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Volume 1

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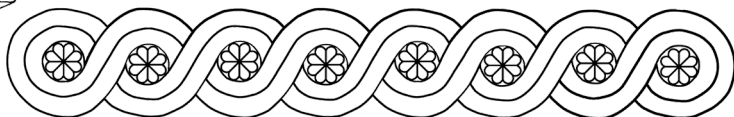
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Modeling the Past

The Ebla Region from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age: Reading Socio-Cultural Changes in Settlement Patterns and Material Culture

Agnese Vacca* and Marta D'Andrea**¹

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an integrated study of excavation and survey data kept in the Archive of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Ebla at the Sapienza University of Rome. Excavations at Ebla and other multi-period sites in its region have allowed for a periodization and a general outline of the local developmental trajectory during these periods. This may provide the chronological and conceptual frameworks to re-analyse data from past surveys in the Ebla region and incorporate them into regional narratives on the time span from the mid-3rd to the early 2nd millennium BC.

1. Introduction

For north-west inland Syria, the centuries spanning most of the 3rd and the early 2nd millennium BC relate to the formation, growth, and cyclical crisis and reorganization of urbanization, as well as to the transition from a non-Amorite to an Amorite political landscape during the shift from the Early Bronze (EB) to the Middle Bronze (MB) Ages. Excavations at Ebla and other multi-period sites in its region (e.g., Tell Afis, Tell Tuqan, and Tell Mastuma) have allowed for a periodization and local developmental trajectory during these periods to be outlined. This previous research on stratified datasets may provide the chronological and conceptual frameworks to re-analyse data from past surveys in the Ebla region.

In this paper we take the view from the integration of excavation and survey data kept in the archive of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Ebla at Sapienza University of Rome (MAIS – Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria).² We summarize below Ebla's developments from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age (§ 2), give some geographic context and briefly review past and current landscape studies on this region (§ 3), and re-analyse data from past surveys in the area (§ 4). This provides groundwork to discuss how to incorporate this data into the regional narratives drawn for the mid-3rd and the early 2nd millennium BC,

1 *University of Milan; **Sapienza University of Rome.

2 This paper was written jointly, with A. Vacca mainly responsible for Early Bronze III-IVA, and M. D'Andrea for Early Bronze IVB and Middle Bronze I. We wish to warmly thank the directors of the Ebla mission, Paolo Matthiae and Frances Pinnock, for allowing us to access this data for our study and to present the preliminary results of our research at the 12th ICAANE. This article is a preliminary summary of a larger work on landscape studies based on legacy data in the Ebla Project's Archive. The project was granted to A. Vacca in 2018 by the Shelby White and Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications; the final results will appear in a forthcoming monograph (Vacca *et al.* forthcoming). All illustrations of pottery sherds in the present article are the credit of MAIS.

and to conclude by mentioning future steps in the ongoing research on the archaeological landscape around Ebla (§ 5).

2. Tell Mardikh/Ebla: History and Archaeology

Ebla, a 56 ha *tell*-site located less than 60 km south-west of Aleppo and nowadays called Tell Mardikh, has been the subject of regional narratives, because of the sheer amount of data and the discovery of a cuneiform archive dating to the 24th century BC. From 1964 to 2010, the site was excavated by the MAIS led by Paolo Matthiae, which revealed the development of the settlement all through the Bronze and Iron Ages and beyond (Fig. 1).³

During EB III (*ca.* 2750-2550 BC) and IVA (*ca.* 2550-2300 BC), Ebla gradually developed from a proto-urban settlement into the capital of a powerful kingdom, which is documented by Palace G with the Archives. In the pre-Palace G phases, during EB III and EB IVA1 (*ca.* 2550-2450 BC), the 4 ha central acropolis was occupied by large buildings and areas for intensive storage and transformation of crops, while the occupation in the Lower Town was scattered over a total surface of *ca.* 10 ha (Mazzoni 1991; Dolce 2009; Vacca 2015; 2018; 2019; 2020a; 2020b). During the palace phase, EB IVA2 (*ca.* 2450-2300 BC), Ebla grew, becoming the largest known site in the region and probably reaching already in this period a size of 56 ha, as is suggested by the discovery of EB IVA mudbrick fortifications buried below the later ramparts.

