

CHAPTER 12

BETWEEN THE MUŠKU AND THE ARAMAEANS  
THE EARLY HISTORY OF GUZANA/TELL HALAF

Mirko NOVÁK

Universität Bern

Institut für Archäologische Wissenschaften

Abteilung für Vorderasiatische Archäologie

Länggassstrasse 10

CH-3012 Bern

Switzerland

E-mail: novak@iaw.unibe.ch

ABSTRACT

*One of the main goals of the renewed Syro-German excavations in Tell Halaf is the reconstruction of its history during the Iron Age. According to the ceramics discovered in the earliest Iron Age levels, the predecessor settlement of the Aramaean town of Gozan/Guzana was founded by immigrants from Eastern Anatolia. Probably they were settled outside the gates of the Middle Assyrian provincial town of Aššukanni, modern Tell Fekheriye, by the Assyrian government in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. After the occupation by Aramaean tribes and its reconquering by the Assyrians the town underwent major reconstructions and changes in its layout.<sup>1</sup> Thus, several breaks can be traced in the material culture of the site, each time followed by distinguished acculturations.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2006 a Syro-German mission started new excavations at Tell Halaf in northeastern Syria, precisely 77 years after the end of the large-sized explorations of Max von Oppenheim at this site. It revealed both a prehistoric settlement with a characteristic type of painted pottery and the capital of an Aramaean principality with a previously unknown monumental art dating to the early Iron Age. The new project is conducted by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus and the Museum

<sup>1</sup> The project is co-directed by Abdel Mesih Baghdo (Damascus/Hassake), Lutz Martin (Berlin) and the present author. The prehistoric levels are investigated by Jörg Becker (Halle). I thank the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums and all the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic for their helpful support and all colleagues involved in the project for their ambitious work, which made this overview possible. Alexander Ahrens requires thank for improving the manuscript. I am indebted to Aslıhan Yener for offering the opportunity to participate at the present volume.

of Ancient Near Eastern Art in Berlin in collaboration with the Universities of Munich, Tübingen and Halle-Wittenberg.

Besides other aims, the new research has gained further information on the chronology of the Iron Age settlement and revealed new and unexpected insights into the early history of the ancient city of Guzana. Surprisingly, there is now evidence for the settlement being founded by immigrants from southeastern Anatolia, prior to the well-known state formation of the Aramaeans during the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC.

#### THE SITE

Tell Halaf is situated in Northern Mesopotamia at one of the sources of the Khabur-River, the major tributary of the Euphrates. One of the main trade routes connecting Assyria with the Northern Levant and the Mediterranean passed through the region, known in Neo-Assyrian times as the *harran šarri*, i.e. the “King’s Road” (Fig. 1, the route starting in Ḥalab and running through Ḥarrān, Gūzāna and Našibīna to Ninuwa). It is flanked by the Tur Abdin mountain range to the north and the Jebel Abdel-Aziz to the south, both running in an east-west direction. The area comprises good conditions for agriculture since it is located within the stable rain-fed zone and is additionally supplied with water by a large number of natural sources. Nowadays, Tell Halaf lies immediately south of the Syrian-Turkish border near the modern twin towns of Ra’s al-Ain (Syria) and Ceylanpınar (Turkey).

Just 2.5 km to the east lies Tell Fekheriye, ancient Waššukanni/Sikani, with which Tell Halaf formed a twin site. The regional urban centre always changed between these two sites; Pre-Pottery Neolithic levels are attested at Tell Fekheriye, Pottery Neolithic and Chalcolithic occupation at Tell Halaf. The Bronze Age is present at Tell Fekheriye again and the Iron Age, including the Hellenistic period, appears at Tell Halaf. The last shift back to Tell Fekheriye, which became the core of modern Ra’s al-Ain, took place during the Parthian period.

The archaeological site of Tell Halaf consists of a high mound, the location of the Iron Age citadel (Figs 2 and 3), and an extended lower town, enclosing the citadel to the west, south, and east. Altogether, the Iron Age settlement covers an area of approximately 75 ha. Within the fortified citadel, a number of buildings were excavated by Max von Oppenheim during his campaigns in 1911–13 and in 1929.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent were the so-called *Hilani* or “Western Palace” in the western area with the adjacent “Scorpion’s Gate”, and the “Northeastern Palace”. While the former was extensively decorated by monumental caryatid statues and carved relief slabs and is dated by inscriptions of the Aramaean ruler Kapara (Fig. 4), the latter lacked direct

<sup>2</sup> The results were published by Schmidt 1943, Langenegger *et al.* 1950; Moortgart 1955; Hrouda 1962; Cholidis and Martin 2010. A reappraisal of the former excavations is given by Orthmann 2002.



indications for a chronological date. Therefore, it was labelled as the dwelling palace of Kapara by the first excavators. Other important buildings discovered by Oppenheim on the mound were two massive mudbrick tombs north of the *Hilani* and a number of burials close to the southern citadel gate, of which two contained female statues for an ancestor cult. In the lower town, the “Cultic Room,” presumably another tomb with statues for an ancestor cult, an Assyrian temple, a couple of dwelling houses and large parts of the defensive wall were excavated.

