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# *Archaeological Evidence for Collective Governance along the Upper Syrian Euphrates during the Late and Middle Bronze Age*

Adelheid Otto

MAINZ

Increasing excavation work in Syria during the last decades has modified our understanding of the functioning of Near Eastern complex societies. Instead of considering the palace-based society the typical Near Eastern model, several regional models with strong corporate political structures begin to emerge. One of them can be observed in the area of the Upper Syrian Euphrates (fig. 1). Intensive archaeological investigations in the Assad and Tishreen Dam rescue areas led to large scale excavations of settlements with well-documented urban structures of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. The discovery of cuneiform texts in many of them (Meskene, Tell Munbaqa, Tell Hadidi, Tell Qitar, Tell Fray, Tell Bazi) permits deep insights into a society with peculiar structures which will be discussed in detail in the following papers.

The position of the elders, of the city and the god of the city was particularly strong in this area<sup>1</sup> (see B. Faist, this volume) and points to a society based on collective governance. Further elements of these corporate structures are the so-called brothers which were responsible for settling private legal affairs (see S. Demare-Lafont, this volume). However, a king is attested at least for Emar and Ekalte, and a 'palace', É.GAL, seems to have existed in both of these towns (see D. Fleming, this volume). The following discussion will examine, how the archaeological record fits with this image.

## ***1. Temples and Domestic Quarters as the Two Elements of Settlements in the Upper Syrian Euphrates Region***

Several Late Bronze Age settlements along the Upper Syrian Euphrates (fig. 1) show a particular urban structure:

- at Meskene, ancient Emar, the excavations brought to light three temples and parts of domestic quarters (fig. 2). The twin sanctuary is situated in Chantier E, at the highest part of the city, Temple M2 lies in the lower

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1. This is documented for example in real estate transactions at Emar, where the elders and the city god are the sellers in a third of the documented transactions without ever being attested as purchasers. In contrast, the kings of Emar buy and sell like the other citizens; Beckman 1997.



Fig. 1. Map of the Upper Syrian Euphrates region in the Late Bronze Age.

town.<sup>2</sup> Except for these three temples, the areas excavated so far have only revealed houses (see sub 2. for the interpretation of the *bit hilani*).

2. Beyer 1982; Finkbeiner 2003; Faist & Finkbeiner 2002. The so-called “temple du devin” is evidently the house of the diviner. Its form and installations, including the altar, correspond to standard Bazi houses. The excavation reports (Margueron 1975, 65–66, fig. 4, pl. VI-4) do not corroborate the reconstruction of a central doorway to the main room.



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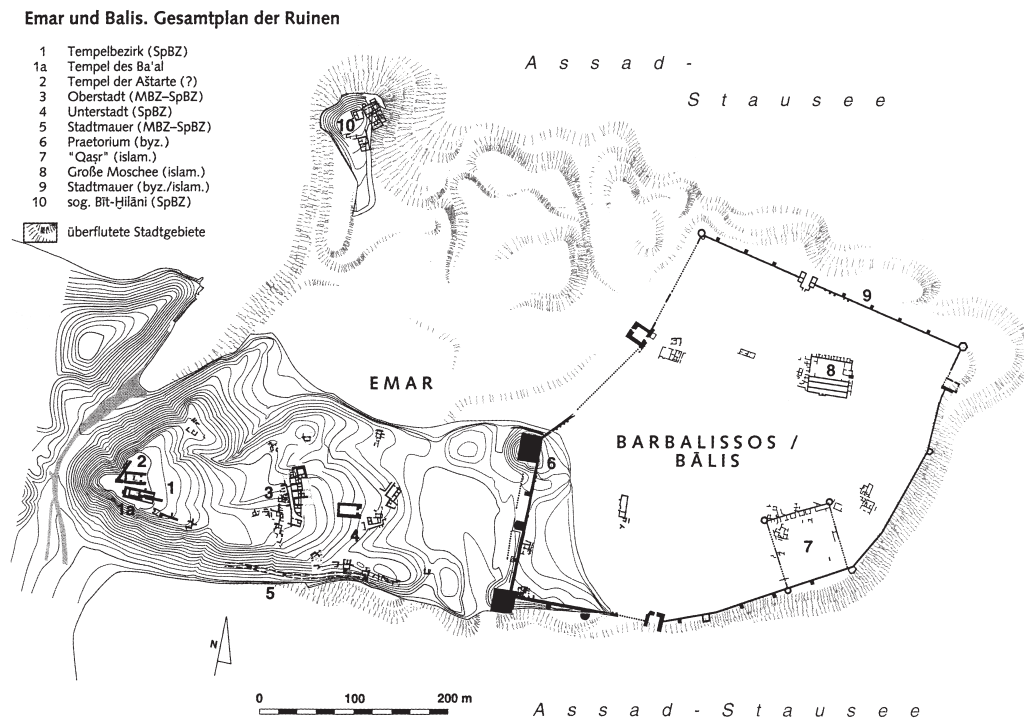


