

# Ebla and the Amorites

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## *The Terms of the Problem*

The Ebla *querelle*, if one may so term the sharply divergent opinions which have come to be voiced about the nature of the language and culture of third-millennium Ebla, is happily on the wane. Happily, because little scholarly benefit came from it; and on the wane, because the difficult task of philological documentation is absorbing the better part of the effort being currently expended in this area. While it is not my intent to review here any of the aspects of this affair, I will refer to it at certain junctures, from the following perspective: the internal dynamics of the *querelle* as a form of scholarly discourse has, in my view, led to a certain crystallization of substantive and methodological presuppositions, which have been at times accepted too soon and too uncritically. The resulting scholarly perception has to be taken into consideration as a sort of mindset which conditions the direction taken by the research, through the assumptions it posits (often tacitly) upstream of any interpretation. In other words, while the *querelle* may well have subsided, the factors which led to its coming into being are still operative and should be addressed on their scholarly merits.

Two important objective factors<sup>1</sup> are (1) the very early date of Ebla archives (Pre-Sargonic or early Sargonic) and (2) the fact that their findspot is found so far to the west of any other third-millennium cuneiform corpus. An important concomitant factor should also be stressed, namely (3) the material consistency and homogeneity of the archives. Such homogeneity heightens, on the one hand, the significance of its early date: this is not a scattered group of texts, without a clear

*Author's note:* The text of this article follows that of a paper delivered at the Center for Ebla Research at New York University, at the invitation of Prof. Cyrus H. Gordon on February 25, 1990. I retain the discursive nature of the presentation, and adduce only a minimum of documentary and bibliographical references; a fuller presentation of my argument and of the relevant data will be undertaken as a part of my research on Khana mentioned below, n. 6. I am grateful to Prof. Gordon and to Prof. Baruch Levine for their hospitality in New York, and to Prof. Gordon in particular for his further hospitality on the pages of his series *Eblaitica*.

<sup>1</sup> I will not take up here the issue of the connections that have been suggested between the Ebla texts and the Bible. For some considerations which have a bearing on the argumentation given below and which pertain to the patriarchal tradition see Buccellati 1990a.

archeological context, but rather one of the largest and best preserved cuneiform archives ever, excavated within a well-stratified and culturally impressive setting. Thus it is that in Ebla we have, as the fountainhead of Semitic documentary evidence, a fully developed scribal practice—or, to put it differently, what we find *at* the beginning is by no means *the* beginning, but rather a full-blown and sophisticated tradition. The homogeneity of the archives also heightens, on the other hand, the significance of their western provenience: the lopsided position of Ebla *vis-u-vis* the rest of the Mesopotamian epigraphic evidence looms even larger when one considers that the great Sumerian centers of the south, far as they are geographically from Ebla, are also just about as distant from it in terms of the wealth and cohesiveness of their epigraphic yield. In other words, there is no epigraphic continuum, in either the constitution of the archives or the geographical distribution of the finds, between the south and Ebla—Mari itself being in effect isolated, and with an even greater distance intervening between Mari and Ebla than between Mari and the southern centers.

To recapitulate, the Ebla archives are a typological unicum whose very uniqueness lends an almost dramatic dimension to their equally impressive early date and their very isolated geographical position. Interestingly, these factors were as operative before the discovery of the archives in downplaying the significance of Ebla as they were going to be afterward in raising scholarly and public temperatures to a feverish level. For it should not be forgotten that archeological Ebla, as a rich urban culture, had been “discovered” considerably before the archives were—and yet scholarly attention could hardly be said to have focused sharply on its extremely important architecture and statuary until the tablets came along. “What good could possibly come from a third-millennium place in western Syria?” seems to have been the underlying, unspoken consensus. Now, if there was any justification to such an attitude it was the lack of a documentary continuum between Ebla and the Mesopotamian south: under such conditions it did strain the imagination to assume an Ebla where we know Ebla to be today. Of course, such a continuum is in effect, except for Mari,<sup>2</sup> still lacking today.

One important exception that one would have expected before the epigraphic discoveries at Ebla pertained to linguistic categories. Amorite, generally regarded as a West Semitic dialect, was found in the latter part of the third millennium in the southern cities—and yet, being a *West* Semitic dialect, would naturally be expected to originate in the western regions, that is, precisely in that part of Syria where Ebla was. Such was the logical expectation expressed,

<sup>2</sup> More third-millennium epigraphic data from Mari have been found in the meantime. Also, a whole new epigraphic region seems to be opening up in the Khabur plains with the recent discoveries of new third-millennium tablets at Tell Brak and Tell Mozan: these finds, too, will cause a new appreciation of important third-millennium sites long since known archeologically, like Tell Brak itself and Tell Chuera.

for instance, in the first preliminary report of the excavations (ten years before the discovery of the texts), where it was hypothesized that the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants of Ebla may have been Amorite.<sup>3</sup> In point of fact, the Mesopotamian evidence alone seemed even then to contradict this assumption, and it was on that basis that at about the same time I expressed my doubts about considering as Amorite the language of the western cities, including Ebla.<sup>4</sup> Yet, a general perceptual atlas of the third millennium would clearly have retained the notion of Amorite as the overall language of the west and would have split Syro-Mesopotamia in two halves, more or less along the lines of modern boundaries, calling the western half, with Ebla as one of its centers, Amorite, and the eastern half Akkadian. It was therefore surprising, from such a perspective, when it soon became apparent that the divergent picture I had in mind in 1967 was in fact correct, since hardly any evidence of Amorite presence was found at Ebla—be it in the form of individuals qualified as **MAR.TU**, or in the form of onomastic items.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the light of such considerations that the terms of the problem addressed in the title of this article acquire their significance: Why is it that the earliest known strand of western Semitic (Amorite) left no trace in the first major archives excavated in the west? It is just this issue that I intend to take up here, with a view toward clarifying both terms of the problem, that is, Ebla *and* the Amorites. One important result will be a new understanding of the early history of Semitic languages in general. I now take up these three points in sequence, beginning with a revised reconstruction of the history of the Amorites,<sup>6</sup> showing then how this affects our interpretation of the history of Ebla, and bringing out in the end the pertinent conclusions for Semitic linguistics.

<sup>3</sup> Liverani 1965: 122–23: “La popolazione doveva essere, a nostro avviso, amorrea: Amorrei i sedentari agricoltori asserragliati entro le mura, Amorrei i pastori nomadi che premevano fuori di esse.”

<sup>4</sup> This was my conclusion published shortly after the initial publication of the first preliminary report, Buccellati 1966, where I wrote (p. 247) that “this reconstruction [i.e., an Amorite linguistic affiliation for Ebla], which undoubtedly deserves serious consideration, seems on this point to be at variance with the Mesopotamian evidence. . . , especially with the fact that in the Sumerian texts the Amorites are never connected with Western cities in contrast to the other people of the West who usually are.”

<sup>5</sup> For a good review of the evidence see Archi 1985.

