

# Politics and Urban Design in the Mediterranean Levant: Three Cases from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (1300–900 BC)

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## 1 Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of contemporary urban life, the dynamic interplay between politics, civic gatherings, and urban design constitutes a nexus of profound significance. Urban analysts see cities as crucibles of diverse ideologies and communal aspirations and the spatial organisation of their urban environments as a critical determinant in shaping the collective political consciousness. In political theory, the work of Henri Lefebvre, especially in *La production de l'espace* (1974),<sup>1</sup> fueled decades of research on how space directly influences power relations and social structures. In Lefebvre's influential view, urban design is not merely a physical configuration of buildings and streets according to principles of aesthetics or pragmatics. Instead, it is a silent orchestrator of political discourse, a stage upon which the drama of civic engagement unfolds. In the labyrinthine alleyways and the bustling squares, the very contours of cities shape the collective consciousness, set the limits for civic encounters, and influence the script of political dialogues. Squares, in particular, have captured the attention of urban historians as critical places of community building and political negotiation across different epochs and cultures.<sup>2</sup> In this line of argument, squares are the fulcrum and epitome of urban design as a political factor.

This paper discusses the role of urban squares as civic and political spaces in the cities of the preclassical Levant, applying a standardised analytical scheme to three examples from the cities of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), Ekalte (modern Tall Mumbaqa), and Carchemish (modern Jerablus), dating in periods comprised between 1300 and 900 BC. Before describing the method proposed and exploring its application to the chosen case studies, a few considerations on the changing theoretical paradigms backing this line of research are necessary.

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1 H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace, L'Homme et la société* 31–32 (1974), 15–32.

2 B.W. Stanley et al., Urban Open Spaces in Historical Perspective: A Transdisciplinary Typology and Analysis, *Urban Geography* 33 (2012), 1089–1117.

## 2 Old Paradigms and New Perspectives

In the past, the study of public squares as political spaces in the ancient Mediterranean and Western Asia followed divergent trajectories. Classical archaeologists recognised and studied squares continuously and with ever-increasing sophistication since the beginnings of excavations in the Roman forum in 1870, with a turning point marked by the seminal work of Paul Zanker, *Forum Augustum: Das Bildprogramm* (1968).<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, archaeologists of the Ancient Near East have long been reluctant to acknowledge the existence of significant public open spaces in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia and the Levant. Even if squares were identified as prominent urban features at Assur already in the early decades of the 20th century and were indeed occasionally excavated throughout the broader region, the general lack of understanding for their urban role is lapidary summarised by Mario Liverani's dismissal of the issue: "in the Ancient Near East [...], while the bulk of the palace dominates from the summit of the acropolis, the piazza has neither visibility nor function".<sup>4</sup>

Liverani, otherwise a master of nuanced discussions on Ancient Near Eastern governance, reports conventional archaeological wisdom derived from a set of diversified theories that go back to a notion of "Oriental Despotism". Most scholars have long assumed a priori a paradigmatic opposition between East and West, identifying squares as an exclusive hallmark of Greek and Roman cities, directly connected to freedom and active participation in civic life. According to this perspective, squares were incompatible with Eastern cities, where passive subjects under despotic rule purportedly refrained from meaningful political participation. This Eurocentric framework perpetuated methodological shortcomings in the field, leading to a dismissive stance on open spaces. Even when these spaces were identified in the field, they were often relegated to insignificance, with excavations redirected towards monumental structures – the conspicuous embodiments of political and religious authority and prime locations for unearthing prestigious artefacts.

In the past two decades, however, new perspectives have critically reassessed old paradigms. As a result, a new wave of archaeological research is redefining the aims and boundaries of studying urban space. Among the innovative theoretical frameworks, Heterarchy Theory and Collective Action Theory have proven particularly relevant for a more profound understanding

3 P. Zanker, *Forum Augustum: Das Bildprogramm* (Tübingen, 1968).

4 M. Liverani, *Immaginare Babele* (Bari, 2013), 21, English translation: *Imagining Babylon: The Modern Story of an Ancient City* (Berlin, 2016), 192–193.

of the connection between politics and urban design in the Ancient Near East and the Levant.

Heterarchy Theory aligns with an “anarchic” approach to social power and offers a contrasting perspective on power relations compared to traditional hierarchy models.<sup>5</sup> The following table contrasts three fundamental tenets of conventional and “anarchic” views.

Tab. 5.1

Traditional Paradigms	Heterarchy Theory
Societies evolve from egalitarian to <i>hierarchical and centralised</i> .	Societies evolve in <i>non-linear</i> patterns, cycling between hierarchical and heterarchical power dynamics.
Political power expands following a <i>core-periphery model</i> .	Political power is multi-scalar, poly-centric and a-peripheral
Power is individualistic and patriarchal (“ <i>Oriental Despotism</i> ”)	<i>Different models</i> of governance co-exist

Heterarchy Theory provides a handy toolbox for understanding the degree of coterminous political diversity in the Levant during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. In the thirteenth century BC, for example, a merchant travelling the small world between the Upper Euphrates and the Mediterranean coast would have encountered collective governance at Tell Bazi, the corporate leadership of a *primus inter pares* at Emar and Ekalte,<sup>6</sup> and a dynastic kingdom with a

5 C.L. Crumley, Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies, *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 6 (1995), 1–5. See also most recently D.S. Davis, Past, Present, and Future of Complex Systems Theory in Archaeology, *Journal of Archaeological Research* (2023), 1–48.

