



Kün Aftare Settlements: First Reports on the Neolithization Process in the Northern Habur Valley

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ABSTRACT

The Neolithization process in southeastern Anatolia has been the subject of many studies over the years. However, these have primarily been concentrated around the Euphrates Basin and Tigris Valley. Meanwhile, recent studies in the Şanlıurfa region provide important information on the Neolithization process in the mountainous region between these two rivers. The 2023 Archaeological Survey of the Pleistocene and Early Holocene Period in the Artuklu, Kızıltepe, Yeşilli, and Nusaybin Districts of Mardin Province revealed many settlements dating to the Neolithic Period in the Northern Habur Valley. In this context, the settlements identified at Kün Aftare Mevkii in the Nusaybin District provide new information on the unique Neolithization process of the Northeastern Habur Valley, a key area to both southeastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia.

Keywords: Neolithization, Northern Habur, Southeastern Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Mardin Province



Introduction

Prehistoric communities in the Near East lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for a long period of time before gradually transitioning to Semi-sedentary and sedentary in response to climatic changes and other external and internal factors. This process, which roughly coincided with the end of the Paleolithic period, is associated with the changes of the Younger Dryas and Early Holocene in the Near East (Kuzucuoğlu 2007; Sanlaville 1997; Wick *et al.*, 2003). During this period, parallel to the wider climatic changes, radical developments in nomadic society have begun. Chronologically, during the Epi-Paleolithic and Early Neolithic periods, the first semi- and fully-settled communities began emerging. These early villages or settlements created a context in which open-area settlements were used in addition to cave dwellings, which were a remnant of the old hunter-gatherer way of life. Notably, studies conducted in the Near East have documented the coexistence of both cave and open-area settlements. The sites of Zawi Chemi-Shanidar (Layer B) (Solecki, 1980) and Layer B1 in Shanidar Cave (Solecki, 1971) are the best reflections of this development.

While it is widely accepted that the Neolithization process in the Near East started in the Epi-Paleolithic period, the exact starting point for this process varied according to local contexts. The archaeological excavations at Ohalo and Ain Gev in the southern Levant, for example, have yielded evidence of simple settlements or village remains. The evidence of both agricultural activities and semi-settled areas suggest that the first settled communities emerged around 20,000 BC (Byrd, 2002: 71; Nadel, 1991; Nadel-Carmi *et al.*, 1995). However, since the data pertaining to these early cultures in the southern Levant are still inconclusive, the exact process that occurred in the area is still uncertain.

Natufian culture (Bar-Yosef, 1998: 162; Childe, 1953; Garrod and Bate, 1937; Neuville, 1951), which emerged in this general region, is also present in traces from these early settlements. This culture also influenced wider Mesopotamia and led to the first settlements there as well. For example, the oldest levels of the Mureybet settlement in northern Mesopotamia indicate that it first appeared in the pre-Neolithic period (Cauvin, 1977: 20; Ibáñez, 2008: 21-22). The site—which features simple, hut-shaped architectural traces—was under the influence of the Natuf-Khimian cultures. Similar data were obtained further north of the Mureybet, in the southeastern Anatolian region of Turkey. However, these data do not demonstrate a Levantine influence as in the case of the Mureybet settlement. Rather, the sites in southeastern Anatolia were more of a regional development with local and mixed cultural (Mountainous Zagros) traces.

The studies conducted in the northernmost part of northern Mesopotamia (i.e., southeastern Anatolia) provide the best evidence of early settlements and the Neolithization process in the region. This is because the area offers not only traces of the first settlements but also traces

