

THE CONTINUITY OF CERAMIC PRODUCTION
AFTER THE FALL OF THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE.
NEW DATA FROM THE RED HOUSE OF TELL SHEIKH HAMAD.

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INTRODUCTION

Once a pottery-vessel gets out of use because it breaks into pieces, the sherds usually become worthless and are treated as rubbish. Unlike metal-objects the raw-material could not be re-used by smelting the broken pieces and forming new objects. Thus, the pottery fragments are left behind. Manufacturing techniques of ceramic vessels and the style of shapes and decorations developed quite fast over time. Therefore, pottery is a crucial factor for dating archaeological contexts in excavations or survey-activities when surface material is collected. Moreover, pottery is one of the most frequent findings, thus it is of utmost significance in archaeology. However, is it possible to discover prominent historical changes in the archaeological record of ceramics?

The end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire represents one of the sharpest breaks during Ancient Near Eastern History. Only a short time after its greatest expansion as far as Egypt it collapsed, and the capital Nineveh was conquered by the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. After the sack of Nineveh there is little evidence for a continuity and we can hardly assign textual and archaeological data to this period as Stephanie Dalley (1993: 134-147), John Curtis (2003: 157-168) and Julian Reade (2003: 149-156) pointed out. Because of the lack of information about this period no more suitable label was found for it than the designation „*Post-Assyrian*“-period.

The main theme three of this congress has the title „Social and Cultural Transformation: The Archaeology of Transition periods and Dark Ages“. Therefore the aim of this paper is to discuss what kind of social and cultural transformations took place after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and to throw light on the so called „*Post-Assyrian*“-period which is usually designated as a “dark age”.

Iron Age pottery has been excavated at several sites in Northern Mesopotamia (Fig. 1). The digs brought to light material from dissimilar functional units ranging from graves of king-wives in the Neo-Assyrian capital Nimrud (Damerji 1999) to a rubbish-pit in Qasrij Cliff (Curtis 1989) which is located in the rural Eski Mosul region.

Until the 1990ies well dated pottery was only known by single pieces: Nimrud ‘Town Wall Houses 53’ (Oates 1954 164-167) and ‘Fort Shalmaneser’ (Oates 1959:13-146), Assur (Haller 1954, Hausleiter 1996), Sultantepe (Lloyd 1954: 101-110). Full material was analysed from limited excavation areas or with uncertain and controversial dating: Khirbet Qasrij, Qasrij Cliff (Curtis 1989), Khirbet Khatunieh (Curtis/Green 1997). Therefore it could not be properly investigated how frequently specific types occurred over time. This can be demonstrated by comparing the criteria of the periodisation of the three surveys which were published during the 1990ies:

In the publication of the Wadi ‘Ağīğ-Survey Bernbeck (1993) argued that an assured stratigraphical sequence of the Iron Age in the region of eastern Syria and northern Iraq did not exist. Thus he analysed the material by creating a seriation of the survey material. As a result he generated three phases: phase A (end of 9th to the beginning of the 8th century BC), phase B (8th century BC) and phase C (7th century BC, eventually persisting into the 6th century BC).

Northern-Jazira-Survey: Wilkinson and Tucker (1995: 100-101) defined two groups: The ‘Late Assyrian’ group covers the time from 1000 to 612 B. C. and the ‘Post-Assyrian’ group the period from 612 to 330 B. C. The authors emphasised that this was a preliminary assessment. One important criterion was the fabric. This differentiation was based on the results of the excavations at Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij.

Lower Habur-Survey: Morandi (1999: 193-229) discussed the bad pool of data and differentiated six chronological groups (A to F) which are based on presence and absence of specific types at Iron Age sites.

New evidence was published by Green (1999: 115-116) on the Eski Mosul region, Jamieson (1999: 287-308, 2000:259-303) on Tell Ahmar, Pecorella (2003:497) on Tell Barri as well as Makinson (2005: 411-580) and Luciani (2005: 719-996) on Tell Shiukh Fawqani. These contributions point to a continuity from the late to the so-called “*Post*”-Assyrian material at those specific sites. However, a consensus of pottery periodisation within the Iron Age of Northern Mesopotamia has not yet been reached so far.

THE MATERIAL OF THE “RED HOUSE”

The present article focuses on the pottery excavated in the Red House in Tell Sheikh Hamad (North-Eastern Syria). The Full assemblage has been analysed and published by Kreppner (2006). The excavation took place between 1993 and 2000. The Red House covers an area of approximately 5400 square meters (ca. 6458 square yards) and is composed of three wings with 90 rooms (Fig. 2).

