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Some Observations on the Geographical Extent of Cultural Areas in Syria and the Transjordan

Though a considerable number of excavations and surveys covering a wide range of periods have been conducted throughout Jordan in the past decades, the material published in preliminary reports has helped, somewhat, to fill in the basic repertoire of cultural materials, but has not yet provided the details necessary to shed further light on the geographical extent of its various cultural entities. We cannot at this point further substantiate or modify the basic districts that we suggested in 1972 (Dornemann 1983: 5–7 and fig. 1). Our basic thesis was to consider the wadi system as a series of natural barriers which helped to shape the cultural distinctions throughout Transjordan.

It became very clear to us on our last visit to Jordan that this model could not safely be extended back in time as far as the Neolithic. The location of major Neolithic sites in the wadi system itself would require that boundary lines be drawn elsewhere (Rollefson 1984). Before such lines are drawn, however, it is essential that more of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites of the Transjordan be excavated and published. Clearly the Iron and Bronze Age model for the distribution of cultural units cannot be extended earlier. It must be assumed that the basic subsistence patterns changed substantially. Similarly caution must be exercised in tracing the legacy of the 3rd–1st millennia BC into the Roman Period, to a time when foreign legions provided security along the *limes* in the east.

Excavations in the Jordan Valley, particularly at Tell Mazar (Yassine 1984) and Deir 'Alla, tomb groups from the Amman area, and the excavations at Buseirah and Tawilan (Bennett 1984), provide significant additional new information for the end of the Iron Age and the Persian Period. This information promises to be substantial and should allow us to develop criteria by which to define the end of the Assyrian, the Neo-Babylonian and the Persian Periods. When that has been accomplished it may be possible to review the available material with an eye to isolating features which are distinctive of their geographical areas; specifically, to what extent can Edomite or Ammonite cultural assemblages be defined for the end of the Iron Age?

The other major period for which a substantial amount of new material is becoming available is the Early Bronze Age.

When further publications of the excavations at Bab edh-Dhra (Schaub and Rast 1981 and 1984), Numeira (Coogan 1984), Khirbet Iskander (Richard and Boraas 1984), Lahun, Jawa and sites in the Jordan Valley (Falconer, Magness-Gardiner and Metzger 1984) are available, the Early Bronze Age may become one of the best documented periods in Jordan. Together with the volume of published material available from Jericho, a corpus of material is accessible for careful comparison with the large quantity of material excavated at Bab edh-Dhra. Though it will not be possible, for some time to come, to trace any development in the geographical peculiarities of the regions of the Transjordan from the Bronze to the Iron Age, it may be possible to determine whether similar patterns of artifactual similarities or differences can be traced. The excavation of Jawa (Helms 1981) presents a case where clear geographically determined features should be evident when sites separated by such a great distance as Bab edh-Dhra and Jawa are compared.

Recent work in Syria, particularly the salvage work in the Euphrates Valley, provides valuable information for comparison and raises important questions concerning the interpretation of cultural districts within geographically fixed areas. The details of the ceramic assemblages are very different, but the growing volume of information is valuable in providing illustrations of the extent to which regional parallels can be expected. Our work at Tell Hadidi has provided an excellent stratified sequence of materials which help to provide a sound basis for comparison within the Euphrates Valley, and elsewhere in Syria and Palestine (Dornemann 1985). Only when the diagnostic features of a given local assemblage have been defined can the full extent of the influence of one region upon another be judged and the impact of specific highways or routes traced.

In the past few years a considerable number of preliminary and final reports (Orthmann 1981 and Orthmann and Kampschulte 1984) have appeared on excavations conducted in the 1960s and 1970s in the 'big bend' area of the Euphrates River Valley in Syria. These reports, and those in progress on the mass of material excavated in the area, provide a larger corpus of ceramic forms for many periods of the Bronze Age than

are available in any other area of Syria. This volume of material has caused us to revise our understanding of the artifactual assemblages all over Syria.

