Climate Change, Globalization, and Other “Modern” Issues in Ancient Syria

Ellery Frahm

Societal responses to climate change in marginally productive areas. Social networks and new modes of communication. Maintenance of identity and cultural practices among immigrants and ethnic minorities. Sustainability under population and resource pressures. Colonial empires with geopolitical interests in controlling natural resources. State formation in ethnically diverse regions. Domestic production versus foreign trade in an increasingly connected world. Farmers and herders becoming city dwellers under economic pressures. Flow of people, goods, and ideas and the effects on local cultures during globalizing movements. This could be a list of topics in an upcoming Syrian studies conference or a seminar course on modern Middle East issues. They are also subjects of great interest to archaeologists who study Chalcolithic (4500-3500 BCE) and Bronze-Age (3500-1200 BCE) Syria. These issues are not as inextricably linked to “modernity” as they first seem, and archaeology offers a way to explore them with time depth.

Much of Syria lies on the outskirts of the Fertile Crescent, occupying a transitional zone between the highlands of Turkey and Iran and the Arabian Desert. Even during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age, the semi-arid steppe was rather marginal for rain-fed farming, and agricultural yields were sensitive to even small climatic shifts. Hole (2009) has explained how, due to both natural factors like climate and social factors like land use practices, agriculture in northeastern Syria is currently unsustainable and under considerable stress. Already farms and hamlets have been abandoned due to aridification. These processes are archaeologically visible as well. For example, a time of increased aridity and decreased water availability across Mesopotamia, circa 2200 BCE, coincided with the end of the Akkadian Empire and the “third millennium collapse,” when most settlements in northeastern Syria were abandoned or shrank in size (Weiss et al. 1993, Cullen et al. 2000, Riehl et al. 2008). Similarly, widespread societal collapse along coastal Syria near the end of the Late Bronze Age has been linked to abrupt climate changes (Kaniewski et al. 2010). By reconstructing how prior societies adapted to these stresses, or failed to do so, we can consider societal responses to similar challenges in the modern world.

The term “social network” evokes such websites as Facebook and Twitter; however, the concept dates back to the work of nineteenth-century sociologist Émile Durkheim. For example, proponents of structural functionalism, such as anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, interpreted society as a structure with interconnected elements that, when analyzed, may explain social links. Visualizations of online social networks create web-like diagrams of links between nodes. These diagrams are strikingly similar in appearance (and significance) to the nexus of pathways, visible in satellite imagery as shallow depressions, which connect ancient sites (Wilkinson 1993, Ur 2003). These sunken paths, called “hollow ways” or “linear hollows,” were created by long-term human and animal traffic among settlements. Thus there is, preserved on the landscape, a representation of intensive communication throughout the region. The theories of social network analysis apply equally to Facebook and ancient “hollow way” systems.

Ancient Syria had mass-produced goods too. Most famous are the bevel-rimmed bowls of the fourth millennium BCE. These ceramic bowls are durable, cheaply made in moulds, and rather unattractive. They are found with great abundance in trash heaps, often completely intact, meaning they were discarded before breaking. Their occurrence at an archaeological site is one indicator of the Uruk Expansion, a millennium-long period of intensifying urbanism. The bowls have a uniform size and shape, and they probably represent a way for city dwellers to be paid in standard rations of wheat or barley. Their disposability is roughly equivalent to that of fast-food styrofoam clamshells and plastic soda cups: most are thrown away as soon as their contents have been consumed. The appearance of bevel-rimmed bowls at Tell Hamoukar, Tell Brak, and other northeastern Syrian sites also reflects the
adoption of Sumerian-style economies. Thus we have an example of the Bronze-Age equivalent of McDonaldization. Jennings (2010) has argued that the increasing regionalization of Mesopotamia during the Uruk Expansion was a sort of “ancient globalization” that occurred during the third millennium BCE.

Tell Mozan in northeastern Syria, where I conducted my dissertation research, has all of these features: a decline in water availability in the middle of the Bronze Age (Riehl et al. 2008) and a subsequent decrease in settlement size and population, hollow ways appear in declassified satellite images, and intact bevel-rimmed bowls have been found. Other features of this ancient city and its inhabitants also provide interesting lenses for the modern world.

Tell Mozan, excavated by Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati since 1984, lies between the contemporary cities of Amuda and Qamishli, and it is one of the largest Syrian archaeological sites inhabited during the third millennium BCE. This settlement was occupied continuously from the mid-fourth millennium, if not earlier, until roughly 1300 BCE, when the Assyrians assumed control throughout Syria. The inhabitants were Hurrians, about which little is known compared to their contemporaries such as the Akkadians. Based on cuneiform tablets, Hurrians were an ethnic minority in most ancient cities of northern Syria. Tell Mozan, though, was the Hurrian religious and political center of Urkesh (sometimes spelled as Urkish or Urkeš), the core of a small city-state. The site is among very few conclusively Hurrian settlements, so if one wishes to explore their culture, this is the ideal place to do so.

One of the questions I have sought to address is whether the Hurrians were, as frequently portrayed, immigrants from the northeast or actually indigenous inhabitants of northeastern Syria who were marginalized by other groups moving into the region. The stone tools that I studied do attest that there was, at least, a flow of materials to Urkesh from eastern Turkey; however, further work is needed to answer the issue of immigrant or indigenous origins. Another issue that I have explored is political influence, in particular, identifying a possible hinterland in the mountainous north or an alliance with a neighboring city-state in the southern lowlands. So far the stone tools offer some support for both potentials and, with further work, may indicate how the mechanisms of influence differed between alpine hinterland and emergent state.

Because Tell Mozan provides an opportunity to identify Hurrian material culture, that is, all of the material remnants of their culture, these features may now be identified at ancient sites where Hurrians were ethnic minorities within the Akkadian and later Assyrian empires. How did the Hurrians maintain their cultural identity under these colonial powers? Which of their cultural practices did they continue, perhaps in defiance of assimilation? What can their material culture reveal about the mechanisms of “Hurrianization” during the expansion of the Hurrian-dominated Mitanni Empire in the second millennium BCE? What can the material culture at “Hurrianized” sites reveal about adoption of, or even resistance to, Hurrian practices? Exploring indicators of indigenous resistance to colonial powers has been a topic of great archaeological interest. Such studies ordinarily involve European colonies of the last few hundred years; however, as with the other issues discussed here, colonialism is not limited to historical times.

My goal here has been to highlight a few shared interests of Near Eastern archaeologists and contemporary Syria scholars. These scholars have much more in common than it may seem initially, and these issues cross-cut the divide between “ancient” and “modern” Syria. Interfaces between past and present offer exciting lines of inquiry in Syrian studies.

Ellery Frahm is Research Associate, Department of Earth Sciences, and Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities.
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Works Cited