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THE FAIVISSA F.5238 IN THE SACRED AREA OF ISHTAR AND THE TRANSITION FROM THE MIDDLE BRONZE I TO THE MIDDLE BRONZE II AT EBLA

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1. Introduction

In the last years the excavations directed by Paolo Matthiae at Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, were concentrated in Area P, in the northern Lower Town\(^1\), where a large religious compound has been brought to light (fig. 1). The Sacred Area, comprising a long in ant\(\)is temple (P2) and a high terrace named Monument P3, was dedicated to the great Syrian goddess Ishtar\(^2\). The religious buildings were placed on the sides of the rectangular temenos (150 \(\times\) 100 m), while between them there was a large square, called Square of the Cisterns, where several cultic installations have been discovered. In the centre of this square, approximately at the intersection of the middle axes of Monument P3 and Temple P2, a rock-cut cistern has been discovered filled with archaeological materials resulting from ritual activities. Discarded temple fittings, food offerings, almost 550 ceramic vessels, and votive objects, were thrown or deposited in this cistern. The faivissa was opened and ritually filled three times during the central phase of the Old Syrian period. Three different layers have been, in fact, distinguished in the filling, rich in archaeological materials belonging to a coherent horizon. A gradual transformation of the material culture may be recognized, illustrating the cultural change which occurred during the utilization of the votive cistern. On the basis of the inner stratigraphy of the faivissa, it is hence possible to identify the significant elements which mark the transition from MB I to MB II at Ebla, filling a gap in the sequence of the main archaeological contexts of the site.

Area P South in the Middle Bronze Age

In the Sacred Area, excavations have reached the virgin soil (fig. 2). The lowest strata, lying directly over the rock, are those of Building P4


Fig. 1. Aerial view of the Sacred Area of Ishtar from the north-east (November 1992). The location of F.5238 is shown by the arrow.
dating from EB IVA³, the structures of which were levelled at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, when the Sacred Area was entirely paved with a layer of beaten earth⁴. The religious function of the area goes back to the Early Bronze Age, as it is indicated by the findings from Building P4, a multi-functional complex depending on a public institution, probably a temple⁵. The religious destination of the area in EB IV is confirmed by a little EB IVB shrine, discovered in between the foundation walls of Temple P2⁶. This shrine is of the broad-room type, and finds several comparisons in Syria-Palestine at Byblos⁷ and Megiddo⁸. Its walls are made of basalt stones, lined in a single row⁹. It is not possible to trace a comprehensive sketch of the Sacred Area in the EB IVB, since the building operations which occurred at the beginning of the MBA obliterated the earlier remains. In stratum 3d, dating from MB IA, the centre of the open cult area was occupied by a small precinct, which enclosed a large cistern and was surrounded by a series of votive pits and burials. Of particular interest are some dogs and sheep burials, presumably resulting from sacrifices¹⁰.

In the following initial MB IB phase (stratum 3c), the cultic practices were focused on a rock-hewn cistern (F.5327), excavated almost at the centre of the square. Offerings, votive materials and discarded pieces of

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³ For a thorough study of this building see Marchetti and Nigro 1995-1996. In one square (EaV16iv) a floor with in situ materials dating from EB III has been identified.
⁴ P. Matthiae has already pointed out the numerous building operations, which took place at the beginning of this period, comprising the enlargement and reorganization of the Sacred Areas of the Acropolis and of the Lower Town (MATTHIAE 1989a; 1991: 314-318).
⁵ This building is clearly different from the Royal Palace of the Archives, thus suggesting that it was not directly related to the latter. However, it yielded precious items and products, such as hundreds of inlays, probably from a workshop, which must be referred to a public institution, like a temple. Also the planimetrical organization of the building, with numerous small rooms, devoted to food transformation, storage, and workmanship, testify to the activities of a probably subsidiary public building (MARCHETTI and NIGRO 1995-1996).
⁶ MARCHETTI and NIGRO in press: fig. 2.
⁷ The so-called Chapelle Orientale presents a similar plan: DUNAND 1958: 480; 1950: plan "cote 26.00-25.00".
⁸ Temple 4040 of strata XIVb-XIVa with the associated platform 4009: KEMPINSKI 1989: 36-39, figs. 16-17.
⁹ The presence of a drain suggests the location of the entrance at the middle of the southern side.
¹⁰ F.5242 is a 2.5 m round pit, 1.2 m deep, which was filled with soft brown earth brought from outside the town. Six complete bowls of the MB IA slightly carinated type (NIGRO in press: fig. 1: 2, 4, 7) were deposited along the edge of the pit, presumably containing food offerings or precious substances. For other cultic features see MARCHETTI and NIGRO in press: figs. 17-18.
Fig. 2. Stratigraphy of Area P South (square EaV17iii+iv: eastern baulk).
temple furniture have been retrieved in it\textsuperscript{11}. During MB IB a new leveling operation took place in the area, and F.5327 was sealed by a flooring made of beaten earth. However, a second cistern (F.5238) was dug next to the former in order to perform cultic activities. This favissa was used for a long time span, as it is indicated by the distribution of the materials. At the beginning of MB II, the flooring of the square was again raised by means of a layer of crushed limestone (stratum 3b) and, after a short while, the sacred cistern went out of use. Four limestone blocks were placed on the sides of the closed mouths of the two favissae indicating their location, in order to recall the sacrality of the area. Several layers of beaten earth represent the continuous use of the square during the Middle Bronze II (stratum 3a). In the new square, stone lined drains were set, collecting rainfall waters into six cisterns. The drains were linked to several inlets, at least three opening into the same huge underground cistern. One of these inlets (P.5213) was in LBI closed by the reversed base of a basalt altar\textsuperscript{12}. It has been only partially excavated and has provisionally restituted large quantities of sheep bones, probably ascribable to the delivering of a communal consumption.

\textit{The inner stratigraphy of F.5238}

The inner stratigraphy of the favissa attests to the occurrence of different cultic operations. After the performance of each cultic activity, the cistern was temporarily closed, since no residual materials have been found in the filling. The three layers identified in the filling have been numbered from bottom to top (fig. 3). They are all composed of greyish earth, fragmentary ceramic materials and objects, ashes, and charcoal due to the many burnt materials thrown (F.5238/i-ii-iii). A stone lined pit filled with sherds (F.5001) was the cap of the sacred cistern and was sealed by the flooring of the MB II square. After the destruction of Ebla, this top cover collapsed into the favissa because of a inner subsiding. One of the blocks in the vicinity of the mouth also fell inside.

