

Ritual Practices and the Emergence of Social Complexity in the Upper Tigris Region at the Beginning of the Second Millennium BC

o. Introduction

Social complexity is not necessarily linked to large urban centers and state-level societies. It can also be characterized by a complex system of interaction between ceremonial and productive dimensions that may be recognizable in rural contexts and among small-scale societies. This kind of approach supports a broader research trajectory that focuses not only on major cities, but also on more peripheral, rural regions and small-sized sites in which elements of social complexity can be found in the material remains of ritual practices and craft production. Such is the case of the upper Tigris region during the beginning of the second millennium BC, when the whole area was marked by the emergence of numerous small-sized settlements, some of which are characterized by a high density of ritual paraphernalia found discarded within architectural contexts (Laneri / Schwartz 2011).

To further investigate the emergence of social complexity in this region, the theoretical concepts of heterarchy, middle-level settlements, and rural complexity will be deployed in the analysis of the Middle Bronze Age architectural complex excavated at the small-sized site of Hirbemerdon Tepe in southeastern Turkey. In so doing, I will test the theoretical framework considered here by examining archaeological data that shows evidence of the materialization of ideological power in a ceremonial context (Demarraïs *et al.* 1996). Particular emphasis will be placed on the relationship between ceremonial activities, iconographic representations, and the creation of new forms of religiosity in defining the political space of the societies that inhabited the upper Tigris region during the early second millennium BC.

1. Middle-level settlements and the use of heterarchy in archaeology

Since the work of Elman Service (1962), archaeologists have been investigating ancient forms of social organization following a linear progressive approach that expects an evolutionary trend from simple to complex societies (Haas 2001). The main focus of archaeological investigation has therefore been the analysis of the highest level of social complexity, that of state-level societies, in which the level of societal hierarchy has been interpreted as high, and hegemonically controlled by religious or royal elites (Crumley 2005, 41–42).

Until recently this unilinear evolutionary trend in archaeology defined most of the archaeological research into ancient complex societies in both the Old and New World through the investigation of large urban centers, but recent studies have challenged this kind of ‘stepped’ typological approach in defining organizational social complexity. Instead the focus is placed on a more dynamic and heterogeneous interpretation of aspects of ancient societal organization (Stein 1994; 1998; Ehrenreich *et al.* 1995; Matthews 2003; Beekman / Baden 2005; Yoffee 2005; Gerritsen 2006; Ristvet 2008) and, especially, on regions that are peripheral to areas with a high degree of urbanization (Schwartz / Falconer 1994; Canuto / Yagaer 2000; Iannone / Connell 2003; Mac Sweeney 2011). As a consequence, a simplistic sys-

temic approach to the interpretation of the settlement patterns of complex societies that contemplates only hierarchical types of social relations has been replaced by dynamic models that envision the archaeological data within a more fluid interpretive framework of operative variables (e.g., site functions, type of social relations and affiliations at both the site and regional level: Schortman / Urban 2003).

In this respect, Carole L. Crumley's use of 'heterarchy' in the fields of history and archaeology appears to be the most innovative and appropriate approach for dealing with regions that are marginal to urban centers, as can be seen in the upper Tigris region during the Middle Bronze Age (Crumley 1995; 2003; 2005). According to Crumley (1995, 3), "heterarchy is the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked, or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways depending on systemic requirements," and also "heterarchy does not stand alone but is in a dialectical relationship with hierarchy" (Crumley 2005, 40). Important factors in determining a heterarchical form of social organization are the distribution of decision-making among different agents and, more importantly, shared or dispersed leadership (Crumley 2005, 46). A heterarchical system can therefore better survive dramatic changes, as compared to urbanized societies that are controlled by a hierarchical management of subsistence strategies. Most importantly, a heterarchical form of social organization can be more resilient to historical or environmental change, because it can easily remodel its subsistence strategies through the participation of all the agents involved in societal politics. Following this theoretical perspective, the dynamics of social organization can be viewed as 'fuzzy' networks with poorly defined and contingent boundaries formed through differential and constantly shifting patterns of cooperation and competition among emergent elites and other groups (Stein 1998, 6).

