

# THE IDEOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UR AND EBLA DURING THE THIRD MILLENNIUM BC

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper will focus on the main economic differences related to secondary urbanism processes in Lower Mesopotamia and Northern Syria and will compare some of the extraordinary art masterpieces (collected during excavations) from the Early Dynastic and Early Syrian periods, such as composite works that adopted more ancient aesthetic concepts. The economic difference between these two urbanisms and the technological analogy between their official figurative representations will reveal that the two worlds had similar aesthetic concepts which came from the Sumerian habitus. This was not only linguistically 'ideographic', but also cognitive and political.*

## THE ORIGIN OF HUMANITY AND THE CITY

In the field of contemporary archaeological research, after Frankfort, Childe, Adams and many other scholars, there has been a long discussion about the terms 'birth', 'revolution' and 'process' as symbolic, economic and anthropological models intended to provide categories of analysis to understand urbanism phenomena in near eastern cultures (Hansen 2000: 11-34; Ramazzotti 2002: 651-752). In order to summarize these terms, through the meaningful histories of their similarities, we can draw inspiration from Mesopotamian literature, since Mesopotamian and Syrian cities signified something more than the mechanical result of a 'birth', 'revolution' or 'process'. The city had the physical appearance of the primordial order and was the metaphysical sign of the arrival of celestial order on Earth through kingship, the microcosm of the universe administrated in the palaces and venerated in the temples (Weidner 1967: 29-32; Gragg 1969: 169; Winter 1993: 27-55; Matthiae 1994: 3-7). In other words, the city was the natural link between Earth and sky, perceived by the Sumerians, the Akkadians and the Eblaites during the fourth and third millennia BC (Ramazzotti 2009a: 54-59.). This connection is presented in the *Sumerian King List* as a continuous metaphor for the order and the destiny that the deities had fixed (Zettler 1998: 1-21).

This metaphor can be observed today also from another point of view, not

only symbolic, economic or anthropological. In ‘real time’ this birth is a natural, chronological moment that follows the creation of earth and humanity, but in the ‘mythical time’ of cosmogonies the ‘dawn of the city’ is analogous to the ‘birth of the universe’. City and universe could both be considered products of a unique divine act that separated Sky from Earth and freed humanity from primordial chaos (Matthiae 1984: 7-126; Wiggerman 1992: 279-304; Bottéro-Kramer 1992: 681-682). Thus the city becomes the earthly synthesis of the celestial order, the place where the deities live (the Greek *Cosmos*), the house where human destinies are fixed,<sup>1</sup> the kingdom where the ruler will be a lord,<sup>2</sup> and the achieved place of the cosmic order.<sup>3</sup> For all these reasons, the city was celebrated through a group of very different images, allusions and epithets that locate it in a time without space, in an ideal centre. Nevertheless, from the moment in which literature presents the first cities in this way, it is evident that the receiver of this erudite message communicated its values to the inhabitants and their daily life, as well as preserving them. Only the interpreter would have been able to actualize the myth. In the modern city (as anticipated by George Orwell in his 1984) a big eye (Big Brother) would have represented this ‘supreme power’, the eye of constant control over human beings, over their political actions, civic life and perception of space and time. In ancient Mesopotamian cities (unique and replicable expression of the urban revolution) this control mechanism was through the iconology of propaganda. The first cities were concepts and icons, symbols of cosmic energy with affective properties: their walls, streets, palaces and temples express a project realized in a closed space.<sup>4</sup>

#### ‘CELESTIAL ORDER’ AND EARTHLY ORDER

At the beginnings of Mesopotamian urbanism, Uruk was the first city in the archaeology, art history and historiography of the ancient Near East. Today no scholar can deny the centrality of Warka, and not just because Uruk was the first and evident urban nucleus, but also because it became the sign of an *equilibrium* between the political centrality of the government and the economic necessities of the population. This balance revealed perfect symmetry between the ‘origin of the *cosmos*’ and the ‘origin of the city’. The symmetry was realized not just intellectually, but through a pictorial communication used to spread the concepts of ‘right order’ and ‘right government’ as a mnemonic

1 The *ME* in Sumerian literature. Castellino 1959: 25-32; Oberhuber 1963: 3-16; Farber-Flügge 1973; Alster 2006: 32.

2 *dEn-uru-ulla*: The Lord of the Primeval City in Sumerian. Wiggerman 1992: 284.

