



Figure 1. Qala'at Halwanji.

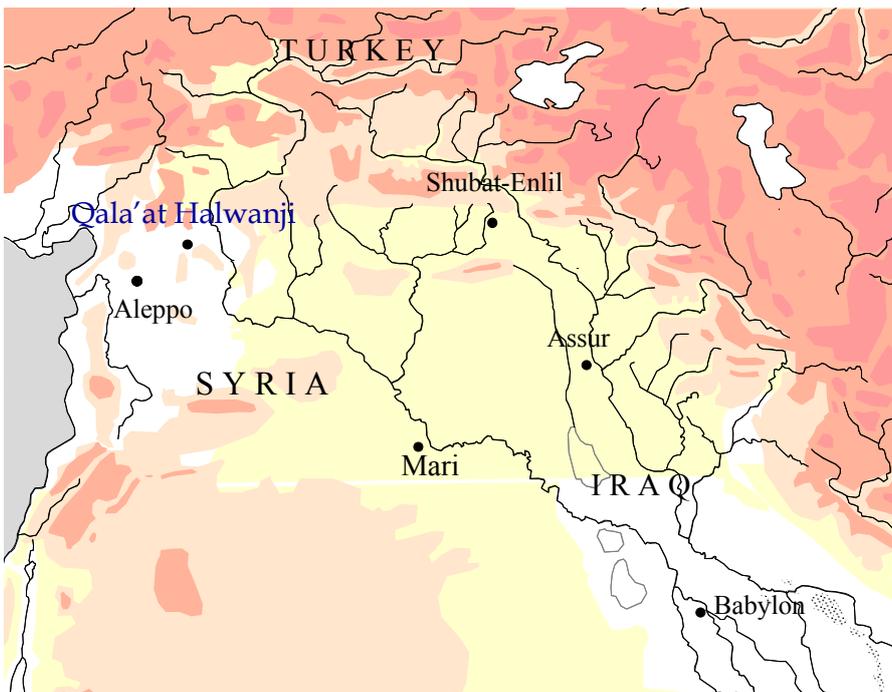


Figure 2. Map showing the location of Qala'at Halwanji (base map by Martin Sauvage).

Qala'at Halwanji: A 4000 year old fortress in Syria

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The eighth Lecture in honour of Prof. K.R. Veenhof was, as is tradition, held in the Taffeh Hall of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden (19th November). The 2009 lecture was delivered by the new director of NINO, and was followed by a ceremony to celebrate the outgoing director, J.J. Roodenberg.

The lecture was an introduction to a new archaeological field project initiated in 2008 in cooperation with the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic. This project will over the next years be a main focus for research by NINO. The article is a revised version of the lecture.

What soft drink can lead to...

Until summer of 2007 Qala'at Halwanji (Fig. 1) was apparently unknown to modern archaeology, but was then accidentally discovered Friday 1st June. That day, the weekly holiday, most members of the Danish team working at Tell Aushariye on the northern Euphrates headed east to visit the Dutch team at Tell Sabi Abiyad. Having a backlog of photography and other work I remained in camp, but in the afternoon went on a small trip, driving west into the narrow Sajour valley to visit a site called Arab Hassane. Some 5 km from the destination our driver felt thirsty, and stopped at a roadside shop to buy a cola. To our left was the thin line of the Sajour river, and behind that a tall, suspiciously regular cliff, and we asked the shopkeeper if there was anything up there. Oh yes, he answered, many traces of antiquities. Exactly what this meant was not clear, but we decided to have a look at the place on our way back. Later that day we found a place where the car could ford the Sajour, and continued on a very rough dirt track up the slope of Qala'at Halwanji. Having reached the plateau of the site we got out and looked around.

