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A History of Syria in One Hundred Sites

edited by

Youssef Kanjou and Akira Tsuneki

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Cover Illustration: View of the excavation at Hummal site
© The Syro-Swiss mission on the Palaeolithic of the El Kowm Area

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Contents

Preface vii

Introduction: The Significance of Syria in Human History 1
Youssef Kanjou and Akira Tsuneki

Chapter 1: Prehistory

1. El Kowm Oasis (Homs) 11
Reto Jagher, Dorota Wojtczak and Jean-Marie Le Tensorer

2. Dederiyeh Cave (Aleppo) 17
Takeru Akazawa and Yoshihiro Nishiaki

3. Wadi Mushkuna Rockshelter (Damascus) 21
Nicholas J. Conard

4. Baaz Rockshelter (Damascus) 24
Nicholas J. Conard

5. Kaus Kozah Cave (Damascus) 27
Nicholas J. Conard

6. Abu Hureyra (Raqqa) 31
Andrew M. T. Moore

7. Qarassa (Sweida) 35
Frank Braemer, Juan J. Ibanez and Xavier Terradas

8. Mureybet (Raqqa) 41
Marie-Claire Cauvin and Danielle Stordeur

9. Tell Qaramel (Aleppo) 44
Youssef Kanjou

10. Jerf el-Ahmar (Aleppo) 47
Danielle Stordeur and George Willcox

11. Dja'de el-Mughara (Aleppo) 51
Eric Coqueugniot

12. Tell Halula (Aleppo) 54
Miquel Molist

13. Tell Aswad (Damascus) 57
Danielle Stordeur and Rima Khawam

14. Tell el-Kerkh (Idlib) 61
Akira Tsuneki

15. Tell Sabi Abyad (Raqqa) 65
Peter M. M. G. Akkermans

16. Tell Seker al-Aheimar (Hassake) 69
Yoshihiro Nishiaki

17. Shir (Hama) 72
Karin Bartl

18. Tell Kosak Shamali (Aleppo) 76
Yoshihiro Nishiaki

Copyrighted material. No unauthorized reproduction in any medium.

19. Tell el-'Abr (Aleppo) 80
Yayoi Yamazaki and Hamido Hammade

20. Chagar Bazar (Hassake) 84
Walter Cruells and Anna Gómez Bach

21. Tell Zeidan (Raqqa) 88
Anas Al Khabour

22. Tell Feres (Hassake) 91
Régis Vallet and Johnny Samuele Baldi

23. Tell Ziyadeh (Hassake) 98
Frank Hole

Chapter 2: Ancient Syria (Bronze and Iron Ages)

24. Tell Beydar / Nabada / Nabatium (Hassake) 103
Marc Lebeau and Antoine Suleiman

25. Tell Banat (Aleppo) 107
Thomas L. McClellan and Anne Porter

26. Tell Mozan/Urkesh (Hassake) 111
Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati

27. Tell Leilan (Hassake) 115
Harvey Weiss

28. Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu/Magdalu (Deir ez-Zor) 119
Hartmut Kühne

29. Umm el-Marra (Aleppo) 127
Glenn M. Schwartz

30. Tell Jerablus Tahtani (Aleppo) 131
Edgar Peltenburg

31. Tell Al-Rawda (Hama) 135
Corinne Castel and Nazir Awad

32. Tell Munbāqa (Raqqa) 139
Dittmar Machule

33. Tell el-Abd (Raqqa) 143
Uwe Finkbeiner

34. Tell Ali al-Hajj, Rumeilah (Aleppo) 147
Kazuya Shimogama

35. Mishrifeh / Qatna (Homs) 151
Daniele Morandi Bonacossi

36. Mishirfeh/Qatna, Syrian Excavations (Homs) 156
Michel Al-Maqdissi and Massoud Badawi

37. Tell Mastuma (Idlib) 163
Hidetoshi Tsumoto

38. Tell Sakka (Damascus) 167
Ahmad Taraqji

39. Tell Iris (Lattakia) 171
Antoine Suleiman and Michel Al-Maqdissi

40. Tell Toueini (Lattakia) 174
Michel Al-Maqdissi, Massoud Badawi and Eva Ishaq

Copyrighted material. No unauthorized reproduction in any medium.

