

STONE BAR-HANDLED BOWLS: CHARACTERISTICS AND VALUE

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ABSTRACT

Stone bar-handled bowls are refined bowls displaying a characteristic bar-handle under the rim. They are typical of the Iron Age stone vessels assemblage, and were considerably widespread during Iron Age II and III throughout the Levant and Mesopotamia. In some archaeological reports, they are considered as possible witnesses of the process of Assyrianisation in the Levant, even though the basis for such a hypothesis remains unclear. Other questions concerning their origin, their relation with pottery, and the reasons for their spread have so far been left unanswered. This paper aims at filling these gaps trying to ultimately define the social value of this peculiar class of stone bowls.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a class of stone bowls characterizing the Iron Age stone vessels assemblage in the Levant and Mesopotamia, displaying a bar-handle under the rim (Fig. 1).¹ They are known under various names;² however, in this paper we will refer to them as bar-handled bowls (BHBs). Despite their diffusion, they have not attracted much attention so far;³ hence, this study aims at clarifying some aspects related to their chronological significance, function and social value. It is hoped this will constitute a contribution to a better understanding of some archaeological contexts where they have been found.

MORPHOLOGY AND MATERIALS

The shape of BHBs varies from shallow to hemispheric examples, with a deep cavity. Their maximum diameter ranges from 16 cm to 40 cm, while their height oscillates between 2 cm to 10 cm. The characteristic bar running under the rim can be continuous or with two short gaps. Its function may have been that of ensuring a better hold, giv-

1 For this study, 102 specimens have been considered, coming from published sources, with the exception of Tell Jemmeh and Tell Farah South examples, which I was able to study in the UCL Institute of Archaeology collection.

2 Double-rim bowls, ledge-handle bowls, mixing bowls are the more commonly used.

3 Previous discussions about this class of bowls can be found in Bombardieri 2003; Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: 51-2.

ing the hands something to grasp easily. However, it may also have had aesthetic value, for example – as an emulation of pottery models (see below). The base of these bowls can be flat, but most commonly they have a low disc or a ring base. The most common raw material employed is a non-vesicular variety of basalt with a smooth surface. Other hard stones employed are serpentine, siltstone, limestone and diorite (Fig. 2). The use of these stones is not uniform across the area. While basalt was adopted everywhere, the other stones were more common in Assyria and in North Syria, where their geological sources were available. BHBs' manufacture is always well executed, both internal and external surfaces are polished, the shape is regularly carved, and no signs of hasty manufacture are visible. These characteristics differentiate these bowls from common mortars, which usually have rough surfaces and a more irregular shape.

CHRONOLOGICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Before the last quarter of the 8th century BC, BHBs are quite spread in the Southern Levant.⁴ Ten examples have been unearthed in total, coming from Hazor V (Yadin 1958: pl. 59.6-7, pl. 62.6; Yadin 1961: pl. 233.12), Megiddo III (Lamon and Shipton 1939: pl. CXIII.5 and 9), Yoqneam XII (Ben-Tor *et al.* 2005: fig. III.20.8), Tell Jemmeh, Kadesh Barnea 3a (Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007: fig. 13.4.3) and lastly Tell Amal III (Levy and Edelstein 1972: fig. 17.8).⁵ Apart from the bar-handle, these examples do not share many other morphological features. They range from a shape with convex walls and low ring base (Kadesh Barnea), to one with straight open walls and a low disc base (Hazor). This lack of uniformity would suggest that many production centres were active in the region, working according to a regional style. Most probably, the model for stone BHBs derives from pottery BHBs, the first examples of which can be found in Hazor in the early Iron Age II (Amiran 1969: pl. 62.25). Two stone BHBs also come from Syria during the 8th century BC, from Hama and Tell Mardikh (Riis and Buhl 1990: fig. 34.72; Fronzaroli 1967: fig. 19.1). The Hama example is dated to level E, i.e. before the Assyrian destruction of 720 BC, while the Mardikh bowl is from a less secure context but it seems possible to associate it to the same horizon as Hama E (Fronzaroli 1967: 102).

The Iron Age III sees a great diffusion of this class of bowls in all the Levant and Mesopotamia. They continue to be produced in the Southern Levant: in Megiddo I (Lamon and Shipton 1939: pl. 113.8), Beth Shean (Qitaf cemetery) (Amiran 1959: pl.

