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THEMA

**New Horizons in Western Asian Archaeology and Bioanthropology**

coord. Arwa Kharobi

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De wetenschappelijke inhoud van het tijdschrift wordt bewaakt door een permanente redactieraad en een internationaal leescomité dat is samengesteld in functie van het thema van de individuele bijdrage. Deze raad en comité hebben in geen geval het recht om de manuscripten te censureren, behalve bij manifest gebrek aan wetenschappelijke ernst. De auteurs zijn steeds de enige verantwoordelijken voor de inhoud van hun bijdrage.

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De Vereniging voor Antropologie van Brussel, gesticht in 1882, kreeg vanaf 1931 de benaming van Koninklijke Belgische Vereniging voor Antropologie en Prehistorie. Ze verenigt al dan niet professionele onderzoekers, zowel Belgische en buitenlandse, gespecialiseerd in de prehistorische archeologie, in de biologische antropologie, in de genetische antropologie of in de menselijke paleontologie.

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## EDITO

The emphasis of this special issue of *Anthropologica et Praehistorica* lies in showcasing recent research in the archaeology of Western Asia, across various periods without chronological constraints; from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods to the Bronze Ages and Classical periods, a group of young scholars guides us on a journey through the Mediterranean region, traversing from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq and Turkey. Employing diverse methodologies and analytical tools, the invited authors present new insights into Archaeology, Biological Anthropology and Epigraphy. This special issue represents a significant contribution to a region famous for its historical and cultural heritage, even amidst ongoing geopolitical and natural challenges. Nevertheless, these challenges have not stopped our authors from actively participating in contemporary academic discourse and open new horizons in front of the archaeology of Western Asia enhanced our understanding of early human history and the development of ancient civilizations.

The inaugural paper authored by **Anas Al Khabour**, titled *Insights from Central Syrian Desert on the migration routes of Homo erectus from Africa to Eurasia during the Paleolithic*, presents a significant contribution to our understanding of early human migration patterns and settlements, especially the migration of *Homo erectus* from Africa to Eurasia, highlighting the role of expansive rivers like the Euphrates as key corridors for population dispersal. One of the paper's strengths lies in its recognition of the importance of the Central Syrian Desert as a region rich in archaeological potential. The paper also acknowledges certain limitations; while surface material collection and surveys have provided foundational data, a more detailed qualitative analysis of these artifacts and fauna would better enhance our interpretations of the cultural and ecological dynamics of the region. The call for future multidisciplinary research endeavours is well-founded by integrating diverse methodologies and perspectives.

In her archaeo-anthropological analysis of funerary practices in the Central Anatolian Neolithic, **Nada Elias** examines the funerary space at Çatalhöyük (Turkey) and its relationship with the living space. What stands out in Elias' analysis is her keen observation of how death influences everyday life at Çatalhöyük by focusing on the dynamic nature of cultural traditions and the ways in which they shape the organization of space and community dynamics; *'the choice to bury people close to where they lived in the Neolithic era tells us a lot about their beliefs and values, connecting us directly to our past'*. From early burials beneath houses to later practices where abandoned dwellings become burial grounds themselves, this transition reflects a distinguished perception of the interplay between the living and the dead. This work underscores the complexities of Neolithic life at Çatalhöyük, where the boundaries between the living and the deceased crossed.

In the subsequent paper authored by **Muhammad Baraze**, titled *The practice of burial in perishable containers in ancient Syria between the 1st and 7th centuries AD*, the author analysis one hundred tombs in nine funerary spaces. The analysis of the graves was carried out either directly in the field (for Palmyra and Es-Samra), or from the archives of excavations (for Edh-Dharih, Faynan, Homs, Mampsis, Palmyre, Qazone, Umm al-Hawran, Umm al-Jimal, Zabayir Ed-Dyab). This analysis included the taphonomical analysis of the skeletons, the graves goods and the positions of inhumation. The collected data made it possible to demonstrate the use of different types of perishable containers for subadults and adults, questioning the social status of those individuals. The author concludes, while there are challenges in understanding burial practices across different regions in Syria, the call for further exploration and the application of advanced methodologies in archaeoethnology is a need to deepening our knowledge in this field.

In his paper titled *An Early 'Long Tub' Coffin from 5th Century BC Achaemenid Nippur*, **Bernard Schneider** concluded that the rationale behind the utilization of such coffins in Nippur for burials starting from the end of Xerxes' reign (465 BC) requires further investigation. The appearance of these coffins may be linked to the influx of foreign populations into the Nippur region. Some of these individuals likely arrived as mercenaries, like the Carians, who had been settled in the Nippur hinterland since the time of Cambyses. These foreign groups often operated under 'a ḫaṭru' (Akk.) organization. Additionally, there was a nearby settlement of Egyptians alongside the Carians, both of which are mentioned in tablet CBS 10059. Furthermore, according to Zadok, Arameans inhabited late Achaemenid Nippur, as evidenced by a text dating back to September 13, 445 BC (6/VI/20 Artaxerxes I). Various possibilities exist for identifying the origins of this specific burial practice in Nippur and Mesopotamia in general. Conducting a dental analysis of strontium isotopes would be beneficial in determining the provenance of at least some of the buried individuals in Nippur.

