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Household Dynamics in Late Third Millennium Northern Mesopotamia

The aim of this paper is to study the structure and development of households at the end of 3rd millennium B.C. in the Syrian Jezireh. In particular the focus is on looking at the two periods Early Jezireh IV and Early Jezireh V. The investigation is based on the house plans of these periods, as well as on the inventories of the houses. One of the main aims is to gain an insight into the functional aspects of the houses, thus allowing for an understanding of the social and economical organisation of the households, and to observe how these aspects changed over time.

A further aspect to be dealt with in this paper is to what extent the development of households can be correlated with the general development of the society at the end of the Early Bronze Age. Its interrelation with the de-urbanisation in the late 3rd millennium, the so-called period of the “urban collapse” (Weiss et al. 1993; Weiss, Courty 1993; Weiss 1997; 2000a; 2000b; Weiss, Bradley 2001; Ristvet, Weiss 2000; 2005), is of particular interest. This leads to the basic question of whether the crisis of the cities is reflected in a degradation of the urban households.

The investigation focuses on four sites: Tell Mozan, Tell Brak, Tell Chagar Bazar and Tell Chuera. These sites cover two zones of urban development in the late 3rd millennium in the Syrian Jezireh. Three of the sites (Mozan, Brak, Chagar Bazar) are situated in zone A, i.e. the “re-urbanisation zone” – the area where there was urban continuity from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age, while one of the sites (Chuera) is situated in zone B, i.e. the “abandonment zone”, where settlements were abandoned at the end of the Early Jezireh IV period (Pfälzner 2012: 73-75, map Fig. 18).

Household development at Tell Mozan

At Tell Mozan, the Early Jezireh IV period is represented by levels C 11 to 8 in the central upper city (Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2000: 219 ff; 2001: 117 ff; 2002: 159 ff; Pfälzner 2012: 63; Bianchi et al, in press). During this time small houses existed in this part of the city (Fig. 1). They had thin walls, very small rooms, a poor layout and simple household installations (Figs. 2 and 3). The houses can be interpreted as small family units, probably only housing one nuclear family. It also suggests that these were rather poor households and that the buildings, thus, represent the dwellings of the middle- or lower-class.

These conclusions are surprising for various reasons. Firstly, because the quarter is in the centre of the town, secondly, because it is close to the major temple precinct and the central city-plaza (Pfälzner 2008). Normally this would be expected to be a particularly prestigious living space, the preferred living area of the elite. A reason needs to be found, why it was populated by comparatively lower-class households during the Early Jezireh IV period.

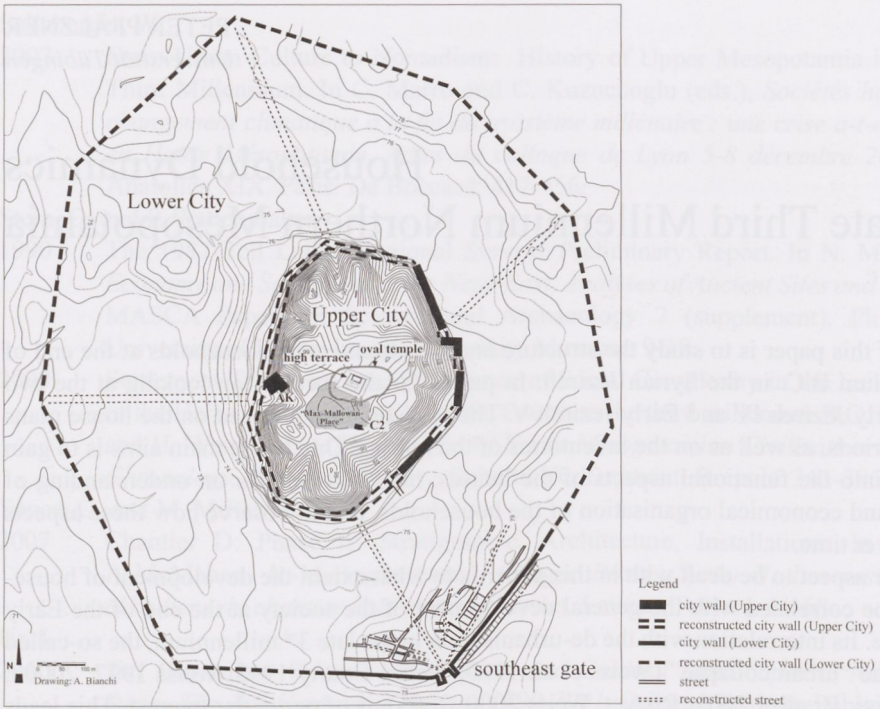


Fig. 1: Reconstructed plan of the city of Tell Mozan/Urkes in the Early Jezireh IV period.

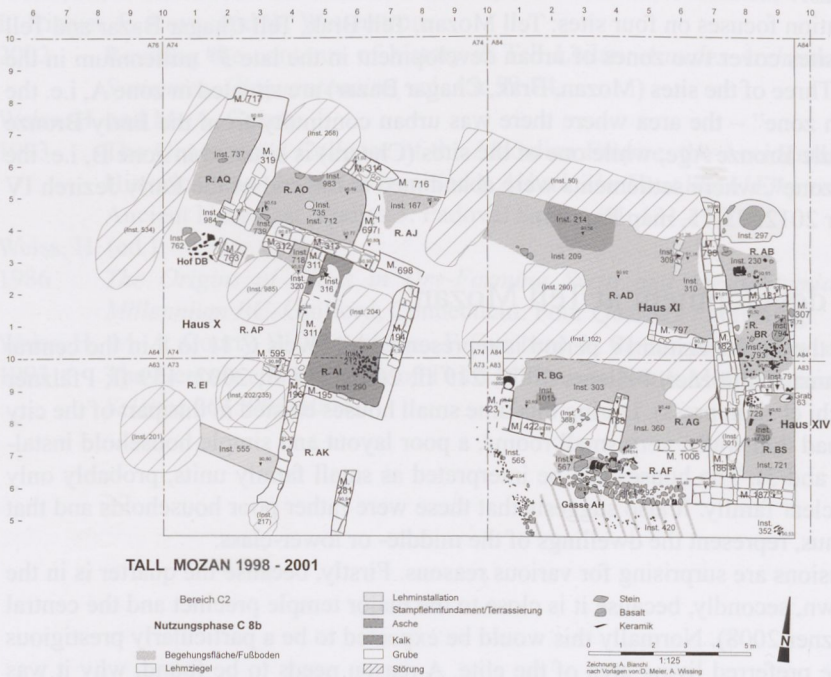


Fig. 2: Domestic architecture of phase C 8 (Early Jezireh IV period) in area C2.