\textsuperscript{11} F.5327 has been excavated in the 1995 campaign, after the delivering of the present paper. This discovery has provided numerous fundamental comparisons for the pieces from F.5238, which, however, is later. A complete description of the findings from F.5327 is in \textsc{Marchetti} and \textsc{Nicro} in press.

\textsuperscript{12} It is an extraordinary piece of furniture (TM.91.F.717), perhaps originating from Temple P2, known from the representations on the sculptured basins from Temples B1 and D (\textsc{Matthiae} et al. 1995: 421-422, nos. 290-291). It is also attested to in the Old Syrian and Cappadocien glyptic, thus pointing to a dating from the MB IB (\textsc{Matthiae} 1994b: 175-177, n. 54)
Fig. 3. North-south section of F.5238.
The cistern is bottle-shaped and hewn into the rock for almost 8 m, while the upper 3 m are excavated through a mud brick wall of Building P4 of EB IVA, which gave structural stability to the mouth. The first layer (F.5238/i) has accumulated in a conical shape, probably because the offerings were thrown from above. It mainly includes crashed jars within a light grey soil, with many limestone inclusions. The empty spaces between this hump and the walls of the cistern were filled with rock fragments fell from the upper walls, presumably indicating a gap in the use of the cistern. When it was reopened, part of the collapsed materials was removed, and new discharge operations took place. The second layer (F.5238/ii) included various sparse materials, apparently removed from their original utilization. It was separated from the third one by 1 m of reddish earth, perhaps a ritual sealing. The top-most layer (F.5238/iii), the richest in votive offerings, was also present above the stone mouth of the favissa (fig. 3), indicating that it was originally higher and that a subsequent internal collapse caused the sinking of the central part. The assemblage pertaining to it thus consists of the evidence from these two separated strata, that accumulated over the rock and that fallen down. The soil was rich of grey clay, limestone fragments and contained a very large number of bowls, filled with food offerings and small votive objects.

2. The pottery assemblages

The almost 550 complete vessels retrieved in the favissa made up two separate assemblages of the greatest interest, because found in clearly stratified layers in chronological succession. The first group is composed of the vases found on the bottom of the sacred cistern (F.5238/i), the second is formed by those found in layers ii and iii, which do not present chronological variations. In spite of certain difference in the distribution of the ceramic materials in the three layers, the interpretation of which will be presented further, the three assemblages share the great majority of the pottery types and display the developments of the pottery horizon at Ebla from the end of MB IB to the beginning of MB IIA. Of course,

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13 After its first employ the sacred cistern was probably sealed, remaining closed for a certain while.
14 An analogous filling of soft virgin soil, containing only small pieces of charcoal, was used to seal the favissa F.5327: MARCHETTI and NIGRO in press.
15 A basic difference existed between the vessels serving as containers of food or substances that were thrown into the favissa, and those deposited for their intrinsic value of dismissed pieces of the temple furniture.
one has to take into account the particular destination of these deposits, which limited the representativity of the sample to certain productions, almost excluding, for example, Painted Ware\textsuperscript{16} and Preservation Ware\textsuperscript{17}. However, they fairly represent other distinguished productions of Northern Inner Syria\textsuperscript{18}, somewhat rare in non specialized contexts, such as Miniature Ware, and Black Burnished Ware, as well as some cultic vessels, of rather unusual attestation. The destination of favissa has also given the possibility to collect almost always complete vessels, apart from some cases of vases already broken before they were thrown into the cistern, thus providing an extended series of types, highly representative of the central phases of the Middle Bronze. Also some technological observations arise from the study of these pottery materials, showing a progressive standardization of the production from the MB IB to the MB IIA, which is clearly indicated by the increased number of coarse ware bowls retrieved in the upper layers of the favissa. However, since no results of the analyses are available yet, only this general trend may be outlined\textsuperscript{19}.

\textit{The pottery assemblage of the lower layer}

In the lower deposit the great majority of the open forms was constituted by carinated bowls, with a high carination, immediately below the everted rim. From the typological point of view, the 80 bowls recovered exhibit a large series of different rims. They are made of two different wares: one has a very pale brown (Munsell colour 10YR7/4) fabric with a fine inner texture, while the other shows a reddish colour (5YR5/6) and a coarser technique, due to the use of large mineral and vegetal inclusions as temper. In both wares the diameter of the bowls varies from 12 to 19 cm (fig. 4: 1-5), while in a third kind of carinated bowls, represented by 29 specimens, it does not exceed 10 cm (fig. 4: 6-11). The latter small

\textsuperscript{16} The dearth of the Painted Ware among the ceramic materials from the favissa is much more striking, since it could be expected to find such a luxury production among the offerings dedicated to the goddess. However, the evidence from Ebla suggests that painted vessels were primarily devoted to banquet services (Baﬃ Guarda\textsuperscript{1994}) and that painted pitchers were usually part of the funerary equipments, probably because of their function as wine containers (Matthiae\textsuperscript{1989b}).

\textsuperscript{17} Fragments of vases of Preservation Ware found in F.5238 are always residual, although they may nonetheless furnish useful chronological references.

\textsuperscript{18} See Nigro in press for a more detailed description of the types and of the technological features of this distinct MB IB ware of Northern Inner Syria.

\textsuperscript{19} The samples are now being analyzed at the MASCA Laboratory of Philadelphia by Patrick McGovern.
Fig. 4. Bowls from F.5238 (scale 1:3).
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<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Reference number</th>
<th>Findspot</th>
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N.B. “Fabric Colour” refers to the core; SW= Simple Ware.

bowls are made of a particularly fine fabric and might be considered a votive production, because they are not attested to in other contemporary contexts at Ebla.

One of the most representative shapes of the lower layer, known only in Inner Syria, is a bowl characterized by a carinated body and a grooved vertical neck, which is named collared bowl (fig. 4: 12-13)\(^{20}\). Almost 60 specimens of such type were buried in the lower layer of the *javisus*, containing food offerings and votive objects. Their use in religious contexts is displayed by a representation on the sides of the Stele of Ishtar, where two worshippers, apparently joining a offering rite, hold in their right hand a bowl of this kind\(^{21}\).

Besides the carinated bowls, probably representing the commonest personal offerings, the ceramic assemblage of the lower layer also comprises

\(^{20}\) About the origin and the development of this MB IB hallmark type see Nigro in press.

more than 50 medium size jars of the type with double everted rim and slightly convex bottom. These are of three different sizes. The biggest ones usually have one or more horizontal combed bands on the shoulder, or sometimes a scrawled wavy motive framed by two combed bands. One specimen, 50 cm high, which is entirely decorated by incised horizontal lines, may be interpreted as a cult vessel, also because it was broken when half of it was thrown in the favissa. This vessel is made of a highly sieved whitish fabric (10YR8/3) and its decoration finds no comparisons at Ebla, except for a few sherds from the Sacred Area.