Subsequently, during EB IVB (*ca.* 2300-2000 BC),⁴ Ebla saw cyclical episodes of abatement and reprise. The local trajectory of this period has been analysed in several recent studies (Matthiae 2007; 2020; D'Andrea 2018; 2021a; 2021b). A first phase of crisis and contraction ensued the fierce destruction of the EB IVA city, with the possibility that a large percentage of the inhabitants fled from the destroyed settlement. This was followed by a central phase of reorganization (still little characterized), and by a late phase of growth and urban regeneration according to a new building program, including temples, a palace, and possibly the beginning of the construction of the rampart.⁵ This phase of renewal of urbanization may have been interrupted by another destruction (Matthiae 2020), followed by a short phase of domestic occupation suggesting resilience in the terminal EB IVB phase (D'Andrea 2021b: 9-10, 12, 17, 20, and fig. 7). After this latter phase, the urban settlement was reconstructed in the early MB I (*ca.* 2000-1800 BC) with a layout resembling that of the late EB IVB city, with the rampart, now accomplished, the temples, and the palace. This may suggest stronger continuity between the very late EB IVB and the early MB I settlements than thought previously (Dolce 2009: 267, 275-276; D'Andrea 2021b: 9-11, 16-20).

³ For a recent overview of the discoveries, see Matthiae 2021.

⁴ Both the sequence of pre-palace G levels (Vacca 2020a: 206–208) and the Palace G destruction (Calcagnile, Quarta and D'Elia 2013) are linked to the absolute chronology thanks to a series of radiocarbon determinations. The destruction of Palace G is placed in the interval from 2367–2293 cal BCE (Calcagnile, Quarta and D'Elia 2013). Conversely, no dating is available for EB IVB and MB I contexts, thus raising uncertainties in the definition of the EB-MB transition. Therefore, for the latter period throughout this article we refer to absolute dates following the traditional Middle Chronology.

⁵ D'Andrea 2019a: 30, 23–24; 2020a: 155; 2021b: 9 and table I. Similar considerations were advanced by D. Nadali (2018: 295–297) based on a re-examination of the city-gates.

3. The Regional Surveys

Within the research activities of the MAIS, surveys in the region around Ebla (Fig. 2) were conducted in 1964 by M. Liverani (1965), and in 1971, 1972, and 1974 by A. de Maigret (1974; 1981), leading altogether to the identification of 47 sites occupied in the preclassical periods and to propose a preliminary chronological outline of the Ebla region's occupation in the Bronze and Iron Ages. In 2010, the ERC-funded Ebla *Chora* Project (ECP) at the Sapienza University of Rome launched a program of new surveys in the region (Matthiae and Marchetti 2013). Preliminary surveys were carried out in 2010 around Ebla by L. Peyronel (2015) and at Tell Mumbatah and Tell Sabkha by M. G. Micale and D. Nadali (Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel 2013). However, subsequently fieldwork activities were halted by the Syrian crisis and the project was reconverted into a remote sensing analysis (Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel 2013; Mantellini 2015).

The ECP project's remote survey focused on three main ecological zones: the western fertile limestone plains and the basaltic foothills around Ebla; the humid environment of the Matkh depression; and the steppe area to the east up to the Jebel el-Hass and Jebel Shbeyt, which marks the Khanaser corridor leading to the Jabbul Lake. Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel (2013: 186, table 8.7) identified a total number of 85 sites in this region, 37 of which were occupied in the Early Bronze Age. They suggested that of the 10 sites in the limestone and basaltic plateau one was occupied only in EB IVA, four only in EB IVB and five in both periods; that in the Matkh region EB IVB and MB I were the most densely settled phases; and that in the steppe fringes only five EB IV sites could be identified. Among the latter sites, they considered Tell Sabkha and Tell Mumbatah as major settlements in EB IVA, marking the eastern boundary of the Ebla kingdom and controlling the Khanaser corridor (Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel 2013: 171, 180). Furthermore, they suggested that these two sites were settled also in EB IVB but considered the latter evidence to be somewhat in contrast to a prevailing MB I occupation in the steppe region to the east, where Umm el-Marra is located (Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel 2013: 180-181).

In addition, two other projects carried out surveys at and around sites in the Ebla region (Mantellini 2013; Fig. 2): the survey of the Jazr Plain led since 1985 by P. Ciafardoni and S. Mazzoni (Ciafardoni 1992; Mazzoni 1999-2000; 2005) and the survey in the region around Tell Mastuma carried out by A. Tsuneki on behalf of the Ancient Orient Museum of Tokyo (Tsuneki 2009). Archaeological information published by these two projects could be integrated into the current research.

4. A Recent Re-evaluation of Regional Surveys: The Ebla Landscape Studies Project

Building off groundwork laid by ECP, the Ebla Landscape Studies Project aims to reinvestigate long-term changes in settlement patterns in the Ebla region during the Bronze and Iron Ages (see fn 2). During the 1970s surveys, more than 4000 pottery sherds from 57 sites were registered and described, out of which *ca.* 2000 sherds were also drawn. The records of regional surveys in the Ebla Project's Archive consists of journals, pottery descriptions and drawings, photographs, and topographic maps; all these data were digitized and entered in a database managed in a GIS system. For this study, we tried to re-read this record and published data from the surveys in the Jazr plain and in the region of Tell Mastuma carried out by other projects through the lens of better-defined ceramic chronologies for this area achieved during the past ten years. For this we used the regional periodization schemes –

based on the synchronization of chrono-typological developments observable in the stratified ceramic assemblages of excavated regional sites – proposed by S. Mazzoni and A. Vacca for EB III-IVA, by M. D'Andrea for EB IVB and the EB/MB transition, and by L. Nigro and L. Peyronel for MB I.⁶