6 A. Otto, Archaeological Evidence for Collective Governance along the Upper Syrian Euphrates during the Late and Middle Bronze Age, in G. Wilhelm (ed.), *Organization, Representation, and Symbols of Power* (University Park, 2012), 87–99. A. Otto, The Organisation of Residential Space in the Mittani Kingdom as a Mirror of Different Models of Governance, in E. Cancik-Kirschbaum *et al.* (eds.), *Constituent, Confederate, and Conquered Space: The Emergence of the Mittani State* (Berlin, 2014), 33–66, esp. 38–39. Otto compares the political situation and the material configuration of the Upper Euphrates region to the free Imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire, like Nuernberg, or to Venice in the Renaissance. For the case of Emar, see in particular D.E. Fleming, Textual Evidence for a Palace at Late Bronze Emar, in G. Wilhelm (ed.), *Organization, Representation, and Symbols of Power* (University Park, 2012), 101–109.

powerful aristocracy at Ugarit. On a fair day, the city of Ugarit would have been just a few hours' sail from the island of Arwad – perhaps best described as a maritime republic<sup>7</sup> – and from Cyprus, which was governed by a ruler who made no use of royal symbols of power.<sup>8</sup> Still other forms of political aggregation manifested themselves outside the classic urban institutions: tribal confederations of pastoral nomads, disenfranchised groups of people led by charismatic leaders, and transcultural bands of pirates with a characteristically egalitarian maritime culture.<sup>9</sup> The extent and dynamics of this political plurality are only beginning to be appreciated, along with their profound implications for understanding the alternative pathways along which new polities and innovative urban forms developed in the Iron Age Eastern Mediterranean, from the Land of Israel to the Greek city-states.

Regarding urban design, stark differences in neighbouring cities reflect varying and often competing forms of governance. At Ekalte, for example, houses were relatively homogeneous, and a palace was altogether absent. At nearby Ugarit, on the other hand, the urban fabric was dominated by one of the most extensive royal palaces of the entire Mediterranean. It covered a surface of 11,000 square meters, ten times the size of the most prominent aristocratic mansion within the city walls. Adopting the perspective of Heterarchy Theory helps us conceptualise these differences not only as a material correlate to governance but specifically as a cultural choice among alternative pathways. Consistent with this perspective, substantial shifts in trajectories should not be attributed to notions of 'development' versus 'decline' but rather understood as deliberate political choices. For instance, Otto illustrates how, during the Late Bronze Age in Tuttul on the Euphrates, the resurgence of corporate political structures led to a profound transformation. The once prominent and venerable Mittanian palace was demolished, its remnants repurposed as foundations for standard merchant's houses.<sup>10</sup>

Moving on to the second stream of innovative paradigms, Collective Action Theory is a theoretical approach that identifies cooperation, consensus building,

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7 F. Briquel-Chatonnet, Le statut politique d'Arwad au II millénaire, in M. Aubet and M. Barthelemy (eds.), *Actas del IV Congreso Internacional de Estudios Fenicios y Púnicos: Cádiz, 2 al 6 de octubre de 1995* (Universidad de Cádiz, 2000), 129–133; J. Vidal, The Men of Arwad, Mercenaries of the Sea, *BO* 65 (2008), 5–15.

8 A.B. Knapp, *The Archaeology of Cyprus: From Earliest Prehistory through the Bronze Age* (Cambridge, 2013), 432–447.

9 L.A. Hitchcock and A.M. Maeir, A Pirate's Life for Me: The Maritime Culture of the Sea Peoples, *PEQ* 148 (2016), 245–264.

10 Otto, *Organisation*, 53–54.

and nonelite agency as critical factors of any political system.<sup>11</sup> Similarly to Heterarchy Theory, it helps reassess the limits of the “Oriental Despotism” model. The following table contrasts three hallmarks of each perspective.

Tab. 5.2

Traditional Paradigms / “Oriental Despotism”	Collective Action Theory
Collective and <i>consensus</i> -based forms of power are <i>irrelevant</i> .	Collective and <i>consensus</i> -based forms of power are <i>essential</i> .
Governance works through <i>coercion</i> and mystification.	Governance works through <i>cooperation</i> and bargaining.
Political authority is negotiated behind closed doors	Political power is performative, people-oriented, and <i>negotiated in public</i>

The implications of Collective Action Theory for understanding ancient urban design are profound. If the negotiation of political authority requires, at least to some degree, a public forum, it becomes imperative to investigate the spaces where such negotiations may unfold. Especially since Daniel Fleming introduced Collective Action Theory to study Bronze Age urban festivals,<sup>12</sup> scholars are increasingly aware of the street network as an arena for power negotiation between multiple stakeholders, including the city as a collective actor. At this theoretical crossroads, urban squares emerge as pivotal political spaces for consensus-building activities involving the civic community at various levels. Minor, relatively secluded neighbourhood squares serve as focal points for neighbourhood politics, and larger, more central town squares serve as focal points for civic politics. Case studies from Mesoamerican archaeology have already proved the potential of this approach. Lane Fargher and colleagues could demonstrate how, in the highlands of Mexico, polities ruled by a hereditary noble assisted by a council of elders were characterised by settlements with a central plaza bounded by temples, while polities governed by a council of 50–200 equally ranked officials were characterised by decentralised cities

11 E. DeMarrais and T. Earle, Collective Action Theory and the Dynamics of Complex Societies, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 46 (2017), 183–201.

