

The Fertile Desert

A History of the Middle Euphrates Valley
until the arrival of Alexander

Anas Al Khabour



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-120-0
ISBN 978-1-80327-121-7 (e-Pdf)

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Cover image: The Euphrates near the Khanuqa George

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To Elisar, Aram and Aliaa

To my eternal love... The Euphrates River

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Acknowledgements

It is a duty and honor to begin these lines with a sincere paean of gratitude to Professor Joaquín María Córdoba Zoilo; his unconditional support and encouragement have encouraged me during a process he has made technically enjoyable and intellectually enriching, almost from the moment I started my doctorate between 2006 and 2012. In these years I not only planted the seeds of an academic background, but, at the same time, Professor Córdoba Zoilo became a sincere friend.

A great friend and scientist of recognized prestige, Dr Ignacio Márquez Rowe provided fundamental support for this research; resorting to his advice was an invaluable source of security and guarantor of my work.

On the banks of the Euphrates, I was able to spend concentrated and rewarding hours with Dr Katsuhiko Ohnuma, along with our team of Japanese experts, including Fujii, Nishiaki, Hasegawa, Kume, Numoto, Hoshino, Saito, Miashta, and their group, who put all their efforts into overcoming whatever obstacles arose. Without their essential contribution, my work is unlikely to have reached its home port.

My teachers, as well as attentive ‘bosses’, Dr Michael al-Maqdissi and Dr Bassam Jamous, who expertly guided my work at the Archaeological Museum in Syria, also deserve special mention.

I am pleased to acknowledge the guidance and advice of Dr Juan Luis Montero, central to this work, as well as the important contribution provided by the experience of Professor Jan Walke Meyer. Nor can I overlook Professor Gil Stein, who always seemed able to support our work in Zeidan in timely fashion.

All through my work, the immense patience of my family and friends never wavered, nor did their unconditional support; they well know how important they have been in helping me reach the goals I set for myself.

Finally, my thanks must go to the New Society of Letters at Lund for their generous contribution towards the English language review, as well as to my own deeply rooted institution, Lund University.

Preface

The Euphrates Valley between the Balikh and Khabour in Syria has been little known. The general impression, however, is that much needs to be discovered; partial reports, isolated interventions or the proposals for a hypothetical reconstruction of the relationship and processes of cultural expansion between Mesopotamia and the Jazira, suggest that the Euphrates had always been a traffic road. But suggestions on a map must be confirmed on the ground.

However, when looking at the usual tools for information or the relevant archaeological charts, such as the Tübinger Atlas, we face a paradox: with the exception of a few well-known sites, a surprising void reigns over the archaeological landscape.

On the other hand, the difficult circumstances suffered by most of the region since the outbreak of the war in Syria, not only did not improve the situation, but made it even more problematic. Fortunately, various archaeological expeditions have intensively worked on the region. The possibilities have changed, and the time has come for a review to attempt at a reconstruction. This has been our goal.

With this research I have tried to reconstruct the history of a part of the Euphrates valley that, surprisingly, remained undocumented. I selected the longest stretch, comprised between the confluences of the Balikh and Khabour rivers. Several surface surveys, local and international archaeological expeditions, interventions of the Directorate of Antiquities of the Republic of Syria and my own intervention in the Syrian teams of most of them, in national field works, and in those related with this research have made available a significant number of data, most of them unpublished, that contributed to improve the view I have tried to offer.

This monograph consisted of five chapters, starting with an introduction of the geographic area and the scope of the study. The method of data collection, objectives of the research as well as methodology and work plan are elaborated in this chapter (Chapter 1). In the next chapter, we display the data about the occupation of territory in the investigated area through the constructed catalogue of a total of 68 archaeological sites along the Euphrates banks (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, 21 sites are studied and analyzed in detail according to the excavation and surveys carried out by local and international expeditions in order to study the territory occupation. The following chapter analyses the cultural and historical process in the studied area from the Paleolithic till the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenian periods (Chapter 4). Finally, the last chapter displays the resumé and the final conclusions of the research (Chapter 5).

This research is complemented by the full bibliography of sources that were referenced in the present book.

