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DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-STATE COMMUNITIES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

edited by

Diane Bolger and Louise C. Maguire

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PART 3

TECHNOLOGY,
ECONOMY AND SOCIETY
Professor Edgar Peltenburg’s outstanding record as an archaeologist shows two recurring elements: his scholarly interest in the social dynamics of technology and style in prehistoric societies; and his propensity for researching a sunny Mediterranean island. However, he has also explored a prehistoric site at Jerablus Tahtani in the heart of Upper Mesopotamia. In this paper I shall investigate the organisation of prehistoric pottery production in Upper Mesopotamia. I shall limit the discussion to one major key site for the Late Neolithic, Tell Sabi Abyad, situated in the valley of the Balikh, a tributary of the Euphrates in northern Syria. The history of the mound of Tell Sabi Abyad is highly complex. I shall review one of the more extensively excavated occupation levels at this site, Level 6, which is located on the south-eastern slopes of the site’s main mound in what has been termed Operation 1 (for an overview, see Akkermans et al. 2006). Also known as the “Burnt Village” because of the conflagration that reduced the Level 6 village to ashes around 6000 BC (all dates in this paper are calibrated dates BC), this settlement was inhabited at a time when communities across northern Syria, south-eastern Anatolia and northern Iraq had initiated far-reaching changes in the way pottery was made and used. Not long before the Burnt Village, at about 6200 BC, a long era of rigorously plain, coarsely finished ceramics had come to an end with the introduction, initially in limited quantities, of painted pottery vessels. Soon afterwards, between c. 6100 and 5900 BC, the ceramic assemblage changed rapidly and fundamentally, from being dominated by mostly plain, plant-tempered ceramics to mainly consisting of painted Fine Ware (Akkermans 1993; Nieuwenhuyse 2007).

This discovery has sparked a lively debate, not just with regard to the details of the ceramic sequence or the precise chronological synchronisations between key sites, but also with regard to the assumptions underlying our interpretations. In Upper Mesopotamia a major obstacle to understanding the organisation of prehistoric societies is the tendency to classify the evidence according to rigid culture-historical frameworks as a basis for comparative studies and reconstructions of long-term social evolution. Textbooks on Near Eastern prehistory are often organised in separate sections dealing with such entities as the Proto-Hassuna, the Hassuna, the Samarra, the Halaf and the Ubaid cultures. Recent fieldwork on the Late Neolithic shows the inadequacies of the existing framework. Most of the elements traditionally ascribed to the ‘Halaf package’ can now be traced back to the centuries preceding the Halaf period. In terms of the ceramics, it has been shown that what is seen as ‘Halaf pottery’ emerged gradually from a preceding Transitional (or Proto-Halaf) stage in which Hassuna and Samarra stylistic traits dominated (Campbell 1992, 1998; Akkermans 1993, 1997; LeMière and Nieuwenhuyse 1996; Cruells and Nieuwenhuyse 2005; Nieuwenhuyse 2007).

The Level 6 Burnt Village was inhabited at the start of the Transitional period between Pre-Halaf and Early Halaf. Rather than trying to pigeonhole this particular community into one culture-historical framework or the other, this paper explores the technological and social aspects of pottery production. What were the raw materials, tools and the technological knowledge needed, and how did people procure them? Were ceramic vessels made locally or were they imported from elsewhere? Is there evidence of pottery production within the village that archaeologists may identify as such?
Models of Late Neolithic Ceramic Production

Scholars have presented divergent views on how pottery production was organised in the Upper Mesopotamian Late Neolithic. This heterogeneity reflects the different research interests of the scholars involved and their theoretical backgrounds as well as the diverse cultural mosaic during the Late Neolithic. To a fair measure it also reflects the slow, unequal development of research. Presently far more work has been done on the later stages of the Pottery Neolithic, which are characterised by an array of attractively decorated pottery styles such as the Hassuna, Samarra and Halaf. In contrast, much less is known about the earlier stages of the Pottery Neolithic, c. 6900–6200 BC, which have only most recently emerged as major research foci in their own right.

