

SETTLEMENT IN THE VICINITY OF DAMASCUS – SYRIA

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Abstract. The research investigates human migration patterns in the Damascus Basin starting from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. Archaeological findings from Tell Aswad Tell Ramad Tell Khazzami Tell Bahariya and Tell Ghreifeh reveal the transition of mobile hunting groups into agricultural villages. The evidence demonstrates how architectural structures evolved together with changes in subsistence methods and burial traditions and symbolic systems. The cultural transformations which led to sedentary life in the Levant became evident through these developments.

Keywords: Damascus Basin, Neolithic, Tell Aswad, Tell Ramad, early agriculture, Mother Goddess, Chalcolithic Syria, prehistoric settlement, Levantine archaeology, architectural evolution.

1. Introduction:

Humans lived in parts of Syria since the early Stone Ages, more than 1.8 million years ago. Human groups migrated from northeast Africa into Syria and found suitable settlement locations near springs and rivers, where plant and animal life were abundant—both being essential sources of food. These locations also provided raw stone materials necessary for crafting tools. Archaeological excavations across Syria have revealed a series of Paleolithic cultures like Acheulean, Mousterian, Hummalian, and Yabrudian, with the oldest human activities found in Al-Kawm (in the Syrian desert) and Dederiyeh Cave near Aleppo in northern Syria.

At the end of the Pleistocene (the cold age) around 15,000 years ago, a warmer and more humid period called the Holocene began. This encouraged human spread in Syria, population growth, and advancement in daily tools—mostly stone-based, with increasing use of new materials like bone and wood. Around 12,000 BCE,

people began constructing new types of dwellings: semi-subterranean, circular houses with stone foundations and upper parts made from branches and animal skins.

Around the 10th millennium BCE, the Neolithization process began in northern Syria, marking a major lifestyle shift to agriculture and animal domestication. This cultural and cognitive transformation lasted thousands of years, moving humans from depending solely on nature to becoming food producers, choosing their diets and dwellings, and founding early agricultural villages. The process began in the Middle Euphrates Basin of northern Syria and then spread southward to areas like the Damascus Basin. This study focuses on some archaeological tells (mounds) around Damascus.

The Damascus Basin experienced major settlement shifts during the Neolithic, from nomadic hunting to stable agriculture and animal domestication, with an economy reliant on natural resources (Muhaysin, 1994). Plant and animal remains (reeds, aquatic birds, fish bones) found at sites suggest the presence of nearby lakes and groundwater, while pistachios and remains of animals like gazelles and goats reflect the semi-desert environment (Tamoum, 2011).

Modern Damascus is surrounded by agricultural village settlements, such as Tell Aswad, Tell Ghrifa, Tell Khazzami, Tell Bahariya in the Ghouta area, and Tell Ramad west of Damascus at the Hermon Mountain foothills.

2. Tell Aswad:

Located 30 km southeast of Damascus between Lake Otaiba and Hijana depression (formed by rivers from Mount Hermon), Tell Aswad is a round mound measuring 250×250 m and 600 m above sea level, rising 4.5 m above the surrounding land (Stordeur, 2018).

Initial excavations were led by Henri de Contenson in 1971–1972, focusing on exploratory trenches on the eastern and western sides. In 2001, new excavations began under Danièle Stordeur and Bassam Jamous with a joint Syrian-French team. These new studies revised earlier conclusions, showing no PPNA (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A) layer, but instead 18 continuous archaeological layers

beginning from the Early and Middle PPNB (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), possibly extending into Late PPNB. Later occupation belongs to the Pottery Neolithic, evidenced by artifacts like arrowheads, sickles, and figurines (Stordeur, 2018). (fig 1)



Fig 1

Early PPNB houses were circular huts, partially dug into the ground (about 50 cm), made of mud and reeds, with seating platforms, ovens, and pillar holes. No stone was used—this architecture was new to the region (Stordeur, 2005).

In the later PPNB, irregularly shaped mudbricks were used above ground, while older parts continued to use mud with plant remains. Buildings were generally large (diameter up to 13 m) and irregular, but well-organized spatially, with entrances oriented eastward to avoid western winds (Stordeur, 2018).

Tell Aswad revealed rich funerary practices: 100 individual graves associated with the houses, some inside walls, others in pits or on the surface, often covered with baskets, cloth, or boxes. Most graves were poor in grave goods (Contenson, 2007). Notable finds include clay human and animal figurines—especially exaggerated female forms emphasizing hips and breasts, symbolizing the Mother Goddess (Fig.2).

