

Geopolitics of the Orontes valley in the Late Bronze Age

LUIGI TURRI

University of Verona, Dipartimento di Culture e Civiltà

ABSTRACT

The Orontes valley is a heterogeneous area located at the border of the humid Mediterranean zone and the dry Syrian steppe: surrounded by mountains, it has narrow valleys, deep gorges, marshes, extensive fertile plains, and marked differences in climate. All these factors have greatly influenced settlement in the region throughout its history. Their effects were exacerbated by the chaotic political situation that characterized the valley during the Late Bronze Age, when, along the river, the Great Powers of the time found themselves in direct contact for the first time. The paper tries to analyze how the region's morphology and natural environment affected both the local settlements and areas of foreign influence.

KEYWORDS

Late Bronze Age, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Orontes, Settlement, ancient geography

Introduction

According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, geopolitics is the «analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations» and, though «in contemporary discourse, *geopolitics* has been widely employed as a loose synonym for international politics», more practically it is the study of the «political effects of geography – particularly climate, topography, arable land, and access to the sea».¹

The conditioning of history by geography is particularly evident in a heterogeneous environment such as that of the Orontes valley. A quick glance at the region's topography shows clearly how diverse its landscape is, creating niches where local kingdoms arose, largely secluded one from the other, and how at the same time it represents one of the main connection and transition areas between different parts of the world – Europe to the north, Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to the south, Asia to the East. During the LBA, this led the local kingdoms, whose ambitions for growth were limited by their geographical positions, to become involved in the clash of the great international powers.

1. The River Valley

The Orontes is the main watercourse in the Levant, and its drainage basin covers over 23,000 km² between the Mediterranean and continental Asiatic areas, surrounded by the Syro-Lebanese coastal strip to the west, the Amanus mountains to the north, the Syrian desert to the east and the Hauran region to the south-east.² This extensive area has contrasting characteristics and is more a patchwork of small different geographic units than a uniform zone.

¹ DEUDNEY 2013

² The basins of the Afrin and the Karasu, tributaries of the Orontes, are included in the 23,000 km² but not the Ruj (WEULERSSE 1940, pp. 34-35). This is therefore to be considered an estimate by default. See also MARFOE 1998, pp. 21-22 and BESANÇON, SANLAVILLE 1993a, p. 16. WEULERSSE 1940 is still the reference work for the physical geography of the Orontes. See more literature in TURRI 2015, pp. 21-54.

The Orontes, which rises not far from Baalbek, because of its height on the sea level could be considered a mountain river for almost 2/3 of its 610 km course. The first part of its path is that of a typical mountain stream, very steep, often dry and without a proper bed; it becomes a permanent watercourse only at Hermel, thanks to the springs of Ayn ez-Zerqa.³ Since the river's greatest supply of water comes, as here, from underground springs scattered along its whole length, Weulersse defined the Orontes as «the river that is born from itself».⁴

In the northern part of the Beqaa the river flows through a deep gorge between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges, and for this reason its water cannot be used for irrigation. This situation is repeated several times along the river's path and this difficulty of using its waters for agricultural purposes – if not through the use of machinery such as the famous norias – is another peculiar characteristic of the Orontes that differentiates it from the other large rivers of the Near East, the Tigris, the Euphrates and the Nile.

Outside of the Beqaa, the natural barrier of the basalt flows to the south of Homs transforms it into Lake Qattina. Thanks to its significant flow rate and precipitation of more than 500 mm/year, the river is not depleted by evaporation, and restarts its run on the Homs basaltic plain, then forming a great bend in the region of Hama, the only area of the valley with reduced rainfall, around 300 mm/year. In the Ghab its flow is revitalized by the increased rainfall and by 30 springs distributed along the graben, where once it used to stagnate in marshes, now drained.

After passing through a deep cut between Jirsh-Shoghur and Jir el-Hadid, it emerges onto the Amuq plain, where a U-turn saves it from the Amuq marshes. Finally, the Orontes turns into a normal Mediterranean river and pours its waters into the sea, to the south of Samandağ.

³ It is difficult to establish a precise starting point for the river. Some consider it to be Ayn ez-Zerqa, where underground springs, spread over 500 m in the river bed, pour out water at an average of 12 m³/s. From here there is a 570 km journey to the sea.

⁴ WEULERSSE 1940, p. 21.

The whole region is of relatively recent formation and is crossed by a number of faults, several of which formed during the Cenozoic.⁵ Here tectonics has predominated over water erosion, and this is the reason for the river's complex course: the Orontes, unlike most rivers, did not create the valley in which it flows, but was born after it. Because of this particular conformation, the river's catchment area includes a large part of the massifs aligned along the valley and its limit corresponds roughly to the 250 mm isohyet.⁶

These topographical features have a significant influence on the climate; temperature and precipitation vary considerably and suddenly, not only from north to south: westwards, the coastal mountain ranges mitigate the humid Mediterranean climate, while eastward lower mountains partially allow the arid desert climate to penetrate. This is the reason why two thermal gradients, one longitudinal and the other latitudinal, must be taken into consideration for the Orontes valley.⁷

In such a varied heterogeneous region – which lies in a natural area of transition, connecting Europe, Asia and Africa – the only common unifying feature is the river valley, that has always offered a connection between north and south. Considering that the western mountains seaward often slope directly into the sea leaving no space for valleys, and that they are rich in streams which flow into the sea through gorges, breaking the coastline, the valley provides the easiest – and almost the only practicable – land route between Anatolia and the Mediterranean world to the north and Palestine, Egypt and the Arabian peninsula to the south.⁸ Longitudinally, a couple of passages through the coastal mountain ranges connect the sea to the valley and then to the caravan routes that proceed across the Syrian desert to Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau, continuing towards the Far East.

⁵ See BREW 2001, pp. 131-138 and MARFOE 1998, pp. 23, 12.

⁶ WEULERSSE 1940, pp. 25-29; BESANÇON, SANLAVILLE 1993a, pp. 16-17.

⁷ MARFOE 1995, p. 24.

⁸ The route through the marshy Ghab plateau might have presented some difficulties but it could be easily avoided by taking the one to the east of the *Massif Calcaire*.

Considering this geographical setting, it was natural that the LBA great powers, pharaonic Egypt and the kingdoms of Mitanni and Hatti, met and clashed along the river. This led to the development of a cosmopolitan, 'international' culture – normally found in coastal cities such as Ugarit but visible as well in the valley's big palaces, at Qatna and Alalakh – and was also the origin of the permanent political instability and repeated breakdown of alliances that characterized the valley's history in the following centuries.