4.1. *The Early Bronze III-IVA and Early Bronze IVB Phasing and Ceramic Sequences*

A fine-tuned ceramic sequence was built around the stratigraphic sequence of Ebla and few excavated sites in the region. This allowed us to discriminate between EB III and IVA diagnostics (Figs. 2-3) and to identify further sub-phases within EB IVA – EB IVA1, Initial EB IVA2 and Late EB IVA2 – the latter being the phase of the Archives. However, when moving to the analysis of unstratified survey data, the differentiation between EB IVA1 and IVA2 blurs out. This is due to the existence of several lingering types (Fig. 3: 5,9) and the impossibility to infer data on the statistical patterning of vessel types and styles that, in the case of stratified pottery assemblages, may allow for a refined chronological evaluation of ceramic phasing.

The EB IVB ceramic assemblages of the Ebla region form a very homogeneous group in terms of spatial distribution of types and styles (Mazzoni 2002: 78-79, pls. XLIV–XLV; D'Andrea 2020b: 76-80). The observation that there are several main vessel types and ware classes that lasted through multiple phases (D'Andrea 2018: 224-233; 2020b: 60-62, 65-67, 69-71; Fig. 4) may suggest that this period might have been not exceedingly long (ideally a couple of centuries). A major achievement of ceramic phasing for EB IVB⁷ was the possibility to clearly identify a group of pottery types and styles that can be associated with the period's later phases (Fig. 4).⁸ The study has also demonstrated that, while MB I harbingers can be isolated in the late EB IVB assemblages, clear MB I vessel types do not appear at Ebla in sealed EB IVB assemblages (D'Andrea 2019b: 269-270, 275-276, 279; 2020b: 78-79, figs 17:14-19, 19-20; 2021b: 11-14, figs 10-12), whereas, in the Ebla region, they seemingly do at Tell Afis (Mazzoni and Felli 2007: 208–209; Felli and Merluzzi 2008: 98-102, fig. 6). On the other hand, the chrono-typological study has shown that some types that were traditionally considered as EB IVA diagnostics lasted into EB IVB, like the corrugated goblets found also in earlier stratified EB IVB assemblages and the triple-grooved-rimmed storage jars ubiquitous at Ebla in EB IVB contexts (D'Andrea 2018: 227; 2020b: 62, 65). This makes it impossible to use sherds belonging to such classes of vessels to ascribe unstratified pottery collected from the surface at a given site to EB IVA unambiguously.⁹

6 Mazzoni 2002; Vacca 2014; 2018; 2019; 2020a; 2020b; D'Andrea 2014-2015; 2016; 2018; 2019b; 2020b; 2021b: 11–14, figs 10-12; Nigro 2002: 102-108, pls. XLVI–LI; Peyronel 2019.

7 The basic and crucial sub-phasing elaborated by Matthiae (2007: 507, 509-512, figs 25-27; 2020: 98-101, figs 5.5-5.8) was followed and expanded in D'Andrea 2014-2015; 2016; 2018; 2021a.

8 Matthiae 2007: 512 and fig. 27, the first goblet on the top left; 2020: figs. 5.7:1 and 5.8; D'Andrea 2016: fig. 3, 5: 9-19, 8: 1-10; 2019b: 268-270, figs. 1, 5: 1, 9: 2, 5, 8-11, 10: 3-6; 2020b: 65-66, figs. 15-19; 2021b: 11-13, figs. 10-11.

9 Fabric differences between the two phases, if observable, may, in the future, offer a means to distinguishing between local EB IVA and IVB corrugated goblets and triple-grooved-rimmed storage jars; unfortunately, this information is not yet available at the time of this writing, although for the corrugated goblets a difference between EB IVA and IVB fabrics based on macroscopic observation and description was suggested by M. Sala (2012: 59).

4.2. Settlement Patterns in the Ebla Region from EB III to MB I

The considerations above define the potential as well as the problems and limits of the use of ceramics to analyse survey records in our study cases. However, even with these caveats, it is possible to put forward some thoughts for a reconsideration of settlement patterns in the Ebla region in the centuries that led from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age based on the record at hand.

Our analysis showed that, during EB III (Fig. 2), the overall number of settlements was small, although low visibility of this phase due to taphonomic reasons might affect the count of sites, like the possible presence of an EB III stratum deep below later remains. EB III sites are generally of small size, ranging between 0.5 and 4 ha, from hamlets and villages to a few towns, with a few larger settlements between 5 and 10 ha in size.

