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978-1-107-40493-9 - Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance

Daniel E. Fleming

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Democracy's Ancient Ancestors

Mari and Early Collective Governance

Democracy's Ancient Ancestors examines the political landscape of the ancient Near East through the archive of more than 3,000 letters found in the royal palace of Mari. These letters display a rich diversity of political actors, encompassing major kingdoms, smaller states, and various tribal towns. Mari's unique contribution to the ancient evidence is its view of tribal organization, made possible especially by the fact that its king, Zimri-Lim, was first of all a tribal ruler, who claimed Mari as an administrative base and source of prestige. These archaic political traditions are not essentially unlike the forms of predemocratic Greece, and they offer fresh reason to recognize a cultural continuity between the classical world of the Aegean and the older Near East. This book bridges several areas of interest, including archaeology, ancient and classical history, early Middle and Near East history, and political and social history.

Daniel E. Fleming is Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible and Assyriology at New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. He is a member of the American Oriental Society, American Schools of Oriental Research, and the Society of Biblical Literature.

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DANIEL E. FLEMING

New York University



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107404939

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First published 2004
First paperback edition 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fleming, Daniel E.
Democracy's ancient ancestors : Mari and early collective governance / Daniel E. Fleming.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-82885-6 (hardback)

I. Mari (Extinct city) – Politics and government. I. Title.

DS99. M3F54 2004

939'.43 – dc22

2003058497

ISBN 978-0-521-82885-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-40493-9 Paperback

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To my parents, with love and gratitude

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Preface

Ancient Mesopotamia is famous for its kings. Sargon of Agade is said to have built the first empire. Hammurabi of Babylon showed off his authority in a collection of standard law. The shadow of later Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs darkens the prospects of Israel and Judah in the biblical tradition. Karl Marx's "oriental despotism" began in the ancient world.

Democracy, in contrast, belongs to Greece, a world away, facing west toward Europe with its back to the east. Here we find the roots of the political system that Francis Fukuyama placed at "the end of history," the system that is the life-breath of all modern academic pursuits (Fukuyama 1992). When we scholars study ancient Greece, we study ourselves. When we study ancient Mesopotamia, we explore the "other," all ethnic identity aside.

Reality, as always, resists the tug of our impulse to categorize. In the case of ancient Mesopotamia and the larger Near East, the reputation for authoritarian monarchy has been transmitted to us through Athens and Israel, the two main conduits that carried eastern Mediterranean ideas into western Europe. Both of these faced eastern empires in the crucial periods of their classical writings, Achaemenid "Persia" against Athens, after Assyria and Babylon had dismantled Israel.

The Near East did indeed produce a variety of powerful centralized kingdoms, but it is not true that individualizing, authoritarian rule was specially characteristic of Near Eastern political life. Specialists have long recognized the participation of groups in Near Eastern politics at various levels, though these are often relegated to the margins of real power. Closer inspection shows that collective political decision making could be an essential aspect of Near Eastern governance. Outside of the largest kingdoms, political life was much less predictably centralized, with many possible equilibria between various political powers. Two particular locations of strong collective traditions were the town and the tribe, two distinct modes of identity with overlapping use. In much of the Near East, individual rule existed only in dynamic tension with a range of other individual and collective leadership.

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Autocratic monarchy dominated the scene more and more with the success of certain large kingdoms, but these should not be considered the essential form of Near Eastern political life.

In fact, the collective component of Near Eastern politics appears to be very old and remarkably persistent, deserving more attention than it has attracted until now. We cannot sketch early political history as a development of increasingly complex societies in which individual leaders established ever more effective central control, until the Greeks introduced a radically different system with no relationship to what came before. The political world before democracy is therefore remarkably diverse, with a range of contributing elements that are not so obviously unlike the various constituents of the Greek scene before the process that led to democracy. In Syria-Mesopotamia, the region of the northern Fertile Crescent, the collective political character of the “town” provides an especially interesting backdrop to the development of Athenian democracy around the unit called the *polis*, again a “town.”

