

# The City-State in Ancient Western Syria

INGOLF THUESEN

## Introduction

The social and political structure of ancient Syria was determined primarily by the geography of the region. Syria was part of the northern land bridge between Africa and Asia, and indirectly a bridge to Europe as well. So from the very beginning of human history Syria held a key position in the spectacular history of the ancient Near East. Its heterogeneous nature favoured multiple incipient adaptation strategies and led to the formation of a unique set of ethnically diverse cultures with a high evolutionary potential. In that perspective it is not surprising to find that the history of Syria is extremely complex in all aspects and incorporates elements of the surrounding cultures. Studying the political and social history of ancient Syria one can observe a number of successive stages ranging from the small independent farming villages – which developed at the beginning of the Neolithic era ca. 10,000 years ago – to the highly complex state organisation which emerged during the Bronze Age. Somewhere within this spectrum of political and social organisation, and in certain periods, a type of state emerged which can be compared to the classical city-state. This contribution attempts to identify those instances and to analyse their structure and evolutionary dynamics over time.

First of all it should be stressed that this analysis is based on the assumption that the history of ancient Syria cannot be written as a continuous comprehensive account, based on generalisation of the scattered evidence, and supplemented with interpolations to compensate for the lack of evidence or historical *vacui*. It is rather a series of brief snapshots, which have survived through millennia to the present day, either as material remains exposed by the archaeologist or as historical documents deciphered by philologists and interpreted by the historians. However, these glimpses tend to indicate some tendencies or evolutionary trajectories in the social and political history of ancient Syria. The surviving sources are severely fragmented and sporadic, which means that all the reconstructions suggested below are highly hypothetical and resemble the situation in the Phoenician area

(Niemeyer, *infra* 89-115). Before defining the scope of this study in time and space I find it expedient to summarise the scope and nature of the historical evidence. There are basically two main sources for the history of ancient Syria: archaeological remains and written sources.

## Archaeological Sources

The archaeological evidence is abundant and informative, but mostly buried in *tell* formations. They sometimes grew to enormous dimensions, and to the untrained eye today they may look like natural features in the landscape. The largest sites in Syria cover an area of over 100 ha and rise more than 40 metres above the surrounding plain. These large *tells* are mostly the historical remains of a large urban centre or of an agglomeration of smaller settlements. More abundantly in the landscape occur smaller *tells*, which measure less than 10 ha in area and rise less than 10 metres above the plain.

The archaeological monuments have attracted the attention of archaeologists since the beginning of the century. The first expeditions to the region for the purpose of excavating the *tells* concentrated primarily on the larger *tell* formations on the assumption that they contained the remains of ancient cities known from the historical narrative. But investigation and excavation activities during the last decades have widened the spectrum of interest to include also smaller sites as well as regional intensive surveys. This is not least due to the determined efforts of the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities to rescue sites threatened by construction activities and reclamation of agricultural land. However, many of the results of recent or current excavations are still not accessible, as archaeological reporting can last for years. Therefore their contribution to a better and more detailed reconstruction of the past still lies ahead. This means that the available data come, mostly, from some of the large sites; and, to some extent, the result is a biased view of the archaeological evidence. Also, for many regions systematic surveys are missing, which com-

plicates the reconstruction of the ancient settlement pattern.

Another limitation of the representativeness of the archaeological data is the often extremely small extent of the excavated area. With present excavation techniques and standards a hypothetical total excavation of a large site may very well last for centuries! In most cases the excavations have only exposed a small fraction of the remains left in a site. As the oldest history is usually buried deepest in the mounds it is, as a rule, inaccessible; and if found it is dug up only in small areas, so that the data become less and less representative as one moves back in time. As mentioned above, this fact together with the high number of still unrecognised and unexcavated sites leaves us with a highly fragmented image of past material culture; but such are our working conditions, whether we like it or not.

### Historical Sources

For the historical sources the situation is, perhaps, somewhat better. Historical sources are found in archives, which were attached to the administrative elite of a central town or region. The main reason why archaeologists traditionally focused on large sites was their hope of finding the archives of the past. This strategy, as a matter of fact, proved successful, particularly within Greater Mesopotamia. In Syria, too, large sites were found to contain archives which were often unexpectedly rich and historically informative. The example *par excellence* is the Ebla archive of the late third millennium; its discovery in 1974 has completely changed our historical understanding of western Syria.

However, when this is said it should also be added that written sources from the northern Levant are relatively rare. Until the find of the Ebla archive in 1974 primary sources for the third millennium were almost non-existent. And, except for the finds in Ugarit and Alalakh, historical sources for the entire Bronze Age are scarce or indirect, i.e. found outside western Syria. During the first millennium B.C. the western Syria region comprises a multi-linguistic *oikoumene*, where such different languages as Babylonian, Assyrian, Luwian Hittite, and Aramaic occur simultaneously (e.g. in Hama, Riis [1990] 27-32, Parpola [1990] and Otzen [1990]). Although it does not increase the amount of historical data as such, this fact at least illustrates the diversification of the region during the Iron Age. Most of the following work is based on the historical texts compiled and annotated by Klengel (1992).