During EB IVA (Fig. 3), the number of sites tripled, but the settlements were still overall small. Ebla reached 56 ha, becoming the major centre, with a few possible towns and villages and hamlets scattered in the countryside, which may suggest the emergence of a three-tier hierarchy.

Coming to EB IVB, it seems that, in our area, the later EB IVB phases are the most visible both at excavated and surveyed sites (Fig. 4). In the survey record, this might be because long-lived pottery types from unstratified contexts cannot be assigned a more defined chronological phase than a general EB IVB date, which might hinder an earlier occupation in the EB IVA period. Obviously, this impacts on our current ability to analyse collapse, resilience, and regional reorganization after the fall of the EB IVA Ebla kingdom in a deep chronological perspective.

Early MB I (Fig. 5) seems confidently attested among the excavated sites, only at Ebla, Tell Afis, and Tell Tuqan, and, possibly, Tell Mastuma, and in the surveyed region only at Tell Alloush and Tell Fakhar. Ebla kept its 56 ha size, Tell Tuqan reached a 26 ha size, and the other sites were smaller, ranging from 1 to 4 ha.

5. Preliminary Thoughts on Settlement Patterns in the Ebla Region between EB III and MB I

Regional developments from EB III to early MB I in the area considered within this study have been traditionally drawn based on the trajectory of Ebla, which seems to have been the largest site in this area all through the period and despite two destructions within little more than two centuries in the last quarter of the 3rd millennium BC (Matthiae 2014; Peyronel 2014; Pinnock 2021). But how do the survey data conform to this trajectory?

The EB III pattern of dispersed small to medium sites (Fig. 2) gave way to a generalized intensification in the number of settlements in EB IVA, when nearly all the areas with a potential for agropastoral exploitation were settled (Fig. 3; Vacca 2020a: 214-221). The EB IVA landscape appears organised in *tell*-based, nucleated communities with a few medium-size settlements and several rural villages surrounded by cultivated fields and pastureland, with Ebla stemming out as the largest urban site. The visible increase in the number of small sites can be explained because of the extensification of dry farming and the intensification of herding prompted by the formation of the Ebla state. The Ebla State Archive's texts report on the existence of thousands of toponyms referring to towns, villages, and farmsteads under the administrative control of Ebla (Biga 2013). However, the number of EB IVA sites identified on the ground (Fig. 3) is remarkably low compared to the number of settlements mentioned in the Ebla texts. This might be related to low visibility of small and flat single-phase sites

(such as farmsteads) or to the loss of archaeological deposits due to soil degradation or modern agricultural and building activities.

EB IVB is well represented in our sample (Fig. 4). The hypothesis of a large-scale migration of political and climatic refugees from north-eastern Syria into the riverine valleys of the Levant has often been advocated to explain settlement growth in this phase.¹⁰ However, this theory has never been tested through bioarchaeological studies and does not seem supported by local continuous development of material culture. In contrast, it may be worth exploring the hypothesis of a dispersal of settlements in the Ebla region during EB IVB, mirroring intra-regional movements after the destruction of Ebla at the end of EB IVA. Interestingly, the ceramic record from Tell Mumbatah and Tell Sabkha shows a strong EB IVB presence as well, with a group of late EB IVB sherds comparable to those from Ebla at both sites (Fig. 4: 1-3, 6, 9), as well as the presence of painted sherds of the Central Syrian tradition (Fig. 4: 7-8). Defining more clearly chronological developments of settlement patterns in the survey record might also allow for a better understanding of the role of sites located at the interface between different ecological zones, and possibly different territorial formations, such as Mumbatah and Sabkha, and if and how their role or function changed through EB IV. In this respect, the Ebla Landscape Studies Project will explore in greater detail recent suggestions about the role played by sites such as Tell Sabkha. In fact, this site was interpreted either as a fortress site protecting the access to the territory controlled by Ebla in EB IV (Mantellini, Micale and Peyronel 2013: 181), or as the northernmost site of a system of circular cities developed in the Central Syrian steppe as a peculiar local expression of urbanism in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC (Mouamar 2017: 189).

With the onset of the Middle Bronze Age (Fig. 5), fortifications were accomplished at Ebla, Tell Afis, and Tell Tuqan, which, in the case of Ebla and Tuqan, are of the typical 2nd millennium BC rampart type with three-pier gates. This might indicate a new phase of settlement nucleation and the establishment of a three-tier settlement hierarchy in the region. If and to what extent this might have developed from a reorganization and negotiation of political and economic power begun in the late EB IVB (D'Andrea 2019a; 2021a: 3-6) is still subject to investigation within this research. In general, at the turn between the Early and the Middle Bronze Ages, a significant change in settlement patterns is visible in the entire area encompassing northern and central Syria (Morandi Bonacossi 2014: 416-420; Schwartz 2017: 116-120). This seems to mirror a major socio-political reconfiguration, as rightly pointed out by M.-O. Rousset *et al.* (2017: 151-159), in the context of the formation and progressive crystallization of what G. M. Schwarz (2013: 498) has called the “second-generation states” of the Middle Bronze Age. The dynamics leading to sociocultural and socio-political change in the early Middle Bronze Age are still blurry compared to those of the more advanced phases of this period, and the interpretative frameworks are subject to change as more data become gradually available through increasing publications. However, it is clearly impossible to analyse developments in the Ebla region from this stage on without taking the view from a larger regional perspective that encompasses Aleppo in the north and Qatna in the south. This matter too will be one of the future steps of our integrated research on excavation and survey data in the Ebla Project's archives.

