

**THE LATE THIRD MILLENNIUM  
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**  
CHRONOLOGY, C14, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

*edited by*

**Felix Höflmayer**

*with contributions by*

Matthew J. Adams, Aaron A. Burke, Michael W. Dee,  
Aron Dornauer, Donald Easton, Hermann Genz, Raphael Greenberg,  
Roman Gundacker, Felix Höflmayer, Sturt W. Manning, Peter Pfälzner,  
Simone Riehl, J. David Schloen, Thomas Schneider, Glenn M. Schwartz,  
Harvey Weiss, and Bernhard Weninger

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Chronology, C14, and Climate Change

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Leslie Schramer

*and*

Thomas G. Urban

*with the assistance of*

Rebecca Cain and Alexandra Cornacchia

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# The Transition from the Third to the Second Millennium B.C. in the Coastal Plain of Lebanon: Continuity or Break?

*Hermann Genz, American University of Beirut*

The second half of the third millennium B.C. is generally regarded as a period of crisis in the Levant. This is particularly evident in the southern Levant, where at the end of the Early Bronze III almost all urban settlements come to an end (Palumbo 1991; Dever 1995), and urban settlements only re-emerge at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Ilan 1995; Cohen 2002). The situation in Syria is more complex, with some regions such as the Euphrates valley showing evidence for a decline or even an abandonment of many sites in the last centuries of the third millennium B.C. (Cooper 2006, pp. 264–67; Genz 2012a, p. 627), whereas in western Syria urban settlements continue to flourish (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, pp. 233–46; Genz 2012a, p. 622).

How does Lebanon fit into this picture? Does it show a continuation of urban settlements from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age as western Syria, or does it show a decline and collapse as the southern Levant?

## Lebanon at the Transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age: The State of Research

Unfortunately, the state of research concerning the transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze in coastal Lebanon is very uneven and fragmentary. The excavations conducted by Pierre Montet and Maurice Dunand at Byblos from 1921 to 1973 provided for a long time the only evidence for this transition (Montet 1928; Dunand 1939; Dunand 1952; Dunand 1954). While these excavations produced a number of spectacular finds for both the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, the inadequate excavation and recording strategies led to severe problems hampering our understanding of the site (see Saghieh 1983; Thalmann 2009).

Fortunately, recent excavations at several sites in the coastal plain of Lebanon have provided a wealth of information concerning the third and second millennia B.C., which enable us to reconstruct at least the broad outlines of the settlement history of the area during these periods (fig. 4.1). The excavations at Tell Arqa in northern Lebanon, which started in 1972, have provided one of the most reliable uninterrupted sequences for the third and second millennia B.C. (Thalmann 2006; Thalmann 2009; Thalmann 2010). Important results were also obtained in the excavations at College site in Sidon, which started in 1998 and are still ongoing (Doumet-Serhal 2004; Doumet-Serhal 2006; Doumet-Serhal 2009; Doumet-Serhal 2010). Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, located 12 km north of Byblos, was investigated between 2004 and 2011 (Genz 2010a; Genz 2012b).

