

RECENT DISCOVERIES IN SYRIA:
THE EXCAVATIONS AT
HAMMAM ET-TURKMAN¹

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TONIGHT I am taking you along to the land between Euphrates and Tigris, the 'island', as the Syrians call it. South of Harran, the 'spring of the bride' gives rise to the Balikh river (Fig. 1), at the headwaters of which Sir Max Mallowan dug in 1938.² Recently another British scholar, Mrs Lorraine Copeland, drew attention to the important part this region played in the time of earliest agriculture.³ Along the Balikh a far greater number of settlements of the VIIth, VIth, and Vth millennia BC are to be found than along the Euphrates to the west and the Khabur to the east. The reason for this seems to be that in summer and winter the river level is only slightly below the adjoining fields, which makes it easy to utilize river water for irrigation. Within living memory, for instance, the weir between Tell Sahlan and Tell Aswad, 10 km upstream from Hammam et-Turkman, was still constructed of branches and clay. Not until the 1940s did a French firm build a concrete weir, which now leads water from the Balikh into an artificial river branch, the Nahr et-Turkman, that waters 100 sq. km within the modern township of Hammam et-Turkman.

At the foot of the large mound, across the river, lies a small early mound, measuring 60 by 50 m (Tell Dameshliye: Fig. 1), that is threatened by the construction of a new canal. In 1984 permission was granted for a small rescue excavation there; a basal level with

¹ This is the annotated text of the Albert Reckitt Archaeological Lecture for 1985, delivered at the British Academy on 28 February 1985. I wish to thank the British Academy for their kind invitation and for their generous offer to print the text in their *Proceedings*.

² M. E. L. Mallowan, 'Excavations in the Balikh Valley', *Iraq*, viii (1946), 111-39.

³ L. Copeland, 'Observations on the Prehistory of the Balikh Valley', *Paléorient*, v (1979), 251-75.

