

Fernand Braudel IFER Fellowships

Research Project

Syria at the Crossroad of Empires: The Politic and Economic Framework of Urban Centres in Late Bronze Age Syria

The Late Bronze Age (1600 - 1200 B.C.) in the ancient Near East is usually termed by scholars as the International Period because of the international relationships that took place among the so-called great powers (i.e. Babylonia, Assyria, Mitanni, Hittite kingdom, Egypt) and among their vassals (local domains). During this period the Syro-Palestinian area was the scene of the activities of Egypt, Mitanni, Hatti and Assyria. Several minor local kingdoms developed under the rule of the great powers. The presented project aims to explore the socio-political structures of Syrian urban centres during the 14th and 13th century B.C. in relation to their economy. This is important as it will help our understanding of a crucial moment in the ancient Near Eastern history, namely the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

The research project will mainly focus on the Middle Euphrates region and Emar, a city on the west-bank of the river (which was first under the Mitannian rule and later under the control of the Hittite Empire. This city is already mentioned in the third millennium in the texts from Ebla, but textual finds date to a period between the 14th and 12th century. Over one thousand cuneiform tablets were unearthed in a salvage campaign in the 1970s by a French team and several other finds came from illegal excavations. The main bulk of

the textual finds consists of economic and administrative texts, such as private contracts, wills, and administrative deeds related to the city temples/cult. These documents stand at the centre of the research project. Their detailed study will allow us to widen our scope and investigate comparative textual data, stemming from contemporary urban centres, such as Ekalte (Tell Mumbaqa), Baširu (Tell Bazi) and Azû (Tell Hadidi) on the Middle Euphrates, and Ugarit on the Syrian coast. The slightly earlier (15th - 14th century) documentation from Alalah and Nuzi will also be taken into consideration, in order to have a better understanding of the developing of the socio-economic frameworks in the Late Bronze Age,

The proposed project is a textual based historical study. This project will complete a former study by the writer on the economy of Emar resulted in the publications of three articles: "Community and Individuals at Emar" (*Altorientalische Forschungen* 37, 2010), "The Economy of Emar I" (*Aula Orientalis* 28, 2010) and "The Economy of Emar II" (*Aula Orientalis* 30, 2012). In these contributions I offered a preliminary analysis on the socio-economic situation of the city of Emar, which will be further verified on the basis of the outcomes of the proposed study.

The city of Emar (and perhaps the entire Middle Euphrates region) developed a system of government which was different in several aspects from the palatial-state administration system of other Syrian urban centres, such as Ugarit. According to Daniel Fleming's definition, Emar was a *limited kingship*. The king shared his power ruling over with several collective powers. Such collective powers, called in the texts the *Elders*, the *Brothers*, the *City* and a few temple authorities such as *Ninurta* are also attested across the Middle Euphrates in the nearby cities of Tell Mumbaqa and Tell Bazi. These institutions appear as active agents in private sale contracts and deeds, either in the role of witnesses or as owners of properties. However, when the Hittites took control over the city of Emar (following Mitannian rule), they brought several changes to the local administration. New Hittite officials, tools of the imperial Hittite bureaucracy, appear in the written sources, as the *Son of the King*, the *Chief of the Land* and the kings of Karkemiš (and possibly the local monarchy came to an end). These changes are also reflected in the administrative and scribal practices as unattested before scribal conventions, called by scholars Syro-Hittite, first overlapped and later replaced the older, local-based Syrian school. This is evident in the new tablet format, juridical formulary and officers witnessing documents.

The presented project wishes to advance along two parallel research avenues. One avenue studies the city of Emar and the Middle Euphrates area and the other, in a comparative perspective, investigates contemporaneous and earlier Late Bronze Age socio-economic polities in Syria.