4 An interesting exception comes from the recent excavations in Megiddo. Here, a bar-handled bowl in basalt, unfortunately not entirely preserved, has been found in area K level 4, corresponding to the first half of the 10th century (according to the low chronology). This would represent a very early prototype of BHBs, also predating the pottery examples (Finkelstein *et al.* 2006: fig. 18.4.27).

5 Tell Jemmeh: UCL Institute of Archaeology collection, reg. n. EXXXVI.17/33. The chronology of stratum III in Tel Amal, modern Nir David, in Beth Shean Valley, was fixed to the 10th century BC by the excavators. However, the presence of this bowl, due to the chronological significance of this typology, would suggest a revision of the chronology of this stratum. A late 9th-century BC date would be more acceptable.

19), Ashdod VI (Dothan 1971: fig. 96.11), as well as Jawa (Daviau 2002: p. 118) and Sahab (Ibrahim 1975: pl. 30.2.229) in Ammon. In the Northern Levant, they have been retrieved from Tell Arqa (Thalmann 1978: fig. 47.11), Tell Sukas (Buhl 1983: fig. 30.647), Neirab (Carrière and Barrois 1927: pl. 55.118), Tell Ahmar (Troky 2000: fig. 7), Sultantepe (Seton Lloyd 1953: figs. 6.42.3; 6.43.2) and Tell Barri (Bombardieri 2010: pl. 149). All these specimens come from contexts that can be surely dated to the Iron Age III, though it is not always clear whether to the 7th or the 6th centuries BC. BHBs were also unearthed in Zincirli, Carchemish and Tell Halaf, belonging to uncertain chronological phases. Four serpentine BHBs were found among the debris of the 7th-century BC Upper Palace of Zincirli (Luschan 1943: fig. 6a-d). Being superficial finds, it is not clear whether to collocate them in the same chronological phase as the Palace. Six bowls were found in the Yunus cemetery of Carchemish (Woolley 1939/40: pl. 16). Three of them come from tombs that can be possibly dated to the early 7th century BC because of the presence of Cypriot pottery (tombs YH4 and YC47) and an Anatolian fabric jar (tomb YC50).⁶ This would lead to the conclusion that BHBs reached Carchemish in the late 8th century BC, before entering the funerary context. Finally, the two Tell Halaf bowls, out of context, can be dated to the 8th BC onwards only by comparison with the other BHBs (Hrouda 1962: pl. 51.2-3).

Pottery BHBs also follow this chronological pattern: they are attested in Syria at the end of the 8th – beginning of the 7th centuries BC.⁷ This reinforces the idea that they were the vector through which the models for stone BHBs were spread.

In Mesopotamia, a large corpus of 45 BHBs comes from the cities of Ashur (Miglus 1996: pls. 58-9), Nineveh (Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: figs. 26-9), Nimrud (Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: figs. 26,28,29,33; Bombardieri 2010: fig. 1.09; fig. 3) and Sherif Khan, ancient Tarbisu (Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: figs 26-8)⁸ near Nineveh. It is important to notice that pottery BHBs arrived in Assyria after the mid-8th century BC (Atanasio 2010: 181), thus, if we consider them as models for stone BHBs, the latter also should not be collocated before this date. Assyrian stone BHBs come from contexts generically datable to the 8th century BC onwards; however, it seems reasonable to collocate their adoption only after Tiglat-Pileser III's campaigns in the Southern Levant, i.e. after 732 BC. Levantine artisans displaced to Assyria after these campaigns, bringing with them their ideas and models, may also have been responsible for the spread of BHBs. Being non-precious objects, it is quite unlikely that BHBs reached Assyria as part of the booty collected from the Levant, or of the tributes the subdued cities were forced to pay.

6 The chronology of the Cypriot pottery is the one proposed by Woolley (Woolley 1939: 17). The Anatolian fabric jar found in tomb YC50 belongs to a typology present in Gordon in the 8th century BC and in Kültepe at the end of the 8th century BC. It may have, therefore, reached Carchemish at the very end of the 8th century BC or beginning of the 7th. This class of Anatolian jar, however, still poses some chronological problems (Dupré 1983).

7 Lehmann 1996: pl. 19. Pottery BHBs seem to have reached Syria after 720 BC.

8 One bowl also comes from the Giparu area in Ur (Woolley 1965: pl. 35) and another from the surface of the Kassite building in area WC-1 in Nippur (Zettler 1993). Their chronological phases are uncertain, but the Ur bowl was found along with Late Assyrian jewellery of the 7th century BC (Curtis 1981).

