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herausgegeben von
Dominik Bonatz und Lutz Martin

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Tell Leilan and the Dynamics of Social and Environmental Forces across the Mesopotamian Dry-Farming Landscape*

Harvey Weiss

Rain-fed northern Mesopotamia, the complement of irrigation agriculture southern Mesopotamia, was selected for a Yale University research program in 1978 because its late prehistoric-early historic, fourth to second millennium BC, developmental trajectory was virtually unknown. Further research quickly led the endeavor to Tell Leilan, an alluring site and hinterland laboratory for defining the dynamics of environmental and social forces across the Mesopotamian dry-farming landscape. Tell Leilan is located in the center of the extensive cereal production Khabur Plains of northeast Syria, maximizing cultivable land between the foothills of the Tur Abdin to the north and the Wadi Radd swamp to the south. Here seasonal rainfall (300–500 mm/annum), self-mulching soils, and flat, unbroken topography together provide for the highest rain-fed cereal production in Syria and, along with the plains of Tell Afar and Mosul, probably ancient northern Mesopotamia as well.¹

Equally significant, Tell Leilan also offered definition of an early historic developmental paradigm. On May 21, 1878 Hormuzd Rassam looked south from the crest of Do Gir, along the road from Turbe Spid (Qubur el-Bid, Khatuniyah) to Nusaibin, and on the horizon spied Tell Leilan, which he was “told has a wall round it like most of the Assyrian sites of importance.”² Thereafter, Assyriologists and archaeologists frequently visited the site, and by mid-century had speculated often that it was ancient Šubat-Enlil, the capital city of Šamši-Adad’s “Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia.”³ In the summer of 1978, the nascent Tell Leilan Project generated the first map of Leilan, its wall-enclosed 90 hectare topography, its 15-hectare Acropolis alongside the Wadi Jarrah, and the surface ceramic distributions to encourage archaeological excavations, regional surveys, and paleoenvironmental researches (Fig. 1). Seven research problems at the intersection of environmental and social dynamics have since been addressed with excavation- and survey-retrieved data, high-resolution radiocarbon dating, and paleoenvironmental research.

* The Yale University Tell Leilan Project acknowledges the support and assistance of the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées, Damascus, especially Bassam Jamous, Michel al-Maqdissi, and the late Adnan Bounni, and the collaboration of many friends at Tell Leilan, Tell Barham, and Qahtaniyah. The research reported here was made possible by the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Barbara Clay DeBevoise, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Foundation, Malcolm Wiener, Leon Levy Foundation, Roger and Barbara Brown, and Yale University.

1 Weiss 1983a,b; Weiss 1986.

2 Rassam 1897: 232–233.

3 Falkner 1957; Hrouda 1958; Van Liere 1963.

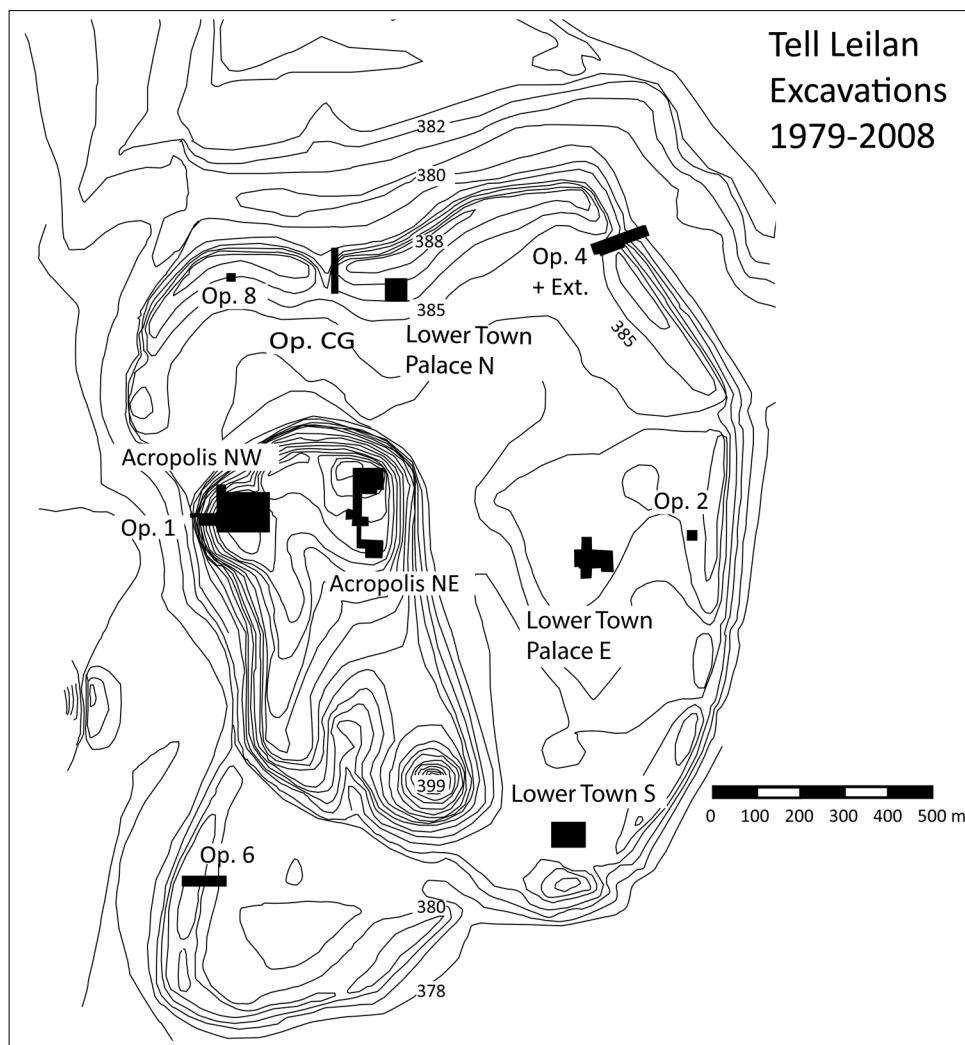


Fig. 1 Topographic map of Tell Leilan and excavation areas 1979–2008.
All Figures: © Yale University Tell Leilan Project.

The Late Uruk Expansion and Collapse

A 26-meter long step trench on the Acropolis, Operation 1, and its subsequent expansions, established the Tell Leilan occupational sequence and ceramic chronology, beginning with the late northern Obeid period.⁴ The Leilan Region Survey (1984, 1987, 1995, 1997), a

4 Weiss 1983a,b; Schwartz 1988.

30 x 60 km transect from the Iraqi frontier to the Turkish frontier, revealed an early site-size hierarchy that already extended during this period from half-hectare hamlets to small villages to 15-hectare towns.⁵ Subsequent Uruk period occupations, Leilan period IV, extending to ca. 3200 BC, included al-Andalus, in the Wadi Radd, a 64-hectares site with a significant Middle Uruk occupation, and southern Late Uruk period settlements, such as Sultan et-Tellul, Sharmoukh, Dabagh, and Aweinat ibn Harshan that frame anew the southern Uruk expansion and its sudden, widespread, collapse in rain-fed northern Mesopotamia.⁶ Six-hectare Sharmoukh is likely a southern Late Uruk colony within the Wadi Radd Late Uruk enclave, and complicates older arguments for the functions of Late Uruk “colony” sites across west Asia.⁷

The generative forces and ultimate functions of the southern Late Uruk expansion onto the Khabur Plains remain unknown. The causes of the sudden termination of these settlements and their local counterparts have been refocused, however, by the ca. 3200 BC two-century aridification event now documented in paleoclimate proxies from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.⁸ Suddenly outside the bounds of rain-fed agriculture, many Uruk sites suffered forced abandonment.⁹ The rapid decrease in Euphrates flow to southern Mesopotamia may also be associated with adaptive settlement reduction, agglomeration, and the emergence of cities’ palace political control which is first documented at the end of this period.¹⁰

The Ninevite 5 Experience

Definition of the succeeding settlements within the Operation 1 sounding provided a first stratigraphic definition of early “Ninevite 5 painted” assemblages, Leilan period IIIa, and the ceramic keys for identifying such sites within the Leilan Region Survey. The severely reduced Leilan IIIa period population that succeeded the late Uruk collapse was settled in small dispersed villages. Excavations at Leilan and elsewhere betray no local Leilan IIIa social or cultural remnants from the southern Late Uruk expansion, and settlements of this period lacked public architecture but for single-room chapels. Populations grew slowly for the following several centuries, as shown by settlement distributions for the Leilan IIIb and IIIc periods, with small villages surrounding a few towns no larger than 15 hectares.¹¹ Northern Mesopotamia and southern Mesopotamia seem to have been isolated and without cultural or economic contact during this period, for reasons yet unexplored. This slow Khabur Plains settlement growth and the regional isolation underscore the sudden transformation of Tell Leilan and the Leilan region landscape at ca. 2600 BC.

5 Weiss *et al.* 2002; Brustolon/Rova 2007.

6 Mayo/Weiss 2003.

7 Brustolon/Rova 2007.

8 Weiss/Bradley 2001.

9 Weiss 2003.

10 Staubwasser/Weiss 2006.

11 Rova/Weiss 2003.

Secondary State Formation and the Second Urban Revolution

At the very end of the Ninevite 5 ceramic period, around 2600 BC, during Leilan period IIId, Leilan settlement expanded rapidly from 15 to 90-hectares, as regional population nucleated, and a city wall was built around the settlement.¹² On the Leilan Acropolis a monumental wall and adjacent storerooms were erected in Operation 1 stratum 15d, and rebuilt repeatedly over the next three hundred years.¹³ Regional population nucleation, centralized store rooms, and public building construction are here, as elsewhere, signposts for the transition to state-level political and economic organization. Confounding many archaeological assumptions, however, the Leilan IIId period urban and state transformation – the period IIa Subarian state – was not accompanied by a synchronous change in ceramic production. Changes in pottery manufacture and styles, from labor-intensive, highly decorated, terminal Ninevite 5/Leilan IIId vessels to uniform “mass-produced” Leilan period IIa wares, only began about 100 years after Leilan urbanization and state formation.¹⁴

Seal impressions on the period IIa stratum 14 floor of Acropolis storerooms included many with the local, northern-style iconography derived from Early Dynastic II–III periods southern Mesopotamian “banquet scenes”, legitimating through emulation of southern iconography the new political and economic order.¹⁵ The later period IIa storerooms included a grain storage room subsequently destroyed by fire. Preserved were much barley, emmer, and durum wheat, mixed with burned roofing materials that included microscopic lignite, molten clay spherules, and phytoliths.¹⁶