As demonstrated by the innovative analysis of the peripheral regions in the ancient Maya world by Gyles Iannone and Simon V. Connell (2003), a heterarchical model of inference of the archaeological data better fits rural areas that appear to have a more variable and dispersive type of power control. The two authors, following in the footsteps of Glenn M. Schwartz and Steven E. Falconer (1994), challenge and redefine the rural/urban dichotomy by introducing a new form of syncretism – termed 'rural complexity' – which is located around sites that show complicated grades of variability in both type and level of complexity. These are minor centers that contain ceremonial features (e.g., temples, altars, plazas, decorated stelae) usually found in the large Maya urban centers (Iannone / Connell 2003, 2). To define these smaller sites, the concept of 'middle-level settlement' has been introduced and is used to describe the minor centers located in rural areas that have large 'civic' structures, suggesting "that these sites had a degree of religious, political, and economic control" (Iannone / Connell 2003, 3).

A similar type of settlement pattern can be recognized in the upper Tigris valley during the Middle Bronze Age (*ca.* 2000–1600 BC). Whereas in northern Mesopotamia this chronological phase is characterized by the phenomenon of increasing urbanization, the creation of dynamic regional kingdoms, and a subsistence economy that combines pastoral and agricultural activities (e.g., the northeastern Syrian region of the Jazirah: Akkermans / Schwartz 2003, 288–326; Ristvet 2008), the upper Tigris region differs. It instead exhibits a settlement pattern formed by small-sized sites (i.e., no larger than 5 ha in extent, such is the case of Hirbemerdon Tepe, Salat Tepe, Üçtepe, Kavusan Tepe, Kenan Tepe, Giricano, Ziyaret Tepe, Müslümantepe: Ökse / Görmüş 2006; Özfırat 2006; Laneri *et al.* 2008; Laneri / Schwartz 2011). In particular, in the case of Hirbemerdon Tepe, the site is marked by the presence of an architectural complex that shows clear signs of specialized craft production and ceremonial activities as demonstrated by the presence of votive objects (e.g., decorated clay plaques, animal and human figurines, highly decorated vessels), and ceremonial architectural features (e.g., an altar, stone basins) found within the Middle Bronze Age complex (Laneri 2011).

