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978-0-521-79666-8 - The Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (c. 16,000-300 BC)

Peter M. M. G. Akkermans and Glenn M. Schwartz

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I

INTRODUCTION

The past thirty years have seen remarkable changes in the archaeology of Syria. Because of the region's rich archaeological heritage, the intensified demands of rescue archaeology, and the exigencies of contemporary politics (in particular, the inaccessibility of Iran and Iraq), Syria has become a prime focus of Near Eastern fieldwork. Numerous multinational projects have generated a continuous flow of extraordinary results, but the very scale of these results has inhibited any attempt to synthesize them. With this book, we attempt to rectify this situation.

While the ancient Near East provides information on a vast array of human societal changes, the archaeology of the region has traditionally utilized two grand issues as its basic framework: the Neolithic transformation and the emergence of urban societies. We adopt these major changes as the main foci of our book as well, and we begin our discussion, therefore, with the Epipalaeolithic groups that provided the springboard to the emergence of sedentary, agricultural societies. Because of our research interests and training, we terminate our study with the end of the Achaemenid Persian period, reluctantly conforming to the traditional separation of the pre-classical from the classical Near East. Although this division is in many ways arbitrary, it can be asserted, at least, that the establishment of Hellenistic Greek political sovereignty precipitated drastic changes in language, writing systems, political structures, and material culture.

A diversity of important issues, momentous in their significance but often intimidating in their complexity, characterizes the time span under review. For the Neolithic period, Syria provides some of the earliest evidence in the world for the onset of sedentary and agricultural life, a salient contribution to our understanding of how and why this phenomenon occurred. In the late Neolithic, private property, social inequality, and economic specialization become increasingly apparent, paving the way for the development of urban societies. When complex societies emerge, their trajectory provides a useful contrast to the well-known paradigm from southern Mesopotamia; indeed, in some periods more data are available from Syria than from southern Mesopotamia itself. In this study, we consider the first three to four millennia of urban life, with the ebb and flow of political complexity, the development and disintegration of ever larger states, and finally the absorption of the region into vast multiregional empires.

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Syria is often styled a “crossroads of civilization.” Located at the intersection of major traffic routes of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, the region was traversed by caravans and military expeditions moving between the economic and political poles of the ancient Near Eastern world, from Egypt to Anatolia, from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia. This raises the question: is Syria a discrete geographical or cultural entity? We would answer both yes and no. On the one hand, Syria manifests a geographical and cultural autonomy distinct from southern Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Palestine. The rainfall-farming plains of the Syrian interior provide a counterpoint to the irrigated alluvial plains of southern Mesopotamia and to the highland plateaus of Anatolia. Syria’s rainfall-farming plains tend to support larger-scale populations, communities, and political units than those of Palestine¹ and Lebanon, with their diversified topography and agricultural valleys of limited size.

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that there is often significant geographical and cultural overlap between Syria and its neighboring regions. Most significantly, the dry-farming plains of northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey are not easily distinguished geographically or culturally from the Syrian Jezireh (upper Mesopotamia), especially in the late Neolithic, early urban, and Mitanni periods. We attempt, therefore, to incorporate discussion of relevant evidence from neighboring areas when appropriate. But our main focus will be Syria, and our discussions of northern Iraq or southeastern Turkey will be representative rather than exhaustive.²

The physical environment

Given limitations of space, we provide here only a brief introduction to the Syrian natural environment and refer the reader to the classic study by Wirth for further details.³ In Syria, the climate is characterized by dry, hot summers and cool, rainy winters, with regional variability as described below. In the west, Syrian geography is defined by parallel chains of mountain ranges extending north–south (fig. 1.1). The northernmost range is the Amanus, in what is now the Turkish province of Hatay. To its south are two parallel north–south ranges, the Jebel Ansariyah to the west (1575 m maximum elevation) and Jebel Zawiyah

¹ Although the term “Syro-Palestinian archaeology” is commonly employed by archaeologists in the southern Levant, it is rarely used by specialists in Syria itself.

² Our main focus is on research conducted under the supervision of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria. A number of valuable general studies can guide the reader further, including catalogues of exhibitions of Syrian antiquities [Weiss, ed., 1985; Rouault and Masetti-Rouault, eds., 1993; *Syrie: mémoire et civilisation* 1993; *Syrian-European Archaeology Exhibition* 1996; *En Syrie aux origines de l’écriture* 1998; Matthiae *et al.* 1995; Fortin 1999b], bibliographies (Anastasio 1995; Lehmann 2002), and a survey of political history based on the written evidence [Klengel 1992].

