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## TOWARDS A UNIFIED CHRONOLOGY OF SYRIA AND PALESTINE THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Problems of archaeological periodization and stratigraphic synchronization are not merely terminological issues, especially in the case of the Middle Bronze Age in Syria and Palestine, two regions which constituted a strong cultural unity during the whole period, albeit with many regional developments. The increase of excavations in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has provided new fundamental insights for a comparative study of these regions at the beginning of the period, a task which has attracted many scholars, even though the key of the problem should apparently be sought on the Levantine coast, where the parallel cultural horizons overlapped.<sup>1</sup>

Of basic importance, in this respect, is relative periodization used by archaeologists for setting provisionally - but very often definitely - their cultural phases and strata within the regional and interregional horizon (Tab. 1).

As regards the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, a major tool was created by W.F. Albright, who proposed and brought to a undisputed success a chronological system based upon Palestine and the Levantine coast, mainly Byblos, which is still widely accepted by scholars of Southern Levant.<sup>2</sup> Although Albright's

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<sup>1</sup> On the Middle Bronze Age as a unitarian cultural phase in Syria and Palestine see Dever 1976; the state of art on Middle Bronze Age in Palestine and the Levant was summarised in: Bietak ed. 2000; Bietak ed. 2002; Bietak ed. 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Albright 1962; 1964. It is noteworthy (at perhaps at the basis of the terminological inconsistency of presently adopted periodization) that the term used by Albright for the

Middle Bronze Age periods reflected an interpretation of the history of Palestine now largely revisited, however, it proved to be resistant to the injuries of time. In the Thirties, Inner Syria was almost unknown (though Hama was giving its earliest results), and on the coast Ugarit and Byblos could only partially enlighten the archaeological periodization of the Middle Bronze Age.

After four decades, the excavations at Tell Mardikh provided Syria of an independent periodization for the Early and Middle Bronze Age.<sup>3</sup> The difference between the two systems is not trivial, and an attempt of comparing them may contribute to the common efforts towards a unified chronology for Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. The comparison, in fact, mainly involves material culture horizons, which may coincide, partly overlap, or be in a sequence. Since up to now only Egypt may provide quite reliable absolute dates, the interconnections among these horizons deserve our sound interest, as well as their relative chronology and denominations: Syria and Palestine are regions where Egyptian documents can be found associated with Mesopotamian chronological indicators in well known material culture assemblages. Moreover, since Syria and Palestine show a strong cultural unity during this age, it seems not inadequate to aspire to connect their respective archaeological periodizations.

## 2. THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE: A PREMISE: THE EARLY BRONZE IV

Problems in the archaeological periodization of Syria and Palestine in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC arise at the very beginning, since the two regions in the preceding period follow different relative chronologies and periodizations, only partially reflecting differences in their cultural and historical development.

In Northern Inner Syria, the material culture horizon characterized by the so-called “Painted Caliciform Culture”, which illustrates the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, is called Early Bronze IVB.<sup>4</sup> This was not a period

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culture characterizing the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, “MB I”, has been nowadays almost completely rejected (see below in the main text), while the denomination he proposed for the following period, “MB IIA”, has been maintained, even if it had no longer sense without the preceding “MB I”.

<sup>3</sup> See *e.g.*: Matthiae 1985: 109-111; Matthiae 1995b; Matthiae 1997; Nigro 2002a; Nigro 2002b.

<sup>4</sup> EB IVB in northern Syria is well illustrated by Hama strata J3-1 (Fugmann 1958: 72-80, figs. 93, 103), Phase J in the ‘Amuq Basin (Braidwood - Braidwood 1960: 442-446),

of crisis of the urban society like in Palestine, even though various important changes are observed both in settlement patterns and in material culture (they fall beyond the focus of this paper).<sup>5</sup> The EB IVB culture is well known in urban centres both in inland Syria at Ebla (Mardikh IIB2), Hama (J3-1),<sup>6</sup> and on the coast at Ugarit (end of Ugarit Ancien IIIA),<sup>7</sup> Tell 'Arqa (stratum XV, Phase P), Byblos.<sup>8</sup>

In Palestine, in the last decades a general consensus has been reached in calling Early Bronze IV the period spanning over the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC,<sup>9</sup> during which several different cultural traditions and groups (identified by "ceramic families") co-existed.<sup>10</sup> The accurate study of these groups point to sloping horizons, which had different chronological extension in different areas. In the Palestinian (and Transjordanian) sites with an EB IV "urban-like" occupation,<sup>11</sup> such as Tell es-Sultan, two main phases have been distinguished both in stratigraphy and in ceramic culture.<sup>12</sup> The chronological limits of Palestinian EB IV may be only tentatively indicated thanks to a restricted number of calibrated radiocarbon dates. The major destruction of EB IIIB Jericho is dated around 2350 BC and is due to an earthquake.<sup>13</sup> After this tragedy, the occupation continued for a certain time, so that the beginning of EB IV may be fixed 2300 BC. On the other hand, the end of the period cannot be precisely established.<sup>14</sup> If we compare animal remains and paleobotanic evidence of Sultan IIIc (EB III) and Sultan IIId (EB IV), a climatic deterioration seems to have occurred. For example, we found clear evidence of the presence of hippopotamus in the Jericho oasis,<sup>15</sup> an animal which needs a huge water supply, and which disappears from the Jordan Valley onwards. Anyhow, as regards the end of EB IV, stratigraphic