In addition to this particular geographical position, other factors have influenced over time the history of the people who lived along the river, such as environment changes. A general drying of the climate had already started between the EBA and the MBA, partly as a result of the impoverishment of the soil due to a large-scale increase in exploitation, but during the LBA – when the ecological and environmental data used to study these trends become incoherent – against a background of constant and progressive global temperature increase, dryer periods started to alternate with wetter ones, growing in frequency and intensity, until widespread drought and famine afflicted the whole Levant at the beginning of the Iron Age.⁹

The decrease in rainfall went hand-in-hand with the degeneration of the pre-existing natural environment, exacerbated by anthropic factors. The deforestation of the lower areas of the Beqaa and the Ghab had been accomplished thousands of years earlier, but in the Bronze Age it was extended to the highlands too.¹⁰ Pollen diagrams from Mishrife/Qatna show that at the beginning of the EBA IV the primeval oak forests had already been destroyed, replaced in the MBA by secondary shrublands or *Juniperus* forests. These forests too decreased during the MBA/LBA transition, probably in part because of the large-scale use of wood as fuel, and were replaced by scattered deciduous oaks and the landscape became more open, though not a proper steppe.¹¹

⁹ ROBERTS ET AL. 2011, pp. 151-152; KANIEWSKI ET AL. 2010 e KANIEWSKI ET AL. 2011. A long-term process of climate drying had already started after the seventh millennium throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern area.

¹⁰ MARFOE 1998, p. 38; YASUDA, KITAGAWA, NAKAGAWA 2000.

¹¹ VALSECCHI 2007, pp. 111-113.

2. Settlements in the Valley

Several archaeological surveys have been conducted in the region.¹² Even though some have not yet been fully published, on the basis of the data available, the first clear evidence is that throughout the entire Bronze Age human settlements were not evenly scattered across the valley but concentrated in well-defined areas: in northern Beqaa, north of Baalbek, with its karst spring oases;¹³ at the exit of the Homs Gap, near the shores of Lake Qattina and on the floodplains around Homs and Hama, where the river is surrounded by soft marl and basalt;¹⁴ in the southern portion of the Ghab graben, where a number of karst springs gush out and the surrounding hills are covered by a fertile red soil;¹⁵ lastly, in the Amuq floodplain, surrounded by mountains, where the confluence of three rivers creates a second wetland.¹⁶

Settlement appears to have been almost inexistent or much reduced outside of these areas, even near the Orontes itself, where the land is too marshy, as in northern Ghab, or where the river runs in narrow gorges that prevent the formation of an alluvial plain and make irrigation difficult, such as between the Beqaa and Lake Qattina or northward to Jisr esh-Shoghur.

It could be objected that survey areas were chosen on the basis of several considerations, among them the archaeological potential of the different regions, which implies that areas not suitable for human settlement would be normally avoided, but there is some evidence that supports the aforementioned considerations.

The Homs Gap is an area of great historical interest as it is a natural corridor linking the Syro-Lebanese coast with central Syria. The Syro-Lebanese-Spanish team that carried out the survey between the city of Homs and the Krak des Chevaliers – the Crusader fortress that dominates the

Bouqaia – did not find any big sites in the area that could be dated to the Bronze Age and very few traces of LBA settlements.¹⁷ Further south, the survey conducted by Graham Philip in the area to the south of Homs has not identified any Bronze Age sites for almost 20 km between Tell Nebi Mend/Qadesh and the LBA sites in the Beqaa Valley.¹⁸ More problematic is the almost complete absence of Bronze Age sites in central Ghab, as found by the Syro-Canadian survey conducted by Fortin:¹⁹ the only known site, Rasm et-Tanjara, was discovered after the construction of the Rastan dam and the drainage of Lake Houash in the 1960s. This might suggest that in antiquity there were other sites, so far unknown to us, and that these were submerged by the marshes sometime after the Neo-Assyrian epoch, to which the most recent known levels of Rasm et-Tanjara date.²⁰

With regard to the number of settlements, if we check the survey data in more detail, we notice that at the beginning of the LBA there was an overall decline in the Orontes valley: in the northern Beqaa only 18 LBA sites have been identified, vs. the 27 attested for the MBA; 35 (4 of which uncertain) vs. 46 in the region around Mishrife; 18 vs. 24 along the Orontes in the area of Hama and 8 vs. 13 to the west of the river.²¹ With very few exceptions, these sites were already inhabited during the MBA and most of them are not bigger than a couple of hectares.

This reduction in settlements shows an overall situation that appears to be a radical break with the past, although the evidence from archaeological excavations in bigger sites seems to be not so drastic and when a period of decline is detectable it does not begin everywhere simultaneously.

At Tell Atchana/Alalakh, located in the area affected by the Hurrian–Hittite wars, the city plan was subjected to consistent changes. The duration of the time span between the fire that destroyed the

¹² See a list in TURRI 2015, pp. 59-62 and literature *infra*.

¹³ MARFOE 1998, pp. 36-37.

¹⁴ PHILIP, BRADBURY 2016, pp. 379-380; BARTL, AL-MAQDISI 2016, p. 304; VALSECCHI 2007, p. 106.

¹⁵ WEULERSSE 1940, p. 21; BESANÇON, SANLAVILLE 1993a, p. 19.

¹⁶ YENER 2005a, p. 2.

¹⁷ HAÏDAR-BOUSTANI ET AL. 2005-2006, pp. 11-12; 2007-2009, pp. 18-19 and 28-31 (Tableau 1).

¹⁸ PHILIP, BRADBURY 2016, fig. 9.

¹⁹ FORTIN 2016, fig. 1.

²⁰ On Rasm et-Tanjara, see ATHANASSIOU 1972, 204; 1977.

²¹ All the data are given in TURRI 2015, pp. 68-147 with literature.

FIGURE 1

Fluctuation in the number of settlements and rough estimates of the population in some regions of the Orontes Valley

Size (Ha)	up to 3	3-5	5-7	more than 7	n.a.	TOTAL	Population
Northern Beqaa (MARFOE 1998, TURRI 2015)							
MBA	17	4	1	1		25	8,000
LBA	15	2	0	1		18	6,000
IA	11	3	1	1		18	7,000
Region of Hama (BARTL, AL-MAQDISSI 2014, TURRI 2015)							
MBA	7	11	4	4	10	36	32,000
LBA	4	10	3	4	5	26	29,000
IA	7	8	4	4	7	30	30,000
Amuq (BRAIDWOOD 1937; CASANA, WILKINSON 2005, TURRI 2015)							
MBA	59	7	12	4		82	42,000
LBA	29	5	8	1		43	20,500
IA	70	9	12	2		93	39,500

Level VII palace in the early 16th century BC, at the time of Hattushili, and the beginning of Level IV is still debated but it seems not to have been less than a century and a half.²² Until the end of Level V there is no evidence of new palaces, but Levels VI and V are characterized by the strengthening and replanning of the city's fortifications, without the previous ones having suffered any violent destruction.²³ The new Level IV Palace was constructed to the east of the previous larger one only at the beginning of the LBA. The continuous reinforcement of the city was surely due to the turbulent international situation but this implies, considering the high cost involved, that at the time Alalakh must have had good economic resources.