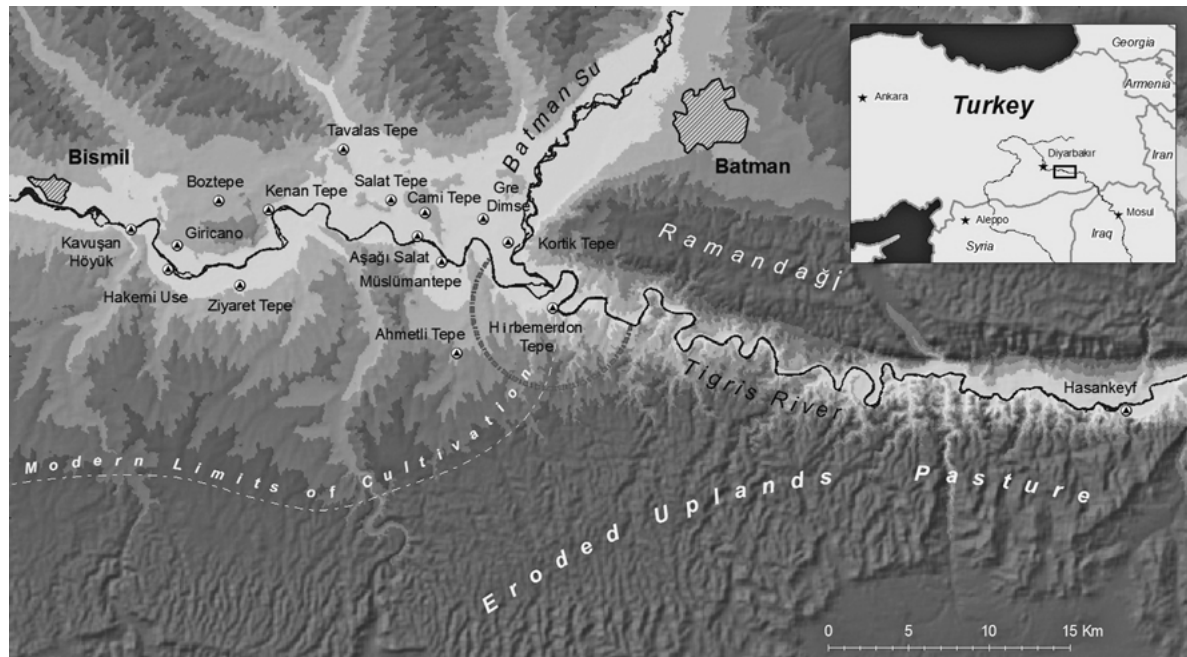


Fig. 1 | Map of the upper Tigris valley with the geographical position of Hirbemerdon Tepe (by Jason Ur).

2. The Middle Bronze Age architectural complex at Hirbemerdon Tepe

Hirbemerdon Tepe is a small-sized site located along the western bank of the upper Tigris valley, about 90 km southeast of the modern city of Diyarbakir (Turkey) and opposite the confluence with the Batman Su in southeastern Turkey (fig. 1). The geological morphology of the area has strongly influenced the separation of the ancient settlements at the site into a High Mound (*ca.* 1 ha in extent) and an Outer Town (*ca.* 2 ha in extent), standing on the river terrace proper below the High Mound (Laneri 2005; 2008). The site is located in a strategic position near the river (to the east) and at the junction between agricultural lands (to the north) and uplands (to the south and the west). The fragmented nature of the ecological zone surrounding Hirbemerdon Tepe is an important factor in determining a mixed subsistence economy for the local population in which the combination of agricultural, pastoral, hunting, fishing, and commercial activities guaranteed a stronger resilience to climate changes and agricultural droughts, as compared to other, neighboring Mesopotamian regions (e.g., northeastern Syria).

The site is a multi-period settlement, but the Middle Bronze Age phase (i.e., *ca.* 2000–1600 BC) is the most important of the archaeological periods recognized during the excavation. Dating to this phase is an architectural complex that was unearthed on the northern side of the High Mound. The complex was probably not larger than 5000–6000 m² and combined specialized work activities, located in the northern and southern sectors, with ceremonial spaces, placed in the more central part of the complex (figs. 2–3). It has been possible to excavate the northern part of the area (dedicated to work activities), which is characterized by a series of agglutinated, long, thin buildings along the main street (47), each with an entrance onto it, which are outfitted with numerous grinding stones that were used for processing food (Laneri *et al.* 2008).

The ceremonial sector (fig. 3) is separated from the productive areas by the previously mentioned street, running in an east-west direction, and is architecturally defined by two outdoor spaces (24 and 35)