12 D.E. Fleming, *Time at Emar: The Cultic Calendar and the Rituals from the Diviner’s Archive* (Winona Lake, 2000).

with several plazas with multiple entries.<sup>13</sup> Their research exemplifies how variations in the power dynamics among rulers, nobles, and commoners can directly correlate with the organisation of urban squares within a settlement.

### 3 Urban Squares in the Levant of the Late Bronze and Iron Ages

Urban squares have been identified in several Levantine cities from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages (*Fig. 5.1*). While a comprehensive catalogue is still in progress, certain squares have undergone specific analysis.



Fig. 5.1 Archaeological sites mentioned in the text (Map: A. Gilibert).

13 L.F. Fargher, V.Y. Heredia Espinoza and R.E. Blanton, Alternative Pathways to Power in Late Postclassic Highland Mesoamerica, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 30 (2011), 306–326.

Late Bronze Age examples include Ugarit,<sup>14</sup> on the Syrian shores of the Mediterranean, as well as Tell Mumbaqa and Tell Bazi,<sup>15</sup> both situated on the Middle Euphrates. Additional urban squares are partially documented in excavation reports of important sites, including Alalakh<sup>16</sup> in modern-day Hatay Province, Turkey, Emar on the Euphrates<sup>17</sup> and Hazor in the Southern Levant. In other cases, including el-Qitar<sup>18</sup> on the Euphrates, Tell Kazel<sup>19</sup> on the Syrian coast, and Beth Shehan in the Southern Levant, the existence of smaller temple squares and neighbourhood squares is likely, although the evidence remains ambiguous.

In the Iron Age, the evidence for urban squares increases considerably. Urban squares are a standard feature of nearly every Luwian or Aramaic city of the Northern Levant, including Carchemish, Zincirli, Hama, and Tell Afis.<sup>20</sup> As recently discussed by Daniel Frese,<sup>21</sup> the same is true for the Southern Levant, including sites such as Bethsaida, Lachish, Tel Dan, Tell Qasile and Tel Jezreel. However, at least a considerable difference in urban design is immediately evident: while cities in the Northern Levant prioritise ceremonial and monumental plazas, towns in the Southern Levant favour smaller squares adjacent to the city gates. Is there a way to correlate concrete aspects of urban design detectable on a city plan with people's past habits, particularly political habits?

To address this question, we will analyse and contrast three urban squares that exhibit significant differences, located at Carchemish, Ugarit, and Ekalte.

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- 14 A. Gilibert, Urban Squares in Late Bronze Age Ugarit: A Street View on Ancient Near Eastern Governance, *JNES* 80 (2021), 377–414.
- 15 A. Otto, Marketplaces in Syro-Mesopotamia in the Second Millennium BC in the Light of New Archaeological Research, in L. Rahmstorf and E. Stratford (eds.), *Weights and Marketplaces from the Bronze Age to the Early Modern Period* (Kiel, 2019), 203–217.
- 16 L. Woolley, *Alalakh: An Account of the Excavations at Tell Atchana in the Hatay, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 1955), 157–160 (“Barracks’ Square”, or “Parade Ground”), 167–168 (“very large open space”).
- 17 D. Beyer (ed.) *Meskéné-Emar: Dix ans de travaux 1972–1982* (Paris, 1982), e.g., 24–29 (“Hilani area”), 31–33 (“Chantier M”).
- 18 T. McClellan, *El-Qitar: A Bronze Age Fortress on the Euphrates* (Turnhout, 2019), in the “Lower Settlement”.
- 19 L. Badre, Tell Kazel-Simyra: A Contribution to a Relative Chronological History in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age, *BASOR* 343 (2006), 65–95, Area IV, in front of the “Northern Complex”.
- 20 A. Gilibert, Archäologie der Menschenmenge: Platzanlagen, Bildwerke und Fest im syro-hethitischen Stadtgefüge, in O. Dally et al. (eds.), *Bild – Raum – Handlung: Perspektiven der Archäologie* (Berlin, 2012), 107–136.
- 21 D.A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors: The Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant* (Leiden, 2020).

This analysis will be conducted using a preliminary method that compares nine factors organised into three groups. Each group corresponds to a specific set of people's behaviour.

