The populations of the Near East and nearby regions: evolution of diet and health status from the Neolithization to the Early Bronze Age

Andreas Schachner – Ausgrabungen in Giricano II: Die chalkolithische Siedlung von Giricano am Oberen Tigris

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The volume under review is the second in a series of final publications presenting the results of rescue excavations directed by the author from 2000 to 2003 in Giricano Tepe, a small mound site on the left river terrace of the Upper Tigris in southeastern Turkey threatened by imminent changes in land use in the region following the flooding of the Ilisu Dam. Conceived of as a straightforward excavation report, it presents in three central chapters and with extensive illustrations the data on stratigraphy and architecture (ch. 2), finds (ch. 3) and ceramics (ch. 4), bracketed by an introductory chapter (ch. 1) and a final synthesis (ch. 5). A detailed summary in Turkish completes the German language volume.

The investigations at Giricano mainly targeted the Bronze and Iron Age levels of this site whose prehistoric occupation on the southern slope was only recognized during the first excavation season. The South Slope was subsequently investigated by a stepped trench (trench 06) of variable extension. This operation revealed over a length of 40 m a combined stratigraphic sequence of Late Chalcolithic levels (levels 19 to 14, phases VII-VI) capped by a layer of domestic architecture from the second quarter of the 3rd millennium BC (level 13, phase V, late Ninevite 5). The site then lay abandoned for half a millennium and was re-occupied in the Middle Bronze Age (phase IV), Late Bronze Age (phase III) and Iron Age (phase II). Older, Neolithic and Chalcolithic material was also recorded, but derived exclusively from secondary deposits within the
excavated sequence (phase VIII). The book is entirely devoted to presenting phases VII to V in detail and includes some secondary period VIII material.

Chapter 2 is the key part of the book as it details the excavated stratigraphy and architecture, combined with primary evidence on dating and important finds, and with interpretative sections concluding the presentation of single building phases. Based on ceramic typology, the sequence of Giricano VII-VI is thought to cover the Late Chalcolithic (LC 1-5; see p. 163 table 58) and a final occupation in the early 3rd millennium BCE. However, the sequence comprises a gap of unknown length caused by extensive leveling and terracing. Chronometric dating is available only for the substantial building J of period VI that belongs to the last third of the 4th millennium BCE (p. 24-25 with fig. 34 and table 10).

Judging from the architectural record (ch. 2), the site Giricano underwent a considerable structural development from level 19 to 14. From the beginning of occupation, levelling and terracing had prepared the ground for buildings, whose size and density increased over time, pointing at growing levels of complexity in planning and within the related community. Period VII comprises phases 19c-a (VIIb) and 18c-a (VIIa), that appear as a continuous sequence of settlement layers comprised of domestic houses in terraced steps (see fold-out plan 4 for an overview). Phases 19c-a extend over altogether 6m of deposits, accounting for about half of the total height of the settlement mound, whereas the continuation in phases 18c-a, although composed of substantial architecture as well, amounts to only a bit over 1 m of deposit. Period VI contains altogether 2.5 m of layers and is distinguished into phases 17-16 (Vlc), 15 (Vlb) and 14b-a (Vla, cf. fold-out plans 2-3).

Occupation began as a terraced settlement on the south slope of the river terrace (VIIb: 19c) that allowed for generous open space in between building. Subsequent terracing in phases 19b and again in 19a enforced the slopes, and buildings G and H were set against the terrace walls as constructions filled up empty space, interpreted as evidence for an increased density and complexity of the settlement. Phases 18c-a follow above and north of phase 19 buildings and are represented by three reconstructions of one substantial house, building F.

