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## Bridging the Third/Second Millennium Divide : the Ebla and Afis Evidence

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## Résumé

À Ebla, les vestiges archéologiques de la fin du Troisième Millénaire suivant la destruction du Palais G (après un certain hiatus) ont été mis au jour dans plusieurs zones du site, dans des structures autant officielles que privées. La statue d'Ibbit-Lim révèle l'existence d'une nouvelle dynastie Amorite aux alentours du 21<sup>ème</sup>-20<sup>ème</sup> siècles av. J.-C. ; la dédicace de la statue d'Ishtar et le lieu où elle a été trouvée près du Temple D indiquent que le Palais avait été (re?)construit à cette époque. Dans la zone du Palais Archaïque également, la continuité fonctionnelle et architecturale du site pendant le Bronze Moyen I est illustrée par une restructuration majeure, planifiée et générale de la ville (construction des remparts extérieurs, temples et palais dans la ville basse et sur le tertre central).

À Afis, les éléments mis au jour n'indiquent pas clairement un déclin du site à cette époque. Bien au contraire, la découverte dans la zone E3 d'au moins une phase principale d'occupation attribuable à une période datée entre la fin du BA et le début du BM permet d'envisager, pour la transition BA-BM, une continuité beaucoup plus affirmée qu'on ne le pensait précédemment. L'évolution céramique confirme également cette continuité. La possible réduction de taille de l'Acropole au Bronze Moyen I doit aujourd'hui être interprétée à la lumière d'une extension de l'habitat dans la Ville Basse, largement étendue.

La continuité de l'occupation pendant cette période, conjuguée à une croissance démographique, est aussi documentée par les résultats des reconnaissances de terrain menées dans la région du Jazr : en effet, plusieurs sites ont livré du matériel comparable à celui dégagé dans des couches de la fin du Bronze Ancien - début du Bronze Moyen de la zone E3 à Tell Afis.

Malgré la différence de nature et d'échelle des faits présentés, aucune crise ne paraît avoir eu lieu vers 2100 av. J.-C. dans la région. Au contraire, on observe une transformation graduelle des traditions culturelles, accompagnée d'un développement important de l'habitat urbain et rural.

Stefania MAZZONI\* and Candida FELLI\*

## BRIDGING THE THIRD/SECOND MILLENNIUM DIVIDE: THE EBLA AND AFIS EVIDENCE\*\*

### Résumé

À Ebla, les vestiges archéologiques de la fin du Troisième Millénaire suivant la destruction du Palais G (après un certain hiatus) ont été mis au jour dans plusieurs zones du site, dans des structures autant officielles que privées. La statue d'Ibbit-Lim révèle l'existence d'une nouvelle dynastie Amorite aux alentours du 21<sup>ème</sup>-20<sup>ème</sup> siècles av. J.-C. ; la dédicace de la statue d'Ishtar et le lieu où elle a été trouvée près du Temple D indiquent que le Palais avait été (re?) construit à cette époque. Dans la zone du Palais Archaïque également, la continuité fonctionnelle et architecturale du site pendant le Bronze Moyen I est illustrée par une restructuration majeure, planifiée et générale de la ville (construction des remparts extérieurs, temples et palais dans la ville basse et sur le tertre central).

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Malgré la différence de nature et d'échelle des faits présentés, aucune crise ne paraît avoir eu lieu vers 2100 av. J.-C. dans la région. Au contraire, on observe une transformation graduelle des traditions culturelles, accompagnée d'un développement important de l'habitat urbain et rural.

### 1. THE CASE OF EBLA, LANDMARK OF THE REGION

Exploring the subject of continuity and disruption in EB/MB north-western Syria, the primacy of Ebla, with its textual sources and the centrality of the events and processes shaping its history, constitutes a solid point of reference for research. Further evidence from the excavations of Tell Afis and the survey of its territory can also furnish significant clues, which complement the Ebla sources. They help substantiate the regional picture, adding the view of the countryside and small towns, a rich landscape with its different habitats of steppe, alluvial plains and hills, to that offered by its focal point, the capital, seat of institutions, monuments and centralized activities.

Ebla provides arguments crucial to the definition of this period. At the present stage of research, direct archaeological and textual evidence attests to only one major disruption, that consisting of the

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violent and abrupt destruction of Palace G and its many units, which coincided with the disappearance of the dynasty as known from the archives and with the fall of its kingdom. Although the precise date and nature of this collapse are still open to debate, cogent historical and epigraphical arguments tend to situate it within the framework of local Syrian conflicts, thus attributing the destruction of Ebla to Mari some time before this latter city was in turn conquered by Sargon<sup>1</sup>. Thus the phase termed EB IVA, which is defined by the pottery assemblage of Palace G of the local phase II B1, came to an end some time around or shortly after 2400 B.C. (Middle Chronology).

The destruction and fall of Ebla resulted in an indeterminate period of local disruption. Palace G and its units were abandoned and filled with debris from the collapse of walls, upper floors and roofs to a depth that, in some points, attains 8 m. The ruins were apparently not occupied by squatters and later they were levelled and filled with rubble; however no evidence exists that would enable us to determine how long the area remained abandoned.

After the destruction of Palace G and the probably short disruption that followed, the archaeological evidence at Ebla documents a new phase, EB IVB, the period of the 'Second Ebla' or Ebla after the 'Fall'<sup>2</sup> which has been recently investigated and reappraised as a crucial phase in the history of Syria<sup>3</sup> providing the link between EB and MB<sup>4</sup>. As far as material culture is concerned, EB IVB is marked by a development of ceramic traditions with diagnostic pottery productions such as painted and combed ware, represented especially by tall goblets which replace the corrugated variety<sup>5</sup>. The evidence of new building activities attests to a certain degree of re-urbanisation concerning both institutional and domestic units, and affecting both the acropolis and the lower town. The town probably covered the same area as before, with limited discontinuity in a few sectors in spite of the prior destruction<sup>6</sup>. That the lower town, however, was already occupied in EB IVA, is indicated by unit P4, an industrial and storage area with activities linked with the nearby Palace G, and by the temple in the SE sector of the town, defined by Matthiae as the "Temple on the Rock", most probably built in EB IVA, and still used in EB IVB<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, in EB IVB a few sectors of the lower town were occupied by new buildings, which were not apparently preceded by a previous EB IVA occupation.

A new palace was planned in the northern sector of the lower town: this is the Archaic Palace, Phase I in Sector P north<sup>8</sup>. To date, the stratigraphy of this sector furnishes the principal direct documentation for the presence of an institutional building at Ebla during EB IVB (L.5715: throne room), also providing proof of an uninterrupted functional continuity into the MB I phase, which precedes the MBII palace, as recently demonstrated<sup>9</sup>. We have, in fact, evidence of a re-development of this same building (Archaic Palace, Phase II), dating to MB I, consisting of new floors and a wing added to the North-East (L.6034, L.6188, L.6096, L.6090<sup>10</sup>), with small rooms (L. 6873, 6855, 6851, 6868, 6867<sup>11</sup>) opening onto a reception hall (L. 6867) and provided with a podium (L.6871). Therefore, while the choice of this area for the palace was the result of a new decision in EB IVB, during MB I and II continuity prevailed and the previous urban layout of the city was retained, here as elsewhere<sup>12</sup>.

That this north-western sector of the lower town, not too far from the debris of the collapse of Palace G, was destined for institutional buildings, is also indicated by the presence of a shrine of the "broad-room" type, encapsulated in the later foundations of Temple P2 and attributed to EB IVB<sup>13</sup>.