<sup>6</sup> I give here a concise summary of a long-term research that I have been carrying out on the kingdom of Khana, as a follow-up of my earlier interest in the Amorites (Buccellati 1966 and 1967) and in conjunction with my archeological work at Terqa. In this study I utilize not only the archeological and linguistic, but also the geographical evidence, in an attempt to understand the latter in terms of the perceptual categories of the ancients. A number of articles have appeared or are in press for my Khana series (1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1990d, and forthcoming). I plan to eventually integrate these articles into a full-length monograph, where I will also take up the issues discussed in this article, and provide a complete documentation, including detailed photographic illustrations of the pertinent geographical phenomena. For now, one will find in the articles cited above the preliminary documentation on which the conclusions summarized here are based.

*A Revised History of the Amorites*

Perhaps because the cuneiform documentation of Mari, as well as Terqa, is so squarely within the limits of the Mesopotamian scribal tradition, we tend to view the region of which these two cities were successively the capitals as practically identical in their geopolitical and sociopolitical structure with the rest of Mesopotamia. In fact, however, there are strong differences which lend to the Middle Euphrates and Lower Khabur region a very unique geomorphological physiognomy. What will be relevant in the present context are some observations on the way in which the peculiar character of the territory affected the sociopolitical structure of the people living within it, and in particular the interaction between the urban and the rural populations.

While both regions (i.e., the Mesopotamian south on the one hand and the Middle Euphrates/Lower Khabur on the other) are "arid" in that they lie below the 250 mm isohyet, there is a subtle but fundamental difference in the relief, which causes a sharp differentiation between the two zones. The south is entirely alluvial, that is, it is entirely irrigable, while the Middle Euphrates and Lower Khabur basin is irrigable only along a very narrow strip, called in Arabic the *zôr*, and in Akkadian the *ah Purattim*.<sup>7</sup> No amount of hydrological work could have raised the river water above the escarpment which, with varying degrees of steepness, bound the valley trough on either side. It is interesting to remark in this connection that the location of Mari corresponds to the southern end of this trough: just below Mari, at a point neatly in line with the modern border between Syria and Iraq, the trough becomes so constricted as to provide practically no land base at all for any real agriculture. Thus Mari, instead of being central, is located at the effective southern border of the agricultural strip and at the mouth of the few canals which were possible in the valley trough. (Similarly, in this respect, Terqa was located near the mouth of the Khabur, and Tuttul/Tell Bia<sup>C</sup> near the mouth of the Balikh.)

Another difference in the relief, minor as it may seem at first in terms of absolute elevation, sets the Khabur plains apart from the Lower Khabur basin. The minor ranges of the Jebel Abd el-Aziz and the Jebel Sinjar constitute in fact a powerful environmental boundary, in that they correspond to the 250 mm isohyet, and thus they mark the southern border of the dry-farming area. It is perceptually very impressive for someone traveling from the alluvial strip of the *zôr* to the rolling plains of the northern Khabur plains to see wheat grow on *rolling* plains, that is, uphill from any water body; it just seems miraculous!

An important implication of this environmental situation pertains to our understanding of animal husbandry. The close interaction between farming and animal husbandry is rooted in the different but related utilization of the same environment. In the Middle Euphrates/Lower Khabur basin the narrowness of the agricultural strip placed severe limits on the development of both economic

<sup>7</sup> As I have suggested in Buccellati 1990b.

activities and led to the exploitation of the immense “backyard,” as it were, of the valley floor: the steppe.

I interpret the evidence of the Mari texts as showing a special phenomenon of land reclamation, whereby the peasants of the *ah Puruttim* were induced, by the very narrowness of the irrigated area available and the consequent rapid saturation of the agrarian rural landscape, to discover the potential of the steppe by tapping its water table through the systematic development of a network of wells. This allowed them to utilize fully the abundant ground cover of the steppe for their herds—a phenomenon which corresponds in terms of cultural history to the development of irrigation in the river basins. Just as irrigation led to the development of a rural class which remained through time under the direct control of the urban elite, so the development of the wells led to the establishment of a rural class which came to be more and more autonomous of urban controls, since city-based administration and military power never effectively extended (or even tried to extend) to the steppe. Instead of “sedentarization of the nomads” we should speak, I believe, of “nomadization of the peasants.”<sup>8</sup>

In their early stages, possibly down to the Ur III period (the end of the third millennium), these peasant-herders or agro-pastoralists remained essentially agrarian in character, that is, based in the *ah Puruttim*, and used the steppe only as an extension of their narrow farming strip (the *ah Puruttim*), so that as a result the state never found it necessary to establish firm controls on this pasture land so ephemeral in use. The Mari texts still represent this by showing how all confrontations of the state with the peasant-herders or agro-pastoralists took place in the agrarian *ah Puruttim* and never in the pastoral steppe. And yet, given the abundant possibility of long-term survival in the steppe, these agro-pastoralists developed into a formidably autonomous rural class, such as neither the irrigated south nor the rainfed north and northwest had ever known. In other words, their effective potential of turning into full “pastoralists” gave them a degree of political power which resulted eventually in the establishment of the so-called Amorite dynasties.

The term *MAR.TU* or *Amurru* ‘Amorites’ refers, in the view just outlined, to this rural class of nomadizing peasant-herders, a class that is developing an

<sup>8</sup> In some respects, this perspective builds on the extensive research undertaken by Rowton (I will quote here only one of the more recent among his many articles on the subject, Rowton 1978), which emphasizes the closeness between settled and nomadic elements of the population, and which has been further developed by others. See for instance how the problem is phrased by Liverani 1970: 10–11: the difference between nomads and settled populations is not so much ethnic or linguistic, as rather one between lifeways of different groups of the same populations; what linguistic differences there may be, will derive more from the difference in lifestyle rather than in origin. On the other hand, the nomads are still viewed precisely as such, i.e., as nomads whose sedentarization is not so much a migratory as a social phenomenon (Liverani 1970: 11). My interpretation adds an even narrower dimension to the nature of the interaction between herding and farming (which are viewed as concomitant functions carried out by the same group of people rather than as specialized professions carried out by two distinct groups) and to an understanding of the origin of (organized) nomadism as a relatively late phenomenon. The difference in interpretation is more clearly in evidence in a more-recent statement by Liverani 1988: 299.

ethnic identity as a result of the particular circumstances which define the strength and limits of the group solidarity felt by its members. The sociopolitical, or “tribal,” groups that emerge in the process (such as Khaneans or Suteans) are smaller than the broader group subsumed under the terms for Amorites. The latter, then, remains a term that describes the lifestyle of these individuals as much as it refers to their broad ethnic identity.’ Why is it, then, that by the Old Babylonian period it becomes an archaic term, when the class of people to which it refers is more in evidence than ever? In my opinion, it was replaced by two terms, which are normally understood as tribal names: *banii Yamina* and *banii Sam’al*. These convey, I submit, the same semantic range that the term *Amurru* had in earlier times, except that they split it in two: the “sons of the right river bank” and the “sons of the left river bank” correspond to what in Arabic is known today as the *sharnia* and the *jezira*, respectively, that is, the steppe to the south and west of the Euphrates in its middle course, and the steppe to the north and east, contained by a “meso-potamian (i.e., inter-riverine) island” (which is the literal meaning of *jezira*) between the Euphrates and the Tigris.” These two worlds, quite similar in many respects but still perceived today as quite different, and separated by what in ancient times would have been a formidable gap, the Euphrates, are the proper habitat of these incipient nomads: the more the steppe, or “steppes,” become their proper environment, the more closely identified they become with it. Thus the “sons of the steppe lying off the left or right river bank’ are terminologically (as well as, in my understanding, genetically) very closely related to the “sons of the irrigation district” (*maru ugarim*), as Old Babylonian Akkadian says of the settled farmers.