Prólogo y reflexión sobre esta obra

Conocí a Anas Al Khabour hace años, cuando él era un joven director del Museo Arqueológico de Raqqa (Siria) y ya con una acreditada labor de investigador, con varios trabajos de campo como arqueólogo en aquella zona que era, al mismo tiempo, su residencia. Se le daban todos los ingredientes para conocer sobre el terreno y de primera mano los rastros de los milenarios asentamientos humanos en un espacio físico crucial para el estudio de los primeros pasos de la Humanidad, en su constitución como grupos humanos organizados. En las jornadas posteriores tuve ocasión de comprobar la profundidad de esos conocimientos cuando nos acompañó a lo que se conoce como las “Ciudades Muertas”, en la altiplanicie central de Siria.

Aparte de la multitud de recuerdos entrañables de las varias visitas que realicé a Siria durante años, hay un rumoroso silencio especial que me acompañará siempre: el peculiar sonido del viento al recorrer las ruinas de aquellas Ciudades Muertas. Sólo la insensibilidad se puede reafirmar en la esterilidad comunicativa –en definitiva, autocomplaciente y sordomuda– ante esos tesoros de la Humanidad que nos transmiten nuestra Historia primordial. La ceguera y la sordera, es decir la ignorancia, ante lo que son las señas de identidad de nuestras raíces y que están escondidas en millones de palabras en forma de piedras y restos arqueológicos, se hace incompatible con una mínima cultura. Aquellos páramos desiertos, pero no mudos para quienes sepan leer de verdad, son el mundo fértil de la Arqueología. Sin ese abecedario básico aún estaríamos convencidos de teorías tan absurdas como el creacionismo y sus corifeos.

El texto al que estas líneas sirven de gozoso pórtico es un referente imprescindible para quienes se quieran aventurar por los capítulos primeros de nuestra niñez como seres sociales, que es tanto como decir humanos en sentido pleno. El que fue durante años llamado el Creciente Fértil (en algunas tradiciones culturales religiosas el Paraíso Terrenal) incluye en su centro, precisamente, la zona aquí estudiada. Es decir, los cursos medios del Éufrates y, por extensión colateral, el Tigris, Asiria en definitiva y los sucesivos reinos arcaicos que tuvieron su referencia territorial en esas tierras fertilizadas, en la incipiente agricultura y sus frutos culturales.

Habría sido un intento titánico intentar resumir en un solo texto la inmensidad histórica y cultural de los primeros siete mil años de la Humanidad, como colectivos de convivencia racional en esa cuna de civilizaciones. Pero igualmente habría resultado derroche inadmisibles el no recoger de forma ordenada un esfuerzo arqueológico como el que aquí se refleja. Anas Al Khabour, doctor *cum laudem* en Arqueología por la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid con esta investigación para su tesis, ha reunido sus trabajos de campo en una tierra que no sólo le vio nacer sino que fue su espacio natural de síntesis de formación académica y dedicación vocacional. Tiene otras virtudes añadidas el texto como la multitud documentada de referencias bibliográficas, agrupadas en cada epígrafe para mayor claridad expositiva. Pero para el sociólogo retrospectivo que firma este prólogo, algo que conecta con lo que da verdadera coherencia comprensiva a todo trabajo que trata sobre el Hombre en sentido lato: la contextualización que conecta los campos necesarios para una cabal comprensión de la tesis expuesta. Sin las referencias historiográficas, sin una datación ajustada y sin describir de forma sistemática las técnicas que se emplean en la investigación, corroboradas por conclusiones puntuales de cada epígrafe, podríamos caer en la mera exposición que, a lo sumo, aspirase a un alarde retórico. No es este, por suerte ni mucho menos, el caso del “Desierto fértil”; oxímoron que, paradójicamente, encierra en su aparente contradicción la esforzada, y a veces fallida, lucha de la Humanidad por la supervivencia en un medio efímero. La Arqueología es ese milagro que hace florecer de sentido las piedras.

El trabajo de campo de años por parte del doctor Khabour se ha centrado en ese tramo lleno de vida enterrada que discurre entre los afluentes del gran río Éufrates, Balih y Hahur, o lo que es

lo mismo entre Raqqa y Deir ez-Zor, en la Siria actual. El período estudiado es amplísimo, desde épocas tan remotas como los primeros pasos de tribus nómadas de cinco mil años a. C. (o lo que es lo mismo, a una distancia más próxima al despertar africano del homo sapiens que a la actualidad), con dataciones basadas en trazas del carbono 14 en los objetos analizados. Desde luego los asentamientos precarios de los primeros grupos nómadas requirieron un estudio adicional a lo que podríamos entender como técnicas usuales de Arqueología, ya que los restos hallados eran, por fuerza de desplazamientos no siempre acreditados, sólo meros indicios fragmentarios y residuales. Es algo con lo que todo investigador actual se enfrenta, la necesaria multidisciplinariedad que obliga a nadar en varias corrientes al mismo tiempo.