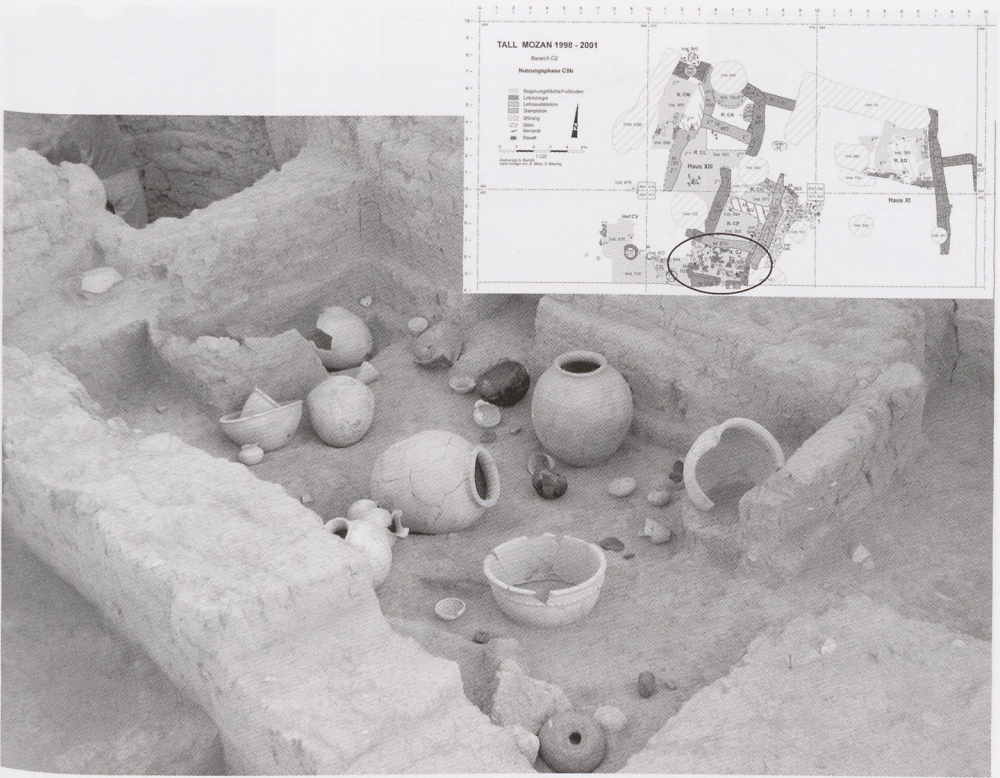


Fig. 3: Western view of room CJ with restored inventory *in situ* within the dwelling House XII at Tell Mozan/Urkesh in Phase C 9b.

To answer this question it is necessary to look at the previous period. The area where this quarter is situated was a public area in the Early Jezireh III period. There was a larger stone building, which probably had public functions, adjoining the large plaza (Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2002: 156-159). Thus, the entire central upper city area seems to have been controlled by public institutions during the Early Jezireh III period. At the transition of period Early Jezireh III to IV the area partly changed its functional character, as it was occupied by comparatively poor private households in the later period. This hints at a weakening of public institutions between the two periods.

A further change in the central upper city of Tell Mozan is apparent in the Early Jezireh V period. It dates to the 21st century BC and is contemporary with the Ur III period of Mesopotamia. During this phase the small houses which existed in the previous Early Jezireh IV period disappear and are replaced by one large building (Fig. 4). It is the so-called “Pusham-House” (Fig. 5) (Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2001: 121 ff; 2002: 163 ff; Pfälzner 2012: 55 ff; Bianchi et al., in press). It was the house of a long distance trader and has a regular plan with storage rooms. Regrettably, the southern part of the house was destroyed by erosion. Within the house hundreds of seal impressions were found bearing Pusham’s name. They sealed the doors to the store rooms and underline that the house was a magazine for trade goods (Fig. 6). Eventually, the house served also as residence of Pusham’s household, but there is no clear archaeological evidence of this.



Fig. 4: Reconstructed plan of the city of Tell Mozan/Urkes in the Early Jezireh V period.

