settlements [Gryer *et al.* 2003: 114]. And the last aggregation is the area of Tell Ghanem al-Ali [Ohnuma and Al Khabour 2008a, 2008b; Al-Maqdissi, Ohnuma and Al-Khabour 2008, 2009], there were documented two funerary areas to the south of the principal settlement of Tell Ghanem al-Ali, in form of necropolis located on the last point which connected the rocky plateau of Bishri Mount and the fluvial plain of the river, considering the diachronic divisions of the settled populations and the mobile ones and the dynamic aspect of these networks.

On the other hand, excavations and surveys affirmed the change of the components of the population from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age through the archaeological record and the mortuary practices in the region of Bishri Mount [Nishiaki 2010: 45], considered as a homeland of the nomadic or semi-nomadic groups mentioned in the epigraphic data and their role in the historical scene during the MBA, these labors were so significant in a moment and area that witnessed and have completed coining of the term (dimorphic state).

Acknowledgements

The archaeological research along the Syrian Euphrates Valley conducted between 2007 to 2009 by the Syrian-Japanese joint archaeological mission, and the international archaeological labor in that area revealed an important data about the urbanism, settlement pattern, material culture and the sociocultural structure of a wide area of the Syrian territory, and filled a meaningful gap of information in the history of the Middle Bronze Age societies in Northern Mesopotamia by means of applying interdisciplinary of sciences to achieve this objective.

In the occasion of the retirement of Prof. Dr. Katsuhiko Ohnuma, director of the Japanese team of the joint Syrian-Japanese mission, I will dedicate these lines to him thanking his wise direction and leadership to carry out our mission activities to achieve the investigation goals.



Fig. 4: Commencement of the excavation at Tell Ghanem al-Ali (Ohnuma, K to the left and the author to the right)

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