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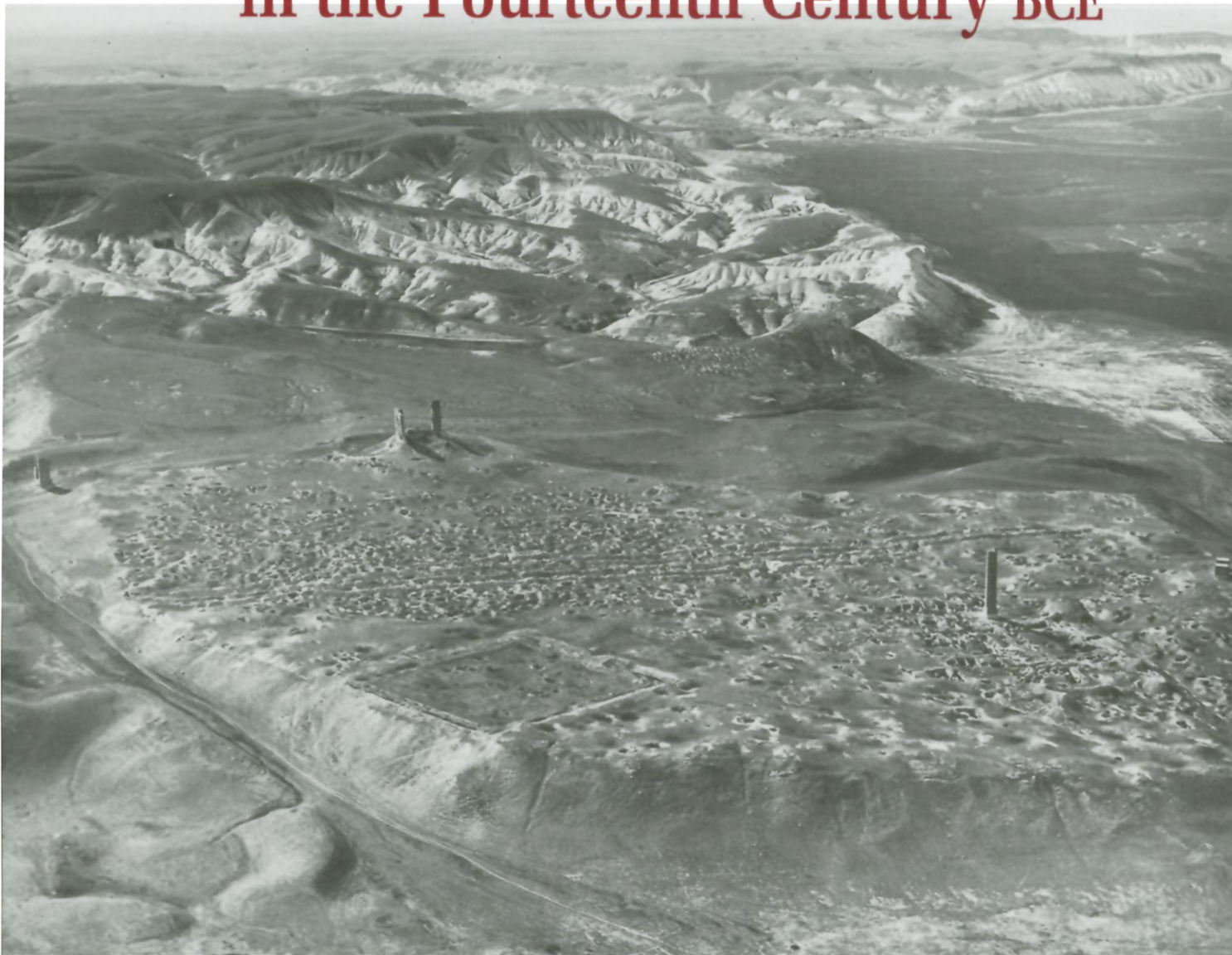
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# Emar, Capital of Aštata in the Fourteenth Century BCE



The aerial view of Tell Meskéné reveals the village of Balis in the foreground while the portion of Emar directly accessible to excavation is visible in the middle ground. The ragged plateau bordering the Euphrates Valley trails away at the rear. *Photograph by IFAPO. All photographs and drawings courtesy of J.-C. Margueron and © Mission archéologique d'Emar.*

*By Jean-Claude Margueron*

UNTIL 1972, THE CITY OF EMAR WAS known only through the archives of Mari, Nuzi, and Ugarit, cities with which it had been in contact politically or commercially. Thanks to his thorough knowledge of the Mari archives, G. Dossin had proposed to identify Emar with the tell at Meskéné Khadimé. The ancient mound is located on the southern bank of the Euphrates where the road to Aleppo meets the river and the river turns towards

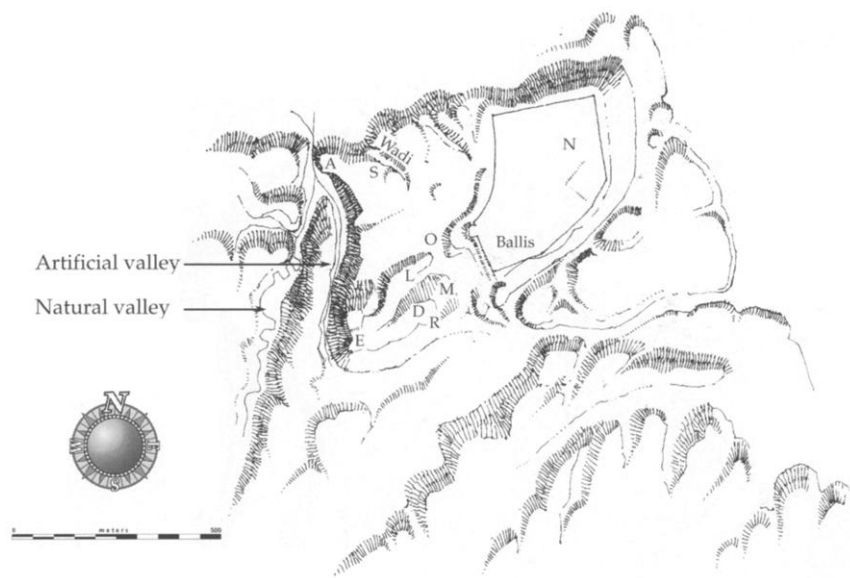
*Translated by Veronica Boutte*

Mesopotamia having emerged from the mountains of Anatolia.

The construction of a dam at Taqba led to the exploration of Meskéné as part of an international campaign to salvage the antiquities doomed to disappear beneath the lake. A mission directed by A. Raymond and L. Golvin of the French Institute of Arab Studies in Damascus initiated the excavation of the ruins of the medieval town of Balis, clearly visible atop one part of the tell.