10 See, for instance, Weiss 2017; Kennedy 2016; Burke 2017.

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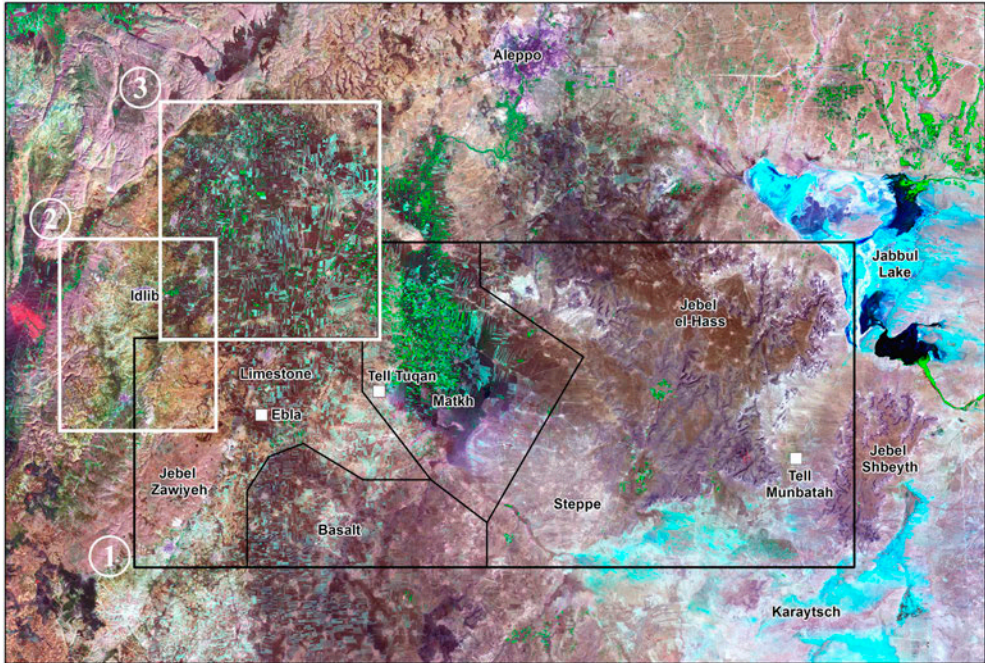


Fig. 1: Ebla *Chora* and other regional surveys around Tell Mardikh/Ebla: 1) ECP survey with the three ecozones (A–C); 2) Tell Mastuma survey; 3) Jazr-Afis survey