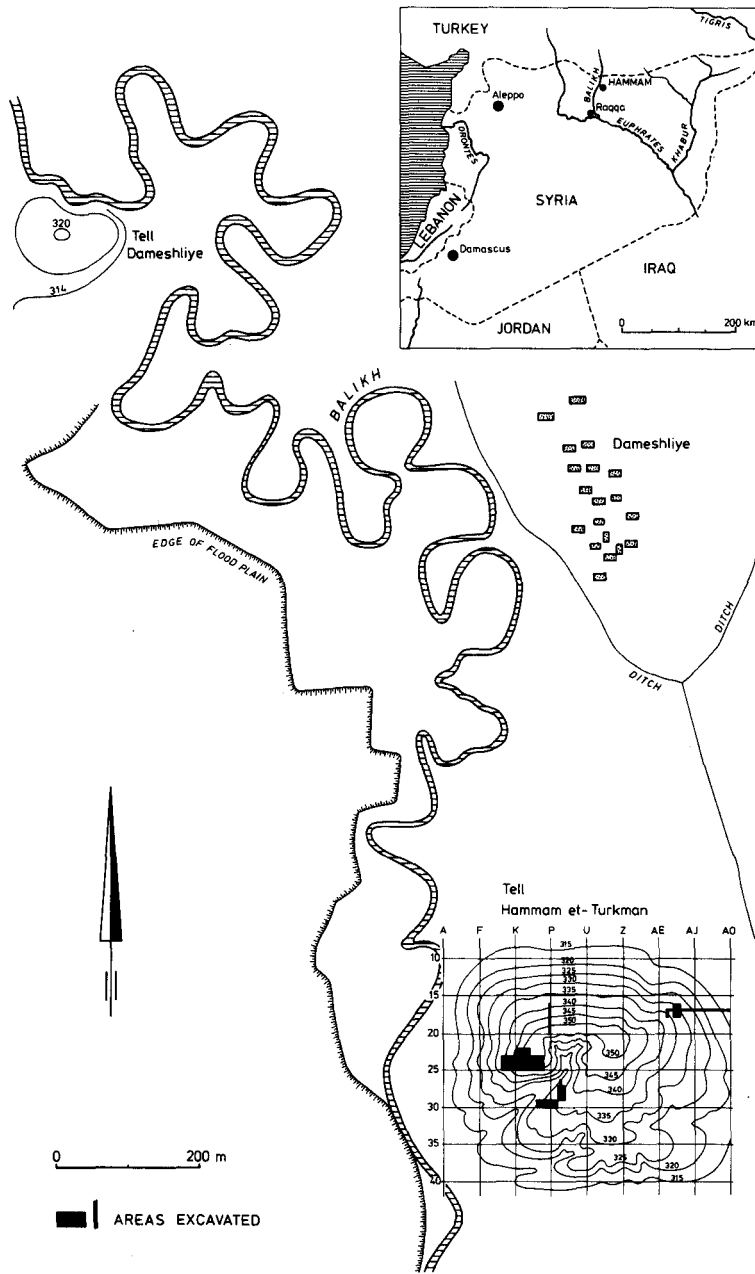


FIG. 1. Map showing Tell Dameshiye and Tell Hammam et-Turkman; inset, position of Hammam in Syria.

small rooms of mud brick and stone vessels of VIIth-millennium type was found. The next level contained coarse light-coloured straw-tempered pottery of VIth-millennium type and charred seeds of emmer wheat, bread wheat, barley, bitter vetch, and lentil. Into and around these remains pits had been dug in the Vth millennium, and subsequently filled with much painted pottery of Halaf type. Finally, in Neo-Assyrian times, the low mound had been used as a cemetery.

The large mound of Hamman et-Turkman itself (Fig. 1), where we have been digging since 1981, measures 500 by 450 by 45 m, which makes it likely that it was the capital of one of Syria's petty kingdoms.¹ Permission to excavate was graciously granted by Dr Afif Bahnassi, Director General of Syria's Antiquities and Museums, and funds were supplied by The Netherlands Foundation for Archaeological Research (ARCHON), as well as by the University of Amsterdam.

The excavation started with test trenches on all four slopes of this rounded rectangular table-shaped mound. In the eastern trench, virgin soil was reached in 1984 at a depth of 12.5 m below the surface. All four walls of the earliest house lay exactly within the 2-m-wide trench. It is at the bottom of a 15-m-deep sequence of levels of the Ubaid culture and should date shortly after 4500 BC, when there was a transition from the north Mesopotamian Halaf style to the south Mesopotamian Ubaid style in painted pottery. Within this sequence house walls often stood up to a metre or more high, and children were buried outside the houses in unbaked clay basins. The bell-shaped bowl, also found by Sir Max Mallowan at nearby Tell Mefesh,² is the most characteristic shape in the earlier Ubaid levels. Painted pottery represents only 5 to 10 per cent of the total. Kiln wasters may indicate the beginning of craft specialization at this early date. In one instance, five painted vertical-sided bowls had been stacked in a fire that was so hot that it melted the clay into a fused mass. Clay animal figurines seem to represent kids and other young domestic animals, reflecting perhaps a wish to increase the flocks by a kind of sympathetic magic.

Towards 3500 BC the small-scale, obviously domestic, architecture of the Ubaid levels is succeeded by a more ambitious structure, containing a main room, 7 m long, flanked by a series of small rooms connected by doorways. In one of these two antlers

¹ W. J. van Liere, 'Capitals and Citadels of Bronze-Iron Age Syria', *Annales archéologiques de Syrie*, xiii (1963), 119-20.

