

NEW RESEARCH ON MIDDLE BRONZE AGE CHRONOLOGY OF WESTERN SYRIA

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In my paper I would like to sketch an ongoing research project at the University of Tübingen. The main aim of this project is to refine the framework of the relative chronology of the Middle Bronze Age in Western Syria on the basis of an analysis of stratified pottery assemblages. In the following, I define the term „Western Syria“ as the area to the west of the Euphrates, to the east of the Mediterranean Sea, to the north of the Lebanon mountains and to the south of modern Turkey (Fig. 1).

The beginnings of archaeological exploration of the Middle Bronze Age in Western Syria go back to the time immediately after the First World War, when Syria and Lebanon had become the mandate of France. This led to intense archaeological fieldwork

by French archaeologists throughout the region. Excavations were undertaken at several important archaeological sites, for instance Tell Nebi Mend, the ancient Qadesch,¹ Qatna² and Ugarit.³

By and by archaeologists from other European countries started fieldwork on Bronze Age sites in Western Syria. A Danish mission undertook excavations in Hama,⁴ an English expedition dug in Alalakh⁵ and in 1964 an Italian team under the direction of Paolo Matthiae began exploring the ruins of Ebla.⁶ Further relevant sites are Tell Kazel in the vicinity of Tartous,⁷ Tell Arqa, located on the Lebanese side of the Akkar plain,⁸ as well as Tell Qarqur⁹ and Tell Ascharneh,¹⁰ both situated on the Orontes river. Finally, since 1999 new excavations

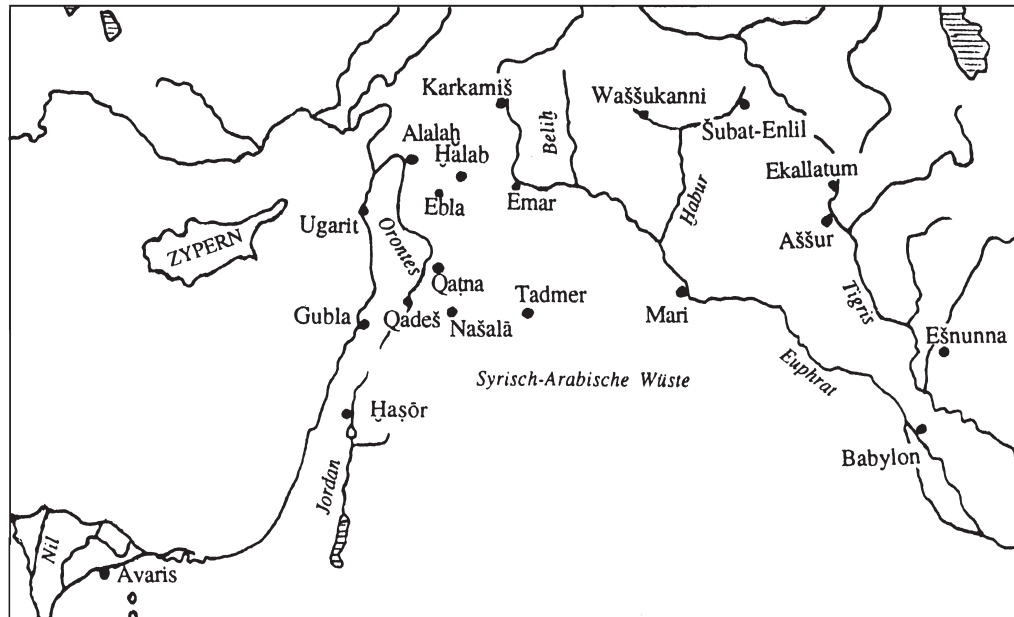


Fig. 1 Map of the Ancient Near East (after KLENGEL 2000, fig. 1)

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¹ PÉZARD 1931.

² DU MESNIL DU BUISSON 1926, 1927, 1928, 1930, 1935.

³ YON 1997.

⁴ FUGMANN 1958.

⁵ WOOLLEY 1955.

⁶ MATTHIAE *et al.* 1995.

⁷ BADRE and GUBEL 1999–2000.

⁸ THALMANN 2000.

⁹ DORNEMANN 1997.

¹⁰ FORTIN 1999.

take place in Qatna within the scope of a cooperation of the Syrian Antiquities Service, the University of Udine and the University of Tübingen. The operations of the German team concentrate on the area of the huge Bronze Age palace in the Upper town of Qatna (Fig. 2).¹¹ Here during the field campaigns of 2001, 2002 and 2003 Peter Pfälzner kindly gave me the opportunity to work on the newly excavated pottery material.