The first set of factors falls under '*configurational*' factors. In this context, configurational factors pertain to elements and features in the built environment that either constrain or facilitate the movement and visibility of people.<sup>22</sup> The three key configurational factors under consideration are as follows:

- F1) The square's relative location within the city (central, peripheral, liminal) influences *accessibility* for both residents and visitors.
- F2) The existence and characteristics of *access points* to the square (such as gates, their number, and position) is linked to formal institutional control.
- F3) The presence and placement of *doors* opening onto the square are associated with informal social control. High informal social control predicts an atmosphere of familiarity, and low social control portends perceived danger and social tensions.<sup>23</sup>

The second set of factors falls under the category of *architectural factors*, which specifically encompass the planning and affective properties of the square:

- F4) The geometrical properties (*size* and *shape*) determine the crowd capacity and the general feeling of the space. For instance, an open and expansive layout tends to be inclusive, while a narrow and angular design generates focus and directionality. Terraced structures contribute to differentiation and hierarchy.<sup>24</sup>
- F5) The degree of *symbolic formalisation*, assessed through the presence of monumental facades, architectural decorations, and figurative artworks, reflects civic and institutional symbolic investments, communicating civic ideology and religious aspects.
- F6) The nature and *function of the buildings* lining the square is a key factor in how public life unfolds outside (with particular attention to differentiating domestic buildings from structures devoted to ritual, administration, storage and exchange).

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22 The key theoretical reference is Space Syntax Analysis, recently re-presented in A. van Nes and C. Yamu, *Introduction to Space Syntax in Urban Studies* (Berlin, 2021).

23 A. van Nes, Indicating Street Vitality in Excavated Towns: Spatial Configurative Analyses Applied to Pompeii, in E. Paliou *et al.* (eds.), *Spatial Analysis and Social Spaces* (Berlin, 2014), 277–296.

24 I refer here in particular to an "affective" and sensorial approach to architecture, as explored in F. De Matteis, *Affective Spaces: Architecture and the Living Body* (London, 2020).

The third category comprises *archaeological factors* that are integral to understanding the day-to-day utilisation of the space over time:

- F7) The characteristics of the floor deposits and the finds retrieved from them indicate the taking place of specific activities.
- F8) The presence of *use-wear traces*, such as indentures of polished surfaces, is a proxy for shared habits and body postures.
- F9) Traces of “*resemantizations*” such as episodes of iconoclasm or spoliation, index civic conflict, political negotiation and selective attitudes towards civic memory and the shared past.

### 3.1 *Case One: Carchemish's Central Square*

At the beginning of the Iron Age, in the 10th and 9th centuries BC, the political centre of Carchemish was organised around a large plaza (*Fig. 5.2*).<sup>25</sup>

The central square of Carchemish serves as a quintessential example of a ceremonial plaza designed for civic rituals. This expansive public space was a theatrical arena, hosting spectacles featuring crowds and meticulously planned ritual choreographies. The square's cycles of figurative reliefs and Luwian Hieroglyphic inscriptions vividly depicted and described military triumphs, religious processions, and enthronement ceremonies. These performances engaged citizens of all ages and genders, involving the audience in emotionally charged acts, ranging from enemy executions to bloody offerings and public loyalty oaths.<sup>26</sup>

The square's location indicates a primarily local audience consisting predominantly of the city's residents. The presence of numerous altars, offering stones, and the imposing structures of key temple buildings and royal compounds underscores that these large-scale rituals occurred under the institutional aegis. The fortified gates further emphasise a concerted effort towards complete institutional control, reflecting a perceived political identity shared among rulers, officials, the military, and the priestly class.

The considerable size of the square signifies the imperative of engaging large crowds, highlighting the political significance of the city's residents and

25 For the archaeological details, refer to A. Gilibert, *Syro-Hittite Monumental Art and the Archaeology of Performance: The Stone Reliefs at Carchemish and Zincirli in the Earlier First Millennium BCE* (Berlin, 2011).

26 Most recently, I. Cornelius, *Memories of Violence in the Material Imagery of Carchemish and Sam'al: The Motifs of Severed Heads and the Enemy under Chariot Horses*, in S. Ammann *et al.* (eds.), *Collective Violence and Memory in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Leiden, 2023), 110–127; A. Gilibert, *Children of Kubaba: Serious Games, Ritual Toys, and Divination at Iron Age Carchemish*, in *Religions* 13 (2022), 881.