Medium size jars constitute a well represented sample (more than 40), but they are rarely preserved complete. They are 20-25 cm high and they are also always decorated with a combed band at the bottom of the neck (fig. 5: 1, 3). These vessels served as containers of food and either represent offerings presented to the Great Goddess or substances thrown in the cistern possibly resulting from a communal consumption which took place in connection with the cult of Ishtar. Four fragmentary jugs in a buff porous clay are the only pots of this kind discovered in the sacred cistern (fig. 7: 22). They might be related to a sacred banquet, too. Five or six potstands were thrown into the favissa probably in association with medium size jars, as their number and their diameter correspond (fig. 5: 4-6). They may be considered either dismissed pieces of the temple equipment, or directly related to the offerings of jars.

The small size jars are largely attested to in the favissa, due to the typically votive utilization of this shape. They do not exceed 20 cm in height and are always decorated with vertical and horizontal incisions, thus testifying to the intrinsic value attributed to these objects. Also the highly sieved very pale brown or the pinkish-white fabric they are made of, indicate that this is a special cultic production. A similar class is that of small jars made of Miniature Ware (in a yellowish light fabric) with applied figurines on the neck. Unfortunately, due to the high firing of the clay, which renders them fragile, almost none of these applied jars was preserved complete. However, from various fragments, we can surmise that only the neck was decorated by such applications. While the applied figurines are usually strongly schematized representations of birds, in

22 A peculiar decorative pattern of MBA jars from Northern Inner Syria (MARCHETTI and NGRO in press: fig. 8: 42).
23 MARCHETTI and NGRO in press: fig. 10: 31, from F. 5238/ii.
24 The specimen TM.94.P.1118/1 has two striking parallels in Grave I (5B696) and III (5A988) at Hama, probably slightly earlier.
25 This production is being studied by F. Pinnock.
26 MAITHIAE et al. 1995: 455, nos. 363-367; such specimens date from MB II B.
Fig. 5. Medium and small size jars and potstands from F.5238 (scale 1:3).
Figure 5 (scale 1:3)

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N.B. "Fabric Colour" refers to the core; SW = Simple Ware.

the specimens from the *favissa* the birds are accurately modelled with incised vertical traits imitating the feathers. On the basis of the numerous bones of doves found, one may identify with this animal the birds modelled on the necks of the small jars. An extraordinary specimen exhibits on its neck the lion-headed eagle *Anzû*; the lion was one of the sacred animals of the Ishtar *Eblaitu*.

As indicated by the analyses of soils, the relevant presence of food offerings can be also related to some plates, bowls and pots of Kitchen Ware (fig. 5), among which is an outstanding bowl imitating a metallic shape (fig. 7: 17). The long bar-handles on the rim and the ring base are the same of a class of bowls also known from MB IIA Palestine (MB IB of Syria). Although such vase is made of Kitchen Ware, it actually belongs to the class of metallic imitations, a class attested to only in the lower layer of the *favissa* and further represented by ten bowls made of a fine dark grey fabric, coated with a highly burnished

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27 From F.5238/ii; Matthiae et alii 1995: 417, no. 274; Marchetti and Nigro in press: fig. 9.
28 These are currently been carried on at Munich University by Claudia Wachter Sarkady, whom we thank for all the preliminary information about archaeobiological materials.
29 Tell el-Mutesellim (Megiddo: Loud 1948: pls. 15: 15, 116: 18), Ras el-'Ain (Aphek), and Tell es-Sultan (Jericho). These bowls presents a typical reddish or brownish slip and a circular burnish. In Megiddo it belongs to stratum XIVa, which dates from the XXIth Century B.C., while in Jericho and especially in Aphek, where a similar type with red slip and burnish has been used to fix the chronological succession of the strata in the palace areas (Beck 1975: 54-56, fig. 4: 17; 1985: 192, fig. 5: 1), it clearly marks Middle Bronze I (IIA according to Palestinian terminology: in terms of absolute chronology the XIX century B.C.; Gerstenblith 1983: fig. 30: 18).
Fig. 6. Kitchen Ware vessels from F.5238 (scale 1:3).
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<td>KW</td>
<td>7.5YR7/6</td>
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<td>10YR4/1</td>
<td>reddish slip, indented strokes on the body;</td>
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<td>10YR4/1</td>
<td>buff outer slip, incised lines and oblique strokes</td>
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<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>KW</td>
<td>5YR6/6</td>
<td>buff outer slip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:8</td>
<td>TM.92.P.177/23</td>
<td>F.5238/i</td>
<td>IIIIB1</td>
<td>MB IIA</td>
<td>KW</td>
<td>10YR4/1</td>
<td>buff slip, grooves on the rim and on the neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:9</td>
<td>TM.91.P.845/9</td>
<td>F.5238/i</td>
<td>IIIIB1</td>
<td>MB IIA</td>
<td>KW</td>
<td>5YR5/6</td>
<td>greenish-brown burnished slip</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. “Fabric Colour” refers to the core; KW= Kitchen Ware.

black slip\(^{30}\). The shapes of these small bowls are characterized by the curving walls, the inturned rim and the ring-base (fig. 7: 20–21). As this ware is nowhere else known at Ebla during the Middle Bronze Age, it can be interpreted as a luxury production, and the bowls can be considered valuable gifts instead of containers for food offerings\(^{31}\). The typical

\(^{30}\) For a comparative analysis of Black Burnished Ware vessels from Ebla see NECRO in press.

\(^{31}\) The Black Burnished Ware is a common production, especially in funerary contexts, in Inner Syria. The shapes usually attested to are the piriform juglets and small bottles with high narrow neck and inner stepped rim. It somewhat corresponds, in inland Syria, to the red-slip ware of the Levantine coast and Palestine.
Fig. 7. Miniature Ware and Black Burnished Ware vessels from F.5238 (scale 1:3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Reference number</th>
<th>Findspot</th>
<th>Strat.</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA1</td>
<td>MB IIA</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>2.5Y8/2</td>
<td></td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>2.5Y8/3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:3</td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>2.5Y8/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:4</td>
<td>TM.94.P.1110/20</td>
<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>10YR8/1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:5</td>
<td>TM.94.P.1106/5</td>
<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>5YR5/6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:6</td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>2.5Y8/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>2.5Y8/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>10YR8/2</td>
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</tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>10YR7/3</td>
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</tr>
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<td>MW</td>
<td>10YR8/3</td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>BW</td>
<td>2.5YR6/6</td>
<td>black burnished slip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA1</td>
<td>MB IIA</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>5YR6/6</td>
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<td>SW</td>
<td>10YR8/3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:17</td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
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<td>MB IB</td>
<td>KW</td>
<td>5YR6/6</td>
<td>brownish red burnished slip</td>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>BW</td>
<td>10YR6/1</td>
<td>black burnished slip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:19</td>
<td>TM.94.P.1113/2</td>
<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>BW</td>
<td>10YR6/1</td>
<td>Black burnished slip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>BW</td>
<td>10YR6/1</td>
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<td>10YR6/1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>F:5238/i</td>
<td>IIIA2</td>
<td>MB IB</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>7.5YR7/6</td>
<td>Combed band on the shoulder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. “Fabric Colour” refers to the core; SW= Simple Ware; KW= Kitchen Ware; MW= Miniature Ware; BW= Black burnished Ware.
features of metal vessels, such as the thin walls, the outswollen rim and
the ridge which stresses the carination, can also be recognized in two
other specimens made of the same ware, which exhibit metallic shapes
(fig. 7: 18-19).