The surface was strewn with sherds from broken ceramic vessels. Most of them could be dated to the Middle Bronze Age II, i.e. the beginning of the second millennium BC. In a couple of places some locals had, fairly recently, dug shallow holes, clearly hoping to find treasure in jars probably located just

under the surface. Sherds of these jars now lay scattered in and around the holes. Inside the holes the soil was heavily burnt, and we could conclude that just under the modern surface were the ruins of a nearly 4000 year old settlement, apparently destroyed by a fire, possibly in an act of war. And this was not all. The layout and topography of the site was also remarkable. Located on a limestone cliff Halwanji literally towers over the valley of the Sajour river. It is almost rectangular and has an extent of ca. 5 hectares. Its perimeter features a broad ridge from which terrain slopes inward towards the center. This ridge and its inward slope seemed to represent an eroded rampart. The perimeter was broken by ca. 30 m wide gullies approximately in the centers of the southwest and southeast ridges. In sum the site had the appearance of a fortress with massive ramparts and two main gates.

Such a fortress could well have been built to control traffic through the Sajour Valley moving west towards the area of modern Aleppo – and of course traffic from there moving east to cross the Euphrates (Fig. 2). The site was clearly a tempting object for further study. We therefore arranged with the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums for a joint investigation at Halwanji, and in autumn of 2008 and spring of 2009 we were able to conduct brief preliminary work at the site.

The first investigations

Having completed a topographic map of Qala'at Halwanji and its immediate vicinity (Fig. 3), we proceeded to collect the ceramic sherds and other objects lying on the modern surface. 40 areas of each 400 square meters were completely sampled. In total we collected nearly 13.000 sherds. Most of them can be dated to the Middle Bronze Age, but some are older and belong to the last centuries of the third millennium BC. We found only very few sherds or other items which can be dated later than the Middle Bronze Age. So after the site was burned in the Middle Bronze Age, there had been

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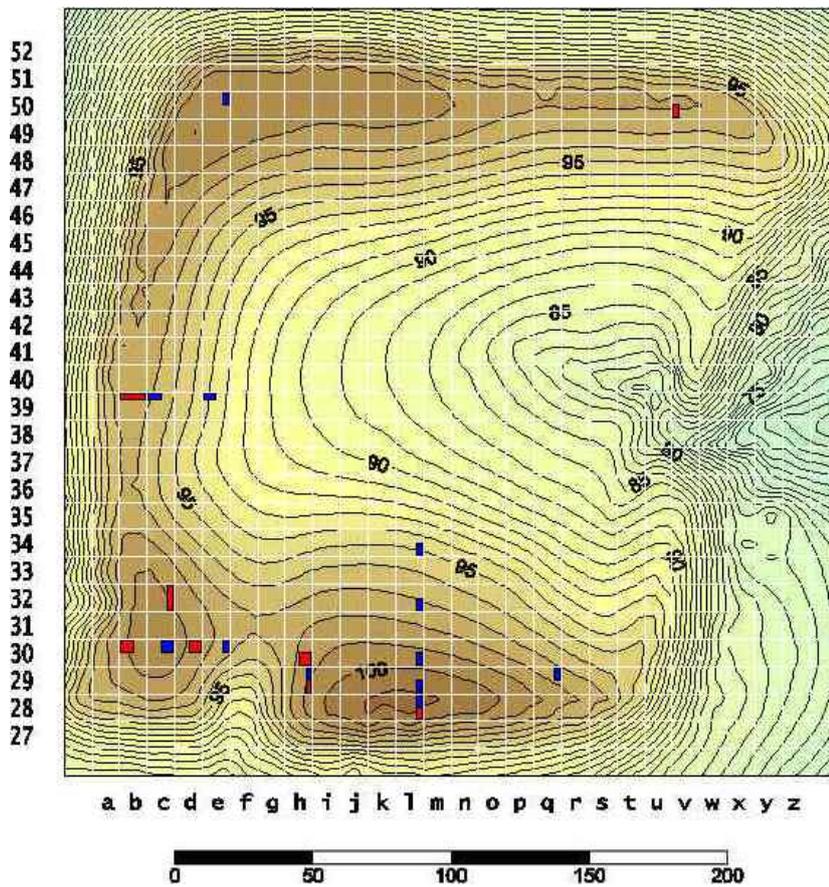


Figure 3. Map of Halwanji with test excavations marked.