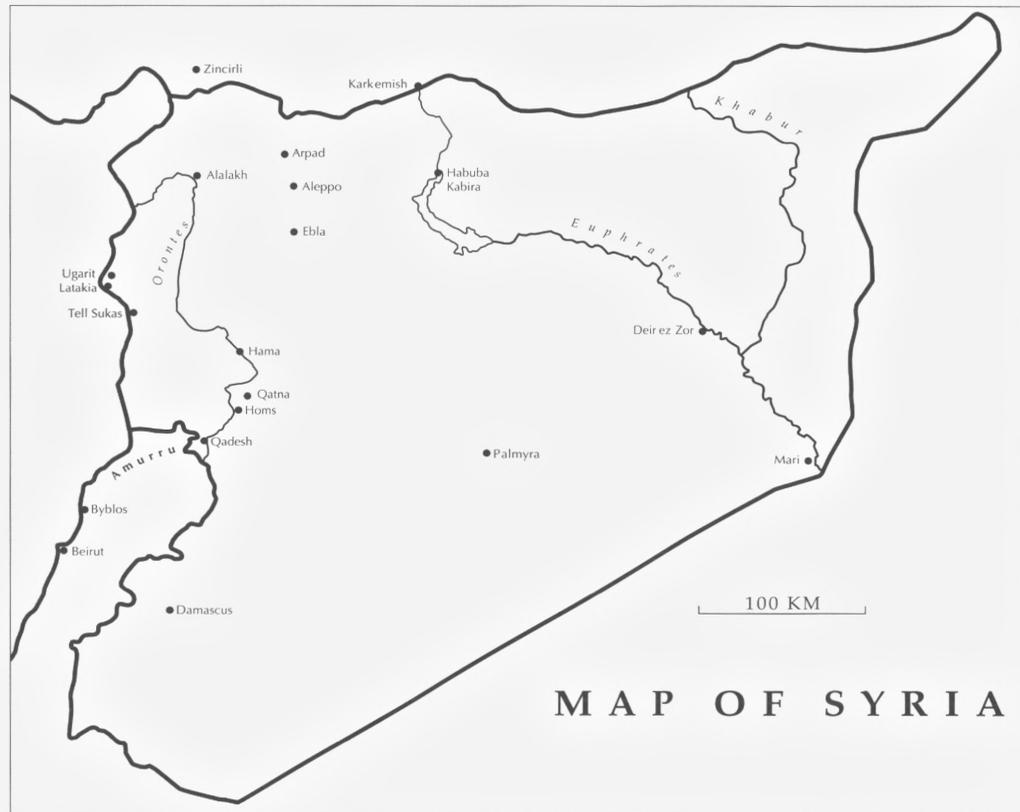
### The Geographical Frame

The geographical region investigated here includes most of modern Syria from the Mediterranean coast to the region delimited by the Euphrates river system or what is part of Greater Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> The northern limit is formed by the Taurus mountains. The southern limit is less well defined, as the natural features of the Levant follow north-south lines. The modern political border is indeed arbitrary when compared with the situation in the past, but has tended to split research into groups concentrating on the Biblical lands and Syria, respectively. The southernmost large urban centre seems to be Tel Hazor in northern Galilee, which may indicate that this region was at the edge of the Syro-Mesopotamian mega-site urban system, characterised by the concentration of the population in large centres.

As mentioned above, this vast area is ecologically and geologically heterogeneous. Two mountain ridges run parallel to the coast line from north to south, *viz.* the Lebanon and anti-Lebanon mountains in the south and the Jebel Ansariyah in the north. They subdivided the land into districts and determined the freedom of movement for the people. Only at Homs and Antioch are there openings in the mountains which give direct access from the coast to the interior. The strategic importance of these two regions throughout history is therefore obvious.

Cutting a section west-east through central Syria somewhere between modern Latakia and Tartus provides us with a typical series of landscapes and ecological regions of high diversity. The first region is the coastal plain and foothills in front of the Jebel Ansariyah. The plain is a highly attractive environment for human settlements, not only due to the agricultural potential, but also due to the coastline, which offers natural harbour facilities at several points, e.g. Latakia, Geble, and Tell Sukas. The next region consists of the 1600 metre high calcareous mountains, Jebel Ansariyah, which provides ideal conditions for hunting and recreational activities, and also houses a number of smaller villages or fortified strongholds for refuge. The eastern slope of the mountains descends into the geological formation of the Orontes river valley, which is the northern extension of the large north-south depression that continues through the Jordan valley, the Dead Sea and Wadi Arabah. The Orontes valley was primarily formed during the Pleistocene as a series of terraces, associated with pluvial/interpluvial periods. This gives it a quite different character from the traditional Mesopotamian alluvial plains surrounding the

Fig. 1.