Besides excavations at present also surveys are carried out on a rather large scale in Western Syria, for example in the Akkar plain,¹² in the plain of Homs¹³ and in regions further to the north. In autumn 2003 the German Archaeological Institute started surveying the region of Hama between Shaizar and Rastan.

To sum up, one may say that archaeological fieldwork in Western Syria is witnessing a boom. It is on this background that it seemed desirable to try and further improve the system of the relative chronology of the Western Syrian Middle Bronze Age, doubtlessly one of the most crucial periods in the history of the region.¹⁴ Indeed, as to date there exist only a few reliable pottery sequences for the whole

area, namely in Ebla and Tell Arqa, the importance of a submission of new material from stratified contexts such as those which have come to light in Qatna has always been stressed in the past.

I intend to carry out my research project in three steps: Firstly on a local level confined to the site of Qatna, secondly on a regional level restricted to Western Syria and finally on a supraregional level. On this last level the refined chronological framework of Western Syria will have to be discussed considering the pottery traditions of adjacent regions such as Southern Syria,¹⁵ the Lebanon and Northern Palestine and with regard to systems of absolute chronology in the Ancient Near East.

Initially I would like to make a few remarks concerning the work on the local level. Here the ceramics from the current excavations of the University of Tübingen in the royal palace of Qatna shall serve as a starting point for a fine-typological pottery sequence of the Middle Bronze Age at that site.

The palace of Qatna was explored for a first time almost 80 years ago by a french expedition under the direction of Comte du Mesnil du Buisson. But diverse shortcomings of these old investigations with regard to excavation technique and documentation work left many questions unanswered, particularly concerning the chronology of the building.¹⁶ Here indeed substantial progress has been achieved within the last five years, for a new stratigraphic sequence could be established in the palace by the Italian and German teams, working in excavation areas H and G respectively. Among the newly defined architectural phases, the phases covering the Bronze Age history of the palace in both excavation areas G and H have been termed 7, 8 and 9.¹⁷ In the following, however, I will concentrate on the results in area G in the western part of the palace (Fig. 3).

There G 9 corresponds to the phase during which the palace was built and is characterized by fillings coming from construction floors and foundation trenches. G 8 represents the main use, while G 7 covers the latest occupation phase of the palace.

Of course, excavation work in Qatna has not yet come to an end, and at the moment only preliminary datings can be put forward. But according to the cumulative evidence of the pottery, the glyptic,

PHASE	STRUCTURES	PERIOD	DATE
G 1	Modern surface, house ruins, debris	↑ Modern	AD 1982
G 2	Later houses of the modern village of al-Miṣrife		AD 1929
G 3	Excavation activities of Du Mesnil du Buisson		AD 1924-29
G 4	Earlier houses of the modern village of al-Miṣrife		AD 1850
Hiatus			
G 5	Later structures of re-occupation of the palace area	Neo Syrian Period	1000 BC
G 6	Earlier structures of re-occupation of the palace area		
Hiatus (?)			
G 7	Later occupation of the palace	Middle Syrian Period	1340 BC
G 8	Main use of the palace with lime mortar floors	Old Syrian Period	1500 BC
G 9	Construction horizon of the palace		
Hiatus (?)			
G 10	Abandonment surface above occupation levels	Early Syrian Period	2000 BC
G 11	Later structures of pre-palace occupation		
G 12	Earlier structures of pre-palace occupation		2200 BC

Fig. 3 Chronological chart of the new excavations in the Bronze Age palace of Qatna (after M. Novák and P. Pfälzner)

¹¹ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2000, 2001 and 2002.

¹² MATSUMOTO and WADA 2001; BARTL and CHAAYA 2002.

¹³ PHILIP *et al.* 2002.

¹⁴ For the present state of research cf. EINWAG 1998; NIGRO 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. now BRAEMER and AL-MAQDISSI 2002.

¹⁶ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2000, 260f.

¹⁷ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2001, 161–165 fig. 4.

the architecture and the cuneiform sources, we place the construction of the palace in phase G 9 at present near the beginning of MB II.¹⁸ Phase G 8 also can be dated to the Middle Bronze Age, whereas the inventories of G 7 show that this phase already belongs to the early Late Bronze Age. So, the palace was definitely occupied throughout the later part of the Middle Bronze Age, which is still not known very well in Western Syria. The end of G 7 actually can be fixed even more closely around the middle the of 14th century BC, since in 2002 an archive of cuneiform texts from the destruction level of the palace has been unearthed which makes it almost certain that the palace has been destroyed during the reign of the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I.

