Fangyuan Sheng

00115961

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# Uruk World System Revisited

## Introduction

The term "Uruk" holds immense significance for all Mesopotamianists. It represents not only a city located in the lower Euphrates valley but also a transformative era that laid the foundations for many aspects of modern urban life. Furthermore, it embodies an unresolved cultural diffusion phenomenon that has been the focus of extensive archaeological inquiry. The "Uruk World System" (UWS), a framework proposed by Guillermo Algaze to understand the phenomenon, posits a hierarchical network dominated by southern Mesopotamian cities that extended their influence over peripheral regions. While the UWS has been highly influential, recent archaeological findings have challenged its assumptions regarding economic drivers, core-periphery relationships, and the extent of Uruk's impact on indigenous societies. This essay critically examines these critiques and explores alternative perspectives, emphasizing the complexity of cultural interactions in this context. By reconsidering the UWS in light of new evidence, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the interregional dynamics that characterized the Uruk period.

## Uruk: The City, the Period and the Phenomenon

Mesopotamia in the 4th millennium BC was one of the most transformative regions in early human civilization, marking the emergence of the first cities, bureaucracies, and writing systems. At the heart of these innovations was the city of Uruk, after which archaeologists termed the era the "Uruk Period". This period witnessed explosive urban growth in southern Mesopotamia and the spread of Uruk-related material culture, known as the Uruk Expansion.

(1) The City of Uruk

Built upon two settlements along the banks of the Euphrates River, Uruk was the most prominent urban center of its time. By the late 4th millennium BC, it spanned nearly 250 hectares, making it one of the earliest megacities in human history.

Archaeological excavations reveal that the city was organized into two principal sectors: the Anu Ziggurat area to the west and the Eanna Precinct to the east. The 11-meter-high Anu Ziggurat dominated the western skyline, with the White Temple atop it, dedicated to the sky god Anu. Featuring a tripartite floor plan, a façade adorned with buttresses and niches, and an altar in its central hall, the White Temple exemplifies the distinctive architectural traditions of Mesopotamia.

In the Eanna Precinct, the city's architectural splendor is further demonstrated by the monumental Limestone Temple, constructed from stone sourced from distant quarries, the Pillar Hall, decorated with clay cone mosaics, and the Riemchen Building, built with Riemchen bricks (Crüsemann et al. 2019).

In addition to the public structures, various artifacts provide further insight into the complexity of Uruk's society. Among them are fast-wheel-made flowerpots, beveled-rim bowls likely used for rationing, cylinder seals, and clay tablets developed to meet the increasing demands of administrative affairs. Collectively, these objects suggest an advanced Mesopotamian culture with sophisticated bureaucratic systems capable of mobilizing large numbers of skilled laborers and managing long-distance logistics.

(2)The Uruk Period

Named after the city of Uruk, the Uruk period (ca. 3800–3100 BC) is characterized by an unprecedented expansion of urban centers across Mesopotamia. While the Early Uruk period remains poorly understood, the urbanization process during the Middle and Late Uruk periods (ca. 3500–3100 BC) is well documented through archaeological excavations and regional surveys, which reveal the explosive growth of numerous cities, fueled in part by the migration of populations from rural areas, and the emergence of a four-tiered urban hierarchy (Adams 1981). At the apex of this hierarchy were major cities like Uruk, whose population doubled or tripled to approximately 50,000 by the end of the Late Uruk period.

Beyond their size and population, Mesopotamian cities distinguished themselves through social complexity. This is evident in the construction of monumental public buildings, the establishment of administrative institutions, and the emergence of specialized labor. Another significant feature of this period is the phenomenon of cultural diffusion, which will be discussed in detail below.

(3) The Uruk Expansion

The Uruk Expansion (ca. 3700 BC–3100 BC) refers to the widespread dissemination of Uruk-related material culture throughout the greater Mesopotamia region. Spanning approximately 600 years and covering an area of around 5,500 km² (Stein 1999), it represents one of the most significant phenomena of the Uruk period. The varying presence of Uruk-style pottery, cylinder seals, tablets, and architecture reflect the diversity of interregional interactions at the time. Key archaeological sites such as Nineveh, Tell Brak, Habuba Kabira, Jebel Aruda, and Godin Tepe have yielded Uruk-associated artifacts (See Figure 1).