BHBs do not seem to have been produced after the Persian conquest of 539 BC, because they have not been retrieved from any sites apart from Lachish (Tufnell 1953: pl. 65.7). Because of its low chronology, this specimen, found in the Solar Shrine, may be considered as a late reuse from an earlier context.⁹

To sum up, we can define the chronological limits of this class of bowls between the 8th and the end of the 6th centuries BC (Fig. 4).¹⁰ They seem to have originated in the Southern Levant, where the most ancient examples come from the pre-Assyrian levels. Afterwards, they spread in the Northern Levant probably as a consequence of the movement of artisans imitating pottery BHBs, finally reaching Assyria soon after Tiglat-Pileser III's military campaigns.¹¹

FUNCTION AND VALUE

BHBs seem to be suitable for everyday use. They are well-finished products but do not show elaborate decorative motifs. They seem suitable to contain solid substances, and could also have been used for light grinding (Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: 52).¹² The reason why stone was employed to substitute pottery may have been that of ensuring long-term survival, so the objects could be passed on through the generations. Stone artifacts are generally given value for their durability and incorruptibility, features that can also acquire symbolic meanings such as purity and cheating the passage of time.¹³ It is because of their susceptibility to acquire diverse meanings that we find stone BHBs in all the archaeological contexts (Fig. 3). Since pottery BHBs do not show this ubiquity, we can argue that stone was expressly chosen as the raw material to charge these items with more meanings.

Most BHBs have been found in domestic and urban contexts. In the Southern Levant, they come from common houses; in Hazor V, one BHB has been found with a basalt pestle (Yadin 1958: pl. 59), although it is not clear whether in direct association

9 Two BHBs also come from the treasury of Persepolis (Schmidt 1957: pl. 61.2-3). They may have reached the Achaemenid city with the booty the Persians collected in Assyria.

10 Two more examples of BHBs come from the citadel of Boğazköy. They belong to phase BK Ia-Ib of the Phrygian palace, dated between 650 and 547 BC. Their chronology corresponds to that of Mesopotamian and Levantine examples (Bossert 2000: pl. 93.103-4).

11 Bombardieri (2003) has suggested that BHBs could represent an indicator of the Assyrian presence in the Levant, mainly based on Tell Barri finds. In this paper, the opposite idea is supported; however, both hypotheses do not necessarily exclude each other. It is possible that in Tell Barri such bowls represent an Assyrian influence on the local material culture, being produced here soon after BHB models arrived in Assyria at the beginning of the 7th century BC, as we have supposed. Accepting this scenario, the cultural influence would have therefore been from the Levant to Assyria, then from Assyria to Tell Barri.

12 The BHBs I could study in the British Museums do not know marks due to heavy grinding or pounding activities. The bar-handled bowls held in the British Museum come from Nimrud, Nineveh, Sherif Khan, Carchemish, Halaf, Al Mina and Lachish, with a total of 33 specimens.

13 An extensive discussion about the value of stone vessels from the Bronze Age Mediterranean can be found in Bevan 2007: 186-94. Similar insights can also be applied to the Iron Age stone vessels assemblage.

with it. In the other sites, such as Megiddo, Yoqneam, Ashdod, Kadesh Barnea and Tell Jemmeh, they have not been retrieved in association with objects that can clarify their use. One bowl from Tell Jawa, in Ammon, has been found in the upper storey of a rich house, where other luxury objects were kept, such as shell items and ivory (Daviau 2002: p.118). This case is interesting as it may support the idea that BHBs retained a particular status among the domestic equipment. Additionally, imitation and reuse are practices that can lead to the supposition that the BHBs played a role as valuable items. Some such examples come from Sahab, in Ammon, where one BHB in basalt is imitated using limestone, a cheaper and more available stone (Ibrahim 1975: 73); and from Ashdod, where one BHB was found in the Hellenistic level, surely as a very late reuse (Dothan 1971: fig. 28.4).

In the Northern Levant, BHBs have been found in urban contexts in Tell Ahmar and Tell Barri. In Tell Ahmar, a considerable group of basalt vessels comes from Building C1 (Trokay 2000), which seems to have been initially the residence of a wealthy person, later transformed into an industrial complex (Jamieson 2000). Possibly, the basalt objects are part of the second phase of the building. BHBs show a careful manufacture of high quality, and probably they were stored here to be used in the nearby building C2, a structure inhabited towards the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire by a wealthy person. Hence, also in Tell Ahmar, we see BHBs employed in an elite urban structure.