Several globular pots with everted rim of two different sizes were
thrown into the sacred cistern (fig. 6: 7-8). The big specimens always
present ridges and corrugations on the buff slipped surface, in order to
easily absorb heating variations.

Another class of Kitchen Ware vessels seems to be strongly connected
with the cultic function of the favissa. A number of fragments of incense
burners has been found, attesting the use of throwing into the cistern
these discarded pieces of the cultic equipment. They were usually bro-
ken into three parts: the high pedestal (fig. 6: 5), the upper burner-bowl
and the joining piece. In the lower layer of F.5238 the burner-bowls
always present a high rounded everted rim, decorated by incised lines
and ridges (fig. 6: 1-3). The carination at the bottom of the rim is
marked on the outside by a marked ridge. A second type of incense-
burner has a shorter pedestal without the upper opening (fig. 6: 4).
Besides the burners with rounded everted rim, a new type, which presents
a simple outgrooved rim (fig. 6: 6), is attested to in the upper layers
of F.5238.

F.5238/i also yielded a rich assemblage of Miniature vessels (fig. 7: 1-
14), especially devoted to votive purposes. At least two different symbolic
meanings may be connected with these vases. On the one hand they
replaced real-size vessels, on the other, they contained precious sub-
stances, such as oil or perfume. The commonest types in F.5238 are the
bottles with everted (sometimes inner stepped) rim (fig. 7: 7-18, 13-14)
and the globular bowls (fig. 7: 1, 15). A group of small carinated bowls
is reminiscent of a popular MB IA shape, descending from the so-called
Gublite bowl (fig. 7: 2-5). Also the miniature trefoil-mouth pitcher (fig. 7:
11-12) is a common MB IA-IB shape, usually known from funerary
contexts. A unique vessel, probably devoted to votive functions too,
is a bowl with flaring walls and plain base (fig. 7: 15-16). Only two
specimens have been found in the sacred cistern, suggesting a ritual

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32 An interesting comparison is offered by a group of miniature vessels found in jar bur-
rial in the Ouvrage des Tirailleurs at Mishrifeh/Qtin (MESNIL DU BUSSON 1927: pl. LXIX:
3). Other assemblages of miniature vessels from sacred areas were found at Nahariya
(DOTHAN 1965: fig. 4), Byblos (deposit 9445-9462 of the Chapelle Orientale: DUNAND 1950:
pl. LXXX) and Ugarit (SCHAEFFER 1949: fig. 110: 1.8,14,25,27-37; see n. 66). However,
no data are available to assert a votive destination of the deposit.

33 MATTHIAE et al. 1995: 454, n. 359
destination, since the type is nowhere else known at Ebla, while a comparison is attested at Mishirifeh/Qatna from the vicinity of the open cult place\textsuperscript{34}.

From the typological point of view the pottery assemblage of the lower layer of the \textit{favissa} is characterized by the presence of numerous collared bowls of the MB IB type with short grooved neck, which gradually replace the Gublite bowl. The attribution of this assemblage to a late MB IB pottery horizon is also testified to by the presence of the carinated bowls which imitate metallic prototypes, and by the bottles with inner stepped rim, a MB IB hallmark in Inner Syria\textsuperscript{35}. From the chronological point of view, the closer parallels for the pottery assemblage of F.5238/i are the vases from the Tomb of the Princess at Ebla and the assemblage of Hama H3\textsuperscript{36}, both dating from the second half of the Middle Bronze IB (c. 1850-1800 B.C.).

\textit{The assemblages of the upper layers}

The pottery materials found in the the upper layers of the sacred cistern share the same types of vessels, and may thus be considered, under a typological and chronological profile, a single assemblage. However, in respect of the lower layer, a completely different distribution of the types appears. Discarded vessels and containers for food offerings (i.e. open bowls and plates) largely dominate the inventory.

Notwithstanding a general continuity in shapes, the later assemblages also exhibit some diagnostic transformations of the types, which can be used as chronological indicators. A striking difference with the lower layer is the appearance of the mass produced bowl with inturned rim, a hallmark of the Middle Bronze II at Ebla, which gradually inherits the broad functions of the bowl with high carination. The profile of the inturned rim bowl is characterized by a particular inset of the walls (fig. 8: 1-5), due to the fast technique of building up the vase. The fabrics used for this sort of vessels are more often reddish wares with many limestone inclusions, resulting in several chalk grits on the surface. More than 150 inturned rim bowls have been retrieved in F.5238/ii-iii, an opposite figure in respect of the carinated bowls, which sharply decrease to less than 50. The occurrence of the collared bowl diminishes; the later

\textsuperscript{34} \textbf{Mesnil du Buisson} 1935: 118, fig. 38.

\textsuperscript{35} \textbf{Marchetti} and \textbf{Nigro} in press: fig. 6: 12.

\textsuperscript{36} \textbf{Matthiae} 1979: 152-160, figs. I-L; \textit{Matthiae et al.} 1995: 494, nos. 436-440; for Hama H3, \textbf{Fugmann} 1958: fig. 120.
Fig. 8. Bowls and basins from F.5238 (scale 1:3).
specimens of this type show a slenderer body and a higher neck (fig. 4: 14-15), which in the long period will become the high flaring rim typical of the final MB II horizon\textsuperscript{37}. The hints at this trend of development may be recognized in the progressive disappearing of the grooves on the neck.

As far as bowls with high carination are concerned, several different outcomes are registered. In some cases the carination is reduced to an upper groove (fig. 8: 7-8), or to a sharpened ridge (fig. 8: 9-10, 12). A general trend towards the squatted shapes is also evident (fig. 8: 13).