At the Lower Town South a planned and walled straight street, 4.5 m wide leading to the Acropolis was set upon virgin soil in Leilan IIId times (Fig. 2).¹⁷ The street and its residential structures indicate that Leilan was now one of the unexplained planned radial-street cities, accompanied by state-level political organization, that suddenly dominated the Khabur Plains and western Syria beginning in the 26th century, as revealed most clearly at Tell Chuera.¹⁸ Lower Town houses here were built within wall-divided sectors and against street walls unbroken but for water-drain alleys. Pig bones in large percentage were a waste deposit in the sherd-laden street – where the tooth of the earliest domesticated equid in northern Mesopotamia was also retrieved.¹⁹ Apart from large quantities of flat-base “s i l a-bowls” in the Akkadian period, phases 3–5, there were no administrative artifacts in the Lower Town residential area.²⁰ The Akkadian period Lower Town South residential occupation and occupation in the northern Lower Town exposures terminated synchronously and abruptly at ca. 2200 BC.²¹

12 Weiss 1990a–c; Ristvet 2007.

13 Calderone/Weiss 2003; Wetterstrom 2003.

14 Weiss 1990a–c.

15 Parayre 2003.

16 Weiss *et al* 2002; Weiss 2002.

17 Weiss 1990a–c.

18 Meyer 2010a,b.

19 Weiss *et al* 1993.

20 Senior/Weiss 1992.

21 The Lower Town South is the subject of Monica Arrivabeni’s Freie Universität Berlin doctoral dissertation project.



Fig. 2 L89, Lower Town South excavation.

Akkadian Imperialization

The urbanization of Leilan and its regional distribution of towns and villages in periods IIId and IIa were pre-adaptations that facilitated region-wide Akkadian imperialization in Leilan period IIb. This southern Mesopotamian penetration of the Leilan region is first documented in the late Akkadian scribal room of Leilan period IIb3 on the Acropolis Northeast, across a stone paved street from a period IIa palace that is yet unexcavated. The scribal room is radiocarbon dated by two grain samples hand-picked from the room's floor, 2433–2315 BC (68.2%), a date surprisingly earlier than epigraphy-based “middle chronologies” for this period.²² Fifteen whole and fragmentary tablets, both round school texts and administrative texts, were situated in a corner of the scribal room floor, probably in a mudbrick box.²³ This small building is, therefore, an intriguing relic of the initially peaceful Akkadian penetration of the region. It raises anew the often ignored question of imperial motivation: what were the internal forces that pushed Akkadian movement into northern Mesopotamia? What forced the immediately subsequent conquest and imperialization of the northern realms?

Akkadian forces destroyed the Leilan IIa palace leaving behind razed and levelled walls and burnt room debris. In period IIb2, an Akkadian Administrative Building was built upon and against the ruins of the IIa palace. The palace controlled the Leilan region for about fifty years to judge from the IIb sequence of Leilan IIb radiocarbon dates.

22 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

23 Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004; De Lillis-Forrest *et al.* 2004; De Lillis-Forrest/Milano/Mori 2007.

Akkadian Administrative Building

The Akkadian Administrative Building, the fortified rebuilding in period IIb2 of the destroyed and partially razed period IIa palace (Fig. 3), was retrieved in 2006 and 2008 with one thousand square meters of the palace, encompassing seventeen rooms.²⁴ The earlier Period IIa glacis wall on the north was restored by the Akkadians with mud pack and mud plaster, and remnant Period IIa walls, built with rectangular bricks, were reused along with the Palace's northern wall. The western portion of the Palace was delimited by the 6.6-meter Period IIa wall rebuilt with large basalt boulders set within the facade of new walls built with square Akkadian bricks. The Room 6 gallery included floor remains with numerous ground stone grain processing tools, querns and rubbers, and plastered work surfaces. The unique Granary, a 3 meter x 3 meter mudbrick construction, was lined with a baked brick floor and interior walls, and an upper course of baked bricks with air flues, presumably for cereal-drying purposes as lenses of cereal grain ash lined the Granary's floor. The middle corridor of the Palace was a central oven area, presumably for grain cooking. Here were concentrated 12 large ovens, each still filled with voluminous quantities of ash and phytoliths. North of room 13 was an over-the-wall dump of oven waste 1.6 meters high.²⁵

Akkadian administrative activities are evident within the partial exposure of room 12's terminal floor: a large grain storage vessel, a ground basalt 2-liter grain measure in front of clay balls for tablet preparation, and clay balls flattened into yet-uninscribed tablets (Fig. 4). Across the palace rooms, ninety-seven clay sealings of various functions, both imperial Akkadian and earlier period IIa style, document the activities of both foreign and local administrators in Akkadian Administrative Building service.²⁶

The goal of the Akkadian adventure, here and across northern Mesopotamia, to judge from the available epigraphic and archaeological data, was agro-imperialism: the generation and extraction of cereal harvest surpluses and their shipment to the imperial capital in southern Mesopotamia.²⁷ Regional settlement, identified by the Leilan IIb assemblage featuring silabowls and other flat-based ceramics, was altered to centralize and streamline the Akkadian administration.²⁸ This was now complexly organized around a 140-hectare conurbation that included 50-hectare Tell Mohammed Arab, eight kilometers to the east.²⁹ Understanding the forces that drove Akkadian agro-imperialism requires research programs not yet imagined.

The Unfinished Building

On the southern side of the Acropolis street, a last Akkadian occupation phase, period IIb1, saw the initial construction stages of a building larger than 17 x 13 meters, situated upon razed and truncated Period IIa white-plastered walls, that was unfinished when it was aban-

24 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

25 Smith 2012.

26 McCarthy 2012.

27 Glassner 1986; Powell 1990; Weiss /Courtney 1993; Sommerfeld/Archi/Weiss 2004.

28 Senior/Weiss 1992; Arrivabeni 2010.

29 Weiss *et al.* 1993; Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004; Ristvet 2005; Nicolle 2006.

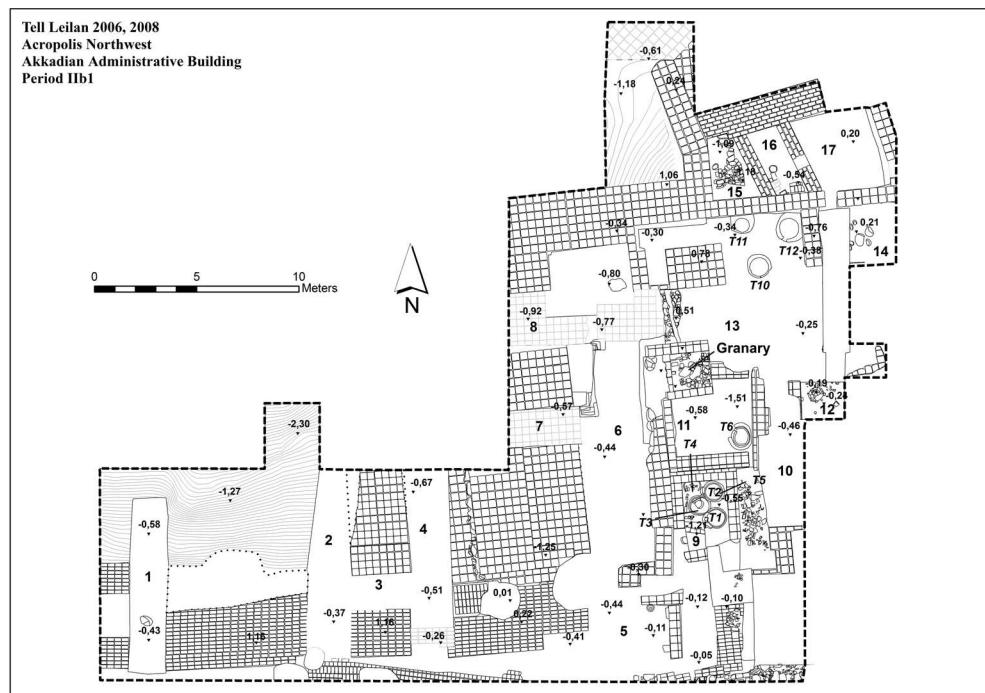


Fig. 3 L06, L08, Acropolis Northwest, Akkadian Administrative Building plan.

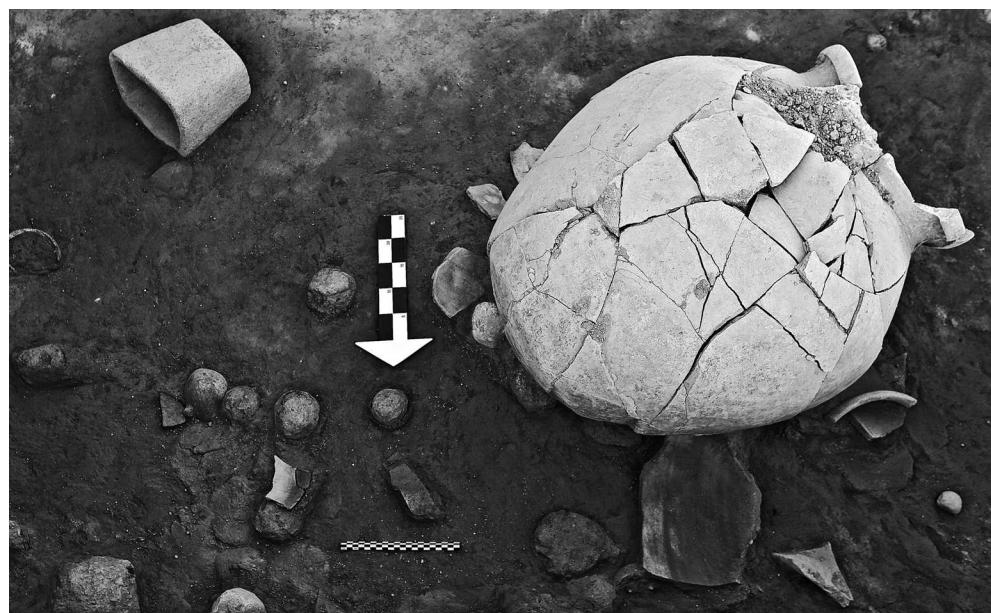


Fig. 4 L06, Akkadian Palace, terminal floor, room 12.

