

The Question of ‘Elites’: Real People or Mysterious Agents? Elitism as a Convenient Recourse to Interpret Social Change in Prehistoric Southwestern Asia (From the Origins of Sedentism to the ‘Uruk Phenomenon’)

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Abstract. *This article analyzes current theoretical discourses within the Neolithic and Chalcolithic research of Southwestern Asia, which is still dominated by interpretations that assume a progression of increased hierarchization. Whether explicitly or implicitly, social evolutionary thinking still pervades our scholarship, and prevents innovative theory-building. This entails an inability to break with heuristics of ‘origins’ inherited from the past (e.g. “from the origins of domestication to the origins of civilization”), even though old and new discoveries, when integrated, are already pointing towards alternative research pathways. Sedentism, domestication, and urbanism were all complex, protracted, non-linear processes. Yet, the visualization of an ‘Uruk phenomenon’ expanding over large areas of Mesopotamia during the 4th millennium BC, ridden with problematic inconsistencies, still heralds the triumphal rise of civilization. Instead of relying on obsolete political and economic theories, or fake economy/ritual dichotomies, the investigation of social intelligence and the articulation of the biosocial in the landscape and within the prehistoric community should be a priority. The ‘agency’ of ‘elites’ is merely an interpretive deus ex machina helping scholars deal with the many difficulties and uncertainties of their research.*

Rezumat. *Acest articol analizează discursul teoretic actual aferent cercetărilor asupra Neoliticului și Paleoliticului din Asia de Sud-Vest, el fiind încă dominat de interpretări bazate pe o progresie a unei ierarhizări considerabile. Fie explicit, fie implicit, gândirea social-evoluționistă încă afectează mediul academic și împiedică dezvoltarea de noi abordări teoretice. Aceasta conduce la neputința de a părași euristica „originilor”, moștenită din trecut („de la originile domesticirii la originile civilizației”), chiar și atunci când anumite descoperiri, deopotrivă vechi și noi, odată integrate, trimit deja către metode alternative de cercetare. Sedentarizarea, domesticirea și urbanizarea au fost procese complexe, prelungite și non-lineare. Totuși, vizualizarea unui „fenomen Uruk” extins peste zone întinse ale Mesopotamiei pe parcursul mileniului al IV-lea î. Hr., cuprins de numeroase inconsistențe, încă marchează apariția triumfală a civilizației. În loc să se bazeze pe teoretizări politice și economice sau pe false dihotomii între economie și ritual, investigarea inteligenței sociale și articularea biosocialului în acest peisaj și în interiorul comunităților preistorice ar trebui să fie o prioritate. „Agenția elitelor” este, cel mult, o interpretare deus ex machina ce sprijină specialiștii în depășirea dificultăților și nesiguranțelor cercetării lor.*

Keywords: *elitism - domestication - Uruk phenomenon - hierarchy - heterarchy.*

1. Introduction

The rise of urbanism in Mesopotamia is currently approached by two disciplines that give the illusion of meeting each other halfway. Archaeologists deal with the second-half of the 4th

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The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

millennium BC, or the Late Uruk/Jemdet Nasr period, whereas a handful of Assyriologists tackle the transition between the 4th and the 3rd millennium, focusing on the study of early written material coming mostly from ancient Uruk, then, with unknown chronological gaps, from Ur and Shuruppak. Archaeologists are mostly interested in showing how ‘civilization’ came to be (the traditional view à la Gordon Childe co-exists with ‘archaic state’ and similar discourses), whereas cuneiformists are mostly interested in proving that scribal transmission operated along familiar lines from almost the inception of the writing system. Even though each discipline has different approaches and interests,² they have one thing in common: they both need to rely on variations of what I call ‘the paradigm of hierarchy’ to sustain their arguments.

Assyriologists need ‘elites’ to sustain an uncomplicated rise of city-states, visualized as palace and temples, and their concomitant ideology and economy, so that —assuming that this process was short and fast, almost as if predestined— they can rest assured that scribal transmission, within the bubbles of well-known institutions, was soon in place, and proceed with their research interests. A basic reconstruction of events in Mesopotamia at large, or in the alluvium for that matter, from approximately 3800 to 2600 BC —regardless of the nature of our sources— is currently impossible. The difficulties inherent in studying the archaic corpus —merely administrative tablets of frequently unknown direction (entries or exits) or uncertain institutional nature or purpose—³ have led, in my opinion, to several pitfalls, like relying on an unrealistic division into only two phases, and given moreover inappropriate names (following confusing and erroneous stratigraphy),⁴ or like relying on allegedly already standardized lexical lists —particularly as concerns *Lú A* (“ list of professions”), and *Namešda* (“list of officials”), somehow treated like ‘Rosetta stones’ that, if only rightly cracked, will help us decode accounts, receipts and allotments in terms of the overall hierarchy of a Uruk society ideal.⁵

Archaeologists need ‘elites’ to sustain a trade network model —the Uruk phenomenon— with no visible evidence of an overarching institution managing such a system, monopoly of any commodity whatsoever, or even a reason for such an ambitious and premature

² Sallaberger and Schrakamp (2015, 4, n. 3) stated that a separation between the historian, archaeologist, and art historian was necessary.

³ The initial work of Nissen, Damerow and Englund provided a basic understanding of tablet layout, measurement and numerical systems, and many commodities decipherment (e.g. NISSEN, DAMEROW and ENGLUND 1993; ENGLUND 1998).

⁴ GREEN and NISSEN 1987 (=ATU 2). Even though Nissen was perfectly aware of the risks of correlating stratigraphy, chronology and findspots, he still decided to link their perceived palaeographic development with a pre-3300 or post-3300 BC scenario (Uruk IV–Uruk III). A summary of the problems inherent to our current understanding of Uruk in the “Late Uruk” period, whenever that was, will be given below.

⁵ See, *inter alia*, JOHNSON 2015; WAGENSONNER 2012; for a slightly different perspective, VELDHUIS 2014.

undertaking. Or else they need ‘elites’ to act as agents of redistributive organizations, which in the transition from the *Middle* to the *Late Uruk* period switch from a religious to a secular character (whatever that means), and feed standardized rations of bread or porridge to oppressed workers (presumably keeping the lion’s share of the fruits of the workers’ labor). Archaeologists involved in current missions on sites or areas that have Late Chalcolithic occupation are keen on pushing the evidence available —“monumental” architecture, assemblages of *Uruk* ceramics or *Mesopotamian* clay cones, impersonal bowls, stamps or seal impressions, valuable commodities, and any iconographic depiction supporting the old “king-priest” discussion— so far into the heuristic ether that they have lost sight of the purpose of their investigations. The language of most works dealing with the 4th millennium BC (and after) is riddled with economic jargon and concepts that help to hide the uncertainties of this relatively short (more than one thousand years nonetheless) period of significant changes, which manifest following badly understood patterns and considerable geographical variation. Patchwork theories that take into account the long span of enchainment developments and the particular nature of those material changes in each relevant area —whether Anatolia or the Upper Tigris, the Zagros in general, or the Susiana in particular, the clusters far away on the Euphrates, and even the epicenter, regardless of whether the epicenter is visualized as “Uruk, the first city”, or as southern Mesopotamia—, are now superimposed to the two main theoretical packages coming from the past, which even if largely obsolete, are still somehow alive and kicking: Algaze’s Uruk system/emporium⁶ with a face lift, leaning now towards a process of gradual emulation or hybridization; or the emergence of secular institutions sprouting like Zeus out of Saturn from an earlier religious hierarchy until the unfortunate demise of these early proto-urban experiments due to climactic decline, conflict, or unknown events (see below).

Both models are ultimately based on stereotypes and assumptions derived from future historical developments (this I call ‘retroactive interpretation’, which allows scholars to create the illusion of a consensual *status quo*, since it apparently fulfills everybody’s expectations and prevents criticism).

Before dealing with the Uruk phenomenon, however, I will first give an overview of remnants of evolutionary thinking in the archaeological theory investigating the processes preceding it. The most striking observation I could make when I started delving deeper into the past during the course of the research for my dissertation⁷ was that four thousand years separate the semi-consolidation of sedentism in the 8th millennium BC from the first attempts at “proto-urbanism”, which I suspect often happened because of meta-communal aggregation (either *ex novo*, heterogeneous aggregation, or advantageous admixtures causing the rapid

⁶ ALGAZE 1993 (first of several publications).

⁷ My original aim was to investigate the social conditions that led to the choice of supreme rulership (sacred kingship) as a form of government.