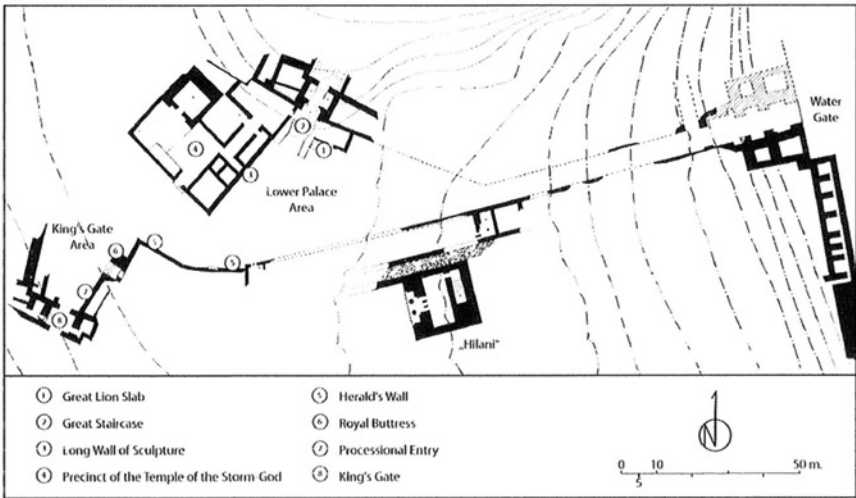
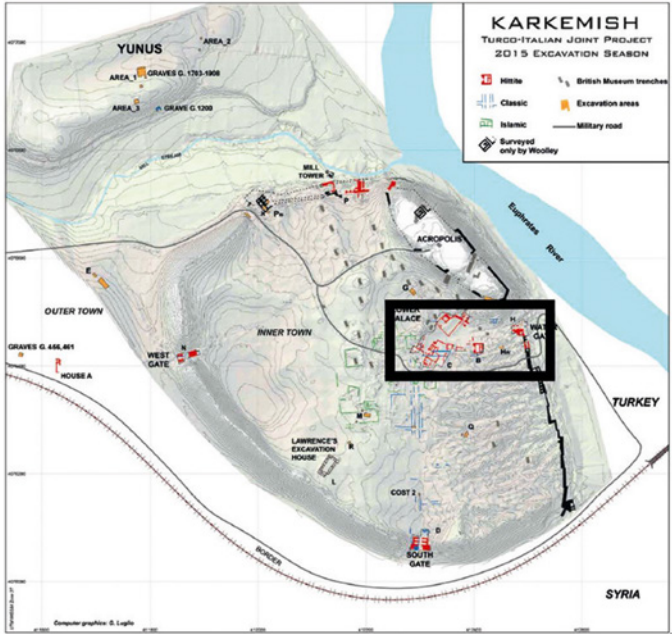


Fig. 5.2 Carchemish, central square. Relative position of monumental relief cycles and statues are marked in the detail plan (Overview plan after Pizzimenti and Scazzosi, *Urban Structure*, fig. 1; Detail plan A. Gilbert).

Tab. 5.3

Factor	Keyword	Discussion	Evaluation
F1	<i>accessibility</i>	the square occupies the city's political centre, at the feet of the acropolis and in immediate proximity to a narrow ceremonial gate leading to the banks of the Euphrates. The square is well integrated within its immediate neighbourhood, exclusively characterised by official buildings, but less well integrated with the city. It is only partially connected to the outside of the city	medium
F2	<i>institutional control</i>	fortified gates entirely control the access to the square	high
F3	<i>social control</i>	several majestic doors open directly onto the square, all belonging to official buildings	high
F4	<i>shape and size</i>	irregular, trapezoidal shape of over 1500 sqm	large, focused, hierarchical
F5	<i>formalisation</i>	several monumental cycles of figurative reliefs, epigraphs, colossal statues, formal doors, platforms, altars ...	high
F6	<i>buildings</i>	the square is lined by temples and royal palaces	ceremonial
F7	<i>deposits</i>	recorded presence of favissae and cultic depositions	ceremonial
F8	<i>use-wear</i>	polished cup marks on altars and platforms	medium
F9	<i>resemantization</i>	recorded traces of iconoclasm, image reuse, and spoliation	high

the ruling class's keen interest in consensus-building politics. Evidence of symbolic resemantizations, such as the mutilation of colossal ancestor statues strategically placed in the square and the deliberate reuse or disposal of older monuments, point to significant dissent among institutional stakeholders.

This suggests a continual rewriting of the official collective memory and a long history of violent redefinitions of the power balance.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, Carchemish's central square emerges as a space for contentious rituals aimed at consensus-building. This occurs within a larger context of competing city-states governed by independent monarchic rulers perpetually seeking popular support and legitimisation.

### 3.2 Case Two: Ugarit's Central Square

In 13th-century Ugarit, the city's topographic centre was taken up by a spacious open area, conventionally referred to as the 'Central Square' (*Fig. 5.3*).<sup>28</sup> Table 5.4 delineates the features of this space based on the factors identified above.<sup>29</sup>

Tab. 5.4

Factor	Keyword	Discussion	Evaluation
F1	<i>accessibility</i>	the square occupies the city's topographic centre, is well integrated within the street network, and is directly connected to the main city gate through a broad straight street. It is at a distance from both important temples and the royal palace. There is a high degree of accessibility for both residents and visitors	high
F2	<i>institutional control</i>	none. The square is at the convergence of at least six public streets, none controlled by gates	low
F3	<i>social control</i>	few doors open directly onto the square, mostly belonging to non-domestic buildings	low
F4	<i>shape and size</i>	oval esplanade of at least 800 sqm	medium, symmetrical, inclusive

27 V.R. Herrmann, The Reuse of Orthostats and Manipulation of Memory in the Iron Age Syro-Hittite Kingdoms, *Semitica* 61 (2019), 399–439.