1) Archi and Biga 2003 : 29-35.

2) Dolce 1999, 2001.

3) Eadem 1999 : 293.

4) Pinnock 2004.

5) Matthiae 1989 : 129-131, Fig. 25.

6) *Ibidem* : 126.

7) As resulting from the paper presented by P. Matthiae at the 5<sup>th</sup> ICAANE in Madrid.

8) Matthiae 1998 : 564-566, Fig. 5 ; 1995 : 660-668, Fig. 10-13 ; 2002-2003 : 124-126, Fig. 1, 2006a : 87, Fig.3.

9) Dolce 2001 : 17; Pinnock 2004 : 93. Matthiae 2006a : 90 : Phases II-III-IV are assigned to MB I.

10) Matthiae 1995 : 670-672, Fig. 14-15. Matthiae 2006a : 90.

11) *Idem* 1998 : 566-567, Fig. 5-6. 2006a : 94, Fig. 7-8.

12) Dolce 2001 : 23 ; Pinnock 2004 : 95.

13) Marchetti and Nigro 1997 : 3, Fig. 2.

This evidence, and the presence of the basalt head of a female statue attributed to Ishtar, the patron deity of the same temple<sup>14</sup>, provides the main argument for dating the construction of Temple P2 with its long-room plan, *in antis*, to MB I. During the earlier part of the period between EB IVB and MB I, the P4 unit of EB IVA date, destined for processing and storage activities and serving as a workshop for small objects, was levelled and paved over. A few cult-related installations occupied the square in stratum 3d: a small precinct with a cistern (P.5223), two dog burials, two *bothroi* with ritual deposits, a human tomb and in the vicinity, a basalt torso of a bearded man of the “stone spirit” class<sup>15</sup>.

Other building activities are also documented by the institutional units of the acropolis. On the top of the western mound where the Western Unit of the Central Complex of Palace G once stood, a stone staircase was built over deposits from the palace, which here reached a certain height, apparently leading in the direction of the MB Ishtar temple D<sup>16</sup>. Materials from this area and from the sounding inside Temple D were attributed to EB IVB as belonging to the horizon of the simple painted ware of northern Syria<sup>17</sup>. The eastern side of this staircase was built over by the foundations of Temple G3, a small broad-room shrine<sup>18</sup>, confirmed by the basalt Ishtar stele erected on the left side of its entrance on its phase 3 floor. On the floor of phase 1 (the earliest) in the north-western corner of the *cella* (room L.3939) the head of a roughly carved “stone spirit” was found<sup>19</sup>. The similarity with the P2 broad room MB I structure, in association with “stone spirits”, point to the same chronological and cultural phase for both buildings. Materials from EB IVB from the Area of the Palace E of MB II might also provide evidence of an occupation in that period, paralleling the situation of the temple areas G3 and D<sup>20</sup>.

Occupation in EB IVB is also documented in Area T in the northern lower town<sup>21</sup>. This consisted of floors and flimsy structures built of related materials of a possibly final EB IVB phase, also showing traditional EB/MB features<sup>22</sup>. The fact that two groups of materials were deposited in two levels, one consisting of the filling over the floors (L.5406, 5422, 5682) and one of the destruction layer above them with materials of a final EB IVB horizon (bowls with grooved rims to be compared with forms of Hama J2-1) provided the main indication of a later phase for this area<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, still in area T, the evidence of three floors with three levels<sup>24</sup> could extend the time-span of this EB IVB occupation of the north-west lower town.

The town wall was probably built or rebuilt during this same phase<sup>25</sup>: in Area AA a brick wall six metres thick (M. 7357) was covered by a deposit containing EB IVB materials of a late date, with painted pottery to be compared with the Hama J1 assemblage<sup>26</sup>. It is noteworthy that at least two pit burials containing very late EB IVB pottery, possibly transitional MB I, were dug into the inner glacis in Area Z<sup>27</sup>. This is, to date, the soundest evidence for attributing the construction of the outer town ramparts to the very beginning of MB I, and not later.

Textual sources furnish important clues, which assist in reconstructing the history of this phase and evaluating the process of its cultural development. The main direct source is the written torso of the statue of Ibbit-Lim, son of Igrish-Kheb, the first documented Amorite king of Ebla<sup>28</sup>, to be dated to the Ur III period (Frayne) or around 2000 after Ur III (Gelb, Archi). The king dedicated his stat-

14) Matthiae 2001 : 278.

15) Marchetti and Nigro 1997 : 5, 29-31, Fig. 17 ; Idem 2000 : 247; Nigro 1998.

16) Matthiae 1989 : 128, Fig. 24, Tav. 72 ; Dolce 2001 : Fig. 3.

17) Matthiae 1989 : 128, Pl. 73 ; Dolce 2001 : 15, Fig. 2b.

18) Matthiae 1987a : 447-452, Fig. 1-2 ; 1987b : 148-149, Fig. 8 ; Matthiae 2006b : 221-225.

19) Matthiae 1987a : 450, note 7 ; TM.85.G.300.

20) Dolce 2001 : 15.

21) Matthiae 1993 : 634-637, Fig. 3: 12-13.

22) *Ibidem* : 637.

23) Pezzetta 2003 : 32.

24) Dolce 2001 : 17, Fig. 5.

25) Matthiae 1998 : 572, note 35 ; 2000 : 580, Fig. 9.

26) Pezzetta 2003 : 32.

27) Baffi 2000 : 57-58, Fig. 12-13.

28) Gelb 1984 : 213-229 ; Frayne 1990 : 807 ; Archi 2002 : 26.

ue and a cult basin “before Ishtar, his Lady” establishing *de facto* the cult of this goddess in the site<sup>29</sup>. Different arguments can be used to determine the position of this dynasty. First of all, the names of the kings of the period show a degree of continuity with older names, a fact emphasized rightly by Matthiae. The name of Igrish-Kheb, the father of Ibbit-Lim, is in fact to be compared with Igrish-Khalab, the ante-penultimate king at the time of the archives<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, in the Ibbit-Lim inscription Ib-Damu appears<sup>31</sup>, *mekum* of Ebla. The title *mekum* is attested also in the legend of a seal reused by an Assyrian merchant on two documents from Kültepe, *karum 2*. A Mekum governor of Ebla is also cited in a document from Drehem of the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Amar-Suen<sup>32</sup>; later mentions of a *Mekum* are also known<sup>33</sup>. Other textual sources supplement information on the role of Ebla in the late Third Millennium. In one of the inscriptions of Gudea, *ensi* of the second dynasty of Lagash, Ebla is cited in relation to its wood, and messengers from Ebla are cited in Ur at the time of Amar-Suen and Shu-Suen<sup>34</sup>. The sources indicate that Ebla was well known and active in trade at the time of the second dynasty of Lagash, the Ur III dynasty and at the time of the Old-Assyrian *karum 2*. All these data have been evaluated as furnishing the historical framework for the process of continuity documented on an archaeological and iconographic basis<sup>35</sup>.

