

A HISTORY OF SYRIA IN ONE HUNDRED SITES

edited by

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

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10. Jerf el-Ahmar (Aleppo)

Danielle Stordeur and George Willcox

(CNRS, France)

Jerf el Ahmar is a site of the Mureybetian Culture (PPNA horizon) established on the left bank of the Middle Euphrates in Syria (D. Stordeur 2015. *Le village de Jerf el Ahmar (Syrie, 9500-8700 av. J.C.). L'architecture, miroir d'une société néolithique complexe*. Paris, CNRS Editions). It was occupied between approximately 9500 and 8700 cal BC. The site was discovered by T. Mc Clellan in the 1980s and was excavated by a Franco-Syrian team from 1995 to 1999 (by D. Stordeur CNRS and B. Jamous DGAM) as a rescue excavation due to the construction of Tichrin dam. Today, the site lies under the waters lake formed by the dam.

The site was established on two small hillocks separated by a small *wadi*. The cultivation of morphologically wild crops is attested in this area (G. Willcox, S. Fornite, L. Herveux 2008, 'Early Holocene cultivation before domestication in northern Syria' *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*. 17/3:313-325).

Cultural developments can be seen during the 500 years of occupation. Towards the end of the occupation the inhabitants of Jerf el Ahmar enter into a phase of transition which announces the PPNB. Eleven occupation levels have been identified. The extent of the area excavation (1000m²) and the abundance of the finds, including building plans of the occupation, made it possible to identify the signs of a complex social organization at this site. The presence of an authority that managed the life of the group has been evidenced in particular through the study of the buildings and their distribution. It has been noted that a certain amount

of communal work, such as the building of houses on terraces which were constructed and consolidated by small walls, were planned and performed collectively. Semi-subterranean communal buildings were built and used by the group. The earliest of these buildings were subdivided by radiating walls (Fig. 1). These walls delimited cells and peripheral benches and bordered a large empty central space. Some of the cells contained tools destined for various functions, all of outstanding quality. Other cells, difficult to access, were clearly destined for the storage of crops. The benches and

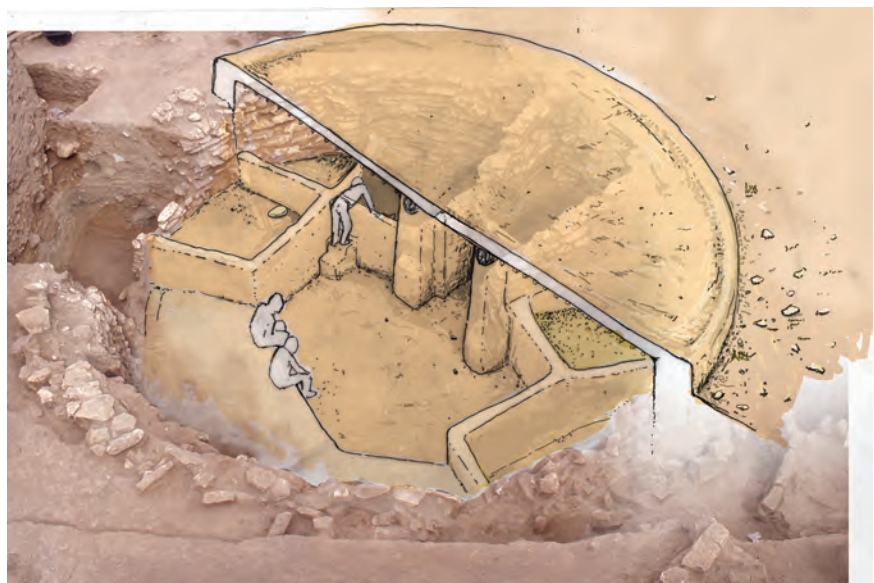


FIG. 1 A COMMUNAL BUILDING SUBDIVIDED BY RADIATING WALLS.