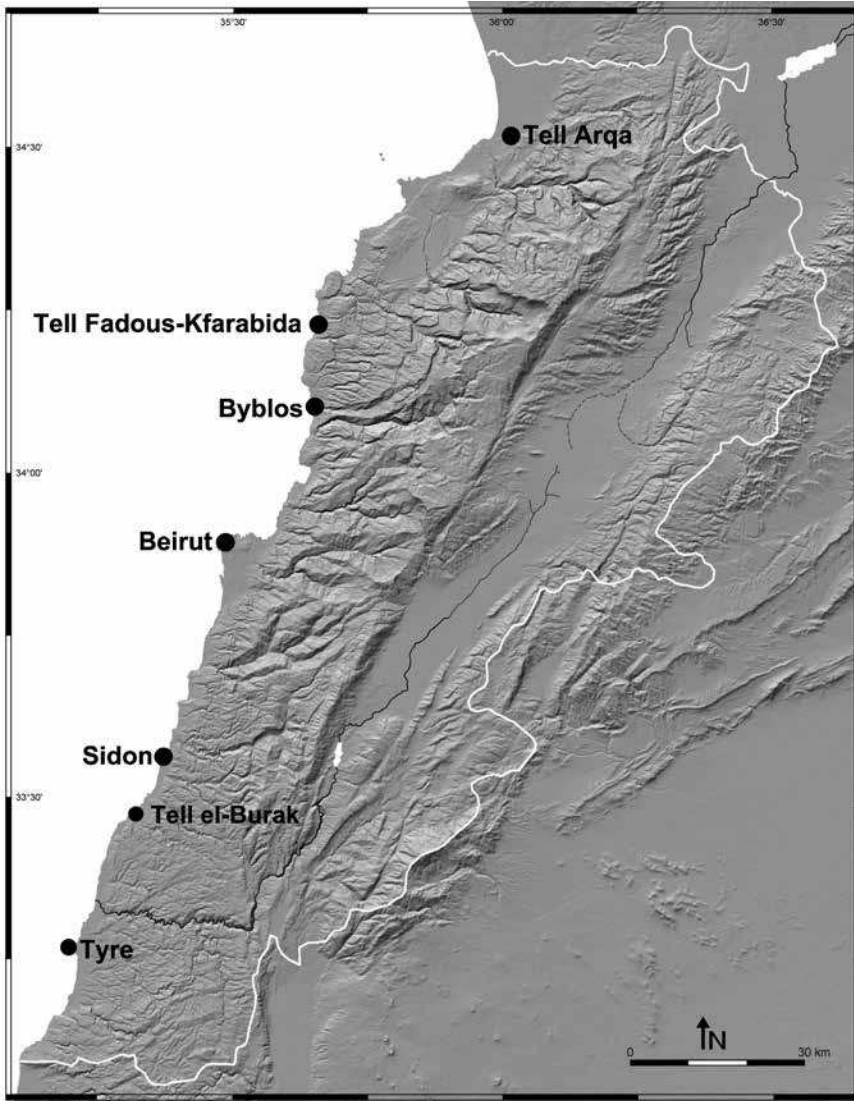


Figure 4.1. Location of the Early and Middle Bronze Age sites along the coast of Lebanon mentioned in the text

Other sites are less useful for the study of the transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age. The stratigraphic sounding in Tyre conducted in 1973 and 1974 by Patricia Bikai has produced evidence for the Early Bronze Age III and IV, but no Middle Bronze Age occupation is attested (Bikai 1978). Excavations on the tell of Beirut conducted by Leila Badre, Uwe Finkbeiner, Helène Sader, and others during the 1990s have produced evidence for Early and Middle Bronze Age occupation, but so far no evidence for the Early Bronze Age IV has come to light (Badre 1997; Finkbeiner and Sader 1997). Tell el-Burak, excavated since 2001, seems to represent a new foundation at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Finkbeiner and Sader 2001; Kamlah and Sader 2003; Kamlah and Sader 2008; Sader and Kamlah 2010).

Survey data for the coastal plain unfortunately are almost entirely lacking. The only exception is the Akkar plain, where Karin Bartl and others have carried out a detailed survey between 1997 and 1999 (Bartl 1998–1999; Bartl 2002; Thalmann 2007).

## Problems of the Periodization and Chronology

A detailed study of the transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age is severely hampered by the limited number of well-excavated and well-published sites. Further complications arise due to the lack of a well-defined terminological system in much of the older literature. Terms like “Early Bronze Age III” are often used quite haphazardly.

As mentioned above, the important results from Byblos are extremely problematic due to stratigraphic uncertainties and the complete absence of reliable absolute dates. Unfortunately, outdated theories continue to linger on. According to Dunand, the Early Bronze III settlement in Byblos ended in a great conflagration, which he attributes to the invading Amorites (Dunand 1952). These migration theories were greatly favored during the 1950s and 1960s to explain the marked changes discernible during the last centuries of the third millennium B.C. in the Levant (Kenyon 1966). However, since the 1980s, such theories have come more and more under attack and are now largely rejected (Ilan 1995, pp. 300–01; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, pp. 288–90). **It is therefore quite unfortunate that the Amorite invasion hypothesis continues to linger on in popular books published only recently (Jidejean 2000, p. 15).**

A further problem in the past was the general absence of reliable absolute dates. While Byblos has provided a large number of inscribed Egyptian objects from the Old (Sowada 2009, pp. 128–41) and Middle Kingdoms, many of these come from unreliable contexts and therefore cannot be used to provide absolute dates.

