The Orontes Valley in texts from Alalah and Ugarit during the Late Bronze Age, ca 1500-1200 BC

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Résumé – Les données disponibles dans les textes d’Ugarit et d’Alalāḫ ne sont guère utiles quand il s’agit du fleuve Oronte, parce qu’elles ne mentionnent pas son nom et n’apportent aucune information sur son éventuelle navigabilité. Ce qui est particulièrement surprenant dans le cas d’Alalāḫ. Cependant, les archives d’Ugarit et d’Alalāḫ nous donnent des renseignements sur les zones-frontières de ces deux cités-États, et là l’Oronte a joué un rôle important. Les traités entre les rois hittites et leurs vassaux à Ugarit attestent que la frontière avec Alalāḫ était soigneusement délimitée par des toponymes qui y sont énumérés et apparteniaient au pays d’Ugarit, situés vers le sud, le long du fleuve. D’autre part, dans les textes administatifs d’Alalāḫ, la cité-État était divisée en plusieurs provinces, dont l’une semble avoir inclus une grande partie du Ghab.

Mots-clés – Syrie, Oronte, Ghab, Ugarit, Alalāḫ, navigabilité, toponyme, frontière, provinces

Abstract – The data available in the Late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit and Alalāḫ are not very helpful with regard to the river Orontes, because they do not mention its name and they give no specific information on whether it was navigable or not. Especially in the case of Alalāḫ this is surprising. However, the archives of both cities have provided us with data that help us to reconstruct the borders of these two city-states and in this the Orontes played an important role. Treaties between the Hittite kings and their vassals at Ugarit ensured that the border with Alalāḫ was carefully delineated by listing all toponyms belonging to Ugarit to the south of the border, including those that come close to the river. In administrative texts from Alalāḫ, the city-state was divided in several provinces, one of which seemed to have included a large part of the Ghab.

Keywords – Syria, Orontes, Ghab, Ugarit, Alalāḫ, navigability, toponyms, borders, provinces

ملخص – إن المعلومات المتوفرة في النصوص عن أوغاريت وألالاخ ليست ذات قيمة عندما يتعلق الأمر بحوض العاصي، فمجرد الاسم لم يرد ذكره بالإضافة إلى عدم الإشارة لأية معلومة عن صاحبه للملاحة وهو ما يعتبر مفاجئاً ويشكل خاص في حالة ألالاخ. ومع ذلك، فإن أرشيف المدينين قد قدم لنا وثائق عن المناطق الحدودية لكلا المدينين-الدولتين حيث كان للعاصي دورا هاماً. وتشهد المعاهمات بين الملوك الحكرين وإمكالوين لهم في أوغاريت على أن الحدود مع ألالاخ كانت محددة بعناية بواسطة قائمة بكل تسميات الأمكنة التابعة لبلاد أوغاريت في الجهة الجنوبية للحدود، والتي تشمل تلك القريبة من نهر العاصي. من جهة أخرى فهي نصوص ألالاخ الإدارية كانت المدينة-الدولة مقسمة إلى مقاطعات عديدة وبدو أن إحداها كانت تتضمن قسماً كبيراً من منطقة الغاب.

كلمات محورية – سورية، العاصي، الغاب، أوغاريت، ألالاخ، صلاحية الملاحة، تسميات، حدود، مقاطعات

Syria, Supplément IV (2016), p. 137 à 144
The Orontes river is the longest river in West Syria and it is also abounding in water. According to Weulersse, the river is 610 km long and its river basin covers about 23,000 km². The water supply is relatively constant, but in the spring there is normally more water than during the autumn. Since irrigation of agricultural land was not necessary extra water is only used for, for instance, horticulture. The water supply of the Orontes is secured by a large number of wells that are located along the river, about 50 in the Ghab alone. The mountains that line the Orontes valley serve as a reservoir for the water that it carries. The water table drops from more than 600 m in the Beqa’ valley to less than 200 m in the Ghab valley. However, the drop in water level in the Ghab was minimal due to the presence of the basalt threshold near Qarqar. This also caused the valley to be flooded over a large area, in particular during the spring.

The Orontes was not navigable in antiquity, at least not as far as Antioch, and it is still uncertain whether it was navigable from Antioch to the Mediterranean. That means that the river was of no importance for the transport of goods and people and that is probably why it is almost never mentioned, at least not during the Late Bronze Age. However, there are enough allusions in the texts that inform us about the political situation of cities situated on the river during this period and in that way they provide indirect evidence.