If one plots on a map (fig. 1) not only the 250 mm isohyet, but also the line between arid/irrigable plain and arid/nonirrigable plateau (the steppe), one will notice an interesting distributional pattern in the relationship between major urban centers and the size of their rural hinterland. The region controlled by Mari and then Terqa is proportionately much larger than that controlled by other single urban centers with political autonomy. Alternatively, one may say that the density of urban political centers (i.e., of cities which served as capitals of independent kingdoms) is much higher in either the irrigated alluvium to the south or the dry-farming plains to the north, whereas the entire region in between has effectively only *one* political center, Mari first and then Terqa.

The kingdom of Khana appears then to be coterminous with a whole and very distinctive geopolitical region, one which is characterized on the one hand by a special relationship to water resources and land exploitation, and on the other hand by a distributional pattern of urban centers which differs from the rest of the Syro-

<sup>5</sup> This is somewhat similar to a specific connotation that the term *Arabhas* today, where in the language of settled (Arab) people it refers to the nomadic (Arab) people, i.e., to the Bedouin.

<sup>10</sup> My (preliminary) arguments for this hypothesis are to be found in Buccellati 1990b. Note how, in this perspective, the renderings *banu*, *maru*, or, for that matter, the shortened *marmu* for *maru Yamina* are all equivalent and therefore perfectly interchangeable.

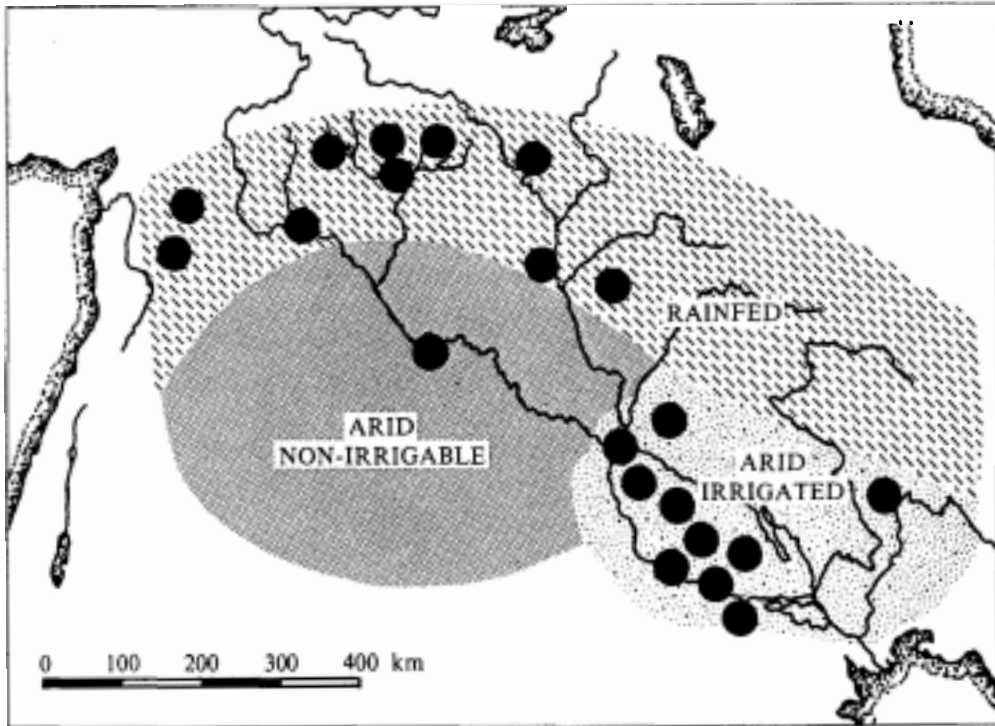


FIGURE 1. Schematic Climatological Map of Syro-Mesopotamia (black dots are major urban centers).

Mesopotamian world. Significantly, this geopolitical region is almost entirely included within the modern political boundaries of the Syrian Arab Republic.

At first, the vastness of the territory may appear to be illusory, precisely on account of the limited presence of urban centers within its boundaries. But, we should not think of the steppe either as an empty quarter or as a territory belonging to nomadic tribes rather than to the kingdom based in the *ah Purattim*. While incapable of sustaining urban life as such, the steppe was an integral resource of the kingdom and one that made it possible for it to develop an economic base otherwise unmatched by the farming resources of the *ah Purattim*. From the Mari texts we know that Khana territorial control over the steppe (in Mari's times at least) extended all the way to the west, since Mari was directly in contact with Qatna over matters pertaining to herds and their grazing rights. Neither Tadmor/Palmyra nor any other oasis had achieved anything even remotely approaching an urban status in the second millennium: the steppe was effectively a vast rangeland, exploited by peasant-herders more or less dependent on the central state power in the *ah Purattim*. In this respect, Mari and Terqa seem to have controlled the entire environmental niche represented by the steppe, and to have aptly subsumed it under the geopolitical term Khana.

Rather than viewing Mari as an outpost, however important, of Mesopotamian civilization, and Terqa as the minor provincial center of a petty local kingdom, we may, in the light of the foregoing discussion, obtain a better perception of the uniqueness of the region of Khana and its kingdom. Distinctive for the geographical zone it occupies and with which it is almost entirely coterminous; distinctive for the mode of adaptation to the environmental situation, from which possibly pastoral nomadism began to evolve from an early agro-pastoralist stage; distinctive for the peculiar pattern of interaction between urban and rural populations—the region and kingdom of Khana stands as a major autonomous component within the geopolitical and sociopolitical makeup of the ancient Near East.

Thus, rather than viewing the Amorites as nomads or seminomads who are threatening Khana from the outside, we should understand them as the unique outgrowth, from within, of the rural class of Khana. The Ur III texts from the south give us a glimpse into the formative period of this process, when the Amorites appear both as scattered individual immigrants settled in the Sumerian cities and as a threatening military force at the kingdom's northern boundary.<sup>11</sup> The early second-millennium texts from Mari, on the other hand, as well as the contemporary onomastics from all of Syro-Mesopotamia, open a larger window onto the climactic stages of this process: the rural classes of the *ah Puruttim* have achieved a sociopolitical autonomy of their own, in fact they have established an ethnic and tribal identity which they carry much beyond the boundaries of their initial habitat and in numbers much greater than in the late third millennium at the time of the kingdom of Ur III.

### *Significance for the History of Ebla*

Considering the difference in date between the period of Ebla (mid-third millennium) and the events described above (end of the third and early part of the second millennium), what is the import of the argumentation adduced above with regard to our assessment of the history and language of Ebla? The answer has both historical and linguistic dimensions.