Fig. 2. LBA Meskene/Emar (from: Faist and Finkbeiner 2002, fig. 2).

- at Tell Munbaqa, ancient Ekalte, three temples occupy the most prominent, elevated point of the city immediately bordering the Euphrates (fig. 3). A fourth temple with two remarkable *baityloi* was situated at one of the city gates, clearly serving as a sanctuary for people entering the city.<sup>3</sup> The remaining area inside the city wall was densely covered by housing quarters. The houses, arranged along planned circulation routes, show a fairly homogenous layout and function. The total area of the settlement can be reconstructed with high probability due to large scale excavation work and geophysical surveys.<sup>4</sup>
- at Tell Qitar, probably ancient Till-Abnu,<sup>5</sup> a fortified settlement situated on a natural hill high above the Euphrates, domestic quarters and a broad room temple have been excavated or traced on the surface within the Upper and the Lower settlement. The Orthostat Building, which was interpreted as a palace, differs from the other houses by two standing pillars and the series of 60cm high orthostats that line the walls of Room 25, but the size is not different from the other houses.<sup>6</sup>

3. Blocher et al. 2007. The *baitylos* which stood inside the temenos in front of the temple entrance, was carefully carved. The other one with a rougher form was set into a niche of the outer face of the temenos wall along the street.

4. Machule 1995; Werner 1998.

5. The ancient name has been derived from the Hieroglyphic Luwian inscription of a seal: "zi-pi-lu-sà ti-la-pa-nu(-)tā-pā+ra/i-i(a) URBS": Priestess zi-pi-lu-sà / sippulumše of Tilapanu (Archi 1993; McClellan 1983–84, 41–42). In a tablet found in Tell Bazi (text 2 line 5) the town may be mentioned as *Tewab*[. . .] (Sallaberger, Einwag & Otto 2006: 98–9).

6. McClellan 1984–85: 43–53; id. 1986: 428–33.



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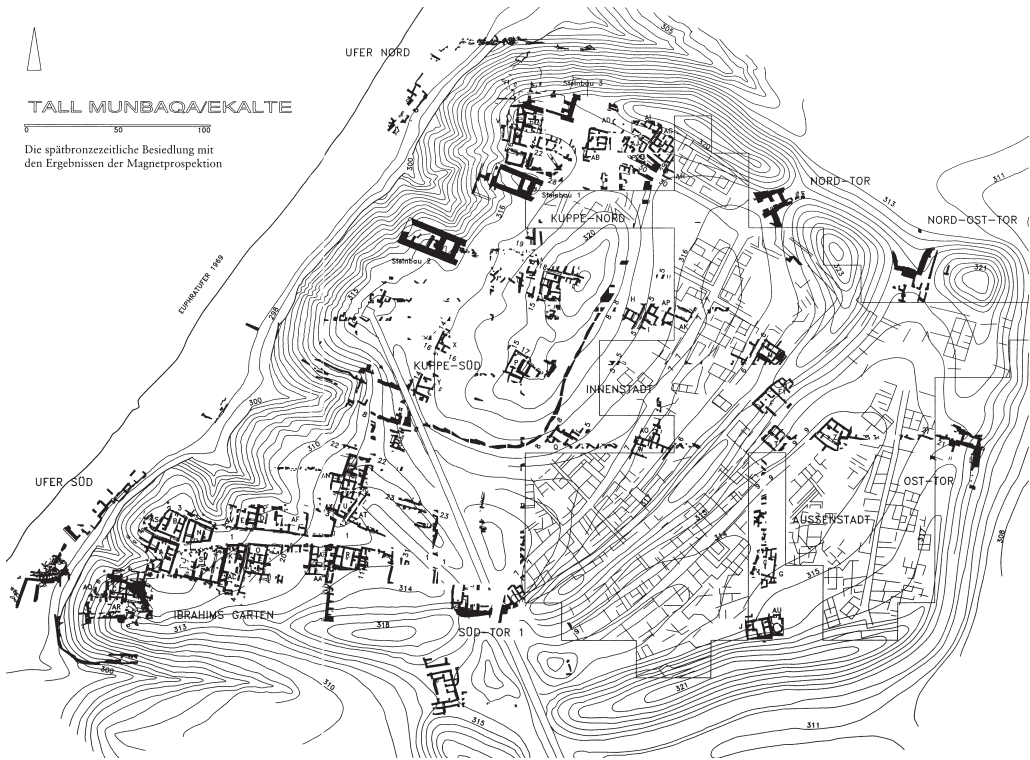