of the earliest social and communal life in the region. The Epi-Paleolithic settlements, which are the earliest settlements of this region, are represented by the data obtained from sites such as Körtik Tepe (Benz *et al.*, 2015), Boncuklu Tarla (Kodas and Çiftçi, 2021) and Çemka Höyük (Çiftçi, 2022). In addition, the Kün Aftare settlements, which are the subject of this study, have recently yielded new data thanks to their discovery after surveys conducted in Mardin Province. These data provide traces of the early Neolithization process in the southeastern Anatolian (i.e., northern Mesopotamian) region, and thanks to the evidence that dates to the Neolithic, they demonstrate all stages of the Neolithization process. However, this process differed both temporally and formally in northern Mesopotamia compared to other parts of Mesopotamia. The sites of Çayönü (Erim Özdoğan, 2011), Çemka Höyük (Çiftçi, 2022), Boncuklu Tarla (Kodas, 2019), Demirköy (Rosenberg, 2011b), Körtik Tepe (Özkaya and Coşkun, 2011), Hallan Çemi (Rosenberg, 2011a), Gre Filla (Ökse, 2021) and Gusir Höyük (Karul, 2020) in the Tigris Valley have a local origin process in the Zagros (similar to the East Jazira region), but they also bear traces of southern cultures, albeit to a lesser extent. The sites of Qermez Dere (Watkins, 1987) and Nemrik 9 (Kozłowski and Kempisty, 1990) in East Jazira have similarities to the sites in the Tigris Valley. In the Middle Euphrates, sites like Karahan Tepe (Karul, 2022), Sayburç (Özdoğan and Uludağ, 2022), Çakmaktepe (Şahin and Uludağ, 2023) and Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt, 2012) demonstrate the regional Neolithization process and are partially related to the lower Euphrates. The sites of Jerf el-Ahmar (Stordeur, 2014), Mureybet (Cauvin, 1997), Tell Abr 3 (Yartah, 2013) and Dja'de (Coqueugnot, 2009) in the lower Euphrates (now Syria) seem to have been more closely associated with the southern Levant. The fact that these regions, which are located on two major rivers (Tigris and Euphrates), reflect a mix of shared and distinct characteristics suggests a unique development in the Neolithization process. To better understand this development, the Habur Valley, which is located between the two rivers and is thus in a key position for research, should be investigated (Nishiaki, 1992; Nishiaki, 2000) and considered together with southeastern Anatolia. The Neolithization process should thus be looked at as a whole before being narrowed down to the regional or local level.

Although southeastern Anatolia is a unique geographical designation, this region is also an important part of northern Mesopotamia. Undoubtedly, this area is of particular importance for studies on the Neolithization process in the Near East (Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, 2014; Karul 2022; Molist and Gómez-Bach, 2020 Özdoğan 1999; Özdoğan 2014; Watkins, 2020). Research on the Neolithization process of northern Mesopotamia has been defined by studies conducted on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Much of this research has consisted of archaeological excavations that have been carried out due to the dam projects on both rivers. However, recent studies in the Şanlıurfa region have enabled the study of the region's Neolithization process not only along the riverbanks but also across a wider geographic spectrum (Çelik, 2014; Karul, 2022, Schmidt, 2012). Studies on the Habur

Valley, which lies between these rivers, are relatively few. While important surveys have been conducted on the part of this region that lies in Syria, the part that lies within the Turkish borders has never been investigated (Aurenche and Kozłowski, 2010; Kodaş 2015; Nishiaki 1992; Nishiaki, 2000). In this context, a 2023 survey conducted in the Artuklu, Kızıltepe, Yeşilli, and Nusaybin Districts of Mardin Province (Karadoğan and Coşkun, 2013), an important area of the northern Habur Valley, has revealed many Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlements (Fig. 1).¹ Most of these sites (about 35 in total) are located on the slopes of the limestone foothills in front of the Mardin Mountains. In addition, three settlements/sites dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period were found on three different mounds on the plain and in the valleys further north. These new findings suggest that a different Neolithization process may have taken place on the slopes in the mountainous regions of the northern Habur Valley. Numerous settlements and sites dating to the Epi-Paleolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods were also found at the Kün Aftare (Sırtlan Sırtı/Hyaena Ridge) site within the borders of the Hasantepe neighborhood of the Nusaybin District of Mardin Province.



Fig. 1: Epipaleolithic and PPN Period settlements identified on the Mardin region

1 The Pleistocene and Early Holocene Period Archaeological Survey of the Artuklu, Kızıltepe, Yeşilli, and Nusaybin Districts of Mardin Province was started in 2022 under the direction of Associate Professor Ergül Kodaş with the permission of the Excavations Department of the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Museums, Turkey.

Kün Aftare Settlements

The prehistoric settlements of Kün Aftare are located approximately two kilometers north of the Hasantepe neighborhood of Nusaybin District, Mardin Province (Fig. 2). Five different points were identified in the area. Four are settlements located on slopes and hills (three of which have been surveyed). The final location is represented by two caves located side-by-side. The settlements are located at the southern end and eastern side of the Dibek Valley, which is connected to the Midyat Plateau. The caves are located about 500 meters west of the settlements, on the other side of the Dibek Valley. This area can also be defined as the foothills of the range known today as the Dibek Mountains (or Bagok). In other words, these settlements are located on the limestone slopes between the plain and the mountain range.