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Mardikh IIB2 at Ebla (Matthiae 1985: tav. 80; Matthiae - Pinnock - Scandone Matthiae eds. 1995; Mazzoni 1982: 197).

<sup>5</sup> See recent discoveries in the Homs region (al-Maqdissi); and in Qatna.

<sup>6</sup> Mazzoni 1985.

<sup>7</sup> De Contenson 1979: 858-860.

<sup>8</sup> Thalmann 2000: 1622.

<sup>9</sup> Richard 1980; Palumbo 1990; Palumbo - Peterman 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Dever 1995.

<sup>11</sup> On this interpretative issue see Finkelstein 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Such a subdivision was first suggested by E.D. Oren (1973) and K. Prag (1986), and was apparently confirmed by renewed excavations at Tell es-Sultan (Nigro 2003a).

<sup>13</sup> Marchetti - Nigro 1998: 242; Marchetti *et al.* 2000: 83.

<sup>14</sup> Dever 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Marchetti - Nigro 2000: 42-44.

observations suggest a date around 2000 BC. These chronological limits, especially the lower one, help in stressing the *aporia* of calling “MB IIA” the first two centuries of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. If we consider the cultural horizon indicated by this term, may we attribute to it such a high chronology, roughly corresponding to the XII Dynasty in Egypt? Scholars, including those supporting Middle or High chronology, admit that the highest dating for the beginning of Albright’s MB IIA is 1950 BC.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a gap exists in the classic periodization of Palestine, and we may try to fill it with the help of finds from Syria and Lebanon, two countries, which having maintained the urban way of life throughout the entire period, provide uninterrupted stratigraphic sequences. What is the relationship between Palestinian MB IIA and Syrian MB I? Do they overlap completely, or does a “Palestinian MB I”<sup>17</sup> exist earlier than MB IIA? Is this a mere terminological affair? No, if we look at the archaeological horizons highlighting material culture similarities, which have a good chance to be synonymous of chronological correspondences.

### 3. MIDDLE BRONZE I IN SYRIA AND ON THE LEVANTINE COAST

From the archaeological point of view, MB I is fairly known in inland and coastal Syria and Lebanon.

At Ebla, the first phase of the Middle Bronze Age (Mardikh IIIA) was identified by Paolo Matthiae already in the Seventies by sounding beneath the earliest layers of the Western Palace and Temple D on the Acropolis. The preliminary definition of this stratigraphic/cultural phase was then confirmed by the discovery of the Archaic Palace in the northern Lower Town.<sup>18</sup> This massive building has provided a clear structural sequence, with stratified pottery materials illustrating the very beginning of the period, as the palace was founded directly over EB IVB domestic remains. The sequence of Area P North has been integrated by data collected in the contemporary private houses of Area T (North-western Lower Town),<sup>19</sup> while the inventory of

<sup>16</sup> See Marcus in press.

<sup>17</sup> This should not be confused with the “MB I” = EB IV of certain old-fashioned archaeological literature (Kochavi 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Matthiae 1994; Matthiae 1995a: 659-681. Two re-buildings of the Palace, with the addition of a wing to the east, occurred during Middle Bronze I. The complete sequence of structures and related materials roughly spans over the first century of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

<sup>19</sup> Area T, which is located in the Lower Town North-West of Tell Mardikh (Matthiae

pottery types has been enriched by materials retrieved in numerous graves sunk in the inner slope of the western ramparts (Areas V, Z, AA) soon after their erection.<sup>20</sup>

Stratified materials at Ebla made it possible to re-examine those excavated at Hama by Harald Ingholt. A rather advanced phase of MB IA is represented by the pottery of Hama H5,<sup>21</sup> and by some vessels from Graves III and VI of the same site.<sup>22</sup>

Other contexts and related materials illustrating this early phase of Middle Bronze Age are available to the north, in the ʿAmuq,<sup>23</sup> in the Nahar Quweiq basin, in the Jabbul Plain,<sup>24</sup> further north in the region of Gaziantep, at Tilbeshar, and in the Middle Euphrates Valley, both to the north (Jerablus Takhtani)<sup>25</sup> and to the south (Tell Biʿa/Tuttul),<sup>26</sup> although within a different regional ceramic horizon. Problematic is the identification of this phase at Alalakh, though some shapes, as the bowl with high disk pedestal,<sup>27</sup> hint at a dating within MB I for stratum XII.