The main phase in which the Red House was in use ended abruptly by a blaze and by violent destruction. Thus ceramics in big quantities were found on the floors covered by destruction debris. Four cuneiform texts which refer to the reign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II confirm that the house was certainly in use after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire – the so called „Post-Assyrian Period“ in Northern Mesopotamia (Kühne 2000: 761-769, Kühne 2002: 171-175, Kühne et al. 1993: 75-150).

The stratigraphical analysis was accomplished by determining the context of all stratified „Fundstellen“¹, that is, the earth lots in which pottery had been found on the floors. After this, the respective earth materials were analysed and the connections to adjoining rooms investigated. This procedure allowed to identify phenomena like secondary use of floors during later times. As a result, deposits of simultaneous formation processes could be assigned to various „Fundbereiche“ (areas with simultaneously deposited pottery).

In order to investigate possible changes of the pottery over time, both older material from floors of buildings underneath the Red House and younger material from floors of the later squatter occupations were considered. The latter was in use after the violent termination of the main occupation. However, this material was by far not as rich and numerous as that from the Red House.

In summary, 51.767 sherds (7.910 of those are diagnostics) have been found on the floors and were analysed. The quantity of fragments assigned to simultaneously used vessels just before the destruction of the „Red House“ is 32.639 sherds. All these date to the first half of the sixth century B. C. (Fundbereich 4).

1 Definition of „Fundstellen“ cf. Kühne 2005: 22.

Well stratified older pottery was found in room RR (Fundbereich 7.1). This room belongs to an older building, which was cut by the „Red House“ and situated at a deeper level. Younger material was discovered in a sequence of three floors in the rooms QX and XZ. These floors were in use one after the other after the destruction of the „Red House“ (Fundbereiche 3.18, 3.19, 3.20) and can be dated by inscriptions to the turn from the 6th to the 5th century BC (Röllig 2003: 395-402).

THE WARES

Data acquisition was conducted by macroscopic description of the pottery. The definition of wares is based on two criteria: Raw material and added non-plastic inclusions. Surface treatment or decoration were not regarded as criteria for the definition of wares and were studied separately. The definition of wares from Tell Sheikh Hamad used by Pfälzner (1995) has been reclassified. This reclassification was caused by the material itself on the one hand, and by the chemical-mineralogical analyses of Schneider (2006) and Daszkiewicz/Bobryk/Schneider (2006) on the other. However, it is not easy to find correct groups because neither the macroscopic phenomena nor the chemical-mineralogical groupings helped find a perfect fit. Ware A 1 was produced by middle to coarse grained clay and straw temper, Ware A 2 was made by the same raw material but without straw temper, Ware B 1 was produced by fine grained clay without straw temper. This ware is usually called „palace ware“, but there is also a fine ware with straw temper which was labelled Ware B 2. Ware C was produced by coarse grained clay and is characterised by coarse white inclusions which are quartz or calcite temper. Ware D has coarse black inclusions.

Regarding the proportion of wares from the chronologically significant stratigraphical units (Fundbereiche 7.1, 4, 3.18, 3.19 and 3.20) the straw tempered ware A1 takes more than 90%. The proportion actually rises in the younger contexts. This result contradicts the widespread opinion that vegetable temper was less frequently used during the „Post-Assyrian“-period.

In contrast to the high percentage of published pieces with ‚eye catching decoration‘ known from other excavations, ‚red slip‘-pottery in the Red House had only a proportion of 0,13%, ‚glazed‘ pottery 0,12% and ‚painted‘ pottery 0,02%.² Only the number of pottery with incised wavy lines and stamped decoration is higher with 2,07% and 674 pieces. The latter ornamentation is known under the name „Sheikh Hamad-Ware“ (Fig. 3). Since the so called Sheikh Hamad-Ware is not common elsewhere it must be regarded as significant for the region where it was dated safely to the „Post-Assyrian“ period immediately after the collapse of the Assyrian empire.

THE FORMS

The forms of the Red House pottery’s diagnostic pieces were initially classified by using both drawings and original material. However, the procedure using only drawings did not generate correct groupings, because the criteria were too detailed (Fig. 4). The grouping of the original material allowed a new matching procedure with regard to single small pieces. This led to larger units and, in consequence, to a total reorganisation of the entire repertoire of forms.