At first, one may be tempted to answer the question about the lack of an Amorite presence at Ebla in chronological terms: the Amorites are not mentioned because *there were no Amorites* at the time of the archives. But we know better. On the one hand, Amorites are mentioned in the south as far back as the Fara period and a few, at least, do appear in the Ebla archives as well. On the other hand, there is an important reference from the south that refers back to about 2200 B.C., the year-name of Šar-kali-šarri which records a victory achieved by that king “over the Amorites in the mountain of *Ba-sa-ar*.”<sup>12</sup> What is particularly

<sup>11</sup> That the Ur III *MAR.TU* are few is not an accident in the recovery of the evidence, since the individuals of Amorite origin are still qualified as such, precisely through the use the apposition *MAR.TU* appended after their name. Such a qualification is no longer used in the later periods because the sheer number of Amorite individuals robs the qualification of its original distinctiveness.

<sup>12</sup> For the references see Buccellati 1966: 236, 327.



remarkable about this event is that the conflict took place in the hilly region known today as Jebel Bishri,<sup>13</sup> at some distance from the *ah Purattim* which is, one should remember, the only place where conflicts between the Mari government and its own rural class (the so-called “nomads”) were to take place in later periods. In other words, in the time of the Mari archives direct royal control (including military deployment) did not extend much further than the first line of wells about twenty to thirty km on either side of the valley trough.<sup>14</sup> However, some four hundred years earlier a king from the south claims to have gone some one hundred km into the steppe, where no Mari king ever took his troops. Whether this was because of the superior tactical and strategic capability of the Akkadian king *vis-h-vis* the Mari kings, or (more likely) because of the as yet lesser degree of strength and cohesiveness achieved by the agro-pastoralist of the *ah Purattim*, who simply withdrew to their inland wells in front of their attacker, who in turn successfully pursued them there—the net result is that we have here a strong indication of the sense of identity which the Amorites projected even then, enough to be registered in the southern perception as something worthy of designating a year-name.

If the Amorites have such a standing some two centuries after the period of the Ebla archives, and since they are after all mentioned, however scantily, in the same archives, the question of their relative absence at Ebla cannot be explained on the basis of their simply not having as yet come into existence. So the problem reposes itself—with a likely solution emerging from the historical reconstruction I have proposed above for the origin and nature of the Amorites. To pursue this solution I wish to contrast different patterns of interaction between the urban centers and their rural hinterland in early Syro-Mesopotamia, which are strongly conditioned by the different environmental conditions described above, and which are represented schematically in figure 2.

In pattern A, documented in the arid and irrigated southern regions of Syro-Mesopotamia, the territories occupied by the urban and rural populations are practically coterminous: this means that urban, and therefore state, controls extend to every aspect of rural life, so that there is no possibility left for the rural classes to develop any meaningful distinctiveness, economic, political or otherwise. An argument *ex silentio* is that we hardly ever hear in texts from the south about any type of political initiative on the part of the local rural classes, nor do we have ethnic terms that seem applicable to them. More positively, we

<sup>13</sup> The Jebel Bishri is not a mountain in the sense of either absolute elevation or difficulty of access—as the Taurus is to the north. It is a relatively low and mildly sloped range, dotted with wells and lined with wadis. It does, however, like the Jebel Hamrin on the Tigris, impress somebody coming from the alluvial south as the first major rise to incise the skyline even on the distant horizon.

<sup>14</sup> This buffer zone along the river banks was called in Mari *bas'atum* in the singular and *basa'atum* in the plural; see Buccellati 1990b: 95. It is conceivable that the defensive line established by the kings of the Ur III kingdom against the Amorites, called *Muriq-Tidnim*, was in effect a similar buffer zone of wells and defensive stations, cutting transversely across the Euphrates basin rather than alongside it, like the *basa'atum* in Mari.

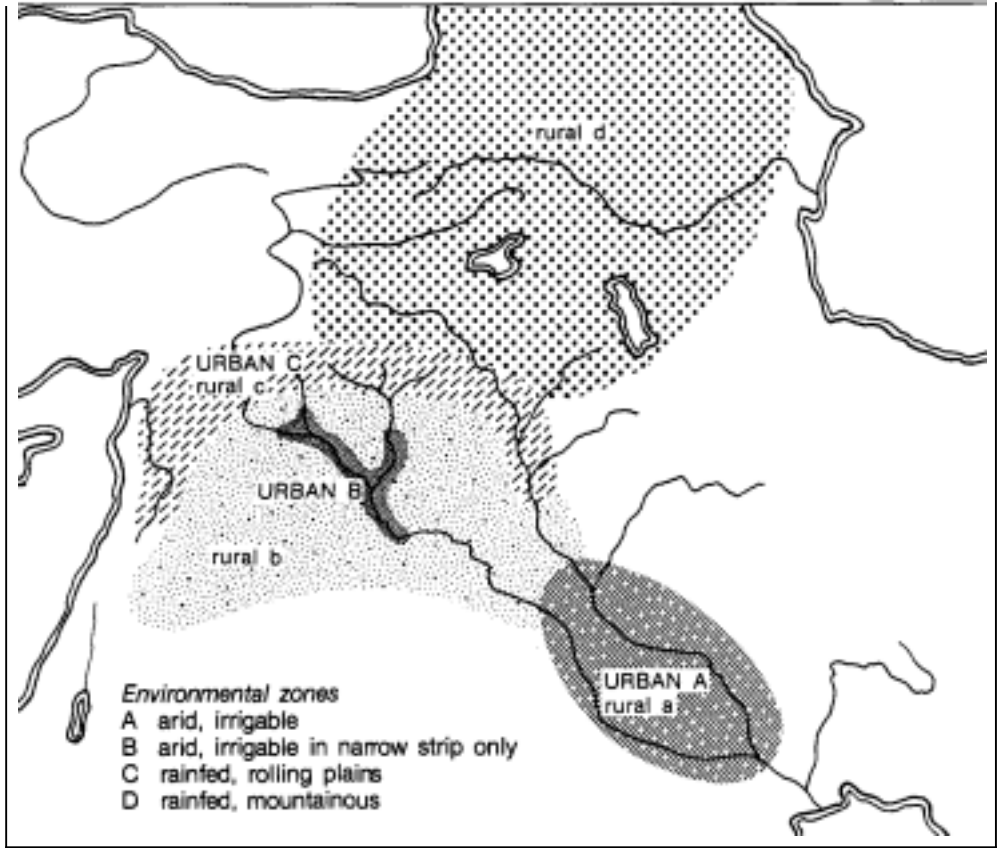


FIGURE 2. Rural and Urban Zones in Syro-Mesopotamia (third and second millennia).

know that the state exercised a very close control not only on agriculture but also on herding.