Chance intervened in the form of the unexpected discovery of a second millennium BCE tablet, outside of Balis, but on a part of the tell not occupied in that period. This discovery led to the formation of a second mission directed by J.-C. Margueron (then a professor at the University of Strasbourg) in order to explore the accessible levels of the Bronze Age town.

After the initial probes confirmed G. Dossin's proposal to identify the town with the ancient city of Emar, six brief campaigns averaging six to seven weeks began in November-December 1972. Excavation of the site was brought to an end



**Topographic plan of Tell Meskené** showing the artificial valley and the location of the most important fields. All drawings by O. Callot unless otherwise noted.

in autumn of 1976 due to the threat of erosion presented by the new Lake El Assad. However, a complementary excavation took place in the fall of 1978 at Tell Faq'ous, a site located about ten km downstream from Meskené. Tell Faq'ous contained the ruins of a fortress directly associated with the protection of Emar.

## Major Historical Landmarks

### *Emar during the Time of Ebla*

The origin of Emar is yet unknown. It owes its appearance in history to the archives at Ebla, a kingdom which had evidently become prosperous by the beginning of the second half of the third millennium.

Four royal names are known to us from the Ebla archives: EN-zi-Da-mu, Ib-Da-mu, Iš-gi-Da-mu, and Na-an-Da-mu. An alliance of dynasties probably existed between Ebla and Emar, since several texts from Emar mention Queen Tiša-Lim coming originally from Ebla. Reciprocal commercial activity certainly formed the basis of their relationship. We know that fairly significant quantities of clothing and precious metal objects were sent to Emar, though we have no idea what Emar shipped to Ebla in exchange. However, beyond the appearance of

names of merchants in the texts, Emar's economic activity as a strategic point of transfer on the Syro-Mesopotamia axis is highly likely in this period.

### *Emar during the Time of Mari*

The archives at Mari paint a picture of Emar at the beginning of the eighteenth century BCE. This exceptionally rich documentation, which illuminates the Syrian world particularly, displays Emar as a city at the heart of the Syrian trade between Yamhad, Qatna, and Carchemish. Though the Mari documents do not emphasize intense waterway traffic with the Euphrates capital—as though the river no longer constituted such an important asset as in the past—Emar appears as the key factor in Syro-Mesopotamian relations.

Politically, Emar belonged to a more restricted world composed by all the towns on the Euphrates. Did it play a major role? Nothing is known with certainty: Emar may have paid tribute to three different kings (most certainly to the King of Aleppo and probably to the Kings of Mari and Carchemish). This would show very limited autonomy, even if occasionally the city showed some signs of independence.

### *Emar during the Late Bronze Age*

The texts from Ugarit and Nuzi mention Emar. With the Late Bronze Age however, a more precise and less speculative history can be presented, thanks to the discovery of hundreds of documents in the various fields opened during excavations at Meskené.

The primary areas of excavation produced a *hīlani* (palace of the local king), temples to Baal and Aštar at the highest point of the site, private homes and personal archives, and, most of all, the library of the Diviner buried in the ruins of the Pantheon (temple M-1).

With the exception of one tablet, probably from the Old Babylonian period found in the fill of Field R, the whole of the epigraphic literature demonstrates that the city was under the rule of the Hittites since the reign of Mursili II (1339–1306 BCE). Emar's situation was then radically different from what we know of earlier periods. Emar was now under direct command of an outside power and not in the sphere of influence of the major neighboring cities.

The city seems clearly to have been destroyed around 1187 BCE, during the great cataclysm that devastated Syria and the Hittite Empire. At least this seems reasonable to deduce from a tablet found on the floor of a private home in Field A. The tablet refers to the Kassite calculation: "Additional Ellul, second year of Melišihu," King of Babylonia. Even if not all houses bear traces of violent conflagration, it looks as though the city has been ravaged, fallen as a result of a siege. For now, our sources are silent about this event, and it would be risky to blame it on the Peoples of the Sea rather than any other people.

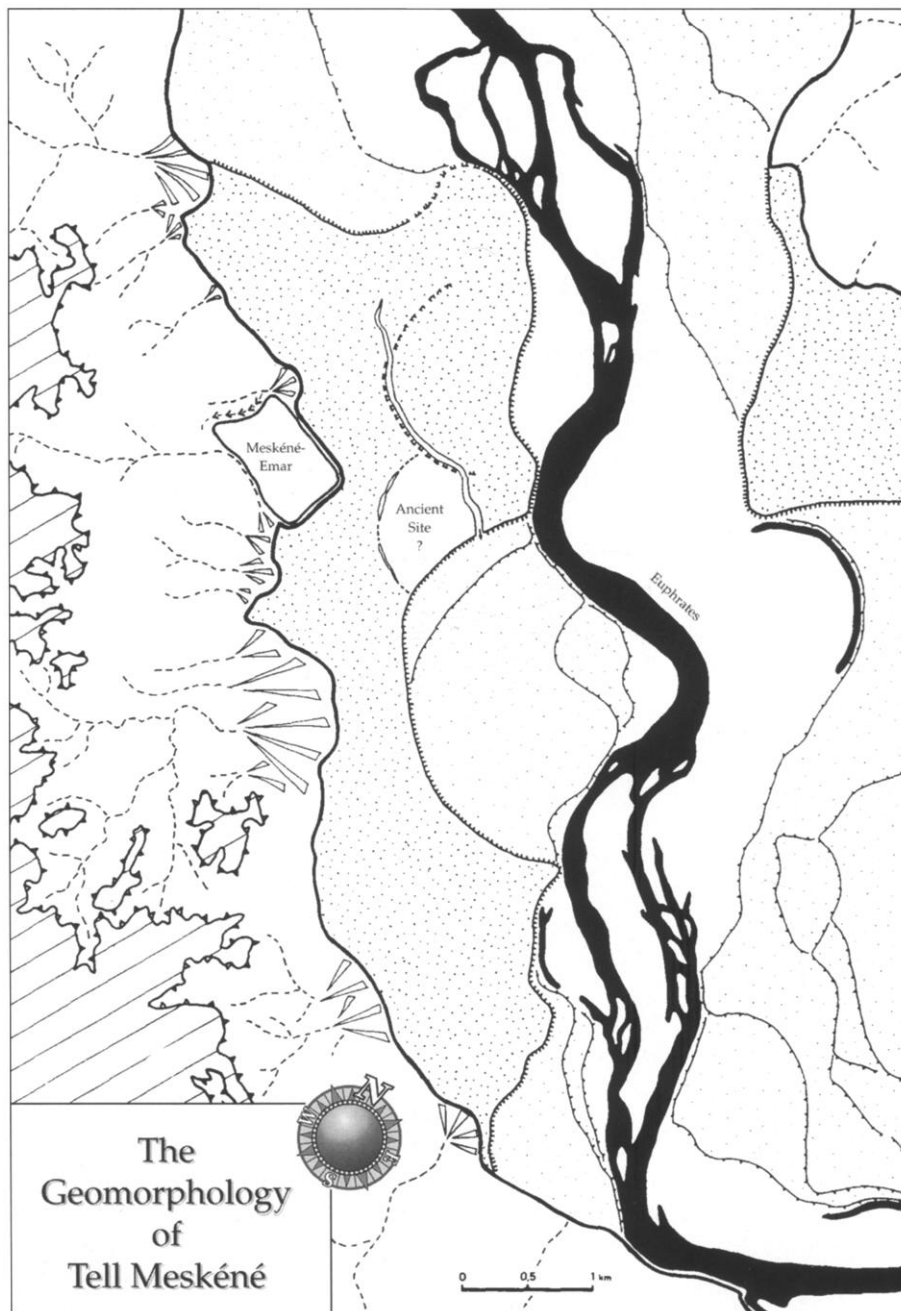
Except for the single Old Babylonian tablet already mentioned, the epigraphic documents cover at most a century and a half. This conclusion derives from studying the individual personalities described in the texts. The royal family covers three generations, perhaps three and a half between the end of the fourteenth century and 1187 BCE. Ultimately, these texts tell us only a small fraction of the whole history of the city—no more than one tenth!

