The Chalcolithic in the Near East: Mesopotamia and the Levant

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Chronological and Geographic Framework

- Ancient Near East: but specifically Mesopotamia and the southern Levant

- Early Chalcolithic in Mesopotamia: the Ubaid Period
  - 6th-5th millennia BCE

- Late Chalcolithic in Mesopotamia: the Uruk Period
  - 4th millennia BCE

- Chalcolithic Levant
  - 5th-4th millennia BCE
The Chalcolithic: an ‘in-between’ time?

• after the Neolithic Revolution, before the Urban Revolution

• but this is our perspective

• should also try to understand what this time was for people in past
  – not only thinking about what came after it (teleology)
Structure of the course

• Lectures: culture historical background; introduction to material culture; principal subjects of research and debate

• Seminar: reports on readings
  – deepen understanding of subjects
  – discussion of lecture material

• Seminar presentations: approx. 15 minutes
  – structure of arguments
  – evidence to support arguments
  – questions you have

• Seminar discussion – how do readings relate to lecture material? to other readings?
Early Chalcolithic in Mesopotamia: the Ubaid period

Topic 1. Ubaid Period: cultural-historical overview
History of research

• Tell al-’Ubaid: excavated just after WW I by H. Hall & C.L. Woolley (1919)
  – initially designated distinctive pottery style: black-on-buff painted (the defining characteristic became found in all contexts called Ubaid)
  – soon thereafter similar pottery found at Ur
  – Ubaid as designation for a time period came into use approx. 1930
  – Along with it the notion of an Ubaid ‘culture’, implying also a ‘people’

• Eridu: excavated around WW II by S. Lloyd & F. Safar
  – sequence of temples, Ubaid cemetery, ‘Hut sounding’

• Southern Mesopotamia assumed to be the core area
  – question then became how, when, where and why did Ubaid ‘culture’ ‘spread’
  – to northern Mesopotamia (Gawra), to the east (Susa), to the Arabian shores of the Gulf (work in the 1970s)
History of research: Chronology

- Oates’ chronology (1960): based on southern Mesopotamia (Eridu)
  - Ubaid 1: Eridu
  - Ubaid 2: Hajji Mohammad
  - Ubaid 3: Early Ubaid
  - Ubaid 4: Late Ubaid

- Chronology subsequently extended:
  - Ubaid 0: Oueili (Samarran)
  - Ubaid 5: Terminal Ubaid

- Calendrical dates – problematic
  - southern Mesopotamia Ubaid 0 – 5: c. 6500 – 4200/4100 BCE
    - Ubaid 1 begins c. 5750 BCE
  - elsewhere shorter:
    - in northern Mesopotamia, adoption of Ubaid features in Ubaid 2 or 3 (c. 5300-4300 BCE)
    - replacing Halaf
    - Arabian shores of Gulf – Ubaid 2-3

- i.e. assumption of ceramic continuity in south, break and introduction of new (Ubaid) pottery in north
Environmental issues

• From 7\textsuperscript{th}-4\textsuperscript{th} mill. BCE moister climate than today
  – some indications of summer monsoons in 5\textsuperscript{th} mill.

• Recent work by Jennifer Pournelle using satellite imagery
  – marine transgression in 5\textsuperscript{th} millennium BCE into southern alluvial lowlands
  – villages in this region in Ubaid times were concentrated on levees and ‘turtlebacks’ bordering marshes
  – dry land was relatively limited
  – Pournelle concludes that Ubaid villagers emphasized exploitation of riverine and marsh resources: reeds, fish, tubers, birds, pig, etc.
Incursion of Gulf waters into southern Mesopotamia

Southern Iraqi marshes in the 1980s
Characteristic Ubaid features

• Pottery
  – black-on-buff painted ware
  – high-fired
  – decoration tends to become simpler over time
  – use of tournette in later Ubaid
  – shapes: deep bowls, shallow bowls, deep basins, squat and globular jars
earlier Ubaid pottery

later Ubaid pottery
Exceptions

Late Ubaid pottery from the Eridu temple and the Susa Necropole
Characteristic Ubaid features

- **Tripartite mudbrick architecture**
  - long, often T-shaped central halls
  - freestanding

- **Temples**
  - plans similar to houses
  - but with niched and buttressed facades
  - altars and ‘offering tables’
  - corners oriented to cardinal directions
  - sometimes built on platforms
  - often not much bigger than houses
Characteristic Ubaid features

Tools
- ‘bent clay nails’ or clay mullers
- weights: for nets, looms
- hoes
- [clay sickles]
Characteristic Ubaid features

- Figurines
  - conical heads, coffee-bean eyes
- Labrets and flanged disks
- Seals and sealings – predominantly in northern Mesopotamia (Gawra, Kosak Shomali, Değirmentepe) and southwestern Iran (Susiana)
- Cemetery burial
Other Ubaid features

• Copper metallurgy and copper objects
  – principally in northern Mesopotamia
  – smelting installations common at Değirmentepe
  – copper tools at Gawra, as early as L. XVII

• Exchange goods
  – lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian at Gawra
  – bitumen from Hit at Kosak Shamali
  – Mesopotamian pottery along Arabian shores of Gulf

• Boats for transportation