Fortunately, in recent years excavations along the Lebanese coast have produced more reliable stratigraphic sequences. Tell Arqa (Thalmann 2006; Thalmann 2010) and Tell Fadous-Kfarabida (Genz 2010a; Genz, in press) especially have produced larger numbers of complete vessels from secure contexts, and the dating of the various levels is backed by large series of radiocarbon dates (Thalmann 2006, pp. 230–31; Höflmayer et al. 2014), thus providing a well-dated, reliable pottery sequence for the ~~for the~~ third and early second millennia B.C. These two sites for the time being form the backbone of a more refined periodization for coastal Lebanon, which is currently being developed in the framework of the Associated Regional Chronologies of the Ancient Near East (ARCANE) project (Mazzoni and Thalmann, forthcoming).

According to the radiocarbon dates from Tell Arqa and Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, the Early Bronze IV seems to begin around the middle of the third millennium B.C., thus making it considerably longer than hitherto thought (Höflmayer et al. 2014). This is in accordance with recent re-evaluations of radiocarbon dates from the southern Levant (Regev, Miroshedji, and Boaretto 2012; Regev et al. 2012). While precise radiocarbon dates for the transition from the Early Bronze IV to the Middle Bronze Age are still lacking, the available evidence suggests a date around 2000 B.C. for the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Genz 2012a, p. 621).

The evidence from Sidon unfortunately is somewhat problematic. Claude Doumet-Serhal claims that the sequence of six Early Bronze Age levels at the site spans the entire third millennium B.C. (Doumet-Serhal 2008; Doumet-Serhal 2009). However, comparisons of the pottery with assemblages from Tell Arqa and Tell Fadous-Kfarabida suggest that the latest

Phase 6 ended sometime in the Early Bronze III, around the middle of the third millennium B.C. **The second half of the third millennium B.C. seems not to be attested in Sidon, and thus a hiatus has to be postulated** (Genz 2014, p. 294). Radiocarbon dates to establish the absolute dating of Phase 6 and more detailed information on the range of pottery types are definitely needed to clarify the situation in Sidon during the latter half of the third millennium B.C.

## The Early Bronze III

**In the first half of the third millennium B.C., during the Early Bronze III, urban settlements seem to flourish along the entire coast. Although these sites are relatively limited in size, Tell Arqa with 7.5 ha and Byblos with 5 ha being the largest ones,** their densely built-up interior and the presence of fortifications and public buildings in Byblos and Tell Fadous-Kfarabida clearly prove their urban character (Genz 2012a; Genz 2014).

In the absence of written documents, we know hardly anything about the political organization of the region. However, the presence of fortifications and public buildings in a small site of only 1.5 ha like Tell Fadous-Kfarabida suggests a rather complex system with larger political centers such as Byblos and smaller, administrative sub-centers such as Tell Fadous-Kfarabida (Genz 2012b, p. 25).

## The Early Bronze IV

A number of changes are noticeable in the Early Bronze IV. **The only Early Bronze IV site along the southern coast, Tyre, is represented only by an ephemeral campsite** (Bikai 1978). This meager evidence suggests that along the southern coast settlements declined or even completely disappeared during the Early Bronze IV, following the pattern observed in the southern Levant.

Along the northern coast, on the other hand, urban settlements continued. This is particularly evident at Tell Arqa, where Strata 16 and 15 represent a densely built-up domestic quarter with multi-storied houses (fig. 4.2; Thalmann 2006; Thalmann 2010). Byblos, with a large number of temples, also witnessed the continuation of urban structures, and continuity in religious practices is furthermore suggested by the offering deposits buried under the floors of the temples, which span the entire period from the Early Bronze III to the Middle Bronze I (Thalmann 2008, pp. 72–75).

As mentioned above, according to the radiocarbon dates the **Early Bronze IV must have started around 2500 B.C.** While Dunand claims that Byblos was violently destroyed at the end of the Early Bronze III (Dunand 1952), it is quite interesting to note that the majority of Egyptian imports, especially from the Sixth Dynasty (Sowada 2009, pp. 128–41), clearly postdate this event. Dunand clearly states that objects dating to the Sixth Dynasty were found below the destruction layer. Absolute dates for the Sixth Dynasty still vary in detail, but general agreement places it between 2350 and 2150 B.C. (Beckerath 1997; Bronk Ramsey et al. 2010). Thus the destruction layer at Byblos should be placed within the Early Bronze IV.<sup>1</sup> The transition from the Early Bronze III to the Early Bronze IV therefore does not seem

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<sup>1</sup> A destruction within the Early Bronze IV is also attested at Tell Arqa at the end of Stratum 16, dated around 2200 B.C. (Thalmann 2010, p. 91).