1993: 634-637), has provided a continuous EB-MB stratigraphic sequence. A distinct ceramic assemblage of the very beginning of the Middle Bronze was been found, comprising small jars and proto-collared bowl (Matthiae - Pinnock - Scandone Matthiae eds. 1995: 452-453, ns. 350-354).

<sup>20</sup> Baffi 2000; these graves provide a *terminus ante quem* for the erection of the MB fortification system, pointing to the very beginning of the period (Mardikh IIIA1, 2000-1950 BC).

<sup>21</sup> A reassessment of the MB I pottery materials from Hama has been recently proposed by the present writer (Nigro 2002b); basically, it has to be taken into account that when publishing Ingholt materials, E. Fugmann attributed them to “levels”, which more properly are archaeological periods (established *a posteriori* on the basis of a few finds deemed diagnostic); hence, these only approximately correspond to real stratigraphic phases. Materials attributed to Hama level H5 (MB IA) are illustrated in Fugmann 1958: fig. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Apart from Grave X, the pottery assemblages of MB Hama tombs included much more ceramic vessels than those actually published by Fugmann in the final report (Fugmann 1958: pl. X); according to the excavation records (presently in the National Museum in Copenhagen), in Grave I, which hosted several burials, 92 vases were found; Grave II yielded 90 vessels, while around 60 vases were found in Grave VI and 30 in Grave III. The ceramic inventories of these tombs show close relationships with that of the Ebla western ramparts graves.

<sup>23</sup> See above note 4.

<sup>24</sup> Schwartz *et al.* 2000: 425, fig. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Peltenburg *et al.* 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Nigro 1999: 277; Einwag 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Heinz 1992: pl. 85: 1-2.



Fig. 1 Carnelian bead with an inscription of Sesostri I from Ugarit (after *Ugaritica* IV: 216, fig. 20).

On the Levantine coast, MB I is known at Ugarit,<sup>28</sup> with two important Egyptian chronological pinpoints: an inscribed carnelian bead of Sesostri I (Fig. 1)<sup>29</sup> and the statue of the daughter of Amenemhet II, Princess Chnumet-Nefret-Hedjet, wife of Sesostri II (Fig. 2).<sup>30</sup> The contemporary cultural horizon may be exemplified by the weapons found in the votive deposit called “Poche aux Bronzes”,<sup>31</sup> buried under the floors of the Temple of Baal, belonging to the same types of those from the abovementioned graves of Hama, and of several votive offerings in Byblos, with which I will deal below.

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<sup>28</sup> Only few shapes attributed to the phase Ras Shamra II,1 = “Ugarit Moyen 1” can be confidently identified as MB I forms (Schaeffer 1949: fig. 99, ns. 27-29).

<sup>29</sup> Schaeffer 1962: 216, fig. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Schaeffer 1962: 212, fig. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Courtois 1962: 342, fig. 4.



Fig. 2 The statue of Princess Chnumet-Nefret-Hedjet, wife of Sesostri II (after *Ugaritica* IV: 212, fig. 19).



Fig. 3 Relief depicting Hathor dated to the reign of Sesostri I from Byblos (after Dunand 1950: pl. CLXXXVIII, n. 8503).

Byblos itself has in fact given a heap of materials, though of very difficult stratigraphic attribution, but clearly belonging to the Syrian MB IA horizon. The city is mentioned in a Ur III text from Drehem as seat of an “ensi”,<sup>32</sup> and has itself provided an Ur III cuneiform tablet, a syllabarius found in Building XXXIX.<sup>33</sup> At the very beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, Mentuhotep III (1995-1983 BC)<sup>34</sup> claims to have reopened the Egyptian sea-trade and Byblos is one of the more reasonable targets of these commercial activities. One of the earliest Egyptian Middle Kingdom monuments in the Levant, a relief depicting Hathor (Fig. 3) was erected in Byblos<sup>35</sup> during the

<sup>32</sup> Solberger 1959-60; Gelb 1961.

<sup>33</sup> Saghieh 1983: 131, fig. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Von Beckerath 1997: 139-142.

<sup>35</sup> Dunand 1950: 166-167, n. 8503, pl. 188 (erroneously attributed to Amenemhet III: Helck 1994).



reign of Sesostri I (1956-1911 BC). Is it possible to describe the coeval Gublite material culture? Exceptional finds, such as the so-called Montet Jar found in the Sacred Complex of Balaat Gebal,<sup>36</sup> or the votive deposits in the *Champ des Offrandes*, in the *Enceinte Sacre* and in the Temple of the Obelisks, as well as the some decades later finds from the Royal Tombs of Abi-Shemu e Apy-Shemu-Abi illustrate a large assemblage of pottery and metallic types, but cannot provide a punctual chronological indication, collecting materials over at least two centuries (among them only the earliest items are concerned for defining MB IA).