The second largest group of BHBs comes from palaces or from areas hosting royal structures. In Hama, one example comes from the *Bâtiment I* on the citadel (Riis and Buhl 1990: fig. 34.72); in Tell Barri, two BHBs were found in area J, where the Tukulti-Ninurta II's (890-884 BC) palace originally stood (Bombardieri 2010: 123-4). However, both Hama and Tell Barri bowls were not used in a royal context. By use in a royal context, we mean when the object is clearly part of a consumption event occurring in the palace. To attest this, we have to move to Assyria. Fourteen BHBs, nine from Nineveh and five from Sherif Khan, bear royal inscriptions with the names of the 7th- and 6th-century BC Assyrian kings: Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.¹⁴ Their value is defined by three aspects: their royal inscriptions, which collocate them among the objects belonging to the king; their sought-after raw materials (diorite, agate, siltstone), which not only give them an attractive look, but also symbolize control over natural sources; lastly, their exotic Levantine shape. It is reasonable to think, hence, that stone BHBs played a role during consumption events such as royal banquets. The distant origin of their type reinforced the message of supremacy over foreign nations. These stone bowls seem, hence, to be charged with a propagandistic message of control over natural resources and distant nations.

BHBs have also been found in the Yunus cemetery in Carchemish. Among the five tombs yielding BHBs, tombs YC 50 and YH4 distinguished themselves for the presence of imported pottery and, in the case of YC 50, also luxury items. Unfortunately,

14 These inscribed bowls are now held in the British Museum and published, with translation of the inscriptions, in Searight, Finkel and Reade 2008: figs. 26-7.

the Yunus cemetery had been partly looted before the excavations, so it is difficult to determine whether there is a positive correlation between stone vessels and luxury items. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that only part of the Carchemish population could afford the disposal of stone vessels. As mentioned above, one of the main reasons why stone BHBs were used was their durability. Consequently, it is logical to find them reused across more generations. Collocating them in tombs, thus taking them out of the inheritance line, may have been considered a privilege. The aim of this act may have been that of both emphasizing a higher social status and reinforcing particular beliefs on death. The use of stone BHBs in tombs may indicate the desire to cheat the passage of time, contrasting the ephemeral human remains with the durability of stone.¹⁵

In sacred contexts, it is more difficult to ascertain whether BHBs were directly involved in rituals. The six bowls that can be assigned to this context come from Ashur (2 examples), Nineveh (1), Sultantepe (2) and Lachish (1). The Sultantepe BHBs were found in Area C on the acropolis, an area thought to be sacred due to the presence of tablets belonging to a temple library. However, no other indications of cultic practices have been identified (Seton Lloyd 1953: 33). One basalt BHB comes from the *cella* of the Solar Shrine in Lachish. This building has been interpreted as a temple because of the presence of an altar and a draining hole probably used for libations (Tufnell 1953: 397). If we accept this interpretation, this would be the only case where a BHB was most probably employed in sacred ceremonies.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can date this class of stone bowls between the 8th and the end of the 6th centuries BC. Their spread followed an arch-like movement from the Southern Levant, where they had originated, to Assyria, where they arrived after Tiglat-Pileser III's campaigns, along with their pottery models. Therefore, the hypothesis that BHBs are witnesses of an Assyrianisation process seems untenable. Despite their large adoption in Assyria, which may have led to this hypothesis being considered, we see them spread in the Southern Levant, and in Hama and Mardikh, clearly before the arrival of the

15 Two interesting bowls come from the Tell el-Qitaf, situated about five km south-east of Beth Shean. They were found on the surface along with a clay coffin of the bath-tube type; therefore, they probably came from a grave. The BHBs are thought to be witnesses of the Assyrian influence on local culture (Amiran 1959). However, according to the idea supported in this paper, BHBs are part of the local stone vessels assemblage. One of the two bowls has three decorated legs in the shape of bulls' feet. On the outer side of the bowl, three ducks' heads correspond to the legs. These decorations, as it was suggested, show similarity with Assyrian art; therefore, this example may be an interesting case of a mixture between local (the bar-handle) and Assyrian features.

16 A well attested use of stone vessels for cultic purposes comes from Jerusalem during the Second Temple Period, when a chalk vessels industry flourished as a consequence of the Jewish laws concerning purity (Magen 2002).