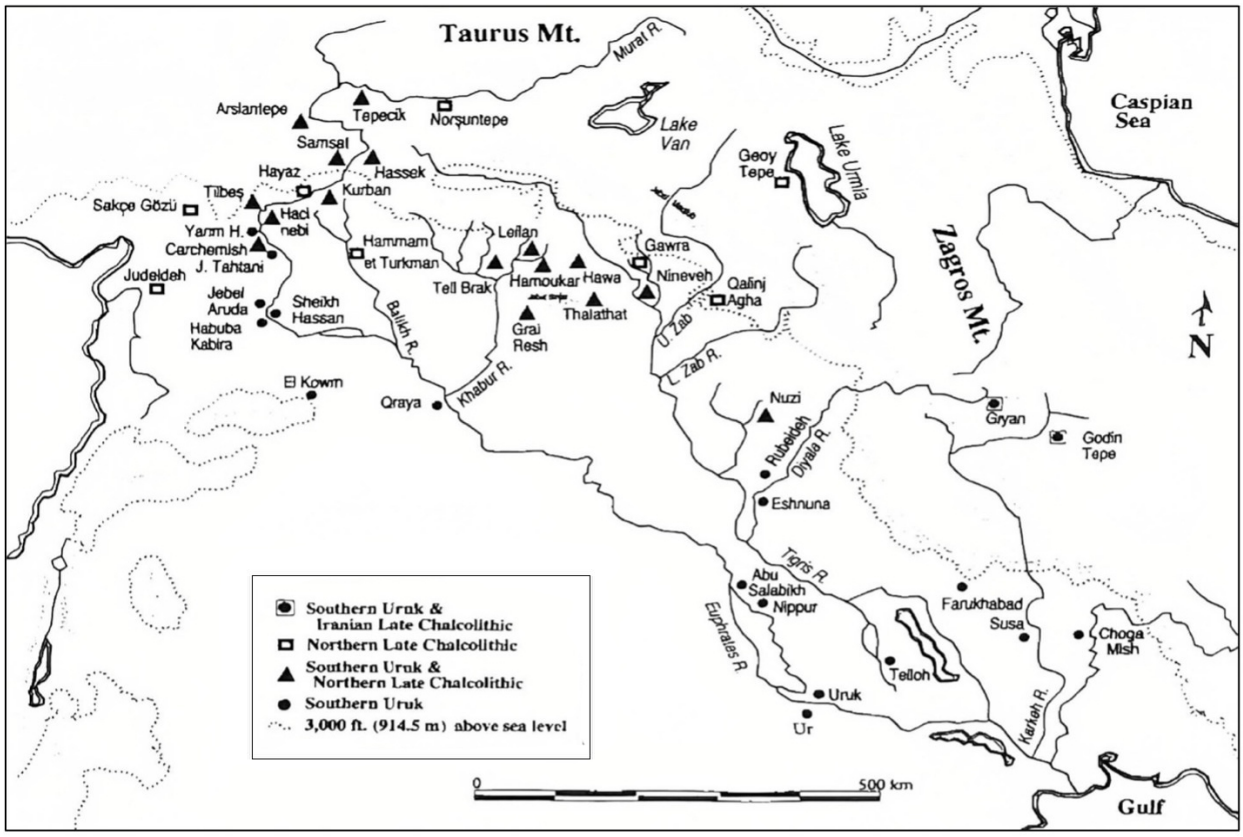


*Figure 1: Major sites during Uruk period (Rothman 2001:6)*

Among these, Habuba Kabira stands out as the most thoroughly excavated settlement, providing the clearest example of this phenomenon. Located in the sparsely populated Tabqa Dam area of Syria, the site was a carefully planned Late Uruk settlement. The elongated city area had distinct functional zones, with a northern residential area and a southern public area. The site, protected by defensive walls, covered at least 18 hectares before its sudden abandonment. Notable finds at Habuba Kabira include (1) tripartite buildings with keyhole-shaped hearths and platforms ornamented with wall cones; (2) Uruk ceramics, such as beveled-rim bowls, flowerpots, bottles with spouts, and four-lugged jugs; and (3) administrative tools like cylinder seals and numerical tablets (See Figure 2).