Pattern B is found in the arid and minimally irrigable area of the Middle Euphrates and the steppe: this situation defines Khana in a uniquely distinctive way, since it does not apply to any other region. Here I view the rural population as appropriating the steppe resources for its herding needs. Technically, this appropriation results in an expansion of territorial control on the part of the state: since the rural population is subject to state control, the territory it exploits is in turn of direct pertinence to the state. There is however one major difference *vis-à-vis* other situations: the rangeland in the steppe is so vast and its human occupation so fluid that actual military and administrative presence on the part of the state is practically ruled out. What is more, it appears to be unnecessary as well—at least as long as the herdsmen responsible for its exploitation are firmly rooted among the rural classes at home in the alluvial strip, the *ah Puruttim*. This means in fact that their presence in the steppe is by definition ephemeral, and that they remain, in principle, under the direct and immediate control of the

state on all occasions when they return to the *ah Purattim*. The change intervenes when they realize that they in fact are not in any immediate and direct *need* to return to the *ah Purattim*, if they choose otherwise: partly, the resources of the steppe may be exploited longer than on a seasonal basis, partly their contacts with the states on the other side of the steppe gives them autonomous contacts with foreign, independent states—such as no other rural population can enjoy. This process, which I consider to be one of partial and selective nomadization, may well be the locus where pastoral nomadism on a systematic scale had its origin,<sup>15</sup> but it provides in any case an insight into a wholly unique dimension that characterizes the region of Khana. The urban-rural pattern of interaction was so completely different from that of the other regions that its rural class left an indelible mark in the historical development of the Near East, in marked contrast with the rural classes of the southern alluvium or the northern rainfed plains. This entire region was firmly under the control of Mari (and of Terqa after the destruction of Mari) in the early second millennium. In the third millennium the situation was probably analogous, as may be assumed from the extraordinary significance of Mari in the texts of the royal archives of Ebla: Emar (by the big bend of the Euphrates) and Tuttul (at the mouth of the Balikh) may have controlled a portion of the steppe, but at most as far as the ranges of Palmyra and the Jebel Bishri, below which the control of Mari presumably extended already as far as the Orontes basin—making Mari a kingdom directly bordering Ebla.

Pattern C is found in the area of rainfed, undulating plains and low hills from the Orontes basin to the Khabur plains, bounded by the Jebel Ansariya and the Taurus. It is the least well known at present, and is proposed here somewhat hypothetically (with the expectation that the study of the texts of Ebla might provide substantive clarification, corroborated hopefully by any new texts which might come from the numerous and major excavations currently taking place in the Khabur plains).<sup>16</sup> I assume on the one hand a large rural population under the direct and close control of the state, somewhat as in zone A. But I am also assuming that this rural population had close links with the mountain-based, nonurban population of the Taurus, perhaps all the way up to the Caucasus (shown as zone D in fig. 2). They served as the suppliers of metals, stones, and timber to the great urban centers of the south—Ebla and the cities in the Khabur plains serving as the gateway for the rest of the ancient Near East. While Ebla and the cities in the Khabur plains belong to the same zone, it is interesting to note what seems to be a real lack of references in Ebla to the great urban centers of the upper Khabur (such as Chuera, Mozan, Leilan and possibly even Brak).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On this see Buccellati 1990b: 98–102.

<sup>16</sup> Besides Tell Brak, Tell Mozan has also begun to yield third-millennium tablets: they have been published in Milano 1991.

<sup>17</sup> This is hypothesized on the basis of the geographical horizon which can be reconstructed for geographical names mentioned in Ebla. Brak has a special position, being the southernmost of the great third-millennium cities in the Khabur plains, controlling the road that leads to the Sinjar

The northern cities were, to judge from the archeological evidence, on the same level of sophistication and urban development as Ebla, but were not, it seems, part of the commercial network utilized by Ebla. It is possible that both Ebla and the Khabur cities had independent access to the raw materials in the Anatolian plateau, and that they were, in this respect, competitors for the same supply centers in the north and the same markets to the south.

In the light of the above remarks about the different patterns of rural/urban interaction we may now better understand the relative absence of the Amorites at Ebla. If the Amorites were the rural class of the *ah Puruttim* that were in the process of reclaiming the steppe on a systematic basis, the kingdom administration of Ebla would have had no reason to deal with them directly, since its Mari contacts were maintained through diplomatic channels directly with the urban center of the *ah Puruttim* kingdom. There is no more reason for the Amorites to be prominently mentioned in the Ebla archives than there would be for a mention of Terqa—which we know existed at that time as an urban center of a certain size and with massive defensive walls, but which was undoubtedly no more than an important provincial city under the political control of the capital, Mari. The contacts between Ebla and Mari would presumably have been carried out along the Euphrates route, that is, the route which was secure because under the direct military, logistic, and administrative control of Mari, possibly already all the way from the mouth of Balikh to the mouth of the Khabur and further south. The situation might be similar to that of the king of Qatna who, in the Old Babylonian period, writes to the king of Mari about matters pertaining to Mari herdsmen interacting, all the way across the vast expanse of the steppe, with Qatna herdsmen.<sup>18</sup> As the crow flies, Qatna and Mari are somewhat closer than Ebla and Mari, but in terms of a direct and secure road along the Euphrates, Ebla is in fact much closer.

In line with the reconstruction proposed above, we may say that Ebla had a direct control over both agriculture *and* herding” in its territory, and left no room for the development of autonomous tendencies in its rural population. To the extent that the Amorites are a rural population with an independent base for economic growth and a concomitantly growing sense of socioethnic independence, there are no Amorites in Ebla. The Amorites in the steppe are just beyond the boundaries of Ebla’s territory,<sup>20</sup> and thus much closer to Ebla, in terms of

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passes. If Archi’s assumption (1984: 233, 240) is right, that Kakmium, east of the Tigris, was important as a station “along the commercial road which led to the Iranian plateau,” then it is possible that such a road would have gone north of Mari along the Khabur, and then across the lower limit of the northern plains, presumably controlled by Brak. Whether or not this portion of the route remained within the territory controlled by Mari, and thus skirted Brak and its territory, we do not know, but the first alternative seems more likely, since the Ebla horizon as we know it at present does not seem to include cities in the Khabur plains in general.

<sup>18</sup> See Buccellati 1990a: 240–41.

<sup>19</sup> See Archi 1980 and Milano 1984.

<sup>20</sup> The Mari hinterland reaches all the way to a point where the steppe meets the dry-farming region controlled by Ebla, somewhere between the Palmyrenean ranges and the river basins.

physical proximity, than their urban counterparts in Mari. But these same Amorites were actually very distant from Ebla in terms of diplomatic contacts, which were carried out at the level of palace-to-palace interaction. The Amorites were physically around the corner, but perceptually it was as if they did not exist, except for the few occasions when some chiefs of the incipient tribal groups (qualified as “kings” in the Ebla texts) appeared on a stray visit in the capital. It was, we may presume, in the interest of the Ebla kings to keep the independent herdsmen of the steppe away from their own rural classes, lest these too should develop an unwelcome sense of independence from the central Ebla government. It was just as much in the interest of the Mari kings to keep their subjects away for as long as they could from any foreign capital, lest they should add a dimension of political prestige to their already growing socioeconomic independence.

### *Significance for Semitic Linguistics*

I have summarized the overall thrust of my theory in a series of schematic charts and maps (figs. 3–6). These should be taken as no more than a graphic index to the argumentation, without any claim at precision in the quantification of the details: within the purview of the present study I have not yet undertaken a full tabulation of the data, which requires a considerable amount of research because of uncertainties in the analysis of third-millennium data and because of the bulk of the evidence in the case of the second-millennium data. Such tabulations will derive from further studies which my students and myself are currently devoting to the topic.<sup>21</sup> For the time being, these maps will serve a dual purpose. On the one hand they will help visualize a certain range of perceptions with regard to the data, with a degree of quantification which should for now simply be taken to reflect the order of magnitude that is applicable. The second purpose is to emphasize the direction which, I submit, study of the data should take: rather than assuming a dichotomy between east and west in the early period, we should envisage a greater Syro-Mesopotamian unity with finer internal differentiations.