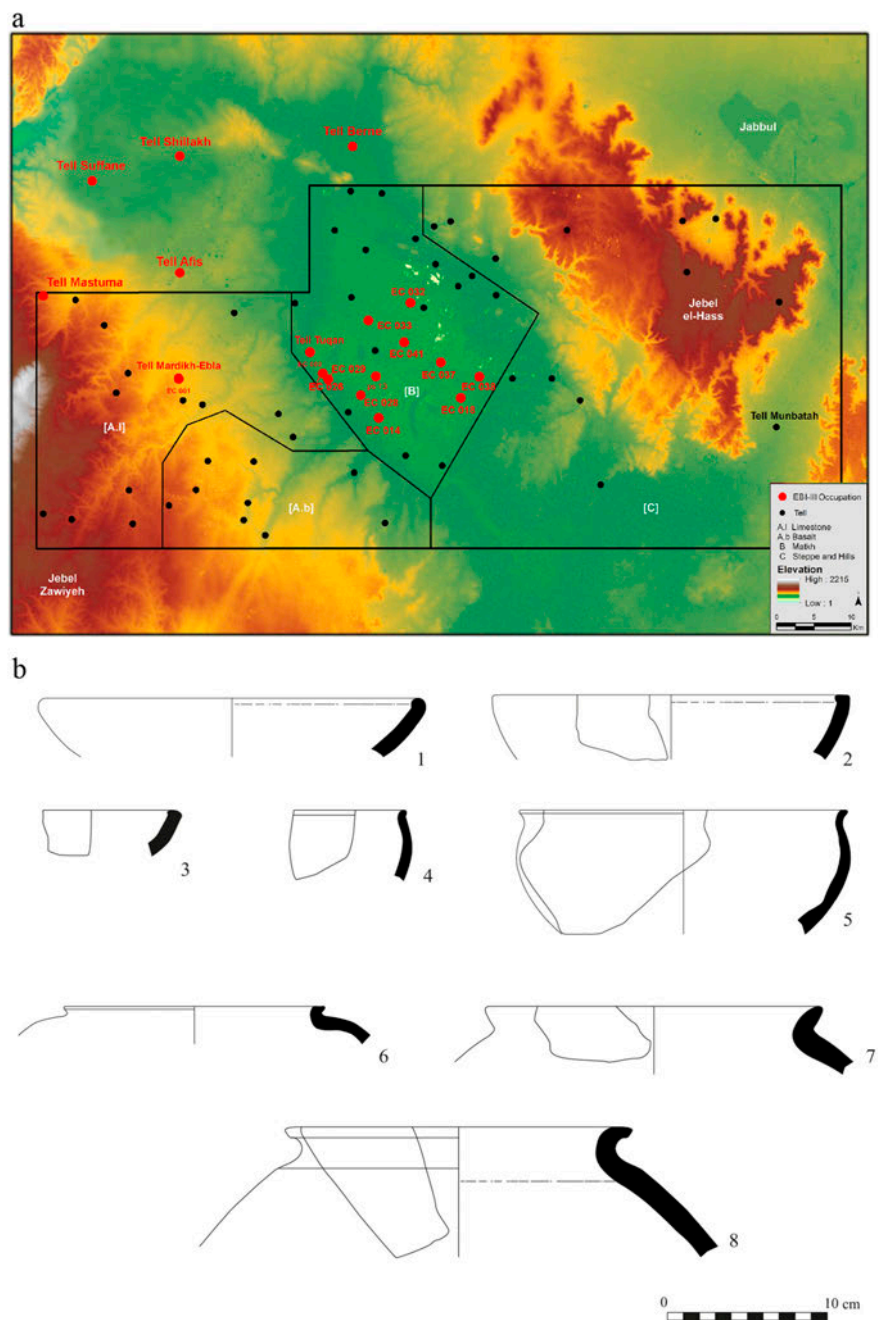


Fig. 2: EB III a) surveyed sites in the Ebla region; b) pottery types: 1. Tell Berne, Phase H (Mellaart 1981: fig. 166:945); 2. Tell Allush (EC 033), TAL.71.S.7; 3–4. Tell Debben (EC 041), TDB.72.S.24, 28, 5. Tell Allush (EC 033), TAL.71.S.41; 6. Tell Abu Mreir (EC 018), TAMR.74.S.105; 7–8. Tell Allush, (EC 033), TAL.71.S.444, 186