The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

growth of a site, both presumably entailing the better maximization of its surroundings). I could not understand how four millennia of “failed” or very slow progression towards “complexity” could be overlooked or distorted, until I realized that all scholarship nowadays is hyper-specialized, and archaeology is not an exception. If the nomenclature of periods based on ceramics, packages or horizons survives despite awareness of their futility, connotations, and risks, it is because an evolutionary, step-by-step approach facilitates tackling some commonalities and overwhelming diversity, large territories, and apparent contradictions, while producing results and satisfying agendas. Nevertheless, efforts made during the last three decades have indeed contributed to a better understanding of the long processes that we call sedentism and domestication and offered a more nuanced view of technological advances or environmental determinisms.

What follows next can only be a succinct overview, and I will mostly focus on the salient points pertinent for my discussion here.

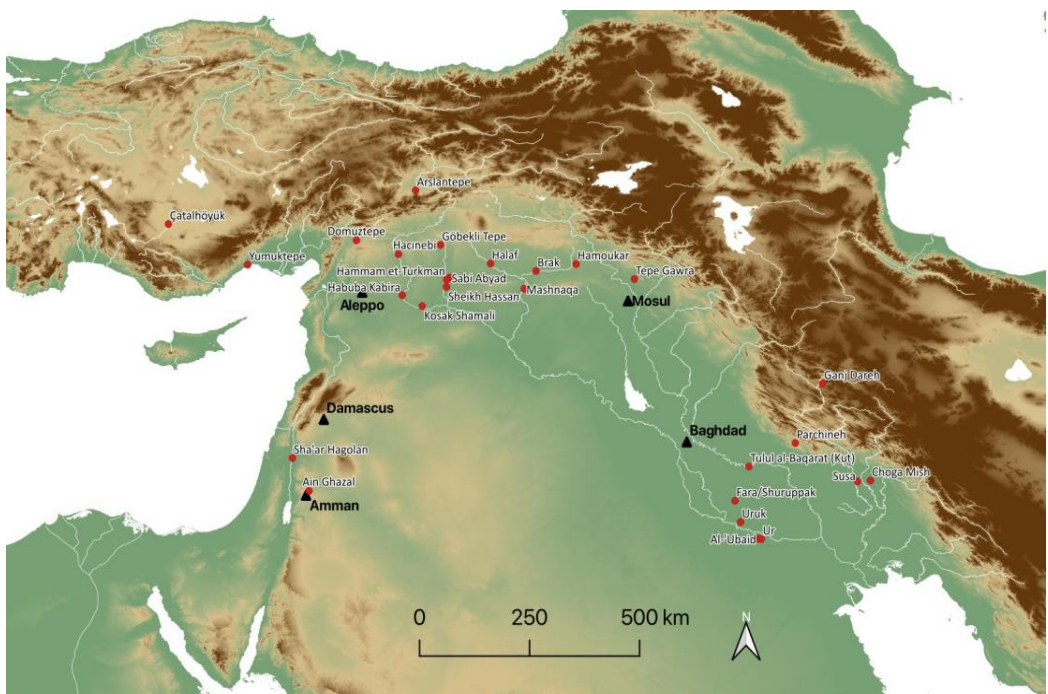


Fig. 1. Map of the main sites mentioned in the text.

2. The process of sedentism and domestication (10th–7th or 9th–7th millennium BC)

Conclusions extracted from recent research

- Connections to the land (homemaking) precede protracted building on a given location.

- The early strategies leading to morphological and genetic domestication of plants and animals are now described as cultivation and husbandry, understood to have non-linear developments, with regional variations depending on both ecological and cultural factors.
- Once more people adopt settling down in a given location, regional and even site variation as concerns construction techniques, mode of aggregation, material culture, and mortuary rituals occurs

Views that require further reflection

- The idea that these early sedentary communities were establishing large-scale networks of some sort, but believed to be mostly based on the obtention of obsidian and marine shells
 - The notion of ‘corporate groups’, a concept already discarded by anthropologists
 - Archaeologists of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in general tend to assume that during the 7th millennium BC, with the consolidation of sedentism, domestication, and pottery, people started living in family households, and family property is inferred to have followed

Let us briefly review each of these points.

The nature of ‘sedentism’ itself is dealt with special sensitivity and acumen in collaboration by Maher and Conkey, the former a specialist in the southern Levantine Epipaleolithic, who was part of the Azraq archaeological project since 2008, and director of the excavations at Kharaneh IV (ca. 19,800–18,600 cal. BP) in Jordan, the latter a specialist in Western European Magdalenian sites, focusing here on Peyre Blanque, a site in the Central Pyrenees (ca. 19,000 cal. BP).⁸ Both sites have given evidence of protracted occupation. Maher posits Kharaneh as a site of regular aggregation for several groups. Conkey finds the proximity of the cave of Marsoulas to Peyre Blanque significant and insists that both caves and open sites were shared during the Upper Paleolithic by a group or groups inhabiting a particular landscape. Their article also challenges the view that hunter-gatherers were not interested in “home-making” strategies. They call attention to archaeologists’ frequent labels to characterize the sedentism of hunter-gatherers as somewhat inferior (i.e. ‘campsite’, ‘dwelling’, ‘hut’, even functionalistic ‘hearth’).

As concerns the “pathways” towards domestication, after decades of investigation, we have finally come to terms with several facts: since the improvement of climatic conditions with the Holocene, it certainly did not happen fast (more like 3,000 years); the theory of a

⁸ MAHER and CONKEY 2019.

The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

single origin preceding diffusion, for either most plant or animal species, is no longer standing,⁹ and to this day, the processes culminating in the phenotypic expression of domestication *proper* are still not fully understood.

The intentionality of plant domestication *sensu* cereal-based “crop package” has been certainly challenged. Asouti and Fuller have questioned the rationale of deliberate, methodical food-oriented behavior. They observed that there seems to be “a continuous gene flow between contiguous wild and cultivated populations” of cereal, indicative, for instance, of “harvesting before cereals reached full maturation, or in multiple passes in which an earlier pass was saved for procuring seed corn.”¹⁰ When looking at the bigger picture, they observe that: (...) by focusing almost exclusively on the domestication process, the vexing question of the historical development of PPN [Pre-Pottery Neolithic] plant management practices has been largely overlooked. (...) That developed crop “packages” seem to have been the exception rather than the rule before the LATE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC also raises another important question: was plant domestication the enabler or the outcome of population aggregation manifested in the LATE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC “megasites”?¹¹

Regarding animal domestication, Zeder’s differentiation of three different pathways towards domestication depending on animal behavior —i.e. the commensal (boars), the prey (easily-hunted herbivores), the directed (horses)—¹² can give an idea of how difficult it is to pinpoint these events in time when strategies to gain the trust of so many different species in several ecological niches was an ongoing process undertaken from around the 9th millennium BC by some communities spread over a vast territory, then selectively adopted, and adapted. Arbuckle has argued for animal domestication in Southwestern Asia to be seen as the “development of systems of animal husbandry” that took place over millennia and “followed markedly different trajectories in different regions”.¹³ Aurochs, for instance, seem to have been domesticated first in Northern Levantine and Southeastern Anatolian sites, whereas in central Anatolia morphological domestication is not confirmed until the 7th millennium (probably because of the meta-cultural value assigned to this powerful animal). “There are only five sites where it is fairly certain that the full suite of domestic livestock were managed together by 8000 cal BC” (ARBUCKLE 2014, 14). “For most of Southwest Asia, however, the barnyard complex did not come together until the Pottery Neolithic (seventh millennium cal

⁹ See the excellent overview by Zeder (2011).

¹⁰ ASOUTI and FULLER 2013, 308. The authors posit here that plant food may have been as much a component of “feasting” events as animals, like aurochs, are usually considered to be. This is still, in my opinion, a teleological understanding of domestication, even if the perspective leans towards ritual.

¹¹ ASOUTI and FULLER 2012, 157. LATE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC stands for Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (second half of the 8th millennium BC).

¹² ZEDER 2012.

¹³ ARBUCKLE 2014.

BC) and in some regions it was not until the Chalcolithic that cattle and pigs were combined with caprine husbandry into fully integrated livestock economies”.

Further evidence against the futility of strict evolutionary views: we have confirmed that ceramics precede sedentism,¹⁴ pottery did not have initial storage or even cooking purposes,¹⁵ monumentality is already attested in the early Neolithic,¹⁶ and urban agglomerations spanning several centuries grew and disintegrated before the stereotypical “Neolithic village” became widespread. Therefore, even if eventually all the threads composing the warp and weft of the rosy-pictured Neolithic tapestry do reveal this ideal (at some point in the 6th millennium), the bottom-up approach, combined with comprehensive overviews, is yielding unexpected results that need to be adequately confronted.