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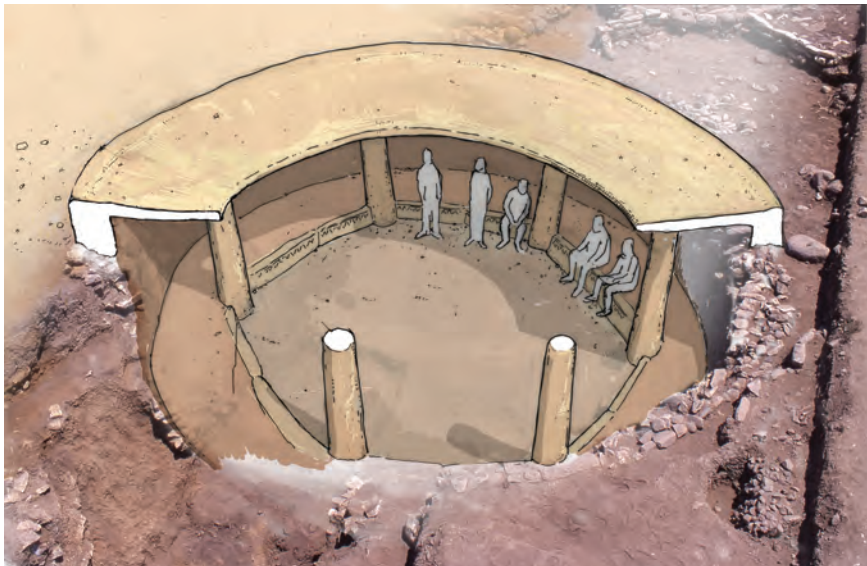


FIG. 2 A COMMUNAL BUILDING WITH A CIRCULAR BENCH.

the central space were intended for meetings. Finally, buried human skeletal remains which appear to have been subjected to violence or even sacrifice were present. Thus, these buildings had multiple functions: storage, meetings, rituals and various other activities. By contrast, the most recent communal buildings (Fig. 2) were used for only one function. Particularly well-built, invariably semi-subterranean and circular-shaped they were intended for meetings and ceremonies. The interior was not subdivided by walls. Solely a circular bench ran along the periphery. Heavy limestone slabs formed the vertical front; all of them were embellished by geometric patterns. One of these buildings showed even more sophisticated decoration with engraved slabs depicting humans with stylized stele of birds of prey.

The construction of houses around these communal buildings was carefully planned. Their size and the quality of the construction depended on their proximity

to the communal buildings (Fig. 3). This may indicate early social differentiation. Another sign of a well-structured communal life at Jerf el Ahmar is the consumption of food, which seems to have been, at least in part, collective. Several houses show signs of food preparation activities (Fig. 4), for example the grinding of cereals, which was undertaken in the houses while the cooking of food took place outdoors in the courtyards or, more often in the communal spaces. Towards the end of the occupation of the site, several large outdoor pit hearths suggest the cooking of large volumes of food, probably large mammals.

Finally, the constant presence of symbolism, well defined and common to the entire cultural area of the northern Levant may also be interpreted as a sign for social complexity. The predominantly animal symbolism was probably linked to myths dealing with death. Within this region, which shares the same imaginary world, engraved pictograms (Fig. 5) on mobile supports or on megalithic pillars (as in Anatolia) clearly show associations of signs and images that were undoubtedly understood by the inhabitants, or a part of them. This provides

evidence that the societies of this period were able to record and transmit messages across a large geographical area.

Cereals were central to the subsistence economy at Jerf el Ahmar. This is revealed by large-scale use of chaff and grain, large storage structures in communal buildings and processing installations in specialised rooms consisting of groups of querns. Cereals were clearly important in the diet, the other important element for subsistence being the hunting of aurochs, gazelle and equids (D. Helmer *et al.* 2005. 'Identifying early domestic cattle from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites on the Middle Euphrates using sexual dimorphism', in J. D Vigne *et al.* *New methods and the first steps of mammal domestication.* Oxford). During the 500-year occupation cereals and pulses increased compared to gathered plants such as non-cereal grasses. Constructed storage structures occur only in later levels. Grouped querns are



FIG. 3 THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOUSES PLANNED AROUND THESE COMMUNAL BUILDINGS.

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FIG. 4 A HOUSE SHOWING SIGNS OF FOOD PREPARATION ACTIVITIES.



FIG. 5 ENGRAVED PICTOGRAMS.

more common in the upper levels. These trends represent a shift towards greater reliance on larger-scale cereal exploitation which required labour for preparing land, sowing, weeding, crop protection, storage, harvesting and processing. These tasks would have been planned collectively, implying a social hierarchy combined with an increase in social organisation.

The cereal economy would have been intertwined with the social fabric of village life. Jerf el Ahmar thus provides a window of 500 years that illuminates the transition from foraging to farming, which started during the Natufian and culminated in the Middle PPNB, and is exemplified by the contrast between the small pit dwellings at Natufian Abu Hureyra and the rows of quasi-identical dwellings at Halula, where mixed domestic farming was established by about 8000 cal BC. The discoveries at Jerf el Ahmar demonstrate that large-scale cereal exploitation and cultivation were practised at least a millennium before this date.

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