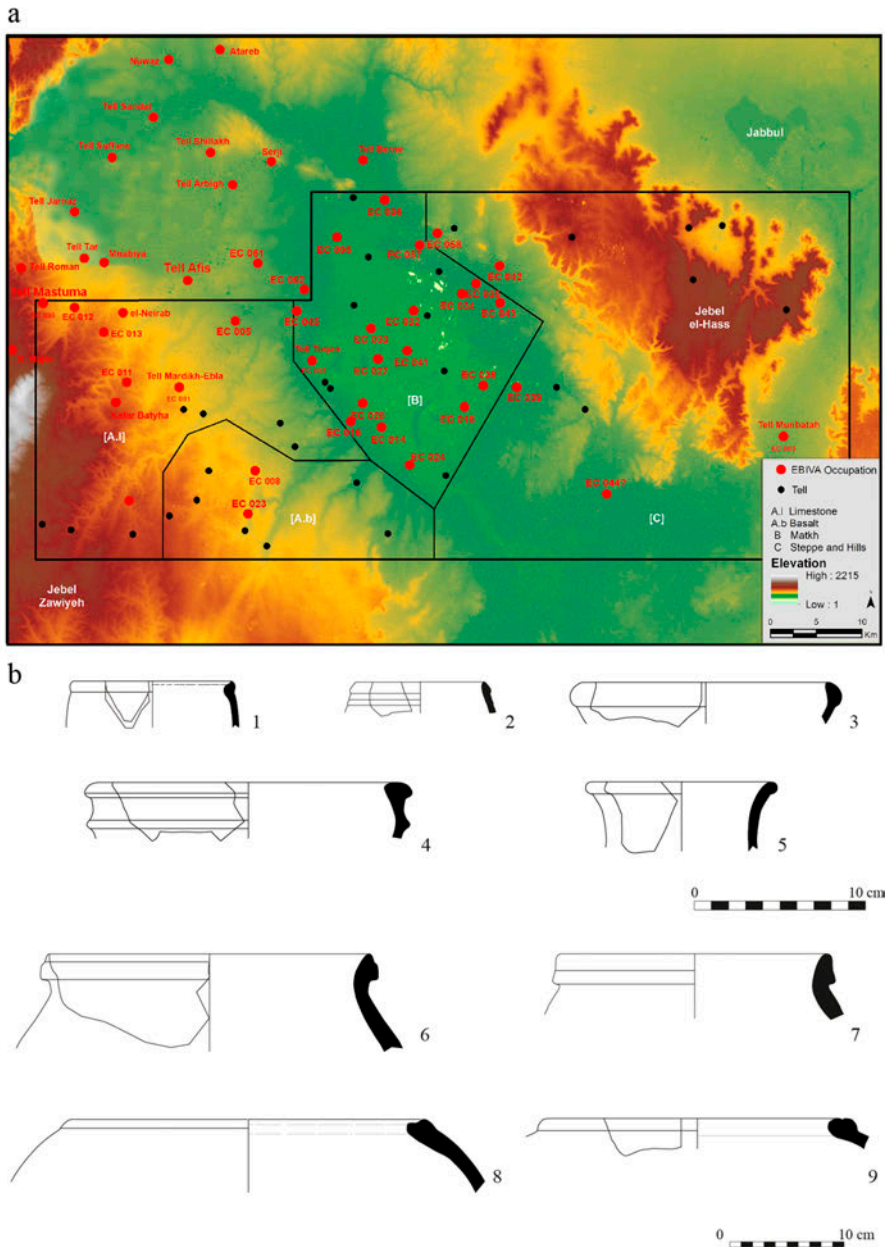
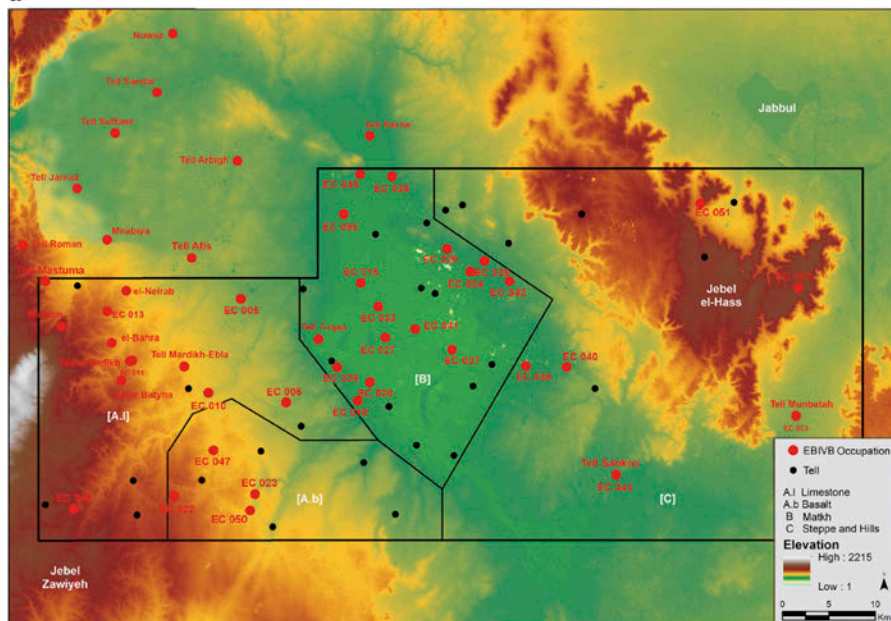


Fig. 3: a) EB IVA surveyed sites in the Ebla region; b) EB IVA1–2 pottery types from the Ebla region: 1. Tell Suffane (Mazzoni 2006: fig. 4k); 2. Tell Selmo (EC 024), TS.72.S.100; 3. Tell Fakhar (EC 027), TF.71.S.98; 4. Tell Dlamah (EC 020), TDD.72.S.35; 5. Tell Suffane (Mazzoni 2006: fig. 4: m); 6. Tell Dlamah (EC 020), TDL.71.S.117; 7. Tell Allush (EC 033), TAL.71.S.486; 8–9. Tell Atchana (EC 032), TAC.74.S.34, 5