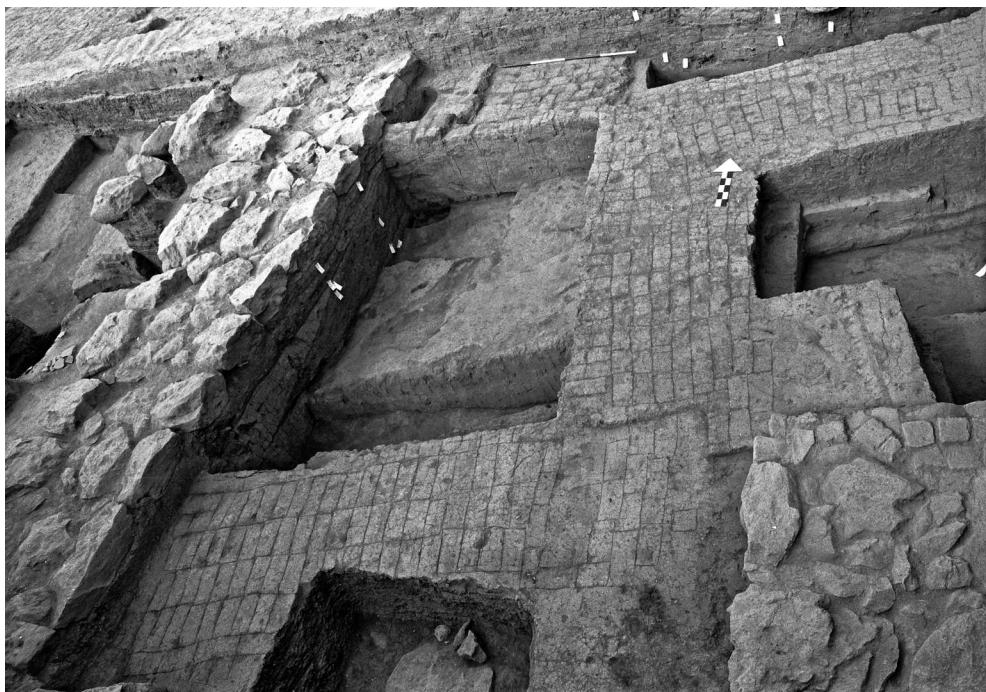


Fig. 5 L93, 44X15, The Unfinished Building, Period IIb1, on razed and truncated Period IIa white plastered walls.

doned (Fig. 5). The Unfinished Building had 2-meter wide walls of roughly dressed basalt blocks. Some walls had a thin mudpack leveling, a layer of sherds, then three or four courses of mudbrick.³⁰ The eastern TUB walls terminated before meeting intended corners, and partially dressed basalt boulders and basalt chip scatters were abandoned in a semi-circle adjacent to the construction and in a line extending to the western slope of the Acropolis – where in 1978 two basalt boulders were enigmatically visible at the surface above the future Operation 1 excavation. The date of this construction effort and, literally, the fingerprint of its imperial direction, were provided by the fragmentary sealing of “Haya-abum, šabra” (Fig. 6), with its string-impressed reverse, retrieved from the TUB construction floor along with tablet fragments and punctate clay balls.³¹ The abandonments of the Akkadian Administrative Building, and the synchronous TUB and Lower Town abandonments, are dated by the analysis of twenty-one radiocarbon dates to 2254–2220 BC (68.2%).³²

30 Ristvet/Weiss 2000; Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004.

31 DeLillis-Forrest *et al.* 2004.

32 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

Post-Akkadian

The only post-Akkadian abandonment structure, Leilan period IIc, with a ceramic assemblage also documented at a few other Khabur Plains sites, was a four-room courtyard-centered house built upon the abandoned Akkadian Administrative Building (Fig. 7). Radio-carbon analyses indicate that this was occupied for perhaps three to five decades.³³ Major site-size reductions are also documented for this brief period at Brak (50%), Mozan (84%), Chagar Bazaar (84%), and across the Leilan Region Survey (87%).³⁴

Seven Generations since the Fall of Akkad

The short-lived post-Akkadian period was followed by the near total abandonment of the Khabur Plains for the next two hundred years. As previously documented epigraphically and now archaeologically, only Mozan/Urkeš was occupied on the Khabur Plains during this period.³⁵ Abandonment at Leilan and across dry-farming west Asia, at approximately 4.2 ka BP/2200 BC was one adaptive response to the global, ca. 300-year, abrupt aridification and cooling event known from marine, lake, glacial, and speleothem paleoclimate proxy records.³⁶ These proxies are distributed densely from Spain to Greece, Albania, Turkey, and Iran, with particularly high resolution in Israel, Syria, and Turkey, and document the yet-unexplained dislocation or weakening of the north Atlantic cyclogenesis that produces the Mediterranean westerlies, the precipitation delivery system for all of west Asia. Here precipitation abruptly declined, 30–50% in some estimates, only to return abruptly at about 1900 BC.³⁷ This two-stage Khabur Plains abandonment, Šamšī-Adad's "...seven generations since the Fall of Akkad,"³⁸ and synchronous abandonments across northern Mesopotamia and western Syria, was accompanied by nomadization and

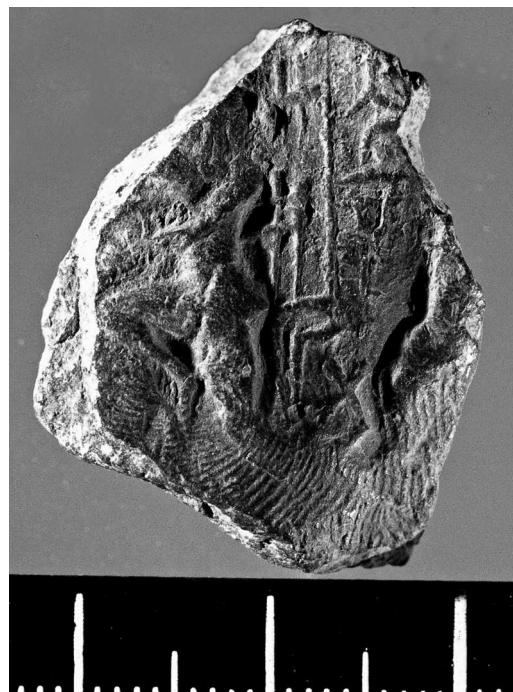


Fig. 6 L93-66 seal impression "Haya-abum, sabra," reverse string-impressed.

³³ Weiss *et al.* 2012.

³⁴ Weiss 2013; Arrivabeni 2012.

³⁵ Weiss *et al.* 1993; Pfälzner/Wissing 2004; Orsi 2011.

³⁶ Cullen *et al.* 2000; Staubwasser/Weiss 2006; Weiss 2013.

³⁷ Frumkin 2009.

³⁸ Grayson 1987: 53.



Fig. 7 L02, 44T16, Pd. IIc 4-room rebuild.

habitat-tracking to the riparian, paludal, and karstic-spring refugia in western Syria, the middle Euphrates, and southern Iraq, where sedentary settlements multiplied in size and number.³⁹

Amorite resettlement

At ca. 1950–1900 BC the return of pre-2200 BC precipitation saw the still-unexplained resettlement of west Asian rain-fed domains, including the Khabur Plains. The Leilan Region Survey documents a ten-fold population increase over the Akkadian period with significant numbers now in small village settlements.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Tell Leilan was resettled under Šamši-Adad's Amorite paramountcy as a new “hollow capital,” Šubat-Enlil.⁴¹

The new capital's distinctive Acropolis temple façades and cylinder seal assemblage iconography represent the introduction of southern ‘Babylonian’ styles into northern Mesopotamia for legitimization of the new Amorite regional control, a tactic previously deployed in Leilan IIId times. The Building level 2–3 temples of the Leilan Acropolis are early exam-

39 Weiss 2013.

40 Ristvet/Weiss 2005.

41 Weiss 1983a; Weiss 1983b; Weiss 1990a–c.

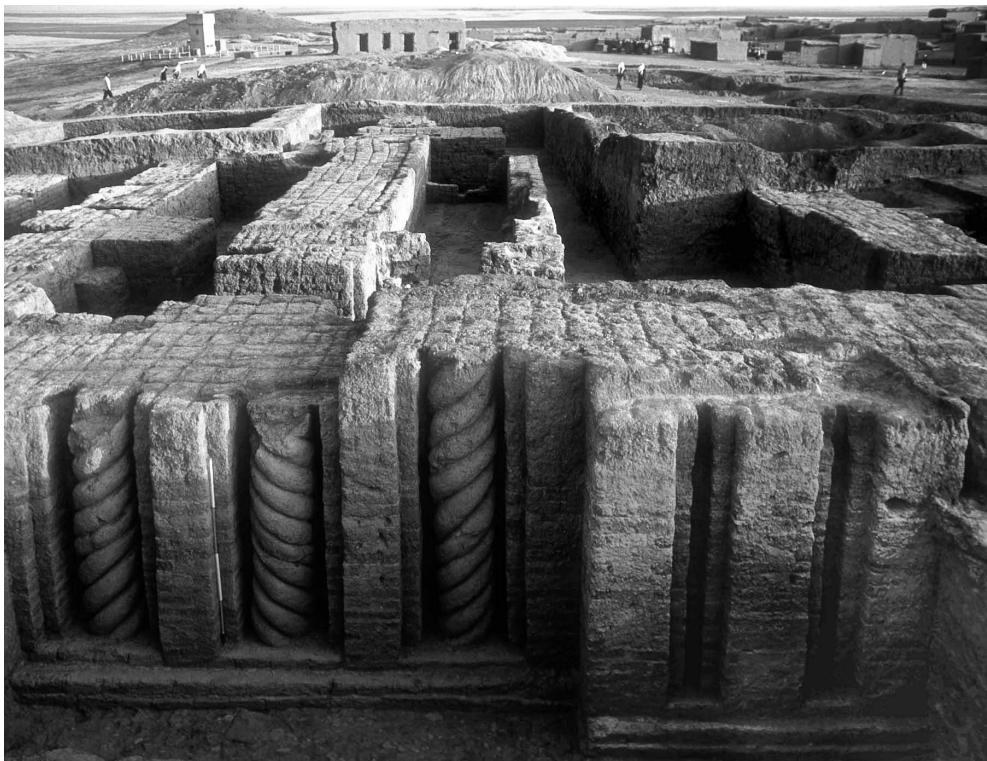


Fig. 8 L82, Acropolis Northeast, Pd. I Building Level II, north facade.

bles of the architectural plan typical of Assyrian temples of the ninth and eighth centuries BC, with direct access entrance – wide room antecella – long room cella. A similar temple was constructed by Šamši-Adad at Assur, and Assyrian temples of the 16th–15th centuries BC follow this plan as well. Similar to Old Babylonian temples elsewhere, and following a tradition that extended back to the Uruk period in southern Mesopotamia, the Leilan temple façades were decorated with mud-brick semi-engaged columns fashioned to resemble, in intricate variety, the trunks of trimmed palm trees (Figs. 8, 9a, 9b): plain-faced large spirals, twisted in alternate directions; plain-faced, straight or twisted; mud-plaster sculpted into imbricated fronds with a smooth surface, with vertical pinnate hatching, or with step-like stages with vertical pinnate hatching and crosshatching; mud-plaster diamond-shaped frond scars, surrounded by braided columns; mud-plaster square, scale-like frond scars.⁴²

The Building Level II temple rooms contained a fragment of a basalt stele inscribed with monumental Old Babylonian script and 20 administrative tablets and fragments, including grain ration distributions according to standard Šamši-Adad period *kina(macron)tu*-measures.