Apart from these, Oppenheim and his team discovered large quantities of painted pottery dating to the prehistoric occupation of the site. Thus, Tell Halaf gave its name to a period of the late Pottery Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia.

#### THE RENEWED EXCAVATIONS

The goals of the joint Syro-German mission are the following: investigation of the nature and chronology of the prehistoric settlement, the chronology of the Iron Age town, the spatial organisation and functional structure of ancient Guzana, the acculturation processes of the Aramaeans at the time of their domination, and after the incorporation of the polity into the Assyrian empire, the “cultural orientation” of the Hellenistic settlement and the organisation of subsistence throughout the occupation history.

A number of excavation areas have been opened since 2006:<sup>3</sup> Sector A explored the area of the *Hilani* and the southern part of the citadel, Sector B was dedicated to the investigation of the prehistoric levels and Sector C stretched all over the eastern part of the citadel, including the “Northeastern Palace”. In the lower town the operations concentrated on the “Cultic Room” (Sector D), the “City Temple” (Sector E), the fortification wall (Sector F) and the residences south of the river Khabur in the eastern part of the lower town (Sector G).

#### THE FIRST SETTLERS: “CHAFF TEMPERED WARE PEOPLE” AND “GROOVY POTTERY PEOPLE”

Tell Halaf contains a considerably extended prehistoric settlement, which was inhabited during the entire Pottery Neolithic (i.e. “Hassuna” and “Halaf”) and the Chalcolithic (i.e. “Late Ubaid” and “Uruk”) periods. Well constructed building remains, e.g. a large house excavated in 2009 (Fig. 5), attest to the importance of the site during these periods. Most of these houses consisted of a circular room and an adjacent rectangular room. Due to the results of the recent excavations, it seems that

<sup>3</sup> On the recent excavations cf. Baghdo et al. 2009; Martin and Novák 2010.

the prehistoric site consisted of a series of smaller mounds neighbouring each other with deep depressions in between.

Neither the old nor the renewed excavations have brought to light any indications for a Bronze Age settlement at Tell Halaf, except for very few sherds. Obviously, the site was abandoned for nearby Tell Fekheriye, which at that time formed the urban centre of the area and can well be identified as the Mittani capital Waššukanni and the Middle-Assyrian provincial town Aššukanni.

Middle Assyrian domination over the Khabur triangle partly collapsed after the last campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser I in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century BC, whereas it continued uninterrupted into Neo-Assyrian times in the areas around Hassake and the lower Khabur, as indicated by the results of the excavations at Kahat (Tell Barri), Tabete (Tell Taban), Šadikanni (Tell Ajaja) and Dūr-Katlimmu (Tell ŠeikhHamad).

This “period of change” is represented by the replacement of the administrative buildings at Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Chuera (and presumably also at Tell Fekheriye) by cemeteries. At Tell Halaf, a sequence of simple domestic architectural units on the northern slope of the mound and the so-called “*Terrassenschüttung*” to the east and north of the *Hilani* represent the earliest occupation after a hiatus of almost 1000 years.

The “*Terrassenschüttung*,” a massive filling consisting of hard and sterile mud, was accumulated inside the depressions between the former prehistoric mounds to create an even surface for the new buildings. The pottery found in it and within some small house units discovered at the northern slope of the citadel mound was a wheel made, crude, and chaff tempered ware with simple forms consisting of thick sides and profiles, mainly bowls and pots (Fig. 6). Besides that, a few sherds of the hand-made “Groovy Pottery”, known from sites along the Upper Euphrates<sup>4</sup>, were discovered (Fig. 7). K. Bartl<sup>5</sup> has drawn attention to the fact that Oppenheim’s excavations had already revealed examples of this pottery, which was attributed to the prehistoric levels by mistake. Only few parallels of these wares were discovered in the Khabur region so far. This could be explained by the fact that most of the other sites like Tell Barri, Tell Taban, Tell Ajaja and Tell ŠeikhHamad were never lost to Assyrian control (and culture respectively). Some sherds of the “Groovy Pottery” found at Kahat (Barri Phase 2)<sup>6</sup> can be dated to the period immediately after the reign of Aššur-bēl-kala (1073–56 BC).

The historical background of the appearance of the “Groovy Pottery” is unclear. However, it seems most unlikely that this pottery can be seen as trade good or even as container of organic transportation good. It is obviously a ceramic made for cooking,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Müller 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Bartl 1989.

<sup>6</sup> d’Agostino 2009.



eating and drinking. Since it is far from being a luxury ware, it is most probably really the indication for people, who brought their ceramic from other regions to Upper Mesopotamia during their migration. One possibility is a connection with groups coming from the Upper Euphrates region, which are mentioned by Tiglath-Pileser I as *Mušku* and *Kašku*, former subjects of the, at that time collapsed Hittite Empire (Fig. 8).<sup>7</sup> It is not unlikely that they were re-settled close to the still existing city of Aššukanni after their defeat. Thus, the new village was founded on a ruined prehistoric mound and became the core of the future site of Guzana.

