

The Mountain at the Core:
The Geo-political Role of the Jebel Bishri
in Early Historic Times

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in the Prehistoric through Historical Periods*
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ABSTRACT

1 Physical geography and modern ethnography

Unassuming though it is in terms of altitude or other geographical features, the Jebel Bishri is central to the historical development of ancient Syro-Mesopotamia. The first part of the talk will highlight those features that made it particularly important, especially the springs that dot it and the high level of the water table. Also useful for an understanding of ancient patterns is the land use on the part of contemporary shepherds.

2 Perceptual geography

It is not so much the physical dimensions that make the Bishri a mountain, but rather the way its perception is registered within the steppe landscape. That is the point of my title: The Mountain at the Core. While generally the steppe is viewed as marginal to the river valleys, I argue that from the mid third millennium the steppe became a macro-region in its own right. The Bishri is at the core of this macro-region – not only in a cartographic sense but especially because of the role it played in defining the landscape.

3 Prehistoric human groups

While the macro-regional perception developed only from the mid third millennium, human confrontation with the Bishri and its steppe began in prehistoric times. Some of the traits of this early occupation will be mentioned in function of a better understating of the properly *tribal* development which comes later. In other words, I will argue in favor of what I consider an all important distinction between

“a-urban” and “para-urban” villages on the one hand, and nomadic nuclei and tribes on the other.

4 The origin of ethnicity in early historic times

The “domestication” of the steppe is what led to the loss of “a-urban” villages in the steppe and the development in its stead of a macro-regional tribal organization. It was ushered in by a population known by the ethnic term “Amorites”: they properly unified the whole region and managed to exploit to their great advantage what were seemingly meager economic resources. Again the Bishri is at the core of this development as attested *inter alia* by the Amorite toponomastics (*Basar, Tadmor, Diddi, Emori*) and onomastics.

5 The origin of the tribe as a political organism

Thus in my view the tribe, in ancient Syro-Mesopotamia, is not simply a quantitatively larger aggregate of nomads. It is a well defined, and very original, structural whole, which emerges as the political counterpart to the territorial state from the river valleys. The talk will conclude with a description of this new reality, as I reconstruct it from the cuneiform textual evidence, with the support of archaeology, ethnography and geography.