Figure 4. General view of the excavations.



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no real occupation on it, only some occasional visitors.

We then opened a series of small excavations – sondages – to test the general situation at the site (Fig. 4). The general picture emerging from these sondages is that of a site partly heavily eroded, partly with excellent preservation. In the trenches on high ground near the edges of the site we have found a nearly 6 meter wide wall, no doubt the main fortification wall. Inside this are what appears to be small rooms with domestic installations, apparently terraced down the inner slope of the site. Provisionally we interpret these rooms as the “barracks” for the garrison of the fortress. In the southwest corner of the site is what appears to be ruins of a main building of the ancient settlement, and which we therefore interpret – also provisionally – as the “Governor’s Palace”, and the administrative center for the fortress. The sondages close to the center of the site and those on the northern edge revealed only shallow some foundations on virgin soil, and the very eroded east part of the site seems unlikely to preserve any substantial cultural remains. It is of course impossible to estimate at present how much structure is lost to erosion, but it seems likely that the most substantial built structures in the Middle Bronze Age were actually situated in the southwest part of the site, and that much of the interior was basically empty of structures.

On the well-preserved southwestern part of Halwanji, where it seems the main built structures were located, we may mention Sondage 11 (Fig. 5), on the high ground west of the south gate, and thus part of the so-called palace. Immediately under the modern surface appeared a 1.6 m thick wall running through the trench. Excavating the space to the east of this wall we reached nearly three

meters into heavily burnt fill before reaching a level close to the floor and lots of broken ceramic jars. It seems the room originally contained a large stack of empty jars, ready for use, and these were broken when the roof and walls collapsed during the fire.

In Sondage 13 east of 11 we have uncovered part of a room with rows of large storage jars embedded in the floor, and originally used for liquids, possibly wine (Fig. 6).

Another example from the same area is Sondage 1 immediately west of the south gate, where we found the corner of a room also filled with broken jars. Interestingly large storage vessels had been placed here in low platforms to stabilise them. The original phase had been destroyed by a fire, and new installations added, in some cases covering crushed jars from the original phase. We can therefore assume that the Middle Bronze Age settlement at Halwanji was destroyed twice – within a very short period – before it was finally abandoned.

Seals

Under the later phase installations in Sondage 1, and thus belonging to the earliest phase, we made a remarkable find. A small group of burnt lumps of clay with impressions of cylinder seals (see separate text box). The clay pieces come from covers for jars or other containers. The impressions were made with cylindrical seal stones with a motif in negative. The seals used to seal the clay pieces found at Halwanji are remarkable. One of them in particular is unique and certainly one of the finest seals known from the Syrian Bronze Age. The seal picture has no less than seven registers, each filled with several scenes and figures. Each register bulges slightly in the impression, and this shows that the original seal must have been heptagonal – that is seven-sided, and not quite cylindrical – another rare feature. The central register shows a deity wearing a hat with horns, and with wings and

Cylinder seals

Small, usually perforated cylinders of stone with a motif engraved in negative. Widely used in the Ancient Near East from the late third millennium BC onwards. Used to make impressions on (still) soft clay surfaces: envelopes for tablets, or small lumps of clay placed on string used to close doors or lids of jars and other containers.

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Figure 5.
Sondage I I.



Figure 6. Sondage I3.

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rays emanating from its shoulders (Fig. 8). The deity holds a string or chain fastened to the head of a snake-like creature upon which it stands. Generally such attributes can be matched with a particular known deity of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon, but in this case the attributes do not match any well-known figure. No doubt this will be a subject of debate for the experts in the years to come, but for now I would suggest that we perhaps have here a goddess named Ishara, who was very popular in Western Syria, and whose character some times overlaps that of the better-known Ishtar, the famous Mesopotamian goddess of Love and War. Another important register on the seal shows what appears to be a narrative mythical scene – a hero figure fighting a monster-like figure – is approached by a row of soldiers armed with bows and headed by a lancer and yet another archer getting ready to shoot.