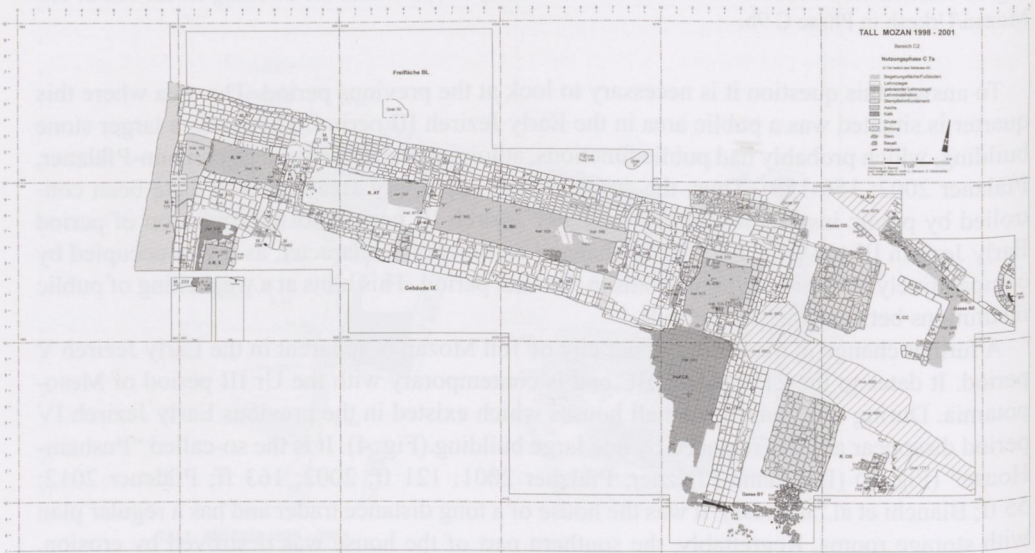


Fig. 5: Plan of the "Pusham House" of phase C 7 (Early Jezireh V) in the eastern portion of the dwelling quarter C2.

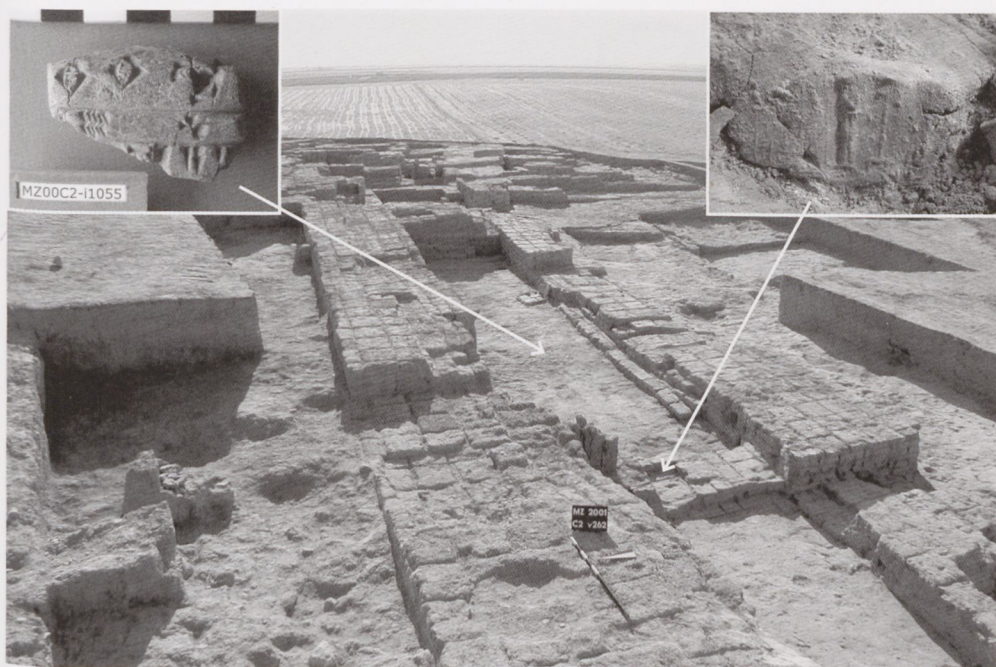


Fig. 6: Western view on the “Pusham House” of phase C 7 (Early Jezireh V period); in room BH were recovered a fragment of a cuneiform tablet and impressions of the seal of Pusham.

There are several indications that this trade house had close contacts to Southern Mesopotamia (Schmidt 2005; 2012) and the seal inscriptions shows that it was an outpost of a larger trade company which had its headquarters in an un-located city, probably in the South (Volk 2004; Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2001: 121-127). The “Pusham House” reflects the appearance of a new functional component in the central upper city. It can be regarded as the household of a rich trader with inter-regional connections and a high economic power. The house occupied a large area in the city centre. Overall, this evidence suggests the concentration of private economic power in the city-centre. This raises the question of whether this represents a general trend. To answer this question we will need to look at examples from other sites.

Household development at Tell Brak

Evidence of extended late third millennium private households has also been recorded at Tell Brak, most extensively in Area FS. Here, houses have been excavated in levels 2 and 1, both dating to Brak period N, which corresponds to the Ur III or Early Jezireh V period. A large residential unit, the so-called “Grey Libn Building”, is attributed to level 2. (Oates, Oates 2001: 63-71, Fig. 79). The house (Fig. 7) is accessible through an entrance corridor (11), which gave access to a courtyard (13/14). Through this courtyard a *tannur*-room (12) could be reached. The rooms to the north of the courtyard have been interpreted as a residential unit (16-19), while three large store rooms go off to the west (2-4). To the west of these there are additional workshops (29, 30, 33). Bordering the southern part of the courtyard is a pebble-lined small chamber (6), which is interpreted as a bath-room. Room 27 contained a

