

Early Chalcolithic in Mesopotamia: the Ubaid period

Topic 3: Localized economies and interregional interactions

Local, Regional, or Pan-regional?

- Early attempts to produce cross-regional chronological comparisons also led to notion of pan-regional Ubaid phenomenon
 - subsequent comparison to ‘Uruk expansion’
- Broadening of archaeological horizons through new research demonstrates real differences among regions
 - eastern coast of Arabian peninsula
 - Zagros mountain valleys of Iran
 - Northern Iraq and Syria
 - Southeastern Anatolia
- Is Ubaid an overarching ‘culture’? or a series of local societies with some similarities? or something else?

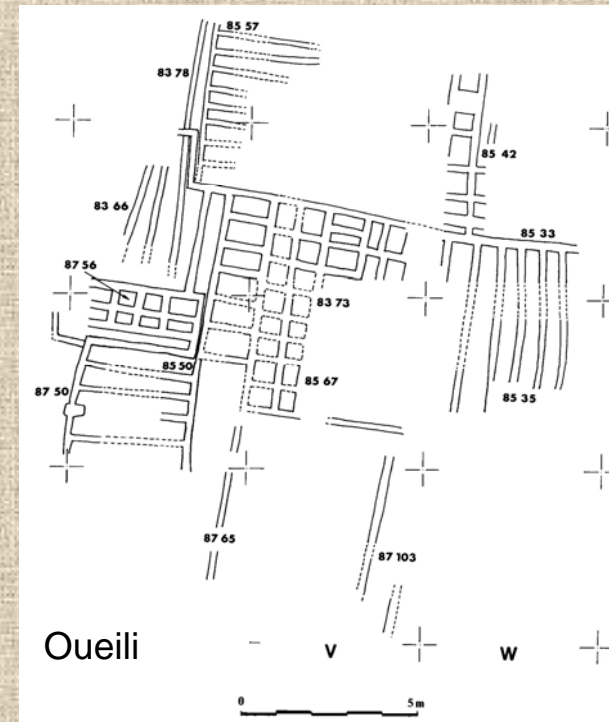
Local economies

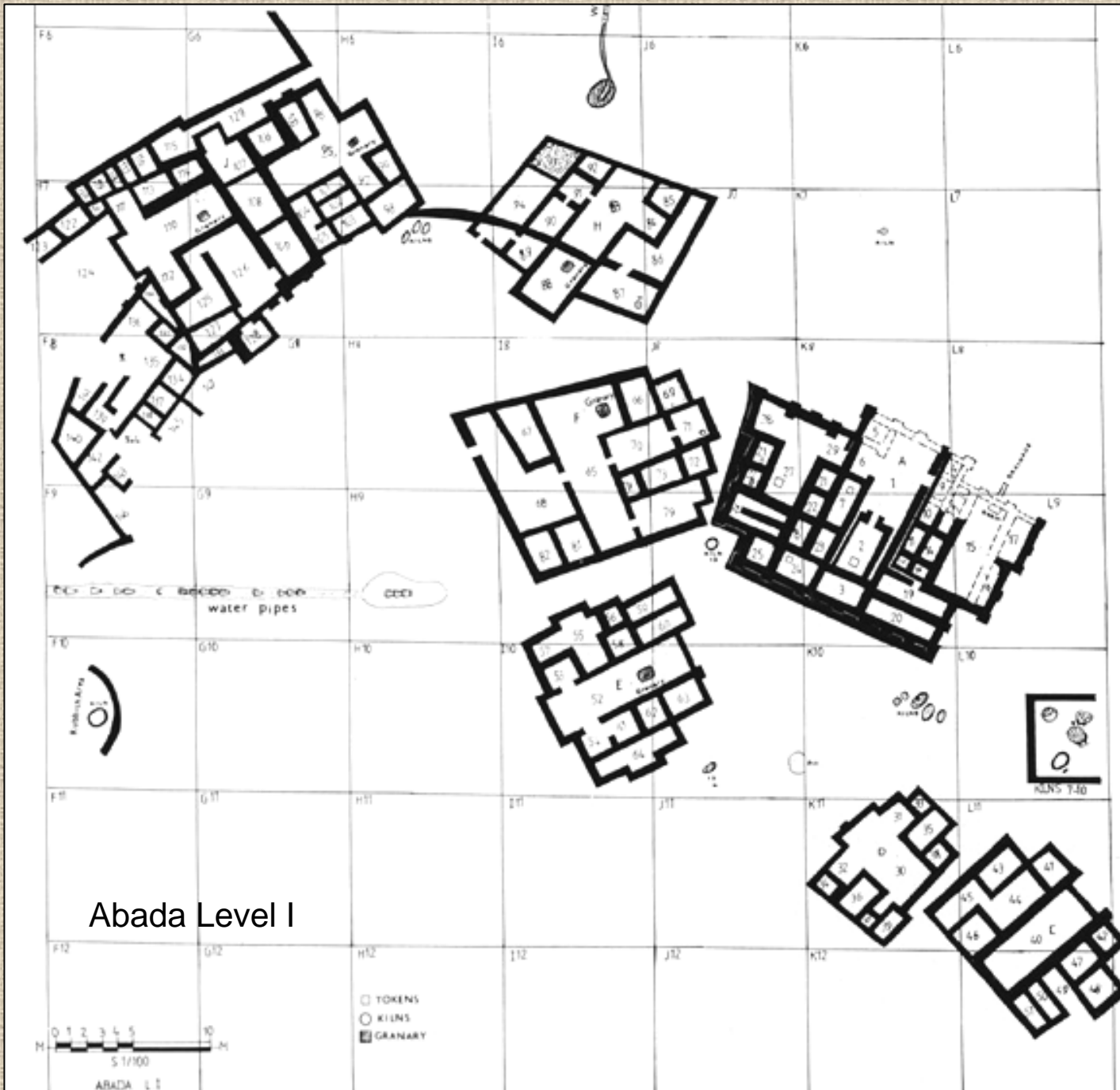
- Virtually all Ubaid contexts characterized by use of locally available resources
 - southernmost Mesopotamia: cattle, pig, fish; dates, sedge tubers, wheat and barley; reeds, poplar, tamarisk
 - further north and in southwestern Iran: mostly sheep and goat, some cattle; hunting of gazelle and equids; wheat and barley; tamarisk, almond, poplar
 - along Gulf coast, fish, shellfish, gazelle, equids; little farming or herding
- Use of hard-fired clay in southern alluvial lowlands as substitute for stone
 - ceramic sickles, mullers, and axes



Local economies

- Similar kinds of tools and other items used in most places
 - sickles, hoes, adzes
 - grinding tools
 - spindle whorls, awls, weights (loom, net)
 - pottery
- Importance of storage – buildings, other facilities (see Abada)
- Implies similar ways of life





Abada Level I

Imported items

- Indicate interactions with other communities
 - Small quantities of semi-precious stones at Gawra
 - Copper artifacts in Susa Necropole
 - Small quantities of obsidian
 - Bitumen, for example at Kosak Shomali
 - Ubaid painted pottery to sites along Gulf
- But overall limited quantities and small range of materials or products
- Reinforces idea of a predominantly locally oriented way of life

How to explain similarities across wide geographical areas?

- Acculturation: societies outside southern Mesopotamia took over Ubaid features once introduced to them
 - implies there was something better or preferable about them
 - Nissen, for example, suggests the expediency of pottery production using a tournette
- Interaction spheres: based on model developed by Caldwell for the North American Hopewell
 - broad geographic interaction among elites, who shared symbols, ideology and their material manifestations
 - overlay otherwise local ways of life
- Practices: rather than looking solely at finished products, need to examine how things were produced, how used
 - different kinds of similarities mean different things

A case in point: the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula

Two sites in particular newly (re-) discovered on the eastern coast (c.1 ha)