There are several concepts that need to be reflected upon before new methods and approaches help us define the social experience better. Archaeological theory frequently turns people into unidimensional stereotypes (as farmers, pastoralists, potters, metallurgists, people using, re-using, or throwing away an object, rulers, elites, commoners, emulators, traders, etc.), so by extension, social interactions are fetishized, the material remains that are unearthed become symbols of those objectified, and social interactions become dualistic relationships (e.g. elites–commoners, rulers–the ruled, traders–clients, etc.). A potter makes an outstanding bowl or serving tray because he or she is emulating another potter, and the elites in the village are using those bowls because they are organizing lavish feasts hoping to gain prestige for whatever sociopolitical purpose. This kind of mechanistic understanding of the social experience is understandable, given archaeologists’ sole reliance on inert materiality, always affected by preservation conditions, not to mention tight budgets and other constraints.

I find that issues related to the adoption of domestication, the notion of ‘household’, and the idea of ‘corporate groups’ betrays a lack of a more holistic understanding of the social experience and could perhaps benefit from anthropologists’ theories and ethnographic accounts, not in order to extrapolate them, but in order to gain an understanding of what diversity implies, particularly as concerns non-productive-oriented societies.¹⁷

I will start with the last of these concepts, corporate groups or lineages. Based on his experience excavating the LATE PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC Jordan site of Basta, Gebel proposed a re-definition of sedentism based on ‘territoriality’, since “this mode of life is supported and secured by a set of measures and behavioral dispositions that originate in a

¹⁴ See JORDAN and ZVELEBIL (eds.) 2009 for the dispersal of pottery from East Asia among Eurasian hunter-gatherers; TSUNEKI, NIEUWENHUYSE and CAMPBELL (eds.) 2017 for West Asia.

¹⁵ See NIEUWENHUYSE 2018. Two contrasting views for early attestations in northern Greece are PERLÈS 2001 (elite goods), and VITELLI 1999 (public occasions and ritual).

¹⁶ Examples of monumentality are most striking in eastern Anatolia, e.g. Göbekli Tepe, Çayönü, Nevalı Çori.

¹⁷ WAGNER 1981.

The question of 'elites': real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the 'Uruk phenomenon')

more aggressive territorial ethology and its related commodification frameworks for space and related cognitive spheres.”¹⁸ His proposal rests upon a classification of “physical” territories (perhaps suggesting, even if subconsciously, that there may be “metaphysical” territories?) that follows the hierarchy paradigm: primary, corporate and obtainable, based on increasing levels of dispute and competition. Negotiation rarely enters the semantics of his theory, nor does he bother to ponder responses to growth. Gebel is seeking to pigeonhole the end of the aceramic Neolithic as one of “corporate ownership”, and yet, there is no such thing as “obtainable physical territories” until the 3rd millennium BC. He is also a member of the archaeological team currently working at Ba’ja, near Basta, an intramontane village accessible only by a natural passage between rock walls. The team has recently published an article postulating that “early Neolithic hierarchization in southern Jordan was based on corporate pathways to power¹⁹ rather than self-interested aggrandizers”, but some aspects of a particular burial pointed to “network based leadership”. What they mean by this (if we leave the four-page long theoretical introduction aside and we focus on the evidence, namely the individual and collective sub-floor burials) is that, on the basis of one juvenile found with a broken macehead and a few personal belongings like arrowheads, a pestle or a bone spatula, “single individuals achieved prestige or status or both on the one hand by their access to exotic items, probably through ancient networks of equally influential persons in other communities of the southern Levant.”²⁰ This is a site where collective burials have yielded a wealth of objects, including beautifully crafted ornaments. Moreover, considering that the house had also other sub-floor burials, this young man or woman may have been chosen to have his/her own corner for any number of reasons, including lack of available space. As concerns the ‘exotic goods’, it is somehow ironic that the recent publication of epigenetic characteristics of teeth and skulls of Basta individuals has revealed that they were a highly endogamic community (based on strontium isotope analysis and the frequency of a particular dental trait).²¹ Yet, this site had been posited as part of an exchange network due to the find

¹⁸ GEBEL 2014, 28.

¹⁹ The “corporate group” approach, favoured by British anthropologists, was already criticized by Lévy-Strauss as a juridical bias (1987) and more recently, among others, by Carsten: “In the mid-century, British social anthropology was dominated by avowedly ahistorical studies of African “unilineal kinship systems.” (...) Lineages were described as “corporate” in the sense that they functioned as though they were a single property-owning and jural unit. (...) In retrospect, it is clear that the unproblematic boundedness of the units described was much more a product of a particular kind of analytic endeavour than a reflection of the much messier realities of the political and social context of colonial and postcolonial Africa (...). Nor did matters become any easier when descent group theory was transported outside Africa to societies in Southeast Asia or Papua New Guinea, where the notion of lineage as a corporate group was difficult to apply” (CARSTEN 2004, 11f).

²⁰ BENZ *et al.* 2019, 27.

²¹ ALT *et al.* 2013.

of greenstones and other raw materials, extracted or ultimately obtained from relatively distant locations (Red Sea, Central Jordan, Sinai).

This is the same dynamic that affects the study of obsidian, a material that is found all across the board from the beginning of sedentism until the historical periods. Every specialist of every period tries to understand how it was obtained, what the analysis of its percentage over the lithic totals can tell about possible routes and manner of exchange, or whether the people manipulating it constituted a highly-valued workshop in the region. For instance, in view of objects like mirrors, amulets and a vessel found at Domuztepe (and also influenced by finds at Arpachiyah), Healey tried to assign this material a cosmological and aesthetic dimension that was more than welcome, but nevertheless was still mired in notions of prestige and social rank for which there is no solid proof either at 6th millennium Domuztepe, nor anywhere else in the following periods.²² A recent article gives a total of 29 obsidian sources accounted for in Anatolia and the Caucasus in the “Ubaid”,²³ even though eastern Anatolian ones always remained the main suppliers. Even at the end of the 5th millennium BC, some scholars posit that obsidian had to have been either distributed by mobile groups or expeditions dispatched to the sources, which suggests that obsidian “monopolies” were in hands of people uninterested in dynamics of power, and that prestige was acquired through skill and maybe the secrecy surrounding it, like metallurgy or other symbolical knowledge in many traditional societies.²⁴

Related to the notion of ‘households’, or the ‘domus’, as Hodder calls it, it is generally assumed that domestication entailed a kind of conquest of man over nature and that the mentality radically changed and became hyper-rational and economy-oriented: buildings become family houses, working and storage facilities witness the emergence of property of the nuclear or extended family, and the decrease in elaborate mortuary arrangements seems to corroborate this scenario (even if explicit consideration of this and related issues is completely lacking, probably assumed to be self-evident or impossible to correlate to materiality). The “common sense approach” is one of the complaints made about a lack of definition of sedentism,²⁵ but I think just as urgent is a debate on social configurations at the local (village or cluster) scale. There may very well be factors which would be very difficult to assess in the spatial constitution of a village: flexible marriage arrangements, polygamy; initiation rituals or sodalities; taboos; whether unmarried men and women, menstruating women, or guests, were allocated fixed or tent-like/hut-like dwellings at the village; whether houses were allotted to families by the leadership; whether burial sites or ossuaries outside

²² HEALEY 2013.

²³ KHALIDI *et al.* 2016.

²⁴ KOPANIAS 2017, 32, with further references; see also IBAÑEZ *et al.* 2016 for the conclusions derived from the fact that the know-how of how to manipulate this fragile material was as important as the material itself.

²⁵ See Whitecross’ dissertation (2016) on this difficult topic.

The question of 'elites': real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the 'Uruk phenomenon')

village grounds, if they existed, were considered part of the home territory or were part of the landscape. Extended family could mean that we are including the grandparents, or it could mean that most of the village was related and had kinship or affinal ties. Admittedly, these factors will probably remain largely opaque, but the equation house=household needs to be approached with due caution.²⁶

In any event, having all these uncertainties in mind, other factors may be explored. In the case of resources like wood, reed and other useful plants, bitumen and clay, lacustrine or riverine fauna, were alliances made between communities sharing the land? As soon as animals enter the village space, issues about animal keeping, stabling and foddering, not to mention extensive processing of animal-related products become problematic. Were a number of animals assigned to families, or were they collectively raised and kept? The fact that houses and villages were given an end (by fire, burial or abandonment), does it not suggest that the collectivity was making decisions on what today we would consider 'property'? How did growth and migration affect biosocial relationships and customs?