When it comes to the Halaf period, 5900–5300 BC, one influential perspective was outlined by Watson and LeBlanc, who suggested that the Halaf painted ‘luxury’ ceramics were symbols of prestige exchange between established elites, for which they used the term ‘chiefdom’ (Watson and LeBlanc n.d.; Watson 1983; Redman 1978). Watson and LeBlanc used statistical measurements of similarity between painted motif frequencies from a range of Halaf sites to infer patterns of social interaction. Strong empirical support for the view of Halaf ceramics as part of organised networks of exchange came from work by Davidson and McKerrel (1976, 1980; Davidson 1977). Using neutron activation analyses (NAA) of Halaf sherds and local clays from a variety of sites and wadis in north-eastern Syria, they argued that a number of Halafian sites had been ceramic production centres. These centres supplied ‘satellite’ villages with ceramic vessels, and at the same time they were engaged in the mutual exchange of high-quality painted pottery.

This view of the Halaf was criticised from the 1980s onwards with the rapid accumulation of new data from the field. New fieldwork made it clear that in fact there was precious little evidence to suggest that Halaf societies had been socially complex in the traditional sense of the word (Akkermans 1993). Apart from the presumed ‘prestige’ ceramics there were few unequivocally identifiable luxury goods, the spatial layout of villages did not immediately point to social differentiation, and the burial record suggested a heterogeneous yet non-hierarchical approach to death (Campbell 1992; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003). Akkermans (1993, 319) concluded that the painted pottery was not involved in the establishment of any sort of social hierarchy. Furthermore, Davidson and McKerrel’s interpretations were subjected to devastating criticism by Galbraith and Roaf (2001). Re-evaluating the earlier data with updated statistical methods, Galbraith and Roaf concluded that although ceramics were certainly exchanged in the Halaf period, the earlier NAA data do not support the specific model proposed by Davidson and McKerrel.

As to the period immediately preceding the Halaf, most scholars would accept that the Hassuna and Samarra styles reflect different subsistence adaptations and attendant social organisations. In this view, the Samarra pottery style reflects socially more advanced organisations based on irrigation agriculture along the two major river systems in Central Mesopotamia, the Euphrates and the Tigris. In contrast, groups in the north with the Hassuna pottery style continued to practise dry farming agriculture and did not develop hierarchical social systems (Oates 1972; 1973; Huot 1994; Breniquet 1996; Aureneche and Kozlowski 1999). Whereas pottery production came into the hands of specialists in the Samarra territories, Hassuna pottery production continued to be practiced at the level of the individual household. While the Samarra potters developed a standardised set of complex design structures, design structures in the north were kept much simpler and did not become standardised (Bernbeck 1994). The Hassuna groups imported the occasional high-quality vessel from their Samarra neighbours and made cheapish imitations (Lloyd and Safar 1945). Mortensen (1970) argued that the stylistic differences between Hassuna and Samarra ceramics reflected different modes of production. Whereas the bulk of the Hassuna pottery was felt to be made locally, Mortensen suggested that the most complexly decorated items were made by travelling Samarran specialists (1970, 118–121).

This discussion has been strongly reinvigorated recently by the discovery in Syria and south-eastern Turkey of a gradual sequence of ceramic change leading to the Halaf pottery tradition. This transition is characterised by a modest introduction and subsequent rapid increase of painted Fine Ware made in what may be termed the Hassuna-Samarra style if broadly applied (Campbell 1992, 1998; Akkermans 1993). During the Transitional period innovations in ceramic technology, vessel shape, and decorative style led to what archaeologists have termed Early Halaf pottery (Cruells and Nieuwenhuyse 2005). In other words, what archaeologists have treated as separate culture-historical entities can also be seen, in Upper Mesopotamia at least, as part of a continuum of ceramic innovation (Nieuwenhuyse 2007). Presently, a lively debate focuses on what precisely should fall within the definitions of Samarra and Hassuna pottery (Bernbeck 2009), the identification of the technological chaînes opératoires (operational sequences) underlying the various pottery groups (Van As et al. 1998; Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2001; Robert et al. 2009), and the issue of ceramic exchange (LeMière and Picon 1987; 1999; LeMière and Picon 2009) among other points.