At the other end of the Uruk Expansion spectrum were smaller settlements like Godin Tepe. Located in the Kangavar Valley of western Iran, Godin Tepe lies along the route connecting Mesopotamia and the Zagros Mountains. The Deep Sounding at the site uncovered an oval compound at the summit, where Mesopotamian pottery, cylinder seals, and clay tablets were concentrated (Gopnik and Rothman 2008). Unlike Habuba Kabira, the building at Godin Tepe was of local design and relatively small. Inside, regional ceramics were found alongside Uruk-style items, with no evidence of conflict, suggesting peaceful coexistence between those with southern Mesopotamian objects and indigenous communities during Godin Period VI. The absence of Uruk-

style architecture and the limited extent of Uruk material culture point to a distinct pattern of interregional communication at Godin Tepe.

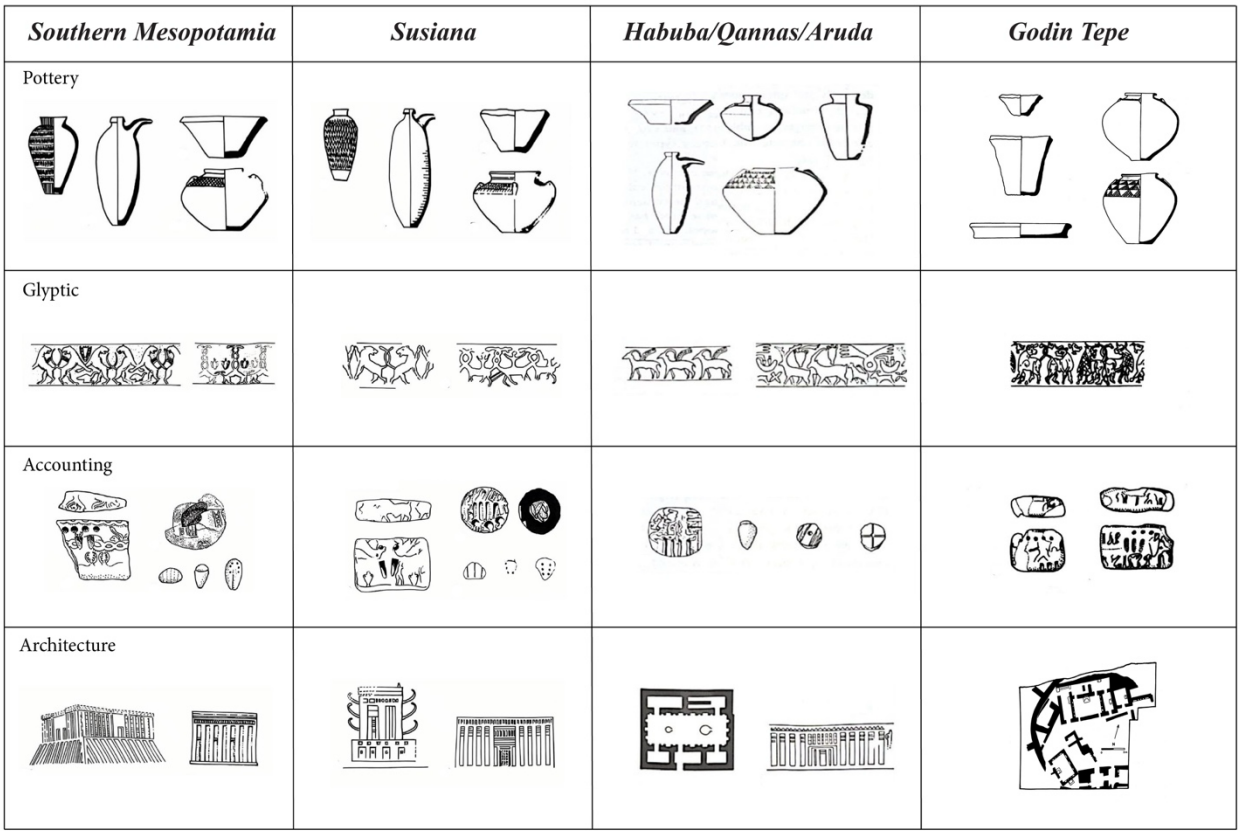


*Figure 2: Selective archaeological findings from major sites of Uruk Expansion*

In conclusion, the Uruk Expansion is a highly complex phenomenon, illustrating a rich web of interregional interactions across a vast geographical area over an extended period. This complexity is reflected in the diversity of sites, each providing unique insights into the nature and extent of Uruk's influence.

**Uruk World System**

The Uruk World System (UWS), proposed by Guillermo Algaze (1993), is the most influential theory regarding the Uruk Expansion. It is significant for two reasons: (1) it offers the first comprehensive analysis of a broad range of archaeological evidence related to Uruk material culture, and (2) it connects the urbanization, the Uruk Expansion, and the divergent development of northern and southern Mesopotamian sites.

