Early Chalcolithic in Mesopotamia: the Ubaid period

Topic 2: Politically and socially egalitarian or hierarchical?
Egalitarian or hierarchical?

• Evolutionary assumptions behind the formulation of the question: 1960s-70s Processual Archaeology
  – chiefdoms must precede (Uruk-period) states
  – chiefdoms should have specific kinds of features, including differential burials, hierarchical settlement patterns, distinctions in architecture and/or goods consumed

• But (most) Ubaid societies do not show many obvious signs of hierarchy
Settlement patterns

• Sites more commonly settled for longer periods – build-up of mounds

• Settlement density appears higher in northern than southern Mesopotamia
  – perhaps due in part to geomorphological issues, survey methods

• Most sites small: 1 ha or less

• In some areas, a few large sites (c. 10 ha): Ur, Eridu, Oueili, Nippur, Uqair, Susa
  – with temples, cemeteries
Tell Abada, Hamrin region

- nearly whole village excavated
- Levels I (most recent) to III (oldest)
Tell Abada

• Most buildings have similar array of domestic artifacts – for cooking, food preparation and storage
  – bread ovens in open spaces outside of houses

• Houses range in from 100-200 m² – but nonetheless have similar array of tools and other artifacts, with one exception

• House A: largest house in all levels
  – extra walled in space behind it: L. II
  – thick walls: L. I
  – no domestic artifacts (L. II) other than pottery
  – clay tokens, marble studs and pendants, numerous infant burials in urns below the floor
Tell Abada

• House A distinct throughout all levels – implying some kind of inherited difference

• Otherwise little indication of internal differentiation

Tell Madhhur

• Nearby Abada

• One well preserved house excavated, 170 m²

• Similar array of domestic items, similar plan
  - 78 pottery vessels, from small cups to large storage jars
  - bent clay mullers, grinding stones, stone hoes, spindle whorls
  - hearths, but no ovens or kilns
Eridu

- One of the first Iraqi excavations of prehistoric site
- Appears in the Sumerian King List (early 2\textsuperscript{nd} mill. BCE) as the oldest city in the world
- Temple sequence
- ‘Hut sounding’ – simple reed mat huts plastered with mud
- Cemetery – approximately 200 burials excavated
Eridu Cemetery

- Burials in earthen pits or brick boxes
- Extended on back
- Single or double burials

- Relatively standard set of grave goods
  - pottery
  - beads
  - little differentiation in treatment except by age
Susa

• First settled in late Ubaid, locally known as Susa A or Susa I

• Huge mudbrick, stepped platform erected: 80 X 65 m and 10 m high
  – façade decorated with mosaic
  – atop the platform a storage building, a temple and a possible residence

• Variety of seal impressions

• Next to step platform a low platform into which graves were dug
Susa Necropole

- Approx. 2000 burials
- Some primary, some secondary burials

- Standard sets of pottery; many pieces particularly fine
- Copper axes and mirrors for a small number of individuals
- Some with beads

- Exception to lack of differentiation and exotic goods
- Also true for Late Ubaid Gawra
Egalitarian or hierarchical?

• Different approaches to interpretation
  – political and social inequalities: Henry Wright; Susan Pollock
  – largely egalitarian, with short-term leaders/priests: Frank Hole
  – inequalities but egalitarian ideology: Gil Stein

• Recent work points to considerable regional variation
  – one problem with earlier interpretations is tendency to lump evidence from different regions