These data offer no clues, however, to date the collapse of EB IVB. Instead a moment of disruption around the year 2000 B.C. has repeatedly been proposed on the basis of both textual and archaeological evidence. The near total cessation of references to Syrians after the 6<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Shu-Suen has been interpreted as being due either to a cessation of contacts or to the decline of the Syrian states<sup>36</sup>. The archaeological evidence supporting the collapse hypothesis has been furnished by the presence of burnt debris containing EB IVB pottery in the core of the urban MB ramparts at Ebla. This has been related to a supposedly violent destruction of the city around 2000, possibly by Amorites<sup>37</sup>. The Amorite hypothesis has later been interpreted no longer as a sudden invasion but, instead, as a gradual process introducing new religious elements and a new material culture whilst preserving, even respecting, royal ideology and urban planning<sup>38</sup>. The ramparts of the city which enclosed the earlier EB IV walls and were built at the beginning of MB I have been attributed hypothetically to Ibbit-Lim, who might also have refurbished the city, perhaps like the kings of Isin and Larsa<sup>39</sup>. There is nevertheless no trace of a destruction layer over the Archaic Palace Phase I floors, which were, however, covered by a thin deposit and built over by the Phase II floors, documenting functional continuity and organic transformation from EB IVB up to MB I.

The date of the Ibbit-Lim inscription, therefore, becomes a decisive factor in the argument. If we attribute the process of re-urbanization of Ebla to an Ibbit-Lim dating to Ur III, we have then to accommodate the hypothetical disruption preceding its accession to the period before the final years of the Third Millennium. Whether or not this marked the passage from EB IVB to MB I is of course questionable, but the attribution to Ibbit-Lim of the re-planning of Ebla implies *stricto sensu* a new cultural phase, hence MB I, which would in this case emerge still within a context of Ur III primacy. If, instead, we date Ibbit-Lim to a post-Ur III phase, *i.e.* the Isin and Larsa period, the new urbanization of Ebla can be set in a scenario of new political entities, such as the Amorites, and new economic trends and commercial trajectories, such as those opened with Anatolia, documented by the foundation of *karum 2*.

To sum up, so far neither the archaeological nor the epigraphic evidence offers very decisive clues for the solution of three main questions<sup>40</sup>: 1) the duration of the disruption and the existence

29) Matthiae 1993 : 656 ; 2000 : 608-609 ; 2001 : 277.

30) Tonietti 1997 : 240-242 ; Matthiae 2000 : 609 ; Archi 2002 : 26.

31) Tonietti 1997 : 229-230.

32) *Eadem* 1997 : 225-226 ; Archi 2002 : 25-26.

33) Charpin and Ziegler 1997 ; Scandone Matthiae 1997.

34) Owen 1992 : 117-121 ; Edzard 1997 : 33 ; Dolce 2001 : 24.

35) Dolce 2001 ; Pinnock 2004.

36) Owen 1992 : 114.

37) Matthiae 1989 : 132 ; Matthiae 2000 : 608-609, note 104.

38) Pinnock 2004 : 116-117.

39) Matthiae 2000 : 609, note 103.

40) See also Dolce 2001 : 26.

of a hiatus between EB IVA and B. Neither the hypothesis that the city was not abandoned even for a short time<sup>41</sup> nor the theory that, instead, a period of around two centuries “elapsed between the destruction by the Akkadians and the construction of the Late Early Syrian city”<sup>42</sup> can be demonstrated with certainty. 2) the chronology of the re-urbanisation in EB IVB, which means both its duration and its phasing; 3) the nature of and reasons for the disruption, if it existed, between EB IVB and MB I. For the second and third questions, arguments for assigning to EB IVB a period of two and a half centuries and a continuity through the beginning of MB I with only a temporary break have been advocated because of chronological considerations based on the bilingual Hittite-Hurrian epic of Freeing<sup>43</sup>. The hypothesis of a Hurrian interference as a cause of the EB/MB disruption at Ebla (suggested with due caution by R. Dolce<sup>44</sup>) is certainly intriguing but rather speculative, as it is based on a scenario alluded to by a literary text of later date.

Instead, a different approach to the whole question can be proposed, once a process of cultural continuity has been ascertained by material culture in connection with a stratigraphic sequence showing apparently no break in the occupational history of the site. This is the case offered in Ebla, at least by the evidence of the northern Palace, P Archaic, and the Ishtar G3 shrine. The fact that they were both institutional buildings provides hints that may help us to evaluate the political conditions supporting this continuity. It could, finally, be argued that the re-structuring of the early MB I Ebla can be interpreted not as a revival after a collapse but as the apex of a trend that had already started in the course of EB IVB and which included economic stability and, eventually, growth and political stability.

## 2. THE CASE OF AFIS

Moving from the metropolis to the smaller centre nearby, to the North, Tell Afis (Fig. 1), the link with historical fact is lost; no palace whatsoever, no kings, no texts<sup>45</sup>. The data available all comes from an area located on the western slope of the site, E3, resulting from the enlargement of one of the ‘steps’ of the first stepped trench here opened in 1991<sup>46</sup>. So far EBA IVB levels (Afis IV in the local periodization<sup>47</sup>) had been reached in relatively small exposures<sup>48</sup>, to the West of (and at a lower level than) the imposing remains of the MBA fortification walls of the acropolis (Afis V: Fig. 2)<sup>49</sup>, which were preserved to a considerable height. The latter were quite probably built in two steps, not too far one from the other, at the latest by the end of MB I/beginning of MB IIA, as revealed by the associated materials<sup>50</sup>. These were the two available boundaries in chronological terms, i.e. EB IVB and MB I, between which must be fitted the archaeological evidence discovered in the most recent

41) Matthiae 1989 : 125.

42) Dolce 1999 : 296.

43) Dolce 2001 : 27-28.

44) Eadem 1999 : 297.

45) It has been suggested to identify the site with the *’Áb-zit<sup>ki</sup>* mentioned in the Ebla archive: Archi *et al.* 1993 : 147 ; see also Bonechi 1993 : 13 and Mazzoni 1995 : 245. More recently, P. Fronzaroli has questioned this attribution favouring instead to locate it in the area of Homs : Fronzaroli 2003 : 141 f.