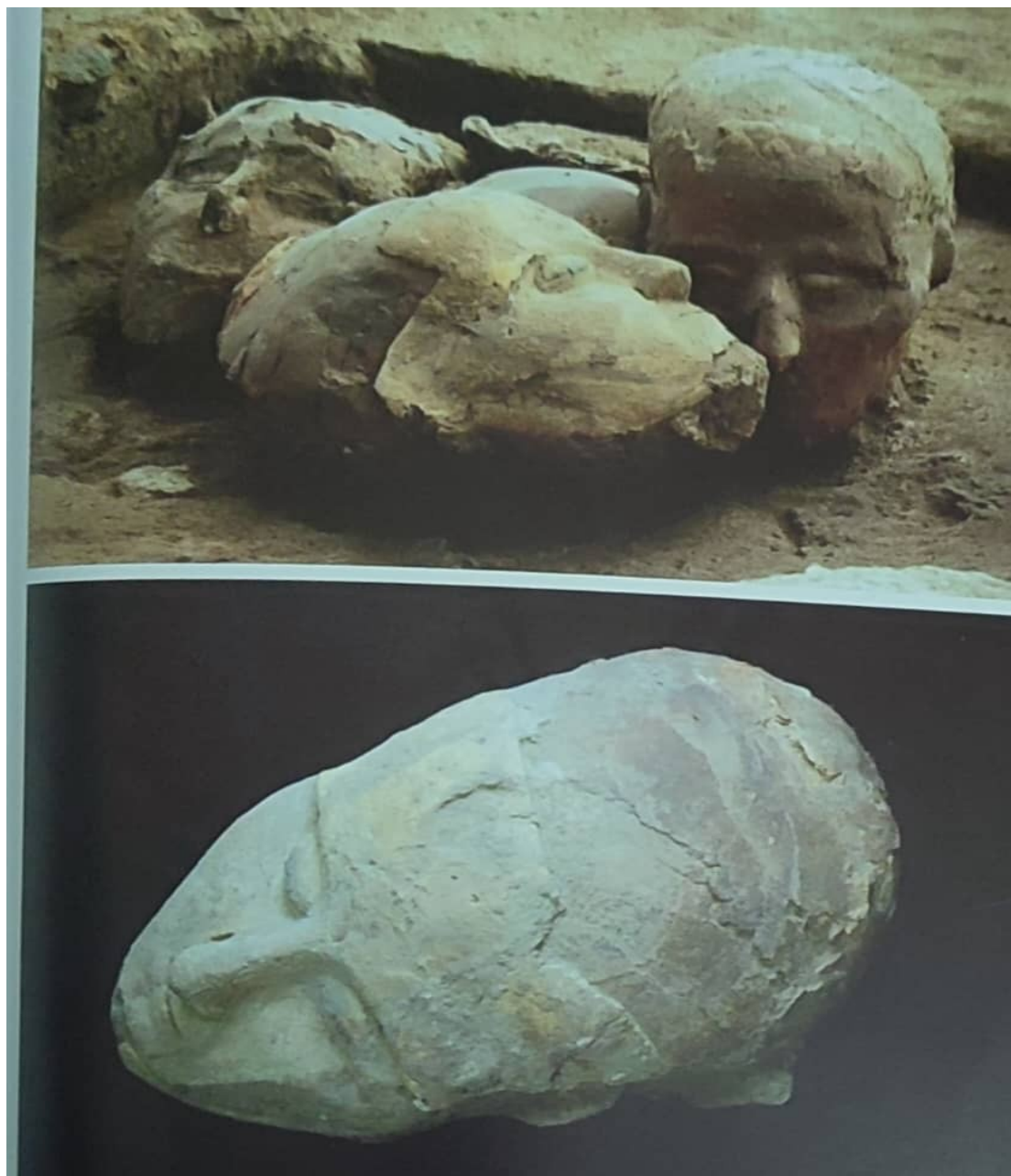


Fig.2

Excavations by Stordeur also found plastered or red ochre-painted skulls, possibly ritualistic, placed under graves as foundation offerings (Stordeur, 2018).

The residents farmed and domesticated animals—evidence of early domesticated grains from the Early PPNB and irrigation agriculture due to insufficient rainfall. Remains of crops like flax and figs, and the presence of reeds, confirm a humid environment. Domesticated animals (Middle PPNB) include goats, sheep, cattle, and pigs. Goats were most used for milk and meat; cattle helped with plowing; pigs and sheep were mainly for meat. Hunting continued, especially for deer, wild boar, foxes, and fish (Tamoum, 2011).