A number of general observations are necessary to view this material in its proper perspective. As we have tried to organize the pottery profiles of several periods represented in our excavations at Tell Hadidi, and tried to place them in their proper context with contemporary materials elsewhere in Syria, we have raised many questions concerning our materials as well as questions about the most appropriate means by which parallels can be made with other sites. As an example, the incised decoration so characteristic of the Middle Bronze Age provides a good link with other areas from Iran to Egypt, as pointed out already in 1979 (Dornemann 1979: 139). But, when and where does this tradition begin? Does it begin suddenly or gradually? Does it begin at the same time in all areas? Does it begin in one area and spread from there? What are its antecedents? Are there other contemporary or earlier traditions of incised decoration which are totally independent of this tradition or are there relationships between them? Can the variations in the use of such decoration be shown to follow a clear line of development? If this development exists at one site, can it be shown to exist similarly at other sites and can it be understood in a general framework which encompasses a broad geographical area? Unfortunately, with the evidence at hand, it does not seem that simple or straightforward answers exist to any of these questions and in most cases our attempted answers are based on very limited evidence.

Similar questions can and must be asked about each vessel type, manufacturing technique and decorative technique which we encounter throughout the Bronze Age, from the caliciform vessels of the Early Bronze Age to the mugs of the Late Bronze Age. Pottery is, of course, only one segment, albeit the most plentiful and a very reflective one, of the artifactual assemblage which must be submitted to detailed analysis for a thorough understanding of the ancient culture of our area. Even more difficult is the evidence for architectural, environmental, political, social, intellectual, and religious traditions, or evidence from the other areas of human endeavor, which must be scrutinized to reconstruct the history and fabric of the ancient civilizations. I see little difference between the eventual interpretation of the significance of the development of a specific rim form and its similarities to forms present in a wider geographical context; or the development of a specific verb form in its usage through time in a specific city and its similarities to the development of the same verb form in neighboring cities and countries; or the development over a period of time of specific variations in the approach to the holy of holies of the temple of a specific god in a given city and its similarities to developments of the same architectural plan in neighboring cities and countries.

The publication of pottery vessels from the first half of the 2nd millennium BC from Tells Sweihat, Halawa, Habuba Kabire, Kanas, Mumbaqaat and El Qatar near Tell Hadidi gives us an opportunity to define the pottery forms of the local

Middle Bronze Age assemblage. When we try to define the chronological overlap of similar forms between different sites, we still find that our evidence is limited. In many cases, specific vessels from different sites look as if they could have been produced at the same site. Where the development of specific forms can be traced, they often show parallel developments at other sites but not always. We have no way of knowing how continuous or how interrupted our sequences are at any site within the immediate area. A site could have been vacant for 50 years between two layers but this may not be reflected by a change in pottery, leading us to assume a continuous, uninterrupted sequence of occupation. Parallels with other sites can be demonstrated; however, these sites may actually have been uninhabited at the specific time but, rather, existed earlier or later. New forms may have been introduced at one site but not picked up for some time elsewhere. Destruction and rebuilding layers represent the history of a specific site and need not be reflected in any way in the record of a neighboring site. Undoubtedly political and economic factors influenced the history and development at each site but they need not, and in many cases probably did not, influence each site in the same way. It is hard to believe that competition, differences in trading practices and partners, political favoritism, similar religious sympathies, adaptations to the peculiarities of the surroundings of each site, etc., did not affect each city, drawing some closer together and separating others.

When specific features are traced beyond the narrow confines of the 'big bend' area of the Euphrates River Valley the same problems exist, and become more complex. Other major factors enter into our consideration, particularly the physical factors of geographical distance, topography and the ease of communication along natural routes. As we have tried to examine the detailed ceramic information published from other Syrian sites, it has become clear that the factors of distance and communication were responsible, in all time periods, for the creation of specific geographically determined cultural areas (Dornemann 1981: 61, FIG. 1). When comparisons are to be made between these cultural areas, even greater caution must be exercised so that comments are only made on the basis of a sound understanding of each area and its chronological sequence. We must know, for example, that the parallels we draw between areas are indeed between closely contemporary materials and not parallels drawn, for example, between materials of the 22nd century BC in one area, the 20th century in another and the 21st century in still another. Most conclusions have been based on rather broad parallels and wide chronological ranges.

It is clear geographically, that the pottery assemblage of coastal Syria has significant differences from assemblages inland. The Amuq seems to be part of the coastal area but probably part of a northern subdivision. The Balikh and Khabur River Valleys represent another district and probably will prove to have at least two subdivisions east and west (east and west of the Khabur). Central Syria, between the coastal area and the desert should be divided into at least three areas:

the Damascus area (with the Beqa as a possibly closely related area or subdivision), the Homs area (with possible subdivisions between the Orontes Valley and the area to its east) and the Aleppo area (with possible subdivisions again toward the Orontes). Finally, the Euphrates Valley provides still another cultural unit illustrated by greater parallels between ceramic materials from cities along its banks, at least from Mari to Carchemish, than with areas to the east or west of the valley. Again, subdivisions will probably be defined in the future around the major sites along this stretch: Mari-Ashara, Tuttul, Emar and Carchemish.