Pottery Production in the Level 6 Burnt Village

The Level 6 Burnt Village has been excavated over an area of almost 1400 m². It was constructed on the south-eastern slopes of a much older mound that dates back to the early...
It is important to note that although there is much similarity from one multi-roomed building to the next, the buildings were certainly not all equal in architectural composition or size. Intriguingly, some building complexes were conspicuously larger than others. These may have been the domiciles of households that in this particular episode of the village history were economically more successful than others. Interestingly, although kilns of various shapes and sizes have been found dispersed through the Level 6 village, they are concentrated in two courtyards on either side of the largest complex in the village (Building II). Before
concluding that the inhabitants of this building controlled essential pottery production facilities, we should note that so far the distribution of small finds does not suggest a clear differentiation (Verhoeven 1999). By and large, each complex appears to have had a broadly similar inventory of material goods prior to the conflagration. Tools and facilities that may have been used for the production of pottery are dispersed widely throughout the Level 6 village and cannot be associated with any building complex in particular. Nor does the composition of the ceramic assemblage, although certainly highly variable from one building complex to another, suggest any patterns that we may interpret as reflecting unequal access to specific pottery groups (Nieuwenhuyse 2007).

It may be difficult, perhaps impossible, at this stage to identify with certainty the tools that people used for pottery production. Since the local production was probably carried out largely at a household level and at a low intensity, the necessary tools may have been unspecialised to begin with (Peacock 1982; Van der Leeuw et al. 1987; Costin 1991). Production facilities, such as pits for clay storage or a covered space for drying vessels, may be virtually indistinguishable from pits and storage rooms used for other activities. No cache of unfired vessels waiting to be fired has been recovered from the Burnt Village. So far it has not been possible to locate any spatial clusters of artefacts that enable the identification of production facilities (Verhoeven 1999; Nieuwenhuyse 2007). How, then, do we know for certain that ceramics were produced at Tell Sabi Abyad itself? Firstly, although such finds are very scarce, misfired and warped ceramic fragments are occasionally found. Secondly, the abundance of ceramic vessels throughout the settlement, their bulkiness, and their fragility in transport all argue for local production. Finally, the microscopic and chemical analysis of ceramics and local clays strongly suggests that a large part of it was made locally (LeMière 1989; Van As et al. 1998; LeMière and Picon 2009).

Most raw materials were locally available. Ethnographic comparisons suggest that the potters from Tell Sabi Abyad collected their clays within walking distance of the village (Arnold 1985). We shall never be able to locate the exact locations, however, as several metres of sediment have accumulated over the Late Neolithic field level (Wilkinson 1996). Most of the samples of clay collected near the current course of the Balikh River, close to the village, have reasonable to excellent properties for making pottery. The main pigment for slipping and painting the vessels was ochre. Small pieces of ochre are regularly found in the Burnt Village, and some of the basalt tools show traces of the grinding of this pigment. Ochre, or iron-oxide haematite, was probably available on the limestone terraces of the Balikh valley, which occur less than 10 km from the site (Akkermans 1993, 274).