Stone tools included arrowheads, chisels, sickles, axes, obsidian blades, bone tools like needles and awls, and ornamental items made of rare stones (agate, steatite), seashells, and obsidian (Stordeur, 2018).

3. Tell Ramad:

Located southeast of Qatana near Mount Hermon (southwest of Damascus, ~20 km away), surrounded by villages like Hineh, Arneh, and Qatana.

Excavated by Henri de Contenson (1963–1973), the site has three Neolithic layers:

- Layer I (6250–6000 BCE): Simple circular huts dug into the ground, with compacted mud and wooden walls, similar to those in the Euphrates Valley. Stone tools were used to hunt deer and gazelles. Farming of grains and stone grinders (querns) were common. Vessels made of alabaster and white limestone were found. Clay figurines representing seated headless humans with red and white paint were discovered, suggesting ritualistic practices (Abu Assaf, 1988) (fig 3).

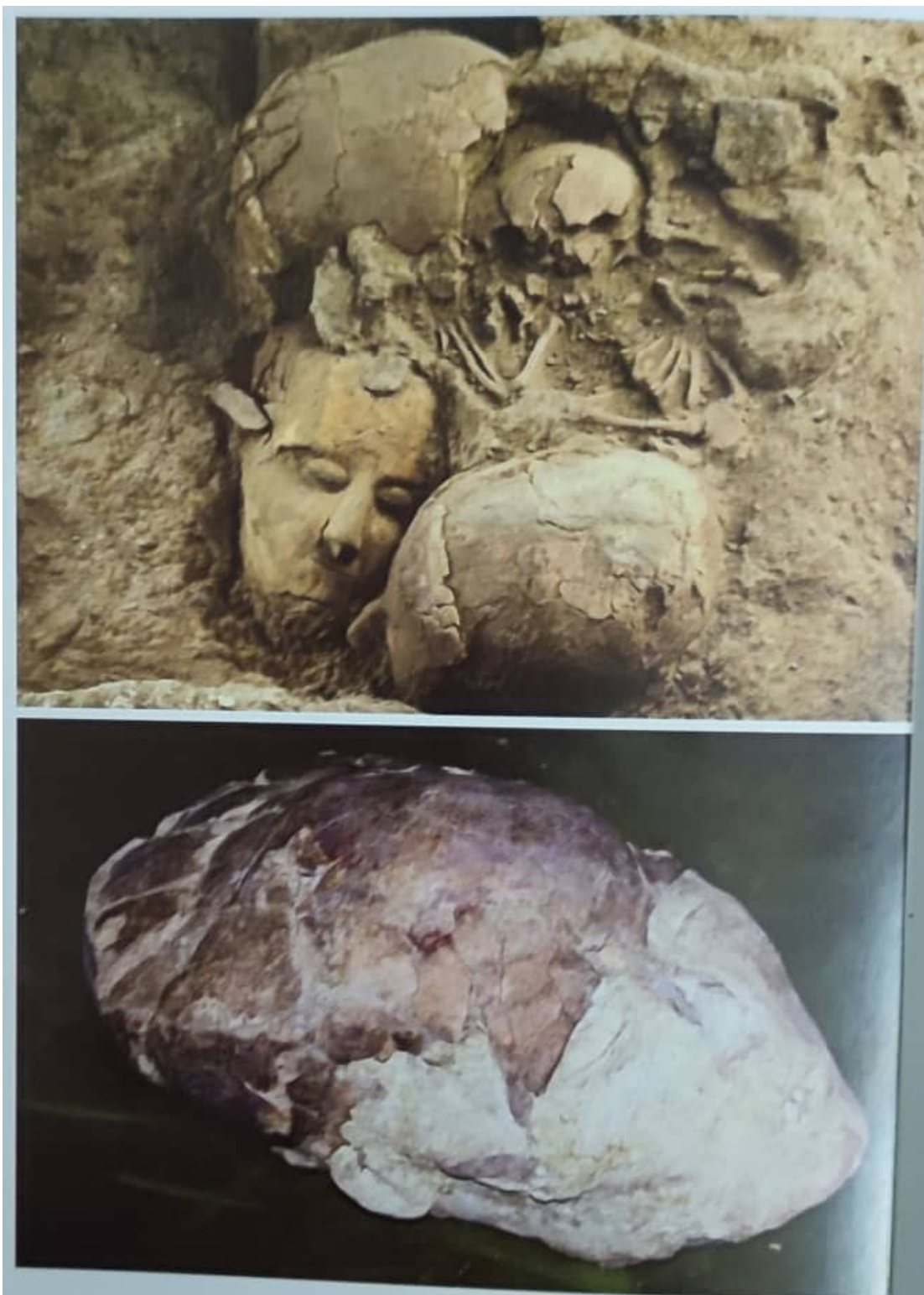


Fig.3

- Layer II (6000–5800 BCE): Residents were more settled, and homes were rectangular, built side-by-side with stone foundations and mudbrick walls. Storage pits for grain (wheat, barley, lentils) were found. In addition to agriculture and hunting, pig and cattle domestication appeared. Red-painted human skulls coated in clay mixed with lime were found, with white-lime-filled eyes (Abu Assaf, 1988).
 - Layer III (5800–5500 BCE): The latest, no house remains—only pits, suggesting a shift to semi-nomadic pastoralism. Pottery made from black clay with incised decorations emerged. Similar pottery found in Lebanon (Ras Shamra, Byblos).
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4. Tell Khazzami:

Located 25 km southeast of Damascus and 3 km northwest of Tell Aswad, on irrigated farmland. The mound, 2 m high and ~1500 m in diameter, was excavated once in 1967 by Henri de Contenson before it was removed to expand Damascus International Airport.

Excavations covered 92 square meters and uncovered interconnected rooms with 60–80 cm thick mudbrick walls (brick size: 25×35×10 cm). Agricultural tools dominated: sickles, arrowheads, awls, leatherworking tools, and bone spoons (de Contenson, 1968).

Pottery included deep jars with flat bottoms, thin inward-sloping lips, and thick-walled bowls with outward rims. Large storage jars had cylindrical necks and thick lips. Pottery was red-painted and similar to those found at Ras Shamra and Byblos (J. Nasrallah, 1956).

Animal-shaped pottery (e.g., a cow) and dried clay animal figurines were found. The tool-making style and building techniques (molded bricks) link the site to the Ghazalian culture, also found in southern Syria and Jordan (e.g., Tell Ghasul, Abu Hammad).