42 Weiss *et al.* 1990.

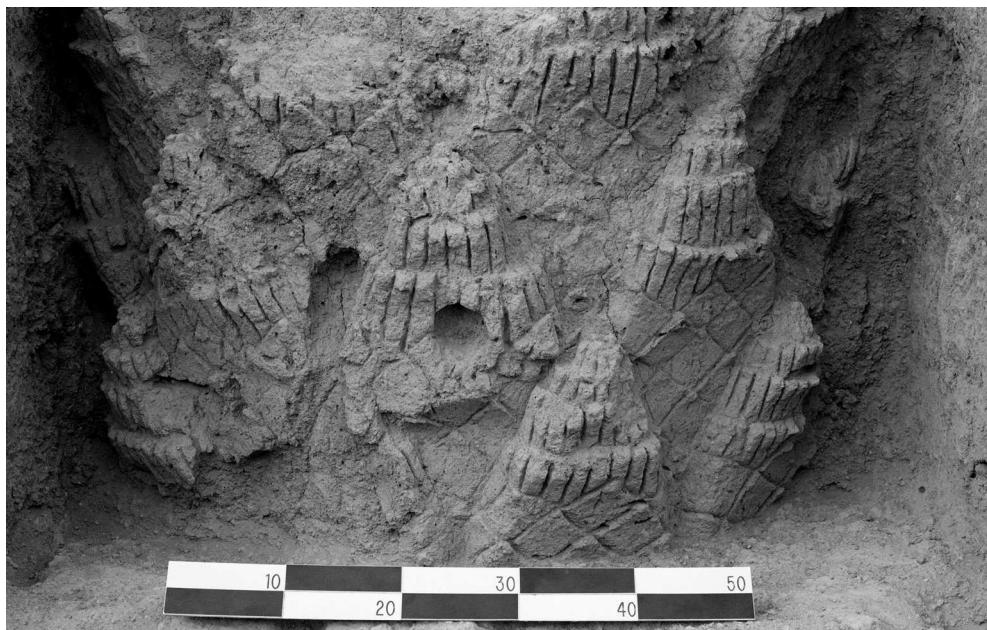


Fig. 9a L85, Acropolis northeast, Pd. I, Building Level II, south façade, west column.

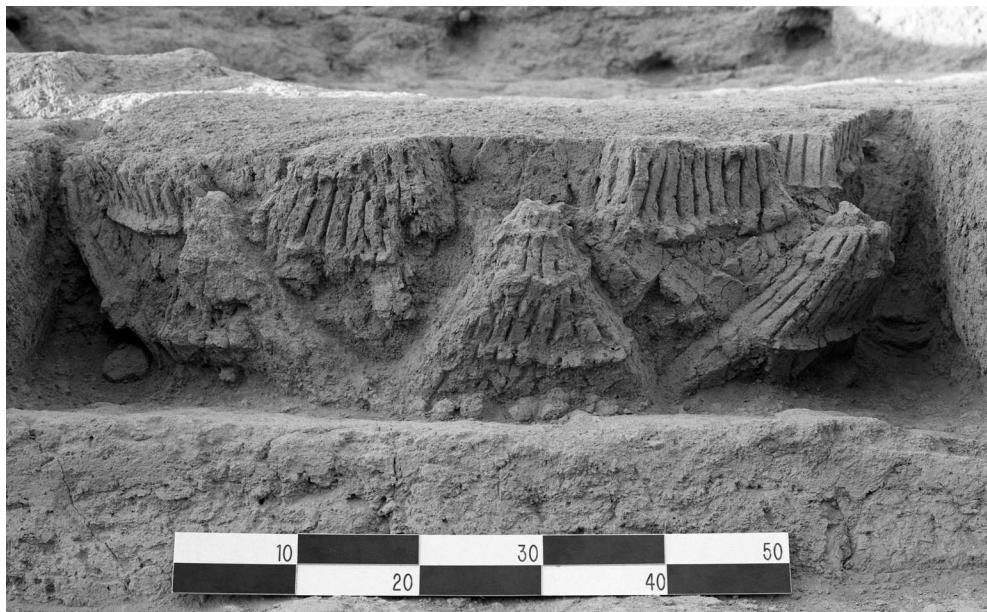


Fig. 9b L85, Acropolis northeast, Pd. I, Building Level II, south façade, east column.

The sealings “Suri-Adad, son of Zidriya, servant of Šamšī-Adad” lay upon the floor of rooms 12 and 13. Secondary renovations of the temple included a blocked doorway against which three sealings of Šuri-Adad were also retrieved and two seal impressions (L82-74, -75) of “Apil-ilišu son of Ali-banišu, servant of Turum-natki.” In room 8 were 227 complete and fragmentary sealings of “Beli-emuqi, servant of Haya-abum, servant of the god Adad.” All the sealings featured the period’s iconographic convention “god with mace facing supplicant goddess,” apart from the unique guilloche-decorated servant of the Turum-natki sealings. These sealings were the first excavation-retrieved linkages of Tell Leilan with ancient Šubat-Enlil.⁴³

The Building Level “X” temple to the south, with only its foundations preserved, may have been linked to the Building Level II temple. If this was the case, then Building Level II and Building Level “X” encompassed ca. 6000 m², twice the size of the Sîn Šamaš temple at Assur and of the temple at Tell ar-Rimah, and equivalent in size to the Assur temple at Assur. Ash and trash accumulated above the foundations, including portions of a Khabur ware associated administrative archive dated with *limus* from Šamšī-Adad’s reign.⁴⁴

Šamšī-Adad’s palace at Šubat-Enlil was retrieved in part in 1985 and 1987 on the Lower Town East, but the excavated sample of 1000 square meters is less than 10% of the one-hectare rise that defines this building (Fig. 1).⁴⁵ Only three rooms of the earliest palace construction, Building Level 4, with seal impressions of servants of Išme-Dagan and Šamšī-Adad were retrieved, although Šamšī-Adad’s servants’ sealings were also deposited in rooms of Building Level 3, where the burnt floors across the extended exposure suggest violent destruction. This destruction can be associated with the well-documented region-wide turmoil following Šamšī Adad’s death and the seizure of Šubat-Enlil by the *sukkalmah* of Elam, and shortly thereafter by Atamrum of Andarig.

Building Level 2 is associated with Himdiya of Andarig, Atamrum’s son. Here more than 600 royal letters and administrative texts and 300 tablet fragments and sealings were retrieved, including a copy of the Sumerian King List.⁴⁶ One territorial treaty text within the archive, L87-1362, suggests localization of the post-Akkadian city of Nawar at Gir Nawaz, at the debouchment of the Jaghagh onto the Khabur Plains, analogous to the location of Mozan/Urkeš 19 kilometers to the west.⁴⁷

The abandoned palace ruins subsequently sheltered temporary occupants only briefly. A partially contemporary second palace, the Lower Town Palace North, was built for Qarni-Lim of Andarig, perhaps as his embassy. Among twelve palace rooms surrounding a courtyard, the Room 12 floor was littered with the 647-tablet beer archive of Šamaš-dayyān, a servant of Qarni-Lim, originally stored within four small jars.⁴⁸ After ca. 1700 BC, and the Leilan palace and temple abandonments, regional occupation declined, for reasons unknown, until the 15th century resettlement around 167-hectare Tell Farfara (Leilan Region Survey

43 Weiss 1985a, b; Weiss *et al.* 1990; Parayre/Weiss 1991

44 Whiting in Weiss *et al.* 1990.

45 Ristvet/Weiss 2011; Akkermans/Weiss 1991.

46 Vincente 1995.

47 Matthews/Eidem 1993; Eidem 2011.

48 Weiss 1991; Van de Mieroop 1995; Weiss 1996; Pulhan 2000

site 186), perhaps the Mitanni capital Waššukanni. The size of this Mitanni period city challenges many archaeological assumptions about ancient dry-farming productivity, settlement distributions and urban sizes, and land transport efficiencies.⁴⁹

Ottoman Decline

Multiple travelers' records during the 18th and 19th centuries describe the fertile Assyrian and Khabur Plains as strangely devoid of villages and agriculture, empty plains only traversed by mobile pastoralist tribes.⁵⁰ These observations have been buttressed by Ottoman archival research within earlier 16th century *defter*-s that record agricultural taxation down to the village level, and across impressively occupied imperial border regions onto the Khabur Plains.⁵¹ The travelers' accounts and tax records have fueled the historiographic debate about late Ottoman decline, poor imperial administration, and the loss of the countryside to plundering tribes who made sedentary agriculture difficult.⁵² Gertrude Bell described, however, the effects of the early Berlin to Baghdad railway links to the west, from Nusaibin to Aleppo: investor excitement at the prospect of cereal harvest rail transport to the now-capitalized markets of western Syria.⁵³ Thereafter, agricultural production, and settlement, quickly began to flourish on the Khabur Plains.⁵⁴ By 1920 the new French administration extended the rail line to only five kilometers north of Tell Leilan, with a picturesque French railroad station of post-and-beam timbers, mansard roof, and a doorway signed in French and Arabic (Fig. 10). To this day, the region's cereal harvests are collected here and then transported west by rail. What drove the earlier settlement and cereal agriculture decline? Were the new rail transport, administrative control, and market orientation the keys to rejuvenated Khabur Plains cereal production? The Leilan Region Survey documents the expansion of settlement in the tenth through fourteenth centuries and rapid decline beginning in the sixteenth century and extending through the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Geoarchaeological sampling along the wadi Jarrah in 2002 produced stratified sediment samples that were subsequently analyzed for pollen-based natural vegetation changes and radiocarbon dating.⁵⁶ Conjoining the Ottoman tax records, the Leilan Region survey data, and the radiocarbon-dated pollen-based natural vegetation changes, we discern the dynamic environmental background for the past four hundred years' successive settlement expansion, decline, and expansion. With the onset of the Little Ice Age in the sixteenth century, Khabur Plains climate became cooler, drier, and less favorable for dry-farming cereal agriculture. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did condi-

49 Donella 2003; Ristvet/Weiss 2005.

50 E.g., Ainsworth 1842.

51 Göyünç/Hütteroth 1997.

52 Hütteroth 2006.

53 Bell 1917: 134.

54 Velud 1987.

55 Vezzoli 2008.

56 Besonen/Cremaschi 2002.



Fig. 10 French railroad station, “Kubur el-Bid,” constructed 1920, five kilometers north of Tell Leilan, for regional cereal harvest transport to Aleppo; H. Weiss photograph, 1991.

tions favorable for cereal agriculture return, an opportunity for resettlement and expanded dry-farming coincident with the French rail transport linkages that made cereal export profitable.⁵⁷ Still effective today, the French railroad station, with its dressed basalt block footing, is reminiscent of an earlier regional intrusion, and the dynamic Khabur Plains environments within which social forces have been both promoted and constrained over the past five millennia.