In the archaeological record of Kamid el-Loz/Kumidi, located outside of the Orontes valley but in a contiguous area, the passage from the MBA to the LBA is marked by several changes, made over a long

time span; after the MBA palace burnt down, its site underwent a change of function and a small house was built in its place, before a new palace were erected in the same area at the beginning of the LBA. The temple too was destroyed by fire at the very end of the MBA – probably at a different time to the palace – but a new one, though different in plan and building type, was immediately built on the site. At least part of the living areas in the town had been abandoned during the MBA II and the area was used as a cemetery for a while before becoming a settlement again in the LBA.²⁴ It is unknown whether during the interval between the two palaces another one was built elsewhere the city, or if there was actually a temporary lowering in living standards, but it is certain that there was no interruption in the settlement. It was only at the end of the LBA that many buildings were abandoned – among them the temple and the palace, that had in the meantime been reconstructed or enlarged several times – and

²² VON DASSOW 2008, p. 6 n. 7, p. 15 and n. 34, 39-40.

²³ GATES 1981, pp. 7, 34-36.

²⁴ HEINZ 2011, pp. 23-98.

there was a lack of significant new constructions.²⁵ At the beginning of the Iron Age the settlement was no longer fortified and the residential buildings changed significantly.

More or less between the MBA and the LBA, a severe reduction in settlement area is attested at Tell Nebi Mend/Qadesh,²⁶ but at the same time in Mishrife/Qatna huge building works reshaped the topography of the city: a sumptuous royal palace was built in the northern part of the upper city while another two monumental buildings were subsequently erected north and south of it.²⁷ Moreover, the continuity of the city's administrative system may be seen in the uninterrupted use of the pottery production area on the top of the acropolis.²⁸ This reshaping of the city in the absence of extensive destruction clearly means that it was a prosperous time for Qatna.

Considering this continuity of settlement in many larger sites, it might be supposed that the drastic decrease in the numbers of smaller settlements was partially counterbalanced by the growth of the bigger cities, which could have been able to accommodate a larger population in a smaller space. Actually we know that many of the big centres of Syria and Mesopotamia during the second millennium BC, were 'hollow cities', places enclosed by huge fortifications and with sumptuous public buildings, that were the places of abode only of the ruling classes and the workers connected with the executive apparatus, the management and protection of the cities: scribes, specialised artisans, high-status officials, armies, and so forth.²⁹

In the enormous area encompassed by Qatna's ramparts, e.g., during the LBA I a residential quarter might have existed between the internal reservoir and the northern earthwork but no extensive residential areas have been found.³⁰ Enclosed within these fortifications there must have been open spaces with bodies of water and fields or gardens, as in

Mari.³¹ The majority of the population must have been basically rural and resided outside the city enclosure, probably in or just outside the triangular 180 km² area encompassed by two wadis, Wadi es-Silk (or Wadi Sin el-Aswad) westwards and Wadi Midan eastwards, at the centre of which the city stood – though there is a decrease in the number of occupied settlements identified in the region.³²

When we analyze variations in settlements it is important not to take just the number of sites but to consider also their size. Clearly a smaller site could hold less people than a bigger one, but the size has also a significant impact on population density which makes the size:population ratio different. For sites smaller than 4 hectares we can assume an average of 125 persons per hectare, while for those bigger this number can increase to 200.³³ Obviously, these areas consider only the place of abode of the population and not the productive areas that are required for their subsistence.

If we try to apply these numbers to the available data, two points must be borne in mind: on one hand there could exist sites that were not detected or recognized by the surveys; on the other it is impossible to estimate the real inhabited surface area of a settlement at a certain time without extensive excavations or intensive on-site surveys – and many of those conducted in the Orontes area were basically extensive surveys aimed at reconstructing the ancient settlement and its fluctuation in the different areas studied. Since the consequences of these two facts are an underestimation of site numbers in the first case and an overestimation of the settled area in the second, if we start from a basis of accurate data we can consider the results reliable, at least approximately.

These considerations can be applied only to the settled sedentary population, therefore not including the pastoral and nomadic components, who are intrinsic to every society and in the Near East are a strongly rooted presence even today.

²⁵ MARFOE 1995, pp. 100-103; HEINZ 2011, pp. 28-29.

²⁶ BOURKE 1993, p. 189.

²⁷ MORANDI BONACOSSO 2007, pp. 77-78.

²⁸ MORANDI BONACOSSO 2007, pp. 76-77; 2008, pp. 114.

²⁹ MORANDI BONACOSSO 2007, pp. 81-82.

³⁰ MORANDI BONACOSSO 2007, p. 79.

³¹ MARGUERON 2004, p. 446. On Qatna lakes see CREMASCHI 2007.

³² There is a third wadi, Wadi ez-Zora, running between these two and along the city's ramparts, feeding the city's lake. See CREMASCHI 2007; TURRI 2015, pp. 79-80, 89-99.

³³ WEBLEY 1972, p. 179.

3. Outside the Cities

3.1 The Rural World

Because of the difficulty of identifying small rural installations in the countryside, consisting of a few houses or a single large farm, maybe occupied for a relatively short time, it is not possible to determine whether the numerical reduction of small sites corresponded to an increase of these structures, perhaps directly dependent on the urban centre, which would have thus increased its rural role.³⁴ Similar sites, small centres of agricultural production, are currently attested only by written sources, in particular at Ugarit, which however is located on the coast, therefore outside the Orontes area.³⁵ But the texts of Alalakh and Qatna also seem to confirm a possible development in this sense. To the approximately 50 toponyms attested in the Alalakh level VII tablets there correspond more than 200 in those from level IV, many of them not mentioned anywhere else. It is true that the first texts concerned a peripheral centre dependent on the great kingdom of Yamkhad while the second regarded the capital of an extensive territorial entity and many of the names might refer to places outside of the surrounding Amuq valley, but some of them enumerate the inhabitants or houses of small settlements of three houses or so that may be considered located in the core territory of Mukish. Archaeological evidence shows many less settled tells in the Amuq during the LBA than those mentioned in the texts.³⁶ A similar situation could have occurred also in Qatna, where the number of sites identified in the surroundings of the city is less than those mentioned in the texts found in buildings within it.

³⁴ LIVERANI 1975 and HELTZER 1976, pp. 4-6, 43 and *infra* are sure of their existence in Ugarit vs. MAGNESS-GARDINER 1994 and CASANA 2009, p. 17.