En un trabajo que se antoja inabarcable en los años dedicados a éste, Khabour relaciona hasta sesenta y ocho yacimientos dentro de la zona estudiada de los que describe un total de veintiuno, relacionados entre sí por la trama espaciotemporal. En su recorrido apunta al principio del reino de Tuttul, que hunde sus raíces en un origen tan remoto para nosotros como la Edad del Bronce Arcaico o Antiguo, llegando en ese yacimiento que reúne indicios del milenio IV a. C. Con tan frágiles mimbres pero con precisión de orfebre nos coloca el autor ante la evidencia material de un centro de culto, el llamado Tell Bīaa, o Colina del Templo aunque Anas Al Khabour lo denomine iglesia.

La cultura acadia ocupa una parte importante de las descripciones topográficas y de contextualización social, apuntando al referente transversal antes aludido. Los modestos, pero elocuentes, ajuares domésticos, distribuidos por habitaciones de las viviendas excavadas, nos remiten en su estado semidestruido a las permanentes luchas por afianzamiento del dominio territorial, que es tanto como decir de acceso a los recursos. No es gratuito, desde ese punto de vista de la supervivencia de los grupos, un tema que recorre todo el texto de esta tesis, como es la fijación grupal en torno a las corrientes de agua y que está en el origen de la ya conocida tesis de las Civilizaciones del Agua. El control de esa vía de comunicación privilegiada que eran en general los grandes ríos, y en este caso el Éufrates, Tell Qabr Abu al-Atiq controlaba el acceso al territorio del imperio asirio, una barrera estratégica contra la amenaza de los hititas de la región de Karkamish y de Emar. Esta descripción, que se antoja paradigmática de lo que era el Éufrates como vía de comercio y comunicación (de ahí la importancia que se otorgó durante milenios a estas fortalezas naturales que eran los altos privilegiados en la orilla fluvial) y la vida que se desarrolló en su entorno. Qleb al Hemma es otro de los ejemplos que ilustran este interesante tramo del Éufrates, estudiado por Khabour. Ese poético “corazón volcánico”, no alude como de forma certera señala el autor, a referencia poética, sino que nos remite al origen por erupción volcánica en la zona y que aportaría, junto con la indudable ruina inmediata de los primitivos asentamientos humanos, el regalo inestimable para las siguientes generaciones de los productos de esa erupción, en especial rocas de ese origen basáltico y que serían después explotadas como materiales y comercio con el sur.

El autor sigue un orden descriptivo de norte a sur, desde Tell Bīaa en el Balih hasta Buqras en la desembocadura del río Habur. Esto aunque pueda parecer un proceso inverso a la cronología de los asentamientos, nos lleva de la mano al espacio arqueológico que se proponía desde el primer yacimiento: describir la aventura de los humanos en un desierto que les proporcionó la fertilidad que venían persiguiendo desde sus tempranas migraciones procedentes del sudeste de África.

Francisco González de Tena

Dr. en Sociología

Chapter 1

Introduction

Mesopotamia, for several reasons, is held as the cradle of civilizations: between the two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, and spread over Syria and Iraq. This zone witnessed the birth and development of the first civilizations, first 'human beings', the first cities. Our two great and 'civilizing' rivers are born in the mountains of eastern Anatolia, taking different courses, and rejoin their waters in a large delta of marshes to flow, finally, into the Persian Gulf.¹ The fertile alluvial sediments, deposited in their valleys, and especially in the lower regions of their routes, have made agriculture and civilization prosper over the centuries.

But the role of the Tigris and the Euphrates was not limited to making fertile valleys. As Margueron (1999; 1980)² points out, the two rivers, together with their tributaries, served to link and communicate with distant lands and vary in their natural resources. The Euphrates, in particular, functioned since earliest times as a connecting axis between northern Syria, the region that borders the Taurus Mountain and the Mediterranean coast, and the lands of Babylon and southern Mesopotamia.