\textsuperscript{37} The type is largely attested to in the Northern and Western Palaces at Ebla (MATTHIAE 1979: G: 2-3) and at Ugarit and Alalakh (HEINZ 1992: pls. 10, 20).
Rare forms, possibly related to the peculiar function of the deposit, such as the small bowls with distinct base (fig. 8: 11), are also attested to in the upper layers.

A few medium size jars are attested to in the upper layers, as well as Black Burnished vessels, which are completely absent, thus confirming the MB IB dating of this production. Many Kitchen Ware plates (fig. 6: 9) were deposited in F.5238/ii full of burnt food offerings. Almost ten fragmentary incense burners were thrown in this layer (fig. 6: 1-3), showing the contemporary utilization of the two types with simple and everted rim. The latter vessels were presumably part of the temple furnishings, together with clay basins, the fragments of which have also been retrieved in the favissa (fig. 8: 15-16).

The importance of the upper layers of the favissa lies in the fact that they clearly attest to the transition to a different archaeological phase, since the diagnostic transformations of the ceramic types and the contemporary appearance of the new shapes described above may confidently be related to a major cultural change. Hence, F.5238 has provided a sequence spanning the critical transition from the MB I to the MB II. The horizon of the beginning of Middle Bronze II, represented by F.5238/ii-iii, is of crucial interest, since it is nowhere else attested to at Ebla.

The data from the 1991-1995 seasons in the Sacred Area of Ishtar (Area P South), have been corroborated during the last seasons, by the excavations in the Area P North (to the north of the Northern Palace). The imposing structures of the Archaic Palace, founded in MB IA directly over EB IVB layers, have provided a reliable pottery assemblage for the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age\textsuperscript{38}, while two soundings have revealed the presence of a third palace in between the Archaic Palace and the Northern Palace, called Intermediate Palace. Soundings, conducted in selected rooms of the Northern Palace, have provided the pottery materials lying over the floor of the Intermediate Palace. They seem to cover the time span immediately before that of the lower layers of the favissa, because of the presence of the so-called Gublite bowl, which in our assemblages is absent (except from some Miniature Ware specimens, fig. 8: 4).

On the basis of the available data the Middle Bronze Age ceramic sequence of Ebla may be summarized as follows:

- Mardikh IIIA1 (MB IA): the early MB horizon is that of the materials found in situ on the latest floors of the Archaic Palace (phases I and II).

\textsuperscript{38} MATTHIAE 1993a; 1995b; NIGRO in press: fig. 1.
Mardikh IIIA2 (MB IB): the mature phase of the MB is represented in its initial part by the materials found on the floors of the Intermediate Palace and in the favissa F.5327, while the subsequent assemblages are those from the Tomb of the Princess and from the lower layer of F.5238.

Mardikh IIIB1 (MB IIA): the assemblage which marks this new phase is that of the upper layers of the favissa, while the late MB IIA horizon is displayed by the inventory of the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats. As far as stratified contexts are concerned, the waste pit F.5861, overlying the Archaic Palace, has provided a large amount of pottery materials spanning the entire MB II.

Mardikh IIIB2 (MB IIB) The transition to the late MB horizon is given by the ceramic equipments of the Tomb of the Cisterns, while the very end of the period is represented by the materials found on the floors of the Western and Northern Palaces and of the houses in the quarter near Gateway A. This relative succession of contexts and associated materials, firmly anchored upon the stratigraphic sequence of Area P, will be the basis for the study of the developments of the pottery horizons of Middle Bronze Age Ebla.

This brief summary accounts for the importance of the discovery of the favissa in an archaeological perspective: it has allowed to build up a continuous sequence of dated contexts and associated materials for the whole Middle Bronze Age at Ebla, filling the gap between the Tomb of the Princess and the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats (the latter is the only context with an absolute dating: see §4) and to better define the transition from Middle Bronze I to II.

3. The objects

The wealth of objects from the favissa is of importance because it provides evidence for cultic offerings and rituals and also because it represents a well stratified assemblage, in which the cultural change from the MB IB to the MB IIA horizons may be observed in several classes of objects. The presence of votive items, often of kinds not attested to in Northern Inner Syria, and the number of functional classes attested to in F.5238 represent a context, insofar as the artifacts are concerned, which in the region and period considered is unparalleled for its variety.

Clay figurines (fig. 9) represent a well documented class of objects (90) within the assemblage of the favissa and from which the best
Fig. 9. Clay figurines from F:5238 (scale 1:2).
chronological observations may be drawn. Four main fabrics may be distinguished. The first one (A) is of brownish colour (Munsell colour 7.5YR7/4) and tends to diminish from layer i to ii-iii\(^{39}\). The second fabric (B), more reddish (5YR7/6), is attested to in the three layers approximately in the same percentages\(^{40}\). Type C has a light colour (2.5Y8/2, 4, 7/2, 4), few small mineral inclusions (black, white or, more often, red) and more attestations in the upper layer. Fabric G is only represented by a few pieces of layer i\(^{41}\). These trends are characteristic, with only local minor variations, of the central phases of the MBA in Northern Inner Syria: in particular, A and the more archaic G are characteristic of MB I, while C of MB II. All figurines are hand-made; only the female ones (39) were modelled and decorated on a flat surface, as a study of their backs reveals. Combings were done holding the instrument vertically (dots) or obliquely (lines).

In the lower layer female figurines have always outstretched arms, apart from one exception, probably a vestigial type of MB IA\(^{42}\). They present crossed combings on the chest and the pubis is indicated by two or three horizontal combings. In several specimens an equal number of combings appears on the backside, while in others there are two holes indicating an anatomical detail. All the six different types from this layer have only one hole in the lateral expansions indicating the ears. In one type the face is applied on the lozenge-shaped back part with a separated strip applied on the front, which is a feature typical of MB I of the head not continuing in the following period (TM.94.P.526)\(^{43}\). Another type, closer to the later MB IIA specimens, is of more rounded proportions and has a modelled face, like the remaining types (TM.94.P.520)\(^{44}\). The variety of types and techniques employed attests to the presence of different productions at Ebla at the end of MB I.

In the two upper layers, dating from the beginning of MB IIA and here considered together, two main types are present, the first one with open arms (TM.91.P.683) and the second with hands holding the breast,

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\(^{39}\) With few small mineral inclusions (with a frequency of less than 3%, diam. <1 mm) which may be brown white, or black (in layer i especially).

\(^{40}\) The few mineral inclusions may be white, more often, black or red.

\(^{41}\) Colour 5Y6/1, 7/2, 8/1, small mineral inclusions with frequency 3-5%, more often black, but also white or red.