Figure 4.2. View of the Stratum 16 buildings at Tell Arqa (courtesy Jean-Paul Thalmann, French Archaeological Mission at Tell Arqa)

to have affected the trade relations between Egypt and Byblos (Genz, in press). It is only after the reign of Pepi II, well within the Early Bronze IV, that relations cease for some time.

Links between Byblos and Mesopotamia at the end of the third millennium B.C. are attested by the discovery of an Ur III tablet at Byblos, and furthermore by the mentioning of a ruler of Byblos in an Ur III tablet from Drehem (Sollberger 1959–1960; Lafont 2009).

The evidence from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, however, complicates the picture. Early Bronze IV activities are only represented by pits, which seems to indicate a marked decline of the settlement. Yet this picture may be misleading. Some of the pits contain an unusually high number of fine wares, notably drinking vessels such as cups and beakers, suggesting special activities such as ritual(?) feasting at the site (Genz et al. 2010, p. 247, pl. 1). Ongoing analysis of the botanical and faunal material may help to clarify this issue.

One intriguing find from [Tell Fadous-Kfarabida](#) is a sherd of a cooking pot with a cylinder seal impression on its rim (fig. 4.3; Genz et al. 2010, pp. 256–57, pl. 7:3). Similar impressions are typical for western inner Syria during the [Early Bronze IV](#), best known from Palace G at Ebla (Tell Mardikh) (Mazzoni 1992) and Hama, Phase J (Matthews 1996), and most likely were used in an administrative context. Despite the fact that the settlement considerably declined in importance and size, this find suggests that the remaining inhabitants were still connected to the economic or administrative sphere of western Syria during this time. Tell Arqa also produced evidence for ceramic imports from Ebla or its immediate vicinity during this period (Thalmann 2009, p. 24).

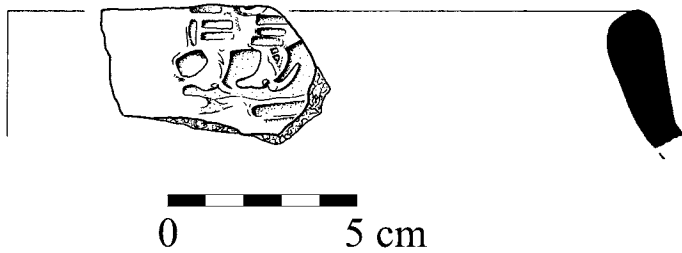


Figure 4.3. Western Syrian cylinder seal impression on the rim of a course-ware pot from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida (courtesy Tell Fadous-Kfarabida Project)

Thus along the northern coast of Lebanon, no break can be observed during the Early Bronze IV. Urban structures continue at least in Byblos and Tell Arqa, and long-distance contacts with Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia are still attested (Genz 2012a; Genz, in press).

## The Middle Bronze Age

The Middle Bronze Age in the Levant is generally seen as a period of growing socio-political complexity (Ilan 1995; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, pp. 288–326). Yet the evidence from the Lebanese coast does not fully support this view, at least not at the very beginning of this period.

At Tell Arqa the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age is marked by a drastic reduction of the size of the site. The northwestern part of the site, which was densely built up during the Early Bronze IV, was only used for burials and pottery production in the Middle Bronze I (Thalman 2006, pp. 33–50; Thalman 2010, pp. 98–99). It is only in the following Middle Bronze II period that this area was covered again by buildings, indicating that the site regained its former size (Thalman 2006, pp. 51–67; Thalman 2010, pp. 99–100).

A comparable situation is attested in Sidon, where an area covered by large buildings during the Early Bronze III was used for burials during the entire Middle Bronze Age (Doumet-Serhal 2004; Doumet-Serhal 2010, pp. 117–23). Only toward the end of the Middle Bronze II was a monumental building interpreted as a temple connected to funerary cult erected (Doumet-Serhal 2010, pp. 123–24).