The Euphrates, however, does not run through the same landscape features along its entire journey; and neither does it 'behave' in the same way – from its source in eastern Anatolia to its ultimate estuary.³ There are roughly four sections that define its course: the passage through Anatolia, with its important geography; the crossing of the Syrian steppe; the journey through the alluvial plain of Lower Mesopotamia; the arrival in the delta area before flowing into the Persian Gulf.⁴

The Balikh and Khabour are the only two tributaries that pour their waters into the Euphrates. Both are located on its left bank and both in Syrian territory, i.e. in the so-called second great 'Euphratic' section. Both tributaries functioned as north-south communication axes, linking the mountainous regions of the Taurus with the Euphrates valley, before reaching into lower Mesopotamia, where natural resources – such as wood, metal and stone – are scarce.⁵ Of capital importance for man was the supply of tree timber from the higher regions down to the low plains that were devoid of this raw material, fundamental for architecture. The same route transported obsidian and metals (copper) from Anatolia,⁶ and without this vital link the temples of Uruk (4th millennium BC) could never have been built, nor the palaces of Mari (3rd/2nd millennia BC).

The study of human occupation along the Euphrates Valley, between Balikh and Khabour, until the time of Alexander the Great.

Given the historical importance of the Euphrates and its two tributaries on the left bank, the study of human occupation along the Euphrates, from the Balikh to Khabour tributaries, is a tale worth the telling. The chronological limits of this research are fixed to the Classical period, the urban 'boom' that followed Alexander's conquest of the East, a process that marks a 'before and after' in the historical geography of the Middle East.⁷ (Students of the historical geography of the Syrian Euphrates in Classical times, more particularly in Roman-Byzantine times, are pointed to Justine Gaborit's doctoral thesis).⁸

¹ Sanlaville 1979: 101–103; 2000.

² Margueron 1999; 1980.

³ Sanlaville 1989: 5–27; 1990: 1–12.

⁴ Sanlaville 1990.

⁵ Larsen 1979.

⁶ Algaze 2005.

⁷ Akkermans and Schwartz 2003.

⁸ Gaborit 2008.

From prehistory to Alexander, there is to date no analysis or synthesis dedicated to studying or presenting the historical geography of the Euphrates Valley from the Balikh to Khabour. We do have field work, especially archaeological surveys carried out in past years, before the outbreak of the recent war in Syria, by research teams who note the lack of scientific work in such an important area historically. Indeed, as we write, there is no work devoted to the study of the history of the pre-classical occupation of the territory of the Euphrates, between the Balikh and Khabour rivers, in the current Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

It is important, however, to single out the *Atlas of Preclassical Upper Mesopotamia* (2004),⁹ in which the Euphrates Valley region, our focus in this present research, languishes as empty and ‘uninhabited’ on each of the maps that correspond to the different historical periods highlighted in the *Atlas*. This lacuna, however, does not tally with historical-demographic reality, but to a basic lack of information as at 2004, the date of the work referred to. Indeed, archaeological researches undertaken over the last decade or so in the provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor have proven that that territory was continuously occupied since the Palaeolithic. This is supported by the surveys of Kohlmeyer, Geyer and Monchambert, Gaborit, the Syrian-Spanish expedition in the Syrian Middle Euphrates, as well as several archaeological excavation seasons by different expeditions in the sites located in the study region (Tell Zaydan, Tell Ghanem al-Ali, Tell Qabr Abu al-Atiq, etc.).

Surveys

Numerous surveys have been carried out to date in the area of interest to us in this present work. In chronological order they are:

1. The French expedition around Ain Abu Jemaa

In 1976, a French expedition (R.C.P.), directed by P. Sanlaville, carried out four campaigns (until 1980) in the Middle Euphrates area, documenting important Palaeolithic sites.¹⁰

2. The French expedition at Mari

Mari’s French expedition, led by B. Geyer and J.-Y. Monchambert, carried out 17 survey campaigns between 1982 and 1990 to delimit the geographical-political territory of the kingdom of Mari. The work covered the Euphrates region between Deir ez-Zor and Abu Kamal, all the sites located on both banks of the Euphrates were chronologically documented, from the Neolithic period to the arrival of Islam.¹¹

3. The German expedition in the Euphrates Valley

The German researcher Kay Kohlmeyer conducted two survey campaigns in the Middle Euphrates between 1983 and 1984, between the Tabqa Dam and Deir ez-Zor, documenting several sites in the investigated area, inhabited between Palaeolithic and Neo-Assyrian times.¹²

4. The Spanish expedition in the Balikh Valley

In September 1986, the Autonomous University of Madrid set out to study the Hurrian culture and its population in the Balikh Valley by means of an archaeological survey. Its main researcher J. Córdoba Zoilo documented 26 sites along the valley’s 100 km.¹³

⁹ Anastasio *et al.* 2004.