41. Tell Sianu (Lattakia) 181
Michel Al-Maqdissi

42. Tell Taban (Hassake) 184
Hirotoshi Numoto

43. Tell Hammam el-Turkman (Raqqa) 188
Diederik J.W. Meijer

44. Tell Selenkahiye (Aleppo) 191
Diederik J.W. Meijer

45. Tell Mohammed Diyab (Hassake) 194
Christophe Nicolle

46. Tell Tuqan (Idlib) 197
Francesca Baffi

47. Khirbet Al-Umbashi, Khirbet Dabab and Hebariye (Sweida) 201
Frank Braemer and Ahmad Taraqji

48. Tell Masaikh and the Region around Terqa (Deir ez-Zor) 207
Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault

49. Tell Ashara/Terqa (Deir ez-Zor) 211
Olivier Rouault

50. Tell Bazi (Aleppo) 215
Adelheid Otto and Berthold Einwag

51. Tell Afis (Idlib) 218
Stefania Mazzoni

52. Tell Fekheriye (Hassake) 224
Dominik Bonatz

53. Mari (Deir ez-Zor) 228
Pascal Butterlin

54. Tell Nebi Mend (Homs) 232
Peter Parr

55. Qala'at Halwanji (Aleppo) 235
Jesper Eidem

56. Tell Ahmar/Til Barsib (Aleppo) 239
Guy Bunnens

57. Chagar Bazar/Ashnakkum (Hassake) 243
Önhan Tunca

58. Tell Humeida (Deir ez-Zor) 247
Juan-Luis Montero Fenollós and Yaroob al-Abdallah

59. Tell Qabr Abu al-'Atiq (Deir ez-Zor) 250
Juan-Luis Montero Fenollós and Shaker Al-Shbib

60. Tulul el-Far, Tell Taouil and Tell el-Kharaze (Damascus) 253
Sophie Cluzan and Ahmad Taraqji

61. Tell Massin and Tell al-Nasriyah (Hama) 259
Dominique Parayre and Martin Sauvage

62. Tell Arbid (Hassake) 264
Piotr Bieliński

63. Tell Halaf (Hassake) 268
Lutz Martin

Copyrighted material. No unauthorized reproduction in any medium.

64. Halawa (Raqqa) 272
Jan-Waalke Meyer and Winfried Orthmann

65. Tell Shiyukh Tahtani (Aleppo) 277
Gioacchino Falsone and Paola Sconzo

66. Ras Shamra/Ugarit (Lattakia) 282
Valérie Matoïan and Khozama al-Bahloul

67. Tell Chuera (Raqqa) 287
Jan-Waalke Meyer

68. Amrith/Marathos (Tartous) 293
Michel Al-Maqdissi and Eva Ishaq

69. Arslan Tash (Aleppo) 297
Anas Al Khabour

70. Tell Meskene/Emar (Aleppo) 300
Ferhan Sakal

71. Tell Barri/Kahat (Hassake) 304
Raffaella Pierobon Benoit

72. Tell Kazel/Sumur (Tartous) 309
Leila Badre

73. Tell Qumluq (Aleppo) 313
Youssef Kanjou and Andrew Jamieson

74. The Cemetery of Abu Hamad (Raqqa) 317
Jan-Waalke Meyer

75. The cemeteries of Wreide, Tawi and Shameseddin (Raqqa) 319
Jan-Waalke Meyer andWinfried Orthmann

76. Tell Ajaja (Hassake) 323
Asa'd Mahmoud and Hartmut Kühne

77. Tell Bderi (Hassake) 327
Hartmut Kühne

Chapter 3: Syria in the Classic World (Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine)

78. Jebel Khalid, (Aleppo) 335
Graeme Clarke and Heather Jackson

79. Palmyra, 30 Years of Syro-German/Austrian Archaeological Research (Homs) 339
Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, Khaled al- As'ad and Waleed al-As'ad