a



b

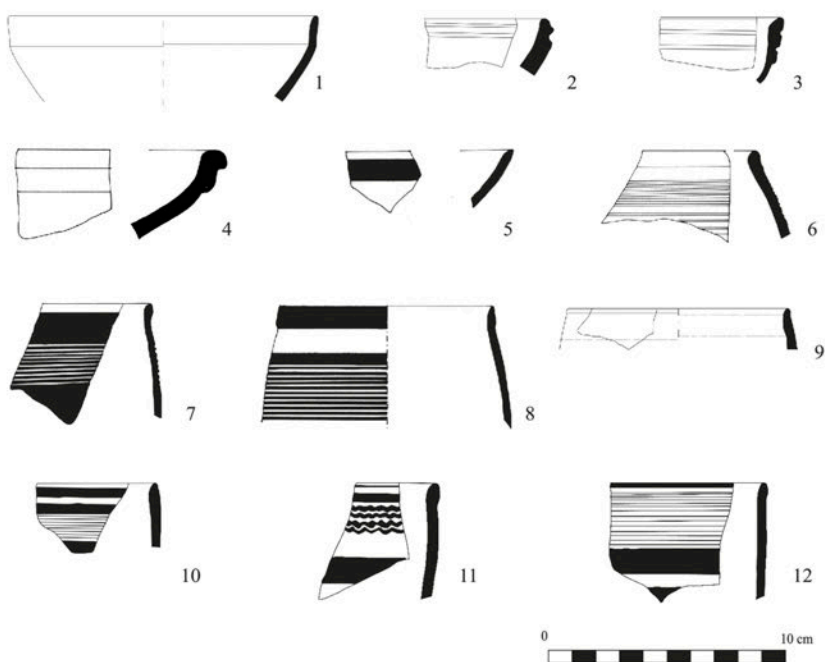


Fig. 4: a) EB IVB surveyed sites in the Ebla region; b) EB IVB pottery types from the Ebla region: 1. Tell Allush (EC 033), TAL.71.S.395; 2. Tell Kalbeh (EC 028), TK.71.S.113; 3. Tell Nabariz (EC 061), TNa.72.S.12; 4–8. Tell Mumbatah (EC 003), TMmb.10.RC.89, TTM.71.S.14, 27, 19, 23, 17; 9–12. Tell Sabkha (EC 044), TSB.73.S.144, 143, 140

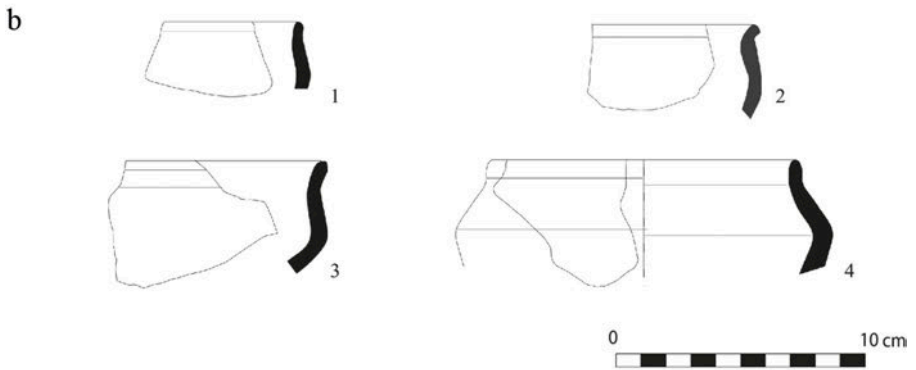
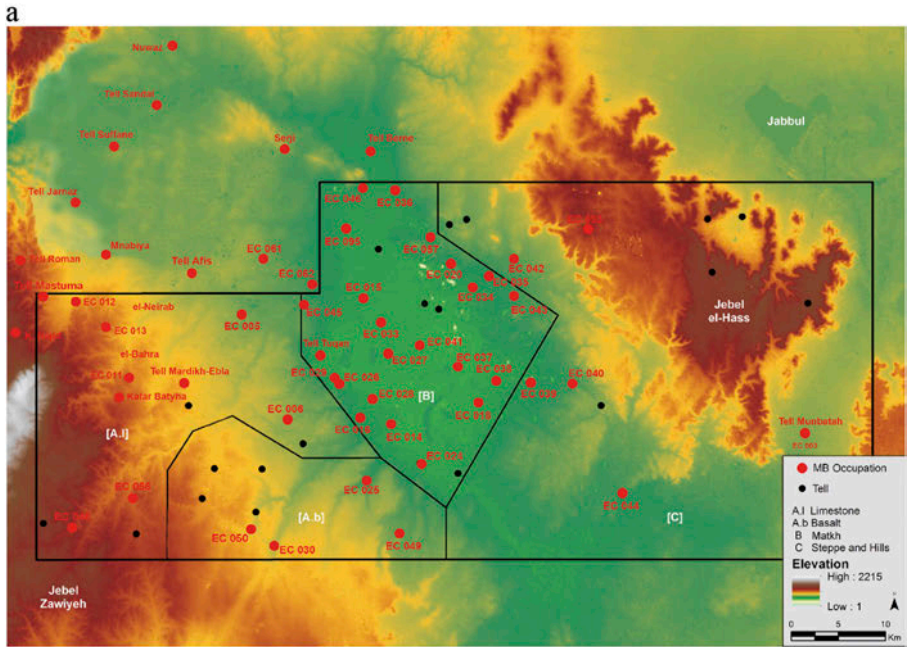


Fig. 5: a) MB I surveyed sites in the Ebla region; b) MB I pottery from the Ebla region: 1–2. Tell Allush (EC 033), TAL.71.S.292, 304; 3–4. Tell Fakhar (EC 027), TF.71.S.8, 211