28 O. Callot, *Ras Shamra-Ougarit I. La tranchee 'Ville Sud': Etudes d'architecture domestique* (Lyon, 1994).

29 Cf. the longer discussion in Gilibert, *Urban Squares*, 383–388, with further references.

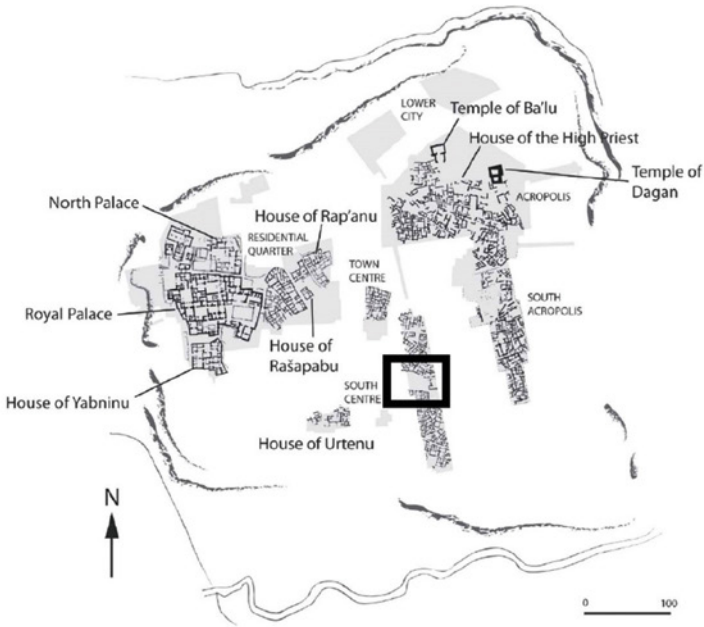


Fig. 5.3 Ugarit, central square (Detail plan after Callot *Ras Shamra-Ougarit I*, pl. X).

Tab. 5.4 (cont.)

Factor	Keyword	Discussion	Evaluation
F5	<i>formalisation</i>	presence of a street chapel with a small stela representing a divine archer (probably “Resheph of the Market”) and a porticoed facade	low to medium
F6	<i>Buildings</i>	the square is lined by merchant’s houses, a scribal school, small shops, storage buildings and infrastructures for commerce	exchange
F7	<i>Deposits</i>	thick organic deposits, few small finds, with a significant number of seals and weights, indexing exchange activities	exchange
F8	<i>use-wear</i>	weathered cultic stela	occasional
F9	<i>Resemantization</i>	none	none

The characteristics of Ugarit’s central square support its interpretation as primarily a market square, where merchants, vendors and a mixed crowd of residents and visitors would met and mingled. The architecture of the space conjured an atmosphere of low institutional and social control, just slightly counterbalanced by the presence of spaces dedicated to popular religion and a porticoed building offering a somewhat formal shelter for, one might presume, selected informal meetings. From a political point of view, this kind of space seems ideal for the negotiation of alliances outside the boundaries of formal politics. A well-known passage from a tablet found at Emar provides a graphic example of a *coup d’état* planned in a similar environment:

When Zû-Aštarti, son of Ba’al-qarrad, (was) king of Emar, in the heart of Emar (ina libbi Emar), soldiers of Emar (ERÎN.MES), tenants (ḥupšu), and “brothers of the king” (aḥḥê ša šarri) who performed military service for the king (lit.: who carried the bronze spear before the king), plotted a conspiracy against their lord.

...

the people who were plotting the conspiracy were in the market square (KI.LAM = maḥiru). Zû-Aštarti, king of Emar, sent 210 troops. They took the conspirators away from the market square: (Zû-Aštarti) killed half of them, and put the (other) half in fetters.<sup>30</sup>

30 D. Arnaud, *Recherches au Pays d’Aštata. Emar VI.3: Textes sumériens et accadiens* (Paris, 1986), 26–27, n° 17, ll. 1–21.

The presence of a market square centrally located but detached from both the royal palace and the primary city temples suggests a degree of free market activity. It also indicates the existence of informal yet significant gathering spaces not directly controlled by major civic institutions. The limited number of domestic doors opening onto the square suggests it was potentially a hazardous or, at the very least, uncomfortable space marked by an undercurrent of social tensions.

However, the square's central location, physical size, and centuries-long existence, evidenced by the substantial organic deposits beneath the 13th-century surface, emphasise its essential role in Ugarit's civic life. Despite the potential for conflict, Ugarit's central square was a focal point for informal political debates within a civic community otherwise structured around a robust and enduring dynastic monarchy.

To fully appreciate the square's political significance, one must consider the co-existence of various ceremonial spaces, expanding beyond the scope of the current discussion. For now, it is sufficient to identify the characteristics of this kind of urban square and connect them to a distinct form of political behaviour – informal gatherings that operate outside the institutional framework.