³⁵ See in BELMONTE MARÍN 2001 *infra* the formations composed by *gittu* (AN.ZA.GAR₃ in Akkadian or *gt* in Ugaritic) followed by a toponym.

³⁶ We have to consider also that the intensive agricultural cultivation and urbanization of the region have hidden or destroyed several tells. See, e.g., YENER 2005a, p. 15.

3.2 Beyond the Political Entities

The decrease of settlements can also be linked to an increase in other components of society, such as pastoral and nomadic groups, but considering that the intensive exploitation of resources requires a small productive area, quantifiable as about 0.2 ha per person, while a non-intensive one, of a pastoral or semi-nomadic type, requires 40 ha per capita,³⁷ an increase in the non-urban or non-sedentary population, which is not quantifiable, should not lead to a large error in the estimated total.

As Jorge Silva Castillo has stated, «it is difficult to classify the diverse forms of nomadism into categories like seminomadism, semisedentarism, transhumance, and occasional nomadism. The combinations are very varied: the movement of the group can be partial or total; the establishment of the community can be temporary or permanent, in a fixed place, in two places, or more».³⁸ Moreover they leave very few traces and it is almost impossible to study them archaeologically, and even written sources contain little information concerning them in the Orontes valley.

The Mari texts are our main sources for the study of nomadic life in the Bronze Age Near East, but they are written from a sedentary, urban point of view, and settled citizens are often suspicious of those who do not conform to their values and way of life, so it is likely that the content of the texts does not reflect completely and objectively the real situation.³⁹

Moreover there are «patterns of economic, social, or political organization beyond local political entities, such as ethno-linguistic or tribal areas or patterns of exchange through trade»,⁴⁰ which are considered by the texts only when they interact with the established powers. Examples are the Suteans and the *habiru*.

The Suteans, Semitic tribes dedicated to semi-nomadic or nomadic pastoralism, are mentioned

³⁷ MARFOE 1998, p. 168.

³⁸ SILVA CASTILLO 2005, p. 127.

³⁹ For a general review on nomadism in the Ancient Near East see SILVA CASTILLO 2005. For Mari see KUPPER 1957.

⁴⁰ On the topic see CANCIK-KIRSCHBAUM, BRISCH, EIDEM (eds.) 2014, *infra*. Quote from *Introduction*, p. 3.

several times in the Amarna letters:⁴¹ Rib-Adda of Byblos complains that the Egyptian commissioner Pahuru, stationed at Kumidi, uses them against him (EA123-122); Suteans seems to have been in the service of Aziru of Amurru and when the king was stuck in Egypt, they left the country, convinced that he would not return (EA 169); the sons of Labaya of Sechem hired them, together with *habiru*, for hostile acts against Biridiya of Megiddo (EA 246); Suteans and *habiru* together are also at the service of Biryawaza of Ube who, according to himself, acts on behalf of the pharaoh (EA 195); finally Dagan-talka, most likely king of a south Palestinian city, asks the pharaoh for help against *habiru*, brigands and Suteans (EA 318).⁴²

In the Amarna letters, the *habiru* – people who have escaped from their social context for different reasons, political, economic or otherwise, thus not forming an ethnic group but rather a social category – are sometimes associated with the Suteans – and also with bandits: what they have in common is the fact that they do not participate in the political and social life of the cities. Not being part of the society automatically makes them, in the eyes of the citizens, outlaws, raiders, criminals and so on.

In LBA texts the word *habiru* is often used in a derogatory and negative way, to indicate any kind of enemy and anyone who does not respect, in the view of the different authors of the single letters, what should be the natural order of things. With this definition, anyone can become *habiru* and it is consequently difficult to understand if the statement (e.g.) that Tette, king of Nukhashe, is of *habiru* origin (CTH 63.A i 7), corresponds to reality or is used to denigrate the enemy.

It can not be ruled out that some of these people did indeed rely on brigandage as a means of surviving, but all the aforementioned texts show them as being somehow dependant on a king or other person integrated into the urban society of the time. This is also confirmed by the tablets of Alalakh where the *habiru* appear several times as mercenaries employed by the city.

The fact that one of the main activities of the Suteans was herding is confirmed by Idrimi, who before becoming king of Alalakh, while fleeing from Emar to the land of Canaan, resided among them: «I took my horse, my chariot, and my groom. I crossed over into a desolate region, where I joined the Sutean pastoralists. I spent the night with them within the shelters of the steppe» (*Idrimi* 13-17).⁴³ It was in the land of Canaan, at Ammiya, that Idrimi met other runaways coming from the north, among whom he subsequently lived for many years: «For seven long years, I stayed among the *habiru*» (*Idrimi* 27). The possibility that Suteans and *habiru* could participate somehow in social life is suggested by Idrimi himself, who, after becoming king of Alalakh, was able to give houses «even to those who lacked a dwelling» (*Idrimi* 85).

Geographically, most of the Amarna references to the Suteans come from letters sent either from the coast or from southern areas such as Palestine and Hauran; more to the north their presence is recorded in the Orontes valley only in the texts of Alalakh. It can therefore be inferred that, in addition to the steppes of central Syria, where their presence is well attested – by other sources as well as by Idrimi⁴⁴ – their presence was concentrated mainly in mountain areas with plentiful forests, in the Lebanon or on the Judean Mountains, especially their western sides – as the eastern slopes are very steep and descend almost straight down to the valley of the Beqaa – or along their passes.

In the same areas the Egyptian texts place the Shasu, who are depicted as fierce, savage and merciless. Papyrus Anastasi mentions a place «Magara, where the sky is dark by day. It is overgrown with junipers and oaks, and pine trees reach the sky. Lions are more abundant than leopards and bears, while it is hemmed in on all sides by Shasu-Beduin»,⁴⁵ a description that immediately leads us to think of an inhabited area, a hill or a mountain setting – and in fact the text immediately afterwards mentions a mountain («You have not climbed Mount Shawe...»). This area must have been located in the highest part

⁴¹ On the Suteans see HELTZER 1981 and ZIEGLER, RECULEAU 2014.

⁴² TURRI 2015, p. 235 with literature.

⁴³ Translation by LAUINGER 2017.

⁴⁴ KUPPER 1957, pp. 90-98.

⁴⁵ Translation by WENTE 1990, pp. 106-108.

of the Beqaa, at the watershed between the Litani and the Orontes, at a height of about 1000 metres above sea level, at the edge of a once wooded area, in a region where during the LBA, for over 10 km there were apparently no permanent settlements – all characteristics that would make the place an ideal refuge for run-aways, fugitives and bandits of all kinds.

Other Shasu are mentioned by the same text further south, in the passage connecting Megiddo to the Jordan Valley: «the narrow pass is dangerous, having Shasu-Beduin concealed beneath the bushes, some of whom are of four cubits or five cubits (from) their nose to foot and have fierce faces. They are unfriendly and do not take to cajolery...».