Euphrates and Tigris rivers and excludes the application of extensive river irrigation. However, since the Roman period river water has been lifted on a smaller scale with waterwheels to the terraces along the river. Moving east and further inland from the Orontes river the landscape gradually turns into the Syrian desert. This region forms a steppe, which can be cultivated in years of sufficient precipitation. However, the 200 mm isohyet oscillates in this zone, following the Orontes river during drought years and penetrating deeply into the desert during wet years (Thuesen [1988] Fig.6). The region is particularly suitable for stock breeding: cattle, horse, goat and sheep for the sedentary population and sheep/goat pastoralism for the nomadic population. For this reason the region forms the traditional buffer or conflict zone between nomads and town dwellers, and therefore its cultural, economic and military organisation is of great importance for the stability of western Syria. Between the steppe and the Euphrates river lies the Syrian desert, which is seasonally exploited by nomadic or pastoral groups, except for the important oases along the trade routes, such as Tadmor/Palmyra.

This brief overview demonstrates the complexity of the landscape which framed the history of the population of western Syria in ancient times. However, the

region comprises several other types of landscape, which it falls outside this work to describe (for a comprehensive geography of Syria, see Wirth [1971]).

### The Chronological Frame

My brief is to describe those early manifestations of political and social structures in Syria which can be classified as city-states. First, I attempt to trace their evolution, which takes us back into the prehistoric periods, *viz.* the Chalcolithic; next I discuss the, apparently, repeated cycle of political events through the Bronze and Iron Ages down to the conquest of Syria by the Neo-Assyrian kings in the eighth century B.C.

I use the traditional Levantine chronological system and terminology, according to which the Bronze Age is subdivided into an Early, a Middle and a Late phase. A similar system is suggested for the Iron Age. Scholarly work on Mesopotamia often uses a different periodisation, which imitates the Mesopotamian historical terminology: Early/proto Syrian, Old Syrian, Middle Syrian and Neo-Syrian, corresponding to, respectively: Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (e.g. Kühne [1980] and Matthiae *et al.* [1995] 88). For an absolute chronology

I follow the dates suggested by Matthiae and based on the Ebla sequence (Matthiae *et al.* [1995] 532-33).

### The Early State Formation in Syria – the First Cycle

Unfortunately, for understanding early state formation in western Syria the most critical period is poorly known. This is not due to any lack of interest among archaeologists. As described above, the main reason is the logistic problem of reaching the relevant levels in the *tells*. However, one event has facilitated our study of this period, namely the establishment of the so-called Uruk colonies along the Euphrates river in Syria and eastern Anatolia. Best known are the towns of Habuba Kebira South and Jebel Aruda, which in detail reflect a material culture similar to what is found in the Uruk homeland, the southern Mesopotamian alluvial plain. The investigation of the area has brought to light residential areas, an administrative-religious centre and a regional centre (Strommenger [1997]).

The Uruk expansion took place after 3500 B.C., but was probably a continuation of an old south Mesopotamian interest in east Anatolian minerals, above all copper. Around 5000 B.C. began a diffusion of south Mesopotamian culture into Syria, also known as the Ubaid expansion. But up till now this very first radiation from southern Mesopotamia has only manifested itself in a dominating style or symbolic language (Thuesen [1989]). When the Uruk expansion along the trade arteries – first of all the Euphrates river – took place more than 1500 years later the impact had a physical character, if we accept Habuba Kebira and similar towns as colonies. The towns were fortified with a defence circuit. Administration was based on inscribed tablets, and the iconography of the Uruk culture indicates symbols of royal power, e.g. the lion hunt stele portraying a person – a king? – hunting lions (Fig. 2). That Uruk society had the demographic potential for such a large scale territorial expansion and domination is obvious from the magnitude of the Uruk homeland cities, e.g. Uruk itself, which is estimated to have accommodated a population of more than 20,000. At this time southern Mesopotamia was urbanised and the population concentrated in large nucleated settlements which show many aspects of a highly developed and complex society, e.g. monumental architecture, central administration, writing, and mass production (Nissen [1999] 41-48).

As known from the available archaeological data,

Uruk society in the Uruk period is the oldest attested manifestation of a territorial state; but it cannot be considered highly representative. We still do not know what went on in other crucial regions of Mesopotamia at the time, e.g. the Khabur plain and Assyria, which may also have been urbanised during late Uruk. Several large sites have substantial remains from this period, e.g. Tell Brak (Schwartz [1997] 355). Furthermore, we know very little about the contribution to the state formation process during the preceding Ubaid expansion, which also had an impact on western Syria and is attested, for example, at Ras Shamra on the Mediterranean coast.

The obvious question is, how did the Mesopotamian expansion during fifth and fourth millennia contribute to the formation of an early political structure in western Syria? At this point the archaeological data fail. Surveys and soundings into *tells* indicate a flourishing settlement system, and in many of the large sites such as Tell Mardikh (Ebla), Hama and Ras Shamra (Ugarit) the stratification goes back to the Ubaid phase and even earlier (Thuesen [1988]). This could mean that the Bronze Age urban pattern in Syria was established in the millennia preceding the Uruk expansion. The process was inspired by the Mesopotamian evolution of an early state, which in the incipient stages placed a remarkable symbolic fingerprint on the west Syrian material culture, the Ubaid (Thuesen [1992]), and later founded colonies along the main trading arteries.