Fig. 3. LBA Tell Munbaqa/Ekalte, areas excavated and investigated by geophysical prospection (from: Werner 1998, cover inside).

- at Tell Bazi, probably called Bašīru during the Late Bronze Age, the citadel housed a large temple and the lower town consisted of several quarters containing similar domestic dwellings (fig. 4). With the help of large scale excavations and geophysical surveys considerable parts of the city are known, but no building other than domestic, industrial or cultic has been discovered.<sup>7</sup>
- at Tell Hadidi, ancient Azu, and Tell Fray no sound basis for a judgement of the settlement structures is possible, because only limited excavations took place. Within the areas excavated at Tell Hadidi only private houses were found; they are closely comparable to the ones at the above mentioned sites.<sup>8</sup> At Tell Fray one temple ('Tempio Sud') and several houses were found.<sup>9</sup> The building, which was formerly called 'Palazzetto', is now called 'the house of Shimegital' (Pinnock 1994).

If we compare the scheme of these settlements with those from other regions, e.g. with that of contemporary Ugarit, where the monumental complex of the royal pal-

7. Otto 2006a; Sallaberger, Einwag & Otto 2006; Einwag & Otto 2006; Otto & Einwag 2007.

8. Dornemann 1980. The Tablet Building has been interpreted as a brewery (Gates 1988: 66–68). However, the recent discovery of many houses with similar inventory show that it was a standard house; see Otto 2006a: 93.

9. Matthiae 1980; The "Tempio Nord" has already been identified as a house by McClellan (1997: 55). The existence of altarlike installations and the form of the long main room which resembles those of a *templum in antis* has in the past often led to misinterpretations.



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Fig. 4. LBA Tell Bazi: The lower town with domestic quarters and the Citadel with the temple.

ace and other associated residences occupied a considerable part of the city, the difference is immediately apparent. Possible reasons for this will be discussed below (sub 5). The considerable economic and political role of a town like Emar and the existence of a king and a palace, however, argue against the explanation that collective governance was mainly restricted to less powerful or dependent settlements.

## 2. In Search of a Palace

As has been pointed out, only houses and temples have hitherto been found at the sites of the Upper Syrian Euphrates region. Two possible explanations for the absence of major palaces come to mind: either the relevant areas have not yet been investigated, or there existed no monumental palatial complexes. If the latter was the case, it could be explained again in at least two ways: either the Euphrates sites no longer required palaces “because they were integrated into systems where administration was carried out at higher-order centers”, that is in Waššukanni during the 16th-15th century BCE and in Carchemish from 14th-12th century BCE (McClellan 1997: 44–5), or the administration was carried out locally, but the different tasks of administration were not concentrated in a single building.

Let us consider these possibilities with the help of the two sites of ancient Emar and Ekalte.



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## 2.1. *The Case of Emar*

Several texts from Emar testify that not only a king, but also a palace existed from at least the 14th century onwards, that is before the Hittite presence, contrary to Adamthwaite's suggestion that the palace at Emar was first established during the Hittite occupation<sup>10</sup> (see Fleming, this volume). D. Fleming already in 1994 described the "limited kingship" of the king of Late Bronze Age Emar, who did not play a prominent role either in property transactions or in rituals. In the following paper he investigates the textual evidence for a palace at Emar. He concludes that the king at Emar was "of considerable wealth and power" mainly because of his enormous contribution for the *zukru* festival. Nevertheless, he calls the king of Emar "no more than the head of the town's leading family". I would like to argue that, although the king in this region was missing many attributes of a Near Eastern ruler such as supreme power, leadership and ritual predominance, he seems nevertheless to have been obliged to generous behaviour in the same way as his powerful colleagues to the east and west.