3 ‘[...] as an order of wills – as a state’. Jacobsen 1946: 127.

4 On the psychological, sensorial and aesthetical reproduction of the spatial archetypes see Cassirer 1956: 15-30.

device.<sup>5</sup> In some iconographies from the archaic seal impressions from Ur, elliptical and subdivided enigmatic symbols could be interpreted as two-dimensional views of some Sumerian cities (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> But these views were probably ideograms inspired by the right order and right government concepts and their codification was replicated and transformed also later on. The intellectual exegesis of the celestial order, of the earthly order, of the royal power and its physical application were involved in orienting the common comprehension of the Sky, of the Earth and of the City as archetypes of urban life during the Early Dynastic and Early Syrian Period.<sup>7</sup>

The southern Mesopotamian symbolic concepts of *right order* and *right government* generated many spatial and figurative pictorial archetypes such as the archaic seal impressions from Ur and the Early Dynastic and Early Syrian royal miniature statues (Fig. 2; Fig. 3) (Woolley 1934: 264-266; Matthiae 2009: 270-311). In the present paper I will focus on the iconography of the bearded hero bearing a four-part object, which is a recurrent motive in Early Bronze Syrian glyptic art (Mardikh IIB1). The specific iconology of this impression discovered at Ebla presents a hero, a king, a bull man, a lion fighting with a bull and a queen while they are probably taking part in a sort of ritual (Fig. 4). Since here the hero bears a circular four-part symbol, where two lion heads face those of two humans (Matthiae 1995: 104), and wear a kind of belt that could allude to the primeval waters (Apsû), we can consider the hero and the symbol as an ‘emblem’ of a kneeling Atlas sustaining the four-part Earth (Fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> The four-quarters are symmetrical opposed quadrants, probably idealized human and animal sections of the Eblaite world. We cannot directly connect this detail of the four quarters with the urban morphology of the secondary Mesopotamian cities, but if we consider the hero as an Early Syrian interpretation of the well-known Sumerian deities Lakhmu or Lakhamu (belonging to the god Enki/Ea) and the symbol of the four quarters as inspired by a sort of creative cosmic reason (*mummu* in the Akkadian) we should admit that they played an important role also in the earthly organization of cosmic plans (*ushurati* in Akkadian) (Heidel 1948: 98-105).

In other words, this earthly order could be represented by an internally subdivided elliptical area, a kind of two-dimensional reflection of celestial order, of earthly order and – in this specific context – an allusive drawing of the Early Syrian urban assessment of Ebla.<sup>9</sup> The origin of the symbol that represents celestial order, earthly

5 Probably, those images are from the Uruk Period, when the so-called ‘surplus redistribution process’ (as an administrated economic process) transformed ‘political choices’ into ‘economic policies’ with specific and well-organized visual communications displaying the facilities, the abundance and aesthetic character of urban life. Ramazzotti 2005: 511-565; Winter 2007: 117-142.

6 Cf. Matthews 1993: figs. 10b; 12 (2, 3, 6, 8); 13 (9-14); 15 (32);

7 For the role of the archetypes in the psychology of the ancient near eastern cultures see Frankfort 1992: 47-69.

8 The emblem related to the ‘cosmic four division theory’ (Matthiae 1982: 82) is built on symmetric overlapping sections, adverse and opposed in their meaning; in this way, the symbol - inspired by the *royal milieu* - replaces the same space division form, known and accepted since early historical times.