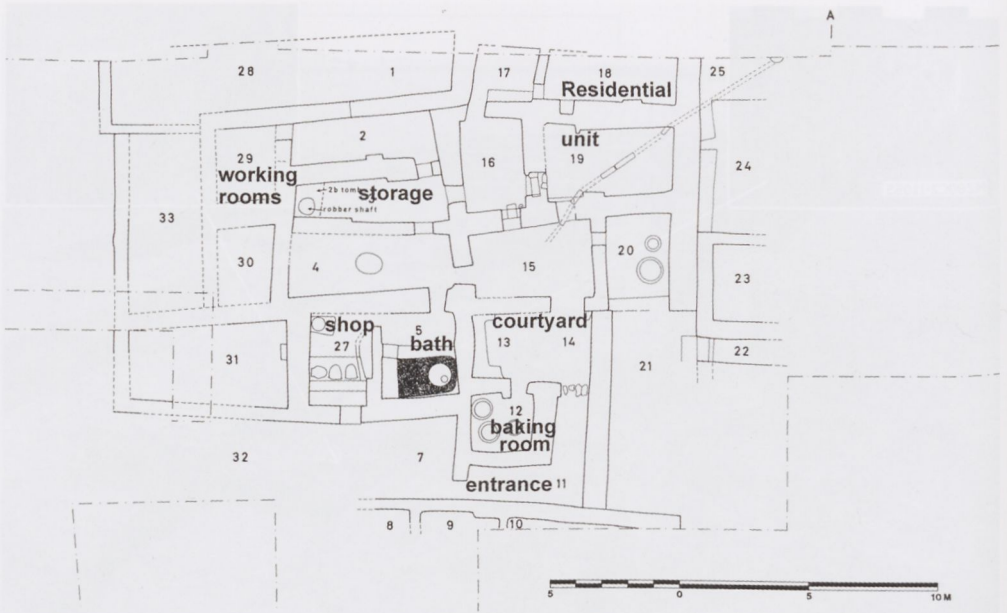


Fig. 7: Plan of the so-called “Grey Libn Building” in area FS, Level 2 (Early Jezireh IV period), at Tell Brak (source: Oates, Oates 2001: Fig. 79).

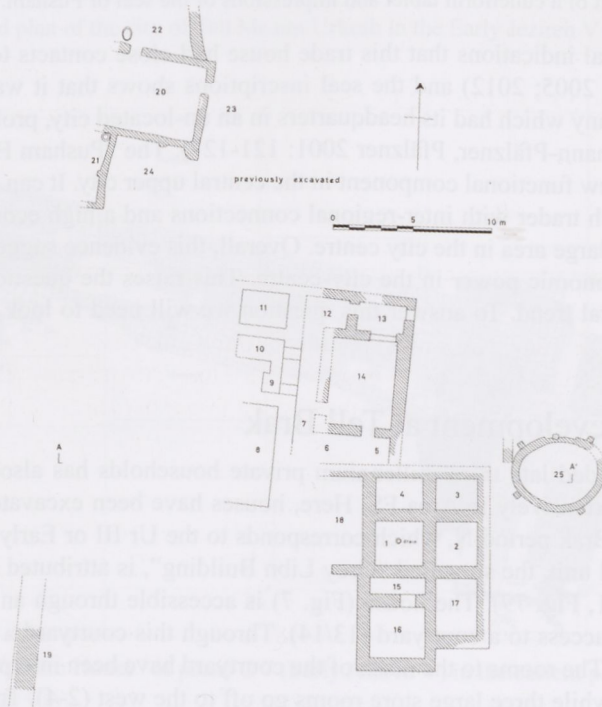


Fig. 8: Plan of the so-called “Red Libn Building” in area FS, Level 1 (Early Jezireh V period), at Tell Brak (source: Oates, Oates 2001: Fig. 89).

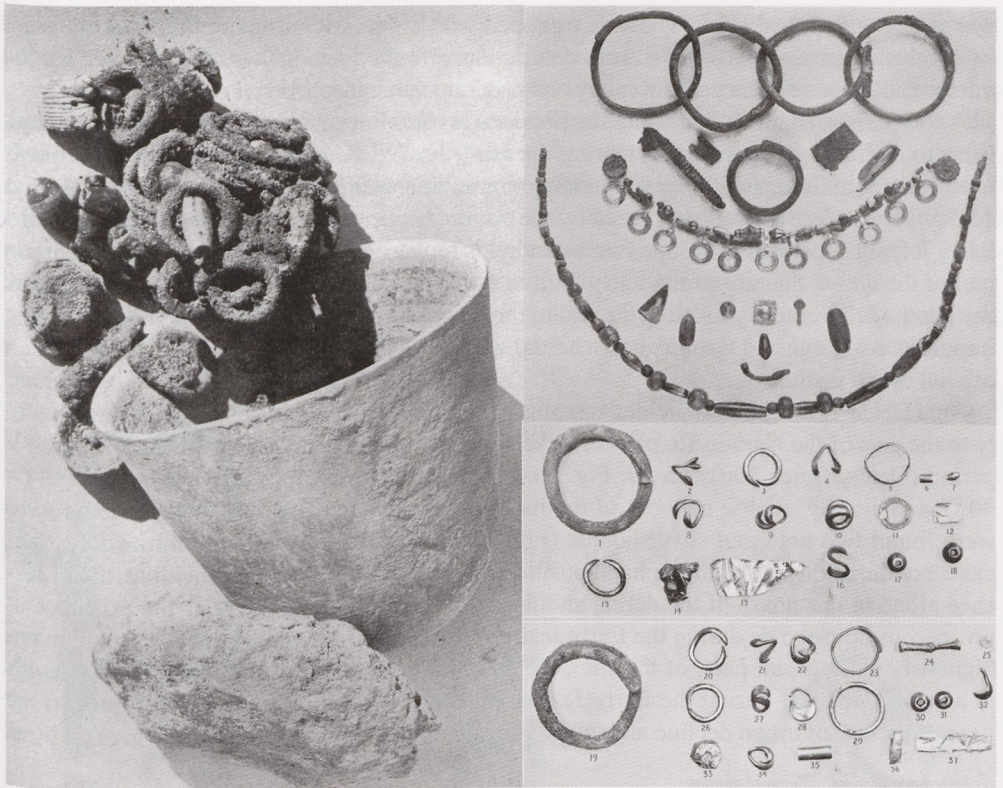


Fig. 9: Two gold and silver hoards from area CH, levels 1 and 2 (Early Jezireh V period) at Tell Brak (source: Mallowan 1947: Pl. 34-36).

grinding installation. It also contained three horizontally installed storage jars of which the upper halves had been carefully cut away. This room has been interpreted as a shop that was accessible from the street.

In conclusion, the “Grey Libn Building” was a complex structure and an extended residence (Pfälzner 2011: 167 f). It combined both domestic and economic functions. To the north of this building further well-built houses with a domestic character were found, as well as another street (Oates, Oates 2001: 69, Fig. 79). This demonstrates that the “Grey Libn Building” was part of a densely populated and vivid domestic quarter in the Early Jezireh V period of the city of Nagar.

