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The Ceremonial Precinct of Canaanite Hazor

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THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE
AT ZEYTINLI BAHÇE HÖYÜK - BIRECIK (URFA-TURKEY):
THE FORTIFIED STRUCTURE

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ABSTRACT

The mound of Zeytinli Bahçe is 2 km south of the town of Birecik, on the left bank of the river Euphrates, in the Şanlıurfa province, South-Eastern Turkey. The investigations of the Italian team have documented a long occupation starting with the Late Chalcolithic period (4th millennium BC) and ending in medieval times. The long sequence at the site brings light to many chronological and cultural characters of the region and thus contributes greatly to the knowledge of the history of this western region of Upper Mesopotamia in the moments of formation and development of the first urban societies.

It is, above all, with the Middle Bronze, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, that we assist at a radical change at Zeytinli Bahçe, testified by the presence of a monumental structure on the highest point of the mound. It is a mud brick fortified structure, with a wide tower and adjacent rooms, in which in situ materials have been found. A street appears to follow, on the exterior, the walls of the structure, that could be considered a kind of citadel, or rather a military outpost, the interior of which, though, we still do not know. In this period Zeytinli Bahçe takes part in the strong cultural connections and economic-commercial relations of the neighbouring reign of Carchemish, and it evidences strong contacts with the contemporary sites of Northern Syria and South-Eastern Turkey. This Middle Bronze occupation at Zeytinli Bahçe ends with a devastating fire, that destroyed the whole structure.

The site of Zeytinli Bahçe is 2 km south of the town of Birecik, on the left bank of the river Euphrates, in the Şanlıurfa province, South-Eastern Turkey. Investigations at the site have started in 1999, under the joint direction of the Urfa Archaeological Museum and the Italian Archaeological Expedition of the Sapienza University of Rome.¹ The mound, which extends 2,6 ha and has a height above the surrounding plain of 31 m is rather imposing and visible from a vast area around it (Fig. 1). The investigations of the Italian team have documented a long occupation starting with the Late Chalcolithic period (4th millennium BC) and ending in medieval times; the latter

1 Frangipane *et al.* 2001; 2002; 2004; 2005; 2006; Balossi *et al.* 2007.

2 Alvaro *et al.* 2004.

occupation is characterised by a monumental Byzantine fortress.² The long sequence at the site brings light to many chronological and cultural characters of the region and thus contributes greatly to the knowledge of the history of this western region of Upper Mesopotamia in the moments of formation and development of the first urban societies.

It is, above all, with the Middle Bronze, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, that we assist at a radical change at Zeytinli Bahçe. The occupation of this period is testified by an impressive structure, that might be the forepart of a much larger fortified building (Fig. 2). This 'palace-like structure', probably forms the original nucleus of the central conical mound of Zeytinli Bahçe. The whole structure is built directly on a large stone platform-like base. Mud brick walls are preserved to a width of 3 m. Identified in the structure is a rectangular room (A80) with a very narrow passage to the west and a second entrance, only slightly wider, to the south. On the floor of this second entrance, blank 'sealings' have been discovered, whilst, just next to the first step exiting the room, but covered by the floor preparation, a stone with incised signs was found. On the eastern side of the building, a wide corridor leads towards the centre of the cone and might possibly represent the main entrance to the Middle Bronze Age palace/citadel. This is, in fact, what we might call a small street (A189), at the sides of which runs a wide plastered bench, and bordered by the high walls of the structure.

Recent excavations have partially brought to light another room, probably rectangular (A248), associated with the monumental structure. The entrance to this room, sealed in a second moment, is from a small pathway along the outside perimeter of the building (A285), which is the continuation of the street uncovered in the past years, to the South-East. Just outside the entrance to the room, a well made spearhead with a tubular tang has been found (Fig. 3),³ further underlining the specific, possibly defensive, function of this building. A group of small bronze utensils (Fig. 4), kept together by a spiral have also been found in the room. A part from pottery, there are also various basalt mortars, one of which is a very elegantly made tripod (Fig. 5). It is possible that this structure thus had a double function: for defense and for the storage of staples.