The impact from the east must have generated a reaction from the contemporary population of western Syria. The massive fortification system of Habuba Kebira symbolises power and suggests fears of hostile attack. Such a threat against the colonial settlements would require at least a degree of coordination of the local Syrian population. But archaeologically we know very little about who generated the need for such a manifestation of power. It is therefore strictly hypothetical, but reasonable, to assume that some kind of political organisation had been established in the region, not as an incipient formation, but as a spin-off from the centralisation of power in Mesopotamian society. Consequently, there is in this specific period a potential for developing the first city-states on a small scale in western Syria, where the political centres were perhaps more like “towns” than like “cities”. The archaeological remains indicate that the towns in which this political and economic centralisation took place were the same as those which during the following centuries became regional centres. One example could be the town of Hama during the late

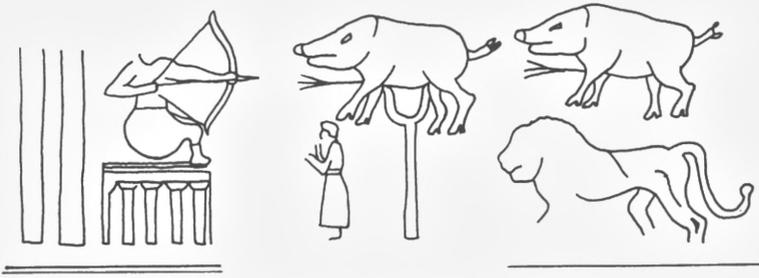


Fig. 2: Lion hunt stele found in Uruk, Iraq. The Late Uruk period, ca. 3200 BC (right) and seal impression from Habuba Kebira (above).



period L and early period K. At this time the core of the town was protected by a high terrace wall built of stones (Thuesen [1988]). We may therefore presume that this was the first cycle of state formation in Syria which included town-states or city-states. But future excavation has to shed more light on the issue.

### The Early Bronze Age – the Second Cycle

At the end of the fourth millennium the Uruk influence in Syria and Anatolia disintegrated, and so did the control of the colonies. In the Mesopotamian heartland a pattern of city-states was established in what is known as the Early Dynastic period (see Glassner, *supra* 36). Important trade routes to the east, reaching Oman and Afghanistan, were opened in order to obtain metals and semi-precious stones. There was a tendency for some of the Sumerian cities to extend their sphere of power, as happened, e.g. under Lugal-zagezi, king of Ur during the Early Dynastic III period. A complete centralisation of power, however, was not achieved until 2350 B.C. when the Akkadian king Sargon not only conquered all of Mesopotamia, but also launched campaigns into Syria, where he reached the Mediterranean Sea. Due to its territorial extension and the formal concentra-

tion of power in the hands of a divine king, Sargon's Akkadian kingdom is usually considered to be as the first Mesopotamian empire.

These events are contemporary with the Old Kingdom in Egypt. The Egyptian rulers' main interest in West Asia was to obtain wood from Lebanon, for which purpose they established themselves in Byblos. In the southern Levant, the urban centres were fortified with walls as a reaction against conflicts raised by internal and external powers during the Early Bronze I and II periods (e.g. Gophna [1995]).

In this millennium the first archaeological and historical data become available from western Syria. Ebla, a large site located in the steppe south of Aleppo, was the seat of a "lord" / king together with a council of elders – depending on the interpretation of the historical texts.<sup>2</sup> Of interest in this connection is the mention of other Syrian towns with a similar political constitution, an indication that the land was divided into smaller kingdoms or states which most likely can be compared to city-states. This process has been characterised as a secondary urbanisation. Ebla provides far the best documentation for the period, not only because of the archives, but also due to the excavation of a palatial building. The city, which may have accommodated a population of between 15,000

and 20,000, was dependent on a territory dotted with small autonomous urban centres (Milano [1995] 1221 ff.). The state was ruled from the palace, which was the seat of the king and his administration. Ebla's hinterland seems to have covered some 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> but the influence of the kings of Ebla, at its maximum, reached Hama to the south, the littoral mountains to the west, and the Euphrates region to the east. Surveys in different parts of western Syria show several settlements. Many of the larger sites contain remains dating to the early Bronze Age, but the present state of the excavations does not allow of any conclusion as to the political status of the towns; but the texts from the Ebla archive indicate that many were what can be called dependent city-states (Milano [1995] 1227).

The toponyms in the texts from Ebla betray an interest in the east, and Mari in particular. The reason for this was most likely the concern for maintaining trade with Mesopotamia. The economy of Ebla was primarily based on the breeding of sheep/goats and the manufacture of wool, supplemented with metalwork (Milano [1995] 1225). This was the typical production potential of the steppe between the desert and the agricultural land to the west. The natural limit of this economy seems to be the central Syrian steppe. Opposite the Mesopotamian alluvial plain, expansion of territory would require the control of other adaptational strategies and economies, which may have complicated any attempt to integrate towns or centres in neighbouring regions, whose economy was based on other subsistence strategies. Examples could be Hama (ancient Amatu) and Qatna, both located on important communication lines through Syria (north-south and east-west), and the harbour towns along the coast (e.g. Ugarit and Tell Sukas).