In the Late Bronze Age, the city of Emar is the chief component of a province of the Hittite Empire known as Aštata; it possesses no real autonomy. Emar reports directly to the kingdom of Carchemish which is itself subordinated to Hattuša, center of the empire. Thus the imperial capital controls—and certainly tightly—one of its remote territories through a series of successive dependencies. Local royal power is exercised by an indigenous family with a clearly limited role under the authority of a Hittite general. This general, “The Chief of Chariots,” is attested both at Emar and at Tell Faq’ous, which was certainly the citadel of Aštata. Finally, an assembly of elders seems to have played a role.

In summary, the documents unearthed at Tell Meskéne address not so much the history of a kingdom in the company of other states of the fourteenth century, as the nature of the relations established between the Hittite power and an old North Syrian city which had long played a significant economical role. The written documents deal mostly with legal, administrative, and economical matters. They contain practically nothing about an international life, which is not surprising given the dependent condition forced on Emar at the time.

#### **Archaeological Periods Present**

Excavations have brought to light the city of Emar from the fourteenth to the beginning of the twelfth century. In fact, Emar is a new city located on a site entirely constructed by human hands. No trace of strata prior to the fourteenth century was detected on the site itself. Only one stratum constitutes the recovered city. Even if one observes restoration phases in some locations, these are very limited. Destroyed by fire probably in 1187 BCE, or slightly thereafter (see above the tablet found on the floor of a house in Field A), the city was abandoned with no trace of any habitation, however poor or temporary, following the destruction.



**Geomorphological map of the region of Meskéne** displaying the location of the excavated site at the edge of the plateau and the presumed location of the ancient town. *Drawing by B. Geyer.*

No major occupation characterized the first millennium. During the Roman era, the site which was abandoned since 1187 BCE, was re-occupied and developed, fairly modestly at first. The city was surrounded by a rampart, which was later reinforced and reshaped during the Byzantine era. The last major phase is represented by a medieval city known as Balis which survived until end of the Ayyubid period. Since then, a few sporadic occupations were detected, but no important construction took place.



- △ **Overlooking Tell Meskéné from the west**, this aerial view shows the most recent course of the Euphrates and evidence of its ancient meander, presumably the site of the most ancient city of Emar before it was moved out of harm's way to the plateau area. *Photograph by IFAPO.*
- ▽ **The western border of the site** was demarcated by the excavation of an artificial valley over five hundred meters in length. Thus, Emar's builders created a totally isolated platform for the foundation of their city.



## The City

### *The Problem of the Ancient City*

How do we understand the absence of any level prior to the fourteenth century on this site, while the existence of Emar at the beginning of the Bronze Age is asserted by references at Ugarit and Nuzi, by texts from Mari in the seventeenth century, and in the archives at Ebla during the second half of the third millennium? This is a fairly peculiar situation.

Recent morphological analysis of the Euphrates valley based on aerial photographs taken before the formation of the lake shows that an urban location could have existed at the

foot of Tell Meskéné. Drifting of the river's meanders at this bend would have made its existence precarious. Most probably this urban site would have been the third and second millennium town, located only a few hundred meters away from the excavated town. This town was probably about to disappear, eroded by the meandering Euphrates. In order to preserve a city which was crucial to the commercial system of the Late Bronze Age, the Hittite king who then dominated Northern Syria (Suppiluliuma I, 1380–1340 BCE, or his son Mursili II, 1339–1306 BCE) decided to rebuild the city on the edge of the plateau avoiding the river's erosive power.

The new city therefore dates to the middle of the fourteenth century. One will probably never know about the first town, which, in its decayed condition, was never detected by the excavators of Emar nor through the surveys which had taken place prior to the formation of Lake El Assad. The older city was drowned in the waters, and the little that was left must now be completely lost. Only analysis of ancient documents permits the formulation of this very likely hypothesis regarding its location.

### *The New City*

The builders of the new Emar chose a portion of flat land on the south bank, which descended towards the valley. This massif was bounded by the Euphrates on the north and was limited on the south by a wadi which encroached upon it severely. It offered a large platform six hundred to seven hundred meters in width north/south and nearly one thousand meters in length. The incision of an artificial valley on the west (five hundred meters long, fifty meters wide, twenty meters deep in certain places) cut through the plateau and created a

rectilinear rock foundation upon which the new city could be built. The city sat elevated from the valley, but also entirely separated from the plateau, and was therefore perfectly protected. The southern wadi probably had been occupied by a road traveling from the plateau and serving the old city.

Once the contour of the foundation was determined, the builders totally remodeled the surface by installing a system of terraces staged from the level of the river at about 280 meters up to the summit of the site at an elevation of 326 meters. By conforming to the existing wadis as well as to the terrain, the builders installed successive levels, with terrace walls con-

formed to the slightest irregularities and often anchored in the rock itself. By filling the spaces above the terrace walls with rock refuse recovered from the valley cut through the west flank or retrieved from the older city, Emar's engineers created a new topography which structured the city somewhat like an amphitheater alongside the river.

The network of the main streets, but perhaps also the entire road-system, was conceived at the same time as the terraces. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to disturb the terrace system to build new roads without creating weak areas within the whole urban structure.