57 Kaniewski/Van Campo/Weiss 2012.

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Tell Leilan and the Dynamics of Social and Environmental Forces across the Mesopotamian Dry-Farming Landscape*

Harvey Weiss

Rain-fed northern Mesopotamia, the complement of irrigation agriculture southern Mesopotamia, was selected for a Yale University research program in 1978 because its late prehistoric-early historic, fourth to second millennium BC, developmental trajectory was virtually unknown. Further research quickly led the endeavor to Tell Leilan, an alluring site and hinterland laboratory for defining the dynamics of environmental and social forces across the Mesopotamian dry-farming landscape. Tell Leilan is located in the center of the extensive cereal production Khabur Plains of northeast Syria, maximizing cultivable land between the foothills of the Tur Abdin to the north and the Wadi Radd swamp to the south. Here seasonal rainfall (300–500 mm/annum), self-mulching soils, and flat, unbroken topography together provide for the highest rain-fed cereal production in Syria and, along with the plains of Tell Afar and Mosul, probably ancient northern Mesopotamia as well.¹

Equally significant, Tell Leilan also offered definition of an early historic developmental paradigm. On May 21, 1878 Hormuzd Rassam looked south from the crest of Do Gir, along the road from Turbe Spid (Qubur el-Bid, Khatuniyah) to Nusaibin, and on the horizon spied Tell Leilan, which he was “told has a wall round it like most of the Assyrian sites of importance.”² Thereafter, Assyriologists and archaeologists frequently visited the site, and by mid-century had speculated often that it was ancient Šubat-Enlil, the capital city of Šamši-Adad’s “Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia.”³ In the summer of 1978, the nascent Tell Leilan Project generated the first map of Leilan, its wall-enclosed 90 hectare topography, its 15-hectare Acropolis alongside the Wadi Jarrah, and the surface ceramic distributions to encourage archaeological excavations, regional surveys, and paleoenvironmental researches (Fig. 1). Seven research problems at the intersection of environmental and social dynamics have since been addressed with excavation- and survey-retrieved data, high-resolution radiocarbon dating, and paleoenvironmental research.

* The Yale University Tell Leilan Project acknowledges the support and assistance of the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées, Damascus, especially Bassam Jamous, Michel al-Maqdissi, and the late Adnan Bounni, and the collaboration of many friends at Tell Leilan, Tell Barham, and Qahtaniyah. The research reported here was made possible by the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Barbara Clay DeBevoise, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Foundation, Malcolm Wiener, Leon Levy Foundation, Roger and Barbara Brown, and Yale University.

1 Weiss 1983a,b; Weiss 1986.

2 Rassam 1897: 232–233.

3 Falkner 1957; Hrouda 1958; Van Liere 1963.

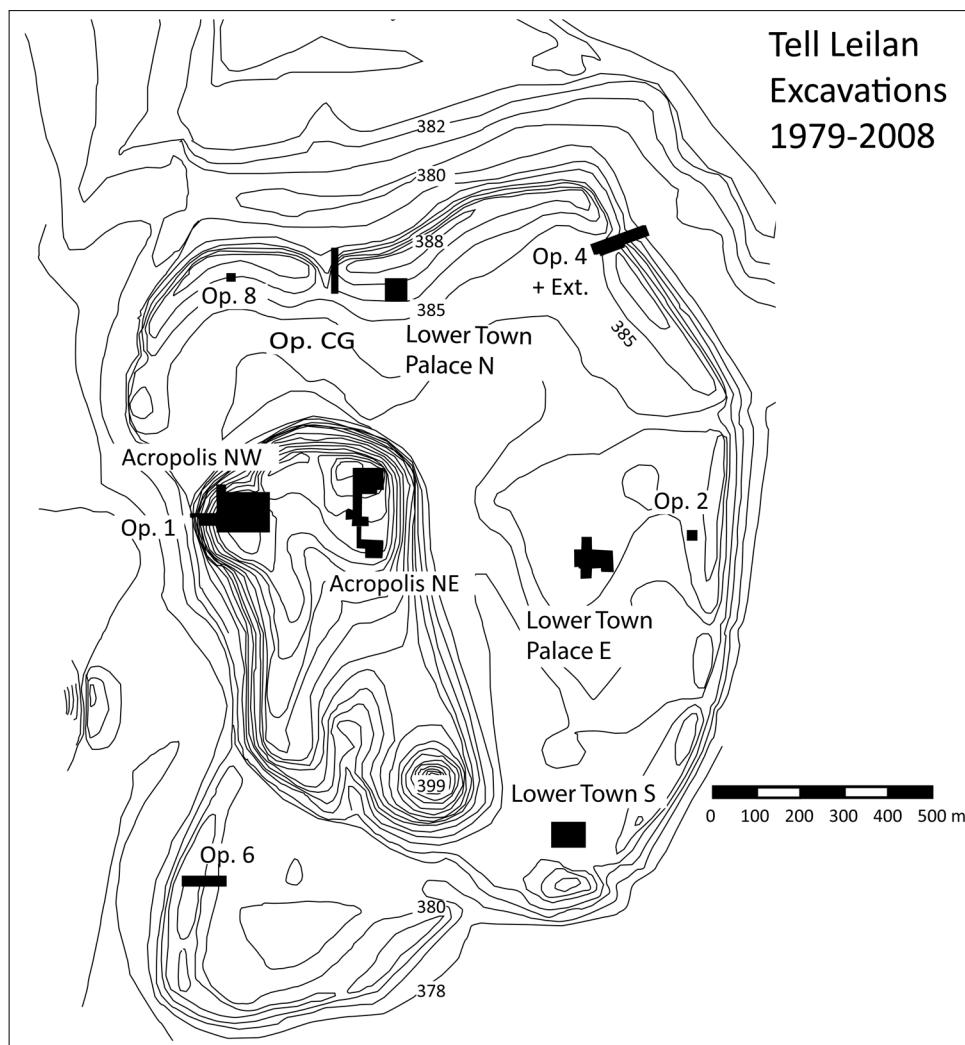


Fig. 1 Topographic map of Tell Leilan and excavation areas 1979–2008.
All Figures: © Yale University Tell Leilan Project.

The Late Uruk Expansion and Collapse

A 26-meter long step trench on the Acropolis, Operation 1, and its subsequent expansions, established the Tell Leilan occupational sequence and ceramic chronology, beginning with the late northern Obeid period.⁴ The Leilan Region Survey (1984, 1987, 1995, 1997), a

4 Weiss 1983a,b; Schwartz 1988.

30 x 60 km transect from the Iraqi frontier to the Turkish frontier, revealed an early site-size hierarchy that already extended during this period from half-hectare hamlets to small villages to 15-hectare towns.⁵ Subsequent Uruk period occupations, Leilan period IV, extending to ca. 3200 BC, included al-Andalus, in the Wadi Radd, a 64-hectares site with a significant Middle Uruk occupation, and southern Late Uruk period settlements, such as Sultan et-Tellul, Sharmoukh, Dabagh, and Aweinat ibn Harshan that frame anew the southern Uruk expansion and its sudden, widespread, collapse in rain-fed northern Mesopotamia.⁶ Six-hectare Sharmoukh is likely a southern Late Uruk colony within the Wadi Radd Late Uruk enclave, and complicates older arguments for the functions of Late Uruk “colony” sites across west Asia.⁷

The generative forces and ultimate functions of the southern Late Uruk expansion onto the Khabur Plains remain unknown. The causes of the sudden termination of these settlements and their local counterparts have been refocused, however, by the ca. 3200 BC two-century aridification event now documented in paleoclimate proxies from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.⁸ Suddenly outside the bounds of rain-fed agriculture, many Uruk sites suffered forced abandonment.⁹ The rapid decrease in Euphrates flow to southern Mesopotamia may also be associated with adaptive settlement reduction, agglomeration, and the emergence of cities’ palace political control which is first documented at the end of this period.¹⁰

The Ninevite 5 Experience

Definition of the succeeding settlements within the Operation 1 sounding provided a first stratigraphic definition of early “Ninevite 5 painted” assemblages, Leilan period IIIa, and the ceramic keys for identifying such sites within the Leilan Region Survey. The severely reduced Leilan IIIa period population that succeeded the late Uruk collapse was settled in small dispersed villages. Excavations at Leilan and elsewhere betray no local Leilan IIIa social or cultural remnants from the southern Late Uruk expansion, and settlements of this period lacked public architecture but for single-room chapels. Populations grew slowly for the following several centuries, as shown by settlement distributions for the Leilan IIIb and IIIc periods, with small villages surrounding a few towns no larger than 15 hectares.¹¹ Northern Mesopotamia and southern Mesopotamia seem to have been isolated and without cultural or economic contact during this period, for reasons yet unexplored. This slow Khabur Plains settlement growth and the regional isolation underscore the sudden transformation of Tell Leilan and the Leilan region landscape at ca. 2600 BC.