#### FROM ASSIMILATION TO REFOUNDATION: THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARAMAEANS

Along with the growth of the village, an assimilation of Assyrian culture took place. The area in the northwest of the mound, now flattened by the artificial filling of the depressions between the peaks, became a burial ground. Several mudbrick cist graves were built, not unlike the late Middle Assyrian tombs known from Tell Fekheriye, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. Four similar graves were excavated in 2007–2009, all situated north and northeast of the later *Hilani*-Palace. The best preserved of these contained the skeleton of a 15 year old girl and a considerable number of grave goods, like textiles, a necklace with a large number of beads, a scarab and several iron rings (Fig. 9). The pottery vessels, which were deposited close to the head of the deceased, are reminiscent of the pottery from the late Middle Assyrian layers and tombs from Tell Fekheriye. Nevertheless, they are thick and chaff-tempered, still in the tradition of the local ware. Max von Oppenheim had discovered two monumental mud brick tombs right to the north-east of the *Hilani* with an uncertain stratigraphic relation to Kapara's building.<sup>8</sup> One of them was not plundered and found intact; it contained elite grave goods, e.g. several appliqués made of gold and a number of ivory carvings. It now seems probable that both tombs belonged to the same cemetery, just like the cist graves recently discovered, and thus predate Kapara.

The architecture of the tombs and cist graves, as well as the objects, clearly show that the assimilation of Middle Assyrian culture by the local population had already reached a high degree at that time. Furthermore, the luxury grave goods, consisting of precious materials like gold, iron, and ivory, indicate the existence of a new local elite, now competing with the inhabitants of Aššukanni.

Already during the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC Aramaean tribes emerged in the areas of Upper Mesopotamia and beyond. Tiglath-Pileser I had to defend the Assyrian empire against

<sup>7</sup> Tiglath-Pileser I mentions in his inscriptions that 20.000 people from *Mušku* had attacked the province of *Katmuhu*. 4000 *Kašku* and *Urumu*, both former subjects to the Hittite king occupied the cities of *Shupria*. The *Mušku* came from *Alšu*, an area along the Upper Euphrates, from which the "Groovy Pottery" probably derived. Cf. Baghdo *et al.* 2009, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Orthmann 2002, pp. 47–50.

these raiding tribes, mostly on the banks of the Euphrates and in the Syrian steppe. His son Aššur-bēl-kala had to face the aggressors even along the Upper Khabur. In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Aramaic tribes founded a number of principalities on the grounds of the former Middle Assyrian Empire (Fig. 10). The most prominent were those of the Temanides in Nasibina, Gidara and to the west of the Kaššiyari mountains (i.e. the Tur Abdin mountain range), as well as Bit-Zammani along the Upper Tigris and Palê/Bit-Bakhiani at the sources of the Khabur.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest rulers known from Palê are Hadianu and his son Kapara.<sup>10</sup> Since the former is only known from the written sources of the latter, it can be doubted if he ever ruled in a residential city; perhaps he was still just the chief of a nomadic tribe. Kapara claimed in his inscriptions that he had “done what his father and grandfather never did,” probably the act of building a palace in an urban capital. His principality is named Palê in his inscription, the later designation of the principality, Bit-Bakhiani, does not appear yet. Obviously, Bakhiani was a successor of Kapara, who was not a direct precedent and the founder of a new dynasty. The capital of his kingdom was named Gozan/Guzana, the ancient name of Tell Halaf.

After a period of weakness and reconsolidation, Assyria re-started its expansion to the west in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. Adad-nerari II collected the tribute of the Aramaic kingdoms of the Khabur and Balikh. Later, he seized Nasibina and Gidara and re-founded Huzirina near Harran. When he appeared at Guzana, its ruler Abisalamu was wise enough to pay tribute and subordinate himself to Assyria. Nevertheless, he did not open his capital city for the Assyrians, but met the Assyrian king in Sikani, former Aššukanni, a city with an Assyrian history.

In the two generations to follow, Bit-Bakhiani remained loyal to Assyria until the replacement of the local dynasts by Assyrian governors.

#### THE ARAMAIC CITY OF GUZANA

It was probably Kapara who chose Tell Halaf as the capital of his Aramaic kingdom. No inscriptions of any of his predecessors, e.g. his father Hadianu mentioned above, were discovered so far.

The layout of the town was changed dramatically. The former burial ground in the northwest of the mound was abandoned, in some cases the architecture of the mud brick cists tombs was heavily damaged by the new structures. The area became the building ground for a representative palace in the western Syrian “*Hilani* style,” decorated with huge caryatide statues of the main deities at its entrance and a large number of relief slabs along the south and north façades. Connected to the palace, the so-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sader 1987; Lipinski 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dornauer in Cholidis and Martin 2010.



called "Scorpion's Gate" gave access to the inner part of the citadel. It also contained rich and monumental decorations.