The infrastructure was certainly conceived in advance. The buildings were then constructed successively as the entire development project progressed. It remains uncertain, however, if each house was foreseen in the original design. A great number of them were founded within the pre-existing terraces.

#### **Organization of the City**

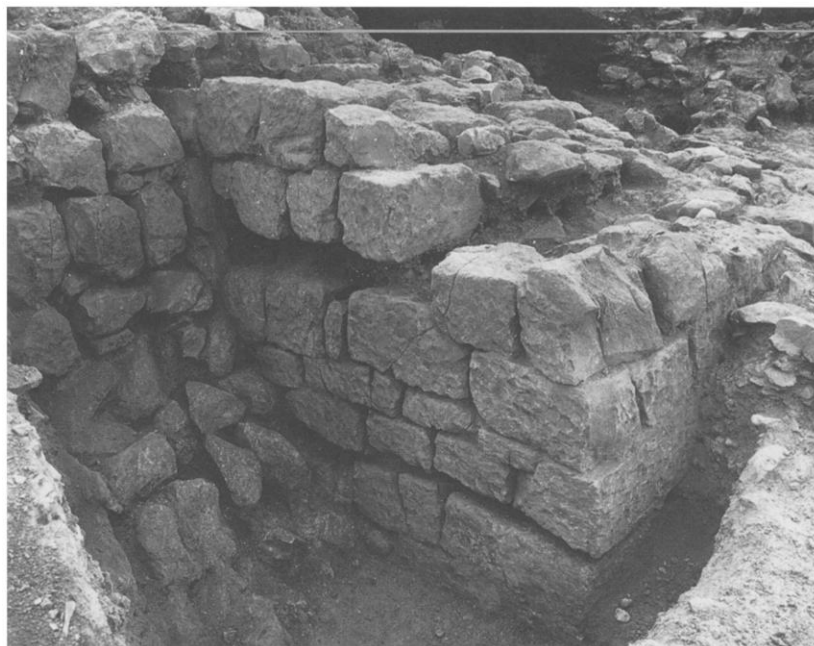
The overall design for the city cannot be sketched with confidence; too many elements remain unknown due to insufficient excavations and later ruins.

The city was laid out following a design resembling a rectangle approximately seven hundred by one thousand meters. Excavations in Field Y, located on the side of the human-made valley, revealed the presence of a rampart. There were no traces of gates however, though they probably existed at the center of each side, based on the topography of the tell. The entire eastern half of the site was covered by the Byzantine town of Barbalissos and the Arab town of Balis and remains *terra incognita*. Perhaps this is where the main decision-making center of the Hittite power was located, since the lone probe made in the area gave us a Hittite tablet. Some of the major thoroughfares have been unearthed, while others can be deduced from the topography. However, none of the principal lines of the network can any longer be discerned. The major sanctuary of the city, dedicated to the pair Baal/Astart, was situated on the southwest at summit point of the site, so as to be visible everywhere. The local king's palace occupied another eminent position at the northwest corner. This location permitted a watchful view over the city and the port which no doubt bordered the northern side of the town. Other temples were integrated into the regular urban fabric.

### **Major Monumental Construction**

#### **The *ḫilani***

The local king's palace, situated on the promontory in the northwest overlooking the valley, takes the form of a complex monumental building: it is in actuality one of the oldest palaces of the *ḫilani* type. It belongs to the Bronze Age, while most buildings of this type are generally considered characteristic of the Iron Age. The structure possesses all the characteristics



**A bastion projects from the rampart and bears traces of wooden ties.** Though its gates were not to be located, Emar was probably surrounded by a city wall that created a rectangle encompassing approximately 175 acres.

which will later constitute this particular category of Syrian palaces. Its facade clearly boasted a second story. A colonnaded portico led to two oblong rooms, with the second doubtless playing the role of the throne room. Dependent structures were located to the south. This is the first time that such a good model of the *ḫilani* type has been found at such an early period. The discovery therefore challenges the breach often fixed between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. A Hittite origin of the building form seems most probable.

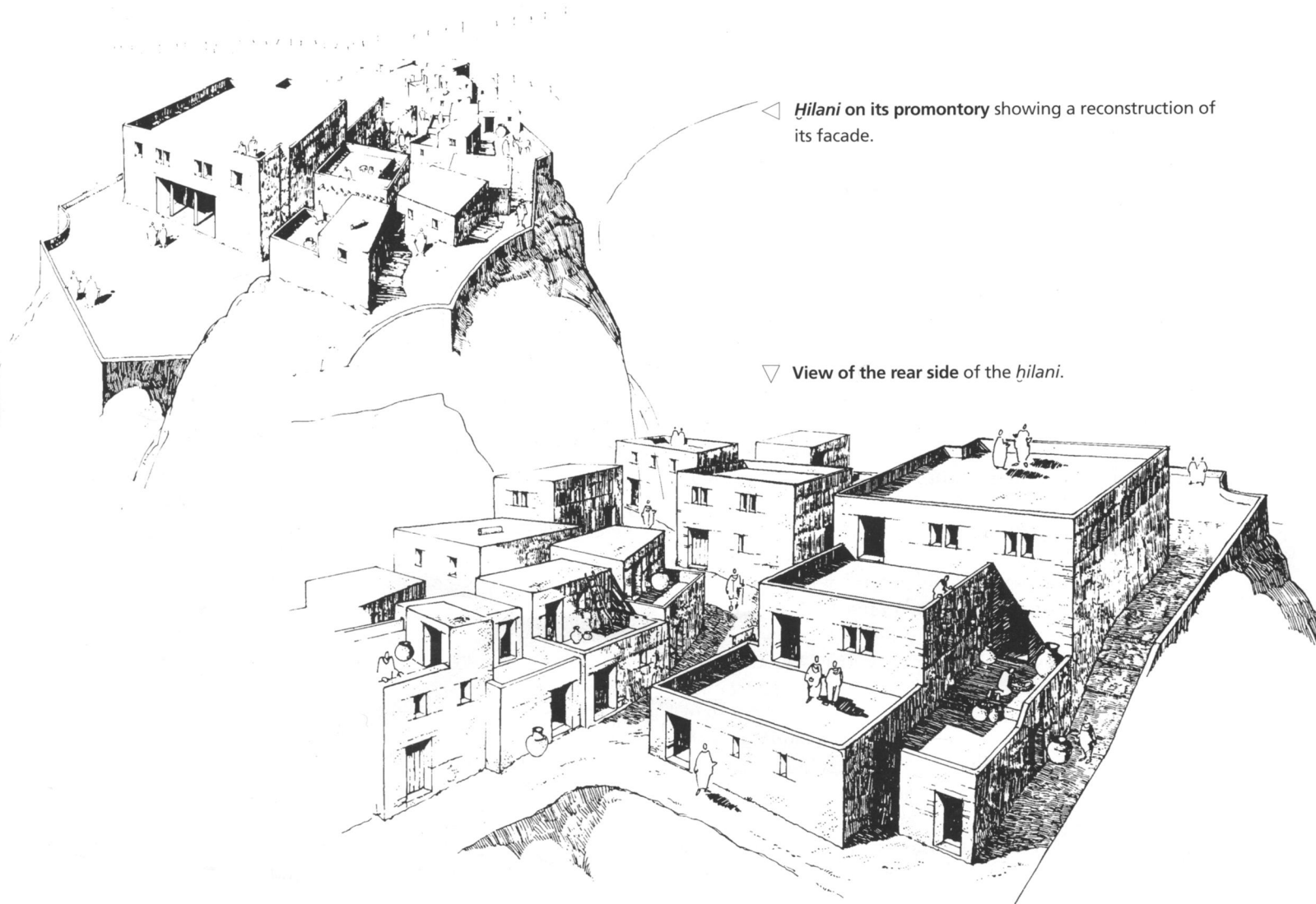
As the archives found in the building testify, this is where the local king used to live. But despite its very dominant location, and the interest it offers for architectural history, one should not assign too much importance to the royal authority who resided in this palace.