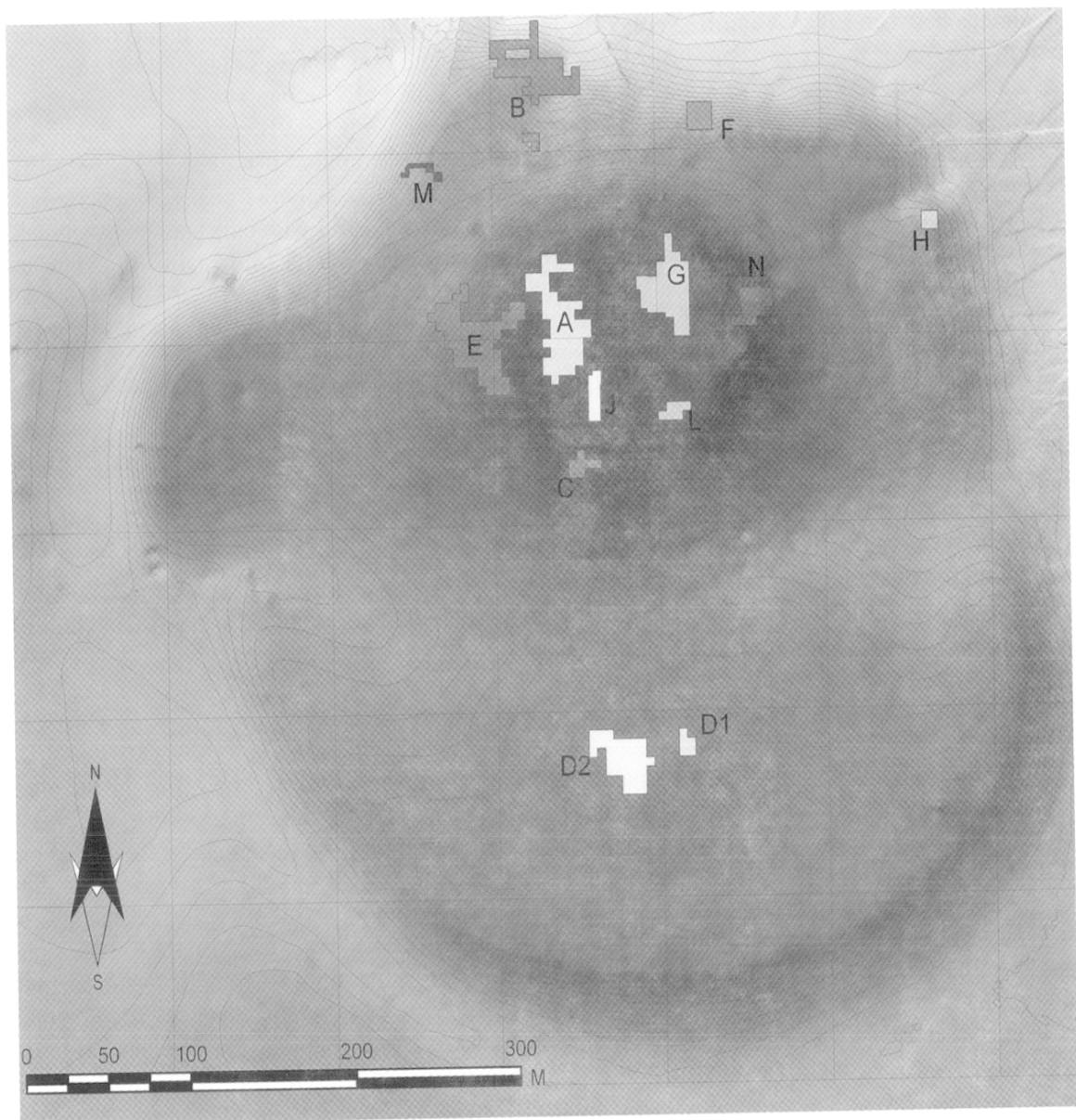
46) Cecchini and Mazzoni (eds) 1998 : see especially the westernmost part of the stratigraphic section at the beginning of the volume.

47) See Mazzoni 2005 : 252. EB IVA materials have been found only in secondary deposits (Mazzoni 1998a : 10 f., 32).

48) Giannessi 1995 : 255-256, Fig. 7; 1998 : 103-104, Fig. 11-12 ; Merluzzi 1995 : 253-254, Fig. 11-12 ; Mazzoni 1998a : 32 f. It is impossible, at the present state of research, to have a clear idea about the settlement extension and layout during the entire Early Bronze Age; therefore, the following considerations are to be taken as limited to a small sample of the site in the very last part of the period. However, in this respect, it has to be added that the most recent excavations in area N on the eastern slope of the site have provided evidence for EBA occupation on the Acropolis at least in its eastern precinct.

49) Gabarrini 1995 : 259, Fig. 15c, 17 ; Giannessi 1995 : 255, Fig. 7a ; 1998 : 104, Fig. 13-15 ; Mazzoni 1998a : 34-36, Fig. 20-26 ; 1998b : 15, Figs 11, 12 ; 2002-2003 : 102, Fig. 6 ; Felli 1999-2000 : Fig. 7 ; Felli and Merluzzi 2002 : Fig. 16.

50) Mazzoni 1998a : 35, Fig. 20-22 ; Felli 1999-2000 : 13 f., Fig. 10.



**Fig. 1 : Map of Tell Afis.**

campaigns, once the remains of the fortifications in the southern portion of the area<sup>51</sup> have been removed. Such evidence has expanded the duration of this slice of the occupational history of the site: a more precise definition of the chronological span covered by these remains would appear clearly crucial to our discussion, but is still in progress<sup>52</sup> and this not only because it is evidence quite recently brought to light. Indeed it is probably not out-of-place to recall once again how little is yet known about the material culture and general history of the area precisely in this period of time: the old sequences of Hama<sup>53</sup> and the Amuq sites<sup>54</sup> are not fully published and may need some revision;

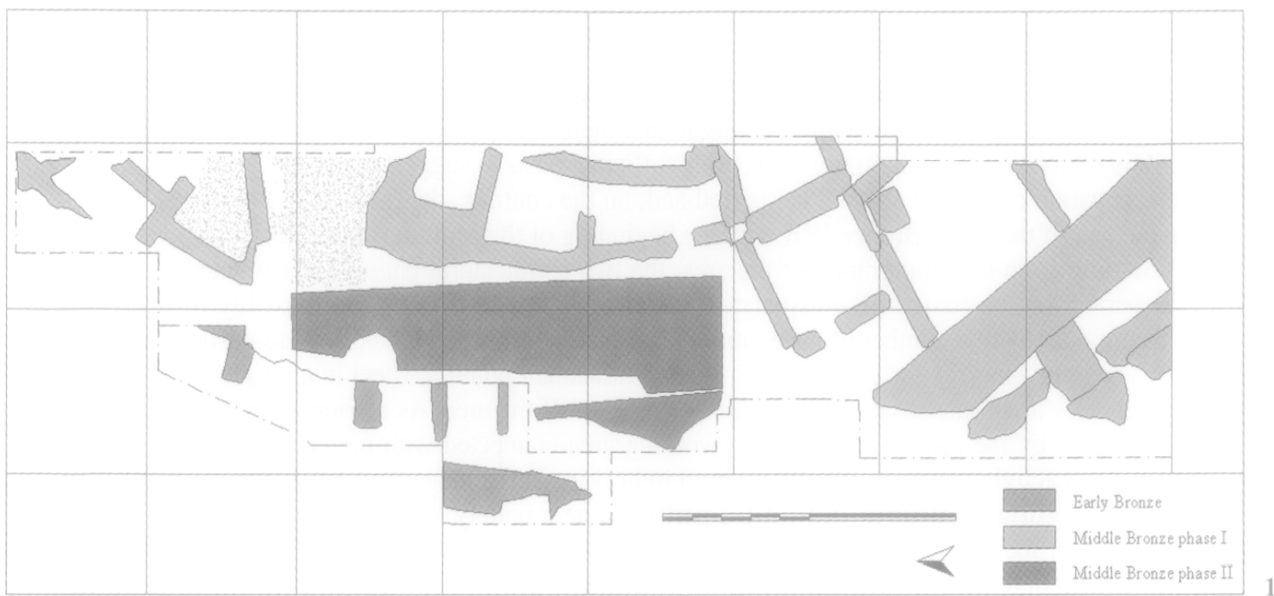
51) Felli and Merluzzi 2005 : Felli and Merluzzi in print.

52) The only C<sup>14</sup> dates available so far for this 'intermediate phase' come from just one context and give us too large a timespan to be really useful here, though suggesting a date towards the end of the Third Millennium (Felli and Merluzzi 2005 : 52). Of course, more dates are needed from other contexts related to this phase as well as a better assessment of possible sub-phases.

53) Fugmann 1958. See also Thuesen 2000 : 1638, where Hama phase J is equalled to the EB/MB transition.

54) For the lack of data on the end of phase J and beginning of phase K in the 'Amuq sites (Tell Ta'yinat) see the remarks in Braidwood and Braidwood 1960 : 429.