The whole mound was transformed into a fortified citadel, accessible only from the south via a gate. An inner part of the citadel was separated from an outer one by another defensive wall. The "Scorpion's Gate" was part of this inner wall. Presumably the fortified Lower Town was also founded in this period.

Since the former cemetery was abandoned for the *Hilani* palace, a new burial ground had to be established. The area immediately south of the citadel's fortification and east of the outer citadel gate was chosen as the burial place of the elites. Oppenheim discovered a number of chapel-like buildings, each consisting of one or two rooms. Two of them contained monumental statues, depicting women sitting and holding cups in their right hands (Fig. 11). This specific kind of statue was dedicated and linked to the ancestor cult and already had a long tradition in Syria at that time, similar to Middle Bronze Age statues from Qatna and Ebla clearly indicate. Below one of the statues, an urn was discovered containing the cremated bones of the deceased and some luxury grave goods. It is of high interest that the burial customs had apparently drastically changed with the foundation of the Aramaen city; inhumation, exclusively practiced in the early cemetery, was now replaced by cremations. The reason behind this change is still unknown, but it might be seen in the light of Neo-Hittite influence.

#### FROM VASSALS TO GOVERNORS: THE ACCESSION OF GUZANA

Early in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Guzana became a vassal to the Assyrians and remained that for at least two generations. Bit-Bakhiani is only rarely mentioned by Assurnasirpal II and Shalmanassar III. The site contributed troops to the Assyrian army and paid its tribute regularly. At Tell Fekheriye, a statue of a certain Hadda-yiš'i<sup>11</sup> was discovered. He is shown as a worshipper in front of the local Storm God of Sikani.<sup>12</sup> In his bilingual inscription he claims himself to be "governor" (Assyrian version) or "king" (Aramaic version) of Guzana. Although his name argues for an Aramaic origin, his father's name Šamaš-nuri is clearly Akkadian/Assyrian. Thus, it is uncertain if Hadda-yiš'i was a descendant of the local Aramaic dynasty, integrating himself into the governmental system of the Assyrian Empire, or an Assyrian official, who took the position of a local king for the sake of being better accepted by the local population. This would be similar to the function of the Middle Assyrian governor of Upper Mesopotamia as "King of Hanigalbat." An identification of his father with the Assyrian eponym of the year 866 would be in favour with the latter solution. If so, Guzana was already

<sup>11</sup> Abu Assaf *et al.* 1982.

<sup>12</sup> On the Storm God of Sikani and Guzana *cf.* Kessler and Müller-Kessler 1995.

completely incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system during the reign of Shalmanesser III, the period to which the statue should thus date.

Guzana became one of the most important provincial towns of the Assyrian Empire. Its governor had the right to be limmu eponym in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> year of each Assyrian king. Probably Šamaš-nuri was first eponym, who owed this honour to his position as governor of Guzana. The activities of his successor Mannu-ki-Assur, eponym of the year 793, are well attested by his archive, discovered by Max von Oppenheim in the southern part of his palace.

Only two events disturbed the peaceful history of Guzana as provincial town and seat of a regional governor. In 808 BC, Adad-nerari III undertook a campaign against the city. Due to the lack of any further information, the reason for that military act remains completely obscure. In 761–758 Guzana participated, together with Arrapha and Kalhu, in a revolt against the eunuch Šamši-ilu, the true ruler of the empire at that time.<sup>13</sup> The city was besieged for two years and then finally captured. After that, it remained the seat of a governor until the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 609 BC. Even afterwards the town was of some importance until it was abandoned in the Parthian period.

#### A PROVINCIAL TOWN: GUZANA IN THE ASSYRIAN PERIOD

The architectural layout of the city of Guzana was once again completely changed during the Assyrian period. Although the fortification walls of the Lower Town and the citadel and some major buildings like the *Hilani*-Palace were kept in use, the inner structure of the citadel was again modified. Huge and high mudbrick terraces were built in the south and east of the citadel, both incorporating and overbuilding the fortification wall and stretching out of the former limit of the citadel into the area of the Lower Town.

The southern mud brick terrace became the substructure of the residences of the elite, which were well preserved and contained rich inventories. The cemetery of the Kapara period was thoroughly covered by this terrace, without destroying the ancestor statues.

The eastern part of the citadel was chosen to be the area of the governor's palace, erected on top of a massive mud brick terrace (Fig. 12). The building, which was founded in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, saw one major reconstruction with significant changes in its formal and functional layout. Since the archive of Mannu-ki-Assur was discovered within the debris of this first phase, the reconstruction must have occurred after 793 BC, presumably caused by severe damages during the capture of Guzana in 758 BC. The second phase of the palace was succeeded by a third phase with nearly

<sup>13</sup> Baghdo *et al.* 2009, p. 96.



the same layout. Due to the date of the inventories discovered on these floors, the occupation of the palace lasted at least until the Late Babylonian period.