(1) The Network Identified and Supporting Archaeological Evidence

Drawing upon Wallerstein's world-system theory and Gallagher and Robinson's concept of imperialism, Algaze interprets the Uruk Expansion as a Mesopotamian imperial network. This

network, he argues, was manifested through formal political control in the Susiana Plain of Khuzestan and informal economic dominance in the Syro-Mesopotamian Plains and the surrounding highlands.

A. The Susiana Plain

In the Susiana Plain, a region separated from the Mesopotamian alluvium by marshes and lagoons, material culture parallel to Uruk traditions was widespread during the Middle and Late Uruk periods. Comparable accounting tools, glyptic, pottery assemblages, and architecture (see Figure 2) suggest analogous administrative procedures, social structures, and even shared mythology and religious rituals, as evidenced by excavations at the centers of Susa, Chogha Mish, and other nearby sites.

The general similarities are even more striking when considering the divergent development of the two regions in the Susa I phase, during which tangible evidence of interregional connections is scarce. This raises the hypothesis that Uruk colonies may have been established in the region. The hypothesis is further supported the clear archaeological break before and after the Uruk period. Just as the Uruk influence suddenly began in a declining Susiana culture, where large buildings had already been abandoned and the population had shrunk, the withdrawal of Uruk influence is also marked by the abandonment of cities and buildings. According to Algaze, these patterns suggest that Uruk may have exercised direct control over the Susiana Plain, taking advantage of its geographic proximity and the ongoing internal disintegration of the neighboring culture, before eventually withdrawing.

B. Syro-Mesopotamian Plains and Surrounding Highlands

Only a few Uruk-related sites have been identified across the Syro-Mesopotamian Plains and the surrounding highlands, where southern cities exert informal economic influence. Algaze classified these settlements into three categories: enclaves, stations, and outposts.

(a) Enclaves

Enclaves are sizeable settlements (often over 15 hectares) with a full range of Uruk materials, located at strategic points of juncture along major waterways and overland routes. These settlements are often surrounded by a cluster of smaller satellite villages. A prime example of this type is the Habuba Kabira-Sud/Tell Qannas/Jebel Aruda complex. Other enclaves include the Carchemish complex in the Birecik-Jerablus area, Tell Brak on the Upper Khabur, and Nineveh on the Upper Tigris (Samsat was later reclassified as an indigenous settlement by Algaze).