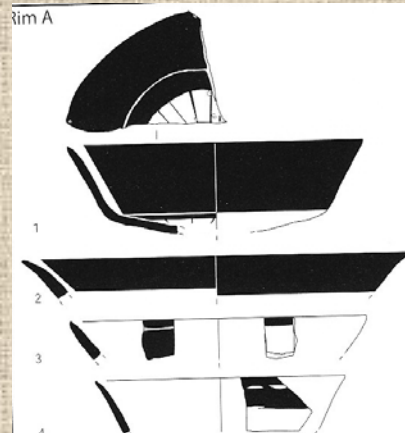
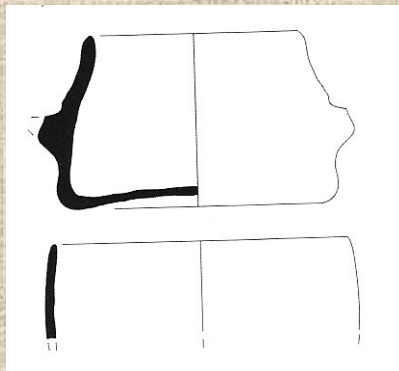
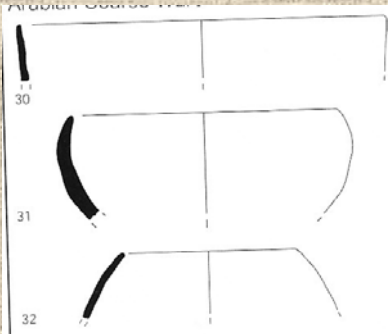
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- mostly dates to Ubaid 2/3, with some possible Ubaid 4 occupation/use at Dosariyah (and Abu Khamis)

- also local pottery: “Arabian coarse ware”



Sites on the Arabian coast

- At H3 substantial architecture; none found at Dosariyah
- first phase of use at H3 had only firepits: probable campsite
- later phases have cellular stone buildings with small chambers
- rooms show frequent temporary abandonments and rebuilding
- probably mixture of use for animals, for living, craft production and storage