The Lower Town of Guzana was densely inhabited during the Neo-Assyrian period. Apart from a temple built on an artificial platform, ordinary houses and elite residences were also excavated. The discovery of the statue of a certain Kammaki, presumably a member of one of the Aramaic elite families of Guzana, living in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC is also of interest (Fig. 13).<sup>14</sup> The style of the statue is clearly in the tradition of the other ancestor statues known from the cemetery at the citadel gate and from the so-called "Cultic Room" close to the southern border of the city. This highlights the still vivid Aramaic traditions at Guzana, also exemplified by the emergence of the Aramaic script and language even in the official administration of the town.

#### CONCLUSIONS

As this short overview aimed to demonstrate, a re-evaluation of the results of Max von Oppenheim's excavations in the light of the new research may give new insights into the early history of Iron Age Tell Halaf, the ancient city of Guzana. As opposed to the presumptions based exclusively on early research, the town does not appear to be established by Aramaeans *ex nihilo*. It seems that a small settlement was founded by immigrants coming from the north, from areas in the southeast of the collapsed Hittite empire. The Aramaeans, who gained control over the region during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, moved the administrative center from Tell Fekheriyé in favor of their new residential city Guzana. How and why this happened are still open questions, hopefully to be answered in the future by further excavations.

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<sup>14</sup> Röllig 2003.

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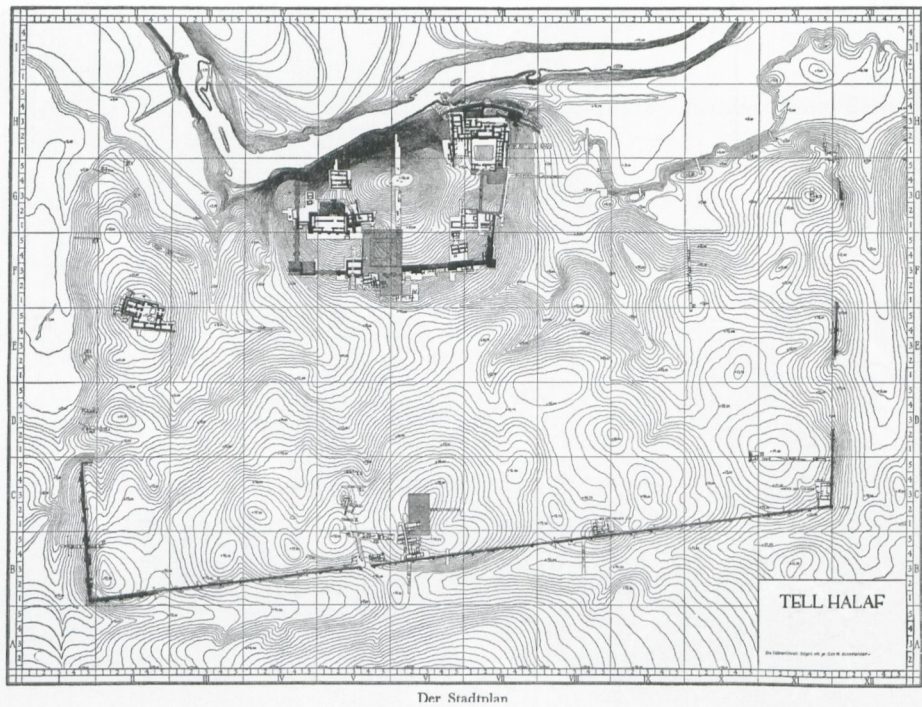


Fig. 2 Plan of the City of Guzana.

