The Chalcolithic Period
Mesopotamia

Part II: The Halafian and Ubaid Cultures
Chronology

Figure 3.14 Interdigitation and succession of prehistoric and protohistoric Mesopotamian cultures, showing descent of Sumerian Culture from Samarra through Ubaib. Uruk is a period named from the city.
Halafian (~7500-6300 BP)

- Named after Tell Halaf (Khabur Valley, Syria)
- Type site is Tell Arpachiya (burnt building)
- Late Neolithic or Early Chalcolithic?
- Well-known for distinctive finely painted pottery
- Rapid spread east and south of small farming communities over huge area across Syria, northern Iraq, southern Turkey
- Sites: Arpachiyah, Tell Sabi Abyad, Yarim Tepe, Tepe Gawra, Tell Halaf
Halafian Sites

• Identified by four features:
  – Pottery (plain and fine wares)
    • Finely painted geometric and animal motifs
  – Architecture
    • Mudbrick *tholoi* (round, domed structures) and rectangular dromos, cobble streets
  – Food Complex
    • Dry-farming agricultural villages and herding
  – Egalitarian Exchange Network
    • Homogenous villages (1-2 ha) surrounding *Central Places* (Arpachiyah and Tell Brak)
    • Local communities “became” Halaf
Halafian Pottery

Distinct, elaborate, arguably finest in NE

Finely painted in black, brown, red on buff background

Finest monochrome from specialised workshop at Arpachiyah
Halafian Pottery
Halafian Art

Amulets
Figurines
Stamp seals – mark onset of personal property?
Halafian Architecture

Reconstruction and plan of a ‘tholos’ at Arpachiyah. Halaf culture, Middle Chalcolithic period.

Halafian and related sites reveal circular plans, with ‘tholos’ houses alongside rectangular architecture as seen in these plans of Halaf-related buildings in Level 4 at Tell Sabi Abyad (a), and Level 3 at Yarim Tepe (b). Reconstructed walls are hatched.

Figure 3.10: Tholoi (‘roundhouses’) in plan at Girkhalhahan
Tell Sabi Abiyad

• Local development  
  Neolithic to Halaf
• Fine Ware (local) & 
  DFBW (import)
• “Burnt Village”
• Multi-roomed 
  houses
• Special 
  purpose rooms
The Ubaid Culture of Mesopotamia

The late-6th through 5th Millennium
(~7500/7000-5800 BP
~5500-4000 BC)
Mesopotamia – Major Ubaid Sites

- Tell al-’Oeulli
- Tell Ubaid
- Tell Abada
- Susa
- Eridu
- Ur
- Tepe Gawra
- Arpachiyah
The Ubaid Period

• Follows Samarran, coincides with latter part of Halafian
• First identified by Woolley in 1923-24 by pottery
• Characterised by:
  – Farming villages (irrigation) and herders (?)
  – Appearance of temples
  – Distinctive and delicate painted pottery (but more austere than Halafian)
• Six chronological phases identified by pottery differences
Site Locations and Settlement Patterns

• Earliest substantial villages of **southern** Mesopotamia alluvial plains

• Spread north and west along Tigris and Euphrates rivers replacing Halafians – exchange networks?

• Residential architecture, temples, storage buildings, courtyards – combination of private and public space
Site Structure

Tell Abada village plan

Figure 3.23 Plan of the Level II settlement at Tell Abada showing large houses rightly nucleated (early Ubaid 3)

Source: Jasim 1985, pt 2: fig. 13.
Tell Ouelli

- Ubaid 0
- Earliest known village settlement
- Architectural similarities to Hassunan and Samarran
Domestic Architecture

- Dense architecture – abutting houses with multiple rebuilding episodes
- Mudbrick houses of variable sizes (100-600 m²)
- Tripartite and T-shaped plan – long central room with smaller chambers off sides
- Open courtyards, paved streets, alleys, freestanding storage structures
- Tell Madhhur – fire preserved food-processing equipment (ceramic serving and cooking vessels, spindle whorls, loom weights, bone awls, clay tools)
- Tell Abada – 8 houses all with same artefact assemblages – no major resource differences between households
T-Shaped Houses