The study of Emar and its neighbouring cities chief goal is to detect how the socio-political institutions and the political changes described above affected the local economy. The first step will be the definition of the role and the limits of action of the local institutions in regards to private and state economy. Since some of these institutions, such as the *Brothers*, only appear in certain contexts as repetitive *formulae* appended to texts, an important question is to verify whether they actually had any institutional role or whether they were only part of a formulaic scribal praxis. In order to describe the local economy and market, namely house, field and goods market, a further step to be undertaken is a systematic statistical-based analysis of prices of sale contracts. This will also allow us to understand which factors (pure economic valuable elements and socio-political influences) affected transactions. Particular attention will be dedicated to the impact that local institutions had on the economy and on the system of ownership. This synchronic approach will be paired with a study of price fluctuations over time, possible because the Emar and Middle Euphrates documentation spans over 150 years. Through such diachronic analysis one may understand the impact of the Hittite political takeover on the local economy. In addition to the analysis of prices (built on the basis of sale contracts), other economic records will be treated. Here the objective will be less quantitative and more historical. It will be asked to what extent are texts such as wills and verdicts indicative of general tendencies in the economic situation. Do they reveal conditions of economic distress or prosperity among the city population?

It is important to state that, in a broader perspective, the study of price fluctuations and economic conditions are crucial in revealing the causes that led to the collapse of the regional structure at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and eventually the regeneration of the region during the Iron Age. In the 13th century, upheavals afflicted all the ancient Near East bringing the fall of the Hittite Empire and the collapse of the system of the great powers and vassal kingdoms with their urban centres, Emar, Ugarit and other included. Within this historical condition, population moves can be detected, such as the arrival and settlement of the famous Sea People in Egypt, the Philistines in Israel and Arameans in Syria and Mesopotamia. Emar and the Middle Euphrates region were involved in these

disorders which eventually brought about to their own end (the latest written sources from Emar date in fact to the very beginning of the 12th century). One of the reasons attributed to this major collapse was a deep economic and demographic crisis. The objective of research to study the economic conditions in the Middle Euphrates region is sure to contribute to our understanding of the nature and scope of the crisis. Furthermore, a comparison of the Middle Euphrates economic trends with data from the other Syrian cities will offer a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian economy on a long term approach, studying changes over time.

Complementing the research of Emar and the Middle Euphrates centres is the study of the economic documentation of contemporary and earlier Syrian cities, namely Ugarit, Alalah and Nuzi. Sources from Ugarit, the major harbour on the Mediterranean Sea which between the 15th and 13th centuries was under the alternate influence of Mitanni, Egypt and Hatti, consist of several thousand cuneiform tablets discovered in the palace archive and in several private archives throughout the city. Eight kings are known to us from the first half of the 14th century down to the beginning of the 12th century. A very centralized monarchy was established in the city, ruling and controlling the local economy which can be defined a palace-based economy. It can be seen how the Palace directly exploited fields and in turn granted lands to new owners. The influence of the socio-political frameworks of Ugarit on the local economy and the system of ownership will be compared to Emar and the Middle Euphrates region. A diachronic study of price fluctuation and economic trends will also be made available for comparative purposes. Hundreds economic records dating to an earlier period (15th - 14th century) have been unearthed in Alalah, a city under the Mitannian influence and Nuzi a centre part of the Mitannian kingdom. The situation of Nuzi is particular relevant. There the system of ownership displays notable differences with what is from Emar. At Nuzi it can be seen how a very limited number of people acquired real estates by taking advantage of the economic distress of former owners and thus progressively enlarging their proprieties. On the contrary, at Emar there was a system of widespread small private properties, even though situations of economic distress are attested.

The economic data that this study will collect will stand at the core of a socio-historical overview of urban centres of the Late Bronze Age in Syria. The aim of the research is to understand how socio-political institutions located in different geographical and economic environments influence the local economy. On the larger perspective, this

research aims to show how on the other hand, these same institutions reacted to crisis situations that eventually led to the end of the Late Bronze Age international regional system. If any difference between the economic situation of the Middle Euphrates region and the rest of Syria stood out, this will be studied in the light of the local socio-political institutional frameworks. These can be considered, on the local perspective, among the active factors of the economy of the Syrian centres, but, on the larger perspective, they underwent the international economic situation by which they were eventually overwhelmed.

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