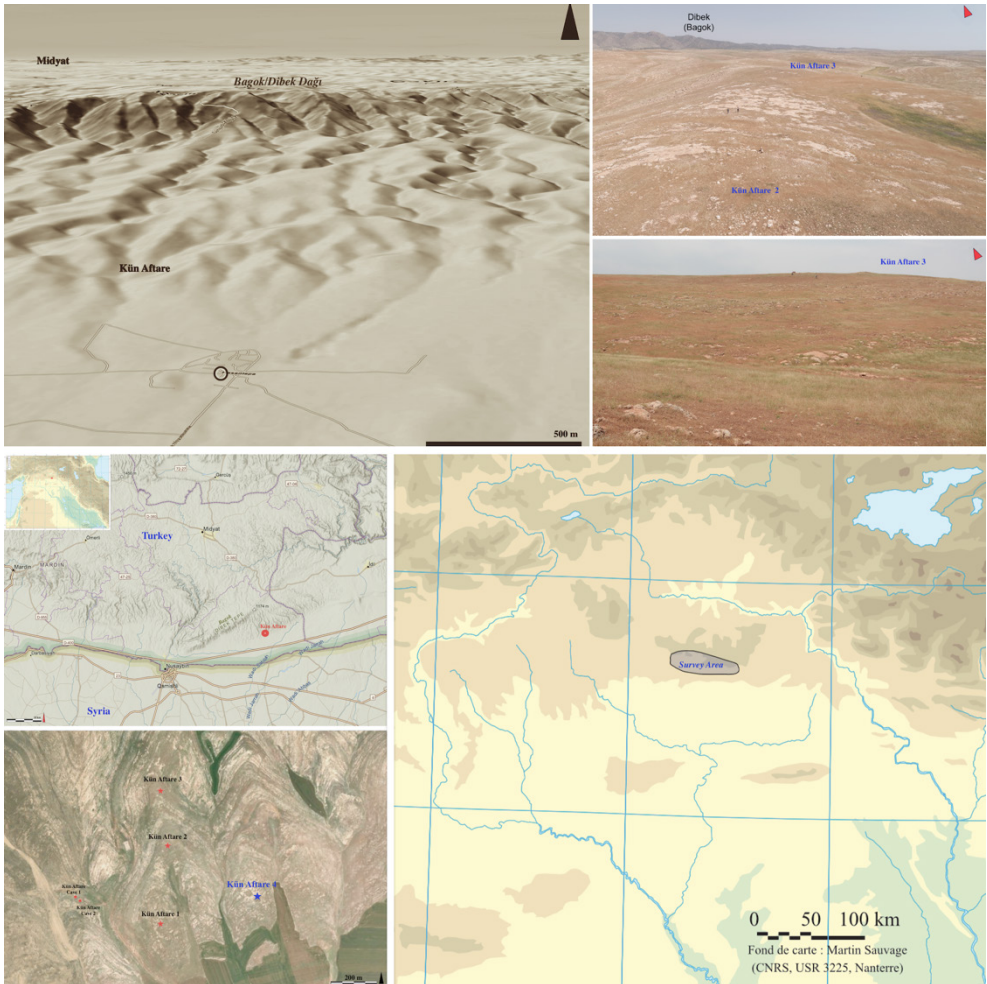


Fig. 2: Location of Kün Aftare settlements.

Kün Aftare 1

The Kün Aftare 1 settlement is located on the southern slopes of the deep Dibek Valley, about 1300 meters north of the Hasantepe (or Til Hesene) neighborhood. The site is approximately 545 meters above sea level. It measures approximately 200 × 300 meters in size and has yielded a few traces of round-plan buildings and scattered rows of walls (Fig. 3/c). Mortar carved into the bedrock and basalt tool fragments that may have been pestles or grindstones were also found (Fig. 3/a–b). Of the 71 flint and obsidian fragments collected in the area, three are obsidian and the others are flint (Fig. 3/d). Among the flint fragments there are two trapezes/trapezoids, five crescents, one micro point, one endscraper, two blades/bladelets, one microblade core, and 56 production-waste flakes. The three obsidian pieces collected in the area belonged to retouched bladelets. In addition, one flint bladelet core and chipping waste flakes (*dechet de taille*) were found in the area, suggesting that toolmaking may have occurred in this settlement.



Fig. 3: Architectural remains, chipped stone tools and grinding stones identified in Kün Aftare 1 settlement.