Kheit Qasim III T-Shaped house

Tell Madhhur T-shaped house
Architectural Features

Late Ubaid architecture from Ur

Ubaid midden from Ur
Reconstructed Ubaid House

- One-storey with flat roof (activity area)
- Larger than Neolithic houses
- Central hallway with attached rooms
- Rooms with features for specialised activities (sleeping, cooking, reception)
  - Based on debris type, access, flooring
Ubaid Pottery

- Typical pottery is fine, pale brown or greenish in colour, and often with dark black or brown paint

- Forms:
  - Beakers
  - Bowls with wide flaring rims or incurved sides
Ubaid Pottery

- Coarse ware: reddish brown cooking pots with lug handles, functional, no decoration (local)
- Fine ware: origin south Mesopotamia (items of exchange)
- Repaired (drilled, bound)
Economy

• Irrigation farmers and herders (staples)
  – Wheat, barley, flax, lentils, cattle, pigs, sheep/goat (Iran) – concentrated around water resources

• Nomadism (herding sites to north where drier?)

• Clay and bitumen resources, copper – focus on local resources (thus, differed a lot by region)

• Trade and Exchange
  – Massive scale – major economic feature
  – Sustained large villages and led to inequality and social stratification – Complexity
  – Resource deficiencies (except clay) stimulus for expansion north (stone, metal) and south (into Arabia for fish and pearls)

• Tribute economy
  – Beyond subsistence to construct temples, stock storerooms, support craftsmen, import goods – focus on generating surplus
Other Technologies

Clay Imitations

Weaving, pottery manufacture, lithics, food)
Ownership of Property, Elites, and the Emergence of Administration

Clay tokens – commodities or counters?

Stamp seals decorated with animals and geometric designs – mark property?
Ubaid Art

Figurines usually female, sometime with child
Lizard heads – protruding eyes
Decorated – paint, tattoos, jewellery
Ideology and Images of Power

• Way of conceptualising the world and one’s place in it

• Tangible evidence:
  – Monumental architecture: 1) temples and ziggurats, 2) palaces, 3) city walls
  – Massive scale and elaboration exceeding functional requirements – commemorative

• Religion
  – Public places of worship and dedication serve to legitimise inequality
Non-Domestic Architecture:
The Appearance of Temples

3.3 Temple from Eridu (after Safar et al. 1981:fig. 39, Temple VII)

4.9 The high platform at Susa (after Stève and Gasche 1971:plan 2)
Tepe Gawra
• Ritual goods (fine pottery and seals) and household goods (spindle whorls, grinders, clay mullers)
• Caretaker “priest”
Tepe Gawra

3 tripartite buildings facing open courtyard
Graves
Social stratification
Eridu

- Early Ubaid
- Proto-urban
- First temples
  - 10 temple phases
  - Earliest simple mudbrick shrine
  - 10th phase – tripartite plan with rooms flanking central corridor on large platform
- Massive cemetery
  - 1000 graves
  - 200 excavated
  - Pottery, clay tool, figurines
Mortuary Practices

- Cemeteries – mostly adults and children, grave goods common – differences in grave goods between individuals, disappears Late Ubaid (empty buildings)
- Regional differences in cemeteries
- Eridu cemetery
  - Extended single interments
  - Grave goods – finely painted pottery (bowls), baked clay figurines
- Means of keeping community ties, land rights, inheritance – focus on the community

Burials represent *idealised* social relations and maintain ideologies
Ubaid Society – Evidence for Economic & Social Differentiation

• Distinctions between houses and temples
• Tell Abada
  – Major differences in artefacts between houses
• Susa (Late Ubaid, 10 ha)
  – 10 m tall platform covering 5000 m², mosaic bands
  – Temple, storerooms, residence of priest atop
  – Nearby cemetery
  – Seals and sealings – simple and complex, differential economic control, ownership
• Temple run economy?
Ubaid Society – Evidence for Economic & Social Differentiation

• Tribute economy
  – Mobilize tribute from producer to elite (persuasion) to fund political institutions, sponsor long-distance trade expeditions, acquire exotic goods and prestige, gifts to win supporters
  – Persuasion accomplished through religion – honouring deity