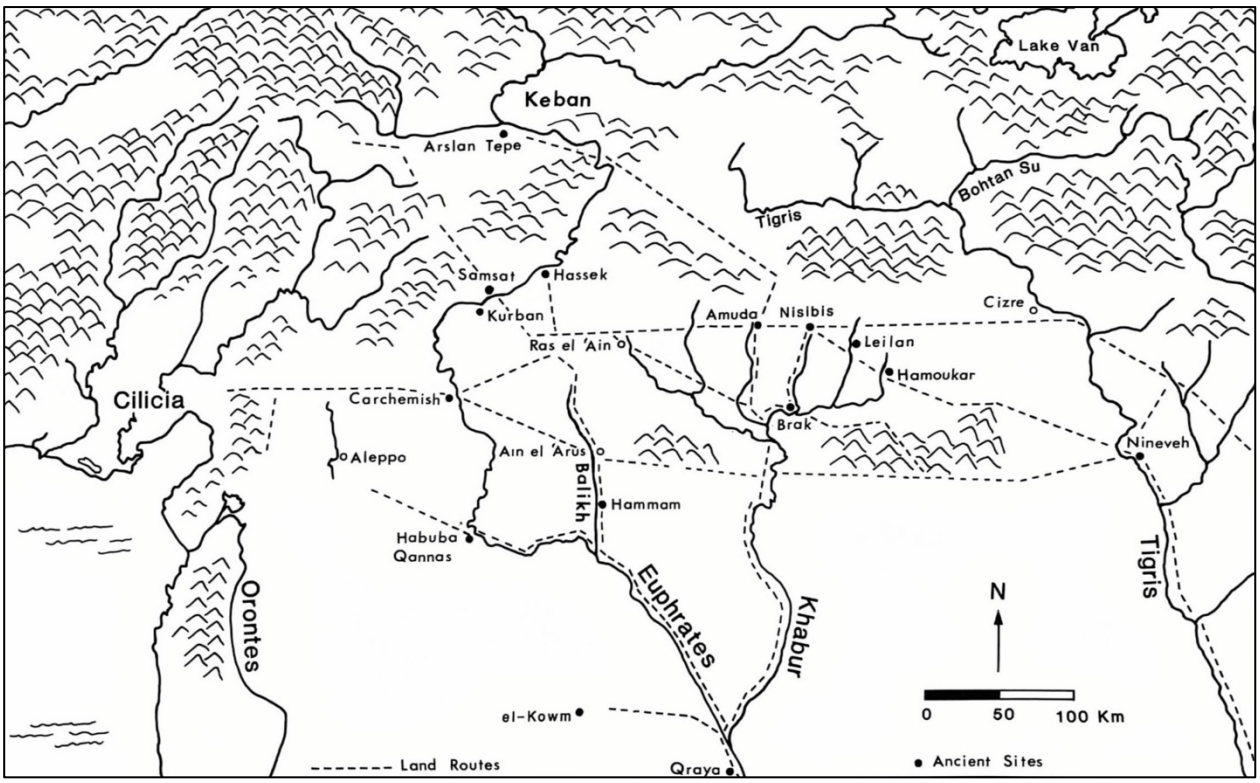


*Figure 3: Major sites and routes of communication illustrated in the UWS (Algaze 2004:47)*

What is particularly notable, beyond the presence of Uruk materials, is the strategic positioning of these enclaves, which reveals much about their role in facilitating interregional communication and economic exchange. For instance, the Habuba Kabira-Sud complex was situated at a key point on the Euphrates, where overland routes terminated before the desert, and where passageways to the western coast and southeast Anatolia began. Carchemish occupied a crucial crossing, linking the Aleppo area with the upper Khabur region. Tell Brak stood at a vital crossroads where traffic from the upper Khabur region in the north intersected with that from the Sinjar Plains in the south. Finally, Nineveh not only controlled the waterways leading downstream to the Mesopotamian heartland, but also sat at the intersection of multiple key land routes (See Figure 3). The distribution of these enclaves suggests they were strategically positioned to secure and facilitate long-distance communication between the southern and northern regions. This network likely relied on the major rivers and key east-west land routes, with Nineveh, in some cases, serving as a central hub for navigation southward.

(b) Stations and Outposts

In addition to the large enclaves, smaller Uruk-related sites are classified as stations or outposts. Along the Euphrates and Balikh rivers, sites like Tell Qraya, Tell Ramadi, Tell Rawa, Hassek Höyük, and Tell Fadgami functioned as stations, strategically positioned to facilitate the movement of goods and information along key waterways and overland routes. In contrast, in the Iranian highlands, Godin Tepe and Tepe Sialk exemplify outposts. Located in more isolated areas and

directly interacting with local highland communities, outposts controlled access to vital resources such as minerals and timber, crucial to Uruk's expanding economy.

The distribution of stations and outposts, however, remains less consistent than that of enclaves. While some regularities have been observed—such as stations located in the Lower Khabur Basin, where they are often found in pairs on opposite riverbanks—the overall spacing pattern of these sites is not uniform. This lack of consistency may be attributed to gaps in archaeological excavation and site preservation.

Moreover, the local influence on stations and outposts is more pronounced, reflecting the distinct regional interaction patterns. For instance, excavations at Hassek Höyük reveal a complex cultural landscape, with both Uruk and indigenous influences coexisting. In a settlement area of 1.5 hectares, archaeologists uncovered two tripartite buildings, surrounded by oval walls, where Uruk artifacts were found alongside local chaff-tempered pottery. This mixed material culture suggests significant interaction between southern and northern communities, with stations possibly acting as intermediaries to facilitate communication with local populations. A similar pattern is also evident in outposts, where proximity to Late Chalcolithic settlements indicates that their survival often depended on the cooperation and consent of local rulers.

(2) The Impetus and Influence of the Network

Regarding the nature of the network, the UWS proposes that: (a) the network was primarily driven by economic motives; (b) exchanges within the network were asymmetrical; and (c) the network exerted immediate and profound influence on indigenous communities.