The so-called proto-collared<sup>37</sup> bowl and the carinated bowl, like the silver specimen found in the Montet Jar<sup>38</sup> (Fig. 4), elected by W.F. Albright to be the hallmark of his MB IIA, on the basis of the pottery sequence established in the main sites of Syria, characterise MB IA, i.e. the earliest phase of the new cultural period.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, the ceramic assemblage and other furnishings of the Royal Tombs,<sup>40</sup> dating from the time of Amenemhat III (1858-1808 BC) and his successor Amenemhat IV (1808-1799 BC), fit well into the Mardikh IIIA2 horizon, i.e. MB IB. They find several parallels in the Tomb of the Princess at Ebla,<sup>41</sup> as exemplified by a jug of metallic ware,<sup>42</sup> with a very distinguished profile (Fig. 5), also attested to at Tell Nebi Mend.<sup>43</sup>



Fig. 4 Carinated silver bowl found in the Montet Jar: a hallmark of the beginning of MB I in the Levant (after Montet 1929: tav. LXXI, n. 605).

<sup>36</sup> Montet 1928: 111-112; 1929, pls. LX-LXX; Tufnell - Ward 1966; Porada 1966.

<sup>37</sup> Nigro 2002a: 301, fig. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Montet 1928: 125, n. 605; 1929: tav. LXXI, 605.

<sup>39</sup> Nigro 2002a: 298-303, fig. 3; Nigro 2002b: 101-104, pl. XLVI.

<sup>40</sup> Tufnell 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Matthiae 1979: 162, note 63.

<sup>42</sup> Nigro 2003b: 356-357, fig. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Pézard 1931: tav. XLI.

Not only pottery vessels, but also the ornaments of the Ebla Princess, find many comparisons among the jewellery of the second half of the XII Dynasty known at Byblos, as it is shown by the employ of amethyst, the distinguished Egyptian semi-precious stone, extracted in the Wadi el-Hudi. Other luxury items, such as two small *unguentaria*,<sup>44</sup> which have a striking counterpart in a bronze specimen of the Montet Jar,<sup>45</sup> allow to connect Mardikh IIIA2, Syrian MB IB, with the last three Pharaohs of the XII Dynasty and the just mentioned kings of Byblos.



Fig. 5 Metallic Orange Ware jug from the Tomb of the Princess, which finds parallels at Tell Nebi Mend and in metallic prototypes attested to in the Royal Tombs of Byblos.

Another key area in the study of Middle and Late Bronze Age is the Plain of 'Akkar.<sup>46</sup> We may take into consideration, for instance, the discoveries

<sup>44</sup> Matthiae 1979: 161-162, fig. 62a-b; Matthiae - Pinnock - Scandone Matthiae 1995: 502, n. 466.

<sup>45</sup> Montet 1928: 125, n. 608; 1929, pl. LXXI, 608.

<sup>46</sup> Thalmann 2000: fig. 1.

of Tell Sianu, where Michel al-Maqdissi has found in a MB palace an Egyptian statuette of the late XII Dynasty, in association with a fenestrated axe and a cuneiform tablet.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the tablet mentions clothes from Subartu, is not surprising, as a direct route of trade was the *Truée de Homs* through the cities of Qatna and Mari. Qatna itself should provide decisive data in this respect. Recent discoveries eventually give consistency to its major political and economic role, which presumably date back from the very beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. Some sets of ceramic materials testify to the MB I at Qatna, being comparable with materials of better known stratified sites, such as Ebla and Hama: for instance, a collared bowl from Tomb I,<sup>48</sup> may be compared with similar shapes of Mardikh IIIA2.<sup>49</sup>

Moving back to the Plain of 'Akkar, the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age at Tell 'Arqa is illustrated by stratum 14 (Phase N),<sup>50</sup> with a well preserved warrior tomb, which yielded distinguished metallic jugs and carinated "Gublite" bowls of typical coastal tradition (Fig. 6).<sup>51</sup>

Recent excavations conducted by the American University of Beirut on the tell of ancient Biruta,<sup>52</sup> and by the British Museum Expedition at Sidon added new important evidence concerning the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age in Lebanon, the area where presumably this new cultural horizon first appeared. At Beirut, the excavations of the fortification system allowed to identify the earliest city-wall of the Middle Bronze Age, dating from the very beginning of the period.<sup>53</sup>

In Sidon the British Museum Expedition brought to light a cemetery with tombs, which were sunk at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age in a sand filling sealing the destroyed remains of an Early Bronze Age domestic quarter.<sup>54</sup> The funerary assemblages of such tombs show important hallmarks of this phase, which found counterparts both in inland Syria and in Palestine.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Al-Maqdissi in press.