\(^{42}\) Cfr. BADRE 1980: pl. LXIII: 29. The Ebla excavation numbers, cited in the text from this point onwards, refer to captions in figs. 9, 12, 14-15. In fig. 9, TM.94.P.520, TM.94.P.526, TM.24.P.515, TM.94.P.638 come from F.5238/i, the rest from F.5238/ii-iii.


\(^{44}\) Cfr. FUGMANN 1958: fig. 117: 3A15 from level H4.
Fig. 10. Clay figurines from F.5238/iii
(TM.92.P.549 and TM.92.P.518; MB II A).
both with two or more holes in the lateral expansions and triangular pubis, all features which constitute a very clear difference in respect of the preceding period (fig. 10). The figurines with hands holding the breast, represented by two small applied pastilles, have a more elaborated decoration than the first type: there are multiple combed bands at the neck (necklaces), three or four holes in the ears, bracelets at the wrists. Its relation with the type with open arms is made clear by the presence of crossed combings on the chest, a feature inadequate to the former type and which in fact disappears already in the second part of MB II A. No common types are present between the two upper and the lower layers. The division between MB IB and MB II A is thus very clearcut as far as female clay figurines are concerned.

The other classes of clay figurines, all fragmentary, are too limited to provide evidence for developments and differences between the two subperiods concerned. Only sixteen male clay figurines were found in the sacred cistern, especially from the middle layer, while only one male figurine was retrieved in the lower layer. They mainly represent riders or sitting men. The combed band on the front should represent a schematic cap (TM.92.P.790). Riders are fixed directly to the body of their animal, which is always lost (TM.94.P.515). Three fragmentary figurines of sitting men are present in the upper layers, holding a curved scepter against the left shoulder (TM.92.P.768). Two votive miniature tripod vases with three applied male heads were found in the lower and middle layers, the latter one intact (fig. 11). More than half (14) of the animal figurines (26), mainly representing rams and equine figurines, come from the middle layer, while only four from F.5238/i. Rams have curved horns (TM.92.P.783) and in two cases presented a vessel on the back and a pierced head for letting out liquids. Some equine figurines have more elaborated decorations on the front part, indicating the harness (TM.92. P.765). Only a few fragments of two-wheeled chariot

46 For the first type cfr. BADRE 1980: pls. LXII: 7, LXIII: 18-19; WOOLLEY 1955: pl. LIVg from Grave ATG/46/15 of MB II A, as the associated collared bowl also suggests (ibid., pp. 323, 328, 334, pl. CXVIII: 100); for the second type, cfr. BADRE 1980: pl. LXIII: 24-25, although later than the pieces from F.5238/i-iii.
47 See e.g. MATTHIAE et al. 1995: 416, no. 272.
50 Cfr. Gubel 1995: 141, no. 280, probably to be dated to MB II A.
models were retrieved: some wheels and three fragments of chassis (TM.94.P.638). The narrow and schematic chariots, with quadrangular section, are typical of the central phase of the MBA (TM.92.P.770)\textsuperscript{53}, while later they are larger and of coarser execution.

The choroplastica of the favissa is representative of Northern Inner Syria at the transition from MB I to II. Considering the female figurines, in the upper layers the typological and technical variety diminishes, thus beginning the process of standardization in the production of the clay figurines, which will become fully evident since the central part of MB II at the end of the XVIII century. The homogeneity of the material culture of the

\textsuperscript{53} The first illustrated piece is from F.5238/i, the second from layer ii. Cfr. BADRE 1980: pl. V: 109, probably from the beginning of MB II A, from the Murek tomb; FUGMANN 1958: fig. 139: 5A602 of MB II A.
region considered is confirmed, not only at the typological level, but also by the technical similarities and the similar distribution of clays among the figurines from the nearby site of Hama.

In the two upper layers of the *favissa* 160 beads were found, of which two thirds from the upper one (fig. 12), while in the lower layer there were none. No internal development may thus be noticed, but they represent a datable coherent assemblage and are thus of importance. The majority (62) of the beads was of a very pure quality of carnelian: the most beautiful piece is a 1.5 cm long perforated bead in the shape of a crouching lion, one of the sacred animals of the goddess Ishtar (fig. 13). The other carnelian beads were either spherical or barrel-shaped, and they may be subdivided in three dimensional classes: the smallest are 3 mm high (TM.92.P.865), the medium ones 5-7 mm (TM.92.P.587) and the largest are between 10 and 20 mm high, all barrel-shaped (TM.92.P.500). A few other beads are made in peculiar shapes, such as a rosette (TM. 92.P.683). Other stones in which beads were made are, e.g., lapis lazuli (5; all of different types, TM.92.P.469), amethyst (2; TM.92.P.498), rock crystal (5; TM.91.P.644). A typical production is that of vitreous materials. While no glass beads were found, two are of faience, i.e. with a vitrified surface (TM.92.P.718). Others are in frit, made of siliceous paste. The larger beads are of powdery white frit, and are mainly spherical or barrel shaped (18; TM.92.P.510), although three are melon shaped. Smaller specimens are almost all of the elongated barrel type and are made of greenish or, more often, light blue frit and were formed on a metallic thread (35; TM.92.P.762). During MB II is particularly noteworthy the development in the production of vitreous materials. Gold beads (11) are realized in various shapes and techniques. The majority is hammered and of spherical with collar (TM.92.P.825) or flattened shape; one specimen is decorated with granulation. The beads of the *favissa* are realized in several shapes and materials, testifying to the skill of the Eblaic craftsmen and the scope of the commercial horizons. The MB IB and IIA represent the *floruit* of Old Syrian jewellery, as the finds from the Royal Tombs of Ebla and Byblos exemplify. Several scraps of gold foils

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54 The clay figurines from Hama have been studied at the Nationalmuseet of Copenhagen. Very few MB II specimens come from this latter site, confirming that the excavated materials belong to MB I and the beginning of MB IIA.


56 Matthiae et al. 1995: 418, no. 279.
Fig. 12. Bracelet, beads and inlays from F.5238/ii-iii (MB IIA; scale 1:1).
probably belong to broken parts of luxury fittings, as also gold nails, threads and revetments (TM.92.P.721, TM.92.P.686) and some inlays in various materials, such as carnelian, lapis lazuli (TM.92.P.474), bone (TM.92.P.696) and white frit (TM.92.P.892), all from the upper layers.

A considerable number of bronze objects was retrieved in the favissa, attesting to different techniques (fig. 14). Some were hammered, while others were mould made, such as an axe from the lower layer (TM.94.P.675)\(^{57}\). Other tools are represented by two spindles from F.5238/i with thickened ends (TM.94.P.640), in order to block the spindle-whorls, which were actually also found. Bracelets are represented by two torques from F.5238/iii, with hooks at their ends (TM.92.P.517, fig. 12)\(^{58}\).