5 Weiss *et al.* 2002; Brustolon/Rova 2007.

6 Mayo/Weiss 2003.

7 Brustolon/Rova 2007.

8 Weiss/Bradley 2001.

9 Weiss 2003.

10 Staubwasser/Weiss 2006.

11 Rova/Weiss 2003.

Secondary State Formation and the Second Urban Revolution

At the very end of the Ninevite 5 ceramic period, around 2600 BC, during Leilan period IIId, Leilan settlement expanded rapidly from 15 to 90-hectares, as regional population nucleated, and a city wall was built around the settlement.¹² On the Leilan Acropolis a monumental wall and adjacent storerooms were erected in Operation 1 stratum 15d, and rebuilt repeatedly over the next three hundred years.¹³ Regional population nucleation, centralized store rooms, and public building construction are here, as elsewhere, signposts for the transition to state-level political and economic organization. Confounding many archaeological assumptions, however, the Leilan IIId period urban and state transformation – the period IIa Subarian state – was not accompanied by a synchronous change in ceramic production. Changes in pottery manufacture and styles, from labor-intensive, highly decorated, terminal Ninevite 5/Leilan IIId vessels to uniform “mass-produced” Leilan period IIa wares, only began about 100 years after Leilan urbanization and state formation.¹⁴

Seal impressions on the period IIa stratum 14 floor of Acropolis storerooms included many with the local, northern-style iconography derived from Early Dynastic II–III periods southern Mesopotamian “banquet scenes”, legitimating through emulation of southern iconography the new political and economic order.¹⁵ The later period IIa storerooms included a grain storage room subsequently destroyed by fire. Preserved were much barley, emmer, and durum wheat, mixed with burned roofing materials that included microscopic lignite, molten clay spherules, and phytoliths.¹⁶

At the Lower Town South a planned and walled straight street, 4.5 m wide leading to the Acropolis was set upon virgin soil in Leilan IIId times (Fig. 2).¹⁷ The street and its residential structures indicate that Leilan was now one of the unexplained planned radial-street cities, accompanied by state-level political organization, that suddenly dominated the Khabur Plains and western Syria beginning in the 26th century, as revealed most clearly at Tell Chuera.¹⁸ Lower Town houses here were built within wall-divided sectors and against street walls unbroken but for water-drain alleys. Pig bones in large percentage were a waste deposit in the sherd-laden street – where the tooth of the earliest domesticated equid in northern Mesopotamia was also retrieved.¹⁹ Apart from large quantities of flat-base “s i l a-bowls” in the Akkadian period, phases 3–5, there were no administrative artifacts in the Lower Town residential area.²⁰ The Akkadian period Lower Town South residential occupation and occupation in the northern Lower Town exposures terminated synchronously and abruptly at ca. 2200 BC.²¹

12 Weiss 1990a–c; Ristvet 2007.

13 Calderone/Weiss 2003; Wetterstrom 2003.

14 Weiss 1990a–c.

15 Parayre 2003.

16 Weiss *et al* 2002; Weiss 2002.

17 Weiss 1990a–c.

18 Meyer 2010a,b.

19 Weiss *et al* 1993.

20 Senior/Weiss 1992.

21 The Lower Town South is the subject of Monica Arrivabeni’s Freie Universität Berlin doctoral dissertation project.



Fig. 2 L89, Lower Town South excavation.

Akkadian Imperialization

The urbanization of Leilan and its regional distribution of towns and villages in periods IIId and IIa were pre-adaptations that facilitated region-wide Akkadian imperialization in Leilan period IIb. This southern Mesopotamian penetration of the Leilan region is first documented in the late Akkadian scribal room of Leilan period IIb3 on the Acropolis Northeast, across a stone paved street from a period IIa palace that is yet unexcavated. The scribal room is radiocarbon dated by two grain samples hand-picked from the room's floor, 2433–2315 BC (68.2%), a date surprisingly earlier than epigraphy-based “middle chronologies” for this period.²² Fifteen whole and fragmentary tablets, both round school texts and administrative texts, were situated in a corner of the scribal room floor, probably in a mudbrick box.²³ This small building is, therefore, an intriguing relic of the initially peaceful Akkadian penetration of the region. It raises anew the often ignored question of imperial motivation: what were the internal forces that pushed Akkadian movement into northern Mesopotamia? What forced the immediately subsequent conquest and imperialization of the northern realms?

Akkadian forces destroyed the Leilan IIa palace leaving behind razed and levelled walls and burnt room debris. In period IIb2, an Akkadian Administrative Building was built upon and against the ruins of the IIa palace. The palace controlled the Leilan region for about fifty years to judge from the IIb sequence of Leilan IIb radiocarbon dates.

22 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

23 Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004; De Lillis-Forrest *et al.* 2004; De Lillis-Forrest/Milano/Mori 2007.

Akkadian Administrative Building

The Akkadian Administrative Building, the fortified rebuilding in period IIb2 of the destroyed and partially razed period IIa palace (Fig. 3), was retrieved in 2006 and 2008 with one thousand square meters of the palace, encompassing seventeen rooms.²⁴ The earlier Period IIa glacis wall on the north was restored by the Akkadians with mud pack and mud plaster, and remnant Period IIa walls, built with rectangular bricks, were reused along with the Palace's northern wall. The western portion of the Palace was delimited by the 6.6-meter Period IIa wall rebuilt with large basalt boulders set within the facade of new walls built with square Akkadian bricks. The Room 6 gallery included floor remains with numerous ground stone grain processing tools, querns and rubbers, and plastered work surfaces. The unique Granary, a 3 meter x 3 meter mudbrick construction, was lined with a baked brick floor and interior walls, and an upper course of baked bricks with air flues, presumably for cereal-drying purposes as lenses of cereal grain ash lined the Granary's floor. The middle corridor of the Palace was a central oven area, presumably for grain cooking. Here were concentrated 12 large ovens, each still filled with voluminous quantities of ash and phytoliths. North of room 13 was an over-the-wall dump of oven waste 1.6 meters high.²⁵

Akkadian administrative activities are evident within the partial exposure of room 12's terminal floor: a large grain storage vessel, a ground basalt 2-liter grain measure in front of clay balls for tablet preparation, and clay balls flattened into yet-uninscribed tablets (Fig. 4). Across the palace rooms, ninety-seven clay sealings of various functions, both imperial Akkadian and earlier period IIa style, document the activities of both foreign and local administrators in Akkadian Administrative Building service.²⁶

The goal of the Akkadian adventure, here and across northern Mesopotamia, to judge from the available epigraphic and archaeological data, was agro-imperialism: the generation and extraction of cereal harvest surpluses and their shipment to the imperial capital in southern Mesopotamia.²⁷ Regional settlement, identified by the Leilan IIb assemblage featuring silabowls and other flat-based ceramics, was altered to centralize and streamline the Akkadian administration.²⁸ This was now complexly organized around a 140-hectare conurbation that included 50-hectare Tell Mohammed Arab, eight kilometers to the east.²⁹ Understanding the forces that drove Akkadian agro-imperialism requires research programs not yet imagined.

The Unfinished Building

On the southern side of the Acropolis street, a last Akkadian occupation phase, period IIb1, saw the initial construction stages of a building larger than 17 x 13 meters, situated upon razed and truncated Period IIa white-plastered walls, that was unfinished when it was aban-

24 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

25 Smith 2012.

26 McCarthy 2012.

27 Glassner 1986; Powell 1990; Weiss /Courtney 1993; Sommerfeld/Archi/Weiss 2004.

28 Senior/Weiss 1992; Arrivabeni 2010.

29 Weiss *et al.* 1993; Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004; Ristvet 2005; Nicolle 2006.

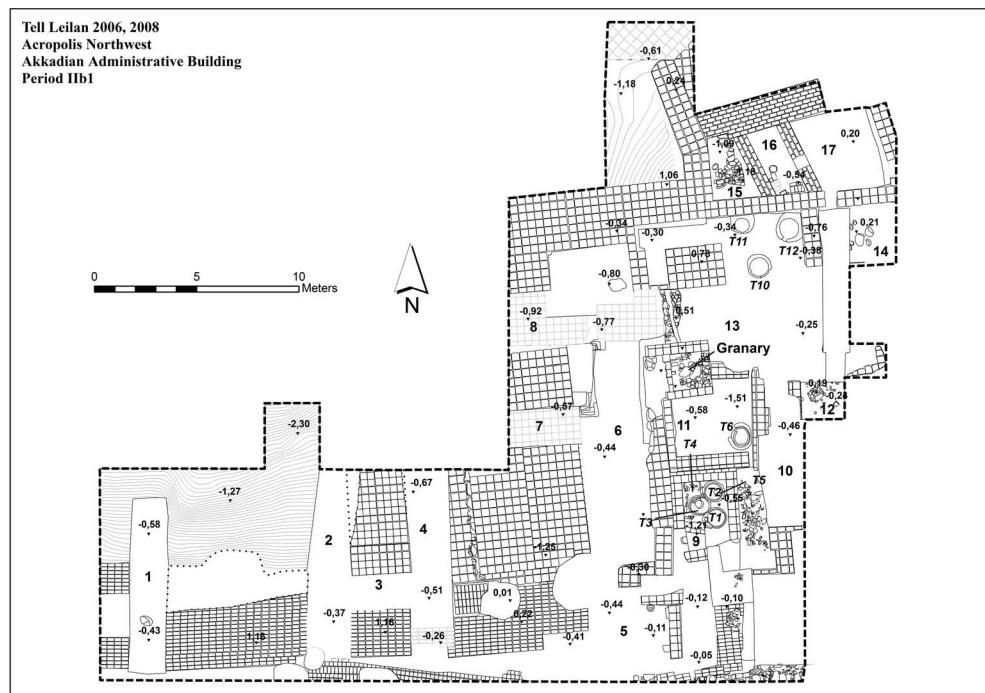


Fig. 3 L06, L08, Acropolis Northwest, Akkadian Administrative Building plan.

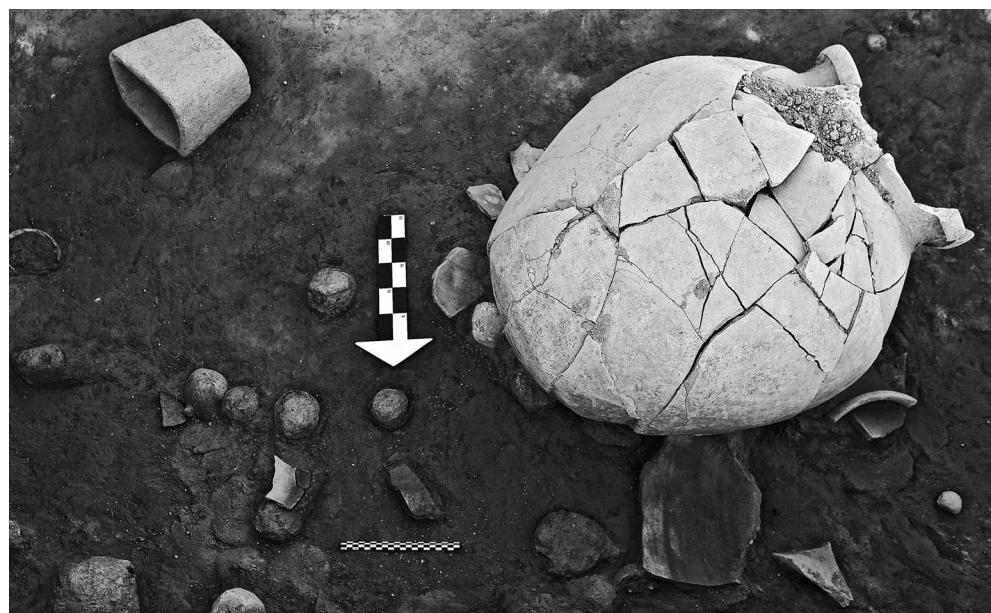


Fig. 4 L06, Akkadian Palace, terminal floor, room 12.