Also at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida the Middle Bronze Age is only represented by pits and tombs, no substantial architectural remains having been encountered up to now (Genz 2010–2011). Even if the possibility that Middle Bronze Age architecture may be found in the still unexcavated parts of the tell is taken into consideration, the settlement certainly was rather small. Yet again, the presence of luxury pottery such as Tell el-Yahudiyeh juglets as well as Egyptian imports (fig. 4.4) demonstrates that the site still had connections to the outside world (Genz 2010–2011, p. 118).

Only Byblos retained its former size, as indicated by the Middle Bronze Age fortifications, which follow the line of the Early Bronze Age city walls (Burke 2008, pp. 192–97). Its importance is furthermore stressed by the spectacular discoveries in the royal tombs (Montet 1928, pp. 143–214) and rather early (early Twelfth Dynasty) contacts with Egypt (Ben-Tor 1998).

Tell el-Burak, ca. 9 km south of Sidon, seems to represent the only newly established Middle Bronze Age site (Finkbeiner and Sader 2001; Kamlah and Sader 2003; Kamlah and

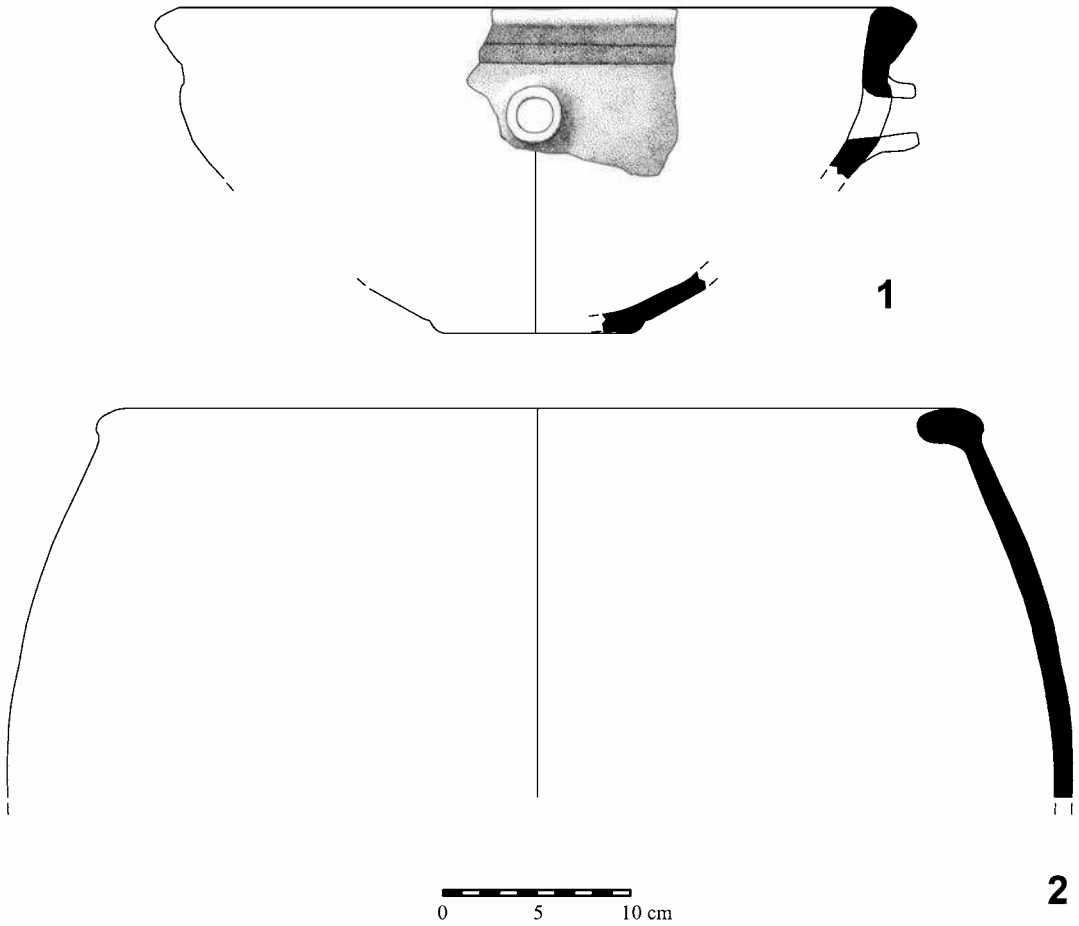


Figure 4.4. Middle Kingdom Egyptian ceramic imports from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida (courtesy Tell Fadous-Kfarabida Project)

