



# Pigs and the pastoral bias: The other animal economy in northern Mesopotamia (3000–2000 BCE)



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## ABSTRACT

Discussion of the animal economy in Mesopotamia has been subject to a persistent, pastoral bias. Most general treatments assume that the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3000–2000 BCE) animal economy was dominated by the herding of sheep and goats. An examination of the abundant written evidence would support such a contention. Zooarchaeological evidence from northern Mesopotamia, however, clearly demonstrates that pigs played a major role in the diet, despite their virtual absence in the written record. In this paper, we attempt to lay bare and correct for the pastoral bias by reviewing the relatively meager written evidence for pig husbandry and by examining the zooarchaeological evidence for pigs from two angles. First, we use relative abundance data from sites across northern Mesopotamia to demonstrate the ubiquity of pigs and to identify regional- and site-level patterning in pig consumption. Second, we use a series of proxy techniques to reconstruct pig husbandry practices at three sites: Tell 'Atij, Tell al-Raqa'i, and Tell Leilan. Ultimately, we argue that this "other" animal economy emerged to fill a niche opened up by the twin processes of urbanization and institutional expansion. For households struggling to deal with the impacts of these wide-ranging transformations, pigs offered an alternative means of subsistence and perhaps a way of maintaining some degree of autonomy.

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"The food of the north tastes too much of the fat of the pig"  
[D. H. Lawrence, "The Food of the North"]

## 1. Introduction

During the Early Bronze Age (c. 3000–2000 BCE), the people of northern Mesopotamia ate a lot of pork. This basic dietary fact is amply demonstrated by the available zooarchaeological evidence, but it has been obscured by a persistent, pastoral bias – that is, by a largely unquestioned assumption that the animal economy was dominated by the herding of sheep and goats. We argue that this pastoral bias, inherited from the ancient written record and passed down in the academic literature, has produced an unbalanced and inaccurate depiction of the animal economy.

In this paper, we attempt to lay bare and correct for the pastoral bias by examining the zooarchaeological evidence for pigs in

northern Mesopotamia from two angles: (1) we use relative abundance data to demonstrate the ubiquity of pigs and to identify regional- and site-level patterns of pig consumption; and (2) we use a series of proxy techniques to shed light on pig husbandry practices at three Early Bronze Age sites (Tell 'Atij, Tell al-Raqa'i, and Tell Leilan). We suggest that the raising of pigs took place primarily on the household level, largely beyond institutional oversight (although, as we show, some institutions did raise pigs), and provided households with a means of adapting to and coping with the changes wrought by urbanization, institutional expansion, and a rapidly evolving political economy.

## 2. Northern Mesopotamia during the Early Bronze Age

Northern Mesopotamia stretches from the foothills of north-eastern Iraq westward across the plains of northern Syria and up into the hills of southeastern Turkey (Fig. 1). The region is crosscut by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as a series of tributaries, including the Balikh, the Khabor, the Upper Zab, and the Lower Zab. In the 3rd millennium BC, park and riparian woodlands covered much of the region, with steppic grasslands persisting toward the south (Deckers and Pessin, 2010; Deckers and Riehl, 2007).