<sup>48</sup> Mesnil du Buisson 1927b: pl. XII, n. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Nigro 2002b: 105, pl. XLVIII, 28-31.

<sup>50</sup> 'Arqa is mentioned in the Execration Texts (Helck 1971: 48, 59); Thalmann 2002: 365.

<sup>51</sup> Thalmann 2002: 366-367, fig. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Badre 2000: 35-39, figs. 1-5.

<sup>53</sup> The city-wall is made of mudbricks and has a width of 2 m ("Complex 1", W 351).

<sup>54</sup> Doumet-Serhal 2003: 9-14, phases 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Doumet-Serhal 2004.

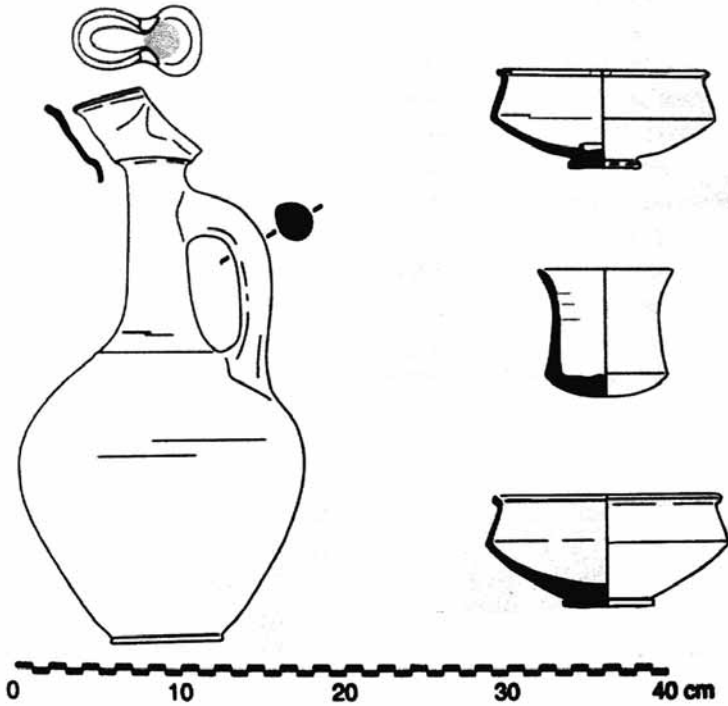


Fig. 6 The ceramic assemblage of the warrior tomb of Tell 'Arqa; note the bowls of the "Gublite" type and the jugs of northern tradition (after Thalmann 2002: fig. 4).

#### MIDDLE BRONZE I IN PALESTINE

In the light of the evidence on Syria and Lebanon mentioned so far, one may take into consideration the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age in Palestine, re-evaluating the cultural horizon called "MB IIA".<sup>56</sup> As MB IIA is virtually everywhere followed by a flourishing phase, MB IIA layers are usually concealed beneath thick strata of successive occupations. For this reason, only a few sites have provided well stratified evidence for this

<sup>56</sup> For an overall synthesis of the most prominent evidence available until 1980, see Gerstenblith 1983; after that see Cohen 2002.

horizon.

The most reliable is perhaps that obtained at Ras el-ʿAin.<sup>57</sup> A preliminary examination of these materials in comparison with the Syrian ceramic sequence shows that those retrieved in the occupational layers of “Palace II” may be ascribed to MB IB. However, the earliest ceramic materials at Ras el-ʿAin, associated with the earliest MB mudbrick city-wall, and the “pre-palace” stratum,<sup>58</sup> confirm that a cultural phase earlier than “MB IIA” did exist in Palestine. This is attested to in sites of the North, such as Tell el-Qadi,<sup>59</sup> which are fully Syrian in material culture (it is perhaps not by chance that the archaeologists working there adopted the Syrian periodization), and on the coast at Ashkelon (mentioned in the Execration Texts),<sup>60</sup> perhaps Tell el-ʿAjjul,<sup>61</sup> Tell en-Nami,<sup>62</sup> al-Kabri,<sup>63</sup> Tell el-Fukhar/Accho,<sup>64</sup> and inland at Tell ʿIfshar.<sup>65</sup> The powerful chronological paradigm of Albright did magnetize all sparse materials from tombs and small sites, and only in the light of the final publication of Ras el-ʿAin excavations, some scholars are starting to recognize this earliest horizon.<sup>66</sup> The apparent dearth of “Syrian-like MB IA” materials in Palestine may be attributed to the inability of archaeologists in distinguishing this phase, but also to a real absence or delay in the development of the local Middle Bronze Age urban culture. In any case, a “Palestinian MB I” did exist, which is not an alternative name for the EB IV, but the very initial phase of the Middle Bronze culture in that region. One can ascribe to it layers XIII B at Megiddo,<sup>67</sup> the just cited “pre-palace” and earliest palatial layers at

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<sup>57</sup> Beck 1975; 1985.