The succeeding phase of area FS occupation is represented by level 1. This is the very last third millennium architectural stratum in this area. Here, we find domestic architecture, as well (Oates, Oates 2001: 71-73, Fig. 89; Pfälzner 2001: 318, Pl. 39). Interestingly, though, it displays a new outline and a different plan in comparison to level 2. This indicates a shift in the urban layout towards the very end of the 3rd millennium BC. There are remains of three houses, two of them situated next to each other, and the third one at some distance to the north. To the east there is a large oval structure, presumably a granary. This might have been connected to one of the two adjoining domestic buildings, probably the southern one. This latter, the so-called “Red Libn Building”, is a large and carefully planned, as well as skilfully executed structure (Fig. 8). It has a rectangular outline and broad, solid walls. Room 1 of the “Red Libn Building”

was paved with baked bricks and was equipped with a drain. It is interpreted as a bathroom. In conclusion, especially when seen in connection with the large granary, the building can be interpreted as the residence of a wealthy and economically independent household.

A comparison of levels 2 and 1 to the previous levels of occupation at Area FS of Tell Brak leads to interesting observations. During the Early Jezireh IV period (levels 5 to 3) there existed official buildings with a religious function in this area (Oates, Oates 2001: 41-53, Fig. 42-59.). They were suddenly replaced by the above-mentioned private households during the Early Jezireh V periods. Thus, private households replace official institutions in an important part of the city at the turn of the Early Jezireh 4 to 5 period. This indicates a socio-economic shift in the urban society towards the end of the 3rd millennium BC. It is marked by a growing importance of large and wealthy households, and simultaneously, a decreasing importance of official urban institutions.

Area CH at Tell Brak also yielded remains of similar households. This area lies immediately to the east of the Naram-Sin palace. Levels 1 and 2 in this area date to the Early Jezireh V period (Oates, Oates 2001: 15-19, Fig. 14-16). They were excavated by Mallowan (1947: 70 f.) and display a dense network of rooms with domestic installations. Within these rooms were found two gold and silver hoards (Fig. 9) (Mallowan 1947, 71). Unfortunately, their exact architectural and stratigraphical position remains unclear.¹ Notwithstanding, their presence alone in this area – if the dating should prove to be correct – suggests the existence of prosperous households during the Early Jezireh V period. Although this picture is not unambiguously valid for all parts of the site², the observable prosperity of the private households in areas FS and CH during the Early Jezireh V (or Ur III) period is in stark contrast to the general picture of urban decline and, even more so, to the assumed collapse during this time.

Household development at Tell Chagar Bazar

At Tell Chagar Bazar a large late 3rd millennium domestic building (Batiment 1) (Fig. 10) has been excavated in area D (Tunca, Miftah 2007: 15-35, Pl. 2.1-2.16). The excavators date the three phases stratigraphy of the house (phases IIa-c) to the “Post-Akkadian” time, which corresponds to the periods Early Jezireh IV (late) and Early Jezireh V (Tunca 2007: 7; McMahon, Quenet 2007: 69).³ The house is of oblong form and has a rectangular outline. It contains arched doorways and its walls are 1 m wide, making it a very solid structure. The house was built over two storeys. The layout of the ground floor displays an entrance wing with four small rooms in square arrangement featuring domestic installations. This wing gave access to an exceptionally large reception room in the rear part of the house. It contained a hearth in the middle axis, which

- 1 In contrast to Mallowan, Oates and Oates (2001: 16, 32, 236) believe that the hoards may be attributable to the earlier phases of CH occupation and, in one case, even to Area ER. They argue that they are Akkadian in date, also with regard to the typology of the container of one of the hoards (supported also by G. Emberling, personal communication).
- 2 The occupation of Area TC of Tell Brak during the Post-Akkadian time (= Early Jezireh V period) is characterized by a small, unpretentious building, the so-called “Pisé Building” (see Emberling, McDonald 2003: 51-2, Fig. 55-6; G. Emberling, this volume: 65), regarded by the excavators to be a low status residential complex and not indicating a large household. Nevertheless, also this building clearly demonstrates that craft production was carried out within a private household during the Post-Akkadian period (*ibid.*). This supports the general picture of an increase in independent economic activities of private households during this time.
- 3 Quenet (2011: 28) ascribes Batiment 1, phases IIb-c to the Early Jezireh 4b-c period, and phase IIa to the Early Jezireh 4c-5 period.

the excavators believe to have been used for “communal functions”. The room measures 6 m by approx. 12 m and is unusually large for domestic architecture. The size suggests a representative purpose of the room, probably it served as a reception room for a wealthy household. This is a clear indication of the former household’s prestige. The upper story was constructed above the front unit of the house, as indicated by a partly preserved staircase leading up to it. The construction of this upper floor further supports the picture of a high labour investment in the construction process presented by this domestic complex. It is the one of the few Early Jezireh domestic buildings where a second storey can be reliably reconstructed (Pfälzner 2001: 130-134; 2011: 166). In addition, there was an un-excavated lateral wing of this residence to the west.

All these factors demonstrate the large size and the extended functions of the house. It must be seen as an elite-residence of a wealthy private household. It also intended to convey the exalted prestige of this household.