² *Iraq*, viii (1946), 128, fig. 7.

lay on the floor and it contained over 2,000 sherds, most of them from highly standardized chaff-tempered bowls with a scraped outer surface. Mrs Joan du Plat Taylor, who called them Coba bowls, found an almost solid deposit of them at Sakçagözü over the border in Turkey.¹ Perhaps this mass-produced pottery might be the precursor of the so-called bevelled-rim bowl which characterizes the succeeding Uruk period (c.3400–3100 BC) in south Mesopotamia and in surrounding countries. Hans Nissen, Henry Wright, and Gregory Johnson have convincingly argued that these later mass-produced bowls served the rationing system in the centralized temple economies of the earliest cities.² Perhaps the thousands of Coba bowls were used to hand out daily rations of grain to the craftsmen working for the temple at Hammam et-Turkman. The building in which they were found contained a whitewashed niche in its final stage and lay close to the spot on which a later and certainly sacred building (to be discussed presently) stood. Besides the bowls, the mid-IVth-millennium structure yielded two models of buildings and a broken stone stamp seal or amulet engraved with the design of a horned genius lifting elbow and knee. Comparison with an almost identical seal from Gawra in Iraq shows that the design should be completed as a genius dominating a wild goat.³ Undoubtedly the perforated stone was used not only as a seal to stamp containers with goods, but also as an amulet to ensure good luck in the chase.

About a third of the way up the east slope of the mound our attention was drawn to an extensive burnt level. The first room to be cleared contained the remains of large storage jars filled with charred wheat and barley. It formed part of an interconnected series of storerooms that ran parallel to a huge hall, of which about one quarter has now been cleared. The burnt mud-brick walls of the hall, 2 m wide, are decorated along the inside with triple recessed niches, 1.30 m wide. The exposed part of the wall, 15 m long, contains seven such niches. Clay pipes that had fallen into these niches must originally have drained rain-water from the roof. They must have fallen from the roof in the fire that destroyed

¹ J. du Plat Taylor *et al.*, 'The Excavations at Sakce Gözü', *Iraq*, xii (1950), 77, 94–6.

² H. J. Nissen, 'Grabung in den Quadraten K/L XII in Uruk-Warka', *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, v (1970), 137–8; H. T. Wright and G. A. Johnson, 'Population, Exchange and Early State Formation in Southwestern Iran', *American Anthropologist*, lxxvii (1975), 282.

³ A. J. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, II (Philadelphia, 1950), pls. 88a:5, 164:95.



(a) Limestone bath tub at Hammam et-Turkman, Syria, c.2000 B.C.



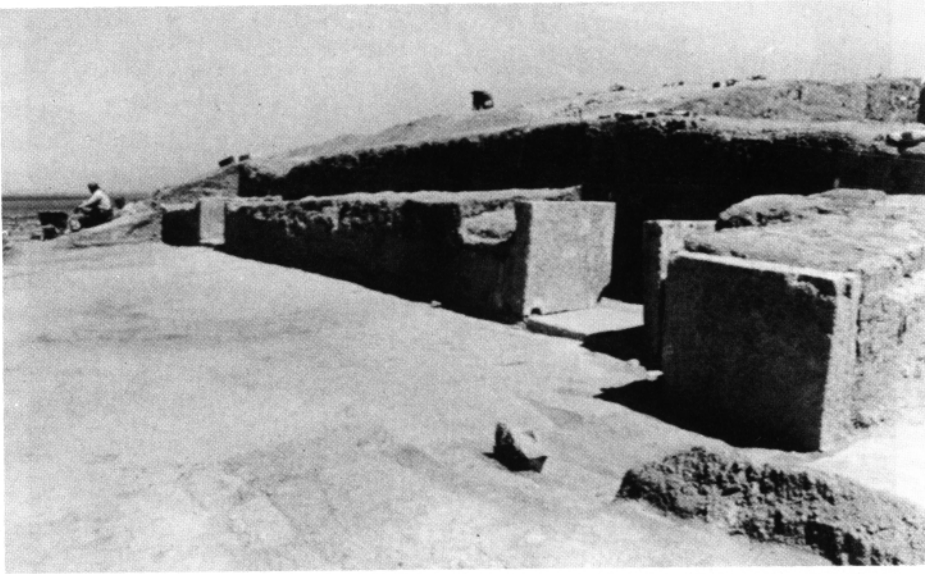
(b) Clay female figurine from Hammam et-Turkman, Syria, c.2000 B.C.
Height 5 cm.