Hodder has associated "violence, danger, and sexual power, and the ability to intercede with the ancestors" as elements that were constantly expressed in the symbolic imagery of Çatalhöyük, and by extension, elsewhere. These values are seen as a demonstration of the "intercession with and control of wild animals and the use of their powers to protect and nurture", which in turn "allowed the creation of trust and dependencies", and therefore "created the conditions in which sedentary life and intensive delayed-return economies became possible (selected for)".²⁷ "Delayed-return economies", therefore, depended upon the integration of the biological and the social, group collaboration and division of labor. This remained true, in my opinion, even after domestication. The distinction between 'wild' and 'domesticated' animals is not always so clear-cut. The attachment that pastoralist societies experience towards the animals composing their herds, not so much encompassing as surpassing property notions, has been sufficiently documented by now²⁸ that the possibility that life-and-death forces embedding all creatures in a particular hunter-gatherer ontology might still have operated without losing coherence in a pastoralist one, or an agro-pastoralist one, needs to be considered. Several anthropologists have criticized Ingold's strict view of domestication as domination.²⁹ This is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. In my dissertation, I study how an animist ontology may have existed and persisted until the end of

²⁶ As far as I know, they have only been partly debated for Çatalhöyük, see e.g. DÜRING 2006; HODDER 2014, but there is no reason why this debate cannot be chronologically extended. Other scholars have also raised doubts, of course, about some of these issues: see CROUCHER 2012, esp. 196 with further references.

²⁷ HODDER 2007, 115. And see his collaboration with Whitehouse, resulting in an evolutionary, Euro-centrist understanding of religion (WHITEHOUSE *et al.* 2014).

²⁸ For instance DRANSART 2002 (the Andes); VITEBSKY 2005 (the Eveny of Siberia).

²⁹ INGOLD 2000, ch. 4.

the 4th millennium through so-called symbolic material: life and death ambiguities, human-animal hybridity, human femaleness as a possible embodiment of multi-species renewal, possible early strategies towards divination, substitution and other ways of communicating and influencing other predators, visible and invisible. On this issue, however, I will only make some remarks in the last section of this paper.

Last but certainly not least, and connected to the sphere of what we understand by ‘property’, a term with economic and legal connotations (different from ‘ownership’ or ‘belongings’, concepts that belong to the sphere of personhood and identity), is the unjustified connection that is still made between stamps —emerging and becoming more abundant, like spindle whorls, gradually during the 7th millennium BC— and property devices.³⁰ The practice of sealing to enhance storage conditions should be separated from the less frequent practice of stamping the sealing.

A cursory examination of these objects and their findspots reveal a complex picture, one that does not fit these scenarios:³¹

1) Stamps come in a dizzying range of shapes, materials, sizes, and engravings, and differentiating them from amulets or ornaments is a futile exercise.

2) Impressing sealings with a single stamp or several is regionally restricted, as the evidence coming now from the Southern Levantine sites of Munbaqa and Sha’ar Hagolan is revealing, where sealing fragments with no stamp impression have been found. Stamps become increasingly attested in this region with time, yet there is almost no attestation of stamped sealing fragments. Even in the collective storage facilities at Sabi Abyad, Burnt Village, the site that to date has given the most numerous assemblage of stamped sealings until the 4th millennium, not all the sealed vessels or baskets bore impressions.

3) Individuals, regardless of their age or gender, may have used or worn several of these objects, as supported by the evidence coming from the Tell El Kerkh cemetery.

4) Despite the increase in figurative or naturalistic scenes in the iconography of amulets and stamps with time, and their geographical expansion —as the isolated cemeteries of Parchineh and Hakalan in the Zagros attest to— nothing in the design of these objects signals a tendency towards ambition and domination until the end of the 4th millennium BC.

In my opinion, sealings were stamped when in need of identifying the contents of vessels, containers or bundles stored in the same storage space and distinguishing them from others (via the people who had processed the food item or resource at a given moment during the

³⁰ There is no space here to treat the issue of tokens or calculi, which are posited as record-keeping objects at sites like Ganj Dareh (end of the 8th millennium BC) in the Zagros, or ‘Ain Ghazal, in Jordan. For an updated, thorough analysis of this material, focusing on the assemblage from Çatalhöyük, see BENNISON-CHAPMAN 2018.

³¹ Based on TÜRKCAN 2013; DUISTERMAAT 1996; 2010; AKKERMANS and DUISTERMAAT 2014; CARTER 2010; FREIKMAN and GARFINKEL 2017; TSUNEKI 2011; ALIZADEH 2008; VON WICKEDE 1990.

The question of 'elites': real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the 'Uruk phenomenon')

year). Stamps must have had initially a decorative function (I favor the textile hypothesis)³²; then they became ornaments, or in other words, items of personhood, which implies that individuals cannot be segregated from their social sphere. In the words of Croucher: "Objects accumulate biographies. Such relationships may also be evident in the apparent ambiguity of 'types' of objects, where seals, beads or labrets [ear/lip studs] can become tokens, and *vice versa*. Multifunctional, such items become bound up with the identities of those giving and receiving during exchange."³³

3. The process of dispersion and the development of flexible sedentism (6th-5th millennium BC)

Conclusions extracted from recent research

- Core-and-periphery models need to be applied with caution. Material culture packages or horizons co-exist with continued practices and regional variation.
- "Halaf" groups are both sedentary and mobile, and largely egalitarian. Communities during the 5th millennium show an increasing trend towards a lack of apparent individual differentiation.

Developments that require further reflection

- Migration and growth
- Opportunism and flexibility
- The body and portable materiality as a means of social adscription
- An exaggerated emphasis on a (relative) decrease of fine decorated wares
- The possibility of first attempts at meta-communal aggregation

On the basis of the ceramics found at Domuztepe, a settlement of prolonged occupation during the first half of the 6th millennium BC, where one would expect "Halaf" pottery but the excavators found sherds that could be classified as "Ubaid" (even earlier than ceramics from a proposed intermediate period, the HUT, applicable to the second half of the 6th millennium), Campbell made the following remark: "In this article, the emphasis is on periods where there was rapid change in ceramic assemblages. It could equally be on periods that saw stability in ceramics or changes in lithic technology or changes in architecture. Obviously, if the emphasis did change, the chronology might look rather different. In some ways, this may help liberate phase-based chronologies from the spiral of ever more complex inter-regional synchronizations."³⁴ Campbell has not been the first one to complain about the tyranny of

³² See ÇIRINGIROĞLU 2009.

³³ CROUCHER 2013, 195.

³⁴ CAMPBELL 2007, 108.

periodizations based on (obsolete) material culture criteria. Both the contributions to a volume devoted to the Late Neolithic of Upper Mesopotamia and those similarly assembled in the *Beyond the Ubaid* volume emphasize the need to break with this view, as well as fruitless and inaccurate core-and-periphery perspectives, inherited from the past, giving a cultural primacy to Southern Mesopotamia.³⁵

In the first volume mentioned, Akkermans and other authors also observe that Halaf societies remained predominantly egalitarian. In contrast to the (exaggerated) phenomenon of mega-sites attested at some specific areas of Anatolia and the Southern Levant during the 8th and the 7th millennium BC, clusters of small sites become well-attested during the 7th and the 6th millennium BC, either reflecting villages co-existing simultaneously in close proximity, or the crab-like movement of villagers progressively expanding, and frequently abandoning previously occupied quarters. But a better investigation of growth, splits, and new foundations is still sorely missing.

In my opinion, this period is characterized by a flexible sedentism strategy, reflecting the opportunism that had characterized the Epipaleolithic and early Neolithic, as well as the consolidation of communal life in most of the Fertile Crescent during the 8th and the 7th millennium BC, which Hodder calls “history-making”,³⁶ expressed through the close connection between the dead and the living, the renewal of houses that remain on the same location, agglutinative modes of building, and a myriad of other practices that reflect the enjoyment of shared social experiences in the same space for centuries. Domestication did cause an impact on social and physical configurations, but it was one where changes in architecture and the maximization of the landscape resources, better suited to deal with the foddering requirements of kept animals, and the processing and storage of primary food items and plant or animal-based secondary products, allowed for a preservation of communal life in a more flexible way. Even though elaborate mortuary rituals disappear and practices diversify, portable symbolism, including painted ceramics, expands and also diversifies.