**Fig. 2 : 1) Area E3 : schematic plan showing superimposition of MB on EB structures ;  
2) MB fortification walls as preserved in the eastern and southern sections.**

very few other sites offer stratified material to compare with for synchronization, especially as far as the very end of the Third Millennium is concerned (see below), and generally too little has so far been published<sup>55</sup>. However, by taking 2100 B.C. not as an absolute chronological term but as a more approximate indication of time, one can argue that there are specific elements in the evidence from the Afis excavations which, in my view, offer sufficient basis to suggest the absence of any break in the occupation of the site around that period and, on the contrary, the existence of a phase connecting the end of the Early Bronze IVB with the beginning of the Middle Bronze age.

Starting from the stratigraphy of the area, the two architectural phases clearly dated to the EB IVB period, on the basis of the associated material<sup>56</sup>, consist of rooms and possibly related open areas provided with a number of installations. These structures can be labelled 'domestic', although there are some hints, as for example the retrieval of a small potter's wheel in a pit along with other stone tools<sup>57</sup>, at an industrial character for at least part of the area. As a point of fact, these phases are followed by the establishment of the working area connected with pottery manufacturing and further craft activities just recently brought to light (Fig. 3). To judge from the scale and number of installations (firing structures, at least the northern one a pottery kiln, still preserving materials *in situ*; a wheel location; some working surfaces), one could define this area with the term 'workshop'<sup>58</sup>, although we cannot determine either its actual production or related patterns of distribution within the site.

At some point in time a major change in the use of the area occurs: the workshop apparently stops its activities; the cavities of the different firing installations are filled-in with debris material, on top of which a very distinctive mixture of small stones and crushed limestone in a clayish matrix is laid, if not all at once, then in quite rapid successive stages; the whole action is followed by the building of thick walls for fortification purposes. That the lapse of time between the latter and the end of the workshop's activity was probably not very long is clearly indicated by the consistent rebuilding on top of previous structures<sup>59</sup>, by the shallowness of the intervening deposits and, as we shall see below, by the materials, which can be related to the next phase found both on the earlier floors and within the mud-bricks and foundations of the walls themselves, among which are also some fired clay pieces, which can probably be ascribed to one of the firing structures underneath. Very little levelling apparently took place before laying the foundations, except in the case of the most imposing northern feature, for which a deep cut into earlier deposits was made, possibly at a slightly later date<sup>60</sup>. Continuity with the previous phase is also attested by the use of similar building techniques: e.g. mudbricks on top of stone foundations, white plastered floors in indoor spaces, sherd-packing for levelling purposes.

If we consider the material recovered from all floors and associated deposits, we can also appreciate a significant degree of continuity of development throughout the sequence. I shall concentrate here especially on the pottery coming from the "intermediate" phase, *i.e.* associated to the working area<sup>61</sup>, which appears due to its stratigraphic position particularly relevant for determining the existence of ties between the EB and MB traditions. When presenting part of this material in the third

55) Among the sites where levels of occupation relating to the EB-MB transition have been discovered we can mention Tell Kabir (Porter 1995 : Cooper 1998 : 1999) ; Tell Sveyhat (Zettler *et al.* 1996 : 18) ; Kurban Höyük (Algaze *et al.* 1990 : 386 f.). In the revised chronology of Halawa-Tell A phasing, J.-W. Meyer and W. Pruß ascribe the more recent level of phase 3 to the transition between Early and Middle Bronze period (*ca.* 2050 B.C: Meyer and Pruß 1994 : 11, table 1) ; see also more recently Hempelmann 2004 : 53. For the most recent overview on the Euphrates valley see now Cooper 2006 : 26.

56) Giannessi 1998 : 103 ; Mazzoni 1998a : 33 ; 2002a: 78.

57) Giannessi 1998 : 104.

58) For this definition see Wood 1990 : 33.

59) This is visible especially in the area of the northern kiln, where the stone foundations for the walls of one of the MB rooms are built above the remains of its outer limits.

60) S. Mazzoni has suggested a dating to MB IB, or to MB IIA at the latest, for the materials found in association with the rooms to the East and also within the wall (Mazzoni 1998a : 35). The investigation of the part underneath this wall just started in 2006 at Tell Afis : an account will be published in the following preliminary report.

61) For a selection of this material, see Felli and Merluzzi 2002 : Fig. 18: 1-6; Felli and Merluzzi 2005 : Fig. 42: 1-11.



Fig. 3 : EB/MB working area plan.

ICAANE in Berlin<sup>62</sup>, we underlined the apparent mixture of traits of continuity and innovation within it: as a result, the dividing line one could draw between the EB and MB periods becomes seemingly blurred. In doing so, we referred particularly to the case of the assemblage from Building Two at Tell Kabir, where forms typical of the EB IV period are found along with forms which either anticipate or already belong to MB<sup>63</sup>. This appears in some way as a novelty at a regional level, where late EB IV and MB assemblages seem characterized rather more by differences than similarities: I am referring in particular to the two main centres of Ebla and Hama, which have provided the basic framework for the reconstruction of the history of the area in both periods<sup>64</sup>, and that was indeed also the case at Afis before the results from the most recent excavations. If in the case of Hama phases J and H, we may be faced with assemblages that are not continuous, thus missing some of the ties that in fact do exist; at Ebla, the situation appears to be different (see above): a continuous sequence of occupational levels from EB IVB to MB I has been recovered both in areas P and T in the Lower Town. Too little of this material has yet been published to establish a thorough correlation with that from Afis, as has been the case for earlier and later materials: however the assemblages of the two phases are described as quite different one from the other and neither of the two seems really to correspond to our phase. A possibility, which is quite likely, is that the sample investigated from the site provides just a selection of the material in use at that time. Of course, local variation should also be taken into account when making such inter-site comparisons.

The types defined as characteristic of the first MB assemblage at Ebla (MB IA<sup>65</sup>) are not found at Afis before the phase of disbanding of the working area. Those that are attested present a few differences, which may indicate an earlier dating. This is the case, for example, of deep bowls with an expanded, upper grooved rim and carinated body, which tend to become more rounded towards the MB IIA<sup>66</sup>. At Afis (Fig. 4: 5-6), the biconical shape is associated with a squatter body and the upper part of the body is generally less vertical than on the Eblaite specimens<sup>67</sup>; furthermore, unlike the latter, these vessels are still made in distinct parts by coils, which also explains the irregular thickness of the walls, and then finished on the wheel<sup>68</sup>. Another characteristic is decorative finger impressions at the level of the carination. The presence of a potter's mark on at least one of the almost complete examples attests to the persistence of a feature characteristic of EBA pottery production, still so frequent on the whole of this intermediate phase material, while diminishing consistently in the Middle Bronze period<sup>69</sup>. Among the other MBA-oriented types of our assemblage should be mentioned a medium- to large-sized jar with no neck and a thickened, externally double-profiled rim type (Fig. 4: 7-9), which seems to have been particularly fashionable during this intermediate stage, as attested by the retrieval of several specimens in the filling of an oval-shaped firing installation in the southern part of the area. Occasionally, a simple decoration consisting of one or more groups of incised horizontal lines occurs on the shoulder, a trait, which will enjoy great popu-

62) Felli and Merluzzi in print.

63) Porter 1995 : 149. A similar situation seems also to occur in period III at Kurban : Algaze *et al.* 1990 : 386 f. and 430 : Algaze 1998 : 551 f.