To define the Middle Bronze Age pottery from Qatna as precisely as possible in its wares, formal types and chronological range, it is, however, necessary to separate it neatly both from the Early Bronze material of the preceding phases and from the Late Bronze material of the last occupation of the building.

Of great importance in this context will be the accurate assessment of the chronological date of the construction phase of the palace. Here the pottery from the foundation trenches and fillings of the construction phase G 9 will have to be examined in detail in order to identify the latest material which can give a terminus post quem for the building of the palace.

Another task will be to arrive at a dating of the pottery assemblages of the palace's main occupation phase G 8. Here, quite a lot of pottery derives from the two rooms N and U in a sector which has been left largely untouched by the early excavations of the Comte. Room N originally belonged to the ground floor level of the palace, but at a certain point in time it collapsed into room U together with its walls and inventory.

Throughout the field campaigns of 1999, 2000 and 2001 the last occupation phase of the palace G 7, which already dates to the Late Bronze Age, had been come across unambiguously only in room G, the so-called 'Salle des Jarres'. This room had been discovered first by the Comte, but its inventory which consisted mainly of great storage jars was left in place by him at that time. Thus it could be rediscovered during the new excavations.¹⁹

Very important discoveries concerning phase G 7,

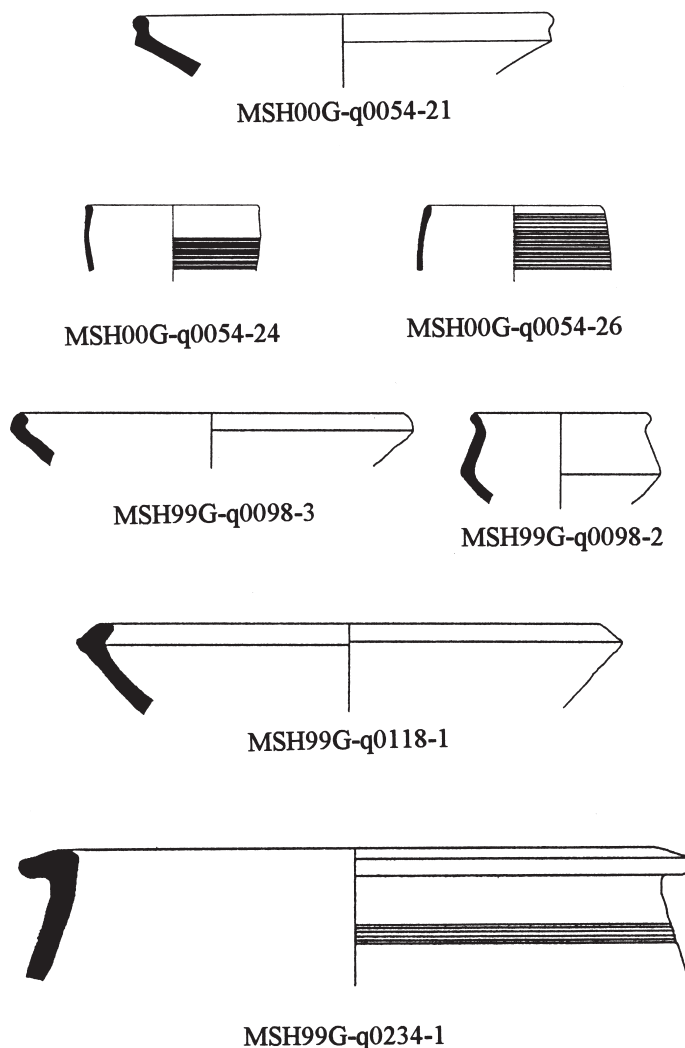


Fig. 4 Qatna, pottery of phase G 9, Scale 1:4

however, were made in the course of the campaign of 2002 in the northern sector of the building. Here the debris of the final destruction of the palace which had fallen from the ground floor into the subterranean corridor AQ leading to the royal tombs brought about a bulk of original inventories including a large number of pottery belonging to the last occupation phase of the building.

The pottery from the royal tombs too mainly should date to the Late Bronze Age. Still, part of it may be older, as it seems that the tombs have been cut into the bedrock simultaneously with the construction of the palace in the course of the 18th century BC. Other than in the destruction debris, the

¹⁸ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2002, 244.