Only a few stone tools were present (fig. 15), particularly in the lower layer, such as some limestone loom-weights (TM.94.P.708). Basalt grinders were all fragmentary (TM.94.P.633), while a few flint blades testify to the MBA production of this kind of tool. In F.5238/i blades were small (TM.94.P.715), possibly belonging to sickles, while in the upper layers a longer blade (TM.92.P.887) and a nodule were present\(^{59}\).

\(^{57}\) Cfr. Fugmann 1958: fig. 109: 3A175 from Hama H5, but the type is not very characteristic being attested to before and after the MBA over a vast area.

\(^{58}\) This type represents the later development of the more archaic specimens found at Byblos and Ugarit during MB 1A especially (see Schaeffer 1949: 49-55 and in general Chap. 2; Marchetti and Nigro in press: n. 86). For a MB II specimen from Haradum see Kepinsky-Lecomte 1992: 381, fig. 165: 1.

\(^{59}\) For some flint blades from the MBA sacred area of Nahariya, cfr. Waechter 1950: fig. 1c-d. For basalt tools from Hama see Fugmann 1958: figs. 120: 2E598, SN3/J10 level H3, 139: 5F253, 5F342, 5A39.
From the topmost layer come some outstanding bronze animal figurines. Two of them represent bulls, probably hinting at the weather-god Hadad, the main god of Aleppo, companion of Ishtar\textsuperscript{60}. Seven snakes with raised neck and a winding tail, although typologically each one constitute a unique piece (TM.92.P.547), and a snake bronze head are probably present in the favissa because symbols of fertility and thus associated to the Great Goddess.

4. Interpretation and chronology

Several conclusions may be drawn from the evidence presented above, concerning the cultic activities which took place in the Square of the Cisterns and the meaning of the favissa in the context of Eblaic religion\textsuperscript{61} and of the Middle Bronze Age culture of the Syro-Palestinian area. The materials retrieved in F.5238 are also significant for the relative chronology of the excavated sites in Northern Inner Syria and contribute to a definition of the central phases of the MBA.

\textit{F.5238 and the cult of Ishtar in the Square of the Cisterns}

The location of the favissa in the middle of the Sacred Area, the great quantity of whole vessels and objects and of burnt food leaves no doubt concerning its nature of sacred cistern where votive offerings were thrown or deposed (fig. 16). However, a careful consideration of the evidence suggests that complementary interpretations of the evidence are possible. The long period of use of F.5238 testifies to its importance: it must have been used in particular occasions, since the homogeneity of each layer probably represents a single operation. The significance of the favissa for the Sacred Area is clearly demonstrated by the fact that, after its closing, large stones were placed around it, marking its location. The fact that several pieces are not complete must mean that they had been broken elsewhere, being perhaps part of the old temple equipment, as e.g. luxury fittings. In the case of pottery vessels one can think that they were used during rituals in connection with food offerings and were then discarded in the favissa. The

\textsuperscript{60} See Matthiae et al. 1995: 415, no. 269 and see the considerations about the cult of Hadad at Ebla, ibid., p. 396, no. 244. Cfr. also Schaeffer 1949: fig. 18: 18, Ugarit Period "Moyen 2".

\textsuperscript{61} For some general considerations about the deities worshipped in the Eblaic temples and other aspects connected to the cult practiced there, see Matthiae 1986; 1989c; 1993a; Baffi 1991.
distribution of artifacts within the layers is not at all homogeneous. In the lower layer are present utilitarian tools, such as basalt grinders, loom weights, spindles, associated with a great number of medium sized jars and many female figurines. In the middle layer a lot of precious gifts are attested to, such as parts of furniture and tens of beads in precious materials, probably thrown as votive offerings into the favissa, as one can deduce from the fact that they are single beads, except in two cases where a necklace and a bracelet could be recomposed. This functional shift is even clearer in the upper layer, where, in addition to the above mentioned offerings, objects recalling the attributes or aspects relating to the Great Goddess were also found, such as the carnelian lion-shaped bead, the bronze bull and snakes. The materials from the three layers, although different, all point to the attributes of the deity. The great number of naked female figurines seems connected to fertility aspects of the cult of Ishtar, although it is not completely certain whether they are intended to represent the goddess or not. In the lower layers the productive activities connected to the female sphere and also the fecundity aspects, hinted at by the numerous female figurines, are stressed. In the two upper layers the offerings are also connected with more exterior, as in the case of jewels, or symbolic aspects. Burnt food (bones, ash and small pieces of charcoal) is probably to be interpreted in the context of these fertility rituals.
Some pieces of evidence help in reconstructing the Eblaic cult in the Sacred Area of Ishtar. One cylinder seal was retrieved in the middle layer of the javissa, representing a sacred standard with two heads, adored by a priestess in front of an altar with bull’s feet, which is a well known Old Syrian piece of furniture represented not only in glyptic, but also on the Eblaic sculptured basins with ritual banquet scenes, the one from Temple B1 of Rashap and especially that of Temple D of Ishtar, where the relations among the ritual act and the forces of nature are most clearly expressed. The lower part of this altar was retrieved a few metres to the south of F.5238, closing a LB IA sacred well62. In a stele dedicated to Ishtar from the Sacred Area of the goddess on the Acropolis several rituals connected to the cult are represented, as well as symbolic motives hinting at Ishtar’s spheres of domain, in the reading of P. Matthiae63. The worshippers on the lateral sides of the stele hold a cup in their hands, reminiscent of the collared bowls from the upper layers of the javissa, with which the stele is contemporary, and near them appear also a goat and a dove, whereby bones of these animals have been identified among the osteological materials of F.5238. The figurative culture of Old Syrian Ebla thus expresses, throughout a variety of means of visual communication, a cultic act of crucial importance, namely the ritual banquet in a sacred context; worshippers carrying votive offerings are also represented. The precise relation of these elements with the evidence provided by the javissa is of course difficult to be determined, but the various elements may be summarized as follows. In the Square of the Cisterns in the Sacred Area of Ishtar cultic practices and sacrifices are evident since the very beginning of the MBA, as two votive pits with bowls of MB IA, three greyhounds burials and one burial where a human and a sheep crania were associated, make clear64. During MB IB, the javissae F.5327 and then F.5238 probably became the foci of ritual practices, which lasted until the beginning of MB IIA, at least. Food and votive offerings were thrown or deposited in the rock cut cisterns located in the Square in front of a large cultic terrace and an in antit temple. Although, at least in

62 See Matthiae et al. 1995: 417, no. 275 for the seal, interpreted as representing the sacred standard of Hadad and Ishtar, which was probably adored in Temple P2 at Ebla; ibid., pp. 421-422, nos. 290-291 for the sculptured basins and p. 504, no. 469 for the offertory table, dated to c. 1850-1750 B.C. (Matthiae 1994b), represented also on a bone amulet where it appears in the funerary banquet (Matthiae et al. 1995, p. 505, no. 470; see also Pinnock 1992).