There were three important fords in Antiquity, the one near Šeizar, the one of ʿAšarneh, and the one near Qarqar. In his survey report Courtois divided the valley of the Ghab and the Rūǧ into three zones (fig. 1). The first of these zones covers the stretch from Šeizar to the west, including ʿAšarneh. The latter is often associated with the city of Tunip known from hieroglyphic and cuneiform sources. An inscription of Sargon II was found here. The zone also includes the area south of Qalʿat el-Mudiq, classical Apamea, to the north of ʿAšarneh.

1. Weulersse 1940a, p. 5. For a general view of the Orontes, see p. 8, fig. 9.
2. Weulersse 1940a, fig. 8.
3. Weulersse 1940a, fig. 7.
The second zone is the northern Ghab, north of Qal´at el-Mudiq and including Qarqar to the north. The latter is one of the most important tells in this zone. It has been studied by an American expedition led by Rudi Dornemann.

The third zone covers the valley of the Rāğ in the north and includes Lake Beloua. Courtois concluded from his survey that a large number of settlements existed in the valley, especially during the Early Bronze Age, which covered the entire 3rd millennium.

**THE TEXTUAL MATERIAL CONCERNING THE ORONTES VALLEY**

Unfortunately, there are no texts from Alalaḥ and Ugarit that explicitly mention the Orontes river. One of the reasons for this could be that —as already mentioned earlier— the river was not navigable, at least not east of Antioch. Since irrigation for agricultural purposes was hardly required it is not surprising that the name of the river has not yet turned up in our texts. If the texts refer to the valley of the Ghab they do so in other terms, such as the Sea of Niḫi in the Egyptian texts. I will first discuss the texts from Alalaḥ and then those from Ugarit.

**ALALAḤ**

Alalaḥ (Tell Atchana) is situated in the Turkish province (the Hatay) in northwest Syria. It was the most important town in the Amuq Valley and it dominated this plain for a considerable time. To the west of Alalaḥ the river Orontes runs from the south, then describes a large curve and turns to the southwest (fig. 2). It is somewhat surprising that the texts from Alalaḥ do not mention the river Orontes. After all, the city lay quite close to its southwest (unlike the present situation). Nevertheless, there are a number of textual sources from Alalaḥ that can at least enlighten us about the size of the state and to what extent the kings of Alalaḥ controlled the Orontes. Since the river came from the south and turned at Alalaḥ to the southwest there are two directions that would have been of interest for the city. Firstly, there is the valley of the Ghab as far south as the modern towns of Asharneh and Šeizar (fig. 3). This territory contained some important overland routes directly to the east of the valley. These routes had been used by traders and expeditionary forces of various empires, such as Mittani, Egypt and Hatti, that aspired to control Syria. The identification of modern cities and tells with ancient toponyms is notoriously difficult and risky, but there are several place names that can be identified with archaeological sites. The best known of these is the site of Qal´at el-Mudiq that has been identified as classical Apamea.

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11. See the map in DASSOW 2008, p. 504.
The geography of the area controlled by Alalaḫ can to a certain degree be reconstructed from the lists of place names that were found there. The criterion whether a town belonged to the territory of Alalaḫ has been formulated by Dassow in the following manner: “If the textual evidence from Alalaḫ IV indicates that the inhabitants or the lands of the place were censused, enrolled for military or labor service, taxed, provided with rations, or otherwise controlled by Alalaḫ, then the place must have been within Alalaḫ’s realm”. 12 One important conclusion was that the name Mukiš does not stand for the entire state. In fact, the texts distinguish four different sectors, one of which was identified as Alalaḫ, the second as Mukiš. The other two groups consist of groups of men, first the ḫabiru men and, second, the šannānu men. 13 According to Dassow, these classifications referred to types of soldiers that were enlisted from different sectors consisting of population groups. One such group provided archers (šannānu) and another group ḫabiru men. The enlistment took place at the same time as the requisitioning of livestock from these same towns. 14

There is, however, also another division of the state and this can be found in text AT 395 from the time of Niqmepa. 15 The text lists amounts of silver that were probably collected as revenue. It was found together with a text (AT 100) that explicitly mentions annual dues in gold and sheep collected by the Alalaḫ administration. 16 It mentions three different countries, the land of Zalḫe, the land of Amāe (of which the reading is uncertain), 18 and the land of Mukiš. Since this text most probably lists revenues, the three areas mentioned must all three be part of the state. Unfortunately, the exact location of Zalḫe is still unknown. Perhaps it should be located somewhere along the Orontes to the south of Alalaḫ. 19