¹⁹ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2000, 267, 270f. 283f. fig. 20.

ceramics from the tomb in the majority were still found complete.²⁰

This short overview may show, that in spite of the fact that the palace of Qatna has been excavated once before, quite a lot of stratified contexts and even complete inventories have been unearthed in the course of the new excavations and are to be expected for the future as well. In the following I will give some examples of pottery coming from the palace of Qatna and also name a few comparisons from other sites.

Typical pottery from the fillings of phase G 9 are painted 'Hama-Beakers' (Fig. 4, MSH00G-q0054-24 and MSH00G-q0054-26). These may originally come from a small-scale occupation of the Early Bronze Age IV as it is evidenced in phases G 11 and 12 underneath the palace.²¹ Good parallels can be found in Hama J.²²

At the same time one can find in phase G 9 already quite a lot of carinated vessels, above all carinated bowls (Fig. 4, MSH00G-q0054-21). Similar carinated bowls still exist in phase G 8 (Fig. 5, MSH01G-q0558-9 and MSH01G-q0614-2). To these carinated bowls one can show up a great number of parallels in MB contexts of Alalakh, Hama and especially Ebla.²³

Other, apparently later bowls from G 9 show rims thickened on the inside and on the outside (Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0118-1) as well as retracted rims (Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0098-3). Characteristic for phase G 9 are also carinated beakers (Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0098-2). They have parallels in MB contexts from Hama, Alalakh, Halawa and again Ebla.²⁴ A complete carinated beaker of phase G 9 comes from a grave of a young woman.²⁵

Pots of phase G 9 with combed decoration and rim turned outside (Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0234-1) again can be compared to vessels from Ebla.²⁶

The pottery from rooms N and U on the whole may serve to give an impression of the plain ware forms which were in use in the palace during the main occupation phase G 8.²⁷ Indeed, already on brief inspection one can notice numerous similarities in the material of G 8 and G 9.

Thus bowls with rims thickened inside and outside (Fig. 5, MSH01G-q0160-12, MSH01G-q0160-15 and MSH00G-q0683-1) already occurred in phase G 9

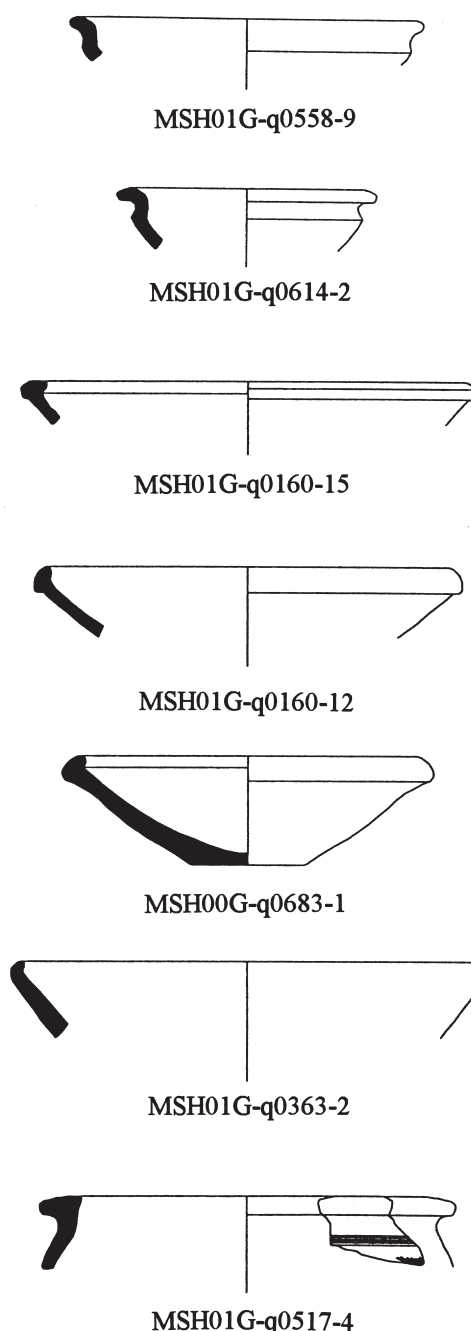


Fig. 5 Qatna, pottery of phase G 8, Scale 1:4

(Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0118-1). Similar bowls as from Qatna are attested at Ebla and Alalakh VIII.²⁸

²⁰ Cf. AW 2/2003, 200 fig. 2.

²¹ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2002, 210f.