<sup>58</sup> Kochavi - Yadin 2002; strata XVII-XIV.

<sup>59</sup> D. Ilan (paper read at the International Conference “The Middle Bronze Age in the Levant”, held in Vienna 24<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2001 - not published in the Proceedings).

<sup>60</sup> Stager 2002; see also Ross 2002: 379-381.

<sup>61</sup> Fischer 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Marcus 1991.

<sup>63</sup> The site was re-occupied early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium; some tombs especially illustrates the local MB I ceramic inventory (Kempinski - Niemeier 1990: XI).

<sup>64</sup> Dothan 1976.

<sup>65</sup> Paley - Porath 1993: 611-612.

<sup>66</sup> Cohen 2002.

<sup>67</sup> Loud 1948: 6-8, figs. 8-16, 368; Kempinski 1989: 44-45, 47-51. Note that the reduced shrine built inside Temple 4040 was attributed to level XIVa by Kempinski (1989: 40-41, fig. 17), even though the bronze fenestrated axe found in its walls convincingly belong to a foundation deposit of MB I, thus hinting at an attribution of the shrine itself to level XIII B (MB I).

Ras el-ʿAin,<sup>68</sup> stratum XXII at Tell Balatah/Shechem,<sup>69</sup> and many finds from necropolises distributed mainly to the North (Galilee and the Huleh Valley) and on the coast, down to Ashkelon.<sup>70</sup> This suggests that the second urban culture of Palestine clearly spread from the north, with two main streams of irradiation: the coast and the Jordan Valley.<sup>71</sup>

At Tell es-Sultan, which shows and uninterrupted occupation through EB IV and MB I,<sup>72</sup> the renewed investigations on MB fortifications provided new interesting data.<sup>73</sup> While the major rampart was built at the end of Period IVa, roughly corresponding to the end of MB IIA/Syrian MB IB (a situation which recalls that of Hazor; see below), an earliest wall of defence was identified in Area D, on the eastern foot of the “Spring Hill”.<sup>74</sup> No data are available for linking this structure with those extensively excavated in Areas A and E, on the southern flank of the tell, where a major fortress (Building A1) related to the MB I fortifications (which were supported by a stone wall), was heavily set on fire towards the end of Period IVb, Middle Bronze II.<sup>75</sup>

At Hazor, the very beginning of MB I is, until now, not attested to, the earliest MB stratum so far identified on the Acropolis dating from MB IB (strata XVIII and “pre-XVII”).<sup>76</sup> According to Yadin the foundation of the Lower Town and the construction of its impressive ramparts should be dated at the beginning of MB IIB.<sup>77</sup> A basic comparative reference was provided by the ceramic assemblage of Tomb 1181, which illustrates the horizon of stratum XVII.<sup>78</sup> In the Syrian sequence, this assemblage exhibits a full MB IB horizon, as it is shown by collared bowls, inner stepped rim juglets of Black Burnished Ware,<sup>79</sup> and combed kraters, comparable with that of the Tomb of the Princess

<sup>68</sup> That is strata XVII-XIV in Area A (with Palace 60 in the latter stratum, marking the flourish of local MB I: Kochavi - Yadin 2002: 190, fig. 4).

<sup>69</sup> Toombs 1972: 102; 1976: 57.

<sup>70</sup> Gershuni 2002.

<sup>71</sup> In this respect, the investigation of Southern Inner Syria - the area of Damascus and Hauran - is of basic importance: as it is shown by recent discoveries at Tell Sakka (Taraqji 1999); and new data illustrated so well by Michel al-Maqdissi in this colloquium.

<sup>72</sup> Nigro 2003: 157-158.

<sup>73</sup> Marchetti - Nigro 1998; 2000, *passim*.

<sup>74</sup> Marchetti - Nigro 2000: 165-179.

<sup>75</sup> Marchetti - Nigro 2000: 199-214, fig. 5:5.

<sup>76</sup> Maeir 2002: 265, fig. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Yadin 1972: 107-108; see also Ben-Tor *et al.* 1997: 6-7.

<sup>78</sup> Maeir 1997.