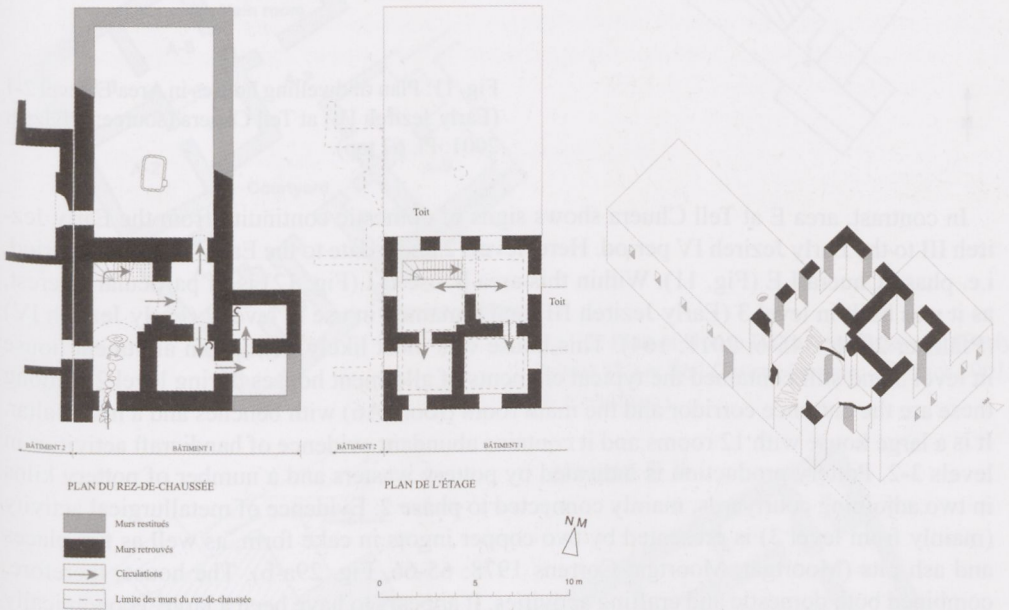


Fig. 10: Plan of Batiment 1 at Tell Chagar Bazar, Area D, stratum B4, Early Jezireh IV b/c to V period (source: Tunca, Miftah 2007: Pl. 2.15-2.16).

Household development at Tell Chuera

Early Jezireh IV private houses have also been recorded at Tell Chuera, although to a very limited extent. Tell Chuera is the site with the clearest evidence of allotment houses in the Early Jezireh III period (Pfälzner 2001: 325-348; 2011: 152-154). They were erected on plots with standardized dimensions, which must have been distributed by a central urban institution (Pfälzner 2001: 395-399; 2002). Thus, they indicate a clear process of town-planning and centralised urbanisation. However, even at Tell Chuera, a site most extensively structured by allotment houses during the Early Jezireh III period, this type of houses falls out of use in the Early Jezireh IV period. A clear pattern of complete abandonment at the end of the Early Jezireh III period is apparent in the living quarters of areas H and K (Pfälzner 2001: 325-345; 2011: 153).

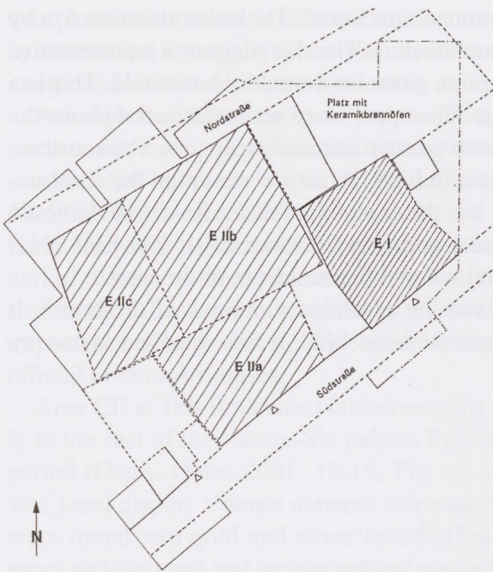


Fig. 11: Plan of dwelling houses in Area E, level 2-1 (Early Jezireh IV) at Tell Chuera (source: Pfälzner 2001: Pl. 67 top).

In contrast, area E at Tell Chuera shows signs of domestic continuity from the Early Jezireh III to the Early Jezireh IV period. Here, levels 2 and 1 date to the Early Jezireh IV period, i.e. phase Chuera I E (Fig. 11). Within this area house E I (Fig. 12) is of particular interest, as it was built in level 3 (Early Jezireh III) and remained in use in level 2 (Early Jezireh IV) (Pfälzner 2001: 345-6; 2011: 164). This house was most likely built as an allotment house in level 3 and still contained the typical elements of allotment houses during level 2. Among these are the entrance corridor and the main room (room A6) with benches and a house altar. It is a large house with 12 rooms and it contains abundant evidence of handicraft activities in levels 3-2. Pottery production is indicated by pottery wasters and a number of pottery kilns in two adjoining courtyards, mainly connected to phase 2. Evidence of metallurgical activity (mainly from level 3) is presented by two copper ingots in cake form, as well as fire places and ash pits (Moortgat, Moortgat-Correns 1978: 65-66, Fig. 29a-b). The house, therefore, combined both domestic and crafting activities. It appears to have been a large, economically active and prosperous household during the Early Jezireh III and IV period. It is interesting to observe that the only recorded surviving household at Tell Chuera in a period of general abandonment during the Early Jezireh IV period was an economically wealthy household.

In the succeeding level 1, the latest in the domestic areas of Tell Chuera, dating to the Early Jezireh IV period, “*Steinbau V*” (House E II) was erected (Moortgat, Moortgat-Correns 1975: 40-53, Plan IV; 1978: 55-70; Pfälzner 2001: 346-7; Pl. 66, 68; 2011: 165). It is a very extended building complex (Fig. 13), which Orthmann (1990: 27) classified as a “palace”. However, this author (Pfälzner 2001: 347) interprets the building as an elite-residence. It includes a representative main room of very considerable size, measuring 11 m x 6 m. Interestingly, this reception room has roughly the same size than that of the above-mentioned elite-residence at Tell Chager Bazar. In House E II at Tell Chuera the wall of the main room facing the courtyard is decorated by buttresses. The building also has massive stone foundations. Thus, it was carefully constructed and solidly built. At the same time, the outer shape of the house is strikingly irregular. This is a result of combining three independent allotment houses

(houses E IIa, IIb and IIc) of levels 3-2, which occupied this area during the Early Jezireh III to IV period (Pfälzner 2001: 347, Pl. 67a). These three single houses and their respective plots were incorporated into one large building. “*Steinbau V*”, therefore, is a good example of the disappearance of the earlier allotment houses – which formerly must have been distributed by a central urban institution – and their replacement by large house complexes during the Early Jezireh IV period. In this case, the plots of three allotment houses were combined to establish one new building. In conclusion, as at the previous sites, we can see at Tell Chuera the progressive appearance of large wealthy households within the city, at the same time as the influence of the controlling central urban institutions decreases.