Sader 2008; Sader and Kamlah 2010). At this site one large isolated building of 30 × 40 m is attested, erected on an artificial mound of 115 × 115 m, reaching 17 m in height (fig. 4.5). The building comprises eighteen rooms, grouped around one large rectangular courtyard. The four corner rooms slightly protrude to the outside and most likely represent towers. Two stairwells provide evidence for at least one upper story. Most intriguing is room 10, the largest room of the building, where wall paintings with good parallels in the Beni Hassan tombs, including a hunting scene, have been preserved. According to radiocarbon dates, the construction of this building started in the nineteenth century B.C. (Sader and Kamlah 2010, pp. 132–33; Badreshany and Kamlah 2010–2011, p. 82 and figs. 3–4), and is unique along the Lebanese coast. It most likely can be interpreted as a fortified palace belonging to the kingdom of Sidon (Sader and Kamlah 2010, pp. 138–40).

Remarkable are the strong connections between the Lebanese coast and Egypt from the Twelfth Dynasty onward. Egyptian commercial and even military involvement is attested in several Twelfth Dynasty inscriptions from Egypt (Allen 2008; Marcus 2007). Evidence for the re-establishment of contacts between Egypt and the Lebanese coast is provided by early

Twelfth Dynasty scarabs from the “Montet Jar” in Byblos (Ben-Tor 1998). During the later Twelfth Dynasty, these contacts intensified, as illustrated by the Egyptian luxury items from the Royal Tombs in Byblos (Montet 1928, pp. 143–204). In contrast to the coast of the southern Levant, where Egyptian ceramic imports are only rarely attested in Middle Bronze Age contexts — the exceptions being Ashkelon (Stager and Voss 2011) and Tel Ifshar (Marcus, Porath, and Paley 2008) — the Lebanese coast has provided a wealth of Twelfth to Thirteenth Dynasty Egyptian ceramic imports, for instance at Sidon, Byblos, Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, and Tell Arqa (Forstner-Müller and Kopetzky 2009; Genz 2010–2011, p. 118). Lastly, the Egyptian features of the wall paintings discovered at Tell el-Burak need to be mentioned in this connection (Sader and Kamlah 2010, pp. 136–38).