Ebla was destroyed around 2300 B.C. The event is often associated with campaigns of the Akkadian kings into Syria, and in particular with the campaign of Sargon. That the destruction was not a result of a local disaster is evident from the Hama sequence, where a similar destruction layer appears between phase J5 and J4. They are archaeologically linked to the same event. That supports the idea of a general disaster in the central Syrian towns or cities, and also indicates that, at that time, Hama had a political or symbolic position which could attract an Akkadian king. The campaigns were repeated by Sargon's successor, Naram Sin and created an unstable balance in the region, which eventually led to the dissolution of the Early Bronze Age kingdoms or city-states. With this destruction western Syria entered into a relatively dark age, and it is impossible in the following century

to find any traces of an Akkadian sovereignty over the region.

The archaeological evidence supporting the development outlined above comes primarily from the excavations at Ebla, where part of a large palatial building complex (G) was unearthed. The important archive found in the building contained ca. 3,000 administrative clay tablets, and trade items were discovered too, such as lapis lazuli and Egyptian stone vessels.

### The Middle Bronze Age Amorite Kingdoms – the Third Cycle

In the period from ca. 2000 to 1600 B.C. – the Middle Bronze Age – the Syrian cities regained political and economic momentum. Around the Syrian territory strong empires were growing up: the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian in Mesopotamia, the Hittite in Anatolia, the Middle Kingdom in Egypt, and the Minoan in Crete. The Near East experienced an unprecedented political centralisation taking place in a number of superpowers, and international trade flourished. The political development in Syria was determined by this process.

During the first two centuries Ebla, Hama, Qatna, Ugarit, Yamhad (Aleppo) and Alalakh and, further to the north and east, Karkemish and Urshu became, once again, the seats of local kings and dynasties, now with Amorite names. By the 18<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the competition among the local rulers resulted in further centralisation. Western Syria was divided basically into two kingdoms: Yamhad in the north and Qatna in the south. Both controlled vast territories of several thousands of square kilometres and therefore exceeded the size of even large city-states. Former towns or cities ruled by independent kings became part of a hierarchy of settlements, with a different status, but which were under the control of the central king. One way of maintaining this dependency was to place relatives of the kings as local governors or petty kings. Ugarit apparently succeeded for some time in keeping its independent status as a harbour town servicing the interests of the surrounding states.

In the first two centuries of the second millennium western Syria was apparently subdivided into a number of small territorial kingdoms, each of them organised as a city-state; and the political structure of the region resembled that of the period prior to the Akkadian conquest. It is difficult in this situation to make a clear distinction between a city-state and a territorial kingdom. A possible parameter might be

to distinguish between city-state monarchies, each controlling a geographical and/or ecological enclave, and monarchies comprising several enclaves, each with its own “subsistence economy”. The geographical diversification of Syria splits the land into such natural enclaves. This favours a city-state culture and may have determined the political pattern of Syria in the periods of state formation.

The best archaeological example of a Middle Bronze Age city-state is, again, Ebla (Fig. 3). The site covers an area of over 60 ha and is fortified with a wall through which four gates gave access to the city.

In the centre of the city rose an acropolis several metres above the lower town. According to the excavations, there was a palace and a temple for the rulers on the acropolis. In the lower town were found non-domestic buildings, temples and palaces (Matthiae [1995] 164-79). Remains of what may have been a royal cemetery were discovered beneath a palace in the lower town (Guardata [1995] 180-87).

Archaeologically and historically the centralisation around 1800 B.C. is documented by the success of the king of Yamhad in adding Ebla and Alalakh to his territory. To judge from the sequence at Hama (period



Fig. 3. Ebla during the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000-1600 BC). Most of the excavated part of the city shows non-domestic architecture, palaces, temples and fortifications.

H), a change in the town plan at the time could mean that this town too experienced a similar development. In levels H4 to H2 is attested a public area with a palatial building; and the city-plan with so-called silos and a possible glacis is similar to the city plan of Ebla (Fugmann [1958] Figs. 116, 119 and 123; Thuesen [forthcoming]). However, Hama's position as a vassal of either Yamhad to the north or Qatna to the south is uncertain.

During this period the kings attempted further centralisation as well as expansion of their territories by conquest. In particular the Old Assyrian ruler Shamsi-Adad seems to have had a strained relationship with the king of Yamhad, but he never succeeded in solving the Yamhad problem, either by alliances or by force, and after his death there followed a more stable political situation. Now the region seems to have entered a period with good relations between the major actors on the west Syrian scene. Sporadically there were attempts to gain independence, and that may well be one of the best arguments for assuming a city-state structure in the preceding period.

The final blow to this equilibrium came from another direction, namely the north. In the meantime the Hittite state had grown in size and developed imperial ambitions. At the end of the 17th century the Hittite king made raids into Syria and Mesopotamia, and the result was a collapse of the established political structure. The Hittites left the country open for new political state formations. There was a short interval before another external power, the Mitanni, took control of most of the region, and during this period documents show that the town of Alalakh was ruled by a local king (Klengel [1992] 87ff.). In the same period the Egyptian kings of the 18th Dynasty took control of several towns in southern Syria. Later the Mitanni sovereignty in the north was, once again, replaced by the rule of the Hittites.