64) See Nigro 2002a : 102, which however gives credit to some continuity in the pottery tradition as far as storage jars are concerned. See also the remarks in Matthiae 1993 : 637 as far as the material from area T is concerned. For an analysis of the aspects of continuity in the realm of the artistic tradition see Pinnock 2004.

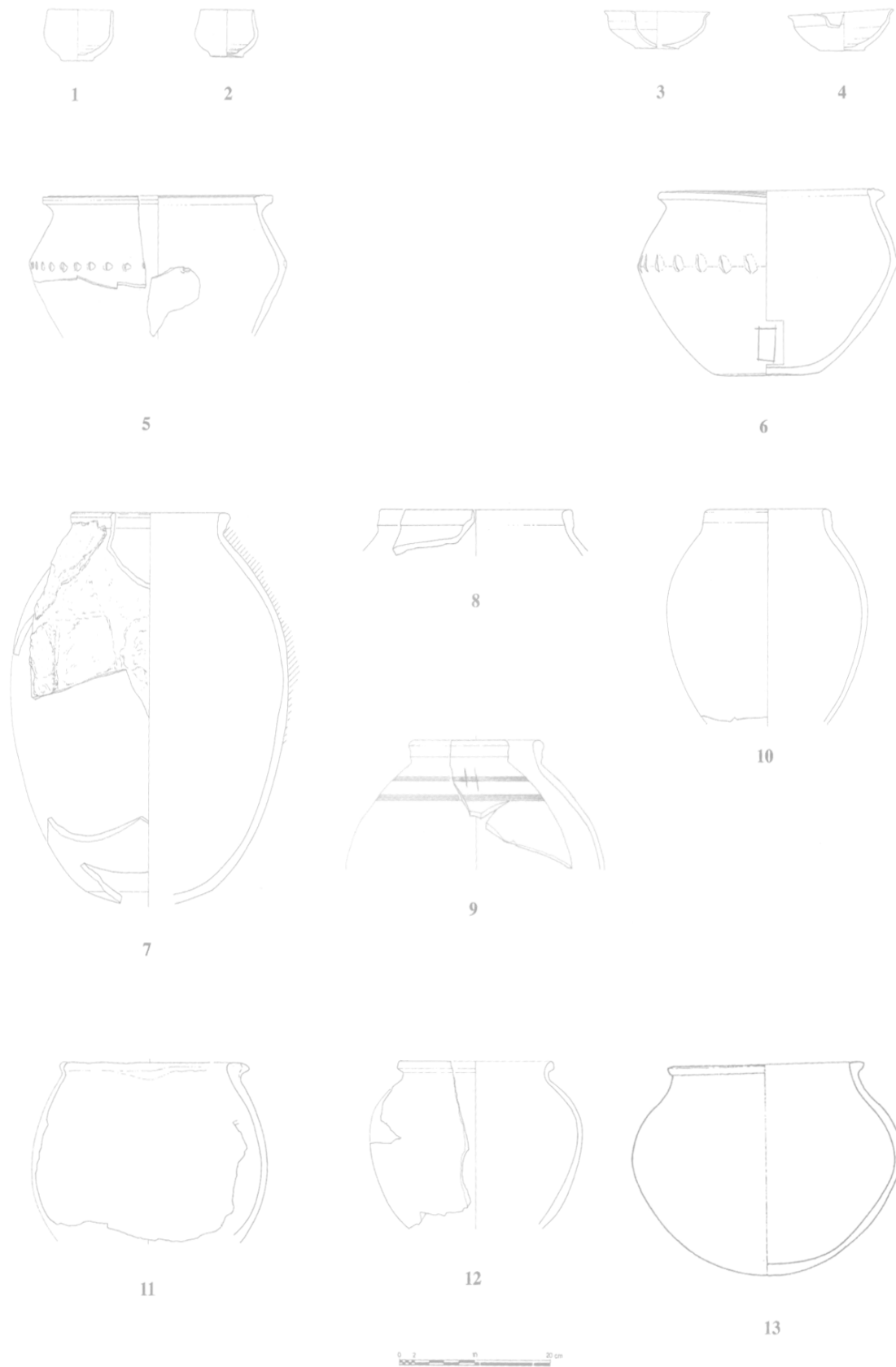
65) For a description of the morphological types within the first assemblages ascribable to MB in Ebla see Nigro 2002a : 102-104 ; Matthiae 2006 : 95, Fig. 9-10. At Tell Afis, stratified MB I materials have been found, apart from area E3, in area B, located at the northern edge of the lower town : Mazzoni 2002b : Fig. 6/2-10; Aletta 2005 : Fig. 31/4-12.

66) Nigro 2002a : 103, Pl. XLVII/20-21. This type occurs also within the EB-MB transitional assemblage at Kabir : Cooper 1998 : 276. According to Nigro, "MB IA specimen may be distinguished only on the grounds of the fabric material. The most widespread fabrics of this period are a whitish variety, tempered with black sand, and a reddish-brown type tempered with chalk inclusion" (*ibidem* : 102, note 64). See also Pinnock 2005 : 45 f.

67) This can be also appreciated in comparison with clear MB examples at our site, which generally tend to be larger : see for example Mazzoni 1998a : Fig. 20/10 : 21/13.

68) Interestingly at least three examples have been found embedded in a floor, all of them in the proximity of a kiln or firing structure, suggesting the existence of some functional connection with it (Felli and Merluzzi 2005 : 49).

69) On Ebla, see the remarks in Pinnock 2005 : 17. For an overview on EB marks from the same site, see Mazzoni 1988 : 89-91.



**Fig. 4 : Selection of EB/MB pottery : 1-10 Simple Ware ; 11-13 Cooking Ware.**

larity in the Second Millennium B.C. However, MBA specimens have usually a more marked profile of the rim: often the upper part tends to be larger and protrude slightly outward. When we look around, this type is found at a very large number of sites spanning the period from late EBA IV to early MBA<sup>70</sup>. Significantly at Mari it is found within levels dated to the early *shakkanakku* period, which should be rather close to the crucial years that interest us<sup>71</sup>.

If we then look at this material from area E3 on the whole, we can say that, unlike the two previous phases, it is likely to come after the *floruit* of the painted ceramic stage of EB IVB: there is clearly a decrease in painted vessels, in particular of the specific type which is the hallmark for EB IVB in the region, *i.e.* the painted and incised beaker. However, painted sherds are still attested, even taking into account that some of the smaller fragments might be in fact residual<sup>72</sup>, thus indicating a gradual and not an abrupt phenomenon. *Smearred-Wash ware*, again a production specific to EB IVB, is still attested although in an even smaller percentage<sup>73</sup>.

Simple ware is by far the most common group, followed by cooking ware<sup>74</sup>. The vessels are mainly grit-tempered, usually undecorated, although simple forms of incised decoration are attested (e.g. series of finger-tips, wavy lines, horizontal lines). As far as pottery technology is concerned, the petrographic analyses carried out on a large sample including both apparent EBA and MBA types have revealed considerable homogeneity within individual wares in terms of clay, temper, surface finishing and firing<sup>75</sup>.

