

Jabal al-Muṭawwaq at the End of the Fourth Millennium BC

Introduction

The region situated between az-Zarqā', to the north of the village of as-Sukhna, and the border of the desert in the east, has witnessed various occupations throughout the last centuries of the fourth millennium, the beginning of the third and the Early Bronze Age. These, from a chronological point of view, do not all belong to a same era, but are evidence of a similar exploitation of the territory during the Early Bronze Age by nomadic or semi-nomadic groups, which would have moved through the strip of steppe and probably penetrated towards the better irrigated areas. It is not possible, at present, to have a clear idea about the origin of these groups that occupied the territory after the dissolution of the Chalcolithic societies that populated the Jordan Valley (al-Ghassūl, Abū Ḥāmid, etc.) throughout the fourth millennium. However, the evidence from sites dating from the end of the fourth millennium in the south, as is the case with the cemetery of Bāb adh-Dhrā' (Schaub and Rast 1989) on the shores of the Dead Sea, and from locations more to the north, like Umm Ḥammād (Betts 1992), and even in the desert area of Jāwa (Betts 1991), seem to indicate that they were groups of people that moved through the territory driven by an economical system based on cattle breeding combined, at least in some places, with cultivation of corn, as we will see later on. The types of exploitation, determined by the variety of conditions of environment of the scarce space in which they move, must have been diverse.

In the area around al-Muṭawwaq, situated in the same meander in the az-Zarqā' River where it changes its stream from north-south to east-southwest, there are many different kinds of manifestations of this presence (FIG. 1). The exhaustive surveys of Dr Jean Sapin, concentrated on the steppe area that stretches out from the border between the Mediterranean area and the oriental desert, have provided plenty vestiges of this presence, particularly of the funeral kind, with numerous dolmen fields, including those of al-Muṭawwaq, that produced a vast number of about two thousand megalithic monuments (FIGS. 2 and

3). Just a few villages allow us to have an idea about the forms of occupation of the lands throughout the Early Bronze Age. Places like Marayim, Jabal Makhad and al-Muṭawwaq, among others, offer the clearest evidence of the presence of groups of human beings in the area to the east of the az-Zarqā' River. Another of these locations, a rocky spur between the "wadis" the 'Ayn and Ḥmayd, is one of the clear examples of a complex religious site of the same epoch. It is surrounded by important funeral monuments.

The short review of these complexes shows the variety of the human occupation throughout the last centuries of the fourth millennium BC and, at least, of the beginning



1. Jabal al-Muṭawwaq. View from the south.



2. Jabal al-Muṭawwaq. Dolmen field.



3. Jabal al-Muṭawwaq. Dolmen.

of the third. Even if we take certain affinities of the material culture of some of these populations into account, the divergences are striking enough to make us think about groups from different provenance that exploited the same region during relatively close periods of time.

Jabal al-Muṭawwaq

The Jabal al-Muṭawwaq site is fundamentally known through the surveys carried out by J. W. Hanbury-Tenison in the eighties (Hanbury-Tenison 1986; 1987; 1989). Regardless of some indefiniteness, the importance of the site was already apparent. Since 1989 we have been analysing various archaeological aspects of the mountain that bear reference to the Early Bronze Age. Conscious of the importance of achieving a global vision of the whole zone, surveys of the area, under the auspices of Dr Jean Sapin, continued to be carried out at the same time.

The first excavations Jabal al-Muṭawwaq were carried out on its slope, on a terrace at 450 m altitude, immediately situated above the PPNB occupation indicated by Hanbury-Tenison, Edwards and Thorpe (Hanbury-Tenison 1989; Edwards and Thorpe 1986). The excavations uncovered an area of ephemeral occupation, whose elements correspond to the traditional elements of the Early Bronze I found in the higher situated village.¹

Subsequently, various campaigns were dedicated to the dolmen fields and tumuli. The last excavations that were carried out were those in some of the houses of Jabal Makhad² and in the so called "acropolis" of al-Muṭawwaq. At the same time, some of the caves were explored and the study of the agricultural terraces of the mountain

was undertaken. In this study we especially took into account the different aspects of the different inhabited zones of the mountain, the religious structures and the terraces.