First, enclaves, stations, and outposts were established to facilitate long-distance trade, rather than for territorial or agricultural purposes. Given the uneven distribution of resources across the region, southern "core" cities relied on imports of metals, timber, stones, and bitumen from resource-rich peripheral areas. Had territorial or agricultural concerns been the primary motivators, one would expect Uruk colonies to be more densely distributed across the fertile and populous northern lands. However, archaeological evidence contradicts this assumption. Instead, Uruk enclaves were dispersed, often positioned at strategically significant locations, and in some cases, even in marginal areas like the Tabqa region, which had limited agricultural potential and a sparse population.

Second, the exchanges within this network were asymmetrical in three key aspects: power, resource flow, and consequences. Firstly, there was a power imbalance between the trading partners. According to the UWS, southern cities were more developed than northern settlements in terms of size and social complexity. Thus, the trade routes and exchanges were largely dominated by the south. Secondly, the flow of goods was unbalanced. The periphery primarily exported raw materials, while the core cities of southern Mesopotamia exported labor-intensive, processed, or semi-processed goods. Lastly, the consequences of trade were also asymmetrical. In the southern alluvium, trade generated positive "spin-offs", stimulating the economy through the

production of high-value and labor-intensive products. However, the overconsumption of non-renewable resources and increasing over-specialization led to economic decline in the periphery after an initial phase of growth.

Third, the Uruk Expansion had a profound and immediate impact on indigenous societies, as seen at sites such as Hammam et-Turkman, Kurban Höyük, and Arslantepe. While no Uruk pottery was found at Hammam et-Turkman, the sudden appearance of monumental buildings in the Mesopotamian style suggests that local elites adopted cultural practices from the advanced southern cities. At Kurban Höyük, the shift from handmade or slow-wheel chaff-tempered ceramics to fast-wheel-produced grit-tempered pottery indicates increased specialization and social development triggered by Uruk contact. A similar transformation occurred at Arslantepe, where the transition from red or black burnished ware to fast-wheel plain ware, the partial adoption of cylinder sealing practices, and the evidence of redistributive activities reflect a shift toward greater social complexity. These changes, brought about by Uruk's influence, contributed significantly to the increasing complexity of Late Chalcolithic communities.

**The Archaeological Debate about UWS**

Despite the systematic framework offered by the UWS, which integrates urbanization and the Uruk Expansion, it has been the subject of criticism and debate among scholars.

1. The Critique of the UWS

Recent archaeological evidence challenges several key aspects of the theory: (1) the interpretation of the Uruk Expansion as primarily driven by long-distance exchange demands, (2) the core-periphery model that highlights asymmetric relationships between southern cities and their northern counterparts, and (3) the assumption that Uruk contact was the main catalyst for social change in communities within the network.

(1) Questionable Economic Impetus

In contrast to the UWS's emphasis on long-distance trade as a driving force behind Uruk Expansion, Frangipane (2001; 2002; 2010) argues that trade in non-staple goods was not a major economic factor for cities like Uruk. Prestige objects made from exotic materials were confined to elite circles and not part of everyday life. Additionally, there is no evidence that Uruk cities sought to strengthen ties with northern centers for raw materials. If trade had been the primary motivation for establishing colonial settlements, more substantial evidence of trade-related artifacts and craft production would be expected. Moreover, the fragmented and competitive nature of southern city-states, as reflected in household structures and the absence of communal storage, further casts doubt on their ability to exert sustained economic control over distant regions.

An alternative explanation for the establishment of large Uruk settlements is immigration. Johnson (1988) proposed that Syrian colonies may have served as refuges for displaced elites during a period of conflict and instability in southern Mesopotamia. This theory is plausible, given the

layout and large population of sites such as Habuba Kabira. Located at the bend of the Euphrates, Habuba Kabira occupied a vacant area near the desert, with no immediate local threats. The large population at the site seems unnecessary for controlling trade routes. Furthermore, recent regional investigations support the idea that the population could have been sustained through dry-farming, without reliance on supplies from distant regions (Schwartz 2001).

(2) Asymmetric South-North Relationships

In the UWS, southern Mesopotamian cities were seen as dominant over weaker peripheral regions. However, recent excavations reveal that northern regions exhibited significant social complexity prior to Uruk contact. In many cases, interregional communication may have been more balanced.

At Arslantepe, a large public structure, Building XXIX, dated to the early 4th millennium BC, was discovered (Frangipane 2002). With a central room measuring 17.5 x 7 meters, it is the largest known building of its kind in the region, surpassing the "temples" of the subsequent VI A period (Figure 4). Similarly, a large gateway and enclosing wall uncovered in Area TW at Tell Brak predates the site's peak during the LC3 period, when it spanned 100 hectares. The existence of the monumental structures and the site's considerable size suggest that Tell Brak held political and economic dominance over its hinterland before engaging with Uruk (Oates and Oates 1997).