The pottery from this monumental area, mainly composed by small jars and bowls, has evident parallels in the Middle Bronze Age levels of Lidar Höyük and, in particular, such shapes are attributed to the most recent phases of the period.⁴ At Tilbeshar, these shapes are illustrated amongst those of Middle Bronze II.⁵ Further comparisons are also evident from the Middle Bronze Age levels of Şaraga Höyük,⁶ and, with this site, similarities are rather strong for most of the material culture assemblage of Zeytinli Bahçe.

3 Comparable to Kültepe level 1b, Özgüç 2003: 246, Fig. 261.

4 Kaschau 1999.

5 Kepinski-Lecomte, Ergeç 1999.

6 Sertok, Kulakoğlu 2002.

The extra-mural occupation must not have extended over a vast area, but in a small, eastern side of the mound, Middle Bronze Age domestic and activity structures have been identified. Of particular interest is a potter's area, recognised by the presence of clay wastes, deformed ceramic fragments and traces of a furnace (not yet excavated). This confirms the presence of specialised activities at the site.

Chronology of these structures is given by the ceramic assemblage, which appears to be globally coherent with Middle Bronze Age II contexts of the region. Only a few fragments, amongst those preliminarily analysed, could be dated to an earlier period. The radiocarbon datings of Zeytinli Bahçe have a maximum overlapping interval (five charcoal samples out of five from the floor of Room A80) of 2028-1980 BC calibrated (the datings were carried out by Prof. Gilberto Calderoni, ¹⁴C Date Laboratory, Department of Earth Sciences, 'Sapienza' University of Rome). Such dates, if compared with those of Lidar,⁷ would appear to antedate Middle Bronze II of at least one century. At Zeytinli Bahçe a phase most clearly attributed to the Middle Bronze Age I has not yet been identified.

A radical change marked the passage from the last Early Bronze Age activity area and domestic occupation and the Middle Bronze Age II fortification. The phenomenon of the abandonment of sites at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age is observed in several settlements of the Carchemish area. The character of the Middle Bronze II settlements of the region bring to the impression that the Middle Bronze II sees the development of fortified centres of minor importance, as Zeytinli Bahçe, with a rather strong cultural cohesion and probably all rotating around a larger regional centre, which could have been Carchemish. This centre probably exercised some control over the other sites, which still maintained, though, a certain autonomy.

The whole Middle Bronze Age building of Zeytinli Bahçe has been destroyed by a sudden and violent fire, and completely sealed by its own collapsed walls and wooden beams.

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Fig. 1: View of the site of Zeytinli Bahçe from the west.

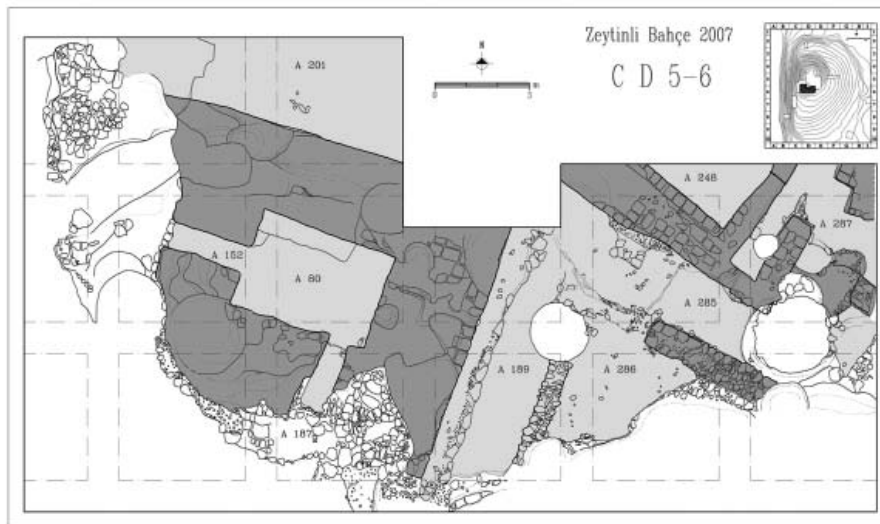


Fig. 2: The Middle Bronze II fortified structure in trench D5-6.



Fig. 3: Spearhead with tubular tang, from Room A287.



Fig. 4: Group of bronze utensils.



Fig. 5 : Stone tripod mortar, from Room A248.