Assyrians. Concerning their use and value, we can agree on a functional use, as multi-purpose items. However, their presence in tombs (Carchemish) and royal palaces (Assyria) denotes their susceptibility to the acquisition of more symbolic meanings. The stones employed for their manufacture surely conferred them with broader social value.

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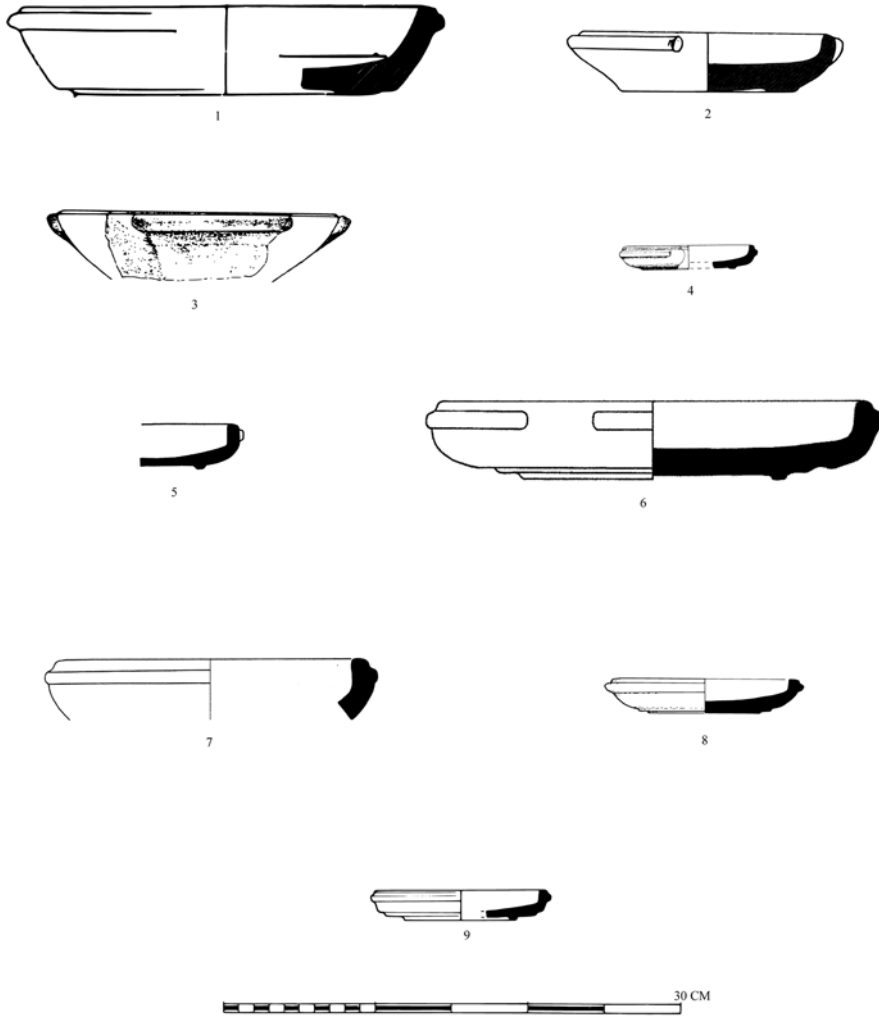


Fig. 1: Some examples of stone bar-handled bowls: 1. Hazor; 2. Megiddo; 3. Yoqneam; 4. Kadesh Barnea; 5. Tell Mardikh; 6. Tell Barri; 7. Nimrud; 8. Ashur; 9. Ashdod.

