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Halaf Settlement in the Iraqi Kurdistan: the Shahrizor Survey Project

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1. Introduction

The archaeology of the Halaf period has seen a very significant increase over the past decades. This recent work almost exclusively focussed on Northern Syria and Southeastern Turkey, or Upper Mesopotamia (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003; Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2013). As scholarship returns to Iraqi Kurdistan, prehistorians bring implicit expectations and assumptions that are shaped to a large extent by the latest work in Upper Mesopotamia. At the same time, the various new projects are taking up the challenge of adapting the existing models to local expressions of the Halaf cultural idiom (Altaweel et al. 2012; Bonacossi and Lamoni 2015; Gavagnin et al. (forthcoming); Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016; Saber et al. 2014; Tsuneki et al. 2015; Ur et al. 2013). For the Halaf period, it is necessary to develop a fine-tuned chronological system that is sensitive to local internal sub-divisions in order to assess the significance of fluctuating site densities through time. The coarsely-grained chronological framework currently available only permits a generalized slicing-up of later prehistory into ‘Pre-Halaf’, ‘Halaf’ and ‘Ubaid’. Such broad chronological boundaries may well turn out to be less significant if these long periods can be split into more nuanced images of change and continuity. The ultimate aim is to develop local frameworks based on explicitly described parameters so as to facilitate inter-regional comparisons (Ball et al. 1989; Dittmann 1992; Ur 2010, 214-5; Wilkinson and Tucker 1995).

In this paper we would like to present the preliminary results from our ongoing investigation of the Halaf period in the Shahrizor Valley, situated on the eastern side of Iraqi Kurdistan. Our work forms part of the Shahrizor Survey Project (Altaweel et al. 2012; Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016). As a preliminary conclusion we argue that Late Neolithic communities in the Shahrizor actively participated in, and contributed to, the broader, supra-local Halaf stream of tradition, but did so in a regionally distinct manner. At the same time, we wish to highlight some methodological issues in the usage of survey data for later prehistoric periods such as the Halaf. We start with very briefly reviewing some recent work on Halaf settlement.

2. Recent Developments in Halaf Archaeology

The past decades have seen important shifts in the geographic focus of archaeological research into the Halaf period (5900-5300 cal. BC.). Serious explorations of Halaf period sites had taken place in northern Syria already in the early decades of the 20th century, with excavations at Tell Halaf, Chagar Bazar and Carchemish (Mallowan 1936; Von Oppenheim and Schmidt 1943; Woolley 1934). However, until the 1980’s, many archaeologists primarily based their interpretations of the Halaf cultural tradition on work in Northern Iraq. Important excavations had been conducted at Arpachiyah, Nineveh, Banahilk, Gawra and Songor, among others (Campbell 1995; Fujii 1981; Gut 1995; Kamada and Ohtsu 1993; Matsumoto and Yokoyama 1995; Tobler 1950; Watson 1983). Soon after the Second World War, Iraqi archaeologists for the first time began to systematically collect crucial information on Halaf settlement patterns, mapping the regional distribution, densities and size range of Halaf sites (Directorate General of Antiquities Baghdad 1970, 1976; Vértesalji et al. 1982). Ismail Hijara’s magnum opus perhaps represents the culmination of this body of work (Hijara 1997).

Since the mid 1980’s, political instability in Iraq has firmly swung the regional focus back to Upper Mesopotamia. The past three decades have seen an unprecedented wave of concerted research projects focussing explicitly on the Late Neolithic (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2013). Tremendous progress was made in understanding localized material culture sequences. For the first time since Mallowan devised his classic tri-partite chronology for the Halaf period, and in spite of continuing debates and a profound lack of consensus on specifics, Halaf scholars have been relatively successful in integrating relative chronologies with sound absolute dates (Akkermans 2014; Bernbeck and Nieuwenhuyse 2013; Campbell 1992; Cruells 2004, 2006, 2009, Cruells and Nieuwenhuyse 2005; Cruells et al. 2004). As a result, the temporal dimension of the Halaf period in Upper Mesopotamia is now relatively well understood, at least in its broad outlines.