Among morphological types which seem distinctive of this phase we can mention the small cup with vertical sides, simple rim and flat base (Fig. 4: 1, 2), which seems to me reminiscent of those attested already at the time of Palace G at Ebla, although in a lower percentage than the beakers with corrugated walls and beaded rim (the so-called Hama beaker)<sup>76</sup>. The carinated bowl, with a flaring rim, slightly bulging sides and a flat base (Fig. 4: 3, 4), which finds a possible parallel within the Hama J1 assemblage<sup>77</sup>, seems instead to anticipate the blossoming of carinated types in open forms

70) E.g. Ebla : Archaic Palace, room L. 5863, dated to MB IA (Nigro 2002a : Fig. 22, 24, 25) ; grave D. 6922 (Baffi 2000 : Fig. 16/1 : MB I) ; grave D. 6274 (Nigro 1998 : Fig. 8: MB IA) ; tomb of the Princess (Matthiae 1979 : Fig. L/2, MB I/II : the context is now dated to MB IB by L. Nigro : Nigro 2002b : 304). Tell Kabir : Building Two, room 2 (Porter 1995 : Fig. 14, with applied decoration and spout, 15/2, 16/3 : Early-MB transitional). Halawa : *Grab* H-119 (Orthmann 1981 : Pl. 66/ 66, 67 : late EB IV). At Tell Bi'a, the related types (89-90 : Einwag 1995 : 176) are found already in the *Keramikkomplex* 1, which should be dated the very end of the EB period (Einwag 2002 : 147): the type 91, with a more pronounced upper part, is instead found in the *Keramikkomplex* 2 and, in greater proportions, in the later assemblages 6 and 7. In the 'Amuq area the type is attested in the Second Mixed Range at the site of Ta'yinat, where no occupational phase was found between phases J and O : therefore R. Braidwood, persuaded that this had to be dated to the Middle Bronze Period (phase K or L), put forward the hypothesis that someone had brought along these vessels from Tell Atchana, though admitting, as a less probable option, that they could represent the very last part of 'Amuq J (Braidwood and Braidwood 1960 : 463, Fig. 363).

71) Pons 1999 : Fig. 10: 1, 2. See also Margueron 2004 : Fig. 397: 8, 10, for smaller size examples.

72) This is indeed a real problem, affecting especially materials from secondary or even tertiary contexts (e.g. walls). On this matter see G. Kaschau's observations on the material from Lidar (1999 : 44, note 306), who also admits the difficulties in discerning what is "Altmaterial" and what is "Durchläufern", especially as far as early Middle Bronze materials are concerned.

73) At Afis the frequency of this ware is never very high even in full EB IVB contexts (Mazzoni 1998a : 32). At least as far as western sites are concerned, the period of attestation of this ware seems to reach as far as the very end of the Third Millennium (*i.e.* Ur III period in Mesopotamian terms : Rova 1989 : 182).

74) A similar pattern of distribution of wares is to be found in period III ('EB-MB transition') at Kurban Höyük (Algaze *et al.* 1990 : 369).

75) We do not have here the same radical change as recorded in Ebla at the start of the local MB phase. The differences in technology observed by Nigro (2002b : 301) are : "1) systematic use of the fast wheel ; 2) specialization of wares according to their functions (in terms of clays, tempers and treatments) ; 3) changes in clay preparation and sieving, exemplified by the affirmation of mineral sand tempers instead of straw ; 4) general fall in the firing temperature, which hints at changes in the shapes and structures of pottery kilns ; 5) frequent use of a wooden tool (a stick) for smoothing and regularizing the vessel's surface ; 6) combed bands as decorative motives in crucial turn of shapes ; 7) coating of vessels' surface with slips, usually made of the same clay as the fabrics, applied before firing". Standardization of forms and fabrics is already attested during the late EB IVB phase (Mazzoni 2002 : 79).

76) E.g. Mazzoni 1982 : Fig. XXIX: 1, 3 ; Matthiae *et al.* 1995 : 361, n<sup>os</sup> 180, 182 and 184. See also an example within the Hama J4 materials (Fugmann 1958 : 69, Fig. 85, 3F815) and possibly also J1 (*ibidem* : Fig. 103, 3K259).

77) Fugmann 1958 : 80, Fig. 103, 3C101 : however, this piece shows an indentation inside the rim and a ring-base which are not found on the Afis examples.

Jazr Survey Sites

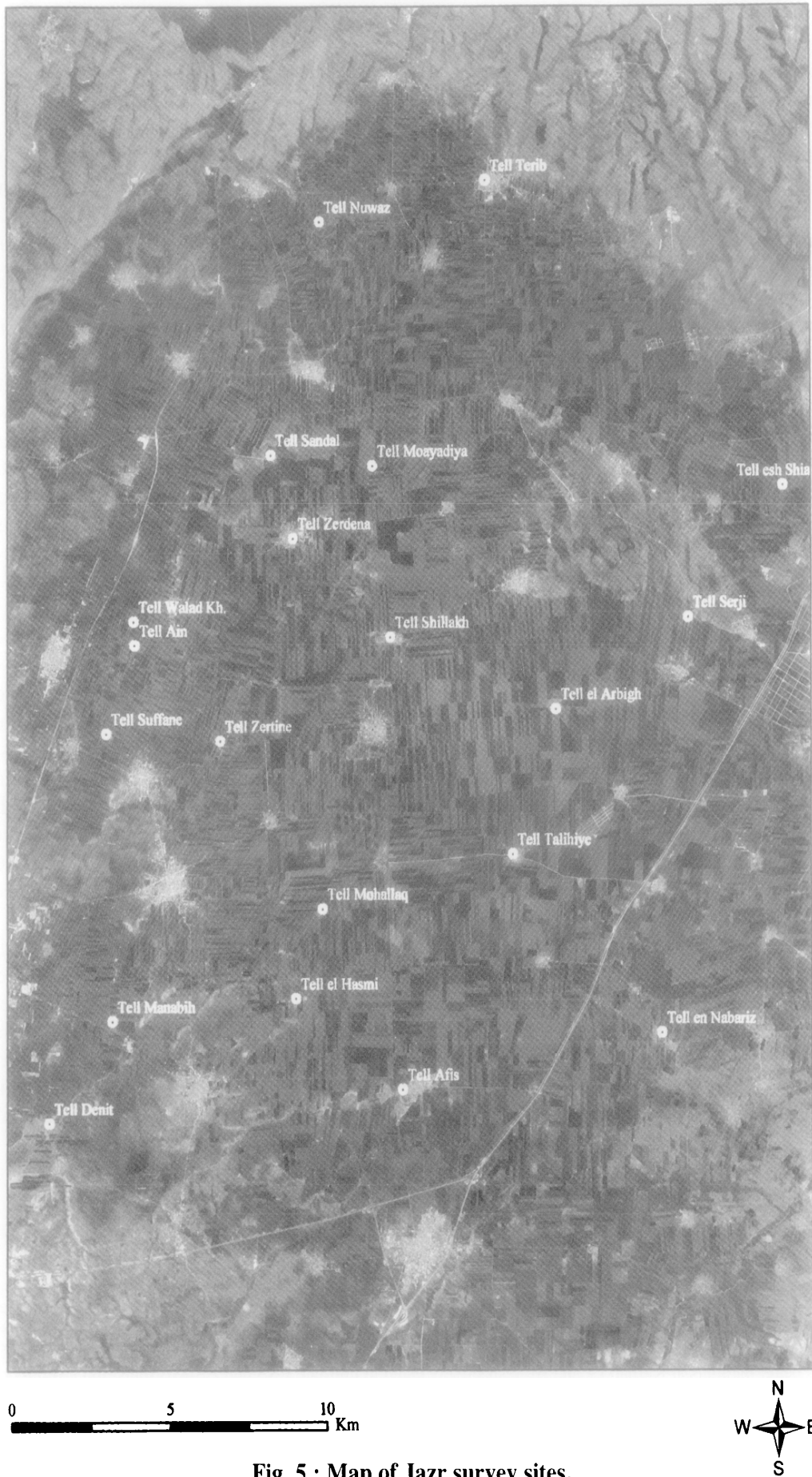


Fig. 5 : Map of Jazr survey sites.

during the Middle Bronze Age; their dense, well-fired fabric, however, is still closer to the tradition of the fine wares of the Early Bronze Age. In reference to this, it might not be out of place to mention the resemblance of these bowls' profile with that of the fragments of two carinated bowls made in what is called "Chefren's diorite", which were found years ago in the last level clearly to be ascribed to EB IVB in this area<sup>78</sup>.