According to the texts, to sum up, the space left for these components of the society – considered unconventional from an urban point of view – was confined to the mountains of Lebanon and the areas immediately to the north, where there are uninhabitable regions – forests or swamps – located in the vicinity of large sites such as Qadesh, or still further northward, at Alalakh, to whose south and south-east there were the Ghab and the steppe.

4. Political Map of the Valley

The most densely settled areas of the valley, where the large centres arose, were those that have easy access to the coast and where the climate is more favourable. First, the Amuq valley, where Tell Atchana is favoured by the local climate as well as by the wide, fertile plain that lies around it, then the area eastward of the Homs Gap, that lets the Mediterranean climate penetrate inland beyond the coastal ranges, where Mishrife is located, and that gives access to the area of Hama. At the beginning of the LBA, the kingdoms centred in these areas, Alalakh and Qatna, appear to have been those with the most extensive territories under their control.

4.1 The Beginning of the LBA

At that time, Hittite power was in decline. The weakness that characterized it after the death of Murshili I, who had previously defeated the Great

Kingdom of Yamkhad, made room for the Hurrians and the kingdom of Mitanni, and Northern Syria was divided into a number of independent kingdoms, formed by the former annexes of Yamkhad.⁴⁶

Along the lower Orontes there was the region of Mukish which formed the core of the kingdom of Alalakh, likely extended for the whole Amuq valley since on the base of ALT 395 also the regions of Amae and Zalkhi seem to have been part of it.⁴⁷ According to the treaty with the city of Tunip, ALT 2, Alalakh shared a border with that city and so also the territory southward the Amuq, from Jebel Aqra to the north of Asharne, must have been under its control. This area was probably that called the land of Niya by the texts and its appurtenance to the kingdom of Alalakh seems to be confirmed also by Idrimi since, as he was able to form an army, leave Canaan and go back to the north, «in one day, as one man, the lands of Niya, Ama'e, (and) Mukiš and the city of Alalakh» turned to him (*Idrimi* 36-39).

Qatna, on the middle Orontes, in the 18th century was one of the most powerful kingdoms of the Ancient Near East, alongside Babylon, Larsa, Yamhad and Eshnunna. It dominated the great river bend and controlled passage to the desert of Palmyra. Even though its power had decreased, at the beginning of the LBA the kingdom's extension was still considerable: from the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon southward, with also some dependencies near the Lebanese coast, to el-Rastan and perhaps even as far as Hama northward.⁴⁸

In this latter region, many of the sites along the great bend arose inside or in front of the many small bends that characterize the course of the river in this area. Thanks to these positions, the tells could control and protect the fertile areas enclosed by the small river bends, where there could have been fields that they controlled directly. The partial or total obstruction of the passage to the inside of a bend made

⁴⁶ On these topics see VON DASSOW 2014 and DE MARTINO 2014.

⁴⁷ On ALT 395, see VAN DASSOW 2008, p. 55-56 and nn. 129-131.

⁴⁸ See RICHTER 2007, pp. 306-307 for Anti-Lebanon; Arashtan/Rastan is mentioned in TT 36 and TT 43 (texts in RICHTER, LANGE 2012); Hama could be mentioned as Amata in EIDEM 2007 n. 35. See TURRI 2016, p.146 and nn. 6-7.

FIGURE 2
Political map of the Orontes Valley
at the beginning of the LBA



it difficult to reach the inner part without passing by or crossing the tell.⁴⁹

Between Alalakh and Qatna there was Tunip, an ancient city already mentioned in the tablets from Ebla and later in MBA texts, which in the LBA began to use to its advantage its strategic location on one of the main Orontes fords and likely started to expand westward, along the Wadi Duarte, including cities as Iripa and Ishkhanik.⁵⁰ These and four other

cities are said to have been handed back to the city by an unknown Hittite king, after they were taken by Ilimilima of Alalakh (CTH 135, KUB 3.16 +21). If this Ilimilima were the successor of Niqmepa, son of Idrimi, this fact could have led to the abandonment of the mentioned treaty signed between the two cities at the time of the father (AIT 2).

Thanks to its position, which allowed easy access to the passage between the Orontes valley and the

⁴⁹ Among these tells there are, e.g., some big sites such as Tell es-Sus, Hama, and Tell Nasriye.

⁵⁰ Tunip should be modern Asharne, while Iripa and

Ishkhanik tentatively could correspond to modern Arifa and Khan Sheikhun. See discussion and literature in TURRI 2015, pp. 246-247, 283-287.

FIGURE 3
Late Bronze Age sites in the Orontes Valley (red dots; see complete catalogue in TURRI 2015) and places mentioned in the text



sea, along the Nahr el-Kabir, Tunip also managed to acquire an important role on the coast in the time of Thutmose III: it had a garrison in an unidentified city, Wartet (ARE II, § 456-459), and its king's son was a commander in Ullasa, on the northern Lebanese coast (ARE II, § 470).

To the east of the territories under the suzerainty of Alalakh there was the land of Nukhashe, whose first mention is in an Alalakh VII text written in «the year the plague was in the land of Nukhashe» at the time of Niqmepa king of Yamkhad (ALT*96, 15-16). To be chosen as a dating reference, the event must have had consequences for or at least caused fear to the inhabitants of Alalakh, indicating proximity between the two territories. But we must pay attention when we speak about Nukhashe: in the literature it is often considered a sort of *sui generis* tribal confederation that eludes a more precise definition.⁵¹ Many of the problems related to the interpretation of its history could be partially solved by interpreting the name Nukhashe in two different senses, one geographical and the other political. In a political sense, Nukhashe would indicate a well-defined kingdom, located north-east of Qatna and to the east of Niya, while geographically the name would refer to a wide region that encompasses the entire area east of the middle Orontes. In this area are included the homonymous kingdom of Nukhashe ruled by its own king, the kingdoms of Qatna, Tunip, Niya, Zinzar, Tunanat – these last three not yet independent in the first phase of the LBA and being parts respectively of Alalakh, Tunip and Qatna.⁵² Geographical names with double meanings are not uncommon, as is demonstrated, e.g., by the contemporary case of Amurru, which originally designated the entire region of Syria to the west of Mesopotamia, but which later acquired also two political meanings, referring to one of the areas under 18th Dynasty Egyptian control and also to a state that at the beginning of the LBA, before

Aziru became its king, was a small political entity on the northern Lebanon mountains.