Until the end of the Bronze Age (1200 B.C.) the towns and cities of western Syria did not regain independence. Mitanni, Hittite, and Egyptian kings established a system of vassal kings or local rulers, each of whom had to take an oath of loyalty to the king. They were expected to pay tribute and to send contingents of men to the king for his military campaigns. The political organisation of the Hittite empire was a pyramidal power structure with at least three levels: the Great King was above everybody else; under him there was a vice-king, placed in Karkemish and selected from his own family; and on the third level was a local prince or governor, who ruled a town or a district. The third level comprised a number of

towns or territories, such as Ugarit, Halb, Nuhashe, Tunip, Qadesh and Amurru in the north under Hittite control, and in the south Byblos, Beirut, Tyre, Sidon, Damascus and Bosra under Egyptian control. While the northern part of Syria had local rulers, the southern region controlled by Egypt was often ruled by Egyptian officials installed by the pharaoh.

As a matter of fact this geopolitical structure indirectly reflects the traditional Syrian city-state culture, with regard both to the size and status of the urban centres, each ruled by a vassal governor or petty king. In the border zone between the Egyptian and Hittite territories – i.e. the plain of Homs and the land of Amurru – local governors were extremely sensitive to changes in the power balance between the two super-powers, and constantly tried to make alliances accordingly. For most of the periods the situation can best be described as a city-state culture consisting exclusively of dependent city-states. However, in so far as the Egyptian and Hittite kings succeeded in turning the Syrian cities into mere provincial capitals, Syria in this period should not be characterised as a conglomeration of city-states.

### The Iron Age Aramaic Kingdoms – the Fourth Cycle

Around 1200 B.C. the Hittite empire collapsed. At the same time new groups of people appeared in the region. Along the coast the Sea People made an impact on the harbour towns. Ugarit was destroyed, perhaps by an earthquake. The city never recovered, and therefore the event must have been associated with political turbulence and weakness (e.g. Liverani [1987]). Inland, groups of Aramaic-speaking people established new kingdoms in some of the central Syrian cities. In this very open and formative stage of Syrian society, the rulers of the Middle Assyrian Kingdom successfully penetrated the country and on several occasions reached the Mediterranean coast. However, around 1000 B.C. western Syria had again reached a stage where the land was divided into a number of smaller kingdoms, ruled by a king located in a central town, but now of Aramaic extraction (Sader [1987]). The kingdom of Karkemish seems to have survived the turmoil and continued a Hittite tradition in northern Syria (e.g. Klengel [1992] 182). Along the coast the Phoenician centres began to reappear. This is the last phase with a city-state like political organisation of western Syria during antiquity.

The new political structure of western Syria repeated the well known pattern of the development

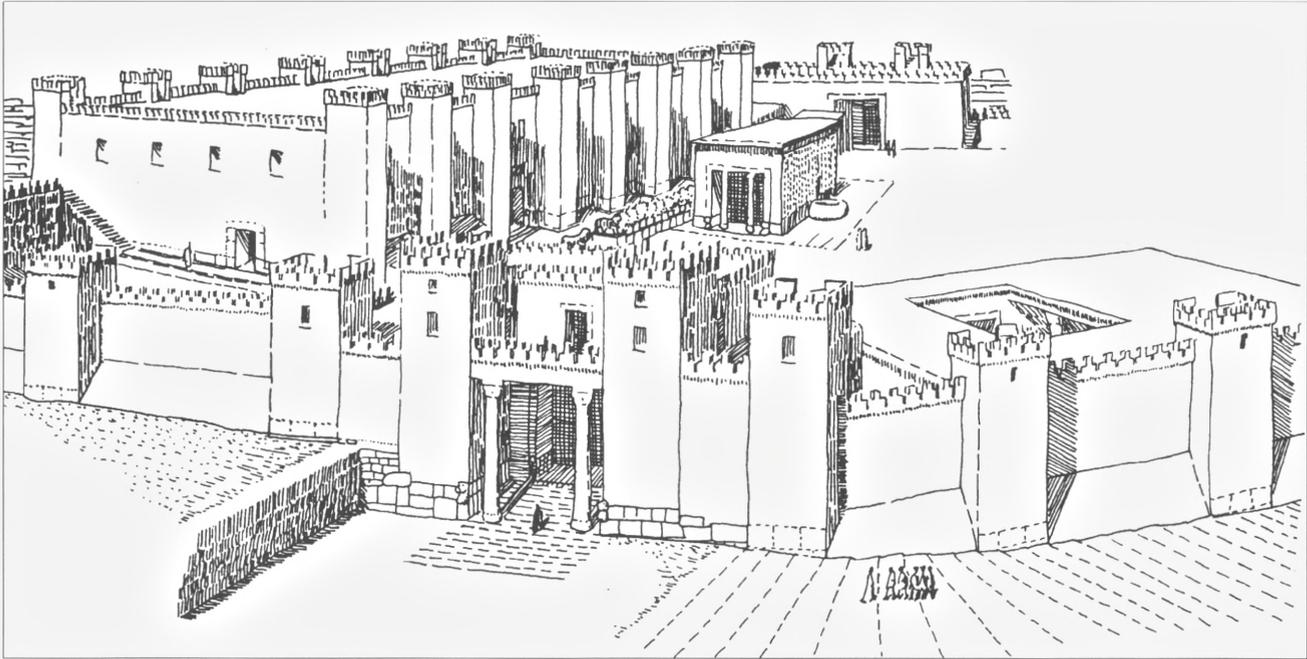


Fig. 4. Hama during the Aramaic kingdom (ca. 1050-720 BC). The excavated area shows remains of large public buildings and colossal lion statues in basalt.