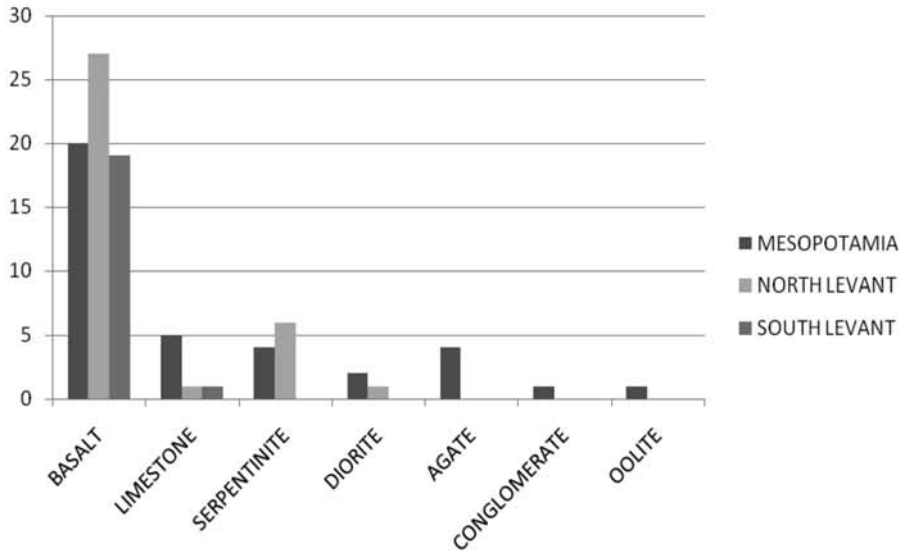


Fig. 2: Graph showing stones used for the manufacture of bar-handled bowls per area

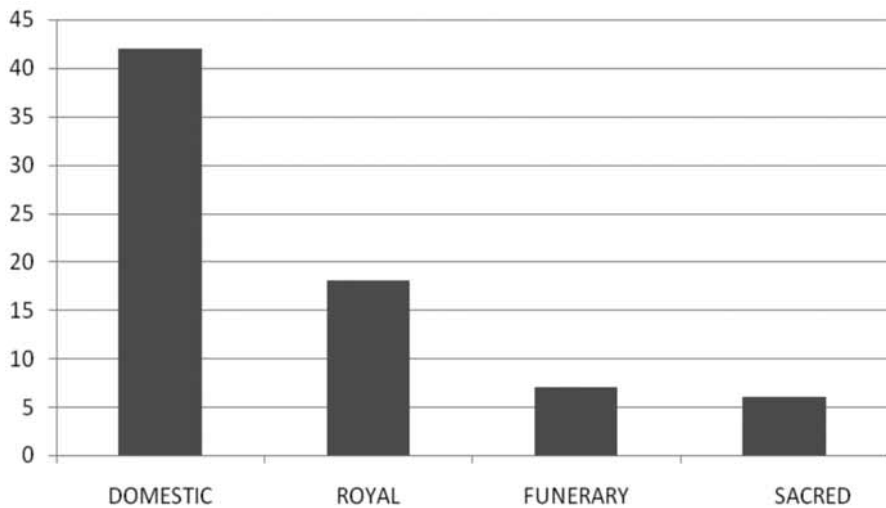


Fig. 3: Graph showing distribution of BHBs per context.

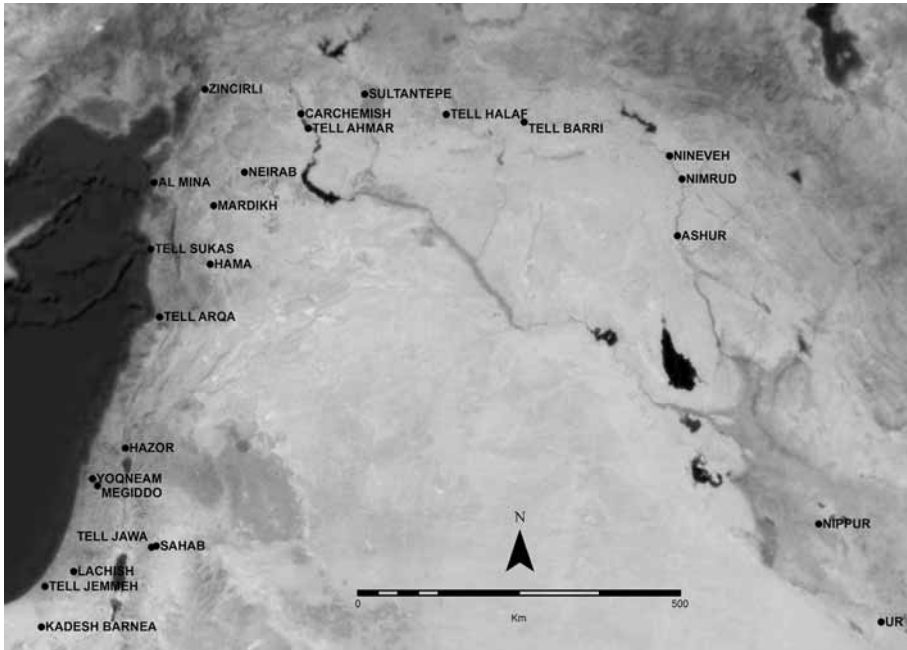


Fig. 4: Main sites mentioned in the text