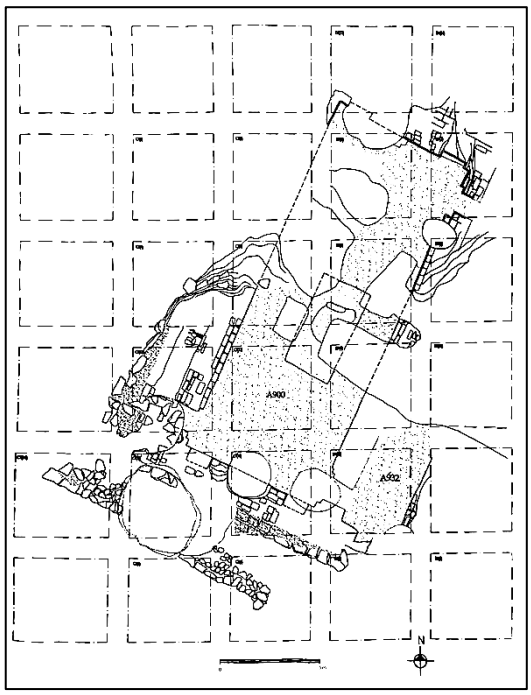

*Figure 4: Plan of Building XXIX at Arslantepe (Frangipane 2002:135)*

Findings at smaller sites also suggest that northern societies were not passive participants. In *Rethinking World-Systems*, Stein (Stein 1999) presents a trade-diaspora model, viewing Uruk Expansion as a network of dispersed merchant groups interacting with host communities. Research at Hacinebi supports this, showing no sign of southern monopoly. The spatial separation between

Uruk-related and local materials, combined with lithic evidence of independent agricultural production, suggests people of possible Mesopotamian origin lived autonomously alongside locals. These groups maintained minimal interaction and used different trade routes. This exchange pattern contrasts sharply with the "colonial" model proposed by the UWS.

(3) Overemphasis on Uruk Influence on Indigenous Societies

The UWS has also been criticized for assuming that contact with Mesopotamian cities would lead to major social changes in northern indigenous societies. However, evidence challenges this assumption from two perspectives.

First, the expected rapid social transformations following Uruk contact were not always evident. The archaeological record from Hacinebi, again, provides a counterexample to the UWS. There, local practices continued from the pre-contact to the contact phase. Agricultural intensification and specialized sheep/goat production were absent, with no significant change in the proportions of crops or the ratio of sheep/goat bones. Likewise, copper production remained local, suggesting that Uruk did not dominate this exchange. Cylinder seals, while found alongside Uruk-style ceramics, were used differently from local stamps which remained tied to local pottery. This evidence points to the presence of Uruk influence without disrupting the continuity of local traditions (Stein 1999).

Second, at sites where social changes, such as technological advancements and production improvements, are evident, these transformations may have been driven by endogenous factors rather than external influences. For instance, the standardized pottery found at Arslantepe during Period VII may not be the result of Uruk influence, but rather the adoption of rotating devices, already in use in the northern regions by the 4th millennium BC. This technological development likely originated locally rather than being directly shaped by Uruk contact (Frangipane 2001).

In addition to the critiques already discussed, there are several other challenges to the UWS. Alizadeh (2010) argues that the UWS's focus on site similarities oversimplifies regional interactions and obscures the fundamental differences between the region. Stein (2001) criticizes the UWS by noting that advanced copper metallurgy at Tepecik suggests that Anatolian societies were exporting finely crafted goods, rather than just raw materials. While there are numerous other critiques, they are beyond the scope of this discussion.

2. The Response from Algaze

In response to these critiques, Algaze acknowledges that his theory needs revision to better incorporate the latest archaeological evidence. However, he defends the framework by reiterating the central role of resource acquisition in driving the Uruk Expansion, integrating more symmetrical relationships into the framework, and advocating for a macro-level approach that emphasizes broad patterns across the region.