It is not my goal in this book to account for the origins of Greek democracy or even to pin down the relationship between predemocratic Greek society and regions to the east. I do, however, find that in discussion of Greece before democracy, the eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, and the Fertile Crescent are separated from the Aegean in a way that strikes me as artificial and improbable in geographical terms alone. Greece and Mesopotamia are too easily regarded as polar political opposites, one capable of giving rise to democracy and the other constitutionally prone to autocracy. The Near Eastern evidence alone proves this a caricature. When these two worlds are regarded as diametrically opposed, both are immediately misunderstood. Something radically new unquestionably appeared in Athens with the advent of democracy, and its radical novelty calls for explanation by uniquely Greek circumstances. At the same time, however, Greece need not be treated as a separate cultural continent, which shares traits with the Near East only by importation. Surely, what is uniquely Greek or Aegean was embedded in a cultural matrix that had no absolute demarcations between adjacent regions.

Syria-Mesopotamia offers us the particular gift of some of the earliest known writing, and this writing allows an inside view of ancient political life in this part of the world. This writing shows us a complex interaction of many different social and political players, including large entities ruled by kings, alliances that acted as a single polity, tribal groups of varying scale and character, and the unit centered at a single settled site called the “town.” Both individual and group leadership are found in every one of these settings, with no single configuration. As our modern world struggles with the invitation to let democracy spread into every political culture, surely it would be thought-provoking to rediscover underlying continuities between the Greek invention and earlier traditions of collective decision making.

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There is no question that in many ancient Near Eastern settings, powerful monarchies had reduced other traditional political participants to relatively minor roles, subordinate to an administrative structure that served the individual authority of kings. The evidence for these other traditions is more abundant than generally realized, but during the time of early writing, they almost never existed as a wholly separate alternative to kingship. Even where kings were weak or distant, other political players had to cope with their claims and their power. Because of this interaction, it would be futile to investigate ancient collective political life in isolation from the individual rule that most often occupied the highest rung of any regional political ladder. The role of the group can be understood only as part of a system that usually involves kings.

In practical terms, this need to think in terms of a political and social system shapes the entire definition of this book. I am interested in the entire phenomenon of group decision making in a world before democracy, but I have chosen to examine this phenomenon from the vantage of the one large archive from a city called Mari. For much of the third millennium B.C.E., Mari dominated the part of the Euphrates River valley just inside Syria's modern border with Iraq. Mari's archives of clay tablets with "wedge-shaped" cuneiform writing come almost entirely from a single brief period just before the site was destroyed, most often dated to the early eighteenth century.¹ Although Mari served as the royal seat of a modest kingdom, its collection of more than 3,000 letters offers an amazing vista on the whole Syria-Mesopotamian landscape.² Moreover, Mari's last king, named Zimri-Lim, was a tribal ruler who survived through a carefully cultivated web of alliances with an array of odd bedfellows. These included tribal peoples from both his own and other groups, as well as many small polities in the region north of Mari. His political contacts reached in every direction and involved every type of leadership. Among these, we find a variety of collective forms. In this network of political interconnections, not kingship, tribes, nor towns can be understood except as they relate to the whole.

If it is a system that must be understood, and not the isolated evidence for elders, assemblies, and the like, then the question is how to define the bounds of the system in view. Here there is a real advantage to the coherence of a single archive. With the documentation from Mari, we are looking at interlocking political traditions of a single period, across connected space. The data themselves therefore provide us a mandate to explain them not as isolated signals of interesting phenomena but as part of an integrated system. Towns and villages were incorporated into larger entities that were not defined in town terms. How are we to understand how the royal administration at Mari or at other centers in the kingdom, such as Terqa or Sagaratum, related to whatever political traditions accrued to each town as such? Zimri-Lim, the last king of Mari and the recipient of most of the correspondence found there, proclaimed himself "king of Mari and the land

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of the Ḫana.” The first title defines him by the walled city that he made his seat of power, and the second associates him with mobile pastoralists who identify themselves by tribe.

With such connections in mind, I have incorporated two other major political phenomena into this study, as a framework for understanding the collective traditions of towns. I begin in Chapter 2 with the identification of people by tribal categories, a custom that reaches every level of society, from rulers to villagers. Such identification by kinship may have been common to all early Mesopotamian society, urban and not, but in the Mari archives we find our richest evidence for large groups spread across considerable territory, whose primary political allegiance may be defined by tribe. These commitments then shape the political life of towns and kingdoms, according to the traditions of the dominant tribal population. Zimri-Lim himself was widely considered to be a tribal king. Having addressed the tribe, I turn in Chapter 3 to the categories that define the Mari kingdom, which may fairly be called an archaic state. In the Akkadian language of the letters found at Mari, the highest unit of political organization was the *mātum*, or “land.” The largest Mesopotamian kingdoms were “lands,” but any people capable of maintaining an independent political identity and of negotiating war and peace could call itself a *mātum*. These “lands” were often defined by the names of the towns at their centers, but some were named for tribal populations. Somehow, the political customs of both towns and tribes were incorporated into this larger framework, and it is not possible to understand either one without exploring the *mātum*. At the same time, it is important to realize that the idea of group decision making is not primarily identified with the “land” in the documentation itself.