The sealings all come from containers, and the seals with which they were made must have belonged to very high-ranking individuals, most likely based in Western Syria, and who were responsible for shipments of luxury items to Halwanji.

The historical scenario

Both the sealings and the pottery found at Halwanji date the Middle Bronze Age occupation to a short period in the 18th century BC. The fortified settlement was apparently twice conquered and burned. In its early phase at least it had high level international contact with western Syria – as shown by the sealings. What role did such a site play in this region? Who founded it and why? To answer such questions we must first take a brief look at the local region. The Sajour region in Syria

was the target for two archaeological surface surveys carried out some 30 years ago, and the basic image of ancient settlement is that of many small and tall, multi-period sites scattered along the banks of the Sajour itself and its tributaries. Removed from the fertile valley beds the landscape today clearly shows that there was little basis for settled life here, and the Sajour was the real life-line of the local communities.

So was our Middle Bronze Age fortress at Halwanji a new military capital for an ancient local king? Although an intriguing possibility it seems more likely that the fortress belongs to an international

horizon and was founded by one of the major powers of the time. Fortunately we have for the period in question very rich written sources, mainly from ancient Mari (see separate text box) which show that the Euphrates functioned as border between two major powers in northern Syria. To the east was the empire of the Mesopotamian king Shamshi-Adad (see separate text box), based in his capital at Shubat-Enlil in Northeastern Syria, while the land west of the Euphrates formed the kingdom of Jamhad, with its capital in Halab, the modern city of Aleppo.

Sources for interaction between these two kingdoms provides a possible scenario for Halwanji. The story includes three main elements. The first is an official note in a chronicle of the eastern king Shamshi-Adad, which states that he was victorious over the western king, a certain Sumu-Epuh, and founded two fortresses in his kingdom. Other sources show that these fortresses really existed and were located close to the Euphrates, but that Shamshi-Adad lost them again after just a few years.

Shamshi-Adad

Although far less known than his famous contemporary, Hammurabi of Babylon, Shamshi-Adad (ca. 1850-1776 BC) was a key figure of his time. Originally king of a small area in central Iraq, he created a large, but short-lived empire covering most of modern northern Iraq and eastern Syria. He placed two sons as viceroys on the flanks of the empire: the older Ishme-Dagan in the east, and the younger Jasmah-Addu in Mari in the west.

Letters to Jasmah-Addu sent by his father have been found in Mari. A number of them scold Jasmah-Addu for his lack of courage and initiative!

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Figure 7. Sealing from Sondage I.



Figure 8. Close up of sealing.



Figure 9. Selection of cups and jugs.

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The second element is of a different character. Years later the son of the western king wrote in a letter:

“Sumu-Epuh, my father, revered the god, and [...] no other king could resist him. Then he took back what he had given Shamshi-Adad, and Sumu-Epuh, my father, was deprived of old age. Because he took back the land he had given to Shamshi-Adad, the god Adad let him die!”

This shows that Shamshi-Adad had established control west of the Euphrates as part of an agreement with the western king, who, for a while, tolerated this control. When he broke the agreement it was viewed as a violation of his oath and the god punished him.

These elements seem to fit the case of Halwanji quite well. The sudden establishment of a fortress in the middle of the Sajour region just west of the Euphrates could be the work of Shamshi-Adad. The high-profile contacts with the west – as shown by the sealings found – could be a reflection of the short period when the agreement was still honored. And – of course – the first destruction at Halwanji could be the end of the agreement!

A final element is the information that – some years later – at least one of the old forts was used as a stronghold for a local rebellion against the king of Jamhad, but quickly seized and probably destroyed. This might then be the final destruction and abandonment at Halwanji – and after that there was no longer any use for the place, except for the occasional Roman soldier or passing shepherd –

while life in the region returned to normal as it were – after the short episode of international imposition represented by the fortress at Halwanji.