One way to emphasize this point is by considering the following unconventional hypothesis. If exactly the same texts as those found in the royal archives of Ebla had been excavated in the Zab rather than the Orontes basin, less would have been made of the West Semitic, let alone biblical, connections. In other words, the geographical and archeological circumstances of the finds have, in my view, weighed more heavily on a linguistic interpretation of the data than the more

<sup>21</sup>The following doctoral dissertations are underway at UCLA: James H. Platt on Ebla graphemics (his work deals extensively with onomastics, particularly with regard to variant spellings of the same name); Joseph M. Pagan on Ebla Semitic onomastics; Mark A. Arrington on name-giving (Ebla, Old Akkadian, and Amorite); and Terrence Szink on Ebla non-onomastic Semitic. On these studies see my article “The Ebla Electronic Corpus: Onomastic Analysis” (below). I plan a fresh study on Amorite onomastics within the purview of my research on Khana, which will include an analysis of the new data not only from the third millennium (Ebla to Ur 111), but also from Mari, Šubat-Enlil, and Terqa.

properly linguistic reality reflected in the texts. In order to better understand the point I am trying to make it will be useful to visualize what I consider to be a diffused scholarly perception of the Semitic linguistic areas in the third millennium.

A modern perceptual map of such Semitic areas in the third millennium (fig. 3) would assume a basic twofold division between east and west. In this perspective, the boundary runs somewhere along the modern boundary between Syria and Iraq. The western area includes the steppe and/or the desert (generally, the difference between the two is not clearly articulated, particularly not in terms of ancient perceptions and modes of land utilization), and in some less-defined way the urban areas in the rainfed or irrigated zones. Mari is the major ancient point of reference on this great divide between east and west: it is considered an outpost of Mesopotamian civilization on the one hand, and on the other a major window onto the West Semitic west. When the texts of Ebla were first discovered it seemed natural that one should seek to fit them into this picture. They were found in the west (geographical considerations), and they represented a cultural unicum in terms of their archival setting (archeological considerations). Hence, two tenacious—and pugnacious—scholarly perceptions. First, Eblaite was immediately viewed as a separate language (it was found far in the west and it was embodied in an incredibly rich epigraphic documentation). Second, and consequent to the first point, the identification of its linguistic relationship to other languages became a major research priority—with an initial irresistible tendency to emphasize the links with (later) West Semitic languages, much at the expense of the (more readily apparent) links with Akkadian. The general scholarly perception as I represent it in figure 3 is heavily influenced by an undue projection into the past of two situations obtaining at a later point in time.<sup>22</sup>

The first of these later situations is the genuine linguistic distinction between East and West Semitic that obtained in the late second and then in the first millennium.<sup>23</sup> There is then a clear distinction between Standard and Neo-Babylonian or Neo-Assyrian attested primarily in the east (though the imperial expansion exports these dialects to the west), on the one hand, and on the other Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic, attested primarily in the west (though Aramaic spreads throughout the east and becomes the *lingua franca* throughout the Near East). This distinction, which is both linguistic and geographical (West Semitic spoken primarily in the west and East Semitic spoken primarily in the

<sup>22</sup> For a similar caution against projecting back in time the later distinction between Aramaic and Canaanite (both of which derived in fact from Amorite), see Liverani 1970: 19; and 1973: 107–8.

<sup>23</sup> In point of fact, the difference between East and West Semitic even in the later periods must also be viewed in a more-nuanced way than is usually the case. Akkadian in the first millennium was progressively becoming a cultural relic from the live linguistic organism that it had once been (something which, of course, has nothing to do with the size of the scribal documentation, that in fact increased during that period of time). In this respect, rather than speaking of East and West Semitic, we should speak of surviving third/second-millennium Semitic and new first-millennium Semitic. But such a topic is clearly beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

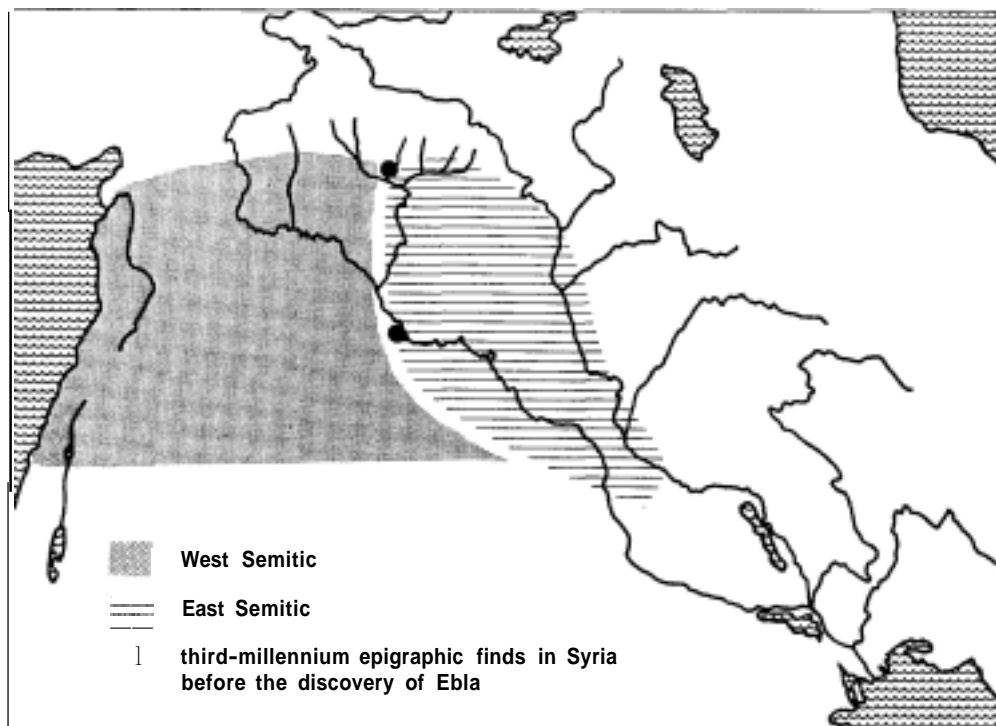


FIGURE 3. *Perceptual Map of East and West Semitic.*

east) is telescoped back to the third and early second millennium: Amorite is West Semitic spoken in the west and Akkadian is East Semitic spoken in the east.

The second situation telescoped back in time is the ethnolinguistic distinctiveness of sizable human groups living in the steppe and then in the desert from the late second millennium on. Appropriately, in this respect, the first kingdom which develops in the steppe proper was called *Amurru*. I have tried to show elsewhere how this kingdom developed not from an earlier political presence in the steppe, but rather as a complete political innovation resulting from the deurbanization of the Middle Euphrates and Lower Khabur in the second half of the second millennium.<sup>24</sup> And so, while the kingdom of Amurru of the Amarna age does in no way provide evidence for the existence of an earlier Amorite entity in the west, it has come instead to be perceived in just such a light: the faint remnant of an assumed strong, earlier West Semitic presence situated in the west. This perception was putatively confirmed by the continued presence in later periods of human groups in the steppe (and desert), from the Akhlamu and Arameans all the way down to the early Arabs.