I will give two examples of flexible sedentism. The East Mound at Çatalhöyük in Central Anatolia gets gradually dissolved during the end of the 7th millennium BC and the West Mound emerges. The nearby site of Pinarbaşı, roughly 25 km away from Çatalhöyük in the Konya Plain is considered by Baird to be a seasonal camp for a mobile group who exchanged products with the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük East.³⁷ I think that the rather obvious interpretation is that expeditions from Çatalhöyük itself appointed this rock shelter at this advantageous location in order to exploit its resources (mostly hunting *cum* herding) whenever it was convenient.

³⁵ NIEUWENHUYSE *et al.* (eds.) 2013; PHILIPS and CARTER (eds.) 2010.

³⁶ See e.g. HODDER 2014; 2018.

³⁷ BAIRD *et al.* 2011.

The question of 'elites': real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the 'Uruk phenomenon')

Likewise, the site of Fıstıklı Höyük was interpreted by Bernbeck as a focal point of aggregation for rotating mobile communities.³⁸ Instead, it is possible again that this site reflects the prolonged occupation of one or two groups that fissioned from a sedentary settlement on a seasonal basis, making the most of both the plant resources and grazing lands for cattle and ovicaprines. Apart from the hunting *cum* pastoralism way of life observed at the southern semi-arid steppes of Jordan,³⁹ it is unlikely that any other ecological niche saw a radical economic specialization, like nomadic pastoralism. Communities became increasingly sedentary and occupied areas hitherto unoccupied all over the Fertile Crescent including the Caucasus and the Zagros.

Migration in general is an issue that needs to be better investigated. The second-half of the 7th millennium and the first-half of the 6th millennium BC was a period of demographic dispersion. The focus has been, understandably, on the crossing over to Southeastern Europe. Southcentral Anatolia may have been the original area of migration towards Asia Minor, yet this scenario looks uncertain. Communities that adopt the Neolithic package appear in Western Anatolia and Northern Greece/Balkans during the second half of the 7th millennium BC. Yet, those who migrate do not cause a visible, discernible impact as pertains to material culture. Whereas Özdoğan sees a clear connection, pinpointing for instance original areas for ceramic wares,⁴⁰ Düring notes: "The situation in the Marmara region is an interesting hybrid. On the one hand, there is a range of distinctly local characteristics. These include the lithic industries, which descend from the Mesolithic Ağaçlı tradition. Likewise, the ceramics are distinctively local from the start, and cannot be linked convincingly with ceramic traditions from Central Anatolia." He likewise argues for distinctive assemblages emerging in the Lake District and Aegean Anatolia.⁴¹

In any event, and taking into consideration that several groups from different provenances may have entered these areas gradually and mixed or not with previous mobile ("Mesolithic") groups, Özdoğan refers thus to this process: "First, it was not an instantaneous event. On the contrary, it extended through a very long period of time, spanning a millennium, taking place in different waves of expansion, each one with its own trajectory and pace. Second, it is also evident that each wave had its own selection of the Neolithic package. Finally, and probably more significant, is the fact that different modes of Neolithisation such as endemic movement, colonization, acculturation, adaptation, and transfer of technologies and commodities, took place simultaneously".⁴²

³⁸ BERNBECK 2013. Occupation dated to ca. 5900–5500 BC (four out of five phases).

³⁹ ROLLEFSON, ROWAN and WASSE 2014.

⁴⁰ ÖZDOĞAN 2013, 197. See this publication for further references.

⁴¹ DÜRING 2013, 88–90.

⁴² ÖZDOĞAN 2011, 666. Likewise, Düring is uncomfortable with a 'chain migration' scenario whereby a small number of pioneers settled in Asia Minor.

I find this remark illuminating, and paradoxically not only valid for other processes of serial, small-scale migration at this moment, but also potentially applicable to both ends of the 4th millennium BC.

What about the so-called Ubaid? Nothing particularly remarkable characterizes the 5th millennium BC, even as it progresses with some noticeable changes by comparison to the preceding millennia. There are tantalizing glimpses of an intensification of the economy here and there —kilns and pottery installations, the increasing presence of metal objects, the clever use of buttresses to reinforce walls and a clever distribution of space, with rooms branching out of a central hall—, but overall the most significant change is the growth of some sites in some areas, most visibly towards the last centuries of the 5th millennium (e.g. Değirmentepe in Anatolia, Hammam et-Turkman by the Balikh river, Tepe Gawra in the Jezireh, Choga Mish in the Susiana). The Ubaid package has been defined by black-on-buff pottery, labrets, clay nails, bent clay mullers, ophidian figurines, tripartite architecture, niched-and-buttressed buildings, communal cemeteries,⁴³ and circumferential headshaping, with the understanding that there is a significant degree of regional variation.⁴⁴ Yet, several of these elements show continuity, like the hybrid figurines, the labrets and cranial modification.

Phillips and Carter acknowledged the bewildering absence of elites, expected to show their behavior by now: “It is possible that stable elites existed or were emerging, at least in some areas, but that such groups chose either to mask their growing power or express it by means other than through conspicuous consumption and display.”⁴⁵ This view was adopted by Brereton in his analysis of mortuary rituals, arguing that wealth —like metal objects— remained in circulation.⁴⁶ The problem is that accumulation of prestige or luxury goods, the famous “conspicuous consumption”, as archaeologists call it, is entirely missing. Rothman and Peasnell, who reviewed the mortuary evidence from Tepe Gawra XIA/B-VIII,⁴⁷ saw no evidence of clear social stratification (two-tiers), much less in an evolutionary manner.⁴⁸

In my opinion, portable symbolism continues to be essential to express a negotiation of identity and social relations, and the perception that aesthetics no longer play a role in ceramics, from the mid-5th millennium onwards, has been somewhat overblown. Karsgaard observed that the most noticeable shift from Halaf wares to those characteristic of the last Ubaid phases is that “the individual appears to have been submerged into a larger shared identity” and that a bigger emphasis was placed on “mundane acts of commensality”,

⁴³ And infants jar burials. See BRERETON 2011, 270ff.

⁴⁴ CARTER and PHILIP 2010, 4.

⁴⁵ CARTER and PHILIP 2010, 13.

⁴⁶ BRERETON 2011, ch. 6.

⁴⁷ Excavated in the 30s.

⁴⁸ ROTHMAN 2002, 147; PEASNALL 2002.

signaling the participants' inclusion in a "community-based identity."⁴⁹ As welcome as an approach going beyond social stratification might be, Karsgaard follows here Wengrow's (2001) article on the equation of bowls with a redistributive economy anticipating the emergence of states. Many sites mentioned by Karsgaard as an example of this alleged trend have not been adequately excavated, like Tell Mashnaqa or Hammam et-Turkman. Tell al-'Abr at this period revealed a pottery workshop in level 5 that may have fulfilled the needs of more than just its community. The excavators comment, however: "The late stages are characterized by an increase in plain pottery, represented by scraped bottom bowls and certain kinds of necked jars. These types are usually identified within the post-Ubaid assemblage at other sites. At Tell al-'Abr, however, the intrusion of these types into the original assemblage was a gradual progression and (...), they had already appeared even in the early stage in which painted pottery was still predominant. Therefore it should be considered that there are some aspects which are not explained simply by the term "post-Ubaid". Even during the latest stage, Ubaid painted decoration still persisted in no small numbers, though with rather simple motifs."⁵⁰

The inclusion of the ceramics from Tell Abada in this trend, moreover, is absolutely puzzling.⁵¹ A cursory inspection of Jasim's publication, figs. 98-225, including levels II-I ceramics, can leave no doubt in anyone's mind as to the creativity of the potters at this site.⁵² And even though the cemetery at Susa I cannot be securely dated, it belongs in any case either to the end of the 5th or the beginning of the 4th millennium BC, and the beauty and range of ceramics and objects found in the graves is well-known.⁵³

There is also quite a bit of chronological uncertainty as concerns both this alleged diminution of painted wares as well as the emergence of bowls and jars of simple manufacture. The contributors to the volume titled *After the Ubaid* gave a good deal of attention to the subject of bowls.⁵⁴ The excavators of Yumuktepe observed, however, an earlier development of this trend, already happening by roughly the mid-5th millennium BC: "The qualitative, technical and aesthetic features of the containers for consumption are transformed. While food in Level XVI was preferentially consumed in black lustrous decorated bowls and in finely painted cups, in Level XV it was mainly served or consumed in the hastily made and roughly finished Coba bowls."⁵⁵ The overall trend, culminating with the BRBs (beveled-rim bowls) of the "Uruk period", seems to be then, quite simply, to facilitate

⁴⁹ KARSGAARD 2010, 56f.