Mari

Famous ancient city on the Euphrates in Syria, excavated since the 1930'ies by French archaeologists. In the Middle Bronze Age palace, destroyed ca. 1760 BC, large royal archives of clay tablets inscribed with text in cuneiform writing were kept. These texts provide a sometimes very detailed historical panorama for the last ca. 30 years before the destruction.

How to build a fortress

From Mari we have an interesting model for rampart construction on an exercise tablet. The text contains calculations of the volumes of earth needed for each side of a rectangular rampart and the number of man-days necessary for the work. Unfortunately the text does not provide dimensions of the walled area or indeed a name of the place, and is clearly an abstract exercise.

A rampart of this type, according to the Mari text, demanded some 27.000 workdays – and so could be completed by, for instance, a workforce of 1000 men in just one month. Even so, such a project would in total represent a considerable investment, and this plus the maintenance of a garrison force would no doubt have been beyond the resources available to a local king.

Perspectives

It must be stressed that we have no proof that this story applies to Halwanji. The pottery and sealings excavated so far can not be dated more precisely than within ca. 50 years, and so the settlement could be either a bit earlier or a bit later than the story known from the Mari archives. In any case we hope to get more information when real and extensive excavation of Qala'at

Halwanji proceeds. In the Middle Bronze Age in Syria the use of writing was widespread in official contexts, and it seems almost certain that a

governor or the like of the Halwanji fortress would have kept small archives of letters and administrative records. If not removed in antiquity or destroyed by later erosion we may find some of these texts, and they may hopefully illuminate the historical setting.

This is only one of the perspectives for future research at Halwanji. The Middle Bronze Age settlement existed only a few years, and the extensive corpus of ceramic vessels found in the burnt ruins will give us a very precise profile of material from a distinct period, and provide a benchmark for dating

of similar material from more complex excavations (Fig. 9).

We are also intrigued by the earlier level at Halwanji. In several places we have reached quite massive foundations of this earlier level, which

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dates to the late Early Bronze Age (IV), several hundred years before the Middle Bronze Age settlement. Finding written sources in this level is not a very realistic prospect, but it seems that the story of international intervention in the Middle Bronze Age has an earlier counterpart.

In a more general way Halwanji seems to offer us the chance to uncover, right below the modern surface of the site, an extensive area of an ancient settlement with virtually intact materials in situ, and thus the opportunity to reconstruct in great detail daily life here some 4000 years ago.

The archaeological work at Qala'at Halwanji was directed by J. Eidem (then Senior Fellow in the Cluster of Excellence "TOPOI", Berlin). Syrian co-directors were A. Nasser (2008) and Mhm. Fakhru (2009). The field work was generously sponsored by the Augustinus Foundation (Copenhagen) and the Danish Institute in Damascus.

Further reading

The discovery of Qala'at Halwanji is reported in:

- J. Eidem, "Une forteresse du bronze moyen sur le Sajour", *Studia Orontica* 2 (2008).
<http://studiaorontica.org/index.php>

Qala'at Halwanji is the first site in the Sajour valley to be scientifically excavated. The earlier surveys of the valley are reported in:

- P. Sanlaville (ed.), *Holocene Settlement in North Syria. Resultats de deux prospections archéologiques effectuées dans la région du nahr Sajour et sur le haut Euphrate syrien. BAR IS 238* (Archaeopress, Oxford 1985).

Syrian seals from the Middle Bronze Age have been studied recently in:

- A. Otto, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Klassisch-Syrischen Glyptik. UAVA 8* (W. de Gruyter, Berlin 2000).

A recent summary of the period covered by the archives from ancient Mari is found in:

- D. Charpin and N. Ziegler, *Mari et le Proche-Orient à l'époque amorrite. FM V* (SEPOA, Paris 2003).

The text quoted on p. 9 is from a letter found at Mari, and published as Text No. 8 in:

- J.-M. Durand, *Le culte du dieu de l'orage d'Alep et l'affaire d'Alahtum. FM VII* (SEPOA, Paris 2002).

