

# **Tell Beydar / Nabada : an Early Bronze Age City in Northern Syria**

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λ λ Around 2600 BC, in the valley of the Khabur and its tributaries, in the NE of nowadays Syria, in the neighbouring regions (Balikh, Euphrates, Tigris) and, more generally, in the whole Upper Mesopotamia, a very wide cultural phenomenon happens, deeply affecting the foundations of the social-economical organisation, the strategy of human settlements and the nature of their interactions.

It is a huge process which spreads out in a relatively short time, a few generations, in such a way it can be considered as a revolution. This is the «second urban revolution».

In a short time thus, the structure of the society or the societies installed in Upper Mesopotamia becomes more complex and the majority of the population adopts a fully urban way of life, framed by a system of associated institutions. Complex societies are appearing, grouped within cities which are considerably enlarged, protected by massive city walls. Those cities control a dense network of smaller urban centres, villages, hamlets and farms. The territory is thus reorganized and the agriculture is not limited anymore to dry farming areas but is extended to more marginal zones. The appearance of élites implies a pyramidal society, which is headed by top rank officials who emphasize their status with the construction of monumental and ostentatious buildings, palaces or temples, with the adoption of elaborate burial practices, with the use of expensive materials in the realization of prestige goods. The territory is reorganized in districts which are controlled by the main cities. At the end of the process, when writing is appearing in Upper Mesopotamia, a kingdom emerges, the Kingdom of Nagar, the ancient name of Tell Brak.

We attend the birth of a new civilization, the *Jezirean* civilization, even being a short-lived one since it will not resist to the Akkadian conquest, around 2350 BC. This civilization will last during almost three centuries. Contemporary to the Sumerians in South Mesopotamia, this civilization was born from the early local component, regenerated by Sumerian cultural concepts and was later brutally destroyed and included in a much larger territorial entity, at the very moment it was reaching the zenith of its fame.

The archaeological exploration of Tell Beydar started in 1991. λ The site is located on the west

bank of the Wadi Awaidj, in the western part of the Syrian Jezirah, 35 km N of the city of Hassake.

From 1992 to 2006, fifteen yearly seasons of excavations took place, under the common responsibility of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria (represented by Antoine Suleiman) and the European Centre for Upper Mesopotamian Studies, represented by me. The European part of the joint mission was composed in 2004 of research groups mandated by the universities of Venice, Brussels, Munich and Madrid.

The site

λ Tell Beydar is a double walled city of the third millennium BC, founded at the end of the Early Jezirah I period, around 2850 BC, and was in activity until the very end of the Akkadian period, around 2100. It was thus occupied during about 750 years.

I shall only speak about one period, the best attested at the moment, the Early Jezirah IIIb (around 2500 to 2350 BC).

λ Tell Beydar was founded on the principle of concentric circles. Starting from the outer part, we can first recognize an outer perimeter of fortifications, which was only used as a city wall in the first third of the third millennium. On this ancient rampart, was installed the main necropolis of the city. Later, in the Early Jezirah IIIb, small workshops were built on the top of the erased city wall. This outer limit has a diameter of around 600m and encloses thus a total area of 25ha. Inside the limit of this early fortification system, an unsettled ring-shaped lower city hosted a large circular moat which was dug and redug at different periods, as attested by deep soundings. A succession of inner ramparts encloses the upper city. A minimum of three different city walls were identified, stacked the one on the other, some of them if not all equipped with an outer glacis. The city wall of the Early Jezirah IIIb period, around 2450 BC, was unfortunately entirely destroyed by the erosion but there is no doubt that it existed, since we found traces of its glacis. This inner rampart encloses an upper city which is 300m in diameter, before erosion, which corresponds to a surface of around 7 ha. This upper city was terraced and densely settled. In the centre of the upper city, a small central acropolis corresponds to the upper terraces of the city. Among other buildings, the Palace and the Upper Temple (or Temple A) were built on the top and in the real centre. Tell Beydar constitutes thus a middle-sized town, characterized by a dense city planning in the upper city, settled on a terrace system which implies a very specific street system.

The upper city and both systems of fortifications are cut by deep gullies which correspond to the main access roads and to the gates of the city. Those main gullies are seven in number, as indicated by the topographical map. It is interesting to note that the ancient documents discovered at Tell Beydar, mention the names of the seven gates. Their names correspond to well known or more local deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

λ Let us concentrate on the upper city, at the Early Jezirah IIIb period, between 2500 and 2350 BC, which, by the way is roughly contemporary to the time of the pyramids in Egypt. Most of the areas of excavations were installed on the top of the upper city. Those fields of excavations, independent at the beginning of the work, progressively merged together.