Most often, the collective political voice is defined by individual towns, and these become the ultimate destination of my study in Chapter 4. This voice may be identified simply by named towns as such or by their gathered leadership, as “elders,” “heads,” or the like. In the cases of Imar, Tuttul, and Urgiš, the collective decision making is attested in the consistent evidence of multiple texts. What can we call this tradition? Our evidence does not indicate any conscious equalizing of all participants or any conscious attempt to extend such equal participation to a whole “cizenry,” however defined. We cannot call this “democracy,” however primitive, without losing the value of that term. At the same time, however, the world before democracy was not bereft of inclusive political process, and we do well to examine the democratic tradition against these independent customs, if only to understand better where the innovation truly lies. Given the geographical proximity of Greece to the ancient Near East, it is difficult not to wonder what similar collective traditions may have been shared by preclassical Greece. This book offers no answers, though I hope that its contents help illuminate the discussion among specialists.

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In general terms, the Mari archives offer a perspective on the ancient political landscape that invites a reappraisal of some common typologies. Zimri-Lim was both a tribal king and the master of a major city center, and his administration embraced both tribal leaders and Mari officials from the previous regime, enemies of his tribe. This same king identified himself vigorously with the mobile pastoralists of his tribe, who represented a key power base, even as he managed the river-valley core of a preexisting Mari kingdom with the normal settlement-oriented methods for governing farming communities. We will always oversimplify and misunderstand if we reduce our interpretation to oppositional pairs, such as urban and rural places of residence, subsistence by pastoralism and cultivation, settled and nomadic modes of life, tribal and urban affiliations, or hierarchical palace and communal village political systems. At every turn, Mari displays unlooked-for combinations and connections that show the urban, the elite, the royal, and the settled in much more intimate relationship with the rest of the typological spectrum than some might expect. Few ancient voices deny outright the unquestioned authority of the king, but his actual power seems to be a matter of constant negotiation, as he engages a panoply of traditional leaderships, each with its own constituencies and assumed prerogatives. Here again, I find myself standing at the edge of questions and evidence that extend far beyond the material that I have addressed in this book. If my investigation provokes any progress by others toward better answers than my own, the effort will have been well spent.

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Acknowledgments

More than any project I have worked on to date, this book was a collaborative effort. To whatever degree it succeeds, this could not have been achieved without the support and assistance of several key people and institutions. I acknowledge them in roughly chronological order.

My interest in Mari followed quickly on the heels of my introduction to Assyriology in the early 1980s under the inspired tutelage of William Moran. As he received the first reports of the new French publication team, led by Jean-Marie Durand, he exclaimed that they were essentially equal to fresh excavated finds, as important as any new Mesopotamian evidence. Ultimately, the project began from this judgment.

My actual work on the book began with an idyllic year in Paris, funded by a Fulbright research fellowship, along with sabbatical support from New York University (1997–8). During this time, the staff of the Commission Franco-Américaine d'Échanges Universitaires et Culturels was particularly helpful, especially Pierre Collombert, the director, and Elizabeth Marmot, head of the American Section. I went to France with the sense that I would learn most about the Mari evidence by making the acquaintance of the experts of the Paris group that has been publishing the thousands of tablets from this ancient city. Both during that first year and since then, the project has benefited from repeated exchanges with various participants in the French group, and I have discovered a new world of friendships and contacts in France.

M. Durand generously tolerated my attendance through most of his 1997–8 seminar on nomads and tribal peoples, which provided a constant foil for my own explorations. Each key conversation with M. Durand has become a point of reference for the development of my own system, and I have pushed to stake out my own interpretive ground, knowing that he will be the first to perceive its real faults. His interest and help have been indispensable.

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Dominique Charpin first welcomed me to the Mari research center at Rue de la Perle in 1991, and it was at his encouragement that I imagined the possibility of a Paris sabbatical. Dominique has read and responded to every generation of my work on Mari, from the earliest notes in 1997 to two full drafts in 1999 and 2001. Perhaps more than anyone, it was Dominique who corrected my gaffes and helped me to distinguish plausible alternatives from impossible mistakes, though of course he cannot be blamed for those that remain. Both personally and professionally, he has shown me enormous generosity and hospitality, and both I and the book are the richer for them.