³ Wirth 1971.

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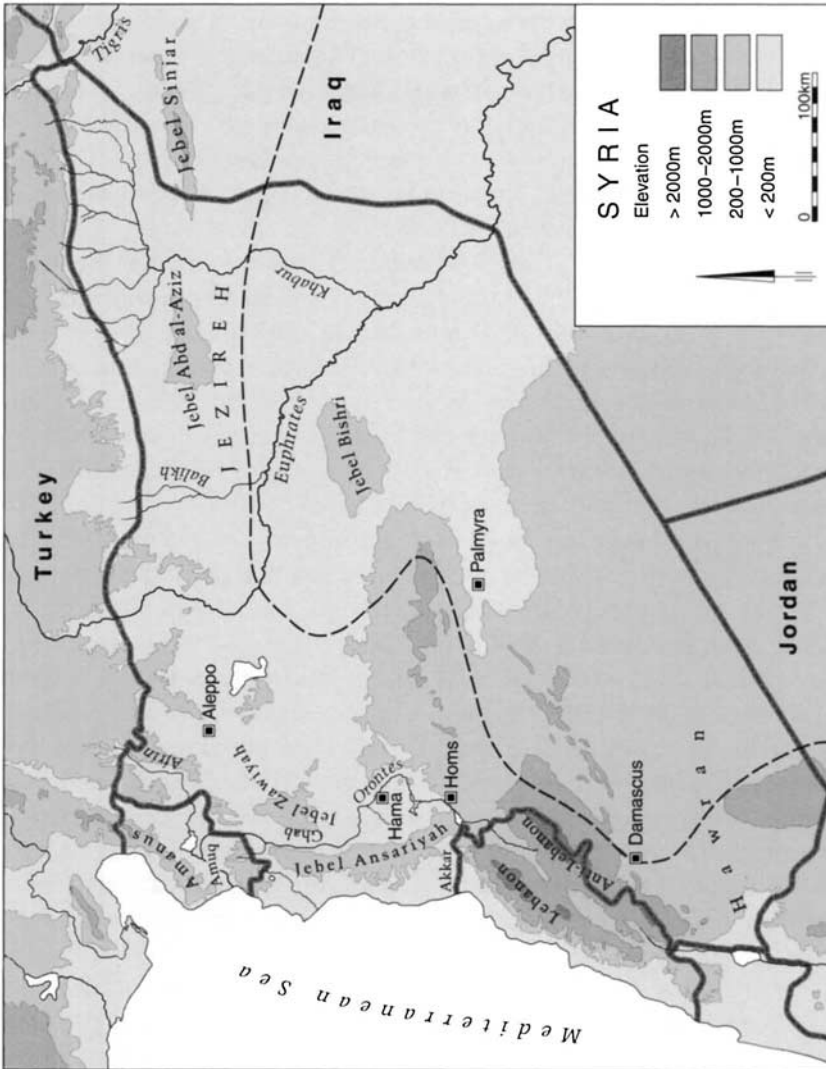
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Fig. 1.1 Syria, geographical details. Dashed line represents 200 mm mean annual rainfall in the present-day.

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to the east, with the Ghab depression situated between them. The Homs (or Akkar) gap separates those two ranges from their counterparts to the south, the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon (2700 m max. elevation) ranges, primarily in present-day Lebanon. Between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains lies the Beqa'a valley.

The gaps between the mountain ranges are strategic and agriculturally significant zones allowing access between regions. Separating the Amanus from the Ansariyah and Zawiyah ranges is the Amuq (Antioch) plain, watered by the lower reaches of the Orontes river. A small gap through the Jebel Ansariyah is located east of Ras Shamra, but more significant is the Homs/Akkar gap between the Ansariyah/Zawiyah and Lebanon/Anti-Lebanon ranges. Given its considerable extent, the Homs gap provides the easiest access between the Mediterranean coast and the Syrian interior.

A narrow littoral, the Mediterranean coastal plain is bounded on the east by the Lebanon, Jebel Ansariyah, and Amanus ranges. Relatively humid, the coast now receives an average of 600–1000 mm annual rainfall and was originally wooded. Also forested prior to the onset of human-induced deforestation, the mountain ranges parallel to the coast receive over 1000 mm of average annual precipitation. Both areas are characterized by Mediterranean terra rossa soils and are conducive to the cultivation of Mediterranean crops such as olives, figs, and grapes, given the availability of cultivable land.