### 3.3 Case Three: Ekalte's Gate Square

The third and last contrasting case is that of Ekalte's Late Bronze Age gate square (*Fig. 4*), recently discussed by Adelheid Otto.<sup>31</sup>

Tab. 5.5

Factor	Keyword	Discussion	Evaluation
F1	<i>accessibility</i>	the square is immediately adjacent to the northern city gate, in a location easily accessible for outside visitors but otherwise peripheral to the city as a whole	medium
F2	<i>institutional control</i>	fortified gates from the outside control the access to the square, but access is free for residents	medium
F3	<i>social control</i>	the doors of the surrounding buildings avoid opening directly onto the square	low

<sup>31</sup> Otto, Marketplaces, with further literature.

Tab. 5.5 (cont.)

Factor	Keyword	Discussion	Evaluation
F4	<i>shape and size</i>	irregular, trapezoidal shape of c. 450 sqm	small, focused, inclusive
F5	<i>formalisation</i>	semi-monumental entrance to a small temple compound, prominent presence of an aniconic stela at a corner, presence of benches lining the outside temple's walls	medium
F6	<i>buildings</i>	military infrastructure connected to the gate, religious buildings and installations, storage, benches, workshops	mixed-use, including ceremony and exchange
F7	<i>deposits</i>	rests of communal feasting events, broken animal figurines	ceremonial, communal
F8	<i>use-wear</i>	traces of food processing inside the temple courtyard	ceremonial, communal
F9	<i>resemantization</i>	none detected	absent

Ancient Ekalte's gate square is an urban square combining selected features of a ceremonial gate and a market square on a small, community-oriented scale. However, precisely these mixed characteristics are significant from a political point of view, pointing to an urban public space with its own specific identity.

The square's location at the city entrance makes it a space for visitors and residents. However, being within the city walls and close to a fortified access point suggests institutional control. This control prioritised access and security for residents over outside visitors, keeping the square space within easy reach of both, protecting the inhabitants' privacy and keeping the visitors under strict architectural control.

The moderate size of the square suggests that it didn't attract large crowds very often. The presence of a small temple, the aniconic stela, several benches, ritual rests and rests of banqueting points to small groups of people gathering on equal feet. These occasions could involve communal consumption under the auspices of a religious institution. However, the typical symbolic paraphernalia of a royal propaganda apparatus are lacking. On the contrary, the semi-formal architectural design, the presence of benches and the public location of a cultic stela with no specific symbols of divinity or political power are inclusive and non-hierarchical.

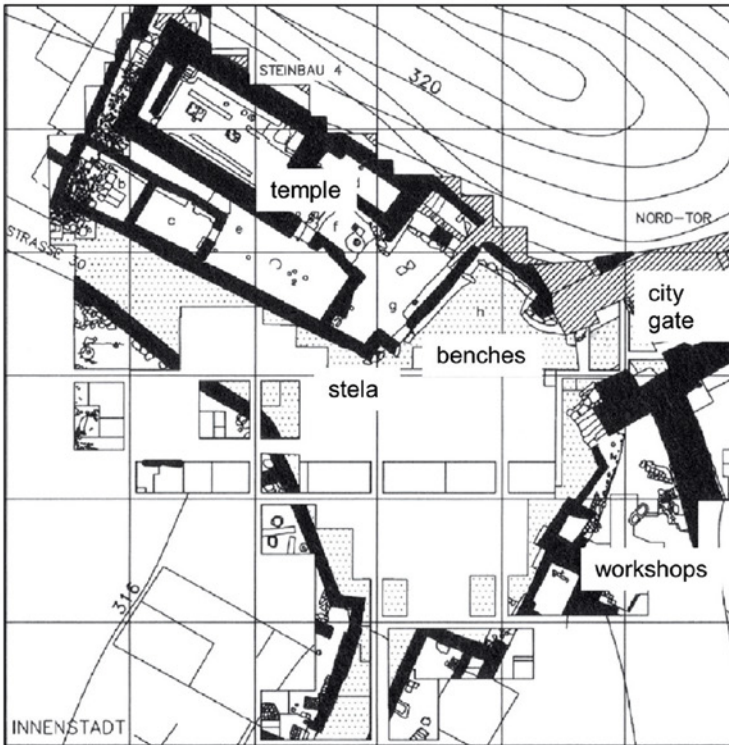
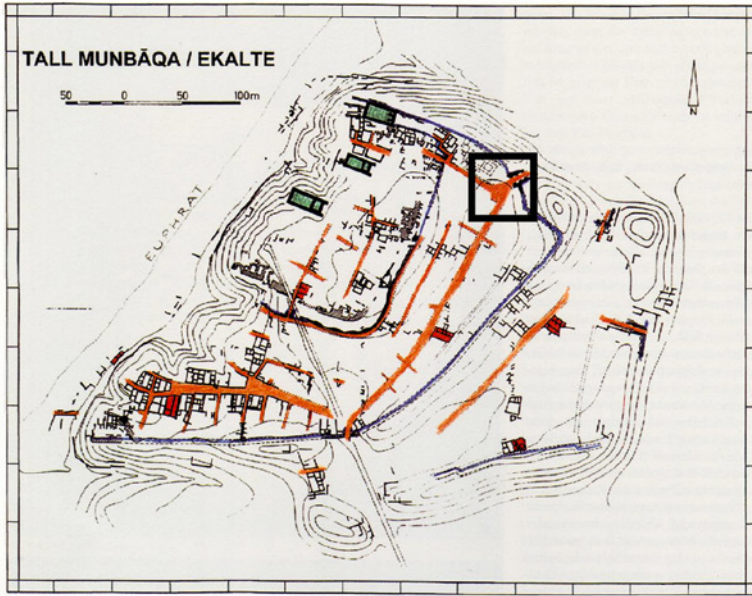


Fig. 5.4 Ekalte, gate square (Plans after Otto, Marketplaces).

