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INTRODUCTION

I. MILEVSKI, F. BOCQUENTIN and M. MOLIST

We present in this thematic issue of *Paléorient* selected contributions to session A25f, “North-South Connections and Disconnections in the Prehistory and Protohistory of the Levant”, in the XVIIth Congress of the International Union for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences held at the University of Burgos, Spain, in September 2014. The session was organized by the writers of these lines with the aim of opening some discussion on the cultural dynamics between the Northern and Southern Levant from a long-term perspective, from the Palaeolithic period to the Middle Bronze Age. We purposely extend the area of study in space and time to other neighbouring regions and early historic periods when the subject was relevant to our concern.

As we are convinced that the understanding of archaeology as a human science is closely related to our own experience, the session that gave origin to this issue was dictated in some way for our preoccupation in the fact that today archaeologists working in the Levant, for political or other reasons, are not enough connected to the field work and research of all the regions of this area.

In some way we still are witnesses of the fact that politicians and statesmen who in the early 20th century drew up the map that dismembered the Ottoman Empire and divided the Levant into the mandates of Syria and Palestine.¹

The end of the mandates in the Levant after World War II, with the Yalta Agreement (Grenville and Wasserstein 2001: 267-277), and the rise of new states as Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, deepened this “dismembering” not only in the peoples of the Middle East but also in the way to understand the past including the prehistory of humankind (Silberman 1995).

As the study of cultural frontiers and similarities and differences between communities can only be based on meticulous analyses and interpretation of the archaeological record,

1. The Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916) between Great Britain and France, to which the Russian Empire assented, defined the mutually agreed spheres of influence and control in Southwestern Asia of these powers. The agreement is mentioned when considering the region and its present-day conflicts by modern authors (Fromkin 1989: 21; Sickler 2001: 286-288).

political and economic conflicts make it very difficult to establish a synchronic comparison between the research of the Prehistoric and Protohistoric communities of the Levant and Mesopotamia. Of course ancient communities of the Levant never knew about a sort of Sykes–Picot or Yalta agreements delineating borders, at least for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (but see Kitchen and Lawrence 2012). The concepts of “territory” and “political borders” were surely absent from prehistoric cultures (Frangipane 2013).

Terms like “Natufian”, “Sultanian”, “Mureybetian”, “Yarmukian”, “Halaf”, “Ubaid”, “Wadi Rabah”, etc., which are used today to define a set of diverse entities and complex materials within concepts of cultural identity, diffused across vast geographic areas in Mesopotamia and the Levant, are theoretical entities proposed for the understanding of archaeological processes in the region. Geographical borders for these entities are difficult to delineate.

The quantities and differences in the quality of the data, however, do not impede the proposal of explanations for “similarities” in the widest sense of the word, between these communities. The dynamics of expansion and diffusion of materials, products and ideas cannot be separated from the need to create a wide-reaching network of direct and indirect (through intermediaries) contacts, in which the circulation of goods is of vital importance.

The assertion of whether or not these connections and disconnections were related to geography, climate, socio-economic formations, religious ideas and practices, etc. could change in time and types of societies, but also could be the way in which each one of us explains the archaeological record and the development of ancient societies.

Ways to explain connections and disconnections are diachronic in shape, like other issues that could be followed through different periods—*e.g.*, migrations, diffusion, trade and exchange, colonization, and synchronic matters, *i.e.* differences or similarities in different realms of the Levantine material culture (*e.g.*, pottery, flint, fauna, burial practices) in which the subject of connections and disconnections can be understood.

In the history of archaeological theory migrationism and diffusionism were two approaches for explaining the spread of prehistoric archaeological cultures. Migrationism explains cultural change in terms of migrations of population portraying not only technological elements but also ideological practices, while diffusionism explained connections of different regions based on the exchange of ideas rather than populations (Trigger 1997: 148-206).

According to K. Kristiansen (1989: 211-212), theories explaining connections (and disconnections) between regions and populations changed across time according to political and social preoccupations of the archaeologists in a given situation.

Modern research has rightfully moved away from the idea of migration as a causal agent of socio-cultural change, but still it cannot be disputed that people have moved then, just as they do today. Ironically, at the time this session was conducted and this volume of *Paléorient* is edited mass migration became one of the greatest questions in Europe and the Mediterranean, as millions of people seek refuge from famine or war in Africa and the Middle East (see Andreou, this volume).

Present political borders make it not only difficult in following cultural developments in ancient societies, but also disconnect researchers one to another working on the same subjects in different countries between these borders (Chazan 2016: 183). For instance, we commonly utilize a simple division of the Levant in two parts: North and South, following, in a majority of articles, the pragmatic Sykes-Picot demarcated frontier. In fact, this modern frontier is partly inherited from a deep historical background and even from the Early Pottery Neolithic (e.g., Kozłowski and Aurenche 2005: 61). But how porous was it? How movable over time? How large were the ‘buffer zones’ between different areas and cultural entities?

Some archaeologists indeed use sometimes the term “Central Levant” (e.g., Gopher 1994; Aurenche et Kozłowski 1999; Kozłowski and Aurenche 2005; Stordeur *et al.* 2010; Prag 2014), which includes, for some of them, the Damascus basin (but see discussion in Stordeur 2004), the Beqa’a Valley, the Lebanon coastal fringe and the Hulah Valley. The fact that this area is straddling three modern countries at war and political conflicts is probably a first serious inability to gather more echoes in research. A second difficulty is due to a lack of sites in this area especially northward, which makes it difficult to be defined geographically. Third, this in-between position with cultural elements considered *de facto* to be ‘from the north’

and others ‘from the south’ according to a complex mixture which changes over cultural aspects, sites and periods stifles the specificity and the role that this central area has certainly played.

The current volume has not the ambition to solve these different issues but wishes to share our preliminary reflections on a somewhat complex topic in building some bridges between researchers working in the Northern or Southern Levant and interested in following cultural dynamics through specific archaeological materials. We are aware of the difficulties in covering a long period of time and regions which have their own questions and their own issues; talking different trajectories about different human cultures and socio-economic formations.

The papers have been arranged in chronological order. The articles devoted to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic will test flint assemblages, obsidian networks and funerary practices. Thereafter, similarities and differences between the Northern and Southern Levant during the ceramic phases will be discussed through function and form of pottery and iconographic themes. Middle Bronze Age will be addressed through tomb architecture and funerary vessels.

We hope that this volume of *Paléorient*, by bringing new data on similarities or differences between the Northern and Southern Levant, will contribute to a better understanding of the cultural dynamics which prevailed in a complex interaction of exchanges, diffusion, acculturation in different directions, and at different rhythms, during the late Prehistory and Protohistory of the region.

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