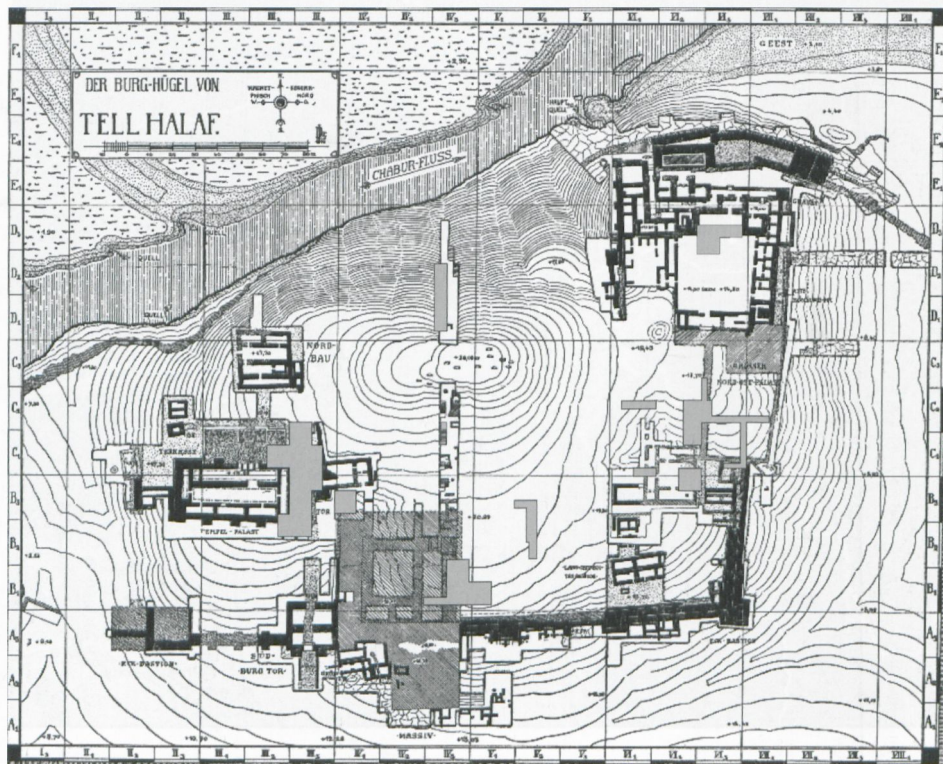


Fig. 3 Plan of the Citadel Mound of Guzana with the Iron Age Buildings excavated by Max von Oppenheim.



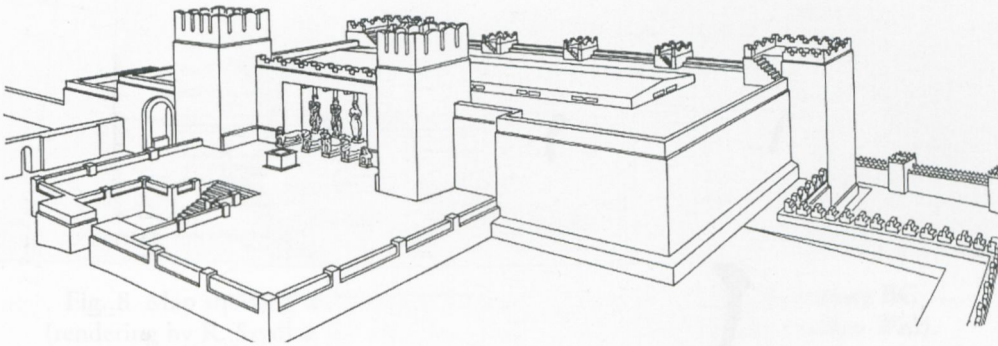


Fig. 4 Reconstruction of the *Hilani*-Palace.



Fig. 5 Building from the Halaf-Period excavated in 2009  
(Photo by G. Mirsch).

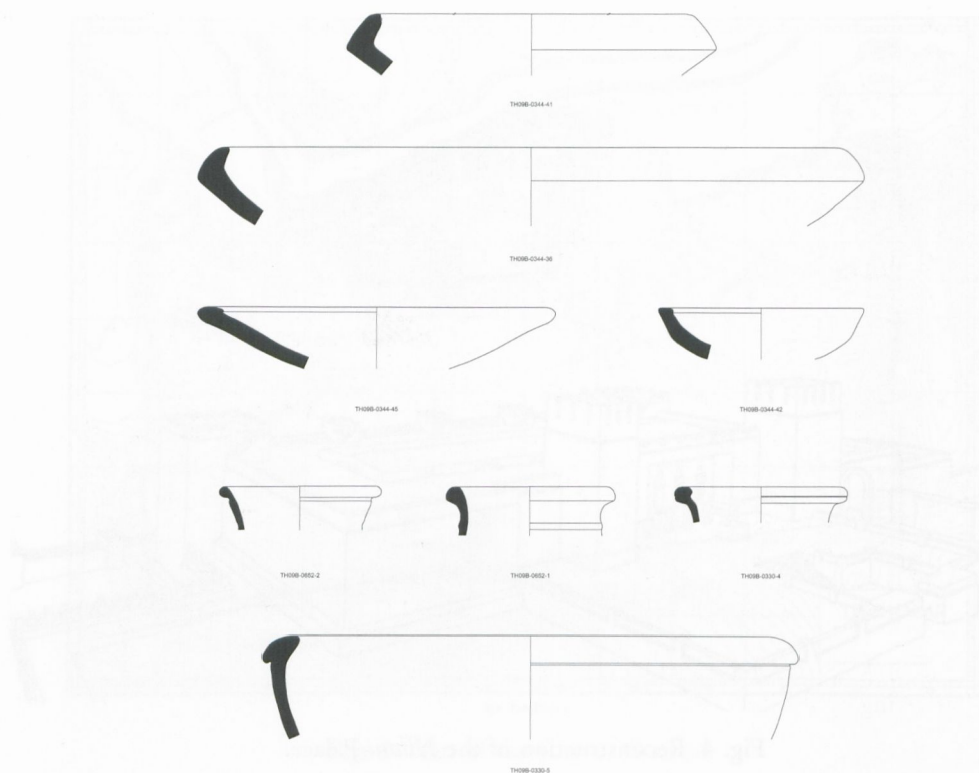


Fig. 6 Early Iron Age “Chaff-tempered Ware” from the new Excavations (drawing by Ch. Radovanov and G. Elsen-Novák).