63 See Matthiae et al. 1995: 390-391, no. 236 for a comprehensive interpretation of this masterpiece of the Old Syrian Period, dated to c. 1800 B.C.

some cases, F.5238 was presumably also used for discarding old fittings, its primary function seems to contain the offerings to the goddess. The quantity of the materials retrieved and the homogeneity of the various layers seem to attest to a communal rite, involving food consumption and votive gifts, often symbolic, for Ishtar. It seems probable that this ritual was parallel, although certainly distinct, to the ritual banquet held by the king.

The offerings of the *favissa* point to rituals connected to fertility cults, which must have taken place in connection with the cultic terrace, as the evidence from other MBA sites in the Levant suggests. At Nahariya and Giv‘at Sharet near ‘Ain Shems sacred compounds in open areas were excavated. On a large platform at Nahariya and in irregular stone precincts in the second site were practiced cultic activities, represented by a great number of cooking vessels, miniature vessels and many votive offerings. The presence of bones, ashes and fat substances upon the installations points to food offering and probably consumption in these peripheral sanctuaries. At Megiddo and Byblos, in small temples surrounded by open spaces, offerings were either kept in the annexes or buried under the temple floors or in courtyards. Miniature ware, cultic vessels, jewels, human and animal metal figurines, including snakes and bulls, appear among the offerings retrieved, with remarkable internal similarities. At Tell el-Da‘ba, offering pits containing smashed vessels and burnt bones were found next to altars in the forecourt of temples (Müller 1995; BiETAK 1996: 36, 40). The evidence from the Levant provides additional and complementary data for the interpretation of cultic activities in open areas during the MBA, which in some cases were dedicated to a female deity, possibly Asherah or Anat at Nahariya, and in other ones to a god with female companion, as perhaps at Megiddo. Food offering and consumption appears at least as important as the votive gifts, which have symbolic meanings as well as in many cases being of intrinsic value. At Ebla, figurative

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65 For Nahariya see BEN-DOR 1950; 1951; DOTHAN 1965; 1981; for Giv‘at Sharet Epstein 1972.

66 A MB II *favissa* containing c. 100 miniature vessels was discovered in the Sanctuaire Hurrite at Ugarit (Schaeffer 1949: fig. 106: 1-6).

67 For Megiddo see Kempinski 1989; 45-46, 58-59, plans 2-5, pp. 178-181, fig. 47; for Byblos see e.g. the deposits of the Champ des Offrandes (Dunand 1954: 271-272, 394; 1950: pls. LIII-LXXX) and of the Temple of the Obelisks (Dunand 1954: 272-273; 1958: 480-481, 640-641, 644-652, 693-948; 1950: pls. XCVI-CXL). See NICRO 1996 for a general discussion of open areas of the MBA in the Levant; for some comparisons between the offerings of Nahariya, Megiddo and Byblos see DOTHAN 1965: figs. 5-6.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Mardikh</th>
<th>Ebla Royal Tombs</th>
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Tab. 1. Comparative chronological table.

documentation, with the depiction of several cultic scenes, and archaeological materials concur to the reconstruction of the Old Syrian cult, furnishing an important opportunity to investigate ancient rituals and religious practices.

*The chronology of F.5238 and the transition from MB I to MB II*

The relative chronology of F.5238 has already been discussed with reference to the other Eblaic contexts (§2). The Hama (H5-I) and the Alalakh (XVI-VII) sequences may be correlated with the Eblaic
one\textsuperscript{68}, providing evidence for a coherent description of the Middle Bronze Age in Northern Inner Syria (Tab. 1). Mardikh periods IIIA1-2 correspond to Middle Bronze IA-B, while periods IIIB1-2 to MB IIA-B. While MB IA may be seen as the formative phase of the Old Syrian culture, it is in the following MB IB that the cultural unity of the area considered is fully evident, to which belong Hama H4-3 and probably Alalakh XIII-X. The MB IIA is represented by Hama H2-1 (at this site, however, only a few materials belong to the second part of the period) and Alalakh IX-VIII, which now shares more features with the horizon of Northern Inner Syria, while to MB IIB belong Alalakh VII, whose archaeological and epigraphic materials are contemporary with those found in the destruction level of the buildings of Mardikh IIIB2. The MBA is divided in two main periods, historically corresponding to the independent Amorite states in the first part (Archaic Old Syrian Period), and to the hegemony of the kingdom of Yamkhad in the second part (Mature and Late Old Syrian). Several cities of the kingdom of Yamkhad, including Alalakh VII and Mardikh IIB, were destroyed by the Old Hittite kings Hattusilis I and Mursilis I at the end of the XVII century. In terms of absolute chronology, Northern Syria is correlated with Mesopotamia, where the middle chronology seems preferable. The synchronization with Palestine and the Levant is complicated by some correlations with Egyptian chronology, but the general framework of data and synchronisms is quite coherent, since the second part of MB IIA at Ebla is linked with the XIII Dynasty by the scepter of Pharaoh Hotepibra (c. 1770-1760 B.C.), found in the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats\textsuperscript{69}. Thus the dates 2000-1800 and 1800-1600 B.C. for MB I and II are quite adherent to the various kinds of evidence. From all the above considerations, we can conclude that the lower layer of F.5238 dates between 1850 and 1800 (late MB IB) and that the two upper ones between 1800 and 1750 B.C. (early MB IIA).

The transition from the Middle Bronze I to the Middle Bronze II is illustrated at Ebla by the stratified layers of the favissa, providing evidence which fits in and completes the relative stratigraphy of Ebla and of other sites. Changes in material culture may also be anchored to a grid of absolute chronology and historical references. The interpretation

\textsuperscript{68} FUGMANN 1958; WOOLLEY 1955; HEINZ 1992. Other sequences fit well in this horizon, such as Ansari VI-III in the Aleppo area (SULEIMAN, GRISENKO 1987).

of the cultic activities in the Sacred Area of Ishtar at Ebla highlights important aspects of ancient religious beliefs and practices. During the Middle Bronze Age, symbolic values and rites were elaborated by the Old Syrian civilization, which continued with little changes until the end of the Late Bronze Age, stressing the cultural continuity of the Syro-Palestinian area.

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