Among cooking-pots, the presence of *Dreieckigen Lappengriffen* vessels (Fig. 4: 11), already attested at Afis in EB IVB levels<sup>79</sup>, comes as no surprise since it is now clear that this type of vessel is found up to the beginning of Second Millennium B.C., especially in Anatolia<sup>80</sup>. More common however, are simple, rounded pots, grit-tempered and usually unburnished (Fig. 4: 12, 13), as are most of the EB IV examples: this is the usual cooking vessel throughout the late EB-MB sequence, another sign of continuity, with a tendency towards more spherical examples in the later phase owing to the fast-wheel manufacture.

In sum, there are in my opinion elements to suggest that the end of the Third Millennium does not represent a period of crisis for the site but, on the contrary, an important formative stage, in which the EB cultural tradition is not lost but, on the other hand, some of the later MB 'innovations' are anticipated. I would also see the building of the fortifications at the end of this phase not as a sign of depletion but as evidence of a still thriving settlement<sup>81</sup>. Whether we want to consider this stage as still belonging to EB or already to MB, or to leave it on its own as *sui generis* is a matter of labelling which on the one hand I do not want to ignore because of its important historical implications, but which, on the other I reckon too large a question to be dealt with on such a reduced scale. This cannot be done until a better understanding of the phenomenon on a larger scale has been achieved.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological documents from Ebla and Tell Afis seem to suggest the picture of an ongoing continuity between EB IVB and MB I. These conclusions can be substantiated with the results of the survey in the Afis region (the plain of the Jazr: Fig. 5), which also furnishes evidence of steady occupation throughout the whole sequence under discussion<sup>82</sup>. While EB IVA is poorly documented, EB IVB sherds were collected in the majority of the tells in the area; transitional EB/MB and MB I materials were also identified largely in the plain, whilst the period of most intense occupation prior to late antiquity was, without doubt, MB II. Therefore, the region underwent a process of settlement increase through EB IVB to MB II, without any gap in the three periods documented, EB IVB, MB I and II.

The pottery horizon is apparently consistent with the process of settlement continuity in the plain, documenting an inner transformation of techniques and mode of production for a repertory developing from original EB traditions. The transformation was a slow and gradual process entailing the success of serial and industrial practices to facilitate standardization and mass-production, increase productivity and respond to a growing demand for storage and table containers for domestic commodities. Therefore, standardized common and fine table wares prevailed over the finished, painted, slipped wares which were limited only to specialized elite or functional uses. Eventually, at the end of this course, storage wares became also mass-produced.

78) Giannessi 1995 : 255 ; Scandone Matthiae 1995 : Fig. 13. For earlier examples from Ebla, see *Eadem* 1981 (especially Fig. C/Aa.1).

79) Mazzoni 1998a : Fig. 16/17.

80) See for example the attestations within MB contexts at Lidar Höyük, with seven examples in the earlier levels, phases 1-2/3, and four in the later ones, phase 5 : Kaschau 1999 : 63, type *KT 4*, Fig. 42 below. According to this scholar, the difference with local EB examples lies in less protruding lugs. The Afis example under examination (Fig. 5) finds its better parallels at Kurban IV and III, respectively dated to mid-late EBA and EB-MB transition (Algaze *et al.* 1990 : Pls 94/F : 135/H. I, although the former has thicker and the latter more rounded lugs).

81) See also Matthiae 2006 : 94 note 16.

82) Mazzoni 2005 : 8-9.



It is certainly questionable whether the material culture developed at the same pace as other cultural traits and economic, if not political situations. However, we would no doubt relate the continuity and steady development of what was once termed "caliciform ware" throughout the second half of Third Millennium B.C. with the process of growing settlement stability, and link both to the advent of secondary urbanization and the economic growth it successfully promoted. It should be noted that it was precisely during EB IVB that urbanization spread well beyond the areas of its prime origin and development, expanding even in areas which were more marginal in terms of agriculture but which were, more favourable to herding, such as the steppe where the creation of a cluster of settlements culminated precisely in EB IVB. This can be seen from the sites already investigated among the many identified by surveys such as Tell Rawda, east of Salimiyeh<sup>83</sup>, Khirbet el Umbashi, in the region to the east of the Jebel el-'Arab<sup>84</sup> and Moumassakhin and Yabrud, in the Kalamoun, to the north-east of Damascus<sup>85</sup>. Urbanization did not survive there for long, because the territory could not sustain a large, settled population concentrated in a restricted habitat except during very favourable years and/or with the support of a controlled or centralized hydraulic system<sup>86</sup>. The inhabitants probably withdrew to a pastoral life based mainly on herding and dispersed across the vast steppe. Areas favourable to agriculture could, instead, maintain and even improve an economy based on crops and horticulture, especially where it had long been demonstrated to be successful (see the Ebla texts), in the bottom of valleys, in the adjacent hilly areas and on the edges of alluvial plains. The clustering of villages around the border of the Afis plain, which apparently culminated in MB I-II but was initiated in EB IVB, fits this case and can be properly interpreted as a dynamic of a steady growth of farming communities bent on optimising resources. This probably resulted in an intensification and specialization of an integrated production of crops in the alluvial plain and along its margins, and of olives on the hilly flanks, based on a strategy of selecting favourable land with well drained soils.

To sum up, the archaeological documentation is coherent and supports the reconstruction of a homogeneous regional process of development across the 21/20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the EB/MB divide. In Ebla, institutional buildings are in uninterrupted use from EB IVB to MB I, attesting to political continuity and economic stability; Afis and its territory show a continuous and dense occupation. The picture is, therefore, apparently unlike the reality of the Syrian Middle Euphrates, where there is evidence of continuity of domestic units but not of institutional buildings, attesting to a crisis of centralization<sup>87</sup>; it is not a case of dispersal from nucleation<sup>88</sup>. A different situation seems to have developed in the area of Ebla and Afis, as well as in the north-western region including the Orontes valley from Hama to Tell Atchana. To conclude, whereas we admit that the textual sources remain silent and that we can not firmly demonstrate that particular political conditions (the rise of the Amorites?), coupled with choices of an economic nature (the intensification of dry-farming on selected land) or a commercial one (the route to Anatolia: *karum*; the route to Mari and Mesopotamia) did in fact promote this development in north-western Syria, we maintain that the documentation from Ebla and Afis does point in this direction.

83) Castel *et al.* 2005 : 82-93.

84) Braemer and Echallier 2000 : 406-409 ; Braemer 2002 : 9-15.

85) Al-Maqdissi 2000.

86) Castel *et al.* 2005 : 83-85, 92-93 ; Geyer and Calvet 2001 ; Braemer and Sapin 2001.

87) Cooper 1998 ; Hempelmann 2004 : 83-85.

88) Peltenburg 2000.

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