The new wave of research addressed a suite of long-standing research issues. These included the question of Halaf origins, and its relations with contemporaneous cultural traditions such as the Hassuna and the Samarra (Akkermans 1989; Akkermans and Le Miére 1992; Akkermans and Verhoeven 1995; Cruells and Nieuwenhuyse 2005; Le Miére and Picon 2008; Nieuwenhuyse 2007; Tekin 2013). Much of this work addressed changes in ceramic style. This showed that in the broader Upper Mesopotamian area, ceramic
assemblages were transformed from being dominated by mostly plain, plant-tempered Coarse Ware, through a short-lived Transitional stage, to an assemblage dominated by fine, mineral-tempered Halaf Fine Ware (Le Miére and Nieuwenhuyse 1996). Intriguingly, during the Transitional (or Proto-Halaf) stage, the painted pottery closely resembled Hassuna and Samarra painted wares known from northern Iraq (Akkermans 1993; Campbell 1992; Nieuwenhuyse 2013). The final stages of the Halaf and its transformation into the Ubaid, too, were investigated with renewed vigour (Campbell and Fletcher 2010; Karsgaard 2010; Özbal 2010; Özbal and Gerritsen 2013). At several sites scholars excavated contexts attributed to the enigmatic Halaf Ubaid Transitional period, including Tell Aqah, Tell Halula, Chagar Bazar, and Tell Zaidan (Davidson 1977; Gomez Bach 2009, 2011; Gomez Bach et al. 2012; Stein 2009, 2012; Tunca and Baghdo 2006).

Others research projects explored Halaf settlement. Innovatively, regional surveys adopted systematic site sampling and artefact analysis to explicitly focus on the Halaf as a distinct cultural-chronological entity with its own diachronic sub-divisions (Akkermans 1993; Becker 2015; Campbell 1992; Koizbe 2013; Nieuwenhuyse 2000; Nieuwenhuyse and Wilkinson 2007; Ur 2010). As a result, we now understand the Halaf cultural landscape in Upper Mesopotamia as very heterogeneous, mostly inhabited by mobile, semi-pastoralist groups that were politically organized in a non-centralized fashion. Halaf settlement in Upper Mesopotamia was characterised by a dispersed, low-density pattern of small (<1 ha), often inconspicuous and short-lived sites. Sub-regional settlement systems included a few larger mounds (ca. 4–6 ha) with more permanent inhabitation, while across the region there are a few ‘mega sites’ (>15 ha). Rather than representing densely-inhabited ‘proto-urban’ villages, however, the latter have been interpreted as palimpsests of shifting site locations over the long term (Akkermans 2013). Finally, Upper Mesopotamian surveys suggest increasing site densities, a sharper site-size differentiation, and a more prominent tell formation by the later Halaf period (Akkermans 1993, 179–85; Becker 2015; Campbell 1992; Nieuwenhuyse 2000). So how does all this relate to Iraqi Kurdistan?

3. The Shahrizor Project

The study area presented here is the Shahrizor Plain, an intermountain valley at the headwaters of the Diyala River, bordering the chaîne magistrale of the western Zagros Mountains (see Mühl and Fassbinder, this vol., fig. 1.1). The valley extends between the modern towns of Arbat, Said Sadeq, Khurmal, and Halabja. The central and southern parts of the plain are seasonally covered by the Darband-i Khan Lake. Several perennial and seasonal water streams drain the plain and unite in the lake. The biggest of these is the Tanjerio River, which runs in a northwestern-southeastern direction. Several small streams are fed by artesian and karstic springs, the latter containing sulphur in the north-eastern part of the plain. With an average precipitation of about 550 mm, the region provides conditions eminently suitable for rain-fed agriculture, which is why it is also known as the ‘breadbasket of Kurdistan’.

