Civic community and public space in the ancient Near East. The case of Hittite Anatolia at the end of the Late Bronze Age (14th-13th centuries BCE).

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Informe

Información del proyecto

COMPUS

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Proyecto cerrado

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Periodic Reporting for period 1 - COMPUS (Civic community and public space in the ancient Near East. The case of Hittite Anatolia at the end of the Late Bronze Age (14th-13th centuries BCE).)

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This project studies public space, that is, streets and squares of the preclassical Near Eastern cities as a material correlate of urban habits and civic communities.

Civic community is understood here as any set of individuals with comparable status bound together by a consciousness of belonging to specific urban cultures. In ancient Mesopotamia, civic communities existed as independent political subjects. Although political power was mostly controlled by religious or monarchical institutions, citizens could express their political opinions in assemblies or in informal gatherings. Both in its institutional and informal dimension, the civic community acted as a significant political factor throughout the history of the ancient Near East, and was a latent antagonistic undercurrent to the monarchical and religious central powers.

Recently, the question of "collective governance" has gained scientific momentous and a number of influential studies reviewed the textual sources in search of the ancient Near Eastern roots of Western collective institutions. However, while philological studies surge, the archaeological dimension of the ancient Near Eastern city intended as a collective body of citizens has received less attention. While the Temple and the Palace as architectonic materializations of the central powers engaged entire generations of archaeologists, the material traces left by civic communities have only seldom been object of analysis. In fact, it has been mostly assumed that citizenship did not leave any archaeological trace. This research challenges this paradigm.

The issue of the material footprint left by civic culture is important for today's society because it connects directly to the ways in which, right now and in the near future, civic communities in transitional, authoritarian policies contest, appropriate and transform public space for antagonistic purposes. It also investigates the response of organized political power in terms of coordinated strategies to regiment political behavior by promoting a public space design that either promotes or, more often, discourages democratic developments.

This research focused on the case study of the city of Ugarit in the 13th century BCE. In this period, Ugarit was a rich dynastic kingdom embedded in a complex and fragmented political scene, including local civic institution counterbalancing the power of the monarchy. Textual sources reveal an atmosphere of relative openness to private business as well as the existence of a lively political debate and a tense network of pressure groups, reaching into and beyond the royal administration. The peculiar socio-political situation at Ugarit reflects on the form and topology of public space. This fact is particularly evident when looking at urban squares. This research identified a large market square and a number of smaller ceremonial squares. The market square was located in the city center, physically disconnected from the royal palace and open to visitors from outside the city walls. It was a place for business activities and informal gatherings outside the direct control of the monarchical administration. Conversely, ceremonial squares were located far away from the city gates, next to the royal palace or the city's main temples. The squares adjacent to the palace were surrounded by buildings where feasting on a grand scale took place, to be seen as consensus-building gatherings under the aegida of the monarchy. Conversely, the temples' squares, decorated

with monumental religious stelas, functioned as culmination points of popular civic festivals under control of the clergy.

In conclusion, the case of Ugarit proves that, provided an ad-hoc methodology, communal political life can be indirectly detected in the ancient built environment, in particular in public space such as streets and squares.

Trabajo realizado desde el comienzo del proyecto hasta el final del período abarcado por el informe y los principales resultados hasta la fecha ⌄

This project has been organized in three main research stages, which built upon one another.

In the first stage, secondary literature has been reviewed, the city of Ugarit has been selected as the focus of the study and topographic data have been collected and geo-processed in a Geographic Information System. The geo-processing of the data has been done in collaboration with Dr. Caterina Gottardi, instructor at the GIS Lab of the IUAV University Venice. At the same time, a close-reading of archaeological contexts was undertaken, in order to verify the stratigraphic history of the contexts analysed and to identify and define chronologically reliable datasets. As a result of this research stage a map of the street system at Ugarit was produced.

In the second research stage, the collected datasets were analyzed in-depth, using the street system map as point of reference and integrating three lines of inquiry: a topological analysis based on Space Syntax; an analysis of urban design, including geometric characteristic and proxemics boundaries of the built environment; and finally a contextual analysis of the distribution of selected classes of artefacts. The analysis of urban design provided insights in the planned aspects of the urban record, while analysing the distribution of small finds helped to define when and how people actually used the spaces in question. As a result of this research stage, a set of graphs mapping measurable social variables of urban space was produced.

In the third and last research stage, the results of the urban analysis at Ugarit were compared and contrasted with urban patterns and textual evidence of contemporary cities of Northern Mesopotamia, such as Emar, Tell Bazi, and Tall Munbāqa. As a result, the trends observed at Ugarit were set in their broader historical significance and embedded into a coherent narrative on the functional, social, and political interaction between built environment, informal civic habits, and communal institutions at the highly significant historical turn of the end of the Late Bronze Age.

The results of the research have been presented (in full or in part) in public conferences in Venice, New York and Munich, and discussed in university seminars in Venice and Berlin. Two articles in scientific journals are in preparation.
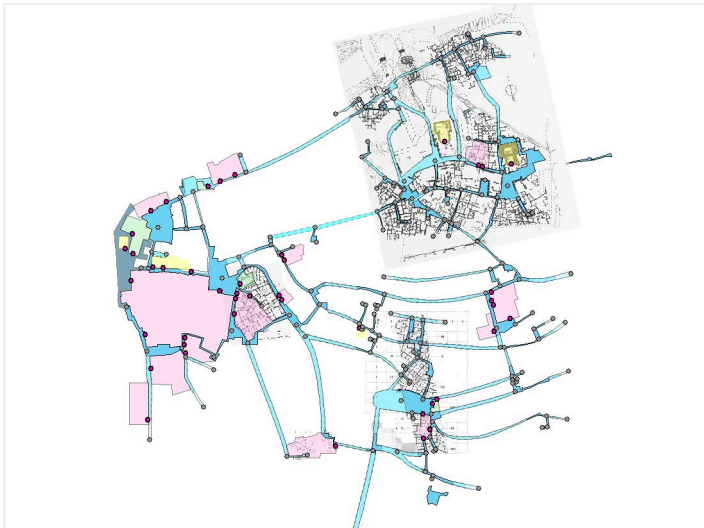
"This research has proven two key points that go beyond the specifics of the case-study.

First, contrary to common historical assumptions, urban squares are significant topographical and socio-political features of the cities of the ancient Near East well before the advent of the Hellenistic agorai.

Second, the urban, political and economic significance of squares is neither monolithic nor static. They exist in different forms and their meaning changes through time. Squares – also squares within one single city – should be addressed as a diachronic historical phenomenon.

This research also opens the path for further investigations on the genetics and mechanisms of public culture in pre-modern socio-political frameworks. By placing itself across archaeology, sociology, and urban studies, this research explores how cultural hegemony is constantly negotiated on a material, spatial level, with the creation of specific ""political spaces"". The background idea is that, if we learn how to ""read"" the story of urban design in its complexities, we will learn to create future political spaces that will resonate with historical depth and will function better.

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Sreenshot of the GIS-environment devised for urban analysis

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