¹⁰ Sanlaville 1979.

¹¹ Geyer and Monchambert 2003.

¹² Kohlmeyer 1984; 1986.

¹³ Córdoba 1988; 2006.

5. The Finnish expedition to Mt Bishri

In 1999-2000, a Finnish expedition from the University of Helsinki launched project SYGIS, which, until 2006, mainly dedicated itself to GIS work across a region east of Mt Bishri to the Euphrates.¹⁴

6. The Syrian-Spanish expedition to the Middle Euphrates (PAMES)

The Middle Euphrates Syrian Archaeological Project was launched in September 2004, through a collaboration agreement between the University of Coruña and the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Damascus (DGAM), to which the Higher Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) and the University Nova Lisbon joined later. The project was led by Juan Luis Montero Fenollós on the Spanish side, and Shakir Al-Shbib (the project's author in later seasons) for the Syrian institution. The main objective of the expedition was to study territory-border concepts in the Syrian Middle Euphrates region in Antiquity, particularly the Pre-Classical periods. The research is concentrated on a section of the Euphrates in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor.¹⁵

7. The Syrian-Japanese expedition to the Euphrates and Mt Bishri

The Syrian-Japanese expedition to the Middle Euphrates and Mt Bishri, led by Katsuhiko Ohnuma and Anas Al Khabour, carried out 15 excavation and survey campaigns in the area, specifically in the province of Raqqa, from February 2007 to November 2010. The main objective of the project was to shed light on the nomadic Amorite communities in the Bishri area and along the Middle Euphrates, from Palaeolithic times onwards. The research team consisted of experts in many disciplines, specializing in cultural and natural sciences. The Syrian-Japanese team set out to determine the relationship between ancient nomadic tribal pastoralists and the formation of urban societies in the central Euphrates area. Numerous environmental and cultural aspects were addressed in the research, i.e. changes in the environment, settlement patterns, livelihood patterns, architectural and artistic styles, and social relations. The expedition conducted several surveys, and opted to dig at Tell Ghanem al-Ali.¹⁶

8. The Syrian expedition in the Mount of Qleb al-Hemma

The General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in June 2011 conducted a survey, led by Michel Al-Maqdissi, on the rocky hillsides of Qleb al-Hemma, formed of volcanic lava. This feature, rising 125 m above the level of the Euphrates Valley, is elongated in shape and measures 11 km x 8 km; it comprises numerous small mounds and valleys. The expedition documented several sites from the Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age.¹⁷

Excavations

The archaeological excavations carried out in the investigated area are:

1. Tell Bīaa

The University of Berlin and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (Germany), under the direction of Eva Strommenger, began archaeological excavations at Tell Bīaa (Tuttul) in 1980. By 1995 a very important site had been revealed – the city de Tuttul.¹⁸

2. Tell Zeidan

¹⁴ For this Geographic Information System project, see Lönnqvist *et al.* 2011.

¹⁵ Montero 2009.

¹⁶ Al Khabour 2012; Ohnuma and Al Khabour 2010.

¹⁷ Al-Maqdissi 2011.

¹⁸ Miglus and Strommenger 2002; Strommenger and Kohlmeier 1998.

THE FERTILE DESERT

In 2008, an agreement between the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums DGAM of Syria and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago led to an archaeological collaboration at Tell Zeidan. The expedition was led by Gil Stein for the Americans and Anas Al Khabour (2008) and Mohamad al-Sarhan (2009) for the Syrians.¹⁹

3. The Abu Hamad Cemetery

The General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums DGAM and the University of Saarbrücken (Germany) carried out a six-week campaign (1990) at Abu Hamad. The expedition was headed by Jan-Waalke Meyer and Murhaf Al Khalaf.²⁰

4. The Syrian-Japanese project

The Syrian-Japanese expedition conducted several excavation campaigns at Tell Ghanem al-Ali, as well as at a burial area south of Ghanem al-Ali and Mt Bishri's burial mounds.²¹