On the cause of the Uruk Expansion, Algaze maintains that trade was the central and initial factor. The tablets recording exchange activities, the substantial quantities of precious stones and metals recovered from the Riemchen Building, and the estimated 3,000 to 6,000 linear meters of timber used in the Limestone Temple provide clear evidence for large-scale resource transported into the alluvium. Further, the placement of newly identified outposts at the edges of steppe lands, ideal for controlling pastoral resources, and the dendritic configuration of enclaves, stations, and outposts—designed to maximize the core's ability to control hinterland resources—strongly supports the exchange-driven nature of the Uruk Expansion. Regarding the immigration hypothesis, Algaze notes that the large population movement at Habuba Kabira occurred only in the final phase of the Uruk Expansion, making immigration an unlikely initial motivation.

In the case of Hacinebi, Algaze argues that the political and economic parity at the site exemplifies a lessened asymmetry in the relationship between the southern Mesopotamian cities and their more distant northern counterparts. The "tyranny of distance", caused by transport costs, restricted the core's ability to maintain dominance over peripheral regions. As a result, multiple interregional likely coexisted between southern cities and northern communities. Consequently, the new data can be integrated into the UWS framework without undermining its explanatory power.

When discussing the impact of the Uruk Expansion on northern societies, Algaze emphasizes that the social complexity found in some Late Chalcolithic polities in the periphery does not mean that northern indigenous communities were unaffected by the Uruk intrusion. He stresses that these communities, as a group, should not be interpreted as politically comparable to the southern cities. It is reasonable to expect significant influence from Uruk on the development trajectories of less complex societies, particularly those already "on the verge of social evolution" (Algaze 2001).

Finally, Algaze further argues that archaeologists should focus more on identifying broader patterns than adopting a case-by-case approach when investigating long-term, large-scale events like the Uruk Expansion. The core-periphery model remains valid overall and is broadly applicable to the greater Mesopotamian region. While the parity relationships and social complexities at certain northern sites may be local conditions, they do not represent a general rule and should not undermine the asymmetric nature of the Uruk Expansion as a whole. The very name "Uruk Expansion" itself reflects the reality that Uruk's material culture appears in the periphery, rather than northern artifacts appearing in the southern hinterlands.

## 3. An Examination of the Debates

After examining the debates, this essay concludes that (1) new archaeological data calls for some major revisions on the UWS to accommodate dynamic north-south relationships (2) while many critiques are valid, they do not substantially overturn the UWS as a macro-level theory and (3) a more nuanced understanding of the Uruk Expansion will require additional archaeological evidence in the future.

On the driving factors, Algaze and his critics present conflicting arguments, each supported by corresponding evidence. Based on the current archaeological findings, it is difficult to determine which side is correct. As for the issue of asymmetrical exchange, the social complexity at Arslantepe and Tell Brak and the balanced trade relationships at Hacinebi suggest the existence of a more symmetrical relationship, questioning the core-periphery model. However, given the limited number of such examples, there is insufficient evidence to conclusively argue for overall equality between southern and northern societies. As Algaze notes, these examples can be incorporated into a revised UWS framework. Regarding whether Uruk Expansion had a significant impact on indigenous communities, Hacinebi is a good example, but it remains a singular case far away from the south. The lack of conclusive archaeological evidence from other sites makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions statistically.

Nevertheless, recent excavations and archaeological research confirm the complexity of the Uruk Expansion, suggesting that a variety of interregional communication relationships existed during the period. Ongoing research will continue to refine our understanding of this phenomenon and provide new evidence to either support or disprove the UWS.

**Conclusion**

The Uruk World System has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of 4th millennium BC Mesopotamia, providing a comprehensive framework that links urbanization, long-distance trade, and cultural diffusion. However, its assumptions about economic motives, asymmetric core-periphery relationships, and the transformative impact of Uruk contact on northern societies have been increasingly questioned. Recent archaeological evidence highlights the complexity of northern communities, suggesting that they are not passive participants of the network and that their social advancements may have developed independently.

Despite its limitations, the UWS remains the most influential framework for interpreting the dramatic social developments of the 4th millennium BC. To date, no alternative theory has provided a comprehensive replacement. As Wright puts it, "all Mesopotamianists are indebted to Algaze for proposing a comprehensive understanding that accounts for much of the evidence available in the 1980s and that has inspired much new research" (Wright 2001).

Gaps in archaeological data leave many aspects of Uruk period unresolved, and the academic debate surrounding the Uruk Expansion will undoubtedly continue. Nevertheless, it is believed that future research will shed new light on this era, and Uruk's legacy as a city, a period, and a phenomenon will endure in the study of early civilizations.

**Word count: 4223**

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