The archaeological and historical remains of the plain were first described by adventurers, travellers and historians of the early 19th century, who often had a research interest mainly in ancient Assyria. Archaeological survey investigations and salvage excavations were carried out during the late 1950s and early 1960s by members of the Directorate General of Antiquities in Baghdad at prominent urban sites such as Yasin Tepe and Bakrawa, but also at prehistoric mounds like Girda Rash and Tell Begom (also Begum). After decades of gruesome conflict caused by the Iran-Iraq war and the Anfal campaign, renewed salvage projects began in 2003 and 2004 by the local Directorate of Antiquities in Sulaymaniyah (Saber et al. 2014).

Since 2009 the Directorate of Antiquities in Sulaymaniyah has been cooperating with an international team from the University of Munich, UCL London, University of Leiden and Heidelberg to survey archaeological sites in the Shahrizor Plain (Mühl and Fassbinder, this vol., Figure 1.1). The project focuses on the archaeology, history, and the past environmental conditions of this region and aims to reconstruct a viable material culture sequence for the later prehistoric periods (Altaweel et al. 2012; Mühl 2010, 2012, 2013). This includes the systematic surface collection of diagnostic sherds and small finds, as well as carrying out limited soundings at strategic sites to obtain sequences from stratigraphic contexts. The reconstruction of the paleoenvironment includes geomorphological studies, off-site and onsite sampling of paleobotanical remains, and involves the analysis of speleothems. From a total of 295 sites detected with remote sensing, eighty multi-period and single occupation sites were selected for physical surveying. Of these, seven can be attributed to the Halaf period with certainty (Fig. 1).

4. Reconstructing a Local Material Culture Assemblage

A first, essential step towards reconstructing the prehistory of the Shahrizor is building a local framework for the interpretation of the material evidence collected from the survey, mostly pottery sherds. Our team began with the classificatory framework for Late Neolithic ceramics developed in Upper Mesopotamia (Le Miére 2000; Nieuwenhuyse 2000; Ur 2010, 214–5), adopting it to the Shahrizor evidence. Evidently, some of the ceramic types characteristic for Upper Mesopotamia may not be present in the Shahrizor at all, or if they do occur they may show locally distinct properties. The
Shahrizor has yielded diagnostic types not identified elsewhere. Finally, excavations at Halaf sites in Iraqi Kurdistan sometimes contained Late Neolithic wares that as of now have no parallel in the Shahrizor surface finds. This holds especially for the coarse, mineral-tempered wares occurring at several Halafian sites (e.g. Watson 1983, 549), which are difficult to distinguish from the grit-tempered hand-made wares from other periods when found in non-stratified contexts. In preliminary fashion we distinguish the following ceramic categories for the Halaf period in the Shahrizor: Plant-tempered Coarse Ware, Halaf Fine Ware, Halaf Coarse Ware, and, potentially, Halaf-Ubaid-Transitional Fine Ware.

**Plant-tempered Coarse Ware**

Coarse, plant-tempered ceramics characterise the earliest horizon in Iraqi Kurdistan but they continued into the Hassuna/Samarra period (Lloyd and Safar 1945; Mortensen 1970; Tsuneki et al. 2015, 13). This thick-walled category was prepared from clay containing visible quantities of plant inclusions, typically leaving incompletely oxidized dark-coloured cores. Mostly roughly finished, it was sometimes decorated with red slips or paints. The Shahrizor Survey project yielded an enigmatic Plant-tempered Coarse Ware base fragment from Bestan Sur carrying an impression of coiled basketry (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2012). This pottery is not commonly attributed to the Halaf period. However, in Upper Mesopotamia it certainly continued into the initial stages of the Halaf period (Akkermans 1993; Le Miére and Nieuwenhuyse 1996). As we still do not know how the transition to the Halaf manifested itself locally, this category may therefore be relevant for identifying the very early stages of the Halaf period.