Only a part of the city of Emar has been excavated (from 1972–6 by a French team under the direction of Jean Margueron and since 1996 by a German team directed by Uwe Finkbeiner) (fig. 2). J. Margueron (1979) described the building in Chantier A as a *bīt hilani*, which served as the palace of the local king. This hypothesis has been rejected by philologists, because the archives are of a private, and not a royal character.<sup>11</sup> T. McClellan (1997) convincingly demonstrated that the ground plan of Margueron's *bīt hilani* is not different from those of normal houses, although many houses at Emar were considerably smaller. A further argument against its identification as a palace is House 14 in the Weststadt of Bazi (see fig. 5, top left) which is not only similar in plan, but also larger (201 sq.m; the building in Chantier A has an area of 144 sq.m). House 14 was one of the three largest houses in the Weststadt and may have been the residence of a rather wealthy family but not necessarily of a ruling monarch (Otto 2006a: 168–71).

But clearly, even if the building in Chantier A at Emar was not a palace, this is no reason to deny the existence of a palace at Emar. The extensive areas of the lower city, which was covered by the medieval city of Balis and is now submerged, would have provided ample space for such a building, although it seems a bit strange that the palace should not have been situated at a prominent, elevated point of the city.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. *The Case of Ekalte*

The existence of a king and a palace at Late Bronze Age Ekalte has been denied by W. Mayer. He thinks that the mayor (*hazannu*) and the Elders governed the city, interprets the two kings named Addu-kabar and Jaḥṣi-Ba'la with his son Zu-Ba'la as kings of Emar, and thinks that the collectively governed city Ekalte was dependent on the authorities in Emar (Mayer 2001: 14; similarly: Pruzsinszky 2004). This view has not been generally accepted (Werner 2004: 21–24). The possibility that the

10. Adamthwaite 2001: 201–3. The existence of a palace and a king at Emar at the time of Idrimi has often been denied because he fled from Alalah to the Elders of Emar.

11. Dietrich 1990; Sallaberger 2003.

12. In Upper Mesopotamia and Syria there are many examples of Middle and Late Bronze Age palaces situated at elevated points of the city, e.g. at Mari, Tuttul, Tell Brak, Tilmen Höyük, Ugarit and others, but there were also a few palaces situated in the lower town as at Tell al-Rimah and at Tell Leilan.