The situation of Jabal al-Muṭawwaq is essentially strategic because it is a passing zone between the north plateau of Jordan (and the routes that lead to Syria), the Jordan Valley and the more fertile areas in the west. Its location, in a border zone between a region with a Mediterranean climate in the west and the desert, with irregular rainfall during different years, would have made the occupation problematic had it not been for the wells ('Ayn Kharaisin and 'Ayn Qnayah) and the az-Zarqā' River that allowed permanent occupation of the area. As has been the case, although very irregularly, until the Pre-ceramic Neolithic B, on the terraces that were closest to the valley (cf. Hanbury-Tenison 1989; Edwards and Thorpe 1986), until the Roman and Byzantine period, also close by the valley and the Qnayah well. Nevertheless, the occupation during the Early Bronze Age of Jabal al-Muṭawwaq has very peculiar characteristics. The settlement is situated at more than 570 m, far from the wells and the river and it stretches out through the whole flat area that reaches to the east at this altitude and extends later to places with an increasing degree of inclination.

Leaving aside the dolmen fields, which, although its origin seems contemporary of the settlement, its use was continued at times after the desertion of this settlement. The village offers various important aspects to interpret the whole. In the first place, it concerns an enclosed settlement that is a little longer than 800 m from west to east and a little more than 200 m from north to south. Inside, three areas can be defined, some of them, almost with certainty, developed at different times. The eastern area stretches out over the most even part of the mountain, and within this area living zones can be made out and another space which we could denominate ritual. Another section, of the central sector of the village, partly stretches out along an area towards which various tracks lead. At this point, one of the gates, known as the "South Gate", that opens in the enclosure can be found. To the east of the central sector there is a big enclosure that, without doubt, can be explained as a place with a religious function. The eastern sector is located on a rather steep mountainside, which is not very suitable for a natural habitat, however at a certain time the village extends towards this place. More to the east, the most important area can be found, an area with agricultural terraces, partly used as foundations for the houses at the time of the expansion of the village. This

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² The Jabal Makhad site is situated over a rocky spur between Wādi Makhad and Suwayinat, near the village of Ḥamma and at around 1.5 km to the southeast of Jabal al-Muṭawwaq.

superficial description allows us to understand the complexity of the settlement, which seems to have been more than just a simple gathering of farmers or cattleman.

Structures of the Settlement

One of the first facts that stands out is, that all the structures are at the surface, which enables us to observe with relative clarity the arrangement of the settlement, the location of the houses and the perimeter wall. It also indicates another phenomenon; the village was only inhabited during the Early Bronze Age IA (although, it may be possible at various moments of this period). There are no higher layers that indicate subsequent occupation, although various vestiges from other periods are evidence of other much later groups that passed through the area (from the Roman, Byzantine and Ayyubid periods). Unfortunately, large sectors of the village were destroyed because of the construction of tracks and terraces, which served to hold back the earth that was dragged along by the heavy erosion, a problem that is not of recent date. In many areas the limestone rocks were completely washed away because of the heavy rains in winter.

The village is surrounded by a wall. We cannot say if the wall was built with a defensive function in mind. It seems to be more a simple wall that was built with big blocks of stone, normally just thrust down on the ground on one of its smaller sides, or pushed over on a bigger base when set over the mother rock. This wall was fortified or erected with smaller stone blocks, as can be seen at some points where the rock slides were retained having formed this way a talus before the wall. The stones used for the walls are the same as those used for all the constructions: the big tabular limestone rocks that came loose from the mountain layers. In no way they seem to be elaborated. The main part of its outline is only a simple wall line, destroyed in its biggest part on the north side, because of the construction of tracks. In other parts, for example around the southern gate, two or three wall lines can be observed. The primitive wall only enclosed the western and central sectors, excluding the big wall which we indicated is located to the south of the southern gate. All along the southern part the wall follows the line of the cliff, from where the village extends towards the north. At some points to the west and to the south, small roofed semi-circular structures, both inside as outside the wall can be observed. When the village extended towards the east a more rudimental wall was erected on the terraces to indicate the limits of the settlement.

The Houses

Within the perimeter outlined by the wall, houses were closely constructed together occupying all the available space. We did not find any urbanistic design, nor the intention to leave big central spaces open, as we can find

for example in the site near Jabal Makhad, where the houses form the exterior perimeter while leaving open in the interior a big space like some kind of central court (FIG. 4). In the whole extension of the settlement of al-Muṭawwaq only at one point there seems to be a sort of small alley that leads from the wall towards the interior of the inhabited nucleus in the south-eastern part of the western sector.

The houses differ in many aspects from the habitat structures of the Chalcolithic, such as can be seen in al-Ghassūl or in Abū Ḥāmid. At al-Muṭawwaq the habitat, as has been observed in the ten houses excavated up until now, characterizes itself by always having the same structure. They are composed of two simple parts: one is a broad room with an oval floor, with earth or with a light plastered whitish fragile floor, and a court. Its length varies between 10 and 14 m and its breadth between 3 and 4 m. They are constructed with big stones that were not rough-hewed to form the floor, nothing was found during the excavations that offers clear evidence about the way these floors were covered. It is most probable that they were covered with fine structures that were easy to lift, especially as in none of the cases could it be seen that any kind of wall was constructed with clay or that there had existed some kind of cover with reed.