**Halaf Fine Ware**

Similar to Halaf sites across northern Iraq and the Upper Mesopotamian plains, the HFW from the Shahrizor was made of a relatively compact clay with few visible inclusions (Fig. 2). This ware was mostly fully oxidized in the firing, resulting in buffish to orange surface colours. Vessel shapes include a range of mostly convex-sided bowls but also bowls with a carinated contour or with S-shaped walls. Halaf Fine Ware was very often painted, but additional decorative techniques found in the Shahrizor include various sorts of surface manipulation (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016; Wengrow et al. 2016). Interestingly, preliminary impressions suggest that the Halaf pottery from the Shahrizor mostly dates to the Middle to Late Halaf. If corroborated by further study, this would fit with impressions emerging from renewed survey work on the Rania Plain, where the collected Halaf Fine Wares all seems to belong to a later Halaf horizon (Tsuneki et al. 2015). In stark contrast to northern Syria, the Shahrizor survey has so far not revealed any ‘transitional’ material between the Hassuna/Samarra and the Halaf. None of the Shahrizor sites presently investigated have yielded any examples of the rather distinctive Early Halaf (Halaf Ia), as is known from excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Arbid Abyad and many other sites in Northern Syria. Nor can we unequivocally confirm the presence of the traditional Early Halaf (Halaf Ib), as is known from

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**Figure 1. Numbers of later prehistoric sites per period in the Shahrizor Plain and estimated average site size according to the Shahrizor Survey (SSP) (after Mühl and Nieuwenhuyse in press).**
Tell Arpachiyah. Possible explanations may include one or several of the following: 1) a pattern of small, low Early Halaf mounds buried and invisible to modern surveys; 2) a lack of cultural continuity and a short-lived abandonment of the valley; or, perhaps more likely, 3) a different type of transition not yet understood (and hence, not yet visible). Local communities may have held on to Hassuna-Samarran styles for a longer period of time, only adopting Halafian stylistic traits in their ceramic repertoire at a later stage.

Halaf Coarse Ware

HCW sherds are thicker compared to HFW and often have incompletely oxidised cores. The containers were made of clay having many small mineral inclusions and, occasionally, small plant particles. This category may be difficult to identify with certainty in surface collections because it may resemble Ubaid and Late Chalcolithic materials. So far it has been recovered from stratified contexts only at Tell Begom (or Begum) and Tepe Marani (Nieuwenhuys et al. 2016; Wengrow et al. 2016). At these sites it comes from layers dated to the final stages of the Halaf period and the so-called Halaf-Ubaid-Transitional.

HUT Fine Ware

A locally well-attested ceramic category may be the polychrome-painted pottery that Ismail Hijara (1997) already dated to a Halaf-Ubaid Transitional stage on comparative grounds (Fig. 2). While it resembled in many respects the iconic Late Halaf pottery from Tell Arpachiyah (Mallowan and Cruickshank-Rose 1935), it was sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate chronological slot post in dating the Arpachiyah finds. Hijara’s interpretation has recently found support in a series of radiocarbon dates from Tepe Marani and Qalat Said Ahmadan that place this category in the mid-late sixth millennium BC (Tsuneki et al. 2015; Wengrow et al. 2016). It should be emphasized here that sherds classified in this group do not always carry polychrome
painted decoration; monochrome paint also occurs, while some HUT-FW sherds do not carry any decoration at all. Incised and impressed decoration is also found occasionally (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016; Tsuneki et al. 2015).

At first sight, the range of HUT-FW vessel shapes and decorative designs fall within the incredibly diverse range of Halaf-Ubaid-Transitional painted Fine Ware styles known from sites across northern Iraq and northern Syria (Cruells et al. 2013; Davidson 1977; Gomez Bach 2009, 2011; Tobler 1950). However, certain ceramic-technological choices make this material distinctive, in particular the use of clay containing plant inclusions. Clearly visible to the naked eye, these do not appear to be accidental inclusions forming part of the natural clays selected by the potters, but intentionally added as a temper. For making Halaf Fine Ware this has so far not been recorded from any of the Upper Mesopotamian Halaf sites. As well, the extraordinary versatility of the polychrome-painted designs known so far find no close match elsewhere apart from in Iraqi Kurdistan itself. Within the Shahrizor, surface collections at Tell Qortas produced very similar pottery (Mühl and Nieuwenhuyse in press), as have the excavations at Gurga Chiya and Tepe Marani (Wengrow et al. 2016). Qalat Said Ahmadan on the Rania Plain produced closely comparable pottery (Tsuneki et al. 2015).