Because the coastal mountain ranges largely impede the movement of precipitation from the west, the plains to the east are much drier than the coast. The west Syrian interior, sometimes designated as a semi-arid steppe, nevertheless enjoys enough rainfall (200–400 mm annually) to support a dry-farming agriculture traditionally characterized by winter wheat cultivation (i.e. winter planting, late spring harvesting). Olives and grapes are also cultivable in much of this region. In the north are the agricultural plains surrounding the city of Aleppo, bisected by the north–south flowing Qoueiq river. Further south is the upper Orontes valley, whose dry-farming agricultural capabilities engendered the urban centers of Hama and Homs, occupied for many millennia like Aleppo. In the regions west and southwest of Aleppo are limestone plateaus that historically supported olive groves; here the “Dead Cities” of the Byzantine period are located.

The major river of western Syria is the Orontes (Nahr al-Asi), which originates in the Anti-Lebanon mountains and proceeds north through the Homs gap past Homs and Hama. Although the river is unnavigable, it can furnish water for irrigating gardens and orchards (cf. the celebrated water wheels (*noria*) of Hama). The river twists to the west and makes its way between the Jebel Ansariyah and Jebel Zawiyah mountains, creating the marshy but fertile Ghab depression with its alluvial soils. Northeast of the Ghab is another agriculturally prosperous enclave, the Rouj basin (fig. 1.2). Continuing north into the Amuq plain, the Orontes makes one last curve to the west and passes

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Fig. 1.2 Rouj basin, western Syria.

between the Amanus and Jebel Ansariyah to reach its final destination in the Mediterranean.

To the south, the Anti-Lebanon mountains inhibit the movement of precipitation to the east, resulting in the dry steppe north of Damascus. Damascus itself, however, is situated in the al-Ghutah oasis created by the waters of the Barada river, originating in the Anti-Lebanon. Often dubbed the "oldest continuously occupied city in the world," Damascus could easily share the title with Aleppo or Hama, reflecting both the early appearance of urbanism in Syria and its relative stability over the *longue durée*. Unfortunately, the massive accumulation of settlement deposition in such long-lived centers has made investigation of their pre-Hellenistic remains decidedly difficult, with a few exceptions like the Hama citadel. South of Damascus is the Hawran basalt plateau, a region of substantial fertility owing to the decomposition of its volcanic rock, with the Jawlan (Golan) region located to the west.

Across the Euphrates river in northeastern Syria is the upper Mesopotamian plain, extending into northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Also known as the Jezireh (Arabic "island," because of its location between the rivers), this region is a relatively flat semi-arid steppe (200–600 mm average annual rainfall) traversed by the Tigris and Euphrates and by the latter's tributaries the Balikh and Khabur (fig. 1.3). The rainier parts of the area, largely situated in the north near the Turkish frontier, have traditionally supported a dry-farming regime based on winter wheat. Currently serving as a breadbasket for the rest of the country, the broad expanse and high annual precipitation

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Fig. 1.3 Upper Khabur plains of the Jezireh, wadi Jaghjagh.

of the upper Khabur “triangle” can produce yields sustaining a large human population.⁴

The valleys of the Euphrates (fig. 1.4), Khabur and Balikh are amenable to irrigation, particularly in their lower reaches. However, the Euphrates, creating a fertile alluvial valley incised into the dry steppe, was probably not used for irrigation upstream from Emar (modern Meskene) in pre-Roman times.⁵

In southeastern Syria we find the driest part of the country, a semi-arid steppe or desert with an average rainfall below 200 mm per year. Agriculture is largely impossible here, with the exception of irrigation courtesy of underground water sources at the desert oases of Palmyra and El Kowm. The region sustains enough plant life to support herbivores, however, and it has traditionally served as grazing land for mobile pastoralists.

Given the environmental constraints of the area, site formation processes have regional peculiarities requiring comment. Most important is the use of mud for architectural purposes, a frequent practice throughout the Middle East. Most typically, mud was shaped into mold-made, sun-dried bricks (*Arabic libn*) (figs. 1.5–1.6); in the Bronze Age and later, bricks were sometimes kiln-fired or baked, but fuel requirements made this an expensive practice. An alternative form of mud architecture is *pisé* (*Arabic tauf*), where wet mud was packed into the desired shape rather than being formed into bricks. Whether a building was constructed of bricks or *pisé*, its roof was usually made of wooden beams and thatch unless a mudbrick dome was constructed.

⁴ Weiss 1986.