⁵⁰ HAMMADE and YAMAZAKI 2006, 457.

⁵¹ KARSGAARD 2010, 56.

⁵² JASIM 1985.

⁵³ CARTER *et al.* 1992.

⁵⁴ MARRO (ed.) 2012.

⁵⁵ CANEVA, PALUMBI and PASQUINO 2012, 369.

fast-food serving, which in turn allowed for this object, like the stamps, to be re-purposed for more numerous commensal events or food-processing/storage needs, respectively, stemming from communal growth, increasing professionalization and better organized labour.

Finally, sites like Yumuktepe XVI-XV and Gawra XII-IX—the first emerging almost *ex novo*, the second experiencing a sudden growth and complexity spurt— suggest that perhaps we should be re-analyzing these and other sites as early precursors of meta-communal aggregation, that is, the fusion of disparate groups who decide to build or reorganize a space to maximize resources, including the most valuable one: people.⁵⁶ This trend, which I would characterize as one of heterogeneous growth —capitalizing on centuries of social intelligence, alliances and sharing of resources in the landscape—, may be more clearly visible at Arslantepe VII and the earliest levels excavated at Tell Brak at the beginning of the 4th millennium BC. The construction of public buildings of whatever nature or function, whether moats like at 6th millennium Tell es-Sawwan, fortresses and citadels, like at Yumuktepe, monumental multi-functional spaces, like the Round House of Gawra XII, or gathering places like the so-called Temple of Arslantepe VII, and even a good portion of the sequence of “temples” at Eridu (if not all) should be first assumed to be the conscious, deliberate effort of a community who expects to benefit from it. As a long tradition of different types of architecture and sedentism all across the board can attest to, starting in the early Neolithic, chiefs and elites are not necessary to coordinate these efforts or command their construction. The issue of public architecture must be preceded by a discussion on why our expectations fall into the two omnipresent categories of secular or religions architecture/elites when we still do not know if the ontology at this time had separated nature from culture, or whether there was already a need to establish permanent, specialized institutions separating decision-making from worship following exclusivist, hereditary dynamics (an example of retroactive interpretations).

4. The long process of proto-urbanism (or meta-communal aggregation)

The 4th millennium BC is an extremely complex period. It is therefore not surprising that old and new theoretical frameworks co-exist without much debate or clarification as to what is meant by certain concepts, like ‘colonies’, or ‘secular/religious’.

An excellent if now somewhat outdated overview of theories proposed for the “Uruk period” was given by Butterlin in 2003, where he revised, among others, proposals like Algaze’s ‘Uruk phenomenon’ model (based on Wallerstein’s world systems theory), or Stein’s 1994 proposal of a Ubaid “staple finance” / Uruk “wealth finance” dichotomy, reinterpreted

⁵⁶ I find Butterlin’s (2009) assessment of the “White Room” at Gawra XII as the house of a chief as problematic as the interpretation of this building as a temple.

The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

by Frangipane for a north / south Uruk-world scenario drawing on her experience as director of excavations at Arslantepe since the 1990s.⁵⁷

Before tackling this issue, however, a brief overview of what is considered “the golden standard” is of the essence. All models, past and present, rely on evidence that is acknowledged as coming from problematic excavations, and reports on stratigraphy and associated material culture that were and remain unreliable. This is valid for both Uruk and Susa. Its main consequence is “monumentality in a vacuum”. Some causes and consequences are summarized here:

- Unreliable ceramics sequences

Though this is mostly true for Uruk, it also affects comparisons with Susa, given the number of observed differences, and by extension, any *Uruk* site in Iran, Iraq and Syria. According to Nissen, Lenzen —who was director of the Berlin excavations at Warka between 1931 to 1939, and 1954 to 1967— was opposed to using pottery as a chronological tool, because he estimated that the architecture, tablets and seals would be enough to establish comparisons with other sites.⁵⁸

- Circular reasoning: attempts to build a chronology based on unstratified or undatable material

Again, this is particularly relevant in the case of Uruk. Disagreements between the excavators on chronological interpretations became more and more visible after the 1960s, and by then, art historians had joined the dating game.⁵⁹ As Eichmann pointed out, regarding these previous attempts to establish sequencing by correlations between the “Eanna-district” and the “White Temple” areas, there was a dangerous assumption that similar-looking artefacts from both belonged to the same period, without taking into consideration the difficulty of estimating the length of a given period in terms of building layers.⁶⁰ Radiocarbon dates are available, but the tree samples give ca. 3500–3250 cal. BC dates for Temple C, belonging to the last sequence of buildings of so-called Eanna district (Layer IVa); and ca. 3500–3300 cal. BC for the White Temple,⁶¹ which entails, on the one hand, that the “Uruk expansion” predated the most monumental of Uruk phases, and on the other, emphasizes the lack of connection to later developments. The section of the central area encompassing the “Eanna district” where all the Uruk-period monuments stood was razed ca. 3300 BC, and many objects, including most of all archaic text fragments, come from the leveling of this vast surface: “Excavations have shown that the Uruk III level buildings were erected over the grounds of razed Uruk IV

⁵⁷ See now FRANGIPANE 2016; 2018; MCMAHON 2019.

⁵⁸ NISSEN 2002, 4. For a comparative overview on Uruk and Susa’s ceramic sequences, drawing on Sürenhagen’s and Dietrich’s reassessments, see BUTTERLIN 2003, 36–59.

⁵⁹ E.g. HEINRICH 1982, 35–55.

⁶⁰ EICHMANN 1989, 180.

⁶¹ See VAN ESS 2019, ch. 63 for pertinent bibliography and details.

constructions, and that the leveling of the many pits formed in razing the old buildings resulted in substantial earth moving, including the transportation of fresh and already deposited debris from the prior administrative centers. Thus trash heaps of shards, bones and discarded tablets were mixed with ancient excavations of still older debris and used to fill in holes and pits”.⁶² Who, then, was writing the “Uruk III” texts? For the period spanning approx. 3300–2450 BC, finds in Levels III–I did not apparently yield much that would help with historical interpretation. To the remains of the so-called *Stampflehmgebäude* or the Red Temple, traces of walls, and some rooms and hearths indicate some architectural activity, but not much.⁶³

- A tendency to fit new evidence into old moulds

Despite the cautiousness exhibited by the new director of the Warka mission, M. van Ess, and her team, the need to boost and maintain the discourse of “Uruk, the first city” has led to some premature conclusions. For instance, the remains of burnt wood coming from the roof of Building C, which allowed for the first radiocarbon dating in 1991, were analyzed and identified as *Pinus spec. (P.brutia/halapensis)*, its provenance automatically assigned to Syria/Turkey and linked to a Uruk trade network scenario.⁶⁴ However a closely related species is also attested in the Zagros and other areas of Iran, known as *Pinus halapensis var. eldarica (Medw.)*, with a similar if not identical anatomy.⁶⁵ Of course, even if the wood had come from a far closer area, it ought to have been cut and transported — presumably by barge — until it reached its destination. Regular large-scale trade up and down the Euphrates, however, should still be regarded as unlikely.

- Assumptions based on data without a clear historical context: surveys and environmental studies.

Two surveys have contributed to give a primacy to Uruk as the single core area at this period: the site one conducted by Finkbeiner and his team,⁶⁶ and the area surveys, conducted by Adams.⁶⁷ The first has been used to argue for the city’s impressive size at this period, even though almost no residential quarters have been excavated of a 4th millennium date.⁶⁸ The

⁶² ENGLUND 1998, 34, and overall, 32–41.

⁶³ See now EICHMANN 2019, 104–107. Even if speculative, given that the new geoarchaeological, magnetometry and satellite imagery investigations have confirmed that canals criss-crossed the city from this period onwards (BECKER, VAN ESS and FASSBINDER 2019), it may be that part of this central area was partly flooded at some point, which would explain much in terms of random seal and tablet deposition.

⁶⁴ VAN ESS 2019, 342f; ENGEL and KÜRSCHNER 1993.

⁶⁵ I thank Naomi Miller for this information.

⁶⁶ FINKBEINER 1991.

⁶⁷ ADAMS 1981.

⁶⁸ Except for a small trench in O 11/12 (FINKBEINER 1991, 193). As Charvat (2002, 193) points out, the survey maps pertaining to the ED period seem to suggest that there were clusters of occupation. Given the highly irregular topography, which implies extensive re-planning of the city layout throughout time, sherd distribution should be taken with due caution.

The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

second established a peak of settlement density in the Warka region in the transition from the Middle Uruk to the Late Uruk period.