²² FUGMANN 1958, fig. 93.3 F 583 (Hama J 3).

²³ MARCHETTI and NIGRO 1997, fig. 7.4–14 (Favissa F.5328/i–iii, MB IB–MB IIA).

²⁴ MARCHETTI and NIGRO 1997, fig. 7.1–3 (Favissa F.5328/i, MB IB).

²⁵ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2001, fig. 23, MSH00G-i0154.

²⁶ MATTHIAE 1979, fig. N:5 ('Tomb of the Lord of the Goats', MB IIA).

²⁷ Still part of the material from this context is definitely later.

²⁸ HEINZ 1992, pl. 18.11.

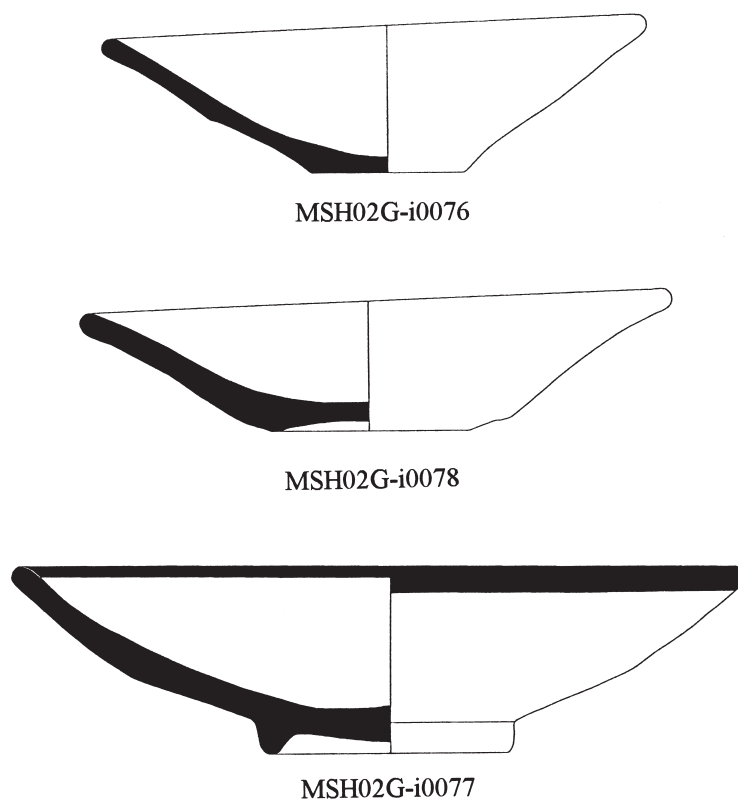


Fig. 6 Qatna, pottery of phase G 7, Scale 1:4

Also the bowl-type with retracted rim is found both in phase G 8 (Fig. 5, MSH01G-q0363-2) and phase G 9 (Fig. 4, MSH99G-q0098-3). Comparable bowls are known, for instance from Alalakh.²⁹

The pots with combed decoration and rim turned outside too are characteristic not only for phase G 9 but also for phase G 8 (Fig. 5, MSH01G-q0517-4). Besides the aforementioned comparisons from Ebla further parallels come from sites as Halawa and Alalakh and with somewhat more pronounced grooves on the rim from Tell Nebi Mend.³⁰

The most characteristic vessel type of phase G 7 and the LB occupation of the palace are flat, straight-sided and sometimes also rounded bowls with unthickened rounded lips. These bowls occur with or without base-rings. Many of them could be recovered complete or nearly complete from the destruction debris of the subterranean corridor as well as from the tomb and its antechamber (Fig. 6, MSH02G-