5. The Syrian-Spanish project

The Syrian-Spanish team of the DGAM Syrian and PAMES project carried out excavations at Tell as-Sin and Tell Qabr Abu al-Atiq.²²

6. Tell Bouqras

A Dutch expedition from the universities of Groningen and Amsterdam undertook several excavation campaigns at Tell Bouqras between 1965 and 1977.²³

7. Tell Qsubi

The Syrian-Spanish expedition of the DGAM and the PAMES project conducted a small survey between 2005–2007. Later, in 2010, the University of Chicago carried out an emergency excavation campaign necessitated by the impending construction of the Halabiya Dam.²⁴

8. The Qsubi Tomb

The funeral area located to the south of Tell Qsubi was excavated by a Syrian expedition in 2009 as part of an emergency excavation programme, prior to work on the Halabiya Dam.²⁵

Our present work aims to bring together all the results of these surveys and excavation campaigns, published and unpublished, allowing the drawing of new archaeological and historical maps that will indicate the presence of human settlements in the region until Alexander's arrival on the scene. Thus, the significant gap perceived in the corresponding maps of the literature to date can be inked in.²⁶

The lacuna referred to above in the maps of Anastasio, as I intend to demonstrate in this research, reflects no lack in human occupation between the Balikh and Khabour tributaries, but rather the absence of data available to the compilers of the aforementioned *Atlas* in 2004.

¹⁹ Stein and Al Khabour 2008; Stein 2010.

²⁰ Meyer 2010.

²¹ Fujii and Adachi 2010.

²² Caramelo *et al.* 2009.

²³ Boerma 1979.

²⁴ Montero 2006.

²⁵ Caramelo *et al.* 2009.

²⁶ Anastasio 2004.

Research objectives

With this research I intend to study the history of the Pre-Classical occupation of the territory of the Euphrates Valley between the Balikh and Khabour rivers, in the current provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in Syria. This historical-geographical work has, as its main objective, the description and analysis of the main events that have marked the region, from the first evidence of human occupation to the conquest of Alexander, by means of the archaeological evidence and written documentation. Thus, we arrive at a fresh look at the evolution of this occupation, from the Palaeolithic to the 4th century BC.

This research not only seeks to identify the sedentary settlements from the Neolithic, but also to recognize the presence of those nomadic and semi-nomadic populations who travelled and inhabited the region, especially in the area of Mt Bishri, throughout the millennia under consideration.

The included catalogue of sites and series of maps corresponding to the occupation of the river territory in the different historical periods (Palaeolithic, Pre-Pottery Neolithic A and B, Neolithic, Halaf, Ubaid, Uruk, Ancient, Middle and Late Bronze, Neo-Assyrian), constitutes an essential contribution to our research. Other studies of historical interest directly related to the subject will also be addressed, i.e. the broad temporal spectrum that frames the project will allow a *longue durée* study to materialize in terms of the settlement/use of the territory between the Balikh and the Khabour. We will also see that the research method followed results in a range of comparative studies, not only from a chronological point of view but also geographically, i.e. between settlement patterns, on both sides of the Euphrates, from different historical periods (Uruk, Early Bronze, Late Bronze, etc.), and the continuity or discontinuity of human occupation.

Methodology, hypothesis, and work plan

The desired historical atlas of the Euphrates Valley from the Balikh to the Khabour must, perforce, be based on an exhaustive catalogue of Pre-Classical archaeological sites, remains, etc., brought to light in this region. Each chosen site includes all available relevant information in historical, archaeological, and geographical terms, referring to the published (and unpublished) data, including any archaeological reports by the various expeditions who have worked in the region between the Balikh and the Khabour, in the current Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

The topographic situation of the different sites is based on existing maps (Soviet Military Topographic Map, 1984, 1/200000, and Topographic Map of Syria, published by the Euphrates project authority, 1962, 1/2500). Nowadays, however, Google Earth provides a helpful tool to augment the geographical data, and gives an easy means, as equally effective and accurate, for anyone to locate a site once the coordinates are known; each site is provided with this information.

The obtained data have allowed an assemblage of (partial) archaeological charts, according to the conventional historical periods (e.g. Ubaid, Uruk, Middle Bronze, etc.), which will ultimately serve to explore settlement patterns and carry out comparative and global studies on the continuity/discontinuity of human occupation in the Euphrates through the timeframe in question.

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