One of the cities that occurs in the lists from Alalaḫ is Niḫi, elsewhere known as Niʿi or Niyā. At the time of the archives of Alalaḫ IV Niḫi most probably belonged to the territorial state. This can be seen from several texts that list objects or commodities to be delivered by the people of Niḫi to the palace administration. 17 In the Idrimi inscription it is said that during his stay in Canaan Idrimi met people from Aleppo, Mukiš, Niḫi and Amāe, and that they were all servants of his father, the king of Aleppo. As soon as he had settled down in Alalaḫ the same people, including those from Niḫi, renewed their loyalty to the royal family from Aleppo to which Idrimi belonged. Unfortunately, the location of Niḫi or Niyā is still uncertain. Most scholars place it at Qalʿat-el-Mudiq, which means that Niḫi is the older name for what later was known as Apamea. 19 If this is true, it would mean that the larger part of the Ghab valley belonged to the state of Alalaḫ, be it within the Mittanian empire. Since this reconstruction predicates on the identification of Niḫi with classical Apamea, the size of the state may be subject to change as soon as new proposals are put forward.

If indeed Niḫi is located at Apamea and it belongs to Alalaḫ, the question that should follow is where the border should be drawn. This depends almost entirely on the location of the city of Tunip, but before we go into this a few remarks about the time that Niḫi was part of the territory of Alalaḫ are in order. During the 15th cent. and possibly part of the 14th cent. the administrative texts make it clear that Niḫi was part of the Alalaḫ state. However, when we look at the texts found in Ugarit from the middle of the 14th cent., Niḫi is said to have its own king, who is mentioned by Shuppiluliuma next to the kings of Mukiš and Nuḫaššē. Moreover, in one Amarna letter (EA 53:42), the king of Niʿi is mentioned, and in a letter from the citizens of Tunip Niʿi is said to have been treated harshly by Aziru of Amurru (EA 59:28). Thus, by this time, the rule of Alalaḫ over the southern Ghab had probably come to an end and the kings

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15. DASSOW 2008, p. 55. The tablets were found in Fortress Room W1, see DASSOW 2008, n. 131.
18. For example, AT 397:3-4 and AT 297:8-9.
of Ni’i were on equal footing with their neighbors. 20

As for the city of Tunip, there are two treaties from the 15th cent. in which Tunip (ʼUrāTu-ni-ip) was one of the partners. The first one concerns the relations of Tunip with its northern neighbor Alalaḫ. 21 This treaty is possibly alluded to in the second text, a poorly preserved treaty in Akkadian between a Hittite king (possibly Tudḫaliya I 22) and Lab’u, king of Tunip (ʼUrāTu-ni-ip; CTH 135 23), probably the son of Ir-Teššub. The text of the first treaty was found in the palace of Alalaḫ level IV. The obverse was sealed by Ir-šIM 24 and the reverse by Niqmepa of Alalaḫ. This copy was probably drafted by Ir-Teššub (who speaks in the first person) and sent to Niqmepa’ (who is referred to in the second person). It contains eleven paragraphs that deal with cross-border traffic and the problem of migrants. According to Dassow, 25 the treaty was possibly drawn up after a war that started when Tunip had defected to Egypt. The text states that Tunip accepted the king of Mittani (again) as its overlord.

In the second treaty, the Hittite king refers to a war that took place between Ilīlimišma of Alalaḫ, the son of Niqmepa’, and Tunip, and it mentions several towns that were probably disputed. According to Dassow, the ensuing hostilities could have led to the destruction of the palace of Alalaḫ IV. 26

The exact location of Tunip is uncertain (fig. 3). 27 According to a Hittite text (KBo. 8, 38 obv. 12’), some geographical obstacle needed to be crossed (za-a-i) near Tunip, probably a river. The Amarna letters from Aziru suggest a location between Amurru and Nuḫaššu (EA 165-167). Several Hittite and Egyptian lists place Tunip between Qadeš and

![Figure 3. The Ghab from Qarqur to Šeizar (after Klengel 1982, p. 68, Karte 1)](image-url)
Ugarit and its border was contiguous with that of Alalah. This would put Tunip on one of the fords in the Orontes and at the point where the ‘lines’ Nuḫašš–Amurru and Qadeš–Ugarit intersect. Astour identified Tunip with Hamath, but note that both names are probably attested in the Ebla archives and perhaps in inscriptions of Thutmose III and Amenhotep III. Courtois suggested to identify Tunip with Tell ʿAšarneh on the Orontes northwest of Hamath and also Klengel, and Belmonte Marín point in this direction. Petrographic analysis confirmed that the most likely origin of Tunip letter EA 59 is Tell ʿAšarneh. The site was excavated (until Syrian civil war unfortunately) and it is to be hoped that the excavation results will shed more light on the ancient name of the city.