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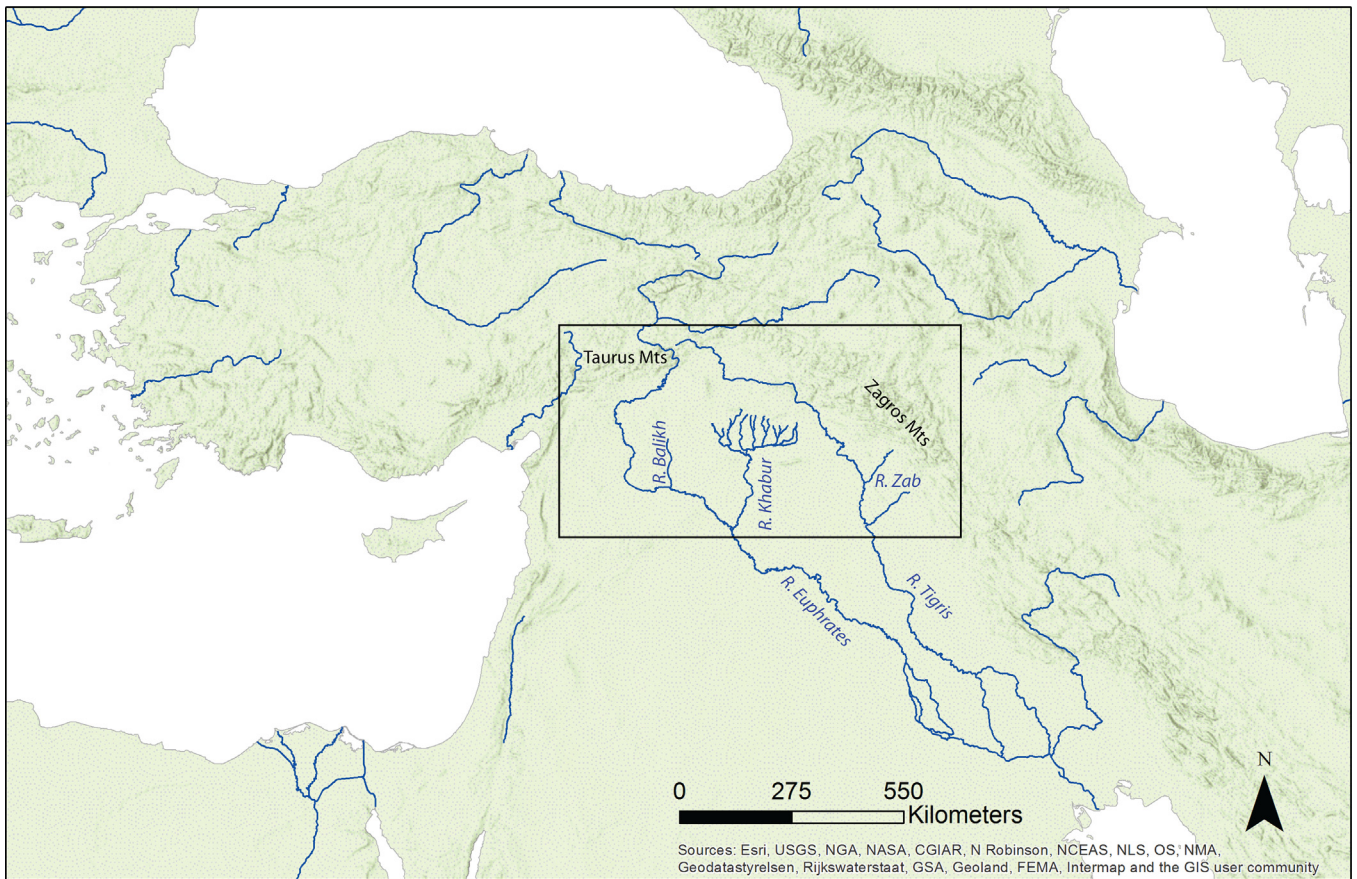


Fig. 1. Map of northern Mesopotamia.

The early settlement history of northern Mesopotamia includes two phases of urbanization, one during the Late Chalcolithic period and a second during the Early Bronze Age (see e.g., Lawrence and Wilkinson, 2015; Ur, 2010) (For chronology, see

Fig. 2). The first phase of urbanization is only partially understood, but it appears to have involved rapid settlement expansion at a select number of sites, some degree of economic specialization and centralization, and a regional-scale reshuffling of

Date BC	Mesopotamia	Jazireh/Khabur	Upper Euphrates/Anatolia	Tell Leilan	Northern Mesopotamia	Southern Mesopotamia
2000	Middle Bronze Age	OJZ 1	MB I	I	Old Assyrian	Old Babylonian
		EJZ 5	EB/MB Transition	IIc	Post-Akkadian	Ur III
2500	Early Bronze Age	EJZ 4	EB IVB EB IVA	IIb	Akkadian	Akkadian
		EJZ 3	EB III	IIa	Ninevite V	Early Dynastic
		EJZ 2		IIIc		
		EJZ 1	EB II	IIIb		
3000	Late Chalcolithic	EJZ 0	EB I	IIIa	Post-Uruk	Jemdet Nasr
		LC	LC	IV	Uruk	Uruk

Fig. 2. Chronology for northern Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium.

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