A History of Syria in One Hundred Sites

edited by

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Tell Barri is located in western Jazira, on the left bank of the river JaghJagh, a tributary of the Habur. The river was fully navigable in antiquity and permitted easy communications as far as the Euphrates. The river supplied water, used not only for drinking but for crops and artisanal activities; cuneiform tablets provide evidence that fishing was also practised.

This part of the Jazira was, in any case, favourable to settlements thanks to sufficient rainfall for the development...
of semi-arid agriculture. Its products, especially grains, combined with intense animal husbandry, notably sheep, formed the mixed economy that seems to have characterized all phases of the life of the site.

The tell, 32m higher than the present-day ground level, has an area of ca. 34ha, including the lower city, and is the result of successive superimpositions of inhabited areas, from the end of the 4th millennium BC until the 13th/14th centuries A.D (Fig. 1).

The excavations, started in 1980 by P. E. Pecorella, have brought to light 22 phases of habitation, coming one after the other without significant interruption: thanks to extensive interventions, conducted at different points and depths of the tell and in the lower city, and to the systematic study of the inhabited areas, burials, and finds, in particular the pottery, present in large quantities in all phases of occupation, it has been possible to distinguish the particular organizational and cultural characteristics of each period. The most significant elements identified over this very long reconstructed chronological sequence are presented here.

The earliest occupation dates to the Late Chalcolithic, but it is only in the first half of the 3rd millennium (EJ II-III) that the site shows the signs of a developed administration, fully consistent with what is known of the regional events of the Second Urbanization. The proof of this is the articulated cult complex exposed in Area G – an enclosing wall within which were two shrines with altars and hearths and which yielded large numbers of cretulae, seals, and votive objects, together with incised Ninivite 5 pottery, typical of the period.

The complex underwent some transformations before being abandoned, in the course of the second half of
the millennium. In the area, houses were built with ample open spaces for domestic and artisanal activities. The pottery changes slowly and reveals influences and contacts related to the nearby Tell Brak in the Akkadian period, then moving into the Amorite orbit, finally closely linked to the powerful city of Mari, as its archives indicate.

A moment of expansion and economic and social growth of the site is attested from the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, when underground chamber tombs with vaulted roofs located within the inhabited area are adopted. This is a sign of the existence of a local élite, whose dynamism is evidenced by the early appearance of the so-called Khabur Ware, and its political role by the citations in the documents found in the archives of Mari and Tell Leilan.

Kahat, which in the following centuries entered the orbit of the power of Mitanni, maintains a role,
including political, in the function attributed to the temple of the storm god – considered guarantor of international treaties. No trace has been found of the temple, but the prosperity of the site is amply demonstrated by the size of the settlement and the vitality of its artisans. To the south, in some 3m of depth, structures built over at least two centuries have been excavated, and a new quarter identified on the northern slope of the Tell. The kilns present for the whole period produced Khabur pottery, alongside the more refined Nuzi ware.

In the Late Bronze Age the construction of a palace attributed to Adad Nirari I on the south side of the Tell, where formerly there were houses, warehouses, and workshops, signals a definite transformation of the site, both as regards the organization of the spaces and a more evident social hierarchization. Three tombs dug in one of the rooms attest to this, with grave goods of extraordinary wealth and originality, indicating that the deceased women were surely of high rank. At end of the social spectrum, we see a standardization and impoverishment of forms of the pottery for everyday use: the vessels, still locally produced, as demonstrated by the recent discovery of an interesting ‘vertical’ kiln on the northeast slope of the tell, are now plain, undecorated and have simplified shapes and constant sizes.

The tendency continues and the social hierarchization seems to become more important in the following centuries, when the site comes under the neo-Assyrian
kingdom, in whose ambit Kahat seems to play a significant role. We see a new distribution of the buildings: an inhabited area is built over the palace of Adad Nirari, and the plan and distribution of the houses indicates an intentional design; a new palace is erected on the western slope by Tukulti Ninurta II: exposed for 80m, it is composed of several courtyards, paved in baked brick, around which are distributed rooms richly decorated with painted plaster and slabs incised with geometric patterns and rosettes. Rooms attributable to a second small palace have been identified on the northern slope, where a large terrace was created to enlarge the area.

The Babylonians did not bring about significant transformations in the organization of the site: the western palace was partly restored to make some rooms into storage areas but kept its function, as in particular the bathrooms and finds show. The southern quarter (Area G), however, was abandoned and temporarily occupied by rich tombs.

From this moment, to judge from the documentation available at present, Kahat is no longer cited in the sources. Life on the site was not, however, interrupted. This is attested by the structures and materials found, clearly influenced by the cultures present in the region and attributed to later centuries, up to the 13th/14th centuries AD.

The most important information from the excavation is the presence, both cultural and political, of the Parthians, followed by the Sasanians: the new data reopen the debate on the complex theme of the frontier and its characteristics, highlighting for the site and more generally for the region, a very close dependence on the eastern Mesopotamian sites.

Of the last phases of life small traces of evidence survive sufficient to attest to the vitality of the site at least until the 14th century AD. The very numerous silos and tools for grinding found in quantity – and largely reused from even very much earlier periods – indicate that grain still constituted one of the major resources of the settlement, whose reduction was probably caused by the Mongol invasion. The last traces of life are in fact small and precarious dwellings, with some tannurs and much hand-thrown pottery, clearly distinct from all previous wares.

Bibliography