I benefited from contact with many other participants in Mari research and contiguous areas, including Nele Ziegler, Sophie Lafont, and Francis Joannès. The one other crucial contributor to my project has been Bertrand Lafont. Everything that I gave to Dominique to read I also gave to Bertrand, and we have maintained a continuing dialogue over five years. On our arrival in Paris with our three young children, it was Bertrand and Sophie who immediately offered help with mundane needs. Since then, Bertrand has helped with every phase of the book in every dimension of its preparation. In the process, I have gained a rare friendship. *Ce que tu m'as donné, tu sais.*

Although much of this book has revolved around my year in France and subsequent contacts with the Mari publication team, the project began a new stage with my return to the United States. I have since presented several components at annual meetings of the American Oriental Society and at the 2000 Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Paris, all resulting in useful feedback. In this stage, when I was working to understand the wider implications of the Mari evidence for politics and society, I made the acquaintance of Tom McClellan and Anne Porter, the excavators of Tell Banat in Syria. We found that our work dovetailed in many ways, and both Anne and Tom have since played an active part in the development and evaluation of the final product. They also read every draft, and in particular, Anne's running commentary on the 2001 draft supplied the most demanding and fruitful critique of my larger conceptions, as I set out to produce a final text for the publisher. Tom has contributed the invaluable maps that accompany the volume. Here, also, what began as business has come to friendship.

In the fall of 2001, just after I had finished a full second draft, I was introduced to Andrew Beck of Cambridge University Press by a colleague named Bill Arnold (thanks, again). To my great pleasure, Andy Beck agreed to have this still rough manuscript reviewed for publication, so that I could incorporate the extensive comments of the Cambridge referees at a stage when the form was still very malleable. Thus, the 2001 draft was perused in full by a large number of generous readers, solicited by me directly and by Cambridge, and the responses gave me much to address and include. These readers included Harry Hoffner of Chicago's Oriental Institute, Bertille Lyonnet of the CNRS, Kurt Raaflaub of Brown University, my colleague Mark Smith at New York University, and two more nameless but appreciated

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readers for the Press. Piotr Michalowski and Günter Kopcke sent me their own forthcoming articles on pertinent subjects.

All of my contact with Cambridge has been a pleasure, thanks mainly to Andy Beck. Stephanie Sakson efficiently shepherded the manuscript through copyediting and production.

I cannot compose a narrative of acknowledgments without thinking of my family, who give color and life to everything I do. I have dedicated this book to my parents, Wendell and Florence Fleming, whose love and influence I may only be beginning to appreciate now that I am taking my own turn as parent. Thank you. To Anthony, Elena, and Luc, my children, thanks for what you did not even know you gave up to this work that I thought worthwhile. Finally, everything I do eventually comes back to you, Nancy, who shares every breath and every heartbeat. Again, you have released me to pursue another love, confident that you can never be supplanted.

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Abbreviations

A.	Louvre Museum siglum
AAAS	<i>Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes</i>
AEM	<i>Archives épistolaires de Mari</i>
AfO	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i>
AHw	W. von Soden. <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–81)
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
Amurru 1	J.-M. Durand (ed.), <i>Mari, Ébla et les Hourrites: dix ans de travaux, première partie</i> (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1996)
Amurru 2	J.-M. Durand and D. Charpin (eds.), <i>Mari, Ébla et les Hourrites: dix ans de travaux, deuxième partie</i> (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 2001)
Amurru 3	Compte Rendu de la 46e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 2000)
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AoF	<i>Altorientalische Forschungen</i>
ARET	Archivi Reali di Ebla, Testi
ARM(T)	Archives Royales de Mari (Textes)
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
AuOr	<i>Aula Orientalis</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BaM	<i>Baghdader Mitteilungen</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCSMS	<i>Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies</i>
BiOr	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i>
CAD	I. J. Gelb et al. (eds.), <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–)