9 A four region division was firstly supposed by Pettinato, Matthiae 1976: 1-30.

order and a metaphysical view of Ebla could have had many sources, but one route that can be easily mapped is the chronological distribution of the elliptical cities, a typical morphology of many Mesopotamian and Syrian urban mounds. In northern Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic and Early Syrian Period (2600-2500 BC), an urban morphology defined as Kranzhügel is well-known. Its crown-shape is determined by elliptical defence walls and an inner fortified citadel. Examples are Tell Khuera, Tell Mabtuh al-Gharbi, Tell Muazzar and of course Tell Beydar and Tell Bogha. All these cities were probably founded at the beginning of the first half of the third millennium BC (Meyer 2007: 129-142) and could have had connections with the more ancient urban topography of Tell Hariri recently ascribed to the beginning of the third millennium BC (Margueron 2004: 49-13). If so, we can follow a kind of geographical distribution of this specific morphology, coming probably from southern Mesopotamia which was adopted also on the upper Euphrates and in northern inner Syria. This could be attested in the city of Ebla during the Early Bronze IVA period and later on also in other very regular elliptical cities such as Tell Rawda.<sup>10</sup> If the itinerary of this morphology is plausible, we could also imagine on the same route the conceptual reception of some other aesthetic concepts. The symbol borne by the Eblaite Atlas, a two-dimensional representation of the Earth under the Sky could have been created at the beginning of the third millennium in southern-central Mesopotamia, then accepted in the Early Syrian royal ideology and sensibly transformed by the Akkadians.

#### THE AKKADIAN *IDEOGRAM* OF ‘UNIVERSAL EMPIRE’ AS A ‘FOUR-QUARTER KINGSHIP’

Now we should be able to understand how and when the *ideogram*<sup>11</sup> of a four-part city as a supposed metaphor of the four-part Early Dynastic and Early Syrian Earth was ideologically received to define the universal empire (and later if, where and how this *Eikòn* was accepted and applied to the landscape). During the Akkad Period, the myth of the city changes from an ideal centre of economic and political equilibrium to a kingdom. In fact, the emphasis on the city as a ‘heroic foundation’ under the hero king built a new dimension in the economic and political spheres. Sargon ‘King of Akkad’, the ‘City Founder’, did not work on social *equilibrium* like the archaic great organizations of the fourth millennium, but gave a new international meaning to conquest, dominion and control (Ramazzotti 2011: 341-375.). From that, probably comes firstly the well-known literary motive of the concentrically ‘five-region

10 Gondet-Castel 2005: 93-109. Moreover during the EBIVB Ebla itself was not abandoned (Dolce 2002) and it is recorded in Mesopotamian documents dated to the Ur III period: Owen 1993: 108-182.

11 ‘Ideogram seems to me, after all, to be the best term, although, of course, not in the sense of an element of a complex pictorial communication which is independent of language, but in the sense of a mnemonic device which by association of ideas could be connected with a number of words existing as element of language’. Djakonoff 1974: 110.

division' of the Earth (one centre and four concentric peripheries), which is not simply a narrative theme (Glassner 1984: 17-34; 1986: 8-12; Michalowski 1993: 69-90). It is certainly linked to naturalistic and geographical knowledge, but was transformed by Naram-Sin (DINGIR) in a centripetal and radial conceptualization of the Earth in order to magnify the perfect subordination of 'earthly government' to 'celestial government' (obviously represented by the divine king).<sup>12</sup> In fact the metaphor of 'dominion over the universe; through the image of the city as the centre of the universe and of the Earth as controlled and divided in four quadrants was promoted, creating the epithet 'King of the Four Quarters of the World',<sup>13</sup> attested first in lines I. 6-7 of Naram-Sin from Akkad's inscription found on a fragment of a copper statue near Bassetki (Ayiš 1976: 63-75). We can speculate on this topic, but the extraordinary masterpiece representing the lower part of a kneeling hero with a standard base between his legs, some iconographic characters and the hero of the Early Syrian seal impression are all similar in posture and belt design (Fig. 6). I would now emphasize two other routes of the ideogram reception in the following periods: the first was invisible but strictly related to the ideological sphere accepted by Ur-Namma, while the second was directly visible, since it could be related to the urban plan of Old Syrian Ebla. In fact, emulating Utukhegal of Uruk, Ur-Namma took Naram Sin's royal title for his kingship<sup>14</sup> and Ebla during the Middle Bronze Age is clearly divided in four sectors (Fig. 7).<sup>15</sup> The recurrent motive in Early Bronze Syrian glyptic art of a hero bearing a four-part Earth was an archaic symbol of kingship in the ancient administration of the Royal Palace G, but we can suppose that it was preserved (after the Ebla destruction) as an ideological concept for Neo Sumerian kingship foundation and as a thematic map for the plan of Old Syrian Ebla.