Not in any of the excavated houses so far could we observe any kind of division of the inner space. Neither, except in one case, have fireside structures been found.

The manner of construction of the houses differs according to the place where they were erected. In the levelled parts they restricted themselves to placing some unprocessed stones, which they dropped on the ground or directly on the mother rock which is at some places perfectly level. The floor was filled with earth in those places where there were fissures or where the ground was slightly inclining. In those places where the degree of inclination was bigger, in the western part of the village, they built terraces and filled them up with earth (which



4. East sector. House.

generally consists of an enormous amount of pottery, flint and bones) to level off the ground and subsequently they raised the house. In this same sector the oldest agricultural terraces were frequently re-used to construct houses on top of them. This fact seems to indicate a moment of expansion of the village, be it because of population growth or desertion of other sectors.

The doors of the houses open towards the court. From data that could be obtained from some houses, the doors were put together with two door posts with a height of 70-80 cm, a threshold and a stone lintel. One of these doors—although somewhat more monumental—is conserved in the big wall situated between the central sector and the western sector of the village. With regard to the court, this was formed by stone blocks, generally smaller than those that formed the base of the houses.

The furniture was very simple: storage jars lined up along the court walls (FIG. 5), small bowls, holemouth jars and some grinding stones.

The fact that the houses only show vestiges in one or two occupations is important. At al-Muṭawwaq integrated structures were found within and outside the wall that surrounds the village. But leaving aside those that are remote in time, either those that correspond to the PPNB or to the Roman or Byzantine period, all the vestiges correspond to various moments of the Early Bronze Age I. There is an initial period in the occupation, of undetermined chronology, of which little circular structures are found buried under the agricultural terraces, or even in the very village and possibly in the caves. Except for those, that are without any doubt related to the first builders of the village, we have not found vestiges of earlier occupations. Nor have perceptible traces been found that indicate that habitation continued at later moments. However, on the other hand, it is certain that from the Early Bronze Age I onwards the mountain could have conveyed a religious or funeral function. There are, nevertheless no clear traces of habitation nor economic ex-



5. Handle with seal impression.

ploitation of the place. This places it in a peculiar position regarding its interpretation. There is no evidence of continuity of occupation, as there is in other, more western, places, which would allow the village an evolution into a more or less developed urbanism. If we take the planning into account, al-Muṭawwaq is not much more than a village of considerable proportions that was occupied during a certain, still not determined, time of the end of the fourth millennium or the beginning of the third millennium BC. with possible temporal desertion. The temporal desertion could be demonstrated with the stratigraphy of the houses in which, not infrequently, a double level of occupation can be observed.

The case presents certain resemblance with Jāwa, where the occupation of this same period was not continued and centuries must have passed before it was occupied again. In the case of al-Muṭawwaq, however, we have additional information close to the site that allows a further interpretation. For the moment, we lack elements that make it possible to establish the origin of this population. There are vestiges that apparently relate the constructive tradition of al-Muṭawwaq with others, that we found more to the west, as is the case of the characteristic oval plan (Byblos, Yiftahel, etc.). Nevertheless, this identity is purely superficial and restricts simply to this case. The houses of al-Muṭawwaq (as we have indicated before) do not permit establishing in which way they were covered. If we simply observe the data provided by the excavations of the latter, it is even possible that we are dealing with light structures closer to the characteristic nomad structures than to the more sedentary with more stable constructions. The houses of al-Muṭawwaq seem to be more fragile in their structure than those of Jāwa, Umm Ḥammād or even those of the village close to Jabal Makhad, where the land slides that filled the houses show more solid constructions with stone walls.

On the other hand, the type of pottery of al-Muṭawwaq, which is generally coarse, is also found in the characteristic sites of Jāwa or Umm Ḥammād, with some types that are not found in the earlier mentioned places. It was usually hand made, except for some items that were made with the use of a turn-table, with simple decoration of thumb impressions, incisions and red or sienna paint, or with simple geometric designs (wavy lines, point, parallel oblique lines, etc.). Metal vestiges are highly rare and restricted to some pin fragments that were found in one of the houses of the central sector. The rest of the metal objects, a ring and part of a disc, both of bronze, were found in situations that allow the assumption of a posterior chronology.