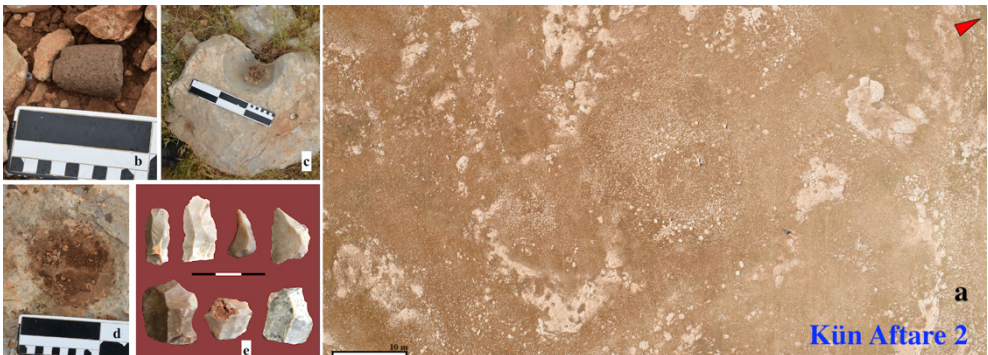


Fig. 4: Architectural remains, chipped stone tools and grinding stones identified in Kün Aftare 2 settlement.

Kün Aftare 2

Kün Aftare 2 is located approximately 400 meters north of the Kün Aftare 1. It is at the top (or southern end) of the slope on which the Kün Aftare 1 settlement is located. The site is approximately 554 meters above sea level, measures about 100×130 meters, and has one meter of cultural fill. Numerous rows of walls that may have belonged to a round-planned building were identified in the area (Fig. 4/a). One row is about 13 meters in diameter, another is 10 meters, and the rest are generally 4–5 meters. In addition, a mortar carved into the bedrock and basalt fragments, which may have been parts of grindstones or pestles, were found (Fig. 4/b–d). Of the 48 chipped stone fragments found in the area, five are obsidian and the others are flint (Fig. 4/e). Among the 43 flint pieces were three triangular, truncated backed bladelets, five retouched blades/bladelets, four front endscrapers, 13 thin flakes (2–3.5 centimeters long and 1–2 centimeters wide), one bladelet core, and 17 production-waste pieces. Among the obsidian fragments, one retouched blade, three thin flakes, and one piece of waste were identified.

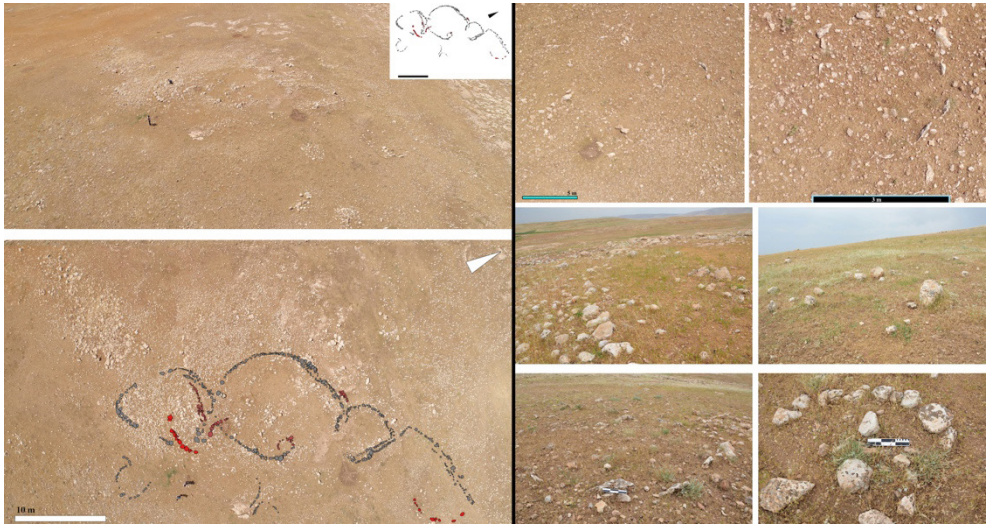


Fig. 5: General view and architectural remains in Kün Aftare 3 settlement.