It is difficult to establish how extensive the area controlled by Nukhashe was. There are very few mentions of it in the text of Alalakh and it is possible that before the time of Amarna it was a rather poor kingdom, centred in the area more or less near the shared borders between the modern governorates of Hama, Idlib and Aleppo, contiguous to the arid steppe of the Syrian Desert, where water is scarce, precipitation is less than 250 mm/year and a great part of the population, even in recent times, consisted of land-poor farmers or pastoralists.⁵³

No big cities are known in the area, either in antiquity or modern times, and this could have determined the structure of the kingdom, more similar to a tribal union, with small settlements scattered over a rather wide area and where the semi-nomadic components formed an important part of the society – and since they were far from the big cities, their presence did not bother them.

Southwards, Qadesh, another small kingdom situated south-west of Qatna, whose importance is due to its strategic position at the margin of the Beqaa valley, strengthened its influence to the south. The wooded area to the south of the city and the neighbouring region, respectively known as the Lebo Forest and Tahshi from several Egyptian texts,⁵⁴ must have had a fairly sparse population, similar to that of the nearby mountains of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon or the more northern Jebel en-Nusayriye, but they also constituted the only land passage from the Beqaa and to the land of Ube, the region of Damascus. The military importance of this position is clearly shown by the huge fortified site of Tell Safinet Nuh just to the north of Tell Nebi Mend, far from water sources, in a position not suitable for a settlement, and by two parallel alignments of three small sites each to its east.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that at least at Tell Aqarib and Tell Ahmar, the central and east-

⁵¹ See RICHTER 2002 with literature.

⁵² When the LBA texts mention «the kings of Nukhashe» in the plural, they refer to all the kings of these kingdoms, not only to the ruler of the kingdom of Nukhashe itself, to whom they refer in the singular. This distinction seems to be supported by the texts, see TURRI 2016, pp. 151-152.

⁵³ ICAARDA 2005. On the interaction between humans and environment in the steppe, see e.g. GEYER, CALVET (eds.) 2001 and many other works by the same scholars on this topic.

⁵⁴ TURRI 2015, pp. 251-252, 280.

⁵⁵ PHILIP, BRADBURY 2016, 387-388; PHILIP ET AL. 2002, p. 19.

ern tell of the northernmost alignment, there are traces of fortifications.⁵⁶ We may suppose that continuous raids, the endemic turbulence of the semi-nomadic population, foreign invasions or other similar circumstances pushed the local authorities to make the huge economic effort necessary for the construction of these defensive structures. Considering the small size of the sites, we can suppose that this could have been carried out only with the help a bigger site such as Qadesh.

It is well known from the texts that Qadesh became the fulcrum of the anti-Egyptian coalition after the first of the numerous campaigns of Thutmose III in Syria when the city led an alliance of Canaanite kings and rulers against the pharaoh's army at Megiddo.⁵⁷ In the subsequent 20 years, its defeat and numerous other clashes – equally unsuccessful – with Egypt are recorded, after which the city became the foremost Egyptian stronghold in internal Syria:⁵⁸ in the Memphis stele of Amenhotep II, successor of Thutmose III, it is said that the pharaoh went to Qadesh and met its prince, a signal that the city had a privileged position among the Egyptian's allies.⁵⁹

The region called Amqi in the Beqaa was the first to fall firmly into the hands of the Egyptians after the defeat of the Hyksos. With the exception of few isolated raids further north, the pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty before Thutmose III did not push their armies beyond this area, which was vital for reaching the northern regions and the only alternative to maritime routes.⁶⁰

During the Amarna age, according to the letters of the Syro-Palestinian petty kings found in Akhenaton's capital city, the number of small independent kingdoms in the Beqaa was relatively high compared to the limited space available. This implies that each of them must have had control of a restricted area, in close contact with its neighbours. The landscape of the region – highly diversified and

with no spaces suitable for the growth of a great political power with a large territorial extension – evidently favoured this process. No big cities are known in the area, especially in northern and central Beqaa – i.e. in the southernmost region of the Orontes valley – where most of the sites are concentrated near and to the south of the headwaters of the Orontes, near Labwe and Ayn Ahla, or further south, along the Litani. Between them, with the exception of two sites, Tell Maqna and Tell Ard et-Tlaili, no human settlement has been identified for an area of more than 200 km². This could be due to the fact that the watershed of the two rivers and the northern part of the Beqaa, north of Labwe, must have been covered respectively by the above-mentioned forests of Magara and Lebo, and that the northern extremity of the Beqaa is a plateau where the river runs in a deep gorge.

The boundary of the territories controlled by Egypt before Thutmose III was probably the edges of the forest of Lebo, where access was difficult and which represent a natural border. The forest became part of the Egyptian-controlled area only after the submission of Qadesh, but its extension and wild nature is still clearly mentioned by Amenhotep II who, on his way from Qadesh to Hashabu (a city in the land of Amqi), passed in the forest and «brought back gazelles, maset, hares, and wild asses without their limit».⁶¹

Urban development and intensive resource exploitation should therefore have been more modest in the Beqaa, divided into small juxtaposed enclaves and surrounded by mountains, with a smaller available workforce and lack of surplus arable land. Storage cannot have been as intensive here as in the big cities in the central-northern part of the Orontes valley. In a similar environment, the problems associated with rainfall variation, soil depletion, epidemics, and hostilities have a heavier and faster impact on the stability and well-being of the various individual areas. The collapse of a single centre creates a vacuum in the network formed between nearby polities and affects these, causing a chain phenomenon that quickly compromises the overall balance achieved.

⁵⁶ PHILIP ET AL. 2002.

⁵⁷ REDFORD 1992, pp. 156-158. For literature and references see TURRI 2016, pp. 161-162.

⁵⁸ For literature and references see TURRI 2016, pp. 315-316.

⁵⁹ ANET, pp. 245-247.

⁶⁰ REDFORD 1992, pp. 149-156.

⁶¹ ANET, p. 246.

The lack of political unity made control of the area by a great foreign power easier, moreover the secluded nature of the region meant it was less involved in the great international political manoeuvres and the control exercised by Egypt could have been light, and not too invasive.

At an international level, the first part of LBA was marked by the growth of Mitanni. To take power in Alalakh, Idrimi had to make a pact with Barattarna and also his successor Niqmepa appears to have been under King Shaushtatar. This implies that the treaty between Alalakh and Tunip must also have been signed under the auspices of the Hurrian king. The first recorded encounter/clash between Mitanni and Egypt is in the Inscription of Amenemhat and dates to the time of Thutmose I,⁶² and subsequently several incursions in their respective areas of influence are recorded,⁶³ until the first diplomatic contacts occurred during the reign of Amenhotep II, followed by the marriage of Artatama's daughter with Thutmose IV.⁶⁴ Towards the middle of the LBA, on the eve of the great campaigns of Shuppiluliuma, the local states seem to negotiate both with Mitanni and Egypt. Mukish and Nukhashe were still firmly in the Mitannian area, but Niya welcomed Amenhotep II into its lands.⁶⁵ Tunip, after having been for a short time an Egyptian headquarters at the time of Thutmose III,⁶⁶ returned to Mitanni, but had to renounce to its western dependencies, since the coast up to Ugarit passed into Egyptian control. Even Qatna, in whose language there is a marked presence of Hurrian elements, maintained some relations with Egypt.⁶⁷ The latter had still firm control over the coast and Amqi, and added Qadesh to its domain, as well as the land of Ubi further to the east.