Tells like Khazzami and Bahariya represent the end of the prehistoric period in the Damascus Basin, with discoveries of counting stones believed to be used for early arithmetic—an innovation that paved the way for writing.

5. Tell al-Bahariya

Tell al-Bahariya is located in the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus, near the town of al-Nashabiyah, approximately 45 km from the city of Damascus. The tell has an oval shape with dimensions of 250×350 meters and an elevation of 617.7 meters above sea level.

Excavations began at the site in 1996 by the Syrian National Archaeological Mission under the direction of Miss Ghada Suleiman, and continued until 2011. These excavations revealed three successive archaeological layers.

- The first layer dates back to the Pottery Neolithic period (7th millennium BCE).
- The second and third layers belong to the Chalcolithic period.

The first layer ended with a major fire that led to the site being abandoned for a period before it was reoccupied in the early 4th millennium BCE.

Architecture:

The architecture of the first layer (7th–6th millennia BCE) was characterized by rectangular houses built of molded mudbrick with roofs made of wood and clay. In the second layer, tholoi-style architecture became prevalent, typical of the Pottery Neolithic and Halaf cultures. These buildings featured a rectangular entrance leading into a circular room, possibly subdivided internally. The floors were made of either lime or compacted clay, and the structures included rectangular rooms with jars used to store wheat. A round house with a lime floor and a 125 cm-wide entrance built with molded mudbrick was found—this is a typical example of tholoi architecture.

Among the notable discoveries in this layer was a figurine of the Mother Goddess, worshipped since earlier times as a fertility deity. The figurine showed feminine features such as breasts and wore a decorated robe with fine craftsmanship. Other figurines included ones with elongated heads resembling hair decorations or tall hats, coffee bean-shaped eyes, prominent noses and lips, and stern facial expressions.

One important structure discovered was a rectangular building ending in two apses, with a clay floor between them. It is believed this building served a religious purpose, especially as two bull skulls and their horns were found embedded in the foundation—possibly to protect the building from natural and human threats. Bull

worship was common in the Levant. Clay figurines representing bulls and gazelles were also found here.

A cemetery was uncovered containing skeletons buried in fetal positions or with clay pillows under their heads. A flint blade was found on one of the skulls.