Given the currently very spotty nature of the archaeological record for Bronze Age Syria, it is obvious that much needs to be done to define these cultural-geographical areas and their subdivisions, and that these divisions must be based on a consideration of all the evidence available, not just the ceramic evidence. It is also necessary to define the extent of the similarities between areas, so that we can set limits on the value of general statements concerning the culture of Syria as a whole.

As a specific example I would like to consider the following hypothesis, not as a statement of fact but a statement which will have to be checked against all the evidence that becomes available. In the Early Bronze Age Ebla was a major central Syrian power for at least 150 years, while Mari in eastern Syria was a major power for a much longer period of time, in round numbers at least from about 3000 to 1700 BC. Though these cities at times controlled large geographical districts, their control was seldom uncontested for any length of time. How can we connect such a picture of political reality with the reality of our artifactual evidence? Emar is mentioned frequently at both Mari and Ebla, but from the Ebla evidence it would seem that Emar was most closely linked to it for a significant period of time contemporary with Palace G of Tell Mardikh IIb1. Unfortunately the archaeological remains of Early Bronze III–IV Emar are not available to us. Azu, Tell Hadidi, is mentioned at Ebla but only in a few references, yet Tell Hadidi has a long Early Bronze sequence. What role did Early Bronze Age Mumbaqat, El Qatar, Habuba Kabire, Halawa, Tawi and Selenkahiye play in the history of the area, to mention only a few of the Early Bronze cities excavated in the 'big bend' area of the Euphrates River? If, for instance, Azu had its greatest cultural, political and trade connections with Mari, Mumbaqat with the Jezireh and Assyria, El Qatar with southeastern Turkey and central Anatolia, and Selenkahiye with the Levantine coast, how would that affect interactions between them and the other cities of the area?

Since we are questioning the validity of assuming uniformity of cultural material throughout Syria, we must continue and state once more our growing uneasiness with the term Syria-Palestine. Certainly Syria-Palestine is a convenient term to use for making comparisons with Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Anatolian, Aegean or other materials and is more acceptable than some alternatives like the use of the term Levant or considering the Syrian area east of the Euphrates as part of Mesopotamia. Some areas of Syria clearly have closer cultural relations with

certain areas of Palestine but this does not provide a justification for a broad generalization. It is time to review carefully the criteria to be used in justification of the use of this hyphenated term rather than the designation Syria and Palestine which presumes no overriding cultural unity for the two areas. Similarly the area of Lebanon must be considered, whether it must be subsumed in either the Syrian or Palestinian area or whether it also should stand on its own.

We must repeat as a warning comments made above in consideration of the Middle Bronze Age, as it seems that they will basically hold true for the Early Bronze Age as well. It seems that the developments between layers at the Euphrates Valley sites, as well as at Mardikh, Hama and Judeideh, are not parallel and consistent. There is no indication that major phases at any of the sites mentioned so far were first occupied, destroyed or abandoned at precisely the same time as part of a massive event which affected a broad geographical area. Rather, changes from level to level do not seem to coincide. Each site had its own history and though the general period developments follow pretty well from site to site, the assumption that they are narrowly contemporary is unsubstantiated by any amount of detail. Local factors determine the temporal duration of specific features, whether they are preserved for any length of time or die quickly.

Though the published documentation of excavated sites in the Euphrates Valley is far from complete, it provides unique information. In comparison with the Transjordan, we can begin to see how much documentation is indeed required for the delineation of a specific geographical region before we can understand in detail its chronological progression of cultural assemblages. We can also see that it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw general conclusions, make specific attributions or understand parallels between regions without the proper data base from which to operate. The realization of an optimal data base will still take a long time. Our comments are not intended to discourage attempts at defining geographical areas or prove that such attempts are hopeless. Understanding the geographical parameters within the area of Syria and Palestine is essential to our understanding of the region. These comments are intended as a caution and a conscience, so that we do not let our desire to shape a limited body of artifactual information within the framework of an even more limited body of historical information, without realizing fully the extent of the limitations and problems which exist.

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