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Abbreviations

- CANE J. M. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1995)
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CRRAI *Compte rendu de la Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*
- CRRAI 38 D. Charpin and F. Joannès (eds.), *La circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien*, CRRAI 38 (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1992)
- DCM F. Joannès (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Mésopotamienne* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2001)
- Emar VI.1–4 D. Arnaud. *Recherches au pays d'Aštata: Les textes sumériens et accadiens* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1985–7)
- FM *Florilegium Marianum*
- GKC A. E. Cowley (ed.), *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar as Edited and Enlarged by the Late E. Kautsch* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910)
- GN Geographical name
- HSAO Heidelberger Studien zum Alten Orient
- IBoT Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzelerinde Bulunan Boğazköy Tableteri
- JANES *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*
- JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JCS *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
- JESHO *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
- JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
- KBo Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi
- KTU M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*, AOAT 24/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976)
- KUB Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi
- LAPO Littératures Anciennes du Proche-Orient
- LAPO 16, 17, 18 J.-M. Durand, *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari, Tomes I, II, III* (Paris: du Cerf, 1997, 1998, 2000)
- M. Siglum for tablets from Mari
- M.A.R.I. *Mari: Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires*
- MDOG *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*
- ME P. Fronzaroli (ed.), *Miscellanea Eblaitica 2* (Florence: Università di Firenze, 1989)
- MEE Materiali Epigrafici di Ebla
- Mélanges Birot J.-M. Durand and J.-R. Kupper (eds.), *Miscellanea Babylonica: Mélanges offerts à Maurice Birot* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1985)

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Mélanges Garelli	D. Charpin and F. Joannès (eds.), <i>Marchands, diplomates et empereurs: Etudes sur la civilisation mésopotamienne offertes à Paul Garelli</i> (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991)
N.A.B.U.	<i>Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires</i>
OEANE	E. M. Meyers (ed.), <i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
OLZ	<i>Orientalische Literaturzeitung</i>
Or	<i>Orientalia</i>
OrAn	<i>Oriens Antiquus</i>
RA	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RAI	Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale
RHPR	<i>Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses</i>
RIMA	Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Assyrian Periods
RIME	Royal Inscription of Mesopotamia Early Periods
RIA	E. Ebeling et al. (eds.), <i>Reallexikon der Assyriologie</i> (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928–)
Römer Festschrift	Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (eds.), <i>Dubstar anta-men: Studien zur Altorientalistik, fs. Willem H. Ph. Römer</i> , AOAT 253 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998)
RSO	Ras Shamra - Ougarit
SEPOA	Société pour l'Étude du Proche-Orient Ancien
Subartu IV	Marc Lebeau (ed.), <i>About Subartu: Studies Devoted to Upper Mesopotamia</i> (Brepols: Turnhout, 1998)
Subartu VII	Olivier Rouault and Markus Wäfler (eds.), <i>La Djéziré et l'Euphrate syriens de la protohistoire à la fin du IF millénaire av. J.-C.</i> (Brepols: Turnhout, 2000)
Syria	<i>Syria: Revue d'art oriental et d'archéologie</i>
Tell ar-Rimah	Texts from Tell ar-Rimah (Qaṭṭarâ); S. Dalley, C. B. F. Walker, and J. D. Hawkins, <i>The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah</i> (British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1976)
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
WZKM	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie</i>