2 The calculation is based on „Fundbereich 4“: 32.628 items.

Rims, Bases, decorations, handles and spouts were classified. The state of preservation varied vastly. Complete vessels as well as small fragments were found. It was not possible to assign every rim-form to a known vessel type. Thus, the material was divided into three groups: rim-fragments, rims with identifiable side and complete vessel-profiles. The frequency of each rim type was documented by establishing specific reference to each ware. As a consequence, frequent types could be distinguished from infrequent types.

In order to investigate what kind of vessels in the Red House were simultaneously in use, complete vessels as well as rim fragments were analysed. Fragments of bottoms and body-sherds were not calculated for this aim. Joined fragments were considered as one unit. Although much effort was spent to find “joins”, the high number of fragments made it impossible to proof a possible fit to other pieces for all fragments. Furthermore, among the rim-fragments some items could have been already broken pieces prior to the destruction of the Red House. Thus the numbers calculated here do not exactly match the actual vessel numbers which had been in use in the Red House. In sum, 2129 “vessel-units” could be defined. The Red House material consists of bottles (39,60 %), bowls (29.37 %), pots (14.04 %), large storage vessels (6.58 %), beakers (3.99 %), potstands (3.10 %), tubes (1.50 %), miniature vessels (0.89 %), lamps (0.33 %), funnels (0.28 %), incense burners (0.14 %), small bowls (0.09 %), and subdivided plates (0.05 %).³

WARE A-VESSELS

92,39% of all vessels were produced of middle to coarse grained clay (Ware A). All the above mentioned vessel-types are represented in this group. The proportion of pieces with vegetable temper (Ware A1) surpasses considerably those which were produced without vegetable temper (Ware A2). “Bottles”, “bowls” and “pots” were discovered in both subgroups. The few specimens belonging to Ware A2 were identical in form to the most frequent forms of Ware A1. Thus the criteria “with” or “without” vegetable temper could not be attributed to specific forms representing different vessel-functions in case of “bottles”, “bowls” and “pots”. However, within the group of “large storage-vessels” the proportion of vegetable tempered items was much higher, whereas “miniature vessels” were much more frequently produced without vegetable temper.

“Bottles”, “bowls”, “pots”, “beakers”, “potstands”, “tubes”, “miniature vessels” and “funnels” bear traces of the fast wheel-production. “Large storage vessels” were formed in coil building technique whereas “lamps”, “incense burners” “small bowls” and “subdivided plates” were made in freehand forming.

The most common colour of the Ware A-vessels is beige. Variations to reddish or greenish are attested in all vessel-types. Obviously, variations occurred within one firing procedure in one kiln. This can be demonstrated by several vessels which bear colour-value variations.

Tall bottles with pointed bases (Fig. 5a), ovoid bottles with round bases (Fig. 5b) and globular bottles with ring bases (Fig. 5c) are attested. Thickened rims with oval, triangular or circular profile are the most frequent rim-forms. Bowls with rounded wall (Fig. 5d) or carination (Fig. 5e) are numerous. Ribbed rims and inverted thickened rims are common. Numerous pots of group Ware A1 have horizontally orientated oval or rectangular rims which are frequently incised on the top (Fig. 5f).

3 Definitions of forms cf. Kreppner (2006: 69), statistics cf. Kreppner (2006: 85-107).

WARE B-VESSELS

Only 4,27% of the “vessel-units” were manufactured by fine grained clay. Usually no temper was added (Ware B1). Only in some cases fine vegetable temper was added. “Beakers”, “bowls”, “pots” (Fig. 6a) and “miniature vessels” do occur. They were produced on the potter’s wheel. Greenish colours are more frequent in Ware B compared to Ware A. This is due to a higher firing temperature. Typical forms are beakers (Fig. 6b) and bowls (Fig. 6c) with high flared rims. The body of several beakers was dimpled.

WARE C AND WARE D- VESSELS

Ware C (3,15%) was produced by coarse grained clay and is characterised by coarse white inclusions which could be identified as quartz or calcite temper. Ware D (0,19%) has coarse black inclusions which are basalt or quartz temper. Daszkiewicz/Bobryk/Schneider (2006) analysed ware C and D pots chemical-mineralogically and discussed how appropriate the raw material and the added temper was to the use for a cooking-pot. Typical forms are globular hole-mouth pots (Figs. 7,8).

CONCLUSIONS

The Red House demonstrates that a high standard residence existed even after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The four cuneiform texts written in Assyrian script dating to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II prove that Assyrians inhabited the Red House during the time of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (Radner: 2002: 17). The fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire neither interrupted ceramic production, nor caused a change in wares and forms.