of political centres in larger towns or cities. In the beginning several towns or territories established themselves as independent states, but over time they became integrated into larger territorial states. This was particularly typical of the inland kingdoms, while in the coastal region the Phoenician harbour towns continued to have a small scale city-state structure based on their importance as entrepôts (Niemeyer, *infra* 90-2). In the southern inland there was a political centre at Damascus, in central Syria there was one at Hama, and in the north there were centres at Arpad (Tell Rifa'at), Karkemish, and Sam'al (Zencirli). An important catalyst for the centralisation was the strong imperialistic tradition of the Neo-Assyrian kings, which forced the Aramaic kings in Syria to form alliances in order to defend themselves against the growing threat from the east. The Assyrian kings' habit of raiding Syria increased in intensity during the 10th, 9th and 8th centuries. The purpose of the campaigns was primarily to obtain tribute from the towns and cedar wood from the mountains.

The excavation of Hama has brought to light a part of an Aramaic king's palace (Hama period E [Fig. 4]). The citadel of the town was fortified with a wall through which a monumental gate gave access to a royal quarter. It consisted of a large open area, probably adorned with free-standing basalt lions and ritual

gear such as a huge basalt basin. Around the plaza were found remains of a huge building with store-rooms on the ground floor, perhaps for the supplies of an army unit quartered nearby. Next to the gate was located a palace of the traditional northern Syrian *Bit Hilani* type known from the Late Bronze Age. It may have been a royal residence, but its size and location make it more likely that it housed a high official of the king. From this royal quarter, which has not been completely excavated, another gate led to the other part of the citadel (Fugmann [1958] 150 ff.). The associated finds – e.g. the stelae with Luwian (Hittite hieroglyphs) and the cremation cemeteries – are evidence of the strong affinity of Hama to northern Syria and Anatolia during this period. The kings of Hama and Damascus tried to stop the Assyrian raids by forming alliances with other Syrian local kings, but internal conflicts among the local rulers also occurred as described by king Zakkur on a stele found at Tell Afis north of Hama (Clemens [1997] 388).

In the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglat-Pileser it was finally decided to integrate Syria into the Assyrian empire as a province. Damascus fell in 732, Hama in 720. During the following centuries Syria remained a province under Assyrian, Babylonian and Achaemenid rule.

## Conclusion

Working from the available archaeological and historical sources it is possible to identify some characteristic features of the political landscape of ancient western Syria. The period from 3500 through 720 B.C. witnessed a series of repeated cycles. Each cycle moves from small independent and relatively unstructured political entities to large territorial states under foreign sovereignty. Behind the dynamics of the process is the existence of a settlement pattern in the region, established already during prehistory, with a number of settlements growing to become local centres. The most obvious reason for this development was the location of the towns near important trade routes or destinations (e.g. Ugarit or Aleppo) or at locations where the natural conditions favoured a concentration of population, e.g. in oases, besides rivers or in rich pasture lands. In each case the size of the hinterland was delimited by ecological or geological boundaries. The Syrian landscape therefore favours the emergence of a city-state culture.

By contrast with the Mesopotamian alluvial plain (Stone [1997]), the geographic conditions in Syria never favoured centralisation. Most of the towns were situated in regions often limited by natural barriers such as mountains or deserts. To some degree that explains why Syria during antiquity had a tendency to return to a political fragmentation into a number of smaller kingdoms, a structure which can be compared to a city-state system. However, the region was never left in peace, but constantly influenced by surrounding powers. This added momentum to the social and political dynamics of the region, which apparently resulted in a cyclic evolutionary pattern (Fig. 5).

When external powers threatened the Syrian kingdoms, the kings tended to form alliances or to estab-

lish kingdoms with larger territories and consequently better possibilities for matching the power of their neighbours. It is therefore possible to identify at least four basic stages in the development of a town or city, which eventually became the centre of a city-state:

- A) The central town which has not yet developed a formal administrative system or political control such as a chief, a king or a council of elders.
- B) The *city-state* characterised by a political organisation in which the ruler of the town also controls a small territory or enclave of ecological and geographical homogeneity.
- C) The territorial kingdom or "*city-state empire*", in which the ruler of a town or city has obtained control over neighbouring towns, which together represents a state composed of one hegemonial and a number of dependent city-states.
- D) The provincial town which still has its former territorial size and structure, but is now ruled by foreign kings, (D1) either through governors, perhaps with the title of a king, or (D2) through mere officials.

This pattern is shown in Figure 6.