#### **The Temples**

Emar's excavators found four temples. The first two took the form of a set of temples associated with a cultic terrace: the major official sanctuary of the city situated on the pinnacle of the tell overlooking, besides the western and southern valleys, the whole urban area and its immediate surroundings. Both of them were designed in the *megaron* style (one elongated room for the Holy Place with its offering table, special paraphernalia for rituals, and podium for the deity or the Most Holy Place), and they were aligned almost parallel, doors opening to the east, on each side of a street leading to a vast cultic esplanade at their rear. An altar was erected on the southern edge of the esplanade, and some cupholes (occasionally of a large diameter, but with no visible function) dotted the floor. Based on a few tablets collected in this temple constellation, it looks as though the temple in the south, located

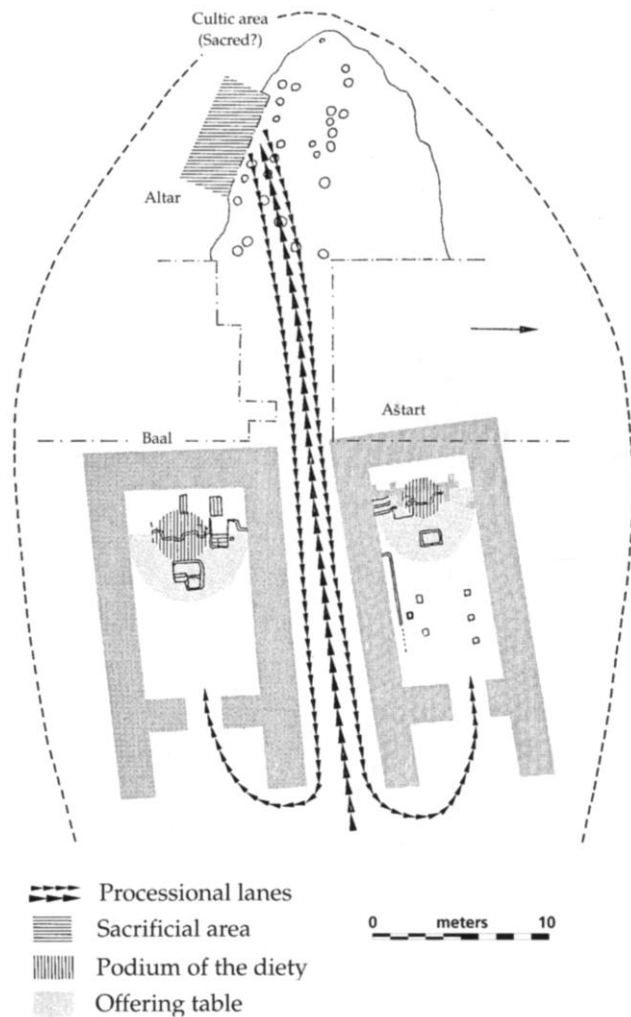


- △ The *hilani* emerged in Field A on the northwest promontory.
- ◁ A section of the palace of the local king. This *hilani* building is among the earliest ever unearthed. Its discovery demonstrates the Hittite origin of the style.



◁ *Hilani* on its promontory showing a reconstruction of its facade.

▽ View of the rear side of the *hilani*.



The sanctuaries of Baal and Astart on the cultic terrace with its processional promenade.

slightly above the rest, would have been dedicated to Baal, while inside the northern temple, Astart would have been worshipped.

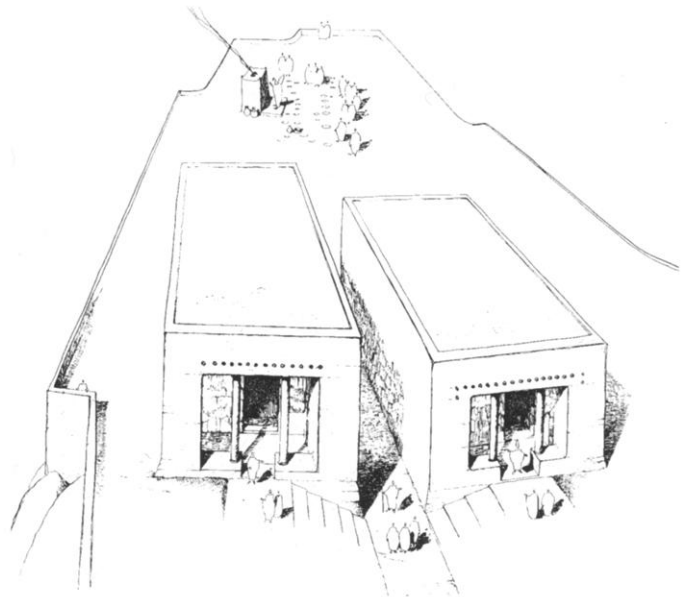
The third sanctuary (M-2), sometimes identified as a Pantheon because it seems to have been dedicated to all the gods, was unearthed in Field M. It, too, was designed as a *megaron*, with the typical structures found in Field E, particularly a small cultic esplanade also located behind the temple. But this temple possessed the peculiarity of being equipped with an annex consisting of three rooms on its long eastern side. Here excavators unearthed the Diviner's archives, which might have fallen from an upper floor. The Diviner was an important figure whose reputation reached the court of the Great Hittite king.