#### THE GENERATIVE GRAMMAR OF AN *ARCHETYPE*

Now, the ideological adoption of the Naram-Sin royal title during the UrIII period in southern Mesopotamia and the physical application of the thematic map on Old

12 'The geographic term "The Four Region" is based on a tradition of dividing the earth's surface into northern, southern, eastern, and western quadrants derived from the four winds or compass point directions. Ancient Mesopotamians could determine the four directions by correlating the position of the sun, moon and stars with wind direction and the time of year'. Horowitz 1998: 298.

13 'lugal an-ubda limmuba / šar kibratim arba'im'. (Hallo 1957: 49 ff.); Maeda 1984: 67-72.

14 1. Ur-Namma the canal-digger (Ur-Namma D): c.2.4.1.4 (ETCLS Translation). King of the Four Quarters, you who make Enlil content, Ur-Namma, provider of Nibru, supporter of Urim, with you (?) the people pass the time joyously in the/at (?) moonlight over the Land of Urim. 2. Ur-Namma the canal-digger (Ur-Namma D): c.2.4.1.4 (ETCLS Translation). King of the Four Quarters, favourite of Enlil, shepherd Ur-Namma, the provider of Sumer and Akkad, beloved of Enlil, it is you (?) who make ... of Urim pass the time joyously.

15 *De facto*, the Middle Bronze Age gates at the NE – NW – SW – SE corners – as in the most ancient urban plan – were the nodes of a complex network, respecting symbolic traditions as well as commercial activities. Matthiae 1991: 304-371; Pinnock 2001: 13-33.

Syrian Ebla urban morphology in northern Syria suggests the route of an archetype. The iconography of the four quarter city is of course a possible interpretation of some ancient symbolism, but we try to demonstrate that this city began an earthly metaphor of the celestial order. Exactly why such a metaphor was used is modern speculation, but we can observe the infinite ramifications of what we call *elliptical worlds* in Mesopotamia from the fifth millennium BC. The economic centralization of products in circular buildings is a strong characteristic of northern Mesopotamian cultures (Tepe Gawra XI and Godin Tepe V) (Weiss, Young 1975: 1-17; Rothman 2002: 27-37) and later the most important buildings of the northern secondary urbanism, as well-documented by many multifunctional round buildings (Tell Razuk, Tell Brak, Tell 'Atij, Tell Raqa'i) (Fortin 2000: 111-136; Schwartz 2000: 163-182). During the Early Dynastic period these elliptical spaces were probably designed to emphasize the religious nature of the earthly government as well documented by the elliptical sanctuaries of Tell el-Ubaid and Khafajah (Woolley 1927; Delougaz 1938, 1940). But – as we have seen – we are able to classify elliptical and centripetal cities (central tell and defence earthworks) both in southern and northern Mesopotamia during the third millennium BC. (Tell Hariri, Tell Khuera, Tell Beydar, Tell Mardikh), that could have maintained a geometric inner division of the lower city. Akkad, unfortunately, disappeared, but the Naram Sin epithet 'King of the Four Quarters' could be elaborated in order to impose the *celestial order* on *earthly order*. Many years after the Akkadian conquest of northern Syria and southern Mesopotamia, the so called Third Ebla was newly planned in an elliptical, centripetal and radial pre-existing morphology. It is well-known that in Babylon of Hammurabi there are scattered and insufficient data, even if the hypothetical morphology of this metropolis was elliptical and centripetal (and in the later biblical tradition Babylon itself was considered the 'cof of the world). One millennium later, during the Neo-Assyrian period, the literary tradition of the four-part kingdom is well-preserved in some dedicatory inscriptions of the Assyrian chancellery that were intended to make the political operations of the kings credible. The semantic code of the elliptical worlds as symbolic and metaphysical representations of a kingdom, of a city, of the earth and of the deep earthly order seems to be evident also in the so-called Neo-Babylonian *Mappa Mundi* (Fig. 8). Here we have an organization of the spaces repeating (on a different scale) an elliptical world perception in a virtual centre of the universe occupied by the most important city (Babylon) (Horowitz 1988: 145-165; 1998: 19-42). The universe known is now wider, but still projected on a two-dimensional map, observed from above, centred on the capital, closed in a circular shape, surrounded by the ocean and linked to the universe by different triangular appendices. Homer and Hesiod<sup>16</sup> will later discuss the existence of an *Atlas* bearing the celestial vault with his arms (Di Pasquale 2009: 60-65); we do not know on which earth Atlas placed his feet, but we can speculate that