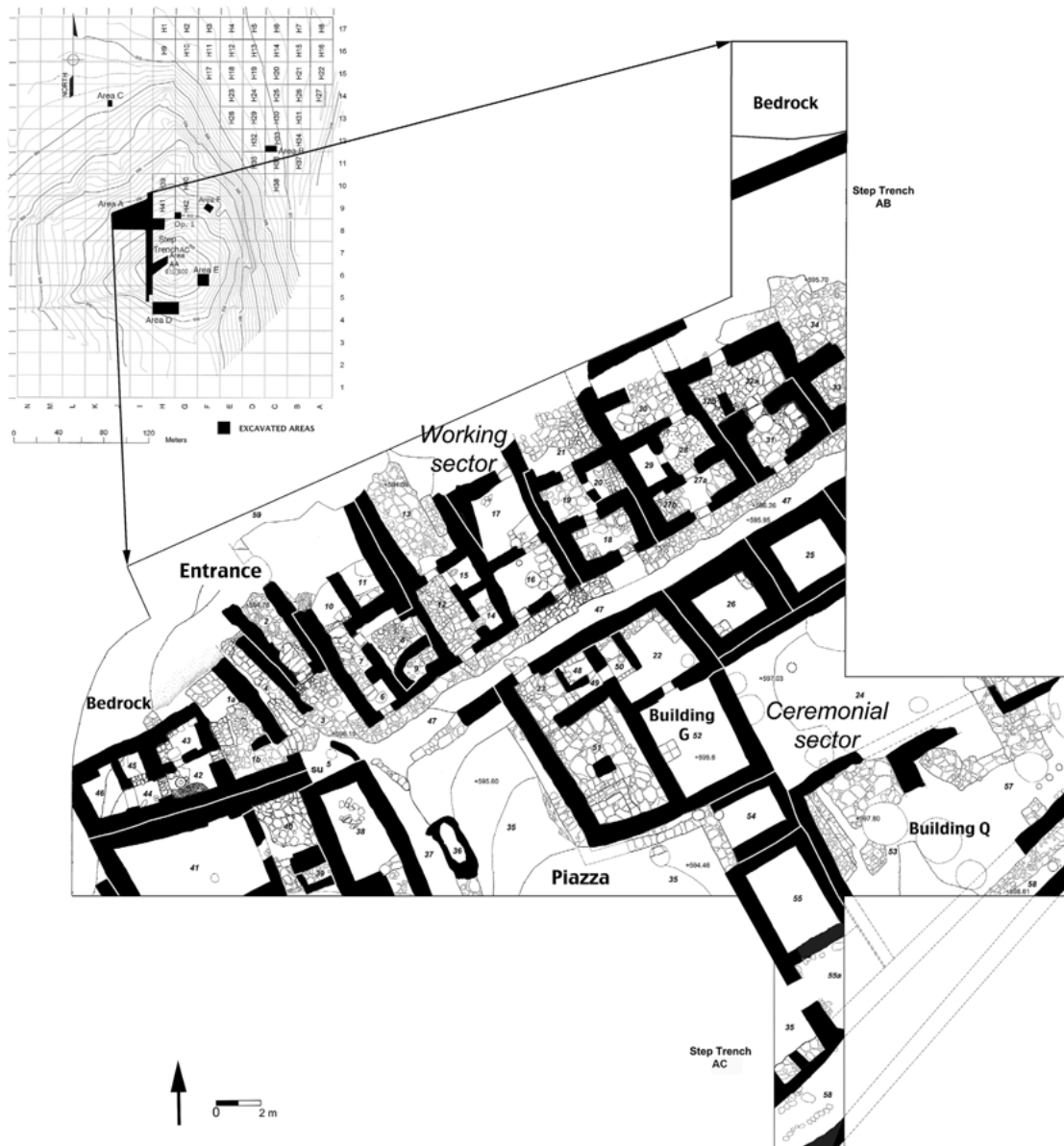


Fig. 2 | Map of the Middle Bronze Age architectural complex (by Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project).

and a series of large ceremonial buildings located further east. Some of these buildings show clear elements of monumentality and of ceremonial functionality (e.g., large rooms, the use of large flagstones for some of the rooms' floors, wide external walls, altars) when compared to the buildings of the more specialized areas. This is especially recognizable in the case of Building G, where a ritual foundation deposit of a newborn pig was found. The ceremonial sector is also characterized by the presence of discarded and purposely broken ritual objects, such as elaborately decorated ceramic vessels (e.g., a vessel painted with a stylized 'dancing' deer motif inserted within triangles), human and animal fired clay figurines, and numerous fragments of decorated fired clay votive plaques (fig. 4), disposed of next to a stone basin (36) in one of the outdoor spaces (35, i.e., the *piazza*: Laneri 2008; 2011).