Kün Aftare 3

Kün Aftare 3 is located about 300 meters northeast of Kün Aftare 2, on the eastern slope of a different hill. The site is approximately 560 meters above sea level. It has the appearance of a mound measuring approximately 200×130 meters. Numerous round-plan building remains were identified in the area (Fig. 5). Some are 10–12 meters in diameter, and others are between 3 and 5 meters. Many basalt or limestone grindstones and pestles were found (Fig. 6). In terms of chipped stone finds, Kün Aftare 3 is richer than the other sites (Fig. 7):

a total of 317 pieces were collected from the site. Obsidian finds are represented by more specimens (42), but no obsidian core was recovered. Among the 285 flint finds were nine micro points, eight blades/bladelets, 30 thin flakes, 21 retouched bladelets, six trapezoids, 13 crescents, five endscrapers, two thin flake cores, six bladelet cores, seven borers, 130 pieces of production waste, and 60 unidentified tool fragments. Among the obsidian fragments, two blades/bladelets, five retouched bladelets, two trapezoids, one crescent, six flakes, 18 pieces of production waste, and seven unidentified tool fragments were found.



Fig. 6: Grinding stones identified in Kün Aftare 3 settlement.

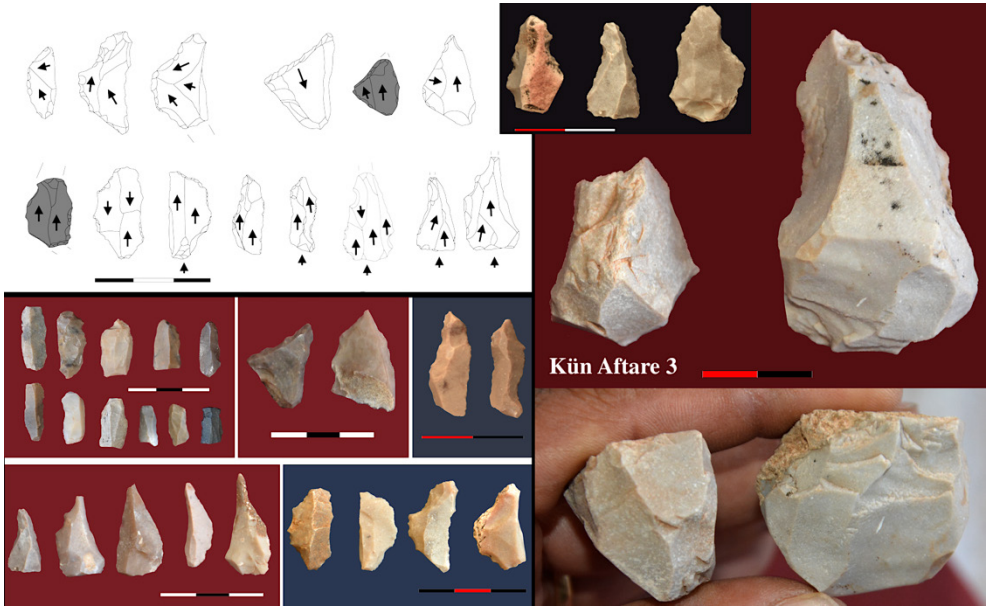


Fig. 7: Chipped stone tools identified in Kün Aftare 3 settlement.



Fig. 8: Kün Aftare caves and surrounding archaeological remains.

Kün Aftare 4

About 500 meters northeast of the Kün Aftare 1 settlement, another small mound (about 800 square meters) was discovered. However, because the area was completely covered with plants and bushes, it could not be fully analyzed at the time of the survey. A small number of chipped stone tools were found. Additionally, the remains of round-plan buildings could be seen in some places. This settlement should be revisited in the future and a more detailed survey should be carried out.