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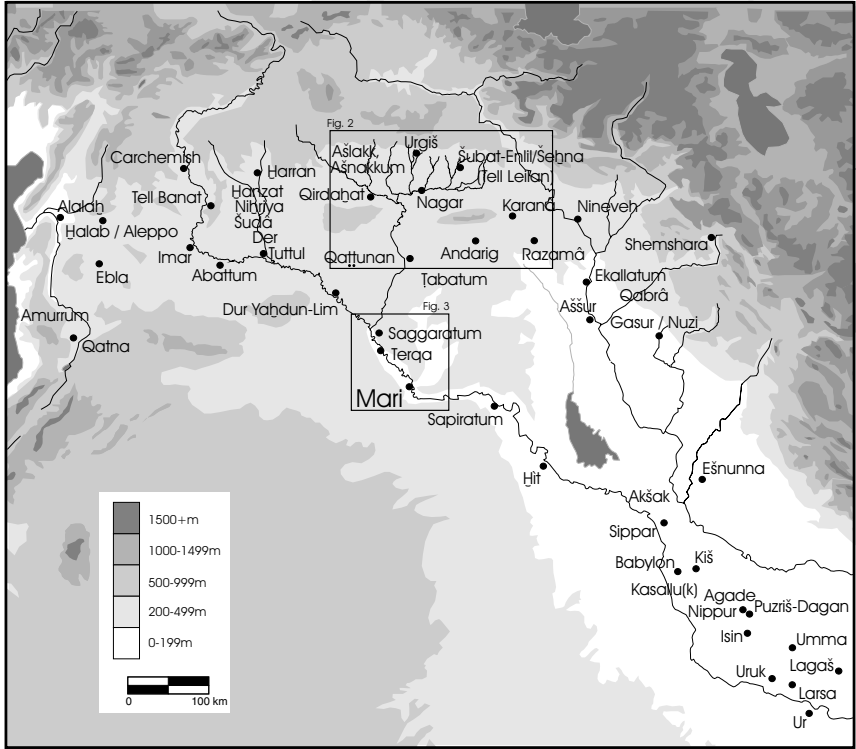
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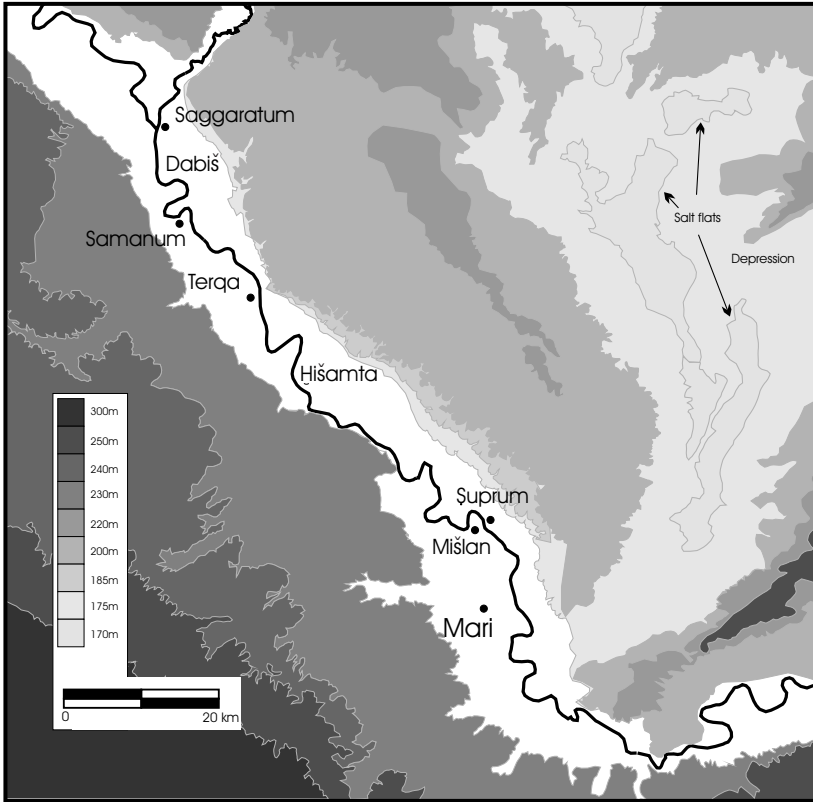
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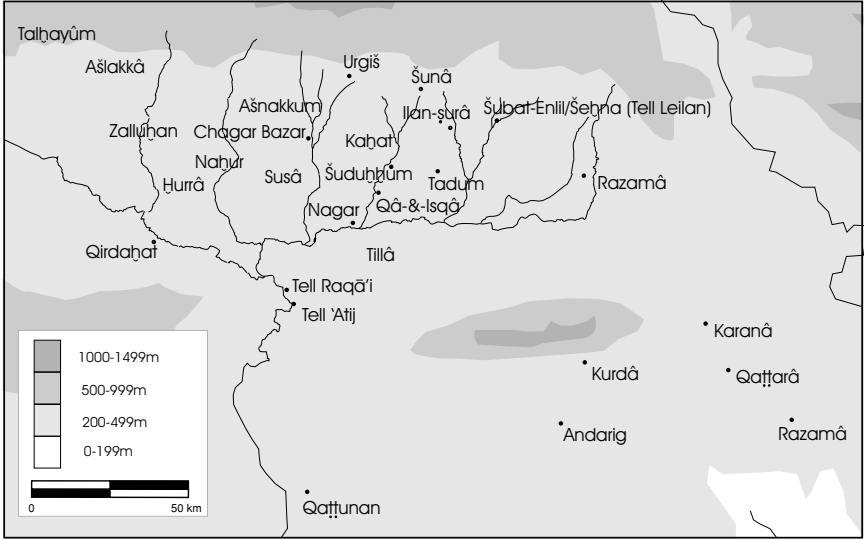
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