A hiatus separates the occupation of period VI from the older structures of phase 18. According to the excavator, phases 17 and 16 (Vlc) both represent episodes of terracing and levelling in preparation for the construction of an important building. This is represented in period Vla by building F in phases 14b-a, with phase 15 (Vlb) likely the residues of a predecessor or preparatory construction. What is preserved of building J are three walls of a single large room with a white plaster floor, with an extension of ca. 170 m² clearly of a dimension beyond standard domestic houses in the Late Chalcolithic. The walls stand on a foundation of stones, and together with the large-scale terracing preceding the construction, likely belong to a substantial non-domestic building. The excavator draws comparisons with cultic buildings in Brak, Arslantepe and other sites (p. 22-23), but specific functions cannot be assigned as there is hardly any inventory preserved except for a storage vessel in the northwestern corner of the room that may have been part of a group or row of such vessels lined up (p. 85 for such an interpretation). The whole construction was destroyed in a single event that made the walls collapse into the room in their entirety (cf. fold-out plan 1), possibly caused by an earthquake.
On top of the wall collapse follows another settlement layer in phase 13 (period V) that is characterized by small one- and two-room buildings that served, according to installations and find materials, domestic functions.

Chapter 3 (“Small finds”) is organized as an annotated catalogue, presenting objects by functional groups and materials, and including some interpretation and comparison in the text. The presented spectrum contains nothing out of the ordinary for the region and time slot we look at, but a few categories deserve a comment. So-called micro-beads (p. 49-50, fig. 68) are interesting as they seem to represent a serial production from an artificially vitrified material, possibly enstatite (not analyzed). Pierced ceramic sherds, often also called “roundels”, are a ubiquitous find group of enigmatic function in Chalcolithic and Bronze Age sites in Northern Mesopotamia. Roundels have variously been interpreted as counting devices, net sinkers or weights, spindle whorls or ceramic production tools. From all of these possibilities, the author decided for a function as spindle whorl, however he does not lay out how he arrived at such a conclusion. Among the metal objects, he draws our attention to the tip of a copper blade with thick middle rib, found on a floor adjacent to building J in phase 14. The fragment may have belonged to a well-established form of spearhead with comparisons known from Arslantepe VIA to Başur Höyük, as the author himself refers to (p. 63-64, figs. 83a, 84).

The few lithic finds are also presented in this chapter (p. 55, with figs. 72, 73 and table 23—not 25, as referenced in the text). Illustrated finds are all blades, some of the so-called “Canaanean” type. Obsidian seems to have been restricted to phase 19a and was apparently analyzed and assigned to East Anatolian deposits (p. 55, footnote 25 with reference to analysis by J. Keller in Freiburg, analysis not published).

At 90 pages, chapter 4 on the ceramic assemblages takes up the major part of the book. The material is presented on the basis of well-stratified inventories in a catalogue system with commentary. The inventories were selected to provide insight into the typological and chronological definition of the individual phase assemblages and serve to situate Giricano among contemporary sites in the wider region with respect to cultural affiliation and degrees of similarity. On this basis, the author emphasizes the strong local character of the pottery assemblages throughout the sequence, and the limited extent of supra-local contacts visible (p. 85).

Chapter 5 wraps up the excavations in the lower levels at Giricano and provides a contextual discussion of the main results. In a diachronic perspective, LC settlement in Giricano begins at a moment when numerous sites appear to shift location to the higher terraces. A strong continuity of ceramic production is apparent and from LC 1 onwards, the formation and transformation of settlement in Giricano proceeds without major interruption until a major building was constructed following massive leveling. This building J may have played an important role in cultic activities and its importance may have exceeded the local level (p. 166). The author is fully aware of the limited excavation area that makes it difficult to extrapolate and compare with contemporary settlements like Tepe Gawra (p. 164), but he emphasizes that Giricano smoothly fits into the greater scheme of development towards increased complexity observed in the wider region, albeit at a lesser scale than the paramount centers Tell Brak and others. The author argues that the importance of the site may lay with its strategic situation at the interface between the Tigris valley and access to the highlands, while at the same time the fragmented territory may account for a greater
self-centeredness of the region that shielded it from integration into the supra-regional currents of Uruk-contacts.