(a) Mud brick fortification(?) wall at Hammam et-Turkman, 1950-1750 B.C.



(b) Clay relief plaque from Hammam et-Turkman: goddess(?) supporting her breasts, c.1750 B.C. Height 5 cm.



(a) View from SSW of main hall of mansion at Hammam et-Turkman, Syria,
c. 1500-1350 B.C.



(b) View from court through inner room to main hall of mansion at
Hammam et-Turkman, Syria, from E.

PLATE IV



Clay sealing from mansion: lower right, deity; centre-upper left: man attacked by lion.
Height 6 cm.

the building and brought down charred roof beams and parts of the mud brick ceiling. Five radio-carbon samples taken from the burnt debris have yielded dates between 3340 ± 35 and 3235 ± 35 BC (GrN-11909 to GrN-11913). Although no altar or statue base has so far been found, it is reasonably certain that this niched building was a temple because sacred buildings at early cities like Uruk and Gawra were distinguished from other buildings by similar niches. The pottery from this building, partly made on the slow wheel, includes bead-rim bowls such as are found in late IVth-millennium Gawra as well.¹ Connections with the early urban civilization of Uruk are suggested by a clay jar sealing, made with a cylinder seal, found nearby. On the right a lion stands over a fallen herbivore and on the left the lion's head is repeated. A prostrate man lies above the lion's back.

Removal of 5 m of later deposits over this temple has given some insight into occupation of the first half of the IIIrd millennium BC. Although most of the superimposed, whitewashed buildings contained niches, buttresses, or benches, they were on a much smaller scale than the temple and contained many domestic appointments, such as clay bread ovens and grain bins. The continuation of the long IIIrd-millennium sequence is given by the lower 5 m of the western trench. Despite frequent destructions by fire the local crafts seem to have flourished and produced fine pottery of extreme hardness without visible temper. Ring-painted bottles seem to belong to the third quarter of the IIIrd millennium, as do clay large-nosed female figurines with pierced, crest-like hair styles. In a burnt house of this period a group of faience or rock crystal beads and shells was found and restrung to form a necklace. The fact that our site was also occupied in the last quarter of the IIIrd millennium is indicated by an Old Akkadian tablet. At this time Mesopotamia, united under strong rulers, succeeded in extending its rule over Syria and thus gaining direct access to the timber-rich Lebanon and the mineral-rich Taurus mountains. Although periods of Mesopotamian strength alternated with periods of weakness when Syrians managed to gain positions of importance within Mesopotamia itself, state control on the movement of goods continued until the end of the IIIrd millennium. Substantial houses equipped with modern-looking bathrooms belong to this period. One shallow limestone bath tub, almost 2 m long, had herring-bone grooves carved into its lower surface (Pl. Ia). Among the pottery, goblets, so numerous

¹ Ibid., pottery figs. 376, 379-81, 413-15, 417.

earlier, were now outnumbered by vertical-rim bowls, a shape also found in contemporary Mesopotamia.¹ Clay figurines, found in nearly every house, seem to represent the Mesopotamian praying goddess in extremely simplified form (Pl. Ib). In previous excavations at Selenkahiye on the Euphrates one such figurine was found *in situ* in a niche with a food offering in front of it.² That the final IIIrd-millennium occupation at Hammam et-Turkman was destroyed in war is indicated by the find of beautifully retouched flint arrowheads, of the same type as found by Sir Max Mallowan at Brak.³