Stages B, C and D1 can be described as city-state cultures. The physical appearance as documented by archaeological remains testifies to medium or large settlements of over 20 ha and often fortified by walls. These urban centres had a complex topography often containing an ancient *tell* formation, which became the acropolis of the city. Here were located temples and palaces and perhaps a garrison to protect the king. In the lower town outside the citadel were located other palaces and temples. Unfortunately, archaeological and historical data on the hinterland of a central town or city-state are still missing.

Despite a history characterised by numerous changes in the political and social system, the ancient Syrian landscape had a settlement pattern in which some nucleated settlements had already emerged as political centres during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic period. There was a tendency for these centres to develop into city-states, which however only lasted as long as external powers or interests stayed away from the Syrian scene. The ancient Syrian city-state culture constituted a very unstable system. That this process can be seen repeated perhaps as many as four times during three thousand years indicates that the formation of self-governing urban centres was a logical adaptation to the landscape of both the settlement pattern and the political organisation of the population.

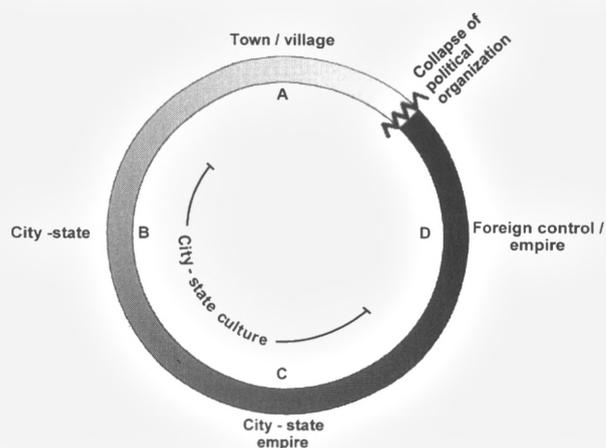


Fig. 5. Schematic presentation of the cycle of political organisation in ancient Syria.

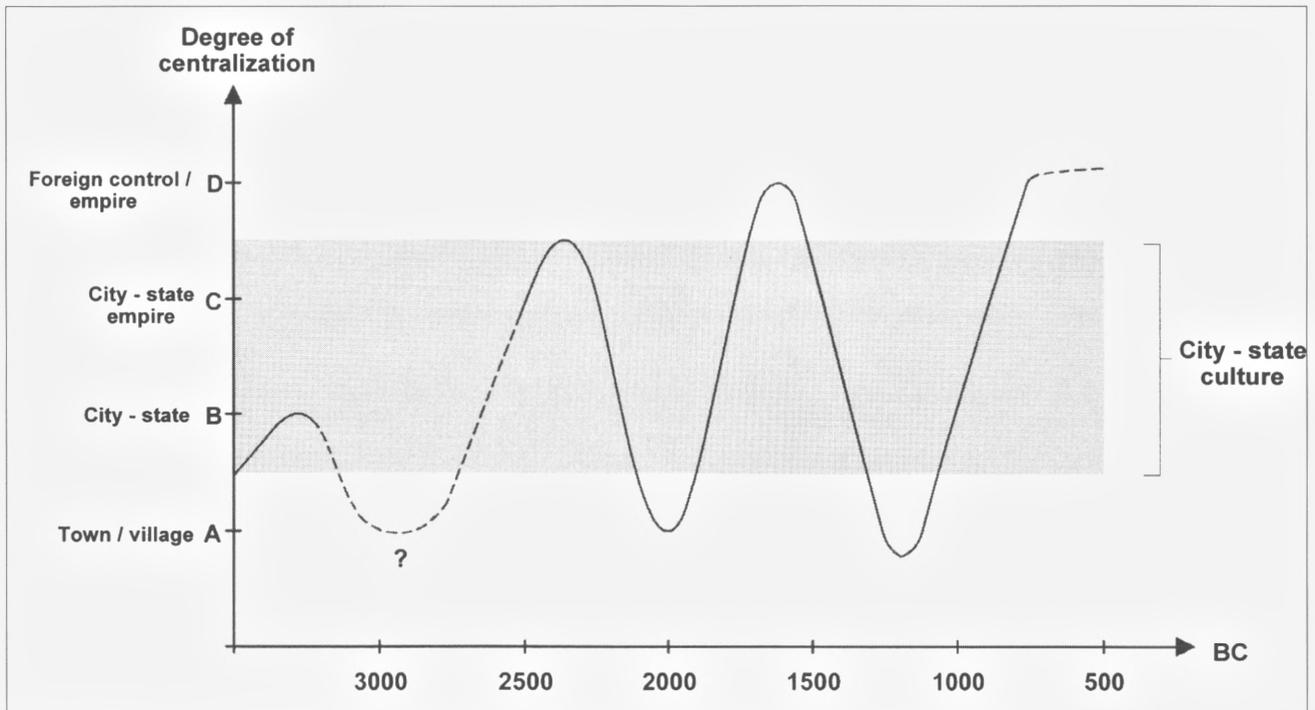


Fig. 6. Suggested cyclic development of the political organisation (y-axis) through time (x-axis) in ancient Syria.

## Notes

1. For Mesopotamia, see Glassner and Trolle Larsen in this volume. For Phoenicia, see Niemeyer.
2. For a recent overview of the Ebla Early Bronze Age city and society see Milano 1995.

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