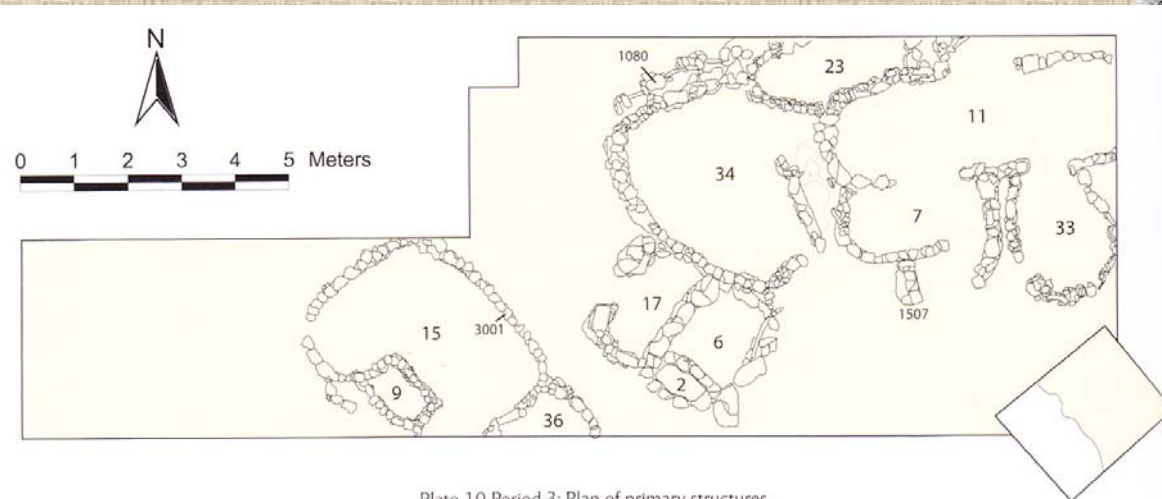
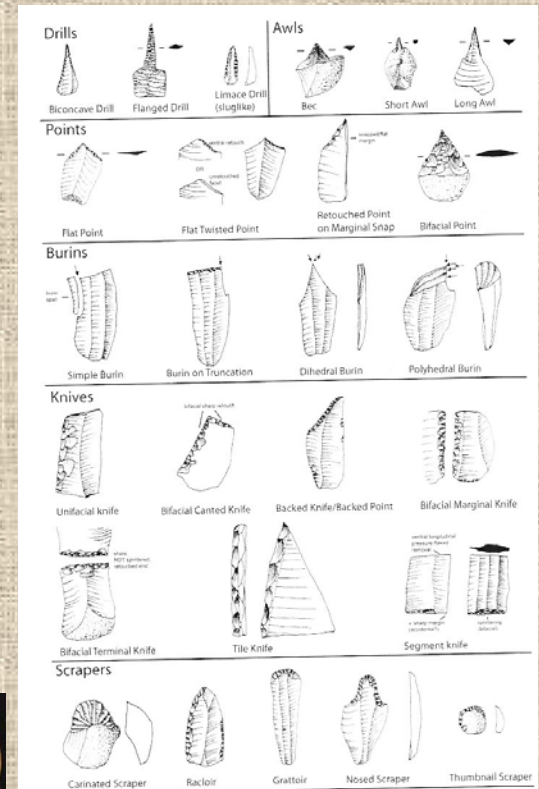
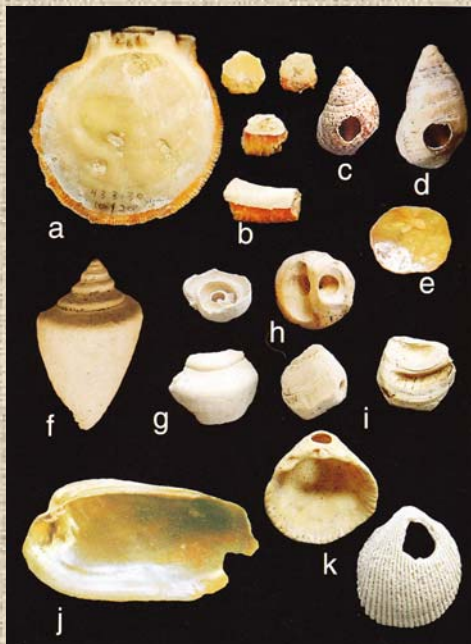


Plate 10 Period 3: Plan of primary structures.

Sites on the Arabian coast

- Craft production includes shell jewelry (beads, pendants), chipped stone tools, thread, use of bitumen
- Bitumen with reed impressions and barnacles, implying use on boats
- Subsistence: fish, shellfish; sheep/goat and cattle herded; gazelle and hare hunted; small quantities of cereals, dates grown



Sites on the Arabian coast: Interpretation

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- A. Masry proposed reciprocal contacts between mobile groups in Mesopotamia and Gulf region
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- J. Oates: Mesopotamian material along Gulf coast the debris of Mesopotamian seafarers; Ubaid pottery only there because of contents that seafarers had brought with them for the journey
 - but hard to explain quantities of Ubaid pottery, presence along Lower Gulf and some indications of imitation of Ubaid pottery by local communities
- R. Carter & H. Crawford: Ubaid pottery used in gift exchange and feasting
 - Ubaid pottery used with "Neolithic" communities; mostly on coast but also found up to 60-70 km inland
 - high proportion of painted Ubaid pottery (c. 70%) implies that it was high status commodity
 - possession of this pottery implied prestige, status, power
 - heavily oriented toward open forms (78% of assemblage at H3) suggests concern with food presentation and hence probably feasting
- Note that little is said about the role of the local coarse wares

Ubaid summary

- Regional differences more important than previously accounted for
- Overarching 'phenomenon' also needs to be explained
 - shared basic ways of life
 - local AND interregional identities: public and private ?
 - how did similarities come about ?
- Importance of practices rather than just outward similarities
- Cannot necessarily assume the preeminence or priority of southern Mesopotamia
 - how differently would we look at the 6th-5th millennia if research history were different ?