Additional finds included small clay figurines of wild boar, bulls, dogs, and goats, along with tools made from flint and obsidian. Seeds of wheat, olives, and other fruit-bearing trees were also discovered. Pottery included black burnished ware and red polished ware, contemporary with ceramics from the Amuq Plain in northwestern Syria. Pottery was made using high artistic and technical standards. Painted and decorated Halaf pottery was also found.

The third layer, built on the ruins of the second, revealed remnants of massive mudbrick walls, indicating a defensive architectural complex. Only parts of the foundations and some floor remnants survived. Inside the structure, rooms were found with organized layouts. One room had a kiln for firing pottery, along with a bench to place the pottery after firing. Another room was used as a kitchen, while others served as residential spaces.

Among the most important finds were bell-shaped vessels similar to those from Tell Brak in Hasakah and Tell Habuba Kabira in the Euphrates Valley, as well as clay pellets and balls used for accounting before the invention of writing. The architecture resembled that of contemporary Tell Khuzama, dating to the 4th millennium BCE (Suleiman, 2011).

6. Tell Ghreifeh

Located about 30 km east of Damascus and 15 km north of Tell Aswad, Tell Ghreifeh lies in the middle of a plain composed of recent alluvial deposits, on an agricultural mound west of Lake Ateibeh. The site rises 5 meters above the plain and stretches about 200 meters north–south. Houses have been built on its southern end.

A French archaeological mission led by Henri de Contenson excavated the site in 1974. Several trenches were dug, revealing different phases of settlement from the Pottery Neolithic to the Roman period.

The site had two main layers:

First Layer (6250–6000 BCE):

This older layer was poor in animal bones, indicating that hunting was one of the food sources. However, it was rich in flint tools, including hunting and multi-use implements. The tools were categorized into two groups:

1. Primary tools: arrowheads, sickles, knives.
2. Secondary tools: chisels, scrapers, awls, drills.

Some obsidian blades were found, as well as flat basalt grinding stones, figurines, and a diamond-shaped bead made from steatite, a type of hard stone. No bone tools were found. There were mud walls reinforced with reed rings. Small animal figurines (~5 cm long) were also discovered with flat bases, slightly curved backs, concave legs, and vertically grooved faces.

Second Layer (3.5 m deep to the surface):

This layer contained fewer flint tools, with about 11% of the finds being tools. Of these, arrowheads, sickles, and knives made up 80%, while the rest were chisels, scrapers, drills, and awls. A new tool appeared here—the partially polished flint axe.

Use of obsidian increased, as did the use of basalt to make oval or rectangular slabs. Flat slabs of limestone or polished calcite were also found, and calcite beads were crafted.

Clay artifacts were mostly animal figurines, while bone tools became abundant, including awls, sheaths, handles, and flat spoons.

Comparative Analysis:

- Tell Ghreifeh, like Tell Aswad, lacked pottery, indicating it belonged to the pre-ceramic period, when household vessels were likely made of wood or straw.
- Comparing the two layers, sickles and arrowheads were more prevalent in the earlier layer, while chisels and scrapers increased in the later one.
- The first layer closely resembled Tell Aswad, with its flint blades, sickles, clay figurines, and architecture made from reed and matting.

- The second layer resembled Tell Ramad, with bifacial tools and bone tools. The appearance of axes indicates increased agricultural and woodworking activities, while the growth in arrowheads, scrapers, bone tools, and animal remains points to active hunting (de Contenson, 1975).

The discoveries at Tell Ghreifeh significantly contribute to our understanding of early human settlement in the Damascus Basin.

7. Conclusion

The results of archaeological excavations in the sites surrounding Damascus reveal that the area has witnessed a significant cultural development since the Neolithic period. This transformation is marked by humanity's shift from caves to open plains, where people built homes, produced their own food, domesticated animals, and changed their lifestyles.

The first homes were simple huts, but over time, people transitioned to rectangular or square houses, moving away from pits that might have been used for storage or ritual purposes. Some pits contained partially preserved skulls, indicating ancestor worship or ritual practices. Clay female figurines likely represented the Mother Goddess, symbolizing fertility.

Despite these advancements—agricultural production, village architecture, and improved tools—many of these early settlements were abandoned at the end of the Neolithic, possibly due to droughts, wars, or social unrest. The emergence of pottery and craft specialization required more organized labor and tools, likely leading to the concentration of people in specific locations and abandonment of others.

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