5. Emerging Halaf Settlement

Previous surveys of the Shahrizor region resulted in the identification of just two Halaf sites, Tell Begom and Tell Sragon (Fig. 3); the Shahrizor Survey Project increased this to a total of seven (Fig. 4). With a total of twenty-two identified sites, the Ubaid period sites are much better represented by comparison. Taking into account the number of sites that have both Halaf and Ubaid period occupation, we estimate that several ‘transitional’ sites, both in a chronological and a ceramic-typological sense, will be discovered in the future.

Interestingly enough, only the number of sites increases after the Halaf period, and not their estimated size (Fig. 1). The average site size fluctuates within a rather narrow margin at ca. 2 ha; at single occupation sites it is mostly less than 1 ha. Some Halaf sites that continue into the Ubaid cover areas up to 3, and rarely 5 ha. Tell Begom

![Figure 3. Map of the Shahrizor showing the locations of Halaf sites known in the 1980's. No. 203: Tell Sragon; No. 204: Tell Begom (after Hijara 1997: 90, fig. 99).](image-url)
would be an example of the latter. Such continuity in settlement size might suggest a continuity in the overall village layout and building traditions. However, as no architectural remains dated to the Halaf period have so far been properly excavated in our region, we remain ill informed on the use of space, the size of the households or the layout of the local Halaf village in comparison with Ubaid and Late Chalcolithic buildings and settlements (Forest 1999; Jasim 1985; Kubba 1998; Rothman 2002).

Typically, sherd quantities for Neolithic sites are often minimal. Five pieces or even less are not uncommon at multi-period settlement mounds (Altaweel et al. 2012, 20). Prehistoric flat sites, which comprise only one or few phases of occupation, usually produce more pieces but never as much as later, historic sites. This raises the key issue of visibility of early sites.

Ongoing geomorphological work in the region attests to a very significant Holocene sedimentation in the plain (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016). This may have caused the burial of a significant number of low settlement mounds that were probably characteristic for Halaf settlement. Following the Upper Mesopotamian model, most of these would have been fairly small (less than 0.5 ha) and easily covered. The category of buried settlements may include large but relatively low mounds resulting from prolonged, but shifting, human settlement within a circumscribed location (Akkermans 2013; Bernbeck 2013). In other words, even a local Halaf ‘mega site’ might be easily missed (lamoni forthcoming). More prominent tell sites such as Tell Begom may or may not be typical for Halaf settlement in the Shahrizor: preliminary investigations suggest that this site may sit on a natural elevation in an early Holocene landscape that was
less flat than today. Future geomorphological study is essential to understand more fully the complex interplay between landscape formation, human settlement and archaeological visibility.

Taking the evidence for what it is, settlement intensity appears to have been very low throughout the Late Neolithic. Presently our analysis has not reached sufficient chronological sensitivity to allow for the identification of time trends during the Halaf. What we can say presently is that the majority of the painted Halaf Fine Ware studied appears to date to the Middle-Late phases of the Halaf period according to the Upper Mesopotamian framework, also termed Halaf II (Campbell 1992). Possibly this suggests an increase in Halaf site density during the later Halaf, similar to the picture in Upper Mesopotamia (Akkermans 1993; Becker 2015; Campbell 1992; Nieuwenhuyse 2000). It may also mean, alternatively, that Halaf cultural influences reached our region relatively late.

The number of sites where transitional Halaf-Ubaid pottery is tentatively identified remains rather low. So far just two sites yielded ‘Transitional’ diagnostics: Tell Begom and Qortas. This low number may reflect the low visibility of Halaf sites in general. It is also possible, simply, that this image is realistic. The Shahrizor may have been very sparsely inhabited during this phase. However, a perhaps more likely explanation may lie in our struggle with identifying the corresponding transitional pottery. In northern Syria, too, the HUT has been difficult to identify in regional surveys (Nieuwenhuyse 2000). Many potentially diagnostic types persisted over long periods while distinctive, chronologically sensitive transitional types may be the exception.