**Ugarit (fig. 4)**

During the excavations at Ugarit conducted by the Mission de Ras Shamra, texts were found in large quantities both in the royal palace and in private archives throughout the city. The texts contained many different genres, such as letters, treaties, juridical texts, literary and religious texts, schooltexts and texts that were part of the administration. Before the Hittites started conquering Syria in the middle of the 14th cent., Ugarit was probably part of the Egyptian sphere of influence. Little is known about this period, because only a few texts have survived. Among these are a couple of Amarna letters (EA 45-49). The treaty concluded by Niqmaddu II of Ugarit and Aziru of Amurru was probably drafted when the Hittite king Shuppiluliuma was already in Syria. Other texts that have been given an early date by some scholars have been dated to a later period by others. Thus, we do not know what the exact extent of the Ugarit city-state was before the advent of the Hittites, but in view of the data that we have just discussed it would seem unlikely that Ugarit claimed the sovereignty over territory east of the Jabal al-Ansariyah, a formidable chain that effectively barred any major traffic from west to east and vice versa.

We are on much more solid ground once the Hittite rule has been established after the wars against the three states that opposed Shuppiluliuma, Mukīš, Nuḫaššē and later also Niʾi/Niya (= Niḫi). The archives found at Ras Shamra probably start around this time and the most important texts that we have from this early period are the treaties with the Hittite kings, first of all Shuppiluliuma I. Apart from these, there are juridical texts dated to the earliest kings, the administrative texts start only in the middle of the 13th cent.

The most informative texts that we have from this early stage are the treaties concluded between Shuppiluliuma I and Niqmaddu II. The Hittite conqueror first wrote a letter to the Ugaritic king in order to convince him to join the Hittite camp. He also promised him military assistance in case the states opposing the Hittites would try to force him to take their side. The next text from the Hittite king is in fact a treaty in which the terms are spelled out, at least as far as the tribute is concerned. Apparently the events that took place after the first letter were more or less as Shuppiluliuma had foreseen, and after he had established himself in western Syria, he imposed a tribute on the king of Ugarit. Everything that had to be paid to the Hittite king himself, his family and his officials was listed in this treaty and the tribute consisted of a number of precious things, such as gold, linen and purple wool. Interestingly, only Mukīš and Nuḫaššē are mentioned in these texts.

34. It has recently been suggested that Ugarit was more a trading partner on an equal level than a vassal, see Altman 2008.
35. Freu makes a point that there are some texts that should be dated to Niqmaddu II’s predecessor ʿAmmiṯtamru II, see Freu 2006, p. 31-32.
In the next text—a treaty that was probably drafted after the one concerning the tribute—the border between Mukiš/Alalaḫ and the kingdom of Ugarit was laid down. The names of the kings who opposed Shuppiluliuma are given and a third party is added, the city of Niʿi under the leadership of its king Agit-Teššub. It is difficult to make out whether Niʿi was not mentioned in the earlier texts because it was still considered part of the territory of Alalaḫ or because it joined the coalition only later. Judging from the Amarna material it would seem that the ties between Alalaḫ and Niʿi had been loosened considerably (see above).

The text states that the Ugaritic king gave the conquering Hittites precious gifts and that he now had to come to Alalaḫ where the Hittite king had established himself. According to Shuppiluliuma, his opponents had demanded that Ugarit take part in their struggle and when the Ugarit king refused they put him under pressure and annexed part of his territory. The Hittite king sought to undo these annexations by clearly describing which towns belonged to Ugarit. Since the last place name of the list is in the middle of the sea, the list obviously starts in the east. Nougayrol thought that the description started with the Rūǧ valley and Astour reconstructed the border of the city-state even farther to the east. However, if we look at the place names that are given, it becomes likely that the northern border started on the Jabal al-Ansariyah and that it then turned west. One of the names is rather puzzling but may actually contain a reference to the Orontes or at least to the Ghab (see below). The river itself is so far not attested in texts from Ugarit.