80. Palmyra, Japanese Archaeological Research (Homs) 349
Kiyohide Saito

81. Palmyrena. The Northern Hinterland of Palmyra (Homs) 355
Jørgen Christian Meyer, Nils Anfinset and Torbjørn Preus Schou

82. Palmyra/Tadmor (Homs) 359
Michal Gawlikowski

83. Cyrrhus/Nebi Houri (Aleppo) 362
Jeanine Abdul Massih and Shaker Al-Shbib

84. Tell As-Sin (Deir ez-Zor) 367
Shaker Al-Shbib and Juan-Luis Montero Fenollós

85. Gindaros (Aleppo) 371
Ammar Abdulrahman

Copyrighted material. No unauthorized reproduction in any medium.

86. El-Iss/Qinnasrin (Aleppo) 375
Marie-Odile Rousset and Youssef Kanjou

87. Resafa/Sergiopolis (Raqqa) 379
Anas Al Khabour

88. Resafa/Sergiupolis /Rusafat Hisham (Raqqa) 382
Dorothée Sack and Martin Gussone

89. Zenobia – Halabiya (Deir ez-Zor) 388
Sylvie Blétry

90. Sergilla, Ruweiha and El Bâra (Idlib) 393
Maamoun Abdulkarim and Gérard Charpentier

91. Musaytbeh-Jableh (Lattakia) 401
Massoud Badawi

92. Deir Qinnsrin-Jarabulus (Aleppo) 404
Mohamad Fakhro

93. Tell el-Kasra (Deir ez-Zor) 408
Yaroob al-Abdallah

94. Syriac Inscriptions of Syria 411
Françoise Briquel Chatonnet

95. Sura (Raqqa) 414
Ali Othman

96. Tell Shayzar (Hama) 417
Matthias Grawehr and Abdulsalam Albachkami

Chapter 4: Islamic Archaeology in Syria

97. The Citadel of Tell Shayzar (Hama) 423
Cristina Tonghini

98. Qalaat Al Mudiq/Apamean Citadel (Hama) 427
Shaker Al-Shbib and Mathilde Gelin

99. Tell Tuneinir (Hassake) 430
Michael Fuller and Neathery Fuller

100. Aleppo Castle (Aleppo) 433
Assad Yusof and Youssef Kanjou

101. Madinat el-Far/Hisn Maslama (Raqqa) 437
Claus-Peter Haase

102. Kharab Sayyar (Raqqa) 441
Jan-Waalke Meyer

103. Tell Damir (Raqqa) 447
Anas Al Khabour

Synthesis: Syrian Archaeology in the Past, Present and Future 450
Youssef Kanjou and Akira Tsuneki

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21. Tell Zeidan (Raqqa)

Anas Al Khabour

(Gothenburg University, Sweden & DGAM, Syria)

The Syrian-American mission began archaeological excavations in Tell Zeidan in June 2008, directed by G. Stein of the American team from the Oriental Institute of Chicago University and A Al Khabour of the Syrian team from the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums.

The investigation aimed to study the Ubaid period in the northern part of Syria and its relationship with older periods, e.g. Halaf and Late Chalcolithic 1 and 2, and covering the period between the 6th and 4th millennium BC.

This period is exceptionally important in shedding light on the development of societies in Syria, by comparison with the well-known sites from Ubaid Period, such as Tell Halaf, Tell Hammam et-Turkman and Tell Hamoukar. Comparison with southern Mesopotamian sites, for example Edidu and Tell al-Oueili, where the appearance of the first political systems, development of the irrigation system, agricultural advances, temple developments and changes in burial methods were equally important.

The site was visited by Mallowan in 1926 during his investigation of the Balikh Valley, as well as by M. Van Loon 1983. The Dutch archaeologist Peter Akkermans studied ceramics from the site, and the Spanish archaeologist Joaquin Cordoba included Tell Zeidan in his survey of the Balikh Valley in 1983 during a project for the University of Autonoma, Madrid. The systematic excavation of the site was undertaken by a joint Syrian-American mission in 2008.