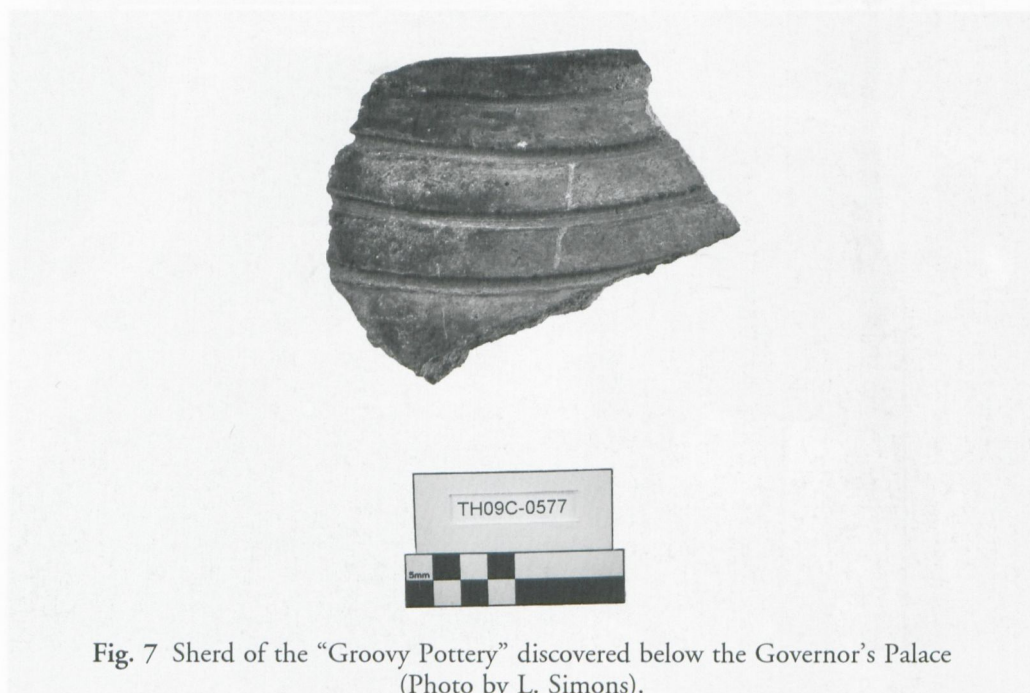


Fig. 7 Sherd of the “Groovy Pottery” discovered below the Governor’s Palace (Photo by L. Simons).



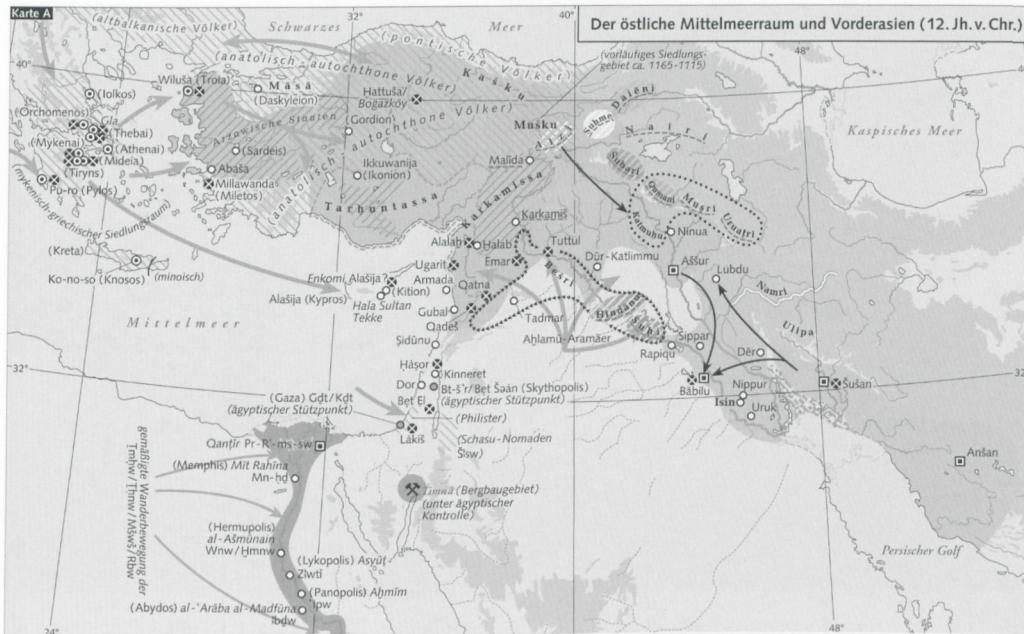


Fig. 8 Map showing the political Situation during the 12th/11th century BC (rendering by R. Szydlak for *Der Neue Pauly, Historischer Atlas der Antiken Welt*).