The Bronze Age period in the Khabur basin (Syria) was the focus of two papers with two different approaches, one focusing on anthropology and the other on glyptic studies:

The first, entitled *Early Bronze Age Population Substructure in the Khabur Basin: Preliminary Evidence from Tell Brak, Tell Arbid, and Tell Barri (Syria)*, where **Nina Maaranen and collaborators** explore the population dynamics and socio-political structures of ancient communities in the region. Based on available cuneiform documents and archaeological evidence, the authors investigate diplomatic relations and migration patterns between North Mesopotamian kingdoms, using two complementary approaches: dental non-metric traits and isotopic analyses.

Their analysis highlighted the complexities of urbanization and community organization in ancient Mesopotamia by suggesting that while Tell Brak was as the capital, experiencing significant growth and immigration during the Late Chalcolithic period, Tell Barri and Tell Arbid, as provincial centres, displayed less population heterogeneity. However, despite their administrative rankings, the three groups exhibited ancestral similarities, revealing shared cultural and genetic traits. While acknowledging limitations as small sample sizes and methodological considerations, the authors emphasize the importance of such multidisciplinary approaches in biological anthropology.

The second is by **Yasmine Mahmoud's** *Four Unpublished Plaques from Ancient city of Urkesh (Modern Tell Mozan, Syria): Analysis of Context and Function*, sheds light on the significance of four nude female representation plaques discovered at domestic contexts at Tell Mozan and dating back to the second millennium BC. All align with Mesopotamian domestic cult traditions, but their fragmentary state of preservation prevented from concluding on their exact function, hence, the identity of the depicted female figure proves challenging. Mahmoud agreed with previous interpretations proposed by scholars on plaque imagery and role as afterlife guardians, but she speculates that if further excavations reveal associations between similar plaques and burials, they might have then symbolized guardian spirits or deities related to domestic cults or religion, potentially playing a role in the afterlife (i.e. netherworld). While Mahmoud's interpretation offers a fresh perspective on plaque function, it necessitates additional data from residential areas to substantiate its validity. Future excavations will enrich our understanding of these artifacts and their role within ancient Urkesh's cultural and religious milieu.

The issue is concluding with two papers from the Pearl of the Desert, Palmyra. The first titled *Revision of the Role of Tesserae and Their Connection to Banquets in Palmyrene Temples*, by **Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider** who challenges the widely accepted notion that tesserae were exclusively linked to ritual banquets in Palmyra. She questions the assumption that tesserae served as entrance tickets to banquets, arguing that they primarily represented the cultic agents involved in the rituals rather than attendees requiring invitations. Kubiak-Schneider contends that tesserae likely held multiple functions beyond facilitating banquet access. Instead, she suggests they could have served as memory tokens, identification tags, transaction markers, or administrative labels. These tesserae were intricately linked to the priests responsible for organizing the meals and managing the associated goods. By offering a nuanced perspective, Kubiak-Schneider enriches our understanding of Palmyrene religious life and material culture. Her insights encourage scholars to approach ancient artifacts with a critical lens, recognizing the potential for multiplicity in interpretation and the need to consider diverse socio-cultural contexts. In conclusion, Kubiak-Schneider's commentary challenges the scholarly community to reconsider entrenched assumptions and explore alternative explanations for ancient artifacts. Her nuanced perspective opens up new avenues for research and invites further investigation into the complexities of Palmyrene temple practices and social dynamics.

The second is by **Mariam Slimoun** on *The Presence of Foreigners in the Inscriptions of Palmyra*. She draws conclusions about the diverse categories of foreigners documented in the city's inscriptions. These individuals, ranging from emperors to simple foreigners such as slaves or freedmen, are prominently featured in both public and private inscriptions, reflecting their integration into various aspects of Palmyrene life. The inscriptions reveal the active participation of foreigners in civil, military, administrative, and religious activities within Palmyra. The coexistence of the Palmyrene language alongside Greek and Latin, the official languages of the Roman Empire, reflects a fascinating aspect of Palmyrene society—the assimilation of foreigners. This linguistic diversity is seen as a natural part of Palmyrene society and indicates a level of integration. Foreign presence in Palmyra, spanning from the latter half of the 1st century AD to the 4th century, was largely due to Palmyra's geographic isolation in the Syrian desert and its thriving trade activities, which exposed it to various cultures and risks. Conversely, Palmyrenes themselves were active travellers throughout the Roman Empire, participating in commercial, civil, religious, and military pursuits. The question of whether Palmyrenes fully integrated into the Roman Empire remains unanswered, underscoring the need for extensive research into the Palmyrene diaspora during the Roman Antiquity period. Overall, the coexistence of languages in Palmyra and the dynamics of cultural exchange hint at a complex relationship between Palmyrenes and the broader Roman Empire, warranting further investigation to better understand the extent of integration and cultural exchange during that era.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all the authors and reviewers for their hard work and dedication. I wish all our readers an enjoyable reading experience.

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