Evidence accumulating from recent excavations confirms what was suspected before, namely that the period around 2000 BC was a time of total disruption in Syria. Except for Mari, which belongs to Mesopotamia culturally, there is no site in Syria at which continuity in architecture or in pottery from the IIIrd to the IIrd millennium can be established. All sites were either violently destroyed or temporarily abandoned; it is tempting to connect this all-round disruption with the fall of the loosely knit empire that had existed under the third dynasty of Ur. Even though rather ineffectual in its later stages, this Mesopotamian empire seems to have been essential in maintaining the stability and Mesopotamian-oriented culture of early Syria. With its disappearance, new forces came to power that had links with Lebanon and Palestine and looked towards Anatolia, the Mediterranean, and Egypt as well. It is the time when private traders, replacing state-organized trade, supplied Mesopotamia with copper and Anatolia with tin and garments. One itinerary of the eighteenth century BC shows that caravans preferred to travel east-west through the southern fringes of the rainfall agriculture zone, coming by Zalpah on the Balikh.⁴ Some letters of the same period show that Zalpah was able to divert most of the water from the river to its own fields, thereby depriving downstream inhabitants of irrigation water.⁵ Both these descriptions would fit

¹ P. Delougaz, *Pottery from the Diyala Region* (Oriental Institute Publications, 63, Chicago, 1952), p. 113, form B.151.210.

² M. van Loon, '1974 and 1975 Preliminary Results of the Excavations at Selenkahiye', *Annual of American School of Oriental Research*, xlv (1979), 100, fig. 3.

³ M. E. L. Mallowan, 'Excavations at Brak and Chagar Bazar', *Iraq*, ix (1947), 180-2, pl. 37:18-23.

⁴ A. Goetze, 'Remarks on the Old Babylonian Itinerary', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, xviii (1964), 116-17.

⁵ G. Dossin, 'Le site de Tuttul-sur-Balikh', *Revue d'Assyriologie*, lxxviii (1974), 27-34.

Hammam et-Turkman located at the point where the valley narrows to a mere 7 m.

On the north slope the search for the early IIInd-millennium city wall was finally rewarded this year when we reached, below towering deposits of later periods, a mud-brick wall at least 7 m wide (Pl. IIa). It had been in use only during the earlier part of the Middle Bronze Age (1950-1750 BC). Subsequently, rain pouring down the slope had cut a deep gully into its side and later construction had covered it up. The character of the Middle Bronze Age city is now best known from work on the south slope, close to the summit, where four houses along a drained alley had already been cleared in 1982. After flimsy beginnings, the Middle Bronze Age inhabitants came to build substantial houses of whitish, lime-tempered mud brick, which were equipped with the usual domed clay bread ovens and grain silos. The narrow streets running parallel to the mound perimeter at first had pottery drains running below. Under one house a gold bead had been placed as a foundation deposit. The dead were often buried in abandoned houses, perhaps those in which they had lived. Adults were buried in mud-brick rectangular tombs, sometimes with a cover made out of disused bath tubs. They were accompanied by their personal ornaments and by vessels containing food and drink for the life hereafter. Children were buried in jars, often near the tomb of an adult relative. The first two centuries of the Middle Bronze Age are characterized by carinated bowls and goblets as well as by pots and jars decorated with incised wavy lines between horizontals. Black-burnished ointment bottles were found in the tombs.

After about 1750 BC Mesopotamian influence reappears in the ceramic assemblage: the shouldered goblet is a shape that gained wide popularity from the reign of Hammurapi onwards. Several clay stands were made in the form of a house with windows and applied figures of birds or naked women. Such naked women are common on clay plaques found among the houses. They seem to offer their breasts to give milk to humanity (Pl. IIb) and stand on small pedestals which confirm their divine status. Georges Contenau proved long ago that this figure represents Shala, who, as a companion of the thunder god, is instrumental in bringing rain.¹ A god in a long garment covered with rows of fringes appears on another broken plaque. Frequent finds of bronze tools and ornaments give the impression of a prosperous community.

¹ G. Contenau, *La déesse nue babylonienne* (Paris, 1914), pp. 16-18, 34-44, 115-18.