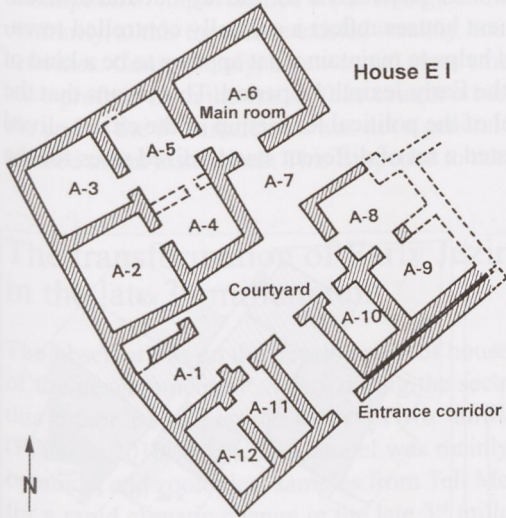


Fig. 12: Plan of House E I in Area E, level 2 (Early Jezireh IV) at Tell Chuera (source: Pfälzner 2001: Pl. 67 bottom).

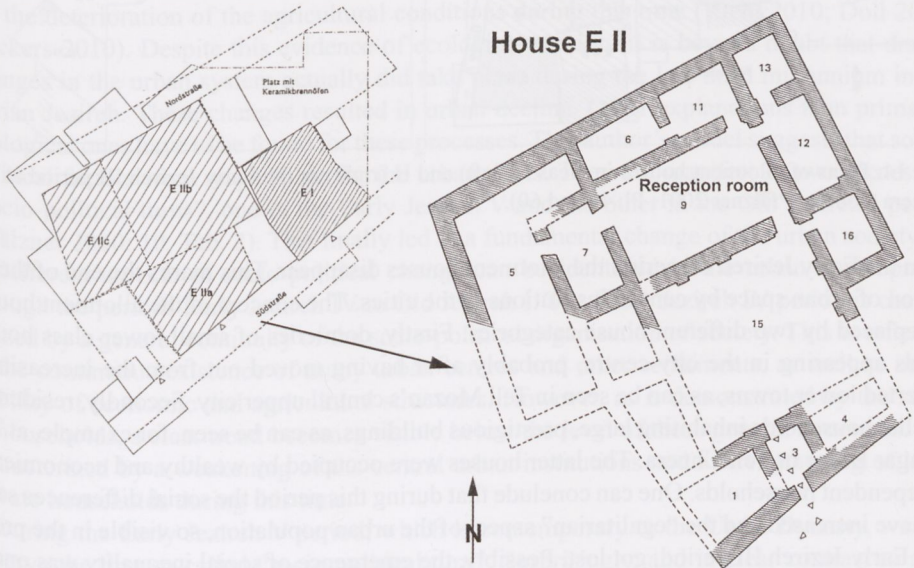


Fig. 13: Plan of House E II in Area E, level 1 (Early Jezireh IV) at Tell Chuera (source: Pfälzner 2001: Pl. 67 top and 68).

The dynamics of households and the urban crisis

In summary, all the four mentioned sites show that there was a clear change in house types and households, which took place in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. This change can be observed in two successive steps, taking place at the transitions from Early Jezireh III to IV and from Early Jezireh IV to V. The development gets clear, when one highlights the typical house and household forms of each of these periods.

In the Early Jezireh III period the majority of houses belong to the allotment house type (Fig. 14). They have standardised plot sizes and standardized house forms. This hints at a strong role of central urban institutions, which were responsible for the lay-out and distribution of the allotment houses. Thus, the allotment houses reflect a centrally controlled town-planning. At the same time, this house concept helps to maintain what appears to be a kind of “egalitarian” structure of the urban society in the Early Jezireh III period. This means that the majority of urban population – below the level of the political leadership of the cities – lived in the same sort of houses, although there existed a set of different standardized sizes for the plots (Pfälzner 2001: 396-7, Fig. 120).

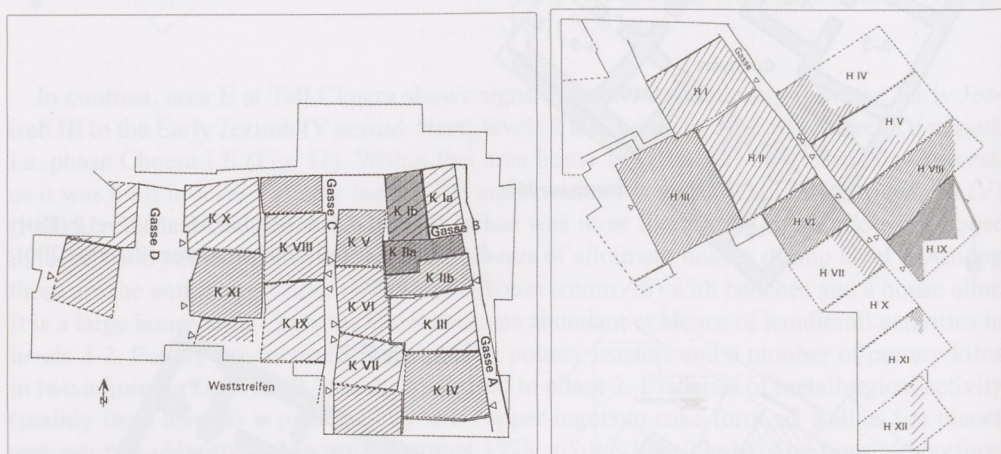


Fig. 14: Plans of allotment houses in areas K (left) and H (right) in the Early Jezireh III period at Tell Chuera (source: Pfälzner 2001: Pl. 49 and 60).