⁵ Wilkinson 1998; van Zeist and Bakker-Heeres 1985: 283.

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Fig. 1.4 Euphrates river, upstream from Mari.

While mudbrick or *pisé* are the most common architectural media in the Syrian Jezireh and throughout Mesopotamia, the greater availability of stone in western Syria allowed for its integration into local architecture. Particularly frequent was the use of stone boulders or cobbles for wall substructures, with courses of mudbricks laid on top. Occasionally, buildings were constructed entirely of stone.

Because of the ubiquity of mud as an architectural component, living sites in the Middle East have characteristically taken the form of mounds (Arabic *tell*) (fig. 1.7). Mud structures were often abandoned after one or two generations because of their inherently fragile nature or infestation by vermin; alternatively, they may have burned in a natural or human-induced catastrophe. In either case, people tended to level the walls of the abandoned or damaged structure, fill in the enclosed space with dirt, and build a new structure above. This process, conducted over many generations, together with the continual disposal of trash into the open or temporarily abandoned areas of the settlement, resulted in the gradual elevation of the site and the formation of a tell. Some sites with very long occupational sequences or many levels of imposing buildings could attain as much as 50 meters in elevation.

The development of Syrian archaeology

Since a review of the development of Syrian archaeology up to 1980 is provided by Matthiae,⁶ we shall offer only a brief sketch of preeminent trends prior to

⁶ Matthiae 1981.

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Fig. 1.5 Mudbricks being molded.

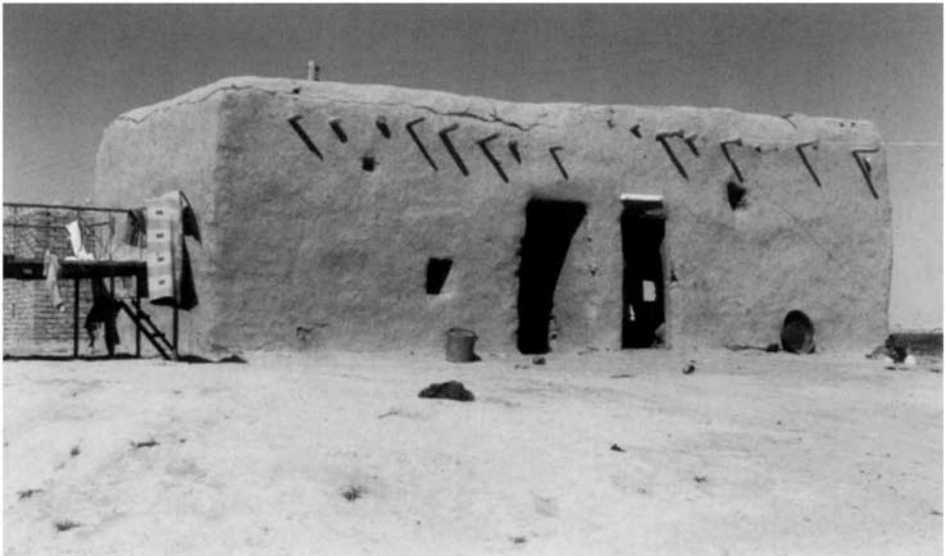


Fig. 1.6 Mudbrick house.

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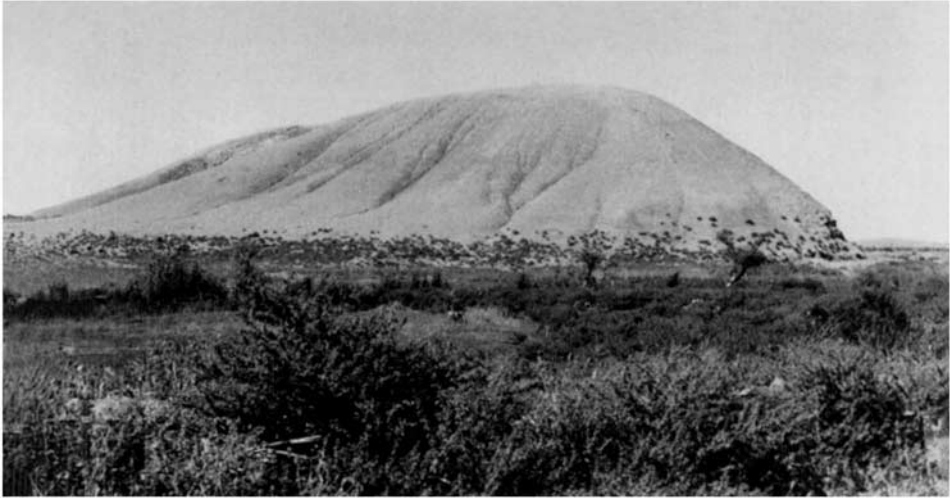