Fig. 3 | Photograph (from south) of part of the Middle Bronze Age architectural complex highlighting the architectural features of the ceremonial sector (by Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project).

Together these elements suggest that the complex contains not only architectural features, but also material culture strongly associated with ceremonial practices. However, specialized craft production was also practiced at the site, as is suggested by the data yielded by the excavation of the buildings located along the complex's perimeter (Laneri *et al.* 2008). These activities may have been related to the performance of ritual practices, reinforcing the possibility of the existence of a 'ritual mode of production' that was enacted similarly to other examples known among small-scale societies of both ancient and modern times (Spielmann 2002; 2008). The interpretation of the architectural complex as a sort of rock sanctuary is also supported by the presence of numerous fired clay votive plaques decorated with a central standing human figure, a spout protruding out from underneath it, bands with geometric decorative motifs located around the figure, and a hole on top for hanging the plaque. The almost total lack of similar plaques from other Middle Bronze Age sites in the region and the fact that the plaques differ in their clay fabrics, modelling techniques, and in the geometric decorative motifs that frame the human figures suggest that these objects were probably brought to the site from other contexts, probably as part of a sort of pilgrimage route from the river valley to the uplands. This journey was probably associated with pastoral and hunting activities pursued around the site, a conclusion supported by the high density of deer bones found within the architectural complex (Laneri *et al.* 2008). In addition, the presence of a complex system for collecting rainwater, consisting of drains and numerous basins dotting the outdoor



Fig. 4 | A decorated votive plaque found within the Middle Bronze Age architectural complex (by Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project).

spaces, can also be associated with the high value that another important natural element – water – had in the enactment of ritual performances (Laneri 2011). Furthermore, the spouts on the votive plaques may have functioned as a mnemonic element that connected the cognitive schemata of the people to a ritualistic use of water and the basins located within the outdoor spaces.

Thus, Hirbemerdon Tepe's ceremonial architectural complex must have been pivotal for the affirmation of the religious power embodied by this specific locale within the social and political space of the upper Tigris region during the early second millennium BC. In addition, the creation and use of symbolic objects (i.e., the ritual paraphernalia) during the performance of ceremonial activities in the central sector of the architectural complex would have further increased the ideological power of the groups controlling the ritual performances through their connection with the religious sphere (Earle 1997, 151–158). It is in fact in the *piazza*, and more specifically near the stone basin, that most of the ritual paraphernalia was found during the excavation. These objects were purposely fragmented and then disposed of in the form of a ritual deposit (similar to an ancient Greek *favissa*). Consequently, this locale should have had a specific purpose in the performance of rituals that connected the participants to a spiritual dimension, probably reached through the voluntary fragmentation of ceremonial objects at the end of their life-histories (Chapman 2000; Chapman / Gaydarska 2007).

3. Discussion

The end of the third millennium BC is marked by a dramatic shift in settlement patterns in some areas of northern Mesopotamia and southeastern Anatolia (e.g., the Jazirah region in northeastern Syria), due to a combination of environmental (i.e., abrupt climatic changes and, as a consequence, the phenomena of desertification and long periods of agricultural drought, Weiss / Bradley 2001) and historical factors (e.g., the collapse of the Akkadian empire, Yoffee 2005, 140–160). As a consequence, the entire area shows a transformation in socioeconomic dynamics characterized by the collapse of the major urban centers (Akkermans / Schwartz 2003, 282–287). The following period (i.e., the early second millennium BC) exhibits a new social landscape, and settlement patterns in which urban centers are ‘re-generated’ (Cooper 2006) and small-to-medium sized polities hold increased power (Ristvet 2008). Numerous scholars have interpreted this socioeconomic transformation as a decrease in social complexity, marked by a tribal form of social organization, as increasing importance was given to pastoralism in the economic subsistence of northern Mesopotamian societies (Akkermans / Schwartz 2003, 288–326; Fleming 2004; Stein 2004; Cooper 2006; Ristvet 2008). In addition, the early second millennium BC features an increase in long-distance commercial exchange of commodities (i.e., tin, copper, gold, silver, semi-precious stones, ivory, textiles, wine, sesame oil) between private Mesopotamian merchants and communities inhabiting Iran, Anatolia, and the Persian Gulf (Larsen 1987; Barjamovic 2011).