To this, the study made by Pournelle on the deltaic landscape of southern Iraq should be added.⁶⁹ She attempted to reconstruct “relict watercourses in their entirety across the full extent of areas where they might be associated to datable settlements”, for which she not only analyzed earlier scholarship’s material and research but also carried out her own mappings. I have selected a few of her observations that may be relevant here. The first is that the Tigris contributed more to the alluvial settlement during the third and second millennia than previously assumed, and “the twin rivers appear to have had anastomosing and significantly intermingled flows”. When focusing on the Warka area, she confirmed that “this basin was, indeed, where the twin rivers’ waters met the sea during the fourth millennium BCE”, but that “not all waterways across marshlands need be interpreted as watercourses in the sense of discrete distributaries”. At a larger scale, she concludes that “towns and cities clustered on ‘turtlebacks’ and levees generally beyond the reach of seasonal flooding, while smaller settlements pushed out onto prograding sediment fans.”⁷⁰

The challenge, now, is to gather fresh data from sites in southern Iraq with occupation belonging to the end of the 4th millennium BC in order to ascertain what the situation was like in the alluvium.⁷¹

5. Discussion

It seems, by now, possible to state that two separate developments take place at the beginning of the 4th millennium, ca. 3800–3600 BC. One is the emergence in Upper Mesopotamia of new settlements that are indeed remarkable. The reason why they are remarkable, however, is not the emergence of public or monumental (or relatively monumental) complexes, but the fact that this architecture is not accompanied by messy residential *cum* working spaces, or, in other words, the organic, spontaneous, and unceremonious aggregations that had characterized communal growth until then (including Gawra until levels IX–VIII).

The main sites are Arslantepe, Brak and Hamoukar in the north, and Uruk in the south. However, whereas Arslantepe VII has been thoroughly excavated and published,⁷² and is

⁶⁹ POURNELLE 2003.

⁷⁰ POURNELLE 2003, 100, 138.

⁷¹ The report by the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Tell Zurghul (ancient Nigin) has revealed that the site had mid-5th millennium BC occupation (Mound B), see NADALI and POLCARO 2020. Shark vertebrae, shells, and fish skins were actually found, together with fishing net clay weights, in sector B. Excavations to the south of Mound A have revealed occupation (“multi-functional” Building A) extending from the end of the 4th millennium BC to the Early Dynastic period, but the finds are still not substantial enough to assess the connection of this site to broader on-going processes. Unstamped sealings made of bitumen, and conical bowls are interpreted along the lines of the redistributive institution discourse currently prevalent.

known to have superseded a largely unremarkable village,⁷³ what the situation was exactly at Brak during the period of the earliest excavated levels (TW 20–17)⁷⁴ or at Hamoukar,⁷⁵ both in the Khabur, is largely unknown. The most interesting thing about these sites is that surveys in the region⁷⁶ suggest that occupation densities were high, which could mean that several groups had a main center of administration and gathering built for convenience, while small-sized facilities and residences were scattered over the land, devoted to agropastoral activities. Specialized workshops and extensive storage were transferred to these new proto-cities. The excavation of small trenches at Majnuna and T2, both at the edge of Brak, have revealed adult burials and rubbish, including sherds, lithic debitage and animal bones in the first case, and burials, pottery kilns, and possible leather or dyeing facilities in the other.⁷⁷

The situation in the Warka basin would have been similar and benefitted from what Pournelle calls “the biomass”. Actually, based on the Brak team’s observations about the extensive form visible at this site and a growth pattern that suggested noncentralized processes,⁷⁸ unlike the southern Mesopotamian model, Pournelle and Algaze remarked that the process in the south, too, may have been similar.⁷⁹

The second development may be related to the climatic fluctuations that appear as early as the mid-5th millennium, even though its worst effects would have taken place at the end of the 4th,⁸⁰ theoretically causing a complete reconfiguration of the map as concerns the process of urbanism during the first half of the 3rd millennium, where we see southern Mesopotamia including the Diyala, Ebla in Syria, and the Zagros and beyond as the new key areas.⁸¹ This long period of climatic fluctuations may have affected the Susiana, according to what is gleaned from some evidence of destruction at Choga Mish and Susa, ca. 4000 BC, even though these cities appear to have grown again by 3600 BC, a theoretical date marking the onset of

⁷² See now BALOSSI RESTELLI 2019.

⁷³ Little is still known about Arslantepe VIII, see BALOSSI RESTELLI 2012. Arslantepe VII had houses on the northeastern area of the mound, neatly separated from the public buildings in the main part of what would become the acropolis during the 4th millennium.

⁷⁴ MCMAHON *et al.* 2007; OATES *et al.* 2007.

⁷⁵ GIBSON *et al.* 2002; REICHEL 2011–12.

⁷⁶ UR, KARSGAARD and OATES 2011; AL QUNTAR, KHALIDI and UR 2011.

⁷⁷ MCMAHON 2013. A study on agricultural practices from (irregular) samples obtained from the different trenches and excavated sections at Brak, spanning the 4th millennium and the beginning of the 3rd millennium, has yielded many interesting results, among them the observation that TW, in the main mound, had a wider range of crops than Tell 2 (HALD 2008, 111).

⁷⁸ UR, KARSGAARD and OATES 2007.

⁷⁹ POURNELLE and ALGAZE 2014, 6.

⁸⁰ CLARKE *et al.* 2016.

⁸¹ Small-scale, serial migration of Caucasus people (Kura-Araxes) into other areas of Mesopotamia started taking place at the end of the 4th millennium BC, but falls outside the scope of this paper.

The question of ‘elites’: real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the ‘Uruk phenomenon’)

the Uruk phenomenon.⁸² Glyptic specialist Pittman has integrated all evidence available to conclude that Susa shows clear signs of having undertaken slightly earlier administrative innovations than Uruk and that it has got a wider range of iconographic motifs.⁸³ Perhaps it is not so strange that the first areas to use stamps for an administrative purpose are Arslantepe and the two main cities in the Susiana, since Anatolia and Khuzestan have strong glyptic traditions since the 7th and 6th millennium BC.

A scenario of small-scale, serial migration stemming from the Susiana is therefore posited here, whereby early *ex-novo* settlements in the middle Euphrates like Sheikh Hassan, and sites around the Taqba Dam, notably Jebel Aruda and Habuba Kabira, were founded by migrating groups who kept in contact with their eastern provenance all along the 4th millennium BC. Small-group intrusions, integrating into the local community, took place at sites like Hacinebi.⁸⁴

The on-going excavations at Tūlūl al-Baqarat, where one of the mounds has remains belonging to the early 4th millennium BC, have revealed material assemblages that connect it to both the Susiana and southern Mesopotamia.⁸⁵ This is a warning against seeing a preeminence of Uruk, which went through its own processes of gradual growth, either in economic or colonizing terms.

I do not intend to replace a Uruk model with a Susa one, of course. And doubtlessly, long-distance exchange—both economic and cultural in nature—intensified with time. An inland east-west route may explain the exotic objects found at Brak,⁸⁶ and connections between Habuba Kabira and Egypt were posited by Sürenhagen.⁸⁷ Actually, according to our current evidence, Habuba/Tell Qannas might as well be considered “the first city,” since it is the only

⁸² KOUCHOUKOS 1998, 225–228; HOLE 1994; ALIZADEH 2010. Early signs of destruction or abandonment are also attested at Tepe Gawra, Mashnaqa, Hammam et-Turkman, or Kosak Shamali, but correlating this to any particular cause is not possible.

⁸³ Her main conclusion, though, is that Susa cannot continue to be seen as a secondary, subordinate cultural area: “Whatever the similarities between southern Mesopotamia and Susiana, they cannot be interpreted as simply a reflection of influence, or invasion or colonization by Uruk. By the Middle Uruk period in Susiana the earliest evidence for what becomes a highly complex administrative system is found in the form of sealings, clay cups, and the earliest cylinder seals with baggy-style images” (PITTMAN 2013, 329).

⁸⁴ Hacinebi revealed during its second phase the intrusion of southern cultural elements (ceramics, wall cones, knapping techniques, high presence of bitumen, cylinder-seal impressions), but the analysis of spindle whorls revealed that the manufacture of this object remained fully local, raising the question of who, exactly, settled here, at this small village (STEIN 1999; KEITH 1998).

⁸⁵ LIPPOLIS *et al.* 2019.

⁸⁶ MALLOWAN 1947, plates VII–XX showing animal figurines like monkeys, and numerous other objects retrieved from the “Eye Temple”. On the problems associated with Mallowan’s work at the (Grey) Eye Temple, to be dated to the mid-4th millennium, see EMBERLING 2002.