The last temple, found slightly to the north and not too far from the previous one, was also fully integrated into the urban fabric. Of the same generic shape, but without a deep entry, it opened into a small room. Very rich artifacts came out of it (glazed ceramics; pearls; a carved caprine horn, one of the most impressive pieces at Emar, artistically), but it was



△ The great hall of the temple of Astart.

▽ Reconstruction of the temples of Baal and Astart.



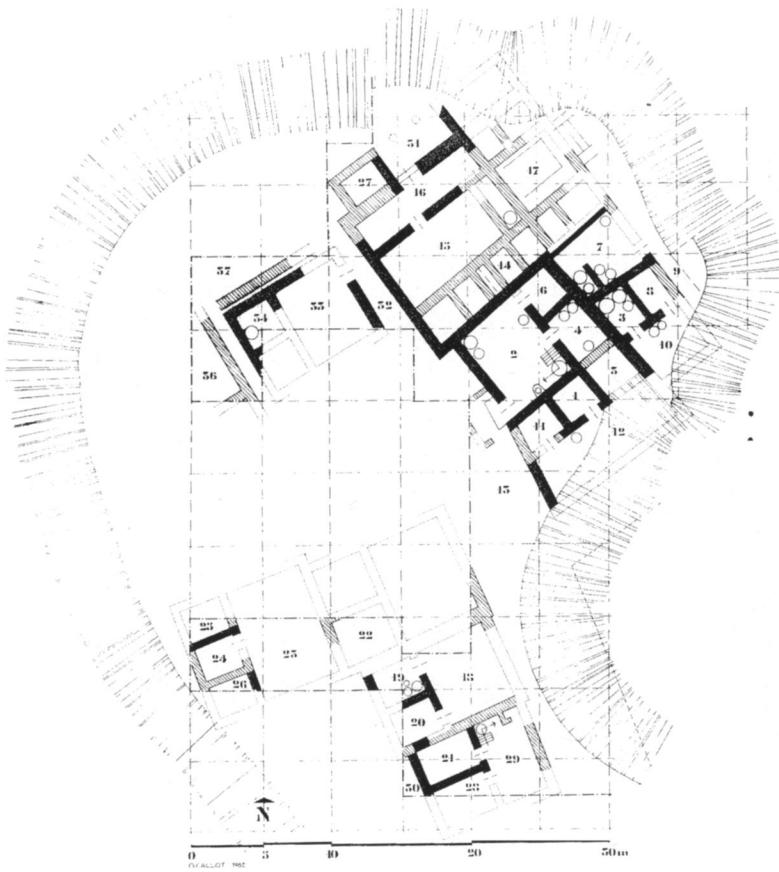
impossible to find out which divinity was worshipped in the temple.

It is remarkable to see that all the temples belong to the model commonly found in Syria since the third millennium and that no attempts by the Hittites were made to replace them with their own.

#### The Houses

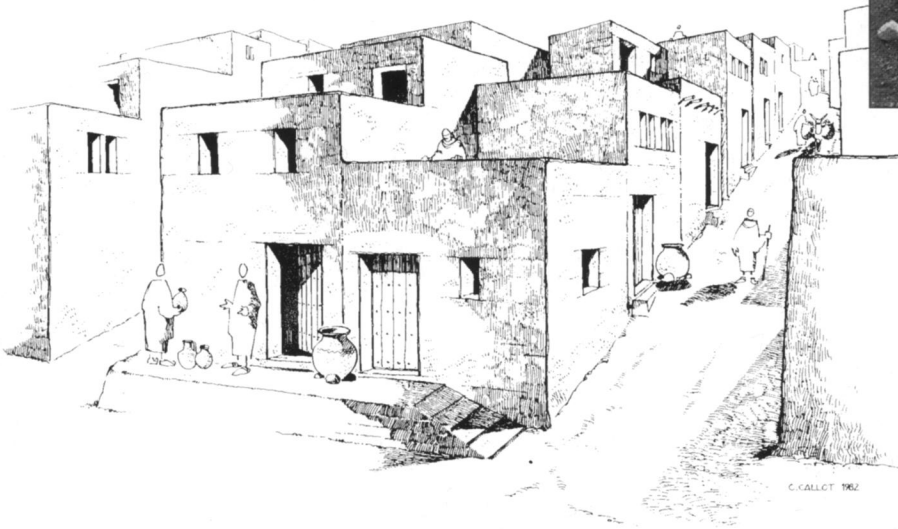
Diggers excavated about thirty private homes in their entirety or partially. In two Fields (A and D), they even unearthed





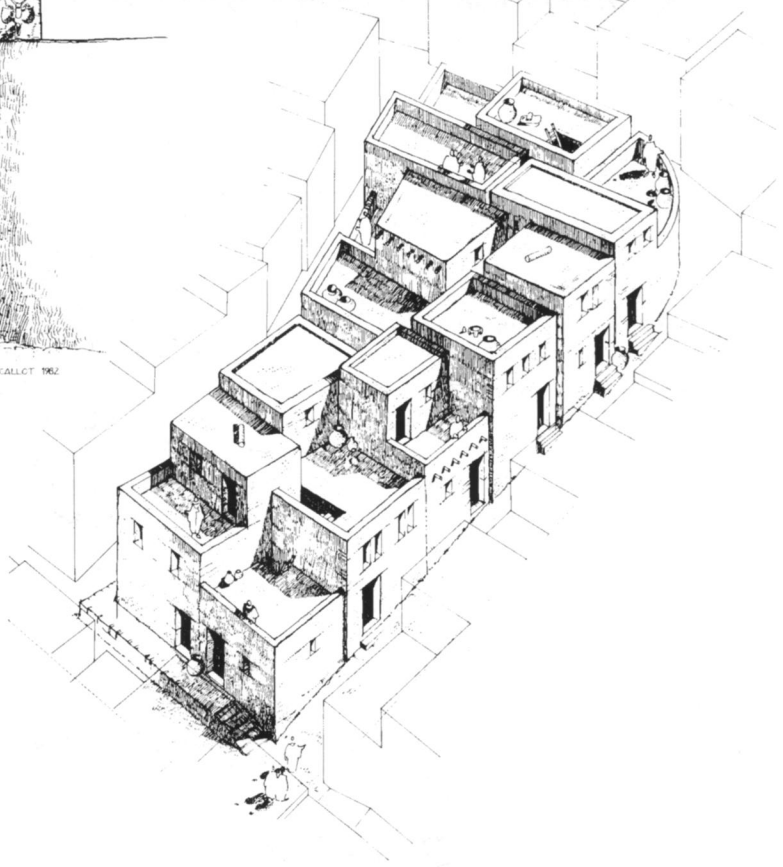
◁ Field A to the north of the *hīlani* with its constellation of domestic buildings.

▽ Foundation of one house in Field D.



△ Reconstruction of the houses of Field D to accommodate human occupancy.

