

*Beyond 'Oriental Despotism': The Origin of Urban Developments in Dry-farming Syria and Anatolia*

**Clemens Reichel**

University of Toronto/Royal Ontario Museum  
Canada

Home to some of the earliest state societies in the world, the ancient Near East plays a pivotal role in discussions of the mechanisms that led to the emergence of early urban civilizations. Past discussion of this area focused on ancient Sumer in southern Iraq, where early cities emerged between 4000 and 3000 BC in an alluvial landscape that was created by and continues to be shaped by the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Numerous scholars—notably Karl Wittfogel—saw this area as a quintessential “hydraulic society,” in which adverse environmental conditions resulted in human responses—notably irrigation, canal and dam building—that led to labor organization, social differentiation, and craft specialization, and hence created momentum towards urbanism.

The discovery of numerous urban centers during excavations in northern Syria and southern Turkey over the past decades, however, has changed this picture significantly. Located in areas where rainfall is sufficient to sustain dry-farming, these cities cannot have been brought about by the coercive forces of irrigation agriculture, highlighting the fact that Near Eastern urbanism did not have a singular origin but could emerge under a wide array of different environmental and geopolitical preconditions.

Using several key sites in northern Syria (notably Hamoukar and Tell Brak) this paper will lay out the available dataset and propose an alternative model for how “northern urbanism” might have evolved.