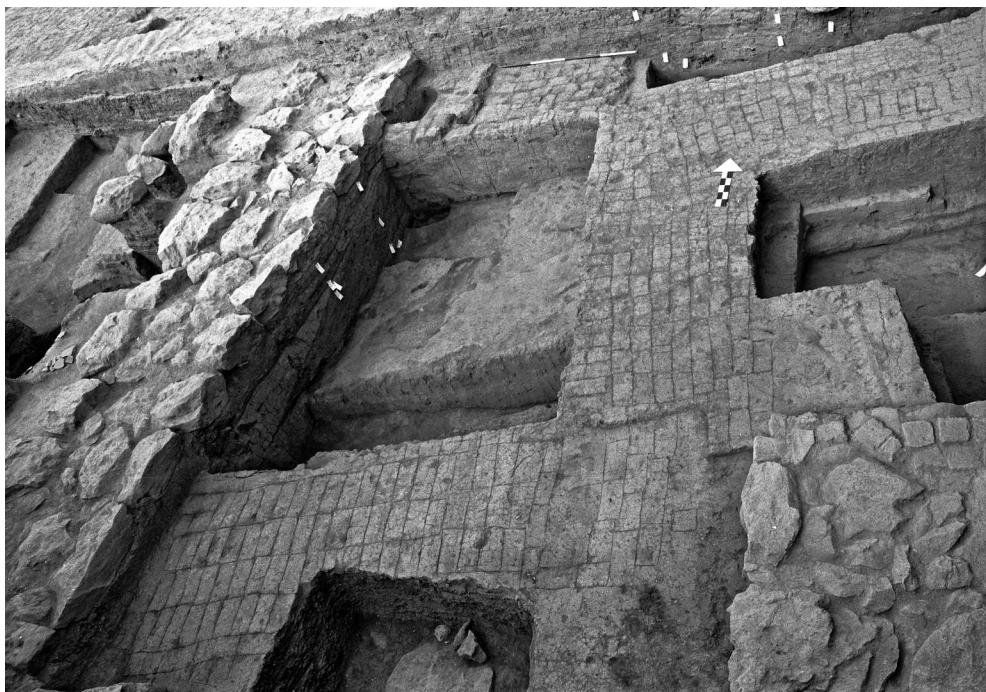


Fig. 5 L93, 44X15, The Unfinished Building, Period IIb1, on razed and truncated Period IIa white plastered walls.

doned (Fig. 5). The Unfinished Building had 2-meter wide walls of roughly dressed basalt blocks. Some walls had a thin mudpack leveling, a layer of sherds, then three or four courses of mudbrick.³⁰ The eastern TUB walls terminated before meeting intended corners, and partially dressed basalt boulders and basalt chip scatters were abandoned in a semi-circle adjacent to the construction and in a line extending to the western slope of the Acropolis – where in 1978 two basalt boulders were enigmatically visible at the surface above the future Operation 1 excavation. The date of this construction effort and, literally, the fingerprint of its imperial direction, were provided by the fragmentary sealing of “Haya-abum, šabra” (Fig. 6), with its string-impressed reverse, retrieved from the TUB construction floor along with tablet fragments and punctate clay balls.³¹ The abandonments of the Akkadian Administrative Building, and the synchronous TUB and Lower Town abandonments, are dated by the analysis of twenty-one radiocarbon dates to 2254–2220 BC (68.2%).³²

30 Ristvet/Weiss 2000; Ristvet/Guilderson/Weiss 2004.

31 DeLillis-Forrest *et al.* 2004.

32 Weiss *et al.* 2012.

Post-Akkadian

The only post-Akkadian abandonment structure, Leilan period IIc, with a ceramic assemblage also documented at a few other Khabur Plains sites, was a four-room courtyard-centered house built upon the abandoned Akkadian Administrative Building (Fig. 7). Radio-carbon analyses indicate that this was occupied for perhaps three to five decades.³³ Major site-size reductions are also documented for this brief period at Brak (50%), Mozan (84%), Chagar Bazaar (84%), and across the Leilan Region Survey (87%).³⁴

Seven Generations since the Fall of Akkad

The short-lived post-Akkadian period was followed by the near total abandonment of the Khabur Plains for the next two hundred years. As previously documented epigraphically and now archaeologically, only Mozan/Urkeš was occupied on the Khabur Plains during this period.³⁵ Abandonment at Leilan and across dry-farming west Asia, at approximately 4.2 ka BP/2200 BC was one adaptive response to the global, ca. 300-year, abrupt aridification and cooling event known from marine, lake, glacial, and speleothem paleoclimate proxy records.³⁶ These proxies are distributed densely from Spain to Greece, Albania, Turkey, and Iran, with particularly high resolution in Israel, Syria, and Turkey, and document the yet-unexplained dislocation or weakening of the north Atlantic cyclogenesis that produces the Mediterranean westerlies, the precipitation delivery system for all of west Asia. Here precipitation abruptly declined, 30–50% in some estimates, only to return abruptly at about 1900 BC.³⁷ This two-stage Khabur Plains abandonment, Šamšī-Adad's "...seven generations since the Fall of Akkad,"³⁸ and synchronous abandonments across northern Mesopotamia and western Syria, was accompanied by nomadization and

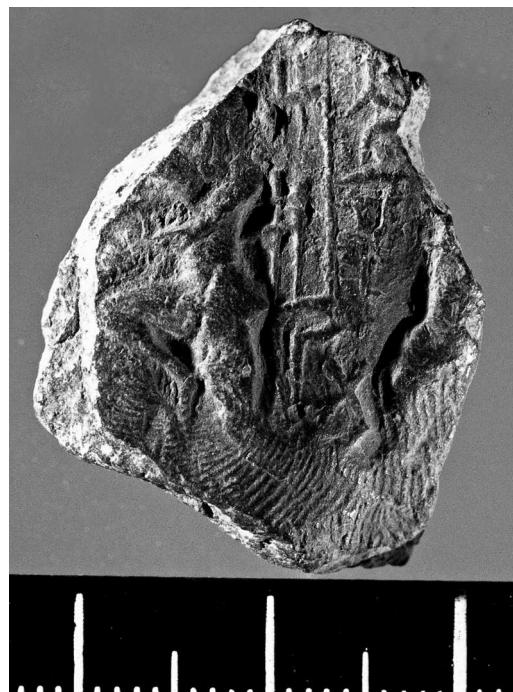


Fig. 6 L93-66 seal impression "Haya-abum, sabra," reverse string-impressed.

³³ Weiss *et al.* 2012.

³⁴ Weiss 2013; Arrivabeni 2012.

³⁵ Weiss *et al.* 1993; Pfälzner/Wissing 2004; Orsi 2011.

³⁶ Cullen *et al.* 2000; Staubwasser/Weiss 2006; Weiss 2013.

³⁷ Frumkin 2009.

³⁸ Grayson 1987: 53.



Fig. 7 L02, 44T16, Pd. IIc 4-room rebuild.

habitat-tracking to the riparian, paludal, and karstic-spring refugia in western Syria, the middle Euphrates, and southern Iraq, where sedentary settlements multiplied in size and number.³⁹

Amorite resettlement

At ca. 1950–1900 BC the return of pre-2200 BC precipitation saw the still-unexplained resettlement of west Asian rain-fed domains, including the Khabur Plains. The Leilan Region Survey documents a ten-fold population increase over the Akkadian period with significant numbers now in small village settlements.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Tell Leilan was resettled under Šamši-Adad's Amorite paramountcy as a new “hollow capital,” Šubat-Enlil.⁴¹

The new capital's distinctive Acropolis temple façades and cylinder seal assemblage iconography represent the introduction of southern ‘Babylonian’ styles into northern Mesopotamia for legitimization of the new Amorite regional control, a tactic previously deployed in Leilan IIId times. The Building level 2–3 temples of the Leilan Acropolis are early exam-

39 Weiss 2013.

40 Ristvet/Weiss 2005.

41 Weiss 1983a; Weiss 1983b; Weiss 1990a–c.



Fig. 8 L82, Acropolis Northeast, Pd. I Building Level II, north facade.

bles of the architectural plan typical of Assyrian temples of the ninth and eighth centuries BC, with direct access entrance – wide room antecella – long room cella. A similar temple was constructed by Šamši-Adad at Assur, and Assyrian temples of the 16th–15th centuries BC follow this plan as well. Similar to Old Babylonian temples elsewhere, and following a tradition that extended back to the Uruk period in southern Mesopotamia, the Leilan temple façades were decorated with mud-brick semi-engaged columns fashioned to resemble, in intricate variety, the trunks of trimmed palm trees (Figs. 8, 9a, 9b): plain-faced large spirals, twisted in alternate directions; plain-faced, straight or twisted; mud-plaster sculpted into imbricated fronds with a smooth surface, with vertical pinnate hatching, or with step-like stages with vertical pinnate hatching and crosshatching; mud-plaster diamond-shaped frond scars, surrounded by braided columns; mud-plaster square, scale-like frond scars.⁴²

The Building Level II temple rooms contained a fragment of a basalt stele inscribed with monumental Old Babylonian script and 20 administrative tablets and fragments, including grain ration distributions according to standard Šamši-Adad period *kina(macron)tu*-measures.