In the Early Jezireh IV period the allotment houses disappear. This marks the end of the division of urban space by central institutions in the cities. The concept of the allotment houses is replaced by two different house categories. Firstly, domiciles of small lower-class households appearing in the city-centre, probably after having moved out from the increasingly deserted lower towns, as can be seen in Tell Mozan’s central upper city. Secondly, residences of elite households inhabiting large, prestigious buildings, as can be seen, for example, at Tell Chagar Bazar or Tell Chuera. The latter houses were occupied by wealthy and economically independent households. One can conclude that during this period the social differences seem to have increased and the “egalitarian” aspect of the urban population, so visible in the previous Early Jezireh III period, got lost. Possibly, the emergence of social inequality was one of the main driving forces behind the deterioration of the urban society during the second half of the 3rd millennium BC.

In the Early Jezireh V period the small lower-class households leave the cities, as can be observed at Tell Mozan. This process probably indicates a general economical crisis. In this critical situation only large and wealthy households survived, as represented at Tell Mozan by the “Pusham House” and at Tell Brak by the “Gray Libn” and the “Red Libn Building”. It is apparent that these wealthier households were not affected by the economical crisis, or at least not to the same extent as the poorer households. One explanation for this could be that they pursued alternative forms of economic activities, which enabled them to accumulate wealth. The “Pusham House” at Tell Mozan, for example, thrived on inter-regional trade (Schmidt 2005). These large, representative houses, and the wealth they are reflective of, contradict the general assumption of impoverished urban living conditions at the end of the 3rd millennium BC. Quite contrarily, at this time there existed wealthy households, which were engaged in supra-regional activities. Consequently, a new social class emerged in the cities. It is a class, which seems to have profited from the crisis of the central urban institutions. We can conclude that the crisis at the end of the 3rd millennium was not a general crisis of the society, but a crisis of the old centralised urban institutions. This happened to the benefit of wealthy private households.

The transformation of Early Jezireh society in the late 3rd millennium

The observations on the development of households can be correlated to the general picture of the development of society during the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Previously this author has suggested a model of two “turns” during the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC (Pfälzner 2010: 8-10). This model was mainly based on the results of scientific analysis of botanical and zoological samples from Tell Mozan, which showed that there is no indication for a rapid climatic change in the late 3rd millennium BC and that there is also no evidence for the deterioration of the agricultural conditions during this time (Riehl 2010; Doll 2010; Deckers 2010). Despite this evidence of ecological stability it is beyond doubt that drastic changes in the urban system actually did take place during the late third millennium in the Syrian Jezireh. These changes resulted in urban decline. Other explanations than primarily ecological ones have to be found for these processes. This author’s model suggests that socio-political factors were responsible for the urban crisis. They are manifest in two successive “socio-political turns”, one in the Early Jezireh V and the other in the Old Jezireh I period (Pfälzner 2010: 10, Tab. 2). This finally led to a fundamental change of the urban society.

Different aspects of socio-political change can be identified in the urban development through the periods Early Jezireh IV to Old Jezireh I. The Early Jezireh IV period is characterized by a general continuity of the socio-political organisation of society. This is reflected in the continuous existence of many urban centres and other settlements, as well as in the stability of economic and agricultural structures. However, as is demonstrated by the study of households, a clear trend becomes visible below the level of these general structures. It is characterized by a weakening of the central urban institutions and a strengthening of large private households during this time.

During the Early Jezireh V period, which is contemporary to the Ur III Dynasty, we can observe the first so-called “socio-political turn”. Surprisingly, and in clear contrast to general paleoclimate data (Weiss et al, 1993; Weiss 2000b; 2012; Weiss, Bradley 2001; Ristvet, Weiss 2005; 2010; Staubwasser, Weiss 2006), the ecological situation improves in this time,

at least in the region of Urkesh. This is signified by an increase in moisture (Riehl 2010: 67-69, Tab. 7). Consequently, there was absolutely no reason for an agricultural crisis. Nonetheless, many settlements are abandoned, even though not all of them (Koliński 2007). There is no indication and no climatic reason for a general and inevitable “urban collapse”. The reasons for the attested urban decline lie in the erosion of the local socio-political systems. The urban institutions were not able to maintain the social order and equilibrium within the cities, and this lack of social and economic regulation made people leave the cities.

In the Old Jezireh I period, at the beginning of the second millennium BC, we witness a second “socio-political turn”. This is apparent in an internal re-organization of settlements and the use of new construction techniques, especially with regard to solid foundations (Pfälzner 2010: 4). Further, there is a re-organization of agricultural activities (Riehl 2010: 57-59, 66-67) and the emergence of a new political system (Porter 2012; Ristvet 2008). All of these changes took place progressively and continually. This is particularly clear from the stratigraphy at Tell Mozan, where there is no abandonment between the Early Jezireh V and the Old Jezireh I periods (Pfälzner 2012: 54 ff.).

In conclusion, a close connection between the development of houses and households and the development of urban structures during the late 3rd millennium BC could be detected. It shows that the period of crisis of Northern Mesopotamian urbanism was characterised by the emergence of large wealthy households. These took advantage of the diminishing role of central urban institutions. And they even seem to have profited from the critical social situation of the lower-class urban population. At the same time they form the bridge for the development of the cities into the Middle Bronze Age. Thus, these rich and large households ensured through their presence and economic vitality the continuous existence of many of the cities in the Syrian Jezireh between the Early and the Middle Bronze Age, throughout the two or three centuries of radical urban change.

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