<sup>79</sup> For a description of this distinguished MB IB-IIA production see: Ilan 1991; Nigro 2003b.

at Ebla.<sup>80</sup> It seems now demonstrated that the Lower City of Hazor was built at the end of MB I. This definitely overcomes the incongruous interpretation which surmised that a small site confined to a part of the Acropolis was the seat of one of the major polities of the region in the Middle Bronze Age: this interpretation proved inconsistent, so that Hazor was an 80 ha. city with impressive ramparts at the time of the written correspondence with Mari.<sup>81</sup>

#### HALLMARKS OF PALESTINIAN MIDDLE BRONZE I (CHRONOLOGICALLY COMPARABLE WITH SYRIAN AND LEVANTINE MB I)

After this quick overview of the stratigraphic evidence for a Palestinian MB I, which only partially overlaps to traditional “MB IIA”, and partly includes strata attributed to the latter, one may suggest some material culture indicators, which are commonly attested to during Middle Bronze I, both in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

A restricted set of distinguishing types may be provisionally suggested among ceramic and metallic productions. Further studies, can surely describe a coherent horizon of material culture, corresponding to the formative phase of the Middle Bronze Age. As regards pottery, the bowl with profiled rim, with inner reddish-slip and burnishing (Fig. 7), the carinated bowl, called Gublite bowl (Fig. 4),<sup>82</sup> and the bowl with knobs on the rim (fig. 8)<sup>83</sup> are the dominant types among open shapes. Small jars with ovoid body and double rim (sometimes with band painted decoration) are the common medium-size containers (Fig. 9).<sup>84</sup> Red slip squat juglets (Fig. 10) are frequently attested to,<sup>85</sup> as well as many other metallic shapes. In this phase Red-Slip largely dominates the realm of metallic imitations, while towards the end of the period its place will be taken by Black Burnished Ware.

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<sup>80</sup> Matthiae 1979: fig. L, 1, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Maeir 2000.

<sup>82</sup> Nigro 2003b: 353-354, fig. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Khocavi - Yadin 2002: fig. 14, ns. 15, 17.

<sup>84</sup> Khocavi - Yadin 2002: fig. 18, ns. 1-4; Kempinski 1989: fig. 20, ns. 16, 18-19.

<sup>85</sup> Kochavi - Yadin 2002: fig. 26, 1; compare Nigro 2002: fig. 5.

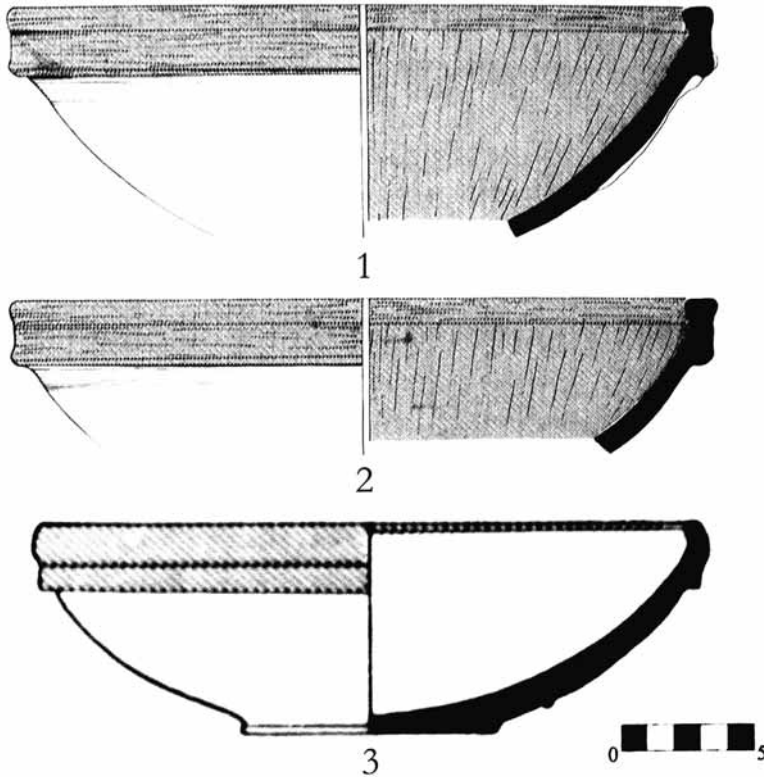


Fig. 7 MB I bowls with profiled rim with inner Red-Slip and burnishing from Ashkelon (ns. 1-2) and Tell el-Mutesellim (n. 3).

Cooking pots with carinated body are a very distinguishing feature of the new MB horizon too.

Among metals, the broad fenestrated axe (Fig. 11) is the classic type of this phase (and not of EB IV), as well as the short dagger with triple rivet (Fig. 12),<sup>86</sup> and various types of pins.

<sup>86</sup> Nigro 2004: 28-38.