λ The central acropolis corresponds to the early upper terraces of the third millenium city. The top of it, before the excavations, was 27,50m higher than the average level of the plain and was occupied by a recent cemetery. The upper terrace sheltered the most important official buildings of the ancient city, the Palace and the Upper Temple, surrounded by auxiliary buildings, workshops and storerooms. A large and majestic main street, oriented S-N and equipped with beautiful basalt stairways, led from the southern gate of the upper city to the entrance of the Palace. To the S, a lower terrace supports large buildings of similar shape. We identify those buildings as temples, Temples B, C and D, in front of which subsidiary buildings of economical function are installed. Those annexes are built in one block but are composed of several units, probably storerooms and workshops closely linked to the temple activity. A glacis isolates the Palace from the northern part of the city, where is installed a large building. Its general shape is quite unusual. We supposed it hosted the official sheepfolds, controlled by the central power. More to the N, a dwelling house quarter has been identified, where a few handicraft activities took place as well.

λ In close relation to the terrace organization of the upper city, the street system has been partly recognized. It is organized on the principle of streets radiating to the centre and concentric streets, which mark the limits of different functional areas of the upper city. λ This «target» scheme has been identified as well at Tell Khuera and in different contemporary settlements and towns in the Syrian Jezirah.

λ If we try to organize roughly the city planning data, when trying to take into account the different functions of the buildings, starting from the centre, thus from the highest point, and progressing to the periphery, we can identify the following functional areas :

-1°) The seat of the central power, which is the Palace, in its third and final phase, occupying half

part of the highest terrace,

-2°) Four cultual buildings, which are Temples A, B, C and D. The Upper Temple (or Temple A) is immediately S of the Palace and occupies a fourth of the upper terrace. Temples B, C and D are standing on a lower terrace.

-3°) The workshops and the buildings related to the economical activity of the city surround the Palace and the Temples. Among those buildings of various shapes, we can mention sheepfolds, buildings whose function is still unidentified around the Upper Temple, and storerooms and workshops facing Temples A, B and C. Another economical building, a large granary, was built further to the E, somewhat isolated in the south-eastern part of the upper city.

-4°) The dwelling houses quarters take place further to the periphery. An entire quarter of private houses is currently excavated N of the sheepfolds.

## The Palace

λ The Palace is a building which counts several architectural phases. Its maximal dimensions are 42m in the W-E axis, and 30m in the S-N axis. It is composed of about 30 rooms. Its latest phase postdates a partial destruction of the western half of the building. This is the consequence of an earthquake or a landslide. The plan I present here corresponds to the third and final phase, which is itself divided in two, of a Palace originally constructed around 2500 BC. λ A central courtyard is paved with baked bricks arranged following a herringbone pattern. It is enclosed on two sides by a wall supported by a central pillar. λ The W limit of the courtyard is a wall equipped with buttresses.

The floor of the western part of the building is 2m higher than the floor of the eastern part. This western area comprises a central large room, which is most probably a reception room, and more to the W, λ a residential area, maybe the private quarters of the local authority, either a governor or a local ruler. λ Those large rooms are surrounded by smaller auxiliary rooms, composed of blocks of two or four rooms, a system which is very typical at Tell Beydar. There is no doubt that the Palace had a second floor, on a part of its plan, probably on half part of it. A large number of equipments were discovered, some of them being of high quality, λ like this bathroom equipped with toilet installations λ or like this elaborate system of water drainage.

## The Temples

λ As mentioned before, four temples have been identified so far, labelled Temple A or Upper Temple, Temples B, C and D. The Upper Temple is the widest and is located just S of the Palace. Without entering in the details of their architecture and installations, which would require much more time, it is nevertheless appropriate to emphasize a large number of similarities which clearly indicate a similar function. λ All those buildings have a recessed entrance door, accessible from a stone or baked brick stairway. In two cases this access stairway is delineated by low walls or benches. λ All the buildings comprise an entrance room paved with baked bricks. λ The temples are equipped with at least two bathrooms, with seated toilets sometimes isolated by a screen wall. λ All bathrooms have large basins in the ground. λ λ The largest covered room is always decorated or equipped with the three following installations: a high brick block stuck to the inner face of one of the walls, which is ornated with a subtle set of niches and recesses, a low bench running at the base of the decorated block, a large and low podium standing on the floor and located left of the block. λ Several auxiliary rooms, two in Temples B and C, more in the Upper Temple, complete the plan. λ Temple C comprises as well two outer façades which are decorated with niches and buttresses that do not reach the ground level.

λ The four buildings are indeed opening a new typological series. Some similarities can be found in other sanctuaries of Upper Mesopotamia, particularly in Mari, but the peculiarities of the Beydar temples compared to what is currently known are nevertheless significant.

#### The administrative and economical buildings, the workshops

At Tell Beydar, we discovered a number of economical or administrative buildings and workshops.

λ In front of Temples B and C, on the other side of a street where the traffic was strictly controlled, was located a very elongated building, divided in five units. A large number of ceramics of different sizes were found on the floor, a majority of which being storage big jars. It seems reasonable to identify this building as an economical building comprising magazines and storerooms, some kind of annex to the temples.