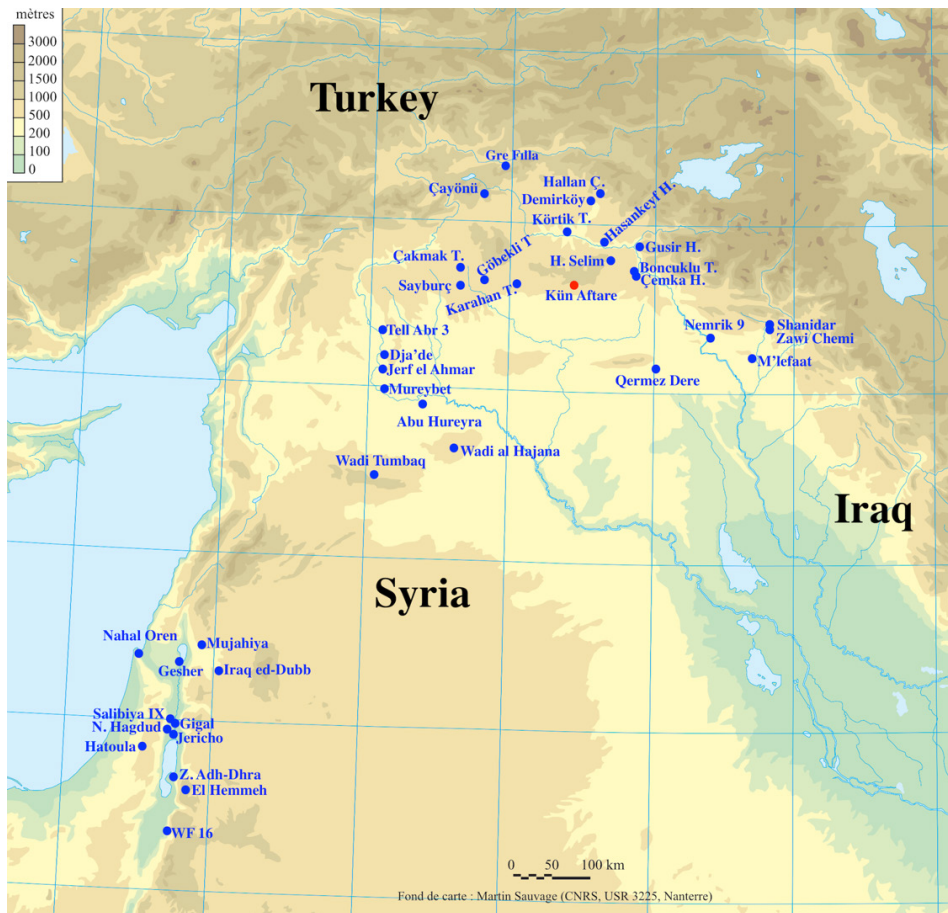


Fig. 9: Some settlements in the Near East dating back to the early stages of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period.

Kün Aftare Caves

The caves are located about 600 meters west of the Kün Aftare 2 and sit on the western edge of a stream that now flows seasonally (Fig. 8). The caves are approximately 540 meters above sea level. Kün Aftare Cave 1, located further to the northwest, is about 43 meters deep, 22 meters wide and 2–3 meters high. The entrance of the cave faces east and is 2 meters high and 3 meters wide. There is another, smaller cave approximately 50 meters southeast of the first cave, but it has been almost filled in by the alluvium carried in by floodwaters. A few flint tools were found on the terraces of both caves. There is also an area carved into the bedrock with a diameter of 2.5 meters just above Kün Aftare Cave 1, which may have been a dwelling. The remains of a round-planned building/structure, which may have been a storage unit, were also discovered in this area. Inside the northeastern cave, especially in

the back, were artificially rounded walls. Mortar cut into the bedrock was also found in the terrace of this cave. However, only a few chipped stones were discovered in the locality of these caves. The finds were 18 pieces in total, including 17 flint fragments and one obsidian blade. Among the flint finds are three blades, one microblade core, four thin flakes, four coarse flakes, and six pieces of production waste.

Conclusions

The Mardin Threshold, which is the mountainous region of the northeastern Habur Valley, has two distinct topographical features, one mountainous and the other valley. There are many deep valleys between the mountainous region and the plain. Kün Aftare's sites are very similar to the sites of Şika Rika, Dokane, Bikeyre, and Mer Babe, which are in the same region. In addition, many caves have been identified in the region, which has plentiful limestone bedrock. In general, the settlements of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period are denser in the foothills between the mountain ranges, which are approximately 1200 meters altitude (above sea level), and the plain, which is approximately 500 meters altitude above sea level (570–700 meters altitude). In some areas, many settlements have been identified at short distances of 300–400 meters altitude from each other (Fig. 1). In addition, during the survey, many other cave or rock shelters were observed in areas close to these settlements. The settlements identified at the Kün Aftare locality indicate the transition to settled life in the early stage of Neolithic Period and were probably from the Epi-Paleolithic period onward. This model points to a gradual transition to settlement that may have remained semi-nomadic. There is also a high probability of a relationship between the settlements and the cave dwellings. In terms of chipped stone finds, the microlith industry was apparently more dominant in these settlements, as no macro-arrowheads were recovered. This suggests that some of the settlements may have been inhabited during the Epi-Paleolithic period (Kartal, 2009; Kartal *et al.*, 2018). When all the data are considered together, these settlements suggest that a unique Neolithization process may have taken place in the region (Fig. 9). The exact nature of this process should be clarified by further research.

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