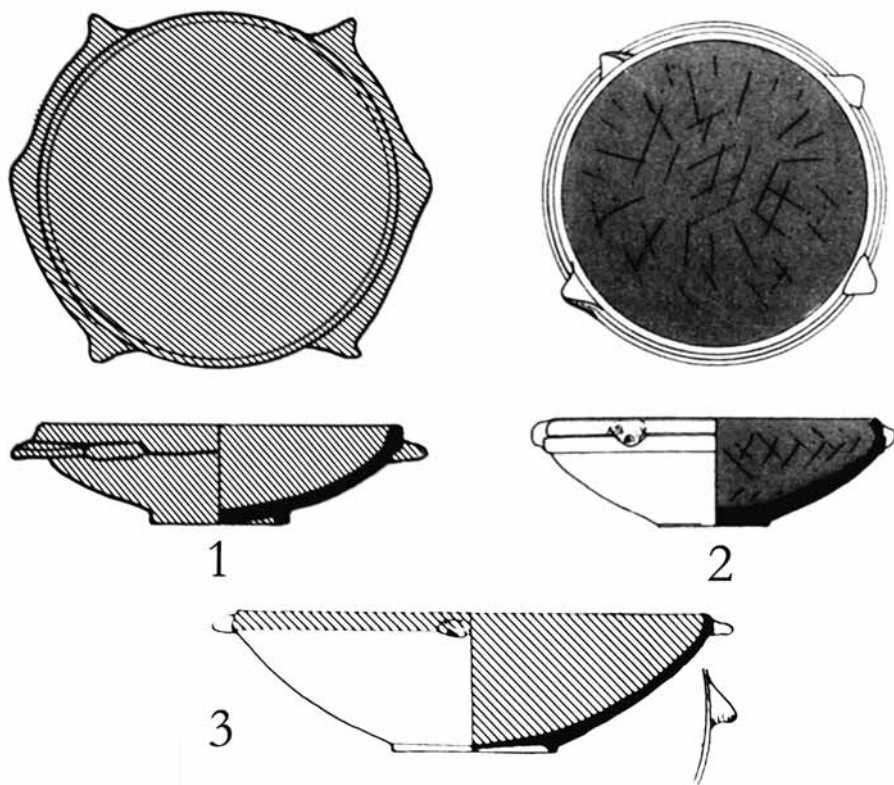


Fig. 8 MB I bowls with knobs on the rim and reddish-slip from Tell es-Mutesellim (n. 1), Ras el-'Ain (n. 2).

## CONCLUSIONS

Is it possible to provide any absolute date for this cultural horizon, that means for the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age? One may rely upon the above mentioned Egyptian synchronisms of Byblos, but they have not direct stratigraphic value. However, in Palestine like in Syria stratigraphic observations show that it antedates classic “MB IIA” and follows EB IV. As regards the latter an end around 2000 BC has been already proposed for many sites. According to this dates we may propose for Palestinian MB I the time span 2000-1900 BC. However, this is valid only in the areas were the

MBA culture appears so early, while in other (the central hills, Transjordan, the Shephelah) the last EB IV cultural “families”, as they were called, were still present. The paradigm of “sloping horizons” explains very well the interpretative uncertainty of scholars, while further excavations in areas yet remained at the fringe of archaeological investigations (Southern Syria and Lebanon especially) may provide deep insights throughout the formative phase of the second urban *floruit* of Syria-Palestine, a phase which I propose to call unitarily Middle Bronze I. This, I hope, will encourage scholars to try to fit their evidence within the general periodization, making easier - and not more difficult as today - to connect different sites and regions in an increasingly coherent chronological grid.



Fig. 9 MB I ovoid jars with double-rim from Tell el-Mutesellim.



10



11

Fig. 10 MB I Red-Slip juglet from Ras el-'Ain (after Kochavi 1990, fig. 4).

Fig. 11 MB I fenestrated axe from Tell el Balatah (after Nigro 2004, fig. 13).

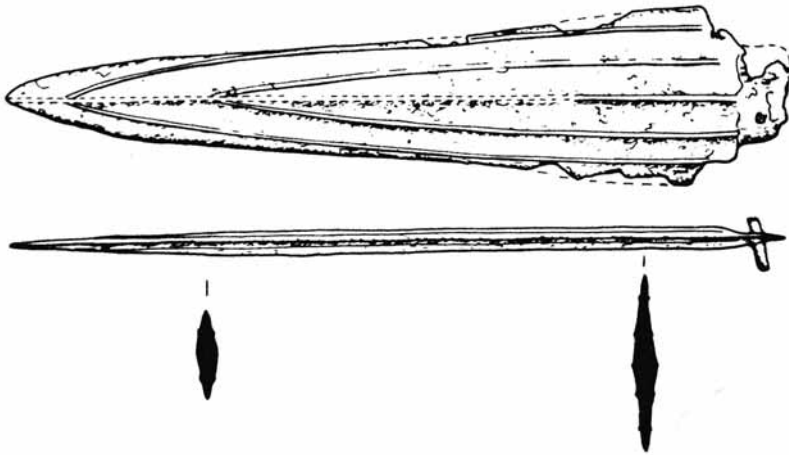


Fig. 12 MB I dagger with triple ridge from Sinjil (after Dever 1975).

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