Unfortunately, in the version of the treaty from the time of Shuppiluliuma, the beginning of the list of toponyms is broken, but there are several copies from the time of his son Muršili II. The latter had to impose the treaty again after he had quelled the Syrian revolt following the death of his father. Claims by the people from Mukiš were then rejected by the Hittite king. The first two lines are very damaged, but from line 3 we can read the following:

“...The town of Bītu-ḫuliwe with its mountain fields, with the fields on mount Burzipe, as far as the border (mi-ṣa-ri); the town Zimmara as far as the ḫundurašu-waters (and) with the fields on mount Ḫešmarasu.”

The name Bītu-ḫuliwe is known from the earlier Alalaḫ texts as Bīt-ḫiliwe. Apparently, it belonged to Alalaḫ during the 15th and early 14th cent., but when it became part of Ugarit is unclear. The treaty states that these towns had been taken from Ugarit by its neighbors, so we have to reckon with the possibility that Bītu-ḫuliwe had become part of Ugarit.

Mount Burziḫe could be identical with Qalʿat Burze on the eastern flank of the Jabal el-Ansariya, and the border mentioned after it is probably the one between Ugarit and Mukiš-Alalaḫ (fig. 4). In the next line the ḫundurašu-waters are mentioned. The word ḫundurašu is also known from alphabetic texts (ḫndrṯ), in particular the hippiatric texts. Pardee in his discussion of the word concludes that in view of the waters mentioned in the treaty, it could be a plant characteristic of an area with marshes or an area bordering on a lake. In view of the possible location of Burziḫe, the waters referred to could be the northern Ghab with its marshes that continued to exist until half a century ago. Since the border was apparently close to Burziḫe, we can safely conclude that the border of Ugarit probably was the Orontes river itself or the marsh that surrounded it.

The second important group of texts from Ugarit that can teach us about the topographical situation on the ground are the administrative documents that we find in large numbers in both the palace and the private archives. That such texts turn up in private archives is remarkable, but apart from these, we also find copies of treaties, court documents, and royal correspondence in these archives.

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41. Van Soldt 2005, p. 52, l. 3-6.
42. For a photo, see Courtois 1973, p. 69.
The texts that help us in reconstructing the topography of Ugarit are lists of place names that appear in various types. There are texts that list items that are allotted to certain people or items that have to be delivered to the palace. But there are also lists of towns that lack any such indications. It is possible that these lists were part of the scribal curriculum, as suggested by Hawley.  

One of the most important texts is a list that contains nearly all the toponyms known from Ugarit (KTU 4.610). The header says that this is a document concerning the tribute for the Sun, that is, the Hittite king. Every town must contribute and also the various professional groups. If we follow the toponyms given in this list, it soon becomes clear that they have been put in an order that runs from south to north. At the beginning there are several harbor towns, among which is Giba'ālā, classical Gabala south of Latakiyah. Southeast of Ugarit is a town called Ilištamu which can be identified with modern Stamo, and to the northeast of Ugarit there is a town called Ḫuri-ṣubū'ī with modern Ḫrašbo. The towns at the end of the list are partly the same as those in the treaty on the northern border.

Texts that serve a purely local purpose often give groups of toponyms that occur in a certain part of the city-state, there are eight groups that can be identified, but it is uncertain how the administration regarded these groups, there are only a couple of names that could be qualified as district names, such as Arruwa in the south. The texts corroborate the order of the toponyms as they occur in the Hittite treaty. Whenever two groups are mentioned in one text they tend to follow a geographical order.

**Conclusion**

Unfortunately, we do not have any attestation of the Orontes river in our texts, possibly because economically the river did not contribute much. What we can say is that the Orontes, or perhaps better the Ghab, constitutes the border between Mukiš and Ugarit, at least at a time that Mukiš still had control of the area as far as Ni’ī/Nįhi. Unlike the kings of Mukiš, the kings of Ugarit seem to have refrained from attempting to control the land beyond the Jabal al-Ansariyah, which is in line with the general impression that the texts give us. Ugarit was a rich and important trade center with a rather small army and at least in the 15th and 14th cent. limited territorial aspirations.

44. Hawley 2008.
45. For the most recent treatment of this text, see Pardoe 2001b, p. 250-282, and Van Soldt 2005, p. 80, 86-87.
46. See the map in Van Soldt 2005, p. 71.