Among tools are sickles and saws, among ornaments toggle pins usually with melon-shaped heads. A tool with earlier Mesopotamian affinities is the bronze drinking tube; applied to the end of a drinking reed and pierced with tiny holes; the tube allowed the liquid beer to pass through, but not the barley grains floating in the beer. An Old Babylonian tablet confirms that, in the Middle Bronze Age too, the Balikh valley was still within the orbit of cuneiform writing. Particularly significant are the findings of the zoologist and botanist, Hylke Buitenhuis and Sytze Bottema respectively, from Groningen University who were attached to the expedition. Their first impression is that, compared with earlier periods, the Middle and Late Bronze Ages show a strikingly large percentage of equine bones and a strong dominance of barley over wheat. Numerous donkey and horse bones could reflect the caravan trade of which the texts speak, and some of the barley might have been grown as fodder for pack animals. In the absence of other evidence, however, this remains highly speculative. The latest Middle Bronze Age level has been carbon-dated 1520 ± 30 BC (GrN-11908).

As the summit of the mound was approached in 1982, a different building, with wide stone foundations, appeared, together with white-on-black painted pottery of the type known as Nuzu ware, also found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the Late Bronze I level of Alalakh (about 1500–1350 BC).¹ Particularly popular motifs on this ware at Hammam et-Turkman are eagle heads and eagles with spread wings, their feathers drawn as superimposed scales. This ware, found as far apart as Alalakh in north-west Syria (now Turkey) and Nuzu in north-east Iraq, has, no doubt correctly, been associated with the kingdom of Mitanni, which ruled over north Syria and north Mesopotamia and, for a century and a half, played an important part in international politics. For three successive generations (Tuthmosis IV to Amenophis IV) Egyptian kings married daughters of the Mitannian king, until the Hittites broke the power of Mitanni and eliminated this buffer state between them and the Egyptians. The Mitannian war lords, of Indo-Iranian origin but soon assimilated to their Hurrian-speaking followers, instituted a completely different social system from that which obtained earlier; it had many features in common with the European medieval feudal system. Under their dominion north Syria and north Mesopotamia witnessed a short, last florescence of a culture different from those before. The large

¹ Sir Leonard Woolley, *Alalakh: An Account of the Excavations at Tell Atchana* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 347–50, pls. 104–7.

mound at Hammam et-Turkman was now crowned by a vast mansion, of which 500 sq. m have been cleared during this season. Its western wall, which had been exposed on the slope, had been so eroded that the main hall, 14 m in length, was immediately revealed (Pl. IIIa). The doorways were lined by polished limestone slabs and doorsills, 2 m long. Wooden beams had been incorporated into the mud-brick superstructure, both horizontally and vertically—an Anatolian method of protection against earthquake. Parallel to the main hall an inner room, 8 by 5 m, had a central bowl-shaped clay hearth. From there a ramp, made of lime-and-gravel concrete and grooved to prevent slipping, led between two low parapets down into a cobbled courtyard (Pl. IIIb). At the far end of the courtyard a bathroom and a kitchen had been altered repeatedly during the lifetime of the building, possibly over a century and a half. In its final form the bathroom was tiled, but an earlier version had vertical drains made of disused pot stands and so-called censers. The original floor contained a sunk earthenware tub. Water was drained from the courtyard by a baked brick channel. The building was never destroyed by fire or other violence, but had been cleared of its contents and bricked up, obviously in the hope that it would be possible to come back and reopen it. Here and there an object had been overlooked, such as a painted drinking vessel of the so-called younger Khabur ware.¹ Larger vessels sometimes had spouts in the shape of rams' heads. The kingdom of Mitanni, with its close ties with Egypt, was also the first part of western Asia where glass and glazed earthenware became common. At Hammam et-Turkman figurines of naked women were now made of black and white glazed earthenware. On the floor of a gatehouse a clay sealing on which three Mitannian cylinders had been rolled (Pl. IV) was found: one shows a Syrian deity wearing a horned crown with an additional prong in front, the second, a lion attacking a falling man who has his arms tied together, and the third, the well-known motif of the worshipper holding what has been called a bouquet-tree.² On removal of the smooth lime plaster floor of the main hall, a group of unbaked clay human figurines and miniature vessels were found. These were treated with paraffin in the field and are now being baked at Leiden University before an attempt is made to piece them together.