Unequivocal evidence of ‘Halaf centers’ – as provisionally defined by sites of more than 5 ha in size surrounded by smaller sites (Iamoni forthcoming) – is rare. Yet, even if we emphasize that only excavation can inform us about relationships between sites, several more intensely-surveyed sample areas exhibit distinct, perhaps clustered occupation patterns. One of these is situated along Wadi Shamlu on the northern edge of the Darband-i Khan Lake (Fig. 4: area A). Previous work had identified just three sites; the Shahrizor Survey Project showed an additional 27 mounds on both banks of Wadi Shamlu. They seem to have formed smaller clusters surrounding the middle-sized tell sites of Tell Begom, Gird-i Shamlu and Tell Qortas. The cluster around Tell Begom and the main site of Tell Qortas can in their entirety be dated to the Halaf period, and continuing into the Ubaid and Late Chalcolithic periods.

Tell Begom in fact consists of several small, low sites clustering around the main mound of Tell Begom. The pottery collected from this cluster mostly dates to the Halaf, Ubaid, and Late Chalcolithic periods (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016). Tell Begom itself is made up of a conical mound and a long elevated saddle-shaped lower town. A surface collection yielded a ceramic assemblage that in many respects closely reflects the sequence attested both in earlier Iraqi excavations and in more recent soundings (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2016). In addition to medieval and Bronze Age materials from the uppermost layers, both the surface collection and the excavations yielded material dating to the Late Halaf and the Ubaid periods, as well as levels dating to an early stage of the Late Chalcolithic. There can be little doubt that Tell Begom was a regionally important place in Late Halaf times.

6. Concluding Remarks

The Shahrizor plain holds great promise for researching the Halaf period. At the same time, the renewed survey work now ongoing in the Shahrizor, as in other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan, highlights the challenges in further interpretation. Archaeologists are facing an urgent need for local material sequences to make sense of accumulating survey data (Tsuneki et al. 2015, 31). The issues of landscape formation and site visibility are particularly pertinent to the interpretation of Halaf settlement. Compared to later periods, Halaf sites are relatively ‘invisible’. In landscapes characterised by significant Holocene sedimentation, such as the Shahrizor, smaller, lower tell sites may be completely overlooked, biasing socio-economic reconstructions based on site densities and inter-site relationships.

Situated on the eastern parts of the classic Mesopotamian realm, later prehistoric communities in the Shahrizor certainly participated in the Halaf cultural tradition. However, they appear to have done so in a locally distinct manner. For one, the local chronologies likely differ from those in Upper Mesopotamia, especially at the onset of the Halaf. The absence so far of any signs of cultural continuity between the Hasuna/Samarra and Halaf phases, and the apparent absence of unequivocally dated Early Halaf materials are intriguing given abundant visibility of these stylistic horizons across the Northern Syrian plains. The absence of these diagnostics in the Shahrizor invites several explanations, certainly not mutually exclusive, including: a prevalence of mobile groups resulting in the spread of small, low sites that now lie deeply buried below later sedimentation; a temporary abandonment of the valley during the Early Halaf; or a local transitional horizon that we cannot yet identify. Tsuneki et al. (2015, 31) have recently suggested that Halaf cultural influences reached the Rania Plain relatively late in the Halaf cultural sequence. Might a similar scenario apply to the Shahrizor?

As to the later Halaf, the stunning polychrome-painted Halaf Fine Ware pottery from Tell Begom and Qortas perhaps suggests a locally distinct approach to the
production and consumption of painted ceramics during the final stages of the period. Such local variability operating within a shared repertoire of cultural forms during the Halaf should of course not surprise us entirely. Archaeologists working in the westernmost provinces of the extraordinary Halaf distribution are familiar with a suite of ‘western’ or ‘Northern-Levantine’ local expressions of the Halaf idiom (Nieuwenhuyse forthcoming; Özbal and Geritsen 2013; Tsuneki et al. 2000). Further archaeometric studies of this intriguing ceramic tradition is called for, in order to situate this ‘Zagros’ tradition within the broader repertoire of the Mesopotamian Halaf.

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