What is the alternative that I wish to propose for the map we have been discussing? There are three basic elements to my answer. (1) We should not be unduly conditioned by the geographical or archeological setting of the corpus in

<sup>24</sup> Buccellati 1990a: 240–46.

assessing its linguistic affiliation: just because it is in the west, and separated by a considerable documentary gap from the south, the language of Ebla need not be automatically considered west Semitic. (2) The strong links with Akkadian ought to be assessed on the basis of a structural comparison, rather than in an ad hoc fashion.<sup>25</sup> (3) The acknowledged links with later West Semitic should be understood within the framework of the historical links with the Amorites, as brought out in the reconstruction presented here.

Amorite, being tied linguistically to the nomadizing rural classes of the *ah Purattim* and the steppe, was more conservative than its urban counterparts, and thus remained more archaic in its typological features. Of these urban counterparts, the earliest is Eblaite. Being the earliest in time, it is also more closely related to the typologically archaic Amorite—not because they are West Semitic, but because they are both archaic. The geographical dimension is pertinent in the following measure: at home in the rural enclaves of the *ah Purattim* but especially in the steppe, Amorite had its own distinctive area where it was presumably shielded from its urban counterparts. Yet Amorite-speaking individuals were perfectly at home in the settled urban and farming areas, where their language was perceived, presumably, more as a kindred socio-lect than as a foreign dialect. Both Amorite and its urban counterparts belong, in this sense, to a broader linguistic unity, which I wish to call here, for ease of reference, early North Semitic.<sup>26</sup> Its development through five successive stages is represented schematically in figure 4.

(1) The earliest stage can only be reconstructed on the basis of comparative criteria between Amorite and its urban counterparts. Amorite being the more archaic of the two, it would have retained closer links with “proto-North Semitic.”<sup>27</sup> (2) At the beginning of our documentation, about the mid-third millennium, early North Semitic is especially attested in its urban embodiment—Eblaite and Pre-Sargonic Akkadian;<sup>28</sup> urban Semitic in this second stage

<sup>25</sup> As is more and more the case, following especially the seminal studies of Gelb 1980 and 1981. A particularly significant contribution is Pennacchiotti 1981.

<sup>26</sup> It could also be called early Syro-Mesopotamian Semitic, taking Syro-Mesopotamia in the precise sense which I have defined in Buccellati 1990a: 229–31. Either term may appear to contradict the caveats I have discussed earlier about a geographical conditioning in our perception of linguistic reality. But this is not so. I have argued against an uncritical equation between the geographical provenience of the documentation with the geographical area where a language is spoken. In fact, as I will argue below, Amorite was *not* initially spoken at all in the West (i.e., the Syro-Palestinian west), and thus it is precisely on geographical grounds that it should not be called a western language.

<sup>27</sup> This point, which needs more research, is in contrast, for instance, with the position of Garbini 1981: 77, who considers Eblaite as the oldest Semitic language (or Semitic *tout court*) and Amorite as the innovative language.

<sup>28</sup> The difference between Pre-Sargonic and Sargonic Akkadian on the one hand, and the closer kinship between Pre-Sargonic Akkadian and Eblaite on the other, has been forcefully and convincingly argued by Gelb 1981; see also Westenholz 1988. For the archaic nature of Eblaite see also, e.g., Conti 1984 and Fronzaroli 1984. An intriguing, if highly tentative, hypothesis may be ventured as a footnote to Westenholz’s comments on the religious conception evidenced, in his view by Pre-Sargonic onomastics. If the Pre-Sargonic pantheon was structurally restricted in scope and gave maximum prominence to a double (masculine/feminine) hypostasis of the divine,



		early North Semitic	
		urban	rural
3000	(1)	[not attested]	[not attested]
2600	(2)	Pre-Sargonic, Eblaite	(archaic Amorite)
2350	(3)	Sargonic Ur III Akkadian	Old Amorite
2000	(4)	Old Babylonian, Old Assyrian	classical Amorite
1600			

FIGURE 4. *Developmental Stages of Early North Semitic.*

corresponds to what Gelb has so eloquently described as the language of the Kish civilization.<sup>29</sup> We know from a few references that Amorite existed, and we can assume that its structure was close to what we know about it from later evidence, or if anything only more archaic. (3) During the Sargonic period, urban

a hypostasis later abandoned as being too lofty and distant from the needs of the people; if Amorite society was more conservative in its religious tradition as it was in its language, and thus more apt to retain early beliefs which it originally shared with its counterpart urban society; and if the patriarchal tradition of the Bible reflects certain survivals of early Amorite traditions—could there be some degree of continuity from the earliest (Pre-Sargonic) to the later Semitic conception of the divine? Aware as I am of the speculative and fragile nature of these wide-ranging connections, and aware as I am in particular of current views about a late date for both the patriarchal tradition and the development of Israelite monotheism, I still do not consider this hypothesis as totally fanciful, and for all the expressed caveats I do not advance it lightly. But any possible merit of such a line of reasoning can only be gauged from a much fuller and more nuanced argumentation than would ever be possible here.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Gelb 1981.

North Semitic undergoes a major development, largely affected, no doubt, by the expansionist policy of the kings of Akkad, which rested on strongly centralized administrative policies. (4) Somewhere between the collapse of the Akkadian "empire," the Guti invasion, the temporary pan-Mesopotamian resurgence of the Ur III dynasty, and the political climax of the Amorites in the early part of the second millennium, profound transformations take place in the development of urban Semitic, which emerges essentially as Old Babylonian.<sup>30</sup> Evidence for Amorite is at its fullest for this same period: unlike its urban counterpart, this rural survival of early North Semitic presumably had hardly any stimulus toward change, and thus had retained a strongly archaic and conservative linguistic structure. (5) The even-greater transformations of the second millennium bring about a more-profound upheaval in the linguistic as well as sociopolitical map of southwestern Asia<sup>31</sup>—and marks effectively the end of the development of North Semitic. For the first time we have a true split between East Semitic (Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian) and West Semitic. The latter is in part an heir to Amorite, whose speakers had brought their political weight to bear more and more on the western regions, as a result of the effective deurbanization of the Middle Euphrates.

By way of conclusion, I provide two schematic maps which summarize the data pertaining to Semitic onomastic documentation in the third and early second millennium. The first map (fig. 5) shows the relative proportion of Amorite vs. non-Amorite Semitic names in Syro-Mesopotamia in the third millennium, down to and including the third dynasty of Ur (the reader is again reminded that the pie charts are only intended to give an approximation of relative proportions, and not an accurate quantitative valuation of percentages). For the documentation in the south only those names are given that either are qualified as MAR.TU or can be analyzed linguistically as Amorite. Also shown are the major findspots of epigraphic finds in the north during the same period. The only sizable Amorite presence is found in the Sumerian texts of the Ur III dynasty, particularly those from Puzriš-Dagan. The most-noticeable gap in the documentation pertains to Mari, from where we have relatively few texts, and of a type which is not as apt to yield onomastic information as the letters and administrative texts of the Old Babylonian period. Since the Ur III texts suggest a provenience for the Amorites from precisely the region of Mari, and since the situation found in the Old Babylonian period does not seem to presuppose a major break in historical development, it seems logical to presuppose that third-millennium Mari may have already exhibited a situation similar to that of the early second millennium—to presuppose, in other words, the presence of a local rural population with an Amorite linguistic affiliation. Be that as it may, we have otherwise positive evidence for the fact that Amorite is barely to be found elsewhere, and clearly not

<sup>30</sup> The typological links between Eblaite and Old Assyrian, for which see especially Parpola 1988, fit nicely into this picture, in the measure in which peripheral areas (in this case the Orontes and the Zab basins) tend to remain linked typologically (in their retention of archaic traits) in spite of their geographical distance.