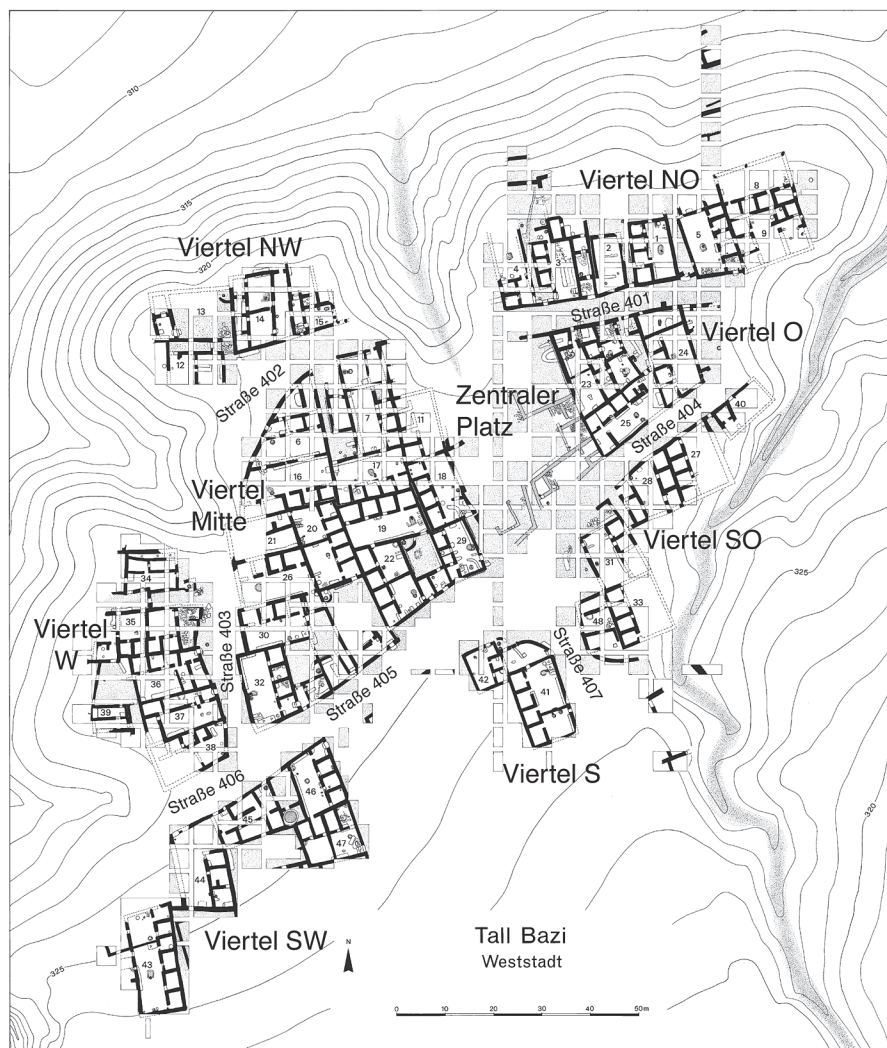


Fig. 5. Schematic map of the LBA Weststadt of Tell Bazi.

kings mentioned in Ekalte were predecessors of the Emar kings is not very convincing, the more so since the sealings on the tablets of Emar and Munbaqa are clearly contemporary.<sup>13</sup> Thus the probability that the kings mentioned in the Ekalte documents had their seat in Emar (Mayer 2001; Beckman 2008: 213) does not seem very high.

Only a single text from Munbaqa (No. 62), which documents a property transaction by the city and the god, mentions the palace.<sup>14</sup> 1000 shekels of silver should be paid to the god Ba'alaka and to the palace as a penalty. Interestingly, on the same

13. Seidl (2004) showed that a large part of the Syrian type of Emar tablets is contemporary to or even earlier than the Ekalte sealings.

14. Mayer 2001: 128–9. Yamada (1994: 1) and Beckman (2008: 218) rightly doubt Mayer's interpretation of a scribe's mistake who wrote É.GAL instead of Ekalte.



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tablet is found the impression of a seal, which is identified on another tablet as the “seal of Jahsi-Ba’la, the king” (Werner 2004: 21–2). This seal of the king of Ekalte was a fairly small seal with a plain seal design, common for private seals, without an inscription and without metal caps, so every typical characteristic of a royal seal is missing. However, the evidence suggests that there existed a king and even a palace at Ekalte side by side with the particularly powerful collective structures.

At the same time, this single attestation for a palace at Ekalte and the rare mentioning of the king suggests that other nearby sites also may have had kings, even if they are not mentioned in the rare written documents. The two tablets found at Tell Bazi mention neither a king nor a palace but suggest that the Elders were the supreme governing body. This, however, is no proof that there had never been a king and a palace at Bazi. But if there was a palace at Bazi, it must have been very small, because the Citadel and the lower town have been thoroughly investigated. Other sites such as Tell Hadidi/ancient Azu, opposite of Tell Munbaqa across the Euphrates, and Tell Fray have provided evidence for similar houses and temples. But because only parts of these sites have been excavated, this does not exclude the possibility that a palace may have existed at one or both of these sites.

The archaeological situation at Tell Munbaqa is different from that at Meskene. The area within the city walls of Ekalte has been investigated on a large scale, partly by excavation and partly by geophysical prospection (fig. 3). In fact, there seems to have been no space available for a palace, unless it was not much larger than a house.<sup>15</sup>

How can we interpret the observations that a palace is mentioned in the texts of Emar and Ekalte, but the position of the king does not seem particularly distinguished, and that moreover no palace-like structure of Middle and Late Bronze Age date has been discovered in the whole area of the Upper Syrian Euphrates?

In my opinion, the crucial question is what a palace in this region would have looked like. Subconsciously our notion of a palace is a large building complex fulfilling the multiple functions of residence, reception, administration, production, storage and distribution, cultic activities and so on of the royal family and a large apparatus of servants – a picture which derives from sites like Mari or Ugarit, where the palace is 20–100 times larger than the adjacent houses. But already at Alalah the difference in size between the palace and the houses was less marked (McClellan 1997).

If the palace was only the residence of the local king and not the headquarter of a centralized administration with a complex body of functionaries, would it have been very different from a large house?