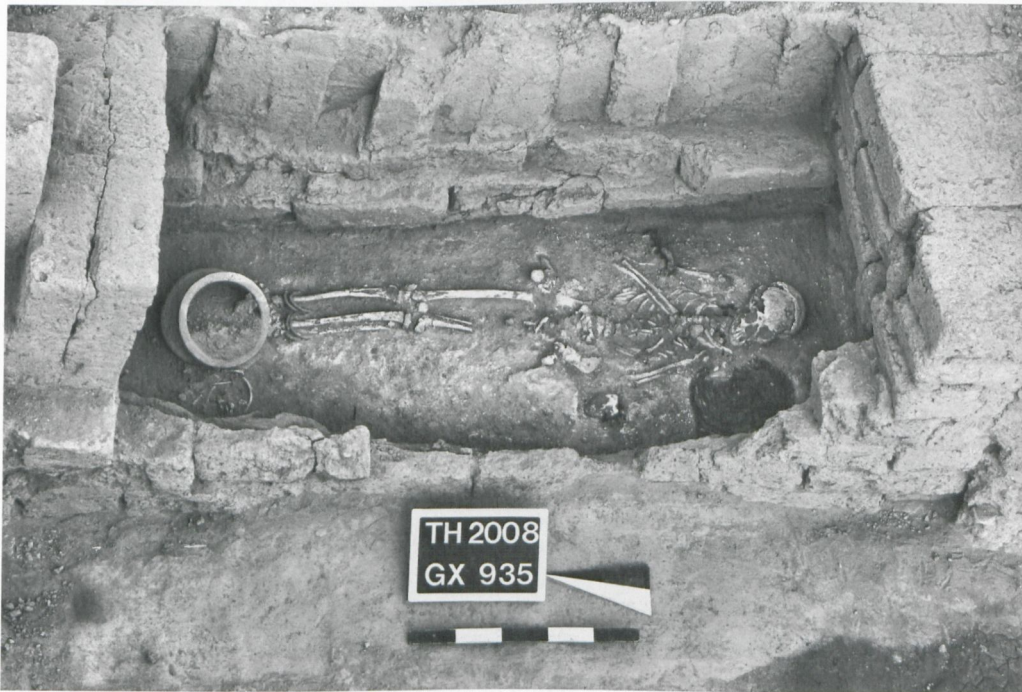


Fig. 9 Mud Brick Cist Grave discovered in 2008 (Photo by L. Simons).

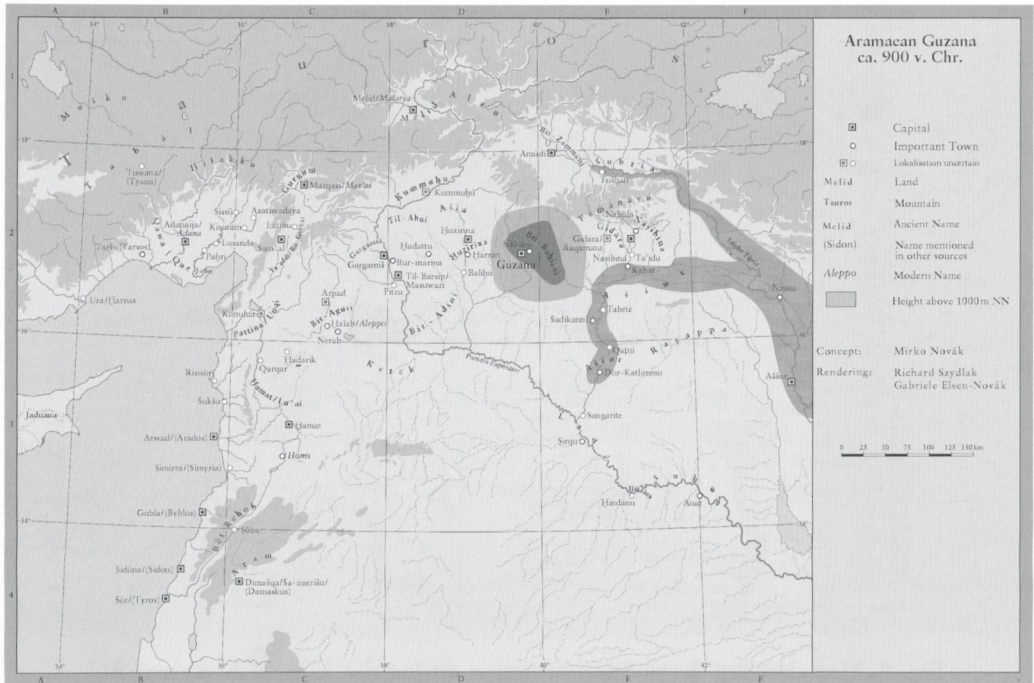


Fig. 10 Map showing the Extension of the Aramaean Principality of Palé/Bīt-Bakhiani.



Fig. 11 Ancestor's Cult Statue of an Elite Woman discovered above a Cremation Burial east of the Citadel Gate.





Fig. 12 Overview on the new Excavations of the Southern Part of the Assyrian Governor's Palace (Photo by D. Vogl).



Fig. 13 Statue of Kammaki, son of the scribe Ilu-le'i (taken from Röllig 2003, p. 432).