<sup>31</sup> I have dealt with these and the following issues in Buccellati 1990a.

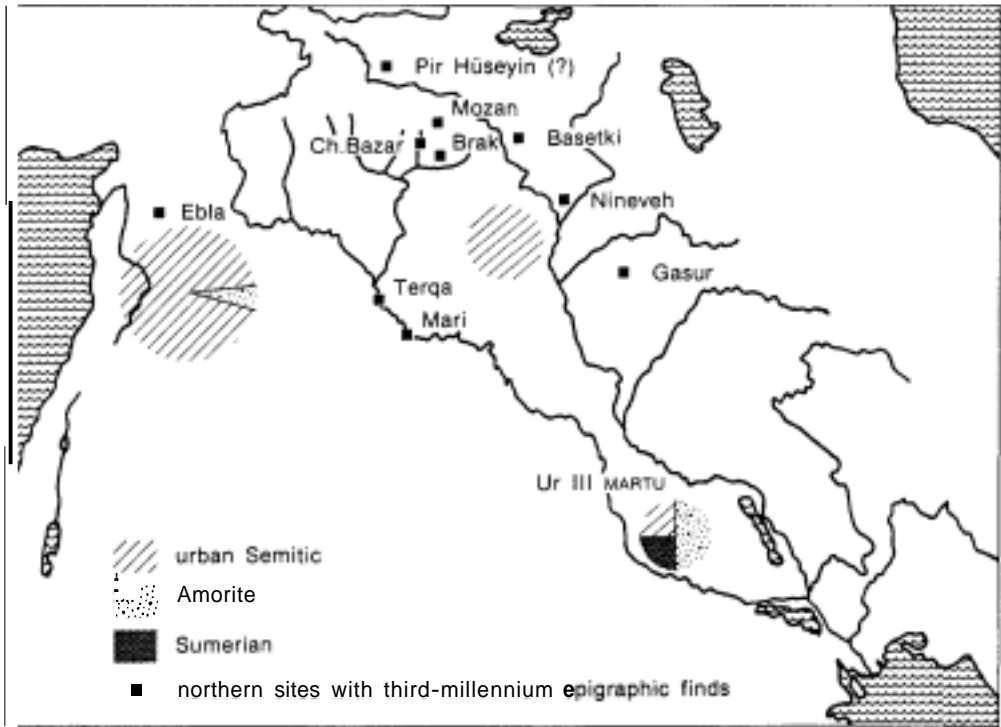


FIGURE 5. *Distribution of Semitic PNs in the Third Millennium (plus Sumerian names for individuals qualified as MAR.TU).*

*Note: Graphic rendering of relative proportions is only indicative of order of magnitude and does not reflect actual percentages.*

in the western region of Ebla. Also pertinent in this respect is the well-known fact that western toponomastics, indicative of the earliest linguistic presence in the area, is not Semitic.<sup>32</sup>

The situation in the Old Babylonian period (fig. 6) is so completely altered that this is often referred to as the *Amorite* period. There is a clear prevalence of Amorite names in Mari, the Khabur, and the west, and a strong presence, if not a majority, in the south. There are also indications that Amorite influence wanes, in onomastics, during the course of the Old Babylonian period. The important point is that an overlay of the maps shows a situation of change: the Amorite presence in the west was not there in the mid-third millennium, and came into being only between the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennium. This ties in well with the notion proposed above about a spread of the agro-pastoralists of the *ah Puruttim* from the Middle Euphrates to the neighboring regions, as a result of the process of nomadization and crystallization of ethnic consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> See especially Gelb 1961 and Archi 1984: 228.

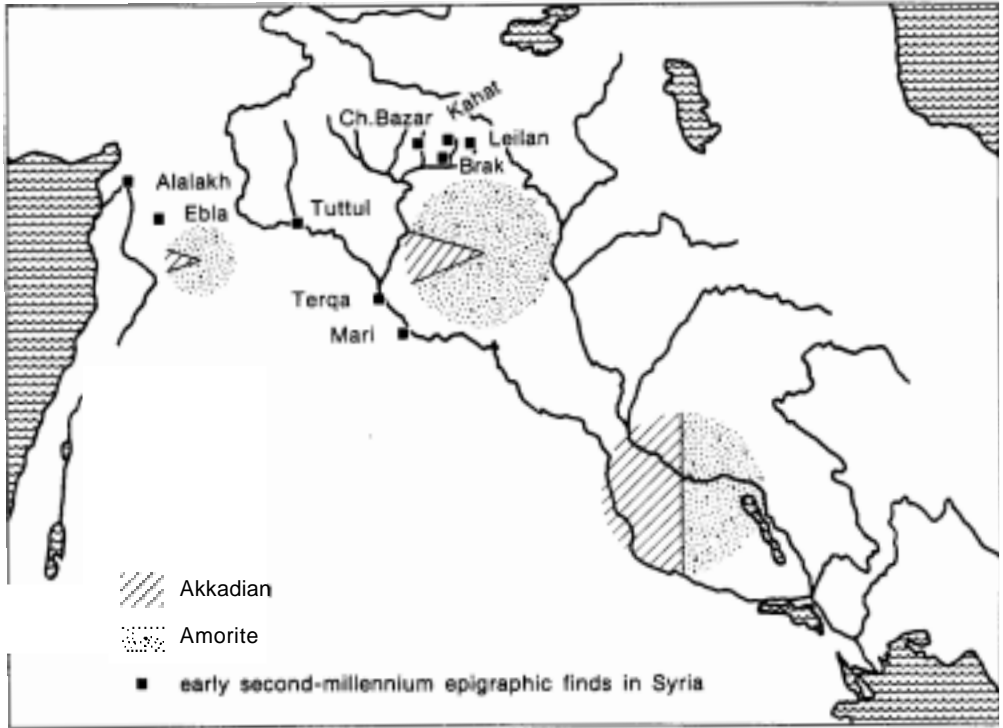


FIGURE 6. *Distribution of Semitic PNs in the Early Second Millennium.*

*Note: Graphic rendering of relative proportions is only indicative of order of magnitude and does not reject actual percentages.*

While predictably controversial in its central thrust, in need of further elaboration on several points of detail, and clearly open to revisions with regard to the nature of the argumentation and the specifics of the documentation—the broad reconstruction I have proposed here will hopefully serve as a catalyst in promoting a fresh perspective on the historical and linguistic setting of both Ebla and the Amorites, and thereby of ancient Syro-Mesopotamia as a whole. Venturing as scholars in the wondrous maze of the Ebla archives, we may sympathize with those first few Amorites who were physically venturing in the maze of this sophisticated ancient city. We come from beyond the borders not only of space and time, but also of established mindsets and perceptual world views. I hope that we may be as successful in bringing to bear our scholarly analysis on the Ebla evidence as the ancient Amorites were in eventually clamping their indelible sociopolitical imprint on it!

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