The site is located on the eastern bank of the Balkh, close to its confluence with the Euphrates River, some 5km to the east of Raqqa. The site is of considerable extent (600x200m) in the north-east and south-west directions. It is 15m higher than the surrounding area. Two low mounds belong to the site and form the lower city. Tell

FIG. 1 LOCATION OF TELL ZEIDAN TO THE EAST OF RAQQA.

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Fig. 2 Painted ceramics from Ubeid Period (first season report 2007).

Fig. 3 Baked clay mullers (first season report 2007).

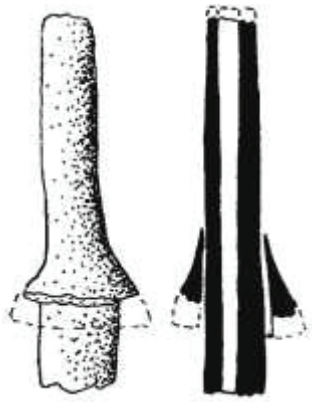

Fig. 4 Blowpipe mouthpiece for smelting copper (first season report 2007).

Zaedan is one of three important tells dated to the Ubaid Period in Syria (Fig. 1).

The excavations at the site revealed finds from the Halaf and Ubaid periods, as well as the Late Chalcolithic. The Ubaid Period was represented by house walls made from bricks and the typical ceramics of this period. The results of C14 analysis provided a date of 4940-5055 BC for the Ubaid Period at the site.

The importance of this period is that it could provide answers to the question of how the Ubaid culture arrived from the southern part of Mesopotamia and replaced the peaceful Halaf culture present in northern Syria at the time. There was no evidence of any destruction or violence; it was a gradual change and the ceramics of the Ubaid replaced the Halaf ceramics and are dated to 5400-5500 BC (Fig. 2).

The results of the excavation confirmed the continuity of site occupation in the northeastern mound over 500 years of the Chalcolithic between 4500-4000 BC. The most representative finds of Tell Zeidan are baked clay 'mullers', stamp seals, and blowpipe mouthpieces used in the smelting of copper (Fig. 3).

Tell Zeidan witnessed advanced economic activities. Imported obsidian originating from Lake Van, around 400km to the north of Tell Zeidan, were found at the site, as well as pieces of artefacts involved in the smelting of copper – this metal was transported from Dyar Bakir in Anatolia, more than 300km away (Fig. 4).

Artefacts from Tell Zeidan reflect elite or higher status individuals, as well as administrative aspects of the site, all suggestive of the presence of a governor. These are represented by a red-stone stamp seal with a deer carved in it (4.5x5.8cm), similar to Gawra stamps found in the Musil region in the north of Iraq (Fig. 5).

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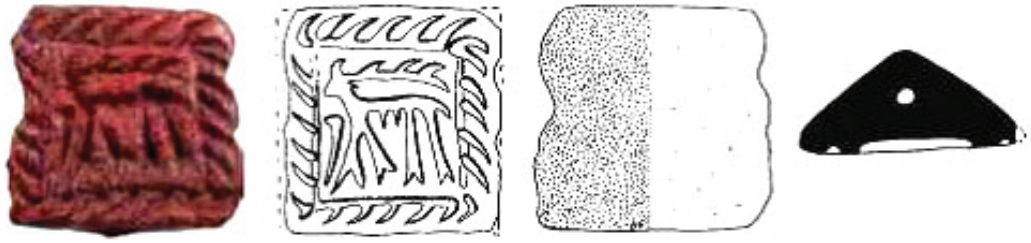

Fig. 5 Late Chalcolithic stamp seals (first excavation report 2007).

The archaeological excavations at Tell Zeidan, to the east of Raqqa, have offered important data about the site, and the occupation from the 6th to the 4th millennium BC. It is one of the most relevant sites in terms of representing the transitional period from the Halaf culture to the adoption of the Ubaid culture; this was confirmed by the coexistence of ceramic traditions from both periods, as well as the transitional phase. The archaeological record also confirmed the occupation of the site during the Late Chalcolithic.

The archaeological finds reflected the economic importance of the site and its relationships with distant regions, through the imports of obsidian and copper, the sites demonstrate administrative authorities similar to the artistic types and materials utilized in other sites in Mesopotamia.

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