⁸⁷ SÜRENHAGEN 1986.

site that fulfills all criteria: enclosure wall, planned layout, monuments and residences, etc.,⁸⁸ and this despite the fact that it never developed a writing system.

Finally, a warning against seeing political developments leaning towards single-rulership needs to be made. The iconography seen in the glyptic does indeed suggest that there is a trend towards authoritarianism, more aggressively expressed at Uruk than elsewhere. In my opinion, this indicates that eventual supreme rulership came after a failed collective negotiation of power and the corruption of public institutions, whose purpose may have been hijacked by people knowing how to steer things to their advantage in times of crisis, but this remains, for now, highly speculative, although no more speculative than the premature postulations of palatial complexes and king-priests.

Starting from early Susiana motifs, the relationship between men and nature (animals) also started to change now (see Figs. 2 and 3 below). It would evolve towards a complete objectification of animals exemplified by the cows in pens and byres of the Early Dynastic period, and continue with motifs like the standardized monsters in procession, or the masters of animals and heroes, which started already early in the 4th millennium.⁸⁹

The 4th millennium as a whole must be seen as a period of transition. Instead of relying on 'the hierarchy paradigm', I propose to see heterarchy as a theoretical platform that may be molded in future to understand management and leadership at this time. Based on McCulloch's coining of this term,⁹⁰ archaeologist C. Crumley developed the possible applications of heterarchy to her central fields of research (Celtic polities and historical ecology) at a time when New Archaeology tenets and economic geography theories were prevalent. Crumley defined 'heterarchy' as an organizational structure "in which each element possesses the potential of being unranked (relative to other elements) or ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements."⁹¹ She has argued that heterarchical societies adapted better to cultural and environmental changes, and that "an intricate net of power relations —counterpoised power— in which negotiating individuals operating in varying contexts play a critical role, can not only support state apparatus but give rise to supra-state confederacies as well."⁹²

⁸⁸ See VALLET 1997.

⁸⁹ See also the sealing from Majnuna (a hero spearing a lion), MCMAHON 2009, 117, Fig. 1.

⁹⁰ McCulloch was a neurologist and is considered the father of cybernetics. In 1945, he published *A Heterarchy of Values Determined by the Topology of Nervous Nets*, where he grappled with the difficulty of conceptualizing mental processes in terms of 'volition'. He was confronted with the paradox of understanding processes resulting in actions characterized by purpose, and apparently not affected by time in a measurable manner. Nervous nets' reasoning and deciding would not behave hierarchically when theoretically confronted with a range of possible actions where the values motivating them were different, and the information sustaining those values might be faulty, contradictory, or paradoxical. He called this "inconsistency of preference", and by inconsistency he meant unpredictability.

⁹¹ CRUMLEY 1979.

⁹² CRUMLEY 1995, 31.

The question of 'elites': real people or mysterious agents? Elitism as a convenient recourse to interpret social change in prehistoric Southwestern Asia (from the origins of sedentism to the 'Uruk phenomenon')

The on-going investigations at sites of the Ghaggar/Saraswati region in northern India (beyond the scope here) may end up offering an alternative profile of developments towards complexity that does not end up in single rulership (the Harappan civilization). In our role as historians, we should not take anything for granted.

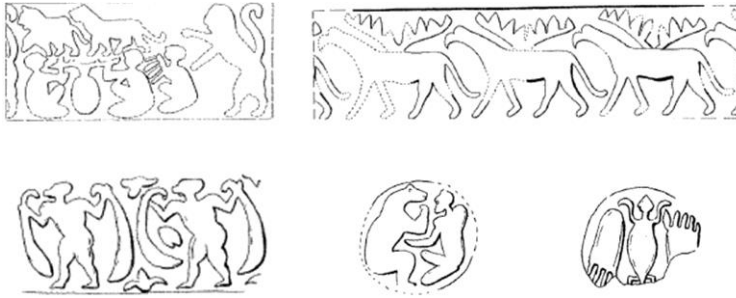


Fig. 2. Early examples of a change in a man-nature ontology. 1) Choga Mish. After DELOUGAZ and KANTOR 1996, pl. 147F. 2) Choga Mish. After DELOUGAZ and KANTOR 1996, pl. 136C. 3) Susa. After AMIET 1972, pl. 13, 598. 4) Susa, After AMIET 1972, pl.4, 457. 5) Susa. After AMIET 1972, pl. 4, 462.

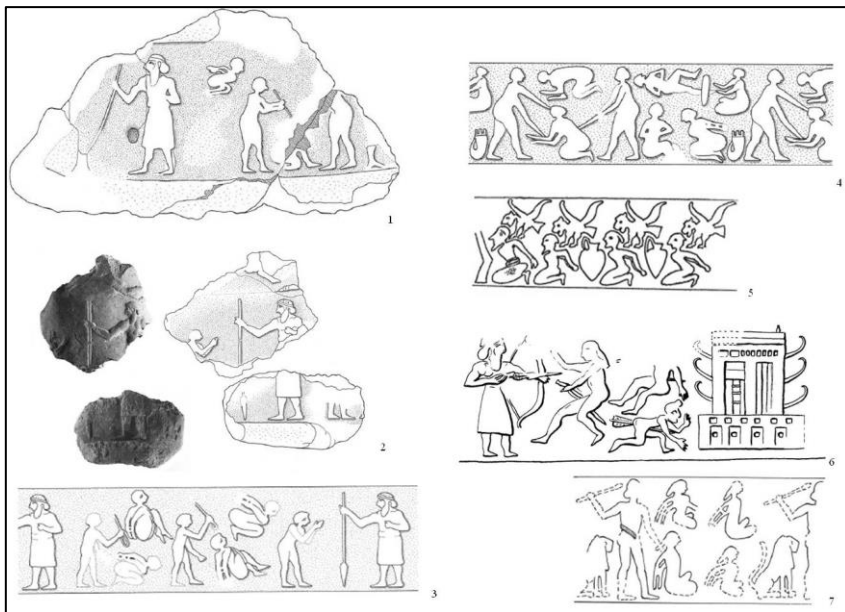


Fig.2. Authoritarianism. 1) –5) from Uruk. 6) from Susa. 7) from Habuba Kabira. 1) After BOEHMER 1999, Tf 9, Nr 3 A. 2) After BOEHMER 1999, Tf 13, Nr 4 A+B. 3) After BOEHMER 1999, Tf 17, Nr 4 A+L (reconstruction). 4) After BOEHMER 1999, Tf 26, Nr 9 A-H (reconstruction). 5) After BOEHMER 1999, Abb 64, A-D. 6) After AMIET 1972, Pl 18, 695. 7) After RITTIG 2014, Tf 193, 2 (reconstruction).

6. Conclusion

This diachronic overview of three processes, sedentism, domestication, and proto-urbanism –forcibly brief– has hopefully contributed to illuminate why social evolutionary thinking and elitism are not really a useful approach to understand why and how changes take place, and even less when applied to many prehistoric societies. My current research indicates that a split between nature and culture did not take place after domestication, or after ceramics, or after metallurgy for that matter, and that when it finally happened, it was accompanied by dynamics of growth and movement that we still do not fully understand. Two main areas of research are of the essence in the future:

- Biosocial intelligence: the ability to negotiate relationships with what is perceived as alive and active in the landscape, within the village, and with neighboring villages. This includes patterns and choices of growth, clustering, and dispersion.
- Migration as a relatively short-time process, particularly visible in certain periods. Material culture needs to encompass a chosen lifestyle, architectonic adaptations to the landscape (or not), stylistic traits or types of objects, the body as an element of personhood, and mortuary preferences. Detecting how long-distance movements took place requires not only more complete DNA databases and isotope analysis, in combination with climatic and environmental regional studies, but also a flexible approach to migration as a complex process: who and why chooses to leave, and how to correlate materiality to this process with a three-pronged approach: relationships with the neighbors (unless there is actual fusion), the new landscape, and those left behind.

If archaeologists and Assyriologists are to confront the challenges of understanding why and how city-states emerged in Mesopotamia –one that adopts a bottom-up approach combined with integrative efforts instead of aspiring to define whole periods in terms of a paradigm, or to catch the moment where a single factor allows to herald the ushering of a new period– they need to accept that social dynamics are multi-causal and multi-focal. Moreover, if we want to go beyond the mirages of ‘orientalism’, we need to leave this kind of discourse in the dust of time (definitely subject to erosion).

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