⁶² REDFORD 1992, pp. 153-154 e n.117.

⁶³ See Mitannian support to Qadesh (ARE § 395) and the campaign in northern Syria with hunting in Niya in the Annals of Thutmose III and in the Tomb of Amenemheb (ARE II, § 481 and 588).

⁶⁴ REDFORD 1992, pp. 163-164.

⁶⁵ See the Stelea of Menphis and Karnak (ANET 246).

⁶⁶ REDFORD 1992, p. 162. See also EA 59.

⁶⁷ See EA 51 and BOSCHLOOS 2012 for the scarab of Amenhotep III found in the Lower City Palace.

Before the rebirth of the Hittite Empire, the border between the lands linked to Egypt and those of Mitanni ran along the southern foothills of Jebel en-Nusayriye, which rises parallel to the course of the Orontes, and then continued eastward to the great bend of the river between Hama and Homs.

4.2 After Shuppiluliuma's Campaigns

The renewed expansionist policy of Hatti in the fourteenth century marks historically the transition between the first and second phase of the LBA. Early in his military advance into Syria, Shuppiluliuma attacked mainly the Mitannian dependencies, and Egypt did not intervene, apparently not interested in who was to rule over territories out of its domain. We must remember that Egypt was going through a particular phase in its history and a lot of energy was absorbed first by Akhenaton's reform, and then by the efforts of his successors to restore the *status quo ante* and to delete the 'heretic king' from history.

Egyptian control over the Syrian region was weakened by the appearance of a new entity on the political scene, the small kingdom of Amurru mentioned above, that grew from «a small highland chiefdom located on both banks of Nahr el-Kebir, on the slopes of Mount Lebanon»,⁶⁸ spreading along the coast and through the Homs Gap, taking advantage of the vacuum created by the loss by Tunip of its western area. Its king Aziru, while pretending to be a subject of the pharaoh, conducted an ambiguous, definitely philo-Hittite, policy, and formed an alliance with Etakama of Qadesh who attacked the lands of Amqi and Ubi (e.g. EA 53: 62; 140: 20-25; 162: 22)

With the rise of Shuppiluliuma, several towns in the valley experienced political divisions and the struggles between pro-Hittite and pro-Mitannian/Egyptian factions led to continuous internal reversals and clashes between the bigger local kingdoms, i.e. the centres of local power and so the first to be weakened.

The chaotic situation of this period is well evidenced by the letters of Qatna. After Idanda's attempt to pass over to the Hittite side,⁶⁹ Akizzi, the

⁶⁸ GOREN, FINKELSTEIN, NA'AMAN 2002, p. 199.

⁶⁹ TURRI 2016, pp. 154-156.

last known king of the city, vainly pleaded for Egyptian help (EA 52-56), but the city quickly declined and never regained much political power. Archaeologically, the decline of Qatna seems to start at the beginning of the LBA II, when the Royal Palace, the Lower City Palace and the Southern Palace were almost simultaneously replaced by relatively modest buildings made with poor materials.⁷⁰ The city disappears from the texts⁷¹ and this decline is mirrored in the surrounding region and northwards, where the surveyed sites date mainly to the LBA I.⁷²

Further south the situation seems to have been stable, in spite of the murder of Shuppiluliuma's son and the Hittite attacks against Amqi,⁷³ but at the northern end of the valley the political situation changed completely: the great kingdom of Alalakh disappeared and later texts mention only Mukish, Niya – that became once more an independent kingdom – and Nukhashe, that increased its possessions. Zalkhi, Amae and Barga gained their autonomy, too.⁷⁴ The city of Tunip was annexed to Amurru and this led to the separation of its former territories: Zulapa (tentatively modern Salba) became the main city to the north of the wadi Duarte and Zinzar (tentatively modern Sheizar) to its south, while Qatna's decline favoured Tunanab (tentatively modern Tell Hana).⁷⁵

The not-so-voluntary adhesion of the rich coastal city of Ugarit to Hatti, which took place in conjunction with the rebellion of the kings of Mukish, Nukhashe and Niya against Shuppiluliuma, marked another significant political change in favour of the Hittite king.⁷⁶

The situation after the Battle of Qadesh shows that Egyptian losses were huge: Ugarit, its southern annex Siyannu, and other coastal cities, including the island of Arwad, were under Hittite control, as well as Qadesh and Amurru.⁷⁷ Ramses only held on to the regions of Amqi and Ubi, plus some coastal cities: his domains were thus reduced to even less than Egypt's territory before Thutmose III.

4.3 Towards the Iron Age

At the end of the Bronze Age, the number of settlements started to grow, but among the large excavated sites Alalakh seems to have been abandoned, Qadesh and Qatna have a few centuries' gap in recorded occupation and Hama seems to have experienced a sharp reduction in living standards.⁷⁸ The increase actually concerns mainly the small sites, which almost doubled in number, but the phenomenon appears to be rather uneven in its distribution: site increase is almost imperceptible in Beqaa and particularly accentuated in the Amuq and the Ghab. This occurrence – a return to a more rural occupation of the land – is the opposite of that which marked the transition between the Middle and LBA

As already pointed out, the abandonment of structured centres in favour of rural life leads to a necessary reduction in the number of inhabitants and if we try to estimate the population on the basis of statistical calculations we can find some differences with respect to the simple numerical variation in site numbers. In the Amuq, where the number of Iron Age settlements might have been higher than those of the MBA, the growth rate probably did not correspond to an equal percentage increase in population, which seems to have been lower than the estimate during the MBA (see fig. 1).

⁷⁰ MORANDI BONACOSSÌ 2013, pp. 119-121.

⁷¹ The city is mentioned only in some Egyptian topographical lists, see TURRI 2015, p. 327.

⁷² MORANDI BONACOSSÌ 2013, p. 125.

⁷³ See literature and references in TURRI 2015, pp. 312-315.

⁷⁴ See e.g. EA 126:5 (Zalkhi) and CTH 63 (KBo 3.3++) (Barga). For modern identifications, see discussion and literature in TURRI 2015, pp. 231-232, 295-296.

⁷⁵ See e.g. EA 161:11-13 (Zulapa); CTH 176 (KUB 21.38: 14') (Zinzar); EA 53:43 (Tunanab). For modern identifications, see discussion and literature in TURRI 2015, pp. 233-236, 298-299.