These natural and historical events probably affected the upper Tigris region too, but strangely it created the background for demographic growth and, consequently, an increase in settlement density. The sudden explosion of small-sized sites (e.g., Salat Tepe, Üçtepe, Hirbemerdon Tepe, Kavusan Tepe, Kenan Tepe, Giricano, Ziyaret Tepe, Müslüman-tepe) sharing similarities in settlement patterns and locally produced material culture (e.g., Dark Rimmed Orange Bowls and the Red Brown Wash Ware ceramic assemblages) occurred during the late third millennium BC (Laneri *et al.* 2008, 187–192). However, it is only during the Middle Bronze Age (*ca.* 2000–1600 BC) that a new type of socioeconomic organization seems to supersede the previous social structure with its small centers which, as seen at Hirbemerdon Tepe, lead to the construction of monumental buildings containing areas for specialized work activities as well as centrally located ceremonial buildings (Laneri / Schwartz 2011). In this changing socioeconomic landscape we can probably envision new groups that used the materialization of ideological power (e.g., ceremonial buildings, decorated votive plaques, and highly decorated vessels) to establish a stronger connection with the natural landscape and to define new forms of political, religious, and social organization within the region (Demarraais *et al.* 1996).

It is within this political framework that archaeologists should envision the creation of objects with high symbolic meanings (e.g., the decorated votive plaques found at Hirbemerdon Tepe) in association with the performance of ritual acts in ceremonial spaces (e.g., the *piazza*), as well as the creation of an interconnection between the built environment and the natural landscape surrounding it (e.g., through the ritual use of water or deer within Hirbemerdon Tepe’s architectural complex).

Following this interpretation, the figurative ritual paraphernalia found at Hirbemerdon Tepe metaphorically speak a visual language that emphasizes the intermingling relationship between the iconic force of the represented human figure and the natural power of the libations poured in the spout. In fact, it is through aesthetic/ritual practices that an ideological power is possessed and manifested. This type of power can transcend all existing institutions and “create the possibility of greater cooperation or exploitation” by the participants of the ritual practices (Mann 1986, 23).

The social landscape emerging from the data available from Middle Bronze Age archaeological contexts within the upper Tigris region is of a polity in which an active engagement with nature is pivotal in framing the religiosity as well as the economic production and social organization of the communities inhabiting this specific area at this time (Ingold 2000). Such an approach to the religious aspects of nature and human–animal relations appears to be a distinctive feature of Anatolian polities from Neolithic periods and may have validated the power of leading groups during the Bronze Age.

This interpretation of the relationship between the ritual and economic domains at Hirbemerdon Tepe can be compared to other archaeological and historical examples, e.g., the pre-contact Hawaiian communities (Earle 1978), the communities of the Titicaca Basin during the Middle Formative Period (Stanish 2004), the early third millennium BC communities of the Syrian Jazirah (Schwartz 1994; 2000), that highlight similar patterns in the use of ideological power to establish the emergence of a new framework of political economies and ranked societies (Earle 1997, 143–192). In fact, it appears clear that, to obtain control over the economic resources, a group has to create a materialization of its ideological power, enacted through the creation of a meta-language. This language is based on symbolic elements (e.g., icons, highly decorated ceramic vessels, ceremonial buildings) and aims to consolidate sources of political, religious, and economic power (Demarrais *et al.* 1996).