λ Two small workshops are located W of Temple B. One of them is devoted to cereal grinding, and its floor is divided into compartments, what implies a control of the production. λ The other

workshop, most probably in the same building, is a small bakery, equipped with large domestic ovens, large enough for providing with bread the personnel of this sector of the city.

λ In front of the Upper Temple, another building seems to constitute an annex of the main temple.

λ W of the Palace and the Upper Temple, a building with solid walls has been only partly excavated, due to erosion. It could be an administrative building, constructed prior to the Palace, what explains the unusual shape of the western limit of the Palace.

Close to the entrance of the Palace and the eastern façade of Temple A, a very strong building comprises four rooms, three being in a row. Its function could have been in close relation with the Palace but is not yet identified with clarity. It was maybe an administrative building, some warehouse where goods were controlled before being processed in, or sent out of the Palace.

λ To the N, on a lower terrace and separated from the Palace by a glacis and a street, a very singular building is composed of a series of large rooms, whose floor is only mud and is devoid of any installation. Those rooms open to a inner large open space which is crossed by two small pebble streets. This kind of inner courtyard shelters poorly built small installations and ovens. λ The analysis of animal prints on the floor of the large rooms could lead to identify the whole building as large sheepfolds directly controlled by the central administration.

λ Finally, in the south-eastern area of the upper city, a large granary presents an architectural scheme largely adopted at Tell Beydar, a series of four large square rooms, 5m on 5m, all in a row. λ The function of this building remained enigmatic until the excavation of the foundation level, λ when a grill plan could be identified.

## The dwelling houses

λ Except fragments of private houses identified in areas D and E, most of our informations concerning private housing come from area B. Two houses were completely excavated as well as parts of the plan of seven other houses. λ The private houses quarter is standing on a number of low terraces raising to the centre of the city. A slopy street, equipped with a stone canalization, can be compared to a stream irrigating a very dense urban planning.

λ The two houses completely excavated are modest and composed of only three rooms. Their plan is well known in contemporary Upper Mesopotamia and in the valley of the Diyala. Other

houses, incompletely excavated, provide plans which are more developed. In a majority of houses, the entrance room is in fact a narrow corridor which is crossed by a canalization leading to the street. This feature is well known in Upper Mesopotamia, at Tell Khuera for instance.

#### The written documents

λ The discovery at Tell Beydar, since the first years of excavations, of more than 200 written documents, tablets, bullae, tokens and labels allow us to have a first overview on several aspects of the life of the city, whose ancient name was *Nabada*. The language is semitic and the calendar is local. The Beydar documents are the earliest written sources ever found in Syria.

λ It is a rank 2 city, submitted at the end of the Early Jezirah IIIb period to the authority of the ruler of the city of *Nagar*. A rank 2 city means the equivalent of a chief town, controlling a district of the kingdom. The city is quoted in Ebla in a short list mentioning the large cities of the kingdom of *Nagar*. The visit of the ruler of *Nagar*, together with his officials, seems to be one of the main events of the town, a town which, most probably, hosted once Queen *Paba*, the wife of Iblu-Il, the great king of Mari.

λ The administration of the city is pyramidal, high officers controlling subordinate service men. A local ruler is apparently not attested, what could lead to suggest that the city was under the direct control of *Nagar*, maybe with the mediation of a governor or a delegate.

λ A large number of professions are attested. Among others : potters, basket makers, carriers, carpenters, cartwrights, door keepers, guards, gardeners, millers, messengers, domestic employees and scribes. A large number of documents refer to allotments of food rations. Many other texts deal with agriculture and breeding. The culture of cereals is largely predominant and the breeding concerns ovids, caprids, bovines and equids. The donkeys of the region as well as crosses between special species are known to be most valuable in Ebla. The production of wool is well attested and carefully registered.

λ As attested by a survey of the neighbourhood and by our large environmental programme, the city of *Nabada* controlled a wealthy agricultural hinterland, wide enough to supply a population which can be roughly estimated to 2000-3000 inhabitants. Its economy was varied, standing on agriculture and breeding, but as well on trade since the city location is most interesting, at the crossroads of important trade routes, and not very far from metal sources.

On the seals used by the dwellers of Tell Beydar, many representations depict carts and chariots. This is a sign of the intense trade activity of the urban centres of the region at the time.

λ The Beydar texts mention a large number of city names. Whether a few of them correspond to well known cities, it seems obvious that most of the toponyms concern settlements located in the immediate vicinity of the city : small urban centres, villages, hamlets or farming compounds.

The programme of architectural restoration

λ A programme of architectural restoration of the public buildings of Tell Beydar was settled in 2003, and is currently still in progress. Several official buildings are already consolidated, restored or even rebuilt. Most of them date to the Early Jezirah IIIb. A mudbrick large building of the Hellenistic period is restored as well. λ We hope that this restoration programme will contribute to encourage the visit of the site, which is currently one of the most spectacular of the region.