⁷⁶ On the rebellion see ALTMAN 2001.

⁷⁷ Its king Benteshina was reinstated on the throne after his betrayal of the Egyptians. See CTH 92 (KBo 1.8++): 11-21. On Benteshina see SINGER 1991: 164.171.

⁷⁸ See YENER 2005b, p. 112 (Alalakh); PARR 1983, pp. 107-108 (Qadesh); MORANDI BONACOSSÌ 2013, p. 121 (Qatna); FUGMANN 1958, pp. 123-126 (Hama).

5. Some Concluding Remarks

On the basis of the above, it is clear that the political geography of the valley differed considerably between the first and second phases of the LBA, and this change seems to follow some rules connected to the different kinds of political control on one hand, and to the geographical position on the other. The only area that seems to have been excluded from this change was the Beqaa valley. The texts, in particular the Amarnian ones, record numerous small kingdoms in the area, which due to the limited space available could not have exceeded the dimensions of city-states, each one of them enclosed in its natural niche.⁷⁹ The area was for the whole LBA in the sphere of influence of Egypt, which controlled it through a commissioner stationed in Kumidi, but not too invasively, leaving the local rulers free to act at least locally, as long as their interests did not compromise their loyalty to Egypt.⁸⁰ The area, enclosed between the mountains of Lebanon and Antilebanon and located at a considerable altitude, was so isolated from the rest of the 'world' that the local kingdoms remained somehow outside of international political events – with very few exceptions⁸¹ – and the texts often designate it with generic geographical but non-political names, such as Amqi or Tahshi.

At the opposite end of the Orontes valley there is the Amuq plain, equally enclosed and protected by the mountains, the Amanus westward and the *Massif Calcaire* south and eastward.⁸² Unlike the narrow Beqaa, the Amuq is a wide fertile plain, with easy access to the coast along the course of the Orontes, or to the eastern plateau along the valley of its tributary Afrin. This prosperous and strategic position, plus the fall of the powerful kingdom of Yamkhad, favored the expansion of the Alalakh kingdom, which at the beginning of the LBA expanded over the whole plain and managed to extend its control on the plateau to the east and on the region of Niya to the south, a narrow strip enclosed between mountains like the Be-

qaa, and furthermore weakened by the constant advance of the Ghab marshes.

In the middle Orontes valley, the site of Qatna – already powerful in the MBA – maintained a certain size in the LBA too, and likely controlled, as well as its surroundings, also a large part of the area enclosed by the great bend of the Orontes. Like Alalakh, Qatna was blessed with an area suitable for agriculture, enclosed by two wadis and crossed by a third, while its proximity to the Homs Gap gave it a favourable climate. Moreover, the Gap represents the only passage through the coastal ranges that can be easily crossed throughout the year – and since it was close by, the city may have held some dependent territories in the hinterland of the Lebanese coast too.

The texts inform us that Tunip, another city of ancient tradition, also had domains on the coast and in addition – if its identification with modern Tell Asharne is correct – it too had easy access to the Homs Gap thanks to its position on an important ford across the Orontes. But Tunip, lacking in natural protection such as mountains or river bends, was squeezed between territories controlled by Alalakh and Qatna; however, it was able to expand eastwards along the Orontes, up to Zinzar, and then along its tributary Wadi Duarte.

In imagining these kingdoms, it is necessary to bear in mind that «the modern concept of a state territory as a continuous area delimited by a continuous border is surely an anachronism during much of antiquity; one should rather visualize the territory of a Late Bronze Age polity in the form of a network of towns, with the routes linking them, leaving the land beyond the hinterlands of towns more or less vacant of state control».⁸³ Not only does the presence of outposts in the Lebanese area confirm this picture, but this territorial non-continuity appears evident in the Homs Gap, which does not seem to have been dominated by any specific kingdom – and indeed the surveys conducted in the area were not able to identify any major site there – as the route through it seems to have been used indifferently by various kingdoms and powers, including Egypt, which was in control of a large part of the coast at the time.

⁷⁹ TURRI 2015, pp. 223 and 300

⁸⁰ LIVERANI 1998, pp. 257-258 with literature. See also NA'AMAN 1981 and HACHMANN 1982.

⁸¹ See e.g. the Hittite attacks on Amqi; TURRI 2015, pp. 311-315 with literature.

⁸² TURRI 2015, pp. 30-31, 33-34.

⁸³ VON DASSOW 2008, p. 67.

In the second half of the 14th century, Hatti expansionist ambitions led to the disruption of these dense networks of cities and especially of the two greatest ones, the kingdom of Alalakh, which was confined to the Amuq plain, and that of Qatna, reduced to the area between the two wadis. Most of the territories previously controlled by them became small kingdoms of very limited range but often centred in key positions, e.g. in the Amuq, Amae – between Alalakh and Aleppo⁸⁴ – controlled the passage towards the eastern plateau, and Zalkhi – on the mountain slopes between Alalakh and Ugarit⁸⁵ – that to the coast.

The importance of passageways is also shown by the case of Qadesh, a small kingdom sited south of Qatna near a forest area, yet one of the most frequently mentioned in the texts and one of the most contended by foreign powers throughout the LBA. Controlling one of the most important passages along the river, that at the northern exit of the Beqaa, it was able to preserve for most of the time a sort of freedom – or at least the possibility to act independently in the area – despite the many destructions.

The disruption process in the second part of the LBA was also exacerbated by the advance of Amurru, which took advantage of the chaos created by the Hittite wars and the lack of proper political control in the Homs Gap, and, from the Leb-

anese coast, managed to enter and expand within the Orontes valley.

The passageways offered by the river and the openings between the mountains that allow access to the coast or inland were therefore crucial in determining the fate of local states, becoming a resource in the periods in which the interference of the great foreign powers was limited or involved loose control, as in the case of Egypt, but also a great weakness when other powers decided to expand and to control the territory directly, as e.g. with the policy of interdynastic marriages applied by the Hittites.

The only local kingdom that seemed to benefit from this desegregation process was Nukhashe in the Syrian steppe, that occupied a large area but not very favorable for settlements and with poor soils. Due to this nature it is likely that, compared to neighbouring lands, Nukhashe had a different pattern of social and political organization, more similar to the rural or non-urban world. Although politically irrelevant throughout the first part of the LBA, after the expansion of Hatti, Nukhashe took advantage of its peculiar nature and, thanks to its capability to control the land in a different, less centralized way, filled the voids left by the collapse of the neighbouring local kingdoms – Alalakh, Tunip and Qatna – gaining also some political weight in the region.

⁸⁴ On the identification of Amae, see TURRI 2015, pp. 220-221.

⁸⁵ On the identification of Zalkhi, see TURRI 2015, pp. 295-296.

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