The Terraces and the Tracks

The occupation of the mountain required the structuring of an important network of tracks that led from the well of

Kharaisin to the village, coming together at the southern gate and the eastern terraces. They followed the lines with the least degree of inclination and, except in some cases. To maintain some more prominent levels, some coarse stairs with steps of unhewn blocks of stone, were constructed. At some points, where the tracks narrowed dangerously, terraces were constructed to extend them (FIG. 6).

At various points of the mountain, walls can be found which were placed perpendicularly in areas with greater inclination. The function of these frames was to contain the earth and accumulate it and at some points to exploit the accumulated earth for agricultural purposes. Their efficiency is apparent, because until today in those areas where they were constructed there is still a considerable consistency of earth. The pottery and vestiges of the industry of basalt are characteristic of the Early Bronze Age I. Some of the disclosed vestiges are related to agricultural activities: sickle blades and a tool that seems to be a fragment of a hoe made of basalt.

A Hypothesis about the Economic System

The information that is being found related to the economic system of the village, indicates a dry culture, made possible with terraces constructed on the mountainside, olive exploitation, cattle raising of goats and sheep and the presence of asses (which must have been necessary at least to transport water from the wells to the higher levels of the mountain: until now no kind of structures have been found that allowed gathering and holding water).

All the elements seem to sketch a kind of semi-nomadic groups that exploit this part of the territory. This system was not abandoned when al-Muṭawwaq was deserted. Close to the mountain there are other settlements, big ones as the one at Marayim, or small ones as those at Jabal Makhad and some others pointed out in the surveys of J. Sapin, that extend towards the desert area. From a



6. East sector. Terrace.

chronological point of view it seems that these places are from the Early Bronze Age I and III, with no continuing occupations, that can persist until the early moments of the Middle Bronze Age. This appears to indicate the presence of groups of human beings in the region, that extends during a relatively long time, dedicating themselves to the seasonal exploitation of the scarce resources of the territory. In fact, in this whole area one had to wait until technological more advanced times before more permanent settlements could be established.

The disposition and the type of uniform houses that we found in the village seem to be the expression of an egalitarian society. We did not find any architectural signs of social differentiation nor function. On the other hand, the vestiges we have of what could be called a religious architecture are important. We cannot say that the spaces that were marked out for these kind of activities have any resemblance with what we know of the chalcolithic world, for example that what could be construed as a sanctuary in al-Ghassūl or like the kind of temple in En Gedi. In al-Muṭawwaq they restrain to enclosures. We have at least two that can be included in this consideration. The first one of them is located in the western sector of the village. It is close to a big tumulus around which we have found foundations of walls (which, as all the architecture of al-Muṭawwaq are just thrust stones). The interpretation of these sites is complicated because of the fact that the area has been changed recently, to use the stones for the construction of terraces. However, it is not complicated in the second big enclosure, which, as indicated earlier, can be found between the central and eastern sectors (FIG. 7). This one was raised after the cliff, that is steeper at this point. Except for the part where it leans over the cliff, it is enclosed by a thick wall (more than a metre at some points) of big unhewn stones, that were not placed as those found in the houses, but without the use of a foundation over one of its broad sides, forming various irregular lines. The entrance is formed by a gate, situated in the north west, which is completely preserved because it was protected by a tumulus that partly concealed it. This wall encloses a space of some 60 m east to west and 40 m north to south, that inclines towards the precipice where it remains open. This is an indication of the fact that it does not concern an enclosure to hold cattle. The excavation carried out around a big stone block, with a prismatic form close to the northern wall, shows the possible ritual use of this space. The block is situated over a very flat layer of limestone, that forms the natural floor of the mountain and that declines forming broad steps towards the cliff. At the south face of the stone a little semicircular podium was constructed with stones filled with blocks of smaller size and joined by mortar. Close to this podium a small fragment of a bronze disc was found, which, as we already mentioned, is a strange remnant on al-Muṭawwaq and



7. Central-East sectors. Enclosure.

makes us suppose that we are dealing with an object from a chronological posterior use than that of the village, on account of which the place may have been visited during a posterior time—during which the use was restricted to funeral (dolmen fields) and religious function—or to an economical exploitation that did not leave any discernible traces. As a matter of fact, al-Muṭawwaq is close to places such as Jabal Makhad and Marayim. Of course, it is not the only place where these thrust stones appear. They are found in other dolmen fields in the area and in the

rocky spur between the “wadis” of ‘Ayn and Ḥmayd, where an authentic sanctuary can be found, much more complex in its structure, also from the Early Bronze Age. However, in spite of the differences in structure of these sites, it seems clear that both are a manifestation of the use of the high places with a ritual purpose and the *massebot* as a form of religious expression.

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