It is evident from the archaeological data presented here that the social system of the communities inhabiting the upper Tigris region during the Middle Bronze Age was complex, variegated, and cannot be easily defined within predetermined categories (e.g., tribal or chiefdom). In fact, although sites in this region are small in size, some of them (e.g., Hirbemerdon Tepe) provide clear signs of the centralization of specialized production and the performance of complex ritual activities. Moreover, the lack of hierarchical differentiation within the settlement pattern of the sites of the upper Tigris region, the presence of identical forms of material culture, and the absence of administrative control suggest the possible presence of a ‘heterarchical’ form of social organization based on multicentrality and a network of distributed authority among different middle-level settlements in a regional system (Crumley 1995). As Crumley demonstrated in her analysis of the pre-classical Iron Age communities of Burgundy (France), in certain complex societies this system is more dynamic (and more resilient to climate changes) than a classic hierarchical social organization and is suitable in ecological zones characterized by a “diversity in resource location” (Crumley 2003, 136). The upper Tigris valley is such a zone, with uplands at the southern border (suitable for pastoral and hunting activities), flat areas (for dry-farming), and the river valley region (for flood-water irrigation, fishing, and transportation).

This type of approach converts a static, mechanistic picture of ancient societies (e.g., urban = complex vs. rural = simple) into a more dynamic vision that gives priority to the complexity of the archaeological data. Thus, the minor centers characterized by ceremonial activities and specialized production in the Middle Bronze Age in the upper Tigris valley can be interpreted following the ‘middle-level settlements’ model used by Iannone and Connell (2003) for the Maya sites of the upper Belize River valley, which foresees “interaction of hierarchical and heterarchical processes operating from variable forces across entire settlement systems” (Schortman / Urban 2003, 132). Moreover, some of the middle-level centers in the upper Tigris valley do not show traces of household activities (e.g., Hirbemerdon Tepe and Müslüman-tepe), and, consequently, this allows us to suggest the possibility of a system of dispersed settlements, in which some of these sites were probably only used for ceremonial and specialized work activities and housed local elite families. A settlement pattern similar to the one recognizable in the upper Tigris valley during the Middle Bronze Age was recognized by Glenn Schwartz (1994; 2000) in the Khabur region (northeastern Syria) during the first half of the third millennium BC. In this case, small cen-

ters (e.g., Tell Raqa'i) were tied to a network of villages that specialized in grain storage and processing and which show clear signs of the use of iconographies (e.g., frescoes) for ceremonial purposes within the productive complex (Dunham 1993; Schwartz 2000).

Small-sized sites and their related settlement patterns must now be investigated in order to better understand the functioning of the ancient socioeconomic landscape of regions characterized by the absence of major urban centers. This type of approach further emphasizes the heterogeneity of modes of societal organization (Stein 1994) in which the dynamics of social complexity may vary according to the necessities and the choices embraced by the communities involved.

4. Conclusion

A higher emphasis on defining the religious value of the natural resources was probably the best solution to the problem of how to protect the community and secure the economic stability of Hirbemerdon Tepe and other sites of the upper Tigris region during a period of dramatic natural and historical changes, such as the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennium BC. It is especially during the early second millennium BC that the level of complexity increased in the upper Tigris region through the establishment of powerful forms of ritual practice. However, in this transforming political, economic, and religious process, these communities continued to reside in small- to medium-sized settlements with clear elements of a heterarchical type of social organization, as is indicated by a lack of differentiation between sites. When this happens, as with Hirbemerdon Tepe, archaeologists can discern evidence that supports the identification of a middle-level settlement, in which elements of centralization, ceremonial, and specialized activities are not necessarily linked to large urban centers, but instead to sites marked by ritual practices.

Thus, the early second millennium BC in the upper Tigris region brought about a different type of social and political landscape, which was based on coordinating productive activities by reinforcing forms of ideological power associated with the creation of religious beliefs. Furthermore, the use of a sacred iconography (e.g., the images depicted in the decorated votive plaques) and the performance of ritual activities in centrally located ceremonial buildings and outdoor spaces became fundamental: it materialized an ideological power that clearly defined the roles played by these emerging groups in the socioeconomic organization of the society at both the site and regional level.

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