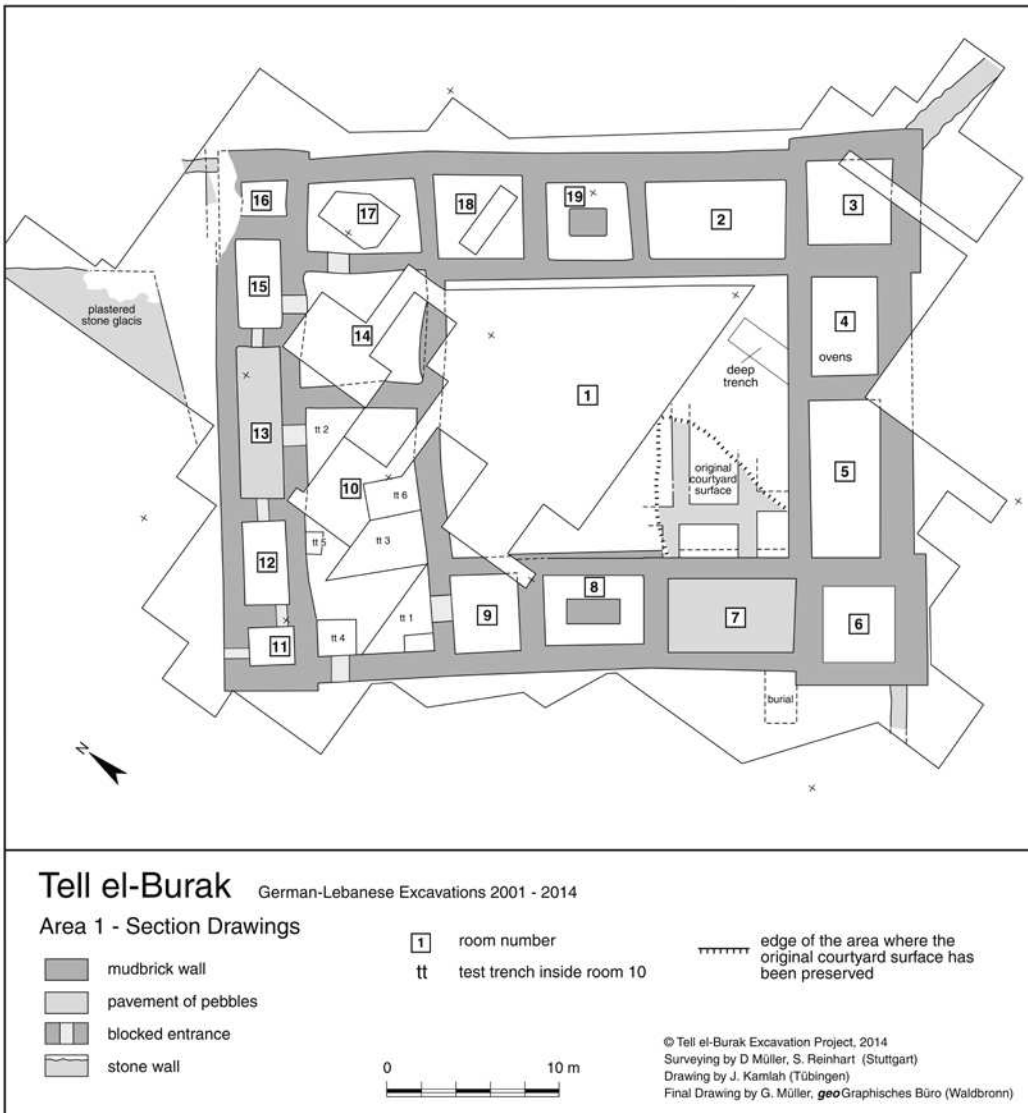


Figure 4.5. Plan of the Middle Bronze Age building from Tell el-Burak (courtesy Jens Kamlah and Helène Sader, Tell el-Burak Project)

## Conclusion

While the evidence is still rather sketchy, several tentative conclusions can be drawn.

During the Early Bronze II and III, the Lebanese coast shows a relatively uniform development of urban centers. The presence of smaller sites with administrative buildings such as Tell Fadous-Kfarabida suggests a rather sophisticated political organization with sub-centers alongside the major cities, possibly reflecting incipient territorial states (Genz 2012a, pp. 614–18; Genz 2014, pp. 297–300).

Toward the middle of the third millennium B.C., in the Early Bronze IV, however, differences in the north and the south can be noted. The southern coast witnesses a marked decline of urban settlements, which either disappear completely or shrink considerably in size (Genz 2010b). The northern coast, on the other hand, provides evidence for a continuation of urban structures, as demonstrated by the discoveries in Byblos and Tell Arqa (Genz 2010b). Furthermore, the northern sites show evidence of continuing contacts with Egypt (at least until the end of the Sixth Dynasty), Syria, and Mesopotamia during this period.

The Middle Bronze I quite interestingly witnesses a general contraction of settlements along the entire coast of Lebanon (with the possible exception of Byblos). It is only in the Middle Bronze II that sites begin to expand in size again. Yet again a small site, Tell el-Burak complicates the picture, due to the discovery of an impressive building that was erected in the later part of the Middle Bronze I. The strong Egyptian connections with the Lebanese coast from the Twelfth Dynasty onward are certainly remarkable.

The collapse of the urban sites at the end of the Early Bronze III has often been attributed to environmental causes, notably the so-called 4.2 ka B.P. event (Weiss 2012). However, the new evidence from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida and other sites in the central and southern Levant clearly dates the end of the Early Bronze III much earlier, around the middle of the third millennium B.C. (Regev, Miroschedji, and Boaratto 2012; Regev et al. 2012; Höflmayer et al. 2014). Furthermore, there is clear evidence for the continuity of urban entities in to the Early Bronze IV along the northern coast of Lebanon. Thus the 4.2 ka B.P. event seems to have had little or even no impact on the central and southern Levant.

As said before, many of the observations presented here are still very preliminary, and certainly will have to be modified with future discoveries. Detailed surveys of the coastal plain are urgently needed, not only to help to reconstruct the settlement pattern, but to document archaeological sites that are severely threatened by largely uncontrolled modern building activities.

One further interesting observation is that small sites such as Tell Fadous-Kfarabida and Tell el-Burak not only have settlement histories that seem to be quite different from those of the larger centers, but even provide surprising discoveries that help to flesh out our knowledge of the settlement patterns and political organization of the coastal plain of Lebanon in the Bronze Ages.

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