The analysis of the development of forms within the stratigraphical sequence (Fundbereiche 7.1, 4, 3.18, 3.19, 3.20) confirmed that the most frequent types of the Red House pottery are exactly those which were found both in the younger and the older stratigraphical units. Thus, a continuity of pottery production is proven from the mid seventh throughout the sixth as far as the beginning of the fifth centuries B. C.

As to the Red House, pottery of Neo-Babylonian style was not introduced. Contrary to various assumptions, also after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire – during the so called „*Post*“-Assyrian period – the clay used for pottery was continuously prepared with straw temper and the forms known from the seventh century were also used during the sixth century B. C.

The current state of research does not allow a definite periodisation because comparable data covering the ninth, eighth, seventh or the fifth centuries B. C are still lacking. Probably it will be revealed that during this period the development of forms was much slower than this has been assumed so far. To sum up, an Iron Age pottery assemblage of a completely excavated and well dated household of higher standard from Northern Mesopotamia has now been analysed for the first time.

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Fig. 2: Aerial view of the Red House

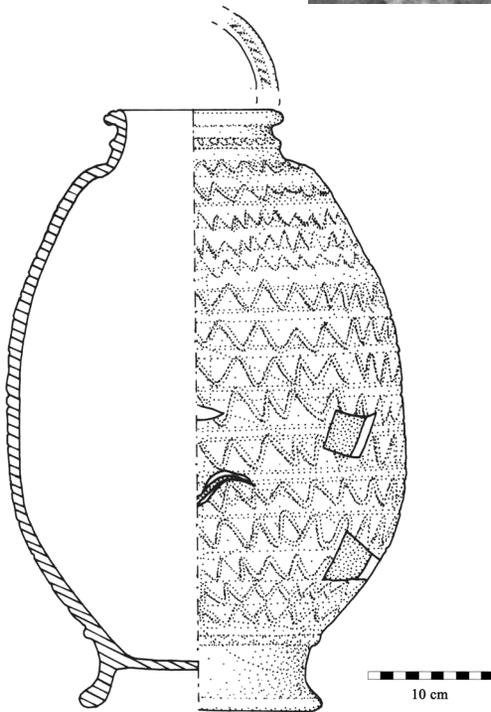


Fig. 3: Tell Sheikh Hamad-Decoration with incised wavy lines

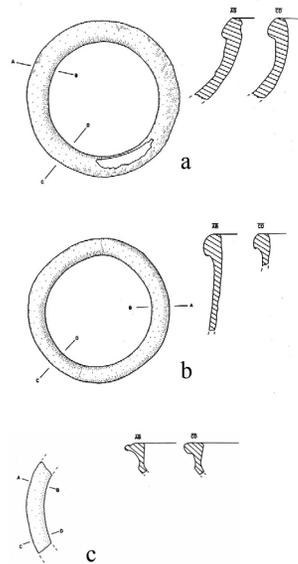


Fig. 4: Irregularity of rim-profiles

a) SH 93/6349/0064/001

b) SH 94/6145/0438/084

c) SH 00/6951/0003/014

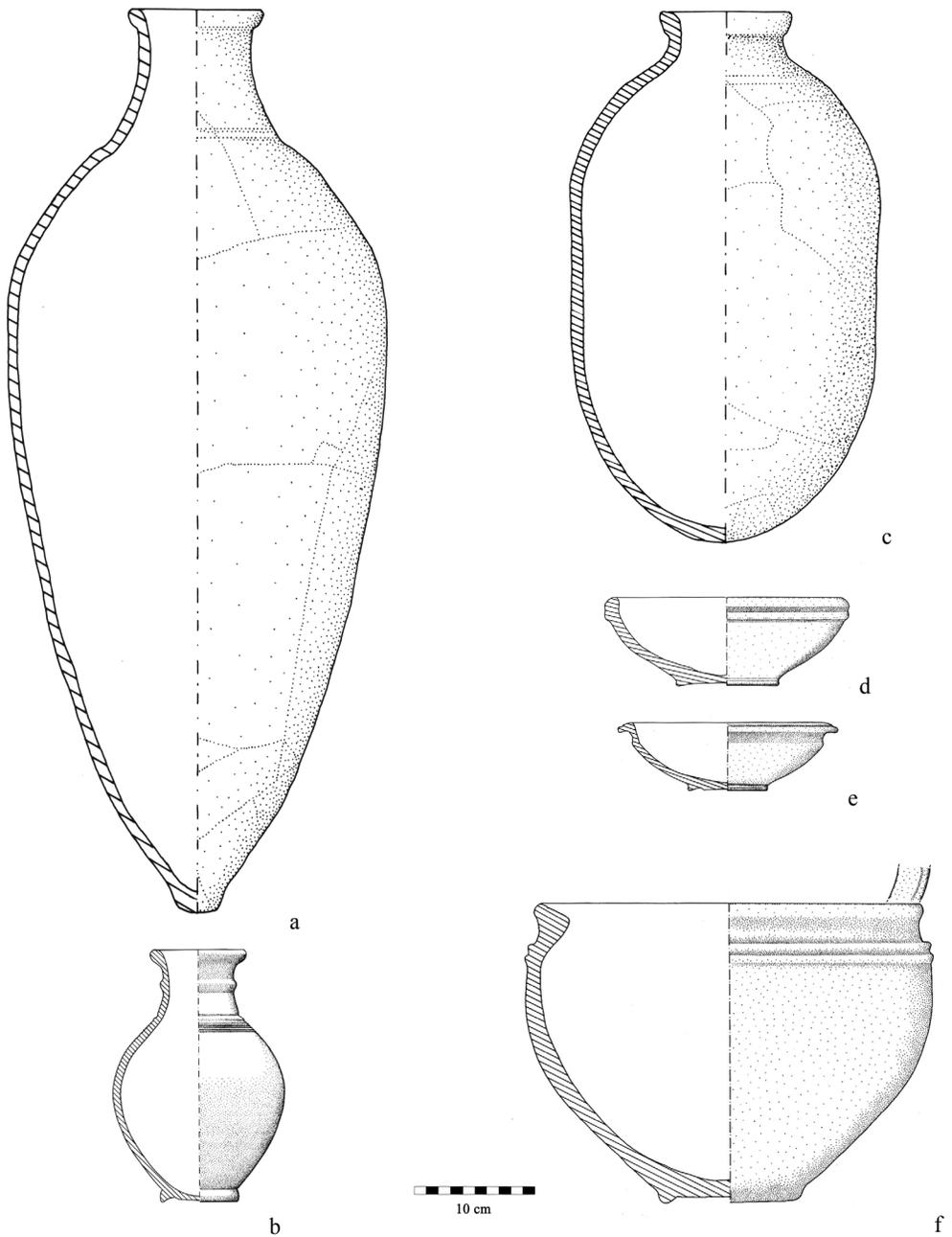


Fig. 5: Ware A vessels: a) bottle SH 95/6543/0151, b) SH 94/6345/0408, c) SH 97/6545/0219, d) SH 98/6751/0767, e) SH 95/6543/0353, f) SH 98/6751/0811

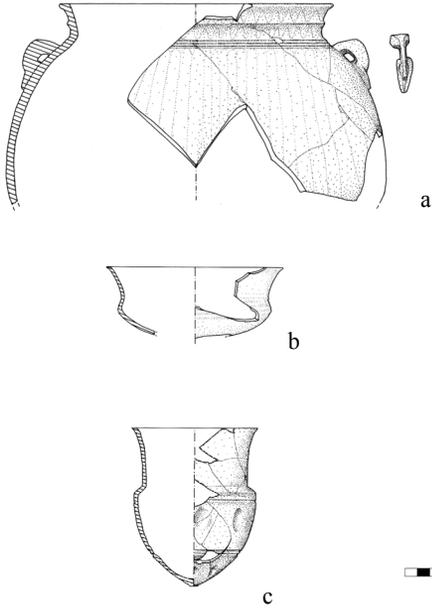


Fig 6: Ware B vessels:
 a) SH 97/6545/0297,
 b) SH 98/6749/0291/013,
 c) SH 95/6345/0339

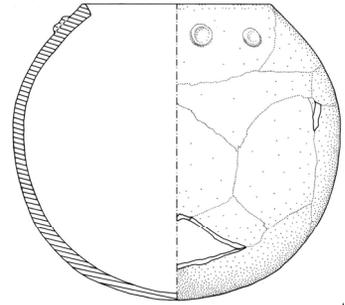


Fig. 7: Ware C vessel: SH
 93/6349/0739

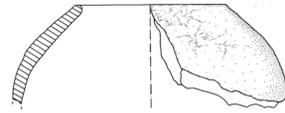


Fig. 8: Ware D vessel:
 93/6147/0035/001

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