Ceramic production was in all probability seasonally organised and integrated within the broader annual cycle of activities, festivities and the movements of people. In the highly seasonal climate of Upper Mesopotamia the cold, wet winter months would have been unfavourable for drying pots and fuel. In the winter and spring, moreover, various agricultural activities would have laid claims upon the available labour time. Within the semi-pastoralist economy these seasons would have been socially intense as the larger part of the community probably stayed within or close to the village. The summer would have been the likely time of the year for ceramic production. A large part of the population would have left the village with the herds. Those who stayed behind would have engaged in ceramic production. Straw left over from the harvest would have made convenient tempering material (Matson 1974; Akkermans 1993, 275–279; Bernbeck 1994, 263; Eiland 2003, 337).

Dramatic changes in vessel morphology occurred during the Transitional period. Interestingly, these do not seem to be associated with the invention of new shaping techniques. Vessels of all shapes and sizes seem to have been made with coiling, a technique known already since the first introduction of pottery around 6900 BC. Moulds were most probably used for shaping convex bases as well as the sharply carinated profiles that became increasingly popular during the Transitional period. First, the base was pressed into the mould, after which the carinated body was built up with coils. The mould may simply have been the re-used base fragments of a discarded vessel (Van As and Jacobs 1989; Van As et al. 1998).

Abundant traces of sculpting, scraping, smoothing and burnishing point to a variety of surface-finishing techniques. Vessels were sometimes decorated with techniques such as stubbing, impressing or incising. The tools needed for this may have been fairly simple and need not have been exclusively limited to pottery production. So far no use-wear analyses have been carried out on the bone awls and needles, the flint or obsidian tools, or the ceramic scrapers and ‘loamers’ that occur in great numbers at the site. It seems likely that in addition to a whole range of other possible functions some of these items were also employed to modify ceramic vessels (Fig. 12.2). Non-industrial potters in ethnographic settings have sometimes been shown to be emotionally attached to the tools they use. These may have been transmitted over generations, and so they can acquire great social value (De Boer and Lathrap 1979; Dillingham 1992). Pebbles with a glossy working surface are indeed attested at Tell Sabi Abyad, but what they were used for remains to be established.

A remarkable technological breakthrough at this time was the development of firing strategies that increased the potters’ control over temperatures and oxygen fluctuations in the kiln. This allowed them to produce dark-on-light painted Fine Ware (Steinberg and Kamili 1984; Noll 1991; Robert et al. 2009). Unfortunately, we are hard pressed to identify the pottery kilns used by the Burnt Village potters.
Characteristic for the later stages of the Transitional period, for instance, is the keyhole-shaped kiln with a narrow, arched, combustion chamber and a domed heating chamber with stones on the floor, partly sunk into the ground to save fuel. They are usually found with only the lower part still intact, however, and their function remains elusive. Verhoeven and Kranendonk (1996, 82) suggest that the smaller examples were used for roasting meat, but the larger examples may well have been used for firing pottery. A similar potters’ kiln was reported from Tell Ziyada on the Khabur River (Buccellati et al. 1991).

Another type is larger, circular or sometimes oval with an opening in the wall at floor level (Fig. 12.2). These beehive-shaped kilns could be up to 3 m in diameter. The interior was usually hard and red-burnt, suggesting that they reached high temperatures. Elsewhere in Upper Mesopotamia, the first examples of circular kilns with a two storey construction appear at this stage (Merpert and Munchaev 1993) in which a perforated grid separated the lower firing chamber from the upper space holding the ceramic vessels. So far, no examples of this type have been attested in the Burnt Village.

Coming from Far Away

Certainly not all pottery vessels in the Burnt Village were locally produced, nor were all raw materials local in origin. For instance, it was characteristic during the Transitional period to decorate coarse plant-tempered vessels by scratching them with bitumen. Geochemical analysis of the pigment showed that it came from two distinct sources in northern Iraq, c. 500 km away from the site (Connan et al. 2004; Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2004). It is most likely that these coarse vessels were locally made and decorated with non-local pigments (Fig. 12.3, nos 5–6).