¹ B. Hrouda, *Die bemalte Keramik des zweiten Jahrtausends in Nordmesopotamien und Nordsyrien* (Istanbuler Forschungen 19, Berlin, 1957), pp. 22-3, 34-5.

² E. Porada, 'Seal Impressions of Nuzi', *Annual of American School of Oriental Research*, xxiv (1947), 17 ff.

Although several centuries earlier than their Assyrian counterparts, they may have been placed below the floor for the same apotropaic purpose.¹

The owners of the mansion never came back and it slowly collapsed and decayed. During Late Bronze Age II (about 1350–1200 BC) adults and children were buried round its outskirts. One child, buried in a jar, was accompanied by a green-glazed bowl. In another burial was a necklace of blue glass paste beads. The Hittites, who were now in power, seem to have influenced the type of female figurine which was found on the surface: it has a disc-shaped halo like the Hittite sun goddess.

As at the sites investigated by Sir Max Mallowan further north,² the Hittite regime seems to have caused serious depopulation, which lasted for over a millennium into Parthian times, when a mud-brick fortress with casemate walls was erected on top of the mound. This could conceivably be Kommisimbela, a fortified place on the Balikh mentioned by Isidore of Charax and perhaps named after the confluence of Nahr et-Turkman and Balikh.³ The spaces in the casemate walls, built mainly to retain the edge of the table-shaped mound, were also used as metal foundries. Crucibles were found among much burnt material. The shapes of painted and incised amphorae resemble those found at Dura Europos. The material culture of the Parthian empire, and especially that of its western fringes, was of course heavily influenced by Hellenistic and Roman culture, so that the hollow female figurines found in these levels, distinguished as goddesses by their tall headdresses, have western prototypes. Hollow clay lamps were also pressed out of moulds, and occasionally bore a figure of Silenus in relief. Such lamps were made at Antioch on the Orontes in the first centuries BC and AD.⁴ From 96 BC to AD 123 the Euphrates remained the frontier between the Roman and Parthian empires, and the later Roman province of Osrhoene, which included at least the upper reaches of Balikh, remained Parthian from 113 BC to AD 195. Nevertheless copper coins of Augustus, probably minted at Antioch about 19 BC, were found at Hammam et-Turkman. In

¹ O. R. Gurney, 'Babylonian Prophylactic Figures and their Rituals', *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, xxii (1935), 31–96.

² *Iraq*, viii (1946), 121.

³ W. H. Schoff (ed.), *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax* (London, 1914), pp. 2–3; L. Dillemann, *Haute mésopotamie orientale et pays adjacents* (Paris, 1962), pp. 169, 178–9.

⁴ F. O. Waagé, 'Lamps' in R. Stillwell (ed.), *Antioch on-the-Orontes*, III (Princeton, 1941), figs. 75–6, nos. 13d:45–25a:76.

AD 164 the Romans drove the Parthians out of Syria and in AD 195 Rome conquered Osrhoene. When the Balikh valley no longer lay in the frontier zone, the mound was once more abandoned and used as a cemetery by those who lived in the surrounding plain. Their graves occasionally contain a glass bottle or a silver earring of a type also found at Larnaka on Cyprus in the second to third century AD.¹

Recent developments, which are the object of research by Norman Lewis, are a good illustration of how a zone that allows rainfall agriculture will fill with settlements as soon as effective law enforcement is established. After six centuries of utter desolation, the countryside around Hammam et-Turkman is once more dotted with villages and hamlets that are in many respects like their predecessors four thousand years ago.

¹ F. H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Jewellery . . . in the British Museum* (London, 1911), pl. 53:2473.