### ***3. Variations of Layout and Size of the Houses in the Upper Syrian Euphrates Area***

The majority of the houses in this area have a main room and one or two rows of secondary rooms. The layout varies slightly from site to site (McClellan 1997), but all of them seem to have developed from the local house form which is already attested during the Middle Bronze Age (for example attested at Halawa). The extant houses of Tell Bazi were so standardized that it was possible to reconstruct the ideal typical house, consisting of a long room flanked by a row of secondary rooms

15. See map in Werner 2004, cover inside; Becker e.a.1994.



accessible from the main room, an upper storey above the secondary rooms, and a multifunctionally used roof, serving as the courtyard. Even the installations and inventories of the houses were so standardized, that the ideal typical use of the houses became evident (Otto 2006a: 41–5, figs. 23a–c).

Furthermore, the sizes of the original plots at Tell Bazi show little variation (fig. 5). 90% measure between 100 and 200 sq.m. in the first phase, the standard size of the 50 known plots is between 110 and 170 sq.m. About 60% vary only about 20% in size (128–159 sq.m.) (Otto 2006a: 252–8). The differences in house size increase during the two to three generations observed, but they can be explained by natural economic developments and property division as a result of inheritance.

There are a few very small houses, among which is House 42, with a surface area of only 65 sq.m. and only two side-rooms, and there are a few large houses such as House 43, with a surface area of 215 sq.ms. and a row of 6 side-rooms (Otto 2006a: 217–20). In this quarter south of the straight main street, the largest, the smallest, and several standard size houses all lie side by side (fig. 5). The variety in the inventories may be due to differences in size and economic background, but not to fundamental social differences between the households, as the analysis of the inventories has shown.

House 43 is situated at the most agreeable place at the western end of the city. In front of the altar lay a seal, weights, jewellery, a bronze figurine and other objects, which point to the fairly high economic and social status of the household. The skull of a bull must have been placed somewhere near or above the altar, as was also testified in several other houses (Otto 2006a, 242–42). A house like this would have been a perfect residence for a local king in his role as *primus inter pares*.

The plots were arranged along planned streets, which were built first, then the plots were laid out (measured in cubits) and apportioned to different families.<sup>16</sup> All this indicates a society with a central authority, but without a strong horizontal stratification.

At Emar the differences in the sizes of the houses have been taken as indicators of the social or economic position of the households. The small houses at Emar have even been interpreted as the homes of day laborers, who had to work for the family businesses situated in the large houses (McClellan 1997: 44). But without considering the material in the houses, such conclusions are rash. Size alone is no sound indicator of the social position of the house owner, but other factors such as physical environment, economy, and variations in household composition can be determinant.<sup>17</sup>

A similar hypothesis was formulated for the small and highly uniform Middle Bronze Age houses at Halawa which were arranged regularly along parallel streets. They are clearly the forerunners of the smaller type of Late Bronze Age houses at Emar, and also of the enlarged standard house type. These buildings were interpreted as housing for an only slightly socially differentiated population of workmen and their families who were dependent on a central authority.<sup>18</sup> The evidence of Halawa could, however, be interpreted in a quite different way. In classical Greece the increase in democracy resulted in a highly uniform plot system and the development

16. Otto 2006a: 254. The walls bordering the streets were clearly erected before the buildings' walls which were built against it.

17. Otto 2006a: 30–2. A good example at Tell Bazi is House 29: its modest size has apparently been accepted for the benefit of the economic ideal situation at the central place, Otto 2006a: 197–200.

18. Meyer 1989: 32; Akkermans & Schwartz 2003: 308.



of fairly standardized house types.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Middle Bronze settlement of Haradum furnishes a good example of a collectively organized planned settlement with strikingly uniform houses (Kepinski, this volume).