16 On the structural relationship between the cosmogony of Hesiod and the Mesopotamian cosmogonies see Komoróczy 1973: 21-45.

it was not so different from the concentric and centripetal world depicted later on in some medieval maps (Fig. 9).

The ideographic code of an earthly order depending on celestial order, supported by the arms of the Early Syrian Atlas of Ebla was later codified in the planar, elliptical, centripetal and radial coherence of the topography of the throne city. This figurative and spatial code of the city as a cosmic city was preserved, replicated and transformed until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. (Fig. 10a), when another similar Atlas will support the sky vault, and no more the earthly globe or the cosmic city (as well documented by the Atlas dated on the Imperial Era (Fig. 10b)).<sup>17</sup> But we can add that these two distinctive visions of the Earth and Sky globes supported by the Hero's arms will change in the Galilean *era* when – without any doubt – for the first time human eyes observed the Earth from the Sky, revealing the infinite universe.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Presumably manufactured in Egypt or in the eastern part of the Empire: Künzl 1998: 45-46; Di Pasquale 2009: 140 (Fig. III.1.7).

18 Ramazzotti 2009a: 54-65.

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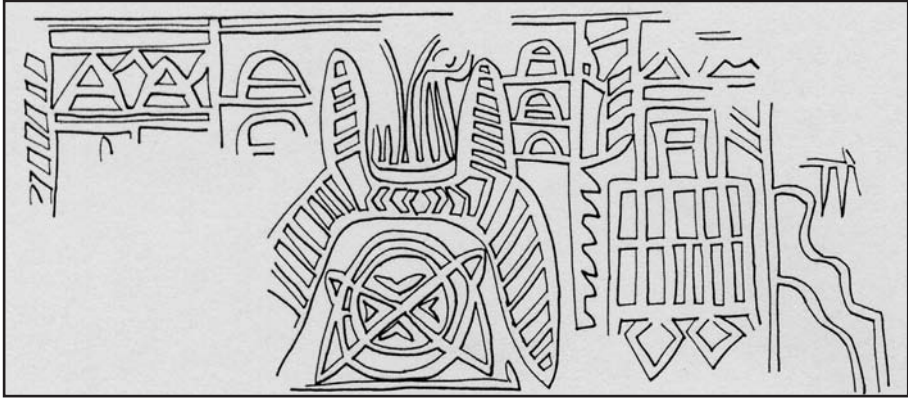


Fig. 1: Ur seal impression.

Source: Matthews 1993: fig. 15/32.



Fig. 2: The Ebla *Maliktum* from the Royal Palace G.

Source: MAIS Archive, La Sapienza.