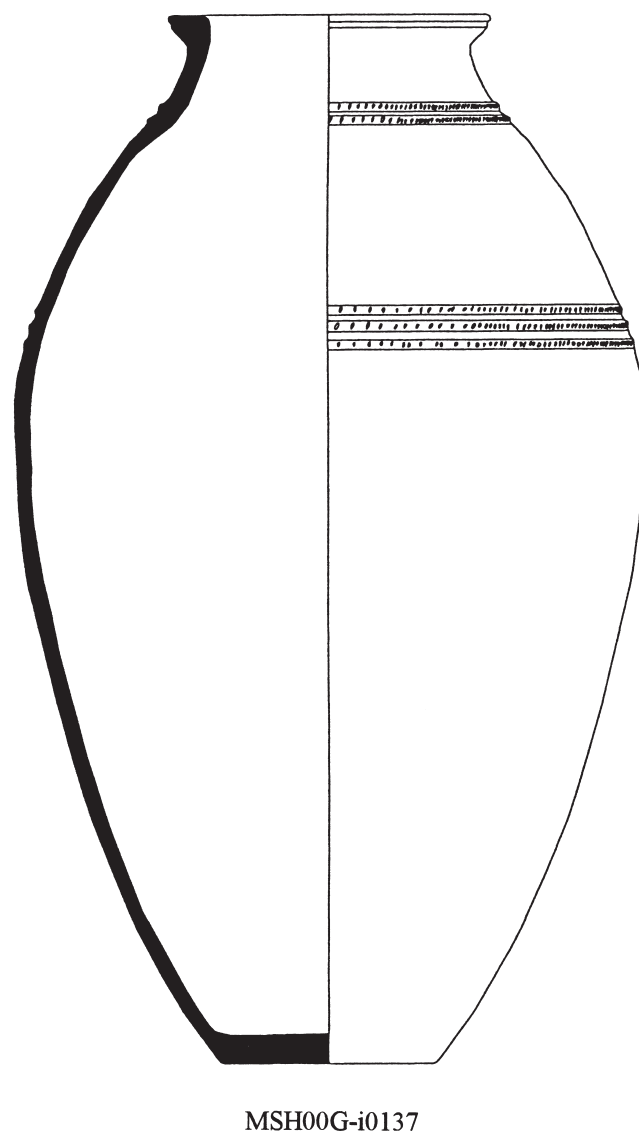


Fig. 7 Qatna, storage vessel of phase G 7, Scale 1:8

i0076, MSH02G-i0077 and MSH02G-i0078). Some specimens show a band of red colour along the inner and outer side of the rim. Further flat bowls with rounded rim of phase G 7 are attested in room G.³¹

Comparable bowls are known from many Late Bronze Age contexts in the Gezira, on the Euphrates, in Western Syria and in the Lebanon. One may quote examples from Ugarit³² and from Kamid el-Loz.³³ However, to a great part the pottery from room G consists of large storage vessels (Fig. 7,

²⁹ HEINZ 1992, pl. 18.12 (Alalakh VIII).

³⁰ BOURKE 1993, fig. 17.3 (Phase G, MB IIC) and fig. 17.1, 2, 4, 5 (Phases H-F, MB IIB-LB I).

³¹ NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2000, fig. 23, MSH99G-q0144-5 and 14.

³² COURTOIS and COURTOIS 1978, 263 fig. 22:8.

³³ HACHMANN 1980, pl. 30:2-6.

MSH00G-i0137). Good comparisons come from MB and LB levels in Hama.³⁴

In summary it may be said that although quite a lot of the MB and LB pottery types from the palace of Qatna reflect general changes in the pottery of Syria and the Levant, the closest parallels can be found at sites like Hama, Ebla, Alalakh and Tell Nebi Mend, which means in the Orontes valley and neighbouring zones.³⁵

This already leads to the overriding objective of the research project, namely to put the stratified pottery sequences of the Middle Bronze Age in Western Syria into a supraregional context. Here special attention has to be paid to imports of widely distributed pottery wares which open up the opportunity to establish reliable datum lines of first appearances across a broad geographical area. For the moment, though, in the palace of Qatna the situation in this respect is a little bit more favourable

with regard to the Late Bronze occupation, where several sherds and vessels of White-Slip-II-Ware as well as two vessels of 'Nuzi-' or 'Acana-Ware' were unearthed 2002 in the destruction debris of phase G 7 and in the royal tombs.³⁶

During a later stage of the project, the information gained from the pottery comparisons will be related to systems of absolute chronology. Western Syria as a zone of intense and permanent contact among civilizations from the North, West, East and South has always been viewed as particularly apt for a discussion of the different chronological systems of the Ancient Near East, because here, more than in other regions, the mutual compatibility or incompatibility in the datings of archaeological contexts and historical events in different regions can be tested.³⁷ It is to be hoped that the new discoveries in Qatna can give a fresh impetus to the efforts in this field of research.

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³⁴ E.g. FUGMANN 1958, fig. 143.S.No. (R.1) from Hama G.

³⁵ SIEVERTSEN in NOVÁK and PFÄLZNER 2002, 243.

³⁶ Examples are MSH02G-i0433 and MSH02G-i0977.

³⁷ See GATES 1987, 60; MATTHIAE 2000, 136f.; ZEEB 2001, 70.

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