#### ***4. Archaeological Evidence for Collectively Used Buildings***

The assemblies of the two main collective bodies mentioned in the texts seem to be reflected in the buildings. The ‘brothers’ who came together to settle private legal affairs, probably assembled in the house of one of them. Several texts from Emar and Ekalte contain the phrases: “PN (the owner of the house) let the brothers enter” and “PN let the brothers sit down”; and at the end of the meeting the brothers broke *hukku* bread and anointed the table.<sup>20</sup> There are several reasons to localize this assembly in the main room of the private houses: the main room of most houses had an altar-like table opposite the entrance and a long bench along one side. The bench clearly served for sitting or reposing as is indicated by the remains of animal furs on it and the fine table ware juglets and plates in front of it; the altar was clearly the social, cultic and economic focal point of the house, as shown for example by the weights and cultic vessels and installations found close to it.<sup>21</sup>

The temples of the region have a layout comparable to the main rooms of the houses: they consist of one long room with one or two benches along the sides and an altar-like installation opposite the entrance. Well known examples for this are the two temples of Chantier E at Emar and the Southern Temple of Tell Fray.<sup>22</sup> If we suppose in analogy to the houses, that the benches here also served for sitting, it may be argued that the assembly of the Elders with the god, which is attested in the texts, could have taken place in the temple (Otto 1996b).

Recently the temple on top of the Citadel of Tell Bazi proved this assumption. Room A, which served as the main room in the temple’s last phase, had a bench along one side (the other side is disturbed) and a massive platform or altar opposite the entrance. Its inventory was preserved by the fire of the final destruction, but in places disturbed in later periods. The remains of cultic vessels, a silver hoard, seals and other precious objects were lying beside the altar. Numerous drinking vessels and jars, some of them still containing food, and the remains of meat meals were found scattered on the floor (Otto & Einwag 2007). They attest that shortly before the destruction of the site numerous people had assembled and enjoyed a banquet here. Two royal documents, which were kept in the same room, testify that the Mitanian kings Sauštatar and Artatama both gave settlements to the ‘sons of Bašīru’, that is to the Elders of the city, without mentioning a king of Bašīru (Sallaberger, Einwag & Otto 2006). Therefore it may be supposed that the Elders and the city god – however we have to imagine this – assembled in the temple. If the temple indeed served as a collectively used place for administrative purposes, as did the houses on a lower level, there would have been no need for other administrative buildings in the settlement.

19. Hoepfner’s (1999: 261–79) designation of these houses as “Typenhäuser” has not been generally accepted, but it describes well the extraordinary uniformity of the houses.

20. Mayer 2001: Nos. 11, 19, 20, 51, 54; Beckman 1996b: 59.

21. See extensively Otto 2006a: 67–71, 75, 234, 241–4.

22. Margueron in Beyer 1982: 28–31; Matthiae 1980: 42–4.



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## 5. Conclusions

It seems that collective structures in urban government, which existed all over the ancient Near East, played a particularly important role in the Middle Euphrates region and possibly beyond.

Several questions arise from this. Why was collective governance particularly strong here? Was it mainly restricted to the lower levels of the political hierarchy in the sense of Liverani (1975) who attributes collective traditions in Late Bronze Age Syria mainly to the rural communities within a powerful kingdom?

Was it significant only for towns that were subject to an external political power – in this area during the Late Bronze Age first the Mittanian and later the Hittite king? And did the degree of collective governance remain the same during the whole period investigated here?

One explanation for these structures is that they were derived from the socio-political structures of transhumant tribes that formed a major component of the population at the border of the rain fed zone. Some scholars have therefore interpreted the collective structures as a new development introduced by the Amorites, while others have argued for strong corporate political bodies already in the third millennium (Fleming 2004: 227–41).

A further possible explanation concerns the economic power of the settlements which led to strong, independent, self-governed communities. Economy and trade are the base of analogous phenomena in many cultures, for example the Hanseatic cities in Northern Europe, the Italian renaissance cities such as Florence and Venice, and the so-called 'Reichsfreie Städte' in 16–18th century Germany such as Nürnberg which were directly subject to the German Kaiser and enjoyed privileges such as exemption from taxes. Possible economic reasons for collective political power in the Ancient Near East have been suggested for Old Assyrian Assur, for Old Babylonian Mari, Tuttul, Emar and other cities.

Evidence from several settlements along the Upper Syrian Euphrates suggests that there existed a form of strong collective self-governance. The settlements were governed by the Elders, but there was in addition a king, who was certainly less powerful than the rulers in other Near Eastern regions, but perhaps not less obliged to generosity.

The fact that a palace has not yet been discovered in any of the settlements is not proof that none existed, since palaces are mentioned in the texts. But one should keep in mind the possibility that a palace of such a king might have been literally a 'large house' which served not as the headquarter of an centralized administration, but as a family residence, while the legal affairs between the 'Brothers' were discussed in the private houses, and the collective governance of the settlement took place in the most prominently situated buildings, the temples.

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