I have provided this slightly pedestrian summary of the book contents with regard to the limited accessibility of the text for non-German readers. Before turning to a more general evaluation of the book, a few glitches need to be pointed out as these are truly disorienting. These concern the order of text and numbers, probably residues of a final re-organization of the text, but confusing nevertheless. Page 49 begins with a section on micro-beads but the first sentence makes it clear that this had been intended as second section only; therefore, the related illustration fig. 68 appears after figs. 66-67 that illustrate the next section on large beads from fired clay. For the lithic industry, the table providing catalogue information for figs. 72-73 is table 23, not 25 as referenced; and fig. 72e refers to the extraordinary long blade 06-163-1298 also displayed on fig. 73, which in the table is listed as 72f. A comparable slip concerns ceramic sherds with impressed surface decoration (p. 103-104), largely found without context, that are for a number of reasons assigned to LC 4-5 (Late Uruk); they are illustrated on fig. 115 and listed in table 43 on p. 96 but referenced as tab. 45. Leaving aside these editorial inaccuracies, the author has made an important assemblage of the Late Chalcolithic to initial Early Bronze Age available to scholars. Equipped with high quality plans and photographs, this excavation report provides a good basis for further study.

Further study is, however, exactly what this nicely presented material warrants. It is a huge task to single-handedly write a monograph on a period the author, who is a well-known specialist for the 2nd and 1st millennium BC, clearly is not so familiar with, and he does not pretend to be, as honestly stated in the Foreword. It is also obvious from the synthetical chapter that barely touches on the ongoing discussions on the dynamics of Late Chalcolithic developments that began with G. Algaze’s seminal “Uruk world system” (Algaze 1993), not in the bibliography, and have seen much refinement since. Departing on the working hypothesis that Giricano is a site with a strong local component hardly influenced by processes of the wider world, there is also no broader contextual discussion provided, not even in demonstrating the differences between Giricano and reference places like Tell Brak (no reports on sites beyond the immediate neighborhood are referenced). The book would have profited from widening the perspective, including the interpretational framework. This would have been possible by including the voices and works of specialists. Today, archaeological work is teamwork, and one wonders why specific sections or parts of the study have not been entrusted to experts who would have come to the task with their deep background knowledge.

One problematic point is the discussion of absolute chronology for the monumental building J in phase VI (see p. 25 and table 10 for dates, p. 24 fig. 34 for a calibrated sequence): five samples were obtained from floors outside of building J, three from the floor of building E that belongs to the earlier phase 14b, and one from the alley between buildings E and J, assigned to phase 14b. All samples were charcoal, without providing a species identification; if we leave aside the sample from the alley that squarely falls into the same range as the phase 14a samples, the three 14b samples come out significantly older than the phase 14a samples that date the upper phase of the monumental building J. Without information on the kind of wood from which these samples were taken, it is impossible to judge if these old dates represent an “old wood
effect”, of if the early phase of period VI is indeed much older than the building proper. The five samples representing phase 14a are taken to represent a lifetime of the 14a building from 3300-3100 BCE calibrated, without mentioning that a major plateau in the calibration curve of the late 4th millennium BCE may be responsible for an artificial homogenization of sample results. While this does not change the overall assignment of building J to LC 5, it remains to be tested if the lower level of the building and the adjacent building E are truly as old as they seem.

14 Throughout the book there are examples where a specialist hand may have been helpful. One is the lithic section that treats the (however small) assemblage as a group of individual finds, with technical drawings by different hands and in different style, and with an obsidian analysis merely mentioned in a footnote. Lithic studies today treat complete assemblages of debitage, not individual finds, and obsidian provenance is an important information that deserves a small technical report in itself. The same is true for the enstatite beads that have not been submitted to lab study. And a specialist would also have approached the ceramic study differently: ceramic studies would today address such assemblages not only for typology and dating but would ask for technology or a reconstruction of a chaîne opératoire, for residues, use wear and mineralogy studies.

15 Enough of the quibbles. This nicely produced excavation report provides much more robust information than we have at our disposal for many other excavations in the wider region and throws the doors wide open for future studies. The author is to be commended for so diligently presenting an important Late Chalcolithic assemblage and presenting it in a way that invites—and necessitates—future study.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


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