A block of houses of Field D reconstructed and viewed from above. ▷



groups of houses, true clusters organized with the terraces.

The design of the houses was strictly uniform: one could practically speak of a standard design consisting of a large downstairs room, generally rectangular and opening onto the street, and two small rooms of indistinguishable function, but separated from each other, located on the opposite side from the entrance. The structure of the houses, the frequent presence of interior stairways, and traces of fire in the debris show that this constellation of rooms was roofed. Often an upper floor was built above the smaller rooms. Everything else was surmounted by an open-air terrace. No courtyards were ever discovered associated with the houses examined.

The bread oven was to be found inside the larger room, as well as familial or commercial storage. Therefore, it seems that daily living took place mostly on the upper floor, in the master room, and on the terrace. This house form was very widespread, not only in the bend of the Euphrates, but in North Syria generally, and sometimes in neighboring regions during the second millennium. However, it is not common to Hittite customs. Rather, it represents a regional style in use since the third millennium and systematically adopted as the main model for the new Emar.

#### **Regional Settlement**

Intensive survey, carried out in an area restricted by the growth of Lake El Assad in this part of the valley, managed to find another site, Tell Faq'ous, a type of oppidum (satellite site) downstream from Emar on the south bank of the Euphrates.

The purpose of excavating on this site in 1978 was to determine whether there had been any contact between this fortress and the capital of the province located about ten km upstream. The single campaign, in 1978, showed that Tell Faq'ous had been a fortress charged to protect Emar against surprise attacks from the southeast, therefore from Babylonia and surely also from Assyria. Excavators revealed a material culture similar to that found at Emar, as well as almost identical architecture except for accentuated military features. The discovery of a seal mentioning the "Chief of Chariots" (General of the Hittites), already known at Emar, proves the common ties uniting the two sites clearly under the same authority.

Therefore, the system organized by the Hittites in order to protect the Aštata province is more apparent, and an enigmatic text from the Annals of Mursili II becomes comprehensible. He goes to Syria to restore order because disturbances have broken out:

When I arrived to Aštata (that is, the province) I went up to the city of Aštata (meaning Emar, already rebuilt or under construction by Suppiluliuma) and I built a citadel



Tell Faq'ous with its access ramp on the right.

(which is Tell Faq'ous) which I garrisoned.

The provincial organization and part of its defense system have reappeared thanks to these two excavations.

## **Material Culture**

### **Daily Life**

All building types—temples, palaces, and houses—produced diverse material finds which display vividly the condition of daily life. The city definitely experienced great prosperity during its one and a half centuries of existence. The furnishings found inside temples and palaces make this obvious. One should particularly note: bronze figurines (divine and bovine); glass and faience containers and ornaments; glazed ceramics; a female ivory head (unfortunately severely charred); weaponry (a beautiful sword of a mixture of iron and bronze); a wooden box with ivory lids; remains of gold and silver leaf; and a silver crescent pendant (perhaps representing bovine horns).

Besides ceramics, occasionally collected in large quantities, the houses produced stone and metallic objects illustrating both day-to-day needs and the activities of city merchants: beer filters; containers; arrow and javelin heads; scales of armor; needles and scissors; long nails; bronze scrapers; millstones; mortars; many kinds of grindstones; pestles; various tools; and stone rings.

### **Architectural Models**

Emar was highly productive, particularly in an artifact very poorly attested previously: terra cotta "architectural models." With over thirty examples, this is the richest collection produced to date by a Near Eastern site.

Interest in these objects is endless, but what draws particular attention to them is that some categories of them

may represent actual buildings or at the very least architectural details in miniature. One type takes the form of a rectilinear tower topped with a corbeled crown whose sharply pointed angles suggest the shape of horns. The other type represents, so it seems, traditional homestyles close to the standard design found at Emar: elongated building space with an upstairs room opening over a terrace. Divided windows, triangular or circular openings, and a front door permit comparisons with real architecture, even if some of the aspects of the decoration (plated naked female figurines, lions, ropes, plant-life symbols) bear only a distant connection to housing. Therefore, one can recognize in certain characteristics, more of the potter's artistic expression than the architect's. The role of these objects, especially coveted in the bend of the Euphrates, is not very clear, but a religious significance should not be excluded.

#### Art

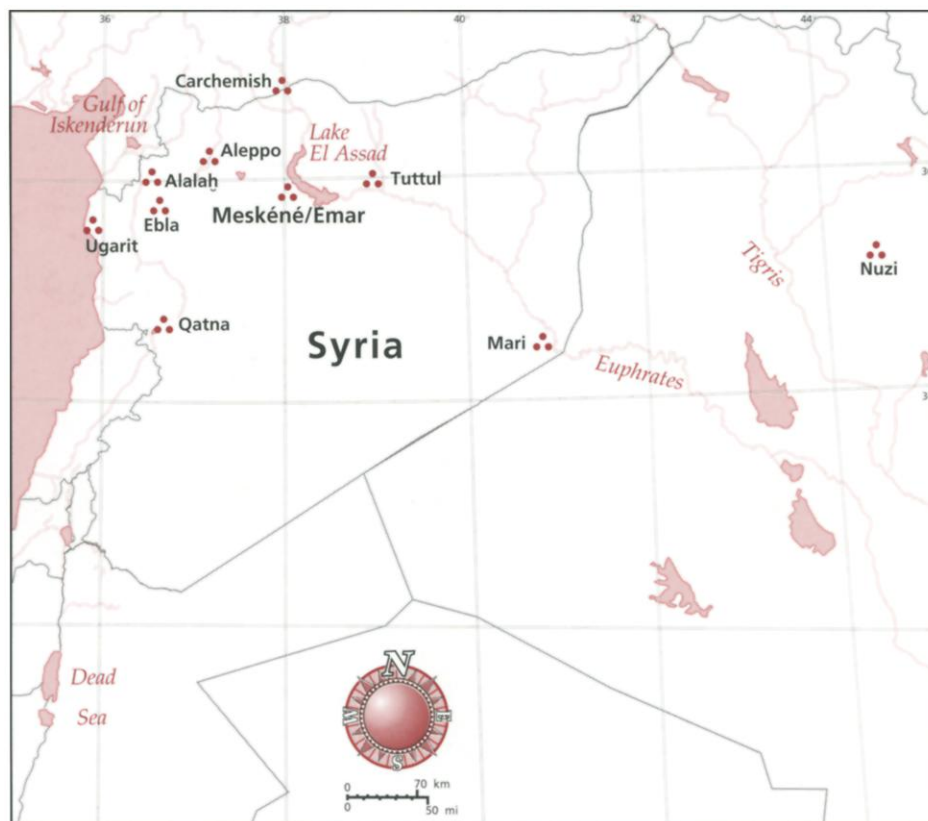
Art is not well represented, perhaps because of the final looting, perhaps because of the fundamentally commercial nature of residents' activities. Sculpture is especially scarce, except for the relief on a bowl fragment from the Temple of Aštar and part of a small engraved stele. Other than that, one should note the many and extremely varied figurines, modeled and cast, as well as embossed reliefs.