Fig. 1.7 A large tell (Sahlan, Balikh valley).

that date. Archaeological fieldwork was begun in the Middle East in the mid-nineteenth century by scholar-adventurers associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with European colonialist aspirations in the region. At first, the main focus was on Mesopotamia, home of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Sumerian civilizations, and on Egypt. Syria was relatively neglected, ostensibly owing to the absence of conspicuous large-scale monuments or historically attested literate civilizations. Indeed, one of the earliest explorations of pre-Hellenistic Syria focused on Assyrian remains: A.H. Layard, the British excavator of the Assyrian capitals Nineveh and Nimrud in northern Mesopotamia, supervised brief excavations at Arban (Tell Ajaja) in the lower Khabur valley in 1850 in search of Neo-Assyrian monumental sculpture.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Iron Age sites in Syria attracted attention in their own right because of the extraordinary examples of monumental sculpture discovered on their surfaces. Two major German projects were inaugurated: Zincirli (ancient Sam'al, now in southeastern Turkey), directed by Felix von Luschan, and Tell Halaf near the source of the Khabur, directed by Max von Oppenheim. Von Oppenheim's discovery of an attractive variety of prehistoric painted pottery at Tell Halaf also awakened interest in pre-urban periods in Syrian archaeology. Competing with the Germans for influence in the waning Ottoman empire, the British excavated a third Iron Age capital, Carchemish. Work was conducted by D.G. Hogarth, C.L. Woolley, and T.E. Lawrence, soon to become famous as "Lawrence of Arabia." The excavations conducted in this early phase of Syrian archaeology were often meticulous with respect to the recording of architectural data, but paid scant

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attention to artifactual remains that were not of significant artistic or historical significance.

After the French mandate was established in the 1920s, the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities was established, and excavations were begun by French archaeologists at numerous sites. Attention was predominantly paid to large tells identifiable with well-known ancient cities that could yield epigraphic remains, such as Mishrife (ancient Qatna), Nebi Mend (ancient Qadesh), Arslantash (ancient Hadatu), and Tell Ahmar (ancient Til-Barsib). But of greatest significance were the long-running projects initiated at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), begun in 1929, and Tell Hariri (ancient Mari), begun in 1933. Both sites have been excavated with very few interruptions until the present day.

British archaeologists reentered the scene in the 1930s when Iraq became relatively inhospitable. Woolley excavated Al Mina and Alalakh in the coastal region, while Max Mallowan, often working together with his wife Agatha Christie, explored the upper Khabur plains. He first excavated a prehistoric/early historic sequence at Chagar Bazar, then exposed fourth- and third-millennium monumental structures at Brak. American participation began with the University of Chicago's investigations in the Amuq plain, then part of the Syrian mandate. The Iron Age city at Tell Tayinat was excavated, and excavations were conducted at older tells by Robert Braidwood. At the citadel of Hama, a Danish expedition exposed Iron Age monumental architecture and a long sequence extending back to Neolithic times.

World War II brought a halt to this period of heightened activity. After the war, Syria won her independence and a new archaeological era began. Now completely under Syrian supervision, the Directorate-General of Antiquities inaugurated excavation projects at sites like Tell Amrit and Tell Kazel on the coast, under the guidance of seminal figures such as Adnan Bounni and Nassib Saliby. International participation in Syrian archaeology was also welcomed, resuming slowly but steadily in the 1950s. Excavations at Ugarit and Mari took up where they had left off, and German excavations directed by Anton Moortgat commenced at the third-millennium urban site of Chuera in northeastern Syria. British, French, and Danish excavations were begun as well; particularly significant was the Italian project inaugurated by Paolo Matthiae at Tell Mardikh (ancient Ebla) south of Aleppo in 1964, which would provide the most revolutionary results of a pre-Hellenistic site in the post-war period.

A proliferation of fieldwork occurred in the late 1960s with the onset of the era of salvage archaeology in Syria. The Syrian government announced plans to construct a dam on the Euphrates near Tabqa and solicited international assistance in excavating sites threatened with submersion. Numerous institutions from a variety of countries responded, and the results of this first major salvage operation were formidable. New data were produced on the earliest Neolithic settlement in Syria (Mureybet, Abu Hureyra), a hitherto