The combined presence of workshops and a religious institution suggest that Ekalte's gate square was a place for small-scale market exchanges and communal transactions requiring protracted negotiations (hence the benches and the banqueting). It is tempting to connect this space to the "temple gate" where, according to a cuneiform tablet, the "city god" and the "Elders" (*šībūtu*) sold a field to a private person.<sup>32</sup>

Ekalte's square illustrates a kind of urban square enhancing the role of communal politics, where institutional control is embodied by small groups of equally ranked persons acting in the name of a civic, religious institution. This model appears to have enjoyed significant success in the Southern Levant, where several urban squares in smaller settlements were located at the city gates and displayed similar characteristics.

#### 4 Conclusions

Traditional Eurocentric views disregarded the importance of public squares in the ancient Near East, assuming they were exclusive to Greek and Roman cities. However, recent perspectives, influenced by Heterarchy Theory and Collective Action Theory, challenge these notions and provide valuable frameworks for reinterpreting political dynamics.

The paper introduces a methodological approach for analysing urban squares, considering configurational, architectural, and archaeological factors. Three case studies are presented: Carchemish's central square, Ugarit's central square, and Ekalte's gate square. Each case is evaluated based on factors including accessibility, institutional control, social control, shape and size, formalisation, buildings, deposits, use-wear, and resemantization.

The analysis reveals that Carchemish's central square functioned as a ceremonial plaza for civic rituals, showcasing the political significance of large-scale rituals and the traces left by institutional conflict, dissent, and rewriting of collective memory. Ugarit's central square, with its inclusive design and lack of institutional control, is interpreted as a market square facilitating informal political debates among residents, functioning as a politically neutral "middle space" of encounter. Ekalte's gate square, with moderate institutional control and a focus on communal politics, suggests a unique urban square model emphasising collaborative transactions and small-scale market exchanges. In this case, which may have significant consequences for analysing urban

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32 W. Mayer, *Tall Munbāqa – Ekalte II: Die Texte* (Saarbrücken, 2001), 80, RS 26.

squares of several Southern Levantine Iron Age cities, the presence and importance of institutions of collective governance seems to have played a key role.

Based on this analysis, the following table organises the observed characteristics into three general kinds of urban squares:

Tab. 5.6

Type	Planning	Relative location	Size	Urban Design	Deposits, finds, Use and Wear	Main function	Political Use
A	formal	central, next to power buildings	large	highly structured, controlled access, with infrastructures for ritual activities and behaviour control	a semiotic palimpsest of political negotiation	civic ritual	top-down gatherings
B	informal	central, dislocated from power buildings	medium	limple and low-key, easy access, with infrastructures promoting informal gatherings (e.g., a porch)	trash, organic deposits, industrial slags	market	none explicit, de facto counter-culture and dissent
C	semi-formal	liminal, next to the city gate, proximity to religious buildings and/or storage and workshop spaces	small	structured, security enhanced, with infrastructures for ritual activities, market exchange and wailing (e.g., benches)	organic deposits	local assembly, legal and judicial activities?	bottom-up gatherings

It is important to conclude this paper with three fundamental caveats. First, a single urban square may have, and, as we can safely assume, mostly had more than one function. The same square can be used for formal and informal purposes, ceremonies and exchanges, political meetings, and everyday

affairs – simultaneously or at different times of the day or the civic calendar. The analysis above is aimed at highlighting the central defining aspect, which, in the chosen cases, appears to be evidently defined. In other circumstances, a mixed function may be dominant, leading to a richer and more nuanced typology than that preliminarily proposed here.

Second, variations of the typology proposed above are, of course, possible. A situation detectable in several sites concerns urban squares devoted to exchange and redistribution activities. In some cases, such as Hazor (Level VIII),<sup>33</sup> these spaces are highly controlled and directly adjacent to the royal palace or similar key buildings of institutional power. This situation suggests robust royal control of good exchanges, as opposed to the situation at Ugarit's central square.

Third, a single city may easily have several urban squares. Apart from small neighbourhood squares (a category not analysed here), ceremonial and market squares can coexist, even in multiple variations. This coexistence must be part of a political decoding of urban design, highlighting political complexity, multivocality, or the presence of competing stakeholders.

Though more comprehensive and statistically robust tests are required, the suggested methodology is an initial and adaptable approach to unveil the political significance of marginalised or overlooked spaces. As fieldwork best practices evolve, especially those incorporating extensive, non-destructive examinations of urban design, one anticipates a substantial expansion of evidence for such studies, fostering methodological advancements.

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