

# The role of hunting at Tell Sabi Abyad, a later Neolithic settlement in northern Syria

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## Tell Sabi Abyad

The settlement of Tell Sabi Abyad is situated in the Balikh valley of northern Syria. Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad were undertaken in 1986, 1988, 1991 and 1992 by the university of Amsterdam and university of Leiden (under the auspices of the National Museum of Antiquities).

The various trenches, excavated at the northeastern mound of the site, gave evidence of a continuous and uninterrupted sequence of Late Neolithic occupation, with the Halaf culture gradually emerging from an earlier, locally founded Neolithic tradition (ca. 5700-5000 BC). So far, no other excavated site has produced a similar transitional period between the Early Neolithic and Halaf, as all the other investigated sites were newly founded somewhere in the Halaf period (Akkermans and Le Mière, 1992).

At present three major period of prehistoric occupation are represented :

1. The pre-Halaf Neolithic (ca. 5300-5200 BC).
2. The Transitional period (ca. 5200-5100 BC).
3. The Early Halaf period (ca. 5100-5000 BC).

## Hunted animals at Tell Sabi Abyad

### Results of the zoo-archaeological analysis of the 1988 excavation campaign

In all three periods of occupation the subsistence economy of the site mainly relies on animal husbandry, with emphasis on sheep and goat, and cultivation of cereals. These

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paleo-economic data coupled to the nature of the site are evidence of a permanent settlement.

Hunting does not seem to have played a major role in the economy of the site. Nevertheless, hunting persists in all three periods, though its importance changes

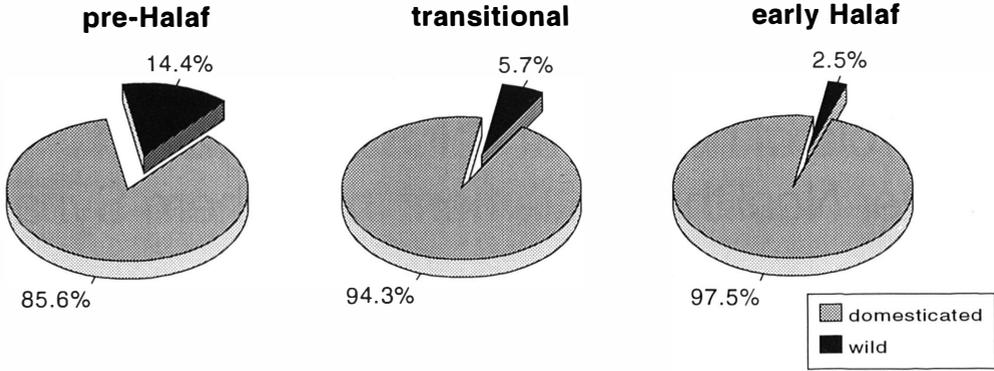


Fig. 1. Percentages of domesticated and wild animals at Tell Sabi Abyad.

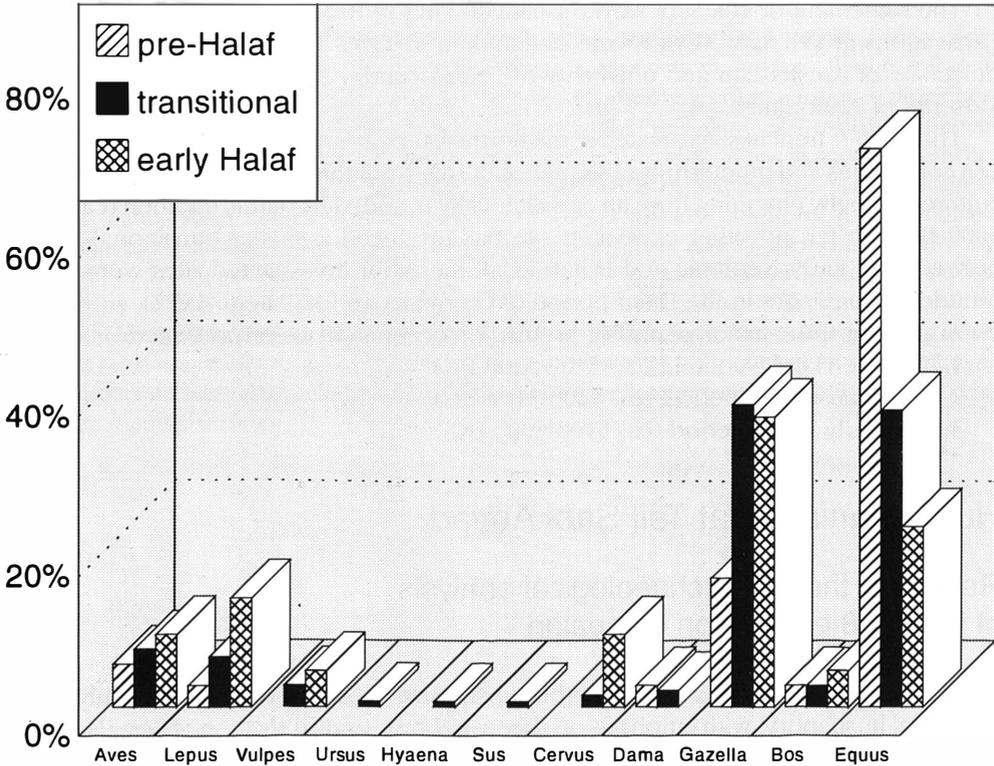


Fig. 2. Wild animals present at Tell Sabi Abyad.

through time. In the transitional stage between the pre-Halaf Neolithic and the Halaf culture the importance of hunting decreases (from 14,4 % to 5,7 %), and even more (so 2,5 %) when the Halaf culture is more developed and settled (fig. 1). In addition, in the Transitional period the number of exploited species increases to 11, compared to 6 in the preceding period. But it must be kept in mind that the pre-Halaf sample is much smaller than the others and that further investigation can change this spectrum.

*Equus* (onager) and *Gazella* are the main hunted species (fig. 2). Both species were probably widely available in the steppe around the village. Hunting of the gazelle increases through time at the expense of the onager. This change in the hunting strategy could be due either to a change in cultural preference or to environmental factors.

The nature and the abundance of the species point to an environment very similar to that of the Jezirah region today. Along the Balikh river a more humid biotope was present, suitable to wild boar, aurochs and perhaps red deer. Animals typical of forested areas are rare.

## Use of hunted animals

### Meat

Wild resources can play an important role as dietary supplement to domesticated plants and animals, especially in « bad years », minimizing the risk of subsistence failure, highly probable in an area of considerable fluctuations in annual precipitation and situated on the margins of rainfed agriculture (dry farming).

### Tools

Bones have been used for the manufacture of objects (awls, spatula, etc.). In most cases species identification is difficult or impossible. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify one unfinished specimen as a metatarsal of gazelle.

### Religion/symbolism

Representations of animals (bucrania, goat, gazelle, birds) are common and typical in the Halafian pottery. If they all represent wild animals, does it mean that people gave a special meaning to them (cf. Çatal Hüyük) or are they only decorative ?

### A special case

A mandibula of striped hyaena (*Hyaena hyaena*) shows an unusual wear pattern on the canine which may have been inflicted by human intervention. The reason for this pattern is still unknown.

## Bibliographie

AKKERMANS P.M.M.G., LE MIÈRE M., 1992.- The 1988 Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, a Later Neolithic Village in Northern Syria, *American Journal of Archeology*, 96, p. 1-22.