There is sound evidence for non-local pottery within the village even if the exact locations of origin remain to be established. Ongoing work by LeMière shows that part of what is termed Standard Fine Ware (SFW) came from elsewhere. Two other Fine Ware groups, termed Orange Fine Ware (Fig. 12.3, nos 10–12) and Fine-Painted Ware, may also be of non-local origin (LeMière and Nieuwenhuyse 1996; LeMière 2000; 2001). These two categories comprise only a very small minority within the assemblage, but their presence is significant. LeMière and Picon (2008) also suggest that the proportion of imported SFW may have been highest in the early stages of the Transitional period. A regular exchange of painted Fine Wares, then, was implicated in the ceramic developments observed during the Transitional period. SFW bears close similarities to Hassuna and Samarra pottery from northern and central Iraq (Fig. 12.3, nos 13–20), but it would be too far-fetched at this stage to conclude that ‘Samarran impulses’ (Akkermans 1993) initiated the Transitional period. Although it is certainly possible that the occasional vessel travelled to the Burnt Village from as far away as central Mesopotamia, it is more likely that most of the exchange was conducted among the Transitional period villages that are now being detected in survey work across upper Mesopotamia (Nieuwenhuyse 2000; Nieuwenhuyse and Wilkinson 2007; Erdalkran 2008).

Perhaps the clearest case of non-local ceramics within the Burnt Village is the Dark Face Burnished Ware (DFBW), which includes about 4% of the assemblage (Fig. 12.3, nos 7–9). This heavily mineral-tempered ware is petrographically,
Fig. 12.3 Selected examples of pottery from the level 6 Burnt Village: (1–4) decorated Standard Ware; (5–6) bitumen-painted Standard Ware; (7–9) Dark-Faced Burnished Ware; (10–12) Orange Fine Ware; (13–20) Standard Fine Ware.
chemically and stylistically distinct from everything else at the site (LeMiére and Picon 1987; 1999; Bader et al. 1994; Nieuwenhuyse 2007; Diebold forthcoming). From its origin, probably within the south-eastern Turkish Zagros, it was widely distributed across the upper Mesopotamian plains. Both functional and socio-symbolic factors may have stimulated demand. Functionally, this was excellent ‘cooking ware’ in which vessels were repeatedly re-shaped from jars into hole-mouth pots (Fig. 12.3, no. 9). Much of the DFBW consisted of serving vessels; in the Burnt Village this pottery may have held the role of exotic serving-and-display ware before the emergence of the painted Fine Wares.

Concluding Remarks
The Burnt Village provides an intriguing case study of ceramic production and consumption in upper Mesopotamia at the close of the 7th millennium. Ceramic production and consumption was far from a self-sufficient, localised affair. Certainly, most of the vessels that circulated in the village were made locally by individual families that organised their work at the household level. Direct evidence for local production is scarce at best, but this in itself fits well within the expectations from generalised models of household production. Pottery production facilities and tools that can be identified are dispersed through the various buildings and open areas. There is little evidence to suggest ‘elite’ sponsorship of, or control over, production. At the same time, certain vital raw materials could only be gained through exchange with other groups, and DFBW and some of the Fine Ware came to the village from elsewhere. Alongside production systems aiming at the local community, some ceramic production will have been organised in a manner more akin to the household industry mode, involving several producing groups aiming at a larger range of regional or even supra-regional consumers.

A dynamic, very active orientation to inter-regional networks and relationships lay at the heart of Late Neolithic societies after c. 6200 BC. Communities such as the Burnt Village participated in supra-regional networks of exchange in which various goods and ideas circulated over huge distances. Approaches to painted pottery styles in the upper Mesopotamian Late Neolithic have sometimes tended to promote a view of material culture as essentially reflecting given life-ways or regional identities. At Sabi Abyad, however, much ceramic innovation observed during the Transitional period centred upon elaborately painted Fine Ware: vessels excellently suitable for social display within the context of serving food and drink. Pottery styles in the Burnt Village were actively involved in creating and maintaining social identities.

References