42 Weiss *et al.* 1990.

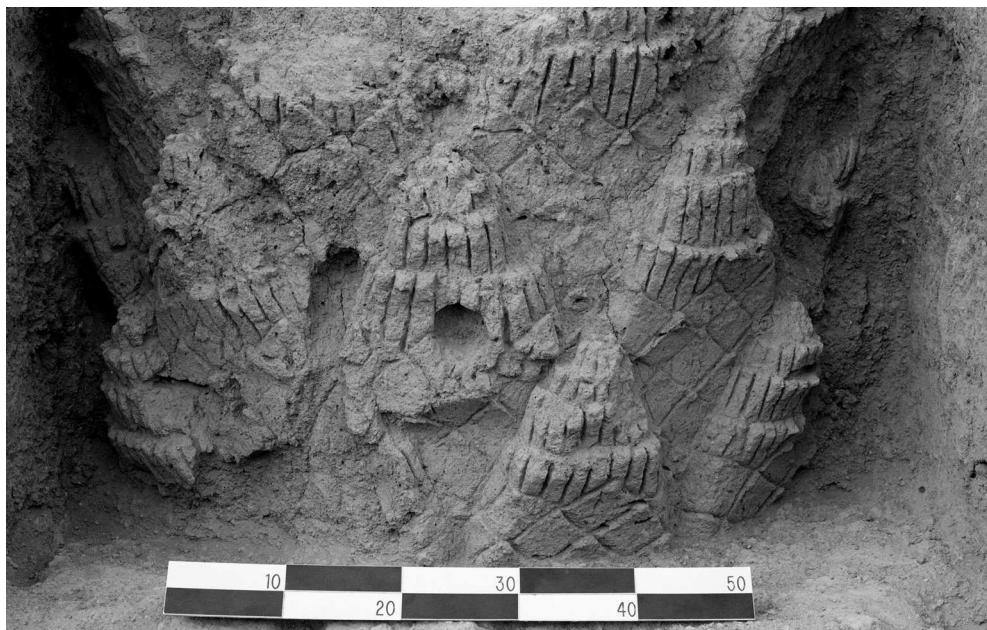


Fig. 9a L85, Acropolis northeast, Pd. I, Building Level II, south façade, west column.

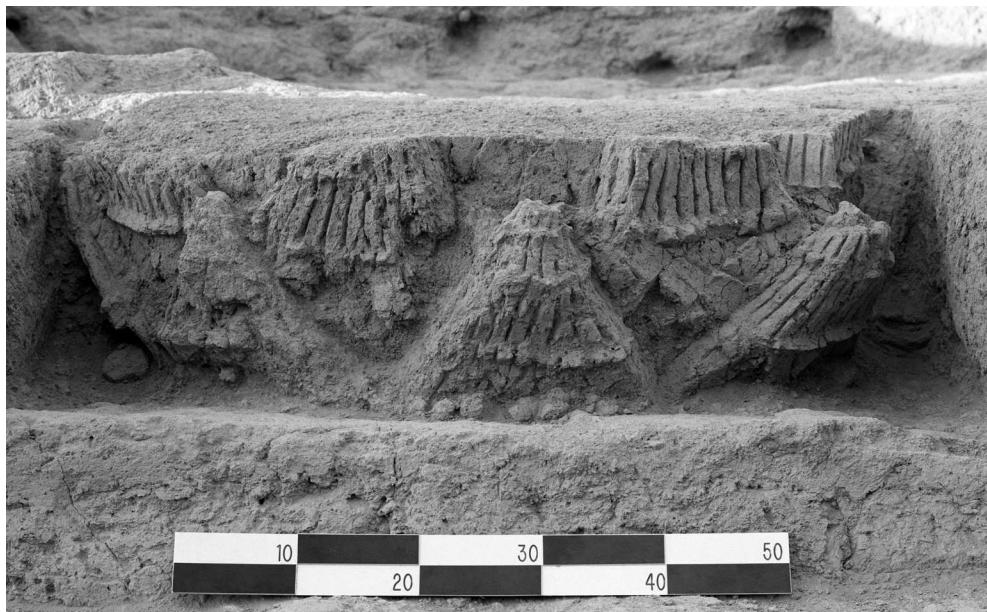


Fig. 9b L85, Acropolis northeast, Pd. I, Building Level II, south façade, east column.

The sealings “Suri-Adad, son of Zidriya, servant of Šamšī-Adad” lay upon the floor of rooms 12 and 13. Secondary renovations of the temple included a blocked doorway against which three sealings of Šuri-Adad were also retrieved and two seal impressions (L82-74, -75) of “Apil-ilišu son of Ali-banišu, servant of Turum-natki.” In room 8 were 227 complete and fragmentary sealings of “Beli-emuqi, servant of Haya-abum, servant of the god Adad.” All the sealings featured the period’s iconographic convention “god with mace facing supplicant goddess,” apart from the unique guilloche-decorated servant of the Turum-natki sealings. These sealings were the first excavation-retrieved linkages of Tell Leilan with ancient Šubat-Enlil.⁴³

The Building Level “X” temple to the south, with only its foundations preserved, may have been linked to the Building Level II temple. If this was the case, then Building Level II and Building Level “X” encompassed ca. 6000 m², twice the size of the Sîn Šamaš temple at Assur and of the temple at Tell ar-Rimah, and equivalent in size to the Assur temple at Assur. Ash and trash accumulated above the foundations, including portions of a Khabur ware associated administrative archive dated with *limus* from Šamšī-Adad’s reign.⁴⁴

Šamšī-Adad’s palace at Šubat-Enlil was retrieved in part in 1985 and 1987 on the Lower Town East, but the excavated sample of 1000 square meters is less than 10% of the one-hectare rise that defines this building (Fig. 1).⁴⁵ Only three rooms of the earliest palace construction, Building Level 4, with seal impressions of servants of Išme-Dagan and Šamšī-Adad were retrieved, although Šamšī-Adad’s servants’ sealings were also deposited in rooms of Building Level 3, where the burnt floors across the extended exposure suggest violent destruction. This destruction can be associated with the well-documented region-wide turmoil following Šamšī Adad’s death and the seizure of Šubat-Enlil by the *sukkalmah* of Elam, and shortly thereafter by Atamrum of Andarig.

Building Level 2 is associated with Himdiya of Andarig, Atamrum’s son. Here more than 600 royal letters and administrative texts and 300 tablet fragments and sealings were retrieved, including a copy of the Sumerian King List.⁴⁶ One territorial treaty text within the archive, L87-1362, suggests localization of the post-Akkadian city of Nawar at Gir Nawaz, at the debouchment of the Jaghagh onto the Khabur Plains, analogous to the location of Mozan/Urkeš 19 kilometers to the west.⁴⁷

The abandoned palace ruins subsequently sheltered temporary occupants only briefly. A partially contemporary second palace, the Lower Town Palace North, was built for Qarni-Lim of Andarig, perhaps as his embassy. Among twelve palace rooms surrounding a courtyard, the Room 12 floor was littered with the 647-tablet beer archive of Šamaš-dayyān, a servant of Qarni-Lim, originally stored within four small jars.⁴⁸ After ca. 1700 BC, and the Leilan palace and temple abandonments, regional occupation declined, for reasons unknown, until the 15th century resettlement around 167-hectare Tell Farfara (Leilan Region Survey

43 Weiss 1985a, b; Weiss *et al.* 1990; Parayre/Weiss 1991

44 Whiting in Weiss *et al.* 1990.

45 Ristvet/Weiss 2011; Akkermans/Weiss 1991.

46 Vincente 1995.

47 Matthews/Eidem 1993; Eidem 2011.

48 Weiss 1991; Van de Mieroop 1995; Weiss 1996; Pulhan 2000

site 186), perhaps the Mitanni capital Waššukanni. The size of this Mitanni period city challenges many archaeological assumptions about ancient dry-farming productivity, settlement distributions and urban sizes, and land transport efficiencies.⁴⁹

Ottoman Decline

Multiple travelers' records during the 18th and 19th centuries describe the fertile Assyrian and Khabur Plains as strangely devoid of villages and agriculture, empty plains only traversed by mobile pastoralist tribes.⁵⁰ These observations have been buttressed by Ottoman archival research within earlier 16th century *defter*-s that record agricultural taxation down to the village level, and across impressively occupied imperial border regions onto the Khabur Plains.⁵¹ The travelers' accounts and tax records have fueled the historiographic debate about late Ottoman decline, poor imperial administration, and the loss of the countryside to plundering tribes who made sedentary agriculture difficult.⁵² Gertrude Bell described, however, the effects of the early Berlin to Baghdad railway links to the west, from Nusaibin to Aleppo: investor excitement at the prospect of cereal harvest rail transport to the now-capitalized markets of western Syria.⁵³ Thereafter, agricultural production, and settlement, quickly began to flourish on the Khabur Plains.⁵⁴ By 1920 the new French administration extended the rail line to only five kilometers north of Tell Leilan, with a picturesque French railroad station of post-and-beam timbers, mansard roof, and a doorway signed in French and Arabic (Fig. 10). To this day, the region's cereal harvests are collected here and then transported west by rail. What drove the earlier settlement and cereal agriculture decline? Were the new rail transport, administrative control, and market orientation the keys to rejuvenated Khabur Plains cereal production? The Leilan Region Survey documents the expansion of settlement in the tenth through fourteenth centuries and rapid decline beginning in the sixteenth century and extending through the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Geoarchaeological sampling along the wadi Jarrah in 2002 produced stratified sediment samples that were subsequently analyzed for pollen-based natural vegetation changes and radiocarbon dating.⁵⁶ Conjoining the Ottoman tax records, the Leilan Region survey data, and the radiocarbon-dated pollen-based natural vegetation changes, we discern the dynamic environmental background for the past four hundred years' successive settlement expansion, decline, and expansion. With the onset of the Little Ice Age in the sixteenth century, Khabur Plains climate became cooler, drier, and less favorable for dry-farming cereal agriculture. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did condi-

49 Donella 2003; Ristvet/Weiss 2005.

50 E.g., Ainsworth 1842.

51 Göyünç/Hütteroth 1997.

52 Hütteroth 2006.

53 Bell 1917: 134.

54 Velud 1987.

55 Vezzoli 2008.

56 Besonen/Cremaschi 2002.



Fig. 10 French railroad station, “Kubur el-Bid,” constructed 1920, five kilometers north of Tell Leilan, for regional cereal harvest transport to Aleppo; H. Weiss photograph, 1991.

tions favorable for cereal agriculture return, an opportunity for resettlement and expanded dry-farming coincident with the French rail transport linkages that made cereal export profitable.⁵⁷ Still effective today, the French railroad station, with its dressed basalt block footing, is reminiscent of an earlier regional intrusion, and the dynamic Khabur Plains environments within which social forces have been both promoted and constrained over the past five millennia.

57 Kaniewski/Van Campo/Weiss 2012.

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