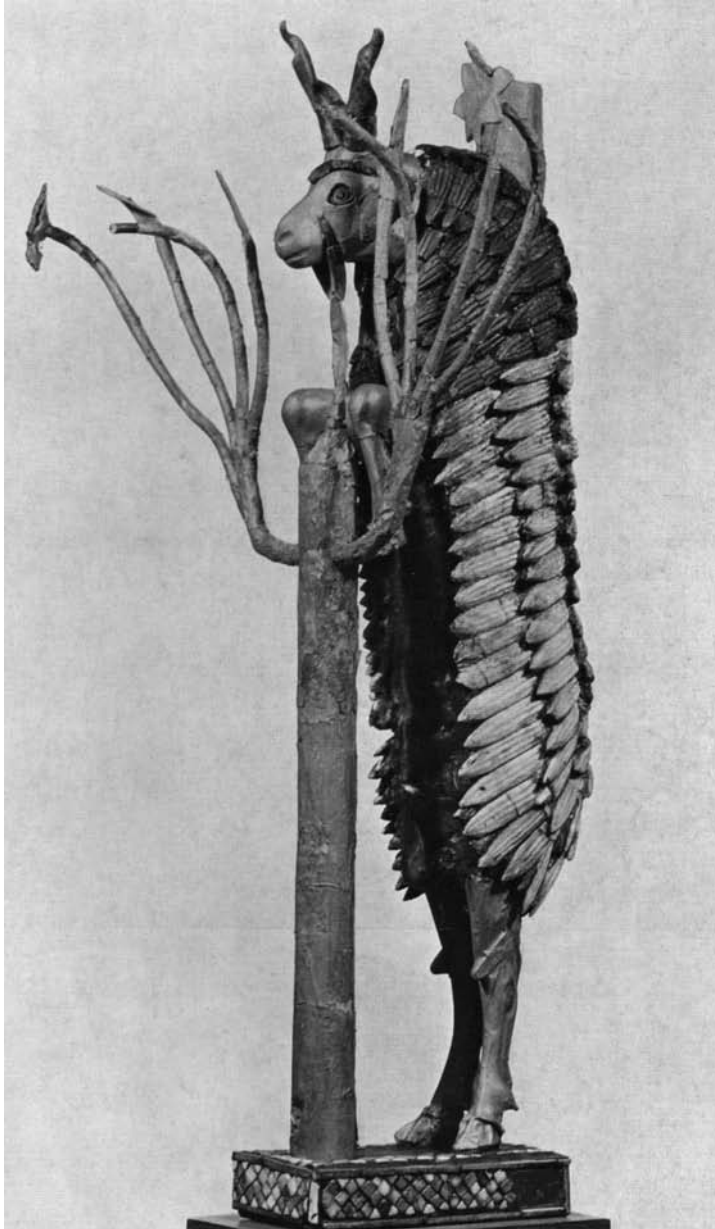


Fig. 3: *The Ram Caught in a Thicket* from the Royal Cemetery of Ur.  
Source: British Museum.

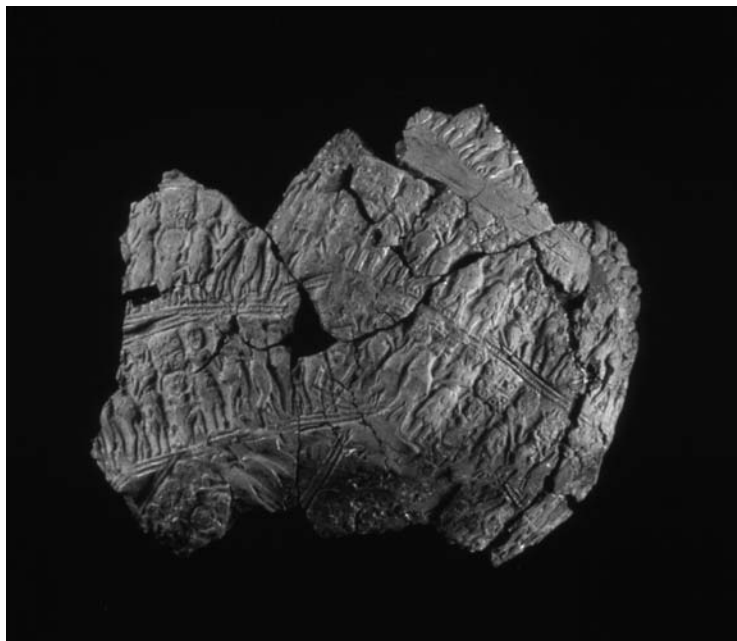


Fig. 4: The Early Syrian *cretula* from the Royal Palace G.  
Source: MAIS Archive, La Sapienza.