The double sanctuary of Baal and Aštar offered some bronze, ivory, and parts of an ornament, probably architectural, made of glass pulp, all of it quite damaged by the fire which destroyed the city. Sanctuary M-2 produced a beautiful collection of fragmentary objects, usually cultic in nature: glazed ceramics, gypsum vases, pendants, and pearls.

Above all, the fascinating sculptured caprine horn found on the floor of the anonymous temple on Field M deserves emphasis. It is 24.2 cm long and divided into six tiered unequal registers: the primary motifs include scenes in which a man confronts a lion; profiles of hunters or warriors carrying bow, hatchet, spear, or lance; chariot ridden by an archer attacking a bovid; parade of lion with antelopes; sphinx; schematic plant life and fringes. All of these belong to the common repertoire for this period; one is struck by the rather clumsy look of the entire work, maybe because it was created in a local workshop. This underlines all the more the value of a few saving successes, such as the wounded bull.

#### Engravings (Glyptic)

In contrast, engraving preserved on eight hundred impressions on tablets is certainly one of the main treasures of the site. After elimination of duplicates, the collection of nearly



four hundred different seals represents the most beautiful assemblage revealed so far in Northern Syria. Next to cylinder seals of the Mesopotamian kind which make up the largest series, one finds circular stamps (more rarely square) of the Anatolian type, and ring-stamps usually with hieroglyphic writing but used especially in North Syria.

In the seals one can observe the encounter of several artistic currents which exercised real influence on local traditions. Typical Syrian features intertwine with manifestly Babylonian sources, while the Mitannian imagery appears prominently as of the middle of the second millennium. Under Hittite domination, northern influences were very well received at Emar. This acceptance is indicated by the fact that the names of Semitic residents of Emar are rendered at the same time in Hittite hieroglyph and cuneiform characters, and that the use of the stamp is spreading without reducing use of the cylinder seal.

One of the main interests of this collection is in the diversity of styles offered: proof of an exceptional capacity to adapt to varied influences and of an eclecticism typical of a region at the crossroads of very diverse milieus. The two most richly represented collections undoubtedly express the contradictions of this land, both attached to its own traditions and under Hittite hegemony. The so-called "Syrian" collection, from local tradition, hides under some form of archaism, where the Mitannian, Babylonian, and even old Babylonian influences are very strong. The "Syro-Hittite" series reflects the nature of the political situation, since the engravers borrow extensively the themes and patterns of the occupying power.

# Artifacts from

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**Seal impression of the "Chief of Chariots"**—identical impressions were recovered in the excavations of both Tell Faq'ous and Emar, demonstrating their political unity.

A figurine depicting a humped bovine.

**Dynastic seal impression of the king of Emar.**

Silver cattle horns.

A glazed goblet.



# m Emar

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**A fragment of a jar decorated  
with an animal appliqué.**

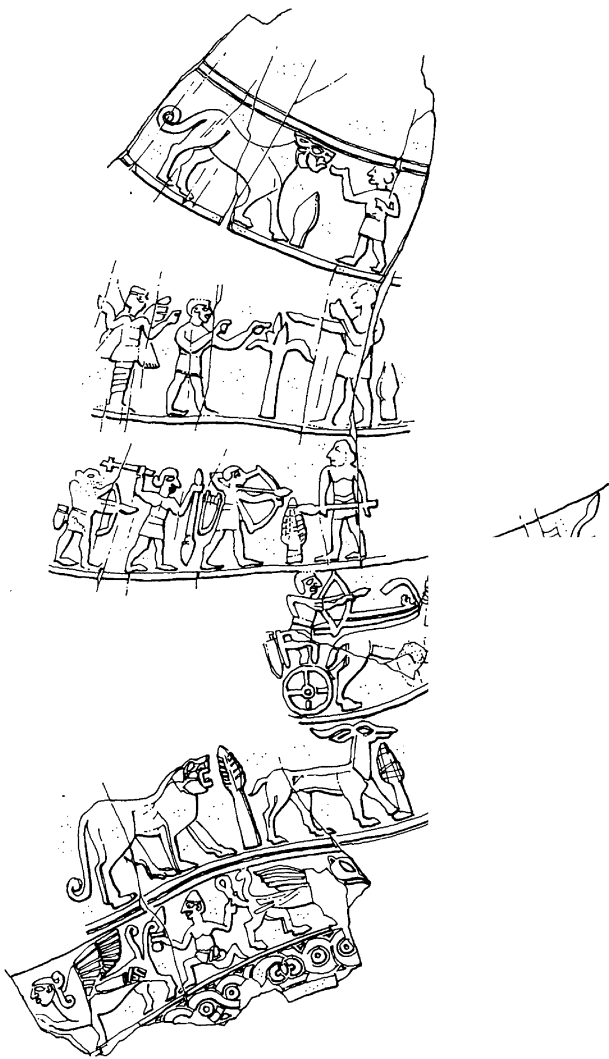
**Terra-cotta chest.**

**The sculptured goat horn  
depicting hunting scenes.**

**Second terra-cotta chest.**

**A terra-cotta plaque of an enthroned deity.**





The unrolled scenes from the register of the engraved horn, viewed simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Although it was an economic metropolis of Northern Syria during one and a half millennia and surely constantly tugged between politically prominent cities like Ebla or Aleppo, Emar never seems to have played a major political role. The results of its excavation show us only one and a half century of its existence at a time when it was in complete submission to Hittite power.

On the other hand, ever since the third millennium, Emar had been, as point of transfer in trade between Syria and Mesopotamia, one of the crucial components of the system which governed, to varying degrees, the economy of the Near East during the Bronze Age. From the fourteenth to the beginning of the twelfth century, under Hittite dominion, Emar population seems to have been very active, at times even insubordinate.

The exploration of Emar has provided a detailed view of the life of a Hittite province during the largest expansion of the empire, of its territorial organization, and of the value of the crossroads represented for international relations. Its

discovery has illuminated political, cultural, and economical relations between the central power and a border town in the thirteenth century. Moreover, its excavation has raised questions of cultural influence, of assimilation, and redistribution of the features of civilization; displayed the economical role of a town as a point of transfer during fifteen centuries; and finally, made prominent the technical skills of Late Bronze Age populations to carry out urban construction as well as large-scale regional settlement.

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