Fig. 5: The figurative reconstruction of the Early Syrian cylinder seals.  
Source: MAIS Archive, La Sapienza.



Fig. 6: The *Bassetki Copper Statue*.  
Source: Baghdad Museum.

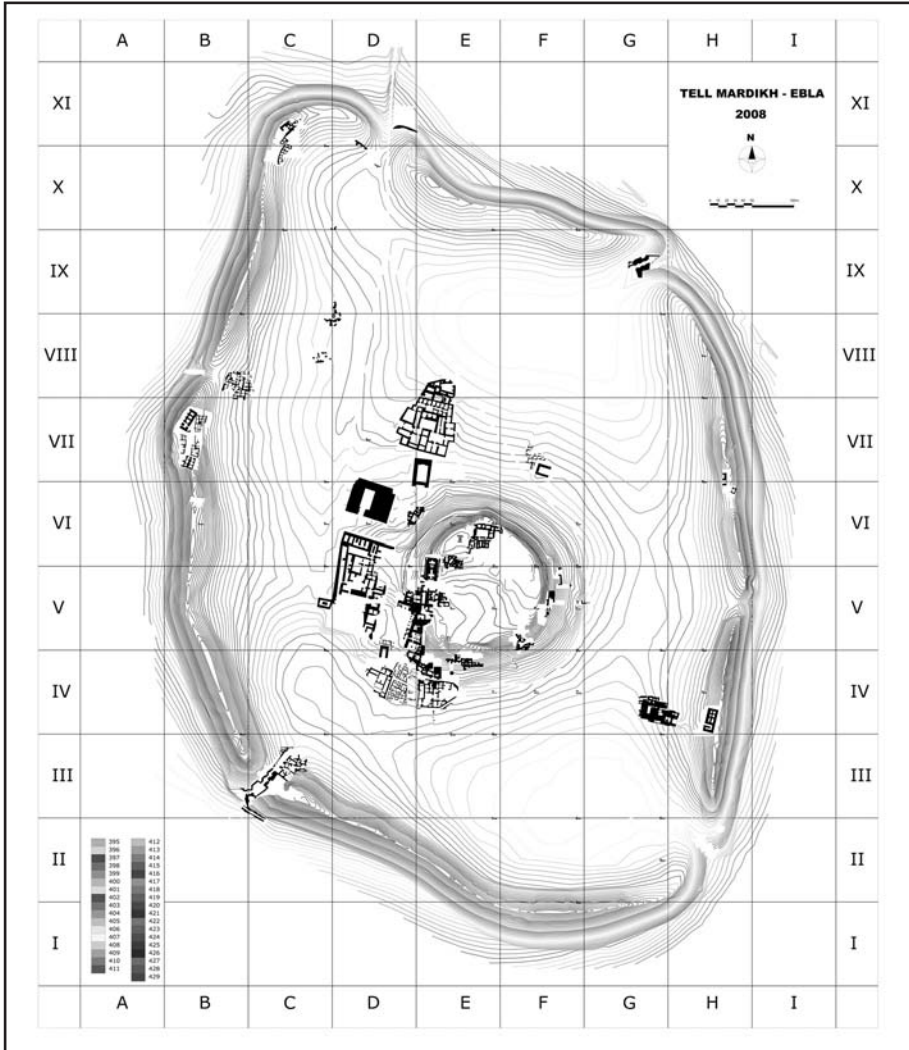


Fig. 7: The Topography of Ebla during the Middle Bronze Age.  
Source: MAIS Archive, La Sapienza.





Fig. 8: The Babylonian World Map WA92687.  
Source: British Museum.



Fig. 9: Vatican Code Ar. 553.

Source: Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.



Fig. 10a: The Ebla Atlas graphic reconstruction.  
Source: MAIS Archive, La Sapienza.



Fig. 10b: The marble statue of the  
Farnese Atlas 42695D .  
Source: Römisch-Germanisches  
Zentrumuseum, Mainz.

